

## On Painting

### Art & Language

**MB:** We propose to talk about the possibility of painting with a certain background in view. We should make clear from the outset that by painting we do not just mean hand-made pictures. What we do and can mean may become clearer as we proceed. The background we have in mind is both theoretical and practical. The theoretical background takes the form of the so-called Institutional Theory, which has been virtually hegemonic within the art world for some forty years, determining upon people who in the majority have probably never heard of it.

**CH:** An informal version of the Institutional Theory was in circulation among certain artists, dealers and curators in the late 1950s, but it was given its first persuasive articulation by the philosopher Arthur Danto in 1964. Danto wrote of the end of art, meaning the end of an art governed by specific criteria and by specific notions of historical progress. It is now conventional wisdom that painting reached a terminus of sorts with the blank canvas. Danto and others following him marked the end of the developmental narrative of modernism with the problem of indiscernibles: objects, one of which is art and the other of which is not, and which cannot therefore be told apart except by reference to the different parts they play in the discourse of an art world. Danto mistakenly based his original argument on [Warhol's](#) all-too distinguishable Brillo Boxes. It fits Duchamp's snow shovel [In Advance of the Broken Arm, 1915] rather better. In fact we might say that at first sight the Institutional Theory is practically required by Duchamp's first unassisted ready-made.

**MR:** The practical part of our background consists in real institutions, their concrete acts and occasions – this occasion among them. In talking of this as background, we do not wish to conflate the Institutional Theory with the practical artworld and its institutions. However, there *is* a connection in so far as the theory has been useful – indeed necessary in excess of its actual explanatory power – in supplying the institutions in question with their practical self-description. They need it to account to themselves for the power that they have come to wield over the status of objects as art.

**CH:** These are the conditions under which painting has to be conceived. We assert that painting *also* has to be conceived under the conditions that are mediated by Conceptual Art. Why is this the case? For two different reasons, each sustained by a different sense of what Conceptual Art is and means.

**MB:** According to one view, Conceptual Art is associated with the turn from modernism, conceived as an ideology of painting and sculpture, and with the advent of generic art with its accompanying and constituting institutional and managerial apparatuses. An alternative narrative is put in place which traces a 'postmodernist' diversification to the agendas ascribed to [Marcel](#)

**Duchamp:** the hoc, the post hoc, and the propter hoc. It is this narrative that produces the current sense of Conceptual Art as a journalistic category born some time in the 1980s that designates promiscuously any art practice or form that is not painting or sculpture. Some of this stuff might be included in what we could call 'good art', but it shares in a globalised *mélange* of late Surrealism, pop art, process art, body art and so on, that has seen not only the empowerment of the curator but the reduction of the artist to the status of client – supplier of fuel to an ideological machine.

**CH:** We would argue that while this hoc, post hoc and propter hoc casts a real shadow and has real effects on the possibilities of painting, it entails a catastrophic misreading of the imaginative and critical possibilities that Conceptual Art promised. There is another hoc, post hoc and propter hoc. We should come clean and acknowledge that the hoc in question is in large measure *our* Conceptual Art – that is to say Art & Language's. The particular post hoc we are trying to examine is painting. It remains to be seen whether this is our painting alone. It should be noted that the narrative in which painting designates a set of possibilities has to be discussed against a background of events that more or less excludes it. The second hoc is narrated against or rather in the midst of the first and better established one. What follows is that if we are to let our own work in somewhere, and if we are practically to envisage some continuation of painting, then we have first to dislodge the sense of Conceptual Art that would reduce it to epigones and descendants of the snow shovel.

**MR:** It might be objected that if Conceptual Art was about anything, then it was about *not* painting; that what we can admire about it is the intellectual challenge it represents. And the intellectual challenge exists in the form of texts and other banalities that eschew the aesthetic virtues that painting can avoid neither technically nor historically. With Conceptual Art, a way of thinking about art is invoked and is indexed and then migrates to the walls, where it murmurs away in Hegelian reflexivity.

**CH:** It is indeed true that Conceptual Art sought to put texts where paintings had been, and thus in a sense to displace them. It served to make the case that late modernism marked a real terminus for 'authentic painting' and that further modernist development was simply implausible. It did this in part by reminding painting of an intellectual substance and depth it might have owned in its pre-modernist past. It thus stood in the way both of a sentimental return to painting's past and of any progress to a painterly postmodernism.

**MB:** It is also clear that the kind of Conceptual Art celebrated under the 1960s and 1970s rubric of 'Dematerialisation' tended to reduce to the status of speciously transparent art world gesture. The complexity its admirers celebrated was usually generated in their own attempts to make sense of its opacities. Not that anyone cared much about this at the time. If it was post-Minimalism it was fine. This was part of what the background was made of then, and we all spent some time trying to see ourselves against it.

