



Conceptual, Postconceptual, Nonconceptual: Photography and the Depictive Arts

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Conceptual, Postconceptual, Nonconceptual: Photography and the Depictive Arts

Jeff Wall

I am going to comment on a passage from the announcement for this conference:

Photography arguably entered the mainstream fine art canon when artists turned to the medium to exploit the very features of its process that appear, from a philosophical point of view, to be in tension with its status as art. Such artists were interested in the *non-art* nature of photography as a new resource and horizon of possibility for artistic practice. That is, many artists valued photography in all the respects in which it seemed to evade, rather than mimic, art with a capital 'A'. In view of this, one way to understand the foregrounding of artistic intentions in more recent large scale, often digital, art photography is as a rejection of this post-conceptual settlement concerning the automaticity of photography. Whether such practices go beyond conceptual photography or return photography to the terrain of pre-conceptual pictorial art remains much debated.¹

The question this raised for me concerns whether there can be a pre-conceptual condition of photography and of pictorial art as a whole—or, as I'll call them, the depictive arts. And, deriving from that, can there be a post-conceptual condition of those arts?

1. Announcement for "Agency and Automatism: Photography as Art since the 1960s," 10–12 June 2010, www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/research/activities/aestheticsafterphotography/agencyandautomatism/. This statement is elaborated in the introduction to this issue, pp. 687–88.

I would like to set aside, for now, the distinction between art and art with a capital A because this distinction may not exist, except as a polemical tool or an expression of personal opinion.

Fifteen years ago, in “Marks of Indifference” I proposed that it was the dialectic of negation in which conceptual art implicated photography that paradoxically breached the final, most subtle, barriers to the acceptance of photography as art.²

That implied, I think, that photography played some central role in the elaboration of conceptual art, what I am going to call the conceptual reduction of autonomous art. I don’t know whether I meant to imply that or not, but, if I did, I shouldn’t have because photography had nothing to do with the success of conceptual art; photography played no significant role in it. Photography was a sort of passenger on that trip. We can put it even more strongly and say that the very presence of photographs in works or discourse distracted or diminished the logic of the arguments conceptual artists were making.

The most rigorous conceptual artists had little or nothing to do with photography because they had no need for it and recognized that, as depiction, it could contribute nothing to the reduction they were seeking to establish.

Strictly speaking—and with conceptual art it will only do to speak strictly—conceptual art had only one objective: the reduction of art to an intellectual statement of the legitimacy of the intellectual statement itself as a work of art, not of literary art, but of visual art—to pass beyond the status of art needing either to be an object or a work, to posit it as something utterly other to all of that. The model work of conceptual art is a text of indeterminate length (since there are different versions of this text) that

2. See Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,” in *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965–1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (exhibition catalog, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 15 Oct. 1995–4 Feb. 1996), pp. 247–67.

JEFF WALL studied art history at the University of British Columbia and the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. His early work addressed conceptual art via photography. In 1976 he began using color photography, culminating in his signature format of large color transparencies mounted in light-boxes. In 1991 he started using digital montage, and he began making large black-and-white photographs in 1995. His work is widely exhibited internationally, including recent retrospectives at MoMA and Tate Modern. He is the recipient of numerous prizes, including the Hasselblad Foundation Award for Photography.

argues successfully for its own status as a work of art under the existing criteria of autonomous art, but that, in succeeding in doing so, passes beyond those criteria, and that of autonomous art as well. Once this argument is made and given its appropriate form, the conceptual reduction is completed and, in effect, conceptual art is also completed. At least its invention and formulation is complete, and there is nothing further to be articulated or created, posited, or proven.

At this point, all that is left to be done is the institutionalization of the proposal, the making of it a permanent touchstone for any and all artistic practice and discourse.

A painter can make any number of almost-identical monochrome paintings and justify doing that as his or her response to the need to remind his or her audience, or emphasize to that audience, or berate and hector that audience, about the cultural emergency that is bourgeois art, about the permanent crisis of bourgeois art.

