

Henry Flynt

ESSAY: CONCEPT ART

[As published in *An Anthology* (1963). Errors are corrected and punctuation is normalized.]

"Concept art" is first of all an art of which the material is "concepts," as the material of for ex. music is sound. Since "concepts" are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language. That is, unlike for ex. a work of music, in which the music proper (as opposed to notation, analysis, a.s.f.) is just sound, concept art proper will involve language. From the philosophy of language, we learn that a "concept" may as well be thought of as the intension of a name; this is the relation between concepts and language. The notion of a concept is a vestige of the notion of a Platonic form (the thing which for ex. all tables have in common: tableness), which notion is replaced by the notion of a name objectively, metaphysically related to its intension (so that all tables now have in common their objective relation to `table'). Now the claim that there can be an objective relation between a name and its intension is wrong, and (the word) `concept', as commonly used now, can be discredited (see my book Philosophy Proper). If, however, it is enough for one that there be a subjective relation between a name and its intension, namely the unhesitant decision as to the way one wants to use the name, the unhesitant decisions to affirm the names of some things but not others, then `concept' is valid language, and concept art has a philosophically valid basis.

Now what is artistic, aesthetic, about a work which is a body of concepts? This question can best be answered by telling where concept art came from; I developed it in an attempt to straighten out certain traditional activities generally regarded as aesthetic. The first of these is "structure art," music, visual art, a.s.f., in which the important thing is "structure." My definitive discussion of structure art can be found in "General Aesthetics"; here I will just summarize that discussion. Much

structure art is a vestige of the time when for ex. music was believed to be knowledge, a science which had important things to say in astronomy a.s.f. Contemporary structure artists, on the other hand, tend to claim the kind of cognitive value for their art that conventional contemporary mathematicians claim for mathematics. Modern examples of structure art are the fugue and total serial music. These examples illustrate the important division of structure art into two kinds according to how the structure is appreciated. In the case of a fugue, one is aware of its structure in listening to it; one imposes "relationships," a categorization (hopefully that intended by the composer) on the sounds while listening to them, that is, has an "(associated) artistic structure experience." In the case of total serial music, the structure is such that this cannot be done; one just has to read an "analysis" of the music, definition of the relationships. Now there are two things wrong with structure art. First, its cognitive pretensions are utterly wrong. Secondly, by trying to be music or whatever (which has nothing to do with knowledge), and knowledge represented by structure, structure art both fails, is completely boring, as music, and doesn't begin to explore the aesthetic possibilities structure can have when freed from trying to be music or whatever. The first step in straightening out for ex. structure music is to stop calling it "music," and start saying that the sound is used only to carry the structure and that the real point is the structure--and then you will see how limited, impoverished, the structure is. Incidentally, anyone who says that works of structure music do occasionally have musical value just doesn't know how good real music (the Goli Dance of the Baoule; "Cans on Windows" by L. Young; the contemporary American hit song "Sweets for My Sweets," by the Drifters) can get. When you make the change, then since structures are concepts, you have concept art. Incidentally, there is another, less important kind of art which when straightened out becomes concept art: art involving play with the concepts of the art such as, in music, "the score," "performer vs. listener," "playing a work." The second criticism of structure art applies, with the necessary changes, to this art.

The second main antecedent of structure art is mathematics. This is the result of my revolution in mathematics, which is written up definitively in the Appendix; here I will only summarize. The revolution occurred first because for reasons of taste I wanted to de-emphasize discovery in mathematics, mathematics as

discovering theorems and proofs. I wasn't good at such discovery, and it bored me. The first way I thought of to de-emphasize discovery came not later than Summer, 1960; it was that since the value of pure mathematics is now regarded as aesthetic rather than cognitive, why not try to make up aesthetic theorems, without considering whether they are true. The second way, which came at about the same time, was to find, as a philosopher, that the conventional claim that theorems and proofs are discovered is wrong, for the same reason I have already given that 'concept' can be discredited. The third way, which came in the fall-winter of 1960, was to work in unexplored regions of formalist mathematics. The resulting mathematics still had statements, theorems, proofs, but the latter weren't discovered in the way they traditionally were. Now exploration of the wider possibilities of mathematics as revolutionized by me tends to lead beyond what it makes sense to call "mathematics"; the category of "mathematics," a vestige of Platonism, is an "unnatural," bad one. My work in mathematics leads to the new category of "concept art," of which straightened out traditional mathematics (mathematics as discovery) is an untypical, small but intensively developed part.

I can now return to the question of why concept art is "art." Why isn't it an absolutely new, or at least a non-artistic, non-aesthetic activity? The answer is that the antecedents of concept art are commonly regarded as artistic, aesthetic activities; on a deeper level, interesting concepts, concepts enjoyable in themselves, especially as they occur in mathematics, are commonly said to "have beauty." By calling my activity "art," therefore, I am simply recognizing this common usage, and the origin of the activity in structure art and mathematics.

However: it is confusing to call things as irrelevant as the emotional enjoyment of (real) music, and the intellectual enjoyment of concepts, the same kind of enjoyment. Since concept art includes almost everything ever said to be "music," at least, which is not music for the emotions, perhaps it would be better to restrict 'art' to apply to art for the emotions, and recognize my activity as an independent, new activity, irrelevant to art (and knowledge).