Remembering and Forgetting Conceptual Art

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In 1972 Ursula Meyer published her classic compendium *Conceptual Art*—a slim paperback that is remarkable not only for the currency it held at its time of publication, but also for its cover design. Set in white-on black, uppercase Helvetica, the phrase "Conceptual Art" is repeated seventeen times, bleeding from top to bottom as if ad infinitum. Meanwhile, the book itself, which predated Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* by one year, features the work of some forty artists, including Vito Acconci, Victor Burgin, Dan Graham, Adrian Piper, and Ed Ruscha. Instead of framing each project with explanatory texts or contextualizing essays, Meyer juxtaposes the work with a selection of quotations from the likes of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Roland Barthes, reserving her remarks for the blurb on the back cover. For Meyer, this new, idea-based art eliminated the need to distinguish between artist and critic, thus untethering the artist from the art historian's analysis. Instead, the book's cover stands in—formally at least—as the primary framing device, underscoring the fact that even as its history was still being written the aesthetic that we associate with Conceptual Art had already been codified within the popular imagination: that is, black-and-white, stripped down, serial, bureaucratic and textual. The design of the book's cover thereby distilled the heterogeneous practices of the artists included, acting as a harbinger of what we now think of as the "look" of classic conceptual practice.

While it is not the purpose of this essay to map out the different branches and legacies of Conceptual Art, it is important to point to the way this distillation elides complex nuances if we are to begin to think through conceptualism's implications for photography. The dismantling of representational signifiers in Conceptual Art resulted in works that were seemingly immaterial (systemic, performative, text-based, ephemeral, amateurish, etc.) when compared with the more traditional formalism of the previous generation of Abstract Expressionists. However, as Benjamin Buchloh has noted, because of the "range of implications of Conceptual Art, it would seem imperative to resist a construction of its history in terms of a stylistic homogenization, which would limit that history to a group of individuals and a set of strictly defined practices and historical interventions."[1] Moreover, even within these stylistic similarities, it is necessary to make distinctions between the key players. For example, the implications of conceptual works varied even within the select group of artists associated with Seth Siegelaub (Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner), not to mention between artists working outside of the small New York scene.

As demonstrated by Liz Kotz's research and other recent scholarship on the use of photography by artists in the 1960s and 1970s, Conceptual Art's turn to the ordinary or quotidian was multifaceted. The impulses behind these works ranged from differing reactions to Minimalism and Post-Minimalism combined with investigations that were both anticipated in the work of John Cage and Fluxus and concurrent in modern dance and experimental poetry. Which is just to say that the form, in this instance, should not necessarily be mistaken for the whole, as it is only one variable in a rather complex equation of influences, pedagogies and ideologies. By reducing what we have come to understand as Conceptual Art to a uniform movement or style we run the risk of conflating the influence of aesthetics with that of ideas. Further, if we are to resist the rigid categorizations and market-driven dichotomies of artists using photography versus art photographers, we must also resist the temptation to collapse different critical strategies and investigatory concerns into aestheticized, nostalgic narratives.[2]

Nevertheless, with the integration of photography into art schools and Master of Fine Arts programs and the imminent obsolescence of analog photographic printing, a bleeding and blending has occurred. For a generation of young photographers who might never print their own work or have to justify their medium, the distinctions between conceptual practice and more traditional documentary modes have become increasingly malleable. That said, the pedagogic hodgepodge of the art-school environment is only part of the equation, for one might also look to the lack of adequate art histories that integrate photography as more than a footnote within surveys of twentieth-century art.[3] For many students today, art history is fluid and pluralism is a given, creating a tendency to sample freely. As Thomas Crow has pointed out in his essay "Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art," consciousness of precedent has become very nearly the condition and definition of major artistic ambition in today's arena.[4] However,

the process of identifying and citing previous generations is necessarily enmeshed with an element of misrecognition or even paramnesia. That we read our own desires and historical conditions onto the past seems obvious, but this continuing process of remembering and misrembering is very different from the conversations, generational anxieties or ideological clashes at play in and between artistic movements. The stakes are different when the process functions more like a personal archive from which histories are constructed at will among seemingly disparate elements and time periods. (Allan Sekula's comparison of the archive to a toolshed is apt in this regard.)[5] However, just as one can build from the archive, the archive is also itself a destructive container. As Derrida would have it, the original memory disappears, replaced by the structure imposed by the archive; memory necessarily entails a replacement of one image by another through a repetition of impossible originals.