**MR:** But playing with language is playing with a big machine. And playing with language in the context of a tradition of painting is taking on a legacy of powerful descriptions – or it is unless you think that stringing a few words together is the next thing in art, while using a lot is falling out of art and into literature. For us, as Conceptual Art developed into an art of describing, what grew around it was a constituency of interlocutors – listeners and learners as much as speakers and producers. As it turned out, this was a threat to professional securities – for instance to the crucial distinction between artist and critic. But it was also here that the substantial connection was

established between Conceptual Art and its syndicalised antecedents in painting. The text may have colonised the physical location of painting, but this text had to mean something – as painting had had to once. It had to be made, and not just be artily found – and the making at issue was a social and conversational pursuit.

**MB:** So we have an implied absence of painting. This absence was represented by the text in at least two possible ways. Firstly, the text was on the wall in some sense in place of the painting. Secondly, it stood in for or was an analogue for the modernist critical text that had come to dominate late – modernist painting – the writing that, as we have said, ‘might as well be put up on the wall’, since it had already come to function prescriptively in respect of that to which it was supposed to be subordinate. In a normal ‘ekphrasis’ we have *ut pictura poesis*. Here we have *ut poesis pictura*. It is as if the painting left the text with the remainder, and not vice versa. This is why [Stella](#)’s early paintings are so good. They threw the prescriptive text back at itself, reflecting upon their own status as insolent readings of the rules.

**CH:** Now once this was noticed – as it was in proto Art & Language around 1967 – painting tended to get subsumed under the describing that went on in Conceptual Art; and once that had happened it mattered rather less whether or not things got stuck up on the wall. The wall could be abandoned for the time being, as it were. It was not the presence of the inscriptions on the wall that now secured the dialectical relation to painting; it was an activity internal to the descriptive text in so far as that text was complex, discursive, recursive and representational. While it did not follow that Conceptual Art and paintings could therefore be established on categorically equivalent terms, there were minimum requirements of complexity and discursiveness in any text that aspired to the dialectic relation in question.

**MR:** ‘A square removal from a rug in use’ was not quite up to the job. Nor was ‘Something very near in place and time but not yet known to me’.

**MB:** We have argued against the characterization of Conceptual Art as essentially and irrevocably Duchampian, and gestural and appropriative – or as slavishly post-Minimal. It should be noted, though that it is through just such a characterisation that the Institutional Theory finds its most obvious justification. Here there are objects a-plenty – it doesn’t much matter what – and it does indeed seem to be through the agency of the art world that they are accorded the status of artworks.

**MR:** But painting tends to be problematic for the Institutional theory. This is not because the art world doesn’t or can’t ratify them. But one of the capacities paintings seem to possess is to generate anomalies with respect to an exemplary case that the theory addresses; namely the problem of indiscernibility. There are in fact very few practical cases in which indiscernibility is a problem – and Danto notwithstanding, Warhol’s Brillo Boxes was not among them. We might conceive of blank paintings as things that need to have art status conferred upon them by the art world. But which blank paintings would we have in mind? [Rauschenberg](#)’s? [Klein](#)’s? [Ryman](#)’s? [Richter](#)’s? Do we actually have any difficulty in telling these apart from each other or from other things that are not paintings? It turns out that paintings have the cheek to look a bit like art whether the art world thinks they do or not.

**CH:** If this or some refined form thereof is not accepted we are left with an entirely uniform field of artworks – one in which there can be nothing *intrinsic* about x to tell us why we are paying attention to it. But the field of art works, as we know, is not yet uniform; the cases we confront are not all neat philosophers’ examples, and we don’t go about asking the same question of everything. We would even go so far as to say that the art world itself is not completely

uniform. Not yet.

**MR:** In fact the more uniform the art world gets, the more terrifying it is. We might say that it is, trying these days to *become* more uniform – to establish curatorial power plus. If every other thing Tate Modern shows is stretching the boundaries of art, what is the nature of the boundary that is being stretched, and what properties are ascribed to the things doing the stretching? The point is that if there were really infinite numbers of items waiting at the disputed edge of art for the art world to confer status on them, few or none of them could be paintings.

**MB:** Painting seems to be of interest because it may act as an irritant to a central doctrine of institutional theory. The Institutional Theory is, we argue, founded on a Gedanken experiment that bases itself on the example of Duchamp's snow shovel, while painting conceived in a certain way refuses to be exemplified by the artefact of which that is a type. This example is supposed to cover all art. If it did, the idea of a generic art would indeed follow naturally. In [Joseph Kosuth's](#) formulation, generic art develops through critical operations on the concept of art; you cannot if you are making painting or sculpture be questioning the concept of art since they are merely fixed kinds of art, i.e., mere subsets of the generic class. In this world, painting is either an authenticist anachronism or it is one postmodern option among many.

