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‘Landscape with St George Delivered at Night’

Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden, Philippe Méaille and Carles Guerra

Quaderns portàtils
MACBA

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Landscape with St George Delivered at Night

A Conversation between Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden, Philippe Méaille and Carles Guerra.

Carles Guerra: Bearing in mind that any collection is in many ways a random collection of objects or items, the first question I want to address is how representative can a collection, such as this one, be? How representative is it in terms of the history of Art & Language?

Michael Baldwin: Well, I think the concept of 'representative' or 'representativeness' is really quite a problematic one in connection with what we have produced over the years. It's quite easy to imagine a representative selection of the work of Picasso – to take the standard autographic model of artistic authenticity. In our case, the work is more complexly constructive and social in so far as it is constructed out of a varying and changing set of conversations and practical initiatives. We have often thought of it as a series of essays in the Benjaminian sense. But also increasingly as a series of unfolding or refolding chapters in a modernist novel! A fiction. Or certainly some set of guises, disguises or plantings of spies or people who hack into aspects of the prevailing system. So it's very difficult to know how to regard anything as 'representative'. I suppose you could say in a positive sense that, because quite a lot of the collection is devoted to scattered documents, it is one of the only collections of Art & Language work brave enough to try to represent that conversational, discursive and social aspect of the work. In that sense it's representative. Of course not in the ordinary sense in which 'representative' is understood.

Mel Ramsden: There are times when I look at Philippe's collection and I think 'he should have had one of those' or 'he should have had one of these' – but not very often. The way Art & Language seems to 'pop-up' is not as a linear series of works but a bit more like a weed. It just 'pops-up'. I think the work in Philippe's collection is interesting because of the way various things just 'pop-up' unexpectedly against other works. But they are also connected in very strange ways.

MB: That is also the narrative of his acquisition.

M: Yes, absolutely. His collection was not done in a rational way, whatever that means. He had his eye on this or he had his eye on that. But he happened to get whatever we happened to have. Or what he could get his hands on.

MB: Making claims about this conversational character is not to abnegate or to deny that one has a certain responsibility for a kind of production. But rather that the emphasis, if you are engaged in this kind of 'performance' (you could call it), is that it is always prominent in the nature of any conversational enquiry. The question is not just what do you do but also 'what does what you do, do to you?' As we were saying the other evening, it would be traceable to Plato's *Parmenides*. It is at that point that the work and the question of the work becomes a moral and political one (and here I would even invoke Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein). If created in this conversational, discursive circumstance, what you do will also do something to you. You then have to have whatever reason or basis to continue to make some contribution to the continuation and to the social 'worthwhileness' of that conversation or that practice. At that point, even on the surface of the work or overt content of the work, there is a moral and political struggle. It is a kind of question that Schopenhauer would say is a question of the will. It is right down there. When you have work that is based down there, the question of continuity or discontinuity has to be phrased in language that is not particularly well adjusted to the idea of autographic production. Although, later Art & Language grew in this absurd mess in the United States and involved a series of misapprehensions by people who had been students of Terry Atkinson and myself, it developed a strange sort of ordinality. And of course that is ok! I mean the point is that it was never a cardinal thing. You could never say how many, only who I met and who I talked to. In the crazy days of the *Indexes* that was actually where it was aimed: at that sort of ordinality. But unfortunately there will be certain people contributing to that ordinal set who will want to turn it into a cardinal one. And they fuck it up! So that happened. It has not been consistently a discursive and open practice. There have been moments of closure and blocking. I suppose that is inevitably going to happen given the social complexity of a conversation. But right from early days, even before Mel and Ian met Terry and me, there was a point where the work became something you handed to another for change, for correction, for modification. It ceased to have anything but a sense of collaboration. Even if the handing of the work to one's interlocutor involved the interlocutor remaining silent.

CG: Could we say that the collection is a massive 'handing in' of a portion of the history of Art & Language?

MB: It is a series of tapes that were running and pieces have been cut off. And Philippe has some great big chunks of that tape.

M: You could make an argument that Philippe's collection is more representative than some of Charles Harrison's more laboured attempts to go through the history work by work. For some reason his collection manages to capture some of those key aspects, in its arbitrariness. Perhaps that's not the right word.

CG: Well, randomness, yes.

MB: It is, rather, a sort of structural complexity.

M: He pressed buttons and bits popped out that we weren't expecting to pop out next to other bits. And this is a kind of reflection of the actual practice of Art & Language.

MB: Again it is characteristic of the sort of practice we are engaged in. We have no mechanism to act as the police in relation to our work. It has to fall where it falls and grow where it grows. It's your turn Philippe!

Philippe Méaille: It's a kind of game that you play and you have to try and be significant.

MB: It's not a game. A game you make with moves and predetermined pieces.

P: Yes, but you are trying to be significant in the face of the time in which you are doing it.

MB: I see what you mean. We are playing with the rules that pre-exist us.

P: Rules given by museums. And things that are bigger than you are and bigger than you will be.

MB: Yes. There is a sense in which when you are hacking into a game, you will have to play that game to a degree. But, I would say that one thing about the discursive practice is that it is not a game. It is not a language game even in the sense Wittgenstein would understand it because the rules change. The problem with games is the rules don't change. You know as well as I do that the development of the rules of the neoliberal institution has shifted faster than we can keep up with. There is the new world of the Leon Trotsky School of Business Administration available to us!

CG: Since we are focusing on the specificities of this collection, could we talk about this theoretical, writerly production and this discursive practice? How can we think about the journey between the practice and the items that represent the practice? There are different historical moments that would deny the value of these pieces of paper. Thus they remain hidden from the market and therefore traditionally hidden from the visible exhibition space. And then when the bigger work gets sold and distributed you have to return to this second order value object, which is the original practice and then, presumably, these papers will enter the market. Later, when facing the opportunity of an exhibition, we find ourselves dealing with an art practice that hasn't been properly supported by the art institution. We have to discuss whether it makes sense to have all these texts on the table or not; whether these texts should be readable or not or whether these papers can mingle with other categories of work. We find ourselves in an insecure moment regarding your practice.

M: Are you talking about our practice or his collection or both?

CG: I'm talking about the idea that someone like Philippe considers all these papers as something that can enter a collection that he will read and engage with – that's quite novel.

P: My first wish was to get rid of the object.

MB: Are you a conceptual artist? (Laughter)

MB: Those papers, at the moment undergoing restoration, are objects. Believe me. This business is quite an odd thing. I can sort of understand why people collect. Although, I mostly disdain them. But I can sort of vaguely understand why people collect Abstract Expressionist paintings I suppose. Vaguely. But most collectors are almost incomprehensible to me. Charles Harrison, our late colleague, was a collector and that was equally incomprehensible to me. Because I do not have the capacity to easily imagine the desire that someone may have to collect. If collecting is associated with some ramification or desire then there are many forms of desire and Philippe's is rare.

M: Here is where you are right in saying that we play a game as we occasionally mess around with painting. I remember a series of paintings, the early 'Hostage' paintings, that have the appearance of a series of semi-Abstract Expressionist works. There are certain things you have to do in order to make that sort of painting. One of them is that you have to mean it!

MB: At the same time you had to be aware that painting in this way was a theatre, an imposture. That performance is planting something in the culture that the culture is not, even now, easily prepared to digest. I remember having a conversation in Madrid with a well-known Spanish painter, who was praising one of these paintings. And I said to him, has it crossed your mind that we might be kidding? I then tried to explain what I meant by kidding and then the conversation ended. It simply did not continue. There was no conversation to be had.

M: That's part of having an essayistic practice. It is always full of a kind of scandal – the whole business is regarded as 'inauthentic'.

MB: So the pieces that get chewed off or removed or appear in the market are the things that have a certain degree of consumability. What is brave about Philippe's collection is that he has collected very little of those consumable pieces.

CG: What is interesting about all this written stuff – the articles, essays, notes, manuscripts – is that you cannot have only one! You have to aim at having many and re-creating a meaning that is dispersed among a plethora of bits and pieces of paper. Consequentially you have to engage in an active reconstruction of a conversation that took place at a certain moment in the past and might well have the capacity to continue in the future.

MB: There is a super reification going on. I remember something that Mathew Jesse Jackson said. I said that Philippe has a lot of paper. And he said, 'yeah! And he who has the most yellowing paper wins! And in that sense Philippe wins!'

