

## *Non-Objective Language*

*Ian Andrews, 2015*

In the second decade of the 21st century how does language enter into, inhabit, and contexture the concrete, non-objective, work of art? Or we might ask: how does art find a place in, or inhabit, language? Is language to be rendered abstract, concrete, transrational, with an excess of materiality over a reduced or zeroed semantics? Or does it take its cue from the semantic transparency of the conceptual art of 1960-70s? Or can we imagine a space in which both streams are combined in such a way that the practice of art engages in an interplay between semanticism and the destruction of syntax? In this essay I wish to examine the philosophic work that art does with language. I will develop a haphazard map of relations between different practices spanning a number of decades and continents. This will entail the invention of a number of heretical labels to describe differing linguistic practices both within and between artistic movements such as concrete art, concrete poetry, conceptual art and conceptual writing.

In October 2003 in his lecture for the Averitt Series at Georgia Southern University, Gerald L. Bruns asked his audience to consider poetry as a species of conceptual art. According to this idea, which is developed in his book *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics*, 'poetry is philosophically interesting when it is innovative not just in its practices but, before everything else, in its poetics (that is, in its concepts or theories of itself)'.<sup>1</sup> A poem that is '*philosophically interesting*,' is, for Bruns, one that 'is *not* self-evidently a poem but something that requires an argument, theory or conceptual context as a condition of being experienced as a poem...'<sup>2</sup> This conception has much in common with Joseph Kosuth's argument, in the essay, "Art After Philosophy," that a conceptual work of art is a proposition which is a definition of art, in the language system of art. As Kosuth says, after Duchamp, all art is conceptual. And as Bruns notes, Duchamp's unassisted readymades indicate the 'degree zero' of what counts as art. The readymade reduces the work of art to an act of pure nomination, such as in Robert Rauschenberg's telegram artwork *This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I Say So*; or Donald Judd's line, quoted by Kosuth: 'If someone calls it art, it's art.' Although both Kosuth's authorial-nominal conceptualism, and the tradition of modern and contemporary poetry that Bruns argues for—from Gertrude Stein to John Cage to the Language poets—can be linked to Duchamp's thinking about art, the two interpolations have serious philosophical differences. The major difference between the two involves the conception and the philosophy of language.

### **Theoretical Conceptual Art**

Language has had a central role in a great deal of art practices from Cubism and Futurism, Dada and Surrealism through to the Fluxus and the neo-avant-garde activities of the 1950s and 1960s. However, the linguistic turn in art has its greatest revolutionary moment when the artists decisively take control of their intellectual and discursive capital in the mid 1960s. The provocation for this overturning is surely Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" (1960). It

is here that Greenberg articulates his Kantian idea of 'self-criticism,' and formulates, in the most explicit terms, the essential division between the work of the artist as unconscious spontaneity in opposition to the work of the critic as intellectual gatekeeper, whose job is to render form into an explanatory framework of discursivity. The response to this way of thinking involved the artist taking back the critical work from the critic, and thus, incorporating a critical analysis of the concept of art within the work of art. The turn to language should not be thought so much as an attempt to dematerialize the object—though this is certainly a side effect—as much as it is a strategy to recover the intellectual and cognitive activity which—under the notions of genius and subjective spontaneity—had been exclusively handed over to the critic. Although we might consider Marcel Duchamp as an important forerunner here this project must be credited to the theoretical work of the English group, Art & Language and the New York artist, Joseph Kosuth. The most radical gesture here is the nomination of secondary text as primary artwork, where the essay about art becomes theoretical work as artwork.

Language in conceptual art often tended to be self-relational and self-reflexive, referring back to its own conditions of presentation such as in Adrian Piper's early work. *Here and Now* (1968) consists of a minimal 8 x 8 square grid. All squares are empty except the one which is four across and two down. It contains the words:

HERE: the square area in 2nd row from top, 4th from right side.

The words are a faithful description of what we see. They present a doubling of the shown and read. These two modes joined by the indexical 'HERE.' Piper writes: 'I tuned to language (typescript, maps, audio tapes, etc.) in the 1960s because I wanted to explore objects that can refer to concepts and ideas beyond themselves and their standard functions, as well as to themselves; objects that both refer to abstract ideas that situate those very objects in new conceptual and spatiotemporal matrices, and also draw attention to the spatiotemporal matrices in which they are embedded.' Influenced by Sol LeWitt (take *Sixteen Permutations on the Planar Analysis of a Square* (1968) more than any other contemporary conceptual artists, Piper regards her early conceptual work as succeeding 'insofar as it illuminated the contrast between abstract atemporality and the indexical, self-referential present.'<sup>3</sup> These early works can be seen to exhibit certain relations between conceptual art, reductive concrete art practices, and concrete poetry.

