

# Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979

12 April – 29 August 2016

## New Frameworks Large Print Guide



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## Introduction

## Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979

This exhibition spotlights a key development that fundamentally changed the nature of art. Conceptual art proposed an art where the idea or concept was placed above the work's material form (which might be ephemeral), realising Marcel Duchamp's dictum of putting 'art at the service of the mind'. The shift in focus from an art object to ideas about art became a critical and analytical act, exploring both the nature of art itself and its context and role in the world as art. Conceptual art was a set of strategies for making art, which still has an effect on many artists working today.

The exhibition spans a period of social and cultural changes, both nationally and internationally, here identified by the election of Harold Wilson's first Labour government in 1964 and the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in 1979. Conceptual art's idealism was for an art that might reconnect with the world and act within it, and this exhibition follows a number of routes from the realities of the artwork to the realities of the world and an engagement with the conditions of society that became more visible by the end of the decade.

# New Frameworks

In the mid-1960s fixed definitions for art and the relative roles of the artist and audience, were all being challenged. Was art something rarefied, afforded a privileged position and so set apart from the world, or was it something that acted within the world?

At this time modernism held sway, but its forms and definitions were increasingly contested. Young artists, frustrated by current teaching in art schools, employed a range of strategies to challenge the dominance of modernist sculpture and painting as defined by Clement Greenberg in his influential book *Art and Culture* 1961. Unlike modernist art's fixed compositions and separation from external reference, works by these artists were propositional, and used unstable materials. Artworks were ordered, not by space or volume, but by time. Placing and context for the artwork were seen as key issues for some artists. The art object was to be seen not as separated from a given environment or a wider society, but as a model or even a trigger for social and political engagement.

The critical responses to modernist art that can be recognised in conceptual art broadly followed two paths, in terms of a dissolution of sculptural form, or an introduction of textual language into painting. Reading rather than looking suggested a new form of self-criticism for art.

Wall labels

Clockwise from right of wall text

Barry Flanagan 1941–2009

**ringn '66**

1966

Sand

An attention to creative and material process underscored much of Flanagan's activity while a student at St Martin's School of Art (1964–1966). His questioning of material properties and processes led him to use impermanent and unconventional materials, such as the builder's sand used here. This destabilised modernist principles in two key ways: 1) use of time or duration directly opposed the notion of a unitary presence for sculpture 2) the process of change over time challenged the orthodox concern with sculpture's rigid constructed materiality. For Flanagan, the grounding for his work was the workshop rather than the artist's studio, and the sand here is redolent of the building site or the bronze foundry.

Tate. Purchased 2010. T13295

Hamish Fulton born 1946

**Hitchhiking Times from London to  
Andorra and from Andorra to London,  
9–15 April 1967**

1967

2 photographs, gelatin silver print  
on paper and typed text on paper

This work structures Fulton's journey as a sequence of dates, times and places (starting and drop-off points). His presentation of factual data to document and reflect on the trip demands an engagement from the viewer far removed from the act of looking that a modernist sculpture would command. Apart from this data and two photographs, the work points to an experience that is otherwise absent for the viewer. It describes a direct and particular engagement with the world, yet all that is offered is a bare summary of that activity. The viewer is left with their own imagination and experiences to expand on what this data may point to.

The artist, courtesy Maureen Paley, London. X59342

Richard Long born 1945

## **Turf Circle**

1966

Photograph, gelatin silver print  
on paper and graphite on board

**Turf Circle** was made just before Long started attending St Martin's School of Art, and like **A Line Made by Walking** and **England** (displayed nearby) it shows him using a geometric figure as the graphic basis for his work. The circle, the line, the cross and the square are all rational, yet arbitrary, shapes. Their symmetrical, non-compositional, diagrammatic character was anathema to an understanding of a modernist compositional syntax that valued a quality of presence over process.

