

SLACKER CONCEPTUALISM: On Theorizing “Counterproductive Conceptualisms in Chicago”

I.

It must have been some time in the early 2020s that we first started discerning the shimmering contours of a newly emerging conceptual art ethos among a younger generation of Chicago-based (or Chicago-trained) artists whose disparate practices appeared to converge, in our view, in a shared disinterest in the long-dominant cult of “production values”—and whose work, therefore, in its occasional defiant flaunting of said disinterest, tends to appear (blissfully, in our view) “provisional.” Theirs are practices characterized by a certain studied nonchalance, a slightly detached sense of knowing ease, coalescing in a deceptively casual cultivation of notions of artistic rigor and conceptual precision that we deem highly site-specific—quintessential products, that is, of our beloved *urbs in horto*. (More on that matter shortly.) They are artists who prefer “taking their time”—and who regularly, in fact, like to take time as their preferred subject matter (or preferred material), prioritizing process over product or “output”: not for them the exhausted critical mystique of the “author as producer” and the concomitant rat-race doctrine of production for production’s sake—or, for that matter, the formulaic theatre of art as a species of social engineering or, worse still, *therapy*. Indeed, shaped to a discernible degree by the local pedagogical legacies of such artists as Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle and Pope.L, this distinctly contrarian strand of contemporary conceptualism seeks to restore the roots of artistic practice in a deeply held love for both art and the social magic of the artist’s life—and for conceptualism as art’s most compelling form of “attitude.” Above all, this ethos seeks to once again take art deadly serious for its own nonnegotiable sake and nothing else, and it understands that such art, as self-effacing as it is ambitious, benefits from the type of time and space that may make the resultant work occasionally *appear* laid-back, makeshift, offhand, slapdash, and slipshod—but only ever self-consciously, critically so. (About this lingo, this terminology, these *words*: we are always looking for approximations, never for “synonyms.”) And that, in all its emphatic formal earnestness, may be their criticism’s most valid and emancipatory point: this ethos is also an *ethics*. (There may be some convergences, here, with the vogue for so-called “romantic conceptualism” that briefly blossomed in the mid-2000s.) “Counterproductive conceptualism,” as we have taken to calling it, proposes an art that is once again

radically different from life as we know it—increasingly unlivable, that is—under the apocalyptic conditions of contemporary growth-obsessed capitalism.

II.

Speaking of contemporary capitalism, then (inevitably): when we first started fleshing out the argument for this exhibition, we gave it the working title “Slacker Conceptualism”—which we were quick to abandon in response to justifiable (and, it should be added, lightly organized) artist discontent. However: we feel that a retroactive defense of that contested nomenclature (“slacker”) is in order here, and we have chosen to retain said formula as the title of this exercise in curatorial reasoning precisely to commemorate the *critical* charge that, in our view, the notion of “slack” has always carried (that’s what happens when, one fine day, you learn that Dinosaur Jr’s J Mascis was once referred to as the “slacker Hendrix”). It should be needless to begin by stating that none of these artists are “slackers,” obviously—no true artists ever are (Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*: “the artist is the only ‘worker’ left in a laboring society”)—but part of the appeal their work holds for us as both critiques of productivism and pleas for a more reserved posture vis-à-vis the pressures of art’s relentless professionalization and continuing commodification resonates with our historical understanding of 1990s slacker culture as inherently critical of the preceding decade’s Reaganite cult of consumption and careerist greed. That is, of art as *product placement*. (This is a conception of art that has obviously come back *with a vengeance*, resulting in an institutional monoculture that the artists assembled in our exhibition have zero interest in perpetuating, though market-focused institutional critique is hardly their point.) In an entertaining and illuminating “history of loafers, loungers, slackers, and bums in America,” provocatively titled *Doing Nothing*, Tom Lutz correctly frames the slacker phenomenon popularized in films by noted workaholics Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith—all truly compelling displays of effortlessness, of course, are always rooted in the kind of mastery won from real effort—as a caustic, timely rebuttal of the tiresome protestant gospel of the presumed nobility of work. (“Slacker subcultures arise and flourish alongside newly heated pro-work rhetoric,” much like one might say that *comedy is tragedy plus time*.) Because “work,” the amateur historian in Lutz is right to point out—and he quotes both John Locke (“labor for labor’s sake is against nature”) and Jeremy Bentham (“taken in its proper sense, love of labor is a contradiction in terms”) in doing so—“was the curse [in classical culture] of mortals in a fallen world.” Lutz writes that “in ancient Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern civilizations, work was by and large considered a curse, accorded dignity only to the extent that it made possible the *vita contemplativa*, the higher life of the mind. Labor had no honor in and of itself, and certainly no enthronement among the virtues.”

