

# a conversation about conceptual art, subjectivity and the *post-partum document*

mary kelly and terry smith

Terry Smith: There are very few artists still practicing now whose work, however transformed, remains shaped—in its basic parameters, perhaps—by that moment in the early 1970s when it seemed possible to achieve what we then called “praxis”: to fuse theory and practice, to evolve a theoretical practice as art, to do art-theoretical work. I recall that David Antin once picked out the most enterprising work of the 1960s as *performative*—I think he had in mind happenings, performance work, maybe even his and Ian Wilson’s speech pieces—or *processual*—which meant actions or environments displaying natural systems, such as Hans Haacke’s early work—or *procedural*—all those nominations of a series of actions, or sequence of thoughts, logical strings, ranging from scripts for performances to Richard Long’s walks, or Huebler’s social measurement mappings. Another term, *propositional* practices, needs to be added to pick up the essential character of language-based conceptualism. This was emphasized by Joseph Kosuth in the second issue of *Art-Language*, when he tried to distinguish the work which he and the English originators of Art & Language were doing from artists in what they called the Seth Siegelau stable (Andre, Weiner, Barry, Huebler, et al.).

These four terms are useful pointers to the forms of practice then, but I believe that content was—as always—crucial. Right from the mid-1960s, the driving template, if you like,

was to work on the concept of art, to test the possibilities for art practices which would be metadiscursive, and to use languages of various kinds to that end. So Art & Language-type work, for example, was initially an *analytic* practice, developing propositions about the possibilities for art practice, first through interrogating imagined or actualized theoretical objects, then through examining imagined theories and theories of imagining, or, better, of theorizing. In the early 1970s, however, things shifted. Analytical work continued, but it became also *synthetic* in the sense that the practice was expanded to become an inquiry into subjects and experiences which were much broader than art and its languages, and, of course, into theories for thinking, for speaking, these subjects and experiences. This is an obvious impact of the social movements of the 1960s.

Examples of this shift would be Hans Haacke, obviously. Less obvious, but important, is the trajectory of Art & Language work itself, especially in New York and then Australia from 1975–6. But it happens all over the world, in Central Europe, in Latin America, for example, sometimes earlier, sometimes later. The conceptual-political connection occurs as a split, or a displacement, or as a nexus, depending on the local context. I see your *Post-Partum Document* very much in this context.

Mary Kelly: When I started work on *Post-Partum Document* in 1973 I was curious about the parallels with Art & Language work in England. They were very influential, as was the work of Kosuth in New York. I did want to shift the emphasis from the notion of the analytical proposition to a more synthetic process. This is a much more complex argument than simply saying that I was going to reintroduce life into art. Your own terms for understanding Conceptual Art—where you set up the idea of a practice concerned with interrogating the conditions of existence for its own interrogation—make a lot of sense to me. In my case, obviously, the founding condition is an investigation of the subject. This was coincident with the kinds of questions being asked outside of art, by Marxism and feminism. The very first piece that I did, called *Introduction to the Post-Partum Document*, used found objects. Previous conceptual work had remained rather distant from that kind of materiality.

That was one of the first big departures from the established conceptual aesthetic. Another was the decision to not use photography. I wanted to emphasize what was effectively, emotionally loaded about this relation that I was documenting. But, then, when I superimposed the Lacanian schema over the baby vests, I don't think that, at the very first moment, I knew exactly how controversial—or even consequential—this juxtaposition would be. It began as a very insistent and almost intuitive attempt to bring the desire—you could say—for theory (itself very, very embryonic as far as its use in the women's movement was concerned at

that time) together with the cathexis of the everyday experience of mothering. *Post-Partum Document* was the first work that I know of to introduce Lacanian references so explicitly, but there isn't a significant division here between the emotional effect of theory and the emotional effect of objects, between the ability of material objects to be fabricated or organized theoretically and for a theory to have its materiality. There's a certain breaking down of these discrete domains by bringing them together.

