

Aesthetic Investigations

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Conceptual Painting. An artist's investigation. . .

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Abstract: On conceptual art, from a painter's perspective.

PART 1

In her essay, 'Conceptual Art', from 1980 Roberta Smith quotes 'conceptualist' Mel Bochner from the 1970s:

A doctrinaire conceptualist viewpoint would say that the two relevant features of the 'ideal conceptual work' would be that it have an exact linguistic correlative, that is, it could be described and experienced in its description, and that it be infinitely repeatable. It must have absolutely no 'aura', no 'uniqueness' to it whatsoever.¹

The comment that Smith makes next is perhaps more puzzling: 'Ultimately, few Conceptual works achieved this ideal state, but some came close, and in doing so achieved an unsettling blend of aesthetic purity and political idealism.'² What is meant by aesthetic purity is unclear but it triggers the idea that 'form', even in the most ruthlessly text-based or verbal/proposal-based artworks, was still an unavoidable, even desirable, attribute of any of these artworks; the aesthetic arena of which had just broadened out a bit.

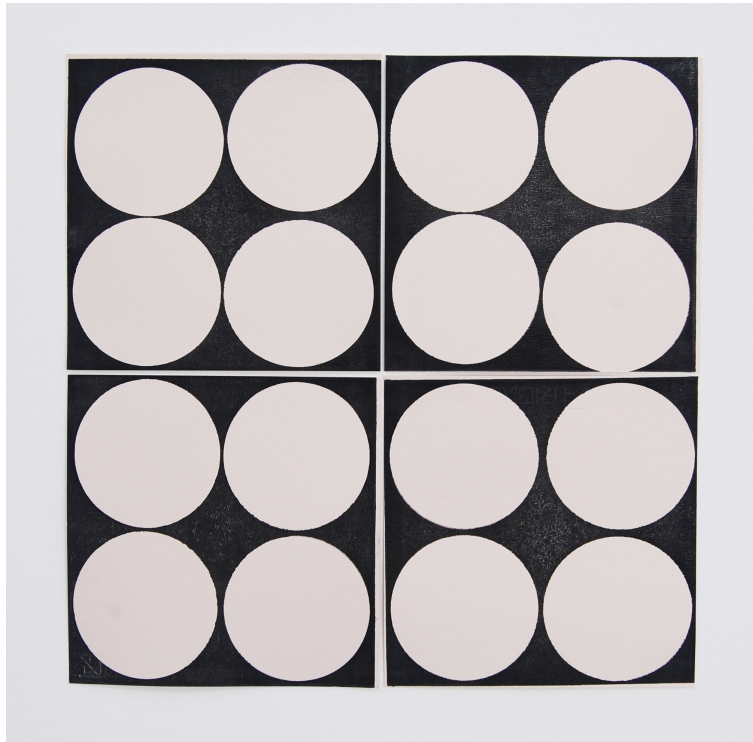


Figure 1: Katrina Blannin, *Four by Four*, 2016. Collograph polyptych: handmade ink on paper 20 x 20cm. Copyright artist.

Political idealism, or any kind of political didacticism, also seem to be the wrong generic qualities to assume of these artworks. Some may have presented a central thrusting polemic but critiquing; poking fun at society and its politics, Dada in its truest sense, might be a closer description.

You could argue that *all* artistic practice (including painting) is a kind of polemical social enterprise and, whether it is the intention or not, artworks, and often the artists themselves, are a part of society's dialogue: its narratives and mirror images. You could also say that all artworks have distinctly formal attributes; that it is impossible to avoid form-based or compositional choices and outcomes of design. Text-based or text-framed art can directly spell out the dialectical, or perhaps more specifically socio-political, premise of a work. Or, frustratingly for many viewers, form may be the only or primary intended subject for discourse—frustrating because language and the lexicon employed for such a discourse on the 'visual' has never been truly developed. But whether dialogue takes place inside the studio or outside it, whether they are easy to read or not, the inescapable originality, or form of artworks has been generated from informed choices and concepts: what we read, who we talk to—who we are. We are all part of the human context—no artist is alone.

The Human Abstract was the title for an exhibition of painting organised by artist and curator Katie Pratt who wrote that: ‘Abstractionists employ various tacks to transpose creative impulse and thought into imagery with legibility and coherence: chance, deconstructed observation, repetition, systems and intuition are all frequent strategies.’³ One may ask about the origins of these ‘creative impulses’ and the nature of this ‘thought’, and about the idea that abstract art can be of anything tangible that mirrors both the ‘simple structures’ and the complex mechanisms ‘of modern life’; intuitively re-stated or re-presented in non-representational form. Depending on where you are coming from, however, the notion of abstract art is that it is cold-blooded and unnatural unless it is obviously rooted in or derived from a figurative image of the imagined or real world about us. But whether artworks are non-representational, representational or something in between, the question is about the process of abstracting. The photographer abstracts; as soon as something is rendered two-dimensional; the painter grasps some thing in existence and recreates an alternative view—new form. So, if human abstraction generates form then is all form conceptual?

