

A Place to Work

Art & Language (Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, Mel Ramsden)

I

Art & Language is the name of a practice whose origins lie in the critical cataclysm that modernist painting and sculpture underwent in the mid-to-late 1960s. One of the effects of this cataclysm was that the material traditions of painting and sculpture ceased to provide the unchallengeable categories of fine art upon which curatorial practice was predicated. It was a consequence of the expansion of what were sometimes called 'new media' that the boundaries or edges that served to distinguish the work of art from the institution ceased to be marked or embodied by a physical or virtual barrier or frame. Indeed, such edges and boundaries and their perceptible signs were now called into question as merely long-established conventions. The attack on 'the frame' was propelled by the literalising modernity associated with Minimalism, and by practices that were able to generate and to exploit contradictions associated with the very conventions that the frame partially exemplified. The museum, which had for some time enjoyed the ideological status of refuge from the world's unaesthetic occasions, was now a focus for concerns with regard to its apparent isolation from matters of 'racism, war and repression'.¹

The attack on 'the frame' was for many artists indistinguishable from a critique of the larger institution, whether that institution was identified with capital in general or with any of its specific structural and superstructural forms. Previously, the site of production had been the studio, while the gallery and the museum were the sites of conservation, display and consumption. The paradigm of the relationship between artist and institution had been a transaction centred on the transferable and portable object, whose notional content was seen to be relatively immune to inflection by context. There were very few ambiguities in the relations involved. The responsibility of the museum was to preserve the work in its material particularity and to display it to its best advantage. The architecture of the museum largely reflected this purpose, and insofar as 'best advantage' meant making the work look serious and important, the appropriate architectural forms signified permanence, substance and security.

With the post-minimal art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, a new transaction came to typify the relations between artist, gallery and institution. Once the conventionally autonomising edge or frame had been successfully contested, the boundary between work and institution

became a matter of debate, contingency and negotiation. The real site of production moved from the studio to the institution or gallery. The artist was now presented with the opportunity to take on the role of curator, and the curator that of the artist.

This postmodern settlement has created an expanding and often confusing range of difficulties and opportunities, affecting the interests of both artists and institutions. A typical opportunity might be characterised thus: a partnership – i.e. a collusion – between a sponsor, a curating institution and an artist. The curating institution (call it Tate Modern) gets a crowd-puller and the publicity attendant upon spectacle; the sponsor shares the publicity that speaks of innovation and high culture; and the artist receives the opportunity to work in a grander than grand manner, and the consequent public status of a minor celebrity. There are many other forms of this relationship. Indeed, we might say that the fabric of the art-world has been largely composed of them for some time.

These were conditions that bore upon the emergence of our own practice and that afforded us our own earliest opportunities. Here were new opportunities for career development, for the formal and material expansion of the work, for development of an aesthetics of critical complexity, and for upward social mobility as the artist was liberated from the requirements of craftsmanship to order belt-way technology by phone; opportunities also to exploit the distributive potential of the institution, and to develop new managerial and organisational skills. At the same time, the effective convergence of interests between artist and institution led to erosion of the privilege associated with the autonomous and contained artwork, and to the consequent displacement of the Wollheimian gentleman – the ‘adequately sensitive, adequately informed spectator’² – from his (sic) role as the prime arbiter of significance and value in the experience of art. What could go wrong?

II

Here’s what went wrong. This moment of liberation was also a moment in which a plethora of unwanted and unbearable determinations began to press. As artists are remade in sparkling white-collar mode, they join the ranks of the institutional management. Far from producing a critique of the institution, they become complicit in creating the falsehood that the institution is the cure and not the disease – that the critique of the modern art institution is something best left to its functionaries. The fact that these functionaries may have been among the dissenters from a cultural ethos does not mean that the institution’s socially negative effects will be overcome. Management supplies a discursive and practical frame in which curiosity and inquiry are understood only in terms of its own instrumental closures. The consistent and predictable one-idea artwork is readily

conscripted to these ends. The consequence is a neurotic compact between artist/curator and institution. The institution demands a predictable form of excess as an embellishment or furtherance of its hegemonic interests, and the artist/curator strives unself-critically to supply it, in the process struggling to outdo the last spectacle to which his or her name could be attached.

