

## **Artistic Autonomy in the “Post-Medium Condition” of Art: Conceptual Artworks as Performative Interventions**

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### **Abstract**

The present text tackles the old problem of artistic autonomy given the constitutive heteronomy of post-conceptual artistic practices in terms of their medium-specificity. Instead of considering the idea of artistic autonomy as a modernist prejudice to be discarded, I suggest that it may be revised as the performative autonomy of discourse against ideological uses of language, given that conceptual art is considered as practice and activity rather than the production of objects. Resistance may be itself redefined as the performative re-articulation of language within its conventional use. Therefore, if aesthetic formalism tried to achieve the autonomy of art in the social sphere by means of medium-specificity, whereas early conceptualists strolled towards a functionalist type of artistic autonomy in the artistic sphere, contemporary post-conceptual practices revised the very concept of form as the critical communicative articulation of the social sphere.

**Keywords:** Artistic autonomy, conceptual art, performativity, ideology, interventionist practices

### **1. Conceptualism and the “Post-Medium” Condition of Art**

Defining conceptual art, or at least, circumscribing its scope and explaining its particularities within the vast array of

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contemporary art seems an almost self-contradictory task, given the anti-formalist dimension of the early conceptual art manifestations – which also means that it was meant to be less a particular style and more a radical re-evaluation of the very concept of art. In whatever terms we may retrospectively describe it, conceptualism was, first of all, an anti-formalist *attitude* rather than a formal innovation in terms of the canonical language of art. At least in what concerns the development of contemporary art in Northern America and Great Britain, conceptual art reacted with artists such as Joseph Kosuth or John Latham against the dominant Greenbergian aesthetic paradigm and its formalist criteria for defining or understanding art (Wood 2004, 297-8; Morgan 1996, 3-27; Colpitt 2004).

Attempting yet to circumscribe its essential characteristics in terms of the use of the artistic language, conceptualism might be briefly described as an “art of the mind” [instead of the senses] (Wood 2002, 6). It might also be defined formally as a distinct artistic genre or language informed by the neo-avant-gardes broader reaction to the aesthetics and values prompted by abstract expressionism (Wood 2004, 296-8). That is, it can be defined by means of its medium specificity, as an art of language – “a kind of art of which the material is language” or as an art in which verbal (spoken or written) language and its “dematerialization” towards the purely conventionalized (and thus, intellectualized) significance replaces the visual language of images and the material presence of the signifier (Morley 2003, 142). Thus, it can be defined as “an art of ideas”, as it was defined both by the artists themselves as exemplified by Sol Le Witt’s “Paragraphs...” or Joseph Kosuth’s art series *Art as Idea as Idea*, and by art critics and theorists with clear expressions such as “information or idea art” (Lippard 2001, xv).

In the above-mentioned terminology it is paramount that “idea” (understood both as a preparatory sketch or project for the accomplishment of an artistic action or work, or as cognitive meaning) plays the crucial part instead of its material presentation. Considered a direct heir of Duchamp’s anti-aesthetic ready-mades, conceptual art is itself usually

interpreted as an *anti or an-aesthetic* artistic manifestation, because it renders irrelevant the sensuous appearance of the artwork, thus shifting the focus of artistic appreciation from artistic morphology to functionalist questions and criteria (Kosuth 2002, 18).

Such a decisive accent may have led some of its early commentators to suggest the well-known label of "dematerialized" art for the type of artistic practices associated with conceptualism (Lippard 2001, xvii and 42). Nevertheless, it has become quickly paramount that, even if conceptual art highlights the cognitive dimension of art and its intellectualized reception and experience, the thinking process has to be communicated through a sensible medium (Lippard 2001, 43). What has become clear with conceptualism is rather that idea can be conveyed through multiple or virtually *any* medium.

