The Artist, the Sage, and the Butterfly:
Ideas and Aesthetic Enjoyment in "Post-Conceptual" Art

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Among various ways to talk about the pluralism of contemporary art, I have repeatedly encountered the term, "post-conceptual." To my ears, the expression implies two things about the contemporary scene. The first is historical: the open-endedness of art since the 70s indeed developed largely, though not exclusively, through conceptual art. When, in the wake of minimalism and its principled confrontation with the limits of painting, sculpture, and music, it becomes feasible merely to declare, "all the display windows of all the shoe stores in San Francisco right now, that's my art;" then, as Arthur Danto explains, "everything is possible, or at least anything is possible."[1] The defense of the autonomous work of art dissolves beneath the weight of its own critical self-consciousness and gives way to the pluralism of contemporary art, in which artists no longer define their practices in terms of specific media, and art can no longer be clearly distinguished from industrial projects, commercial advertising, personal collections, social gatherings, and other aspects of everyday life.[2]

The second implication that the term "post-conceptual" has for me extrapolates from these conditions and draws a conclusion, with which I am not entirely comfortable. Because artists now often work between different media and don't define their practices in disciplinary terms as, for example, painting or sculpture, some draw the conclusion that *the media don't matter: what matters is the idea*. In this sense, post-conceptual art is understood as conceptual art. It not only bears the mark of its historical legacy; it carries on its practice. And the practice of conceptual art is understood as putting art at the service of ideas.[3]

As someone with training in academic philosophy, I have been wary of this conclusion for two principle reasons. Language and thought handle concepts with far greater rigor and clarity than images. If post-conceptual artists were indeed only interested in ideas, wouldn't they have given up their art practices long ago and gone back to the books? If ideas really do trump images in post-conceptual art, wouldn't we have to conclude that post-conceptual artists are lazy, pretentious, pseudo-philosophers, who remain mired in picture thinking? And isn't at least some contemporary art better than that?

Also in the history of modern philosophy, the relationship between ideas and aesthetics has been more complicated. Indeed, some like Hegel and Danto argue that scientific self-consciousness trumps the enjoyment of art in the development of the modern world. However others, like Schiller, Nietzsche, and Freud, see art as an antidote to the all-too-coherent logics of conceptual thought. For them, artwork doesn't merely express ideas in cloudy images but articulates contradictions in us and in experience, which conceptual thought implicitly disavows insofar as it presumes to be able to explain them away. Under the influence of this romantic line of thinking, philosophers from Kierkegaard and Heidegger to Blanchot, Derrida, and Deleuze have adopted performative approaches to philosophical writing and explored the poetics of language and thought in opposition to the over-valorization of conceptual clarity.

And finally to treat contemporary art primarily in terms of the dominance of ideas simply seems wrong. On the one hand, it fails to acknowledge that ideas always have been part of the enjoyment of art – not merely as theoretical or political positions expressed by artworks, but as *aesthetic ideas* inspired by the formal tensions of the works themselves and, as such, intrinsic to them.[4] On the other hand, treating contemporary art as conceptual fails to acknowledge how thoroughly sensuous it has become.

As a glaring example of this confusion, literature accompanying Mathew Barney's recent exhibition at SFMOMA, *Drawing Restraint*, identified him as a conceptual artist. If Barney's orgiastic spectacles are conceptual, the term means nothing or, at best, the opposite of what would seem to be intended. Rather than expressing the centrality of ideas in art, the term "post-conceptual" would imply that conceptual art and the other anti-aesthetic movements of the twentieth-century have been altogether left behind. We are once again free to indulge our sensuous impulses without being bothered by disturbing, self-conscious reflections on the conditions of our enjoyment. And the appeal to concepts in name would act only as an abstract (and as such meaningless) guarantee that the work is meaningful, while sparing us from actually thinking – like the lexicons identifying the "significance" of distinct elements of the work, which Barney often provides.

Sticking to the first, historical implication of the term outlined above, the programming at MISSION 17, where I work as a curator, might rightly be described as "post-conceptual." The artists who show there often don't identify their practices in terms of specific media or disciplines. They often appropriate images and forms from commercial, amateur, and other extra-artistic sources. And some have almost entirely left behind formal, aesthetic considerations. Among other approaches, they have instead orchestrated interpersonal encounters, explored the objectivity of social scientific discourse, and crafted exhibitions of everyday objects solicited from amateurs.

