Introduction: An Invisible College in an Anglo-American World?

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Exasperated by the flood of generalities accompanying recent reconsiderations of the art of the 1960s and 1970s, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden — two artists who currently comprise the British group Art & Language — have characterized Conceptual art as “Modernism’s nervous breakdown”¹ and “the homeless art of the culturally displaced.” According to Baldwin and Ramsden, the most vivid and consequential legacy of Conceptual art remains its status as an art in exile. Conceptual art displayed a distinctive kind of formal hybridity and affected an attitude of malingering raised to the power of a cultural irritant. With a great deal of irony, Baldwin and Ramsden suggest that Conceptual art may yet be seen as “an exotic avant-garde variety of amateur art”; a critical practice that may somehow provoke the downfall of the artist.

The phrase “the artist out of work” — an expression initially prompted by conversations within the Art & Language group that took place in New York during the early-1970s — is another way of registering the fate of the Conceptual artist. Like the quip of Baldwin and Ramsden, it also has the virtue of saying something slightly scandalous and unexpected about the future of Conceptual art. More to the point, such comments were, and continue to be, calculated to place Conceptual art out of reach to those who seek to establish a decorous relationship between so-called conceptualist contemporary art and the not-too-distant past. (One motive for wishing to normalize Conceptual art stems from the functions, both pedagogical and public, that such accounts of art are expected to fulfill. For example, the pressure to turn the study of Conceptual art into a coherent university syllabus. We may yet wish to resist such expectations and the instrumentalities that litter their wake.) The phrase “the artist out of work” was not uttered in the spirit of solidarity with any realistically recoverable tradition of twentieth century artistic practice. Rather, it signaled a break and a kind of desolation. It implied that during the 1970s there seemed to be no work for the artist to do which was not circumscribed — that is to say, compromised — by the tenacious protocols of Modernist cultural legitimation. The artists who sought to advance beyond these protocols became victims of their own sense of paradigm shift. Conceptual art, which marked the paradigm shift was, for these artists, not merely a

reformation (or “dematerialization”) of the art object but a project for the transformation of artistic practice. And this, it seemed, entailed a shift away from the conventional processes of cultural legitimation.

It was argued by Art & Language that most of the “dematerializations” of the time were absurd reifications of discursivity, perfectly formed for co-option; that the prevailing discourse of modern art had been effectively emptied as a resource of artistic expression. In one view, to be an artist out of work did not give one the imperative or the freedom simply to move on — or away — to other professions or “real” political causes, but to face a real question of identity. Terry Atkinson, who had withdrawn from Art & Language by 1974, argued that “What is required in modern art are the logical heirs of Courbet, not the logical heirs of Duchamp, Picasso and Warhol. Art & Language has failed in many aspects of this requirement, but, as far as I know, it is one of the few art debates that encompass this at least as part of its consciousness. We all know we have to live with contradictions and paradoxa, not least of which is the way we earn our money, and if we cannot at least make these contradictions part of the work, and in an ideologically sophisticated way, we will fail utterly.”2 As Ramsden mused some years later, this path was fraught with difficulties: “to include yourself, your own position, and to regard that position as problematic is to invite the terrors of indeterminacy and uncertainty.”3 Clearly, this pain was to be the price of autonomy as an artist. Opposing voices in and around Art & Language in New York and Great Britain believed that the situation described by Atkinson and Ramsden obtained so long as their practice was defined in opposition to Modernist art. A more outward-looking practice, they argued, would enable artists to distance themselves from this dilemma, and finally from art itself.4

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2 Terry Atkinson in correspondence with Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, November 15, 1974.
4 Artists who had been associated with Art & Language during the 1970s and subsequently abandoned the art milieu for political activity of one kind or another or for academia include: Karl Beveridge, Jill Breakstone, Ian Burn, Carole Condé, Preston Heller, Michael Krugman, Andrew Menard, Philip Pilkington, Dave Rushton, and Paul Wood. A typical analysis from this standpoint, one which emphasized the limited social agency of art and art student activism, is found in Dave Rushton and Paul Wood, “Hovels and Palaces: 2,” Studio International, vol. 192, no. 983 (September/October 1976): 134-135. For a coruscating account by Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, Philip Pilkington, and Mayo Thompson of the coalition Artists Meeting for Cultural Change and the mass organization Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union — both of which figured prominently in the playing out of this conflict — see “Method 7.0 — AMCC and AICU,” Art-Language, vol. 4, no. 2 (October 1977): 66-81.
Art & Language continues to promote the view of Conceptual art as a practice that emerged unexpectedly out of a desire to resist a notion of professional competence in art.\(^5\) They assert that it had become increasingly apparent to a generation of artists coming of age during the 1960s that “art objects now depended upon a framework of supporting institutions.” This led them and others to the conclusion that “what was required was not so much ‘works’ as work on the circumstances of work.”\(^6\) The problem became a search for ways to “go on.” Working and talking with each other were a means to construct a discursive space at some ideological and social remove from the institutional order of what was then called “normal art.” The studio had indeed been transformed into something like a study,\(^7\) but what emerged did not necessarily function — could not be seen to function — as art. What was being fought over during the mid-1970s within and beyond the bounds of the Art & Language group was not simply the nature and function of, in Paul Wood’s words, an independent critical art. While some conceived Conceptual art to be “a guerrilla action against the powers that be,” others imagined it to be a sign that the basis for a radical cultural practice laid elsewhere. While both positions were contiguous with respect to Art & Language, one should hesitate from concluding that there was a necessary causal link between them. What these positions did share, however, was a common ancestor in the debates that defined the cultural politics of the New Left.\(^8\)

