

Essay

By Lucian Wester

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# **Photography and Conceptual art.**

**The aesthetic of administration.**

## **Introduction**

The following essay arose from two questions mentioned at the end of my last essay. The first has a direct link with that essay wherein I tried to find a reason why we consider photography to be objective? I questioned myself how photography got itself accepted within the discourse of fine art? The second question has to do with a fascination that I have with the work of the Bechers. What were their ideas about photography and how important is their work for photography and its place within the art world?

These questions led to the text below wherein I tried to describe how in the mid sixties of the last century Conceptual art arose and what its relation is to photography. Where did this Conceptual revolution come from? Why did a lot of Conceptualists work with photography? And what has this meant for photography in relation to the art world?

## **Bechers**

The period wherein the Bechers started working was post-war Germany in the 50s and 60s. In those days the majority of people tried to deny ideology, an ideology or anti-ideology, because of the horrific things that happened during the Second World War.

Although the work of the Bechers can be seen as an industrial archaeological project, they tried to preserve the industrial architecture of their time because it was rapidly disappearing. But this isn't the only thing why the Bechers made their work, more than an archive is their work about: Objectivity. Their aim was to suppress their own subjectivity as much as possible from a piece of work. And they did this by: 'This difficult and disciplined form of expression is achieved in the strict adoption of a constant, straight, composition, unchanged over nearly half a century.' (Sarah James, p.51) The Bechers tried to increase this rejection of the ideology and identity for instance by not only photographing the industry of Germany but from all over the world and combining them all together.

In their work they created a typological arrangement in which the photographs together form a generic type. 'The typological arrangement of their photographs enable the viewer to sense the similarities between each and the emergence of a generic type, whilst simultaneously registering all of the differences between the structures and their eccentric characteristics.' (Sarah James, p.53)

By showing their photos in this serial way and creating this generic type the subject, the industrial architecture, becomes more abstract.

The work can be both seen as aesthetic and anti-aesthetic, for it isn't picturesque but it is realistic in the sense that it shows us the beauty of the reality. The modernistic

idea of aesthetic is to closely entwined with ideology and therefore the horrors of the War.

The photographs by the Bechers bear the same opposition as the concepts of subject and object (particular and general).

### **Photography before conceptual art.**

Photography was mostly used in two ways; one being the document and the other an artistic work of art. Pictorialism tried to make a photograph that looked like a painting with soft focus etc. Also later movements such as 'f64' made very beautiful landscape photographs, almost like paintings. The only difference being that the focus was razor-sharp, hence the f64. But to review not that much changed within world of artistic photography, for there was always an emphasis upon the beauty of the photograph. The fake painterly aesthetic was one of the reasons why photography was not really recognized by the fine arts as being art during the first hundred years of its existents.

### **Conceptual art.**

Most of the Conceptual artists had a sculptor's background and all had teachers coming from the Minimalist movement. Within this movement there was a lot of discussion upon the status of the art object. The object itself however, the sheer fact that a work of art should be an object, wasn't been questioned. The early Conceptualist, disappointed with the art world around the mid sixties, started to reject the object and tried to make art that had no physicality. 'Because the proposal inherent in Conceptual art was to replace the object of spatial perception experienced by linguistic definition alone (the work as analytic proposition), it thus constituted the most consequential assault on the status of that object: its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution.' (Benjamin H.D. Buchloh p.515)

But also the counterculture of the sixties and new linguistic philosophy had played a role in the rise of Conceptual art. The Conceptualists wanted to make art more pure in being art instead of a commodity.

To rephrase: 'This move from is to why derives its content initially from two sources: linguistic philosophy's emphasis on matters of truth as matters of sense and context, and minimalist sculpture's recognition of the importance of context as a means of 'seeing' the artwork.' (John Robbarts 1997 p.17). Lucy Lippard calls this process dematerialization, because in her view a lot of the practises of artist around the 70s were dealing with this theme of dematerializing the art object but not where really collectively on the subject. She argues that most artists now considered Conceptualist had lot of different ideals but where all somehow related to the dematerialization of

the art object.

