

Idea as Art –
Intangible Art and the Creation of Value

Silja Burch Wiederkehr

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Executive Master in Art Market Studies
University of Zurich

Hintere Bahnhofstrasse 79
CH-5000 Aarau
siljawiederkehr@hotmail.com
079 467 18 57

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Sebastian Egenhofer

Statement of Authorship:

I hereby certify that this master thesis has been composed by myself, and describes my own work, unless otherwise acknowledged in the text. All references and verbatim extracts have been quoted, and all sources of information have been specifically acknowledged. This master thesis has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree.

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1. Introduction

The main interest when choosing the topic for my present master's thesis lay in the concept of *Idea* as art and its market. I wanted to think about what happens to an artwork when it consists solely as an idea and enters the market in this form. Can this artistic strategy succeed? Is this work tradable? Why would a dealer be interested in representing an artist whose work does not appear to be a tangible commodity? What might be the gain for an artist to work this way and produce artworks with no objecthood, creating no physical objects whatsoever? What are the roles of the other players, apart from the artists and dealers, in the art market to support such kinds of art: the role of the collectors, the public institutions, the art critics, and lastly not to forget the artist's colleagues? Is objectless art sustainable and if so, why? If I am interested in these kinds of concepts of art, there might be other people who are too: people who can afford to collect an idea.

In the following paper I will outline different aspects of this concept and focus on three different artists including examples of their artworks. I consider each of the three artists through a slightly different approach in order to describe examples of their work. This is necessary due to the arguments that are developed from their works. The goal is to propose arguments in favour of the concept, but also to show more disadvantageous aspects of the it.

Through the historical foundation in the first chapter, on the rise of the concept in Conceptual Art of the 1960s and early 1970s, I try to give an overview of the appearance of an idea behind it. I show the historical and social context particular to this time period that made it possible for such a concept to evolve. The role of the different players who were involved in the process of this emergence will be discussed. Other artists working at that time will be taken into account. This chapter functions as an introduction to the context and for the following chapters. For this introductory chapter, it is crucial to note the far more general overview of place and named protagonists/artists. The work and the practice of three selected artists will be examined in detail subsequently. The selection of the artists and the works chosen for the examination might appear eclectic, but it is based on my interest in all three *oeuvres*. The working practice of these artists seemed to be exemplary to show the argument of this present thesis.

The first artist I will discuss in more detail is Yves Klein and his *Oeuvre immatérielle*. Even though the art historical discourse considers him part of the *Nouveau Réalisme*, the chosen work under discussion has the conceptual approach that gained my interest to inspect it. The argument that I will try to develop here is the exchange of value of this work. As a French artist, mainly active in the 1950s and early 1960s until his death, Klein was one of the first European artists to work without (almost) any physical material, which made it very interesting for me to draw a comparison

to the work by Michael Asher. An artist a bit younger than Klein and living in the United States, Asher started his artistic work in the 1960s and was a follower of the early Conceptualists, but at the same time, way more radical than many. Thus, Michael Asher is the second exemplary artist I will have a look at. For a long time, I have been an admirer of his work. I think he is the perfect artist to consider when questioning the commodity status of art. From the beginning, Asher created works that vanished after the end of the exhibition period, and I have never (nor have many others) seen a work of his in person. There is no use of looking at photographs depicting his exhibition settings, as the viewer will not see any art object in the common sense of the word.¹ This allows Asher to be a great example of an artist to discuss the argument of this paper.

I saw the need to bring in a contemporary position to the discussion, to have some sort of outlook on how sustainable the concept of *Idea* as art is in present times. The most interesting artist in this context seemed to be the British-German artist Tino Sehgal, a truly conceptual working artist, and not to be mistaken as a performing artist. Sehgal creates works that – the way Michael Asher does – are only existing during the exhibition period, but on the contrary to Asher, who neglected a market approach, Sehgal has always been very forward in trading his work. And, Sehgal has been successful with it, if you believe the newspaper articles. Unfortunately, I do not have testimony from Sehgal's dealers, as dealers are rarely open about the capacity of an artist's market.

Nevertheless, counting the public institutions which publicly own Sehgal's work, there seems to be a big demand.

It is my opinion that all three artists are more or less great examples of how artists employ different strategies to overcome the object status of art, but not the commodity status. This is done intentionally, willingly or with an ironic twist. Through the course of the development of my thesis I will show whether the actual intent of the artistic practice was a lucky coincidence, an ironic note or a serious work strategy. I believe that all three artists pursued different goals, and succeeded more or less, maybe did not even want to be successful and solved it otherwise. The reception of their work differs a lot. All three artists are much respected by the art community. Conclusively, it is important to note that I have not attempted to extensively describe the artists's *oeuvres*. There will be no interpretation of the works I have selected from the artists' *oeuvres*, nor a comparison to link the artists to each other by means of contextual analysis. The artists and their exemplary works are considered to develop the theoretical argument of the creation of value.

¹ To make a case, I will not include any photographs of or documentation on the discussed works of all artists in an appendix of the paper. The text on the example work by Klein is written in the paper itself. Asher's works are described also in detail in the particular chapters. On Sehgal's works, there exist neither photographs nor documents, as I will outline later on. I can understand that the reader has the wish to gain visible proof on the descriptions, but including photographs would basically undermine my argument.

Behind (and before) all these artists working in and since the 1960s and 1970s, there are two artists to be mentioned who were important for the concept of *Idea* as art: Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. Neither artist will receive his own chapter in this present thesis, but are bore in mind whilst the discussion of the subject goes on. Duchamp wanted to stress the system of how art was being circulated by creating an object that was not previously considered art and by putting this in the art context to declare it as art. By doing so, he tried to get rid of art.

The first artist who used the principles of mass production to make art and by creating series from originals was then Andy Warhol. While Yves Klein was still convinced that his artistic intention conferred value to the artworks, Warhol went one step further.² For him it was obvious that an artwork gained its value only through the amount of money someone was willing to pay for it.³ He had his factory mass-produce endless series of prints with the same subject and put these on the market. With the devaluation of the creative act, Warhol emphasized the importance of the idea over its realization and with this he became one of the pathfinders of Conceptual Art.⁴

Since the material aspect, including its adaption and processing, has continuously and successively lost its impact, today the main catalysator of art and the art market is innovation. Beginning in the 20th century, it has become clear that the dematerialization of the artwork is the core of the art. It is now all about phrasing an artistic aim and selling ideas.⁵ As said before, the emphasis of this paper is on the artists who are innovators by working with the basis of *Idea* as art and are therefore artists who try to materialize nothingness and create value with this strategy.

2 See Dossi, 2007, p. 226

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 227

5 Ibid., p. 229

2. Conceptual Art in the 1960s and Early 1970s

This following introductory chapter undertakes a description on how the concept of *Idea* as art evolved in the 1960s and early 1970s including the factors that were crucial for this development. An overview is given of the the underlying elements that led to the success of Conceptual Art in the art market during this period of time. The concept of 'dematerialization' is the starting point for this study, and it looks into the following questions: „What is left to sell when the art work doesn't crystallize in a permanent body?“⁶ and „Could Conceptual Art evade commodification?“

2.1. Introduction: A Historical Embedment

From the mid 1960s until the early 1970s the movement of Conceptual Art, which was emerging from two directions - *Idea* as art and *Action* as art⁷ - took over the discussion of what art was and what art could do as well as how and where it should be presented. It was also a statement on and negation of the status quo of the perception of art that was dominant in the public discussion. In fact, it altered the whole conception of art. This new approach was somehow 'in the air', and it was strongly related to the social demands and cataclysms, which were activated in the United States, but also in Western Europe during this decade. Anti-establishment fervor focused on the demythologization and decommodification of art and on the need for an independent or 'alternative' art that could not be bought and sold by the sector that owned everything. At the same time, through this 'new' art young artists formulated a criticism against the institutional refusal to present contemporary art that was not pictorial or, as Marcel Duchamp - the early and virtual originator of Conceptual Art - put it: - 'retinal'.⁸ Also, Conceptual Art has often been seen as a reaction to the changes in working conditions that are due to the development of information technology, which holds the role of the main production force in modern, highly developed societies.

This chapter consists of eight parts, in which the different players who were the main catalysts for the movement of Conceptual Art will be described beginning with a short description of the term 'Conceptual Art'. The analysis of the fundamental factors for the development of Conceptual Art is constricted to several boundaries. First, there is a bias toward New York City and Germany. At that time, New York City was the center for the artistic activity of Conceptual Art and Germany - in particular the Rhineland area around Dusseldorf - formed a fertile soil for artists interested in

6 Egenhofer, 2011, Lecture „Conceptual Art and its Markets“, p. 1

7 Lippard, 1973, p. ix

8 See Naumann, 1999, p. 215

Conceptual Art. Therefore, some German artists concurrently discovered a similar setting to that of their U.S. counterparts. Later will be described how the artists found important supporters of their art in Western Europe. The second limitation of this paper is the selection of artists. The overview here is on the rise of Conceptual Art and the artists, which were originally selected by Sophie Richard.⁹ Her book constitutes the main source of information for this research paper. The third limit is related to the first and the second: those considered in this study are either U.S. or German artists. However, the discussed artists will not be presented in depth or described individually. This methodical choice may be justified by the fact that the protagonists are well known. They were important figures of this time period and are still today. The artistic development during the approximate 'six years' between 1966 and 1972¹⁰ is the subject of this academic research. Lastly, neither the post-conceptual artists of the 1970s, nor the work of the neo-conceptual artists of the 1980s and 1990s will be discussed. As mentioned in the introduction, I will later on outline a contemporary position with Tino Sehgal. Conceptual Art comprises different categories such as: Minimalism, Land Art, Earth Art, Happening, Fluxus, Text and Literature, Audio, Video and Performance, which were all defined through academic consideration at a later date in art history. This chapter does not distinguish between these various classifications, since at the time the art was being created the artists did not particularly categorize themselves. Klein and Sehgal, considered for the later analysis, deal with performative acts, but are not performance artists.

2.2. A Short Description of the Term 'Conceptual Art' and the Concept Behind *Idea* as Art

Conceptualism or Conceptual Art emerged in the 1960s and was the field of study for different artists. Sol LeWitt proposed a first definition in 1967¹¹ and even though the notion of Conceptual Art has been proclaimed from different sides since the early 1960s it was not until the publication of LeWitt's text that the promotion of Conceptual Art as a *Zeitgeist* has gained public acknowledgment. Its central claim is that art is a 'concept', rather than a material object. There are strong precedents of Conceptualism in the work of the artist Marcel Duchamp, who was well known in the New York area of that time.

Conceptualism is shaped by four basic tenets. The first is that the artwork is an idea, or concept, rather than a material object. To understand the *idea* that shapes an artwork is to understand the

9 Richard, 2009

10 See Lippard, 1973

11 See 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', in: Artforum, Vol. 10, Summer 1969, p. 79-83, in: Kunsttheorie im 20. Jahrhundert, 1998, p. 1023-1026

work itself - so it is possible to understand an artwork without ever having seen it in its physical appearance. Conceptualists deliberately blur the distinction between language and art when they define the artwork as an idea or concept. Regardless of whether a Conceptualist artwork employs wood or canvas, the real work is the idea and the language used to construct, manipulate and explore it. The artist's intention and the spectator's response are an integral part of the work itself. This has radically affected the materials used in Conceptualist Art, and the way such works are made.

Conceptualism also criticises the commercialisation of art. In a capitalist economy, commercial value is attached to tradable objects, especially those which support and endorse current social arrangements. Designating an object, as 'art' can be a sure means of increasing its material value, so it can be bought, sold and insured for enormous sums. When Conceptualists assert that the idea is the artwork and not the material object, they hope to disrupt this trade, or at least problematize it. Finally, by emphasizing the concept over the artwork, Conceptualists attempt to disrupt the process by which ownership translates into social status and cultural authority. Individuals become important collectors because of their wealth, not because of what they know about art. However, institutions such as museums and galleries can shape and influence our experience of art through their powers of selection and omission.

