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ART CRITICISM



INSIDE: DeKooning Reconsidered
 ...and more

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Art Criticism

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On the cover:

Willem De Kooning's *Woman I* (1950-52), oil on canvas, 75 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 58 inches, collection Museum of Modern Art, New York. On view through Jan. 8, 1995, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, as part of the retrospective, *Willem De Kooning: Paintings*, featuring 78 of the artist's works made over a span of five decades. Photograph of *Woman I* courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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Robert Smithson: An Esthetic Prospector in the Mining Industry (PART 1: the 1960s)

Ron Graziani

Painting, sculpture and architecture are finished, but the art habit continues.

Robert Smithson, 1966¹

Like Eliot said, "I'll show you fear in a handful of dust" ... The eternalizing aspect is permeated with a kind of terrible mortality.

Robert Smithson, 1969²

The artist does not have to will a response to the "deepening political crisis in America." Sooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying.

Robert Smithson, 1970³

Consistently, Robert Smithson's earth art came from places marked either by heavy industry or its sibling, modern urbanization. Smithson framed the encounter between environment and industry within an esthetics of confinement, one that relied on — as he often described it — a kind of shoreline, a place of demarcation, an edge where differences met. Often, that mediating edge was waste itself, spoil from an abandoned site. Those remains archived an industrialized life style and its view of nature as rich in mineral resources. Not unexpectedly, as part of the growing ecological debates of the late 1960s, Smithson and his art of demarcation were already contributors among many.

By the second half of the 1960s, the kind of discarded sites Smithson chose had also captured the public's interest, and cleaning them up was becoming something of a public mandate. In the ensuing confrontations, Smithson chose to side with those who were economically tied to the

minerals the earth's crust could supply, a position that would necessarily pit him against those who were fueling the growing politics of ecology. The interests of both mining and political climates were key factors in the structural logic of Smithson's esthetics. A history of each will play a significant role in salvaging what has been discarded by subsequent historical accounts of his art. Despite the changes that have occurred in the discipline of art history over the last twenty years, including a social investigation of the discipline itself, the issue of patronage in the production and reception of art continues to play an insignificant role in the critical analysis of contemporary art. Accounts of Smithson's productions are no exception, ranging from Smithson: the "formalist ... fascinated only by the look and scale of waste,"⁴ or Smithson the postmodern allegorist deconstructing classical forms of representation with "fragmentary, inconclusive, digressive types of storytelling."⁵

Elsewhere, I have dealt with how Smithson's estheticized s(p)oil was a historically conscious (de)tour through the semiotics of the picturesque-sublime.⁶ I argued that within the success of Smithson's art, a significant esthetic convention was inevitably communicated; in the art by Smithson, that convention took the form of the picturesque-sublime. While the significance of any art will be tied to some esthetic conventionality — the horizon within which successful art is circumscribed — esthetic traditions, likewise, are no less attached to other disciplinary traditions. And that includes the political and economic habits of those whose commitment to art help to establish the significance of particular artistic practices. The present essay pursues this connection in terms of how Smithson understood an esthetics of the land from the econocentric perspectives of the natural sciences. My intent is not to reveal the earliest moment Smithson began to develop his use of industrial waste so as to prove his originality, but to view the success of Smithson's innovative art within the emerging conservationist politics of the 1960s.

The anamorphic angle of this essay is in part determined by the current state of affairs which has seen the environmental movement spawn a huge bureaucracy of resource legal eagles. Opting for liberal reform policies rather than fundamental change in the postindustrial politics of profit, litigation currently revolves around establishing environmentally safe tolerances within an economic goal of "sustainable development".⁷ As a support mechanism, a wide array of revisionist ecological paradigms have also taken philosophical root since the 1960s, from the anthropocentric "new conservationist" movement to the more radical tactics of eco-warriors. The biocentric philosophies of deep ecology, the deconstructive framework of the ecofeminists as well as the various proposals of stewardship put forth by social ecologists have all helped to give shape to the recent eco-philosophical debates.

Concomitantly, the culture industry has also expanded its ecological base; for example, in 1992, the College Art Association devoted its summer issue of *Art Journal* exclusively to the theme of art and ecology. This journal presented a wide variety of ecologically based esthetic activities, inscribed within a range of ecological paradigms and anchored with the historical precedents set by European artist Joseph Beuys and the bio-esthetics of Americans Helen and Newton Harrison. Conspicuously missing was the art by Robert Smithson. This omission seemed somewhat peculiar, considering that the theme of this summer issue was a critique of the anthropocentric thrust of modern materialism and its detrimental impact on North American bio-regions. Not only did Smithson's chosen terrain, the Garden State of "New" Jersey, identify the culprit of this detrimental activity as a European transplant, but he also used the Jersey techno-gardens as (de)tours into the scionic esthetics of an American picturesque-sublime.

Omitting Smithson from the publication was, by itself, not disturbing, for art historical accounts necessitate calculated omissions. But coupled with the issue's subtheme, marginalizing Smithson takes on greater ramifications. Despite a spirit of pluralism, the publication's range of art centered either around developing interdisciplinary proposals that advocated the need for restoring a sense of balance to our global ecosystem, or esthetic displays of the ecological havoc industrialized communities have generated. Lacking were any artistic practices that go below the synthetic nature of these blueprints before they take hold of our psychic perceptions, a practice this essay will argue preoccupied Smithson. His ecological position embraced many of the parameters used in the summer issue — Smithson and the artists discussed in the summer issue avoided the idealistic denials of their respective decade and both believed in collaborative or participatory positions. While also opting for a paradigmatic shift, Smithson nonetheless refused to present a fundamental or partial solution to the environmental crisis. Whereas the summer issue of *Art Journal* presented a range of eco-gestalts geared toward damage control, be they environmental or psychic, Smithson's geological narrations used a variety of "enlightened" disciplinary practices to tell a different story.

By the late 1960s, Smithson would insist that he had "mapped [his chosen] sites in terms of esthetic boundaries rather than political or economic boundaries."⁸ Notwithstanding, contemporaries complained that Smithson's art — for example his 1967-69 series of *Non-sites*, or more specifically the bins of debris in those *Non-sites* — recalled "the areas of those vast terraced depressions created by copper mining excavations."⁹ Taken together, these two quotes may suggest a naive artist who still believed in the autonomy of art while unwittingly estheticizing the

industrial methods of mining. But Smithson, who understood the intimate relationship between industry and art in anything but naive terms, argued: "Technological ideology has no sense of time other than its immediate 'supply and demand' and its laboratories function as blinders to the rest of the world. Like the refined 'paints' of the studio, the refined 'metals' of its laboratory exist within an 'ideal system'."¹⁰

Smithson's esthetics assumed not only that many of the traditional anticipations from industrial progress were no longer appropriate in the current situation, but also how that realization was creating, on a societal level, an ambivalence viscous in its circularity. As part of the instabilities of the late 1960s — when a shifting of power relations had yet to be determined — Smithson's esthetic s(p)oil came to play a useful role. But like it or not, history is, in part, what the present makes of it. As a participant in the post-conservative politics of 1992, Smithson's ecological position must have seemed inappropriate for the editors of *Art Journal*. What has yet to be decided, however, is how Smithson's esthetic dosage of confinement recalled the ecological realities of an industrialized life style. This essay will pursue that topic through Smithson's relationship with the mining industry and how he relied on the various disciplinary practices of the physical sciences to define his esthetic position.

In 1965, in response to the growing controversy over the environmental impact of mining, Congress enacted the Appalachian Regional Development Act directing the Secretary of the Interior to make a survey and study of strip-mining operations.¹¹ The subject of how to handle mining sites was not new; it had a long legislative history. Between 1949 and 1964 alone, spanning the 81st through the 88th Congress, close to 40 bills related to regulating the mining industry "were introduced. Although none of these efforts resulted in any significant legislative action."¹² But the 1960s would witness an acceleration in the mining industry's environmental recklessness. Equipped with technological improvements and an inevitable concern for cost effectiveness (profit), the mining industry was in the midst of redirecting its operations; from 1961 to 1971, the surface mining of coal, for example, (the cheapest but also most devastating type of mining in environmental terms) doubled in output in comparison to the more expensive deep mining of coal which dropped by 50 percent.

