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THE WORLD AS GALLERY

Conceptualism and Global Neo-Avant-Garde

IN 1989 A SPECIAL edition of *Art in America* announced the arrival of global art, its cover adorned with a NASA photograph of the Earth taken from lunar orbit. Yet inside, Martha Rosler warned that the new fetish of the global threatened to obfuscate the material shape of the art world—its circuits of communication, distribution and exchange—where a capitalist restructuring was in process.¹ The term ‘global art’ took hold as the Cold War drew to a close, through years when broader discourses of globalization also came to flourish. While the meaning of this term continues to trouble artists and critics, a normative imperative to ‘think global’ has come to structure the practices of art institutions, framing the endless drive for recognition of new artists and regions, as biennales and art fairs proliferate.

Conceptualism has always had a special relationship to the question of the global. The issue of its geographical mapping is linked to that of the determinate bounds of artworks and practices—something often explicitly thematized in conceptual works themselves—and a conscious orientation to this question was evident within the movement by the late 1960s, when tensions emerged over whether it constituted an American or an international phenomenon, a reductive formalism or a radically inclusive ‘free-for-all’.² Dominant figures in the United States, such as Lucy Lippard, Seth Siegelaub and Joseph Kosuth, presented it as fully international, as facilitating global connectivity and artistic reach. Yet for Luis Camnitzer, a Uruguayan artist working in New York at the time, such claims obscured the exportation of ‘contemporary colonial art’.³ From the late 1970s, German art historian and critic Benjamin Buchloh effectively defined Conceptualism as proper to the European

and American hegemonic centres, though Siegelaub disputed Buchloh's emphasis on Manhattan.⁴

Then in the early 1990s, as a lucrative Neo-Conceptual movement consolidated its position in an expanding global art market, Conceptualism was proclaimed the first global art form. In a series of articles and exhibitions—mostly on US soil—Mari Carmen Ramírez presented Latin America as the exemplar of Conceptualism's global character. Ramírez became a core reference for inscriptions into an emerging narrative of global conceptualisms, cementing an image of Latin America as radical other to the US's formalism.⁵ The landmark 1999–2000 exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* was decisive in extending this story, inviting eleven international curator-essayists to formulate accounts of their respective regions.⁶ The unifying idea was that Conceptualism had spontaneously proliferated worldwide in two waves—1950–73 (in the US, Japan, Western and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Canada, Australia), and 1973–89 (in the Soviet Union, South Korea, China, Africa)—as a set of strategic responses to the socio-political effects of the consolidating global economy.⁷

¹ Rosler, contribution to 'The Global Issue: A Symposium', *Art in America*, vol. 77, no. 7, July 1989.

² Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley 1973.

³ Luis Camnitzer, 'Contemporary Colonial Art' (1969), in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, MA 1999, p. 225.

⁴ Yet in his classic text on conceptualism, Buchloh himself had noted—contrary to demands for 'purity and orthodoxy' from some artists—that 'the historic phase in which Conceptual Art was developed comprises . . . a complex range of mutually opposed approaches', making it 'imperative to resist a construction of its history in terms of a stylistic homogenization, which would limit that history to a group of individuals and a set of strictly defined practices'. See 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, vol. 55, Winter 1990, p. 107, and the debate between Buchloh, Kosuth and Siegelaub in *October*, vol. 57, Summer 1991.

⁵ Ramírez consolidated Simon Marchan Fiz's 1972 formulation of Latin American conceptualism as 'ideological', in contrast to US 'formalism'. Ramírez, 'Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America'; essay written for the catalogue of the exhibition *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, MoMA, New York 1993.

⁶ Directed by Jane Farver, Rachel Weiss and Luis Camnitzer, the exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art in New York included over 135 artists from 30 countries.

⁷ This periodization was based on Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*, London 1994.

In its drive for inclusivity, the exhibition stretched the definition of Conceptualism to the verge of indeterminacy, and the regional accounts in its own catalogue were sometimes in tension with the unifying idea. In relation to 1960s–70s India, Apinan Poshyananda explained that anti-American sentiment had brought resistance to Pop and Conceptual Art and, citing Siva Kuma, that experimentation had been inhibited by entrenched colonial pedagogy.⁸ Okwui Enwezor denied the existence of anything like a Conceptual movement in 1970s Africa, citing a few ‘isolated’ and ‘scattered’ examples.⁹ Regional studies of conceptual practices have since proliferated, with some attempts to return to more determinate analyses of the artistic landscape, seeking to qualify—rather than deny—the clear dominance of the hegemonic centres.¹⁰

The conceptual moment

The indeterminacy of Conceptualism as a movement may be grounded in certain generic aspects of artistic modernity. As John Roberts has claimed, ‘the most fundamental shift of modernism was less the move to painterly abstraction than the subsumption of art under the logic of art’s conceptual and formal conjunction’.¹¹ If modernist art practice is schematizable into two moments, or modes of response to the crisis of the art object—on the one hand, a ‘Greenbergian’ self-interrogation within existing terms; on the other, avant-garde experimentations in Peter Bürger’s sense, which throw into question the artwork as such, and thereby the status of art as social institution—much of the latter can be construed as ‘conceptual’ in some sense.¹² Thus the globality of ‘conceptualism’ may partly be that of a generic aspect of modernist art, itself already quite geographically dispersed by the time a self-identifying Conceptualist movement emerged in the 1960s.

⁸ Apinan Poshyananda, ‘“Con Art” Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in South and Southeast Asia’, in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–80s*, New York 1999; Siva Kuma, ‘Contemporary Indian Art: The Last Fifty years’, in *Tryst with Destiny: Art From Modern India, 1947–1997*, Singapore 1997, pp. 45–56.

⁹ The main exception was Malcolm Payne, a South African who studied in London in 1973. See ‘Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on “African” Conceptualism’ in *Global Conceptualism*, pp. III–6.

¹⁰ See for example, Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*, Cambridge, MA 2016.

¹¹ John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant Garde*, New York and London 2015, p. 2.

¹² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis 1984.

Those aspects were sufficiently prominent within the widespread neo-avant-garde tendencies of the postwar period, particularly amid Abstract Expressionism's global *capita mortua*, that it is plausible to identify numerous practices that—with the prejudice of hindsight—can appear at least proto-conceptual. These were indeed globally 'spontaneous', in the sense that they lacked any single organizational pole or conscious referent, but it took the emergence of a hegemonic, New York-centred scene from this broader moment for these to be ranged under, and read through, a single term. What follows is an attempt to sketch the crystallization of 'Conceptual Art' in this ambiguous structure, whereby local neo-avant-gardes both provided preconditions for, and were mediated by, determinate transnational networks centred on the global metropolises. Since these structures were themselves often thematized in the artworks and exhibitions around which they were constructed, we should also be attentive to the peculiar function of 'the global' in the neo-avant-garde imaginary. If such structures are often obscured by what Pamela Lee has termed the art world's 'global state of mind', looking at the question in this way we may hope to break out of the endless play of antinomies between abstractly boundless extension on the one hand, and reductive concretization on the other.¹³ But since these structures pivoted upon the metropole, it is there that we should start.

I. UNITED STATES

The landscape in which US Conceptualism emerged was shaped by the particular 'internationalism' of postwar reconstruction and the Cold War. With the transfer of the cultural centre from Paris to New York, a self-conscious programme was developed of mobilizing US modernism—of which Abstract Expressionism was of course the emblem—as a tool of soft power.¹⁴ New transnational networks for the circulation, distribution and exchange of artworks were established, parading American art throughout Western Europe, Latin America, Africa, India, Japan, Yugoslavia and Australia, while US institutions sometimes bought up art from around the world—especially where resonances with Abstract

¹³ Pamela Lee, 'Boundary Issues: The Art World Under the Sign of Globalism', *Artforum*, November 2003; see also Marina Vishmidt's critical comments on Lee's more recent work in 'Etherized', *Radical Philosophy* 190, March–April 2015.

¹⁴ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, Chicago 1985.

