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Carpenter of the Predicate

Ian Burn, Conceptual Art, and Making

One of the earliest critical accounts of conceptualism, the 1968 essay "The Dematerialization of Art," staked out what the authors named "ultra-conceptual" art in opposition to making. As the authors Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler put it: "The artist as thinker, subject to none of the limitations of the artist as maker, can project a visionary and utopian art that is no less art than concrete works."[1] The reception of conceptual art has often reproduced this idea of a break with the "limitations" of making, along with the motif of "dematerialization." Conceptual art is normally said to have decentered the purely visual and to be concerned with ideas, at the expense of the production of artifacts. If conceptual artworks have a material form, it is supposed to be incidental, because they appeal primarily to the intellect, rather than to the senses. By contrast, "making" normally connotes the working of material. Making is nondiscursive, though now often envisaged as a kind of "thinking": that is, as a form of cognition that depends on tacit skill, embodied knowledge and sensuous engagement with matter.[2] The kind of cognitive experience that conceptual art produces, on the other hand, is normally understood to be communicable in verbal language. Of course, these generalizations about conceptual art are not entirely without foundation; artists associated with the movement did often reject the idea that the artist's role is to make artifacts primarily for visual consumption. Even so, the distinction between conceptual art and making is often drawn far too sharply and obscures important features of the movement and its legacies.

To illustrate this point, it is interesting to consider the international group of artists associated with the collective Art & Language, normally said to be the most rigorously theoretical tendency in conceptual art.[3] Along with Joseph Kosuth, whose two-part essay "Art after Philosophy" was published in *Studio International* in 1969, members of Art & Language secured a reputation as strict advocates for the idea that art need have no relationship to artifacts, and therefore making. The work of Art & Language involved a polemic against formalist painting that seemed to set them entirely against the remnants of the artisanal dimension of art practice.[4] The introductory essay to the first issue of *Art-Language*, the collective's journal, famously asked whether "an attempt to evince some outlines as to what 'conceptual art' is" (that is, the matter of the introductory essay itself), might be considered an artwork.[5] This

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"hypothesis," or provocation, appeared to dispense entirely with the art object and to identify art practice with theoretical enquiry. Even so, at least some members and former members of the collective would come to assert the *importance* of skill and making, a fact that has received relatively little sustained critical attention. This chapter explores how questions concerned with making might have played an important and understudied role in theoretical conceptual art in the late 1960s.

Although Art & Language has a secure place in the conceptual art canon, the group has often been misrepresented by influential art-historical texts. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh, for example, in a well-known account of conceptual art, characterized the activities of Art & Language as "authoritarian quests for orthodoxy."[6] This comment suggests that the group existed to enforce a single polemical line, but an ambition of this kind is not in evidence in its output. From 1969 until 1976, Art & Language made public a dialogue among group members that first explored the role of language in art, before opening up to explore questions of a political character. This dialogue always contained disagreements, and differences of perspectives also exist in the histories written by those associated with Art & Language.[7] Even so, the misconception that Art & Language held to a single programmatic position on conceptual art is a persistent one.[8] This essay argues that art-historical study of Art & Language should take into account its members' divergent views.[9] Some members of the group saw making as a redundant or regressive feature of art practice, whereas others took a more nuanced position on this question. Understanding the diversity of positions taken by members of Art & Language sheds light on the kind of theoretical enquiry this group undertook.

This essay focuses on Ian Burn, an Australian artist who began to make conceptual art in the late 1960s, before he joined Art & Language between 1971 and 1976. On leaving the collective, Burn gave up his artistic career to focus on political activism, union journalism, and occasional curatorial work for around a decade. In the late 1980s, he returned to art making, developing themes that were present in his work of the late 1960s, before his early death in 1993. Burn's work has been extensively studied by art historians in Australia, but it has received little attention in recent scholarship exploring conceptual art as a materialist, rather than a "dematerialized" tendency.[10] This is strange because, at an early date, Burn used conceptual art to explore skill, deskilling, and, therefore, making. This study is based on a close reading of works that Burn made before he formally joined Art & Language, alongside arguments about artistic skill and deskilling that he made in the early 1980s in essays that reflected on the significance of the historical moment of conceptual art. Burn's practice demonstrates that the theoretical debate in Art & Language was never an orthodoxy, as Buchloh argues. Kosuth and Burn understood conceptual art quite differently and, indeed, Kosuth's views were often in tension with the positions taken by the majority of members of the collective. In addition, the nature of Burn's practice demonstrates that Art & Language, from early on, included members whose work addressed questions to do with materiality and making.

1. The *Xerox Book*

The second issue of *Art-Language* begins with a short essay by Kosuth, entitled "Introductory Note by the American Editor," which characterizes making in dismissive terms:

> In terms of art then this work (the painting or the sculpture) is merely the "dumb" subject-matter (or cue) to critical discourse. The artist's role is not unlike the valet's assistance to his marksman master: pitching into the air of clay plates for targets. This follows in that aesthetics deals with considerations of opinions on perception, and since experience is immediate art becomes merely a human ordered base for perceptual kicks, thus paralleling (and "competing" with) natural sources of visual (and other) experiences. The artist is omitted from the "art activity" in that he is merely the carpenter of the predicate, and does not take part in the conceptual engagement (such as the critic functions in his traditional role) of the "construction" of the art proposition.[11]

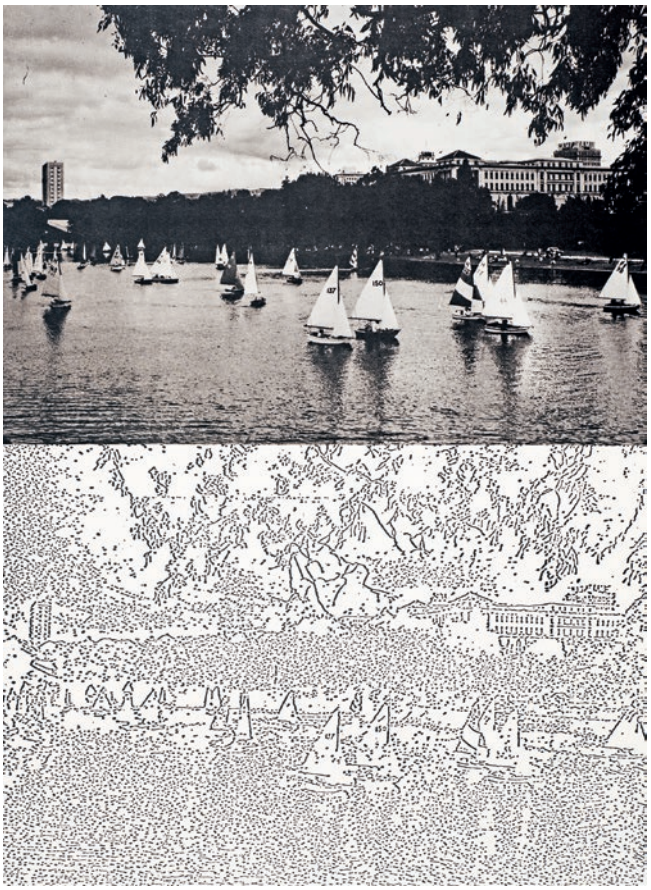
The painter is a "carpenter of the predicate" because paintings are "dumb": they wait for critics to come along and attach discursive meaning to them. Conceptual artists, by contrast, make explicit the conceptual content of their work. For Kosuth, the conceptual artwork is an "analytic" proposition: art is understood *as* language.[12] Sometimes, Kosuth is assumed to have spoken for Art & Language in his writings of the late 1960s but, in fact, there were important differences between his ideas and the positions articulated in the first issue of *Art-Language* and in the journal thereafter by other members of the collective. The editors of *Art-Language* proposed an investigation of art via "the language use of the art-society," that drew upon the resources of analytic philosophy but did not exclude questions concerned with making in quite the definitive way that Kosuth proposed.[13] For other members of Art & Language an artisanal identity would become important as a vantage and reference point from which to critique the art world, a trajectory that is very clear in the work of Burn.[14]

Burn moved to New York from London, where he had been living since arriving from Australia in 1965, in July 1967. His earliest conceptual art works date from around this time. They include text-based works made on or using mirrors combined with sheets of glass and, also, a sequence of works made on Xerox machines between 1968 and 1969. I will focus on these latter works because they neatly problematize what is meant by the term "concept" in conceptual art. This question has historical significance because in the late 1960s, the term "concept" had not taken on the exclusive identification with language that it would later develop (most obviously in Kosuth's work). Used interchangeably with linked terms like "idea" or "premise," the term "concept" might refer to a plan, a process, or an object. In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" of 1967, Sol LeWitt wrote, for example: "The conceptual artist would want to ameliorate . . . emphasis on materiality as much as possible or to use it in a paradoxical way. (To convert it into an idea.)"[15] A material object might potentially qualify as an "idea" according to this definition.