2.3. The Role of the Artists as Intellectuals

Apart from Michael Asher who never was a leading protagonist, artists in the U.S. like Lawrence Weiner, Mel Bochner, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham, Bruce Naumann et al. and artists in Germany such as Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, Hanne Darboven and Hans Haacke to name a few, were all starting to work in the early 1960s around the idea that the idea itself could be art. Next to Yves Klein there were also important figures in France, The Netherlands, Italy, Great Britain, Belgium and Switzerland, who tried out a new implementation of their ideas for art. What made these artists differ from the main fields of artists who were working at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, was the negligence of the artistic and pictorial composition in a painting.¹²

It was a common understanding, between the followers of the conceptual approach to art, that the way to elaborate their ideas into art was done in an intellectual way that could include any of the following: conveyed information by means of language and text, sketches, drawings, models, or documenting photographs, happenings and films. Conceptual artists were also using new

¹² „Artists have finally been accepted as idea men and not merely as craftsmen with poetic thoughts.“ Seth Siegelaub, 1969, in: Alberro, 2003, p. 152

technology to separate them from the traditional ways of making art and they advertised their art through such technological means (see for example the „The Xerox Book“ catalogue-exhibition in 1968, organized by Seth Siegelau¹³). The motto „You don't need galleries to show an idea“ can be applied to the techniques used to show how the art works have found their way to the public perception. Two important events happened that were crucial for the acknowledgment of Conceptual Art by the intelligentsia. The first two mixed exhibitions in the U.S. were held at colleges.¹⁴ Both shows were followed by public symposia with the artists. Artists explaining and debating their work was a totally new approach. These public discussions held in educational surroundings demonstrate the will of the artists to engage with the audience. Many artists were also engaged in teaching, writing, and curating. There was a lot of interest and trust between the artists including an exchange of information about their respective work, which shows the strong network that was established in the second part of the 1960s. Organizing group shows together was a great catalyst for this network and the group identification of the artists with one dealer.¹⁵

Spreading the work was a task, on which as an example the art dealer Konrad Fischer lay a weight on, by the production of „multiples“ pieces, which were done with a high edition number. This art object was small, worked very well as an example for representing the original artwork and it was also cheap and affordable for people who could not afford an original artwork. The high number of editions also allowed for the distribution of the work and can therefore be seen a promoter and an advertisement of the artist's work. Joseph Beuys, who saw the advantage of the multiples, also followed this practice..¹⁶ However, Duchamp took this lead before anybody else.

2.4. The Role of the Art Dealers: Exhibitions in Commercial Dealer Galleries as a First Step to Success – The 'Art Enablers' of this Period

A key role for promoting the wide acceptance and early understanding of the importance of the new born Conceptual Art in the public eye, was the role of some important art dealers who soon began to show conceptually working artists and established a successful business with them. These dealers mainly included: Seth Siegelau but also Paula Cooper and Leo Castelli in New York City, Konrad Fischer in Dusseldorf (as the most important figure in West Germany), but also Alfred Schmela

¹³ See Alberro, 2003, p. 130-151

¹⁴ February-March 1968: Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner at the Laura Knott Gallery of the Bradford Junior College in Massachusetts; follow-up show from April-June 1968 at the Windham College in Putney in Vermont. See Lippard, 1973, p. 40-48 and Alberro, 2003, p. 16-24

¹⁵ Alberro, 2003, p.153

¹⁶ See Zentralarchiv des internationalen Kunsthandels, 16, 2009, p. 74

and Heiner Friedrich, who had his galleries in Munich and later a second one in Cologne, and Paul Maenz in Cologne. The dealer Ileana Sonnabend, who was working in Paris and had a strong connection to New York City, as well as Yvon Lambert joined in dealing with Conceptualists at an early date. There were also dealers in London (Nigel Greenwood, Lisson Gallery, Jack Wendler), Amsterdam (Art & Project), Brussels (MTL) and specially Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin. In Switzerland one could list Rolf Preisig in Basel and Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich, who soon became facilitators. Some of these dealers were actually more dealer-curators than art sellers in that they provided a platform where the work could be displayed and gave the artists the gallery space for free use. In addition, they secured material for on-site productions and helped organize the necessary equipment for their installations or for happenings. These galleries actually functioned like artist's studios abroad. Thus, these young dealers encouraged the innovative working methods of young artists and most of the dealers were working with the artists rather than with objects. This led to new production practices such as catalogue- or magazine-exhibitions, in situ productions, working outside the gallery space or occupying collector's houses with joint group shows and happenings.¹⁷

The development of the notion that the concept on which a work is based can prevail over its physical realization and privileging the ideas of artists over material objects - this „new art“ - led to the formation of innovative exhibition and dealing practices.¹⁸ It is not surprising that the dealers who represented this new art were young, well educated, curious and bold, wanting to do the opposite of what the traditional and conservative dealers were doing with the pictorial art. They didn't know if they would earn money by representing these artists at the beginning, but they trusted their intelligence believing that this constituted the art that the postwar generation would understand, would want to see in the museum or even acquire. Dealing with and representing these artists was in a way also a reaction to and protest against traditional institutions, which were not open to radical new positions.

It is surprising that, despite the rejection of the art object in favour of an emphasis on the conceptual process, there were dealers found who really supported the artists. Conceptualism, because of its dematerialization, seemed to challenge the work's value as a means for economic exchange. It seemed to suggest a hostile relationship to the market and the commodification of art, but it didn't.¹⁹ It is interesting to see that Lucy Lippard, as early as 1973, expressed her disillusion with such hopes.²⁰ This paradox also becomes clear in Alexander Alberro's study of the role of Seth Siegelau, where he underlines the paradoxical status of Conceptual Art, which on the one hand

17 See Richard, 2009, p. 261

18 Ibid., p. 33

19 Ibid., p. 35

20 Lippard, 1973, p. 263

challenged the traditional frameworks of the art world, but on the other hand was dependent on marketing and advertising. Such artists and their work first gained supportive attention from dealers, who weren't necessarily art dealers in the today's understanding, but took over this role since the time was demanding for it and their artist colleagues needed a place to show and sell.

2.5. The Role of the 'Network'

The Conceptualist *Zeitgeist* could not have been such an important new thing if it had not been for the 'Network', which the conceptually working artists established, not only throughout the United States, but also across the Atlantic Ocean. Collaborating and testing new ways of exhibiting their new ideas in newly found forms were basically the net that kept the artists together and created interest in each other's work. What Sophie Richards described as the important role of the network of the conceptually working artists of the United States and Europe also becomes evident in Alberro's publication, where he outlines the prolific collaboration between the artists living and working in New York and being represented by one of the main galleries for Conceptual Art in New York and Western Europe. The dealer-curators in Germany had a strong interest in inviting people like Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson and Richard Long to put together a show. The U.S. artists on the other hand also had a strong incentive to take part in the development in Europe, as their art seemed to be much supported there.

One fact was crucial for the establishment of this network: As especially younger galleries or venues did not have a big budget to ship the artworks, it was usually the artists who travelled to the places of exhibition to realize their works in situ. They executed their work outside their studio.²¹ Curators, art critics and publishers like Walther König participated and engaged in this network.

2.6. The Role of Art Fairs: New Forms of Marketing

With the decision to open up another gallery art fair in Dusseldorf, as a reaction to the demand that only a few galleries could show at the Cologne Art Fair *Kunstmarkt*, which was first established in 1967, a new platform of selling art was born. Cologne tried to position its art fair as the most important one, but because it only allowed German galleries to take part which were members of the VPDK - the gallery collective - the path was free to open an art fair that was rather international. This led to the inauguration of the first *Art Basel* in 1970. The series of exhibitions *Prospects*, which took place at the *Kunsthalle* in Dusseldorf, were launched by art dealer Konrad Fischer and

²¹ Lippard and Chandler, 1968, p. 31-36

art critic Hans Strelow and took place in 1968, 1969, 1971, 1973 and 1976. An international jury decided on the international dealer galleries, and not on the artists. This was an original concept.²² The art fair took place one month before the Cologne Art Fair in 1968 and soon gained the public attention.

The *Prospect* exhibitions were not intended to be an art fair nor a group show. It was rather, as the exhibition catalogue stated, an „international preview of art from the avant-garde galleries“. As the *Kunsthalle's* brochure explained, the dealers who were showing at *Prospects* intended to attract another clientele than what the *Kunstmarkt* had drawn attention to: „(...) the information on the current trends on the international art scene is necessary, because the art lover ought to know what is really up-to-date, what he can expect to see in the coming season in the galleries of the world, the first intermediaries between the new art and the public.“²³

The dealers wanted to attract new collectors and this new form of concept promised to do so.

2.7. The Role of Private Collectors

Conceptual Art attracted collectors who had a different approach to collecting art than the traditional collectors. „The economic aspect of Conceptual Art is perhaps the most interesting. From the moment when ownership of the work did not give its owner the great advantage of control of the work acquired, this art was implicated in turning back on the question of the value of its private appropriation. How can a collector possess an idea? But, in fact, this question was generally 'superseded,' the artist gave his signature, or a certificate of ownership, even in publicity on behalf of the reputation of the purchaser.“²⁴

Younger collectors started early to buy art from Conceptual artists. Not only because it was hip, it was avant-garde, but also it was the opposite of what had been collected ten years earlier. Also, it was affordable. Apart from the conclusion to rather buy the idea and not the physical object, conceptual artists were still quite unknown or only known to a younger public, such as the intellectuals of the 1960s. And it lies within the concept of Conceptual Art that the *Idea* is purchased, rather than the fabricated artwork. One could only purchase the certificate of authenticity with the artist's signature on it and have it built at home, following the artist's instructions. Collectors would still care about of having the possibility to display the work somewhere. But, since the artwork was in reality sometimes only visible as a sheet of paper,

22 Richard, 2009. p. 80

23 Prospect 68, Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1968. translation in: Richard, 2009, p. 79

24 See Seth Siegelau, interview with Michel Claura, December 1973, in: Alberro, 2003, p. 153

drawing or as a text, the works did not have high prices. „The artists who are trying to do non-object art are introducing a drastic solution to the problems of artists being bought and sold so easily, along with their art.... The people who buy a work of art they can't hang up or have in their garden are less interested in possession. They are patrons rather than collectors“.²⁵

„There existed the hope that Conceptual Art would be able to avoid the general commercialization (...) which was for the most part unfounded. It seemed in 1969 that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a Xerox sheet referring to a past event (...), a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition (...), words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market orientation. Three years later, the major Conceptualists were selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe. They are presented by (and still more unexpected - showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries. Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object (easily made work, catalogues and magazine pieces, primarily art that can be shown inexpensively and unobtrusively in infinite locations at one time), art and artist in a capitalist society remain luxuries.“²⁶ Finally, I can conclude what then and there seemed to be the exchange value: You buy an idea, and you gain education.

2.8. The Role of the Public Institutions

It does not come as a surprise, after outlining the important role of the dealer-curators, that the public institutions started organizing exhibitions of conceptual artists, after having recognized the intelligent quality of the dealer-curated exhibitions and the satisfying success at the *Kunstmarkt*, the *Prospects 68, 69, 71* etc, the *documenta 4* in 1969 and *documenta 5* in 1972 and other defining group shows of Conceptual Art. The shows in the museums were pushed by curators and museum directors who themselves belonged to the network of conceptual artists, such as Harald Szeemann's path breaking group exhibition at *Kunsthalle Bern* in 1969 „When Attitudes Become Form“, which travelled afterwards to Krefeld and London and unified all the conceptually working artists who became the heavyweights of Conceptual Art.²⁷ With Kynaston McShine, curator at the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York City, was also an excellent advocate who organized a show on Conceptual Art as early as 1966.²⁸ The practices of the dealer-curators were progressively taken over by

25 Lippard, 1973, p. xiv

26 Ibid., p. 263

27 Yves Klein's 'Oeuvre immatérielle' was part of the show.

28 'Primary Structures', Jewish Museum, New York. It is said that McShine was acquainted well with critic and curator Lucy Lippard during the 1960s. There again existed a strong personal network.

curators and directors of public institutions, but when comparing the amount of shows organized by dealers to shows organized by institutions, it gets unmistakably clear that it was the dealers' merit that the reputation of Conceptual Art spread.²⁹ Hence, the new approaches were originally created by artists and art dealers and not by museums. Two thirds of all the shows of Conceptual Art organized in the U.S. and Western Europe between 1966 and 1977 were curated by art dealers.³⁰ Moreover, there were not many museums acquiring contemporary art for their collection after the war, if they did, they put the focus more on Pop Art or Abstract Expressionism. But the prices for Conceptual Art at the end of the 1960s were reasonable enough. A few museums can be named here where the acquisition budget was small which made the possibility of acquiring the still affordable Conceptual Art interesting and the museum directors saw the potential in it.³¹ These museums included: The *Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach*, *Kunstmuseum Luzern*, the *Stedelijk Museum* in Amsterdam and the *Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum* in Eindhoven (which mainly collected conceptualist artists from The Netherlands) and others.³² When the collections of museums such as the *Ludwig Museum* in Cologne or *Kunstmuseum Basel* incorporated Conceptual Art, the reason for this lay in the donation of private collections which were given to these museums as gifts. Additionally, it was important for artists that works of art were included in public collections to gain exposure. This is why some artists, like Hanne Darboven for example, were giving works to museums as gifts. One must also consider the low storage and handling costs involved for the museums collection when the work of art purchased consisted of an instruction manual on a sheet of paper.