It seems logical, therefore, to speak about the "medium-indifference" associated with conceptual art (Wood 2002, 97). This "indifference" may also sum up the conceptualist condition of contemporary art as a "post-medium condition" (Krauss 2000), in which the conceptualist activity of reflection pervades all other types of artistic gestures. In Krauss's account, this condition reflects a conscious critical attitude towards the medium used by the artists, once we have entered the era when virtually any medium may be used to convey an idea. As summarized by Krauss, the major part played by conceptual art in this narrative seems to relate to the basic acknowledgement of art's interdependence on its related systems of consumption and production, the inherently intermediary and interdependent structure of artistic expression (Krauss 2000, 32) in the ensemble of cultural discourses and its engagement with the commercial system instead of an utopian denial of its mechanisms in search for a medium-specific purity, hence, autonomy of art (Krauss 2000, 11).

## **2. Aesthetic Formalism and the Problem of Artistic Autonomy**

The precondition of this epochal shift in the definition and evaluation of art, which Kosuth described as "the shift from

a question of morphology to a question of function” (Kosuth 2002, 17) is that the aesthetic evaluation and appreciation of art, at least in formal terms, bears no import on the function and nature of art. In Paul Crowther’s terms, in conceptual art the relationship between form and content becomes contingent (Crowther 1997, 178). It seems reasonable, then, to take for granted the assumption that conceptual art plays a major role in the “anti-aesthetic” tendency to be noted in twentieth century art, understood not as a negation, but as “a critique that destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them” (Foster 1987, xv). The term also signals that the aesthetic realm of art altogether, as separate from the (socio)political field, can no longer sustain *per se* the critical attitude of resistance required from art in the postmodern conditions of an ever-growing cultural industry (Foster 1987, xvi).

But if conceptual art is giving up both the formal and the aesthetic elements which may seclude the sphere of art as an autonomous public sphere in relation to social and political spheres and the dominant cultural discourses at a certain time, the old problem of artistic autonomy reappears in new terms. What sort of critical autonomy may still claim such an art in relation to the social sphere and its culture? Is it still possible to differentiate the critical potential of art from the ways of mass culture and cultural industry absorbing images into its spectacular regime of production and consumption, given the medium-heteronomy and the inherent dependency of conceptual art to the non-artistic spheres of everyday life, politics and culture? Can conceptual art evade these problems by stepping out altogether from the realm of images directly into their ideological frameworks of interpretations? And, most of all, is the problem of autonomy an obsolete desire and an inappropriate claim in the new system of contemporary art?

As Adorno warned us, the problem of artistic autonomy seemed to be more than a desirable formal condition of art in modernity (Adorno 1997, 8-9). Rather it turned out to be a necessary (albeit illusory) strategy of aesthetic resistance conceived in negative terms, served to guarantee art’s non-assimilation into cultural industry – and thus, its critical and

political potentials. The distinction between high and low art and the dialectic between the artwork's formal autonomy conceived as a social monad and its simultaneous embedding into larger structures of social production were not regarded necessarily as an obstacle, but rather as a necessary distance which is able to support critical judgment instead of collapsing into a passive reaction of immersed contemplation within the aesthetic experience of art. Now, given conceptual art's embrace of the low art's favorite mediums of production, that is, the machinery of mass media and its structures of promoting and distributing information (Alberro 2003, 100-10), in a way similar to Pop Art's collapse of the distinction between art and commercial graphic design (and, *in extenso*, between a glamorous high art and the growing aestheticism of everyday-life), one may as well suspect that, despite its austere looks and critical apparatus, conceptualism may have ultimately signed the documents of complete resignation in respect to the problem of artistic autonomy.

This problem seems to become even more important when the aesthetic dimension of autonomy is at stake, since the post-medium condition of art also seems to mean giving up the aesthetic autonomy of artistic experience and reception, which may have secluded the realm of art in the cultural sphere. How is then autonomy secured for a type of art that promoted itself a purification of art precisely from its aesthetic heteronomy?

