

an inadequate history of conceptual art*

SILVIA KOLBOWSKI

After a number of years of observing the resurgent interest in Conceptual art in Europe, the United States, and parts of Asia and Latin America, I was motivated to produce a project that would raise some questions about its return. This return has taken various forms: retrospectives, revived careers, academic and press attention, market interest, the coining of the term neo-conceptualism, and, more recently, books. The intended purpose of this project was to slow down the rapidity with which this return occurred, in order to be able to look more closely at its significance. I thought that if I asked artists to speak from memory about conceptual projects from the past, the recountings would include both valuable recollections and the fallacies of human memory. It seemed that these fallacies, the stutters of memory, so to speak, could trouble the fluidity of the official return.

In 1998, I sent letters to sixty artists, asking them to participate in this project. Forty artists agreed to respond to the following statement: "Briefly describe a conceptual art work, not your own, of the period between 1965 and 1975, which you personally witnessed/experienced at the time. For the sake of this project, the definition of conceptual art would be broad enough to encompass such phenomena of that period as actions documented through drawings, photographs, film, and video; concepts executed in the form of drawings or photographs; objects where the end product is primarily a record of the precipitant concept, and performative activities which sought to question the conventions of dance and theater."

* This project was first exhibited in September 1999 at American Fine Arts Gallery, New York, and in January 2000 at The Oliver Art Center, CCAC, Oakland. Another version was exhibited in the Whitney Biennial, 2000. Note that in order to capture some of the spoken quality of the recordings in text form, pauses in speech are indicated by ellipses. Although the installation format allows the spectator to distinguish between male and female voices, the printed version does not. Thanks to Makram El-Kadi, who assisted in the coordination of the project, and to all the artists for their generous contributions of time and thoughts.



To date, twenty-two artists have been recorded. The artists were told not to mention their own names, the names of the artists whose work they described, or the titles of the works. They could mention the dates of the works and the locations. In addition, their hands were videotaped in close-up while their accounts were being audio-recorded. In the resultant audio-video installation, which includes the consecutive voices of twenty-two artists, the large projected images of their hands play without sound and out of synch with the audio component of the artists' voices. If Conceptual art questioned the privileging of the artist's hand, here the hands return, quasi-readable, expressive and detached at the same time. Neither the video nor the audio component were edited; the audio played on a Bang & Olufsen Beosound 9000 CD player, a high-end audio system that was, according to its recent advertisement, "Created. Not made."

The majority of the artists selected works within the time frame, while several deviated. The following artists were included in the installation (in alphabetical order):

Vito Acconci, Dennis Adams, Mac Adams, Connie Beckley, Dara Birnbaum, Mel Bochner, Hans Haacke, Eileen Hickey-Hulme, Mary Kelly, Joyce Kozloff, Louise Lawler, Les Levine, Jonas Mekas, Alan McCollum, Howardena Pindell, Lucio Pozzi, Yvonne Rainer, Dorothea Rockburne, Al Ruppertsberg, Carolee Schneemann, Lawrence Weiner, James Welling.

Following is an "excerpt" of the project, including several of the transcribed accounts from the audio recordings and stills from the video.



an inadequate history of conceptual art. 1998–99.
Installation view, American Fine Arts, Co. New York.
(Photo: Takahiro Imamura.)

1. The event I will attempt to describe took place probably around 1964 at the York Theater. I think it was on York Avenue, in the Sixties, Seventies? It may not be there any longer. There were actually two things I remember from that evening. There was a proscenium stage. A folding screen, accordion folding screen, was set up, and projected against it was a film of the sea, of waves, a very rough sea. And obviously someone was behind the screen and . . . knocking, making these knocking sounds. Perhaps on the screen. So what you saw was this ordinary room divider, a projection of the ocean and these knocking sounds on the screen. That was all. It went on for about fifteen minutes. Another event that same evening was an empty stage, and the light battens were half way down and they were turned on and the house lights were turned off—and then there would be a cross fade and the house lights would come on and the stage lights would go off!

So there was this constant cross fading of the stage and the house lights. It was all about . . . light, I guess. And that went on for about fifteen minutes, and nothing else. And that was that evening, as far as I remember.