2.9. Outlook: Success in the Art Market

This chapter tried to pick up the following questions about how the art market, dealers and collectors reacted to Conceptual Art: Could the artists and the art dealers earn money with it? Did the private collectors and also the institutions buy this kind of art? Was it successful as a means of making money out of it? Was the underlining idea of the concept „Ideas alone can be works of art“³³, with which many artists from that era identified themselves, sustainable? If the selling and buying of art makes art a commodity, with which these artists did not want to be identified anymore, would then there not have been the consequent step to undertake the total withdrawal of

29 See Richard, 2009, p. 17-19

30 Ibid.

31 The prices for Conceptual Art were by the end of the 1960s reasonable enough. Compare Richard, 2009, Appendix p. 332-338

32 See Richard, 2009, Appendix p. 302-313

33 Sol LeWitt, 1969, in: Harrison and Woods, 1999, p. 1023

the process of making art in order to quit taking part in this process? Or, if the object of art is reduced to the idea written on a sheet of paper, or photocopies of an action, to whom exactly did these artists intend to sell the works? If the collectors consider these early conceptual works as sustainable and worth buying, what kind of works were in fact purchased and why?

When analyzing the secondary market nowadays, two things become obvious: first, the leading and influential figures during the high time of the Conceptual Art in the 1960s and 1970s are the singular artists whose works show up in today's auction sales regularly: Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth to list just a few important ones. The prices their works sell for depend on the elaboration of the *Idea*. What is still very sellable are the works that have been realized, and not so much preliminary drawings and sketches. These prices are set on quite a low estimate.³⁴ Secondly, some artists have completely disappeared from the market. This might have two explanations. Their particular approach to the concept of the *Idea* as art was not sustainable or not interesting enough, or they quit making art because they wouldn't want to enter the market conditions. They would then have followed through with the prior intention, which seemingly underlined the whole concept of Conceptual Art: reduce the art to the idea, and the idea remains nothing but the idea.

As Alberro puts it in his publication, the standard accounts that assumed that Conceptual Art wanted to negate the commodity nature of art, is mythical.³⁵ Lucy Lippard argued, that the Conceptual Art movement had lost its innocence, had failed its attempt to eliminate the commodity status of the art object.³⁶ It has to be stated, that the artists themselves and also their dealers were always seeking to market the art. There was just the question of how to deal with the problem of how a collector would be able to purchase, and possess a work, and therefore how ownership could be transferred and the collector could be able to own an authentic art object - even when it was no longer an art object in the conventional sense. This was solved by developing the transfer of 'signature' of the artist, or a 'certificate of authenticity of ownership' for the work, to the collector.³⁷

34 See www.artprice.com

35 Alberro, 2003, p. 4

36 Lippard, 1973, p. 263

37 Alberro, 2003, p. 4

2.10. Conclusion

The process behind establishing a network of artists and art dealers may be concluded in two points: first, make the Conceptual Art publicly known, and second through broader attention, sell. It cannot be denied that there existed a strong commercial interest by both the dealers and the artists. The works were exhibited in galleries to gain the interest of collectors. People like Konrad Fischer, who's importance cannot be stressed enough, or Paul Maenz in Germany - he organized the two shows „Serielle Formationen“ and „Dies alles Herzchen (...)“ in 1967³⁸ (which were the two shows named as starting points for the idea of dealer-curators) and characters like Seth Siegelaub in New York City and his acquaintance Lucy Lippard (who were very active in exhibiting, networking, advertising, curating and writing about Conceptual Art) helped to pave the way for shows in institutions.³⁹ The dealers who represented conceptual artists seemed to have three goals: provide a venue, „make“ the artists they believed in and promote them to the public, the press and the institutions. Dealers like Seth Siegelaub were convinced of the importance of publicity and what arose from a public platform. In that sense, these galleries were the first of what nowadays one can call „programmatic“ galleries with dealers who discover artists and advocate them materially and psychologically.

For a final conclusion, the following six factors can be summarized for why the Conceptual Art of the 1960s and early 1970s was successful in the means of the market:

1. The Pop Artists specially led by Andy Warhol and his work, were pioneers who paved the way for the next generation of artists who were wanting to find new ways of making art. The dematerialization of art objects, where it is postulated that the artist may construct the work, where the work may be fabricated, or where the work need not to be built, and each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist⁴⁰ arises from the idea that the idea is the machine. It is the opposite of what the Abstract Expressionists were doing. The conceptually working artists wanted their art to be accessible and distributed. “The new work is not connected with a precious object - it is accessible to as many people as are interested. (...) It can be dealt with by being torn out of its publication and inserted into a notebook or stapled to the wall - or not torn out at all - but any such

38 See Richard, 2009, p. 17

39 e.g. „557,087“ at Seattle Art Museum in Seattle in 1969 (cur. by Lucy L. Lippard and travelled to Vancouver and Buenos Aires), „Information“ at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970 (cur. By Kynaston McShine) or the „6th Guggenheim International Exhibition 1971“ at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1971 (cur. by Diane Waldman). See Richard, 2009, p. 17/18

40 See Lawrence Weiner, 1969, in: Lippard, 1973, p. xvii

decision is unrelated to the art.⁴¹

2. There existed avant-garde art dealers in New York and in Western Germany, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland who were interested in selling this kind of art, who were convinced that it was a fundamental development and who reacted before the most of the academics did. This conceptual art first made its way through commercial galleries. Especially younger, intellectual buyers started collecting.

3. The institutional interest had arisen with the first gallery exhibitions and not a long time later the first museum shows were curated.

4. The artists themselves played an important role, as they would write about their art, explaining it, and draw the public attention to it. Publishing texts in art magazines or catalogues helped the proclamation and advertisement that led to more people gaining an overall understanding of what the artists were doing.

5. The network that the players built up together was a catalyst that helped establish the artists' names and success in exhibiting and selling abroad.

6. The work production means were a mechanical fabrication. The artwork was still a commodity and the artists' intention was even more to make money by selling the work. Though it was done under a different precondition: physicality of the work was not essential. An idea itself does not need to be built, handled, shipped, even insured, nor restored; it never breaks nor can be destroyed. But then again, the idea only, without any physical body cannot be shown unless the gallery space stays empty.⁴²

3. Thoughts on an Intangible Artwork and Yves Klein

3.1. Introduction

This chapter engages in how a conceptual work – conceived in the early years of the 1960s - a work that exists only as information, description or story, can answer the problems in art historical context, as a collectible item, and under the pressure of the demand of the market. What might be the significance of a non-materialistic work that is being perceived through tales and documentation only? What was the scientific discourse's appraisal, the collectors' aim, the institutional standard and the market's valuation? First and foremost, what was the artistic strategy behind the creation? Under which parameters can it be discussed? And lastly, can such a work overcome the status of

41 Joseph Kosuth, quoted in: Robert Barry, Interview with Arthur R. Rose, in: 'Four Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, Weiner', Arts Magazine, 43, February 4, 1969, p. 22-23, in: Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.): Kunsttheorie im 20. Jahrhundert, Vol. 2, Verlag Gerd Hatje, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1998, p. 1028/1029

42 See chapters on Michael Asher and Tino Sehgal.

commodity or what could be its value? This chapter is an attempt to summarize the complex and difficult aspects of an *Idea* as artwork. The basic deliberation to implement these questions was the decision to use one of the most abstract conceptual works of that time as an example. A work that exists only as an idea and denies all materiality, a non-objective artwork, captured, exhibited and traded only through story-telling only: Yves Klein's 'Oeuvre immatérielle' from 1962. As this paper localizes its main field of study in the high time of Conceptual Art from the middle of the 1960s until the middle of the 1970s, and as the exhibition 'Live in your head. How attitudes become form' in 1969 in the *Kunsthalle Bern*, curated by Harald Szeemann, is still considered nowadays as one of the most important exhibitions to give an extensive overview of the conceptually working artists during that decade, it became evident that one of the most radical works within that exhibition was the perfect example to illustrate the above described questions for this paper.

3.2. A Definition of the Term *Oeuvre immatérielle*: The *Idea* as the Artwork

The term *immaterial* was postulated by the French post-structuralist philosopher and curator Jean-François Lyotard.⁴³ *Immaterial* is the opposite of material and refers to an entity that is neither physical nor tangible. One of the most discussed aspects of an intangible artwork is the anti-art approach; the non-existence of material and the pure, original idea transfer to the beholder by means of notional activity. As it is impossible to transfer the original thought of an idea from the head of the artist to the head of the beholder, the artist has to make use of other tools to communicate: words, scripture or sketches. In the Conceptual Art practice, the original idea often resulted in the execution and construction of this idea, even though the completion had not to be carried out by the artist himself, but by an assistant or gallery employee, by a museum technician or collection manager, by a printer (advertisement, invitation card), documentary photographer or film maker. Sol LeWitt's claim is commonly agreed on: that - conceptually thinking - the artwork does not even have to be brought to life. However, in the Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s, many of the works were indeed executed by someone and somewhere: in institutions, galleries, collections, in the landscapes and cities, in the artist's studio as preliminary sketches or in publications. Non-material or *immaterial* artworks on the contrary do not intend to become material at all. In their anti-art approach, the aim is to be conveyed by story telling only, thus no secondary documents such as photographs or texts should be employed. In this understanding, the artistic experience happens in the beholders head and the art comes to life as an esthetical examination. This deep involvement of the beholder in the art process and in the creation of meaning shall evolve

43 Lyotard curated in 1985 the show 'Les Immatérieux' in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

without being able to perceive the work as an object: no materialization is intended nor needed. But then again with all these requirements in the back of our heads, how can an immaterial artwork survive?

3.3. Yves Klein: the Concept of an Intangible Artwork

Throughout his oeuvre, Yves Klein was on the search for the 'Immaterial', a search that was related to the Neodadaism of the French Nouveaux Réalistes and the different forms of „reductive“ modernism, which has been practiced in the 1960s in the United States.⁴⁴ At the end of 1955 in Paris, Klein exhibited monochromatic paintings at Colette Allendy. At the same time, he started to work on the canvases and objects in deep blue. He realized that different colors of the paintings would distract the audience. His main goal was to show color in its purity. In his lectures at the Sorbonne University in 1959, he explains that he has discovered the 'immateriality' during his work on the color, reducing the painting to visualize color.⁴⁵ The crucial point is that Klein developed the idea of immateriality of art by studying the history of paintings, the work of important painters such as Giotto, Delacroix and Ingres, but also the Constructivism, Mondrian and Malewitsch. His reduction of all dimension to one specific color, a color that was in his eyes was the personification of the ultimate depth. He claimed that his blue paintings refused to be spatial, beyond any dimension and granting no psychological associations of concrete, material or comprehensible ideas. Blue being the perfect symbol of the abstract. Taking the questioning of colour and painting as a starting point, Klein attained a further concept of showing the immateriality of art. In 1958, at Iris Clert in Paris he presented an empty gallery space as an exhibition, titled 'The Void'.⁴⁶ The walls were painted in white and a guard stood at the entrance to the gallery. With this avant-garde gesture, Klein turned the whole exhibition space to be the artwork, the audience coming to the opening being an integral part of it. Klein found his way from color to the abstract and from there to the immaterial. What was the strategy behind Klein's reduction? In October 1960, Klein jumped out of a window of a Paris apartment and titled the work 'Saut dans le vide'. Documented by a photograph, which in fact was not a real shot of the actual action, but indeed was a montage and functions merely for the purpose of illustration, this jump into the void is intended to be the prove of the possibility to overcome the materiality of art. Realizing an idea by a singular action in time is declared as an artwork, having nothing else to back it up but by a documenting photograph, which is not even a true evidence. Within the image processed photograph lies another game plan: the

44 Harrison and Wood, Vol. 2, 1998, p. 991

45 See Klein in: Harrison and Wood, Vol. 2, 1998, p. 992

46 See O'Doherty, 1999, p. 88

photograph, having the paradoxical function of being a prove and a fake at the same time, is a manifestation of a strategy, with which Klein tried to confront the fetishism of materiality of the art market.⁴⁷ There are other works of art by Klein, apart from presenting a blank gallery space or a single action as art, which go in the same direction (e.g. the work 'Zone de sensibilité picturale', also 1962). It is with the same intention, with which Klein created the work 'Oeuvre immatérielle'.

