

CHAPTER 2

Conceptual Art, the aesthetic and the end(s) of art

Charles Harrison

Introduction

The aims of this chapter are to consider the breakdown in the authority of modernist aesthetics and critical discourse that occurred in the 1960s, to discuss the ensuing development of forms of Conceptual Art in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to review some consequent changes in the priorities of criticism. Modernist criticism was typically concerned with the relative 'quality of effect' in painting and sculpture conveyed through visible arrangements of shapes and colours. But viewers of Conceptual Art were confronted with works that were largely devoid of colour and that in many cases had no single definable shape: see, for example, Plates 2.2–2.7. Anyone mindful of the history of avant-gardism in the twentieth century would be likely to pause before simply denying such things the status of art. The first question to be faced, therefore, was just *how* these entities might be conceived of as works of art – and not as mere statements, proposals, documents, works of criticism or theoretical essays. The second was *why* so much should apparently be dispensed with that had previously contributed to art's sensuous appeal.

The study of Conceptual Art is complicated by difficulty in restricting the field of reference of the term. Since the 1970s, 'conceptual' has been widely used as a catch-all label for a range of artistic products that resist inclusion in more specific technical categories such as painting and sculpture. Something similar happened to the term 'abstract' during the third to fifth decades of the twentieth century, when those who were not professionally implicated applied it to more or less any work that was hard to understand. The normal barrier to understanding abstract art was that it did not picture things in the world in immediately recoverable ways, this being the formerly indispensable function by which paintings and sculptures had been recognised as such. That one might conceive of something as a painting *without* its having to be a picture of anything was certainly an idea by which the first practitioners of abstract art had been fascinated during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The subsequent prevalence of 'abstract' as a description for the new and stylistically unfamiliar provides confirmation that the prising apart of art from picturing was indeed a process that had wide implications. The more the currency of the term spread, however, the more remote its meaning inevitably became from that strange and barely thinkable possibility that had first possessed the imaginations of Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and others.

PLATE 2.1 (facing page) Art & Language, detail of *Index 01* (Plate 2.12), showing section of wall display.

It has been customary to regard 'exhibitions' as those situations where various objects are in discrete occupation of a room or site, etc: perceptors appear, to peruse. In the case of so-called 'environmental' exhibitions, it is easily shown that aspects of the discrete arrangement remain. Instead of inflected, dominating surfaces, etc., there are inflected, dominating sites, etc. Objections to this view which call up questions of degree (in respect of fineness of supported detail) are irrelevant here since they are integral to the discrete situation, only serving to distinguish one mode from another there.

It is absurd to suggest that spatial considerations are at all bound to the relations of things at a certain level above that of minimum visibility.

Our proposals so far concern an interior situation: to declare open a volume of (free) air would be to acquire 'administrative' problems which inform a further decomplexity. (A distinction, as appropriate to these proposals, between, say, designator and designandum is beyond the scope of this writing.) Administrative problems are anyway only partially distinguished in a formal sense from others concerning requirements of specificity, etc. Inside, dimensional aspects remain physically explicit; 'air-conditioning' itself acquires a contextual decorum.

It is traditional to expect so-called ordinary things to be identifiable: there is nothing in the instrumental situation which demands identifiability. It may be true that the situation will remain only partially interpreted along many axes: there is a lack of a system of rules like those of correspondence.

A complete interpretation in terms of operations with sensitive instruments, etc., would amount to showing a veneer over the extended possibilities which the work supports. It is easy to define what is meant by saying that a magnitude which is only 'computable' with the help of, say, instruments and one which one can take a ruler to are nonetheless values of the same physical magnitude. It means that the visible or stated relations of the functor to other physical functor are the same. Obviously, anyway, one is still with experience.

Ornamental detail in the rooms may be objected to on the grounds that it offers a 'strong' experiential competitiveness which would never be supported by the air medium (the competition would never be met). Here, the all black, all grey all white, etc., environmental situations inform ornamental values. Extremes of air-temperature (either very hot or very cold) are cut-out for several reasons: one is that to allow the air to become self-importantly hot or cold indicates an insistence upon just one of its properties; another, which is secondary here, is that extremes of high or low temperature make us dwell on tactile experience. Any sound coming from the equipment is not ornamental so long as it is consistent with the functioning of the equipment. Terry Atkinson has written: 'Sounds from outside should be eliminated, although sounds from outside kept at a very low level might well be consistent with the super-usual quality'.

The demand made of the equipment would be that it keep the temperature constant: this is another reason for going inside. Prescriptions which go much further in specifying the dress of the room are mostly useless; it has to be looked at *mutatis mutandis*.

Terms like 'neutral' are irrelevant in this context except perhaps with one application - a 'social' one. There the term might indicate an absence of the feeling that what was occurring was technologically miraculous (such feelings are engendered by air-conditioning, in, say, London, whereas people are used to it in New York).

Rubrics like 'Non Exhibition', etc., are not inaccurate, they are just nonsensical. Obviously, there are cases where, for instance, sense is not exhibited, but the usage of the term itself is not similar to the present one.

It can't be said that we are relying on old-fashioned logical postulates (The Bellman's map in *The Hunting of the Snark*), or that the experiences offered are in any sense cut-down; rather they rely less on the vagaries of a detailed situation.

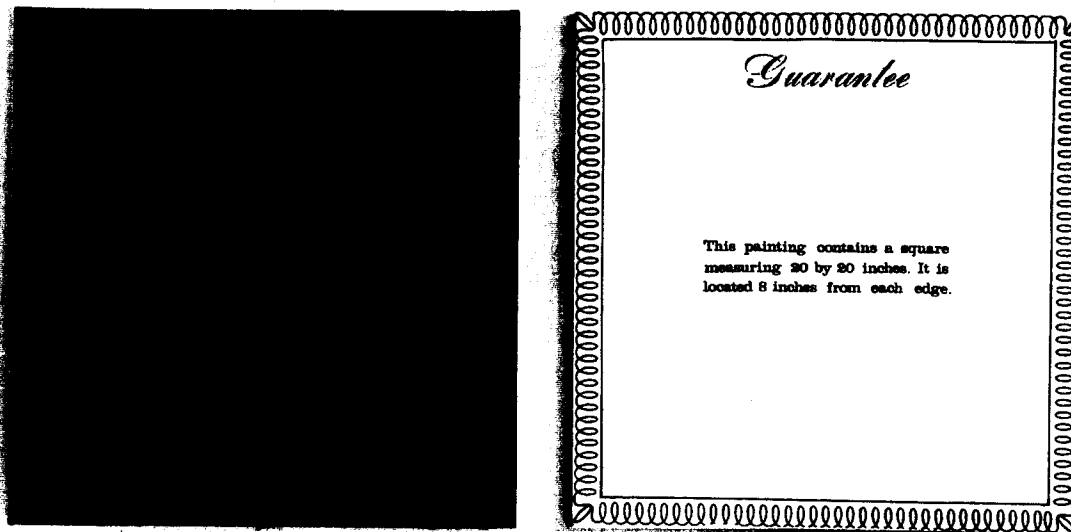


PLATE 2.3 Mel Ramsden, *Guaranteed Painting*, 1967–8, liquitex on canvas with photostat, two sections, each 92 x 92 cm. (Collection Bischofberger, Zurich.)

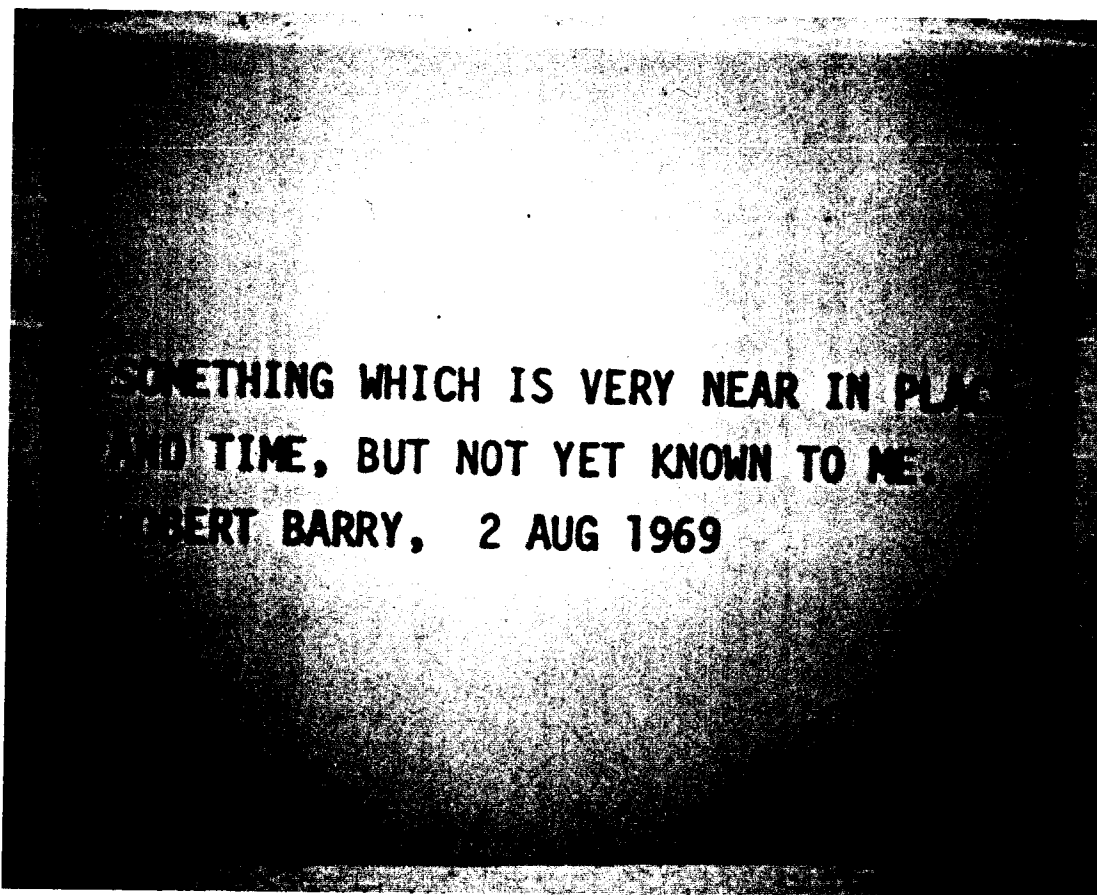


PLATE 2.4 Robert Barry, *Something Which is Very Near in Place and Time, but Not Yet Known to Me*, 2 August 1969, installation from the exhibition 'When Attitudes become Form', Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, September 1969. (Photo: Charles Harrison. Courtesy of Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc. and the artist.)

