

LEIGH TENNANT/STEVEN COTTINGHAM/THE MEANS OF DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION

The predominant mode of production in art after the rise of conceptualism can be understood as a process of discursive argumentation. This era has disputed origins: some conflate it with Conceptual Art and Lippard's concept of "dematerialization" (1966), some point to Duchamp's ready-mades (1914) or Malevich's monochromes (1915)—we might go so far as to say that art's discursive production is first precipitated by Courbet's *Realist Manifesto* (1855), in which the art-object was declared to no longer be self-evident. Regardless of its particular catalyst, conceptualism instantiates a mode of production wherein the materials, events, and circumstances that comprise the work of art are *selected* rather than crafted—that is, their materiality is taken from the symbolic structures that constitute society instead of being invested with symbolic content in the final instance. Artistic material is therefore differentiated from non-artistic material not by its representative capacity but through a process of discursive production. In pre-conceptual paradigms, a given set of robust yet flexible media (paint, charcoal, plaster, clay, bronze, etc.) were prized for their ability to produce non-ephemeral representations, entering into the symbolic through mimesis. But in the wake of conceptualist frameworks, material is understood to be *already* representative. It participates in the symbolic order regardless of its artistic status, regardless of its process of production, and regardless even of its self-evident capacity to do so. What was once a contingent aspect of artistic media is now the constitutive element. Therefore, artistic production is no longer synonymous with the production of meaning as content—meaning must now emerge through form. The mediacy of artistic material arrives through an *anti-representational* process: a given material must repudiate its former role (its supposed use-value) as a mundane artefact of "nature" or capitalist production in

order to be apprehended artistically.

The sum of these conditions is a system wherein *discursive engagement* rather than artisanal labour or cultural corroboration unites artistic endeavors. To enter into the discourse of art is to enter into a set of recursive relationships, wherein the capacity to perceive (much less appreciate) a work of art is simultaneous with the capacity to produce (to discursively nominate) a work of art. It is not enough for a work to "look like" art, it must be recognized as art by both producer and consumer. This recognition is not innate to its mode of production, but is a product of its recursive participation in discourse. However, when conceptual art can look like anything, and therefore anything can look like art, the system necessitates a discriminatory gesture to make sense of the noise that is material culture. Looking like art points to a qualification based on visual resemblance of objects and their signifying traits at the expense of the specificity of those traits within discourse. Therefore we witness the emergence of a curatorial class to foment the circulation of art: a managerial role that is positioned between producers (artists) and consumers (the public, institutions, patrons, etc.) of art and thus re-institutes a division of labour between producers (artists) and circulators (curators and art historians). Despite that early conceptualism was articulated precisely by artists circulating their own work—through salons, manifestoes, and artist-led societies—this division of labour emerges not only at the level of metaphor (artist's work is, in economic terms, incommensurable with waged labour) but as an actual struggle over the means of discursive production.

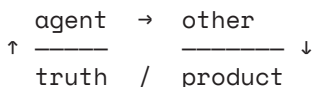
How, then, do these discriminatory gestures occur? Art is removed from the symbolic order of use as it enters into spaces that filter

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out noise—for instance, gallery conventions like white cube architecture and flat lighting all serve to make sense of noise by “neutralizing” (excluding) non-pertinent factors. Absence precedes presence, but absence must be *established upon* the ever-presence of noise. Selected material is atomized so that it may be considered in spite of the noise of its former context or utility. As in language, where meaning arises through the selection of signs from a near-infinite field of syntagmatic and paradigmatic positions, artistic discourse likewise makes distinction between noise and meaning. In fact, it is because noise (the near-infinite field of potential sense) is filtered out that meaning can arise. Meaning is the sense of noise.

Already, we can get a *sense* of how the artistic discourse operates. Art is not intrinsic to its material, it arises through discriminatory gestures that differentiate art from non-art, or actually-art from potentially-art. These gestures are made by both artists and curators, but because artistic discourse is constituted by recursive relationships, we cannot grasp its totality by simply charting the art object in its different contexts. We must attend to the various “speaking” and “receiving” roles that determine these possible contexts. In order to substantiate and develop this reading of art-as-discourse, we turn to Lacan’s theory of discourse—a schema that describes the roles and positions of different speakers in different contexts.