What is conceptualism? If some sort of starting point, or seed, is a prerequisite for the development of a new idea (we have to start somewhere) then does that starting point need to begin at a moment in time when a particular configuration of mental attributes, information, notions, concerns and desires, occurs and thereby creates a new condition for the production of art? Is this happenstance or are we in control? Medieval philosophical thinkers formed the radical view that universals (relations, properties) exist only in the mind: meaning is constructed internally through subjective thought processes and not from any kind of universal determinism of objects that exist outside it. This kind of inward looking conceptualism, where ideas are formed individualistically and subjectively presents a rather narrow view of where the development of ideas takes place. In the world of avant-garde art, and in the artists’ studios, their cameras or their desk/s (-top computers): the kitchens of creation where ideas are cooked up into new dishes, often the idea of the self-reliant ‘genius’ chef persists—there is no desire for decisions made by committee.

Despite the specified avoidance of form or a ‘traditional’ aesthetic, and conceptual art was not supposed to be discussed in this way, looking back now we can see that form is nevertheless innate. Furthermore, it would seem that many surviving low tech objects: texts (often generated by typewriter), found images, multiples, variables, repetitions, photographic documentation and films have now taken on an historically situated fetishistic aged or charming dated quality, which it most certainly did not have the original intention to acquire.

Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings. It cannot be defined in terms of any medium or

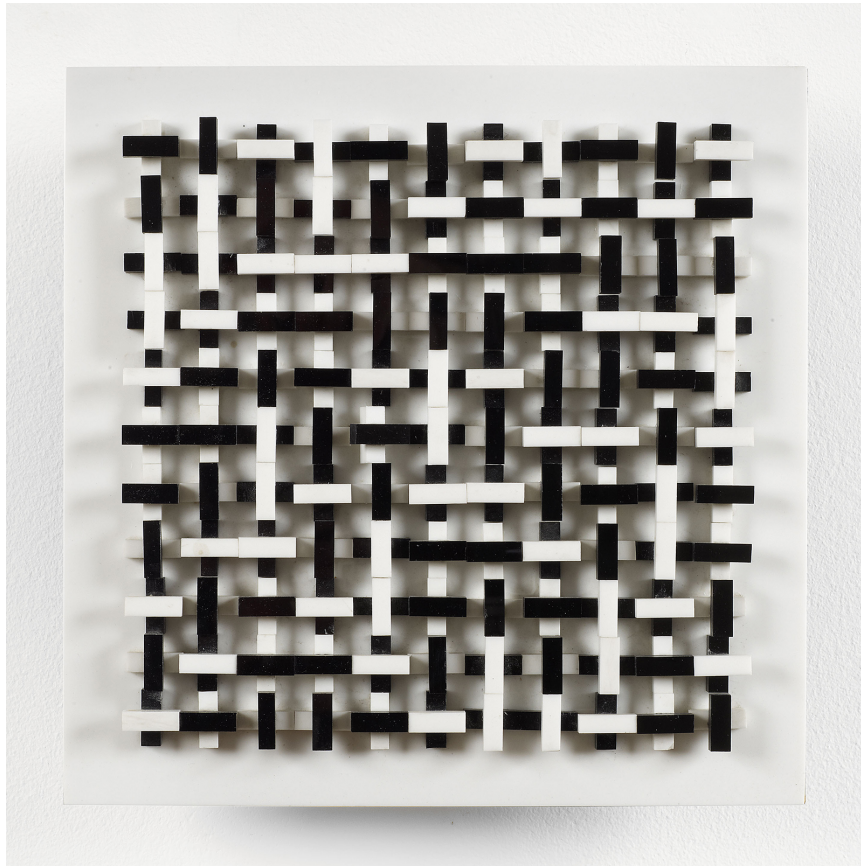


Figure 2: Peter Lowe, *Permutations of Rows*, 1968. Black and white Perspex on wood 25 x 25cm, Courtesy of Waterhouse Dodd, London.

style but rather by the way it questions what art is. In particular, Conceptual art challenges the traditional status of the art object as unique, collectable or saleable. Because the work does not take a traditional form it demands a more active response from the viewer, indeed it could be argued that the Conceptual work of art only truly exists in the viewer's mental participation.⁴

Leafing through Tony Godfrey's *Conceptual Art* from where this introduction comes one notes that far from being dry or dull much of the work was visually arresting and comedically driven: either set up like a Wittgensteinian 'game' or riddle, or realised as a kind of theatrical performance. And therein, surely, lies an aesthetic that it could call its own—perhaps we could call it 'sensation': a configuration of either linguistic or image based witticisms (datribes, instructions, proposals, installations) that were designed to tweak at the intellect but also to engage us in their structures and materialities.

