

# Ian Burn's Questions: Art & Language and the rewriting of Conceptual Art history<sup>1</sup>

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How, where, and by whom is art historical achievement verified? For art historians, this perennial question is rendered more problematic at a time when major art museums are increasingly working with living artists and their commercial representatives on career-defining exhibitions and publications. This paper examines the case of the pioneering Conceptual Art group Art & Language, whose manipulations have led to a short-circuiting of museum scholarship and the art historical reception of artworks based, as this paper argues, on the false and unsubstantiated claims of the artists and their erstwhile collaborators who stand to benefit commercially.

This paper outlines how Art & Language have constructed misleading and deceptive biographies, exhibition histories, and bibliographies in order to obscure, distract from and avert questions regarding the origins of theirs and others artworks as well as their unacknowledged indebtedness to the art and writings in particular of Ian Burn, a deceased former collaborator in Art & Language. By publishing such accounts in the context of survey exhibitions in important museums and other art institutions they have not only made themselves complicit in the false authentication and substantiation of artworks, but have deliberately and destructively misrepresented art history, a course of action that has misled and deceived individuals and art institutions who have relied upon these texts in acquiring and exhibiting the work of Art & Language. This has in turn been exacerbated by art historians, curators and art institutions who have subsequently published on the entity and, in the process, have unwittingly repeated and reinforced the artists' claims and have thereby added to the increasingly canonical status of the artworks, their perceived art historical importance in the museum world and value in the art market.

Finally, this paper reflects on how Art & Language has reacted when they have been called to account for their manipulations. It is a cautionary tale to be sure, but it is one that raises important ethical and legal questions about the role and responsibility of major art museums having effectively colluded with living artists to re-construct art history.

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In most western democracies the law prohibits misleading and deceptive conduct in the course of trade and commerce. The world of contemporary art,

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however, often seems oblivious to it. This disparity came into sharp focus in early January 2005. While browsing at the Centre Pompidou bookshop, I happened upon the catalogue for a recent retrospective at the Contemporary Art Centre Málaga by Art & Language, the once collectivist entity at the forefront of developments in Conceptual Art, but which since 1977 has been reduced to the duo of Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden. Flicking through this publication a number of things caught my attention. Principally, it appeared to misrepresent the important contribution of Australian artist Ian Burn, whose name and *Mirror Pieces* were not even mentioned in the curator's overview. At the same time, the Málaga catalogue presented mirrored work by Baldwin as seminal, under a text that paraphrased (without acknowledgement) Burn's final writings about mirrors, published just prior to his untimely death in 1993. Curious and uneasy, I wondered what might be at stake in minimising the contribution of an artist who had been central to the Art & Language project?

Ian Burn commenced working with mirror and mirror-like materials in New York in 1967. In August 1968, he exhibited *Two Glass/Mirror Piece* and *Four Glass/Mirror Piece* in *The Field*, the landmark survey of contemporary art that re-opened the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne.<sup>2</sup> In early 1972 Burn's work with mirror was featured in Ursula Meyer's pioneering study *Conceptual Art*.<sup>3</sup> Then, in January 1973, the artist first showed *Mirror Piece*, his most well known work with mirror, under the Art & Language banner in a solo exhibition at the Galerie Paul Maenz, Köln. In 1974 Burn again exhibited *Mirror Piece* under the Art & Language banner: in April at the Kölnischer Kunsterverein in *Kunst über Kunst*, and then in June in a group show at the John Weber Gallery in New York. Then, in 1977, soon after breaking with Art & Language, Burn showed *Mirror Piece* again, this time under his own name, in a thematic exhibition at the Downtown branch of New York's Whitney Museum. The origins, early exhibition history and critical context of this aspect of the artist's work are well established.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite this, his *Mirror Pieces* have failed to fully register in the recent proliferation of books on Conceptual Art. Instead, it is mirrored work of Michael Baldwin that is increasingly foregrounded in widely circulated volumes such as Anne Rorimer's *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, as well as in official Art & Language histories.

