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Wor(l)d of Art:
Inscriptions off the Page, Obscure Poetry
in Conceptualism

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by

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For the one flower to come.

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Abstract

In the 60s and 70s, Conceptual Art emerged as a ground-breaking tendency when making of verbal language one of its most significant instruments of creation. Taken off the intimacy of paper, words were put in evidence shaking artistic categories with works that stood between images and letters. In an environment of de-mythification of the imagetic value, Conceptual Art appeared in an impetus to disfigure the solid tenets of Fine Arts by proposing a textual turn and showing both the material presence of language and its inconsistencies as source of meanings. Conceptual written artworks suspended the strictness of the sign turning their texts into obscure and enigmatic even if making use of very simple statements.

Written artworks were brought into the field of literature to be approached under literary and semiotic theories. Conceptual Art literature bears a thoughtful contribution on narrative, authorship and reception. Artists often refused the taxonomy of poets, for their literature was to promote new readings ahead of artistic demarcations. The presence of words emphasized the opacity of language in two ways: in both its plastic, solid characteristics and the amplitude texts could reach. Language in Conceptual Art also contributed to the questioning of the long-lasting art object; it suggested a less alienated social function of art and artists, and it turned viewers/readers into active participants in the reading of art. Thus, language became a revolutionary tool in Conceptualism having an important effect in the arts to come.

Resumo

Nas décadas de 60 e 70, a Arte Conceitual surgiu como uma tendência inovadora quando fez da linguagem verbal um de seus principais instrumentos. Tiradas da intimidade do papel, as palavras foram colocadas em evidência, estremecendo as categorias artísticas com obras que se situavam entre imagens e letras. Em um ambiente de desmitificação do valor das imagens, a Arte Conceitual surgiu num ímpeto de desfigurar a sólida base das Artes Plásticas ao propor uma virada textual mostrando tanto a presença material da linguagem quanto suas inconsistências como fonte de significados. Trabalhos conceituais suspenderam a rigidez do signo fazendo de seus textos obscuros e enigmáticos mesmo quando usando simples enunciados.

Trabalhos de arte escritos foram trazidos para o campo da literatura para serem abordados de acordo com teorias literárias e semióticas. A literatura da Arte Conceitual apresenta uma contribuição considerável em termos de narrativa, autoria e recepção. Artistas geralmente recusaram a categoria de poetas, uma vez que seus escritos deveriam promover novas leituras além de demarcações artísticas. A presença de palavras enfatizava a opacidade da linguagem de duas formas: em suas características plásticas e sólidas, e na extensão que textos poderiam alcançar. A linguagem na Arte Conceitual também contribuía para o questionamento do eterno objeto de arte; sugeria uma função social menos alienada da arte e artistas e tornava espectadores/leitores em participantes ativos na apreciação da arte. Assim, a linguagem se tornava uma ferramenta revolucionária no Conceitualismo, tendo um efeito importante nas artes por vir.

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Fig. 1. Ben Vautier, *Art est un mot écrit*, 1975.

Introduction

The complicated concern with classification has always disturbed the history of arts. Because of human creativity, artistic manifestations are often perceived as separate entities usually approached under different standpoints. However, that did not hold them from approximating at times or distancing at others. Arts could integrate, cross, or parallel accordingly. Fine Arts and Literature, for instance, have been studied in their intellectual and cultural spheres, each requiring particularities in their analysis, even if by means of resemblance or support – just as a literary text could serve as a supplement to a painting, a drawing could help the reading of a passage. Yet, with the coming of the twentieth century, the idea of having walled art categories underwent a radical transformation with the emergence of art pieces that could no longer be accommodated within the known practices or perceived under traditional disciplinary domains.

In the late 60s, Conceptual Art emerged amongst other innovative art practices as a tendency utilizing strategies that resembled little of Fine Arts, at least in the conservative sense. It transited along with diverse means and methods often challenging art institutions and shaking fixed art categories. Conceptual Art was one of the artistic tendencies that questioned the enclosed system of arts suggesting a different way of reading and looking at art. It wished to leave assumptions of classification behind in order to produce freely, without the knots of *Beaux Arts* aesthetics definitions. Conceptual Art dislocated the focus from the art object in order to show the preponderance of the concept (or the idea) to the artistic process. The result was less important than the realization. Conceptual artists wished to take the audience to the ambit of thoughts and courses of action during the development of their art.

Despite a wide range of procedures, conceptual artists used words and texts as one of the most efficient means found to air their ideas. Many conceptual artists had dropped

the brush on behalf of linguistic inscriptions and language appropriations. Conceptual artists took words off the limits of a page in order to present them in and out the gallery settings. Far from the familiar confinements of paper, words in Conceptual Art acquired an unusual characteristic demanding more than the addicted artistic eye and contributing to a different reading, a different look – less poetic, less alienated, less passionate. The texts in Conceptual Art provoked questions concerning the understanding of both what art intended to be and the system which legitimated it; it functioned as a cultural device for arousing political and social awareness concerning art, biased readings and the problem of labeling; and it brought the complexities of language into focus.

Conceptual artworks could be mistaken at first for literary texts or at least raise doubts on their appropriate category. Just as it seemed hard to analyze word works within the Fine Arts convention, so it was to dislocate them completely to the field of literary studies. To call a conceptual artwork a poem, for instance, would be as misguided as to call it a painting. The textual production was to be read under an exchange of looks amongst artists and writers from the broadest perspectives within and outside arts. Therefore, unlike most studies offered in this field, Conceptual Art could not be approached for a “word and painting” combination, once in this textual turn artworks rarely came accompanied by a pictorial support, but could simply and only use words, scriptures, and statements. Language was not a supplement but the center. Thus, approaching Conceptual Art textual production should be done taking into consideration its dialogical quality, its hybrid condition, and its crossing points with literary strategies.

I intend to analyze the contribution of conceptual artists’ textual production in their interface with literary studies considering the artistic context and effect of these texts to the arts. Literary strategies will help understand conceptual artists’ writing production regarding their narrative, style, author and readership. Meanings are to be generated in a net of

intersemiotic relations as source for orientation and interpretation so that their poetics could appear.

In Conceptual Art, one could easily come across quite distinctive propositions, works and documents running the risk of falling in contradiction or failing to offer a satisfactory view of the movement. In fact, the term Conceptual Art was not even created by a group of artists who had the idea of getting together to do a particular type of art. Categorization was almost purely a need for presentation. This tendency was never strictly connected to a specific academy or educational institution but spread in different corners, to different parts of the world. The difficulty to deal with the amplitude of a movement such as Conceptual Art forces scholars to select singularities, to choose pieces instead of the whole, to select some to the detriment of others. Some considerations are left behind while others become known. Therefore, only in confinement was I able to present the appreciated perspectives and impressions regarding texts and inscriptions.

Several were the restrictions made to delimit my analysis. The choice of artists was conditioned to their being often recognized as language-based artists as well as their use of English language. These artists were usually known for being in the margin of literary production, which will help enrich the analysis of their works. Though this research does not aim to create a catalogue of works and artists, the reason I visited more than one artist indicates the prominence of several artists instead of a single and unique genius to represent the movement – only to try the minimum coherence with this tendency's own purposes. The works are bound by their resemblance and differences, sometimes pulling, sometimes pushing one another.

This thesis is divided in two parts. The first part consists of five chapters, each delimiting the wide field of Conceptual Art, each narrowing the possibilities of this art practice. Chapter 1 is a contextualization of Conceptual Art that will add to an ample view of its emergence as well as other movements during that period. There was also the

concern to bring forward movements that were known for having used a diversity of media (including language) in their production but also known for having influenced conceptual practices. The second chapter takes this influence further presenting a brief parallel between Conceptual Art and the early century European avant-garde, with which it was most often recognized. Chapter 3 offers some of the most popular definitions of the term Conceptual Art and marks possible correspondences between these definitions and their bond with language. Chapter 4 includes some artworks to set starting points from which texts could be developed into intelligible commentary. Particularly Mel Bochner's *Language Is Not Transparent* is used to show the implications language had in the Conceptual Art movement. The fifth, and last chapter in part one, introduces two artworks usually identified as those likely to have initiated the Conceptual Art practice. These artworks are included in order to give a previous demonstration of the written works analysis to come.

The second part consists of four chapters, each about a particular artist. These chapters are dedicated to the works of Douglas Huebler, On Kawara, Lawrence Weiner and Robert Smithson. I hope that these artists will contribute to the perception of how reading could become a thoughtful exercise and texts an ample source of meanings even if in the least words possible. The works of these artists will be read for their implications to the addicted reading practice, their innovative poetics and textual strategies, their taking of artworks to the margin of arts and interdisciplinary studies, and their posing questions to the so perpetuated art institutions.

This thesis traces routes on language and literature reflection challenging imperative cultural discourse. Most importantly, the idea is to demonstrate the possibilities of poetic reading texts out of the recognized field of literature could provide. This work is less an attempt to redefine parameters in contemporary art and literature than to induce a sensibility beyond category orders.

Part 1:

Approaching Words in Conceptual Art

Chapter 1:

Contextualizing Conceptual Art

Conceptual artists of all varieties shared with others of their generation an unequalled sense of opportunity and obligation to question the authority of the institutions that superintended their social roles, and the ambition to develop alternative means of negotiating their interests within the larger social order. Just as the Black Panthers felt the need and the capacity to challenge the racism of police and, thereby, of society as a whole, by posing a substitute armed force, just as antiwar activists were able to question the legitimacy of the war and circumvent the draft by various countercultural moves, and just as women's liberation and gay power advocates called into question the institution of the patriarchal family and its extension in the larger social order and the developed alternative structures of support and agency, so conceptualism challenged the authority of the institutional apparatus framing its place in society and sought out other means for art to function in the world.

(Stimson xxxviii)

After the Second World War – or at least for the ten or fifteen years that followed the end of war – painting and sculptures still ruled the world of art. However, since the beginning of the 20th century there had been practices that clearly defied the knowable art practices and traditional concepts for long disseminated in art. The art world has always experienced ruptures and novelties, confronts and challenges. Art has always had the quality of promoting transformation usually attempting a “rupture” with previous practices in order to innovate. Different measures, means and manners of producing art have always developed alternative conducts towards the art world sometimes directly confronting conventional lineages of art, sometimes perpetuating well-known ruling practices. The early century European avant-garde proposed some appealing transformations of art procedures with movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism or artists such as Magritte or Marcel Duchamp. Most recently, after the Second World War, Pop Art and Minimal Art emerged with the decline of American Abstract Expressionism contributing to new perceptions of

the culture industry and consumerism. By the 60s, the so perpetuated art tradition was put at stake under unexpected procedures that were to subvert a totality of established artistic conventions strongly affecting manners of perceiving art. Conceptual Art was one of the tendencies that emerged in the mid-60s to raise questions about the art world through a diversity of techniques and methods but especially through a particular use of words and texts. Through their textual production, conceptual artists contributed to a revision of art categories and deconstructed the familiar world of words.

Conceptual Art could be minimally fenced within a period based on its peak productions and exhibitions. Most sources seem to agree that the movement began in the late sixties and took its last breath in the early seventies. The art critic Lucy Lippard in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of Art Object from 1966 to 1972* edited and annotated impressions on Conceptual Art through a network of documents and texts. Like Lippard, Tony Godfrey, who has been writing on contemporary art since 1970, stated in his book *Conceptual Art* that its heyday “has normally been seen as the period between or around the years 1966 and 1972 (often loosely referred to as the late 60s).” Again, “Conceptual Art can be said to have reached both its apogee and its crisis in the years 1966-72” (6). Another writer who has dedicated most his texts to contemporary and Conceptual Art, Alexandre Alberro, on the other hand, extended the period a little as proposed in his text “Reconsidering Conceptual Art: 1966-1977.” The German art critic and historicist Benjamin H. D. Buchloh described the emergence and operation of Conceptual Art “roughly from 1965 to its temporary disappearance in 1975” (1999: 514). Therefore, though already 40 years far from Conceptual Art and tempted to give it a broader perspective – being an art production from the late 60s Conceptual Art is history but still

contemporary – the period it contemplated is generally limited to a decade, approximately from 1965 to 1975.

Conceptual Art's sites of production seem harder to delineate though this tendency is often recognized as having had an American origin. That is partially true considering the American art market at the time. After the Second World War (even before its end) the art world was moving away from the European tradition to settle in cosmopolitan cities that were to become representatives of a multicultural modern system carrying universal tendencies. While Europe was facing a period of reconstruction, the United States was in steady rise developing a powerful culture industry. Especially New York grew as art galleries, museums and publications emerged together with a whole revision of the art educational system. Artists and intellectuals had gone to New York escaping from the turbulences of war and after better opportunities also contributing to its artistic production and development.

The progressive fame of American Abstract Expressionism (from the mid-40s to the 60s) was certainly due to New York's fertile artistic ground. In fact, whereas Abstract Art lasted till the 60s, New York's eminence endured. The city soon gained international prestige emancipating its borders and standing for one of the most prosperous centers of distribution and promotion of art. Apparently the United States was interested in enlarging its art prospects as New York, in particular, embraced the art world. Therefore, with the coming 60s New York was already professed as an important contributor to the growth and internationalization of art – which is likely to have facilitated the appearance of Conceptual Art. New York was attentive to what the world was doing and the world was attentive to what was done in New York. Besides, at that time, the transit amongst artists,

artworks and exhibitions increased so that it was easier to be in touch with productions throughout the world.

Though many had settled in New York, at the time Conceptual Art came into view living there was no longer a condition to make art or achieve status. In a conversation with art critic Michel Claura, Seth Siegelaub – one of the most significant art dealers and curators to hold Conceptual Art ideas – explained the importance of New York to Conceptual Art’s emergence by saying that “one could think that it [Conceptual Art] evolved from New York, but this is certainly due to the fact that New York was the center for artistic promotion, reviews, books, galleries, etc.” (Claura and Siegelaub 287). At a different moment, Siegelaub claimed that he was “very interested in conveying the idea that the artist can[could] live where he wants[wanted] to – not necessarily in New York or London or Paris as he has had [had] to in the past – but anywhere and still make important art” (qtd. in Kosuth 1991: 30). Thus, even if directly related to America, Conceptual Art could be found in European countries, Japan, Argentina, and Brazil. Its production was being done under prospects ahead of demarcations, having its works overtake borders. In fact, it was probably during this period that the participation of Latin-American artists was facilitated into the international world of art, for they were usually “excluded from the hegemonic system of circulation and artistic information, centered in Europe and America” (Freire 27).¹

Probably the reason for the emancipation of the American artistic production is attributable to their posture, which differed significantly from the secular European tradition. Particularly during the post-war period, as European countries searched for their vanished national identity, the United States kept their doors opened having their art transcend traditional identity formations. Instead of American national culture, New York

¹ My translation of: “Vale observar que, nesse momento, talvez tenha sido a arte Conceitual a que mais tenha facilitado a participação de artistas, especialmente latino-americanos, em geral excluídos do sistema hegemônico de circulação de informações artísticas, centralizado na Europa e nos Estados Unidos.”

adopted a postnational position. In the introduction of *Neo-Avanguard and Culture Industry*, Buchloh claimed that he had gone to the United States willing to “escape from the strictures of the highly overdetermined cultural identity of postwar Germany” (xvii). He attempted to find in the US a “model of posttraditional identity formation” (xvii). Still, Buchloh concluded that the proposed American model “appears now more like a different, slightly advanced version of a discourse of cultural hegemony in a country that Hegel once famously called ‘a bourgeois society without a state’” (xviii) – a liberal market with the least interference from the state.

By the 60s, the American fame progressed though artists had become more critical and tended not only to abandon modernist beliefs but also to require different attitudes concerning the art market.² Art institutions became rather outdated as this new generation of artists revolutionized artistic creations and interrogated the role of art and its insertion in the world.

The 60s came with its turbulences and effervescence, a time of questionings and uncertainties. The world reflected a context of advanced capitalist societies that though apparently promising, seemed quite discomfoting to some. People were bothered by the dehumanizing aspects of capitalism claiming that what society shared was in fact a “delirious contentment” strengthened by the promise of a world which would be made better through technological progress (Godfrey 148). In the distressing Cold War, and with the approaching of Vietnam War, people envisioned a more egalitarian world and

² Modernism is the period that started in the early 20th Century and lasted until the post-war period. However, it seems that most critics have reduced the broad term Modernism to the post-war period, often described as High (or late) Modernism. This period coincided with Abstract Expressionism production and aesthetic perceptions of the time, usually attacked for proposing the autonomy of the art object and its medium purity – different from Conceptual Art ideas.

manifested their dissatisfaction turning the sixties into a decade replete of riots and street protests. Protests against authority, anti-war manifests and demonstrations favoring the inclusion of rejected social groups characterized the period with “new perceptions of community, democracy, work, and entertainment” (Banes 14).³ The 60s was a moment when shared social expressions were bursting in several corners of the world.

Within these events, language was proliferating as an efficient means of reorganizing the world and proposing changes. Unable to directly break with social structures, people held language as a symbol of their revolt. Words invaded the world as the only possible means by which intellectuals, students, and the underprivileged could voice their restlessness and register their participation. Words were aired in the streets, stamped on walls, inscribed on posters (Melendi 40). Language created its own scene the moment it left the confinements of a paper to be presented, usually anonymously, in public.

Words were being incorporated as a tool to refute authoritarian and devious political discourses known to have used deceitful, alienating rhetoric. Tony Godfrey explained that “the authority that declares a war is intimately related to the authority that declares what is art and what is not. Both had power invested in their language” (188). Again, according to Godfrey, “wherever we see words presented visually in public, we are seeing political or ideological struggle” (346). Influenced by this context but also due to an exhaustion of images, Conceptual Art appeared in an impetus to disfigure the solid purposes of art categories – as the natural artistic flux has always done. However, the presence of language in the artistic field was not only a political act. To take written artworks as such is just one possible reading and may even risk leaving important contributions behind. Conceptual artworks integrated the tensions of its sign and the unsteadiness of time to which any artistic work is constantly subjected.

³ My translation of: “... novas noções de comunidade, de democracia, de trabalho e diversão...”

Conceptual Art came to light as artists were encouraged to embark on an adjustment of institutionalized standards interrupting the visual order of images. Language was integrated in Conceptual Art under the idea of a collective mechanism bringing elements from popular culture into the artistic world and taking the artistic world into the social universe of language. Language became a partner and a means of production inflected by social modes in order to inspect cultural, economical and political aspects of society. Conceptual artists needed to produce relevant works feeling pushed to bring ideological conflicts into focus on behalf of alternative positions towards the commercial art world. It needed to move away from any techniques believed to be determinant criteria to name any work an artwork or strategies perceived to contribute to the policy of exclusion that made of certain works, and not others, precious art pieces. Conceptual Art seemed bothered by the position of institutions (the competent source of art selections) as cultural manipulators.

This tendency contested traditional principles of art definition through a libertarian field of art exploration and subversive views on the conventional aesthetics and vicious art language. Notions such as epic, classical, erudite, and high collapsed giving place to new sensitivities. Any device known to contribute to either a high-class or an authoritarian posture would be degraded in this new world⁴ where “works of art reappear as texts, history is exposed as a myth, the author dies, reality is repudiated as an old-fashioned convention, language governs and ideology comes disguised as truth” (Hearney 7).⁵ Therefore, they promoted pertinent debates concerning most of what was made-believe

⁴ Eleanor Hearney uses the phrase “new world” to refer to the period from the late 60s on.

⁵ My translation of: “...as obras de arte ressurgem como textos, a história é exposta como mito, o autor morre, a realidade é repudiada como uma convenção antiquada, a linguagem governa e a ideologia se disfarça de verdade.”

through institutionalized conventions, interrogated strategies of art validation and upheld a revision of procedures believed to legitimate art. Conceptual Art had come to shake any stable structures of the World of Art – even if by now its achievements has become part of the artistic structure.

Language became a strategy of resistance, a discursive form artists found to express some of their critiques but also pertinent questions regarding verbal language. Through language artists accomplished their project of dematerializing the art object (taking into consideration the most complex attributions of this term to be better analyzed soon); they refuted the status of the art object reacting against the purely aesthetic and intellectually redundant art; they acted in response to the commodity culture of modernism and the artists lack of social function; they denied the high art/low art distinction and the authoritarian stand of art institutions; they accomplished their ambition to communicate to a wider audience and their desire to make an art that would be in your head. Words were a competent source of signification and so through this textual turn artists also raised thoughts on the nature of meaning, the social function of language and the role of the reader.

All these attempts were not necessarily restricted to language. They could come disguised in several other Conceptual Art ground-breaking practices such as photographs, videos, films, documents, maps and performances usually vented in museums and galleries, and on the streets. Buchloh explained that conceptual artists moved away from the known practices of painting and sculpture as they “reject[ed] the idea of aesthetic autonomy” which caused them “to abandon traditional procedures of artistic production” (1988: 101). The autonomy of the artwork was under attack and so was the art for art’s sake motto. The idea of an autonomous artwork detached from social dimensions and imposing its own conditions could no longer handle these new artistic desires or would, in the least, be contradictory to the idea of art they were willing to put across – probably part of the

criticism they would later receive. While “[m]odernism marginalized the issue of artistic motivations or interest outside the art system, denying that artworks were bound by a web of connections to specific historical and social contexts” (Wallis xiii), Conceptual Art wished to be affianced.

As some conceptual artists started within the American Abstract Expressionism boom, even if not directly taking part of it, the lack of interest in painting or sculpture, for instance, could be simply perceived as a lack of interest in doing them again and not necessarily as a stand up confront or a refusal. Conceptual artists were not simply objecting to painting and sculptures when they moved away from them, but these categories seemed to have been worn out, to have reached their limit. As the conceptual artist Donald Judd stated, “the objections to painting and sculpture will sound more intolerant than they really are. They are qualifications. The lack of interest in painting and sculpture is a lack of interest in doing them again, and not in them” (qtd. in Archer 48).⁶ Therefore, along with several practices, language became one of their artistic tools and in the present thesis, the focus.

The truth is that the presence of language was neither an exclusive privilege of Conceptual Art nor was it restricted to the 60s. As Terry Eagleton stated, language became a fascination to the 20th century intellectual life (134). New philosophical thoughts in language emerged amongst academic studies proposing the “deconstruction of the very theoretical boundaries that had hitherto demarcated literature from fiction, art from culture, the elite from the popular” (Milner 18). In literature, for instance, the rise of

⁶ My translation of: “As objeções à pintura e à escultura vão soar mais intolerantes do que são. Elas são qualificações. O desinteresse pela pintura e escultura é um desinteresse em fazê-las de novo, e não por elas como têm sido feitas por aqueles que desenvolvem versões mais avançadas.”

cultural studies gave the term a different perception when, instead of classifying literary texts for their aesthetic or timeless qualities, it offered perceptions that took socially constructed cultural values into consideration. The 60s and 70s seemed to be the glory of literary theory (Compagnon 11). It was an attempt to reduce the divine artistic value to more human assessments. Many of Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas about the language system started to infiltrate the 60s and the 70s. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, became a seed of language reflections (even if by means of opposition) influencing anthropology, philosophy and literary studies. Roland Barthes, Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida – amongst other prominent names involved in theories of language – also reached their apogee during the 60s, 70s contributing to a boom of French theorists. Instead of being limited to academics or scientific studies, their books were sold practically as best-sellers in popular book shops. These had all become important factors to the appearance of language in art and in Conceptual Art especially in the American ground:

Indigenous transformations in American art and criticism in the 1970s were fueled by the introduction of new translations of European critical theory, particularly the works of the Frankfurt School, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Continental feminists theory, and British film theory. (Wallis xv)

But it was not just in language theories that Conceptual Art found some of its strongest encouragement to make art with words. By the 60s many artistic tendencies were not only utilizing language, but also insisting on a conjunction of media – verbal, visual, musical (Perloff 83). In 1942, the Rumanian Isidore Isou created Lettrisme (Paris) as an art form with the intent of promoting poetry to a more popular instance by involving sounds and the graphics of letters in artistic projects. Besides texts, it made use of media such as films and performances. Situationist International was originated in 1957 by experimental European groups, being rather international and political from the beginning including and

fusing several art practices and language. It was formed by artists and intellectuals influenced by Marxist ideas, Dadaism and Surrealism. Situationists International's ideas and agitation were present in the events of May 68 and ever since the participants' writings kept many of their thoughts alive in Europe and the United States. Due to the respect Lettrisme gained in France by the 60s, it was also involved with the situationists and in the 1968 attempted revolution. These movements split in several others under several other names.



Fig. 2. Isidore Isou, *Nouvel objet plastique*, 1944.

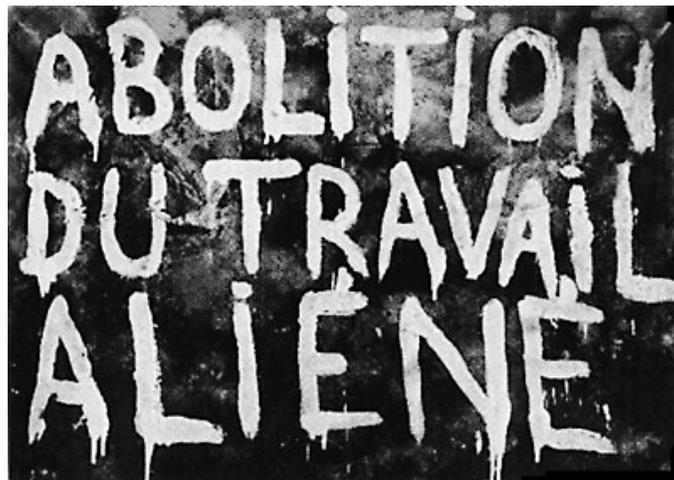


Fig. 3. Pro-Situationist International, *Abolition du travail aliéné*, n.d.

Also around the 50s, Concrete poets incorporated language to explore symmetric, geometric or pictorial devices in their visual poems making use of a series of inter- and intra-semiotic relations (Plaza 12). Their works seemed to function under the belief that form was an extension of content. As the American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth once said, “concrete poetry was a formalization of the poet’s material” (1991: 35). Concrete poetry is sometimes referred to as visual poetry due to its typographical organization of words. In 1962, the idea for a linguistic work of art had been proposed by the group Fluxus, which was a retreat of boundaries and defined materials – and very close to Conceptual Art’s ideas. Fluxus was about blending art, poetry, music, creating games, performances, experiments, and texts in a playful and unconventional way also opposing standard notions of art and art professionalism. Dick Higgins, who was part of the group (and often linked to concrete poets), wrote “A Child’s History of Fluxus” in which he said that “Fluxus was like a baby whose mother and father couldn't agree on what to call it – they knew it was there, but it didn't have a name” (Higgins “Child’s”). The group was showing the troubles of labeling and naming artistic creations. This citation represents the troubles of categorizing art practices and defining strategies of creation. Fluxus also dealt with polemic issues. Some works were playfully criticizing the exacerbated consumerism through ironic language devices and solid cultural icons (*God*, Ben Vautier).



Fig. 4. Ben Vautier, *God*, 1960.

Manifesto:

2. To affect, or bring to a certain state, by subjecting to, or treating with, a flux. "Fluxed into another world." South.
 3. *Med.* To cause a discharge from, as in purging.

flux (flŭks), *n.* [OF., fr. L. *fluxus*, fr. *fluere*, *fluxum*, to flow. See FLUENT; cf. FLUSH, *n.* (of cards).] 1. *Med.*
a A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part; esp., an excessive and morbid discharge; as, the bloody *flux*, or dysentery. **b** The matter thus discharged.

Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual", professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, — PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM"!

2. Act of flowing: a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuing succession of changes.
 3. A stream; copious flow; flood; outflow.
 4. The setting in of the tide toward the shore. Cf. REFLUX.
 5. State of being liquid through heat; fusion. *Rare.*

PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART,
 Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.

7. *Chem & Metal.* **a** Any substance or mixture used to promote fusion, e.g. the fusion of metals or minerals. Common metallurgical fluxes are silica and silicates (acidic), lime and lime-tone (basic), and fluorite (neutral). **b** Any substance applied to surfaces to be joined by soldering or welding, just prior to or during the operation, to clean and free them from oxide, thus promoting their union, as to an

FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.

Fig. 5. George Maciunas, *Fluxus Manifesto*, 1963.

Pop Art and Minimal Art were two other art movements that are relevant to this artistic growth after the Second World War. Pop Art criticized the culture industry using words, icons, advertising and comics as a means to approach the popular culture in opposition to the elitist. Pop Art and Minimalism brought aspects of urban American culture and industrial reproduction to the artistic field. Pop art often incorporated advertising logos and texts so as to give rise to another account of the art-commodity (Wall 505). Actually, both Pop Art and Minimalism are known for having great importance to the

emergence of Conceptual Art. Conceptualism saw the presences of Pop Art and Minimal Art as those which contributed to the decline of the mentality of the 40s and 50s generation. Conceptual Art clarified these movements' attitudes as they intensified the gradual decrease in importance of Abstract Expressionism. Nevertheless, the young generation of conceptual artists did not keep the serenity and convenient social distant of both these movements.

