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## (In)visible writing in art and performance

Kiff Bamford 

Leeds School of Arts, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK


### ABSTRACT

Considering writing and performance in its broadest sense, this article questions the role of text in art works where the presence of the textual element does not seek to make an immediate visual impact, but rather hides behind conventions of administration (Art & Language); exhibition information (Teresa Margolles) or contracts (Adrian Piper; Gina Pane; Marina Abramović; Margolles). Through a comparison of two installation pieces linked to conceptual art and exhibited at *Invisible: art about the unseen 1957–2012* (Hayward Gallery, London), the ways in which this ‘quiet’ text questions the conventions of language as a static form is discussed with reference to ideas of the figural put forward by Jean-François Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*. Lyotard’s concern for the ‘thickness’ of language is exemplified in the writings of Marguerite Duras as pictured in an article by Sanford. S. Ames, printed in the journal *Visible Language* in 1978. Such references help us to recognise the role that textual practice has played in the development of contemporary art practice as both discursive and unsettled: an art history of revisiting, re-performance and restlessness.

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**KEYWORDS** Conceptual art; performance art; Jean-François Lyotard; the figural

In 2012 the Hayward Gallery, London staged an exhibition curated by its Director, Ralph Rugoff: *Invisible: art about the unseen 1957-2012*. The exhibition was carefully placed both to provoke and riff-off the perennial cry of the ‘emperor’s new clothes’, and drew a flurry of press headlines, both witty and dismissive. Rugoff’s project was sincere however, if not without an humorous edge, and provided a sixty-year survey of contemporary art’s questioning of the visible, whilst drawing attention to the increased role of the textual. Yves Klein was taken as the starting point, specifically the ‘empty room’ which featured in the Paris exhibition *Propositions monochromes* of 1957, coincidentally also the year of the curator’s birth.

**CONTACT** Kiff Bamford  [c.a.bamford@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:c.a.bamford@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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Perhaps appropriately, little remains of Rugoff's exhibition a decade later: like many exhibitions there is a considerable hiatus between the contemporary response of visitors and critics, and any subsequent attention from art historians, curator or artists, if that ever arrives. In the meantime such a project likely remains as an increasingly selective, fragmented memory in the consciousness of those who encountered it. What has risen to the surface in my memory and which serves as a starting point for this article, is the visual equivalence evident in two of the featured pieces, works made several decades apart which employ seemingly similar strategies to different ends. As such this is a reading which is consciously out of time, anachronistic and responds perhaps as much to the provocation of the curatorial act of selection as to the place the art works take within art history. More specifically it is a pretext to return to a concern much highlighted in the history of conceptual art: the role of writing, not only as a bearer of meaning but as an integral material presence in the visual encounter. Both Klein and Rugoff draw our attention through acts of removal, to attend to that which is left: 'the invisible' for Rugoff, a 'poetic energy' for Klein. I want to draw us into the role of the textual in these and related pieces, to consider how their visibility is enhanced when integrated to their functioning not only as conveyors of meaning or disturbance but figurally, as a material presence.

## Air writing

I begin many years ago in the exhibition *Invisible: art about the unseen 1957-2012*, at the Hayward Gallery, London. Two installation pieces, both reliant on text and both related to that which is termed conceptual art: Art & Language's *Air-Conditioning Show* (1966–1967)<sup>1</sup> and Teresa Margolles's *Aire / Air* (2003). *Air-Conditioning Show* creates a slightly chilled environment through the inclusion of air conditioning units positioned within an enclosed section of the exhibition, entered through plastic strips of the type found in chilled industrial units or on the back of refrigerated trucks. One has to push through this curtain of unforgiving, semi-transparent plastic strips to enter the space, empty except for the two freestanding air conditioning units. The wall external to *Air-Conditioning Show* displayed a grid of 20 closely-typed sheets, a text which debates, obliquely, the implications of the proposed work, framing the proposition as its title suggests: *Frameworks: Air-Conditioning* (Figure 1). The text is dry and academic in tone, it references both thermodynamics and the philosophy of language, but there is also an underlying discursive informality which gestures to debates on-going outside the presented text. There is a dry humour at work, but one which relies on a patient reader, leaving most visitors to respond simply to the visual presence of the text and the immediate effect of scanning, which reveals the conceptual construct, but not the humour.



**Figure 1.** Installation view *Invisible: Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012*. Hayward Gallery, London 12 June–5 August 2012, photo: Mark Blower © Mark Blower.

Several years after visiting this exhibition I am now trying to decipher my own notes. I remember being excited, at first, to see a work which is now a classic of early conceptual art but feeling equally disparaging of the installation's inability to deliver the intended avoidance of 'things'. In my sketchbook I wrote:

meant to be a bland room – but it smells of pvc – it does sound different, feel different, smell different – is the sensory meant to be important here, in the attempt to reduce conceptually? But the remnants are also important, due to the text. Display of 'original' photo / invite. Shows it as a show of a show. Part of MACBA collection on long term loan.

Somewhat jumbled, but the questions being raised by my notes – about what is being shown, and the role of the sensory aspects to which the visitor pays attention in the absence of a clearly determined visual object – follows the intention of the artists, to some extent.<sup>2</sup> What these comments also reveal is the means by which the layers of text frame the presentation of the work, also indicative of the approach of Art & Language and the history of this work.

