

*Art & Language*

NOW THEY ARE SURROUNDED:  
RECONFIGURED

Unit 2 invites you to the opening view  
Friday 26 October 2007, 6–8pm

Exhibition: 20 October – 17 November 2007

## NOW THEY ARE SURROUNDED: RECONFIGURED

*'Hoc opus hic labor est'*<sup>1</sup>

The work *Now They Are Surrounded* consists of 144 canvases each measuring 26 × 31 cm. On the surface of each canvas is depicted a page of text that has been torn or cut in some way and then repaired with rather mangy Sellotape. In other words, the work consists of 144 pictures. The pictures are framed and glazed in such a way as to leave a small gap between the edge of the canvas and the frame. For this exhibition, the 144 framed pictures have been photographed and configured as an interactive projection that can be reconfigured in a number of ways.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition is offered as an essay-like contribution with regard to a Symposium, 'Systems Art', organised jointly with London Metropolitan University, Whitechapel Art Gallery, and The National College of Art and Design Dublin 26th and 27th October 2007.<sup>3</sup>

The work *Now They Are Surrounded* was first exhibited at the Guildhall Art Gallery, 2005, and had been made specifically for the occasion. The framed canvases were distributed around the gallery singly or in groups. In many cases they might easily have been taken for information about the paintings they adjoin. They sidled into the practical and thus cultural territory of the curators and did not immediately, if at all, claim the attention of the viewer as the equivalents of the paintings on display.

In producing the work, we kept two thematic questions in view:

1. How might a work be conceived that addressed its own external and unwanted conditions, and at the same time sustain a kind of internality?



2. Would a change in the circumstances in which the work was exhibited change its internal description?

Thus it was envisaged that the work would indeed be installed in altered configurations in other circumstances. One such circumstance occurred at ZKM, Karlsruhe in November 2005. This present occasion (Unit 2 Gallery, London Metropolitan University, 2007) constitutes another.

Internality is something we require of our own work. What we have in mind is the internality that is necessary to autopoiesis. An autopoietic system is one that knows about itself, is recursive, and 'as a consequence of this' is empowered to know about the world outside. It is in virtue of this dialectical internality that the work of art can work to resist entry by those agencies whose secular power rests on the solipsistic arbitrariness of meaning. Such a work is in one way or another in a position to disconfirm some interpretations and to dispute certain usages. It is not made simply by the relations that compose its internal structure, but rather by a self-description that these relations imply.

Further, it is a condition of the aesthetic, political and social morale of our own work that it be project-like or essay-like; that it be a response to a problem or puzzle, and not just be hitched on to one of the versions of 'inner necessity' by which media-led generic art tends to be rendered consumable. When we say that the work is project-like or essay-like we mean

that we do not seek the kinds of spurious psychological and stylistic continuities by which artists' oeuvres are supposed to be distinguished and out of which their cultural content is partly formed. Instead, we have a conversation of sorts; we try to sustain a discursive, and indeed a recursive practice that looks at itself as well as outwards. This conversational practice may be exemplified by – or lead to – at least two types of production or work: artworks and a form of critical and theoretical literature. As we intend it,

the conversation is awake to itself as a practice and represents a continuity of sorts, albeit one that could not be tracked in terms of the differentiae that would conventionally be used to trace an oeuvre. Our work's aim is not simply to reflect or to instantiate our conversational and inquisitive processes, but also to be part of them. There is no paradox in this.

If we ask what work the artwork is to do, then the answer is that it should take on a question that has been put to a project. A corollary of this is that it should avail one of a critical description of the set of circumstances to which it is a response. We do not argue that what we may propose will be the only possible description of the given conditions. All we are saying is that, one way or another, it is necessary to look 'at' and 'to' the world to set an agenda.

*Now They Are Surrounded*, is assuredly pictorial. It consists of pictures that among other things picture texts. A viewer might ask if she should regard the work first as picture and then as text or vice versa.