To understand the intentions of conceptual art a bit better it is interesting to discuss a temporal text written by Joseph Kosuth. He was one of the most purist conceptualist at the time. Kosuth has the idea that a work of art is like a proposition, it adds something of conceptual value to the concept of art. After it has succeeded in its goal the work of art will be of no value anymore, it will only be historical object. 'In other words, what is important in art is what one brings to it, not one's adoption of what was previously existing.' ( Joseph Kosuth, 1969 p.233)

Kosuth defines Conceptual art as the purist form of art because art only exist conceptually. In his essay 'Art after Philosophy' from 1969 he describes how and why all art after the first readymade by Marcel Duchamp can only exist conceptually: 'This change (readymade L.W.) – one from 'appearance' to 'conception' – was the beginning of 'modern' art and the beginning of 'conceptual art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.' ( Joseph Kosuth, 1969 p.232)

One of the quotes that I've read in a number of texts discussing Conceptual art was this: 'Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, viewed within their context – as art – they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he saying that a particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is true a priori (which is what Judd means when he states that 'if someone calls it art, it's art'). ( Joseph Kosuth, 1969 p.232)

Kosuth gives us his definition of art, something that is for him the exact definition of art: define what art is. He thinks that art should always question its own nature, it should be self-reflective.

### **Photography and Conceptual art.**

But what role did photography play in this whole conceptual revolution? In the preface of the book 'The impossible document' John Robbarts describes that within the foundations of conceptual art lies the conflict between iconophobia (the fear of images) and iconophilia (the love of images) that can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Most of the Conceptual artist tried to break down the hegemony of the visuality but they couldn't fully reject any visual image to present their ideas.

Photography is being used up till this point in time as both document and pictorial art, but the aesthetic of the photographic document has never been used in an artistic context. Minimalist had already been using photography for just plain documenting of their sculptures within the context of for example a gallery space. The Conceptualist followed in their footsteps but they didn't document sculptures, they documented their conceptual ideas or works. One very clear example of this is Bruce Nauman's

'Self-portrait as a Fountain' a work that can only exist by being documented through photography.

So through the conceptualist with their unquestioned faith in the claim of photography on the real, photography itself entered the world of fine arts: 'The photographic interest of Conceptual artists bypassed the fine arts tradition of Alfred Stieglitz, the spiritualism of Minor White, and even the formalism of Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. Instead Conceptualists plunged into an examination of publicly accepted notions of photographic truth. (Mary Warner Marien 2006, p.372)

Photography became for some Conceptual artworks, like Bruce Naumans Self-portrait as a Fountain, the actual or physical work of art. Although the Conceptualist chose photography for the fact that it is cheap and that it in a sense could materialize their real works, their conceptual ideas.

Besides photography the Conceptualist also used systems to structure their ideas and to make works. But above all it creates an idea of objectiveness, the same as photography's claim on the real give an objectiveness, both were used to dematerialize the art object.

Conceptual project collapsed in the mid seventies, it had failed to demolish the status of the art object and was set aside as idealistic nonsense from the sixties. The Conceptual art project may never fully be realised but it did change something, one of those things is that it established the aesthetic of administration: 'Just as the readymade had negated not only figurative representation, authenticity, and authorship while introducing repetition and the series (i.e, the law of industrial production) to replace the studio aesthetic of the handcrafted original, Conceptual Art came to displace even that image of the mass-produced object and its aestheticized forms in Pop Art, replacing an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization and institutional validation.' (Benjamin H.D. Buchloh p.520)

## **Conclusion**

The conceptualist wanted to dematerialise the art object in favour of more conceptual understanding of art itself, but to realised they still needed to make artworks. This was something problematic and so they tried to overcome the problem by choosing materials that were cheap and methods that were very clear in their form. Photography of course was one of these materials that were cheap and at the same time worked as an agency for the truth, the Conceptualist embraced photography's claim on the real and used it in their advantage.

Both the Becher's and the Conceptualist worked with photography for its documenting power to shift the attention of the viewer, away from work itself and to something conceptual. For the Becher's this was an objectiveness and for most Conceptualists

the idea of art itself. In a way they both failed in achieving their goals but they created a totally new aesthetic within the discourse of arts, that of the administration and that gave photography its way into fine art world.

'By ultimately dismantling both along with the conventions of visuality inherent in them, they firmly established an aesthetic of administration.' (Benjamin H.D. Buchloh p.525)

### **Research strands**

I want to look further into the way that photography developed itself from this point onwards. Mostly with the emphasis on self-reflective photography within the realm of the fine art. Artist like Jeff Wall, Alan Seculla and the students of the Becher's like Anderas Gurksy, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth. Also someone like William Eggleston would be interesting to investigate because he brought the color photography into the art world.

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