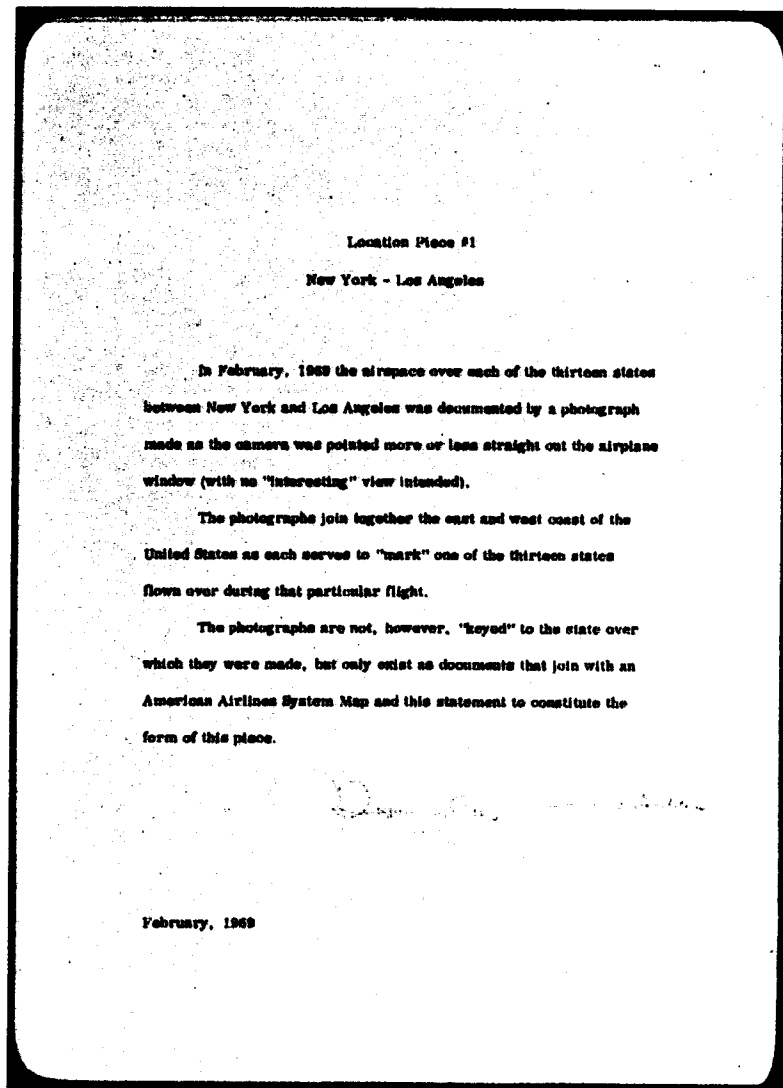


PLATE 2.5
Douglas Huebler,
Location Piece No. 1,
1969, map 41 x 70 cm;
typed statement on
paper 41 x 34 cm;
thirteen photographs
each 31 x 36 cm
(not shown). (Photo: Gian
Sinigaglia/Archivio Panza/
Giorgio Colombo, Milan.
© ARS, New York and
DACS, London 2004.)

mean·ing (mēn'īŋ), *n.* 1. what is meant; what is intended to be, or in fact is, signified, indicated, referred to, or understood: signification, purport, import, sense, or significance: as, the *meaning* of a word. 2. [Archaic], intention; purpose. *adj.* 1. that has meaning; significant; expressive.

PLATE 2.6

Joseph Kosuth, *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, definition of the word 'meaning', c.1967, photostat on paper mounted on wood, 119 x 119 cm. (The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston. © ARS, New York and DACS, London 2004.)

It is much the same, I believe, with the idea of the 'conceptual', which replaced 'abstract' as a mark of the controversial at a time when it seemed that the potential for development in abstract art was exhausted. On the one hand, the increasing currency of the term testifies to the significance of the change it refers to: in this case a change in the grounds on which artistic objects are recognised, defined and judged as such. On the other hand, that very currency serves to obscure the specific conditions that certain artists faced in the later 1960s, when they contemplated those new modes of practice to which the term was first attached. In both cases, what is at issue is the character of a transformational moment in the history of art. In the study of each of these moments, what is required is a sympathetic imagination of the *practical* conditions – the framework of problems and possibilities – by which the pursuit of art seemed at the time to be defined for a number of those who were engaged in it.

One aerosol can of enamel sprayed to conclusion directly upon the floor

PLATE 2.7

Lawrence Weiner, *One Aerosol Can of Enamel Sprayed to Conclusion Directly upon the Floor*, 1968. (© ARS, New York and DACS, London 2004.)

Uncertain objects

In 1963, Henry Flynt published an essay on 'Concept Art' in an anthology edited by the avant-garde composer La Monte Young.¹ Flynt was associated with the Fluxus group and took part in several of its concerts and other manifestations. Written in 1961, his idiosyncratic essay was more clearly addressed to music and to mathematics than to art. The term 'Conceptual Art' first gained currency in 1967 following publication of Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' in a special issue published by the American magazine *Artforum*.² LeWitt was involved in the minimalist tendency in New York in the mid-1960s and by 1969 was producing various specifications for wall drawings intended to be executed by others (Plate 2.8). 'When an artist uses a conceptual form of art,' he wrote, 'it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair ... Conceptual art is only good when the idea is good.'³

In the broadest sense of the term, 'Conceptual Art' might be said to shade at one extreme into an art of performance, and at the other to be concerned with ideas that issue in the form of texts, plans, diagrams or photographs. The distinction between an art of performance and an art of ideas is certainly not one that could be rigidly applied to all the avant-garde work of the later 1960s and early 1970s, but it may be used to mark out a number of different types of enterprise within the wider Conceptual Art movement. This chapter will not be much concerned with those kinds of avant-garde activity that edge into performance or poetry. Rather, I mean to concentrate on a type of work that was specifically addressed to the recent and current condition of fine art, diverse as it had become, which engaged with modernist theory as the dominant account of that condition and which aspired to be mainstream in that sense at least. The nature of this engagement served to distinguish the Conceptual Art avant-garde from such earlier and more recent avant-garde movements as Dada and Fluxus, whose oppositional character had been established at an intentional distance from the conclaves of the dominant culture, and whose claims to critical virtue were necessarily issued from the margins.

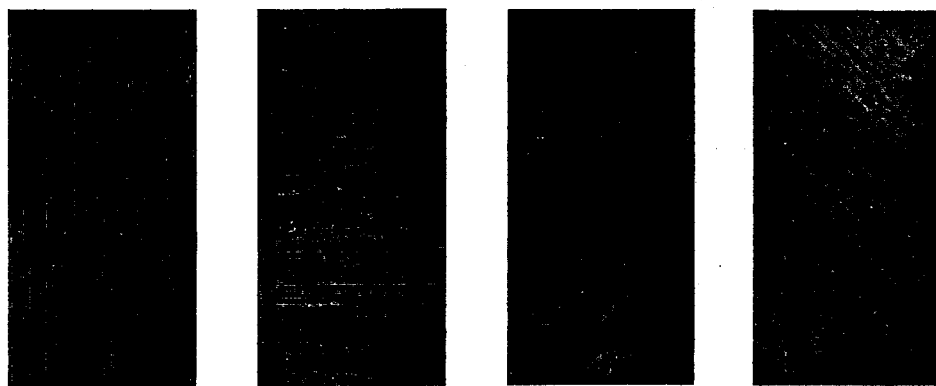


PLATE 2.8 Sol LeWitt, plan for drawing on north wall, Dwan Gallery, October 1969, 88 x 49 cm. (Photo: Giorgio Colombo, Milan. © ARS, New York and DACS, London 2004.)

The Conceptual Art I have in mind was generally characterised by the lack of physically robust material – no expressive brushwork on the walls, no accumulations of three-dimensional stuff on the floor – and by the recourse to linguistic specification and description that followed from that absence, words being the most effective means to draw the spectator's attention to objects that were imperceptible or imaginary or merely theoretical.

The works illustrated in Plates 2.2–2.7 were all produced between 1967 and 1969, during what I would regard as the first and definitive phase of the Conceptual Art movement. Michael Baldwin (b.1945) is an English artist who joined with Terry Atkinson (b.1939), David Bainbridge (b.1941) and Harold Hurrell (b.1940) in 1968 to adopt 'Art & Language' as a name for the collaborative practice they had variously developed over the previous two years. In the spring of the following year, they published the first issue of the journal *Art-Language* in Coventry (Plate 2.9; the subtitle, 'The Journal of conceptual art', was removed after the first issue). Mel Ramsden (b.1944) is also an English artist who was working in New York in the late 1960s. In 1970, he and the Australian artist Ian Burn (1939–93) merged their separate collaboration with Art & Language.

