

Süddeutsche Zeitung

Kunst produziert ja reales Kapital

Die Gruppe Art & Language gilt als Urgestein der Konzeptkunst. Eine Ausstellung von Michael Baldwin und Mel Ramsden in Berlin

Es sind glückliche Tage für Nostalgiker und Fans der Brit-Kultur. Nicht nur weil die Rolling Stones auch auf deutschen Bühnen spielen, in diesen Wochen. Im deutlich leiseren Rahmen des Kunstbetriebs gehen sich Michael Baldwin und Mel Ramsden, die heutigen Mitglieder des 1968 gegründeten Künstlerkollektivs Art & Language, die Ehre und stellen erstmals in Berlin aus. Zwar verkörpern die Veteranen der Konzeptkunst nicht eben den Rock 'n' Roll, Art & Language stießen mit ihrer Praxis weniger auf die Sinne, denn auf die zerebrale Ebene. Doch die Künstlergruppe hat diverse musikalische Projekte auf dem Gebiet des „Abstract'n'Roll“, in Angriff genommen: Wollte man das Tun von Art & Language auf einen Nenner bringen, dann als kognitiv-linguistisches Überschreiten sämtlicher Genre- und Gattungsgrenzen.

Art & Language gründeten sich zu einer Zeit, deren gesellschaftliche und künstlerische Um- und vor allem Ausbrüche bis heute nachwirken. Viele Künstler wandten sich in den späten Sechzigerjahren gegen die Ideologie des Abstrakten Expressionismus und die Vorstellung einer Kunstentwicklung, die in der Ungegenständlichkeit ipfult. Die Kritiker eines solchen Denkens wiesen die Kunst von ihrer Bindung an die einwand und andere klassische Materialien, befragten das Verhältnis zur Theorie, experimentierten mit neuen Medien, kämpften gegen den Mythos vom kreativen Genie, den Männlichkeitswahn, die Entfernung von Politik und Gesellschaft. Es entstanden institutionskritische Texten und Werke, in denen die Macht von Mu-

seen und Galerien, symbolisches und reales Kapital zuzuschreiben, befragt wird. Nicht zuletzt verfasste Roland Barthes in jener Zeit seinen Essay vom „Tod des Autors“ und betonte die sinnstiftende Rolle des Lesers.

In dieser Gemengelage fanden sich wechselnde Künstler unter dem Label Art & Language zusammen und entwickelten ein Œuvre, das sich nicht mehr mit Begriffen wie Malerei, Skulptur oder Performance umschreiben lässt. Doch das ist, streng genommen, auch nicht nötig – denn die Künstler sind zugleich ihre eigenen Kritiker und Theoretiker. Seit 1970 publizieren sie das Magazin *Art-Language*, von dem einige Originalausgaben nun in den Berliner Kunstställen zu sehen sind. Reflektieren und Sprechen über das eigene Werk gehören untrennbar zur Praxis von Art & Language. In Berlin führen die Künstler

**Momente der Entkörperlichung:
Mal steht der Sprecher ohne Text
da, dann der Text ohne Sprecher**

das auch im Rahmen der Installation – als Beheftsbegriff – „Nobody Spoke“ (2013) vor, einer Gruppe von 17 Stahl-Objekten, die aus jeweils zehn schwarz-weiß bemalten Leinwänden bestehen und weder Möbel noch Gemälde noch Skulptur sind. In jedem Fall sind sie der Anlass für die Performance „Speaking of Nobody Spoke“ (2014), die mit einer Beschreibung des Werks beginnt und in einer Art Seminar für ästhetische Theorie mündet.

Doch selbst dieses vermeintliche Zwiegespräch samt gespielterm Einwand aus dem Publikum, das von drei Mitgliedern des selbst ernannten Performance-Unternehmens The Jackson Pollock Bar vorgelesen wird, entzieht sich sämtlichen Konventionen der Rede. Der Text stammt von Art & Language, eingesprochen wurde er von Studenten. Er tönt aus Lautsprechern, die Performer bewegen die Lippen und agieren dazu. So kommt es immer wieder zu kleinen Momenten der Entkörperlichung, in denen der Text ohne Sprecher oder der Sprecher ohne Text dasteht. Wer also spricht? Aus welcher Position her-

aus und zu wem? Spricht der Text für sich und zu sich selbst? Und wenn diese Rede Teil eines Kunstwerks oder vielmehr Kunst ist, wie lässt sich dann überhaupt über sie sprechen? Und was ist die Kunst an diesen sich sämtlichen Beschreibungen und klassischen Begriffen der Kunst widersetzenden Akten und Objekten?

Schon im Jahr 1913 hatte Marcel Duchamp mit dem Readymade, also vorgefundenen Gegenständen, die er in Ausstellungsräume versetzte, die gängigen Kriterien für Kunst außer Kraft gesetzt. Nicht mehr Originalität, Können, irgendeine Form der Bearbeitung, der Anschluss an be-

stimmte Traditionen oder Regeln machten nun das Kunstwerk aus. Es genügt die Behauptung des Künstlers und die Definitionsmacht des Kunstraums. Damit aber verlagert sich das Problem nur – denn wer bestimmt nun, was ein Künstler ist? Eine Kunstinstitution? Wer lässt wen dort hinein? Somit stärkt jeder, der gängige Vorstellungen vom Kunstwerk schwächt, zugleich die Rolle von Künstler und Institution, ohne diese jedoch zu klären.

**Die Künstler sind Musiker,
Texter, Theoretiker – ihre
eigenen Kuratoren und Kritiker**

Aus diesem Zirkelschluss kommt man nicht heraus. Auch in Berlin erscheinen Art & Language als Musiker, Texter, Theoretiker und bildende Künstler und gleichzeitig als ihre eigenen Kuratoren und Kritiker. Michael Baldwin und Mel Ramsden zeigen Schallplatten und Magazine, tapetieren den Ausstellungsraum mit Zeichnungen und „dekorierten“ ihn mit schwarz-weißen Girlanden („Portraits and a Dream III“, 2013). Sie reflektieren über ihr Werk und nennen diese Reflexion dann Kunst, während die Figur des Autors zugleich verschwommen bleibt. Die Fragen, die Art & Language mit ihrer Praxis aufwerfen, drehen sich im Kreis. Das ist klug – aber auch schwindelerregend.

ASTRID MANIA



Die Installation „Nobody Spoke“ (2017) von Art & Language.

FOTO: SEBASTIAN EGGER

Art & Language: Nobody Spoke. Kunstsäle Berlin bis 18. November

LISSON GALLERY

Tate etc.
February 2016

TATE^{ETC.}

The New Heretics

The 1960s saw a profound change in how artists worked, with some turning away from producing anything that might have been previously recognisable as art. What came to be known as conceptual art went beyond traditional media, to focus on the idea that art could take any form: performances, texts, postcards, temporary sculpture – or apparently nothing at all. Tate Britain's forthcoming exhibition *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979* charts the development of this new breed of art from an era of optimism and experimentation through the economic recession of the 1970s. One of the critics engaging with the work at the time recalls how these conceptual artists emerged in a transformative period of cultural and political upheaval

by Richard Cork

During the 1960s anyone daring to question the fundamental supremacy of painting and sculpture was regarded by the British art establishment with immense hostility. Near the end of the decade, when I was lucky enough to become art critic of the *Evening Standard* at the age of 22, the radical spirit of innovation pushing young artists made me determined to explore their heretical experimentation. In one of my earliest pieces, written in 1969, I made a lot of enemies by emphasising how 'at the moment, a large number of serious artists are concerned with redefining the nature of art, seizing on new materials and new approaches in order to escape from all the old preconceptions about what art should be'.

