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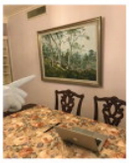

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Ian Burn and the Aporias of Conceptual Art

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Ian Burn's exit from the intense Conceptual art context of the New York City art world in the late 1970s was full of historical meaning. Critics have interpreted the Australian artist's flight from the art circles he had helped to foster for over a decade through the lens of economic limitations, political disenchantment, and even nostalgic notions of home. However, as is evident in reading through Ann Stephens' excellent anthology *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993,* these are, at best, only partial explanations for his departure.[1] Burn's insider understanding of transformations in artistic practice as a vital member of the Conceptual art movement was crucial to his decision to pivot his art activities away from the dominant art framework toward achieving effective social change.

The Melbourne-trained artist's Conceptual art had two distinct facets. The first, most clearly articulated in Burn's 1970 essay, 'Conceptual Art as Art,' is practical. It understands Conceptual art as seeking to rebuild artistic practice from its core outwards by replacing 'the customary visual object constructs with arguments about art'.[2] This viewpoint positions Conceptual art as reductivist, a self-reflexive modernist avant-garde practice that seeks to strip away all layers of aesthetic experience to get to the essentials of art in the context of modernity. As Burn explains retrospectively in the 1981 essay 'The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath. Memoires of an Ex-Conceptual Artist,' 'an amalgam of attempts to critically analyse and dissect' artistic practice comprised Conceptual art's reductivism.[3] Conceptual artists sought to peel away from artworks the multiple layers of aesthetic forms, colours, and figures that they saw as obstacles to understanding what lay at the literal core of the Western category of Art. This rigorous negation of art's expressive and perceptual elements, together with the systematic revocation of all aesthetic properties from artworks, culminated in the reduction of artistic production to instrumental language—in the distillation of art into a discursive form of expression and critical cognition that is meaningfully different from visual representation. Conceptual art replaced the Western category of the auratic art object and all the plastic and iconographical residue that object had accumulated

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over the years with analytical arguments about art's ontological nature, and, it hardly needs saying, arguments are the sort of thing that play out best in written or spoken language. For Burn, the Conceptual artist, linguistic signs became primary; they became the form that the avant-garde critique of art's norms took in the late 1960s and 1970s. Language was the medium that Burn and his peers mobilised as they refocused their attention on critical investigations of art's fundamental essence.

One can track the reductivist culmination in language and concepts that characterised the work of Conceptual artists such as Burn to the New York-based practitioner Sol LeWitt's claim in the 1967 manifesto-like text 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' that in art ideas are more important than the objects that materialise them.[4] Artists interpreted LeWitt's emphasis on the prominence of the conceptual aspect of the creative process to mean that the ideas underlying artworks, regardless of the particular mediums utilised, were perfect forms that spatial and perceptual manifestations could only ever approximate. In other words, they understood LeWitt to argue that the underlying notions of artworks were abstract ideals and that, at best, formal realisations of those underlying concepts could only ever accomplish approximations of the ideals. What Conceptual artists found most promising about LeWitt's text was how it separated art's value from its objectness and visual appearance. As LeWitt puts it, an artwork's quality depends on the strength of the underlying idea. A good idea will culminate in powerful art regardless of its form when rigorously developed. By contrast, a pedestrian idea, even if presented through sublime techniques, will necessarily remain mediocre.

This notion, which prioritised determining ideas, provided justification for many artists who adopted Conceptual art to explore a wide range of formats and materials. These elements included not only traditional media such as painting and sculpture but also language, performance, dance, music, videotape, film, street theatre, multimedia installations, and more. The production techniques were of secondary importance. What was crucial was the quality of the concepts undergirding the artworks. The primary aim was to provide renditions of truly exceptional ideas.