LeWitt also wrote in 1966 that the artist should be a "clerk cataloguing the results of his premise" in a famous text that set out principles of what he then called "serial art."[16] Burn used the same term more than once at around the same time when titling works (though he used the alternative spelling, "premiss"). For example, the work *Yellow Premiss*, painted in 1965, comprised six identical paintings, featuring yellow stripes on a white background, displayed alongside one another. In a message back to his parents, on the occasion of the work being exhibited in Australia in 1966, Burn defined the term "premiss" as "a proposition put forward upon which later suppositions are based."[17]According to Ann Stephen, whose monograph on Burn provides the most extensive enquiry into his work, it was the uncomprehending reaction to *Yellow Premiss*, when it was sent to Australia for exhibition, that prompted Burn to begin writing about his practice. He would develop his enquiry into the relationship between art and serial repetition in his first *Xerox Book*.

These kinds of works are sometimes termed "proto-conceptual" because they broach issues around seriality, the problem of originality, and so on, but via artifacts. In paintings produced between 1965–67, such as the *Yellow Premiss* and *Reflex* series, Burn worked through the implications of the work of Frank Stella, Piet Mondrian, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings*, while simultaneously developing collaborative work with his friend Mel Ramsden, such as the work *Soft Tape* of 1966, which explored the relationship between sound and environment.[18] When Burn stopped painting, and making any individual works, whether using mirrors, glass, or Xerox machine, his art practice became entirely collaborative and theoretical: first in the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses with Mel Ramsden and Roger Cutforth between 1969–71 and subsequently in Art & Language. The copy machine that Burn used in 1968 and 1969 seems to have provided space to work through questions to do with the relationship between language art, and artifactuality, because it problematized the value judgements that attach to artisanal expertise, which conceptual artists invariably saw as screening the cognitive content of the work. Burn used the copy machine to make artifacts, primarily books, but the "concept" of the *Xerox Book* is not communicated exclusively in language. Instead, these works dramatize a problem to do with making that, I will argue here, plays a significant and understudied role in conceptual art of the period.

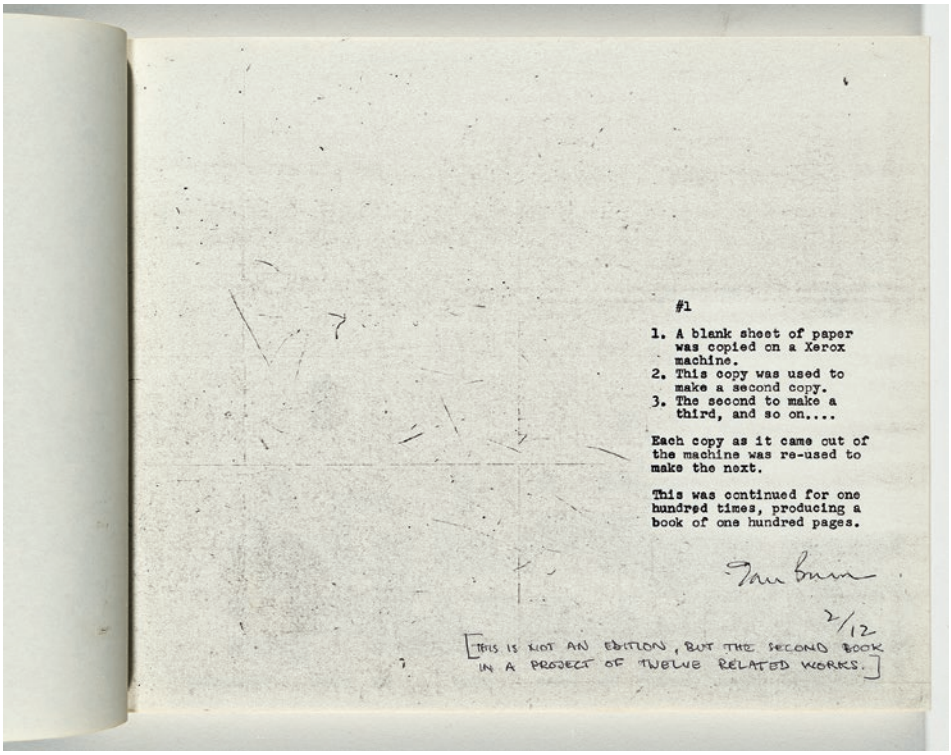
Burn explored various ideas on the Xerox machine, in the process of analyzing what it means to make an art object. For example, a work entitled *Systematically Altered Photographs* (fig. 1) problematizes the relationship between language and seeing. Burn used as the subject matter for this work images taken from an Australian government publication called *Australian Panorama*. Images selected from the book were each juxtaposed with a copy, produced by passing them repeatedly through a copy machine until their tonal organization degraded entirely. The resulting image is still discernible as the same scene, though it is reduced to swarms of dots and frail lines on the facsimile. In an essay accompanying the book, written by Burn and Ramsden, these images are proposed as demonstrations of the way that language is so embedded in seeing that it sometimes "screens what we see," even to the extent that the language we use to construe an image may be "confused with brute facts."[19]



1 Ian Burn, *Systematically Altered Photographs* (detail), 1968. 3 black and white photographs (reproduction from "Australian Panorama," Australian News and Information Bureau, ca. 1967) and photocopy on paper, 1 black and white photograph, dimensions variable

Close attention to language is necessary because it shapes perception and, indeed, stands in the way of it. This investigation of vision would become a recurrent preoccupation of Burn's work, but the copy machine also made it possible for him to analyze the relationship between language and a making process.

Created around the same time as *Systematically Altered Photographs*, Burn's *Xerox Book* explored an alternate premise using the same technology. A series of similar works were made at this time, some of which used alternative titles such as *Structure* or *One Structure*, but I will describe here *Xerox Book #1* (fig. 2). This work is interesting because it developed an afterlife, as I will show, as Burn began to explore the possibility that an artwork might be entirely language-based. The production process for this work is described in a typewritten text on the inside cover of the book:



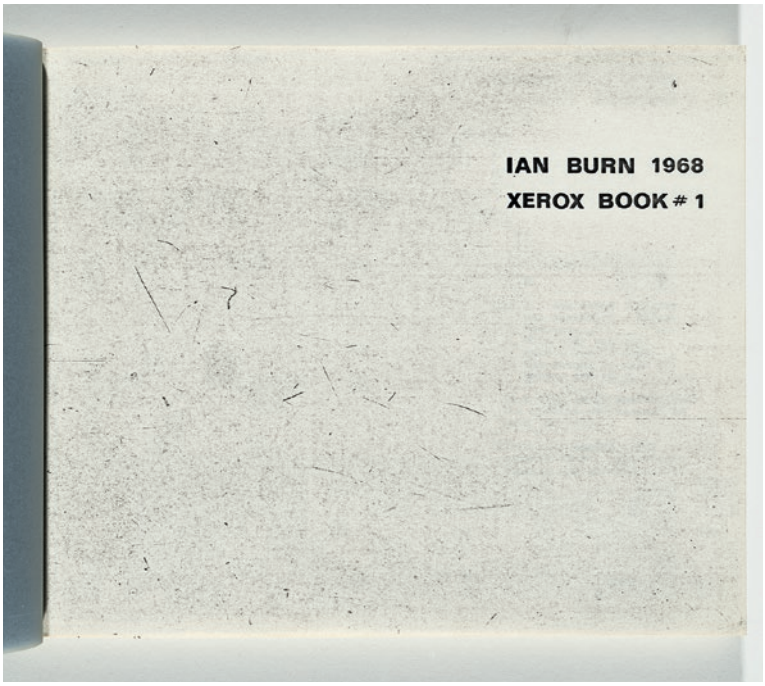
2 Ian Burn, *Xerox Book # 1*, 1968. Inside cover, 21.2 × 27.6 cm (book closed)

1. A blank sheet of paper was copied on a Xerox machine.
2. This copy was used to make a second copy.
3. The second to make a third, and so on. . . .

Each copy as it came out of the machine was re-used to make the next.

This was continued for one hundred times, producing a book of one hundred pages.

Although this work uses a copy machine to remove any possibility that it should be understood as dependent on the hand of the artist, Burn signs the work and even includes a handwritten note: "This is not an edition but the second book in a project of twelve related works." There is no explanatory essay, unlike with *Systematically Altered Photographs*, but the book does contain exactly one hundred pages, including the cover and inside cover on which the written description is typed.[20] Rather than the degradation of an image, the pages of the book record the accretion of visual "noise" produced by the copying process. Instead of the subtraction of visual information, which is essential to the logic of *Systematically Altered Photographs*, *Xerox Book #1* foregrounds the contingent materiality that is part of the imperfect process of copying. Although "the blank sheet of paper" is described as part of the concept of the work,



3 Ian Burn, *Xerox Book # 1*, 1968. Cover, 21.2 × 27.6 cm (book closed)

it is interesting to note that it is not part of the book. This is evident because the title page of the book is a copy, featuring scratches transferred from the platen glass of the copier (fig. 3).

According to a widely held view of conceptual art, the linguistic statement included in the Burn's *Xerox Book* ought to be sufficient to communicate the concept. This is what we might expect, for example, if it is the case that conceptual art "deemphasizes material aspects," as Lucy R. Lippard argues in her 1973 book *The Dematerialization of the Art Object*.[21] This does not, however, seem to hold for *Xerox Book #1* because, although the making is automated, the relation between statement and artifact remains significant. The written statement includes information that is not in the book (it refers to "the blank sheet of paper"); the book contains information that is not included in the statement: namely, the accumulated visual noise that derives from the copier repeatedly translating imperfections from one facsimile to the next.

A second version of this work appeared in the mimeographed magazine *Art Press*, a publication that was produced by the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses in 1969. In this version, the specification for the work appeared on the left-hand page; on the right, there is a single sample sheet showing the last of the hundred copies. This work, which is titled *Xerox Piece*, has a slightly altered text. Burn indicates here that "[t]he original work exists as

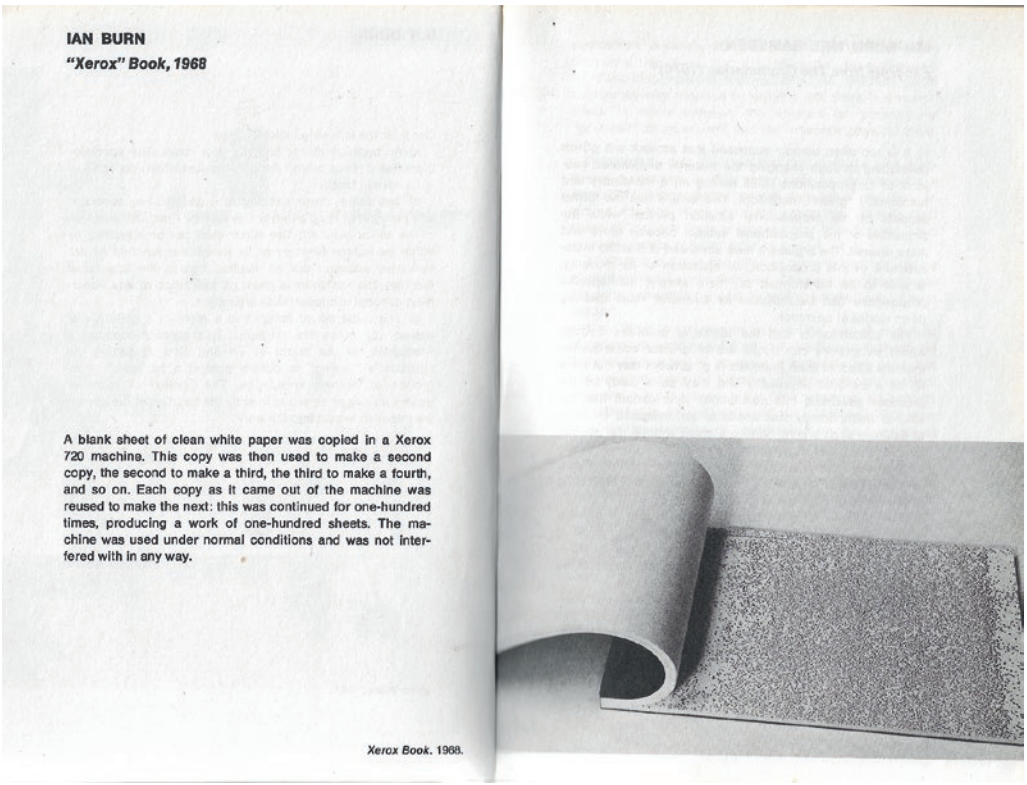
the idea in specification and/or the one hundred sheets."[22] Stephen observes that this addition "left it to the viewer to determine whether to see the art in the idea or the one hundred sheets."[23] This is also a specification that seems to recall the well-known "Statement of Intent" of Lawrence Weiner, probably composed in 1968:

> 1. The artist may construct the piece
> 2. The piece may be fabricated
> 3. The piece need not be built
>
> Each being equal and consistent with the intent of artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership

The point of comparison here has to do with the idea that a work, "a piece," might exist either as a material artifact, or intervention, or as language. At this time, Weiner consistently argued that his work dealt with materiality, although each work was realized as a linguistic "statement," typically one that indicated a physical or material intervention. Weiner's work would have been available as a point of reference for Burn's project, which also explored tensions between language and materiality. (Weiner published "Statement of Intent" in the catalogue to the group show *January, 5–31, 1969*, organized by Seth Siegelaub. *Art Press* came out in July of 1969.)[24] As art historian Sabeth Buchman notes, Weiner's work is generally recognized as "a prime example of a materialistic notion of Conceptual art."[25] Interestingly, Buchman makes a point of contrasting Weiner's approach to the "text and theory work forms of the group Art & Language."[26] This statement reflects a common view that Art & Language was somehow not interested in materiality, because they privileged theoretical work. Yet, Burn would become a member of Art & Language and, as I will show, often reflected on the artifact and on making in a way that bears comparison to Weiner's work.

