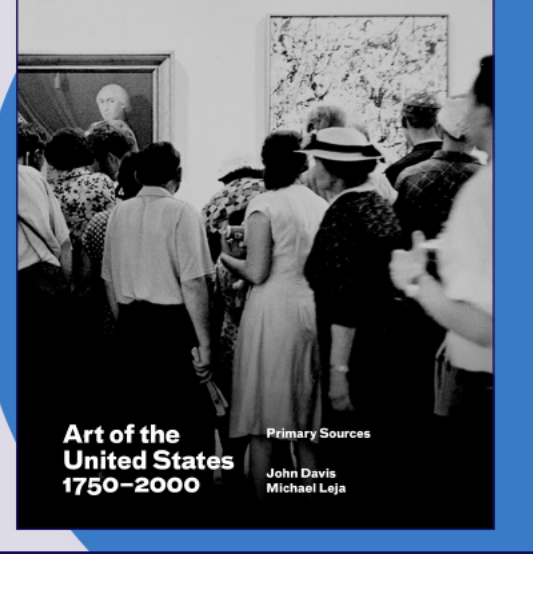


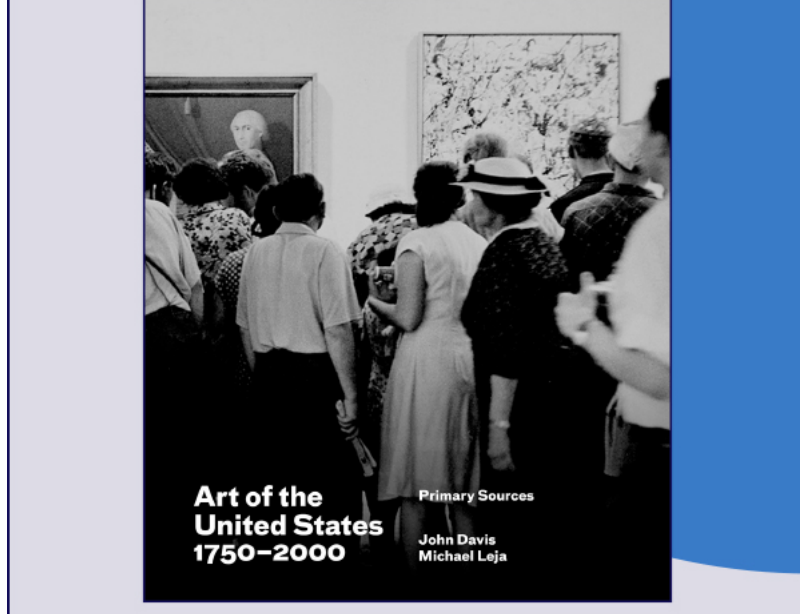
Art of the United States, 1750–2000

John Davis and Michael Leja
 Edited by Francesca Rose

"An affordable and well-organized anthology."—*Art Libraries Society of North America*



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Rosalind Krauss

A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition

London: Thames and Hudson, 1999. 64 pp.; 45 color ills. Paper \$16.95 (0500282072)

Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds.

Rewriting Conceptual Art

London: Reaktion Books, 1999. 264 pp.; some b/w ills. Paper \$24.95 (1861890524)

Anne Rorimer

New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality

London: Thames and Hudson, 2000. 320 pp.; 280 b/w ills. \$50.00 (0500237824)

Claudia Mesch

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The current explosion of critical and art-historical writing on "Conceptual Art," like the discursive production of "postmodernism" of the 1980s and early 1990s that preceded it, posits that the art production of a particular group of artists, by means of critical attack and strategic engagement, extended the development of visual modernism into what has been termed a "critical postmodernism" of the late twentieth century. Therefore, we are at this moment witnesses to the slow process of canonization that often characterizes the discourse of art history. It comes chronologically on the heels of American and European exhibitions that have attempted to encapsulate Conceptual art. It is clear that the "postmodern," a term which can compete with "Conceptual art" in the expansive flabbiness of its content, is also being historicized in this process and is finding a home within Conceptual art—in fact, in some cases, is being subsumed by it.

Even as a discourse under construction, Conceptual art describes one of the most significant moments of art production of the past century because it most effectively questioned the fundamental classifications that have come to generate meaning within modern art, such as that of artistic medium, as well as basic categories of knowledge in place since the Enlightenment. Many Conceptual artists delineated discursive production as the scope of their art practice; their art therefore refused traditional assumptions about the ontology of art because it nullified the boundary between the production of an object and the production of critical reception. Such a nullification collapsed the distinctive areas of intellectual specialization that had formed the bedrock of the dealer/critic system since the nineteenth century and that had helped make Clement Greenberg, a formalist nemesis for many Conceptual artists, the most powerful critic and theorist of mid-twentieth-century modernism. At least in theory, this removal of boundaries also reconfigured modernity's strict separation of the epistemological spheres of art, science, and morality. The move of art into the discursive posed problems for the discipline of art history that are still being sorted out. One problem was the resistance of much of this artwork and its original authors to the disciplining activity of art history as carried out by critical art historians.¹ Another was how to talk meaningfully about "dematerialized" artwork that appeared to carry reductionism to its logical conclusion, that is, the production of no art object and the use of no medium at all.