Countering the continued Congressional gridlock and the mining industry's increased devastating impact on the land, an environmental awareness movement took root and turned to the general public for support in its call for more strident regulatory guidelines concerning strip mining. By the end of the 1960s widespread concern for the environment saw the once obscure science of ecology become a household word. Membership in environmental groups — from the long-established Sierra

Club or Friends of the Earth to back-to-nature counter-culture youth movements — skyrocketed. A somewhat misguided grass root abolitionist lobbying campaign to stop strip mining altogether had even surfaced in Congress. In January of 1970, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) became law, and the National Resource Defense Council quickly began bringing suit after suit to enforce regulatory details on environmental issues. On April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day was celebrated. The numerous teach-ins held across the country that day were seen by many as consciousness-raising opportunities to reflect on the ecological consequences of our modern life style.¹³ That year, Smithson would cryptically speak of “seeing the handwriting on the wall,” suggesting, “all these sins, and here 2000 coming so near, sin everywhere, the dead river, with its black oil slime, the crucified river instead of the crucified man, when do you think they’ll start burning polluters at the stake?”¹⁴

Typically, Smithson came to see this historic moment in entropic terms: “On one side you have the idealistic ecologist and on the other side you have the profit-desiring miner ... you have this stalemate ... Two irreconcilable situations hopelessly going over the same waterfall. It seems that one would have to recognize this entropic condition rather than try to reverse it.”¹⁵ As an artist, recognizing this entropic condition meant framing this unresolved ambivalent situation — the tension between an ever-consuming mining industry and the various manic forms of re-managing its accumulating debris — in esthetic terms. As Smithson argued, when there was “talk about preserving the environment or conserving energy or recycling, one inevitably got to the question of waste.”¹⁶ But his use of our industrial wasteland differed from T.S. Eliot’s romantic version. Smithson’s position was to “accept the entropic situation and more or less learn how to re-incorporate the things that seem ugly.” He saw “the nostalgia for the pre- [read, a return to some pre-industrialized natural environment] ... as a kind of rinky-dink idea of nature ... a kind of Humpty [Dump]ty way of doing things,” a form of nostalgia that held for Smithson a “kind of picture book sentimentality, a very trite romanticism of what the balance of nature is” about. Smithson’s use of industrial waste avoided “going upward into the ideal”¹⁷ nor did he resort to the one-dimensional picturesque images used to screen over what Smithson felt were “the really frightening problems” attendant to the collapse of nature.¹⁸ Participating in the tradition of the picturesque-sublime, Smithson reiterated, “the people of my generation have grown up in the industrial blight, and it’s no rustic woodside that we remember.”¹⁹ Made in early 1970, this statement attests to how Smithson conceptualized the conventions of the picturesque-sublime in his *Partially Buried Woodshed* at Kent State, completed in January of that year.²⁰

Early in his career, ruins had become Smithson's terrain, but the ruins he chose were a different sort than the type deployed through the category of the picturesque-sublime. During the second half of the 1960s, the Garden State of New Jersey provided Smithson with all sorts of modern day versions of machine-in-the-garden situations, for example, his 1967 article, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," and subsequent "tourist" excursions to the site. Intentionally echoing promotional tours that have traditionally used the esthetics of the picturesque to stimulate commercial interest, Smithson chose the construction site for a new highway along the Passaic River — just one of many highways that were under construction in New Jersey.

The construction ruins he chose in Passaic were in turn analogized with nature's own entropic geological processes. The notion of entropy was a prolific metaphor in the 1960s and the term had a broad range of meanings. The source Smithson used extensively came from the physical sciences, specifically geomorphology — the science that deals with the description of nature and mineral phenomena and the history of geological change through the interpretation of the earth's topographic features.²¹ In geomorphological terms, geological flows (or alluvial fans) refer to slow-moving masses that widen or fan out as they proceed — which necessarily includes a slowing down or thermodynamic loss of energy to propel them. Smithson not only chose to equate industrial expansion to this reading of entropy, he also chose his sites accordingly; for example, the specific vicinities of New Jersey which Smithson used for his series of *Non-sites* were within a terminal moraine — a wall of accumulated debris or broken rock deposited by a glacier — a mass of moving crystals (ice) flowing under its own weight. Geological massings in the form of terminal moraines, volcanic flows or alluvial fans would be the chosen terrain for Smithson's esthetics including his subsequent land reclamation projects of the 1970s.

In the Passaic travelogue, Smithson equated the technologized process of urban sprawl to the various types of flows that have shaped the earth's crust. Fossilized as monuments of alluvial debris, the ruins of Passaic located the future-in-reverse, reattaching to the picturesque travelogue and its ideology of manifest destiny the sublime reality of its entropic inevitability. Smithson's reconceptualization of the sublime ingredient as a slow, drawn out, low-energy form of entropic inevitability — instead of the traditional pictorial image of debris from an awe-inspiring powerful force — locates this "suburban odyssey" as neither romantic nor cynical, neither nostalgic nor condemning. In short, Smithson had no intention of transcending his archaeological narrative of modern society's entropic confinement.

Smithson's *Pours* of 1968-69 were another way he analogized industrial

expansion with geological similarities. For *Asphalt Rundown*, *Concrete Pour* and *Glue Pour*, Smithson used fabricated (industrially produced) materials and “naturally” re-sited them as geological alluvial massings. These *Pours* take their forms from the condition of the site, doubling the process of an alluvial wash. Smithson didn’t film these *Pours* in action, arguing that he wasn’t “interested in process itself” but in the image of an alluvial “process absorbed.” For *Asphalt Rundown* in Italy (1969) the Roman ruin was the erosion that had occurred at an abandoned quarry site, a process known as creep — a type of downward movement of soil and rock that occurs on the steep walls of abandoned quarry sites. The creep acted like a mold that the poured asphalt filled on its path down the wall of the quarry slope.

But *Asphalt Rundown* was more than merely a fictionalized fill, an inverted reenactment of the way the surface of the earth behaves. The asphalt *Pour* brought together the issues of mining, transportation and the picturesque that preoccupied Smithson throughout his career. Smithson not only trucked the manufactured asphalt to the site but he had to build the road to the top of the promontory overlooking a section of Rome’s Cava di Selce — the quarry site chosen for the *Pour* — re-enacting the general mining procedure of first having to gouge out roads before mining a desired site. A photograph of this road used on the invitation card for a 1969 show of Smithson’s at Dwan Gallery, attests to the road’s construction as an integral part of the *Pour*.

For Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown* in Rome also recalled the falls of Paterson, New Jersey and “all the associations you could have from the falls of Paterson”²² — Smithson’s childhood backyard. Paterson, New Jersey, situated on a dormant volcano, is recorded as our nation’s first planned industrial city. Late in the eighteenth century, the Great Falls of Paterson and the waterways of the Passaic River were harnessed to power the city’s factories. Ironically, Paterson soon became a manufacturing center for locomotives, the preeminent machine in many a 19th-century frontier landscape disciplined under the desires of Manifest Destiny.²³ With reference to Smithson’s own delight in science fiction and B-rated movies, one could even say Paterson, New Jersey was for Smithson an urbanized place for the sublime where Volcanic Nature Met the Furnace of Industry.

By 1966, Smithson had had first-hand experience in the engineering practices of mapping geological terrain while he served as artist consultant for a Dallas/Fort Worth air terminal project. Although never proceeding beyond the drawing stage, crystalline structures determined how Smithson was to tackle the aspects of the terrain he was assigned. Although the project was never realized, it did stimulate Smithson to write a 1967 essay “Toward the Development of an Air Terminal Site.” In

that essay, Smithson argued for a type of futuristic air transportation, one based on abstract prefabricated crystal systems of pyramidal or tetragonal units. Time travel itself was understood as a crystalline structure, with the aircraft inhabiting that space given names like “Tetragonal Terror” — a kind of mapped sublime or, again, the picturesque-sublime.²⁴ Smithson ultimately chose to relocate the doomed air terminal project into an imaginary park; equating the length of the would-have-been Texas runway with the length of Central Park. He conveniently closed the essay with a mention of the Pine Barrens of New Jersey (the site of Smithson’s soon-to-be first *Non-site*) as another possible site-to-be organized in a similar way by art.

The air terminal-as-a-park essay targeted a regional audience actively engaged in deciding what to do with the New Jersey Pine Barrens. That same year, *New Yorker* magazine published an extensive two-part picturesque travelogue into the Pine Barrens, which the author described as a “glaciated farm”—again, the sublime tamed.²⁵ Treating this large section of New Jersey as an endangered species, the author, who referenced two competing proposals for transforming sectors of the Pine Barrens — into a huge international jetport or a national recreation park area — felt that “the state had about five years to act,” dolefully concluding that the picturesqueness of the Pine Barrens was slowly heading toward extinction.²⁶ Wedging into the current discourse, Smithson proposed an air terminal-in-a-park development for the Pine Barrens — an “entirely new way to order the terrain,” a way that would bring “into view a vast garden.”²⁷

This was 1967, and the efforts of a few groups were finally beginning to make headway into the public exposure of the devastating reality of mining practices.²⁸ Congress had also just responded with its own revisionist ecological blueprint for the mining community — a colorfully illustrated report titled *Surface Mining and our Environment*, a report two years in the making. Together with dramatic photos and a variety of charts tables and diagrams, the 1967 report told of how the industrial mining process had scarred, ripped and polluted the environment. The report’s conclusion called for “elementary principles of resource management, to put a stop to unnecessary damage from future mining, and begin an orderly program to repair the damage from past mining.”²⁹

Outlined in this report was a “new conservationism” one that no longer grounded its rhetoric in the poetics of the 19th-century transcendentalists — those who had helped steer the conservationist movement into the 20th century. The Congressional ‘newer’ version of conservationism was now based on the cost-benefit analysis of the modern-day resource manager, drawing on the voice of Gifford Pinchot (founder and Director of the U.S. Forest Services) to substantiate its statistics. The report also displaced

the “back to approximate original contour” doctrine that had been part of the Congressional reclamation debates since the late 1940s. The doctrine would have required mining companies to return a disturbed site back to the way it had been before it had been mined. The eco-logic was (and still is), if technology could mine the site, technology could also restore the disturbed site to an image of virgin or untouched nature, as if it had never been touched by the mining industry. Despite a persistent lobbying campaign by environmental groups for a “back to approximate original contour” doctrine, the basic Congressional parameter defining reclamation would change. With the 1967 report, “back to a useful condition” became the regulating guideline. As the then-Secretary of the Interior plainly stated before a Congressional committee: “Let me make the record clear about our use of the word reclamation. In the context of surface mining we do not consider reclamation to mean restoration of the land to its original condition.”³⁰ The report received much attention in Congress, and by 1968, both the House and the Senate had held hearings on strip-mining activities. The guidelines stipulated in the 1967 report helped to direct the course of the debates and subsequent bills that came out of those hearings. But despite this flurry of activity, 1968 saw no detailed standards develop, and with strong opposition from the mining industry, the proposed bills stalled in Congress.

