

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s”

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Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s Conceptual art in the United States was an exciting alternative to the asceticism of minimalist art. That defiance of the aesthetic object as an end in itself emerged simultaneously with our defiance of government policies in Vietnam. It is not so different, really, from the opposition that is now emerging to the global economy: there is an increasing distrust of the world's hegemonic systems. In conjunction with that condition, the exhibition "Global Conceptualism Points of Origin 1950s -1980s" is a timely examination of conceptualism in art as a means of opposition and liberation. Shown at the Queens Museum of Art, New York, The Walker Art Center Minneapolis, the Miami Art Museum and the MIT List Visual Arts Center, the exhibition includes 200 works by 130 artists that come from 28 countries. Assembled by a team of 11 curators and organized by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, this complex exhibition is ambitious and groundbreaking. It presents politically-engaged artists who bravely opposed entrenched systems both within the "art world" and in the society in general.

That distinction divides the exhibition- artists in secure capitalist societies (North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan) were subverting art systems while those living in repressive regimes (Latin America, the Former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China/Hong Kong/Taiwan, and South Korea.) were fighting for their lives. These sections of the exhibition introduced compelling and unfamiliar examples of visually sophisticated art produced within a political program of opposition. The curators firmly explained the connections between the artists and the social and political environment in which they worked. Mari Carmen Ramirez, writing on Latin America, for example, spoke of a desire on the part of the artists to "actively transform the world..." In the context of a military regime, this was a far more courageous act of defiance than simply opening up the definition of art as an intellectual exercise. For example, the collaborative group Tucumán Arde addressed misinformation by the media under the military regime in Argentina. Their work was presented in a compelling video of an exhibition originally shown in a worker's union hall in 1968. The exhibit was closed by the military and the artists dispersed into guerrilla fighting or just stopped making art entirely. A contrasting example is the work of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark whose interactive performance works are intended to enable the viewer/participant to experience a sense of liberation.

Most unfamiliar for me were the artists in the South Korean section, curated by Sung Wan-kyung. He emphasized Min Joong Art (People's Art) a practice pursued by many collectives in Korea who sought to openly struggle with the military government (they certainly didn't see themselves as rarefied conceptual artists in the mainstream American tradition which also existed in South Korea). Park Bul-dong' s Nightmare No. 1 (Electoral Campaign Poster)1985 is powerfully defiant of the US military presence in South Korea. In 1984 Kim Yong Tae collected photos of American soldiers taken at commercial salons near military bases and arranged them in a D..M..Z. on the wall. They

speak eloquently of the fluid social borders, the sex trade, the interracial marriages, and other types of cultural exchange that develop around military camps. Kim Dong-won and the Labor Newsreel group developed connections between artists and laborers, and were able to document the destruction of illegal housing before the Asian Olympic Games in 1986.

The Japanese section, curated by Reiko Tomii with Chiba Shigeo, lies at the heart of the exhibition, a fact that is, in my opinion, not sufficiently emphasized. Tomii tactfully acknowledges the complexity of sorting out Eastern and Western sources for Japanese conceptualism, but the anti-object ideology actually originates in Asian philosophy; it was transmitted to the United States by John Cage, the young Yoko Ono and others during the 1950s. The works in the exhibition demonstrate that primacy. Yoko Ono's earliest works date back to 1961. Yutaka Matsuzawa's *Human's Lets Vanish, Gate Gate-Ant civilization Committee*, was a text based art expression that he began as early as 1964. Matsuzawa became a guru to a group of younger artists in the 1960s. In 1963 Akasegawa Genpei's *Model 1000 Yen Note Incident* became a courtroom performance piece when the artist was tried for counterfeiting money after he mechanically reproduced a 1,000 yen note.

Another omission from the exhibition was the works discussed in the catalog by Apinan Posyananda from South and Southeast Asia. Lack of space is the reason given, but on the theme of globalism, I would much rather have seen this work, than the familiar artists from the Euro American axis. Another argument for their exclusion might be that many of them dated from the 1990s, and thus fell outside the scope of the show (which was organized vigorously into two phases, the early (fifties to seventies) and the later (eighties). Too bad South Asia, you just took too long to go global.

