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Democratising Conceptual Art: What About the Spectator?

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Abstract: In this paper, I elaborate on the elitist character of mainstream theories on conceptual art. I show that this elitism is founded on wrong presumptions concerning the relation between artists and spectators. Working from the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, I reject the hierarchical structure in these mainstream theories on conceptual art. Instead, I propose to take a ‘democratic turn’, as understood by Rancière: the contribution of the spectator is revalued as equally active and creative as the contribution of the artist. The democratic turn has serious consequences for the theoretical foundation of conceptual art. We can no longer maintain that the conceptual work of art is *solely* the artist’s idea, nor that the material appearance is negligible. Furthermore, the democratic alternative opens up conceptual art for a broader audience, while the very core of its practice remains intact, namely that the idea behind it is essential. But it adds an important caveat: what the idea represents is more than what the artist initially had in mind.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of conceptual art from the early sixties on caused quite a stir. It is a controversial form of art that is praised a lot as an intellectual high-flier but also much contested because of its inaccessibility. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens rightly remark that ‘many of us feel fear, mistrust, and other negative emotion towards it’.¹ Conceptual art is considered problematic – even ‘threatening’ – because it radically differs from previous forms of art. Furthermore, conceptual art is commonly thought of as ‘elitist’. Yet, problematic as this is, little attention in philosophical literature is paid to the origin of

these feelings of frustration and dismissal. Philosophers of conceptual art rather seem to unproblematically accept and even embrace its acquired elitist character, such as Joseph Kosuth proudly claiming that ‘the “man on the street” is intolerant to artistic art’.² In this paper, I argue that the negative emotions towards conceptual art and elitist Kosuth-like expressions are symptomatic of the problematic presuppositions on which the mainstream theories of conceptual art are founded. That is, these theories of conceptual art rely on a hierarchy in which artists are placed at the top, as creators of ideas. Beneath them there are the regular art gallery visitors, who have sufficient background knowledge to understand the ideas. And at the very bottom we find the ‘man on the street’, who are not able to understand anything of it. Yet, working from the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, I show that this hierarchical, hence elitist, structure is untenable. Instead, I propose to take a democratic turn on conceptual art, following the Rancièrian principles of the ‘emancipated spectator’. From this, a new outlook on conceptual art is set up. This outlook does away with elitism, but also values the gaze of the spectator as well as the material work of art, without losing the essence of what conceptual art is all about, ‘the idea’.

II. CALL A SPADE A SPADE: ELITISM IN THEORIES ON CONCEPTUAL ART

Conceptual art is a much-contested art form which has had a major theoretical response in philosophy of art. Philosophers of art have searched for a definition of conceptual art, or even a definition of art in general which is capable of uniting previous art forms and conceptual art under one denomination. Therefore, the theoretical writings on conceptual art have had a great impact on the theory of art in general. In a similar way, the elitism of conceptual art also spills over into our attitude towards art in general. This elitism causes art to have less impact, and it is also based on false presuppositions. However, before we can come to a cure, we must first make up a diagnosis. Step one is an investigation into the medical record of our patient: what do the mainstream theories on conceptual art entail?

In their edited volume on *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (2007), Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens introduce conceptual art using the following definition:

[...] there is one artistic movement [conceptual art] which has claimed that art should invariably aim to engage its audience intellectually, and, moreover, that it need not do so aesthetically or emotionally. Art, on this view, should aim to be ‘of the mind’, not simply because it demands a primarily intellectual approach, but also because such artwork is best understood as an idea. The purpose of art, according to this movement, is analytic, and as such, art is in the *business of creating and transmitting ideas*.³

Following this definition, conceptual art distinguishes itself from other kinds of art by no longer engaging with its audience aesthetically or emotionally, but rather ‘intellectually’. The material appearance of the work of art only serves as a vehicle to transmit a political, philosophical, or self-reflective idea.⁴ Artists are no longer skilled craftsmen, but rather authors of meaning, since, repeating Sol Le Witt’s famous words, ‘ideas alone can be works of art’.⁵

