

You Call That Art?



Untitled work by Robert Morris—"The overwhelming element is space—informal, undefined, evocative of a primitive and mystical time."

by Warren Sylvester Smith

A PLAQUE on the gallery wall says that the artist, Jochen Gerz, spent 16 days on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, in a compartment whose blinds were drawn, as he traveled from Moscow to Vladivostok and back. Each day (so the plaque explains), he placed a different slate under his feet. These slates are arranged in a hollow square on the gallery floor, four on a side, with a symbolic chair in back of each. Gerz's notebooks and all further evidence of the trip have been burned and the ashes smeared on the slates; the exhibit is now the only tangible reference to his journey.

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It is clear from the plaque that Gerz intends the viewer to be uncertain about whether the trip ever really took place.

In the middle of the plaza outside the gallery, a team of well drillers is at work, partially sinking a one-kilometer metal shaft into the earth. Walter de Maria, the American "earth artist," has planned to leave a handsome portion of the shaft exposed above the surface, with a plaque that will assure the viewer that the underground segment of his "Vertical Earth Kilometer" really exists. But those who have not seen the drilling equipment at work may be as skeptical about the unseen part of the 1,000-meter shaft as they are about the reality of the Trans-Siberian journey.

Gerz and De Maria have created two of the more doctrinaire examples of what has come to be called Conceptual Art. Both works were exhibited last summer as part

of Documenta 6, the international contemporary art show held in Kassel, West Germany, but they could have been included in almost any contemporary art show in the Western world. Reactions to such works usually range from a few shrieks of delight to a great deal of puzzled but tolerant interest to a skepticism—sometimes even to resentment—that is most often accompanied by the question, "Do you call that art?"

Despite such reactions, the Conceptual Art movement is by no means a new one. The Conceptualists had their own exhibit at the New York Cultural Center, in 1970, and they were also much in evidence at Documenta 5, in 1972, the same year Ursula Meyer wrote a book describing the works of 40 Conceptualists (*Conceptual Art*, E. P. Dutton & Co.). By now, the movement is well enough established to warrant serious consideration. Just what is

Conceptual Art trying to do? Does it in fact induce certain mysterious resonances in our inner life by touching a chord that does not respond to conventional artworks?

First of all, it is clear that the trend represents a departure from aesthetic traditions—not only from the Renaissance tradition but from twentieth-century tradition as well. For Cubists, Surrealists, Abstract Expressionists—even Minimalists—the art experience centers in an art object that displays a craftsman's skill. The object has some substance and some permanence—though admittedly these characteristics have been fading in recent years. It can be owned—put in a home, a lobby, a museum, a sculpture garden. It may not exactly fulfill Tolstoi's requirement that a work of art express an experience its creator has lived through, but it usually has the power to communicate *something*—if not joy or remorse, then at least some kind of geometric satisfaction.

For the Conceptualist, on the other hand, the actual art object either completely vanishes (as with Gerz's train trip) or becomes a kind of invisible concept (as with the underground portion of De Maria's shaft). The respondent has merely an idea of what has happened or of what exists. (Perhaps I am wrong to say "merely," since Conceptualists believe that the idea is more significant, more powerful, than the object. They are not simply reviving the Twenties art of Duchamp and the Dadaists. "What is being attacked," says Robert Morris, a Conceptualist, "is something more than art as an icon. . . . What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even, in the service of discovering new perceptual modes.")

In any radical movement, the doctrinaire practitioners are not always the most interesting or the most significant. Because the uncompromising Conceptualist is committed to the total disappearance of the art object, he must inevitably arrive at a dead end; the abolition of the art object becomes an unsatisfying aesthetic, as evidenced by Gerz's need to display chairs and slates and by De Maria's need to leave some of his metal shaft exposed above ground. But the Conceptualist philosophy has spread beyond the extremists and into the larger world of art and is attracting many artists who in a somewhat more conventional way are searching for a different interpretation of the word *art* and for a different way of relating art to life.



Nam June Paik's video jungle—"Combining the ephemeral with the technological."

