

Shall We Kill Daddy?

Mike Kelley

The following article was written by Mike Kelley for a catalog on the work of Douglas Huebler. The catalog, which was released in the spring of 1997, and published in conjunction with the "Origin and Destination" exhibition series at the Société des Expositions du Palais de Beaux Arts, in Brussels.

"...When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts - we want it to happen!

They will come against us, our successors, will come from far away, from every quarter, dancing to the winged cadence of their first songs, flexing the hooked claws of predators, sniffing doglike at the academy doors the strong odor of our decaying minds, which already will have been promised to the literary catacombs.

But we won't be there . . . At last they'll find us - one winter's night - in open country, beneath a sad roof drummed by a monotonous rain. They'll see us crouched beside our trembling airplanes in the act of warming our hands at the poor little blaze that our books of today will give out when they take fire from the flight of our images.

They'll storm around us, panting with scorn and anguish, and all of them, exasperated by our proud daring, will hurtle to kill us, driven by hatred: the more implacable it is, the more their hearts will be drunk with love and admiration for us."

Filippo Thomas Marinetti

From "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," 1909

"It is not my intention to point out a **negative** aspect of the work, but only to show that Huebler - who is in his mid-forties and much older than most of the artists discussed here - has not as much in common with the aims in the **purser** versions of "Conceptual Art" as it would superficially seem."

Joseph Kosuth From "Art After Philosophy," 1969

First of all, I am an ex-student of Douglas Huebler. I studied with Doug at the California Institute of the Arts in the mid- Seventies, a period many romanticize as its Conceptualist heyday. In fact Doug was my "mentor," the faculty member charged with keeping an eye on me. Actually, I chose him because I could not get along with the mentor I had been assigned to. Doug came into the school as chair of the Department of Art at exactly the same time as I arrived as a student. We have another thing in common - we went to the same Undergraduate Art School: the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Despite the fact that Doug graduated twenty-one years before I did, we still had some of the same teachers and courses. Hard to believe, isn't it? Oh, we have one other thing in common. . . Doug Huebler and I share the same birthday: October 27. He was born exactly thirty years before I was.

When asked to write a short essay on the work of Douglas Huebler for this catalogue, I immediately said yes. That was quite a while ago, and now I sit here and scratch my head. I am finding it difficult to begin. I will say first that I like Douglas Huebler's work very much. I will say that I am a fan. But talking, writing about it, expressing my interest in his practice, in language, is hard for me. Why is that? I had never given it much thought before. Some artist's work instantly provokes a stream of commentary from my lips, almost involuntarily - like drool, but not Doug's. His work seems to ask me to ponder upon it. But then my response is generally in opposition to this directive. I have an unconscious physical response - I laugh. I am confused, and this is a surprise in that, on the surface, his work often looks so dumbly straightforward. There is an image, typically a quite mundane and recognizable one, accompanied by text which one would expect would elaborate on, or explain, the image. It does not do so. Instead, in Huebler's terms, the text "collides" or "dances" with the image. You expect the expected first. This expectation is induced through familiar visual terms. Then, through the use of the device, which in our culture is the most common mode of explication - the written explanation, this expectation is destabilized. What looks so familiar, becomes ungraspable. The result is not so much "uncanny," that is, the familiar become unfamiliar, as it is annoying. We crave familiarity and instead we are made dizzy. Like children in school we seek to please the erudite master, the one who orders, who renders in clear language the visual chaos of the world. We seek to please him through our understanding of his message, through shared communion with him. But this is a cruel teacher whose lessons elude understanding. You are only left with yourself, and the nervous laughter of doubt.

When I was asked what the theme of my essay would be, I said something to the effect that it would be about "ageism". I didn't know exactly why I said that at the time. It just blurted out of me. And I know that this subject might not seem to be an appropriate one for an essay in an artist's monograph, since it could be seen to prioritize the social reception of the artist's work over and above his own intentions. Yet Doug's age is something that has been of great consequence in the reception of his work over the years. Just take a look at the Kosuth quote above and that fact is clear. In 1969, in Conceptualism's infancy, Doug's age was already an issue. It was an issue, in a different manner, in the mid Seventies when I was a student of his. And even now, when Doug is being reintroduced into art history as a Conceptualist master and, you would think, his age should no longer be of any importance, it continues to be so.

