

ART & LANGUAGE

Interview: The 'Too Dark to Read' Exhibition; Joelle Pijaudier-Cabot with Art & Language, Installed in the style of the Jackson Pollock Bar

(Text first 'installed' on 26th January 2002 by the Jackson Pollock Bar, in connection with the Art & Language exhibition Too Dark to Read: Motifs retrospectives 2002-1965', Musée d'art Moderne de Lille Métropole, Villeneuve d'Ascq, January-May 2002. An interview between Joelle Pijaudier-Cabot and Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden was published in the catalogue of this exhibition. The interview was extensively reworked and fictionalized by Art & Language as a script for the performance of The Jackson Pollock Bar.)

Joelle Pijaudier-Cabot: You wrote recently that the maddest (and bitterest) of your interlocutors rail against the appearance of what are called paintings in our work, and that there are others, more calm and urbane, who frequently demand an account of this appearance.

Mel Ramsden: We also said that we are often bored by the prospect of providing one, preferring a slightly different answer each time.

Charles Harrison: An example of the strangeness which attended the emergence of pictures (possibly not yet paintings) is provided by Portraits of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock and by the Studio paintings "by mouth". The generation of something (a text) recoverable within the practical ambit of a Conceptual-Art-like practice led to "aesthetic" and even contemplative presences.

MR: Titles turn into pictures, which, as a negative consequence of being processed, turn into paintings. A line runs from Portraits of V.I. Lenin through the Studio paintings to the Incidents in a Museum to the Hostage landscape paintings. It probably ends in a loop with the Cunt paintings (the series Index: Now They Are).

Michael Baldwin: Portraits of V.I. Lenin were more critically efficient if they attracted the same psychological and cultural predications as Pollock paintings. The aporetic nature of the détente between Pollock's style and an icon of V.I. Lenin was better brought out. Painting therefore returned as a condition of effective cultural manipulation.

CH: It did not resurface as a sudden, in-itself-critical desire to take on the absurd implications of 'The New Spirit in Painting', 'Young Italians' and all that.

JP: So the paintings are produced as projects. They answer questions.

MB: Art & Language's practice has been project-like and essay-like. And this entails that it must be a critical practice. Necessary but not sufficient for this is that it is also a collaborative practice. Work, in the sense of non-wordy action and its consequences, is embedded and then re-embedded in conversation, until the edges of what is work and what isn't work vanish and then re-appear in different places. Strange displacements and hybrids are generated, not by juxtaposition but by fallings-in. Figures inhabit figures (or non-figures) and this somehow recalls and reflects what is often called "indexing".

MR: Some people see this contentedly as "self-referentiality". But what the displacement implies for us is that the visible (and invisible) production has an unstable past and an unstable future – a synchronous and diachronous contamination by narrative and an unpredictable release from it.

MB: This temporal slippage is also a "spatial" one. Characteristically, a literal thing will turn figural, objects will become fictions, a face will transform itself into a mask, and so on. Ventriloquial relations proliferate: there's a difficulty as voices inhabit dummies or bodies not their own.

MR: Technical and productive considerations are liable to obscure our sense of cultural purpose or directedness.

JP: But you don't talk like 'technical' artists.

MB: I'd say that instability in (or loss of) the connection between cultural effects and the means of achieving those effects leads to a virtual weakening of the mechanisms linking work to culture. This remark is no doubt rather old-fashioned, but it is hard to continue or to know that one is continuing without a story – a passing theory – of what one is doing now, with what, etc.

MR: The barbarism of the present requires that a knowingness about culture is entirely separated from the mysterious competence of "technicians" – those people who know more than where the hammers are in art galleries and who are often – no, always – the most interesting people to talk to.

CH: The banishing of politics and virtue in favour of the slogans of 'cultural democracy' has seen a reinforcement in hierarchies of work and an obliteration of detail or of significant difference. This has been accomplished in the interests of an ever-more-happy alliance between interests of the cultural academy and the material interests of capital in its monopolistic and global forms.

MR: Reflexive re-description produces narratives. In them detail is often revealed. These narratives are often inconsistent, paradoxical and irritable.

