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**Aesthetics of Conceptual art: the  
Disappearing Artwork**

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**Introduction**

In this essay the term disappearance should be utilized literally: it should be made clear that this term is used to describe the phenomenon when an artwork is being partly or fully deprived of its material qualities, especially those that offer visual experience to the audience. To explore this phenomenon I will respond to the tradition of conceptual art, in the broader sense of the word tradition, of course. It will comprise artistic strategies which have been employed from 1960s onwards. I am aware of the difficulty to define the term “conceptual” as this notion is lacking a strict content and sometimes can be applied rather ambiguously. Nonetheless, I suggest relying on this uncertainty for the time being and, in the end, the objective of this essay is not to clarify the meaning of certain words.

Instead, I would like to investigate the conditions of the possibility of existence of a disappearing artwork (or an artwork already disappeared if it ever existed). This includes studying some underlying suppositions and trying to grasp the effect of the practice. I will also mention some artworks that, in my opinion, are significant to illustrate and understand the problem.

I will also contemplate on the role of the art context which is crucial for understanding conceptual art and I will explore the way vanishing artworks introduce literary strategies into the domain of what we call visual arts. After having realized the scope and the main characteristics of the practice it will become possible, I believe, to challenge or alter several traditional aesthetic concepts (like, the notion of “aesthetic experience” and “aesthetic autonomy”) by indicating that the vocabulary we use to describe art sometimes fails to grasp its contemporary expressions which is the reason why it has to be reviewed.

**An Outline of the Dematerialization of Art**

Though it is not unthinkable, still it seems rather uncommon or bizarre to agree that an art work equals to absence of its material qualities or, if we do not want to be very extreme, the absence can be viewed as a tendency of an artwork, for instance, an inclination to crumble, bleach out, to be eaten up, to be purposefully destroyed, in other words, to decay in various ways. The spoils that appear due to bad weather or transportation conditions are not relevant since now it is important to focus on the disruption planned by artists themselves, though sometimes the art work is purposefully made so fragile that it is most likely to break down, like, for instance, a canvas with eggshells attached to it by Marcel Broodthaers that broke apart when transporting the work from one venue to another. The techniques artists, including Broodthaers, choose tell us something about the

standards of art and notions employed not only by artists but by wider audience in general. This is the reason why this topic is interesting.

The approach to art manifested by conceptualism provides us with a significant hint that makes it possible to realize the phenomenon of a disappearing artwork. To provide a quick sketch of this approach one can refer to the term of dematerialization employed by art critique Lucy Lippard<sup>1</sup> as a crucial feature to describe conceptual art. Dematerialization takes place as a result of the emphasis on the "idea" of an art work that overshadows the material realization of it and sometimes can lead to a total disappearance.

A well known articulation of the term "conceptual art" was done by Sol LeWitt in his text "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", first published in *Artforum* in 1967. This publication provided the first public grounds for recognition of the movement although several conceptual art works had been made since the early 1960s. In the "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" and "Sentences on Conceptual Art" that appeared two years later LeWitt characterizes the phenomenon of conceptual art and gives the artist and the viewer some instructions though, as he claims, his intention is not to say that only conceptual art is worth our attention. It is there that the famous sentence of him (which is often cited in art books) can be found, namely, that "what the work of art looks like is not too important"<sup>2</sup>. LeWitt grounds his interest in the idea of the art work and explains the way it is linked to the execution of the work which is, according to him, "a perfunctory affair"<sup>3</sup>. LeWitt claims that the idea is the very "machine" that makes art and that the initial stage of art making is to make one's mind clear about the results one wants to achieve. These ideas do not necessary have to be sophisticated or philosophical; in fact, LeWitt sets art free from the impact of philosophical theories or "any other mental disciplines"<sup>4</sup>. He states that "most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple"<sup>5</sup>, and this is the starting point of an artwork and the most important part of it. Besides, as he states in the "Sentences on Conceptual Art" two years later, an art work may consist entirely only of an idea since "all ideas need not to be made physical".<sup>6</sup> An art work that is not physical can be as well regarded to be disembodied or disappeared. Actually, LeWitt distinguishes between "idea" and "concept", pointing out that ideas are the components of the concept while former "implies general directions"<sup>7</sup>, but I will use the two words as synonyms, and sometimes referring to the realm that they indicate as the "content" of an art work. Furthermore, I will elaborate on various artistic strategies that embody the idea-based approach which may prepare the ground for a more abstract speculation.

