From visual to textual: typography in/as conceptual art

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From Looking to Reading:
Text-Based Conceptual Art and Typographic Discourse

I begin this discussion with a quote from Peter Osborne's book
on Conceptual Art, where he notes how:

> At its best, "Conceptual Art was never quite sure where
> *the work* was:" because it was never just in one place,
> or even one *kind* of place… Making this apparent, in
> opposition to the monistic materialism of Greenberg's
> late modernist criticism, was the most critically
> productive use of written language in the art of the
> 1960s…However, this does not mean that the visual
> dimension of linguistic inscription is irrelevant, even
> when it is the function of such inscription to *negate* the
> intrinsic significance of visual form. On the contrary,
> it is precisely its "unmarked" or neutral *visual* quality
> that performs the negation. In… many [artworks] of the
> period, this was achieved via design decisions associa-
> ted with "publishing," rather than with "art."[1]

This quote is useful, not only because it introduces the emergence of text-based art
works within this art historical period and situates them against the shifting criti-
cal discourse surrounding art at that time, but also because of the way in which it
draws particular attention to typographic language and the activity of publishing
as key factors in the ability of these works to, as Osborne puts it, "*negate* the intrin-
sic significance of visual form."

Retrospective critical accounts of Conceptual Art are numerous and include
comprehensive discussion of the motivations behind the adoption of published
typographic formats as a means of producing and disseminating art. However,
what has surprised me in my own consideration of the works is how these accounts
are often supported by poor quality or misleading reproductions, or a failure to
cross-reference examples to each other. What this becomes then is a general failure
to adequately demonstrate the precise nature and evolution of these works, either
by failing to provide a full picture of their operation within this activity of publish-
ing or through not giving a clear impression of the various different typographic

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1 Osborne refers here to Terry Atkinson's 1968 article, "Concerning the Article: 'The Dematerialisation of Art.'" Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2002, 31–32.

POEM, MARCH 1966 / DAN GRAHAM   THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR / ROLAND BARTHES
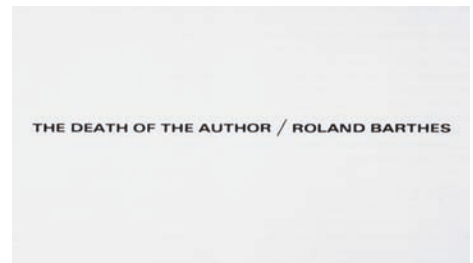
1 Front cover details of two identical booklets included in *Aspen*, 5+6, Fall & Winter (1967–68).
   (left) Dan Graham, "Poem, March 1966."
   (right) Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

configurations they employed, which would allow them to be understood collectively. Indeed, without these things, it can be hard to fathom exactly how these works can be understood as pieces of Conceptual Art and to appreciate the importance of their published typographic form to the achievement of this status.

As such, this discussion aims to present some key text-based artworks from this period and to describe more precisely how they operated typographically within the activity of publishing. This will not only add something to the art historical account of the works but will also serve to demonstrate their relevance to specific areas within typographic discourse, which are difficult to resolve within strict disciplinary boundaries.

The Shift to Text in/as Art

As noted by Osborne, these text-based works are situated against the backdrop of a very particular art historical period, which began in the mid-1960s and ended in the mid-1970s. Indeed, what is important in considering the works is that this period is generally characterized by a shift from the notion of art as an object toward the notion of art as an idea and, in particular, how this manifested itself in experiments with the ways in which the idea could be implemented *conceptually through language* rather than *perceptually through vision.*

2 Robert Smithson, "Language to be Looked At and/or Things to be Read," press release written for the first of four "Language" shows at Dwan Gallery in New York between 1967 and 1970 (1967); Atkinson, "Concerning the Article: 'The Dematerialisation of Art'" (1968).

3 Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy," in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. John Bird and Michael Newman (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1999).

4 *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* was originally published in nine small separate volumes between 1759 and 1767; *Un Coup de Dés Jamais n'Abolira le Hazard* [*A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*], was first published as a 20-page poem in 1897.

5 See Barthes's essay, "The Death of the Author" (1967) and his distinction in *S/Z* between the "Readerly text," which is transitive, acting purely as a conveyor of meaning, and the "Writerly text," which is intransitive, aiming not to take the reader beyond but to draw attention to the activity of writing itself (1973).

The shift from object to idea is of course, as Osborne also states, connected to the collapse of Clement Greenberg's notion of medium-specific modernism and the emergence of a new art critical position, which moved away from the idea of the passive spectator *looking* at a pre-existing artwork toward the idea of an active spectator engaged somehow in the physical and/or conceptual creation of the work. So, in the case of these text works, what was presented – via typography and the publication of printed matter – was a context in which the spectator could conceivably encounter the artwork through the active process of *reading* rather than through any particular form of visual contemplation. In fact, this shift was specifically articulated by the artist Robert Smithson in his 1967 press release, "Language to be Looked At and/or Things to be Read" and by Terry Atkinson in his 1968 essay, "Concerning the Article: 'The Dematerialization of Art.'"[2]

It is also relevant that what is described as "the turn to language" in the art of this period connects these text works to the philosophical shift through structuralism and semiotics, as described in Osborne's essay, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy."[3] And it is interesting that accounts of this shift refer to much earlier text-based experiments in literature and poetry including, for instance, Laurence Sterne's novel "Tristram Shandy", which was published in the mid-18th century and Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "A Roll of the Dice", which was published in the late 19th century, as well as French experimental writings of the 1950s from those like Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and the work of post-War American poets like Jackson MacLow and John Ashbery.[4]

Indeed, what these earlier experiments demonstrate, alongside the style of their writing, is the use of specific textual arrangements and page layout to disrupt what has subsequently been described as a "readerly" immersion in the text. This is an idea that, by the late 1960s, had been articulated through the theoretical writings of Roland Barthes through, for example, his depictions of "the death of the author" and the "writerly text."[5]

So, in relation to the turn to language and text in the art of this period, it is worth noting that "The Death of the Author" was first published in 1967 in a printed booklet within the art magazine "Aspen" alongside another identical booklet that contained an important typographic work by the artist Dan Graham: "Poem, March 1966" (Fig. 1). As with Barthes's essay, this work by Graham is discussed in relation to a conceptual shift away from the idea of artistic authorship and the autonomous work through the way in which it is typographically constructed, not by the artist but via an editor's response to questions about a document's editorial and design specification (Fig. 2).