Three recent titles propose differing topographies and assessments of Conceptual art: Anne Rorimer's *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*; *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, an anthology edited by Jon Bird and Michael Newman; and a short but packed essay by Rosalind Krauss published as a book, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. Of all these publications, Rorimer's is the best introduction to the artworks that have become associated with Euro-American Conceptual art. The other volumes assume the reader's familiarity with the major figures and groups and their writings, and even with earlier historical and critical accounts of Conceptual art, such as those by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh or Charles Harrison, the official spokesman for the British Art & Language collective (See Harrison's *Essays on Art & Language* [Cambridge, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1991]).

Rorimer's survey-like introduction to major works and figures, which of necessity is also an introduction to the major critical and pictorial strategies she uses to form her definition of the scope of activity of Conceptual art, operates on the fundamental assumption shared by Krauss: that Conceptual art continues to engage with aspects of medium, a central concern of high modernism that Greenberg helped set in place. Where Krauss contextualizes this ongoing concern with medium within what she terms the "post-medium condition" of a spectacle culture formed by television, Rorimer understands a consistent "critique of the stationary, self-sufficient, material object" (9) in Conceptual art that retains the modernist notion of autonomy and its primary concern with medium. For Rorimer, medium engages necessarily with the visual, the physical, and with what she identifies as "the replacement of sculptural three-dimensionality with 'non-sculptural' methods of representation" (9). Conceptual art cannot be "dematerialized" as Lucy Lippard claimed; Rorimer states in her preface, "This book is predicated on the idea that visual form and mental formulation are inextricably linked" (9). She thereby adheres to a notion of Conceptual art that Peter Osborne, in his contribution to *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy," has termed "inclusive." This ambivalent view toward the physical object, first articulated in the critical writing of the artist Sol LeWitt, simultaneously devalues and emphasizes the physicality, the object aspect, of the artwork within the mental process of art making but underscores the process of physical realization as a kind of psychological expression of idea. The idea behind idea art, for LeWitt, results in an "infinite plurality of media" rather than in a process of thinking about the idea (54–56). LeWitt ties the idea or concept behind Conceptual art to a modernist conception of self-reflexivity, a self-consciousness or self-criticism outlined by Immanuel Kant, which LeWitt brings to bear on definitions of medium.

LeWitt's pluralistic notion of medium lends itself to the broad scope of the survey genre. The categories of painting and not-sculpture Rorimer sets up are open-ended enough for her to address a wide range of medium-critical artistic production. In a well-known essay of the 1980s, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Krauss had similarly expanded categories for the artistic medium of sculpture by applying what she called the "structuralist mathematics" of the Klein group in order to construct and diagram further categories for sculpture according to formalist logic (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985]). Rorimer's less restrictive model of mediums aligned with Conceptual art allows more permeability of definition yet is less elaborated than Krauss's earlier analysis of the expansion of the medium of sculpture.

Rorimer begins her survey by summarizing earlier developments and directions in postwar art in an introduction. Her first chapter focuses on Conceptual artworks that critique the medium of painting; the remaining chapters outline explorations of "'non-sculptural' methods of representation" that Conceptual art has undertaken: in the use of language as primary medium; in the turn to photography unsubsidiaried to painting or sculpture and distinct from traditions of fine-art photography; in the application of organizational systems or schemata, such as numerical or permutational sequences, as a means of generating a visual result; in the thematic focus on the "onlooker's" presence and the action of looking within aesthetic experience; and in installations that consider and critique the institutional frameworks which usually disseminate art. Rorimer requires that Conceptual art's critical engagement with medium carry over to the artist's role within the process of artistic production: The work itself must evidence a suppression of "authorial presence and subjectivity".