If an artist puts the most of attention to the idea of her work, it may be evident that the focus on the "immaterial" sides of an art work allows neglecting "material" means of expression simply because they do not seem anymore important enough. Therefore this approach often motivated the usage of "short-lived" and cheap materials or materials formerly considered inartistic. However, the opinions concerning the "invention" of new materials may vary, and, while several conceptual artists used mediums previously undefined by art convention and appropriated styles, manners and genres of other domains, LeWitt, on the contrary, is rather suspicious about using new materials because he believed they exaggerate the physical aspect of an art work and make the material used to appear too important. Usages of new materials LeWitt calls "one of the great afflictions of contemporary art" which eventually threaten to make conceptual art into "another kind of expressionism."<sup>8</sup> The truth is somewhere in between, I assume.

Then, of course, there have always been aspirations to include the element of destruction in the very concept of an artwork – corrosion that would lead to disappearance, and this a slightly different practice of disappearance, though, in my opinion, it offers the viewer the magnificent opportunity of seeing an art work of this kind and simultaneously experiencing it as already vanished away. This might be achieved in many different ways; I will mention some of them which I find most appealing and suitable for illustrations.

One of my favorites is the contemporary vanishing art work of a pile of candies by Felix Gonzales-Torres (candies in each pile are wrapped in different color papers and visitors are asked to taste one, of course, "at their own risk") or a bunch of posters, also by Gonzales-Torres that you can take with you for free, and a museum worker will offer you a rubber to keep the posters rolled up. At first I encountered these works by Gonzales-Torres in Hamburger Bahnhof museum in Berlin and a few months afterwards in the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam. Both times the candy pile was arranged in a different shape and no one could really tell if those were the same candies or not. This could be an example of stressing out the content of the work – the idea of a candy pile – rather than the material execution of it – asking if these are the same candies and if they are linked to the original candies that Gonzales-Torres arranges himself.

Gonzales-Torres offers the audience not only to witness an art work growing smaller and smaller, but to directly participate in its run-down. It is evident that no special and "authentic" objects will be left to the posterity and in the future art history books we will see only photographs of an art work that has already been erased by the visitors of the exhibitions. We will not be able to say which particular pile it was unless additional information (art context) concerning the time and place of exhibition is provided. We will not be able to define this art work either – its characteristics (size, color and amount) are constantly changing. We may wonder if it changes anything in our perception of art.

The privileged role of the concept implies that the usage of shapes, colors, textures, surfaces or other materials is put aside as second-rate, at least in theory. Disregard of the appearance evolves into a tendency to avoid any bright colors and impressing volumes because they may turn out to be too impressive and overshadow the "pure" idea that is underlying the art work. According to Marcel Duchamp, as he pointed out in 1913, one has to achieve a state of "visual indifference,"<sup>9</sup> which means refusing to provide the audience a spectacle. Not for nothing Duchamp is often mentioned as the grandfather of conceptual art, and Joseph Kosuth in the work "Art after Philosophy" is referring to Duchamp as the initiator of modern practice of art since he introduced the distinction between what art looks like and what it indicates or means within the context of art history. The actual material properties of an art work are not very essential because they do not determinate the meaning nor initiates questions that an art work asks.

What is especially curious about visual indifference is the fact that it indicates as well absence of a good and bad taste and implies a shift in the language of an art work: instead of working on the image and on what is picturesque artists are focusing on the ideas and therefore on linguistic expressions of them. I should avoid hasty generalizations, of course, and I do not intend to say that every conceptual artist is willing to provide a text longer than the title of the work. However, very often in order to be able to comprehend the meaning of an art work and to appreciate it, the viewer should be informed about the subject the artist is investigating, motivation for her choice, and finally, the art situation

in general. In other words, as Kosuth puts it, "one has to be familiar with contemporary art to appreciate and understand it."<sup>10</sup> According to Kosuth taste is irrelevant to art since this is merely the subject of aesthetics which has nothing to do with art itself. Taste refers to what one likes and dislikes and it can be said about anything. If it is said about an art work, this statement shows nothing but merely the taste of the person which had been formed according to the circumstances she grew up. Aesthetics in general is something incompatible with art because it deals with opinions on perception of the world which is outside the realm of art. Art refers only to art, but aesthetics refer to something else. This is, no doubt, a remarkable attack on aesthetics and actually on the intention of this essay. The chance to escape the criticism initiated by Kosuth is to point out that the realm of aesthetics is wider than he has mentioned and the work "Art after Philosophy" is part of it.

