

A Visual Interplay of Cracks Metaphorically to Present Segregation in Conceptual Painting

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Abstract

This installation-based study investigates the intersection of conceptual art, site-specific installation, and socio-political critique by employing the metaphor of cracks to visualise segregation. Executed on and around a visibly cracked wall, the work unfolds in three interconnected parts that blend found objects, black-painted tree branches, and multicoloured woven fabrics into a spatial, immersive experience. Cracks extend from the wall into the surrounding environment, transforming metaphor into lived encounter, while the juxtaposition of dark, fractured branches and vibrant textiles symbolically enacts the tension between division and unity. Grounded in conceptual art's emphasis on idea over object, the installation leverages metaphor, materiality, and appropriation to provoke reflection on ethnic and religious segregation. The cracked wall serves not just as a physical backdrop but as an active narrative agent, reinforcing the role of site-specificity in generating meaning. Through embodied viewer engagement and the strategic reinvention of ordinary materials, the work transcends traditional visual art to become a participatory dialogue on social fragmentation. The installation directs viewers into a sensory and intellectual negotiation with division, offering space for both critique and contemplation of collective healing.

Keywords: Conceptual Art, Metaphor, Site-Specific Installation, Segregation, and Cracks

Introduction

Appropriation has been a versatile tool for conceptual artists, allowing them to fully own and repurpose objects and situations for new purposes beyond their original intended use. Notable examples are Duchamp's "The Fountain," Kosuth's "The Chair," and Nadama's "Coconut." In each of these examples, the artist integrated the characteristics of the objects used to create his artwork, giving them a novel meaning and purpose. Similarly, Sekuk appropriated the environment within which his installation titled "Echoes of the Rift" is situated, the cracks on the wall, an engineering pit, and unclean surroundings, to create a site-specific installation. This is an installation that connects with the viewer through its physical presence. It is interactive, allowing the viewer to walk through it and fully understand its concept.

By prioritising the idea and intellectualism of the artwork, it sets the stage for deeper inquiries into its context while leaving the content and materiality to the background. Intellectualism is a defining characteristic of conceptualism, as artists with high academic attainment were able to theorise their ideas and act as critics (Stimson, 1999). This prioritisation of the idea encourages the

viewers to engage in philosophical debates about the artwork's meaning, whilst taking them beyond aesthetic values and revealing profound, thought-provoking insights.

The use of language and social commentary by conceptual artists is pertinent. This is seen in Kosuth's "The Chair," where the artist presented three chairs, the definition of a chair, the picture of a chair, and a physical chair. While social commentary is perceived in Duchamp's "The Fountain". In "Echoes of the Rift," cracks are used metaphorically to represent religious, ethnic, and class segregation. The artist employs this strategy to invite multiple interpretations, allowing the artworks to exist as open text (Eco, 1989).

Analysis of the work

The analysis of this artwork is structured under the subheadings as follows: Conceptual Art and the Language of Metaphor, Site-Specificity and Spatial Dialogue, Appropriation and Symbolism, Materiality and Colour. The installation is structured in three interconnected parts and is executed directly on and around a visibly cracked wall. White paper is carefully pasted onto the wall, creating a neutral backdrop that both reveals and highlights the natural cracks as seen in Plate II. This foundational gesture seeks to underscore the hidden yet persistent nature of social divisions. From the wall, the cracks are extended into a three-dimensional space using tree branches painted in a black hue. These organic forms mimic the jagged features of the wall's cracks, suspended mid-air over an engineering deep pit. The branches conceptually represent the continuation and intrusion of division into lived experiences. Their presence in space reinforces the idea that segregation transcends superficial aspects and penetrates deeply into the environment and society. Surrounding these suspended branches are strips of woven, multi-coloured fabrics, which symbolise cultural diversity and communal interconnectivity. However, the crack-like branches fracture this visual harmony, slicing through the fabrics and visually asserting the divisions imposed by ethnic and religious segregation.



Plate I." Echoes of the Rift" Cracked wall Background, foundation of the installation, suspended tree branches, and discarded woven fabrics. Photograph by: Zumnan Moses Sekuk



Plate II." Echoes of the Rift" Front view: Installation, suspended tree branches, and discarded woven fabrics. Photograph by: Zumnan Moses Sekuk



Plate III." Echoes of the Rift" Right view:
Installation, suspended tree branches, and
discarded woven fabrics.