What is therefore essential with regard to these text-based Conceptual artworks is to see how they, in fact, emerged out of the intersecting of a number of historical and theoretical factors. These include the aforementioned philosophical

SCHEMA	POEM
(number of) adjectives	35 adjectives
(number of) adverbs	7 adverbs
(percentage of) area not occupied by type	35.52% area not occupied by type
(percentage of) area occupied by type	64.48% area occupied by type
(number of) columns	1 column
(number of) conjunctions	1 conjunction
(number of) depression of type into surface of page	0 mms. depression of type into surface of page
(number of) gerunds	0 gerunds
(number of) infinitives	0 infinitives
(number of) letters of alphabet	247 letters of alphabet
(number of) lines	28 lines
(number of) mathematical symbols	6 mathematical symbols
(number of) nouns	51 nouns
(number of) numbers	29 numbers
(number of) participles	6 participles
(perimeter of) page	8″ x 8″ page
(weight of) paper sheet	80 lb. paper sheet
(type) paper stock	dull coated paper stock
(thinness of) paper stock	.007″ thin paper stock
(number of) prepositions	3 prepositions
(number of) pronouns	0 pronouns
(number of point) size type	10 point size type
(name of) typeface	Univers 55 typeface
(number of) words	61 words
(number of) words capitalized	3 words capitalized
(number of) words italicized	0 words italicized
(number of) words not capitalized	58 words not capitalized
(number of) words not italicized	61 words not italicized

2 Dan Graham, "Poem, March 1966" as reproduced on consecutive pages of a booklet in *Aspen*, 5+6, Fall & Winter (1967–68).
(left) The piece begins with a set of questions (entitled "Schema") about the editorial and design specification of the poem's host publication and an instruction from Graham that the list of questions is to be "set in its final form by the editor of the publication where it is to appear." Graham also states that this activity should happen in various magazines to create a series, or "set," of "individual poems."
(right) The final "Poem" (the answers to the questions posed by the Schema) thus appears as a unique text-piece each time it is reproduced, being specifically derived from the individual editorial and design specification of its host publication.

territory and the obvious art historical lineage back to the nomination and staging of Duchamp's Readymades, but also incorporate other contextual features surrounding the visual arts at that time, such as the breakdown of the critical discourse of medium-specific modernism and links to experimental poetry and literature. What

6 Dan Graham and Nicolás Guagnini, "A Conversation Between Dan Graham and Nicolás Guagnini: New York, New York, 14 May 2006," in *Dan Graham: Beyond*, ed. Bennett Simpson and Chrissie Iles (Los Angeles and Massachusetts: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and The MIT Press, 2009), 278. Graham had earlier described how he wanted to connect the serial logic of Minimalism with this new type of sociological journalism: "*Esquire* magazine was publishing sociological exposes like David Riesman's 'The Lonely Crowd.' They used photographers in the school of Walker Evans … [and] were showing vernacular workers' housing, suburban housing … I wanted to show that Minimal was related to a real social situation that could be documented." (Dan Graham interviewed by Mike Metz in *Two Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on his Art*, ed., Alexander Alberro (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1999 [1994]), 185.
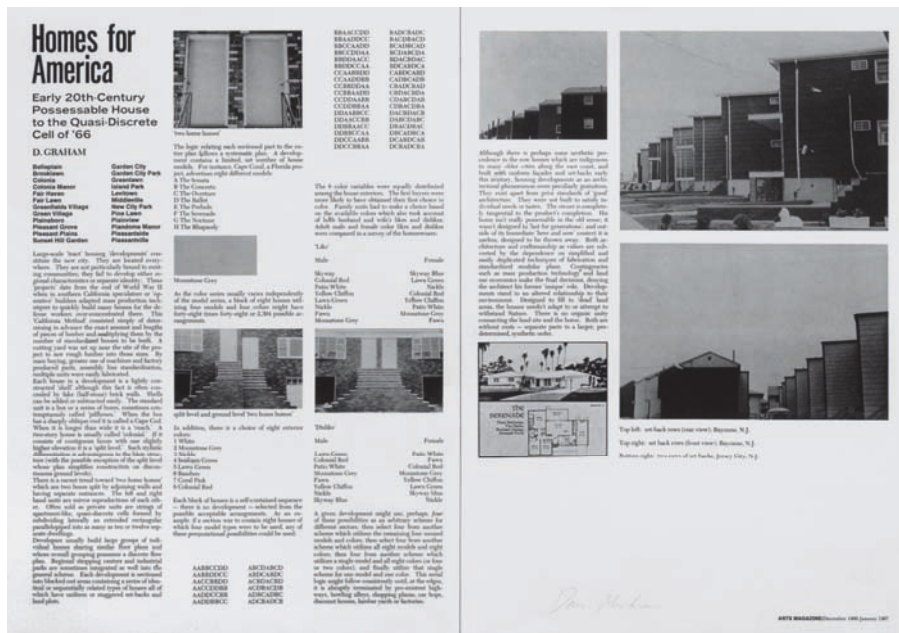
3 Dan Graham, "Homes for America," original paste
  up for *Arts Magazine* (1966).

is more, this also extends to the particular social and economic climate at that time
in the 1960s, which had provided new possibilities for the positioning of art within
published contexts, ranging from short-run office-printed documents to mass-
circulation illustrated magazines.

Indeed, what these new publishing contexts specifically helped to create was a
different kind of location for art, as well as a different kind of audience – one that
would be receptive (whether knowingly or not) to the positioning of works within
these kinds of printed matter. As Dan Graham put it:

> I didn't go to art school or college, but I read a lot of
> magazines like "Esquire"… Not to be academic about it
> but I think the mid-60s was magazine culture. I really
> liked "Esquire", which had writing and also photographs
> by famous photographers, often about the suburbs.[6]

The Published Text as Conceptual Artwork

Within their own niche, examples of text-based Conceptual Art appropriate a di-
verse array of typographic and publishing genres. However, rather than attempting

AABBCCDD	ABCDABCD
AABBDDCC	ABDCABDC
AACCBBDD	ACBDACBD
AACCDDBB	ACDBACDB
AADDCCBB	ADBCADBC
AADDBBCC	ADCBADCB
BBAACCDD	BADCBADC
BBAADDCC	BACDBACD
BBCCAADD	BCADBCAD
BBCCDDAA	BCDABCDA
BBDDAACC	BDACBDAC
BBDDCCAA	BDCABDCA
CCAABBDD	CABDCABD
CCAADDBB	CADBCADB
CCBBDDAA	CBADCBAD
CCBBAADD	CBDACBDA
CCDDAABB	CDABCDAB
CCDDBBAA	CDBACDBA
DDAABBCC	DACBDACB
DDAACCBB	DABCDABC
DDBBAACC	DBACDBAC
DDBBCCAA	DBCADBCA
DDCCAABB	DCABDCAB
DDCCBBAA	DCBADCBA

Belleplain	Garden City
Brooklawn	Garden City Park
Colonia	Greenlawn
Colonia Manor	Island Park
Fair Haven	Levitown
Fair Lawn	Middleville
Greenfields Village	New City Park
Green Village	Pine Lawn
Plainsboro	Plainview
Pleasant Grove	Plandome Manor
Pleasant Plains	Pleasantside
Sunset Hill Garden	Pleasantville

4 Dan Graham, "Homes for America,"
text and image details

to present a survey of "types," my intention is to consider how it was the act of positioning these works within this context of publishing that specifically allowed them to undermine traditional ideas of form, authorship, and the "Institution," which had dominated pre-1960s art.

The works I present here are therefore *not* those involving one-off painted or stenciled texts, as for example produced by artists like On Kawara or Ed Ruscha, which are in some ways easier to describe and exhibit through conventional author/object-based criteria. Instead, I specifically focus on those works that were typeset and distributed through the channel of mainstream, print-based, publishing and, as such, can be identified as much with the activity of publishing as with their particular material form as printed matter.