JP: In this connection, I have a question about this sort of malentendu about the paintings. You admit there are a lot of possible misunderstanding. Your works juggle with a certain degree of misunderstanding regarding aesthetics. Frequently the spectator is perhaps 'incompetent' and may feel 'taken in'. They may grasp the issues and fully appreciate their abstruseness or Pandora's box character, and the uncertain manner in which they are perceived. Interactivity can then fully play its part and many demands are made on them. However, I feel uncomfortable about the 'incompetent' spectator being excluded from the sophisticated games your works engender – not from an 'art democratisation' standpoint but rather with respect to what might be called 'uninteresting' misunderstandings.

MB: There is the misapprehension which leaves one in a state of ignorance, and then there is that critical sense of misapprehension which is an awareness of complexity and contradiction. Our work often sets traps in the sense that we seek to drive expectations only to render them untenable, to invoke a cognitive stance on the part of the viewer, only to create a problem for it. So there is a question always of the competence of the viewer including ourselves.

MR: It is possible that we are asking a lot of the viewer. But at the same time, it may not be a question of knowing a lot of art history. Indeed, that might be an impairment. I suppose we demand of the competent viewer a disposition or willingness to be awake, to be prepared to do some work with the detail.

CH: The incompetent viewer in this sense is the lazy consumer, and there are many who know everything that I'd regard as lazy consumers.

MR: It is tempting here to suggest that if painting is to be defended culturally that will be because it is a space (or place) from which expert convictions of cultural relevance or epochality can be aggressively denied – or drowned in inscrutability.

MB: To a certain degree we are apostate modernists, notwithstanding the fact that we are counted among those Conceptual artists who inaugurated post-modernism. If it is possible for human

beings to remove from their world certain unwanted or oppressive conditions then I believe artists can bear marginally upon that project of emancipation.

CH: This presupposes that we can identify conditions as oppressive as distinct from merely identifying them passively as historical imperatives.

MR: We could all become happy cultural artificers who celebrate the great post-modern distribution of things.

MB: There are many artists, as well as many philosophers and cultural theorists, who think that there is a distorted Hegelian project such that all we have to do is acquire a sense of our epoch, of our moment at the end of history. In contrast, I would say that we have to work, work critically against our own presumption or prejudice regarding what the 'age' is like. We have to keep working at projects of re-description in a spirit of open enquiry. There is something very Spenglerian in the deliberations of the academy of post-modernist culture that wants to tell me, without argument, that certain questions are simply not questions and that there are certain injunctions put upon me by a sense of the age, that I have not the mandate critically to interrogate.

CH: I am scared of those who think that they know where we are now.

MR: But that is what a lot of Conceptual artists have learned to do. They make vague pronouncements about contemporary culture, without any sort of link that might demonstrate how their work so perfectly embodies it.

MB: Their work answers atmospherically to the epoch.

JP: You seem to be talking not only about Conceptual Art, but rather of its effects, social and political, as well as cultural.

MR: And strangely enough, Conceptual Art has been conscripted into this area of expertise. In their distorting mirror, Conceptual artists are of a class superior to those who work with their hands.

JP: It's true. I quite often think it was an 'art de notaire'.

MB: Half-baked epistemia without know-how.

CH: The consequences of "installation" on art are dramatic and troublesome, far more than the seemingly stylish initial ruptures of Conceptual Art.

MB: You know the formula. You do not have to have internal detail in art because the world as it is perfectly good for that. Lewis Carroll told a story against Hegel - the story of a map. The people want a map of the country. The cartographers make one map and the people say, "It's not detailed enough." So they make another bigger, then another, bigger and bigger until they have a map which is the same size as the country itself. Then the farmers say, "This would be a terrible thing because it will cut out all the light and our crops won't grow." The philosophers solve the problem by saying, "It's OK, the country itself will do just as well."

CH: If we have reached that point of literality such that the world will indeed do, we are out of a job, or the task of continuing the dialectical struggle begins.

MR: We just make little maps. History is the flight away from representation.