T.S.: Putting it that way makes me want to set out a little more fully how I see the unfoldings of Conceptual Art. Not exactly in phases, or cut and dried periods, but the first significant moves of conceptualism occurred, I believe, between 1965 and 1969 and were—it is often forgotten—object-directed. Paradoxically, of course—or better, through a doubling. You remember that a lot of people, then, were working at the edges of minimalism or performance or anti-form sculpture or environmental art or earthworks, in ways supplementary to the work which we saw as achieving style under those headings, inspired by it but wanting to maintain a distance from the specifics of the incorporating processes operating in each case. Well, one move was to create impossible objects, things that might, for example, embody the morphological characteristics of any artwork but only those, or consist of the general characteristics of every artwork but none of the specifics. Some of these, like Nauman's, were emotional objects, with somatic psychic residue. But most were theoretical objects, instantiating speculation about art itself. Like algebraic solids, or DNA models. This is where language became so crucial. Early Art & Language work—the impossible objects made, or conceived, by those who first formed Art & Language in Coventry and elsewhere in England, and those in Melbourne, New York and elsewhere who joined the group or did related work—was about examining the conditions for producing just those kinds of objects. The next move—although some had already made it before 1969—was to interrogate the conditions for the interrogation of what it was to produce those kinds of objects. This doubled meta-discursivity is, to me, the key to language-based, or analytic, conceptualism.

M.K.: But how did this relate to the social, psychoanalytic and experiential emphases I was suggesting?

T.S.: It was as if a commitment to pure experimentality, to radical interrogation of everything in its most specific forms, was enough . . . we assumed that the articulation between these would take care of itself, would just, somehow, happen. It took many of us until the early 1970s to realize how wrong we were. This was partly an impact of feminism, partly because the crisis of capitalism then was even deeper than we had thought.

M.K.: For me, the impossible objects you talk about were still unitary rather than relational. For instance, in the *Document*, the intersubjective object was the speech of the child. The pre-condition for that investigation—that is, of language—is already put in place, but not as a question of how we come to be speaking subjects, and how that becoming positions us as men or women.

T.S.: You're right, subjectivity in this sense was largely lacking from the first two moments of Conceptual Art . . .

M.K.: The significance of the relation between the psychic and the social was made obvious to me by its absence in Art & Language work in England, in Kosuth's work. . . . I saw that space as being open.

T.S.: It became increasingly obvious to some of us in Art & Language as well, although there was a huge reluctance to embrace psychoanalysis. There was an assumption, shared by most of us engaged in public sphere politics, including the varieties of Marxism, even anarchism, that whatever happened in that sphere would override the private, or should. There was perhaps also a masculinist suspicion of what seemed an invitation to confusion in "the personal is the political." A fear of loss of power, not unfounded. On the other hand, Freudian psychoanalysis, institutionalized or not, did not seem self-evidently the royal road to a political solution. Instead, we became deeply concerned with indexical processes, with understanding what was at stake in regarding ourselves as a language-embedded, language-producing community. We set the measurement routines of formal language-logics, and the analyses of ordinary language, against the actual chaos of our own conversations.

M.K.: The linguistic theories that seem to predominate initially in the art world were positivistic. But there was already, in France, the development of semiotics. I was part of that trajectory because of my associations with people in film as well as other women in the movement who were interested in the relations between semiotic linguistics and psychoanalysis. I remember when I published the first writing about the *Document* in *Control Magazine* in 1977. Steve Willett's magazine was a perfect example of this information theory attitude towards language, yet it was flexible enough to include my writing. Semiotics is, perhaps, the tendency that predominates now or, at least it did, through the 1980s. But in the period that we're talking about it was just being introduced in a way that was rather confrontational. Even within the women's movement psychoanalytic theory was not at all accepted. In the early 1970s it started to come out, when Ros Coward and Juliet Mitchell and others insisted on its uses for feminism—it was very hotly debated. So, the key contexts of the *Document* were the relations

it had to linguistic theories in the art world and to the questions of socialization raised in the women's movement. In both cases, there was an insistence on certain shifts, most specifically focussed on that impossible object which Freud called the unconscious, and the body of theory appropriate to it, that is, psychoanalysis.

I wanted to go back to the discussion of Art & Language and ask how far you think they went with what you call the synthetic proposition?

T.S.: Well, I suppose it began in the early 1970s with the move into indexing in England, and the Annotations and Blurting projects in New York. The shift is that the work became conversations not only about the concept of art, and about the conditions for interrogating it, but about the art world, about political change and its impact on our practice. To some degree they were about language and subjectivity, about the formation of speakers, about what we called the *idiolect*—pursuing the implications of the idea that each person had their own particular way of speaking—but you could also say this as *ideolect* and thus pick up subjectivization, or interpellation, through ideology: the subject spoken by the state, of and by official language-use. Not by the “beginnings” of speech, as Lacan has it. By 1974 Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden and I were writing an issue of *Art-Language* which began from social speech but became a conversation about international politics, provincialism, individualism, the modernist art machine, etc. Certainly in New York these were the great points of debate—as is obvious in such formations as the Artists Meeting for Cultural Change. But these happened late in New York, artists' unions had sprung up, as you know from your experience in London, all over the place.