A third version of *Xerox Book* was included in an early anthology on *Conceptual Art* published in 1972 and authored by Ursula Meyer (fig. 4).[27] Burn was employed as a consultant on this work, so it seems reasonable to assume that he was content that any works included were representative of his practice.[28] This version of the *Xerox Book* uses the same wording as is in *Xerox Piece* except that the statement "The original work exists as the idea in specification and/or the one hundred sheets" is now removed. The text is supplemented by a photograph of the book, lying open so that one page is visible. The text reads:

> A blank sheet of clean white paper was copied in a Xerox 720 machine. This copy was then used to make a second copy, the second to make a third, the third to make a fourth, and so on. Each copy as it came out the machine was reused to make the next: this was continued for one-hundred times, producing a work of one-hundred sheets. The machine was used under normal conditions and was not interfered with in any way.



4 Ian Burn, "*Xerox Book*," 1968. Version included in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art,* New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972

In this later version of *Xerox Book*, the numerical ordering is removed from the statement and the model of Xerox machine is named. (There exists an alternative version where the address of the copy shop where the book was made is also included in the work.) This version of the text includes the statement "The machine was used under normal conditions and was not interfered with in any way" seemingly to guard against a possible misconception, which could arise because the statement is separated from the accrual of "noise" that a viewer might examine across pages of the book. When looked at in sequence, features like scratches are reproduced across successive pages in a way that provides evidence of the process described in the printed description of the work. Seen only as a photograph (or a single reproduced page in *Xerox Piece*) a viewer might infer that the machine had been tampered with to induce these effects.

It is possible that Burn's decision to include this qualification was prompted by other circumstances, of course. The historical situation of the Xerox machine was complex. An invention of the 1940s, it was funded in part because the United States military wanted to develop a photographic process that would work close to nuclear test sites. It entered the office in the

early 1960s and was connected both to deskilled forms of administrative work and also to technophilic fantasies of liberation caused by the nascent revolution in information technology.[29] It was considered by Marshall McLuhan to signal a new kind of democratic access to information where everyone could be "both author and publisher."[30] However, copiers were also interesting because they achieved "bland, shitty reproduction," in the words of Seth Siegelaub, the conceptual art impresario who created an entirely different work named *Xerox Book* in 1968.[31] That is, for conceptual artists, the Xerox machine was appealing because it reduced opportunities to read art aesthetically. Even so, by 1970, forms of copier art had emerged, such as Sonia Sheridan's work included in the exhibition *Software* in the Jewish Museum, using sophisticated and experimental copier technology as a form of interactive art where "objects change as rapidly as thinking allows."[32] At the time, "intervention" in the technology might have been taken to imply a technologically adapted version of creativity that pointed in the direction of affirmative humanism. By contrast, Burn seems to want the copier to operate in the spirit of LeWitt's account of conceptual art where "the idea becomes a machine that makes the work."[33] The copy machine is supposed to negate the artist's subjective references and problematize romantic ideologies associated with making.

It is noteworthy that Burn's choice of wording ("The machine was used under normal conditions") makes explicit the difference between Burn's approach to conceptual art and Lawrence Weiner's "Statements." Although Burn seems to use the copy machine because it deflates any ideology of making, it is still important to the work that the book has been *made*. Weiner's statements were always phrased in such a way that they may or may not record an actual occurrence, such as, for example:

> One sheet of plywood secured to the floor or wall.

Burn establishes a quite different framework for understanding the work, by using the past tense to indicate that that *Xerox Book* was made at a definite point, on a specified machine, presumably by the artist. Having said that, the *Xerox Book* certainly does not aggrandize this authorial position. Anyone could make a similar artifact, but the concept is not presented as generalizable: it matters when and where it was produced, even when the artifact is no longer present. In fact, the handwritten note in *Xerox Book #1* thematizes each iteration of the work as irreducibly unique, as a condition of apparent repetition: the versions of the work are "not an edition" [i.e., not facsimiles of an original—author note] but "a project made of 12 related works."

Burn's work maintains a kind of residual commitment to artisanal making then, because it refers to a made object as linked to a specific material process and spatial and temporal coordinates. Ann Stephen notes that Burn's early experiments with the Xerox machine would involve him repeatedly copying the same sheet of paper in a copy shop, when the machines were not in use by other customers. This activity seems to have interested Burn on an experiential level, and he noted in a letter to his friend Ramsden, who was still in London at this time, his interest in the quality of boredom produced by watching Andy Warhol's films:

> Went to another Warhol film, *I, a Man*, it was very interesting I was bored the whole way through. I like the way he gradually destroys everything you might be able to grasp—dialog, story, form, technique—all become just meaningless, and you are left with nothing, but it isn't nothing because you have been there.[34]

It is not difficult to see a kind of analogous experience in what must have been the repetitive labor required to make *Xerox Book*. Evidently, *Xerox Book* does not require skilled work, but instead thematizes the experience of unskilled, repetitive labor. Although the work is conceptual, the concept involves an experience of making that has some kind of relationship to contingent materiality. This is the case, even in the later versions of the work that is communicated in text alongside a photographic image.

2. *Read Premiss*

It has already been noted that some influential histories of conceptual art treat Kosuth as if he were the American spokesman for Art & Language in 1969, the year in which "Art after Philosophy" appeared in *Studio International*, and the same year in which the first issue of *Art-Language* was published. The views of Burn and Ramsden, the other New York-based artists who would go on to join the collective, have tended to receive less attention. This is perhaps because Kosuth, though he joined Art & Language before Burn and Ramsden, never subsumed his individual practice entirely into the collective. He was careful to maintain a distinct artistic identity and, in "Art after Philosophy," supplied strident claims that lend themselves to being quoted, even if they are not entirely coherent. Having established some of the problems explored in Burn's series of Xerox books, it will be helpful to sketch how they sit in relation to Kosuth's work, and in relation to histories of conceptual art.

For Kosuth, the conceptual artwork is tautological. Described by analogy to analytic definitions in the linguistic philosophy of A. J. Ayer, the concept makes a claim about the character of art, which renders information from outside of art entirely irrelevant. As Kosuth puts it, works of conceptual art "provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact."[35] In Kosuth's work of the period, known as "The Second Investigation," categories lifted from *Roget's Thesaurus* were distributed in press advertisements, on billboards, and using handbills in fifteen exhibitions that took place in Europe, North and South America, and in Australia. One of Kosuth's basic principles was that the mode of delivery of the artwork was contingent: the concept was inviolate and removed from any material instantiation of it, which meant it could be communicated simultaneously in disparate media.

Drawing primarily from Kosuth's work to characterize conceptual art, Buchloh goes so far as to characterize conceptual art as a "cult of tautology," which he represents as a resurgence of the symbolist ideal of an entirely self-sufficient and self-referential art, and as symptomatic of the middle class in postwar capitalism. As Buchloh puts it:

> [A] newly established middle class . . . could identify comfortably with the late Modernist model of the tautology and its accompanying aesthetic of administration. This aesthetic of administration is structured exactly in analogy to this class's social identity, since its tasks are to administer labor and to organize and supervise the distribution of commodities, rather than to actually engage in material production.[36]

Needless to say, this attempt to reduce conceptual art into a product of a class formation that was complicit with consumerism is a controversial one, based on a sweeping generalization. Perhaps the most important point to note is that some products of conceptual artists did have a relationship to material production, which was derived from their use of technology associated with administrative work. The Xerox machine is the obvious example of such technology, one that Buchloh does not consider despite his reference to an "aesthetics of administration."

Art historian Tamara Trodd argues that the Xerox machine provided an opportunity for artists to disrupt the shibboleth of medium-specificity by applying a self-reflexive procedure outside the domain of painting. Trodd develops this argument through an analysis of the 1966 exhibition *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*, at the School of Visual Arts in New York, which was curated by Mel Bochner. Bochner displayed the drawings and ephemera that formed the show in four binders, all of them xeroxed in a show that is often said to have been the first conceptual art exhibition.[37] On the first page of each binder Bochner included a xeroxed plan of the gallery space and, on the final page, a copy from the Xerox user manual showing a plan of the copy machine mechanism. Trodd describes this as a "parodic performance of medium-specificity . . . as if in hysteric travesty of the medium's terms at the time."[38] This "tautological self-reference" employed modernist principles in order to subvert them.

