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IS CONCEPTUAL ART INHERENTLY NON-AESTHETIC? ART, IMMATERIAL LABOR AND THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS¹

Conceptualism as Crisis in the Aesthetic System of Art

There seems to be widespread consensus in contemporary art theory and aesthetics concerning the function and nature of Conceptual art understood in a broad and encompassing sense. It formalizes interpretive presuppositions that reached an unprecedented consensus about the antagonistic relationship between conceptual art and contemporary aesthetics. This interpretive consensus is based on two dogmas. The first dogma states that, considered to be the direct heir of Duchamp's anti-aesthetic ready-mades, conceptual art practices are usually interpreted as an *anti or an-aesthetic* artistic manifestation. The second assumption is that the anti-aesthetic character of conceptual art happens not only as a programmatic artistic intention, but also a result of rendering irrelevant the sensuous appearance of the artwork. The shortest formulation of the second interpretive assumption might be alternatively stated as follows: the relationship between form and content is contingent.² Taken together, these two dogmas can be considered to sum up a major crisis of the aesthetic definition and appreciation of art in the twentieth century art, marking a certain crisis of modernism.

However, these assumptions share a certain reading of aesthetics, marked by a Kantian tradition, as well as a specific formalistic stance towards conceptual art. In what follows, I would like to propose an alternative reading, according to which conceptual art, in its diverse historical forms, is neither anti- (or an-) aesthetic (as the first dogma would claim), except for a very limited notion of the aesthetic stemming from Kantian philosophy and Clement Greenberg's art criticism; nor

does it simply render irrelevant the sensuous appearance of the artwork (as stated by the second dogma). Instead, we may redefine the first assumption by stating that it actually expands the political dimension of aesthetic experience, by replicating patterns of community and social communication inside the artistic field. Such replication bridges the autonomy of art and its closed institutional system (the artworld) with the broader sphere of experience. Thus, conceptual art may be considered to re-organize the “distribution of the sensible”³ proposed by these formats of experience. Consequently, the simple thesis that I propose in the present text is that the relationship between form and content in conceptual art is not contingent, as it may seem. Even in conceptual art, form matters. It is rather the discrepancy between the material articulation of signs and their significance that becomes relevant as a critique of visual representation. Moreover, by linking the history of art with a history of forms of labor, as Jacques Rancière seems to suggest, I think that we may reconsider the core problem of conceptual art as being related more to the way community may be produced in and through artistic communication.⁴

Conceptual art and “conceptualism”: a brief genealogy

For those unfamiliar with the artistic phenomenon in question, conceptual art might be briefly described as an “art of the mind” [instead of the senses].⁵ That is, it can be defined by means of its medium specificity, either as an art of language - “a kind of art of which the material is language”⁶ - or as an art in which verbal language signals the “dematerialization” of the signifier towards pure significance.⁷ It might also be formally defined as a distinct artistic genre or language, informed by the neo-avant-gardes broader reaction to the aesthetics and values prompted by abstract expressionism.⁸ The latter attitude prevailing, it can further be defined as “an art of ideas” (instead of forms), as it was exemplified by Joseph Kosuth’s art series *Art as Idea as Idea* and defined both by artists and by art critics and theorists.⁹ Consequently, Conceptual Art becomes an artistic *manner* of expression or a “style”.¹⁰ One of the essential features of conceptual art in its historical manifestations is the unprecedented expansion of artistic objecthood, including documents (photographs, notes, instructions etc.), readymade objects, displacement and re-contextualization of objects, as well as performative actions

(interventions) that shade a new light upon a certain context, and (spoken or written) words.¹¹

Conceptualism may be understood from an art-historical perspective as describing a line of artworks encompassing both the historical conceptual art of the sixties and seventies and later “post-conceptual art” or “neo-conceptual” artistic productions. In this sense, it can be defined in terms of medium heterogeneity rather than as the art of language in a strict sense – that is, as a type of art in which object and idea coexist on an equal plan, being articulated in a contrasting tension rather than as a formal synthesis. But this later recollection between materiality and idea is often considered to represent new type of “everything-goes” formalism, in which idea itself becomes form. For instance, Western European and North American post-conceptual art manifestations (especially as represented by the group of the Young British Artists in the nineties), may be understood not as the historical accomplishment, but rather as the exhaustion of early conceptual art’s critical potential or as an “aesthetization of the neo-avant-gardes”.¹² According to Julian Stallabras, the transformation of “pure” conceptual art of the late sixties and seventies, oriented towards meta-artistic inquiries and socio-political interventions, into the global, and thus, *formal* conceptualism of the nineties is possible when art history is itself transformed into a pure history of empty forms.¹³

