

Exploring Conceptual Art

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1. The Idealistic Obstinacy of Conceptual Art

Many philosophers and critics agree that Conceptual Art is distinguished not only to be a loose collection of various practices but especially for its significant contradictions that increase the theoretical controversy about it.

According to the theorist Donald Brook (1972) the phrase «Conceptual Art» has different senses and it is used with a general non-acceptance. His argument is based on the following premises: (i) this obscure label refers to many kinds of processes and objects; (ii) artists' justifications about them are vague; (iii) their writings, in many cases, are in gibberish. So defining Conceptual Art is a complex matter. Brook acknowledges that this difficulty is related to four uses of the phrase: to indicate a primacy of a conceptual approach to art in contrast to the perceptual one; to emphasise that Conceptual Art is art of ideas and not art of physical objects; to claim that it is also an artistic process based on a semantic paradox that changes art and points out the critical approach to its nature; to remark the restricted meta-activity character through which art became essentially a comment on itself.

The four uses of the phrase «Conceptual Art» singled by Brook reveal a high level of ambiguity due to its use. Nominally we could use the phrase to refer to an artistic movement or a general set of new experimental practices of the 60s that don't accept the traditional methods of art making. In the first meaning the phrase is differently coined and used by two artists¹, and it is not completely working if referring to other kinds of artistic movements. Conceptual Art in this case would be the name of the artistic movement initially based upon the creative activities and the critical statements of many different artists, largely American². In the second meaning instead, the phrase is used to describe a decisive tendency for the profound change of art due to the new experimental practices of the 60s that also established a large part of the successive artistic evolution until today.

The controversy about Conceptual Art is corroborated by this nominal ambiguity that reflects: the uncertain nature of Conceptual Art, its invisible boundaries but, at the same

¹ Henry Flynt in his *Concept Art* (1961) speaks about an art whose material are «concepts»; Sol LeWitt in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967) remarks the primacy of ideas in art.

² In this view the main American conceptual artists were Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, supported by the gallery director and intelligent divulger of their activities, Seth Siegelaub. Anyway, in a historical view, Sol LeWitt, Walter De Maria, Bruce Nauman, Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson, The Art & Language Group and many others are also considered as conceptualists.

time, its visible heritage from Modernism³ and also its questionable philosophical references upon which are based many of its different practices.

Philosopher Richard Sclafani (1975) doesn't believe that the conceptual movement has any implications for art or for philosophy. He grouped the conceptual works in three categories: extra radical; quasi-philosophical (based on a self-referential character); and based on a language and thought model of reflection. A conceptual confusion is to the basis of the first group of works: it's not possible that if someone calls something «Art», then it is art. Surely, the success of a conceptual artwork – also the famous urinal exhibited by Duchamp – is strictly linked to the artistic community context. But the contextual statements are not sufficient so that something becomes art. It seems that for conceptualists it was impossible «to reject a claim of art status» (Sclafani 1975: 456). As Sclafani explains: «Not everyone can be an artist simply as he pleases, and not everything can be a work of art simply on anyone say's so. Without logical constraints on artmaking and arthood, the concepts 'artist' and 'work of art' are rendered vacuous» (ibidem). With the extra-radical artworks many conceptualists lose the Duchamp' lesson, since they claimed that it was essentially a contextual statement to confer arthood. The quasi-philosophical works – largely based on incursions in analytical philosophy – prove an unfavourable intellectual complexity, as a heritage of philosophical is-

sues implied in them. Lastly, the third group of works, in which language and thought are intriguing subjects to an obstinate model of reflection, increases confusion and nonsense. So Sclafani concludes that Conceptual Art is a nonsensical and confused kind of art.

Consequently, the risk to define Conceptual Art as not art or to assign it the «anti-art» label is very high.

Although it is also possible to define art according to an institutional framework⁴, a problem still remains: how can we determine the boundary between what is art and what is not? Philosopher George Dickie (1975) argues that this was possible using the phrase «anti-art», especially to refer to actions and statements of some artists: the performers. Actions and statements are not artefacts. Performers don't produce any material objects through their actions and declarations, so they make anti-art. As Dickie explains what performers do «is real anti-art: art because they use the framework of the artworld, anti because they do nothing with it». For this reasons they are «bureaucrats» because «they occupy a niche in an institutional structure but do nothing which is really productive» (Dickie 1975: 421). In his ontology of art Dickie doesn't include artists' actions and statements, and his theoretical perspective seems to be in accordance with the one of the dematerialisation of art – as described by

³ See Wood (2002).

