

# Foreword

## *Art & Language: A Conquest*

By Stephanie Cristello



In April of 2016, I was invited by Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts, as part of a research trip for EXPO CHICAGO through President | Director Tony Karman, to attend the opening of the Philippe Méaille Collection at the Château de Montsoreau—a beautiful renaissance style castle installed at the convergence of two rivers, the Loire and the Vienne in France. The château was built on the remains of a XI-century construction, then used as a strategic military point, until renovated to completion during the second half of the XV–XVI

century. The perfectly picturesque building held, contrary to its outward expectations, one of the largest collections of work by British conceptualists Art & Language. Defined by their rigorously stark and administrative aesthetic, the pieces included within the château exhibition are spaced sparsely throughout vaulted dining rooms, chambers, and turrets—each painted a stark chalk white, the closest impression to a contemporary art situation the context could achieve. Within the stone walls, the air was saturated and soft; the large expanse of the shallow river drifted steadily by. The first encounter is with *Mirror Piece* (1965), a line of sixteen reflective surfaces, each a slightly varied size of standard proportions, neatly installed between two inset windows, and flanked on either side by the castle’s impressively large chimneys. Despite its minimal approach, the piece glimmers ornately as the sun sets, casting a myriad of reflections about the room. Each metallic panel captures its surroundings—rather than contributes to them—blithely reproducing passages of the pale green stained glass opposite the piece, catching angular fragments of the wooden timbers that lined the ceiling above, and returning the image of a void that once held fires from either edge of the work. The château is replaced by its reflection.



During the opening, I turned to Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin (Art & Language) and made a joke to this effect. Indeed, *Mirror Piece* alone conquered the space. I suggested the title of the exhibition be *Art & Language: A Conquest*. This observation was made better upon realizing that a flag—a white waving fabric carrying the group’s name in bright orange text—had been erected by the exhibition organizers on the side of the château that faced the water.

On the second level, a nearly identical grand dining room houses a collection of large-scale text works that one would expect of Art & Language—simple, typewritten words blown up on large expanses of white paper. The works, from the series *Paintings I* (1966), are installed along the perimeter of the space, as well as on a freestanding partition—its black-edged wall operating at once between a billboard and temporary structure—to make more works visible. While at a distance, the work included on the second floor appears effectively uniform (a deliberate affront to the casual visitor), each unfolds in radically different ways in the eyes of their reader. This quality of unpredictability—which is to say, the uncertainty of how the written word translates into an image within the mind of the viewer—is simultaneously the consistency of Art & Language’s work.



Two texts in particular define this space. The first takes the form of a letter to an unnamed reader—it states: “Dear...The work is glib. The description holds so long as there are things you can go out and buy for the decoration of your house. It describes a class of things offering a class of responses.” The text translates on a dual register; on the one hand, the painting’s form echoes the simplistic (glib) character the text implies. After all, what is more slick than Art & Language’s administrative aesthetic—the wholly unspectacular black, white, and grey of an office? (See: the design of this publication). Yet the letter also presents a persuasive secondary reading of the text—one that precisely undermines the myth of the self-reflexive, self-aware painting its style of open address implies.



Here, the contextual surroundings of *Paintings I* are no less coopted than in *Mirror Piece*—the work similarly absorbs its own intentions; while its ‘voice’ is directed outward, toward the (plural) viewer, its declaration belongs to an untraceable, indistinguishable, and nearly anonymous source. Such is the lore of Art & Language’s practice. Under the guise of a moniker, the identity of the artist is forever concealed, belonging instead to the chaos occupied by multiple conceptions of artistic practice. Such was the (purposely failed) mission of conceptual art. Just as no control can ever exist over the utopic possibility of governing the image elicited in the mind of a viewer through language, there is doubly an infinite amount of possibilities with how the tone, expression, and intonation of the text is ‘heard’ and internalized by the viewer. An avalanche of voices.



While the first text gestures toward the voice of the image, the second text addresses visibility in a more applied way. It asks us to participate in a pictorial exercise:

“A cube is placed in position so that one face only can be seen. If the cube is now rotated on a vertical axis the second face will gradually come into view. If the rotation is continued, the first face will disappear and the second face will be the only one visible.

At (exactly) the central point of this rotation both faces will be equally visible. Here is therefore the best possible view that can be obtained of the cube, showing two faces.

If the cube showing an equal area of two faces is tilted forward, the top of the cube will gradually become visible. Continued tilting will ultimately result in a position where the top only is visible.

At the intermediate position, the top and the two sides are all equally visible. This is therefore the best possible position for viewing all faces at the same time.”

As with the letter, the work attempts to exert its control over the viewer, asking us to imagine, through fixed and measured steps, the correct (and thus truthful) vision hidden within the text. Is this, then, the definition of a perfect image—one that exists only in the viewer’s imagination? By this standard, every image simulated within the mind of a viewer is validated by its mere existence. This is inevitably the warmest quality of the work—despite its distanced character, so long as the viewer interacts with the work, every past engagement is as authentic as the next. How many mirages has Art & Language produced? Surely, enough to fill a desert. For, as with all work by Art & Language, text does not substitute another object, it *is* the object—in this regard, to think an image is to own it. Perhaps this is the truest conquest of their work.

