Conceptually driven, this site-specific installation examines the relationship between language, materials, and objects in order to investigate aspects of absence, intention, and beauty.

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Artist Lecture followed by Reception
Tuesday, October 7

Lecture: 3 - 4 p.m. in XARTS
Reception: 4 - 6 p.m. in Thacher Gallery

Artist Statement

My position as an artist is one that is acutely aware of contemporary theory and practice, as well as their histories. As a result, my artwork is conceptually driven, enlisting the services of materials and objects as they further the direction of the ideas which support my work. I am always seeking new ground. I believe that in order for artwork to be current and successful, it must be both conceptually and visually engaging. My work is designed to do just that. I am interested in the relationships that exist between language, materials, and objects. Currently, I am investigating these relationships in order to explore various concepts of absence, intention, and beauty. While my work is generated from specific ideas, my presentations are often open-ended in nature and drawn on the experiences and background of the viewer for their interpretations.

CONCEPTUAL ART: A Brief History

1. the artist may construct the piece
2. the piece may be fabricated
3. the piece need not be built

From Lawrence Weiner's "Declaration of Intent," 1968

THE SEEDS OF CONCEPTUAL ART appear as early as the 1900-1920s with Duchamp's readymade "Fountain" and Malevich's abstract "Black Square." In fact, the movement's play with language and reproduction can be traced to Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Russian Constructivism alike. Later influences (1940-1960s) can be seen in minimalist and modernist works by the New York School of painters such as Rothko and Pollock as well as Rauschenberg and Stella. Its performative aspects were born during the 1960s political movements with art "happenings" by groups such as Fluxus and Cobra.

In attempting to define what these precursors have in common, we begin to understand conceptual art itself. In all of these movements we see a turning away from traditional modes of representation and narrative subjects; an interest in language and theory as part of the visual form; process as part of the artwork; and the appropriation of everyday objects.

ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE CONCEPTUAL ART began in the mid-1960s and extended throughout the late 1970s. These definitions changed depending on which artist was describing them and were often subject to debate. Simply put, conceptual art is an art in which the material is the concept.* It raises questions concerning the products of art making, art's purpose in relation to modernism, ideas of high art, and the role of the museum.† (Ironically, many conceptual art pieces are now held in major museum collections.) Examples include Joseph Kosuth's "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) Meaning" which used new photocopier technology to present dictionary definitions of words often debated in contemporary art discussions; Mel Ramsden's "Secret Painting" which included a painting of an abstract square beside a textual explanation; and Mel Bochner's exhibition of hundreds of photographic drawings placed into identical binders titled "Working Drawings and Other Visible Things Not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art."

Through conceptual art's engagement with politics and linguistic theory, the art object often became information and the object ephemeral—even non-existent.

CONCEPTUAL ART'S LEGACY is especially apparent in video art, but its influences can be seen in contemporary artworks as diverse as Lorna Simpson's photographs, Glenn Ligon's textual self-portraits in the style of slave narratives, and Barbara Kruger's use of text and advertising imagery to explore power and identity.

Matthew Gehring's work exemplifies the many traditions in conceptual and post-conceptual art. The work you see here, a combination of abstract "landscapes" and language-based games, engage the minimalist aspects of the tradition as well as its obsession with language. With these design-inspired compositions Gehring "activate[s] the space between visual and spoken/written language" in order to seduce the viewer through aesthetic and idea.


For a conceptual art reading list, a visual timeline on conceptual art (including many the artworks discussed in this essay), and additional information about artist Matthew Gehring, please see the exhibition binder.