Discursive positions



Lacan delineates four terms, each of which can occupy four different positions. The term behaves a certain way in a certain position, but it is not fixed to this role. Instead, the tendencies innate to each term manifest in disparate ways depending on its relation to the other terms. First, Lacan identifies the master signifier (S1), which stands for the innate logic or telos of a given paradigm. As in any semiotic relationship, the master signifier necessitates a significant other, a sign in the role of signified (S2) which extends the semiotic chain. S2 is therefore knowledge—all that is knowable within the discourse determined by S1. S1 becomes the guarantee of S2 but is also obscured by the smooth functioning of the chain of meaning. This signifying relationship, which purports to knowledge within the terms of the discourse, also produces fragments and excess. If S2 stands for all that is signified by that which determines what is significant (S1), then the *objet petit a* (*a*) stands for all that is excluded from discourse. Crucially, *a* can be understood as the real that is excessive to the symbolic—it is found in traces such as the gaze, the voice, the communicative channel, or that which allows discourse to occur—but it itself is not significant (or even wholly signifiable) within the terms of discourse set by the master signifier (S1). The split subject (\$) beholds and participates in discourse, and is split precisely because of the irreconcilability of the real and the symbolic and the constraints imposed by language upon speech. Nonetheless, the identity of \$ is determined by discourse. There is an attempt to pursue knowledge (S2) through discourse, but the attempt is always incomplete because of the traces of *a* that haunt and foster a given symbolic realm.

We have briefly mentioned three roles within the artistic discourse, each corresponding to the production (artists), circulation

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(curators), and consumption (the public) of art. To this we can add a fourth, the role of art itself. As that which enables the artistic discourse but remains in excess or irreducible to the discourse itself, art can be signified by *a* as detailed above. It moves through artistic discourse by occupying one of four positions: the position of agent (that which speaks), other (that which receives), truth (that which motivates), and product (that which results). As Lacan's diagram shows, the agent, motivated by the truth, speaks to the other, resulting in a product. We will borrow Lacan's articulation of the four resulting discourses, maintaining fidelity to their forms while amending their content to be legible within and as the discourse of art.

CURATORIAL DISCOURSE

Discourse of the master

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S1 & \rightarrow & S2 \\ \uparrow \text{---} & & \text{---} \downarrow \\ \$ & / & a \end{array}$$

Curatorial discourse

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{curator} & \rightarrow & \text{public} \\ \uparrow \text{---} & & \text{---} \downarrow \\ \text{artist} & / & \text{artwork} \end{array}$$

In Lacanian terms, the discourse of the master is constituted by the master signifier in the role of agent, directing speech to the mark of knowledge. Within art we see this dynamic expressed in curatorial discourse. In the post-conceptual paradigm, S1 is instantiated by the curator: the gatekeeper (the funder, director, or gallerist) who has the power to recognize meaning from the realm of noise. S1 comprises one aspect of art institutions, the other, S2, comprises the institutions' public, its consumers. When S1 occupies the role of agent, the gatekeeper speaks to the public, making sense of the split subjectivity of artistic practice, enabling the public to conceive of *a* as a product of knowledge.

Curatorial discourse avoids the excessiveness (*a*) of art by organizing exhibitions, surveys, prizes, etc., with particular themes or mandates (S1). Noise is reduced to sense. The *a* of art is thereby determined by the capacity to fulfill these thematic criteria, giving rise to a deductive procedure wherein a theme or mandate is elaborated according to its own logic. These exhibitions make the link from S1 to S2, ultimately providing a kind of origin to the signifying chain. The theme (S1) is the "subject" that a signifier represents to another signifier (S2). Thus art could fall within the terms of *a*, which both exceeds discourse but remains a subject. As a result of the curatorial discursive relation, *a* becomes legible as art: the field of noise is subject to discriminatory selections in order to produce that which is art, and therefore also that which is not art—or at least that which is deemed unfit to enter into artistic discourse and is condemned to remain as noise. Because discriminatory criteria are embodied within S1, all other subjects within artistic discourse are subject to their terms. And because discourse is fundamentally recursive, the speech of these subjects is ultimately oriented toward inclusion rather than exclusion from the curatorial paradigm.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Discourse of university