I guess I should ask myself why this stuck in my mind all these years, over thirty years. It was in the middle of the minimalist surge and things of such a simple nature seemed quite astounding, as though we had never seen light before or never seen that particular convergence of simple events—the sea and a bedroom screen and a sound that was so totally recognizable and quotidian. So this kind of juxtaposition, quotidian juxtaposition of unlikely materials was quite exhilarating, it was totally exhilarating. And duration of course was not . . . you didn't expect a variety of incidents. So the duration of one thing or one combination of things was not a problem for anyone at that time. . . . Might be a problem for me now.



2. Let me think. Right. The piece I'm going to talk about was, let's see, it must have been early or mid-'70s. It was a performance at 112 Greene Street. And it was in the evening. This was when 112 was real funky, and I remember seeing a lot of green paint crumbling off the walls. This was a performance that took place in the elevator shaft. The artist was in the elevator shaft, and he was going to invite three people to come into the elevator shaft and to stick pins in him.

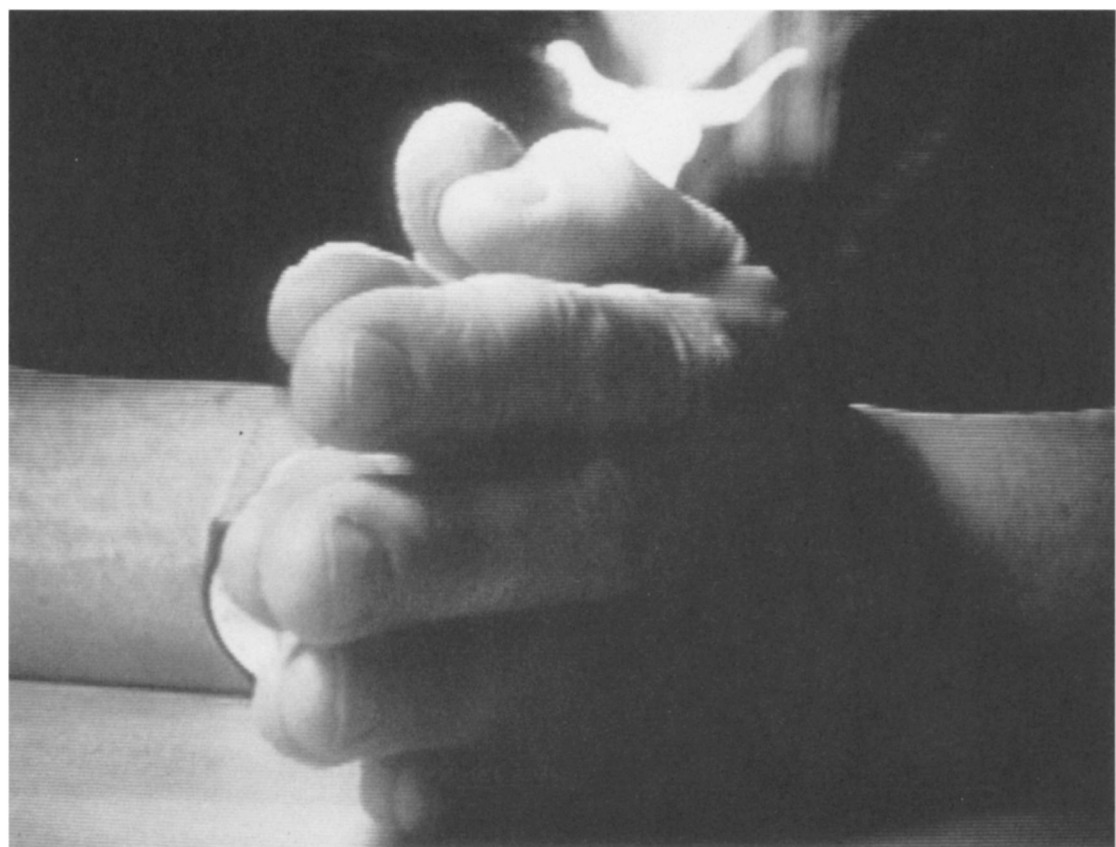
I found that a very strange thing, but I think what was strange was that there were quite a lot of people—I can't remember how many, maybe fifty or sixty people. And I think what struck me about the whole thing was the audience's response. 'Cause the elevator shaft looked, it had that greeney kind of paint that old lofts had, and a little kind of window, I remember seeing a kind of—I never actually saw the person in there. Maybe I did, I think I saw him lying down, with just his pants on, lying on some kind of table or something. Through the window. And there was a kind of guard at the door saying we weren't allowed in, we could look through. It looked a little bit like a kind of execution chamber. I thought, this is a very strange kind of thing to look at.