For Ian Burn — an important figure in Art & Language in New York from 1971 to 1977 — the experience of making Conceptual art seemed to be inseparable from a sense of anxiety, uncertainty, and crisis. Of course, politics was never far behind. A witticism emanating from England — “not Marx or Wittgenstein, but Marx and Wittgenstein.” — encapsulates perfectly the need felt by Burn and others to harness the analytical insights of the late-1960s to a socially

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5 The issue of specialization has to do with the arbitrary bureaucratic closure of talking and learning in and around art. It may be dressed up in any manner of respectable academic garb. Competencies remain insufficiently theorized. But this is not a function of their relationship to contingency. In a recent exchange, Art & Language reply that “in that sense art is, or rather is something, that seeks only to refuse or to make impossible the conditions of confident specialization. In this process questions of expertise and so forth get broken down.” Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, correspondence with the author, July 5, 2002.

6 Baldwin, Harrison, and Ramsden, “Memories of the Medicine Show,” p. 34.

7 “As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study.” Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” Art International XII, no. 2 (February 1968): 31.

self-conscious practice. (It also speaks to a healthy disregard towards academic models of interdisciplinary research.) In advance of the mainstream’s acknowledgement, by the mid-1980s, of the politicizing practices of a younger generation of so-called “Neo-conceptualists,” Burn explained how he had arrived at his position as a radical cultural worker from a career as a Conceptual artist. In a retrospective examination of Conceptual art, Burn argued that it should be located “in the broader crisis in American society.” Among others, the Conceptual artist, wrote Burn, “participated through a self-conscious struggle to resolve particular social issues in relation to their own means of production.” The symptoms of the crisis of the 1960s that were deemed by Burn to be most relevant to later developments within Anglo-American art were many and varied, and included “the deskilling of the practice of art,” “the decreased importance of the physical object,” “the devaluation of subject matter and recognizable imagery,” “the negation of the artist as subject,” “the commercialization of art,” “sexual and racial discrimination in art,” “the social disengagement of the artist,” and “the Americanization of art.”

These themes are thoroughly familiar now; they tend to read like a litany of comfortable certainties of Postmodern art. Nevertheless, when Burn reflected on the aftermath of the crisis in art and the legacy of Conceptual art, this was hardly the case. Then, at the beginning of the era of Reagan and Thatcher, the social and political aspirations ascribed to some of Conceptual art’s practices still had some bite. It was these aspects of Conceptual art, in danger of being erased altogether from historical memory, that Burn believed to be worth talking about and defending.

Burn’s conclusion is cold comfort to readers accustomed to an interpretation that historicizes Conceptual art in terms of a conceptualist present:

“For those who took the inevitable steps beyond Conceptual Art — and ventured outside the market-dominated avant-garde heritage — part of the understanding of the necessity of this was arrived at as a function of Conceptual Art and not despite it. The real value of Conceptual Art lay in its transitional (and thus genuinely historical) character, not in the style itself.”

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9 For a discussion of the conjunction in Art & Language of a Marxian analysis of the “point of production” and a Wittgensteinian stress on “language games,” see Michael Baldwin and Philip Pilkington, “Discursive Robinsonades” at http://blurting-in.zkm/de/e/discursive-robinsonades.


11 Ibid., p. 65.
By redescribing the moment of Conceptual art as a transmission belt rather than the foundation of a new kind of avant-garde art, Burn refused to view Conceptual art as a style or an instrumentality. The kind of cultural practice envisioned by Burn would no longer count as a work of art, Conceptual or otherwise. Nor did Burn imagine that a shift away from Conceptual art would necessarily entail a move towards the model of “activist art” or “conceptual engineering” practiced by Hans Haacke or the Artists’ Placement Group. Burn argued that while Conceptual art was a situated practice of critical import, once the impossibility of reconciling its internal contradictions was recognized, an individual would have no choice but to abandon the avant-garde altogether. For Burn, who “faithfully pursued the ‘straight’ political

12 Commenting on Hans Haacke’s controversial work of the early-1970s, one critic contends that the attack on art’s neutrality and the emergence of the critique of institutions was the result of “a more decisive shift in contemporary art . . . when artists broadened the concept of site to embrace not only the aesthetic context of the work’s exhibition but the site’s symbolic, social and political meanings as well as the historical circumstances within which art work, spectator, and place are situated” (italics mine). See Rosalyn Deutsche, “Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate, and the Museum,” in Brian Wallis, Marcia Landsman, and Phil Mariani (eds), Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), p. 22. The paradigmatic work by Haacke that signals this shift is “Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971.” Proof of its practical power as an ideological critique is demonstrated, it is claimed, by the fact that Thomas Messer — then director of the Guggenheim Museum, New York — cancelled a planned retrospective of Haacke’s work on the basis of its proposed inclusion in the exhibition. Slightly earlier, in Haacke’s so-called visitor polls — developed and exhibited mainly between 1969 and 1973 — the artist’s work can already be said to be moving in the direction described by Deutsche. “Around 1969,” writes Robert Morgan, “Haacke’s work began to be focused toward the spectators of his art rather than toward the observation and concomitant transformation of detached physical and biological data. . . . Haacke chose to incorporate the process of documentation into the actual viewing space; rather than removing the work from the spectator’s sense of ‘real time’ Haacke made the recording of information about the viewer an integral part of the space.” See Robert Morgan, Conceptual Art: An American Perspective (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1994), pp. 107-108. The interest in the social dimension of site may be said to be precursor to a far more “homeless” practice within the field of Conceptual art. Ian Burn and Hans Haacke’s approaches illustrate two ways in which the demand for autonomy voiced by Modernist art was challenged; the history of Conceptual art provides us with many more examples.