# *Emergency Conditionals: Chicago Redux*

By Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts

Art & Language are the Rolling Stones of Conceptual Art. This collaborative group of artists began their astonishing and radical work in the late 1960s; today it is Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden working in their studio outside Oxford, UK. Their essayistic projects have for many years championed the possibility of recurring but unique ideas. Their works are ontologically insecure and unstable, insisting then that the viewer participate in an unusual way—not as a consumer, but as a rewriter, an intruder in the text, as Barthes suggests. Their works do not reward the lazy regard.

In these early years, texts were written, exchanged, re-written, discussed, and turned into activities, performances, actions, or text works with photographs on the wall, or objects and sculptures, though sometimes not. They named this predicament the *Emergency Conditional*, and it announced the birth of a new genre, which was neither literature, philosophy, nor criticism—a new kind of textual genre that incorporated philosophy and Conceptual Art. A given text work was not theory nor philosophy nor literature, in case it was art and vice versa.

This kind of activity, a new genre, was part of the Chicago landscape from the earliest times in the Art & Language oeuvre. In conversation, Michael Baldwin notes that the performative aspects of their work had a huge and very important connection to the city. Mel Ramsden recalls being invited in the 1970s to lecture at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Twenty years later, with the opening of Chicago's Drag City Records (Dan Koretzky and Dan Osborn), the group re-issued early Mayo Thompson (Red Krayola) and Art & Language collaborative albums: *Corrected Slogans* (1976); *Kangaroo* (1981); and *Black Snakes* (1983). In 2007, they released a new collaboration, *Sighs Trapped By Liars*, followed in 2010 with *Five American Portraits*, which consists of musical portraits of Wile E. Coyote, President George W. Bush, President Jimmy Carter, John Wayne, and Ad Reinhardt. This year, Scott McGaughey has reissued *Baby & Childcare* (1984).

In addition, text and performances, conversations, and articles of Art & Language have a long history with the University of Chicago—its dedicated U of C Press, as well as the journal *Critical Inquiry*, to which they have contributed. The late Charles Harrison (1942–2009), in-house critic alongside Art & Language, taught at U of C in the 1990s. Likewise, faculty W.J.T. Mitchell and Matthew Jesse Jackson have both been involved with the Art & Language practice, participating in meetings, seminars, lectures at ZKM, Karlsruhe, along with The Jackson Pollock Bar—performances where Art & Language theory was disseminated via performance projects. The fluidity of these disparate art making activities included a discursive narratives of talks, lectures, performances

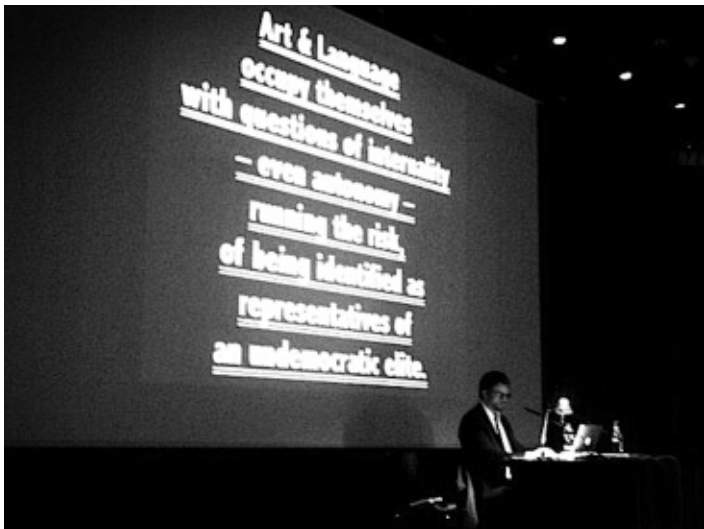
and rock & roll—all of which have had a strong influence in the development of *Our Literal Speed*, including Art & Language's theory installation "Interview with Mayo Thompson" and the last Charles Harrison-trio text called "Confession" performed in Chicago in May, 2009.

This particularly critical history of Art & Language was then given a public viewing in 2010 as legendary gallerist, Rhona Hoffman—who has strongly supported the historical currents of Minimal and Conceptual Art—brought an exhibition I had curated, entitled *BLURINGS: A Retrospective of Art & Language Drawings and Works on Paper*, from Europe to Chicago for the first time.

With this as a historical background, this publication is produced on the occasion of ART & LANGAUGE returning to Chicago this September for EXPO CHICAGO, with *MADE IN ZURICH: Early Editions 1965–72* from The Philippe Méaille Collection (Booth 127); a new portfolio of prints published and shown in Editions + Books by René Schmitt; new paintings at Rhona Hoffman gallery; and an afternoon symposium as part of /Dialogues, featuring three succinct conversations that trace over half a century of making, and the legacy of ART & LANGUAGE's work within an ongoing paradigm of contemporary art.

# *“If You Were Art & Language, Then You’d Be A Fucking Decent Contemporary Artist.”*

## Our Literal Speed



A depressing, anesthetizing triviality seeps into everything when art becomes a question of proper institutional gambits clad in professional intellectual decoration. You feel sick. You feel superfluous. You begin to suspect that all of your actions are really the fruition of a second-rate ambition to fulfill an appropriately “critical” or “provocative” role in the distribution and analysis of culture. For nearly a half century, in varied guises and manifestations, Art & Language has been dedicated to resisting this process of trivialization.

