

**PERFORMING PRACTICE AT THE END OF ART**  
Conference paper, *AAANZ Annual Conference 2016*

In relation to the conference's theme, a sense of the artwork as the 'tip of the iceberg' of practice, and of practice itself as 'performative', originates here from the conceptual moment. I want to position these notions in relation to contemporary art as a *post* conceptual art, both in terms of its practice and theorisation. I'll elaborate on the nature of contemporary art as a post conceptual art, relate this idea to a theorisation of contemporary art as the end of art, and argue for a view of practice as *necessarily* performative at the end of art.

As became evident via both the lack of form and the plethora of forms characteristic of work in the conceptual movement, a self-critical practice is a concern with art as concept. Conceptual work was frequently aligned with processes such as writing or talking and a sense of art as idea or situation over something necessarily object-bound, and conceptual practices often had more in common with theoretical or philosophical discursive work. As a contemporary practitioner, I am both interested in and concerned to maintain a sense of art as critique and concept, which I view as being in line with the notion of contemporary art as a 'post' conceptual art. The seeming impossibility of working self-referentially or self-critically through contemporary practice and the tension such an attempt evokes renders it of greater interest to me than a sense of art as affect, aesthetics or allegory, or a practice conducted in relation to political, pedagogical or pragmatic concerns.

In 2013, Peter Osborne raised the notion of contemporary art as a postconceptual art in his attempt at its philosophy in *Anywhere or Not at all: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. In his analysis, Osborne makes the speculative proposition that 'contemporary art is post conceptual art', citing Hegel in his claim that in the philosophical use of such propositions, the subject – in this case, 'contemporary art' – is destroyed by its predicate, 'post conceptual art'. In contrast with the standard propositional form, the speculative proposition is said here to represent a continuous movement between subject and predicate, wherein the predicate, having destroyed its subject, becomes the subject itself, the inverted proposition reading, 'postconceptual art is contemporary art'.<sup>1</sup>

The new subject, 'postconceptual art' is destroyed by its predicate, 'is contemporary art', in turn. Osborne identifies that a continuous movement between these terms prevents the thought process from forming a 'firm objective basis' in the subject. To Osborne, this style of proposition retains a 'productive opaqueness' – the unstated implication is that Osborne's use of such a proposition embodies the opacity of the contemporary itself in its tendency to defy definition or boundaries, its restless movement between all possibilities and readings representing a new, timeless period

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All – Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 51-2

invulnerable to the failures frequently attributed to modernist teleology and metanarratives. As an artist, I am less concerned to avoid the conceived theoretical pitfalls of a modernist understanding of the statement that 'contemporary art is postconceptual art' and take it instead at face value.

Contemporary art is postconceptual art in the most obvious and chronological sense in that its nature as concept, object and practice is directly informed by the complexities, impossibilities and unresolved tensions endowed by conceptual art's legacy.

Since the conceptual moment embraced a multitude of practices and practitioners, an attempt at its complete or final assessment is complicated. I'll briefly revise its legacy here via the viewpoints of two conceptual practitioners, those of artist Joseph Kosuth and theorist and curator Lucy Lippard.

Kosuth's sense of conceptual art related to a pure concern with art as concept, a dematerialised practice that had more in common with philosophy than object-making or aesthetics. This could be considered a modernist view of conceptual art, especially in relation to Kosuth's use of the manifesto format to identify the movement's objectives and his attempt to distinguish 'pure' conceptual art from that which was merely 'stylistic' – art utilising conceptual forms tropes. Lucy Lippard's more open description of the conceptual moment accounts for and includes the plethora of practices the movement ultimately came to embrace, a view more in line with the dawning reality of conceptual art's future in the openness of the contemporary. While Kosuth and Lippard's accounts differ in emphasis, they share a common sense of the conceptual ideals of art's dematerialisation alongside its freedom as a concept from institutional co-optation and determination. In addition, both accounts convey a sense of the movement's ultimate failure to achieve such a dematerialised freedom: Kosuth in his essay *1975*, published in *The Fox* in 1975, and Lippard in *Escape Attempts*, published in 1997.