In the same vein, the most rigorously logical conceptual artist could present the same text any number of times in any number of exhibitions, situations, or other contexts.

If I had been a real conceptual artist in 1970, that's what I would have done. I would have written the argument in my own words (which would be slightly different from another artist's words, say Terry Atkinson's words), honed it, and gotten it as short and precise as I could. Then I would have presented it on a wall in an exhibition space, as a work of art, as I've described. Given that it was 1970, I would have typed it on my Hermes 3000 typewriter on a piece of ordinary white A4 paper and pinned it to the wall of the space, maybe at the Camden Arts Centre or, if I'd been cool enough, at the Lisson Gallery.

And then I would have continued, maybe—probably—to this day, re-presenting, or presenting for the *n*th time, my text, my argument, in ever-new contexts.

And since the text would argue for its own special status as the universal and abstract articulation of the fact that art could be reduced to this specific form and content and still oblige its audience to accept its status as art, it would have relevance in any imaginable artistic context—exhibition, publication, performance festival, biennale, marathon interview session, panel discussion, critical seminar, fashion/art fusion event, rock concert light show. The text could be printed in its “classic” form on that single sheet of paper 1969-style, or projected as a video scroll, spoken in the Guggenheim rotunda by children or senior citizens, sung by the Red Krayola, and so on. It would always be the same transcendent work and it would relate in a dynamic, unpredictable, and inexhaustible way to any other

work of art from any other period. It would challenge the status of any other work as simply a “work” of art, an individual physical instance of the being of art—because it was the only instance of art that was not a work of art, and yet, in saying that it was not a work of art in the way that all other works are works, it becomes a work of art because it must be a work-that-is-not-a-work if it is to sustain the legitimacy that it claims and that it demonstrates in the body of its text. And so on.

But never would I need to append any photograph to the text or bring any photograph into relation to the text. Never would I need any depiction of any kind; any depiction would by the logic of the text’s conditions of legitimacy be external to it.

Its status as passenger on the reductionist ride helped to transform photography significantly, as young artists developed new attitudes toward their own practice from their contact with the aggressive atmosphere of the moment; and so it has appeared as though the conceptual reduction had in some way been effected by the presence or deployment of photography in works that could be thought of as works of conceptual art. But these works were not instances of conceptual art, as I’m characterizing it.

I notice that I used the term *photoconceptualism* in my 1995 essay, and I’m horrified by that because I’ve been under the impression that I have always insisted that there is no such thing and that the term has no meaning. I don’t know how I could have made such a blunder.

Anyway, if these works aren’t conceptual art, and they aren’t photoconceptual art either, what are they? Maybe the most suggestive example of this kind of work is Douglas Heubler’s. His works of the period normally consist of a written description of a project for the making of a certain number of photographs, accompanied by the photographs made according to the terms of the project. As Heubler states in the text portion of many of these pieces, both, together, constitute the work (fig. 1).

The work is not simply the photographs; they require the presence of the text and seem to have no status independent of that text, and, moreover, they don’t seem to strive for one. The photographs appear to be the proof that a legitimate work of visual art can be made by means of the putting-forward of an assignment (any assignment whatsoever no matter how pointless) and the carrying-out of that assignment as routinely, systematically, and passively as imaginable. This tends to reduce the photographs made in these circumstances to bare instances of the completion of the operation; they are so subordinated to the operation—we could call the operation a concept—that the outcome is the reduction of the status and presence of the photos and thereby a “loss of the visual,” a diminution of the visual element in favor of the

