

# CONCEPTUAL ART

by Wilson Ponseca

# CONCEPTUAL ART

## WHEN IDEAS BECOME THE ARTWORK



Presented By:  
Wilson G. Ponseca

“The idea becomes a machine  
that makes the art.” – Sol LeWitt

# WHAT IS CONCEPTUAL ARTS ?

- The idea or concept is the most important part of the artwork
- Execution is secondary; planning and concept come first
- Can take any form
- Challenges traditional definitions of art
- Emerged as a movement in the 1960s and 1970s

# HOW IT STARTED ?

- Rooted in early 20th century ideas of Marcel Duchamp
- Duchamp's Fountain (1917) challenged what can be called "art"
- Movement formally emerged in late 1950s to 1970s



# HOW IT STARTED ?

- Sol LeWitt emphasized “the idea is the most important part”
- Rejected traditional materials and techniques
- Focused on ideas, messages, and the artist’s intention
- Influenced later artists like Martin Creed, Damien Hirst, and Tracey Emin

# WHAT INSPIRED IT ?

- Reaction against traditional “art as object”
- Influence of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades
- Desire to emphasize ideas over materials

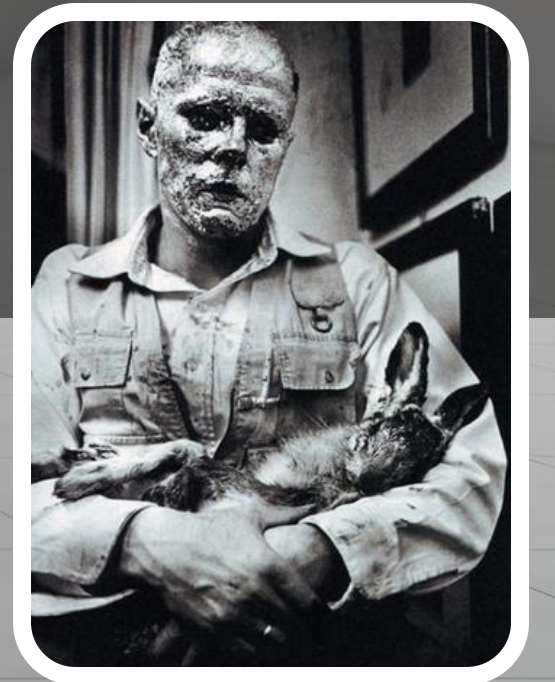
# WHAT INSPIRED IT ?

- Critique of the commercialized art world
- Social and political unrest of the 1960s–70s
- Artists wanted freedom from museums and markets
- Focus on thought, language, and audience interpretation