JP: A major theme in your work is criticism of the museum as an institution. Charles suggested

on one occasion that you view the museum as a location for producing works by 'lunatics', and you have claimed the right to produce 'abnormal' works of art in comparison with normal museum practices. You have also made demands for other forms of distribution circuits. What do you feel about the museum in relation to what you've said about installation and end-of-history fantasies?

MR: The form of installation is determined by its efficiency in terms of packaging and distribution. It needs exhibition credibility and a feasible turnover time. It can be argued that this reaffirms art as a form of social production in exchange and consumption - something "public". On the other hand, the imperialistic expansion of market-driven effects has pensioned off traditional genres far more ruthlessly than Conceptual Art ever did. There is much in history-laden art genres, including "disgraced" ones like landscape and still life, with which to form a place or a representation of a place of historical continuity against and (perhaps) outside the efficiency requirements of the world of cultural output.

MB: But nostalgia is the source of the worst opposition. What forestalls it are the undreamed-of disorders and abjections of hybridity.

CH: In these circumstances, I would prefer it if all museums were turned into species of 'archive', little else. If 'the public' want some information or edification, then they might be encouraged to seek it. I'm sure that the original idea (whatever the critical ramifications) of the relationship between museums and public libraries in the development of literacy and other projects, is overlooked at our peril.

MB: If it is a question of out Beaubourg-ing the Beaubourg each time we approach the institution, we are destined to Wagnerian neurosis in its monopoly capital form. Nothing else. Before he was Baudrillard, Baudrillard wrote l'effet Beaubourg. Did no one hear?

JP: His text has proved to be extraordinarily prescient.

MR: To satirise the culture of the modern art museum no intervention is necessary, only observation.

MB: Out of the bureaucratisation and museumification of the art of the person of fashion comes, for example, 'original' avant-garde appearance. The material conditions of its production are mediations which render its 'genetic character' only virtual.

MR: Is the fake revolutionary innocent, and conceivably comic, or a purposeful deceiver?

MB: We often describe our work as 'Indexes'. What we want to suggest is that we are engaged in a task of re-description. This is not merely a defensive strategy but a practical necessity that bears on what it is for something to be art at all.

MR: As a present concrete activity, indexing is very strange, particularly if you use objects like paintings as the indexical fragments. It can't help but have a past, and it can't help but have a future but its present involves uncertainty.

JP: I want to ask you about the new Indexes, and in particular about the change of the status of text from the original Indexes to Sighs Trapped by Liars and then to Wrongs Healed in Official Hope - about the play on the text in the form of solecisms and puns with Wrongs Healed in Official Hope? It seems to me that in Wrongs Healed in Official Hope, the text doesn't necessarily have to be read. The written word has now a special status in your work, increasingly remote from normal conditions of reading.

MB: One of the major considerations regarding this use of text is the phenomenon of Conceptual

Art purism. We confront the police-like mentality of some of our colleagues regarding what Conceptual Art is and is not, or was and was not. Mel summed up our position regarding Conceptual Art purism as follows: "It's time to get the decorators in." So we sought a way to treat text as surface and vice-versa. We made no apparent distinction between Conceptual Art texts modified as pictures and some later forms like pornography or malaproped 'junk'. It would be the task of a reader - if there was a reader - to make that distinction. I am not sure I know what the status of text was in 1967. Was it performative - acting on the world? Was it painting? Was it instrumental, and therefore internally evacuated once it had done its work? And so on. These questions remain largely unanswered.

MR: He is talking about a kind of scepticism about the status of the text in our work. It isn't clear whether Conceptual Art did, or did not have, a certain kind of decorative function originally. It's wrong to think that it was just literal or performative.

CH: Clement Greenberg called Robert Motherwell's work "arch". He observed that Motherwell was like the interior decorator who staked everything on a happy placement. Everyone knows this is right and that Motherwell's work is largely a joke. But there is a powerful sense in which the very truth of Greenberg's observation is what makes that work interesting and instructive. Motherwell's work embraced the very terror that stalked Abstract Expressionism: apocalyptic wallpaper.