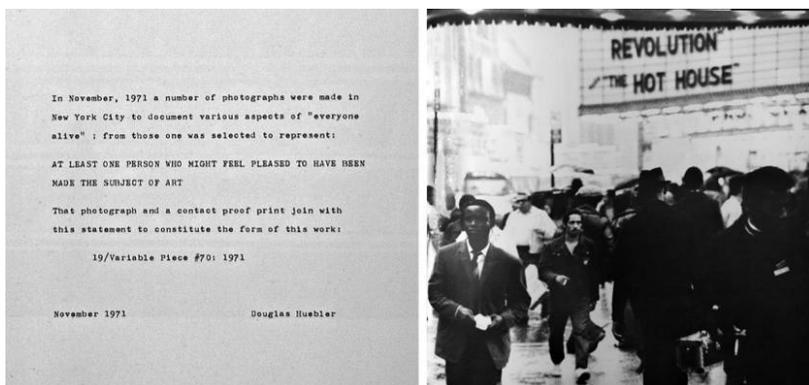


FIGURE 1. Douglas Heubler, *Variable Piece #70* (1971).

emphasis on the structure, concept, or assignment that caused them to be made. Heubler's work, I think, takes the reductivist impulse as far into photography as anyone managed to take it. That reductivism clearly resembles, is related to, the conceptual reduction.

John Hilliard's work *Camera Recording Its Own Condition (7 Apertures, 10 Speeds, 2 Mirrors)* (1971), depicting a camera recording its own reflection in a mirror as the exposure settings are changed, is a related example, from around the same time (fig. 2). These works show how reductivism can shape the making of photographs—and, in passing, can refer to all the ways in which procedures and protocols both within and outside of art affect the making of photographs. There's an obvious critical commentary going on here, aimed at what the generation of 69 saw as an excessive subjectivism in the then-reigning versions of art photography.

This is all fair enough and the works are good, but all of this is a secondary consideration in terms of conceptual art and not significant in relation to the conceptual reduction, properly speaking. And the same can be said about Joseph Kosuth's, Dan Graham's, Robert Smithson's, Mel Bochner's, or Ed Ruscha's photo works of the same period. All these artists made good work and did so out of their interest in finding analogies to reductivism, antsubjectivism, and antiillusionism. The conceptual reduction was the most compelling model for that, the one that appeared to connect directly to the practice of photography.

So, even though photography played a significant role in the reductivist milieu and within the work of conceptual artists themselves—like Kosuth—its role in the conceptual reduction is peripheral.