⁴ The institutional framework – as it as theorised by Dickie at this stage of his research – consists in a core of: (1) creators; (2) presenters; (3) appreciators; (4) theorists, critics and philosophers of art; (5) exhibition machinery. See Dickie (1975).

many artists and theorists⁵. If this is correct then we could conclude that most of conceptual artworks are anti-art because they are dematerialised. Once again, also with these outlines of Dickie, the problem of a Conceptual Art definition emerges (especially if we accept the dematerialisation of art's topic).

According to philosopher Dale Jamieson (1986) literature about Conceptual Art is pervaded by an «endemic confusion». It seems that defining Conceptual Art may be possible only referring to the definitions of the conceptual artists or to the descriptions of critics. Both reveal a connection with the indeterminacy of a presumed conceptual framework and with the absurd target of the dematerialisation of art. About this second matter Jamieson argues that «the claim that conceptualists “eliminate” the art objects is nonsense» (Jamieson 1986: 118). Conceptual artworks are objects. Without them there would be no Conceptual Art. Moreover Jamieson faced also other questions concerning: the conceptual artworks classification – «why should earthworks be classed as conceptual piece?» (ibidem); the inadequate conception of the shift from object to concept (explained as criticism against economical market, commodities and so on and so forth); the use of word «conceptual» without reference to style, time relations etc. If the term is used to speak about the ontological and epistemological status of certain artworks, then we might differentiate them to the traditional ones. Focusing on the relation between concepts and their

manifestations – concepts are imperceptible, instead their manifestation are perceptible – Jamieson proposes to distinguish three kinds of Conceptual Art in which:

1. Art object is imperceptible but its existence is contingent on its perceptible expression.
2. Art object is imperceptible and it has no perceptible expression, but its existence is contingent on its apprehension by some audience.
3. Art object is imperceptible, it has no perceptible expression, and it doesn't need to be apprehended by an audience.

In his account Jamieson points out that in first kind of Conceptual Art, objects are material supports and documentations of ideas. In the second kind conceptual artworks are essentially thought as performances rather than objects. Finally, in the third kind they are similar to things yet not known that depend on some theory about them. About the second kind of conceptual works Jamieson notes that viewing the artwork as a performance implies any distinction between Conceptual Art and the traditional one. About the third kind of works Jamieson points out a theory-dependence of them: «[t]he point is that even in order to grasp what the artwork in question is, one needs some theory about the nature of conceptual artworks. Traditional artworks are much more autonomous with respect to theory» (Jamieson 1986: 122). Concluding his account Jamieson pronounces also a verdict: «conceptual art has little to offer to aesthetic theory» (ibidem). Except one, other kinds of Conceptual Art have been anticipated by phi-

⁵ See Lippard, Chandler (1968).

losophers: the first by Collingwood and the second by Croce. However, the third seems to teach that «forgotten thoughts or things unknowable can be artworks» (ibidem).

These criticisms feed the controversy about Conceptual Art. At the same time they point out the idealistic trend that has characterised the first and radical productive period of Conceptual Art in which the main target was the dematerialisation of art object. The main directions of this trend are summarised in: a defence of mental processes considered conclusive to make art; an idiosyncratic attitude toward materials and objects; the inclination to the attainment of the dematerialisation of art. The latter becomes exactly the decisive topic to investigate Conceptual Art: is it really possible to eliminate physical objects in art? Of course, this is a fascinating proposal, an ambitious goal whose achievement would determine the definitive transformation of art. In practice, however, things went differently. In the second productive period of Conceptual Art – between the late 60s and the early 70s – we can record a change: artists return intentionally to objects and materials. For this reason now I would focus on this change of direction, which I think is to the basis of the evolution of art in the last fifty years. Perhaps this is a risky way to approach Conceptual Art, but I would like to show that we might start our philosophical investigations on art examining what at first was not considered relevant by conceptualists: exactly matters and objects, that never really disappeared. This change of direction allows us to focus on the strict adherence to the reality that characterises the contemporary evolution of art.

