

It may seem like a strange place from which to introduce a piece on Modernism and Postmodernism, but I propose to use Conceptual Art, rather than Pop Art (traditionally regarded as the cut-off point between the two schools of idea). For this we must consider Conceptual Art not only as an artistic method, but take it much further as a replacement for traditional philosophy for the latter half of the Twentieth Century and onwards. Sol Lewitt posits that Conceptual Art is a better means of understanding the philosophy of language and dialectics, as it bypasses the “language games” of the written word (to some degree). In Lewitt’s own words:

“When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”

The above is quoted from Lewitt’s esteemed “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” and perfectly encapsulates the rationale behind the movement. Here, traditional methods and means of art (the brush, paint, etc.) are completely disposed of in favour of the idea as the medium. Prior to Conceptual Art, the artist relied entirely on our understanding of language to make his or her works understood, because we perceive with language (this may seem like a bold statement, but when one considers this for long enough, then one is forced to concede the inevitability of language. This is a train of thought readily associated with Wittgenstein, of whom more later).

Now, the reasoning behind my using Conceptual Art as a lead-in to this piece may or may not now begin to become clear. I propose that a good understanding of the philosophy behind Conceptual Art is a perfect key to understanding all art prior to Conceptual Art. How I qualify this is by proposing further that Conceptual Art can be considered (chronologically) as a kind of Big Bang in reverse: all of the elements traditionally associated with art have been removed, or at the very least held back by the artist. “One and Three Chairs” by Joseph Kosuth (1965) is a good example of this. In the piece, a chair sits next to a photographic representation of the same chair on the left, and a written dictionary description of a chair on its right. At first this work strikes the viewer as exceptionally flat, dry and distant: where is the beauty? All aesthetics seem to be missing, but with Conceptual Art, the viewer is obliged to pay close attention to everything which is omitted, for the reasonings behind this sum up not only the piece being perceived, but also the philosophy of Conceptual Art in general. When we perceive the chair, our broader understanding of what a chair is instantly tells us it is a chair, but the photograph of the chair is undeniably a chair also, but has none of the functional aspect of the chair in the middle, nor has the dictionary definition. So, taking this idea further, one must consider that the chair in the middle may not have the same functional meaning for all who see the piece, much like the representations of the left and right do not, when thought of in depth, carry the same functional meanings. In the end, one is left with the realisation that the idea and conception of what a chair is is not laid out in front of us by the artist, but rather brought to the piece by the viewer, by way of our own conception of a chair.

This is a theme which Kosuth would repeatedly play out with various other objects. These objects would be of the most perfunctory nature, as only by using objects so prosaic can Kosuth present work stripped of all enigma, metaphor and innuendo, because these are the objects which carry the least visual and metaphorical associations, and therefore address directly our immediate assumptions of them.

At this point it may be fruitful to point out that I have just taken a break from writing this essay, and during that time I did the washing up (hear me out...). Whilst rinsing the cutlery in the bottom of the washing up bowl I felt the familiar metallic clangings of the spoon, forks and knives. This sensory perception of the cutlery told me instantly that I was rinsing cutlery, that it was my cutlery and it

would be used for eating my food. I did not even have to think of its functional meaning: it was there, where I expected it to be. But before I looked at the cutlery, and had only the tactile notion of it in my hands under the water, only I could have made the immediate assumption that it was my cutlery. Some other kind soul who may have offered to do my washing up would have to be one step removed from this assumption, as their own cutlery in their own home may not have been fashioned from metal, may not consist of the same contours or other such embellishments, and so, philosophically speaking, may have had to lift the cutlery out of the water and look in order to make their own functional meaning. Also, I could have, whilst washing them myself, taken a spoon and used it to eat some soup from the hob. This action would not have necessarily meant that I was using a spoon for this task – it may well have been a cup. But the object I used was made from metal, so it obviously was a spoon. Here, things begin to get messy, in philosophical terms. Only I could have made the theoretical jump from “metallic” and “spoon-shaped” to “spoon.” The mere fact that the spoon had these qualities would not be enough to define it. To a certain degree, using it to eat the soup clears this up, as most would argue that the act of using it so spoon made it a spoon, but there again the fact remains that I could have been using another object of similar dimensions and made from metal to perform this action.

This is precisely the kind of thing which Kosuth is asking us to question. It is the very essence of the transparency of language: when we contemplate an object, we don't contemplate its definition. We bypass the written, oral and aural definitions of the object and go straight for the object itself. From this proposition, we begin to see words as every bit as perfunctory as the objects they describe. The only true version of the object is the one that is already in our minds.