But the people there were sort of festive; it struck me as a little bit like a carnival. I mean people had wine and they were standing around and talking about when's it going to happen, and who's going to go in there and do this, and people would joke and say, well, what if they stick the pins in his eyes, or they stick him in his testicles—I mean where are they going to stick these pins, who's going to do it? [laughter] And I can't remember exactly what was going on, but it seemed like we were there for like an hour, and people were starting to get really impatient. I could see that people were starting to get really pissed off that they had to stand there and hang around. It wasn't getting unruly, but it was a little bit like a carnival show. I was thinking, I mean what am I doing here? Why do I need to look at this, to see someone get stabbed with pins?

And then someone said, "Okay we're going to start," and everyone really wanted to be selected to go in and do this. And then all of a sudden they open up the door and I remember people saying "His friends are here, his friends are here." And then people said "It's a setup, he's only going to have some friends come in, so they'll stick him in his fingers or something, they're not going to stick him in his eyes." I mean [laughter] it was really a very strange response, and then the door opened and somebody went in and came out, and then somebody else went in and did it, and nobody ever saw where the pins were stuck or how they were stuck. And that was it! It was very anticlimactic, in the sense that there was no drama.

But I guess the reason that I'm talking about it is that it stuck with me for a long time as to what this was all about. And I guess the question was what it wasn't about. I think the reason that it stuck with me so long was that it wasn't about a sort of aestheticization of objects, I guess it was about tension, the psychological space of people being invited to penetrate this person's body, the danger of it, the temporariness of it, and it could, I guess, have been really nasty. But it worked out kind of fine, I guess.

But the whole thing still has a kind of resonance with me, in terms of why people . . . as a piece of sculpture, the idea of stabbing someone with little pins. I still think it was kind of powerful. Today, imagine someone doing that—it could be deadly, you'd think there could be AIDS, there'd be all kinds of contamination. The risk factor would probably increase a lot.





3. I'm somewhat resisting your original request that it has to be something that I experienced. But as far as actually seeing, I'm not even sure. I heard about this piece. It was done in California, I believe in . . . the '70s, but you know, it maybe even wasn't done. I have seen the location. What it is is a collector's home, who commissioned a work by an artist. The artist moved a wall, a property line wall, a stone wall. He gave the next-door neighbors an extra, I felt it was an extra six square feet of property. And that was the piece. I like telling people about it, because I like it a lot. But I don't think I actually saw it.





4. Well, it's 1972. You can imagine, just the height of the student anti-war movement, the women's movement, the beginnings of so-called "new art" in London. I'm outside the Hayward Gallery with leaflets, trying to get people to join the artists union. And in fact, it was really hot and lots of people were coming. Kitaj just signed up. But all the time, I was anxious to get into the exhibition. And I remembered a peculiar feeling of inside/outside. You know, on the one hand being committed to this organization of artists and the sort of broader politics of the trade union movement, and on the other being absolutely caught up in the, not just the polemic of the second stage of conceptual art, but really with the look, which is something difficult to explain. But on the one hand, if I just went back to saying, well, this move from the first to the second phase involved in the process of interrogating the interrogation, some sort of move that was often described as . . . engaged with . . . sociality in the sense of simply communication . . . here it was exactly the place that I had been thinking about problematizing the notion around the . . . issue of the subject, and subjectivity. And I knew there was work in the show that I was dying to see. And finally, you know, before we finished the leafletting, I got into the show. And one of the pieces being shown there was *absolutely* amazing for me at this time. It was a room full of . . . cabinets, really. And filing systems. And a proposal to be dealing with the complete meta-discursive . . . catalog of aesthetics, right? And I thought, well, would I go and open all of these, these cases? It was just the thrill of thinking it was beyond anything that I could possibly go through in its entirety. And it was the point where I realized that it actually was the *look* of the archive—it wasn't what I would find in it, but that it was just actually the idea that you couldn't see anything from the outside. But you conceptualized that system. And it was one of the things that kind of drove me in the polemic of my early work to think how I could make some sort of reference. Not *within* that structure of the fine art institution itself, but to use that in a way that would go outside. But the experience of that piece has remained with me and has formed kind of the basis of everything that I kind of worked against, on the one hand, but remained visually very cathected for me.