Conceptual Art emerged from the disappointment and dissatisfaction with these art movements over the fact that the social forces and ideas which had been stirred and revived by the aggressively mechanistic and anti-expressive aspects of the new art, did not extend into the kind of radically explosive and disruptive expression desired within the cultural New Left. In the eyes of the conceptualists, the cultural shock effects of Minimal and Pop art had, by the late 60s, given rise only to a new, more complex and distressed version of the art-commodity. (Wall 505)

When one art tendency came forward, it usually selected from previous or contemporary movements the ideas it wished to continue, to refute, or to improve. Conceptual Art was not dissimilar. However, Conceptual Art and its contemporaries based their relationship more in a bond than in influence; more in proximity than in hierarchy. The truth is that language had since its beginning been present in the art world – introduced with the European avant-garde (mostly influenced by Mallarmé). In fact, art practices that emerged after the second half of the century (including Conceptual Art) appeared practically exclusively under the influence of the early century movements. The fact that most these movements were inspired by the European avant-garde could be read as more relevant to their uprising than the influence they had on each other. The inclusion of different media and language into the art world, as well as the opposition of mainstream artistic and social values, and the promotion of experimental art fusions under (usually) leftists ideas about art

are some of the factors that often turn their link to the avant-garde possible. Therefore, to comprehend the impact Conceptual Art had, it is important to draw a parallel between the early century European movements and the 60s neo-avantgarde, also taking into consideration the European and American ground and contexts. This probable bond was made into a brief observation that will hopefully help to better understand the looks this tendency received when it emerged.

Chapter 2:

A Mere Return to the Early Century?

Conceptual Art is usually recognized as resembling much of the early century artistic movements – particularly the European avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. It is often said that Conceptual Art and other neo-avantgarde movements from the 60s were only a restoration of the avant-garde of the early 20th century. The apparently revolutionary and original procedures through which Conceptual Art innovated its language are often perceived as the re-establishment of the art from the early modernism, especially concerning their inquisitive and subversive attitude towards the art world and the effective art, art institutions, and their mixing of art and language. The same resemblance was perceived between the American poetry of the 60s (New American Poets) and that of the early century. Marjorie Perloff traced a parallel between these poetic practices that seems suitable for the artist scenery. According to Perloff, “from the hindsight of the twenty-first century, their [New American Poets’s]⁷ fabled ‘opening of the field’ was less revolution than restoration: a carrying-on, in somewhat diluted form, of the avant-garde project that had been at the very heart of early modernism” (Perloff “Introduction”). Both the avant-garde of the early century and the neo-avantgarde approached similar set of problems. As Buchloh explained:

The set of problems was not entirely different from the questions posed by the original avant-garde of the period between 1915 and 1925: the blatant contradictions between mass culture and high culture; the extraordinary impact of technical processes of reproduction on the notion of the unique, auratic work; and the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the isolated,

⁷ The New American Poets are mainly those who were writing roughly from 1950s on such as John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, Amiri Baraka, W.H. Auden and Robert Lowell, amongst others.

elitist practices of high art production and its ultimate powerlessness in attaining readability for mass audiences. In addition, the neo-avantgarde had to contend with the extraordinary increase in visual manipulation brought about by the rise of advertising, photography, cinema, and television.

(2000a: 356)

On the other hand, to believe that Conceptual Art is simply a recycling of the first movements of the 20th century is to reduce its importance as much as it would be to claim its distinctive originality. It appears more reasonable to claim that once again it was as if history was doubling back in itself under different assessment – the spiral of time revisiting the past or, turning the present into a collection of pasts. Júlio Plaza moved further in his perceptions when he claimed that the 20th century was characterized by its interest in proposing “better interaction amongst languages.” He saw contemporary art as a

formidable bricolage of history in synchronic interaction, in which the new seldom appears, but has the possibility of becoming present only because of this interaction. This actual period [contemporary] is characterized by the coexistence of previous periods that, isolated or combined, provides infra-structural conditions to the material development of art as a superstructure sphere. (12)⁸

The idea is not to explain Conceptual Art after the avant-garde moment, but to perceive historicism not as a linear sequence of events, but as a constellation in which “each present sheds light on the others in a dialectic and discentered relationship in the manner of an

⁸ My translation of: “... imensa e formidável bricolagem da história em interação sincrônica, onde o novo raramente aparece, mas tem a possibilidade de se presentificar justo a partir dessa interação. O período atual caracteriza-se pela coexistência dos períodos anteriores que, isolados ou combinados, fornecem-nos as condições infra-estruturais para o desenvolvimento material da arte como esfera da superestrutura.”

electronic web against the linear montage of historiography” (Plaza 4).⁹ Instead of putting events in sequence, in straight line, Plaza is proposing a combination of events, all present, all available. These events, these forces work together their differences or similarities under no hierarchy or rank of importance, but coexisting.

The European avant-garde made of words and texts a vital force during Modernism, which developed into a supportive engagement creating a long-lasting legacy in the arts to come. The insertion of language in art had actually appeared long before Modernism but recently with Mallarmé in the late 19th century, who is often perceived as that responsible for having influenced most the early century avant-garde, especially enlightening other artists’ manners of perceiving art through his exploration of typographical elements in poetry. Eventually, the entering of the 20th century was permeated by language practices evident in Marinette’s *The Futurist Manifest*, in Blaise Cendrars’s *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France*, Apollinaire’s calligrams, Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, in Picasso’s carefully chosen collages, Picabia’s *The Cacodylic Eye* and, of course, Marcel Duchamp’s readymade and never-ending language games.



Fig. 6. René Magritte, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, 1929.

⁹ My translation of: “... cada presente ilumina os outros num relacionamento dialético e descentralizador à maneira de uma rede eletrônica em contraposição à montagem linear da historiografia.”

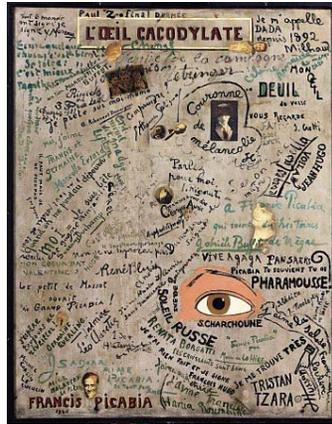


Fig. 7. Francis Picabia, *The Cacodylic Eye*, 1921.



Fig. 8. Marcel Duchamp, *La Boîte verte, La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même*, 1935.

Marcel Duchamp's artistic production was considered one of the major sources of Conceptual Art's evolution, well put in Kosuth's words:

The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to “speak another language” and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted readymade. With the unassisted readymade, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a

question of function. This change – one from ‘appearance’ to ‘conception’ – was the beginning of modern art and the beginning of ‘conceptual art.’

(1991: 18)

Many conceptual artists took Duchamp as an important source to the emergence of Conceptual Art. Duchamp created interesting language games that contributed most extensively to the relevance of content also focusing on the context where an artwork was to be seen. He was interested in language, but also in the context of an artwork. Conceptual artist Hans Haacke said, “Duchamp was, of course, the first artist to think about the aura that surrounds art and artifacts, and the power of context. As we know, they fundamentally affect the way in which we look at objects” (Haacke 18). The bringing of objects from the existing world to the world of art – the ready-made – confronted the aesthetics proposed in museums and art institutions and allowed those who paid respect to the art piece a different look at things and at our cultural determinism. In this aspect the context was of sum importance. Duchamp believed that no formal aspect (what Kosuth called morphology) was enough to call something art but the dislocation of that something into the context of art, the context where it was set. Therefore, art was reduced to its designation, to the calling of something art instead of a recognition of something familiar. It probably took the context of a museum to call an object a piece of art.

The reading of Duchamp’s works implicated a careful association of title, object, images, and inscriptions. The work piece was presented in its complex (and apparently infinite) web of significations and inferences. His works became an inexhaustible source of meanings teeming with annotations, word games, and objects. With no hierarchy of sign systems or first meanings the spectator was invited to find hidden and elaborated significances behind the apparent, the transparent, the obvious: words and materials joined in a single art puzzle. He had often worked with the idea that the meaning of a word does not reside in what it is supposed to represent. Language was to Duchamp “the most

perfect instrument to produce meanings and also to destroy them” (Paz 11).¹⁰ In *Marcel Duchamp ou o Castelo da Pureza*, Octavio Paz described the artist’s bond with language as a fascination of intellectual order. Duchamp himself had once claimed that as a painter, it was better to be influenced by a writer. He was influenced by the writings of Brisset, Roussel, Lautréamont and, of course, Mallarmé – whom he considered a great figure (Mink 29). Duchamp had extended the term painter to that of an artist.

Duchamp took Dada to New York, away from Europe and away from the destruction of the coming war. Dada was about art, literature (mainly poetry), and music; about creating sound poems and absurd poetry. As Duchamp once said:

Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude. It was intimately and consciously connected with literature. It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic. It was a way to get out of a state of mind – to avoid being influenced by one’s immediate environment, or by the past: to get away from clichés – to get free. The blank force of Dada was very salutary. Dada was very serviceable as purgative. And I think I was thoroughly conscious of this at the time and of a desire to effect purgation in myself. (qtd. in Godfrey 50)

Both the French artist Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia gained most their fame from their participation in the 1913 Armory Show held in New York. This influential exhibition of Modern Art released important international artists resulting in Duchamp and Picabia’s notoriety in America. Duchamp would move to New York and later become an American citizen whereas Picabia turned into a regular visitor especially between 1913 and 1915. Though Duchamp’s most important work in the Armory Show was *Nude Descending the Staircase, No 2*, – a painting linked to his practices in Cubism – it was only from that point on that he dropped the brush to experiment with readymade and tangle questions of art

¹⁰ My translation of: “... é o instrumento mais perfeito para produzir significados e também para destruí-los.”

and life, high and low, originality and authorship. From then on he innovated the language of art showing in his pieces that art was not engaged solely with the eye (purely retinal), but most importantly with the mind. The simplest object could reflect upon a complex chain of thoughts. The fact that Duchamp had become an American citizen contributed to his art being often revisited in the American ground, especially being rediscovered in the late 50s. Duchamp was probably the link that allowed the 60s American movements to look back at the early century avant-garde – and obviously, his art.

The manner language was being looked at during the early or late century present different focuses or, at least, different considerations. The presence of language in Early Modernism was not exactly harmonious. The idea of Modern Art was still mostly centered on paint and canvas, though this time little committed with events or narratives. Modernism aimed to get away from the tight bond between literature and art as being both media capable of narrating great events – one through words, the other through images. In the beginning of the century, Modern Art production was based on progress, technological experiments, personal feelings and sensations, and interrelations of arts. Yet, many artists revolutionized even the most advanced modern perspectives. Artworks were many times radical and inquisitive towards the art world and its conventions, and words were subtly walking into a world of brushes and sculptures as a confronting – though subtle – tool. However, these art practices were discouraged especially after the Great War exasperating the social art dream on the benefit of academic experiments with paint and color, on behalf of abstraction. As Marjorie Perloff stated in the preface of *O Movimento Futurista*, “the desired revolution by poets and artists from the avant-guerre never came, at least not in the way it was expected” (19).¹¹ Perloff’s statement could be completed by Huyssen’s parallelism, when he says, “[f]rom the perspective of today, American art of the 60s – precisely because of this successful attack on abstract expressionism – shines as a colorful

¹¹ My translation of: “a revolução almejada pelos poetas e artistas do avant-guerre nunca veio, pelo menos não na forma em que foi prevista.”

death mask of a classical avantgarde which in Europe already had been liquidated culturally and politically by Stalin and Hitler” (168).

Despite the importance of Picabia and Duchamp in New York, Andreas Huyssen wrote, “New York Dada remained at best a marginal phenomenon in American culture, and neither Dada nor Surrealism ever met with much public success in the United States” (167). For that reason, the art of the 60s and 70s appeared more novel than it really was mainly due to the difference between the prospects in the American and European artistic world. Huyssen continued to say, “the audience’s expectation horizon in the United States was fundamentally different from what it was in Europe. Where Europeans might react with a sense of *déjà vu*, Americans could legitimately sustain a sense of novelty, excitement, and breakthrough” (167). The 60s and 70s revolts against art institutions in the United States appeared more innovative and prepared to confrontations and probably more likely to result in significant institutions changes than the early century avant-garde. Huyssen explained this contrast in terms of the development the culture industry had achieved at both moments: whereas in the earlier avant-garde the culture industry was still in its initiation stage, the post-war neo-avantgarde faced a “fully developed media culture” (168). The culture industry had reached different levels of maturity at both moments. Huyssen understood that the shock of the new was much harder to sustain than that of the earlier century: “The 60s and 70s revolts against art institutions in the United States probably appeared more revolutionary and prepared to confrontations and probably more likely to result in significant institutions changes than Futurism, Dada or Surrealism” (Huyssen 167). Conceptual Art was not simply a return of the mentioned art, rather, it was the making-up for the fact that in the early century art tendencies did not fulfill their expectations. Conceptual Art could then modestly be seen as that which resonated some of the early century practices.

Chapter 3: Labeling and Defining

Defining Conceptual Art may be a complex task, first because most art forms could be, at a certain point, conceptual – related to ideas. Besides, the difficulty to shed light on Conceptual Art results from its range of means and materials, the amount of artists in action and the multiplicity of theories, texts and thoughts offered. The range of practices within Conceptual Art segmented this ample movement weakening the possibility of a uniform combination of thoughts – probably the reason why Conceptual Art is usually called a tendency. Because of the complex attributions that differentiated the 60s neo-avantgarde, Conceptual Art was born as “a contested field of multiple and opposing practices rather than a single, unifying artistic discourse or theory” (Alberro 1999: xvii). A single Conceptual Art exhibition could have, for instance, more than 150 artists participating. Bringing together such assortment under a single definition is to reduce this movement – and I mean movement as flux – to theory. In addition, conceptual artists contested the nature of terminology and tended to be highly troubled by the cultural act of definition that depended on one’s standpoint. Peter Osborne explained that “each critical term imposes its own retrospective unity on the history of art by proposing a standpoint from which to think what is most distinctive about the art of its time” (17). When conceptual artists changed the strictness of artistic categories by works that could hardly be judged by long-established art principles, this tendency could hardly fit its own label. The movement had itself been called Media Art, Idea Art or even Information Art.

There would be disagreements on whether a certain work should fall under the term Conceptual Art, whilst in parallel, it could also fit adequately in other movements (and so could an artist). The art production from the 60s and 70s culminated in a diversity of procedures as much as labels dismantling disciplinary frontiers and obscuring art

specificities worth a separate examination. Arts mixed, interchanged, and crossed in several, unrestrained ways. Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Process Art, Land Art, Body and Performance are examples of art tendencies whose births coincided and for that were very often mixed or mistaken. Their procedures were varied, increasing the chances of their coming closer at times and withdrawing at others.

In the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form: Works – Concepts – Processes – Situationists – Information*, held in Bern in 1969, the curator Harald Szeemann noted that he had better ignore category labels due to the range of names but troubles of definitions those tendencies provoked. He “realized that in order to exhibit such work successfully, it was vital to ignore categories and to give way to the spirit of informality in which the works themselves had been conceived” (Godfrey 202). A year later, Germano Celant organized the exhibition *Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art* in Turin, which also showed the problems in categorizing an artwork. The exhibition exposed wider notions of art when the distribution of works in the gallery was apparently little concerned with divisions:

Word-oriented artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner were hung next to Land artists such as Walter de Maria and Robert Smithson, and Arte Povera artists like Michelangelo Pistoletto and Janis Kounellis. The three tendencies were seen as overlapping, rather than mutually exclusive. (Godfrey 209)

For a Conceptual Art exhibition to be successful and coherent with the artists’ ideas, it required an entire change of procedures. Some curators were becoming specialized in this recent art, being sometimes even subjected to the fury of conservative art institutions. They might have been the first to understand and attempt to convey the idea of Conceptual Art accurately, though at the time Conceptual Art emerged it was still relegated and marginalized. Many Conceptual Art exhibitions had been cancelled, many curators had

their participation prohibited in museums and galleries, and many works and artists were rejected.

Artists themselves were incorporating the role of curators so that exhibitions could be organized under the appropriate conceptual thoughts. Probably aware of the difficulties they had raised, artists had come with a sense of duty regarding art and took on the role of writers, theoreticians, and critics. What before could have been restricted to experts was altered in Conceptual Art when artists were writing on art as much as making it. A great amount of bulletins, newsletters, magazines and journals had specially intensified the sum of artists' writings. Magazines and journals such as *Artforum*, *October*, *The Fox*, and *Studio International* kept pace with contemporary art and accentuated artists' textual production, already as intense as their art. Published articles and catalogues were often no less a conceptual work than any other exhibited in galleries, museums, shown in the streets or performed. As a result, several were the histories Conceptual Art disposed leaving little of the notorious art criteria to its own evaluation.

The first definitions of the term (Conceptual Art) were developed by conceptual artists, though not in the form of manifests. Therefore, though I have presented a number of problems of reducing Conceptual Art to definitions, some of the conceptual artists' main interests and common qualities permit modest generalizations of the term or at least may give an idea of what Conceptual Art might have been about. The following paragraphs present some of the most recognized theorizations on the term giving particular emphasis on its link with language. The relevance of the following definitions to this work lies exactly on the fact that it approximates the artistic production to language, the concept to word.

Though Conceptual Art had its roots in Modernism, it was only in 1961 that this term first appeared in the writings of the artist Henry Flynt, linked to the group Fluxus from New York.¹² Flynt was a musician, a philosopher and usually stood as an anti-art activist of deep philosophical thoughts on language and mathematics. He advanced what was to become Conceptual Art, which makes of his essay a relevant document to the understanding of its blooming. As Flynt defined in his essay Concept Art, “Concept Art is first of all an art of which the material is concepts, as the material of e.g. music is sound” (“Essay”).¹³ Flynt’s definition (note that he used Concept Art and not yet Conceptual Art) differentiated Concept Art’s material from those used in other artistic categories. Concept – like sound in music, words in literature – was the cornerstone for the execution of the work. From there he concluded that once the material of Concept Art is concepts, and “since concepts are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language.” He explained that in the philosophy of language, concept “could be thought of as the intension of a name,” which is the “relation between concepts and language.” Concepts are abstract ideas usually thought of in their correspondences in language, thus “bound up with language.”¹⁴

This approximation of the term concept to language is actually the bond that makes Flynt’s definition necessary to the comprehension of the emerging written art. Flynt had not only forwarded the tight connection between Conceptual Art and language but also anticipated the absence of the traditional visuality – or aesthetics – that conceptual artists would so strongly refute. Flynt wondered, “now what is artistic, aesthetic, about a work which is a body of concepts?” (“Essay”). Conceptual Art is to be perceived in the mind, in thoughts, even if materialized by the artist.

¹² The group Fluxus was founded by the American-Lithuanian George Maciunas, having the participation of artists from all over the world.

¹³ Flynt’s essay was written in 1963 and first published in *An Anthology*. His essay, “Concept Art,” is available in image format.

¹⁴ Concept could also be associated with other representations besides linguistic, and so could Conceptual Art.

Despite its significant input to the rising of Conceptual Art, Flynt's definition had still not contemplated or been credited to having named its ample process – which had not until the late 60s created a solid body of works. It was only in 1967 that the term was to conquer international impact with the writings of Sol LeWitt, an American artist associated with Minimalism. With LeWitt, Conceptual Art was baptized and the name recognized. From that point on, the movement gained some identity as well as the sympathy of others that were also to become followers in the United States and the world. As Peter Osborne stated, “[t]he term was first used systematically to identify a distinct kind of art. It quickly took hold in the US art as a unifying framework for the understanding of an emerged body of work” (25). LeWitt was probably that who gave the practices of Conceptual Art some unity. However, unlike Flynt, Le Witt does not make a straight bond between Conceptual Art and language. In addition to being possibly materialized in a three-dimensional object, he claimed, “ideas may also be stated with numbers, photographs, or words or any way the artist chooses” (LeWitt 222).

LeWitt had first drawn a difference between artworks to be sensed through vision and works of Conceptual Art. In 1967, he published “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in *Artforum* magazine, in which he said that “art that is meant for the sensation of the eye primarily would be called perceptual rather than conceptual” (LeWitt 214). Similarly to Flynt, LeWitt distanced the aesthetics usually present in art from Conceptual Art, that is, the visual aspect did not reign. LeWitt also put the process in evidence, the thinking of art. A work of Conceptual Art is a mental process that *may* be materialized. “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art” (LeWitt 214). The idealized image of an artist as that working under insights, inspirations, and instinct gives place to the thinking of art so that the material form (if there was one)

could be estimated. Conceptual artists focused now on the thinking of art production, the conception, process, or elaboration of art rather than the final product, the object. The thinking *is* the art. As he put it, “the idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product” (Le Witt 214). Art could exist only as idea. In LeWitt’s thoughts, the problem of materializing a conceptual work of art is that “the physicality of a three-dimensional object then becomes a contradiction to its non-emotive content” (214). The sensitiveness usually brought by the art form could be paradoxical to what conceptual artists wished to expose.

Two years after his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” LeWitt wrote “Sentences on Conceptual Art” in which he complemented his theories saying, “Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be physical” (222). Again, he is saying that art did not need to be embodied or materialized, as the focus was dislocated from the object to the concept and could exist solely in the artist’s mind. The material or the form lacks importance, as long as the idea prevails. In LeWitt’s ideas, neither the physical properties of things, nor the appearance were part of Conceptual Art’s issues but would function as means to expose or present the idea by simply giving form to what could not be seen. In his “Sentences,” he explained that “a work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artists’ minds to the viewers” (LeWitt 222) – a way artists could air their art. He conceded that “... it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artists’ minds.” LeWitt was aware that even if the artists’ ideas were put into form the viewer/reader might never perceive them as the artist thought. The message is always subjected to interpretation when out of the sender’s mind, when in the viewer/reader’s. The conceptual artist Robert Barry well described this concern – or awareness – when he made a work that was presented as a single statement:

“Something which exists and of which I am aware, but I cannot know if anyone else is aware of it, or even can be aware of it.”¹⁵

The object of art lost its supremacy in Conceptual Art changing the notion of the artwork as a valuable piece. Conceptual artists dematerialized the object of art, operating the potential of materials only to reach more accurate courses from which their art could guide its way towards meaning. In 1968, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler asserted, “as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art” (Lippard and Chandler 218). The consequence would then provoke “a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object” which might “result in the object’s becoming obsolete” (218). It seemed the end of the long-lasting artwork as that worth of admiration and contemplation. The art of excellence emptied its throne and the sovereignty of the object of art was diminished as new tendencies of artistic creation marched into the art world. The object of art was finally to have its status intercepted.

But the idea of dematerializing the art object shall be read specifically in relation to the capital letter “Art Object.” In fact, it was through visibility that the viewer/reader could perceive something floating above the solid piece – the art of concepts. Though conceptual artists wished to raise thoughts, these thoughts could only be accomplished if there were something from which they could be developed. Conceptual Art should be seen with the eyes closed, in the mind, in thoughts, but it still needed a starting point. The effect of this dematerialization proposed by Lippard and Chandler – often rejected by artists, for most believed materialization was something they could not escape from – was that the artists were almost exclusively concerned with the thinking of art rather than the building of it. One artist could conceal an idea in a studio but would not necessarily feel accountable for its production. It was actually common that others than the artists would be escalated for

¹⁵ More comments on this piece in Chapter 6.

the execution of the idea. It seemed that the apprehension in turning ideas visible is due to the unexpected side-effects carried along the artistic process usually unnoticed in the final product. Therefore, once the result was less important than the realization, the steps could come to the fore as sometimes more interesting than the final product. If the process were put in evidence, anything that had been part of it was also to be called art, the artwork itself. Artists' thoughts, conversations, sketches, drawings, and notes became representative to Conceptual Art as a significant basis to their questionings and artistic aspirations.

Other definitions of Conceptual Art were developed straightening its link with language. The Art-Language group, for instance, took on an analytical approach to Conceptual Art. This group of artists set in England decided to publish their own journal in which they could express their thinking through essays, articles and open debates. Artists such as Michael Baldwin and Terry Atkinson used the term Conceptual Art to describe what they had been doing since 1966. The first publication of their journal, entitled *Art-Language: A Journal on Conceptual Art*, in 1969, aired relevant reflections on Conceptual Art and its purpose, giving special attention to the theoretical and critical role of their works. This group believed in a replacement of the work of art by an analysis of it expressed through language. In the introduction to their first journal, the editors claimed that, in Conceptual Art,

[t]he content of the artist's idea is expressed through the semantic qualities of the written language. As such, many people would judge that this tendency is better described by the category-name "art-theory" or "art-criticism;" there can be little doubt that works of "conceptual art" can be seen to include both the periphery of art criticism and of art theory, and this tendency may well be amplified. (*Art-Language* 99)

The members of this group bridged the gap that separated art from theory. In their introduction, the editors tried to illustrate their thoughts: "Suppose the following

hypothesis is advanced: that this editorial, in itself an attempt to evince some outlines as to what ‘conceptual art’ is, is held out as a ‘conceptual art’ work” (99). It appeared that these artists had sublimated art to theory, art to its own analysis. Their writings and texts were as much a work of art as any exhibited object – unlike LeWitt’s, who clearly stated that his sentences (Sentences on Conceptual Art) “comment on art, but they are not art” (222).

The American artist Joseph Kosuth, whose theories were very influential in the Art-Language group, shared this analytical approach to Conceptual Art. Between 1969 and 1970, Kosuth collaborated with the group making expansive analysis of philosophy to develop his art theories and pieces – often made of different representations of the same idea (*One and Three Mirrors*) or presented for what they were (*Five Words in the Red Neon*).



Fig. 9. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Mirrors*, 1965.



Fig. 10. Joseph Kosuth, *Five Words in Red Neon*, 1965.

Art movements from the 60s were little interested in perpetuating grand narratives famous for legitimizing historical records as if history progressed towards enlightenment. The incredulity towards the character of metanarrative in philosophy, literature, and fine arts troubled any kind of unilateral account. This artistic period coincided with philosophical investigation of language. As the contemporary philosopher Arthur Danto explained, “in the fifties and sixties, avant-garde philosophy consisted either in the logical examination of the language of science, or the close reading of the way ordinary men and

women use language in the everyday scenarios of common life” (27). Inspired by contemporary philosophy of language, – especially A. J. Ayer and Wittgenstein – Kosuth also thought language should be considered in its every day use. In the introduction of Joseph Kosuth’s collection of writings, Gabriele Guercio adjusts the lines between his work and philosophy once his well-known thesis – *Art after Philosophy*, 1969 – attempts to mark “the end of philosophy and the beginning of art” (14). Instead of being concerned with the unsaid – as did traditional philosophy – Kosuth proposed in his art a concern with the *sayable*. That is, he wished to escape the confusions of traditional philosophy in order to present accessible and direct language. He perceived art as a continuation of philosophy in that sense. In an interview with Jeanne Siegel broadcast by WBAI-FM in 1970, Kosuth clarified the relation between art and philosophy in his works: “It seems that we are in a kind of post-philosophical period; as the power of philosophy atrophied beginning with this century, the philosophical thrust of art increased” (Kosuth 1991: 53).

Wittgenstein’s idea that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein “Philosophical”) highlights the fact that meaning should not necessarily point to something out of the proposition that gives it sense. How we attribute meaning to a word is not as important as our ability to use that word. Meaning should be found in its usage, in context. Kosuth pointed in *Art After Philosophy* that “a work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he [the artist] is saying that a particular work of art is art, which is a definition of art” (1991: 20). He defined Conceptual Art “in terms of its special capacity to provide information about the nature of art” (1991: 20). Conceptual Art works aspired, in Kosuth’s view, a pure definition:

The ‘purest’ definition of conceptual art would be that it is inquiry into the foundations of the concept ‘art’, as it has come to mean. Like most terms with fairly specific meanings generally applied, ‘Conceptual Art’ is often considered as a *tendency*. In one sense it is a tendency of course because the

‘definition’ of ‘Conceptual Art’ is very close to the meanings of art itself.

(25)

In Kosuth’s works, linguistic propositions are converted into an investigation of the artistic language. His propositions were a reflection on the nature of art instead of formalist views of language concerned with physicality. Like his, some works of Conceptual Art referred to their own execution, their own process through the instrument language. That alone seemed enough of a criticism of former art movements usually concerned with visuality:

Because the proposal inherit in Conceptual Art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone (the work as analytic proposition), it thus constituted the most consequential assault on the status of the object: its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution. (Buchloh 1999: 515)

Because of Joseph Kosuth’s popularity after his theories in *Art After Philosophy* and *Art as Idea as Idea*, he is considered one of the forefathers of Conceptual Art. However, Kosuth’s works still seemed self-referential, therefore amply criticized. There are still disagreements regarding his contribution. He might have been caught in his own purely conceptual ideas and for that his works were said to still continue Modernists views on pure or autonomous art. In *1962-1969 Conceptual Art From the Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique*, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh was critical of conceptual artists’ ideas on static meanings of signs and the transparency of language. Buchloh’s text went a long way when it generated a response from both Kosuth and Siegelau. In many critics’ views, these linguistic tautological practices seemed little fruitful in the universe of Conceptual Art and are known for having even vulgarized philosophy. In “Del Arte Objectual al Arte de Concepto,” Simón Marchán Fiz explained that the criticism over pure conceptualists is related to their “vulgar notions on analytical philosophy” (nociones vulgarizadas de la filosofía analítica) (261). Other adequacies of language did appear more productive when artists highlighted

the importance of the remaking of the artistic object where words would be perceived for both their material condition and sight of significations. Kosuth insisted that the object was not important to the work (Osborne 32) – a trap he ended up setting himself. Osborne explained that “[t]here was thus always, from the outset, within language-based conceptual art, the danger of a repetition of the contradiction or ‘negation of the negation’ inherent in the ‘visual indifference’ of the readymade: the danger that conceptual art would acquire, and be valued for, a ‘look’” (32). Kosuth seemed interested not in language as a material but simply in its “‘meta-artistic’ function of questioning the nature of art by *stipulating* that some particular thing is ‘art’ that otherwise falls outside the established extension of the term” (32). On the other hand, Osborne explained that the idea should not be that “the visual dimension of linguistic inscription is irrelevant, even when it is the function of such inscription to *negate* the intrinsic significance of the visual form. On the contrary, it is precisely its ‘unmarked’ or neutral *visual* quality that performs the negation” (32). This is just one of the several contradictions attributed to the presence of language in Conceptual Art. Disagreements regarding Conceptual Art still exist, as many artists from that generation are still alive and involved with art. Most these artists are still discussed and studied and their involvement with the movement weighed and pondered.

