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EXHIBITIONS

■ Art & Language

Lisson Gallery London 27 January to 27 February

The unnamed writer of the press release for this display of recent works by Art & Language emphasises that they are 'among the very last works [by A&L] that [Charles] Harrison saw and commented on'. Harrison, a collaborator with the group since 1970, died in August 2009 (see *Obituaries AM329*). Although the actual making of A&L's studio work was carried out by Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, Harrison's contribution as a theorist and recorder of the now extensive history of this recursive, sometimes controversial practice is of some significance. He is quoted several times in the press release, to the point where one might regard this exhibition as a homage to his labours and support. And indeed it is difficult to think of another contemporary practice which has enjoyed the benefits of having an in-house, full-blown art historian as part and parcel of its operation.

What is particularly pointed about this situation is that A&L's long-standing dispute with the established canon of modernist art has involved a critique not only of the visual practices associated with that term, but also of the institutional discourses upon which this canon rests, and through which it continues to exist within the museum today. While the members of A&L have, since the group's inception in 1968, produced a complex weave of texts and publications written, as it were, in their own hand, Harrison's presence as the Guillaume Apollinaire of Conceptual Art has surely done much to contribute to A&L's own entry into the convoluted hierarchy of potentially disaffirmative artistic practices. The paradox here remains, however, unresolved.

Several of the pieces in the current exhibition are an extension of work first shown by A&L in the late 1990s. A number of 'minimalist' chairs have been assembled from uniformly sized, painted canvases, many bearing snazzy graphic patterns or mutated extracts from A&L's own extensive history. Placed adjacent to the gallery walls some of the chairs either face towards or have their backs to framed images and texts, obscuring but also drawing attention to them. Reader-viewers are frustrated in their

reading-looking; just as they cannot sit upon this rigid yet essentially unstable seating, so their critical engagement with the overtly visual or textual material in the show is held in check. Harrison, in his *Conceptual Art and Painting*, 2001, places considerable critical weight upon works by A&L of this type, in which the aesthetic or textual components of a given piece are rendered so as to place much of the material out of reach. Such hybrid objects – part text, part painting, part sculpture or ready-made – hover, according to Harrison, midway between legibility and decoration. In discussing A&L's *Sighs Trapped by Liars*, 1997, a work consisting of 436 small canvases, he notes that: 'A spectator ... could easily read the text on the nearest row of panels. The next row was harder to read ... and so on. As the individual texts shaded into illegibility, so the spectator was invited to surrender to the decorative properties of the whole.'

This passage is more than a little apposite when considering *Portraits and a Dream*, 2009, which fills the front ground-floor gallery of the Lisson. Here a wall-mounted printed text, consisting of 90 pages arranged in a grid, is accompanied by rows of paper-chains suspended from the ceiling, these having been made from a second copy of the wall-based text. Much of the latter can be read directly – 'What chance is there for us in these conditions critically to address some questions to the prevailing culture of art?' runs one line – but a great deal of it is impossible to decipher. In the paper-chain version the text is scrambled into decoration, the loops of prose implying prison shackles as much as the annual office party. What might be described as the level of decorativeness is notched up a rank here, as if to suggest the impossibility of ever grasping artistic meaning in its entirety. Alternatively, this consciously contrived instability between image and text may itself be a mode of anti-institutional address. This kind of ostensibly productive awkwardness is directly defended in *Conceptual Art and Painting*, yet one wonders just how much critical mileage might be gained by such an acceptance of the all-too-respectable realm of the decorative. For one may further read such works as signs of critical emasculation, the potentially interrogative force of art having been reworked by the culture industry, rather than by A&L itself, into a form too easily manageable and contained. Intentional ambivalence is not necessarily an effective critical force. ■

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