

What is the role of perception in the work of artists who attempted to change our relation to the art object?

Olav Lorentzen

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Paul O’Kane and Naomi Dines

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Invisible, 1971

Giovanni Anselmo. Celant. p.189

“Although conception without perception is merely empty, perception without conception is blind (totally inoperative).” Nelson Goodman. p.38.

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Introduction

I do not wish to go very far into the nature of what I do, but I believe a part of it can clarify why I chose this topic of research. First and foremost I want to express the difficulty I had in producing this paper. The very logic of writing a dissertation, creating a build up of information in order to support an argument, is almost a direct contradiction to what I pursue in my practice. Even though I am always reading and looking at past and present works of art, I always try to pick up the essence of the work and leave the interpretation aspect wide open. For me, if one thing can be seen in many different ways, no matter how simple that thing is, the more distinctive it becomes. For me, that is the beauty of art. It's subjectivity.

I started out as a painter. I never thought I would be a professional painter but I enjoyed doing it as a hobby. In search of subjects for my paintings, I started joining objects that at first seemed to have no relation to each other at all, other than the fact of them being placed together for their posing purpose. I soon realized something about my paintings, that they were really bad. However I cannot undermine their importance, for without them I never would have noticed something that became primordial for my continuous practice; the crucial role that objects have in the way we perceive the world. Using objects I could achieve what I wanted to achieve in the first place; to create ideas that could only be explained through the senses. My first "successful" work, or one that at least attempts to embody what I am talking about is *Loop*, 2012. In this sculpture, a fan is blowing air into a microphone, the sound of the wind being captured by the microphone is emitted by a speaker placed facing back at the fan. The result is an endless motion of sound waves being produced and blown back into its own creation, generating, theoretically, an infinite amplification of that sound.

Seems hard to understand without seeing? Well, that is the whole point.

Looking into contemporary art, especially after I arrived in London, I noticed this very pessimistic path that art has been tracking. Some argue that for something to be beautiful it has to be shocking and absurd and that we have to face the intense reality of the world. But what if we could find new ways of seeing this world? New ways of looking at something that we thought we had already understood. Isn't that how mankind achieved its knowledge? I mean, hasn't gravity always been present, but was only noticed after an apple fell on Newton's head?

I believe in the potential of human perception. I believe in several truths existing at the same time and that contradicting realities can keep us questioning our beliefs. Hegel's dialectic touches a bit on this subject. In his theory of the *Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis*, a question becomes an answer and that answer becomes a new question. I believe in art that no matter how simple still manages to confuse us over time.

If something material has infinite new meanings, if it has the power to keep triggering a transcendental state in which we leave the physical world (like the birth of a child, or the passing of someone special, or even a brief instant of music or poetry), then this world is an endless source for thought. In a world where physical space can be experienced mentally, and mental space can be experienced physically, maybe we should let our senses trigger our thoughts and our thoughts trigger our senses.

The expression Wabi-sabi, in Japan speaks of an aesthetic vision centred on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. In an age of abundance and obsolescence, maybe we should look at things that are common and find answers in places we thought we had fully comprehended. Perhaps there is beauty in the ordinary, a certain kind that everyone can understand.

What is perception?

I swing my legs around the edge of the bed and I take the entire world with me. Billions of bits of information are sensed and intellectualized in a moment and I don't even realize it. I just walk down to the shower and start my day.

Perception lives in a realm between the qualitative and the quantitative, a realm between the subject and the object, and that is the same realm in which art lives. By realizing this relationship, it can be said that art is really a tool for the extension of perception. Perceiving more means seeing further, realizing realities that were always there but were never noticed. In a way, the role of the artist is nothing other than finding these new potentials and calling out our attention to them.

Philosophers, who discuss phenomenology, or the study of essences, as Merleau-Ponty defines it, can help us understand the human experience of perception and consciousness. In his book, *Phenomenology of perception*, he reasons that perception is not purely sensation, nor is it purely interpretation, that consciousness includes both. For him, the body is a medium for the perception of the world. Bodily experience gives perception a meaning beyond that established simply by thought. Thus, Descartes' cogito "I think, therefore I am" does not account for how consciousness is influenced by the spatiality of a person's own body.

