



Kent Academic Repository

Kalyva, Eve (2014) *Conceptual Art and Language: Introducing a Logico-Semantic Analysis*. *Social Semiotics*, 24 (3). pp. 283-301.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/84528/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2014.896639>

This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Conceptual Art and Language: Introducing a Logico-semantic Analysis

One cannot guess how a word functions.

One has to look at its use and learn from that.

But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice

which stands in the way of doing this.

It is not a stupid prejudice.

(Wittgenstein 1953, §340; original emphasis)

Introduction

The use of language in conceptual art is often attributed to an attempt to replace the art-object and to suppress the aesthetic experience of art. Arguing that this attempt failed on both accounts, this consideration is often accompanied by an evaluative distinction between using language as a means to investigate conceptual or perceptual structures (something that falls well within the modernist enquiry into art's form and structure) from advancing language as an arguably self-sufficient art form (Buchloh 1990; de Duve 1994; Krauss 1973). Approaching a variety of artistic practices from this binary viewpoint presents two main shortfalls.

First, it rigidifies a particular language for discussing conceptual art. True, the conceptualisation of an anti-aesthetic impulse in conceptual art helps underline its particular historical context, where rigid institutional formations advanced the modernist art discourse as the dominant and best-articulated theory of art and defended the immediacy and autonomy of aesthetic experience as a countermeasure to other forms of socially- and politically-engaged artistic practice. However, while the history of modernism(s) itself has been reconsidered from socio-political perspectives, and contemporary art's social practices call for diverse interpretations of art's public presence and position in society, studies of conceptual art often follow a narrow path of analysis. This conflates the critique of the traditional art-object and its institutions (coined under the general rubric of "dematerialisation") with a particular interest in language as the prioritisation of a strong "conceptual" component. For contemporary art practices, a strong "conceptual" component that has been elevated to an equally autonomous (self-referential or tautological) status forms conceptual art's legacy and

becomes a means to establish their relation to discourse as a form of legitimation (Osborne *et al.* 1997; Osborne 2010).

Second, an ontological distinction between artistic and non-artistic means becomes unattainable in light of a multifaceted contemporary art production in global visual art markets, while (art) writing has been institutionally established as a critical practice. Approaching conceptual art's use of language along this line of enquiry often involves a "linguistic turn", which can be understood as referring to the choice of visual artists to utilise language as well as to the production of increasingly critical texts by artists, which were disseminated in exhibition catalogues and avant-garde art magazines. Indeed, throughout the seventies, the page became a new site for production and experience of art, claiming a space traditionally reserved for art criticism where the binary critical text/photographic reproduction also played out a division of professional labour. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind how attention to language use was not an exclusively artistic phenomenon. From the fifties onwards, the status of language and its relation to moral truth and an infallible state of consciousness was philosophically challenged, and new developments in linguistics, communication studies, and cultural theory contested the one-to-one model of dialogical exchange and marked the power of discourse in language, the organisation of knowledge, and social life. Particular to the British context, the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and logical positivism (Ayer, Carnap) shaped critical thinking, along with influences from the French intellectual scene (especially Barthes and Foucault). In the sixties and seventies, critical linguistics developed at the University of East Anglia and the Birmingham Schools of Discourse Analysis and Culture Studies advanced scholarship with influences from M.A.K. Halliday, Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistics (1971, 1973), French structuralism, and Marxist theory (Threadgold 2003). By the time of conceptual art, it became a central premise across the humanities and the social sciences that meaning is created through social processes that are subject to discursive and ideological regimes. Extending this fundamental thesis to the artworld, the refutation of any natural or universal meaning in linguistic or pictorial signs, for example by the use of language, implicated not only the status of art's unmediated and intuitive experience but also the privileged status of the artist-genius and artistic production.

The lack of discussions on conceptual art and its use of language from a wider sociological and interdisciplinary perspective is evident in the case of canonical

(Western) practices as opposed to more adaptable considerations of Latin American or East European activities. Inviting a diverse reading of conceptual art beyond evaluations of a particular type of *modernist* aesthetic, this article aims to show how the critical use of language within a public context negotiates the space of art as a social space. It proposes a logico-semantic analysis of two seminal British conceptual artworks, Keith Arnatt's *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972) and Victor Burgin's *Room* (1970), based on Wittgenstein's examination of the logical relationship between propositions and the world and Halliday's discussion of social semiotics. These artworks, the one combining a text with a photograph and the other exclusively utilizing linguistic propositions, create a situation of particular tension between perceptual and conceptual apprehension. As this article argues, they manipulate the conditions of communication by utilizing loan rhetoric (a rhetoric external to the art context) and displace associate meaning in order to challenge the institutional status of the artist. In doing so, they critically stage those power structures that establish reading and viewing regimes and, most importantly, they bring art's social modality into focus.

A logico-semantic analysis considers the relations between signs within linguistic structures at a functional level, and the relations between signs and extra-linguistic objects or relations at the level of social discourse. Rather than investing in some aesthetic or anti-aesthetic impulse in art, and accepting that artworks have conceptual as much as perceptual significance as long as they have material presence, this article examines the manipulation of language in conceptual art as a paradigmatic starting point in the analysis of the dialectics of art's communication and critical potential. On the one hand, because the attention to context and the implications for meaning was an interest contemporary to conceptual art, an analysis of how the latter communicates in context contributes to the art historical enquiry and helps overcome those binaries that are typically associated with conceptual art (aesthetic/anti-aesthetic, art/language, artistic sensitivity/pure logic). On the other hand, the emphasis on meaning-making as a social practice allows one to consider art's variable roles across the social field of semiosis (as an art-object, a placeholder for bourgeois values, a social formulation etc) and becomes fundamental in studying contemporary multi-modal art production. A logico-semantic analysis, therefore, has a wider application, offering a methodology or a basis for a theory of visual communication that explains how artistic practices engage with their audiences and raise concerns beyond the artworld.