Critical discourse

$$\begin{array}{ccc} & S2 & \rightarrow & a \\ \uparrow & \text{---} & & \text{---} & \downarrow \\ & S1 & / & \$ & \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{ccc} & \text{public} & \rightarrow & \text{artwork} \\ \uparrow & \text{---} & & \text{---} & \downarrow \\ & \text{curator} & / & \text{artist} & \end{array}$$

In what Lacan calls the "university discourse" and what we term the critical discourse, the public speaks to the artwork directly. This

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speech act is an act of recognition, recognizing the artwork as that which is capable of receiving meaning as constituted by S2 channelling S1. In less abstract terms, the public (exemplified by critics, didactic panels, educational programs, art school curricula, etc.) attributes meaning to the artwork. This discourse takes as a given the paradigm selected by curators, who have enabled certain works to circulate within the artistic discourse writ large. The public (S2) attempts to make sense of S1.

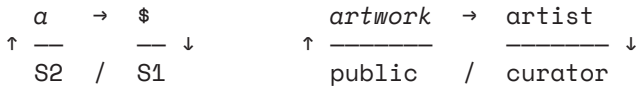
If the curatorial discourse is a procedure of selection, then the critical discourse is one of justification. Just like S1 and S2 comprise two parts of art institutions, \$ and S2 comprise two parts of art's immediate emanation: the meaning of an artwork is always recursively related to the author's intention (\$) and the viewer's interpretation (S2). Lacan's university discourse can be exchanged with the capitalist discourse because of the way it denies the split of the subject with a new figure of knowledge or commodity to remedy our existential condition. This relay burns the subject out and simultaneously alienates them from the truth that there is no subject of knowledge, that knowledge is incomplete, and hides from them the unconscious discourse that governs their behavior.

Critical discourse is therefore defined by its appeal to objective knowledge, and this desire causes discourse to avoid the unknowable *a* by instead deferring to labour, anecdote, biography, desire, or other forms of humanism that only acknowledge one aspect of the split subject (\$). While the curatorial role obscures the split subject that produces the artwork (*a*), intending for a particular rather than fractured discursive meaning to come through, the critical public (S2) interprets this meaning, projecting it back upon the artwork. The meaning of the

work is irreducible beyond the play of these two relations.

DISCOURSE OF THE OBJECT

Discourse of the analyst Discourse of the object



The discourse of the object occurs when the artwork itself acts as agent. This whole discursive cycle relies on specific artistic works, even as they are subsumed under the sign of other discursive positions. Because art is itself a discourse—that is, a system of semiotically-coded artefacts that simultaneously entertain a privileged relation to the real or material— α marks discourse itself. Consider the communicative channels that enable but are not legible by discourse: for example, writing or poetry within the Lacanian paradigm are said to make do with the leftovers of the α —indulging rather than circumventing noise. The object in this instance operates without discourse and yet discourse is predicated upon it: ultimately the object can be described, critiqued, or otherwise represented, but cannot be reduced to any discursive formation of the object. It is always in excess of semiotic relationships, even when a curatorial framework (S1 linked to S2) attempts to give it a sort of coherence.

In Lacan’s formulation, this discourse is the analyst’s discourse, wherein the split subject is permitted to speak in an attempt to address rather than repress the symptoms of their split. This permission is granted by the silence of α (its semiotic excess) that appears as a form

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of certainty in the symbolic, rendering the other existent and, often, the subject in the status of object. That is, it comprises a lack of lack, and will ultimately produce anxiety. However this emergence of the object that is certain and not barred cannot be measured empirically. Because the object is a remnant of the body and an effect of structure, it itself is lost and does not actually exist separately from the overarching structure: all objects are an inadequate substitution and there would be no objects without language. Capitalism busies itself trying to simulate and count what is otherwise unformulizable or packageable—the *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire. In this sense, the art object can be understood as an attempt to represent the *a* and the thing, which can only be presented as a void or absent cause. As technique, the space given to the speech act is informed by disparate knowledges (S2) but is not constrained to them. The object does not determine the subject's response, it only allows for a response to occur. What psychoanalysis attempts to produce through analytic encounters is a recognition of S1 as a determining framework, making S1 legible as a construction that ought not be confused for the entirety of the subject's reality. In the artistic discourse, this encounter has the capacity to confront rather than corroborate the professionalized curatorial paradigm.