**CH:** The Conceptual Art careers that were built on Duchampian foundations were like their postmodernist reflections, somehow bound tightly or loosely to the various legends of the end of art. What these notions tell us is that we can break with the formal traditions of history – or, rather, that we can break with the idea that forms are connected with and borne forth in traditions that have some historical meaning or saturatedness. History and historicism are abandoned in favour of a certain simultaneity. The various senses of order, sequentiality and periodicity can thus be abandoned. We are now, it seems, sure that artistic forms are not at all bound to the context of their emergence – and that they do not need to overcome them, for example. We can divorce things from their historical context and put them in any arbitrary combination.

**MB:** It is a surprise to no one that this supposed, freeing of art from the need to find its historicity in a dialogue with the self-image of the age was in fact no such thing. The cancellation of the distinction between map and territory has itself acquired a Spenglerian and an epochal character. This is the self-image of the age and it has seen not the end of art and of art history, but the inscription of these both in and as a narrative of institutional powers.

**MR:** You can do anything: take a photograph, stick some stuff in a box, do a painting, anything, because everything is art in the same way. This is seen as anti-elitist and the democratisation of art. What it effectively does, however, is to empower the institution to make the selections that get to count while it masks its own non-cognitive operations with circularity. We will come to this in more detail later. It seems to us an odd democratisation that as more and more is distributed across the net of art and doesn't have to answer for itself, the success or failure of work gets harder directly to determine. The development of criteria in this connection becomes very uncertain, and falls easily into the hands of the manager and the therapist.

**MB:** If all things are possible, then it will be necessary to tighten the criteria for selecting what is admissible or good or relevant or edifying or whatever. The question we face is how do we select? As Niklas Luhmann says, only the overcoming of difficulties makes a work significant. As he goes on to say, *Hoc opus hic labor est*. It's that bit of Virgil that we have tried to keep in our minds. Expansion without discomfort, without scepticism and without some source of paradox and anomaly does not increase the realm of meaning; what it has tended to increase is the power

the institution wields to make of its self-description the demand of the epoch.

**CH:** What's confusing is that submission to that power can seem commensurate with liberation from posh talk about inherent quality, and from the idea that art status is decided by empirically verifiable visual properties. In the late 1960s this sense of liberation released a certain appropriative gesture into the world. But this appropriative gesture faced the critique that it was still Cartesian in its artwork ontology. If perception and description were often the same thing as the later Wittgenstein suggested, then a conversation had to take over. Conversation tends to generate projects for itself. It imagines its 'objects' as always problematic, (always) deflated and deflating. (This is perhaps the beginning of a sense of resistance also to another programme that we have described as bureaucratic, managerial and spectacular.)

**MB:** In the form of the doctrine of indiscernibles, the Institutional Theory argues that the status of art is conferred upon objects by the art world. There are thus still objects that somehow lie 'behind' the artwork, however installed, evasive and dematerialised they may be. Here is an instance of Cartesian theatre, the machine behind the artwork's ghost. Perception and description are pulled apart. In the case of the snow shovel we are supposed to perceive a snow shovel and describe it as a work of art. But in the case of a painting of even minimal internal complexity, our address to it will tend to obliterate a Cartesian object in the background, even if we allow the implicit ontology to linger. If an object is an artwork under description as such, then certain worrying if consequences easily follow. It is as if David Beckham's free-kick against Greece [for England in a World Cup qualification match] had to be thought of as a perceived bodily movement, a knee jerk, that has been placed under the description of the scoring of a goal. Our argument is, of course, that the scoring of the goal and David Beckham's action are not intelligibly separated. We would say that even painting of a traditional authenticist type has the power to point to the Cartesian pitfalls of the Institutional Theory of art objects.

**CH:** It should be allowed, though, that the Institutional theory does often have its uses. It frees us from looking for empirical features or family resemblances that are somehow shared by works of art – the art-historian's tedious compare-and-contrast exercises as the key to all significance – and suggests that in the matter of art status we had better be engaged in some form or other of conceptual analysis.

**MR:** If a possibly and increasingly rare and hard-to-think-of controversial object has had art status conferred upon it, then we might say that the contextually needed conferral is parasitic upon, if it is not grounded in, relatively non-problematic cases. But this does not mean that these 'grounds' are justified or defended in the same way. 'If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true nor yet false.' Someone might ask, 'Are you telling me that this scruffy and unskilled bit of scrawling is art in the same way as Ingres' drawings are art?' You say, 'Yes.' He says, 'On what grounds?' You say, 'I can't give you grounds, but if we keep talking you might agree.' If this didn't happen, you might say that the questioner couldn't or wouldn't learn about art and art history in the twentieth century – or something.