This is not to say that the use of language makes an artwork *ipso facto* critical. Rather, the critical currency of a medium or method (the use of found objects, linguistic propositions, public spaces) fluctuates across different historical contexts and institutional settings. For this reason, the work's criticality cannot be deduced to a matter of simply enlisting non-painterly or sculptural means in order to make a statement. Rather, it involves a process that dialectically interrelates the object, the viewer, and their communication, and therefore depends on whether the artwork succeeds in securing, albeit provisionally, those procedural means that are able to produce something that cannot be readily assimilated by the culture industry.

Wittgenstein and Halliday

The opening statements of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, published in 1921, read: "The world is all that is the case" (1) and "The world is the totality of facts, not things" (1.1) (Wittgenstein 2002). Rejecting any vantage point outside language, Wittgenstein sought to interpret the nature of propositions and their relation to the world. For Wittgenstein, to find the general form of proposition also meant to show the limits of language since what could not be generated by this general proposition would be nonsensical and outside the realm of language. As Wittgenstein noted, "The limit will therefore only be capable of being drawn in language, and what lies outside of the limits will be simply nonsense" (2002, 3). Or, as famously written in *Tractatus*: "the limits of *language* [. . .] mean the limits of *my world*" (Wittgenstein 2002, 5.6.2, original emphasis).

The attention to facts, not things, underlines the importance placed on existence *in a state of affairs* rather than on existence in general. Acknowledging the particularity of the case at hand, the focal point of investigation becomes how things are arranged in language and in the world; and how these two systems correlate. Wittgenstein analysed language as a system of significant (*Sinvol*) propositions that yield a schematic representation (*Bild*) of the relation between words and facts: "A proposition is a picture of reality: for if I understand a proposition I know the situation that it represents" (2002, 4.021).¹ This means that things exist in a state of affairs *and*

¹ *Bild*, as the most basic form of representation, is often translated as picture or model. It is also used to refer to the mental representation of a memory, and to what one makes when mapping out an area. Wittgenstein uses different words to describe the relation of a picture to the world. A picture *represents* (darstellen) the situation that would make it true, it *depicts*

convey those logical structures and rules that make them communicable independently of whether they are true or false. Moreover, sense must be determinate (or pre-agreed, *bestimmt*) (Wittgenstein 2002, 3.23). This emphasises that the evaluation of a proposition as true or false requires that it is answerable to something – for Wittgenstein, this is the world. On the contrary, a proposition for which one can decide whether it is true or false without having to measure it against the world is a tautology, i.e. unconditionally true – for example, “We will leave when we leave”.

In the sixties and seventies, developments in linguistics (notably conversational analysis and discourse analysis) and in cultural studies (notably critical discourse analysis) examined language as an instrument of communication and focused on its social and political dimensions, social exchange, and the reproduction of ideology and power.² Accordingly, discourse is a communicative event where conversational participants are doing something else beyond just using language: they interact. Equally, meaning is determined through processes of social interaction. It is important, therefore, to understand language as a social semiotic – a system of information that must be interpreted with reference to its place in the social process of communication, the conventions and assumptions made in this process, and the type and aim of the situation within which it operates (Halliday 1978). Halliday characteristically asks: “How else can one look at language *except* in a social context?” (1978, 10; original emphasis). Likewise, in a communicational exchange, the text (verbal, visual, textual) is not only an instance of linguistic interaction, but a process of sharing – the shared creation of meaning (Halliday 1994, 175). Most importantly, since language is actualised within given social situations where it communicates information about these situations, the patterns of behaviour, and habitual thought, it also serves as a vehicle of reality. In that sense, and meeting Wittgenstein, Halliday (2002b) notes how language realises a world.

(abbilden) that reality, and the elements in the proposition *stand in for* (vertreten) the objects in the represented situation (White 2006, 50; 72).

² Conversational analysis examines communication at the time of the event while discourse analysis, developed by ethnomethodologists and sociolinguists, extends beyond the sentence and considers the overall products of discourse as a social practice (Sacks 1972; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Stubbs 1983; Brown and Yule 1984). Critical discourse analysis considers the relations between power and discourse and the patterns of access to (public) discourse for different social groups (van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 1995; Wodak and Meyer 2001).

Keith Arnatt's *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972)

Conceptual artworks advanced strategies of re-signification and transposition of signs and meanings across artistic and non-artistic sites, aiming to create an *aporia* of meaning that implicated the status of the object as well as the validity of the viewing and reading modes that help to shape and recognise that object. In the analysis of visual culture, the juxtaposition of images and texts has particular importance because it brings together not only different modes of communication but also their respective systems of interpretation and evaluation. The photographic part of Arnatt's *Trouser-Work Piece* was widely circulated on the occasion of the exhibition *The New Art* (17 August – 24 September 1972, the Hayward Gallery) as the arrogant face of this new art and the authoritarian yet arbitrary claims of its artists.

[image omitted from this version]

Figure 1: “Keith Arnatt winning friends and influencing people at the Hayward’s ‘The New Art’” (image caption, *Time Out* 1972, 21). The Tate. © Keith Arnatt Estate.

The New Art was organised by Anne Seymour, Assistant Keeper of the Tate, for the Arts Council of Great Britain and was envisaged as the first in a series of biennials mapping contemporary art production. Contrary to initial planning, the show focused on selected artists working in mixed media, while a stand with relevant exhibition catalogues, artists’ books, and other publications was available during the show (TNA archives). For its part, the exhibition catalogue featured a dedicated artists’ section – something that was a novelty by the standards of British public galleries but that became characteristic of conceptual art exhibition catalogues by the early 1970s. Paradigmatic of its contemporary interest in philosophy and language, *The New Art* catalogue included Burgin’s analysis of art’s institutional framework with reference to Wittgenstein and French structuralism; Art & Language’s reflections on *Index 02* (1972) with reference to Morris Weitz; and John Stezaker’s analysis of the relation between art and theory from a traditional and analytical perspective. Arnatt’s participation included *Trouser-Word Piece* and excerpts from *Art and Egocentricity – A Perlocutionary Act?* (1971), which discussed Grice and Searle.

