

PARAGRAPHS ON DECEPTUAL ART

by Joe Scanlan

The editor has written me that she is in favor of avoiding “the notion that the artist is a kind of public servant who has to be mystified by the earnest critic.” This should be good news to both artists and public servants. To use a political metaphor (one artist wanted to occupy the institution, another to work from within), I am grateful for the opportunity to strike out for myself.

I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as **deceptual** art. In **deceptual** art the **camouflage** or **fiction** is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a **deceptual** form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are **built into the camouflage or fiction itself** and the execution is an **ongoing** affair. The **deception** becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is **improvisational**, it is involved with all types of **theatrical** processes and it is purposeless. It is usually **dependent** on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with **deceptual** art to make his work **all-encompassing** to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become **enthralling**. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the **deceptual** artist is out to **trick** the viewer. It is only the expectation of **transparency**, to which one conditioned by the **social turn in art** is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art.

Deceptual art is not necessarily logical. The **progression of a scene** or series of **patterns** is a device that is used at times, only to be ruined. **Narrative** may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that she understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as **Brecht vs. the theatrical concept of the fourth wall**). Some **deceptions** are **clear in concept** but **perceptually opaque**. The **deceptions** need not be complex. Most **deceptions** that

are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful deceptions generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable. In terms of deception the artist is free even to surprise herself. Deceptions are discovered by paying attention to the world around us. What the work of art looks like is very important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with a deception. It is the process of set design and the constraints of expectations with which the artist is concerned. Once given physical reality by the artist, the work is open to perception and transmutation by all, including the artist. (I use the word perception to mean the apprehension of contrived elements, the objective understanding of the scenario the elements inhabit, and simultaneously a subjective interpretation of both.) The elements can be perceived only in the process of being completed. The elements need not be actors, or even human; they might be surface decorations, projections, or inanimate objects.

Art that is meant primarily for the betterment of society would be called social rather than deceptual. This would include most public, participatory, and community-engaged art.

Since the function of deception and reception are contradictory (one pre-, the other post- fact), the artist would mitigate his deception by applying subjective judgment to it. If the artist wishes to explore his deception thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while caprice, skill, and other flourishes would be encouraged in the making of the art. The situation should be rejected if it is not convincing. Sometimes what is initially thought to be ordinary will eventually seem extraordinary.

Working with fictional characters that are fragmented and open-ended is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also avoids the necessity of anticipating every turn the work might take. Circumstances inform the work. Some deceptions contain millions of possible details and variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other

schemes imply infinity. In each case, however, the artist selects the basic form and issues that govern the deception. After that, the more decisions made in the course of the scenario unfolding, the better. This minimizes the known, the useful, and the subjective as much as possible. This is the reason for using this method.

When an artist uses a multi-faceted method he usually chooses simple patterns and readily available forms. The actors who might portray the characters themselves are of great importance; they become the grammar for the total fiction. In fact, it is best if the actors are deliberately interesting so that they may more easily become a distinct part of the entire fiction. Using complex basic forms successfully disrupts the unity of the whole. Using simple repeating forms narrows the range of the work, and using distinct actors intensifies the differences between their portrayals. The overall effect is the deception, while the fiction becomes the means.

Deceptual art doesn't really have much to do with justice, truth, or any other moral disciplines. The philosophy of the deception is implicit in the deception and it is not an illustration of any system of philosophy.

It doesn't really matter if the artist understands their intentions in making deceptual art. Once it is out of his hands the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive it, let alone react to it. Different people will understand the same deception in a different way. Some people will be deceived and never know they were deceived. Some will be deceived and become pleased when they find out. Some will be deceived and become angry when they find out. Some will not be deceived. Some will not be deceived but will carry on as if they were. Some will not be deceived, will not become angry, will not become pleased, and will not carry on. Most people will never experience the artwork at all.

