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## ERRATA

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# The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath

(Or The Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)

*Ian Burn*

As we move into the 1980's, how will official history deal with the past decade? There were no new 'isms' generated, no rapid turnover of styles to which we were made accustomed during the 'fifties and 'sixties. Is the art of the 'seventies to suffer a similar fate to the 1930s which has so often been presented as innovatively dull and empty, not worthy of much consideration? The real character of the art in many countries during the Depression years is made up of the production of vital and socially-creative imagery – but the political sympathies explicit in much of the work made it too 'impure' for the art historians of the book publishing industry during the Cold War and afterwards.

It has not been difficult to observe the falsification of the history of the past decade, even while that history was taking place. The ever-prolific art magazines have been filled with revivals of 'fifties and 'sixties styles, incorporating minor modifications to satisfy a market need for 'change'. That same work has filled the galleries, been displayed and acquired by the museums, supported by the state funding bodies and bought by the modern Medicis. In Australia, it has been little different – in general, the magazines, the various survey exhibitions and institutional purchasing policies, recurring events like the Sydney Biennale, have constantly tried to convince us that nothing else has been going on.

It is fairly well accepted that capitalism has created the most effective form of censorship ever: if something does not reach the market-place (or any of its agencies), then it does not exist! Plainly, anyone who accepts that as a criterion for writing history (or making history 'visible', as curators and others do) is a fool, though more likely than not a very successful one. Nonetheless, it is still history with a ghetto mentality.

Any historian aspiring to a more comprehensive history of the 'seventies must account for not merely the art market push but also the diverse, experimental and culturally-rich work which has mushroomed outside of marketing constraints and avant-garde ideals: the community-oriented art and cultural activities, the work of numerous women's groups, the street murals and theatre, the activities of artists working within trade union contexts and with social and political activist groups, and more. An important element in such an historical account however will be an analysis of the developments critical to the later 'sixties. In the following article, I want to outline one basis for such an analysis, focusing on the ideological character

*The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath*

of the crisis in art which unfolded between roughly 1965-69 and its implications relevant to an account of the 'seventies.<sup>1</sup>

The massive economic and political expansion by the United States already begun by the end of the Second World War came to a close towards the later part of the 1960s. Under the leadership of the United States, the capitalist world shifted into the period of crisis and reconstruction which we are still experiencing.

During the 'fifties and 'sixties, political/cultural life was being shaped by the struggle between conservative forces and Cold War liberalism.<sup>2</sup> The shift of influence towards more liberal ideals confronted, but was unable to provide answers to, the social crises which, throughout the sixties, took on increasingly public forms: the Black nationalism, the Civil Rights movement, student radicalism, the Hippies and 'counter-culture' – and providing a common meeting ground was the burgeoning anti-War movement.

Each evening, while eating their dinners, Americans watched their military defeating the communist hordes in Vietnam – yet the ultimate victory never came and the official lies continued. More and more people felt moral outrage at the continuing American atrocities, as well as a spreading anger at the many other oppressive and repressive aspects of the American Way of Life.

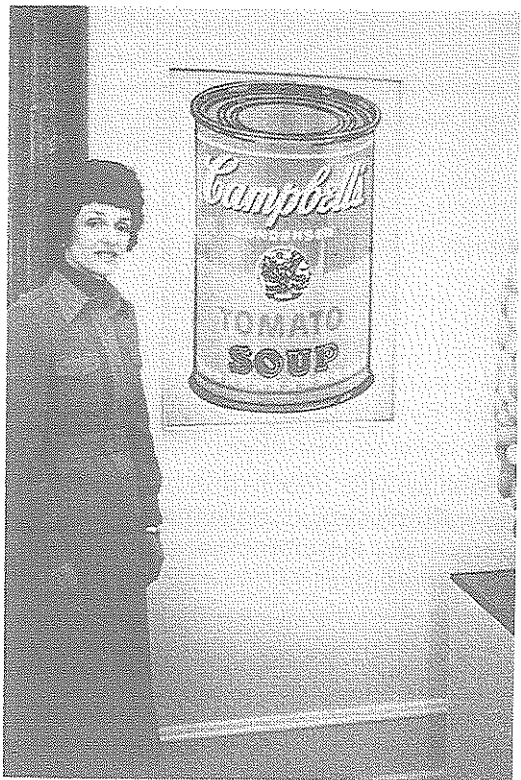
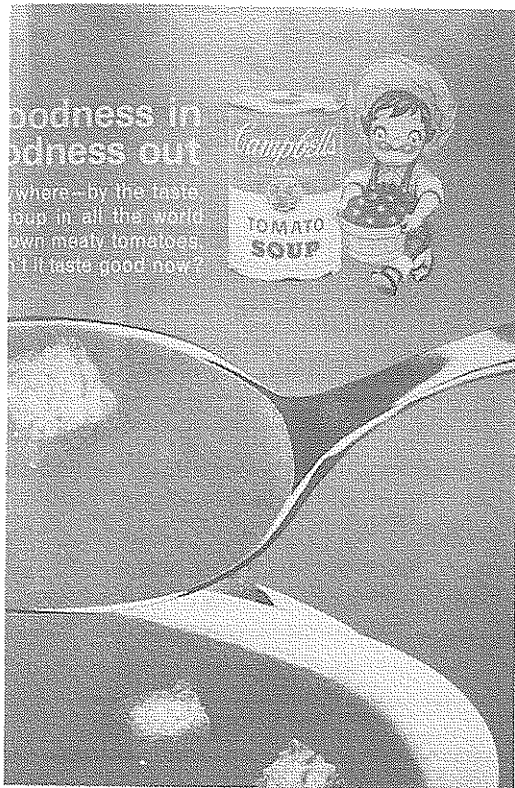
Since the Second World War, the corporate forces of American capitalism had been making a concerted effort to create an explicit identification of the needs of individuals with the interests of corporations. Hence anything which rejected the basis of that identification was seen as *political* – e.g. life-styles, individual feelings, quality of life, spontaneity, anti-institutionalism, 'free-form' expression, drug-associated cultures, and so on. In conflict with the passively aggressive impersonalism of corporate style and values, a new feeling of personal-social responsibility was surfacing. In the broadest sense, these diverse cultural expressions converged on a common attitude of anti-institutionalism.