The inadequacy of taste in regard of an art work has characterized also LeWitt in his "Paragraphs" where he writes that "caprice, taste and other whimsies would be eliminated from making of art"<sup>11</sup>. In this case the term taste refers to a broader action of appreciation which a viewer engages when visiting galleries, museums, art venues etc. Later LeWitt adds that good art calls to revise the standard of art and, accordingly, our appreciation also, which indicates the presence of some kind of art education, though no one really would like to call it this way due to the slight flavor of didactics in this sentence. Therefore, to put it more neutral, I shall argue that the information one acquires when looking at art and thinking about it, at some point can have an impact on the way we consider art in general.

All what has been said about taste is remarkable, since this has been an essential criterion in art discourse since the essay by David Hume "Of the Standard of Taste" in 1757 and has been mentioned in the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant. Therefore I find it appealing, of course, that a traditional and a bit authoritative notion can be dismissed with the slight gesture like this.

Let this be only a sketch in elaboration of the concept suggested by Duchamp and the philosophical ideas by Kosuth – some implications and consequences of its usages I will reveal in a separate passage of this essay. Now I would prefer to provide the basic characteristics of conceptual art, which, I believe, will create the necessary context to go to the button of the question concerning disappearing art work and – to some degree – also the subsequent changes of our perception of art definition. I shall specify two cases where the term disappearance can be applied.

### **Case One: Usages of Negativity**

There have always been artists that enjoyed playing with the notion of negativity in their works – presenting artworks that are merely a Xerox sheet referring to a past event or an event never directly perceived. Another well-liked strategy provides documentation of a situation taking place somewhere else that the person that documents it is located. Sometimes it is just an overview of a project that has never been completed. An example of this approach is the work of Keith Arnatt. He has elaborated on the idea of "art as an act of omission"<sup>12</sup> in his contribution to a project executed at the Museum of Modern Art, Belgrade, in 1971. The project consisted of three postcards that were handed out to three artists. Arnatt in his postcard reflected on the phenomenon of exclusion in art. His final sentence in the postcard goes like that: "If art is what we do and culture is what is done to us [Andre] – what could culture do to us if art is what we didn't do?"<sup>13</sup>

The notion of "doing nothing" has been employed also in other works of Arnatt. Once when he was asked to participate in an exhibition he tried to reveal what would be the meaning submitting no work at all, except for the fact that his name would be mentioned in the catalogue. Arnatt asked "Is It Possible for Me to Do Nothing as My Contribution to This Exhibition"?<sup>14</sup> Then he wrote a short paragraph in which he studied the implications of this possibility. It seemed that "doing nothing" could imply two different things. One can simply refuse to act at all, on one hand. Then, "doing nothing" could be a certain case of doing something within the context of the exhibition, on the other hand. Of course, this implies that actually to do nothing is impossible, since, for instance, this little text Arnatt wrote is already an evidence of some kind of activity. Nonetheless, we have to take into account that there is a space in the gallery meant to be filled by the artist. If, in this case, the only thing available is a theoretical note about the implications of "doing nothing" I believe we can assume he has attained the goal. It is obvious that a maneuver of this kind is introducing debates about the implementation of doing nothing and its relation to art. In this case the intention of the artists is prior and thus excluding any material indicators of his work, which corresponds with the overall setup of conceptual art, since an art work is consisting of the preparation, thinking over, series of refusals and trials. As LeWitt points it out, "all intervening steps – scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations – are of interest.(..) Thought processes of the artists are sometimes more interesting than the final product."<sup>15</sup>

### **Case Two: Metaphors of absence**

In the second case I have put forwards to analyze the appropriateness of the term "dematerialization" and here we have to deal with several expressions of negativity that should not be taken as literal as in the first case. Disappearance of an art work can be detected in such features that are actually material at least to some extent but that traditionally are not ascribed to artistic purposes: cubes of melting ice, repetitions and permutations, repeating and everyday objects, Xerox sheets, dictionary entries, found objects, documents, pseudo scientific materials like lists, diagrams and numbers, and, by the way, a pile of candies as well. This way several notions of art production have been altered, namely, the well-established concerns of composition, color, technique and physical presence. It seems that the conceptualists launched a different criterion of an artwork and therefore the audience is expected to approach the work differently too, though, no doubt, it is up to the audience to decide what they think of certain piece of art.