Recently there has been much written about performance art, but I have not discovered anyone who admits to doing this kind of thing. There are other art forms

around called social practice art, parafiction, zombie abstraction, flip art, and mini-art. No artist I know will own up to any of these either. Therefore I conclude that it is part of a secret language that art critics use when communicating with each other through the medium of the internet. Mini-art is best because it reminds one of a small British car company successfully purchased and rebranded by a German multinational corporation. It must refer to very small works of art. This is a very good idea. Perhaps "mini-art" shows could be sent around the country in the backs of the cars. Or maybe the mini-artist is a very small person, say less than five feet tall, whose studio fits in the back of a mini. If so, much good work will be found in cities with a shortage of proper parking spaces.

If the artist carries through his idea and gives his deception a visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any realization. All intervening steps—research, sketches, auditions, typography, fabrication, models, conversations—are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.

Determining how long a deception should go on is difficult. The question would be what duration is best. If the fiction were to go on indefinitely then the duration alone would be impressive and the thread may be lost entirely. If it is too brief, it may be inconsequential. The willingness of the viewer may have some bearing on the work. The artist may wish to camouflage objects within the context of the white cube, or beyond. The piece must be expansive enough to give the viewer whatever information she needs to understand the work and placed in such a way as to facilitate this understanding. (Unless the idea is about impediment and requires difficulty of vision or access).

Space can be thought of as any and all media occupied by the deceptive artwork's realization. Any deception occupies space. It is air and cannot be seen. It is the

interval between **all** the **elements comprising a fiction** that can be measured. These intervals and measurements can be important to the **deception**.

Set design and three-dimensional art are of completely opposite natures. The former is concerned with making **a space** with a **persuasive** function, **be it through costumes, lighting, furniture, props, or vitrines**. **Set design**, whether it is a work of art or not, must be **credible** or else **the deception will** fail completely. Art is not utilitarian. When three-dimensional art starts to take on some of the characteristics **of set design**, such as forming utilitarian **spaces** or functioning as **props**, it weakens its **status** as art but strengthens its status as **deception**. When the **deception ends** the set design is rendered useless and its components become works of art. **This disintegration** emphasizes the physical and emotive power of **all art** at the expense of **the annihilation** of the **deception**.

The **artist's biography** is one of the great afflictions of contemporary art. Some artists confuse their **life stories** with new ideas. There is nothing worse than seeing art that wallows in **the self-satisfied assumption that the content of an artwork corresponds to the life of the artist who made it**. By and large most artists who are attracted to **this** strain of essentialism are the ones who lack the stringency of mind that would enable them to use their personal histories well. It takes a good artist to **transform** autobiographical material into **art**. The danger, I think, **is** in making the **subjectivity** of the **material** so important that **veracity** becomes the **crux** of the work (another kind of expressionism).

Essentialist art of any kind is based in the **irreducible identity** of the individual. The **artist's autobiography** is its most obvious and expressive content. **Deceptual** art is made to **destabilize** the minds of viewers rather than **assuage their consciences** or **confirm their assumptions**. The **representative function** of **identity** then becomes a contradiction of its **subjective** intent. Color, surface, texture, and shape only emphasize the **disciplinary** aspects of the work. Anything that calls attention to and

interests the viewer in these demographics is a deterrent to our understanding of the art and is used as a controlling device. The **deceptual** artist would want to **undermine** this control as much as possible or to use it in a paradoxical way (to convert it into an idea that destroys itself). This kind of art, then, should be staged with the greatest **subterfuge** of means. Any idea that is stated in two dimensions should be better in three dimensions, if stated in three dimensions, then better in four, and so forth. Deceptions may be staged with numbers, photographs, artworks, words, or any way the artist chooses, so long as the form remains important.

These paragraphs are not intended as categorical imperatives, but the ideas stated are as close as possible to my thinking at this time. These ideas are the result of my work as an artist and are subject to change as my experience changes. I have tried to state them with as much clarity as possible. If the statements I make are unclear it may mean the thinking is unclear. Even while writing these ideas there seemed to be obvious inconsistencies (which I have tried to correct, but others will probably slip by). I do not advocate a **deceptual** form of art for all artists. I have found that it has worked well for me while other ways have not. It is one way of making art; other ways suit other artists. Nor do I think all **deceptual** art merits the viewer's attention. **Deceptual** art is good only when the deception is good.

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