Even in 1972, when the Arts Council decision-makers finally allowed Anne Seymour to curate a major exhibition called *The New Art* at the Hayward Gallery, they still felt unhappy about the focus of the show. Seymour, then Assistant Keeper at Tate, concentrated on young British artists who had rejected painting and sculpture as their prime media of expression. But the Arts Council very nearly insisted that the selection be widened into a more all-embracing survey, thereby destroying the provocative emphasis which made it so stimulating.

Why was Britain so unwilling to acknowledge the relevance of this innovative generation? Part

of the answer must lie in a widespread national suspicion that the whole basis of art was threatened with extinction. Simply because a number of young rebels challenged the status quo, many of their seniors saw nothing in the offing but anarchy and destruction. The achievement of Marcel Duchamp, by whom the new generation was so heavily inspired, appeared all very well as a theoretical excursion. But once the full implications of his ideas began to be explored by a whole range of successors, Duchamp seemed more like Beelzebub than Isaiah.

Some young artists inflamed this opposition by rooting their work in irreverence and iconoclasm. Bruce McLean started off, like several other rebels, as a student at Saint Martin's School of Art. Sculptor Anthony Caro was the most powerful teacher there. But another, John Latham, had already become notorious by organising a ritual chewing of critic Clement Greenberg's influential 1961 book *Art and Culture* – not to mention involving himself with Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive art projects on the South Bank. As a result, Latham lost his part-time post in 1967. But that did not stop McLean and his contemporaries reacting against the ideology which had dominated Saint Martin's. His dissatisfaction erupted into satirical defiance.

He mocked the old idea of sculpture by posing on plinths as 'semi-draped' reclining figures reminiscent of Henry Moore's bronzes. He also posed as a 1960s sculptor inside a tumbledown garden shed and called this photo piece *People Who Make Art in Glass Houses* 1969. Then, in a solo show, he spent all day at the Situation Gallery executing hundreds of hasty drawings which he crumpled up and threw on the floor. One by one, they were retrieved by his dealer, who ironed them out and hung them on the wall. By the time Tate invited him to put on an exhibition in 1972 as part of the ground-breaking series *Seven Exhibitions*, McLean was ready to subvert the idea of a retrospective as well. His one-day show there, called *King for a Day*, contained nothing except a floor-full of catalogues surveying his brief career, and he simultaneously announced his retirement as an artist.

Such an extreme salvo was bound to upset and disconcert, but Gilbert & George, by contrast, adopted courteous personae which avoided any hint of outright aggression. They also attended Saint Martin's and, after dismissing the traditional concept of sculpture, embarked instead on a series of fastidiously considered alternatives. The duo concentrated on projecting a self-conscious image of themselves as 'living sculptures'. Everything they offered their audiences turned out to be an extension of their daily lives. Guests were invited to partake in *The Meal* 1969, where carefully chosen 'English' food was prepared and consumed. Galleries were given over to the staging of *Singing Sculpture* 1969, where the gold-painted couple performed a non-stop mimed rendition of the song *Underneath the Arches*. They issued postcards wishing you were there, limericks decorated with wispy drawings, wry poems and even essays in book form. Behind all these enterprises lay an acute intelligence, which enjoyed claiming the freedom to make a variety of art forms convey one single vision: the lifestyle of Gilbert & George themselves. And they pushed art as close as it could go towards life by using their own decorous, old-fashioned appearance as the motif – short haircuts, polite suits, stiff movements and a shy, dreaming outlook, romantic yet curiously detached.

Richard Long, on the other hand, spent his student days at Saint Martin's embarking on a continuing involvement with natural landscapes. One of the very first artists to seize on the land as a legitimate working material, he also proved to be the most sensitive and consistent practitioner around. Each of his excursions, so inventive in their versatility, was rigorously attuned to the demands of the site in question. Whether based on cycling,

walking or creating primal shapes out of pebbles, seaweed, stones, grass and pine-needles, his understanding of his selected locations was always poetically apparent. The works assumed a number of forms: maps inscribed with diagrams of the patterns set up by Long's activities, photographs of outdoor installations subsequently eroded or washed away and pieces made specifically for exhibition in a gallery. They could not be quieter or more meditative in their effect, but the pervasive mood of isolationism continually aroused adverse criticism.

So did the exploits of other young artists, most of whom were also included in the Hayward Gallery survey. Hamish Fulton, another land worker, concentrated almost exclusively on photographing natural scenery, its moods and changes of season. David Dye conducted an exhaustive and precisely considered investigation into the potential of film as a preserve for art. Keith Arnatt was a wide-ranging enquirer who employed sly wit as well as philosophical astuteness in order to define his own intentions as an artist. And John Hilliard, an ex-sculptor, utilised the manifold possibilities of photography to chart his fascination with the metamorphoses an image can undergo.

Women artists were far less prominent at this time, but in 1973 Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt and Mary Kelly began collaborating to produce a powerful blend of documents and gritty images called *Women and Work*, exploring the division of labour with outstanding feminist drive. In the same year Michael Craig-Martin made a landmark work by placing an ordinary glass of water on a glass shelf. The title of the piece was, provocatively, *An Oak Tree*. Craig-Martin's accompanying text argued with cool irony about his right to 'change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water'.

However cool and overtly methodical most of these artists appeared, they were all in their separate ways setting out to ask one fundamental and profoundly unsettling question: what can a work of art be? In that sense, therefore, they were united in a critical activity, and this aspect was developed by possibly the most misunderstood and controversial artists of all: the Art & Language group. Centred on a regular publication containing essays by Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge, Harold Hurrell and other affiliated parties, Art & Language employed the weapons of philosophical debate to substantiate their belief that art theory could itself be considered as a work of conceptual art. They were dedicated to a thorough re-examination of the traditional idea that art was

basically a visual medium, and every assertion they made was bolstered by a framework of consideration which used to be elaborated by the critic alone.

Both they and other highly intelligent artists such as Victor Burgin and John Stezaker, who likewise dealt with verbal propositions, defined their own terms of reference even as they made a work of art. The two elements became indivisible, thereby offering a direct challenge to a writer such as myself, still cast in the role of explainer and assessor. That is why I scrutinised the broad direction taken by the contributors to the Hayward *New Art* show with the closest attention. In my *Evening Standard* review, I predicted that 'the exhibition is bound to attract heated controversy, particularly from visitors who expect to find at least a token section adhering to the old tradition of painting and sculpture'. But I insisted that the show 'constitutes the kernel of all the finest avant-garde art created here over the past few years', made by very individual artists who nevertheless 'share a common wish to move beyond hallowed categories into activities involving a wide spectrum of alternative materials'. As a result, contemporary art was liberated in so many ways, and this exhilarating freedom continues to stimulate the most adventurous practitioners today.

Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979 is at Tate Britain from 12 April to 29 August and is curated by Andrew Wilson and Carmen Julia.

Richard Cork is an award-winning art critic, historian, broadcaster and exhibition curator. His reviews of the period covered in this article can be found in his book *Everything Seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s*, published by Yale in 2003. His most recent books are *The Healing Presence of Art 2012* and *Face To Face: Interviews With Artists 2015*.

Follow this exhibition further with an exclusive feature by curator and art historian Lynda Morris for the Tate Etc. app and on our website. Morris, curator of the 1972 exhibition *Book as Artwork* and later founder of East International, worked at the ICA and Nigel Greenwood Inc Ltd and collaborated with many of the key conceptual artists and figures active at the time, and gives Tate Etc. her reflections on what shaped conceptual art in Britain.

