

Interpretant :Mihai Nadin

The Semiosis of Conceptual Art

Conceptual art arouses suspicion. The common attitude can be described as benign indifference. The most that conceptual art has obtained is a place in art history books, in other words, in a *sui generis* coffin. Why does conceptual art have such a tough going with the public? And why, despite public resistance to it, does it keep fighting for a place in the realm of art? If these questions could be answered by philosophers of art, theoreticians, by artists themselves, the response would revolve around the consensus that conceptual art is too rational to be art and too aesthetic to be science. In other words, there is a certain discontinuity between means and goals. Or, to approach conceptual art from a totally different perspective, semiosis is diverted from the path its premises seem to have predetermined. This sentence is a bit too complicated to be left like that. Let me explain. *Semiosis* is the term for "sign process." A sign process is the process through which the representation of an object and the associated interpretation are brought together. In a certain respect, we are defined as human beings through the way we interpret signs. Now back to conceptual art. The object to be represented is a concept. Concepts are abstractions. Contrary to what some repeat without knowing what they say, we do not live in space and time. Space

and time are abstractions; we live in/at a certain place during a certain interval. Clocks and watches don't measure time; rulers don't measure space. Since concepts make abstractions from the concrete, from the real, it becomes quite obvious that to represent a concept is pretty much a theoretical endeavor. As far as we know, the artist, even of the most abstract art, produces concrete objects. The piece of art that deserves the adjective "abstract" will have to be as immaterial as our concepts. Knowing that art must leave the trace of the artist, must bear his mark, and knowing at the same time that concepts are rather anonymous, a sort of generic frame of mind, we again notice that conceptual art exists. The collection of coffins constituting the history of art is the last proof I would use. Which will be the first? Once more, semiosis.

Let's imagine a process of signs triggered by the reality of a concept. And let's imagine, in the same vein, Plato's cave and the shadows dancing on the wall. And let's imagine further a cave in a cave in a cave And while writing these lines, I hear, "A rose is a rose is a rose" and understand why, despite its conceptual nature, conceptual art can be a source of aesthetic pleasure. The semiosis of conceptual art is very much based on empathy. Discovering that reality is no longer only grass, trees, sky, a lake, relatives and acquaintances, kings and queens, statesmen, cars, and streets but also the concepts that were derived in the attempt to know what is behind the immediate, the conceptual artist is less attached to the immanent while cultivating that which goes beyond immediacy. It is not the traditional impertinent attitude of the artist challenging eternity and considering art as a passport to immortality. The conceptual artist believes that what we pass on in the series of generations is not so much paintings, sculptures, books, or records as conceptions. There is, however, a paradox involved here: praise of the idea while nailing this idea onto matter. In doing so, the conceptual artist in fact forces the semiosis of ideas into the semiosis of objects. Some will say that conceptual artists are unfulfilled human beings getting rid of their innermost frustrations. Some others will go so far as to say that conceptual artists might be intelligent but not talented. When one attempts to describe the semiosis of conceptual art, one of the first things to be noticed is what is called "intelligence." But would it be too much to say that intelligence is a source of aesthetic pleasure?

These introductory notes concern the semiosis presented in this book, which by no accident is entitled *SEMIOSIS*. Eddie Ma offers us here a portable mini-exhibition in which his visual explorations – all conceptual in nature – are structured as pages in a book. We are used to the notion that ideas belong in books. But let's not lose sight of the fact that this book is the book of a book of a book This should not be interpreted as a way of saying that Eddie Ma's aesthetics is the product of his reading or even the product of a book-oriented culture. In fact, Eddie Ma deconstructs the book; better said, he *declassifies* it. The semiosis he deals with is not one pertaining to our concepts, but to the semiosis of what is called "idea". We are on a high level of abstraction here. And this abstraction of abstraction of abstraction becomes evident when he deals with semiotic concepts.

In representing Peirce's sign typology, Eddie Ma looks not for examples belonging to each of the ten classes of signs but rather to the relations established between classes. He does not redefine; he does not explain. The seemingly strange words used by Peirce are "melted" into a new image in which the interrelations become essential. That is the level at which concepts are brought down to earth. An even more expressive example is the division of the object and the interpretant. In his correspondence with Victoria, Lady Welby, Charles S. Peirce reached a certain poetic level. I have in mind the aesthetic qualities of a theory which we usually take for granted. I don't know of any successful theory which does not involve a high aesthetic value. A mathematician will not consider his work finished until he brings it to a beautiful relation (I purposely did not put "beautiful" between quotation marks because I see no essential difference between the beautiful in art and the beautiful in a scientific work.). When in our days computer scientists insist on the aesthetic qualities involved in programming, they do not pay tribute to an obsolete ideal but define their own cause. The best programs are beautiful, and their beauty can be described in terms similar to the beauty of a work of art. Whenever we use a sign, our sign must indicate its object, as Peirce said, "by a hint." He calls this hint the *immediate object*. The immediate object is grasped through collateral experience. Peirce gave as an example of immediate object the word "beauty." It is what he called an "abstractive." Eddie Ma goes along this line and deals

with the quality of something as an abstractive. The reward is generous. Not only is a theory applied, but the semiosis extends to the work itself. Immediate and mediated are embodied, and the effect upon the interpreter's mind is precisely the infinite semiosis that Peirce had in mind.

