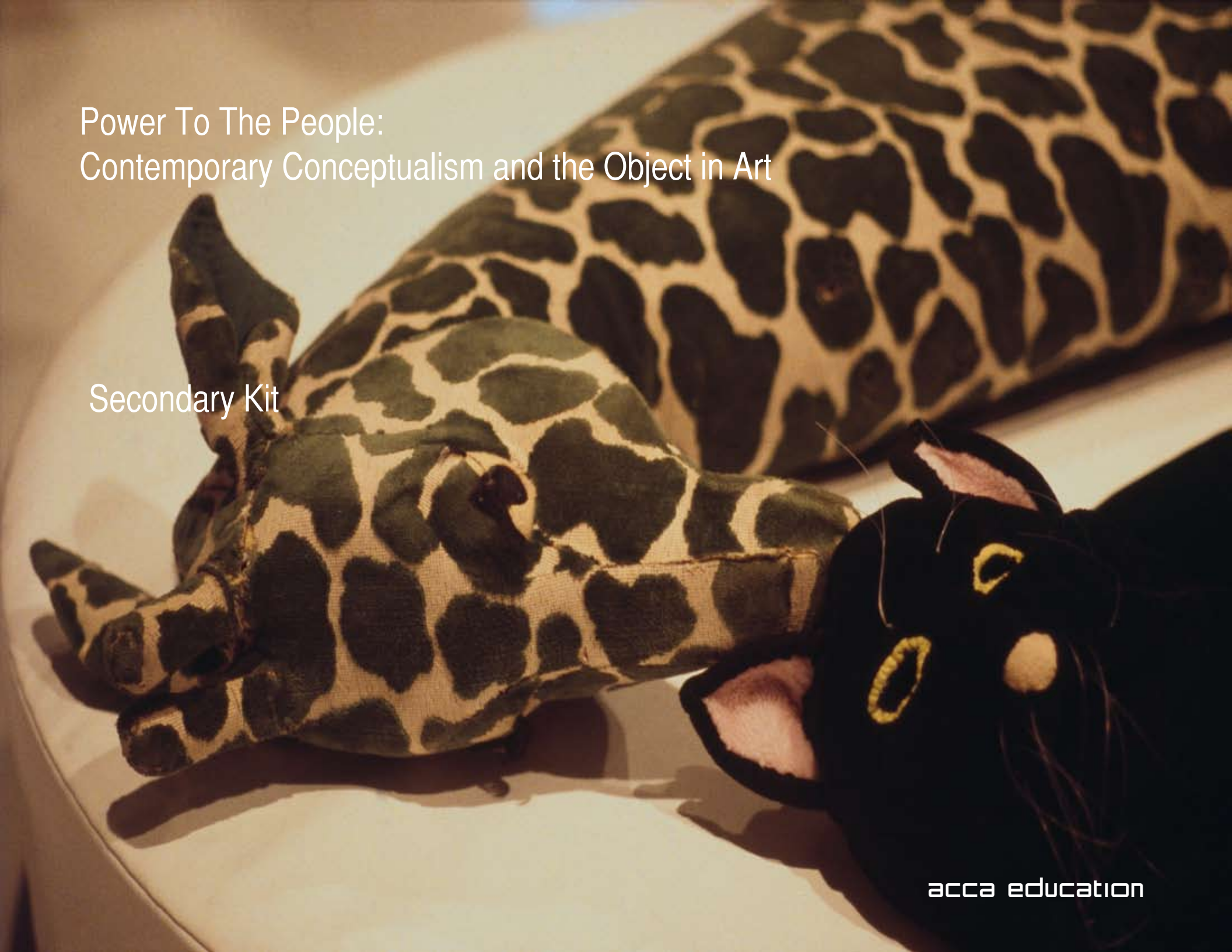


Power To The People:
Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art

Secondary Kit



curatorial rationale

POWER TO THE PEOPLE takes Conceptual Art as its starting point and explores the importance and influence of this pioneering movement on a recent generation of Australian and international artists.

The exhibition queries the ongoing return of contemporary artists to the artworks, events and strategies of the first wave of Conceptual Art, and identifies **audience** and **imagination** as key areas that have been liberated by younger artists from Conceptual Art's dusty archives.

The relationships of this recent generation of artists to Conceptual Art are articulated in many ways. Some are activated by a direct engagement with material sourced from first wave conceptual art practices, including artworks and events.