The four American artists Robert Barry (b.1936), Douglas Huebler (1924–97), Joseph Kosuth (b.1945) and Lawrence Weiner (b.1940) showed together in New York in January 1969. The exhibition, 'January 5–31 1969', was organised in a vacant office building by the avant-garde dealer–entrepreneur Seth Siegelau. It was announced with the formula '0 Objects, 0 Painters, 0 Sculptors, 4 Artists ... 32 Works'.

In the summer of 1969, Kosuth was invited to act as American editor of *Art-Language*. Although pursuing an independent career, he retained his links with Art & Language until 1976, when they were severed by local action taken in concert with Art & Language. By that time some twenty-five artists were variously associated with the group name, more or less equally divided between England and New York, where an Art & Language Foundation published three issues of a journal called *The Fox* in 1975–6. Since 1977, however, the artistic work of Art & Language has been in the hands of Baldwin and Ramsden alone.

The works I shall principally be concerned with in this chapter will be by the artists listed above, although it should be borne in mind that contributions to the Conceptual Art movement as broadly defined were made by artists working in many other locations across the world. The exhibition 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s', mounted in 1999 at Queens Museum of Art in New York, included works by over 135 individuals from Asia, western and eastern Europe, Latin America, North America, the former USSR, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.⁴

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 1

MAY 1969

Art-Language

The Journal of conceptual art

Edited by Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge,
Michael Baldwin, Harold Hurrell

Contents

| | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|----|
| Introduction | | 1 |
| Sentences on conceptual art | Sol LeWitt | 11 |
| Poem-schema | Dan Graham | 14 |
| Statements | Lawrence Weiner | 17 |
| Notes on M1 (1) | David Bainbridge | 19 |
| Notes on M1 | Michael Baldwin | 23 |
| Notes on M1 (2) | David Bainbridge | 30 |

Art-Language is published three times a year
Price 75p UK, \$2.50 USA All rights reserved
Printed in Great Britain

PLATE 2.9

Art-Language, vol.1, no.1, May 1969, cover.

I mean to give some emphasis to the work of Art & Language as exemplary of an 'analytical' tendency within the larger Conceptual Art movement. Plates 2.10–2.12 show a specific installation of *Index 01*, one the most substantial works associated with this tendency. It was produced by Art & Language for exhibition at 'Documenta 5' in Kassel, West Germany in 1972. Mounted on four plinths are eight filing cabinets filled with 87 texts published in the journal *Art-Language* or otherwise authored by members of the expanded practice and circulated among them. A typed and photographically enlarged index is pasted onto the surrounding walls or onto the wall behind the cabinets (depending on the physical conditions of the display). To make the index, each text was read in relation to each of the others, and the relation between each pair was then specified as one of compatibility (+), of incompatibility (–) or of incommensurability (T; meaning that the contents of the texts in question were too different to be compared without a radical transformation of the grounds on which comparison was made). In its printed form the wall-mounted index gives a listing for each text, with each of the others listed alongside it under one of the three specified relations.

At the time of its first exhibition, ten names were listed in connection with the production of *Index 01*, although levels of responsibility for that production

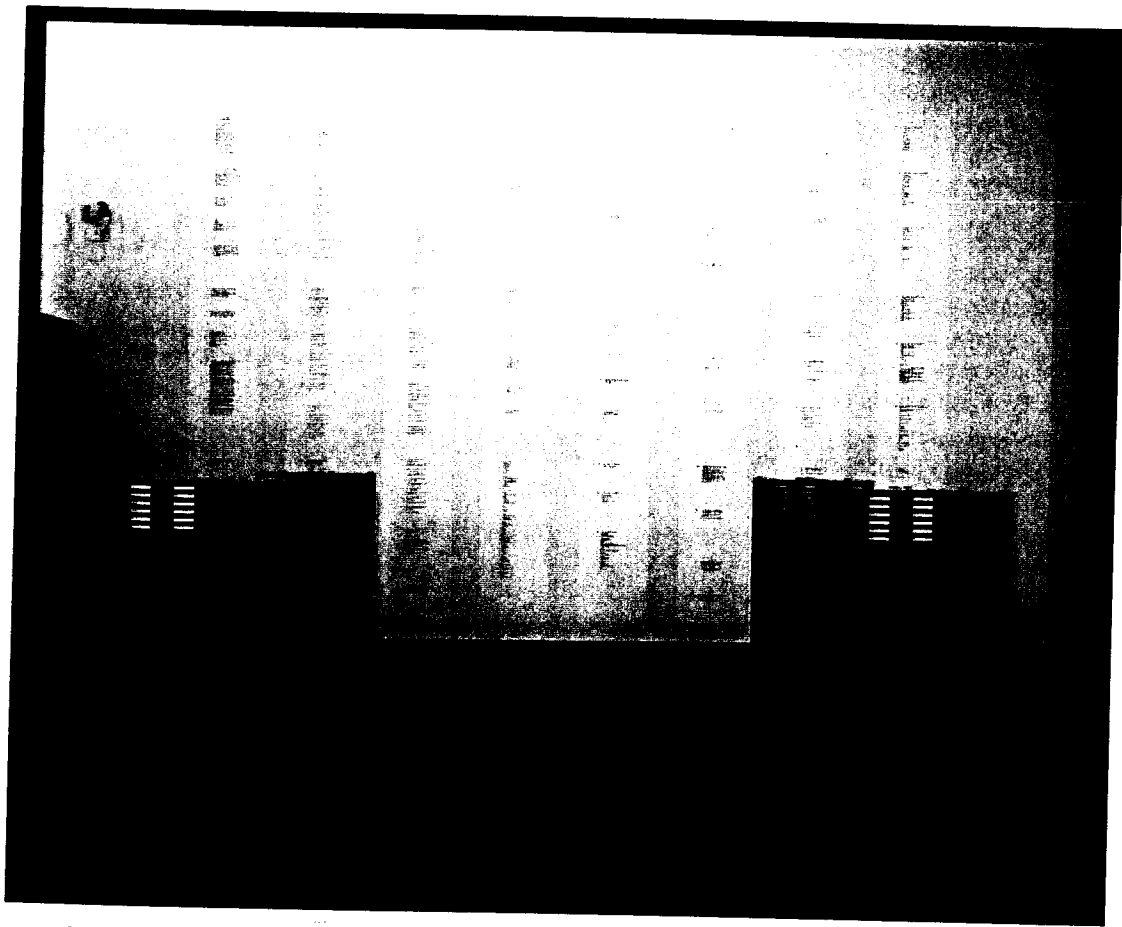


PLATE 2.10 Art & Language, *Index 01*, 1972, eight metal filing cabinets with texts and photostat wall display, dimensions variable, installation at Musée d'art moderne de Lille Métropole, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France, 2001. (Collection Alesco AG, Zurich. Photo: Matthieu Langrand.)

varied greatly. The work may be thought of as an attempt to make a kind of map of a particular conversational world – one in which what was thought about, talked about and written about was the condition of art, the problems of defining it, of making it, of criticising it and of teaching it. A spectator/reader of the *Index* could use it to sample the nature and concerns of this conversation and to trace its patterns of consensus and disagreement,

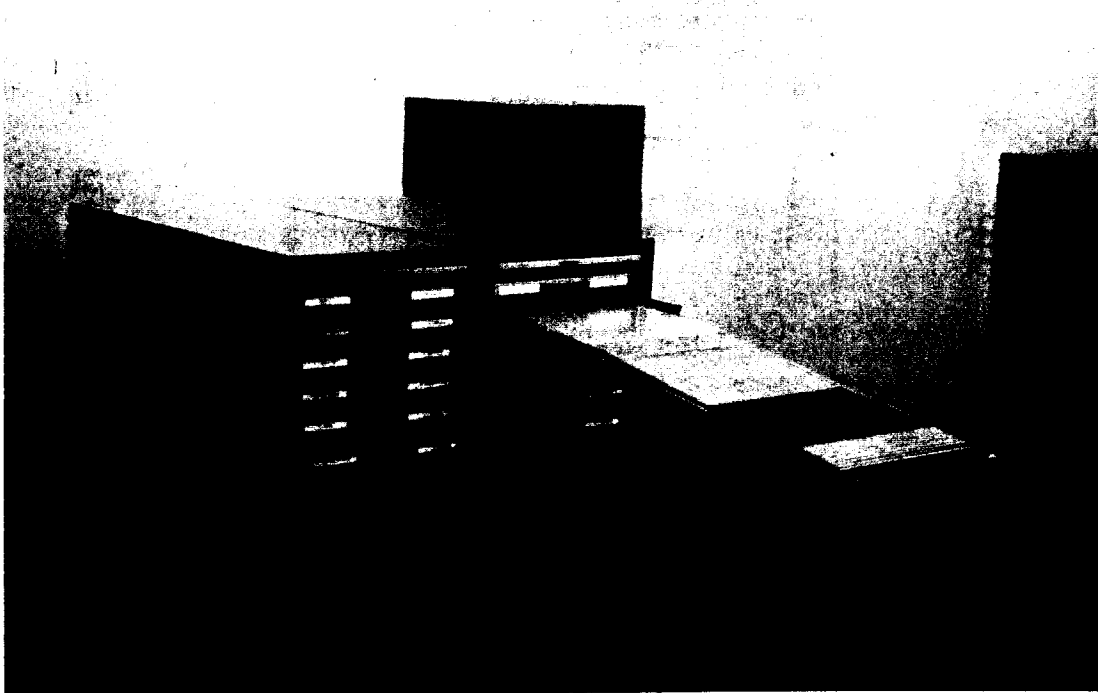


PLATE 2.11 Art & Language, detail of *Index 01*, showing open file-drawer with text.