2. Artworks as Conductors of Ideas

Since the 60s many conceptualists have aimed to the dematerialisation of art objects essentially to defend first a not commercial and anti-market art making and second a political approach integrated in their productive activities. However, with a complete elimination of the objects none of the two aims would be satisfied. Let's consider the first productive period of Conceptual Art: obsolescence is not eminently only about physical objects, but mainly to visual representations. To challenge capitalist market integrated in the artworld means questioning the traditional methods for making images. These latter are the real targets of many conceptualists that introduce new ways to elaborate representation reducing saliency of visual shapes. Conceptualists adopt an articulated reductionist process to make art. So, on the one hand images become visual recordings like documents and on the other hand making art means using directly human bodies, various materials and objects. At the same time, these latter become essential to explicit, to advertise and to share socially the conceptual content of the artworks. In the following I would consider the impact of the reductionism introduced through Conceptual Art⁶.

⁶ In 1972 Italian philosopher Ermanno Migliorini considers – in a phenomenological view – what he defines the «Conceptualist Paradigm», as characterised exactly by a double reductionism: aesthetical (to the *áisthesis*) and artistic (to the *póiesis*). The first reductionist process is the principal aim of

Contrary to what is usually believed, physical objects are still essential for conceptualists. They make art using ordinary or natural objects, human bodies in action or mere materials exhibited in some places. So, a conceptual artwork, rather than being thought as an idea, should be recognised immediately as a material presence; as a matter presented in a certain place. Surely, also paintings and sculptures were considered as material presences, but they are used in function to elaborate a visual image and to depict something that is not really present to us, but only duplicated and postponed by such materials. In a different way, conceptual artworks are essentially materials used to exhibit really, and first of all, themselves without constrictive connections with the elaboration of a visual image that depicts a real or an imaginary entity. Being objects, bodies and materials presented in a place, conceptual artworks are available to us, to our perception – about this specific point I agree with philosopher Alva Noë that «perceptual presence is availability», it's a question of style to access the world through our sensorimotor understanding (Noë 2012: 19-24). The availability of materials, bodies and objects is decisive to our interaction and comprehension of conceptual artworks since they are in our own plane of reality – differently to objects, bodies or materials represented by images. Of course, there

Minimal Art, the second one of Conceptual Art. In their relation, artistic and aesthetical reductionism express – Migliorini notes – a shift towards the significant matter of the value of art. See Migliorini 1972.

are also conceptual artworks that are based on visual postponements: video- and photo- recordings in particular – and, in a certain way, also texts that postpones objects, bodies and performances through documentary traces. But unlike traditional artworks, videos and photos used by conceptualists have no perfunctory or visual relevance exactly because are mere recordings that transmit conceptual content much more quickly than traditional works. This content is essentially a set of coordinates – information or instructions – that allows us to meet a photo- or a video- subject as if it was present to us through the picture, although it is *only present through it*. So objects, space, human bodies, natural environments etc. recorded by videos and photos could be understood according to the «presence-as-absence structure of pictures» (Noë 2012: 85), acknowledging however an increased content accessibility. A conceptual artwork should be recognised as a material presence that transmits, in a clear and accessible way, ideas.

To understand a conceptual artwork not only the knowledge of the art history, but first of all the knowledge of our real world is requested, its objects and subjects and their spatial and temporal coordinates to explain their relations. When we see the real chair – the material one – exhibited in Kosuth's piece *One and Three Chairs* (1965) we immediately acknowledge an ordinary object belonging to our world, its ambient position and its new value as artwork since it is exhibited into an institutional place. Moreover the photo and the dictionary definition of «chair» emphasise the connection between concept and object.

These acknowledgments are relevant for at least two reasons. On the one hand, through the description of the materials exhibited we can access to the idea of a deconstruction from the 'chair-object' to the 'chair-concept' transmitted through this work. On the other hand, also if we did not accept that it was an artwork, then probably we'll have to deal with the issues of the nature of art and of the closely relation between the work and the institutional framework that guarantees it to be such. Moreover, in the same moment in which one says: «this is not an artwork, but only a chair», he claim both his skeptical reasons against the work and also his exigency to put in question and discuss the concepts of «art», «artworks», «artist» and «aesthetical experience». This is because through their works conceptualists challenge our traditional belief about art. More precisely, in the words of the philosopher Elisabeth Schellekens, «[f]irst and foremost, Conceptual Art challenges our intuition concerning the limits of what may count as art and what it is an artist do» (Schellekens 2007).

