Cracking the codes of Conceptual art

Jan Verwoert

Some say that Conceptual art failed.1 It didn’t. It just became hermetic. We encounter Conceptual art today as an art of coded signs: encrypted messages typed out on yellowing sheets of paper or enigmatic gestures captured in black and white photographs and deteriorating videotapes gone fuzzy with time. At the heart of the code, we sense the presence of a secret: the key to a way of thinking and of doing things that seems intimately connected to the spirit of the early 1970s. To understand the meaning of the radical rupture that Conceptual art constitutes, one would need to find a way of tapping the experience from which it resulted. To say that Conceptual art became hermetic is a way of describing a specific sensation, namely – to attempt a shorthand definition of ‘hermetic’ – that of confronting artefacts or articulations that defy common modes of interpretation and instead, through innuendo, hint at a body of experiences into which one would have to initiate oneself first to be able to grasp the full implications of their significance.

Admittedly, this approach directly contradicts the declared objectives of Conceptual art voiced by many of its first-generation proponents. This was the idea that idea art was revolutionary transparency2; and that the purpose of using text or photographic/video documentation was to say what you meant by simply saying it and to show what you wanted to do by simply doing it, in the hope that this commitment to clarity would destroy the traditional cult of art which relies precisely on the senseless custom of having to initiate oneself into hermetic codes of connoisseurship and taste. In this sense, the stakes of Conceptual art were to further the emancipatory project of Modernism and to create an artistic language that would be as universally understandable, and therefore democratically accessible, as pure information.3 In terms of professional politics, getting your ideas straight to the public as an artist (and thus making sure that your work was understood as you wanted it to be) was meant to cut out the middle men – critics, historians, gallerists, curators – who capitalize on the power of art’s institutions to fix the meaning and value of a work.4 In terms of a wider sense of social politics, speaking out openly in the realm of art was held to be a means – to use the political idiom of the day – of ‘sticking it to the man’.

But, maybe things were never that clear to start with. Perhaps conceptual working methods were always riddled with the performative contradictions inherent to the attempt to create a new artistic code for code-free communication. And it could be precisely these contradictions that make Conceptual art worth engaging with today. If the conceptual turn in art constituted a
rupture, the point now may be to open up the rift within that rupture. So, let’s look for ways to open that rift.

One work that could be such a starting point for this – marking, as it does, a critical tipping point in the course of Conceptual art unfolding its hermeticism – is Art & Language’s contribution to Documenta 5, Index 001 (1972). The work consists of four black filing cabinets on plinths, the drawers of which contain essays on art and its politics written by, and circulated among, the members of the artists’ group, which was founded in 1968 with one branch in the UK and one in the USA. On the gallery wall is a text: long columns of numbers and letters that would indicate, were one to decipher their code, who read which text when and changed what. On the one hand, the didactical, library-like mise en scène conveys a commitment to transparency as the group discloses its production process to the public. The members of Art & Language dedicated themselves to the ongoing critical discussion of art’s conceptual premises that, among other manifestations, was relayed through publishing journals such as Art–Language or The Fox. If you sought to gain access to the group’s discourse, Index 001 would indeed offer you what core members Ian Burn, Joseph Kosuth and Mel Ramsden termed a ‘learning situation’. On the other hand, as a mode of visual address, the enigmatic columns of code and cool black boxes full of files constituted a deliberate affront to any casual visitor, a stand-offish gesture stating that anyone unwilling to initiate themselves into the lore of Art & Language would get nothing out of the work. To position itself publicly, the group chose to use two modes of address simultaneously: the gesture of public accessibility and the embracing of the hermetic.
Looking at neo-Conceptual practices in the UK in the 1990s, it could be argued that the implications of precisely this twofold mode of address were what artists realized and developed in their work, albeit in two fundamentally different ways: firstly, by pitching ‘one-liner’ works that are presenting enigmas as accessible; secondly, by attempting to make didacticism and hermeticism clash within one practice as two intimately related, yet inimical, forces.

