

*This essay considers the relevance of The British Avant Garde exhibition at the New York Cultural Center in 1971 to the reputation and discussion of British artists in the US, and its subsequent impact in Britain. It situates the exhibition with reference to Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects at the NYCC and Information at the Museum of Modern Art, both held in 1970, and within the background milieu of a lively transatlantic and multi-directional network of artists such as Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, Ian Burn, Barry Flanagan, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Christine Kozlov, Richard Long, Mel Ramsden, Sol LeWitt and Lawrence Weiner, who were developing alternative ways to make and to distribute work by using text, photocopies, and self-publication as forms of production as well as becoming the site of exhibition. Devised by Charles Harrison, assistant editor of Studio International magazine, the exhibition was a collaboration between the magazine and the NYCC, directed by Donald Karshan. Despite the mixed press reviews in New York, the exhibition paved the way for establishing institutional support for the artists in the UK.*

In May 1970, Charles Harrison, assistant editor of *Studio International* magazine, was in New York on a research trip when Joseph Kosuth introduced him to Donald Karshan, founding director of the New York Cultural Center (NYCC). Karshan's launching exhibition, *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, had just opened with great aplomb—during the private view searchlights were beamed from the building into the night sky.<sup>1</sup> It created a stir; "Xerophobia rages out of control", was Hilton Kramer's response in the *New York Times*. Kramer was bemused by the thought of text presented as art and failed to make connections between synchronicity, duplication, and multiples. He grudgingly reported that Kosuth's *Information Room*, where the viewer was invited to read a variety of books and magazines on philosophy and art criticism, was the "best thing" in the show.<sup>2</sup> The director's statement was not included in the exhibition catalogue, which was devoid of explanatory text, but it was on hand at the venue to justify what Karshan termed "Post-Object Art". This term built on some considerations of new art raised by David L. Shirey in a two-part feature with Thomas M. Messer (director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) called "Impossible Art". Messer outlined its characteristics as follows: "extreme fragility . . . [it] moves towards invisibility, disembodiment and sheer non-existence . . . It is useless to all but those who would accept it for its own sake."<sup>3</sup> Shirey located the artists' work in categories of practice as "earthworks, waterworks, skyworks, nihilworks and thinkworks".<sup>4</sup> The last two terms focused Karshan's assertion that

[at] the end of the 20th century we now know that art does indeed exist as an idea . . . and we know that quality exists in the thinking of the artist, not in the object he employs—if he employs an object at all. We begin to understand that painting and sculpture are simply unreal in the coming age of computers and instant travel.<sup>5</sup>

The article reached a broader and more international audience when it was published later that year in *Studio International*. Harrison considered it to be something of a "coup", and "the first time a serious discussion of conceptual art" was aired in the British art press.<sup>6</sup> Karshan's essay, "The Seventies: Post-Object Art", written for *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* but, as noted, not included in the catalogue, explained the shift from painting and sculpture to "idea art", "analytic art", or work foregrounding a "conceptual aspect".<sup>7</sup>

Writing in the *New York Times*, Peter Schjeldahl found the exhibition almost free of visual stimulation but vigorous in its "scholarly austerity"; for him it presented a distinct contrast with the "flea market" organization

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of the *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. He remarked that "enough gifted young artists had taken to working in or around [conceptual art] to guarantee its influence for a long time."<sup>8</sup> In contrast, *Information* was broadly scoped like Messer and Shirey's "Impossible Art" to the surveyed variety of practices preoccupying artists. And unlike the NYCC exhibition, it was not restricted to Anglo-British artists but included artists seen in the US for the first time from South America and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, Karshan was anxious to get attention for what he hoped would become NYCC's radical programme, and to get the exhibition opening before the Museum of Modern Art's much longer planned exhibition was important to him.

The evolution of *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* bears a relation to the *The British Avant Garde* show devised by Harrison which was also held at the NYCC a year later. A series of exchanges consolidated relationships between British and US, particularly New York City-based, conceptual art practices. Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin had stayed in the city and established contact with Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham, and Joseph Kosuth, amongst others. Baldwin and Atkinson devised a collaborative practice from 1966. Two years later, in association with David Bainbridge and Harold Hurrell, they adopted the term Art & Language. Ian Burn worked collaboratively with Roger Cutforth and Mel Ramsden, and in 1969 they formed The Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses, through which they published text-based art.<sup>9</sup> The first issue of *Art-Language*, published in May 1969, had the subtitle, "the journal of conceptual art" ([fig. 1](#)). Edited by Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge, and Harold Hurrell, the issue's introduction situates the dialogic investigation of their practice with the rhetorical question: "Can this editorial come up for the count as a work of art within a developed framework as a visual art convention?"<sup>10</sup> Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner contributed works to the issue. It was shown in *Number 7*, the exhibition curated by Lucy R. Lippard at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, which presented text-based and ephemeral work by British and American artists including The Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses, Richard Long, Hanne Darboven, Lee Lozano, Joseph Kosuth, Christine Kozlov, and others.<sup>11</sup> The latter two, along with Atkinson and Baldwin, Barry Flanagan and Richard Long were participants in Seth Siegelaub's *One Month* calendar exhibition of March 1969, when thirty-one artists were each offered a page on which to make work for print distribution.