3.4. *Oeuvre immatérielle* by Yves Klein, 1962

In Harald Szeemann's exhibition 'Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form' in the *Kunsthalle Bern* in 1969, Yves Klein was represented by a work which was not included in the show itself, though documented in and informed about in the exhibition catalogue. Yves Klein's work *Oeuvre immatérielle* was described by artist his friend Edward Kienholz in a text for the catalogue and Kienholz claimed to also be the owner of the work, lending his work to the show.⁴⁸ The work makes the difference in concept visible: It is not the physical elaboration, nor the form and the material that are crucial, but the artistic activity is the theme and content of the artwork. The inner attitude of the artist becomes the work, without being in a specific form. It is the postulation for an aesthetical experience rather than a materialistic value creation. It shows Klein's argument to create immaterial art in order to show the presence of the absent. His work is the meaningful paradigm to uncover the Conceptual Art, which Szeemann described in the introduction of the catalogue with the following terms: 'Anti-form', 'Possible Art', 'Impossible Art' and 'Concept Art'.⁴⁹ The artists were not working to produce objects, but rather on the contrary, wanted to be freed from the dictate of the object. Their goal was that the process of making art and the creation of an idea, was at the same time the end result. The process of making art would then be the work present in the exhibition, the museum or the gallery space. The conceptually working artists were presented in the exhibition with concepts, procedures, situations and informations through 'forms', in which the artistic attitude becomes visible.⁵⁰ These instructions could no longer be referred to as original artworks, but were rather orders and guidelines for an intended experience, which should occur to the viewer. A common criticism of the pictorial understanding of art historical tradition at that time was the accusation of the loss of the aura through the loss of an original. But, did the idea of the aura indeed vanish in this non-original, methodological approach of artistic work?

47 The duplicate of the photograph is still being sold on the secondary market: in 2002, a poster format of the photograph from 1960 was sold in a sale of the auction house Cornette de Saint-Cyr for 7000 Euro. It is not noted how many copies of the poster exist. There is also no record of how many copies were made of the original photographic montage of 'Saute dans le vide' by Harry Shunk.

48 Szeemann, 1996, p. K

49 Ibid., p. 2

50 Ibid.

Before going deeper into this question, a short description of the artwork under question will follow.

3.4.1. A Described Experience of Yves Klein's *Oeuvre Immatérielle*, 1962, by Edward Kienholz

„(...) *An Immaterial* is a very difficult work. In its final distilled aspect, it is probably pure art because nothing physical exists. It works this way: The buyer-collector of an Immaterial would give Yves money; in fact, quite a bit of money for the ownership of the Immaterial. Yves would then issue a receipt for the money which was printed on very special paper, the stub of which I believe was filed somewhere by someone for record purposes. Yves would then divest himself of the money by „throwing the gold“, which meant actually scattering the money in the mountains from a plane or dropping it in the ocean from a boat, etc. The buyer-collector then completed the gesture by burning the receipt so that the artist and owner each had nothing but the art experience. (...)“⁵¹

This artwork is a work that not only includes the recipient as transformer, which means that the work would be inexistent without the function of the sender/recipient duality, but in fact demands for a seller/buyer relationship. Without this, the work would not exist. The immaterial work is therefore even „less“ than, let us say, a written one-sentence piece on a wall by Lawrence Weiner, a work one could also call an immaterial artwork. In fact, the work by Yves Klein is in not formulated as an original text by the artist. Basically, Klein's work has no medium at all, no language and no scripture. The work simply can take form by the collector/owner telling their story on how he/she has received/purchased the work. How the collector/owner tells the story and what wording he uses to do so does not necessarily have to agree with the intentional thoughts of the artist when selling the work. The work in the exhibition is in absolute terms possessed by the collector/owner. Even the borrower - the *Kunsthalle Bern* in this case - has no curatorial influence on the specific presentation of the work. It is the collector/owner - in our case Kienholz - who determines the wording of his experience. One could say that the *Oeuvre immatérielle* consists of nothing more than the mutual agreement between the artist/seller, the collector/owner/buyer and the money transfer. What happens to the work afterwards and how it is transferred and translated into language is incumbent upon the collector/owner.

3.5. Collecting an Idea: Aesthetical and Monetary Considerations

When looking closer at the issue of ownership and possession of an idea, in this particular case of the *Immaterial* by Yves Klein, there are several interesting points to discuss. As Kienholz outlines, the work is not completed until the artist throws away the money he was paid by the collector and the collector burns the receipt, which he received for purchasing the artwork. The artwork does not exist until both gestures of destroying have been undertaken. In the end, both the artist/seller and the collector/owner have nothing else but the art experience. This means, the collector has no written documentation on how to preserve, exhibit or resell the work in the future. What remains is the aesthetical experience, the story to tell. One can also assume that the completing gesture of the artwork might have been different in each case of selling the *Oeuvre immatérielle*, depending on where the artist scattered the money bills or the gold bars and how the collector tells the story. Does an original even exist or do only replicas exist? In Kienholz's particular case, and because Yves Klein died on June 6 in 1962 shortly before he could „throw the gold“ his widow Rotraut and his artist friend Arman cast gold leaf from a boat on the waters of the Mediterranean in his name to symbolically completing Kienholz's work.⁵² The collector/owner is left with no tangible proof but instead has to trust the heirs in what they report. Finally, the collector/owner does not possess any document that would prove his ownership. The receipt of the money transfer when purchasing the artwork, which one could call the certificate of ownership, must be destroyed in order to complete the work. Is there a chance of reselling this type of artwork after the purchase, apart from the case of the death of the artist, in which case his legacy is obliged to fulfill the work? In case the collector/owner would want to resell the work during the lifetime of the artist, one can see the possibility of doing so: by repeating the action and issuing a new receipt. But then again, who is obliged to do what and who will receive money for doing so? Will the present collector/owner turn into the artist by his act of scattering the money he receives from the new buyer and copying the previous art experience? Is the second art experience without the artist involved, a secondary and minor art experience? What happens in case the current collector/owner dies? Does the work die as well, with no one passing on the art experience? In case the collector wants to lend the work to a show, who holds the rights on how it is displayed? Art the rights according to the wishes of the artist, the owner or the institution? On the other hand, how will the collector/owner ever know how many of these immaterial artworks are out there since the information of the creation of this kind of work stays between seller/artist and buyer/collector? The lack of documenting information is absolute.

52 Szeemann, 1969, p. K

3.6. Legal Issues of Transfer of Ownership of an Idea

The most interesting question in legal issues is that of who holds the authority on how the work shall be reproduced after the work has been sold when documentation of proof is lacking?

One can find a note on legal conditions in Kienholz's text itself: „Yves would then issue a receipt for the money which was printed on very special paper, the stub of which I believe was filed somewhere by someone for record purposes.“⁵³ One can assume that the certificate of ownership was therefore filed and archived by either the representing gallery, the artist studio, by the estate after the death of the artist or even by a notary.⁵⁴ This stub gains much importance for the collector/owner, as it certifies his ownership. It is unsure whether this counterfoil contains information about how the work should appear, how it should be exhibited or resold in the future. Maybe it only states the buyer and the date of the sale. It is therefore crucial for the collector/owner that all related details on the future presentation and continuance of the intangible work are explained and determined when the ownership is transferred. As these kinds of works can very easily be faked, it is a fundamental necessity that the records of the artworks are filed. This precarious condition of the records might be one of the reasons why the original receipt to complete the art experience of the *Oeuvre immatérielle* gained much prominence. It seems to be common knowledge that quite a few collectors kept their receipt instead of burning it. Today these receipts have an estimate worth over 100'000 Euros on the art market.⁵⁵ Since the destroying of the receipt is part of the agreement between artist/seller and collector/owner, it seems to be illegitimate to possess and resell the receipt itself. This might be the reason why these sales do not go through public auction sales, but rather must be undertaken in private sales; the seller and buyer (in bad faith) could be prosecuted.⁵⁶ No excuse like acquiring in good faith could be accepted as the conditions and obligations attached to the work should be known.

The judicial fundament of works of art that are not physical in the sense of a three dimensional artwork, but are rather ideas, are stated in copyright law. The *Schweizerisches Urheberrecht* defines a work of art, which is protected under coypright as an intellectual creation with an individual character in the field of the arts. It is crucial that the work of art must be an expression of a thought,

53 Szeemann, 1969, p. K

54 See Heinick, 2010

55 Heinick, 2010

56 There could not be found any evidence of a sale on artprice.com or artnet.com. Of course, the photograph prints of Klein's actions themselves have also an evident market value, which can not only be explained by the quality of the paper print, the numbering of the original editions or the growing dimensions of the photograph format or other value enhancements undertaken by the dealers.

that it holds an unique and a certain new value and that it breaks off from already existing works of art.⁵⁷ „Zum Wesen des Werks gehört (...) ein Gedanke und sodann die Darstellung dieses Gedankens in bestimmter Form, seine Verkörperung, die mit Hilfe eines Ausdrucksmittels, wie Sprache, Ton, Bild oder Mimik, erreicht wird.“ This has been decided by the German supreme court.⁵⁸ Solely the idea therefore is not protected under copyright law. The intellectual content must find a physical form. One can therefore state that writing down the idea on a piece of paper is enough for being protected under the law. The artist, in order for a third party to experience it either visually or auditively, must convert the work creatively. The certificate of ownership for ephemeral and immaterial works of art bears this claim. The certificate is also what is disposed, purchased and collected, but not in the case of the *Oeuvre immatérielle*. What can be protected is the written story about the specific conditions of each sale. But how does the law protect the artist from any change in the work? The URG determines that no major or minor modifications shall be done to the work of art without the consent of the artist and the artist holds the exclusive right to decide if, when and how the work shall be modified.⁵⁹ However, with the *Oeuvre immatérielle*, Yves Klein passes - after a successful sale - these rights on to the collector/owner, and this person now has the responsibility for the work and how it appears. The artist seems to neglect any further accountability; a strategy that avoids publicly understood principles of aesthetical, monetary and legal requirements. One can summarize the potential opposition through its irreconcilability that is linked with such an intangible artwork and with the principles of the market: no commodity: no market.