According to the exhibition’s press release, *The New Art* sought to challenge the time-honoured notion of art being primarily concerned with beauty and, as the

organiser argued, aimed to capture the latest developments in artistic production in Britain, which were more gradual in comparison to other European or American countries (TNA archives; Seymour 1972, 5). This particularity can be explained by the mediatory position of the British art scene between an internationally projected American modernism and distinct European avant-garde movements, and by the changes in national art education and public funding for the arts (Morris 2005; Richards 2003, 462-65; Harrison and Orton 1982; Harrison 1971; Warren Piper 1971). By the mid-sixties, the element of the “new” advanced by the Independent Group became part of Britain’s answer to the influence of abstract expressionism (Massey 1995). In 1968, the Arts Council opened the Hayward Gallery as its dedicated exhibition space thus ending its collaboration with the Tate, and supported the expansion of the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The activities of the ICA become particularly important. Its opening show, *The Obsessive Image 1960-1968*, gathered new art production across the media, television, and advertisement. In 1969, it hosted the seminal touring conceptual art exhibition *When Attitudes become Form: Works-Concepts-Situations-Information* (28 September – 7 October 1969), sponsored by Philip Morris Europe.

For its part, the Hayward’s *The New Art* attracted over 13,000 visitors, a total income above £4,000, and various shades of public disapproval. For many, the artworks on display were neither “art” nor “new”; others questioned the fairness of the selection process and the Arts Council’s policy, and argued that the exhibits, being neither paintings nor sculptures, did not belong in a public gallery let alone on taxpayers’ money (TNA archives). Equally, press reviews claimed that the show’s contents were absurd, verbally unintelligible, concerned with linguistics and structuralism rather than with color theories or social evils, and more likely to be informed by Wittgenstein and Levi-Strauss rather than by Monet and Manet (Mullaly 1972; London Art Scene 1972; Gosling 1972).

[image omitted from this version]

Figure 2: Keith Arnatt, *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972). The Tate. © Keith Arnatt Estate.

Arnatt’s *Trouser-Word Piece* combines a text and a photograph in individual frames of the same size (1005 mm x 1005 mm). The text, an excerpt from John

Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), discusses how understanding the word "real" entails a process of exclusion that is particular to the specific application of the word "real". In the photograph, a black and white body portrait, the artist holds a sandwich board that reads "I'm a real artist". The examination of the logico-semantics of this work will begin with an analysis of the latter proposition, and then proceed to consider the work's behaviour in context. The central premise in this analysis is that things already exist in a state of affairs that is shaped by conventions and appropriate rules of engagement. This concerns both observation and description. By extension, things are always set in a state of affairs, and talking about them sets them in a state of affairs thus understood. As Wittgenstein emphasised "only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning" (2002, 3.3). In the case of Arnatt's *Trouser-Word Piece*, this nexus is institutional.

In the photographic part of the work, we read "I'm a real artist". In the process of communication, the necessary and sufficient conditions of understanding an utterance are knowledge of grammar and vocabulary – that is, knowledge of how the constituent parts of a sentence interrelate and how they relate to the world. Before commencing the analysis of the proposition "I'm a real artist", let us avoid, momentarily, marked words such as "real" and "artist" and their associated traditions of privileged artistic subjectivity and genius, and consider the structure "X is Y" in a more simple form such as "Sam is a brother". This utterance could be used to mean that "Sam has two parents who have at least one child other than Sam and Sam is related to that child as brother". Notwithstanding, real language users avoid utilizing simple, elementary propositions because that would impede communication if not making it impossible. Rather, they rely upon the reassurance that there *are* certain underlying and shared conditions that make a particular meaning possible and they behave so accordingly, expecting that their utterances will be judged as true or false on those conditions. Thus, if one contested the validity of the above proposition by replying that "no, Sam is not a brother", one could either mean that a) "no, Sam's parents do not have any other offspring" or b) "no, Sam's parents do have children, but they are all female". On the other hand, if the speaker by saying "Sam is a brother" intended to actually say that "Sam is a brother from the 'hood'" and one tried to verify the truth of the proposition by investigating Sam's family condition, then interpretation has missed the point. In other words, the conditions of meaning not only depend on situation and context, but also on the form of the proposition (mode, tenor) and the

intention of the speaker (Halliday 1978). Finally, this process of analysis also makes clear the methodological distinction between understanding the conditions of communication within a language system from evaluating whether a proposition is plausible or convincing. This becomes particularly important in the discussions of artworks, where the aesthetic often functions as both a mode of communication and evaluation.

Returning to Arnatt's proposition "I'm a real artist", it can be analysed into two simpler ones, the first proposing the relation of the object to the world and the second qualifying that relation. Thus, we have the conjunction:

(I am an artist) (real) . (I am a real artist)

The first proposition, "I am an artist", can be logically represented as follows:

$(\exists x)Ix \ \& \ (\forall x)(\forall y)(Ix \ \& \ Iy \ \rightarrow \ x=y) \ \& \ (\forall x)(Ix \ \rightarrow \ Ax)$

This reads that there is an "I" that is only one (thus everything else that is qualified as "I" is identical to itself) and for every x instance of that "I" that "I" is "an artist".³ Here, the necessary conditions that allow one to decide whether this statement is true or false are that an "I" must exist, and that "artist" must be such a characteristic that can be attributed to that "I". Had this compact statement been presented in a more elementary form, for example "I, Keith Arnatt, the real person whose work is exhibited in an art gallery where artists exhibit their works can be classified as the commonly understood artist – that is, a person who exhibits his works in an art gallery", analysis would have been redundant.

