

Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub Reply to Benjamin Buchloh on Conceptual Art

We are here reprinting, at the request of Joseph Kosuth, the following replies to Benjamin Buchloh's "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," which appeared in October 55 (Winter 1990). These replies were written in response to the version of the essay that appeared in L'art conceptuel: une perspective (Paris: Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989). Kosuth's initial response was inserted into the first edition of the catalog, and the revised version printed below (which Kosuth has now further revised with the addition of a comment on Buchloh's footnote 28 [footnote 29 in the October version]) appeared, together with a response by Seth Siegelaub, in the second edition of the catalog. The quotations within the replies come from the version of Buchloh's essay that appeared in the catalog.

It is the first time in my experience that I have seen a participant in an historical survey show attacked—much less with such vehemence. When it is an art historian who takes as his task the defamation of a living artist in character, work, and name, the situation is even more difficult to countenance. I do not propose that Mr. Buchloh give up his grim subjectivity. Yet, it should not escape notice that his attack is primarily a personal one and grounded in my *writings*, rather than an analysis of my work. Whether Mr. Buchloh's newfound writing style—apparently developed for this occasion—is intended to pass as theory or art history undoubtedly will provide some amusing speculation, but in any case it does a disservice to both while satisfying the requirements of neither.

Unfortunately, the moralism at the root of Mr. Buchloh's journalism does not translate into a professional ethic. In his systematic condemnation and ridicule of my work, he breaches not only the trust I placed in his personal assurances of a fair and objective reading of this period—he engages in a wholesale falsification of a history—and not only my own. I would only hope that the blatant cronyism hiding below his "history" of conceptual art and his biased and judgmental diatribe leveled against my work does not escape the attention of the reader of this catalog.

This letter will not address the score of injustices in Buchloh's article nor will it attempt to show the limitations of his history of the readymade. He had five months to write his article and I have had two days to digest it. I will merely cite two of the most blatant falsehoods, saving an itemized account for a later date.

Footnote 6. Apparently, Mr. Buchloh did not read *Art after Philosophy* closely. On Kawara is included. I admire and respect both On Kawara and Sol LeWitt and resent anything else being implied. Excuse me if I was influenced by Judd and Morris and not by Buchloh's choices. Their agenda as artists was something quite separate from mine. This is common knowledge to those familiar with the period. The bad faith attribution of my motives is uncalled for. Although Buchloh never asked me, I will say that I never saw *Red Square, White Letters* by Sol LeWitt until the seventies and was surprised and interested in it. In any case, it is certainly an anomaly in his work.

As for SVA, I was notorious there when I was a student for questioning the teachers. So much so, in fact, that the director of the school, Silas Rhodes, put me on the faculty at the age of twenty-two.

Footnote 18. The exhibition space referred to was called the Lannis Gallery (after my cousin Lannis Spencer, who was paying the rent) for the first month, and the Museum of Normal Art thereafter. I never called it the "Lannis Museum" and corrected anyone who did. Those familiar with this period know this, as well as the fact (as usual unmentioned) that it was the space where Hanne Darboven, Robert Ryman, On Kawara, and others were publicly exhibited very early—if not for the first time. This fact and activities such as my show "Fifteen People Present Their Favourite Book" in 1967 (among others) is curiously omitted. By 1967, I was working on the *First Investigation* and never exhibited the *Proto-Investigations* at the Lannis Gallery. All this is known and documented.