From a philosophical perspective, we may also understand the term “conceptualism” as denoting the core of the neo-avant-garde conceptual art as a historical phenomenon, its abstract and general features which may be later applied to other artistic phenomena. According to such a view, “conceptualism” describes a specific critical artistic attitude towards the nature and the function of art, characterized, on the one hand, by a meta-artistic questioning of the means and limits of artistic language and its social function and, on the other hand, by a sharp critique of visual representation. Thus understood, conceptual art becomes the basis of all-encompassing, contemporary artistic practices. As a set of defining features, conceptualism has been often reduced either formally to the use of written or verbal language as art or (and consequently), to an an-(or anti-) aesthetic new genre of art, according to which form is irrelevant, or at least contingent to the message or “idea” to be conveyed. In other words, the communicational function of art prevails over the aesthetic function.

Nevertheless, as I will try to prove in this paper, the major importance of conceptualism for contemporary art and for its particular aesthetic regime does not lay in the invention of a new artistic language, but

in the redefinition of the very notion of artistic form as a structure of communication or language. In what follows, I advance a reading of conceptual art informed by Jacques Rancière's articulation of aesthetics and politics and the post-Marxist notion of "immaterial labor", understood as cognitive, affective and linguistic production of knowledge, emotions and signs.¹⁴ According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labor involved in this production as *immaterial labor* — that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication."¹⁵ Following Rancière, I claim that conceptual art may be considered a particular form of "redistribution of the sensible", that is an articulation of ways of doing and making that affects other social practices and productions,¹⁶ or a specific articulation of artistic work and labor which instantiates particular political and aesthetic regimes of community. Consequently, in its historical development and geographical diversity, I state that conceptual art advances possibilities of living in common and social interaction corresponding to specific aesthetic practices. Some examples of particular aesthetic regimes of communication in conceptual art may include what I will instantiate as "system aesthetics", an aesthetic of administration", and an "aesthetic of services".

Two Dogmas of Conceptualism

Let us start our discussion of the anti-aesthetic aspect of Conceptual art by summarizing the two influential dogmas which support the interpretive consensus. The first dogma can be formulated as the anti-aesthetic stance or the demise of aesthetic experience. We can have at least two formulations of this dogma. The first one would state that conceptual art is aesthetically neutral: it is not concerned with the production/presentation of objects to look at, endowed with specific qualities and/or producing an aesthetic experience for the viewer. This formulation of the dogma is supported by several artistic statements and a long list of possible examples. We may quote, for instance, Joseph Kosuth, a pioneer of American, "analytic" strand of conceptual art, who explicitly states: "The point is this: aesthetics, as we have pointed out, are conceptually irrelevant to art. Thus, any physical thing can become objet d'art (...) but this has no bearing on (...) its functioning in an art context".¹⁷

We may also take into account, as notorious examples, Robert Morris's *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal*, an art piece in which the artist declares that, by his sole authority, he virtually withdraws any aesthetic qualities associated with one of his former works. The declaration alone (stated in a properly bureaucratic authenticity form) suffices to ascribe or to withdraw qualities to or from an object who is otherwise aesthetically-neutral as a vehicle of meaning.

There is a second, specifically narrow sense in which we can interpret the above-mentioned dogma. It runs as follows: conceptual art is anti-aesthetic, in opposing Greenbergian formalism and purism as the main values informing the definition and evaluation of art. Up to a certain extent, this thesis is also supported by a large amount of evidence. Much of "East-Coast" American and British Conceptual art grew out of a reaction against Greenberg's system of artistic values, favoring presentness of the object and advocating the purity of the artistic medium as "high art", which lies in its own proper visuality and is eventually reduced to the "flatness" of the canvas.¹⁸

On the contrary, just like other neo-avant-garde tendencies, Conceptual art seems indifferent to the materiality of the object. It addresses thinking rather than the senses; it favors either low quality or hybrid materials (like Fluxus or Arte Povera) or industrially produced materials (like in Minimalism or in Pop Art). Sometimes, the very realization of the artwork may be delegated to others (like in John Baldessari's *Tips for Artists*) or it may be even unrealized, or realized by the public at will (as in Lawrence Wiener's *Statements*). Additionally, "pure" conceptualists tend to replace visuality with textual description or other forms of recording information.

