

**Yet each knew he saw only aspects
on Art & Language and the Red Krayola
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Thrust-parry-riposte. The duality of dialectics breaks down when identities fail. Attack is always also defense and vice versa. There is simply no way to discern one intention from the other when the subject positions of the actors won't stay put. One can only identify the attack if one can identify the attacker (and the attacked). Thus, in 1976, when Art & Language and the Red Krayola launched their intermittent, four decade collaboration with the album, *Corrected Slogans*, it was unclear to whom – or *at* whom – their corrections were directed.

Art & Language formed in Coventry, England in 1967, part of we might call the “conceptual turn” away from Greenbergian Modernism. They have operated as an accordion-like collective since their founding, expanding and contracting in order to emit differing pitches. But throughout their history, they have consistently engaged the logic of art and the art world, refusing the standard conceptions of what art is and how it makes meaning.

The Red Krayola (forced by U.S. trademark law to use the K) formed in Houston, Texas in 1966, part of a burgeoning psychedelic rock scene in the country's hardpan midsection. Since the late-60s, the Red Krayola has been largely synonymous with Mayo Thompson, the project's one consistent member. Like Art & Language, Thompson has refused to play the game he's playing by the rules that everyone else plays by. His songs are just as likely to engage Marx as romantic love, just as likely to bare the device of routinized rock'n'roll as to revel in improvisational skronk'n'skedaddle.

At the time of their first collaborations in the mid-70s, the two groups' alliance would have seemed less likely than Nixon-Mao. Among artists pursuing conceptual approaches, Art &

Language were taken to be the hardest of the hardcore. To cite just one notorious example from their 1970s output, they responded to an invitation to present work at Documenta 5 in 1972 by installing *Index 01*, a set of office-grade filing cabinets populated with texts written by the collaborative over the preceding few years. No pictures. Nothing intended to complicate the category of “sculpture.” Just printed texts stored in accordance with the workaday archival practices of mid-level corporate management. It seems close to inconceivable that these hard-edged British conceptualists should, shortly thereafter, put their heads together with a psych-rock outfit from cowboy country. And yet we needn’t merely conceive of it, because we can place their LPs beneath the penetrating caress of the stylus and listen to what this unlikely pairing hath wrought.

Peter Osborne makes a distinction between what he terms “inclusive,” or “weak,” conceptualism and “exclusive,” or “strong,” conceptualism. He puts Sol LeWitt in the former category and Art & Language in the latter. Osborne, a philosopher, locates this distinction in the relationship of art to philosophy. Whereas weak conceptualists take a broadly philosophical approach to their work, strong conceptualists redefine the ontology of their work and, by association, of art in general, by abandoning certain qualities previously essential to the definition of the art object. Osborne classifies Art & Language as strong conceptualists because, not only do they philosophize about their work, not only do they collapse the boundary between the practices of art and criticism, but they also allow philosophizing and criticism to stand as the art object itself. For Osborne, *Index 01* is “the culmination and the demise of strong conceptualism.”¹

What would Osborne say about *Corrected Slogans*, or any of the other collaborative LPs produced by Art & Language and the Red Krayola? Undoubtedly, these recordings subvert the ontology of what we must now scare-quotify as “the art object.” These LPs are unproblematically cultural products, but they would seem to fall on the other side of a line separating art from music. They are released commercially in accordance with the conventions of rock and roll (numbered tracks, designed jacket, liner notes with information about musicians, composers, and engineers). Based solely on this categorical distinction, it’s hard to see how these recordings might qualify as strong conceptualism. While they do swap out the traditional media

of “fine” or “visual” art, they do not undermine the deeper conditions of form, aesthetics, authorship, etc., that abide and attend to the conventional art object.