There are at least two important questions related to the conceptualist demise of formal *and* aesthetic types of autonomy of art. First of all, we may criticize the formalist conventions of conceptual art, which in retrospect may have only expanded the formal vocabulary of art without actually replacing the fundamental modernist presuppositions of Greenberg's four-points purist definition of art as aesthetic form. On the contrary, as several authors have already pointed out (Wood 2004, 298; Colpitt 2004, 32-6), it may have presented a purist and essentialist hence modernist definition of art in simple negative terms. In Kosuth's works, for instance, pure visuality is replaced by concepts or ideas; subjectivity is evacuated by the pure "objectivity" of impersonal (and seemingly authorless) statements; sensuality is replaced by thinking, reflective and

interpretive processes; considered to be oppressive, “high art” is collapsed into “low art” or even no art at all – that is, into the realm of everyday-life language, practices and transactions; being considered before as the key factor in the definition of art, aesthetic value as an intrinsic value of the aesthetic object is explicitly denied. Among his arguments, Colpitt also notes Kosuth’s insistence on the idea of art for art’s sake, while the insistence on tautology may also resemble Greenberg’s flatness of the canvas (Colpitt 2004, 34). Last but not least, Colpitt notes reductionism, that is, the elimination of unnecessary conventions as an important underlying intention of Kosuth’s investigations, which, according to Greenberg, may be considered one of the main drives of modernist progress or advancement (Colpitt 2004, 36).

This means that, at least for the “early” or “pure” conceptualists such as Kosuth, the investigation into the nature and function of art initiated by conceptual or reflexive art, the problem of the autonomy is not only present, but also plays a key role in the process of investigation, justifying both the search for essentialist criteria of art and the meta-artistic character of the artistic production itself. The “conceptual” features of art are meant precisely to secure the autonomy of art in relation to the manipulation of image in popular culture or mass-media.

But the same problem of artistic autonomy becomes important in conceptual art in what concerns its entangled relationship to the art market, its conventions and ideology. It may be argued that the formalist understanding of the autonomy of art, for which Kosuth is the best example, makes it blind to the options of direct political engagement, thus acquiring at best a professional autonomy from the critical judgment and thus, failing to find a proper audience except for a narrow circle of “initiates” and peers (Stimson 2004, 290). It has been equally noticed that, in doing so, Conceptual art did not elude art’s constituent dependency on the market and the larger cultural industry, despite its innovations concerning the systems of artistic distribution. Thus, the utopia according to which ideas were meant to be anti-commercial given the explicit denial of objecthood was considered to be failed (Lippard 2001, 264; Burn 1999, 320-333).

Particularly, conceptual art may have equally been prone to a fetishism of ideas, being constrained by an organizing principle borrowed uncritically from the world of work and engineering, that of "productivism" or "production for production's sake" (Stimson 2004, 283-91). It has equally been accused of having served the interests of the market by promoting cheap goods for an economy affected by crisis (Smithson 1999, 284-5). Last but not least, the idea of a market-free economy of art has been criticized on grounds of conceptual art's embrace, complicity with and eventual incorporation of promotion and distributions systems pertaining to mass-media and advertising (Alberro 2003).

### **3. Use and Function: Conceptualist Interventions and Critical Performativity**

Here we also may note that, essentially, conceptual art has succeeded in highlighting once again the inherently *communicative* dimension of art. The idea of "dematerialization of the artistic object", as Lippard dubbed the early conceptual artworks, plays an important part in understanding conceptual art if redefined as an information-oriented communicational structure of art, since in a "post-medium condition of art" the image of the artwork as an aesthetic object "to be looked at" is replaced with the transmission of any kind of information between the artist and its public (Alberro 2003, 10-17).