DISCOURSE OF THE ARTIST

Discourse of hysteria

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \$ & \rightarrow & S1 \\ \uparrow \text{---} & & \text{---} \downarrow \\ a & / & S2 \end{array}$$

Discourse of the artist

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{artist} & \rightarrow & \text{curator} \\ \uparrow \text{-----} & & \text{-----} \downarrow \\ \text{artwork} & / & \text{public} \end{array}$$

What do we mean when we refer to split subjectivity, much less to the split subject of the artist? In psychoanalytic terms, the split (\$) constitutes the distinction between symbolization and the real (a), which is both cause of symbolization but also an internal limit to discourse. The split manifests between signifier (S1) and the impossibility of the signified—Lacan twists Saussure's work on the sign to argue that meaning is produced in *chains* of signifiers (S1→S2→S3...) and not through *stable* signifier/signified relations (S1↔S2). This lack of a stable or purely conscious self-presence is structural to subjectivity as inherent to signification, even as the ego attempts to reject the resulting lack. This understanding of discourse and subjectivity should have radical effects on how we occupy discourse. That is, if we accept the irrevocability between truth and knowledge, then the art object could itself inscribe a world of discourse. Thinking from a discursive analytic perspective puts more emphasis on art as a singular discursive situation and event imbued with multiple possibilities rather than a discrete object capable of retaining a specific meaning over time.

Specific to the artistic discourse, wherein the artist's position is conditioned by the same symptoms of the psychoanalytic subject, we find that this split is adequately exemplified by the anti-representational process briefly articulated above. In making art, the artist must repudiate the extant symbolic qualities of a material (e.g. their prior use-value) in order to bring about an artistic work (a). The prior symbolic qualities are not eliminated outright, but their primacy is contested so that the artwork may be distinguished from normative commodities or symbols that populate the master signifier of capitalism. In so doing, the artist is split by their subjugation to the capitalist social relation and their fidelity to artistic discourse. Although

the two overlap in many instances, ultimately artwork cannot be waged, for the coercions of the wage relation would subsume the art within the category of commodity or not-art. It is not just that commodities appear as noise (as raw material) in the artistic discourse, and that art appears as noise (non-commodity) within the capitalist discourse, but that our definition of art and creative practice *is precisely that which is excessive to capitalist sense-making*. The artist therefore makes art at a loss, against the obligation to fulfill conditions of sustenance and economic self-reproduction. The artwork is excessive to the capitalist social relation, it is useless rather than useful. Thus the artist navigates the compulsion to make art with the obligation to achieve sustenance.

One way in which the capitalist social relation and the artistic discourse overlap is precisely as an address to this split. Grants, funding, commercial opportunities all help solve the problem of sustenance in the name of art, and yet—even if the various conditions of these opportunities are not the same as the economic coercions of capital—they still demand adherence to a consistent master signifier. We find that the curatorial discourse, and the critical discourse that results from it, are both constructed according to what is legible (what makes sense) within capitalism. Symptoms could manifest as productivity, the pursuit of (discursive) capital, atomized competition, the valorization of the individual genius, the deferral of use- to exchange-value, and so on.