Merleau-Ponty argues that that which is perceived by its very nature admits of ambiguity and belongs to a context – or “field” –, which shapes it. This can lead us to regard the role of art as “conditional,” or something that works in and responds to the specific surrounding world of experience. This means that that which is perceived must stand out from a background; it must have a contour, an outline. Modern art has been examining this delineation for more than a century. Paintings have grown out of the frame, and sculptures have started conversations with its surroundings. Many theorists, such as Lucy Lippard and Ferreira Gullar, defend the thesis that they “dematerialized” or became a “non-object”, but have they really?

In order to better understand these concepts, this paper will look into the work of key artists who first questioned the relationship between the art object and the viewer, and relate their ideas to the work of conceptual artists of our time.

Indifference

Never one to believe in absolutes, definite theories or progress, Duchamp questioned whether art could ever be “adequately defined because the translation of an aesthetic emotion into a verbal description is as inaccurate as your description of fear when you have been actually scared.” p. 106.

It is curious that one of the first artists to defend, “art in favour of the mind”. Used objects in order to do it. Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made sculptures were chosen to represent indifference, “my idea was to choose an object that wouldn't attract me, either by its beauty or by its ugliness”, however they did far more than what they intended. In 2004, *Fountain*, the infamous urinal that he submitted as an art piece to the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917, was selected as "the most influential artwork of the 20th century".

One can argue that the relation between the object and the spectator had a significant role in this accomplishment. That the unexpected change in its context, or “condition” lead to the possibility of realizing a concept that would never have been understood if the urinal had remained in the loo. Even though most would argue that the real art lays in the artist’s gesture, the action of taking something and placing it somewhere else, what that something was turned out to be of primordial importance, almost crucial, in the communication of the idea. I enjoy analysing this as a phenomenon that frequently occurs with good art. It is the case where the object beats the artist. The result turned out to be far more relevant than the intention and the consequences were immeasurable.

This new form of art disrupted centuries of thinking about the artist’s role as a skilled creator of original handmade objects and was heavily criticized. Some argued that these sculptures were immoral, vulgar and even plagiaristic. Controversy took over the art world, and as it had done before it led to new thinking, and new relationships between society and art.

When he was only 25 years old Duchamp’s avant-garde friend Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) predicted that, above all, Duchamp would manage to “reconcile art and the people”. 1970 p.48.

Spatiality

Duchamp’s awareness of art as thought triggered an entire artistic movement. The minimal artists of the 60’s made art that went beyond the limitations of painting and sculpture, art that

distanced the artist even further from the art piece. Robert Morris mentions Duchamp in his interview to Benjamin Buchloh, “Well, I think it is more explicit. When I was doing the so-called Minimal pieces, some of those had definite references to Duchamp.” p.48.

At this point in time logic and label were no longer a concern of the artist, for art had become both logic and label. Art and idea had become inseparable. In a sense what was most important was what an artist did, rather than what he was, and what an object did – in terms of response – rather than what it was. Art had become, in a metaphorical way, philosophy and perception once again played a very important role. Alan Leepa stated that “the minimal artist attempts to state point blankly in visual form what philosophers and writers have been saying verbally - phenomenology is the basis for experience.” p.122.

Artists, like Robert Morris, understood that the self’s perception of the world was based on material-objecthood and space as occupied by that material and the artists/viewer’s body. For him, this condition of objecthood is what elevates the work of art, theoretically, from mere things in the world. Fried, p.4.

On his “Notes on Sculpture” Part II, Morris quotes a conversation with Tony Smith on his six-foot cube:

Q. Why didn’t you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?

A. I was not making a monument.

Q. Then why didn’t you make it smaller, so the observer could see over the top?

A. I was not making an object.

Even though it may sound quite intellectual, minimal art does not exist on theory alone. Since a great deal of its impact results from experiential factors, such as presence and scale, face-to-face confrontation of the physical object is essential. Even though these artists avoided overt symbolism and emotional content, they very much relied in the material object and its context. “The medium bears the artist...” Dan Flavin. Battcock p. 271.

