



Conceptual Painting - Between Thinking and Sensing

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P A I N T B O X *extensions*

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BankMalbekRau

Karina Peisajovich

Ruth Campau

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CONCEPTUAL PAINTING

– *between thinking and sensing*

By Anne Ring Petersen

What is conceptual painting? This question is pressing for two reasons. One is the immediate occasion for this piece: the *PAINTBOX extensions* project which presented a specific profile right from the outset: a series of exhibitions focusing on ‘conceptual painting,’ as the presentation folder put it. As the sequence of exhibitions unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the category ‘conceptual painting’ encompassed a varied spectrum of idioms and modes of expression. The project spanned the range from Michael Mørk’s work with the tension between the plane and limits of the canvas to Elmer’s neo-Pop versions of images from everyday culture to Terry Haggerty’s balancing act between painting and design and Tim Ayres’ investigations into transitions between text, image, and sound. From here, the projects went on to paintings that quite tangibly transgress the boundaries of the picture format to conquer architecture and enter the space around them, as was the case with e.g. Malene Landgreen’s *gesamt*-installation of an exhibition and Karina Peisajovich’s disruption of the traditional pillars of painting – the central perspective and static representation – by means of projections of light and shadow that slowly changed, thereby immersing the painting in the dynamic flow of time. As a natural continuation of these painting-installations followed exhibitions that focused on the relationship between paintings and the world around it: Tumi Magnússon’s monumental painting, using illusionism as a battering ram to tear down the wall between the interior and the infinite; and Ruth Campau’s installation, featuring perspex paintings suspended in a free-standing structure that formed a barrier for our gaze right inside the exhibition venue’s large windows; a dimming and sealing of the panes broken only by narrow openings that offered a glimpse of the real spatial depth behind the planes of colour. As if this was not enough, the female trio BankMalbekRau contributed yet another dimension to the radical spatialisation of abstract painting addressed by Landgreen, Peisajovich, Magnússon, and Campau. They did so by fusing it with the classical function

of painting as representations of recognisable motifs and decipherable signs on a surface, or, to be more precise: by representing the motifs as planes and surfaces, i.e. as two-dimensional set pieces in the room.

The representatives of conceptual painting who exhibited their work within *PAINTBOX extensions* obviously did not have any common idiom or collective project, nor did they stay within the format of the frame or the flat surface of the canvas. This is to say that the 'conceptual' aspect had nothing to do with the way the works looked; rather, it concerned a special way of working with painting and the ways in which the works address the observers.

This brings me to the second reason why the question feels so pressing: the scope of the phenomenon. If we are to trust Barry Schwabsky's introduction to *Vitamin P. New Perspectives in Painting* – a hefty collection of qualified takes on what painting can be around the year 2000 – it is now a widely held belief that all painting of any significance is 'basically conceptual'. As you peruse the very diverse examples provided in the book, you quickly reach the conclusion that *anything goes*. If 'conceptual' is an adequate term for this vein of contemporary painting in all its colourful multiplicity – and even for most contemporary art of any kind – the meaning of the word must by now have been stretched so far that it has lost its theoretical acumen and ability to separate a particular type of art from others. If this was not the case, the term could not possibly encompass the diversity of painting as regards materials, style, modes of expression, content, and cultural issues. Today, a word like 'flat' can say something far more specific about a given painting than the word 'conceptual'. Whereas it is something of a truism to say that a contemporary painting is conceptual, it is not a given that it is executed on a two-dimensional surface. For present-day painting occupies an expanded territory, entering into all sorts of hybrid relationships with other media: photography, sculpture, drawing, installation art, etc.

Briefly put, 'conceptualism' has become a diffuse notion with a somewhat unclear meaning, but with a clear discursive function: it acts as the net with which critics and art historians seek to rein in the rampant pluralism within painting as well as other media. 'Conceptualism' collects and categorizes the positions under a common heading, allowing the diversity to be fitted into a comfortable, familiar model of historical progression as a period-specific 'new movement' that distances itself from previous movements – most importantly everything that museums and the art market celebrated as 'the new painting' in the 1980s: Neo-expressive, neo-figurative, 'wild' painting.