But, if we are willing to think of conceptual art as fundamentally motivated by concerns other than those which occupy Osborne, we can conceive of conceptual art in a way that doesn’t divide the weak from the strong, LeWitt from Art & Language, or even make a strong distinction between these artists and those who emerged a little later, and used conceptual apparatus to interrogate issues of politics, identity, the body, and institutional reason. Rather than fixating on the modality of the work (object, image text, idea, recording), we might focus on the very category of “the work” and on how one identifies the work amidst other related materials. This is a different kind of philosophical approach, one that casts the whole of conceptual art as a philosophical project. The issue, then, isn’t about the consistency (or lack thereof) in the philosophical system of a Joseph Kosuth; nor is it about what Osborne calls “the double-coding” of conceptual art’s relationship to philosophy.² Instead, in the wake of Greenberg’s entangled obsessions – with medium specificity and Kantian formalism – conceptual artists came finally to terms with the fact that artistic experience is not limited to the object that is (mis)taken to be coterminous with the work. The work of the work – that is to say, the verb of the noun: the effects and meanings that emerge as a result of the work’s catalytic exertions – necessarily occur, in whole or in part, in materials other than those which rest upon the pedestal or within the confines of the frame. At the same time, and for nearly identical reasons, the formal boundaries of the work are not inviolate. Much that the work depends upon does not live in the same formal space as the one we’re compelled to point to when we refer to “the work.”

This philosophical perspective is drawn from Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of Kant’s distinction between the *ergon* (Greek for “the work”) and the *parergon* (an external supplement to the work).³ Kant insists that the *parergon* must be disregarded so we can focus on and respond to the work itself. It is crucial that we know where to draw the line between the work and the not-work. Kant’s examples of *parerga* – that which must be disregarded – include the clothing on Greek statuary, the columns on a classical building, and, most straightforwardly, the frame on a painting. But as Derrida shows, even on formal grounds, this is an impossible task. Any effort to identify that which lies *inside* the painting, depends on identifying where the *outside* begins

(where the *inside* ends). The innermost edge of the frame is, in fact, the very thing that tells us exactly what and where the painting is. Holding Kant to the logic of his own distinctions, Derrida shows that the frame (taken, by Kant, to be *outside* the painting) provides information that is crucial to any identification of what lies *inside* the painting. We cannot refer to the *ergon* without reference to the *parergon*. The conclusion cannot be avoided: the frame is not supplemental; it is a constitutive part of the work.

Conceptual art was the first artistic tendency to proceed under the assumption that the work disperses in its *parerga*; that on some level there is no *ergon*. “There’s no there there” (Gertrude Stein). The object, image, text, or action, that we take to be the work of art is merely the catalyst (sometimes merely the signifier) of the broader field of relationships that constitute the meaning or effect that we really mean to indicate when we say “the work.” While this is an un(der)reported facet of the conceptual turn, it may be its most profound subversion. I would go so far as to claim that this dispersal of the work among a constellation of *parerga*: affiliated materials, experiences, situations, expectations, spaces, and times, is what makes conceptualism truly radical, and why it has remained a potent critical tool for these subsequent fifty years.

If we accept this view of conceptualism, then the dividing line between Osborne’s weak and strong strains of conceptualism dissolves. In “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” LeWitt states,

The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps – scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations – are of interest.⁴

From this, Osborne concludes that “LeWitt is not really thinking ontologically about art’s objecthood here at all...”⁵ Osborne’s point is that LeWitt doesn’t fully abandon objecthood (in favor of the idea) and therefore isn’t really interested in an ontological interrogation of the art work. But if we think about an ontological interrogation regarding the *ergon/parergon* distinction, then the object-residue of LeWitt’s conception – “scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations” – is not as psychological or dualistic as Osborne claims. If we abandon the notion of the *ergon* being the ontological “it” of the art in question, then the problem of dualism disappears and we are left with a dispersed field of relations between vastly different

kinds of significant structures. LeWitt's apparently "weak" conceptualism is just as dependent on this acceptance of the work's dispersal and, as such, it ends up being as properly philosophical as strong conceptualists such as Kosuth and Art & Language.