The era of Minimal Art, saw the future optimistically. It evidenced an unmatched enthusiasm for progressive invention and a passionate commitment to intellectual inquiry. It was, then, a world without fragmentation, a world of seamless unity.

Walter De Maria, one of the most influential of this time, put it in his own words, “I think both art and life are a matter of life and death.” p. 143.

However this utopian world would soon be lost, as minimalism paved the way into conceptual art, or what Lucy Lippard calls, one more step into the “dematerialization of the object.” Unlike Minimal Art, Conceptualism placed no premium whatsoever on the object. The art lived entirely in the idea, and the conceptual object could be put together by anyone using a set of instructions. Douglas Huebler summarized the conceptualist enterprise when he stated: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.” p. 261.

But does the fact that conceptual artists avoid making objects, remove the role of the object in art?

NO.

On the contrary, it is possible to reason that, it makes their participation even more significant.

Art first started “disappearing” also in the 60’s, when Yves Klein's *Zones de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle (Zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility)* (1958-1962) involved the exchange of “charged” empty space, represented by a cheque-like certificate of ownership, for gold. As invisible as it may seem, two very apparent objects are involved in this endeavour. The conception of the piece is only made possible because of the relationship between human-beings (which as mentioned earlier can serve either as object or subject) and gold, the most objective illustration of capital.

Another example, and perhaps the most emblematic piece when it comes to representing conceptual art and “dematerialization” is Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* (1965). A physical chair that sits between a scale photograph of a chair and a printed definition of the word "chair." Even though the piece denies the hierarchical distinction between an object and its representation, it is only made possible by the notion of the object in the first place. Like Duchamps urinal, the physical object is key for the understanding of the concept, even though the actual art lies in the idea. All that Kosuth is doing is pointing out to an object and making us reflect about what is really is. Referring back to Ponty, I believe that Kosuth’s

main achievement with this piece was to point out very clearly that sensation and interpretation walk hand in hand.

The scars of thinking

This radical new way of making art, which had been growing especially in America, started generating discomfort in many European artists who did not agree with this systematic and unworldly approach. Art had been growing far too distant from life. There had to be a way of creating these concepts using more tangible matter.

The speed of information in America had created perceptive conditions in which things took form only in rapid and ephemeral communication. For some artists it had become “without substance.” It had become flat and superficial. The very purpose of art through thought had turned on itself and had become so momentary that it did not give the receiver enough time to think about it. “The traditional work of art is experienced mainly through distanced contemplation. In declining bourgeois society, this became an asocial stance. In contrast, modern cultural forms such as photographs, TV shows and film do not lend themselves to contemplation. They are imperative, challenging and agitating the viewer, putting up signposts.” Walter Benjamin argues that *distraction* became an alternative to contemplation. “Distraction is fundamentally social. It replaces the viewer’s thoughts by moving images, stopping the viewer from thinking.”

Arte Povera seemed to be the answer. It first appeared in a text by twenty seven year old art critic Germano Celant to accompany his exhibition at Genoa, Galleria La Bertesca in September 1967. The term referred to a group of young Italian artists who wanted to reconsider the relation between art and matter. Their most distinctly recognizable trait was their use of commonplace materials that evoke a pre-industrial age, such as earth, rocks, clothing, paper, rope, and etc. “They all shared a crystalline understanding of the marriage of concept and materials.” p. 83.

For Arte Povera artists, the concept could only be visualized through process. They made art without any pre-conceptions and without the limitations of ideological or theoretical systems that had been the guidelines in America.

While American minimalist artists explored new forms and materials for obviously formal and symbolic reasons, in Arte Povera the relation between form and material was always elegant but rarely sophisticated. The process always began with the substance itself and its properties, including its physical, historical and social dimensions. “What distinguished arte povera was its direct relationship to, and reaction against, the historical moment. They created a plurality of refractions who’s understanding involves a knowledge of everyday reality as well as history.” p. 172.