The *Air-Conditioning Show* questions the materiality of the artwork. It is a proposal whose various iterations are integral to its concept: first distributed as a text and image in 1966, these were then published at the suggestion of Robert Smithson, in *Arts Magazine*, November 1967.<sup>3</sup> Related texts were circulated and published, including a letterpress booklet – *Frameworks: Air-Conditioning*, produced in an edition of two hundred by Art & Language



**Figure 2.** Art & Language Poster for the “Air-Conditioning Show” 1971-1972, Graphic material. 49.7 x 41.6 cm. Collection Philippe Méaille, Château de Montsoreau- Musée d’art Contemporain, Loire Valley, France.

Press in 1967 – and a model was made.<sup>4</sup> In 1972 it was realised (or ‘reconstituted’) by Joseph Kosuth, who had joined the group in 1969, at the School of Visual Art Gallery, New York. The London installation at the Hayward Gallery in 2012 included not only the 20 pages of text – *Frame-works: Air-conditioning* – but also the poster from the 1972 exhibition (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> Conceived entirely from type this poster announces the title of the exhibition ‘The “Air-Conditioning” show’ in sans-serif caps, displayed diagonally across the sheet (49.7 × 41.6 cm), together with the names of the artists, the date of the work’s conception (1966) and the event’s information. This diagonal title-band cuts across seven columns of text, which constitute the remainder of the poster. More accessible than the 20 pages of text, they include the initial proposition written by Michael Baldwin, as published by *Arts Magazine*. Other sections describe the potential inherent

in the proposal to remove the object of the art work and replace it with a change in the temperature of the visitor's body, to enact an internal discussion and reflection on the proposition, and to draw attention to the changing nature of a 'thermal system'. Describing the effects of a proposed 'column of air' produced in the space, the text then reflects on the problem presented by the use of such visual language, in a project which attempts to refute the identification of 'things' and avoid the trap of getting 'casuistically stuck with "picturing", or with the pure or the alloy of visualization'.<sup>6</sup> The effect is a confident tone and visual textual presentation, undermined by passages of discursive doubt.

The use of written language as a strategy to displace the object of art is a well-versed trope in contemporary art and the references to Marcel Duchamp's *Air de Paris* (1919) and his concept of 'inframince' (infra-thin) maintain these connections in the selection of work for the exhibition *Invisible*. However, the parallels between work from different periods allow for something other than a simple construction of another family tree of artistic lineage and demonstrate, rather, the extent to which strategies can be adopted and altered to different effects. This is particularly apparent through the pairing of *Air-Conditioning Show* with the seemingly very similar installation by Mexican artist Teresa Margolles. The extent to which the work rests on the role of the text depends on the visitor's prior knowledge of the artist's work. Whereas prior knowledge of Art & Language's dense and sometimes convoluted writings would have, arguably, little impact on the sensible impact of the work's installation, the interrelation between experience and knowledge derived from the text incorporated into Margolles' pieces is significant. When installed in *Invisible*, Margolles' *Aire / Air* (2003) was upstairs from *Air-Conditioning Show*, yet the physical similarities were unmistakable: similar air-trapping curtains, similarly minimal white space and large, white, humming machines. But in *Aire / Air* (Figure 3) there was only one text; taking the form of an exhibition label which reads:

TERESA MARGOLLES (b.1963, CULIACÁN/SINALOA, MEXICO)

*Aire / Air*, 2003

Installation consisting of 2 cooling systems filled with water that was used to wash the bodies of murder victims before the autopsy  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist & Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

This room appears to be empty, apart from a couple of working air-conditioning units. The slightly humid air is cooled by water from public mortuaries in Mexico City that was used to wash the bodies of unidentified murder victims prior to autopsy. Teresa Margolles, who holds a Diploma in Forensic Medicine, works with death as her primary material; she focuses not on the dead themselves but on the physical traces left by death, and the attendant evils of violence and poverty, preferring 'not to exhibit the physical horror, but the silence'

The water vapour is harmless.

**Figure 3.** Exhibition text for Teresa Margolles *Aire / Air* (2003) *Invisible: Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012*. Hayward Gallery, London 12 June–5 August 2012. Graphics: Robert Boon at Inventory.



In order to be affected by the presence of death in the exhibition space, the visitor has to read the carefully positioned wall text. Visitors who know Margolles' work and her use of water, used to wash bodies 'of unidentified murder victims', from public mortuaries in Mexico City to make mist (*Vaporisation / Vaporización*, 2001) or bubbles (*In the air / En el Aire*, 2003), may not need the visible text, but will still be drawn to it.

The use of short, explanatory captions is a central and necessary feature of Margolles' work: the wall text for *In the air / En el Aire*, for example, is both descriptive and provocative: 'Bubbles made from water from the morgue that was used to wash corpses before autopsy'. When *Vaporisation / Vaporización*, was installed in PS1, New York, an additional textual element prepared the visitors: they were required to sign a declaration before entering the mist-filled space: 'P.S.1 renounces all responsibility for any physical, mental, or emotional damages caused to the undersigned once he/she enters the installation'.<sup>7</sup> The wording is designed to cause alarm, even though the work's label makes it clear that the water, whilst collected from morgues in Mexico City, had been disinfected.