legacy of Conceptualism,” this would not have been a particularly easy decision to make. In the event, collaborative partners would need to be sought outside the milieu of art; precisely the path that Burn and others associated with Art & Language during the 1970s pursued.

In terms of the issues raised by the authors in this volume, two aspects of Burn’s practice of the late-1960s are worth reconsidering. The first is an emphasis on the socializing and pragmatic functions of language in terms of art. The second articulates Burn’s concern with what he and his co-participants in Art & Language took to be a diminished sense of seriousness or rigor within projects related to Conceptual art. Undoubtedly, the English journal Art-Language — which first appeared in May 1969 and to which Burn and Ramsden first contributed in 1970 — played an important role in articulating the debate on language and art. The journal was founded, in part, on the belief that art could be language-based and co-operative. Among its editors, Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin analyzed the frameworks of art in works of the late-1960s such as “Frameworks,” “Air-Show” and “Air Conditioning Show.” By linking art and language in this way, the social embeddedness of art became an object of inquiry and a potential site for critical intervention. In a text of 1970, Burn and Ramsden declared that Conceptual art had shifted the emphasis in art production from “single iconic elements (art-objects, art-works)” to a “whole continuum of these elements in a sign-process (semiosis).” This insight has much in common with sentiments, voiced by Atkins on and Baldwin as early as 1966, that had specifically addressed this point. Later, Victor Burgin, working in London during the early-1970s, took up a similar position on meaning in art as “not something which resides within an object but is a function of the way in which that object fits into a particular context.”

13 Mel Ramsden, “Ian Burn’s Excellent Adventure,” in Stephen, ed., Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn, p. 23. Burn’s political reading of Conceptual art unfolded over the course of several years and may be explained partly by his cultural situation as an Australian artist who had immigrated first to London, then to New York. The dialogue on regionalism that he so eloquently initiated with Ramsden and others who participated in Art & Language during the early-1970s stresses precisely the pragmatic and political aspects of certain kinds of cultural discourse. These concepts would be developed further during the later half of the 1970s as a space for cultural resistance and change. On the cultural contradictions that shaped Burn’s early work, see Art & Language (Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden), “Making art from a different place,” in Ian Burn: Minimal-Conceptual Work 1965-1970 exh. cat. (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 6 February – 29 March 1992), pp. 7-16. The relationship between Burn’s Minimal and Conceptual work of the 1960s-1970s and his paintings of the 1990s is discussed in some detail by Ramsden in “Ian Burn’s Excellent Adventure,” pp. 23-28.

14 For accounts of Burn’s cultural work of the late-1970s and 1980s, see the relevant texts in Stephen, ed., Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn. For Burn’s analysis of the demands on artists working with organized labor, see his “Artists in the labour movement,” in Ian Burn, Dialogue: Writings in Art History (North Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1991), pp. 140-151.

15 Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, Notes on Analyses, 1970.

While these statements summarize the beliefs of many Conceptual artists at the time, they do not define a majority view. It remained to be seen what sort of sustainable practice could be recovered from a critical attack on Modernist art. Citing the work of Benjamin Buchloh and Charles Harrison, Thomas Crow writes of “the ‘withdrawal of visuality’ or ‘suppression of the beholder’” as the crucial strategies of Conceptualism. These enabled artists to set aside the “presumed primacy of visual illusion as central to the making and understanding of a work of art.”

Before Crow’s analysis of Conceptual art, Buchloh had proposed a more radical interpretation of the place of language within it by claiming that “the proposal inherent in Conceptual Art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone (the work as analytic proposition).” Thus, for Buchloh, Conceptual art would remain “an art practice emphasizing its parallels, if not identity with the systems of linguistic signs.”

However, Conceptual art also developed by vigorously exploiting the social and pragmatic dimensions of language as the form of some of the world’s facts. According to Baldwin, it was principally through Art & Language’s breakthrough indexing projects that the group “sought to inflect linguistic meaning with questions from the non-linguistic part of the world.”

By Buchloh’s own admission the so-called linguistic definition of Conceptual art remains at best a partial description. For example, there is little evidence to suggest that work by Joseph Kosuth produced under the rubric “the work as analytic proposition” had much influence on the field of Anglo-American Conceptual art after 1970. On the other hand, Buchloh is correct to

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17 Thomas Crow, “Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art: Against Visual Culture,” in Modern Art in the Common Culture (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 213. Michael Baldwin points out that the phrase “suppression of the beholder” was coined by himself, not Charles Harrison.