Take, for example, the work "Homes for America" by Dan Graham (Fig. 3), which is held up as one of the seminal pieces of text-based Conceptual Art: The

5   Dan Graham, "Homes for America" as reproduced in *Arts Magazine*, vol. 41, no. 3, (December 1966 – January 1967)

6 Dan Graham, "Homes for America," revised
version of article layout as reproduced in
Dan Graham, a booklet produced by Lisson
Publications: London and Koenig Publishing:
Cologne & New York (1972)

7 Dan Graham, "Homes for America," revised version of
article layout as reproduced in *For Publication*, Otis
Art Institute of Los Angeles County (1975). Reprinted
in 1991, by Marian Goodman Gallery: New York

usual account of this work is that it began as a proposal for an illustrated magazine article, with the content and arrangement of the text and images referring back to the serial logic of Minimalist Art via a descriptive, reportage-style account of suburban tract housing in a New Jersey suburb (Fig. 4). In fact, from its outset, Graham had in mind an intention to place this work within a mainstream published context through his production of a pasted-up page layout intended for submission to a magazine editor.

As the story goes, Graham was initially thinking of a mass-circulation magazine like "Esquire" but, possibly because his friend Robert Smithson was a contributing editor at "Arts Magazine", he prepared and presented it instead to that publication.[7] And it was at this point – the point at which it was accepted by "Arts Magazine" – that the work made its shift from a static (conventionally object-like) paste-up (Fig. 3) into the active context of publishing, whereby the editors changed the layout to follow the magazine's house style and replaced some of Graham's photographs with alternative imagery (Fig. 5).

So the operation of this work as a piece of Conceptual Art lies in this shift *away* from the autonomous art object; *away* from the hand of the author; *away* from the Institution; and *into* the work existing within the activity of mainstream publishing via its editorial alteration and reproduction – and, importantly, through its subsequent re-formulation in later published versions (Fig. 6, 7).

As I have said though, it can be hard to get your head around this properly when faced with the available reproductions of "Homes for America," which fail to give the full picture of this evolution since they usually depict just one of these versions of the work. What is more, whichever the version depicted, the individual reproductions all appear captioned with the same overall title – "Homes for America" – without sufficient visual explanation of their individual position as one of the various stages in this potentially on-going progression.

So despite the undisputed quality of the critical accounts of the piece – by Graham himself, but also by Jeff Wall, David Campany, Thomas Crow, Benjamin Buchloh, and others – the importance of actually seeing this progression proved to be key to my full understanding of the operation of this work.[8] And, for me, this seeing could only be accomplished through a process of gathering and then comparing every different reproduction I came across (Fig. 8).

7 Various sources record the involvement of artists at that time with the editorship and design of both arts and mainstream magazines: See for example James Meyer, "The Mirror of Fashion: Dale McConathy and the Neo-Avant Garde," in *Artforum*, vol. XXXIX, no. 9 (2001): 134–38.

8 See, for example, Graham's essay "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art'" (1985); Jeff Wall's essay "Dan Graham's Kammerspiel" (1985); Thomas *Crow's Modern Art in the Common Culture* (1996); David Campany's "Conceptual Art History or a Home for 'Homes for America'" (1999); and Benjamin Buchloh's "Moments of History in the Work of Dan Graham" (1978).

(a)
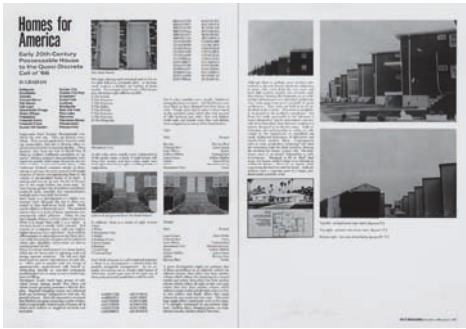
(b)

(c)

(d)

(e)

(f)

8

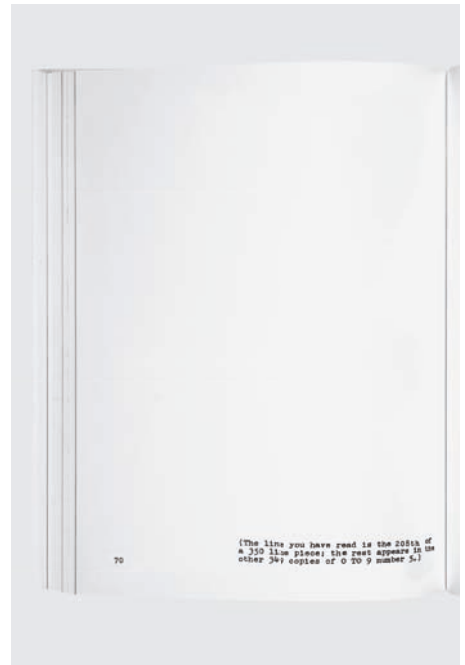(a) **1966** "Homes for America" began with Graham's Kodak Instamatic photographs of New Jersey suburban houses and diners, which he started in the early 1960s and, in 1966, projected as slides in the exhibition "Projected Art" at the Finch College Museum of Art in New York.

(b) **1966** However, in 1966, Graham also wrote and produced his pasted-up page layout for the piece as an illustrated magazine article, which included some of the original photographs alongside a written account of the particular style of the suburban tract housing in this suburb. He submitted this to *Arts Magazine*.

(c) **1966–1967** *Arts Magazine* ran the piece in the "Critique" section of their December 1966–January 1967 issue, although they altered the page layout so that the article would run on from the previous article and into the next. The editor also dropped most of Graham's photographs and substituted instead a photograph by the established photographer Walker Evans whose images were popular in sociological journalism at that time.

(d) **1970** And then, in 1970, Graham produced another paste-up of "Homes for America", which, although re-presented as a double page spread, differs again in format from both his original paste-up and the *Arts Magazine* version and returns to the inclusion of Graham's original photographs. This version also often appears alongside critical accounts of "Homes for America" and, like the *Arts Magazine* version, is accepted and referred to as *the work*.

(e) **1972** In 1972, a booklet was produced by Lisson Gallery in London (who represent Graham) and Koenig publishing – and here again a new layout for the piece was published, again returning to Graham's original photographs rather than the ones used by *Arts Magazine*.

(f) **1975** And, in 1975, a booklet entitled *For Publication*, was produced by the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles – with yet another published layout and set of images for the piece.

across the lake region, the middle Mississippi Valley, and

(The line you have read is the 205th of a 350 line piece; the rest appears in the other 349 copies of 0 TO 9 number 5.)

68   70

9   Vito Acconci, "Act 3, Scene 4", in *0 to 9*, no. 5 (1969)
    For this work, Acconci broke his text into 350 single lines, which are then separated
    across each of the 350 individual copies of this issue of the magazine. As a result,
    the work exists only as a fragment in each copy and, without looking at each, the
    reader/spectator can only imagine the whole piece.