Extending the study of linguistic structures to their semantic environment, Arnatt's proposition is presented within an art context by a photograph. This context becomes the measure of the proposition "I am an artist" where the latter communicates based on certain conditions. In this case, these are, I suggest, relevance and symmetry. The condition of relevance is observed when one relates the immediately viewed object to a subject known from contextual vicinity, which can be spatio-temporal or referential. For example, one would relate a numbered tag on a pair of boots found in a shoe shop to the equivalent price of that pair. In the case of Arnatt's proposition, one understands the "I" to relate to a person called "Keith Arnatt", either because one

³ Alternatively, the "I" can be taken as a proper name, as in the example of "Sam", in which case the typology of the proposition reads: A(I). My thanks to Roger White for the indication. However, in the case at hand, the subject of the utterance is not well established or is only tentatively established. This is the starting point of the work's critical engagement with its context and its analysis.

recognises him in the picture or because one recognises him as the author of the work (for example, as indicated by the caption to the image that refers to the person, Keith Arnatt). Symmetry, or symmetrical transposition, underlines a state of affairs and, as a condition of communication, allows one to draw parallels between the quality of a context and its contents. While the artworld is a particularly mutable environment characterised by shifting financial and ideological interests, the following logical association is nevertheless generally valid: “if this art gallery is a place where artists show their work and Keith Arnatt participates in the show *then* he is an artist”. Combining the conditions of recognition and symmetry, analysis shows why it becomes reasonable to assume that the proposition “I am an artist” can refer to the artist of the work, Keith Arnatt, who participates in an art exhibition such as *The New Art*.

The conjunction of the second propositional component in the photographic part of Arnatt’s work, “real”, can be understood as a qualifier of the relation of the proposition “I am an artist” to the world, as suggested above. Generally speaking, the word “real” entails comparison and knowledge of the relevant state of at least two things. When one says “object A is real and object B is not”, it means that one is in a position to argue about the state of both object A and B. Here, the famous example from Austin involves a rubber duck; but the word “real” can also be used as an evaluative, for example, “this is a *real* steak”. More specifically to our case, if the word “real” qualifies the relation of the proposition “I am an artist” to the world, it must yield a logico-semantic rule for at least one of the conditions of communication of the latter, which propose its relation to the world. In the case of relevance, the “real” qualifies “Keith Arnatt” (to whom the “I” of the first clause refers) as a real person. In the case of symmetry, the “real” qualifies the word “artist”, which derives from the logical association that “this is a commonly understood artist *because* artists exhibit their works in an art gallery and the works exhibited in an art gallery are done by artists”. Combining these two aspects in the wider context, Arnatt’s work seems to negotiate “real” relevance of art on behalf of the viewer and “real” symmetrical transposition of quality on behalf of the art establishment. Finally, recalling from Wittgenstein (2002, 4.0312) that logical constants such as “and” and “or” are not representatives, both conditions become answerable to the world. Thus, in the process of communication, *Trouser-Word Piece* brings into focus how “gallery” becomes the site of qualification of art and “exhibit” the mode.

The second stage of analysis examines the juxtaposition of the work's textual and photographic parts. The photograph of the artist holding a panel with the proposition "I'm a real artist" is presented next to a frame of same size with an excerpt from Austin. This composition seems to work better in comparison to other formats of presentation such as placing both image and text on the same page, which was considered by the artist (Arnatt 1972); or placing each one on each side of a postcard, which became available at the time (KA archives). Specifically, the selected correlation of image and text challenges the status of the photograph as a neutral or self-evident medium, and is instrumental in the process of hierarchisation of meaning. Visually, the work seems to generate a series of interrelated frames. The framed image of the artist, whose subject matter is yet another frame (that of the sandwich board), is located next to a framed text, whose layout is typical for signs or, given the context of art exhibitions, explanatory notes that usually accompany works of art proper. Understanding the frame also defines understanding its content, which is artificially (i.e. visually, materially) separated from its surroundings but which remains conceptually relevant (i.e. artists working within the framework of a gallery system of evaluation and distribution of art).

Finally, turning to the image's accompanying text, the artist chose the following extract:

[image omitted from this version]

Figure 3: Keith Arnatt, *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972); detail reconstruction. The Tate. © Keith Arnatt Estate.

Austin's discussion of the word "real" is an additional correlation point between the text and the framed picture next to it of an artist holding a sign that reads "I'm a real artist". Specifically, Austin examines the problem of identification through reference and argues that the notion of the "real" communicates on the conditions that, first, one must know by contrast that which is not "real"; and second, one must know what the speaker intends to say by the specific application of the word "real". A central premise of discourse analysis regarding the meaning-making process as demonstrated by the example "Sam is a brother" is that in order to understand what the speaker is talking about one must know, or at least have some knowledge of, what the speaker talks about. In his analysis, and illustrating his point regarding the use of the word

“real”, Austin uses the following metaphor: that it is the negative use of the word that wears the trousers –in other words, that the non-real has the lead in the process of recognition and identification. This metaphor draws on from the text’s social context where the expression “wears the trousers” resides, and in turn creates a parallel between the reading of the text and social behaviour. Projected beyond its frame on the gallery wall or on the printed page, the text operates within a social context where hierarchical relations are structured in a certain way that is neither neutral nor natural but maintained by shared beliefs, convention, and force.