The exhibitions Rorimer has organized beginning in the 1970s at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art have established the reputations of several European artists in the United States, particularly Gerhard Richter, Marcel Broodthaers, and Daniel Buren. In *New Art in the 60s and 70s*, she further introduces important work from Italy associated with Arte Povera by artists such as Giovanni Anselmo and Giulio Paolini and other European work by Roman Opalka, Blinky Palermo, Jan Dibbets, Stanley Brouwn, and Lothar Baumgarten. Her narrative also discusses the work of American Conceptual artists originally aligned with the Seth Sieglaub Gallery who have become the best-known practitioners of this critical direction in art: Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, and Robert Barry. To Rorimer's credit, she includes lesser-known figures from both sides of the Atlantic: She examines the fascinating work of more obscure figures such as Maria Nordman, Ian Wilson, Robert Huot, and Christine Koslov. In reading her book, one can't help but note the irony of the fact that certain artworks, which the artist initially rendered inconspicuous by displaying them in non-art surroundings, such as the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* (Dan Graham) or the sidewalks of New York (Stephen Kaltenbach), in the medium of the book are elevated and homogenized into the succession of image/text relations that comprise the art-history survey book. Interestingly, one artist stages a stand-off with photographic reproduction; the almost total absence of visual referents in Rorimer's description of Brouwn's work is striking. Here is an instance where Conceptual art insists on its modesty and its distance from the reproducing machinery of the discipline or institution of art history.

I would challenge Rorimer's demarcation of a strict boundary between the activities of Performance art and those of a medium- or object-oriented Conceptual art; this boundary is more difficult to delineate than she admits. Her view of Performance art as not Conceptual relates to her marginalizing reading of another direction in Conceptual-art production, namely, the reaction against an object-oriented Conceptual art by artists who have been described variously as "analytic," "strong," or "exclusive," such as the Art & Language collective or Joseph Kosuth. Rorimer reads this direction of Conceptual art production as though it too was primarily occupied with the object rather than with the discursive production of something that approached analytic philosophy. While Rorimer might be able to speak to Kosuth's ambiguous art that in practice privileged both discursive and object production, she cannot accurately account for the stricter scope of production of the early Art & Language. This may explain why she did not include in her narrative the "exclusive" Conceptual artist Bernar Venet, who presented in the gallery contemporary research in astrophysics and mathematical logic among other topics, and declared, "I did not present Mathematics as Art; but Mathematics as Mathematics," (as quoted in Ursula Meyer's *Conceptual Art* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972, 212]).

Rorimer sets two categories in opposition to characterize Conceptual art, that is, "idea and object" (Conceptual art) versus "not idea and object" (meaning not Conceptual art, but traditional painting and sculpture). Krauss's practice of the "logical expansion" of categories of art by means of formal logic might be of use here in order to think about the "strict" direction of Conceptual art that is not object-oriented. I could then construct my own Klein-group diagram to map the following expansions to Rorimer's category of Conceptual art: 1) "idea but not object"; and 2) a final category, "not idea, not object." The latter might refer to art that is something like a pure window onto the real which leaves no object and no sign of mediation of that reality, the possibility of which is doubtful. I would include the exclusive strain of Conceptual art Venet and Art & Language pursued under the first expansion, "idea but not object," a category of Conceptual art that does not exist in Rorimer's model.

I would also classify much of Performance art under the "idea but not object" category. This of course raises the possibility that Performance art is also critically concerned with questions of its own "medium," an issue that has emerged in connection with body art and with performance having to do with ritual structure. Rorimer claims that the performance-oriented activities of Fluxus had completely eliminated the object from art practice and that Fluxus did not share Conceptual art's critical stance toward illusionism. In this she ignores Fluxus publishing projects that arguably opened the way to the publishing-focused activity of some Conceptual artists and their production of multiples, a new medium it took up from the Swiss Fluxus-sympathizer Daniel Spoerri. The multiple posed fundamental challenges to the gallery institution as the privileged site for the dissemination of art; Conceptual art continued but did not initiate this line of critical attack. Rorimer also ignores an important precedent for Conceptual art in the early décollage performances by Wolf Vostell, such as *Cityrama* of 1961, which deployed photography within the framework of performance to examine the inherent opacity of the documentary photograph as a window onto physical reality. A second weakness of Rorimer's narrative is its privileging of the critical writings of artists and its disinterest in how art history has approached these same questions; for example, the chapter on the centrality of spectatorship to Conceptual art fails to cite Michael Fried's first delineation of this break with formalist modernism in his essay "Art and Objecthood" of 1967. The boundary between Minimalist art and Conceptual art is also more difficult to negotiate than this text would indicate. In other words, work remains to be done on these questions.

