

This is not an oral history: an inadequate archive of conceptual art

Silvia Kolbowski

*...the people there were sort of festive; it struck me as a little bit like a carnival. I mean people had wine and they were standing around and talking about when's it going to happen, and who's going to go in there and do this, and people would joke and say well what if they stick the pins in his eyes, or they stick him in his testicles - I mean where are they going to stick these pins, who's going to do it? [laughter] And I can't remember exactly what was going on, but it seemed like we were there for like an hour, and people were starting to get really impatient. I could see that people were starting to get really pissed off that they had to stand there and hang around. It wasn't getting unruly, but it was a little bit like a carnival show. I was thinking, I mean what am I doing here? Why do I need to look at this, to see someone get stabbed with pins?**

a revisionist history creates new archives

In the 1990s I observed the growing re-emergence of historical Conceptual Art in many forms – the appearance of thematic retrospectives and their companion catalogues, art criticism both mainstream and academic, the increasing popularity of PhD topics about the artists and works of the movement, the revival of exhibition and art market careers for forgotten artists of the that period, and the coining of a new stylistic term, “neo-conceptualism.”

Through the organizational categories created by curators and historians in the 1990s, some artists who had previously been considered secondary to the defining concerns of historical Conceptual Art were elevated to central status while some who were previously designated as central were marginalized. The historical category of Conceptual Art and the groupings of artists situated in it were both contracted and stretched – in terms of geography, gender, materials, mediums, processes – by exhibition parameters and historical revisions. In the 1990s, whatever tenets were previously thought to define Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s were being reshuffled. This was not always an overtly announced process. Rather, it seemed that a largely unannounced and unremarked process – a process of normalization - was taking place that wrote artists retrospectively into and out of a 1990s history of Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s.

It could be said that a revisionist history of Conceptual Art was being created in the 1990s by curators, academics, artists, critics, historians, and popular media. But the concept of “revisionism” is always already overdetermined by a dependence on an allegiance to an earlier history considered to be normative, the formation of which actually had its own contingencies, displacements, condensations, projections, etc. That said, any kind of historical revisionism – by virtue of the ways in which it changes the make-up of institutions and reception - always creates new archives. These new archives may take material form – privileging particular works through archival acquisitions, maintenance, or accessibility - or they may take the form of more ephemeral academic pedagogy and social debate and in this way enter the mutable archives of discourse.

*Sometimes artists rush in where critics refuse to tread,” Yvonne Rainer once remarked. In the absence of an adequate historical reception for John Cage from that quarter Rainer called “the avant-garde critical establishment,” the artist shouldered the responsibility herself, protesting in an indignant aside: “So whom does that leave? Me?!”***

Regardless of the fact that all historicization is in a sense revisionist, by the mid-to-late-nineties I had a growing sense that the new histories being created were problematic in several ways. And in 1998 I decided to contribute something to the process that was taking place, as an artist who was young enough to have missed a first-hand experience of historical Conceptual Art, but old enough to have been affected by its legacies. The intention was to contribute something specifically as an artist, rather than engage in theorization or historicization. To contribute as an artist among artists. Not in order to privilege the point of view of the artist, but to include that perspective in the historicization of Conceptual Art and to broaden the definition of an aesthetic contribution to history. In my project artists would recount their memories of Conceptual Art projects, recorded on audio, while their hands were video-taped as they were speaking. While the organizing concept of the “case history” was a touchstone for me, that of the oral history was not.

*My memory of the piece is somewhat vague, just simply time and I had been in a very bad car accident before I saw the piece. So my memory - I had a head injury - so my memory is still a little peculiar. But I had gone to Iowa City to do a visiting artist stint, and this artist was a very good friend of mine, and she happened to be in Iowa City doing an earthwork piece. So after I did my obligatory lecture, I went to the outskirts of Iowa City to an area that looked like it had been perhaps part of a flood plane? Because suddenly you have the normal landscape turn into what looks like a ravaged landscape, where you can see tree roots and you have gullies and fissures in the earth. And she was digging in the earth creating a human form that was part of the earth, and I can't remember whether some of the forms that were dug were on fire...it's very sort of vague to me, but I remember how scary the landscape looked and I kind of felt worried about walking around in it, for fear I might fall through.**

the lower case

I began my project with a prospective title, *an inadequate history of conceptual art*, written in lower case letters. Like many titles conceived at the inception of a project, the title not only described the project, it also helped to guide its development. At the start, I foresaw and accepted that the project would be inadequate in its final form due to practical limitations. Later, I saw this inadequacy as part of a discursive and historiographic structure of the work. My goal was not that of the historian. I wanted the title to announce the *partiality and limits* of the project. At the start of the project, the theoretician Parveen Adams asked me in passing about what I was working on. When I told her that I was working on a project entitled “an inadequate history of conceptual art,” she responded with dry humor and an academic’s perspective: “That should not be difficult to achieve.”