As this analysis aimed to demonstrate, *Trouser-Word Piece* exists in a dynamic state of communication that is externally sustained and whose rules of engagement and conventions are critically mirrored and challenged by the work. Thus, how are the words “real” and “artist”, and the image of someone wearing trousers and holding a sandwich board to be understood in this artwork, which exists within the artworld as well as within a wider social context? The work duplicates Austin’s use of a common metaphor in textual and visual terms. However, this process does not simply entail the transfer of a quality of something into a parallel environment, but also contextualises that quality and shows how it is culturally determined. Put differently, the work does not only compare things (a man, a photograph, a rubber duck). Rather, and more critically, it draws parallels across the act of recognizing objects and their contextual status: recognizing someone as a man because he is wearing trousers, a street vendor because his is wearing a sign, and an artist because he exhibits his works in an art gallery. At this point, one may argue that understanding what the artist is saying does not mean that one has to believe him or accept him as an artist (or his work as art). However, who has to believe it to be true in order for Arnatt to be a real artist? And if he is an artist, does this make this work, the means to convince that its author is a real artist, art? Then again, if one accepts that language embodies social norms, one should also accept that wearing a sandwich board as if he were a street vendor commercialises the artist, since he does, after all, self-promote and sell his art.

Trouser-Word Piece successfully shifts reading and viewing attention across the object in question and the subject of its making; but also across the subject of its viewing and the conditions of producing and displaying art. The work can be understood within a hierarchical system of classification and promotion of art, for example a gallery space where visitors recognise and symmetrically transpose institutionalised power structures. Through the work’s critical engagement with its

own condition as an art exhibit, “real” becomes a relevant notion polarised between those who potentially make a real selection of art (the art dealer? the public? funding bodies for the arts?) and those who contest this process, as Keith Arnatt may be doing or as the viewer is encouraged to do. By extension, the work prompts one to question how it could be for an artist *not* to exhibit his or her work in an art gallery and how it could be for the gallery-goer *not* to be a mere spectator who recognises things. By juxtaposing textual and photographic parts as well as reading and viewing regimes, Arnatt’s work exceeds its material and institutional frame and comes into dialogue with the social space that surrounds it. Or better, it dialogically engages the gallery space *as* a social space. No doubt, when the photographic part of *Trouser-Word Piece* is isolated and circulated as the arrogant face of a new type of artist – the conceptual artist – the work’s self-critical engagement with its constituted parts, the co-text, and the reader/viewer is suppressed and replaced by a celebratory affirmation of both the art-object and the artist. For his part, and exceeding the institutional and physical confinement of art in galleries, the artist took his iconic portrait to the streets, appearing with the signboard reading “I’m a real artist” in public spaces and outside art institutions (*Live in Your Head* 2000, 2).

Victor Burgin’s *Room* (1970)

Critically-engaged conceptual art practices brought to the surface and interrogated those qualities of art that were held self-evident and reproduced by institutional discourse and market behaviour. They involved reflections not only on form and spatial context, but also on other social practices that were, overtly or covertly, interrelated with the processes of production, promotion, and theorisation of art. In this sense, conceptual art’s concerns did not only engage art’s aesthetic, but also its rhetoric. To better understand what art’s rhetoric can mean and how it was formulated as a conceptualisation of one of art’s multiple aspects, one can analyse how conceptual art implicated the language used to talk about art within general social formulations, as well as the artwork’s own voice – for example, by considering a text-based work. Comparing textual artworks and artworks that juxtapose image and text allows us to examine different patterns of communication, as well as to check the methodological range of the analysis.

Victor Burgin’s *Room* consists of 18 numbered propositions and was originally shown at *Idea Structures* (24 June – 19 July 1970, Camden Arts Centre). Organised by

Charles Harrison for the Borough of Camden as an annual survey of developments in contemporary art, the exhibition took place at the Camden Arts Centre and the local library at Swiss Cottage (a 15-minute walk away). Exhibits were presented in conjunction with relevant catalogue entries and, in retrospect, the organiser notes how he “naively envisaged [it] as a representation of the hard-line in conceptual art” (Harrison 2002, 223). Burgin’s work exclusively filled the centre’s biggest room (see Harrison 2010). Its propositions were individually reproduced on 280 x 200 mm paper panels and pasted, as instructed, in order and at equal intervals around an “otherwise empty, white painted room (starting to the right of the entrance and finishing to the left)” (*Conception* 2001, 38). *Room* was also shown at *The New Art* on a panel with other propositional works by Burgin that explored the relations across signification, position, and experience (see VB Archives; Burgin 1973). It was bought by the Tate in 1973, while the Arts Council of Great Britain bought *Performative-Narrative Piece* (1971) in 1973 and *This Position* (1969) in 1974. These and later works by Burgin negotiate the semiotic and ideological functions of signs across viewing subjects and viewed objects, and contest the ideological division between the inside and the outside of the gallery (Burgin 1986). In his text “Margin Note”, included in *The New Art* exhibition catalogue, Burgin discusses the institutional legitimation of art as something singular, concrete, and independent of human activity; and how language embodies social order while social institutions impose their own frameworks, which the work’s critical and political aim is to reveal (Burgin 1972a).

Burgin’s early propositional works such as *Room* have been interpreted as part of the tradition of minimalist sculpture and the historical development of art, formulated by Clement Greenberg, through problem-solving challenges. In the case of *Room*, these challenges included object placement after Robert Morris and an inquiry for a non-geometrical and non-organic form after Donald Judd, to which Burgin responded by using the exhibition room as part of the work and removing the object all together (Burgin 1982, 1997). Artworks often seek to underline the contingency of the physical object by creating situations, drawing attention to space and movement, and prompting the spectator to become aware of her own position. More critically, this interest can expand to the social attitudes that encompass and establish these acts, and seek to uncover the viewing and reading processes that situate art and the habits and ideological interests of recognition. One way of doing this is by turning attention to how linguistic structures set the conditions of apprehension on which aesthetic systems

are designed (Burgin 1969). In the case of *Room*, a logico-semantic analysis will demonstrate how the work creates a situation where the picture of reality, which it meticulously fabricates, is forcefully measured against those perceptual and conceptual processes that structure reality beyond the artwork. In doing so, *Room* reveals how not only the artwork as an object (and its contents as referential signs) but also the relations that it stages and which are created through its interaction with the viewer/reader exist in a state of affairs.