Expressionism were perceived. The terms of Clement Greenberg's dispute with Harold Rosenberg over the nature of modernism supplied the dominant theoretical framing: a counter-Enlightenment programme of medium-specific self-interrogation vs. the free act of painting over and against the art object itself.¹⁵

Some famous early harbingers of the US conceptual turn appeared in the early 1950s, specifically as repudiations of Abstract Expressionism and its attendant ideologies. Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) were pitted against the dogma of expressive artistic processes; his *Erased de Kooning* (1953)—a literal description of the work—signalled a rejection of the Abstract Expressionist's personalized signature. The aim was a de-reification of the artwork, to allow new kinds of meaning to appear. Significant in the cultural ambience at this time was a burgeoning interest among American artists in Zen—exemplified in D. T. Suzuki's 1950s lectures at Columbia—which helped promote a certain mysticism of the negative.¹⁶ Then in the mid 1950s a Duchamp revival began, in which the readymade would be interpreted as revealing art's conceptual nature and the institutional underpinnings of its alleged autonomy.

In 1961, Lithuanian-American George Maciunas formed Fluxus, rekindling the Dadaist hope for an inclusive transnational artistic collectivity. Through it, a loose international network of artists would flow, producing concerts, theatre, performance, publications and mail art. It was a Fluxus-associated artist, Henry Flynt, who first used the term 'concept art', in 1961, to define 'an art of which the material is *concepts*, as the material of e.g. music is sound'.¹⁷ A 'non-movement', claiming 'everything is art and anyone can do it', Fluxus sought universal accessibility for art across geopolitical and class boundaries, aided by an erasure of distinctions between objects and words, visuality and language.¹⁸ It aimed

¹⁵ Key texts here were Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters' (1952), in *The Tradition of the New*, New York 1960; Clement Greenberg, "'American Type' Painting' (1955), in *Art & Culture*, New York 1961; Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in *Forum Lectures*, Washington, DC 1960.

¹⁶ As the Situationists put it: 'the mental infirmity of American capitalist culture has enrolled in the school of Zen Buddhism'. See 'Absence and Its Customers', *Internationale Situationniste* #2, December 1958.

¹⁷ See Flynt, 'Concept Art', available on the George Maciunas Foundation website.

¹⁸ Fluxus had a relatively high ratio of female artists and a feminist impulse. Examples are Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) and Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Paintings* (1965)—which may have been meant as a critique of Pollock's ejaculatory aesthetic.

to dissolve the art object and to implement the universal artistic event. The Yam Festival (1962–63)—a year-long event of daily performances—would, according to Robert Watt, enable ‘an ever expanding universe of events’. Fluxus epitomized the liquefaction of the artwork into process and performance—a ‘neo-Dada’ tendency for which Greenberg placed the blame on Rosenberg’s privileging of action over object.¹⁹

Neo-avant-garde

Though Peter Bürger would later dismiss the work of this period as a derivative after-image of the early twentieth century ‘historic avant-gardes’, its concerns with the dissolution of art into life, with art as social institution, and with the paradoxes of art’s supposed autonomy, often resemble his definition of avant-garde more literally than the original.²⁰ Sometimes this was under the influence of the earlier avant-gardes—Dada especially—but the more important influence was negative: opposition to the core assumptions of Greenbergian modernism—material objectivity, medium-specificity, opticality and autonomy—loomed large throughout the period.

In the context of the Duchamp revival, artists were inspired to reflexively flood the developing void of the artwork with its externalities. Robert Morris’s *Card File* (1963) was a filing cabinet of notations about the economic, social and biographical contingencies of the work’s production. His *Document* (1963) was a typed ‘Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal’, in which he denied that another work—purchased but never paid for—had aesthetic content. Meanwhile, Minimalists were troubling the Greenbergian programme by displacing painting’s reduction to the ‘medium-specific’ flat plane into what Donald Judd called ‘specific objects’, made of standardized materials, eradicating visual illusion, effacing the hand of the artist, and collapsing the distinction between painting and sculpture. In the US, the first phase of Conceptual Art developed out of these tendencies, brought together in the 1966 New York exhibition *Primary Structures*, which had direct spin-offs around the world.

Much early US Conceptualism was concerned with the market, bureaucracy and cultural institutions—perhaps because it was especially

¹⁹ Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’.

²⁰ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

feeling their grip. Through the 1960s, state promotion of the arts was being formalized and the first federal arts institution—the National Endowment for the Arts—was set up in 1965, with an internationalist agenda.²¹ The 1960s also saw a flourishing art market permeated by speculative logics and fuelled by injections of private and corporate sponsorship. Modern art collecting, which had hitherto barely stretched beyond the Impressionists, now opened up to new forms. The relation between Conceptual Art and business was double-edged. While many artists aspired to be anti-commodity, some—notably Seth Siegelaub and Joseph Kosuth—courted business.²² The influx of speculative capital encouraged the development of new entrepreneurial forms, a new breed of gallerist and collector, as well as artist-run spaces—developments often championed as a de-hierarchization and hybridization of roles, an erosion of the status of the expert.

Between 1967 and 1969, Sol LeWitt set out a programme positioning the nascent movement against Abstract Expressionism. With Conceptual Art, ‘the concept is the most important part of the work’ and the execution ‘a perfunctory affair’.²³ Cynicism about the cultural language of the postwar era—freedom, will, ego, spontaneity, expression—was evident in his claim that ‘the idea becomes the machine that makes the art’.²⁴ The artistic idea, initiated by intuition, became a system that, once set in motion, should be followed absolutely—an attitude common among international neo-avant-gardes.²⁵ While there were varying attitudes

²¹ Greenberg played a role here as voice of establishment modernism, embarking internationally on state-sponsored tours, though the results seem to have been ambiguous: according to Geeta Kapur, despite the existence of regional modernisms, Greenberg’s aesthetics meant very little in Asia. See ‘Dismantled Norms: Apropos an Indian/Asian Avant-garde’, in *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, New Delhi 2007, p. 59.

²² See Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA 2003.

²³ Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ (1967), in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, Berkeley 1996.

²⁴ LeWitt, ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’ (1969), in Stiles and Selz, eds, *Theories and Documents*, p. 826.

²⁵ Adorno identified a general tendency in modern art to pursue such logics: ‘The subject, conscious of the loss of power that it has suffered . . . raised this powerlessness to the level of a programme . . . perhaps in response to an unconscious impulse to tame the threatening heteronomy by integrating it into subjectivity’s own undertaking as an element of the process of production’. *Aesthetic Theory*, London and New York 1997, p. 33.

towards the material, a ‘dematerialized’ strain now emerged, both facilitating and in accordance with the changing political economy of art.

For Kosuth, materials were an obstacle, and art need not be made even of linguistic material—though he invariably produced it. Inspired by Logical Positivism, his art was an ‘analytic proposition’. Echoing Greenbergian notions of autonomy—albeit now released from the tie to physical media—art was to refer only to itself; the auto-interrogation of the medium had become that of art as such, as mere idea. In the 1966 *Art-as-Idea-as-Idea* series, Kosuth ditched all other elements to identify art with the concept alone, albeit presenting this identification in a post-painterly fashion on the gallery wall. Similarly, after spending the early 1960s blowing craters in the Californian landscape—an inverted land sculpture—Lawrence Weiner began his ‘Statements’, describing pseudo-artistic gestures that may or may not be enacted, such as *One Pint Gloss White Lacquer Poured Directly on the Floor and Allowed to Dry* (1968).

Abstract globalism

As US-based artists reduced their work to mere information in the years after 1968, they also emphasized a global interconnectedness. As Lucy Lippard told Ursula Meyer in 1969:

Some artists now think it is absurd to fill up their studios with objects that won’t be sold, and are trying to get their art communicated as rapidly as it is made. They’re thinking out ways to make art what they’d like it to be, in spite of the devouring speed syndrome it’s made in. That speed has not only to be taken into consideration, but utilized.²⁶

Gallerist Seth Siegelau was promoting new exhibition and distribution formats that attempted to do just that. Dissolving art’s presentation into its distribution, he wanted to facilitate a geographical and institutional decentralization of the art world. ‘I think New York is breaking down as a centre’, he enthused in 1969, ‘Not that there will be another city to replace it, but rather, where any artist is will be the centre.’²⁷ This vision resonated in much post-68 practice, especially that of Siegelau’s

²⁶ Lippard, *Six Years*, p. xvii.