There are no failures possible here. So long as the goods are as specified and described, they are guaranteed to rule out the horrors of alienation and deflation, save in the picturesque of the object and its cognates. The institution has demonstrated its democratic power. In abandoning all memory of education, deflation and critical negativity, it procures the artist as a minor enabler of its new status as celebrity venue. Armed with public relations, the artist waits for his or her share of that celebrity or, if he/she somehow outranks the institution in this regard, is flattered by its further confirmation.

Contemporary art institutions continue to conceive of themselves as expansive. As varieties of multi-media and film join the objects paraded in the exhibition space of the museum, new technical and real-estate requirements emerge. It is not easy to tell whether this is an expansion driven by the demands and productions of artists relatively independent of the promptings of the institution, or whether it is driven by the expansionist pressures of the institutions themselves. Unquestionably, there are art practices, such as the Critical Art Ensemble, that see themselves as socially and politically 'critical' or 'oppositional', for which the expansive museum and the expansionist view of art that it harbours represent opportunities exploitable for their non-Wagnerian purposes. These are practices whose oppositional voice is dependent on the institutional frame at its limit. In the case of the Critical Art Ensemble, the targets attacked are for the most part corporate. The principal reason for the practice's identification of itself as 'artistic' is precisely that the art museum or high-profile gallery as institutional frame provides a source of funding and a platform of sorts. The privilege associated with this frame is thereby put to oppositional use. But the same conditions provide structurally similar opportunities for practices that could under no stretch of the imagination be regarded as oppositional: both the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Royal Academy in London have played host both to the Armani brand.

The institution's capacity to accommodate these two contrasting types of display is indicative both of its liberal self-image and of its power. And it is the necessity for expansion under conditions that harness liberality to power that defines the life of the modern institution. Once this process of expansion is set in train, failure can only lead to a fatal ebbing of sponsorship and support. Capital,

whose interests have been previously served by expansion, will simply bestow its largesse elsewhere.

The drive to expansion in the contemporary art institution is inexorably connected to the erosion of boundaries between artistic media – those specialised categories that have traditionally served to contain curatorial ambition. Similar processes may be seen at work in the institutions of higher education, where expansion entails erosion of the distinctiveness of disciplinary subject-matter, and of the detailed study that this tends to require, in favour of topicality, interdisciplinarity and thematic work responsive to the promptings of the market. Here, failure to expand similarly entails loss of prestige and of funding. In both cases, it is in the name of the ideological label ‘democracy’ that suppression of the demands of specialisation is typically justified. The suppression is in fact determined by the demands of distribution and business, and by capital’s self-serving cant that what the customer requires is that which is consumable without critical exertion. Just as the contemporary art institution fears the deflationary power possessed by certain forms of art and tends to camouflage it by trivial topicalisation, so the higher educational institution fears the difficulty attendant upon specialisation and responds accordingly. In the one case what is feared is loss of audience, in the other it is diminution of student numbers. Both of these are symptoms and causes of contraction. The pervasiveness of these inescapable conditions is such as to bring despair to the most resolute of Theodor Adorno’s supporters.

As we write, biennales are expanding exponentially and art fairs are being set up in more and more preposterously improbable locations across the globe. The up-market shoppers who control and haunt the latter make donations from funds that link the art fair to the institution. A fund controlled by one such band of socialites has been set up specifically to purchase items from London’s Frieze Art Fair for donation to Tate Modern. Artists now often save their most ambitious, largest and most spectacular work for the art fair – a phenomenon no doubt already subject to limp postmodern connoisseurship both in the art institution and in the cultural studies department of some university or other.

