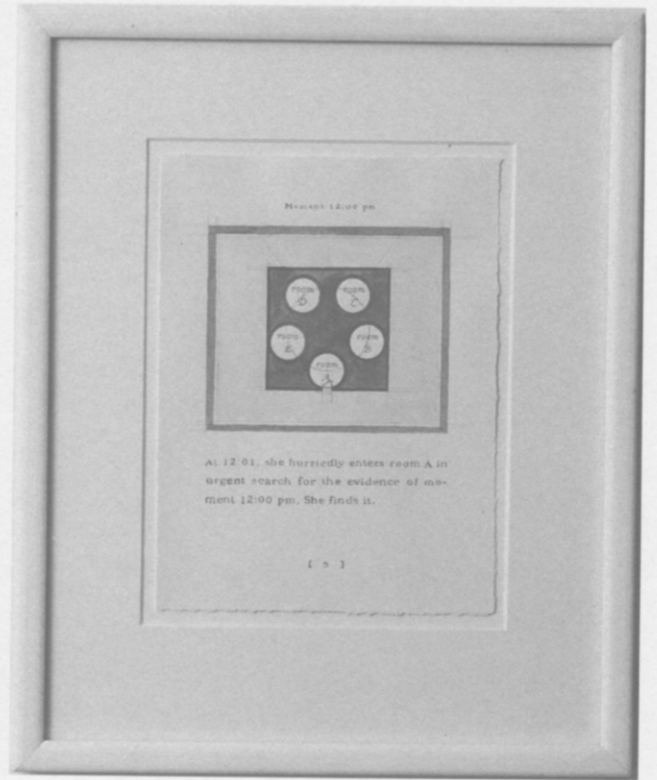


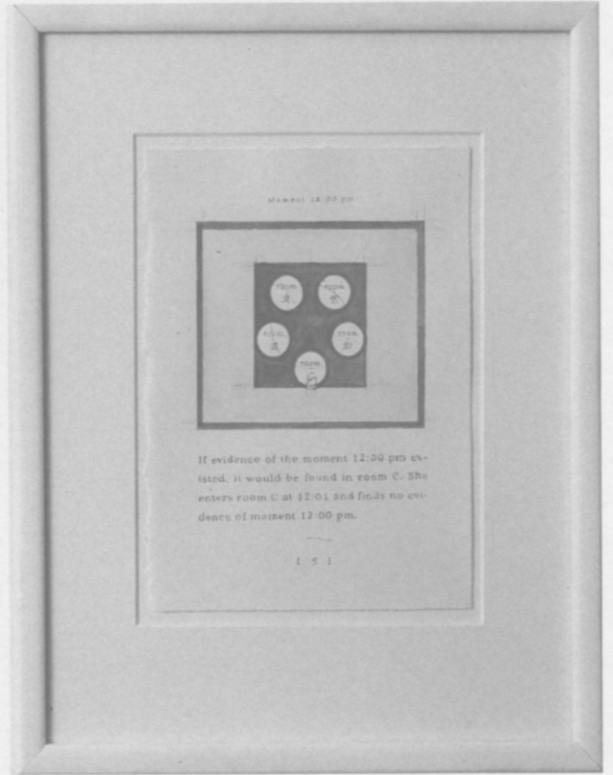
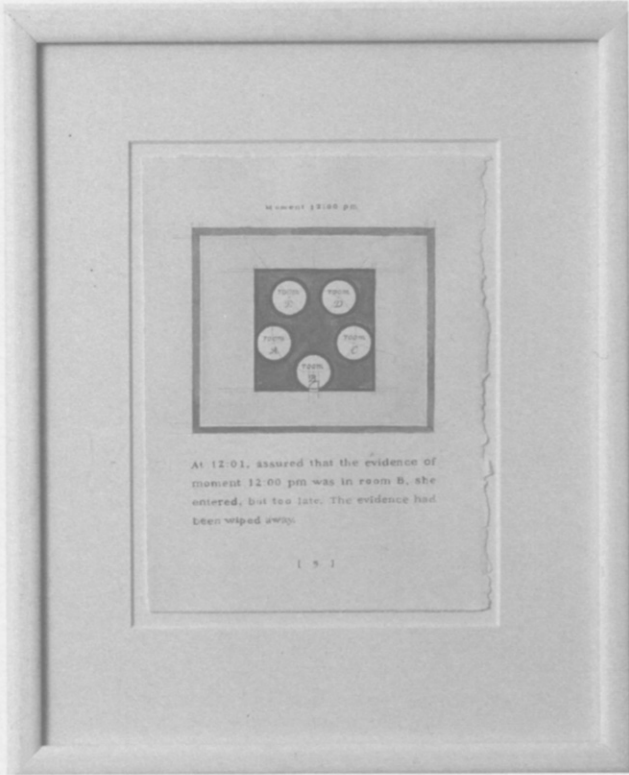
ENCYCLOPAEDIA
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MOMENT'S EVIDENCE

