

Are You Experienced?

How designers are adopting the strategies of Conceptual art by *Ronald Jones*



Clemens Weishaar
and Reed Kram
VENDÔME
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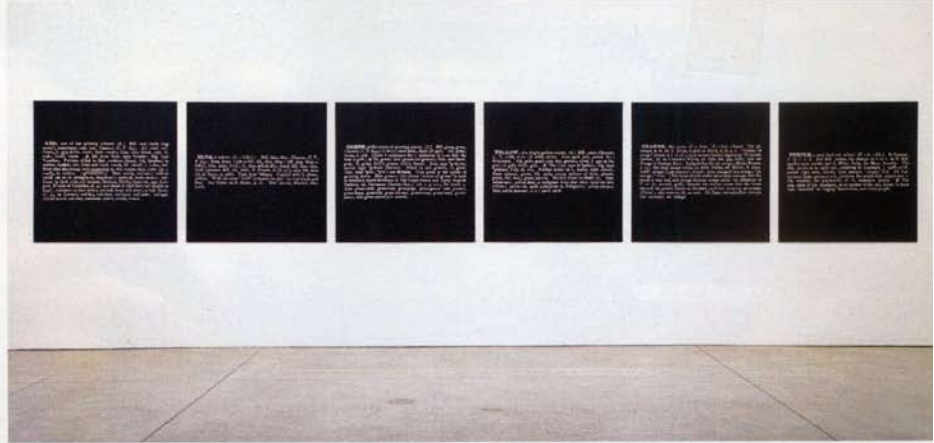
In 1981 the art critic Robert Pincus-Witten differentiated for the first time between two kinds of Conceptual art: between what he called *ontological* Conceptualism and *epistemological* Conceptualism. Acknowledging the distinction between these two fundamental methodologies alters what one sees in the rear-view mirror, but it also opens up the opportunity to look forward, towards the emergence of a new discipline called 'experience design'.

'Being an artist now means to question the nature of art', Joseph Kosuth wrote in 1968, before declaring: 'If you make paintings, you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art.' Ontological Conceptualism, advanced by Kosuth and a few others, was the frontal assault that utterly changed how art could be said to exist. Today, when you eat Thai curry (Rirkrit Tiravanija) or walk through a garden of black flowers (Jenny Holzer), you understand that the identity of artists has become inseparable from questioning their practice; ontological Conceptualism has become so totally invasive that it is no longer possible to speak about it in terms of influence.

The competing methodology, epistemological Conceptualism, Pincus-Witten characterized as making or doing 'things for the kinds of information, knowledge or data which things or activities reveal', and with this distinction he laid emphasis on the experience of knowledge production rather than its ontological end. Its masterpiece is Lawrence Weiner's *Declaration of Intent* (1968), the systemic account of the terms for experiencing Conceptual art. Weiner and artists such as Hans Haacke (*Rhinewater Purification Plant*, 1972) created systems of experience, as Jack Burnham believed, for what they revealed about art, sustainability, politics and a myriad of other interrelated themes. Simon Starling and Mark Dion are among their heirs and,



Exhibition view of Lawrence Weiner's 'AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE', Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 2008



Joseph Kosuth
Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)
1966

more recently, epistemological Conceptualism has been adapted to educational collectives such as Anton Vidokle's *unitednationsplaza*. Nevertheless, the potential of this methodology to design experiences in order to project power and influence has been consistently underappreciated by artists, especially when compared with contemporary designers who co-opted epistemological Conceptualism as a platform for designing the experiences of knowledge production, reception and comprehension across disciplines – often furthest from their own – affording them an expanding sphere of influence.

Prioritizing the value of experience is hardly exclusive to art and design. In 1998 B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore forecast that the emerging value of experiences over commodities would progressively undermine the goods and services economy. In their *Harvard Business Review* article 'Welcome to the Experience Economy' Pine and Gilmore used the simple birthday cake by way of an explanation. In the agrarian economy cakes were made from scratch, using milk, eggs, flour and sugar (farm commodities). With the emergence of the goods economy, cake mixes, although more expensive, became popular, and as time itself became an increasingly valuable commodity within the services economy, bakeries flourished. 'Now, in the time-starved 1990s,' they wrote, 'parents neither make the birthday cake nor even throw the party. Instead, they spend \$100 or more to "out-source" the entire event to Chuck E. Cheese's [...] or some other business that stages a memorable event for the kids – and often throws in the cake for free.' Pine and Gilmore describe how experiences are being commercialized in the entertainment, airline and sports industries, where business had gone beyond a 'commodity-mind-set'

in order, as former British Airways chairman Sir Colin Marshall remarked, to 'compete on the basis of providing an experience'. With confidence they describe a future for experience design where it will become 'as much a business art as product design and process design are today'. That's not quite true yet, but it's becoming so; its emergence will quicken as China and India begin acting on the obvious, giving design away for free because their economic advantage is with mass-manufacturing, not designing prototypes for mobile phones. China and India's efficiency at mass-producing physical commodities frees up small but growing sectors of the Western design community to create and distribute intangible commodities, including experiences.

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Designers such as Clemens Weisshaar and Reed Kram understand the potential for prioritizing the design of experience over things. Kram describes a research strategy reliant on modular, highly co-ordinated and interdisciplinary systems for knowledge production that trigger fabrication only if that's the objective. 'In China they use a Fordian system of manufacturing: mass production, chain-line, costs reduction,' he said. 'The only way for Europe to compete with this is to control, manipulate and re-invent processes based on networks of flexible partners and the latest technologies. Each work necessitates the design of a new logic.' In effect Weisshaar and Kram produce systems for experiencing design,

just as Weiner produced the system for experiencing Conceptual art; either can be physically realized or remain as an idea, but in both instances the intangible experience is always primary. When it becomes applied epistemology, it creates subtle psychological relationships between people and objects that evolve over time as experience. The customization of epistemological Conceptualism represents the most significant paradigm shift in living memory, as design professions migrate from myopic design assignment – *design me a toaster* – towards conceiving the intangible commodities that feed the experience economy – *design me a system*. Ways to describe this nascent paradigm vary – Banny Banerjee at Stanford Institute of Design talks about 'disruptive innovation'; at the Experience Design Group in Stockholm, Rolf Hughes and I consider it as a trans-disciplinary form of 'disruptive innovation' – but held in common is the belief that designers should be critical thinkers and strategists first, capable of addressing cross-disciplinary problems by designing the social, political, economic and educational 'systems' that give them greater reach, responsibility, influence and relevance. It is reasonable to conclude that the Conceptual artists whose work first embodied ontological and epistemological methodologies were engaged in the rarest research of all, known as fundamental research. Perhaps this is an accolade deserved by the designers who carried over those methods into an 'economy of borrowed ideas', without regard to whether or not the knowledge discovered would be of direct practical use.

Ronald Jones is Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Konstfack, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, Sweden. At Konstfack he leads the Experience Design Group, and he is a guest Professor in Experience Design at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, India.