# CONCEPTUAL ART & SOCIETY

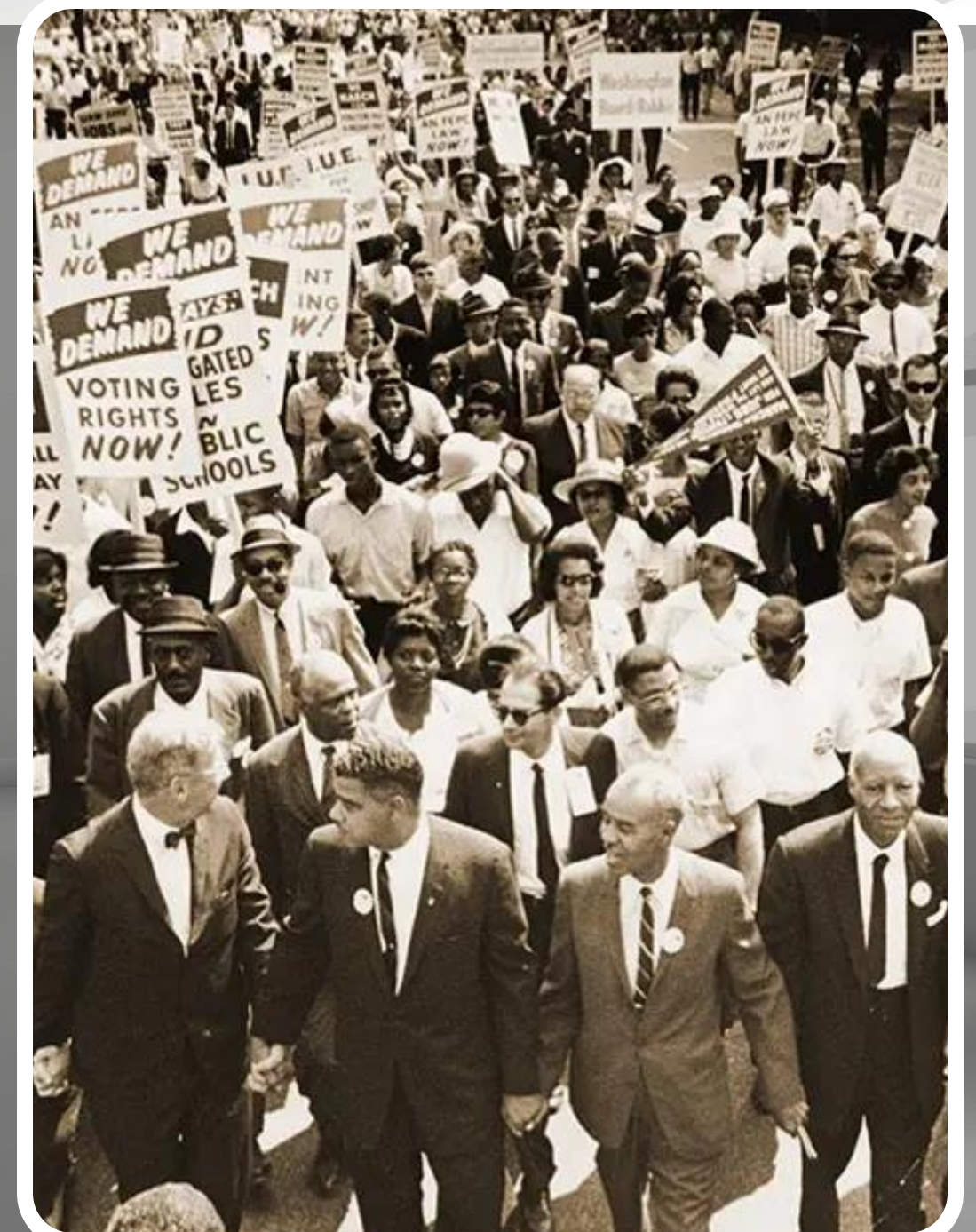
- Reflected social and political change of the 1960s–1970s
- Questioned capitalism and the commercialization of art





# CONCEPTUAL ART & SOCIETY

- Protested war, inequality, and authority
- Social and political unrest of the 1960s–70s
- Promoted freedom, thought, and participation
- “Everyone is an artist.” – Joseph Beuys
- Brought art closer to everyday life





# ICONS OF CONCEPTUAL ART

- Marcel Duchamp – Fountain (1917) Father of conceptual thinking in art
- Sol LeWitt – Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967), “The idea is the machine that makes the art.”
- Joseph Kosuth – One and Three Chairs (1965) Explores meaning, language, and representation



I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as conceptual art. 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. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally accessible to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become immediately clear. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is not to have the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to conventional art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving the art.

Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be crossed. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lead the viewer into the belief that he understands the work, or to enter a paradoxical situation (such as logic vs. illogic). The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are hopelessly simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable. In terms of ideas the artist is free to even surprise himself. Ideas are discovered by intuition.

When one uses a concept in conceptual art, the concept may be changed in the process of execution.

What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned. Once given physical reality by the artist the work is open to the perception of all, including the artist. I use the word "perception" to mean the apprehension of the sense data, the objective understanding of the idea and simultaneously a subjective interpretation of both. The work of art can only be perceived after it is completed.

Art that is meant for the sensation of the eye primarily would be called perceptual rather than conceptual. This would include most optical, kinetic, light and color art.

Since the functions of conception and perception are contradictory one pre-, the other post-, the artist would integrate his idea by applying subjective judgment to it if the artist wishes to explore his idea thoroughly. Then arbitrary or chance decisions would be left to a minimum, while caprice, taste and other whimsies would be eliminated from the making of the art. The work does not necessarily have to be rejected if it does not look well. Sometimes what is initially thought to be awkward will eventually be visually pleasing.