The way we historicize artistic influence is also part of this condition and offers an opportunity to reevaluate the stakes of even our most foundational critical narratives. To date, Jeff Wall's account in his essay "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," although often contested, has stood as one of the decisive voices in tracing the ramifications of Conceptual Art for contemporary photographic practice. In Wall's account, the modernist concerns of self-reflexivity and medium specificity are ultimately realized in conceptual artists' deskilling and amateurization of the photograph. For conceptual artists, photographic depiction is detached from representation and thus points to what Wall calls the "experience of experience." In this account, conceptual artists' images are consciously employed and constructed as the antithesis of the highly skilled modernist photograph. It is precisely because they are produced outside of the "History of Photography" that they distill the medium to its essence, thus opening the door for the reintroduction of picture-making in or around 1974.

To be sure, this summary risks an over-simplification of Wall's argument. Still, if this moment truly represented the furthest limits of modernist self-reflexivity in photography, why should it inevitably lead the medium back to painting— pictorialism, pastiche, and tableau? Perhaps there are other ways to think about this story other than the way Wall has narrativized it. That Conceptual Art was reacting against the craft of fine art photography is only one possibility. As we know from the writings of many conceptual artists working at the time, their use of photography was, for the most part, detached altogether from a consideration of photographic histories.[6] Rather, the employment of a deskilled photographic process was less an outright rejection of one kind of photography in favor of another than it was an embrace of particular representational strategies made possible by photography. It is the conceptual artists' approach to the photograph—using it as an image that stands in for an idea—that offers some of the greatest significance for our understanding of the potential for photographic representation. Furthermore, conceptual artists' reduction or amateurization of the photograph must also be acknowledged as an aesthetic decision, no matter how much it may be tied to chance operations or deconstructive procedures. Wall's proposition that Conceptual Art was the catalyst for photography's transcendence of its own medium, making possible a return to pictorial strategies, thus suggests that Wall may be more invested in distancing himself from modernist photographic practice than were the conceptual artists themselves.

Indeed, just as Wall posits 1974 as the year of a new order of picture making, Buchloh argues that 1975 is when Conceptual Art goes on a brief hiatus. It is worth considering the significance of these years, which mark the resignation of Richard Nixon and the end of the Vietnam War. As it happens, 1974/75 is also the moment when Martha Rosler produced *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*. While I would be hesitant to burden this oft-cited work with too much significance, Rosler's juxtaposition of typewritten text and straightforward, black-and-white photographs can be seen as a bridge between a certain conceptual practice and documentary photography (even as it critiques it). In turn, 1975 was also the year of the *New Topographics* exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY—a seminal collection of work by photographers who had made their mark using large-format cameras to depict the landscapes of suburbia, industrial decline, and the American West, including Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, Stephen Shore, and Bernd and Hilla Becher.

For William Jenkins, the curator of that exhibition, these photographs were characterized by their banality and lack of style. Although this remark might seem strange from today's perspective given many of the photographers' critical success and massive influence, at the time the photographs were discussed as empty and anonymous, echoing early descriptions of Conceptual Art. It should come as no surprise, then, that in his catalogue essay Jenkins

highlights Ed Ruscha's deadpan photographs as an inspiration for at least some of the photographers in the exhibition. However, for Jenkins, this deadpan quality is where the similarities end, the distinction being that for Ruscha the photograph was a means to an end, a comment on representation and art as opposed to an exploration of photographic meaning. That is, Ruscha's photographs of parking lots and gas stations are only partially concerned with their ostensible subject matter. For Jenkins, the distinction between Ruscha's photographs and the pictures in the *New Topographics* exhibition is the difference between what a photograph is "*about"* versus what it is "*of*." The photographers included in *New Topographics* were drawing from and reacting to a variety of photographic influences, among them street photography, Andy Warhol, and Neue Sachlikeit. In particular, as Jenkins suggests, the formal qualities of conceptual projects like Ruscha's books and photographs were separated from their critical context, adopted, and transformed.