The impacts of language within Conceptual Art were several and what interests us most is the effort to use language in a way it would not lose relevant information. However, this attempt to language transparency or semantic opacity was confronted by vagueness, the imprecise qualities of language and relative meanings. It is actually under these considerations that works of Conceptual Art are to be perceived. The lack of transparency is a fundamental concept to the understanding of their written art. It is especially from the challenge of language as transparent that this thesis will gain force and Conceptual Art works analyzed.

Chapter 4: Emerging Word Works

Conceptual artists adopted words in a quite original way with little commitment to an exclusive category of speech or discourse. They were not tied to a single usage of verbal language but explored and made use of distinctive textual formats. They had the quality of making of words whatever could be most suitable for their purposes. Whether resembling every day language, advertisement, statements, philosophical propositions, or poetry, a work of Conceptual Art could hardly be named under any of those categories. No matter how conceptual artists attempted to blur borders, bring arts together or focus on interdisciplinary qualities, the term Conceptual Art was still enclosed within the fine arts classification and thus now written with capital letter – as any recognized art movement would. The formats were borrowed and appropriated for, even if Conceptual Art had also moved out of the known artistic context, the name art, now we know, prevailed. However, this censorship or concern with classification does reduce readings to categories or, in the least, forces the reading to take careful steps. In *O Óbvio e o Obtuso* Barthes explains that the act of writing is a single one and that we have created laws to separate, for instance, a writing from a painting as far as an inscribed letter is concerned. He bases his argument on Eastern civilization whose ideograms are both writing and painting – and neither prevails (Barthes 1990: 96). The association between a written word and its iconic origin was suppressed in the Western use of verbal language, thus it could bring interesting reflections amongst art and literature. To inscribe a word with a brush could be as much of a writing practice as to write a word in pen.

The analysis of works of Conceptual Art in this thesis is meant to be done in their interface with literature. When words came into the Conceptual Art world they first seemed to have been dislocated from literature. Yet, once in the artistic field, language adopted an

unusual posture, words were to be read from a different perspective. Language was to expand and dialogue with different systems; it was to open the artistic field beyond the borders that usually defined a written word, for instance, as literature. But that does not mean conceptual artists brought language into the art world to simply call it art, – though they did – or to drop the literary label. It was an interdisciplinary attempt. Conceptual artists wished to get our addicted perceptions to change – Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read.¹⁶ They wished to create a different sensitivity and language seemed a suitable tool. Therefore, when showing the crossing points between arts, this thesis is aimed at getting their perceptions of art across and not exactly to present an analysis of Conceptual Art written works under literary perspective but to note the moments their texts approximated or distanced from literature.

I brought conceptual works to the area of literary studies to shed light on their textual production, having my literary background as a starting point. However, were I to say Conceptual Art written works resembled literature in many aspects, I would get into the hard work of defining it and delimiting a literary period with which it could be compared. Thus, though Conceptual Art word works were off page, it is the presence of some literary strategies that will be pointed out along this thesis eventually reaching conceptual artists poetics. Defining literature seemed as hard a job as to define art. Moreover, at the time Conceptual Art emerged, literature was also going through changes. Writers were proposing different perceptions and sometimes carried a similar posture towards verbal language just as conceptual artists did. It was better to believe in correspondences and overlapping arts than a real moving from fine arts to literature. Defining a term like literature depends on the conditions and circumstances agreed to use such a term – what the authorities have claimed to be literature (Compagnon 45).

¹⁶ Dwan Gallery press release written by artist Robert Smithson (under the pseudonym Eton Corrasable) in 1967.

If I were to insist in bringing Conceptual Art works into the ambit of literary production, what would then be the best definition of these artists' poetics or literary techniques? To what "literature" would I compare it to? In the introduction of *Anthology of Conceptual Art Writing*, the editor Douglas Craig Dworkin offered his thoughts on the poetic style of Conceptual Art works, if their words were to be called poems:

But what would a non-expressive poetry look like? A poetry of intellect rather than emotion? One in which the substitutions at the heart of metaphor and image were replaced by the direct presentation of language itself, with "spontaneous overflow" supplanted by meticulous procedure and exhaustively logical process? In which the self-regard of the poet's ego were turned back onto the self-reflexive language of the poem itself? So that the test of poetry were no longer whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise. ("Anthology").

In contrast, even if nothing could be read or seen according to conventional literary systems, conceptual artists were sometimes compared to writers and their works to poems. Though some of them might have begun as poets, the words included in their works resembled little of traditional poetry, just as their art resembled little of traditional art. Therefore, the implications of such attempt might be a straight threat to conceptual artists' own ideas, for instead of leaving an open field, the readings of their works would simply migrate from one category (Fine Arts) to another (Literature). Osborne explained the problems of making straight connections between literature and works of Conceptual Art:

The making of art in the form of written or printed texts might seem like a simple change of activity: from 'art' (and artefactuality) to 'literature', but this fails to grasp the peculiar function of texts in the institutional context of visual art. Texts acquire new, and inherently unstable, artistic and cultural

functions by being placed in the spaces of art, and claimed as themselves artwork. (27)

Artists themselves rejected this connection when asked if there was any link between their works with literature, particularly poetry. LeWitt explained that “if words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature; numbers are not mathematics” (222). Joseph Kosuth in an interview with Jeanne Siegel responded about this possible relationship between Conceptual Art and literature: “Absolutely no relationship at all. It’s simply one of things superficially resembling one another” (1991: 51). To better explain his going to the textual medium, Kosuth made a parallel with concrete poets, with whom conceptual artists would sometimes be “mistaken by”. He explained the complications of treating art as literature by saying that the utilization of different media was the need to find most adequate means of present the artists or the writers’ work. He actually called this comparison “superficial”:

That’s the reason the concrete poets have begun doing ‘street work’ projects because of the fact that they don’t feel in many ways that language is adequate to make the kind of statements they want to make. And so they’ve been doing a lot of performance pieces as well. But the typical concrete poem makes the worst sort of superficial connections to work like mine because it’s kind of formalism of typography – it’s cute with words but dumb about language. It’s becoming a simplistic and pseudo-avant-garde gimmick, like a new kind of paint. (52)

Kosuth usually refused the formal aspects of language in order to concentrate on content, on concept. The first generation of Conceptual artists was not interested in the form or materiality of words, but the meanings they carried. They perceived this comparison as a comparison based on form, on the resemblance between the shape of conceptual works and that of a poem. Similar to Kosuth, the conceptual artist Robert Barry, when asked if

there was any relationship between his works and literature, answered: “Not at all. Only in the sense that there are those who believe that all art is a form of poetry, but only in that sense” (Renton 124). Finally, to call conceptual artworks (words) literature would put important implications of their readings in jeopardy. Though it is possible to identify literary conventions and poetic structures in their texts, it is also important to bring to the fore the dialectical approach of words and images within this analysis so as to maintain the desired openness of their works but also to stimulate a new practice of reading/looking. Though many artists wished words were read only for the meaning they offered, the material properties of language are also going to be called into focus in this thesis, in their word works. Verbal language in Conceptual Art will be read for its obscure meanings; written words will be read for their lack of transparency, their need to constitute meanings, for their search for freedom to mean something else (Barthes 1990: 108). As a social and cultural sign, language in their works extended meanings and significations; their texts functioned as a never ending sign.

Texts usually came accompanied by other materials and media, so that conceptual artists enriched their production and established new perspectives creating in their writings an unexpected poetics. There were crossovers, juxtapositions and mixing of arts and media. Words occupied galleries and went to the streets in the form of advertisement, photographs, performances, installations, in billboards and posters. As their production distanced from the formal aesthetics of art creation, others felt tempted to be also part of Conceptual Art. Writers, poets, photographers, and musicians felt welcome to take part in Conceptual Art contributing to a “semiotic free-for-all” quality of creation (Osborne 16). The artistic skills were consequently going through revision. Artists from the 60s and 70s defiantly deviated from the familiar and became motivated by other arts:

There were significant crossovers between art and music, film and performance, sculpture and architecture, painting and popular culture. This

gradual shift or mutation in the rigidly structured forms of modernist art has led not to another style, but to fully transformed conceptions of art founded on alternate critical premises. (Wallis xiii)

In *A Poetics of Postmodernity*, Linda Hutcheon described what had since then happened to exclusivity of media in artistic language. These “new arts” were giving place to a “fruitful straddling of the borderline between the literary and visual arts.” To strengthen this quality of the artistic move, Hutcheon quoted Theodore Ziolkowski:

New arts are so closely related that we cannot hide complacently behind the arbitrary walls of self-contained disciplines: poetics inevitably gives way to general aesthetics, considerations of the novel move easily to film, while the new poetry often has more in common with contemporary music and art than with the poetry of the past. (qtd. in Hutcheon 6)

Such strategy did create new arts or, in the least, took the concept of art to an interdisciplinary sphere. The hierarchy of languages within the artistic field was being looked at with indifference. Its tyrannical vein and medium purity had to be demolished so that Conceptual Art could rise from its ruins. A single medium could no longer be expected to hold any definition accurately or draw clear lines to differentiate distinct procedures or art movements. Multiple vectors guided Conceptual Art production in opposition to universal beliefs that had prioritized the essentially visual artistic quality of artworks. As the aesthetic importance of the artwork was diminished, “medium specificity was replaced by multiplicity” (Osborne 11). The aesthetic status that “rests[ed] upon a fusion of semiotic features and procedures that, according to habit, belong to separate sign systems or art forms” came to contest “fundamental conventions of both literature and the visual arts, as it questions[ed] their established status as distinct, even mutually exclusive media” (Vos 137). What happened was a transfiguration of our reading of signs. According to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in *Modernização dos Sentidos*, what happened when objects could

no longer be “read,” could be called sign disregulation. “The world of objects was no longer experienced as a universally intelligible world; and, once the world of objects was no longer ‘given’, a space for intellectual and artistic experiments could be metaphorically called ‘sign disregulation’” (162).¹⁷

In this analysis of Conceptual Art written pieces, the artists blocked the sometimes alleged transparency of language to turn it into a problem. The correspondences between signified and signifier oscillated and turned language into an unstable structure. Whilst it guaranteed meanings, it denied them. In fact, correspondences between signifier and signified; figurative and denotative meanings problematized language in Conceptual Art. Conceptual artists ended up spotting the fissures, inconsistencies, and range of significations language could bring about.

In 1970, the conceptual artist Mel Bochner criticized the idea of language as a transparent means of communication in his work *Language is not Transparent* (Bochner’s contribution to the Dwan Gallery in 1970). This work consists of the statement ‘1. Language is not Transparent’ weakly hand-written in chalk on a black surface painted directly on the wall. Though resembling a rectangle, instead of a straight line, the bottom of this tab is left undone – it ends in running black paint and drips. This condition gives the impression the piece was either unfinished or carelessly done, it might also be referring to action painting (like drips in Abstract Expressionism) or graffiti and written words that had invaded the streets during the 60s (such as in May 68).

¹⁷ My translation of: “O ‘mundo dos objetos’ deixou de ser experienciado como um mundo universalmente legível; e, com o mundo dos objetos deixando de ser ‘dado’ como um mundo de signos, abriu-se um espaço para experimentos intelectuais e artísticos que podem ser chamados metaforicamente de ‘desregulação do signo’”.



Fig. 11. Mel Bochner, *Language is not Transparent*, 1970.

Bochner had three pieces containing this same statement “language is not transparent.” A previous version (1969) is likely to have been developed into the piece of 1970. It consists of four cards on which Bochner stamped the statement “Language is not Transparent” once on the first card, twice on the second, four times on the third and sixteen times on the fourth. The sentences are centralized so that they top one another, especially on the fourth card. In Bochner’s work, the implication of the statement *Language is not Transparent* is reinforced by the work itself. The statement demonstrates the legitimacy of what it reports for what one sees is language – which is anything but transparent. Once topping one another, the statements act as if they were transparent to each other though they again end up proving the content of what the statement claims (language is not transparent). But this is a procedure that does not consent legibility but reinforce the

physical, material presence of language. “What seems a tautology – a statement that validates itself through repetition – is in fact a state of suspension, since what appears as redundancy is actually embedded in two distinctively separate language systems of word and image as if they were transparent to each other” (Field 42). In this work language is a scripture. By the last card it is unreadable – a material, an image with no content.

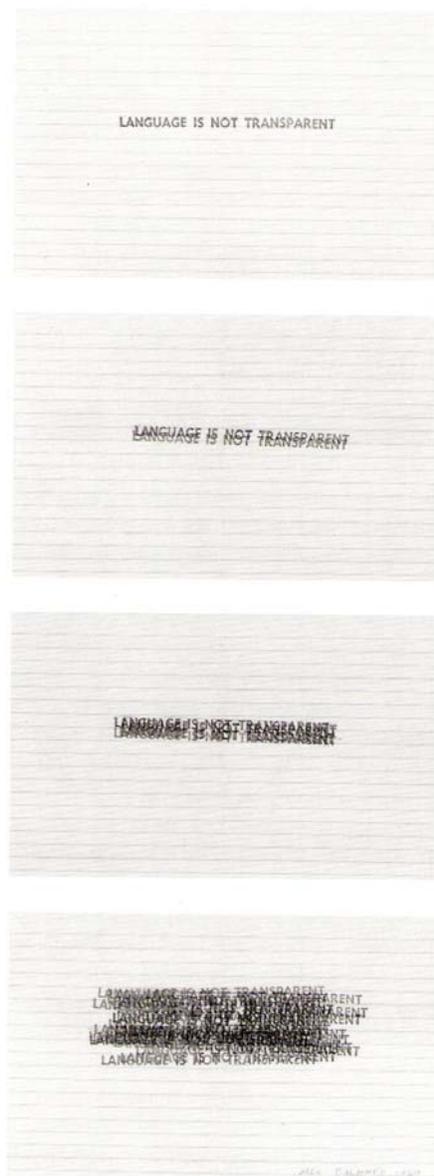


Fig. 12. Mel Bochner, *Language is not Transparent*, 1969.

This piece was also reproduced in 1999 under a similar presentation of that from 1969. This time the statement “language is not transparent” was printed 17 times on a white surface. The statements were centralized on a cotton base sheet so that they could sometimes occupy the same space – be juxtaposed. The sentences were watermarked in black color that on the sheet ranged from light to dark – practically transparent as if vanishing, becoming invisible. When asked about the piece from 1999, Bochner claimed that it was “[l]anguage obliterating itself,” a characteristic that was also present in the earlier work from both 1969 and 1970 (Obrist and Antelo-Suarez “Interview”). Topping each other, sentences annul meaning by claiming themselves matter and nothing more.

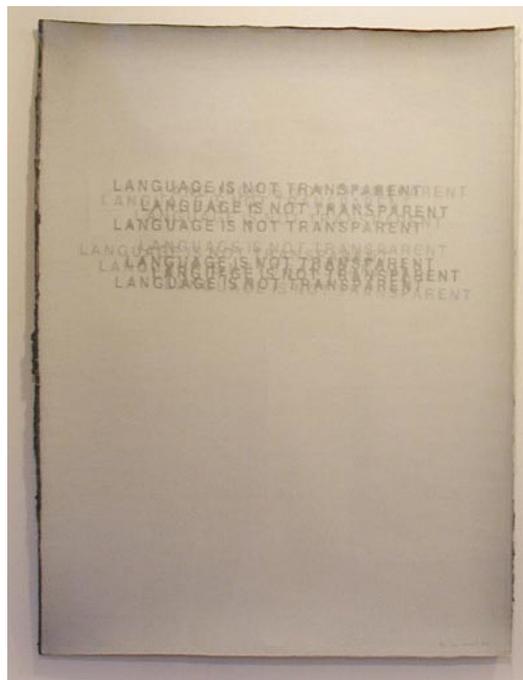


Fig. 13. Mel Bochner, *Language is not Transparent*, 1999.

These pieces are significant to the reading of word works in Conceptual Art present in this study since they offer the main aspects that motivated my impressions. The vulnerability of the language is represented by the juxtaposition of sentences (1969 and

1999) and the ephemeral condition of the material with which is written – chalk (1970). The transient condition of language suspends or promotes the dissolution of the meaning attributable to its being material. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Sandre Antelo-Suarez, Bochner explained that “language is, in a sense, the instructions or the genetic code of the piece. It is presented as equivalent to the physical evidence” (“Interview”). Bochner is emphasizing the material qualities of language. If language is not transparent, it is compact, materialized, objectified. What often happened in Conceptual Art works was that as the object was being dematerialized, language became materially present; that is, language became the object itself. Letters were proudly presented for their material existence instead of emphatically emphasizing its function of meaning conductor alone (even if against some artists’ ideas). Instead of being concerned with representing reality, language could itself be reality.¹⁸

When using language, conceptual artists have not dedicated to calligraphy, type designs or sophistication, I must say. They have not turned the practice of writing into an aesthetic practice, but highlighted the language quality of being written, solid, opaque, meaningless, mute. We cannot see through language. Words do not narrate, explain or represent anything out of their own solidness, they are impenetrable. Words are fragments of language, found poetry. Bochner stated that “there is not thought without language, and that in the visual arts there is no language without a physical embodiment” (Field 41). By reinforcing the material presence of language, conceptual artists wished to escape from characteristics usually linked to Conceptual Art, such as the words in Conceptual Art being uniquely concerned with the idea. Especially with these works, Bochner wanted to guarantee a lack of boundaries amongst arts but mainly amongst images and words.

Yet, words still designate, name and mean. Their shape is their clothing. Beneath its shell, language hides its secrets and meanings. After staring at a word long enough, the

¹⁸ Maria Angélica Melendi actually asks if language could offer a version of reality but not be reality itself (45).

reader sees it cracking, notices the fragility of the material. If there is a spirit – or spirits – in the letter, it is disguised, covered by material, the image of the letter, until it sprawls in negotiations of meanings. The non-physical quality of the letter remains alive even without the matter that made it visible – language has a ghostly characteristic. The statement (language is not transparent) could then be also referring to one of the current speeches that permeated language theories from the 60s. Then the word transparent is not exactly exalting language's materiality but claiming that its function of meaning maker is not so obvious. It rejected the approach of language as a pure reproduction of the idea, as a transparent, clear way to reach the idea. It is not pure or uncontaminated. It is not a clean path but a crossing of roads and plural meanings. Letters have lived long enough to carry in their souls many experiences, histories, many meanings, many corridors.

Though most artists did wish to leave passionate or sentimental discourses aside using brief, simple and direct language, their verbal constructions were usually chained into a complex net of significations hidden behind their so desired objectivity, denotative meanings and transparency. Some used words and photographs as an objective set of practices more likely to register experiences without the subjectivity of the artist as if a text could convey ideas neutrally, with little passion or emotion, without metaphors or ornaments; as if meanings could be purely and accurately transmitted with the minimum noise possible. Some developed ideas on pure Conceptual Art or straightforward speech to favor comprehension, but, like Kosuth, could be trapped or risk being contradictory. Besides, if a painting could speak for a thousand words, what would words speak for if they were transparent? Furthermore, even if there was some effort to produce works where language offered little nuisance, the moment words were present in the artistic field, they contained an inborn metaphorical value. Artists' short inscriptions were qualified for their cognitive value. Words were moving into representation of ideas, of concepts. The moment artworks were written, meanings were expanded beyond expectations.

Another suggestion is that writing words in a short and objective manner means the artists could be leaving metaphor construction to the reader. The text could develop its plurality, language could undress in front of the reader as in Duchamp's *Fresh Widow*. *Fresh Widow* consists of a real size window frame approximately two meters tall and one meter wide standing on a wooden structure detached from any walls. It is exposed as if in a show-room, particularly due to its status of industrial window, made in large scale production – another of Duchamp's readymades. Instead of the expected transparent glass, the window has its panes covered in black so that the viewer cannot see through. Its frame is painted green and the spectator would be surprised to find on the wooden floor sustaining structure the painted inscription *Fresh Widow Copyright Rosé Selavy 1920*. The words written in block, well-shaped letters first trap the spectator, who suddenly realizes that the about-to-be-pronounced “French window” was actually *Fresh Widow*. French window is actually a style of windows that seemed more appropriate to marry the object displayed – the window. Meaning is immediately delayed (*retard*) for when the right words clearly appear in front of the reader, they become illegible, opaque, empty. The meeting of the words inscribed in the object (*Fresh Widow Copyright Rosé Selavy 1920*), the object (window) and title (*Fresh Widow*) turned this piece into a game in which it was up to the spectator to tie the knots and join possible clues that could lead to possible meanings. The meaning of *Fresh Widow* is suddenly thought to be hiding behind the blocked window panes and an almost sensual image of the widow is suggested – sensual due to the adjective fresh, which adorns the lady with clean, new and healthy qualities. At this point window and widow coexist. The widow is personified, physically present, though absent to the viewer, hid behind the blocked window. The widow is Rosé Selavy.

But this name is also to be undressed. Behind this name hides Duchamp, a woman, the artist, the meanings, a resignation (“c’est la vie” – Selavy). The proper name (Rose Sélavy) is also a sentence. The double ‘rs’ in French is pronounced ‘er’, turning the first

name into er-rose. Therefore, *Éros, c'est la vie*, “a statement inscribing life within a circle of eroticism” (Krauss 200). Duchamp is playing with words, meanings and transparency; he is calling the mind of the reader into the game of words and significances.



Fig. 14. Marcel Duchamp, *Fresh Widow*, 1920.

The idea of a text functioning for its plurality could be conveyed through Roland Barthes' suggestion of language as being a source of unstable meaning. The idea of language as a transparent tool can be confronted by what Barthes called writerly texts. In 1970, Barthes wrote *S/Z*, in which he analyzed Balzac's *Sarrasine*. In the first pages, Barthes drew a difference between writerly (“scriptable”) and readerly (“lisible”) texts.¹⁹ He defined ‘writerly’ texts as those which are our own value, the texts rewritten by us. Barthes

¹⁹ The readerly texts are those that obey a linear order and seem transparent. Barthes calls any readerly text a classical text (4). If language was to be transparent, the signifieds would be given priority so that the reader's participation would be limited to either accepting or refusing the inward meaning. Therefore, the readerly texts are transparent and seem to be tightly connected to the idea of a first, denotative and objective meaning.

explained that the writerly texts are our own value “because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes 1974: 4). ‘Writerly’ texts are not to be consumed passively but should encourage the reader’s participation for these texts are plural and do not have hierarchical conditions or fixed meanings. The writerly text has no first or second meanings, as it could be accessed by any entrance, instead of a determined or right way – though he admitted it is not easy to escape from the definitions of denotation as a first meaning. There is a significant input on the receiver rather than on the producer. It is now the reader, the receiver, the spectator demanded to continue the unfinished work.

Writerly texts, however, are not objects and could not be found in book shop shelves. When Barthes suggested a moving from the work to the text he meant a complex net of significations, but not necessarily written (Eagleton 191). In Barthes’s *The Death of the Author* he explained that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes “Death”) Barthes continues to explain:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestations, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is reader, not as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost: a text’s unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination. Yet this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted (Barthes “Death”)

The idea of a text representing or imitating reality gives place to dialogism: an assemblage of relations amongst texts. If language is not transparent, it does not name things limpidly. *Language Is Not Transparent* is an alert to conventions – reality is a convention. Hal Foster explained in *Re:Post* that a text “does not enclose one signifier and signified as such” (194). Signifier and signified exchange roles, change positions. They freed themselves from the obligation of holding one another. A text is a composition of suspended forms and concepts.

Bochner had not only introduced a seed for language rumination, but he had also reinforced the interrelations between sign systems. When he produced a work that resembled a blackboard (an icon for formal studies) or when he included the number 1 before the sentence Language is not Transparent (as if a premise for studies) or the dripping paint (a reference to Abstract Expressionism), he disturbed the reading with unusual occurrences. In Conceptual Art the meeting of texts, photographs, paintings or typographical elements postponed the meaning. The text in Conceptual Art is a suggestion of a new kind of art where words and images meet in a hybrid space. “Increasingly, Bochner would insist that phenomenological description or pure information presents an insufficient picture of the world” (Field 41).

Chapter 5: First Conceptual Word Works

There are specifically two pieces that are very representative to the emerging of Conceptual Art works. They are *Words* and *Cardfile*, which are more often identified as one of the first Conceptual Art pieces. The work *Words* was first exhibited in 1962 within the confines of Smilon Gallery in New York, exploring spatial possibilities instead of a single spot on the wall. It is an example of the initial attempt to recreate the gallery space through the conception of a new environment. This work consolidates artists' needs to change the usual exhibition mark of artworks.



Fig. 15. Allan Kaprow, *Words*, 1962.

In this work, words covered walls, constructed others, spread on floors or hung from ceilings. Two rooms were invaded with printed words and sounds, presence and participation. In the first room, the American artist Allan Kaprow covered walls and ceilings with cardboards, canvas and papers handwritten in large black bold letters ranging

from a single word to sentences, from flat papers to rolls. The audience was welcome to take part in the rearrangement of the space by making choices of either pinning or removing these posters, or rolling the paper-rolls up or down or reading them from any direction. Amongst several words and sentences, invitations such as “Roll the rolls and see the words line up” reinforced the participation request. It was up to the public to create their own poetics. Hidden, seen, heard or silent, words were available to constructions and combinations.

Kaprow also placed three or four gramophones in the room again encouraging the public participation. The score was vital in Kaprow’s works and so was in *Words*. Recorded sounds, spoken texts and noises, which could be played singly or together, were made available to the audience’s choices adding to the completion of the atmosphere. “Listen to the word on the victrolas.” The audience turned into physically present bodies invited to act, to move, to touch. “Try a record, try a poem.” Sometimes these words could even appeal in imperative tone: “Get your money worth! Listen!”



Fig. 16. Allan Kaprow, *Words*, 1962.

The second room was darker. There was a phonograph whispering Kaprow’s voice and the walls were covered with white papers and colored chalks hung from strings so that the visitors could write or draw upon them as if graffitiing a wall. Unlike the first room, in

which the spectator made choices by playing with the pages of a bigger text, in the second room they were invited to create, to write, to put their ideas on paper.

Spectators wrote, read, spoke and heard words. Words exalted their existence – “Words Words!” – calling attention to their presence within the limits of the rooms. Written or spoken, *Words* filled the space as they were bombed and invasive reaching people’s ears, eyes, hands and mind. Kaprow gave the term environment the quality of an indoor setting characterized by a diversity of materials with which the audience could operate, cooperate and interact. In other works he had filled spaces with everyday objects changing the role of the public from passive observers to thinkers, poets, architects. In this environment the objects were words, marks, signs, notes and whispers.

The architecture of *Words* resembled urban billboards, posters, newspapers and pieces and bits of conversation. It called street qualities into the gallery which was occupied with active participants. It seemed Kaprow was reinventing space. When demanded a different posture, however, the audience reflected on their own condition in the gallery space and in the streets: “By presenting words as ‘images’ and inviting viewers to become active writers/artists in this environment, the work questioned existing distinctions between artist and audience on both a formal and a social level” (Osborne 113). Also, “Allan Kaprow observed that in becoming a participant the viewer was in effect the object, or the painting, while the stuff and instructions were like the canvas. Active engagement was also demanded on a mental level. The viewer had to become a thinker” (Godfrey 143).

From merely observers, the public turned into significant figures in the artistic piece in the role of writers, designers or disc jockeys. Kaprow experimented with materials integrating time, space, the audience, life and art. He extended the concept of action painting towards different art forms to develop practices that pushed his pieces further from the known concept of art exploring different materials and objects of every sort. Kaprow, like Duchamp, was not concerned with distinctions amongst art categories and

expanded the term 'artist' when he said that: "Young artists of today need no longer say, 'I am a painter' or 'a poet' or 'a dancer'. They are simply 'artists'" (Kaprow 195). He once said that *Words* and other of his early works were more "orchestrated, composed, more like 'art.' Or like an extreme form of opera, multimedial, for example" (Kontova 95). Though Kaprow was not recognized as a conceptual artist – probably because he was older than the Conceptual Art generation – he brought new ideologies into view accompanied by similar moves such as Fluxus and the Gutai group in Japan. This work in particular advanced the plurality of texts and the need of audience participation – qualities highly spread in other conceptual artworks.