While we acknowledge that reading and 'looking' are distinct, we suggest that reading the text in a textual picture is in some sense equivalent to understanding certain iconographic or technical principles, and that these go to the picture's having an internal subject. What then is the significance of the other marks on the paper: the pictorial representation of cuts and holes, the simulated Sellotape and so on?

The short answer is that these are pictorial simulations of the literal properties of a surface upon which the text is inscribed. The picture plane is the literal surface of the canvas. The pictured cuts and holes with their sellotaped repairs are also capable of both external and internal description.

Is it also part of the subject of these pictures that they are sometimes related to one another – that they form a number of continuous texts? Perhaps we have to say that being part of a continuous text is, as it were, the



internal subject of the pictures, since it is – at least largely – dependent on the texts being read and understood. The picture's being part of a continuous whole is also a consequence of a judgement that this reading order imposes some sequence on the assemblage of pictures themselves – an order that supervenes possible alternatives.

As a kind of counter to the idea that this order is determined by the sequence of the texts, we might ask what case could be mounted for saying that the order of the pictures is on the contrary determined – as

it were formally – by the patterns of virtual cuts or of fake Sellotape. Does it follow that the texts are the figure and the cuts and so on part of the ground? Or are all three elements competing for figure status in a contest that is incapable of resolution? Is this to ask whether from a figure/ground perspective *Now They Are Surrounded* is inherently unstable? Could we say that it is this figure/ground instability that assists the work in preserving its internality through actual or imagined changes of circumstance?

Perhaps we can now begin to try to say more clearly what we mean by 'internality'. The internal subject of a picture will be defined not only by certain technical and iconographical considerations, but also by the picture's capacity to engage the viewer in the questions that arise in the light of these. This is what an adequate description – or set of descriptions –

will attempt to capture. We might say that the artwork that lacks internality will have no such description. Its external definition will suffice as an account of its content.

Can we now say that changing the circumstances in which the work is exhibited has changed its internal description? How are considerations of internality born upon by the two circumstances which have seen *Now They Are Surrounded* installed as the gridded occupant of a single wall at

ZKM and now as an interactive work that offers multiple configurations? Can we say *Now They Are Surrounded* has preserved all or some of its critical negativity?

With 144 items, the possible permutations are legion. The gridded block, 8 frames high and 18 wide at ZKM occupied roughly the same amount of space as a very large modernist painting. The whole measured just over 2.5 × 5m, roughly the same dimensions as Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Here *Now They Are Surrounded* is exhibited not only in a new formation relative to the two previous occasions, but it has also been transformed into *Now They Are Surrounded Reconfigured*. The latter title marks a double change. We might call one of them 'material' and the other 'formal'. The status of both picture and frame as sign is now unmistakable, and, relieved of the need for screws and rulers, its spatial distribution is in the hands of the viewer, who can in some measure manipulate the relations between detail and a totalising view of the virtual 'whole'. The small pictures in their frames are now rendered wholly as images. We are looking now at a picture of a picture and a picture of its frame and these images are distributed by means of an interactive programme.

As *Now They Are Surrounded* was installed at ZKM, any sense of its internality remained dependant upon there being an internal description which the long view avails, to the effect that it is composed in the form of a conspicuous and aesthetically more or less plausible occupier of white institutional space. We might say that the long view makes for a culturally astute spectator of a kind, but it will be one who is bereft of competence with regard to certain internal features of the work. The sense of the work's internality also depended upon its being seen as consisting of texts with small marks and adhesions. It might even be said that these marks and adhesions form patterns of abjection and poverty. These are internal features that determine what the



work is. The point is that *Now They Are Surrounded* is dependent for its meaning on this mutual negation of each regard by the other. It is not shuffling back and forth that will avail one of the 'whole. We might say, rather, that there is nowhere to stand. It is an internal condition of *Now They Are Surrounded* that this is the case – wherever and however it may be installed and indeed, reconfigured.