Ironically, in their overt anti-Greenberg reaction, the so-called "hard-core" conceptualists like Joseph Kosuth or the Art & Language group tend to become as purists as Greenberg itself. Just like Greenberg did in theory, the above-mentioned artists transform art into art theory and run an investigation into the nature of art. In their works, pure visuality is replaced by pure concept or ideas; subjectivity is evacuated by pure "objectivity"; sensuality is replaced by thinking processes; considered oppressive, "high art" is collapsed into "low art" or no art at all; being considered as the key factor in the definition of art, aesthetic value is declaratively negated. The purism of form becomes the purism of the idea.

If we take a closer look, we may easily notice that this dogma relates to a narrow understanding of aesthetic experience as a subjective activity of disinterested contemplation of the "free play of forms". It is informed

by Greenberg's own reductionist interpretation of the Kantian aesthetic judgment that conflates disinterestedness with "aesthetic distance".¹⁹ The redefinition of this dogma that I propose assumes that aesthetic experience as experience of pleasure or displeasure provoked by the contemplation of forms can be replaced by the understanding of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience as a political "distribution of the sensible".

The second dogma concerning the non-aesthetic character of conceptual art concerns the "dematerialization" of the art object or the irrelevance of artistic form for the artwork's value, appreciation and even meaning. There is a famous quote of Sol Le Witt that may summarize this dogma: "what the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned".²⁰

Given the fact that language tends to favor pure significance and to get reed of the signifier at all, the idea of the "dematerialization" of the art object has been proposed as a definition for conceptual art practices of the late sixties.²¹ In Lucy Lippard's account, conceptual art "emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively", which may "be provoking a dematerialization of art, especially of art as object".²² This conclusion is supported by the so-called "linguistic turn" initiated by conceptualism. "When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves but symbols or representatives of things. Such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself. The medium need not be the message."²³

Nevertheless, as the Art and Language group members noticed, "dematerialization" is a rather too strong term, since, in written or visual form, matter remains, after all, the support of the signification. Therefore, it might be replaced with "invisibility".²⁴ In my opinion, a different critique of this dogma can show that what has been perceived as "dematerialization" is in fact part of a larger drive towards the heteronomy of art, commonly initiated by the neo-avant-garde's *indifference towards the medium*.²⁵ If we interpret conceptual art not in isolation, but in connection with other forms of art of the time, we can see that, unlike Joseph Kosuth solitary inquiry into the purity of art, conceptual art at large militated also for the abolition of the distinction between art and life. This critique of the autonomy of art from the other spheres of experience can be narrowly understood as an iconoclast critique of (abstract expressionist) painting (supported for instance, by Charles Harrison²⁶), in relation to which the

intrusion of language makes art dependent upon “external relations” to its own modernist system of values and history. But, as I would like to suggest, placed in relation to other social practices, it can also be perceived as a radical critique of the modernist autonomy of the artistic form and objecthood by means of the transformation of the artwork in a system of communication, inherently related to other social communication systems in the broad sense. It is this connection between the dematerialization of the artwork and the rise of service industry, the management and the technology of information which allows for a specific sense of aesthetic experience connected with the everyday-life aesthetic experience.

Let us summarize. Both these dogmas concerning conceptualism relate not to a positive description, but to a negative understanding and definition of conceptual art in close relation to a Greenbergian understanding of Modernism and of aesthetic experience. The first conceptualist dogma attacks the centrality of subjective aesthetic experience, emotionally defined, regarded as a corollary of the second dogma. The second dogma attacks the understanding of the artwork as an aesthetic object whose expressive qualities are embedded in its sensuous (albeit, visual) appearance. Together, the two dogmas reinforce the reading of Conceptualism in merely formal terms.