**CH:** Similarly, if we find out that for all its faults Art & Language's Documenta Index is a rather serious business, we do not have to know that there is something that exists that is called 'the art world'. The existence of art – that is to say art works, Conceptual Art and its place in the world and so on – is what will *tell* us that the Documenta Index might be a work of art, even if we care little for the information.

**MB:** Neither of these instances draws on the need for an institutional conferral of status. Now if the Institutional theory can penetrate only so far into the Documenta Index, then this will have

something to do with an internality that it shares with painting – even as analogue or ghost. While the Index does not have the impertinence to look like art, it partakes at a distance of painting's capacity to generate anomaly for the Institutional Theory, of its pre-reflective capacity to create its own context, to be 'seen' to act autopoetically, to resist contextualisation and yet to know a little about it.

**MR:** Painting is not only a problem for Institutional Theory, it holds within it a possible critique of those real institutions that use the theory and that constitute the world into which paintings are uttered. There is a non-professional tradition both in the production and the consumption and display of paintings. We may well dismiss (some) of these objects as bibelots, but there is little doubt that the non-professional tradition exists and that we might as well call its constituents 'art', just in case. Yet one of the more telling things about painting, with regard to the matter of conferred status as art, is that we are often either quite unconscious or unselfconscious as to its status as art at all. We might say that we go straight to the painting in a cognitive style that is more or less unable in its language game to think of the object behind it. We are freed from reflections upon the art world and its conferring power by the very boundedness of many paintings – by our tendency to assign them an autonomy that is the analogue of moral personality.

**CH:** Imagine showing somebody a painting by, [Jackson Pollock](#). You would be acting unintelligibly if you tried to get them to perceive the object that the Pollock is and then to think of its unexhibited character as a work of art. You would also be acting oddly if you tried to explain that it was a work of art because the art world deemed it so. You would be more likely to say that it was a painting and that it possessed certain properties and that these had some connection with criteria for calling it a work of art – this because a certain agreement existed in the matter. This would then, in the end, involve an 'institutional' pragmatics. Works of art can only *be* works of art as perceived and described things whose classification is somehow 'agreed'.

**MB:** What we are saying, perhaps, is that the pragmatic route that invokes agreement as to the art status of most paintings is such that the status is in fact invoked in the perception-description *inter alia* and not as a description sundered from the description of the object. Of course we don't say that all (or any) painting is entirely immune to contextualisation. This can and indeed does confer status, but the status conferred is not necessarily art status – not at least in any way in which we can seriously imagine conferral.

**MR:** It is hard, for instance, to imagine someone nowadays asserting to any serious purpose, that Velasquez's *Las Meninas* is a work of art. We might say that from its lofty vantage point *Las Meninas* is sceptical about the power of an institution to confer status on it as art. It outranks the institution, as it were – and we don't just mean the Prado or its other contents. By analogy, we might argue that there are things or activities, sceptical and existing at a different 'social altitude', that can never be explicitly ratified, but which might be of interest in ways that are at least analogous to the ways that *Las Meninas* is. The institution may merely 'outrank' them. They operate on the institution in ways that it can't account for – ways that it can't assimilate.

**CH:** *Las Meninas* refuses to be institutionally *aufgehbt*. From its lofty position, it is subversive of the institution's conferring power. There is a sense, however, in which it is not mere loftiness that makes it do the subverting work. So far as the institution is concerned, it is perhaps at too vulgarly aesthetic a level to be of critical interest. But this very vulgarity may be productive of some scepticism *vis-à-vis* the prospect of institutional assimilation. If we try to think of things that evince an analogously subversive or sceptical property but from a position that does not outrank the institution but is outranked by it, then we may run into trouble. The history of the



avant-garde is stuffed with assimilated provocations. Indeed, it is a mere commonplace to say that it would be hard to find an act or item dirty enough or low enough as to be finally inadmissible to the institutional picturesque and thence to be an object of conferred status. *Low* is not exactly where we should look for scepticism.

**MB:** One possible place to look might be into a world with an unassailable, and from the institutional perspective, banal aesthetic. Take engineering artefacts. Let's say that the old six-cylinder-in-line BMW engine is a rather satisfying thing to look at; even beautiful. It was very durable and looks it, and so on. Here is a sort of 'aesthetic' that connected to purpose – is unKantian in its origins, but in its nerdy way nevertheless aesthetic. We might say that this nerdy aesthetic protects the object from a certain institutional ratification. There is, certainly, no way that it can be assimilated in accordance with institutional theory as mad-artist's-cum-self-publicist's-cum-avant-gardist's charter. The aesthetic operation in relation to the car engine stays just below the condition – or is it very slightly above it? It can't be rescued by the institution in ways that would allow its aesthetic to be mapped onto that of the institution. And this has something to do with the car engine's internal complexity. Its informal aesthetic has, as it were, a life of its own that makes it resistant to and sceptical of assimilation. It is possible, perhaps, to think of certain painting as rooted in its domestic occasions and as similarly resistant.

