POST CONCEPTUAL ART: EMBRACING THE END

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In Bernard Smith's book of 2007, *The Formalesque: a Guide to Modern Art and its History,* he attempts an argument concerning a new understanding of the period formerly known as 'Modern Art'. Smith finds this term 'modern art' itself erroneous, as it references an era he considers past, complete, over and dealt with, and therefore no longer 'modern'. He proposes that we replace the term 'modern art' with a descriptor of his own invention, 'the Formalesque', in an argument based on a sense of art's evolution through the modern as a concern with form. To Smith, this evolution was embodied by a 'drive towards abstraction' and an apparent 'disdain for figural art'.

The pages of Smith's text are peppered with likenesses of those art historians he believes significantly impacted the discipline of art history, and I was moved to scan the portraits and place them in a single slide, for effect. Smith doesn't explicitly include himself in this lineup, but it's safe to assume that his attempt to have the final word on the category of modern art would grant him a position of some importance, so I added his author portrait to the end. The overwhelmingly masculine, Western focus of Smith's history is as jarringly out of time with the ideals of diversity and equality that were maintained in 2007, the year of the book's publication, as they are today.

Smith recognises the contributions of a variety of global cultures to the era of the Formalesque, including the work of female artists. However, the only theorists and historians he considers worthy of mention results in the picture of colonial patriarchy illustrated here. Rather than develop an argument based on gender, it is in relation to the complications presented by any sort of essentialism that I propose to accommodate, if not historicise, the ideals of openness and diversity typical of the realm of contemporary art. Locating their source within the conceptual period, these ideals will be viewed as nascent within the sense of escape identified by critic and writer Lucy Lippard in the work of conceptual artists. In a view of contemporary art as *necessarily* undefined or undetermined, I hope to show how the ideal of escape informed conceptual art, arguably the last modern movement, in relation to the entirety of modernism's challenge to essentialisms and narratives *as such*.

Smith equates modern art's concern with form, its 'drive towards abstraction' and apparent 'disdain for figural art' to a preoccupation with style over meaning. Barely able to conceal his preference for representational art, Smith's equation of pure abstraction with style and representational art with meaning is simplistic. He declares that modern movements from Minimalism onwards represent the

Formalesque's decline, where pure abstraction gives way once again to the primacy of the image. There is a sense here of history correcting its wrongs, with the re-introduction of imagery to art representing a triumph of meaning over style. As with many attempts at periodisation and definition, Smith's account of the period of modern art is hardly as straightforward as the simple binary of abstraction versus representation might imply. Minimal, purely abstract formats continue to exist both alongside and in combination with representational work in the period post 'the Formalesque', with both formats considered not only acceptable but as equally open to interpretation and a sense of meaning.

Two examples might be Archie Moore's work *Mīal,* from 2022, and Roni Horn's *Gold Mats, paired - for Ross and Felix* 1994 – 2021. Of *Mīal*, The Commercial gallery states that, 'Moore takes the serious tradition of monochrome painting and draws a direct connection to racist jokes of the late 19th Century'.[1] Moore's own story of this work on the gallery's website reveals it as both a complex commentary on racism in relation to colour and a critical view of the tradition of monochrome painting itself, blending contemporary expectations concerning social or political commentary with the modern sense of art as self-reflective and critical. Roni Horn's work, *Gold Mats,* 1994 - 2021 is described by Riccardo Benassi as, 'a dialogue made of gold', representing as it does a conversation between Horn and artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. To quote Benassi, 'Here minimalism stands for honesty: *Gold Field* seems to acknowledge its own partiality within the daily, perpetuating the notion that the creation of meanings exists only as the outcome of new encounters'.[2] The work's blank surface is interpreted here in the context of art as relational, imbuing it with meaning and a capacity for interpretation. Both works utilise the abstract format of the monochrome, post Smith's identification of such forms as outdated, to achieve complex, meaningful outcomes in the face of his claim regarding pure abstraction's lack of meaning. From this, rather than the *form* of the artwork determining its propensity to hold 'meaning', it seems some other factor is at play.

