

“An index does not simply face its audience. It reflects its past and prompts its future. And that implies activity – agency – on the part of the artist and viewer that re-makes the work.” (Art & Language)

Art & Language, considered one of the co-founders of Conceptual Art, has been engaged in “creating a dialogue” between contradictory conventions of artistic practice since the 1960s. Established as a group in 1968, they entered the stage of the “art discourse” for the first time with the eponymous magazine “Art - Language” in 1969. Members since 1977 have been Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden. At issue during the tumultuous years of their foundation was initially the expansion of the modernist concept of art that at the time defined only painting and sculpture as art forms and ascribed texts exclusively to art theory and art critique. While other proponents of Conceptual Art totally rejected sculpture and painting, Art & Language started integrating these genres in their work from 1975 onward. For fifty years, Art & Language have been producing impressive paintings, sculptures, lyrics, art critique, performances and music, subtly and “eloquently” calling into question our conventional values in art and everyday life.

Their works have been presented at the documenta V, VII and X, as well as in numerous solo shows at Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, PS1 in New York, Migros Museum Zurich or MACBA Barcelona, among others. Their works are included in museums such as the Tate Gallery London, the Museum of Modern Art New York, the Centre Pompidou Paris, the Museum Moderner Kunst Vienna, or the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst in Ghent.

The current exhibition combines two principle works of Art & Language, French Painting by Mouth from 2008 and Art & Language Paints a Picture (The performance of the Actors of the Jackson Pollock Bar); Art & Language Paints a Picture (Directions for the Actors) from 2012. Both pieces embody in a wonderfully sophisticated and at once striking manner Art & Language’s strategy of “indexing,” that is, making reference to art history, everyday phenomena, their own groups of works, and the question as to how we interpret what we see or believe to see.



French Painting by Mouth, 2009

lasertran, acrylic and mixed media with 144 pages of text bound in four volumes
each 88 × 38,4 × 35,5 cm

The installation French Painting by Mouth consists of four objects reminiscent of chairs as well as 144 posters. In the combination of text, object and image, our viewing and reading habits are put to the test. Each “chair” is made of ten canvases, of which nine are painted in stripe patterns reminding one of color field painting. Only when taking a closer look does one discover that there are texts under each stripe of the painted surface. Each “chair” “carries” 40,000 words, all four chairs a total of 160,000 words. The number of words is comparable to a long book. Indeed, these texts are also like a “survey show,” for they were written between 1967 and the present. They are either from Art & Language’s works consisting purely of text, or text fragments, lyrics, art-critical essays, or interviews from five decades. The 144 posters are pasted on the wall and, in reference to the chairs, show the same texts.

Kadel Willborn

Birkenstraße 3

D – 40233 Düsseldorf

www.kadel-willborn.de

Each poster indexes its part of one of the chairs with headings like “Chair in bright colours / Lower panel of backrest / Upper horizontal bar coloured bright yellow with mid-grey text.” That is where one can then read the lyrics of “If She Loves You” and the beginning of the essay “Painted by Mouth,” for example. In a tongue-in-cheek way, Art & Language challenges our viewing habits. We “see” a text comparable to a picture on “chairs.” The “chairs” are not for sitting, but defiantly “occupy” the space as autonomous objects constructed from unique paintings, which are not hanging on the wall, however. What we see on the wall, are texts that one would rather read in a book. When we read them, the words become “voices” that expand the space. In an extremely fascinating way, Art & Language continues the dialogue between the concepts of “discourse” and “decoration” that is characteristic of their work. They speak of the “installation of a phantom” that in a certain respect refers to themselves as artists, musicians and art theorists playing with art history and everyday life.

This (self-)ironic dialogue between decoration and discourse, the strategy of indexing, the eloquent and visual play with art critique and art history are marked in a special way by the 12-part wall installation Art&Language Paints a Picture (The performance of the Actors of the Jackson Pollock Bar); Art & Language Paints a Picture (Directions for the Actors). The work evidently consists of garlands arranged in picture frames. It is based on the text “Art & Language Paints a Picture” published in 1992, which later served as a script for a performance by the theater group The Jackson Pollock Bar in 1999. On stage, the actors precisely recited the text and simultaneously produced a painting following the directions as a performance. The 12-part work now consists of a cut-up oil painting depicting the actors during the performance. These garlands are in the larger frames, while the smaller ones contain garlands made of a cut-up oil painting inscribed with the directions, the script for the actors. The motif of the garland has been part of Art & Language’s work since the 1990s and was the topic of an essay entitled “Making Meaningless” that discussed the ideology by which the self-description of the artist is constructed. The work is also influenced by documentary photos of a canteen decorated with paperchains of a company that went bankrupt—it was supposed to be the “last celebration.” In antiquity, garlands were spanned between the horns of animals that were later sacrificed. In this regard, the motif of the garland combines festive decoration with the dark side of loss.

This ambivalence is intensified with a wink by Art & Language, for in the last part of the script, the actors of The Jackson Pollock Bar are directed to overpaint their arduously produced painting in white. Or, as Art & Language describe it: “The celebratory origin of the paperchains has been displaced—bleached out. A large painting, accompanied by a set of directions that account directly for its existence has been effectively destroyed and remade in the form of garlands that speak less of celebration, than of loss. (...) The work is hermeneutically insecure and unstable: a complex event recorded by the destruction of the record.”

Biographical Note:

Since 1977, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden have been working as the artists’ group Art & Language. They live and work in Middleton Cheney, UK. Art & Language have participated in several documenta exhibitions, the documenta V, documenta VII and documenta X. Major solo exhibitions at, among others, the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Barcelona, Spain (2014); Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (2013); Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, Switzerland (2012); Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Espoo, Finland (2009); Centro De Arte Contemporáneo (CAC) Málaga, Spain (2004); MoMA PS1, New York, USA (1999); ICA, London, UK (1991); Tate Gallery, London, UK (1985); Musée d’Art Moderne, Toulon, France (1982) and Museum of Modern Oxford (1974). Works by Art & Language are included in numerous museum collections, including The Tate Gallery London, Museum of Modern Art New York, The Centre Pompidou Paris, Museum Moderner Kunst Vienna, Museu d’Art Contemporani Barcelona, The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Städelmuseum Frankfurt and the Migros Museum Zurich, just to mention a few.

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