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Modernidad y vanguardia: rutas de intercambio entre España y Latinoamérica (1920-1970)



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Modernidad y vanguardia: rutas de intercambio entre España y Latinoamérica (1920-1970)

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Some Reflections on International Exchanges and the Avant-garde after Conceptual Art

EVE KALYVA

"The label conceptual art is simplistic and misleading".

Seth Siegelaub (1973: 156)

The discussion around the history of conceptual art practices can take many directions. A particular one foregrounds activities in New York, often with a parallel discussion of activities in California, and celebrates the autonomy of art by attributing an exclusive tautological concern in what is loosely described as 'linguistic turn'. Such homogenisation of different artistic practices and interests serves to consolidate the genealogy of American modernist art both locally and internationally. The focus on Latin American artists who have moved to the States is often geared towards this end. Here, the *writing* of the story of conceptual art—an apparatus for conveying corresponding systems of beliefs and value judgements—lies at the crux of contemporary debates on historiography and art criticism, international artists' networks and the centre-periphery binary.

The following discussion aims to re-evaluate transatlantic exchanges and how Latin American art practices critically engaged the socio-political context. This is important for two reasons. First, it helps shape an alternative framework for cultural production, which interrogates and seeks to change social reality by producing new means of expression, vocabularies and modes of action, and which contests the ideological isolation of artistic practice from other social activities. Second, this desire to reconnect art to public life both in terms of experiencing art *in* the public domain as well as using art as a transformative force *of* that public domain is operative in the discussions around the avant-garde.

Periodisation and Nomenclature

The breach in the writings of the history of conceptual art is best articulated in the criticism of Benjamin Buchloh, a critic who helped shape the genealogies of American art, by Seth Siegelaub, an important figure in the reception of conceptual art whose political thesis on artistic production got somewhat overshadowed in the process. The touring exhibition *L'art conceptuel une perspective* (1989-1990), which came from Paris to Madrid, included extracts from an interview by Siegelaub. In one of the omitted pas-

sages, Siegelaub outlines two main flaws in Buchloh's well-known argument on the administration of aesthetics (published in the same exhibition catalogue). First, the absence of any relation to the social, economic or cultural historical period that it pretends to describe—something that leads to a formalistic and idealistic account, “*a sort of tautological art history as art history as art history*” (Siegelaub, 1989: m/s 1). Second, Buchloh's conservative and hermeneutically-sealed version of conceptual art is based on the New York scene (“*of what he thinks happens in Manhattan between 23rd street and Canal street*”, Siegelaub notes), and is singularly fixated on Duchamp: “*Like Hegel, for whom human history was conceived as the realization of the Idea, Buchloh's conceptual art is the realization of the Duchampian Idea*” (Siegelaub, 1989: m/s 1, m/s 3).

With this I do not wish to demonstrate the omnipresence or not of Duchamp as a historical influence. Minimalism and Duchamp did form a historical as much as a pragmatic reference point albeit not an exclusive one—as Lucy Lippard notes in 1972, even though Duchamp gave the obvious art-historical source, context and occasional strategy, most of the artists did not find his work all that interesting.¹ On the contrary, I want to highlight how constructing the history of conceptual art around any such singular reference also constructs a geographical reference, which by extension relays a cultural hierarchy.

Certainly, there are other accounts of conceptual art's relation to modernism. In the same exhibition catalogue, Charles Harrison (1990, 2002) explains that conceptual art formed a hiatus between the failure of the hegemony of American modernism, given that its modes and categories of production had become increasingly irrelevant, and the announcement of the artistic business as usual under the sobriquet of postmodernism in the late 1970s. As other critics note, locating conceptual art becomes a historiographical problem since its own practice incorporates the document (Sperlinger, 2005); put differently, conceptual art made explicit the aporia of modern art as a category since at the same time it must acknowledge and surpass its own limits (Newman, 1996).