Plate II." Echoes of the Rift" Left view:
Installation, suspended tree branches, and
discarded woven fabrics.

Conceptual Art and the Language of Metaphor

Conceptual art favours the idea or concept over traditional aesthetic or material concerns, placing thought as the primary medium of artistic practice. As Sol LeWitt (1967) famously articulated, in conceptual art, "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art," emphasising that the conceptual framework takes precedence over the final object. This principle marked a radical shift in twentieth-century art, moving away from visual aesthetics and craftsmanship towards intellectual engagement. In the same vein, this installation draws heavily from the conceptual tradition, thereby employing cracks metaphorically to represent societal fractures and disconnections. The use of metaphor aligns with the understanding that conceptual art often deploys symbolism and associative thinking to evoke reflection rather than deliver immediate aesthetic gratification (Alberro & Stimson, 1999). In this installation, cracks are not merely formal elements; they are charged with layered meanings, becoming visual signifiers of broader socio-political realities such as ethnic and religious segregation.

Eco (1989) notes that the application of metaphor within conceptual art has been discussed as a strategy for inviting multiple interpretations, allowing artworks to exist as open texts. In this context, the crack metaphor provides an expansive field for viewers to project personal and communal experiences of division and healing. The fractured lines of the cracks project what Johnson (1987) describes as "embodied metaphors," wherein abstract concepts are given perceptible sensory form. Moreover, conceptual art's emphasis on dematerialisation, the idea that

art need not exist as a traditional object. Lippard, is supported by Lippard (1973), who supports the choice of ephemeral, site-specific installation methods.

Appropriating naturally occurring cracks and extending them into space through suspended branches makes the work an evolving, situational commentary on societal fractures, resonating with Kwon's (2002) notion of site-specific art as context-dependent and meaning-generating. Thus, the use of cracks as metaphoric language situates this installation firmly within conceptual art practices that seek to disrupt passive viewing and instead engage the audience in critical, reflective thought. It merges individual expression with shared cultural memory, aligning with Kester's (2004) advocacy for dialogical aesthetics, where the artwork acts as a catalyst for social dialogue rather than an isolated artefact. *Echoes of the Rift* is also fundamentally characterised by its spatial, experiential, and immersive nature, transforming the act of viewing into an embodied, participatory experience. Rather than presenting art as a self-contained object, this installation engages the surrounding environment and the viewer's sensory perception, thereby redefining the relationship between art, space, and audience. Bishop (2005) emphasises that installation art "foregrounds the viewer's embodied experience," making it a medium that operates on psychological, emotional, and physical levels simultaneously.

The work also demonstrates the immersive potential of installation to extend visual elements beyond the traditional two-dimensional surface of the wall. The installation incorporates tree branches that physically protrude into space and woven fabrics that respond to the architectural and symbolic dimensions of the site. By doing so, the work aligns with Reiss's (1999) observation that installation art often "envelops the viewer" and demands a form of active engagement rather than passive observation. The suspended branches, painted in black and positioned across a deep pit, act as fragmented extensions of the wall's cracks. Their placement interrupts the visual and bodily passage of viewers, creating tangible barriers that metaphorically reference societal segregation. This physical obstruction mirrors what Kwon (2002) describes as the "site-specific imperative", where the artwork's meaning is inseparable from its spatial and social context. Thus, through its immersive strategies, this installation transforms cracks from mere visual motifs into dynamic spatial experiences. It demands that viewers not only observe but also physically negotiate the divisions and fractures presented, thereby deepening their encounter with the themes of segregation and disconnection.

Site-Specificity and Spatial Dialogue

Site-specificity is central to the conceptual and material framework of this installation. Rather than treating the site as a neutral background, the work embraces the notion that meaning emerges through the dynamic relationship between the artwork and its location. As Kwon (2002) asserts, site-specific art is "inseparable from its location," meaning that the physical, social, and historical contexts of the site actively inform the interpretation of the work. In this installation, the cracked wall is not a passive surface but a co-creator of meaning, embedding the artwork within an environment already marked by physical fracture. Meyer (2000) also introduces the concept of the "functional site," where the work is less about the physical location itself and more about the processes, histories, and experiences the site evokes. The cracked wall thus becomes a functional site in Meyer's sense, mediating between physical decay and the invisible fractures within society.