By now, decades have passed since we left behind the modernistic notion that painting had a universal and irreducible core that remained unchanged at all times – and that of

all artists, the modernist painters had come closest to this core or *essence*. As the American art historians Stephen Melville and Michael Fried pointed out, the definition of painting changes over the course of history. It coalesces and disperses and coalesces again. Inexorably. The form of painting regarded as important during a given phase of the history of modern painting is the form of painting that can convince the art scene that it complies with the current paradigm. This is to say that the task of modern painters is not to seek for the – utopian – essence of painting, but to discover the conventions and rules – the *model* – that will establish their works as paintings at any given time. The prevalent model around the year 2000 is ‘conceptual painting’.

To the individualistic artists of our day and age, however, the term does not entail an obligation to realise a particular political-ideological or critical-formal project. This makes present-day conceptual painting different from the Conceptual Art that set new standards for artistic activities during the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Today, the term ‘conceptual painting’ does not promise anything more than the picture in question is not just a painting, but also, in a general sense, a representation of an idea of what painting is, thereby constituting a sign of a specific artistic position. Or, in other words: the work contains a built-in self-reflective element – the minimum being an awareness on the behalf of the artist that the painterly representation is based on conscious, deliberate work with an idea, a painterly problem, or a particular formal idiom, and that this means that the work is *not* intuitively conceived in a moment of sublime inspiration. Thus, the term has almost become a strategic brand, one whose mixture of blurred contours and associations to 1960s and 1970s radicalism and intellectualism can place a painter at a safe distance away from the reviled formalism, hedonism, and utopianism of Modernism – all without pigeonholing the artist. Thomas McEvilley’s historic stock-taking of the significance of Conceptual Art poignantly expresses how little the term ‘conceptual painting’ actually says about a specific type of painting. McEvilley concludes that the whole objective of Conceptual Art was to go behind the formalism of high Modernism and to reintroduce thought and self-reflection as compelling and obligating themes in art. He continues by saying, “Once thought is back, any medium that really unfolds it becomes a form of Conceptual Art.”

Modernism versus Conceptual Art

But why this fight over words when the real topic here is images? Because conceptual painting does not only exist in the ‘weak’ sense of the word described in the above. As was demonstrated by *PAINTBOX extensions*, conceptual painting also exists in a ‘strong’ and obligating sense that is not captured by the broader notion of conceptualism. But what, then, is conceptual painting in this strong sense?

When the meaning of any concept has been eroded, it is useful to reach back to the source – in this case to the original *Conceptual Art*. In very general terms, you could say that Conceptual Art was and is art about the cultural act of *defining* – primarily, but not exclusively, the act of defining what ‘art’ is. It arose as a strong reaction against the formalism of Modernism and as an attempt at liberating art from market mechanisms and the role as luxury item and investment object that modernist painting was only too willing to accept. Unlike modernist painters, conceptual artists were not occupied with visual form and composition – they focused on analysing ideas in and around art. As a result, they emphasised *language* and communication systems analogous to language, as well as the ideological, historical, social, political, and institutional contexts that a work of art appears in. Conceptual Art can be regarded as the culmination of a sequence of partly overlapping revolts against some of the notions that Western art institutions and modernist art theory applied in their perception of what a work of art is: the notion that a work of art is a material object and so more closely associated with the material than the spiritual; the notion that visual forms have an inherent or ‘inner’ meaning; the notion that the autonomy of a work of art gives it a universal nature that lifts it above time and place, i.e. that historical, social, economic, and physical circumstances have no impact on the work; and finally the notion that art is closely associated with specific academic art *forms*: painting, sculpture, drawing, etc.