As to the form of such work, it became less propositional, and, indeed, less procedural. The time for issuing instructions for “actions” other people might take was well past. Frankly, it became very difficult to produce public work—that is, find forms of display—that seemed adequate to the social work of the conversations. Yet the desire to do so was crucial: the turn, or re-turn, of conceptual artists to political practice in the mid-1970s is a major move, one which has driven much of the significant art done since. For me, your earlier project *Women and Work* and the *Post-Partum Document* come out of a similar moment in England.

M.K.: *Women and Work* was an installation which documented the divisions of labor in the metal box industry during the implementation of Equal Pay legislation. For me, it was clearly related to Haacke's *Shapolsky Real Estate* project. But neither it nor *Post-Partum Document* is usually seen as a conceptual work, is it? Rather, as the product of a certain moment in feminist art—usually the one after the moment in which it was produced. It was made in the 1970s, yet is normally seen as representing the shift in feminist art into more theoretical con-

cerns around 1980. Sometimes it seems that the particular moment of a work's reception—in the United States—is more definitive than the moment of its creation. In this case, it eclipses even the scandal of *Post-Partum's* first reception: the “Bricks and nappies” controversy when it was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1976.

T.S.: Cultural imperialism rides again! I see *Post-Partum Document* as primarily conceptual work, definitely in its form: it's organized to track various activities, that is, procedurally. Its organizational logic is presumed to be larger than the subject or the person doing the tracing. It's processual in that its subject—motherhood—is itself normally figured as a natural process. Yet the procedures you follow, or set out, seem to cut against any sense of natural flow, seem placed against the instinctual. There is a kind of manic restraint, a withholding, an initial distancing which nevertheless hopes to surprise some otherwise inaccessible information or attitudes along the way. This mood is typical of procedural work from the late 60s onwards.

Some people probably did read the *Document* as about natural forces, and were shocked by its cognitive armature. To me, it's a work of theory, in the sense that it shows theory at work in your daily life, actively constructing the sort of relations involved in having children, being a mother. Mothering is a theoretically informed practice in a absolutely saturated way. Dr. Spock, or Penelope Leach, anyone?

Another Conceptual Art aspect of the *Document* is that it enables—in fact, obliges—the spectator to experience theory, to relate to what's happening via theory as the only way of grasping what's going on.

M.K.: Right, the *Document* follows, in your terms, typical procedural forms, tracing events such as feeding every hour, every day, or taping the linguistic exchanges between mother and child. This might look developmental, but what I always call the pseudo-scientific discourse is countered by the reference to the Lacanian diagram. In the Footnotes “Experimentum Mentis” sections I introduced a different theorization of that moment which was much more connected to the debate around psychoanalysis and feminism. The Art & Language indexes, although they might have touched on questions that moved outside of aesthetics, still seemed to me to remain within the discourse of the fine art institutions. The installation of the *Document* was intended to be polemical with the Art & Language *Index*. My idea was that you would go to the Footnotes for information, but rather than a system of internal referencing, it would raise issues which related to the social movements of the time.

T.S.: That's important, but a response might be that if you look closely at the *Index*, or many other conceptual works right from the mid-1960s, you will find that systemization always has one or two random terms in it, or that its structural regularity is aimed at provoking,

even generating, some kind of dyssytemic irrationality. The craziness of things in the world. The randomness of structures. The irreality of the real. These were what drew us—more and more, especially in the early-mid 1970s. So it's not an obsession with order, but a thirst towards a catacrexic disordering of pictures . . .

M.K.: For some people, the *Document* was a catacrexic disordering of motherhood.

T.S.: Yes, mothering appears in an environment of manic intensity!

M.K.: And once you take the discourse to that extreme it almost turns itself inside out, it's hardly recognizable as coming out of that procedural method.

T.S.: I was also thinking about Adrian Piper's work in the early 1970s. It, too, focussed on identity-formation, confronting people on the street, glancing off a connection with them. Somewhat like what she is doing now, but in forms that were more singular, and less to do with racism, from memory.