VOLUME I NUMBER I		MAY 1969
Art-Language		
<i>The Journal of conceptual art</i>		
Edited by Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, Harold Hurrell		
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First issue of *Art-Language*, published
May 1969

John Hilliard,
Newspaper Room 1969,
photographed at the
artist's home and studio
in Dartmouth Park,
north-west London,
50.8×50.8cm

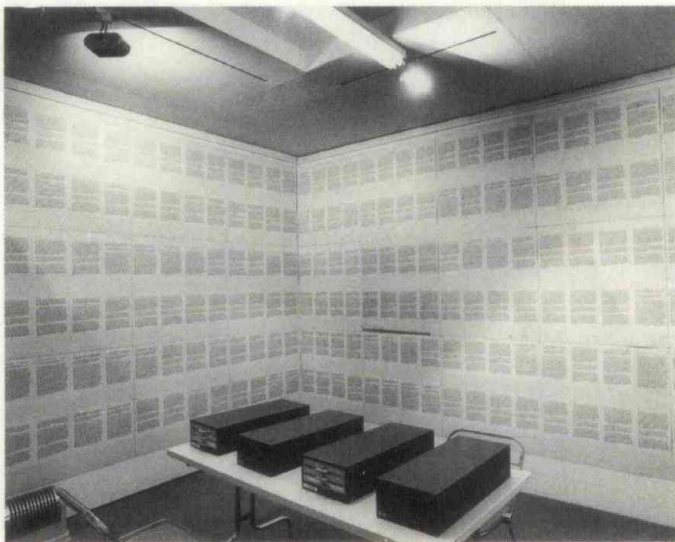




Keith Arnatt,
Liverpool Beach
Burial 1968, 35mm
colour slide



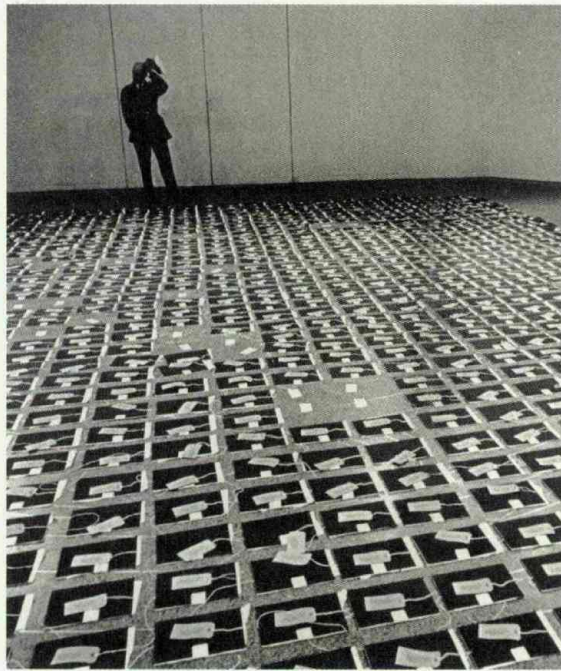
Installation view of Art & Language's *Index 2*
(III) 1972 at the exhibition *Art & Language:*
Flags for Organizations, Lisson Gallery, 1978



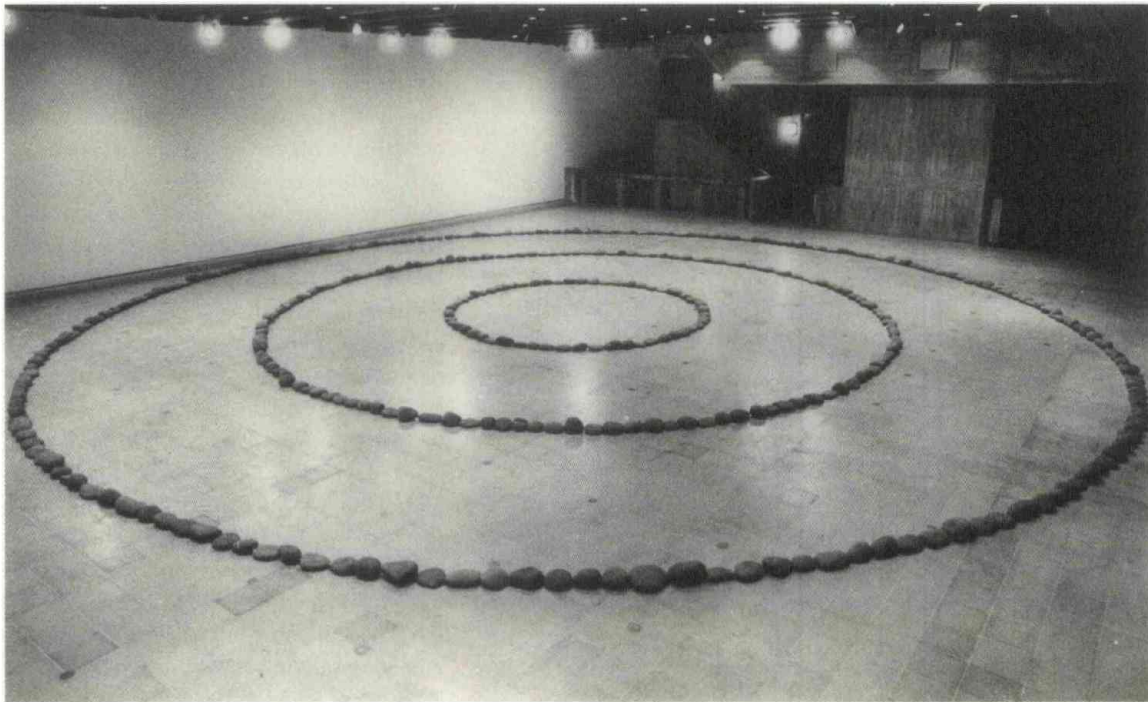
Mary Kelly, *Analysed Markings and Diary Perspective Schema* (*Experimentum Mentis III: Weaning from the Dyad*) from the series *Post-Partum Document* 1975, 13 works of graphite, crayon, chalk and printed diagrams, mounted on paper, 36 x 58.3cm



A perplexed museum guard studies Bruce McLean's *King for a Day* 1969, a typed list of proposals for works realised and unrealised, laid on the floor at his one-day retrospective of the same name at Tate, 1972



Barry Flanagan,
ringn '66 1966, sand,
dimensions variable



Richard Long's *Three Circles of Stone* 1972 installed at *The New Art*, Hayward Gallery, 1972



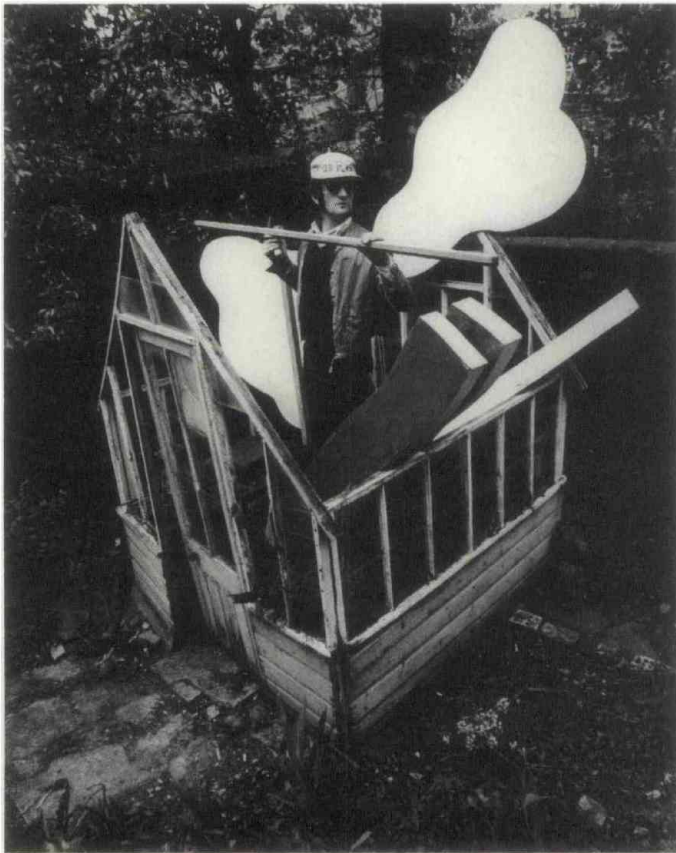
John Hilliard, *Ride* 1968, steel and fibreglass, painted blue and grey, photographed in the artist's back garden, Dartmouth Park, north-west London