On the heels of the ecological debates in Congress, the culture industry was not far behind in developing an esthetics for earth art, with Dwan Gallery as a primary promoter and backer during the early years. Smithson’s 1966 *Tar Pool* and *Gravel Pit*, with its inner configuration of (hot) tar center and outer blue (cool) framing bin — rectangulating an entropic cooling down massing — was an early earth art shown at Dwan Gallery. For Smithson, Virginia Dwan — a Minnesota mining and manufacturing heiress — played the classic role of patron, supporting him throughout the second half of the 1960s. Meeting in 1966, their relationship stabilized Smithson’s professional career.³¹ While on a stipend, Smithson was accompanied by Virginia Dwan on many excursions that he later developed into *Non-sites* including *Pine Barrens; Bangus, Pennsylvania*; and his *Yucatan Incidences*.

Conceptualizing the habits of mining, Virginia Dwan later recalled how Smithson would “squander almost nightly” a barrage of peculiar syntax, quoting such phrases as “the refuse between mind and matter was a mine of information.” Dwan promoted Smithson’s art as a form of reclamation, salvaging the accumulating s(p)oil of industrial progress. Estheticizing the growing ecological demands for reclaiming post-mining sites, she argued Smithson’s art as sites where “the ruins of an industrial age ... were enhanced, [places] where taboos of negatives and nihilism were tossed aside. From these places sprang new energy and productivity

... the dreadful and the banal were made mythic and romantic.”³² In addition, when describing her relationship with Smithson, Dwan glorified it in the language of Manifest Destiny, finding their excursions together and “the idea of virgin land ... very exciting in this context ... [adding] we had a terrifically pioneering feeling.”³³ Considering Smithson’s predilection for abandoned sites, what she described must have been their excitement at applying the latest esthetic practice to a landscape, revealing the latter to have been underdeveloped all along. In many ways Virginia Dwan voiced the general (and growing) societal ambivalence of what to do with both the anticipated thrills of industrial profit and its accumulating destructiveness. In 1968, Dwan Gallery launched “Earthworks” with a group show. Included was Smithson’s *Franklin, New Jersey Non-site*, the first of his *Non-sites* that dealt specifically with an abandoned mining site.

For his part, Smithson continued to pursue a growing commitment to abandoned quarries and his long-standing interests in crystallography and map-making in general. Smithson had spent the second half of 1967 unsuccessfully trying to buy (through Dwan Gallery) specific parcels of land in the Pine Barrens. He intended to construct a system of outdoor pavements at the sites. His ultimate failure to procure such tracts resulted in Smithson’s first *Non-site*, his *Pine Barrens* which referenced a run-down airstrip. This first of a series of *Non-sites* had a well-developed infrasystem that included a topographic map, a verbal description and wooden bins, in this case containing sand.

For the next three years, Smithson would develop a series of *Non-sites* that dealt with sites that had either been overused by industry to the point of discard — no longer of any commercial value — or abandoned sites ready for an environmental face lift. Smithson argued his art in terms of how it left unresolved the ambivalence that has been operative in Manifest Destiny since the 19th century, a compulsive reenactment Dwan (and the subsequent reception Smithson’s art has generated) conveniently displaced with her synthetic version of Smithson’s art. Similar to the (de)tours he would take through the conventions of the picturesque, Smithson’s *Non-sites* (dis)played the disciplines of crystallography and cartography. His esthetic practice staged the arbitrariness and contingent nature of crystallography, cartography or, for that matter, any type of containment or narrative.³⁴ In theoretical parlance that meant destabilizing the closure that had occurred within the humanistic discourse of the Enlightenment. Replacing the leaf — the Enlightenment’s symbol of progressive growth and thought — Smithson used the crystal, or more accurately, the discipline of crystallography to structure his esthetics of confinement.³⁵ More to the point, the structure of Smithson’s art emphasized that crystalline systems, as forms of classifications, are arbitrary grids —

imaginary axes or lines of references — used to differentiate the various types of crystals. In other words, Smithson was well aware that an arbitrary (even to the point of being a fictional) narrative structured the science of crystallography. Using the practice of crystallography — in which, at best, the lines of reference used to describe the difference in crystalline planes are imaginary planes of demarcation — Smithson also took the disciplinary premises of map-making into its own necessarily fictional space, commenting in 1969: “You lay a grid on the globe the same way that you lay a grid on the crystal ... even though both are rooted in the material.”³⁶

Smithson designed maps whose systems of referencing prospected sites were constructed in order to emphasize mapping’s arbitrariness, deploying a wide range of configurations. For example, he had used a negative photostat roadmap of the region along the Passaic River in “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” — the configuration of which was a pictorial expanded sequence of one of Smithson’s sculptures. The map images the region of the Passaic River, but as a negative photostat it also references — in true picturesque fashion — not the external site but another prior map as the source of its design of the Passaic River region. Smithson expanded on the mapping equation in his series of *Non-sites*, superimposing various types of grid systems, often crystalline in shape. For the *Pine Barrens*, Smithson re-fabricated a topographic map in the shape of a hexagon; for *Franklin Furnace*, he used an aerial map shaped as a single axis of a hexagonal crystalline structure; in *Line of Wreckage*, he shaped the stratigraphic map in terms of what was referenced in the map, a line; in *Palisades*, the fictionality of the science of mapping shows itself by simply being an outdated 1874 map; and in *Mono Lake*, the map itself is imaged as a frame.

In an unpublished essay titled “A Provisional: The Theory of Non-sites” Smithson defined the *Non-site* as a “metaphorical representation of an actual site even though the Non-site did not resemble the site. [It was a] three dimensional picture which didn’t look like a picture ... The little theory [of *Non-sites*] is tentative and could be abandoned at any time, like the earth structure.”³⁷ Smithson’s initial *Pine Barrens Non-site* set up a series of crystallographic-like grids — an abstract infrasystem consisting of hexagonal map and corresponding bin configuration — in referencing the *Pine Barrens* airstrip site. Arguing the relationship between the site and non-site as similar to the disciplinary systemization of crystals, Smithson stated “the quartz crystal has six sides in its raw state but that they are irregular, it was only when you locate this crystalline lattice in the abstract that it becomes based on a hexagonal lattice.”³⁸ The maps and bins of *Pine Barrens* map out and stabilize an otherwise somewhat scattered arrangement at the site. Using a 1967 topographic map to locate

the region surrounding the air field, Smithson superimposed a hexagonal infrasystem locating (in red dots) the places from which the sand in the bins had been taken. He re-configured the central hexagonal bin as an X on the map. The X that marked the center of the mapped hexagonal system defined, for Smithson, how “the map had six vanishing points that lose themselves in a pre-existent earth mound.”³⁹ In an unpublished section of a 1966 article that Smithson wrote for *Harper's Bazaar* titled “The X Factor in Art,” he defined the X factor as the infinity ingredient in all systems of containment.⁴⁰ All of Smithson's *Non-sites* were, as he suggested, “jeopardized forms of map-making.”⁴¹

A similar conceptual ambivalence appeared that same year in what Smithson called his *Non-site #2, Line of Wreckage, Bayonne New Jersey*. Here, Smithson again ties urban development directly to the geological phenomenon of an entropic alluvial process. As he suggested in his 1966 article “Entropy and the New Monuments,” once the “cloying effect of urban values wears off, one perceives the facts of the outer edge ... that infinitesimal condition known as entropy.”⁴² Smithson described the *Line of Wreckage* as the “entropic spin-off from New York City.” New York City became “the point of a crystalline pyramidal structure” with sprawling “Bayonne being the runoff,” the bottom of the slow alluvial flow of urban sprawl — what Smithson called the “forbidden cold zone” of urbanization. The *Non-site* was an image of an “obliterated linearity,” or as Smithson called it, an image of a continual “buildup of breakdown” or “the wrecked line.”⁴³

If the actual Bayonne site disrupted the whole notion of any kind of linearity, the *Non-site's* infra-systems nonetheless re-stabilized the “linear emerging from the wreckage.” The purple bin containing recycled clean fill (broken concrete/asphalt from a disused road, used to shore up the shoreline coast of Smithson's chosen site), the snapshot photos (what Smithson called a kind of low-level scanning of the sunken bay site), and a map (a photographic blow-up whose linear configuration doubled the line of wreckage located as “the Foul area,” all do their part in that re-containment.⁴⁴ The five-foot vertical aluminum bin — a cage-like box surfaced with ever-widening “aluminum bands and lines of rock”—reenacts the piling-up process of stratification, its sedimentary buildup. The whole *Non-site* becomes a “cross-section of the site,” but being merely frontal (the bins' consecutive bands of aluminum and rock don't continue around the sides of the bin), the *Nonsite* was “a stratified mental experience of the site.”⁴⁵

