

Inanima- an illustrated history of stuff

By Erica Scourti

"Inanima- an illustrated history of stuff" is a project in which I attempt to draw from memory all the inanimate objects located in my immediate surroundings on a day to day basis. It exists primarily as a constantly updated drawing-blog, organized into years and months, but has also found material form as a postcard, a poster, a colouring in book and screensaver. The word 'inanima' is a neologism that combines the words 'inanimate' and 'anima', which amongst other meanings¹, was defined in Jungian psychology, as the unconscious or true inner self of an individual, as opposed to the persona or outer aspect of the personality. The work therefore is an investigation into both objects existent in society, and their possible illumination of a true inner self, if such a thing exists. This essay will focus on relating it to some of the features, both stylistic and methodological, of Conceptual art, and to a lesser extent Pop art of the 60s and 70s. By comparing their similarities and disparities I hope to trace areas of further potential research and to refine my own thinking around the work.

Against the wishes of one of its main protagonists, Mel Bochner², conceptual art did eventually develop into a recognizable style- the use of text, the abandonment of colour in favour of black and white, the deployment of mathematical sequences and grids in structuring the work. A visual language that was once attractive due to its abstract, non-referential qualities, is now inextricably linked with the anti-emotive, anti-expressive ethos of conceptual art. Inanima, consisting of simple black and white drawings arranged in a grid against a white background, borrows this language, using it as a cultural signifier of exactly this attitude, but disrupts the seemingly natural equivalence of signifier and signified by re-introducing subjectivity through the trope of autobiography. Conceptual art's wish to 'avoid subjectivity'³ and to 'become serious and completely concerned with its own problems'⁴, would have made the autobiographical anathema, centred as it is on the experiences of the concrete individual. Reacting against Greenbergian modernism, in which the artists soul and existential angst

¹ In Christian contexts, the Latin word is used to translate Greek *psykhe* (soul or spirit)

² "Serial order is a method, not a style"- Mel Bochner, 'The Serial Attitude' , in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970* by Donna De Salvo (Editor), London 2005.

³ Sol Lewitt, quoted in Mark Godfrey 'From Box to Street and Back again' in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970* by Donna De Salvo (Editor), London 2005.

⁴ Ian Burn 'Conceptual Art as Art' in '*Art and Australia*' 1970

had been 'laid bare' on the canvas, this newer generation were trying to challenge this type of literally self-centred art. Inanima's hand-drawn quality plays on the notion of the artist's gesture holding or expressing meaning, while confusing this connection by holding it within a strictly organized structure.

One of the features of modernist art which was co-opted and adapted by the Conceptual art movement was the use of the grid. Rosalind Krauss points out that the grid organizes the individual elements within it in a non-hierarchical space, and by flattening out temporal and physical space any sense of their order in time or in a value system is undermined. This in turn acts to silence narrative, which depends on beginning, middle and end⁵. By resizing the objects in each cell to fit specific dimensions, Inanima similarly rejects any hierarchy of objects, both in terms of their use or monetary value, or in terms of their position in an imaginary narrative.

Krauss also pointed out that modernist artists like Malevich and Mondrian often saw a spiritual element to the grid, saying they found a 'staircase to the universal'⁶ through it. This search for the universal, which recalls Kantian notions of the sublime and a Romantic sensibility of searching for something metaphysical, beyond material existence, is not usually associated with conceptual art. Recent readings however, have suggested a connection between the two movements, apparent in their shared desire to merge art and philosophy, and the realisation that behind many of conceptual art's 'rationalists' lay 'mystics'⁷.

One element with links to the mystical, or spiritual, is the notion of infinity, traditionally connected to the unknowable, the indefinable and ultimately the divine⁸. The recurrence of work which evokes the concept of the infinite, both directly and indirectly, suggests that the rejection of the sublime as postulated by the generation of artists who preceded them, such as Barnett Newman, was replaced by a more abstract, cool investigation into what the unknowable could be. Obvious examples would be Joseph Kosuth 'Infinity' and Giulio Paolini's, "*The Encyclopaedia Britannica*" which both used definitions of the word printed onto canvas or photocopied; while in Kosuth's case this may have been a dead pan deflation of some of the values of the abstract expressionist artist, Paolini's

⁵ Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass. 1985

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Johanna Burton, 'Mystics Rather than Rationalists', in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970* by Donna De Salvo (Editor), London 2005.

⁸ Paolo Zellini *A Brief History of Infinity* Penguin Books Ltd, London 2005.

work positioned the text carefully centred on the canvas in an approximation of a visually pleasing, and poetic, arrangement.