Others focus on the legends and myths that have arisen around this movement and its attendant claims of mysticism. There are also those who are connected through their adaptation and continuation of key strategies initiated by the pioneers of conceptual art almost fifty years ago. In a contemporary situation where revisiting histories and rewriting stories is an everyday practice, and a work of possible and continuous reinvention, these artists have approached Conceptual Art with an energising sense of freedom.

PTTP curator Hannah Matthews has a particular interest in the lineage of conceptual art and performative modes of practice. After graduating with a Master of Art Curatorship from the University of Melbourne in 2002 she has worked in curatorial positions at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Monash University Museum of Art, Next Wave Festival, the South Project, the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the Biennale of Sydney. She has also curated a number of institutional and independent exhibitions and completed a series of residencies in New York, Berlin, Tokyo and Venice.

Conceptual art

Then:

During the late 1960s, following events such as The Vietnam War, the emergence of the civil rights movement, the strikes of Paris '68, a new artistic movement, focused on political and social activism began to emerge. Artists began to move away from creating precious, discrete art objects to instigating dynamic situations, installations, happenings and interactive audience projects. The art of the first wave of conceptual artists was critical, provocative and diverse and above all, was founded in its idea rather than its form. As Italian critic Tommaso Trini recognised, the pioneering art created between the sixties and seventies was characterized by “the transfer of interest from the object to the subject, from the things to human beings”.

Now:

Today, the strategies of Conceptual Art find themselves reconsidered and their relevance expanded by contemporary artists in light of a number of factors. These factors include a recent move away from the seemingly never-ending inflated art market and the fetishised art object; an increased consciousness of environmental sustainability and a need for material rationalism; a resurgence of performative modes of practice; the continued interrogation of the gallery as site and authority; and a desire for an empirical connection to a world that faces an unstable future. The original concerns of the conceptualists and their methodologies for finding new ground, continue to be embraced as a means of awareness within a contemporary landscape of new and familiar concerns. Via a range of motivations, methodologies and outcomes, the recent generation of artists selected to participate in this exhibition reflect on the strategies of Conceptual Art in a way that argues their validity today.

Key themes

Audience

Power to the people:

The pioneers of Conceptual Art sought to alter the relationship between object and audience by freeing the 'work' of its physical media and locating it in ideas and information freely accessible and independent of the gallery system. Through these efforts many artists sought to implicate the audience in their work and yet simultaneously relegated them to a secondary role to the art itself. The work of those contemporary artists drawing from the first wave of Conceptual Art proposes a very different relationship with the audience, demanding a more active and responsive relationship and, in some cases, even encouraging the audience to determine the outcome of the work itself.

Imagination

Power to the imagination:

Italian writer Luca Cerzatti says it best when he argues that, "Conceptual Art told us that what matters is the creative instant, the poesis, or considerations about it. But poesis - the unconscious moment - is something that is hard to communicate. It can only be provoked or evoked, preferably with dense, synthetic means. So, conceptual art asserts, it is better to move the object, the image, away from our senses and do no more than allude to it. Once it is distanced from the object and image, the art takes place in the 'beyond', which is a purely mental place that can be reached by each of us according to our own personal ways and means. It travels a potentially infinite chain of transmission and transformations, with the emphasis on what 'metaphorically' happens outside the frame in a sort of delocalization within the walls of our brains."

Hence, it can be argued that it was Conceptual Art that introduced the idea that it is within the infinitely elastic space of our imagination that an artwork completes itself or takes shape. Robert Barry reinforced such claims, famously stating that "art is brought to life only in the observer's imaginative space, in that subjective place that is our mind." Forty years later, in an age in which we are all increasingly actors and supernumeraries in a huge public performance, there are still some artists who suggest the possibility of an art that exists in the last remaining private place: our heads. The artists participating in this exhibition, through an economic use of materials, deliberately leave room for the audience's imagination to translate, transform, distil and contribute to the exhibited work.



Peter Friedl

Berlin based artist Peter Friedl (b. 1960) explores political awareness, power and autonomy, displacement and the reinvention of genres through consistently diverse mediums, styles and meanings. *Peter Friedl (1998)* is a series of animal costumes distributed around the space that the audience can wear and inhabit as they move through the exhibition and negotiate other works in the show. The work was originally created for an exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, where Friedl asked the staff to name the animal they would like to be and fabricated a heap of childlike costumes from their suggestions. The audience too, chooses a costume to represent themselves, and upon wearing it, takes on a new identity. By inhabiting the costume, the viewer becomes the art object, disrupting the traditional division between the artwork and audience.