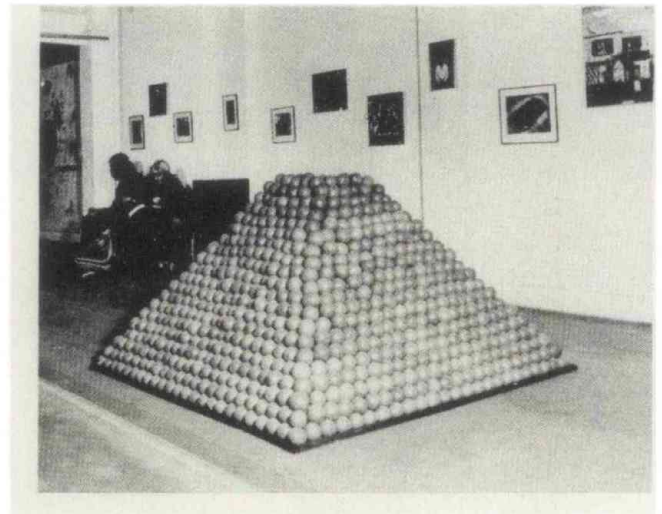
Gilbert & George,
Singing Sculpture 1969,
living sculpture, staged
at Nigel Greenwood
Inc Ltd, 1970



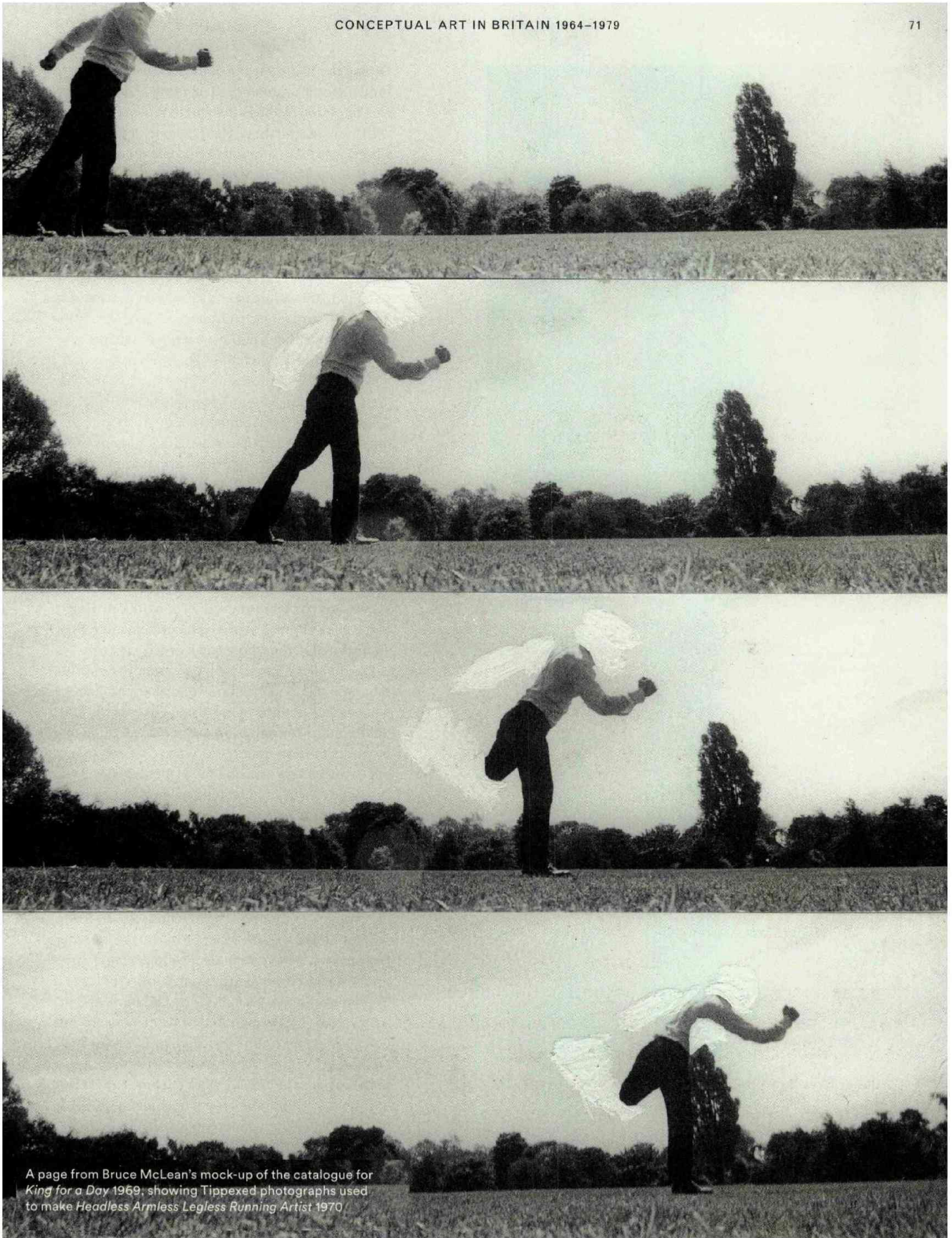
John Latham, *Skoob
Tower Ceremony*, South
Bank, London, June
1966. Among those
present were Ivor
Davies, Barry Flanagan
and Gustav Metzger,
who intended the
event to publicise
his Destruction in Art
Symposium planned
for September 1966



Bruce McLean,
People Who Make Art
in Glass Houses 1969



Roelof Louw, *Pyramid (Soul City)*
October 1967, 6,000 oranges,
152.4 x 167.6 x 167.6 cm



A page from Bruce McLean's mock-up of the catalogue for *King for a Day* 1969; showing Tippiexed photographs used to make *Headless Armless Legless Running Artist* 1970.

Art Monthly
February 2015

Art & Language: Nobody Spoke

Lisson Gallery London 14 November to 17 January

The title of Art & Language's current show, 'Nobody Spoke', refers, according to A&L veteran Michael Baldwin, to 'the embarrassing silence that punctuates the disjointed sound of many voices'. The exhibition, then, may be regarded as a moment of awkwardness, a void, or a refusal to accept an established trajectory or belief. Baldwin's remark is embedded within an engaging dozen-page discussion between A&L and Joanna Thornberry in the accompanying catalogue, in which the theme of the plurality of voices, including, a bit clumsily, the 'voice' of the artwork, takes a prominent role. A&L seem to be suggesting, both in this printed exchange and through the structure of the exhibition itself, that such Bakhtinian pluralism may be a necessary counter-strategy to the hyper-reductive readings so prevalent in contemporary art – readings not only of specific works but also of the idea of what reading itself might entail being of vital concern in A&L's practice generally. Here, Baldwin refuses to give Thornberry's question about the relation of A&L's writing to their studio work a tidy reply, supplying instead an ambivalent but cognitively acute response: in the world of A&L, neither the material artwork nor the accompanying – if sometimes cogently abstruse – textual infrastructure takes the primary role. Meaning is made manifest (so A&L's multi-material approach implies) within, around and across the various collisions, overlaps and cunningly constructed lacunae that comprise their practice.