Conceptual art, it could be said, has always gravitated toward two poles, toward gestures that might be described as productive or deductive, and Art & Language has always stood at one extremity within this dichotomy. Productive conceptualism, as I’m calling it, aspires to hot-wire emotive, mnemonic energies, to fire them up and take the viewer’s mind for an illicit, often psychedelic or shamanistic, spin. This mode of conceptual art wonders very little about the investigation of its own possibility. Instead, its most promising terrain can be found at the intersection of the specific and the general, where big existential questions of individual human perception and the laws of the cosmos confront each other. Think Joseph Beuys’s drawings or Robert Barry’s texts (“Something that is taking shape in my mind and will sometime come to consciousness”). Such art seeks to produce new orders of experience and knowledge through a kind of art-magic. It does not purport to deduce the lineaments of already existing, if still insufficiently described, orders.

From its beginnings, Art & Language has had little time for this productive side of conceptual art, for the work endowed with “supposedly magical significance,” as Charles Harrison once wrote, since the cultivation of just such romantic mystery is “a function of the magic-authenticating system.”<sup>1</sup> Art & Language’s prototypically



deductive conceptualism proceeds differently by concentrating its energies on the conditions and procedures that allow artworks to be recognized as such—or, in the terms of painting talk, “the internal structure of the picture is deduced from the shape of the support,” to quote Yve-Alain Bois recapitulating Michael Fried on Frank Stella. By seeking to better understand its own becoming, Art & Language delves into constellations of value and desire that lie submerged beneath the placid obviousness of our day-to-day cultural experience. Because they simultaneously materialize the forces that enable art to accrue meaning, while also making gestures that are themselves meaning-bearing and artful, Art & Language’s deductive projects—often instantiated in lo-fi ephemera and ephemeral actions—are frequently classified as “critical,” yet “hermetic” meditations on visual art’s “public accessibility.”<sup>2</sup> Yet such descriptions go only so far. Art & Language’s deductive conceptualism may very well acknowledge, even foreground, the “social” or “critical” aspects of art, but not without striving to suppress commonplaces about “sociality” or “criticality.” For four decades the practice has asked: Why is the work here? Why are we looking at it? More important, why are we able to place the work in front of you? And perhaps most important of all, is it even possible for an artist to avoid complicity with the art industry’s “magic-authenticating system”?

Art & Language began in the late sixties, a time when the “Modernist impulse” had apparently waned in visual art. Yet, despite decades of arguments to the contrary, it’s now clear that Modernism never disappeared in the supposedly Postmodern era of Warhol, Koons and Sherman. It just mutated into forms that grew harder to recognize and describe, moving away from discrete objects made by individuals toward texts and installations and later onward to situations and performances created through collaborative activity. In this sense, Art & Language’s practice defines the contours of ongoing transformations within this Modernist sensibility, even as the practice repeatedly returns to Modernism’s enduring concerns: to a self-reflexive skepticism toward its own capacity to represent the world, to the doubtful status of the artist and her authority; to a fascination with non-commercial modes of being in the world, as well as to a concentration on the problematic character of description. It is in this atmosphere of Modernism After The End of Modern Art that conceptual art began, and it is crucial for understanding the achievement of Art & Language to locate its art in this space and time.

To supply a crude and slightly proleptic chronology: in 1850, one could look at a sculpture or a painting and compare the work with one’s everyday perceptions of one’s surroundings and this constituted the crucial act of coming to terms with a work of art—in other words, art challenged conventions of seeing. By 1950, advanced art relied less on modes of comparison; instead, it typically demanded the negotiation of subjective proposals concerning the relationship of art and reality. No longer a question of comparison between familiar perception and specific presentation, the back and forth occurs more often between the artist’s presentation of information and the ability of the viewer to interpret this information to meaningful effect—in other words, art challenged conventions of representation. Logically, by 2050, the principal activity of the spectator will no longer be to

compare, or even to interpret, but rather to hone her ability to recognize situations endowed with art-effects; that is, if the art of 1850 accepted the depiction of a shared “reality” as a given, while the art of 1950 accepted the status of the artwork as *artwork* as a given—now, we are entering a phase in which recognizing what constitutes a locus of compelling art-effects will become the most consequential experience of art—in other words, art will challenge conventions of presentation and distribution.

Far ahead of its time, Art & Language long ago shifted from contesting seeing or representing toward working in, on, and around the conventions of presentation and distribution that allow one to recognize an artwork as such. Fleeing from propriety or grandeur, Art & Language’s production, consistently inexpert and amateurish, has chosen to sit in the shadows whenever possible, to reside in an aesthetic shanty town of contingencies and proposals, of models and lists, of talk, meetings, tape recordings and transcripts—what Art & Language has described as its serial production of “homeless stuff.”<sup>3</sup> Ironically, following Art & Language’s lead, much recent art has been made out of just such “homeless” materials, out of situations, atmospheres, and attitudes that had not earlier constituted meaningful elements within one’s potential experience of art.<sup>4</sup> The email and the PowerPoint lecture in the work of Walid Raad are not additives to his artworks. They frequently *are the art*. In the art of Tania Bruguera, the openings and ancillary events to her exhibitions often function as *her art*, although she does not necessarily notify attendees of this fact beforehand. In a similar fashion, the interventions of the post-human entity known as Reena Spaulings, from being a gallery to being a character in a novel to being the supposed intelligence behind conventional object-making, as well as Anton Vidokle’s endeavors as e-flux entrepreneur and cultural organizer have elaborated a sensibility in which unlikely, often vaguely inappropriate, amalgams of commerce, design, documentation, and education have come to the fore. Much of this art vivifies the heretofore neutral, merely decorative surfaces that had once surrounded the discussion, production and display of artworks. Thus, the professional and discursive framing that had once allowed us to rapidly, almost automatically, distinguish art from its non-art surroundings, has been transformed in recent years, and, in important ways, Art & Language’s *homeless stuff* has been more *contemporary* than most “contemporary art” for several decades. Manifesting itself in unstable texts, unstable objects, and unstable situations, Art & Language has inaugurated a cascade of hybrid art genres—journal editing, discussion leading, transcript sifting, lyric writing, slogan correcting, performance organizing, among them—genres that ideally embrace material and conceptual contradictions that become nearly self-annihilating.<sup>5</sup>