But why objects, materials and documentation – their material presence – should be so relevant? Many conceptualists claim the primacy of ideas intentionally corroborating their inaccessibility and so risking their private closing in their minds. Although conceptualists insist that the transmission of ideas can easily be obtained through their statements or actions, their 'permanent conduction' – what I mean as the opportunity to share and understand an idea over time, in the course of history – is possible only through a material object physically put into middle position be-

tween artist and viewers. This is the basic rule to share art in our society. And this is also a direction that seems implicated in the words of a radical conceptualist as LeWitt – even though with many theoretical complications. In his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969) he writes: «(10) Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical» (LeWitt in Alberro, Stimson 1999: 107). Of course, an idea is conceivable as an abstract object, but to grasp it as embedded into an artwork – or to find out a piece's creative process – it is necessary its transmission through a physical object. LeWitt than also writes: «(13) A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewers. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist's mind.» (ibidem). The term «conductor» reveals the artist's choose to transmit the idea through the artwork. Nevertheless if LeWitt is right, the idea (that moreover he means as an abstract object different to the concept⁷) is a secret content present only into the artist's mind and not exactly expressed through the artwork. Unexpectedly, this is the typical situation in which we are approaching traditional art. With paintings and sculptures we partially know which is the subject and never which is the idea that the artist would like to transmit through his work. Barely we fail to

⁷ In the ninth sentence LeWitt writes: «The concept and idea are different. The former implies a general direction while the latter is the components. Ideas implement the concept.» (LeWitt in Alberro, Stimson 1999: 106).

recognize the referents of visual representations. So, why should we claim an Idea Art or a Conceptual Art, if we don't have any opportunity to access its conceptual contents? It seems we are at a blind spot.

I think that an alternative to this impasse is possible. Since in traditional artworks ideas are exactly inaccessible – essentially because they are masked by images, as if they were artist's secrets – we may suppose that historical conceptualists reducing the significance of images and its visual saliency aimed to explicit and transmit immediately accessible ideas over time through their works. I guess this was possible whether this communicative transmission is supported by a material trace that makes it recoverable. This basic material trace has no formal relevance because it is formally reduced. The reductionism is implicit in the conceptualists' approach to art so that the phrase «less is more»⁸ indicates a methodological rule to make a conceptual artwork. The more the work's external form is reduced – in terms of a 'short form' – the greater the emergence of ideas will be. In this view a conceptual artwork is a reduction to: an ordinary or a natural object, a human body engaged in performance, a video-, photo- and textual- documentation that explicit its conceptual content. For this reasons, I'm inclined to think that we might grasp the conceptual content directly going back from the material object to the idea. And the second evolutionary

phase of Conceptual Art, between the late 60s and the early 70s, it's a confirmation of this direction: it was exactly the period in which artists reconsider the significance of the objects⁹. In other words, after a first radical experimental period in which artists claim the primacy of ideas putting out the objects, in a second time they reconsider the latter, making art according to a new materialisation model based on the reductionism.

This awareness of the material relevance to transmit ideas is also a consequence of the incoherent theoretical anti-object claim, never fully satisfied neither in the first period of Conceptual Art. Such a methodological tension into artistic processes is verifiable investigating several conceptual artworks belonging to both periods that exhibit this immediate accessibility to ideas.

In 1969 artist Robert Barry dispersed a litre of Argon gas in the atmosphere working on the Santa Monica Sea. Surely, the Argon gas is imperceptible. However, the act of dispersion in that specific natural environment is possible according to its contextual materials and the use of a glass cruet originally containing the gas successively dispersed. I don't say that the cruet has the same value of the act of dispersing Argon gas in the atmosphere. But I would say that the objects – and the environmental context too – are essential to Barry's aims. Neither the documentation nor the photos can be considered of secondarily importance. Without them, today we would not have historical memory of *Inert Gas Se-*

⁸ This phrase was originally adopted by the German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) reflecting about a minimalist approach to design and architectural works.

⁹ See Smith 1999.

ries: *Argon [from measured volume to indefinite expansion]* – Barry's artwork. Documentation is essential because allows the transmission of essential coordinates to understand the idea – and, in many cases, also the artistic agency at the origin of a conceptual artwork.

