

New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias



Claudia Mattos Avolesse
Roberto Conduru
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Claudia Mattos Avolese and
Roberto Conduru

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Historiographies of the Contemporary: Modes of Translating in and from Conceptual Art

Michael Asbury
*Chelsea College of Arts,
University of the Arts London*

The title of this essay departs from two statements by the philosopher of art Peter Osborne: the first statement argues that the term contemporary should be understood as a “coming together of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities,” the second that contemporary art is post-conceptual.

In the former, Osborne appears to be in agreement with other writers on the subject, such as Giorgio Agamben, when he claims that the term contemporary is inadequate when employed as a mere periodizing tool.¹ However, if for Agamben “contemporariness” is described as “that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism,” Osborne, being interested in the contemporariness of art, argues that it is both a conjunction and disjunction within the “time of art history.” It relates to the fact of being together in time, in the present, and the anachronistic presence of different art historical temporalities. Intrinsic to this argument is not only the very praxis of but also the specific historical disjunction in conceptual art. It is specific for it relates to its very own genealogy, one that Osborne locates in conceptual art’s rupture with abstract expressionism and the disjunctive invocation of the early work of Marcel Duchamp. It is this relation that conceptual art has with its own art historical narrative that, enables Osborne to make the paradoxical claims that contemporary art is both defined by the “coming together of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities” and that it is post-conceptual.

The liberating potential that Osborne’s proposition offers in terms of the validation of different temporalities in art is thus contradicted or, at the very least, retracted by the claim that “contemporary art is post-conceptual art.”² If Osborne seems to identify an important malaise within legitimizing discourses on contemporary art—through the critique of the periodizing transition between the modern and the contemporary—he also appears to fall victim of that very ailment himself. Duchamp thus stands as the historically disjunctive element within conceptual art just as conceptual art stands for the disjunction in con-

1 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All* (London: Verso, 2013), 18; Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus, and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39.

2 Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*. (London: Phaidon, 2002, reprinted 2005), 11.

temporary art. Yet although we can safely claim that Duchamp owes his historical significance to conceptual art, can we say the same about conceptual art? The negation of the contemporary as a periodizing term is thus contradicted by a teleological conception of the time of art history that this equation proposes. This time of art history appears in this way more conjunctive than disjunctive, more hegemonic than discrepant. Such an affirmation raises the question, in other words, as to the possibility of envisioning, within such an all-encompassing view of contemporary art, examples that do not relate to genealogies stemming from either the rupture with abstract expressionism or the legacies of Duchamp and conceptual art.

If “the first properly ‘conceptual’ artworks” are identified, as argued by Osborne, “in the transposition of the score from music and dance into the institutional context of the gallery and in the exhibition of the documentation of performance events,” then inherent to the very praxis of conceptual art lies a process of translation, an operation in transmedia in which the artist projects his or her work across the boundaries of disciplines. We find Henry Flynt, for instance, describing his own art in 1963 as conceptual—that is, as an art made of concepts and therefore language, while for Joseph Kosuth, “the event that made conceivable the realization that it is possible to ‘speak another language’ and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp’s first unassisted readymade.”³

The affiliation is established through the figure of the ancestor, who undermines the historical chronology and provokes the disjunction, and the specific praxis of art, which brings a shift from an emphasis on form and medium specificity to one generally understood as language.

I mention language with caution, as I would propose that conceptual art is not strictly concerned with art as language but as Kosuth himself put it, it relates to the possibility of speaking another language as art. That is to say, it is concerned with translation in the widest possible sense of the word.

3 Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” in *Studio International* (October, November, December 1969), 164. Reprinted in: Osborne, Peter. (2002). *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002), 232–234.

By way of analogy, let us think of these “different but present temporalities” of contemporary art as languages; let us think of their “coming together” as a process that requires translation. Such an analogy demands a short digression:

The Portuguese poet and writer Fernando Pessoa famously claimed through Bernardo Soares, one of his heteronyms or literary personas, that “minha patria é a lingua portuguesa.”⁴ The fact that the statement “the Portuguese language is my fatherland” does not translate into English in a satisfactory way is telling. The translated form distances the subject from its object, not quite contradicting what is claimed but stepping aside, like the author who steps aside from being, himself, the subject who claims such belonging by employing a character to make the enunciation on his behalf. In the Portuguese version, we may ask who is speaking about belonging: Fernando Pessoa or Bernardo Soares? This ambivalence is problematized in translation by Bernardo Soares’ fatherland: a place where he once belonged, where he still claims to belong, but no longer inhabits. The translation celebrates that which it brings forth, that which is considered worthy of being reiterated elsewhere, yet, at one and the same time, such an act of generosity toward the other perpetrates a betrayal. It is a betrayal that occurs through the separation that transforms the translated into an orphan of its own mother tongue and fatherland. The translated is thus ascribed another place which it must inhabit, only now in exile.