MR: It's a matter of popular art historical convention that Matisse wanted the experience of his paintings to be like sitting in an armchair. Conceptual artists have generally opposed such sitting down. Richard Huelsenbeck, in his first Dada manifesto, was definitely against chairs: "To be a Dadaist means to be an artist only by accident, to be a Dadaist means to let oneself be thrown by things, to oppose all sedimentation: to sit in a chair for a single moment is to risk one's life." If the decorators come in and we make and exhibit a chair we might think that this aestheticizes our politics. But it could also be that it suggests a politicised aesthetics.

MB: To make chairs or their equivalent and to oppose all sedimentation. Is this a contradictory practice or it is an ornamental and political excess? If Matisse's sedentariness and Huelsenbeck's over-excitement are seen as fundamentalist (as the enemy or temptation of Postmodernism) can they be brought into collision and simultaneously preserved?

MR: The preservation bit is political excess: permanent iconoclasm as the politics of gracious living.

JP: Can you say that, with this question of the decorative, you champion something which has to do with a minor position in art?

CH: We do not so much champion the minor as insist sometimes that we have to bring the work low as the only way you get it to change its self-description. We made the panels of Sighs Trapped by Liars into furniture because that is the only way they would function as art.

MR: But major going into minor is rather like competence going into incompetence. I am never sure what it means to say of something that it is major and to say of something that it is minor. A thing can actually be both. A Jackson Pollock is, of course, decorative. This is one of the reasons for their large size. Had they been small, they would have been 'more decorative' in that they would have fit in modest houses. Would that make them major rather than minor? There are a lot of questions there, which have never been answered satisfactorily.

MB: We've suggested that the dual figure of the armchair, and of its other which refuses the sedentary, can be made to work as a permanent and unresolvable contradiction upon which an activity insists.

JP: And now can we speak a little bit about the idea that conversation is an important constituent of your work. There have been various echoes of this in younger artists. Do you have any sympathy with them?

CH: Art & Language as originally "constituted" amounted to a discursive project and a desire to see that project reflected in a publication, insofar as no antecedently established publication seemed to offer a 'natural' place to put this work.

MB: Other "interests" were loosely packed into a commitment to talk, to explain, to stock our minds with puzzles and to let this show in a publication.

CH: Any suggestion grander than this is the product of bitterness and fantasy. But this loosely-packed conversation was a conversation.

MR: This was the teleological hook.

MB: There may be some who overheard our animadversions to 'conversational practice' and hypostasized it into a product. Our work is conversational in the sense (a) that is what we do, and (b) that the products of that conversation join in and also talk amongst themselves.

CH: The tradition of silence by the artist and service by the critic had long been established. Not even the likes of Barnett Newman or Don Judd or Robert Morris, who spoke eloquently for themselves, could be said to have engaged in their published work in an open or self-irritatingly discursive activity. They tended to ratify a certain sort of art - work explicitly distinguished from their writings.

MB: Our theorising and talk had by the late 1960s issued an invitation to us and perhaps to others to abandon or to close this kind of distinction wherever possible in favour of a commitment to discursive activity and its indices as our work - as art of some kind. What made that commitment possible was the very complexity, absurdity and difficulty of the material which appeared to touch our situation; together with the ontic insecurity and exoticism of the artistic materials generated.

MR: The relations between discourse and putatively artistic materials were, as matters of dialectical interest, unavoidably contested and unstable. The status of texts and art work was constantly subject to emergency conditionals, annihilated and returned and annihilated again, often in the course of hours rather than days.

CH: This was now not Conceptual Art: the practice had moved, from purified-Minimalism plus Duchamp plus a commitment to make that reduction stick, into an artistic practice which conceived of itself as totally in continual process.

MB: The Indexes from 1972-74 were an attempt to collect and to reflect - to take some measure of this activity, which, by its nature, was ordinally social rather than exclusively proprietorial and ratificatory. The "implosion" which the indexes represent is also a drawing in as contributor of anyone who took the trouble to exert themselves in working with or on them.

JP: The dead spectator?

MR: Among the questions that all this raises is whether or not it might be possible to regard some other form of work (say painting) initially as qualified by this indexing activity and finally as exemplifying it.