Art & Language’s work has aimed to frustrate the mind that finds comfort in judging and evaluating. As a result, most art industry professionals, especially mainstream art critics, have not cared much for Art & Language.<sup>6</sup> The work does not sustain saucy cocktail conversation, nor can it be packaged neatly for the art industry consumer base, save as gestures that radiate a casual fraudulence and lazy deceit. Obviously, such art contradicts the industry’s enthusiasm for high-end presentational decorum and quasi-intellectual publicity. While many art



practices have been successfully pounded into submission by the art industry's sophisticated Relevance Machines and Solipsism-Reducing Siege Engines, Art & Language's shanty fortress has somehow managed to invent mechanisms to keep the industry at bay. By orchestrating circumstances of historiographic insecurity around their work, by engaging in a practice of intense and misleading self-curation, as well as by periodically engaging in forays into full-blown para-intellectual chaos, Art & Language have routinely undermined or exploded projects that have aimed to "evaluate their practice" in the name of the public, sometimes even inconveniencing these curatorial and critical voices to such an extent that the voices are silenced, or transformed, or both.

Art & Language's passion for an opacity that destabilizes professional activity has amounted to a cardinal sin within the recent industrialization of visual art. This approach is frowned upon because it inhibits the entrepreneurial zeal of the art institution and the collector. It is a practice conceived as having more of a future than a past, a practice that lacks "appropriate teleological symmetry," one that maintains a sense of disobedience toward the "proper historical record." Instead, Art & Language have occupied themselves with questions of internality—a position rejected as "supersolipsistic," "hermetic," or "esoteric" by adherents of "relevant art." They have even had the bad taste to be concerned with the old fashioned notion of "autonomy," thereby courting the risk of being identified as representatives of a retrograde, undemocratic elite. A more accurate analysis would be that Art & Language present artworks that emerge from a social practice that aims to be substantively independent from the art industry's own logic. However, such a position is barely tenable these days, since it undermines the linear progression of promotion, sponsorship, and sales that undergirds the current art system. Capital, whose interests are served by these practices, must be obeyed, since otherwise it might choose to bestow its largesse elsewhere.

By its very continued existence, Art & Language serves as an embodied indictment of our culture's owners, managers and servants and their conceptions of art, knowledge and research (which frequently amount to emphatic clichés arranged to satisfy the mild curiosity of corporate trustees). Neglecting to gather around itself a body of appropriately laudatory commentary, Art & Language has rarely cooperated with this machinery, while others, whose Conceptual art careers also began in the 1960s, have relished their place within recent historical accounts. Say what you will about the practice, no one can doubt that Art & Language have constructed a body of work that maximally disrupts their own identity; a practice that continually engages in self-deflating forms of mimicry and ventriloquism; a practice that never stops undermining Art & Language's "appropriate place" within the historical record.

As accidental inheritors of High Modernism's concept of autonomy, Art & Language produces works of art that are inevitably fragments extruded from larger, longer conversations. And though the outcome of these conversations might sometimes be exhibited in the form of a painting or a drawing, even such "traditional" works exist only as fragments torn from the larger whole. This is an internality, or autonomy, or "supersolipsism," that

emanates from a discursive origin, an autonomy that conflicts with the institutional and critical apparatuses that seek to frame it. And as ever greater varieties of performance and film enter the space of the auction house, gallery and museum, new requirements are emerging: an overwhelming drive toward bigness and speed in the contemporary art institution is feeding an erosion of boundaries between artistic media—those specialized categories that had once restrained the curator and critic in their drives to become would-be avant-garde uber-practitioners or showbiz movers and shakers. In its wake, a flood of self-aggrandizing collaborations between artists, institutions, curators, sponsors, and pop culture celebrities have banished the experience of “real communicative failure” from the viewing of art. Today, “Contemporary Art” most often preserves alienation and deflation only as forms of “picturesque abjection,” while genuinely complex transformations within art practices are disappeared due to the risks that heterogeneity and inconsistency bring to sales and notoriety.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, art institutions now inhibit, or simply exclude, works that cannot be consumed rapidly. The difficult, autonomous artwork, the object once designed to be interpreted by Richard Wollheim’s “adequately sensitive, adequately informed spectator,” has, for all intents and purposes, disappeared. In its place, we encounter varied flavors of institutional management that yield a mix of “contemporary masterworks” and “political activism” refigured as curatorial mannerism. Art & Language has navigated this artworld of museums and galleries, as well as the academic world of art history and “art theory”—worlds usually closed to each other. Occupying the role of commentator and actor in both worlds, Art & Language has confounded nearly all existing descriptive art vocabularies. In this way, it might be more accurate to say that Art & Language has transformed its critics and commentators, rather than accommodating them. In fact, it might be most accurate to say that Art & Language *infects* its would-be curators, critics and commentators. “Infects,” in the sense that Art & Language’s practice brings with it the demand that the would-be curator, critic, or commentator enter the conversation, a protracted, circuitous discussion differing in form and substance from the art industry’s.