Within this radicalizing climate, the social consciousness which developed tended to value highly the ideals of spontaneity and individualism, tending at times to appear as virtually an ideology of personal psychology. Jerry Rubin argued, for example, that politics is how you lead your life, not whom you vote for. The revolution was to happen by each of us transforming his or her own consciousness, – sometimes referred to as 'communism of the mind'. These attitudes found cultural expression on a wide front, from the seeking of alternate life-styles and the counter-

1. The term 'crisis' is being used in its social sense here. At the time, the experience of any crisis for artists was largely intuitive and for many perhaps indistinguishable from the kind of 'crisis' associated with any formal or avant-garde shift. However, with hindsight, the crisis had significant dimensions to it which moved it beyond that aesthetic sense.

2. See for example Irving Horowitz' discussion of the period in *Ideology and Utopia in the United States 1956-1976* (O.U.P., New York, 1977). Daniel Bell's widely read thesis on 'The end of Ideology in the West' in *The End of Ideology* (The Free Press, 1960) can be located as a key text heralding the triumph of (the ideology of) liberalism. The way he argues this should be read at first hand. (Against this should be placed the many shifts away from liberal ideals in the West during the 'seventies and early 'eighties.)

One of the ways the shift towards liberalism affected artists was that it legitimized the 'split' between art and political commitments. The need was no longer felt to vocally deny the role of a social content in art, as the Abstract Expressionists had. For the younger artists, the liberal ideals informing their art 'transcended' such issues. This attitude also served to make artists *unconscious* of many other implications of their work.



... Australian film, pro-  
... human values.  
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... Gibson (film) for the  
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... Nicholson for Film Australia.  
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Photographs. 1. Detail, Campbell's Soup Advertisement c. 1963 from Life magazine, 22 3/1963  
2. Andy Warhol, Campbell's Soup Can, 1964 (oil and silk-screen on canvas)  
3. Mrs. Joan Mondale with Warhol's Campbell Soup Can in the vice-president's mansion, Washington D.C.

## *The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath*

cultural forms to the still-elegant adjustments within elite intellectual production, including the officially-sanctioned high art styles.

By the mid-'sixties, the sanctioned styles of avant-gardism were Pop Art, Colourfield or Hardedge painting (or Post-Pantherly Abstraction) and Minimal Art. For the ambitiously avant-garde younger artist these formed the horizon of options to be 'worked through and beyond'. But they were also the styles which would function (i.e. be used) to legitimize the next avant-garde developments.

Looking back over the rapidly and successfully institutionalized avant-garde art of the later sixties, a strong sense of crisis remains in the work, appearing on a wide front and seeming to connect political and social consciousness to aesthetic attitudes. The art did not merely passively reflect the larger social milieu but was in fact undergoing its 'own' crisis as a necessary climax to its own recent history. This artistic crisis, while very much part of the pervasive condition throughout American society, needs to be examined in terms of its own specific character in order to unravel its participation in the larger crisis but also to identify how the issues were experienced and confronted in terms of its own specific production. In other words, both the 'autonomy' of high cultural forms *and* their 'integration' into a corporate capitalist culture have to be accommodated.

The symptoms of the crisis within avant-garde art surfaced in respect of the following characteristics. I have tried to describe them as fully as possible in the form they were experienced at the time.

### *(i) the deskilling of the practice of art*

Each of the early 'sixties styles was marked by a tendency to shift significant decision-making away from the process of production to the conception, planning, design and form of presentation. The physical execution often was not carried out by the artist who could adopt instead a supervisory role. While the execution frequently entailed quite rigorous control and technical proficiency, the scope of required skills was severely limited . . . or else it demanded skills of workers in other-than-art fields, where there was little advantage to be gained by the artist acquiring and competing with those skills.

This mode of production encouraged artists to devalue not just traditional skills but the acquisition of any skills demanding a disciplined period of training. Younger artists were faced with the conclusion that it was unnecessary to acquire any more than the few skills demanded to reproduce the particular style to which they were committing themselves.

While arguments can be made in favour of discarding 'anachronistic' practices in the face of 'space-age' technologies, what is so often overlooked is that skills are not merely manual dexterity but forms of knowledge. The acquisition of particular skills implies an access to a body of accumulated knowledge. Thus deskilling means a rupture with an historical body of knowledge – in other words, a dehistoricization of the practice of art.

This problem is an enduring one. For example, in Australia, the growth period for Australian art schools, as elsewhere, was during the 'sixties and early 'seventies, when the American influence was at its peak. Preferences for tenured positions in these schools was more often than not given to artists whose work directly acknowledged American influences. During the 'seventies, the tendency has been for art students to be taught traditional skills (e.g. figure drawing, composition, perspective, colour



theory, knowledge of materials and techniques) on an ever-decreasing scale. This, I would argue, is a heightened problem in Australia since the concept of an avant-garde has scarcely gained a tradition here. It has not been uncommon during the past decade for students to experience an avant-garde context during their art school years, but to find difficulty in sustaining such attitudes outside of the school and to then discover that they have not been taught skills to allow them to work in any other way.<sup>3</sup>

(ii) *the decreased importance of the physical object*

The devaluing of traditional skills threw into question the status of the work of art as a privileged object, as a special thing-in-itself. With few or no artistically-valued manual skills involved in the production of the work, it was hard to sustain the idea that the object itself was the exclusive embodiment of a special creative process.