Since Burn's passing, Baldwin's mirror pieces, which are known as the *Untitled Paintings* and come in a range of sizes and configurations, have been editioned and promoted under the Art & Language brand by major European and American art dealers, while a small Belgian gallery has also been active in their

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<sup>2</sup> These works are reproduced in the catalogue for *The Field* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1968), 12–13.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 92–93.

<sup>4</sup> For further information on the evolution, exhibition history, and critical context of Burn's *Mirror Pieces*, see *Ian Burn: Minimal-Conceptual Work 1965–1970* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1992). See also Ann Stephen, *On Looking At Looking: The art and politics of Ian Burn* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2006), 113–117.

marketing.<sup>5</sup> In 2004 I encountered one of these works in an exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York, and it was there that I first became acquainted with questions of authorship, attribution, and Art & Language. Not then familiar with Baldwin's practice of retrospectively assigning his juvenalia to the group, I felt uneasy that the *Untitled Painting* before me, which was simply attributed to Art & Language and dated 1965, preceded the founding of the Art & Language label. This experience added to my discomfort as I began to sense the 'overlap' between Burn's late writings and the words used by Art & Language in the Málaga catalogue to prop up Baldwin's student work. The effect of their rhetorical borrowings diminished Burn's contribution when, in fact, he had been central, and in relation to the mirror in particular.

In July 1993, for his exhibition *Looking at Seeing & Reading* at Sydney's Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Burn wrote:—

I notice reflections in a mirror more readily than I see the surface of the mirror. To 'see' (produce, project) the mirror surface demands concentrated effort, which may be assisted by focussing on imperfections, dust, smears, haze, steam (that is by the mirror's inability or failure to be a perfect mirror). The extent to which we are able to see the mirror surface irrespective of these incidental factors depends on a self-consciousness of the possibilities of seeing: on being able to look at ourselves seeing, and on being able to interpret our not-seeing of the surface.<sup>6</sup>

In the Málaga catalogue Art & Language ran over the same ground, this time in support of Baldwin's *Untitled Paintings* :—

A mirror, insofar as it is reflective, has no pictorial structure of its own. Its surface, in being perfectly uninflected — blank — is inflected by whatever it reflects. The intrinsically unpictorial surface is inevitably pictorial. The mirror is then both a near perfect blank (an endgame painting surface) and something which can almost never be blank. Reflecting on this, the viewer may attempt to look not at the image reflected in the mirror but at the blank surface itself. This is a difficult task. One is required to force the abstract seeing of an aspect (the knowledge that this blank surface is there) to overcome the seeing of the contingent world reflected.<sup>7</sup>

The Málaga catalogue was not the first time that Art & Language had published this text or slight variations of it. The text appears in a number of official Art & Language histories, proximate to illustrations of Baldwin's *Untitled Paintings*, notably in the aftermath of *Looking at Seeing & Reading* and without reference to it.

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<sup>5</sup> The intensive marketing of the *Untitled Paintings* appears to have commenced with an Art & Language exhibition at Lisson Gallery, London in June 1994. Other commercial galleries active in the promotion of these works since that time include the Patrick Painter Gallery, Los Angeles and the Mulier Mulier Gallery, Knokke. See also footnote 20 below.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Burn, *Looking at Seeing & Reading* (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1993), n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Miguel Cereceda, *Art & Language* (Málaga: Centro de Arte Contemporaneo de Málaga, 2004), 24, 105.

While the questions being asked are much more elegantly expressed in the Burn text, the similarities are nothing if not striking.