III

We ourselves have been implicated in this development, both in the attack upon the paradigmatic status of painting and sculpture and on the types of spectatorship and consumption that were associated with Fine Art – and a fortiori in the idealisations of the museum that were supportive to both. We were involved, in other words, in that moment of crisis that has been called Conceptual

Art.³ One of the difficulties faced by Conceptual Art - which had initially conceived itself as highly portable and distributive, aggressively allographic and indifferent or hostile to the conventional art market and its associated modes of exhibition and display – was that the institution had begun to identify qualities in it that the majority of the artists had been either unable or disinclined to foresee. Critics like William Rubin, of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, had voiced fears that the post-minimalist movement would lead to the elimination of the museum – as some of those involved might indeed have fantasised that it would. Meanwhile, however, a number of artists had found sympathetic galleries in continental Europe, where a tradition of the peripatetic intellectual avant-garde had persisted – albeit associated more with literature and politics than with art. Coincidentally, the idea of the national museum of modern art had spread throughout Europe, based on the successful model established in New York between the wars. Given these conditions, it was a cause of powerful attraction that the post-minimalist or Conceptual Art movement was the most completely international avant-garde tendency that the history of art had witnessed. We saw, then, a movement whose very *raison d'être* lay in a putative critique of privilege and autonomy, welcomed by museums which were under pressure to demonstrate the seriousness and cosmopolitanism of their commitment to new artistic developments, and which had finally recognised that Conceptual Art was not going to go away.

We might say that the museums of modern art – fired on the one hand by the memory of 1917 and the rejection of Marcel Duchamp's urinal, and on the other by the same artist's apotheosis in the 1960s – were presented with the chance to relive the earlier moment and this time to get it right. For reasons that were in many instances far from dishonourable, the directorates and curators of these institutions saw in Conceptual Art a degree of newsworthy and discursive refreshment of their culture – to the extent of absorbing some of the institutionally-critical content of the work in question.

However, once it became clear – as it had by the 1980s – that there existed virtually nothing so base as to have the museum's doors closed against it, the intellectual and material resources and grounds of opposition were, to say the least, depleted. It is possible that there were those within the curating institutions who, either explicitly or intuitively and vaguely, perceived in Conceptual Art the catalyst essential to their expansion. That is to say, they saw in Conceptual Art a property necessary for the erosion of those categorical boundaries by which institutional expansion had previously been curtailed. It is also possible that those same or other individuals and institutions

understood that these were the conditions for considerable expansion and upward mobility in the role of the curator – the curator as avant-garde ber-practitioner.

Under these circumstances a great deal appeared to be on offer, especially to those whose stake in Conceptual Art had been the establishment of an avant-garde niche or brand (an achievement normally predicated upon a crudely successionist view of art history). If it was indeed a brand that the artist had established, then the liberal modern art museum would furnish almost all in the way of distribution and expansion that might be required for its success.

Among the potentially undesirable effects on artists of this development in the culture and politics of the museum were the inhibition of self-change and of the risks of inconsistency that it entrains, the discouragement of those types of internal complexity that fare badly under conditions of rapid distribution, circulation and consumption, and the identification of the signifying power of the artwork and of the morale of its production with the life of the institution itself, so that any artwork emerging from a social practice in some way independent of the controlling ambit of the institution was liable to be derogated as a failure. As the site of production moved from the studio to the institution, the artist was made bereft of that productive privacy and relative independence without which institutional critique tends to be implausible – and is at worst the result of connivance in fraud.

It is by now a virtual truism that artistic practices that had their origins in the aesthetics of liberation have been accommodated to the orthodoxies of the free market, and that this has been achieved in large part through the agency of the art museum. The institution has acquired a power coercively to determine the form of the work of the artist. We do not pretend that an absolute and unqualified resistance to this determining power is possible in practice. There remains the question of what a qualified resistance might amount to.