Conceptual art's severing of ideas from their visual manifestations transformed Western art in ways that are hard to overestimate. It enabled intellectual subject matter and research to play central roles in the practice of artists working in its legacy. Dan Graham, for instance, pursued his interest in suburban architecture and its permutations, On Kawara in the passing of time and the ontology of being, Hans Haacke in the function of museums, Adrian Piper in racial tensions in public space, Juan Downey in the relationship between art and anthropology, Martha Rosler in the division of labour in the Western household, Mary Kelly in the development of the ego and female fetishism, and so on through to the practices of innumerable contemporary artists working in this legacy today. Conceptual art's gambit encouraged practitioners to conceive of artistic practice as not just the making of things but also of thinking, reading, researching, writing, analysing,

and discussing things. It marks nothing short of a watershed moment in art history that fundamentally transformed the nature of art practice as we know it.

Conceptual art's technique of decoupling ideas from their material manifestation segues into the second facet of Burn's Conceptual art, which adds an important social element to the practical goal of probing art's core. This aspect certainly complicates the artist's understanding of avant-garde reductivism. While still maintaining the importance of intellectual work, Burn describes Conceptual art as an art practice that strives to comprehend art's essence to breach the status quo. As he puts it in the 1970 text I cited earlier, one of the primary goals of Conceptual art 'is to devise [effective] *functional* change' first in artistic production by incorporating theory, argument, and analyses, and then, by implication, in society.[5] This definition highlights a central element of Conceptual art's strategy. In the mid-1970s, the pursuit of productive deviation from the norm guided artists' activities as they interrogated the function of their production.

Like the first facet of Burn's Conceptual art, this second one also emphasises ideas over their visual manifestation, regardless of the medium in which artists realise them. It looks to intellectual content to provide unity and developmental coherence. Burn mobilises the tools of the art discipline to analyse the discipline and identify contradictions in its operation. He probes the very concept of art and thinks self-consciously about the implications of his artistic practice. But now he expands that self-reflexivity to explore the possibilities and limits of Conceptual art's social effectiveness, and the rigorousness of this expanded interrogation leads him to crucial questions about Western art's relationship to the commodity form and the role of the art market in interpellating artworks.

In his 1975 article, 'The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation', Burn reflects extensively on the determining effects of the dominant commercial system for even the most politically ambitious contemporary art. 'While it may once have seemed an exaggeration of economic determinism to regard works of art as "merely" commodities in an economic exchange', the artist writes in this crucial text initially published in the journal *Artforum*, 'it is now pretty plain that our entire lives have become so extensively constituted in these terms that we cannot any longer pretend otherwise'.[6] Burn remarks with concern that despite the long-standing independence of artistic practitioners from capitalist structures of economic exchange and the generation of surplus value, many have now adopted 'an intensely capitalist mode of production'.[7] Some of the most savvy have learned from the business world how to mobilise publicity, marketing, and various other enterprising techniques. He dismisses analyses of the art framework's operation that fail to take the commercial system's impact seriously, stating that it is 'sheer lunacy … to maintain that … market relations are just incidental' to contemporary artistic practice.[8] Artists, he concludes in a tone of both disdain and lament, have independently and voluntarily 'internalised' the capitalist mode of production and transformed artistic practice accordingly.[9] But, he continues, 'I want to restate that this [transformation] has been achieved primarily on tacit agreements [between artists and their agents] and not on the typically overt bureaucratic

techniques—proving once more how little surveillance a system like [the art market] requires once [its] principles have been internalised and everyone has [assumed] "like-minded" interests'.[10]

By the mid-1970s, then, Burn had come to link even Conceptual art's 'most iconoclastic work' with marketable novelty, writing that 'the market capitalises on "innovation" for its own sake, strictly as a profit maximizing factor'.[11] The artist acknowledges the various ways 'the need to innovate' has 'rhetorically infected' his artistic practice, and remarks on the pressure 'to innovate, on pain of extinction' that he and many other Conceptual artists in the Western formation face'.[12] Burn took his conclusions to heart. As is evident in his art and writing from the later 1970s, he cut all ties to the mainstream art business, with its bureaucracy, galleries, and museums, and refocused his attention and activities on social life. From 1977 onward, he developed a very different understanding of the artist's role in capitalist society, one that considers changes in that social body's dynamic.