- E 1** (+) N(ii) Z(ii) 1 F(iii) 5 8 I(iii) A(ii) F G H L Q(ii) S(ii) 6 T(ii) 2
X(ii) 2 N(i) 3 L(i) 1 2 M(i) b 9 U(i) a 1 2 Z(i) 8* K(i)* I(i)* M(ii)*
X(i) 1 2*
- (-) V(i) 1 B(iii) b 1 N(i) 1 Z(i) 8* K(i)* I(i)* M(ii)* X(i) 1 2*
- (T) L(ii) P(ii) B C D O(ii) P(ii) S(ii) 1-5 Y(ii) 1 3 S(i) P(i)
- 2** (+) N(ii) Z(ii) 1 F(iii) 5 8 I(iii) A(ii) f A 3-5 F G H L Q(ii) S(ii) 6
T(ii) 2 X(ii) 2 N(i) 3 L(i) 1 2 M(i) b 9 U(i) a 1 2 Z(i) 8* K(i)* I(i)*
M(ii)* X(i) 1 2*
- (-) V(i) 1 B(iii) b 1 A 2 N(i) 1 Z(i) 8* K(i)* I(i)* M(ii)* X(i) 1 2*
- (T) L(ii) P(i) Q(ii) P(ii) S(ii) 1-5 Y(ii) 1 3 S(i)
- 3** (+) N(ii) Z(ii) 1 F(iii) 5 8 I(iii) A(ii) f A 3 F G H Q(ii) S(ii) 6 T(ii) 2
X(ii) 2 N(i) 3 L(i) 1 2 M(i) b 9 U(i) a 1 2 Z(i) 8* Y(ii) 1 3 K(i)* I(i)*
M(ii)* X(i) 1 2*
- (-) V(i) 1 B(iii) b 1 A 4-6 K L Z(i) 8* K(i)* I(i)* M(i)* N(i) 1 X(i) 1 2*
- (T) L(ii) P(ii) O(ii) S(ii) 1-5 S(i) P(i)

PLATE 2.12 Art & Language, detail of *Index 01*, showing section of wall display.

of orthodoxy and eccentricity. The work might also be thought of – as it subsequently has been within Art & Language itself – as a kind of updating of the genre of the Artist's Studio: that is to say, as a staged representation of the conceptual artist's place of work.

At this point I should acknowledge an interest. I have acted as editor of *Art-Language* since 1971, am among those associated with the exhibition of the *Index* at 'Documenta' and with some subsequent works in the name of Art & Language, and have continued to collaborate with Baldwin and Ramsden on literary and theoretical projects. Given this long association, my view of Art & Language work in particular and of the Conceptual Art movement in general is bound to be partisan in certain respects. In compensation I can offer the advantages of direct acquaintance with some relevant work.

Look carefully at Plates 2.2–2.7, paying particular attention to the details of size and medium given in the captions. Within the limits of the information provided, assume for the moment that each of these is *in some sense* intended as a work of art. What characteristics or properties would you say that these works have in common?

Many of the most common features are kinds of negative. None employs colour and none exhibits any significant personal touch. None makes any obvious pretence to value in terms of quality of materials or skill of technical execution. None fits securely into the category of either painting or sculpture. Kosuth's *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* resembles certain paintings of the time in size and format but is simply a tonally reversed photographic enlargement of a dictionary definition. (Kosuth's designation of the work as *Titled* takes its point from the practice of the minimalist Donald Judd, who labelled each of his works *Untitled* so as to prevent anyone from attaching a further and irrelevant title to it. By the same token a series of works from 1967 by Atkinson and Baldwin is labelled *Title Equals Text Nos. 1, 2, 3* etc., so as to identify each with the extensive text that is printed on its face.) Ramsden's *Guaranteed Painting* uses paint on canvas, but in such a manner as to efface the signs of manual application, and like the other five works it employs some form of printing. It is not so much a painting in itself as a two-part work that makes a kind of ironic *use* of painting. (The device of the guarantee was suggested by the practice of American artists like Dan Flavin, whose works were made of standard commercially available units – in Flavin's case fluorescent light tubes – and who were therefore obliged to issue them with certificates of authorship and authenticity.) All six works are in principle entirely repeatable in their form of presentation, although *Remarks on Air-Conditioning* is the only one of the six that was actually first *published* in the form of an essay rather than a wall-mounted object. (It represents the opening section of a longer text. This concerns the idea, proposed and discussed by Atkinson and Baldwin, that a volume of air-conditioned air should be considered as an art object.⁵)

Of the common features that might be expressed in positive terms, perhaps the most obvious is that each of the works incorporates – in some cases perhaps *is* – a text of some kind, although the text in question varies considerably in length. Less easily formulated but equally significant is the observation that each of the works presents some problem to the spectator who approaches it as a work of art. That is to say, there is a problem in identifying just what it is that is supposed to be the object of critical attention:

is it the text itself, or the object, concept or state of affairs the text refers to – the 'Something' in Barry's work, the line traced across the USA in Huebler's, the volume of air-conditioned air in Baldwin's, the puddle of sprayed paint in Weiner's – or some combination of the two? ■

That art might be made out of the problems of definition of art was not a new idea in the later 1960s. The point had been made by Marcel Duchamp with the first of his readymades as early as 1914, while much of the work of the Dada and Surrealist avant-gardes had been designed deliberately to strain the limits of what could be taken for art. In the later 1950s and early 1960s, the critical establishment of a modernist mainstream was accompanied by renewed interest in Dada and Surrealism – and by a revival of just those avant-garde strategies that modernist criticism had tended increasingly to disparage. Notable among the artists involved were Piero Manzoni in Italy, Yves Klein in France, and Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris in the USA. The emergence of the international Fluxus movement in the early 1960s provided further evidence of this revival. Specific works that might be seen as antecedents for the Conceptual Art movement include Rauschenberg's *Portrait of Iris Clert* and Morris's *Metered Bulb* (Plate 2.13). (Both were included in the first major retrospective survey of the Conceptual Art movement, held at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris in the winter of 1989–90.) The first of these is a telegram sent by Rauschenberg to the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris in 1961, following a request for a contribution to an exhibition of portraits of the owner. It reads 'THIS IS A PORTRAIT OF IRIS CLERT IF I SAY SO'. It can be seen as a kind of avant-garde parody on the idea that the meaning of a work is decided by the intention of the artist, and also, perhaps, as a kind of flagrant aside on the relationship between representation and resemblance.

Morris's *Metered Bulb* dates from 1962–3, a time when he had contacts with artists of the Fluxus movement. It is composed of an electric light bulb with socket and chain switch fixed above an electric meter. When the switch is pulled to illumine the bulb the meter records the consumption of units of electricity. It is one of a series of works Morris made at the time that seem both to raise questions about the conditions of an object's being regarded as art, and to short-circuit interpretation through some self-documenting aspect. In this case we might be led to ask just what it would mean to talk of the *Metered Bulb* as a 'work of art': for instance, is it (a) a kind of composition, the form of which involves its having both an 'on' and an 'off' state; or is it (b) an object that is only 'art' when the bulb is lit and the recording system in operation; or is it (c) 'art' by virtue of its capacity to produce in the spectator an unresolvable state of uncertainty as to whether (a) or (b) – or (c) – is correct?

What distinguishes the works illustrated in Plates 2.2–2.7 from these enterprises of the early 1960s is principally a slight change in the circumstances to which they are respectively addressed. At a time when the dominant model of art was still the large-scale painting of the American Abstract Expressionists, both Rauschenberg and Morris could claim a kind of exceptional character for their work by looking back to an earlier phase of avant-gardism. By the later 1960s, however, the identification of modernism with painting and of painting with abstraction no longer seemed secure. In a larger view, it could be said that the twentieth century saw a gradual decline in the work of art conceived as a unique object to be regarded by a solitary spectator. What was now at issue