Indeed, when placed together, what these different reproductions demonstrate is a much clearer account of the precise evolution of "Homes for America": from its initial conception as a set of photographic images; to the integration of these images and an associated text in a page-layout; to the insertion of this layout into the context of mainstream publishing (which introduced the first editorial alteration of the piece); and on to a series of further revised layouts, either though revisions to the paste-up by the artist himself, or through subsequently reformatted versions in further publications of the piece. And, importantly, what a clear understanding of this evolution demonstrates is how the work "Homes for America" can in fact be understood equally as any single one of these instances, or as all of them collectively as a number of constituent parts of an open-ended work.
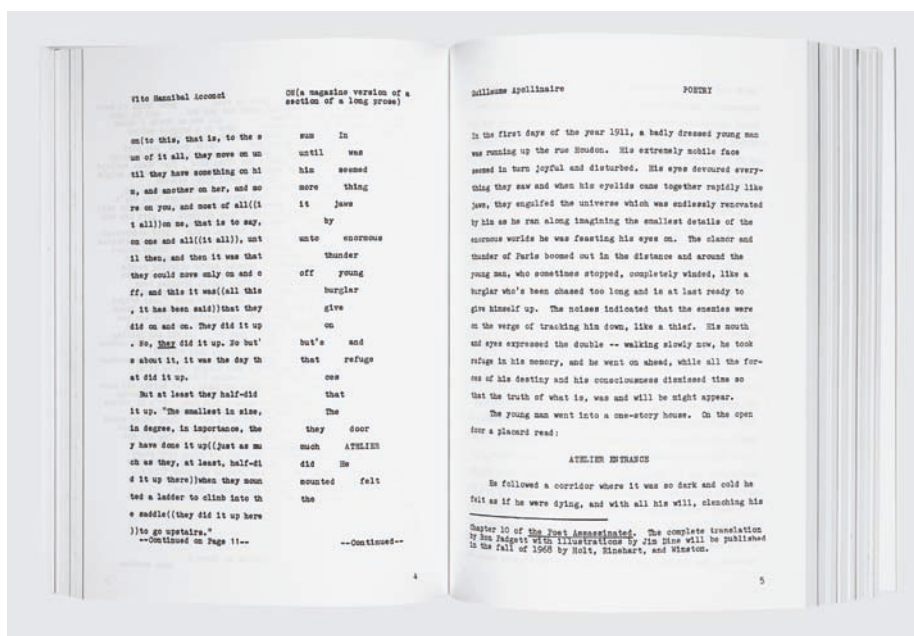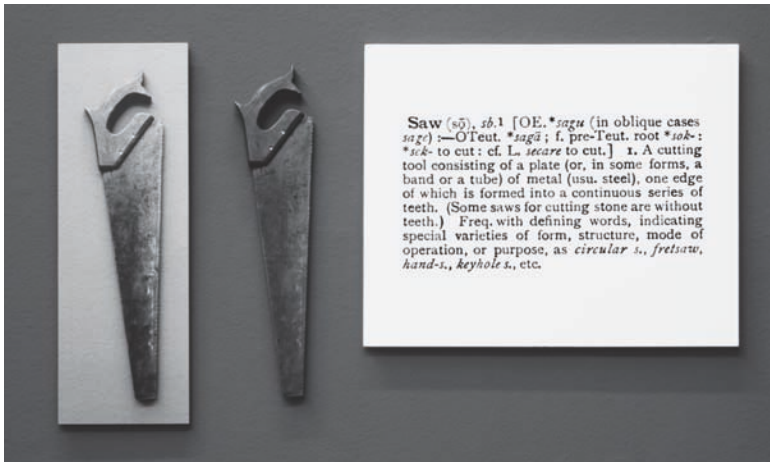
10 Vito Acconci, "ON", word cloning in *0 to 9*, no. 3, (1968).
    Acconci's texts in *0 to 9* are often non-linear in their arrangement on the page
    and intentionally disruptive to the linear reading of other surrounding texts: In this
    work, for example, his text appears across a number of pages, inserted between the
    texts of other contributors, and is created by cloning individual words from the pieces
    that immediately precede and follow it and arranging them in a scattered single-
    column. This establishes a relationship (or transaction) between the texts on either
    side which is described by Liz Kotz as a "word-transfer" or a "writing-through-project"
    (2007) or by Acconci himself as a "transference installation" (1969).

The Typographic Layout as Conceptual Artwork

I have noted how accounts of "Homes or America" often refer to the ways in which
the content and layout of the article's text and imagery connect back to the serial
logic of Minimalist Art. These highlight Graham's focus on the pre-fabricated mo-
dular units of tract housing developments and his echoing of this arranged modu-
larity through the typographic groupings and picture placements within the ar-
ticle (Fig. 4). In this sense, "Homes for America" can be considered alongside the
text works of other artists like Carl Andre and Vito Acconci, who were engaged
with similar interrogations of typographic layout during this period of the 1960s.
In fact, in much the same vein, these artists applied classic Minimalist strategies,
such as interruption, accumulation, fragmentation, and repetition to reduce and
isolate texts into independent units.

STATEMENTS
Lawrence Weiner

A 2" wide 1" deep trench cut across
a standard one car driveway

11 Lawrence Weiner, "Statements," as published in his book *Statements* (1968), front cover and inside page
12 Joseph Kosuth, "Proto-Investigation: 'One and Three Saws'" (1965)

The typographic arrangements of Andre demonstrate, for example, the potential for words to operate as a form of sculptural unit in the manner of the units (e. g., bricks, blocks, bales, and tiles) that he employed for his more conventional Minimalist sculptural works:[9]

> greengreengreengreengreengreengreengreengreengreen
> greengreengreengreengreengreengreengreengreengreen
> greengreengreengreengreengreengreen
>
> arc
> bath
> bench
> chrome
> brine
> bulb
> cog

9 The first example here is an excerpt from Andre's poem "Green" (1960) and the second is an excerpt from Andre's poem "Essay on Photography for Hollis Frampton" (1963/4).
10 James Meyer, "Carl Andre: Writer" in *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004*, Carl Andre, ed. James Meyer (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2005), 12. Meyer also cites Craig Owens's discussion of this in his 1979 essay "Earthwords."

11 Carl Andre, transcribed interview from 1975, cited in Meyer, *Cuts*, 214.
12 Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed., Jack Flam (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996 [1968]) 80, 84.
13 Ibid.