Piper's *Concrete Space-Time-Infinity Pieces* with their strictly aligned typed grids and squares resemble Mike Parr's typed pages in *Black Box of Word Situations* (1971-91) of meticulously typed squares of text of about 50 x 50 characters. One page consists of the word 'twoup' typed in a grid. For these

works Parr tossed a coin (a penny) to determine which letters would be typed in a certain colour (green-for heads). If heads came up a letter would be typed. If tails a space would be typed in order for the red letters to fill the gaps once the ribbon had been changed. As it is based on the Australian Two-up game Parr has written on the work: 'this is my archetypally "ocker" concrete'

In the Art & Language series *100% Abstract* (1968), the text refers back to the material of its mode of presentation. Mel Ramsden presented paintings made up entirely of text in the form of a list of percentages e.g. 53.5% 17.3% 12.2% 17.0% which refer to the proportions of chemicals which make up the paint used for the work. In other Art & Language works the English language system itself is opened to questioning via a series of interventions. Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden's *Six Negatives* (1968-69) takes the six classes in Roget's tabular synopsis of categories that form the basis of his thesaurus. These are dispersed over nine pages (of a fourteen page book). In older and unabridged versions of the thesaurus, each class, containing a number of subclasses is arranged in two columns indicating often positive and negative terms, but in some cases other distinctions. The first column of each class has been crossed out with an ink marker (a process of negation), leaving only the negative terms readable. Finally the nine pages were presented as photographic negatives (black text on white page becomes white text on black page). The work makes an important observation about the privilege in Western philosophy given to positive concepts, as well as to the idea of negation itself.

In a catalogue essay for the 1989 Conceptual Art survey exhibition *L'art conceptuel: une perspective*, Benjamin Buchloh contends that: '...Kosuth was arguing, in 1969, precisely for the continuation and expansion of modernism's positivist legacy...' by utilising 'Wittgenstein's logical positivism and language philosophy.'<sup>4</sup> Rather than constituting an overturning of Greenbergian formalism, Buchloh argues that Kosuth had succeeded in merely updating 'modernism's project of self-reflexiveness.'<sup>5</sup> Although Kosuth's intentional epistemological self-reflexivity replaced formalist perceptual self-reflexivity, Buchloh claims that:

...Kosuth stabilized the notion of a disinterested and self-sufficient art by subjecting both—the Wittgensteinian model of the language game as well as the Duchampian model of the readymade—to the strictures of a model of meaning that operates in the modernist tradition of that paradox Michel Foucault has called modernity's "empirico-transcendental" thought.<sup>6</sup>

Buchloh's essay, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," provoked a furious response from both Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub, and the original essay plus Kosuth's and Siegelaub's responses were published in *October* issues 55 (1990), and 57 (1991) respectively. I do think that Buchloh is far too hard on Kosuth's work. On the other hand, Jessica Prinz—in a detailed analysis of Kosuth's work that I think goes too far in the other direction—has pointed to the radical deconstructive strategies that this work performs. What such analysis illustrates is that for any work of art there will always be available multiple divergent

interpretations. This is no less true when a work uses language. But what Prinz neglects to emphasise is that such interpretations would surely never be authorized by Kosuth himself. Although Prinz's readings of the works are not entirely off the mark, such unsanctioned interpretations point to a central problem with Kosuth's theoretical activity. That is, that conceptual artists such as Kosuth and Art & Language—artists that Kosuth designates as belonging to 'theoretical conceptual art' as opposed to those denigrated as involved in merely 'stylistic conceptual art'—place a great deal of currency on *intention*, which takes the form of a univocal idea that does not merely inform the creation of the work, but essentially *is* the work. In this respect, any meaning that is not part of the artists originating intention cannot be accepted as part of the work, since these are the limiting conditions put in place by the very notion of 'idea art.' These works put us in a double bind. If the meaning that we receive from the theoretical conceptual work of art cannot be contained within the kernel of the originating idea, then it can only constitute a residue, along with the other 'props' (which are not the work itself but only assist in bringing it into view).

