Art & Language’s Afterlife
in The Philippe Méaille Collection

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Michael Baldwin, a member of Art & Language, did the voice-over for a documentary about the Georges Pompidou Centre in 1982. In little more than twenty minutes, the artist provided a rigorous description of the institution. The editing combined footage of inside the Pompidou Centre, invaded by thousands of visitors, with other shots filmed outside in the streets. Outside the museum, various crowds demonstrated and were confronted by riot police. The programme, produced by The Open University in collaboration with the BBC, was originally supposed to be educational. To judge from the tone, however, it could be deemed an exercise in institutional critique, the same kind of artistic practice associated with Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher or Andrea Fraser. The political, economic and social questioning of the museum carried out by these artists constitute what we nowadays call, broadly speaking, artistic research. Baldwin’s commentary threw out a ‘critical and provocative’ observation about the modern art museum housed in the Pompidou Centre. To his mind, that was ‘a strategic and administrative response to the 1968 events’. He went on to say that ‘its raw materials are people’, and after commenting on its genuine construction lattice, considering it a place for ‘the spectacle following the death of culture’, he concludes with a remark about the impression the massive building left. ‘Inside’, the voice-over said, ‘practice is made a mythology’. Meanwhile, the screen continued to show artworks hanging on the museum’s walls.

This television programme does not, officially, form part of Art & Language’s work. Instead, it comes across more as a journalistic variant of Art & Language’s discourse, something not to be taken as an institutional criticism. It consists simply of an analysis of cultural policy which avoids the theatrical components which institutional critique has made us so used to. This programme’s insertion into the realms of education

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1 Art & Language has comprised, among others, Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, Ian Burn, Charles Harrison, Harold Hurrell, Joseph Kosuth, Philip Pilkington, Mel Ramsden and Dave Rushton. In 1977, Baldwin and Ramsden took over Art & Language’s practice, maintaining its essayist and self-critical nature. From 1969, the publication Art-Language offered public access to the multitheoretical field in which Art & Language developed their initiatives during the sixties, seventies and eighties. The most recent positions adopted by the artists Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden take up the perception of their own collective past.

2 Beaubourg was written and presented by Michael Baldwin (The Open University and BBC, 1982). The programme was transmitted with a disclaimer to the effect that it did not represent the views of the BBC. This was almost unknown in the BBC’s Open University output.
associates it with one of the most downgraded genres in the chain of artistic production. ‘The paradigmatic site of modern art in the mind of its producers is the museum.’

Education sits apart from art production. It is segregated from the sphere of reproduction. ‘The sites of modern art … [for example], the classroom, art school, studio, the art magazine and the gallery’ – to quote the very same ones Baldwin mentioned – make up an alternative distribution network. These other spaces, often misvalued, have brought about specific production conditions throughout Art & Language’s history: from the days when Michael Baldwin and Terry Atkinson were teaching at Coventry College of Art, then through the magazine Art-Language, the group’s principal interface with the public, and to the studio practice which the same Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden maintain today. This explains the heterogeneity of the materials which make up The Philippe Méaille Collection of Art & Language Works. One should not be surprised that a collective which has been active for almost fifty years would generate such diversity. More than five hundred works and documents are highlighted in the collection, reflecting the centrality of writing in the second half of the sixties and the following decade, together with hundreds of other items. The materials take the various forms of exhibition work, documents, preparatory notes and different kinds of publication. Every collection brings a certain contingency into view and The Philippe Méaille Collection of Art & Language Works is not immune to this.

A large-scale canvas, dated the same year as Baldwin’s documentary and which is part of the collection, represents Art & Language’s studio as a space occupied by multiple conceptions of artistic practice. The chaos to be seen in Index: The Studio at 3 Wesley Place in the Dark [1982, p. 110] is not a product of pictorial naturalism. Neither is it gratuitous that the studio is in darkness as if there had been a power cut. By showing it submerged in a half-light, the studio takes on an allegorical dimension. The myth of practice forces the workshop to position itself as the antithesis of the museum. As a product of the Enlightenment, the museum abhors darkness. As a result, in this painting the studio is relegated to a pre-institutional order. At the beginning of the eighties – a time when production shifted to the institution – the studio was chosen as the place to display the already convulsive, for the day, history of Art & Language. The disparate fragments are shown bereft of order and clarity – in a disarray that frustrates interpretation and avoids at all costs any incursion into the mythology of practice of which Baldwin spoke in the documentary. Art & Language’s workshop refuses to let itself be turned into the projection of a story that conforms to professional or institutional categorisation. Far from registering an orthodox division of labor, Art & Language took over – or took upon themselves – the romantic cliché of the artist in their workshop rather than refusing to recognise it. By any reckoning, this sounds contradictory to the spirit of a group famed for its fierce criticism of the abstract expressionist ego and of the workshop home of the myth.3