Let's take this point further now and claim that the conceptual reduc-

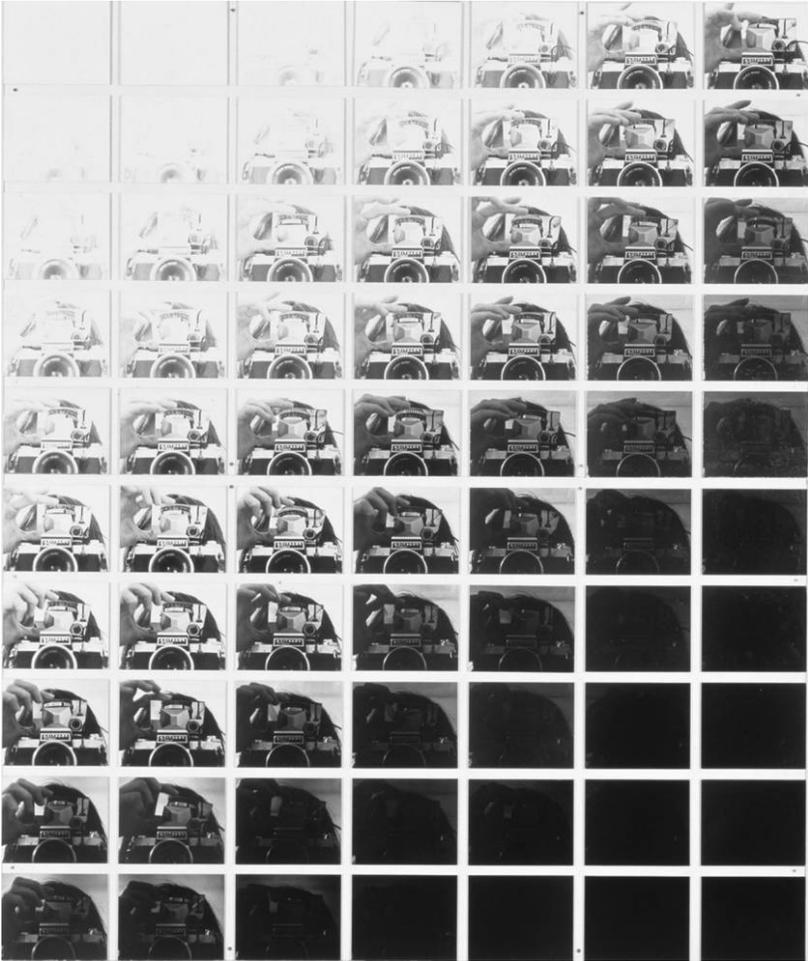


FIGURE 2. John Hilliard, *Camera Recording Its Own Condition (7 Apertures, 10 Speeds, 2 Mirrors)* (1971).

tion had almost no relevance to photography and to the depictive arts in general and, given the nature of those arts, could not be expected to have any.

Here I'm going to make reference to a lecture I gave in Holland a few years ago, where I dealt with this question, among others, in a way I still feel is relevant here. In "Depiction-Object-Event," I argued that reductivism—the attempt to reduce the presence, content, and physical character of the depictive arts to something other than themselves and to claim that what replaced the work was the more essential element of what we call art—was the gist of the

long historical attempt to displace the depictive arts from their preeminent place in art. I argued that the reductivist impulse originated with Marcel Duchamp's readymades:

The Readymade is the point of origin in the history of the attempt to displace the depictive arts. Yet it has an unusual relation to depiction, one not often commented upon.

The Readymade did not and was not able to address itself to depiction; its concern is with the object, and so if we were to classify it within the canonical forms it would be sculpture. But no-one who has thought about it accepts that a Readymade is sculpture. Rather it is an object that transcends the traditional classifications and stands as a model for art as a whole, art as a historical phenomenon, a logic, and an institution. As Thierry de Duve has so well demonstrated, this object designates itself as the abstraction 'art as such', the thing that can bear the weight of the name 'art as such'. Under what de Duve calls the conditions of nominalism, the name 'art' must be applied to any object that can be legitimately nominated as such by an artist. Or, to be more circumspect, it is the object from which the name art cannot logically be withheld. The Readymade therefore proved that an arbitrary object can be designated as art and that there is no argument available to refute that designation.

Depictions are works of art by definition. They may be popular art, amateur art, even entirely unskilled and unappealing art, but they are able to nominate themselves as art nonetheless. They are art because the depictive arts are founded on the making of depictions, and that making necessarily displays artistry. The only distinctions remaining to be made here are between 'fine' art and 'applied art', or 'popular' art and 'high' art, between 'amateur' art and 'professional' art, and, of course, between good art and less good art. Selecting a very poor, amateurish depiction (say a businessman's deskpad doodle) and presenting it in a nice frame in a serious exhibition might be interesting, but it would not satisfy the criteria Duchamp established for the Readymade. The doodle is already nominated as art and the operation of the Readymade in regard to it is redundant. . . .

Since a depiction cannot be selected as a Readymade, depiction is therefore not included in Duchamp's gesture of negation. This is not to say that the depictive arts are not affected by the subversion carried out in the form of the Readymade; far from it. But any effect it will have on them is exerted in terms of their exemption from the claims it makes about art, not their inclusion. They are exempt because their

legitimacy as art is not affected by the discovery that any object, justly selected, cannot be denied the status of ‘instance of art’ that was previously reserved exclusively for the canonical forms. This new ‘inability to deny status’ adds many things to the category art, but subtracts none from it. There is addition, that is, expanded legitimation, but no reduction, no delegitimation.