To make sure that the idea remained uncontaminated, the use of language in and around this work had to be clear, concise, and transparent. For Kosuth and Art & Language, this meant the adoption of the procedures of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and scientific positivism (for example, A. J. Ayer, and J. O. Urmson); and the linguistic theories of Frege and Wittgenstein. As Kosuth says, in "Art After Philosophy," "Continental" philosophy [by which he means existentialism and phenomenology] need not seriously be considered here.<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Catherine Millet, published in the French journal *Art Vivant*, 25 (1971), Art & language describe their activity in the following way:

At this moment one of the essential preoccupations of Art-Language is that of putting to test and cleansing its language of idealist tendencies. For example, Art-Language is indebted to Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophical tradition, and in a certain way all analytic efforts which Art-Language has been able to make at any moment on the artistic condition proceeded in part from the analytic philosophical apparatus.<sup>8</sup>

The assumption here is that 'good' language, or the 'correct' use of language, is always transparent and efficient. As Charles Green notes, this neutral, transparent, conception of language was challenged by Roger Cutforth—Ian Burn's and Mel Ramsden's early collaborator in the short lived three man group, Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses (1969)—'asserting in 1971 that "[i]t just strikes me that language is not neutral, and that certain types of language support certain types of thinking."<sup>9</sup> Cutforth cut ties with Burn and Ramsden shortly after in 1970. Looking back from vantage of the 21st century, Art & Language member Michael Corris remarks on a sense of deflated optimism in regards to the attitude towards language held by the Art & Language group by the beginning of the 1970s: 'But language, it turns out, is not as reliable as it seems. Language, being context-dependent, has an indexical side. An unruly, ambiguous, discursive side.'<sup>10</sup>

While pure idea art was certainly a truly radical concept in the 1960s as an interventionist strategy toward the hegemony of Greenberg and Fried's modernist criticism, it would seem—from the point of view of the deconstructionist philosophy invoked by Prinz—to be represent a very conservative position toward language. Moreover, it would seem to repeat, in a very conservative way, the traditional view of thought, speech and writing that is prevalent in Western metaphysics. What is at stake here is the primacy given to the idea as *eidōs*; as an ideality that has no 'real' existence in the world. While Greenberg's essentialism veers towards certain physical aspects of the artwork (reduction to flatness in painting), this 'eidetic' conceptualism seems to essentialise the idea as purified of, and existing prior to language. To put it into Saussurean terms, it is an art of the signified that abandons or denigrates the signifier, relegating the latter to mere stage prop (in principle if not in practice).

One of the consequences of such a philosophy is that language can never be completely adequate to the idea. In this sense theoretical conceptual art would seem to offer a rationalised version of what Raymond Williams sees at work in the theories of the twentieth century avant-garde: what he calls a secular version of the Symbolist position. For Williams, the move to the destruction of syntax, trans-rational language, and automatic writing was often motivated by a desire to transcend language, which is seen as 'blocking or making difficulties for authentic consciousness,'<sup>11</sup> Both the avant-garde and eidetic conceptual art ultimately see language in some way as corrupting or distorting pure consciousness or the ideality of the 'idea.' But these positions are reversed in respect to each other. While the avant-garde see logic and reason—as well as the normative syntax of everyday language—as inhibiting pure consciousness, the eidetic conceptual artists regard anything other than normative logical language as corrupting. What is common to both positions is the contention that the logical idea, or pure consciousness, is always prior to language and has some form of existence outside of language.

### **Concrete Poetry**

The common element between concrete art and concrete poetry is reduction. Marjorie Perloff describes the activity of concrete poetry—and the more recent re-examination of concrete poetry from the practitioners of conceptual language—as an *arrière-garde* movement.<sup>12</sup> This means not only a continuation but a completion or deepening of the project. The renewed space for the consideration of this activity means that the nexus of concrete poetry, conceptual writing and reductive concrete art offers a jumping off point for a range of hybrid possibilities (many of them digital).