The project would be inadequate because it would not purport to be geographically comprehensive or inclusive, since my self-funded budget would not allow for travel and full immersion in the subject. By emphasizing the roles played by memory and the unconscious in the construction of a history, and by setting specific limits on the participants in order to foreground the partiality of spectatorship and reception, I suspected that the project would not find public or private funding because it overlapped or overstepped various genres. And it did not. In the U.S., projects funded by cultural organizations and philanthropic foundations need to fit comfortably within existing genres – documentary, oral history, pragmatic research – each with its conventional standards and accepted modus operandi. More specifically, such genres and categories of research must subscribe to what is supposed to be verifiable truth value and transparency of form and medium in order to legitimate themselves within existing definitions of historical documentation. But in order to bring out the ways in which histories are created, I wanted *aihca* to dredge up the suppressed psychological processes that are always participants in the creation of histories and archives. These processes alert us, in their mutability and sometimes unexpected interconnections, to the inherent but usually veiled instability of conventions and historical narratives accepted as fact or truth.

aihca would be inadequate, in part, because it would not aim to create a definitive archive of Conceptual Art works. It would not fetishize the encyclopedic. In the end, the fact that the project could not be publicly funded due to the narrowness of social conventions resulted in an emphasis on limitations and inadequacies that proved to be fruitful.

an artwork not your own

To begin my project I selected potential participants from the New York artists section of a 1997/98 *Art Diary*. I selected artists that I thought, based on age and geography, might have witnessed Conceptual Art projects first-hand in the approximately ten-year span that has generally been used to circumscribe the art historical period. Approximately half of my selected artists were women, and half were men. I developed a working definition of Conceptual Art that was included in the letters sent to 60 artists, inviting them to participate in a project that would require their being audio- and video-taped responding to the following request.

Briefly describe a conceptual art work, not your own, of the period between 1965 and 1975, which you personally witnessed/experience at the time. For the sake of this project, the definition of Conceptual Art should be broad enough to encompass such phenomena of that period 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 that sought to question the conventions of dance and theater.

The letter sent to the artists also stated the following.

Although I am an admirer of [Conceptual Art] and – as an artist who began to work in the early 1980s – its avid student, I feel that the increasingly rapid turnover of interest in the aesthetic production of various periods would benefit from a gesture of reflection. To this end I am audio-taping artists (not necessarily conceptual artists), briefly describing a conceptual art work (not their own) of that period, which they personally witnessed/experienced at the time. These audio recordings will be compiled (unedited) into a CD which will be played in installation format. Artists will not be identified in audio format, but will have the option of being identified in printed matter, or of remaining anonymous. The accounts of the memories of the projects would ideally be unrehearsed and spoken without a written record. The accounts can be anywhere from a couple of minutes long to fifteen minutes long. [I later notified the artists that their hands would also be videotaped in close-up while they spoke.]

A crucial aspect of this project was the incorporation of specific parameters and limits set for the participants and for myself from the outset. These limits included:

- a historical frame, from 1965-1975
- a particular definition of Conceptual Art
- a request that participants not engage in research to refresh their memories
- a requirement that the participants remain anonymous
- a requirement that participants not identify the artist whose work they described, and not identify the title of the work described.
- a my silence during the audio recordings and video-tapings

Curiously, for reasons I cannot remember, or fully understand now, I allowed participants to state the location and the date of the project, if they remembered it. Although I had no control over what the artists would describe, by expressing themselves within the stated parameters I intended the spoken accounts to offset the illusory voluntarism and transparency of the oral history, and to confound the spectator's valorization of an account by virtue of an artist's status. The limits contained in the preliminary directions to the participants were also meant to distinguish this project from the political and cultural populism of contemporaneous works that fit under the rubric of relational aesthetics. Populism fetishizes the non-professional without seriously questioning why the informed, professional, trained, and experienced subject has become suspect. Even as Populism romanticizes the collective and the everyday, it usually maintains a top-down authority veiled by the rhetoric of a level playing field. As artist of this project, I presented an overtly directive role, while at the same time remaining silent throughout. I let others speak about what I had not witnessed, while still setting present-day boundaries that I thought were important in shaping the project for the spectator's perception of the historical material. Subsequently, critics have written about the ways in which my silence created a transference for both the participants and the spectators, pointing to the active role played by my silence in the work.

