

SOME THOUGHTS ON CONTEMPORARY ART

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We read a lot these days about conceptual art and the question arises, what is conceptual art? It's a question I would not be so brash to attempt to answer here, but the following may provoke discussion.

Unlike previous art movements (if it can be designated as such), its visual and tangible manifestations are mere diagrams that illustrate an idea: random delineators, or photographic records of an event spelt-out in space and time. This much is clear: we have moved, in conceptual art, away from traditional forms and the fully articulated art object is as extinct and irrelevant as the dinosaur: *formalism* is despised and the other tradition, Dada and Surrealism, is held to be the valid one. In these works the concept, often disembodied, is master, and the materials and forms that are used are expedient only as markers or recorders. It follows, too, that conceptual art carries within it an incipient, and often overt, protest; it is not for buying or selling; it is not an exchangeable market commodity.

In the catalogue foreword to the When Attitudes Become Form exhibition (I.C.A. London /69) Scott Burton writes: "The conceptual, categorical ambiguities of the new art stand in sharp contrast to its direct occupation of space or specific demonstrations of physical laws." He then asks the question of what happens when a Bill Bollinger rope piece (included in the exhibition), fixed and taut between two anchoring bolts, is disassembled. Does it still exist, as rope, as potential art, or as art?

These are questions that, plainly, Bollinger himself is asking - using suitably impermanent materials - philosophical questions to do with the viability of art, the effect of change through time, chance, or willful act. The work itself is not necessarily a work of art and the art quality, if it exists, is secondary to the idea. As Burton says: "Its installation is made synonymous with its existence, whereas a painting or fixed-form sculpture . . . does not literally cease to be when it is in storage."

Clearly the Bollinger is more act than object and the ideal is defined by the most minimal of means. Time and change are essential ingredients. There is, however, a broad distinction that separates what is, in essence, the mere demonstration of a theory, in Bollinger's case, and the anatomy of a work of art which embodies a complete fusion of concept with the materials used as, for instance, in a Brancusi bronze head. Why do I, for one, regard the Brancusi as a work of art and the Bollinger as an exercise, a titivator of ideas, no more, no less, even if the idea behind the work is well demonstrated by the taut and anchored rope and form and content, in this work, happen to be as well married as they are in the Brancusi? But while Bollinger introduces a time element. Brancusi's head is timeless. It exists as an enduring embodiment of an idea; it has been born out of a struggle between concept and material; and its birth pangs have been hard and prolonged as it emerges, in its time, out of the womb of western art, a fresh, new extension of that tradition.

On the other hand, the Bollinger is disarmingly simple. In its full cycle it demonstrates the kind of change that could have equally been demonstrated by any number of other simple acts, the blowing of smoke rings, patterns of graphite strewn across a gallery floor subjected to change as the spectator-participant walks across the floor (another Bollinger work). All these manifestations are ephemeral and banal in the extreme. They touch on questions of natural phenomena but have little or no scientific relevance. Furthermore, they do not stand alone as a Brancusi does. They must be supported by a written explanation, a manifesto of intentions.

The literary basis of this movement places it well within the surrealist tradition. Burton refers to "an experience of anxiety about being" which is one of the fundamental tenets of surrealism. On a grander scale Christo's Little Bay project, now as ephemeral as life itself, neatly documented away in little boxes, raised these same questions of an essentially pessimistic and fatalistic nature. In 1960 Tinguely's self-destructing machine set in reverse acceleration the normal creative processes. At least it attempted to, in a comic-heroic fashion.

In recent months conceptual art has come to Sydney. It is essentially a poor man's art. It is unmarketable and non-establishment. Ideas are free; string and rope, wire and pebbles, flex and light globes are cheap. The movement itself is likely to be as transitory as Dada, as impermanent as the materials it uses. Mary McCarthy's cautionary note "You can hang an act on a wall" is perhaps more relevant now than it was when said. After all, if a Jackson Pollock was the sum total of a series of acts, at least they were directed towards the making of a finished object. The evidence is still there - they were not just gestures in the air.

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