Both wall texts and signed disclaimer rely on a tone of voice which comes not only from the language used, but also its visual presentation and the expected banality of both museum labels and institutional bureaucracy. Margolles' long association with the morgues of Mexico City includes her work there as a technician and the founding of the art collective SEMEFO in 1990. Taking its name from the Servicio Médico Forense – the forensic medical service, most notorious for dealing with victims of crime, and also the name given to the morgue itself – SEMEFO's work has made direct use of the materials, fluids and bodies of the morgue, often courting controversy; but they have also initiated collective activities which address wider issues of everyday violence and injustice. It is therefore appropriate that in her solo work Margolles has drawn on the subtle banalities involved in administering death through a particular use of language. A police account of a murdered victim does not dwell on poetics. It is this frankness, adopted in the texts present in Margolles' work, which forces the process of bureaucratic accountability to resonate within installations that are often immersive and sensorial. Similarly, the bilingual titles given to the work comment on the relationship between two communities: the forward slash between Spanish and English works as a visual proxy for a multiplicity of boundaries and inter-relationships: *Aire / Air*.

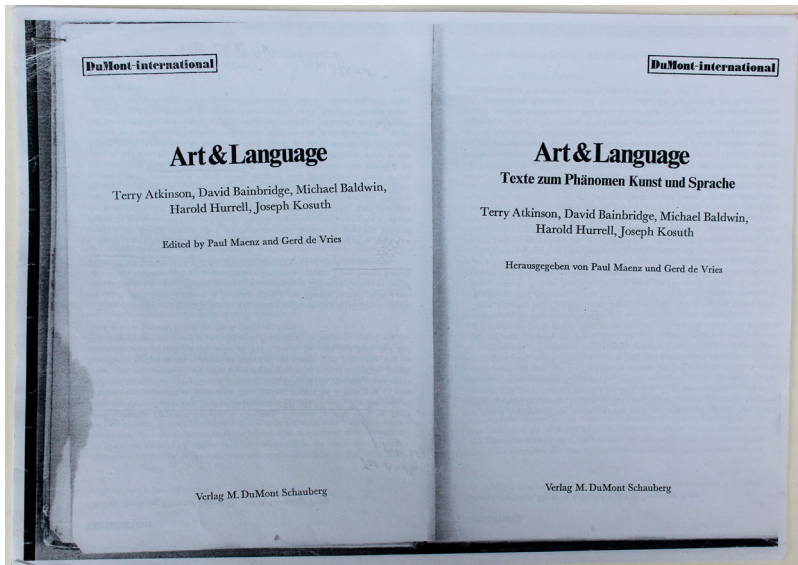
To bring the work of Art & Language and Teresa Margolles together under the guise of considering the role of visible language in contemporary art is to place a particular emphasis on reading, to draw attention to the mechanics of particular strategies at play. The curator Ralph Rugoff's reflection on *Air-Conditioning Show* in the catalogue for *Invisible*, emphasises the act of reading as the default reaction of an audience when presented with little else to consume: 'given that there was nothing else to look at in the



gallery, the reading of the text essentially comprised the viewing of the artwork'.<sup>8</sup> This interpretive gloss by Rugoff précises the following speculation by Art & Language: 'is it necessary actually to install air-conditioning as described in the text or will the text do just as well?'<sup>9</sup> This is a question which could not easily be asked of Margolles' installation, even speculatively. In both works an act of reading shifts the perception of the viewer, directly in the case of Margolles and more discursively with Art & Language, though with each the linguistic elements act as a prompt to thought, activated by the spatial presentation of the text. The subtlety of its visual presentation, its ordinariness, renders its visible properties hidden – a strategy I allude to in the title of this present article as '(in)visible writing'.

The effect of reading the 20 sheets of text which constitute *Frameworks: Air-conditioning*, whilst standing in a gallery, waiting to enter a chilled room, is considerably different to my attempts to decipher its meaning now, sitting at my desk. I am reading from a photocopy of the essays included in a 1972 *Art & Language* collection, presented in parallel texts in English and German, a photocopy that succeeds in duplicating the dog-eared corners and the creeping stain which coloured the left-hand margin (Figure 4). Let us consider this difference in reading in the light of the prompt at the opening of Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure*, first published in 1971 but eventually brought back to life through its English translation years later: 'One does not read or understand a picture. Sitting at the table one identifies and recognizes linguistic units; standing in representation one seeks out plastic events. Libidinal events'.<sup>10</sup> Lyotard is talking here not so much literally about the physical difference of reading whilst sitting or standing, but rather the difference between approaching things textually, reading the flat surface of coded signs, or with that depth inherent in the plastic, the physical, the visual where 'the thickness of the flesh' forces us to acknowledge 'the objects' mobility, which constitutes them as world'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, according to Lyotard, the basis of western thought and painting has been perplexed by the ambivalent relationship between the two. The 'shimmering' of the visual field is denied, or absolved, if its power comes from elsewhere, through a tradition always bound to the word and the insistence on the absent ideal. Yet, still it draws us back in.