Rethinking the Sensible: Expanding the Notion of Aesthetic Experience

In order to allow both for the fact that conceptual art does take into account form in the actual production or presentation of the artwork and that it facilitates a specific type of aesthetic experience, allow me first to expand the narrow sense of aesthetic experience reduced by Greenberg to a certain type of formal appreciation of the material qualities of the artistic object.

There is a sense in which Conceptual Art may accommodate an aesthetic use of ideas which returns our discussion to the properly Kantian description of the aesthetic character of art. In this sense, art is the presentation of aesthetic ideas, that is, of ideas (of reason) that cannot be presented or subsumed under a concept, but which can be instead metaphorically presented to imagination and intellect in their material embodiment. Instead of instantiating ideas, conceptual art may be considered to actually expand ideas in imaginatively complex ways.²⁷

Nevertheless, it is not this sense of conceptualism's intrinsic aesthetic character that interests me here, but a new understanding of aesthetic experience which gets art back to the sphere of intersubjectivity and politics. The Kantian model of disinterested judgment points out to an autonomous sphere of aesthetic experience, in which the appreciation of art and the appreciation of nature are separated, just like cognition and morality seem to be separated from the aesthetic judgment. As we know, unlike cognitive judgments which are determinative, aesthetic judgments are reflexive. They concern particular objects, but cannot subsume the subjective representations of the objects under a specific general concept. Instead, they can convey a feeling of pleasure or dislike which accompanies an object's representation for the subject. According to this feeling, the object is judged to be beautiful or not.

However, according to Jacques Rancière, aesthetic experience may also be understood in a more radical sense of the term related to our sense-experience of the world. It is related with the economy of space and time as structuring conditions (or a *priori* forms) of our perception - the "transcendental aesthetics" of Kant's first *Critique*. In Rancière terms, "aesthetics can be understood as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to experience (...) it is a delimitation of space and time, *of the visible and invisible*, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience".²⁸ In this sense, the aesthetic experience of art is not an autonomous sphere of experience in itself, separated from moral life and cognition, but it is always embedded in different *historically determined* conditions of perception which are to be found in the society at large. In this sense, we can speak about the aesthetics of politics.

Just like the relationship between art and politics, the relationship between art and aesthetics is, therefore, constitutive. As Rancière puts it, "aesthetic practices as I understand them, (...) [are] forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices". In turn, "artistic practices are ways of doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of the ways of doing and making as well as in the relationship they maintain to ways of being and forms of visibility".²⁹

The underlying assumption at work here is that art, understood as a type of social practice and a specific economy of labor, is always a part of the social life. Its objects are not autonomous in being socially unrelated, but rather by means of their specific regime of existence. In this respect, aesthetics is a specific regime of art, one that connects labor

and autonomy. Consequently, art as praxis is structurally related to society and to the way social life is constituted and governed, that is, to politics. Put in historical terms, art knows three regimes of existence – one in which is judged ethically according to its function, the other in which art is reduced to an aesthetic representation, the final one in which aesthetic experience and politics are mixed in order to create a different equalitarian social regime. This defines *strict sensu* the politics of aesthetics. Such redefinition of the aesthetic regime of art also implies a distinct sense of visibility, which is not reduced to the qualities of the surface, but to the position of the subject in relation to the object and to the formats in which we may perceive our world as such. It relates, in other words, to a politics of seeing and speaking in and about society, which is not limited to a passive mirroring of social life, but with an active transformation of existing living conditions by inventing new correspondences between discursive practices and material forms, between artistic and political actions. According to Rancière, “the representative regime in arts is not the regime of resemblance (...) but a certain alteration of resemblance – that is, of a certain system of relations between the sayable and the visible, between the visible and the invisible”.³⁰

Let us also take a closer look at Rancière idea of the “politics of form”. Broadly speaking, different types of social government and politics, that is, the sharing of common social life, are prescribed or reflected in the formats of (visual) art genres and media. In their own historicity, artistic forms reflect privileged types of politics, of which modernism, in Rancière interpretation would stand for the democratic regime of artistic representation. Briefly, in their quest for the autonomy of new artistic forms, avant-garde artists challenge the democratic regime of art and propose new distributions of space and time for the experience of the daily world, that is, new forms of commonality and sociability.