According to Celant, European culture sees history as a truth to be clarified and deconstructed in order to defend oneself from certainties and univocal values. His argument is directed against mysticism in its various forms. For him, there must be a balance, between rationality and mystic, between physical and metaphysical, in order for perception to occur.

Arte Povera wanted to create an alternative to the modular and standardized way of working, romantically tied to order and technology. The only hope for salvation lay in rejecting purism and homogenization, in contaminating them and ripping them open with soft and acid matter, with animals and fire, with primitive craft technologies like ax-blows, with rags and earth, stones and chemicals.

Underlying to this experimental approach was an insatiable appetite for new materials and a restless desire to explore new processes. It was a fusion between being and situation, between agent and witness, between sense and nonsense. Art could be anything: living things, products of the earth and industrially produced materials, as well as substances such as moisture, sound, energy. It could be painted, handcrafted, industrially produced, gestured, spoken, written, acted, filmed, dreamed. All of which were considered materials used in a process. “Perception involved both direct sensation and mediated experience.” Luciano Fabro Buco 1963.

Its hard to define Arte Povera exactly, but one can concentrate on some key aspects; the obvious contrast with form, the deep personal and emotional involvement, the explanation of art objects that have not yet been identified as such, the shift in interest from the result to the production process and the use of ordinary materials such as earth or dirt, as concepts. The

essential philosophy was that there had to be something there. Not just air and idea. There needed to be a mark, a scar.

Balance

“In much of my work I reflect upon metaphor. Discourse also becomes material. Life turns into raw material.” Cildo Meireles p.136.

Brazilian contemporary artist Cildo Meireles is a great example for helping us understand the themes discussed so far. Cildo is best known for his large-scale, theatrical installations; at once seductively beautiful and foreboding, they are environments in which viewers observe and act. In these works, the artist examines issues of perception, a concept, as he puts it, “with both rational and non-rational implications. As an academic discipline, perception encompasses psychology, philosophy, neuroscience and biology, fields associated with logic and reason. The word also connotes intuitive understanding of moral, psychological or aesthetic qualities, apprehensions informed by the senses that are usually more emotional than intellectual.”

Surrounded from floor to ceiling by a soft net, a kind of gridded curtain, *Eureka/Blindhotland* was Meirele’s first work to define and control a discrete space. *Eureka* is comprised of a set of scales on top of a post located in the midst of the environment; two wooden blocks sit on one side of the scales and a cross, made of identical blocks on the other. The two should not balance (there is less wood on the cross because the blocks intersect) but they do.

Blindhotland contains two hundred rubber balls, strewn across the floor of the piece and around the scales. They appear to be identical but are radically different weights. Vision alone is insufficient to comprehend this installation; it is only by entering it and picking up the balls that one begins to gauge it’s meaning.

Eureka/Blindhotland’s underlying conceptualism, its challenge to visual perception, and its pleasure in confounding its audience, recall Marcel Duchamp. His 1921 sculpture *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* Is composed of a cuttlebone and a thermometer that are stuck amid what

appear to be sugar cubes. All of these elements are encased in a small birdcage. The work's title, inscribed on the underside of the cage, is visible only when the cage is lifted. The sculpture appears light but is, in fact, extremely heavy: the 'sugar cubes' are made of marble, functioning like the weighty rubber balls in *Eureka/Blindhotland*, while the scales in Meireles's work suggest Duchamp's measuring device, the thermometer. The net encloses the entirety of the installation as the birdcage does the readymade.

The creation of powerful metaphors that transcend the events of a biographical situation are common in Meireles's work. The artist frequently confronts us with tensions and dilemmas between body and mind, which begin in physical sensations of seeing and hearing and translate to a mental enquiry that operates in our consciousness.

"Meireles projects fantasies that paradoxically both restrict and release, operating both on the immediacy of perception and the powerful drag and pull of memory." Bartolomeu Mari p.149.

