

**TIM CLARK**

**EPILOGUE: COMPLEXITY AND THE CONTEMPORARY LIMITS OF ART**

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*(From the publication: Tim Clark. Reading the Limits: Works/Oeuvres 1975-2003. Eds. David Tomas and Michèle Thériault. Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2008. Published in conjunction with the exhibition Tim Clark. Reading the Limits)*

The social functions of the artist and the work of art have been changing over the last twenty-five years. They no longer appear to coincide with a hundred-year-old avant-garde tradition whose ambitions were first clearly exposed in Marcel Duchamp's complex and intellectually demanding work and that reached the limits of its aspirations in the anti-institutional, dematerializing ideational strategies of conceptual art. It is difficult, for example, to apply the word "avant-garde" to visual products conceived for widespread public consumption and that operate as provocative distractions for the masses. The word also sounds awkward today because the economic and cultural composition of the art world, and the current evolutionary state of advanced production, storage and distribution technologies, favour centralized forms of social interaction and prestigious, economically integrated and well governed institutions for the presentation of art.<sup>1</sup> These conditions for the production and display of works of art are different from those of the 1960s and 70s, a period—perhaps the last one in recent history—to be distinguished by a rebellious climate of change and uninhibited artistic experimentation. The artistic creations of this period are now the archives of unusual and challenging models of the artist and work of art.<sup>2</sup>

Most of these models are in the tradition of the avant-garde. A few are associated with its more complex and intellectually challenging practices.

These models are important because they provide insights into possible directions for the development of art at a time when it is subject to the pressures of an entertainment- and mass media-based democracy and the unprecedented demand for commodities that can be easily integrated into a global—neo-liberal or conservative—free-market economy.<sup>3</sup> Their critical and historical values are enhanced by the artist's assimilation (in the Anglo-American world) into a university system that is no longer considered (by the dominant political authorities and university administrations) to be independent of this economy.<sup>4</sup> These are the new socio-political conditions in which the functions of the work of art can be explored and re-evaluated. One of these functions is related to the role of the university in the education of the artist and the production of the work of art. Another has to do with the limits of art. Tim Clark's works of art are a product of the former and are focused on the latter.

The production of Clark's work has taken place against the backdrop of the university and its academic culture. He shares this background with other artists of his generation and most, if not all, young Anglo-American artists today. Philosophy is the dominant intellectual force that has guided his work's development. It leads to the work of Joseph Kosuth and to Clark's admiration for Adrian Piper, a first-generation conceptual artist, Afro-American feminist, Harvard philosophy graduate and former professor of philosophy at Wellesley College. Philosophy provides the frame of reference and the discipline of mind through which Clark's works have been conceived and presented. However, what separates Clark from other artists of his generation is the way in which he has integrated philosophical and artistic influences and how these strains of thought and practice have been amalgamated and directed at the question of limits in art.<sup>5</sup>

While the university has provided Clark with an infrastructure and its disciplines (philosophy, studio arts and art history) have provided him with the tools and expertise, the complexity of his visual practice has been modulated by a semi-professional form of autodidacticism. He never completed his philosophy degree, he was not formally trained in art until he pursued graduate studies in the mid-1970s, and he was not “professionally” implicated in the disciplinary developments of philosophy and art history.<sup>6</sup> This form of independence ensured a degree of freedom—of critical autonomy—that was congruent with the tradition of the avant-garde. The loose framework of references to conceptual and performance art reinforced this autonomy and helped to produce a hybrid “disciplinary” work and visual experience. Non-materialist historical strategies and an interest in contradictory social issues and their relationship to the way a viewer assimilates a work of art according to his or her expectations were articulated through complex visual and formal propositions to produce intellectually challenging works. They targeted a viewer’s habitual modes of thinking and his or her socio-aesthetic expectations in order to activate their capacities of conflict resolution and clear the way for new perspectives on the world. These are strategies that are not normally associated with academic practices.