To sum up, artistic forms are challenging the possibilities of political and social experience, by challenging our experience in the intersubjective world. In Rancière terms, “what links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience”³¹ – that is, aesthetic experience. Consequently, if it is considered to offer such an aesthetic experience and it is considered to be art, then conceptual art offers itself a new distribution of the sensible and works in its aesthetic regime to establish a new form of artistic democracy.

Art as Immaterial Labor: Conceptual Art and the Redefinition of Form

Let us now return to the linguistic characteristic that may serve to define the medium specificity of Conceptual Art and to establish its unique position inside the regime of Visual Arts. I would like to take into account the definition of conceptual art as an information-based communication process – an interpretation also supported, among others, by Alexander Alberro.³² Such a definition is not incompatible with what I previously stated concerning both the heteronomous and heterogeneous character of conceptual art. For it is not the presence of written or spoken language that plays the crucial part in the constitution of art as being *conceptual*, but rather the very process of communication between artists and the public, understood in a broader sense. In this sense, *any* other structures that serve at recording, analyzing and transmitting cognitively relevant information may be used in the construction of an artistic project: ready-mades, documents, words and actions – including visual language like in documentary photographs.³³

We may note that the idea of dematerialization still plays an important part in understanding conceptual art if redefined as an information-oriented communicational structure, since the image of the artwork as an aesthetic object “to be looked at” is replaced with the transmission of information between the artist and its public. But if, conceptual art focuses on communicational and informational structures and sometimes borrows these structures from related fields such as the scientific language of sociology, cybernetics and analytic philosophy.³⁴ For instance, it is the case of Joseph Kosuth’s insistence on tautology and analytical propositions, or of Art and Language’s use of an “academic philosophical jargon”. But other conceptual artists also analyses the transmission, replication and critique of information in different other social fields such as law and administration, politics, sociology and the humanities at large. Thus, conceptual artists more often highlight impersonal and intersubjective formats of communication, pointing to the conditions of discourse and perception in which such public communication is structured in present-day social life. As Johanna Drucker and Edward A. Shanken have already suggested, the widespread use of language as a simple system of communication may be related to the advancement of technologies of communication and the rise of the “information paradigm” in the late sixties, the time when conceptual art appears (more or less) as an

autonomous genre on the artistic scene.³⁵ The emancipatory potential of transmitting unaltered information at distance in physical space may be associated with the desire to “dematerialize” the artwork to the point it becomes a mere system of communication deprived of aesthetic qualities.

However, in order to understand this assumption, we should also question the type of subjectivity they require from their viewer. In other words, how is the subject of artistic experience conceived by such artistic practices? And what type of subjectivity do they propose or relate to? It is obvious that the subject of conceptual art is a disembodied subject, the agent of thought and speech lacking any specific features. In other words, it is a linguistic abstraction. Artistic and aesthetic relations are formed in the space of pure semiotic communication, whose assumption is that language speaks itself, that is, that language articulates itself as a “text” while artists and viewers alike are not its creators, but merely its users. Meanings are the results of structures, that is, of simple semiotic codes, patterns and rules that govern intersubjective communicative experience. Such assumption is crucial for understanding conceptual art from the point of view of its relations both with aesthetic experience and forms of labor included in its production. For the major turn to be taken into consideration besides the “linguistic turn” in art history and theory in the late sixties is also the advancement of “immaterial labor”, that is, forms of labor that create affects and information instead of producing material objects.