Moreover, the official styles of the early 'sixties deflected importance away from the physical work of art itself, giving more weight to the conception of the work, the process by which it was produced, its context of display or its sheer existence ('presence'). The power of the work became the power it could reflect, through its immediate institutionalized context (galleries, museums, glossy magazines) – or through contexts it invoked associations with, e.g. the 'international style' which had become identified with the new corporate architecture, design and public-relations image; the advertising and symbolism of multi-national corporatism; the mass-reproduced imagery of the media, etc. Within the styles themselves, the tendency towards simplification and paring-away of 'non-artistic' elements gave the *illusion* of an essence being revealed – however, in retrospect, it has become clearer that the 'essence' lay not within a rigorous tradition of art but more within the realm of a repressive corporate way of life.

For one to accept the power of these early 'sixties styles implied (whether one was conscious of it or not) the acceptance of the power (i.e. dominance) of the corporate world over the individual. . . and that dominance was beyond challenge. To challenge this assumption meant attempting to create a 'personal' power of a similar nature and strength.

To place significance back onto the object again was a 'regressive' step in terms of avant-garde 'logic'. Yet how was one to conceive of the continuing practice of art as the production of objects lacking any importance in themselves?<sup>4</sup>

(iii) *the devaluation of subject-matter and recognizable imagery*

Under these circumstances, subject-matter could not be retained in any traditionally significant role. More often than not this entailed subject-matter itself being

3. A rather obvious consequence can be seen in many of the street murals being done by artists. Often they show a marked lack of proficiency with traditional skills, which is not a function of expediency. Hence they fall into an uncomfortable area displaying neither developed skills nor the naivety of untrained community-produced murals. While obviously this does not amount to a major criticism of such work, it is still the case that the intentions of the artists could be more readily conveyed through greater command of the skills of expression.

4. Similar ideas can be found in other areas of cultural production, from the 'transcendence' of the materialist values of Western society deriving from Eastern religious beliefs, to some of the ideas advocated within sections of the New Left, and particularly Herbert Marcuse. The latter, for example, supported the notion of an avant-gardism of ideas, while rebelling against the dictates of 'repressive reason' in which brute facts and mere objects became an outrage to the imagination, an attitude which extended into a moralistic 'horror of objects'.

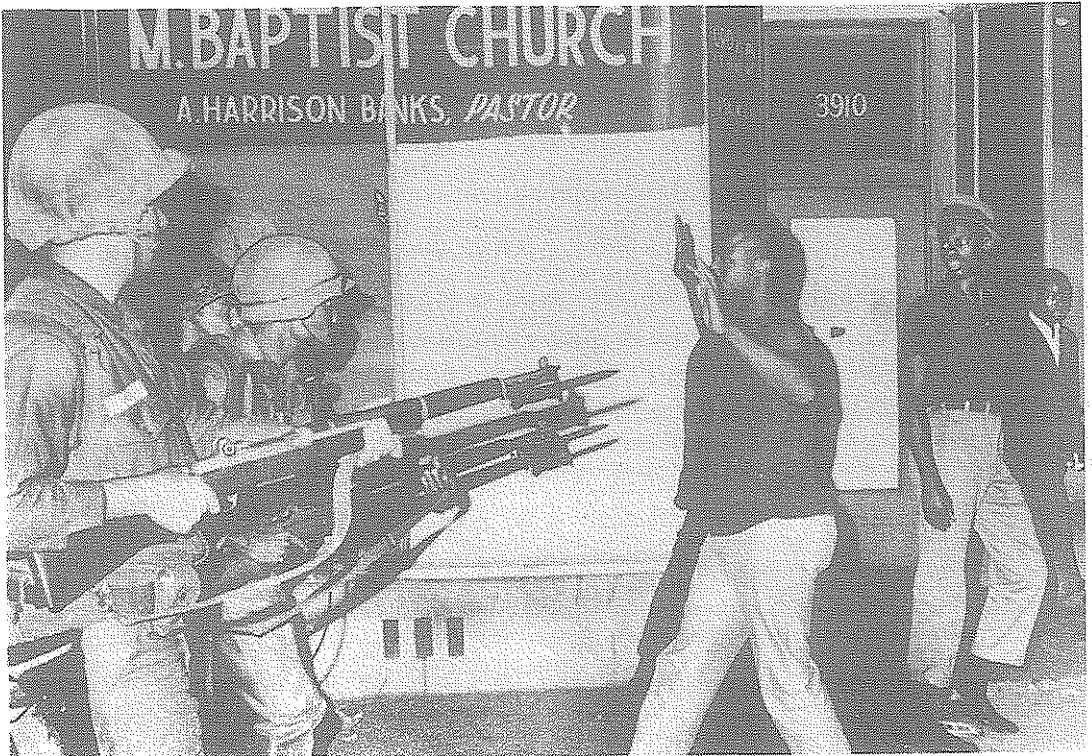
### *The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath*