The nature of this emerging aesthetic is not yet wholly clear, but one element that is established is its emphasis on flux. Change seems so rapid and civilization so insecure to these artists that they can relate to the real world in only the most tenuous and temporary fashion. Conceptual art, more than any other, evokes this feeling of transience. For example, "Musical Space," by the Greek sculptor Takis, is a darkened room filled with strange, disordered sounds. Takis has spotlighted their sources: a magnetically operated hammer that intermittently strikes a huge curved steel plate; foot-long steel needles that dangle from long threads and bounce against cello strings. What is singularly Concep-

tualist about this exhibit is the evanescence of its effect. The experience of being in the room is indescribable, fascinating, even strangely comforting; but it is ephemeral. Even if one lingers at the exhibit, its effect is fleeting at best.

In order to produce such works, Conceptualists are turning more and more to technology. It is difficult to say whether MIT's "Centerbeam," for instance, belongs in an art exhibit or in a science fair. But its designers—Otto Piene, Lowry Burgess, and their colleagues at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies—did submit the 200-foot beam to Documenta 6, where crowds enjoyed its holograms, its colored steam, and the laser designs it projected

against distant trees. "Centerbeam" is one of a number of artworks that are blurring, perhaps even completely erasing, the line between technology and art. In keeping with the Conceptualist theory that the realm of art is all-embracing, technology is fast allying mythical and emotional elements with its intellectual and practical ones.

The combination of the ephemeral with the technological was bound to result in works using the television image. The moving image on videotape can be slowed down, speeded up, frozen, or reversed. It can be blurred or shattered. In black and white, it can be shifted from positive to negative; in color, it can be altered by chroma-key or other studio devices. This versatility is well represented by several recent artworks. Shigako Kubota used video magic in his spoof of Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." In each riser of a four-step staircase, Kubota placed a television screen, each of which sequentially showed an electronically altered nude coming down the stairs. Nam June Paik, the Korean artist whose work was recently shown at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, also used the TV image. In a large room filled with shrubbery, ferns, and small trees, Paik scattered 30 television sets, all tuned to the same program. In an original arrangement by Bill Viola, a small camera is focused on a drop of water forming at the end of a tiny pipe. When the drop falls, it strikes a drumhead that has been placed over a microphone. Projected on a television screen only a few feet away, the image of the drop appears as a slowly expanding shape that vanishes with a thunderous explosion. Such TV artworks are the vanguard of a genre that will increasingly use videotape to transmit fleeting sights and sounds as impermanent art forms.

It is characteristic of most Conceptualist works that they require three-dimensional space. Conceptualists do not limit themselves to the visual or the tangible. Frequently, they dominate a complete environment by controlling light, sound, and sometimes odor in a portion of a room, an entire room, a loft, or a stairwell. Sometimes their art requires considerable outdoor space, as does an untitled work by Robert Morris. In a lovely wooded parkland named Karls-Aue, in Kassel, Morris has carefully arranged rocks to create a total environment in a couple of acres of clearing. A formation of huge boulders standing on end suggests a small-scale Stonehenge. Piles of smaller stones resemble cairns. There are stone platforms and

truncated walks. The overwhelming element of the work, however, is space—informal, undefined, evocative of a primitive and mystical time.

It may seem paradoxical to cite such a permanent environment as a Conceptual artwork. Morris's park is a very real arrangement in which the artist has skillfully used tangible materials. Still, he has presented us with no *identifiable* art object. Though Morris provides considerably more visual help than Gerz has given to his Trans-Siberian journey, it is the whole atmosphere of the park that affects us—the concept and not the stones.