Now, let's consider the transparency of other artistic pieces belonging to the conceptual framework. *Spill (Scatter Piece)* (1966) is an artwork by Carl Andre based on the gesture of toppling from a canvas bag 800 plastic blocks on the floor. After the fall, the blocks create a totally random structure added on the floor's surface. «Combination» and «randomness» are two concepts immediately accessible examining the blocks of plastic and recognising their position on the floor. *The Nominal Three (to William of Ockam)* (1963) is an artwork by Dan Flavin. Composed by some fluorescent tubes, allows to see a reduction. Three, two and one neon on the wall in an ambient illuminated by their white light. The methodological principle of Ockam's Razor – referring to parsimony and economy in order to avoid to multiply elements if it is not necessary – results as a reduction of the same tubular neon – from three to one. We can access to the idea through the description of the material objects. And this means to start our investigations by focusing first and foremost on objects and materials. With the words of the curator and theorist Germano Celant we could say about Flavin's works that «[t]he news, then is the light, not its image. The only purpose is to put the spectator before object light – commonly considered as an instrument – in order to give him a chance to grasp it directly. [...] The problem is no longer the

mediation of light, the problem of the lamp or of the source, but the use of light, and it is not merely an artistic problem, but a concrete, vital matter influencing our grasp of reality» (Celant 1969: 54-5). Also human beings engaged in several performances – like objects and materials – influenced our re-action and our approach to reality. The experience of performance influences our grasp of reality as a consequence of the reductionism adopted by conceptualists.

3. To Explicit Ideas through Body Presence

A man is closed in a room with a coyote: something dangerous will happen to him? This is not the incipit of a novel but a short description and a legitimate question about a real event: one week's performance of German artist Joseph Beuys in René Block Gallery in New York, in 1974. Posing some questions about this artwork and describing it, we will also take its main concept: a wild coyote encounters a human being closed with him in a room. The animal symbolises the United States of America, the German artist Europe. The encounter is first between man and animal and secondly – let's say, according to a symbolic project plane – between United States and Europe. So *I Like America and America Likes Me* is a transparent artwork: first we can immediately access to the ideas about a relational instability and the risks connected to the encounter between a man and an animal, and secondly we'll be able to face also the sym-

bolic plane about the Germany/U.S.A. relationship implicated in the artwork. So first we meet the two livings presented in the gallery and then the mythologies and the reflections about political, cultural dialectical and hierarchical implications between different societies in the world. Without excluding Beuys's energetic conception of a «group soul of all forms of life» – an «essential part of his concept of reality» (Tisdall 2008: 11) – it is the presence of the livings and the objects in the Block Gallery to afford Beuys' creative process, his critical statements about society (consider the pile of *The Wall Street Journal* present in the gallery) and his remarks about natural connections between higher and lower forms of life.

I think that a phenomenon in particular was relevant for our philosophical investigations of conceptual artworks and their relation with reality, the phenomenon of presence. Presence of several objects, materials and bodies implies, first of all, a reflection on our sensitive approach to them. Experience of a human being in front of us is profoundly different to make experience of a picture of it. The presence of the former implies our direct approach with it, since it's not postponed by an image. It is no present as absent and our perception is engaged by profiles that change when we approach it and move around it, in accordance to the environmental availability (cfr. Noë 2012).

The real presence of a body, especially in the case of performance, might be also shocking. Surely we could think that Marina Abramović' *The Artist is Present* (2010) was also an artwork about something that we

could not immediately see and we could grasp only through an interpretative process. Nevertheless, is the same presence of Abramović, his bodily presence, to be decisive first to our aesthetical re-action and secondly to our thought about her work. Who participated this performance experienced a human being that silently looked at another one; a real person sitting on a chair not an image of it. Why did many people, once seated in front of Abramović, start crying? I would say because her bodily presence has a greater impact on them, on their sensitivity and perception, indeed different from the presence of a painting of it. It is really difficult to establish a comparison between a performance and a traditional artwork. In this regard, philosopher Arthur Danto remarks: «the practice of no other art requires the sacrifices that performance exacts. [...] It crosses boundaries most art does not approach, though it has occurred to me that some of the strong depictions of physical suffering painted for purposes of strengthening faith in the Counter-Reformation in Rome, have something like that effect. [...] The body itself renders pointless the effort to try to depict it naturalistically: this is what bodies are.» (Danto 2010: 32). One of Abramović' ideas concern exactly the bodily presence in a specific space and time according to a certain state of mind to the basis to experience it during a performance: how is it possible to transmit that? The same presence of the body and its availability to the viewer's perception in a place allow to grasp these concepts.