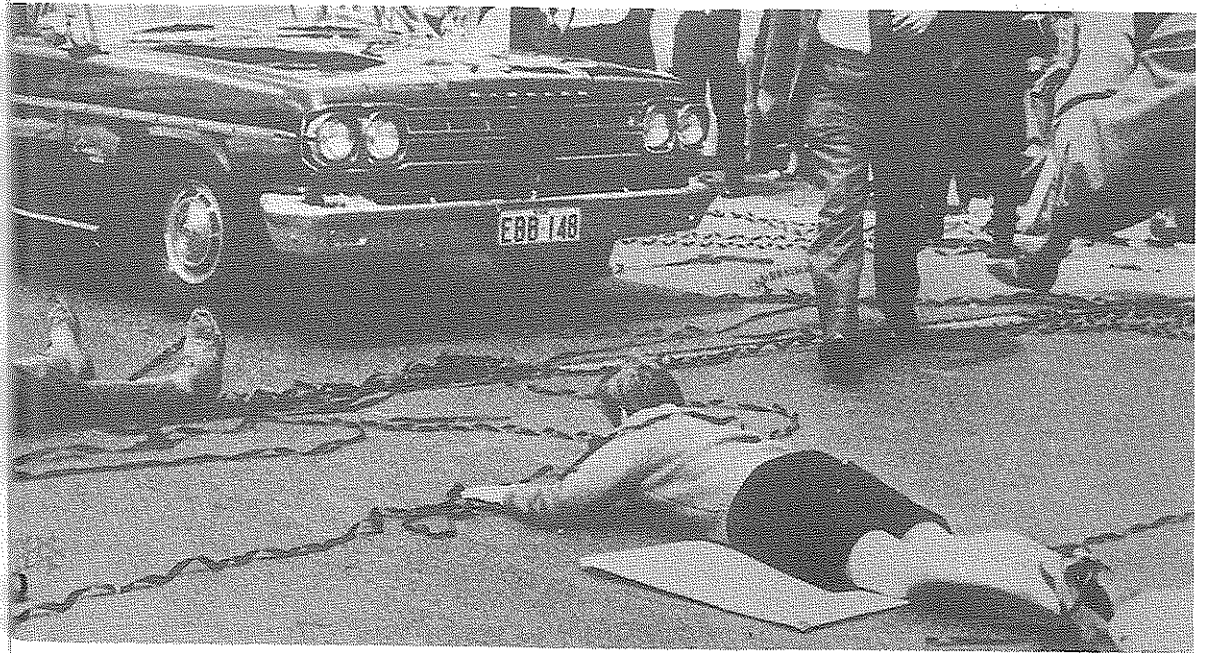
excluded or substituted for by a set of formal qualities. If a recognizable image was used (e.g. as by the Pop artists), then its 'meaning' could not be read literally. For example, the image of Coca Cola bottles was used, not because of what it depicted but for what it represented or symbolized. The image-associated power sought by the artists could not be satisfied by (e.g.) the image of a local Tarax soft drink bottle, but only by the 'international' (multi-national) symbol of corporate identity and domination.

#### *(iv) the negation of the artist as subject*

The corporate-like institutions of the New York art world and its international art marketing system were increasingly acting to determine the public 'meaning' of works of art. The artist's prerogative to determine a 'meaning' of his or her work had been eroded, indeed it seemed to have been surrendered almost willingly. Moreover, the body of knowledge of art traditionally acquired in association with its practice was being increasingly taken over by the new growth art-industries of art history departments, the publication of criticism, the contemporary museums and galleries. The perpetuation of many careers in these areas demanded that the territorial claims be defended by all conceivable means.

Thus success as an artist implied more than ever that one did not merely produce 'good art' but one had to produce 'history'. Indeed (and it has been commented on by other writers) there is much evidence in their attitudes and comments to show a growing 'art-historical' consciousness among American artists from the 1940s onwards, but which is paramount during the 'sixties. This was not a broad and culturally diverse sense of history, but a particular history conceived as a narrow lineage of styles, in relation to which the artist's task was to invent the next (formally) 'logical' step.





photographs, 1. Detroit, 2. Los Angeles, 3. Sydney (president L.B. Johnson's visit, 1966)

By conceiving of one's work as 'instant art history', one necessarily conceives of oneself as merely an object of that history – not a thinking, acting subject.

The tenets of the styles themselves encouraged artists to eliminate all personal reference and marks; the finished product hid rather than revealed the artist. Similarly, the viewer was presented with little to engage him or herself – increasingly a detailed familiarity with the recent avant-garde tradition was presupposed in order for the viewer to appreciate a work. One contemplated, not the work, but oneself experiencing an inability to engage the work. In other words, the nature of the work encouraged the viewer to experience him - or herself not as a thinking, acting subject.<sup>5</sup>

(v) *the commercialization of art*

From the mid-'fifties, art became big business on an unprecedented scale. The international art market centred in New York grew into a multi-million dollar industry and money literally poured through the market. The sheer impact of this on the process of art production itself has yet to be accounted for adequately.<sup>6</sup> Yet, by the mid-'sixties, it was an unavoidable experience for any artist involved with avant-garde art, and conflicted openly with the moralizing idealism of the artist in bourgeois society. Such intense commercialization was widely regarded to spell corruption and the prostitution of the artist . . . and every artist had a story to prove the point.

The agent of corruption was identified – albeit rather shortsightedly – as the commercial gallery system, while generally ignoring its role and interdependence in the larger marketing totality of museums, curators, historians, magazines, critics, collectors, private and state patronage, etc. The perpetuation of galleries depended on the trading of unique objects, which might be acquired as property and/or investment. Thus artists were faced with this moral dilemma: to continue to produce physically large objects, or indeed any objects at all, implied a commitment to producing the commodities on which galleries thrived; it implied conforming to the priorities of the property/investment art market.

(vi) *sexual and racial discrimination in art*

Since about the 1870s, women students have outnumbered men in art schools, yet the institutions and the history of art have continued to be dominated by men. Rising feminist consciousness during the 'sixties led to overdue questioning and challenging of the male-dominated status quo. Discrimination against women artists was shown to be in evidence in the museums and galleries, the magazines and the writing of art history.

Paralleling this, cases were made in respect to discrimination against black artists in the United States, though different class and cultural complexities exist in their circumstances.

5. Many of these points are very complex, and the necessarily simplified form in which they exist in this article is far from satisfactory.

6. I have made several tentative attempts to deal with this issue at particular moments, none of which I would hold as very successful: e.g. 'The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation', *Artforum* April 1975; 'Pricing Works of Art', *The Fox* #1, 1975; and 'Don Judd', *The Fox* #2, 1975 (with K. Beveridge).