18 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962 - 1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” in October 55 (Winter 1990): 107, 116. The genetic relationship of Conceptual art to the administrative processes that drive post-industrial capitalism remains a matter of contention, despite Buchloh’s assertion to the contrary. The point I wish to stress here is that mannered administrative processes — in Conceptual art practice this includes, among other activities, form-filling, the compilation of detailed inventories, the objectification of social and biological processes, and the obsessive repetition of routines or application of systems of production — are no longer administrative processes as such. This is the point that Buchloh fails to appreciate when he condemns some Conceptual art as complicit with the bureaucratized worldview of late-capitalism.

19 Michael Baldwin, correspondence with the author, June 24, 2002. In 1975, Ramsden compared indexicality to what “Walter Benjamin in the thirties called the ‘cult’ or ‘aura’ of the work of art (lost through ‘mechanical reproduction’ which destroyed situation and moved art to an object of consumption).” See Ramsden, “Hard-Line Brainstorm,” n.p. According to a recent summation by Baldwin and Ramsden, “the indexing project was inaugurated on the conviction that a (necessarily) complex internal discourse was perhaps the main condition of resistance a) to institutional power, b) to passive co-option by that institutional power and c) to the masquerade of artistic authenticity that is an ideological principle of institutional power.” See Michael Baldwin/Mel Ramsden, http://hosting.zkm.de/blurting/discuss/msgReader$428?mode=topic&y=2001&m=10&d=25.
emphasize that to attack the status of the art object through language invites a critical examination of “its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution.” These concerns were highly visible in the critical literature and in the writings of Conceptual artists virtually from the start. It would not be misleading to suggest that they were central to the sort of explicit political intervention discussed in fringe publications of the mid- to late-1970s like The Fox, Red-Herring, Left Curve, or Main Trend. For example, the ways in which ambiguity and contradiction are ruled out through various formal, technological, or semantic devices was a persistent topic of conversation in Art & Language during the mid-1970s. It alludes to an interest in the political writings of Noam Chomsky, which at the time stressed the relationship between language and political power. Writing in 1975, Ramsden argued:

“It is just this kind of community control that is the most insidious part of art-imperialism. Just rule out interference from context: this is essentially what Greenberg tried (to cite an obvious example). But all critics, since their remarks are alien to the work, try this out to a degree. One way of breaking the hegemony of such control situations is to say, well, the context, e.g., the community is different; your formal language doesn’t ‘make sense’ since we don’t have your rules of interpretation. I think this is one reason, the determination to look over new rules of context, that underlies the old ALUK [Art & Language in Great Britain] interest in translation problems. . . . it was part of the theoretical background through which Ian looked into all that stuff about provincialism and internationalism. The anarchic contradictoryness of getting context to impinge and interfere is not Guru Cagean aesthetics but an activist concern with decentralization as well as busting Imperialist hegemony ‘from the top.’ This is at least a large part of the motivation behind the shows currently in Melbourne and Adelaide. . . . It is I think very important to remember that some of the current ‘activist’ concerns are part of a deep theoretical thrust engendered by some of the older problems — translation to name one, formal languages, semantics, to name two others.” (Italics mine.)

Burn’s second line of inquiry — the perceived decline of seriousness in the discourse and practice of Conceptual art — invites one to draw a distinction between an art of powerful analytic purpose fashioned through relatively meager formal means and an art of excessive

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sensuousness, of mere “aesthetic confections,” produced by the “anachronistic daubing of woven fabric with colored mud, the chipping apart of rocks and the sticking together of pipes . . .”

Conceptual art is supposed to be the antithesis of “artyness” partly because it radically negates the visual pleasure of painting and sculpture. “It is necessary for me to chose a particular way at this time,” writes Kosuth in 1970, “which is neither ‘important’ in its own right, nor deliberately ‘unimportant’ in an arty manner.” In retrospect, it seems questionable to argue that Conceptual art was never involved with style, that language itself could guarantee the attainment of a condition of “stylelessness,” or to deny that at least some Conceptual art preferred to trace its origins back to visual poetry. Indeed, language was often discussed in terms of its opacity and its power to shatter, as much as shape, sociality. Nevertheless, Burn and other Conceptual artists were alert to the dangers posed by Conceptual art’s subsequent stylization, even if they preferred to downplay the genetic relationship of their art to the highly stylized Minimal painting and three-dimensional objects that preceded it, and alongside which it was often displayed.

Internal distinctions that were being drawn within the field of Conceptual art by Kosuth prompted Burn to reflect on the potential trivialization of an “analytic or strict Conceptual Art” by “work which is of a Conceptual appearance.” Analytic Conceptual art, notes Burn, intends “to devise a functional change in art,” whereas a stylized Conceptual art is concerned merely “with changes within the appearance of the art.” Unfortunately, the distinctions drawn by Burn and Kosuth were not sustainable and do not guarantee the desired result. The strategy of art making based on the notion of the “suppression of the beholder” constituted one possibility open to Conceptual artists in the mid- to late-1960s. Yet as far as Burn and Ramsden were concerned, Conceptual art was animated by a revisionist impulse directed towards the entire framework of art, not just the sort of object that might count as a work of art; “galleries, social convention, art

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24 In 1970, Kosuth defined Conceptual art as “an inquiry into the nature of art” that involves “a working out, a thinking out, of all the implications of all aspects of the concept ‘art’.” Again, it is Conceptual art’s subsumption under a model of language that rescues it from being “little more than a manufactured stylehood.” See Joseph Kosuth, “Introductory Note by the American Editor, Art-Language, vol. 1, no. 2 (February 1970): 3, 4.
25 Ian Burn, “Conceptual Art as Art,” Art and Australiá (September 1970): 168, 170; reprinted in Burn, Dialogue, pp. 125-130. Michael Baldwin writes “this distinction, while capable of being made, can get you into trouble. Often, it was and is a matter of emphasis. You could also say that a change in appearance will go to a change in function, and vice versa.” Baldwin, in correspondence with the author, June 24, 2002.
criticism and theory” were all open to change.\textsuperscript{26} Whereas Minimal art was thought to exemplify the accommodation of art to the physical and ideological space of the gallery and the museum, Conceptual art was portrayed as having the potential to challenge such an accommodation at every turn.