Burn's artistic practice between 1967 and 1977 developed in the context of these distinct facets of Conceptual art. The artist explicitly restricted his production to a particular form of presentation, namely language. But he didn't prioritise form. When he complains in 'Conceptual Art as Art' that the production of some of his peers is not Conceptual art in the strict sense, his objections are not to the techniques these practitioners mobilise but to the weakness of their work's content, which, for example, Burn variously dismisses as anecdotal, frivolous, autobiographical, or self-absorbed. In short, he takes the production of some Conceptual artists to task for not being rigorous enough. According to Burn, the logic underpinning this artistic formation's peeling away of art's perceptual properties, what I'm referring to as Conceptual artists' continuation of reductivism, was to get a glimpse of what lay underneath those multiple aesthetic layers—to bring Western art's essence out of its embedded state in figural and sensual pleasures. Burn finally arrives at what he believes is art's core, its literal conditions, and its zero degrees when he centres on the commodity form and the art market. In his essays of the mid-1970s, he incriminates the art business as the mechanism that determines what does and does not count as art in Western society. In the capitalist context, he concludes, objects or gestures come into focus as artworks only when circulating in the art market. Otherwise, they remain noise.

In 'The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath', written, as I noted above, retrospectively in the early 1980s, Burn reflects on this terrible realisation. The artist laments that he lives in a society where art forms must 'reach the marketplace (or any of its agencies)' to exist.[13] He observes that this unfortunate reality has led even some of the most innovative Conceptual artists to steer their production toward the art market so that they can participate in the conversation. But what I want to highlight is that Burn here identifies Conceptual artists' adoption of the avant-garde practice of what he calls 'deskilling', which, as he puts it, shifted 'significant [artistic] decision-making away' from manual competence 'to the conception, planning, design, and form of [an artwork's] presentation', as one of the primary reasons

why Conceptual artists were ultimately unable to develop a viable path through the art context that remained separate from the structures of the market.[14]

Conceptual art's production techniques and the artists' emphasis on concepts in the generation of art ruptured the idealised but long-entrenched belief that artistic practice is separate from modernity's division of labour and specialisation—that artists emblematise the unity of mental, physical, ethical, and technical work, and are autonomous from capitalism's efforts to make production more cost-effective by separating the roles performed by each worker and fragmenting those roles into smaller and smaller tasks. This autonomy, which sociologists refer to as the 'artistic critique', had since the late nineteenth century, granted Western artists the freedom to work in ways not dictated by the alienating conditions of economic rationality.[15] In the Western context, artistic production has long been conceived of as an activity without predetermined use or outcome, as an autonomous or semi-autonomous realm of free individuality where creation is separate from the merciless laws and conventions of labour division, surplus value production, and economic and state rationality could occur. This ideal remained central to critical art practice throughout the modern period, allowing artistic practitioners to question and challenge dominant norms and values. It also protected artists' practical and economic sovereignty as independent producers in control of their labour and its products to a relatively large degree.

In effect, Conceptual art's prioritisation of intellectual over manual work brought that long-standing ideal to an end. As artists emulated capitalism's division of labour and specialisation, they and the field of art, more generally, lost their emblematic status as symbols of freedom in the context of rampant instrumentalisation. Artistic practitioners could not legitimately claim to operate in a unique framework where mental and physical production intertwined. They no longer worked in a manner that opposed capitalism's alienating conditions. In separating conception from execution, Conceptual art succumbed to the power of this economic paradigm to subsume all areas of social activity, even those that do not directly produce economic value.