Indeed, for Andre, these arrangements of basic word-units act as an extension to his particular interrogation of the relationship between "the part (the 'cut')" and the overall sculptural unit.[10] He acknowledged the link between his sculpture and these text works as follows:

> My interest in elements or particles in sculpture is paral-
> leled by my interest in words as particles of language…
> [I] write poetry in which the sentence is not the dominant
> form but the word is the dominant form.[11]

Robert Smithson describes this feature of Andre's text works in his 1968 article, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," stating how "Each poem is a 'grave,' so to speak, for his metaphors. Semantics are driven out of his language in order to avoid meaning…. [H]is 'poems' and 'sculpture' have no mental or secondary qualities; they are to him solidly 'material.'"[12] However, in a further elaboration, Smithson articulates his own interest beyond what he calls "the physical properties of both language and material," and he states "they are both physical entities, but they have different properties, and within these properties you have these mental experiences, and it's not simply empirical facts."[13]

So, whereas Minimalist Art had by this time come to be seen as outdated and confined by its focus on the object, for Smithson, the important point about these text works was that, while initially focusing on the word as a material unit, they also demonstrated a shift into a more specifically language-centered interrogation. Thus, *as constructions of text*, they had the subsequent potential to expand away entirely from the confines of the object. In other words, although at first glance text-works like Andre's might appear to connect to concrete poetry (where text would be arranged semi-pictorially to evoke the poem's subject), what differentiates them

13 Joseph Kosuth, "The Tenth Investigation (Art as Idea as Idea): 'The Information Room'" (1970). Installation realised in various locations, including galleries and libraries: Installed here at Sprüth Magers Munich in 2005

is precisely the ways in which they echoed the shifting theoretical paradigms of visual art at that time by moving the object into a solely language-based context.

This shift is demonstrated well by the text-works of Acconci.[14] Indeed, these specifically illustrate this evolution of the text from something material and static (which could still, to some extent, be *passively looked at* like an object) toward something much more shifting and dynamic, demanding a more conceptually orientated *activity of reading* from the spectator. As Acconci himself put it:

> A poem was already too much like a painting (most poems
> could be seen at a glance, on a single page). We wanted to
> move, from number to number, from word to word, from
> line to line, from page to page.[15]

What Acconci's works particularly engaged with then was the interplay between reading and navigating around the self-enclosed pages of a document. As such, his text works were often situated across different copies or across several pages of the magazine (Fig. 9, 10) and/or were dependent upon their relationship to the adjacent texts of other contributors (Fig. 10). Accounts of the operations of Acconci's text works, including his own 1972 essay "Early Work: Movement Over a Page," often therefore center around notions of temporality because of their disconnection from the perceived traditional or *linear* temporal mode and their move toward something more contingent and shifting.

14 Many of which were published in the magazine *0 to 9*, which Acconci produced with the poet Bernadette Meyer between 1967 and 1969. See Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2011).

15 Vito Acconci, "10 (A Late Introduction to *0 to 9*", *in 0 to 9 The Complete Magazine*: 1967–1969, ed., Vito Acconci and Bernadette Meyer (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006), 8.

16 Vito Acconci, "Early Work: Movement Over a Page," in *Avalanche*, 6 (1972), 4–5.

17 Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, 31.

18 Lawrence Weiner and Benjamin Buchloh in conversation, in *Lawrence Weiner*, ed., Alexander Alberro, Alice Zimmerman, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and David Batchelor (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1998), 20.

19 Liz Kotz, *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2007), 51.

And what these texts also introduced was a much more conceptually focused relationship between the work and the reader, which was increasingly achieved through a connection between the words on the page and the space in which the document was read. As Acconci himself described, he used the page as the beginning, or boundary, of an event that eventually left the page and occurred in some outside space.[16]

Text as Readymade

In many ways, the "Statement" texts of the artist, Lawrence Weiner (Fig. 11) establish a similar kind of conceptual text/reader relationship to the works by Acconci. Indeed, although Weiner, like Andre, was interested in the idea of language as a kind of sculptural material, his texts operate much more in the manner of Acconci's, gaining their sculptural qualities through the translation of material content into the mind of the "spectator" via the *act* of reading, rather than from looking at any particular *form* on a page. As Osborne puts it:

> The "pieces" that Weiner states… are *linguistically*
> *determinate*. There is no question of their having existence
> as "idea" until they are formulated as statements; and no
> question of them being "pieces" until these formulations
> are actualized in some system of communication, in this
> case writing.[17]

In fact, although many of Weiner's Statements appear as handpainted or stenciled lettering on walls, when considering the operation of these works against the notion of texts *to be read rather than looked at*, one should primarily consider the examples he positioned as typeset texts in published documents and, in particular, examples that were presented in a purposefully utilitarian style:

> Take [the book] STATEMENTS: There is a design factor
> to make it look like a $1.95 book that you would buy.
> The type-face and the decision to use a typewriter and
> everything else was a design choice.[18]

Thus, as with Graham's "Homes for America," it is the specifically neutral appearance of these published Statements that helps these examples to shift away from notions of authorship and objecthood. And their particularly utilitarian typographic style also serves to connect them back to earlier examples of typewritten text works, such as John Cage's score for the work "4'33"", which as Liz Kotz discusses, had similarly rejected the fetishization of the handdrawn mark and moved toward "vernacular signs so repeat-able and translatable that no original appears to exist."[19] These examples by Weiner become useful then, alongside those of Graham, in demonstrating the retrospective art historical connection that has been drawn be-

14 Art & Language,
Art-Language
journal (1969–85).
Selection of front
covers from vols
1 and 2 (1969–72)

15 Typical page
spread from the
Art-Language
journal (1969–85)

> Suppose an artist exhibits an essay in an art exhibition (like a print might be exhibited). The pages are simply laid out flat in reading order behind glass within a frame. The spectator is intended to read the essay 'straight', like a notice might be read, but because the essay is mounted in an art ambience it is implied that the object (paper with print upon it) carries conventional visual art content. The spectator being puzzled at not really being able to grasp any direct visual art read-out meaning starts to read it (as a notice might be read). It goes as follows:
>
> 'On why this is an essay'
>
> The appearance of this essay is unimportant in any strong sense of visual-art appearance criteria. The prime requirement in regard of this essay's appearance is that it is reasonably legible. Any decisions apart from this have been taken with a view to what it should not look like as a point of emphasis over what it should look like. These secondary decisions are aimed at eliminating as many appearance similarities to established art-objects as possible.

16 Art & Language, excerpt from the introduction to
the first issue of the *Art-Language* journal (1969)

tween text-based Conceptual Art and Duchamp's concept of the Readymade, which in 1913 had already used language to propose a shift in the assignment of meaning from *non-art* to art.[20]

Moreover, what works like these serve to illustrate is Graham's proposed extension to the Readymade idea, as articulated in his 1985 essay, "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art.'" Here, he claims that, through its particularly neutral appearance and ubiquitous nature, the published text work has the potential to possess a dual (or oscillating) status as *both non-art and art*, existing *simultaneously* both within and outside the Institution. In fact, Anne Rorimer makes this same point in her discussion of the artist Joseph Kosuth's investigations of "art as an analytical proposition," describing, for instance, the way in which his appropriated dictionary definitions (Fig. 12) operate "by virtue of the capacity of [typographic] language to be what it is and what it is about simultaneously."[21]

20 As articulated for example, in Joseph Kosuth's essay "Art after Philosophy" (1969) where he depicts Duchamp's work as key to a revision of art history whereby the Readymade, rather than the evolution to and beyond formalist abstract painting, is posited as central to the critical collapse of medium-specific modernism.

21 Anne Rorimer, "Siting the Page: Exhibiting Works in Publications: Some Examples of Conceptual Art in the USA," in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, eds., John Bird and Michael Newman (Reaktion Books Ltd., London, 1999), 17.