[image omitted from this version]

Figure 4: Victor Burgin, *Room* (1970). The Tate.

At a first level of analysis regarding the work's visual, public display, the placement of *Room*'s propositions on small strips of paper around the gallery walls is reminiscent of captions to images that are now, as objects, strikingly absent. Thus, even if the work is considered visually "dry", it does not (and could not) operate on an exclusively linguistic, referential level. Rather, by combining reference in seemingly factual propositions with placement in an institutional space, the work manipulates both its visual allocation and the viewer's reading activity. At the level of content, *Room* interrelates co-text with context in such a way that creates a series of transgressions of the logical and perceptual order of things. The work operates on two fundamental propositions that indicate a total space (proposition (1) "all substantial things which constitute this room") and a total time (proposition (3) "the present moment and only the present moment"). As reading unfolds, consequent propositions demand attention to sensations, recollections, and inferences; to the criteria according to which these can be spatio-temporally distinguished; and reflection on the actions of one's body and of others. Because of the numerical ordering of these propositions and their instructive association, the process of *reading* the work contributes to understanding and developing its structural unity. However, and despite the factual tone of its propositions, the work's unity is sustained by conceptual as much as physical movements across an interpersonal, communal space, which becomes evident in its extended gallery display.

Room's temporal and indexical propositions are structured in a progressive order that both interrelates them and correlates them to the world. As reading progresses, the work exceeds its spatio-temporal parameters and opens up to the world.

Consider, for example, proposition (5) “all of your recollection at 3 of appearances of 1 directly experienced by you at any moment previous to 3”. While the work has already set the premises of its apprehension, it now requests recollections and inferences to be made beyond its own structural parameters, drawing attention to other systems such as the architectural composition of the gallery space, the artist’s intentions, the viewer’s own understanding, social behaviour, institutional conventions. In addition, these propositions are articulated in a process of accumulation and exclusion that logically involves deduction of the particular from the general. In linguistic terms, signs are combined according to principles of combination and differentiation; in the case of art, this also involves processes of evaluation and decision-making that *Room* brings to the surface. This is a second transgression of the unity of the work. Existing in relation to other systems, *Room*’s logical, factual propositions admit the work’s own lack of autonomy and stability at both a structural and ontological level. At the end, the opening statement (1) “All substantial things which constitute this room” can only be understood in a nexus of meaning that is conceptually, contextually, and institutionally structured.

Room prompts one to realise how even the most naturalised and factual situations or objects can only be tentatively defined. For Burgin, the use of generic language facilitated association across different contexts and display situations (galleries, catalogues, art publications) (Burgin 1972b, 1974). The tendency to linguistic abstraction is well-located within the historical context of conceptual art. Other strategies include the manipulation of common signifying systems from the everyday within their ideological and political contexts – consider, for example, Burgin’s *UK 76* (1976) series. However, while the printed multiple page was a typical mode of dissemination of conceptual art, and one that technically did not alter the work’s textual nature in reproduction, there is a qualitative difference between a public and a private reading of the work. This involves changes in the connotations and correlations that characterise different contexts, the public interaction of viewer and artwork, and the difference between bodily transposition in the gallery room and the reading movement across the page. Most importantly, there is a shift, as a final transgression, of the public sphere of affairs into a private one. While the work’s presence beyond the gallery room can still implicate institutional hierarchies and negotiate different perceptual configurations, the fact that the reader of the

reproduction can *own* the page further mystifies the artwork's conditions of production and consumption that are themselves reproduced in multiple copies as factual.

Conclusions

This article examines artworks within the broader cultural and social context, which is formulated historically and shaped by social behaviours and institutional policies. While utterances may appear as isolated instances, they are generated within discourse and operate under given frames of reference through the interaction of notational, logical, and social systems. In the case of conceptual art, this frame often relies on the polarity between art's aesthetic value and language's logical operations. Yet experiencing art is a social as much as a discursive activity that must be considered within the ideological, economic, social, and cultural milieu. As Halliday (2002a) explains for texts (and, we can add, images), these are actualised within certain discourses where they exist not only by what is said but perhaps most importantly by what is left unsaid. If conceptual art discredited any singular attention on the *object* of art, it did so by bringing into focus the enabling conditions of communication within a wider system of reference, upon which the artwork depends and rehearses. In their less critical version, conceptual art practices created localised paradoxical instances while ignoring their own conditions and therefore remained limited to them. In their more critical version, they engaged with, or indicated a way of engaging with, the conditions (material, perceptual, institutional) that support such thing as the art-object by dialectically shifting attention to the discursive processes of apprehension and evaluation of art.

As a method, the study of the logico-semantic relations of artworks with a visual culture examines their material form, referential content, and variable engagement across different environments. Particular to conceptual art and its use of language, artworks critically manipulated the image/text binary, which reflects the traditional dichotomy mind/body (Mitchell 1987) and arbitrary/universal, and demonstrated how both pictorial and linguistic signs are subject to reiteration, appropriation, and validation as part of the social semiotic. Combining the use of loan rhetoric with formal, visual strategies, works such as *Trouser-Word Piece* and *Room* signal content within a broader cultural context (Roberts 1986). This is not only done at the level of structure or aesthetic apprehension, but also at a level where the manipulation of semiotic and semantic codes deconstructs the visual art rhetoric. Put

differently, such artworks communicate through processes that challenge percept and concept, the inside and outside of the work, and move across their frame, gallery space, and public sphere. They do so by constructing a picture of reality to which they are both the subject and the object, and which they seek to contest. Bearing the danger of undermining the validity of their own status and artistic licence to do so, they open up the experience and consideration of art to its social context.