In Burn's retrospective view, Conceptual artists' negation of the traditional studio aesthetic and all of its acquired skills in pursuit of art's essence 'threw into question the status of the work of art as [an exceptional] object, as a special thing-in-itself'.[16] And yet, he continues, that reductivist program's deskilling practices ultimately rendered it difficult 'to sustain the idea that [artworks are] exclusive embodiment[s] of a special creative process'.[17] Instead, 'with few or no artistically valued manual skills involved in [artistic] production', works of art came to approximate the products of intellectual decisions and artists the role of production managers.[18] Accordingly, rather than distancing their practices from normative modes of production, artists and their productions began to operate and circulate fluidly within the logic of capitalist relations. As Burn maintains, in the early 1980s, the artistic practice of reductivism's paring-away of aesthetic elements and traditional skill sets in the pursuit of art's essence culminated in a negative formalism that led straight to 'the realm of a repressive corporate way of life'.[19] In

rigorously following the reductivist trajectory by deskilling production and granting priority to art's ideational element, Conceptual artists inadvertently brought artistic practice into a direct correlation with corporate management. Although many initially resisted art's commercialisation, their operative techniques came to parallel the corporate world's efforts to control workers and manufacturing more readily by separating mental decision-making from manual labour. Soon after recognising the incompatibility between his political views and the aesthetic ideology his artistic practice had come to represent, Burn abruptly distanced himself from Conceptual art and its deskilling practices more generally.

The unfortunate reality of Conceptual art's antinomies has led many commentators to focus on the art movement's flaws and refer to it as a failure. In the postscript to her well-known 1973 volume *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Lucy Lippard observes that initial 'hopes that "Conceptual Art" would be able to avoid the general commercialisation were for the most part unfounded.' Conceptual artists, she writes, 'are selling major work [in the United States] and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected—showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries. Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved in the process of dematerializing the object … art and artist in a capitalist society remain luxuries'.[20] Burn contributed to this point of view in his important retrospective text 'The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath', where he writes that the most significant thing that can be said about Conceptual art 'is that it failed … to fulfill certain initial expectations and ideals'.[21]

However, from today's vantage point, the conclusion that Conceptual art was catastrophic seems hyperbolic. Subsequent history reveals this art movement's profound impact on some of the most consequential developments of contemporary artistic practice. Indeed, in the 1981 text I just cited, Burn immediately qualifies the claim that Conceptual art was unsuccessful by interpreting that failure dialectically, describing it as one of the art movement's most significant accomplishments. He argues that the limits of Conceptual art inevitably led not to a conservative return to traditional media and the aesthetics of the studio but to a deeper reflection by artists on the social and political implications of their roles as practitioners in a crucial though highly problematic field. The 'real value' of Conceptual art, Burn writes, 'lay in its *transitional* (and thus genuinely historical) character' and in the realisation that, rather than things that emanate from an essence, artworks are always active, perpetually in the process of becoming, the products of specific social contexts and cultural values.[22]

This shift from the noun to the verb form of the word 'work', from an exploration of what art 'is' (or what artworks *are*) toward a focus on the agency of art (the *work* that artworks perform), generated numerous transitions. Many of these took place in the late 1970s and 1980s when Burn and others were actively institutionalising art in Australia through organisations such as the Artworkers Union, the Artworkers Alliance, the National Association for the Visual Arts, the Arts Law Center, the Art and Working Life program, and Art Bank. During these years,

Burn mostly worked with Union Media Services (UMS), which sought to promote the innovative media productions of trade union members. UMS developed a small but robust business by designing union newspapers and other media that aimed 'to counter union biases of the daily press'.[23] Burn was also marginally involved with Art and Working Life, a federal government program established in the late 1970s to encourage cultural activities by artists, art workers, and unions both within and outside the workplace. The program, which brought together the Australia Council for the Arts and the Australian Council of Trade Unions, played a significant role in funding a wide range of collaborative projects between artists, designers, and communities. While promoting Art and Working Life amongst unionists, Burn developed a major show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Titled *Working Art: A Survey of Art in the Australian Labour Movement in the 1980s,* the 1985 exhibition included union posters, journals, photographs, newspapers, and banners. The accompanying catalogue essay encouraged state museums and other government institutions to support the working class movement and acknowledge its significant contributions to Australian culture. Burn located the Art and Working Life program within the labour movement's history of cultural engagement and stressed the vital role museums could play in legitimising working-class art production as a valued activity.[24]