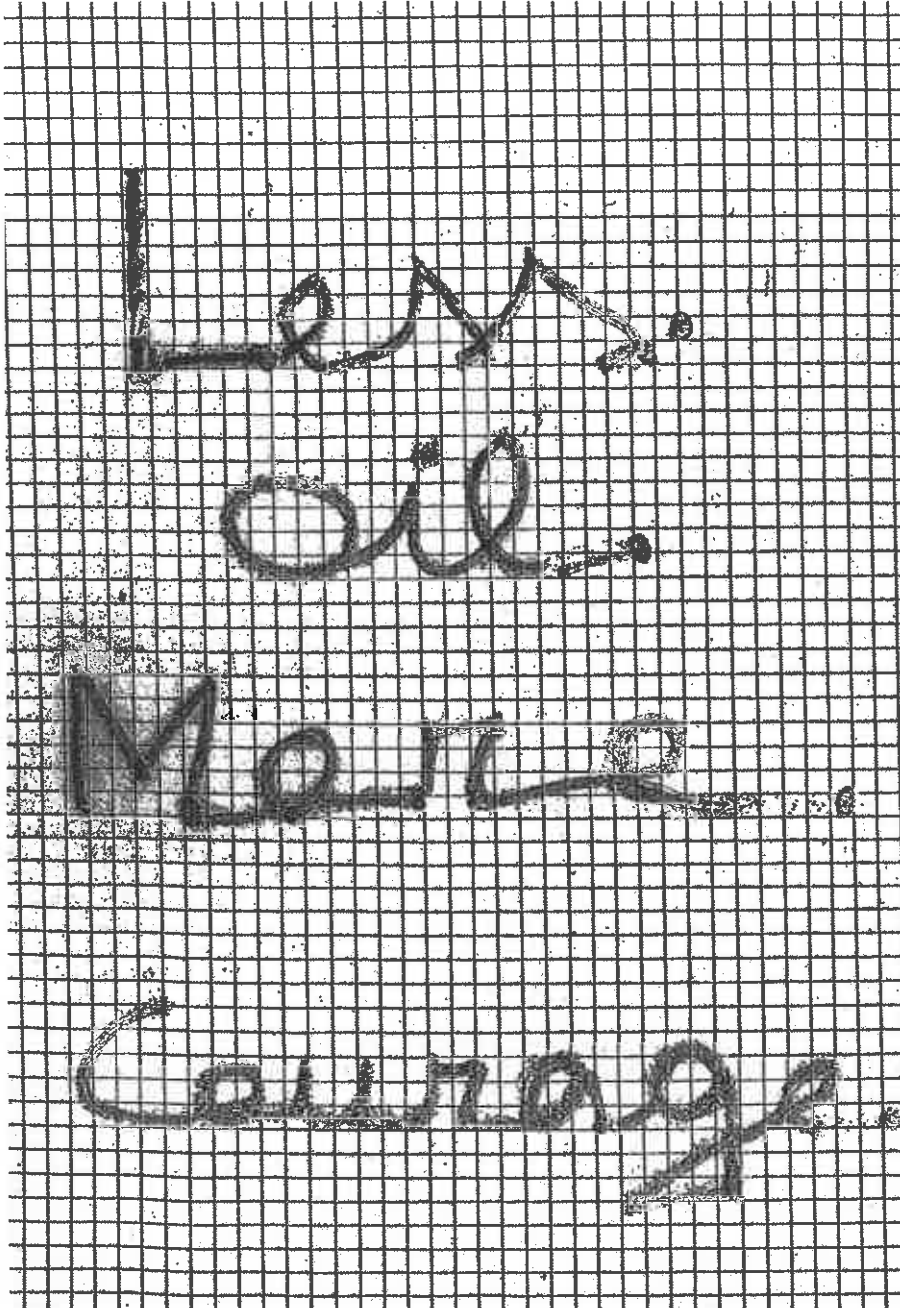
Seen in the light of this last point, it is surprising that Conceptual Art quickly found offshoots within the art of painting, an art form which many conceptual artists regarded as antiquated and compromised by capitalism, a discipline with a problematic penchant for expressionism, aestheticism, subjectivism, and genius worship. The American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth even regarded painting as a kind of pollution that artists should avoid exposure to. Indeed, most conceptual artists preferred to work with ‘anti-artistic’ media and materials that were not ascribed any artistic value or market clout at the time combined with photography, words/text, ready-mades, video, charts, and diagrams. These means of expression also had a dry, ordinary, and ‘informative’ feel that made it possible to minimise the incentive for sensual delight. This de-aesthetising or withdrawal of the sensual appeal of visual arts was rooted in the conceptual artists’ desire to break away from modernist indulgence in optic effects and in their ambition to incite onlookers to a more intellectual and analytical participation in the work. As the art critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler noted in 1968, American Conceptual Art from the late sixties was characterised by the way it interfered with the spectators’ accustomed way of looking at art “because there is ‘not enough to look at’, or rather not enough of what they are accustomed to looking *for*.”

