

Art & Language

17/11/17–5/1/18

Since their foundation in 1968, Art & Language have stood for the critical questioning of the conventions of artistic practice and been regarded as one of the “protagonists” of Conceptual Art. But while many other proponents of Conceptual Art completely reject sculpture and painting, Art & Language began critically integrating these genres in their work from 1975 onward, for as the art theorist Charles Harrison remarked with regard to the working method of Art & Language: There should be no ‘You can’t walk there, it’s off the map’! The oeuvre of Art & Language includes performances, concerts, paintings, texts, drawings and sculptures, and is characterized by collaborations with the art critic Charles Harrison, the avant-garde rock band The Red Krayola or the performance group The Jackson Pollock Bar. Typical of all works by Art & Language is the strategy of “indexing” that, as an “autopoetic system”, generates an endless dialogue between everything involved: various groups of work by Art & Language, the different conventions of producing and viewing art, concepts of the artist, of authorship and originality. During their work process, Art & Language literally “hack” the different systems of grasping and producing art, letting them appear in different “costumes” in their works and then disappear again, something that also depends on the interpretation of the viewer.

The installation “Now They Are I” consists of 144 pages of text behind glass frames, with one or several portraits drawn over some of them. The texts were all written by Art & Language and published in magazines or art publications. While the texts of the installation “Index 01” exhibited at the documenta 5 in 1972 were partially “hidden” in file cabinets, in “Now They Are I” the texts cannot be completely read because of the portraits drawn on them. “Now They Are I” can be regarded as a “portrait index” of Art & Language. The portrait drawings follow to a specific grammatical logic, a portrait is drawn only if a person is directly referred to in a sentence in which their name occurs. The installation “Portraits and Dreams” from 2010, in turn, is based on the neuroscientific insight that saying a name can have the same effect as actually showing a portrait. “Now They Are I” combines both aspects, for if the texts are already a “portrait”, what are the drawn

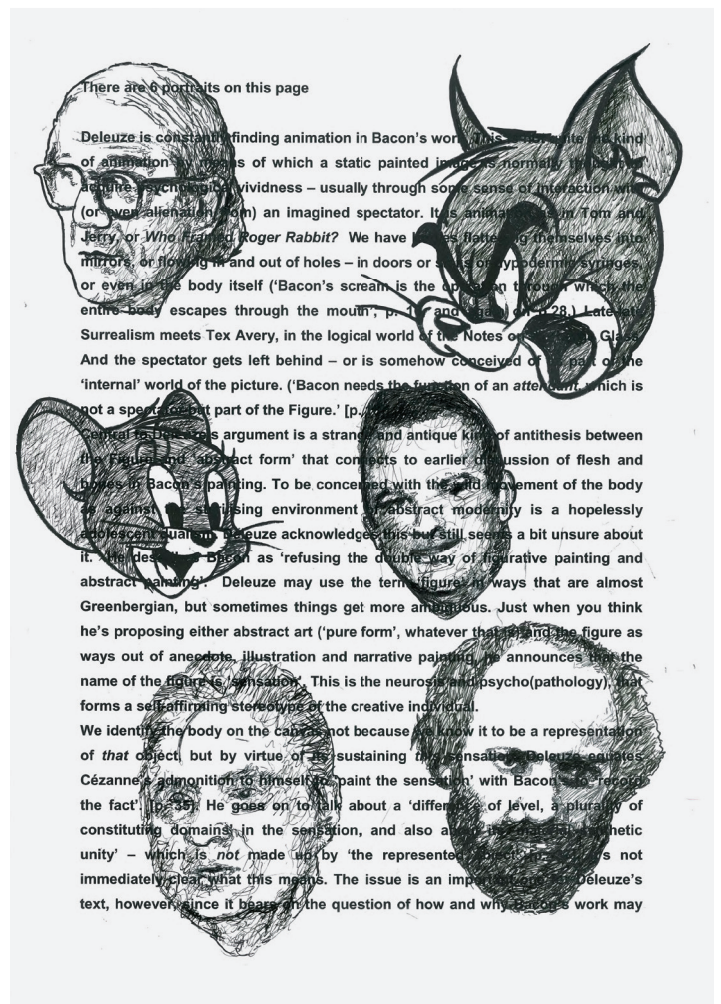
pictures? The portraits depict persons, or sometimes cartoon characters such as Tom and Jerry, including the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the artist Marcel Duchamp, the vocalists of the song “Four Stars” written by Art & Language and The Red Krayola, Sandie Yang and Elisa Randazzo, the art critic Rosalind Krauss, and even Art & Language themselves. While on most pages there is an indication of how many portraits can be seen, some have the heading “There are many portraits on this page” and lead to the hidden subtexts of the actually visible text, because only one portrait is apparently visible. This is indeed a “morphed” portrait of several personalities to which the respective text refers as a “social group”, without directly mentioning them. “Now They Are I” plays with a number of possible relations between naming, describing or depicting a person, metaphorically or literally. Depending on the vantage point, the 144 framed sheets of paper turn into a grid-like pattern in which the portraits are “positioned”, or the texts covered by the portraits are discerned as a “text image” that is possibly legible in fragments. The viewer turns into a reader and vice versa, not least to also decipher the “identities” of the portraits that cannot be immediately recognized.