Donald Kuspit has also obliquely addressed the problem in 'Pop Art: a Reactionary Realism', *Art Journal*, Fall 1976, and 'Authoritarian Abstraction', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Fall 1976.

While white male chauvinism was a fact of the market-place, it was also the case that the discriminatory values of the market had been 'internalized' as a normal function of the dynamic of the official avant-garde movements of the 'fifties and early 'sixties. These styles were blatant in their enshrinement of stereotyped 'masculinity', — the qualities sought and experiences reflected, the associations of particular materials, the sense of power, the relation to and manipulation of public spaces, and so on. It needs to be seen as no accident that male artists almost exclusively dominate Pop Art, Hardedge painting and Minimalism. With the devaluation of the role of artist as that of a thinking, acting subject, the artist's ability to act to overcome the male-biased values became impossible without challenging the whole framework and tradition. Thus one frequently found those discriminatory values being reproduced by both male and female artists, despite their other intentions.

Much has been written on the bias against women artists, but more close analysis needs to be done on the ideological biases of the dominant ideas and values in specific circumstances of art.

(vii) *the social disengagement of the artist*

The styles discussed are overt in their separation of art from any notion of politics. The mounting politicization of a growing sector of the American people, including artists, led to the realization by some of those artists that the officially-sanctioned styles could not be used in any fashion to express a critical view of American society. In other words, the artists' major means of expression was 'voiceless', incapable of conveying their outrage at the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Admittedly, for many, this was a quite acceptable situation — not because they endorsed those militarist actions, but because the belief that art naturally and rightly 'transcended' such issues was still widely and strongly held.

By their uncritical character, such styles should be seen as part of what has been called 'the affirmative culture', acquiescing to and by default endorsing all aspects of American society. For artists with commitments or investments in such styles, social and political protest became an activity engaged outside of art production.

This perhaps more than any other factor gave explicit focus to the sense of crisis. The social and political upheavals affected many of the artists, and increasingly there appeared an awareness of the conflict between their personal political views and the aesthetic ideology expressed through their work.

(viii) *the Americanization of art*

With greater financial support relating to control of and privileged access to the market, as well as favoured treatment by aspiring contemporary museums around the capitalist world, American artists had begun to travel widely. Increasingly they found themselves subjected to accusations of 'cultural imperialism'. Many of the artists began to be sensitive to this accusation, even if they were not very sensitive to the actual problem. There was however a gradual realization on the part of some of these artists that the work they were presenting, disseminating and publicizing did not 'transcend' the society in which it was produced, but was indeed intensely nationally chauvinistic.

This chauvinism followed similar lines of monopolistic-self interest which obsessed the corporate empires. One of the more offensive examples was the assumption that the particular styles produced in the United States were really 'international', while



anything else was not.<sup>7</sup> What needs more considered elaboration is the extent to which the official styles had come to reproduce the American corporate way of life, the sort of person it made you as you produced that kind of art, as you viewed and appreciated it.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this was less obvious to people in the United States, given the dominant role played by corporate values within everyday life. But the quite explicit use of this art by corporately-persuaded institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York made its Americanistic values all too apparent in other countries.<sup>9</sup>

The specific character of the American styles of the 'sixties separated them from most prior styles. The adoption of any one of those styles implied a concentrated but very narrow range of possible options. Diverse cultural and individual backgrounds tended to be negated or suppressed. There was, for example, little or no room left within the styles for 'Australianizing' Pop Art, or Colourfield or Minimalism. The consequence was, in places like Australia, that a generation of young artists became alienated from their own cultural specificity.<sup>10</sup>

The above listing characterizes the main aspects of the crisis of the late 'sixties in a generalized and probably incomplete fashion. What it does begin to suggest is the *complexity* of the issues as they were being experienced at the time. It also conveys the sense of the *interrelatedness* of the issues, and the manner in which aesthetic questions collided with social and political ones.

Given this situation, the process of sorting out which of the issues were the priorities depended largely on the conscious experiences of particular artists. For example, faced with a realization of the deskilling process, it is perhaps not surprising to discover a renewed interest in various forms of realist painting, including Photo-Realism. The latter evolved a particular mode of painting which permitted an obvious display of skill in depiction or imitation, yet without any real engagement with or emotional commitment to the subject-matter, thus maintaining a continuity with some of the major tenets of the recent abstract tradition. Their main interest in the subject-matter chosen was generally that it offered the right conditions for a display of a particular skill.

The rejection of the traditional status of the physical work of art was conceived in a variety of ways. Conceptual Art provided some of these (on which I will elaborate later), but also Body Art. Environments and Performances can all be interpreted in part as responding to this priority.

The devaluation of subject-matter and recognizable imagery in turn led to a

7. For example, Donald Judd: "... I think that American art is far better than that anywhere else but I don't think that situation is desirable. Actually, it's international art in America and the best thing that could happen would be equal international art elsewhere." *Studio International*, Feb. 1970.

8. The beginnings of such an elaboration can be found in M. Kozloff, 'American Painting during the Cold War', *Artforum* May 1973 and J. Tagg, 'American Power and American Painting', *Praxis* #2 (1976). A useful discussion of the context in which artists produced in the 'sixties, see W. Van Ness, 'The Minimal Era' in *Arts in Society*, Fall/Winter 1974.

9. See, for example, E. Cockroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon during the Cold War', *Artforum* June 1974. For an elaboration of the context of this period, see W. Hauptman, 'The Suppression of Art during the McCarthy Decade', *Artforum* Oct 1973.