Burn’s elaboration of the notion of functionality in Conceptual art sounds like a justification for making art out of sparse means. Yet, it also prefigures how conversation might function in Conceptual art. Here, it is worth recalling the gathering crisis in Art & Language; a crisis which peaked in 1972 with the completion of “Index 001” and again, in late-1973, with the publication in New York of “Blurting in Art & Language.” In both cases, the work focused on the dialogical setting of the collaborative situation of Art & Language. Both projects were “activist” in the sense that they addressed the dualism characteristic of the normal encounter between art and spectator, or teacher and student.\textsuperscript{27} These and other projects attempted to redescribe the sociality of Art & Language in terms of a discursive map. As Burn pointed out in 1970, conversation — being external, social, and open to scrutiny — “creates an actual area of the work” that enables a viewer to participate in a dialogue that “gives the viewer a new significance.” The viewer becomes an interlocutor “involved in reproducing and inventing part of that dialogue.”\textsuperscript{28}

The work of Art & Language from the mid-1960s to the late-1970s demonstrated one way by which the social limits of art might be tested; it offered an alternative model for the politicization of Conceptual art that had nothing in common with art that aimed to represent or narrate contemporary political events. Burn’s declaration of Conceptual art as an artistic practice interrogating cultural norms was in marked contrast with other, less nuanced models of art practice that sought to explicate the social and political dimensions of art. Indeed, Burn stops short of advocating such a transparent political art, arguing that the empowerment of the artist can only come about through collective organization for managing the means of production and distribution of art. During the early-1970s, Burn, Ramsden, Kosuth, Terry Smith and others in New York who had engaged actively with the work of Art & Language in England stressed the “implicit political/rhetorical status” of all “art-participation.” They concluded, rather

unremarkably, that the political in art is a “necessary relation, not a contingently alien one.” One means by which some of these individuals sought to make their ideological concerns explicit was through the transformation of the gallery and the encounter of the spectator with art into something like a classroom scene; one where the experience of the viewer approximated that of “a learning situation.” 29 A salient feature of this sort of practice was how thoroughly it was able to frustrate and problematize the “natural” inclination of the spectator to approach the work of art as an object of contemplation or as the bearer of an unambiguous message. It was concerned with communication, but not how effectively it communicated a partisan political message. Burn’s memoir implies that Conceptual art had an important moral dimension; something that warranted a personal responsibility on the part of the artist to himself as well as to the viewer. Conceptual art served to resituate art in culture. It could possibly help to point artists in the direction of a deeper understanding of the embeddedness of culture in socio-economic, political, gendered, and ethnic realities. What is crucial to Burn’s early optimism concerning Conceptual art is the possibility that the subject position of the artist and the spectator remain open to revision.

The crux of the social dimension of Conceptual art, then, is how one interprets the presence and use of language in the field of Conceptual art. Burn, among others, did not share the view, attributed to Henry Flynt, that language served as the basis for a “kind of art of which the material is language.” Rather, it was reasoned that the pragmatic dimension of language would enable a Conceptual art with socializing potential. A form of art (perhaps leading to a generalized cultural practice, whatever that may be) that not only questioned the spectator position presupposed by late-Modernist art, but actively contributed to the constitution of a new type of spectator for art. This new type of spectator would be encouraged to play a more active, discursive role in the realization of the work: at first, metaphorically; later, in terms of the realization of cultural goals framed by an explicit political agenda. The artist, as well, would be implicated in this shift, which entailed a redescription of the sites of production and distribution of art. The revision of art education undertaken by Atkinson and Baldwin at Coventry Polytechnic in the early-1970s in collaboration with their students Philip Pilkington, Kevin Lole and David Rushton provided another, important model.

Ian Burn’s career exemplifies a Conceptual art practice that lays claim to the socializing power of language in art. It is, however, one version among many. The essays collected here deal with a broad range of social and political aspects or consequences of Conceptual art as they were articulated within the field of Anglo-American artistic practices of the mid-1960s through the late-1970s. These practices, while distinct and at odds with one another, may be grasped as a field of discourse on the limits of the social in art. In other words, the analysis of the social dimensions of Conceptual art — a major theme of the earliest British and Australian critical accounts of this practice and an increasingly prominent feature since the early-1990s in North American accounts — owes its greatest debt to the original writing and practice of the artists themselves. It is a discourse that was initiated through the work and writings of such diverse artists as Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke, and Adrian Piper, to name but a few. It existed uneasily alongside a heterogeneous field of cultural-political agitation, ranging from the demands issued by the Art Workers Coalition to the political theater produced by the Guerrilla Art Action Group. Within the North American discourse, the social dimension of Conceptual art was never far from view. Practices and interventions aimed explicitly at the social and institutional supports of art have haunted “mainstream” Conceptual art throughout its history. Yet, when the issue of the social dimension of Conceptual art is raised, it is usually done so in terms of political or activist art practices that are imagined to function as Conceptual art’s radical wing. The point here is not to create a canon of politicized Conceptual art; rather, to recover and explore some of the historical detail that speaks to the interactions and relationship between some Conceptual art, the institutions of cultural power, and a spectrum of positions of political engagement from liberal reformist views to ultra-left “revolutionary” programs.