Untitled, 2017

Lovely Hostage V, 2016
glass, oil on canvas
73 x 65 cm

Just as the portrait is one of the main genres of art, landscape painting represents different social values and myths, depending on the historical context. In 1989 Art & Language described in a text a landscape painting that they would realize sometime in the future. The text describes a landscape in the vicinity of their studio in Oxfordshire. The three new paintings “Lovely Hostages” are part of Art & Language’s series of paintings titled “Hostages” that they began in 1990 and were exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art, among other places. While the early works of the series were exclusively produced in large portrait formats, all depicting poplar trees on the edge of a field, the “Lovely Hostages” are in a square format, each showing one tree in the center. All trees can be found near the studio of Art & Language. The iconic representation of a single tree plays more with the figurative associations of a portrait than with the conventions of landscape painting. At the same time, just like with the earlier works of the “Hostages” series, this “iconic view” is “obstructed” by the impasto application of abstract color streaks. Intensified by the glass panel directly mounted on the picture – and factually contributing to the creation of the abstract color streaks – the beholder is inevitably drawn into a play of disorientation between form and content, surface and space, illusion and reality. In this sense, the “Hostage” paintings function as a collage of different concepts related to painting.



Page from: Now They Are I, 2015
 144 parts, ink and paint on paper
 each 42x29,7 cm, overall dimension variable



installation view Art & Language, Kadel Willborn, Düsseldorf, Germany, 2017

Now They Are I, 2015

144 parts, ink and paint on paper

each 42×29,7 cm, overall dimension variable

Since 1977, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden have been working as the artists' group Art & Language. They live and work in Middleton Cheney, UK.

Art & Language have participated in several documenta exhibitions, the documenta 5, documenta 7 and documenta 10. Major solo exhibitions at, among others, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Barcelona, Spain (2014); Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (2013); Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, Switzerland (2012); Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Espoo, Finland (2009); Centro De Arte Contemporáneo (CAC) Málaga, Spain (2004); MoMA PS1, New York, USA (1999); ICA, London, UK (1991); Tate Gallery, London, UK (1985); Musée d'Art Moderne, Toulon, France (1982) and Museum of Modern Oxford (1974).

Works by Art & Language are included in numerous museum collections, including The Tate Gallery London, Museum of Modern Art New York, The Centre Pompidou Paris, Museum Moderner Kunst Vienna, Museu d'Art Contemporani Barcelona, The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Städelmuseum Frankfurt and the Migrosmuseum Zurich, just to mention a few.

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