To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also shows the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work. Some plans would require millions of variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other plans might be infinite. In each case however, the artist would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible. That is the reason for using the method.

When an artist uses a multiple modular method he usually chooses a simple and readily available form. The form itself is of very limited importance; it becomes the grammar for the total work. In fact it is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work. Using complex basic forms only disrupts the unity of the whole. Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form. This arrangement becomes the end while the form becomes the means.

Conceptual art doesn't really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy or any other mental discipline. The mathematics used by most artists is simple arithmetic or simple number systems. The philosophy of the work is implicit in the work and is not an illustration of any system of philosophy.

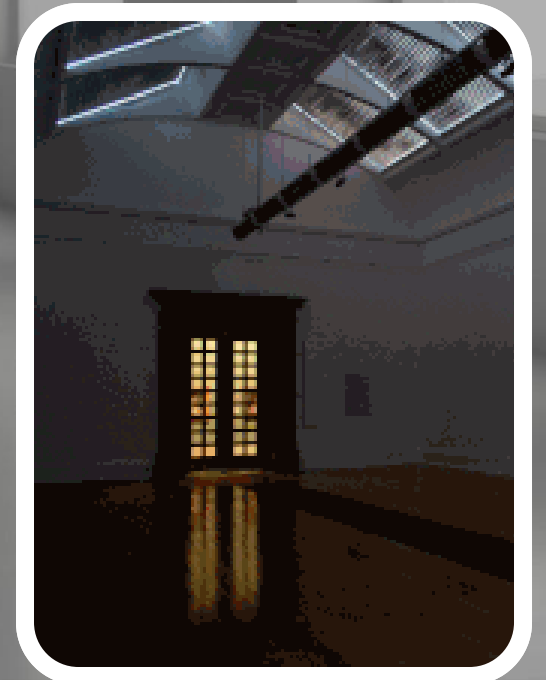
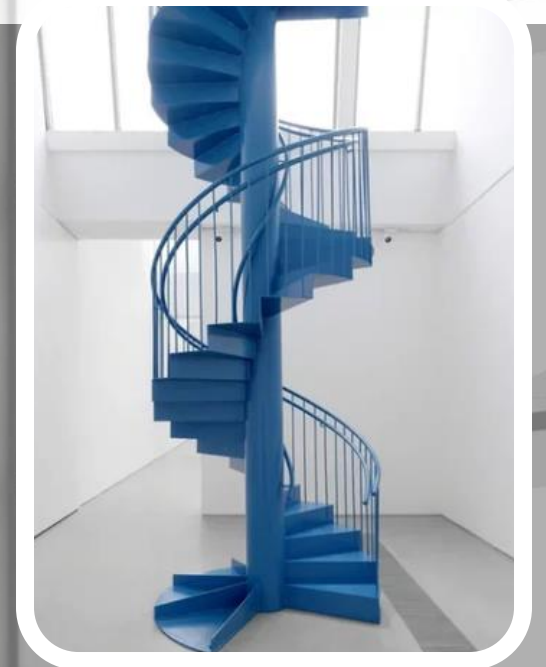
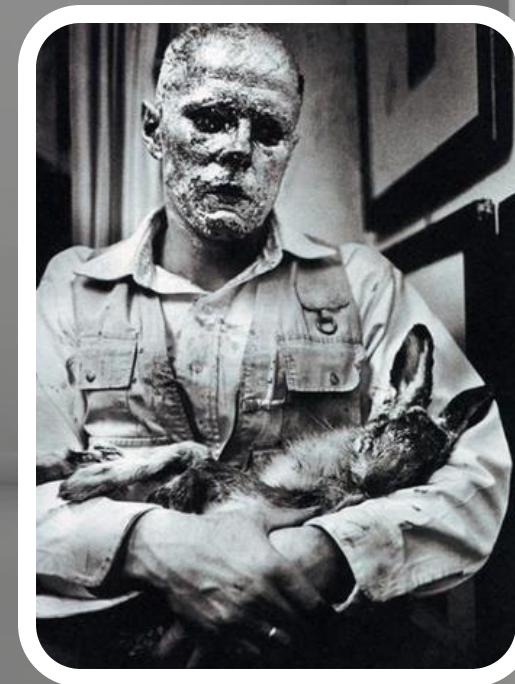
It doesn't really matter if the viewer understands the concept of the artist by seeing the art. Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.