Allow me to exemplify several types of social communication patterns and systems used in conceptual art that relate to these shifts in the construction of subjectivity and artistic labor. First and foremost, we find the widespread use of juridical and administrative language, that we may summarize under the heading of an “aesthetic of administration”. Many artists make use of administrative systems of artistic production, exhibition and reception, highlighting the constitutive character of the institutional context and its relations with other related social systems in which art is embedded. For instance, we may consider Mel Ramsden’s *Guaranteed Painting*, which offers a certificate of artistic authenticity and value associated to an empty canvas, or Robert Morris’ *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal*, where the artist claims to withdraw all aesthetic qualities from a previous sculpture, exhibiting the model of the sculptural piece accompanied by a certificate of aesthetic demise. Secondly, politics, sociology, economy and journalism are favorite fields for the *investigative* character of socially and politically engaged conceptual art and institutional critique. An illustrative example is Hans Haacke’s *MoMA*

Poll and Documenta Visitor's Profile, in which the system of voting and the form of sociological inquiry are used to interact with the public. We may also note the use of public communication systems, such as the postcards (On Kawara's *I Got Up Series*), or telegrams, such as Raushenberg's (in) famous *Portrait of Iris Clert*, in which the relationship between personal and the public/impersonal systems of communication is set forth by means of the use of the often impersonal formats favoring the "pure" transmission of information, or the use of advertising such as the Art Workers's Coalition famous *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies* annotated war crimes photograph. According to this paradigm of artistic production, operations of *classification, selection, recording and restructuring* information become autonomous artistic procedures.

This "aesthetic of administration" is not restricted to the realm of Western conceptual art. On the contrary, state bureaucracy and its excessive formalization of everyday life to the point that commonality becomes a regulative but empty form, becomes the background of archiving practices in the former Soviet Union that aim at deconstructing the rationality of the "big archive".³⁶ For instance, Ilya Kabakov's installations such as *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* expose the inner failure of the state machinery which turns material evidence in compulsive repetition and accumulation of debris without any coherent internal structuring principle. It is in this respect that we may understand the relation between the use of linguistic structures in the former Eastern Europe and the linguistic character of its ideology. As Boris Groys has noted, historically realized communism as a totalitarian political regime of an ideological nature may be understood by a complete "linguistification of society", where ideas replace commodities.³⁷ The hegemony of language becomes the background against which forms of social protest and alternative forms of subjectification become available. Whenever art seems to involve absurd or nihilistic actions and statements, of blunt character and minimalistic appearance, as in the artworks of the Moscow-based group Collective Actions, we may understand their incomprehensibility in relation to the rationality of social structures and bureaucratic language. If the logic of communism is a totalizing one, which means that a fragment of language and the whole linguistic structure of society are intricately related, a piece of nonsense is taken to imply the nonsense of other similar operations which sustain party ideology by means of logical paradoxes. The basic assumption active here is the same fundamental one: that language is an essentially social activity: "people's relationships with language

are understood to be a model of their relationships with society".³⁸ Consequently, to show the contradictions inside the structure of language means to show the contradictions of society itself. In their first action, *The Appearance* (1976), two members of the group come out of the forest carrying suitcases after a period of waiting. They distribute to the other members of the group that simultaneously formed the audience certificates of presence as participants to the event and disappear as mysteriously as they have arrived. Written language serves to record these actions and comment upon the content of the accompanying documentary pictures. It serves as a framing device for a politically charged notion of "nothingness", challenging the dominant ideology of "work" as a normative idea and an empty word.

Finally, we may recall the widespread use of the so-called "service industry" in which conceptual art sometimes serves as a critical tool questioning the power structures confining a certain regime of visibility. Aware of the rise of social communication as part of the growing industry of services, some conceptual artists subvert capitalist economy by replicating the same structures of working in constructed artistic situations. Thus, they highlight power relations operating inside particular systems of service industry. They also render visible the often "invisible" processes or situations. A case in point may be Mierle Laderman Ukeles's feminist and institutional critique interventions, such as the *Hartford Wash* (1973) in which, by hiring herself as a maintenance worker to the Museum, she made visible the maintenance work that supports the presentation of art in the artworld remaining nonetheless invisible for the large public.

We may note that all these spheres of communication are not proper to the artistic sphere or the artworld. They belong to the larger system of social communication in which art takes part. Also, we may note that they are not invented by the artists, but merely replicated with a twist inside the artworld. Artistic communication is situated within existing language-systems. Whenever they are duplicated inside the artworld, the usual regime of perception and the distribution of the visible and invisible, the relation between the spoken and the unsaid, are dislocated from their normal functioning and rearticulated. In this sense, conceptual art may be defined as a continuous process of *recoding*. What is already visible is put in words (as in Art Worker's Coalition's work); invisible administrative conditions can be brought into language (like in Mel Bochner's or Hans Haacke's examples); what is invisible is brought into light (Mierle Laderman Ukeles's case); finally, what is already known to

stand into a specific relation is set into different possible relations, such as in Art and Language's use of indexical systems in their famous *Index 01* work. All these works serve both to communicate information and prompt to moral questions.

