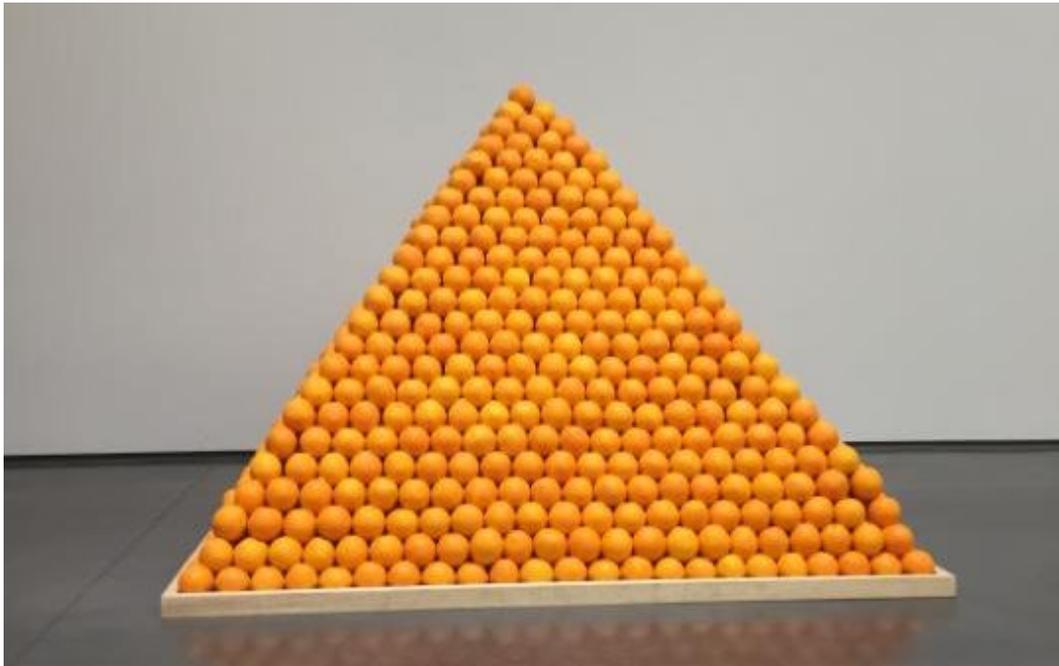


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You may run screaming for the gallery exit of Tate's Conceptual Art in Britain – review



Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges), Roelof Louw, 1967

By [Mark Hudson](#), art critic
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No art raises hackles like conceptual art: signed urinals, dead sharks, unmade beds... No, hang on, let's define our terms. There's a tendency to refer to just about any Turner Prize-aspiring, postmodern junk that isn't painting or sculpture as conceptual art.

In fact, true conceptual art is about how we perceive and define art itself. So Marcel Duchamp's Fountain, made in 1915 – simply a china urinal signed R. Mutt – can lay claim to being the first piece of conceptual art. But Damien Hirst's bombastic meditations on sex and death, and Tracey Emin's endless riffing on her childhood problems and most other so-called YBA art don't belong in this area at all.

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Indeed, while we tend to think of conceptual art as belonging very much to now, this challenging exhibition views it as a tightly defined historical phenomenon, whose heyday was 40 years and more ago, a period during which, the show claims, British artists changed the very nature of art.

The first exhibit you encounter, Roelof Louw's Soul City, is a pyramid of 3,303 oranges, which changes its "molecular structure" as visitors help themselves to the fruit. I mention this in particular as it provides just about the only note of colour in the entire exhibition.

The key works of British conceptual art are all in stark monochrome, from Richard Long's A Line Made by Walking – a photograph of a line of flattened grass – to Bob Law's No. 62 – a six-foot square black canvas designed to force the viewer's awareness of "an idea of a painting idea".



A Line Made by Walking, Richard Long, 1967

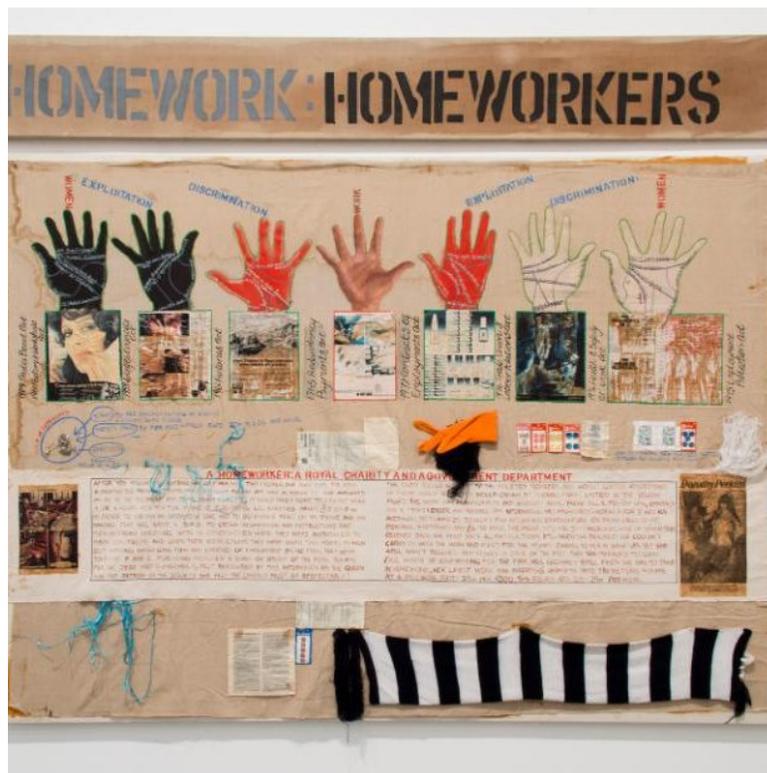
This is art that has been winding up the gallery-goer for nearly half a century: it is dry, wilfully difficult and simultaneously looking down its nose at the viewer and taking them for a ride. Conceptual art, the show argues, was created by young artists impatient with the modernist abstraction of the previous generation, typified by sculptors such as Anthony Caro and Phillip King. These young rebels were interested in ideas rather than objects, in art that operated in time as well as space, which interacted with, rather than ignored, the surrounding social environment.

For the conceptualists, philosophy and theory weren't just ways of explaining their work, but became in many cases the actual content of the art. In a phrase that really gives the game away, we're told that "reading became as important as looking".

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That word “reading” is not a figure of speech. This is, by some distance, the most text-heavy exhibition I’ve ever encountered. Keith Arnatt’s *I Have Decided to Go* to the Tate Gallery Next Friday, typifies the tone: a photograph of the artist in his Seventies flares walking up the entry steps to Tate Britain is accompanied by two panels of philosophical speculation on the meaning of the work’s title. On the one hand, there’s the droll, even whimsical humour of the photograph and title; on the other the brain-aching aridity of the text.

Frameworks, by a group of artists calling themselves Art & Language is simply 20 pages of dense theorizing on the subject of Frameworks, glued to a wall. Everywhere there is text, text and more text: in the artworks, in vintage catalogues and magazines and in lengthy explanatory panels which often render the work even more opaque. If linguistic philosophy and the semiology of image-making are your bag, you’ll have a field day; if you’re the kind of person who can only cope with one paragraph of undiluted intellectualse at a time you may feel a major panic attack coming on.



Homeworkers, Margaret Harrison, 1977

There are plenty of hints that this isn’t all intended to be taken at face value. So it’s tempting to let all this verbiage wash over you like so much unreadable poetry and concentrate on the rarefied elegance of some of the objects and images – even if it does feel a bit of a cop out. David Tremlett’s *Spring Sounds*, a glass shelf of 81 audio cassettes, each containing 15 minutes of ambient sound of a British county (which we don’t, of course, hear) works as a piece of poignant poetic sculpture.

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Keith Arnatt's *Invisible Hole Revealed By the Shadow of the Artist*, a photograph in which a pit in the ground creates a rectangular hole in the artist's shadow, is probably the most beautiful work in the exhibition, though as the intention was "to create a piece of visual art that is non-visual", it is presumably a failure in its own terms.

This exhibition makes valiant efforts to render this intellectually slippery art intelligible. The handsome design makes a visual treat of art that would no doubt despise the whole idea of a visual treat. Where it falls down is in failing to relate this art sufficiently to parallel developments in Europe and America, giving the erroneous impression that conceptual art was an exclusively British phenomenon.

It gives us, though, a highly evocative view of its period, and in the last room, where the work becomes more overtly political, you can really smell the edginess of the late Seventies. Yet even here, in work such as Victor Burgin's *Lei-feng*, a horribly pious meditation on advertising, there's a sense of the insistent, one-note cleverness that permeates the entire exhibition, which, after prolonged exposure, induces a feeling of spirit-crushing claustrophobia.

Did conceptualism really change art? While its influence has been huge, much subsequent art, notably that of the YBAs, has been a reaction against its intellectual austerity. These days most artists try to get their heads round its challenging ideas, before moving rapidly on. That's a path many viewers to this exhibition will find themselves following – if they haven't long since run screaming for the exit.