Of the 60 artists contacted, 44 agreed to participate in the project, and 22 were recorded and video-taped, simply organized through schedule conveniences. Ten of those 22 were women.

*This was...there were two performances that I remember, when I was living in L.A. in the late '60s, early '70s and this took place, the first one that I remember the most about took place...I would say in the early '70s. I don't remember exactly the year, or the month or anything, but it was sometime in the early 70s. And, it took place in John Baldessari's studio. It was just a good artist's studio at the time. It could have taken place anywhere, but it was just that John had a good space for it and John was also friends with this artist, as I was. And so it was a kind of word-of-mouth performance that...nobody knew exactly what it was going to be. The artist was getting ready to leave town, and this was going to be his final work, final performance, final everything for L.A., and the word just kind of spread out and when I got there, the studio was filled with people and nobody knew what to expect.**

In the 1999 press release for the project's first exhibition, I included the following.

The project attempts:

1. to question the “smoothness” of the return of conceptualism – from the point of view of the artist – through a “rough” account provided by unrefined/unedited memories;
2. to use the imperfections and fallibility of casual memory to indirectly emphasize the ways in which historical returns are molded by new contexts;
3. to “speak” about history as an artist, to the side of the disciplines of history/criticism;
4. to pose inadequacy in relation to the unquestioned fullness/sufficiency of the returns;
5. to slow down the pace of the return and encourage reflection on history as well as the present.

One way in which *aihca* reflected on historicization was through its particular form of installation and presentation. *aihca* is always installed in two rooms – one for the audio and one for the video. Due to this division, the spectator has to take in the video and audio loops separately, and must put them together conceptually, mentally, and actively through processes of association and memory. Spectators sometime try to evade the disjunction created by the separation of the senses, by standing between the two rooms to view the video while listening to the audio, but the layout of the spaces always encourage a vacillation between the two ways of experiencing the work. It could be said that the spectator is doing their own research while taking in the work – sorting through audio and video, making associations and connections, visualizing spoken material...

une perspective

The idea for *aihca*, was precipitated in part by reading the catalogue of the French exhibition, “L’art conceptuel:une perspective” (Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris;1989), curated by Claude Gintz and covering projects designated as Conceptual Art between 1965 and 1975. While the title of the exhibition declared a partiality, the exhibition and catalogue did not equivocate in according retrospective legitimation to a narrowly defined selection of works in this first retrospective exhibition. The ensuing circulation of the catalogue, including Benjamin Buchloh’s much-read catalogue essay (republished in *October* 55, 1990, including a heated exchange with Joseph Kosuth), allowed this first retrospective exhibition to set the tone for the way in which Conceptual Art of the mid-60s through the early 70s would begin to be written into history, or as Suzanne Page, the French Commissariat General, put it in the catalogue’s introduction, the way in which this exhibition would “reactivate an artistic practice.”

L’Art conceptuel included 38 artists, of which only three were women. The curators limited the genres and mediums in the exhibition to sculptures, diagrams, drawings, photographs, language, printed matter, archival formats, industrial objects, a few objects made from re-purposed materials, and a couple of examples of painting reduced to concept. According to the catalogue – which was, in effect, a ready-made archive for me as a geographically distant reader who had not seen the exhibition - the only films included were four by Bruce Nauman, which presumably were projected in the exhibition. No other films or video of the period were included; no broad definition of performance or dance informed the selection. And, creating a neat tautology, the “list of exhibitions” of the period included in the back of the catalogue covered only those exhibitions that served to reinforce this “perspective.”

*Well, it's 1972. You can imagine, just the height of the student anti-war movement, the women's movement, the beginnings of so-called "new art" in London. I'm outside the Hayward Gallery with leaflets, trying to get people to join the artists union. And in fact, it was really hot and lots of people were coming. Kitaj just signed up. But all the time, I was anxious to get into the exhibition. And I remembered a peculiar feeling of inside outside. You know, on the one hand being committed to this organization of artists and the sort of broader politics of the trade union movement, and on the other being absolutely caught up in the, not just the polemics of the second stage of conceptual art, but really with the look, which is something difficult to explain.**