3.7. How can Intangible be Original?

The big issue in the years of the 1960s and 1970s and for the postmodern era was the question of the loss of originality by losing the author. Pop Art, Conceptual Art and later the rise of the Appropriation Art opened up the possibility for the lack of an original author. Philosophers, linguists as well as works of literature and art theory have postulated its death. While the strategy of Pop Art was to produce countless copies of the everyday object, Conceptual Art postulated the death of the author by handing the creation process of the artwork over to whomever. Giving guidelines, providing only the idea of the work, and passing the completion of the work through the production process on to someone else was a strategy to turn it into a mechanical and democratic one, without the postulate of the artist as creator of its physical appearance. The accusation could be

⁵⁷ See Sykora, 2011, p. 26

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 4

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 62

undertaken that the strategy of a conceptual, intangible artwork could lead to the loss of the aura attached to an original. However, it became obvious that Walter Benjamin was wrong and that the mechanical reproduction of artworks did not give way to the loss of the so-called aura. He described aura as „*einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie auch sein mag*“.⁶⁰ The distance that appears in the intangible artwork is the unattainability of the original. The grasp for the artwork is denied and can consequently not be devaluated. On the contrary, the value of the work increases, but not necessarily or directly in monetary aspects. The immaterial value of the work *Oeuvre immatérielle* is the myth, which was born out of this (at least ideally) totally materialistic devaluation of art. The story about the art experience is an incarnation of the above-described *Ferne*/distance/absence. No one will ever seriously claim that only within the physically existing paintings by Klein lies an auratic moment. As the immaterial original action is not purchasable, the substitution or the compensation is. The action itself proves that the idea can be shared between all recipients. The original becomes an issue of giving a notion of art which is a repetitive, reproductive and duplicating a transformation of reality.⁶¹ As Benjamin stated, a moment of the loss of the aura can be attached to the shifting of the artwork from the metaphysical to the social sphere. But the question stays whether the artwork cannot also develop its aesthetical activity in the social and in the political domain. These are the subversive and relational aspects of the intangible art.

3.8. Conclusion

As one can see in the example of the *Oeuvre Immatérielle* by Yves Klein, an intangible artwork bears different functions and problems. First, there seems to be no such thing as the pure form of immateriality. The artwork always has to be described, documented and written about in a 'material' way. At least by then this seemed to be the constraint. The idea of the artist has to be made accessible, a function that is by all means material. „The process of documentation is not an external record of artistic decisions, it is intrinsic to the decision-making process itself: no decision without documentation.“⁶² The characteristic attributes of immaterial art are medial independence and immateriality of the work of the first regime: existing as idea only. The catalogue is the only medium through which the *Oeuvre immatérielle* is mediated within the exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form'. The physical presence of the works is reduced to the demands of communicability and the materiality is limited to intellectual and mental processes as material.⁶³

60 Benjamin, 1936, in: Harrison and Wood, Vol. 1, 1998, p. 642

61 Metzger, 1995, p. 21

62 Groys, 2004, p. 5

63 See Scheer, 1992, p. 91/91

As Boris Groys defines it, „It is (...) impossible to make a decision on the status of an object as a work of art without a real 'material' witness.“⁶⁴ Further, another risen issue is the problem of the fixation on the objecthood of an artwork that disregards the constitutive power of the location. Boris Groys' analysis of the topology of the aura declares that the quality of a work of art is dependent on the topological context of the object, which shall become art. „Nonetheless, one can still consider a single artistic decision as immaterial, regardless of its factual documentation and realization. And one can also say that art is immaterial when the work of art is presented as a series of explicitly formulated artistic decisions and instructions required to construct installations and objects, to produce performances or to organize events. In this case, immateriality does not mean the non-material but rather something transparent, rational, and comprehensible.“⁶⁵

Thus the intrinsic qualities of an object are not decisive for the aura of the artwork. Yet this is even more true in a time when the technological standards turn the question of originality to a definition-making question. The auratic moment results from the context of the object in question. Going further, one can say that the aura of an artwork can only arise from the topological context.

We can summarize that the intangible artwork indeed has an aura, which arises in the specific context, results from sharing the idea through story telling and is produced by the social and political engagement of the traditionally apolitical space of the institutions. In an intangible artwork, the *Ferne*/distance is not the prohibitive moment - the economical value - but the mythologized inaccessibility. While Groys draws the conclusion that this liberation from the individual, creative body in favor of a transparent, intersubjective and immaterial program - meaning that the immateriality is the independence of art from the body of the artist - one can understand the work *Oeuvre immatérielle* by Yves Klein with also a slightly different perspective. The experience of the artwork is strongly attached to the thought of a possible performance of scattering the money out of an airplane, and imagining this action is bond to the artist Yves Klein. The only other way I could think of this would be by means of human substitutes for the artist himself, where they would follow his precise guidelines. Maybe this is what Groys meant by exoneration from the creative body, but somehow there is also the fear of the loss of the aura attached to this consideration.

The strategy of Yves Klein could be described as the goal to make art, but with the subversive demand of the central criticism of the market. Even though it was imaginable in purely formal and aesthetical terms, it did not seem possible to integrate intangible art into the established, traditional art world. Because this kind of art subverts the market and its economical assessment criteria, it

64 Groys, 2004, p. 5

65 Ibid., p. 6

stays outside the common understanding of what constitutes value in art. It publicly displays its opposition to the official canon, which is conditioned by the market. Yves Klein did not think further how these works should be traded after the primary sale and how they would be passed on in the future. It will be seen with Tino Sehgal that this is a crucial consideration when providing such works to the market. But first, another artistic position will be examined within the argument of value creation and value exchange.

4. Institutional Critique as a Market Critique: The Work of Michael Asher in the 1970s

4.1. Introduction

In the second half of the 1960s, Michael Asher's artistic interest lay in the examination of how art was presented and the environment where art appeared. Since the very beginning of his production, around the middle of the 1960s, the approach of removing materiality from the plastic phenomenon instead of inserting a three-dimensional object into space, became the center of his aesthetical practice. His artistic approach was a reaction to Minimal Art and a questioning of the artwork as an object always in relation to the institutional and discursive general framework, which defines art as art. Minimal Art involved the viewer as an integral part of the work. The conceptual approach to Minimal Art evolved in the dematerialization of the art object. Michael Asher experimented in early exhibitions with the reduction of objecthood, whereas the material he was working with became as intangible as light or air.⁶⁶ In 1969, for a show in the Seattle Art Museum, his intent was to abstain from an art that was committed to an object and started to think about space as the subject of perception. In 1970, he made the 'white cube' his main theme as the space where art is displayed and in separation from the outside world. This preoccupation with the artistic artificial space in relation to the natural real space lead Asher to draw the beholder's attention to the specific situations in which art is on display: the framework and the codification of reality through the exhibition space. Rather than creating new art objects, Asher was interested in the dissection of the assumptions that govern how art is perceived. Asher typically altered the existing environment by repositioning or removing walls, facades or the lighting system etc. A practice therefore that lead the art historical scientists to group him together with artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke who were said to have an art practice that circled around the notion of

⁶⁶ One can call Michael Asher a follower of Richard Irwin and the 'Light and Space' movement in Los Angeles, a phenomenological approach which is understood as a continuation of Minimal Art. See Fritz 2007, p. 2

institutional critique.⁶⁷ If one agrees in this assumption, the following chapter would postulate that Asher's strategy of institutional critique can also be perceived as a market critique. This can be seen even more when Asher conceived works for an exhibition planned to take place in a commercial environment such as working in and with gallery spaces, and questioning the spatial conditions of how art is being presented in a mercantile framework.

The emphasis of this chapter lies on the works, which Michael Asher produced for the few gallery shows he had in 1973 and 1974.⁶⁸ The intention is to uncover the assumed immanent questioning of the market by Asher's strategy. The works he created in this time period are his best known, a fact that results mainly from his book 'Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979' which he compiled in collaboration with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, but also because the major institutional exhibitions Asher had during this time were accompanied by extensive exhibition catalogues that documented his work thoroughly. In many of the important articles and publications on institutional criticism, Conceptual, Contextual and Installation Art are subjects of research. Asher is mainly well-known for his ephemeral, time-phased and subtractive interventions in architectural structures of galleries and museums,⁶⁹ works he himself calls „situational interventions“. The fundament of Asher's practice is that a work should not be brought into an exhibition situation from the outside and that it should not even be constructed site-specifically, but rather it is the exhibition situation itself that is worked upon: becoming the object of the work. Asher's work is not *about* the exhibition situation and it is not metaphorically structured. Inside the architectural and institutional apparatus which serves the exhibition and which constitutes and presents something as „art“, part of this very apparatus is introduced instead of and in the place of the artwork. Asher operates within the framework of the institution of art, but what is brought into the institution and shown as an art object, is not transformed into art by means of an aestheticization. With this kind of work, the function of the institution of art is subject to critical analysis and it is stressed that the postulated autonomy of the artwork is really dependent on the effectiveness of the institutional apparatus.⁷⁰ It may be that such a work may still be readable as an alternative paradigm for a still functional work of art within the field of art in a museum. It will be interesting to see what this may imply for the

67 As Isabelle Graw described it, it is yet unclear who determined the term 'institutional critique' first. It appeared in Andrea Fraser's text on Louise Lawler in 1985, where she named artists such as Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke as being bound to institutional critique. It may also be that Benjam H.D. Buchloh established the term with his paper on conceptual art 'From the Aesthetics of Administration to the critique of institutions' in 1990. See Graw, 2005, p. 41/42

68 Asher made three later appearances in commercial art galleries: he returned to Claire Copley Gallery in 1977 for one show. In 1984, he showed at the Hoshour Gallery in Albuquerque, New Mexico and in 1988 at Galerie Roger Pailhas in Marseille. Both shows will not be subject to this paper.

69 See Fritz, 2007, p. 2

70 Loock, 1995, p. 8

commercial art world framework.

The next pages include a closer look at Michael Asher's shows in galleries in Europe and the United States in the early 1970s. It is crucial to see that in the beginning Asher was invited by galleries to do shows. As a consequence, it is interesting to see the reasons that may have contributed to Asher's decision to quit working with commercial galleries later in his career. Throughout his artistic career, Asher mainly exhibited in public art institutions or took part in art events such as the *documenta* or the Venice Biennial and hardly returned to do shows in galleries after the 1970s. The four installation works discussed in the following chapters can be understood as the perfect examples for the herewith postulated thesis that Asher's method was primarily a questioning of the market.⁷¹ The emphasis is on works presented in European galleries, all in the summer/fall of 1973, when Asher travelled within Europe, but light is also shed on a work he created for a Californian gallery a year later in September 1974. The close temporal connection of the works realized makes sense in this context and in the study objectives. Why Asher might not have returned - except from a few examples, as mentioned before - to do shows in dealer galleries after the 1970s, will be discussed after the following descriptive chapters.

4.2. Exhibitions in Dealer Galleries in the Early 1970s

4.2.1. Lisson Gallery, London, 1973

In 1973, Asher made his first appearance in a dealer gallery in Europe, at Lisson Gallery, which was founded by Nicholas Logsdail in 1967. Lisson Gallery organized shows mainly with conceptually working artists of that time. Asher was invited by Logsdail and as a work he proposed to cut a 6 mm architectural reveal into the wall, where the floor met the wall, with an average depth between 1.3 to 2.5 cm.⁷² The presentation was done in the exhibition area consisting of one room in the basement. The reveal started at the entry door to the room, was carried around the whole room, also around the two structural columns on the long walls, and ended again at the entry-exit. It stayed within the perimeter of the room and did not turn towards the opening, since that became the point of transition between the two separate rooms in the basement. The boundary where the artwork began and where it ended was therefore limited to the actual exhibition space, defining with this decision the constructional changes as art. Asher did not alter anything else in the room. The room was lit by two fluorescent lights and had a visible open beam ceiling. Without any change, Asher

⁷¹ In this context it might be important to note that Michael Asher grew up as the son of a gallerist in Los Angeles.

