

A critical study of conceptual art

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Abstract

Conceptualism or idea art is a relatively recent artistic trend that seeks to present unconventional artistic creations. The strangeness of this trend stems from the fact that the issue of its creativity may go beyond the boundaries of the usual creative artworks, with what this means is a lack of concern for the language of form and the accepted formulations of beauty, which is usually used in traditional artworks; such as painting and sculpture. However, conceptualists are concerned with their ideas, which are the focus of their creative work. The artist highlights it through the appropriate techniques, often benefiting from modern technology and the diversity of its applications. This research study sheds light on conceptualism as a contemporary artistic style that has imposed itself on public and private galleries worldwide, causing an intellectual uproar among art critics, artists, and all recipients. This study aims to clarify the dimensions of conceptual art through a review of its history and the reasons and motives for its emergence, along with a presentation of various models that represent it, explaining its most important intellectual and creative features and presenting its most influential creators, leading to highlighting its positive and negative aspects on the contemporary plastic movement and human creativity in general. This study found that the significance of conceptual art has been controversial since its creation, but history will assess the extent of its worth and uniqueness.

Keywords: Aesthetic; conceptual art; idea art; plastic movement.

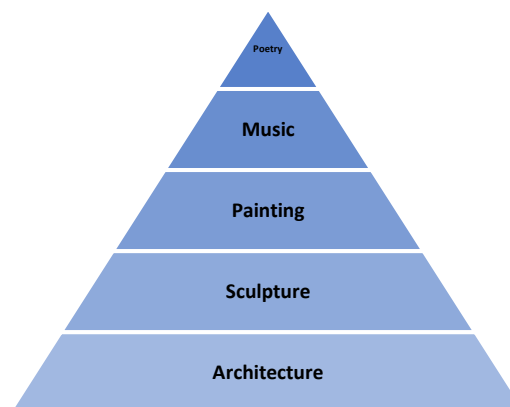
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1. Introduction

Art, including fine arts, has been signified as an essential aspect of life by several art academics and philosophers. “The lifespan of art is about to be the lifespan of humans” is a statement by the most prominent social art critic in the modern era (Fischer, 2020). Furthermore, Rene Magritte - professor of fine arts psychology, asserts that art is not amusement or luxury. Still, art is an urgent necessity of the human soul in its continuous and arduous dialogue with the universe surrounding it (Clement, 2014).

The importance of the idea in art was the concern of the philosopher Hegel (as cited in Siani, 2020), who addressed the significance of knowledge and ideas in the value of art. He believed that art is a form of knowledge that enables humans to obtain self-knowledge because it gives them a better understanding of themselves and the surrounding world. Besides, he ranked the five fine arts in a hierarchy of values based on the level of an art form's dependence on the material, where the most valuable type of art is the one most independent from the material. It is now possible to see why Hegel (as cited in Siani, 2020) thought the modern period would witness ‘the end of art’. According to Graham (2006), the development of human understanding consists of a move from art to philosophy as it moves from the most material (architecture) to the least (poetry). Figure 1 displays this analogy.

Figure 1
Hegel's Hierarchy of Art values considering knowledge



Moreover, perception is a state of a person's sensory response towards outside impacts. Arnheim (1986) points out that works of art should be experienced cognitively. But if a person wants to understand them, they must place them appropriately in a conceptual network of appropriate relationships. Besides, judging the aesthetic value of an artistic work requires experience or technical proficiency. It depends on perceptual sense, careful consideration of the factors of work of art composition, harmonious cohesion, order, and simplicity, and the originality of these aesthetic judgments (Arnheim, 1986). The above presupposes the presence of a great deal of experience and cognition on the side of the recipient, critic, or historian when viewing a piece of art.

1.1. Purpose of study

In this context, conceptual or idea art is one of the artistic trends that emerged during the post-modern period. Its features were revealed in the second half of the twentieth century, and we still live in the light of its cultural influences. Furthermore, it has its own creative and intellectual goals and dimensions as it seeks to present an issue and concept. In this type of art, an artwork idea is a pivotal starting point that the artist embodies and contributes to the public through his production, even if this is done on the ruins of the artistic formation values and the usual concepts of beauty and artistic production. In this regard, it is necessary to point out the questions raised by post-modern artists, especially the conceptualists, where various questions have been raised about the value of these artistic trends and their impact on the contemporary plastic movement. This study aims to investigate the controversial viewpoints over conceptual pieces of art. In other words, would these pieces be

considered artworks, or would they be counted as a form of human expression missing the traditional beauty concepts over successive historical stages?