With respect to historical Conceptual art, it seems increasingly difficult to argue for the view that its work and critical purpose was undertaken in anything but the name and spirit of art, albeit as an expanded category. Lawrence Weiner claims that his generation “made it clear that an artist was essentially a professional person within society who didn’t do anything but make

art.” Hans Haacke — who, like Weiner, prefers not to be described as a Conceptual artist — grounds himself firmly in the sphere of art. Haacke justified his work in galleries and museums based on a tactical understanding of the demographics of the art world public. “I believe,” he stated, “the public of the art world . . . is to a considerable degree identical with the segment of society that makes the decisions today, that determines what we think. If one has a bit of influence there, it might be of some importance.” In order to address this public and to advance the notion of art as use-value rather than merely exchange-value, Haacke “needs the commercial channels of the established art world — the galleries, museums, magazines, etc.” Haacke claims “if the work stayed outside this network nobody would get to see it. The issues it raises would not be talked about, and for all practical purposes it would not exist.” Haacke’s conclusion that one is in the “contradictory position of playing the game while criticizing it,” displays strong existential and political commitments.

Artists like Burn and Ramsden, eager to maintain a degree of autonomy in the face of competing claims for a socially relevant practice, severely criticized Haacke’s position. They concluded, rather painfully, that a critical interrogation of modern society demanded more than Conceptual art — or indeed more than any form of avant-garde art spectacle — could reasonably offer. By the early-1970s, it was becoming clear that an expanded field of artistic practice could not sufficiently distinguish itself from the market dominated avant-garde heritage and was well on its way to being swallowed up by the art establishment.

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Our understanding of the social context and political aspirations of Anglo-American Conceptual art has been altered irrevocably by recent work on the scope of so-called global conceptualism. What was once considered to be marginal to the concerns of European and North American

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34 See Mel Ramsden, “Review: Framing & Being Framed – or, Are We Going to Let Barbara Rose Away With ‘Dialectics’ This Year,” The Fox volume 1, number 3 (1976): 64-74.
35 Writing in the mid-1970s, Ramsden offered a view of the situation confronting artists that contrasts sharply with those voiced by Weiner and Haacke. The tone is appropriately hysterical and evangelical; it was meant to be a call to arms: “A paradox,” writes Ramsden, “is not a dilemma, nor is it a contradiction. With these latter two we can still choose. You choose one and lose or suffer the alternative. The result may not be exactly happy but the choice is still logically possible. A paradox is different, it totally bankrupts choice. Nothing is possible and a self-perpetuating oscillation is set in motion. Faced with our current situation, recognizing social realities, considering the way I want to act, paradoxes follow paradoxes. This is nothing new but it is increasingly leading to a kind of pandemoniacal despair. A moral anguish which so far I refuse to romanticize, but I will if it keeps me out of the loony bin.” Mel Ramsden, unpublished memo, 1976, unpaginated.
Conceptual art is now presented as the milieu in which Anglo-American Conceptual art is seen to be something of a special case. The inclusion of artists and practices outside a strictly Anglo-American axis is necessary for the presentation of a more complete view of the circumstances under which Conceptual art developed. However, in this volume, with few exceptions, the majority of artists, critics and curators under discussion lived and worked during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States (principally, in New York and Los Angeles), Canada, Great Britain and Australia. Such a relatively narrow geographic and chronological focus may well strike the reader as anachronistic, especially in comparison with recent, ambitious critical studies and exhibitions on Conceptual art and its legacy. In this discourse, one encounters persuasive arguments for not taking the Conceptual art produced during the mid- to late-1960s in Western Europe and North America as paradigmatic. Conceptual art is presented as a truly international tendency comprised of a variety of artistic strategies which, nevertheless, share at least two important characteristics: a profound scepticism towards the status of the object in art and a passionate disavowal of the constraints imposed by artistic tradition (or the State) on the formation of new relations between art and society. In my view, the Anglo-American focus presented here is not necessarily unsympathetic to the goals of the curators of an exhibition such as Global Conceptualism. What the reader will find in the present collection of essays is a treatment of the artistic milieu of New York City, for instance, as a local, specific environment rather than an imperial center radiating cultural lessons outwards towards a mute and subordinate margin. By way of puncturing the myth of New York’s arrogant supremacy during the 1960s and 1970s, one may point to the discourse on cultural imperialism and the dialogue that existed during this period between artists based in New York City and those living and working beyond the Pale of the institutional network of North America and Western Europe.

36 The inclusion of others — notably Hanne Darboven, the German artist who lived for a time during the 1960s in New York, and Harald Szeemann, an influential organizer of exhibitions of new art in Europe — is justified by the significance of their work to the Anglo-American artistic community as a whole.