The Readymade critique is therefore both a profound success and a surprising failure. It seems to transform everything and yet it changes nothing. It can seem ephemeral and even phantom. It obliges nobody to anything. Duchamp himself returns to craftsmanship and the making of works, and there’s no problem. Everything is revolutionized but nothing has been made to disappear. Something significant has happened, but the anticipated transformation does not materialize, or it materializes incompletely, in a truncated form.

My earlier talk continues by recognizing the next decisive moment of reduction, that of conceptual art and what I have been calling the conceptual reduction. Conceptual art reiterates aspects of the readymade but extends it beyond the domain of objects, to “the ‘generic instance of art’, a condition beyond objects and works of art, a negation of the ‘work of art’, the definitive supercession of both object and work.”³

This reduction was the most rigorous and convincing version of the long critique of the canon and the canonical, depictive arts. It is possible now that there will be no further versions. What could they do? We might have arrived at the end of an era of reduction of the depictive arts, an era that seems to have begun around Édouard Manet’s time, but it really became significant with the new reception of Duchamp around 1960.

The conceptual reduction, being necessarily realized in the purest linguistic form, “can concern itself”—as I said—“with only a single subject: the argument it makes for its own validity. The text can tell us only why and under what conditions it must be accepted as the final, definitive version of the ‘generic instance of art’ and why all other kinds of art are historically redundant. But it cannot say anything else. If it does, it becomes ‘literature’; it becomes ‘post-conceptual’” (“DOE”), and inaugurates a generalized postconceptual condition.

As decisive and significant as it was, its attempt to withdraw legitimacy from the depictive arts was no more successful than was the readymade version.

3. Wall, “Depiction-Object-Event,” www.hermeslezing.nl/hermeslezing2006_eng.pdf; rpt. Wall “Depiction-Object-Event,” *Afterall* 16 (Autumn–Winter): www.afterall.org/journal/issue.16/depiction.object.event; hereafter abbreviated “DOE.”

From the early 70s on, it seems that most artists either ignored the reduction altogether, or acquiesced to it intellectually, but put it aside and continued making works; [this repeats what happened with the reception of the readymade in the 1920s and 1930s.] But the works they made are not the same works as before.

Since there are now no binding technical or formal criteria or even physical characteristics that could exclude this or that object or process from consideration as art, the necessity for art to exist by means of works of art is reasserted, not *against* the conceptual reduction, but in its wake and through making use of the new openness it has provided, the new 'expanded field'. The new kinds of works come into their own mode of historical self-consciousness through the acceptance of the claim that there is a form of art which is not a work of art and which legislates the way a work of art is now to be made. This is what the term 'post-conceptual' means.

The reduction increased the means by which works can be created and thereby established the framework for the vast proliferation of forms that characterizes the recent period. The depictive arts were based upon certain abilities and skills and those who did not possess either had little chance of acceptance in art. The critique of those abilities, or at least of the canonical status of those abilities, was one of the central aspects of the avant-garde's attack on the depictive arts, and conceptual art took this up with great enthusiasm. The Readymade had already been seen as rendering the handicraft basis of art obsolete, and conceptual art extended the obsolescence to the entire range of depictive skills. The de-skilling and re-skilling of artists became a major feature of art education, which has been transformed by two generations of conceptual and post-conceptual artist-teachers.
["DOE"]

The expanded field is filled with a new kind of art, distinct from the depictive arts and their criteria and framework of quality and the judgment of quality. The newer forms develop in terms of the suspension of that framework, depending for this on the consequences of the conceptual reduction.

This is the still rather surprising form of the avant-garde attempt to negate autonomous, bourgeois art.

For this avant-garde, it has always been the problem of autonomous art. Autonomous art seems to have been a burden to be borne, a disorder to be endured and treated somehow, a problem that was to be resolved in favor of another kind of art, one more likely to be useful to whatever purposes

required a nonautonomous or postautonomous art (and these are in principle all the worthy social purposes of the twentieth century).

But the depictive arts were not suitable for this heteronomy, and the evidence for this is that they were not susceptible to reduction either to object or linguistic form, but retained a surplus of utility in the autonomous form itself and in the depictive activity emancipated and sustained by the autonomous form.