Take for example *Sweating Blood*, by the Cuban conceptual artist Ana Mendieta.⁶ The work consists of a three minute long stop motion video in which a woman, the artist herself, is framed in a close up against a black background. Barely moving, almost as if it were a photograph and not a video, drips of blood are very slowly appearing on her forehead and then slowly dripping down her face. We see her ‘sweating blood’. The work is understood in a context of growing feminist intentions, ‘responding to the rape and murder of a fellow student at the University of Iowa in the previous year’.⁷ Following Schellekens’ conceptualisation, we should understand this work as a transmission of a political idea conveyed to us via the material work of art, i.e., the video.

Lucy Lippard goes even one step further and talks about the ‘dematerialisation’ of conceptual art. Since conceptual art only revolves around the idea, it does not matter whether or not we can see, touch, or hear the work of art.⁸ For this, the artwork *Inert Gas series* by Robert Barry serves well as an example.⁹ The work of art consists of the release of small amounts of gas in various landscapes, among others the Californian desert. The release of gas was photographed and exhibited. Of course, there is nothing to see, as the gas is invisible. Transmitting a self-reflective idea, the work questions the limits of the art practice, showing that art can exist even though it is invisible.

Joseph Kosuth, as both conceptual artist and theorist, defines the conceptual work of art as ‘a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art’.¹⁰ Therefore, he states that ‘it is necessary to separate aesthetics from art, because aesthetics deals with opinions on perception of the world in general’.¹¹ The validity of conceptual art is

‘not dependent on any empirical, much less any aesthetic, presupposition about the nature of things. For the artist, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with physical properties of things’.¹²

An example from Kosuth’s own work is *One and Three Chairs*. In this work, a philosophical idea is transmitted.¹³ The work consists of three chairs: a real chair, a photograph of a chair and a framed dictionary definition of the term ‘chair’. Here, the three manifestations of a chair are represented, i.e., as a concrete particular, as a depiction of a particular, and as concept. In explaining his work, Kosuth refers to Plato’s theory of forms and the concept of semiotics, as posited by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce. The

artwork is transmitting a philosophical proposition by questioning what is the ‘real’ chair and what is mere appearance.

These theories, which I consider to be the mainstream theories on conceptual art, all favour the cognitive value of the work of art over its aesthetic value.¹⁴ The cognitive value is the value of the idea or proposition, that is a philosophical, self-reflective or political one. Conceptual art is therefore often defined as ‘intellectual art’.¹⁵ It is, then, following Kosuth, highly necessary for spectators to be familiar with contemporary art and its intellectual background in order to be able to appreciate and understand it. ‘Likewise, one understands why the “man on the street” is intolerant to artistic art and always demands art in a traditional “language”’.¹⁶ Arthur Danto, in like manner, states that ‘what the viewer must do, is interpret the meaning-bearing properties in such a way as to grasp the *intended meaning* they embody’.¹⁷

In these citations, we discover the underlying presupposition that it is in fact the *artist’s* idea that must be discovered, since it is the task of the spectators to deduce the ‘intended meaning’ or ‘proposition’ from the work at hand. Thereby, an imperative is imposed on the spectator, namely: understand what the artist wants to say! However, one is only capable of doing so if one has sufficient experience and background knowledge. This presupposition installs an intellectual hierarchy in conceptual art in which artists are placed at the top as creator of the ‘intended meaning’ or ‘proposition’. Then, there are the regular art gallery visitors, possibly capable of grasping the intended meaning in confronting the work of art, but not at the level of the artists, since they did not create the idea themselves. At the very bottom stands the ‘man on the street’, who is, following Kosuth, not capable of understanding conceptual art because of his lack of artistic background knowledge.

This hierarchy runs contrary to the activist character that is related to many conceptual works of art. As mentioned above, part of the ideas transmitted by conceptual art are political in nature and aim to denounce something, as exemplified by Ana Mendieta’s *Sweating Blood*. But how could conceptual art ever meet any activist goal if it only addresses art connoisseurs and does not aim to reach the average ‘man in the street’? If art is to have any impact, should it not necessarily move away from this hierarchy?