Given this ability to separate a certain photographic formalism from its ideational underpinnings, we might also consider how such strategies inform practices outside Conceptual Art's conventions of photographic vision. Here, it is helpful to recall Wall's account of Conceptual Art's use of photography, in which he posits two modes of photographic reportage: the performative and the parodic. One functions as a document of an event, while the other eludes, refuses, or trumps depiction. It is this second instance that interests me, because it highlights certain problems posed by representation in photography. To take the work of one of Wall's primary examples, Douglas Huebler, as a case in point, there seems to be a shift in the onus of meaning away from the subject depicted in the photograph. For instance, in *Location Piece #2, New York City – Seattle, Washington, July 1969*, Huebler assigned the same task to a person in each of the three cities: to photograph a place that he/she "felt could be characterized as being (1) frightening (2) erotic, (3) transcendent, (4) passive, (5) fevered and (6) muffled."

The photographs were then scrambled, so that in the final piece the intent of the photographer vanishes and the viewer is left to project his/her own psychological condition on the images. In his statement accompanying the work Huebler writes:

> "I would define art as an activity that extends human consciousness through constructs that transpose natural phenomena from that qualitatively undifferentiated condition that we call 'life' into objective and internally focused concepts. Since Impressionism most art has been based on an inference that our experience of natural phenomena necessarily calls for its transposition into visual manifestations. My work is concerned with determining the form of art when the role traditionally played by visual experience is mitigated or eliminated."[7]

There are several other works in Huebler's oeuvre from this period that gesture to the limits of photographic representation with ever greater poignancy. For instance, when Huebler photographs in the direction of a birdcall heard in Central Park, the viewer is only shown a tangle of trees; when he attempts to photograph every person alive, we are confronted with the impossible nature of such encyclopedic taxonomic endeavors. While we could also consider the impulse to point the viewer outside of the photograph's frame through the lens of Robert Smithson's non-sites, it was through Huebler's pedagogic legacy that such strategies have gained currency within contemporary photographic practice: Sarah Charlesworth, Mike Kelley, and Christopher Williams were all his students.

Instead of arriving at a dematerialized object, I would argue that such work engages in a sort of masking in which images, even when utterly depictive and seemingly objective in nature, betray an opaqueness of meaning that is derived precisely *through* photographic representation. For all of the textual apparatus that accompany Williams's images, his viewers are nevertheless left with a catalogue of factual information that conveys little about the modes of production and systems of exploitation and consumption behind the objects depicted. Ultimately, the photograph withholds meaning even as it discloses itself entirely. Similar to Huebler's investigations of subjective or perceptual experiences that must necessarily lie outside of the photograph, in Williams's work meaning is always located elsewhere. For Williams, the inability of the photograph to communicate fully

> "[A]ctually reflects or could represent a viewer's relationship to the world outside of the pictures. Every object around us is at once very present and identifiable, but also the representative of multiple historical trajectories, economies and desires which you barely have to scratch the surface to get into. The coffee you're drinking is obviously a product that had a rich history here in Europe, but it's also just a cup of coffee. And that's something inherent in all objects."[8]

A similar archaeology of the image or object is being explored by younger artists such as Simon Starling, for whom the object—whether a photograph, Eames chair or bicycle—is only one point in a series of interconnected material histories. For all three —Huebler, Williams, Starling—the photograph operates as a document whose meaning is contained not primarily in what it depicts, but in the myriad associations that it mobilizes.

This is but one thread that we might follow when discussing how the strategies of Conceptual Art have come to inform contemporary photographic practice. As artists continue to quote the aesthetics of Conceptual Art we might ask whether this is indicative of a continued investigation of ideational concerns or an appropriation of style as an empty signifier for criticality. With regard to photography in particular, we might on the one hand consider the recent turn to seemingly immaterial models of distribution and accumulation that speak increasingly to the way we use and understand images, while, on the other, reconsidering how works in so-called "conventional photography" skirt the edge of conceptual strategies or have been informed by them. In this light, how do we situate a work such as Joel Sternfeld's *On This Site*, which at once points to the potential for historical trauma behind every photograph while at the same time producing important photographic documents in and of themselves? When an artist makes reference to "conceptualism" is it based on a furthering of the ideas of autonomy or an aestheticization of its components? [9] At what point do we call a work conceptual—does it begin with an idea or an aesthetic?