10. To take one instance, consider the subsequent developments of many of the artists who showed in the 'The Field' exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, 1968 - and contrast their developments with Australian artists of the 'forties and 'fifties.

reconsideration of images. This is most apparent in relation to the newly expanded interest in photography, not just art photography but photographic images in every sense, including historical. This has occurred in a context in which more critical means of reading or analysing imagery are becoming more widely accepted. These means integrated, among other things, the heightened formalist analysis associated with the early 'sixties styles with ideological readings of the subject-matter, thus creating a more critical mode of reading images which has influenced artists, photographers, as well as writers and certain areas of art history.

The crisis in terms of the artist's self-conceived role led some to reject the objectification of the role in favour of acting as more responsible (initially moralistically so) subjects. This attempted to reclaim responsibility for the public 'meaning' of what one produced, and in general attempted to conceive of the practice of art in relation to broader ranging thinking processes, more socially responsible in a less restrictive intellectual context.

The reaction to the commercialization of art was wide and took many fairly obvious forms. It is perhaps enough here to point to the most obvious ranging from the rapid development of artist-run galleries and co-ops to the phenomenon of Earthworks, artworks whose material form is created *in situ* outside of the expected precincts of art. However the more successful responses gradually built up financial supports outside of traditional patronage structures and directed their production towards specific non-art audiences.

The challenge to sexual discrimination has been better documented than any other aspect of the crisis, mainly within feminist art publications such as *Lip* (Aust.), *Heresies* and *Feminist Art Journal* (both New York). But also of at least as much importance has been the nature of the work developed 'out of' the social and working relations within various women's collectives, which more than anything else has given weight to a critique of male chauvinist values.

The social and political disengagement implied by the dominant styles of the 'fifties and early 'sixties led artists to utilize wide ranging means to reconstruct their practices in socially more responsible ways. These included reconstructions within the avant-garde tradition, such as so-called Political Art, to greater interest in political posters, street murals and community-oriented art, to social activist and unequivocally political involvement.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in revulsion against the Americanization of contemporary art practices, there has emerged in many countries a renewed interest in the national, regional and local cultural forms and traditions. From that ground, conscious struggle against the imposition (and blithe or unwitting acceptance) of the values and forms of American culture has gathered strength. In addition, it has been realized that if work is produced in a context where it is liable to be reproduced and even exhibited 'around the world', then its 'meaning' cannot be simply that which it accrues in its original context. For example, the impact that a Minimal sculpture has in a place like Australia is as much a part of the 'meaning' as the effect it has in New York. In other words, work which is conceived to function in an 'international' context should be defined by the accumulation of 'international' 'meanings'. If particular kinds of work reproduce imperialist relationships in other contexts, then that is part of the work's 'meaning'. (This discussion connects with recent work on unequal exchange

11. For a useful account of this development, see T. Schwartz, 'The Politicalization of the Avant-Garde', *Art in America*, Nov-Dec 1971.

and questions concerning centre/periphery relations, some of which I hope to take up in a further installment of this article.)<sup>12</sup>

In the above, the connections made are the obvious and often more simplistic. Yet the majority of the connections are not simple or obvious. Nor are there single 'causes' for any movements or new interests. Nor for that matter were these developments simultaneous. Nonetheless the above does provide a number of suggestions to the way in which artists were acting and reacting within that crisis atmosphere.

In this section, I want to consider a specific case in the light of the above discussion. The reasons for choosing Conceptual Art are many, not merely personal involvement at the time. Conceptual Art participated and responded within the crisis atmosphere perhaps more self-consciously than any other contemporary work.

Generally, Conceptual Art can be seen as an amalgam of attempts to critically analyse and disassemble the situation in which artists were working, to assume a responsibility for articulating these ideas, and to develop ways of incorporating that critical perspective into the work of art itself. By these means, Conceptual Art hoped to transform the practice of art itself.<sup>13</sup> Such intellectual Luddism was unashamedly idealistic, and in retrospect the inadequacies of those initial critiques are patent – they were more symptomatic of the situation than remedial. Thus the piece-meal rationality built up into a composite irrationality. Nonetheless, Conceptual Art did contribute importantly to developing a groundwork from which more penetrating analyses of current art practices were generally realized.

This is not the moment to lay out a 'history' of the development of Conceptual Art or to elaborate a list of 'major' works. There are books and articles providing adequate enough surveys of work and which establish the individual 'heroes' for the market and history.<sup>14</sup> (However the discussion that follows presupposes some familiarity with that material.)

More than a decade has passed since Conceptual Art became a public and institutionalized style. Most styles of the 'sixties have since come under microscopic scrutiny through voluminous writings in magazines and books – often the kind of writing which would embarrass artists was it not at the same time directly connected to their 'success'. But Conceptual Art has been conspicuous by its comparative lack of discussion and the poverty of such discussion as has appeared. Reasons for this must include the role and historical location that Conceptual Art adopted during the critical period.

More than any other style during the 'sixties, Conceptual Art constituted itself upon *social* criteria. While the work was often disguised within apparently formalist objectives, its character still contained a social dimension of a kind incompatible with the ethos of other styles associated with the avant-garde tradition of the period.

12. For further elaboration on these points, see forthcoming article by Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen in *Arena*.

13. In retrospect, it is plain that there was at the time little consciousness of the historical derivations of form and content. Hence the way form arbitrarily determined content was not realized, nor was there any conscious development of the contradiction.

14. The most widely available books are U. Meyer's *Conceptual Art* (Dutton, 1972) and L. Lippard's *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Praeger, 1973).



There was no materialist analysis of the conditions of art production – indeed the understanding was very far from that, and can be seen as quite overtly utopian.

Thus perhaps the most significant thing that can be said to the credit of Conceptual Art is that it *failed*. In terms of its development, it failed to fulfil certain initial expectations and ideals, and its goals were in many ways unattainable. How this unfolded can only be elaborated through discussion of some of the more general tendencies within Conceptual Art.