Karshan and Burn became friendly when the former needed frames for his print collection and called into Dain's workshop where Burn made frames. Karshan was looking for ideas for the opening exhibition at the NYCC. Burn suggested involving Kosuth, the recently appointed American editor of *Art-Language*, knowing his extensive contacts would attract a range of artists. (The second issue of *Art-Language* dispensed with the subtitle "the journal of conceptual art" because it suggested inclusivity of the diverse practices loosely configured by the rubric of the term.) ([fig. 2](#)) Although Karshan would be described as the organizer of *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, it was conceived and "ghost" curated by Burn and Kosuth, who proposed the artists and installed the exhibition.<sup>12</sup>

*The British Avant Garde* emerged from conversations between Karshan, Harrison, and Kosuth during a weekend spent at Karshan's country house in upstate New York, when Karshan asked Harrison to organize an exhibition of British artists.<sup>13</sup> They discussed extending the project with a

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special issue of *Studio International* and the simultaneous publication of the exhibition catalogue, using the same material.<sup>14</sup> Harrison was working on his section of Siegelau's *Studio International* magazine exhibition for July/August 1970, which included many artists showing in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*.<sup>15</sup> Harrison's connection with *Studio International* and its grass-roots editorial policy of commissioning artist-generated projects appealed to Karshan, and both were alert to the possibilities of international networking. Harrison proposed focusing on ten to fifteen artists working in areas beyond conventional interpretations of painting and sculpture.<sup>16</sup> Karshan thought this "a little thin"; he wanted "a broader sweep more like thirty artists including painters and sculptors".<sup>17</sup> In fact, Harrison restricted the selection to artists who, broadly speaking, were engaged in conceptual art, film, sound, light, text pieces, and sculpture using non-traditional materials.

In September 1970, Harrison informed the artists that as the project was a joint venture with *Studio International*'s May 1971 issue he intended to commission them to make work "direct for the printed page".<sup>18</sup> These contributions would be treated by the artists as an extension of the exhibition, as well as a record of it.<sup>19</sup> The results formed a dedicated issue of *Studio International*, acknowledging the NYCC's involvement. (fig. 3)<sup>20</sup> An extra run, minus the masthead, was printed as the exhibition catalogue (fig. 4).<sup>21</sup>

Harrison disliked the title *The British Avant Garde*, and was dismayed when he heard from Konrad Fischer about Karshan's nationally themed series: *The Swiss Avant Garde*, *The French Avant Garde*, and *The Avant Garde from South America*. On hearing this "disturbing rumour", Harrison remarked that the title sounded like "Swinging London in a Bowler Hat".<sup>22</sup> He proposed the title *New Art from England* instead, as "the concept of the avant garde seemed dated." Karshan ignored the suggestion but the title reappeared as *The New Art* in the Hayward Gallery survey in 1972, which was largely based on Harrison's exhibition and the work of *Studio International* magazine in drawing attention to new and experimental art practices.

The artists Harrison selected as they appeared in magazine-catalogue order were Bruce McLean, Keith Arnatt, David Dye, David Tremlett, Roelof Louw, Barry Flanagan, Gilbert & George, Gerald Newman, Richard Long, Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, Sue Arrowsmith, Colin Crumplin, Andrew Dipper, and Victor Burgin. Ways of thinking about duration, movement, and the processes of documenting practice feature prominently in several contributions. I will outline a few examples. Dye utilized the action of page-turning as intrinsic to the viewing process and creates a *mise-en-scène*. To realize the project, and in keeping with the prevailing spirit of collaboration, he asked Harrison if he could have another artist's page-pulls. Harrison sent him those of David Tremlett, though no one recalls if his permission was sought.<sup>23</sup> Dye had himself photographed seated with Tremlett's pages resting on his knees as he turned them. Dye held the page showing his name while his right hand turned the page to reveal Tremlett's double-page contribution (fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> Dye's work in the exhibition, *Distancing Device*, was a series of vertically mounted mirrors in hoods with which the viewer read the single letters of the words, "k-e-e-p-g-o-i-n-g". The constructions demonstrated how the viewer needed to read in the act of viewing the work while moving away from the vertical arrangement as they faced it whereby the letters under the hoods become visible.