In 1963, *Cardfile* was exhibited, also carrying most qualities that were to strongly take form in Conceptual Art. The introduction to the catalogue for Robert Morris's 1971 Tate exhibition describes his work as: "art that goes beyond making, selling, collecting and looking-at kind of art, and proposes a new role for the artist in relation to society." Robert Morris was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1931. He was a versatile artist who wrote much on the art field and due to his wide-ranging investigation of various art instances he is also known as one of the pioneers of Minimal art, Performance Art, Land Art, Process Art. He had approached not only Duchamp but also Saussurean language studies transcending the "limited definition of the readymade as the mere displacement of traditional modes of artistic production by a new aesthetic of the speech art ('this is a work of art if I say so')" (Buchloh 1999: 518). In the early 60s, he started to assault some of the basic art principles introducing the crucial foundations of Conceptual Art.

Cardfile is known to have anticipated the movement of Conceptual Art exploring the artistic process, actions and decisions taken while in the route of elaboration. The presence of language in *Cardfile* submits art to an investigation of process of making art. Unlike Kaprow, who has used the frame of a gallery, Morris's *Cardfile* was framed as a readymade, in the shape of a real object. Morris association with Minimalism is mainly due

to his sculpture pieces. Though these coming arts seized Minimalism liberties, they also reacted against its formalities, as Minimal Art is thought to have been an art of sculptures – a formal art category – and Conceptual, an art of informalities.

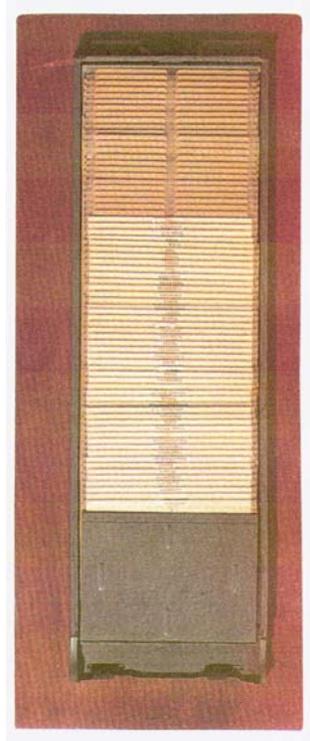


Fig. 17. Robert Morris, Cardfile, 1963.

Cardfile is from 1962 and was first exhibited in 1963 at the Green Gallery, New York. It consists of a metal and plastic file attached to a vertical wooden board containing 44 index cards. These 44 cards carry titles organized in alphabetical order and lined up vertically. The 44 index cards received labels that are listed as follows: Accidents, Alphabets, Cards, Cards-2, Categories, Changes, C..?, Communications, Completion, Conception, Considerations, Criticism, Cross Filing, Dates, Decisions, Decisions-2, Dissatisfactions, Delates Entries, Delays, Duration, Dimensions, Forms, Future, Index, Interruptions, Locations, Loosen, Materials, Mistakes, Names, Number, Owners, Possibilities, Prices, Purchases, Recoveries, Repetition, Signature, Size, Ster., Tenses, Time,

Title, Trips, Trips-2, Working-1, Working-2. Though the spectator can only see the titles, each of the 44 files is inscribed with annotations usually concerning the making of the piece itself – the Cardfile. That is, the content of the files is related to the process of constructing the piece. The annotations could only be read if the card is pulled. Then the reader would find that each carried typed remarks on the suggested topic including the indication of the date and hour it was written. These cards are narrated in a routine manner inviting the viewer/reader to a journey into thoughts, ideas and even the interferences Morris suffered while performing the task. In the card Recoveries, for instance, he informs where he found some of the cards he had lost, which cards these were and even what was inscribed in one of the cards he found:

Discovered in black brief case: 3 blank cards, 6 cards with the following categories: Considerations, Future, Locations, Changes, Responses-Actual, Responses-Predicted, on one card the scribbled note: “Role of Ideas – make the work not self-contained, refer to, stand for, sign” and further down on card the notation: “Sign//form”. (See Loses)

The style is personal, almost biographical for the words are written as if they were the artists’ most spontaneous statements, as if the artist was writing a personal diary, thinking declarations on his assignments. Besides, Morris’s language could be a bit chaotic when spit like notes or instructions he assigned to himself – because thoughts and plans do not always set in the paper in an ordered or organized way. The content of the files seem to be a translation of the artist’s process of creation, ideas and plans. The relationship between the actions and the written thoughts is almost tautological. We are left with the language that achieves the status of performance. The poetics of everyday language (annotations, reminders) replace actions in a textual format. The words on the cards function as a linguistic definition of the acts in his narrative practically tearing apart the boundary that separates the artistic production from his everyday life.

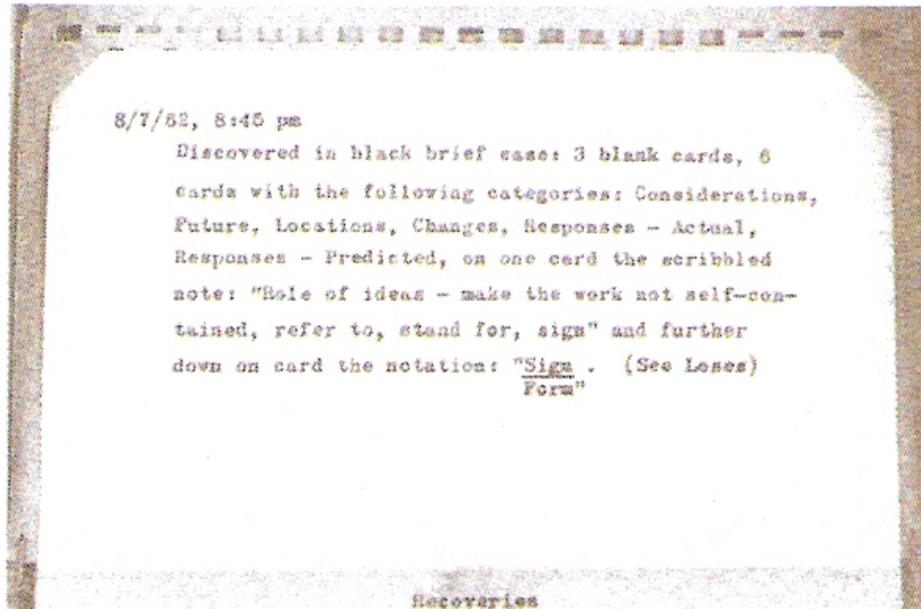


Fig. 18. Robert Morris, *One of Cardfile's Annotations*, 1963.

In the card Recoveries, Morris suggests that the work should not be self-contained. His predilection for a bureaucratic form could be read as an avoidance of pre-established codes in the art world. Morris's cardfile was relocated from its most immediate related site – an office, for instance – and inserted in an artistic institution. The nature of the cardfile is to put order, tidy, organize. This function contrasts with the openness proposed by conceptual artworks offering a dialectical approach that envisions a liberation from restrictive signifiers to a range of possibilities. At this point the object cardfile acquires the quality of filing thoughts. This work has no utility, no bureaucratic information but it approximates its content to a registration of mental process. The meaning of his work darts away, escapes the reader. The ideas within his verbal language fragment in front of the reader as if he was interested in presenting the dullness of his activity. It seems Morris has created an illusion for his own purpose. The conceptual artist Robert Smithson explains

that “this very vapidness and dullness is what inspired many of the more gifted artists. Morris has distilled many such dull facts and made them into monumental artifices of ‘ideas’” (1996: 13-14). He also explained that “mistakes and dead-ends often mean more to these artists than any proven problem” (1996: 11).

Robert Morris enjoys putting some “mistakes” into his language systems. His dummy *File* for example contains a special category called “mistakes.” At times, the artist admits it is difficult to tell a real mistake from a false mistake. Nevertheless, Morris likes to track down the “irrelevant” and then forget it as quickly as possible. Actually, he can hardly remember doing the *File*. Yet, he must have derived some kind of pleasure from preserving those tedious moments, those minute events, that others call “living.” He works from memory, which is strange when you consider he has nothing to remember. Unlike the elephant, the artist is one who always forgets. (Smithson 1996: 80)

Smithson’s saying proves the lack of importance of the object in relation to the artistic process. The artist seems lost in his own process as if the result was so irrelevant he even forgot the work he was narrating. The annotations in the file, written down to be remembered, will tell little of what it does, little of what it is that shall be remembered. Smithson might be implying Morris’s work is a work about nothing, about boring doings, monotony.

Works such as these (*Words* and *Cardfile*) were enigmatic and their novel role was not immediately assumed. The bureaucrat work follows no strict rules or procedures. The gallery room or the file frame seems to be a critique of this ordering of art. *Words* and *Cardfile* show art through spontaneous words, unconventional ambiance. The textual elements were initially intrusive and of hard comprehension. The words demanded more than simply appreciation. The viewer/reader stands in “intellectual discomfort” (Godfrey

143) in the presence of words not figured, in the presence of a puzzle, a riddle. The timeless art piece was subverted when the artist decided to accentuate the time spent on the making of art. There was no longer the interest in eternal art pieces if the time of the artist was to be ignored. Words were to bring the audience closer to thoughts, to concepts but also to materials. Concepts were to be reached through ink or air, through inscriptions.

Part 2:

Language-based Conceptual Artists

Chapter 6:

Douglas Huebler: Narrative with No Story

The story was too long.
 Before you told it, you forgot it.
 Before the snake unwound
 his infinite body
 from around the tree
 the head forgot where he was going.
 The story had too many beginnings.
 If you stepped through a door
 twelve others might open.
 (Nye "Problems")

The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more. I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and/or place. More specifically, the work concerns itself with things whose interrelationship is beyond direct perceptual experience.

(Huebler *January*)

Douglas Huebler was one of the pioneers of Conceptual Art and the introduction of photography into the Conceptual Art world. Huebler started as an action painter, transited among minimal qualities of sculptures to become a language-based artist much interested in everyday perceptions and documentation. During his last artistic phase his projects were a marriage between photography and descriptive texts as a means of keeping record of his ideas and experiences. Language entered his work as a means to reading experiences. In an interview with Patricia Norvell he said, "I began to get into the whole notion of language, the convention of language as a way by which we read our experience – really read our experience or conceptualize our experience" (Huebler 2001: 139). Language got into his work as a way he found to rebel against "mystification" – concept he used to call the attitude artists had when letting the critic speak for their works whilst they played the role of dumb artists (Huebler 1997: 124). The presence of words in Huebler's work

came from his perception of how language had invaded the universe of art as a guide to understand artworks. As a teacher, he noted how dependent on words professors and students were. Huebler explained that “after hearing and reading an appropriate menu of words, students were enabled to ‘see’ what they were supposed to see in art objects” (1997: 124). Due to the need to rationalize paintings, words functioned as an interpretative guide to allow comprehension. To Huebler, words in the artwork were to take the place of a verbal discourse that usually permeated the art world translating and interpreting paintings, drawings, sculptures. Written, an artwork no longer needed a supplementary text, but could be the text itself.

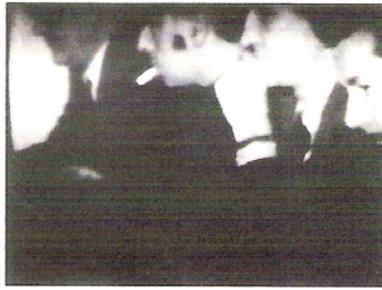
His photo-based projects consist of descriptive texts on the steps taken to execute the work, whereas the photographs are a registration of the execution. His pieces resemble reportages, though in Huebler’s reporting news an occurrence is hardly found – it is reportage with no event. The reader, intrigued by obviousness and lack of actions, searches for something secrete behind the apparent. Huebler’s works are of such mundane themes that there seems to be something floating above their simplicity. Otherwise, his works could simply be read as writings with no account or, as Joseph Kosuth once wrote, a narrative without a story.

One of Doug's earliest desires, one that goes back in fact to the Formica sculpture for which he was first known, was to do work that had “no inside or no outside.”²⁰ This meant in the photo-based projects that the fictive space of the narrative – which a work employing time unavoidably constructs – had to be subverted. Doug’s work has a narrative so flat it comes without a story, without even narrative desire. Time on the table, a tableau of parts, no meaningful beginning, middle, or end, just the

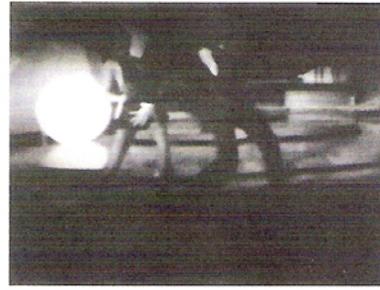
²⁰ Joseph Kosuth is referring to the written statement in the catalog of minimal sculptures exhibition called “Primary Structures” (New York, 1966). In this catalogue, Huebler wrote, “I wish to make an image that has no privileged position in space and neither an ‘inside’ nor an ‘outside’.”

organizational texture of the passage of time, which naturalizes the construction. If there is a story there, it's too big, one is too close to the screen to read it, one can make out an arm or a table. (Kosuth "Times")

Huebler's works seem to narrate the passing of time, a fragment of his life experiences. It was as if he had sat on a bench of a square, selected a focus of observation, and later narrated this bit through words and photographs. His juxtaposition of texts and images certifies an experience, a past experiment, a pastime. The referent may never be entirely recovered in Huebler's texts and photographs. His words turn his personal experience into a broader social perspective (especially in his *Variable Pieces*). The texts in his photo-texts works, which were apparently aimed to state the measures taken to produce the piece, were possibly just the entrance to a broader tale, a springboard for something else (Huebler 2001: 136). Godfrey explained that for Huebler art was "not about ideas in isolation, but about being in the world" (416). It was as if things could only have some interest when meeting the rest, when noted amongst others. His works give the impression they exist just to be supplanted; it is one presence to remind us of others, of webs and relationships. Huebler's narrative shows a scene, chooses a portion, a fragment to stand for a larger entity. Huebler's pieces are part of a larger puzzle. We just do not know where in the whole his pieces are supposed to fit, or even the extension of the whole. They seem essentially metonymic as they present one attribute to refer to something bigger and more intricate, even if one could hardly figure what this something might be. Huebler pushes the logic of dematerialization "to the verge of its own disappearance and transforms it into an instrument of emancipation" (Pontégnie 145). His works serve the purpose of releasing art from conventional formats eventually broadening perspectives.



13. At least one person who is beautiful but dumb.



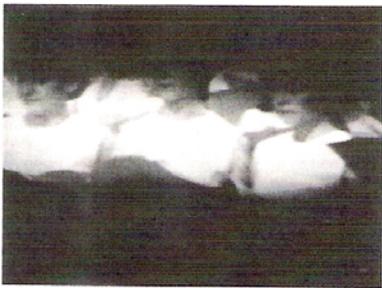
21. At least one person who always has the last word.



7. At least one person who is very confused about the present function of art.



22. At least one person who believes that this is the best of all possible worlds.



2. At least one person who would rather be almost anonymous.

63/Variable Piece #70: 1971

During the first 24 days of the artist's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford England one photograph was made each day (by museum personnel) from normal programming received by a television set installed with this work.

In order to rule out subjective associations chance determined the manner whereby each photograph was placed on a board on which were printed 24 aphorisms each characterizing an aspect of the 'everyone alive' project, e.g., 'At least one person who has achieved purposelessness'.

April, 1972

Douglas Huebler

Fig. 19. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #70*, 1971.

Two of Huebler's drawings (not yet his photo-texts) might help exemplifying his visions of art and some qualities of his text-based pieces. In one of his drawings, Huebler put a dot in the middle of a large piece of paper – though according to him the size did not matter as long as he used language (Huebler 2001: 144) – and wrote on the sheet: “On this point are located all the other points in this room.” The simple content of the statement immediately confronts the visual experience. Whether visible or not, the world is

surrounded by infinite points and though one in particular is located on the paper and visually perceived by the audience, the statement leads the viewer to the presence of all the other (visible/invisible) points. Huebler located one just to refer to the others, to guide his work to an ongoing situation: to expand language. This continuing perspective of his work results from the dialectics between words and image; language and point. In another drawing, Huebler meant to instruct through words the image the viewer/reader was to have. He wrote on a blank sheet, "Ahead of this surface is located an infinite amount of three-dimensional space." As the reader decodes the sentence, probably while still laying eyes on the blank sheet, s/he is led to think of the deep and solid space around. The artist is taking art away from the flat canvas. The visual experience interrupted by language leads the viewer/reader to build the piece mentally, to mirror on this white sheet, on a *tabula rasa*, its surroundings. It is the idea of being in a certain place aware of its relation to the rest. Huebler was interested in "the sense of your feeling about a place, where you are in relation to a larger context" ("Interview" 138). His works are about stating existing things, alerting the viewer/reader to what the world already has and eventually, the position this viewer/reader takes in relation to these reported presences.

This confrontation of object, image and language is also present in many other conceptual artists' works. Ian Burn's *No Object Implies the Existence of any Other* consists of this very same statement written on a framed mirror. The viewer/reader is faced with the object, the statement, and her/his own reflex. The proposition opposes the function of the object mirror for whilst "no object implies the existence of any other" a mirror is exactly defined as that which reflects the existence of other objects, that which presents other presences. As in Huebler's work, in Burn's pieces, text and object also have a dialectical relationship. If no object implies the existence of any other, neither could the mirror entail other presences, nor could the point or white sheet in Huebler's works function as a metonymy for something else – each being enclosed within its own presence, each pointing

to its own existence. As in Huebler's drawings, in Burn's piece it is also the incidence of language that defies the object presented (the mirror in Burn's, the point and the paper in Huebler's) probably turning language back to itself, to its own meaning or even to its own materiality. Whereas in Huebler's work the statement "Ahead of this surface..." pulls the eye and mind of the reader out of the paper, – it points to the exterior – in Burn's piece the statement "No object..." emphasizes the autonomy of either the object mirror or the statement itself – a provocation. However, though they seem contradictory, both exemplified how conceptual artists used language to reach more multifaceted issues but often stuck to the arbitrariness caused by the presence of language.



Fig. 20. Ian Burn, *No Object Implies the Existence of Any Other*, 1967.

Huebler called his works dialectical, for they uttered the ambiguous nature of things, which made their reading conflicting and problematical. Robert Smithson (also a language-based conceptual artist and protagonist of our last chapter) explained that in dialectical language, "nothing is isolated from the whole," and that "dialectics is not only the ideational formula of thesis – antithesis – synthesis forever sealed in the mind, but an

on-going development” (1996: 371). Huebler explained the effects of this dialectical approach to Conceptual Art:

[C]onceptual art had never been really bent on collapsing the very institutions – the art galleries, museums, collectors – through which their nature must be communicated. There are those who wrongly perceive Conceptualism as having had such an ambition, and who declare the entire enterprise to have been co-opted because it (necessarily) remained thoroughly within the art system. The conduct of ideological activities in the ‘real’ world can always be virtuous, always be politically ‘correct’, simply by being exercised through head-on confrontation with an opposing ideology. In the 1960s Conceptual Activity assumed a dialectical stance towards various art-world ideologies because head-on confrontation would have failed to produce any affective discourse, thereby rendering it a non-issue. (qtd. in Godfrey 254)

It seemed the effects of dialectics in art could provoke subtle reflections on ideological instances (institutions), but did not directly or openly tackle institutions of art. Huebler’s works might be actually trying a phenomenological approach to the meaning of art behind his apparently empty narrative. Huebler’s works avoided any kind of dogmatism or pure medium resisting a complete narrative in order to stimulate a different, apparently ordinary, view of the world. He wished to state existence. Just as one would make art on a great theme, Huebler approached the banal. In fact, the idea within his works could then highlight the creative process turning either the banal or the significant content into equal matters. The grand could come from the ordinary, just as the banal could be a fruit of the grand. What Huebler seemed to convey in his works is that artworks, language, existing things, and life slipped a definite significance, implication, or proposition but were still a source of meaning production. Amongst time and space, viewer and the context of

viewing, texts and photographs, Huebler suggested that an artwork was probably not to allow a final conclusion but to exist in the present “as a model of how meaning may be formulated” (1997: 124).

Huebler’s pieces had to do with his own perceptions of the ordinary usually presented in unsophisticated manners. It could be said he even ridicules his own doings, the irrelevance and dullness art (and life) could comprise. Huebler avoided artworks for aesthetic appreciation the moment his photographs and texts lacked attributes that would please the eyes. Anne Pontégnie described his works as having “[no] technical virtuosity here, no great subject, nothing sublime. Huebler probes the depths of ordinary habits, chooses one, captures it, then plays with it and reconstructs it until it reveals the infinite possibilities it contains” (143). These characteristics could be shown in some of his pre-established categories developed in several pieces. These projects (text-based) were separated by names that ranged from *Variable Pieces* (concerned with human existence), *Duration Pieces* (passing of time) and *Location Pieces* (involving specific sites, locations, and routes). Each of these pieces was numbered and dated. They were unique for their own existence and peculiarity though still meant to be part of something larger, still just a piece from a puzzle.

The *Variable Pieces* – also known as *Everyone Alive* – are essentially (almost existentialist) human. In these Huebler seemed concerned with culturally constructed assumptions present in language, the individuals and their insertion in the world, in their social contexts. These *Variable Pieces* were elaborated under the awkward idea of photographing and cataloguing “everyone alive.” In his own words, his project was to “photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive.” This piece probably elicits some giggles due to its inherent impossibility and eventual amusing initiative. We at once know this is a life project, interminable because of the nature of its purpose, doomed to fail the moment it was created.

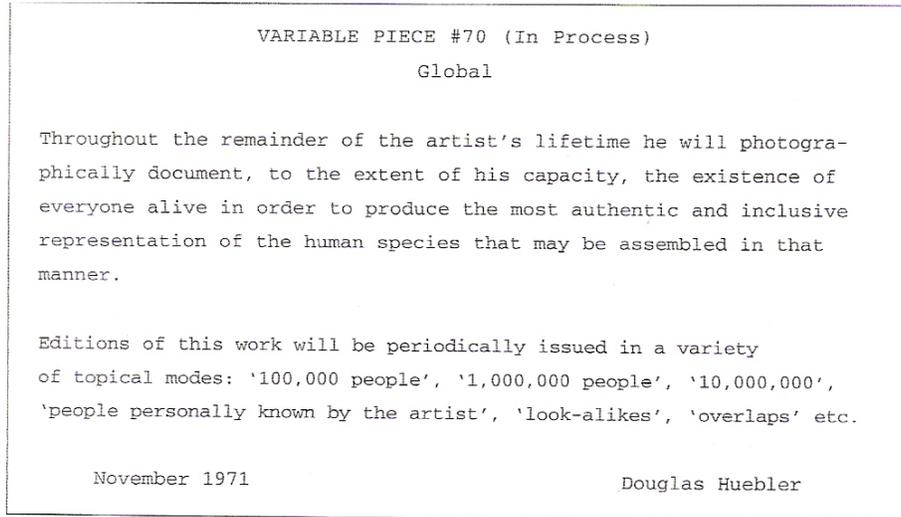


Fig. 21. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece # 70 (In Process)*, 1971.

The *Everyone Alive* project is “in process” drawing attention to its own development. The initial immeasurable proportion of its purpose (to photographically document everyone alive) could add some comfort to the artist’s own production and commitment – familiar with the impossibility of its completion. He frees himself from any external eventuality or personal limitations when underlining that the project’s accomplishment was conditioned “to the extent of his capacity.” They would be reported (probably exhaustively) until either the artist’s death or any other event that would make such triumph impossible. It is likely that the artist would repetitively register and document people until the end of *his* time, the time he defines (or the time defined) for himself. In *Everyone Alive*, Douglas Huebler meant to assume neither a tragic nor a heroic posture. Just like Sisyphus was engaged “in an endless absurd task” the idea of a work in process “provides [Huebler] with both reason and pleasure for producing work under the umbrella of the impossibility of ever completing its pronounced purposes” (Huebler 1997: 134). Like Sisyphus, Huebler is rolling the stone up until faith completes the work. There is something

tedious about this activity, present in the repetition of his task and (apparent) lack of purpose of his projects. It is this idea of a meaningless work, the repetitive act of registration and the implicit reference of its dimension in relation to the magnitude of the rest that brings Huebler's work (and works) closer to unreasonableness – life is purposeless:

Man's struggle to wrest meaning from life is foredoomed to failure because, of course, sooner or later we are all obliged to face mortality. Camus goes on to say that Man, like Sisyphus, must accept the absurdity inherent in that truth, and then conquer it through creative activity whereby he, or she, exists in a state of rebellious acceptance, a transcendence that refuses resignation, especially during the time when a creative object is being produced. At the conclusion of each such creative production its products are put aside and another begun. (Huebler 1997: 123)

There is no clear meaning in life, there is no clear meaning in art. Therefore, he dealt with the non-sense of life and our doings. Art had probably become the “creative activity” he found to exist in a “state of rebellious acceptance.” Huebler's works report the fluidity of time, place and identities. Particularly in *Everyone Alive*, the people reported seem to emphasize the nonsensical quality of our existence, and eventually that of art. We are then back to the presence of existentialist thoughts in these pieces, all departing from real characters – though they are made fictional – instead of celebrities or personalities. The artist and his photographed characters become clowns, foolish figures. In fact, Huebler himself is reflected in these characters. He is Sisyphus, Vladimir and Estragon (though the latter two are still trying to find their own pastime). He is waiting for faith, for death; he is killing time. His art is his amusement, the people his corpus. These are the humans he reports:

Vladimir: Nothing you can do about it.

Estragon: No use struggling.

Vladimir: One is what one is.

Estragon: No use wriggling.

Vladimir: The essential doesn't change.

Estragon: Nothing to be done. (Beckett 385)

This is how one should perceive both art and life: for what they are. In *Everyone Alive* he wishes to show the shared condition of being alive by photographing others. The idea of photographing everyone alive makes this venture what it is. It makes us feel our own record is necessary, but so are those of all the other living human beings. This brings us closer, it turns all of us into the same subject – subjects of human follies. We are all subjected of the same provision. Huebler wanted to “produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species.” Through this particular statement and the word *inclusive*, the artist is approaching a meticulous appeal for plurality and collectiveness. This should be a democratic and comprehensive piece. Because of this purpose, Huebler acquired the mark of a social scientist. In Godfrey's words,

Photography speaks not with one voice, but with a myriad of voices: black, white, brown; male, female, transsexual; sane, demented, mildly insane. The gaze of the camera is one of mastery, in which a dominant ideology tells, hints and insinuates what we should do and how we should think; but occasionally there are ways, like these, for an artist with the camera to dominate their subjects, to escape the horror of always speaking for others, to let that other have a voice. (341-42)

Huebler's photographs reveal characters in a transient possibility. People are revealed for the fluidity of reality instead of striking a pose eternalized in a single moment. The characters in his works are usually in movement, passing in the streets, visiting events. They might even stop to have their picture taken, but were most times caught on their ways. This

might be one of the reasons his pieces were called ‘variable.’ Variable for the diversity of people, variable for the spatial and temporal movement everyone alive is. The pieces in *Variable Pieces* offer a sociological picture of humanity. The individuals are inevitably reported for their personal characteristics but also, and most importantly, as members of society (unity to speak for the whole). They are reported amongst the social environment in which they are found. Huebler seems to be attesting our shared humanity and condition.

However, to photographically document the existence of everyone alive becomes also a device used to develop the divergent considerations of what it claims. Photographs cannot rescue a moment but leave a mark, a return of what is already dead – a moment that will never be revisited. Therefore, the impossibility of the project is present in the purpose of photographing everyone alive, for the moment one is photographed, the photograph gains life whereas the person could lose hers/his. Photographs could even attempt to bring the referent forward, but can not attest life.

Most *Everyone Alive* pieces consist of photographs, statements – “culturally fabricated aphorism and sayings” – and descriptive texts of the whole procedure. Huebler was especially interested in noting how people reacted to culturally constructed assumptions. These qualities also turned the *Everyone Alive* project into a social alert on conduct and language empowerment. Though subtle, his work is provocative. It is not only in the presence of clichés, aphorisms on cultural representation that Huebler approximates cultural assumptions, but also when confronting them to the photographed people. Through photography he manages to aggravate the questions of arbitrary constructions challenged by language and linked to the impossibility of the task.

The obvious impossibility of its declared program turns its photographic representations into free floating signs attached to the equally readymade terms of culturally fabricated aphorisms and sayings. As in all my work this project is meant to put the question to its audience about how willing it is –

and anyone else – to accept arbitrarily constructed relationships between language and appearances. (Huebler 1997: 134)

Both photographs and language constructions would work as striking labels or representations of the chosen characters in his story and could irritate participants who might eventually find their given role unsuitable. Huebler had noticed how uncomfortable people could be in front of the camera. He noticed that “for most people the camera represents a ‘threat’ of a certain kind,” like “a profound of vulnerability in front of the camera because it symbolizes a one-way mirror, an eye that sees its subjects in an unconditional matter while denying him or her any possibility of seeing his her ‘reflection.’” He added that the camera often “kidnaps one’s worst face” (1997: 129).

The photographs – in a way very much like the texts – offer little lyricism: their presence map and catalogue. Like the function of language (descriptive), photographs are present to reveal. When asked about the importance of photographs in his works, Huebler explained that they were only present as documentation, but that the work could exist solely in words. Therefore, the execution, the registering, the image were not to be perceived without the reading of the text. They were superfluous for their own nature in the projects, just as much as the projects themselves appeared to be. Huebler once said, “since 1968 I have brought language into the literal foreground of my work regardless of the kind of visual imagery with which it was associated: no matter how seemingly disparate the imagery may be it is language that permits the percipient to reconstitute the forms of information into a conceptually comprehensive text” (1997: 127). Unlike the past centuries, when words were seen as supplements to the artwork, in Conceptual Art – and Huebler’s – they are placed at the front. Below is an example of how words and image could be disparate in Huebler’s pieces, exactly to utter the privilege of language.