(We would like to think of *all conceptualisms* as art's approximation of the highest good that is said *vita contemplativa*—and of our “counterproductive conceptualism” as one that is acutely aware of the *economic* conditions of such striving. And such *economic* awareness, in the twenty-first century, is of course always also an *environmental* awareness; here we find ourselves reminded of the fact that the counterproductive ethos is necessarily also an ethics.) More dramatically, still, “antipathy toward labor, we might say, has been the norm since the beginning of time: in Genesis, when God expels Adam and Eve from Paradise, he does so with a host of curses, damning Eve to experience pain in childbirth and subjugation to her husband, and he damns both of them to a life of labor, saying, ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.’” Indeed, “until the Protestant Reformation”—Lutz correctly observes that “we know less about work over the long haul of human history than we know about almost any other essential human activity,” and that “until the nineteenth century, work was not considered a fit subject for literary representation”—“work remained compulsion, a way to avoid the devil’s snares, or at best a duty; it was primarily a diminishment rather than an expression of human being.” Not surprisingly, much of the greatest art ever made has had *leisure* as its overarching theme (Friedrich Schiller: “Man . . . is only wholly Man when he is playing”), and much of art’s “point,” historically speaking, has been to make work *appear* as leisure: art’s very own “proof,” if you like, that we work to live, not live to work. This we take as *another* of counterproductive conceptualism’s hidden life lessons—in addition to its teachings on the temporal economy of work anno 2026, so much of which takes the shape of our attempting to master mobile technologies designed, it seems, with the sole aim of the monopolization of our time in mind. Indeed, our counterproductive conceptualism is largely indifferent to the matter of technology, especially those social technologies that have been remade as veritable black holes of time.

III.

Conceptualist critiques of “work” in general, and of “production” more specifically, will of course inevitably meet their fair share of blowback in a city that likes to fetishize its “big shoulders” and foundational working-class culture (though we should once again remind ourselves here of the sobering fact that—as Tom Lutz cites from scholar John Burnett—“work . . . was not a central life-interest of the working classes”). Indeed, it may well be that conceptualism’s inherent suspicion of the glorification of labor as implied in its prioritization of ideas over execution—its preference, that is, for the easy chair over the studio, or “process” over “product”—has contributed to its relative marginalization in Chicago’s modern art history. For although the midwestern metropolis has obviously been a major art hub at the

intersection of some of the most influential developments in postwar American art—one is loosely associated with the surrealist legacy of the Imagists, another with the so-named social practice paradigm, and the intersection of the two a major source for the many permutations of “craft” (which is just another word for “work”)—it has not habitually been closely aligned with the conceptual art tradition, the canonical points of anchorage for which have long been New York and Los Angeles. Indeed, even though conceptual art currents, of both the ortho- and heterodox variety, have long informed Chicago’s vibrant arts ecosystem, what little contemporary art history (and/or criticism) does attempt to chart its local influence typically focuses on a handful of seminal art practices dating back to the 1980s, most notably those of inspirational figures such as Jeanne Dunning, Gaylen Gerber, Dan Peterman, Kay Rosen, and Tony Tasset. (The latter’s work in particular, incidentally, is not without consequence for our current debate.) A tale of two, three cities, then—as American art has so often been. In a column published in the May 1990 issue of *Art & Antiques*, artist-cum-critic Carol Diehl—erstwhile maker of irreverent, conceptually inflected paintings—offered the following observation in the wake of her own move from Chicago to New York: “I wake up in the middle of the night contemplating writing about art in Chicago, where I lived for many years. Lying there in the dark, I’m convinced that no matter what I write everyone will hate me. I keep telling myself—it’s only art. But in Chicago it’s a subject as sticky as politics. Everything is taken so personally.” (Yes.) Diehl continues: “Chicago is a service-oriented city where waiters are waiters, not actors, and where gas-station attendants still wash your windows. If anyone wants to know what happened to the work ethic, it’s alive and well and living in Chicago. But fond as I am of the work ethic, in Chicago this means labor is what counts and ideas are suspect. I think it’s the literalness of the city that’s made it so resistant to abstract art and has put the emphasis on craft. In a town where pedestrians don’t cross against the light, artists paint within the lines—no messy art here.” (*Maybe*.) And finally: “After noticing that artists still living in Chicago, like Martin Puryear, were becoming nationally known, I began to think that Chicago may have become one of the best places for an artist to live, now that New York is no longer affordable. Although it’s still cliquish, there’s a sense of community that no longer exists in New York nor, I’m told, in the spread-out urban chaos of L.A. ‘It’s like New York twenty years ago’ is a frequent comment.” (These are excerpts from an article titled “Mixed Emotions: Chicago’s Ambivalence Toward its Own Art,” one section of which we came across in a vitrine in the exhibition *Over My Head: Encounters with Conceptual Art in a Flyover City, 1984–2015*, curated by Gareth Kaye and Iris Colburn and presented by Gertie in the fall of 2025. The exhibition included work by the aforementioned Gaylen Gerber, Kay Rosen, and others.) Naturally, the latter comment immediately brings to mind the widely