The work in the gallery is divisible into several distinct parts: a quartet of paintings collectively titled *Sea Ghosts*, all 2014; an installation of 17 chairs and a PA system, *Nobody Spoke*, 2013-14; a large number of framed *Drawings from the Winter*, 2012-13; and sixteen *Portrait Vitrines*, 2014. The pieces all exhibit certain family resemblances with earlier bodies of A&L work, and again the catalogue discussion, in which Baldwin and fellow A&L collaborator Mel Ramsden describe much of what they produce as 'indexes', anchors their studio production to specific critical concerns, nonetheless leaving room for (and indeed unable to prevent) wider, perhaps less desirable interpretive accounts. As Ramsden notes, 'an index has a past and the past of [a given] work is the kind of practice that we engage in ... An index also has a future

and what that future is ... could be anything'. The double pull of the philosophical notion of indexicality is put to good use here, foiling militantly misrepresentative accounts of A&L's work while paradoxically assigning it a somewhat open future.

Recognition of the artwork as index is imperative if one is to counter the view that the newer A&L work merely rehashes the old, as opposed to provocatively redescribing it. A number of what appear to be the same or similar chair pieces to those in the current display were on view at the Lisson in 2010. In their present incarnation as *Nobody Spoke* they constitute a half-bleak theatre of absent individuals, each chair fabricated from a combination of ten idiosyncratic canvases, with the entire 17 chair set-up cleverly providing a complex assemblage of infinitely rearrangeable pictorial fragments from A&L's extensive oeuvre. A&L has itself developed *Nobody Spoke*'s further potential in a script written for, and performed with and around, this work by the group's occasional collaborators, The Jackson Pollock Bar.

The departure point for the anagrammatic *Sea Ghosts* is the 1988 *Hostages*, paintings referring through their muddy, pompously incompetent paint surfaces to the aleatory colour alignments of the artist's palette. As with these earlier pieces, the *Sea Ghosts* contain tenuous but effective internal frameworks made of inserted strips of tightly painted patterns, frequently quoting the interior décor of New York's Whitney Museum. But the *Sea Ghosts* also betray their heightened satirical import when one recognises that the loose blobs of paint forming the majority of the works' surfaces have been further overlaid with a stylised, cartoonish rendition of daubed paint, destroying the initial illusion that they are nothing more than scaled-up versions of actual, aesthetically indifferent artist's palettes.

The *Portrait Vitrines* vaguely echo the filing-cabinet format of A&L's *Index* 01, 1972, itself an allusion to minimalist sculpture.

Each thin vitrine holds a single sheet of text, ostensibly a portrait of a public figure. These texts are placed four or five feet from the ground under shiny plastic or glass through which it is possible, but difficult, to read each one. One way to do this might be by using the gallery's wall-mounted security camera to zoom in on the details of the details; with Art & Language, scrutiny of the bigger picture is a key concern. ■

PETER SUCHIN is an artist and critic.



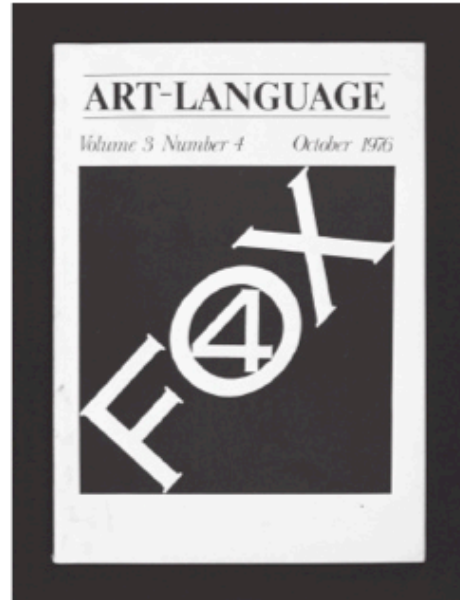
Art & Language
Nobody Spoke 2013-14

ON ART, LANGUAGE AND CONSECUTIVE MATTERS



(A)

(A) Lawrence Weiner, As Long As It Lasts, Euronast, Rotterdam, 1993. Courtesy: the artist



(B)

(B) Art-Language, Vol.3 No.4, October 1976

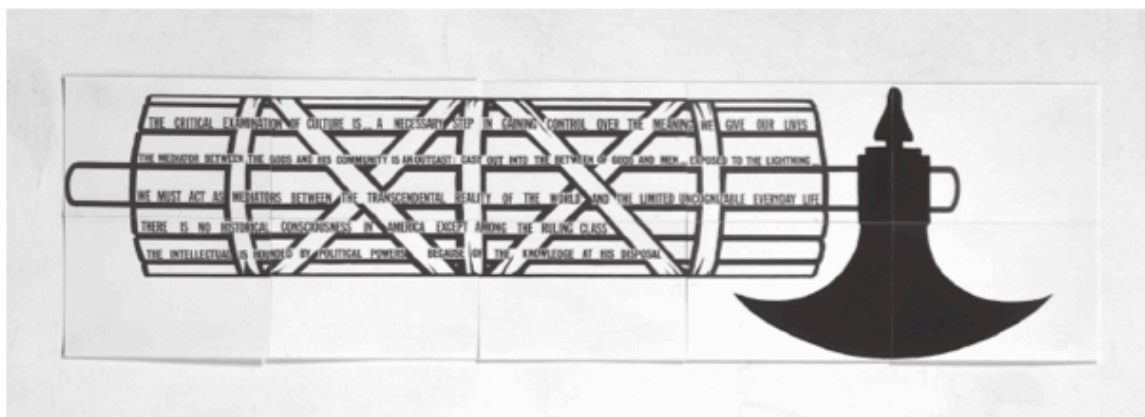
(C) Dana DeGiulio, I Think That I'm Bigger Than The Sound, 2011. Courtesy: the artist

(D) Art & Language, Ten Postcards, 1977. Courtesy: Lisson Gallery, London



(C)

(D)



The history of contemporary art is paved with collisions between art and language. Julian Myers gathers and interprets them, starting with the rejection of language of Greenberg, passing through the speech bubbles of Pop and the circumlocutions of Conceptual, all the way to the reversal of modernist positions with the assumption of language in favor of the image. The author examines, in particular, the work of Art & Language and of Dana DeGiulio to demonstrate the fertility of this endless antagonism.

ENG

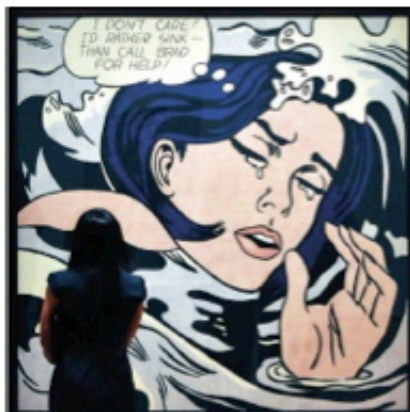
BY JULIAN MYERS

The antipathy to language amongst the modernist avant-gardes is legendary. Take for example the kamikaze attacks on 'the language that journalism has abused and corrupted' described in Hugo Ball's diary of his years in the Cabaret Voltaire, *Flight Out of Time*.¹ Or, to invoke another paradigmatic example from a different place and time, recall the critic Clement Greenberg's epochal description of everything good art was not, in his 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch": in his account, capitalist kitsch had commenced to looting existing cultural traditions for "devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, [and] themes" and repurposing them as sales apparatus.² The only way to preserve what was still worth saving was to reject such story-telling devices and to embrace the "plastic values" of Picasso and others like him. To silence or pulverize language: this was one great task of the best art of the modern period, and even a cursory look at the writing of these men will suggest just how impossibly difficult, how imperiled and imperiling, such undertaking was taken to be. To be successful meant defying capitalist modernity as such.³