²⁷ Charles Harrison and Seth Siegelau, ‘On Exhibitions and the World at Large’ (1969), in Alberro and Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art*.

clique, who withdrew into producing ideas for circulation. Kosuth gave up making photostats, anonymously publishing his works as posters, flyers, magazine adverts and billboards, to be circulated worldwide. Weiner substituted his industrial-style removals with descriptions of past actions, typed in minimal, emotionally-neutral language, circulating them in catalogues.

Robert Barry's famous *Inert Gas Series* consisted of a mailshot with a phone number connecting to an answering service, which reported that Barry had 'returned' noble gases to the atmosphere in various locations—most notably the desert. Due to the colourlessness and chemical inertia of noble gases, their release had neither visual nor chemical effect, expanding forever in an imperceptible environmental sculpture. This may be taken as emblematic of a tendency to toy with the abstractly universal as both content and form, gesturing towards an infinity of potential inclusion at the level of communication, ideas, even physical reality: the many negatives—inertia, invisibility, non-presence, unconfinement, desert—may be read together positively as conjuring an abstract globality. Similarly, Barry's *All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking—1:36 PM, 15 June 1969, New York*, posed the idea of a work transcending 'all space and time'.²⁸ Such withdrawals forced exhibition organizers to enact the limits of institutional spaces in order to present the conceptual artwork, implicitly measuring up the particular exhibition against a potential universal extension beyond it.

From 1969, exhibitions were increasingly reduced to catalogues, with surrounding texts citing informality, equality of participation, global connectivity, and an anti-commodity intent. 'Catalogue shows', of which Siegelau held a series between 1969 and 1970, were a convenient way of collating the work of geographically dispersed artists. In *March 1–31* (1969) he ignored the gallery altogether, asking thirty-one artists to respond swiftly with 'any relevant information regarding the nature of the "work" you intend to contribute', the catalogue of which would be distributed worldwide, free of charge. This format was repeated in

²⁸ In these pages Malcolm Bull has recently made ingenious hay of the antinomies between the apparent solipsism of such works and their publicity, drawing on the Wittgensteinian notion of private language. Missing from his reading is a sense of the abstract globality conjured by the many negations of the conceptual artwork. See Bull, 'The Decline of Decadence', *NLR* 94, July–August 2015.

the trilingual—English, French and German—*July–August–September* (1969), which had eleven artists, all in Siegelau’s clique, positioned at locations around the world. Kosuth’s 15 *Locations* (1969–70), in which thesaurus categories were published in local newspapers, took place ‘all over the world’—in North America, Western Europe, Argentina and Australia. In *July/August* (1970)—the last of Siegelau’s catalogue shows—he asked six critics to select artists to fill eight pages of *Studio International*. As Alexander Alberro has noted, this insertion of art into pre-existing circuits of distribution rendered it equivalent to its advertising.²⁹ These modes of circulation gave international currency to US Conceptualism, and to specific artists. But for Siegelau, it was a matter of embracing a world without boundaries—institutional, national, ideological. By reducing presentation to publicity he had ‘eliminated space’ and turned the whole world into his gallery.

Concrete universalism

This extension of the space of art to the world at large was not the avant-gardist dissolution of art into life. If Kosuth’s ‘art as idea as idea’ displayed a lingering Greenbergianism, even Siegelau’s attempts to dissolve the artwork into an unbounded communication could be construed as so many instances of autonomous art’s self-interrogation. In the dialectics of artistic autonomy, Conceptualism’s vacuous universalism was always at risk of challenge in the name of a more concrete one. From the late 1960s, the aspect of institutional critique in neo-avant-garde practice was increasingly allied with radical social and counter-cultural movements, and issues of race and gender were forced onto the agenda. The Art-Workers Coalition, a heterogeneous group of 300 artists, demanded less hierarchy and centralization in the art world, an end to institutional complicity in corruption and to the suffering of Vietnam. By the 1970s, Kosuth’s tautological formulations were being rejected, and more personal, social and directly political practices, using bodily performance or photo-text combinations, were pushed to the foreground. Adrian Piper—who describes being marginalized within the Conceptual Art scene, despite the rigorously analytical bent of her earlier work—began her *Catalysis* series (1970), redefining art as a catalytic agent which could bring about transformations in the viewer or artist.³⁰ Piper walked New

²⁹ Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, pp. 56–7.

³⁰ Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol 1: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–92*, Cambridge, MA, p. xxxv.

York streets promoting ‘non-pragmatic human confrontation’ of people with their desires, fears and prejudices. By forgoing the institutional space, she aimed for an art that could become a tool of direct social transformation. Such approaches sometimes crossed over into grassroots community organizing, as with the 1971 exhibition and collective of the same name, *‘Where We At’: Black Women Artists*.

While American artists proclaimed the decentralization of art and reached out to the Third World, and while the world was becoming significantly more connected, US Conceptualism’s global imaginary remained an abstract projection from artistic centres. And while many works and exhibitions employed telecommunications—such as the *Simon Fraser Exhibition* (1969)—these were typically restricted to North American and Western European participants.³¹ The art market was dominated by Western artists and sellers, as it has remained to the present.³² But the US was of course home not only to an ‘indigenous’ Conceptualism; it functioned as a nexus for artists from around the world. According to Terry Smith, Conceptualists often defined the movement as a practice ‘for travellers between the peripheries and centres of cultural power’.³³ Such travel was largely that of a set of metropolitan intellectuals and artists, enabled through governmental or institutional grants, or compelled through exile, and migration was primarily one-way—‘periphery’ to ‘centre’—with countries or regions represented by a narrow set of figures. New York, Paris and West Germany were where most international conceptualists gained recognition—Yoko Ono, Yutaka Matsuzawa, On Kawara, Liliana Porter, Luis Camnitzer, Cildo Meireles, Eduardo Costa, Roman Opalka, to name a few.

Key Conceptual Art exhibitions from the late 1960s, largely organized by North America- or Western Europe-based artists, presented an increasingly global vision. Kynaston McShine’s *Information* (1970) at MoMA—the first ‘international report’ on Conceptualism—exhibited 150 artists from 15 countries, adding Argentina, Brazil and Yugoslavia to

³¹ While Lippard emphasizes connectivity and exchange in the late 60s, her examples are mostly between the US and Europe—England, Italy, France, Germany, Holland and Yugoslavia—with the exceptions of Argentina, Canada and Australia.

³² For a relatively recent estimate of the geographical balance of the art market see Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, Oxford 2004, p. 5.

³³ Terry Smith, ‘Peripheries in Motion: Conceptualism and Conceptual Art in Australia and New Zealand’, in *Global Conceptualism*, p. 87.

the usual set.³⁴ ‘Peripheral’ representatives were handpicked, and exhibitions and symposiums conducted by telephone, through catalogues, or held in scattered locations around the world. But almost all participants were either born or based in North America or Western Europe (and very few were women). Lippard made efforts to connect Latin American and US artists after her ‘numbers’ exhibition in Buenos Aires (1970), opening a genuine dialogue with a handful from Argentina and Brazil, some of whom spent time in New York as a result, but the exhibition made few ripples in Latin America itself.³⁵ As Lippard reflected:

Communication (but not community) and distribution (but not accessibility) were inherent in conceptual art. Although the forms *pointed toward* democratic outreach, the content did not . . . Contact with a broader audience was vague and undeveloped.³⁶

II. JAPAN

A Japanese modernist tradition had existed since the mid-nineteenth century, though artistic identities were troubled. In 1947, art historian and painter Kunitaro Suda described Japanese oil painting as ‘cut-flower art’—a stream of imported styles that never took root—envisaging a ‘pure’ Japanese painting of the future.³⁷ Many post-war artists wished to resist cultural westernization, but grew sceptical about visions of an authentic Japanese form.³⁸ While US modernism circulated in the 1950s, most Japanese artists identified with Europe. And while Japanese buyers had entered the art market in the early twentieth century, the Great Depression had forced their exit; a significant presence was not to be seen again until the ‘bubble economy’ years of 1986–91. Japan’s commercial

³⁴ The exhibition’s catalogue described it as an investigation into the effect on art of ‘a culture that has been considerably altered by communications systems such as television and film, and increased mobility.’ See Kynaston McShine, *Information*, New York 1970.

³⁵ Pip Day, ‘Locating “2,972,453”: Lucy Lippard in Argentina’, in Cornelia Butler, ed., *From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy Lippard’s Numbers Shows 1969–74*, London 2010, p. 78.