**CH:** Another engineering example comes to mind concerning [Anish Kapoor's Marsyas](#). We might say of this enterprise that the work of the engineers and riggers is admirable, and might mean this in a sense that could be understood as aesthetic. This would be to configure the work in an implicitly sceptical description. The institution presumably had something more in mind. That something more provides conditions of assimilation as the vulgar something less does not.

**MR:** We might ask if such cases have any possible analogues in the realm of painting or possible painting? We have said that paintings are, in some regards, institutionally unsightly in theoretical terms. We are now concerned with their practical resistance. It is not an unfamiliar objection to a mixed show of paintings and installations that the show was bad but the paintings taken individually were OK, were good, and so forth. In this case, the paintings' standing out has nothing in principle to do with their being mediated by Conceptual Art or not. They may be 'authentic' in a way that Conceptual Art forecloses. The example, in other words, is not quite good enough. If we are to imagine painting subversive of institutional power, then it will have to take examples like that into its self-description – into its aboutness. They will have to be paintings that know about the infra-institutional or extra-institutional life of the paintings in the example but are unable directly to claim such status. This may mean, for example, that they hide their infra-institutional autonomy and internality in apparent forms – installations – that are client to institutional power. Another way to hide is as text – but text configured so that it is recovered as *pictorial* detail as much as read, paintings that mangle, hide their faces and lose their looks, and know that they are at best the asymptotes of a scandalous circle.

**CH:** It turns out that in the form in which we have been discussing it, the institutional theory cannot avoid an obsession with art-status. But what if we were not so bothered with the issue? An apparently plausible defence of the Institutional theory does indeed agree that the question of whether or not a thing is a work of art is trivial. The significant question to ask is of the form, 'Is it a *good* work of art?' The question, 'What is a good work of art?' is thus detached from the question, 'What is a work of art?' This might sound like a kind of relaxed pragmatism. But if it turns out that we're dependent on some authority within the art world for our understanding of what is a good or bad work of art, then we're just back where we were within the Institutional

Theory's particular kind of circularity.

**MB:** It seems likely that that's exactly *where* we are, since if we consider what kind of examples a real pragmatism would produce, the answer is that they would unquestionably be of a kind that the artworld would find intolerable: David Shepherd's elephants, perhaps, for the internalists' reason that the eyes follow you round the room.

**MR:** We are now at the parting of the ways. Our argument thus far is that a painting is something typically possessed of internal complexity, such that it does not reduce to a contextual object. Thus conceived, painting may be resistant to certain central doctrines of Institutional theory, and may show them to be counter-intuitive and Cartesian. We also argue that painting of any kind must labour under the shadow or perhaps in the light of Conceptual Art. If the Institutional Theory is true regarding the centrality of the case of the Duchampian readymade, and, if indeed the blank canvas is an instance of that case, and, further, if the theory of indiscernibles is applicable to art tout court, then painting doesn't have much of a problem. It can either be an absurd craft anachronism or be post-modern. Either way, it's harmless.

**MB:** Our argument regarding Conceptual Art is that it developed into an art of describing, and that at the margin of that describing was a practice of painting that Conceptual Art had not at all rendered generic. We suggest that it is its possible resistance to the genericist's reduction that makes painting worth bothering with. We do not take this apparent resistance for granted, though. It is rather that there is a constructive pleasure in painting conceived as the anomaly that besets institutional theory. Of course painting is also itself beset – or *aufgehbt* – by Institutional theory. Painting must always live with the possibility of reduction to the status of ordinary object among others. Our point is rather that one possible mode for trying to think about painting lies in such apparently broken-down – even philistine – statements as, 'Well, you can tell a painting is art by looking at it.' This goes even for most *real* blank canvases. That's because of something that's internal to them, and that is not reducible to their relations to a given context.

**CH:** We might even say that Danto himself is not entirely dazzled by the transfiguration of the ordinary, nor wholly immune to the recalcitrance of, painting. He may admire the snow shovel and the misperceived Brillo Boxes but in life as opposed to theory he'd take a Chardin or a Morandi if he were given the choice. Isn't that one way or another because of their internal complexity – because, rather than raising questions of status conferral that are marooned in Cartesian theatre, they remind us of the advantages of keeping perception and description together?

**MR:** Perhaps it is easier to do this with regard to those things we might conceive of living with, rather than those we can only visit in museums. We don't say that painting belongs only in the first category and generic art only in the second, but we do say that the antagonisms between them are disturbingly shadowed by considerations such as these. On the question of the relations between painting and generic art, there is no last word. The force of the question will in any event vary according to cultural, curatorial and economic circumstances.