Recently there has been much written about minimal art, but I have not discovered anyone who admits to doing this kind of thing. There are other art forms around called primary structures, reductive, objective, cool, and minimal. No artist I know will own up to any of these either. Therefore I conclude that it is part of a secret language that art critics use when communicating with each other through the medium of art magazines. Minimal art is best because it reminds one of minimalist and long-legged girls. It must refer to very small works of art. This is a very good idea. Perhaps "mini art." There could be sent around the country in mailboxes. Or maybe the mini-art is a very small person, say under four feet tall. If so, much good work will be found in the primary schools (primary school primary structures).



# ICONS OF CONCEPTUAL ART

- Joseph Beuys – Social Sculpture concept Believed creativity could transform society
- Yoko Ono – Instruction Pieces (1960s) Used participation and imagination as art
- Martin Creed – Work No. 227: The lights going on and off (2000) Modern conceptual art example questioning perception









# FORMS & MEDIA

- Installation and Spatial Art – Transforming spaces to express ideas
- Readymades and Found Objects – Everyday items redefined as art
- Instructional and Participatory Works – Viewers become part of the piece



PAINTING TO SEE THE SKIES

Drill two holes into a canvas.  
Hang it where you can see the sky.

(Change the place of hanging.  
Try both the front and the rear  
windows, to see if the skies are  
different.)

1961 summer

# CRITIQUES

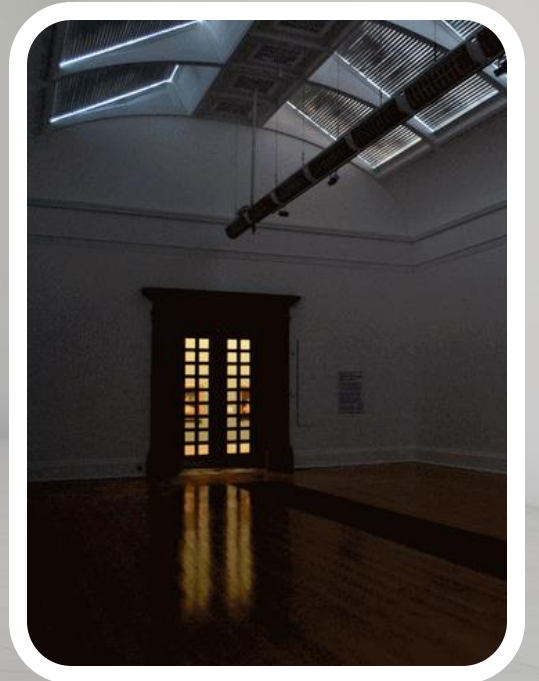
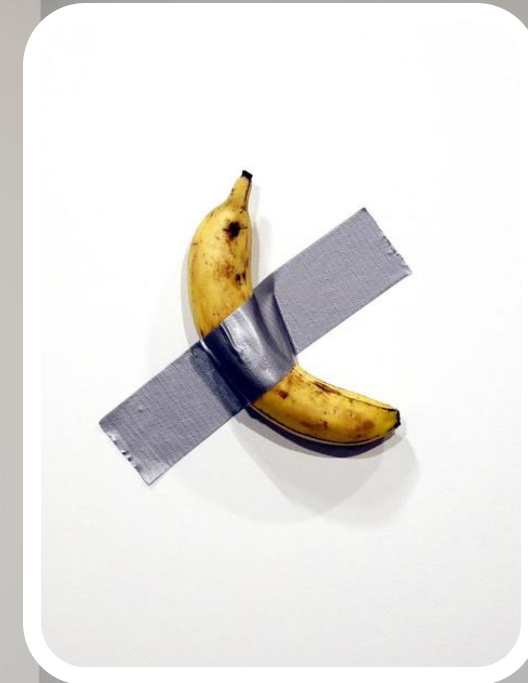
“It’s too intellectual.”

“Anyone can do that.”

“That’s not art!”

“It’s overpriced!”

“It’s confusing.”



THANKS FOR  
WATCHING



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