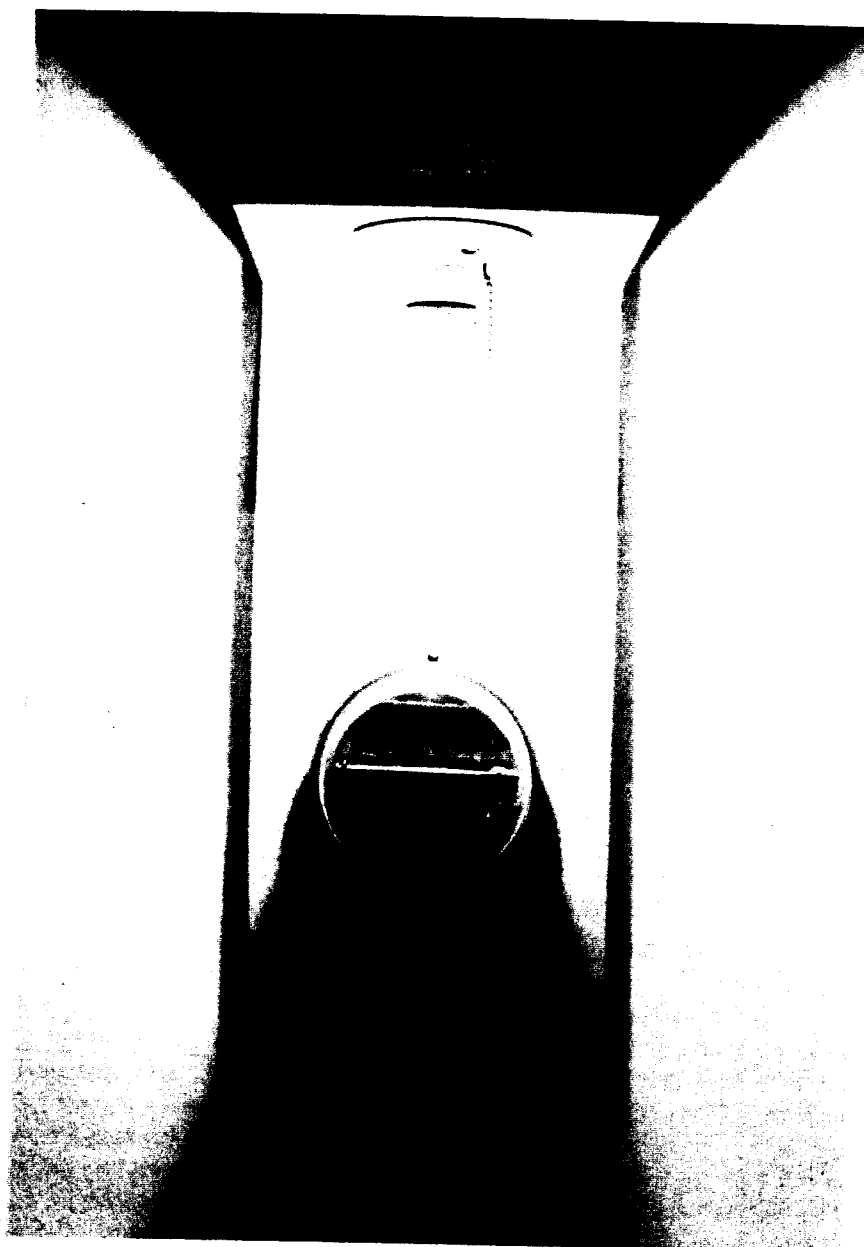


PLATE 2.13
 Robert Morris,
Metered Bulb,
 1962–3, mixed media,
 43 x 20 x 21 cm.
 (Collection Jasper
 Johns. © ARS, New
 York and DACS,
 London 2004.)

was whether 'art' required any 'objects' at all. A work by Atkinson and Baldwin from 1967 takes the form of a photographically enlarged text mounted on board (Plate 2.14). The text opens, 'We need objects?'⁶ In an interview recorded in October 1969, Weiner asserted, 'I do not mind objects, but I do not care to make them. The object – by virtue of being a unique commodity – becomes something that might make it impossible for people to see the art for the forest.'⁷ In a statement for the catalogue of Siegelau's January 1969 exhibition, Huebler wrote, 'The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more. I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and/or place.'⁸

We need objects?

One may argue that an extensional object is merely designated, i. e. it is directly referred to in a Fregean context, it is distinct from 'idea' and the set of properties which make it up. The 'mode of presentation' of that object may be said to subsist somewhere between the concept, if you like, or idea (of it) and its simple designation - its simple picking out, distinguishing from others. It is that which is designated. The mode of presentation, or object constituted in terms of mode of presentation is not the object itself in this extensional sense, nor is it anything entirely 'subjective' or, if you like, accountable only in a private experiential or ideational domain. In the Fregean system one can effectively compare the 'object', the 'mode of presentation'. I associate object and the ideational one with the table, the cube - the cube as a relational entity presented sensorily in a certain way, and the retinal image of each individual spectator.

Intention as 'the object in a certain mode of presentation'. For reasons of antipsychologism, Frege wanted to make sure that the object, in the extensional sense should neither be confused with its mode of presentation nor the idea of it.

PLATE 2.14 Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, *Art & Language*. 38 Paintings (Painting No. 11), 1967. photostat, dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the Lisson Gallery and the artists.)

In fact, just how straightforward a matter 'stating the existence of things' could actually be was the subject of considerable disagreement among those concerned in the Conceptual Art movement. The most extensive deliberations on the problems involved were those published in the journal *Art-Language*, and they have always been widely regarded as difficult reading. Referring back much later to this period, Baldwin has written, 'An artistic practice consisting exclusively in the production of texts seemed to place a world of hitherto unimaginably complex entities within the grasp of the artist.'⁹ But on the other hand, 'We were also aware that an art composed of ideas, or concepts, held intentionally would need to appear in *some* extended form, even if this was to be textual; and this text would have to have *some* coherence.'¹⁰

In due course I will return to the works shown in Plates 2.2-2.7, and will give particular consideration to the relationship between two issues skated over in the discussion above: those of definition and of value. First, though, I want to sketch in some general background to the emergence of works such as these at the end of the 1960s, and to offer some reasons for the incursion of language into the domain of the visual arts.

A crisis of modernism

In the history of art it is sometimes possible to connect substantial changes of direction and priority to relatively specific moments in time. The period of the late 1960s was one such moment; to be more specific, I would say the period from the summer of 1967, when *Artforum* published its special issue, until the spring of 1969, when the exhibition 'When Attitudes become Form: Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information' opened at the Kunsthalle in Berne, Switzerland. (A revised version of this exhibition was installed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in September 1969. Plates 2.15 and 2.16 show views of this latter installation.) A similar moment had occurred in the 1860s with the emergence of artistic modernism in France, at a time when responses to the exhibition of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* served among other factors to mark a new kind of division between modern 'Realists' and traditionalists. From that moment on, long-term critical success was to become increasingly associated with an apparently rapid turnover of styles, while all possibility of practical development seemed denied to those artists who adhered to institutionally validated concepts of tradition, taste and competence. A century later, however, it was the adherents to a now established modernist tradition who seemed denied the possibility of further significant development, and the prevailing critical account of that tradition that seemed suddenly to be lacking authority and plausibility. Matters were not helped by the fact that a powerful curatorial and distributive apparatus was now in place, which paid lip-service to the relevant modernist protocols while sharing none of the deeper critical and ethical commitments



PLATE 2.15 'When Attitudes become Form', exhibition installation at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, September 1969. (Photo: Charles Harrison.)

that they were supposed to serve. (At a symposium held in May 1966, the critic Michael Fried spoke publicly of his depression at the growth of an *uncritical* admiration for the modernist artists he esteemed, and at the 'valueless and appetiteless voraciousness of contemporary culture'.¹¹)

I should make clear the sense in which I am here using the concept of modernism. I mean it to stand for a kind of *value*, but one associated both with a specific historical period and with a body of theory (of which the prevailing art-critical exemplar is the writing of Clement Greenberg). Modernism is the singular value that an influential body of theory and criticism represents as common to various works of art since Manet that it regards as most deserving of attention on aesthetic grounds. The works seen as possessing this value are those that compose the modernist canon. As is common in aesthetic theories, there is a clear tendency to circularity. For the critic of a modernist persuasion, a work of art might be both technically accomplished and politically correct in its tendency, but it could not be significantly *good* unless it was also modern, and would not be significantly modern unless it was good – good, it should be said, in the eyes of those who deemed themselves qualified to make the right kinds of comparative judgement. For Fried, 'The issue of *value* or *quality* or *level* is explicitly, nakedly, and excruciatingly central: the desire of contemporary painters and sculptors to match or approach in quality the great works of the past is what gives modernist painting and sculpture their history.'¹² How, then, was this elusive modernist 'quality' to be assessed? Certainly not by gauging the work's address to the topical concerns of the culture; still less by counting such up-to-date features of the physical environment – typically, machinery in one

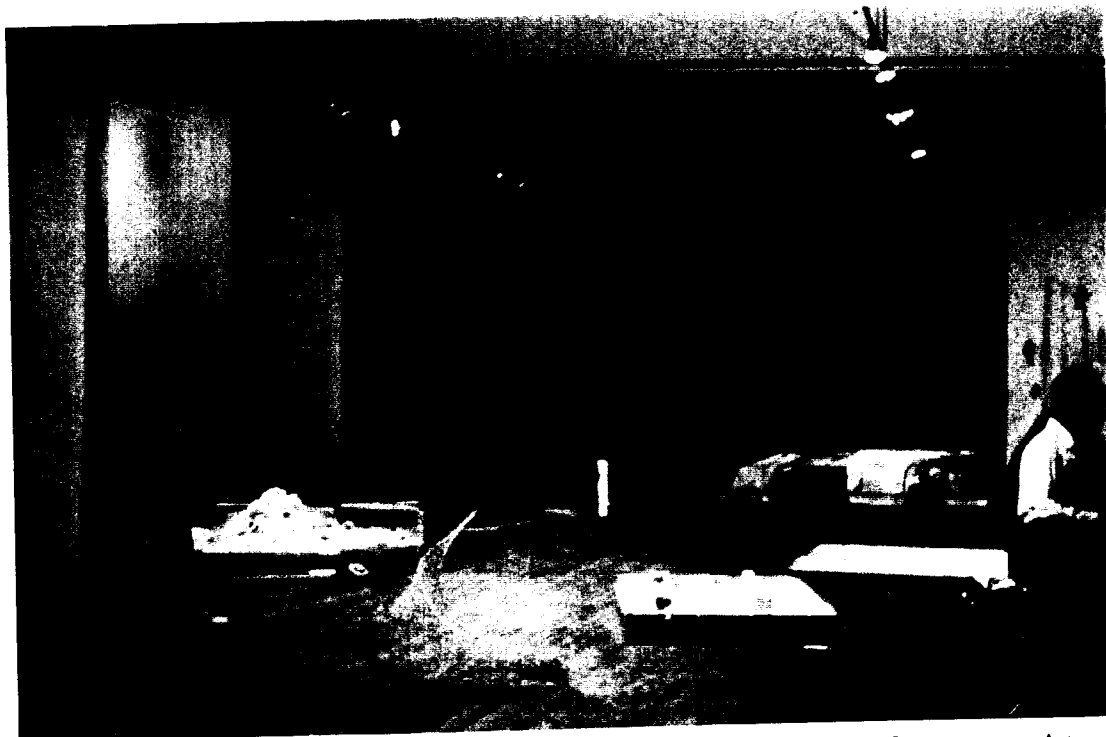


PLATE 2.16 'When Attitudes become Form', exhibition installation at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, September 1969. (Photo: Charles Harrison.)