Despite his insistence that material elements function in his work as mere props, it would be difficult to exclude a certain relation to materiality in Kosuth's later 'public' text works, where place and context play such an important role. Yet as we have seen, Kosuth has never had any time for poetry, particularly poetic activities that would seek to make incursions into visual art. Concrete poetry, in wanting to say the unsayable, Kosuth argues in 1970, presents 'a kind of formalism of typography—it's cute with words, but dumb about language. It's becoming a simplistic and pseudo-avant-garde gimmick, like a new kind of

paint.<sup>13</sup> Kosuth's hostility to concrete poetry has by no means diminished over time. In his recent diatribe against Lawrence Weiner he maintains:

Words as objects suffer along with the rest of concrete poetry by having neither the integrity of a Juddian 'specific object nor the essential quality of language... the transparency of meaning-generating relations. ...concrete poetry... reifies language into dumb decoration at best... exploiting the authority of language but without generating any actual new meaning, parasitically hoping some myth of profundity can be simply borrowed from art history to mask its emptiness.<sup>14</sup>

It would be wrong to consider concrete poetry as a monolithic practice, as Perloff argues, 'not all concretisms...are equal,'<sup>15</sup> there is a case to distinguish between the extreme reductive concrete poetry of (the Swiss) Eugen Gomringer, or that of (the Scottish) Ian Hamilton Finlay, and the more linguistically complex work of the Brazilian *Noigandres* group (Décio Pignatari, Augusto, and Haroldo de Campos). Even though the poets of Zurich and São Paulo shared some common ground, Haroldo de Campos clearly differentiates the Brazilian concrete poetry of Noigandres from the austere orthogonal constructions of Gomringer. The work of Noigandres, in comparison, is, he says, much more complex, it is 'baroque, pluralist, multifaceted.'<sup>16</sup> What Haroldo de Campos means by 'baroque' is a deeply ingrained linguistic and bodily eroticism, a 'ludic space of polyphony and of language in convulsion,' of the Brazilian psyche.<sup>17</sup> But above all, Brazilian concrete poetry is intersemiotic: it is concerned with the complex semiosis between the sound, shape, and semantic charge of the word-elements. The aim of Noigandres was not to empty the word of its semantic charge, but rather, to utilise that charge—in the politically enervated context of Brazil in the 1950s and 60s—in conjunction with the other elements, and thus, to not subordinate linguistic signification to sound and visual form. Thus sound, graphic shape, and semantic charge were considered to be of equal importance: the relation is, in the words of Noigandres, *verbivocovisual*. As Haroldo de Campos maintains, 'The word-element is used in its entirety and not mutilated through the unilateral reduction to descriptive music (*Létrisme*) or to decorative pictography (*Calligrammes*).'<sup>18</sup> The concrete poetry of Noigandres, as Augusto de Campos maintains, 'may be differentiated from other experiences (*zaum*, *letrisme*, phonetic poetry) for not rejecting semantic values but rather placing them on equal footing with other material, visual, and sonorous parameters of the poem.'<sup>19</sup> The concrete poem, according to Noigandres, is not a transparent vehicle for transmission of the objective world. Rather what it communicates is its structure. Its structure is its content. Moreover, the visual ideogrammatic syntax of this structure functions as a voluntary constraint, where 'graphic space' functions 'as structural agent.'<sup>20</sup> The radically reduced format of the concrete poem serves as a constraint that enables a particular exploration of language, where the aim is, against transparency, to develop 'an instrument capable of bringing language closer to things.'<sup>21</sup>

## Conceptual Writing

It is around about the time of Bruns' 2003 lecture that Kenneth Goldsmith began to embark on his project which would later fall under the rubric of 'conceptual' or 'uncreative' writing. After half a century of language poetry practice, a number of younger poets felt that a state of exhaustion had come into effect. The optimism of the project that Steve McCaffery once described as 'poetic research into the endless possibilities of language,'<sup>22</sup> seems to have been replaced, for some, by the feeling that everything had been done, or at least as far as poetry on the page can go. This feeling of completion, along with the new ease afforded by the technological means to digitally conduct, by means of the most basic search tools, obsessive-compulsive textual operations, has resulted in the recent phenomenon of 'conceptual writing.' The aim of the Conceptualists—to name a few: Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin, Caroline Bergvall, Christian Bök, and Jan Baetens—is to replace emotional expression, and the image in poetry, with strategies relating to the presentation of found texts, rigorous LeWittian processes, and a direct presentation of language in 'uncreative writing.' In what functions as a manifesto for conceptual writing, "Sentences on Conceptual Writing,"<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith overtly 'plagiarises' LeWitt's "Paragraph's on Conceptual Art," substituting the words 'writing' for 'art,' 'uncreative writing' for 'conceptual art,' etc. The found text, as an assisted, or, sometimes, unassisted readymade, constitutes one of the mechanical procedures specific to the 'uncreativity' of conceptual writing. In the recently published anthology, *Against Expression An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Craig Dworkin, in an essay entitled "The Fate of Echo," frames the argument for conceptual writing with an exposition of the practices of Conceptual Art. He writes: 'I coined the phrase "conceptual writing" as a way both to signal literary writing that could function comfortably as conceptual art and to indicate the use of text in conceptual art practices.'<sup>24</sup> I'm interested in the space opened up by this reframing. Literary art and visual art traditions begin to rub shoulders or bump into each other in both theory and practice. What we are seeing is an inter-disciplinary dialogue opening up between traditions. Conceptual writing, like conceptual art, gives priority to the 'idea' over the actualised work. But it is important to note that this idea is not an idea in the sense of thematic content but is rather the generative idea that not only generates the work but also in a certain way describes it.