Now, we can consider the exclusionary statements of Kosuth or the commonplace aversion for conceptual art as symptomatic of the hierarchy ingrained in the very theoretical foundation of the movement itself. In other words, elitism is not a superficial phenomenon but follows necessarily from the theoretical basis of conceptual art. In the next paragraph, however, I will show how this hierarchy stems from two false presuppositions that lie at the very heart of these theories, namely that (1) the artist’s idea is *effectively* transmitted to the well-educated spectator, and (2) the material appearance of the work of art only serves as an arbitrary vehicle for doing so.

III. OVERTURNING HIERARCHIES: *L'ARTISTE IGNORANT*

It is time to diagnose the exact problem. What is the hierarchy in conceptual art based on? Following the theories above, the whole movement of conceptual art is about the idea and its goal is to transmit a 'proposition', i.e., a political, philosophical, or self-reflective idea. To put it another way, there is a pedagogical relationship of the artist who wants to teach the spectator something. Jacques Rancière's theory on pedagogy, worked out in *Le maître ignorant* (1987), therefore serves as an ideal means to expose the illness.

Le maître ignorant starts off with an anecdote about Joseph Jacotot, a French teacher who was sent to Flanders in the late 18th century to teach a group of students. However, Jacotot could not speak a word of Dutch, and neither did the Flemish students know any French. To bridge the divide, he brought in a book as 'the minimal link of a thing in common [that] had to be established between himself and them'.¹⁸ Through an interlocutor, he asked the students to read the first half of the book in French with a Dutch translation next to it, and to closely examine what they could understand and what not. Then, the students had to read the second half of the book in French at a fast pace. After having read the whole book, the students had to write a paper about it in French, and to his surprise, they were able to write a relatively good piece about it in French. Rancière describes how this experience unleashed the teacher's mind.

Until then, he had believed what all conscientious professors believe: that the important business of the master is to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise. [...] [T]he essential act of the master was to explicate: to disengage the simple elements of learning, and to reconcile their simplicity in principle with the factual simplicity that characterizes young and ignorant minds.¹⁹

However, what this unique experience showed was that teaching did not necessarily require explanation. Without any manual, dictionary or classes on grammar, the pupils had managed to learn the language and were able to construct grammatically correct sentences. This made it clear to Jacotot that he was as ignorant as his disciples. What they had in common is that neither of them had '*savoir de l'ignorance*', that is, neither knew the exact distance which divided knowing from ignorance.²⁰ This experience made Jacotot reject the classical hierarchical structure of the 'all-knowing' master and instead affirm the position of 'the ignorant schoolmaster'. As it turned out, it was not intelligence but knowledgeability dividing Jacotot from his students – a divide, crucially, that Jacotot could not measure in any way. In other words, the schoolmaster was ignorant of the exact distance dividing their different positions of knowledge.

Rancière uses this anecdote to form a critique on classical hierarchical pedagogy in which the master presupposes an inequality of intelligence. Classical pedagogy holds that the distance dividing the pupil from the master is caused by a certain *amount* of knowledge of the curriculum. It is the task of the master to overcome this distance by teaching the curriculum. In doing so, the master is assumed to be always one step ahead. The master knows ‘the ignorance of the pupil’. Because of his superior position of intelligence, the master possesses both knowledge of the curriculum and knowledge of ‘how, at what moment, and according to which protocol’ the students will receive *his ideas*.²¹

Subsequently, in *Le spectateur émancipé*, Rancière makes the analogy between pedagogy and artistic practice. More specifically, in the context of theatre, he examines the role of the dramaturg as master. Rancière reveals how the dramaturg, just like the master, wants to ‘teach’ the audience something. Rancière argues that, therefore, the relationship between the dramaturg and the spectator should be questioned in the same way as Jacotot questions the classic pedagogical relationship. Both the master and the dramaturg, Rancière claims, presuppose to know exactly how their idea can be transmitted to the pupils and spectators. By relying on this presupposition, they install a hierarchy based on an inequality of intelligence.