A few days after encountering the Málaga catalogue I was in Vienna, where I shared my observations of it with the artist Heimo Zobernig (\*1958). In the previous year, Zobernig had commenced researching Ian Burn's work from the 1960s, with the outcomes of this research first presented at my Brisbane gallery in May 2004. On that occasion, Zobernig presented Burn's *Acetate/Mylar Mirror Piece* of 1967 within a space-related installation of mirror-foil curtains, while Burn's biographer, Ann Stephen, presented a paper on the subject of the *Acetate/Mylar Mirror Piece*. In addition, the art historian Rex Butler led a public discussion with the artist on the subject of his engagement with Burn's work. Since then, Zobernig has presented his research into Burn's work at important galleries, kunstverein, kunsthallen, and at major museums, including the Tate. Following our conversation in Vienna, Zobernig and I resolved to hold a small exhibition at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, where I then had a residency.<sup>8</sup> This exhibition, which opened in early March 2005, consisted of a small scratched bathroom mirror by Zobernig together with an announcement designed by the artist and, at his request, printed on Bible paper. For the reverse side of the announcement I wrote a short essay entitled 'A defective mirror in Paris', which introduced Zobernig's scratched mirror and discussed its relation to Burn's *Mirror Pieces* and late writings about mirrors, and the recent exhibition and catalogue practices of Art & Language. In mounting this exhibition, I was also positioning Zobernig's work within a constellation of shows then on view in Paris, including a temporary intervention in the permanent collection hang at the Centre Pompidou by Art & Language, but also major institutional projects by Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Thomas Hirschhorn — all of whom, along with Zobernig, are well-known for their critical engagement with the legacy of Conceptual Art.

Soon after the exhibition at the Cité closed, I received an angry email from Mel Ramsden complaining about my 'defective mirror' essay. Notwithstanding the glaring omission of Burn's name from the curator's summary of the evolving membership of Art & Language in the Málaga catalogue, Ramsden alleged that it was I who had "misrepresented a period of shared work dating back over 40 years." To the possibility that he had paraphrased Burn's late writings about mirrors, Ramsden was indignant. He wrote:—

You seem to forget that when you talk of Art & Language you are talking of Ian Burn's oldest collaborators; we learnt from each other. The inputs and outputs of this learning process have occurred in many forms and circumstances since the 1960s. No one has claimed to privately own their particular part to the exclusion of the others (...) Our work has included various contributions, some minor, some major, from various people at various times. We were present, talking, trying things out, when Ian was

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<sup>8</sup> Heimo Zobernig, David Pestorius Projects, Power Institute Studio, Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, 5–20 March, 2005.

making his Mirror Pieces. This is not to make less of Ian Burn or his works but rather, more. The logic he developed around his Mirror Pieces was (and is) part of a conversation that has been going on for nearly 40 years.

Ian Burn's *Looking at Seeing & Reading* text does not reprise any of the artist's early writings about mirrors and was written almost two decades after he discontinued his "conversation" with Mel Ramsden. Further, the artist was scrupulous when it came to acknowledging the contributions of others and there is nothing on the face of the publication to suggest Ramsden had any input whatsoever. It is also instructive to note that while Burn included historical work by both Ramsden and Baldwin in *Looking at Seeing & Reading*, he did not include any of their mirrored or reflective work. Ramsden also manages to forget that in April 1994 he and Baldwin wrote an essay for the posthumous presentation of *Looking at Seeing & Reading* at the Monash University Gallery in Melbourne. There they frankly admit that the perceptual questions Burn was asking in *Looking at Seeing & Reading* were "Ian's questions" and that his text was:—

... more like a handbook with which to work and with which to do things. Perhaps we should try to do (some) things with it? Perhaps we should try to work for a moment with what Ian was working with.<sup>9</sup>

In Ramsden's angry email, written over a decade later, the questions posed in *Looking at Seeing & Reading* were no longer "Ian's questions". Now they were simply recast as "part of a conversation that has been going on for nearly 40 years." And, now that Ramsden had done some things with Burn's "handbook", it too was no longer Ian's, with his former collaborators apparently entitled to restate its questions without acknowledging the person who had first formulated them. What's more, they were now at liberty to apply those questions, not to future work as they had foreshadowed in 1994, but retroactively to prop-up Baldwin's juvenilia. How could this be making more, and not less, of Ian Burn and his work? Ramsden's email also confirmed the identification of Burn with the mirror at the heart of the Art & Language enterprise, thus making it that much harder to understand why his name and work should be slipping away in official accounts of Art & Language history. Surely the group's challenge to traditional notions of authorship could not possibly extend to and legitimise such conduct. This was the thrust of my reply email to Ramsden, which he did not respond to.