Continuing this type of compulsive ambivalence, Smithson's next *Non-site*, his 1967 *Franklin, New Jersey* (Smithson called it his *#3 Non-site*), dealt specifically with an abandoned mine quarry. Both the aluminum bins and map of the site were “contained within two 70° perspective lines

without a center point”⁷⁴⁶ — in a sense, one segment of a hexagonal configuration. But both map and bins lacked what would have been the triangular closure of their shape. The rocks used were of a homogeneous group of minerals whose physical properties all belonged to the hexagonal crystalline structure. Smithson described the site as resting on two prehistoric rock beds: a Paleozoic bed of “Camptonite dikes, Kittatiny limestone and Hardyston quartzite” and a Pre-Cambrian bed consisting of “Pegmatite, Franklin limestone, and Gneiss,” insisting that this *Non-site #3* contained the site both topographically and stratigraphically. Smithson also chronicled going to a museum at the site, visiting a mine replica and what was called the *Fluorescent Display Room* — all ways of containing the scattering at the *Franklin* site. Nonetheless the piled rocks emphasized, in their irregularity, the arbitrariness of laying a grid on a terrain — here that means the hexagonal configuration of the bins and photos used to contain the site. Posting a notice regarding “an unexhibited aerial photo of the missing focal point” — claimed to be an aerial photo of a dead-end street” — and a key making it available deposited somewhere in a bank-vault” attest to the economics of mining, but they also suggest the type of heavy protection needed to safeguard any system of containment which, sooner or later, would find its form of discipline in jeopardy.

For his 1968 *Palisades, Edgewater New Jersey Non-site*, Smithson used a literary reference of the site. Smithson based his site-selection on Christopher J. Schuberth’s book *The Geology of New York City and Environs* (1961). Specifically quoting page 232 of Schuberth’s book, Smithson’s posting read as follows: “An old Trolley [sic] system connected the Palisades Amusement Park with the Edgewater-125th St. Ferry. The trolley [sic] was abolished on August 5, 1938. What was once a straight track has become a path of rocky crags — the site has lost its system ... The amusement park rests on a rock strata known as the ‘chilled zone.’” In these few sentences, Smithson not only mentions a system of transportation, its derelict condition, the entropic (“chilled zone”) reality of the site as well as a direct relationship between waste and enjoyment in terms of the amusement park. The inclusion of the date 1938, the year the trolley was abolished and the year of Smithson’s birth, seems more than merely fortuitous.

Smithson’s *Non-sites* consistently denied a sense of closure, while insisting on their forms of containment. Within this conceptual framework the prospected site mattered to Smithson. He saw the environment as substance, what it was made of, how long it had been there, how it was being used. Along with other theorists and artists, who in the 1960s began developing a heavy interest in phenomenological issues, Smithson channeled his relationship with the earth’s strata through the contingencies of that philosophical forum. Later, when the theoretical

concerns for the esthetics of the phenomenological expanded to notions such as site-specificity or the semiotics of structure, Smithson again participated. But he also defined his relationship to the phenomenological in a different light, the way in which a mining foreman would have.

Instead of working as a “laboratory scientist who has the control of laboratory experiments ... a type of security that ... is very similar to the security that comes from working in a studio,” Smithson preferred to see himself as a prospector or “field scientist who was working, in a sense, with uncontrollable aspects.”⁴⁷ Arguing for the structure of his *Non-sites*, Smithson claimed, “It was just a matter of going to where the ore was. There was no preconceived idea of where the ore was ... you are going toward a particular material that you have decided that you need, the resources, yet how you get to it is not based on any preconceived tautological logic, otherwise what you’d have is the perfect mountain ... which is a conceptual fallacy.”⁴⁸ Mining ore required a phenomenological frame of mind but also one equipped with infra-systems to contain the ore. It is a business whose process or forms of extraction are directed by the conditions of the preferred site. Smithson’s rock-hounding excursions and subsequent *Non-sites* gave esthetic shape to the conditional reality of mining for ore.

Similarly, Smithson’s cognitive understanding of what ‘nature’ meant was contingent and ever-changing. It was an ecological attitude that avoided a nostalgia for virgin nature — referred to as a Humpty Dumpty way of treating nature — that necessarily challenged the logic of those lobbying for a reclamation program based on the expensive “back to the approximate original contour” doctrine. In a way similar to the “new conservationist” movement, Smithson replaced the poetics of wilderness with his use of the physical sciences. Nonetheless, while avoiding the call for a return to some pre-industrial state of nature, he also played havoc with the scientifically based resource management theories of the “new conservationists.” He saw the various programs of “preservationism or recycling as a symptomatic reaction to urban development.” These programs were seen as “a public relations cover or compensation” for a society accustomed to and not wanting to give up on an ever-consuming life style. Both environmental positions were what Smithson called an “evangelical popularization of ecology.”⁴⁹ Smithson saw the then-current ecological programs for containing the entropic reality of industrialized society as ambivalent at best — a condition his *Non-sites* re-enacted. The infrasystems of his *Non-sites* were filled with scientific forms of containment but destabilized in ways that staged their contingency factor. As Smithson argued, “to give something seemingly chaotic a certain kind of coherence to me is intriguing ... It’s dealing with something that is going to pieces but at the same time arresting that or stabilizing that

breakdown.”⁵⁰

Smithson consistently looked for “homogeneous material that covered a general vicinity.” The specific site was determined by the “availability of great amounts of homogeneous matter. The site was only bounded [mapped out] after [he] found the material.”⁵¹ Smithson went in search of a resource as a mining engineer would. Preferring abandoned sites (and their entropic condition), Smithson traveled over a prospect region, and only after scanning a vicinity — which included the initial step of relying on descriptive maps of the vicinity — did he map an esthetic grid system onto the prospected site.

Smithson developed a variety of sophisticated *Non-site* versions. *Double Non-site* of 1968 consisted of an inner square bin surrounded by four trapezoidal bins. Displayed on the wall was a double map of similar configuration consisting of two stratigraphic maps with a photo negative as the central element. The outer trapezoidal bins held volcanic cinder cones, pumice gathered “in the vicinity of the Maul Mountains about 10 to 15 miles east of Baker, California”—while the inner square bin of volcanic obsidian lava — a homogeneous amorphous volcanic glass rock whose lack of crystalline form is due to its extremely rapid cooling — came from the “vicinity of Truman Springs, Nevada.”⁵²

The inner-outer relationship for Smithson’s *Double Non-site* has consistently been understood as a double negative dialectical conceptualization⁵³ — an estheticization of what one encounters in a gallery. But *Double Non-site* has a geological rationale for its configuration. Double was the result of an ore-hounding trip which Smithson took with artists Nancy Holt and Michael Heizer to an area separating California and Nevada.⁵⁴ The vicinity he chose was a “burned-out volcanic” environment, a once-active site now fossilized as a low-level energy site. After scanning the “ore” at the site, Smithson arranged the inner/outer configuration for *Double Non-site* to mirror the volcanic process itself, how the chosen minerals scatter during a volcanic eruption. As Smithson scanned the vicinity, it became apparent that the obsidian, which has a greater heat breakdown point due to its density, remained close to the center of the eruption, while the lighter pumice moved to the outer perimeter of the volcanic site. The *Double Non-site* in-effect, doubles this reality in the configuration of its bins and maps, setting up a geologue (instead of a dialogue) between “the dispersed lava and the concentrated obsidian or volcanic glass.”⁵⁵

Conformation of this configuration (as in all of Smithson’s *Non-sites*) directs the viewer to visit the location where the rock hounding took place, but once out there, one will find it extremely difficult to locate the actual site where the volcanic minerals were gathered. This dislocating experience has subsequently been attached to various post-modern

versions of the sublime — be it Lyotard's love of the incommensurable or a Barthesian *jouissance* (pleasure of the text), the former a conceptual, the latter a psychic journey that can somehow break from its disciplining background.⁵⁶ Contrary to these excursions, Smithson always argued in terms of what the geological site had to offer, even if “the information from the site one has to draw from is at such a low level that it doesn't allow one to focus on any particular spot.”⁵⁷

The fact that Smithson only used sites with deposits of homogeneous materials — or near undifferentiated material — effectively enhanced the low-level effect and one's inability to focus the vicinity into specific sites. The prospected location for the *Non-site* does evade one “all the while the *Non-site* is directing you to it.” Continuing, Smithson insisted, “the containments [his abstract grid systems] are there to get under control” the scattered material, but they were only “abstractions ... that don't really find anything.” The connections and relationships developed in the *Non-sites* are “held in suspension,” but the entropic course of that experience differs from the versions of the post-modern sublime that have subsequently emphasized the ficticity over the geological substance of Smithson's art. The geological location plays an integral part in the *Non-sites*. More to the point, the more one believes that Smithson's infrasystem of maps, photos and bins of mineral would lead one to locate the prospected site, the more manic one's ambivalence becomes. If a viewer makes an effort to go out to one of Smithson's prospected sites, s/he is left with “all background with no fixed points for the site.”⁵⁸ Conceptualizing what literally took place in his 1969 *Hypothetical Continent* — a configuration of stones that slowly sank into quicksand — Smithson insisted, “Background will always ultimately determine foreground — there are no fixed points only background.”⁵⁹ What remained of the physicality of collecting rocks at the site was contained by the *Non-site*, as Smithson suggested, “The existence of the non-existent site is invaded with raw material [that is, the piles of rock contained in the *Non-site*] which in a sense solidifies the hypothetical.”⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the physical and psychological experience of trekking out to the location was an included aspect of Smithson's esthetics of confinement.