Yet, this analogy does not entirely hold since the pedagogical aspect of the dramaturg is only a small part of the practice of theatre. One should also take into account the role of the actors, the director, the costume designers, the musicians, etc., each contributing in their own way to the final work of art. The dramaturg’s contribution, i.e., the transmission of an idea, is not what the theatre is *all* about and we would miss the point if we would only think of the actual theatre play as a ‘manual’ to teach an idea. It is just as much about the beauty, the atmosphere, and the emotions it brings about. Therefore, we cannot hold that, because of the dramaturg’s focus on the transmission of an idea, the practice of theatre is fully marked by a hierarchical pedagogy.

We *do* find this pedagogical structure to be present at the theoretical basis of conceptual art as set out above. The mainstream theories on conceptual art state that the work of art is all about the idea and that its material appearance only serves as ‘vehicle’, just like a teacher makes use of a manual. In addition to that, Lippard’s notion of dematerialisation (cf. *supra*) reveals that it does not even matter that much which manual is used. Different manuals could produce the same effect. Kosuth and Danto even talk about a ‘proposition’ that is transmitted by the artist, and emphasise it is up to the spectator, who ought to be equipped with sufficient background knowledge, to discover the ‘intended meaning’. In presupposing to know from what position of knowledge the spectator can, and cannot, receive the ideas, the conceptual artist assumes his position of knowledge to be superior to that of the spectator. So, just like the hierarchical pedagogy between masters and

pupils, the mainstream theories on conceptual art clearly rely on the same presupposition of an inequality of intelligence between artists and spectators.

But, what the anecdote of Joseph Jacotot clearly shows, is that the pedagogical presupposition of inequality of intelligence is invalid. The master does *not* know the position of knowledge of his pupils, since he does not possess knowledge of ignorance.²² Consequently, the master is not able to forecast how and in what manner the pupil will perceive an idea. This also means that the master cannot presuppose a ‘causal transmission’ of an idea. This is the very crux of the matter. Not only does the master not know *how* an idea is perceived, but he also has in fact no idea *what* idea is perceived. For conceptual artists, this is no different. They cannot know the position of knowledge of their spectators, so, they cannot predict how their work of art will be perceived.

This leads us to reject the presumed hierarchy between the ‘man on the street’, the regular art visitor, and the artist. We do not know about the other’s position of knowledge, so we must equate them, assuming an equality of intelligence between the artists and all spectators. Furthermore, we must also reject the presumptions that conceptual artists transmit a fixed idea. Since artists do not know *how* and *what* is in fact perceived by the spectators, they can no longer hold on to the presupposition that their artwork is able to transmit their own idea. In other words, causal effectivity cannot be assumed. But if the conceptual work of art is all about the idea, and the initial idea of the artist cannot be transmitted, then what is the idea that is the actual work of art?

IV. A DEMOCRATIC TURN ON CONCEPTUAL ART

In the paragraph above, I have made a diagnosis of the elitist character afflicting the mainstream theories on conceptual art. They follow the logic of a classic hierarchical pedagogy, thereby relying on two false presumptions, namely the inequality of intelligence between the artists and their spectators, and the causal transmission of the artist’s idea. The Rancièrian alternative to this is to equalise, and so democratise. That is, to emancipate the spectator.

First things first: what does it mean for the spectator to be democratised? With the notion of ‘democratisation’, Rancière does not refer to any form of political constitution or a style of social life. He instead uses the word in a more original way, referring to the ‘power of the demos’.²³ The ‘demos’ should not be understood as ‘the people in general’, but rather ‘the poor’, those who are ‘outside of the count’, who ‘have no speech to be heard’.²⁴ In (true) democracy, those who are ruling are not ruling because of one or another specific qualification, they are ruling for the sake of being demos, assuming that everyone is capable of being politically active. To democratise then, is to listen to ‘the demos’, that is in our case the ‘the man on the street’,

or broader, the spectator in general, for no other reason than the assumption that everyone is capable of being artistically active.

