

Conceptual Art

Educator Workshop | March 25, 2014

Selected works from *Mel Chin Rematch Works from and NOMA's Permanent Collection*

OVERVIEW

The roots of **Conceptual Art** go back to early Modern Art approximately a hundred years ago to 1917. In response to multiple factors such as the development of photography, World War I, and technological innovations, many artists began to question the role of art in representing the world around them. **Cubists** strived to show the world simultaneously from multiple angles. **Futurists** expressed their exuberance about the pace of technology which seemed to be reshaping the world around them. **Dadaists** embraced irrationality as a response to the horror of World War I by creating an anti-art that challenged the notion of art as a way of creating meaning.

It was in this context that Marcel Duchamp created some of the first examples of conceptual art. He looked at his contemporaries and rejected their works as “retinal” art. Duchamp wanted to make work that would engage the mind rather than the eye. His work is most closely associated with Dada. Many contemporary conceptual artists including Mel Chin continue to reference Dada. While the focus of conceptual art places the idea or concept above a work's form or visual qualities, the concepts presented are sometimes enigmatic harkening back to the Dadaists' attempts to reflect what they saw as truth: the world was essentially a chaotic and unpredictable place.

Duchamp began creating what he referred to as “readymades,” a term he borrowed that was commonly used in the United States to refer to mass-produced objects. *Fountain*, his most famous readymade, consisted of a urinal turned on its back and placed on a pedestal. He famously argued that “taste good or bad was the enemy of art.” Duchamp created a pseudonym R. Mutt, which he used to sign his readymade.

An anonymous editorial in the *Blind Man*, a Dada journal published in New York in 1917, claimed:

Whether Mr. Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.



Nude Descending the Staircase No. 2 by Marcel Duchamp, 1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection



The original *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, 1917, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz

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While Duchamp laid the foundation for Conceptual Art, the term Conceptual Art came into common use in the mid-1960s. This term was used to describe a diverse range of artists whose work raised fundamental questions about what could be considered art and its function outside of the traditional settings of the gallery and museum.

In the 1960s American artist Sol LeWitt, who is considered both the founder of Conceptual Art and **Minimalism**, coined the term Conceptual Art. He created a system of drawing that was applied directly to the walls following a set of instructions. Like Duchamp's readymades these works challenged the notion that the artist's hand is essential to the process of art making. LeWitt described conceptual art this way:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.

In Germany, Beuys argued for a radical reshaping of the role of art with his idea of social sculpture. The idea of social sculpture expanded art to include social and political activity as a creative process. He famously proclaimed "every man is an artist." Beuys co-founded the German Green party and was elected a Green party candidate to European parliament.

Beuys, a former Luftwaffe pilot for the Nazis, created an elaborate and symbolic personal narrative. He claimed to have been rescued by Tartars who wrapped him in fat and felt after his plane crashed over the Crimean front. These materials recur throughout his work. Many historians are skeptical of the story of his rescue, and instead view it as a one of many mythical fabrications Beuys constructed around himself.

In 1974 Beuys performed *I like America and America likes me*. He was taken by ambulance to René Block Gallery at 409 West Broadway. Arrived at the gallery and spent eight hours with a wild coyote over three days. He was wrapped in a heavy wool blanket, carried a staff, and at times he lay on a pile of straw in the gallery. He left in an ambulance at the end of his performance. He claimed, "I wanted to isolate myself, insulate myself, see nothing of America other than the coyote." Like the Dadaists, Beuys' work has element of the absurd.



Sol LeWitt, Inverted Spiraling Tower, 1987, painted wood



Beuys's *I like America and America likes me*, black and white offset lithograph on wove paper, New Orleans Museum of Art, gift of Milton Esterow

The conceptual artist Fred Wilson addresses social justice and race by creating mock museums. In 1992, he created an exhibition called *Mining the Museum* in which he reshuffled the Maryland Historical Society's collection of Native and African American. In this process, he revealed the way the museum itself was at times unwittingly reinforcing racist beliefs or behaviors. He says that:

"He no longer has a strong desire to make things with his hands. 'I get everything that satisfies my soul,' he says, 'from bringing together objects that are in the world, manipulating them, working with spatial arrangements, and having things presented in the way I want to see them.'"

His work expanded the boundaries of art to include the curatorial practice of exploring how meaning can be constructed within a museum's collection. His work calls into question the role that curators themselves play in constructing meaning through the language of display.

Conceptual Art has radically influenced the landscape of Contemporary Art, giving artists license to expand their creative process beyond the traditional visual boundaries of their discipline. It has altered the definition of art to include a wide range of practices including political and social engagement and curatorial practice. Contemporary artists often collaborate with other disciplines and situate their work locations far from the gallery and museum walls.

VOCABULARY

Conceptual Art: art in which the concept or idea takes precedence over the form.

Cubism: in a cubist work objects are analyzed, broken up and reassembled in an abstracted form—instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint, the artist depicts the subject from multiple of viewpoints.