We may also note that the dematerialization of the object understood as the simple communication of information does not exclude per se the existence of an aesthetic regime of conceptual art. There are two senses in which the replication of the formal structures of social communication can be called aesthetic. In the first sense, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh criticizes the so-called "pure" or "analytic" conceptual art, characteristic for the initial stages of American conceptual art as meta-artistic investigation,³⁹ of replicating conditions of production of post-Fordist society, in which administration of work has replaced production of objects.⁴⁰ In this sense, Buchloh rightly considers that "analytic" or "pure" conceptual art like Kosuth's "investigations" ultimately stages a manner of communication relevant for the language of administration and therefore, instead of critically subverting the relationship between art and the market, it is only proposing a particular "an aesthetic of administration", inserting a new language into the artworld. Indeed, much of "pure" or "analytic" conceptual art can be understood not only as a philosophical analysis of artistic language, but also as an aesthetic replication of social communication systems in late-capitalism.

But conceptual art may not only imitate social life, by formally replicating already existent structures of communication, but it may also critically challenge and reconfigure relations of power inscribed in these patterns of communication and social production. As I mentioned, by its democratic impulse and emancipating intentions, it may also relate back to the aesthetic regime of art as a specific "distribution of the sensible" by inventing structures of (in)visibility, disclosing power relations and proposing particular formats of creative participation.

To summarize, Buchloh's "aesthetics of administration" thesis points to an inherent aesthetic dimension of conceptual art, highlighting the importance of the formats of art installation and presentation to the public and pointing out the relation between their aesthetic potential and the social world they replicate or relate to, starting from the type of labor that is included in their construction. But this replication is aesthetic not only in the sense of being an imitation of existing structures of communication into the language of art that can further be appreciated for its formal qualities, but also if we conceive it as a critical questioning of their inherently

political potential, taken as constitutive conditions of social, intersubjective experience. Aesthetic critique may occur by consciously altering the patterns of perception inscribed in the forms of language they replicate inside the artworld. With the risk of offering a very rough illustration of the idea of the political regimes inscribed in the new artistic forms proposed by conceptualists, let us mention several meanings of the political represented in the above-mentioned examples. For instance, we may encounter an authoritarian regime of artistic communication, where the artist is the main legitimating principle for the meaning and experience of the work, while the public is only the executor of the artists's instructions, such as Rauschenberg's telegram reducing a portrait of the gallerist Iris Clert to a mere assertion – "this is the portrait of Iris Clert if I say so - or Morris's decision of imaginarily withdrawing aesthetic qualities form an artistic piece. On the other hand, we may also encounter a critique of forms of representational democracy, like the use of the voting system in Haacke's work, or even direct participatory democracy such as Ukeles's *Sanitation Project*. But in a more nuanced sense, critical aesthetics concerns what I have described above in relation to the aesthetic regime of experiences and their redistributions proposed by conceptual art (that is, their own micro-politics) as a relationship between the visible and the sayable.

Therefore, in a positive description of conceptual art, we may consider that the replacement of purely visual objects (in the narrow artistic sense) with other systems of communication in a broad sense (documents, interventions, instructions, indexes, signs, conversations, statements, maps), both replicates and questions a specific configuration of communication as cognitive labor and its related intersubjective experience in present-day society.