In Smithson's 1968 *Six Stops on a Section Non-site*, the low-level infrasystem consisted of a set of three snapshots of six locations; a blown-up sector of a 1874 “stratigraphic subsurface map” that delineated a “line from New York City to Dingman's Ferry on the Delaware River in Pennsylvania;”⁶¹ and six rectangular aluminum bins placed on the floor containing the minerals gathered at each photographed site. The piece also included a 30-inch-by-30-inch blow-up photo titled *Dog Tracks* captioned with a description of what was depicted. Each site contained its own distinctive scattering of homogeneous mineral outcroppings (alluvial

wash deposits), and all of a commercially profitable mineral type. Reading from right to left, the first stop was a bin filled with gravel from Bergen Hill (an ancient rock edge in the New Jersey Meadows visible from the New Jersey Turnpike). The second bin, Second Mountain, contained sandstone and the third bin, the Morris Plains bin of stones and sand was followed by a bin of rocks and stones from Mount Hope. The last two bins were the Lafayette bin of gravel and a bin of slate from Dingman's Ferry. Cut out of each bin's aluminum cover are the horizon lines charted in the corresponding stratigraphic map displayed above each bin. By filling the lower half of each templated cover with the raw minerals collected in the bins, Smithson "rooted" the abstract silhouetted grids (or horizon lines) "in the material," where as the irregularity of the collected rocks simultaneously emphasized the arbitrariness of "laying a grid on a terrain."

Smithson was making a specific point with the addition of the large Dog Tracks photo and its posted description as well as another later project titled *Gravel Mirror with Cracks and Dust* (the raw material for which came from an abandoned hospital foundation at the first stop site of Bergen Hill). These pieces illustrate that one can "keep drawing perceptual information out of"⁶² each site — that is, *Six Stops* could continually be re-mined for other information. Re-mining tapped resources has had a long history in the mining industry itself, which often returns to abandoned mining sites to re-mine what was once thought to be useless spoil. Smithson made this issue an even more integral part of his *Non-site* (Ruhr-District) Germany commissioned by Konrad Fischer for his Dusseldorf Gallery.

Accepting an invitation in 1968 from Konrad Fischer, Smithson wrote to suggest that Fischer search out possible locations for the *Non-site*. When Smithson arrived in Germany, Fischer had arranged that photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher drive Smithson around the Ruhr district. The site Smithson chose was the steelworks in Sterkrade (Oberhausen), Gute Hoonung's Hutte, which Fischer's great grandfather co-founded. The "Bechers themselves were working on a project on the Oberhausen steelworks and foundries at the time."⁶³ Smithson's subsequent *Non-site* consisted of low-level snapshots, a blown-up photostat of a topographical map of the district and five white bins containing slag. Graduated in height and width, the bins decrease in height away from the wall while increasing in width, imaging a geological (sprawling) alluvial process.⁶⁴ In an additional part of the installation, Smithson placed a lump of asphalt from the site on the floor of the Fischer Gallery.

More germane to the discussion here, was the slag collected in the bins. The deposits of slag found at the mining site, although once thought

to be useless waste, had become a useful fertilizer that was revitalizing previously abandoned industrial mines throughout the Ruhr district. Whereas Smithson's *Dog Tracks* staged as an addition to his *Six Stops on a Section Non-site*, gave conceptual shape to this mining practice, the bins of slag at Dusseldorf contained the very material that was currently being re-mined in the Ruhr district of Germany.⁶⁵

Another aspect of mining, submerge-ness, was more fully played out at Smithson's 1969 *Cayuga Salt Mine Project*, the most complex of the *Non-sites*. The *Cayuga Salt Mine Project* consisted of a site-nonsite and a subsite-subnon-site. As part of the first museum exhibition of earth art held in 1969 at Cornell University's Andrew Dickson White Gallery, the Cayuga project dealt with one of the richest — in terms of minerals — areas in the Finger Lakes Region of New York. The site chosen was actually located down in the mines of the Cayuga Rock Salt Company. There, Smithson randomly placed twelve one-foot square mirrors in the mine shafts. The subsite was located above ground at the Cayuga Crushed Rock Salt Company quarry known as "fossil quarry" — located inland between Myers Point and Portland Point. In addition, eight mirror (dis)placements formed a trail between the site the subsite and the *Non-site/subnon-site* at the *Museum* (the nonsite in Room 2 on the main floor, the subnon-site in the basement of the museum). A topographical map of the overall vicinity pinpointing the mirror placements was part of the *Non-site*.

While Smithson went underground at the Cayuga mines, the scientific community was reaching for its new future in space. Planned for the middle of that year, NASA would attempt the first U.S. walk on the moon. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong successfully accomplished what Smithson would describe as "a very expensive *Non-site*."⁶⁶ Performing the future-in-reverse, Smithson planted a series of mirrors (at various location of the project) and snapshots (on a mound of rock salt), that pre-enacted, the planting of mirrors and flags that would take place on the Sea of Tranquility in a few months. As early as 1967, Smithson had argued that the drive to reach the moon, was "a preoccupation with desolate nothingness." Nonetheless, Smithson found intriguing, "The whole idea of gathering remnants ... going all that way to bring back particles from up there ... and then trying to make sense of them."⁶⁷ But he would also add, the "moon landing perhaps was one of the most demoralizing events in history, revealing the earth to be a limited closed system ... not unlike the island in the *Lord of the Flies*."⁶⁸ Smithson meant to keep our industrialized life style and its entropic inevitability confined to the planet Earth.

Using Levi Strauss's structuralist writings, Smithson discussed the mines of Cayuga in terms of our most primitive emotions. He argued the

Cayuga Salt Mines project as a very primitive, totemic situation, a “taboo territory” of awareness one that “produced all kinds of weird masks and things.” He had been told while in the mines that “women were not allowed in mines” and the reason given “was some vague notion” which Smithson took as a “very strong taboo ... a revival of very archaic sentiments,” a type of hysteric reasoning of the earth as Mother Earth and the “mine as a vagina.”⁶⁹

The seemingly haphazard arrangement of mirrors in the mining shafts also estheticized the random course of the mine shafts themselves. Similar to how mining for ore lacked an ordered or preconceived direction, Smithson’s casual placement of mirrors doubled the chaotic arrangement of the mine’s own infra-system (its mining shafts) developing out of the way the ore was found scattered at the site. But the mirrors allowed for more than that. They continued to act as a containment of low level information, as the photo had in previous Nonsites. But the mirrors also acted as a low-level form of scattering — something a snapshot could not do. By the early 1970s, water would come to replace the mirror as Smithson’s means for simultaneously containing and scattering low-level information. That is, as Smithson’s “containers” moved from photo to mirror to water, the more he was able to “consolidate the scattering while heightening the loss of focus”⁷⁰ in a single act.

The piles of ore at the *Non-site/subnon-site* also continued their role of “solidifying the hypothetical”—referencing the existence of the prospected sites — that is rooting Smithson’s forms of laying a grid on a terrain, in the material. But by playing the additional role of literally supporting or containing the five mirror configurations, the loose piles of mineral ore both filled Smithson’s infrasystems of mirrors while simultaneously recontaining the mirrors’ configurations as precarious at best.

When defining how one might want to read his *Non-sites*, Smithson psychologized how “the artist ... physically engulfed tries to give evidence of an experience through a limited revision of the original unbound state.”⁷¹ Throughout his series of *Non-sites*, Smithson developed a geocentric framework that included man (not the other way around). Equating the activities of industrialization with geological alluvial activities, Smithson argued against the “modern day ecologists — with a metaphysical turn of mind — who still insisted on seeing the operations of industry as Satan’s work.”⁷² For Smithson “the entropic devil [read, mining] was more Manichaeian in that you really couldn’t tell the good from the bad. There was no clear-cut distinction.”⁷³ Nonetheless Smithson came to see the ecological crisis as symptomatic of a modernized life style. As long as industrialized communities refused to give up a life style of ever increasing development, as long as there was profit in accumulation, entropic inevitability awaited even the most manic forms

of recontainment. Smithson's esthetics of confinement equated technological activities to those of the earth's crust, an analogy often used by those justifying the practices of the mining industry. Yet his art never hinted that an industrial surrogate could ever come to completely replace natural cycles, and thus resolve the depletion of the earth's ecosystem. Smithson felt the programs for managing the ever-consuming mining of the planet — such as the recycling of waste — conveniently misrecognized the economics of industry. Ecological programs such as recycling were, for Smithson, not a resolution but a public relations tool that would only displace the problem (in an entropic, alluvial way) onto the next generation. Confining this relationship to the geological parameters of our globe (even if that materiality was in ruin), was a necessary aspect of Smithson's earth art.