In his talk with Geraldo Mosqueira he defends the argument that idea by itself is not sufficient. The way in which it takes form is of primordial importance:

CM: In the early 1970s I saw Conceptual Art as a more democratic, less hegemonic movement than Pop Art, but I was also aware of so much conceptual work that ended up as dry as verbal discourse. For me the art object must, despite everything else, be instantly seductive; it cannot work without that seductive involvement. Intelligence is not determined by quantity of information. If something has sufficient poetic power to be considered as an art object, it should be comprehensible to anyone, without the provision of extra information. This is why I try to make art which has that level of communication and immediacy."

GM: A bit like Duchamp's concept of a place for instantaneous coincidences, an infinitesimal cut in space, an area where conventional norms do not apply...the *Objetos Semanticos* series, where the connection between title and image points towards other ways of apprehending reality.

CM: In 1970 I made a work called *Dados (Dice/Given)* which consisted of a small case, like a ring box, lined with black silk. On the outside there was a small plate, which said: *Dados (Dice)*:

1 Dice

2 Title

On opening the box you would find a dice and another metal plate on which was written: Dado (Given). That is the origin of the *Semantic Objects*.

As Moacir do Anjos writes, invoking one of Brazil's leading aesthetic thinkers, Ferreira Gullar, Meireles exercises a method of investigating the world that, "instead of focusing only on the retinal field of perception, concentrates on a "synthesis" between sensorial and mental relations", so that the senses and the reason stimulate each other to produce, together, the cognition of inhabited or merely conceived space. p.170.

Where is this immaterial?

By what has been seen so far, it can be reasoned that both the physical and the intellectual coexist, and that both are legitimate. They are mutually exclusive and mutually dependent at the same time. Even though this is a very interesting contradiction, it does not mean in any way, that one excludes the other. The sentient realm and the intellectual realm are unaware of each other and this is why the information is usually biased to one side. The idea that mind is an aspiration to pure and that body is an embodiment of evil is an example of how this can happen in a social/religious aspect. If it was to be true, then why was god embodied in the form of Jesus? Why was mankind to witness god in order to understand his concepts.

John 1:6

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

⁷ The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.

⁸ He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

Perception relies on the material and the immaterial. There is no way of escaping it. If one gives it some thought and reflects about most of the arguments we have in life, there always

seems to be one point endearing over another, when in reality the true answer lies in the balance between the contradicting ideas. I understand that in this same manner one should realize that sensation is not only triggered by internal factors but also by external. What we feel is an intersecting point between what we experience and what we think.

The history of modern art is really a re-examination of this relationship between physical and intellectual, however theorists always tend to be biased. Lucy Lippards *Dematerialization of the object* where she states “conceptual art means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious”, should be re-evaluated. Has the object been dematerialized or have we been shown it differently? Sol Lewitt distinguished between conceptual art, “with a small c” (e.g. his own work, in which the material forms were often conventional, although generated by a paramount idea) and Conceptual art “with a capital C” (the “invisible” one). But the objects never really disappeared, they were just perceived in a different way. Not only is conceptual art tangible, but also it has become a commodity that has been sold by substantial amounts and has been represented by the most prestigious galleries.

“I’m interested that the object appear less important, that it loose importance that we can almost ignore it. In favour of the idea and the shape it takes, it is a return to the object in another manner, in a much harder way. First and foremost I’m interested that the object be very banal, just almost not there.” Keith Sonnier. *En Marge*, 1969.

Thinking is thought through concepts, thought through functions, thought through sensations and no one of these thoughts is better than another, or more fully, or more synthetically “thought.” The frames of art are no more scientific coordinates than sensations are concepts. “Abstract art and conceptual art are two recent attempts to bring art and philosophy together, but they do not substitute the concept for the sensation; rather they create sensations and not concepts.” Deleuze. p.198.

Deleuze, one of the most celebrated philosophers of our time, and Guattari, his collaboration friend and psychiatrist, also support the *sensation* aspect of art. In their book, *What is philosophy?* An entire chapter is dedicated to percept, affect, and concept. The text discusses the relationship between art, science and philosophy. “It is no longer sensation that is realized in the material but the material that passes into sensation.” p. 193. In their view, the thing or the work of art “is a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and effects.” The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else; it exists in itself. Even the void is a sensation.