In association with the readymade, Dworkin emphasises the activities of nominalism and choice over making; the conceptual work's self-description and self theorisation; the presentation of raw information; the non-retinal shift to 'art as idea'; the privilege of process over product; the de-skilling, distance from the artist's hand; the refusal of originality and aesthetic values; and, most importantly, the nomination of writing as primary artwork (in place of painting and sculpture) rather than secondary text. However, Dworkin observes that in Conceptual Art 'the supposed dematerialization of the art object was bought at the cost of the rematerialization of language.'<sup>25</sup> As we have seen many of the conceptual artists insisted on the transparency of language, but, as Dworkin insists, 'positing language as an alternative sculptural or painterly material cut both ways.'<sup>26</sup>

Conceptual art—which required language, in order to replace the art object with the idea—gradually became aware of the inevitable materiality of the

printed words in the gallery, however much some of those artists wished to resist such conclusions. Perhaps a good illustration of this is Kosuth's *One and Eight—A Description* series—conceived by Kosuth in 1965 but constructed and exhibited much later—consisting of sentences in neon, such as “FIVE WORDS IN RED NEON,” “NEON ELECTRICAL LIGHT ENGLISH GLASS LETTERS RED LIGHT,” and “NEON” which depend upon a certain materiality—or at least their status as objects—to succeed at all. For conceptual writing, on the other hand, as Dworkin observes, the materiality, or opacity of language was already assumed. He writes:

In conceptual poetry, the relation of the idea to the word is necessary but not privileged: these are still poems made of words; they are not ideas as poems. A procedure or algorithm organizes the writing, but those procedures do not substitute for the writing.<sup>27</sup>

Like conceptual art, conceptual writing eschews expression. Its modes of genesis are appropriation and the procedural constraint. The words and sentences are found and the structure and syntax are generated. The writing is not 'created.' It does not issue from within a creative subject. It is rather the result of 'external' material generated and organized through meticulous processes and procedures resembling the mathematical constraints of the French literary group OULIPO. Much like its predecessor, Language Poetry, conceptual writing puts into question the traditional idea of expression where language serves as a conduit for the inner feelings of the writer. But unlike language poetry, conceptual writing deals much more with regular syntactic structures. But this does not constitute a return to transparency. As Goldsmith writes: 'With the rise of appropriation-based literary practices, the familiar or quotidian is made unfamiliar or strange when left semantically intact. No need to blast apart syntax.'<sup>28</sup> And in the July/August 2009 issue of *Poetry*, he urges us to 'Start making sense':

Disjunction is dead. The fragment, which ruled poetry for the past one hundred years, has left the building. Subjectivity, emotion, the body, and desire, as expressed in whole units of plain English with normative syntax, has returned.<sup>29</sup>

But it has returned in a very different way, without the expressivist sense of 'meaning to say' and of 'saying what one means,' of what Jacques Derrida attacks as the phonocentric notion of *vouloir-dire*. Goldsmith puts it quite poorly here, but what we might say is that if subjectivity has returned, it is decentred. If emotion has returned it is detached from the feelings of the author. What it says has no authorial conviction behind it. But this does not mean that there is no conviction in this activity at all. The conviction resides in the decision to start a particular process and continue with it right through to the end.