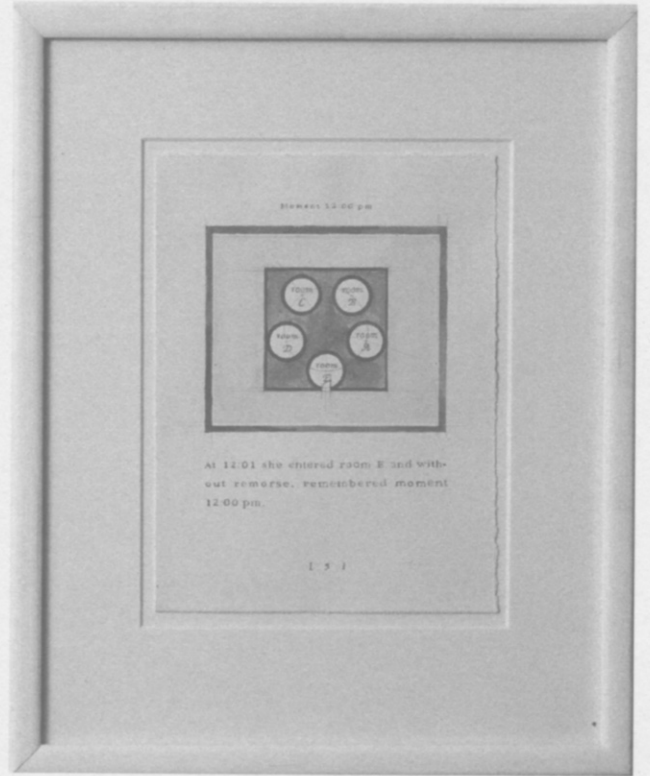
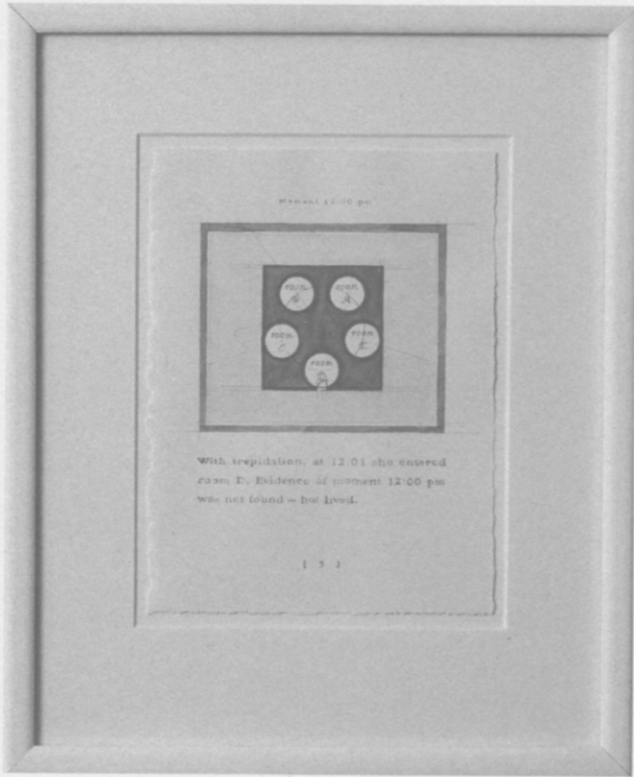
LONDON: GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS, 1917

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

MOMENT	PAGE
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12:57 pm	2
12:58 pm	3
12:59 pm	4
1:00 pm	5
12:01 pm	6
12:02 pm	7
12:03 pm	8
12:04 pm	9
12:05 pm	10







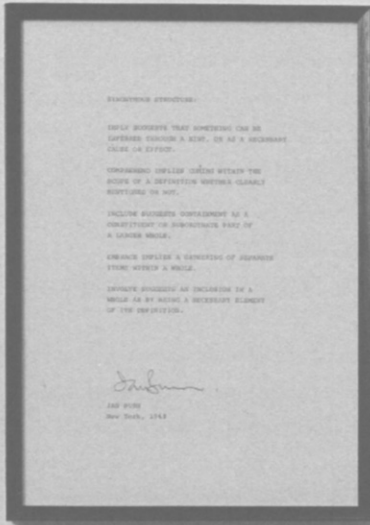
IMPLY SUGGESTS THAT SOMETHING
CAN BE INFERRED THROUGH A HINT, OR
AS A NECESSARY CAUSE OR EFFECT.