Today this prohibition has long since been lifted, and with it, the claims for the critical value of artistic resistance to or withdrawal from language. Confronting an exhibition of contemporary art, one traverses language in multiple orders: from words quoted, spoken, spelled out, or depicted in the field of the work itself, to the narratives, theories and histories that structure its approach, to many forms of linguistic framing and evaluating (publicity, wall text, titles, critical discourse, and so forth) that attend to any artwork in the present. A genealogy of these transformations is beyond the scope of the current writing, but it might begin from the word balloons of Richard Hamilton and Roy Lichtenstein, and the circumlocutions of vari-

Roy Lichtenstein,
Drowning Girl, 1963,
MoMA Collection,
New York

Right – Art &
Language, *Ten*
Postcards, 1977.
Courtesy: Specific
Object / David
Platzker, New York



ous forms of conceptual art and intermedia practices in the 1960s (the former addressed, for example, by Hal Foster in *The First Pop Age*, while the latter developments are detailed in recent writing by Liz Kotz and Eve Meltzer, among many others).⁴ Contemporary prac-

tices under the sign of art and language would seem to draw the square root of these once-disparate genealogies, into something like a critical pop-conceptualism, whose expansive boundaries would include practices as varied as **Claire Fontaine**, **Fia Backström**, **Jonathan Monk**, and **Ron Terada**, to name just a few.

What is fascinating is the way that the political valence of language seems to have been inverted from the modernist argument I've sketched above: now, it is not language but *image* that is to be regarded with suspicion. Language is understood to be instrumental: it enters the picture as information—archival, educational, or documentary—troubling the ideological suture of a consumerist cult of images; it appears as a democratizing agent, immediately legible, whereas pictures are subject to flights of bourgeois fancy or obfuscation; or art becomes language, absorbing, miming, and correcting the slogans that permeate popular culture (**Lawrence Weiner's** *As Long As It Lasts*, 2009; Monk's *Neon Piece*

Claire Fontaine,
*Is Freedom
Therapeutic?*,
2009. Courtesy:
the artist and
T293, Naples/Rome



Right - Ron
Terada, *You Have
Left the American
Sector*, 2005,
installation
view, Musée d'art
contemporain
de Montréal,
2006. Courtesy:
Catriona Jeffries,
Vancouver



(*Until Then If Not Before*), 2007; Claire Fontaine's *Is Freedom Therapeutic*, 2011; and so on). Language is assumed to be vulnerable to artistic interruption or redirection, in a way that images now are not. But what accounts for this reversal of tactic? An answer would at least need to entertain the possibility that contemporary art, like other forms of social labor, is today produced "through language and means analogous to linguistic performance"⁵—and that this means not a reversal in language's fortune or effects but something more like a capitulation.

Instead let me pose a different question, and see where it might lead. How might art play, aesthetically and politically, on the difference between the orders of attention that are reading and looking? I'll point here to a couple specific cases. **Art & Language**—which for several years was essentially the name for a sprawling "social ecology" among dozens of artists and writ-

ers about the nature of art and the possibilities for collectivity, carried out in the journal *Art-Language* and in exhibitions alike—had, since their inception in 1968, produced perhaps the strongest claim for the temporary displacement of what they called “first-order” visual art by a “second order” discourse in linguistic form. “[N]otes, diagrams, ‘drawings’ and speculative jottings” of a highly informal nature were submitted to the form of exhibition, and sometimes, ambiguously, assigned the status of “works of art.”⁶ This was the subject of much agonistic debate within the group itself: “the problem of the ontological status of pieces of paper,” as they later referred to these disagreements.⁷

And so when, after a fractious meltdown amongst the group in 1977,⁸ members Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden elected to continue under the name *Art & Language*, their production shifted in turn back towards images. While later works like the *Portraits of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (1980) would inhabit more confidently the ontology of “first order” work, with autonomy and expressive meaning ratified by the group’s internal discourse, transitional works of the late 1970s such as the *Ten Postcards* (1977) and *Flags for Organizations* (1978) inhabited an intriguing no man’s land between slogans borrowed the group’s debates, and the iconography of a then-degraded Socialist Realism: “Canadian troops prepare to flush out Semilogists whose ideological resistance was of particular importance in slowing down the drive towards Rome.” Irony and a deflated self-mythology ricochet between art and language, such that neither conforms to its familiar ideological shape.

Another anxious collision of art, politics and language is enacted in recent works by the Chicago-based painter **Dana DeGiulio**. Language is often called up in her work to regulate, reframe, or negate the abstract struggle happening in the rectangle of the work—as if the painting itself suddenly abandoned its silent objecthood to blurt out its purpose, or to abort her painting’s careful mounting up of gestures on the work’s field. And then there is the entanglement of abstraction and language in the work DeGiulio installed at Peregrine Program, Chicago, in late 2011, for the group show of her artists’ collective *Julius Caesar*, titled (after Thomas Hobbes’ description, in *Leviathan*, 1651, of life as the “war of every man against every man”) “Nasty, Brutish and Short.”

Balanced between the floor and the back wall of the gallery space, were three painted objects in tense relationship, each half-obscurer the next. Farthest back was a white canvas with modulated grey marks, pulling (from what the viewer could see) horizontally from left to right, as one might read a page of text. In front of it, blocking the top part of the previous work’s field, was a found protest sign, composed of red spray-paint on the surface of a hand-cut paperboard; its message, protesting collaboration with the authoritarian Rwandan president, decried, “NO USA AID TO KAGAME.” Mounted on the surface of the sign was another abstract painting on panel by DeGiulio: grey-green and white marks atop a rough, tentative black field—though, caught in this fraught syntax of objects, the little painting’s subtleties were invisible. Instead it appeared as a black monochrome, as dramatic and declarative an act of utopic vandalism as Malevich’s famous square.

At stake in DeGiulio’s artwork was a difficult play between abstraction’s muteness—and here her painting seems to want to evoke, and perhaps to renew, the

intense, protective, inward, self-contained object-hood that the modernist avant-gardes so often aimed to achieve—and the alienating reductions of the sign's sloganeering, sandwiched contentiously between her two paintings. The sign's purposeful energy besieged the paintings, which came to seem by comparison too careful and delicate (the white painting behind) and too rudimentary (the black one in front)—a diffident pair in light of a ferocious political statement that blocks the one and overwhelms the other.

But language didn't ultimately win out. The resistance was in the ensemble: first in the obstructions and cancellations it enacted against abstraction and political speech, art and language, both; and then in the relations it called into view, of "art" imperiled and relativized by the work's confounding aggregation of figures: the internationalist, neoliberal state, the controversial third world leader, and the coded recollection of art's own utopian-imperial ambitions in the form of the black rectangle. This is to say that DeGiulio's work recognized (in its form) the historical drifts of art and language, "plastic values" and the linguistic turn, in the last century—and found in their continued antagonisms and mutual pressure, "a critical distance for the viewer with which to evaluate both moments, both formations."⁹

"We did not see our 'work' ('art work') as presenting us with results independent of the more untidy practices (arguing, theorizing)... 'Language' wasn't a new kind of paint, a gimmick, or a transcendental good idea, it was simply a necessary competence."

—Art & Language, 1979

"In 1969 we published in *Art-Language* some little works by our dear friend Lawrence Weiner. Lawrence Weiner's work at that time—he was a poet, he was a painter, but he produced this work which was essentially small, typed fragments of a sort of quasi-English. Larry has not developed discursively. The way that the work has developed is to increase in size and ornamental value. Now, the one thing we would not imagine was natural to [Art & Language's productions from the same period] was that it should, as it were, be developed in an equivalent or analogous way. That it would suddenly acquire an ornamental value and an institutional value that robs it of its internal complexity. I guess that's one thing I would say is not possible. But when he's dead and I'm dead, who the hell knows? You could take any of those little documents and blow them up to a certain scale, or manipulate them in some way, so as to produce endless institutional embellishments. Of course you could do that. It would of course involve the return of Mel and myself from our graves to haunt and murder the sleep of anyone who did that."