Today we would argue strongly against the idea that these kinds of artworks demand more attention than, say, a constructivist sculpture, or an abstract expressionist painting, but what is more alarming, is that these art-

works were not considered to have form: and that the aesthetic purity or its literalism is assumed to be ‘anti’ art. Conversely, now we would argue that painting itself can be non-traditional, non-unique, demands the interaction of the viewer and can question the status of the art object—the expanded field is expanding.

PART 2

Constructivism is something else and has a different history. If you become interested in the idea of construction, as an artist, then you might encounter a contradiction to the notion that all art is abstraction: a kind of transformation or transposition. In the methods of constructivism form becomes the beginning, middle and the end: both the verb, the noun, and its own sentence. All artworks are produced, but the real question when considering constructivism is more specifically about construction: how and with what are they constructed? So, if an artwork is a construction then what are the building blocks and how will it be put together? And if so how to start? What do we need? If the starting point is to construct in non-mimetic form then, conceptually speaking, this is known as concrete and is the opposite of abstraction.⁵ This would be the process of working with form—not with a language/word or image based transformation (abstraction) of concepts or ideas, and what is known as conceptual art.

In an interview, Peter Lowe, one of the participants of the Systems Group founded in 1969, was asked: ‘The Systems Group has been described as being involved in the promotion or practice of “syntactic art”. How would you describe the concept of artistic syntax?’

He answers:

Jeffrey Steele proposed the word ‘syntactic’ as an alternative to, or subtext to ‘systems’. I argued that the word ‘systems’ was preferable to ‘syntactic’ since it was the more common usage. We could have translated the term ‘art concret’ but decided not to because, although ‘concrete’ is the antonym to ‘abstract’, it also has the misleading connotation in English of a mix of stones, sand and cement. Syntactic tendencies are found in most cultures whereas Western European art is preoccupied with mimesis and symbolism. I directed my work towards system and syntax because of my dissatisfaction with abstraction, mimesis and symbolism.⁶

If the word ‘syntax’ means the arrangement of things in order to generate a clearer meaning through some kind of logical order, the Systems artists never had the intention to obfuscate and make it difficult for people to understand and enjoy the artwork, but wanted to present something that in its declared rationality was there to be interpreted by the viewer. Peter Lowe:

There is more than one way of seeing syntactic works and this ambiguity adds to their richness. Some people say that to understand something ruins their enjoyment. Sometimes ignorance is bliss but understanding heightens perceptions. Viewers are encouraged to look at syntactic art without interpreting it in literary or figurative terms. It is not always appropriate to look at things as metaphor.⁷

So, going back to the idea of construction can we use the analogy of the constructivist artist as builder (or the word ‘constructionist’ which some artists preferred)—a builder with the intention of creating something concrete—perhaps something new in the sense that it has never been seen before—not an abstraction? So, then this builder needs to have some building blocks with which to build. Peter Lowe describes his as ‘units’—‘how can you ‘construct’ something if you haven’t got the blocks with which to do it?’ he once exclaimed.

When or where to start and stop ordinarily besets creative enterprise. The Martins used permutations which contain a beginning and an end. I invented an alternative conclusive method using identical units. Four units combined, layer upon layer, form a cube. This allows me to convey direction, growth and scale.⁸

Is one aim of systems art to eliminate all evidence of the personality of the artist? Peter Lowe again:

Not only the Constructivists but also some of the Dadaists and Surrealists shared this aim when they experimented with chance. Syntactic art does not glorify idiosyncrasies of craftsmanship like the brush mark. Bravura performances of technical skill or lack of it are not essential. But, for better or worse, the personality of the artist will emerge whatever systems or structures are in place.⁹

PART 3

Did Cézanne become, in the later paintings of his career, an abstract painter or a constructivist painter? When Lawrence Gowing discusses Cézanne’s ‘patches’ of paint in his essay ‘Cézanne: The Logic of Organized Sensations’ he uses terms like systematisation, composition, arrangement, fragmentation, and importantly disintegration, which he suggests was the first phase towards the most significant development: modulation. ‘The move toward a disintegration of the object in some of the most memorable works of a painter so attached to objects is the attraction and the riddle of Cézanne’s last phase.’¹⁰