“Perhaps the peculiarity of art is to pass through the finite in order to rediscover, to restore the infinite.” p. 197. Something material that can transport us into the immaterial. Something that is so charged or uncharged that it redefines the way we think. I suppose what Deleuze is saying is the same as what was identified earlier whilst analysing Duchamps urinal, that sometimes the object beats not only the artist, but also the mind.

Slowly conceptual artists started to realize that their work was not as immaterial as they suspected. Laurence Weiners work, for example, is almost exclusively language based, however he regards his practice as sculpture, citing the elements described in his texts as his supplies. “The name is the piece itself, the idea of the piece. The idea is a removal of the plaster from the wall, one meter per one meter, and that’s all it is. There’s no name, no title. This was done in New York, and the piece in New York and the piece here are exactly the same piece. This is just an illustration of the idea.” Lawrence Weiner. *En Marge*, 1969.

The paper you are holding, the letters on the paper, are they not as essential as your realization of what they mean? An idea that takes form in text or speech still “materializes” in a way that it can be perceived. The young man will smile on the canvas for as long as the canvas lasts.

When you open your eyes does the world come up to you entirely formed or do you form the world in front of you at every moment? There is no correct answer to that question. But that does not mean we should not consider both perspectives?

Conclusion

Differently from what I suspected as I started writing this paper, a little bit of research does not hurt. I still don’t think everything should be thoroughly explained, especially in art, but a re-examination of the recent endeavours has helped to clarify my approach towards thinking about the world we are in. I do not wish to use this as an argument to support what I do but having references surely help along the way. Even if it is only for psychological support,

knowing what came before surely builds confidence when thinking about what is coming next. Not to say that what I do is an answer in any way, but maybe it can be helpful in better understanding the question.

I was surprised by the way perception always finds a way to balance things out. The further into the intellect that art tries to push the more it relies on the object, and in terms of response, the greater the attention it pays to the material the deeper it dives into the mind. I think this was the main lesson I learned with the research and I think it will be hard not to keep it in mind while making work in the future.

I know there is space for further investigation here and somehow, as exhausting as this was, I feel like I will keep looking into perception for a long while. However, I am confident that I have put down the essence of my thoughts on paper and hopefully it can make the subject interesting for other curious minds. Similar to my practice I tried to make it as clear as possible, and attempted, with all of my competence, not to bore the reader. I can only hope that I have made a significant contribution.

Duchamp's urinal was a turning point, not only in art history, but also in my understanding, in the history of thought. Modern art has turned the world upside down and we don't understand what the result of this is yet. Dematerialization, non-object, post-modern, none of this makes any sense to me. The history of modern art is only about 200 years old and we are only half way there. It is a radical transformation of the way we think and a radical deconstruction of many things that had been bothering us for centuries. Only now have we started applying it to the world and trying to figure out the affect it will have on our lives.

Art is not entity it is enquiry, it is a door into imagination, into new ways of thinking. It does not give us a brand new world it just opens a window so we can start looking into it.

The minimalist artists, I believe, were very much aware of this. They made people look at their own role in perceiving the world. Applying Merlau-Pontys ideas to their work, they thought of the body as a medium and in my judgement that changed everything. They were the first to attempt the application of modern art into life, the idea I was talking about earlier. I am not trying to say they were completely successful, it is not a question of success. They do not have to prove their methods like scientist would. In art, the experiment will suffice.

Art Povera did the exact same thing using different procedures; once again they prove that all of it has not yet been fully understood. Most writers have a lot of difficulty even to describe the Art Povera movement and only recently has it reached a greater public.

This is why I am so interested in Meireles. He leaves it up to the viewer. He makes them realize the change in perspective while they are experiencing the work. People are forced to go through the entire process while they are still inside his installation. If one can apply what they learn during this process to the real world the amount of questions it would generate is absurd.

Can something exist with no content? Must something have no content in order to have no hierarchy?

An art object's qualities are not quantifiable; they depend on our own perspective. There are as many realities as there are individuals. The stream will never flow over in the same space twice. It is hard for us to accept this but the truth is that nothing has a beginning or an end everything is a continuum in all directions. I believe art has the power of showing us just that.

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