Conceptual art initially grew out of aggregations of flimsy paper and bland photographs, and Art & Language has emphasized conceptual art’s modesty, its traffic with the weak. As such, Art & Language’s enduring challenge to the viewer and reader is its call to extend this cast of mind—to nurture ways of being in the world that sidestep genius, mastery, control, and judgment at all levels of cultural experience and intellection. In this sense, Art & Language’s activity has been ontologically recalcitrant, demanding strange, unexpected modes of exertion and creativity from its viewers and readers. So much so, that in contemplating the practice of Art & Language, one finds that the space for dispassionate neutrality withers; one must choose sides. And even though Art & Language offers no positive account of the humanist project, the enlightenment project, the contemporary art project, or any other project for that matter, and even though they have committed manifold sins and wickedness in the eyes of the art industry, Art & Language are fucking decent artists anyway.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>2</sup> See the overview in Jan Verwoert, "Secret Society," *Frieze*, issue 124, June/July/August 2009, 137.

<sup>3</sup> See the text of Art & Language's performance, "Confession," Gallery 400, Chicago, 1 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> For an account of these trends in recent art, see Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> A good example of such nearly self-annihilating mini-*gesamtkunstwerks* would be Art & Language's performance of "Letters to Jackson Pollock Bar in the Style of The Red Krayola" at MACBA, 18 May 2013. The event involved recorded music, live commentary, projected video and an overall atmosphere of homely improvisation.

<sup>6</sup> For a representative example of this kind of art criticism, see Jerry Saltz, *Seeing Out Loud: The Village Voice Art Columns, Fall 1998-Winter 2003* (Great Barrington, MA: Figures, 2003), 293. "[T]here's the art we don't understand and hate, secretly wishing it would disappear. Last month this subdivision was personified for me by the British Marxist-conceptualist collective Art & Language, whose supersolipsistic survey at P.S. 1 consisted of wall-to-wall philosophical texts, political posters, card files, and re-creations of famous paintings. A quarter century ago, Art & Language forged an important link in the genealogy of conceptual art, but subsequent efforts have been so self-aggrandizing and arcane that their work is now virtually irrelevant."

<sup>7</sup> See the text of Art & Language's performance, "Confession," Chicago, 1 May 2009.

# EXPO CHGO

This publication is produced as a limited edition of 250 copies to accompany the Art & Language Symposium at EXPO CHICAGO (September 22-25, 2016), as part of /Dialogues, presented in partnership with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2007

# **EMERGENCY CONDITIONALS**

Art & Language

## Preamble

We were surprised to be invited to speak at the conference on Philosophy and Conceptual Art. In fact the invitation was made to Charles Harrison. He is sometimes an academic. But he felt a) that it would be inappropriate to respond as such, and b) that together we would probably represent our relations with philosophy (whatever that is) to greater practical purpose; that's to say that we might be able to represent our practice – as something that absorbs or spits out 'philosophy' – in such a way as to reflect the thirty-odd years of our conversation.

The brief for the conference seemed historically naïve – unaware of the vicissitudes and variations in the use of the term Conceptual Art. So we began to trace a sort of narrative. To do this it was necessary to distinguish our sense of Conceptual Art from at least two possible others. To this extent, we were adding philosophical and practical flesh to what seemed at the outset some very meagre bones – or not even bones, just vague and ambiguous usage. ...Not that that's always so bad. What was disturbing was the sense of aestheticians' dreariness: a sort of killing abstraction that failed to recognise the practical and philosophical connectedness of the territory. Edwardian uncles get round to it after thirty-five years and get it wrong. (Imagine philosophy discovering Cubism in 1947.)

Anyway, what we offered was not a performance. It was a sort of expository paper converted to the representation of an artistic practice. This practice is discursive and reflexive – talkative. How do we represent ourselves among philosophers? Not as philosophers. Was what we said philosophy? Is it affected by the faint whiff of scandal or insecurity that is expressed by what we call the emergency conditional?

The 'voices' that are connected to particular speeches have no urgent or unique connection to what they say. They do not record an actual speech event. The text was divided up into speakable chunks. Each chunk was assigned a number from 1 to 3 – on a more or less arbitrary basis. **1 was spoken by Michael Baldwin, 2 by Mel Ramsden, 3 by Charles Harrison.** There is no necessity in this, either psychological or factual. We have collaborated on several occasions with the members of the Jackson Pollock Bar of Freiburg. We write theoretical texts and they install them. Professional actors perform the lines and actions variously assigned to Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden. In the case of the following text the speakers could have been rearranged. As to whether there would have been some loss as a consequence of a rearrangement we do not know, nor will we ever know what loss there may have been as a consequence of the arrangement we followed. To this extent it was a performance as in live theatre – or as in instruments playing from a score.