17 Art & Language "Index 01" (1972). Eight file cabinets, texts and photostats. In "Index 01", the unbound printed journal pages from *Art-Language* and other texts by the group were contained within the drawers of eight metal filing cabinets, and a cross-referencing reading strategy was then suggested by assigning each text an index number and displaying a proposed "system of connections" (along with its results) in the form of printed index lists on the walls of the exhibition space.

The Undifferentiated Continuous Text as Conceptual Artwork

The further interesting shift in Kosuth's use of text came, however, when his investigations dispensed with photocopied dictionary definitions, and moved instead toward the publishing of definitions of possible *art information* directly into non-art channels of communication.[22] Indeed, for Kosuth, this not only got around the potential for the works to fall into any kind of pictorial illusionism, but more importantly, it also allowed him to shift his focus entirely toward the *staging of art as pure information*. His final investigations therefore moved toward the idea of art existing more as a kind of dynamic theoretical and critical commentary that might involve the navigation through (or the origination of) a series of *extended and typographically undifferentiated continuous texts*.

In "The Information Room," for example, various forms of printed continuous text were exhibited on reading tables in an exhibition space that was described as "a venue for knowledge rather than … a container for objects." Here the work, although "physically contained" in the room, was – through its very textual form – able to take the reader conceptually beyond the physical confines of the space (Fig. 13).[23]

22 Here, for example, Kosuth published thesaurus texts directly into the advertisement sections of newspapers or onto billboard-sized street advertisements.

23 Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001), 100.

24 Which included Kosuth for a time amongst its membership.

25 Terry Atkinson, et al., introduction to: *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*, (Coventry: Art & Language Press, 1969), 10.

26 These "overlapping contexts" included conversations within the group and active involvements within art education.
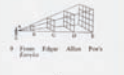
18 Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinites and the Waning of Space,"
published in *Arts Magazine*, vol. 41, no.1, (November 1966)

This use of text to position art *within* the intellectual space of theoretical and critical commentary was most fully elaborated, however, by the group, Art & Language.[24] This group used its practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s to consider whether *theoretical analysis itself* could constitute a "method for… making art."[25] And, although they used a number of overlapping contexts for their inquiry, their use of typographic language was a key aspect of this process.[26]

Of particular importance was the group's exploration of *the editorial/essay as artwork*, which they undertook through their production of typeset continuous texts, situated within the bound format of a published journal (Fig. 14, 15). Here, the neutral typographic design of the journal with its white cover and pages of un-illustrated text, echoes again the attempts by others to divest their works of any authorial/artistic voice, so that the reader engages with these texts through a process of *reading*, without any question that they should perhaps be *looking at the journal as a visual object*. However, in the introduction to the first issue, the group advanced a new hypothesis that elaborated more specifically on the particular need for this completely neutral textual appearance: That the *content* of the editorial "is
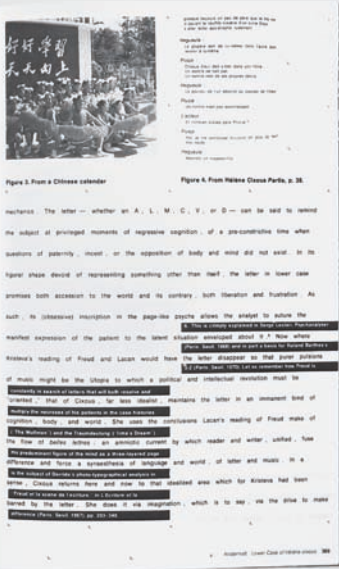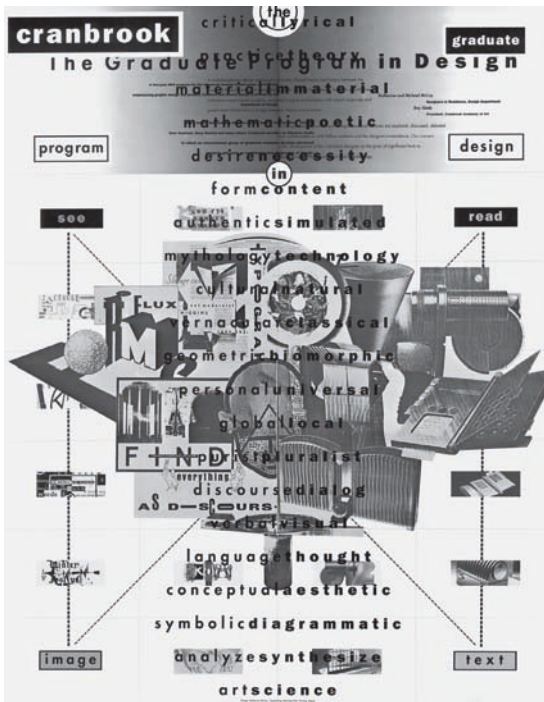
19 Page layouts by Katherine McCoy and a team of Cranbrook students for *Visible Language*. Special issue *French Currents of the Letter*, vol. 12, no. 3, (Summer 1979). These pages (308–9 and 372–3) show progressive interruptions to the text setting, which were applied throughout this issue of the journal to disrupt any standard linear reading of the text.

20 Katherine McCoy's poster design "Cranbrook Graduate Design" (1989) from Cranbrook Academy of Art. As McCoy put it in her 1988 essay "Typography as Discourse": "No longer are there one-way statements from designer … both the texts and the images are to be read in detail, their meanings decoded. Clearly this intellectualized communication asks a lot of its audience; this is harder work that the formal pleasures of New Wave." (see note 36)

[itself] held out as a 'conceptual art' work" through its critical or theoretical content *alone*. An excerpt from the introduction thus reads as follows (Fig. 16):

Suppose an artist exhibits an essay in an art exhibition (like a print might be exhibited). The pages are simply laid out flat in reading order behind glass within a frame. The spectator is intended to read the essay "straight," like a notice might be read, but because the essay is mounted in an art ambience it is implied that the object (paper with print upon it) carries conventional visual art content. The spectator, being puzzled at not really being able to grasp any direct visual-art-read-out-meaning, starts to read it (as a notice might be read). It goes as follows:

"On why this is an essay"
The appearance of this essay is unimportant in any strong sense of visual-art appearance criteria. The prime requirement in regard of this essay's appearance is that it is reasonably legible. Any decisions apart from this have

21 Anne Burdick's page layouts for *Émigré* 21 (1992). As Steve Baker observes, this approach to layout "heralded the use of graphic 'interpretation' to deflect and enrich the trajectory of the critical text." (see note 37)

been taken with a view to what it should not look like as a point of emphasis over what it should look like. These secondary decisions are aimed at eliminating as many appearance similarities to established art-objects as possible.[27]

27 Atkinson, et al., introduction to *Art-Language*, 3.
28 Ibid., 6–7.
29 Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, "Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered" in *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties*, eds., Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris and Charles Harrison (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 208.
30 Pamela M. Lee, "Ultramoderne: Or How George Kubler Stole the Time in Sixties Art," in *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 218–56. This is also discussed by Jack Flam in his introduction to Smithson's collected writings: Jack Flam, "Introduction: Reading Robert Smithson," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996), xv–xvii.
31 See Norbert Weiner's, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950) and George Kubler's, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962).

