WORKS OF CONCEPTUAL ART FROM THE COLLECTION OF
DAVID BELLMAN EXHIBITED AT OR GALLERY VANCOUVER
AUGUST 1984 WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY BY
IAN WALLACE

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DAVID BELLMAN
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I AM STILL ALIVE
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I would like to extend thanks to David Bellman, and the artists who made this exhibition possible, and to
ken Lum, director of the Or Gallery for his enthusiastic support and assistance.
INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

David Bellman has collected a number of key works of conceptual art by artists whom he has shown in his privately-financed exhibition center that he opened in Toronto in 1980. In gathering a selection of these works for exhibition at Or Gallery in Vancouver, I wanted the focus not to be on conceptual art as a generalized phenomenon, but rather on the experience of actual works of art, however marginal they may be as objects. I also wanted to present them as free as possible of institutional and commercial frameworks. I wanted to show that they are "still alive" and relevant to the present, indicative in all their modesty of the continuing tradition of avantgarde practise.

The inscrutability of these works has always been a part of their strategy for survival and independence; and their accessibility, openness and risk as a freedom of outlook. If there was to be anything gained from this show that would be immediately useful to artists, I hoped that it would offer suggestions about a way of working; how an attitude finds it place in a form of production; how freedom from the object can present new possibilities of meaning.

Each work tests the limits of its possibility bounded by its moment in history; that same moment of self-consciousness in language that brought forth the literature of linguistics and semiology; and of the awareness of the function of ideology in cultural discourse. Conceptual art was the art (or rather practise) of the negation and destabilization of the sign in order to open it up to another strategy; to the ideal interchange of the author/artist and the reader/viewer; and to mobilize a dissatisfaction with the given and prepare the audience for new thoughts, new politicized ambitions within and without the artworld. The frameworks of beaux-arts culture and of the museum were broken open. Traditional categories of 'painting' and
'sculpture' were replaced by the 'work' or 'piece'; its form could inhabit any aspect of the world, any medium of communication including thought itself.

A new economy of art and its language, a negation of the exclusive commodity in favour of pure exchange, was proposed. It originated a functioning criticality that sought to discover how to produce the idea of art without producing its substitution as the art object. But even conceptual art, as it became popularized in the early '70s, played with 'ideas' and 'idea art' into a mimickable style, a manneristic decorum. But underneath both its seriousness and sly humour was also a perpetuation the idea that was the outcome not of a notion of style, but of the larger goals of authentic art. The reserve, the austerity and ironic sobriety of conceptual art was the means by which it wilfully distanced itself from absorption by the voracious appetite of the modernist audience attracted to the glamour of its exclusivity.

But this distancing was not hermetic. It was an insistence that it be understood on its own wilfully difficult terms. In fact one of the contributions of conceptual art, its link to the avantgarde, was its openness, accessibility and demand for artistic freedom, not only for the artist as producer, but also for the audience from habitual ways of seeing and ritualized forms of culture. This freedom and accessibility is also located in the fact that because the works in this exhibition are not traditional art objects, they did not have to be transported. There were no shipping or insurance costs and very little of the usual apparatus of art institutions needed to be called into play (this catalogue excepted). Although each work entailed its own specific problems of installation, there was no 'original' object. Nevertheless each of these works has an integrity and an authenticity that one expects of the 'original'. Even in their ambiguity and non-objectivity there is a clarity of structure and an intensity of conception that finds its completion in the response of the audience.

And the ideal audience is the collector. Since there is often no art object to purchase, the collector of conceptual art partakes in a special participation in the artistic process, an identification with the artist in the adventure of risk, discovery and idealization that is the aim not only of conceptual art but of all avantgarde art. This participation takes the form of an 'underwriting' of the practise of the artist by the collector, rather than as the purchase of the art object as commodity. Thus it is of special significance that the collector be identified with the work and its author, and it is fitting that recognition be given to David Bellman who has generously loaned these works for our appreciation.
COMMENTARY ON THE WORKS
In the mid '60s Robert Barry had been making works which demanded awareness of the peripheries of vision. His paintings were self-effacing. He created works consisting of thin wire stretched across the space of the room so that it was hardly visible. By 1968 he was exhibiting sound waves, then ultrasonic waves, so that not only was his art invisible but also inaudible. In early 1969 he made infinite energy sculptures consisting of radioactive isotopes and inert gasses released into the atmosphere. In May 1969 he included a telepathic piece in an exhibition at Simon Fraser University. In the summer of 1969 he did a series of works consisting of statements of possibilities which can neither be comprehended nor confirmed. These works included All the Things I Know But of Which I Am Not at the Moment Thinking; 1:36 PM, June 15, 1969; Something Which Can Never Be Any Specific Thing; and It Can Only Be Known As Something Else which is included in this exhibition. This statement points not only away from any experience of perception, since it is only a modestly-typed statement on a card, but it also implies in the content of its statement, that we should direct our attention away from the work of art to “something else”. Art is used to communicate its own absence and thus confirm its practise.

