



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## **Language Strategies in American Conceptual and Post-Conceptual Art**

Maia Toteva  
Predoctoral Fellow  
University of Texas at Austin

In the late sixties, conceptual artists including Joseph Kosuth, John Baldessari, Mel Bochner, and Lawrence Weiner questioned the ability of traditional media to convey art's essential characteristic—the idea. Rejecting the “formalist modernist canon,” conceptualism borrowed theoretical notions from analytical philosophy, structuralism, and post-structuralist thinking. In the context of a “linguistic turn” in the humanities of the second half of the twentieth century, language became a form of expression in art.

To date, there is no art-historical investigation of the linguistic strategies employed by conceptual artists. The majority of studies merely assume a descriptive mode or document the increased use of words in art. Analyzing primary sources such as oral interviews, artists' writings, exhibition catalogues, and gallery records, my research will examine the specific linguistic, structuralist, and post-structuralist notions that influenced the art of the sixties. Furthermore, I will explore how those ideas were appropriated and transformed in conceptual artworks and artists' writings.

A new generation of artists of the seventies and the eighties (e.g. Vito Acconci, John Latham, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Victor Burgin, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer) took on the conceptual use of language to advocate more socially oriented messages. Examining primary materials, I will investigate the linguistic nature of their techniques. The main goal of the project is to put conceptualism and its successors in a new methodological perspective, analyzing various artistic strategies of language use.