Conceptual Art did not commit to a specific medium anymore than it developed a specific style. That is precisely what paved the way for a paradox: even the stigmatised sphere of painting could give rise to a form of conceptualism that examined the issue of painting as

idea, language, and historical phenomenon in a self-critical manner. As far back as the early 1960s, Edward Ruscha examined the opportunities for letting words act as replacements for figuration in a series of paintings, and in 1967, artists such as Mel Ramsden and John Baldessari began working with the canvas as a vehicle for linguistic utterances on a par with books. Parallel with word-based painting, artists like Victor Burgin and Mel Ramsden worked with monochrome images – the most wordless or ‘mute’ form of art. They worked on the basis of the thesis that you could answer the question: “What is a painting?” by returning to the very foundations of painting, i.e. its ability to create a coloured space that transgresses the picture’s physical boundaries as an object in the spectator’s space. Similar endeavours to peel back layers right through to the foundations could be found in works by the Parisian painters Daniel Buren and Niele Toroni. The difference was that they also abolished this basis. Like other conceptual painters from the sixties, they worked on the basis of systemic principles – such as Roman Opalka’s counting images and Gerhard Richter colour diagrams – but at the same time Buren’s and Toroni’s works acted as interventions in a physical space. By 1966, the two artists had reached a uniform format or formula which they used to apply serial production to the painterly gesture, as it were, thereby turning it into a kind of ready-made in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp, the father of Conceptual Art. Buren painted vertical stripes with a width of 7 to 8 cm; Toroni used a no. 50 brush to set marks at intervals of 30 cm onto a lightly-coloured base. Two other painters followed them and reduced their idioms to simple formulae: Olivier Mosset arrived at a single circle against an empty background, Michel Parmentier at horizontal stripes. In 1967 the four artists carried out a happening-like intervention where they hung their paintings above the stage in the lecture hall at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. After an hour in which nothing happened, they handed out flyers to the audience, explaining that this was obviously only a question of looking at paintings by Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni. Here, the Hard Edge painter Frank Stella’s famous maxim “what you see is what you see” was taken to a logical conclusion where the one-sided focus on the visual appearance of paintings took a turn and became something else. By being exhibited at that particular location, the four artists’ paintings diverted the spectators’ attention away from themselves to focus on their institutional and cultural context instead. Thus, they did not just act as abstract paintings, but also as political manifestations directed at an external world. This process of opening up towards the space around the painting and the medium’s development towards a more contextual and installation-like quality forms one of the key links between conceptual painting from the 1960s and the present day.

The modernist-conceptual axis

The development of conceptual painting was promoted by the very same tradition that the historical Conceptual Art rejected. Ever since the second half of the 19th century, where