Other more oblique strategies which evoke the infinite would be practices such as Douglas Huebler's, especially his *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) Global, 1971-*, which aimed to photographically document the existence of everyone alive, thereby alluding to the infinite through the very enormity and impossibility of the task. Also On Kawara's work, whose date paintings could go on being made indefinitely, evoke the infinite or unreachable in temporal scale.⁹

This carrying out to the letter as far as possible of an eccentric, non-sensical experiment was identified by Sol Lewitt in his statement 'irrational statements should be followed absolutely and logically'¹⁰ as one of the defining features of conceptualism. Contrary to popular opinion at the time, when this work was generally perceived to be the simple application of mathematical formulae to visual form, this shows a fascination with 'the purposelessness of purpose', an open-ended play rather than strict experiment. Similarly, *Inanima* is set up with an apparently simple postulate, but one that like Huebler's is bound to failure as the set of objects is both infinitely large and ultimately unknowable, since the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of certain objects within it is never made explicit. Like work by Bas Jan Ader, which seemed to test out supposedly rational experiments while consciously playing with the idea of their failure, this attempt is almost Romantic in its knowing acceptance of the task's overwhelming nature.

Also, the loss of purpose could allude to a loss of meaning, which equally has been seen as one of the defining attributes of boredom.¹¹ Being bored was what Andy Warhol was famous for, and his favourite motto of 'so what?' implies full acceptance of a world of endlessly repeated forms and things, be they soup cans or celebrities (all equally part of the never-ending stream of commodities available for consumption). Conceptual art also embraced repetitiveness, but often in the form of seriality, which Mel Bochner outlined as involving a transformation of some sort- a permutation/ progression/ rotation, i.e. a mathematical function¹². In Pop art, the objects are the same, no transformation occurs, and therefore they are all alone, unconnected to the preceding and following

⁹ Other examples would be Stanley Broun's "Bulletin II", Dan Graham's "March 31, 1966 [1970]"

¹⁰ Sol LeWitt, 'Sentences on Conceptual Art', in Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (Eds.) *Art in Theory* 1900- 1990. Blackwell, 1997.

¹¹ Lars Svendsen *The Philosophy of Boredom* trans John Irons, Reaktion Books, London 2005.

¹² *ibid.*

members, unlike items in a series. By combining these attitudes in Inamina, the intention is to create an infinite series, describing a pre-determined set where the members are neither related to each other by transformation, nor are exactly the same. Chance, and social/ cultural contingency (i.e. what happens to have been there at the time) determine the individual elements, resembling in this way an archive, or index, rather than a system.

Archives and indexes are ways of organizing data into comprehensible form, and are used by museums, banks and libraries amongst others as methods of categorization. This method has also been adopted in conceptual art, most notably by Art & Language, for whom indexing plays a key role. The eight cabinets of their work '*Index 01*' (1972) consisted of a compendium of their work, organised into sections within drawers, containing all their manuscripts, publications and texts. The indexing itself was fairly complicated ¹³ and acted like a grid in conceptual space to distance both the artists' subjectivity from their work, allowing the viewer- as long as they had the commitment to engage properly with it- the opportunity to delve deeply into the work, with no mystifying processes to prevent them doing so.

Other artists, like Susan Hiller, approached archiving from its more sociological angle, as a method of showing back to a culture the artefacts it produces. Her background as an anthropologist probably influenced the detached, museological style of works like '*From the Freud Museum*' (1991-6) which places in a large vitrine 'worthless artifacts and materials – rubbish, discards, fragments, trivia and reproductions – which seemed to carry an aura of memory and to hint at meaning something'¹⁴. These potentially resonant or poetic objects are carefully arranged and indexed in a way that similarly creates a distance from the artist while also presenting them as simply specimen of the culture they find themselves in. Inanima similarly records objects of 'importance but little value' ¹⁵ as though preserving them for future historians, looking for the everyday, throwaway objects that seemed insignificant at the time but nevertheless create an image of a culture through its lifestyle. The banality of the objects is also an ironic take on the notion of 'lifestyle' as presented in

¹³ 'For »Index 01«, all the texts were divided into text sections and each section was assigned index numbers. On the narrow side of the drawers, which also form the outer front side of the file cabinets, the index numbers are printed. These numbers are also printed on the texts of the index cards in the drawers. Thomas Dreher '*Blurting in A & L: Art & Language and the Investigation of Context*', *Blurting in A & L* online http://blurting-in.zkm.de/e/invest_context

¹⁴ Susan Hiller, quoted from tate website

¹⁵ 'Buried Cube containing an object of importance but little value' was a work by Sol Le Witt: 1968

magazines, TV programmes and advertising, as it offered a glimpse of the less than glamorous day-to-day environments most people inhabit.

Inanima therefore takes up a mixture of methodologies, including indexing, archiving and grid-structuring, as well as the more indirect strategies of some conceptual artists, but ends up creating a self-portrait of sorts. Still, why talk about oneself? Perhaps in line with more recent concerns in relational aesthetics, such as the importance of specificity of place over space, these inanimate objects have value in their recording and describing of that place. The work could be showing that within capitalist systems, each individual, while not necessarily having a 'true inner self' has the means to express themselves through the objects that they surround themselves with. Whether that's a good thing or not is another question.

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