Arnatt's *Trouser-Word Piece* reveals the conditions of relevance and symmetry (or recognition and agreement) that make it communicable and the mechanisms of conferring and sustaining artistic value. In a historical context that strongly advocated aesthetic experience as a private, unmediated affair among the individual artist-genius, the art-collector, and the bourgeois art-lover, the critical negotiation of the supporting value system of art (by using language for example) was easily deemed as a passing artistic fancy.⁴ Even so, the work's critique of the institutional setting of art remains valid as long as such hierarchical administrative structures remain in place. In 2002, *Trouser-Word Piece* was acquired by the Tate. Since then, it has been exhibited as part of a tradition that promotes the cult of the artist-celebrity leading up to Tracy Emin (*Self Evident* 2002); affirming the artist's *real* photographic interests (*I'm a Real Photographer* 2007); or advancing him as a *real* sculptor (*Box, Body, Burial* 2009). In 2010, the artist Savage developed the series *I'm A Fraud* (2010), which engaged with concepts of ownership and rites of exchange, and appeared on the February cover of *an magazine* with a sandwich board that read "I'm a fraud". The self-reflective enquiry of Arnatt's work causes it to oscillate between absurdity and tautology. Responding to a particularly pertinent discussion of its time, *Trouser-Word Piece* would not need to assert its universal, self-evident nature if it really were art; if it needs to do so and be externally and institutionally validated, then it cannot *be* art. However, as the work still reminds the contemporary viewer, this is not (only) a problem of art's ontology but of its definition and use.

In Burgin's *Room*, logically structured propositions shift the perceptual and conceptual order of reading and viewing, and engage the institutional and conceptual framework of art and its experience. This context is expressed in the work itself, rather than being referred to, *and* realised via its formal presentation. Burgin was particularly

⁴ In a text titled "A Passing Fancy?", and a letter to Barbara Reise dated November 1972, Arnatt discussed the relations between what is said and the actions that support it such as public and private goals and values, economic prejudices, social conventions, and – often – a passing fancy (KA archives).

meticulous about the work's presentation (Harrison 2008), and the conditions of the work's communication and contextual function can be studied in its different displays (at *Idea Structures* in a room of its own; at *The New Art* alongside other textual works; on the page surrounded by other texts). For Peter Osborne (2002), Burgin's text-works perform a reflective mediation of phenomenological concerns of a post-minimalist art combined with the philosophico-linguistic and set-theoretical problematic of analytical conceptualism. However, whether one perceives the gallery room as part of the work or conceives it as an application, this "otherwise" empty space is also discursively constructed. The work refers to itself, the act of referring to itself, and the conditions of viewing, being, and referring; and demands the presence of the spectator as a requirement for communication. Equally, there is no totality of experience that the work can offer, since it addresses the conditions of viewing/reading as these are perceptually, conceptually, and institutionally defined. Thus, the process of reflection that Burgin's propositions incite is not teleological. Rather than displaying a progressive discovery of appearances, the work reveals a dialectical relation between the physical and discursive environment wherein both the viewing subject and the viewed object are being formulated.

Using language within a visual art context can be understood as trans-systemic transposition between different notational systems and modes of communication, as well as across their different conceptual and evaluative frameworks, which in turn can draw attention to the meaning of a word, to the meaning of inscribing words, of making pictures, of reading and viewing, of experiencing and reflecting. The negotiation of the bigger picture by a particular artwork is dialectically interrelated to the viewer's understanding not only of that bigger picture but also of the object within that frame in a constant process of transformative recognition and effect. The system of reference determines its constituent parts and constituent parts are thus understood as to fit a given system of reference. By manipulating language, conceptual art shows how, in practice, the dialectics of experience and reflection of art is polarised by the distinction between what finally goes on the gallery wall and what not. This distinction, by being instrumental to the relation between outside and inside the frame of reference, establishes that frame. By the same token, the distinction between the processes of interpretation and evaluation can only be tentative, because what is worth analysing is based on what has already been understood and therefore deemed worthy of bearing relevant meaning. This means that the aesthetic qualifiers of an artwork are

also part of its mode of signification and therefore cannot confer exclusive value judgement, not so because judgement comes after experience, but rather because judgement is part of the discursive system of meaning-making and evaluation that *defines* the relation between the “I” and the object, its experience and communication.

If minimalism sought to purge its materials and to indicate not only what one sees but what *can be seen* in front of the viewer, conceptual art counter-suggested that the viewer is unable to look in front of her less she is *not* looking in front of her. Thus, in order to understand the function and critical potential of art in the social space of production, one has to look and see how the artwork generates a chain of signification that implicates its claims and how it negotiates its own status without rendering itself incommunicable or readily-available – that is, how well the artwork sustains this *aporia* of meaning. Rather than internalizing the nature of art and celebrating the idea of art, art as idea, or the idea as idea, critically-engaged artworks contest both the methodological and ideological constructs that formulate the object in question and, to do so, they must retain an element of *externality* as they stage their categorical transgression beyond given systems of art, aesthetic, or value. Demanding that analysis acknowledges the discursive fields of meaning that are generated by the work in the process of manipulation and challenge of art’s frame of reference is conceptual art’s legacy as a critical practice.

Bibliography

- Arnatt, Keith. 1972. Letter to Barbara Reise, December, 4. The Tate Archives TGA 786/5/2/6.
- Bernstein, Basil. 1971 & 1973. *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol 1 and 2. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Box, Body, Burial: The Sculptural Imagination of Keith Arnatt*. 2009. Edition on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition 8 February – 26 April 2009. Leeds: Henry Moore Institute.
- Brown, Gillian, and Yule, George. 1984. *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buchloh, Benjamin. 1990. “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.” *October* 55:105-43.
- Burgin, Victor. 1969. “Situational Aesthetics.” *Studio International* 178(915):118-21.
- Burgin, Victor. 1972a. “Margin Note.” In *The New Art*, 22-25. Exhibition catalogue, 17 August – 24 September 1972. London: The Hayward Gallery, in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain.
- Burgin, Victor. 1972b. Interview with Anne Seymour. In *The New Art*, 74-78. Exhibition catalogue, 17 August – 24 September 1972. London: The Hayward Gallery, in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain.