For example, in Frederic Paul's opening essay in the monograph accompanying Huebler's 1993 exhibition at the F.R.A.C Limousin, he reintroduces the issue. Paul provides a list of sixteen artists, associated with various recent art movements, who are listed chronologically by their birth date. Huebler is located third from the top with a birth date of 1924; Kosuth comes in last with 1945.

Following this list are some possible interpretations of it concerning Huebler's "late development": "...either one concludes that Douglas Huebler was the founding father and prime mover of conceptual art (it has to be admitted that precious few have reached this conclusion) or alternately one can opt for the view of Huebler as a sort of aging dandy, versatile and shrewd enough to jump on the bandwagon. . ." The latter reading of Huebler as an artworld Humbert Humbert (Huebler Huebler?) succumbing to Conceptualism's late Sixties Lolita-like charms strikes me as especially amusing considering the critical and economic clout Conceptualism held at the time. What, one wonders, was Huebler supposed to gain from jumping on the Conceptualist bandwagon? If the answer is youthful vigor by association, Doug could have more- wisely decided to put a flower in his hair and gone to San Francisco as part of the flower child "summer of love."

What is the implied purpose of Paul's list of artist's birth dates? What does it immediately intimate? The unfortunate answer is that we still expect artists to conform to some clearly constructed time line of progressive art historical development. Kosuth's estimation that Huebler was too old to be a pure Conceptual Artist has become so entrenched in the history of Conceptualism, as it now stands, that this premise must always now be addressed in discussing

his work. Here I am, doing it again. If Huebler was too old to be a Conceptual artist, then what was he? A poser perhaps, but since posing doesn't seem antithetical to the aims of Conceptualism, his problem must be that he is the wrong kind of poser. An even sadder conclusion would be that he was simply not a young enough poser to fulfill the expectations an era, the late Sixties, when youth itself was portrayed as avant garde. Given this mindset, if Conceptualism was to be understood as vanguard it could not be seen in the company of "old men." The equation of counter culture with youth culture was the kitsch philosophy of the moment.

Not surprisingly, Huebler's most-often discussed works of late are his early works which, contrary to his problematized definition as a Conceptualist, prove he was indeed one. They do so both through their dates, and through their outward appearance, which conform to our expectations of what a "Conceptualist" artwork should look like. Maps, diagrams, unprofessional photography, and simple understated typography are the dominant signifiers of this art historical mode which is now in the process of being institutionally defined (witness the two recent museum survey shows of Conceptual Art: *l'art conceptuel une perspective* held at the Musee d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1990, and *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1995). By focusing on these early works, Huebler can be more easily assimilated into this fresh history of Conceptualism which, like all histories, is less complicated and diverse than the reality it purports to convey.

I am not here to discuss these early photographic works, even though I thoroughly respect them. I personally am more interested in Huebler's work when it begins to take into account his own historical placement. This is most easily observed in his large-scale project, collectively titled *Crocodile Tears*, begun in 1981 but which Huebler sees as an outgrowth of his *Variable Piece #70* of 1971 - loosely described as a proposal to "photographically document the existence of everyone alive." *Crocodile Tears* is a project that Doug continues to work on until this day.

As the story goes, a conversation about Conceptual Art with Hollywood B movie director/producer Roger Corman resulted in Huebler writing a screenplay - the aforementioned *Crocodile Tears*. When asked about it, Doug isn't very clear about the choice of title, but when the viewer is faced with the plethora of complaints emanating from the cast of unsympathetic characters portrayed in the project, the choice is not surprising. The initial script