Recently the actions of Goldsmith have plunged the very term 'conceptual writing' into disrepute. In the tradition of his book *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Goldsmith turned the autopsy report of murdered African American teenager, Michael Brown (killed by police in Ferguson Missouri), into a work of poetry. Titled 'The Body of Michael Brown,' it was performed at a conference



titled 'Interrupt 3' at Brown University. Although Goldsmith considered the work to be a tribute to Brown, the textual representation of a dead black man's body in a white man's work of art—in the context of a largely white institution—offended many. What made things considerably worse was that Goldsmith 'narrativised' the structure of the original report causing it to end on the words: 'the remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable,' In defending his work Goldsmith explained that he always massages dry texts in order to 'transform them into literature.' It certainly would have been a good idea for Goldsmith to keep his white literary fingers off of Brown's corpse. Goldsmith's excuses for his alterations are largely aesthetic, and as such would seem to go against the grain of conceptual writing. The Consequence is that, for some, the term 'conceptual writing' is now so tainted that it cannot be used in any productive way. But we must ask: what happens to the poetic and theoretical work that has become associated with this term? I would argue that this should not lead us to abandon or close off a project that combines the new sentence of Language poetry with the reduced language of concretism.

Though I have stated the case put forward for conceptual writing, I wish to propose the obverse. Rather than pursue the issue from the side of poetry in the way that the conceptual writers do—in order for literature to benefit from the lessons of Conceptual Art—I wish for contemporary art (which, to some extent, learned these lessons in the 1960s) to benefit, in as much as it deals with language, from the tradition that culminates in Language Poetry. But this does not necessarily mean a turn (again) to texts as primary artworks. Rather, I am proposing that thinking contemporary art as a kind of poetry involves thinking it, as Heidegger says, as poetic composition in the broad sense. It would be a mistake to think that conceptual writing is merely the application of the ideas of conceptual art to poetry. At the core of conceptual writing are strategies of the constraint derived from a very different tradition: from Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, George Brecht, Fluxus, OULIPO, the chance operation, the Lucretian swerve, the *clinamen*. Not far away is the thought of Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Zen Buddhism, Kierkegaard, and the poetry of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. It is a form of conceptualism that is not absolute but relational.

### ***Between Word and Thing***

Certain installation practices can perhaps be conceived as a poetic placing of objects beside each other in a reconstructed syntax, reminiscent of words on the page—Kosuth, in his diatribe against Weiner, cites Haim Steinbach as an artist that makes a new contribution to the use of language in art in such a way, without using words. What I am particularly interested in, however, is the space between word and object; between word and thing; or between text and image. The late 1960s and early '70s work of Marcel Broodthaers constitutes not only an investigation of the space between words and objects, but also a use of language that is antithetical to that of the historically adjacent practices of Conceptual Art. This is hardly surprising since before turning to visual art, and abandoning his former practice in 1964, Broodthaers was a poet, moreover a poet under the spell of Mallarmé. Broodthaers' 'abandonment of poetry,' however, should be seen as turn from the idea of poetry in the narrow sense to the idea of poetry in the wider sense. As I see it, his work is essentially a

(broadly) poetic form of conceptual art. Benjamin Buchloh notes that the extent to which Broodthaers wished to maintain a distance between his own use of language and that of Conceptual Art, can be seen in one of his 'open letters':

Thus the first letter from the "Section Littéraire," addressed in English to a conceptual artist, begins with the reversal of the first of Sol LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art," so that it reads, "Conceptual artists are more rationalists rather than mystics... etc..."<sup>30</sup>

LeWitt's first line in "Sentences on Conceptual Art" reads: 'Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.'

Broodthaers' turn away from poetry, formally announced in 1964, is inaugurated in a work that consists of encasing his remaining copies of his last volume of poetry, *Pense-Bête*, in plaster. However, even before this act of destruction, Broodthaers had been erasing his poems by gluing rectangles of coloured paper that almost completely obscured the poems, preventing them from being read. As Buchloh observes, this 'erasure' anticipates his later intervention into Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés j'aimais n'abolira le hasard*, in 1969, where all of the lines of text are replaced by black bands which 'appear simultaneously as erasures and as elements of increased visual emphasis and spatial presence.'<sup>31</sup>