With the growing strength of the environmental movement, Smithson made a fateful decision in the early 1970s. He would take his estheticizing of waste directly into the social fabric. Smithson had been well aware that when there was “talk about preserving the environment or conserving energy or recycling, one inevitably got to the question of waste.” But he had also become more conscious of how “waste and enjoyment” were being coupled — an “equation between the enjoyment of life and waste”⁷⁴ was being used to help resolve the ecological effects of mining the globe. With the explosion of new National Parks created to preserve the depletion of so called ‘wilderness’ regions, Smithson turned to designing Industrial Parks, parks which would keep both waste and enjoyment as integral components of their designs.

Many of the previous locations chosen by Smithson for his *Non-sites* had inadvertently been enveloped by the parameters of waste and enjoyment; his *Pine Barrens Non-site*, the *Palisades*, *Edgewater Non-site*, even his *Mono Lake Non-site*. A promotional brochure, at the time, described Mono Lake — known as the dead sea of America — as “no longer a gateway to mines ... [referencing the post-1850 Gold Rush that had helped stimulate the areas growth not to mention the mining for obsidian that the Paiute Indians pursued prior to being run off their land because of the available minerals] but had become a tourist attraction of importance.”⁷⁵ Smithson was not “a formalist distanced from the world fascinated only by the look and scale of waste and pollution ... neither lamenting industrial waste nor supporting sound ecology-minded programs,”⁷⁶ but a participant circumscribed within societal habits.

Nonetheless, Smithson came to view his narratives of the 1960s as necessarily displaced from any effective engagement in the ecological course being pursued, an artistic activity that only continued the myth of artistic independence. In a 1972 interview, Smithson spoke of how artists “were not in control of their value. [How] the artists sits in his solitude

knocks out his paintings, assembles them, then waits for someone to confer the value.” He gave an image of the “artist estranged from his own production ... and with the museum as the instrument of political control.”⁷⁷ Other artists were already, by the early 1970s, targeting the ideological functions of the institutional framework of the museum space. Smithsonian, on the other hand, chose to move away from this forum and participate more directly within the societal recreational fabric. Society had for some time been turning disturbed lands into places of recreational enjoyment and Smithsonian’s subsequent land reclamation projects were also the means to that end. It was a move that would tie his estheticized s(p)oil more directly to the politics of vacationing.

In the aforementioned 1967 report *Surface Mining and Our Environment*, the issue of reusing abandoned mining sites for recreational purposes had become one of the primary means for redefining the Congressional parameters of reclamation. After discussing how our lands had been ravished, slashed, stripped and scarred, the report nonetheless asked for some “tolerance for past (and even present) mining procedures,” which necessarily “mine as cheaply as possible, [mining] the deposits that were the most accessible, and provided the greatest profit to the producer,” and all with only “short-term gains” in mind. The report then suggested that without such an approach, the United States “probably would not have reached its present economic level.”⁷⁸ Nonetheless the report stated the call was now for better management of our resources. The whole report was a pedagogical outline — called a “new conservation” — of what was needed to regulate the mining industry and the planet’s resources. And framing the initial two-page general outline, were two full-page color photographs — one of a wheat field, the other a recreational facility — both of reclaimed surface-mined areas, both photos provided by the National Coal Association.

The plan defined reclamation as a compromise between the environment and industry or, as stated in the foreword to the report: “There is a necessity not only to maintain the precarious balance between the requirements of our population and a shrinking natural resource base, but to meet those requirements and, at the same time, avoid destroying the natural environment that sustains all life on this planet.”⁷⁹ The report suggested two separate categories for how to reclaim disturbed land. The “basic reclamation” plan called for the “minimum treatment undertaken to return land to an acceptable condition. A more recreation-based plan stated that “mines near or within relatively easy driving distance of heavily populated areas would lend themselves to more sophisticated treatment for the development of recreational areas.”⁸⁰ This more specialized “rehabilitation” category — ideal for “parks or recreational sites — would require more extensive treatment, and would require some re-

shaping of the land.”⁸¹ The report ended its “Impact on the Environment” chapter arguing that “surface mining has created many opportunities to develop [picturesque] recreational areas where none existed before,” suggesting “small ponds, or lakes and the spoil piles themselves frequently provide a pleasant topographic change in areas of virtually flat land” — mentioning Illinois and Ohio as two examples. By the early 1970s, Smithson began to pursue this category and the above locations.

Participating in the social climate of the early 1970s, when many still saw radical participation as a means to shift power relations; Smithson claimed, “There is no point in trying to transcend ... industry, commercialism, and the bourgeoisie. This whole notion of trying to form a cult that transcends all this strikes me as a kind of religion in drag.”⁸² Smithson refused to buy into the concept of autonomy as a path to freedom. He did not subscribe to a *deus ex machina* in the form of eros (*jouissance*) free in the garden of social constraint. By the early 1970s, Smithson’s esthetics meant participating within the bureaucratic parameters that dealt with the issues of industrial pollution and waste. Turning his esthetics of confinement away from the somewhat displaced museum space, he began designing prototypes for industrial parks. Smithson’s subsequent land reclamation projects were only and always a tentative esthetics that incorporated both the economic desires of the mining industry and the changing ecological demands of those who — the very same who indirectly benefited from industrial profits — were finding it harder and harder to avoid the adverse affects of that activity. The course of Smithson’s involvement within that political reality depended upon how he saw the environmental issue unraveling before him.

Prior to this shift, Smithson’s art had been intentionally manic in its ambivalent forms of containment. His esthetics simultaneously oscillated between an image of entropic breakdown and forms of disciplinary containments. But his position was (and I’m taking Smithson at his word here) “one of sinking into an awareness of global squalor and futility.” By the early 1970s, Smithson would complain “the rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art.” But perhaps hinting at the euphoria of the early 1970s, he added, “The trap is set.”⁸³ Smithson would subsequently develop a portfolio for the the mining industry, that attempted to use the swelling environmental movement to leverage his eco-esthetics as good for public relations. Today, a quarter century later, mainstream environmental agencies continue to assume likewise, that when dealing with the mining industry, using the more radical tactics of the eco-warriors of today to leverage their ecological demands as a voice of reason is an effective policy for change. But what happened in the early 1970s when Smithson used this tactic and made his esthetics of confinement a more integral part of the sociality of mining the earth is a

telling lesson for the current situation.⁸⁴

The hearings considered creating federal standards for all federally owned lands as well as for all federally owned mineral rights on private lands. Additionally, the hearings considered creating requirements for state enforcement on non-federal lands. Suggested standards included measures to control the impact of surface mining on water pollution, soil erosion, health hazards and preservation and restoration of natural beauty. To help implement these standards, Congress suggested the issuance of a mining permit to be contingent upon the petitioning company's submission of a reclamation proposal of the desired site.

With *Non-site (Uncertain)* the external site evades one in a different way. This *Non-site* consists of seven progressively smaller L-shaped bins sequentially arranged into a near square, lacking only a culminating square bin to complete the configuration. No map is used to help contain the low-level information of the site, which was located somewhere in Southern Ohio, the only place Smithson claimed cannel coal could be found. He defined the site as "belonging to the Carboniferous Period, no longer existing, the site being completely buried. [As such] there is no topographical reference, only a submerged reference."⁸⁵

Notes

- 1 Robert Smithson, "An Esthetics of Disappointment," (unpublished 1966), in ed. Nancy Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 212. This source will be quoted hereafter as *The Writings*.
- 2 Eugenie Tsai, "Four Conversations," in *Robert Smithson Unearthed* (New York: Columbia Press, 1991), 121.
- 3 Robert Smithson, "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," *Artforum* 10, (September 1970): 39.
- 4 This view of Smithson is the one Robert Hobbs staged in his introduction to the 1982 Smithson Retrospective. Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 19.
- 5 Although started by the Octoberists' in the late 1970s, this position has become a "New Art History" version of Smithson's art. *Blasted Allegories*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), xiv.
- 6 Ron Graziani, "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry*, (Spring 1994). Prior to turning to abandoned sites in his home state of New Jersey, Smithson had constructed a series of "chemical" paintings/sculptures, which targeted the pharmaceutical industry based in New Jersey.
- 7 Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, "sustainable development" has become the official economic and social blueprint for the industrial communities of the Northern Hemisphere.
- 8 Archives in American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3834, frame 240.
- 9 Peter Hutchinson, "Earth in Upheaval," *Arts Magazine*, 54 (November 1968): 19.

