

## The Conceptual Dimension of Art

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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# The Conceptual Dimension of Art

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Boissier, Jean-Louis. *La Relation comme forme : l'interactivité en art*, Genève : Mamco, 2004

Godfrey, Tony. *L'Art conceptuel*, Paris : Phaidon, 2003, (Art & idées)

- 1 Recent publishing events have prompted a return to Conceptual Art, and a close look at the evolution of current art through its somewhat conceptual dimension, in the visual sense that we can lend this term. So Tony Godfrey proposes a history of Conceptual Art in the 20th century, which chronologically follows its major artistic developments. Divided into thematic chapters ("The anti-art gestures of the beginnings of modern art", "The postwar period: the alternatives to painting", "Phoney, radical, and dogged: realities of the early 1960s", "What's your name?: artists and words since 1980"...), this generously illustrated and well-documented book can also be read like a general epic of creation and its metamorphoses. The references to the current events of the period in question make it possible to recontextualize the activities of artists and lend a political and social depth to many of the inventions mentioned. Even if Conceptual Art as such—that is to say clearly identified as a "movement" with its own theoreticians and artistic figures—appeared explicitly in the 1960s—at the exhibition *Preparatory Drawings and other Visible Objects on Paper not Necessarily to be Regarded as Art*, organized by Mel Bochner in 1966, T. Godfrey uses this term for usually earlier works and activities, or those contemporary with it without being historically assimilated to it. So Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein and Joseph Beuys, for example, to stay just with these three names in a list which could be considerably longer, are, according to the author, participants in Conceptual Art. In reality, T. Godfrey does not make any clear distinction between conceptual praxis and Conceptual Art, properly so-called, with the result that the reading of this artistic saga

leads to an extension, not to say dilution, of this second category, so as to finally imagine that all the art of the 20th century, or in any event the bulk of it, stems from it. A glossary, a helpful detailed chronology, short biographies of the major artists mentioned in the book, as well as a map of western cities that have accommodated these metamorphoses of art, and a summary biography are all tools helping to understand and follow the development of this history.

- 2 The American artist Mel Bochner was an important figure in this odyssey. The publication by the MAMCO in Geneva of the first volume of his writings offers very evident proof of this. Mel Bochner usually writes quite short essays and articles, a habit which lends his thinking a certain concentrated quality. In this volume, give or take a few exceptions, you can read analyses already published in the United States—in particular in the magazine *Arts Magazine*—and not necessarily known in France, apart from those devoted to Serial Art. The publisher's very bright idea consists in using in facsimile form the original articles accompanying their French translations, which makes it possible to appreciate the quality of the layout of the earlier version and the very precise choice of its iconography. In an article devoted to Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*, published in May 1968, Mel Bochner and his publisher compose the two double pages of analysis in the manner of a fully-fledged literary and visual work. A pure journalistic dream. Essentially, Mel Bochner's visions are those of a critic and artist who works language by avoiding superfluity and its retinue of metaphors. Whence the very economic and scathing aspect of his observations. The subjects he broaches stem essentially from the creative work and aesthetic challenges peculiar to the 1960s and 1970s (Dan Flavin, Process Art, systemic painting, the dematerialization of the art object...). Nevertheless, his reflections can also have to do with the Beach Boys or prompt him to write an essay with Robert Smithson, "The Domain of the Great Bear" (1966). The publisher has chosen to feature at the end of the volume a resuscitated piece first published in 1971 in a book. All these factors go to make an important book which makes available to the public material that is little known in the French-speaking world. In addition, this publication sheds new light on the art criticism and the artistic praxis of the 1960s and 1970s.
- 3 Over and above the theoretical and historical ins and outs of Conceptual Art, another book recently published by the MAMCO questions digital art and interactivity in the realm of art. This book is a collection of analyses—17 in all—formulated by Jean-Louis Boissier over the past 20 years. Nothing could be more abstract, from another viewpoint, than this art whose characteristics are broached by the author by making links and comparisons with what, *a priori*, seems to be quite aloof from it, for example, the world of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and that of Chinese painting. At issue here, what is more, is one of the salient points of these studies using, to highlight the virtues of digital techniques, a language which may seem off-kilter but which in the end turns out to be more illuminating than ever. Thus, for example, when the author compares plant collection and gathering with the compilation of information in the computer world, he manages to lend his tool a surprising look: "The interactive itinerary in today's data- and image-bases has a fine antecedent: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's botanical walk". A CD-Rom is also offered with the book. Made up of images and texts which echo installations, it goes hand in hand with the theoretical demonstration in an elegant and poetic manner. The figure of J.-J. Rousseau crops up in it, needless to add. The handling of this extremely pleasing and larksome tool offers a complement to the reading of the texts. From them comes an impression of venturing into a world what is in resonance with the very even tone of

most of the analyses proposed. This rich publication offers a collection of overviews of practices which, without being altogether new, are far from having exhausted all their visual and theoretical resources.