Roman Ondák

Roman Ondák (b. 1966) lives and works in Bratislava, Slovakia. Ondák creates artistic interventions that blur the boundaries between art and reality. *Teaching To Walk* (2002) is a daily happening in which a mother is invited to come to the gallery space and to help her young male child to take his first steps. Ondák captures a short-lived but essential moment in the life of a human being not by representing it, but by involving the audience in it. *Teaching To Walk* transforms the traditional stillness of the gallery into a performative space and a movement based activity into an art object. The artist explores the possibilities of how such a situation would be perceived or whether visitors would even notice it. Through this the child's achievement is simultaneously undermined and monumentalized by his presence in the gallery. Ondák provokes the question: at what point does reality become art, or vice versa, and how does this happen?



Dora Garcia

Spanish artist Dora Garcia lives and works in Brussels. As a performance, installation and video artist, Garcia uses the exhibition space as a platform to investigate the relationship between the visitor, the artwork and place. *Instant Narrative* (2006-08) comprises of a gallery attendant seated at a desk in the space who writes a text about the visitors to the exhibition. These observations about the audiences are simultaneously projected as a live feed onto the wall of the gallery. The result is a real-time story in which the viewers are the protagonists, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not. *Instant Narrative* alters the traditional viewing experience. The spectator observes the work, yet the work observes back, commenting on the spectator and their reaction. Authorship shifts between the artist to the writer to the visitor, while Garcia plays with the visitor's expectations, forcing them to question their role in the work and the objectives of the project.



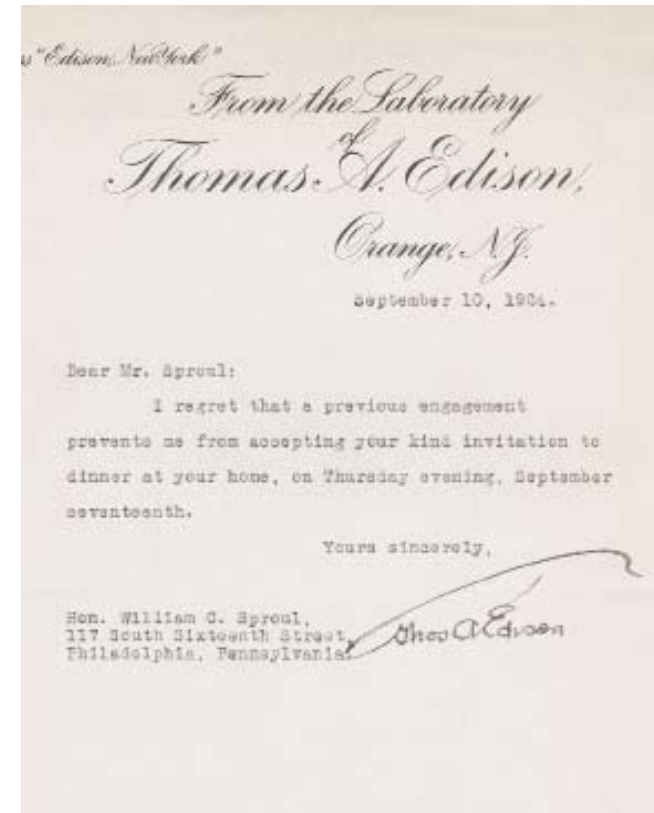
Agatha Gothe Snape

Sydney artist Agatha Gothe-Snape (b. 1980) creates works in mediums as diverse as conversation, performance, participation, painting, printing and powerpoint presentations. Originally performed as part of her *Masters of Visual Art, Every Artist Remembered* (2009 - ongoing) is a weekly performance held each Friday evening throughout the exhibition. Gothe-Snape invites another artist (of differing practices and generations) to engage in a two hour conversation where they devise a schemata of art history through the mind mapping/flow charting of artist names directly onto the gallery wall. Each diagrammatic wall drawing traces the influence of conceptual art through a verbal exchange between the artist and invited guests, while also bringing both the Australian and female perspectives into a more central position within the history of Conceptual Art. These performances are open to the public to watch, but not contribute to.