³⁶ Lippard, *Six Years*, p. xv.

³⁷ Kunitaro Suda, ‘Waga Abura-e wa Izuko ni Yuka ka’ (‘Whither Our Oil Painting?’), *Mizue*, Nov. 1947, cited in Akira Tatehata, ‘Mono-Ha and Japan’s Crisis of the Modern’, *Third Text*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2002.

³⁸ Tatehata, ‘Mono-Ha and Japan’s Crisis of the Modern’.

gallery system was thus slow-growing in the first half of the 1950s, and government salons dominated, but several key spaces, such as the Yomiuri Independent (1949–65) and Gutai Art Association (1954–72), emerged as channels for experimental art, including proto-Fluxus, Anti-Art and Neo-Dada. As in the US, these heterogeneous neo-avant-garde tendencies provided a local seedbed for subsequent Conceptualism.

Gutai were international in outlook but drew upon traditional concerns of Japanese art in their critique of modernism, which they thought had suffocated art under ‘false significations’ of the intellect. Through ritualistic performances, the artist could release the ‘scream of matter itself’.³⁹ Identifying as ‘experimental painters’, they aimed to enact Rosenberg’s understanding of the painting as an arena of action. Saburo Murakami’s *At One Moment Opening Six Holes*—performed in Gutai’s first Tokyo exhibition in 1955, in a public park—preceded European destructive art and theatrically paralleled Lucio Fontana’s slashed canvases (1949–68). In *Challenging Mud* (1955), Kazuo Shiraga wrestled a pile of mud to make a ‘painting’, seemingly instantiating Jean Dubuffet’s idea of an art consisting only of ‘monochromatic mud’.⁴⁰ Following Rosenberg’s instructions to avoid the paintbrush—which they interpreted as an injunction to liberate paint itself—Gutai utilized cannons, paint bombs, bicycles, umbrellas and vibrators, before abandoning painting for theatre.

By the late 1950s, Japanese art was gaining recognition abroad. From 1958, Sogetsu Art Centre in Tokyo served as a hub of international collaboration, whose central coordinates were symbolized by the monumental Abstract Expressionist and Art Informel paintings adorning its hallway.⁴¹ Initially dominated by Sakkyokuka Shudan (Composers Group), and frequented by Toshi Ichiyanagi and Yoko Ono, the centre hosted John Cage and David Tudor in 1962 and Rauschenberg, Cage and Merce Cunningham in 1964. In 1962, Ono, visiting from New York, exhibited *Instructions for Painting*, a series of canvases of written instructions for *An Imaginary Piece*. Such ‘recipes’, with their capacity to unsettle the

³⁹ Jiro Yoshihara, ‘Gutai Manifesto’ (1956), in Stiles and Selz, eds, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*.

⁴⁰ In his 1946 manifesto, ‘Rehabilitation of Mud’, Jean Dubuffet had claimed that the role of painting was now to ‘discover and order (an image) within formlessness of matter, so that one can rehabilitate that matter’.

⁴¹ Doryun Chong, ‘Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde’, in Doryun Chong et al., *Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde*, New York 2012, p. 70.

roles of artist, audience, exhibitor, can be found in avant-garde practice as far back as Tristan Tzara's 1920 'How to Make a Dadaist Poem', but they loomed particularly large in Conceptualism, and Ono's may be viewed as one of the first emphatically Conceptualist pieces.

Art as agitation

A 1958 Yomiuri Independent exhibition had marked the consolidation of Japanese Anti-Art and Neo-Dada. Signalling a move beyond Gutai's attachment to painting, artists began turning to junk-based or Surrealism-inflected sculptures, often alluding to the disfigured body.⁴² But when Yomiuri's host site, Tokyo Metropolitan, attempted to exclude Anti-Art's 'offensive content' in 1962, terminating the event two years later, this helped precipitate a turn away from institutions, paralleling tendencies elsewhere towards institutional critique and art-activism as Japan entered its turbulent 1960s.⁴³ The traditional outdoor setting of Japanese performance art soon gained a political twist, as art became public and agitational. Following the 1960 protests against Anpo—the Japan-US security treaty—the streets of Tokyo saw performances and provocations, in which artists used the body as an instrument of critique, targeting the aspirations that accompanied economic growth, the persistence of oppressive social mores and state control.

In 1963, Zero Jigen Group began 'ritualistic happenings', involving over 300 eruptions of 'anti-social' behaviour in city spaces deemed respectable. In 1963–64, Hi Red Center—the former Neo-Dadaists Genpei Akasegawa, Jiro Takamatsu and Natsuyuki Nakanishi—held street 'agitations', documenting them on a giant map of the city. Before the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, in *Cleaning Event* they dressed up in surgical masks and lab coats to scrub Tokyo's tourist areas with toothbrushes, satirizing gentrification and Japan's jubilation at being a world player. In *Shelter Plan* (1964) they created single-occupant nuclear fallout shelters, with unopenable cans of food for invitees, signifying the ironies of US protection and growing urban atomization. The group accumulated anonymous contributors, who carried out guerrilla actions around

⁴² Doryun Chong, *From Postwar to Postmodern, Art in Japan 1945–1989: Primary Documents*, New York 2012, p. 182.

⁴³ Alexandra Munroe, 'Morphology of Revenge: The Yomiuri Independent Artists and Social Protest Tendencies in the 1960s', in Munroe, ed., *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, New York 1994, p. 157.

Tokyo, decentralizing art practice and mirroring the broader wave of ‘citizen activism’.

According to critic Toshiaki Minemura, by 1970 three tendencies were evident: a shift from production to presentation, which deskilled art and uncoupled it from its institutional and professionalized form; a ‘de-hierarchization’ of visual perception, which dismantled the artwork and revealed its relations; and a ‘refusal to make’, which ‘de-historicized’ the medium, splitting it into opposing poles of idea and thing (*mono*).⁴⁴ This trajectory—shaped by and accelerated through social unrest—de-reified the art-object in the first half of the 1960s, only to re-reify it in the late 60s and early 70s, through a split into Conceptual Art on the one hand, and post-Minimalist sculpture on the other.

Several famous Conceptualists—notably Yoko Ono and On Kawara—worked in the US, and others had followed by the mid-1960s after the end of Japanese Anti-Art and Neo-Dada. Many were attracted to Fluxus, and there was some overlap between this and Conceptualism in figures such as Ono. Works by these émigré artists often adopted a style closer to Western Conceptualism. Prefiguring the later cognitive mappings of the British-origin group, Art & Language, Arakawa’s pencil diagram, *Sculpting No. 1* (1961–62), drew attention to the mental processes in art production: arrows led out of the frame, indicating the work’s conditions—an utterly dry statement about art’s autonomy. In Kawara’s date paintings (1966–2014), he laboriously hand-painted the date onto a monochrome canvas every day in the language of his location (which was typically New York), and placed it in a box lined with a local newspaper.

Prior to studying in the US from the mid 1950s, Yutaka Matsuzawa had composed increasingly abstract poetry, eventually formed only of ‘+’ and ‘-’ signs, believing that by transcending linguistic parameters the predicament of ‘discommunication’ and self-destruction could be overcome in a ‘universal language’.⁴⁵ It was actually in the US that Matsuzawa became interested in Shingon Mandala, a form of Japanese Buddhism, and decided to shift his practice from poetry to ‘art through

⁴⁴ Minemura Yoshitake, ‘On “Mono-Ha”’ (1978), in Mika Yoshitake et al., *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-Ha*, Los Angeles 2012, pp. 120–1.