This brings us to his most reprehensible attack—even beyond the bounds of Buchloh's infamous polemics. It concerns the date of my *Proto-Investigations*. Ever-diligent in supporting the causes of his friends (Mr. Buchloh has heretofore not published on my work, although he borrows the voice of an "expert" on Conceptual Art here), my early work presents a special problem for this group, as it does for their champion. As I stated very clearly at the time (Buchloh could have asked Seth Siegelaub et al. about this, rather than interviewing individuals who neither knew my 1965 work nor had anything to gain by supporting me, to put it mildly), these works existed only in notes or drawings and were fabricated after I had the financial resources due to interest in the somewhat later work. Of course I was asked "what did you do before?" notably by Gian Enzo Sperone, among other critics and gallerists. Again, this is all known, if not by Mr. Buchloh. I simply had no funds at that age to fabricate works, and frankly, with no hope to exhibit them at the time—and with the nature of the work being what it was—there really was no point. This work is titled *Proto-Investigations*, clearly from the vantage point of the Investigations. Is the physically exhibited presence of a work the only criterion for its existence? It isn't, if you know anything about Conceptual Art. In contrast to his claims, Mr. Buchloh did not ask me to provide any documentation about this early period. I find it bitterly ironic that he singles out my work to have legitimate dates questioned while the dates of two of his friends' works are patent fabri-

cations that are left unchallenged. Or are these diversionary tactics the purpose of his essay?

In order to isolate and dismiss me as a modernist, Mr. Buchloh simply stops discussing my activities at the moment they can be favorably compared with the work of his friends on the issue of “institutional critique.” The period from *The Second Investigation* through to the period of *The Fox*—the years covered by this exhibition—is completely missing. At the same time, Mr. Buchloh takes insights, terminology, even a philosophical agenda from this early text of mine and naturalizes it in the process of validating the work he wants to support. And he would have you believe, dear reader, that the “institutional critique” which he ascribes only to the work of his chums burst forth out of thin air, and could have done so without benefit of this early writing and the work which went with it.

Mr. Buchloh seems desperate to either deny the work I did or to attribute it to someone else. In good faith I accepted the assurance of Buchloh and others that a hatchet job of this sort would neither be done nor permitted. Buchloh and I had one two-hour conversation (our first) after which it was agreed that we should correspond and exchange summer addresses. I never heard from him again. Apparently he opted for the easier job of a partisan attack rather than doing the necessary homework for a text more appropriate to such a catalog. A press release for a gang of pals should not be confused with historical scholarship. With this text, Mr. Buchloh disqualifies himself once and for all from being taken seriously on this subject.

Footnote 28. Mr. Buchloh is himself a very adept modernist who uses an endless citation of “facts”—dates, quotes, references, cited works, and so forth for the purpose of constructing a scholarly, “authoritative” genealogy. Yet glaring errors abound. In this footnote, to cite one with remarkable implications, he cites my *First Investigations*, in passing, as *paintings*. Those works, texts of definitions from my dictionary, are mounted photographs. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of my work knows that this work, as well as the *Proto-Investigations*, used photography. The literature of and on this period, not to mention my own writing on this work, is replete with references to it because of its philosophical/ideological importance for an art engaged with signification rather than auratic manipulation of form. Either Benjamin Buchloh is breathtakingly ignorant of the movement he is claiming expertise in (as other errors would suggest), or he has intentionally misrepresented facts of this history in order to support a subjectively inspired polemic (as the rest of his manipulation of the facts would indicate).

—Joseph Kosuth, November 19, 1989, and April 20, 1991.

Despite claims and occasional footnote references to the contrary, Buchloh's text is a formalistic and idealistic one, a sort of tautological "art history as art history," which has little, if any, relationship to the social, economic, or cultural, i.e., historical, period which it pretends to describe. Although the text claims to deal with the production of art between 1962 and 1969, it is hard to imagine how one can deal with that period without mentioning, even in a passing footnote, for example, May '68 or the U.S. War in Vietnam, which marked the period, even the art world. This is especially the case for a "progressive" art historian trying to understand so-called "Conceptual Art," an art whose spirit, ideas, and practices were linked with the broad social issues of the time. Instead of an open-ended, imaginative history questioning the possible dialectic between the art and life—why, for example, this type of art arose when it did and not, say, in 1926 or 1947 or 1984, or how this art was related to the changing mode of the production, distribution, and consumption of culture, etc.—he has chosen to write a standard, conservative, hermeneutically-sealed, textbook-type history of his idea of "who-influenced-who," "who-did-what-first," etc.