Conceptual artworks are more accessible than traditional ones, since they are conceiv-

able as 'transparent material presences'. Transparency of their contents is due to the presence of ordinary and natural objects, of human beings (in some cases, also animals) engaged in several performances that we immediately recognise. The role of documentation as material traced is therefore evident: without video or photo recordings we would not have neither the coordinates to access to the concept of a work nor historical memory of them.

Conceptual content embedded in an artwork is secreted in traditional art, not in Conceptual Art. Conceptualists claim the primacy of ideas and of the cognitive approach to art through the disappearance of objects but, on the contrary, they laid the foundation of bringing back art to the ordinary – corroborating original Duchamp's intuition. Only with a varieties of objects and materials presented in several places artists can transmit ideas and share them socially with the viewers. To explicit ideas is one of the basic methodological rules of conceptualism that is based on a new model of materialisation to make art. Thus, no wonder then that conceptual artist John Baldessari, during a conversation with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, has stated about his studio (a kind of archive): «it's small for me. Conceptual artists aren't supposed to need space!» (Baldessari, Obrist 2009: 35).

4. Conceptualism and New Materialisation in Art

Investigating art we might consider conceptualism as a methodological trend inherited by Conceptual Art and widely shared by contemporary artists. However, on the subject of conceptualism in art there isn't a peaceful and unique theoretical conception. In this regard I would like to present some remarks about conceptualism in order to consider its strict connection with a new model of materialisation and some consequences of its impact on art.

According to art historian Paul Wood in contemporary art there isn't the same critical spirit of historical Conceptual Art. Original intents of conceptualists would have been contradicted. Their creative model was based on a radical criticism against capitalism's rules and an analytical approach towards mind and body. In the actual artistic scene things are not the same. Wood writes that «[t]he analytical strand of Conceptual art, linked as it was to a left-wing class politics, was eclipsed by a burgeoning of performance-related activities (often accompanied by video technologies or installations) and frequently underwritten by a politics of identity. This shift lies behind the emergence of a notion of 'conceptualism' that has come into currency to describe the range of object-, video-, performance- and installation-based activities that currently hold sway across the international art scene. 'Conceptualism' in this sense is effectively a synonym for 'postmodernism'.» (Wood 2002: 75).

I don't completely agree with these remarks. Accepting that the claims of original

conceptualists since the 60s are based on an idealistic obstinacy – as we saw, largely criticized by many philosophers and theorists – we might acknowledge also their utopian view concerning the dematerialisation and the contrast to the capitalist market as essential reasons to support their postmodernist approach to art. In a different perspective, we could say that between the late 60s and the early 70s, exactly with the return to the objects, conceptualists succeed to increase their critical attitudes towards many social, cultural and political issues. So, if this perspective is correct than we could think also that conceptualism was synonym of postmodernism only in the first ‘hyperbolic idealistic phase’ of Conceptual Art in which artists insisted on the dematerialisation of the art objects. More precisely, conceptual artworks can be conceived as postmodernist in two senses: because they were made chronologically after the modernist paradigm or because they are results of the primacy of ideas and of a constructivist approach, both typical of the postmodernist paradigm. Returning to the objects conceptualists inspire newly a reflection about our real world, our ordinary and natural objects, the limits and the opportunity to approach and acknowledge them. I propose a different use of the term «conceptualism». I would use it to refer to the art adherence to ordinary and reality. So in this perspective, through conceptualism a revival of art based on a new materialisation model that characterized the artistic scene since the 60s until today begins.