In 1996 and 1999, two exhibitions opened in the U.S. that seemed to revise the history presented by *L’art conceptuel*. *Reconsidering the Object of Art* (1996, Museum of Contemporary Art, L.A.), curated by Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, included 55 artists, of which only 8 were women, and covered work from 1965-1975. Compared to *L’art conceptuel*, the mediums and genres defined the historical term more expansively to include performance, video, film, slide projections, installation-like work, and dance, as well as those categories included in the Paris show. But although the curators included in the catalogue an article by Susan L. Jenkins on “information, communication, documentation,” which states the importance of “...the diverse approaches to artistic production and the prevailing concern with the institutionalization of art that are associated with” Conceptual Art, there is no attempt in the extensive list of exhibitions published in the back

of the catalogue to include anything that was not connected to typical institutional settings. Thus, the list includes a chronology of exhibitions in major museums, university galleries, commercial galleries, and large biennial-like exhibitions, but no attempt seems to have been made to trace the networks of non-institutional, under-media-radar sites that could have generated different emphases on those works that now went – through this exhibition and catalogue – into creating a significant archive of continuing influence.

1999's *Global Conceptualism: Points of origin, 1950s-1980s* (Queens Museum of Art, NY), curated by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, Rachel Weiss (listed as project directors, not curators), included 134 artists, of which only 15 were women (and possibly a few more depending on whether some of the collectives included women). In a surprising, and somewhat questionable move, the project directors of this exhibition expanded the time-frame of historical Conceptual Art up to 1989, which allowed them to significantly expand the definition geographically and to include more collective endeavors than the more accepted temporal bracketing would have allowed. As Apinan Poshyananda wrote in a catalogue essay entitled "'Con Art' Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in South and Southeast Asia," "Asian artists recognize that conceptual art in the West has its distinct genealogy, but their own interpretations of such art have often derived from different trajectories."

But more is not always better, and this inclusiveness serves to trivialize the process of historicizing aesthetic practices by privileging modalities and subject matter over the imbrication of their development in a particular historical period. So although the exhibition uses 1989 as a coincidental end point, the curatorial logic would actually have it continue indefinitely, outside the frame of the exhibition, as long as the artwork could be considered to be rebellious in some form or another. Okwui Enwezor, in his essay "Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on 'African' Conceptualism," admits that "...conceptualism in Africa is a practice associated with scattered, isolated, and solitary examples and never blossomed into a full-fledged artistic discourse." Nonetheless, he does go on to describe and analyze the work of five artists and one collective, spanning 1961-1997.

a long tail

By 1999, when I refined the idea I had in 1998 to respond to the various "returns" of historical conceptualism in art, I had several intentions in mind. I wanted to slow down an inevitable cultural turnover through an art project that would create a physical space of memory in the form of an exhibition. But the project also had the unexpected effect of creating a discursive space. *aihca* has had a long tail, being re-exhibited over the past thirteen years in numerous countries, analyzed in publications, and taught during that time in academic settings, sometimes as an example of a new form of historiography. In addition, the project has sometimes been utilized as an archive of sorts. To a degree, this long tail was enabled by a digital dispersal of data and information on the project. Such forms of dispersal have made it possible for many art projects to move from production to discourse, being less dependent on valorization by private or public exhibition spaces. In fact, *aihca* has been strongly supported by public exhibition spaces over the years, and has actually ended up in the collections of two major museums, but its entry into academic and other discourses has clearly been facilitated through searchable keywords, critical writings, reviews, and website postings, allowing it to enter into discourses outside those of the fine arts – those of literature, history, film, women's studies, etc. A long tail can now be considered as an alternative space of sorts, for an exhibition, for an archival inquiry.

the conceptual archive

Much has been written about Conceptual Art's dematerialization of the art object and the resultant time-based forms, many of which were ephemeral – performances, dance hybrids, the carrying out of instructions through activities, the temporary and mutable alteration of the landscape. Whether or not dematerialization can be considered to be the main defining characteristic of Conceptual Art, such works' ephemerality makes the archival format essential to the historicization of Conceptual Art. The archival compilations of documentary photographs, correspondence, writings, etc., will comprise not just future resources for study, but also the materials of exhibitions to come. One unexpected result of setting *aihca* in motion was the preponderant emphasis in recollections of performative works from the period. More than half the works recounted by the 22 participants fit into the category of performance. Yet, of course, no retrospective exhibition or print catalogue to date has come anywhere close to such a proportion. It may be that performative works remain imprinted in memory longer than works in other mediums. It may be that the limit on research that was a requirement of participation in *aihca* (one which several people transgressed) privileged a human capacity to remember temporally distant performative events and performances more easily than objects. It may be that asking people to speak their recollections extemporaneously into a

microphone rather than write them resulted in a default to a narrative format that dredged up performative events that themselves had a narrative arc. For whatever reason, *aihca* became a particular archive for such works, albeit presented through memory rather than conventional research.

out of the frame and off the page

aihca was intended to implicitly challenge the overwhelming popularity of the autobiographical genre as it existed across art, film, literature, and media registers in the late 1990s (continuing into such current pop genres as reality television, confessional memoirs, social network postings, etc.).