At the same time, the text is readable, translatable and so forth – a mere text. Was our reading of it art or philosophy or drama? It is possible that it belongs to a genre that could include *The Blue and Brown Books: the Musical*, or *Painting as an Art on Ice*. It is more likely, though, that it bears a passing family resemblance to what the Jackson Pollock Bar calls Theory Installation. How would it then be distinguished from what might normally be presented at an academic conference?



**MB.** By way of an opening we need to ask just what the term Conceptual Art is supposed to pick out. It has lately come to mean more or less any kind of art that does not explicitly seek to attach itself to a technical tradition and is not medium specific. Art is no longer conceived on the basic principle of a painting/sculpture axis, but rather as a current and continuing generic product capable of installation and distribution within some institution of an art-world.

**MR.** As an alternative, we could think of Conceptual Art as a specific critical development in the historical ambience of high Modernism during the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. In talking of high Modernism we mean not just a selection of transatlantic art made retrospectively in accordance with a purified Greenbergian theory – not just the paintings of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, and the sculpture of Anthony Caro – but also the work that both overlapped and competed with theirs: Frank Stella's, Don Judd's, Dan Flavin's, Robert Morris's, Sol LeWitt's. A Conceptual Art movement conceived along these lines is associated with a specific historical period – though we can still argue both about how that period is defined and about what work does or does not come up for the count. Thus, by analogy, while Cubism was a movement with fuzzy boundaries, and while the epithet 'Cubist' was used by non-professionals as late as the mid-twentieth century to refer to odd-looking avant-garde art, it could be said that a Cubist painting made in the 1950s would have been unlikely to deserve much serious critical attention.

**CH.** It might seem that these two different modes of usage of the category of Conceptual Art are easily enough reconciled. We can simply consider a continuing generic

Conceptual Art as the long-term outcome of the historically specific Conceptual Art movement – or of what has been called 'Modernism's nervous breakdown'. But we have to be careful. It was not as though practical dissent from hegemonic Modernism had one single possible outcome. It might have seemed for a while that everyone was busy disinterring Marcel Duchamp and playing the same game of appropriative and nominative gestures. (I think of this as the 'When Attitudes become Form' moment – lasting until around the summer of 1969.) But it very soon became apparent – at least to Art & Language – that this could develop in several quite different ways, from which we pick out a contrasting pair.

**MR.** It could go towards a kind of institutional theatre: from Joseph Beuys and Daniel Buren, to the more recently celebrated works of Ilya Kabakov, or to more or less anything liable to be installed in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern.

**MB.** Alternatively it could lead to a kind of essayistic practice that reflected upon its own conditions and considered the language and vocabulary and historicity of the appropriative gesture itself.

**CH.** But these were not possibilities with equal pragmatic legs. The first may have been the complaisant client of demotic institutional theory, but by the early 1970s informal versions of that theory were spreading apace both through the avant-garde sectors of the art-world and through the graduate departments of American universities. The art of institutional theatre both rode and was ridden by various types of fashionable postmodernist theory, and particularly by those that were vehicles for virtuous anxieties about the consequences and inequities of class, race, gender and

expansion of the media. Its various practical modes were unified under the sign of the curator, and were supported from the world of cultural studies and corporate radicalism.

**MR.** In the climate of taste this alliance has served to encourage, pathetic Modernists like Cy Twombly and anti-Modernists like Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud could be recuperated alongside such exciting newcomers as Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin. ‘You’ve got to choose between Mondrian and Duchamp’, Ad Reinhardt said in 1967. Now choice means the right to consume everything indifferently.

**MB.** Not long ago we participated in a symposium addressed to the question, ‘What work does the art work do?’ On that occasion we suggested that for the sake of argument a distinction might be made along the following lines: on the one hand there are works of art – and theories about works of art – based on the proposition that work is what spectators do in variously animating the work of art through interpretation and exegesis. It should be clear enough that the art of institutional theatre tends on the whole to conform to this mode, and that it delivers itself up with some facility to journalism, whether of the popular or of the academic variety.

**MR.** Media-led critical bullshit sticks easier to the slight and the trivial than it does to the articulate and the complex.

**MB.** On the other hand there are works of art – or theories about works of art – based on the proposition that whatever work is done is intimately connected to the intentional character of the artwork, and that it is what that artwork does in animating its suitably attuned and attentive spectator.

**CH.** We should make it clear, perhaps, that we do not here mean to invoke that Wollheimian gentleman who is the artist’s boon companion. We simply mean to suggest that there exists the possibility of interpretative failure, and that to a significant degree the work will be the arbiter of that. When we refer to the intentional character of the work, we do not want to suggest that this is the intentionality of a single individual, but that there is some critical dialogue that the work and the viewer enter into regarding what is relevant and resonant in a given interpretation, and that one of the participants in this dialogue will be the work itself conceived as intentional.

**MB.** The second, essayistic, type of Conceptual Art tended to look to the second of these modes. It separated itself out from the permissive melange of ‘When Attitudes become Form’ at a point when it no longer seemed defensible to treat Modernism’s nervous breakdown as an occasion of opportunity. It developed out of a kind of anxiety regarding the relaxed, ostensive practice of dematerialisation-as-liberation. One couldn’t just live in a relaxed world of wilful artistic ostension. How, we asked, might one make work with detail in a circumstance where the possibility of detail is not given among the resources of a specific medium? By detail, what we had in mind was some aspect or set of connected properties that both required and arbitrated a complex description – one that was not just an account of how the work interacted with the artworld.