The installation creates a spatial dialogue that connects tangible materiality (the wall, branches, pit, and fabric) with intangible socio-political concerns. Thus, site-specificity in this installation is not merely a formal choice but a critical strategy that connects space, material, and meaning. The cracked wall acts as both a literal and symbolic ground, facilitating a spatial dialogue that renders the invisible visible and the abstract tangible.

Appropriation and Symbolism

Appropriation, the strategic reuse of existing objects or images within new contexts, is a crucial method within contemporary art practices, especially in conceptual and installation art. As stated by Levine (1981). Appropriation challenges notions of originality and authorship, turning familiar objects into critical carriers of new meanings. In this installation, appropriation is used through the repurposing of found tree branches and woven fabrics, transforming them into potent visual metaphors. The tree branches, sourced from the natural environment and painted black, are transformed to resemble cracks, thereby serving as metaphoric representations of fractured societal structures. This act of transforming natural elements into symbolic forms resonates with Nadama's (2018) notion of the "composition X," where organic vestiges are embedded with critical commentary on contemporary conditions to convey social ills within the Nigerian context. By appropriating the organic form of the branch and altering its appearance, the installation reflects themes of disintegration, tension, and societal breakdown. Similarly, the woven multi-coloured fabrics symbolise cultural diversity, communal interconnectedness, and the richness of plural societies.

Resonating with Obeagu (2018), where he utilises symbolic elements to explore the concepts of self-reflection and dualism, and Jerry Buhari, "National Issue," in Gbadan, (2014) which represents the diverse and complex issues within a heterogeneous society. In this artwork, the flowing fabrics embody unity and coexistence, while the intrusive, blackened branches interrupt and fragment these flows, visually manifesting the disruptive effects of segregation on communal cohesion. The use of symbolic objects in installation art also draws from Marcel Duchamp's concept of the "readymade," wherein ordinary items are transformed into art through contextual shifts (Cabanne, 1971). Here, branches and fabrics, though familiar, acquire charged new meanings within the installation's framework, inspiring the audience to reinterpret them within the socio-political narrative of segregation.

Materiality and Colour

Materiality in installation art transcends mere physical presence; it becomes a crucial medium of meaning-making. As Lange-Berndt (2015) emphasises, materials in contemporary art practices are not passive carriers but active agents that shape interpretation, embody emotions, and anchor conceptual frameworks. In *Echoes of the Rift*, a deliberate selection and transformation of materials express the thematic tension between segregation and cultural plurality. The use of black-painted tree branches conveys a strong symbolic charge. The branches, appropriated from their natural form and altered chromatically, embody the forces that interrupt social unity, projecting a visual metaphor of disruption into three-dimensional space.

In contrast, the vibrant, multicoloured woven fabrics introduce a counter symbolism signifying cultural vitality, diversity, and communal interconnectedness. The brightness and multiplicity of the fabrics offer a visual celebration of plurality, suggesting the rich textures of multicultural societies. The material juxtaposition of the black branches against the lively fabrics enacts a palpable tension between forces of division and aspirations for unity. Materiality operates as a silent but eloquent language, one that invites viewers to experience segregation's violent ruptures and the resilience of cultural diversity simultaneously. In this installation, materiality and colour are not ancillary aesthetic choices but critical conveyors of meaning, constructing a sensory dialogue that aligns physical experience with socio-political critique.

Conclusion

This installation-based inquiry explores how conceptual and installation art can be employed to critique and visualise segregation through the metaphor of cracks. The work prioritises ideas and symbolic meaning over traditional aesthetics, using cracks as powerful metaphors for societal division. These cracks, extended into space through immersive installation, invite viewers into an active, embodied experience that mirrors real-life social fractures. The use of a specific, cracked wall as the site of the work adds depth, allowing the location itself to shape meaning and reflect broader social realities. Found objects such as tree branches and woven fabrics are repurposed to symbolise cultural fragmentation and diversity, reinforcing the installation's themes through contrast in material and colour. By combining conceptual thought, spatial engagement, and symbolic appropriation, the work transforms art into a platform for reflection, dialogue, and emotional resonance. It not only visualises division but also challenges audiences to consider the potential for healing and unity through critical engagement.

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