Moving from Asia to Europe, the Soviet Union was privileged as a special section, undoubtedly because we are so familiar with the émigré artists like Komar and Melamid and Ilya Kabokov. The humble, gritty, early work by these artists produced in opposition to the tradition of unofficial art as well as to the Soviet regime are a stark contrast to the later works by these artists produced in the capitalist West. The Eastern European section is all new territory except for the well-known Marina Abramovic, originally from Bulgaria. Covering Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Roumania, Czech Republic, and Croatia was an ambitious task for its curator, László Beke. Even at that areas are left out like Macedonia, for example, where there is an exciting conceptual art movement (but again in the 1990s). Beke carefully outlined the political histories between these countries, and included such provocative artists as the influential Rumanian Ana Lupas' who asked all the women in a village to hang their white laundry on a green hillside in Translyvania and Tadeusz Kantor , a Polish artist who created happenings like conducting a concert in a lake. As a whole the Eastern European artists made offbeat, visually compelling and anarchically political statements that had their own edge.

One of the greatest contradictions between mainstream "conceptualism" on the Euro-American model, local politics, and local practice was in Africa. Politically, in the 1960s, Africa stood in transition. Many parts of the continent were undergoing liberation from

colonialism in the 1960s and 1970s and then a post-euphoria crisis led, in some places, to repression. Furthermore its artistic production stood outside the traditions of Europe, but, as the curator for this section Okwui Enwezor states that traditional African art always existed within a local nexus of ideas, language, and performance. Unfortunately, rather than pursuing this theme, Enwezor then proceeds to try to find examples in Africa (the entire continent!) that will correspond to the show's premise. He comes up with only four artists (and a group who refused to participate) and three of those artists are white South African men. The other artist is Rachid Koraichi, an Algerian living in Tunisia, who stands here also as a window into the Middle East and Muslim culture, another area omitted from the show. Koraichi's calligraphic work uses Arabic script that combines political questions and private psychological explorations. Of course, for the Western eye it becomes a formal device that we cannot read.

Therein lays a fundamental paradox of the exhibition. A theme of "Global Conceptualism" is the use of language, but most Westerners cannot read Chinese, Korean, or Japanese characters, the Cyrillic alphabet of Russian or even the Latin- based Eastern European languages. Thus the language used in each country became a private joke, including the arcane jokes in English of the early North American and British conceptualists. What was far more translatable in the early seventies was the idea of conceptualism as an opening up of art to the world. The curators emphasize the distinction between conceptual art, as an extension of modernist practice, and conceptualism as an idea that enabled artists to break away from objects and open up possibilities of connections to the social and political.

With such emphasis on conceptualism as a means to social and political liberation, I found the omission of Joseph Beuys and Fluxus really surprising. Beuys is a world wide stimulus for conceptualism, particularly in its more political aspects. One reason may be that Beuys is not nearly as influential in England, France and the United States as he was elsewhere. The Western European section included people like Art Povera precursor, Piero Manzoni and offbeat examples of the well known Yves Klein, Daniel Buren, Art and Language artists and others. The only German artist included was Hanne Darboven, whose obsession with the visual experience of time are important (and she was one of only a handful of women who were included in the exhibition), but far from the public importance of Beuys.

"Global Conceptualism" bravely attempts to expand our perspectives and to include local conditions as formative, a difficult enterprise when most of the curators as well as the exhibition itself are part of a Eurocentric system. The exhibition has some spectacular successes, but it also has some equally spectacular omissions. But its failures actually made the exhibition all the more important, because they make it clear that this is not the final word, but a transitional moment in our efforts to think globally. Much like the protests against the World Bank, "Global Conceptualism" is the beginning of a process of decentering the Eurocentric perspective which is long overdue. In spite of the obvious difficulties of such an endeavor, the exhibition itself included powerful unfamiliar examples by artists from all parts of the world who were confronting injustice and oppression through their art.