⁷² See Asher in: Fuchs, 1980, p. 8

transformed the beam ceiling into being a part of the work by declaring that the beams and the reveal framed the wall top and bottom.⁷³ The beams should function as projections into the exhibition, whose limits were represented by the existing walls and the reveal became a projection away from the exhibition, implying the possibility of more room beyond the existing walls. By remaining very small, the reveal appeared to be more obvious than the expanse of the wall surface. Bringing the actually biggest elements, the wall surface, to not wanting to be seen but wanting to be known of.⁷⁴

4.2.2. Heiner Friedrich, Cologne, 1973

In the same summer, Asher conceived a show for Heiner Friedrich in Cologne. His proposal was to use the whole gallery space, containing a foyer, a hallway, the bathroom, the kitchen, the two staff offices with desks, equipment and storage shelves and the actual exhibition area including a semi-rectangular space with two windows. Asher was using the gallery's interior architecture without any added construction.⁷⁵ His aim was to concentrate on the two interior surfaces with identical size and shape, the floor and the ceiling.⁷⁶ Since the color of the floor was a dark brown asphalt tone, he matched the same color paint and applied it to the ceiling to cover the entire ceiling surface within the gallery space. By doing so, he wished to emphasize not only the floor and the ceiling, but also the opposing white walls. The corresponding color of floor and ceiling created a tension between accessibility and inaccessibility. The ceiling was only accessible by viewing. The inherent properties of floor/ceiling were integral parts of the gallery space. The relationship of floor/ceiling made the office equipment, the kitchen furniture and all other features of the space parts of the same work. The static nature of floor/ceiling emphasized these mobile features and their placement within the space became unimportant. Their function would stay the same wherever they were located in the gallery area. The gallery office activity being generally inaccessible to the general public then became accessible to questioning through having been incorporated into the artwork. The relationship between gallery office activity and exhibition became visible as corresponding parts of the same commercial gallery. Their immediate functions were now opposed: the fixed nature of the work being the gallery - the floor/ceiling situation - came into opposition with the commercial function of the gallery. The exhibition put the commercial function of the gallery into suspension.⁷⁷

⁷³ See Asher in: Fuchs, 1980, p. 8

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 12

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

4.2.3. Galleria Toselli, Milan, 1973

The same September, Asher exhibited at a gallery in Italy, at Franco Toselli's gallery in Milan. His presentation there constituted in sandblasting the existing paint off the walls and ceiling and in doing so, exposing the plaster surfaces underneath.⁷⁸ The idea behind it was to „(expose) a past surface (...) as a new work in a new time frame for a new generation of people.“⁷⁹ Here again, Asher did not alter anything else in the space. The room itself was lit by three windows that admitted natural light from the courtyard. When the gallery was sandblasted, only this natural light from the window was used. The matter that interested Asher was that the original floors were out of concrete with no coating and once the walls were sandblasted they gained the same property (no coating) as the floor: now sharing some continuity with one another.⁸⁰ With the complete removal of the surface, a subtractive condition became additive with the exposure of the plaster. By sandblasting (a notion of exposure) Asher brought the recollection of an outdoor material indoors, with which another variable concerning a gallery and its surrounding became recognized. The plaster surface, which had previously been concealed by the accepted presentation surface of white paint when generally presenting artworks became in this case the physical content of the exhibition. As underlying content, the thought of white paint was brought to the surface and through its absence the viewer is reminded of the white paint. The question can be raised how that surface (white paint) must affect the context of art usually supported by it. If the viewers have to assume that the space has been liberated from the white paint support, they have only to view the plaster to appreciate the inherent paradox that the plaster is another support surface and is as much an integral part of the gallery as white paint (another coating).⁸¹

4.2.4. Claire Copley Gallery Inc., Los Angeles, 1974

In 1974, Michael Asher was invited by Claire Copley for a show in her gallery in Los Angeles, where he returned later on in 1977. The gallery used the rooms of former business premises. To separate the exhibition space from the office and the storage, the gallerist had built a wall in between the two areas. For the time of the exhibition, Asher removed this wall. In doing so, what were usually the spatially und functionally separated spheres were connected with each other. Asher had all walls of the now conjoining areas painted in the same white color, thus turning the whole space into an

⁷⁸ See Asher in: Fuchs, 1980, p. 16

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

exhibition space.⁸² The generally hidden gallery office furniture, storage facilities and other equipment were integrated into the exhibition and showed to the visitor what otherwise is blanked out: the gallery as business and the exhibited works as commodities. Part of the work became not only the visitors entering the gallery, but also the gallery employees. Asher used their given presence appearing in the context of their everyday activities as a „behavioral tableau“. ⁸³ He considered his instructions and guidelines as well as the time context as integral parts of the work. The temporal aspect of his work was important in terms of perception. The actual installation period - the preparation and the tearing down of the wall - had been concealed from the viewer in order to publically present only the result: the exceptional situation of the space. In order to finish the work, it was necessary to reconstruct the wall after the exhibition.

4.3. Significance of the Works in Relation to the Institutional Critique

One can see that Asher's strategy is addressing a specific situation in the different gallery spaces by taking into account everything which conditions that situation: the architecture, the spatial structure, the history, the function and the programmatic ideology. In the praxis, Asher's working principles are being tested by a precise execution of each particular work. Removing elements from a spatial setting are parts of his personal vocabulary. On the contrary, he refuses to bring any new material to produce his works. Instead of adding material, he subtracts it from the exhibition site. With this, Asher changed the role of the gallery as a strict space for showing and selling art objects by a determined situation in a strictly limited time – during the exhibition period. His concept can be defined by the „specific concretion of an instrumental-functional use in a specific context (architectural, institutional, temporal, spatial).“⁸⁴ Neither the material nor the techniques employed in the production of a work are determined before. They are, on the contrary, dependent upon the particular conditions under which a work is being created as well as on the requirements it has to meet in each case of a particular situation. With his plastic phenomena, Asher makes visible to perception what is being taken for granted and remained concealed. Withdrawal of perception and the complementary strategy of revelation has become the essential format for plastic art. This tendency of moving from the visual-plastic toward the conceptual and toward an elimination of the material domination of the aesthetic object in favour of an increased autonomy of the viewer (the subject), and arguably the opposition of revelation and withdrawal as a fundamentally aesthetical category, can be traced back to the strategy of Marcel Duchamp. As Buchloh puts it, he sees the

82 See Wappler, 2005, p. 6

83 Buchloh in: Fuchs, 1980, p. 37

84 Ibid., p. 36

impact of the Duchampian tradition on Conceptual Art in general, but equally some of its consequences in Michael Asher's work.⁸⁵ Rather than adding to the classes of things, Duchamp detracted from them – a feature which is very close to Asher's description of the work presented at the Lisson Gallery.⁸⁶ It dealt with subtraction rather than addition, by making a mark through taking away. A similar notion was used as one aspect of the Toselli exhibition.⁸⁷ Instead of decorating the walls with art objects, he revealed the materials of the architecture. Therefore one aspect of the work deals with revealing. „In Asher's work the issues of concealing and revealing are concretely transformed in an alternation of subtraction and addition of materials as well as in links or exchanges of the visually accessible and inaccessible.“⁸⁸ One can see this as well in the works at Heiner Friedrich and Claire Copley, where the generally inaccessible gallery office activity became accessible to questioning through being incorporated into the artwork. What Asher challenged with his contributions was a questioning of the materialistic art critique. By acknowledging the uniqueness of the specific spatial categories, towards his work, Asher tried to generate a complete materialistic critique of the modern idealism.⁸⁹

4. 4. Institutional Critique of the Avant-garde in the Contemporary Discourse

In her lecture at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2005, Isabelle Graw described the institutional critique of the early time of Conceptual Art as antiquated, because it seemed hardly imaginable that the artistic strategy of institutional critique can be pursued and survive in the encounter with the market.⁹⁰ Graw reminds us of the deep enmeshment of the artists and institutions and how the institutions co-determine the works that were created for them. Institutional critique is a paradoxical construction of a term. The criticized institutions support these kinds of critical works, because it seems to be fancy to be perceived as a critical institution where works are shown that match the institutions intent and where the institutions have co-determined the form of the works and are well accepted because of them. With Asher, a system is exposed in which the intrinsic factors of an artwork form the basis for its accumulation of value. However, there are external factors that affect the artistic method, the product and its perceived value.⁹¹ Within this context, Graw sees the need for emphasis in contemporary art historical analysis that the canon of

85 Buchloh in: Fuchs, 1980, p. 36

86 Ibid., p. 37

87 Ibid., p. 38

88 Ibid.

89 See Crimp, 1996, p. 169: Crimp notes that Minimal Art failed to bear this critique by allowing the sculpture/object to function in all possible sites: in the studio, in the gallery space, the museum, the public site or in private houses. This way the art object can be circulated like any other commodity.

90 Graw, 2005, p. 41

91 Ibid., p. 45

the agreed protagonists in institutional critique - Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke - are not the only artists questioning the art institution, but that there are other artists working within these parameters whose work can also be interpreted as institutional critique when it is agreed that 'institution' represents not only the space in the true sense of the word, but more precisely represents a closed system of belief.⁹²

Artists who are both politically and critically active, but are enrolled in the gallery system and their work is present in the market, are hopelessly compromised. In its short history, the term 'institutional critique' has made a change in the art context. According to Graw, there are two concurrent interpretations of the term.⁹³ One interpretation is restrictive and equalizes 'institution' with 'art institutions' such as museum and gallery. One can find this reading in Daniel Buren's work. When Buren was speaking of the function of museums, it meant that he was really looking close at what the museum defined, how it built up value and how it framed, isolated, excluded and naturalized. This made it possible for him to do very concrete and exactly describable interventions.⁹⁴ One can also find this basic approach in Asher's work, but Asher's critique did not only define the very space of the museum, but targeted the institution as such in the second understanding as Graw described it. There, 'institution' means not only this small topological art apparatus, but also much more broadly the corporate culture and celebrity culture, which served as an improper reference field. The former art world became a visual industry with global players. In a visual industry, visibility and significance are not set up by single protagonists (artists, curators, art critics, gallerists), but the production of images and content are with bigger organizations and international associations.

Corporate structures cannot be localized: they are global and transnational. The new definition of power in the art market can be cognizable by the fact that economical criteria have taken the place of artistic criteria. An artist who is economically successful is automatically important for curators and institutions. Whereas in the 1960s institutions held the decisive role in the process of accumulation of value, the market nowadays decides this. It has also been uncovered that the term 'critique' has experienced a shift of meaning.⁹⁵ The idealized distance between critic and the criticized has been discovered to be a fiction, as the so-called critical distance is compromised from the beginning. Of course, you can say that this may be for artists who are active in the market. The following chapter uncovers whether this can be applied to Asher's questioning of the market and the visual industry as such.

92 Graw, 2005, p. 47

93 Ibid., p. 50

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

4.5. Asher's Materialistic Critique as a Questioning of the Art Market

We have discussed that the danger of critique is that this might be exactly what the market may be looking for at a specific moment in time, and therefore critique can itself become a commodity.⁹⁶ There are possibilities of a less total, situative appreciation of practice what critique can do. In certain situations, the questioning alone of the current canon, the adherence to non-economic criteria or the demonstration of the instrumental use of critique can open up or broaden horizons of what is actually makeable and thinkable.⁹⁷ Of course, such forms of critique cannot stop the machinery, but what seems possible is the breach in the system of belief in which the critic is part of at the same time. Or, as Graw puts it, look at art as soon as it circulates on the art market, without any illusion. That way, institutional critique must be a critique that is characterized as only situational critique and it is inevitable that the artist embraces in his critical praxis the statement of objection and the posing of problems.

To make a distinction between Michael Asher's institutional exhibition and his exhibition in commercial dealer galleries might be seen as an eclectic differentiation, primarily because the works conceived for both types of exhibition spaces do not ostensibly differ in theoretical approach and aesthetical praxis. For both venues, Asher seems to decide on the current architectural site specifications and instruct guidelines for the new work depending on the spatial conditions. But for the viewer, the two institutions differ fundamentally. When entering a museum, the viewer does not expect to think about the presented artworks in an economic context, whereas the visitor of a gallery as business premises anticipates the exhibited objects to be for sale. The assumption for the viewer visiting the museum is to gain information on art with regards to contents. On the other side, the visitor to a gallery expects a venue for commercial trading. It may therefore be crucial to compare Asher's attitude towards both venues in the context that institutional critique may evoke. Johannes Meinhardt described the term in *Dumonts Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenössischen Kunst* as a position within the artistic method: a position which examines the social and institutional determining factors for the creation and use of art *analytically*.⁹⁸ In business premises, the determining factors for art is very different from an institution in terms of how the presented artworks are perceived by the audience.

