

*If this is conceptual art, then what does it mean?*

If you ask me, you're right to raise the question! For what was conceptual art about if not the hope to make art communicate meaning differently -- clearly -- without shrouding it in mystery as artists had done for centuries?

Wasn't the transparency of ideas and intentions part and parcel of the utopian promise of Conceptualism? This is why artists used this very medium -- text -- rather than imagery, to reduce ambiguity, to convince rather than seduce, and finally make direct contact with the people on the receiving end.

It's probably true that in understanding art as a tool for information, Conceptual artists were adapting their working methods to the latest standards of immaterial labour imposed by Information Capitalism -- and that, by presenting documents as artworks, they were unwittingly paying homage to the logical, authoritative air of bureaucracy.

Yet, it still stands to reason that the driving force, or if you will, the DESIRE articulated through the new language of art as text, or art as idea, was not that different from the spirit of free experimentation with the conventions of social communication that the hippy culture of the time was politically and emotionally engaged with. What is Conceptual Art if not one such experiment in creating the conditions for a better, less alienated life by changing the ways how we communicate; an attempt to cut the crap and find a way to reach other people and talk freely? Take Lee Lozano's *Conversation Piece*, for example.

Negri and Hardt argue in *Empire* that social communication, and the human potentials to create communality -- in short all that defines social life -- has become a resource for the growth economy of the creative industries. To reappropriate the means of production today, they say, means to claim your life back and set the terms of how you want to communicate. In light of this analysis, it would seem productive to go back to the early 1970s and re-experience the ways in which people were searching for new forms of communication and communality. ... Does that answer your question?

*No, not really. You still haven't told me -- if I were to understand this as part of a conceptual work -- what this means or how it signifies?*

You're right. But this is precisely what I cannot tell you and what, I feel, no-one can really say any more. But this isn't because Conceptualism failed -- and I have to add that I strongly object to anyone who claims that it failed because it was co-opted by the so-called powers-that-be. Who could embody those powers more forcefully than any individual who assumes the position of the juror of the past? Without a judge there is no trial, and in the absence of a verdict any case can be reopened at any time. Oedipus Schmoedipus ... let's be done with the patriarchal ceremony of dividing artists into the binaries of independent or co-opted, the legitimate or illegitimate spouse ...

So let's say Conceptualism didn't fail -- it just changed its mode of address. Or maybe our understanding of how to use and respond to this mode of address changed.

Let me put it another way: "hermeneutics" is an approach to learning about the world founded on the belief that, using reason, we can progressively enlighten and liberate ourselves by dispelling the secrets and myths that bind us. I think that in the 1970s some artists still believed in the possibility that art could play its part in what you might call a HERMENEUTICS OF DESIRE. That is, in a form of communication which renders desires transparent and which, in doing so, addresses anyone and everyone; and that this particular mode of address had the potential to allow people to realize their desires collectively by, for instance, starting a revolution. Text, transparency, direct communication, all that ...

Today this faith in a transparent hermeneutics of desire seems to have been shattered -- maybe it was already broken back then. It is inconceivable, for example, to consider Conceptualism without Feminism, and wasn't one of the main charges that Feminism brought against a male-dominated discourse that language was *never* transparent and merely *confirmed* the power of the men speaking by leaving no room -- that it didn't even provide the words (yet) -- for women's concerns to be articulated? Take *Art & Language*: what ill-disguised macho posturing! What did they ever do but introduce hermetic language as a tool to intimidate and shut other people up and out!?

So if there *is* Conceptualism after Feminism -- and Deconstruction -- we should probably understand its mode of address to be embedded not in a hermeneutics but rather a HERMETICISM OF DESIRE. In other words, if we seek to address a public through the language of Conceptualism, or find ourselves thus addressed, it seems more productive, more honest even, to acknowledge that is only through modes of innuendo, through ways of inventing codes and sharing secrets, that we use the opaque medium of text to communicate and seek to connect to people we may never actually meet or know. Who are you anyway, reading this? I cannot tell you what I want from you, let alone what you should expect to want from me -- your desires -- in all of this!

From the vantage point of hermeticism this text, like any text, is not *just* a text but also a contract between you and me. But what arrangement it implies and what it would mean for either you or me to sign it, I cannot tell you. Perhaps we can work it out together ... that seems to be the only viable way to continue. What do you think?

*I'm not sure, but*

*If this is a contemporary art show, then what does it mean?*

It's difficult to say, I agree. We don't even quite know what it means to be contemporary. What is the time that we live in about? People say we live in times of uncertainty. Is *this* the one certainty we share, then? How do we even know that this much is certain?

