

"The Quick and the Dead"

WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS
Matthew Jesse Jackson

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
—The Apostles' Creed

CONCEPTUAL ART, it could be said, gravitates toward either deductive or productive gestures. Deductive Conceptualism, as I'm calling it, concentrates on the conditions and procedures that allow artworks to be recognized as such—or, in the terms of painting talk, "the internal structure of the picture is deduced from the shape of the support," to quote Yve-Alain Bois recapitulating Michael Fried on Frank Stella. By better understanding itself, deductive Conceptualism proposes to better understand the world. Artists such as Art & Language, Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, Liam Gillick, Hans Haacke, Mary Kelly, and Walid Raad have made this trajectory familiar.

Such art delves into constellations of value and desire that lie submerged beneath the placid obviousness of cultural experience. Because they materialize the forces that

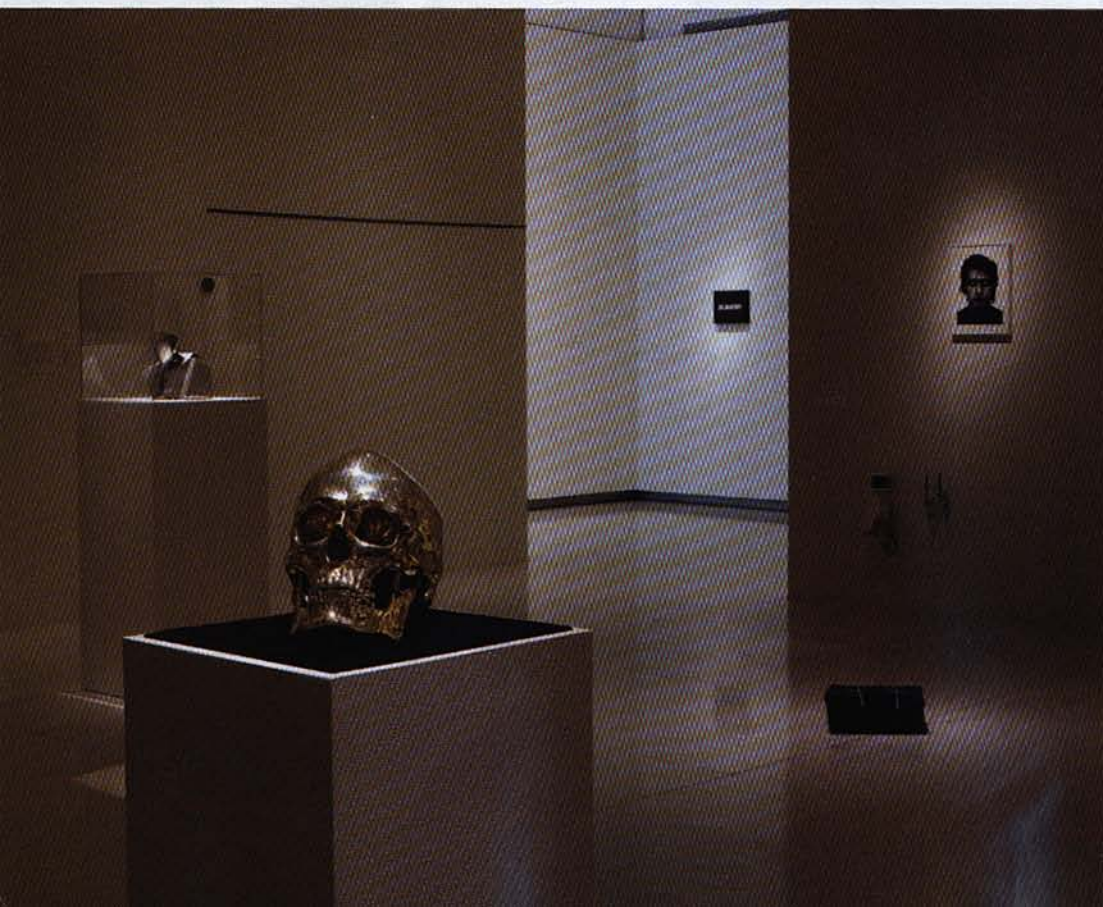
enable art to accrue meaning, deductive Conceptualism's self-consciously prosaic objects, texts, and performances are usually classified as "critical" projects, as examples of "institutional critique" or meditations on art's "social role." Yet such descriptions go only so far. The deductive Conceptualist—at times jocularly parochial (Asher's *Painting and Sculpture from the Museum of Modern Art: Catalog of Deaccessions 1929 Through 1998* by Michael Asher, 1999), at others crypto-canonical (Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, 1973–79)—may very well acknowledge, even foreground, the "social" or "critical" aspects of art, but not without suppressing trivial notions of "sociality" or "criticality." From its beginnings, this side of Conceptualism has had little time for the work endowed with "supposedly magical significance," as Art & Language's Charles Harrison once wrote, since the cultivation of just such romantic mystery was "a function of the magic-authenticating system."