**MR.** The problem wasn’t that one objected to art getting away with things under the artistically demotic forms of an institutional theory – ‘If someone calls it art, it’s art’ and so on. For the most part the emptiness of

Conceptual Art amenable to such theory just seemed critically harmless.

**CH.** Nor was the problem how to have something of aesthetic interest in a Wollheimian sense that nevertheless didn't have the physical properties by which that interest was supposed to be provoked. At a certain level the issue of aesthetic interest was simply beside the point. Art is theory-laden and concept-laden whatever anyone claims to be seeing and feeling in front of it — and not just any old concepts or any old theories. Peter Lamarque has made a similar point with respect to the work of Rembrandt. It could be said that essayistic Conceptual Art simply made an issue of this.

**MB.** The difficulty was that neither of these senses of the problematic took adequate account of the consequences of the collapse of the Greenbergian mainstream; nor did they properly acknowledge the insecurities attendant on the institutional theory — the concern that it might simply be wrong in its accounting for the relations between perceiving and describing, or that, in accepting it, artists might find themselves in an invidious position vis-à-vis actual institutions — or in a dead end so far as art was concerned.

**MR.** In fact it could be said that one consequence of the institutional theory has actually been to licence an obsession with the idea of art as generic, when much of what is produced in the name of generic art could quite well be accounted for as continuous with the critical concerns of late modernism. After all, there are actually very few Snow-Shovel like things, but many paintings with words and tasteful arrangements of stuff — which do no more real damage to modernist ideas about medium-specificity than did Frank Stella's black paintings.

**CH.** As we have already suggested, the alternative modes we have labelled institutional theatre and essayistic practice were not actually equivalent and parallel developments. The consequences of the development of generic Conceptual Art were such as to suppress the discourses of autonomy and internality, and to obliterate the sense of a parallel development that retained some investment in their continuity. It grew fat on the very theoretical resources it claimed to have transcended. In the new hegemony, even the supposedly outmoded modernistic discourse on autonomy was somehow incorporated and represented.

**MR.** But we do clearly identify the practice of Art & Language with the essayistic alternative. We are therefore unwilling to accede to the idea that generic Conceptual Art is the unchallengeable outcome of the original Conceptual Art movement. This does not mean that what we have been and are trying to do is to flog Greenbergian Modernism back into life, or to reinstate its concepts of autonomy and internality. It may be that our form of Conceptual Art had in common with painting the fact that it did not actually *require* a specifically institutional kind of theory to tell it what it is. But given the way things were going, autonomy was always going to be a contested and insecure project. It was not as though the question of what work the art work does was ever really going to be settled one way or the other. Indeed, if it were, art would almost certainly be a thoroughly uninteresting business.

**CH.** We should try to review some of the conditions of problems. One is that the critical negativity [bankruptcy?] of Modernism was part of the reason that the Conceptual Art movement could emerge.

**MR.** A second is that institutionality is or has become a sort of enslavement to management.

**MB.** A third is that only by means of some form of internality combined with some capacity for detail could death by curatorship be effectively resisted.

**MR.** A fourth is that the denizens of the happy world of wilful ostension failed to grasp the complexities and difficulties of the very language by which that ostension was being effected. Instead they relied both on the artist being accorded a kind of 'Romantic' authenticity and on a complaisant acceptance of the transparency of his words.

**MB.** A fifth problem is that this authority and mystification could only be resisted by description, and by a theory that was in some way internal to the work itself. What was required was a social world in which and into which the work could be uttered.

**CH.** In fact it is not entirely clear which came first: the imperative to beat the curator by creating a descriptive circumstance, or the need for some sort of internal complexity in the work.

**MB.** The best way to resolve that issue is to say that a sort of context of conversational concentration was 'naturally' established once one recognized that art is vacuous unless it is describing as well as described.

**MR.** And once you have got a conversational process going it tends quite naturally to take on a project-like character: in being conversational it tends also to take account of the world of which it is with difficulty a part, and in which it is uttered. It is thus availed as a matter of course of the grounds

on which to contest claims for the internality of its own outcomes. This is to say that a conversational practice will be disposed to sustain a degree of tension between, on the one hand, its contextual and institutional circumstances, and on the other the kinds of claim it might make to internality (to having an oeuvre, and to there being some degree of formal integrity in its products, and so on).

**CH.** In fact the conversational practice tends to militate against any purified sense of what the work is, so that its capacity to constitute an oeuvre is severely impeded. There is a popular representation of Art & Language according to which we are held to have made an avant-garde claim to the effect that our conversations and proceedings are art. This vexatiously misses the point. It takes us as it were back to the original point of bifurcation and associates us with the institutional theatre of such figures as Ian Wilson — who did indeed claim around 1970 that his conversations were art.

**MB.** We can recall having had conversations with Ian Wilson. We can recall nothing of their content. The presupposition was presumably that as artworks they need have none. 'Conversation' was a quasi-Duchampian readymade — in this case an appropriated category, or... what? In fact were one able to remember the content of a conversation with Ian Wilson one would be the less likely to recover conversation itself as a ready-made.