It is this condition of exile, this orphaned state, that so easily goes unnoticed, that is naturalized by and in translation, that I wish to suggest as a possible way in which to illustrate the similar condition in which artistic languages find themselves where by submitted to a so-called global art history—or, as exemplified here, when they are understood under the equation that equates contemporary art with post-conceptual art.

By denominating discourses of displacement as translations, I wish to emphasize their estrangement; I want to betray the naturalness with which they are enunciated, normalized in their uprooted, orphaned state. I refer to the particular use of

4 Fernando Pessoa [Bernardo Soares], *Livro do Desassossego* [first published posthumously in 1982]. (Brasiliense: Rio de Janeiro, 2011), 359.

the term conceptualism when applied as a description of those distinct yet equally present artistic languages that were translated into the mother tongue of conceptual art.

To consider translation as a viable means of describing the various forms of practice that constitute our understanding of conceptual art has implications for other conjunctions of different temporalities. Here, the tautology art-as-idea-as-idea that conceptual art claimed for itself or, more precisely, which was claimed on its behalf, becomes in conceptualism art-as-translation-of-translation.

The noun “translation” possesses a threefold significance: (1) the process of translating words or text from one language into another; (2) the conversion of something from one form or medium into another; and (3) the process of moving something from one place to another. As we will see, the transposition of diverse art practices into the art historical frame of conceptual art through the naming of the term conceptualism involves all three definitions: (1) the act of the researcher as the translator who enables one language group access to hitherto unknown artistic practices through the translation and interpretation (another form of translation) of archival, critical, and art historical writing from the source language (Spanish or Portuguese, for example) to the target language (predominantly English); (2) the very praxis of conceptual art as an art of and in transmedia; (3) the conjunction of these two forms of translations, historical and artistic, as a means of “moving” art practices from a peripheral condition into a “mainstream” cultural inhabitation.

Mari Carmen Ramírez’s 1993 essay “Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America” is generally credited as the primary source for the descriptive relation that the term conceptualism holds with the diverse practices that originated in Latin America between the 1960s and 1970s.

The essay, however, begins by proposing another art historical origin for such an association, namely Simón Marchán Fiz, who, according to Ramirez, coined the expression “ideological conceptualism” in 1972 as a means of differentiation from what was considered the overtly tautological nature of North American conceptual art, exemplified by “the generalizing, reductive

posture of [Joseph] Kosuth's 'art-as-idea-as-idea.'"⁵ Ramírez expands Fiz's scope of comparison from the specific case of the Argentinean Grupo de los Trece and its relation to contemporaneous art practices in Spain, to the art produced in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and more generally in Latin America since the mid-1960s and their relation to art produced in the USA and, to a lesser extent, in Europe. For Ramírez:

As with any movement originating in the periphery, the work of Latin American political-conceptual artists—in its relationship with the mainstream source—engages in a pattern of mutual influence and response. It is both grounded in and distant from the legacy of North American Conceptualism in that it represents a transformation of it and also anticipated in many ways the forms of ideological conceptualism developed in the late 1970s and 1980s by feminist and other politically engaged artists in North America and Europe.⁶

Ramírez proposed a reciprocity between center and periphery that is cartographic in nature and evidenced through time, whereby the former translates the language of conceptual art, its "mainstream source," into an "ideological conceptualism" that anticipated subsequent developments within conceptual art itself. Her essay refers to practices that emerged in locations other than the art historical genealogy to which conceptual art is seen to belong and the geopolitical space it inhabits. Ramírez thus establishes a relation and separation between conceptual art and conceptualism, the former as predominantly North American, the latter defined by its Latin American specificity.

Conceptualism, as a term ascribed in retrospect, must therefore be understood as a form of translation, a term that unleashes a chain of re-translations from and then back into the canon. Within this process of translation, the "betrayal" inherent to

5 Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Blueprints Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America," in *Latin American Art of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Waldo Rasmussen, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993) 156–167. Reprinted (from which it is referred to here) in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 551.

6 Ramírez, "Blueprints Circuits," 551.

the act is not considered as a form of loss but, on the contrary, as a positive means of differentiation. As such, conceptualism, with the benefit of historical hindsight, is defined as an art that transposed the self-reflexivity, tautology, passivity, and immediacy of North American conceptual art respectively as contextualization, referentiality, activism, and mediation.⁷ Ramírez transposes these distortions or betrayals committed by translation back into mainstream art history through the legitimizing anticipation of the historical progression of North American conceptual art itself.