Tate. Purchased 1976. P07148

Richard Long born 1945

**A Line Made by Walking**

1967

Photograph, gelatin silver print  
on paper and graphite on board

**A Line Made by Walking** is the first work that Richard Long made by walking. He walked across a field backwards and forwards through the grass until the path was visible as a single straight line. The photograph marks both presence and action, described further by the title inscribed beneath it stipulating the place and date – 'England 1967'. The photograph in this and other works of this period by Long, does not simply document an action but is inseparable from its conception as sculpture that is also a pictorial and indexical image.

Tate. Purchased 1976. P07149

Richard Long born 1945

**England 1968**

1968

Photograph, gelatin silver print  
on paper and graphite on board

Tate. Purchased 1976. P07151

Keith Arnatt 1930–2008

**Invisible Hole Revealed by the Shadow of the Artist**

1968

Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

This work was a result of Arnatt's thinking 'how visual does visual art have to be?'. This entailed not only a concern with disappearance or invisibility but also a concentration on a work's context or siting so that the two would be indivisible. By contrast, modernist sculpture was held to be categorically different from its surroundings. Arnatt dug a cube-shaped hole in the ground and lined the sides with mirrors, placing a square of turf on the base of the pit. The hole's presence was only revealed when a viewer – here the artist – cast their shadow over it. Many of Arnatt's contemporaries also used geometric shapes as a way to counter the modernist ideal of compositional syntax.

Tate. Transferred from Tate Archive 2010. P13145

Bob Law 1934–2004

**No. 62 (Black/Blue/Violet/Blue)**

1967

Acrylic paint on canvas

In 1972 Bob Law wrote about his painting that 'The nature of my work can be viewed as the last of complete unit picture making in western culture easel painting ... So much so that one is no longer looking at paint but one is forced to be aware of an idea of a painting idea, at this point one has entered in conceptual art and my work is the transition from pictures on the wall to conceptual art in the head.'

This painting is the result of a considered process to achieve a black painting from nine or ten evenly applied coats of paint using the colours given in the title. It is from a series that Law painted through the 1960s – each painting being the same size, 66 by 69 inches, which he observed to be 'the size of a man with his arms outstretched, large enough to be peripheral when viewed'.

Tate. Purchased 1976. T02092

Art & Language

(Michael Baldwin born 1945)

**Untitled Painting**

1965

Mirror on canvas

Over an unpainted stretched canvas, Baldwin has applied a glass mirror sheet the same size, held in place by clips. The viewer looks at a reflection of the environment around the painting, not the material surface of the mirror itself. The blank mirror becomes pictorial and so dislocates modernist ideas of perception, which would be directed at the painting itself and not at incident external to it. The movement of the viewer looking at the reflections in the mirror introduces elements both of time and participation into the experiencing of a painting.

Tate. Presented by Tate Patrons 2007. T12331

Art & Language

(Mel Ramsden born 1944)

## **Two Black Squares**

1965

Enamel paint on wood

Paintings by Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin from this period use parody and critique to engage with the conditions of modernism as set out by the American critic Clement Greenberg. Although the extreme abstraction and perceptual flatness in this work chime with modernist values at their furthest extent, its materials – enamel paint on hardboard – present a degree of everyday fact and object-hood that oil paint on canvas would not have. Later paintings of this subject by Ramsden are titled **The Paradoxes of Absolute Zero** to both mimic and ridicule the emptying out necessary to achieve a modernist purity.

Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Nicholas  
Themans Trust 2013. T13893

Art & Language

(Terry Atkinson born 1939, Michael Baldwin born 1945)

**Painting / Sculpture**

1966–7

Alkyd paint on Masonite

The text on **Painting / Sculpture** suggests that the object cannot be judged by its material properties. The categories of 'painting' and 'sculpture' are being proposed as interchangeable, otherwise the naming of one panel as painting would cancel out the other's identity as sculpture. The immediate provocation to the viewer lies not in the disjunction between looking at an object and reading what is written on it, but in the realisation that the text is perhaps of primary interest. This rejects the traditional activities of looking at and then responding to a modernist painting aesthetically.

Courtesy Mulier Mulier Gallery, Knokke-Zoute, Belgium.