CH: With a certain continuity of working ethos and practice, where are the limits which determine what can count as its index?

MR: We don't simply want to tease the viewer. One of the questions that seems to me quite interesting is how many representational modes we have to use in order to avoid turning the work into spectacle? We have to keep different kinds of representation going: parody, hinting, copying, bluffing, play, all sorts of things.

JP: And this is what a project of 'indexing' demands?

MR: The billboards, or Homes from Homes I and II, as they are properly called, are engaged in re-embedding the work in a narrative which it did not originate. In a conventional exhibition, each item shown acquires an autonomous conversational penumbra. In this exhibition there is a fight going on. When your attention is focussed on a particular image you can, for example, be attracted to something with a frame around it. That's a kind of limit. At the same time you may be distracted by another work nearby. Now, that brings up a kind of narrative, because you don't know whether it is something that has significance or whether it is empty. You don't often even know how to separate those two possibilities.

JP: The work may not be the 'utterance' of the artist, as it were.

MB: This brings us more or less naturally to the question of "voice". There is something characteristically although marginally ventriloquial about the written work of Art & Language in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

CH: There were exceptions of course. Those whom we've called traditionalists were shameless (or insecure) in their need to be seen speaking from their mouths.

MB: There were very few clues antecedently available as to what sort of voice we had made up and where it had been thrown. And made up and thrown it was.

MR: Here were artists not acting artist. Indeed they were artists wearing the clothes of researchers or talkers simultaneously attached to some sort of artistic purpose.

CH: There were possibly two ventriloquial voices. One (which often deluded itself as to its authenticity) was the researcher's voice projected by the conventionally ambitious artist; an accretion of a researchy style to a competitive transformation of artistic practice. Here, philosophical-type discussion offered itself as a conventionally defensible artistic practice - as something capable of being the next thing in historicist space.

MB: The other voice was harder to identify. It was a voice constantly disowned by what we have called an emergency conditional. Art & Language was engaged in something researchy and philosophical just in case this was an artistic practice (even if it was difficult to say how) and engaged in an artistic practice (etc.) just in case those involved thought they were engaged in something authentically research-like.

CH: The onset of Contemporary 'Conceptual Art' and its cognates has seen us develop another voice which has its genesis in 'paintings',

JP: It seems that your use of 'voices' makes you not only ventriloquists, but also ironists, or - since you don't like the word - at least concerned with the comic.

MB: There is always a danger for anyone who would play the ironist, as Paul De Mann pointed out very succinctly.

MR: Thomas Mann spent much of his life wondering if he was a fraud. His work is to do with mapping this insecurity. His are not funny books. The absurdity of the author haunts his works. Now, that has a comical aspect. This present circumstance is a circumstance for comedy to the

extent that we are probably our own victims as we are in any other production of ours which possesses a comic aspect, but not perhaps in the sense of there being some provocation to really serious convulsions of the diaphragm.

MB: As an artist's work approaches vacuity (as it loses internal detail), so it seeks to reanimate some form of Hegelian inner-necessity. This is comedy. The more vacuous the work is, the more it relies upon a misapprehension of that conservative aesthetic. It is perfectly possible, for example, that in the work we displace the jargon of authenticity: from time to time, we ACT and sound like artists.

JP: Does this mean you are actors as well as ironists or comics?

CH: The works we could bring to mind in trying to answer that question are known colloquially as "palette Hostages". They are all constructed of several parts. A number of slits (narrow sections) are transcribed from a view of a museum interior. The site described (depicted) is a site of artistic production in the series of paintings Index: an Incident in a Museum. These transcriptions are fixed to narrow, flat, rectangular "canvasses" and they are inserted so as to form the shape of an architectural plan (of a museum) in a larger canvas surface that contains small recesses designed to receive them. Painted in similar "plan" patterns in this large surface (but not inserted in it) are various forms of flat colour: fake painted wood-grain, dots and other surface vulgarities. The entirety of the surface so far painted is masked, and a "palette" is plastered overall.