37 One of the more important recent contributions to the discourse on the international and social dimension of Conceptual art is the exhibition “Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin.” The curators survey the production and circulation by Latin American, Asian, and Eastern European artists of ephemeral, contingent and highly politicized forms of avant-garde art. See Jane Farver, ed., Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin (Flushing, NY: Queens Museum of Art, 1999). Such activities were not entirely unknown to artists and critics working in New York City during the 1960s and 1970s. Examples of such practices were represented in Kynaston McShine’s 1970 exhibition “Information” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and documented by Lucy Lippard in her 1973 collage-anthology Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972.

Early Anglo-American Conceptual art — from the mid-1960s to the moment of cultural ratification in 1972 at Documenta V — was frequently elaborated in terms of the possibilities of an art without conventional objects, readily identifiable authorship, or the need for conventional means of distribution. These aspirations were plausibly radical up to, perhaps, the end of the 1960s. They were supposed to lead to a transformation of art and culture, not the creation of a new class of cultural managers who happened to promote and distribute Conceptual art.

Historically, it is not the case that all Conceptual artists were convinced of the necessity to rupture the boundary between art and culture or, more precisely, between linguistic signs and iconic signs. In some critical contexts, at least, it seemed far more pressing to defend Conceptual art as serious art, rather than yet another tedious version of anti-art, a herald of the dissolution of art into life (as Lucy Lippard asserted at the time), or an adjunct to class struggle. This was made abundantly clear by Charles Harrison in his “Notes towards art work,” where he argued that to do otherwise would be to evade a confrontation with Clement Greenberg’s concept of Modernism. Harrison links the withdrawal of visual interest from art with the condition that Conceptual art remain in an art context. Conceptual art presents an open challenge to contemporary habits of professional art criticism precisely because it resists the prising apart of its idea from its means of presentation. When Harrison asserts “art now has no object in view,” he is asserting that the negation of the object — by which he means its diminished sense of importance in art — is a type of withdrawal associated with an act of resistance. This description of the significance of Conceptual art is at some remove from other critics’ interpretation of that practice in terms of its social meaning or engagement with media, mass culture, or technology. “Some withdrawals,” Harrison points out, “are more operative than most engagements.”


40 Johanna Drucker’s definition of information as input prised apart from output is analogous to Harrison’s description of the action of the typical art critic. See “The Crux of Conceptualism: Conceptual art, the Idea of Idea, and the Information Paradigm,” p. 00.

41 Harrison, “Notes towards art work,” p. 42. The notion of withdrawal as resistance has featured prominently in recent Art & Language texts, where it is expressed in the rhetoric of displacement and marginality: “The ‘theme’, if you like, of internal exile which is played out, no doubt upon the surface of cultural margins, is no more than worthless provocation unless it is the prospect of the annihilation of the artist herself . . . . This is exile which entails the derogation and loss of hard-won competence, not the promise of Napoleonic return and final triumph.” Baldwin, Harrison, and Ramsden, “Memories of the Medicine Show, part 2: We Aimed to be Amateurs,” p. 49.
The artists Barry Flanagan, Christine Kozlov, Ad Reinhardt, Victor Burgin, and Joseph Kosuth are cited in support of Harrison’s advocacy of negation and the ineluctability of the context of art, outside of which no art gesture or practice makes sense or is “operative.” Harrison’s judgement of art practices outside the frame of the art context is scathing: “Art is the only sure means of judging art . . . Art stays within the area of art . . . Pseudo-art continually aspires to non-art conditions: hence ‘anti-art,’ ‘technologic art,’ ‘pop art,’ etc., etc. . . . the labels — ‘anti,’ ‘technologic,’ ‘pop’ and so on — direct attention away from the issue into less critical areas. . . . Pseudo-art is involved with avenues of escape from art.”

The need to remain within the art context is essential, according to Harrison, for another reason: it is only within what he calls the “primary art context” that “an investigation of language” in art can proceed on art’s terms, not the terms of literary ideas: “Art alone is engaged with other art on equal terms.” Clearly, reluctance on the part of artists and critics to challenge the self-contained nature of Conceptual art is present from its inception. (This view of Conceptual art as a self-referential system is based on a radical redescription of Minimal art.) As the internal conflict between those who derived meaning from the recovery of an earlier avant-garde heritage and those who sought to elude the duality of art and everything else deepened, anxiety over the status and role of Conceptual art increased. Conceptual art was an avant-garde artistic practice that was largely dependent upon the institutions of art for its legitimation, while being equally beholden to the resources of mass media, technology and everyday life in clear opposition to the kinds of aesthetic practices exemplified by the works of high Modernist painting and sculpture. The anxiety expressed by Harrison in early-1970 over Conceptual art-as-art is not without precedent; one senses that this tension lay at the heart of Dan Graham’s seminal magazine projects of 1966.

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The essays in this volume, most of which have been newly commissioned, share a view of Conceptual art as a set of practices that sought to enable a critical engagement with art, media, mass culture, and technology. My aim in assembling these essays has been to introduce the historical detail necessary to an adequate redescription of Conceptual art in terms of social discourse. Such redescription emphasizes those practices and debates within Conceptual art that

42 Harrison, “Notes towards art work,” p. 42.
43 Ibid.
sought to expose and criticize the basic social and political relations that binds art to society and
culture. As I have indicated in the remarks above, some of these practices were, literally,
conversational; others more self-consciously metaphorical and poetic.