The anonymous reviewer of this present essay asked that the role of the figural, or at least figure, might be elucidated further within the context of the present writing. A reasonable request, particularly given the potential ambiguity inherent in titling illustrations within an academic context as 'figure'. Such illustrative 'figures' may be the least likely to hold any sense of the figural in the Lyotardian sense, however, bounded as they are within borders and the conventions of titling. Such constraints tally with the secondary function of illustrative figures: of forming, figuring and illustrating an idea or argument elsewhere. Consequently, it is not in the



**Figure 4.** Photocopy showing opening bi-lingual pages of Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, 'Air-conditioning Show / Air Show / Frameworks', in Paul Maenz and Gerd De Vries, eds, *Art & Language* (Cologne: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1972).

illustrative figures we would expect to find figural interruptions. In a journal named *Textual Practice* one might reasonably hope for textual disruptions, figural interventions, to occur in the writing; but in expecting nothing from the 'figures' which accompany the text, something might yet occur. Irruptions cannot be anticipated, prefigured. In attempting to evoke aspects of the figure Lyotard turns to Freud's dream-work, to the workings of Freud's unconscious and desire; he sees its effects in the poetic experimentation of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* and Michel Butor's 'Les Montagnes Rocheuses'. But as soon as these are given to the reader as illustrations, their figural force dissipates.<sup>12</sup> As with Karen Barad's descriptions of diffractions, as being identifiable only in their effects, the *figural* is identifiable after its event – once its effect has been felt.<sup>13</sup>

### Seepage and slippers

I want *Discourse, Figure* to begin to seep through the pages of this present article, like the crescent-shaped stain on the edge of my dog-eared photocopy of the *Art & Language* essay, always on the margins of our sight. The late translation of *Discourse, Figure* merits a return to its ripe contents. How does writing operate when integrated into the artwork, into its display, its reproduction? How can writing elicit the affects produced by an artwork?

The call to attend to the written line and the printed character as deep and richly figured was answered in the 1970s by the US journal *Visible Language* which included articles on concrete poetry, and the use of visual language by artists including Allan Kaprow, Georges Brecht and Alison Knowles. By Summer 1978 it was visualising its discussions on the page graphically, demonstrating the impact of French literary theories through articles on Michel Serres and Marguerite Duras, among others, in this now famous special issue typeset by students of Cranbrook Academy of Art under the supervision of Katherine McCoy.<sup>14</sup>

One beautifully pictorial essay by Sanford S Ames, 'Cinderella's Slipper: Mallarmé's Letters in Duras' weaves together Stéphane Mallarmé and a discussion of the 'slipper-letter "V"' as an empty sign of the feminine in Marguerite Duras' *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964). In a footnote Ames notes that the repeated use of the 'V' at the heart of the protagonist's name in the French edition functions as a signifier of the 'material structure of language', yet this middle letter 'V' is absent in the English translation by Richard Seaver, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*.<sup>15</sup> This erasure echoes the character's abandonment, which is a primary consideration for Ames' analysis, '[T]hat which is forgotten haunts the text'.<sup>16</sup> It is to emphasise such forgetting, inherent in the process of representation and opposition on which language is based, that Ames refers us to Lyotard's promotion of desire, as that which insists on forgetting as a singularity which confronts the cage of representation.<sup>17</sup> Like the absent 'V', translations often struggle to present aspects of language which allow words a temporary freedom from the prescriptions of fixed signification. The homonyms offered by 'verre' (glass) or 'vair' (fur in Old French), as the material of Cinderella's slipper, help to maintain the 'mystery of letters', Ames writes. It was the uncertainty of oral transcription which led Honoré de Balzac to claim that Cinderella's slipper was one of *vair* / fur, a sensual material whose sexual connotations have been exploited by many artists, including Méret Oppenheim's celebration of all things oral in her fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon. Anecdotaly Oppenheim's *Objet* (1936) was the result of her calling for 'un verre' (another glass) in response to Pablo Picasso's claim that anything could be covered with fur, a tale told by Josephine Withers in *Arts Magazine*, 1977; its alternative title *Le Déjeuner en fourrure* (The fur dinner) was given by André Breton. This *Fur Breakfast*, as it is also sometimes known, is a suitable vessel to hold both Charles Perrault's possible mis-transcription of Cinderella's slipper in 1697, Duras' lost 'V', and the multiplicity of Mallarmé's 'crise de vers' (crisis of verse). As Ames ends his essay:

As *vair* in heraldic fur, it is also *ver*, the worm in the apple, *vers*, the verse that consoles, and *verre*, the glass that is raised in the toast of memory. It is a close encounter with the force that ramifies and divides, at the tip of the tongue, the pen, or the finger that turns the page.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst this discussion of the poetic possibilities of language may seem to divert us from the visibly dry language of Art & Language, it serves rather to remind us that the bodily is not forgotten in their discussion of *Air-Conditioning Show*. In fact it is by neutralising the space visually that their focus is turned to the temperature of the body of the visitor, not to draw attention explicitly to the situation – which might render the effect illustrative, to become a metaphor for another situation – but to draw attention to the modes of control subtly at work. This occurs through the isolation of the air conditioning as a conceptual focus, the reduction of ‘visual pointers’ and aiming rather at ‘a maximum “visual ordinariness”’.<sup>19</sup> Equally, the body that reads the text in Margolles’ installation cannot but be involved physically in the situation, in breathing the water vapour circulating in the space of *Aire / Air*, not as a means of evoking a place elsewhere, but to bring us up short and consider the act of washing which produced the residue we now breathe.