What I propose to call productive Conceptualism, on the other hand, engages materiality and textuality differently. Aspiring to hot-wire emotive, mnemonic energies, to fire them up and take the viewer's mind for an illicit spin, this mode of Conceptualism cares less about the investigation of its own possibility. Instead, its most promising terrain can be found at the intersection of the specific and the general, where big questions of individual human perception and the laws of the cosmos come into play, as in Joseph Beuys's drawings or Robert Barry's texts ("something that is taking shape in my mind and will sometime come to consciousness"). Such works seek to *produce* new orders of experience and knowledge; they do not purport to *deduce* the lineaments of already existing, if still undescribed, orders.

With "The Quick and the Dead," an exhibition dedicated to "considering conceptual art and its legacy," curator Peter Eleey offered an engaging exploration of this productive sensibility. Building up its distinctive visual grammar over the course of several rooms and outdoor installations, the exhibition featured the work of more than fifty artists, including Beuys and Barry, periodically interspersed with George Brecht's framed event scores. Although a few works—such as Pierre Huyghe's *Timekeeper*, 1999, a "circular abrasion to the wall revealing the successive layers of paint from past exhibitions," and Simon Starling's site-specific ceiling painting *Three Day Sky*, 2004/2009, produced with a spray gun powered by solar energy that had been captured over a three-day period in Spain—invoked both "sides" of Conceptualism, for the most part one wandered among amiably interconnected productive

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gestures. One confronted the drama of embodiment, for example, in the juxtaposition of Lygia Clark's *Bicho* (Beast), 1960, a diminutive metallic sculpture with manipulable folds, and the balled-up corporeality of a performer following Bruce Nauman's instructions to "curl your body into the corner of a room." Deadpan visual paradoxes arose in Trisha Donnelly's pair of enigmatic, headlight-clad plaster sphinxes and Steve McQueen's twelve-minute silent



film of a dead horse almost winking, as well as in the reflective surfaces in Giuseppe Penone's photograph of himself with mirrored contact lenses and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (*Orpheus, Twice*), 1991, a bare-bones installation of twin full-length mirrors.

Triggering a heightened appreciation of warped or blocked sensation, that which cannot be seen or heard united Jason Dodge's *FOUR CARAT BLACK TOURMALINE AND HALF-CARAT RUBY INSIDE AN OWL*, 2007, Stephen Kaltenbach's sealed time capsules, and Christine Kozlov's installation of a microphone whose recording was in turn recorded over. Many pieces slowed and congealed the processing of information until measurements and abstractions became weirdly tangible—Helen Mirra's *Map of parallel 59°S at a scale of one inch to one degree longitude*, 2000, a fragile swath of watercolor on cotton, foremost among them. There was even a clever visual pun (a rare feat in itself) on the exhibition title in the pairing of Charles Ray's motorized gray disk and Maurizio Cattelan's taxidermied dog. Indeed, punctuated by dozens of riffs on the character of space and time, the exhibition could have come off as a grab bag of existential one-liners and provocations—the art equivalent of Steven Wright's stoner-philosopher comedy.