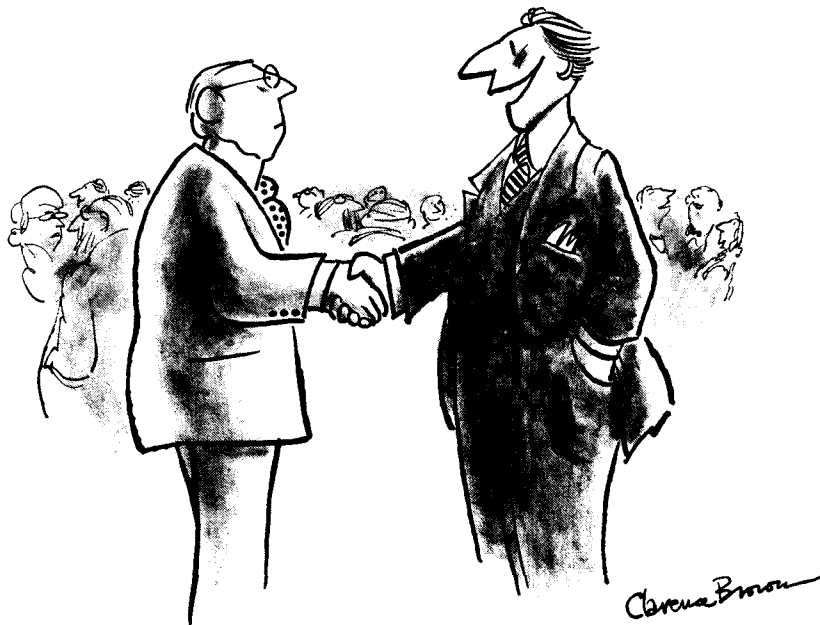
Admittedly, Conceptualism is fraught with contradictions. One can argue that no work of art can exist solely in the mind; yet one can also contend that art never really exists anywhere else. Conceptualists have a cavalier attitude toward craftsmanship; yet many of their works represent virtuoso performances of high technical skill—although it is not the kind of skill developed in art classes. Conceptualists revolt against conventional art markets; yet a few of them have turned handsome profits. Finally, their art form is a radical break with tradition; yet their primary purpose is the thoroughly traditional one of raising the human consciousness to a higher level.

In one sense, Conceptualists may be considered reactionaries rather than radicals. Traditional artworks can be reproduced, and reproductions have come to be regarded as viable substitutes for the originals. In the classroom, in fact, color prints and sound recordings must of necessity substitute for the originals. But Conceptual

artworks cannot be reproduced. They exist only in the place where the artist has created them. They have brought us back to the days when those who wished to view a work, or to experience it, had to seek out the original.

Well, *do* you call this art? Not if you insist on the usual definition of art. Although the Conceptualists cannot divorce themselves from the past any more than other artists can, they do not venerate traditional art. Consequently, they have no illusion about their own work being venerated in the future. They are content not only with personal mortality but with the fleeting vitality of the moment. They have little regard for the traditional skills of the painter, sculptor, printmaker, or musician; yet they demand the right to use any materials and any techniques these traditionalists have developed. They also demand the right to explain their work and to deal with any concept, no matter how exalted or mundane. But grandiose as their pretensions may seem, they leave the artist with almost nothing to display and the respondent with almost nothing to grasp.

Though the doctrinaire Conceptualists are easy targets for ridicule, they have released new springs of creative energy that are spreading throughout the art world. However we choose to regard their work, one response is insistent: Those implausible slates of Gerz, that symbolic thrust into the earth of De Maria, have tripped open secret doors into the imagination, giving us a glimpse—at least for a moment—into yet unknown, yet unexplored, avenues of the human consciousness. ●



"Of course I remember you! We met on the Planning Commission. I never forget an interface."

The Movies

A Phantasmagoric J. Edgar Hoover

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

The *Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* is, first of all, a phenomenon. Who would have supposed that within half-a-dozen years of the great patriot's death a movie would portray him as a neurotic tyrant who freely violated the law, blackmailed presidents, drove an ex-agent to suicide, and had an arguably homosexual relationship with his closest FBI friend? Nor is this a fly-by-night radical or scandal-mongering movie, but one with a well-known cast and theater distribution by that least ideological of organizations, American International Pictures (AIP).

So one must credit Larry Cohen, the writer, director, and producer, with audacity of conception—as one must credit AIP with a gamble on the change in the national mood. As for the film itself, it is low-budget, episodic, and unprofessional, wavering unpredictably between documentary and comic book. The phenomenon is more fascinating than the film.