Conceptual art taught us that artists can think about things, too, and read things, and write things, and analyze them and research them and document them and describe them and argue them. It was a real opening of the intellect. Once that happens, intellectual work generally and writing in particular is just one more artistic medium for giving form to your ideas.<sup>20</sup>

Artist and philosopher Adrian Piper writes the above in an article about the artist Ian Burn, a member of Art & Language and part of the shift towards artwork as discursive practice. When Adrian Piper walked the streets of Manhattan with ‘wet paint’ written on a sign hung round her neck, her clothes painted with wet, white paint, or travelled the subway with her mouth filled by a white towel, she was not coolly evading the visual through the use of language, but making that discursive field move. Her hand-painted signs applied to herself, as though to a painted object, made for an uneasy reading, in the sense both of the difficulty of categorising the statement out of place and also the implication of the body of colour as object which walks to Macy’s to decorate itself with gloves and sunglasses (Figure 5). In a short interview with Lucy Lippard in 1972, Piper’s description of her process evokes an uncertainty which seems to reflect the uneasy mode of her operations: ‘For quite a while I felt absolutely unanchored in terms of what I was doing. I’m not sure I can describe that’.<sup>21</sup>

Uneasy, because of its jumping, out of the categories of accepted forms of communication: the anticipated forms which Lyotard refers to as articulated discourse. In the title of *Discourse, Figure* Lyotard carefully separates the two terms ‘discourse’ and ‘figure’ with a comma, a pause, an intake of breath; not as a mark of opposition but as a mark that indicates the extent to which discourse is reliant on the support of the figure, the figural as the event of difference which cannot be signified, yet from which language rises. It is only through separation that language emerges, Lyotard argues, ‘the object



**Figure 5.** Adrian Piper, *Catalysis III*, 1970. Documentation of the performance. Three silver gelatin prints (reprinted circa 1998). Each photograph 16.14" x 16.14" (41 cm x 41 cm). Documentation photo credit: Rosemary Mayer. Detail: #1 of 3. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation Berlin.

must first be constituted as lost for it to have to be signified'.<sup>22</sup> It is in this violent separation that the figural remains at the heart of discourse, giving depth to language through its reference to that which is outside itself and which a structuralist understanding of language neglects: 'Discourse is always thick. It does not merely signify, but expresses'.<sup>23</sup> Even the apparently simple title of Margolles' installation *Aire / Air* is given thickness because it is not read but seen, spatially. Its act of signification is more than bilingual presentation: its forward slash is a (semi-) permeable membrane across whose border the respective language speakers traverse – the *barra inclinada* as both barrier and breath.

## Commitment

The visual language of information labels, signs, contracts and disclaimers, are conventions often manipulated by artists, with a rich history in both conceptual art and performance work. Aspects of this history are discussed by Kathy O'Dell in her study *Contract with the Skin* in which she details the

'contract-like' agreement printed on invitations to an action by Gina Pane, *Nourriture-Actualités télévisées-Feu*, which took place in a domestic space in 1971. The invitations stipulate the conditions for entry to the space of the action: 'A sum equivalent to 2% at least of your salary will have to be deposited in a safe at the entrance of the place where I will be performing', thus ensuring that the artist is not the only one placed in a vulnerable position.<sup>24</sup> Other artists have used the contract as a means of establishing an agreement to a code of behaviour in performance situations, often where the conventions of a museum or gallery space have been adapted. *Marina Abramović Presents* (2009) asked visitors to commit to a duration of four hours in the performance spaces of Manchester's Whitworth Art Gallery (for which they received, in turn, a signed 'Certificate of Accomplishment'); whilst in Abramović's 2014 durational exhibition *512 hours* they were required to remove and deposit time recording devices – watches / mobile phones – in locked cabinets.<sup>25</sup> The legal connotations of a contract are explored by O'Dell in relation to the conventions of masochistic relationships, where the body is given over to another outside of usual societal codes of interaction, but within an understanding specific to a particular partnership. This negotiation also interested Gilles Deleuze in his analysis of the masochist not as a libertine, but as a stickler for ritual: 'The masochistic contract generates a type of law which leads straight into ritual. The masochist is obsessed; ritualistic activity is essential to him, since it epitomizes the world of fantasy'.<sup>26</sup>