In the 1990s, artists and curators probed critiques of Conceptual art by figures such as Burn to address social and economic issues facing artists. Some continued Conceptual art's refusal to produce tangible goods, offering services related to the arts instead. These services variously involved interpretation, presentation, and public education activities beyond material production. A case in point is artist Andrea Fraser, who, along with curator Helmut Draxler, theorised what they referred to as 'artistic service provision' that assumed a reflexive and critical stance toward art's economy and the increased importance of the tertiary or service sector in the late twentieth century.[25] Fraser developed what she describes as 'a self-conscious artistic critique of the cultural commodity, of the exploitation of art for economic and symbolic profit'.[26] Artistic service provision terminated the modern notion that artists live and work in a manner that separates them from the division of labour—that the alienating conditions of labour do not dictate how artists work. Its project-oriented practices collapsed the distinction between the artistic production of essentially useless or purposeless things and the means-end rationality of economic imperatives. These practices, in turn, opened the way for developing project art and exhibitions that proliferate in the twenty-first-century art context. The makers of this type of art and exhibition work across institutionally defined and often rigorously guarded boundaries between artistic expression and scholarly research to introduce elements of history, politics, and science into the art framework. They also explore how the art context can productively adapt formats such as public lectures, workshops, and conferences. They experiment with ways of relating individual and collective artistic ambitions and commingling the unique roles of artists, curators, and scholars. The fusion of differences is a crucial feature of their investigations. Project works and exhibitions such as Fred

Wilson's *Mining the Museum: An Installation* (1992), Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann's *Ex-Argentina* (2002–2006), Thomas Hirshhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (2013), and Iosu Aramburu's *Atlas of Andean Modernism* (2022–) encourage debate and disagreement. Their producers consider lucid, candid opinions and honest, robust discussions signs of social health.

Many contemporary artists have also developed Conceptual art's juxtaposition of images and texts to realise artworks that grapple with topical social and political issues. But perhaps the most significant transition introduced by the limits of Conceptual art has taken the form of artistic responses to art's compromised relationship with patrons and the art market more generally. Artists continuing in but pushing beyond the Conceptual art legacy of Burn and his peers have, in recent years, targeted museums, galleries, art fairs, festivals, magazines, schools, and public cultural agencies with protestations concerning the ways these institutions operate, the officials who govern them, and the patrons who underwrite them as government funding becomes more challenging to secure. They subject art institutions to public scrutiny, highlighting their complicity in perpetuating, concealing, or neglecting unjust and oppressive practices. In the United States alone, critical interventions by dozens of art groups embedded in social movement activism, such as Working Artists for the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), Decolonize This Place, Occupy Museums, Not An Alternative, Art Space Sanctuary, Chinatown Art Brigade, and Gulf Labor Artist Coalition have recently subjected art institutions to public scrutiny, highlighting their complicity in perpetuating, concealing, or neglecting unjust and oppressive practices. Their 'creative direct actions' include petitions, pickets, strikes, boycotts, divestment campaigns, and occupations of various kinds.[27] In this respect, the artists' strategies recall the demands of Conceptual art and Institutional Critique practitioners who, in the late twentieth century, called on administrators to grant art workers more significant roles in the governance of art institutions. However, in a vital pivot that Burn writing in the 1970s could not have anticipated, today's artists have shifted the critical focus from the relationship between art institutions and their workers to the association between patrons and the institutions they support. They seek to hold the institutions' administrators accountable to their stated commitments to cultural education, civic engagement, public discussion, aesthetic enrichment, and moral leadership and behaviour beyond the now omnipresent trustees' and sponsors' interests. Artists working in the Conceptual art legacy today embrace new strategies for a new era. They 'engage in a simultaneous negation and affirmation of art', a 'dynamic articulation of art and direct action', and a resocialisation of the commons in the face of neoliberal capitalism's efforts to restructure it.[28]