⁴⁵ Midori Ishikawa, ‘Quantum Art: Post Hiroshima Psychotechnique’, in the catalogue for *Yutaka Matsuzawa 1954–97*, Saito Memorial Kawaguchi Museum, 1997.

words', but unlike Ono and Kawara he returned to settle in Japan. In 1964 he claimed to have heard a voice telling him to 'Vanish Objects!' and started using language-based conceptualism, performance and mail art to prompt 'non-perceptual' works, whose completion required contemplative visualization.⁴⁶

The imaginary work

As with much American Conceptualism, this movement beyond the art object was associated with a mystical universalism. Echoing Fluxus, Matsuzawa conceived 'vanishment' as a dissolving of barriers, claiming that artists should withdraw from the world of destructive things and move towards undifferentiated universal space. He sought a form of art that was insubstantial, spatially and temporally unlimited and accessible to all, his favoured medium being telepathy.⁴⁷ An advert for *Independent 64* instructed, 'Don't believe in materials, don't believe in sensations, don't believe your eyes / Leave behind your artwork and bring the formless work (the imaginary work) to the venue.' The work, *¥ Dead ¥ Body ¥ Remains*, consisted of thousands of leaflets displaying Shingon textual configurations, which served as portable prompts for visualization. In *Anti-Civilization Exhibition*, he instructed viewers to evacuate the exhibition's content—eyes closed or open—and replace it with their own. *Disappearing Material Ceremony* (1966) invited people to sit facing a canvas and watch it reduce in size day-by-day until it disappeared.

As tensions mounted over Vietnam and Anpo—due for renewal in 1970—artists began evaluating the effectiveness of recent practice, including Conceptualism. Mono-Ha (School of Things) emerged in 1968 from Tama Art University, a central site of student struggle, though its artists refrained from political radicalism in their work—a point of contention for younger students.⁴⁸ Disillusioned with the New Left and with the anti-institutional pretensions of Anti-Art, Mono-Ha expressed fatigue with the avant-garde's admiration of industrial society, its logic of competitive novelty, a perceived anthropocentrism, and an imperialism of 'creating'.⁴⁹ Conceptual Art—understood as the 'creeping colonization' of the material by the idea, and the work by the

⁴⁶ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, London 2002, p. 115.

⁴⁷ Ishikawa, 'Quantum Art: Post Hiroshima Psychotechnique', p. 85.

⁴⁸ Tatehata, 'Mono-Ha and Japan's Crisis of the Modern'.

⁴⁹ See Yoshitake, *Requiem for the Sun*, p. 99.

artist—epitomized the imposition of human consciousness, and thus appeared a quintessentially modernist practice. Also lacking hope in any pure Japanese art form, Nobuo Sekine declared: ‘a movement is viable only if it lacks a prospect or vision. We must start from that.’⁵⁰ Mono-Ha rejected Conceptualism, seeing transformative potential in the construction of a new philosophy of perception, which could forge a ‘third way’ between divisions of East and West, left and right, in which the world appeared stuck.⁵¹

Other artists were more negative still. Bikyōtō (Artists Joint-Struggle Council), founded in 1969 by Hori Kosai and Naoyoshi Hikosaka, questioned the role of the radical artist, and their complicity with institutions they sought to criticize; drawing on the student slogan *Jikohitai* (self-negation), they encouraged artists to negate their own bases of expression. Grappling with the limit-point of avant-gardism, Bikyōtō advocated a direct dismantling of ‘the power structure of art’ by shutting down exhibitions, but the group splintered following the student movement’s defeat. Though opposed to Mono-Ha’s inward-facing practice, subgroups like the Bikyōtō Revolution Committee also abandoned direct politics after 1970 to focus on institutional critique.⁵² Bigakkō, an alternative art school where many conceptualists taught, emerged in 1969 as a refuge and site for the formation of freethinking artists fit for political action. Matsuzawa’s 1973 seminar series *Final Art* consisted of discussions and contemplations: students stood on the spot all day with ‘nothing’ written on them. But after the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam in 1973, the mass movements with which Japanese neo-avant-gardes had been closely connected lost their unifying focus.

III. WESTERN EUROPE

With Western Europe’s post-war artists facing an obliterated landscape and wilted avant-garde, Abstract Expressionism was symbolic of reconstruction by the US. While the new American art circulated through

⁵⁰ Nobuo Sekine, in ‘Voices of Emerging Artists: Mono Opens a New World’ (1970), roundtable discussion in *Requiem for the Sun*, p. 216.

⁵¹ Mika Yoshitake, ‘What is Mono-Ha?’, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. 25, December 2013, p. 209.

⁵² Reiko Tomii, ‘Six Contradictions of Mono-Ha’, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. 25, December 2013.

the 1950s due to US cultural policy and connections between artists, its generalization in private galleries did not come until the 1960s. Art Informel emerged as a European counterpart, abandoning geometric abstraction to express spontaneity through gestural techniques of dripping, blotting, spraying. But as in the US and Japan, from the late 1950s an exhausted abstract painting gave way to a range of antagonistic neo-avant-garde activities. Along with the personal networks connecting these regions—which had developed through the post-war era—these established a base for later Conceptualism.

Zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility

The famous trajectory of Yves Klein—child of Art Informel painter Marie Raymond—may serve as a microcosm for broader tendencies here. Returning to Paris in the mid-1950s from travels in Western Europe and Japan, on which he had encountered Rosicrucianism and Zen, Klein began exhibiting monochromes, which signalled the immaterial by eradicating textural particularity.⁵³ But like many proto-conceptualists, Klein playfully revealed the conditions of art's autonomy: a book, *Yves: Peintures*, documented the production of various fabricated works. His display of eleven identical but differently-priced monochromes in 1957 extended the investigation to the realm of value. 1958's *Le Vide* was a white room displaying an empty cabinet, which thousands of guests queued to be shown.⁵⁴ His final step, *Zone de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle* (1959–62), was to sell 'zones' of immaterial space to willing collectors, offering certificates of ownership in exchange for gold. He gave each the option to burn the certificate, at which point he would throw the gold into the Seine.

Economic growth stimulated the art market, and dealer galleries multiplied throughout Western Europe, some of which engaged with key US dealers, importing Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, sometimes with two-way exchanges. But tensions around the burgeoning market and limitations of abstraction surfaced within the Nouveau

⁵³ The Rosicrucian notion that 'the way to the rose is through the cross' may be relevant here in framing the irreducibility of the material within a mysticism of abstraction, by analogy with Hegel's famous affirmation of the socio-historical immanence of reason: 'reason is the rose in the cross of the present'.

⁵⁴ Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London 2004, pp. 437–8.

Réalisme movement, which Klein joined in 1960, and which used various approaches to return to 'real things'. In 1960, responding to Klein, Arman stuffed the Iris Clert Gallery with objects, creating a material inversion of *Le Vide* which retrospectively illuminated the spatial dimension of Klein's work and extended his critique of institutional space to commodity culture.⁵⁵ *Nouveaux réalistes* created sculptures in Paris streets, often out of rubbish, while removing paintings from the Musée d'Art Moderne, declaring it an institutional 'void'.

As with Japan, the aesthetics of abstract globality were less widespread than in the US. In West Germany, Joseph Beuys opposed avoidance of the fascist past by ritualistically evoking the national. In Vienna, rejection of the art object had a performative rather than conceptualist character, with the Actionists first creating ritualizations of 'action painting' that echoed those of Gutai, then from the mid-1960s abandoning abstract painting altogether for social and public events which sought to purge a repressed fascism through bodily debasement.⁵⁶ VALIE EXPORT's late 1960s agitational feminist performances had some resonances with Adrian Piper's challenges to mainstream US Conceptual Art, but the critical object was Actionism, whose motif of debasement she extended by forcing the public to enact it within everyday situations.

In the UK, Minimalism was in the air by the mid-1960s: while working as a civil-engineering draftsman, Rasheed Araeen had independently developed a kind of sculpture that incidentally resonated with work in New York, while some of the artists who would go on to form the Art & Language group were engaged in simple deconstructions of conventional artistic media—and attacks on Greenberg. Antipathy towards Greenbergianism was also in evidence in John Latham's event-oriented work. *Still and Chew* (1966) famously had St Martin's students masticating a library copy of Greenberg's *Art and Culture*, which was then fermented—apparently punning on the word 'culture'. In a gesture that recalled Duchamp's 1930s *Boîtes-en-valises*, Latham later exhibited the jar inside a briefcase with relics of the event—chemicals, powders, Greenberg's book, and the resulting letter of dismissal from his teaching post at St Martin's.

⁵⁵ See Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, p. 435.

⁵⁶ Actionism found theoretical framing in Oswald Wiener's 1954 *Cool Manifesto*, which argued that artistic production should shift from objects to 'event structure'. On Viennese Actionism see Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, pp. 494–9.