As part of the main exhibition at the 2015 Venice Biennale, perhaps the most glamorous gathering of the art world, Adrian Piper installed three circular receptions desks, each positioned in front of a wall text in gold vinyl, declaring one of three statements: 'I will always be too expensive to buy'; 'I will always do what I say I am going to do'; 'I will always mean what I say' (Figure 6). Visitors were invited to subscribe to one, to two, or to all three of these by signing a contract, which was then archived and sealed for one hundred years.<sup>27</sup> To sign such a declaration as a promise to oneself – and an unspecified, future reader – is potentially a platitudinous activity, yet in the context of the artist's other work the temporality of such commitments takes on a different dimension: is the signatory the sole addressee or does the question also address itself to the pretense of responsibility that attends positions of status and power? Elsewhere at the Biennale, Piper's work *Everything #21* included lines of cursive text written repeatedly, 25 times on each of four chalk boards: 'Everything will be taken away'. It is the same statement through which Piper has been reflecting on mortality and temporality for over a decade: in a gallery in Scotland a performer removes the chalk statement with a wet cloth, line by line; the same statement is printed in red onto photocopied images, whose surfaces are worn away with sandpaper (Figure 7). The repetition of this simple phrase adds a



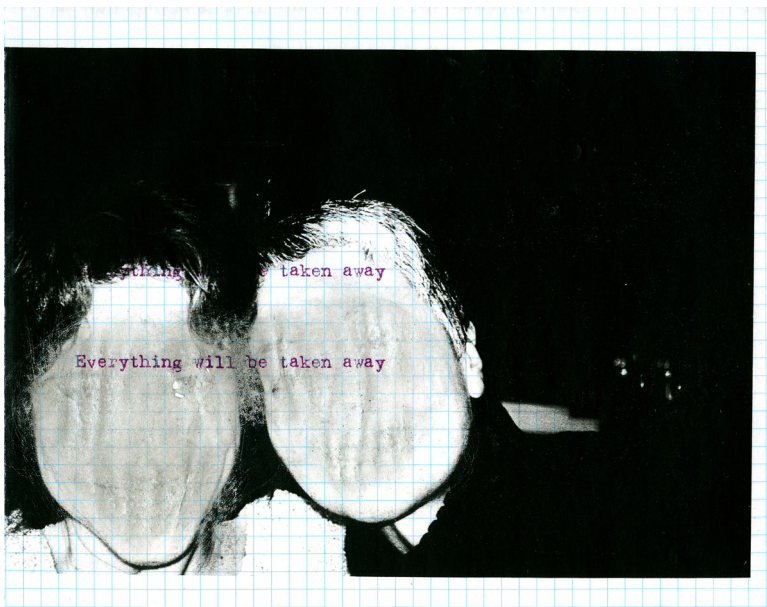


**Figure 6.** Adrian Piper, *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3*, 2013. Installation + Participatory Group Performance: three embossed gold vinyl wall texts on 70% grey walls; three circular gold reception desks, each 70" Ø x 42" (182,88 cm x 106,68 cm); contracts; signatories' contact data registry; three administrators; self—selected members of the public. Detail: Venice Biennale installation, Arsenale Gallery 5: *The Rules of the Game #2*. Collection Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. © Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation. APRA Foundation Berlin.

persistence, a thickness, to its reading. It is not the thickness in the phenomenological sense that Lyotard refers to when heralding that which he termed the figural, and yet it is. Perhaps not necessarily in the cacophony of gigantic shows like the biennale but softly, gently, whispered across the page. The official voice of the declarative statements signed under golden lettering can be laughed away, but the removal of someone's face replaced only with those words of leaden facticity – 'everything will be taken away' – can resonate with a certainty instilled by institutionalised behaviour.

A bureaucratic tone has been adopted by many artists as a cover of neutrality, an 'aesthetic of administration' as Benjamin Buchloh termed it, maintaining a steady claim to undermine and question the conventions of authority.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the phrase 'steady claim' misses the point; the conventions of typewritten text, the quiet visual language which has become synonymous with a certain cerebral approach, often relies on an uneven, unpredictable use of language, whose effect is to trouble. It is an instability insufficiently recognised by some art historians, argue Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden and Charles Harrison, of *Art & Language*, in an article written in 2006. They express a





**Figure 7.** Adrian Piper *Everything #2.2*, 2003. Photocopied photograph on graph paper, sanded with sandpaper, overprinted with inkjet text. 11" × 81/2" (21.6 cm × 27.9 cm). Venice Biennale installation, Central Pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale, Gallery 12. Collection Irène and Bertrand Jacobberger. © Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation Berlin.

concern for the way in which art historians associated with the journal *October* have begun to canonise some aspects of conceptual art, described as ‘institutional critique’, in ‘an anachronistic nostalgia for a battle long over in a conflict that nevertheless continues’.<sup>29</sup> Instability and open-endedness are integral to a discursive art practice for which a subtly hidden form of (in)visible language plays a key role, both in the activation of the work and through its persistent republication, presentation and archiving, a concern which has exercised many in relation to the representation of performance art pieces.

In her 2004 book, *What the Body Cost*, Jane Blocker reproduces, in full, the text of Faith Wildings *Waiting* from her 1972 performance, at *Woman-house*, the installation built by the first Feminist Art Program at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts). In 1972 the text was reproduced as a poem in *Ms* magazine and then as an appendix to Judy Chicago’s book *Through the Flower* (1975), but when approached to re-perform the work for the 2007 exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Wilding chose not to re-perform the same text, but to ‘redo the performance from her point of view in 2007’.<sup>30</sup> Retitled *Wait-With* ‘Wilding enacts herself within a web of discourses and images (including those relating to the original *Waiting*)

as becoming-woman', thereby reinvigorating and questioning its historicised form.<sup>31</sup> 'Waiting ...' the passive iterative opening to each line, describing a solitary experience in *Waiting*, is replaced by a collective resistance in *Wait-With*, including quotations from a variety of sources and an active discussion with the audience: 'Waiting-with, as a space of resistance'.<sup>32</sup> Wilding uses language not to define a piece as a stable, clearly defined element, but as part of an artwork in flux, a flexibility which draws us back to the playful proposals of Fluxus and its precedents, perhaps to Robert Filliou and his idea of a whispered history of art.