The ascetic attitude towards the appearance of an art work that conceptual art has revealed produced art works where "where is nothing to look at". This strategy has been adopted purposefully even though the degree to which this idea was embodied varied in different times and different art works. In the 1960s, for instance, the prevailing tendency was to try to make an art work look as "modest" as possible – mostly grey scale colors were used and other similar approaches that bridges conceptualisms with minimalism. This tendency I believe is linked to the "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" and the demand to implement the "economy of means", as LeWitt defines it<sup>16</sup>. If an art works should be impressing then only because of the concept, and LeWitt advises to avoid using any three-dimensional objects because they resemble architecture and are too "picturesque". For instance, when examining the works of Dan Graham and Donald Burgy we find enormously big numbers that had been utilized for artistic means to describe a certain phenomenon. Also regular usages of maps, charts, diagrams and other pseudo scientific artifacts are typical for many conceptual artists. And to certain degree we might agree

that these strategies are "dry" and unappealing to the eye and that they introduce a certain type of "negative" spectacular aspect. The only remark I would like to make is to point out that the intention to take no notice of the material aspects and the consequent ignorance of the visual in fact has turned out into a well-thought game an artists starts off: to make one work appear "grey and modest" one has to think carefully about which materials she is going to use. This, nonetheless, does not contradict the overall assumption of the dematerialization of art, and any irony is throughout well-minded on my side.

Of course, there is no reason to presume that conceptual works necessarily have to be very simple and unpretentious. Besides, there is one controversy with the usage of the term "dematerialization". Let's take an example of the work of Paul Kos "Sound of Ice Melting", made in 1970. It is an installation with an ice cube and several microphones at the Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco. Therefore one might ask: why would you call a piece of ice a less material substance than a traditional canvass painting? To respond quickly to the question we may point out that, no doubt, in some way ice and microphones are material and existing, but it is crucial to realize that the essence of the art work was built upon the process of melting. This art work equals to the sound of disappearance and after all we may wonder if such sound exists at all.

Therefore we may assume that the means of expressions used by conceptual artists – simple, ordinary, short-lived and cheap – are more ephemeral than the ones exploited in different artistic strategies, for instance, in abstract art or expressionism that were contemporaries of the conceptual art. We shall agree that the conceptual art works I have mentioned here are dematerialized not absolutely, but rather metaphorically.

Yet another and a very subtle example of disappearance is the strategy of artists to appropriate of other artists' works and words. In this case the actual artwork does not exist; instead we see something else which is definitely not the art work we were expecting to see. We may wonder if it is a coincidence or a well prepared strategy. In fact, we are used to seeing sometimes shocking objects being labeled art. But in this case if it is a work of somebody else, it is evident that what we have is not the work we are told to have, and, I assume, this confusion is a bright illustration of a fleeting art work.

Marcel Duchamp and the ready-mades were the first ones to introduce the artistic usage of appropriation. Remarkably, the conceptual artists have followed the trace of Dadaism that became especially fashionable from the 1960s onwards. This meant appropriation of art objects and themes already used by other artists and often – other art traditions, which, however, was nothing novel – in 1950 Rene Magritte produced a work "Perspective II: Manet's Balcony" offering a straightforward allusion to the famous work of Claude Manet, adding some irony and a bit of black humor.

But being novel could not have been the main aim of the conceptual art, rather finding new expressions and attitudes. Appropriation was, of course, one of the concerns of conceptual artists and they have notably extended the term by usages of not only a theme of another artist and a popular motive, but also style, techniques and manner of making art in general. The source of inspiration could be mass media, bestsellers and advertising. Say, for example, the aesthetics of posters and billboards, formerly exploited merely by advertising companies have been successfully adopted by artists like Jenny Holzer and Bruce Nauman. This approach has embodied also the tendency to neglect the concept of individuality and originality of an artwork. In this case one can play with the notion of

the authorship as well, and in addition to suggest art works as outcomes of projects of collective art. One of the artists who engaged in this practice is Robert Barry: he worked on a project where he was presenting works of other artists, and sometimes this was based on an agreement though not always and cases of evident kidnapping were present as well.