COMPREHEND IMPLIES COMING WITHIN
THE SCOPE OF A DEFINITION WHETHER
CLEARLY MENTIONED OR NOT.

INCLUDE SUGGESTS CONTAINMENT AS A
CONSTITUENT OR SUBORDINATE PART
OF A LARGER WHOLE.

EMBRACE IMPLIES A GATHERING OF
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INVOLVE SUGGESTS AN INCLUSION IN A WHOLE AS BY BEING A NECESSARY ELEMENT OF ITS DEFINITION.

Can we know what we see? On this issue, Ian Burn is very curious. He consistently advocated a fierce attentiveness to the visual properties of artworks. This meant scrutinizing an artwork with extraordinary precision in order to discern the visual intelligence operative within the work.¹ Yet Burn's art practice frequently destabilized the very basis for "reading the visual." Of course, he affirmed the specific, meticulous qualities required for visual analysis, yet his artwork also often strained the conditions of viewing to such an extent that it was difficult to tell what one was seeing anymore — or indeed whether one was seeing at all.

Examples of this straining are plentiful. In *Systematically Altered Photographs*, 1968, a once resolute image gradually ebbs from view as if to testify to the facility of the photocopier as a machine capable of deranging visible form as much as registering it. The *Xerox Books*, 1968, work in a contrary fashion, starting with a blank sheet of paper and repeatedly photocopying it until an anemic pixilated form emerges. Although Burn refers to this as a "dumb" procedure, it is the infidelity and imprecision of technical reproducible processes (particularly the earliest photocopiers) that produces the residue that we begin to notice.² Then there are the *Reordered Paintings* (1965) that take as their premise a propensity for the eye to be drawn to certain colors first. This perceptual priority for viewing colour is then reordered by allocating a contrary numerical sequence that goes against the grain of this inclination to follow colour in a certain order. But why would art go to such lengths to trouble vision? Surely art becomes a perverse activity when it goes against the grain of more immediate inclinations?

Burn's efforts imply that we only become attendant to the perplexity of visual analysis when prompted perversely. What constrains our capacity to deal with visual forms is the seductive appeal of the visual as something presumed to be direct, replete and ultimately transparent, which condemns it to be being overlooked. Only the act of a dense overlaying, such as that found in Jasper Johns's *O through 9*, 1961, stalls this propensity to overlook the visual (or to look through the visual to find something else). In a posthumously published conversation with Imants Tillers, Burn explained how he interpreted this work by Johns, which obviously was an impetus for the *Reordered Paintings*, and thus how he approached these issues in general:

You can read each numeral, but it takes a considerable effort, and after you've gone through that process it's as if you've gained nothing. Perceiving it is like a process of retrieval — seeing what you can read and reading what you can see ... What interested me about the work was the way it managed to position the viewer in conflict between looking and reading, which encourages a critical awareness about what your eyes are doing.³

Burn saw a positive potential in initiating a conflict within commonplace assumptions about perceptual retrieval. As opposed to reading through the visual text, the aim of such modernist works of art was to arrest one's attention, to stall it so that a viewer cannot but become entangled with a dense material presence requiring effort to scrutinize.⁴ In fact, whether a work of modern or contemporary art works at a sub-optimal level of vision or whether it creates a dense, layered surface, the outcome is precisely to credit the emphatic materiality of the visual. A Jasper Johns's flag is never simply just a flag, according to Burn, for the eye must deal with "traces of other things, bits of newspapers, photographs, embedding these within his surfaces of wax encaustic making reference like de Kooning and Pollock."⁵