So where do they stand with regard to the second implication of the term "post-conceptual," which I

have outlined above, and the questions it begs concerning the relationship between ideas and aesthetic enjoyment?

Among all the "post-conceptual" projects undertaken at MISSION 17, none has borne the mark of conceptual art's legacy as obviously as Michael Zheng's *As The Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu*. Within the framework of my curatorial practice, the show marks something of a limit, which defines the "conceptual" within the "post-conceptual."[5] Nevertheless, aspects of the show were decidedly beautiful. Zheng's articulation of his ideas remained rooted in, and dependent upon an aesthetic encounter. And the intellectual enjoyment provided by the show often had a distinctly affective quality. Despite its epistemological orientation, one might say, the show was poetic. *As the Butterfly Said to Chuang Tzu* thus provides a rich occasion to explore the relationship between ideas and aesthetic enjoyment in contemporary art. Does the media matter in Zheng's work? Does it merely serve ideas, which otherwise remain independent of it? If not, what is the relationship in Zheng's art between thought and aesthetic enjoyment? And what does this imply about the force of concepts in art today?

The title of the show, *As The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu*, announced it as a study in perception. The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu famously dreamed he had turned into a butterfly. When he awoke, he couldn't help but wonder whether it was he, who had dreamed of becoming a butterfly, or the butterfly, who had dreamed of becoming Chuang Tzu. Zheng's concerns in the exhibition were primarily epistemological. He was interested in how we know what we know. And the show focused specifically on questions about framing, and how shifts in seeing aspect shape experience.

To explore these questions, in much of the show, Zheng employed the gallery itself as the medium of his work.[6] For "Hole in the wall," he hammered a hole in the wall, photographed it, and covered the hole with an image of the hole, leaving only the tip of the actual hole visible above the photograph. Had Zheng actually damaged the wall? I was around when he was installing the show, but frankly I didn't know for sure. Was this a photograph of a hole in another wall, taken somewhere else and mounted here? Or was it not a representation at all, but rather a transparent piece of plastic over an actual hole?

A second piece, "The Wall," took these questions still further. Zheng photographed an area of the wall and posted the image onto the wall itself. The absence of any obvious content provoked formal questions. What is the relationship between the wall and the representation of the wall? How is the distortion of the photograph different from the refraction of a transparency, if that's what the piece actually is? Where

does the wall end and the piece begin? What is presented here and what is being concealed?

"The Pillar," similarly played with these dynamics of presence and absence in the constitution of experience. Zheng encased in plywood an actual pillar in the center of one gallery wall. Was there a pillar there? I could hardly remember. Was this a work of art or a necessary structural support? The exposed wood made the piece look like the wall was obnoxiously still under construction. Did it actually "work' – as edifice or artifice?

And, for "The Big I," Zheng cut out an 8' by 1.5' rectangle from the wall and raised it by one half an inch. In this piece, Zheng's epistemological concerns reached a certain limit. What was the piece and what was the gallery? The gallery itself had become the piece, framed by the rectangle cut in it – not positively as a drawing, but negatively as an absence, a bracketing of the gallery.

Each of these pieces raised questions that might be considered equally appropriate, if not more so, to philosophical epistemology. Nevertheless, as an artist, Zheng did not leave behind or even actively thwart the viewer's aesthetic enjoyment of the work. His questioning remained rooted in the construction of encounters, which were aesthetically rich as well as intellectually stimulating. In fact, the two could hardly be separated. And, in this regard, *the medium mattered*. Zheng's use of the gallery walls, of course, suggested that he had no medium; but in fact the show employed photographic, sculptural, and drawing techniques, which only seemed to disappear on account of Zheng's subtle mastery of them. Furthermore, Zheng exhibited a *refined capacity to engage the limiting conditions of his surroundings, both aesthetically and intellectually.* This is the technique that frames Zheng's eclectic use of other media and, despite the conceptual nature of his concerns, it had a look like any other. Zheng asked specific questions in specific ways. And his questions not only stimulated thought - they resonated.

"Hole in the Wall," presented a subtle composition in which the otherwise empty picture plane was interrupted by an almost circular shape set asymmetrically in the upper-right-hand corner. This hole itself was composed of small fragments of various shapes, which often overlapped or collapsed in against one another. And they surrounded an off-yellow shape with a different texture, comprised of insulation from behind the sheet rock that now was revealed. As well as conceptual, "The Wall" could be enjoyed as a minimalist composition: a simple off-white rectangle with hints of purple and blue, whose opacity seemed to shift as one moved towards and away from it. "The Pillar" was a sensuously textured wooden sculpture, which stood against the wall with a commanding physical presence. And "The Big 'I'" oscillated between a sculpture and drawing, which Zheng talked about even as representational – a letter "I," and an image of the subject both as a thinking consciousness and as a physical body.