2. Method and materials

This is a qualitative study that uses the literature review method. The study is conducted by investigating art trends developed throughout art history because art history has shown various unique and robust trends initially rejected and excluded from the art field. Integrity, openness, and honesty were the guiding principles of the researchers' work. Carefully and impartially, without prejudice or manipulation, the data were gathered, analyzed, and interpreted.

3. Results

3.1. The development of Conceptual art

Conceptual art arose in Western countries due to the artist's frustration with the traditional frameworks and ideas dominating the classical art movements. The roots of this art movement went back to New Dadaism in Europe and America at the beginning of the twentieth century (Folland, 2020). It was deepened in the sixties of that century, and its fame spread to become a global movement. The conceptual art trend is one of the trends developed in the modern era -since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of modern artistic movements, that has turned traditional art forms into expressive forms in which art was only a means for the artist to express a story or a specific topic in an enjoyable visual way (Leavy, 2022).

Impressionism at the end of the nineteenth century abandoned that vision of expressing or presenting a topic and started to express their color impressions by adopting the effect of light on visuals, revolutionizing their works in composition and artistic expression (Clark & Fowle, 2020). At this stage, plastic formulation became the primary goal that prompted artists to create various creative forms, and a revolution occurred that affected their subsequent artistic production. Successive artistic trends emerged, beginning with the Fauvist school in the early twentieth century, which presented bold vivid contrasting colors for compositions whose elements were reduced to the minimum possible visual elements, then the Cubist school, which reformulated and reconstructed an artwork's elements, then a move to abstraction, in which the subject was replaced with artistic formulation. The creative work has become like music, which the eye enjoys just as the ear listens to music, regardless of the artistic subject, as the feeling evoked by the creative work is the basis for determining its value. Then, the futuristic art trend sought to express the fourth dimension of artistic work, that is, motion, as the artists of this trend were influenced by the development of science and technology in that era. Later, during World Wars 1 and 2, the Dadaist trend appeared to reject everything beautiful, leaving and mocking the traditional and museum arts. Then, the emergence of Freud's theories, which discussed what goes on in the human psyche, affected several artists. Therefore, the surrealist art movement emerged and was led by the renowned Spanish artist Salvador Dali. It aimed to move away from the truth and release repressed ideas, imaginative perceptions, and the control of dreams.

In light of this disparity in modern and contemporary artistic trends and schools, and the desire of artists to confirm their presence, creative originality, diversity of subsequent artistic trends (Baumgarth & Wieker, 2020), and the direct use of up-to-date techniques and technology, the conceptual vision (the art of the idea) emerges to present a perception of the artwork that differs in form and content from all previous trends, although different in its originality representing one of the essential features of creativity in the modern era. What the conceptualization presented about the nature of the artistic work and the artist's role has raised many questions and differences in cultural communities about whether this is considered art. Should it be presented through art exhibition halls? This is because conceptualism emphasizes the displacement of the role of the skilled artist from the work on the one hand and, on the other hand, emphasizes that the idea (the idea of the artistic work) is its actual value.

3.2. Features of conceptual art

Conceptualism supports the idea that art is essentially based on the artist's translation of their idea using the medium that the artist deems appropriate to express it (Marchán Fiz & Adey, 2021) while enjoying the freedom to choose the proper type of materials that can embody his concept without being restricted by the technical conditions and familiar traditional foundations. With Conceptualism, the artists are liberated from presenting their work as a commodity that can be used by trading in the art market, thus focusing on highlighting reality as an aesthetic value. The basis of a work of art is not its shape and the image in which it appears but rather the idea or concept that the artistic producer wants to convey to the audience without bias or seeking the help of any theory. It also removes the skill or literal requirement in favor of meaning, which has become a primary goal rather than the form or style it appears to be. The characteristics, components, and features of conceptual art can be clarified in the following points:

- Giving great importance to the idea or meaning
- Marginalization of aesthetic style and form
- Displacing the role of the skilled artist
- Openness to the societal environment
- Employing new media or image technology to complete artistic work
- Working on public and individual issues and concerns

3.3. Conceptual artists

Many critics point out conceptual art emerged from the Dada and Surrealist movement leaders in the twentieth century, such as the Frenchman Marcel Duchamp (1887 - 1968) as demonstrated in Figure 2 (Duchamp & Mink, 1995), and the Belgian artist René Magritte (as cited in Magritte, Passeron & Weidner, 1986) seen in Figure 3. Instead, they consider that the Dada and Surrealist movements planted the seeds of conceptual art. There is no doubt that the actual emergence of conceptualism as we see it today began with the American artist Joseph Kosuth, who is considered one of the pioneers of conceptual art (Alberro & Stimson, 2000). He was born in 1945 in Ohio and studied at the Toledo College Museum of Design from 1955-1962, and in 1965, he moved to New York to study at the School of Visual Arts. He soon abandoned the painting and began the trend of conceptual works in 1979.