As an alternative to hierarchical pedagogy, Rancière proposes a 'democratic pedagogy', that is, a pedagogy which assumes an equality of intelligence and ascribes an equally active role to the pupils as to the masters. Every act of learning, following Rancière, is always an act of intelligence trying to overcome a gap of ignorance by linking signs and figures to one's own position of knowledge. This gap of ignorance is not the gap between the knowing master and the ignorant pupil, but simply 'the road from what he already knows to what he still does not know but is able to learn in the same way as he has learned the rest'.²⁵ The role of the schoolmaster is not to try to offer his own knowledge but rather to supply some signposts that enable the pupil to find their own way.

So, pupils are not considered to be mere passive receivers of ideas, since they are the one actively linking and translating to their own position of knowledge, thereby creating something new, something teachers do not know themselves. In the same way, 'the spectator also acts, just as the pupil or the scholar. He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He links what he sees to other things he has seen in other scenes and other kinds of places'.²⁶ What happens if we apply this logic to the mainstream theories on conceptual art?

Conceptual art is characterised by depreciating its material appearance as a mere vehicle for transmitting an idea, or even rejecting it in the name of 'dematerialisation'. As shown above, these theories rely on false hierarchical presumptions. Therefore, we should take Rancière's notion of democracy in mind and consider the activity of the spectators. Yet, if we want to take into account the role of the spectator, we can no longer consider the material appearance as irrelevant. The material work of art is rather the condition of possibility for the spectator's intellectual activity to be initiated. Just as Jacotot needed a book, the material work of art is the crucial mediating link between the artist and the spectator. This is, I believe, especially true for conceptual art. To substantiate this point, we shall take a closer look at the constitution of the 'idea', that is, the actual work of art.

V. THE CONSTITUTION OF THE ACTUAL WORK OF ART: DISSENSUS

The creation of a (conceptual) work of art can be described in the following manner: first, artists are captivated by an idea. With this idea in mind, they start creating a material work of art, meaning to convey their idea to the spectator via the object. Yet, I have shown that a causal effectivity cannot be assumed, since both the artists and the spectators are in a different position of knowledge. So, the material work of art may result from a specific idea, but it is not able to serve as a vehicle, straightforwardly transmitting the

idea. Instead, the material work of art rather serves as a catalyst, initiating the intellectual activity of the spectators. In confronting a strange material appearance, such as a video of a woman sweating blood, the spectators are ‘composing their own poem with the elements of the poem in front of them’.²⁷ Just as ‘the student learns something of the master which the master does not know himself’, the artists are able to have an unanticipated effect, namely that the spectators come to understand something which the artists themselves did not know.²⁸ Inspired by the work of art, the spectators in turn discover their own ideas. What is at play here, is a ‘paradoxical effectivity’.

The paradoxical effectivity is an effectivity that brings forth a distance as well as a neutralisation between artists and spectators. Distance is created because the material work of art causes a ‘suspension of any determinate relation between the intention of an artist, a sensible form presented in an art space, the gaze of a spectator and a state of the community’.²⁹ In confronting the work of art, spectators do not know why it is there nor what is meant by it. The intent of the production is placed at a distance. The second point then, neutralisation, is about the effect of the artwork that is similarly neutralised. Just as spectators are not able to grasp the intent of the artists, the artists have no control over the effect that is produced in the gazes of the anonymous spectators. It is ‘an effectivity of disconnection, a rupture between the productions of the artistic know-hows and defined social ends, between the forms of the sensible, the meanings that can be read in them and the effects that they can produce’.³⁰ There is, returning to the example of, say, Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, a rupture between the philosophical proposition that Kosuth wants to present, and the reflections of the spectator looking at three forms of chairs in a museum.