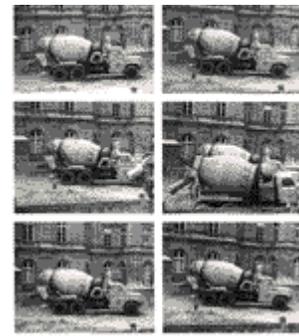
(presented in synopsis in the catalogue for the show Douglas Huebler held at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in 1988) concerns the daring exploits of performance artist Jason James. The ridiculous and convoluted story paints James as a comic book super hero-artist, willing to perform death-defying stunts in order to fund his utopian arts organization: the "Vincent Foundation," (named after his favorite artist - Vincent Van Gogh), aided by his lover/sidekick: Feminist artist Mollie Trainor. The script is filled with allusions to many of the artworld preoccupations of that moment: spectacle, body art, tech and computer art, multinational corporate conspiracy theory, anti-art commodity rhetoric, and PC politics. A side plot concerns James being hunted by an exconvict who was jailed as the result of an earlier James Conceptual artwork.



This is an allusion to a work by Huebler from 1969, *Duration Piece #15*, where Huebler himself offers a reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of bank robber Edmund McIntyre. This piece is then recontextualized, through *Variable Piece #70* of 1971 (the piece where Huebler states his intention to photographically document the existence of everyone alive), into the *Crocodile Tears* project as *Variable Piece # 70 (In Process)* Global, 1981, *Crocodile Tears: Inserts "Woody Wright."* In this work, McIntyre is replaced with current "wanted by FBI" criminal William Leslie Arnold, who is recast in the *Crocodile Tears* narrative as Woody Wright - the killer out to get hero Jason James. This particular work also inaugurates Huebler's return to painting, at least in a quotational manner, in that it also contains a painting of Arnold, supposedly done by Jason James, where he is depicted, "as he might look today" - aged to make up for the fact that his photo on the wanted poster is twenty years old. This portrait of Arnold/Wright is painted in the manner of Vincent Van Gogh who, as you might remember, is James' favorite artist.

At this point Huebler's work, already complex, goes in a direction exceedingly layered. As the *Crocodile Tears* project progresses, he begins to add to it parallel or tangential elements which seem quite extraneous to the plot at hand. Older works and working methodologies, art historical allusions presented via paintings done in the manner of famous artists, and side narratives about characters only marginally connected (if at all) to the Jason James story (illustrated in a cartoonish manner), all compete for attention. Whereas in his early work Huebler was quite reserved visually, limiting

himself to diagrams, simple type written texts and snapshots, the work now becomes almost psychedelic in its overload of elements.



In much of Huebler's early work there had been a tension between surface blandness and infinite meaning. Take for example *Duration Piece #2*, Paris, 1970, where the viewer is presented with six snapshots said to illustrate the "timeless serenity" of a statue seen in the distance behind some cement trucks. The accompanying text informs us of the mechanistic intervals at which the statue was photographed, but also tells us that the photos have been shuffled so they are chronologically out of sequence. No longer reportage, we are instead presented with time scrambled - which produces, I suppose, the statue's "timeless serenity." In other examples, too numerous to mention, Huebler similarly activates banally presented visual information via text. With *Crocodile Tears* the visual presentation of the work takes on an unprecedented equality with the text. You might say that the image itself is for the first time treated as a text instead of an invisible convention.

Let's consider for a moment a work by Mel Bochner from 1970 titled *Language is not Transparent*. I've always found this a particularly annoying and compelling work, and in some ways one of "Conceptualism's" most self-conscious works. The work consists of a sloppily dripping band of black paint on the wall, large enough to contain the phrase "Language is not Transparent" which is written upon it in chalk. At first the work elicits a tautologically induced "So what?" from the viewer, but then the work's very inability to define, aided by its limited presentational mode, opens up a vista of questions. The work seems to be full of very particular allusions: in its drippy execution - to the Abstract Expressionist Oedipal father of Conceptual/Minimal art, and in its use of off hand lettering in chalk on a black surface - to some kind of childish educational scenario. These things cannot simply be looked through to the abstract message of the phrase. They inform and color the phrase; they problematize its abstraction. Yet what this piece by Bochner tells us cannot be done, much early Conceptualist art asks us to do. Huebler himself writes, in 1969, " I use the camera as a 'dumb' copying device that only serves to document whatever phenomena appears before it through the conditions set by a system. No 'esthetic' choices are possible." In essence, Doug is telling us that his photographs are transparent. It is possible, because the photos are "non aesthetic," to look through them directly into the system they exemplify. I could never accept this proposition.