From the beginning, Broodthaers was 'haunted by a certain painting by Magritte,' *La Trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)*, 1928-29, 'the one in which words figure.'<sup>32</sup> This painting of Magritte's displays an image of a tobacco pipe beneath which is written, in cursive script in French: 'this is not a pipe.' In this work the shown (the depicted pipe) and the said (the text) are put into an unstable relationship. As Michel Foucault observes: '*Ceci n'est pas une pipe* exemplifies the penetration of discourse into the form of things; it reveals discourse's ambiguous power to deny and to redouble.'<sup>33</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell commenting on the incommensurability of Rene Magritte's *La Trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)*, 1928-29 writes: 'It isn't simply that the words contradict the image, and vice versa, but that the very identities of words and images, the sayable and the seeable, begin to shimmer and shift in the composition, as if the image could speak and the words were on display.'<sup>34</sup> Magritte's 'real aim,' Mitchell observes, 'is to show what cannot be pictured or made readable, the fissure in the representation itself, the bands, layers, and fault-lines of discourse, the blank space between the text and the image.'<sup>35</sup> Broodthaers' *Industrial Poems* (1968-70), utilising vacuum formed plastic, that he describes as 'rebuses,' transform Magritte's incommensurability between text and image toward a radical disassociation of text, image and material-object. The *Industrial Poems*, due to their process of fabrication, resemble communicational or advertising signs—which are designed to be easily read—but instead, as Perloff observes, the image-like quality of the words, and the word-like quality of the images impede a clear reading either way. As Perloff notes:

Since the plaque (*Livre-tableau*)... supplies no useful information, it cannot function as a signboard, but neither does it make the slightest concession to aesthetic value, as has been the case in Futurist or Dada typography. The aim, on the contrary, seems to be to force the viewer/reader to “see” what he or she in fact always does see... as if for the first time.<sup>36</sup>

What is seen for the first time are, again, in Edmund Husserl's terms, the trivia, the most obvious, behind which the most 'deep-lying, widely ramifying problems' lie hidden.<sup>37</sup> A concern with these forms of meaning, that are foregrounded by the work of art, have been, as Husserl says, neglected by the science of logic, due to their 'supposed narrow obviousness and practical uselessness' <sup>38</sup> Broodthaers' work dissolves the habitual, as Anne Marie Freybourg observes, by reorganising and recontextualising the conventional relations between object and concept, at the level of 'insignificant abstracta.'<sup>39</sup>

### **Non-objective language**

If objective language is characterised by impartiality and absence of bias, would this mean that non-objective language might be thought of as subjective? Absolutely not. One way of thinking what non-objective language might be is to think of it as having no relation to a possible object either present or absent. If language represents things; if we consider language in a 'picture theory' way; if language is a transparent means of seeing through it to the object or ideality; then non-objective language would not have a bar of any of this.

Jacques Derrida was particularly interested in the Husserl's phenomenological attempt to formulate a pure logical grammar. The significance of Husserl's project, for Derrida, was that it radically departs (at least through the evidence of its internal arguments) from classical grammar by unlinking the possibility of signification—or functioning expressions—from the fulfilment of intention in an object. In a bold reduction that puts out of play any considerations as to whether an expression is true or succeeds in intuitive fulfilment in an object, Husserl concludes that the fulfilling intuition is not essential to functional speech. Meaning is not compromised if the object aimed at by intuition is absent or even non-existent. But since Husserl's main concern is with the knowledge and logic, his project of finding pure forms—which do not depend on satisfaction by either presence or truth—is, as Derrida point out, 'always governed by the epistemological criterion of the relation with objects.'<sup>40</sup> Thus the semio-linguistic possibilities opened up by Husserl are in a certain way closed off before he starts. This is where pure logical grammar is seen to depend on the distinction between the absurd and the ungrammatical. Husserl classes expressions that are contradictory or false, such as 'the circle is squared,' as *widersinnig*. In such statements there is no referent, nor even a signified (in a certain sense), but there is still meaning. On the other hand, expressions made up of meaningless words such as 'abracadabra,' or meaningful words arranged ungrammatically, such as 'the green is or,' are considered to be absolutely meaningless (*Unsinn*). 'The circle is square' makes sense in as much as a logical relation to an object remains a possibility. For example, we could use it to construct a perfectly meaningful proposition: 'the circle is square is an impossibility.' Due to its grammatical structure, 'the circle is squared' remains

good speech, even though it is contradictory. But 'the green is or' is meaningless. Here, for Husserl, there is no cognitive language, no cognitive relation to an object.