At the same time, Burn always sought some critical restitution just as this active engagement seemed to be taken to the precipice. As with many of the most vehement avant-garde denunciations of art throughout the twentieth-century, the underlying presumption is that art is presented erroneously elsewhere (by art history, institutions or art criticism) and that it can be presented better, more accurately, somewhere else or at least in some other, more apt guise. It is not surprising that conceptual art sought to ground that proper

representation in the ambit of the producers, the artists. In Burn's essay of 1970, "Conceptual Art as Art," in which he seeks to introduce Conceptual Art to his native Australia, this grounding in the artist's concept pulls everything back from the brink just when it seemed modern art had lost all its traditional coordinates: "Once one understands that art is not in objects but in the completeness of the artist's concept of art, then the other functions can be eradicated and art can become more wholly art."⁶

This sustaining position, regarding the completeness of art, rehearses a very old line. Its ideal goal is a circuit of knowledge. I would argue that this assumption is inimical to establishing the genuine challenge of modern and contemporary work that Burn (and Conceptual Art) would otherwise seek to endorse: whether the whole idea of retrieval can be understood adequately in terms of fidelity.

Discussing Robbe-Grillet's suggestive appeal for minimalism over twenty years later, Burn begins with the proposition that artists toil to "produce objects in anticipation of their description." By the time he wrote this later piece, everything was different; in fact, everything that follows serves to undermine this hope.⁷ Robbe-Grillet, he reminds readers, presented a model for discussing the minimal object back in the Sixties. Yet Robbe-Grillet's impact was to unsettle the role of description. It was difficult to differentiate what was descriptive gloss and what was substance in his work, so that if one skipped the descriptive passages, one was left incapable of following anything. The conventional spatial-temporal and descriptive frames of reference had been displaced, though ironically displaced to a central position: "imagining they have been dealing hitherto with nothing but the frame, they will still be looking for the picture." This was a "world without adjectives," for Robbe-Grillet "rejected all associations, references and sensations, and his description acknowledges objects as merely the occasion of a certain optical resistance."⁸

In the spirit of optical resistance, Burn interspersed the text with his own artwork from the period: *Looking Through A Piece of Glass*, 1967-8, *Looking At A Piece of Glass*, 1967-8, and *Synonymous Structure*, 1968. What's the connection? Nothing clear-cut, but Burn likens description in Robbe-Grillet to a corrosive movement: it does not stop to delineate objects distinctly, but instead (perhaps thinking of his mirror piece or of *Looking At A Piece of Glass* over the page) "description" acts "like a mirror reflecting real space dislocating it, making it unbelievable, a surface denying its own substance, where do our eyes focus on a mirror?"

Yet since minimalism "real space" was an ambition, perhaps again a perverse one with post-minimalist work for it is forged upon dislocation, a dislocation of the viewing space. Take the mirror pieces as an example. Burn wanted them to replicate ordinary, household mirrors ("I don't see why people don't look at my mirror pieces in the same way that they look into a bathroom mirror ..."). Prompted "by (Mel) Ramsden's reflective, black paintings of 1965-66," Ann Stephen notes that Burn had become fascinated by the appeal of reflective surfaces, so much so that he had used automotive enamel in works such as *Blue Reflex*, 1966-7. This reflexivity evoked an elusive quality that makes them difficult to access. Where is the best place to stand? Where do I focus? How can a photographic reproduction be made of such works without including the act of photographing them? "In spite of Burn's polemic for the ordinary," as Stephen suggests, "estrangement occurs." This is best summed up by Burn himself who, on the one hand, argued that the mirror pieces do not require "any time looking" at them, yet, on the other hand, asserted that they demand "concentrated effort." Clearly these works are "about" visibility and reflection, but they fail visible perception — such a contrary practice accords with the effort to undermine the then overly optical emphasis within American modernist painting as well as with the purely morphological focus of American formalist criticism.⁹ Such effort comes from the way they fail to elicit a coherent, readily secure source of visible recognition, even though this is explicitly what they are concerned with — being mirrors after all. Again there is something consistent in this approach. It is best summed up as saying that the active attempt to undermine "ordinary" perception simultaneously seeks to trigger alertness to the genuine demands of concentrated involvement with the processes of the visual: "on being able to look at ourselves seeing, and on being able to interpret our not-seeing of the surface."¹⁰

Thus, in suggesting Robbe-Grillet's evocative significance for minimalism, the conclusion is all the more

unsettling for seeming to account for such work so well:

... its experience founders on the tensions between what is seen and what is (physically) difficult, awkward or impossible to see. Produced and constrained by its own description the object has nowhere to go but reflect upon its own description conceptually ...¹¹