We needn't concern ourselves, then, with whether Art & Language's collaborations with the Red Krayola qualify as "strong" conceptualism. But they are surely conceptual in the way I've just defined the term. Listening to *Corrected Slogans*, one must work outward from the music, the text, even the directly-adjacent supplements: the jacket; the liner notes; the video, "Nine Gross and Conspicuous Errors" (from the same year as *Corrected Slogans*) which shows members of the two groups ad-libbing their way through a set of songs that could be album outtakes. The conceptual work depends upon how the thing-at-hand interacts with a vast set of proximate and distant events, things, debates, and relations. Beyond a working familiarity with the discourse attending the demise of Greenbergian Modernism and the specific challenges of Minimalism and Conceptualism; in addition to an understanding of Marxian and Frankfurt School critiques of the culture industry, and theories of authorship and objecthood emerging from post-structuralism and related philosophical enterprises; on top of grasping the plate tectonic political shifts of the mid-70s as Labour and Democratic governments, in the U.K. and the U.S. respectively, embraced neoliberal ideas and mechanisms; an album like *Corrected Slogans* also depends upon a teeming, shifting swarm of related phenomena. These *parerga* are not merely the artistic, historical, or philosophical "environment" of the work. They are active contributors to what the work is, what it does, what it means. As Derrida has shown, their externality to the work cannot be reliably established.

One might be hard-pressed to make sense of *Corrected Slogans* within the context of other rock albums released in 1976. Its wobbling arrangements, like wagons with egg-shaped wheels; its ramshackle performances; its retrofitted lyrics, seemingly affixed to its song-structures with all the care of a toddler assembling an Ikea bookcase; its systematic disregard for the euphony of key structures; and its stylistic inconsistency from song to song, announce its distance from such 1976 offerings as *Frampton Comes Alive!*, *Songs in The Key of Life*, *Radio Ethiopia*, *Hotel California*, or the Ramones self-titled debut. But that is not to say that there was nothing remotely like it at the time. Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band had already released nine

LPs of deconstructed, surrealist blues and rock. In 1976, San Francisco's anarcho-satirists, The Residents, released their second album, *Third Reich 'n Roll*. And that same year, Cleveland's Pere Ubu, released their first three singles of art-damaged, absurdist, proto-post-punk. (Four years later, in 1980, Mayo Thompson would briefly become a member of Pere Ubu, appearing on two albums.)

Regardless of how much or how little they share with the motivations and methods of Art & Language and the Red Krayola, the experience of listening to these contemporaneous albums does not have much in common with the experience of *Corrected Slogans*. Listening to *Corrected Slogans* necessarily engages the *parergonal* contributions of all this music (and more besides). By design, this album refuses to deliver what a rock album, ca. 1976, is supposed to deliver. So, the listener cannot stop at being just a listener. Because, whatever *Corrected Slogans* is, it is not simply the material inscribed upon its surface. This is true of any artistic work, but it is more true of works we call "conceptual," and truer still of works as complex, unresolved, and unfeasible as *Corrected Slogans*. Such a work can only be constructed by the networks of *parerga* that frame the territory that – for convenience's sake – we indicate with the title, *Corrected Slogans*. As different as the two works would seem to be, Osborne could have been referring to *Corrected Slogans* when he described *Index 01* as "a massive cross-referential index system mapping relations of compatibility, incompatibility, and lack of relational value between its terms."⁶

NOTES

¹ Peter Osborne, “Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy,” in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds. (London:Reaktion Books, 1999), 64.

² Osborne writes: “The idea of Conceptual art, in the exclusive or strong sense, is the *regulative fantasy* that these two sets of criteria [philosophy as philosophy, and philosophy as a method or material of artistic practices] might become one. The practice of strong Conceptualism was the experimental investigation – the concrete elaboration through practice – of the constitutive ambiguity produced by this founding double-coding.” (Osborne, 50.)

³ See: Jacques Derrida, “Parergon,” in *The Truth In Painting*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), *passim*.

⁴ Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in *Art In Theory*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 848.

⁵ Osborne, 54.

⁶ Osborne, 64.

This essay’s title is from John Ashbery’s poem, “Parergon,” included in his Selected Poems. Here is the longer passage from which it is taken:

Yet each knew he saw only aspects,
That the continuity was fierce beyond all dream of enduring,
And turned his head away, and so
The lesson eddied far into the night:
Joyful its beams, and in the blackness blacker still,
Though undying joyousness, caught in that trap.