Gilbert & George were photographed on the Thames Embankment opposite the Houses of Parliament, with the text of *There were two young men who did laugh* printed across it (fig. 6). The image, although not acknowledged as such, restaged a tourist postcard of the scene.<sup>25</sup> Newman presented documentation of both *Piece* (1971), a sound work on a looped tape that was included in the NYCC exhibition, and *Piece for Two Lights* (1970),<sup>26</sup> which differed from the light piece he included in the exhibition. Art & Language's *De Legibus Naturae* accompanied the text-work *Theories of Ethics*, which was shown in the NYCC exhibition.<sup>27</sup> Harrison had supplied Karshan with a Xerox copy of Art & Language's text-work, *Theories of Ethics*, for reference. It is a theory of the ethics of the production of artwork as an artwork in itself.<sup>28</sup> The book was to be published in an edition of two hundred. Harrison was shocked when he discovered that Karshan had copied it for the art critic Jack Burnham without seeking permission. Harrison discussed this with the artists who proposed making five copies for interested parties, and keeping a record of who received them.<sup>29</sup>

There were several films on show, including Arrowsmith's *Street Walk* (1971); Flanagan's *The Lesson* (1971), *The Phantom Sculptor* (1971), *Atlantic Flight* (1970), and *a hole in the sea* (1969); Gilbert & George's *The Nature of our Looking*; Long's *Ten Mile Walk* (1969), McLean's *In the Shadow of your Smile Bob* (1971); and Tremlett's *English Locations tapes* (1970–71).<sup>30</sup>

Installation instructions were the motivation behind Flanagan's making of *The Lesson*. His work *ringn 66* (1966) was selected for the exhibition and Harrison would need to construct it. In March 1971, Harrison contacted Karshan with a list of materials required, including sand "as golden yellow as possible; but must be fine and dry" for *ringn 66*, noting that Fischbach Gallery might still have sand following Flanagan's exhibition there in 1969.<sup>31</sup> Flanagan's film served a dual purpose, both to document making the sand sculpture and for this to become a work in itself. Harrison assisted and photographed the process (fig. 7).<sup>32</sup> In September of that year the film was shown again at Situation Gallery, London, in *Film Show*, part of *Prospect 71: Projection*, with films by Hamish Fulton, Bob Law, McLean and Tremlett.<sup>33</sup>

In the time between Karshan's invitation and Harrison's arrival in New York to install the exhibition, relations between them were strained. It was at Karshan's insistence late in the process that Gilbert & George were included. Harrison managed to secure the Museum of Modern Art's agreement to lend the recently acquired work by Gilbert & George, *To Be with Art is All We Ask* (1970), with the stipulation that the NYCC cover the panels with Plexiglas.<sup>34</sup> The NYCC did not, however, provide the budget for this, and to Harrison's embarrassment he was unable to satisfy this condition and the work was returned immediately after the opening, leaving the wall space blank.<sup>35</sup> The exhibition opened on 19 May to mixed reviews. It closed on 29 August 1971.

Overall, Schjeldahl in the *New York Times* was supportive, although he incorrectly made "British" synonymous with "English", asserting that the exhibition "brought to Conceptualism the kind of discrimination and stylishness typical of English modern art" (fig. 8). This, he felt, was a movement that had not "exactly electrified art-world discourses these past few seasons".<sup>36</sup> Bored by bandwagon repetitions of "the end of art as we know it", he welcomed the opportunity to see this new British art, mostly unknown in New York (with the exceptions of Flanagan and Long—whom, he remarked, were not conceptualists). His favourites were

the vivid informal sculptures of Barry Flanagan . . . a tepee of sticks containing a square of green felt and the actually charming work of Richard Long, redolent of an Englishman's fondness for walks in the country, on which he may pause to arrange some rocks . . . [which] rightly fall outside the canon.

Schjeldahl noted the removal of work by Gilbert & George, describing them as "the most unheard of thing Harrison brought with him—the life sculpture of two gentle young artist-poets", and noting that "Unfortunately only one short film represents them." The article was illustrated by a still from *The Nature of Our Looking*.<sup>37</sup> The Flanagan work Schjeldahl referred to, *no. 1, '71*, was reproduced in Shirey's review in the *New York Times*. Shirey was scathing, picking up on the exhibition's title exactly as Harrison had feared: "what looks avant garde to Mr Harrison in England looks manifestly derriere garde to some observers in the United States."<sup>38</sup> Conversely, John Perreault described the exhibition's conceptualism as "global whether we like it or not".<sup>39</sup>

Despite Harrison's reservations about *The British Avant Garde* exhibition, the May 1971 issue of *Studio International* was immediately regarded as a reference point for new practices in British art. The international attention affected the reputation of these younger British artists: Michael Compton, the Tate Gallery's assistant keeper, organized *Seven Exhibitions* in February 1972 in space made available by the cancellation of Robyn Denny's show. Files kept by younger Tate keepers, including Compton and Richard Morphet, formed the basis of this project and enabled Compton to persuade the director, Norman Reid, of its relevance.<sup>41</sup> Joseph Beuys was the only non-British artist of the seven, and each received a solo show.

When the Arts Council of Great Britain began planning what would be the first museum survey of new art practices by British artists in the UK, *The New Art*, Nicholas Serota (assistant to the exhibition officer, Ann Seymour), contacted Townsend to ask for twenty-five copies of the issue.<sup>42</sup> The Hayward exhibition included many of the same artists as *The British Avant Garde*, and several films were screened again.<sup>43</sup>