Barry's works continues to the most extreme end the zen-inspired mystic abstraction inherited from Ad Reinhardt, who proposed in 1961: “a pure, abstract non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting — an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendant, aware of no thing but Art (absolutely no anti-art).” Barry goes even further. In an interview in 1969 he said: “For any new truth that you discover for yourself, you have to discard some favoured old belief. I would like to get away from calling things art”. But this could be the last and final limit that Barry might have to recognize to even imply the possibility of that “something else”.
IT CAN ONLY BE KNOWN AS SOMETHING ELSE.

Robert Barry *It Can Only Be Known As Something Else* 1969
collection David Bellman, Toronto
Since 1965 Daniel Buren’s work has been based upon the exhibition of paper or cloth covered with alternating white and coloured stripes 8.7 cm wide. They are installed in such a way as to bring into question the frameworks of art in general, the picture, the art object as commodity, the museum and gallery and the discourse that surrounds it. Thus his interpretation of conceptual art has been political/contextual/situational; an intensification of the critical and strategic relations that art has with the world. He is less concerned with the validation and reification of art as such than with art as a political practise that affects the world at the margins of aesthetics.

In this work, In and Out of the Frame of 1970, the stripes, signifying the total practise of the artist and its didactic extensions, forms a field behind and beyond the limits of the (picture) frame. Although most of Buren’s works are made in situ for the specific exhibition situation, this work, although no less conditioned by its context, is more versatile, stipulating simply that the wall surface be covered with stripes and that an empty frame be mounted on this wall as one would a conventional picture. The primacy of the framed image is thus overcome by the wall against which the privileged space of the picture is hung.

In a similar work of 1973 titled Within and Beyond the Frame shown at the John Weber Gallery in New York, Buren’s striped panels extended from within the gallery out into the street, questioning the framing of the work by the gallery itself. Although the idea is more important than appearance, as is generally the case with conceptual art, Buren does not hesitate to exploit the spectacle of the exhibition in order to undermine its exclusiveness, and he cunningly uses his identification with the ‘logo’ of the stripes to mobilize publicity responses. Thus after twenty years of prolific and provocative exhibition he is recognized as seminal to the conceptual/critical dimension of contemporary art.

Daniel Buren has also written many critical texts that proselytize and question all facets of art production, exhibition and distribution. Buren understands the limit of the frame to be the location, the place of the work, the position by which it generates its meaning. In and Out of the Frame is a work that shifts its location, in this case from the space of the ‘private’ collection of David Bellman, to the public space of the Or Gallery, where it reminds us that we cannot take the privileged space of the picture frame, or the validating space of the gallery, for granted. It is there to be questioned.
Daniel Buren In and out of the Frame 1970
collection David Bellman, Toronto
Between 1965 and 1966 Dan Graham was doing conceptual art that dealt with numbers, statistics, graphs and so on. Having set up ‘schemes’ of numbers that had their own inner structure, logic, and necessity, he proceeded to insert them within certain publications, so that their internal logic would interrupt, contradict the media, or conversely would destabilize and question the structure itself. *Figurative* is particularly interesting in this connection. In 1965 he made a prototype or ‘schema’ as he called several of these early number sets, consisting simply of prices on a cash register receipt slip. This early piece, although complete in itself, was titled *Scheme for magazine page advertisement*. When it was published in the March 1968 issue of Harper’s Bazaar under the title *Figurative*, it appeared between two advertisements directed towards the female customer and her body. The title puns on the literal list of figures, on its emblematic and analagous or ‘figurative’ meaning; and on the female ‘figure’ or ‘model’ or ‘schema’ provided by the conventional advertisement.

Whether by design or accident, *figurative* cuts a swath across the page of the discourse of fashion. It empties out information. The typical reader could hardly be expected to comprehend it’s rationale even if only as a cash register receipt, and certainly not as a work of art. Yet it reveals its status as art by the title *Figurative by Dan Graham* appended to the work on the page. The list is thus inferred as a text underwritten by authorship and its ideal intentionality. But this text and its authorship is an interruption, passing through the anonymous body of advertising and fashion and back to the context of art.
But Graham’s work was irrevocably altered by this interaction. It reversed the framing of art and liberated the artist from the hermetic dependance of the frame of the gallery. Instead he stood outside, out-of-place, and thus a threat to the existing. In 1969 he published a short piece called *Magazine Advertisements* in which he wrote: “People read and identify with a magazine a prefabricated system of belief and buy (relate to the advertising) the product or ‘image’ it sells. My first (1965-66) ‘conceptual’ art used magazine space as their context without first being defined as a priori content (they in-formed themselves specifically by their context of placement and usage of place). As they weren’t defined (previously) as GALLERY ART they weren’t usually published. I found it necessary to subvert this structure and for the artist himself to place the work as ads which would short-circuit the process.”
Dan Graham *Scheme for Magazine Page 'Advertisement' 1965*

collection David Bellman, Toronto

(not in exhibition)
Lawrence Weiner's work is based upon a singular proposition which determines the possible relations of the work from the fact of its existence as a concept and its possible execution as an object; to the artist as producer; and to the audience, both the public spectator and the private or public collector. This proposition is in the form of an open contract, an understanding:

1. The artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece need not be built

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership. Within this indeterminant framework Weiner creates linguistic statements that suggest analogues to experience. In his earliest works, he made paintings according to specific instructions as in his 1968 statement: A Rectangular Canvas and Stretcher Support With a Rectangular Removal From One of the Corners Sprayed With Paint for a Time Elapse. In his statements of 1968-69, instructions were given in the form of titles to affect materials, as for instance in the following works: One 14 oz Aerosol Can of Enamel Sprayed to Conclusion Directly Upon the Floor (1968); A Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wall Board From a Wall (1968); and An Object Tossed From One Country to Another (1969). As specified in the proposition, the statement need not, but could be, executed. In any case, they predicated a
THE MERE INTERCHANGE ( )

Lawrence Weiner *The Mere Interchange* ( ) 1973

collection David Bellman, Toronto
certain kind of action that could be categorized, in these instances, in the following order: demarkation, removal, translation or displacement. After 1969 Weiner published his statements as purely linguistic categories of possible predicated action accompanied (or not) by qualitative, contextualizing terms. *The Mere Interchange* ( ) of 1973, from the collection of David Bellman and included in this exhibition, is a work of such a purely linguistic nature. The key word, "interchange", functioning as a noun in this case meaning "a reciprocal exchange" also can perform as a verb meaning "to change by means of putting each two things in the place of the other". This word thus describes in effect the character and dominant theme of Weiner's work from the very beginning: the object exchanged for idea; the artist/receiver relationship; a potentiality by which a condition is acted upon but not violated, one given for the other; and so on. But in this work there are two further terms which qualify (add colour to) the concept of "interchange". The word "mere" adds a term of bounding or limits, implying that the interchange be "that and nothing else" or "nothing more or other than", an "unmixed" or "absolute" condition. These are the limits that makes the work possible as a categorical experience. But in interviews Weiner consistently insists on the indeterminacy, openness and choice on the part of the viewer. Therefore the other term that frames the word "interchange" is an indeterminant, absent signifier, a set of brackets framing a potential but unspeci fied word. About a third of Weiner's works are public freehold, and thus open to 'exhibition', by anyone at anytime.
Ian Wilson's *Circle On the Floor* was first exhibited in a group show at the Bykert Gallery in New York, May 25 to June 22, 1968. It was also reproduced under the title *Chalk Circle* on page 48 of Lucy Lippard's chronology of conceptual art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972* (Studio Vista Books 1973). There is also a similar piece titled *Circle On the Wall*, also of 1968, which was first exhibited at David Bellman Gallery in May, 1983. These are his only 'tangible' works, for otherwise Wilson has been exclusively concerned with oral communication, that is, the objectification of speech as an (abstract) art form. At the beginning Wilson discussed the validity, aims and possibilities of oral communication. These works would be advertised to occur in a specific place and time. There would be a discussion (which would be the work) which could take any form, but would usually be about oral communication as art.

More recent discussions concentrate upon consideration of propositions about conditions of knowledge. On the evening of May 21, 1983, at the David Bellman Gallery, Toronto, Ian Wilson forwarded (among others) the following proposition for discussion: *That Which is Both Known and Unknown is What is Known*. Like Robert Barry, with whose work Ian Wilson is most closely associated, this form of conceptual art attempts to stretch the limits of credibility and comprehensibility. In a panel discussion on 'Time' in 1969, Ian Wilson commented: 'I use it as a word that has suitable characteristics, but one of the facts is that it is a word, and that it is so nebulous, such an enigma, that you can't pin anything on it; it's so vague, it's not even there. The word, when said, is like a sound; it vanishes in its moment of execution, the sound vanishes, just like time. But this is really what I'm trying to do'. In his fascination with the disembodiment of language, with a 'vaporization' of meaning, Wilson forces us to a more intense consciousness of the urgency of meaning and the consequence of language. Ironically and revealingly, Wilson's comments on 'time' were given during a benefit of the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam in New York in 1969, certainly an occasion for information, discourse and rhetoric. But Wilson chose to objectify speech itself in the course of exploring the subject.
In an age which insists on the rationalization of rhetoric, Wilson’s evasiveness has the effect of a modernist wit, like that of Diogenes who said: “If as they say, I am only an ignorant man trying to be a philosopher, then that may be what a philosopher is”; or even like that of the skepticism of Herakleitos who said: “The beginning of a circle is also its end”. The Circle On the Floor is only there to remind us of the absence that Wilson intuits is avoided by consciousness. And his objectification of speech is another means by which we are stimulated to organize the denial of our own absence, to frame our self-consciousness with words and thus ‘spatialize’ our ineffi-

bility. By this process he understands oral communication as a form of sculpture.
Ian Wilson *Circle On the Floor* 1968
collection David Bellman, Toronto