

**AMERICAN FINE ARTS, CO.**

By Alexander Alberro

*Artforum*, 1999

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*an inadequate history of conceptual art*, Silvia Kolbowski, 1999.  
Installation view at American Fine Arts, NY.

Silvia Kolbowski's multimedia installation, *An inadequate History of Conceptual Art*, 1998-99, comprises a 9-by-12-foot projection of a soundless, sixty-minute videotape loop featuring close-ups of different pairs of hands along with an audio recording of various voices. The hands and memories belong to twenty-two artists who responded to Kolbowski's request to "briefly describe a conceptual art work, not your own, of the period between 1965 and 1975, which you personally witnessed/experienced at the time." Kolbowski encouraged the participants to assume a broad definition of Conceptualism, one capable of embracing phenomena as varied as "actions documented through drawings, photographs, film, and video; concepts executed in the form of drawings or photographs; objects where the end product is primarily a record of the precipitant concept, and performative activities which sought to question the conventions of dance and theater." Hence she targets the most transitory manifestations of the movement, those most likely to have left "inadequate" traces and thus most dependent on the memory of direct witnesses for insight into their initial receptions. Kolbowski imposed two further conditions on the respondents: that they reveal neither their own identities nor their chosen work's title or artist.

At first it seems that the two components are synchronized and that the voices can be matched to the hands. But the acoustic loop is almost twice as long as the video, making any correspondence arbitrary. One artist remembers several works from the late '60s that took the form of written directions for actions. Another recalls an early-'70s piece that relocated the property-line wall of the commissioning collector's backyard in such a way that the next-door neighbor gained an extra six square feet of land. By showing a videotape of the participants' hands gesturing, Kolbowski visually references some of the basic tenets of Conceptualism, such as an interest in removing all traces of the hand from artistic production and an attempt to problematize notions of authorship and authenticity. And, by invoking disembodied hands alongside another important authorial signifier, the voice, the artist encourages viewers to question the authority of those who are remembering and to think about how their memory might be affected by their institutional or ideological position today.

Of the sixty artists Kolbowski approached, forty agreed to participate in the project (the remaining eighteen are to be recorded in the near future). An alphabetically ordered list of the participants--who include Vito Acconci, Dara Birnbaum, Mel Bochner, Hans Haacke, Mary Kelly, and Lawrence Weiner--is available in the gallery, but the voices remain unidentified. The accounts on the CDs are arranged chronologically according to the remembered date of production of the artworks. As such, gallerygoers are encouraged to participate in mentally reconstructing, albeit with the help of someone else's memory, the impact of the

originals as they were produced. True to the spirit of early Conceptual art, this implicit call for engagement provides the public with a role in determining the meaning of the work.

The inherent tenuousness of recollecting an artmaking practice that dreamed of democratizing the realm of the aesthetic by employing low-tech material's is highlighted by Kolbowski's use of a slickly designed, state-of-the-art Bang & Olufsen Beosound 9000 CD player in the installation. This striking contrast points to the complex relationship between a previously iconoclastic artistic movement and its return in a new historical context. Indeed, "Conceptual art" has in recent years become a catchall that has little to do with the rigorous definitions of the original movement. An Inadequate History of Conceptual Art encourages reflection on how groundbreaking this art movement initially was, while provocatively problematizing its return in the present.