Among the works Burn reproduced in his Robbe-Grillet article, *Synonymous Structure*, 1968, proves to be an intriguing example of this propensity because it too throws up more questions than it answers. It is a work that circulates around certain fundamental propositions as if skimming a shallow pond for deep meaning. Comprised of a series of grouped texts, it seems destined to delineate a core meaning by explicating every possible permutation of meaning. The overall effect, however, is of a work entirely caught up with this circling movement around meaning, caught forever in this striving, like a shark circling around an absent prey. In Burn's 1992 Robbe-Grillet article, the first plaque of the version reproduced there reads: "Hint implies the use of slight or remote suggestion with a minimum of overt statement." Compare the version from the University Art Museum (UAM) collection, shown in the recent *In Conversation* exhibition, which begins: "Imply suggests that something can be inferred through a hint, or as a necessary cause or effect." Although there are nine *Synonymous Structures*, 1968, they all revolve around a set of subtle permutations of similar definitions-aphorisms. The UAM version contains an accompanying framed text, which replicates the verbal structure of the "work" itself, if indeed that is what we are still dealing with. For within such a circulation of concepts, what is framed does not necessarily constitute the work: instead that title should more accurately be assigned to the plaques, which actually look like wall signage. The framed text 'mirrors' the plaques in size and format, yet what the artist has signed here is clearly not the work.

Conceptual Art conjures riddles. There is confusion about which is which: does the signed framed version act as a type of mock museum signage? Or does it function as a certificate of authenticity? Or does it serve to counter-sign the deceptive status of the conceptual statements on the plaques? The conceptual mimes the notional work, unsettling what seems fixed, extending its parameters beyond morphology, yet the riddles proliferate due to this extension of visual art beyond the clearly visible and readily comprehensible. Burn's *Synonymous Structure* suggests a conceptual rendezvous, a rendezvous with the question of art, but one that is elegantly disconcerting. At once, it is dry, formulaic, elusive and humorous. Across from Burn's *Synonymous Structure*, another work that serves to situate a rendezvous is one of the highly manicured 'sculptural situations' of Gail Hastings.¹² Hastings' work is like a staged scene, a whodunit in fact! There remain clues to certain presences, but no traces of any other activity other than the passage of time itself, time expended in the act of searching for something. That something happens to be art. Hastings' work too is a circuit, but one seeking to locate that thing which might be there, which might be called "art," or it might not. In her work, *Encyclopaedia of a Moment's Evidence*, 1993, each fastidiously executed panel looks like an arcane activity sheet recording the event of a transit in time. The clues are contrary here too: the passage of time subtly encoded in "Times" font, yet the sequence of page numbers — as if torn from an actual encyclopaedia — do not reveal a sequence at all, but page five each time. They present like pages from a lost text, but the sequence goes nowhere except from room to room. Burn's *Synonymous Structure* pivots around notional meaning for a notional work, which proves to be the work itself; Hastings' work is episodic, a temporal-spatial circuit that races around in pursuit of clues, as if to render significance though barely registering in time. Plate 3: "At 12.01, she hurriedly enters room A in urgent search for the evidence of moment 12.00pm. She finds it." Plate 4: "At 12.01, assured that the evidence of moment 12.00pm was in room B, she entered, but too late. The evidence had been wiped away."

As scenarios, Hastings' sculptural situations are akin to a convivial event that welcomes its visitors and invites them to imbibe. The question is, to imbibe in what? For these situations are also set-ups. It is a bit like chess: everything seemed overly determined and proscribed, yet it is always possible to make moves. Within these proscribed limits, one is able to participate in a game of sorts. This is how Hastings greets the Janus-faced legacy of post-Minimalist work: "stunned by the spatial, aesthetic and philosophical conundrums" of the work, she also finds that the legacy it provokes proves disconcerting to a viewer as well as setting up new,

unintended spheres of authority in art: "so elastic now is our understanding of what art can be. Hence the call for a text to identify an object as a work of art ..."13 Yes, it's true, we don't know what a work of art is! Hastings dwells in this fraught possibility. Minimalism dissolved the frame between art and the functional objects surrounding them. Minimalism, however, re-institutes a type of frame through an "authoritative voice" of the catalogue essay or the art-historical underwriting, which precedes the work. Hastings' conclusion is that the viewer drops out of frame.