Thinking the matter at an end, I was surprised by the attention the small exhibition at the Cité had garnered. In June 2005 the Paris art quarterly *Pacemaker* republished my 'defective mirror' essay, while Artspace in Sydney invited me to organise a project with Zobernig that would present the latest outcomes of his research into Burn's work, and not just his *Mirror Pieces*, but importantly also his paintings that 'updated' Mondrian's early diamond grids. This project was realised in April 2006 and between these two events I took the opportunity to examine more

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, *Ian Burn: Looking at Seeing and Reading, A Reading* (Melbourne: Monash University Gallery, 1994), n.p.

closely Ramsden's various claims on behalf of Baldwin's *Untitled Paintings*. In September 2005, on a visit to Los Angeles, I was able to examine at the Getty Research Institute ('GRI') the archive of the Galerie Paul Maenz Köln. During the 1970s Maenz was one of the most important European promoters of Conceptual Art. In addition to operating gallery programs in Köln and Brussels, he initiated major publishing projects as well as outside exhibitions in co-operation with important institutions. Maenz represented many of the key artists associated with Art & Language, including Burn and Ramsden, who mostly functioned as an identifiable duo under the Art & Language banner. The gallerist's files and the other rare publications at the GRI shed light not only on the dynamics of the Burn and Ramsden "conversation", but also on the ontological status of Baldwin's *Untitled Paintings*. In his email, Ramsden claimed that they had been "first shown at the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry in June and July of 1966" and that he had documentation to prove it. Predating Burn's *Mirror Pieces*, it is an important claim that Ramsden has since caused to be reiterated.<sup>10</sup> If true, it would be evidence of a general "conversation" that Burn would have to be seen as having taken up, not having led. I was immediately struck, however, by the absence of the *Untitled Paintings* in *Art & Language: Catalogue Raisonné, November 1965–February 1969*, one of the rare publications unearthed at the GRI.<sup>11</sup> Curiously, this *raisonné* is not cited today in official Art & Language bibliographies. Further, Baldwin's exhibition history in the catalogue for *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* at the New York Cultural Center in April 1970 — the first American museum survey of Conceptual Art — makes no mention of a 1966 exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery, while the records of The Herbert also do not support the claim that Baldwin exhibited in its galleries in June and July of 1966, or at any other relevant time.<sup>12</sup>

So far as I have been able to determine, Baldwin's *Untitled Paintings* had no public or critical context prior to their appearance in an Art & Language catalogue published by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 1980. Two years later, the first official history of Art & Language briefly mentioned that Baldwin had made monochromatic paintings with "mirror-like surfaces", not in 1965 as is now claimed, but in 1966 (when he was a 21 year-old art student).<sup>13</sup> Since then, but mainly since Burn's passing, these works have surfaced in ever increasing numbers, been assigned the date 1965, and given pride of place in exhibitions and publications, none of which provide any information on their true origins, provenance, or historical reception. With respect to Burn's state of knowledge regarding these works, he refers to them only once, in passing, in a text published in 1991. While

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<sup>10</sup> Ann Stephen, *Mirror, Mirror: Then and Now* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2010), 75–76.

<sup>11</sup> *Art & Language: Catalogue Raisonné November 1965–February 1969* (Leamington Spa/Zürich: Art & Language Press/Galerie Bischofberger, Zurich, undated). According to one official Art & Language source this *raisonné* was produced in 1973. See Charles Harrison and Fred Orton, *A Provisional History of Art & Language* (Paris: Editions E. Fabre, 1982), 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ron Clarke, Keeper, Visual Arts, The Herbert: Arts.Media.Museum.History Centre, Coventry, e-mail message to author, 9 May 2008. According to Clarke, the records of The Herbert also contradict Art & Language claims that a 1968 exhibition titled *VAT 68* was an Art & Language solo exhibition. Apparently, *VAT 68* was a large group exhibition with over 20 participants, which, critically, did not include Baldwin.

<sup>13</sup> See Harrison and Orton, *op. cit.*, 22.