And this is why Conceptual Art is a good way of introducing an essay on the divide between Modernism and Postmodernism. Using the above rationale, we can consider meaning, form and intent in all art before Modernism came to its conclusion. And why? Because, before this Art was by and large objective: it spelled out to a great degree what we were perceiving. But with Modernism came Abstract Expressionism, which was an art form which disregarded the objective and dealt entirely with the subjective: it externalised the internal. This is the period in art history where the methods of understanding laid bare by Conceptual Art fail to be of any use, as the subject matter of Abstract Expressionism had no recognisable signs in relation to the outside world – it existed only within the artist. When one first observes a work by, for example, Pollock, one first notices the chaos, the seemingly random splatters of colour which resemble nothing tangible. It is only through our understanding of Pollock and his methods that we appreciate the work as a piece of Abstract Expressionism i.e. the artist creating from instinct alone.

Modernism pushed things as far as they could go, progressively speaking. In the first half of the Twentieth Century (and with a mindset that began with the Industrial Revolution) mankind strived tirelessly to create bigger and better cultural objects, be they in the field of art, architecture, medicine etc. One could say that man's arrival on the moon was the zenith of his achievement, and that after this event it would be a long wait until anything of such magnitude could occur again. One could also suggest that the end of Modernism was also the last point in human history to bring with it original thought, and that everything thereafter was merely a rehash of old ideas. This is certainly the opinion held by many when the advent of Pop Art in the late Sixties heralded the arrival of Postmodernism.

Postmodernism as an ideology was all about using the culture of the past and present and using it in ways which suggested meaning other than was their original intention. Here we see Andy Warhol taking images of Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Campbell's Soup and Coca-Cola and reproducing their likenesses to comment upon the cult of celebrity, Jasper Johns using subverting American

iconography and Lichtenstein turning the aesthetics of comic books into something entirely more subtle. I have spoken about Pop Art more in depth in another essay, and so here I make reference to it only to discuss Clement Greenberg, who saw Pop Art and Postmodernism as mere celebration of the low-brow and culturally barren. Greenberg saw broad taste as “lazy taste,” and so the cultural references found within the framework of Pop Art were obviously anathema to him.

Yet it is also interesting that the philosophy of Conceptual Art would also struggle to understand the methods and principles found in Pop Art. The latter’s very use of reproduction is a spanner in the works of a mind like Kosuth’s. A reproduction is a representation of a representation, and when that representation is reproduced even further, the language games used in Conceptual Art lost their grasp as the reproduction becomes ever more ambiguous in meaning: again the common cultural reference loses its ground.

So what does this tell us about Postmodernism? Well, for one it suggests that what is perceived (be it in a painting, on a screen or elsewhere) can no longer be trusted because if, as is inevitably the case with images being reproduced over and over again, the reproduction is no longer of the original object, then layers of that object’s common functionality are lost, thus rendering it irrelevant to its original concept. The transparency of the language instilled in us (that of ostensibly innate understanding of a thing [a philosophical concept far too convoluted for this short essay]) loses its transparency: the viewer’s view of the object perceived becomes muddied by the graininess of the reproduction. All that we see must now be questioned. And in questioning the image we must also question the motives of the artist, as these motives may well be entirely alien to the motives of artists before Postmodernism (and, to a certain extent, Modernism) came along. In fact, what essentially drives Postmodernism is a sense of irony, or rather a tacit agreement between artist and viewer that both are fully aware of A) the relevance and social context of the original object, and B) the distorted, often cynical, spin which the artist has given the object.

It may be of some use here to state that, at this period in time, Postmodernism has been itself superseded by what is essentially a grey area of logic and culture. The Modern Art scholar Nicolas Bourriaud is credited with naming this grey area “Altermodernism.” Altermodernism goes a step beyond Postmodernism in that, whereas the latter took elements of a past culture and twisted them to create contemporary commentary, the former would completely re-format the past, take its concepts, ideas and artistic output and attempt to provide better forms of them.

This is most prevalent by far in the world of cinema, where for decades film producers have taken films of the past and reshot them. Even as far back as the 1970’s, films such as “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” were contemporary repeats of earlier films. This gained momentum during the 1980’s and is now so common that the general public hardly knows which are original films and which are remakes. In literature, too, the likes of “Sense and Sensibility” are being re-written to include zombies, and with a tongue only slightly in cheek, and sub-genres such as Cyberpunk and Steampunk look to the future and the past respectively by using the fashions and ideas of their cultural opposite.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951) suggested in “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus” (1921) that “The logical picture of the facts is the thought”, and that “The thought is the significant proposition.” These two statements, although debunked some thirty years later by Wittgenstein himself, seem to perfectly encapsulate the theories behind Conceptual Art, and certainly go at least some way in describing the fundamental differences between Modernism and Postmodernism. As I earlier suggested, the questioning of our ideas of language, which is at the very heart of Conceptual Art, can help us to understand the cultural framework of the Twentieth Century and beyond.