- 10 Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind" in *The Writings*, 87.
- 11 L. C. Dunlap, "An Analysis of the Legislative History of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1975," *Rocky Mountain Mineral Law Institute Annual*. (1976)
- 12 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 13 This is not to say that others, like the Students for a Democratic Society, did not boycott the numerous Earth Day teach-ins as calculated distractions from the more pressing anti-war movement.
- 14 Philip Leider, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation," *Artforum*, 10 (September 1970): 41.
- 15 Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible," in *The Writings*, 194-195.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 190
- 17 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 123. The picturesque subject par-excellence in North American art is the shed.
- 20 Due to the frozen winter weather at Kent State, Smithson couldn't do his intended *Pour*; *Partially Buried Woodshed* was the result. While at Kent State in January 1970, an article appeared in the *Daily Kent State* newspaper (a copy of which Smithson kept in his collection) which discussed the topic for the upcoming April "This Week at Kent State University" event. Anticipating the first Earth Day celebrations that year, the theme was to be "environmental conservation," and its issue was to revolve around how "our environment was being degraded" and possible solutions "to eliminate this problem." (*Daily Kent State*, 20 January 1970.) The *Partially Buried Woodshed* has subsequently been attached to the brutal incident that occurred at Kent State four months later in 1970, when police shot and killed several students protesting the Vietnam War. Although pre-dating the politics of that shooting, the *Partially Buried Woodshed* in its rendition of the picturesque, carried with it some of the very same politics that surfaced on May 4, 1970, at Kent State. For more on the esthetic parameters of the *Partially Buried Woodshed* see my essay "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situations: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s."
- 21 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 110.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 23 This reference comes from Leo Marx's 1964 book *The Machine in the Garden*, a book with which Smithson was acquainted. Considering Smithson's preoccupation with the submerged quality in much of his art it also seems of interest that Paterson, New Jersey was also a manufacturing center for Holland Submarines.
- 24 Robert Smithson, "Toward the Development of an Air Terminal," *Artforum*, (June 1967) in *The Writings*, 46.
- 25 John McPhee, "The Pine Barrens, I and II," *The New Yorker* (December 1967): 66-74. Smithson retained a copy of this article in his private collection.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 27 Smithson, "Toward the Development," in *The Writings*, 46.
- 28 That year, the *Louisville Courier Journal* received the Pulitzer Prize for "meritorious public service in its battle to bring a measure of legislative control to the strip-mining

- industry." E.W. Clyde, "Legal Problems Imposed by Requirement of Restoration and Beautification of Mining Properties," *Rocky Mountain Mineral Law Institute Annual* (1967).
- 29 U.S. Department of the Interior, *Surface Mining and our Environment* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 105-6.
- 30 John Simpson, "The Emotional Landscape and Public Law 95-87," *Landscape Architecture* (May/June 1985): 62.
- 31 There were other supporters of earth art: Robert Scull, the taxi baron, was one of Heizer's patrons; The Dia Foundation, a non-profit branch of the oil drilling fortunes of de Menil Family, supported de Maria's early earthworks; and Stanley Marsh, a Texas oilman on whose property is located Smithson's Amarillo Ramp.
- 32 Virginia Dwan, "Reflections on Smithson," in *Art Journal* (Fall, 1982): 232.
- 33 Florence Rubinfield, "Robert Smithson" unpublished master's thesis, Goddard College (1975), 25.
- 34 Smithson also used the photograph (another way of laying a grid on the physical terrain). This aspect is pursued in my essay "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situations: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s."
- 35 Smithson gives credit to George Kubler's book *The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things* for "suggesting that metaphors drawn from physical science rather than biological science would be more suitable for discussing the condition of art." In "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space" in *The Writings*, 33. For a group show in 1969, Smithson also produced a *Urination Piece* which consisted of orchestrating various miniature puddles of his own urine—along a stretch of New Jersey terrain—into the configuration of the *Hydra* constellation, and mapping the results. The anthropocentric emphasis on human waste is as obvious as it is unusual for Smithson. Nonetheless, the use of a fictional constellational configuration and its reference to Jorge Luis Borges's notion of the "numerous headed Hydra — the swamp monster ... or emblem of geometric procession ... the terror of infinity taking over modernism" (Smithson, "Letter to the editor," in *The Writings*, 13) makes the work consistent with the rest of Smithson's art.
- 36 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 107.
- 37 Robert Smithson, "A Provisional: The Theory of Non-sites," unpublished essay, Archives in American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3835, frame 240-249.
- 38 Unpublished interview with Dennis Wheeler, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3833, frame 131.
- 39 Smithson, "Sedimentation of the Mind," in *The Writings*, 90.
- 40 Robert Smithson, unpublished section of "The X Factor in Art," *Harper's Bazaar* (July 1966), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3834, frames 939-941.
- 41 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 107.
- 42 Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Artforum* (June 1966), in *The Writings*, 11.

- 43 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 114-115.
- 44 Considering the close relationship Smithson had with Joseph Kosuth for a short time in the mid 1960s, and how Smithson felt Kosuth's conceptual art was too one-dimensional, and also keeping in mind the controversy over when Kosuth actually did his *1 & 3 Propositions* (for example his *1 & 3 Chair*), whether it was 1965 (which Kosuth claims as the date) or the early 1970s (the only record of their public showing), it is worth noting the similarities between Smithson's *Non-sites* and Kosuth's *1 & 3 Propositions*. Whereas Smithson set up a dialogue between photo, map and raw rocks, Kosuth's Propositions relied on—for example in *1 & 3 Chair*—a photo of a chair, a dictionary definition of a chair and a real chair. Smithson acquired one of Kosuth's art-as-idea-as-idea photostatic negatives of dictionary definitions — it was a large blow-up photostat of the definition for entropy.
- 45 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 115. In 1970, Smithson retranslated this image of urban sprawl (set up in his Line of Wreckage) as a natural phenomenon in his *Texas Overflow* project. The work was to consist of hot asphalt piped into a limestone crater built in the Northwood Quarry in Houston, Texas. This project for a man-made image of a natural alluvial sprawl was never completed.
- 46 Part of the posted description for the *Franklin Non-site*.
- 47 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 122.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 49 In an unpublished short essay of around 1970, titled "Patholopolis," Smithson turned to Michael Foucault's book *Madness and Civilization* and its archeology of the birth of modern disciplinary institutions. Smithson relocated Foucault's image of the "18th century ... laden with maleficent vapors, where entire cities were threatened," within the ecological concerns of the 1960s. The subtitle of the essay was "The Pollution Hysteria." Smithson equated the "great fear that spread through the 18th century" — whose forms were hospitals and prisons and whose terms were medical — with the 1960s "ecology hysteria." As Smithson argued it, the new hysteria was "animated by a similar confusion." Robert Smithson, "Patholopolis: The Pollution Hysteria," unpublished essay, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3834, frames 350-355.
- 50 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 107. Subsequent responses to his art would argue different halves of that equation, either emphasizing the displacing quality of his postmodernism or, as Dwan saw fit, the containing or reclaiming substance of his art.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 115-116.
- 54 It is interesting to note that later that year, Michael Heizer began working on his own *Double Negative* in Nevada also with the financial backing of Dwan Gallery. And while on an excursion with Tompkins in 1971 to revisit various earth work sites, Virginia Dwan refers the title of *Double Negative* to the green double zeros on Nevada roulette tables.
- 55 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 112.

- 56 Graziani, "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situations; Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s."
- 57 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 113.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Unpublished portion of an interview with Dennis Wheeler, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3833, frame 1145.
- 60 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 114.
- 61 Part of the description posted with the *Non-site*.
- 62 Ibid., 116.
- 63 Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature," 118. Reynolds's article draws a useful analogy between Smithson's *Non-sites* and the A.M.N.H.'s habitats.
- 64 Ibid., 114. Reynolds gives the inverse of this graduated configuration which is told to image the industrial refining process. She also gives a description of another *Non-site* Smithson did for *Prospect 69*, titled *Non-site Essen Soil and Mirrors*.
- 65 Interestingly, in the 1970s, when Smithson began to propose land reclamation projects to our mining industry, the only proposal that reached tentative approval (before his death put a halt to these proposals) dealt with how to contain left-over mineral deposits during a mining operation for possible future use.
- 66 Kurtz, "Conversation," in *The Writings*, 203.
- 67 Calvin Tompkins, "Onward and Upward with the Arts," *The New Yorker* (5 February 1972): 53-57.
- 68 Robert Smithson, "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," *Artforum* (September 1970): 39.
- 69 Tsai, "Four Conversations," 102.
- 70 Robert Smithson, "Primary Envelopment," Archives in American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3834, frame 1189.
- 71 Robert Smithson, "Primary Envelopment," Archives in American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3834, frame 1189.
- 72 Smithson, "Olmstead," in *The Writings*, 120.
- 73 Sky, "Entropy Made Visible," in *The Writings*, 190.
- 74 Ibid., 190.
- 75 From a brochure in Smithson's collection, Archives in American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3835. It is not by chance that the connection between waste and amusement shows up in many of Smithson's projects. For example, Smithson's 1968 corner piece used sandstone from the Sandy Hook Quarry, New Jersey, which today is The Sandy Hook National Seashore Recreational Area.
- 76 See footnote number 4 in this essay.
- 77 "Conversation with Robert Smithson on April 22nd 1972," ed. Bruce Kurtz, in *The Writings*, 200-202.
- 78 U. S. Department of the Interior, *Surface Mining*, 5.
- 79 Ibid., 3. The report ends with a large (one-and-one-half page spread) photograph (tinted blue) of the huge one-mile deep and three-mile wide Bingham open-pit copper mine in Utah—the same image Smithson ultimately used for one of his reclamation proposals.