—Art & Language, as spoken to Radio Web MACBA, 2011

Notes

1. Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: a Dada Diary* (edited and with an introduction by John Elderfield). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996: 71.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1981, 1989: 10. Originally published in *Partisan Review* 6, 1939.
3. This account is obviously telegraphic, omitting for example Ball's own particular approach, which, in pulverizing language aimed to reconstitute it, as a redemptive, ancient-modern ur-tongue; still, the general story, I think, stands.
4. See Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age*. Princeton: University Press, 2012; Liz Kotz, *Words*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999: 22.
5. This is Michael Hardt's felicitous summary of Christian Marazzi's *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy*. In his introduction to that book. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008: 8.
6. Charles Harrison and Fred Orton, *A Provisional History of Art & Language*. Paris: Editions E. Fabre, 1982: 28-29.
7. Harrison and Orton, *A Provisional History*, 58.
8. See Chris Gilbert's account of the tumult in "Art & Language, New York, Discusses Its Social Relations in 'The Lumpenheadache'," Michael Corris, ed. *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 327-341.
9. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900*.

CultureCritic talks to Art & Language...

Upon the opening of the new Art & Language exhibiton at the Lisson Gallery, Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin sit down with CultureCritic to discuss portraits, party chains and 40 years of collaboration.

Where does the humour in your work lie, if at all?

MEL RAMSDEN: Some of the pretensions of art are funny. It's not difficult to make them funny.

MICHAEL BALDWIN: We've been around for such a long time and the same fatuous drivel passes for criticism and artspeak, the same rubbish and substitute for thought has passed muster in the murmurings of the art world since we began. Not that we ever lampoon it particularly, except in literary circumstances, but the fatuities and vacuities of artspeak are in some regards targets, in limited ways.

There's always an element of hidden or residual black, or even not-so-black, humour in putting the viewer in a difficult, rather deflating or alienating position. If you put someone in a position where genres appear to be working against one another, and the viewer has no hope of settling in relation to the work, you're setting them the task of trying to settle, or of wondering why they're failing. Because there's that work to do, there's a slight risk that the viewer has to take if they're going to engage with the work, and there's going to be a possibility of making an absolute tit of yourself in relation to it. And there's a possibility equally that the work has made a tit of itself. In any work that's a little bit difficult.

The idea of making a tit of yourself – that's a position you are not unafraid of, but interested in...

MB: Well, there are tits and there are tits... or to get away from this term, there are idiots and there are idiots. We're not afraid to take a chance and risk failure. But that's not quite the same as making a public spectacle of oneself. There's nothing exhibitionist about us at all. In fact, if anything, that exhibitionistic convention that some artists feel compelled to subscribe to makes me feel sick. I think it's largely a substitute for having any ideas or doing any work that's worth bothering with.

There's certainly a sense in which we seek to work in a relatively dark place so that we can fail, and sometimes we've made a public confession of that failure. As for other forms of exposure, we often play with seeming to be exposed when we're not. We sometimes get involved quite directly in academic performance and circumstances, writing articles and texts in relatively serious publications. Not art world publications, which are very rarely serious. And we occasionally make some sorts of truths about ourselves in these circumstances rather uncomfortable. We think it is important that as artists we can chance our arms and fail. And sometimes show the world what the failures look like.

MR: There are two of us and sometimes there's a limit to the plausibility of professionalism. It can be done, but we tend to look at each other and 'kill each other's pits', as we used to call it – constantly inflating and deflating each other. We used to think the relationship between the two of us makes another person, and that other person is a woman.

MB: Or, as we used to describe it, a difficult woman.

The title of this exhibition comes from a late Jackson Pollock painting, *Portrait and a Dream*, from 1953. It was considered to be demonstrative of his downward spiral. What does it mean to you?

MB: The classic all-over Pollocks are certainly the most famous and probably the most engaging, interesting, satisfying and aesthetically sorted-out aspect of Pollock's production. But some of his failures, some of his attempts to live up to Picasso are nonetheless rather instructive and interesting, and suggest that the more obvious Greenbergian virtues of his work weren't necessarily that satisfying to him.

MR: I don't actually know anything about what Pollock did when he painted it, but it looks like it was two paintings done on a strip of canvas. And normally he cut them up, but this time thought, 'no, actually they look OK together.' That aspect of it is really interesting – the getting away with it, calling it *Portrait and a Dream* and getting away with it.

MB: The poetry of the title is somewhat adolescent, which makes it rather engaging. The work in our show actually does have a component in it that claims to be portraiture – the poster portraits. The portrait aspect, if you've worked it out, is that there are a lot of names on pages. But beware, only certain usages of proper names work as portraits. In certain grammatical circumstances they don't count, i.e. 'Of Fred' doesn't count as a portrait but 'Fred' does. Presumably, therefore, the paper chains, the grey celebratory items, are the dream.

Are the text pieces – the poster-portraits – in this show works from the 1970s that you wanted to revive or rejuvenate?

MB: No, the form may be from that time, though, good God, next week it could be the latest thing, and everyone will have forgotten people used grey bits of paper in the 1960s and 1970s. The texts on the wall in the show are fragments from published work of ours going back probably ten years.

It is probably worth speculating that one of the characteristics of the genre of textual conceptual art that emerged in the 1960s is that you don't have to read it, or to understand the language in which it's included, in order to have some experience of it. That would make a distinction between text as art and other genres such as literature or poetry, so it's actually quite an important point – how much of it do you need to read in order to have some engagement with it?

If part of the point of making the chains from the text is to bring the texts down low, why do you have the texts on the wall at the same time?

MR: Well otherwise we couldn't call it Portrait and a Dream. I suppose they could have been on another wall, or they could have been in a book. Look at the relationship between them. Are you sure that the things on the wall are the same as the things on the ceiling? Well, you'd better check.

MB: That's a little job for the viewer. They are, but in what order? And so on. You could actually spend quite a lot of time figuring out whether there's any connection. There are worse things to do on a wet Wednesday.

Are you treating your own works in the same way you treat historical works?

MR: Malevich's black square has a history in our work too. I think that that Malevich's black square is actually Michael Baldwin's 16 false Supremacist squares. That's what it's a reference to, rather than to Malevich. Of course the work from the 1960s had a direct reference to Malevich's black squares. However, I don't think we just 'go into' other people's work, except when we've used Jackson Pollock. We used him for a specific reason, however. Sometimes it sounds like we go around loving or appreciating great moments of art, whereas I think sometimes we just treat them like they're kind of junk.

MB: The postmodern dispensation has meant that more or less anything can be related to anything, and I don't think we have that approach at all. In the 1960s I was doing Malevich squares on the wall. At that time, a lot of research was involved in getting hold of anything about Malevich as he was by no means as fashionable then as he became. He was legendary in a certain way. Very little was shown because it couldn't be gotten hold of. So there are two narratives involved in this: first of all messing with the genre of the black square, a reductive icon, in the 1960s, and there is also the difference between how that looked at the time historically and how that looks now.

We are not by any means simple postmodernist rummagers. At the same time we are pretty handy with paste; we tend to tear off bits and bobs and glue them down in funny shapes and sizes. But treating our own work in the same way? That is and isn't true. Looking back at our own work is in part looking back at our own actions, but it would involve a bit of strain to claim that Malevich's black square has got anything to do with our action, although it has to do with our 'construction'.