Futurism: was an artistic and social movement that originated in Italy in the early 20th century. It emphasized and glorified themes associated with contemporary concepts of the future, including speed and technology.

Dadaism: Dada was born out of negative reaction to the horrors of World War I; it embraced the absurd and created a form of anti-art.

Minimalism: an art movement in visual art and music that pared down form to the essential elements.

THEMES FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

What is art?

Conceptual Art and politics

Form and content in art

Interdisciplinary collaboration as art

Viewing art outside of the gallery

CONSIDER

How has conceptual art changed the role of the artist?

If society can be viewed as a social sculpture, is political engagement a creative process?

How does a work of art's form and content work together to create meaning?

Selected Works from Mel Chin's *Rematch*

***Lecture Ax*, 1988, Mel Chin, altered book (*Collier's Encyclopedia*), wax, pigment, wood in glass, and wood case, collection of Marilyn Oshman.**

Chin was invited to give his first lecture in New York at the New School for Social Research. Chin fabricated *Lecture Ax* for this talk, with the intention of using it as part of a performance. To produce the ax's blade, Chin placed his lecture notes in a *Collier's Encyclopedia* volume and dipped the book in wax. He then carved and colored the book to resemble a sharp metal blade, and attached it to a hand-carved wooden handle. During the lecture Chin smashed *Lecture Ax* against the chalkboard, releasing his lecture notes, which he then began to read.



Lecture Ax has since been exhibited in a glass case, to be used in “philosophical emergencies.”

DISCUSS

What is a philosophical emergency?

Why do you think the artist decided to create an ax from an encyclopedia?

DEBATE

Pick a philosophical topic to debate such as: Albert Einstein's assertion that imagination is more valuable than knowledge.

Extraction of Plenty from What Remains 1823–, 1989,
Mel Chin, plaster, wood, pulverized sandstone, whitewash,
steel, banana tree fibers, mud, coffee, blood, mahogany,
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The columns in *Extraction* are designed with the same circumference and color as the columns that adorn the White House. They are broken along the top with the silhouette of their upper edge designed to emulate the upper edge of the signatures of ten U.S. presidents including James Monroe and Ronald Reagan.

Between these columns is a cornucopia, constructed of banana fibers and Honduran mahogany (materials specifically evoking the economy of Central America), and bathed in coffee, mud, and goat's blood. Placed closely together, the columns appear to be squeezing the cornucopia. The goat's blood, while carrying connotations of sacrifice, also alludes to the bloodshed caused by U.S. intervention in cases such as the Iran-Contra affair during the 1980s.

This artwork addresses the legacy of the U.S. Monroe Doctrine. Enacted in 1823, the Doctrine established the United States as the foremost power in North and South America, and gave the U.S. the implied right to intervene in other countries when it deemed appropriate.

DISCUSS

How has the artist used both the choice of materials and form to express his ideas?

RESEARCH

Read the Monroe Doctrine:

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=23&page=transcript>

DEBATE

Discuss its impact on American foreign policy.



***Revival Field*, Mel Chin, 1991**

Revival Field combines art, science, and public affairs. It began as a cooperation between Mel Chin and Rufus Chaney, an agronomist from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), who had conducted research on metal-accumulating plants, also known as “hyperaccumulators.” *Revival Field* was designed to test the effectiveness of phytoremediation, or using plants to treat toxic soil. *Revival Field* renewed interest in the study of phytoremediation, provided data for scientific research, and created a public dialogue about waste disposal and soil remediation. Since *Revival Field*, phytoremediation continues to grow as an area of study, though it has not yet to achieve widespread commercial viability.



***In the Name of the Place*, (two props from project), 1995–97, GALA Committee, television episodes, 120 artists, 150 props; exhibited as looped television clips**

In the Name of the Place was a collaborative project produced by the GALA Committee: a group of 120 artists, including Chin and a core group of students from the University of Georgia and the California Institute of the Arts.

Between 1995 and 1997, the GALA Committee (short for Georgia and Los Angeles) designed and strategically placed artworks as props in the prime-time television soap opera series *Melrose Place*. These props offered serious political and social commentary. Chin, who held joint appointments at the participating schools, initiated the project, but stresses the collaborative nature of the project that forged alliances among artists and the writers and producers of *Melrose Place*.



Works of art from *In the Name of the Place* were originally shown in the exhibition *Uncommon Sense* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1997. The works were later auctioned at Sotheby's in Beverly Hills in 1998 with the proceeds given to educational charities in Georgia and California.

DISCUSS

In *Revival Field* and *In Name of Place*, the artist is collaborating with people with different specialties. How does the setting affect the meaning of these collaborations?

DEBATE

Many artists now collaborate in interdisciplinary collaborations. What might each partner bring to such a collaboration?

KNOWMAD, 1999, Mel Chin, interactive video installation, vintage rugs, fabric tent, projector, Windows computer, courtesy of the artist

Chin created this work to pay tribute to the nomadic cultures in Central Asia that face challenges due to their political exclusion. Chin assembled the KNOWMAD Confederacy—a group of computer-game experts, graphic designers, and a musician to create the work.