His "Conceptual Art" history is reductive for still another reason: for him, "Conceptual Art" is basically a history of what he thinks happens in Manhattan between Twenty-third Street and Canal Street, just like artists living in Paris or Berlin in the early part of the century. A false idea, as its international character, especially the relation between artists in Europe and the U.S., was one of its most original traits, differing greatly from other art "movements." Europe, in fact, was—and still is, twenty-five years later!—the site of most of the exhibitions—including this one—and of the interest which supported this work. Apparently, although living in Europe at the time, Mr. Buchloh does not find this of interest; perhaps he is unaware of this history?

His history is written with the hindsight and sense of distance of an art historian writing about the (long) dead past, with very little, if any, connection to the present, or, especially, future. His article even begins with ". . . roughly from 1965 to its temporary [?] disappearance in 1975," and concludes with Marcel Broodthaers's anticipation of its ". . . abolition of object status and commodity form, at best, would only be short lived," so we should not forget that we are dealing with a closed—and unsuccessful?—chapter in past art history. (Perhaps this need to reduce history to a compact package is precisely one of the unspoken purposes of museum exhibitions and art history?)

One of the reasons why this type of writing claiming to be history can be written about "Conceptual Art" is that during its development there was no art critic who lived the period and "promoted" and explained it (with the obvious exception of Lucy Lippard in New York, and to a lesser degree Charles Harrison and Michel Claura in Europe) and is still interested in writing about it twenty years later. Perhaps this was because the artists identified with this current were so vocal and literate about their work and thus partly excluded the need for a

critical backup, but in any case the result is that much of the documentation and history of the period has been—and will be—left to people who have not lived it and are trying to reconstruct it long after the fact. This poses some very original problems in charting the period, in addition to understanding the significance of the art produced.

But the specific problem with Benjamin Buchloh's text is not that it is composed of much subjective opinion, but that it pretends to be a factual history of the period, a pretention reinforced by its attachment to—and legitimation by—the catalog of the first museum attempt to produce an historical exhibition of the work of the period. Obviously, we all can have insightful opinions about a period we didn't personally live through—even art critics and historians—but what is disturbing here is that Buchloh's opinions are parading around as facts.

Of the other numerous underlying misconceptions ordering his concept of "Conceptual Art," we will only mention here the most important: the Duchamp fixation.

Like Hegel, for whom human history was conceived as the realization of the Idea, Buchloh's "Conceptual Art" is the realization of the Duchampian Idea.

Duchamp is depicted as the only possible "progressive" antidote to what Buchloh considers a "reactionary," tautological, positivistic formalism—which has been enlarged by Buchloh to include all square art objects. With Buchloh's history, the Duchamp influence is inescapable: "Confronting for the first time the full range of Duchamp's legacy, Conceptual practices . . ."; "This erosion by the introduction of a legalistic language and the administrative style of the material presentation of the artistic object—has, of course, once again been prefigured in Duchamp's practice as well"; "In January 1963, (the year of the first American retrospective of the work of Marcel Duchamp at the Pasadena Art Museum) a relatively little-known Los Angeles artist [Edward Ruscha] decided to publish a book entitled *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*"; "It is therefore all the more surprising to see around 1968 (what one could call the third phase of Duchamp reception) . . ."; "A few months later, Kosuth based his argument for the development of conceptual art on an equally restricted reading of Duchamp"; etc.; etc.