In 1969 curator and art historian Harald Szeemann explores this innovative scene with a great exhibition at the Bern Kunsthalle titled

Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form. Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information. With the exhibition Szeemann was able to point out and remark the features of this new artistic horizon. An artistic object is the secondary product of mental processes. At the same time, materials and objects (formally reduced) reveal the ideas and the agency transmitted by the artists. What does this mean? I would say that it is possible to go back from physical object to understand ideas and agency transmitted by an artist. In this regard, Szeemann acknowledges the two essential art traits that persist also today: (i) the primacy of the creative process and the agency of the artist both coinciding with the formal reduction of the works; (ii) the adaptation of the creative regulatory framework necessary to elaborate an artwork to the exhibition space. In other words, for Szeemann it was clear that acknowledging an object means immediately individuating the process through which it was elaborated, reduced or only placed. Furthermore, the artistic process necessary to make an artwork is adapted to the social, exhibition and relational space in which the work will be placed. Although characterised by stylistic irrelevance, a mere object or a simple material connotes itself, denotes attitudes and transmits ideas. Therefore, the return to the simplicity of the materials – as Szeemann correctly remarked yet – is the guarantee of a direct and immediate access to the work and to its content. Szeemann was again right when he said that through these practices artists help to make

the public more aware of both the processes and the materials presented¹⁰.

Now let's consider many works we could meet in our contemporary artworld: how has art changed after conceptualism? In 2003 Colombian artist Doris Salcedo installed 1550 wooden chairs stacked in the empty space between two buildings, in Yemenciler Caddesi No.66 in Istanbul. In 2005 during her exhibition at Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Salcedo reworked one of the institution's major rooms by extending the majestic vaulted brick ceiling. In order to access to Salcedo's ideas – but also to explain *Untitled* (2003) and *Abyss* (2005) – it is sufficient to describe first their constituent materials and objects, their position and their relations with environments and ambient. In the first case it is the idea of «precariousness» to be accessible to us; in the second work it is instead the one of «obstruction».

Conceptualism is implemented in parallel by a new materialisation in art that requests, first of all, a reflection about our sensitive approach to external world. This is essentially an aesthetical approach based on our direct experience of material elements, variances and invariances of physical objects and

environments. In many cases it means to grasp not only a conceptual disagreement but also a physical friction. Both confirm a new art role: through it we could explore and reconsider not only imaginary worlds but also reality. So this means to explore directly its «limits» and «possibilities», acknowledging external world essentially as «unamendable» – as maintained by philosopher Maurizio Ferraris in his remarks concerning a positive evaluation about the emergence of thought and sense from reality (cfr. Ferraris 2013). Clearly, I'm not saying that our sensitive approach to reality is the principal and the only aim of all conceptualists and neither of all contemporary artists in general. Rather that it become of primary importance through the establishment of conceptualism since the 70s.

Whether we want to trace some general features of conceptualism we could list at least the following methodological rules adopted by many artists: (a) to involve intentionally the viewers making ideas accessible through the reductionism adopted in art making; (b) to engage viewers in terms of a fully multi-sensory experience through performances, relational and participative events modifying ambient and environments; (c) to raise questions about the nature and the knowledge of art; (d) to encourage explorations of reality and its social, natural, political implications. As a consequence we could think about a conceptual form of art in two different ways. First an art that allows us to go back to the object in direction to appreciate a project, an idea or directly a reflection about the nature of art. Further-

¹⁰ In 1969 during a television interview, Szeemann explains clearly that it is not possible to understand the works of the artists active in those years in terms of a movement or a 'school'. He opts instead for the recognition of a trend shared by performers and artists, summarizing it in the following key elements: the reaction to the geometrical inclination typical of the artistic production of the 60s; the resumption of the Duchamp's practice of ready-made, of the pollockian gesture and of actions and happenings.

more, a conceptual form of art allows also to explore our reality and its social, natural possibilities and complexity; the relational and spatial coordinates between objects and subjects present in our external world. In this second sense art strictly concerns a thought about reality – and this is a second way in which we could think about art after conceptualism.

As I tried to show, between the 60s and the 70s of the last century, art through conceptualism and a new model of materialisation has encouraged our explorations and remarks about reality and its social, relational, political, participative and moral implications. Of course art still remains connected with fiction and its visual views. Abstraction, representation, narrative implications and visual deformations still are relevant topics still. Today, however, after the achievement of conceptualism, through art we can explore also new fields concerning our reality: popular culture, quotidian objects, politics, globalism, audience, institutional machinery, gender's questions and many others¹¹.

¹¹ The list proposed by the critics Eleanor Heartney in her catalogue concerning the relations between art and toady emphasises exactly this combination between historical fictional fields and new realistic areas connected with contemporary art. See Heartney (2013).

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