5. This was . . . there were two performances that I remember, when I was living in L.A. in the late '60s, early '70s and this took place, the first one that I remember the most about took place . . . I would say in the early '70s, I don't remember exactly the year, or the month or anything, but it was sometime in the early '70s. And, it took place in John Baldessari's studio. It was just a good artist's studio at the time. It could have taken place anywhere, but it was just that John had a good space for it and John was also friends with this artist, as I was. And so it was a kind of word-of-mouth performance that . . . nobody knew exactly what it was going to be. The artist was getting ready to leave town, and this was going to be his final work, final performance, final everything for L.A., and the word just kind of spread out and when I got there, the studio was filled with people and nobody knew what to expect.

And, so then the artist came, and he goes to the front of the studio, and I don't remember if first . . . either first he took off all his clothes, or first he gave this long monologue, a kind of serious psychological monologue about what he had been going through. And it was real personal and very intense. It kind of set the tone immediately because it was so emotional and self-analytical and all this kind of process he'd been going through and all of the things that had led up to his, if I remember right, his departure from town. And the nature of this performance and all of these kinds of things came out in this monologue. And so I guess then he took off all of his clothes and got on top of a table and said that he wanted a male member of the audience to come up and give him a blow job. And everybody was just like *dead silent*.

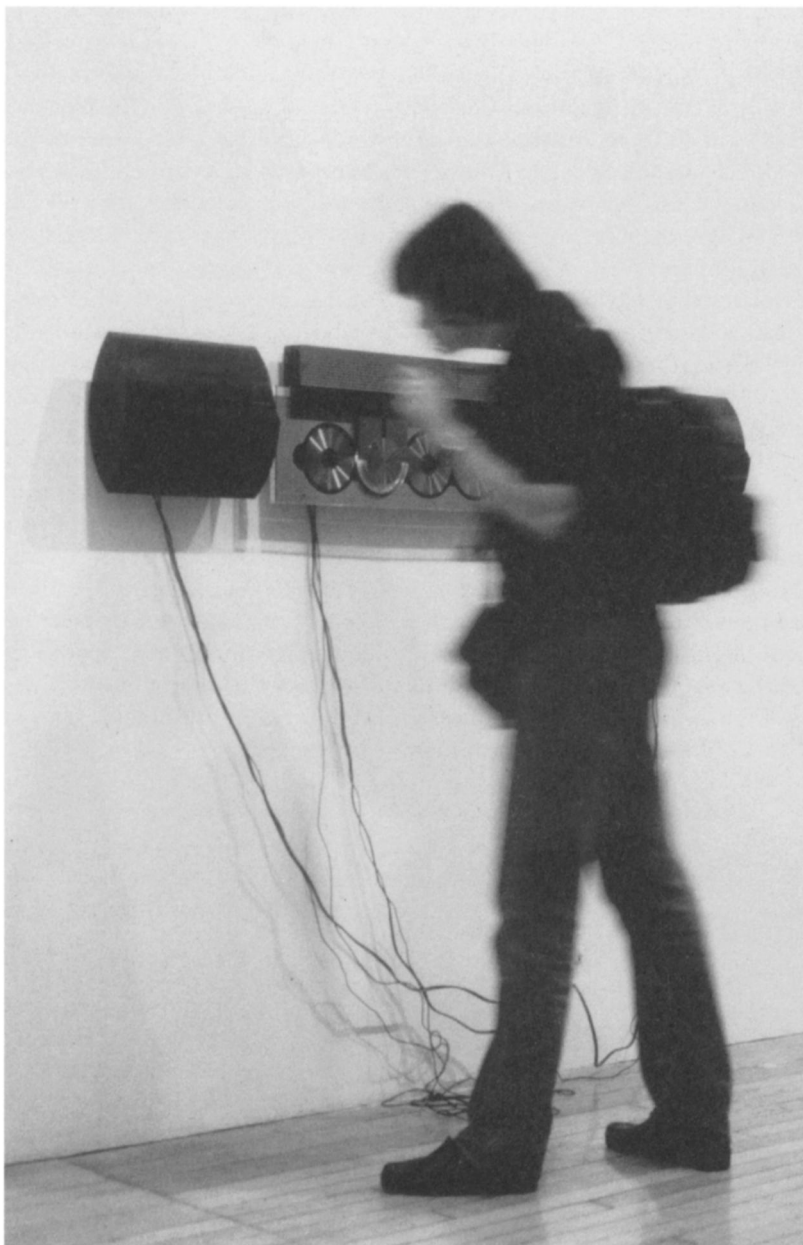
So then he had to get a hard-on and this became *excruciating*. Nobody would come up, I mean everybody sat there stunned . . . also because of the psychological monologue that had gone on beforehand. And so nobody did anything and he had to get an erection. And he couldn't. And he tried everything, and it went on and on and on, and it was so like, kind of creepy. All this time he was talking to the audience, and going through more of this self-examination and why he wanted to do this. It got more and more excruciatingly embarrassing. Embarrassing for *him*. And so I don't know how long it was. Maybe after twenty minutes, one half hour of this, finally, all of a sudden a guy jumps up out of the audience, who was with his girlfriend, and he jumps up and he says "I'll do it." And the girlfriend—we all looked over, of course—and the girlfriend was just horrified, because it came out of the blue.