circulated essay by New York-based artist Josh Kline, “New York Real Estate and the Ruin of American Art,” which was published in *October* magazine in February 2026, and which singles out the lack of both space and time as the reason for New York’s precipitous decline as an epicenter for the production of adventurous, forward-looking art (there too, then, “it’s about time”): “Contemporary art in twenty-first-century America is sick with problems. These are not problems raised by artworks as subjects of concern, but structural malignancies in the United States that are present in art’s curation, its institutions, and its patronage; in the commercial entities that sell it and the schools that produce the people who participate in its world. The result is a tidal wave of art whose primary function as decorative speculative financial instruments eclipses any possibility of inquiry, experimentation, or real meaning. These problems share a root cause: New York City real estate and its currently impossible prices and rents, which smother art in a choking, conservative atmosphere. American art is suffering a polycrisis that combines a lack of belief in and support for its artists born after 1975, the structural de-centering of artists in the art industry, and the subsequent stagnation and possible breakdown of formal innovation in art. In other words, meaningful art, relevant for society and our time, may not be sustainable under the current conditions here.” Kline’s “here” being New York, one of two cities (the other being Los Angeles) “that the majority of America’s working artists, curators, and art dealers are forced to call home by the art industry’s unspoken operating systems.” Kline, himself a highly politically motivated maker of exquisite objects (therein may lie part of the rub), is right to lament that “if artists are starved of time to make their art”—primarily because “most New York artists have to hold down one or more full- or part-time jobs in order to pay the rent, put food on the table, and make art”—“they are also starved of time to participate in political activism. Artists who care about politics and society will be forced to make a false choice between art and politics—and between both of them and making a living.” All of which, in the context of Kline’s New York, has resulted in the ossification of economic conditions that strongly favor a “commercially oriented painting practice” (“speculative financial décor for oligarchs”). Reading this important, well-informed yet maddening parochial text anywhere in the US that isn’t New York, one is of course inevitably compelled to wonder out loud, “Josh Kline, why don’t you move to . . . Chicago?” (American art history is reduced to New York or Angeleno art history at art’s expense alone.) Because “here” there is both space and time—lots of space, to make art “about time”—as you can tell from some of the most engaging and interesting art being made in America right now.

IV.

“The Non-Productive Attitude” is the title of an essay written by the Viennese-born, New York-based artist Josef Strau for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne*, organized at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 2006. In this text, Strau reflects on the heady glory days of Cologne’s late 1980s and early 1990s *Referenzkunst* scene, when you could still “live the social life of an artist without actually producing any art, or at least without presenting art,” provided you had the intellectual chops to convincingly anchor such a stance in the legacy of the conceptual art tradition as enriched by readings in critical, feminist, and postcolonial theory. Strau, too, understood “the substitution of the artist-as-producer with the sheer behavior of the artist-bohemian [to be] a reaction to the work values of the eighties” that “necessitated a very dense social field in which to act out its partly theatrical impulse.” Such a dense social field, of course, is the very definition of a “scene”—its chosen “theatrical” platforms dive bars rather than studios, classrooms rather than galleries. The social aspect of this artist mythology is easily parodied and ridiculed, but the real contribution of Strau’s apology for this “anti-visual heresy” obviously lies in the fact that its critiques of productivism were grounded in the self-evident effort of an exhaustively argued—and politically charged—intellectual position: it took real work (= space + time) to engage in such a critique of work. (Only “laborious” critiques of labor, and only productive critiques of production, need be taken seriously.) To be clear, the artists gathered in our exhibition—Alex Chitty, Shir Ende, Max Guy, Jinn Bronwen Lee, Dave Lloyd, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Devin T. Mays, the late Pope.L, Nick Raffel, and Miao Wang—do produce and present work (concepts, events, images, objects); theirs is not a “non-productive attitude” in Strau’s radical-romantic mold. Theirs is a *counterproductive* conceptualism instead, countering the current doxa of a narrowly economic, instrumentalizing view of art (as either social work or investment opportunity) with the production of a better, more thoughtful—i.e., more *leisurely*—life through the making of a better, more thoughtful—i.e., more *leisurely*—art.

Dieter Roelstraete & Abigail Winograd for DRAW Projects, Chicago, May 2026

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