Firstly, Conceptual Art was a specific reaction against the entrenched art marketing system. As pointed out above, the art object had become the symbol of commercialization and commodification of art – and the gallery was seen as the context in which that process occurred. There was in Conceptual Art a genuine attempt to produce a kind of art which eschewed such absorption by the market; in fact it saw itself in the process of divesting itself of the materialist aspects of the market.

Lucy Lippard's notion of the 'dematerialization' of the art object is perhaps the most widely known description of this process and was influential on a number of artists. However, the concept of 'dematerialization' – as she defined it, "a de-emphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness)" – remains highly problematic.<sup>15</sup> It seems that what we witnessed with Conceptual Art was an absolute separation of mental or intellectual work from manual work, with a revaluing of the intellectual and a devaluing of the manual. It is hard to avoid the analogy with the role of management in industry – but would we say that the mental work of management was a 'dematerialization' of the manual work? Of course not – the mental work represents the *withdrawal* of mental decision-making out of manual production, in order that management might more readily *control* production and workers. If the analogy is applied back to Conceptual Art, one is left with endless questions about why art should mimic that structure, why at this particular time, and so on.

While 'dematerialization' may perhaps be appropriate for describing some of the work, it is clearly inappropriate for other work. Certain work saw the object as a problem, not because it was an object, but because of its *special* or *privileged* status, a status which removes art objects from their everyday settings and renders them immune to commonsense assumptions. This attack on the object did at least acknowledge that the object existed within particular relationships, though there was little grasp of any means of transforming those relations. But the outcome did lead to realizations about the contradictory, the arbitrary and capricious nature of the category of art.

But there is a further consideration concerning the indictment of the role of the object. From the present vantagepoint, it is obvious that there was a marked failure to distinguish between objects and commodities, and in particular a failure to appreciate that one does not need to have an object in order to have a commodity.<sup>16</sup> Ideas can and do exist as commodities in societies like ours. What really counts is not whether or not something has a physical form, but rather the nature of the economic and social relations in which a particular form of production is embedded.

15. The concept was first discussed publicly in an article by Lippard and J. Chandler in *Art International* Feb 1968. For a contemporary critique of this use, see Lippard's book, pp. 43-44.

16. 'To become a commodity, a thing must pass by way of *exchange* into the hands of the other person for whom it is a use-value.' (Engels)

Thus this attack on the object was more a moralistic and emotional stance rather than a course of action based on social necessity.<sup>17</sup> Its moralism remained individualistic, and its necessity conformed too readily to the avant-garde ambience.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, Conceptual Art represented a tendency to use forms which were potentially more 'democratic', ie. the forms of mass communication and media. Works of art were (re)produced which existed solely or primarily in art magazines catalogues or books, and thus could potentially reach a wider audience, and faster, than an object exhibited in a gallery. Moreover, the art accrued some of the cultural aura associated with the media. This decision reflected a desire to move away from unique objects, to produce art which could not be owned in the traditional sense – often all one needed to do was to rip a page out of a magazine and pin it on your wall, in order to 'own' it. Elitism was equated with the unique object, and the utilization of media forms which did not encourage uniqueness seemed a way to escape the elitist tag.

The 'sixties were a time when Marshall McLuhan was widely read, while the political naivety of his 'global village' ideas was not very apparent as yet. He asserted that the medium was the message. If the medium is the message, that effectively negates any other functioning of the content.<sup>19</sup> But to avant-gardists committed to the search for formal innovation, this justified a 'contentless' trek through the many possible media forms . . . from hiring men to walk Paris streets carrying sandwich boards covered with stripes, to a tape-recording of a mathematics lecture playing continually in an art gallery, to telegrams to friends assuring them of the artist's continued existence, to billboards in the middle of a New Mexico desert quoting to passing motorists a section of the Synopsis of Categories of Roget's *Thesaurus*. It also led many artists into publishing their own books and journals, and to realize that form as the primary outlet for their ideas and art.<sup>20</sup>

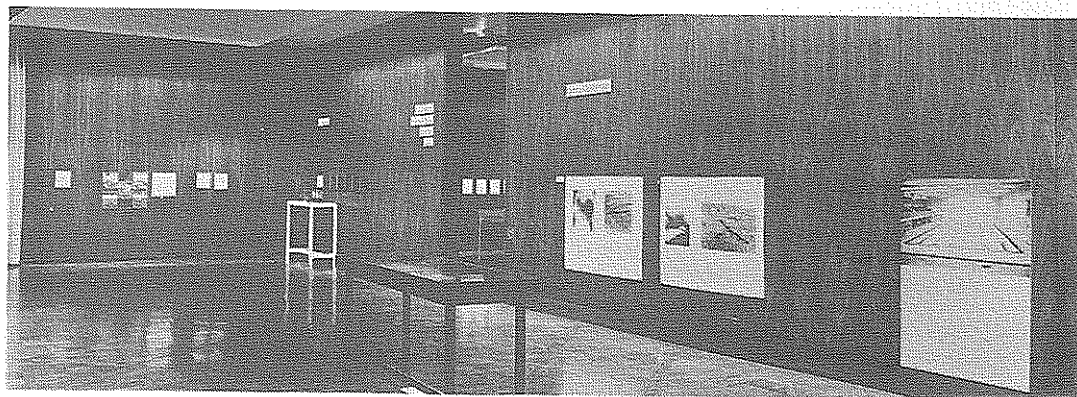
17. For example, in an interview in 1969, Lawrence Weiner said:

I do not mind objects, but I do not care to make them . . . Industrial and socioeconomic machinery pollutes the environment and the day the artist feels obliged to muck it up further, art should cease being made. If you can't make art without making a permanent imprint on the physical aspects of the world, then art is not worth making. In this sense, any permanent damage to ecological factors in nature not necessary for the furtherance of human existence, but only necessary for the illustration of an art concept, is a crime against humanity. (U. Meyer, *Ibid* p. 217)