It is also true that, in this process of radical redefinition of art, early North American conceptualism may have been infused with the cybernetic revolution proclaiming an ideal of communication based on objective and positivist knowledge borrowing terminology such as "art as software" and "system aesthetics" (Shanken 2004, 236-43), doubled by a strong belief in the power of language to convey ideas as transparently as possible (Drucker 2004, 256-62). Such suppositions may also underpin the engagement with information regarded as a democratic gesture for some conceptual artists, and the important position played by written text, indexical and documentary photography and other means of recording information such as the tape-recorded ambient sound in Christine Kozlov's iconic work *Information: No Theory* (1979),

in which the process of constant remembering and erasure is expressed by the endless process of tape-recording all sounds in the given environment during the exhibition in a continuous loop, while simultaneously erasing the old ones registered on the same tape. The underpinning ideology describing the tension between images and information is that, if images may be manipulated in their rhetoric force and given their complex visual articulation, written text may acquire objectivity in artistic communication, since it adheres to a purely intellectual experience of reception. Thus, conceptual art may also communicate in a democratic and *collective* manner, since the interpretive competence required for understanding and responding to a text is no match for the interpretive complexity of an image. It also opens up a space of collective and intersubjective reception instead of the subjective and emotional private space of reception required by aesthetic formalism.

In order to accommodate both the perceptual indifference and the conceptual autonomy of the artworks which seems to rest at the core of conceptual art as a critical gesture, we may be required both to redefine the modernist concept of artistic form as the perceptual articulation of visual images, which is clearly inoperable here, and the subsequent concept of artistic autonomy associated to the formalist tradition of autonomy as linguistic purity belonging to a specific evolutionary narrative of the medium itself. First of all, it is not necessary that artistic autonomy should be expressed as art for art's sake (despite Kosuth's obsessive interest in debating the nature and boundaries of art). In other words, the problem of autonomy given the heteronomy of conceptual art as an art infused into usual structures of communication and representation becomes a problem of linguistic autonomy against other possible uses of language. The problem of the autonomy of art shifts accordingly "from a question of morphology to a question of function" (as Kosuth had put it) and becomes, therefore, in itself, a *performative* problem.

Concerning the (postmodern) question of the post-medium condition of conceptual art and consequently, of contemporary art in broader terms, we may note that it did not immediately turn *any* artistic manifestation into a "conceptual"

gesture. In fact, as Tony Godfrey noticed, the conceptualist artworks may be restricted to a quite limited array of favorite techniques of expression. Accordingly, the artwork itself may consist broadly in four types of supports, all of which may have been considered to be non-artistic or at least to belong to the non-artistic sphere of everyday life and communication: ready-mades, interventions, documentations and words (Godfrey 1998, 7). We may expand the last category according to the way words are used into written text in order to produce a spatialization of language, written texts used as narrative or documentary device meant to inscribe or instantiate temporality (processes or events) and texts used as a performative device, especially exploiting the dimensions of direct communication and orality, by means of conversations, formal or informal dialogues and other forms of collective discourse. If the ready-mades in Godfrey's classification may have appeared as one of the possible and major artistic precedents to be reprised and reconsidered, the use of contextual interventions starting over from the performative dimension of placing an object in a situation, the documentation of a situation or an event and the textual description or statement are certainly new ways of understanding art, appropriated (among others) from the legal and administrative language (Buchloh 1997). If conceptual art focuses on communicational and informational structures and sometimes borrows these structures from related fields such as the scientific language and analytic philosophy (Osborne 1999, 47-65). For instance, it is the case of Joseph Kosuth's insistence on tautology and analytical propositions, or of Art and Language's use of an "academic philosophical jargon". But other conceptual artists also analyse the transmission/replication/critique of information in different other social fields such as law and administration, politics, sociology and the humanities. Thus, conceptual artists more often highlight impersonal and intersubjective formats of communication, pointing to the conditions of discourse and perception in which such public communication is structured in present-day social life. By means of an artistic use, these become aesthetic "forms" which only highlight conceptual art's communicative potentiality.