Burn does not state when he first learnt of the *Untitled Paintings*, it is clear that his own work with mirror was well under way, if not complete, and that Baldwin's mirror pieces held no more significance than the diverse mirrored work of other artists mentioned, including Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson, Keith Sonnier, and Robert Morris.<sup>14</sup>

For his April 2006 exhibition at Artspace, Zobernig produced a small artist's book, which included my 'defective mirror' essay, the email correspondence with Ramsden, copies of historical documents tending to contradict his claims, and a fresh essay that summarised my research at the GRI.<sup>15</sup> Evidently apprised of this publication, Ramsden again sought to kick up some dust. This time he wrote to the editor of *Art Monthly Australia*, sought to trivialise matters, and amidst the non-responsive bluster introduced a tone of threat.<sup>16</sup> This vile tone was then magnified following the inclusion of the Zobernig book in the September 2006 exhibition *...Concept Has Never Meant Horse* at the Generali Foundation, an institution well-known for its scholarly interest in Conceptual Art.<sup>17</sup> It was almost exactly a year later that Drag City Records released *Sighs Trapped By Liars*, an album by The Red Krayola with Art & Language. In the lyrics to 'A Pest', a track from the album, Ramsden casts *himself* as the victim:—

I look at the mirror  
And what do I see?  
A man who knows his history  
And he's coming after me.

A crime scene from down-under  
By a pest chasing a dollar  
With fake research delusions  
And he's coming after me.

He has a funny style of speech  
Like a little lawyer  
He's got the information  
And he's coming after me.

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<sup>14</sup> Ian Burn, 'Glimpses: On Peripheral Vision,' in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 191. See also Stephen, *Mirror, Mirror: Then and Now*, op. cit., 5, where the author suggests that Burn was familiar with Baldwin's mirrored work "sometime in 1967". Curiously, the source of this information is not revealed. Elsewhere she states that Burn was first introduced to Baldwin's work by the New York gallerist/curator Seth Siegelau in or about May 1969. See Stephen, *On Looking At Looking*, op. cit., 130. This introduction, however, would appear to have been limited to Baldwin's more conceptual work, realised in collaboration with Terry Atkinson, which Siegelau was then exhibiting.

<sup>15</sup> Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled 2006* (Brisbane: David Pestorius Projects, 2006). Copies of this book were included in one of the displays in the Artspace galleries

<sup>16</sup> Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, 'In Response: David Pestorius and the Paul Maenz Archive', *Art Monthly Australia* No. 189 (2006), 40.

<sup>17</sup> *...Concept Has Never Meant Horse*, Generali Foundation, Vienna (curator: Sabine Breitwieser), 15 September–17 December, 2006.

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Small time operator  
(It's as plain as it can be)  
Masquerades as a truth-teller  
And he's coming after me.

Such creatures are  
Familiar things,  
Bugs that stink, not sting  
And they're coming after me.

Do I laugh and hope  
That he goes away?  
Is that the best way to be  
When he's coming after me?

Or take him to a lonely place,  
Explain why he annoys;  
Offer quiet extinction  
And bury him under a tree?<sup>18</sup>

The Red Krayola is a rock group that functions between the art and indie music contexts. It is primarily a vehicle for one Mayo Thompson, a Texan musician who has collaborated with Art & Language sporadically since the 1970s, most recently at the 2012 *Whitney Biennial*. There the Red Krayola is hailed for "keeping alive the spirit of resistance."<sup>19</sup> However, Thompson is not the paragon of virtue the institution would have the public believe he is. In the second half of the 1990s, for example, he was a Director of the Patrick Painter Gallery, a major Los Angeles contemporary art dealer, which at that time, in a joint project with London's Lisson Gallery, commenced to market a new line of Baldwin's *Untitled Paintings* as an Art & Language multiple dated 1965/95.<sup>20</sup> In other words, a little over a year after Ian Burn's death and the monetisation of his *Looking at Seeing & Reading* "handbook" was underway, with Thompson close to the dealings.<sup>21</sup> As it happens, the multiple bankrolled by the big dealers points up the tenuous relation between Baldwin's mirrored work and the questions Burn was posing in *Looking at Seeing & Reading*. A low-down corner piece, virtually identical with the apparently 'unique' work illustrated in the Málaga catalogue, it solicits a reflection of the viewer's lower body, but not their head, and, therefore, is not conducive to the kind of looking experience Burn was describing. For Burn, whose own *Mirror Pieces* are installed at eye-level, like the common bathroom mirror they recall, it was the tension between seeing oneself looking at both the mirror's portrait-like reflection *and* its blank surface that