- Burgin, Victor. 1973. *Work and Commentary*. London: Latimer New Dimensions.
- Burgin, Victor. 1974. Conversation with Penelope Marcus, Spring/Summer. Audio record available from the Tate Library TAV 24AB.
- Burgin, Victor. 1982. "Sex, Text, Politics." Interview with Tony Godfrey. *Block* 7:2-26.
- Burgin, Victor. 1986. *Between*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Burgin, Victor. 1997. Interview with John Roberts. In *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976*, edited by John Roberts, 80-103. London: Camerawork.
- Conception. Conceptual Documents 1968 to 1972*. 2001. Exhibition catalogue, touring. Norwich: Norwich Gallery.
- De Duve, Thierry. 1994. "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism." *October* 70, The Duchamp Effect (Autumn):60-97.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Boston: Wesley.
- Gosling, Nigel. 1972. "British Brain-Bashers." *The Observer*. August 20, 30.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1978. *Language as a Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1994. "So you Say "Pass"... Thank you Three Muchley." In *What's Going on Here? Complementary Studies of Professional Talk*, edited by Allen D. Grimshaw, 175-229. Nortwood: Ablex.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 2002a. "The Linguistic Study of Literary Texts." In *Linguistic Studies of Text and Discourse*, 5-22. London: Continuum.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 2002b. "Language in Urban Society." In *Linguistic Studies of Text and Discourse*, 154-63. London: Continuum.
- Harrison, Charles. 1971. "Some Concerns in Fine-Art Education." *Studio International* 183(937):122.
- Harrison, Charles. 2002. "A Crisis of Modernism." In *Blast to Freeze British Art in the 20th Century*, 221-24. Exhibition catalogue, touring. Ostfildern: Cantz.
- Harrison, Charles. 2008. Interview with the author.
- Harrison, Charles. 2010. *Looking Back*. London: Rindinghouse.
- Harrison, Charles, and Orton, Fred. 1982. *A Provisional History of Art & Language*. Paris: Editions E. Fabre.
- I'm A Real Photographer, Keith Arnatt Photographs 1974-2002*. 2007. Exhibition catalogue, touring. London: Photographers' Gallery.
- KA archives. Keith Arnatt, 1969-1977, Barbara Reise Collection. The Tate Archives TGA 786/5/2/6.
- Krauss, Rosalind. 1973. "Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post "60s Sculpture." *Artforum* 12(3):43-52.
- Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965-75*. 2000. Exhibition catalogue, 4 February – 2 April 2000. London: Whitechapel Gallery.
- "London Art Scene." 1972. *London Weekly Diary of Social Events*. September 17-23, 39.
- Massey, Anne. 1995. *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain 1945-59*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. 1987. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morris, Lynda. 2005. "Introduction." In *New Research into Conceptualism in Europe*, edited by Lynda Morris, n.p. Norwich: Norwich Art Gallery.
- Mullaly, Terence. 1972. "Journey into Nowhere." *Telegraph* [August].

- Osborne, Peter, *et al.* 1997. *Healthy Alienation: Conceptualism and the New British Art*. Conference organised by the Tate and Camerawork, held at the Tate Gallery, London June 13. Audio recording available from the Tate Library TAV 1781A.
- Osborne, Peter. 2002. "Everywhere or not at All: Victor Burgin and Conceptual Art." In *Relocating: Victor Burgin*, edited by Victor Burgin, 65-75. Bristol: Arnolfini.
- Osborne, Peter. 2010. "Contemporary art is Post-Conceptual Art." Public lecture presented at the Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, July 9. Available from the Foundation's website at <http://www.fondazioneratti.org>.
- Richards, Sophie. 2003. *Unconcealed: The International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967-77, Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*, edited by Lynda Morris. London: Ridinghouse.
- Roberts, John. 1986. "Victor Burgin." *creative camera* 6:29-32, 39.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1972. *Lecture Notes*. Department of Sociology, University of California.
- Self-Evident: The Artist as the Subject 1969-2002*. 2002. Exhibition catalogue, 28 October 2002 – 5 January 2003. London: The Tate.
- Sinclair, John, and Coulthard, Malcolm. 1975. *Towards an Analysis of Discourse: The English Used by Teachers and Pupils*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stubbs, Michael. 1983. *Discourse Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Syemour, Anne. 1972. "Introduction." In *The New Art*, 5-7. Exhibition catalogue, 17 August – 24 September 1972. London: The Hayward Gallery, in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain.
- Threadgold, Terry. 2003. "Cultural Studies, Critical Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis: Histories, Remembering and Futures." *Linguistik Online* 14:2. Accessed February 28, 2012, URL http://www.linguistik-online.com/14_03/threadgold.html.
- Time Out*. Image caption to the photographic part of Keith Arnatt's *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972). August 18-24, 21.
- TNA archives. *The New Art* exhibition, 1971-1973. The Arts Council of Great Britain Archives ACGB/121/764.
- van Dijk, Teun. 1993. "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis." *Discourse & Society* 4(2):249-83.
- VB Archives. Textwork by Victor Burgin, c1970s, Charles Harrison Collection. The Tate Archives TGA 839/2/5/1.
- Warren Piper, David. 1971. "Art and Design Education." *Studio International* 181(933):195-97.
- White, Roger. 2006. *Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Continuum.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M Anscombe. New York: Macmillan.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2002. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921]. Translated by D.F. Pears and D.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge.
- Wodak, Ruth, and Meyer, Michael, ed. 2001. *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage.