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Introduction

Conceptualism and Materiality. Matters of Art and Politics

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In the context of what has been labeled as a ‘material turn’ in the humanities and social sciences, numerous art historical studies have reconsidered the role of matter, materials, and materiality in the making, reception, and interpretation of art.¹ Within the field of contemporary art, those studies have often focused on practices that involve unusual “non-art” materials, and on artists who have highlighted the importance of materiality in their work.² At first glance, the opposite seems to be the case for the art addressed in this volume. Conceptualism, as a set of loosely related artistic practices that emerged across the globe from the 1950s to the 1970s, and even more so Conceptual art, as its specific manifestation in North America and Western Europe, have commonly been described as attempts to radically challenge the importance of the art object and its visual as well as tangible character by highlighting intellectual over material content.³

In the Anglo-American context, these efforts were frequently directed against formalist Modernism, the most dominant historical and art critical narrative of the postwar period. Developed and advocated perhaps most fiercely by the influential critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), it expanded upon ideas that had been introduced earlier in the twentieth century by the British critics

¹ See Elkins 2008; Rübél 2012; Rosler et al. 2014; Heibach & Rohde 2015; Lange-Berndt 2015b; Lehmann 2015; Apter et al. 2016; Bushart & Haug 2018. For the difference between ‘matter’ and ‘material’, see Wagner 2015; for a distinction between ‘materiality’ and related notions such as ‘physicality’, ‘reality’, or ‘concreteness’, see Brown 2010.

² Wagner 2001.

³ Buchloh 1990; Harrison 2001. For the differentiation between ‘conceptualism’ and ‘Conceptual art’, see cat. New York 1999. The present volume adopts this terminology, while simultaneously acknowledging local particularities such as the specific meaning and connotations of terms such as ‘concept art’ or ‘conceptual art’ in Japan and Poland.

Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Clive Bell (1881-1964).⁴ Thus, North American and Western European Conceptual art must be situated within a longer process of constant challenges against the notion, prevalent since early nineteenth-century Romanticism, of the artist as a maker of unique, privileged objects that are deeply linked to his or her own sensibility, imagination, or “genius”. The period from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, or what the historian Arthur Marwick has termed the ‘Long Sixties’, marked a peak in this longer history, during which that critique took a variety of different forms — from turns to normalized production and popular culture to the highlighting of the ephemeral.⁵

Yet similar processes took place in other parts of the world within the same broad time span, and they were often guided by considerations that were distinct from the critique of Greenbergian Modernism. Under authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Eastern Europe, for instance, conceptualism often held an explicitly political dimension. Transient actions and easily reproducible, paper-based works that could be disseminated through the mail were used as strategies to escape censorship and to allow artists to participate in transnational networks.⁶ In Japan, to give another example, concerns of materiality and its dissolution often resonated with existential questions related to the ways we perceive the world, or even the future of humankind as such.⁷ Despite these important distinctions, however, there were manifold direct connections as well as sometimes surprising resonances between those practices.⁸ As the essays in this book demonstrate, one important common feature is the key role played by the material contexts, tools, and media that went into creating these “immaterial” works and that facilitated their circulation.

The aim of this volume is to highlight the significance of materiality within Conceptual art and conceptualism more broadly. It challenges the notion of conceptualism as an idea-centered, anti-materialist enterprise by highlighting, first, the heterogeneous motivations that guided so-called dematerialization, and second, the importance of materiality within conceptualist practices. The authors focus on the significance of material concerns for artists working between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s in different parts of the world. This time frame corresponds roughly with the historical

⁴ Greenberg 1986-1993. For a critical discussion of Greenberg’s concepts, see Frascina 2000.

⁵ Marwick 2005.

⁶ See Camnitzer, Farver & Weiss 1999, viii.

⁷ See Tomii 2016.