Following the first strategy, by condensing a conundrum into a punch line and then pitching it, you’re sticking it to the media instead of sticking it to the man. The trick is to construe a puzzle that is easy to solve. People love feeling they are being let in on an exclusive secret. What’s a dead shark doing in a huge fish tank? It represents The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991). Ha! Cannily, the enigmatic quality of the title of Damien Hirst’s piece affirms the aura and value of art: since the eerie beast is about the sublime secret of life and death, it must be worth its price. Getting a share of the secret here is like being invited to a free lunch on the executive office roof terrace: you get to know what it is like up there. Coincidentally, this is also how the stakeholder society of the 1990s worked: New Labour’s pitch of the ‘everyman entrepreneur’ made people feel they were being let in on the game, so they all took a gamble and invested in it.

Participation in the social is, indeed, most often organized through rites of sharing open secrets. In capitalism, as Karl Marx observed, the secret is the abstract value of value, which, in a complex exchange economy, is essentially empty. Everyone knows that bank notes are just printed paper. Yet, this all the more incites the desire to see the secret of value magically made tangible: in the aura of the commodity fetish, the ‘it’ thing. To own ‘it’ is to be in on what value – and society – is about. In a class-based society, being in on it might just be about modulating your vowels in that certain way. For social distinction to work, all must know the unspoken rules of the game.

To expose the Byzantine logic of such basic social mores was precisely the point of Angela Bulloch’s ‘Rules Series’ (1993–ongoing), a body of works in which the artist exhibited selected codes of conduct – from places ranging from a girls’ school to DJ booths and strip clubs – as wall texts. Bulloch thereby translated Art & Language’s coded index into an index to the codes of society at large, offering a didactical introduction to the Kafkaesque hermeticism of social protocol. In a different way, you could see this clash between the didactic and hermetic persistently enacted in the practice of Liam Gillick. His work exists in two modes. Firstly, in the presentation of display surfaces or design objects, such as his trademark ‘Discussion Islands’ (1997–8) semi-transparent coloured panels suspended from
the ceiling of, or otherwise inserted in, the gallery. As silent things, their presence is opaque; yet through their particular makeup they also, by innuendo, evoke the desires encoded in contemporary design. Secondly, in an ongoing didactical performance in which Gillick publishes books and gives talks unfolding his critical theory of precisely those codes of desire that the current neo-liberalist makeup of the social imaginary puts into effect. The rift between the hermetic object and the didactic operation is the position from which Gillick operates, working outwards from within the contradiction between the two.

To directly confront the hermetic and the didactic within a single conceptual piece is exactly what Cerith Wyn Evans does in Look at that picture ... How does it appear to you now? Does it seem to be persisting? (2003). Here, five crystal chandeliers are installed in the exhibition space, each connected to a different computer that, in realtime, encrypts a text into Morse code from a signal relayed by the brightening and fading of the chandeliers’ lights. The texts transmitted are essays by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, John Cage, Theodor W. Adorno and Brion Gysin & Terry Wilson, as well as the novel La Princesse de Clèves (1678) collectively written by the salon of Madame de Lafayette. These written works can be read line by line, in plain text and cipher, on a monitor linked to each computer, as it encodes the signal. The process is fully transparent, yet its effect is still ghostly. Animated, as if they were breathing, by the swelling and dimming of the light, the chandeliers evoke a spectral presence. All the while, the installation clearly resembles a ‘learning situation’: a seminar dedicated to the close reading of critical and creative writing. But this seminar is also a séance in which the spirit of creative criticality is summoned. The hermetic ceremony here consecrates the didactical operation to a particular spirit. It becomes a seductive invitation to initiate oneself into the joys of critical thinking.

To use the hermetic as a mode to further the project of criticality is an approach to Conceptual art that Susan Hiller helped to pioneer. Her piece Ten Months (1977–9) is pivotal in this sense. It consists of two series – each of ten frames – mounted parallel to one other on
In solemn shots, the artist is shown dressed as a performer in the film, inhabiting that world and sharing its joys and pains. Danai Anesiadou does this brilliantly as Profanation, then, is a way to make a secret yours, building a lecherous look here or a cock showing through someone's trousers there. It admits the profanation of the secret occurs in Olesen's work, for instance, when his choice of imagery appropriating secrets is to destroy the illusion of its rare value, to make the object talk, and to waste the capital to be gained from seeming special. It's an anti-economic stance inherent to humour and style. The invocation. The savvy ones know: secrets sell.