18. We should not underestimate the function of the concept of avant-gardism in shaping the attack on the object. The concept of avant-gardism projects its own 'necessity', irrespective of any social awarenesses. It locates the artist within an alienated sense of necessity, 'a necessity of one's own un-necessity'. The residual strength of the concept in conceptual art is apparent in the historicist statements of some of the artists. Robert Barry (speaking of his own radio-wave transmissions): "I guess it was the first invisible art" (Meyer, *Ibid*, p. 36); Joseph Kosuth: "I am perhaps the first artist to be out of the grip of the 19th century" (catalogue statement 1969); Douglas Huebler: "I was one of the first people to use language with photography", *Journal*, Southern California Art Magazine, no. 15, p.38). Such comments are the function of 'art-historical' consciousness: to establish precedents in some often trivial formal innovation could be assumed to be enough to guarantee a place in 'art history'. Given this, to do away with the object was probably the most avant-garde option open to artists at the time.

19. There may be an interesting parallel between McLuhan and Clement Greenberg which could be developed through a comparison of McLuhan's notion that the medium is the message and that each medium is unique, with Greenberg's argument that the task of the Modernist artist is to isolate the unique features of painting.

20. As a dealer in the late 'sixties, Seth Siegelaub held 'exhibitions' of his artists in which the



Photographs, 1. Part of 750,000 anti-war protestors in Washington, November 15, 1969. photo: Brian Shannon: source: *Out Now* by Fred Halstead, (Monad Press, New York, 1978)  
2 & 3. Installation views, *Conceptual Art & Conceptual Aspects* exhibition, New York Cultural Centre, April 1970

## *The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath*

Thirdly, tendencies within Conceptual Art gave expression to more direct and personal relationships. This was a sort of self-externalization, or avant-garde 'humanism', set against the overwhelming impersonalism of Pop, Colourfield and Minimalism. However, what was allowed to count as personal and individual was constrained by a narrow and particular concept of the individual, one which conformed to the definition of the individual in a mass consumer society. Not surprisingly this aspect of Conceptual Art often led to excesses, ranging from the recounting of whimsical personal anecdotes to narcissistic obsessions. Nonetheless this still represented the reclaiming, in part of a personal/social relationship and expression within the practice of art.

Fourthly, given the withdrawal from the production of unique objects, more collectively-organised work became possible and numerous artists began working in groups. Not only was that possible, but work could emerge which reflected the collective socialization process, that is which grew 'out of' the working interaction between the artists in the group.

The fifth point to be made points to the process of self-re-education by artists and the development of a more critically informed understanding of their own situation. This was one of the functions of reclaiming for the artist a more subjectively active and potentially more self-liberating role. Despite the naivety of much of it, it opened certain doors which had been shut for some time. It encouraged attempts to demystify the art process, and to acquire intellectual tools which might assist in this task.

Other general points could be made, but the above is enough to indicate the social and the 'progressive' implications within a number of attitudes in Conceptual Art. It is possible to see how, within that particular 'movement' during the late sixties, artists participated in the broader crisis in American society through a self-conscious struggle to resolve certain social issues in relation to their specific means of production.

But each of the above attitude contained implications which could only undermine the attitudes held. For example, how long can you use mass media forms before becoming aware of the political and economic function of mass media in a capitalist society? <sup>21</sup> How long do you need to work collectively before realizing that genuinely collective work is antagonistic to the hierarchical social relations of a capitalist society? How long can you give expression to your most personal feelings within an alienating market structure before realizing you are also alienating you own personal feelings? After you realize that the market can operate by selling ideas just as readily as it sells objects as commodities — how long can you continue to believe you are being subversive towards the market?

exhibition consisted solely of a catalogue of the works being published. Siegelau's own history is not without interest: he moved from being a fairly straight dealer, to a shrewd promoter of a group of conceptual artists, to an involvement in artists' rights and art politics, to his present role as a part of a publishing group in Paris which publishes an important range of left cultural critiques. In this fashion, Siegelau parallels the history of many artists who moved through Conceptual art to more direct engagements with 'real-world' issues. By comparison, the Conceptual artists he was promoting have proven to have far more conservative ideals and histories (or even arrested developments).

21. For example, many people involved in the various protest movements advocated using the media all the time. But one of the most divisive techniques of the mass media is over-exposure. The Situationists criticized the deliberate use of the mass media: "The revolt is contained by over-exposure. We are given it to contemplate so that we shall forget to participate".

In other words, Conceptual Art evolved in a context of trying to find some resolution to the issues experienced within that crisis atmosphere. But within its development new contradictions emerged which made impossible their resolution as part of the avant-garde tradition of modern art. In this manner, Conceptual Art failed . . . though its failure is significant. Nor can one blame the victims for complicity. That some artists have invented successful careers as Conceptual artists and others have continued to cling to unsuccessful careers cannot impinge on the profound inability to resolve those contradictions.

Conceptual Art had a dual character: on the one hand, the social nature of the work was progressive; on the other, its structural adherence to the avant-garde geography was conservative. Insofar as art history has chosen to notice only the latter, its reactionary aspect has dominated.<sup>22</sup>

But the history of the other no longer exists as art history. For those who took the inevitable steps beyond Conceptual Art — and stepped outside of the market-dominated avant-garde heritage — part of the understanding of the necessity of this was arrived at as a *function of* Conceptual Art and not despite it. The real value of Conceptual Art lay in its *transitional* (and thus genuinely historical) character, not as a style in itself.

22. For example, Lippard, in the 'Postface' to her book, complains that her earlier hopes were shattered by the rapid commercial success enjoyed by Conceptual artists. But she has chosen to be only aware of that work which has broached the market.