**MB:** While painting may put up a sceptical and vulgar fight against reduction to the generic condition, it may not follow that a form or forms of painting that labour in the shadow of Conceptual Art are capable of such untidy behaviour. It might be argued that in so far as Conceptual Art does indeed finally implement the Duchampian generic condition, then anything that plays in its shadow – or more dubiously in its light – must be *ipso facto* generic.

**CH:** Our response to this argument is that not all Conceptual Art was generic-type art tout court, and that its reflection in painting is thus similarly non-generic.



**MR:** It might further be argued, however, that to say that texts began to occupy the place of painting is actually to say very little beyond the fact that (some of) these text-objects achieved the conferred status of art objects. After all, no one really believes coherently that works of Conceptual Art consisted of no more than ideas or ‘meanings’ reducible in some form to an artist’s intention. They have to be *something*, after all.

**MB:** But matters were not as simple as this argument proposes. While it is true to say that it all began with a sort of declaring – a sort of appropriating – for us, as things went on, the declaring began to reflect upon itself. To be satisfied with the thought that the nominatings and declarings were in any way transparent seemed a disservice to realism. It seemed also to undermine the possibility that there might be ontological consequences for the art object in conceptual art. There was something both arrogant and absurd in thinking of the mere gesture or fiat of nomination or appropriation as any more than an artsy Cartesian romance – a comfortable relation between artist and imagined object. Such problems arose systemically as the ontological range of possible objects expanded.

**MR:** The illocutionary act of appropriation-cum-ostension – usually in the form of a brief description – had expanded into a more elaborate act of describing. And on it went, until the art object all but disappeared in favour of the description and the discursive development of that description. This was – as we have said – a necessarily sociable and conversational activity. Its forms were internally complex even if they were composed of philosophical fragments and bits of wreckage.

**CH:** Conceptual art insinuates text. Not necessarily as painting, but so as to make painting and text fight it out for the status of ‘origin’. In saying this we do not intend to suggest that the text and the picture by which it is *mediated* are in anything like the relation between a description and the instantiation that satisfies it. If we describe a possible painting and somebody then makes a painting treating the text as its ‘specification’, the result will not be the exhaustive satisfaction of the text by the painting or the exhaustion of the painting by the text.

**MB:** In suggesting that the hoc of Conceptual Art was conceivable as an art of describing, we are not arguing that text then had to dominate – or even appear on – the surfaces of paintings, but rather that it could no longer be ‘naturally’ excluded, and further that, in any case, paintings were now in some shadowy way mediated by text (or some other descriptive form).

**CH:** So, we have the possibility of language-mediated non-authentic painting uttered into what has become a context-rich culture. For let us not forget that the other quite real and determining hoc of Conceptual Art has empowered the development of the installation, and with it a grasping of (or gadarene obsession with) the power of the institution to act as the switch or condition of certain interpretative themes and possibilities and what are quaintly called ‘modes of attention’. The little contexts that are paintings now have to seek a place in bullying curator-and-architect-and-sponsor-built contexts. These are often not contexts that serve as Gofmann suggests to ‘condense expectations’, but rather contexts that dominate production and effects.

**MB:** It might well be thought that an appropriate function for an institutional theory would be to show the mechanism of this domination. How the theory actually performs, however, is to protect the illusion that the curatorial quantification of anything and everything that can fit on a Deleuzian matrix is an emancipatory extending of boundaries.

**MR:** We might want to object that it’s all very well going on about this as if it’s a philosopher’s puzzle. Is it not likely that these problems now lie somewhere else: that it’s not the ‘art’ that’s important in ‘art status’ but the ‘status’? Prime management stuff, just stack it next to ‘celebrity’.

The description has been removed from the object and people have run off with ... with what?  
With the concept no doubt.

**MB:** There are social and historical forces at work supporting, promoting and celebrating this work, and indeed in supporting the celebrity that sort-of produces it. Its history is among other things a narrative of the globalisation of meaning in the world media-scape. Here immediately are some problems for painting – or if they are not within its purview, it is simply harmless. Quite how painting might address them seems to rest on whether somehow they ought to be resisted – even modestly. If they are resisted, then the history of painting will eventually go to a history of dissenting forms of art, not just to the canonical history of painting.

**CH:** This is to suggest a relationship painting might have with Conceptual Art's original sense of itself. We're trying to get to this relationship by describing Conceptual Art as like painting in that it does not have to be in its nature to wait anxiously for the status of art to be conferred on it. It is necessary to try to explain this and, as you will have noticed, it's not very straightforward. Paintings (or rather pictures – it's often hard to see the difference) usually have some significant internal, technical, symbolic, iconographical detail which belongs to a tradition of other comparable things.