But the first emphatically Conceptualist exhibitions from 1967 lagged shortly behind—and took impetus from—New York, with *Serielle Formations* (1967) in Frankfurt giving nods to the Minimalist-influenced *Primary Structures*. Private collectors from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands were early supporters of Conceptual Art, acting as a hinge between artists and public museums, which endorsed Conceptualism in the early 1970s. Among these, Konrad Fischer (Dusseldorf), Yvon Lambert (Paris) and Gian Enzo Sperone (Milan) were key in spreading and consolidating it in the region and securing the reputation of many artists, including some from the US. Most conceptual artists and exhibitions had direct relations with these dealers, and with New York.⁵⁷

The German conceptualist Hanne Darboven lived in New York in 1966–68, mixing with LeWitt, Kosuth and Carl Andre. After this she began her serial drawings: numerical sequences derived from the Gregorian calendar through formulas that produced endless variations. Following LeWitt's mantra that 'the idea is the machine that makes the art', Darboven's laborious mental performances evacuated subjective expression. Although she was working in New York, her first solo exhibition actually took place at Konrad Fischer Gallery in 1967, launching her into the centre of the Western European conceptual scene. Following Michael Baldwin's trip to New York the previous year, 1968 saw the formation of Art & Language in Britain; they were exhibited at New York's Dwan Gallery shortly after. By the early 70s they had a New York branch, and Kosuth was involved with the group's journal.

Art as idea as eagle

But while Conceptualism spread at this time, resistances to it tightened. ZOCK—an inflammatory collaboration of the actionist Otto Muehl and Vienna Group writer Oswald Wiener—declared Pop Art, Minimalism, Land Art and Conceptualism enemies of their now anti-cultural gestures.⁵⁸ An anti-institutionalism was developing amid student uprisings and general strikes, with protests against the Venice Biennale and Documenta 4, and an occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in

⁵⁷ For a focused study of the networks between American and Western European dealers of Conceptual Art, see Sophie Richard, *Unconcealed: The International Network of Conceptual Artists, 1967–77: Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*, London 2009.

⁵⁸ Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, p. 467.

Brussels. In 1968, Marcel Broodthaers, at one time a member of the Belgian Groupe Surréaliste-revolutionnaire, began his travelling exhibition, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*—a many-faceted work of institutional critique that managed to be 'conceptual' while playfully sketching the aporias that art faced in the dawning conceptual moment. The eagle here was both an emblem of Conceptualism—Broodthaers would affirm the 'identity of the eagle as idea and of art as idea'—and a metaphor for the prospect of art taking flight as it encountered the limits of traditional media.⁵⁹

In 1969, three key exhibitions consolidated Conceptualism in Western Europe, all organized by Fischer. *Op Losse Schroeven* opened at Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam before touring Europe, and *When Attitudes Become Form: Works—Concepts—Processes—Situations—Information* was curated by Harold Szeeman at Kunsthalle in Bern and then Charles Harrison at the ICA in London. Both reflected the diversity of the moment, displaying Minimalist, Arte Povera, Land Art and Conceptualist works alongside one another. As its title suggests, *Konzeption—Conception*, at the Städtische Museum, Leverkusen, took a clearer Conceptualist turn, exhibiting no three-dimensional works, only the idea, sketch or description.

The commercial capacity of this new art was now indisputable. *When Attitudes Become Form* was a landmark event in art-based marketing, sponsored by US tobacco firm Phillip Morris, which praised its 'innovation'.⁶⁰ Fischer's ambition was to bring together the best international art of the moment, his trilingual catalogue—English, German and French—indicating the proposed audience. But as in the US, this internationalism was limited: artists were either from North America or Western Europe, or else had studied, lived and exhibited in these regions for several years. The commercial success of Documenta 5 in Kassel (1972) was the climax of the initial conceptual period in Western Europe. Again, of the 164 artists exhibited, only one described himself as residing outside the US and Western Europe—Michael Buther, from Morocco. By 1973, with most major museums having presented solo

⁵⁹ See Rosalind Krauss's analysis in *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 2000.

⁶⁰ 'There is a key element in this "new art" which has its counterpart in the business world. That element is innovation—without which it would be impossible for progress to be made in any segment of society'. Sam Hunter, *Art in Business: The Phillip Morris Story*, New York 1979, p. 37.

shows and large group exhibitions under the banner of Conceptualism, it had been firmly institutionalized.

IV. SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE

In the USSR and Eastern Europe, autonomous art faced more opposition from officialdom than from radical artists. Currents of Surrealism, Cubism and Expressionism were tolerated but ignored by official Soviet media, but audiences for experimental art—which typically walked a legal tightrope—were small.⁶¹ Such conditions led many artists to emigrate to the US or Western Europe, where some became key conceptualists.⁶² But restrictions on cultural production, presentation and travel of course varied between states and over time, and in some areas control was relatively light. Some ‘alternative spaces’ had emerged in the late 1950s, where artists generated and exchanged ideas, held critical seminars and exhibitions, and for most of the 1960s there would be little direct censorship of experimental art in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Although artistic production was regulated—with ‘unofficial’ artists (i.e. those not working for the state) having to submit work to Unions of Visual Artists—these permitted some forms, as did those in Yugoslavia, which remained more connected to the European art scene.

If Greenbergian modernism was not at stake, familiar neo-avant-garde tropes were in evidence. Localized actions and quasi-ritualistic demonstrations, seeking to collapse art into life in the name of individual freedom, were common in the 1960s. Against state control and instrumentalism they emphasized the pointless and playful, aiming to puncture the passivity of participants and spectators through unexpected situations. In *Walk Around Nový Svět (A Demonstration for All the Senses)* (1964), the Czech group AKTUAL led a small group around Prague, where they encountered staged events that stimulated different senses—a sculpture made of dresses; a closed space full of potent smells.⁶³ Affinities with Fluxus sparked direct relations from 1965, in

⁶¹ Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, Cambridge, MA 2010, p. 4.

⁶² Pavlina Morganova, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art behind the Iron Curtain*, Prague 2014, p. 26.

⁶³ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London and New York 2012, pp. 133–4.

which Milan Knížák played a central role, strengthening the region's international connections.⁶⁴

While there was a rejection of the art-object, of conventional technique and of institutions, this was driven in part by a need to be covert and anonymous, and by the inaccessibility of materials. Much work was less professionalized than Western Conceptualism, and less routinely documented, marked by ambiguous, flexible and makeshift activities, but there were clearly parallels. In 1965's *Happsoc 1*, Slovaks Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčik and Zita Kostová sent invitations to an imaginary exhibition in which all life in Bratislava from 2–8 May would be the artwork. The cards indexed the work's material: 138,036 women, 128,727 men, 49,991 dogs, 18,009 houses, 165,236 balconies, 40,070 water pipes in homes, 35,060 washing machines, 1 castle, 1 Danube, 22 theatres, 6 cemeteries and 1,000,801 tulips.⁶⁵ And a familiar utopian universalism was in evidence in Fluxus East's *Keeping Together Manifestation* (1967): March was declared the month of 'worldwide togetherness', and thousands of letters were sent out asking for the cooperation of states, embassies, militaries, factory committees and priests in spreading ideas of human solidarity.

From 1965—preceding both Kawara's more famous date paintings and LeWitt's pronouncements on the art idea as a 'machine'—Roman Opałka began the *Infinity Paintings* in which he would effectively turn the rest of his life into a conceptual artwork.⁶⁶ Every day for eight hours he painted sequences of numbers in white paint onto black canvas, starting from the top left and allowing the paint to trail off before he reloaded the brush. Over a period of 46 years he made 233 such canvases—conceived as 'a single work, a single life'—ending on 5,607,249, before his death in 2011. From 1972 onwards he began making each canvas one per cent whiter, adding a more pronounced visual dimension to his progression towards numerical infinity and his own finitude. Opałka's desire to reach 'white/white' before he died—he succeeded in 2008—indicates the meditative function of the work, binding his accelerating labour to the passing of his life.

⁶⁴ László Beke, 'Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art', in *Global Conceptualism*, p. 45.

⁶⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 141

⁶⁶ Opałka had a cosmopolitan background and life trajectory: born in 1931 in France to Polish parents, he lived in Warsaw, Paris, Berlin, Venice and New York.