X56067

Stephen Willats born 1943

## **The Random Event**

1961

Carbon copy, typed text on paper

This is one of a small number of manifesto texts that Willats wrote between 1961 and 1962. Willats examines the types of interaction that could be set in process between artist, environment, object and viewer. With this text Willats observes the degree to which these relationships can be understood as sets of 'random variables'. This echoes his experiences while a student on the Groundcourse at Ealing College of Art, which was based on 'cybernetic' principles (the study of networks of dynamic relationships). Willats's work was also informed by his awareness of information theory, cognitive psychology, systems analysis, semiotics and behavioural science.

From the archive of the artist. X60113

Stephen Willats born 1943

**Homeostat Drawing No.1**

1969

Graphite on paper

In this freehand grid of squares linked by arrows, Willats has adapted the cybernetic idea of the 'homeostat' (a system which remains in flux but in which conditions are regulated and stable) to model a view of society that is self-organising and without boundaries. The drawing is not a modernist grid indicating a linear flow of information, but one that represents multi-layered, democratic and textured flows of interaction. The arrows indicate transmission, reception, feedback and behavioural response, while the regularity of the grid demonstrates a system that is self-regulating and in search of equilibrium. Willats took the idea of the homeostat from the writings of William Ross Ashby.

From the archive of the artist. X58629

Bruce McLean born 1944

## **Six Sculptures**

1967–8

6 photographs, gelatin silver print  
on paper, typewritten caption on card

The sculptures that made up **Six Sculptures** stood as a challenge to the permanence and material solidity represented by modernist sculpture, such as that by Anthony Caro. By contrast McLean's sculptures were formed from natural materials and were returned to the environment. For instance, **Floataway Sculpture** was broken up by the action of the water currents. These works were transitory in physical form, measured as event and governed by natural processes. The photographs constitute the only record of their existence.

Tate. Purchased 1973. T01740

Roelof Louw born 1936

**Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges)**

1967

Oranges, wood, plastic

**Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges)** is an example of a sculpture made using organic unstable materials, and ordered by time, rather than a fixed spatial or volumetric composition. Oranges are arranged in a regular pyramid but this geometry is then disrupted by the act of viewer participation when the fruit is taken and eaten. Louw explained: 'By taking an orange each person changes the molecular form of the stack of oranges and participates in "consuming" its presence. (The full implications of this action are left to the imagination.)'

Tate. Presented by Tate Patrons 2013. T13881

Installation views of

**Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges)**

at the Arts Lab, London 1967

You are welcome to take an orange from the top of the stack but please do not eat it in the galleries.

## Showcase labels

Clement Greenberg's book **Art and Culture** was published in 1961. It defined modernist painting and sculpture as a medium-specific, reductive and essentialist practice validated by aesthetic judgement. The modernism described by Greenberg directly defined the character of Anthony Caro's work and that of many of his students and peers.

John Latham's work was known for the destruction and parody of systems of knowledge. In August 1966 while teaching part time at St Martin's School of Art he withdrew Greenberg's book from the school library. He then organised a party at which his guests chewed and spat out pages from the book.

The documents in this case describe the act of distillation and what happened when the library recalled the loan in 1967 as a painting student was 'in urgent need of Art and Culture'. Latham returned the remains as a phial of fermented, distilled liquid. Shortly afterwards Latham received a letter from the art school informing him that his contract would not be renewed for the following academic year. The phial was returned to Latham. In 1969 he gathered documents and objects together and exhibited them in an attaché case. This entered the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York not long afterwards.

1

Letter from John Latham to Norbert Lynton  
5 July 1967

Tate Archive TGA 200819. Z05475–7

2

John Latham

**Least event, one second drawings,  
blind work, 24 second painting**

**Statement on Art and Culture**

Exhibition catalogue, Lisson Gallery, London 1970

Tate Library. Z05473

3

John Latham

**Art and Culture 1966–9**

1969

Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Courtesy John Latham Foundation. Z05939