What results from this paradoxical effectivity is not a consensus about any fixed idea, but rather a ‘conceptual play’ that is constituted by both the artist and the spectator. I propose to understand this conceptual play following the Rancièrian concept of ‘dissensus’. This is ‘a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt’.³¹ With the relationship between ‘sense and sense’, Rancièrè is referring here to the everyday ‘distribution of the sensible’. This is a framework through which all our *sensible* experiences *make sense*. One could understand the distribution of the sensible in a Kantian or Foucauldian way as a (historical) a priori system of perception, ‘a division of times and spaces, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and sound which defines both the place and the issue [of the things we perceive]’.³²

However, the distribution of the sensible is anything but neutral. It is a system of inclusion and exclusion which establishes one’s role and position in a community. It makes some things more visible than others and thereby often maintains the status quo, i.e., the consensus. Dissensus, stemming from the paradoxical effectivity of the work of art, causes us to question the everyday distribution of the sensible. ‘It breaks the sensible evidence of the ‘natural’

order which destines individuals and groups to command or obedience, to public life or to private life, by first assigning them to such and such a type of space or time, to such a way of being, of seeing, and of saying'.³³ In doing so, it makes possible new configurations of the senses, i.e., new ways of seeing and understanding the world. This causes art, following Rancière, to be deeply political in nature.

VI. DISSENSUS AS THE ACTUAL CONCEPTUAL WORK OF ART

Now, we can return to the question of what the actual conceptual work of art is and what role its material appearance plays. In the paragraph above I have shown that we cannot expect the initial idea of the artist to be causally transferred via the material work of art. In other words, there is no direct transmission of a political, philosophical, or self-reflective idea. Rather, the spectator's active engagement with the work of art creates something new, a new idea of which the artists themselves have no exact knowledge of.

I have proposed to think of this idea, which is not solely the work of the artist but also that of the spectator, as 'dissensus', a concept introduced by Rancière. In confronting a strange and confusing material appearance, such as three chairs or a woman sweating blood, our everyday experience is disturbed. It makes us reflect upon our distribution of the sensible and may even cause us to *redistribute* our sensible i.e., to look in another way at things after having confronted and thought about the work of art. So, taking this democratic turn on conceptual art, the gaze of the spectator becomes constitutive for the *actual conceptual work of art*, that is, dissensus. However, this means that its material appearance can no longer be thought of as just a vehicle or medium to transmit the idea. Its materiality is rather intrinsically interwoven with the constitution of the artwork, as a *crucial mediating link* between the artist and the spectator. It is the result of the idea of the artist and catalyst of the intellectual activity of the spectator. So, in the material work the initial idea loses itself and becomes dissensus.

Let us apply this to the given examples. First of all, there is the work of Ana Mendieta. She created *Sweating Blood* with several incidents of rape in mind. We perceive the artwork, from our position of knowledge, making up our own idea about it by, for example, linking it to the suffering that gender inequality brings about in our own lifeworld. Though there may be no consensus about a certain underlying 'proposition' or 'intended meaning', what is invoked is a dissensus: the woman's suffering is made more visible than is usual in our everyday distribution of the sensible. Secondly, in Robert Barry's *inert gas series* the spectator is confronted with a photograph of just an image of a landscape. However, the true work of art is the fact that he released invisible gas in this landscape. Of course, in a museum, the artwork would be accompanied by this explanation, and so the story is part of the

material appearance of the work of art, just as reading a book would count as the material appearance of a novel. Confronting this work of art is as if one is confronting a poem. We are drawn into a fiction, into another world, where the invisible of everyday life suddenly takes on a leading role. Lastly, the work of Kosuth, *Three Chairs*, ought to bring forth a philosophical proposition. Of course, any ‘man on the street’ will not immediately think of Plato’s theory of forms or twentieth century theories of semiotics, but he could still wonder about the appearance of a chair from his own position of knowledge and this wondering is not, in any sense, less valuable than the original idea of the artist.

Of course, there is still the possibility that ‘the man on the street’ does not even try to engage with the work of art. Because of its mysterious and confusing appearance, conceptual art demands an active effort of the spectator. The passive spectators, who do not want to put in any effort, are as wrong as Kosuth is in thinking that conceptual art is not for everyone. Both wallow in a hierarchical pedagogical relationship, assuming that spectators must get a clear idea, a pre-chewed concept, from the confrontation with the work of art. By asking the artist: ‘what do you mean?’ ‘What should I understand?’, they want to take a shortcut, thereby reducing themselves to passive receivers, bad students in class. In this sense then, passive spectators equally contribute to the elitist character of conceptual art.

