

## Art History

# During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed

By Camiel van Winkel

Valiz, €25/£34.95 (softcover)

When you picture the conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s, you might imagine a presentation featuring various systems or aesthetics of administration: files, typed cards, boxes, charts and rules. Perhaps you'll think of Hans Haacke's surveys, Art & Language's filing cabinets or On Kawara's correspondences. Yet if those artists borrowed bureaucratic and managerial systems in order to draw attention to the systems and machinations that affected art and the world beyond it, but that operated behind closed doors, then they left out one crucial part of the process, according to Dutch academic Camiel van Winkel. An artist sets some rules – throw three orange balls in the air in the shape of an equilateral triangle (John Baldessari), follow a person along the street until they go into a private building (Vito Acconci) – and then executes the task or has someone execute it for them. The first part, the concept, is privileged over its final realisation, whether the result is a 'failure' or not. There is no quality control. The phrase 'any result is a good result', repeated several times in van Winkel's essays, takes on an almost sinister tone; nihilistic even, as though those orange balls are just being thrown into a space in which anything can be accepted. And with this begins the crisis in criticism, an inability to define a system of judgement, which (if countless panel discussions on the subject are anything to go by) continues to plague the field of art today.

This is just one of a set of 'paradoxes' left over from conceptual art and still undealt with that, van Winkel argues, leave what we have come to describe as 'contemporary art' resting on shaky ground. Based on his PhD thesis, van Winkel's argument, expounded via a series of essays, is that the work of conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt (whose 1969 *Sentences on Conceptual Art* is a repeated reference), Robert Barry (whose 1969 *Closed Gallery Piece* gives this book its title), Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner have had a fundamental impact on the production and reception of art today. And now that conceptual

art has been canonised and many of its leading lights – Baldessari among the most prominent – have been influential on younger generations via their teaching, today is a moment the author feels safe in terming fully 'post-conceptual', following a lengthy introductory analysis of the key texts on the subject, including ones by Lucy Lippard, Benjamin Buchloh, Thierry de Duve and Alexander Alberro.

Van Winkel is at his best when discussing a particular exhibition or moment in history, and the first chapter is particularly well spun, devoted to the experimental, controversial Sonsbeek 71, an edition of an irregularly held art festival based around an Arnhem park. In 1971, curator Wim Beeren included several artists, such as LeWitt and Robert Smithson, who fall within the 'conceptual art' bracket, and decided to broaden the show's geographical scope by several hundred miles so that it encompassed the whole country, making it virtually impossible for anyone to see it in its entirety (especially since there was no one to invigilate or provide information about the show). Consequently, it became clear that much of the work couldn't 'exist' or be seen without the information provided by art specialists – a team of writers, curators and critics who had been employed by the festival to provide context – and prominent critics argued that this moment proved that art had been transformed into an 'elite' form of knowledge. In this way the ideal ambitions for this exhibition – that the whole country could experience these new forms of art practice – and the reality of it clashed, spawning interpersonal anger, as well as negative reviews and articles which left the organisers and those involved shaken: van Winkel even describes this as a Sonsbeek 'trauma'. The next edition of the show did not take place until 15 years later.

Van Winkel identifies several such ruptures and splits within conceptual art. On the subject of institutional critique, he is in agreement with art historian Michael Newman, who has written that conceptual art was 'a defensive mimicry of

bureaucratic culture [which] remained parasitic on the institutions it subjected to critique'; he spends an interesting chapter considering the emergence of graphic design, and Wim Crouwel's practice in particular, alongside the art of the period, proposing the idea of a territorial divide – designers would put all their attention on visualisation rather than information, and artists would focus on the information; while another section is spent on the taboo issue of conceptual art as decoration in collectors' homes.

But there are also one or two problems: the writer could have distanced himself further from the thesis structure (with its long introduction on methods and approaches), and the collection of essays is unedited, which means that there is a lot of repetition. There's also something cold and distant in van Winkel's discussion of artworks (a fact that he mentions himself in the conclusion), and it's difficult sometimes to get a sense of the power of the artworks discussed, if they have any at all. But this may be his historian's approach, and in general van Winkel is engaging and lively, with a clear, unfussy manner of delivery and a keen sense of the shifting priorities shaping artists and institutions through history. Ultimately the author argues that only by understanding these histories can we address the paradoxes of the present.

LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS



CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE  
PARADOXES OF CONCEPTUALISM