Within this relation, conceptual art remains the live language (where translation operates as both praxis and poiesis), the one that is deemed to evolve, whilst conceptualism, with its specific characteristics, ideological and/or didactic, precedes that evolution while not being a part of it, unrecognized as a developing entity in and of itself, but condemned to this day to be reincarnated as the always-deferred affirmation of its difference through its innate subversive marginality. That is, it is condemned to always be an art historical translation, a hybrid product of the strategy of negotiation with the mainstream's pure artistic trends. Difference, as far as conceptualism is concerned, seems to be the key question here, whereby that which is deemed untranslatable becomes the distinguishing marker, the identifying trait, the underlying and unifying procedural strategy. This process is commonly associated with the term "hybridity," that sterile amalgam of central and peripheral elements condemned to forever defer the resolution of its internal conflict. However, if the translation from conceptual art into conceptualism betrays the poiesis of the former, the normalization of the praxis of conceptualism within the canon, as an art category in its own right, denies any relationship that the art languages of those who are carried across by the enunciation, by the translation, may possess with their own forbearers. The translation uproots, exiles, and orphans its subjects from their own genealogies (their mother-tongues and fatherlands) while paradoxically emphasizing their identities as orphaned others, outsiders who relate but do not belong.

Terry Smith, for example, recounts the significance of conceptualism as far as its origin, *raison d'être*, and, most revealingly, its purpose within the legitimizing economy of contemporary

practices, as a paradoxical category within the time of art history. For Smith, the paradoxical nature of conceptualism lies in the fact that it does not fit within a genealogy in its own time, that it is at one and the same time a term that refers to art that is precursory, contemporaneous, and derivative—in short, an art that, although its definition is based on the specificities of the historical moment and its geopolitical context, is celebrated as the bearer of a possible future differentiating significance of and for contemporary art practices.

It is a nice paradox that the term “conceptualism” came into art world existence after the advent of Conceptual art in major centers such as New York and London—most prominently and programmatically in the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* at the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1999—mainly in order to highlight the fact that innovative, experimental art practices occurred in the Soviet Union, Japan, South America, and elsewhere prior to, at the same time as, and after the European and U.S. initiatives that had come to seem paradigmatic, and to claim that these practices were more socially and politically engaged—and thus more relevant to their present; better models for today’s art; and, in these senses, better art—than the well-known Euro-American exemplars.⁸

Conceptualism is translated into that specific, hegemonic affiliation while being ascribed a particular form of praxis, one that imposes representation as its artistic method—a language that is understood not as art, but first and foremost through the (representation of the) political/ideological sphere: an art exiled from the very language of art.

Analyzing the historiography of the consolidation of the term, Miguel A. Lopez has suggested that as it has become normalized and brought forward into the mainstream, conceptualism has come to deny the possibility of unearthing

8 Terry Smith. 2011. One and Three Ideas: Conceptualism Before, During, and After Conceptual Art, (E-Flux Journal n.11, 2011). <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/one-and-three-ideas-conceptualism-before-during-and-after-conceptual-art/>

a *multitude* of not-yet articulated and potential genealogies. Beyond mere naming, these words appear as proof of the fact that there is something irreducible—a discordant crossing of stories that point to divergent ways of living and constructing the contemporary—its capacity to unfold other times.⁹

Conceptualism, exiled from the context of its own art languages, thus presupposes that Latin American artists are disqualified from the reflexivity of their own specific genealogical relations. It is understood not in direct relation to Duchamp, nor through its relationship, either through affirmation or negation, with its own specific genealogies. Instead, it is mediated (translated) through conceptual art. However one desires to differentiate conceptualism from conceptual art, however one wishes to portray it as a mirror or an inversion, the relationship that is established, through its very (improper) name presupposes a fundamental hierarchy. Thinking of this relation as translation, we are reminded of Walter Benjamin's argument that in "translation the original grows into a linguistic sphere that is both higher and purer."¹⁰ Despite all the negations proposed by conceptual art, the ideal of purity remains like an umbilical cord connecting it to Greenbergian modernism. Kosuth would claim, for instance, that "the 'purest' definition of conceptual art would be that of an inquiry into the foundations of the concept of 'art!'"¹¹ Within the transition from an art of morphology to one of language, the ideal of purity not only remains, but is invested with the power of legitimacy. Conceptualism, as a translation of conceptual art, thus acts as the affirmation of conceptual art's purported purity.

Conceptualism is contaminated in its translated condition, its condition of exile from the language of art. It is this very fact that enables or, at the very least, makes credible the absurd comparison of the art of one artist (Kosuth), as representative of conceptual art in general, with that of a multitude of practices within a sub-continent. Conceptualism disguises both the heterogeneity of that which it defines as well as that of conceptual art itself.

9 Miguel A. López, "How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?" in *Afterall* 23 (Spring 2010), PAGE.

10 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume I, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 157.

11 Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," 171.