⁸ My usage of the terms ‘connections’ (for direct links or interactions) and ‘resonances’ (for correspondences that are not based on such points of contact) is derived from Tomii 2016.

break from the waning of high Modernism to the rise of postmodernism identified by the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson (b. 1934) in his account of the period, and also with the time span that the critic Lucy R. Lippard (b. 1937) denoted in the title of her pivotal anthology *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.⁹

Lippard first introduced the term ‘dematerialization’ in an article she wrote jointly with the critic John Chandler (b. 1932) for the magazine *Art International*.¹⁰ Although their text was heavily criticized soon after its publication, the term has continued to inform debates on conceptualism and Conceptual art ever since. My essay, which follows this introduction, takes Lippard and Chandler’s text as a point of departure for a reassessment of the discussions on matter, material, and materiality between artists and critics during the late 1960s. Identifying an important shift from a rationalist-idealist notion of art as idea to an understanding of art as information, this critical overview explores the political promise that the notion of a ‘dematerialized’ art has held during the period and traces its ongoing potential. In doing so, it sets the stage for the essays that follow.

The second section of this book, *Intangible Materials*, focuses on artists who challenged dominant understandings of materiality in their work. By analyzing an early series of untitled air works by Michael Asher (1943-2012), Kavior Moon reveals the crucial position that material considerations held for the American artist during a formative period in his work. In her exploration of this understudied group of works from the late 1960s, Moon demonstrates how working with air led Asher to consider the architecture of an exhibition space more closely, and thus paved the way for the development of his institutional critical method that the artist later named ‘situational aesthetics’.

While Asher’s early work contested conventional understandings of materiality through his choice of air as material, the Polish artist Jan Chwałczyk (b. 1924) emphasized the notion of light’s agency. But as Magdalena Moskalewicz establishes in her essay, Chwałczyk’s *Reproducers* — a series of painted wooden objects dating from the late 1960s — not only evoke an “immaterial”

⁹ See Jameson 1984; Lippard 1973.

¹⁰ Lippard & Chandler 1968.

experience of light and shade, but they also simultaneously have a strong physical presence. Building upon concepts proposed by the critic Jerzy Ludwiński (1930-2000), an important advocate of Chwałczyk's work who downplayed their materiality, Moskalewicz nevertheless offers a revisionist reading of the *Reproducers*. In this manner, she sheds light on the ways the material dimensions of these works intersect with issues ranging from science and authorship to industrial production and state patronage.

Expanding the scope of this section to an even less tangible form of materiality, Larisa Dryansky explores the fascination that antimatter — a phenomenon whose existence was scientifically proven in the late 1950s — held for a number of artists active during the 1960s. Her analysis adds a new chapter to the larger history of how practitioners and theorists challenged the binary of materiality and dematerialization, expanding on contemporaneous, more familiar readings of matter as energy by artists such as Terry Atkinson (b. 1938) and Robert Barry (b. 1936). Moreover, she situates the turn to 'antimateriality' (rather than 'immateriality' or 'dematerialization') within a broader shift in thinking about materiality and reality at the time and emphasizes its ongoing relevance in the light of current philosophical discourses.

Conceptualism's critique of objecthood often took the form of a turn to language. Yet language also has its own materiality, ranging from its manifestation as written text or printed matter to the traces of its past uses. In the third section, *Language as Material*, Sabeth Buchmann and Jacob Stewart-Halevy address different aspects of this phenomenon. Buchmann discusses the American artist Lawrence Weiner's (b. 1942) text-based works and their potential for constant actualization or re-materialization, with parallels to software and cybernetics as a point of departure. In order to demonstrate how Weiner's work transcends conventional material-object paradigms, she identifies further connections with the French poet Stephane Mallarmé's (1842-1889) understanding of language as a form of production and the philosopher Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) reflections on the possibly endless iterability of the linguistic mark.

Stewart-Halevy situates the South African-born artist Ian Wilson (b. 1940) within a wider discussion of artists who experimented with language in the 1960s. Reading Wilson and other Conceptual artists' rationalistic approaches against the more open attitudes to the social context of

language and its uses adopted by artists such as Lee Lozano (1930-1999), he argues that a focus on the material and pragmatic aspects of language could serve as a corrective not only to early Conceptual art's blind spots, but also to the shortcomings of some more recent theoretical approaches to materiality.

The fourth section, *Materials of Communication*, expands on these considerations by focusing on the significance of various means of communication, especially within Latin American conceptualism. Niko Vicario considers artistic uses of the teletype machine in the second half of the 1960s. Drawing on the examples of the Argentinian artists David Lamelas (b. 1946), Marta Minujín (b. 1943), and Roberto Jacoby (b. 1944), and the New York-based, German-born artist Hans Haacke (b. 1936), he explores their aspirations to reconfigure the geography of contemporary art and to establish alternative communication systems through the use of modern technology. Their aims invite comparison to other contemporaneous projects, but also to present-day hopes for the internet.