As with a séance, the crucial question is in what spirit this act of appropriating secrets is performed. For the decisive difference between the fabrication of enigmas that affirm the status quo and a defiant embrace of other secrets lies in the minute details of how you do the invocation. The savvy ones know: secrets sell. In recent years, many careers have been built on work that, often playing on codes of rare modernist designs, relies on imbuing objects with delicate crafted ambiguities. Feeding the audience on breadcrumbs, such work suggests the potential of some exquisite secret hidden somewhere in its depths. To never actualize that potential – by making the object talk – but instead to harbour it through eloquent silence is the safest way to ensure the success of the work within an economy of rarified goods.

The opposite of this strategy of rarification is a practice of profanation that, while cherishing a secret, also allows for the jouissance – the joy and pain – at the heart of this secret to spill out in all its obscenity. There is something mundane about the most existential secrets – of love, power and pleasure: people have always been making, having and taking it. Everybody’s got the Fever. But few will admit how common that is. Because, to share the profane actuality of one’s secret is to destroy the illusion of its rare value - and waste the capital to be gained from seeming special. It’s an anti-economic stance inherent to humour and style. The profanation of the secret occurs in Olesen’s work, for instance, when his choice of imagery admits the jouissance punctuating his reading of historical codes to be the joy of spotting a lecherous look here or a cock showing through someone’s trousers there.

Profanation, then, is a way to make a secret yours, build a mundane universe around it, inhabit that world and share its joys and pains. Danai Anesiadou does this brilliantly as a performer in the film X, A & M (2008), which she produced in collaboration with Sophie Nys. In solemn shots, the artist is shown dressed in a lush, yet somewhat scraggy, fur coat with a
stoic look on her face, walking through the ornate halls of the Nymphenburg Palace in Munich, where Alain Resnais filmed *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (Last Year in Marienbad, 1960), squatting on a sofa with a male partner in a room crammed with queer domestic artifacts in the museum of Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux at Saint-Idesbald, and, finally, reclining in a dentist’s chair, gracefully holding – in a motion that echoes the gesture of the mannequin presenting her illuminated lamp in Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* (1946–66) – a coloured lump of crystal rock. Bits of dialogue and music from *L’Année dernière* … make up the soundtrack. Through the film, Aanesiadou inhabits Resnais’ hermetic discourse of lovers’ memories by dismantling its rarified atmosphere, by re-encrypting its secret in her own code: the profane material ciphers of the scraggy fur, the props of Belgian domestic surrealism, the dentist’s chair and the lump of crystal.

This is the promise that the embrace of the secretive holds for critical conceptual art practice: the promise of transgressing the limits of its own discursive codes by speaking two languages at once, the didactic and the hermetic; of creating forms of counter-hermeticism to defy the hegemonic codes that make capitalism and class-structures work; and of inhabiting worlds in which the jouissance of one’s secrets is shared through their profanation, by letting it show that you like it this way rather than that: bulging, cocky, scraggy, furry, lumpy…

There is a joke that captures this attitude to sharing life’s secrets.8 A man walks into a pub in Vladivostok and orders a black coffee. Suddenly, a gorilla bursts in, grabs the coffee, washes his balls in it and storms out. Quite shocked, the man asks the waiter: ‘Mister, do you know why gorilla wash balls in my coffee?’ The waiter can’t, so the man demands to see the manager who has no explanation either, but tells him to talk to the band playing the joint as they have experience in such matters. So the man asks the band-leader: ‘Mister, do you know why gorilla wash balls in my coffee?’ ‘No,’ the musician responds, ‘but if you hum a few bars, I’m sure we can play it.’

1 One such proponent is Blake Stimson. He seems to consider it his brief – like a coroner inspecting art history’s victims – to confirm as dead what is alive about Conceptual art, so that he can historicize it more authoritatively as a historical failure. See Stimson, ‘The Promise of Conceptual Art’ in Alexander Alberro/Stimson (eds.): Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. xxxviii–li

2 Joseph Kosuth was a prominent proponent of this view. See Kosuth, ‘intension(s)’ in Alberro/Stimson, op. cit., pp. 460–9

3 One of the first survey shows on Conceptual art at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1970, was tellingly titled ‘Information’ and promoted Conceptualism as a medium of rapid, direct political communication appropriate for the global information age.

4 See Kosuth, op.cit. In the panel discussion with Jörg Heiser at the Frieze Art Fair 2006, Adrian Piper also forcefully asserted this position.


8 I got this joke from Boris Ondreicka. It changed my life.

Jan Verwoert 2009

http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/secret_society/

Jan Verwoert is a contributing editor of *frieze* and teaches at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.