

WORKS OF CONCEPTUAL ART FROM THE COLLECTION OF  
DAVID BELLMAN EXHIBITED AT OR GALLERY VANCOUVER  
AUGUST 1984 WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY BY  
IAN WALLACE

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

David Bellman has collected a number of key works of conceptual art by artists whom he has shown in his privately-financed exhibition center that he opened in Toronto in 1980. In gathering a selection of these works for exhibition at Or Gallery in Vancouver, I wanted the focus not to be on conceptual art as a generalized phenomenon, but rather on the experience of actual works of art, however marginal they may be as objects. I also wanted to present them as free as possible of institutional and commercial frameworks. I wanted to show that they are "still alive" and relevant to the present, indicative in all their modesty of the continuing tradition of avantgarde practise.

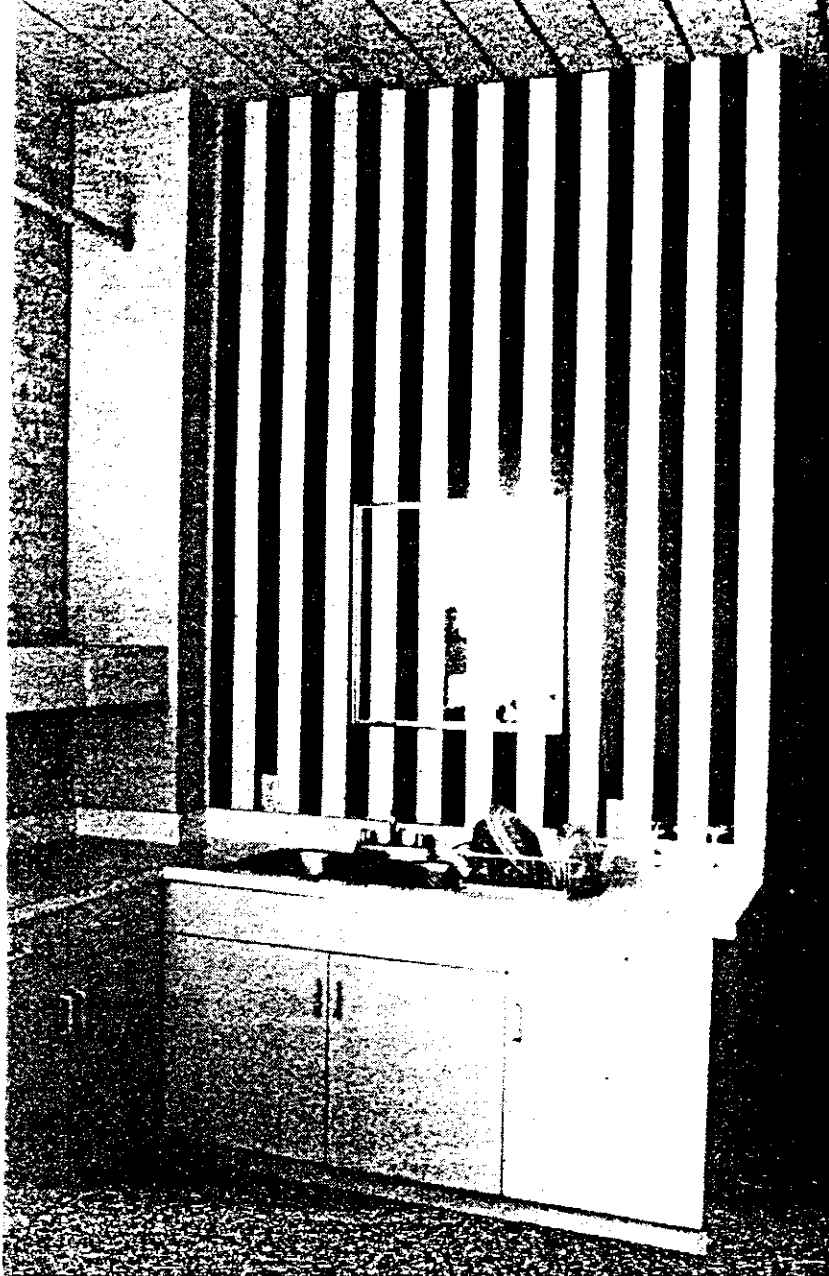
The inscrutability of these works has always been a part of their strategy for survival and independence; and their accessibility, openness and risk as a freedom of outlook. If there was to be anything gained from this show that would be immediately useful to artists, I hoped that it would offer suggestions about a way of working; how an attitude finds its place in a form of production; how freedom from the object can present new possibilities of meaning.

Each work tests the limits of its possibility bounded by its moment in history; that same moment of self-consciousness in language that brought forth the literature of linguistics and semiology; and of the awareness of the function of ideology in cultural discourse. Conceptual art was the art (or rather practise) of the negation and destabilization of the sign in order to open it up to another strategy; to the ideal interchange of the author/artist and the reader/viewer; and to mobilize a dissatisfaction with the given and prepare the audience for new thoughts, new politicized ambitions within and without the artworld. The frameworks of beaux-arts culture and of the museum were broken open. Traditional categories of 'painting' and 'sculpture' were replaced by the 'work' or 'piece'; its form could inhabit any aspect of the world, any medium of communication including thought itself.

A new economy of art and its language, a negation of the exclusive commodity in favour of pure exchange, was proposed. It originated a functioning criticality that sought to discover how to produce the idea of art without producing its substitution as the art object. But even conceptual art, as it became popularized in the early '70s, played with 'ideas' and 'idea art' into a mimickable style, a manneristic decorum. But underneath both its seriousness and sly humour was also a perpetuation *the idea* that was the outcome not of a notion of style, but of the larger goals of authentic art. The reserve, the austerity and ironic sobriety of conceptual art was the means by which it wilfully distanced itself from absorption by the voracious appetite of the modernist audience attracted to the glamour of its exclusivity.

But this distancing was not hermetic. It was an insistence that it be understood on its own wilfully difficult terms. In fact one of the contributions of conceptual art, its link to the avantgarde, was its openness, accessibility and demand for artistic freedom, not only for the artist as producer, but also for the audience from habitual ways of seeing and ritualized forms of culture. This freedom and accessibility is also located in the fact that because the works in this exhibition are not traditional art objects, they did not have to be transported. There were no shipping or insurance costs and very little of the usual apparatus of art institutions needed to be called into play (this catalogue excepted). Although each work entailed its own specific problems of installation, there was no 'original' object. Nevertheless each of these works has an integrity and

Excerpt from catalogue



Daniel Buren *In and out of the Frame* 1970  
collection David Bellman, Toronto

an authenticity that one expects of the 'original'. Even in their ambiguity and non-objectivity there is a clarity of structure and an intensity of conception that finds its completion in the response of the audience.

And the ideal audience is the collector. Since there is often no art object to purchase, the collector of conceptual art partakes in a special participation in the artistic process, an identification with the artist in the adventure of risk, discovery and idealization that is the aim not only of conceptual art but of all avantgarde art. This participation takes the form of an 'underwriting' of the practise of the artist by the collector, rather than as the purchase of the art object as commodity. Thus it is of special significance that the collector be identified with the work and its author, and it is fitting that recognition be given to David Bellman who has generously loaned these works for our appreciation.

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