The notion of plagiarism is based to the phenomenon of a disappearing art work "conceptually": it broadens common understanding of what an art work is, how it functions and what kind of things that we used to exclude from the term "art" can actually very well be incorporated. An art work that is an outcome of kidnapping is not accessible to us and in this sense it will be a vanished art work.

I have described various characteristics of conceptual art and by now I believe it has become comprehensible that they are linked to the question of disappearing art work. I have mentioned literal as well as witty, ironical and metaphorical interpretation of the principle of negativity. Now I would like to talk about the way we perceive the disappearing art work, its implications, some positions artists have fought for and eventually I will mention the role of art context and art theory. In the last chapters I will strive to provide something one might be called "a philosophical grounding" of the enterprise.

### **Overlooking the Visible: The Autonomy of Art**

After the overview on conceptual art, indicating its affinity with negativity and its aspirations for non-traditional results, I would like to return to the term of visual indifference. According to aesthetics of Enlightenment and Romanticism the essence of art was claimed to be found in its perceptual properties which were responsible for evoking aesthetic experience in the viewer since an art work maintained the "significant form"<sup>17</sup>. This is exactly the background where the novel ideas of conceptual art might very well be positioned, since the function of a background is to provide information about the views contrary to the ones that are discussed here.

The emphasis on the aesthetic quality of art work stems already from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant when he talks of the autonomy of aesthetic experience which results in the lack of what might be called an applied interest for an art work. Excluding art from the field of utilization we assume an art work to be autonomous, having its own rules and artistic means. Art critiques like Clement Greenberg have emphasized the distinction between, on the one hand, aesthetic autonomy of art and, on the other hand, market oriented culture.<sup>18</sup> This opinion stresses out the qualities of an art work that are derived from their visual properties, for instance, the interplay of colors, shapes and proportions. This kind of art works have been opposed to "subject-matter" art works where verbalization of the idea of the work is of paramount importance. Linking art with idea seemed unacceptable since this corrupted the notion of aesthetic autonomy and merely artistic ends of art.

Today these ideas have to face some criticism. Not only due to the contribution of conceptual artists, but in more general terms, following the development in arts, it has become clear that contemporary art in most cases is linked to textual reality, more over, it depends on historical, social and cultural contexts. Art history and art theories are playing important role in apprehension of art: some pieces of art are readable as art only if located within these domains.

The aesthetics of conceptual art have preserved the concept of art's autonomy which surely is not the prevailing tendency in arts nowadays since socially engaged art and art bearing political connotations are encountered very often, for instance, in feminist art. Nonetheless, LeWitt and Kosuth are setting art free from any "mundane" connotations. In fact, there are two lines of argumentation though they are linked together, and I find these ideas rather interesting. I would like to elaborate on them more in detail.

Which I find especially appealing, LeWitt and Kosuth are striving to set art free from the obstructive influence of philosophy. "Conceptual art does not really have much to do with philosophy or any other mental discipline," admits LeWitt in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art"<sup>19</sup>. This slightly ironic remark is addressed to all the philosophers' attempts to talk about art and perhaps to all the art theoreticians as well, since in his "Paragraphs" LeWitt in a really witty way describes his attitude towards art critics: he recites different art trends, like minimal art, primer structures, reductive, rejective, cool and mini-art and then confesses that all of them is a "part of a secret language that art critics use when communicating with each other through the medium of art magazines."<sup>20</sup> In this case aesthetics is the underlying motive of the "secret language" that is unknown to artists that make art and which therefore is alien to art itself.

A more severe criticism of aesthetics and any influence of other disciplines outside the direct realm of art can be found in the work of Kosuth. I have already mentioned briefly some points and now I would like to particularize his views. That is why I shall describe the main ideas found in the work "Art after Philosophy".

Kosuth is making a shift from the visual information about art work to the conception which is a decisive step towards the disappearing art work. First of all it has to be mentioned that the purpose of Kosuth is to offer a new look on art and art history by means of analytical approach which he has adopted under the influence of philosophy of Alfred Ayer and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Kosuth is talking about the tautological nature of art and new art language that has been introduced by Duchamp's ready-mades, and he underlines the importance of the "art condition" and the analytical character of the proposition that art makes, which is opposed to the synthetical statements about the world. Hence art gets excluded from any other realms of life. This is not only an ironical statement about realism in art, but in fact Kosuth makes art inapplicable to anything else outside art. The issues that have to be known or understood by art are there *a priori* and the following empirical experience is of no use at all. An art work, according to Kosuth, "expresses definitions of art or formal consequences of definition of art,<sup>21</sup>" that is, it questions the status of art, its role and the attitude of the viewer. Questioning the nature of art is what an artist should do.