I don't think that we're so deluded that we don't know the distinction between some act of borrowing from the outside and an act of borrowing from the inside. There are often fuzzy edges.

In the 1960s and 1970s Courbet was seen as a model of the avant-garde by some (such as art historian Tim Clark). Then in the 1980s his painting of female genitalia, L'Origine du monde, was taken on by Feminist discourse. This image appears in your show. What do you think it means now?

MB: I'm inclined to agree with Tim Clark, who thought Courbet was pretty good. He bloody well was. At the same time, we were actually involved in debates with him in the early 1980s. We've been involved in aspects of Courbet's work for all sorts of reasons. During the 1980s, L'Origine du monde was not available, it was in Lacan's shed, or consulting room, if that's what you could call Lacan's place of abuse.

Our interest in it was connected to an interest in the black square, and to our interest in portraiture, and an interest in the debate of the male gaze. We had written a libretto for an opera called Victorine in the early to mid 1980s which concerned a policeman who could not tell the difference between the forensic evidence of murder and images of nude women. One of the star turns in this was Victorine Meurent, who was a well-known model in Paris, for Manet and others. Our interest in L'Origine du monde was to do with its history of concealment, that's the important thing.

Our interest was in concealing it – both absolutely concealing it and not concealing it at all. We produced large, sometimes two-metre sized images which were covered in flesh-coloured glass. As a male viewer, you became rather exposed, as if you were trying to look at something that was not to be seen. In the centres of these large paintings we often would put a little greeting, 'hello', in order to supply this torso, this female pudenda, with a head, so that there was a virtual gaze engaging the male viewer who was busy trying to look at her bits.

Is the bush discernable?

MB: If you work hard.

And does the viewer have to be familiar with the image to make it out?

MR: Possibly, yes. I mean, tough...

MB: It's a pretty well-known image. It's a national treasure now in France – school children are trooped in to look at it. But its appearance as such is relatively recent, since something like 1995 when it was hung in the Musée d'Orsay.

What critical purchase can painting have now compared to what your texts were doing in the 1960s? Do you see a possibility for painting to put up that kind of resistance?

MB: You have to choose your paintings very carefully. One might argue that painting is simply one among the other products in the art cake.

MR: It's another readymade.

MB: And that could easily be true of painting that gets slightly fetishised, such as the work of Chris Ofili, which I think is absolute tosh. It's not interesting formally, it's generic stuff, and the fact that it's compulsory viewing – it's on the BBC – is good reason to regard it as that. Radio 4, that sort of thing, the middlebrow. The avant-garde is very middlebrow, but there is a sort of painting that can still have critical power, no doubt.

Our studio paintings from the 1980s referred to the modernistic conventions that coveted the authentic look associated with the idea of distortion and expressivity, and with male aggression. We painted these seven-metre-long pictures by mouth, on our hands and knees, so there was distortion inevitably. We got lost being so close to the work, so we were undermining any sense of male aggression – we were the opposite of Jackson Pollock pirouetting with a stick. We did write about it, but there's a certain sense in which dealing with an enormous painting and the bombast of its distortion confronts us with a strange kind of bathos. It certainly deflates any sort of confidence you can have in that whole discourse of expressivity and authenticity.

MR: We did those paintings ourselves in order to figure out some of these problems. And it's interesting that someone came to see us recently and asked: 'did you get someone else to do it for you?', a real 1990s or 2000s view. It absolutely shocked me that this person wasn't interested in productive relationships, but only in the thing as a stunt. Strange.

You have a self-imposed rule that you only make what you can yourself, is that right?

MB: It's not a fetish of craftsmanship, it's a way of limiting any sort of Wagnerian tendencies that we might want to exhibit. You have to remember, this sort of self-denying came to us quite a long time ago, when we began to realise that the very creature that we had helped breathe life into in the mid to late 1960s was now turning into something of a curatorial and managerial monster.

MR: We found out that we'd invented white-collar art...

MB: Quite a lot of post-minimalist art was made of very little, and unless that kind of work has some way of developing discursively, and developing a sort of complexity and an internality then the only way to go is on the Wagnerian route of making your little, rather gnomic phrases bigger and bigger or out of neon. That degeneration happened very quickly. So that self-denial came from a recognition, quite a long time ago now, that that was on the cards. The curator started to emerge. Again, conceptual art was one of the great opportunities for the ambitious and manipulative curator.

MR: That we did see coming.

MB: Now it's nothing to say that the curator and the artist are virtually interchangeable.

MR: We were in a show by Jens Hoffman in Lisbon in 2007, and all the work was so exquisitely chosen to embellish the curatorial role that what that show needed more than anything else was a fucking painting! But he couldn't choose such a thing. It made you long for a small, messy abstract painting.

MB: Our contribution to that show consisted of a painting whose text gave an ironical backward glance at some early work of his. We guaranteed the text on the painting, and adjacent to this guarantee was an endorsement of the initiative of this curator. In fact, it was an extremely intemperate denunciation of him as a little twerp. But that's a small joke in a small show.

Are there any other art forms that have fed into your work?

MB: French authors like Flaubert and Proust. One of my children is a scholar of this so I get to read about it a lot, and aspects of the discourse of that do bear upon my thinking quite powerfully. Certainly writers like Kafka and Joyce have meant a lot to us, Beckett equally. The observation in his play Endgame, 'if you're really in the shit, there's nothing left to do but sing', does seem singularly appropriate. And we've used Beckettian tones of voice in various ways, in this shift from a neutral exposition to something very slightly more menacing.

We write lyrics for a band called the Red Krayola, and have done so since the 1970s. But writing the lyrics for music is essentially a literary project. We do not have input to the music, it is a milieu that we're rather unfamiliar with. The music press is a rather distinct thing from the art press.

MR: And really fast. 20 or 30 reviews are on the Internet before the record has come out.

MB: People are often shamelessly opinionated, shamelessly ill-informed, but also sometimes extremely well-informed. It's a strange world.

MR: We released a record with the Red Krayola called Five American Portraits. One review said 'everybody should listen to this record at least once.'

MB: The purpose of the project with the Red Krayola is to produce records – that kind of simple, nice, cool thing. It's not a way for us to contribute to the genre of arty, art world band performance, because the Red Krayola has a reasonable career of performing at art world gigs, unhappily. Better really to be performing on the TV. [But] the chances of that are pretty remote...

MR: And the art world pays well. Better than ordinary venues.

What art do you live with?

MB: In the studio, there is a small Hogarth print, a self-portrait. We are not collectors in any sense. I understand why someone would be, but I think it's a rather dangerous thing for an artist.

MR: A lot of artists are.

MB: Good on them if they can stand it. I don't think I've got the strength to do it. If I start to collect then I start to see myself as exercising a certain taste and backing that taste with my money. Until he died last August, we worked really quite intimately from time to time on literary projects with a person who was a collector, and a very avid one. The sorts of shenanigans that he would get up to in order to get hold of certain things struck me as being very worrying. If you pile up that set of desires, can you think clearly about your work? I suspect not. Plus there were certain moral dimensions to it, which bothered me. I have, of course, lived with the thought that [our] work might be collected. It's a complete double standard.

How much time do you spend together?

MR: We work fairly regular hours, five days a week; we go home about 6.30 or 6.45. We don't live in each other's pockets though, we'd go mad.

If you hadn't have become artists, what would you have been?

MB: At grammar school I was being lined up to become a lawyer, probably because I could chat.

MR: My mother wanted me to be a typesetter because that way I'd always have a job, which is really funny because I actually wouldn't.

MR: I was going to be tramp.

MB: That could still happen.

Art & Language - Portraits and a Dream is on show at the Lisson Gallery, London until 27 February 2010. To see the latest reviews, [click here](#)