However, the space also hosted persistent intimations of violence and catastrophe, as in Michael Sailstorfer's film of an awkwardly contorting, not quite exploding warehouse, and the aftermath of atomic-bomb blasts pictured in both Harold Edgerton's and Shomei Tomatsu's photographs. Crossing the exhibition's threshold thus conjured the feeling of entering a pharaonic mausoleum or a haunted house in Disneyland. The ambient, ethereal tones of Arthur Russell's music enshrouded the viewer;

the lighting was dim, the walls slate gray. One traversed narrow hallways; secluded, darkened chambers; and sequences of stairs. An austere, ruminative atmosphere took hold, not least because of a nearly iconoclastic purging of the global culture industry's products: no television screens, no movie stars, no iconic logos, no ironized ad campaigns. In fact, the very existence of contemporary mass visuality was suggested in only a few works, and fleetingly at that—in an installation by Ceal Floyer that played a snippet of suspenseful film music; in Tony Conrad's ingenious *Yellow Movie 2/28/73*, a huge slice of jaundicing paper; and in Tacita Dean's *Fernsehturm*, 2001, an elegantly understated film shot in the rotating restaurant inside the television tower on Berlin's Alexanderplatz. All in all, the only sustained analysis of the world outside the Walker's catacombs came in the form of a room dedicated to Paul Etienne Lincoln's *New York-New York* project, 1987–2003, a baffling accumulation of texts, images, records, musical instruments, and ambiguous devices that purports to offer "a mechanical portrait of New York during the last century." This curatorial strategy underscored the exhibition's aggressive *apartness* from everyday life—its self-sufficiency, its clear debt to the individual mind that contrived to orchestrate this situation.

The design of the accompanying catalogue is strikingly appropriate in this regard. Boasting the unmistakable look of a modernist literary classic, something like a Modern Library edition of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* circa 1950, the catalogue's packaging serves as much more than a saucy marketing ploy: Abandoning customary curatorial obsessions with thematic organization and historical pigeonholing, Eleeey's method shares far more

with the elliptical repetitions and impeded narratives of the modernist novel than with the protocols of the museum education department. As a result, if you are like me, you may have left the show or finished the catalogue feeling that you learned remarkably little about Conceptual art and the fields of possibility that it has sought to reconfigure, but a good deal more about why you puzzle over art in the first place. The artworks may have functioned primarily as material in a novelistic mega-installation, but Eleeey never pretended that this display aimed to be anything other than an intimate articulation of what he values in art. And having waded through countless bogs of institutional exercises in generic, user-friendly lowest-common-denominator-hood, I found this precise, intelligent, low-key carnival of juxtapositions to be immensely satisfying.

In this sense, "The Quick and the Dead" mined the productive side of Conceptualism to great effect. Yet it quietly elided the questions that deductive Conceptualists relish: Why is the work *here*? Why are *we* looking at it? More important, why are *you* able to place the work *here* in front of *us*? And most important, is it possible or even desirable to avoid complicity in the art world's "magic-authenticating system"? Conceptual art grew out of aggregations of flimsy paper and bland photographs, and its most appealing trait, I think, has always been its modesty, its traffic with the weak. As such, is not its most enduring challenge its call to extend this cast of mind—to nurture ways of being in the world that sidestep mastery, control, and judgment? But then again, who am I to judge? □

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Opposite page, clockwise from left: View of "The Quick and the Dead," 2009, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Foreground: Kris Martin, *Still Alive*, 2005. Middle ground: Jason Dodge, *ABOVE THE WEATHER* in Algeria, Djidjiga Meffrer has woven a tapestry from string equaling the distance from the earth to above the weather, she was asked to choose string the color of night, 2007. Background, from left: Lygia Clark, *Bicho* (Beast), 1960; On Kawara, *20.JAN.1989*, from the series "Today Series," 1966–; Michael Sailstorfer, *800M*, 2007; Giuseppe Penone, *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (To Reverse One's Eyes), 1970; Anthony Phillips, *Sphere Eversion Schematic*, 1966. Harold Edgerton, *Spilt Milk*, 1933, black-and-white photograph, 11 x 14". Lygia Clark, *Bicho* (Beast), 1960, aluminum, 15 x 15 x 20". This page, from left: Steve McQueen, *Running Thunder*, 2007, still from a color film in 16 mm, 11 minutes 41 seconds. Trisha Donnelly, *Untitled*, 2008, plaster, horsehair, paint, pillow, belts, lamps, two parts, each 35 3/4 x 59 3/4 x 22 3/4".