As long as the avant-garde critique took place within the boundaries of the depictive arts, it was impossible to dispose of the principle of artistic quality. Subversions of technique and skill are permanent routines by now, and they are just as permanently bound by the criteria they challenge and with which they must all eventually come to terms. And the most irritating thing about these subversions is that the most significant of them are accomplished by artists who cannot but bring forward new versions of autonomous art, and therefore new instances of artistic quality. The canonical forms of the depictive arts are too strong for the critiques that have been brought to bear on them. As long as the attempts to subvert them are made from within, they cannot be disturbed. As soon as the artist in question makes the slightest concession to the criteria of quality, the criteria as such are reasserted in a new, possibly even radical way.

This was the dilemma faced 50 years ago by those who, for all their by now famous reasons, were determined to break what they saw as the vicious circle of autonomy, subversion, achievement, and reconciliation. They recognized that their aims could never be achieved within the *métiers* and the canon. Once again they attempted the complete reinvention of art.

“They cannot be said to have failed, since they discovered, invented,” and legitimated art forms that are not depictive in nature and not subject to the same criteria as the depictive arts (“DOE”).

A new way of looking at the identity of the autonomous depictive arts is to see them as entities that cannot be reduced to anything other than themselves. Although they have a rich conceptual aspect, the only concept that applies to them is that of autonomous art. But, in order to be that autonomous art, they have to be a practice, a *métier*, a tradition, and a canon. All the critiques of those things—practice, *métier*, tradition, and canon—have been extraordinarily successful and have created new discourses or new levels of discourse. But their principal effect has been progenerative, not prohibitive. The critiques have created new art forms, maybe hybrid forms, forms that are not depictive and that have a new and com-

plex relationship to the concept of autonomous art. The new forms are by now legitimate, and they have a history. The new forms are essentially postconceptual. They emerge, even if unexpectedly, from the conceptual reduction and would not have emerged without it. These arts cannot have a preconceptual status because they did not exist previous to the conceptual reduction process. Since the conceptual reduction cannot now be withdrawn, the postconceptual condition is permanent, and its evolution will continue, and it will continue to affect the depictive arts in unpredictable ways.

So the depictive arts do not continue just as before, and in that sense they do have a relationship to the postconceptual condition. The best I can do to formulate that relationship is, as I mentioned earlier, to call it an exemption. The new forms were, to a great extent, brought into being through the frustration felt by generations of artists with the limitations of the depictive arts. The transcending of the boundaries of depiction and, to a lesser extent, of autonomous art has been the mainstream of the history of contemporary art for more than a century now. The legitimacy of the new, alternative forms is uncontested, and they are beginning to dominate the field of contemporary art to an extent that the depictive arts are beginning to seem to have been relegated to, if not a secondary position, at least to a less dominant one than they enjoyed for centuries.

But this discussion is no defense of the depictive arts or a panegyric to their unique qualities and superiority. The century-long struggle against them has revealed their weaknesses and boundaries as never before.

Nevertheless, whatever their limitations, being nonconceptual or preconceptual are not among them. They are not preconceptual, conceptual, or postconceptual. They are nonconceptual.

I'm prepared to accept the philosophical aesthetic history of the term *nonconceptual* with all the contradictions it implies. It's in the spirit of those contradictions that I argue that calling the depictive arts nonconceptual is not to acquiesce to the comfortable notion that the depictive arts have no intellectual content, discourse, or consequences—a notion so popular with people who want to limit the intellectual consequences not only of the depictive arts but of all the arts, usually for their own political reasons. I would rather put it that the intellectual and critical content of the depictive arts is strictly dependent on them being autonomous art subject to aesthetic judgment. This is a content that now explicitly, not implicitly, contests the conceptual reduction—in principle, as an aesthetic position, and then, practically, work by work of art, in photography, or any of its sister or brother arts.