This questioning can proceed in several ways. Firstly, Kosuth claims an artist has to get rid of the traditional aesthetic dictionary and avoid categories like "sculpture" or "painting" because otherwise she will immediately engage herself with the traditional dichotomy and will not be able to ask new questions about the function of art. Secondly, an artist has to work on the conception of art instead of emphasizing the appearances. The question about the form of the language of art that an artist uses (like colors, surfaces, volumes etc.) gets replaced by another question – "What is being said?"<sup>22</sup> The answer is connected to the function of art, to what can be called art and the way new objects are considered to be art if they appear within the "art context". "What is being said" is not

concerned with anything else than art itself. It does not say anything about "reality", facts or visual experience.

In addition, self-expression of the artist is also insignificant, because it can seem important only to the family members or close friends of the artist, and, since Kosuth and other conceptual artists dismiss the notion of "self-expression", as the result we have to refuse from any subjective meaning an art work may bear and therefore arrive in the realm of anonymity. This, of course, has often been one of the tools conceptual artists have used. Bright illustrations of how to neglect the notion that an art work is stemming from personal subjectivity are the works of Lawrence Weiner, for example, his "Propeller" which removes compositional decisions, surprise, inspiration and expression and is a simple picture of a propeller. Also his series of works "Removals" (1966) are produced almost mechanically (with a spray gun and compressor) and thus question the expressive decision-making process art has been traditionally linked. No aesthetic choice can be found in works like "One Pint Glass White Lacquer Poured Directly upon Floor and Allowed to Dry" (1968) or "Two Minutes of Spray Paint Directly upon the Floor from a Standard Aerosol Can" (1968). These works can be called anonymous; they have no trace of skill, craftsmanship or talent, and therefore conceptual art works of this kind are not really suitable for office walls and their place in the arts markets is rather paradoxical – what could be the value of a art work that can be made by any one else, repeated again and again and without having any education as an artist.

These art works, that appear so simple and almost mechanical, are not simple in the statements that they make about art. Disclaiming the meaning of physical qualities of an art work is a logical condition of its disappearance, and it provides a direct reflection of formalist art which is, quoting Kosuth, "the vanguard of decoration"<sup>23</sup> while formalist art criticism is merely "analysis of the physical attributes of particular objects."<sup>24</sup> If we focus on the appearances we do not acquire any new knowledge necessary for our understanding of the nature or function of art because what we see is only entertainment, decoration or visual experiences – services that art is not supposed to perform because it can be easily replaced by anything else, like kitsch or technology<sup>25</sup>, or amusement parks. So it has been made clear that art should not be utilitarian.

### **Art in Context**

If what we call an art work or any other object is visually pleasing it has nothing to do with art, because "tasteful" or "aesthetically interesting" can be any object, a comb or a tea pot, but it is located outside the realm of art because it has no bearing to the "art context". Art context is the "arts playground", namely, the space where art works and ideas about art can be found. It is where "art "lives" through influencing other art, not by existing as the physical residence of artist's ideas."<sup>26</sup> An example that Kosuth is mentioning refers to cubism – its value is not in the visual qualities or particularization of certain colors or shapes, instead it can be found in the ideas cubism has expressed about art in general and that has contributed to the realm of art. Any other outside contexts are irrelevant to understanding of art, and here again we return to the tautological nature of art – it provides no information about any matter of fact, except that it claims that certain work of art is a work of art.