Index: The Studio at 3 Wesley Place in the Dark dashed the last hopes that the artistic bohemian might redeem the culture of neoliberalism. In the terms which Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello brought into play in The New Spirit of Capitalism, all the demands of the ‘artist critique’ inspired by the deregulation of work, as happens in the art field, have been seen off by today’s capitalism. What is more, the sort of criticism which called for more ‘autonomy’, ‘creativity’ and ‘authenticity’ in the spirit of capitalist enterprise has descended into crisis. As these authors say, ‘above all, its crisis comes from its apparent success and the ease with which it was recovered and then used by capitalism’.4 The initial strategy of Art & Language lay in not being critics of everything they were expected to be critical about – in being unpredictable. The frantic transitions which Art & Language underwent in the previous decade cancelled the validity of the art system’s most orthodox antagonisms. From 1976, Joseph Beuys and Hans Haacke were the opportune targets of the distrust Art & Language expressed at a political art which was too sure of its own superior morality.5 Although Art & Language were to receive, at the beginning of the seventies, accusations of formalism by ‘mimicking philosophers’,6 their career left no doubt that the emblematic theory which characterised the collective had been the product of conditions of transitivity (dynamic transitivity),7 transitionality (dialogical continuum),8 and transformation (transformational derestriction).9 These were conditions that could generate changing scenarios for the production of art which invested in an intellectual effort on the part of young people without a managerial and professionalised sense of what work they might do – whether they might be artists or not. The linguistic turn allowed them to move from the work as visual reminiscence to text as the work; from the Post-Minimalist object to Duchampian nominalism; from the use of philosophy as reference to that as primary material; from conversation as a complement to work into the place of work; from aestheticism to ideology; from art criticism to cultural policy; from text to painting and from painting to text; from analytical rigour to literary informality; and from the sincere to the inauthentic. A list of transitions which often bars Art & Language from whichever historical retelling and distances it from any stable, fixed and recognisable category. This makes The Philippe Méaille Collection into a kind of refugee camp, a place of exception which takes in work of uncertain status.

If one had to evoke The Philippe Méaille Collection synthetically, the resulting scene would strongly resemble that which we see in Index: The Studio at 3 Wesley Place in the Dark. In the centre of the composition there would be a mass of documents among which there would be notes, drafts, manuscripts, edits, first proofs, photocopies and

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9 Ibid., p. 68.
microfiches generated by different group members. An avalanche of writings among which barely a single voice can be discerned and in which authorial issues give way to questions of authority, much more significant than the identification of who’s who. Texts such as *Mirror Piece* [1965, p. 26], *Text as Performance* [1965–66, p. 26], *Acid Boxes* [1966, p. 28] and *Lecher System* [1969, p. 34] were already offering strategies of self-destruction, self-concealment and self-exegesis. Their rhetorical style was identified with analytical philosophy and anticipated the difficulties these proposals were to encounter when they came to circulate as art objects. Even before they were rejected as illegible, they presented themselves by means of writing that was often opaque. These are difficulties which such works continue to face today. In the proceedings of *Soft Tape* [1966, p. 37], another inexistant work, Mel Ramsden had said “thus we will consider “words” – either spoken or written – as a necessary part of the objects.”¹⁰ The text did not substitute another object; it was the object. The dialectic between the virtuality of these works and the mere existence as text satisfied their authors. Thanks to this promise, explored once more in the paintings in the *Hostages* series [1989–91, pp. 139–42], the work enrolled in a cycle of extended existence. Just as Peter Osborne has said about Sol LeWitt’s *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, it is all about an artistic process of infinite becoming.¹¹

This huge collection of documents, which is no more than the material residue of a very wide-ranging conversation, poses the challenge of rescuing a hidden form out of the heterogeneity which nestles within them. This task was to be carried out by the indexes, beginning in 1972, but can be seen in retrospect as a model susceptible to extrapolation to The Philippe Méaille Collection as a whole. The connections, contextualisations and comparisons within the universe of Art & Language’s discourse, as Philip Pilkington has said, would prevent anyone exercising a psychological privilege over the contents.¹² Thus we cannot expect that a contemporary reader might attempt the opposite. There is no chance to work out a cognitive vantage position in respect to this ever expanding discursive practice. The philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine uses an analogy to describe different individuals who have both acquired a given language, as in the case of two hedges whose external appearances are very similar while the internal structures of the two differ enormously. ‘The anatomical details of twigs and branches will fulfill the elephantine form differently from bush to bush, but the overall outward results are alike’.¹³ What the indexes aspired to represent was the distinctions between anatomical details and the shared form which harboured them. That is to say, between the details and minimal linguistic units of a way of thinking peculiar to Art &

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Language and the theoretical and methodological models in which they took shelter. In the context of The Philippe Méaille Collection, Quine’s analogy is useful in understanding Art & Language’s policy towards the seeming freedom and diversity in which liberal capitalism’s artist was operating. The body of subjective reactions which Modernism supposed in the face of certain aesthetic products represented the counter-example to this structure. If the convergence of Modernity’s own aesthetic judgements came about tacitly, what the indexes were aiming for was the empirical reconstruction of those coincidences and divergences of opinion. That was their mission.