In challenging the autobiographical genre by questioning the “free” flow of memory, *aihca* bears the legacy of a Post-Structuralism that questions such organizing genres. Oral history as a form of historiography depends on pre-Structuralist attitudes toward authenticity, assuming autobiographical enunciation to have an unquestionable truth value based on an illusion of fully mastered and expressed experience. The truth value accorded to oral histories veils the inherent overdetermination of all historiography – oral and otherwise - by such socially undervalued or ignored psychical processes as screen memories, displacement, projection, identification, repression, etc. Among other things, post-structuralism challenged the notion of a subject without an unconscious and of autobiographical subjects of fluid facticity. Unarguable historical facts may of course be recounted in an oral history. But the partiality of the processes by which meaning is shaped in an oral history – including omissions, repressed facts, narrative contiguities and dispersals, “irrational” associations, particular emphases, affect – is obscured by western culture’s naturalization of first-hand experience and academic historiography’s persistent resistance to navigating the effects of the unconscious.

And, so then the artist came, and he goes to the front of the studio, and I don’t remember if it...either first he took off all his clothes, or first he gave this long monologue, a kind of serious psychological monologue about what he had been going through. And it was real personal and very intense. It kind of set the tone immediately because it was so emotional and self-analytical and all this kind of process he’d been going through and all of the things that had led up to his, if I remember right, his departure from town. And the nature of this performance and all of these kinds of things came out in this monologue. And so I guess then he took off all of his clothes and got on top of a table and said that he wanted a male member of the audience to come up and give him a blow job.*

It is not that taking into account the partiality of unconscious processes will allow for a more authentic history to be unearthed and catalogued, nor that such awareness will automatically result in a more complete history. And I would not argue for the value of a fully undifferentiated and fragmented recounting. Rather, the value of archival partiality in historical notation is that it can create, among other things, an awareness of what is always out of the frame and off the page, whether it be that which is too troublesome to be represented, or that which would skew norms. The three exhibition catalogues mentioned above are perfect examples of the broad strokes with which aesthetic practices, for example, are periodized and archived. Of course the three exhibitions and catalogues added valuable material to the historical archive of Conceptual Art. But their curatorial and critical approaches were overdetermined and weighted by particular goals. For example, by giving little or no emphasis to the performative and the filmic in Conceptual Art practices, the arena that was legitimated was almost completely male. Was it organized the other way around? That is, were those endeavors organized through an unconscious discomfort with foregrounding the women active in those practices, resulting in an under-emphasis on the performative and the filmic? Significant omissions can feed on themselves to legitimate further omissions down the line. And broad-stroke repudiations of such legitimation processes create their own problems. Still, it may be that conventional retrospective exhibitions will always have these limitations, and that it will be up to artists to work on the sidelines of curatorial, critical, and archival activities to raise questions about such limitations.

*So then he had to get a hard-on and this became excruciating. Nobody would come up, I mean everybody sat there stunned...also because of the psychological monologue that had gone on beforehand. And so nobody did anything and he had to get an erection. And he couldn’t. And he tried everything, and it went on and on and on,, and it was so like, kind of creepy. All this time he was talking to the audience, and going through more of this self-examination and why he wanted to do this. It got more and more excruciatingly embarrassing. Embarrassing for him. And so I don’t know how long it was. Maybe after twenty minutes, one half hour of this, finally, all of a sudden a guy jumps up out of the audience, who was with his girlfriend, and he jumps up and he says "I’ll do it."**

*Transcription excerpts, throughout, from *an inadequate history of conceptual art*, Silvia Kolbowski. Video + audio, 1998-1999. These excerpts were published in *October* 92, 2000.

** Quoted in “Oral Histories: Silvia Kolbowski and the Dynamics of Transference,” by Mignon Nixon, in *Silvia Kolbowski, inadequate...Like...Power* (Seession and Walther Konig, Vienna and Cologne), 2004.