Trodd does not seem to be aware of Burn's works, though the *Xerox Book* clearly resonates with her argument.[39] Having said this, Burn's self-reflexive use of the copy machine has a distinct emphasis. Bochner's exhibition employed diagrams and drawings and used the mechanically deadening effect created by the copy machine to form a visually unified context in which to encounter disparate material. By contrast, Burn focuses on the relationship between the linguistic description of a making process and the made artifact. As I have already noted, the language component of the book is given in the past tense, describing the process that results in the book itself. Indeed, the facture of the pages indicates that the statement might have been typed onto one of the sheets after it was copied, or perhaps typed first and then copied. The *Xerox Book* is made using a technology that seemed to reenforce the split between conception and execution, but the reflexiveness of the work puts the priority of conception in doubt. Does the description of the operation precede and dictate the work that makes *Xerox Book #1*, or does it follow after and inadequately describe the process?

The curator and art historian Helen Molesworth notes of art of the 1960s that "much of the most important and challenging art of the period staged the problem of labor's transformation, its new divisions, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and leisure."[40]

In this respect, the use of a Xerox machine itself is readable as a response to what Molesworth terms "societal anxieties around the shifting terrain and definitions of work."[41] This is suggestive because, as I will shortly discuss, Burn would write about conceptual art in the early 1980s, situating it within the crisis initiated by the changing technological form of the labor process, which has come to be known as "deskilling." Though Burn could not have encountered theoretical debates about deskilling until the mid- to late 1970s, it is clear that he was preoccupied with problems concerning making much earlier, in works he created in 1968.[42] If the copy machine appealed to many conceptual artists as a means to subvert a romantic ideology of the artist that persisted in abstract painting, it was also for Burn a means to ask to what extent art as "concept" could be thought to overcome the material conditions of an artist's activity and its situatedness in time and place.

Work that explores making is sometimes understood to connote a conservative attachment to a proto-artisanal ideal of the artist. I do not think Burn's work falls into this category. It tends to challenge conventional expectations about authorship, while also problematizing the extent to which a concept can be detached from the embeddedness in a concrete context that is associated with making. Burn's production of conceptual artworks involved collaboration that would culminate in a commitment to a collective art practice, as a member of Art & Language. *Read Premiss*, a work that Burn made between 1968–69, shows how questions to do with making formed a conscious point of reflection in a collaborative work. *Read Premiss* takes the form of an essay, which describes Ramsden's artwork *Six Negatives* (fig. 5). It is therefore, in simple terms, an essay whose function approaches something like art criticism's; however, Burn designates *Read Premiss* as a self-reflexive conceptual artwork that attempts to describe accurately Ramsden's *Six Negatives*. Burn's description of it provides an opportunity to ask questions about the difference between a concept communicated in a discursive essay, and one communicated using a "ready-made" strategy. (*Six Negatives* comprises lists of synonyms and antonyms from *Roget's Thesaurus* where the entire list of "positive" terms is crossed out.) In this respect, it shares something with the approximately contemporaneous "Introduction" to the first issue of *Art-Language* discussed above.

A distinction between the not-made and the made figures prominently in the argument of *Read Premiss*. Burn notes that *Six Negatives* is "ready-made" and thus not-made: i.e., it is not readable in the same way as an artifact is.[43] Given that it is not-made, Burn asks whether *Six Negatives* is adequately communicated by his description of it. If an artwork is conceptual, might it be simply described, or explained, in order for it to exist for its audience? Burn rejects this argument: "To say that an experience of an object is the same as that of a statement of information is of course absurd, they are obviously different kinds of experience."[44] Having argued this point, however, Burn seems to change his mind. He also wants to claim that artists' decisions are more legible when they are *not* realized as works, because any artifact provides information that distracts from the concept. *Six Negatives* raises some of these questions because the "negation" of one side of the synonym/antonym relation sourced from the *Roget's Thesaurus* poses questions for the viewer about how the remaining elements of the

5 Mel Ramsden and Ian Burn, *Six negatives*, 1968–69. Bound book: 14 leaves, 13 photo lithographs, 28 × 21.5 cm (each leaf); 28 × 21.9 × 0.3 cm (book closed)

categorization ought to be read. Burn's *Read Premiss* is self-reflexive, but it is not self-enclosed and tautological because it responds to the problem set by Ramsden's work. Burn closes with the statement:

> But the point at which the viewer contacts the idea and its form is in each the same [*i.e., it is the same in the "experience of an object" as it is in a "statement of information," seemingly contradicting the statement quoted above*—author note] and beyond any initial perceiving of the work. The work exists simply within a conceptual basis rather than a visual framework, and the conceptual basis requires that the language form be arrived at in one way or another.[45]

The interesting thing here is that Burn had not settled on a single conception of the way that art interacts with language. Between 1968 and 1969, the moment when analytic conceptual art developed a distinctive identity, he was working through alternative hypotheses in response to this problem. In the essay accompanying *Systematically-Altered Photographs*, language is said to "screen" experience, stand in the way of it. In *Xerox Book* a linguistic statement describes how an artifact was made, but this statement has an uncertain status, in part because it does not account for all of the information the artifact provides. In *Read Premiss*, Burn seems to concede that a material object is different from a linguistic description, before shifting tack to argue that all art is ultimately accessed via language, however it may be realized. Taken together, these various positions constitute an unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, inquiry into the relationship between language, art, and making. Arguably, this unresolved quality is a virtue.

Kosuth advocated a program for conceptual art, complete with definitions as to the character of artistic concepts. By contrast, Burn kept in play alternative hypotheses on the relationship between art and language across works and writings of that time. Ultimately, in 1969, these different ideas fed into an argument that presented conceptual art as a dialogue. Burn writes: "Participating in a dialogue gives the viewer a new significance; rather than listening, he becomes involved in reproducing and inventing part of that dialogue."[46] Whereas Kosuth modeled conceptual art on tautological definition, Burn aligned it with the social and pragmatic dimensions of language. In this respect, Burn was obviously reflecting on the work he was then undertaking with Ramsden, and also exploring the implications of the work of Art & Language, the group that they both would join. The defining feature of the dialogic practice of this group is that it was an open-ended research program, rather than a "quest for orthodoxy."[47]

The open-ended enquiry pursued by Art & Language would develop a definitively political character by the mid-1970s. Around 1976, the dialogue between members in New York, and between the New York- and United Kingdom-based wings of Art & Language, became overwhelmed by contradictions, in part because the collective began to examine the political situation of its practice more explicitly. Although wildly dysfunctional, the breakup of Art & Language (and the journal *The Fox*, which was then the focus for the New York wing) also produced a searching reflection on the limitations of political agency within art. In the next section I will explore how Burn viewed conceptual art from the vantage point of the 1980s, after he had seemingly abandoned his career as an artist, while working as a journalist and advocate for cultural programs aligned with the Australian trade union moment. Burn's reflections on conceptual art from this period revolved around "deskilling," a term he introduced into the lexicon of contemporary art theory. They are in some respects in tension with, and in others continuous with, the ideas explored here in the *Xerox Book* and *Read Premiss.*

3. Skill and Deskilling

In the early 1980s, Burn "wrestled" with the idea of reinventing his art practice after a number of years focused on his work with Union Media Services.[48] In a notebook from this period, he reflected: "I don't see myself as a rebel, a romantic hero, or a bohemian. I spent five years working as a carpenter, another ten working in picture-framing factories."[49] This artisanal identity is not the "key" to Burn's conceptual art practice, but it is reasonable to suggest that his familiarity with skilled artisanal work made him thoughtful about the material conditions in which he operated. A respect for the material conditions that shape discourse is an often-overlooked feature of Art & Language debate that recurs throughout their output. In Burn's case, it is evident in various essays of the mid-1970s, where he began to reflect on the relationship between art and the market, for example. Burn was prescient in his attention to the emergence of an investment market for contemporary art that would transform the character of the freedoms won by conceptualism.[50] Certainly, Burn's career as a skilled maker goes some way toward explaining his reflections on deskilling.