Then I don't really remember. I just remember that the guy went up there, and I don't think that the artist ever got an erection, and the whole thing was so awful that eventually it was—I don't know if it actually had a conclusion or not, or if all of a sudden he said "That's enough, it's over," or whatever. But people started to stream out of there. The whole thing probably lasted about forty-five minutes or something, I don't know. Nobody knew what to say or what to make of the whole thing and everybody just felt kind of weird and left. Very quietly, on your own, you just left. So [laughter], that's all I know. And then he came out of there and he got

in his car and he was on the way to his new house out of state and he got in a car accident and died.

And of course we didn't know that until weeks afterwards, that this had really happened, and so the whole thing obviously got all mixed up with all kinds of feelings for him and what the art was, and for his work and his life and everything. And so that has become a kind of . . . for the people who were there, nobody has ever forgotten it. And everybody has certain feelings about the whole thing. It's just so bizarre, that it was without a doubt the most bizarre performance that I ever saw. It was so much about real life, that it made other performances pale in comparison.





an inadequate history of conceptual art. *Detail view with Bang & Olufsen CD player. American Fine Arts, Co. (Photo: Takahiro Imamura.)*

6. My memory of the piece is somewhat vague, just simply time, and I had been in a very bad car accident before I saw the piece. So my memory—I had a head injury—so my memory is still a little peculiar. But I had gone to Iowa City to do a visiting artist stint, and this artist was a very good friend of mine, and she happened to be in Iowa City doing an earthwork piece. So after I did my obligatory lecture, I went to the outskirts of Iowa City to an area that looked like it had been perhaps part of a flood plane? Because suddenly you have the normal landscape turn into what looks like a ravaged landscape, where you can see tree roots and you have gullies and fissures in the earth. And she was digging in the earth creating a human form that was part of the earth, and I can't remember whether some of the forms that were dug were on fire ... it's very sort of vague to me, but I remember how scary the landscape looked and I kind of felt worried about walking around in it, for fear I might fall through. I just, after the accident I still physically was not that strong.

So this, let's see now, this occurred October 23rd/24th—or at least this particular artist visit—1980, which was about a year practically, because the accident was 1979, in October, about a year from my accident date. And I remember being puzzled by the piece in a way, because it felt like one needed to have the whole landscape in your view to enjoy what the piece represented, although the artist would photograph the installation. I felt very privileged to have what you would call a full body experience [laughter], you know, where I could see the piece or the pieces, and have a sense of the scope of it relative to how the whole landscape felt, which I think the photograph of course can only give you sort of a narrow focus of the piece. That's about all I remember.

OCTOBER

92

Rosalind Krauss

*"The Rock": William Kentridge's Drawings
for Projection*

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

*Raymond Pettibon: Return to Disorder and
Disfiguration*

Silvia Kolbowski

an inadequate history of conceptual art

Helen Molesworth

House Work and Art Work

Mignon Nixon

Posing the Phallus

Hal Foster

An Art of Missing Parts

Helen Molesworth

Stops and Starts