It therefore becomes paramount to maintain a clear view in mind in relation to categories and historical periods. This distinction is central in the discussion of the avant-garde, even more so in our contemporary context of neo-liberal global (art) markets. In the creation and articulation of discourses, nomenclature plays a key role. This becomes evident in the use of the terms conceptual art/conceptualism, which can be better understood as an operative, albeit tentative, distinction. Historically, such terms

1 On the other hand, and despite the contextualisation of historical reference in the touring retrospective *L'art conceptuel une perspective*, the press reviews to the show announced Duchamp as the precursor of conceptualism abolishing the limits between idea and the work (Rodríguez, 1990; Fernández, 1990). According to María Corral, president of the exhibition's sponsors Caja de Pensiones, the exhibition was very timely, both resonating with the return to neo-conceptualism and offering the possibility to “*recrear una tendencia que ha marcado el arte contemporáneo que aquí, debido a nuestras particulares circunstancias, no pudimos vivir como en el resto de Europa*” (quoted in Rodríguez, 1990).

were used interchangeably (consider, for example, the international texts of Jorge Glusberg); notwithstanding, their use gradually became a divisionary classification for non-Western art practices within art historical discourse. Luis Camnitzer (2007) speaks in terms of conceptual *strategies* that extend into politics. Moreover, the by now seminal touring exhibition *Global Conceptualisms* (1999) brought the ‘global’ into the picture. The danger in the denomination of a global register for practices across sites and historical periods whose only connection with the matter at hand seems to be their predisposition to a “critical stance” notably through the use of language is evident: it replays a non-tenable generalisation regarding the prioritisation of the linguistic component in art as a means to modernist purity and abstraction, and animates a hegemonic dissolution of alternative references, both political and aesthetic, to artistic production.

The divide conceptual art/conceptualism is not the only debate in naming reference and origin. Other strands of conceptual art’s historiography relate back to Henry Flynt (1961) who himself speaks of “concept art” rather than “conceptual art”; while Harrison (1988) observes how perhaps no other such brief period in the history of art has witnessed so many attempts to name a movement or to distinguish its factions: post-object art, multiformal art, non-rigid art, concept art, conceptual art, idea art, ideational art, art as idea, earthworks, earth art, land art, organic-matter art, process art, procedural art, anti-form, systems art, micro-emotive, possible, impossible, arte povera, post-studio art, meta-art. And not to forget, an analogous vocabulary develops in the discussion of modernism, post-modernism, “post” modernism, post-post modernism etc. In this process of constructing clusters of references and discursive hierarchies, the validation of different accounts in the writing, re-iterating and revising the past and a corresponding present itself accumulates value. It is these kinds of processes that ascribe value and attribute meaning that require our careful consideration.

Alternative Frameworks, Networks and Works

The mode of production and dissemination of conceptual art is particular, defined by circuits of socially engaged critics such as Siegelau, Harrison, Glusberg, Lucy Lip-pard, Ursula Meyer and Michel Claura, international networks, independent gallery press and public interventions in Europe, North and South America.² In early 1970,

2 For gallery networks in Europe see Richards, 1999. This is not to say that conceptual art was not present or quickly absorbed by the mainstream artworld. Notable examples include *Information* (MoMA, New York, 1970), *Seven Exhibitions* (Tate, London, 1972) and *The New Art* (Hayward Gallery, London, 1972). To a lesser extent in terms of the institutional space they occupied but not the discursive space they acquired, consider *When Attitudes Become Form* (Kunsthalle, Bern; ICA, London, 1969) and *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (New York Cultural Center, 1970).

Harrison meets Glusberg. They share a critical interest in artistic practices that challenge modernism's cultural hegemony and the writings of its history, and coordinate artistic exchanges by organising two exhibitions, *Art as Idea from England* (CAYC, Buenos Aires, 1971) and *From Figuration to Systems Art in Argentina* (Camden Arts Centre, London, 1971).

Demonstrating new forms of cultural production, such conceptual artworks interrogate the languages of the dominant ideologies both within the artworld (the modernist art discourse, the commercialisation of art) as much as beyond its presumed boundaries and inside the wider social sphere (imperialism, social movements, anti-colonial struggle, gender and race discrimination). In doing so, they advance a trans-categorical strategy to question and change not only the conditions of artistic production but also the hierarchies, values and systems of production of capitalist society.

The engagement of conceptual art with the artworld and the social context or, better said, with the artworld as part of a corresponding social, political and economic context results in a variety of materials, techniques and languages. Here, the use of different types of language not traditionally associated with art (philosophical, scientific, everyday) may be reflective but is not tautological. It may call attention to the material conditions of the work by signalling technical attributes of production such as size and material. However, and more importantly, it seeks to signify the process of signification *itself* in far more complex ways. As such, the multiplicity and amplitude of production becomes a means to question how the artistic *activity*, rather than just its product, communicates and functions in context. Likewise, conceptual art practices manipulate the circuits of communication not only visually (room placement after minimalism, experimentation with optical and mechanical elements in the case of photography and video, etc.) but also structurally and systemically within the semantic and pragmatic field [fig. 1].