*It's what the art shows us: "uncertainty" is what the art represents and expresses, isn't it?*

Well, yes maybe you *could* say that ... but still, how can we be *certain* that the art here represents contemporary uncertainty? For it to do that it would surely have to be certain in its expression for these expressions of uncertainty to convincingly represent the contemporary sentiment. I'm not trying to be willfully paradoxical here. I am simply not convinced that art relates to the contemporary by "representing" or "expressing" it.

*What's wrong with representation?*

Well, a moment ago we were talking about the question of hermeneutics versus hermeticism: whether we still believe art to be a tool of learning which serves to render the world and our desires transparent -- as the hermeneutic approach maintains; or whether we would not rather assume art to be a hermetic language of coded innuendo that yields knowledge only to those willing to initiate themselves into its opaque codes and participate in the experience of codification. In the light of our skepticism with regard to the idea that any language could ever be transparent, it seemed that the hermetic take on how art makes meaning was much closer to the way things actually work.

*Okay ... but isn't that a pretty bleak outlook?*

It doesn't have to be. All I'm trying to say is that art works a bit like fashion: each season there's a new set of codes as fashion re-encrypts the way in which we combine clothes and colors, and which decades we reference when we wear them, and with what kind of attitude we might adopt to carry that look off. To be in sync with fashion you have to initiate yourself in its code and rehearse its combinations, references and attitudes.

When I was here at an Armory building performance last week, it struck me how closely connected the operations of fashion are to that of art -- especially in a city like New York. The clothes the kids in the audience were wearing were coded in much the same way as most of the works on show: they were perfectly in sync. And it seemed that the key cipher in this code was, well, whatever you want to call it: uncertainty, depression, alienation ... or equally, post-punk, new wave, no wave, goth ... late 1970s, early 1980s ...

If you look at this so-called "uncertainty" -- or depression, recession, alienation, et cetera -- primarily as a cipher for a code rather than a sentiment to be represented, then it becomes clear why the "expressions" of uncertainty that define contemporary art, fashion and music *are* so certain, so defined and determinate in their expression: because they are a pretty stable, solid code that artists, designers and musicians have been working on for a couple of years now.

*But if people have been working on these codes for so long, how can it be contemporary? After all, the recession is only happening now -- literally NOW.*

Well, isn't that the fascinating thing about contemporaneity? That to be *truly* contemporary you actually have to be slightly ahead of yourself, you have to be decidedly UNCONTEMPORARY in order to prefigure, presage, and prepare yourself for what is to come. The codes have to already be in place when the shit hits the fan.

Don't you remember the first time around ... ? I recall trying to initiate myself into the codes of alienation as a teenage goth ... god, some twenty odd years ago. At that time I was of course much too young to have experienced anything that could have instilled the deeply existential morbid sense of melancholy I was aiming for. But still I wanted to prepare myself for that experience. The trouble was that I did not *like* parts of the experience of the code. And I *did not like that I did not like them*. So I tried to force my body to process the code. I deliberately put on a record I didn't like very much -- *Psychocandy* by The Jesus & Mary Chain: simple beautiful songs willfully effaced by too much reverb and random feedback -- then lowered the blinds in the living room and lay on the floor to make my blood pressure drop. All to create an experience through which I would get the code. I don't remember if it "worked", as such, but it prepared me nonetheless.

In this sense you could say that much contemporary art, fashion and music of recent years has not been representing but *preparing* us for a moment of alienation -- for the event of recession -- by teaching us to rehearse the code in advance of eventually experiencing it. You could even say that recession is the event, or rather the revenant, the ghost, that we were actively *summoning* through this ceremony of preparation and anticipation. Maybe anticipation is the key to any code; the key to the desire inscribed in the code. Perhaps codes are even one of the strongest manifestations of a desire -- that strange desire for something, *anything* really, as long as it stops things from being as they are and have been for a while. And all within the context the still-booming art market ... so we arrive at full tables all dressed up and ready for uncertainty and recession. Funny, isn't it?

*Funny? Well I'm not so*

*If you're describing a kind of crisis scenario, what should we do?*

I'd say we're doing a lot already. For some years we've been preparing ourselves for crisis and presaging its eventual occurrence by developing a code of crisis in art, fashion and music -- a contemporary form of dark new romanticism; call it neo-goth if you like -- though I don't think I would. Anyway, if that code wasn't already firmly established, I don't believe we'd even be in a position to recognize, describe and experience the current situation of recession as a crisis. We'd simply lack the terms to do so. Naming a crisis as such already demonstrates that we're defining and controlling the moment. To give a name is to sign a contract, and our contract with contemporary culture is now signed in the name of crisis. That's the cipher we've chosen to interpret -- or *encrypt* -- our experience of the present moment. And so I believe we're already proficient in the use of that code. We know it off by heart ... but still rehearse it to initiate ourselves further.