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<sup>18</sup> The Red Krayola with Art & Language, 'A Pest', from *Sighs Trapped By Liars*, CD album (Chicago: Drag City, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2012Biennial/TheRedKrayola>

<sup>20</sup> The Patrick Painter/Lisson multiple is still promoted today on Painter's website: <http://editions.patrickpainter.com/artists/ArtLanguage/Index.html>

<sup>21</sup> Thompson's double-life as a Director of a major commercial gallery is briefly touched upon in Richard Hertz, *The Beat and The Buzz: Inside the L.A. Art World* (Ojai: Minneola Press, 2009), 330.



was critical. This dual experience is not possible with the Art & Language multiple, which is geared to produce only the reflected body in line with orthodox Minimalist theatrics.<sup>22</sup> More troubling than this, however, is 'A Pest', the song Thompson co-wrote with Ramsden. Its "offer" of my "quiet extinction" and burial under a tree is not just threatening and aggressive, it's hysterical; while the decision to have sweet sounding female vocalists sing the song is curious. Perhaps it was intended to disguise the threatening nature of the lyrics, which are so clearly from Ramsden's pen. Certainly Thompson is on record advocating disguise as critical gesture, and while Red Krayola publicity shots from the early 1980s show him dressed like an art dealer, it is my contention that when Thompson worked for the Patrick Painter Gallery he really was an art dealer.<sup>23</sup> In the end though, does it matter so much that the *Untitled Paintings* don't have the swanky pedigree that Baldwin and Ramsden claim for them? They would not, after all, be the first heroes of Conceptual Art to play the backdating game, though they *would* be the most hypocritical, vociferous as they've been when it comes to the chronologic failings of other artists.<sup>24</sup>

Ramsden's shame is that he should and could have been an important advocate for Ian Burn's work, internationally. Instead, he has diluted Burn's contribution to an important moment in art history. He has deliberately obscured and minimised the place of Burn's *Mirror Pieces* and late writings about mirrors. And, vandalising his own practice, he has smudged and fudged his historical association with Burn and Australia, omitting from the extensive artistic biography and bibliography in the two-volume treatise *Art & Language In Practice* — published in 1999, it is still today the primary source of information on the group — his involvement in and contribution to many important exhibitions and publications in Australia.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps most tellingly, Ramsden omits his participation in *Looking at Seeing & Reading*. Other significant omissions include *The Field* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1968 and *Recent Australian Art* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1973, both widely acknowledged as groundbreaking surveys of contemporary art. Other exhibitions in Australia that Ramsden leaves off his artistic biography include *Ian Burn & Mel Ramsden: Collected Works* at Pinacotheca, Melbourne in 1971; *The Situation Now: Object or Post-Object Art* at the Contemporary Art Society, Sydney, also in 1971; *The Letter Show* at the George Paton Gallery, Melbourne in 1974; *The Field Now* at Heide Park & Art Gallery, Melbourne in 1984; *Australian Art 1960–1986: Field to Figuration* at National Gallery of Victoria in 1987; and Rene Block's *Eighth Biennale of Sydney* in 1990. Another telling omission from Art & Language exhibition lists is the retrospective *Art & Language (1966–1974)* at the Galerie Sylvana Lorenz in Paris. Held in March 1989, before the *Untitled Paintings* began to really advance in the canon, this show included a Burn *Mirror*

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<sup>22</sup> See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), 116.

<sup>23</sup> See Mayo Thompson, 'A Manifesto For The Red Krayola', in *2012 Whitney Biennial* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012), n.p.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Juan Vincente Aliaga and José Miguel Garcia Cortés, 'Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden on Art & Language', *Art & Text*, no. 35 (1990), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, and Mel Ramsden, *Art & Language In Practice*, 2 Vols. (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 1999).