Michael Asher is said to be one of the founders of institutional critique⁹⁹, in a different way but with the same intent were artists like Marcel Broodthaers (today represented by Marian Goodman Gallery, New York), in a very different way but with the same intent, Daniel Buren

96 Graw, 2005, p. 51

97 Ibid.

98 Meinhardt, 2002, p. 127

99 Fritz, 2007, p. 2

(today: Bortolami Gallery, New York and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels) and Hans Haacke (today: Paula Cooper Gallery, New York). In opposition to Michael Asher, these artists, soon after they had started their artistic praxis, had commercial galleries showing them throughout Europe and in the United States and sold their works successfully.¹⁰⁰ Apart from private collectors, Marcel Broodthaers' work has been purchased by public institutions such as the *Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach*, The Tate Gallery in London and the *Kunstmuseum* in Basel since as early as the beginning of the 1970s.¹⁰¹ The *Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum* in Eindhoven integrated in its collections works by Daniel Buren in 1974, 1976 and 1977.¹⁰² One must admit that prices for these artists' work ranged from cheap to very cheap¹⁰³, but on the other hand were a good value. The institutions were convinced that the work of these artists was worthy of being collected. In some way the market did influence the collecting decisions, also through the affordability.

Within the listing of artworks by conceptual artists whose work was purchased for public collections throughout the 1970s, Michael Asher does not appear. He is also nowhere to be found in the ranking of artists within this time period, even though he did shows in both dealer galleries and museums. What might be the reasons for this negligence? All of the above named artists were shown extensively in dealer galleries throughout these years, when their ephemeral institutional critique approach was strongest. One can ask whether the institutional critique of Broodthaers, Buren and Haacke was more compatible to their market presence than Asher's work was. Asher's ephemeral and site-specific works were indeed very hard to sell, as they mainly comprised of the idea behind it. Since the matter of time, including the beginning of the work and the end of it were crucial parts of the work, incorporating this kind of work in private collections was hard to deal with. What is on display in the homes and houses of the private collectors who buy this kind of art in order to show it? Situative works, which Asher conceived for the above-mentioned four dealer galleries, were created to show the public the premises of the art market business. Doing the same in an institutional environment resulted in a different presentation. If Asher's questioning of the materialistic art market was successful, then so was the analysis of and the resistance against an institutionalization of art in the commercial system.¹⁰⁴ If the artwork can exist without a certain site-specific condition, than this is the precondition for its circulation: from the studio to the gallery and from there to the collector's house or museum. Asher's works are qualified as being site-specific in a way that they are destroyed after the exhibition ends. Reconstructing the gallery spaces means destroying the works. This kind of work does not accept the institutionalized circulation of

100 See Richard, 2009, throughout Appendix 1

101 Ibid., Appendix 1.6, p. 323 and 330

102 Ibid., Appendix 1.6, p. 328

103 Ibid., Appendix 2.3

104 See Crimp, 1996, p. 169

commodities.

4.6. Conclusion

When Sarah Thornton visited Michael Asher's Crit Class for her book 'Seven Days in the Art World', she mentioned something striking and very true: Most of Asher's students have never seen his work and Asher's „situational interventions“ are often invisible.¹⁰⁵ She also wrote that Asher has no dealer and his work is not generally for sale. When asking Asher whether he resists the art market, he replies that he wouldn't avoid commodity forms and that in 1966 he had created these plastic bubbles that came an inch off the wall. He had sold one of those.¹⁰⁶ One could postulate - bearing in mind that his notion might have been ironic - that Michael Asher was not willing to fulfill the market requests and serve the market with art. Maybe the only possible way for him to be an artist who questions the market conditions, to be politically and critically active, but not to be compromised by being present in the market, was that his art(works) not be for sale. Asher decided to work as an art teacher in order to make a living, and he did so until his death in 2012.¹⁰⁷ The ultimate critique of the market might be the decision to avoid the market by restraining from participating in it.

5. A Contemporary Position: Tino Sehgal's Work and the Creation of Value

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, a contemporary position of producing immaterial artworks and their relationship to the market are examined. British-German artist Tino Sehgal (b.1976) quickly gained the interest of the art world at an early stage of his artistic career beginning around the year 2000. He has developed an immaterial and ephemeral form of art, which only happens when one encounters it.¹⁰⁸ All his works have in common that they reside only in the space and time they occupy, in the memory of the viewer and their reception. The artist himself describes his works as 'constructed situations', whose materials are the human body and voice, language, movement, space, time and the interaction between humans, without the production of any physical object. His pieces are choreographies that are regularly staged in museums or galleries, and continuously executed by

¹⁰⁵ See Thornton, 2008, p. 44

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Asher has worked as an art teacher at the California Institute for the Arts in the U.S. for over thirty years.

¹⁰⁸ See the press information of Kunsthaus Zurich: Tino Sehgal. April 23 to May 31, 2009

trained individuals - Sehgal refers to them as “interpreters”¹⁰⁹ - for the entire duration of a show. For his choreographies, Sehgal regularly auditions men and women of all ages, including dancers, academics, students and ordinary people with different backgrounds. The people who are selected to interpret his work are then camouflaged among the guards and the visitors. The reaction and/or the participation of the spectator gives the possibility for the work to actually happen. The artwork itself is the constructed situation or interaction, which arises between the interpreters and the audience of the piece, and it will afterwards only exist in the world of experience and memory of those who directly encountered it. Consequently, Sehgal prohibits that his works are visually documented in any way, not photographed nor filmed. There is no written documentation or reproduction allowed, in order to focus all the attention on the physical evidence. In that sense, a description of the works under inspection in this chapter are in reality summaries of people recounting their experience seeing the works on different occasions. Each person experiences the same piece individually. Without any material object, Tino Sehgal's works still fulfill the conventions of visual art, but rather than creating objects, subjective experiences are created. Rather than considering Tino Sehgal as a performance artist, he is a sculptor who creates immaterial objects or situations. His pieces are present throughout the entire duration of the exhibition and can be offered, acquired and collected by museums or private persons. Sehgal has gallery representatives in Germany, Belgium and in the U.S. Even though his art is completely intangible, it can be bought and sold without involving any object whatsoever.

The aim in the following sections is to show how the creation of value happens in Tino Sehgal's work. What is the substance of these intangible works and how is it created? The argument is developed through a selection of different examples of works and how they enter the art market since it is the common agreement that the market is the initiator of value.

It is necessary to begin by describing a selection of works in order to throw a light on how the works are constructed.

5.2. Selection of Works

5.2.1. In Sehgal's work *Kiss* (2002), a couple is lying on the floor, embracing and kissing each other. What these two interpreters are actually trained to do in this situation is to continuously enact a sequence of specific kisses from familiar works of art, such as the pose in Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss* (1889), Constantin Brâncuși's (1908) or Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* (1907–08), Jeff Koons ceramic sculpture series *Made in Heaven* (1990–91) and various Gustave Courbet paintings from

109 In: Lubow, 2010, p. 25

the 1860s. When encountering the scene without previous knowledge about the piece, it might evoke an awkward feeling in the visitor, as the situation is of an intimate state. For some visitors the unusual behavior of the couple within an exhibition context might be provocative and the visitor might feel the urge to leave the place. The feelings the scene triggers are unique within each individual: resulting in everyone reacting differently to it. As the piece does not include any spoken words or a demand for an oral reaction from or interaction with the visitor, the situation *Kiss* is much more a sculptural work than the later „constructed situations“.¹¹⁰

5.2.2. For the German pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2005, the work *This is Exchange* (2003) was conceived. When entering an emptied out space, the visitor was involved in a discussion with an interpreter about economics and free market economy.¹¹¹ The temptation for the visitor to take part in the discussion and make remarks on the topic was stimulated by the visitor being promised to receive a refund for the admission fee afterwards. Making the voluntary participation in a discussion on economics in order for the visitor to receive a refund for the entrance fee was the substantial content of the work *This is Exchange*.

The visitor was even enlisted as co-producer of the piece.¹¹² For many visitors, especially those who argued that they detested the market economy, it came as an unsettling surprise to receive this reminder that whatever their opinion of it, they were nonetheless immersed in it. Which, of course, was one of Sehgal's aims.¹¹³ Here, the role of the spectator is incorporated as an integral part of the piece. From then on, Sehgal started with a second line of work similar to the above mentioned „constructed situations“, in which the visitor is drawn into the piece and becomes a participant.¹¹⁴

5.2.3. One of Sehgal's most complex works, *This Situation* (2007), required the participation of a group of six intellectuals, which were selected carefully by the artist and trained on the subject for six weeks. During the time of the exhibition period they occupied an otherwise empty room and interacted with each other and with the audience in accordance with a set of rules and games established by the artist. The starting quotation for the back and forth between the interpreters was: *In 1958, somebody said, 'The income that men derive producing things of slight consequence is of great consequence'*¹¹⁵. With this sentence, the production means of material objects is linked to the

110 See Lubow, 2010, p. 25

111 See Jahnsen, 2012, p. 73/74; Hafner, 2009 and Ackermann, 2009: All three authors were talking to different interpreters, e.g. a young woman or an emerita professor of economics.

112 The work has also been on show at Tino Sehgal's exhibition at Kunsthaus Zurich in 2009. As institutions always spend very little money on the production of Sehgal's works, it seems ironic that the one piece, where the museum is obliged to pay money to participating visitors, is titled *This is Exchange* – or is it intended?

113 Lubow, 2010, p. 28

114 Ibid., p. 27

115 Ibid., p. 26

income that is generated out of this process. In this work again, the visitor is implicated in the situation and the piece, being a constructed situation, is implied in the title of the work.

5.2.4 In Sehgal's 2010 work *This Progress*, performed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the artist emptied Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral gallery of all artworks. Not knowing the actual site within the museum complex where Sehgal's show was supposed to take place, the museum visitor is met at the base of the spiral by a child, who asks the visitor what he/she thinks progress is. As they begin their ascent up the spiral ramp, the visitor and the young student continue their conversation until they are met by a high school student who then picks up the conversation while the child leaves. Farther on, they are met by a young adult and lastly by an older adult who finishes the talk at the upper-most point in the museum. By walking upwards and with the replacement of the interpreters by older ones, the subject of the discussion grows more complex and the subject of it is made visible.

With the list of the above-described selection of works, one can see that given their situational specifications and their event-like character, the works intentionally test the traditional notion of art and open up a new perspective on the art production and reception in the museum context. The fundamental significance of all these works is that „the only thing that is expended is human energy; it's this idea of how to make art without any visible trace, without any residue.“¹¹⁶

The work *This is Exchange* stands out from this fundamental thinking of invisibility or expenditure, because the exhibiting institution trades the human energy of collaborating as a visitor for money. The artwork itself changes when it receives another level of enactment through the visitor who makes the work possible by his participation, but receives money in return to do so.

5.3. Collecting Sehgal's Work

Tino Sehgal is represented by leading galleries in contemporary art: *Johnen Galerie* in Berlin, *Galerie Jan Mot* in Brussels and Marian Goodmann Gallery in New York. One might think that „his work (is) a statement against the commercial aspect of art, but he is happy to sell his intangible wares.“¹¹⁷ For the sale of his work, Sehgal stipulates that there is no written set of instructions, no written receipt, no catalogue and no pictures. The buyer purchases only the concept or the idea of the work. In order to sell his idea and the right to enact it, Sehgal engages in a verbal

116 Nancy Spector in: Stein, 2009

117 Stein, 2009

contractual conversation with the buyer in the presence of a notary and witnesses.¹¹⁸ Since Sehgal started to work with galleries, there is always a gallery representative present during the conversation to „seal the deal“.¹¹⁹ The buyer has to memorize the contract clauses. It is forbidden to take notes during the sales talk, and as there is no certificate or receipt available, the buyer has to have the instructions in mind to record them after the talk. The oral contract lists about five legal stipulations of the purchase:¹²⁰ the work shall be installed only by someone whom Sehgal himself has authorized via training and prior collaboration; the people enacting the piece shall be paid an agreed-upon minimum; the work shall be shown over a minimum period of six weeks; the piece shall not be photographed; and if the buyer resells the work, he shall do so with this same oral contract. „We discuss these clauses, and then at the end repeat them and then we shake hands.“¹²¹ This procedure has been passed on by both museum directors, Glenn Lowry and Alfred Pacquement. The Museum of Modern Art acquired the work *Kiss* in 2008 after it had been on show and the *Centre Pompidou* purchased *This Situation* in 2010. Sehgal also does this kind of talk with individual collectors who receive private instructions by Sehgal. Rumor has it that already in 2007, his works were sold for five-figure sums.¹²² In 2009, Sehgal was open in an interview about the prices for his ephemeral works: they cost between EUR 25.000 and EUR 75.000.¹²³ As of 2010, the 'constructed situations' sold in editions of four to six (with Sehgal retaining an additional AP) at prices between \$85.000 and \$145.000 a piece.¹²⁴ There are no other costs attached to the purchase: no shipment costs, no insurance expenses, no storage nor future restoration costs involved. Sehgal's work is held, among others, in the public collections of the the *Centre Pompidou*, Paris¹²⁵; Tate, London¹²⁶; the *Stedelijk Museum*, Amsterdam¹²⁷; the Guggenheim¹²⁸, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis¹²⁹, *Kunsthaus Zurich*¹³⁰ and the Museum of Modern Art in New York¹³¹. As Sehgal usually expects the exhibiting institutions to purchase the piece on show afterwards, one can assume that more museums have a work in their collection. As for private collections, his gallerist will only

118 See Ackermann, 2009

119 Before being with a gallery, it is said that the works were paid cash during these conversations (see artforum.com, January 11, 2011). The financial transaction goes through the gallery, from there the invoice is sent out by email to the buyer, so the appearance is preserved of no form of a written trace.