In contrast to the more transitory nature of the spoken word, the shifting state of *Air-Conditioning Show / Frameworks* was not immediately apparent visually in its installation at the *Invisible* exhibition, but through scanning the texts on the wall – both the sheets of *Frameworks* and the poster – its frayed edges began to be suggested (Figure 8). In fact the piece increasingly refuses to be pinned down as a discrete entity, and its deliberately inconclusive trail becomes more evident with further research. My attempts to recall the particular set-up of the installation from *Invisible* many years after the exhibition have exposed the shifting nature of the piece, which may surprise, given the dominance of the textual as its support. Yet it is the use of excessive text as a visual element that disturbs conventions of art historical record, which is reliant on reproduced images. When reprinted as an image the text becomes either unreadable or reduced to an extract; if reproduced as a text it is absorbed into the default settings of the host publication. Although



**Figure 8.** Installation view *Invisible: Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012*. Hayward Gallery, London 12 June–5 August 2012 photo: Mark Blower. © Mark Blower.

the role of the Art-Language press assuaged the potential problems of the latter, the 1967 edition of *Frameworks* is now accessible only as an artists' book via the museum archive, or reprinted and reformatted in the catalogue to the 1980 exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (Art & Language, 1980). Writing in 2006 Art & Language reflect on the role of reading in their work: 'the lengthy text acts acquired readers. To read these works was to put them to practical use. They were not literary texts but porous, open, and discursive things constituting a new genre, a form that invited the reader-as-writer's intervention'.<sup>33</sup> To some extent, this is demonstrated in another manifestation of *Air-Conditioning Show* in 2009 (Voids Pompidou, Paris; Kunsthalle, Bern) which did not recreate the show but displayed the piece as one of a series of eight empty spaces – each representing eight uses of 'empty' spaces by artists – accompanied by detailed textual discussion as part of a 464-page catalogue.<sup>34</sup> Included in the catalogue is the Art & Language text from the 1966/72 poster and discussions from the *Air-conditioning show conference*, held in 2008 to discuss its shifting legacy.

The attempt by artists such as Art & Language, Faith Wilding and Adrian Piper to maintain an active role in the open-endedness of their own work and make deliberate interventions in its historicisation, is a continuation of Piper's understanding of the engagement with art as an intellectual activity. It is important to think of visible language in contemporary art not only as that work which engages in an obviously sensual manner, but to consider how text is used as a means of continuing to question the conventional uses of textual language in the arena of art. When Lyotard writes, in *Discourse, figure*, of the figural working within discourse to undo language, to work it over, 'vibrating until it disjoins', it sounds more viscerally active than the careful, considered pages of text in *Air-Conditioning Show*, the small label in *Aire / Air*, or the iterative sentences of Wildings performed poetry, yet that is to reduce the figural to the visible and to forget that the figural works within language '[t]o undo the code without, however, destroying the message, while instead releasing from it the meaning and the lateral semantic reserves concealed by structured speech'.<sup>35</sup> The quietness of visible writing at work in contemporary art can turn things over by refusing to adhere to coded conventions and to make communication jump, to open a space for the displacements of time and categorisation which conventions of art historical formulae tend to refuse, and to insist on its texts as discursive propositions, without end. In a surprising collaboration, two decades after the French publication of Lyotard's *Discourse, figure*, the artist and one-time editor of *Art-Language* in the USA, Joseph Kosuth, published *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1969–90* with a foreword by Lyotard: 'Foreword: After the Words'. Lyotard writes: 'Writing leaves the remainder to be written, by the mere fact that it writes. There will always

be the remainder. It is not words or letters that are the signs; it is what is between them. Writing is finite; its infinity inhabits its finitude'.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

