

## DEMONSTRATING THE LIMITS OF POSTCONCEPTUAL ART

Conference paper, *AAANZ Annual Conference 2022* Monash University & the University of Melbourne

A progressive or historical view of modern art in the west can reveal the existence of a linear – or semi-linear – narrative concerned with art's definition. In this philosophical view of art, the entirety of this narrative embodies a demonstration of art's changing limits as a concept over time. This demonstration took place not in words but in the format of the art object itself, in both physical objects and in art's more recent ephemeral forms, such as situations or actions. For example, at a certain point in time, the limit that 'art' as a concept was necessarily embodied by, or connected to, an image, that it was necessarily *representational*, was demonstrated to be completely *unnecessary* to its definition when the image – or indeed any mark at all – was gradually eliminated via artist's movements towards abstraction. More recently, the necessity that 'art' even be embodied by an object at all was demonstrated as surplus to its survival as a concept via conceptual artist's attempts at art's dematerialisation. On the whole, it was modern artists themselves who, *through their art*, could quite literally demonstrate that the limits previously considered essential to art's definition – that art must be representational, or that it be embodied by an object – were not in fact essential at all. These radical acts were tangibly demonstrative, artists 'showing' us *through* art what art was, or what it could be. This paper will consider whether, and how, this sense of demonstration could apply to art in the current or 'contemporary' moment.

To make this consideration, I work from a view that 'art', as a *concept*, is historically and culturally contingent. Here, the concept – the word 'art' – is not something essential across all cultures or histories, but something specific to a particular cultural set, timeframe and story. To discuss today's art historically and in relation to this sense of demonstration, I will refer to Peter Osborne's 2013 definition of contemporary art as a 'postconceptual art'<sup>1</sup>.

Within his text, *Anywhere or not at all – Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013), Osborne claims that this proposition does *not* refer to, or define, contemporary art as simply a movement following that of the conceptual in a progressive fashion towards some ideal end; this, despite his use of the word 'post'. Rather, for Osborne, 'contemporary art is postconceptual art' is a *speculative* proposition, one that he believes engenders an infinite movement between its terms; a proposition that retains therefore, in his words, a 'certain productive *opaqueness*'<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All – Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 51

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 53

According to Osborne, this proposition, 'derives its meaning from the role it plays in the interpretation of the individual works that constitute its referent: contemporary/postconceptual art'<sup>3</sup>. Rather than situate the meaning, or value, of this proposition in relation to the interpretation of *individual* works as Osborne does, I apply it instead to a larger consideration of 'art' as a concept, in its totality. Unlike Osborne, for me the term 'postconceptual' is useful in its most literal and historical sense, defining contemporary art, the art of the current moment, in relation to the movement directly preceding it – conceptual art – and in a larger view in relation to modernism more generally. I believe a historically situated use of the term 'postconceptual' helps avoid the trap that occurs when contemporary art is theorised or defined as a moment completely different to or outside of that of the modern. When current art *is* defined this way – that is, as a new, somehow timeless moment wherein all sense of striving toward the solution of some 'problem' via history is avoided – it tends unfortunately to replicate the idealism and sense of aspiration it claims to avoid. I suggest that a definition of contemporary art as postconceptual situates that which is possible as art today relative to the history of the art preceding, to the project or story of this history's dealing with that which was possible as 'art': the project of art's definition. In the story of modern art's demonstration of art's limits, my attempt to consider the art of the current moment in line with this – contemporary art's ability to demonstrate art's current limits – necessarily situates our moment relative to the history from which it results. It is from the point of view of practice that I address these questions; here, rather than ask, 'what is contemporary art?' or attempt its definition or philosophy, as a practitioner I work from the problem of how to confront art's limits and point to its definition *via art*. In 2010, artist Liam Gillick claimed that, 'the contemporary necessarily restricts the sense in which you are looking for a breakthrough'<sup>4</sup>, indicating a restriction or entrapment by the limits of the field 'the contemporary', with which, as a practitioner, I identify. For Gillick, individual works of contemporary art lack significance, or political or social affect, since as he claims, 'moving against the stream is a problem, for it goes in every direction.'<sup>5</sup> While many artists are no doubt satisfied with the current state of affairs, happy to produce allegorical objects or situations with aesthetic or political intent, for artists who seek to work *against* the current moment, such as Gillick, to find a way to 'move against the stream' or continue the opening up, questioning and radicality

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Liam Gillick, 'Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place,' *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010) accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67664/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place/#:~:text=Liam%20Gillick,-Issue%20%2321&text=The%20term%20%E2%80%9Ccontemporary%20art%E2%80%9D%20is,the%20growth%20of%20doubt%20consolidation>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

characteristic of modern movements, it seems it is no longer possible to demonstrate or embody this state of affairs, to make this question evident, via our work as form.