Natasha Johns-Messenger

Melbourne artist Natasha Johns-Messenger (b. 1974) currently lives and works in New York, where she is studying a Masters of Fine Art Film at Columbia University. Johns-Messenger is best known for her spatial and experiential installations that draw on aspects of specific sites. *Yellow* (2003/2011) is a built corridor bathed in yellow light that uses strategically located mirrors to extend the perceived limitations of the ACCA building both within and outside its walls. As they move through the corridor, the viewer comes across an end point where the image of *Vault*, an iconic sculpture by Ron Robertson Swann currently located on ACCA's grounds is made viewable inside the gallery by way of security camera footage projected at window scale. The work plays with site, inter-subjectivity, the material and immaterial. The work was originally presented in 2003 at the VCA Margaret Lawrence gallery located on the opposite side of the *Vault* and takes the object perspective to a whole new conceptual plane as it factors in not only a temporal play (the years), but adds the element of the relationship between an original and the re-production.



Kirsten Pieroth

Kirsten Pieroth (b. 1970) lives and works in Berlin and examines the overlapping of the real and the imaginary, authenticity and fakery in her practice. *Letter of an Inventor* (2003) explores invention and the myths around Thomas Edison. Pieroth purchased a letter signed by inventor Thomas Edison containing the following sentence "I regret that a previous engagement prevents me from accepting your kind invitation to dinner at your home." Intrigued as to whether the excuse was true or merely an invention, the artist set out on an investigation. She wrote to various experts, including the scholar in charge of Edison's papers and a great grandson of the inventor, who concurred an invention was likely. Pieroth then unsuccessfully approached the Patent Office in an attempt to patent it. The letters she sent out and the replies received are displayed together, alongside small details of personal ephemera, signed photographs of him asleep on his workbench and a recreation of the table. Edison famously slept only four hours a day and used every opportunity to make up for lost time. The signature on the photograph has been copied straight onto the workbench and the 'original' signature is now a fake. Pieroth weaves a complex study of invention, creating discrepancies where truth and fakery are jumbled together to form an authorized version.



Matthew Shannon

Melbourne based artist Matthew Shannon (b.1980) investigates translation, technology and the experience of viewing art. He is concerned with how objects exist in a world of images. *God And The Worm* is a digital animation about the Willem de Kooning bronze sculpture, *Standing Figure* 1969/84, that exists in the garden to the rear of the National Gallery of Victoria. The enormous bronze has been cloned in a computer generated space, with its lumpy mud like body having been sculpted in a virtual world. The movements of the camera show us the sculpture from the extreme points of view, known to cinematographers as the god's eye view – looking vertically down on the world – and the worm's eye view – looking vertically up. In between these two extreme points the surface of the sculpture is examined in great detail, as if the machine is doing the looking for you. The work allows us to see the sculpture amplified, for it to be more real in its image than its physicality. The significance of the de Kooning work is in its proximity to ACCA where the film will be shown. Viewers of the ACCA show will be able to see both the actual sculpture and its virtual counterpart in the same day: they will be able to view the sculpture at the NGV with the human eye as well as the inhuman eye of the film shown at ACCA.

Curriculum Links

VCE Art Unit 4 Outcome 1 Art Issues

Some artists work “relationally,” meaning, that their work involves interaction with others. Who should be recognized as the creator when artists, performers and audience contribute to the creation of artworks? How valuable is the personal idea to the authorship of artworks? Discuss Roman Ondák’s *Teaching To Walk* and Dora Garcia’s *Instant Narrative*.

VCE Studio Arts Unit 4 Outcome 3 Arts Industry Contexts

Discuss ACCA’s unique curatorial program with specific reference to the Power To The People exhibition. What are the key themes and curatorial rationale for the exhibition? How has the audience and their participation been considered in the exhibition design? What are some of the challenges of curating a show involving conceptual art, performances and audience interaction, especially with international artists not present for the install?

VCE Philosophy Unit 2 Area of study 2 Outcome 2 Aesthetics VELS LEVEL 6

Discuss Kirsten Pieroth’s *Letter Of An Inventor*. Does this work appeal more to the imagination than it does aesthetically? What defines the aesthetic? Is beauty necessary or even desirable in art? Pieroth uses Edison’s original letter, a photograph of his workbench and a copy of his workbench and signature. How important is originality in the arts, and should we condemn forgeries, or even copies?

VELS LEVEL 5 and 6 ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

Research Joseph Beuys and Social Sculpture.

Create a conceptual art piece based on bringing real life into the gallery setting. Write a list of instructions. Who would perform, yourself or, would you involve the audience?

Do you think it’s possible to own a piece of performance art?