MB: The "palette"; it is only a representation of a palette. It may also be some sort of high-genre abstraction. It may be (is) the effect of a considerable concentration and effort. This is an aesthetic effort, within its parentheses, more or less compatible with a Wollheimian description of what a painter does or imagines when she's painting. To discover the virtues similar to or at least compatible with those that Wollheim discovers in Hans Hofmann or De Kooning would not be a mistake, yet in the context of the entire work (the masking-tape removed to reveal the slits), to recover no more (or far less) than that would be an error.

MR: The seemingly Wollheimian painting is ventriloquial.

CH: The Hostage is not merely a representation of such a work - although at a certain level of reduction it is this of course - but a riskier illusion. The ventriloquist disguises her voice, so as to assign it to the dummy although she need not. Her voice is distorted technically in being produced ventrally. Its source is hidden thereby and assigned to the dummy. She is not an actor who assumes a character.

MB: The ventriloquist infests a body not her own with a representation of a voice not her own, but which has its origin in her. The voice-thrower's voice is spatially displaced, and the spatial displacement is disguised. The palette bit of the palette is the authentic production of Art & Language displaced centre-stage-front into a constructed "other".

MR: The "risk" the ventriloquist takes is that her presence on the stage is such that it is only to be displaced. To be recognised as the author of a vocal production is another risk.

MB: Someone might say that a strict analogue here would require that we pretend that some literal other (someone with a different name and identity) had produced the palette. This would not address the simultaneous virtuality (or presence) of dummy (or other) and ventriloquist.

MR: The palette is produced under the condition that we may be misunderstood as its willing producers, producers who willingly accede to the culture of such productions but who are simultaneously present as those who do not. The painting is the other - the dummy, who virtually speaks in a voice which is actually ours.

CH: The risks of being seen to be represented by the dummy (the painting) are worrying enough. There is a great temptation to be a bad ventriloquist – to move one's lips. The fact is that the palette can't be done without a concentration analogous to Hans Hofmann's...

JP: ... but equally, it can't be done without your being other than Hofmann-like.

MB: What we're doing (and what we've often done) is to make things (art of sorts) which are built like mesomeric chemicals. Built of parts not mixed together, not identified with the sum of their constituents, but such that they are identical with all of them conceived separately as resonant. We might call them "hybrids", not in the anthropological sense of Homi Bhaba, but in the sense that we're producing work which is mutated from its original form, and decidedly mutated in relation to what might be called our original intentions (or hopes and fears).

MR: In fact, "hybrid" may not be quite the appropriate expression. A chair made of small canvasses on which a picture of an open book is depicted (an open book also legible to the viewer) is not a hybrid as such. It is a chair as well as a representation of a chair. It is simply that it is constructed of materials which are usually associated with a more or less normal wall display – small paintings – and that it presents a decorative surface.

CH: The constructed chair is a dis-construction – a dis-mantling of the "original" form in which these items are intended and found. In this sense it is not at all a hybrid but a use – a use of the small paintings which might be like the use of a door or doors to make a fence or the use of a fridge as a garden shed, a use which almost supplants an earlier or an original identity, but which is itself also liable to be supplanted or made scandalous.

MR: We also made something domestic. These chairs do not need to be shown off. They need the reverse. They need somehow to be secluded.

JP: I think that this is one of the ways for you to criticise the autonomy of the art work. Do you consider that in some specific and 'new' way the autonomous work of art is finished? How can this be considered in the context of property rights?

MB: It's a way to say that the conditions of identity are very unstable. That they don't need to be stable is probably more to the point.

MR: There is no necessity for a given work to be differentiated in the way it is differentiated, even though we 'originally' intended that for it. A work's autonomy is conventional. By creating a narrative situation in which our works have to seek new forms of self-description, we resist, to some extent, the contextualising powers of the institution.

CH: I don't think that you can categorically say that this always removes 'original' autonomy so much as it puts the self-description of the work radically into question. Could a reproduction, for example, restore autonomy?

MB: A more or less ordinary circumstance of mis-use is actually also just use or re-use. (Indeed, that's what it really ought to be thought of.) In any case, what is used (or etc.) undergoes the contrary of being aufgehoben.

JP: How does all this connect to the various interventions and performances of the Jackson Pollock Bar?