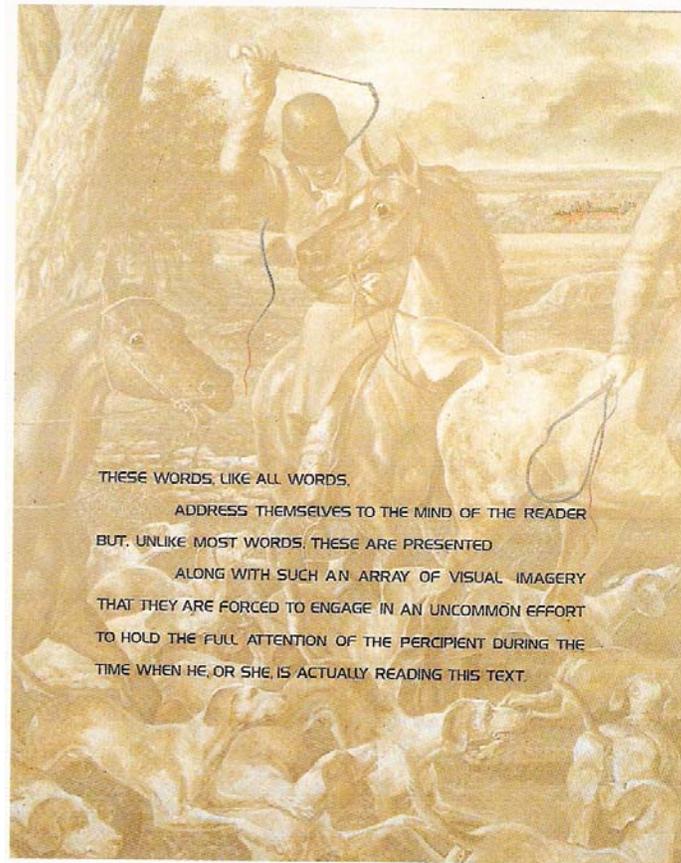
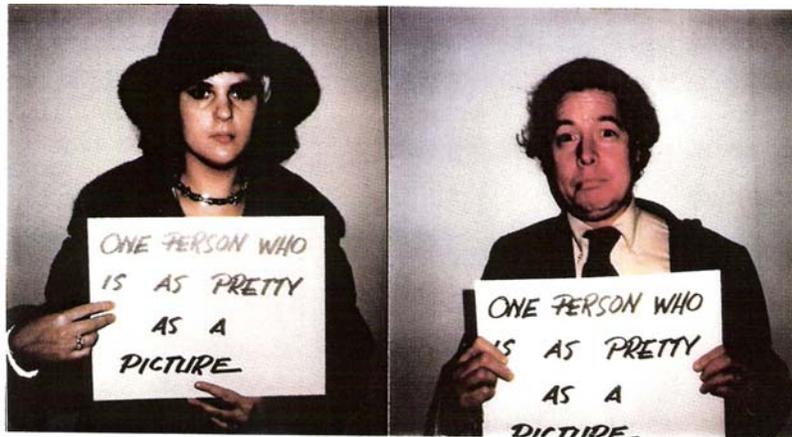


Fig. 22. Douglas Huebler, *Buried Treasure Painting*, 1995.

If the viewer/reader perceived the photograph before the text, the work could hardly make any sense; whereas if approached as a piece, texts and photographs would offer a new element created by an intermediatic relationship. Though texts make sense in isolation, texts and photographs create an equilibrium built upon paradoxes: a new language. Sometimes photographs are presented just to show the inconsistencies of Huebler's purposes. The photographs have the peculiar function to "masquerade as part of some extraneous project" that emphasizes the process instead of the final product and blends contradictory ideas (Wall 2002: 251). The photographs are the dumb snapshots that have nothing artistic or great. They are also a criticism of the great concern with physiognomy – evident all through his projects. The photographed subject is then perceived in the conditions the project was conducted.

In *100E/ Variable Piece No. 70: 1971* (started 1971 and ended in 1977), Huebler exposes his characters in a humorous way. The text informs of the decisions Huebler had taken to execute the work, how the piece has been organized but then also the bit he would leave to chance. This is a good example of how his characters were confronted with language, aphorisms and cultural assumptions – as mentioned earlier.



100E/ VARIABLE PIECE #70: 1971

Since 1971, countless thousands of people have been photographed for the 'Everyone Alive' project; hundreds have been photographed in the following specific manner:

At various art events, visitors who had agreed to the conditions for participating in this project randomly selected one of eighty cards on which were printed clichés such as 'AT LEAST ONE PERSON WHO IS BEAUTIFUL BUT DUMB'. (Included in the stack of cards were 'characterizations' fabricated by the artist especially for this work.)

By being forbidden to read the card until after being photographed with it, each participant posed with the full knowledge that 'chance' would associate his or her face with a characterization whose truth could be gratuitously flattering or outrageously insulting.

The subject of each 'portrait' produced by this activity had agreed that, whatever the result, it was to become a permanent document of the 'Everyone Alive' project. Anyone who found the instantly produced Polaroid print completely unacceptable was allowed to use a 'Magic Marker' to 'de-face' it; virtually no one did so.

During the several years before this particular form of documentation was concluded in April 1977, a total of four people became forever associated with the characterization...

ONE PERSON WHO IS AS PRETTY AS A PICTURE

Enlargements of their photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

1977

Douglas Huebler

Fig. 23. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #70*, 1971.

According to Huebler, these people had equal chance of being chosen. Once chosen, the artist explained that the participants would pick one of the eighty cards printed with aphorisms or clichés and hold them in order to have their photograph taken. They were not allowed to read the sentence in the card until the photograph was developed. Participants could feel either “flattered or insulted” when aware of the chance they had taken – even though they knew about that risk. But as Huebler explained in the piece:

The subject of each ‘portrait’ produced by this activity had agreed that, whatever the result, it was to become permanent document of the ‘Everyone Alive’ project. Anyone who found the instantly produced Polaroid print completely unacceptable was allowed to use a ‘Magic Marker’ to ‘de-face’ it; virtually no one did so.

Some of the statements in the cards were “At least one person who is beautiful but dumb” or “At least one person who knows that life is unfair” or “At least one person who had to be coaxed into having this picture taken” or even “One person who is as pretty as a picture.” The photographs resemble criminal records for they were taken in a neutral background and each participant held the printed card, looked in the eye of the camera as if they had just been imprisoned. But this time, instead of a number, they would hold printed statements. Printed statements would function as a means to recognizing the character, identification.

When using aphorism and confronting people with them, he was likely to be critical to how language could have a negative or positive effect on people – it all depended on their content, on what their signification implied. In stating that participants knew that “chance would associate his or her face with a characterization whose truth could be gratuitously flattering or outrageously insulting,” the artist was already pointing to the problems constructed meanings could generate and the disturbing influences a label directly connected to a photograph, to a person, could have. He was focusing on the

importance people give to language, to labels. Huebler was demonstrating the presence of language in the world as a powerful and aggressive element, especially if the content of words did not match the people's thoughts. Language might have a more serious effect on people than actions. In another *Variable Piece* (*Variable Piece No. 34*) from 1970, Huebler photographed "8 people at the exact instant when the photographer said: 'You have a beautiful face!'" Unlike the *Variable Piece No. 70*, in this piece people immediately reacted with a smile, obviously due to the satisfying effect the statement had on them.



VARIABLE PIECE #34
Bradford, Massachusetts

During November, 1970, eight people were photographed at the exact instant when the photographer, or his assistant, said: "You have a beautiful face!"

The eight photographs, and this statement join together to constitute the form of this piece.

December 1970 Douglas Huebler

Fig. 24. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #34*, 1970.

Variable Piece No. 105 is another good example of how Huebler could create identities often exposing people under comic features. In this piece, Huebler photographed 18 mannequins (from window shops) and after each of these he immediately photographed

a passer-by in the street, of the same sex as the previous mannequin. He was in Oxford Street, London, and photographed each mannequin at two-minute intervals. “Immediately after each photograph was made the artist turned and photographed the next person that he saw who was of the same sex as the previous mannequin photographed....” The photographs of the piece are coupled: mannequin and its real life counterpart. Even if aware it was all done randomly, the audience would still have the push to look for any resemblance.



VARIABLE PIECE #105
London

Eighteen mannequins were photographed at two minute intervals through the windows of clothing stores on Oxford Street.

Immediately after each photograph was made the artist turned and photographed the next person that he saw who was of the same sex as the previous mannequin photographed, thereby juxtaposing a model of reality with a real life counterpart.

A contact proof print and twelve photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

1972

Douglas Huebler

Fig. 25. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #105*, 1972.

The idea of tackling a person with a mannequin, though comical at first, calls for an alert on human conditions. The photographed mannequins acquire a direct connection to their pair. Whereas it presents the incongruities between human and dummy, it also highlights their resemblance. The word “counterpart” suggests the mannequin is a matching part of the being. Huebler’s fascination with look-alikes could be either an act of humanizing dummies or dehumanizing people. Either way, his work allows us a different perception of reality from faces not usually perceptible to us. If we force our connection to dummies, we might conclude, in Huebler’s works, that our manipulators are language – we are victims of our own creation.



DURATION PIECE #3
New York City

Twelve photographs were made of the escalator located on the main floor of the New York Port Authority Building, following the time pattern charted below:

September 26, 1968

4:22 p.m.
4:23 p.m.
4:24 p.m.
4:25 p.m.
4:26 p.m.
4:27 p.m.
4:28 p.m.
4:29 p.m.

4:59 p.m.
5:59 p.m.

September 27, 1968

4:22 p.m.

October 26, 1968

4:22 p.m.

None of the photographs is keyed with the time it was made; all twelve join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

Sept./Oct., 1968 Douglas Huebler

Fig. 26. Douglas Huebler, *Duration Piece # 3*, 1968.

Huebler usually shows interests in letting chance take its turn in his works. He undoes tasks he had set himself; he often disrupts some of his own assignments – though they also become part of the project. As Osborne mentioned, Huebler parodies his own assignments practically turning them into a pointless procedure (251). His procedures were first guided to be soon handed to arbitrariness. In *Duration Piece No. 3*, for instance, he would have 12 photographs of an escalator taken at very specific time patterns, though “none of the photographs is keyed with the time it was made.” He is setting specific time intervals only to disrupt them. A logical time principle exists just to be subverted. Besides, photography is usually an isolated image, freed from temporal and spatial qualities, freed from the temporal succession of events. Huebler is defying his own creation, he is acting against language. Instead of being manipulated by language, Huebler turns against it.

In another work, *Duration Piece No. 4* he explained that “photographs of two children playing ‘jump-rope’ were made in the following order: I. Three photographs were made at 10 second intervals. II. Three photographs were made at 20-second intervals. III Three photographs were made at 30 second intervals.” Again, he left all to randomness: “The nine photographs have been scrambled out of sequence and join with the statement to constitute the form of this piece.” The reader is aware of the criteria Huebler chose to work with. Yet, his next sentences discredit his organization, making them unnecessary: Huebler’s procedures oscillated between a definite organizational pattern and randomness. His lack of commitment to the exact chronological order photographs were taken disturbs the harmony of the piece. This device qualifies the language of photographs. Photographs are “rapid exposures which produce a state of rest, an isolated sign,” and “the isolation of something from within the succession of temporality” (Krauss 205). By doing so, Huebler is avoiding narrative, for the preceding photographs in his sequence do not bear the others to come. The order of the photographs will not alter the result of his art and reinforce the

lack of importance a chronological sequence has. In the *Duration Pieces*, he focuses on transience, a dead time.

This lack of commitment to consistence is presented by language. It is through his texts that we know image and text could be unrelated. It was as if you could have a photograph and headline that though intelligible on their own, are disparate when put together. That is probably the reason Huebler emphasized the relevance of texts to photographs. Again, he is focusing on arbitrariness. The inadequacy of his propositions, instead of purely informational, acquire something of little informational, non-transparent or pure. His apparent rationalism is just one of the devices for his amusement. Huebler was

accused of being too reminiscent of an administrative rationality, as a way to reduce his means in order to escape representation or fiction. On the contrary, Huebler uses this strategy as an extra outlay, a gratuitous complication which exposes, with more humor than irony, the rationalization in which he is accused of participating. (Pontégnie 146)

Huebler' texts are descriptive, objective and as flat as any text that avoided stories would be. He sometimes spent more than four weeks just to improve his words in precision, reducing them to the minimum lines possible. His texts are an account of what he had planned (or/and unplanned) and that is clearly perceived. His projects are a provocation of our perceptions of passing time but also a strong critique of accuracy in documentation.

At a time when artistic practices tend, by means of either structural deconstruction or linguistic analysis, to become transparent and explicit, Douglas Huebler chooses instead to complicate the reading of his works. He initiates a perverse dialogue between the Conceptual strategies he has helped to set up – documentation, text, rejection of aesthetic seductions – and the parodic, humorous way he keeps them at a distance. (Pontégnie 145)

Huebler is acting against the current conceptual doings that he had probably helped setting. Thus, he left much of the meaning production to participants, viewers, readers. His narratives play amid the actual and the fictional, description and deconstruction and so avoid imposing significations. His projects lack conclusion, turn art into a distraction. Huebler defies analysis when he builds identities in order to show that in his works there is nothing to be done but report, denounce our own conditions, confront them with language, laugh at time.

Though Huebler's texts seem informative, clear and transparent, probably exactly for that reason meanings fluctuate and force exactness into displacement. Texts do not fulfill the viewer/reader's crave to fully understand the subtleness of his works. Texts cannot be assumed to be the experience but to evoke one, never again to be achieved. Verbs, like photographs, reinforce the accomplishment of works through the simple past tense that grants the works intelligibility. We know of the procedures. The photographs also grant the spatio-temporal delimitations of what was already accomplished. Photographs are testimony of what occurred but the viewer cannot confirm or validate the effects of such experiment. The viewer/reader does know what was done, though not what it meant. The audience knows the conditions in which the artist worked, its spatial and temporal references. Still, they just hardly see the point of it. His works make one aware that meaning is a given. Things, events, words are not really interested in bringing meaning to us but it is we who want to shape them with meaning. Though he might be interested in a corresponding transcendence amongst texts and photographs, personal and public, perceiver and perceived, his works also push meaning further away. Probably that is what his works are all about – the tricky nature of language; our eternal search for reason.

Huebler's descriptive texts carry the format of a script narrated in the third person where participants/characters were subtly (sometimes unaware) guided in their performance. His narrative resembled a storyboard – a film project – due to the succession

of photographs conducted by language. Though in prose and in the adjustment of everyday speech, still his texts function as a guideline. In Huebler's pieces, the narrator does not express her/his opinions or judgments. Neither does s/he have a physical presence in the story. This narrator is like a camera, like a little fly on the wall, detached from any personal judgment. His responsibility is simply to describe the artist's doings, procedures taken, purposes and sometimes participants' reactions towards their own contribution to the pieces. In the *Everyone Alive* project, the narrator explains the procedures to execute the work, referring almost exclusively to the artist – he never uses the subject pronoun 'I' but we know it was written by Huebler because his name is at the end of the text, on the right hand corner. We know the protagonist is a male artist due to the presence of pronouns or adjectives such as in “to the extent of *his* capacity” or “immediately after each photograph was made *the artist* turned and photographed the next person that *he* saw....” (my italics). The narrator indicates the protagonist – unnamed – in order to register his doings but not his intentions or what he meant to present. The narrator does not have access to the artist's mind. The narrator is not omniscient but a witness.

Huebler's text lack expression and for that reason could hardly be connected to literature. However, even the avoidance of literary status seems to be just another distracter. Huebler explained the relationship of his art to literature:

Art forms or expressive forms that have used language have been called poetry or literature, and have not been allowed to be about the visual arts at all. Maybe all of these categories are a bit stuffy and archaic at this point. And maybe there are experiences that we can have where we shift from those normal expectations. It's in challenging these expectations that I am the most interested.... (2001: 144)

This critical attitude, this “challenging these expectations” was not confined within museums, but served to all artistic instances that seemed out-dated. It is easier to conclude

why these artists would often refuse the label of poets, writers and sometimes even conceptual artists. The Canadian photographer Jeff Wall explains other conceptual artists' and Huebler's attitudes toward texts:

[T]hey eschew literary status and make claims only as visual art objects. Nevertheless, his renunciation of the literary is a language-act, an act enunciated as a maneuver of writing. Huebler's "pieces" involve the appropriation, utilization and mimesis of various "systems of documentation." (2002: 251)

One cannot forget the writing style, no matter how subjective the term *style* may be at this point. It is all a matter of choices. Huebler chose to write descriptively. He decided to leave metaphors up to the readers. Kosuth had once compared Huebler's texts – also his own – to a verb:

We both made art a verb, not a noun: the meaning of a work of art is completed by the viewer. With work that contained the vast variety of parts his did, its "whole" really only exists in the mind of the viewer/reader. One cannot talk about the "integrity of the art object" or, even better, the autonomy of art. The kinds of systems Doug used took one into the world, allowing virtually anything to come into play. (Kosuth "Times")

A noun could be that from which the whole phrase is built. It labels and determines meanings. A verb could be the central element when combined to a subject. It does not name but it denotes action or even our states of simply being. It describes. For that reason, a verb needs completion. A noun, on the other hand, nominates. It is all up to Huebler's writing preferences. His works seem to be a "meditation on the fictional (and hence conceptual) character of narrative itself" (Osborne 30). He pretends to write a scientific text – just as literary theory once wished to be science – only to hide enigmas that might not have any clear resolution. His narrative frustrates expectation and reinforces its quality

of an open text. The distinctive literary qualities of narrative escape Huebler's texts. Chronology is not necessarily the framework of his stories and if there is a plot it is usually not to arrange events but to untidy them.

Huebler's works are about language as a source of information to art the moment he chose to mitigate the traditionally visual experience in the world of art. The appearance – photographs – in his works is soon proved arbitrary when in the presence of texts. Random or logical, his works usually present some kind of mismatch amongst words and photographs. There is no tautological relation there; there is no transparency. Huebler's use of texts was a performative and documentary act, especially presenting the ambiguity of language. He engaged language to his idea that meaning is never fully present. His works oscillated from literal to figurative meaning, from words to ideas.

The interest in Huebler's texts is due to his avoidance of restrictive significations, even if through linguistic clear directives. His news, his documentations are a verification of language as a vast source of signification. Besides, his works being apparently purposeless do present our needs to find reason, logic or at least some motivation that could have led him to such absurd tasks. He turns viewers/readers into dummies, language slaves, meaning searchers. It shows that language and the human mind work in a social sphere, responding to each other, demanding from one another. Therefore, I may call Huebler a poet, for "the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (Wordsworth "Preface"). His texts are objects of deep reflections getting in the mind of the reader. Restless, the reader discovers that only in his own mind, language and social environment is s/he to find meaning, to write her/his own story, to find her/his own experience.

Chapter 7:

On Kawara: Something, One Thing

Nature's first green is gold,
 Her hardest hue to hold.
 Her early leaf's a flower;
 But only so an hour.
 Then leaf subsides to leaf.
 So Eden sank to grief,
 So dawn goes down to day.
 Nothing gold can stay.
 (Frost)

What a difference a day makes
 Twenty four little hours
 (Grever)

Some Conceptual Art works guaranteed an approximation of art and life when framing their pieces into every day activities usually approaching complex issues under the ordinary. On Kawara (born in 1933) started as a painter in Japan but soon realized there was something disturbing about paintings. As a leftist, he was not satisfied with caricatures from Social Realism and how they portrayed the working class. He slowly started to use words (and does until today), which he was less skeptical about. Even so, words were also misleading. Kawara believed they were “essentially flawed by arbitrariness and that art exists beyond language” (Watkins 50). But it was under this idea that most artists had used language: for its arbitrariness and to present a language beyond the limits of written inscriptions.

Kawara felt there was little he could say about his art. Despite the employment of language he was an artist of few words that based his creation on the least. In his views, the communicating of messages was diluted in an over confidence deposited in language. Like Huebler, he was shedding light in the obscurity of language and its inconsistencies, instead of clear and transparent qualities. It was as if language was better used to elucidate its auto-analysis than to air ideas purely. He demonstrated a disbelief in empirical evidence or

universal truth reported through language. “For Kawara, history and current affairs had become an odd assortment of concocted stories” (Watkins 67). Newspapers, for instance, used language as the most trustful means to report facts. Language was expected to present truth, to be transparent.

The relationship Kawara had with textual production was surgical. He dealt with language carefully. Probably because of his own experience of being Japanese, living in Mexico, Paris and New York, language was an exercise that demanded effort and concentration. He created language games around speech and constantly exposed the absence language could evoke. In *Code* (1965), Kawara created an unreadable system that was reduced to a single form – a stroke (horizontal traces but slightly bending to the right). The range of colors distinguished one trace from the other. The only resemblance of his code to our western language is the use of punctuation marks such as commas, full stops, inverted commas. Nevertheless, it was still indecipherable.

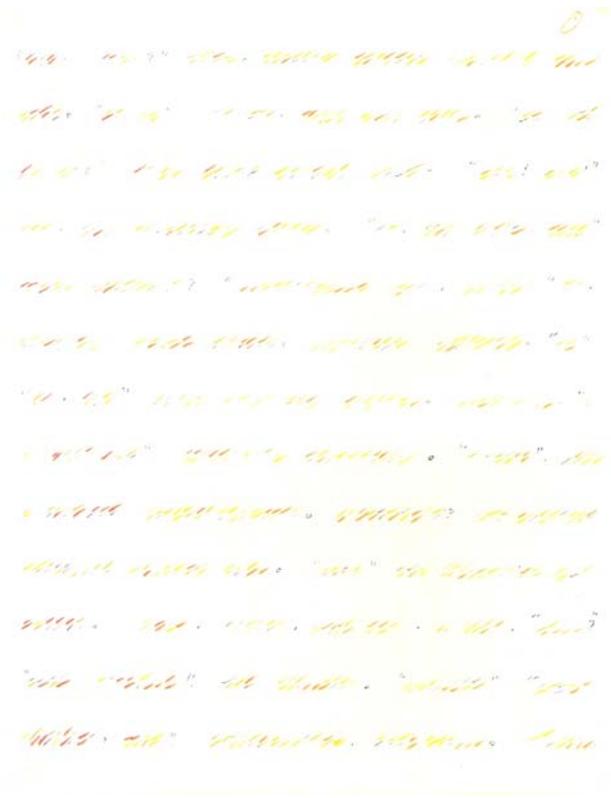


Fig. 27. On Kawara, *Code*, 1965.

Code reflected his apprehensive posture towards language. The reader is offered an uninhabited shell, a hollow crust, a material with no content. If there is meaning, it remains unknown. There is no transparency here but visual perception. Instead of meanings, we are left with forms. Though he does make of Western verbal language his material, the silence in On Kawara's works sometimes speak louder than his words and probably that is what he meant when designing *Code*. Through language, he often designated his omissions.

But Kawara is famous for his *Date Paintings*, which consisted of painted dates in big bold white letters on a monochromatic background. This project started in 1966 under the concept that the painting – or painted date – should be finished by the end of the day it was started otherwise it should be destroyed. Therefore, the date to be painted was that of the very same day it was produced, challenging the temporal aspect of art production but also that of a day.

The *Date Paintings* were made following rigorous procedures. The canvas received three layers of paint (meaning each of them had to dry so that the next layer could be painted) and then the texts were filled with several layers of white. Texts were usually written in white and the background ranged between black, blue or red. Therefore, the works required an organization of time, procedures and a good amount of self-discipline. The painted dates consist of the day of the month, the month and the year often in the same font. The months were written in the language of the country where the canvas was painted, either fully or abbreviated. However, when in Japan or China Kawara wrote in Esperanto to maintain the roman type of the letter.



Fig. 28. On Kawara, *Date Painting*, 1966.

Each piece in the *Date Paintings* is unique. Whatever happened on one of Kawara's dates is distinctive. By exposing a particular date, he opened the possibilities of countless events within 24 hours. These events could be either private or collective. Through his dates one could recall personal experiences or historical events. He activates our memory and apparently wants to share experiences.

On Kawara's Date Paintings are attempts to re-singularize one of the systems through which we objectify time: calendar time. The date recorded contains the potentially infinite number of events, from the most personal to the universal, which may take place on a given date, but it is a sign that indicates the possibilities without determining them. (Huebler 2001: 142)

But all we know of him when laying eyes on one of his *Date Paintings* is that on that particular day Kawara painted that piece. Kawara's works function as testimonies of his working.

These dates could come accompanied by another frame consisting of a piece of newspaper from the same day, containing reporting news usually of international relevance. Though the date opens the possibilities of occasions on a certain day, the newspaper bit determines a report. In the artistic scenario, the presence of both a canvas and a piece of

newspaper is representative for it counterpoints the artistic media of painting (exclusive) with the daily media of newspaper (ordinary). “By combining a painting (on canvas) with a piece of newspaper, Kawara conveys aesthetics relativism, challenging ideas of high and low art” (Watkins 78). Nonetheless, it is the reminiscence of past events that makes these readings of his works a subjective, nostalgic one. Each of his *Date Paintings* pieces was a perpetuated memory of a life instant. It is open for yesterday, today and tomorrow, an album, a diary. It could also be his proved-alive calendar of existentialist ideas.



Fig. 29. On Kawara, *21 Oct. 68*, 1968.

Kawara organized his *Date Paintings* in journals where he wrote all the necessary information of the pieces. He kept record of his pieces by detailing the size, color and date of the paintings, and also by adding a sentence to which it was related, which functioned as a title. These sentences could range from very personal information (“I have decided to be

alone” or “I didn’t sleep well last night”) to serious information, such as newspaper headlines. If the piece (*Date Painting*) were married to a newspaper article, the sentence in his file would be the same as the headline in that newspaper. For instance, the sentence for the July 20, 1969 work – accompanied by a newspaper – was “Man walks on moon.” This working principle confirms that Kawara was also a collector, a bureaucratic worker. He was an artist who had found in his own life experience, in a daily hobby, a means to create his art.



Fig. 30. On Kawara, *Title*, 1965.

A little before On Kawara had started his *Date Paintings*, he presented reflections more evidently tied to international affairs. In 1965, he painted the work *Title* (known as one of the precursors of his *Date Paintings*), which consists of three canvases. They were displayed horizontally and each consisted of an inscription in the following order: One Thing / 1965 / Viet-Nam. The dramatic and vivid red painted background contrasts with the bright, white texts written within. There are also some tiny silver stars pasted on the corners of each of the three canvases – probably a reference to the United States. The canvas painted with the year is between the other two and its frame is slightly larger as well

as the font size. The work presents an event (one thing), time orientation (1965) and a location (Viet-Nam). This brief narrative is a reference to the American bombing in North Viet-nam. Unlike most his works, the location (Viet-Nam) was not the place where the painting was done but its subject. Unlike his *Date Paintings*, which leave the thinking of events to the reader, his short narrative limits the thoughts raised in *Title* to the Viet-nam War. People could imagine what the Viet-Nam War might have been about, even if they did not experience it. That is what language does; it narrates experiences, but cannot take their place. This is how Kawara perceived language: in its quality of creating a new reality but never rescuing the reality of what it refers to. Instead of clear meanings, we are led to think of our own personal knowledge and engagement with world occurrences.

Title dialogues with another of Kawara's work known as *Nothing, Something, Everything*. This work consists of the word "something" written on a sheet of paper in black capital letters, confined to an outlined rectangle. Out of this rectangle, out of the black margins, the title of the work (*Nothing, Something, Everything*) and the year (1963) are handwritten in pencil. The word "something" suggests existence and though imposing its presence on paper, in the title it is modestly placed between "nothing" (no event, no amount or idea) and "everything" (all the events, all the facts, all the ideas). "Something" is placed between absence and totality. The presence of "something" is confirmed, even if unnamed, unspecified. We know something is "one thing" even if we do not know what this thing might be.



Fig. 31. On Kawara, *Nothing, Something, Everything*, 1963.

Nothing, Something Everything and *Title* dialogue not only for being triplets, but when accusing one event, one thing, something. However, whereas one thing – probably a development of something – is confined to an event (the bombing of Viet-Nam), something is confined to its margins. Though the possibilities of something are infinite due to its semantic productivity, there are always constraints.

Robert Barry – another text-based conceptual artist – used the amplitude of the word “something” in order to practically annul meaning. Barry’s statements activate the mental process of thinking. Instead of materially building the work, the work is to be built mentally. Barry’s words seem to be about the thinking process and how the presence of words might change our perceptions towards art and the artist. The words in Barry’s works refer to the “mental realization” of the piece (Osborne 123). The viewer/reader has access to the artist’s ruminations when executing the work. Barry communicates through language the presence of “something” that apparently did not leave the artist’s mind; therefore, it could not be accurately perceived by the viewer/reader. This “something” is probably not physical or optically passive of perception, but the thinking of art, which becomes art. In

1969, he typed on paper, “Something which exists and of which I am aware, but I cannot know if anyone else is aware of it, or even can be aware of it.” He understands that his thoughts cannot be accurately grasped by others. He is also aware of the inadequacy of language to clearly represent thoughts. In another piece he wrote, “Something that is taking shape in my mind and will sometime come to conscious.” There is something in Barry’s thoughts that will, probably soon, awaken or acquire material existence, even if in words, even if already present in the made object. Within the gallery settings, for instance, Barry is not solely describing the mental process, but his own art creation.