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to another book cover of sorts, this time from the March 2008 issue of *Artforum*, on which a full-frame, medium-format color photograph is reproduced at the center of a white field. The image is from Zoe Leonard's project "Analogue," and it depicts an array of used items such as shoes, a crucifix, and eyeglasses. Amassed over nine years, the larger project is comprised of approximately four hundred such photographs, in color and black-and-white, of subjects like small storefronts, independently owned businesses, outdoor markets, secondhand sales, and homemade signage. Exhibited at Documenta this past summer, "Analogue" is especially remarkable precisely because of its obvious indebtedness to the history of traditional documentary photography. For Mark Godfrey, writing in the accompanying article, "Analogue" is a document of an economy that with globalization and increasing corporatization will soon be outmoded, if it does not disappear entirely—an analog photographic gesture in a digital world.

Still, despite its unabashed embrace of the language of the vernacular subject within a clearly documentary photographic practice, for Godfrey Leonard's project is best understood in a conceptual lineage that includes the Bechers and elements of Pop Art.[10] By describing "Analogue" as an "allegorical" project, Godfrey is thus able to situate Leonard more comfortably among her immediate peers in New York's early eighties downtown scene and the postmodern works of the Pictures Generation. However, to reclaim this ostensibly documentary project as an "allegorical impulse" shifts the valence and perhaps the poignancy of the work from the legacy of Evans to that of Rauschenberg. But this is not necessarily a case, as we have seen, of clear distinctions. Whatever terminology might ultimately be employed as a framing device, it is clear from Leonard's diverse oeuvre that her influences are rich and multiple. Indeed, for much of the work being produced today we must acknowledge something deeper than stylistic quotation, but rather a kind of double indebtedness—both to Conceptual Art and to photography as a conceptual practice.

WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES
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Notes

1. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962 – 1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter, 1990), p.107.
2. The recent exhibition *Romantic Conceptualism* is a case in point. In particular, the curator of the exhibition singles out Bas Jan Ader as one of the founding fathers of a certain emotive brand of conceptualism. As Thomas Crow observed over ten years ago, there is a danger in making "Ader into a retrospectively romanticized cult figure." This "romanticism" or sentimentality in Ader's work is quickly deemphasized once his work is couched in the terms of European post-war trauma and displacement.
3. Although History of Photography courses are common in art history programs, photography is rarely fully integrated into 19th and 20th century art survey courses. Thus, there is little opportunity to contextualize the different strands of photography as they relate to the broader sphere of artistic practice.
4. Thomas Crow, "Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art," in *Art After Conceptual Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p.59.
5. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive" in Brian Wallis (ed). *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists.* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), pp. 114-127.
6. While these works implicitly stand in opposition to the aesthetics or social initiatives of the art photography of the same era, the photograph was utilized more often as a tool or means to an end, employed as an objective, mechanical, recording device. Joseph Kosuth, for example stated "I didn't consider the Photostat as a work of art; only the idea was art."
7. Douglas Huebler, *Location Piece #2, New York City – Seattle, Washington, July 1969*
8. Christopher Williams, "Christopher Williams in Conversation with Mark Godfrey," *Afterall*, No. 16, (Autumn/Winter, 2007), p.69
9. Liz Kotz observes, "While critics continue to argue that the conceptual use of language as an artistic medium propels something like a 'withdrawal of visuality' or 'dematerialization' of art, and a current generation of artists often seems intent on trawling the 1960s for remnants of ephemeral practices that can be turned into commercially successful objects..." *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) p.98.
10. Mark Godfrey writes "Leonard has managed to produce an allegorical work with straight-on photography, something more astonishing when we consider that the 'allegorical impulse' has usually been associated with postmodern photographic strategies of quotation, appropriation, and collage. *Analogue's* clearest connections are to other archival projects (the Becher's, for instance) whose focus has been disappearing objects and buildings, but the work should also be contextualized within the history of Pop art." *Artforum* (March 2008), p.300.