Some of the contributions to Newman and Bird's *Rewriting Conceptual Art* begin to do this work. In the wake of the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* at New York's Queens Museum of Art in 1999, critics and scholars have begun to shift their focus to Conceptual art produced outside the West, from China to Africa to Brazil. Essays in this volume by Alexander Alberro and Desa Philippi raise the importance of sociohistorical context for Conceptual art practices in Latin America and Eastern Europe, respectively. An essay on Conceptual art's engagement with utopian feminism by Helen Molesworth contests Buchloh's famous claim that Conceptual art never shared any of the sociopolitical ambitions of the historical avant-garde; Peter Osborne considers the ramifications of "the exclusive" Conceptual art's attempt to ditch the object, the visual, and finally the aesthetic. Unfortunately, the editors seem to veer toward another radically expansive, or even outright totalizing, notion of Conceptual art as a "movement" in the introduction to this collection. They chart three historical phases or generations of development, which culminate in the ascendance of Conceptual art to a position of "market triumph": the first phase of the early Seth Sieglaub exhibitions and the initial publication of key artists' essays on Conceptual art; the "second generation" of artists such as Barbara Kruger and Martha Rosler, who continued their critique of representation; and in the 1990s work in film, video, and installation that continues the tradition but with a new emphasis on identity. Issues of identity would seem to be in contradiction with Conceptual art's complete aversion to subjectivity. Nevertheless, the editors fold aspects of postmodernism into Conceptual art in order to construct a smooth teleology of art after 1965 or so, which seems entirely too leveling and celebratory for the specified picture of Conceptual art asserted by the rest of the volume.

In her book, Krauss takes the reverse course and presents an art-critical circling of the wagons against a kind of art rooted in Conceptual art practices but that has in her view become fashionably vacuous, a shibboleth—"installation art." *A Voyage on the North Sea* (the title is taken from the 1973 film by Marcel Broodthaers) is an extended consideration of medium as the "idea" others have uncovered at work behind "idea art" or Conceptual art but that could easily refer to visual modernism more generally. Krauss reflects that the notion of the specificity of medium as a foundation of the modern was shaken by Broodthaers's practice and by the introduction of video technology in the 1960s. She anchors her historical narrative in the writing of Greenberg and Fried (in the latter's reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and in paintings by Jackson Pollock and Color Field painters, the sculptures of Richard Serra, and the structuralist films of Michael Snow, all of which registered a "new idea of aesthetic medium" in new artistic conventions of opticality, which Krauss describes as foregrounding a "phenomenological vector" in art that connects an object to a viewing subject. She forwards the notion that the construction of physical structure, even within the making of film, is constitutive of modern art: "For, in order to sustain artistic practice, a medium must be a supporting structure, generative of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their subject, will be wholly 'specific' to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity" (26). But in Krauss's narrative, by the late 1960s video and television were rendering film obsolete; Broodthaers's Musée d'Art Moderne signalled a loss of confidence in medium in retreating the readymade to embrace the entirety of commercial dross. In so doing Broodthaers further registered the classifying and collecting functions of the museum as a practice heading toward obsolescence. Meanwhile, the museum was also being thoroughly absorbed by the markets and industries of culture under late capitalism.

Krauss, however, sees a rescue of medium and of art in the form of Broodthaers's theory of language as fiction, which she connects to Walter Benjamin's notion of the wish-image. Other scholars, such as Maria Kreutzer, have outlined Broodthaers's complex notion of art, which he viewed as beginning within the sphere of writing. The fiction he constructed as books, as films, and as the fiction that was his hypothetical *musée* was always to be in total conflict with reality and with a lived world of social and political distance. It has been argued that for Broodthaers fiction or art can be made productive in its critical distance from the world, in its refusal to accept things as they stand. Krauss tells us that Broodthaers's fictions in fact present an allegory of medium-specificity in a "self-differing" manner that cannot be reduced to merely its physical support.

Whether we can buy her view that fiction, along with film, is already on the scrap heap of history is another matter. But in this argument Krauss snatches the notion of medium from the abyss of obsolescence and retains it as a critically productive field within both art history and within Conceptual art practice, presumably in the work of recent artists who have also accepted her, such as James Coleman and William Kentridge. She does not elaborate on what comprises the artlessness of the "problematic aftermath" of installation art after Broodthaers. For me this declaration evokes a déjà vu moment. It repeats not only Fried's earlier stand against Minimalism but also Rorimer's against Performance art. It could be that a fundamental challenge is currently being mounted to our still-forming understanding of what Conceptual art is. But that is another story.

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¹ For example, the sharp exchange that took place between the artist Joseph Kosuth and art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in the journal *October* after the publication of Buchloh's important first history of Conceptual art, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions" (*October* 55 [Winter 1990]: 105–143). Buchloh remains the most sophisticated theorist of the avant-garde in the discipline and is unique among historians of Conceptual art in his acknowledgement of the critique of positivist rationality initiated by the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault. Accordingly he problematizes Conceptual art's uncritical celebration of analytic philosophy.

² Maria Kreutzer, "Plastic Force and the Sphere of Writing: Considerations on the Interpretation of Art by Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers," in *Punkt de confluência* (1988): 169ff.



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