KNOWMAD consists of a video arcade machine installed in a customized “nomad” tent surrounded by handmade rugs. In the video game the player crosses a landscape of tents, each filled with mazes of rug patterns. The KNOWMAD Confederacy recreated specific rug designs for the video game, transforming the woven textile into virtual media. The digital patterns were based on the weavings of the nomadic peoples from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, the Caucasus, and Anatolia (modern day Turkey).



To succeed players must capture the pomegranates hidden inside the mazes. Each pomegranate awards the player with more time to continue the search. Time is linked to survival: when the player does not find the pomegranates during his or her allotted amount of minutes, the game is over and the player must begin again. This highlights the strife inherent in nomadic life.

DISCUSS

Can a video game be a work of art? How can a video game be used to educate as well as to entertain?

DEBATE

View Jane McGonigal’s TED talk, *Gaming Can Make a Better World*
http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world

Debate her argument that gaming can make a better world.

The Funk & Wag from A to Z, 2012, excised printed pages from The Universal Standard Encyclopedia, 1953–56, by Wilfred Funk, Inc., archival water-based glue, paper, 524 collages, courtesy of the artist

In *Funk and Wag from A to Z*, Mel Chin created 524 individual collages using *The Universal Standard Encyclopedia* 1953-56 by Wilfred Funk Inc. After the death of his parents, Chin found a single volume from the 1954 edition of the encyclopedia. The discovery offered Chin the opportunity to create in the wake of their death. His technique for this project follows the Dada practice of photomontage, in which images from popular media are arranged to create new meanings and leave the possibility for interpretation open to the viewer. The entire set of encyclopedias is incorporated into the installation. The collages are hung on the wall and the remaining parts of the encyclopedias are placed within a stand situated at the center of the room.



The Fundred Dollar Bill Project, begun 2008, Mel Chin

The Fundred Dollar Bill Project is an extensive, nationwide campaign, whose goal is to collect millions of *Fundreds* (drawings of hundred dollar bills), each drawn by different individuals. These *Fundreds* provide individuals with a way of expressing their voice in the struggle to end lead poisoning. The *Fundred* drawings also emphasize the value of children's creativity which is something threatened by lead poisoning. The goal of the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* is to present these *Fundreds* to lawmakers in Washington, D.C., and ask for an even exchange of funding and policy measures to prevent lead poisoning.



DISCUSS

Mel Chin has involved the larger community in the creation of these *Fundreds*. Who is the artist in this project?

DEBATE

What skills can an artist bring to a political debate?

LESSON PLAN

<http://www.fundred.org/classroom/>

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NOMA
New Orleans Museum of Art

Selections from NOMA's Permanent Collection

***America*, 2013, Will Ryman, gift of Sydney and Walda Besthoff,**

Will Ryman's *America* is life-sized log cabin coated with gold resin. This form is meant to evoke the boyhood home of Abraham Lincoln, who played a prominent role in the abolition of slavery through the Emancipation Proclamation. Entering the interior through a door you discover that the interior walls have been covered with numerous objects including: railroad ties, arrow heads, coal, cigarettes, gas caps, spark plugs, soda tabs, telephone cords, pills, key boards, iPhones, iPads, and light bulbs. These various objects were chosen to symbolize the industries and historical trends that shaped the U. S. economy. The floor is entirely covered with shackles referencing the role that slavery played in building the early American economy.



Odili Donald Odita, *Forever*, 2011, museum purchase, Robert P. Gordy Fund

This painting by Philadelphia based, Nigerian born artist Odili Donald Odita was commissioned in honor of NOMA's centennial. The dynamic composition and color are inspired by the time that Odili spent in New Orleans. He says, "I want to create a wall painting that shows the jubilation of life and culture, that spirit, that vitality of New Orleans."



Drawing on his experience as a Nigerian born artist, Odili strives to create meaning through choice of color and pattern. In *Third Color –Third Space*, Odili states:

The organization and patterning in the painting are of my own design. I continue to explore in the paintings a metaphoric ability to address the human condition through pattern, structure and design.

This wall painting was not painted by Odili himself but was created by a team following his instructions. Like the artist Sol Lewitt the idea is key and the execution is done by following a set of instructions.

Perfect Vehicles, 1988, Allan McCollum, gift of Sydney and Walda Besthoff

Based on the traditional Chinese ginger jars, these sculptures are meant to serve as a caricature of the perfect vase. McCollum claims that they are “an homage for one thing standing in for another.” McCollum is a self-taught artist and began his career as a professional artist in the 1960s. He was influenced by the music of John Cage, the art of Robert Rauschenberg, Fluxus, and performance art. As someone who never attended art school he was very interested in making art that everyone could understand. He was interested in the idea the objects have different meaning to different cultures.



His work often consists of multiple objects which are displayed together, referencing the mass production of so many of the objects around us and contradicting the preciousness of the unique art object.

DISCUSS

How can an object have different meanings in different cultures?

DEBATE

Has the meaning of the fleur de lis changed from its origins in France to its contemporary meaning in New Orleans?