In the same letters to Lady Welby, Peirce referred to his division of the interpretant, in other words, to the processes of thought involved in the interpretation of signs. Semioticians have paid little, if any, attention to the division of the interpretant. Let's quote Peirce:

My immediate Interpretant is applied in the fact that each Sign must have its peculiar Interpretability before it gets any Interpreter. My Dynamical Interpretant is that which is experienced in each act of interpretation and is different in each from that of any other; and the Final Interpretant is the one Interpretive result to which every Interpreter is destined to come if the Sign is sufficiently considered. The Immediate Interpretant is an abstraction, consisting of a Possibility. The Dynamical Interpretant is a single actual event, a Final Interpretant is that toward which the actual tends.

If you follow Eddie Ma's semiosis, i.e., aesthetic interpretation of the division of the interpretant, you will remain within Peircean semiotic while simultaneously enjoying a very personal visual interpretation of it.

I know that we tend to refuse the idea that our interpretations can be made in anything other than verbal language. Dominated by the logocratic model (*logocratic* as "tyranny" of words), our culture will not accept that any other mode of expression can accomplish an interpretive function. The visual is accepted only if it enhances the verbal but does not replace it. According to the same assumption, some senses are superior, while others are not at all suited to interpretive tasks. Eddie Ma challenges this cultural dogma. In my opinion, his challenge is a direct result of his exposure to semiotics. While dealing with signs in general, semiotics makes us aware of the fact that each form of sign is potentially adapted to interpretive semiosis. While professional semioticians fail spectacularly by following the traditional path of specialization, Eddie Ma succeeds by pursuing interdisciplinarity. In his work, art is interdisciplinary. There are important similarities between the

semiosis of the division of the interpretant and some of his more personal conceptual art statements. Dealing with configurations rather than sequences, forcing words into unexpected relations, placing them in "visual sentences," he convinces us that words can be visualized, that images can be perceived in their rhythmic or melodic quality, that music can stimulate complex perceptions extending up to taste or smell. I like in Eddie Ma's approach the very healthy recuperation of a human being with all senses interacting. He gives to reason not a higher place but a special one. Part of this is expressed in graph form. Existential graphs, as we know them from semiotics, provide a moving picture of semiosis. All thought is in signs; all thought is diachronic. To construct some sort of diagram has for a long time been only a mathematical device. In the meanwhile, we learned that we can prove our hypotheses through diagrams. Eddie Ma's diagrams belong to the realm of the aesthetic due not only to their formal qualities but mainly to their constructive nature. They visually re-name concepts and this re-naming is accomplished through a very good sense of the ceremonial involved in every known type of initiation rite.

Having worked with Eddie Ma – in respect to him, I would not use the word "teach" – I know that he knows that fine line which Peirce (once again, Peirce) wrote: "I regard Logic as the Ethics of the Intellect." And that is the way Eddie Ma actually applies logic to his work – as a way of self-control, self-mastery. Baumgarten, who originated the word "aesthetics," understood that aesthetics can be built only as a logic of our senses. It came as no surprise to me that semiotics was part of his aesthetic system. Unfortunately, the section on semiotics in his *Tractatus* was never written (or, as I hope, not yet found). In his research, Eddie Ma involved the aesthetic premise. This becomes very clear in the series through which he represents his universe. Eddie Ma's window, Eddie's mirror, and everything else pertaining to his universe tend to configure a very rigorous and very sensitive way of expression. In such cases, semiosis extends to the relation between what is frame and what frames. Of course, framing is not a new subject. Art is, after all, a succession of quotes, of frames put in frames put in frames Art is, after all, about art. While writing this sentence, I must be very careful. Working with someone is just as well an example of semiosis. We interact. We interpret each

other. We change each other. The question is not how much I have influenced Eddie Ma or *vice versa*. The question is not whether I want to take credit for some of his accomplishments. The question is not even if this book would have become what it is if, by a different turn of events, I had not started my work at the Rhode Island School of Design. If these are not the questions, then what are? Would Eddie Ma have followed the same path without having been exposed to semiotics? It's a ridiculous question, I must confess, since I am convinced that at this moment of his evolution, man is a *zoo semiotikon* (semiotic animal). It does not matter if we know it or not. We produce signs, interpret signs, are interpreted as signs. Our existence is a sign process, a semiosis. At the other extreme of our existence, we find the natural component. We are the unity between nature and semiosis. If browsing through this book you miss nature, do not be upset. It is within the intention of Eddie Ma's conceptual art to make us more aware of the contradictory unity between our natural character and our semiotic condition.

Semiosis is infinite by nature. To foresee Eddie Ma's future work means to define a sign process which is actually too open to be predetermined. He wants to establish his own institute, to pursue his studies in semiotics. I look at Eddie Ma's window and place his smile in the middle of it. I look in his mirror and wonder if one can say that Eddie Ma is Eddie Ma is Eddie Ma. Is this part of his semiosis?

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..... Not Everybody is Christo.