Art & Language used their introduction to further describe the absence of any defined exhibition instruction and to articulate how "the art-gallery component had to be specified… [by the editorial] as a theoretical rather than a concrete component."[28] However, what is interesting here is how the group subsequently moved on from this idea by repositioning the printed pages of the journal back into a more conventional exhibition environment as part of their work "Index 01" (Fig. 17), a process through which they were able to undertake further more controlled interrogations of the reading of these texts.

Indeed, by using this context to force a particular kind of cross-referencing reading strategy, what this exhibit conveyed was how the content of the individual journal texts could be extended in any number of ways through their endless potential for reference to other similar texts. This cross-referencing was used to demonstrate how "the kinds of decisions we make about the relations between one text and another can have implications for our picture of [how one might conceive of] an entire conversational, or ideological world."[29]

The Integrated Text as Conceptual Artwork

I turn now to the layout of a published article by Robert Smithson, which not only seems to fit in here, around the point I have reached with the journal pages of *Art-Language*, but also – because of its existence as a magazine article, and the year in which it was published – connects back to my earlier consideration of Graham's "Homes for America."

Smithson's article, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," was published in the November 1966 issue of *Arts Magazine* just prior to the magazine's publication of Graham's "Homes for America" (Fig. 18). And since Smithson, unlike Graham, had clearly had the opportunity to specify his own page layout, he used this as a key component of the work. His method was thus to break the text into separate blocks so that the main commentary could be surrounded by textual and visual marginalia, which would integrate with the main body of the document to facilitate a cross-referencing style of reading.

In her book *Chronophobia*, Pamela Lee describes this use of page layout in relation to Smithson's interest in a constellation of meaning.[30] She points to the inclusion, in Smithson's marginalia, of references to the writings of the anthropologist and architectural historian George Kubler and the cyberneticist Norbert Weiner, whose preoccupations included non-linear and metaphorical representations of past historical time and future communication systems.[31]

So, despite there being no obvious connection between the integrated arrangement of Smithson's article and the single-column, un-illustrated, essay-like texts of the *Art-Language* journal (Fig. 15), Smithson's use of both subject matter and

layout seems rooted in a similar territory to that of the infinite possibilities for cross referencing content, as presented by Art & Language in their later work "Index 01" (Fig. 17).

And it seems apt then to refer to a 1970 text by Art & Language's Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden. This text seems to present not only an end point for this discussion but also perhaps a starting point for thinking about subsequent post-Conceptual engagements, which have seen a shift from the distribution of text-based artworks through print toward practices that are situated entirely within the interactive and networked channels of digital publishing: [32]

> Since an art object by now "might conceivably be anything
> on the face of this planet," then "it would be dumb to insist
> on nominating an analytic art construct (i.e., this paper) as
> an '*artwork*.'" [33]

Indeed, as Osborne observes with reference to this text:

> Conceptual artists [had] turned their concern not to "the
> proliferation of designated signifieds" but to the "semiotic
> mosaic" from which meaning was derived… [This was
> the new question:] How was the "continuum," the system,
> the structure-as-a-whole itself to be made the content of
> the work? [34]

What Relevance to Typographic Discourse?

One can look in a number of directions to see connections between these examples of text-based Conceptual Art and the more general discourse of typographic design: These art engagements of the 1960s and 1970s can, for example, be considered against experimental typographic practices, which emerged in the United States between the 1970s and the 1990s where, as Richard Hollis notes, designers were becoming "more aware of the need for theory and history to back up their own practice." If one looks, for instance, at the design journal, *Visible Language*, and its development of what Hollis calls a "critical [rather than purely technical and historical] view of graphic design" (Fig. 19); [35] or at the related practices and discourses at Cooper Union and Cranbrook Academy, where students were encouraged to

32 The artist Seth Price explores this shift in his essay "Dispersion," free pdf at www.distributed history.com (2002–ongoing).

33 Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, "Notes on Analysis", excerpt reproduced in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, ed., Lucy Lippard (Berkley: University of California Press, Ltd., 1973 [1970]), 137.

34 Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, (2002).

35 Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 214.

The Serving Library: ARTICLE OF INCORPORATION

The Serving Library is a cooperatively-built archive that assembles itself by publishing. It will consist of 1. an ambitious public website; 2. a small physical library space; 3. a publishing program which runs through #1 and #2.

IN OTHER WORDS

Here is a thought-experiment. Imagine yourself in a virtual space surrounded by icons: a claustrophobic negative photo of a woman, apparently underwater; a large asterisk; an open book in a heraldic shield, underscored by the phrase "Lux et Veritas"—Light and Truth; a man blowing what appears to be a handful of feathers but turns out to be a disintegrating book; a curious-looking alien glyph; a familiar optical illusion that looks like another open book projecting first out then in then out again; and an odometer on the brink of changing from 9999999 back to zero.

These are the front pages of a number of Portable Document Formats, and this is www.servinglibrary.org, engine room of The Serving Library. Each PDF is a "Bulletin" containing an article or essay that constitutes part of some overarching theme or themes—in this case, from specific to general: Libraries, Media, and Time. The essay behind the large asterisk, for example, contemplates the possibilities for human communication in light of some extraordinary physical attributes of the Octopus Vulgaris. As it turns out, that "asterisk" is actually *an octopus in plan view.* This and the other PDFs are available for anyone to download for free. Contributions to the latest theme are added from time to time over a six month period, and at the end of the season they are collected together into a single document, printed and published in both Europe and the USA, each in an edition of 1,500, as *Bulletins of The Serving Library*. The PDFs remain available on the website, while a new theme is developed over the next half year.

One copy of *Bulletins of The Serving Library* is bound in hardback leatherette, catalogued, and placed on a shelf in the physical home of The Serving Library. Here it joins past issues, along with twenty issues of its predecessor, the left-field arts journal *Dot Dot Dot*. A neighboring shelf carries a larger collection of older, most frequently referenced books by the circle of contributors to both *Dot Dot Dot* and the *Bulletins*—on art, literature, philosophy, and so on—that maps a far-reaching but still very particular constellation of interests. And on another shelf, is a further assortment of relatively recent titles covering a wide gamut of contemporary publishing that had been sold from—and often purchased by—Dexter Sinister, a design workshop and bookstore on Manhattan's Lower East Side that was run as a primitive form of The Serving Library by two of its founders from 2006–2011.

The walls that surround these shelves are hung with seventy or so framed artifacts. These are wildly diverse in size and medium, from a huge red wax crayon rubbing of a "Monument to Cooperation" (the original of which is located outside a housing estate, around the corner from Dexter Sinister) to a double portrait of Benjamin Franklin (the classic etching of a smug Postmaster General next to a photo taken of four people checking for evidence of forgery in a giant blow-up of the same portrait on a fake US$100 bill, otherwise known as a North Korean "Superdollar"). Other objects include paintings, lithographs, record covers, faxes, acid blotter artwork, and a ouija board. At some point, each of these items appeared, scanned or photographed, as an illustration in an issue of *Dot Dot Dot* or the *Bulletins*, typically accompanying or triggering a piece of writing. As such, each one has an elaborate backstory. The ouija board, for example, was made

by British polymath Paul Elliman while a professor in design at Yale University in the early 2000s. It utilizes a version of the Bauhausler's modular geometrical typeface to render A–Z, 0–9, a "yes" and a "no," laser-cut from a square of the same hardboard Albers used in his famous color paintings. New Bulletins published from The Serving Library suggest new anecdotally-loaded objects to be sought, acquired, framed, and added to the wall.