IV

The dawning of our own perception of these as the prevailing conditions of artistic practice coincided with the production and exhibition of the *Documenta Index (Index 01)* of 1972 (fig. 1), and with the increasing ratification and expansion of the Conceptual Art movement during the 1970s (a development that has culminated in the contemporary use of the term Conceptual Art to identify more or less anything not painting and not sculpture that is possessed or seen to be possessed of some kind of avant-garde aspect).⁴ One of the critical propositions actuating the *Index*

concerned the stereotypes of artistic identity that had persisted even as the Duchampian generic object had begun to take its position as the paradigmatic art-object. What the *Index* proposed was that a discursive practice was not only conceivable but also sustainable, so long as the conversation involved had a necessary recursive dimension; i.e. was concerned with the nature of its own processes and internal situation as a condition of awareness of its situation in the world. Here was a discursive possibility – a sort of conversational pragmatics – that could not be subsumed by the public purposes of the museum, even if bits of the conversation could be reified and lopped off as exhibitable swatches that invited the viewing public to join in and to contribute to the larger body of work.

While the social aspect that the annotated and self-indexing conversation of the *Documenta Index* seemed to promise may have proved intractable - a conversational space not necessarily being a workable model of community - the practical habits, needs and tendencies the *Index* engendered seemed very much worth maintaining. And it followed that what was required was a place of work. The studio has of course always been as much an ideological construct as a physical location, the image or description of the studio always an active reflection of the artist's self-image, whether substantial or mythical. Our place of work would in some respects be virtual. But it was at least distinguished by its very difference with respect to the museum. This difference is not to be defined simply in terms of literal place, rather in terms of the sets of determinations that the conversational and essayistic practice regards as welcome, as against those it regards as inimical to its existence.

Of course, most artists have studios in which 'the work gets done'. In the era of the expansionist museum, however, this is generally work in a relatively reduced and mechanical sense: either nailing and sawing and so on, or the prosecution of some professional purpose. In the studio of the typical museum-active artist, wherever there is another person present besides the artist, that person will tend to be either an assistant, or an entrepreneur, agent or curator. It follows that the conversation will be characterised either by the passing on of instruction in a manner reflecting the hierarchical division of labour, or by questions of presentation, distribution and consumption reflecting the aims and purposes of the institution. But the pattern that the implications of the *Documenta Index* established for the present practice of Art & Language was a) that conversation was far more than a contingent by-product of that practice - that it was not possible to conceive of a productive moment in the studio (except mechanically) where only one person was present; and b) that to qualify as relevant to the practice, the conversation had either to play a necessary part *as work* or as an agent in its production, or to bear critically upon the conditions of its presentation, distribution

and consumption, or both. (In speaking of the presence of another, we do not necessarily imply literal presence, but rather virtual presence in so far as the type of conversation we have described provides the sustaining morale of the practice.)

It has to be acknowledged that the resulting practice is one whose relationship with the institution is *inefficient*, in so far as it is indecipherable by the management. There are very few who would hazard a characterisation of an item of our work, let alone of the conversational performance of which that item forms a part. In an artistic culture in thrall to slogans and short-term shibboleths, our tendency to self-dismantling complexity is liable to be seen as impenetrable, and to exhibit all the characteristics of menacing failure associated with the supposedly transcended forms of specialisation. While the institution feels bound to take seriously work that emanates from a long sustained career of sorts – one prefaced by the authenticating formula, ‘among the founders of Conceptual Art’ – the work in question resolutely refuses to appear to take itself seriously, and thus to satisfy the persistent Romanticism that still makes the link between artist and capital.