Like Burn, many artistic practitioners today have left the 'feudal system of art', with its 'institutional chateaux', its 'exploitation of subjectivities', its market entanglements, and associated themselves instead with local grassroots organisations.[29] But today's art activists are more pragmatic than Burn's Conceptual art cohort. Instead of striving to uncover the secrets that lay at art's foundations in capitalist society, artists and art collectives such as Chto Delat (Saint Petersburg), Etcetera

(Buenos Aires), Liberate Tate (London), Mujeres Creando (La Paz), Multiplicity (Milan), CAMP (Mumbai), Taring Padi (Jakarta), and the Yes Men (New York) shift the focus of their inquiry to align it with counter-publics in the face of intensifying social and political emergencies. They transmit truth claims, radical pedagogies, militant research, and non-orthodox types of art and knowledge production, such as how human agents can counter epistemic injustice. In this respect, these artists veer beyond the realm of practice deemed appropriate by contemporary art's established institutions, and their work flirts with dissolving the category of art altogether into an expanded field of collective social engagement and creativity.

With the exception of his renewed interest in landscape compositions in the early 1990s, Burn dedicated his artistic activities following his departure from the Conceptual art context in 1977 to trade union journalism and curating and advocating for artists to organise collectively as socially and politically engaged producers with ethical principles and goals. However, the number of artistic practitioners who have since taken the Conceptual art legacy he pioneered and directed it toward developing activist practices that pursue effective political change is enormous and stands as a living testament to the lasting impact of Conceptual art and Ian Burn's fundamental role in its historical unfolding.

Notes

1. Ian Burn, *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993*, ed. Ann Stephens (Sydney and Berlin: Power Publications, KW Institute for Contemporary Art and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2024)
2. Ibid., 123
3. Ibid., 506–507.
4. Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' *Artforum* 5, 10 (1967): 79–83.
5. Burn, *Collected Writings*, 136.
6. Ibid., 225.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 230.
9. Ibid., 225.
10. Ibid., 232.
11. Ibid., 230.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 495.
14. Ibid., 498.
15. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. G. Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), 424–482.
16. Burn, *Collected Writings*, 498.
17. Ibid., 498–99.
18. Ibid., 498.
19. Ibid., 499.
20. Lucy Lippard, 'Postface' in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 263. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh makes similar claims in 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55 (1990): 105–143. Also see Adrian Piper, 'Ian Burn's Conceptualism' (1996), republished in Burn, *Collected Writings*, 661–682.
21. Burn, *Collected Writings*, 507.
22. Ibid., 512.
23. Ian Burn as cited in Sandy Kirby, 'A Working Life in Art and Union Media Services' in *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, ed. Ann Stephen (Sydney: Power Publications, 1996), 49.
24. Ian Burn, ed., *Working Art: A Survey of Art in the Australian Labour Movement in the 1980s*, exh. cat. (Sydney, 1985).
25. Andrea Fraser, 'How to Provide an Artistic Service: An Introduction' (1994) at https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/fraser1.pdf
26. Andrea Fraser, 'What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?' *October* 80 (1997): 115.
27. Annabelle Boissier, 'Interview: Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husain–MTL Collective' *Arts Cabinet*, April 2017, https://www.artscabinet.org/interviews/interview-nitasha-dhillon-and-amin-husain-mtl-collective. For an overview of these activities, see Joanna Warsza, ed., *I Can't Work Like This: A Reader on Recent Boycotts and Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).
28. Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (New York: Verso, 2016), 6, 187.
29. Bureau d'études, 'Resymbolizing Machines: Art After Oyvind Fahlström' in *An Atlas of Agendas: Mapping the Power, Mapping the Commons* (Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2014), 146.