*Piece*, while the 1966 start date in the exhibition title again raises ontological questions for the Baldwin works.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most striking omissions from *Art & Language In Practice* are bibliographic in nature, with its so-called "full bibliography" failing to record substantial contributions by Ramsden and Baldwin to catalogues for Australian museum exhibitions of Burn's work. They include *Ian Burn: Minimal Conceptual Work 1965–1970* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1992, *Looking at Seeing & Reading* in 1994, and *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn* at the Monash University Gallery in 1996. These omissions reveal just how strategic, cynical, and in lock-step with the management these people are: in Australia, where Burn's achievement is well documented, there is the veneer of support, while on the international stage — where careers are made, the art historical canon is written, and the market omnipotent — it's all bets off and every man for himself.<sup>27</sup>

Sadly, Ramsden and Baldwin are not the only former Art & Language collaborators to wilfully diminish Burn's important contribution to Conceptual Art. Recently in the widely read *e-flux journal*, Terry Smith reported Joseph Kosuth had informed him that Burn had engaged in the very same back-dating practices that have long cast a shadow over Kosuth and his work.<sup>28</sup> It is a scurrilous claim, which is not only unparticularised, but ignores the fact that Burn's *Mirror Pieces* — the work upon which his reputation largely rests — were first exhibited in a major museum exhibition in August 1968. And unlike Kosuth, whose dating practices are the subject of substantial disputation and debate,<sup>29</sup> if Burn's material production was not exhibited soon after it was conceived, there tends to be credible evidence that verifies his dates. Kosuth's latest efforts to denigrate Burn's work come as no great surprise. For years now, he has claimed that he alone organised *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*.<sup>30</sup> In 2006 Ann Stephen, in the first biography of Burn, set the record straight.<sup>31</sup> There she revealed that, in fact, it was Burn who had been invited to organise this groundbreaking exhibition and that he had co-opted Kosuth to work with him on the project. In a recent interview in Australia, Kosuth reiterated his claim and then, adding insult to injury, stated that Burn "helped me do that," as if he had merely been an assistant of some kind and Stephen had not already shut

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<sup>26</sup> The previous exhibition at the Galerie Sylvana Lorenz was by Heimo Zobernig, who showed for the first time his cracked mirror pieces, which had been made in a studio at the Cité Internationale des Arts. This was an important cue for the small Zobernig project at the Cité in March 2005.

<sup>27</sup> This charade continues today in Australia in the projects of curator Ann Stephen, including *Mirror Mirror: Then and Now*, op. cit., and, more recently, *1969: The Black Box of Conceptual Art* (Sydney: University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Terry Smith, 'One and Three Ideas: Conceptualism Before, During, and After Conceptual Art', *e-flux journal*, no. 29 (2011), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/one-and-three-ideas-conceptualism-before-during-and-after-conceptual-art/>

<sup>29</sup> While Kosuth's practice of assigning his early work the date 1965 (on the basis that it reflects the date of conception, rather than the more conventional date of execution or exhibition), has long been disputed by key practitioners and critics of Conceptual Art, it has been widely accepted by major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Joseph Kosuth, 'History For', *Flash Art*, no. 143 (1988), pp. 100–102.

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen, *On Looking At Looking*, op. cit., 133–142.

the gate on this mischief.<sup>32</sup> It's all quite baffling, to say the least, but no more so than the hoards of curators, art historians, critics, dealers and collectors who blindly trumpet the Ramsden and Baldwin juggernaut as the genuine article, when it ought to be the subject of sceptical scrutiny.<sup>33</sup> While there is little pretence these days that Art & Language is other than a *nom d'artiste* used to market the careerist pursuits of two thoroughly conventional gallery artists, they are, in fact, mere artistic chancers who have about them not even the nostalgia of a once radical, socially committed practice.

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<sup>32</sup> Natalie King, 'The material of meaning: Illuminating the art of Joseph Kosuth', *Art & Australia*, vol. 47 no. 4 (2010), 592.

<sup>33</sup> One refreshing exception is the French promoter of Conceptual Art Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, who recently positioned Burn's *Mirror Piece* at the centre of Conceptual Art activities in Paris during the 1970s. See P. Nicolas Ledoux, *GMV: Is there any Ghislain Mollet-Viéville? (Information ou Fiction)* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2011), n.p.