Following the Soviet invasion in 1968, some Czechoslovakian artists withdrew into meditative practices, paralleling inward-turns seen elsewhere. Permitted to go to New York—although temporarily incarcerated *en route*—Knížák abandoned disruptive action to analyse the transformative potential in negating conditions of everyday experience. In *Lying Ceremony* (1968), he instructed students to lie silently on the floor blindfolded for long durations. In the Sartrean *Difficult Ceremony* (1969), small groups were to occupy a deserted space together for 24 hours without eating, drinking, speaking or sleeping, exiting silently afterwards. Prompted by a deflating sense that anything could be art, he was seeking forms of thought that could not be conventionally communicated or interpreted, regarding introspection as transformative; the adequate response to repressive control.⁶⁷ Questions of collectivity now began from the assumed separation of individual participants.

Instances of Conceptual Art proper occurred increasingly in the 1970s, when its 'pure' form was being challenged in the US. A rare exhibition—*In Another Moment*—took place in Belgrade in 1971, showcasing local artists alongside US-based Conceptualists. But restrictions on travel made publications and mail art more important: postcards, pamphlets and books were to communicate ideas throughout East and West, and major Conceptualist texts circulated—language and the idea taking on a particular charge under conditions of censorship. In *Imagination* (1971) Hungarian artist László Beke sent requests to 28 Eastern Europeans to submit ideas for artworks on paper with the prompt, 'An artwork is nothing but the documentation of an idea'; much like US-centred catalogue exhibitions, the work was only accessible as a publication of proposals.⁶⁸ From 1970 Endre Tót, another Hungarian and hitherto an Art Informel painter, began paring his work back to the most minimal possible content to get it past the censors, thematizing such reductions while satirizing bureaucracy for a Western audience: *My Unfinished Canvases* (1971) was a catalogue of empty rectangular frames giving only dimensions, printed in the West; *I am glad that I could have this sentence printed* (1971) was just that sentence illegally printed onto card in Pest and reprinted in the West. Despite the empty, tautological quality of this gesture, Tót refused any identification with Kosuthian Conceptualism;

⁶⁷ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 139.

⁶⁸ László Beke, 'Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art', p. 43.

the object here was less art as such than the difficulty of its production under specific political conditions.⁶⁹

In the Soviet Union itself some key figures were ‘official’ artists who also experimented with other forms. Officially an illustrator, Ilya Kabakov ran into trouble with the state in the 1960s for drawings exhibited in Italy by a PCI member. In the 1970s he turned in an increasingly conceptual direction, exploring questions of authorship in fictitious artist biographies. This practice—which seems in part to have been a way of reflecting on the frustrations of the artistic career under Soviet conditions—also occurred around the same time in the work of advertising designers Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, originators of Sots (Socialist) Art—a kind of Pop Art stemming from cynicism about Socialist Realism. By the mid-1970s the poet Lev Rubinstein was filling ring-binders with library cards bearing the abstract imperatives of a textual form that Boris Groys has compared to machine algorithms, resonating with both Western Conceptualism’s ‘aesthetics of administration’ and the instructions for pieces from figures such as Ono.⁷⁰

Universal art history

Unofficial artists had no galleries, museums, media or art market.⁷¹ Thus themes of institutional critique or opposition to the commodity were of little relevance, and formally similar practices had different meanings. Given the difficulty of gaining any audience, the issue of art’s public itself loomed particularly large. In 1976, Andrei Monastyrski organized the first of many Collective Actions. In these the focus of artistic activity was shifted from objects to the creation of fleeting events, to the active construction of a public, to documentation and to discussion. In a typical example, an audience was assembled and driven to a snow-covered field—the white of which, it seems, inevitably recalled Malevich—on the edge of a forest a couple of hours outside Moscow. There an event was staged, which the audience would be invited to interpret, the results of which would then be compiled and circulated among participants.⁷²

⁶⁹ Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule, 1956–1989*, London 2014, pp. 144, 148, 172–4.

⁷⁰ Groys, *History Becomes Form*, pp. 109–13, 14–19, 38–43.

⁷¹ Groys, *History Becomes Form*, pp. 38, 83–6.

⁷² Groys, *History Becomes Form*, pp. 146–51. See also Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, pp. 152–61.

In 1979 Igor Chelkovsky, an artist who had emigrated to Paris, started the journal *A-Ya*, published in both Russian and English with copies to be smuggled into the Soviet Union. Groys introduced the first volume with a piece on ‘Moscow Romantic Conceptualism’, presenting these Soviet artists to the West—though he was criticized by some for using this term, with its apparent suggestion of derivation from Western forms.⁷³ But if US Conceptualism in particular was often oriented to the abstractly universal, this found a counterpart in the altogether different conditions of the Soviet Union. According to Groys:

The place in which Russian unofficial artists situated themselves as artists was neither the Western art market (because they had no access to it) nor the Soviet official art system (which they despised). Rather, they situated themselves in universal art history—a space that included all past and present artistic practice but at the same time was transcendent in relationship to any past or present art institutions. This universal art history existed, of course, only in the imagination of the Russian unofficial artists—it was purely a utopian space.⁷⁴

V. LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America—the key test-case in the ‘global conceptualism’ narrative—neo-avant-garde art practices were concentrated in the emerging centres of São Paulo and Buenos Aires. Suppliers of food and raw materials during the Second World War, Brazil and Argentina had begun experiencing high growth rates, population explosions, urbanization and an expansion of education. With modernization came a flurry of new institutions with internationalist agendas, such as the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires, which—funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations—began to transform itself from a private modernist painting collection into a major site of experimental practice, offering artists funds for travel. São Paulo’s Biennale was established in 1951, the second in the world after Venice. While many Latin American artists remained tied to the European scene, with the relocation of the artistic centre to New York, discourses increasingly hinged on the hegemony symbolized by Abstract Expressionism and its false universalism.

⁷³ Groys, *History Becomes Form*, pp. 4–7.

⁷⁴ Groys, *History Becomes Form*, pp. 13–14.

In 1959 a coalition of Brazilian artists broke with the Concrete Art in which they had been working, criticizing its rationalism, redefining art as an existential strategy and calling for a harmonization of sensory and mental experience. ‘Neo-Concretism’ rejected pictorial representation and two-dimensionality, conceiving of artworks as living organisms, and turned increasingly to the human body.⁷⁵ Lygia Clark’s *Nostalgia of the Body* (1964) abandoned the art-object to examine the bodily sensations experienced in collective processes. Often seen as paralleling interventionist and participatory strains of Conceptualism, due to its proposals for the reinvigoration of the spectator, Clark’s work was also in tension with ‘purer’ forms.

The dominant narrative about Latin American Conceptualism—suggested in the 1970s but consolidated in the 1990s—has been simple: it inverted the North American version.⁷⁶ Against the alleged formalism of US Conceptualism, it has typically been presented as uninterested in formal considerations; seeking direct political intervention; characterized by collective strategies and community-building; unmediated by cultural institutions. This narrative was partly motivated by a desire to uncover the radicalism and particularity of certain 1960s and 70s practices in the face of their neutralization by the 1990s art market. But reducing the real tensions of US-based work to formalism risks essentializing both poles, as Miguel López has argued.⁷⁷ After all, there was plenty of radical art activism in the US too, often at the fringes of Conceptualism, while at the time, most artists working in Latin America rejected the Conceptualist banner, identifying it with the hegemonic culture.⁷⁸ The practices that crystallized in the region in the 1960s echoed as well as diverged from those elsewhere. Here too, artists focused on circuits of information, distribution and exchange. In 1966—three years before Siegelau’s catalogue shows—Argentinian artist Roberto Jacoby produced a catalogue for a non-existent exhibition. But just as Soviet ‘conceptualism’ had other resonances under tight state control, so did these Latin American tactics under military regimes: artists were

⁷⁵ Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p. 38

⁷⁶ Examples occur in the writings of Mari Carmen Ramírez and Luis Camnitzer.

⁷⁷ Miguel López, ‘How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?’, *Afterall* 23, Spring 2010.

⁷⁸ This has been acknowledged by Mari Carmen Ramírez, the originator of the ‘global conceptualism’ story. See ‘Tactics for Thriving on Adversity’, in *Global Conceptualism*, p. 53.

concerned with censorship, the centralization of information, and the hegemony of often inaccurate narratives.