*Art & Language / Chris Smith*

1. 'Only the Overcoming of difficulties makes a work significant: *Hoc opus hic labor est*' Luhmann. 2000 N, *Art As A Social System*, Translated by Eva M. Knodt, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, p. 315
2. Annie Spinster and Chris Smith, from, *Now They Are Surrounded Art & Language* 2005. 2007
3. Nicolas Luhmann makes particular reference to *Art & Language* in *Art as a Social System*: op cit, p. 295

## BIOGRAPHY

Art & Language were amongst the originators of the Conceptual art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The name now designates the practical artistic work of Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden who are joined by Charles Harrison for literary and theoretical projects. Their works are widely exhibited and collected in Europe and the USA. International exhibitions include Documenta of 1972, 1982 and 1997, as well as major retrospectives at the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris (1993); P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (1999); Musée d'Art Moderne, Lille (2002) and the Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, Malaga (2004). Recent publications include 'Art & Language: Homes from Homes II', Zurich, 2006; 'Art & Language, Writings', Madrid and London, 2005, 2007.

Art & Language have also contributed to a number of journals and periodicals including *Radical Philosophy and Critical Inquiry*. An exhibition of recent work is currently on show at Distrito 4, Madrid. They have collaborated with the London Metropolitan University on the project 'What Work Does the Artwork Do?' Art & Language are currently Visiting Professors in the Sir John Cass Department of Art, Media and Design.

pp. 2-3 & 4-5: *Art & Language, Now They are Surrounded*, 26 × 31 cm, Guildhall Art Gallery, 2005

pp. 6-7: *Art & Language, Now They are Surrounded*, 2.5 × 2 m, ZKM Karlsruhe, 2005

Poster image: *Art & Language, Now They are Surrounded*, 26 × 31 cm (detail)

## SYMPOSIUM – SYSTEMS ART

Friday 26 & Saturday 27 October 2007, 2–5 pm  
*Whitechapel Art Gallery*

Speakers: Art & Language (Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden & Charles Harrison), Francis Halsall, Mette Gieskes, Peter Osborne, Robert Linsley, Kitty Zijlmans, Ken Friedman, Mary Anne Francis and Paul Cobley.

In 1968 the artist and writer Jack Burnham prophesied that, 'a Systems Aesthetic will become the dominant approach to a maze of socio-technical conditions rooted only in the present.' This symposium investigates this claim by responding to, provoking and presenting a sustained discussion on systems-theory and art. Speakers discuss art's relationship to the operation of social systems, provide the basis for an account of the diverse art practices that occur after modernism in terms of a systems aesthetic and explore a definition of artistic media which is not materially specific.

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Organised in collaboration with Visual Arts Practice Research Group, Sir John Cass Department of Art, Media & Design, London Metropolitan University and National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

## UNIT 2 GALLERY

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Design: Fraser Muggeridge studio  
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# UNIT2





...pictures could be contemplated because they were the practice transformed by politics.



...ourselves as continuing to paint. However, the focussed 'facticity' of the work has had to confront the fact that it was just as important to do things 'with' the painting as to



...works which are texts in whole or in part or are implicated in its straightforwardly technical way...

...we devise a name for reflexive ekphrasis?

...quite carry the sense here. The works we have in mind are not so much reflexively or refractedly reflexive... it's not an expression we need as much as the "route" that texts and image take to get to the surface of

...and apropos the idea of paintings not to be seen or not quite to be seen" refers to an unavoidable non-thematic characteristic of that which one is making or trying to make - a cultural practice that is thereby thematised by the work... and that the paintings we have are mere representations of a disabled culture. They are themselves not doing things, in the sense that that which is not-to-be-seen in them is not a reason or another painting cannot now picture without itself being - without, in fact, failing to be modern. What this implies is that being not-to-be-seen may be a realistic function of that which the work is of (or would be a picture of if it were to be seen): those unworthy of a landscape, "the nude" and "the still life" through which forms and failure are unavoidably disclosed.