Glusberg was director of the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC). Its prolific transatlantic activities highlight the importance of human life, communication and systems of signification; the need to take art out of the commercial circuits; "first"- "third" world exploitation and ideological domination; the relations across art, ideology and consumption; the active participation of the viewer; and the notion of the artist as investigator of social reality (CAYC, 1971, 1974, 1973, 1970). As Glusberg clarifies: "*el arte es una forma de significación de la realidad, un sistema semiológico; desde el punto de vista de la semiología, el arte es un discurso ideológico*" (CAYC, 1972). The differences between what was nationally presented and internationally circulated in CAYC's shows as well as Glusberg's personal trajectory can be reserved for another discussion. In either case, CAYC's international profile was materially made possible by the use of easily reproduced materials such as heliography, which Glus-



Fig. 1. *Grupo Experiencias Estéticas* (Luis Pazos, Héctor Puppo, Jorge de Luján Gutiérrez), *La Cultura de la felicidad* (1971). *Arte de sistemas I*, 19 July – 22 August 1971, CAYC/Museum of Modern Art, Buenos Aires.

berg introduced for the widely travelled exhibition *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano* (1972-1974)³ [fig. 2].

The interests of critics and artists from this period can be understood within their historical context (new technologies, structuralism, philosophy of language, semiology). As early as 1969, Glusberg invites Umberto Eco to Buenos Aires (as he did Clement Greenberg, Lippard and Joseph Kosuth). By 1976, Eco's *Theory of Semiotics* is translated into Spanish under the direction of Antonio Vilanova, professor at the University of Barcelona. Further highlighting the exchanges between Spain and Latin America, two particular publications discuss corresponding artistic developments close to their time of production: Simón Marchán Fiz's *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto* (1973) and Victoria Combalía's *La poética de lo neutro. Análisis y crítica del arte conceptual* (1975). The proximity be-

3 The exhibition toured Medellín (3rd Coltejer biennial), Buenos Aires, Pamplona, Madrid, Warsaw, Reykjavik, Quito, Panama, Cali, Oberlin (Ohio) and Richmond (Virginia). It was awarded the Gold Medal by the Yugoslavia-based jury for the international exhibition *Peace '75*, organised in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. According to Glusberg, the jury lauded the diverse international collective of contributing artists for their "all-embracing, lucid and harmonious approach to the underlying cultural problems in countries that seek new artistic paths in the midst of the changes which they are undergoing" (1989: 23).

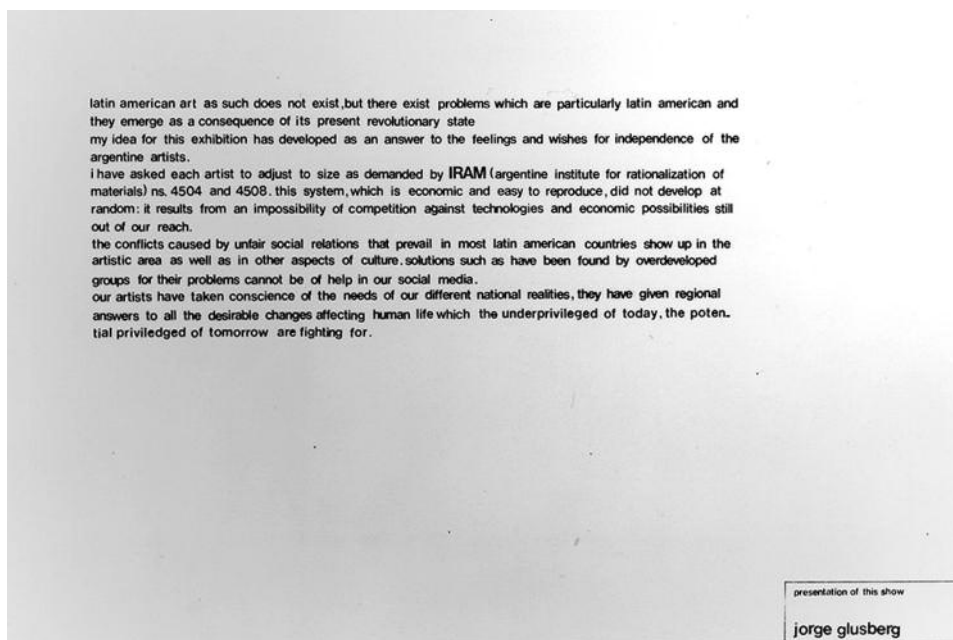


Fig. 2. Jorge Glusberg, *Presentation of This Show* (1972). *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano*, touring exhibition. University of Iowa Archives. The University of Iowa Libraries.