The term "deskilling" does not originate in an art context. Rather it derives from the "labor process debate" that was inspired by Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*, first published in 1974.[51] In this work Braverman analyzes what he terms "the destruction of craftsmanship" that accompanied the expansion of monopoly capitalism throughout the twentieth century.[52] ("Deskilling" later came into common usage to describe the process Braverman analyzes, though Braverman does not use the term himself.) Braverman's central thesis is that capitalism involves a "secular trend toward the incessant lowering of the working class as a whole below its previous conditions of skill and labor."[53] He demonstrates this point through an analysis of "scientific management," better known as Taylorism, after its key proponent Frederick Winslow Taylor. Braverman shows that Taylorism had the effect of stripping workers of their decision-making power in the labor process, while concentrating skills and knowledge in the domain of management. As a result, the political power of workers declined, as they were forced into low-skilled "detail labor," made increasingly interchangeable and disposable.

Braverman's argument challenged the prevailing view in postwar sociology, which was that technological progress would inevitably create an increasingly skilled workforce.[54] He argued that the average level of skill in the production process could increase, and the majority of work could simultaneously become deskilled, because high-skilled occupations became concentrated in fewer and fewer hands as workers tended to become divested of any control over decision-making in their work. This tendency affected both manufacturing and administrative labor, since all kinds of work are susceptible to being divided between the conception and execution of tasks. So-called "scientific management" of the labor process was employed in manufacturing, but also in the rapidly expanding clerical and service work of the postwar period.

Braverman notes that monopoly capitalism, because of the way it divided up an increasingly complex production process, demanded the increased specialization of clerical

and administrative activities: including banking, law offices, advertising agencies, and publishers. Notably, workers in many of these industries had formerly enjoyed a professionalized status. As the sheer volume of clerical work, and paper, increased, however, clerical labor became proletarianized for most clerical workers, at a time when the workforce became gradually feminized. The median wages of clerical workers were lower than those of workers in traditional production industries in the 1960s. In the United States in 1960 around two-thirds of clerical workers were women; by 1970 the proportion reached three-quarters. This analysis underlines that the "administrative aesthetic" of conceptual art is more complex than a rehearsal of a "white-collar" class position, as Christian Berger has noted.[55] In the 1960s, the status of white-collar occupations was increasingly ambiguous, because of the rapid changes in the character of work. The Xerox machine was a technology that played an important part in this transformation: much of the early advertising for the machine-made sexist claims about the ease with which secretaries would be able to use it.

In art theory, "deskilling" is often identified with art historian Benjamin Buchloh. Buchloh first used the term in 1988 in the essay "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason" where he defines deskilling in art as rejection of "aesthetic autonomy . . . the traditional procedures of artistic production (and, by implication, of course, the concepts embedded in them)."[56] He goes on to argue that this work "demands new skills, which [develop] a different form of historical knowledge, and [address] a different social group and modes of experience."[57] He has since gone on to propose a number of different interpretations of deskilling as a tendency in twentieth-century art though, fundamentally, his version of "deskilling" involves the idea that artists made a transition from handicraft to intellectual skills, following the example set by Marcel Duchamp.[58] In these writings on deskilling, Buchloh's position tends to suggest that skilled artisanal labor contains no integral intellectual horizon. Painting is not a method of enquiry, it is a carrier for certain limiting "embedded" and historically superannuated concepts, which artists overcame by engaging with other fields of intellectual enquiry, such as journalism in the case of Haacke.

Buchloh acknowledges that it was Burn who brought the term "deskilling" into art discourse in an essay published in the Australian journal *Art & Text* in 1981, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath: Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist."[59] The essay contains a thoughtful attempt to work through Braverman's categories via a reflection on the milieu of conceptual art.[60] For Burn, deskilling in art of the 1960s was one feature of a profound, cultural, and political crisis. He saw deskilling at work in all of the major styles of the early 1960s, including Pop Art, color field, and minimalism. Burn suggests that artists may have come to identify with management, as they began to occupy a "supervisory" role in the production of work. It is likely that he had in mind Donald Judd, whose work was outsourced to fabricators. Burn and Karl Beveridge had excoriated Judd's work in the mid-1970s for its incorporation into capitalist ideology.[61] It is notable then that Burn does not view "deskilling" as an expansive strategy as Buchloh does, but as problem afflicting all the art that considered itself "advanced" in the 1960s.

An important feature of "Crisis and Aftermath" is that Burn writes about skill in a way that seems at odds with his earlier adherence to "deskilled" conceptual art. He writes:

> While arguments can be made in favor of discarding "anachronistic" practices in the face of "space-age" technologies, what is so often overlooked is that skills are not merely manual dexterity but forms of knowledge. The acquisition of particular skills implies an access to a body of accumulated knowledge. This deskilling means a rupture with an historical body of knowledge—a de-historicization of the practice of art.[62]

Buchloh's commentary in this passage wryly suggests that it might provide "a rationale for the new cultural conservatism."[63] For Buchloh, the political and artistic significance of conceptual art depends on its movement away from painting; consequently, any mention of skill within contemporary art looks to him to be a regression. Burn was not advocating a return to traditional art practice, however. On the contrary, in "Crisis and Aftermath," Burn celebrates the diverse politicized art that he sees as having been overlooked by art criticism of the 1970s: "The community-oriented art and cultural activities, the work of numerous women's groups, the street murals and theatre, the activities of artists working within trade union contexts and with social and political activist groups."[64] This milieu represented, at the time, a vibrant space for cultural activism and engaged art of the kind that Burn himself practiced after leaving Art & Language. Indeed, many former associates of the collective would operate in this ambiguous space between art and politics, though Burn made work that was more easily identifiable as conceptual, or postconceptual, on his return to art making in the late 1980s.[65] Rather than advocating for a univocal tradition, Burn was opposing what he viewed as an avant-garde ideology that permeated modernism and its self-appointed successors.

Burn's focus on skill is best understood through his idea that deskilling is a "rupture with a body of historical knowledge." Implicit in this statement, is the idea that learning skills involves developing a socially embedded, or "lived," connection to a history. The effect of deskilling, Burn suggests, is that avant-garde artists in the 1960s came under pressure to "produce history," because they were alienated from the kinds of nondiscursive knowledge that was found in a skills-based tradition. He goes on:

> This was not a broad and culturally diverse sense of history, but a particular history conceived as a narrow lineage of styles, in relation to which it was the artist's task to invent the next (formally) "logical" step. By conceiving of work as "instant art history," one necessarily conceives of oneself as merely an object of that history—not a thinking, acting subject.[66]

Burn sees the avant-garde developments of the 1960s as part of this competition to create "instant art history." His point is that the perceptual skills provided by traditional artistic training might provide some defense against the alienating effects of art history and art criticism. It is derived from recognition, which had been fundamental to conceptual art, that discourse

has the power to shape and define the practice of artists. For Burn, as for other members of Art & Language, art criticism and art history were managerial discourses. Although conceptual art sometimes has the reputation of being hyperintellectualized, for these artists theoretical work was undertaken so as to resist the separation of intellectual and manual labor, expressed in formalist modernism via the division of labor between art criticism and art practice. Though the two artists evidently understood the practice of conceptual art in very different ways, Kosuth and Burn agreed that the subordination of artistic practice to the judgments and interpretations of art critics had invidious effects.

