

■ Art & Language / BANK

White³ at Gallerie Poo Poo London

October 30 to November 22

In the white cube, trapped between autonomy and bureaucracy, the atmosphere is more claustrophobic than rarefied, but one can see things clearly, if not how things lie. It is clear that Art & Language has invested heavily in history, as opposed to Jay Jopling owner of the hippest white cube in town who trusts only the metaphysics of capital. The artists collectively known as BANK, who have little faith in either history or capital, have decided on a different course of action and put their shirts on a less than pristine exhibition space in Shoreditch where they stage events and collaborations. BANK's White³ gallery, which was more oblong than square, occupied one half of the group's exhibition space and the Art & Language collaboration was the second part of a programme that included Lolly Batty's polystyrene piano and a project by Bethan Huws.

The appearance of an Art & Language work at a time when the craze for small and medium dry goods is sweeping the capital makes the pulse beat faster. Just when you thought it was safe to come out of the atelier with 'Boundary Road or Bust' chalked across your portfolio, Art & Language surfaces and raises some awkward questions. In BANK's White³, Art & Language installed rows of many-coloured objects, arranged to form a table and six chairs. The many-coloured objects, small oblong canvases of shallow depth, each hold an image of an open book containing a text concerning Art & Language. Swathes of colour have been silk-screened over the texts, partially masking the words underneath. Is this a table to read, to read at, to sit down at and talk at, to eat your dinner at or to look at? The troubles of Conceptual Art were given a melancholic twist in Art & Language's parlour piece: the text of the open book printed on canvas becomes an image verging on the blankness of a monochrome (when the ink gets too thick), which makes for an attractive table top and a comfy seat on which to rest your weary arse. Except that you know you cannot sit down at the table as it is an artwork destined for a collection. The table and chairs know this as do the individual canvases and collectively they do their job as the ciphers of alienation.

In addition to the table and chairs, which are related to the domestic installation recently exhibited at 'Documenta X', Art & Language pasted A4 pages around the

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walls of the gallery. Some of the pages contained familiar texts from Art & Language's oeuvre which were interrupted by the group's recent writing. One such text takes the Grammarians to task for casting Conceptual Art as a complex meta-language that examines 'the propositional claim that something is an artwork', rather than casting Conceptual Art as an operation that works to dematerialise thoroughly visual art. The text goes on to reference John Roberts' assertion that much Conceptual Art had an affinity with the best abstract painting, defined as work that attempted to make and reveal the rules of its own operation. Art & Language is worried by this, and rightly so, as it places Conceptual Art in a formal tradition.

In its work for BANK's White³ entitled *Sighs Trapped by Liars*, Art & Language appears as slave to its own critical operations as much as to the institutions of art. Rumour has it that the title of the work is a reworking of the phrase 'thighs trapped by wires' taken from a sado-masochist text. In sado-masochist relationships it is often argued that the masochist is in control through the contract drawn up with the sadist, but just exactly what kind of master/slave dialectic is being invoked here is difficult to say as all aspects of Art & Language's history and practice are being interrogated in its work.

The meeting of BANK and Art & Language in a white cube might seem unlikely but on reflection both groups share a concern for what Charles Harrison termed the other history of Modernism, the history of avant-garde negation and provocation of bourgeois art: both groups appear to refuse to make their artwork work for the institution of art. What unites them is a distrust of the professional Grammarian and a sardonic humour. One good joke was to place Art & Language in a (imaginary) white cube, free from institutional corruption. (Imagine there're no curators, it's easy if you try.) Another BANK joke was the 'society of the spectacle' to be found around the back of White³ in the form of cut-out celebrities, flashing lights and projections that graced White³'s exterior wall.

Art & Language's self-referencing is not out of place in BANK's company but in being concerned for its place



BANK

Exterior of Gallerie Poo
Poo during Art &
Language show

in history Art & Language does not seem to have much time for anyone else. This is not true of BANK, though maybe this will come with age. Whereas Art & Language's work is made to last and is at home feeling not at home in the museum, BANK's works are hardly works at all. Its collaborative shows, paintings and tabloids are more like manifestations, which was Peter Bürger's preferred term for avant-garde works.

Art & Language's challenge to the passive viewer of Modernism through a demand for an active reader for Conceptual Art has been one of the most significant avant-garde practices of the post-war era. It is in addressing the issue of an audience's role in interpreting artworks that BANK's past manifestations are in sympathy with Art & Language's project. Through provocative acts and by placing different art practices in relation to each other and in the maddest of schemes, the audiences of a BANK show are forced to read artworks as props in some strange film narrative or dialogue that doesn't quite make sense. It was telling then that at the opening for the show the professional Grammarians were visible through their absence. ■

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