

Post-Conceptual Painting

'I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid confronting my own taste.'

PAINTING THAT EMBRACES or at least acknowledges the legacy of conceptual art is, by definition, post-conceptual, but what is this legacy? For my generation (those who studied in the 1960s) conceptual art was the dominant discourse. A minority amongst us continued to paint, not out of obduracy or ignorance but because we found the ideas that conceptualism threw up compelling. Conceptual art challenged art's objects and its orthodoxy.

For the last 20 years, whenever the Turner Prize rolls round, pundits square up to TV cameras and ask celebrities whether they think this year's Turner Prize is about painting or conceptual art. This is lazy thinking and cynical journalism – who cares what a celebrity thinks? The question presents a false dichotomy – assuming that the two discourses are mutually exclusive. It's rather like asking if gin is more popular than bleach. Both have their uses. Moreover, the questioner is invariably implying that painting is passé and dumb whereas conceptual art is edgy and 'modern'. Sadly, this kind of thinking is all pervasive.

'The only thing that is not art is inattention.'

Painting has always been a conceptual pursuit. The language of painting, pictorial space and illusion are reliant upon a panoply of conceptual conventions and innovations. Over the last half century painting has been informed and irredeemably changed by the emergence of conceptual art – and it's dominance within the theoretical domain.

It has become transformed, not only in our estimation but also in our understanding. As a result we've come to regard painting differently. This has resulted in a kind of painting that is smarter, more self aware and questioning. This is painting that has embraced the legacy of conceptual art and painters who continue to ignore conceptualism are missing an important and historic lesson – imagining yourself to be a 'force of nature' doesn't cut it any longer.

Conceptual art also played a significant part in the emergence of appropriation, a key strategy in post-modernist practice where culture becomes the ultimate 'readymade'. That's why Duchamp is important.

For my part, the paintings of Fernand Leger were instrumental; they combined a muscular and emblematic sense of image with a vivid, almost industrial sense of paint as matter. The history of painting is one of constant appropriation and re-appropriation and the most celebrated appropriationist in recent history has to be Picasso – whether from Cezanne, Poincaré's non-linear geometry or Dogon sculpture. What distinguishes Picasso is ultimately the synthesis that his eclecticism produced – cubism.

'Art has absolutely no existence as veracity, as truth.'

We often lose sight of 1960s conceptualism's anti-capitalist aspirations; to challenge the market's dominance by disavowing and delegitimising the art object. The argument ran that it wasn't the object that was being acquired so much as it's aura. As artists and cultural workers it was our job to raise consciousness – not shift 'wall furniture'.

Thirty years later the art market fought back and the result was a tendency that had been deftly manufactured in the same way as a boy band: a market ready product with a spurious pedigree – a sanitised misrepresentation of Duchamp et al. The YBAs (Young British Artists) were legitimised by constant references to conceptual art but the truth is rather different. Although they're often cast as the grandchildren of Duchamp, they are in fact the nieces and nephews of Thatcher. The sole achievement of that generation was to establish art in the

mainstream as the new rock and roll, which inevitably made it dumber. The art market thrives on the attention of the media, celebrity and dodgy money. PR heaven.

'Art is making the invisible, visible.'

A common fallacy when discussing art is to classify art objects according to medium. However, it's much more appropriate to regard art objects as products of a variety of cultural influences. The most prevalent of these is obviously money – and probably always has been. This now entails creating a 'brand', preferably one that has pedigree, rather like Jaguar's constant reference to their glory days at Le Mans in the 1950s or Aston Martin's association with the James Bond film franchise. Like any brand, aspiration is paramount and the YBAs collectively projected a rather savvy post-punk chic – a commercially acceptable and non-threatening form of nihilism.

It's common practice for artists to question what they're doing, and why they're doing it – it's a major component of modernist methodology. Conceptualism challenged received notions regarding art production, particularly the phantoms of authenticity and originality. Along with self-expression – the 'fifth amendment' – beloved of the self indulgent and intellectually flaccid.

'I don't believe in art. I believe in artists.'

The methodology that I inherited from my exposure to conceptualism led me to approach painting with scepticism – to constantly challenge my assumptions and expectations. I'd always been concerned about originality, authenticity and self-expression in art; conceptualism gave me the tools to address these issues. It enabled me to realise that painting was a perpetual synthesis of past and present, and that it not only had the power to conflate thought and matter but transform it. It made me realise that paintings that may look similar may ultimately be very different because it's the intellectual and emotional ambitions and imperatives that dictate kinship. This is because painting is a discourse – not an activity. Appearance and style are inevitable components of painting, but intention is the major player.

'In my day, artists wanted to be outcasts, pariahs. Now they are integrated into society.'

Another aspect of conceptual art's legacy is the manner in which it has influenced discussion – particularly its impact upon the lexicon. It has made us more measured, more articulate (and verbose) in our exchanges. I witnessed an example of this over 30 years ago during the Painting School entrance examination at the RCA. I was a visiting tutor at the time.

The candidate asserted that his numerous sketchbooks contained what he referred to as 'ideas'. The professor at the time (Peter de Francia) observed that each of the sketchbooks contained 100 pages. The professor then complemented the candidate on his profusion of ideas – several hundred of them. He immediately added that according to Picasso's biographer, John Richardson, that he (Richardson) thought that Picasso had only had three ideas in his entire life.

'Marcel, no more painting; go get a job.'

Graham Crowley, 2019

All quotations are by Marcel Duchamp.

This essay emerged from notes made in preparation for a paper I delivered at the Sluice Art Fair London in October 2017.

Also on the panel with me were Rosalind Davis and Clare Mitten.