Burn's writings on art from the 1980s consistently identify artists as producing a kind of knowledge that is distinct from the interpretation provided by art history and art criticism. By this point, he was skeptical of the idea that art was always reducible to propositional thought. In the essay "Is Art History of Any Use to Artists?," first published in 1985, Burn writes:

> Pictures embody an historical understanding and practice which links them to particular artistic and cultural traditions, classes and societies. That understanding is largely built up by the way an artist notices and looks at art; its values and significance evolve in relation to the acquisition of skills, techniques and knowledge which are all part of an artist's practice. The historical understanding vested in a picture doesn't simply illustrate an historical point of view; it can't be adequately accounted for by biographical details (even with "psychological" insights) or by social history or sociological readings of the art. It isn't explained by evolutionist or avant-gardist "logic," or even by what the artist says is his or her historical interest or understanding. History isn't just "background," or a set of occasional references, but is infused in the creative process.[67]

This statement shows that in the 1980s Burn continued to address questions that were present in his work of the 1960s, if with a different emphasis. Whereas once the interrogation of language was central to conceptual art, now painting is defended as a process of making, where art is embedded in nondiscursive practices: skills and forms of "noticing." But perhaps things are not so clear-cut in Burn's early work, as I have already discussed. Even in the 1969 essay "Dialogue," Burn wrote that language could bring "into use new material, areas for ideas and processes beyond previous perceiving," but he tended to stop short of reducing art to a linguistic identity. He also affirmed that "language and the product [*in context, this seems to refer to the art object*—author note] are separate and independent."[68] Rather than a volte-face, Burn's later writings show a return to an unresolved problem regarding the relationship between language and made artifact. As Adrian Piper has noted of Burn's early and later work, the "consistency" between them is striking.[69] Here, consistency does not mean inflexible adherence to one position, but rather willingness to revisit a persistent problem.

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Kosuth's reference to a "carpenter of the predicate," though intended as a casual jibe at painting, contained an intractable dilemma concerning the relationship between nondiscursive and discursive investigation in art making. Burn, a carpenter by profession ironically enough, explored this problem throughout his artistic career. It is worth noting that Michael Baldwin and Ramsden, who have worked under the name Art & Language since 1976, continue to take a position on skill that is in dialogue with the one that Burn expressed in the 1980s. In an essay published in 2011, written with collaborator Charles Harrison, these former first-generation conceptual artists write:

> The de-skilling of the painter was supposed by many to invite the re-skilling of the artist as intellectual. But this de-re-skilling has not entrained an unambiguous or total transformation. The most obvious shift was not from craft-skill to no-skill, but from self-production to an overwhelming dependence on the craft-skill of others.[70]

Artists who were supposedly the most extreme exponents of a purely conceptual art here express the view that the abandonment of artisanal skill after painting has resulted in a relationship of dependency, or even of exploitation, between artists and skilled makers. Is this evidence of a drift from progressive to reactionary aesthetic views? This is what Buchloh hints at, of course, in his allusion to "cultural conservatism" in relation to Burn's account of deskilling. To characterize the views of Burn, or Art & Language, in this way is inadequate because it fails to recognize the continuity between the earliest hypotheses that contributed to the group's dialogue, as demonstrated by Burn's works analyzed here, and these more recent reflections on skill by Baldwin, Ramsden and Harrison. Buchloh tends to identify the politically progressive legacy of conceptual art with abandonment of artisanal skills, but this was never the position advocated by Art & Language, though it may have been Kosuth's view. Although members of Art & Language did criticize modernist painting, their primary target was the division of labor between modernist artist and art criticism, which had become rigidified by the 1960s, when formalist critics like Clement Greenberg or Michael Fried had assumed a kind of supervisory role with regard to the artistic problems that they deemed to be the most "advanced."

The work of Burn suggests a consistent research project, as I have argued. The project points to the inadequacy of a widely adopted caricature of conceptual art, where it is written off as hopelessly detached from "making." Rather than abandoning technique, Burn, along with other members of Art & Language, problematized a field—late modernist painting—that was already deskilled, because painters operated in a context where legitimate problems came to be defined by art critics. Under those conditions, it made sense to use language to explore the authority that accrues to language in art's social milieu. Conceptual artists associated with Art & Language did not reduce art to theory, but instead used language as material, medium, or even a tool that allowed them to problematize the institutional authority that was secured by art criticism, theory, and art history. This position was never programmatic, but it is recoverable as a method that was used in the practice of key contributors to Art &

Language. As it developed (and came to respond to the sanctification of conceptual art) this method tended to become an explicit defense of the kinds of nondiscursive cognition that are associated with making.

Conceptual art, during the 1960s and early 1970s, was extremely heterogenous and, for the most part, intended to be resistant to definition. Hence, the clean-cut account of conceptual art that Kosuth supplied in "Art after Philosophy" is attractive to anyone trying to pin-down a movement that challenges the generalizations that often underpin narrative art history. Kosuth supplies a readily summarized account of the aims of what became known as "analytic conceptual art," which has been understood as though it were the platform for Art & Language. But the method employed by Art & Language ran counter to celebration of abstract tautology that was present in Kosuth's early work. Although members of the group frequently had recourse to self-reflexive motifs, the collective endeavor of Art & Language dramatized theoretical enquiry through its group dialogue. Even during the early 1970s, when Art & Language was seemingly at its most theoretical and abstract, this dialogue was obsessively focused on the social situation of abstract theorizing and the conditions under which ideas are made.

Notes

I would like to thank Ann Stephen and Paul Wood, who generously gave their time and provided helpful corrections to an earlier draft of this essay.

1 Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), p. 270.

2 "What then is the relation between thinking and making? To this the theorist and the craftsman would give different answers. It is not that the former only thinks and the latter only makes, but that one *makes through thinking* and the other *thinks through making*." Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 6.

3 Art & Language was founded in Coventry, United Kingdom, by Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harrold Hurrell. Joseph Kosuth became the American editor of *Art-Language* in 1969, and Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden joined formally in 1971, having contributed to the journal from the second issue.

4 Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, I and II," in *Idea Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), pp. 70–101.

5 Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harold Hurrell, "Introduction," *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (May 1969): 1.

6 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," in *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth Century Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), p. 412.

7 A number of noted art historians and art theorists were members of or otherwise associated with Art & Language. Charles Harrison wrote extensively from the perspective of the United Kingdom wing: Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Charles

Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA MIT Press, 2001). Paul Wood was associated with Art & Language in the 1970s and has written about the group regularly since the 1980s. See, for example, Paul Wood, "About the Avant Garde: a Fragment for Art & Language," in *Art & Language in Practice*, ed. Charles Harrison (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1999). The art theorist John Roberts was associated with Art & Language in the 1980s and 1990s and writes often about their work. For a recent example: John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015). Michael Corris, a member of Art & Language, New York has written from the perspective of the United States wing of the organisation. See Michael Corris, "Inside a New York Art Gang: Selected Documents of Art & Language, New York," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

8 This is largely due to the influence of Buchloh's essay "Conceptual Art 1962–1969." Recent examination and revisions of conceptual art tend to note the limitations with Buchloh's framing by pointing to the changes that emerged in the position taken by Art & Language over time. However, the position is still typically understood as a single perspective that changed, rather than a dialogue involving different views. See Christian Berger, "Wholly Obsolete or Always a Possibility? Past and Present Trajectories of a 'Dematerialization' of Art," in *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics*, ed. Christian Berger (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 21–23.

9 New York-based members always formed a subgroup in the wider organization. Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden merged an existing collaboration into Art & Language, which continued under the Art & Language name until 1976. See Ann Stephen, "*Soft Talk / Soft Tape*: The Early Collaborations of Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*. On Art & Language in New York, see Robert Bailey, *Art & Language International: Conceptual Art Between Art Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). On the political trajectory of Art & Language in New York, see Nizan Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 113–24; Kim Charnley, *Sociopolitical Aesthetics: Art, Crisis and Neoliberalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 21–86.