Kosuth (1992) presented a work entitled "The Information Room" (Figure 4), which consists of two tables, on which a collection of books, most of which are research in science, language, and philosophy, including critical and philosophical research and studies by Joseph Kosuth himself, and their several chairs invite the viewer to sit and read. The artwork here does not exist in books, tables, and chairs arranged in this artwork. Instead, the artwork exists in the idea of the work, which is (Reading) and placing this idea, that is, the process of reading, in the context of visual art, that is, transforming visual art into a cultural, philosophical, existential, scientific art. This nature, i.e., the conceptual nature of this type of art, is more humane and has a social and educational function because it gives the viewer information and is different from other art forms. The morphological nature of visual art presents something visually beautiful or ugly. Art, as Kosuth (1992) says, does not exist in things because things are secondary, but art exists in the artist's concept of the work of art.

In the twentieth century, other artists developed significant approaches to conceptualism, such as John Baldessari and Thomas Demand; their unique artworks are shown in Figures 5 and 6 (Demand, 2015).

Figure 2

MARCEL DUCHAMP "Fountain", 1917



Source: Camfield, (1990).

Figure 1

RENÉ MAGRITTE "The Treachery of Images", 1928



Source: Magritte, Passeron & Weidner (1986)

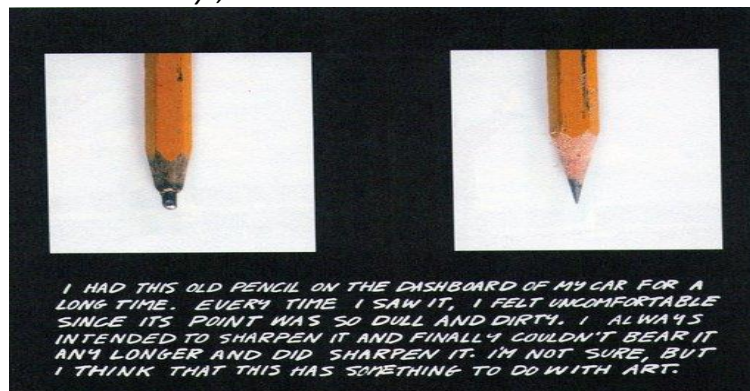
Figure 2

Joseph Kosuth "Information Room", 1970



Figure 3

JOHN BALDESSARI "The Pencil Story", 1972



Source: Veroeve (2021)

Figure 4

THOMAS DEMAND "Kitchen", 2004



Source: Demand, (2004).

4. Conclusion

Conceptual art has created a controversial and uproarious state in cultural communities from its inception until now. Some intellectuals would positively support this state or maybe negatively rejected by others. Conceptual art bypasses all previous artistic trends by displacing the role of the skilled artist, mastering the creative tools, and instead developing a new approach of pure visual and intellectual style in presenting an idea, regardless of the artistic values of the artwork.

When approaching conceptual works with criticism and evaluation, first of all, the viewer must be in a state of neutrality that enables them to communicate with an artistic work that is different in its thesis from traditional artistic works. Conceptualism is entirely different from what traditional arts and modern arts introduce in terms of usual aesthetic or creative plastic values. It is another form of visual research in presenting the idea adopted by the artist. The conceptual artist employs various modern technologies and techniques to highlight an idea, regardless of the plastic aesthetic value of his work.

Undoubtedly, history will judge the extent of the value and originality of what conceptual works present. The history of art teaches us that impressionist artists were first rejected and excluded. Their works were refused to be presented, and their status was belittled because they differed from the classical concept known in this era. Still, after some time and with an objective evaluation of the critics, the world and even cultural artistic communities recognized the value and credibility of their works. The works of its pioneers, such as Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, have become worth millions of dollars. Therefore, judging conceptualism as a creative experience is not yet clear. Considering it, as the researcher sees it, will be decided in the future. The future and history will judge the importance and value of conceptual works.

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