An example might serve both to clarify the circumstance and to map a connection between the *Documenta Index* of 1972 and a subsequent kind of studio practice with (admittedly broken) heir-lines to a tradition. In 1982 we produced a pair of paintings titled *Index: the Studio at 3 Wesley Place Painted by Mouth I and II* (fig. 2).⁵ This was work that took up the genre of the Artist’s Studio, making particular reference in terms of scale and figurative ambition to Gustave Courbet’s *Atelier de l’artiste* of 1855. Courbet described his work as ‘a real allegory’, and as showing ‘the whole world coming to my studio to be painted.’⁶ It was, then, a work of elevated historical purpose: the artist’s reflections upon his studio rendered as high genre. Our studio paintings are haunted by the bathetic indexation, ‘painted by mouth’, which provokes the thought that the artists were somehow impaired and that the status of the genre is consequently lowered. The physical impairment of the artist implies the possibility of a consequential incompetence in technical execution of the work. Any perceived distortion may have to be seen not as intentionally expressive but as accidental and unfortunate, the artist not as romantic and heroic, but as disabled and pathetic. The genre becomes connected to the catalogue advertising Christmas cards produced by ‘mouth and foot artists’, to be sold for charity. Indeed, for an ambitious genre, painting by mouth might suggest not so much mere bathos as total loss. Are the *Studios at 3 Wesley Place* merely exercises in burlesque? Might an exhibition still take these works seriously? They certainly look serious. They are large and highly populated with figures and referential detail, but could it be that the artists were just fooling around to no serious purpose?

The conversational and essayistic practice has always been a dialogue with impairment and disfigurement. After all, such a practice will always be formed of such things – of fragments made to seem like a whole for a moment, only to risk abandonment as ill-formed. Though these fragments are what can be housed in institutions, they will always be things that strive, albeit with limited success, to supply a context for themselves. In recent years we have made exhibitions of such fragments in various institutions of modern art, notably in 1999 at the Foundation Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona and at PSI in New York (fig. 3), and in 2002 at the Musée d'art moderne Lille Métropole at Villeneuve d'Ascq (fig. 4). Designed in response to the demand for retrospection, these have been assemblages of works and representations of works, each so ordered by ourselves as to provide for the internal conversation of fragments a potential context beyond the reach of the institution within which they have been no doubt comfortably lodged.⁷

NOTES

¹ An 'Art strike against racism, war, repression' was staged by the Art Workers' Coalition in New York in May 1970, with demonstrations mounted outside the major museums.

² The reference is to Richard Wollheim's *Painting as an Art*, London and Princeton, NJ, 1987, p.22 and *passim*.

³ The nature of this involvement is discussed at some length in our article 'Voices Off: Reflections on Conceptual Art', published in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 33 No. 1, Chicago, Autumn 2006, pp. 113-135.

⁴ The *Documenta Index* – otherwise *Index 01* – is so-called after its first exhibition at 'Documenta 5' in Kassel in the summer of 1972. In its physical aspect it was composed of eight metal filing cabinets mounted on four plinths. The cabinets contained some 87 texts written by those then associated with Art & Language or with the journal *Art-Language*. The surrounding walls were papered with a Photostat enlargement of a typed index. Under each of the 87 separate entries the remaining texts were listed according to three possible relations to the text cited: a relation of compatibility, a relation of incompatibility or a relation of transformation, signifying that the relevant documents did not share the same logical/ethical space and were not to be compared in advance of some notional transformation. Ten names were publicly associated with the exhibition of the *Documenta Index*, though not all of these had been involved in its working-out or installation. The adoption of a principle of collective responsibility was not simply a matter of strategy in the face of public exposure. It had been an informal assumption of Art & Language interchanges from the start that the materials of discourse were open to being differentiated on more powerful grounds than those of authorship. In the design of the *Index* this informal assumption was elevated to the status of an organising principle.

⁵ The two paintings were first shown together at 'Documenta 7' in the summer of 1982.

⁶ In a letter to Champfleury written in 1854, first published, from an undated autograph version in the Louvre, in *Gustave Courbet 1819-1877*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Grand Palais, Paris, 1978; English version printed in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, eds., *Art in Theory 1815-1900*, Oxford and Malden Mass., 1998, pp. 370-2.

⁷ For further deliberations on the subject of the modern museum, see our 'Failed Town Planning', first published as a review of Josep Montaner and Jordi Oliveras, *The Museums of the Last Generation*, London and New York, 1986, in *Artscribe International*, No. 62, March-April 1987; reprinted in *Art & Language, Writings*, Madrid, 2004, pp. 143-8.