To be honest, as a European I'm always amazed, and even slightly jealous, when I see how *fast* U.S. culture recodes its codes to prefigure and frame the near future. Where I come from people put styles and ideas through the mill for what seems like forever, and whatever survives the grind might be reasonably sound but deeply unattractive -- to the point that there seems to be no reason to even bother immersing yourself in the experience these styles and ideas may have once enabled you to have. Don't get me wrong, I *like* it fast. I admire the agility of U.S. culture to recodify its codes, re-encrypt its ciphers, revisit, recycle and revivify its icons in different incarnations. Just start your tour of the Whitney from the "old" collection on the top floor and you'll see what I mean. It's the image of a country and culture overwritten, reconfigured, recast and recoded ceaselessly, insistently, and most of all, *performatively*. It's a constant performance of recodification. And it's a great performance. The rest of the world lines up at the box office to go and see it.

*Do I sense a trace of irony in what you are saying?*

Um, yeah maybe ... but I think only because the situation is *inherently* ironic -- by which I mean that although I'm aware of producing and consuming a rapidly codified culture while being endlessly attracted to it, I still feel slightly uneasy about its codes. It's not a question of morals, really. I don't mind being corrupted and consumed by ciphers that promise attractive experiences. After all, how else would you learn about what you feel and think? Still, there is a certain discomfort with regard to how that codification works here. Speed is not really the problem. Okay, you might argue that the fast pace at which all this happens is set by the market, because as long as it is still thriving it needs products to circulate -- and that, if people took a bit more time to think about what they are doing and what they actually want, the products that they would eventually put out would be coded differently; or not products at all. Then again, so much of this so-called extra time, or "non-productive" time, taken tends to be consumed by the anxious desire to figure out *the right thing* -- the *legitimate* thing -- to do. AS IF YOU COULD EVER WORK THAT OUT IN ADVANCE -- sanctifying your cause *a priori*, categorically and unassailably. In the end, I think, it's better to get your hands dirty and deal with the challenge of the code.

If there *is* a problem here, though, I think it's more related to the absence of other voices in the process of codification. For sure, there are a fair number of different voices, but most of them speak with familiar accents. Again, don't get me wrong: I *like* American accents; I love it when Americans sing their own songs and, even if I can't make out every line, I've learned to experience my emotions in the key of these songs. It's just that I also long for different voices, or a difference *in the voice*; that is, for a mode of address which is not merely *one*, but differentiated to the point where it is about to disintegrate and become many -- and which consequently does not address *me* as one, as belonging to this one culture, but rather as a subject, citizen and voice of different cultures and languages, a subject committed to UNBELONGING.

So I'm thinking about a MODE OF ADDRESS here -- and I do actually see it very occasionally formulated in certain works -- fractured and improvised and not bothered by the overriding code of certified production value. A mode of address that allows different voices to resonate in its articulations in the raw form of citations cut out or xeroxed and glued to the page, or scanned in to stick out from the flow of scripted speech. Of course, there are and will be codes and ciphers at play in this mode of address as well, but *more than one*, and they perhaps won't interlock to suit the mechanics of the decoder so that the message it spits out is as scrambled as the original transmission was -- and not in order to remain enigmatic, but because the emotional state which it encoded was truly scrambled in the first place.

*And what value would that have?*

Precisely none. For if there is one thing I believe we should be very wary of, it is of using the code of crisis as a tool to generate values we can supposedly bank on. Codes create certified values when they establish themselves, not because the secret at the heart of the cipher would be disclosed but because people agree to share the secret as a secret. This is basically how Marx explained the workings of the symbolic economy of Capitalism. *The value of the value of capital is essentially a secret that cannot be disclosed because, in modern times, the relation between the things we consume and the labour we invest has become abstract.* To become tangible this abstract relation is constantly re-encoded by Capitalist culture as a secret -- as a secret with the power to make us feel that the things we desire to have actually had a value in themselves, independent of the processes of production that create them. So in one sense, the whole operation of encoding is the simply that of a culture sustaining the illusion of THE VALUE OF VALUE by feeding the imagination with ever-new attractive secrets. If the secret today is to codify crisis in a way that makes it feel contemporary, this is precisely how the value of value is generated.

And so in the end -- or for now -- if we want to resist the drive towards the mere reproduction of value, the point is perhaps not to reject the act of codification and passion for the secret as such, but to *perform it differently*, with a different mode of address, one that interrupts itself before it arrives at a workable cipher and engenders the values that