

Nami Dunham
Graduate Seminar
B. Dungan

East of Eden

Eden

The work I've created this semester has been disparate both in concept and form, though I believe ultimately they have all come out of a similar place - from a need to see and to share. My projects have ranged from tight, realistic pencil drawings, to action based organization exercises, to conceptually driven, graphic announcement cards. The learning curve was extremely steep, and from where I was at this time last year (pre-Graduate school) to where I am now constitutes a real sea-change. My understanding of what art is and can be has been challenged. It has been shaped by my deepened understanding of what early conceptual artists were attempting to do, escape the white cube and all that it represents, as well as my "hind-sight is 20-20" vision of the reality of the art world and the culture it represents. The struggle that Conceptual Art (and in turn Conceptual Artists) have met in the face of the Art World largely mirrors what I see as my internal struggle between the ur-artist in me and the rational, thinking-artist. Early Conceptual Art is something that speaks to the utopian-minded, ur-me, but somehow I could never make the leap to be the mystic that Sol LeWitt proclaims, I believe accurately, Conceptual Artists to be (p 16¹). Lucy Lippard's essay "Escape Attempts" eloquently lays out both the 'escape attempts' as they happened and the eventual re-absorption of those escape attempts into the larger Art World, yet ends with a taste of hope. This largely mirrors the experience I had this year, and out of the several projects I've worked on this semester, I will offer thoughts on the first and the latest: my *Quixotic* gallery announcement cards, and the snapshot project I've been referring to as "*How Am I Not Myself?*"

A Quixotic Gallery - announcement cards

Communication (but not community) and distribution (but not accessibility) were inherent in Conceptual art. Although the forms pointed toward democratic outreach, the content did not. However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread)" (p31).

My project involving my invented venue, *A Quixotic Gallery*, felt much like this statement, and in a way, while an important stepping-stone, it is why I moved away from art that references art; it was ultimately too exclusive. In this project, I created announcement cards for my fake gallery that I felt would make good exhibitions, which were meant to exist in thought and imagination only, not in reality. The titles for these imagined shows came from lectures I had attended or readings for classes, which were

¹ There were no page numbers on the reading except to say that it appeared from p 16-40 in the book *Reconsidering the Object of Art*. I tried assigning page numbers based on that, but I think that there must have been a page of images only that didn't make it into our reader because my page numbers only made it up to 38. I will use my page numbering to let you know where quotes came from.

paired with groups of real artists who might very well illustrate the exhibition title. I used the graphic skills I had used as a one-time gallery in-house graphic designer to create plausible announcement cards for these shows. In a way, it was a dematerialized version of Lippard's own traveling exhibition (at one venue called 557,087), which earned her a nod in Artforum: "There is a total style to the show, a style so pervasive as to suggest that Lucy Lippard is in fact the artist and that her medium is other artists" (p29). If I was to list medium for these cards, it might say "archival ink, paper, artists." The thinking-artist in me felt satisfied with these cards, but they were limited in who could understand them or make connection with them. They alienate a portion of potential audience-members, just as much Conceptual art did in its attempt to reject Art (with a capital A). And while some of these artists did this by replacing "traditional formal concerns of composition, color, technique, and physical presence" with a "restructur[ed] perception and the process/product relationship of art, information and systems" (p30), they applied these substitutions to the arena of the Art World, not necessarily the world at large.

How Am I Not Myself?

Systems were laid over life the way a rectangular format is laid over the scene in paintings, for focus (p30). Sometimes, with the proper system overlaid, things that seem disparate will be shown to have commonality; the focus, once shifted, can be truly illuminating. In this project, I took a series of snapshots of my mother from approximately age 4 to age 30, and searched out snapshots from my own life where we are doing either the same basic activity or are making an identical gesture or expression. Though I did take snapshots of the snapshots as a form of documentation of the process, the act of looking was more where my artistic concern lay; the snapshots of snapshots were like the 'waste product' of the action². It was an amazing discovery how, through this system of the snap shot, I was able to see commonality between my mother's life and mine; photos of us being silly with friends; a pair of photographs that center on our hands making similar gestures; two faces making the same expression when doubled up in uncontrolled laughter. When sitting side by side, the fact of the photos almost dissolves the difference between the two experiences. What does it mean when something that you think is yours only (your smile, your body-language) turns out to have existed even before you? It makes me think: What is mine? Who am I? How can my individuality be individual if this person shares them (or shared them in the past)? And by extension, what do I have share with other people in this world who take snapshots? Perhaps someone looking at these images might recognize some snapshot of their own in there. We may seem different, but are we really? Aren't we all just humans, not just artists trapped by a white cube, but humans trapped by our humanness? Am I really just me? Couldn't I be you, too? These questions were what I was hoping to place the focus on.

East

The process this year has been more noteworthy than any of the projects pursued. While an 'object maker' by training, I have always had a very wary eye turned toward the Art

² Joseph Beuys quoted by L. Lippard (p31).

World, ever doubtful of its glossy, candy colored offerings if only you could provide the correct password. The differences between buying in and selling out, of appropriation and originality, the importance of the personal versus political have always been a part of my inner dialogue. Knowing that even the most valiant attempt by artists in the late 60's at solving "the problems of artists being bought and sold so easily, along with their art" (p28) through the vehicle of Conceptual, non-art, and knowing that it did eventually become part of the Art vernacular, much as Lippard suspected it would³, could be a discouraging, career-ending thought. But Lippard hasn't given up hope. Her final thought in this essay is, "The process of discovering the boundaries didn't stop with the expansion of what "art" can mean. The escape was temporary. Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell, but parole is always a possibility" (p38). For me, parole isn't necessarily what I'm striving for. Nor am I searching for or pushing boundaries. Rather, I'm looking for a way to bring everything and everybody into the cell with me, because, you know, we are all human and share that prison necessarily. We might as well realize that we all inhabit it together.

³ "the art world is probably going to be able to absorb conceptual art as another 'movement' and not pay too much attention to it" (p 37).