In 1866, earlier in Cézanne’s career, he had used a palette knife, for a time, to shape his patches of paint: patches of paint with straight edges. But although this had been done before, as Gowing says:

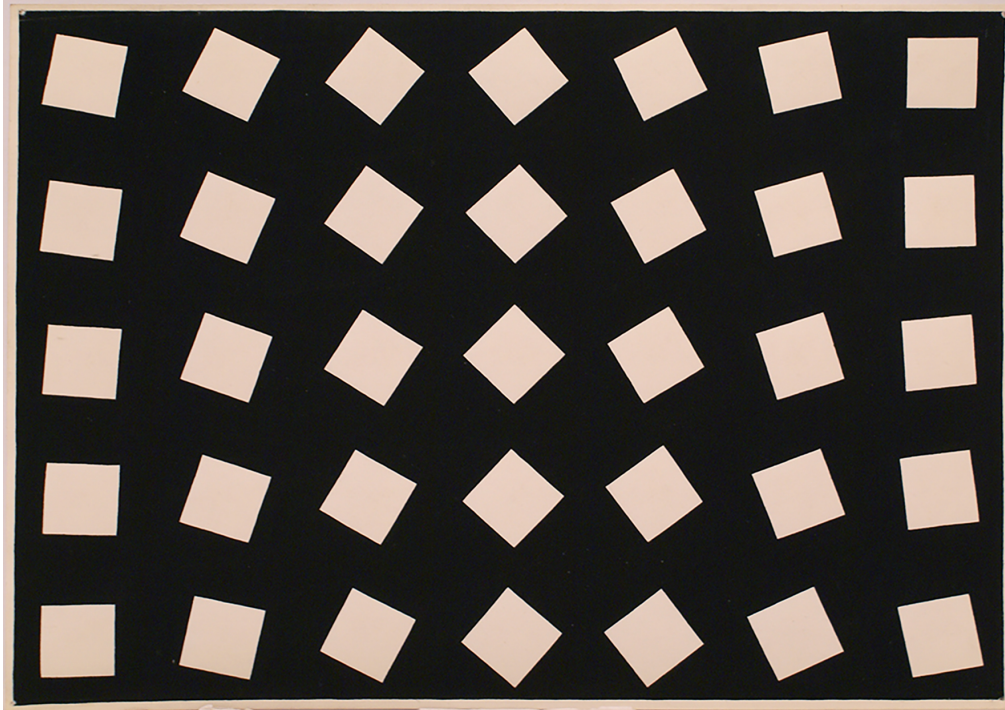


Figure 3: Jeffrey Steele, *Square in Cinematic Rotation through 90 Degrees*, 1960. Gouache on paper 26cm x 36cm, Collection British Museum, London.

he instinctively knew that if this approach was to be used at all it should be done consistently throughout the picture—and that the handling *was* the picture.’ The consistency of facture that Cézanne achieved makes a new kind of intrinsic material unity, which links the picture not only with the material significance of the objects, but with the common consistency of the material world.¹¹

A few years later, patches applied with a knife, together with new ideas about colour differentiation, appeared in the painting *L’Etang des Soeurs* in 1877 and were, as Gowing suggests, crucial to the development of his method. Gowing’s essay sets out in detail the development of a modular approach and how Cézanne began to organise colour systematically in sequences.

For him colour modulation was the sense of the painting. . . Cézanne himself [later] referred to the colour patches that he was using in 1905 as abstractions, and he felt them to be in need of explanation. But he made it clear that they possessed a systematic figurative function, a function which though not descriptive was expository—the history of these expository systems of colour appeared in the later watercolours and now ultimately permeated Cézanne’s whole art.¹²

Gowing's analysis of Cézanne's late paintings reveals how his thinking as a painter translated itself into the construction of the paintings, and proposes that 'he was well aware that his mutations of colour originated as much in theory as in observation.' In perfect synchronicity, the theory originated in ideas about form: 'Modulation implies a transition through perceptible stages. Smooth monochromatic modelling always seemed to Cézanne a falsification.'

PART 4

Extracts from an interview with Jeffrey Steele, a founder of the Systems Group 1969:¹³

KB: Can you clarify the importance for 'Systems' art of staying with painting—as opposed to say relief, sculpture or architecture inspired installation pieces, which became an important new vocabulary for the constructionists? Why is it important to develop or advance the historically charged process of 'paint on canvas'?