...there is the matter of agency. The painting which is "unseen" is not so much passive - to have no voice, no discursive presence in the work - with history. To conceive of a painting which is "not to be seen" is to accord it a form of agency vis-à-vis the spectator in that it has a voice on its own behalf, albeit a voice not translatable into a form without a sense of loss. In other words, the condition of being "unseen" is to be connected with the practical matter of assigning a form of discursive agency to that thing which is being discursively and visually represented in the studio.

...the attribution of a "voice" to the work (conceiving of it as if it were to speak - a power which it manifestly lacks) is or is not the matter of its being thought to have "words". We might say



...barely to note the non-specificity, the undetailed nature of the sentence and get on with the book, with the unfolding of the plot.

A: But what if it matters to the plot later that you did imagine what he is playing? What is clear is that the picture-imagining viewer cannot easily privilege his imaginary picture over that of anyone else. If we continue for a moment to abstract the text from all contextual and modal inflections, *mutatis mutandis*, and regard it as a description of a possible painting it cannot do this uninterpreted. And it would be both a tenuous and sophisticated hermeneutics that would furnish anything powerful enough to do this.

Of course, the text can provide a reason for us to "prefer" imagined green paintings over imagined red ones when it says "We shall paint a green painting", but it's not entirely clear why. *Salva veritate* doesn't make much sense here.

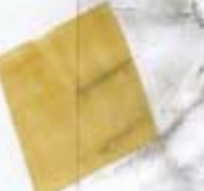
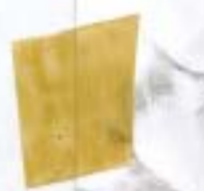
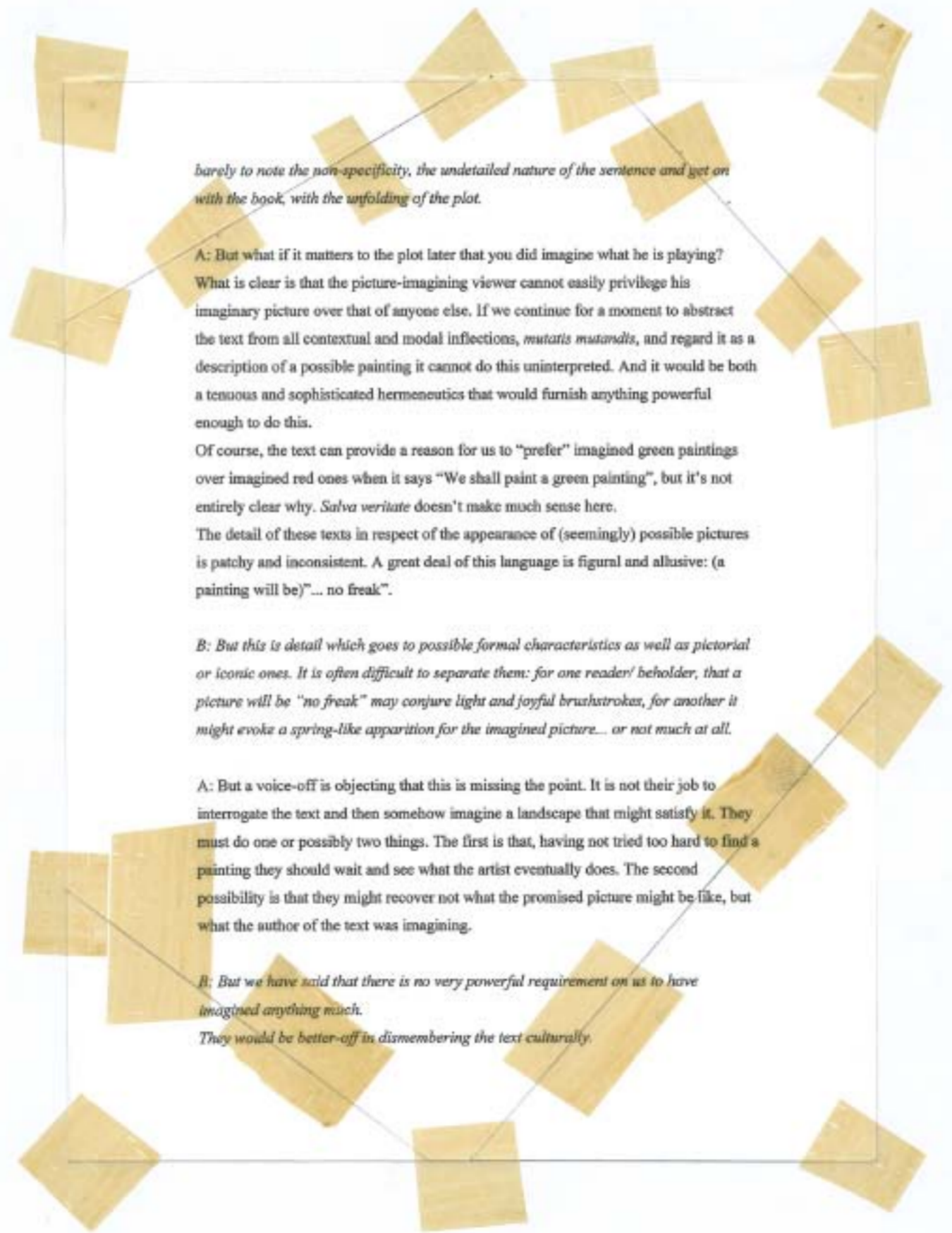
The detail of these texts in respect of the appearance of (seemingly) possible pictures is patchy and inconsistent. A great deal of this language is figural and allusive: (a painting will be)"... no freak".

