

Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology

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in support of meta-art

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I would like to make a case for a new occupation for artists. This occupation might exist as part of, alongside, or instead of the art itself. If it existed as part of or alongside the art, it might have the effect of giving the art a perspicuous and viable interpretation, support, or framework, although I don't see this as its intention. If, on the other hand, it were to replace the art, well and good. We could then add it as a nascent appendage to the field, and spend hours of discussion and many kilocalories deciding upon its status and implications. I will call the occupation I have in mind "meta-art." To establish something of its character, I will first give a loose account of what I mean by the term. Then I will try to sharpen the definition somewhat by contrasting it with other activities for which it might be mistaken, viz. art and art criticism. Finally I will attempt to justify the contention that we need such a thing.

1. By "meta-art" I mean the activity of making explicit the thought processes, procedures, and presuppositions of making whatever kind of art we make. Thought processes might include how we hypothesize a work into existence: whether we reason from problems encountered in the last work to possible solutions in the next; or get "inspired" by seeing someone else's work, or a previously unnoticed aspect of our own; or read something, experience some-

thing, or talk; or find ourselves blindly working away for no good reason; or any, all, or other processes of this kind.

Procedures might include how we come by the materials we use; what we do in order to get them; whom we must deal with, and in what capacity; what kinds of decisions we make concerning them (aesthetic, pecuniary, environmental, etc.); to what extent the work demands interactions (social, political, collaborative) with other people, etc. In general, by procedures I mean what we *do* to realize the work as contrasted with how and what we *think*.

Whereas getting at thought processes and procedures is largely a matter of perspicuous description of what is immediately available, getting at presuppositions is not. Here there are many possible methods, all having to do with analysis of some kind. One might be what Kant called the method of “regressive proof” which he used in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Such an analysis would consist in beginning with the fact of the work itself, and from its properties inferring backward to the conditions necessary to bring it into existence. Luckily there is no need to insist that such conditions be transcendental. They might just as easily be social, psychological, political, metaphysical, aesthetic, or any combination thereof. Still another kind might be based on a loosely construed Hegelian method, in which the work is treated as thesis, an antithesis is posited, and a synthesis arrived at which in turn becomes thesis. The resulting dialectic attempts to specify the work with respect to the system of which it is a part. A third might be some variety of formal or informal psychological analysis: Freudian, Jungian, Reichian, etc. in terms of which we would try to make clear our subjective assumptions about the world.¹ Clearly there are others. We might do induction on the dreams we’ve been having, conduct ultimately *ad hominem* arguments with friends about the nature of art, etc.

The distinctions between the above are not intended to be sharply drawn. Generally what is required in meta-art is that we stand off and view our role of artist reflectively, that we see the fact of our art-making as itself a discrete state or process with interesting implications worthy of pursuing; that we articulate and present these implications to an audience (either the same as or broader than the art audience) for comment, evaluation, and feedback.

2. (. . .) Meta-art is generically related to art, art activity, and being an artist. The impulse to meta-art is unfathomable in the way the impulse to art is; meta-art is unique in just the way art-making activity is, and for the same reasons; its subject matter is, like both of these, immediately accessible to artists. But unlike art and art-making, meta-art is not completely opaque because its tools are the discursive, conceptualizing, cognitive abilities of the artist. Doing meta-art presupposes immediate and privileged access to the impulse, the activity, and the

emergence of the art. It is all of a piece with these, but in addition requires an epistemic self-consciousness about them, viz. viewing ourselves as the aesthetic objects we are, then elucidating as fully as possible the thoughts, procedures, and presuppositions that so define us.

3. Obscuring the distinction between meta-art and art criticism has resulted in the conceptions of the artist as superstar, as financial con man, as political satrap, as public relations expert. But it makes a difference whether *we* describe our own machinations and the motives and presuppositions behind them, or whether these machinations are revealed or imputed to us by a critic. The interviews in *Avalanche* attempt to circumvent or simply ignore this problem by allowing artists to speak for themselves. But this mode of self-representation is not immune to the problem of misrepresentation encountered in third-person discourse. The point I want to press is that it is one thing to handle the referents of *artworks* in the third-person case, or try to educe them from the work: art itself can't, after all, protest that it is being misunderstood. But to handle artists this way is more often than not to make of them unpleasantly stylized biographical objects. This then creates near-inviolable prejudices which blind us to any genuine attempts to penetrate past the formal properties of the work for a framework in which to understand it. Artists almost always complain about the way they come off in such articles or interviews, the best intentions of the critic notwithstanding. Since they are clearly not averse to having the material revealed in the first place, the implication is that artists should take the means of revelation into their own hands. (. . .)

Because the focal point of meta-art is on the artist *qua* artist, it simultaneously accommodates all those broader referents which support the art (including its cultural, financial, social, etc. status), while circumventing the requirements of cultural anthropology to account for an entire social context. Although the values will be social, ethical, philosophical, political, as well as aesthetic, the meta-artist need merely explicate his or her particular condition in order to suggest the condition of the society.

The contrasts I have tried to bring out support a description of meta-art as artistic in its concerns, epistemological in its method, humanistic in its system of values. (. . .)

I said earlier that the values of meta-art were humanistic in character. I meant to contrast this with the narrowly aesthetic values of art, and then argue that aesthetic values alone were in fact never sufficient to explain or justify making art, when viewed in its broader social context. Our basic aesthetic proclivities may indeed be real enough; but curiously, they barely develop, if at all, in the face of poverty, overcrowding, fifth-rate education, or job discrimination. Having aesthetic proclivities presupposes gratification of survival needs; and the more we

are hit by the social and political realities of the suffering of other people, the more the satisfaction of aesthetic proclivities seems a fatuous defense of our position.

In elucidating the process of making art on a personal level, meta-art criticizes and indicts the machinations necessary to maintain this society as it is. It holds up for scrutiny how capitalism works on us and through us; how we therefore live, think, what we do as artists; what kinds of social interactions we have (personal, political, financial); what injustices we are the victim of, and which ones we must inflict on others in order to validate our work or our roles as artist; how we have learned to circumvent these, if at all, i.e. how highly developed we have had to become as political animals; what forms of manipulation we must utilize to get things done; what compromises we must make in our work or our integrity in order to reach the point where such compromises are no longer necessary; whether, given the structure of this society, there can be such a point.

This is not to say that the justification for meta-art is social indictment alone. It can also be an epistemic tool for discussing the work on a broader basis which includes the aesthetic. But ultimately the justification for meta-art is social, because it is concerned with artists, and artists are social: we are not exempt from the forces or the fate of this society.

NOTES

1. For some recent examples, in this and other fields, from an observer's standpoint, see: Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation* (New York, 1972); Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1962); Bruce Mazlich, ed., *Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, 1971); C. Hanley and M. Lazerowitz, eds., *Psychoanalysis and Philosophy* (1971); Rosemary Mayer, "Performance and Experience," *Art* (December-January, 1973), pp. 33–36. Evaluations of some of these efforts—predominantly negative, and justifiably so, include Robert Coles, "Shrinking History, Part I," *New York Review of Books* (February 22, 1973), pp. 15–21; and Emmet Wilson in *The Journal of Philosophy* (March 8, 1973), pp. 128–134.

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