Moreover, the inherently communicative and performative dimension of conceptual art as the heir of Duchamp's critical revolution of artistic criteria may be seen especially in the interpretation of the readymade itself as a nominalist *gesture* (Duve 1999, 382-93). This interpretation takes Duchamp's performative gesture of proposing the readymade as art by the act of naming as the key artistic prerogative of contemporary art, the institutional gesture that brings artistic legitimacy to an object belonging to the sphere of the everyday-life. The conceptual intervention (such as naming the infamous object "Fountain") is thus a performative production of the artwork, an intervention which turns the object into art – "this is art" (Duve 1999, 301-20). Thus, the conceptual *gesture* of providing a new name for an ordinary object becomes the *work* of the artist and the transformative factor in relation to the ordinary object<sup>1</sup>. It is also remarkable that, according to a reading retrospectively influenced by the institutional critique art practices of the seventies, Duchamp's work may be conceived as the gesture of provoking and challenging the conventions of art by doubling the authorial instances (the invention of the fictitious author Richard Mutt), claiming the artistic status for an ordinary object and defending the imaginary author by means of an apologetic statement. This interpretation turns his work into a strategic artistic intervention, based on authorial multiplication and conceptual recontextualization. We may thus redefine the uses of documents and words as representing strategic forms of interventions, whereas intervention becomes the pivotal category in Godfrey's classification, subordinating all the others as alternative modes of performativity. Consequently, the conceptualist intervention becomes the name of a strategic performative production of cultural discourse. But the performative dimension of the conceptualist production artistic production seems to depend on the production of the speech-act in appropriate institutional conditions (that, is, the artist has the legitimacy to name something and performs such ritual into the appropriate institutional context). This only highlights the second problem associated with the conceptual art's autonomy in relation to the institutional conditions and conventions

governing art, noted by Buchloh in his critique of conceptual art's early gestures belonging to a formalist "aesthetics of administration" (Buchloh 1997, 117-20).

#### **4. Some Supportive Examples: The Ideology of Language and its Conceptual Critiques**

Thus, we may arrive at the second major question, that is, how conceptual art as intervention may acquire its critical potential once its modes of expression are embedded into the ordinary channels of communication, that is, once medium has accepted the heterogeneous and heteronomous modes of production in relation to the material structures of production prevailing in the consumer's society and the ordinary language and ideology in totalitarian systems of Eastern Europe and Southern Latin America. This takes us back to the question of the power of performative acts which may explain why interventions may be more desirable than the production of objects. We may briefly state that, with conceptualist gestures, the critical use of language is meant to pay attention to the ideology behind an image or a discourse – that is, to the naturalization of a belief or a discourse.

Here I take ideology to be constituted not only by an explicitly textual set of statements, but also by unconscious beliefs and by the implicitly textual (or "discursive") elements inscribed in an image which support, confine and make possible the circulation and interpretation of that and other related images in society, often regulating the rhetorical functions and uses of the image (associated with the "figural" regime of the image) (Bryson 1981, 3-5). Also, in a Barthesian vein, I understand ideology as "the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality", leading to "the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality" (Eagleton 1991, 2). I also think this specific notion of ideology as the naturalization and universalization of a particular set of dominant values, accompanied by an exclusionary process of obliteration and false conciliation of social antagonisms is particularly suited for approaching many (now) historical works of conceptual art of a

marked performative structure taking place in the seventies and the early eighties.

Such a redefinition of conceptual art as (inherently) a performative, interventionist practice may offer a clearer answer to the problem of artistic autonomy as a pragmatic problem related to the critical uses of language. The critical reuse of the dominant language in a certain cultural and political space may define the way artistic autonomy may be obtained. Therefore, achieving autonomy relates to the critical gesture of dismantling or criticizing the dominant ideology at a certain time and in a specific cultural and social space.

A few examples of such performative interventions may suffice to offer concrete art historical ground for the theoretical claims from above. When artists associated with institutional critique such as Hans Haacke make use of ready-made, that is, found and existing documents, consisting in notes and photographs in order to debunk the ideology of the museum as a corporative structure infused with capitalist values of profitability and hence as an interested institutional structure as opposed to the alleged neutrality of its purely aesthetic function and values, they install their work in the communicative structures already existing in the context they intervene in. It is the case of Haacke's well-known works such as the *Manet Projekt 74*, refused by the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne and eventually realized in the Paul Menz Gallery in Cologne by exhibiting a color reproduction instead of the original, where he detailed the provenance of Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus*, a piece who had entered the museum as a permanent loan from former Nazi patron and Deutsche Bank manager Hermann Joseph Abs, or the equally controversial *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. The last art piece consisted of 146 photographic views of New York buildings, six pictures of transactions, maps of New York districts and an explanatory wall. Each photograph was accompanied by a type-written text describing the location and the financial transactions around each pictured building. By means of this work, Haacke discloses the transactions of a real-estate firm between 1951 and 1971 whose influential owner was also connected to the Guggenheim