form or another – as it might serve to illustrate. After all, much of the art canonised in modernist criticism is abstract. In Fried's memorable formulation, 'Roughly speaking, the history of painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Matisse may be characterized in terms of the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality – or of reality from the power of painting to represent it.'¹³ Rather, what was looked for was a kind of critical difference and development with respect to other recent and approved 'major' work in the same medium – which tended to mean painting or sculpture. The typical measure of this development was that it involved the shedding of any aspects or functions of the medium that proved to be inessential – inessential, that is to say, to the stimulation of aesthetic response in those spectators who were adequately equipped with sensibility. This is the process referred to by Greenberg as 'the self-critical tendency of Modernist painting'.¹⁴ In his theory of art, it is the identification of modernism with the self-critical development of specific media that assures the maintenance of 'past standards of excellence'.¹⁵

In so far as the value of modernism as I have described it may be associated with a particular historical period, the inauguration of that period in the 1860s is marked by advances in painting that occurred principally in Paris. In the 1960s, on the other hand, the very continuance of a tradition of painting was among the points at issue, and while modern art now had a new centre of development in New York, signs of significant change could be observed extensively on both sides of the Atlantic. The exhibition 'When Attitudes become Form' was intended to survey a new international avant-garde, and it included some 120 works by 70 artists drawn from nine countries. Even under the most liberal of descriptions, no more than two or three of these works could conceivably have been considered as paintings. And as to that preoccupation with the 'great works of the past' that the modernist critics saw as indispensable to achievement in the present, Kosuth's views may be taken as representative of many of his fellow exhibitors in 'When Attitudes become Form':

We have our own time and our own reality and it need not be justified by being hooked into European art history. Nothing being done could be done without the accumulated knowledge we have at our disposal, obviously. One can never completely escape the past, but to look in that direction intentionally and blatantly is creative timidity. The academic and conservative mind always craves historical justification.¹⁶

The changes at issue were not sudden in themselves – indeed, if we can give credence to the idea of a 'Global Conceptualism' originating in the 1950s, we would have to allow that the signs had been building up worldwide for at least a decade – nor were they marked by any particularly momentous events. However, their eventual fruition in the later 1960s coincided both with the final years of a phase of relative economic prosperity and social liberalism in the West, and with a not-unconnected period of widespread political protest. In New York many of those artists who were involved in the Conceptual Art movement were also members of the Art Workers' Coalition, which co-ordinated artworld opposition to the war in Vietnam and campaigned against the effects of racial and sexual prejudice in the policies of American museums. In the words of Siegelau:

there was an attitude of general distrust towards the object, seen as a necessary finalization of the art work, and consequently towards its physical existence and its market value. There was also the underlying desire and attempt to avoid this commercialization of artistic production, a resistance nourished, for the most part, by the historic context: the Vietnam war and subsequent questioning of the American way of life. This was certainly the most seriously sustained attempt to date to avoid the fatality of the art object as commodity.¹⁷

For whatever reasons, it must have seemed to many quite separate individuals and groups during the late 1960s as though there had been a noticeable widening of distance where divisions tended ordinarily to occur, whether between generations, between teachers and students, or simply between people of different inclinations and commitments. The modernist account of the development of art had never gone unopposed, but by the early 1960s it had become dominant, even hegemonic, empowered in part by the international success of American Abstract Expressionism, to which it provided a telling intellectual complement. For all the resolute political individualism of the Abstract Expressionists themselves, that dominance was now inescapably associated with the exercise of American military and economic power. At the same time, it was as though certain fault lines in the modernist account had become impossible to ignore, while overt fissures showed here and there on the surfaces of its subscribing institutions – on the walls of galleries and museums, in the pages of magazines, and in the studios of art colleges. Talking of the business of learning how to be an artist in the mid-1960s, Baldwin has described modernism as 'like a surface that wouldn't bear your weight; you'd try to put your foot down somewhere and that bit would just seem to break off and float away'.¹⁸

Among the clearest signs of a breach in the authority of modernist criticism were separate essays published by Fried and Greenberg in 1967. Each had clearly been prompted to mount a defence of the nature of his preferences and of the grounds of his judgements. Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' was published in the *Artforum* special issue referred to earlier. It was written to defend the abstract painting and sculpture he admired against the 'literalism' of Judd, Morris and others of the minimalist tendency.¹⁹ He regarded their work as reliant on an essentially theatrical encounter between spectator and art object. What he meant was that the specific *circumstances* of that encounter must always bear upon the received sense of the work. He thus saw this effect as compromising the experience of perpetual 'presentness'²⁰ that he associated with painting such as Kenneth Noland's and sculpture such as Anthony Caro's. His essay offered an impassioned argument to the effect that aesthetic value was contained within the individual arts – and he clearly had painting and sculpture specifically in mind – while a sensibility 'corrupted or perverted by theatre'²¹ reigned in the ground in-between. This, of course, was just the territory that had already been colonised by 'happenings', performances, installations, environments and the like.

Greenberg's 'Complaints of an Art Critic' was written to support two principal theses. The first is that aesthetic judgements upon works of art coincide with involuntary and thus *disinterested* responses to their non-literary properties and effects, and that these judgements are not modified by subsequent reflection or thought. 'Because esthetic judgements are immediate, intuitive,

undeliberate, and involuntary, they leave no room for the conscious application of standards, criteria, rules, or precepts.²² Other things being equal, a painting by Henri Matisse is for Greenberg always better than a painting by Edvard Munch, and no amount of research into the troubled psychology – or 'literature' – of Munch's pictures can make it otherwise. Greenberg's second thesis is that the history of art is decided by 'sheer quality' – by the observable succession of the 'best' works – as distinct, for instance, from its being established in a series of iconographies or contested through differing accounts of social practices.

In these two remarkable texts the hegemonic voice of modernism can still be heard, for better or worse – or for better *and* worse – speaking in American accents for a mainstream tendency in artistic culture. It speaks defensively, however, as though already responsive to those intellectual instruments that were soon to be widely deployed, in the name of a postmodernist plurality, to sharpen the critique of hegemonic powers and to oppose the convergence of cultural values. It also speaks in the face of an emerging art to which it is explicitly hostile. The summer 1967 special issue of *Artforum* in which Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' was published also included the third of Morris's 'Notes on Sculpture', an essay by Robert Smithson on 'The Development of an Air Terminal Site' and LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', which effectively both offered a name to a movement and sketched out some of the priorities according to which contributions to that movement might be judged. Proposed in the same journal a few months later, Greenberg's definition of aesthetic judgement appeared already to be simply *inapplicable* to a steadily growing number of enterprises. How, after all, was judgement based on an immediate and involuntary response to visual effects to be exercised on works such as those illustrated in Plates 2.2–2.7 and Plates 2.10–2.12, where such visual properties as might be in evidence tended to be inessential, or variable or accidental, and where there might be reflective work to do or choices to make before the spectator/reader was in a position to identify the art in the first place?

One of the axioms of LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' was 'What the work of art looks like isn't too important'.²³ If valid, this would imply the potential redundancy of an entire tradition of criticism and interpretation based on the analysis of visual properties – the tradition upon which modernist criticism depends and to which it makes a definitive contribution. I have suggested – following Greenberg – that the contained easel picture was associated with particular modes of attention, and by implication with particular kinds of social circumstance.²⁴ While the specific work of art was physically marked off from other objects, art as a whole was clearly distinguished from other kinds of social practice. The resulting procedures did indeed serve to provide some appropriate kinds of focus, *so long* as the highest critical achievements of art could be associated with the traditions of painting and sculpture, and with works in which those traditions were plausibly distinguished and continued. But what if those distinctions had effectively lost their practical necessity? For instance, what would it say about the continuing substance of the traditions in question if it transpired that the only substantial difference remaining between a painting and a sculpture was that one went on the wall and the other on the floor – and that it did not much matter which was which (Plate 2.17)? For all Greenberg's and Fried's considerable success in theorising a modernist tendency

