THE DECLINE OF DECADENCE
Rethinking Intellectual History Keynote address by Malcolm Bull

ABSTRACT: The concept of "decadence", once an indispensable term in the lexicon of cultural criticism, appeared to lose much of its salience in the latter part of the twentieth century. This paper explores one possible explanation by examining the controversies around British and American conceptual art c.1970 in relation to Wittgenstein's private language argument, Von Mises's socialist calculation argument, and Lukacs's concept of decadence. The interpenetration of these debates in early twentieth-century Vienna suggests that art, philosophy, and economics may sometimes have overlapping histories, and that it may be possible for a development in one field to count as a move in another as well. Perhaps "decadence" was never just a cultural or philosophical phenomenon, but an economic problem as well. In which case, conceptualism's eventual embrace of the market may be seen, not as a betrayal of its utopian promise, but as a solution to the problem of decadence itself.

Malcolm Bull is Professor of Art and the History of Ideas at Oxford, and also this year's Visiting Pilkington Professor at Manchester. He works in both art history and political theory and is on the editorial committees of Oxford Art Journal and New Left Review. Recent books include Inventing Falsehood, Making Truth: Vico and Neapolitan Painting (Princeton, 2013); Anti-Nietzsche (Verso, 2011); The Mirror of the Gods (OUP/Penguin, 2005) and Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision, and Totality (Verso, 2000). His presentation at the conference is part of an ongoing attempt to rethink aspects of the relationship between modernism and capitalism in the twentieth century.