JS: I hadn't worked this out theoretically during the 50s and although it seemed sometimes as if I had been producing constructivist art then in fact I spent the whole time experimenting with how to be a painter: talking about it and exchanging ideas with whoever would participate and avidly looking at everything. It was a 'given' that painting was the thing and I have always wanted to try to justify the supreme importance of painting. As [Charles] Biederman said: art is the evolution of visual knowledge and visual knowledge is knowledge. And then knowledge or cognition affects our actions and this in turn is political. It is the fundamental question in its widest sense. I am interested in what happens to people's psychology and the collective ideation or ideology borne out of encounters with painting and imagery in all its visual manifestations: comic strips, mass media, advertising, different sections of fine art: in fact, the whole notion of 'Bildlichkeit' as set out by Feuerbach, who influenced Marx and Engels when they wrote *The German Ideology* in 1846. It was Feuerbach who recognised the crucial effects of Christian images on society. Painted images of the Madonna and Child were for instance key to the forming of German romanticism and this impact could not have been created by anything except through the art of painting—and it's inescapable—to this day! To turn one's back on painting and all its political effects throughout history would be foolish.

Rather than taking a stand against painting, as Anthony Hill and the Martins were said to have done at the time, I became interested in Tachisme and painters like Michaux and Hartung. In 1960 when I was living in Paris I saw a group exhibition with the wonderful title 'Antagonismes' which included Vasarely's 1950s paintings and they influenced me greatly. Although I am not a complete Vasarely apologist, (earlier and later works were inferior: rather tinselly and cheap), here I could see everything: the geometric,

the mathematical, the Cartesian and a bid for rationality. Here was everything combined from the history of painting: Poussin, Uccello, Chardin and Watteau and crucially the pictorial architecture of Cézanne. Here you could see the birth of Cubism in Cézanne's last paintings. Here was Tatlin and Malevitch. Here was a realist facing all the problems of picture making and dealing with the clash of mimetic and constructed imagery.

KB: I have seen your works in the setting of a gallery and they are so much more pleasing to the eye than reproductions with regard to materiality and sensation. Can you say something about the aesthetic values that we might bring to Systems painting?

JS: This is a very fine question because I can't answer it readily at all. It is a central problem but I don't really know the answer. Take my newest painting for example, which is a set of 15 square paintings, each 50cm x 50cm, the culmination of many years of research. We were just talking about the white, which is actually the priming of the canvas and then there are 4 colours. In a sense they are like a set of drawings and the whole piece could be seen as a prototype for a work which could go on to be realised again in different materials—I don't know, I don't have an engineer's outlook. It is like a mine of visual structural information and is, I think, perfect. Yes, there is perfection here in the offing, waiting in the wings. This perfection of course raises problems and to clarify I just mean that nothing can be added or taken away without damaging the whole. Now, why should the prototype be superior to the eventual product in the case of a painting, when this is obviously not the case with an aeroplane or other utilitarian objects? The question begins to answer itself doesn't it? The artists who I was influenced by or working alongside in the early 60s, such as Getulio Alvani, were interested in having their works made for them in a factory. They were against the idea of the artist's touch. They believed that the artist was the manager in a way: a Bauhaus idea of course. However, in this process you lose the evidence of the 'journey'. And for me the 'journey' is worth knowing and the traces of that 'journey' are important to see.

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NOTES

1. Smith 1980.
2. Idem.
3. Notes by Katie Pratt. See urls.
4. Godfrey 1998, 4.
5. Steele on 'concrete' (from an interview):
JS: Well, if you have something that is completely abstract: a mathematical structure like for example a Euclidian tri-

angle, in order to make it concrete you need to invent a syntax. Ah, and this is where it gets genuinely problematic. Cézanne, in one of his letters to Emile Bernard (Aix, 26 May 1904), uses the word 'concrete' probably for the first time in relation to painting. The phrase he used was '[...] le peintre concrète [...]'. Note the final 'e'. He was using it as a verb—not as in 'concretises' as in the English mean-

- ing to concretise from the abstract—turn the abstract triangle into a drawing - but something else—it’s a different meaning. He didn’t mean ‘to concretise’ it but to ‘make’ the triangle or ‘concrete’ the triangle.
6. Peter Lowe interviewed by Alan Fowler, May 2005. See URLs.
 7. Idem.
 8. Idem.
 9. Idem.
 10. Gowing 2001.
 11. Idem.
 12. Idem.
 13. Blannin 2012.

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URLS

- Pratt, Katie: <https://thehumanabstraction.wordpress.com/>
- Peter Lowe interviewed by Alan Fowler, May 2005: <http://www.peterllowe.plus.com/pages/page1.htm>