But Derrida wants to continue the important reduction where Husserl leaves off, going much further by saying that not only is the presence of the object not essential for meaning to occur, but that the absence of the object is structurally necessary for it to occur. The absence of the intuition of an object is required by signification. But even further, 'there are modes of sense which do not point to any possible objects.'<sup>41</sup> Such as the language of avant-garde poetry. It's not that Husserl would reject the claim that these forms of language have the capacity for signification, but he would not grant them the status of having a logical relation to an object. It is in this way that we might characterise much of the language of writers such as James Joyce, e.e. Cummings, Jackson Mac Low, Steve McCaffery as non-objective writing. But most importantly, the underpinning theory for such practices cannot be thought of as—in Williams' terms—pointing to the ineffable. Rather, they are writings of the surface. There is nothing behind them or beyond them but they are unquestionably meaningful.

This brings us back to conceptual writing's promotion of a certain semanticism. Yet we should not see this as a recovery of the traditional dominance of semantics over syntax. In order to displace the opposition (which is the project of dissemination) it is not necessary to abandon semantics in favour of the word fragment or transrational language. Rather it is a question of keeping at the margins of thematic content, and holding off at the limits of meaning.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerald Bruns, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. Bruns' emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> "On Conceptual Art" first published in *Flashart* 143 (November-December 1988), reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge, Ma., London: MIT Press), 241.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter, 1990), 125.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," in *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Art & Language/ Catherine Millet, "Interview with Art-Language," *Art Vivant*, 25 (1971), trans. Maya Rabasa, in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 264.

<sup>9</sup> Cutforth, unpublished letter to Robert Rooney, 24 May 1971, cited in Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Corris, 'The Dialogical Imagination: The Conversational Aesthetic of Conceptual Art' in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins, (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006).

---

<sup>11</sup> Williams observes that '[T]he idealist substratum of Symbolism was the belief that the world transmitted by the senses—but then by all the senses and most profoundly in synaesthesia—should be understood as revealing a *spiritual* universe. The Symbolist poem would then be the enabling form of such revelation, a mode of realized *correspondence* in Baudelaire's sense, in which the 'poetic word' becomes a verbal symbol, at once material in embodiment and metaphysical in its revelation of a spiritual but still sensual reality. This concept was related, linguistically, to ideas of the "inner form" of a word...' Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkey (London & New York: Verso, 1989), 71. The main culprits here, for Williams are Artaud and Surrealism.

<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 52, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Jeanne Siegel, on WBAI-FM April 7, 1970. Thereafter published as "Joseph Kosuth: Art as Idea as Idea" in Jeanne Siegel, *Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985), 221-231. Republished in "Art as Idea as Idea: An Interview with Jeanne Siegel," in *Art after Philosophy and After*, 52.

<sup>14</sup> Kosuth, in Peter Lodermeier, Karlyn de Jongh, and Sarah Gold, eds., *Personal Structures: Time.Space.Existence* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2009), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Haroldo de Campos, *Novas: Selected Writings of Haroldo De Campos*, ed. Odile Cisneros Antonio Sergio Bessa (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 171.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>18</sup> Haroldo de Campos, "Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication," First published in the *Suplemento dominical do "Jornal do Brasil"* (Rio de Janeiro), 28 April 1957 and 5 May 1957, republished in *Novas*, 237.

<sup>19</sup> Augusto De Campos, "Questionnaire of the Yale Symposium on Experimental, Visual and Concrete Poetry since the 1960s (April 5-7, 1995)," <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/yaleeng.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," Originally published by the authors in *Noigãndres* 4, São Paulo, 1958, reproduced in Campos, *Novas*, 217.

<sup>21</sup> Haroldo de Campos, "Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication," in *Novas*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Brins, *The Material of Poetry*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, "Sentences on Conceptual Writing," [http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg\\_ol\\_goldsmith.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg_ol_goldsmith.html).

<sup>24</sup> Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds., *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 2010), xxiii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, 147.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, "Flarf and Conceptual Writing," *Poetry*, July/August 2009, cited in Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, 162.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Open Letters, Industrial Poems," *October* 42 (Autumn, 1987): 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> Marcel Broodthaers and Irmeline Lebeer, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," trans. Paul Schmidt, *October* 42 (Autumn, 1987): 39.

---

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, "This is Not a Pipe," in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 1998), 197.

<sup>34</sup> W. J. Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 68.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Marjorie Perloff *Radical Artifice*, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Volume 2, 76, §14, note 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Anne Marie Freybourg, "Taken in a Moment of Optical Confusion... Film and Photography in Certain Relations (Man Ray, Duchamp, Warhol, Snow, Broodthaers), *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, Catalogue for the Eighth Biennale of Sydney, 11 April -3 June 1990 (Sydney: Biennale of Sydney and the Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 127.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 98.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.