**MR.** For us, the conversational process was not a Duchampian gesture. Though it may have had heir-lines to it, it also had heir-lines to the 'internal' critique of high modernism and its penumbra. But first and foremost it was a means of exchange and production. The point was that we were in no position confidently to impose a sense of artistic



hierarchy on the distinctions between verbal discussions, informal on-paper exchanges, essays, and pieces of paper stuck to the gallery wall. Of course certain hierarchies did get established for purposes of publication and display, but they were matters of practical contingency.

**MB.** It would be wrong, though, to suggest that there were no normal aesthetic considerations in play. Whether we cared to admit it or not, certain matters of taste were relevant, and these were of a more-or-less Wollheimian kind – to do with the physical properties of things.

**MR.** That which was produced for distribution and display was not without its vestigial aesthetic aspects. There was no pink Conceptual Art, and absolutely no green. What tended to predominate was the black, white and grey of the office and of the otherwise socially unspectacular. There was a kind of truth to materials in this. In those days there were no colour photocopies. In the case of a great deal of Conceptual Art – some of our own included – there may in the end be little remainder once considerations of graphic taste are accounted for. It is an open question just how far Wittgenstein-on-the-wall escapes significantly from the kind of aesthetic admonitions that were associated with the work of Don Judd without in the process simply being reduced to an inefficient form of Wittgenstein-on-the-page.

**MB.** We did have some anxieties about this at the time. What followed were texts printed in green and red and so on. The point was to evade the myth that neutral taste was co-extensive with critically significant dematerialisation – and that there was a progressive political aspect to both.

**CH.** We were well enough aware of the silly hypostatisations. Some of the talk about dematerialisation certainly muddied the waters. In fact it was in muddy water that we saw our work as in constant transition between the conversation, or the theorising that it recorded, and the gallery wall it had syndicalised or taken over. In so far as it achieved some independence from graphic considerations that work put itself in the way of aesthetic virtues that were literary – either theoretical or descriptive.

**MR.** It did not follow, however, that in so far as it achieved virtue of a kind it must therefore be embedded in the theoretical discourses of literature or philosophy. To say that it was theory was false, since the work it did as art absolved it of the standard assumptions that it was truth-telling, coherent or extensible in ways that theory and philosophy are supposed to be. Nor was it literary in a normal sense. It did not and could not demand of the viewer that she be a literary reader.

**MB.** This sense of permanent transition and instability brought us to what we called an emergency conditional. The work was theory (or something) just in case it was art, and it was art just in case it was theory. Could we say then, that in its strangeness it resonated with both?

**CH.** And, further, permanent transition and instability called forth other emergency conditionals. We were artists just in case we were critics and critics, or teachers or art historians, just in case we were artists. This ‘homelessness’ gave the work a brief independence; paradoxically, a place of production that was not wholly subservient to institutions and disciplines.

**MR.** But what if someone objects that the work actually *was* ‘theory’; that it could be read and (occasionally) used as theory. Is it then displaced or disqualified as art? We are not sure that it is. It may end up, like Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, as a kind of book about nothing. But if it *is* theory, then on the whole it will try to be about something – some object or relation or process; and this will then map it back to the circumstances of the original bifurcation consequent upon Modernism’s Nervous Breakdown.

**CH.** What is perhaps more to the point – if more problematic – is the thought that by around 1968 to ’69 the original ontologically iffy artworks – air-conditioned rooms, columns of air and what have you – had been swamped or themselves partly displaced by the theory that was intended to be ‘about’ them. The ‘Air-Conditioning Show’ of 1967 furnishes an example. This consisted of a text proposing the air in an air-conditioned room as an art object and expanding on the problems that that proposition entailed. The question raised was, ‘Is it necessary actually to install air-conditioning as described in the text, or will the text do just as well?’ Was the text to be identified as the art – the meaning – we make, and was any concrete ‘realisation’ of that which it described merely a conservatively contemplative distraction?

**MB.** We might think of this question as marking the distinction we have already proposed between Conceptual Art thought of on the one hand as a kind of Duchampian extension of Minimalism occasionally outside the realm of middle-sized dry goods, and on the other as a fundamentally textual cultural practice.

**CH.** Imagine that someone asserts that ‘Everything in the unconscious perceived by

the senses but not noted by the conscious mind during trips to Baltimore in the summer of 1969’ is his work of art, and someone else say, ‘What do you mean?’ The ‘What do you mean?’ is supposed by the artist and his admirers not actually to impinge on the assertion. To treat that assertion as a speech act – or its textual equivalent – is to commit a kind of foul. It seems nevertheless necessary to treat it as the speech act it actually is. But to do this is to impede it. What we had in mind was a kind of text in which the interrogative is included along with the appropriative claim – and one which would therefore be an object of a quite different order. The consequence was considerably to increase the detail of the appropriative gesture – the theoretical content that it wore on its face.

**MB.** The difference entailed is more than merely quantitative. The viewer is made a reader of sorts – a conversationalist of sorts. This seems a not undesirable outcome. It is one with which we have tried to render our subsequent practice consistent. Conceptual Art may entail a way of making art. If it is one in which painting as traditionally understood can only be sentimentally pursued, it is not necessarily one in which the possibility of internality is ruled out. What may be ruled out is the idea of an oeuvre as unified by some biologically authenticated style. A conversational practice will tend to rule against certain kinds of consistency and purification.

**MR.** If Conceptual Art as we understood it had a future it was not as Conceptual Art – not, at least, if what that means is simply the Duchampian model emptied of its transgressive potential and rendered congenial to the managers of interdisciplinarity.