This is the quandary bequeathed by minimalism, and Hastings presents this legacy precisely as a quandary. Again the issue revolves around a hypothetical circuit of knowledge: who knows? Hastings candidly notes her own trepidation: "That this work of art I am looking at is not meant for me but for someone else more equipped ... more art-informed." Hastings' work aims to serve as a point, or conjuncture, before "authority" intervenes. Hence, when discussing the general ambit of difficult art decisions and related works, she speaks of mentally fumbling in "the architecture of one's own seeing," "to stumble with intrigue" and in terms of "passages of nothing" and "a space of evacuated nobodies."14 Authority plays an interesting role here because it always plays a role off stage. Its effects have taken centre stage, Hastings asserts, even though they ought to be peripheral. Consequently, she talks of inverting "the traditional viewing experience by placing the art object on the periphery of the visual situation, and the observer at its centre." Yet for all this staging it is not evident that anything is really cleared up, nor that Hastings' work resolves the uncertainty of the viewer and creates a more stable space to grasp the contemporary art object and its most apt context. The props in these stage settings, these sculptural situations, are both incongruous and central, and this is an interesting feature of Hastings' work, in which the viewer and the periphery double as props.



Authority and circuits of meaning are at stake both in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of a Moment's Evidence* and in Burn's *Synonymous Structure*, though the different treatments reveal how each generation deals with the legacies passed on to it. The self-perceived breakthrough of Conceptual Art was related to the fact that "not only does it remove morphological significance as art, but it isolates 'the art' from the form of presentation altogether."15 For Burn this legacy proved ambiguous. Viewed in a positive light, following on from Robbe-Grillet's perplexing example, it presents a vivid possibility: "the realm of qualification can be only spatial or situational, time identified by merely a change of place, the viewer's presence identified in a geometric, spatial, situational dictionary."16 On the negative side, Burn was concerned with the corporate-like institutions of the New York art world, which tend to determine public meaning. Artists become preoccupied with attaining the status of "instant art history." The conclusion he reaches is similar to his positive alignment—at least when you think of these possible outcomes as descriptions of contemporary art: "The tenets of the styles encouraged artists to eliminate all personal reference and marks? One contemplated not the work, but oneself experiencing an inability to engage the work."17

Incredibly for much of contemporary art today, both the negative and the positive account apply equally, and this is certainly true of work such as Hastings' sculptural situations. Yet, for Hastings too, there appears a positive and negative force at work. There is always a pernicious force and, as with the Conceptual Art critique, it is identified with the effects of the counter-signature ("galleries, museum officials, critics") — the off-stage external authoritative voices that have now assumed centre stage due to the dislocations provoked by art she actually admires.18 Of course, such a binary viewpoint always assumes a more meritorious, uncorrupted role in these affairs, which is nearly always associated with the artist—although a near-virginal viewer is also admitted onto this side of the ledger. But where would that completeness of the artist's concept actually lead, for we have seen that it provokes a rendezvous that simply never seems to rendezvous adequately (for instance, the artist can never counter-sign their own signature)? By focusing upon such often intangible aspects of art practice (though admittedly the force of Conceptual Art in the wake of minimalism has been to demonstrate that they are always somewhat central), one unintended aspect that Conceptual Art permitted was that the name of the artist alone came to operate as a kind of trade-name and the material, or

media, as a kind of trademark (for example, Joseph Kosuth's photostats or Carl Andre's bricks). Without a tangible, coherent work, the effort of publicity around concepts became more profound.²⁰ Of course, to limit its effect to this one outcome would be equally limiting, though its effects cannot be disassociated from such commodification. The conundrum of contemporary art, on the other hand, is not simply reduced to the fact that the viewer not versed in twentieth century art doesn't get it. Yes, of course, for many lay viewers contemporary art constitutes a kind of riddle and Hastings perpetuates this riddle, even in the best way possible. Her work effects an aesthetic estrangement, in the fine tradition stemming from Cubist collage and perhaps more significantly Russian Constructivism, that produces objects like 'real world' objects, a space like some other ordinary space, but wholly different and subtly discontinuous with what it seems readily identifiable with. One arrives at a scene in a Hastings' work to find many of its key elements escape any comprehensive attempt to account for them.

Despite every effort to move 'closer' to meaning, to grasp something central and of immediate communicative value, there is much to recognize in this dislocation of the viewer of contemporary art. For Johns, Burn, Hastings and many others, reading visually is always enacted against the grain of simplified readings and against readymade identification. If it is correct that a vital feature of Burn's own legacy is to attempt to undercut the quick, dispensable treatment of the visual image, then this achievement comes at the cost of producing a quandary. For the very ability to enhance and sustain acuity of the complexity of visual analysis is also what makes artworks appear incongruous to everyday reception.