1. Prior to the official formation of the group Art & Language, in 1968, Michael Baldwin and Terry Atkinson had been undertaking activities using this name and had initiated the Art-Language press in 1967. Although sometimes referred to as pre-Art & Language *Air-Conditioning Show* will be referred to as the work of Art & Language throughout this article.
2. The extent to which the air conditioning should be a barely perceptible, rather than noticeable element is highlighted in Kevin Brazil's reflection on the geographic specificity of this work: 'The opportunities offered by air conditioning only become visible because of their foreignness in England, but given that the project relies upon air conditioning being experienced as 'socially neutral' as opposed to 'technologically miraculous', it can only be realised in New York. It is a conceptual work which could (and has) been installed anywhere within the globalised system of contemporary art, yet it indexes its origins from a specifically transatlantic exchange'. Kevin Brazil, 'Art & Language, Transatlanticism and Conceptual Cosmopolitanism', *Tate Papers*, 27, Spring (2017). [https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/27/art-and-language#footnoteref11\\_h8ftgqm](https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/27/art-and-language#footnoteref11_h8ftgqm) [Date accessed: 10 January 2022].
3. Michael Baldwin, 'Remarks on Air-Conditioning: An Extravaganza of Blandness', *Arts Magazine*, November (1967), pp. 22–23.
4. Pages from this letterpress edition have also been presented as a wall-piece, as in the *Invisible* exhibition and elsewhere, including the exhibition at Tate Britain, London: *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–75*, 12 April–29 August 2016. The version owned by Tate was purchased in 2011 (reference P80069) and is described as '10 sheets of printed paper, paper cover and detachable plastic grip', measuring 210 × 150 × 2 mm, titled *Air Conditioning Show / Air Show / Frameworks 1966–1967*, which points to the multiplicity of its forms of presentation. On the Tate copy each sheet comprises two printed pages; the exhibition copy presented at the Hayward consisted of one page per sheet.
5. The catalogue for *Invisible: Art About the Unseen 1957–2012* lists the elements of the installation as three separate parts, the air-conditioned room (*Air-Conditioning Show*, 1966–1967); the twenty pages of text (*Frameworks: Air-Conditioning*, 1966–1967) and the poster (*Poster*, 1966–1967).
6. Art & Language, 'The Air-Conditioning Show, 1966–1972', in Mathieu Cope-land (ed.), *Voids: A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2009), p. 22.
7. Amy Sara Carroll, 'Muerta sin fin: Teresa Margolles's Gendered states of exception', *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 2 (2010), p. 103.
8. Ralph Rugoff and Helen Luckett, *Invisible: Art About the Unseen 1957–2012* (London: Hayward, 2012), p. 13.
9. Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden, *Art & Language in Practice Vol. 1: Illustrated Handbook* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 1999), p. 132.
10. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Mary Lydon and Antony Hudek (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 4. Note: I am simplifying Lyotard's argument here.

12. On the difficulties of defining the figural and the need to seek out, enact or perform its effects, see Kiff Bamford, *Lyotard and the figural in Performance, Art and Writing* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
13. See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), chapter 3 'Diffractions'.
14. *Visible Language*, 12, no. 3 (1978) was a special issue titled 'French Currents of the letter', famously designed by Graphic Design students at Cranbrook Academy of Art, under the supervision of co-chair Katherine McCoy, who were given an introduction to deconstruction by then head of architecture at Cranbrook, Daniel Libeskind. The resulting eight essays variously privileged the footnotes and typographic spacing over the body copy prompting lengthy debates within the graphic design community, especially the magazine *Émigré*, and was defended by Ellen Lupton, among others. See Ellen Lupton and Abbott Miller, *Design, Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design* (London: Phaidon, 1999).
15. Marguerite Duras, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Pantheon, 1966). A subsequent translation by Eileen Ellenbogen reinserts the 'V' in the title, though this edition is now out of print, see Marguerite Duras, *The Rapture of Lol V Stein*, trans. Eileen Ellenbogen (London: Hamilton, 1967). See also the original French edition: Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
16. Sanford S. Ames, 'Cinderella's slipper: Mallarme's Letters in Duras', *Visible Language*, 12, no. 3 (1978), p. 247.
17. *Ibid.*, 248.
18. *Ibid.*, 254.
19. Art & Language, 'The Air-Conditioning Show, 1966–1972', p. 67.
20. Adrian Piper, 'Ian Burn's Conceptualism', in Michael Corris (ed.) *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 345.
21. Lucy Lippard, 'Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 16, no. 1 (1972), p. 78.
22. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 8.
23. *Ibid.*, 9.
24. Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 59.
25. See the exhibition leaflet for *Marina Abramović: 512 Hours*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 11 June–25 August 2014.
26. Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone, 1991), p. 94.
27. Signatories were also required to supply contact details to the Probable Trust Registry. At the end of the exhibition a complete list of signatories is circulated to all participants and contact between signatories is facilitated by the Adrian Piper Research Archive, depending on individual permissions.
28. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, 55 (1990), pp. 105–143.
29. Art & Language, 'Reflections on Conceptual Art', *Critical Inquiry*, 33, no. 1 (2006), p. 118. The wider discussion relates to the valorisation of a particular group of artists associated with conceptual art and 'institutional critique' by the art historians associated with the journal *October*: Benjamin Buchloh,

- Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, in light of their publication *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*.
30. Amelia Jones, 'Faith Wilding, Waiting and Wait-With', in Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (eds), *Perform, Repeat, Record* (London: Intellect, 2012), p. 253.
  31. Ibid.
  32. Bettina Knaup, 'Telling Stories Differently', in Bettina Knaup and Beatrice Stammer (eds) *RE.ACT: Feminism: A Performing Archive* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2014), p. 74.
  33. Art & Language, 'Reflections on Conceptual Art', p. 131.
  34. *Voids: A Retrospective*, ed. Mathieu Copeland (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2009).
  35. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 53.
  36. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Foreword: After the Words', in Joseph Kosuth (ed.), *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected writings 1966–1990* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991), p. xvi.

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### ORCID

Kiff Bamford  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0222-6073>