To discover what it was that conceptual art may have demonstrated about art and its institutions, I will refer to the set of circumstances upon which conceptual art was founded.

In his 1969 text 'Art After Philosophy', conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth claims that, 'All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually'<sup>6</sup>. Kosuth places great significance on the event of Duchamp's first unassisted readymades here, claiming that, 'it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity'<sup>7</sup>. For Kosuth, when changes were made to our conception of art prior to the readymades, 'art's "language" remained the same, but it was saying new things'<sup>8</sup>. Post the event of the unassisted readymade, Kosuth determines that it became possible to 'speak another language' while still making sense in art, moving from art as 'appearance' to art as 'conception', or concept. I take this to mean that where the introduction of, for example, abstraction in painting challenged the requirement that artworks contain imagery or literal representation, the works nonetheless remained within the same format, or 'language': that of a painting rendered by an artist's hand. With the advent of Duchamp's unassisted readymades, Kosuth claims that art's form in total was radically altered, that a change was made to its very *language*, that art as a concept was no longer necessarily embodied by the traditional forms of painting or sculpture, or indeed the original creation of an artist at all.

Kosuth declares further that, 'the "value" of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art'<sup>9</sup>. In his book *The World of Marcel Duchamp* (1966), Calvin Tomkins echoes Kosuth's sentiment, claiming that Duchamp's readymades, 'quietly undermined several centuries of Western art'<sup>10</sup>. According to Tomkins, the first 'unassisted' readymades Duchamp made upon moving to America included the snow shovel, the hat rack, and the coat rack. Duchamp was initially mindful that these works did not become an 'artistic activity':

He made a note to himself to limit the number of readymades yearly, and he never sold them; they remained in his studio or were given away to friends. When three readymades were included in an exhibition at the Bourgeois Gallery in New York in 1916, Duchamp insisted that they be hung unceremoniously from a coat rack at the gallery door, where, to his unfeigned delight, nobody even noticed them.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 18

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp 1887 - 1968*, (New York: Time-Life Books, 1966), 36

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 38

From this quote, it seems Duchamp intended that his readymades exist outside art's context by restricting their production and exhibition, keeping them within the privacy of his studio or embracing their lack of visibility in a gallery context. The unassisted readymade I want to focus on here however is *Fountain* (1917).

In 2004, a survey of 500 artists, curators and critics voted this work as the 'most influential artwork' of the modern era; artist respondents in particular were most in favour of the work. Unlike Duchamp's earlier readymades, *Fountain* was very much intended to enter the context of 'art', since it was submitted in the same year to an open exhibition held by the Society of Independent Artists. The story of this work's rejection by the Society is well known, and is central to my argument concerning art as demonstration. According to Tomkins:

The Society of Independent Artists, which Duchamp had helped to found in New York, put on an exhibition in 1917 that was open to any artist who paid the six-dollar fee. There was no jury and, theoretically, at least, no restrictions on what could be shown.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its claim to 'no jury' and 'no restrictions', Tomkins states that, 'The hanging committee indignantly refused to exhibit this item as sculpture'<sup>13</sup>. Duchamp himself argued publicly against the work's rejection in his publication *The Blind Man* that same year, in a piece titled, 'The Richard Mutt Case': 'They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit. Mr Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited'<sup>14</sup>. It is said that Duchamp resigned from the Society over its rejection of the work.

In recent years, we have of course been made aware that *Fountain* was almost certainly the work of someone other than Duchamp. Much research indicates that the German-born Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a fellow Dada artist and friend of Duchamp's, procured the urinal in Philadelphia, personally signed it 'R Mutt', and posted it as a submission to the open exhibition. This fact is supported in a letter Duchamp wrote to his sister that year, where he tells her that, 'one of my female friends who had adopted the masculine pseudonym Richard Mutt sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture'<sup>15</sup>. It seems here that Duchamp did not claim responsibility for *Fountain* at the time of its submission, and was openly aware of his friend's act. It was apparently Andre Breton who

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Duchamp, 'The Richard Mutt Case', *The Blind Man*, Issue #2, 1917

<sup>15</sup> Siri Hustvedt, 'A Woman in the Men's Room: When Will the Art World Recognise the Real Artist Behind Duchamp's Fountain?', *The Guardian*, (30 March 2019) accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/29/marcel-duchamp-fountain-women-art-history>

attributed the urinal to Duchamp later in 1935, while Duchamp himself authorised the work's replication in 1950, long after the Baroness had died.