What gives *Hoover* a certain redeeming dignity is the reasonably complex and not altogether unsympathetic portrait of the director himself, rendered in strong and subtle performances by an actor named James Wainwright as the young Hoover and by Broderick Crawford as the aging veteran. Both are excellent, Wainwright in conveying the inner tensions of a youth on his way up, Crawford in radiating the complacent but uneasy power of a man at the top. Among other things, they both *walk* so well—and so much like the director. Dan Dailey provides sensitive, weatherbeaten support as Hoover's sidekick, Clyde Tolson.

A quarter of a century ago in *All the King's Men*, Broderick Crawford gave another carefully wrought performance—that time as a politician obviously based on Huey Long. The figure was not, however, called Huey Long. He was called Willie Stark, as he had been in Robert Penn Warren's novel. That device liberated both novel and film from any exact obligations to the character and career of Long. *Hoover*, however, purports to be about real

figures involved in real events. This raises problems. Of course, the dramatist cannot be held to the same standards as the historian. He must have freedom to foreshorten, heighten, transpose, and even invent scenes to meet artistic needs. But the retouching of art must not violate the essential spirit of history.

Is speculation about Hoover's sexual life within the limits of permissible dramatic license? A scene showing Hoover exciting himself by listening to tapes of someone else's sexual performance is surely too much. But more serious, I believe, is the distortion of the historical record. The wiretapping issue, for example, receives the most slipshod treatment. The film exhibits a demented Roosevelt giving a reluctant Hoover, in the words of the script, "authority to tap wires, search homes, and burglarize bedrooms of American citizens." In fact, Roosevelt disliked wiretapping and, when he gave the bureau permission to tap suspected Nazi agents, specifically directed the attorney general "to limit these investigations ... to a minimum and to limit them insofar as possible to aliens." Hoover's postwar interpretations of Roosevelt's order stretched it inexcusably, but this was Hoover's work, not Roosevelt's.

Nor does the film even recognize the vital distinction between wiretapping—the physical tapping into wires to record telephone calls—and electronic bugging—the planting of concealed microphones near a person under surveillance. In the Hoover years, taps required authorization; bugging did not. Robert F. Kennedy, for instance, never authorized the bureau to wiretap the mob or Bobby Baker, as the film suggests. The bureau bugged the mob and Baker (or at least one of his associates), but this it did on its own, not on the instructions of the attorney general.

There are other distortions without compensating artistic gain. The film shows Hoover trying to blackmail Robert Kennedy by bringing up the CIA's engagement of the gangster Giancana in a Castro assassination plot. In fact, it was Kennedy who informed Hoover about the plot. "The attorney general told me," as Hoover

wrote in a memorandum in May 1962, "he wanted to advise me of a situation in the Giancana case which had considerably disturbed him." The confrontation between Martin Luther King, Jr., and Hoover, as staged in the film, is entirely fictitious. Far from a bitter clash between the two men by themselves, it was a session described by Andrew Young, who was present, as "a mutual admiration society" and by Cartha DeLoach of the FBI, who was also present, as "more or less of a love feast."

The actors do well enough, as noted, by Hoover and by Tolson. The first scene between John and Robert Kennedy, however, has the air of nightclub impersonations and actually roused titters in the screening room. Thereafter, Michael Parks catches a little of Robert Kennedy's diffidence, irreverence, and conviction. Much of the cast appears to have been chosen in a game of blindman's bluff. Lloyd Nolan, a good actor, is wholly wrong as Harlan Stone. George Plimpton, a fine writer, does not in the slightest resemble Quentin Reynolds. And Howard Da Silva as FDR gives what may well be the silliest performance in the history of movies. It is an act from a Union League Club smoker, circa 1936.

Fortunately, *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* does not have sufficient weight to plant indelible historical misconceptions in the minds of its audience. Its inaccuracy and bias are deplorable—no more so, however, than the pro-Hoover films to which the Republic has been subjected for so many long and wearisome years. ●

Wit Twister No. 112

Edited by Arthur Swan

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word. Answers on page 52.

When he fares forth with great
chivalric glee,
A knight's hard _ _ _ _
_ is verily a boon;
But if he _ _ _ _
himself incautiously,
This erstwhile _ _ _ _
makes him swear or swoon.

Contributed by Ura Brown, Waterloo, Ill.