M: Really, you can collect anything. But there are very distinct categories. Paintings don't belong to documentation and documents don't belong to paintings and so on. But in the case of Philippe's collection there have been connections made between paper and paintings, other documents, things that are not works of art and things that were never meant to be seen, things that were workings out of things that were meant to lead towards a painting – there are all sorts of new connections there. In the good old days of Conceptual Art, in New York at least, people thought they were evading the capitalist system by working with bits of paper because they thought no one could collect them. But of course they can collect them – you can collect anything.

P: These objects are very interesting. We do not always agree on what this object is or where it belongs. Even now for Mel, Michael and myself it is a challenge to pick up an item and say where it belongs. Each time you pick up something you say oh, it is significant! And each time it becomes significant.

MB: Is it ever insignificant?

CG: This brings me to the fourth question. Can we describe the current collection as a by-product or result of a collaboration between you (the artist) and you Philippe (the collector)?

MB: There are some ways in which the artist might say they collaborate with a collector: the way in which the collector has a certain power to commission. In this case, I would say not. He is a friend, whatever moral and emotional difficulties and glories that entails. And in one way or another when you call someone your friend they begin to collaborate or conspire or fail. I would say I have never known anyone to collect the way he collects. I know he collects other things including ancient architecture. I find it very difficult to comprehend. But I vaguely know what brings him to want to acquire this stuff. And I also know that there are moments in which we seek to hide our stuff from him as much as give it to him and I'm never quite sure what those moments are. They are rather like the moments that characterise conversation. So in many ways we are engaged in a conversation.

M: I'm not trying to flatter you but you have been for the last ten years a kind of collaborator of ours in so far as the Jackson Pollock Bar, Mathew Jesse Jackson and Red Krayola have been. I've never thought of that before. It is a strange kind of collaboration that I would have a hard time unpacking. Except that it is a kind of friendship. Although, it's a bit beyond that.

MB: Sometimes when Philippe talks about what brought him to Art & Language, I am reminded of the sometimes maddening conversations which one had in the early sixties and seventies with American conceptual artists, who confidently saw themselves as abolishing the object and going beyond the object and reducing art to the idea. To our mind this is a ludicrous notion because, notwithstanding the conversational and collaborative tendencies that we have, the fact is that our pronouncements or our texts (which were a kind of new genre – neither literature nor philosophy – that was *sui generis* in some sense) are essentially opaque. And if you produce opaque stuff it is *ipso facto*. You embark upon a kind of conversational process. You don't necessarily even clarify it. You might even make it dirtier and muddier. But you embark on it and you have an imperative to do that.

CG: To summarise what we have so far discussed: what we are saying is that Philippe frantically engaged in collecting a conversation. This is in itself an unending or incomplete enterprise that cannot be objectified. Someone engaged in this production cannot just be a collector: whoever enters the conversation in any form becomes a collaborator.

MB: Well, in some ways we are making things sound much more mysterious than they actually are. The fact is that our society is built on property and increasingly on the atomisation of individuality and so forth. This is possessive individualism reaching its apogee in many ways. However, one has to see oneself as working towards doing as much as one can to wreck that development! We are virtually powerless to do it of course. Although I would like to think that we can hack-in and produce a kind of praise of poesy as opposed to philosophy.

P: It's very strange because a friend of mine told me a week ago that you can't be rich through your own work. What strikes me is that in fact the artist is producing property.

MB: Of course. This is saying nothing new but the old modernist program of negativity has been replaced by a discourse of material novelty and luxury goods. Everyone knows it and at the same time there is a whole discourse of art world language that purports to deny that or obfuscate it. What I'm trying to say is it is not as mysterious as it seems. A German TV station once asked me, 'What's it like to work with someone else?' And the reply I gave was, 'Do you know anyone who does not?' In fact it's not mysterious. It would be very mysterious if we did not work together! The more Romantic oeuvre is a mystification. It's an ideological construct, not a socially or theoretically sound idea. The fact that it persists in a post-Duchampian age is merely because it constitutes a sufficient quasi-poetic background to business. As long as the artist is sufficiently colourful and picturesque then that satisfies the materiality of the rest of his or her production. It's not a mystery that the Duchampian dispensation is addicted to a romantic ideal.

P: But, I don't see your position as cynical.

MB: No, we're not in that sense cynical.

P: We need that. Or you need that: to produce property. This transfer of property is important.

M: He does occasionally pay us for works! But not very much! (Laughter)

MB: He tends to be addicted to the buy-one-get-one-free school.

CG: Speaking about property, Philippe, we can say that you have compiled an interesting sample of writing and papers. But what is your sense of property in regards to this material? We are in a time where any text is bound to be endlessly appropriated or misappropriated and often misunderstood. So can we get a bit more precise about the notion of property in relation to these works?

P: We all know that there are very few readers of Art & Language texts until now.

M: No, no. There are thousands of them. Although it's not something you can actually quantify. You can't say that ten thousand people read that Art & Language text.

CG: Philippe, there is an interesting aporia in your collection. I always thought a piece like *Lecher System* (1969) was just an essay. And then all of a sudden I realised there is an actual piece: that it exists as a work and there is a photographic document of it. So I began to think whether the discursive practice was serving to erase or even hide the memory of the objects. Then all of a sudden, I hesitated again thinking about the structure of this situation. There is the photograph, the essay and the piece. How should one present this logic?

M: Some of that has historical basis because a lot of early so-called Conceptual Art came out of Minimalism. *The Air-Conditioning Show* (1966) was a kind of object but it was also a speculation about how that object could be defended as art. The whole problem in that particular period was whether it was the text or the object that was pertinent.

MB: But it also represents a social contingency. The fact that there exists a series of parallel conductors which will produce a standing wave and that would demonstrate an electronic principle and also demonstrate the principle that the object exists even when the evidence of the object existing is between waves (which is really all it's about). That object is an apparatus that you have to set up with your clamps and your Bunsen burners in a class in school or something like that. It operates in that way.
Art & Language itself was never founded around the existence of these works, which are specifically associated with two people who were to a degree peripheral. Their work was never quantified as Art & Language except in the case of *Lecher System*, which was. It serves as a kind of demonstrative apparatus and a provocation of a certain type of text. *The Air Conditioning Show* is again a post-minimalist gesture. It was published in 1967 in *Arts Magazine* and it was actually inserted in *Arts Magazine* by Robert Smithson! In due course he hated Conceptual Art but was perfectly happy with this notion. That gives you an idea of where it stands. In writing these texts about *Lecher System* or *Air Conditioning* we were producing opaque texts. These were not transparent gestures by the artists nominating things in a clear, transparent or Duchampian way. In other words, we took a power away from ourselves that quite a number of American artists have kept their hands on. They were regarding themselves as artists through asserting X as 'my art'. We recognised the potential absurdity of this and certainly the conservatism. In recognising this opacity we found ourselves more and more engaged in the production of virtual objects. For example in the late sixties and early seventies, I took the trouble to learn to operate a now quite obscure logical notation invented by polish logician Jan Lukasiewicz. This was a simplified form of symbolic logic in that it used only capital

and lowercase letters in strings to produce a kind of logical calculus. This was a logic that was, for the orthodox philosophers such as Quine or Donald Davidson, conceived in sin! Nevertheless, it was the logic that came to be called deontic logic: a logic of possibility and necessity. I learnt to use this as it fascinated me that we might be able to nominate or identify, in a Duchampian or opaque language, something that might exist or might not exist in the future. So the objects were more and more attenuated and began to inhabit the text far more than be nominated as something in the world. Our American colleagues then turned that rather primitive Duchampian gesture into what later became, in some cases a kind of inferior version of William Carlos William's poetry. An inferior version of, for example, *The Red Wheelbarrow* (1923). The fact that the art world found it so easy to consume is evidence I suppose of the relative illiteracy of the art world.

M: Why did you address that question to Philippe?

CG: I addressed this question to Philippe because in collecting the photographs and in some cases the objects he has contributed to raising this discussion. I am confronting this variety of objects and the discourses it triggers in a way that it would be tempting to forget about the original economy operating.

MB: Yes, but I think he was also collecting some of that material as you collect things that are hidden from view. You buy a box of bricolage and bricolage is a surprise to you or is not what you expected. I think that's what you get in some cases, especially with the slides or diapositives.

M: Ah, I see what you're talking about now. The slides.

CG: Exactly.

MB: But I would say that quite a lot of those things are pre-Art & Language or were never quantified as the work of Art & Language.

P: The collection is up to a point where it tells a story. We can give a sense around how Art & Language was born and where it went. And it came to the museum to be shared.

CG: This makes me reflect on the different production modes or archival modes that this collection traverses over time. Originally, as artists, you can control the work that goes out into the public domain – whether it is the publication *Art-Language*, the texts or else a work that goes on the wall or in an exhibition. But then over time the collection brings up objects, items and practices that were meant to be preparatory, transitional or forgettable. And now we are looking at them with precious attention – trying to make sense of every detail. And this is because the collection is fairly complete, fairly thorough. It is giving us the chance to read the genealogy of all these modes of production.

P: The category of 'forgettable things' is quite empty in my point of view.

MB: I think it becomes a question of one's own artistic, moral or political compunction about whether these things are forgettable or not. There are many artists who know very well how to make architectural embellishments out of flimsy ideas or quasi-poetics. This is not uncommon. It's perfectly possible to take any one of those yellowing bits of paper and to dignify it in a way that would render it consumable. The point that we are making in allowing it to remain is that this was a passing thought and it had better stay that way. There are moments when these things have been dignified far beyond their capacity to bear that dignity. We are not immune to occasional lapses of ontic scruple and allowing things to be made larger than they ought to be. That does happen! At the same time, these are very unstable objects and sometimes they refer. And that is one trajectory in the history of Art & Language. Sometimes they predate that new genre of discourse that was neither philosophy nor poetry but were effectively 'appropriative' texts. And those texts were transformed slowly (and in practice) into much more opaque things where the object was increasingly embedded into the text and ceased to be referred to by an outside. And that is a change and a development. Philippe's collection marks that moment of transformation from the post-minimal, quasi-Duchampian discourse to a discourse where Duchampian referentiality had been embedded as a matter of opaque content within a text itself.

P: Michael what is interesting about what you said is that (for example with *The Air Conditioning Show*) you have the manuscript, you have a certificate with the work, you have the work and you have a book that we could consider as representing the show. So, what is the most significant work?

M: The question of what is the work? That is of course the most interesting aspect. That's also something that you have to try and recover historically. As far as I know *Air Conditioning* was never produced as an air-conditioning room until 1972. It didn't need to be! A blank air-conditioned room – anyone can think of it. It can be in your head!

MB: Well you can think of it and I can think of it but we will have to have a conversation to see if we are thinking about the same thing. In other words we have to become intelligible to one another. And that seemed to be what is interesting about the development that occurred within that quasi-Duchampian beginning. It was the question of intelligibility to another.

M: Which means that if you wrote a text about an artwork that was floating in the sky somewhere, you had better ask someone else what they thought about it. Otherwise you risk being insane.

P: There is a big difference between writing about love and loving – between writing about a sensation and having a sensation.

M: Who's talking about love?

MB: I don't understand what point you are making.

P: Because Mel was talking about the fact that *Air Conditioning* was not built before 72' because there was no reason to build it before then – that writing about a blank space was enough. But I think that to have the air conditioning room built is important.

MB: We reverted to a commentary on this, very much later in the eighties. We produced a series of texts, the first of which was called *We Aim to be Amateurs*. In the text we promised to produce paintings, knowing of course that to promise to produce such a painting was essentially empty because it was impossible to determine whether a given painting performance on our part constituted satisfaction or not. So, we then attached these promises to paintings that could not conceivably be regarded as satisfying the promise. There was in fact a degree of automatic falsification built into that text. Because if I say 'If I had known you were coming I would have prepared dinner' and the answer is 'I came' then that conditional statement is in fact falsified, not confirmed. There is a sense in which by doing the painting you are falsifying the claim. So we visited it in an illustrative way perhaps. But this is something that has interested us from time to time and is no more alien to the production of things like paintings than it is to using yellowing bits of paper. Those paintings were just as unstable as the pieces of paper, since there is absolutely no limit on what can be made desirable.

P: Yes, but it is because yellowing paper is a part of twentieth century practice. It belongs to that moment.

M: Oh god.

MB: The yellower the better! So this interview is going to be transcribed by someone?

CG: Yes. Actually this would be an interesting point to address in relation to a certain moment when your practice was very much this: an editorial process or a conversation that would later be transcribed. The whole idea of transforming this particular mode of labour into items that can be collected is an interesting process and it happens quite rapidly. If one would like to play the art historian one would say that these administrative practices were anticipating a new form of labour.

M: We were ahead of our time! (Laughter)

CG: Indeed, and that is one of the values of your work. I always like to say that this conversational practice is a practice conducted by young people. You had no money to invest in the work but you had a lot of time to spend. And that was converted into capital.

MB: Well that's the point. As an artist I will learn to manipulate this obscure logical notation and that was acting outside my professional remit. At the same time one might say why the fuck shouldn't I try to learn that? Even if I learn it imperfectly. Even if I do it unprofessionally. Even if I fuck it up? Because to a degree one was putting a shoulder to the discursive, productive wheel. But that is a good description: your capital was your time. No one was buying this shit at the time. There were a few. People like Daniel Templon who was investing in it. Not because he understood it or sought to understand but because he thought that somehow it was even more radical than Duchamp but he didn't know why.

M: Because Catherine Millet told him.

MB: Yeah, because she told him.

CG: As Philippe was saying, I find interesting the particular moment when this conversational practice only required time – time that is disposable as long as you are young, as long as you are not a professional and as long as you are not limited by the structure, 'time equals X amount of money'. Art & Language anticipates contemporary forms of labour in the sense that all you invest is your knowledge, your creativity, your time, your curiosity, your willingness to participate in creating an exchange that will generate more text, more conversation and more ideas.

M: Yes, but I would add that some of that has to do with the class of people who were engaged in that sort of activity in the first place. Nobody had a studio! People worked from their kitchen table. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe said, ‘Oh, Art & Language only did conceptual art because they couldn’t afford to buy canvas and paint.’

CG: He was right!

M: Yes, in a way he was right. But it has to do with the kind of people involved in Art & Language who were people from a particular class. I’m not going to say working class or ‘my dad was a miner’, but there is a sense in which that is significant in terms of selling your labour.

MB: Or labour power. I call it labour power. It’s not the same as labour.

CG: You are investing what you have, which is time.

P: I think you are selling property not labour. As an artist you produce property.

M: That’s because you’ve had a conversation with someone who said everything is property!

CG: Isn’t that the saddest part of this story? When this original form of labour gets transformed into property, which becomes somehow frozen in the yellowing paper? How do you feel about this process?

P: The concept of property is interesting. To have property is a powerful position. That’s why being an artist is also a powerful position.

MB: It can also become a question about what you exchange for economic and biological survival. There is a moment in which that labour power is indeed sold.

CG: The extreme intelligence of that moment lies in the fact that you realised you had a power. You became aware that you didn’t have to go to the studio but rather enact what is made in the exchanges and conversations. There is the power, to my understanding.

MB: Yes, but it is also a historically bound moment. Mel once clearly described the content of the publications we were producing around the early seventies as having a kind of ‘independence’. What he meant by independence was that they owed nothing to professional philosophy or professional art: they had a degree of homelessness in a sense! I think it was only possible at that time, when what was exchanged was relatively slow or interpersonal. Indeed the professionalisation of thought and the institutionalisation of forms of philosophising had not really been accomplished in the way that it has been recently with the various distributive mechanisms available today. I could be wrong. I think Mel was suggesting that this degree of independence or marginality could only be sustained at a time when the modes of distribution were still primitive.

M: I don’t want to talk about fucking Conceptual Art, as some of this stuff was pre-Conceptual Art, beside Conceptual Art or around the corner from Conceptual Art. But there was always a sense in which Art & Language writing, in particular, doesn’t know who its audience is. A long time ago it really didn’t know who its audience was. It was whom you give the piece of paper to and who would talk back to you. It wasn’t addressed to any particular milieu of people. I’ve had cause to think about this recently as this is one of the things that was always a problem with Charles’ adaptation of some of that writing and his participation in that writing. Because he always knew who his audience was! And that always gave rise to a certain kind of difficulty. Does that make sense?

MB: Yeah, of course. And indeed, those people who had any kind of quantifying tendencies with regards to audience Mel always regarded as demonic or wrong!

M: I think it’s still true of a lot of the work.

CG: I’m thinking about all of this on relation to the exhibition at Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). The exhibition is going to occupy the second floor and I wonder, ‘is that enough’? Is the audience to be waited for or is the audience to be constructed for the work? How do we work with that?

M: You can’t run a place like this and wonder about who your audience is!

MB: Some of that unwillingness to care is a corollary of the recognition that one was engaged in an opaque activity. Another corollary is the fact that quite early in the seventies we had spotted the corruption of so called Institutional Critique. That’s to say that which had begun in Minimal Art as ‘drawing attention to the institution’. It very quickly began to transform into the jewellery hung about the architecture of the institution. And we began to write about it early in the seventies, as it just seemed obvious. It had to be recognized that what was left of institutional critique was probably in the discourse itself and certainly wasn’t to be found in merely allowing the institution to find a way to naturalise it. That was one of the points about the scruffy yellowing bits of paper – you can dignify them as much as you want but the instability of these bits of paper is in part its content of institutional critique. The opacity and not worrying about the audience are corollaries of that critical position against that corruption.

M: I wouldn't like to sound so pure and say that we never worried about what the audience thought because there are later works where we had some idea that it was going to a gallery and we had to make it work there. Not knowing what the audience was is not a pure position and it's not even an aspiration. I personally never had any idea about what I was doing. I was just putting one foot in front of the other! A certain kind of Institutional Critique came up after Conceptual Art became a tired old avant-garde category that later collapsed in to a type of journalism. And it lacked that kind of uncertainty, or that implausibility that you can do by making a certain kind of art.

CG: When you begin a certain practice like a conversational practice, you make a stance against other forms of production that very soon become the norm. In the case of Art & Language, this conversational practice became the true form to make capitalism work. Nowadays we are all making linguistic exchanges and sending messages and nobody finds it exceptional. What we can say is that over time, what began as a remarkable exception for a mode of production, very soon became the norm for the society at large.

M: We've been that influential! (Laughter)

CG: What was started by a group of young artists was expanded into a large section of the society. This is the very logic of the bohemian. The bohemian is that guy working with no boundaries regarding time and space. And then suddenly the bohemian is the model for the new entrepreneurial class: bursting with creativity and working with no time constrictions.

M: And the gentrification of whole neighbourhoods.

CG: Exactly.

MB: One of the reasons we took up painting was simply to break out of that prison of a self-policing purism generated around Conceptual Art. Even though we had always been anomalous to Conceptual Art, there were considerable pressures on us to naturalise as some variant.

CG: With the paintings we were looking at today, *Index: Incident in a Museum XVI,* (1986) you take these *Art-Language* issues and you melt down the words into a kind of black stain.

M: In a black museum.

MB: It's changing its category and that is the ultimate form of destruction.

CG: But now we find ourselves in a much more evolved position and we have to recuperate that destructive act and self-destruction that you enacted in the recent past. How do we recuperate it within the long-term logic of Art & Language? Will it be recovered from the melted issues of *Art-Language*? What logic can we retrieve from melted language?

MB: Perhaps it summaries our trajectory! It dissolved. I still entertain the hope of dissolving, or leaving no trace – a greasy stain. At best, a greasy stain.

(Break...)

CG: One of the questions where I wanted Philippe to be more precise was the aspects of the MACBA Collection you think are worth mentioning in relation to Art & Language. What made you think that this would be an interesting place to loan your collection? I'm curious to know.

P: It's the Study Center. MACBA is a museum where you can sit and take time to really look at things. The global thing was interesting to me.

CG: One of the things we are working on at the moment is how to distribute the work and how to present it. The visitors will not have had any contact with the previous questions and issues of Art & Language.

P: We talked about this with Michael. Michael has said that I collect architecture and for sure objects are connected. Architecture is an object at the end of the day. As a collector I have to deal with this object and as an artist Michael has to deal with this object. It is impossible to find a transparent architecture. You just have to deal with them. I'm sure we will bring this architecture into something else.

CG: When I was sharing the Art & Language history with the group of students at the Independent Study Program here at MACBA, I got the impression that the whole trajectory of the Art & Language production is totally relevant to these young people. They read the texts and listen to the music. There are so many ways to approach it. It makes it appealing.

P: But remember, I am not a historical collector of Art & Language. I was born in 1973. I'm between your students and Michael and Mel in terms of age.

MB: When you began collecting you were young.

P: I always say that to students. That in 1965 you were twenty years old!

MB: Yes, I was nineteen in 1965.

CG: I was born in 1965!

P: To see this work made by people who were twenty years old is very appealing to me. It's a message to students. Don't waste your time! You are more beautiful than you think!

MB: Maybe Elvis Presley was the most influential, though. Rock and roll was the thing that transformed the cultural lives of young people so that they ceased to become scale models of their mothers and fathers. That post war dispensation was exceedingly important. It was the kind of resistance represented by the groups of people who came out of art school in the sixties: the Beatles, the Who, The Animals, The Rolling Stones, The Specials – they all came out of art school. Art schools had a very particular character. They were not the professional institutions that they are now.

M: They thought they were, but in a different sense.

MB: They tended to be repositories for those who were kind of awkward in terms of official forms of education. So the sixties produced a lot of strange autodidacts. That's a species of rock and roll. I wouldn't want to over cook any sort of cultural coincidence. But there was an independence. You could be a bad musician with rock and roll. With the Glenn Miller Orchestra, never! With rock and roll bad musicians nevertheless had something they thought they wanted to say. So a kind of ferocious willingness to give it a go was the thing that emerged. And then it evaporated. Rock and roll is a bounded and unbounded musical genre. Mel calls me a rock n roll fundamentalist and I am. But I would say that the innovation that it represents has rarely been surpassed and further elaborations of innovation don't come close to being as transformatory.

M: I'm not giving into Michael's fundamentalism but the transformatory power or 'otherness' of listening to Little Richard in the fifties was an extraordinary experience. Perhaps later we encountered it again with Frank Stella who had that sort of 'there it is, take it or leave it and if you don't like it tough. It's crap!' attitude. But it was an

experience that our generation shared – in art schools at least. It is very important what you said about art school being that place you went because you weren't quite sure you could do anything else and what you could do seemed to fit there.

MB: Black – and White-Trash – music is essentially working class though.

CG: One of the first descriptions of Jazz is 'music on my own time' – music that doesn't belong to the capitalistic production. It runs on time that has not been regulated by the profit of labour. That's what I was talking about when I described the conversational practice as a practice that is done 'on your own time'. It is time that has not yet been regulated to be professional or productive. It is boundless time. Besides this comparison between rock and roll and Art & Language, there is another rumour that is consistent throughout the Art & Language history: that Art & Language production is sort of homeless and that the practice is a 'besieged practice'. It has been attacked from all sides simply because it cannot be easily compared to others. It is an exception and therefore it is always threatened. Couldn't we say that the collection is a protective environment for this practice? A sort of refuge?

MB: Yes, in a funny way it is.

CG: When the work of an artist like Dan Flavin is shown in a museum, nothing else can be shown next to it because it will be tainted. When I see Art & Language works in the collection I think 'these guys do not belong to the same culture!' They deserve a different space. There is something very violent or nonsensical about seeing an Art & Language work next to other people's production. Except for the mirrors that naturally incorporate whatever is around it. Can you dwell on this idea of Philippe's collection as a kind of protective environment for your practice?

MB: Yes, the collection as a home for the terminally sceptical! I mean a home in the sense of a refuge or perhaps an asylum.

M: You mean the collection has work in it and the work has friends in it?

CG: The collection allows for a regime that is completely determined by the Art & Language practice.

M: Well, that is true of any collection of an artist's work. It self-contextualises.

CG: I was using the example of Dan Flavin because it is that glowing light that is going to taint the other work no matter how bright. You know what I mean?

M: I think so.

MB: We have to think about what makes that space though. Mel touched on the context of the world of installation – of work contextualised by the institution. We sought to hang on to or keep a sense of self-contextualising power and part of that is done intellectually as much as formally. We have an abiding tendency to a kind of reduced, strange or damaged formalism. But there is a sense in which we have tended to confront those traditional categories such as the critic and the artist. Many people still find that difficult. Our tendency to do that is part of creating an envelope around it, which means it's not going to talk very willingly to anything that it's placed adjacent to.

M: That includes not just conversational, reified practice but also the paintings, which also remain within that area of the practice.

MB: The installation of our work at the Tàpies Foundation in 1999 was an allegory of what it was like to be Art & Language. We put our own work in a context where some of our works did talk to each other, some of them wouldn't talk to each other, some of them hated each other, some of them destroyed their partners, some of them forgot their words and fell silent and resentful and so on. We intended to make an allegory. Some of that was about telling the story and following a degree of self-contextualisation. But we also wanted to point out that self-contextualisation is risky. You can damage your own work and yourself.

P: That's why showing works together in general is a very fragile experience. You have to have a complete confidence.

MB: Do you mean taste?

P: Well taste is very risky.

MB: We should always be suspicious of good taste.

P: To act with your taste is very risky. With the example of Flavin – it is very hard to hang a Flavin next to a painting. You have to isolate the Flavin.

M: Do you mean that the work of Dan Flavin drove other art away from it?

CG: But if you decide to sit next to Dan Flavin you risk being obscured and tainted.

M: But are you using that example as an analogy for what happens hanging an Art & Language work on the wall? In the sense that you are motivated to take other work away from it?

P: Dan Flavin is an installation. You have to give the proper space to the light.

M: People regard Art & Language work as a bit dangerous. Or another angle: I know someone who repeated to me a conversation with Anthony d'Offay who really questioned the idea of whether Art & Language was serious at all. This is another example of that kind of danger. The idea of not being serious is a strange thing. I just saw the collection over there and you can say it's a load of old shit. And yet it seems that Art & Language still retains a degree of implausibility. It makes us sound a bit like, 'Oh we're so dangerous'! (Laughter)

MB: Mad, bad and dangerous to know! That notion of seriousness is still relevant today. There is something in British artistic culture that has become a very strange tea party – and I mean Tea Party in the sense of the fairly recent American manifestation. There is a way in which we have never sought to live in the art world. We were not willing to reside there. We have always guarded our privacy. We endeavour to work from a dark place that is not open to the light of the institution. One of the characteristics of contemporary art production is that it's done in the light essentially – in the light of the institution. We seek to find a shadowy place so that the work comes out of that shadow into whatever light it finds. Sometimes it's very uncomfortable in that light. Although, sometimes it's too damned comfortable. We were at the opening of the Herbert Foundation and viewed a work of ours together with a number of graphically upright works of Conceptual Art by others. Our work is this enormous, uncharacteristic and completely fictionalised image of the studio painted by mouth and yet it found itself categorised so easily as 'Conceptual Art' among others. This noisy distorted image provided a deafening or blinding of all the rest of the work in the room. It shouldn't have been there. It did not belong. And yet historically no one knew where else to put it.

M: That was one of the works that Joseph Kosuth described as 'embarrassing, catastrophic and disastrous'. Which seems just about right!

CG: You once said that the best description for a work of art is someone else's attack on it.

M: Well, I didn't say that but it's a well-known quote. [Art Historian T.J Clark] got that out of things written about Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and Courbet in general. Because if you read the bad reviews they really show you what's going on.

MB: The pictures of Courbet painting with a broom contain a kind of truth. It's a truth! The fact is that he gets the palette knife out and it looks like he's done it with a shovel! You might say that Courbet had a considerable lapse in taste. At the same time, those lapses of taste and the ugly characterisation of him are what make him what he is. It is also what makes his work so interesting to study.

CG: We can finish up for today.

MB: Yes, let's leave question seven for tomorrow. It's a killer question! It's related to voices and that aspect of our practice which uses ventriloquism through the likes of the Jackson Pollock Bar or Red Krayola. It deals with that question of hacking and the idea of 'influence' – the notion of 'inserting' something and then waiting to see what grows.

M: I understood that question to be about something quite different. That it's rather about whether and how you prevent other people from taking over Art & Language and the history. And there are certain names I can think of.

MB: Yes, but there are certain voices that we have to allow, many of which are disgruntled with regards to the persistence of Art & Language.

(Break...)

CG: We should return to the debates from yesterday. Do you have any particular question Philippe?

P: For the genealogy of the collection it could be good to talk about the Rubens.

MB: Well that was a series of strange events. In the end, however, we realised that the reification of that pencil and paper proposal was intellectually suspicious.

M: This is a conversation that requires background. Carles do you know what they are talking about?

CG: Yes, Philippe had a Rubens work in his apartment and he then acquired a text from Art & Language mentioning that particular painting.

P: This story is between Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter!

MB: Well it is emblematic of the kind of relationship we have. What happened is that Philippe acquired a work that proposed an entirely hypothetical triptych composed of Rubens' *Landscape with St. George* (1635), a Rothko and a Corot. We had discussed the implications of imagining it as a single entity or what the processes of individuation would have to be required to think of it as a single item. And then all the sorts of anomalies and problems associated with doing that. Philippe mentioned on an occasion that he had a version of Rubens' *Landscape with St George*. We knew of it as belonging to the collection of the Queen in Buckingham Palace. A work acquired by Charles I, who was the king who had his head cut off in the English Revolution – a bourgeois revolution much misunderstood and not celebrated enough in my view. Anyway, he mentioned that he had a version. And one night I had a telephone call from a French guy saying he had something to bring us in his camionnette and he would be arriving around 10 pm. He arrives and opens his truck and he has a Rubens in the back. No papers, no nothing! Just the painting. So we carry the painting out and put it in the studio. It was a delight! Its status as a Rubens is actually debatable but there is some very good work in it – some fantastic figures. Later Philippe moved and went back to the Château so back it went, having spent three years in our company. The discussion that Philippe wanted to suggest to us was that we might want to realise that imagined triptych in some form. However, we never had a privately owned Rothko or a Corot. No one sent us one of those! We would have had to fake it to realise it. After a fairly lengthy conversation with Philippe we had to say we are not going to do this. The thing remains where it was: on the paper and in a virtual world. It was never meant to be rendered literal. And Philippe was entirely willing to understand the thrust of that argument. It does give a good picture of what it's like to work with him.

CG: It is an interesting event as it illustrates how Art & Language work represents a sort of potentiality. There is always a sort of promise withheld in the work, like the *Hostage* paintings. The collection that Philippe has brought together also represents the promise of transcending the act of collecting into an institution of education, or as a space for cognitive work. We still have something to do, a job to complete. It is uncompleted not just because we are missing parts or chunks of the work. It is because it is generative of other types of discursive activities that are not simply related to contemplating works in a museum. Philippe, was this the idea? Did you intend to generate more activity and investigation?

P: In the beginning the intention was to build an international collection of art. Little by little this collection had become an assembling of so-called names. The names that everyone has to have: Franz West, Laurence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Art & Language, or as you have in your collection, Basquiat. And then there was another collection intending to be a collection of Art & Language. I just made a choice from this collection of work because these objects are unstable. As a collector you have a responsibility to buy it and own it. If you just hang it on the wall its not enough, in my point of view.

M: I agree with what Philippe said. The contingencies of the work are what have made it possible for people to continue it. Although I don't like to say continue because it sounds a bit inter-disciplinary. The Rubens is a good example of the way the work 'pops up'.

MB: As Philippe avers, there is an instability in these yellowing papers. They are only significant so long as they remain so. The thing about the Rubens is that to literalise that and make stable that discursive possibility would have been a loss in a certain sense. But at the same time the discussion is perhaps something that the work has to face. We decided that to literalise it would be a loss. But to have someone interested enough and dynamic enough in that prospect is something of great importance to us. One of the besetting horrors of the late Duchampian dispensation has been the literalisation of what in the earlier days had been mere possibilities.

CG: You could even see this in the Constructivist and Productivist period. There you have a load of utopian proposals that were never meant to be realised. They were pointing to the horizon that was supposed to be unattainable.

MB: We could even just call it imagining. Utopian is one way to describe it. There is an element of that horizon in our work. I feel a little diminished by utopianism, but I know what you mean. That degree of instability – of the possible and therefore the general – is something that has been lost now to literality. Now that Rubens would have been realised and artistic success would follow.

M: It would have been an interesting thing to make.

MB: But not for us!

P: I'm thinking about probability – the probability of this thing to happen in a life-time.

MB: He won't give up! (Laughter)

P: My father bought this painting when I was three years old. I remember the day the painting arrived. The painting was then hidden for fifteen years until the day I took it.

One day I begged my father to have the painting in my apartment in Paris. Later I bought the Art & Language text. On the back was another text. Even with the two objects together I couldn't have read this text at the time. It's a manuscript and it is barely readable.

CG: What is the title of this text, as I'm not familiar with it?

P: *History of Art*.

CG: When was it written?

P: 65' or 66'.

CG: Is it in the archive?

P: Yes, you've got it!

CG: I get the impression that we are really pointing at something interesting here. Let's leave aside the question of utopianism and contingency about the work. If we look at *Lecher System*, the story of the Rubens and some of the *Hostage* paintings, there is an interesting argument to be made related to dematerialisation.

MB: There is always an economy of the virtual. Last week we were having a conversation with Paul Wood. I was moaning on about the contemporary curatorial cant that always ends up in the description of people's work as 'showing familiar objects in a new context' or 'we look at the familiar in a new way'. It drives me mad. Paul said yeah but remember that this is something that is as old as Romantic poetry, in Shelley in particular. We both noticed, however, that Shelly didn't get a skylark and nail it to the table. They don't get a Grecian urn and stick it in your face! They're describing a Grecian urn and it's a virtual thing. In our economy, we have an addiction to the virtual because there is that generality. There is that question of shared intelligibility, which the literal does not invite. That is one of the losses we've seen in the last forty years – an extraordinary resurgence (even as the virtual increases in the world of electronic media in so far as cloud computing and so on) of literal mindedness, or be it a literal mindedness that ascribes a duality to that which is literal. It is a category mistake in my view. We have tried to hang onto something that should remain in the realm of will and representation.

M: Along with the work being essayistic I think the idea of the virtual was something that was a can of worms because the virtual is very unstable. It goes back to the essential qualities of good painting. You referred to the work as something that can be made but doesn't have to be. Well, we opened the virtual in things like (not that I had anything to do with it!) *The Air Conditioning Show* and said that there was this possible world of not making the work but writing about the work and not relying on institutional art world but defending it in a social space. We opened up a can of worms of virtuality that is not possible to complete. It expands and expands. Part of the virtuality is this Rubens.

P: In the art world an important artwork is expensive. And sometimes within the institution the curator doesn't want to understand that a text can be an important work. I have talked a lot about the column of air over Oxfordshire. This is an important text and artwork. Obviously you don't have to build this column of air. It would become an expensive artwork.

MB: Something similar happened! Some guy, I can't remember his name – a successful Brit artist – had some notion of a column of steam. The Art Council, or some such state organisation, spent something like 250,000 pounds trying to realise this.

P: When?

MB: Last year. This idiot wasn't content with pencil and paper operation. It had to be turned into something spectacular. They spent a fortune in the estuary in Liverpool vaporising the river water and blowing it into the air!

P: Maybe we can borrow it? (Laughter)

MB: Or destroy it! That struck me as the final comedy in relation to literalisation. With a column of air over Oxfordshire, of course you can't make it because it didn't involve any apparatus. Except it could involve an apparatus if you wished to be involved in the thermodynamics of this aggregate of space. Enter P.W. Bridgman and all the other semi-popular physics textbooks (partly under the influence of Bob Smithson) that we read.

CG: There is another sense of virtuality when you painted *Incidents In a Museum* and returned to the Whitney galleries to install the work. There is an interesting statement there about the virtuality of art history – of the institution wherein the work exists. But later you suggested the wild idea of having powered rocket shoes flying through the museum.

M: Painting *Study for a Museum of the Future* was bordering on satirical magazine stuff. At one point we entertained the idea of painting the museum of the future. The rocket powered shoes were a joke about how people imagined the future.

MB: There was a kind of bathos of imagining the future. That gave rise to our promise to do paintings.

M: The *Hostage* paintings.

P: The future museum project was an aborted project? I wish you could tell me more about that.

MB: We never did it. We could only make it in terms of a description derived largely from publicity that falls through the letter box announcing shows that are often called 'the decade'. A chunk of time is always involved. So the best we could manage was to aggrandise an announcement. We made one-minute strip in which we satirically represented a kind of advanced abstraction, which people often associate with progressive futures. This entailed Mel acting in a comic way. I don't mean comic in a red-nose clown sense. But it should be remembered that there is always an element of performance in our paintings. We want to invite the viewer to see them as virtual paintings as well as paintings. They are virtual in the sense that we are acting artists. The Whitney space was chosen because it's a space that we cannot enter. Although, through our connection with Red Krayola we did enter it in the end with small images of the Whitney. Oh no, there were actually large works in fact.

M: We finally entered the Museum of American Art!

MB: Even the negativity – someone destroyed that! Events came around and falsified our negative assumptions. That motif of the Whitney Museum was something that ensued from another set of virtual paintings. *The Studio* paintings arose because we were concerned with the fact that the image of the studio was always an ideological image. The best of the studio genre has always involved a reflection by the artist of what it's like to be an artist and operate in the society or historical conjuncture. But at the same time, there is always an ideological dimension to it. So Courbet's *L'Atelier* (1854), the biggest and the most aggressive in a certain sense, is highly virtual. Both of those paintings by mouth of the studio (there is a whole narrative of why they were done by mouth), show a central figure of Charles Harrison with a brush in his mouth. In the painting in the Herbert collection he wears a red waistcoat. At the opening of the Herbert Foundation, I was obliged to explain to some people from the Tate Gallery that Charles did not in fact work on the painting anymore that Victorine Meurent – who is shown painting her own distorted image by mouth – did. Like Courbet's *Atelier,* the work embodies (several) fictions. Does anyone think that Garibaldi went to the studio and stood still while Courbet painted him? The point is that painting *Index: the Studio at 3 Wesley*

Place (1982) 'by mouth' offers the possibility that any distortion is in fact a kind of incompetence that reduces its epistemological or prescriptive power.

M: Distortion is always expressive. We painted it by mouth so we made it incompetent. Or did we? It could be expressive.

P: You entered the Whitney Museum in 2012. Is there a particular celebration to be had around this date?

MB: I don't think we expected to live until 2012! (Laughter)

P: After having a relationship with the BBC, did you have someone inside the Whitney?

M: No! Amazingly enough Mayo Thompson was invited to participate in the Whitney Biennial.

P: Because in terms of probability, this is really something.

MB: Anyway, we got to depicting the Whitney having engaged with that idea of a (virtual) painting of a fictional circumstance, as a reflection upon a genre, which is supposed to reflect on a kind of ideological space. It then occurred to us that it was now a very limited ideological space because the place of production was no longer the studio. The place of production was the museum. So we presented it as a site of production. But a virtual site of production. As it was a site that we could not enter productively. They were essentially virtual paintings. We played a certain kind of painter. It's a question of learning to make certain kinds of moves – to operate a set of manual protocols in order to get a certain kind of painting-like result. Suddenly, however, one finds oneself embroiled within it. There is therefore a dignified (or undignified) aesthetics that wanders into one's practice and if you don't concentrate you will replay that role in a Lee Strasberg sort of way. There is a danger in that.

M: You've said it all.

CG: Do you want to answer the last question?

M: Fascinating question! 'How tempted are you to intervene in an Art & Language history, and does its very disputed representation and the multiplicity of voices involved in it over the years make it a relevant issue?' I'm very curious as to why you wrote that question.

MB: He's heard the voices!

CG: It's obvious that several people have been involved in Art & Language. At the moment it is you and Michael.

M: I don't regard myself as Art & Language. I mean I work for Art & Language – whatever that is. There are many people who have various stakes in the time that they worked with Art & Language and they have their various histories of their participation. That's fine. Isn't it? I always treated people in a straightforward way as possible as being equal participants. But in the history of Art & Language there are now more voices popping up. Sometimes they can be a distraction.

CG: But this is also part of the work – the making of the history and the description of the history. The *Indexes* could be seen as a summary of a certain trajectory of the different issues being tackled. Later in 1975, in your first retrospective at the Oxford Museum, these issues were debated and presented as what Art & Language had done so far. Whenever we go to Valldoreix, where all the works from the Philippe Méaille collection are stored, we try to ask, 'how does this enter into the Art & Language universe?' 'In what way is this particular work relevant to the overall identity?' We actually discussed that yesterday in relation to the David Bainbridge and the Michael Corris works. It is nothing to do with paranoid control of identity but rather the idea that history is never a homogenous story. The first official history of Art & Language was the *Provisional History of Art and Language* (1982) publication by Charles Harrison and Fred Orton.

P: But Carles, do you have a strong idea around history of art? Even for the history of twentieth century art? Can you tell it now?

CG: No, of course there are many stories. The fact is that Art & Language is not a passive subject waiting for someone to tell its history, which is actually what happens with many artists.

MB: There are some distinctions that people are unfortunately unwilling to make. Some of them are mere social and economic contingencies. For example, Art & Language was never an organisation with explicit rules. While I owe a lot of my understanding of politics to a Marxian perspective, I remain a political ironist, or someone who feels constantly displaced politically. Art & Language was never a democratic organisation in which people voted or had equal voices. Never! It was more of a Spartan organisation, in which babies were exposed immediately after birth to see if they lasted the night.

There was a kind of leadership (if you will pardon the expression) by the people who did the teaching. To a degree they shared their 'research' with the students and at the same time they endeavoured to pay lip service to the idea that teaching should not always be a dichotomous hierarchy. That teachers should be as teachable as the student. Things then developed in various ways. At the same time, there will always be people of a certain disposition who will see themselves as belonging or not belonging to something. I was never sure who or what belonged. As the efflorescence occurred in New York, a sense of who belonged and who did not began to become rather more proprietorial and more literal. There was a formula which Charles, Mel and I uttered many years ago which is basically: since 1976 the entire production of Art & Language was taken into the hands of Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden and they participate in theoretical and literary projects with Charles Harrison. That was the formula. It was absurd of course to suggest that we did not inter alia participate with Red Krayola or Mayo Thompson and so forth. There are many who made great contributions who do not consider themselves part of Art & Language. I can think of five or six people who made significant contributions and who would not consider themselves as a 'member'. Again 'member' was never an expression that we would use. The kind of spatio-temporal continuity conditions are a bit complicated with Art & Language, but they're not that much more complicated than the human individual. Not a cell in my body was present when I was born! Similarly the dramatis personae has shifted for various reasons.

M: The ethos of the *Indexes* was the idea that we could participate in a sort of learning process. Indeed the concept of learning is crucial to any idea of sharing a culture with someone. In other words if x shares a culture with y, y can learn from x and x can learn from y. But it never occurred to me or Terry or Michael or Ian that by engaging in the *Index* suddenly those who learned and were willing to do the work had to be quantified as belonging to this Art & Language 'party'. It never was that kind of organisation. We always insisted on its lack of cardinality.

MB: Various other people were involved. As I said, every man (in this case it's always men) tends to be the hero of their own autobiography. And the delusional possibilities that are presented by that are fairly obvious. I can give you a list of a number of people who have had moderately satisfactorily careers independent of Art & Language who have not found it necessary to make their disgruntled voices heard. Kathryn Bigelow has no particular need to complain about her lack of recognition as having been involved in Art & Language. Phillip Pilkington does not feel aggrieved. In the 1970s Atkinson couldn't afford to continue because at that time he needed to make money and we weren't making any. In the 1980s he was perfectly willing to recognise Art & Language as something independent of him because for a moment he had a reasonably promising career. As soon as that career entered a less successful phase suddenly 'being aggrieved' followed. We can do nothing about these contingencies. If people feel aggrieved we take on the implications of what that feeling is about. But usually, I'm sorry, they turn on the idea that we have continued the project. That project has not died and that project has had some degree of recognition.

M: And it has continued by keeping the work and the morale going!

MB: And it has had voices in terms of publications and writings independent of Art & Language in the art world. And this creates a situation where people think that there is something to be joined again – something to be exploited. And that is a little bit ugly and makes me feel angry from time to time.

P: In the end, is Art & Language English or American?

MB: Mathew Jackson would tell you 'No you're British!'(Laughter)

M: Why would it be American? It began in the U.K.

P: Because there were a lot of Americans involved.

MB: But Americans have a particular way of collaborating. People were involved in the Anti-imperialist Cultural Union. As far as I know that was not part of Art & Language. Our collaboration with the Jackson Pollock Bar is not one where the Jackson Pollock Bar have been disgruntled because we don't include them in Art & Language. We collaborate with them and that's what we do! If one has a sense that one's identity is more-or-less sufficient then one's identity is more-or-less – albeit shifting – sufficient.

M: We went to the restoration place and I saw a piece by Michael Corris and other people that Philippe has collected and in your documents there is Terry Atkinson's *Index*: a little book written in 1992 called *Indexing: The World War 1 Moves and the Ruins of Conceptualism*. Of course this book is part of your collection and I don't feel paranoid about that stuff being included in any way.

MB: Yeah, why not?

M: Well yes it's fine. Just going back to the question of what Art & Language is, when I first participated in Art & Language I thought I was participating in a magazine. That's what *Art-Language* was: a magazine. So participating in 1970 or 1969 was participating in a journal. It was being on the editorial board and writing.

MB: The point is that the work published by Terry Atkinson or me was independent and predated the journal. The publication was merely a way of subscribing to the idea in public that the Romantic conventions of artistic identity were suspect.

CG: Somehow you are impelled to regain your own history, which over time has been expropriated by the hegemonic narratives of Conceptual Art. Many artists do not have to engage actively in writing their own history. But this is a serious preoccupation in the case of Art & Language because it is a besieged practice. If I, as a young student, thought that this was an interesting practice it's because it opened the door to not just being a passive spectator or reader. It was like a fictional school and I was able to join. And it made me go from being taught in the 1980s in the Abstract Expressionist Ego paradigm to being exposed to other ways of conceiving art practice. It was a relief to come across those texts, even though I had a hard time with the quirky English language used in the writing. It was a great promise for me. It didn't mean just reading things in a journal – it meant 'there is a problem here'. And a problem I would like to follow.

MB: That was precisely the point! And what tended to happen in the 1960s and seventies is that it was kind of normal for young people to gather around causes. As far as I know Art & Language was never a cause. It was a series of discussions that people had. Later in New York, there were many who thought that they could (as Americans frequently do, I'm sorry to say!) take over and conscript it to something that was new to them, which was left wing politics. Left wing politics had died in a certain way in the U.S.A at the height of the cold war and it was news for them. Yet here, the discourses of the left were sort of natural to us in Europe. If not only at the level of the social democratic dispensation that followed World War II. But if you studied politics at American universities in the 1960s or seventies you studied public administration. You did not study Marx! If you studied politics in Europe you did study Marx. That American efflorescence, although it had some interesting aspects, was one based on some colossal misunderstandings. In the case of Preston Heller or Andrew Menard, they did their bit and buggered off! When we went over there with the *Index*, Michael Corris worked very hard to get a grip on that. Philippe's collection is evidence that he managed it. I find the fact that that document exists very interesting.

M: Yes, and this wouldn't have come about had he not collected it.

CG: I want to ask you three, Michael, Mel and Philippe, this question: some time ago you compared Art & Language to a sectarian organisation, didn't you?

MB: Some people did describe it as that.

CG: But I mean it in a positive way. It provides a genealogy of sectarian organisations: retrospectively we could imagine Art & Language as people who were separated by geographical distance but shared an idea that is not institutionally validated.

MB: The point about sects is that their adherents often disappear into society except for the moment when they join. You can belong to certain kinds of sects and still do your job.

MB: There are contingencies bearing on that.

P: Well, I would say I'm happy to be here. There is something interesting about what Mel said about Art & Language being just a journal. At the time the texts were also produced as text works. There was the exhibition in 1969 where everything was set up with text works.

MB: You are referring to the infamous *Catalogue raisonné*. For a start, there is nothing more silly than producing a catalogue raisonné. (Laughter)

MB: This was a document required by Bruno Bischofberger. I remember Terry Atkinson was Art & Language's handshake at the time. The point is that Bischofberger wanted a monopoly on the work and yet we were producing work rapidly and discursively. The idea of a catalogue was entirely absurd! At the same time Terry went along with the project. He had to! I had been thrown out of teaching at the time. It makes a list of works and that's it. 'Raisonné' it was not.

M: But hang on, are you referring to the fact that I thought it was a magazine? And then you are saying that this catalogue lists these texts as art works? You are contradicting what I said then. The catalogue was produced in 1971. In 1969 I had no idea that there were these scraps of paper that were going to be collected by Bruno Bischofberger. I was writing for a magazine and I didn't care about anything else!

MB: And we were people of relative youth. For a moment we had this radical dream and it seemed that the only vehicle for the issuing of work was going to be the magazine. This was when the emergency conditional began to develop: that it was theory just in case it was art and it was art just in case it was theory.

M: It was the idea of having the journal and collaborating with other like-minded people. We didn't worry about where the work was going apart from that. And this was powerful.

P: I'm sure of that. I'm also sure that at that time everything was not as clear as today.

MB: The other thing is that in any conventional artistic career there will be social experiments and all kinds of provisional apparently long-term commitments that turn out to be unworkable or unpractical or contradictory. The prospect of operating *Art-Language* as this hybrid wasn't going to work. It was never going have the weight to critique the institutions it sought to critique. It was always going to be just a magazine. No one was going make that epistemological shift and see that magazine as public space. It just wasn't going to work. That aspiration was abandoned in a short time.

P: I would consider Bischofberger as a sort of hero in this history of Art & Language. Because he believed that it was possible to present texts as artwork.

MB: I have no idea what he believed. He probably had an intuition.

P: It was a radical position. A strong intuition.

MB: I don't think he did it out of philanthropy. That's what I mean.

M: No, obviously. He thought it was going to be profitable. For me, up to 1972 Art & Language was a magazine. The *Documenta Index* changed everything. Suddenly there was a place and it was an index: a collaborative area that was not just the magazine and that changed everything for me because I understood that you had to work in a kind of collaborative space. You had to talk to other people. Hence Michael Corris, Andrew Menard and all the people who came from New York and the whole *Annotation* project. After 72' it became much more complicated. It shifted from simply publishing a nice little magazine.

CG: It became complicated because there wasn't a market for that?

M: No, I'm not sure I understand that.

CG: It wasn't feasible anymore?

M: No, the magazine was totally feasible.

MB: The work left the magazine essentially, and went into the *Index*, which then caused that explosion. But then what happened was that people wanted to become members! From the perspective of Europe, it personally drove me raving mad. The idea that there was this desire to borrow a sense of identity from an organisation drove me crazy. You have to remember that the parallel to this was Joseph Kosuth's plans. He had a powerful interest in allowing me and Terry to be conceived of as 'his': Conceptual Art's 'background boys'; the 'thinkers behind it'. Then he realised that he could organise in New York and *The Fox* was born.

M: But Art & Language in New York began with me and Ian Burn. The organisation in the States had nothing to do with Joseph Kosuth, I mean this is all bullshit anyway.

MB: No he did. He enabled it in many ways.

M: Well he enabled *The Fox,* he paid for the first issue.

MB: That's what I mean.

M: But before that, in early 1973, there was the whole *Annotation* project.

MB: Ok, but it ran parallel. It was another plot, another scene in the play.

M: *The Fox* was a way for Joseph Kosuth to take over the Art & Language bit in New York. And also side-lining *Art-Language*. Having an Art & Language presence in New York is very different to having an Art & Language in the middle of England. It was in fucking Soho. It just got completely out of control, partly because it was in New York! Michael says he is a political ironist. I was fairly new to Marx myself and I thought that after Conceptual Art these activities would lead to a political party. There were people in New York who thought that Art & Language already was a political party. Anyway, part of the fuck up was that it was in New York.

MB: Part of it is American social convention I think. Americans are very good at that 'neighbourliness'. The neighbour wants a barn so you help them build a barn. This is far from socialist collaboration. It is certainly social and natural to American society. But it was a collaboration of self-interest, not inimical to the Tea Party, which was very distinct form the kinds of collaborations we sought.

M: There was *Art-Language* and then there was *The Fox*. Then there was Artists Meeting for Cultural Change. And then I thought: where is this going? And it dissipated and a lot work turned into journalism.

MB: There is no harm in that but don't pretend it's not designed for passive consumption!

M: Then it just expanded into nothing.

CG: That is a good description of that moment.

MB: We have already agreed that historically we are dealing with a complex entity. And if you have a complex entity, you are bound to get a dispute as to the nature of that thing. You're bound to get many views. Since we have continued to write the chapters, our voice may not be privileged but we have a more self-critical view than someone who wants to say that the moment that they were involved was the best one. The concept of the best moment seems not worth considering.

Other titles

01. Marina Grzinic
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28.Peter Osborne
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29.Wolfgang Ernst
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Colophon

‘Landscape with St George Delivered at Night’
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About the author

Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden took over Art & Language’s practice in 1977, 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 Baldwin and Ramsden take up the perception of their own collective past. **Carles Guerra** is an artist, art critic and independent curator. He holds a PhD degree from the Universitat de Barcelona, where he completed a doctoral thesis about the dialogical aspects of the practice of Art & Language. In 1999 he co-curated, along with Manuel Borja-Villel, the exhibition *Art & Language in Practice* at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies. He was the Director of La Virreina Centre de la Imatge (2009-11) and Chief Curator at MACBA (2011-13). **Philippe Méaille’s** consistent recollection and gathering of early works by Art & Language gives us full access to a fascinating period in which the analytical philosophy, that of language and of scientific knowledge provided the tools to dismantle the notion of art and art object.

This text is the conversation held among Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden, Philippe Méaille and Carles Guerra on the occasion of the project entitled *Art & Language Uncompleted. The Philippe Méaille Collection*, presented at the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) from 19 September 2014 to 12 April 2015.

Quaderns portàtils

QP

Portable Notebooks is a line of publications available free of charge through the Internet. In general, the texts proceed from lectures and seminars that have taken place at the MACBA, as well as from exhibition catalogues. This and other issues of the *Quaderns portàtils* collection are available on the Museum website.

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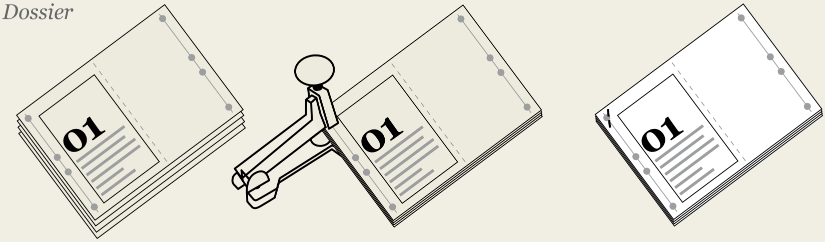

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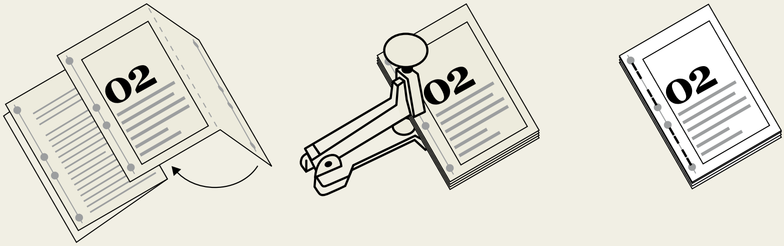

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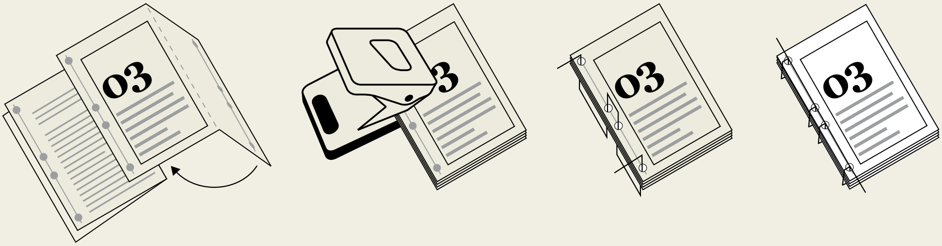

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