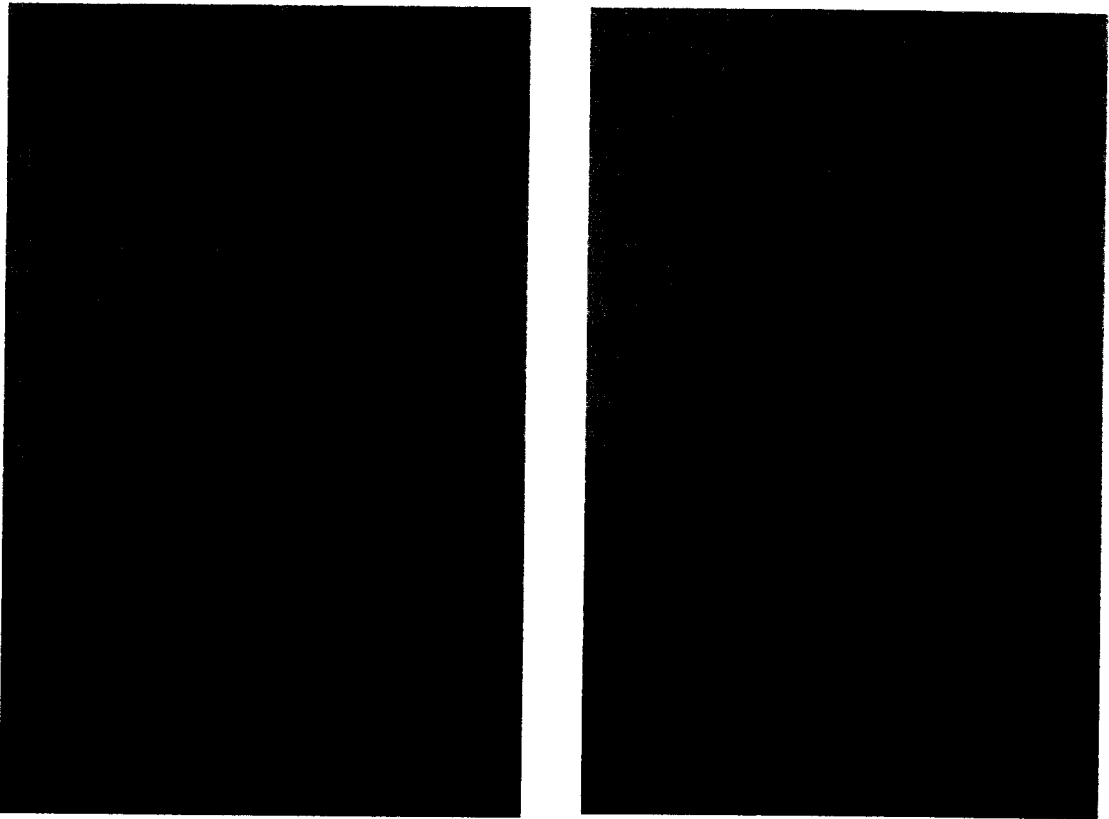


PLATE 2.17 Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, *Art & Language, Painting-Sculpture*, 1966–7, alkyd paint on masonite, two parts each 81 x 51 cm. (Private collection. Courtesy of the Lisson Gallery and the artists.)

in the fine arts, by the mid-1960s it had become practically and theoretically difficult to maintain either the macroscopic distinction (between art and other modes of social practice) or the microscopic focus (on the bounded surface within the frame) without disqualifying large areas of significant cultural activity, and without increasingly conservative investment in media that seemed simply to be running out of steam.

Of the time when he was working on the *Art & Language Index*, Baldwin has written, 'One of the things I recall being interested in was the way it might have killed off the "edges" of artworks.'²⁵ A conventional painting is contained within its framing edges. Indeed, the function of the frame is in part to manage the relations between the painting and the surrounding world of not-the-painting in such a manner as to emphasise the self-sufficiency of the former. But an index to a body of discursive text may do just the opposite. It will tend to raise awareness of the partial character of its contents – the possibility that relevant additions to any of its categories might be made from outside the particular sample offered to view. Later forms of *Index* exhibited by Art & Language in 1973 and 1974 were designed to take explicit account of those interests on the part of spectators/readers that must affect their responses to the material presented to view, and of the potentially limitless body of unindexed material that extends from the margins of any given text (Plate 2.18).

ART AND LANGUAGE

01 (c)

Select a topic of interest from the 'topic list' (02) and find a place in the text (on microfilm) that's indexed by that topic number. The index set of each concatenatory unit (expression) is potentially the topic set whose several members are designated '1' - '16'. Each line of the (microfilmed) index can be read as listing possible relations of 'going-on' (e.g., A to B, B to C, etc.) in discourse. The numerals '1'... '16' refer to the items in the topic list. 'x' is a bound variable substitutable for a term designating any relevant pair of items of the text which instantiate the relation A to B... etc.

No textual items are named in the index... it merely lists the kinds of item (relational individuals) that can be considered together in relation to one another.

Select a concatenation expression that seems promising (as a relation). You can continue to uncover figure-ground circumstances with respect to the grammar (logic) of concatenation by trying to map the continuance of a concatenation relation with respect to your interest (hence selection) of either a topic or an item of text. You are considering the sets which are the life conditions of your interest(s).

Topic List (02 (c))

- 1) Idiolect
- 2) Ideology
- 3) Ideology revision
- 4) Interest
- 5) Technology/Bureaucracy
- 6) Modalities
- 7) Pragmatics
- 8) Situations... Guessing who...
- 9) Socialization
- 10) Indexicality
- 11) Going on grammar
- 12) AL Teleology
- 13) Community presuppositions
- 14) Good faith, bad faith
- 15) Darwinian descent
- 16) History/Methodology

PLATE 2.18 Art & Language, *Index 05*, 1973, instructions for reading the index, photostat, dimensions variable. (Collection Philippe and Carine Meaille, France.)

The moment of 'postmodernism'?

The concept of *postmodernism* was not to gain currency in the art world until the later 1970s, but once the term took hold it would be widely applied to aspects of the art of the later 1960s with which modernist theory and criticism found itself uneasy, or to which it was downright hostile. Now, when that period is reviewed in the light of hindsight, various otherwise disparate incidents and manifestations tend to be grouped together as signs of the decline of modernism and the establishment of the postmodern. In fact, I think we should be cautious about assuming too rigid a distinction between modernism and the postmodern. It is now common in English-language art history and criticism to conceive of modernism as both a phase and a tendency in western art, lasting approximately a hundred years from the 1860s to the 1960s. However, we should bear in mind that the concept of a mainstream 'modernist art' – from Manet's markedly artificial works to the post-painterly abstraction of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland – was not widely theorised until the very end of the period in question. The most forthright exposition of that concept, Greenberg's essay 'Modernist Painting,' was not published until 1960, and was little discussed until after its reprinting in the European journal *Art and Literature* in 1965. It was not included in *Art and Culture*, the volume of Greenberg's collected essays first published in 1961, which appeared in paperback in 1965 and which publicised his views outside the relatively restricted magazine audience to which those essays had originally been addressed.²⁶

What I mean to suggest is that, where art was concerned, the advancement of a self-conscious art-historical understanding of modernism was in itself an enabling condition and perhaps even an early manifestation of *postmodernist* theory and practice – that is to say, of those very tendencies and values by which modernism was to be opposed. It was a sign, in other words, that in regarding the critical development of art one might stand apart from those modernist tendencies that Greenberg had represented as 'spontaneous and subliminal' and as 'altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice and never a topic of theory,'²⁷ and treat them as just that – a topic of theory. This, I think, is what the Conceptual Art movement stood for, in its English-language manifestations at least – this grasping at alternative theory in the face of a newly established modernist account of modern art, and of its values and its development. The perception driving this movement was that the account in question had become unsustainable even as it achieved dominance. To a sceptical eye, what the modernist critics represented as inescapable and *involuntary* conditions of aesthetic practice appeared increasingly like the habits of mind of a failing power – one that in restricting its own focus became the more easily resisted.

We should be quite clear about what was involved. Modernist theory proposed that a 'spontaneous and subliminal' self-critical process lay at the heart of the practice of art – a process that was thus somehow prior to language, or out of reach of language. It was just this process that led to art being *good*. But once that very process had itself been theorised, the one thing it could no longer be was spontaneous and subliminal. Nor was it any

longer out of reach of language. It was as though the painter standing in front of the canvas, brush in hand, found that what was on the end of that brush was no longer a medium of wordless expression; it was art history, art criticism, art theory, concepts ... *words*. 'I'm believing painting to be a language, or wishing language to be any sort of recognition', Johns wrote in a sketchbook some time before 1964.²⁸ Commencing in 1959, he had painted a number of works in which colours seem to compete with, or to be replaced on the surface of the canvas by, their verbal labels (Plate 2.19). Meanwhile, a highly literate kind of modernist criticism continued to expatiate on the 'purely visual' virtues of ever-more refined kinds of abstract painting and sculpture. It was coming to seem increasingly as though the art in question was *made* of the very theoretical concepts that represented it as spontaneous and 'prior to theory'. In 1965, in his long and forceful essay 'Three American Painters', Fried could claim with some justice that 'criticism that shares the basic premises



PLATE 2.19
Jasper Johns, *Jubilee*,
1959, oil and
collage on canvas,
153 x 112 cm.
(© Jasper Johns/
VAGA, New York/
DACs, London 2004.)

of modernist painting finds itself compelled to play a role in its development closely akin to, and potentially only somewhat less important than, that of new paintings themselves'.²⁹ But such claims were open to a different interpretation than the one Fried had had in mind. As Ramsden has said, referring back to the moment of the late 1960s, 'It had become necessary, finally, that the "talk" went up on the wall.'³⁰

Under these circumstances, putting a text where business-as-normal might expect a painting was a kind of aggressive avant-garde act: an open assertion, perhaps, of a suppressed truth about the relations that now obtained between artistic practice and criticism. There were also class connotations – more evident in the UK than in the USA – in the movement of artists onto the ground of writing, thereby reclaiming the initiative from their supposedly better-educated interpreters. There are connections to be made here with the development over the same period of certain intellectual critiques of modernist art history. It had become increasingly clear that the establishment of a modernist canon entailed a degree of strategic amnesia regarding those untidy avant-garde enterprises from earlier periods – and particularly from the moment of the Russian Revolution – in which the barriers between art and language had been broken down in the interests of cultural and political provocation. In other narratives than those of modernist art history, such enterprises might be reinstated so as to furnish significant practical precedents.