Ontologies of media

Jacoby's 1966 manifesto, 'A Media Art', written with Eduardo Costa and Raúl Escari, proposed using mass media to create a new art with the modernist goal of thematizing mass media as such, while echoing the McLuhanism of the time, and the Situationist notion of 'spectacle'. The newly omnipresent media had 'de-realized' objects, rendering them 'pretexts' for the operation of the media apparatus itself. Through an ontological inversion, the very form of mass media had assumed logical primacy and the act of transmission had gained priority over the constitution of the object, until what was said no longer mattered. The role of art was to reveal this. Thus the group enticed the press to publish a report of a made-up event, *Happening for a Dead Boar* (1966), before denouncing its falsity, and thereby highlighting the unreliability of mass media, while signalling their potential as alternative sites of practice. Responding to this, Argentine essayist Oscar Massota's 1967 text 'After Pop, We Dematerialize' used the concept of 'dematerialization' before Lippard's famous 1968 identification of this word with Conceptualism.⁷⁹ The meaning, however, was distinct, registering not a formal choice—an emphasis on thought-process—but a deeper social logic. Opening with an epigraph from El Lissitsky's 'Future of the Book'—reprinted in these pages the same year—Massota perceived a tendency of material accumulation, characteristic of the age, to be accompanied by 'dematerialization'.⁸⁰ Cycles of material expansion and consumption are eventually 'relieved' by the arrival of a dematerializing technology, just as the telephone relieved us from an overaccumulation of paper. The artist must utilize these tendencies to bring about change, which, for Lissitsky, meant radicalizing the book form—ideas that Massota saw crystallized in Jacoby's art.

In 1968 artists became involved in provocative practices. In *Confinement Action*, Graciela Carnevale of the Tucumán Arde (Tucumán is Burning)

⁷⁹ Massota, 'After Pop, We Dematerialize', in Inés Katzenstein, ed., *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-garde*, New York 2004; Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', in Alberro and Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art*.

⁸⁰ El Lissitsky, 'The Future of the Book' (1927), NLR, 1/41, January–February 1967.

group publicized an exhibition in Rosario, a hotspot of Argentinian artistic radicalism. After assembling the audience she locked them inside the gallery, until a passer-by smashed a window to release them; the police banned further exhibitions on the premises.⁸¹ The *Experiences* exhibition at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella marked a turning point. In *Bathroom*, Roberto Plate installed some toilet cubicles, inviting people to cover them in anti-state graffiti, which resulted in a police guard over the work, inscribed into it as a symbol of censorship. In protest, the artists destroyed their works on the pavement outside while distributing statements denouncing state repression. The same year, artists in Rosario staged a kidnapping of the Institute's director. Their statement denounced bourgeois artistic autonomy, redefining art as the transformation of social reality and declaring that 'the life of "Che" Guevara and the actions of the French students' were 'works of art of greater significance'.⁸²

After 1968, as military rule hardened in both Brazil and Argentina, many artists went into exile, gravitated back to painting, or gave up making art altogether. Following the removal of 'subversive' work from the Bahia Biennale, the closure of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio and the arrest of its director, a boycott of the 1969 São Paulo Biennale gained widespread support in the US and Western Europe. Some artists were gaining recognition abroad at this time: since 1965 there had been a conscious promotion of Latin American art in New York through the Rockefeller-founded Center for Inter-American Relations, and connections were increasingly developing with North American and Western European artists. After Lippard's 'awakening' in Buenos Aires and Rosario, the museum curator Kynaston McShine's survey of the area led him to select several artists for the 1970 *Information* show in New York.

But significant activity continued in Brazil, where Cildo Meireles—sceptical about the possibility of appropriating a centralized mass media—sought to extend artistic interventions into circuits of commodity exchange. He collected batches of empty Coca-Cola bottles, onto which he transferred (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) anti-imperialist messages which could only be seen when the bottles were full, such as 'Yankees Go Home!' above an initialled and dated statement of intent. These were returned to be refilled—presumably mechanically, so undetected—and

⁸¹ Lippard, *Six Years*, p. xix.

⁸² Luis Camnitzer, 'Conceptual Art and Latin American Conceptualism', in *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation*, Austin 2007.

distributed. He hoped receivers would redistribute their own messages, creating a participatory system of counter-information.

For *Information*, Meireles submitted only a photograph of three bottles, insisting that the work itself existed only in circulation. While he was critical of reductive forms of Conceptual Art—which appeared to celebrate a shift from manual to intellectual labour—he understood his work as a continuation of the deeper logic of Duchamp’s readymades.⁸³ By inserting a urinal into the bourgeois museum, Duchamp had materialized and demystified the institutional context supporting the aura and autonomy of the artwork. Extending this idea, Meireles sought to materialize existing circuits of distribution through gestures that would bring to the surface their political meaning, operating outside the gallery to forge a connection with the public, yet highlighting the separation of this relation, and its mediation through power structures. If, that is to say, in conceptual tendencies from Duchamp down to 1960s and 70s institutional critique, the modernist self-interrogation of art had crossed over into an avant-garde probing of art’s institutional conditions, here such activities were undergoing a further shift towards a kind of general social critique, in which art as such was no longer the fundamental stake. Yet, as long as they were residually identified as art, such practices could always be somehow reclaimed by art markets and institutions ever hungry for something new—a general aporia of avant-garde or critical art that is still with us today, as art’s status as a financial asset class deepens and the art bubble grows.⁸⁴

If a certain ‘conceptualism’ can be identified in global art practices from at least the 1950s, it is because neo-avant-garde practices in general tended to probe the bounds of artworks and institutions, and this often involved a foregrounding of the ideational as opposed to the traditionally aesthetic. Rather than simply inverting the priority of aesthetic and cognitive within an otherwise unaltered art-object,⁸⁵ such practices displaced

⁸³ Mari Carmen Ramírez, ‘Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America’, in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, p. 159.

⁸⁴ Roman Kräussl et al., ‘Is There a Bubble in the Art Market?’, *Journal of Empirical Finance*, vol. 35, January 2016.

⁸⁵ This reading is characteristic of philosophical analyses. See Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie, eds, *Conceptual Art and Philosophy*, Oxford 2007.

that object and its swarm of institutional experts, recoding its presentational format as information; snippets of documentation; instructions or imperatives. With this came a potential for the work to be communicated and distributed widely, rapidly, cheaply, and in its very form it thus harboured a potential to be the global art *par excellence*.⁸⁶ Conceptual Art proper was a specific crystallization—and later, institutionalization—of this broader tendency, in the identity formations of transnational artistic networks centred on New York, and it was surely at least in part their hegemonic position that enabled this term to become the eponym for a whole global period in art practice.

Conceptual Art's serial negations often involved the conjuring of an abstract universalism, projecting an infinite potential inclusion, sometimes mediated through the deepening telecommunications infrastructure, often mystical. Its 'melancholic modernism' sought to redeem the radical utopianism of avant-garde abstraction by projecting an imaginary collectivity.⁸⁷ This global imaginary offered itself up for the contestation proper to a hegemonic pole: sometimes the Conceptualist identity was refused outright, and sometimes its boundaries and content were disputed. The pushes for a maximally-inclusive retrospective definition in the 1990s were fitting extensions of this logic. But the fact that these took place in the altered context of a restructured capitalism meant that the question of 'the global' had become altogether different. From utopian projections of a global unification in the abstract space of art to the actual unity of a single world market, scoured by art institutions.⁸⁸ This is the great irony in the history of Conceptualism's reception.

⁸⁶ Peter Osborne uses the term 'postconceptual' to define the contemporary character of art, which registers these fundamental ontological shifts. See *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London and New York 2013.

⁸⁷ Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, p. 559.

⁸⁸ With the exhaustion of the question of 'global conceptualism', the same problematic has been extended to Pop Art—Conceptualism's sibling—with *The World Goes Pop* at Tate Modern in 2015 and *International Pop*, starting at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis in 2015. Some of the rhetoric for these exhibitions has been nearly identical to that of *Global Conceptualism*. Only five years earlier, in 2010, Tate Modern's *Pop Life: Art in a Material World* had focused squarely on the US and UK. See Olivia McEwan, 'Tate Modern's Absorbing but Haphazard Look at Global Pop Art', *Hyperallergenic*, 10 December 2015.