© Rirkrit Tiravanija, sketch of **Untitled**, 2003

avant-garde painters such as Courbet, Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne made it their mission to modernise painterly devices, and ever since the Dadaists and Surrealists began to look for alternatives to painted pictures and found them in the form of collage, montage, frottage, and automatism, painting as a genre has been exposed to countless attacks from within and without. That is precisely why painting has become an exercise in particularly strict critical thinking. Think of René Magritte's use of words in paintings that address the difficult relationship between plastic representation and linguistic reference, and how the two systems cross each other without ever merging. Think of Kasimir Malevich's and Alexander Rodchenko's monochrome paintings as consistent attempts at localising the logical zero point of painting. Or think of Francis Picabia's work with conceptual forms of painting in the 1920s and of Mondrian's grid compositions and the ways in which they make the very delimitation of the picture shape, the framing that divides the picture's universe from the surrounding world, to an object for thought and contemplation. It would not be too far amiss to say that there is a conceptual tradition within modern painting. There is a tradition for meta-painting where artists not only *use the* painterly devices – colour, form, surface, plane, structure, delineation, perspective, illusionism, etc. – to conjure up perceptual effects. They also foreground how their works represent a *reflection* on these devices. So in summary, one could say that where Conceptual Art makes a break with Modernism, conceptual painting works as a continuation of Modernism.

The fact that painting has incorporated some of the strategies of Conceptual Art to criticise the financial and museum conditions for art is a telling expression of the potential for critical and self-critical analysis that painting holds. For example, Allan McCollum's *Plaster Surrogates* – surrogate paintings made from plaster and reproduced by the hundreds – holds criticism of the saleability of hand-made paintings, whereas Rirkrit Tiravanija's painting with the legend *Less Oil More Courage* points a critical finger at the frictionless way in which paintings, including Tiravanija's own impasto painting, slips right into the well-oiled machinery that is art institutions. Conversely, *Less Oil More Courage* can also be interpreted as a comment on those exhibition venues which do not have the courage to show anything other than that which is 'painted in oil', i.e. the conventional and accepted. But the fact that painting can formulate such criticism of its own institutional and financial conditions does not mean that this critique is successful. Today, painting has become institutionalised through and through, and any protest is swallowed up by the art system. Nothing demonstrates this better than Tiravanija's small painting. It was painted in 2003 and was exhibited at the main exhibition *Delays and Revolutions* during the Venice Biennial that same year. Thus, the work's message had already been rubber-stamped and canonised by the very same system it was opposed to – even before the message reached a wider audience.

If painting can no longer act as criticism of institutions, then what is conceptual painting in the 'strong' sense today? First of all, I should like to propose an alternative term: *analytical painting* – a term that circulated within German and Italian art discussions during the mid-1970s after being introduced by Filiberto Menna and Klaus Honnef. At that time, the designation applied to a type of painting that placed analytical thinking above all else. Such painting worked with sober examinations of the material basis for painting, its language and methods on the basis of a rational and unyielding concept. But it was also interested in painting as part of an art-historical process where our ideas of what is convincing as painting are replaced on an ongoing basis, and was aware of the wider social and political contexts in which painting was inscribed. In this sense, analytical painting is a formal vein of painting that works in continuation of the modernist-conceptual axis described above – and which openly owns up to this dual allegiance. The way I see it, this is a vein of painting that is based on a 'materialistic' basic idea – the idea that painting is 'thinking matter', i.e. that painting can be a form of thinking or theorising in itself; primarily thinking about the issue of what makes painting painting, and alternatively thinking about what it takes to break away from painting in its familiar incarnations. The theoretical reflection of analytical painting crystallises out of the artistic activity. In this context, 'thinking' and 'theory' is not something that is imposed on the work by an expounder, but something that can be traced in the work itself and directs the interpretation of it. It goes without saying that a painterly practice founded on a concept of painting as thinking matter cannot aim for the hostility towards sensing that characterises Conceptual Art. Instead, it will insist on sensing and form as a route to cognition that is equal to thinking and the idea. As a consequence, it will seek to make painting a dialogic field where thinking and sensing, idea and form, conceptual strategy and visual appearance can confirm and challenge each other in a painterly move aimed at both the body and the intellect.

Translated by René Lauritsen

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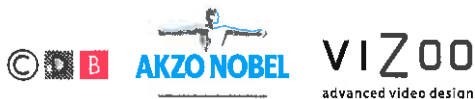
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