Strategies and networks of alternative communication also course through Zanna Gilbert's contribution. She analyzes the Argentinian artist Edgardo Antonio Vigo's (1928-1997) 'manual multiples' as an emphatically material form of mail art that was created outside the country's political and cultural capital, Buenos Aires. Through her study of Vigo's 'object-based conceptualism', as the author terms it, Gilbert counters established trajectories of dematerialization in Argentine art and the notion of mail art as ephemeral and dematerialized.

Expanding on these 'materialities of communication', the fifth and final section, *Materials and Affects*, considers how artists charged communicative acts with affective, spiritual, or erotic dimensions.¹¹ In their drastic departure from the conventional view of conceptualism as a cerebral or rationalistic enterprise, they throw into sharp relief the limited validity of such generalizing descriptions. In Japan, Yutaka Matsuzawa (1922-2006) was a paramount figure in the development of conceptualism or 'concept art' (*kannen geijutsu*). Yoshiko Shimada describes how Matsuzawa, despite his credo that all objects had to vanish, produced highly sensual work with a strong material presence. Highlighting the example of the brightly colored, large-format *Banner of Vanishing*, Shimada situates Matsuzawa's art within the religious traditions of his home region of Suwa in central Japan and

¹¹ For the notion of 'materialities of communication', see Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer 1994; Lenoir 1998; Mitchell & Thurtle 2003.

reveals an unexpected eroticism in the work, substantiating her findings with hitherto unpublished materials she unearthed in the artist's personal archive.

Luiza Nader brings to light another topic that has rarely been associated with conceptualism by focusing on the confession and redefinition of love in the Polish artist Zofia Kulik's (b. 1947) early photo-based work *Letter from Milan*. In her close reading of the piece, she stresses Kulik's use of non-verbal tools for communication and, drawing upon current studies of emotion and affect, expands her argument to a consideration of the material dimensions of human subjectivity. Analyzing Kulik's method of 'actioning' (*czynnościowanie*), which is how the artist termed her process of critical inquiry and action, Nader elucidates how Kulik explored, through her ongoing work and reflection upon forms of communication, processes to bring about personal transformation as well as social and political change.

Through their reconsideration of conceptualism's neglected material aspects, the authors reveal the rich range of artists' inquiries and concerns and the importance of materials and materiality in their pursuits. Their studies revise and diversify the account of this important chapter in the history of twentieth-century art, whose significance for subsequent cultural production has been widely acknowledged — including the assumption that all art produced since the 1960s was 'post-conceptual'.¹²

This reassessment carries wider implications for the study of art and materiality in general. The reappraisal of materials and their productivity generates critical perspectives on idealist assumptions, notions of authorship and gender, and also of society and politics more widely. In her account of materiality in contemporary art, the art historian Petra Lange-Berndt states: 'Material complicity (...) has a clear political agenda.'¹³ Lange-Berndt's claim echoes the anthropologist Bruno Latour's (b. 1947) credo to 'follow the actors'¹⁴ — a core belief of so-called actor-network theory, the

¹² Van Winkel 2012; Osborne 2013.

¹³ Lange-Berndt 2015a, 15.

¹⁴ Latour 2005.

theoretical model of which he is the most famous proponent — and resonates with the more recent theoretical approaches often subsumed under the umbrella term ‘new materialisms’.¹⁵ Broadly summarized, the essays in this volume share the new materialists’ emphasis on the ‘productivity and resilience of matter’ and their commitment to acknowledging the significance of materiality.¹⁶ Distinct from some of these approaches, however, they take into account both the social mediation inherent within material configurations and the culturally ingrained nature of human encounters with the material.¹⁷ In so doing, they focus not only on conceptualism’s neglected material aspects, but also on the politics of materiality.