B: But this is detail which goes to possible formal characteristics as well as pictorial or iconic ones. It is often difficult to separate them: for one reader/ beholder, that a picture will be "no freak" may conjure light and joyful brushstrokes, for another it might evoke a spring-like apparition for the imagined picture... or not much at all.

A: But a voice-off is objecting that this is missing the point. It is not their job to interrogate the text and then somehow imagine a landscape that might satisfy it. They must do one or possibly two things. The first is that, having not tried too hard to find a painting they should wait and see what the artist eventually does. The second possibility is that they might recover not what the promised picture might be like, but what the author of the text was imagining.

B: But we have said that there is no very powerful requirement on us to have imagined anything much.

They would be better-off in dismembering the text culturally.



...contra Barthes, do not merely constitute a superiority of one view over another, but are denied in the culture of anecdote and nostalgic order.

II  
The foregoing is a kind of recollection of an article on Bacon that I wrote for the journal *Artscribe* almost twenty years ago.<sup>1</sup> Its final thought was constructive and emancipating to take the piss out of Bacon through the genre of serious criticism. Deleuze's *Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation* unquestionably to the genre of serious criticism.<sup>2</sup> We might also see this as significantly against our recollection. We ask this in changed circumstances: the hegemonic triumph of global capital has had consequences. It has put a management in charge of production that has blotted the power of the institution and robbed art of its internal power of the institution is to be resisted, it may be necessary to re-assert the complexity of the artwork. Painting may supply some clues to what has been accomplished.

While we argue that Bacon's early emergence was due to a reaction against the British art, he has re-emerged more recently in an abundance of other cultural 'studies' addressed to the body. Bacon's 'scenes of excretion' [p. 16], his zones of indiscernibility between man and animal, and abjection goes to the truth, aggressive. Deleuze explicitly mentions the transgressive. His book will lend support to this however.

Abjection becomes splendor, the horror of life becomes intense life [p. 52].

This is right out of the old bohemian's charter. It is perhaps difficult to set running in the civilising world of Sir Kenneth Clark being honoured by Julia Kristeva. Deleuze argues that 'Bacon's is a civilisation of the world' [p. 43]. But we can also read today that 'interest in the body depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances', via Bataille for the power of abjection, on the grounds that it is a system, order; that it does not respect bodies, positions, rules'.