It is this problem of transparency that I believe primarily separates the first generation of Conceptual artists from the so-called second generation, which I am often defined as a part of. Much of the pleasure I got from early Conceptual artworks was from seeing them as a critique of, a parody of, dominant modes of the presentation of "knowledge." I think this was accentuated by the fact that, in the late Sixties, Conceptual artworks existed within a milieu where they would have been considered alongside psychedelic counter culture graphics. Psychedelic graphics set up a mode of visual address that was distinct from dominant cultural modes, whereas Conceptual Art did a pathetic version of them. Conceptual Art's primary visual source looks to be the academic textbook, where the poorly-printed photograph or diagram, accompanied by a caption, is standard fare. The fact that this mode of address is culturally omnipresent does not render it invisible, for, as I have already pointed out, there are modes of address distinct from it that, by comparison, will always render it visible again. It is only invisible in context. The artworld pressures operating at the time to render the visual tropes of Conceptualism invisible are twofold. The first is political - artists of the time sought to make works which, in their seemingly invisible ("dematerialized" to use Lucy Lippard's term) state, could symbolically lie outside of commodity status. The second pressure was philosophical - to downplay the fetishized objectness of artworks was to play up the mind, the intelligence, of its maker. This is the Duchampian model. Nevertheless, the visual tropes of Conceptualism **were not** invisible, which is obvious now that it has been rendered an academic and historically recognizable art movement.

In response to this crisis of the "look" of Conceptualism, the Neoconceptualists of the late Seventies/early Eighties began exploring presentational modes previously taboo within Conceptualist practice - modes derived from Modernist art history and from popular culture. I know from my personal experience at Cal Arts, in the mid Seventies, how reviled popular culture was. The general consensus of the first generation Conceptualist faculty was that use of such material was a reiteration of the values of the dominant culture, and critical usage of it was simply impossible. The apolitical stance of Pop Art had seemingly closed the issue in the Sixties. Some of the most widely-discussed writings at this time, by people of my generation, were ones that tackled the politics of image usage, and especially the usage of mass media imagery. *Images That Understand Us: a conversation between David Salle and James Welling* of 1980, Tom Lawson's *Last Exit: Painting of 1981*, and Richard Prince's *Why I Go to the Movies Alone* of 1983, are good examples of the kind of texts I'm talking about. All

three of these texts in one way or another attempt to reconcile the use of mass media imagery with the political aims of Conceptualism. Lawson's text attempts to reintroduce imagistic painting as a viable artistic pursuit; while the other two texts evoke a kind of phenomenology of popular image reception (An example common in the latter two texts is the allure of magazine photography.) Prince's text is in the form of a narrative novel.

These popular images, these "images that understand us" are dead, are opaque. Salle and Welling write "So what are the big themes? Much talk about opacity as a positive value, ambiguity, and the complex notion that there are some images or some uses of images which, rather than offering themselves up for a boffo decoding by the viewer, instead understand us. That is to say that there is a class of images, call it an aesthetic class, that allows us to reveal to ourselves the essential complicity of the twin desires of rebellion and fatalism. To say that a work of art is dense or opaque is not to say that it is not implicative, subversive or poignant." Lawson posits that painting, by the very fact that it is an outworn mode, is the last exit for the radical artist: "He makes paintings, but they are dead, inert representations of the , impossibility of passion in a culture that has institutionalized self-expression. . . The paintings look real but they are fake." This experience is a familiar one in relation to Conceptual artworks. Huebler's early work presents itself in given terms, as I have already described. The very deadness of its academic facade leads the viewer to other places.