This perspective applies not only to the political, cultural, and historical significance of specific materials. Rather, it encompasses a reassessment of material and supposedly immaterial or dematerialized work in the context of the socioeconomic transformations of the long 1960s — the turn from an industrial to a post-industrial, or ‘post-Fordist’ economy — and their implications for artistic practice.¹⁸ In his book *An Essay on Liberation*, the Frankfurt school philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) describes the emancipatory potential that he saw in this shift from an economy based on physical labor to one that relies on ‘mental energy’ — a process he refers to as ‘dematerialization of labor’.¹⁹ However, more recent political theorists such as André Gorz (1923-2007), Maurizio Lazzarato (b. 1955), and Paolo Virno (b. 1952) have regarded these changes, for which Lazzarato has coined the term ‘immaterial labor’, more skeptically.²⁰ According to them, the role of capital becomes even more dominant under these new circumstances, absorbing the worker-consumer’s time, thoughts, and existence as a whole. Virno specifically highlights the role of the ‘culture industry’, as the sector in the post-Fordist economy that generates and modifies communicative procedures, which have partly replaced the machines as means of production.²¹ Two other radical thinkers, Yann Moulier Boutang (b. 1949) and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (b. 1948), have respectively developed the concepts of ‘cognitive

¹⁵ Coole & Frost 2010b.

¹⁶ Coole & Frost 2010a, 7.

¹⁷ Edwards 2010, 284; Nisbet 2014, 251, n. 95. For notions such as ‘material agency’, ‘vibrant matter’, ‘hyperobjects’, ‘object-oriented ontology’, or ‘speculative realism’, see Latour 2005; Meillassoux 2009; Bennett 2010; Harman 2010; Bryant, Srnicek & Harman 2011; Morton 2013; Harman 2017. For approaches to new materialism with a distinct political thrust, see Bennett & Joyce 2010; Coole & Frost 2010b; Wark 2015.

¹⁸ See Amin 1994.

¹⁹ Marcuse 1969, 49.

²⁰ See Lazzarato 1996; Virno 2004; Gorz 2010; also see Chukhrov 2010.

²¹ Virno 2004, 61.

capitalism’ and ‘semicapitalism’ to convey similar concerns.²² This discussion carries important implications for the role of Conceptual artists as ‘art workers’, whose reactions to these processes were surely more complex than what influential accounts have described as an uncritical imitation of the immaterial labor of white collar workers and the advertising industry.²³ Anchoring the artistic practices addressed in this volume in these current scholarly debates foregrounds the complexity of their roles within the wider social and economic transformations during the 1960s and early 1970s, and might in turn allow for new perspectives onto these transformations themselves.

If materiality was already at stake during the 1960s, its reassessment has gained a new urgency at a historic moment characterized by notions such as the ‘knowledge society’, the rise of the ‘creative economy’, and an ever-increasing importance of the digital.²⁴ Until now, scholars have stressed that even the most emphatically ‘conceptual’ works depended on a material basis and that their experience remained rooted within the sensual.²⁵ To be sure, it may be argued that no form of conceptualism was able to overcome these basic facts. However, it seems more productive to trace the connections between conceptualist ‘dematerialization’ and our contemporary reality. Today, what are often assumed to be immaterial digital realities remain highly dependent on physical infrastructure, and the status of material and information is again readjusted under the auspices of an all-pervading economy of visibility.²⁶ High-priced communications-electronics are all too often produced under precarious working conditions, access to the so-called ‘rare earths’ built into smartphones and many other high-tech goods has become a vital geostrategic question, and — as Niko Vicario notes in his essay — the data traveling worldwide through the internet depends in principle on the same system of undersea cables that has enabled other forms of telecommunication since the nineteenth century.²⁷ Following the writer and editor Brian Kuan Wood, the relationship between material and information needs to be considered anew, now that financial values appear to be linked predominantly to abstract concepts. Moreover, issues of visibility have become so prominent that it may (again) falsely be

²² See Berardi 2009; Moulier Boutang 2011; also see Wark 2017.

²³ See Buchloh 1990; Wall 1991. For the notion of ‘art workers’, see Bryan-Wilson 2009.

²⁴ See Gorz 2010; Chukhrov 2010.

²⁵ See Egenhofer 2011; Groys 2016.

²⁶ See Gitelman 2006; Wood 2015.

²⁷ The natural resource strategist David S. Abraham has stressed the economic and geopolitical significance of rare-earth elements or rare-earth metals by referring to our present and near future as the ‘rare metal age’. See Abraham 2015.

assumed that we ‘function (...) purely in the realm of the idea’.²⁸ As these considerations demonstrate, conceptualism has not only shaped contemporary art to this day — many of the larger questions that it raised remain still relevant or have in fact come to matter even more.

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²⁸ Wood 2015, n.p.

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