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Joselit, David. *American Art Since 1945*. London, Thames & Hudson, 2003.

Chapter 6: The Artist's Properties: From Conceptual Art to Identity Politics

What is conceptual art? David Joselit explores this question and the beginnings of conceptual art and theory through chapter six titled, *The Artist's Properties: From Conceptual Art to Identity Politics*. In the late 1960's and 1970's, artists began to move away from the notion of mastering a specific technique or medium in favor of becoming managers, producers or curators of information, new systems, process and feedback loops (Joselit 161). This change in process and dogma created a change in the art object generating a new relationship between the art object and artist; which in turn began a new aesthetic practice in the art world.

Joseph Kosuth, in his art essay, *Art After Philosophy*, stated that conceptual art consisted of a formal language or code, and was fundamentally linguistic in nature; essentially rendering the art object as obsolete and only a part of the *proposition* (Kosuth 161). Kosuth believed that the artist was meant to do more than just express him/herself through art, but instead was designed to give birth to a proposition, or an idea specific to the artist that would transcend the physical or even mental objects, and instead would express definitions of art. Kosuth further explains that conceptual art should do two things; one, it should consist of the artist's linguistic propositions, and two, the art content should be its own ongoing definition (Kosuth 161). This propositional nature of conceptual art has led critics to bemoan it as a dematerialization of the art object (Joselit 161). However, Kosuth wasn't advocating for dematerialization. Instead, he was ushering in a materiality that was suited to documenting the intellectual and physical properties of the artist; their ideas, bodies and desires for their work after its initial creation.

One of the first artists to follow Kosuth's theories was Lawrence Weiner. Weiner used the materiality of the written word and books as vehicles for a coded language, and ideas to construct a proposition that functioned as art. Weiner's created works, *Statements*, utilized text as a linguistic mode for direction to document the process and act of creation. In this case, the instructions for creating a painting. In this example, Weiner's *Statements* render the actual process of creating a painting unnecessary, and instead highlight the function of the proposition as art rather than matter. Weiner's pieces are sometimes described as "immaterial", (Kosuth 162) but conceptual artists like

Weiner replaced traditional artistic materials with materials of information by manipulating language and photomechanical reproductions (Jones 162-163).

This rematerialization led to the idea that conceptual art was the artist's intention (*proposition*), and not just the art object. This fundamental shift in focus generated the drive for the physical presence of the artist and their proposition to become equal to the act of expression seen earlier in abstract expressionist painters such as Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Art theorist Sol LeWitt speculated that a work of art was a contract between the viewer and the artist, although the idea may never leave the artist's mind or arrive within the viewer's mind (LeWitt 164). This contract created a relationship or communication mode that was sometimes seen as telepathic in nature and somewhat intangible to the viewer but wholly dependent on the physical presence of the artist.

A parallel between this idea of a contract and the new role of the artist as discussed by Kosuth and Weiner, was the *The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement (Contract-Poster)*, co-created by Seth Siegelaub and Bob Projansky (Joselit 164). The *Contract-Poster* was created as a pseudo-artwork and advocated for the artist's right to control reproduction and exhibition of his or her work (Joselit 165). This crucial work and advocacy derived from the shift from objects to linguistic propositions characterized within conceptual art.

Within conceptual art, the shift can be understood as an effort to chart and understand the boundaries of the self through local, social, symbolic and legal parameters (Buchloh, 165). This investigation of selfhood branched off into two directions. On the one hand, it forced the artist to advocate and fight for artists' rights. On the other hand, it sensationalized the artist's presence through the manipulations of the body as an aesthetic property (Joselit 165-166).

Groups such as the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), were salient in their agitation and activism towards artists' rights. The organization rallied and solidified around the artist Takis' removal of his work *Tele-Sculpture* (1960) from "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age" exhibition at the MoMA in New York (GAAG 165-167). The museum owned the work, but the Takis had requested that his work not be exhibited in this specific context. The museum ignored the artist's request. Takis was then forced to snatch his work from exhibition (GAAG 165-167). Many artists and the AWC were in support of his actions and drafted a set of demands that included; free gallery admission, diversifying boards of trustees, exhibiting more minority artists, extending programming into communities of color. This demand also stipulated that museum professionals were to be held accountable towards the aesthetic choices made for exhibitions, programming and advocacy of artists' rights (GAAG 166).

Artists like Vito Acconci, preferred to test the limits of the body through performance. In his work, *Trademarks*, he explores his own physical and psychological limits by biting his nude body repeatedly. The marks left by his teeth were then inked and printed; creating the art object through performance. By titling the piece, *Trademarks*, Acconci plays with the idea of the artists' body being the major component of the work and a legally sanctioned product. Thereby consuming the idea (artist) and the product in pursuit of the final art object. Acconci was interested in creating a new system, consuming himself, and then opening that system by making the prints, that resulted in a feedback loop of information Nemser 167-169.

Acconci's actions serve as a counterpart to the idea of a contractual relationship with the viewer in order to secure their (artists) intellectual property. Instead, Acconci creates a contract with the skin in which the artist's physical property is assessed through the act of self-inflicted pain. Conceptual art strategies reflected the ideas of either the artists emphasized mental intention, or those (artworks) produced by the artists and viewers' physical presence. This didactic approach to conceptual art resulting in the exploration of the conditions of selfhood in a world flooded with new information (Joselit 171).

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