The essays in Part I — “Artist, Object, Spectator” — examine a number of early practices in the context of Anglo-American Conceptual art. The selection does not presume to be exhaustive. Rather, it is indicative of the practices that more or less self-consciously intended to transform the relationship between artist and art object, artmaking and authorship, and art object and the public. Historically, these practices were situated initially on the margins of artistic practice. From the late-1970s onwards, these practices have been the subject of successive waves of misreading and revision by younger generations of artists, beginning with individuals such as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Alfredo Jaar. The most notable feature of these wilful misreadings — which virtually exclude consideration of any other historical aspect of Conceptual art — is their relentless emphasis on the distributive or media-like potential of Conceptual art; a quality which seemed to flow inevitably from the hybrid forms that were the hallmark of its practice.

Part II — “Display” — provides accounts of attempts by critics and curators to consolidate Conceptual art as a stable artistic practice; to construct an institutional setting or home for a cluster of practices that were, in some cases, absolutely opposed to such curatorial intentions. As long as Conceptual art was confined to a life of symbolic resistance to the conditions of production and distribution of art, it would be open to bureaucratic manipulation. This was true regardless of the ontological inconvenience Conceptual art may have posed to curators and collectors. At the outset, the revisionary ambitions and interests of some Conceptual artists quite clearly exceeded the imaginative grasp of many curators, critics, and collectors. This is seen in the widespread emergence in Conceptual art of projects — grounded in technology, activist politics or models of alternative contexts for learning and teaching — which continued to menace the critical and curatorial certainties that accompanied attempts to normalize Conceptual art. An unintended consequence of the encounter between museums and Conceptual art was the beginning of an unprecedented bureaucratic revolution in museology.

Part III — “Recoding Information, Knowledge, and Technology” — presents essays that contextualize Conceptual art in terms of a productive misreading or “recoding” of the concepts and practices of information theory and technology. Here, one may appreciate the contradictions
that beset Conceptual art, whose embrace of systems theory and the fadish notions of Marshall McLuhan are symptomatic of a search for a cultural home away from the staid precincts of high art.

Part IV — “The Limit of the Social” — profiles the shift away from the self-contained model of early Conceptual art towards an attempt to actualize the perceived social and political potential of Conceptual art. This most tendentious claim about the so-called politicization of Conceptual art is elaborated in essays and case studies of the work of Art & Language, Ian Burn, Joseph Kosuth, and others. There, Conceptual art began to confront its initial utopian longings in public, before an audience constituted of other artists, art critics, historians, and political militants drawn from the ranks of the African-American and Meso-American communities. Within this characteristically strife-ridden space, an effort was made to transform the actual conditions of artistic production through an engagement with institutions, ideologies, intellectual resources, and political formations that lay outside the sphere of art. The gap between implicit and explicit senses of the social in artistic practice is expressed well by the historian Blake Stimson, who writes of “the promise of Conceptual art.” Stimson concludes that the reception of Conceptual art that emphasizes its social dimension represents a foundation upon which may be devised a new challenge to “the authority of the institutional apparatus framing [art’s] place in society” and “other means for art to function in the world.”

Given the historical evidence, we may well ask if Stimson’s assertion is not overly optimistic. At the same time, it is clear that Stimson alerts us to the urgent need to reconsider what we mean by an independent critical practice in art. Practices and resources that seek to function in the world and yet wish to remain

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44 Blake Stimson, "The Promise of Conceptual Art," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. xxxix. One example of such an agenda, taken from The Fox, asserted that artists must now consider their position in respect of the process of reclamation of art as an instrument of social and cultural transformation, in order to expose the domination of the administrative apparatus of culture as well as that of an art which reflects that apparatus. What was called for was a practice that aimed to contribute to a wider movement of social criticism and transformation; initially, on the art front, but by no means limited to the context of art. In the event, it proved to be impossible to realize this program without significant revision. This revision would spectacularly undermine the authority and cultural preserve of the middle-class contemporary artist. While art was indeed on the agenda of political collectives like the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union and its cultural wing, the Yenan Theater Workshop, it was to be resolutely an art of “the people.” A montage of fragments of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong, and Brecht justified the return to a species of social realism. For an analysis by Michael Baldwin, Kathryn Bigelow, Mel Ramsden, and Mayo Thompson of artists groups, collectives, and the conditions of possibility of ideological solidarity with the working class, see Art-Language vol. 3, no. 4, 1976. Accounts of the kind of practice embraced by New York and Californian artists who continued to work outside the mainstream of art may be found in issues of Left Curve of the late-1970s, as well as in Red-Herring, no. 2 (1978), and Main Trend, no. 1 (1978) and no. 2 (1979).
identifiable as art are hardly without precedent. For contemporary art, some lessons may yet be recoverable from the historical practices of Conceptual art. Not all of them, however, are likely to be constructive or congenial to the pursuit of contemporary ideals. The legacy of Anglo-American Conceptual art is surely to be found in the questions which it threw up for art and which remain vivid and productive for artists. Part of that legacy is the understanding that Conceptual art is clearly inseparable from its history as an avant-garde practice; a history that embodied its real, rather than imagined limitations as art.

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45 This was the crux of the internal strife that characterized Art & Language until late-1976. Charles Harrison rightly notes that for Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin the most positive outcome of these scandals was “a continuing existence for Art & Language as an artistic practice.” See Harrison, Essays on Art & Language, p. 128.