However, an examination of the history of Clark’s practice reveals a gradual displacement of references and working methods and a renewal of production under different conditions. A first shift took place almost imperceptibly over an eighteen-year period beginning in 1985 (when Clark first decided to stop producing performances because of their emotional and physical demands and the changing social and political climate of the milieu in which he operated). It ended in 2003 when he realized that art and academic production inhabited very different creative universes and chose, as a consequence, to pursue the latter form of research.<sup>7</sup>

Another shift overlaps with the first and pivots around the year 2003 and the screening of the final version of his feature-length video *A Reading of "Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West," by the Southern, American Author Cormac McCarthy*.<sup>8</sup> It began in 2001 with Clark's involvement with the foundation of Hexagram, an inter-university new media research institute, and it was well established by 2005 when he produced a series of academic papers that dealt with new subject matter such as artificial evolution and artificial intelligence. This series established the priority, in Clark's activities, of systemic disciplinary research into the limits and expanding boundaries of "intelligence" as defined and redefined by interaction between humans and machines.<sup>9</sup>

The move toward academic research is, however, considered by Clark to be perfectly in keeping with the research paradigm first implied in conceptual art and explicitly advanced, if inconsistently pursued, by conceptual artists such as Kosuth, Art & Language and Hans Haacke, or professionally promoted by the dual artistic and academic career of someone such as Adrian Piper.<sup>10</sup> The art object's materiality is, in keeping with the parameters established by this stream of conceptual art, subsumed to the dictates of ideas and harnessed to probing the epistemological, institutional and socio-political limits of art. Its natural extensions are the book, writing and research, objects and activities that are common to Clark's performances and table installations.

Ultimately, it is the role of books, texts and words in defining and transmitting ideas, and their place in society as well as their functions in redefining what an artist does and what systems of references he uses in producing his art that seeps out of the interstices of Clark's artwork and research activities. Their roles are addressed in this oblique fashion because of the objectives that he has set himself and the way that he uses knowledge and the

disciplines he engages with, from philosophy to art history and beyond to computer science and artificial intelligence.

Clark's artistic career can be interpreted as the permutation of a set of questions. They are disguised as individual visual propositions that have been presented as a sequence of works of art. What are the functions of the artist and the work of art when they are harnessed to questions of language and ethics and directed at habitual forms of behaviour? How does a particular set of historical and disciplinary references shape visual propositions and hone their contents and patterns of association in order to better serve the purpose of placing the artist, his art and its viewers in situations of conflict in relation to systems of belief, social paradigms and basic cosmologies? How are three-dimensional propositions "designed" and constructed in order to target the contradictions that might exist in a viewer's belief system and to trigger an appropriate process of self-examination? What happens to the relationship between a work's visual logic and the viewer's system of belief—this delicate articulation of visual and intellectual checks and balances, tensions and fissures—when the viewer realizes that the artist is in some sense detached from the "work" of art, that he is in fact conducting a kind of "social" experiment designed to expose psycho-social limits and boundaries?<sup>11</sup> Each of these questions is posed by an individual work of art on its own terms. But each of them also raises the question of the "radical" implications of research-based conceptual art and its disciplinary aspirations (to rationally and logically test and expand the boundaries of art beyond the world of objects, traditional representational categories and centralized, institutionalised delivery systems). They also raise questions about the contradictions that exist today between an avant-garde history of art, university-based systems of thought (with their ethical codes for human research) and the products of a new set of cultural imperatives produced by dominant socio-political and economic forces whose objective is to assimilate and normalize deviant forms of social activity.

They are questions that demand clear answers even if they are confronted with indifference or embarrassed silence.

Clark is still producing visual work today. It consists of articles. He is also working on books. Although this form of work no longer appears to operate in the art world and in terms of the same kinds of viewers and expectations that one finds in a gallery or museum, it can be considered to be an extension of Clark's "performances for the audience." Clark's research into artificial evolution and artificial intelligence is not only an extension of what he describes as his "critical engagement with the socio-political and materialist nature of the 'world' we live in."<sup>12</sup> It is also, in a very subtle and almost imperceptible way, a "critique of the standard institutional setting for the viewing and production of art."<sup>13</sup> The question of limits is no longer explicitly posed in visual (formal and aesthetic) terms. It is now posed through a form of critical activity (nourished by the history of Clark's use of conceptual art) that has been stripped of the straightjacket imposed by the socio-psychological and aesthetic and cultural expectations promoted by galleries and museums.

However, this displacement also coincides with the emergence of a new kind of spectator characterized by a peculiar absence of psychological and socio-cultural complexity. This type of viewer is broadly defined in statistical terms. It is an amalgam of numerical data (such as number of gallery visitors per hour or per day that can be attributed to a particular exhibition). It is a kind of viewer that is not subject to crisis or contradiction. It can be gradually and conveniently refined by special educational programs designed to facilitate the most unambiguous and transparent reception of a work of art according to the most basic principles of pleasure: instant gratification and uninhibited comprehension. These principles are associated with a world that is free of contradictions and they produce an experience that is suspended beyond the intricate world of everyday events. Educational panels, new wireless communications technologies, and spectacular

media and entertainment presentations ensure that the work of art's conditions of reception are reprogrammed, in the direction of simplicity and accessibility, in order to be seamlessly integrated into a new operating environment geared to uncompromised communal pleasure. This model viewer, so different from the one envisaged by Clark in his performances, is the product of the same culture that has embraced the future of artificial intelligence with its promise of programmed knowledge and creativity. This suggests that there is an underlying logic to Clark's shift from the production of works of art to academic research and that this logic extends beyond the confines of the academy.