Source: Latin American Realities/International Solutions.

tween theoretical discussion and subject matter is not only temporal. It extends to the use of similar sociological frameworks, an informed reflection with socio-political extensions and a critical orientation to reconnect art with social praxis. Indeed, these authors offer methodological and theoretical insights regarding both conceptual art and art's social function that remain relevant in understanding cultural production today.

Combalía (1975) explains how the communicability of the work is made possible because of a sufficient common code. While interpretation derives from the cultural environment that conforms to the dominant ideology, one can find new ways of expression, given that reality evolves, that are not yet assimilated by ideology—and, we can add, by the market. From a similar perspective, Marchán Fiz (1972) discusses the artwork within its socio-cultural context as part of a system of communication, and calls for a new syntactic-semantic model in order to understand the dialectics of conceptual art. This, for Marchán Fiz, functions as an alternative to the American artistic colonisation. Moreover, it distinguishes the critical challenge, which Latin American art faced within its context of military oppression and imperialist exploitation, from a generalised understanding promoted then as it is now of an a-political and tautological linguistic conceptualism.

Reconsidering the Avant-garde

Conceptual art practices populated sites traditionally reserved for art criticism and moved beyond those spaces traditionally reserved for art (the museum room, frame or pedestal). They concretised an enquiry beyond individualised perception, a history of styles and problem solving in colour and form, and the narrative of ruptures well-contained within an autonomous art system. (It is not that one cannot historicise style, but one certainly needs to contextualise corresponding attitudes and interests.) By claiming the streets and other public sites, by manipulating systems of reference and by juxtaposing objects, activities, attitudes and languages not traditionally associated with art, they invalidated the conferral of art status by virtue of presence or declaration. In doing so, conceptual art redirected attention to meaning-making processes within the continuum of social semiosis,⁴ and relocated the production and communication of art within its historical and socio-political context.

From this perspective, the tendency to dematerialise the *object* of art can be understood as part of a critical programme to challenge art's markets and the ideological constructs that support them (the artist-genius, the expert critic, and the viewer-consumer). This disqualifies the *origin* or hierarchy of authorship: it is neither the work that is more important than the idea nor the idea than the execution; rather, it is a question of how to *articulate* the dialectics of experience and reflection *as* the dialectics of criticism. Seeking to reconnect art with life both in terms of lived experience and as part of social communication, artistic practice does not only address reality as its theme. On the contrary, it structurally, organically, articulates how itself is part of cultural production partaking discursive operations and ideological structures that run across all spheres of public life.

If there is a critical instruction for contemporary art this is not to be found in the prioritisation of the idea, thus rendering construction irrelevant. Rather, it lies in conceptual art's intention to manipulate the negative moment, which its assault on official and habitual reading and viewing regimes creates. A critical moment of categorical transgression, this opens a provisional discursive space, a space of semantic ambiguity where recognition collapses and experience (or the type of experience that modernist discourse defines and capitalist culture promotes) cannot be guaranteed. Shaping its legacy today, conceptual art not only challenged the way we do and talk about art, but also exposed decision—and meaning—making processes beyond the space of art as a

4 The field of semiosis consists of the syntactic (relations between signs), the semantic (relations between signs and their sense) and the pragmatic (relations between signs and users). Any object can function as a sign when its presence enables one to take into account something that is not present (Morris, 1971).

public and social space. By manipulating the interrelation of the artwork to the world, it interrogated art's function and mode of communication, and demonstrated the dialectic relation between art and criticism, and between artistic and everyday experience.

The articulation of this dialectics is one of the contributions of conceptual art to the consideration of the avant-garde as a category. A second one is how it allows us to refocus on art's autonomy in relation to its resistance to be assimilated by the culture industry. Conceptual art practices offer new modalities of reading both the work and its surrounding environment, a reflective *mode* of engaging with context that is initially performed on the work's own body in order to indicate a critical strategy for reading the world. Here, the work can be evaluated by its ability to sustain a critical distance and resist to affirmatively (re)produce the systems, structures and hierarchies it seeks to challenge—that is, resist a permanent inscription within the discursive apparatuses it interrogates.

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