M.K.: Aside from her, there were very few artists doing performance work in rigorously theoretical ways. I'm thinking of Gina Pane's *Sentimental Actions*, or Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*, where the question of subjectivity did come into it.

T.S.: Subjectivity was one route that early language-based Conceptual Art didn't take. Nauman was exceptional. By '69 at least he was casting bits and pieces of body space, setting up those harrowing performance rooms, or observational spaces, where sometimes recorded statements operated as a kind of surveillance-voice. They weren't widely known then, but they were part of the first, analytic move of conceptualism in that they were very much about the spectator in space in relation to an object. The degree of psychic, unconscious, actually traumatic emphasis was unusual for conceptualism. As it was in Acconci.

M.K.: This junction, where performance-oriented work had taken on in some way the question of subjectivity, and conceptual work had developed a kind of theoretical, procedural rigor, is exactly what I wanted to come together in the *Document*. It had the procedural look of Conceptual Art, but fundamentally it engaged with the kinds of issues that predominated in performance work.

T.S.: I want to return to the question of power distributed according to gender in those days. There was an appalling lack of space for women artists in the early "thrust" (I have to say) of conceptualism. This led to some blinkered perceptions, which still echo. Hanne Darboven's work, for example, was seen as a screen of pseudo-language, as something decorative that would never become meaningful. It ended up as a general sign for obsessiveness. Yet in the late 1980s she exhibited a series which interspersed photographs of library spaces with her usual sequences of written pages . . .

M.K.: But her work amounts to much more than just, say, foregrounding obsession. It's the concentrated intensity of the activity which has power. She lets that quality become quite clear as having a level on which, while entirely subjective, is also completely determined by something outside of scientific discourse, although she never states that very explicitly.

T.S.: As if her books were being written by forces outside of her? They do seem runic.

M.K.: The perception of her work has been very male dominated, perhaps.

T.S.: This is a serious issue because in a certain sense she has been figured as someone whose work had the look of Conceptual Art, but none of the content. Another instance of historical gendering?

I wonder how this might come up in relation to the *Post-Partum Document*? One point of view, perhaps masculinist, would presume that its subject—motherhood—is a domain of social experiencing, bodily feeling, emotional diversification, etc. which is both specific to each individual, and also widespread. Not universal, but quite fundamental, basic if anything is, miasmatic. So you were faced with the possibility of this project roaming in every direction. Against this chaotic yet bounded prospect you set your methods of regulation, which posit flows, and escaping from regulation. Nothing like a flow escapes from the look of the *Document*, or from its mode of presentation. But flows do erupt in the way many people responded to it, especially to its message about motherhood—which does seem at the heart of what most people take to be natural—being constructed. Many, including me, reacted by reading the work itself as closed: how could motherhood be subject to this cool, withdrawn, unemotional analysis? Maybe our response was one of shocked displacement from the realization that motherhood—even motherhood!—was not a natural but social, psychic, linguistic construction.

M.K.: It is what I was saying earlier about the affective force of the idea, that it should be taken on—as you would say—as part of the interrogation of the conditions of interrogation as such. It's not divided up into some neat masculinity/femininity, theory/practice binary, but is a rather chaotic, anarchic, impositional structure of drives and desires that I continue to be interested in. All of my work has, I think, a certain tension between ordering and losing control.

T.S.: True, but even as far back as Sol LeWitt's first sentences, or Dan Graham's late 1960s poem projects, an anti-analytic relativism was present.

M.K.: If that's the case then the move to subjectivity in the *Document* should have seemed a logical step. For many, it seemed to go too far . . .

T.S.: You must have had people criticizing you for dealing with, and very clearly valuing, motherhood, when lots of women thought of it as a total trap, an anti-feminist way to go. And for doing so in a way that was intensely and obviously theoretical in its mode of address.



M.K.: Well, in one sense that dilemma just put me squarely in the old tradition of the avant-garde transgression. Yet part of the point of conceptualism, you remember, was to change the distribution of interpretative power in the art world, to restore some of it to artists. Certainly to try to influence the ways it would be institutionally received. What amazes me now, looking back, is how little control you do have, finally.

T.S.: The other side of the dilemma for some viewers was the very fact of the subject—motherhood—being made so central in such a sustained way in the *Document* when among the women whom I was closest to at the time, the idea of motherhood—while not necessarily ruled out in practice—was certainly not seen as a likely, or even possible, subject for art. By introducing such material, such a central subjectivity, the *Document* signals a major break with the main concerns of early conceptualism.

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