Conceptual art work, independent of the skill of an artist as a craftsman, is appealing to its viewer intellectually – art is engaging her mind instead of her eye or emotions. Therefore LeWitt calls conceptual art "non-emotive":<sup>27</sup> it does not provide the viewer

with an "emotional kick", if compared, for instance, with expressionist art. The goal of the artist is to find a very simple form, preferably – if it is readily available, because complexity is disrupting the unity of an art work. There is no form that would be intrinsically superior to another and artist may use any, "from the expression words (written or spoken) to physical reality."<sup>28</sup>

Execution of an art work is something inferior and may be very simple. I would like to mention an art work by LeWitt which I saw in Amsterdam Stedelijk museum "Map of Amsterdam without the Amstel River" (1976, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam collection). It is a map of the city where the river Amstel has been cut out. I find the idea luminously simple and the execution, of course, did not take much effort. LeWitt himself has said that "it is difficult to bungle a good idea" and that "banal ideas can not be rescued by beautiful execution."<sup>29</sup>

LeWitt has already introduced the usage of words and literary strategies, which has been present also in other art works I have mentioned here. In fact, it seems rather clear that, since the visual material is sometimes very poor, the context of a particular art work is created verbally. The generative role of the title can be seen in, for instance, works of Lawrence Weiner which I have already mentioned. I would not generalize and claim that a textual strategy is typical of conceptual art in whole, however it applies to some art works more than to other ones (let us recall the "nonrepresentational" titles of the abstract art, for instance).

If an art work begins with an idea and if especially the idea is what defines the authorship and the very "core" of an art work, and if any impressive visual effects are considered disturbing, any visual properties might be diminished very quickly. The perceptual qualities responsible for the aesthetic experience of the work are neglected or replaced by verbalized stories and the art work in this case is shifting from one category (visuality) to another (conception). This indicates a change in the status of an art work and a certain shift in the evaluation and appreciation. Thus the case of a disappearing art work challenges steady notions like uniqueness, permanence, authorship and decorative attractiveness of an art work. Conceptual art provides cases and situations where these notions fail to describe art and our experience of art, therefore they have to be revised.

Telling a story, attaching a poem, providing a dictionary entry or incorporating fragments of one's diary into an art work are the strategies that bring art and literature very near. To finalize, I would like to mention one example which I like myself very much: a simple painting by Anne Truitt that is called "Sea Garden" and where in addition to the painting she presented also a short text: "There was a blue sea, and above it was a yellow hill and beside the hill was a green field. On the other side of the blue sea was a blue sea, and on the other side of the yellow hill was a yellow hill, and on the other side of the green field was a green field. And that was a sea garden." For me, what is written is joining the representation of a simple landscape and provides it with air of a subtle poetry. In addition, the painting itself is very simple and of no big spectacle, so it can be very well be regarded as a conceptual art work.

### **Conclusion: the Disappearance of Art**

The practice of disappearance is based on the presupposition that visual properties are non-essential to appreciation of an art work and that simplicity of the perceptual qualities is something that is desired. This could develop within the aesthetics of conceptual art

since the significance of the idea is making it possible to neglect the execution. Disappearance of any visual experience can be considered as a radical outcome of these beliefs, though in reality the results can vary remarkable and offer very different and very interesting art works and opinions about art.

One of the most curious issues about conceptual art is its rebellion character and disapproval of the traditional notions of aesthetics. It calls to revise the adequacy of such ideas as uniqueness, permanence and visual appeal of an art work, it sets free the art from the authority of the artist, the self-expression and the skillfulness in terms of the execution, and, in fact, in some cases the art work does not has to be completed at all, since just writing down a proposal may be enough. Aesthetics of conceptual art are appealing to the notion of plagiarism and doubting the moment of inspiration of a genius, and, naturally, such figures as taste or reference to reality seem to be out-of-date as well.

By providing these remarks conceptual art shows that the vocabulary that we use to talk about art is problematical and that it fails to describe conceptual art works. It introduces the need to reform the basic aesthetical concepts and change our attitude. The rebellion art is desirable since any movement is preferable to a standstill. Besides, the conceptual setup provides the answer to the question that contemporary art has to face now and then, namely, "Is this art at all?" and "What does it say?" The answers I have already mentioned in this essay so I will not repeat.

What I also find interesting about this subject is that artists engaged in the tradition of conceptual art have often demonstrated certain interest for integrating text into an art work, sometimes referring to another art works or influencing them. This introduces another remark – in order to be able to fully appreciate conceptual art the audience needs to posses some knowledge of the art context (art theory and history) as well. The aesthetic experience becomes rather an intellectual exercise which metaphorically may be called "reading of the meaning" which is displayed in the art work. Any perceptual qualities are therefore just the medium which, in its most radical case, may as well be absent, disappeared or very fragile.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> LeWitt, Sol. *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*. 834.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 838.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 836.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid..

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 842.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 844.

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