VII. CONCLUSION

I started off by problematising the elitist character of conceptual art. I showed that this elitism stems from the hierarchy that is ingrained in the theoretical basis of conceptual art. In this hierarchy, artists are placed at the top, as intellectual creators of ideas, underneath there are the regular art gallery visitors, as trained passive receivers, and at the very bottom there is ‘the man on the street’ who is not able to understand anything of it. This hierarchical structure is not only undesirable, but I showed that it also relies on false presuppositions, namely that (1) the artist’s idea is effectively transmitted to the well-educated spectator, and (2) the material appearance of the work of art is negligible.

Drawing from the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, I have proposed an alternative outlook on conceptual art, in which the hierarchical pedagogy of conceptual artists is put into question. A critical examination of the interaction between the artist, the material work of art, and the spectator, revealed that the belief in any causal transmission of the artist’s political, philosophical, or self-reflective idea is untenable. Instead, there is a paradoxical effectivity at play, in which both the artist and the spectator are actively creating, without knowing exactly the other’s position of knowledge. Therefore, the object of the conceptual work of art can no longer be thought of as a *fixed* idea. Rather, a ‘conceptual play’ is brought about, constituted by

both the artist and the spectator. I propose to understand this conceptual play in line with the Rancièrian concept of 'dissensus', i.e., a break with our everyday experience which makes us see that the way in which we make sense of the world is more contingent than we might think.

Such a conception allows us to open up conceptual art for a broader audience, since every spectator is capable of bringing forth their own dissensus, while the very core of its practice remains intact, namely that the conceptual work of art is all about the idea. Yet, it also leads us to reject a second presupposition, that the material appearance of the artwork would be irrelevant. It is rather the crucial mediating link between the artist and the spectator: the result of the idea of the artist and catalyst of the intellectual activity of the spectator. It shows that the elitist perspective on conceptual art is fundamentally tied up with false presumptions concerning the relation between the artist, material work of art and the spectator. Of course, one could counter this by stating that the elitism of conceptual art is also caused by the institutions it resides in. This is another issue that is located on an external sociological level, but which also deserves due attention. Yet, what I have tried to show is that, on an internal philosophical level, the intellectual hierarchy intertwined with the tradition should be rejected. And it is up to the spectator to do so.

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NOTES

- ¹Goldie and Schellekens 2009, VII.
²Kosuth 1991, 20.
³Schellekens and Goldie 2007, IX, my italics.
⁴Schellekens and Goldie 2007, 76.
⁵LeWitt 1999, 107.
⁶Mendieta 1973.
⁷Grayson 2021, see also URLs.
⁸Lippard 1972.
⁹Barry 1969.
¹⁰Kosuth 1991, 19.
¹¹Kosuth 1991, 16.
¹²Kosuth 1991, 20.
¹³Kosuth 1969.
¹⁴The theories that I am addressing here are the most referred to and most renown (therefore ‘mainstream’) theories on conceptual art. Yet, it must be noted that there are other theories that deviate from these mainstream theories, such as for example Lygeia Clark who particularly em-

phasises the active participation of the spectators and values their subjective perception Rolnik 1999.

¹⁵Goldie and Schellekens 2009, 112.

¹⁶Kosuth 1991, 20.

¹⁷Danto 2013, 38, my italics.

¹⁸Rancière 1991, 2.

¹⁹Rancière 1991, 3.

²⁰Rancière 2008, 15.

²¹Rancière 2008, 14.

²²Rancière 2008, 17.

²³Rancière et al. 2001.

²⁴Rancière et al. 2001.

²⁵Rancière 2008, 16.

²⁶Rancière 2008, 19.

²⁷Rancière 2008, 19.

²⁸Rancière 2008, 20.

²⁹Rancière 2008, 63.

³⁰Rancière 2008, 66–67.

³¹Rancière 2010, 143.

³²Rancière 2000, 14.

³³Rancière 2008, 66.

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