But the real problem of the Duchamp fixation is not that it makes Duchamp appear omnipotent; it has an even more insidious and important effect. By fabricating his history of "Conceptual Art" around the armature of the Duchamp idea—or the idea of Duchamp—Buchloh's history has been reduced almost exclusively to artists and ideas which can be situated—whether *pro* or *con*—within the Duchamp perspective, thus very carefully avoiding any other ideas, such as those of Andre, Weiner, Buren, and Barry, among others, which have little, if anything, to do with Duchamp, and often open directly onto social, moral, and political issues, both art-related and more general. The obvious

exclusion of Carl Andre from the beginnings of this history is especially revealing; it is nothing less than the exclusion of the “political.”

In light of his Duchamp fixation, much of Buchloh’s critique of Kosuth also appears as a disguised dispute over the “correct” interpretation, use, and misuse of Duchamp. Furthermore, whereas Buchloh devotes much critical energy on the ideas of Kosuth without mentioning his work, it is quite the contrary for most of the other artists, whose work is mentioned—albeit usually descriptively—but rarely their ideas (except for Robert Morris, who is treated approvingly because of his Duchamp ideas, and to a lesser extent, Sol LeWitt and Daniel Buren, who, however, are treated rather ambiguously).

As one can see, I have not even begun to question Buchloh’s subjective choice of specific facts and their ordering in time and space; this will have to wait for a more thorough and serious study of “Conceptual Art” and its relation to its historical moment. For our moment, I will limit myself to a random list of some actors “missing in action”—dematerialized?—who contributed, in one way or another, to the formation of the art historical moment called, for lack of a better term, “Conceptual Art”: Carl Andre, John Baldessari, Robert Rauschenberg, Jack and Nell Wendler, Hollis Frampton, John Chamberlain, Ron Wolf, Harald Szeemann, VH101, Jean-Luc Godard, Edward Keinholz, Lucy Lippard, Jan Dibbets, Prague 1968, Eugene Goosen, Art & Project, Dennis Oppenheim, “Art and Industry,” Gian Enzo Sperone, Christo, Wim Beeren, Richard Serra, Art Workers Coalition, Robert Smithson, Walter König, *Avalanche*, Vito Acconci, Germano Celant, Robert Irwin, Jennifer Licht, Lotta Continua, Stanley and Elyse Grinstein, Joseph Beuys, Ray Dirks, Yvonne Rainer, Prospect, Niele Toroni, Donald Burgoyne, “Process Art,” Woodstock, Giuseppe Panza, Peter Townsend, “Art of the Real,” Willoughby Sharp, Keith Arnatt, Michel Claura, Konrad Fischer, May ’68, Frederick Barthelme, Jack Burnham, Peter Downsborough, Barry Flanagan, Christine Kozlov, Pulsa, Hamish Fulton, Guerilla Art Action Group, Stanley Brouwn, John Chandler, Enno Develing, N.E. Thing Co., the Black Panthers, David Askevold, Hanne Darboven, Richard Long, Terry Fox, “Land art,” Billy Kluver, Johannes Cladders, Michael Asher, Gilbert & George, Piero Gilardi, Peter Hutchinson, Michael Harvey, Al Hansen, “Antiform,” Luis Camnitzer, Michael Heizer, David Lamelas, Allen Kaprow, Ger Van Elk, Stephen Kaltenbach, Artist’s Rights Movement, the Rosario Group, Bruce McLean, Mario Merz, Ursula Meyer, Walter de Maria, Barry Le Va, Roelof Louw, Adrian Piper, Gerry Schum, Les Levine, Franz Erhard Walther, The Bay of Pigs, Ian Wilson, Klaus Rinke, Keith Sonnier, William Wiley, Michael Snow, “Video Art,” William Wegman, John Gibson, Tony Schafrazi, James Lee Byars, Abbie Hoffman, Sigmar Polke, Herman Daled, the U.S. Servicemen’s Fund, Tommaso Trini, Eugenia Butler, Gene Beery, Lee Lozano, John Perrault, Marjorie Strider, Alan Ruppertsberg, John Latham, Gene Swenson, Kent State, the Beatles, and, lest we forget, the Vietnam War.

—Seth Siegelau, January 1990.