Even the epistemological questions raised by the show remained rooted in an aesthetic confrontation with the work.[7] The viewer was provoked not only to think, but also to suffer frustrations, to laugh with surprise, to marvel at the indeterminacy in the work, and, perhaps most importantly, *to look again*. Rather than a philosopher, Zheng acted like an illusionist. He orchestrated deceptions, pierced the veil of these deceptions, and left the viewer wondering which of the two to believe, the illusion or the truth offered to explain it away – Chuang Tzu or the butterfly. Contrary to the cold abstractions of philosophical epistemology, the show inspired an aesthetic contemplation, which as philosophy might better be compared to religious wonder. And, rather than a scientist, Zheng occupied a position as an artist somewhere between a sage and a sideshow barker.[8]

So what are we to make of this persistence of aesthetic enjoyment in Zheng's otherwise conceptual art? And specifically, within the framework of this essay, as defining the "conceptual" in the "post-conceptual?" A proper response to this question would require a deeper historical study of conceptual art as it has appeared and re-appeared since the 20's. One would need to examine the dynamics between ideas and aesthetic enjoyments at each of these moments, and consider broader trends in art, ideology, and politics, since then. However, it seems clear that for Zheng attention to concepts in art does not require disrupting what Sol Lewitt describes as "the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed." Zheng relishes in aesthetic enjoyment as integral to his conceptual concerns.

Does this persistence of the aesthetic then imply that the 'post-conceptual' has left behind the self-consciousness of conceptual art? Did conceptual art exhaust the critical resources of modernism and open the door to mere spectacle, as I have argued above about aspects of Mathew Barney's work? *As The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu* does not resolve these questions. However the show offers three distinct models for understanding the dynamics between of ideas and aesthetics in contemporary art. These models are, to my mind, embodied in the remaining pieces from the show, as variations on the *experience of wonder*.

1. The first is indeed *wonder as spectacle*, presented by what were, to my mind, the weakest pieces from the show. To make "The Knob," Zheng wrapped a piece of reflective mylar tape in a circle around a

screw in the wall. The piece offered little more than a cheap illusion: is it in fact a knob or merely a screw with a piece of mylar wrapped around it? One's answer depended only on the degree of one's willingness or desire to suspend disbelief. In "ONO YES," Zheng employed the same mylar tape, placing it in circles over pieces of square paper on which he had written the letters O-N-O-Y-E-S, in reference to Yoko Ono's "Yes." The play between the letters as words and shapes added a complexity to this work, but the historical reference ultimately undermined any tension it provided. Once you had read the words properly, it was clear what it meant: Zheng was situating himself in relationship to Fluxus and, as such, reassuring the audience that this was art, despite the questions raised by other work in the show. One either knew the reference, read the words, and 'got it,' or didn't. And, for "Seeds" Zheng planted seeds in three pots with instruction to viewers to water each of them with distinct intentions: encouraging, discouraging, and neutral. I couldn't help but be reminded of a recent study of prayer and its failure to aid recovering patients. The piece played with questions of faith that are currently too politically charged to take lightly. And again, the force of the work depended only on the degree of the viewer's critical self-consciousness or need to believe. In these three pieces, *wonder was aestheticized as mere spectacle*: one was free to wonder in the reassurance that the questions raised had already been answered or hadn't been seriously posed at all. This wonder belongs to the mystic and the charlatan as well as much post-conceptual art.

2. "The Blind," on the other hand, expressed *wonder as anxiety*. Zheng hung a beat-up Venetian blind on the long wall of the gallery. The viewer could not help but worry what was behind the blind, despite recognizing the absurdity of the question: there was nothing but a wall. The blind created what it concealed by concealing it. And this sense of the hidden, called attention to *the psychological desire* to know. As the sun set, shadows from the sign in the window were cast across the surface of the blind. What was inside? What was outside? The piece reminded me of film noir. And the phenomenological play of presence and absence seemed to be invested with the sense that something was wrong, and needed to be resolved. It expressed ambivalence, more than indeterminacy, and seemed to be riddled by guilt and desire.