**MB:** There is a history of production, of sorts. This history is bound up with such properties as family resemblances and discernibility. Had things stayed like this, the Institutional Theory would have been slow in coming – if it came at all. It came with the snow shovel and the Conceptual Art that followed it, however unwillingly. It shed light on painting. One question that we can ask in our current sense of crisis is whether painting can now shed light on the institution – and do this without reversion to the old habits of looking for family resemblances.

**MR:** Suppose we look back to painting's moment of high insecurity in the mid-1960s. Minimal art actually took its cues from painting, but it established a kind of literalism in defiance of what [Donald Judd](#) derogated as 'European relational painting'. To do this it had to be installed in institutions that protected its place with a kind of social decorum. If it was in an art gallery it was art and if it wasn't other ways of drawing attention to it had to be devised – magazines, publicity and texts. Arthur Danto was not alone in operating an institutional theory. He was simply its more persuasive and elegant exponent. Don Judd, for example, gave it an individualistic – almost solipsistic cast in the form of the dictum: 'If someone says it's art it's art'.

**MB:** This was liberation of a sort for all of us. Quickly however it appeared as an empty yet simultaneously imperialistic assertion of the new professionalism of the artist. Next to the objects of minimalism, the minimalist paintings of [Jo Baer](#), David Novros and others now forgotten just looked displaced and sad. For a while the blank canvas seemed like a goer. Everyone tried their hand at it, including us, though its admittedly marginal internality seemed to turn its back on the possibilities that minimal sculpture appeared to disclose. In the ensuing theatre, the conditions for an avant-garde arms race were created. The advent of Conceptual Art had the effect of stifling it, however. It took a few years for this professionalised psychosis to re-emerge, pumped-up by money and management.

**MR:** One way to describe this phenomenon is as Wagnerian neurosis, another is to say that it is a trajectory built into the later twentieth-century logic of the avant-garde: an art seeking constantly to surpass itself. In the words of Niklas Luhmann, however, 'If art's condition is to constantly surpass itself, then eventually there has to be some reflection on art having constantly to surpass itself'. Conceptual Art, perhaps in our specific and admittedly limited understanding of it, can be understood as such a reflection. In the 1960s and early 1970s

Conceptual artist were often called ‘word men’ by their traditionalist tormenters. Given the reification of Conceptual Art, through the Institutional theory and the legacy of minimalist theatre, we face the need not for a reflection of art’s self-surpassing – a forestalling of its imminence – but a reflection upon art’s practical self-image as such.

**CH:** As art appeared in the 1960s to emancipate itself from all apparent questions of medium-specificity, it faced the unacknowledged paradoxes and mystifications of its naive sense of dematerialisation. The work still had to be made and presented somehow. The practical circumstances of this ‘emancipation’ could not be sustained in the hypostatising jargon of meaning. The other hoc of Conceptual art developed a critical life of sorts and either sucked in or excluded *professional* critics. It faced redescription in an ‘internalistic’ conversation that tended to produce anomaly in respect of institutional closure.

**MR:** We have an example in mind. It is a ‘work’, if it may be so called, named Frameworks. It is a lengthy, fragmented and difficult set of speculations, arguments and assertions as to how a column of air could be identified and defended as a work of art or not. But a column of air could be described in many ways. You couldn’t easily point to it. Immediately the problem of the ‘metaphysical’ location of the work of art was encountered. Was it a column of air or was it a sort of fictional entity? Was it the argument, the ‘theory’ and speculation or the text? The object was being made by the text. Its independence as an art object was being eroded. Many of the dematerialised clichés of post-minimalism are present but the art object risks the condition of mere ‘as if’ insofar as the object – turns into text and the conventional powers of the artist are transformed into those of a participant in discursive talk.

**MB:** The journalistic use of the term Conceptual Art to designate any art that isn’t painting or sculpture or that otherwise lacks a material tradition is a largely British – that is to say provincial – perversion. In fact it is not quite true of such stuff that it lacks a tradition. Much of it amnesically repeats the form or look of some Conceptual Art of the 1960s and ‘70s. These concepts without percepts have, however, discovered their *modus vivendi* in an asocial matrix not of Deleuze but of public relations. Their mediate origin lies in the Britain of the 1980s – the Britain of the Thatcher junta. Indeed, to describe this stuff as a *modus vivendi* is perhaps to stumble on the reality. In their most celebrated form, works of high art like Conceptual Art have acquired the character of mere traces – one might say accidental or arbitrary indices. These are the arbitrary or idle traces of the lives of *artistes sans oeuvre*, artists without a body of work. Work is the manipulated material of public relations.