Conceptual art's failure is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the fact that most conceptual practice remained bound to institutional contextualisation, such as that of the museum or the market, and was therefore subject to accompanying expectations of art as an object, as aesthetic or as commodity. In 1997, Lippard wrote that, '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)'; she describes the sense that art had been, 'recaptured and sent back to its white cell'<sup>2</sup>. Paradoxically, the perceived failure of the conceptual moment may be seen to have its roots within its very ideals: in order to exist, the venerated concept 'art' requires demarcation from the objects and situations of everyday life. The

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Escape Attempts' in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (California: University of California Press, 1997), xvii

frequently ephemeral or everyday nature of conceptual art's objects and situations means our ability to discern them *as art* almost mandates their institutional contextualisation, in turn lending institutions greater agency in determining art as a concept. A sense that art is visual, something that must be *seen*, is confirmed by its reliance on institutional frameworks, which reinforce a sense of even ephemeral art forms as visual, further entrenching the concept 'art' within a sense of affect or aesthetics over that of situation, discourse or event.

For Osborne, conceptual art's failure is proof of the necessity of aesthetics to the concept 'art', so for him a philosophy of contemporary art mandates a concern with aesthetics. As an artist wishing to work within the complicated conceptual legacy of critique and escape, or acknowledge the fact of contemporary art's indebtedness to these ideals, I find Osborne's insistence on aesthetics here conservative. It is within the tension between a view of art as aesthetic, visual or object-bound versus that of art as concept or idea that contemporary practice interests me most and where I situate my own work, to whatever end. Like most artists, I am less concerned with a definition or philosophy for contemporary art than I am with the question of how to practice in the current moment.

Slightly prior to Osborne, Terry Smith outlined his own theory of contemporary art in 2009 in his book *What is Contemporary Art?* In the same year, Hal Foster pursued similar answers via his *Questionnaire on the Contemporary* in October magazine. Most theorists' efforts to remain true to the contemporary's variety of instances and forms ultimately reinforce the field's lack of definition by resulting in arbitrary lists of contemporary artist's names, apparently contemporary themes and supposedly contemporary styles, bound together by shifting and multi-layered categories. In addition, characterisations of 'the contemporary' as a new, improved moment that sits outside the problematic teleology and metanarratives of the modern simply emulate modernist utopian ideals, overlooking the moment's real significance. Attempts at contemporary art's theorisation intersect with the question of practice in relation to the idea of the post-modern lack of metanarratives. As an artist, the seeming infinity of forms and possibilities allowed art today complicates practice by precluding meaning or significance. Why pick one form over another? What is the significance of exhibiting a photograph over a painting, or of serving a meal in a gallery? Alongside its multiple definitions or frameworks, contemporary art can operate in relation to fields as diverse as the market, history, charity, science, design, allegory, self-expression or politics, and a single work can address multiple frameworks simultaneously.

Rather than attempt to reign it in via definitions or philosophies, contemporary art's novel sense of openness could conversely be celebrated as the final attainment of the modern goal of absolute

freedom, equality and the end of metanarratives, where all forms of art are valid and everyone is an artist, if only nominally. This sense of celebration increasingly informed American philosopher Arthur C Danto's theory concerning contemporary art as the end of art, an idea he arrived at through his art practice in the early 60s. Upon making the realisation that art had ended, Danto immediately stopped making art in order to focus on writing its philosophy, a logical response to a sense that art's project in material form was over. Danto's conclusion that art becomes philosophy at its end mirrors Kosuth's almost simultaneous statement that conceptual art, in its ability to embody concepts and ideals rather than exist at a discursive remove, would take over the role of philosophy. The intersection of art with philosophy in the 1960s reflects a view of art as aesthetic versus art as concept, and may account for the schizophrenic, undefinable nature of art today.

The end of art is an unpopular idea, no doubt due to its innate negativity but also perhaps to its having been extensively analysed by Hegel in his *Aesthetics*. Danto expanded upon and contemporised Hegel's end of art, based on the idea that within the contemporary moment, modern art's progressive historical project of questioning the boundaries that define the concept 'art' is over. Despite views of history as either multiple, disorderly or contingent, it is nonetheless possible to illustrate a broadly developmental and chronological sense of modern art via the fact that many contemporary artworks or forms – for example *My Bed* (1998) by Tracey Emin would not have been accepted or even recognised as art in earlier periods of modern art's history. The developmental progression of art as a concept through this history is viewed by Danto as complete when works of art are indistinguishable from ordinary everyday objects, rendering art's project as a visual concern over. In this sense, the end of art is the end of the historical development of art through the modern period.

This is less a view of art as affect, allegory, information, politics, pedagogy or pragmatism, and more that of art as a self-critical or ontological practice that embodies its reality or philosophy rather than describe it. It is art as a critical, analytical concern that has the art object itself as subject, paralleling philosophy's reflection on the human subject and its grappling with the void at the subject's core. This view is in line with Hegel's statement concerning his 'scientific' approach to art in the introduction to his *Aesthetics* and could also be described as an anthropological view, 'art' representing a historically contingent concept rather than something essential to all people at all times.

Confronted with the view or deep conviction that art has ended, best practice could be said to be the cessation of art production altogether, as Danto himself believed and successfully achieved. The complicating result of his situating art's project within the realm of philosophy however is that the

idea of the end of art tends to remain *within* this realm rather than that of art or art practice. When philosophers such as Hegel or Danto claim that art is over, it is frequently countered by the charge that philosophy is attempting to 'take over', or even eradicate, art's role or significance. It seems that as long as 'art' as a venerated concept remains, attempts at its critique or reflection must be made *within* art practice and reception. In addition, the complete renunciation of art by individual artists, or their withdrawal from the artworld, renders their voices mute, unable to impact the concept further.

Several modern artists attempted to give up art, including Duchamp, Warhol, and Lozano. Where Duchamp and Warhol ultimately returned to practice, Lozano is said to have maintained the action until her death, constituting the completion of her work *Drop Out Piece*, begun in 1970. Duchamp gave up art as painting, or art as a 'retinal' concern, in 1912 but more famously declared he was giving up art altogether in 1923 in order to play chess. He displayed a desire to be free of the concept 'art' even while he practiced it, wondering in a note in 1913: 'can one make works of art which are not works of art?'<sup>3</sup> Despite finally giving up art in 1923, Duchamp nonetheless maintained a secret studio practice, hidden from the artworld, from 1946 until 1966.

Warhol signified his giving up art with his work *Silver Clouds* in 1966, stating later that, '(the silver pillows) meant something special to me: it was while I was making them that I felt my art career floating away out the window'. As friend and biographer Bob Colacello recalls, 'since he had announced his "retirement" from painting at a show in Paris in 1965, Andy saw his art as little more than the means to make money for his movie business.'<sup>4</sup> Both Duchamp and Warhol attempted an escape from the concept 'art' by hiding or re-contextualising their activity, Duchamp via his final secret studio practice and Warhol switching context from art to film.

The inescapability of the role of artist in its association with the concept 'art', accompanied by the impossibility of conducting a reflexive or critical practice in the current moment, could be viewed in light of what Baudrillard negatively refers to as the 'conspiracy' of art: it is in relation to these impossibilities that I conceive contemporary practice as necessarily performative. I'll describe two contemporary art practices here in relation to my own reading of contemporary art as performative at the end of art.

Born in Colombia in 1986, artist Oscar Murillo lives and works in London, where his family migrated when he was ten. Murillo achieved early commercial success and notoriety making abstract paintings; while the studio process that resulted in these works has itself been described as

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<sup>3</sup> Marcel Duchamp in Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp, a Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 116

<sup>4</sup> Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror – Andy Warhol Close Up* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 59

‘performative’, it’s in relation to a different sense of performance that Murillo’s work interests me, wherein it seems that he makes an attempt to span the gap between art as either object, as aesthetic or as commodity, and a more conceptual sense of art as critique.

In 2016, Murillo’s participation in the Biennale of Sydney was surrounded by intrigue upon reports that en route to Sydney the artist destroyed his British passport by flushing it down the aeroplane’s toilet. Upon arriving at Sydney airport Murillo was detained, kept in a detention cell for two days and subsequently deported to Singapore, from where he took a complicated route back to London using his Colombian passport, via Barcelona, Madrid and Colombia. A representative from his New York gallery stated that Murillo, ‘...destroyed his British passport en route to Sydney as an act and response to the notion of “privilege” that is associated with certain citizenships in the Western world’. The fact of Murillo’s accompanying dissatisfaction with the work he had negotiated to present at the Biennale resulted in his own claim that, ‘despite the agenda for the biennale, which wanted to propose a strong situation, there seemed to be a lot of conservative attitudes toward allowing an artist to be really freely expressive’, and that in addition, ‘even though there was a degree of satisfaction with what I wanted to offer, I nevertheless thought that it wasn’t enough, that simply intervening in a space was too symbolic, too limiting and slightly ignorant, and not present and not urgent enough’. His original contribution to the Biennale, located in an obscure laneway in inner-city Chippendale, remained unfinished, with Murillo sending a book of drawings and a sound work to be exhibited at Mortuary Station instead.

Speaking at a subsequent Salon panel for Art Basel Hong Kong, Murillo commented that:

The West is a salivating penis, you know, pretty much ready to penetrate the rest of the world, as it has been for 500 years or more – we in the context of the art world need to get rid of people like Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Cecilia Alemani, Massimiliano Gioni, and all these curators and individuals that keep the status quo.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Murillo’s artworld acceptance and success, his dissatisfaction with the fact of western colonization here represents a charge against contemporary art’s frequent celebration as post-colonial.

Rather than locate a sense of performance within Murillo’s destroying his passport or similar acts, I want instead to view the more conservative aspect of his practice, the production of objects for sale in compliance with artworld institutions, as performative. When compliance to art as object or

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.artnews.com/2016/04/11/oscar-murillo-deported-from-australia-after-destroying-his-passport-mid-flight-in-protest/>

aesthetic in the contemporary moment is accompanied by radical actions or words critical of its institutions, the objects themselves are lent a kind of irrelevance, existing as props within the greater performance made by the artist *as an artist*. Making, exhibiting and selling objects become acts, essential to remaining *within* the artworld while pitting oneself against it and ensuring that critique by withdrawal or dissent is heard.

Like Murillo, Australian artist Richard Bell is both involved with the production of regular objects of art, such as paintings, while displaying antagonism towards artworld institutions and notions of colonialism via his video work and other actions. In 2011, as sole judge for the Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW, Bell narrowed his choice down to 29 finalists via the criteria that the painting either depicted an animal or was made by one of his friends, and settled on the winning work by tossing a coin. For Bell and Murillo, access to the institutions of contemporary art is made possible via a performance as artist: it could be seen that their work as radical critique, reflection or escape from these institutions only takes place as a result of the access this performance allows.

There's no evidence to suggest that either Bell or Murillo share my sense of their art production as a performance, and while both examples involve a sense of artist as celebrity, I think the idea of practice as performative and the object as a prop could be extended to less commercially successful practices, including those that don't result in objects. My aim is to reinforce a theoretical view of all contemporary practice as necessarily *performative*, a means by which to create a sense of distance or escape from the stronghold of art's institutions in the post conceptual moment by rendering art objects – the primary site of art as aesthetic – merely props. While it's possible to consider the modern project as having succeeded due to contemporary art's pluralism and openness, in practice its real success would involve the end of the category 'art' altogether and allow for art's dispersal within the category of the everyday.

In 2003, Baudrillard described the modernist impulse toward the liberation of art and the real world as resulting in the indexing of one on the other, describing this situation as, 'a deadly chiasmus for both art and the real world.' In this state, he claims that, 'art is simply what is discussed in the art world, in the artistic community that frantically stares at itself'. Baudrillard goes on:

Even the "creative" act replicates itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation – the true subject of a painter is no longer what he or she paints but the very fact that he or she paints. The painter paints the fact the he or she paints. In that way, at least, the idea of art is saved.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Art...Contemporary of Itself' (2003) *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer, translated by Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e) 2005), 91