So how does the split subjectivity of the artist speak within the artistic discourse? Just as the agent itself is split, so is our framing of this particular discourse. In Lacanian terms, the discourse of the hysteric (where \$ is agent and S1 is receiver) possesses both an

emancipatory and a regressive capacity. We have above described discourses of *selection*, *justification*, and *interpretation*, and here we articulate a discourse of *protestation*. On one hand, the subject (\$) demands that S1 reorganize itself, shifting the terms of discourse to include that which was excluded. This is how the avant-gardes made arguments for the expansion of what could be considered art. On the other hand, the plea from artist to institution only reinforces the institution's capacity to respond, to act as a guarantor of what is sensible. We term this latter mode the *supplicative discourse*. And this is the mode which is predominant in post-conceptual artistic production today. Artists do not *argue* for the artistic status of their work so much as they *seek permission* for inclusion within extant institutional frameworks. Consider the sheer amount of writing undertaken in service of teaching applications, project proposals, exhibition submissions, etc. The terms of art are expanded solely at the level of content as some individual artists are permitted access to resources in the form of funding, recognition, or discursive capital. The overall form is not only retained, it is in fact emboldened by the plea issued to S1, recognizing S1 as an agent with both the power and the permission to make change.

REVOLUTIONIZING OUR POSITION

Using the framework of conceptual materialism paired with Lacan's four discourses, we have sketched out a heuristic for understanding the various terms and positions of postconceptual artistic discourse. As in psychoanalysis, our goal is to produce an emancipatory rupture, freeing the subject from the conditions of normative semiotic relationships. We see precedent for these ruptures in various historical avant-garde movements, but discursive conditions have

shifted so that the tactics that sustained these movements are now fully incorporated into the extant symbolic. In pursuit of a renewed symbolic, we articulate the powers and tendencies of the various actors within current artistic infrastructure, ultimately seeking to occupy an argumentative position in relation to the excessively-semiotic artwork.

Rigorous art after conceptualism marks the artist's attempt to take a conscious position within the discursive fields that produce the artist-identification in the first place. Although the transition from master's discourse to university discourse (just like the shift from feudal to capitalist economy) is in some sense "progress," its revolutionary aspirations fail in the pursuit of stable objectivity which completely evacuates the question of subjectivity and, with it, any subjective responsibility. The unconscious is never anyone's fault, but we are responsible for it because no one, not even the analyst, has more power than the subject to address their subjectivity. The question then is, how do we arrive at new significations, new formations, and the revolutionizing of discursive positions?

By recognizing the discursivity of artistic practice, and by using Lacanian discourse analysis to consider art's symbolic infrastructure, we find precedence for seizing the means of discursive production. The goal is not only to shift the positions of speakers and receivers so that the paradigm of curatorial discourse becomes the discourse of the artist, nor is our aim simply to replace one speaker with another so that a supplicative discourse becomes an argumentative one, but to intervene precisely at the point at which noise is made sensible. It is here that the discursive positions outlined above are fluid, recursively related to one another, as they simultaneously estrange and corroborate the

criteria that discriminate noise from meaning. Because art in the general sense already has the capacity to affect aesthetic and epistemological modalities, a revolutionary art can preempt new value forms and political symbolizations. In psychoanalytic terms, images come to stand in for signifiers as desire is displaced within the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of language. We can decipher art in a similar manner, through free association with the work (*a*) and the conversion of the image into text. However, these free associations are not made to uphold metaphoric narratives with arbitrary arcs and endings, nor to fall prey to the same "free association" that equivocates exchangeable commodities, but to induct the excessiveness of symbolic noise. The framework of conceptual materialism therefore proposes a formal analysis of the sign, tracing its contours beyond what is known and understood. In this way, art (*a*) is granted permission to remain a partial object or semiotic fragment, and the lack or split that results from creative expression is not compelled to be ideologically sutured. What is revolutionary about understanding artistic discourse constituted by semiotic fragments is, literally, the capacity to revolutionize one's position within discourse. Positions are not fixed so that the overarching paradigm is always categorized by the unchallenged terms of S1, or the purportedly complete justifications of S2, but retain fluidity as agents revolve in and out of speaking/receiving roles, always facilitated by the incomplete-endlessness of a (art).

Here the recursivity of artistic discourse comes to full light. Inasmuch as matter is often deemed to be a passive resource over which we have the power to control or exploit—and inasmuch as discourse is understood not as something we wield but as something that speaks through us and determines our ability to perceive or to

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value—then art's political capacity is realized precisely by reckoning with the materiality of discourse itself.