**CH:** The trouble is, the artists in question are not Arthur Cravans. Their function is social. They represent the revenge of the petty bourgeoisie upon the Marxian and highbrow modernity from which they felt excluded. The *artistes sans oeuvre* have in fact been given the job of rendering the whole system *middle-brow*. The unreflective but lifestyle-sensitive consumer will absorb almost anything that’s been mediated by a journalistic agency. The non-*oeuvres* of provocative *enfants terribles* consumed as colourful culture. But it’s no good if it doesn’t do the Benetton job.

**MB:** Of course there are many artists with ‘substantial’ – all too substantial – *oeuvres*. We are not suggesting that all post-conceptual artists – or artists with post-conceptual careers – are *sans oeuvre*. What we can say is that they share a certain practical *Weltanschauung* with the latter. They have seen that their post-conceptual future is, in the sceptics view, not only to make too much of too little, but to mask triviality in Albert Speer’s cathedral of ice. This helps both the police of one-idea purism, and – paradoxically – those creative souls who are assisting in the

lowering of art's improbability.

**MR:** What we mean is this. If art is as the work of Niklas Luhmann suggests, an ostentatiously improbable occurrence, then this must be due to the fact that there are some undetermined spaces, beyond the reach of ordinary causal explanation, that require interpretative work. The purpose of the institution is largely to silence that work in favour of interpretation according to institutionally favourable protocol, and thereby to reduce improbability.

**MB:** That's the point about the spectacular mediascape: a high level of redundancy and consequently high probability. Given a Spenglerian characterisation of the demands of the epoch, how often does a calculated response have to be repeated before a sense of the age gets replaced by a sense of the epidemic - by a diagnosis of cultural pox?

**MR:** An apparently – and no doubt appallingly – obvious solution to the danger of being thus overwhelmed by institutional power is actually to withdraw into authenticist painting; or at least to withdraw into the antique language of inner necessity and its cognates. But this possibility is foreclosed by Conceptual Art, which has reconfigured painting in the genetic character of the text, and has thus also prefigured it. Any authentic form is therefore already described in and as an attenuated fiction.

**CH:** But careful. This could nevertheless be to describe nothing more than a postmodern sequence – an account of how painting gains admission to the generic world of irony and anything goes. We are trying to say that while Conceptual Art may serve to deprive painting of its authenticity, it does not reduce such self-contextualising power as painting may retain without it. The puzzle is how that power might now actually be exercised – and exercised in a world where such powers are suspect if they are admitted at all. The answer seems to be that in so far as its self-contextualising power *has* been retained, painting survives through a kind of malingering. If the ordinary object is upraised, installed in the museum and transfigured by the art-world's attention, then painting, already crippled by a mediating agency, but still bravely and quietly possessed of its memories and virtues, refuses the upraising effect or renders it in large measure otiose.

**MB:** In the end the Duchampian moment may just mean that some internalist objects are a bit beleaguered. Perhaps it is through its very beleaguered state that the internalist object can defeat or undermine the power of the institution. Perhaps it is through its internal complexity that it can both reveal and resist the arbitrariness and ultimately the vacuity and coercive power of the institutional reality. Artworks are recursively self-describing and, insofar as they are interpreted, can mean almost anything that Humpty Dumpty wants. We have to work critically – that is to say transformatively – at the conditions in which that is so. What can art do to resist? Tighten the criteria; go 'inward' and make it hard for the Institutional theory to invoke Duchamp's putative legacy without embarrassment. More to the point, make it hard for the reality that that theory contingently represents to set the conversational agenda. Make work that can fight for its moral and political rights. That means that art not only has internality, it means that it *does* have a reflexive description, a sense of its own project. This will be a question of what the work does and what the artist does.

**CH:** We are desperately in need of a degree of vulgarisation. We need either to expand ad infinitum our sense of the institution and the ways objects are manipulated in or as or by it – a solution that puts the power into the hands of an already discredited management – or we need to recognize that if there is a crisis it is a crisis of real institutions. The samizdat is often – but, of course, not always – in a frame. What we mean by this is that it is possible that under conditions

of mediation and restraint, painting in some form may well be a medium of resistance. The basis of this resistance lies not only in the fact that painting supplies anomaly in respect of many attempts at an Institutional theory, but also in the fact that painting itself is capable of resisting the power of the institution. Its possible internality in every sense is the key to that.

**MR:** If there is a crisis in the arts, it is a crisis produced by the institutional ordering and management of art. For this reason, painting is surely worth a try. Concentrate, throw away the commuter's pass and go somewhere. On our analysis, painting perhaps stands in relation to the rest of art as singing a song stands to the rest of music.

**CH:** In the words of Samuel Beckett: 'Quand on est dans la merde jusqu'au cou, il ne reste plus qu'à chanter.'

**MR:** 'If you're in the shit up to your neck, the only thing you can do is sing.'

**MB:** There's certainly good reason not to dance.

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