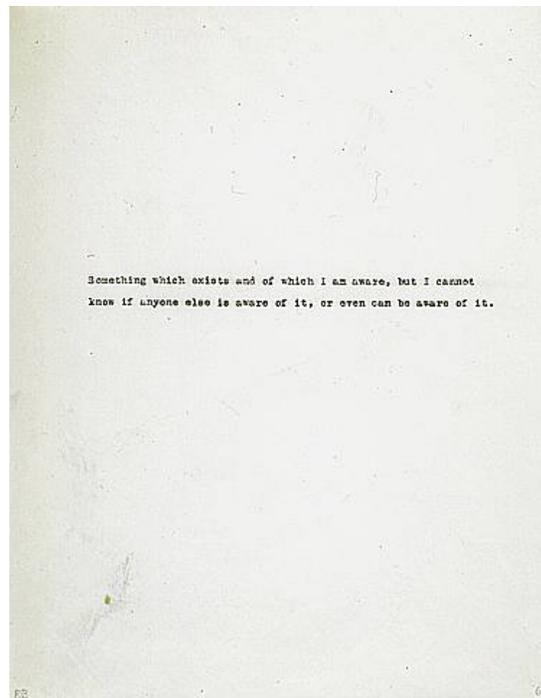


Fig. 32. Robert Barry, *Untitled*, 1969.

Barry might be referring to the theme of his work, to his ideas and probably the incapacity of language to handle them, just as On Kawara did. But it is with the instrument language that he describes his active mind, his sometimes undefined thoughts. When asked about his textual production, he explained, “I use words in a sense that makes them meaningless, and of course the only way you can make something meaningless is to present

it in all of its possible meanings. It's a totally open entity, which makes it an elusive thing" (Renton 123).

This oscillation between all possibilities and no possibilities annuls meanings in their obvious sense. Barry explained that the work "is usually keyed in with space, and getting somebody to spend a little time in front of it. I don't make words you can go by very quickly. I mean, you can't see it from a car and get the whole item!" (Renton 123). This complexity disguised as simplicity compromises meaning in both Barry's and Kawara's work. Kawara and Barry could once again be posing provocative questions such as, What do we know of? or What does language tell us? Both confront their ideas and thoughts when writing pieces under theirs and probably our own uncertainties, especially Kawara's.

The questions he was asking sprang from a profound inquisitiveness as to what can be certainly known and, in the light of this, how one acts in relation to (the idea of) others. For Kawara, any interrogation of the nature of artistic activity epitomized his ongoing preoccupation with the nature of consciousness. (Watkins 60)

Kawara triggers our knowledge, our recognition of things. He questions our ability to write and read thoughts. We may have our thoughts, other people can have theirs, but how accurately can these thoughts leave the enclosures of our minds? How accurately can they reach other people? Language as the translator of thoughts is subjected to elusiveness. The distance from a thought to its written translation eventually leaves residues, which may never be rescued – not only thoughts but also events, actions and, again, experiences. That is probably what Kawara attempts when using news in his art. By using newspaper in his *Date Paintings*, for instance, he seemed to be also provoking language used in the media (meant to be accurate) and taking our understanding to a personal instance. Furthermore, within the artistic environment, his art practices acquire the characteristic of a personal activity. It is his experience directed to the viewers/readers, the activity of making art.

Like Huebler's *Everyone Alive*, Kawara's practice is exhausting. He continuously executed his works for years. His *Date Paintings*, for instance, were known for having surprising records. The art critic Joshua Decker said in 1992, "[a]ccording to recent information, On Kawara has made (at least) over 1,700 'Date Paintings' in seventy-one cities over a twenty-five year-plus period" (85). On Kawara's projects are often surprisingly methodic, demanding discipline and organization. His *Date Paintings* were done practically every day, just as one takes coffee or has a shower. It was just another daily habit. Besides, in his late *Date Paintings*, Kawara maintained the same style as when he started in the sixties and he still has not developed or innovated but stuck to the rules. He registered, kept records and turned his art into a regular, habitual practice.

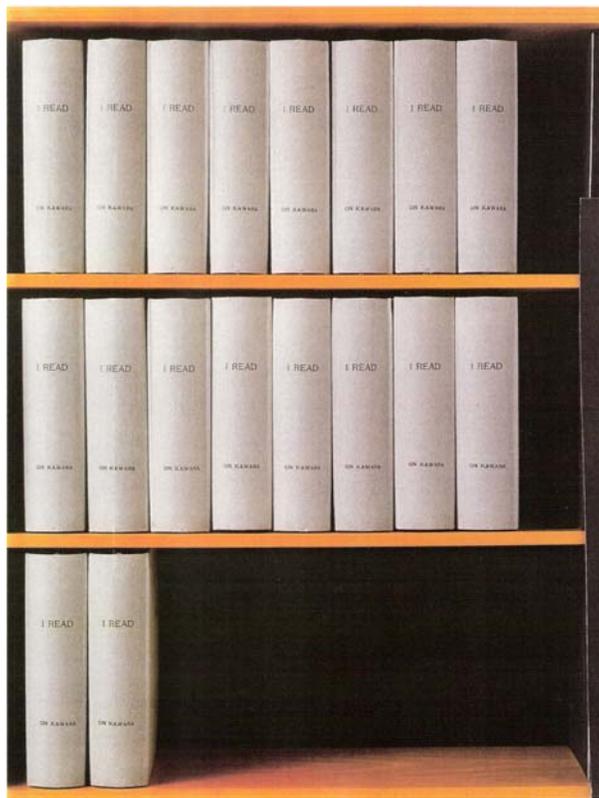


Fig. 33. On Kawara, *I Read*, 1965-1995.

Other works also carry this routine quality. His work *I met*, for instance, consists of a list of all the people he met on specific days. The result was a compilation of paper sheets

joined in hardcover catalogues. It was an exhibition of Kawara's social contacts and comprehensive exercise of cataloguing. Similarly, *I read* is a collection of newspaper cuttings assembled in chronological order in loose sheets of paper then also compiled in hard cover folders. Kawara was creating his library, drawing his portrait in a collection of registrations. His works are Borges's library, Poe's message in a bottle. On Kawara is the bookman, a man known for his books, the books he writes. His works stand for his character.

Together with the *Date Paintings* project, Kawara started his *Today Series*, which consisted of works like *I met* or *I read*. Instead of a canvas, Kawara usually used daily means of communication to produce his *Today Series*. Though dates were also part of his *Today Series*, it was the linguistic inscription that called one's attention. He marked the passing of time and perpetuated his condition by registering activities of every day life in telegrams, postcards, maps and books. He traveled to more than 90 countries along his career and that accounted to his art works being produced in several locations on the five continents. On Kawara registered his existence by saving records that ranged from everyday activities (such as the work *I met*) to reflections on the human essence (*I am still alive*).

As much as a date (in *Date Paintings*) could tell, however, his statements were on the verge of an epiphany. Time experiences are defined by daily events such as getting up, meeting people, reading the paper or going to places. Kawara believed that everyone needed a daily activity (somewhat like a severe routine), and that is what he made of his art. However, if his words are apparently crystal clear pieces, when in the hands of a receiver they could be missing a part, be broken, just a fragment.

Kawara's *I got up...* and *I am still alive* are examples of this vulnerability of language. On Kawara wrote *I got up at...* (and the inserted time) in postcards and sent them to colleagues and friends. The postcards consisted of the address of sender and recipient so that the receiver knew where On Kawara was when he got up. The cards usually showed photos of tourist sites so that our memory could be activated and our knowledge could

come to the fore due to the recognition of the place. Memory was then stimulated by intersections between verbal and pictorial language.



Fig. 34. On Kawara, *I Got up*, 1974.

He usually sent two postcards – each to a friend – on a single day always with the same information (*I got up at...*) so as to report his state and the time he raised on that day. This project started in 1968 along with other complex self-indexical works. Instead of typical information normally found in postcards, such as “Today I visited...” or “Yesterday we went...,” Kawara launches a personal statement with exclusive information. The personal pronoun “I” refers to On Kawara, the artist, the writer, the person, the author – a private testimonial of an ordinary, mundane activity that breaks the personal in order to reach a broad spectrum. His works go from personal to universal, the private and the collective, the piece and the whole. The declaration of his personal condition leaves the individual sphere to reach ours. He got up but so did we.

However, again Decter stressed that Kawara’s pieces are perceived for having the “systematic construction of an archive of the self which denotes, with informational accuracy, the habitual routines and redundant logic of ‘subjective production,’ which for On Kawara seems interchangeable with the regular articulation and evidence of personal activity” (86). He is still the centre of his production. Decter also stated, “[t]he sign-value

(that is signifier/signified) continuously returns (through the codes of the calendar, the inventory, the message) to the subjective source in a non-subjective manner” (86). His works register our habitual routines whilst conditioning them the confirmation of one’s existence. It seems life has walked into the art world to threaten it through linguistic devices. This is best exemplified in Kawara’s *I am still alive*. Kawara had also sent telegrams to his friends with the sentence *I am still alive*. Unlike postcards, telegrams imply urgency. It demands fast delivery, therefore communicating by its own means the importance of the news.

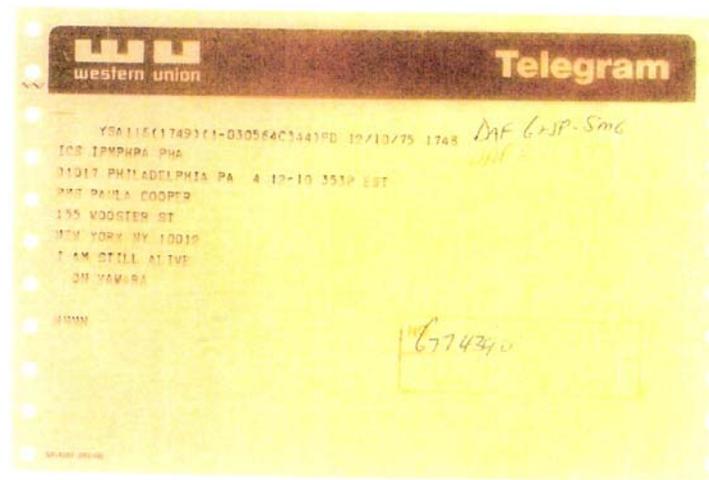


Fig. 35. On Kawara, *I Am still Alive*, 1975.

The sentence “I am still alive” still obeys his logic of “subjective production” and dissemination. In the vein of *I Got up...*, *I Am still Alive* reinforces the paradox, for whereas it is a proof of one’s existence, it was simultaneously betrayed the moment it was written. “All sorts of accidents and unforeseen disasters might be imagined” (Watkins 87). When in the hands of the receiver (a friend) the telegram already gives little evidence of one being alive – the opposite might also be true. It might as well be read as “I *was* still alive.” To better exemplify his concern with life and death, also part of his *I am still alive* project were

postcards sent with the statement “I am not going to commit suicide don’t worry” or “I am not going to commit suicide worry” or even “I am going to sleep forget it.”

Both *I got up...* and *I am still alive* appear to be self-declarations of his existence, but do raise the possibility of his being dead. They are registrations, photographs, memories. By saying “one thing,” On Kawara also points to “something” else. Even though he presents alibis (dates, addresses) to prove his breathing, he is immediately betrayed by the instability of temporal aspects. When the words are written, they immediately escape their context. His works are composed of evident ideas on temporality that, instead of precision, are perceived for their relativity – even time can be cultural.

Instead of stimulating the distinction between art and life, On Kawara brings them closer. These customary means of communication apparently were incorporated in his art as readymade, which “are not meant to be separated ... from other so called ‘every day’ objects and materials” (Decter 85). The boundary between art and everyday life is hardly seen; it is unfocused, for one does not know when the daily statement ends or where art begins. On Kawara’s intentions, “like those of Douglas Huebler, seem to be to destabilize the major systems of representation without renouncing the idea of bearing witness to an experience” (Pontégnie 142). The calendar time, for instance, is one of these systems that takes his art to personal and collective experiences, to heterogeneity of readings without determining them.

In the Phaidon Collection of Contemporary Artists on On Kawara, the Interview section was replaced by Tribute. Though alive, Kawara suggested a collection of statements written by some of his friends or colleagues. He is said to be a cult, mysterious character. His art is the only trace of his existence. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabba was amongst those who contributed to Kawara’s profile and I do share some of his views:

I have never met On Kawara. And though much of his work is inscribed in the first person – *I read, I met, I am still alive* – his name brings no-one to

mind. Yet every day, when the computerized clock clicks the changing time of day, the newspaper announces that it's another day, national public radio repeats the day's headlines, I know On, not as a person, but as a kind of place that one has to occupy, a moment to follow, a problem with which to be preoccupied: *can you ever keep time?* (Kawara 16)

“Can we ever keep time?” His works, similarly to Huebler's photographs, reinforce the idea of a present that serves to recall the past. Their works present what has been. The image, the date, the word, the work are past, never present. Though they might occupy a space and be physically present, Huebler's and Kawara's works share the existing search for a time that our next breath leaves behind.

Lawrence Weiner, the character of our next chapter, also participated in Kawara's profile. Instead of formally writing a tribute to On Kawara, he created a piece:

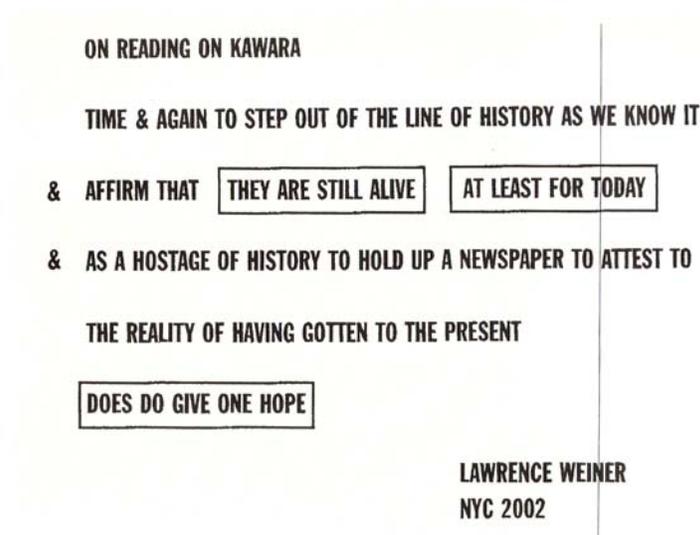


Fig. 36. Lawrence Weiner, *Tribute to On Kawara* in Phaidon Collection, 2002.

Above all, Weiner seems to be highlighting the existentialist focus of Kawara's pieces and adding force to the time factor. By attesting the prominence of his life experience, Kawara brings our own into focus, our lives, our own deaths, our relation to

time, to space, to routine. His art is an autobiographical haiku mirroring his (and our) condition. Kawara and Huebler turned their pieces into a whole, one piece mixing fictional and factual (Osborne 30), turning life into art, turning time into nostalgia. Particularly Kawara's art is a paradox between a proved alive/proved dead reflection betrayed by language.

This seems to be the illusory element in Kawara's art, the illusion of keeping time. The fictional element of Kawara is visually sterile, dull documentation, monochromatic in its essence. Kawara had a certain compulsion for an apparent emptiness, like many other artists and writers at the time did. Like Huebler, he plays with what can or cannot be seen, can or cannot be communicated, can or cannot be accurate. There is a focus on absence, on absent art, an art gone before one laid eyes on it. His works may be visible, but highlight a literature of oblivion, the least move, the minimal effort – despite its accurate methodology. One does not need to build enormous constructions or be involved in great causes to feel alive, continuing, yet practically dead. The residue left in the rear of Kawara's language could be pointing to our always behind pace in time. The relevance of his language is in its becoming an abstract sign for his own existence. Language presents the contradictions of what it wishes to report.

Chapter 8:

Lawrence Weiner: Statements on Material

Turn out the lights around the statues.
 Unlock the vaults of unhewn stone; put down
 An order for new men. Place high the value
 Of those others: do not forget what they have done.
 Do not destroy. They build a world we could not use;
 They planned a course that ended in disaster.
 Their time is up. The curtain's down. We take power.
 We're sorry they left us so little. We wonder
 If any will say of us: Do no forget. Do not destroy.
 We wonder if they will mean it as much as we do now.
 Turn out the lights around the statues
 What do you think the dead will wear next year?
 (Patchen 90)

In 1968, Lawrence Weiner realized that the interference of words and texts could be more prominent than physical, spatial interferences. The reason for that was probably an outdoor exhibition he had joined that same year in Windham College in Putney, Vermont, organized by Seth Siegelau. In this exhibition, Weiner performed an installation in which he formed a rectangle on the ground delimited by a set of stakes on regular intervals and connected by twine. Weiner was surprised to know that the students cut the twine in order to walk across the campus lawn or play football. What he concluded was that he could have been less obtrusive had he presented only the idea of the project. Viewers could have had the same effect if the work was written, simply made of words instead of executed. Though the installation had been destroyed and proved ephemeral, words could remain, be kept in the viewer/reader's mind. Moreover, instead of the imposing or aggressive posture of the installation, words would leave more to the imagination of passers-by.

In that same year, 1968, Weiner published a small book called *Statements*, in which the installation realized in Vermont was reduced to a statement – joined by several others.

In fact, many were the works designed by Weiner that at the end of the 60s acquired a linguistic version.

A series of stakes set in the ground
 at regular intervals to form a rect
 angle
 Twine strung from stake to stake to
 demark a grid

Statements was one of the works that had initiated Weiner's (almost exclusive) language use. It consisted of twenty-four statements, one per page (including the Vermont installation), which in the book were divided in General and Specific Statements depending on the precision and details with which they were written. The written statements unchained the artist from the obligation of making a conventional material object (sculpture or painting). *Statements* was "a straightforward declaration of the independence of 'art as idea' from its, nonetheless possible, physical manifestation" (Osborne 31). Like many other language-based artists, Weiner used verbal language with no commitment of constructing the piece. The work could exist exclusively in words.

A book consisting only of statements brought the problematic issue of taxonomy into focus. There was hardly any certainty of its appropriate spot on the shelves or whether it should go to the shelves at all. *Statements* certainly resembled little of an art book – often expensive, with photographs of art pieces printed on large and high quality paper – nor did it look like a catalogue, especially because it was not done after an exhibition nor did it contain displayed works. Besides, *Statements* offered a peculiar system of purchase. Whereas an artwork would normally be a single, exclusive piece and cost a fortune, Weiner's *Statements* was published in series and cost only \$1.95. That was common among conceptual artists. Godfrey explained that "books were an attractive format to artists of this time: they were reasonably cheap, accessible and transportable" (225). Instead of high

prices, books and catalogues seemed handy and available to all becoming one of their favorite possibilities of presentation and distribution of art.

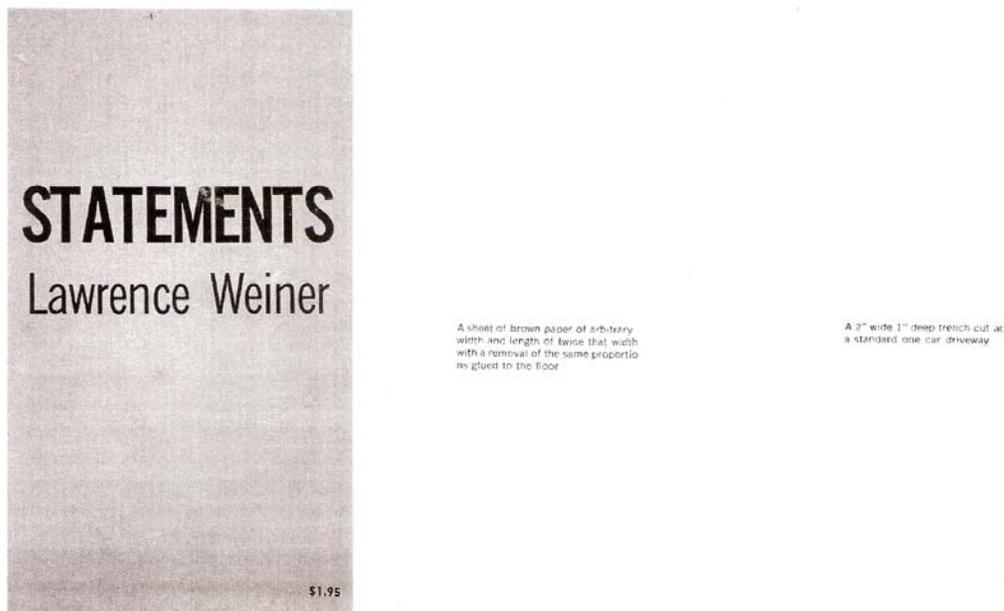


Fig. 37. Lawrence Weiner, *Statements*, 1968.

Weiner's design choices were important to the coherence of his proposal. The book cover was white with the title *Statements* written in black bold capital letters. Below the title, his name (Lawrence Weiner) came written in lower-case letters except for the initials. The 24 statements were also typed in lower-case except for the introductory letter of each statement. The book was small, thin, black on white emphasizing the simplicity of its features and justifying its low price. When Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, in *Conversation with Lawrence Weiner*, asked him if his book lacked design, Weiner explained the lack of sophistication or complex typographies saying, “[t]here is a design factor to make it look like a \$1.95 book that you would buy. The type-face and the decision to use a typewriter and everything else was a design choice” (Buchloh 1998: 20). *Statements* carried crude minimalist characteristics in both its execution and concept which were evidently – and deliberately – opposed to commercial design. He added, “[y]ou could talk about universal

ideas using simple basic concepts” (20). Weiner was moving away from the appearance first not to give aesthetics the usual importance, and second to accentuate the content his statements, their simplicity.

When his works moved to linguistic operations in a book he was not simply changing medium, but avoiding the status an artwork was supposed to have. His *Statements* promoted serious implications on value (due to its low price) and uniqueness (there were several). By making an art piece of accessible and public acquisition Weiner disestablished some of the institutionalized assumptions that ruled the art world. Therefore, with *Statements* the problem of placement was intriguing. It stood in a hybrid position as it touched different categories though still to fit the label (conceptual) artwork. In “The Posters of Lawrence Weiner,” Buchloh mused on:

[H]ow Weiner’s linguistic operations actually relate to and compare with the plastic and visual conventions of painting and sculpture. Or whether it would be more appropriate to perceive these statements within the sole framework of writing in relation to poetic uses of language: after all, if his language were not to be read or perceived as poetry or literature, it would seem itself to assume – in the manifest absence of a central and substantial aesthetic construct – the status of the supplement and the secondary text, the commentary. (2000b: 556)

But Buchloh went further by asking a question: “Could the written word, in its concretion in the book, the catalogue, and the poster [another media often utilized by Weiner], possibly assume the status and the function of the work itself?” (556). It is true that catalogues could follow exhibited pieces so that the works were perceived as primary information and catalogues secondary. However, Conceptual Art exhibitions had sometimes existed only in books, catalogues, newspapers, or magazines. Then, these media could be ahead of objects, and usually displayed as such. Therefore, the written word,

answering Buchloh's final question, is to be seen as the artwork itself even if resembling poetry or a supplement of the artwork due to the medium presented.

The attempt to hierarchically label first and second information was another of the issues conceptual artists discussed. The curator Seth Siegelaub was also concerned with "the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' information, which allowed for the exhibition catalogue to take precedence over the exhibits" (Osborne 29). In Siegelaub's words,

when art does not any longer depend upon its physical presence, when it has become an abstraction, it is not distorted and altered by its representation in books and catalogues. It becomes primary information, while the reproduction of conventional art in books or catalogues is necessarily second information. (qtd. in Osborne 29)

Siegelaub was approaching Conceptual Art for its focus on the idea, the information. The idea within a Conceptual Art work could not be distorted when in books, catalogues, written, constructed or in any other form of presentation. When Siegelaub referred to art as abstractions, he would be referring to Conceptual Art as an art of concepts, so that its material presence was not to be given as much importance as the idea presented. The concept was the primary information.

However, when attentive to the appropriate application of Weiner's works and format of *Statements*, Buchloh asked "whether it would be more appropriate to perceive these statements within the sole framework of writing in relation to poetic uses of language." Even if the book was not a supplement but the artwork itself, some works were recurrently being interfaced with literary production. This is certainly a point of interest in this thesis. At a first reading, Weiner's linguistic propositions do intermingle with poetry due to its economy of presentation, typographical element and visual construction on the page. His statements were often made of at least two verses up to about six, typed from the

middle of the page (vertically) onwards. Sometimes the typographical element was marked by unusual word partings such as the words “thrown” in the following statement:

One quart exterior green enamel thro
wn on a brick wall

or “proportion”:

A sheet of brown paper of arbitrary
width and length of twice that width
with a removal of the same proportio
ns glued to the floor

The separation of these words changes stress, rhythm and natural pauses in his verses. It disturbs the harmony and for that fascinates (not to say puzzles) the reader. The words are broken and bent. They become fragmented material. But still, contrary to what one may think, Weiner deposits most these choices on expediency. In an interview with Patricia Norvell, Weiner explained that to write *Statements* he had chosen a standard typewriter and “locked it on both sides and just started typing” (Weiner 2001: 107). It seemed none of the syllables division was done as if it had been carefully planned or for poetic reasons. He said, “when I couldn’t get my finger down anymore, I put it to the next space” (Weiner 2001: 107). It was convenient and had little to do with real typographical decisions. Any expectation as to poetic choices would be frustrated by Weiner’s words, when he concluded that he “just set up the typewriter, and the typesetter did the best they could do to fit it in, and that’s how the book was done” (2001: 108). Weiner compared the expected attitudes (or poetic choices) to those taken when you want to show a structure poem (2001: 108), that is, a poem that is centralized in form rather than content, which was not the case.

But besides the apparently poem format appropriation, there are still repeated words that bear a resemblance to the stylistic device of poetry. The repetition of words and sounds such as “wall” in “A removal to the lathing or support *wall* of plaster or *wall*board

from a *wall* (my italics) or “width” and “with” in “A sheet of brown paper of arbitrary *width* and length of twice that *width with* a removal of the same proportions glued to the floor” (my italics). Note the “s” and “r” in the next statement also resembling the technique of alliteration and/or consonance: “A series of stakes set in the ground at regular intervals to form a rectangle (in) twine strung from stake to stake to demark a grid (in) a rectangle removed from this rectangle” (my italics). Still, Weiner would often discourage any similarity of his words, of his statement style to poetry. He moves further by saying, “[t]he use of language for the purposes of literature requires a sense of empathy, a sense that you can understand what another human being is feeling. This belief in empathy carries with it a belief in a world order, a belief in a God-created world” (Weiner 1998: 140). Or even,

Literature is an attempt to express within the context of a narrative or non-narrative structure the relationships between people, and art expresses the relationships between people and objects. Poetry is essentially non-translatable; it is possible to render an approximate translation, but poetry is made to show the beauty, the form, and the meaning of language itself. And my work, from the beginning, is designed to be translated into a physical shape or into other languages. Literature essentially deals with subjective reality, art with objective reality. (Weiner “Lawrence”)

We have been cultivating habits holding us from an opened perception. The main differences he drew from his statements to poetry are still connected to conventional poetry. His works are not subjective or personal but tend to describe procedures passive of execution. He calls to mind questions he had heard throughout his adult life, such as “can literature be art, can language be art, can this be art, can that be art?” (1998: 132). Weiner’s art deals with associations, relationships. His art brings the world to his statements and

triggering thoughts on institutions, culture and society but all in relation the art world, the world of objects, and our relation to both.

Despite his discomfort with art categories, Weiner's words seemed to highlight artistic features rather than literary. Words were to be seen for their plastic and material condition. But this material condition could mean both language as material, but most importantly the material they refer to: their content. As Weiner stressed, that is exactly why language had become such an attractive tool: "I like language very much because it's ambiguous" (2001: 107). But still, this ambiguity was still to be read in the context of Fine Arts. Besides, most artists, when asked about the resemblance of their words to literature, would often bear in mind the language used for both the aesthetic qualities and meaning. Again he explained the distinction between his works and poetry:

This is a major problem with me because sharing my work could be done by publishing a book, just the statements per se of the work. It would be just as good as if the work were built. As for poetry, poetry is inherently involved in the medium of language as well as the content. I may utilize the medium in an attempt to get across only the content, in the most concise package I'm capable of at the moment. (Weiner 1998: 97)

That is why he often refuted the features that would add up to poetic form. There was an apparent lack of importance to the aesthetic quality on behalf of Weiner's semantic concern. Weiner's works seem to centralize in content, for either if written or executed, it was still the meaning that joined all forms of representation. For Weiner there was no difference whether his work was written, executed, or communicated verbally. Weiner's works could move from image to sign, from concept to score. His words are present in a "syntagmatic chain" of oral, written documentation and performed declaration. For that, materials are engaged in a recreation of meanings. His works involve a "chain of signifiers that summon and refer to one another" (Alberro 1998: 50). Weiner was interested in the

relations between material and these materials could be his words or the materials mentioned. He did not wish to dematerialize his words or highlight only and exclusively the concepts. Osborne explained that Weiner's works do not involve "a retreat from 'matter', so much as an expansion of the means through which it may be understood to become artistically significant" (Osborne 29). Osborne also explains that the linguistic content, materiality of graphic form, and the constituents of the objects to which reference is made become Weiner's materials and he "constructs a reflective play between them, at the level of meaning, out of the *indeterminacy* inherent in the idea of materials as such" (Osborne 31). His works are sculptural in this sense.

Though his statements were clear, objective, and available, there was something extra-textual about them. When Weiner meant to move into the world of words in which their content was to be presented freely, without distractions, he did mean to present his art for its first, denotative meanings. His linguistic operations were supposed to be consistent and concise, brief and direct apothegms. Weiner insists his words represent what is read. In the interview with Buchloh, he claimed to be interested in the meaning of words. The content was to be present despite the form it took.

I am interested in what the words mean. I am capable of using words for their meaning, presenting them to other people. I hope that the vast majority will read the words for their meaning and that they will place that meaning within the sculptural context of their parameters and how they get through the world. (Weiner 1998: 97)

The content of his statements usually permeated amongst materials. His assertions were usually concerned with material procedures, its prosaic conditions and physical actions. In reaction to the statement "One quart green exterior industrial enamel thrown on a brick wall" (1968), one could think of the material (enamel), its color (green), the quantity of the material (one quart) and the action taken (thrown on a brick wall). Due to the precision of

his words, we imagine a wall, the design of this paint on the wall and even the intensity of the green. Viewers are the executants of his mental sculptures. However, locations and viewers' experiences obviously result in different images, different interpretations. The precision leads to our visualization of the work, to the transparency we know he targets, though the mental recreation of meaning might still differ from one person to another. If one were to execute the work, the choices would also certainly be variable.

His statements do not narrate past, present or future events, but material experiments passive of execution – timeless, placeless. Weiner leaves the spatial-temporal specification indeterminate (Osborne 31). Therefore, these experiments could be accomplished by anyone, anytime, anywhere. The verbs are mostly written in the past participle, which also disassociates his production from the authoritarian imperative but leaves the possibilities of execution open. They could be written by anyone, performed by anyone, aired in conversation circles, in institutional locations – art galleries and museums – or around coffee tables. His works hardly showed the hands of the artist. He usually used industrial letters so that when displayed, his statements had no attractive, no ornament, no subjectivity. They were written in plain block letters ranging only in colors (though many were monochromatic) later to include language symbols, punctuation, brackets, parentheses and capitalization. The sentences did not have his signatures so that when in public places, commercial plates, billboards and urban signs, amongst movement and streets sounds, it was camouflaged. He was moving away from authorship and all that term could imply.

According to Weiner the question was not “What is the function of art?” but “What do people do with this stuff that other people make? What do people do with the idea that there are human beings making things and placing them in the world and that those things are just means for other people to understand their relationship to the world?” (1998: 137). In his poem “I Am Not Content” (1982), Weiner condenses most his

discomfort towards clearly distinguished art instances and concludes with what he believed the function of art should be.

My colleagues and I, despite good will, good grace and a need to know, revolved around the context of art.

The questions to be found revolve around the content of art.

The ecumenicism necessary for a materialist artist to conceive of the needs and aspirations of expressionism new and/or old eludes me.

The present preoccupation with the market's determination of aesthetics is not a moot concern. The market can only determine the ambiance.

Art is and must be an empirical reality concerned with the relationships of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings.

(1998: 106)

This is the relationship inherent in art that Weiner would so often recall. In Weiner's opinion, his written art was supposed to be based on observations and scientific method. It must rely on experiences and observations; rather than based on theories, it must depend on consequences that are recognizable by the senses. He believed that the

function of art was not to be a metaphor; otherwise, when art is a metaphor it leaves nothing for the reader to interpret (whether using language or not) (1998: 132). To Weiner, “art is not a metaphor upon the relationships of human beings to objects and objects to human beings but a representation of an empirical existing fact / It does not tell the potential and capabilities of an object (material) but it presents a reality concerning that relationship” (1998: 124). In addition,

when art is a metaphor, whether in a gallery or on the street, whether it uses language or doesn’t use language, whether the metaphor is about homeless people or brutality in former Yugoslavia, or brutality in the Second World War, that metaphor leaves you out of it. It leaves out the people that come to see art to find their relationship with materials and this is because it requires, in order for you to understand it, that you accept the value structure, the assumptions, everything that came from those people who committed those things that gave you the metaphor. (1998: 132)

If a metaphor is to exist, it should be created by the audience, not by the artist. He is more interested in the extension of meanings words could reach not in his piece, but in the minds of the readers – that is how metaphors should be developed. Whilst art (re)presents, the audience creates the possibilities. In the Phaidon collection under his name, he wrote an *Intervention* entitled “The Possibility of Language Functioning as a Representation of Non Metaphorical Reality, e.g. Art.” He states,

[A]ll my adult life I have listened to artists, intellectuals, curators, speaking nonsense about art and language. Can literature be art, can language be art, can this be art, can that be art ... Language is like red paint. It’s totally dependent upon how it’s used, where it’s used. The difference perhaps between academic disciplines and those of the artist is that the praxis, the

reason for existence of the academy, is solely to find answers, or at the very least to find solutions to problems. (1998: 132)

Weiner wishes to present, he wishes people would be presented with his art. However, his words might still leave the ambiguous position of statements on the verge of a new poetics. The material language cracks so that the obvious meanings, after long stared, spread usually evoking other possibilities. “When you are dealing with language, there is no edge that the picture drops over or drops off. You are dealing with something completely infinite. Language, because it is the most non-objective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops” (1998: 98). So Weiner was aware of the material he was dealing with. He was aware that by empirical reality he meant a language choice, but that his statements were to be developed by each individual, each viewer/reader’s own experience.

When Weiner moved to textual definitions (or what he called “stated facts”), he seemed concerned with a new proposal of sign systems and icons but also as a means to make amends to the distribution of art and art/audience relationship. Moving to language was not simply a change of style but a new proposal of audience constitution and art distribution (Alberro 1998: 48). Weiner was concerned with reception and that became more evident in the last years, when he had almost exclusively exhibited in public sites. In the last years, he had given special attention to the public sphere so that his texts could be perceived by regular people on the streets. He became more and more interested in writing in public sites (on building walls or entrances) due to the effects it had on a regular observer, that who does not go into a gallery or museum to appreciate art. He once wrote about the impact of his art in Prague, in 1996, where he had spread his statements in several public buildings and walls:

This is a city and a culture that is essentially literate – traditionally literate. It has a tradition of poetry, of people “reading” the walls...We were pleasantly astonished to see people stopping, putting their briefcases down and

looking at the work... Isn't that what public art is supposed to be? (Alberro 1998: 36)

In Prague, he had written several statements on walls, such as “Things made to be seen forcefully obscured,” “Things pushed down to the bottom and brought up again” and “Things capable of combustion collected and burnt to a crisp.” These sentences show that some of Weiner statements were ready to be developed into a metaphorical instance. The statement “Things capable of combustion collected and burnt to a crisp” could be a reference to the great fire that devastated the city in 1689, but also to the Jews that were killed during the Second World War. All three statements could also be a reference to the massacre during the Second World War when hundreds of Praguers were killed by mistake by the U.S. Air Force in 1945. But the statements may also leave other reading possibilities. “Things made to be seen forcefully obscured” could also be read as Weiner’s reference to the amount of stamped signs that had by the end of the 20th century intruded cities and coexisting with ancient buildings. Therefore, by displaying his statements publicly, Weiner elicited curiosity bringing in each individual the knowledge or personal context, but also the historical context of the statements’ settings.



Fig. 38. Lawrence Weiner, *Things Made to Be Seen Forcefully Obscured*, 1996.

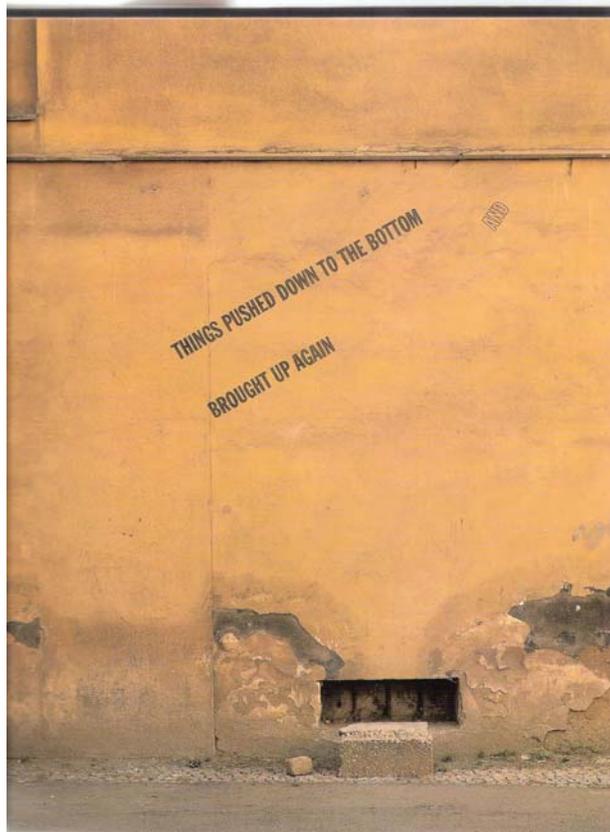


Fig. 39. Lawrence Weiner, *Things Pushed Down to the Bottom and Brought Up Again*, 1996.

One interesting aspect that has always been present in Weiner's works is audience participation. Weiner counted on the receiver not only to create a chain of significations but also to the eventual fabrication of the piece. If the piece was bought or exhibited, it was up to the buyer or curator to choose whether s/he wanted the piece – any of his assertions – to leave the page, his notes, or even the book *Statements* in order to be displayed, written on the wall of a museum, a gallery or gone to public instances, or even performed. Joseph Kosuth, who had been friends with Weiner and also an art partner, explained that “by the summer of 1968, [Weiner] decided to have his work exist only as a proposal in his notebook – that until a ‘reason’ (museum, gallery, or collector) or as he called them, ‘a receiver’ necessitated his work to be made” (1991: 27). His works could be executed as long as that is what the receiver wished.

Before his written pieces, more precisely around 1966, Weiner started his *Removal Paintings*. These paintings were painted with a spray gun and a compressor and were constructed according to the decisions of the receiver who would decide on the color, the size of the painting and the size of the piece to be removed (usually a rectangle from the corner). Weiner was, in a way, slightly distancing himself from the responsibility of the construction and eventually leaving some questions on the role of both the artist and the audience in the art choices – not only in terms of the eventual fabrication of the piece, but also in the co-production of meaning. The absence of the artist's personal subjectivity is shaken by the receiver's (subjective) interference. It was now up to the viewer/reader the realization, the finalization of the work.

Already in the 1960s Weiner was drawing attention to the role of the viewer and the construction of a public. Through his evocation of the isolated and passive TV viewer who is fed a steady stream of images, Weiner posited instead an active public viewer for his art, a viewer who could engage dialogically in co-producing meaning. (Alberro 1998: 41)

Weiner “problematized the decision-making process of the artist and frustrated attempts to interpret the artwork as stemming from the personal subjectivity of an exceptional, unique sensibility” (Alberro 1998: 39). He was aggravating the notion of art as that made by the hands and soul of the artist. He was appealing to the public participation.

Though Weiner's statements were producible, he preferred not to execute them but display them verbally. The execution could take time and was troublesome though he did occasionally construct or build it as an object or in the form of an installation, which confirmed the validity of his statements (Alberro 1998: 42). In 1968, when Sol LeWitt wrote “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” Weiner wrote “Declaration of Intent” (also called “Statement of Intent”), in which he proposed an anti-formalist theory of the art piece. Unlike Weiner's Declaration, LeWitt's Sentences on Conceptual Art claimed that “ideas

alone can be works of art,” which means that ideas can exist without having to necessarily leave the artist’s mind. However, there would be no art unless it was formulated. Osborne says, “[t]here is no question of their having an existence as ‘idea’ until they are formulated as statements; and no question of them being ‘pieces’ until these formulations are actualized in some system of communication, in this case writing” (31). Weiner’s Declaration reads:

- (1) The artist may construct the piece.
- (2) The piece may be fabricated.
- (3) The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.²¹



Fig. 40. Lawrence Weiner, *Statement of Intent*, 1969/96.

Declaration of Intent is the artwork institutionalizing itself but also highlighting that its completion is achieved in receivership. What could be first seen as a contract is now just another well-known Conceptual Art piece. Weiner had displayed this Declaration on walls and galleries but also in exhibition invitations and cards. Weiner’s Declaration emphasized the lack of need to construct his verbal ideas (the piece need not be built). But several are the examples of works which were both written and performed. An example could be his

²¹ In the exhibition *January 5-13, 1969: 0 objects, 0 paintings, 0 sculptures* organized by Seth Siegelaub, in New York.

statement “A 36’’ x 36’’ removal the lathing or support wall of plaster or wallboard from a wall.” This statement could be written on wall but also executed.

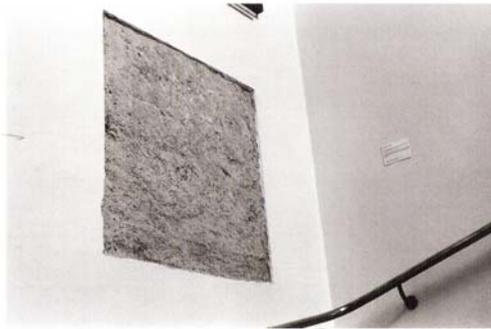


Fig. 41. Lawrence Weiner, *A 36’’ x 36’’ Removal the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall*, 1968/1983.

Weiner’s statements were often related to subtraction, deletion, amputation. For example, “A sheet of brown paper of arbitrary width and length of twice that width with a removal of the same proportions glued to the floor” or “A square removal from a rug in use” (1969) or even “A 2’’ wide 1’’ deep trench cut across a standard one car driveway” (In *Statements* 1968), which was also executed.



Fig. 42. Lawrence Weiner, *A 2’’ Wide 1’’ Deep Trench Cut Across a Standard One Car Driveway*, 1968.

Weiner is dealing with absence and negation. The integration of a piece – a location – is missed when having a part of the setting removed. The piece should be appreciated in its lack of unity. He is altering an object, a wall, a road. By removing the known, the familiar, he brings other reflections into focus. The carving of a trench, for instance, is also a reference to sculpture, which is about carving, removing, leaving residues. It is as if he would rather deal with the lack of action instead of action, the absence instead of presence. By eradicating a part, Weiner makes one aware of what is missing in the piece, what has been emptied. It calls attention to the invisible, to what is no longer there. The process of removal also brings “the building into the consciousness of the viewer” (Krauss 217). Removing seems to be just as appealing as fabricated objects. Therefore, this technique might be just an attempt to redefine the artist/viewer relationship to the object. It might be Weiner’s attempt to revolutionize art in terms of the expected, but still parodying it.

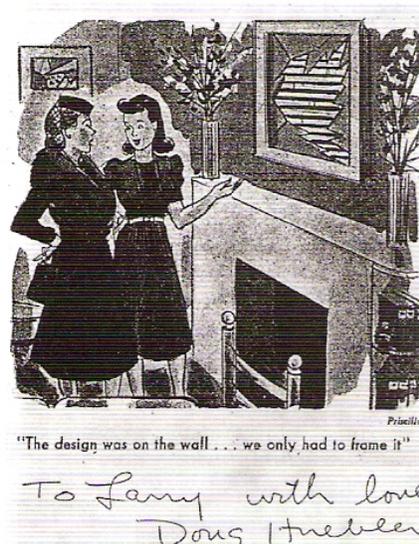


Fig. 43. Newspaper cartoon. Sent to Lawrence Weiner by Douglas Huebler, 1968.

He has also worked with the idea of adding elements. He “poured”, “threw” or “sprayed.” That is, as in his removal pieces, he is willing to change the notion of the known art practice of painting, drawing or sculpting; he is pouring, throwing or spraying. The

statements “One standard dye marker thrown into the sea” or “One hole in the ground approximately one foot by one foot by one foot. One gallon water base white paint poured into this hole” (1968) or “An amount of paint poured directly upon the floor and allowed to dry” present some of the possibilities of addition that reinforce a different art perception: one that deals with different material, the social-economical implications of the material he used, the lack of artistic skills or exclusive hand of the artist, the absence of a canvas. Weiner drew attention to the bringing of ordinary materials to the art world. Instead of acrylic or water paint, he brought materials such as “dye marker” (One standard dye marker thrown into the sea) or “green enamel” (One quart exterior green enamel thrown on a brick wall) into the art world. These are all present in his statements as a means to break with conventional art. These statements, in particular, could also be read as reference to Abstract Art or graffiti practices, once most of them were written on the wall. However, it seemed available to any for it demanded no technique or specific knowledge, which calls for the bringing down of the art piece as that known for its value. Weiner invalidates previous art due to the content of his propositions. His statement could convey analogous ideas to those of conventional art, as do the previous and the following: “One quart exterior green enamel thrown on a brick wall” (1968) or “Two minutes of spray paint directly upon the floor from a standard aerosol spray can” (1968) or even “The expected harmony of the piece is cratered (‘A field cratered by structural simultaneous TNT explosions’)”. His language, as his art, is to reach a collective reception by being simple. He is also cracking any element, especially in his language, that may find beauty, or violent linguistic constructions. His statements are simple, legible, therefore offering a rather pleasant grouping of words and the satisfaction of the viewer/reader. His poems are arid in language, arid in image but decipherable. His scriptures evoke an image easily perceived by the reader. Still, he proves that the fascination of his art might be found in the material language itself.

Though most his statements were concerned with actions involving industrial material, some could be slightly different though still about our relationship to materials. The work “Earth to Earth, Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust” is a known passage from Christian funeral reading that begins: “In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother ... our sister (name).” Then, “and we commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” In non-liturgical conditions, Weiner’s piece becomes a reflection on our own body material, on transformation. It is our process of transmutation. This is probably the relationship between humans and materials he had so often brought forward. These materials report our conditions, eventual fortune, and vulnerability. In this aspect, it reports the empirical evidence of our beings (or those whom we will revisit). Weiner is still dealing with material, though this time our flesh and bones and their return to earth, ashes, dust.



EARTH TO EARTH ASHES TO ASHES DUST TO DUST

Fig. 44. Lawrence Weiner, *Earth to Earth*, 1970.

Some statements also refer to Weiner’s physical description and again refer to decease. The statement “One 106’’ x 16’’ slab of Dow HD 300’’ Styrofoam sunk flush with the ground” refers to Weiner’s height (106 inches) and shoulders’ width (16 inches) whereas the element Dow HD 300 Styrofoam is a light plastic substance usually used for insulation, to keep something warm. It is usually used on floors, so Weiner might be suggesting the exact measures of his own grave.

Though I tried to work within the limits (as far as limits could be drawn) of Conceptual Art (mid 60s to mid 70s), later works had acquired an apparently historical sphere, though he still claimed they were not supposed to be site specific. The reason their presence is necessary in this chapter is due to the metaphorical value developed from them. Besides, at this point it is the content, the meaning of his statements that I am interested in presenting in order to conclude this chapter and the analysis of his words, of his poetics. The statement “Smashed to pieces (in the still of the night)” was painted on a Vienna building in 1991 and it could be a metaphor to the Second World War when the city became the focal point of Nazi German anti-Jew legislation.

The pogrom of November 1938, popularly known as Kristallnacht (or “Night of Broken Glass”), was particularly brutal in Vienna. Members of the Nazi party and its various paramilitary organizations (including the SA and the SS) were joined by civilians, emboldened by the lack of police interventions, to form “spontaneous” mobs that torched most of the city’s synagogues and small prayer houses. Many of these burned to shells as the public and fire department personnel looked on, intervening only when the blaze threatened neighboring buildings. Jewish businesses were also vandalized and ransacked. (“Holocaust”)

Weiner had never really assumed this metaphor, neither that this statement was meant to be site-specific (Vienna). Even if he had made this statement specifically to the Vienna public exhibition, this same statement could be displayed in another context and eventually acquire another signification. These are the possibilities of language that he was interested. His statements are not to do with innovative form and due to its presumably precision, contrary to what one may expect, do not confine meaning to obviousness.

If any of his displayed statements were to be shown in another context, in another country, Weiner would translate them so that the emphasis would still be getting his

message across. Weiner's interest both in language and in communicating his ideas developed into the regular practice of translation. In his text "A Translation from one Language to Another" (1995), he explains that "if in fact there is communication / all communication is a form of translation" (1998: 130). His thoughts on translation are not tied to a linguistic act. He continues to explain that "the needs and desires of one human require a translation into language [art music etc] to bring about a structure or situation that will answer to those needs and desires" (Weiner 1998: 130). Just as he claimed his works could be displayed verbally, or physically, the practice of translation also maintains the content, even if it changed forms. What he is trying to say is that his work must be available to all in content, no matter what form it is displayed. "If in fact all things should be available to all people / each thing must be adaptable to the needs of each group of people (perhaps to enrich life as it is or perhaps to change what could be changed)" (130). To Weiner, nothing is lost in translation if its concern is with making content available to another culture. "A *stone* is a stone. This does not obviate the sensuality of the original object but in translation allows each culture to adapt the object to fulfill their own needs / A translation is really the moving of one object to another place" (130). Weiner perceived objects, material and language as communication props. Unlike other artists who dealt with language, he held communication as his priority and for that brought cultures and countries together when adapting the language of his statements to have them seen. By translating from one language to another, he was straightening the bonds amongst countries as in his work "The joining of France Germany and Switzerland by rope" (1969), which seemed a meeting of national frontiers through the development of a new link.

He was interested in the social aspect of language, as much as in the beholder of his art. His statements are the physical art object and the conceptual information that instead of supposing a complete art production or public, they help constructing both. He sculpts language and from anyone's lips his words, like poems, can be recited repeatedly, though

differently. Weiner's statements are units of meaning that may be what they pretend to be and little bit more. As an instruction piece, he is directing the viewer/reader on how to behave in front of an art work as his words change the course of habit of displayed art.

The poetics of his statements and its interface with literature lies on the crude simplicity of participle actions developed into a spark of light on the audience perception. Words and art are now about being in the world, amongst the people. In the "Art and Literature" symposium, presented in Santiago de Compostella in April, 1997, Weiner concluded,

Alienation is not a subject for art. Therefore this question about art and literature, art and language, is perhaps a non-subject. Whatever means necessary. I do not believe that use of language has pushed aside the use of colour, the use of form, the use of gesture. It's just another addition to the language of the means that people use to present what they consider art to other people who believe that if they could look at art they might understand better their place in society. I'm not being idealistic, I'm being extremely rational. Thank you. (143)

Weiner reinforces his use of language in art. He does not intend to reject other artistic means of making art, but does show language was his choice of making art of concepts, art that would leave ideas that are not to isolate the subject art, but bring it closer to life, to society, to new sensitivities. His art is poetic not because it fits all attempts of classifying a written text as literary (it probably does not), but because it depends on how others intend to read it, because it depends on reception. The meanings of his texts are perceived in the context in which they are found, on the experience of the reader. The thinking of his statements is done in the mind of the reader and in the social setting where it is found. "Alienation is not a subject for art."

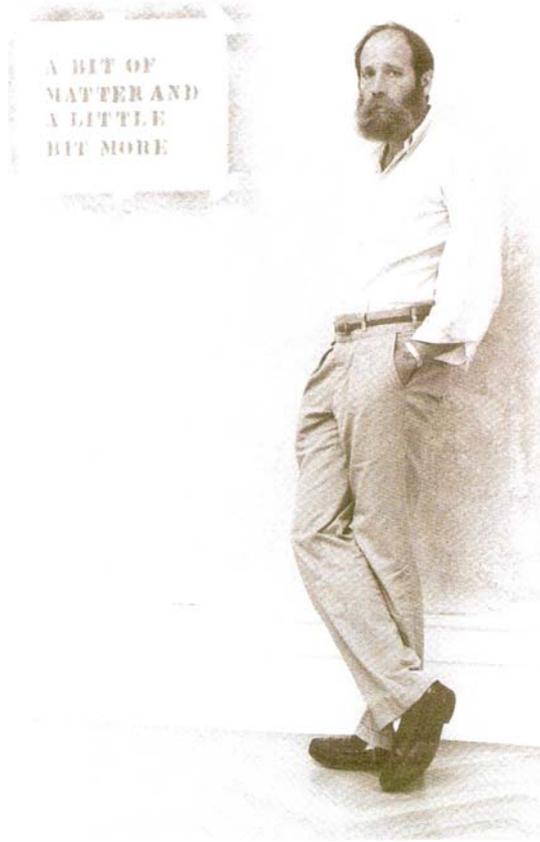


Fig. 45. Lawrence Weiner, *Works & Re-constructions*, 1983.

Chapter 9

Robert Smithson: Bricks or Words?

Language operates between the literal and the metaphorical signification. The power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tension it disparates. A word fixed or a statement isolated without any decorative “cubist” visual format, becomes a perception of similarities in dissimilars – in short a paradox.
(Corrasable)

The American artist Robert Smithson (1938-1973) started his artistic career as a Minimalist but also practiced a bit of painting influenced by Abstract Expressionism. However, like most artists presented here, by 1964 he discredited the efficiency of paint and average art procedures. From then on, along with early works mixing drawings, sketches and words, Smithson developed Land Art works, Mirror Displacements and Earthworks. His art left the ordinary to often consist of grand, large-scale sculptures constructed outdoors – in the case of Earthworks – or could also consist of bits and pieces of raw materials taken into the space of galleries and museums. He distinguished his artworks mainly between sites and nonsites, the former being “the source of material or the place of a physical alteration of the land” and the latter being the sites “parallel or representation in the gallery” (Shapiro 2). Smithson called his open-air sculptures site-specific (*Asphalt Rundown*) whereas the sculptures made in galleries were called nonsites.

In his Earthworks (site-specific), Smithson altered landscapes by bringing to land different materials, eventually changing perceptions of the natural environment. But the natural environment chosen as the setting for his sculptures was usually not that natural anymore. Smithson preferred sites that presented a somewhat damaged or pulverized aspect instead of the often-idealized beauty of nature. In *Asphalt Rundown* (Rome, Italy), for instance, he chose a dug and abandoned piece of land in order to make his running down. He would then have a truck throw hot asphalt from a cliff, “following the slope, running

down, and dissipating itself' (Smithson 1996: 239). Similarly, in *Glue Pour* (Vancouver, Canada) he poured bright orange glue from a can onto the soil on an already eroded and slanted section.



Fig. 46. Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969.



Fig. 47. Robert Smithson, *Glue Pour*, 1969.

Though apparently resembling abstract expressionist action painting, Smithson's sculptures annihilate the artistic unity usually centered on the hands of the artist. It is an anti-sublime act deprived from the touch of the artist and raising ideas of decay and renewal, chaos and order. Therefore, his art brought about two basic criteria that differed from the conventional: the material (anti-sublime) and the making of art (done by others). In these

pieces, he dropped the formality of art, its known forms and the museum site. By working with different materials, Smithson challenged the artistic meaning and the artistic act. Since he stopped painting, he had shown preference for raw material – such as soil, minerals, and rocks – instead of anything refined such as oil or acrylic paint.

Like On Kawara's works, Smithson's sculptural projects demanded a lot of traveling. He visited sites and investigated soil and other natural resources in order to project his sculptures. Though he wished people saw his sculptures in the location where they were made, most were appreciated solely in photographs. He once said he had always had people telling him how interested in sites they were. Yet "they never go [went] there. A few people have" (Smithson 2001: 129). Therefore, the perception of the site was limited. It was generally observed in his photograph, in his registration – now already in complacency with museums and galleries. It was up to photography to preserve these site-specific sculptures. However, through photographs people could see the sculptures that were located on a specific site, though the site could hardly be noted. The photographs could center the sculpture, whereas the nonsites were often the edge, the peripheries. Though his sculptures were seen, the sites were absent – that is why these were called nonsite works. What viewers could see around the photographed sculptures was the space of the gallery and that was another experience. The site of the sculpture became the indoor location where the photograph was to be seen: the gallery, the museum. The absent site is made present in the nonsite sculptures, photographs, or texts – or at least it is represented by them. When Smithson placed a box full of rocks in the art gallery, he wished to recollect the absence of the location where they were taken from. That is, he was dealing with notions of inside and outside when analyzing the experience of the viewer. The nonsite would stand for the site. The nonsite was just the piece, the part, the articulation bringing the site into the museum space – a metonymic relation. The site and nonsite tension in Smithson's work marks respectively the "immediate present and the most remote

geological past.” Smithson’s site was a reference to extension, the earth, and the universe whereas the nonsite was the implication, the importance of this enormity present in a small section of it (Flam xvii).

Perceptions of presence and absence, existence and non-existence, past and present are constantly being called into Smithson’s works. Not only in his sculptures but also in every other media he had used. He was interested in aspects of time, space and changes, natural history and geology. These were current in his texts and art, which actually could barely be separated. Smithson was concerned with habitual frames and limits of art. Though most his sculptures relied on documentation (photographs, maps and texts), there was no secondary media of presentation but they all existed simultaneously. His photographs, for instance, are an alert to the idea of constant changes, evidences of past, remaining pieces for the future. Smithson’s photographs registered and preserved a moment in time whilst the sculptures would eventually vanish. The photographs registered the sculptures, the ephemeral. As an artwork, the site-specific acquired the quality of what could not be maintained, kept, or sold. The art critic Craig Owens stressed that “the site-specific work becomes an emblem of transience, the ephemerality of all phenomena; it is the *memento mori* of the twentieth century” (206-07).

Smithson was also involved with drawings, essays, poems and even films. In fact, the reason I have introduced this chapter with his site specific and nonsite works is exactly because the themes he approached in them were expanded thoroughly in any support he would choose to develop his art. His works seemed to dialogue, maintaining a coherent posture despite the media presented. Transiting amongst issues concerning divergent thoughts, Smithson was able to take his art to the level of reflection and revelation of the world, instead of interpreting it. Conceptual artists usually dealt with art production in this tactful manner. They were more interested in presenting, pointing, inducing reflection than

handing a complete product, interpreted, finished. His texts in particular perpetuated the dialectical presence of his purposes.

It was particularly his use of language that turned him into an important critic, writer, poet and thinker; a reference to Contemporary and Conceptual Art. Robert Smithson had dominated linguistic features exploring the visual aspects of language reinforcing its material qualities. He often perceived language for its solid presence, “as if words were not only abstract signs for things and concepts, but also a form of matter” (Flam xv). He emphasized that there could be no breaking away from language and its material properties. In Smithson’s texts, the object is a linguistic presence and vice-versa. The material form of words turns them into monuments of suspended meanings – suspended because of the tensions between the physical presence and significance, the dialectics between objects and ideas, words and image.

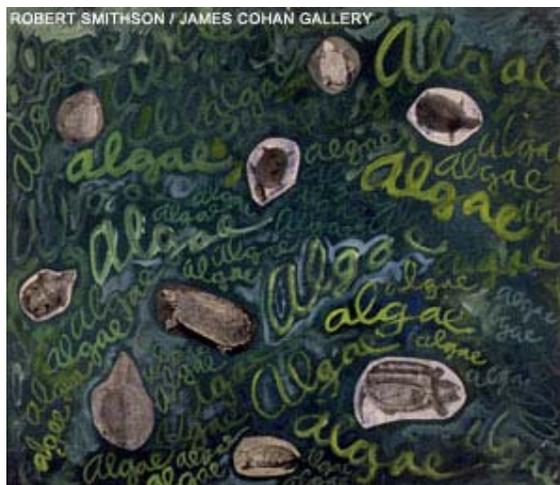


Fig. 48. Robert Smithson, *Algae*, n.d.

Smithson’s texts could include images just as his images could be textual. He is actually known as a writer who “innovated with the essay form” (Osborne 36), probably because of the hybrid position where his words stood – not just texts, not only images. He

had different visions of language and its function in the art world. He often accused language in Conceptual Art for being too simplistic and showing little of the expansive space it could reach. He thought artworks that either depended on written data or dealt uniquely with the mind did not tell the whole story of language in Conceptual Art. In an interview with Patricia Norvell (1969), he explained a bit of the linguistic presence in his works and the problems of limiting it to informative tool or simply to a product of the mind. He believed demonstrations of thoughts were straightly connected to language. However, he was interested in the vulnerability of this verbalization. Though words did set individuals in the present, they would soon become fragments of the past, susceptible to loss. These words are not important as representatives of something concrete but abstract entities created to orient society. In his words, “you have to build something upon which to convince yourself that you’re still around” (Smithson 2001: 133) – which reminds me of Kawara. Still, they were subjected to time. Time acted in objects, words and ideas.

For me there are only manifestations of thoughts that end up in language.
It’s a language problem rather than anything else. It all comes down to that.
What you call something yesterday and what you call it today really results
in nothing but verbalization of mental constructs.

Like a registration, like his nonsite works, language is also just a record. Language is a material record of material thoughts. Both language and photograph capture a moment, a thought, express them through their materialization and leave them to history – become just historical records. It is a registration of what is continuing, moving, changing, past, present, future. Much is lost in the photograph of his sculptures just as much is lost in translation of thought through language. Smithson was dealing with language as “the site of new problems for art, as well as a model for understanding it” (Osborne 112). He believed that no matter what artistic scheme he adopted, he could never have it enclosed but, instead, it would eventually evade, open up and crack. A word is like a fossil. A word or a

fossil contained a number of readings and meanings. Besides, as materials, they were constantly being piled. They were accumulated in history and in references. Language, as the soil, the minerals and his sculptures, was submitted to time and spatial conditions. However, the artwork was usually rated by the value it received, the historical purpose it was given or said to represent when in the gallery or museum. In this sense, Smithson believed that the object of art was just a mental problem instead of a physical reality. The use of language became to Smithson a means to present the problems of art history as a linear source of knowledge.

In 1966, Smithson built *A Heap of Language*, consisting of a handwritten text – pyramid shaped – on a rectangular grid paper. In this piece, words are mounted on grid paper giving the work the quality of a language sculpture. Robert Smithson's pyramid is flat on its peak, as if missing the top (similarly to the Maya pyramids of Yucatan). In this monument, even the difference of the graphics of his words is approximated when written in similar traces. It acquires a homogeneous visuality. The words come practically entrenched, pressing each other giving visual unanimity to the whole piece. It seems they were written – as they can be read – in a holding breath impulse. The text offers no punctuation or pauses, nor articles, prepositions or syntax, similarly to ancient languages – Latin, for instance. The content of the linguistic inscriptions is language and its correlates.

The grid is horizontally numbered 1 to 21 (on the top of the paper); and vertically, though not indicated, we know that it covers 6 quadrants of the same size totalizing 126 finished squares in the entire paper. The basis of the text reaches the whole horizontal extension of the paper (from quadrants 1 to 21) whereas the top occupies only the central quadrants 10 and 11. The quadrants below the sculpture are occupied by the handwritten title of the work (*A Heap of Language*) on the left and Robert Smithson's signature coupled with the year the work was made – R.Smithson 66 – unlike a regular poem, which would have the title and author's name first.

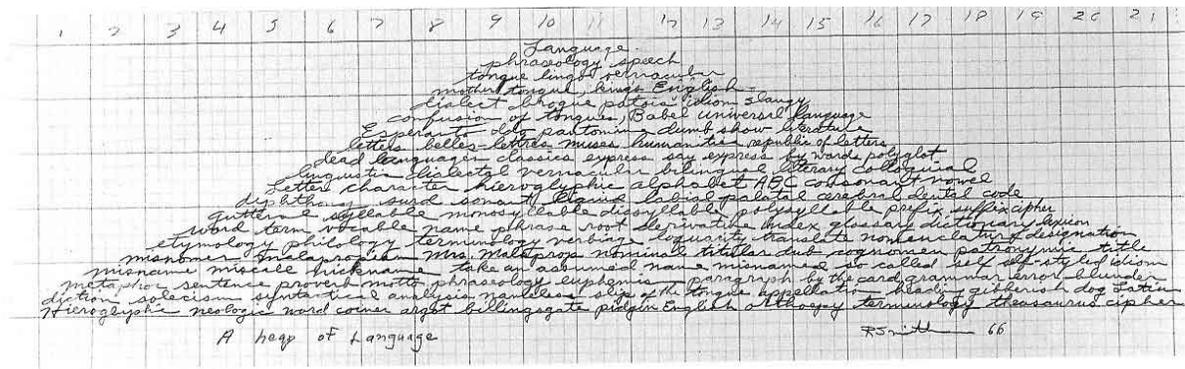


Fig. 49. Robert Smithson, *A Heap of Language*, 1966.

The grid declares spatial and temporal functions. Rosalind Krauss explains that the spatial function of the grid is to state “the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal” (Krauss 9). It is a structure that refuses a narrative but admits a limitation. The repetition – or seriality – of movement or semantic content lack a fixed temporality. The temporal aspect shows the grid as that which has a form “ubiquitous in the art of *our* century” (Krauss 10). Repetition is both replication, and recurrence. Words reflect one another, refer to each other. This repetition device makes the reader goes from one point to another, but at each point it seems that we could face a bifurcation, a maze. This seriality suggests a construction of a conceptual monument brought by material and matter (words). This heap is not a monument for the future but an impersonal return where the reader transits amongst words, concepts, and passages. Whatever material (word) or thought (concept), we are always left with our own memories and recollections. In this *Heap*, we are led to think of ourselves thinking and how this thinking functions as a scattering of our own experiences. In his own words, “Language should be an ever developing procedure and not an isolated occurrence” (1996: 155).

The word “Language” is at the top of the pyramid. “Language” on the first line, alone on the first layer – the first brick. Language introduces its own studies and related concerns in a series of words regarding its matter. Language is followed by its equivalents such as “phraseology, speech, tongue, lingo, vernacular.” The entire pyramid goes on maintaining this semantic relationship amongst the pyramid’s sculpting words.

Placed at the summit of this verbal tumulus, almost like a thesaurus entry (or dump truck) spilling out a cornucopia of synonyms, the word “language” establishes the governing paradigm for all the following terms and/or phrases-which work as metaphorical equivalents for or metonymic attributes of the condition of langueness. In this sense, “A Heap of Language” perfectly illustrates Jakobson’s structuralist definition of “poetry”: the projection of the vertical axis of selection onto the horizontal axis of combination. (Sieburth)

A Heap of Language is a language repertoire that goes from top to bottom in a profusion of signifiers with similar signifieds. These words obey the horizontal limits imposed by the pyramid shape though their arrangement within that line may not make much difference. This poem of related words, however, calls into question issues on form, language, and the physical world. The metaphorical value of *A Heap of Language* is confronted by their literal meaning of the words it contains. “Discursiveness literalness is apt to be a container for a radical metaphor. Literal statements often conceal violent analogies” (Corrasable 61).²² The basic sense of words is suppressed. Words could be so limpid they reflect as if they were mirrors. They evoke the sculptural presence of a pyramid, a layered monument recalling ancient civilizations, a heap recalling a large quantity of collections – all to be dug, excavated, explored.

²² This quote is part of the same text from which the initial quote of this chapter comes. In the exhibition in Dwan Gallery (1967), Smithson wrote a text utilizing for the first time a nom de plume (Eton Corrasable) under the name “Press Release: Language to be Looked and/or Things to Be Read.”

The shape of these mounted words, the pyramid, also constructs the first letter of the Roman alphabet. The three points of the pyramid are marked by the word “Language” at the top, “Hieroglyphic” on the left hand corner and “cipher” on the right hand corner. This trio turns the whole pyramid of words into the single letter A (upper case), the first letter of the Greek alphabet – alpha – or the Hebrew alphabet letter, – the aleph (א) – both descending from the Phoenician aleph (𐤀). By using the single letter “A” Smithson uses one distinctive letter to refer to all the others that help building it – or the other way round.

In this small pencil drawing a two-dimensional form reminiscent of an ‘earthwork’ is constructed from handwritten words, beginning at the top with ‘language’, underneath which are layers of words and expressions all of which relate to language, progressing from ‘phraseology, speech, tongue, lingo, vernacular’, through words describing written language, translation, dialect, the study of handwriting and so on, and ending with ‘cipher.’ The words function both as units of language and as the ‘objects’ from which the ‘heap’ is formed, inviting speculation about the relationship between form, language and the physical world. (Osborne 122)

The title of the work itself – *A Heap of Language* – refers to a pile of language, a mountain that apparently only works for material substances. It is a sculpture filled with (printed) matter. The work says what it shows. Similarly to *Language Is Not Transparent*, *A Heap of Language* presents itself. The description could also serve the purpose of what it does. Its literalness confirms its heap composed by language. Words are bricks, similar in its purpose, each being equally needed as to the building of the sculpture.

The relationship between form and content sheds light on the dialectical approach present in this heap. Johana Drucker explains how texts could support language as a visual image as much as a source of meaning. In “The Art of the Written Image,” she shows how this duality could be manifested in written language. Writing, according to Drucker,

manifests itself with the phenomenal presence of the *imago* and yet performs the signifying operations of the *logos*. It is an act of individual expression and an instance of that most rule-bound and social of human systems- language. It is at once personal and social, unique and cultural, asserting real physical presence and functioning through intertextual chains of association and reference. It is both an object and an act, a sign and a basis for signification, a thing in itself and something coming into being, a production and a process, an inscription and the activity of inscribing.

Therefore, that takes the studious to all sorts of language examination often crossing disciplines such as literature, fine arts, or archeology. Smithson is proposing integration and crossovers amongst words and images allowing potential meanings and perceptions through this dialectical approach. *A Heap of Language* could be either read or looked at. It makes both a sculpture and a visual poem.

Words function as bricks in an architectonic project. However, in this language sculpture, instead of being built from bottom to top, Smithson's cursive letters go from top to bottom. Unlike bricks on a pyramid, which would start from the basis, his words start from above. Yet, language and object approximate. Language works as material, the material of the sculpture is language. He called written words "printed matter" – a term he used to explain that his sense of language "is that it is matter and not ideas – i.e., 'printed matter'" (Corrasable 61). The term printed matter indicated both "the materiality of language and the textuality of the material" (Shapiro 19). The presence of words suggested more than a meaning maker particle. This was a practice present in Smithson's drawings, essays and poems. In his text "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" (1968), for instance, Smithson developed a text as if constructing a museum. He explained how the essay itself could be read as a museum for it was constructed with "stairways of words, a shaky edifice of fictions" (Smithson 1996: 78).

The entire article may be viewed as a variation on that much misused remark²³; or as a monstrous ‘museum’ constructed out of multi-faceted surfaces that refer, not to one subject but to many subjects within a single building of words – a brick = a word, a sentence = a room, a paragraph = a floor of rooms, etc. Or *language becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limit is nowhere.* (Smithson 1996: 78)

Bricks and words construct the whole composing room/sentence, floor of rooms/paragraph. Both Smithson’s language and museum offer several entrances and exists. He explains that “[L]anguage ‘covers’ rather than ‘discovers’ its sites and situations. Here language ‘closes’ rather than ‘discloses’ doors to utilitarian interpretations and explanations” (Smithson 1996: 78). In fact, to Smithson, visiting a museum is “a matter of going from void to void” (41). This is a criticism of art museums. The displayed objects are empty in the sense that they try to rule our perception but are still anachronisms for the audience. In museums “Themes without meaning press on the eye. Multifarious nothings permute into false windows (frames) that open up onto a verity of blanks” (1996: 42). This is also represented in his drawing *The Museum of the Void* and writing “Some Void Thoughts on Museums” (1967).

In this drawing, Smithson shows the dark entrance of *The Museum of the Void*. He thought of museums as places that held relics. Museums manipulate history, and history “is a facsimile of events held together by flimsy biographical information” (41).

²³ Smithson is referring to Pascal’s remark: “Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (Smithson 1996: 78).

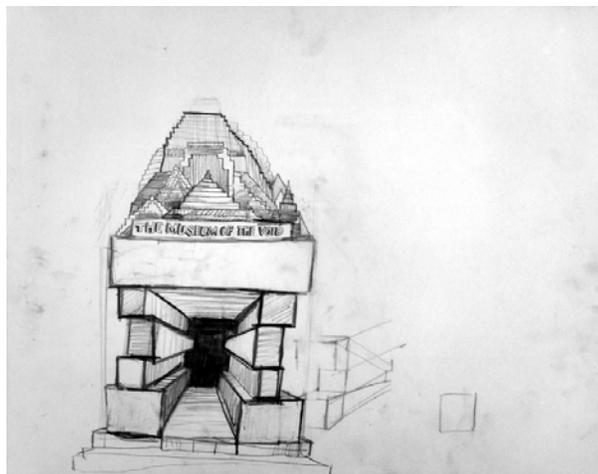


Fig. 51. Robert Smithson, *The Museum of the Void*, 1967.

When he was younger, Smithson himself collected shells and fossils in the basement of his house with the help of his father and usually went to the Museum of Natural History in New York – though he knew there was nothing natural about it. It was all a combination of facts and fictions, real and imaginative. However, he was not very pleased with the Museum of Modern Art and often attempted to de-mythify art history by presenting the artifice of art and the art world.

Art history is less explosive than the rest of history, so it sinks faster into pulverized regions of time. History is representational, while time is abstract; both these artifices may be found in museums, where they span everybody's own vacancy. The museum undermines one's confidence in sense-data and erodes the impression of textures upon which our sensations exist. (Smithson 1996: 41)

Like many conceptual artists, Smithson saw the museum as a place where people are to pay respect to bits and pieces from the past, to pay respect to the dead. He did not criticize this characteristic of museums, but thought it was also time to turn the eyes to the empty walls, to be aware of the absent. Instead of learning history by looking at objects shown, one

should look at the blank space, the infinite, labyrinths of knowledge that transit among the representational museum – or history of art.

In “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” Smithson’s linguistic construction utters the museum; just as in *A Heap of Language*, language utters a monument – like Borges’s Library of Babel is analogous to the universe. Smithson believed everything was language materialized in several forms. In Smithson’s view, there is no difference between names or objects. Just as one would talk of earth as a museum (recoveries), language was also passive of investigations:

The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomfoting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle. Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language. (Smithson 1996: 107)

Smithson might be again referring to time, to his impressions of history. As in his essay “Ultramodern” (1967), in which he analyses the buildings of the 30s, he states that “nothing is new, neither anything is old” (Smithson 1996: 65). History is presented in chains, in collections and reminiscences. Similar to the pieces displayed in the museum, to Smithson language is dead and alive. It is ruin. In each word, a number of splits recall the past but point to the future. Poetry as dying language could mean that it hardly shows any novelties but a recurrence of language, a repetition. It is a dying language because the

repetition recollects the familiar, the past, even if by means of projecting the future. In this aspect, language (or poetry) is to this artist allegorical.

In the case of “A Heap of Language”, the dark and compact grouping of material words make the Heap, the monument. It aims to the sky as did the Tower of Babel. The word babel is actually mentioned on the fourth line (top to bottom) of the sculpture. Babel represents the fissures of a text, the tensions and disparities an inscription suggests. Babel represents language as that which no one possesses or has control. “We have always been in Babel, or more specifically in its library where the dispersion and juxtaposition of many languages, each fractured and fissured, takes its most material form” (Shapiro 177). Babel is “both a destroyed structure and the destruction of the illusion of a single language in control of its own use” (Shapiro 166). This idea is supported by the failure of its project. The Tower of Babel failed due to human pride, to the illusion of unity. Babel is also the dissolution of the idea of art – the tower – as a vehicle for the sacred. There is no divine word (nor sacred art), there is no authority in language, no master voice, no godly artist. Language is the material that attempted this illusion and showed itself as likely to collapse.

In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge... but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures... at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations (Smithson 1996: 78).

The Tower of Babel indicates the ambiguities and inconsistencies of language. There is no specific way and each step given forward accumulates several others (Shapiro 179). Language is “haunted by splits and faults, tangible by ‘printed matter’ that can be arranged in strata and heaps” (Shapiro 174).

The strata of writing are constituted by accumulations and drifts of all kinds, not only libraries, files, archives, bookstores, publishing warehouses, and the like; even within what we typically call a single text we can detect different strands, themes, or voices that can be to some extent sorted and articulated in relation to one another. Finding the vein or nerve that we are seeking in a piece of writing is like unearthing the remains of a buried culture or an ancient geological era. Smithson's "Strata" displays the analogy and shows that 'reading' and 'reading the rocks' share the same principle. (Shapiro 165)

These geological aspects of language are again related to his references of materials. Smithson's writings escort us away from a nostalgic aesthetics of the past to eternalize the present – but only in the future it can be done. As an archeological piece would, matter and mind are present to reflect an experience, an investigation of the past. That is why his works flow into a variety of other words and present the abyssal nature of language. Smithson presented language as a fractured material form. He drops any belief in words as consecrated particles, but instead put them on the same level of materials, soil, earth, and mind. They are all historical in the sense that they have been on this planet for some time. That means they have all eroded as much as been layered. To read a word is an archeological task. To Smithson, language is not just a reference to the concept. The concept cannot be separated from the act of writing itself.

Smithson's artworks generally present some discomfort towards art theories. Smithson's impressions on art and literature seem similar to Barthes' who believed that texts could progress towards several significances. Smithson presents both his text and image as belonging to the same semiotic field, even if they sometimes appear to be contradictory. Marjorie Perloff explains that this is the challenge of the reader (374). Words and materials mean to reveal presences, absences, ways and returns. Though one may think

only a word might be capable of resonating the past, even the most modern technological device is also made of the most remote substance.

Texts are an assemblage, an archeological investigation with infinite possibilities that though infinite do not expand but contract. It does not create the new but replicates. It is an accumulation of citations and narratives. For Smithson, artists did not seek truth in their works but this mirroring, this repetition. “What the artist seeks is coherence and order – not ‘truth,’ correct statements, or proofs. He seeks the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate” (Smithson 1996: 91).

When the word “fiction” is used, most of us think of literature, and practically never of fictions in the general sense. The rational notion of “realism,” it seems has prevented esthetics from coming to terms with the place of fiction in all the arts (Smithson 1996: 83).

Smithson is interested in showing that letters, hieroglyphs or codes are things made, that is, they are fictions in that sense. That is when the material language comes into view. The form of his works recalls poetry of artifice, which does not aim at being relic nor a historical object, but just another anonymous layer that is just another constitutive of the universe. Smithson would construct his language inscriptions just as he would construct his works. What Smithson wants is to redefine art within society using words that echo Borges and Barthes. He wished to dislocate art, to dissolve boundaries on behalf of an advanced principle between verbal and visual (Owens “Earthwords”).

Part 3:

Disguised Poetry

Disguised Poetry

Everything said here might seem too obvious,
but the excessively obvious could hide traps.²⁴
(Piza 73)

This research was initiated by questionings permeating the bringing of words into the art world, into Conceptualism. Conceptual Art works freely combined trends from the early century to the mid-sixties in a way endorsing a crisis of representation. The presence of words originated from the destruction of a unique centre developing practices and forces in continuous expansion. Conceptual artists' challenges echoed throughout their language practice affecting readings and art assumptions.

In the course of this thesis, I have examined the literature and textual strategies in the general aspects of Conceptual Art and specifically in the works of four artists: Douglas Huebler, On Kawara, Lawrence Weiner and Robert Smithson. I had the choice of picking female artists but ended up with a disturbing selection of males. The reason for that was not only due to available bibliography but also because their texts seemed to fit more adequately my expectations. I did develop some studies on Yoko Ono and Adrian Piper, for instance, which I intend to advance in other opportunities. However, apparently it was only in the late seventies and early eighties that women more significantly entered the (word) world of art in the works of Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger, much influenced by Conceptual Art.

Because of the multiplicity of Conceptual Art practices, the finding of texts that could satisfy my purpose was not an easy one. The choosing of artists departed firstly from their use of words and texts. I wanted to determine how this artistic textual production

²⁴ My translation of: "Talvez tudo que se diga aqui pareça óbvio demais, mas o excessivamente óbvio pode esconder ciladas."

could interface with literature; which the effects of writings to the fine arts and field of literature were, and how these artists have blurred disciplinary boundaries.

It seems that nothing is so difficult as to define art or literary texts, what to say of written activities within the world of art. Particularly the scriptures present here seem to defy definition, to escape strategies of organization. Inscriptions, statements and texts had to be read time and again until words released themselves from their physical properties to reach the material functions of the mind. Only then were I to delimit the tasks within this thesis and start observing and annotating the most relevant remarks. The first step taken to conduct this analysis was guided according to similarities between the chosen writings. That was a necessary condition to an approximation of their textual format. Though there was an initial attempt to drop category restrictions of art or literature in order to approach their texts, it seemed impossible not to take predominantly the artistic context into consideration.

From the selected written artworks, I posed questions first concerning writing strategies. The initial observation made was that most works – and that is basically what brought these artists together - dealt with the minimum amount of lexical and compact writings. Their texts ranged from single statements (Weiner and Kawara), short descriptive texts (Huebler) to plain grouping of words (Smithson). This reduction device usually led me to clear and objective, legible and understandable readings – at least as far as semantics and first meanings are concerned. But it is exactly this characteristic that was disturbing. Texts still left the reader with a sense of frustration, a feeling that there was still something unclear about them, something hiding behind obviousness. To a displeased reader, this objectiveness was just one tactic artists used to reach rather complex ideas, a device to extend their readings, to expand thoughts. At this point, Bochner's *Language Is not Transparent* became a suitable source of investigation. In this piece, it was possible to identify two of the most important criteria used all along this textual analysis and present in

most language practices: the material quality of language and its unclear presentation of meanings, language's lack of transparency. From these qualities I was able to move toward an approximation between these texts and literary production.

The material quality of language identifies either written or pronounced words as physical entities. Unlike the attempt to emphasize the concept as the only purpose of Conceptual Art, words were materialized. These artists approximate language to its imagetic quality usually forgotten in our western writing system. Language is material just as any object would be. Once in the art world, it was natural to advance any resemblance between the written inscriptions and their approximation to images, their pictorial qualities. However, it seems that in none of the works presented here artists have really dedicated to lettering as an iconic practice in itself. Words did not recall images due to their plastic qualities nor typographical presentation, except maybe for Smithson's *Heap*. They were still just the meaningless grouping of letters from the alphabet that could only find significance when recognized to the reader in the form or/and sound of known words. Though a brush could be used in the writing practice approximating painting to literature – such as in Kawara's works – it was still just a manner of filling in the letters. Most texts were typed or in the shape of industrial letters so that little of the artist was left in the work and words were presented in their most simplistic graphics. The writing gesture in Conceptual Art was not as close to painting as a painting would be of writing. This choice contributed to the emptying of aesthetic values of beauty so as to leave the least distraction on what really mattered: the reading, the material presence. It was all still just verbal language. It was only through descriptive texts or illustrative statements that a mental image could be created. Huebler's and Weiner's writings, for instance, were to produce abstract figures in the viewers/readers mind probably because their narratives were easily decoded.

The opacity of language, as an extension of their material properties, was an open statement some conceptual artists made to words having an ambiguous nature. Though

they are apparently clear and readable, their opacity covers languages beyond letters. Words are to recall other words. Words carry histories; they are present to elicit recurrences. They live on collecting information, other words and meaning in their layers since the time they have been. To perceive a meaning, one is to excavate a word just to find other layers, other periods, other words. This was also a means to tackle many conceptual artists who wished to treat language as a clear source of ideas. Language escaped meaning. It seemed it was used just to defy signification.

The recognition of language as an opaque presence – material and obscure – allowed a moving forward in this analysis. Conceptual artists seemed acquainted with letters when formulating works that could be read as relevant reflections to the linguistic system. Whether in statements or prose, their narrative would hardly have any concern with plot or resolution. It is a language to describe and present, so that the intrigued audience would find their own individual course of action and ways towards meanings. The route is not guided by the artist, but by the mind of the spectators. All conceptual artists do is put our pin in the “start” so that we could choose which road to take in this open game of hide and seek. The reader was to take responsibility for the creation. The narrative had to stand for something else, to offer attributes. It seemed the suspended meanings forced the reader to keep going, to identify a grand theme. There had to be something else, an idea, a concept.

The subject matters in these texts were usually concerned with materials, every day perceptions, every day language. Writings were an alert on the ordinary, an observation of the common showed through their content but also due to the media presented. Photographs, newspaper and wall writings brought the making of art closer to living and eventually reduced the artistic activity to the level of any other work. It advanced questions on cultural values especially bringing the artist into the social life, as a worker. Facing the contradictions of its time, this written art works with possibilities that confront culture through experimentalist creations. It transformed thoughts of audience and distribution, it

censured cultural imperialism and consumerism. Arts do not want to make art works to be eternalized in museums but to draw attention to the artistic process and working conditions – even if that moment passed into oblivion. One cannot forget the power artistic institutions had acquired since then and especially that Conceptual Art had eventually entered the linear art history. The result of these observations leads to assumptions concerning this textual turn, but especially perceiving their texts as argumentative rather than interpretative. They have infiltrated the establishment as illuminating episode in the history of writing, in the history of art.

It seemed that at this instant the effect of words in the art world could be estimated. But still, I often caught myself wondering if their works were not more a critique of language as it was of visual arts. The effect of their texts in the field of literature was still just obscure poetics. Reflecting on the steps taken along this thesis, I may say the works considered did challenge imperative cultural discourse but, above all, left a legacy that lies less in the destruction of the literary or artistic values of academy than on a demonstration of the extension a word could accomplish. It was only then I noticed their writings could be not only poetry disguised, but an exercise on empty rhetoric. The constant critiques on the artistic discourse to support or explain a painting or a sculpture could have taken these artists away from the art talk. They could be simply presenting the immanence of language, letters and words. Even if their inscriptions did reach transcendence in the reader's search for meaning, they were just material, mere signifiers. Even if these language materials fractured, expanded layers of other signifiers, or evaded beyond borders, they would again contract and shrink in their own presence. It is all just a language experience, just a text.

Now forty years far from Conceptual Art practices, it seems their texts were an ongoing activity. Conceptual Art could be called political exactly because it revolutionized its language. Its manifestations are revealed in dialogical texts that motivate further discussions on arts and literature. Though conceptual artists wished to be affiliated to their time and

context, they did re-collocate pasts in order to envision the future. The poetic dimensions of their words/images are hardly perceived by the reader. It is meticulous and non-emotional. It is a creative expression of arts and not a unique art practice. In Conceptual Art texts and semiotic strategies, the artist leaves the confinements of categories to visit and interfere with others. Literature and Fine Arts are no longer what they used to be. Conceptual Art is a character that admits influences and dialogical qualities in its personality. Actually, it wants to bring these dialectical characteristics to light. Language and words are also dialogical characters. Each look, each step mounts a collection. The relevance of conceptual inscriptions to literature and fine arts derive from this idea that language is engaged in endless thoughts and interactions amongst human beings and the world. Just as a perfume would bring different memories to different people so would a piece of music, a painting, a single word. The textual qualities of Conceptual Art awaken and die in time.

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