Benjamin argues that the purpose of translation is the “expression of the most intimate relationship between languages.” Such a relationship cannot be revealed by the translation but merely represented.¹² If, following the example of Kosuth, the translation of the chair across different media reveals not the ideal itself but that which is merely represented, conceptualism, within this understanding, becomes therefore a representation of its own relationship with conceptual art. This relationship is substantiated, as Smith would have it, in the contemporary, in the here and now. Such a coming together of temporalities may be understood more broadly than in Osborne’s terms by referring to Benjamin’s claim that:

The history of great works of art knows about their descent from their sources, their shaping in the age of the artists, and the periods of their basically eternal continuing life in the later generations. Where it appears, the latter is called fame.

Translations that are more than transmissions of a message are produced when a work, in its continuing life, has reached the age of its fame. Hence, they do not so much serve the work’s fame (as bad translators customary claim) as owe their existence to it. In them the original’s life achieves its constantly renewed, latest, most comprehensive unfolding.¹³

Conceptualism thus represents conceptual art’s “constantly renewed, latest, most comprehensive unfolding.” In this Benjaminian sense, conceptualism owes its very existence to conceptual art. In other words, those practices that the term conceptualism claims for itself exist in a state of exile from their own mother tongues, their own specific genealogies and/or creative languages, and as such, they are condemned to project the language of the other (that of conceptual art) onto the contexts that they claim for themselves but no longer inhabit. Again, we are reminded of Benjamin, who claimed that “translation indicates a higher language than its own, and thereby remains inappropriate, violent, and alien with respect to its content.”¹⁴

12 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 154.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 157.

Translation is translated here into the field of art, and as it is carried across, I realize that I am perhaps speaking out of turn, speaking of betrayal while committing the same sin. I am betraying an art language whose identity is built upon the translated form itself, one that has grown to identify itself with its own (foreign) accent.

The translated, after all, does not give in without a struggle; it drags its heels as it is carried through, it holds onto the vestiges of its own (old) self, it pollutes and contaminates its new host. It does not speak the lingua franca with ease, with the naturalness with which it speaks its mother tongue; it carries with it an accent that is pronounced in speech and in writing through the awkwardness of its native figures of speech. This accent and the foreignness that it invokes, for those whose mother tongue and fatherland are the lingua franca, become the unifying characteristic of the multiple voices, polyphonic tongues of those who have been translated.

Benjamin himself affirms that it is necessity to translate despite the process's flaws, despite its inherent betrayal, or, as Maurice Blanchot put it, despite its treachery. For to suggest the absolute untranslatability of one to another is as absurd as suggesting the opposite, that one is the same as the other. Paul Ricoeur argued that the pure universal language that translation aspires to, but cannot attain, is at the crux of the necessity of translation, it is its ultimate justification:

The dream of the perfect translation would gain, gain without losing. It is this very same gain without loss that we must mourn until we reach the acceptance of the impassible difference of the peculiar and the foreign. Recaptured universality would try to abolish the memory of the foreign and maybe the love of one's own language, hating the mother tongue's provincialism. Erasing its own history, the same universality would turn all who are foreign to it into language's stateless persons, exiles who would have given up the search for the asylum afforded by a language of reception.¹⁵

For Ricoeur, like Benjamin, one must translate the untranslatable. Such an impossible task is made possible by the translator who, in the very act of translating, reveals both the grandeur of translation and the risk associated with it through the “creative betrayal of the original, [the] equally creative appropriation by the reception language, [and the] construction of the comparable.”¹⁶

Yet it seems that in the case of conceptualism, such constructions of comparison fail to consider the reception language, the hegemonic context into which these other practices are translated; through a tradition that is not their own, that of conceptual art, they become contemporary. Such a condition, that of contemporary art as post-conceptual art, seems natural only from within an art historical monolingualism, one that is deemed to possess a proper fatherland and mother tongue, one which we inhabit as translators and thus find natural, ordinary, legitimate, and perhaps even pure.

We must realize, it seems, that when we speak of Latin American art, that singular category that holds a heterogeneous world, we are speaking the lingua franca; we are inhabiting it whether we claim it as our own or not. It is perhaps the only language, the only art historical frame, that we possess, but we must beware that it is not the language of that which we claim for ourselves, that which we carry over through the act of translation.

This condition, this fatal predicament in which we find ourselves, seems to be one of “the monolingualism of the other,” one in which a prosthesis of origin becomes seemingly necessary (such as conceptual art as the prosthesis of origin for contemporary art). Similarly to how Jacques Derrida described his own condition as a French-speaking Algerian Jew, we are condemned to speak a language that is not our own. It may be our only language, but it does not belong to us. In this fatal realization resides the predicament and the very task of the historian of Latin American art.

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Michael Asbury

Michael Asbury is an art critic, curator and art historian. He is deputy director of the research centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN) at the University of the Arts London (UAL).