A resident caretaker presides over these two collections of publications and artifacts. This is a rotating position which turns on the same six-month cycle as the *Bulletins*. His or her duties combine those of a regular librarian—cataloging, maintaining, and updating the collections—with those of an events organizer and editor. The caretaker is a constant presence at The Serving Library, available to open its doors to groups or individuals by appointment, then to supervise and direct their use of its resources. He or she also proposes reconfiguring the collections, drawing out certain books for display—perhaps highlighting an essay in an early *Dot Dot Dot* that explicates one of the artifacts, or juxtaposing some of the older, classic books in order to trace a history of, say, Pragmatic philosophy. Or, equally, reassembling the artifacts—chronologically, for example, or grouped by medium. The caretaker is also involved, to a greater or lesser degree, in the production of the *Bulletins* published during his or her tenure. Ideally, assuming the necessary skills, experience and insight, he or she will guest-edit the season's material, proposing, coercing, and working on contributions.

The caretaker also attends—and attends to—a modest pedagogical program, which takes place in the Library environment during an allotted period every year. It is based on a reconsideration of the traditional Bauhaus Foundation Course, still the default model in contemporary art and design schools. Given that the Bauhaus was set up in direct response to specific cultural conditions almost a hundred years ago, why does it remain the standard today? Through the Library course, this question is considered in relation to the Photoshop toolbox icon—adopted essentially as a surrogate for any contemporary arts software. Working backwards from the fact that such digital "creative suites" constitute the consensus of commercial demand, various guests from different fields will deconstruct the toolbox by isolating a component—pointer, brush, pencil, paint, type, dodge & burn, magic wand, etc., then discussing its analogue past, virtual present, and potential future. These investigations are conducted through seminars and workshops, which draw frequently on the Library's books and artifacts for immediate example and insight. This reconsideration proposes—initially for the sake of argument—that color wheels, circles, triangles and squares and other principles of cross-disciplinary "basic design" are less relevant today than a communal effort to observe and relate contemporary conditions, by practicing the forms of reading, writing, and speaking that facilitate their articulation. In other words, the course will aim to build a critical faculty to comprehend the culture in which art and design operate in advance of (or parallel to) operating in it.

As new component classes are clipped onto the basic "handle" over time, a new metaphorical toolbox is assembled by the Library, which replaces the old foundation with something more fluid, pertinent and reflexive. And this customized, palimpsest set of soft tools-for-thinking is also folded back into The Serving Library's live archive, a pedagogical branch of servinglibrary.org's network that can be followed remotely online, as well as taught in the local space. As aspects of the teaching programs are hardened into new *Bulletins* to be published, which in turn feed back into subsequent teaching, the growing Library automatically charts its own development.

22 Stuart Bailey, Angie Keefer and David Reinfurt (eds). Text excerpt from "Article of Incorporation" (2012), reproduced at the back of each issue of *Bulletins of The Serving Library*

"think about art and design in terms of culture and language" (Fig. 20);[36] or at the new layout and content relationships explored by a magazine like *Émigré* (Fig. 21),[37] one can see how these works demonstrated a similar desire to move beyond the critical framework of modernist formalism, toward more active engagements with the reader. Indeed, the discourse surrounding these examples locates itself equally against the evolution of structuralism into post-structuralism and references the same theoretical ideas and precedents in literature and poetry as cited in accounts of text-based Conceptual Art.

As such, whereas these experimental typographic practices were attacked in the 1990s by critics like Robin Kinross for being poor interpretations of a set of rarefied theoretical ideas, which led to counter accusations of a kind of "zombie modernism" in typographic discourse, what these connections demonstrate is how the example of text-based Conceptual Art could contribute a much more stringent point of reference to such critical debate.[38] Indeed, if one considers how, despite these cross-disciplinary references to a shared historical and theoretical lineage, the critical collapse of modernism in art had not been to the same degree replicated in the field of typographic design, it seems obvious to propose that one *has* to look at such examples of 1960s art to gain an understanding of the full significance, both historically and theoretically, of this shift towards active typographic engagement.

What then seems also relevant is that examples of 1970s–1990s experimental typography are in fact similar in their scope to the kinds of interrogation undertaken by an artist like Vito Acconci. As such, it can be further proposed that the progression of textbased Conceptual Art into more extensive interrogations of the active contexts of publishing (as with the practices of those like Graham, Art & Language, and Smithson) provides a more expansive set of engagements that are

36 J. Abbott Miller and Ellen Lupton, *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design* (New York: Kiosk, 1996), vi; and referred to within Figure 20, Katherine McCoy with David Frej, "Typography as Discourse," in *ID* magazine (New York: March/April, 1988), 34–37.

37 Steve Baker, "A Poetics of Graphic Design," in *Visible Language*, special issue *New Perspectives: Critical Histories of Graphic Design, Part 1*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1994).

38 See Robin Kinross's, *Fellow Readers: Notes on Multiplied Language* (London: Hyphen Press, 1994); followed by subsequent heated exchanges between Kinross and those such as Gérard Mermoz, Kenneth FitzGerald and Jeffery Keedy on the pages of *Émigré* and *Eye* magazines (1995–1997), which are encapsulated by Keedy's essay "Zombie Modernism," in *Émigré*, no. 34, (1995).

39 The work of Dexter Sinister began, for example, through the publication of a graphic design journal (*Dot Dot Dot*) and has evolved into a series of extended engagements with the activity of publishing, staged increasingly within art contexts such as the Whitney Biennial (New York, 2008) and the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language" (New York, 2012). However, since their practice remains very much focused on typographic processes and acts of publishing, the work of Dexter Sinister (Bailey and Reinfurt) and The Serving Library (Bailey, Reinfurt and Keefer) remains popular with graphic design students and practitioners and they are often invited to participate in schools and events more conventionally associated with design than art.

useful as a point of reference for contemporary publishing practices like those of Dexter Sinister and The Serving Library or the artist Seth Price, which have even more overtly straddled the disciplines of art and typographic design (Fig. 22). Indeed, the desire to engage with such contemporary practices in *both* art and design contexts seems to point again to the need for this lineage to be understood and incorporated more rigorously within mainstream typographic discourse.[39]

In short, rather than focusing on "for" or "against" arguments in response to self-initiated typographic practices where designers might be seen equally as artists, or sidelining these trajectories as "experimental," typographic discourse should perhaps be willing to understand the role of this art lineage in defining a particular type of post-Conceptual inter-disciplinary engagement that continues to interrogate how an active engagement with structure can indeed become the content of the work.