Alongside his concern to reformulate our understanding of the period of the modern, Smith is moved to defend the discipline of art history itself in the face of its apparent inability to account for art in the current moment. To Smith, our inability to historicise current art is simply because we, 'do not possess sufficient distance yet to see it steadily and see it whole'. To Smith, contemporary art

[1] The Commercial, *Archie Moore — Mīal,* 2022 https://www.thecommercialgallery.com/artist/archie-moore/exhibition/1041/archie-moore-mial (accessed 1/12/24)
[2] Benassi, Riccardo, 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "1990: L.A., 'The Gold Field'"', *e-flux* September 1, 2015 https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/237616/felix-gonzalez-torres-s-1990-l-a-the-gold-field (accessed 1/12/24)

cannot be perceived as a 'period style' because 'the period in which we live is not yet over'.[3] While there is some truth to this, to claim we cannot historicise or define the moment we inhabit lends great agency to art historians, upon whom we must seemingly wait for enlightenment concerning our own art once the moment is deemed adequately 'past'.

Smith identifies the term 'contemporary art' as the overriding descriptor for all art produced since 1970, which gives it a life span now of over half a century. Where the period of modern art, spanning just over one hundred years, had witnessed a series of distinct movements flourish and die within *its* first half century, a certain stasis is seen to exist within art's forms since the conceptual period, moving several commentators to attempt to define, philosophise or otherwise account for the timelessness of this new period regarding art's form. In 2009, the editors of the journal *e-flux* devoted two issues to the question, 'what is contemporary art?', the same year Terry Smith published a book asking the same question. In 2013, philosopher Peter Osborne attempted a philosophy of contemporary art with, 'Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art', and Hal Foster presented the results of his *Questionnaire on "The Contemporary"*. Despite Bernard Smith's urging that we simply wait till the moment is right to historicise contemporary art, attempts *were* made at this time to achieve some sort of discourse.

The list of texts that deal with contemporary art is of course longer than the few mentioned here, and could include work by writers such as Jacques Ranciere, Boris Groys, Hito Steyerl, Liam Gillick, Okwui Enwezor and Nicolas Bourriaud, to name only a few. I'll focus here on Terry Smith and Peter Osborne, as both explicitly set out to achieve a definition or philosophy for contemporary art.

In his book, Terry Smith writes that, 'generalization about contemporary art has evaded articulation for more than two decades'[4] while for his part, Osborne describes contemporary art as 'badly known', and both apply a series of categories and timelines to divide, define and historicise the era of the contemporary. Smith identifies 'three currents' of contemporary art, 'three core meanings' of the term 'contemporary' (with the addition in brackets of a fourth), two 'contentions' to describe the conditions of contemporaneity, and four 'main themes' of contemporary art. Peter Osborne identifies three *periods* of contemporary art, simultaneously endowing it with a 'distributive unity', wherein 'multiple contemporaries' reflect a variety of subject positions. It is difficult to track the

[3] Smith, Bernard, 'The Formalesque: a Guide to Modern Art and its History', South Yarra, Victoria: Macmillan 2007, 123

[4] Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1

categories and subsections around which Smith and Osborne structure their discourses, their multiple declarations tending to occlude meaning rather than enlighten.