3. "As Is" in turn expressed *wonder as social tension*. Zheng hung a microphone out the gallery window, which channeled the sound of the street into speakers set on the floor at the other end of the room. The sound was beautiful, abstracted from its context, and the piece was successful simply as a composition. The echo of the street in the gallery was disorienting and one couldn't help but question not only what one was hearing, but also where one stood. The piece raised phenomenological questions about framing akin to those addressed by "The Wall," and "The Big I." Was the gallery the frame for the sound of the street or the street the frame for the gallery? However, in this piece, the uncertainty took on a decidedly political tone. The question of the frame entailed considerations of class, ideology, education, work and leisure, calling attention to the social relations that inform aesthetic enjoyments as well as the aesthetics that inform social relations. How were these spaces distinguished? Who is included and who is excluded?

As The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu raised epistemological questions through aesthetic encounters and engendered a phenomenological sense of wonder about the nature of experience. It not only posed questions, it provoked them as affectively, psychologically, and socially loaded. And, though it did not categorically clarify the dynamics between ideas and aesthetic enjoyment in contemporary art, it articulated vivid models for further investigation.

Notes:

[1] Arthur Danto, "Art After the End of Art," in The Wake of Art, ed. Horowitz and Huhn, p.122. My example paraphrases one provided by Allan Kaprow in "The Education of an Un-Artist."

[2] Roberta Smith explains the connection between minimalism and the origins of conceptual art:. She writes, "Minimalism itself had aspired to be completely logical. Yet it was also the first art movement to be 'formalist' and Duchampian in equal parts. It achieved pure, abstract, often classically beautiful form via a preconceived intellectual approach, which made extensive use of various 'readymades': mathematical systems (used to determine composition), geometric forms, un-manipulated industrial materials and factory fabrication (which removed the artist from the actual construction of the object). Minimalism reinforced the idea of progress in art, which verged on the scientific and likewise of an art which moved forward by appropriating methods and ideas from other disciplines and areas of knowledge. Also Minimalism's severe reduction did not leave younger artists, instilled with this idea of progress, much to do in the formal arena: this too helped push them towards what seemed to be the next logical step – the elimination, or at least de-emphasis, of the object, and the use of language, knowledge, mathematics and the facts of the world in and of themselves." From "Conceptual Art," in Concepts of Modern Art, ed. by Nikos Stangos, p.262

[3] Sol Lewitt would seem to give support to this idea, at least concerning conceptual art, when he writes, "What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has a physical form . No matter what form it may finally have, it must begin with an idea," and later, "Ideas may stated with numbers, photographs, or words or anyway the artist chooses, the form being unimportant." However, he's also careful to add, "conceptual art doesn't really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy, or any other mental discipline." Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Alberro and Stimson, pp. 13 - 15

[4] Kant writes, "By an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it." The Critque of Judgment, p.182

[5] In the pluralism of contemporary art, Danto argues, art history ends along with the dissolution of the autonomous work

of art. And avant-gardism gives way to the repetition of diverse forms, as all now equally "possible." In this light, the topic of my paper might be reformulated as a study in the repetition of conceptual art: how does it function now?

[6] Analogously Dan Graham explains the origins of his own involvement with conceptual art as a questioning the relationship between the value of art and the gallery itself. He celebrates this exploration in the pieces by Dan Flavin, which use the gallery's fluorescent lights as their medium (whether or not this was Flavin's intention), and sees them as solving a problem he had with Duchamp's model of conceptual art. He writes, "By contrast Flavin's fluorescent light pieces are not merely a priori philosophical idealizations, but have concrete relations to specific details of the architectural arrangement of the gallery, details which produce meaning." Dan Graham, "My Works For Magazines: a history of conceptual art," in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. by Alberro and Stimson, p.42

[7] Lucy Lippard notes, "Dematerialized art is post-aesthetic only in its increasingly non-visual emphasis. The aesthetic of principle is still an aesthetic." ," From "The Dematerialized Object of Art" in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. by Alberro and Stimson, p.48

[8] Sol Lewitt writes, "Conceptual artists are mystic rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." From "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. by Alberro and Stimson, p.48

[9] Like John Cage's 4:33

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This essay was also presented at the conference "Visual Intelligence and the Sense of Art" at Cal State Stanislaus; an interdisciplinary faculty seminar at Mills College, Oakland, 2006; and "Canadian Society for Aesthetics," in Saskatoon, Sasketchewan, 2007.