The strategy of putting the talk up on the wall could also claim some substantial theoretical support. In 1964, the philosopher Arthur Danto visited an exhibition of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (Plate 2.20) at the Stable Gallery in New York. His conclusion was that Warhol had demonstrated a fundamental point about the essence of art. In Danto's view there was nothing intended to distinguish Warhol's Brillo boxes from the ones on the supermarket shelf, *except* for the all-important fact that the former were art and the latter were not. What this appeared to him to demonstrate was that art could not be defined in terms either of the intrinsic or of the manifest properties of specific works; it could not be determined by what the viewer feels or sees in front of it. Rather, it must depend on some factor 'outside' the work: in other words, in Danto's view, on its being the object of a theory of art developed by some relevant community – in this case the artworld. 'To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.'³¹ To put the matter crudely, what makes the difference between one object and another is the *discourse* that it provokes. The Brillo box in the gallery 'speaks' of art and the world and of the relations between them as the one on the shelf does not. Danto's conclusion was that artworks are not to be defined as things made through the application of artistic techniques; rather, they are brought into existence *in theory*.

Against such a thesis it might be argued that it drives an unreasonably broad wedge between sensual experience and theory, and between artistic techniques and theory. It might be granted that Danto's philosophical argument is entirely relevant to such actually readymade objects as Duchamp's snow shovel – and to the paradox that there may be two perceptually indistinguishable objects only one of which is a work of art – but that it is necessarily inattentive to the thoroughly perceptible differences between



PLATE 2.20 Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964, synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on wood, 43 x 43 x 37 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. DIGITAL IMAGE © 2003 The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Photo: Scala, Florence. 358.1997. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./ARS, New York and DACS, London 2004.)

Warhol's original Brillo boxes, which were made of wood with roughly silkscreened decoration, and the commercially produced cardboard boxes on which they were modelled. For our present purposes, however, what is significant about Danto's argument is not so much its validity as its timeliness. It seemed to answer to that combination of restless testing of the nature of art and copious theorising that had increasingly characterised the various avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. And more enticingly still, it allowed a significant part in the establishment of new art to just those 'external' factors that modernist criticism was concerned to eliminate from its considerations – among them the effect of its own stipulations. In fact, it was clear to some people in the mid-1960s that work such as Judd's was 'installational' in the sense that it functioned as art with regard not only to the state of modernist theory, but also to the art gallery as a condition of the New York artworld. Danto's work may not have been responsible for the tendency to identify modernism as an institution in its own right, but in initiating what was to become a dominant 'institutional theory' of aesthetics, he certainly provided that tendency with some supporting argument.³² As he himself observed in a much later publication, Greenberg's modernist narrative was progressive, just like the earlier Renaissance narrative that saw art 'getting better and better over time at the "conquest of appearance"':

That narrative ended for painting when moving pictures proved far better able to depict reality than painting could. Modernism began by asking what painting should do in the light of that. And it began to probe its own identity. Greenberg defined a new narrative in terms of an ascent to the identifying conditions of the art. And he found this in the material conditions of the medium. Greenberg's narrative ... comes to an end with Pop ... It came to an end when art came to an end, when art, as it were, recognized there was no special way a work of art had to be.³³

'When art came to an end' 1

The circumstance Danto describes might well appear liberating: not literally the end of art, but the end of art regulated by the application of specific criteria and by the expectation of historical development. Writing in the catalogue to the 'When Attitudes become Form' exhibition in 1969, the French critic Grégoire Müller claimed that 'With this new movement, art is liberated from all its fetters.'³⁴ Yet where there are no limits there can be no significance. In the absence of any appropriate technical category or genre, just how was any given work of art to be distinguished from the rest of the signifying stuff that decides our experience of the world? If the protocols of modernist criticism were to be abandoned or overthrown, what – if anything – was to be put in their place? The question that hangs over the Conceptual Art movement is this: if it is no longer useful or relevant to distinguish between works of art through analyses of their shapes and colours, if, indeed, there are no intrinsic properties by means of which an object can be recognised as an *art* object, how is criticism – and more importantly *self-criticism* – to proceed, and on what basis? If it is the case that certain works are 'talked'

into importance by the inhabitants of the artworld, is this all that criticism really amounts to? Are there other grounds on which to distinguish the exceptional from the indifferent – or from the mildly interesting, the passable, the good-in-its-way and so on – or are such distinctions bound in the end to lose all substance once accuracy of resemblance ceases to be a relevant criterion? It is certainly the case that since the early 1970s the concept of 'quality' has become virtually unusable in art criticism, and has had to be abandoned to its compromising association with the snobbery of connoisseurship and the auction house, and to its disastrous co-option to the jargon of educational administrators and management consultants. Does this tell us something about the failure of a specific cultural regime – one that can no longer plausibly defend the autonomy of its values – or is it indicative of a significant change in the very meaning of art, which until recently had tended to be virtually synonymous with its perceived aesthetic merit?

In normal discussions of previous avant-garde movements – Cubism, say, or Constructivism – the objects that came into critical consideration had for the most part had discernible features in common, and could be compared on the basis of these. Even in the case of abstract painting and sculpture, candidates for attention were united by their adherence to one medium or the other and by their recognisable *avoidance* of descriptive representation. With Conceptual Art, however, we are dealing with a range of enterprises in which problems of identification and description are often the very stuff that the viewer is invited to address. Is an endless playing with the definition of art all that art now has to offer? Should we be comparing the relevant works on the basis of their ingenuity in posing the problems in question, so that the less probable it is that the object proposed should be accepted as a work of art, the 'better' it is *as art*?

It is time, finally, to return to the works referred to at the outset of this chapter. I want particularly to consider the different ways in which language is used in some of those illustrated in Plates 2.2–2.7. While it is significant that the use of language is a common feature, we should be careful about drawing conclusions from this, unless and until it is clear just what it is in each case that is 'the work' under consideration. Kosuth, for instance, claimed in 1969, 'I didn't consider the photostat a work of art; only the idea was art. The words in the definition supplied the *art information* ... the shift from the perceptual to the conceptual is a shift from the physical to the mental.'³⁵ In his view, the work of art is not the photostat mounted on the wall, but the idea of the *idea* of theory as art. Its interest, for Kosuth, lies in the critical effect that this idea has on our thought about art. The definition of 'meaning' (Plate 2.6) is one of a long series of such definitions issued by the artist in 1967–8. Others include 'art', 'painting', 'time', 'square', 'colour', 'theory' and 'definition' itself. Faced with any two of these it would not, I think, make a great deal of sense to ask which is the more successful work of art. It would be more to the point to give critical consideration to the character of the series as a whole. We might ask, for instance, whether there is some common aspect to the words included, and whether there are others that would definitely not fit. By such means we work for an understanding of the nature of the system in question, and of the kinds of critical observations that may be relevant. The process is not so very different from that by which we learn how to make critical distinctions between different kinds of painting. To

respond to the character of Mondrian's painting is to perceive the principle that a drip of paint on its surface would read as an accident and would spoil it. But to apply the same principle to a painting by Pollock would be to miss the point of his work. We make such judgements intuitively, I think, even before we have any real theoretical understanding of the works in question – and as part of the process of acquiring it. It is on the basis of such intuitions that theory and criticism are most soundly developed. In the case of Kosuth's work, addition of the definition of, say, 'Sin' or 'Turnip' to his series would seem like a kind of offence to its intentional style: the equivalent of a drip on the surface of a Mondrian. The one would import dramatic and irrelevant considerations of morality and of religion, the other would connect too immediately to the material and natural world. To sense this is to begin to recognise a kind of intellectual decorum by which the series of definitions is itself defined: a decorum that aligns itself with the priorities of modernist criticism and theory.

Writing in 1969, Kosuth claimed that 'Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art.'³⁶ For all his vaunted anti-modernism, Kosuth's assumption that the modern artist is necessarily concerned with problems 'intrinsic to art' is one that he shared with the Fried of 'Three American Painters'. However, in place of specific traditions of painting and sculpture he proposed a tradition of inquiry into the function of art that he saw as initiated by the readymades of Duchamp:

The 'value' of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art ... Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art's nature. And to do this one cannot concern oneself with the handed-down 'language' of traditional art.³⁷

This is very close to suggesting that the value of any given work of art lies in its sheer improbability.

Weiner's texts, on the other hand, sketch out particular situations and processes or list the properties of a hypothetical object or physical state of affairs (Plate 2.7). Asked in 1969, 'What is the subject matter of your work?' he replied, 'Materials'.³⁸ For the reader/spectator or 'receiver' of the text, what follows from it is a possible realisation of the physical circumstance that it describes. As descriptions the texts are typically highly general and imprecise – allowing, perhaps, for some resonance to develop between description and realisation. In any given case the realisation may be either actual or imaginary, according to whether either Weiner or the receiver (curator or purchaser) has 'built' the piece in question, or whether it remains 'unbuilt'. In Weiner's words, each of these possibilities is 'equal and consistent with the intent of the artist', so that 'the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership'.³⁹ If you bought a work by Weiner in 1969 (which at the time would have cost you exactly \$1,000) you would receive a piece of paper with the specification of the work, signed by the artist, and would then be able to decide whether to have the artist realise it, to realise it yourself in whatever form seemed appropriate, or to leave it unrealised. If you were a curator installing a work for exhibition you would similarly make the decision whether to have it realised or not.