Concluding Remarks: On the Aesthetic Potential of Conceptual Art as a Critical Tool

The critique of the two dogmas of conceptualism I have advocated so far advances a reading of conceptualism not only as a mere negative form of critique of the autonomy and purity of the Greenbergian type of modernist art, but as the introduction of a radical heteronomy of the artwork in the artistic language, both aesthetically and politically inscribed into social systems and relations. If conceptualism implies a critique and subversion of aesthetic regime of art, it does so rather by reusing

familiar “regimes” and patterns of social communication in order to expose the relationship between art and social production of knowledge rather than by merely rejecting a narrow concept of aesthetic experience inherited from Kantian theory, related to a formalist theory of art which reduces form to visual appearance. To put it bluntly, I have claimed that the aesthetic potential of conceptual art lies in the “redistribution of the sensible” that it operates by using existing social communication patterns and strategies and producing art as “immaterial labor”. Relating thus to a political economy of space and time, (post-)conceptual artists politically propose and challenge different types of living in “common”. Thus, conceptualism as a typology of artistic production can be ultimately understood as an artistic practice of *critical aesthetics*, defined by artistic uses of everyday-life patterns of communication in order to reflect or refract dominant patterns of social labor and the conditions of living in common they relate to.

NOTES

- ¹ The author of this paper was a NEC-*Adevărul* Fellow for the academic year 2010-11.
- ² Paul Crowther, *The Language of Twentieth Century Art*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997, pp. 178-179.
- ³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, transl. Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York, Continuum, 2006, pp. 12-20.
- ⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press, 2009, p. 22.
- ⁵ Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art*. London, Tate Publishing, 2002, p. 6.
- ⁶ *Ibidem*.
- ⁷ Simon Morley: *Writing on the Wall. Word and Image in Modern Art*. Thames and Hudson, London, 2003, p.143.
- ⁸ Paul Wood, *Varieties of Modernism*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 296-8.
- ⁹ Le Witt, Sol: "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art". in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge Mass., The MIT Press, 2000, pp. 12-18; Lippard, Lucy and Chandler, John: "The Dematerialization of Art" in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. cit.*, pp. 46-52.
- ¹⁰ Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art*, London, Tate Publishing, 2002, p. 75.
- ¹¹ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, London, Phaidon Press, 1998, p. 7.
- ¹² Julian Stallabras, *Art Incorporated*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 152.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 174.
- ¹⁴ The notion of immaterial labor was introduced by Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato in the seminal article "Immaterial Labour", trans. Paul Colilli & Ed Emory, in Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 132-146. It was later popularized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their subsequent works published in the 2000's.
- ¹⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 239.
- ¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, transl. Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 13.
- ¹⁷ Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy", in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000, p. 164.
- ¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting". In Clement Greenberg: *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. IV, ed. John O' Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

- ¹⁹ Dairmuid Costello, "Kant after Le Witt", in Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (eds.), *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007, pp. 97-100.
- ²⁰ Sol Le Witt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000, p.12.
- ²¹ Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art", in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. cit., pp. 46-52.
- ²² *Ibidem*, p. 48.
- ²³ *Ibidem*, p. 49.
- ²⁴ Terry Atkinson, "Concerning the Article 'The Dematerialization of Art'". In Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000, pp.
- ²⁵ Paul Wood, *Varieties of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 97.
- ²⁶ Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting. Further Essays on Art and Language*, Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001.
- ²⁷ Dairmuid Costello, *op.cit.*, pp. 110-111.
- ²⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London and New York: Continuum Books, 2006, p. 13.
- ²⁹ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso, 2007, p. 12.
- ³¹ Jacques Rancière: *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2009, p. 23.
- ³² Alexander Alberro: "Reconsidering Conceptual Art. 1966-1977". In Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000. Pp. xvi- xxxvii; Alberro, Alexander: "Introduction: At the Threshold of Art as Information" in Alexander Alberro and Patsy Norvell: *Recording Conceptual Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, pp.1-17.
- ³³ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1998, p.7 .
- ³⁴ Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy", in Michael Newmann and John Bird (eds.), *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, pp. 47-65.
- ³⁵ Edward A. Shanken, "Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art", in Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 235-250; Johanna Drucker, "The Crux of Conceptualism: Conceptual Art, the Idea of Idea and the Information Paradigm", in Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 251-269.

- ³⁶ Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive. Art from Beurocracy*, Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 2008, pp. ix-xiv.
- ³⁷ Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*. London: Verso, 2010, pp. 1-32.
- ³⁸ Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptualism: Its Aesthetics and History", in *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*, edited by Boris Groys, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2008, p. 58.
- ³⁹ Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy", in Michael Newmann and John Bird (eds.), *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, pp. 48-50.
- ⁴⁰ Buchloh, Benjamin H. D., "Conceptual Art 1962- 1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique", in *October*, 55, 1990, pp. 105-43.