Much writing concerning this fairly recent discovery focusses on the sense of injustice over a female artist losing authorship of their work to a man, however since the Baroness signed the urinal with a male pseudonym, it indicates she was aware of, and potentially pointing to, the gender imbalance inherent to art world machinations. It is difficult to retrospectively calculate the facts concerning *Fountain's* genesis, however since Duchamp wrote publicly in favour of Richard Mutt's work, was a friend of the Baroness and was heavily involved with the Society, we could speculate that the story of its rejection constitutes a game played on art and its history, perhaps in collaboration with von Freytag-Loringhoven. A great deal more could be written about the implications of this story's demonstration of art's limits, particularly limits concerning the artist's identity and authority – that is, those who are granted the authority to ordain an object 'art', or the authority concerning that which constitutes 'art' as a definition. For the purpose of this paper however, I want to focus on the fact of the work's rejection by the Society more specifically as a demonstration of the limits of art as form.

It is easy to understand the rejection of *Fountain* from this 'open' exhibition, since as an object, as described by Kosuth, the work challenged the forms of art typical of its time. The only two issues of *The Blind Man* Duchamp produced were almost entirely devoted to pieces concerning the Society, its open exhibition and *Fountain's* rejection, indicating perhaps that the actual incident – the historical fact of the work's rejection – was as important to Duchamp as the object itself. His involvement in both establishing the society and organising the exhibition renders Duchamp instrumental in setting a scene for this challenge to the 'rules' of art, a game with which he was himself involved. By challenging the fact that an artwork must be the work of an artist's hand and be embodied by a painting or a sculpture, *Fountain*, through its very form, challenged the independence declared in the society's name as well as the exhibition's open, 'jury free' status. The sense of wildness, freedom, and openness that had come to be valued within the radical gestures of modern artists were here proven tame, revealing that a limit or boundary still existed with which to challenge the concept 'art' in relation to form. The invention of the readymade revealed, or demonstrated, that traditional forms no longer embodied the field's limit.

As identified by Kosuth, *Fountain*, alongside other unassisted readymades, triggered a new extreme, and the widespread rejection of traditional art forms by conceptual artists decades later is a logical extension of this moment. In his writing concerning conceptual art Kosuth defined its boundaries quite tightly, for example with his declaration that 'real' conceptual art was confined to work that

‘questioned the nature of art’ as previous radical forms had done. Discussing the sense of the movement’s failure in his essay *1975*, Kosuth laments its development into what he calls ‘stylistic conceptual art’ – art that merely adopts the tropes or forms of conceptual art, in contrast to ‘theoretical conceptual art’, or art that he believed ‘questioned the nature of art’. In contrast, Lucy Lippard’s account of that moment in her essay, ‘Escape Attempts’, from the book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...* (1997) is open to the almost infinite variety of forms that did eventuate when art as a concept was freed from what she refers to as its ‘frame-and-pedestal’ syndrome, from more traditional art forms, or from any form at all. Lippard’s choice to focus on the fact of art’s dematerialization in the conceptual era is an account of that to which Kosuth objects: the opening of art to all form, including complete lack of form, in the event of its definition as pure concept.

Lippard’s openness to this diversity is evident in the excessive length she allowed her book’s title, particularly in the section that states that the book is:

...focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, anti-form, systems, earth, or process art, occurring now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (with occasional political overtones)...<sup>16</sup>

Lippard attributes here conceptual art with an openness not only to a variety of forms, but also a variety of names and origins, admitting to the ‘vagueness’ of its definition and allowing it a sense of the political. No matter Kosuth’s efforts to tighten its boundaries, the historical fact of art’s dematerialisation in the conceptual movement resulted in art forms as diverse as wall drawings, horses installed in a gallery, empty galleries, performances, instructions, cleaning as art and even ‘giving up art’ as art. These forms can be said to have aimed toward situating art within life, or within the everyday, since when art still exists, whether it is visible *or* invisible, both with and without an audience, it comes closer to its essence as a concept. By pushing art’s form or lack of form to an extreme, conceptual art demonstrated the logical extension or culmination of the modern movement towards art’s definition. Another version of this story exists within Jean Baudrillard’s 1987 description of modern art as, ‘an explosive practice, then an implosive one, following which the cycle was over.’<sup>17</sup> Baudrillard likens this ‘explosive practice’ to an orgy, a process that led to ‘liberation in every domain’, including that of art, where it manifested as: ‘the assumption of all models of representation, all models of antirepresentation.’<sup>18</sup> We could interpret here that modern

---

<sup>16</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (California: University of California Press, 1997)

<sup>17</sup> Jean Baudrillard, ‘Towards the Vanishing Point of Art (1987),’ *The Conspiracy of Art*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

art's explosive practice to liberate art via form was realised in conceptual art's total embodiment of this aim, its subsequent *implosion* occurring when art was dispersed within any and every conceivable form.

Kosuth and Lippard both write of a sense of conceptual art's failure. For Kosuth, this failure lies within the movement's inability to contain or restrict itself to the questioning of what art *is*, and its development into a style indicating a collaboration with, rather than radical opposition to, the institution. For Lippard, the institutional embrace of art's newly dematerialised forms indicates the failure of the conceptual ideal toward the liberation of art as a concept within the real or everyday, and its 'recapture' by the institution. This sense of failure establishes the conditions under which current art may be seen to labour: how do contemporary artists challenge art as form, when all forms are possible and available, including a complete lack of form? What boundaries remain against which to rail? To question or oppose? A significant end to the tradition of the modern, or of radical gestures via art, seems apparent here: the challenge to contemporary artists could be framed as, how to demonstrate, *via our art*, art's current boundaries as a concept?

Towards the end of her essay, Lippard maintains that while art's escape had been temporary, the 'spirit' of the art remained, waiting to be tapped into by artists of the future. She states that: 'Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell, but parole is always a possibility.'<sup>19</sup> This statement forms a clue as to the boundaries that challenge postconceptual artists: no longer restricted by what is allowed as *form*, the boundary confronting artists today concerns the fact that institutional approval is still required in order that something – a situation or object – be seen and recognised as 'art', despite, or perhaps even because of, our ideal of freedom. The notion of 'the institution' here is not restricted to the context of the gallery, museum, market or academy, but the identity of the artist and even the concept 'art' itself. The historical and conceptual stalemate with which contemporary artists are confronted can be summed up by Baudrillard's question, 'WHAT DO WE DO AFTER THE ORGY?'<sup>20</sup> – that is, how do we continue the project to free art as form, when form itself is boundless, already ideal and totally free?

I believe a clue lies within the actions of von Freytag-Loringhoven and Duchamp. Whether *Fountain's* invention and the story of its rejection by the institution was a single act or a collaboration between the two, a sense of 'strategy' is inherent to this event. In 2006, Baudrillard described the modern project as one of disappearance, that it, 'abolished itself in the course of its practice', an 'event' he

---

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Escape Attempts', *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (California: University of California Press, 1997), xxii

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Towards the Vanishing Point of Art (1987)', *The Conspiracy of Art*, 104.

claims was of 'decisive importance'<sup>21</sup>. Baudrillard follows this with the sentiment that, '...art today, though it has disappeared, doesn't know it has disappeared and – this is the worst of it – continues on its trajectory in a vegetative state'<sup>22</sup>. While characterising modern art's disappearance here as a 'strategy', Baudrillard claims there is: '...simultaneously a game, the possibility of playing with all that; the possibility of an art, though not in any way an art in the cultural and aesthetic sense, but something closer to a martial art'<sup>23</sup>. Duchamp and von Freytag-Loringhoven's act was a game with art's history, a strategy that played with art's institutions and its definition. By challenging the Society of Independent Artist's claim of 'no restrictions' on that which would be accepted in their 'open' exhibition, Duchamp and von Freytag-Loringhoven's submission of a urinal (perhaps unintentionally) opened art's form to that which lay beyond the frame or pedestal, rendering art identical to reality, or to 'non-art'. The impact of submitting this early readymade to an institution concerned with what art *was*, was that art itself became touched, or muddled if you like, by the insinuation that art could be embodied by *anything*, or by *any* object. In this way, Duchamp and von Freytag-Loringhoven contributed to the modernist project's aim, as identified by Baudrillard, to 'make art disappear' – to disappear as an object into the world, into reality, and into non-art. By playing the rules of the game, submitting their object to the Society's exhibition and challenging its claims of openness, Duchamp and von Freytag-Loringhoven successfully revealed the falsity behind the claim, revealing a crack in the sense of modernity or radicality the Society of Independent Artists may have identified with.

Conceptual art's failure to escape the institution means the institution itself must still ordain that which can be 'art' today so that we recognise it as such, much as the Society of Independent Artists did when they rejected the urinal as 'art'. Institutional ordination ensures that observers *see* or apprehend artworks as aesthetic or retinal experiences; while this is necessary in a state wherein art objects are indiscernible from ordinary, everyday, 'non-art' objects (like urinals), this also tends to work *against* art's disappearance, or its freedom from the institution. I'd like to suggest that it's with a sense of strategy, or Baudrillard's suggestion of a martial art, that artists today may look to challenge the rules that govern art's definition and institutional enclosure. Working *with* the institution, we might aim to turn the energy of the institution back against itself to expose the cracks in its façade and its obsession with art as necessarily aesthetic. Following the example of Duchamp

---

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 26



and von Freytag-Loringhoven, playing with the rules of art's definition may offer today's artists an opportunity to take art beyond those rules using action and strategy rather than objects, words, description or representation. Here, rather than make art that allegorically questions the institution, or institutionalised form, *via* its form (futile in the face of this project's completion), artists might – by playing, and perhaps without even trying – achieve a new definition for art and renewed authority over its definition, enabling – if only briefly – Lippard's hope for art's escape.