120 See Stein, 2009

121 Sehgal in: Stein, 2009. As mentioned above, by today, the buyer does receive some sort of written acknowledgement of the purchase, the the bill of sale from the gallery, otherwise the transaction would be illegal.

122 See Midgette, 2007

123 See Ackermann, 2009

124 See in: Lubow, 2010, p. 26

125 *This Situation*, 2007

126 *These Associations*, 2012

127 *Instead of allowing some things to rise up in your face, dancing bruce and dan and other things*, 2000

128 *This Progress*, 2010

129 *This Objective is That Objective*, 2004

130 *This is Exchange*, 2003

131 *Kiss*, 2002

say that Sehgal's art is collected in private collections in Europe and North America, but not which ones.¹³²

5.4. Creating value

Throwing a light on the meaning of Sehgal's work, it becomes clear that he follows a conceptual way to form his art by putting the idea of work before a physical object and defining it as art by establishing it in an art context and discourse. Almost a century after Duchamp has expanded the horizon of what art is, by attaching titles to everyday objects and demonstrating that anything can be art if the artist says it is, Sehgal tries to go beyond.¹³³ By ways of choreographies¹³⁴, Sehgal's work proposes the transformation of actions as a way of obtaining a product or an artwork, a true conceptual gesture.¹³⁵ Where conceptually working artists wrote down their artwork in a written form as instructions, texts or manuals, or also in a documentary way like photographs or film, Sehgal's work dispenses with any documentation at all. Instead, he trusts in understanding the artwork as a momentary state of being and in the action or interaction of a given moment. From there, the existence of a piece lives in the memory of those who experienced it.

Sehgal is an artist who does not produce tangible objects and he is not interested in leaving any form of visible trace. By making live action that is based in sculpture, his medium is immateriality, which he uses to generate highly provisional pieces of art that explore the relationship between humans and objects and challenge the traditional museological context. With the artistic materials of the human body and human voice, language, movement and interaction, Sehgal stakes out a radical position within the field of Conceptual Art. Compared to Yves Klein who fifty years ago sold empty spaces in Paris in return for gold¹³⁶ or Michael Asher who ten years later was staging interventions at commercial galleries by removing the walls between exhibition space and the back office, Sehgal goes one step further. The buyers of Klein's *Oeuvres immatérielles* received a certificate of ownership and Michael Asher documented his interventions in meticulous descriptions. As it was labeled on Asher's work, one might want to call Sehgal's praxis a way of institutional critique, if not Sehgal himself would state that his pieces work best in a museum or

132 See Stein, 2009. In the interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Sehgal told him that the collector Jérôme Bel owns an edition of *Instead of allowing some things to rise up to our face dancing bruce and dan and other things*. See in: Obrist, 2003

133 See Lubow, 2010, p. 26

134 The German word Sehgal prefers is „Aufführung“. See in: Kittel, 2013

135 Hoffmann, 2002

136 See Lubow, 2010, p. 27

gallery.¹³⁷ The label would not fit, because also at the same time, and again different to the intent of some conceptual artists of that period Sehgal considers his work to be imbedded in the system of art through its presentation forms and in the art market. Yet, his acknowledgement of even the ephemeral artworks being linked to a mercantile system and therefore being a commodity, is much more honest than the not well thought through deliberation of the Conceptualists back in the days: „In their flight from the object-based art market, these Conceptualists (...) artists left behind them, like bread crumbs, objects that provided a path back in.“¹³⁸ Sehgal's works are being traded and collected. His attitude is positive towards this fact, believing that even though they are not „objects“, his „constructed situations“ are proper artworks which one can own. Of course, he is questioning the coordinates that define the system of art: idea, visualization, originality, producer, viewer, owner, market value. For exhibitions, he forbids one to write and publish press releases (information on shows can only circulate orally over the phone), no posters are designed, there are no advertisements allowed, not even invitation cards are sent out, thus there are no private views or openings held. The exhibitions do not include any wall labels or introduction panels.¹³⁹ Clearly, this strictness about any of these exhibition features - which usually helps to draw the public attention to the show - is a perfect example of excellent self-marketing. But with Sehgal, this praxis goes throughout his whole *oeuvre*. He claims not to write down any of his ideas for new pieces. Instead, he thinks them through and discusses them, but none of his works are noted somewhere. The *Idea* is the work. As simple as this, the *Idea* is created as idea, marketed as idea, shown as idea, sold as idea, preserved only as idea. In the end, what he establishes with this form is creating value by creating experience. In that sense, the artist here can be viewed more as the catalyst, rather than being at the centre.

Sehgal's practice can be applied to the tendency of „relational art“ or „relational aesthetics“ a mode originally observed by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud. This approach can be defined as „a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.“¹⁴⁰ Thus, the artwork creates a social environment in which people come together to participate in a shared activity.¹⁴¹ Rather than the artwork being an encounter between viewer and object, relational art produces intersubjective encounters. Through these encounters, meaning is elaborated collectively,

137 See Sehgal's remark in: Obrist, 2003

138 Lubow, 2010, p. 26

139 See the exhibition information on Tino Sehgal's show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 2005

140 Bourriaud, 2002, p. 113

141 Ibid., p. 13

rather than in the space of individual consumption.¹⁴²

5.5. Conclusion

As argued above, unlike the aims of many conceptually working artists in the 1960s and 1970s, Tino Sehgal is not protesting the art market itself. His work is specifically conceived to function within the art world's conventions: it is lent and exhibited, bought and sold.¹⁴³ He even calls these works products, and is producing objects not in the material sense of the word, but in the product sense of the word.¹⁴⁴ As Müller has pointed out, it almost seems like the viewer's interest in the situations can be shattered like shares can. Buying the entrance ticket, the visitor takes part in his or her experience in creating the body of value, which in fact is fragmented and divided in countless single pieces. The shareholder value consists of each single intellectual participation in the meaningful production of the situations¹⁴⁵ and added together, this might be how the creation of value happens. Sehgal himself has tried to explain what he aims to accomplish: The pieces are „(...) a structure to have a conversation about people's values“.¹⁴⁶ By avoiding unnecessary consumption, Sehgal makes art that does not require the transformation of any materials and he refuses to add objects to a society that has already enough objects produced: „I'm especially trying to be cleaner than conceptual art in the sense that if we want to dematerialize the object, let's really dematerialize it.“¹⁴⁷ Instead, human beings are filling the role that sculptures occupy in a museum. But when the museum closes at night or the exhibition ends, nothing is left to see or read. Only the idea stays in people's head.

Sehgal tries to go one step further than Duchamp by declaring that an idea is art by virtue of the artist saying it is art. He does not need a visual object to prove this. He uses the museum context to legitimize this strategy. He uses the human mind to declare it as art and it only works when the situation stipulates something in the viewer to make him think, maybe even react to it in a variety of ways and ideally to interact directly in the constructed moment. This creation of artistic value justifies the monetary value that is linked to these artworks. The experiences and insights are not for free. But then again, only what humans share orally or unconsciously in their everyday interactions is truly for free. For all other experiences, one must at least pay an admission fee.

142 Bourriaud, 2002, p. 17/18

143 See Midgette, 2007

144 Sehgal in: Obrist, 2003: „(...) whereas I am interested in creating products but by rethinking the notion of a product as a transformation of actions not as a transformation of material.“

145 See Müller, 2012, p. 45

146 See in: Lubow, 2010, p. 29

147 Sehgal in: Obrist, 2003

6. Conclusion

Can a final statement be found to conclude the search for the ephemeral moment of creating value that lies within artworks that consist only as *Idea*?

The era of Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s enabled the artists to discuss through their work the system of how art is circulated and by doing to put this system into question. The social and political conditions of society during this period of time brought out ways of new artistic practices and theoretical thinking that established the artists as intellectuals. The loss of the author and the challenge of the term 'original' planted in the theoretical discourse ways of deconstructing the presumption that the artwork needed to possess a physical body. During this time phase, the production means of how art is created and established underlay critical inspection, which lead to a much wider and broader understanding of the features of the art object. The circumstances of when and how objects are perceived as art, in what context this happens and on which terms the audience receives it were put into discussion. By establishing a network between the different players in the art world a concept, which explored how art was exhibited, distributed and circulated was put into question.

There were many artists who contributed greatly to the critical thinking of the presentation status of art, its commodification and how art became a fetish. But retrospectively, Conceptual Art compromised itself. Instead of evading commodification, most artist found their way right back into it. Among these conceptually working artists during the 1960s and 1970s there were two who found possible ways to question the status of commodification by creating works without a physical object. When a work of art consists only as *Idea*, there must be some commonly agreed upon value attached to it. In the course of this paper, two different, but in their practice somehow related artists have been examined. With the *Oeuvre immatérielle*, Yves Klein presented a work that consisted of story telling only. The creation of value is attached to the experience the buyer/collector receives out of the act of purchase. In the moment of the destruction of the money paid for the piece, the work production or creation is closed. The buyer/collector becomes co-producer of the work, is the sole owner of it and from then on how the work is being transported in time lies in his hands. But apart from his few actions to certify the value of an intangible artwork, Klein produced mainly objects and paintings that were already strongly collected in his lifetime.

Michael Asher produced works that existed only during a certain period of time - the exhibition period - and after one single presentation, the works were destroyed due to the reconstruction of the exhibiting space after the end of the show. He tried to overcome the objecthood not by producing, but instead by reducing given situations and declaring these constructions as works. For the possible

buyer of the pieces, there is nothing left to collect, except for guidelines the artist might give to re-establish the works. The final works have no material to preserve, as these site-specific situations were attached to the conditions of the particular spaces. By deproducing 'things' and changing the position of things, Asher created value only for a short period of time. He evaded the commodity status by not creating tangible objects to collect and by pursuing an artistic career without serving the market needs.

A third artist was brought into the discussion and an artistic strategy in the context of contemporary art was tested. Tino Sehgal as a contemporary artist was familiar with both practices and saw both Klein and Asher as somehow related to his „dialectical reworking“¹⁴⁸, but Sehgal's work takes a third route. He produces no physical objects and also nothing remains after the exhibition ends. With his „constructed situations“, which greatly involve the viewer into the production of the pieces, he creates intersubjective encounters. In these, the viewer participates in a shared activity and out of this, he/she pulls out an experience, which is meant to live on in his or her memory. From this participation, individual meaning and creation of value are established. Not to allow any written documentation or photographs, but at the same time to embrace the market opportunities, is a smart self-marketing strategy by Sehgal, which somehow guaranteed the talking about his pieces orally. The traditional history in writing is replaced by an oral translation, a truly postmodern gesture. In that sense, I can conclude that Sehgal's „constructed situations“ fulfill all aspects of a veritable intangible artwork, but in a postmodern understanding, where the participation and communication becomes the commodity by which value is created.

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