

Philippe Méaille loans an extraordinary collection of 800 pieces by Art & Language to MACBA, making this the museum with the most works by the group internationally

- ▶ MACBA will devote a major exhibition to the collection in 2014, curated by Carles Guerra, an expert on this group, which brought about a linguistic revolution in art
 - ▶ The works loaned are crucial to any understanding of how contemporary art developed, as they enable researchers to break with a canonical vision
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What is an artwork, and what is comment? What is to read and what is to look at? Art & Language poses quite a challenge to any museum with an interest in classification. The French collector Philippe Méaille has loaned MACBA an extraordinary collection of 800 pieces (works, texts, magazines and books) built up over 15 years at the Château de la Bainerie (Loire region), advised by Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, members of the collaborative practice that began in 1968 in Coventry (United Kingdom). This acquisition makes MACBA the largest international depository of the works produced by these artists, who made a vital contribution to the development of conceptual art by questioning modernity in art through language and conversational practices. In view of the diversity of materials and the size of the collection, the Méaille Collection is not only crucial to understanding the birth of conceptual art in Europe and the U.S.A., but the accompanying documentary resources also enable researchers to break with a canonical vision of contemporary art. Many of these pieces will go on show in MACBA in 2014 as part of a major exhibition curated by Carles Guerra (the last show devoted to the group in Spain was at the Tàpies Foundation in 1999). Moreover, once their contents have been classified, the MACBA Study Centre will make the documentary resources that accompany the artworks available to researchers. This will be an arduous task because, throughout its forty-year history, Art & Language have considered more as artworks the written comments that make them possible than the objects themselves. The work of Art & Language as a whole revolves around reflection on such subjects as: the responsibility of the artist; the role of the museum and the painterly tradition; the ability of the spectator; the changes undergone by meaning; aesthetic canons; the logic of the production and reception of art; authenticity; and the dialectic between concealment and visibility.

The case of Art & Language is perhaps the most heterodox to be found in the second half of the 20th century. The group's practice has always eschewed the commonplaces of artistic production. Starting up as a work-in-conversation, Art & Language is sustained by a

conversational relation and distributes its work publicly through a magazine. These characteristics caused a linguistic revolution in art in the early-1960s, placing the emphasis on language, which had formerly been considered a mere appendix. The cooperation between Méaille, on the one hand, and Baldwin and Ramsden, on the other, was also crucial in building up, over a fifteen-year period, the extraordinary collection that Méaille has now loaned to MACBA.

Founded in Coventry (UK) in 1968 by Michael Baldwin, Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge and Harold Hurrell, Art & Language brought together the collaborative work that these artists had been producing since 1965. The following year saw publication of the first issue of the group's magazine, *Art-Language*, reflecting on the theoretical problems that faced conceptual art. This issue (and those that followed) became the real vehicle used by the group to develop its ideas. Mel Ramsden, Ian Burn, Joseph Kosuth and Charles Harrison joined between 1969 and 1970, and, at one point, the group brought together more than thirty artists. Since 1977, Art & Language has comprised the artistic collaboration of Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, along with the theoretic intervention of the art historian and critic Charles Harrison, who died in 2009.

Representative pieces from all periods

The Philippe Méaille Collection includes both pictorial and sculptural works, as well as works on paper and documents. Besides copies of all the magazines published by Art & Language (vital to any understanding of the group), the collection of books and texts features pieces from each and every year of the group's history. As for artworks, the collection comprises a representative selection from all the different periods, including posters, texts, intervened photographs, objects, sketches and paintings.

These works include outstanding pieces from the group's early days, such as *38 Paintings* (1966), *Frameworks* (1966-67), *Study for the Air-Conditioning Show* (1967), *Guaranteed Paintings* (1967), *Secret Paintings* (1967-68) and *100% Abstract* (1968). From the 1970s, there are pieces from the series entitled *Indexes* (1972-76), as well as other important works, such as *Flags for an Organisation* (1978). From the 1980s, when Art & Language was engaged in reflection on painting through painting itself, the works loaned to MACBA include pieces from the series *Study for Picasso's Guernica in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (1980-81), *Hostages* (1989-91) and *Now They Are* (1991-92). Finally, the collection also includes such recent works as *Tell Me, Have You Ever Seen Me?* (2003).

Philippe Méaille was a 21-year-old student of Pharmaceutical Science (he is now 36) when he discovered the work *Mirror Pieces* at the home of a collector. From that moment, he abandoned his studies and devoted his life to systematically acquiring works and documents relating to Art & Language, building up one of the most renowned collections in the world. Over the last fifteen years, the works have been on show in different rooms at the Château de la Bainerie, an 18th-century property that is also Méaille's home. Loaned now to MACBA, in 2014 these works will form part of a major exhibition that the Museum plans to devote to Art & Language, whilst the documentary resources will be available for consultation at the MACBA Study Centre.

Art & Language played a key role in the birth of conceptual art. Through the magazine *Art-Language* (of which the Méaille Collection includes copies of all issues) and exhibitions, the group has taken an extremely critical approach to modern art. Distancing itself from art aesthetics and history, and using theoretical disciplines from linguistic philosophy, linguistics

and logics, it questions the place of art in modernity. Through a series of visual and discursive initiatives, moreover, the group questions the need for the physical object in the process of creating an artwork, making a critical analysis of the conditions required in order for a work of art to exist.

The collaborative structure of Art & Language has often taken the shape of including philosophical materials in art practices and incorporating art criticism into artistic production itself. Harrison's appointment as editor of the magazine *Art-Language* implied the assimilation of the critic into the artist's studio, a situation which subverted the habitual distances and different professional roles associated with art. As much as – or even more than – mere criticism of or opposition to received ideas, this attitude embodied the desire to interpret the conditions for work provided by modernity. All this is reflected in a collection of essays signed collectively by Art & Language, which reconstructs a hitherto unknown topography covering the period of conceptual art and subsequent decades.

Art & Language has taken part in many international exhibitions, including Documenta in Kassel (Germany) in 1972, 1982 and 1997. The group has also been the subject of several retrospectives, such as those at the Jeu de Paume in Paris (1993), PS1 in New York (1999) and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Lille (2002). In Barcelona, the Antoni Tàpies Foundation devoted a major show to the group, accompanied by two volumes edited by Charles Harrison himself, in 1999.

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