What are the criteria of selection that are suggested by the comparison between these new conditions of reception and the alternative social functions for works of art and the artist proposed by the history of Clark's practice and its relationship to conceptually-based research practices? They can be simply presented in the form of a series of interlocked choices: complexity or simplicity; social ambiguity and the tensions associated with contradictory experiences, or visual entertainment; a heightened sense of self-consciousness and self questioning based on subtle and time consuming intellectual engagement, or planned collective pleasure. The distinctions operate as boundaries—as limits—to two worlds that can rarely co-exist because they are the products of antithetical intellectual economies and art histories. One is represented by Clark's career and its recent academic re-articulation which extends the logic of research-based conceptual art. The other is represented in large measure by the highly programmed world of contemporary institutionalized art and the new economies (including university economies) that sustain it. Note the common environments, the complex roots of a career and the antithetical models of art and the artist. The choice is not only between different traditions and futures. It is also a matter of how we engage with history and the reasons for our desire to reinvent it.

## NOTES

1. It is interesting and thought-provoking to think of the Centre Georges Pompidou's "open public spaces" or the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in terms of collectively defined, centralized and normalized forms of social interaction and then to compare them to other sites of mass entertainment (football and other forms of stadium-based activities). While the events presented and the infrastructures that define spectatorship, or viewing conditions, do not overlap in structure or objectives, there is an unusual resonance between the scale and impersonality of the collective events presented in each case and the way that they re-articulate individual consciousness and dissipate it through an anonymous collective experience.

2. The most obvious examples are provided by Hans Haacke's real-time social systems art and Gordon Matta-Clark's urban interventions.

3. There is a distinction that should be made here between works of art that critically engage with this economy, works that deliberately exploit it in order to further explore its characteristics, and others that simply and uncritically acquiesce in the dominant modes of exchange that are proposed or imposed by these new economic conditions. My objective in this article is not to discuss these alternatives but rather to point to another model that exists beyond these common ones. This is the model that promotes complex or intellectually demanding conditions of reception as a precondition for a work of art's intellectual and aesthetic digestion. The model is interesting because it sanctions a radically different vision of the world and of human behaviour and education. It is also particularly resistant to institutional assimilation under the ideology of reception imposed by the existing economic and cultural regimes I have noted.

4. For a revealing articulation of this economic integration see Hexagram's mission statement, in particular the reference to the fact that it brings together "artists, scientists, engineers and students from universities, and independent artists and researchers, with partners from the cultural sector and industry":

[http://www.hexagram.org/spip.php?page=about&lang=en&id\\_rubrique=13&id\\_article=53&sid=1](http://www.hexagram.org/spip.php?page=about&lang=en&id_rubrique=13&id_article=53&sid=1)

This institute for "research/creation" in media arts and technologies was co-founded in 2001 by the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM) and Concordia University in Montreal to support the work of university-based "artist/researchers".

5. See also my essay "Limits in Art" and Eduardo Ralickas's essay "Egocide: A User's Guide" in this volume.

6. See, for example, Tim Clark's statement of filiation in "Notes," published in *Parachute* 13 (Winter 1978): 40.



*In terms of formal education in photography or any other form of fine arts, I have none, except for a workshop with the American photographer Minor White. . . . My actual formal education is in philosophy, the main area of research being 20th Century English analytical philosophy.*

This is followed (on page 42) by the statement that his work “is not a function of conceptual art” (because the “ideational premises” behind the conception of a work are not revealed prior to viewing it) and that “the type of art information dealt with is traditional in aesthetics, and visual/formalistic in nature.” Thus, the system of references involved in the production of Clark’s early conceptually informed work is conditioned by disciplinary and conceptual art references but not necessarily in either a pure “academic” or narrow conceptual art sense. With *Limits in Art* the references will become clearer, but they will still remain loosely tied to their origins. Later works are developed under the same conditions.

7. See the Tim Clark “Chronology” elsewhere in this volume.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. E-mail communication with the author, 31 July 2008.

11. The set of questions and the nature of their visual manifestations clearly differentiates Clark’s practice from that of Vito Acconci or Chris Burden.

12. E-mail communication with the author, 31 July 2008.

13. *Ibid.*