10 This essay draws extensively on the research of Ann Stephen, who is the key authority on Burn's work. In particular, see Ann Stephen, *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006). For recent texts dealing with conceptual art and materialism, see Berger, ed., *Conceptualism and Materiality*; Dominic Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism: Art in New York in the Late 1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

11 Joseph Kosuth, "Introductory Note from the American Editor," *Art-Language* 1, no. 2 (February 1970): 1.

12 Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, I and II."

13 Atkinson et al., "Introduction," p. 10.

14 Christian Berger adds nuance to Buchloh's argument, suggesting that Art & Language was originally "anti-materialist," but then acknowledges that their position changed after they engaged with Marxism in the early 1970s. The problem with this claim is that it does not explain Burn's work very well, as I argue here. See Berger, "Wholly Obsolete or Always a Possibility?," pp. 22–23.

15 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 15.

16 Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project #1," *Aspen,* nos. 5/6, item 17 (1966), https://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/serialProject.html.

17 Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 93.

18 Stephen, "*Soft Talk / Soft Tape*."

19 Ian Burn, *Systematically Altered Photographs*, 1968, https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artworks/1997.74D//; Ann Stephen notes that this essay was actually a collaboration between Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden. See Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 72.

20 As this text was completed during intermittent lockdown, I was not able to visit the National Gallery of Australia to look at *Xerox Book #1* in person. I am indebted to Imogen Dixon-Smith of the National Gallery of Art for answering questions about the work.

21 Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 5.

22 It reads in its entirety: "The original work exists in the idea in specification and/or the one hundred sheets. No single sheet can comprise the work. The sheet facing this sheet is a copy of the one hundredth sheet." Reproduced in Ann Stephen, *1969: The Black Box of Conceptual Art* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2013), p. 66.

23 Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 129.

24 On the "Statement of Intent," see Dominic Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism: Art in New York in the Late 1960s* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 152. For a detailed discussion of *Art Press*, see Ann Stephen, *1969*, pp. 29–31.

25 Sabeth Buchman, "Language Is a Change in Material: On Lawrence Weiner's Ellipses," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*, p. 164.

26 Ibid.

27 Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), pp. 94–95.

28 Burn cited in Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 146.

29 On the complex historical situation of the Xerox machine, see Kate Eichhorn, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2016).

30 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2001), p. 123.

31 Seth Siegelaub cited in Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 135.

32 Jack Burnham and Judith Benjamin-Burnham, eds., *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1970), p. 24.

33 LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," p. 12.

34 Burn cited in Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 71.

35 Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, I and II," p. 83.

36 Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," p. 442.

37 Ibid., p. 413.

38 Tamara Trodd, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction: Technology and Aesthetics from Duchamp to the Digital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 153.

39 Trodd writes: "Bochner was relatively unusual in using a photocopier to make this work." She notes that Seth Siegelaub's *Xerox Book* was actually printed using offset lithography. Trodd assumes that this was because the copy machine itself was, at the time, too expensive "without the benefit of a free staff photocopy card, as Bochner enjoyed." Trodd, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction*, p. 145. This is all based on a misunderstanding. The Siegelaub *Xerox Book* was printed using offset lithography because this made *binding* cheaper for the run of 1,000 copies. Copying was inexpensive in public copy shops at the time, but the cost of assembling and binding the sheets was prohibitive.

See this interview with Jack Wendler, Siegelaub's business partner: Jack Wendler, "Jack Wendler Speaks about the XEROX BOOK," KADIST, June 25, 2013, video, 7:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85wsUOaqCN8.

40 Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art; University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 38.

41 Ibid., p. 25.

42 See, for example, Benison Kilby, "Deskilling and Post-Fordist Forms of Work in Ian Burn's *Systematically Altered Photographs*," benisonkilby.com, undated, https://benisonkilby.com/Deskilling-and-Post-Fordist-forms-of-Work-in-Ian-Burn-s-Systematically#:~:text=In%20his%201981%20essay%2C%20%27The,and%20execution%20in%20their%20work.

43 This work can be viewed in its entirety on the website of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Burn subtitled *Read Premiss* as *The Holding System for Six Negatives*: "Six Negatives 1968–1969," artgallerynsw.gov.au, undated, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/9.1974.a-n/

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Burn, "Dialogue," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 111. This text was originally published in 1969 in *Art Press* and then reprinted in *Art-Language* 1, no. 2 (the issue to which Kosuth provided an "introductory note.")

47 For discussion of the open-ended enquiry of Art & Language, see John Roberts, "Conceptual Art and Imageless Truth," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*, ed. Michael Corris (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 305–25.

48 Stephen, *On Looking at Looking,* p. 48.

49 Ibid.

50 Ian Burn, "The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation," *Artforum* 13, no. 8 (April 1975): 34–37; Ian Burn, "Pricing Works of Art," *The Fox* 1, no. 1 (1975): 53–59.

51 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

52 Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, p. 94.

53 Ibid.*,* p. 89.

54 Ibid., p. 3.

55 Christian Berger, "Introduction," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*, p. 10.

56 Benjamin Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason (1988)," in *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 211.

57 Ibid., p. 210. Note that John Roberts subsequently developed a much more far-reaching investigation of deskilling in art than Buchloh's, which, because of lack of space, I am unable to discuss here. See John Roberts, *Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2006).

58 Buchloh discusses deskilling most extensively in Benjamin Buchloh, "Introduction," *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), pp. xv–xli.

59 Ian Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (Or, the Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)," *Art & Text* 1 (Autumn 1981): 49–65.

60 Burn does not actually cite Braverman in the text, but his account of skill as history and tradition seems clearly to draw on Braverman's work. He probably encountered Braverman's ideas in the

context of art in the work of Bruce Kaiper, a Californian documentary activist who produced a slide show called "We Are Not Happy Robots," which he shared in lectures with workers in the late 1970s. "We Are Not Happy Robots" explicitly works with Braverman's arguments, though the emphasis is different to Burn's references to "deskilling." Burn himself developed activist work using slide shows when he returned to Australia. Kaiper seems to have been the first to have explored the implications of Braverman's ideas in the context of art. Ann Stephen, person communication email, March 27, 2022. For early citation of Braverman in Kaiper's work, see Bruce Kaiper, "The Human Object and Its Capitalist Image," *Left Curve* 5 (Fall–Winter 1975): 40–60.

61 Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn, "Don Judd," *The Fox* 1, no. 2 (1975): 129–42.

62 Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath," p. 53.

63 Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason," p. 210.

64 Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath," p. 49.

65 Many former members of Art & Language operated in this milieu after leaving the group. Michael Corris, Carole Condé, and Karl Beveridge did so with the journal *Red-Herring* between 1977 and 1978, and their involvement in the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union. Condé and Beveridge continue to make dialogic artworks with union members in Canada. Paul Wood and David Rushton, who were closely associated with Art & Language in the United Kingdom, developed a critique of art education from the mid-1970s through to the mid-1980s. Wood has described these various practices, including Burn's, as an "Art & Language diaspora." Paul Wood, "Conceptual Art and Politics in the UK c.1970–1985," paper delivered in the panel "Collectives, Art and Neoliberalism," Association for Art History Conference, April 7, 2022. Unpublished paper. See also: Paul Wood, ed., *Biting the Hand: Traces of Resistance in the Art & Language Diaspora* (Helsinki: Rab-Rab press, 2024).

66 Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath," pp. 54–55.

67 Ian Burn, "Is Art History Any Use to Artists? (1985)," in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), p. 4.

68 Burn, "Dialogue," (1999 [1969]), p. 110.

69 Adrian Piper, "Ian Burn's Conceptualism," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, p. 342.

70 Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden, and Charles Harrison, "Feeling Good: The Aesthetics of Corporate Art," in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, ed. Armen Avanessian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin: Sternberg, 2011), p. 170.

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