In the May 1982 issue of *Artforum* Huebler lashes out at the ideas expressed in Lawson's essay *Last Exit: Painting*. In his counter essay *Sabotage or Trophy? Advance or Retreat*, Huebler adopts a Marcusean position vis a vis "New Painting's" embrace of popular style: "Little wonder that art-world marketing strategies are so successful: they simply emulate an all-pervasive ideological impulse which seeks gratification through constant change. Little wonder that the products of art are regarded as consumable; little wonder that the historicizing of Conceptual Art lined it up in the fashion parade of art as yet another example of avant-garde style!" Huebler labels the New Painting, in its use of already consumed and lifeless images from the past and present, "reactionary" and pluralist. Surprisingly, Huebler cites, in opposition to the New Painters, such socially engaged artists as Suzanne Lacy, Hans Haacke and Helen and Newton Harrison as more compelling producers.

The stated reason is that these artists focus on matters that lie outside of art. I say surprising because this is not the path that Huebler himself takes. In his

own work, Huebler also reintroduces painting, and specifically paintings mimicking the styles of famous art historical figures. He also begins producing works utilizing such popular forms as the Hollywood narrative, and the newspaper comic strip. And none of these works are overtly political in the manner of Haacke, for instance. It raises the question of exactly how is it that these works operate differently than that of the Neoconceptualists.

Needless to say, Huebler's attacks on Neoconceptualism did not exactly endear him to the younger generation. But, on the other hand, at this point his work had more in common with theirs than it did with the work of most of his contemporaries. Huebler was an interesting figure in the Eighties art world in that many young artists had a kind of attraction/repulsion response to him. His work definitely made an impact on many of the artists associated with Neoconceptualism, and by this I mean not only the so-called New Painting (and photography) but also Commodity Art and Appropriation Art. But here I can point out one great difference between Huebler's practice and that of the Neoconceptualists. Whereas in their work the artists themselves are rarely present (And I would add that this is true in their social positions as artists as well. By the mid Eighties hardly any of the so-called Neoconceptualist artists wrote critically and many of them became increasingly tight-lipped in the Warholian manner, about their artistic motives.), in Huebler's work his own position vis a vis the art world becomes more and more overt, even though it is presented through fictional characters. Despite the fact that Cindy Sherman continually photographs herself in her Film Still series, you never learn anything about Cindy Sherman, nor do you expect to. The work constantly refers back to social archetypes. However, in Huebler's *Crocodile Tears* project a great deal can be gleaned about his relationship to the art world, art market and art history. Again, his work **is** fictive; it is not overtly biographical, but it does allow access to social realities instead of social archetypes. I agree that this is a distinction that, in artworks, cannot be made clearly, I guess it would be more proper to say that Huebler's work **intimates** experience instead of fantasy. The popular images he uses are not completely dead, they still resonate somewhat with life. The work rides a slippery line between the two.



In one version of the *Crocodile Tears* project, done as a weekly comic strip for a Los Angeles newspaper, Huebler presents the tale of a character, named Howard, who is a first generation Expressionist. As I recall the strip, with the rise of Eighties Neoexpressionism Howard thinks his career will make a comeback. No way. As a reminder of Expressionism's less than new history, Howard is an embarrassment, a threat to Neoexpressionism's pose as fresh goods - as current style.

I remember hearing young artists describing Huebler's *Crocodile Tears* project as the complaints of an aging and bitter man. They were frankly embarrassed that the pathetic artworld scenarios depicted in this work were being paraded in public. Huebler's work did not engage the popular dream spectacle to the proper degree. It wasn't cool enough - not hip. He seemed too present in his fictions. These younger artist's problem with the work was precisely that it introduced unsavory topics that young up-and-coming artists didn't want to think about. Again, the specter of Huebler's age looms. I, for one, embraced his tactics. Why shouldn't these things be the stuff of his work - they are the stuff of his life, and have become the stuff of mine now that I have been in the artworld a while. These embarrassing and loaded subjects should be the material of art production. And if, as in Cindy Sherman's work, we can look through the thoroughly recognizable trash of television melodrama into something else, why can't we similarly do the same with Doug Huebler's scramble of dreary artworld scenarios. Well, one reason, as I have already stated, is that they are embarrassing - at least to artists. They are too close to home. In this sense you can even say that Huebler has a remote connection to Abject Art.