museum where Haacke was supposed to present the work in a single-show. The effects of such use of information were enormous, since the show itself was cancelled, thus raising even more questions about censorship and the limits of critical discourse.

Haacke's artworks also have the function of pointing to their context of utterance and use, to the structures making possible discourse and to the way language is formed and discourse articulated, as well as to the system of power governing their possible or impossible material existence, the very possibility of being uttered as such and the system of their exclusion – the study of which formed, for Foucault (1981, 60-4), the object of an "archeology of discourse". In Haacke's case, the performative artistic gesture plays an emancipative role for the consciousness of his public, his conceptual interventions attempting to debunk the ideological mechanisms concealing subsequent political realities behind the modernist aesthetic and formalist ideology of the institutionalized art space.

The performative function of conceptual language is sometimes double. For the *MoMA Poll*, Haacke actually asks visitors to answer questions in a sociological survey meant to obtain an actual response from the audience to the ethical problem revealed, namely the visitor's opinion on the political activities of Nelson Rockefeller who was, at the time both a candidate for presidency and a member of the MoMA board of trustees. In performative terms, he is thus both asking a question and making a request. In other situations, the intervention consists simply in reusing the existing language in order to force it to reveal hidden patterns of ideology.

Therefore, we may also observe that conceptual art as a critical gesture actually means to perform discourse analysis on a series of communicative practices related not only to the art world, but to the social and political realities at large. This is the case of the absurd situations of (noncommunication encountered in most of the conceptual art developed in constraining political situations such as the totalitarian political system of communist ex-soviet countries and its Eastern European sphere of influence and to a certain extent in Latin America where it is also doubled by a highly subjective

and poetical function. It is only when adopting the performative stance towards such projects that their entire meaning and reasons become intelligible, that is, their inherent semantic non-intelligibility makes sense.

If the logic of communism is a totalizing one, which means that a fragment of language and the whole linguistic structure of society are intricately related, a piece of nonsense is taken to imply the nonsense of other similar operations which sustain party ideology by means of logical paradoxes. The basic assumption active here is the same fundamental one: that language is an essentially social activity: “people’s relationships with language are understood to be a model of their relationships with society” (Bobrinskaya 2008, 58). Consequently, to show the contradictions inside the structure of language means to show the contradictions of society itself.

The strategic effects obtained by indexical self-erasure of the work’s content in the work’s very structure is complemented in this context by what may be called a *politics of nothingness*, echoing the subsequent activity of voluntary “linguistic incomprehensibility” in Moscow Conceptualism (Weinhart 2008, 70-3). It happens in the actions of the artistic group Collective Actions, performing seemingly absurd activities with no determinate content or paradoxical actions in which nothing happens except for the event itself. Sometimes, the event becomes the interruption of a routine, the suspension of an established order of significant events. In their first action, *The Appearance* (1976), two members of the group come out of the forest carrying suitcases after a period of waiting. They distribute to the other members of the group that simultaneously formed the audience certificates of presence as participants to the event and disappear as mysteriously as they have arrived. Written language serves to record these actions and comment upon the content of the accompanying documentary pictures. It serves as a framing device for a politically charged notion of “nothingness”, challenging the dominant ideology of “work”.