Despite the sense of multiplicity inherent to his subject, Osborne's ultimate finding is contained within the statement that 'contemporary art is postconceptual art'.[5] Osborne qualifies this proposition as 'speculative' in that the subject of the statement – in this case, 'contemporary art' – disappears within, or is destroyed by, its predicate. The predicate then becomes the subject – 'postconceptual art is contemporary art' – and is consequently destroyed in turn. To Osborne, the 'infinite movement of thinking' engendered by these terms lends them a certain harmony or unification – and, perhaps, avoids an association of the word 'post' with the sense of historical progression or master narratives deemed inappropriate to defining the contemporary. Osborne characterises 'the contemporary' itself as fictional and hypothetical due to its assumption of a 'total conjunction of present times' and a 'unity to the temporal mode of the present', its fictional status requiring us to 'construct' contemporary art, rather than discover it. He states that the proposition 'contemporary art is postconceptual art' itself 'approaches the experience of art', but only, 'at the end of a very long process through which the meaning of the elements at issue…are developed.'[6] Where Osborne 'constructs' rather than 'describes' his subject, there is a sense that his text embodies the nature of contemporary art itself; a sense perhaps that, by writing this text, Osborne is *creating* contemporary art. Where he claims that his proposition 'approaches the experience of art', and considering his belief that his philosophy must be experienced through the entirety of his text, Osborne hints at a claim to the role of the artist himself. This sentiment is reflected in Bernard Smith's statement that, post the establishment of the discipline of art history by his heroes, 'the practising artists and art critics largely responsible for the development and maintenance of the Formalesque…worked in the wake of the established values of this new discipline'.[7] Relegating the role of artists and critics to the development and maintenance of the course of the Formalesque 'in the wake of' the new discipline of art history, Bernard Smith, like Osborne, lends a sense here that art follows theory or critique, rather than the other way around.

For both Terry Smith and Peter Osborne, the contemporary's sense of multiplicity and diversity separates and defines this moment from and against common conceptions regarding the modern.

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[5] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All – Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 3
[6] Peter Osborne, 'Contemporary Art is Post-Conceptual Art', Lecture delivered at Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, 2010. https://fondazioneratti.org/projects/contemporary-art-is-post-conceptual-art (accessed December 2, 2024)
[7] Smith, 'The Formalesque', 52

However, an attempt to remain true to a sense of the current moment as a *break* with the modern complicates intentions towards its definition, with the barrier to the question, 'what is contemporary art?' being its tendency to *evade* definition, a single narrative or an answer. If we value current art's lack of narrative, the need to remain true to this characteristic can hamper attempts at its theory. Where Osborne claims the movement of terms within his proposition explains or embodies contemporary art, I prefer its more literal, chronological interpretation, wherein the roots of contemporary art are determined by the problems and challenges raised by conceptual art.

Lucy Lippard's well-known essay 'Escape Attempts' of 1997 reflected extensively on the aims and outcomes of conceptual art in relation to art's dematerialisation, in what she identifies as the short period of this art's existence between 1966 and 1972. Lippard describes conceptual art's drive towards dematerialisation as an attempt to escape what she called the 'frame-and-pedestal' syndrome, where the embodiment of the concept 'art' by more ephemeral, dematerialised forms would allow its escape from the institutions of the museum or the market. She identified conceptual art as having made art more accessible to women, its dematerialized format rendering it inexpensive and unintimidating. Lippard claims it was in its presentation or form (or lack of a form) that conceptual art was radical: here, the *form* of conceptual art was political over its content. Lippard describes conceptual artists as wanting to attack the notions of originality, individual style and genius that were associated with 'patriarchal, ruling-class art'. Lippard's emphasis concerning conceptual art is on its diversity, openness and inclusivity.

In 'Escape Attempts', Lippard includes a variety of quotes from conceptual artists concerning art's dematerialisation, such as:

> Ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical…the words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept. (Sol LeWitt)
>
> I was beginning to suspect that information could be interesting in its own right and need not be visual… (John Baldessari)
>
> To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration…objects aren't very important for me anymore. (Joseph Beuys)[8]

[8] Lucy Lippard, *Escape Attempts,* from *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (California: University of California Press 1997)

Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth wrote equally extensively regarding conceptual art, albeit in a more restricted sense than Lippard in his attempt to restrict the movement to its most 'pure' form rather than open it to the multitude of instances identified by Lippard. In 'Information 2' from 1970, Kosuth also quotes a number of conceptual artists expressing their ideals towards art's dematerialisation, for example:

> I'm not really interested any longer to make an object. (Jan Dibbets)
>
> Materialist implies a primary involvement in materials, but I am primarily concerned with art. (Lawrence Weiner)
>
> I present oral communication as an object…I'm diametrically opposed to the precious object. (Ian Wilson)
>
> and 'Whatever happened to the art object?' (Carl Andre)[9]

Art's dematerialisation, or art considered as a concept over its manifestation in objects, was a widespread ideal for conceptual artists. At the end of the short period of conceptual art, both Lippard and Kosuth wrote of the movement's failure. Lippard describes how in 1969, artists believed nobody would pay money for objects such as 'a Xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded', but that only three years later, 'major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by…the world's most prestigious galleries'.[10] For Lippard:

> However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread).[11]

Conceptual practitioner's aspirations towards art's dematerialisation were geared towards an escape of the art world, in a view of art as a concept existing within the objects and situations of the everyday, or within 'non-art'. Despite these aims, in recent decades new materialist and object-oriented discourses have been applied to an understanding of art as necessarily material, with art

[9] Quotes from Kosuth, 'Information 2' 1970, *Art After Philosophy and After,* 57-71
[10] Lippard, 'Escape Attempts', xxi
[11] Lippard, 'Escape Attempts', xvii

forms previously considered 'dematerialised' – such as performance, air or even ideas – conceptually re-materialised in relation to new considerations of matter. In 2019, historian Christian Berger challenged Lippard's account of art's dematerialisation in his book, *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics,* against evidence revealing the priority of dematerialisation for conceptual practitioners. The re-materialisation of art in the current moment cements its re-institutionalisation, returning it to commodity status and a complicity with capitalist systems, representing a particular end of the ideological drive toward art's liberation with conceptual art.

The drive towards liberation offers a framework not only for the conceptual movement but for all modern movements, in a reading of the modern as a concern with form. This differs to that of Bernard Smith's account of the Formalesque, where his simple formula concerning abstraction versus representation as a matter of 'style' versus 'meaning' cannot account for art as we experience it post 'the Formalesque'. Smith's addition of the suffix 'esque' to the word 'formal' gives a sense of the modern period as something of slight concern, lending it the status of a tendency over a moment of any consequence. This contrasts with Baudrillard's 2006 description of modern art as an 'event' of 'decisive importance', as a project concerning art's 'disappearance' wherein it, 'abolished itself in the course of its practice'.[12] Still a reading of the modern as a concern with form, unlike Smith's formulation it is less a challenge to art regarding 'style' than a challenge to form *as such*.

In defending his discipline of art history, Smith claims art historians risk succumbing to a state of 'apocalyptic jitters' when they, 'begin toying with the idea that art history is itself coming to an end because they cannot make "historical" sense of contemporary art'[13]. While he doesn't identify the historians who have succumbed to this jittery state, Smith does mention the work of historian Hans Belting and philosopher and critic Arthur C Danto in the context of Hegel's thesis on the end of art history, two theorists who have made a point of analysing art in relation to ideas of the end. Since neither writer appears in Smith's esteemed lineup, it's safe to assume they do not hold a place in his version of art history, no doubt due to their willingness to at least consider a sense of the end of the subject their discipline is based upon. Whether desirable or not, there is a sense that within the post conceptual or contemporary state, ideas concerning the end inform the discipline of art history, *following the course of art itself*. Where conceptual art strove to end a sense of art as embodied or aesthetic and set it free within the everyday, a certain end of art as we know it took place. Despite

[12] Jean Baudrillard, 'On Disappearance', *Jean Baudrillard: Fatal Theories,* D. B. Clarke, M. A. Doel, W. Merrin, R. G. Smith (eds), Routledge, New York, 2011, 27
[13] Smith, 'The Formalesque', 123

its difficulty, in the moment post this state, both historians and artists are called to reckon with this sense of art as having ended, rather than deny it.