I do not want, however, to dwell too heavily on the sociopolitical aspects of Doug's work. They mean nothing without the complex structure they are built upon. Doug's work is extremely playful formally and much of my enjoyment of it, or exasperation with it, comes from that. The work's self-criticality rises from Doug's insane interplays of structure and content, of his putting forth of a prospect which then mutates into something else unexpected or indecipherable. Earlier I mentioned the seeming contradiction of Doug's attack on the pluralism of the New Painting and his own involvement in what could be understood as pluralist practices. The *Crocodile Tears* project is a huge mishmash of styles and references. One could easily see Doug's compositional methodologies as akin to David Salle's leveling strategies. This is not how I



experience them however. Despite the complexity of the work, it still strikes me as dialectical – even though sometimes the various positions he plots are so numerous that it becomes impossible to position yourself in relation to them. Yet I do not experience this as planned futility. Rather I take it to be a challenge to involve myself in complexity. It's up to the viewer to take up the challenge or not. Doug's work is not designed to fail. It is possible to navigate through Huebler's multilayered constructions. It's just that his is not an easy art.

The subject of pluralism is wittily evoked in the *Crocodile Tears* project through the inclusion of the "Peaceable Kingdom" elements. Throughout the project, the narrative is interrupted by various non-illustrative elements including photos from the continuing Variable piece #70, which in its stated intention to document everybody alive is already an impossibly democratic endeavor. Another intrusive element consists of paintings mimicking the works of other artists. These have been executed in the manner of Breughel, Mondrian, Monet, Matisse, etc., etc.. On occasion these paintings have included within them the phrase "The Peaceable Kingdom." This phrase refers to a vision of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them./And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (11:6-7). What better parable of harmless (non dialectical) coexistence. Though Huebler was not specifically evoking him, it's hard not to think of the Nineteenth Century American painter and Quaker preacher Edward Hicks, who is said to have painted over one hundred paintings illustrating the vision of the peaceable kingdom. Because members of the Quaker religion separate themselves from the general society to reside in their own communities based on pacifist beliefs, the theme of the peaceable kingdom becomes, in Hicks' case, more than a mystical parable, it is a call to social action. It is a utopian example, calling for the construction of a society based on brotherly love.

This scattering of works, in myriad styles, labeled "The Peaceable Kingdom" could be read as an illustration of "Postmodern" pluralism, and as a snide comment on the failure of the Modernist utopian program which sought a kind of aesthetic version of brotherly love in its various attempts at international style. And I don't think it would be so wrong to read it that way. However, Huebler's work is never solely ironic. It continues to hold within it the spark of Modernism's utopian goals. He has told me as much. Though it reveals no

clear social program, and staunchly refuses to speak clearly, his work is not fatalistic. His very choice to work narratively, to set up a system that progresses forward, even as it constantly evokes its own past and making, proves his belief that art is forward-looking.

And now I will demand the impossible, and state that the "generation gap" (It's a term that makes your skin crawl just saying it.) no longer exists. We now live in a paradoxical community of dialectical brotherly love free from distinctions based solely on chronology. Hooray! That's not to say that we are equals, however.

Mike Kelley
1996

NOTES

- 1) Filippo Thomas Marinetti. "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," Marinetti: *Selected Writings*, edited by R.W. Flint, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1972, pg. 43
- 2) Joseph Kosuth. "Art after Philosophy," *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, pg. 26
- 3) Frederic Paul. "D H still is a real artist," Douglas Huebler: <<*Variable*>>, etc., F.R.A.C. Limousin, Limoges, 1993, pg. 28
- 4) Douglas Huebler. "Prospect '69" exhibition catalogue statement, October 1969, quoted in: Jack Burnham. "Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, February 1970, pg.41
- 5) David Salle and James Welling. "Images That Understand Us," *Journal*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, June/July 1981, pg. 41
- 6) Thomas Lawson. "Last Exit: Painting," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis, David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts, 1984, pg. 160
- 7) Douglas Huebler. "Sabotage or Trophy? Advance or Retreat?," *Artforum*, May 1982, pg.73