The performative reasons of conceptualist interventions also explain the way incomprehensibility surround the group’s play with ambiguous slogans only highlighting the uncanny event of their utterance, their very material occurrence in a

specific place. The transparency of the artwork attained in this way which serves to appropriate the language of power and to divert its meaning in a perfectly self-referential way, since it blurs the exact position of the subject of speech and the speaking subject. Who is speaking in actions of the Moscow group Collective Actions such as the red banner installed in the middle of the forest, that reads "I do not complain about anything and I almost like it here, although I have never been here before and know nothing about this place" – is it the decontextualized banner itself, the artist as the author of the text or the reader? The very structure of the utterance is self-contradictory. If, in the first and second sense, the meaning of the utterance is absurd and clearly ironical, in the last indexical identification it becomes both ironical and sad, since it is imposing to the disoriented virtual reader (which in the original context of production, was also a participant) the hasty precaution to restate the official ideology that "everything is fine and he does not complain" about the incomprehensible situation he is set in.

The double reading of the works with slogans leads us to a particularly influential trope: irony. It is the way irony is inserted into the artistic mimicry of official bureaucratic structures of linguistic production that may explain both the value and the significance of artworks such as those of Ilya Kabakov or the works with slogans of Collective Actions Group in Russia in the late seventies of the last century. As a figure pertaining to the performative dimension of language, irony supposes the appropriation and superposition of a literal, primary and indirect, secondary layer of meaning into the same utterance. In Hayden White's account of the trope, irony "is a trope that derives its effect of apoppositiveness to the description of things by playing upon the relation of opposition" (White 1999, 52). On a different account, irony is considered "a kind of metaphor, but one that surreptitiously signals a denial of the assertion of similitude or difference contained in the literal sense of the proposition" (White 1978, 72). Irony denies what it affirms in the first stance. Each utterance may thus be read in at least two divergent ways and sometimes the secondary

meaning may contradict the primary or literal assertion by the very act of its utterance.

This is also the case of Kabakov's works at the end of the seventies such as *Schedule for Slope Pail Dumping* (1980) or *Sunday Evening* (1979). The large enamel on masonite tables depict administrative structures regulating daily activities. The first work expresses a fictional five-year plan for the communal activities such as taking out the garbage meant for a certain block of flats, whose obvious symbolic associations (the rationalization of exclusion) humorously mark the absurdity of the task at the level of the society as a whole. Here, not only that language is annihilated by means of its spatialization in a painting, but semantic rationalization is performatively interrupted. As far as the second mentioned work is concerned, Kabakov paints a similar table which is astutely recording analyzing and classifying the garments and behavior of all his guests in a private dinner in a highly bureaucratic form, evaluating it overall with the mark "satisfactory". The conscious mimicry of the language of surveillance and administration and the alleged internalization of the disciplinary apparatus consisting in making notes and archiving any activity of the subjects, by means of its unaltered assumption, which simultaneously points out to the annihilation of subjectivity in the very act of repeating the "official" language.

## Conclusion

The arguments and examples presented in the present paper support the claim that the performative dimension of conceptual art, which became clear and paramount in the works focused on identity politics in the eighties, is not only inscribed at the core of conceptual artistic processes, which may explain the use of textuality and other documentary activities as critical devices accompanying, commenting (and sometimes replacing) visuality. In stronger terms, it may also become the key element in explaining how the idea of artistic autonomy is not abandoned together with the aesthetic and medium-specific indifference of conceptual art. Understood in terms of critical cultural resistance, autonomy is rather redefined as the ability

of language to resist its heteronomous manipulation by the dominant cultural ideologies and political power. Resistance may be itself redefined as the performative re-articulation of language within its conventional use. Therefore, the implicit political dimension of early conceptual art becomes not only an epiphenomenal feature of geographically and temporally limited set specific artworks or a merely stylistic attitude, but a central position in accounting for the "post-medium condition" of post-conceptual art.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to a much stronger institutionalist perspective, this primarily nominalist gesture gains legitimacy when uttered by its gesture of exposure in the appropriate institutionalized context, be it the Salon of Independents in 1917 or generally the spaces of the gallery, the museum or other designated and circumscribed spaces such as temporary structures of the biennials or the interventions into the public space as such under an explicitly declared artistic assumption.

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