The posterity of these documents, and the conversation they hold, depends on the use we make of this collection of papers which with the passage of time are becoming ever more yellowed. The museums which in recent times have incorporated spaces for the management of archives and study centres are in a position to restore them, but we do not know if they will be able to preserve their potential. Advanced conservation methods will save the papers but will not prevent their reification. Such an overwhelming mass of documents demand a performative response which should now rescue them from the display cabinet, the usual destination in this sort of practice. In Art & Language’s career, there is a significant difference between the kind of treatment texts were subject to in the different indexes of the first half of the seventies – which are widely represented in The Philippe Méaille Collection (pp. 86–109) – and how discursive production is processed a decade later through paintings, of which there are significant examples too. Research into the vicissitudes of meaning in the context of conversation and the modelling of the processes of learning and socialisation, despite carrying out the experiment such that it ‘does not (should not) “exhibit” incompleteness in any dramatic way’, pushed the group to exhaust solutions based in logic. After this analytical climax, Art & Language moved on to adopt strategies to disturb the contents. In *Index: Incident in a Museum XVI* [1986, p. 60], a number of copies of the magazine *Art-Language* were pressed against the surface of the painting, so that the central area of the work was covered by a thick black ink-stain. The articles blurred together, producing a blotch of illegible text, a ruinous image with a view to Art & Language’s posterity. This, however, is the way in which Art & Language – adopting a sceptical position toward the sanctification of Conceptual Art – escaped from a teleological narrative. Their genuine tendency to self-immolation – which so resembles the thanatophilia attributed to the avant-garde – is a refusal of the instinct to survive. By this means, Art & Language disarm any attempt at a philological approach to their history. In this sense, it is closer to Dieter Roth’s *Literaturwurst* than any other form of Conceptual Art.

The destiny of Art & Language’s conversation does not necessarily depend on its survival as material – in the form of works or documents. As Paolo Virno – one of the principal representatives of Post-Fordist thinking – came to say, a dialogical style of work ‘takes on the appearance of an activity–without-a-work, resembling in every way

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those virtuoso executions whose basis lies in an evident relationship with the presence of others’.¹⁵ This definition of intellectual work which has been assimilated into the modes of production of cognitive capitalism – which came into being in the early nineties – betrays the assimilation of the most radical artistic practices into the new neoliberal economy. At the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties, what had for Art & Language been an exceptional way of working, organised around communication and discursive exchange, began to be presented as a normalised way of working. If the Index, which had needed a considerable investment of time to exemplify its internal relationships, had been produced at the beginning of the eighties, it would surely have been posed as a computational problem – and indeed there are indications in The Philippe Méaille Collection that some attempts were made in this direction [p. 109] – and not as a problem of social organisation, which is what it ultimately became. While the Index, and the ways of working which were associated with it, represented an exception in respect of other classical ways of working in capitalist society, the Index could be defended as an aesthetic production. As Theodor W. Adorno insists in his Aesthetic Theory, the unlimited freedom of art depends upon the limited freedom of other social spheres.¹⁶ Once this difference is neutralised, it means that art has ceased to be an autonomous activity with the capacity to criticise the society in which it is produced.

The hermetic, opaque and difficult reputation which Art & Language have acquired – and perhaps indeed cultivated – up to now has guaranteed a position of exception among the movements of the second half of the twentieth century, a situation which could however come to be reversed within a system where marginality fosters hegemony. Before Art & Language end up in modern art’s dustbin – a place where, according to Mel Ramsden, they might happily place themselves – The Philippe Méaille Collection grants new life to materials which still suffer an alarming institutional precariousness. The new museums have made people into their raw materials, just as Michael Baldwin suggested, but have not been able to normalise discursive production nor take it out of its radical otherness in the system of modern art. Writing remains confined to the archives, classified among the documents and effectively exiled from the apparatus of the exhibition. This tendency might nevertheless be reversed. What is required – to paraphrase a little-known text from Art & Language’s early days – is the notion of a 368 years old spectator [p. 30]. Given that ‘It seems to have been blandly and numbly assumed that the emphasis in fine art practise will remain upon the ancient procedure of “shallow” context object making’,¹⁷ it would be advisable to apply the category of ‘event’ to Art & Language. Following that essay’s recommendations, Art & Language


would need the same attention that is given to a football match. That is to say, not as viewer of a work but as a watcher of an event, which might occupy a fraction of history longer than the one which is dictated by the succession of artistic styles and movements: a not entirely discountable possibility which might help us to see how papers yellow decade to decade. We would face the implicit risk however, of ignoring their written contents.

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