- 80 Ibid., 12. The minerals studied were coal, sand, gravel, clay, copper, rock, and iron-ore—the minerals Smithson collected in many of his Non-sites or used for his hypothetical Islands. The sites inspected were mainly open-pit mining and strip mining from Utah, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio and Florida, again the states in which Smithson pursued his land reclamation projects of the early 1970s.
- 81 Ibid., 81.
- 82 Moira Roth, “Robert Smithson on Duchamp” in *The Writings*, 198.
- 83 Smithson, “The Artist and Politics,” 39.
- 84 This will be the topic of Part 2 of this essay, “Robert Smithson: An Esthetic Foreman in the Mining Industry: Reclaiming the Picturesque-Sublime”.
- 85 Paul Cummings, “Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution,” in *The Writings*, 155.

Two Views of de Kooning

Dan Seidell

Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.

Martin Heidegger, "Poetically Man Dwells"

More difficult to do a thing than to talk about it? Not at all. That is a gross popular error. It is very much more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it.

Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist"

The art criticism of Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess has for too long been regarded as either "rhetoric that does the work of analysis"¹ or "poeticized gossip."² It is commonly thought that their critical writing is too personal to make a truly lasting contribution to modern art criticism. (In other words, they cannot be imitated because their methods cannot be codified into law.) Their position is tenuous because art critics and historians have followed the positivistic model of criticism spawned by Clement Greenberg, for all their railing against it. The following essays intend to show that Rosenberg and Hess offer a viable alternative to the obsessions with the "formal facts" of art and language, which blinded Greenberg to their larger significance. Because of this lack of interest in Rosenberg's and Hess's writing, the critical reception of Willem de Kooning's work has suffered as well. Both critics supposedly bestow "centrality" on de Kooning by mystifying his creative process.³ Consequently, the same unreflective epithets that are used to sum up their critical methods in one broad stroke are used to categorize de Kooning's work. (Many art critics and historians in effect regard de Kooning as a Frankenstein created by Rosenberg and Hess in their effort to give "life" to their romantic fantasies about art.)

Above all, I want to suggest that, in contrast to Greenberg's writing, theirs shows a sensitivity to the limitations of language in the critical experience of the visual arts that leads them to a "poetic" approach which at once underscores and transcends the problem. To experience the depth of de Kooning's art, Hess and Rosenberg seem to suggest that one must run the risk of falling into the abyss of meaning created by language. Only by verging on the complete dissolution of language — the poetic — can de Kooning's own dissolution of the language of visual art—the idea

that it is at bottom language — be understood. The poignancy of his art follows from its attempt to navigate the abyss of formlessness while still remaining art. This is what Hess's and Rosenberg's "poetic" criticism points to and correlates with. And I hope to show that a "poetic" art criticism ultimately discloses more about an art than a positivist approach, which denies the problematic nature of language — whether it be verbal or visual — in its quest for the clarity of aesthetic experience.

Harold Rosenberg

It is Harold Rosenberg's unfortunate fate to be remembered primarily for his invention of the term "action painting" to describe the new art in New York during the forties and fifties.⁴ There is, however, much more to Rosenberg's critical method than merely his vision of "the artist taking to the canvas like Ishmael took to the sea." Detached from his more broadly-based theoretical essays out of which it flows and from which it is supported, Rosenberg's concept of action painting is easily reduced to the shallow buzzword of "cultureburg" that Tom Wolfe poked fun at in *The Painted Word* (1975). Even in the hands of a seasoned critic like Lawrence Alloway, Rosenberg's concept of action is seen only as an attempt to bestow "centrality" upon de Kooning.⁵

All of Rosenberg's art writing must be read in relation to his cultural essays because for him art is always a product of the artist's transaction with culture. In contrast to Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, Rosenberg does not suffer from these critic's insecurities concerning the social relevance of making art. For him the modern artist, in his act of creation, actually clarifies his relationship to society.

Rosenberg's most insightful cultural essays were published in *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics* (1973). Although they post-date his essay on action painting, these essays must be the starting point for a reevaluation of his method in relation to his critical encounter with de Kooning. For Rosenberg, the artist's social identity is not established simply by the expressive act of creation *ex nihilo*. The artistic process, according to Rosenberg, preserves the integrity of the individual self in modern society. In "Art and Work" (1965), Rosenberg argues that

To many of the critics of contemporary civilization the practice of the crafts is the activity by which the human creature is defined. Man is a maker, *homo faber*, an artist. Put this proposition in reverse — when man ceases to be a maker he is no longer man — and our present crisis is explained. The fall began not in Eden, when man was condemned to labor, but in the nineteenth century, when the machine first threatened him

with leisure ... man the maker commenced to lose his skills, through which he also gave shape to himself, and with them his dignity and independence.⁶

For Rosenberg, the arts and crafts are indistinguishable from one another in their reaction “against machine-produced copies of things” that function “as a workshop for fashioning handmade ornaments and pushing forward possibilities of design.”⁷ Elsewhere, in “Hypothesis for Criticism” (1969), Rosenberg states that “creation needs to limit the role of the head, and in painting and sculpture the hand would seem to be best fitted to provide this limit.”⁸ The essential handiwork of art, the necessity for the artist and craftsman to use their own hands to fashion individual and unique objects, is a way for him to resist the impersonal mechanization of society in the twentieth century by personalizing his environment by “using” it as much as it “uses” him.

There is, however, another element of artistic work that resists the authoritarian demands on individuality: “free work.” He argues that

whether in the studio, the workshop, the laboratory or the industrial plant, [free work] is done because the worker wants to do it, when he wants to do it, how he wants to do it. It is done not in obedience to external need but as a necessity of the worker’s personality. It is work for the sake of the worker, his means of appropriating nature and the heritage of other men’s ideas and skill—thus his means of developing himself.⁹

According to Rosenberg, “work” defines the artist as a human being, not an artistic genius. It is a way of preserving his individuality — his ability to develop consciousness of his own condition. For Rosenberg, “free work” leaves the question of aesthetics behind by restoring unity to the estranged relationship — a “dissociation of sensibility” — between labor and the individual.

The importance, or even the necessity, of “free work” for the arts is not, according to Rosenberg, a universal constant.

Art as craft and, to a lesser degree, art as experiment, can function under any social system. Art as action, [free work] however, is the offspring of this revolutionary epoch and can flourish only so long as individuals are determined to be responsible for their own development and to interpret the past in relation to this aim.¹⁰

What is implied is that art’s reliance on “action,” or free work, is a necessity of specific historical circumstances and not a discovery of a universal constant in the making of art. For Rosenberg, the shifting emphases in art are not due to any quality inherent in the medium, as

Greenberg posited, but were embedded within the changing relationship between the individual and society.

In "Tenth Street: A Geography of Modern Art" (1964), Rosenberg compares the communities of Greenwich Village and Tenth Street and ascribes to its inhabitants fundamental ontological differences. The Greenwich Village artists, Rosenberg maintains, with its gangsters and artists operating as gangsters (Edward Hopper's and Reginald Marsh's social commentaries are seen by Rosenberg as a kind of mafioso art) had only "the law" against them. Their deviancy was socially and culturally administered and accepted. In other words, their activities were legitimized within an institutional context. In contrast, at Tenth Street the artists are compared to bums:

The criminal has only the law against him; the bum struggles with space. The instant he stops moving, his very right to be on the earth becomes problematical. One might say the criminal is a mere social outlaw, the bum a metaphysical one.¹¹

Rosenberg's concept of action must be seen in relation to this comparison. For just as the bum has no institutional context out of which his existence or activity can be given meaning, the Tenth Street artist must function outside the institutional context of "Art." The Tenth Street artist, like the bum, must achieve his context. For Rosenberg, all authentic art of this period is related to action, activity, and motion. In other words, the need to keep moving. In this unique situation, even "nothingness" can be an active process. In "On Space" (1949), Rosenberg declares that the artist begins with nothingness. "That is the only thing he copies. The rest he invents." Thus part of what is invented is the context that gives the work its meaning. Rosenberg goes on to claim that "the nothing the painter begins with is known as Space. Space is simple: it is merely the canvas before it has been painted. Space is very complex: it is nothing wrapped around every object in the world, soothing and strangling it."¹² Unlike Greenberg and Fried, for whom a "tacked up canvas" could conceivably be read as a painting, Rosenberg's blank canvas shutters with possibility — not as an example of an object that could be aesthetically reified and regarded as art, but a surface in a state of becoming — a world waiting to be released by the first attack of the artist's brush. It functions in effect as the "potential space," as D.W. Winnicott calls it, which serves as "the place where cultural experience is located."¹³ The canvas then becomes the "arena" in which the artist transacts his environment. In "Critic Within the Act" (1960), Rosenberg argues that

Perhaps you cannot hang an event on the wall, only a picture.
But this is a problem for the picture more than it is for the

events. For a wall implies a space in which to stand next to it. This space is now lacking. The Bolshevik Revolution may have turned into a picture on the wall, but it was a picture that pulled the entire globe into it, and even outer space. No room was left for the spectator who merely looks, as there was in the days when the earth had empty spots and the heavens were full.¹⁴

For Rosenberg, space is not a perspective — a means to observe something from a safe distance in order to control it. Space is dynamic; it is in a constant state of flux. Like the artist and the bum, the relevance of space is called into question when it ceases to be active. An objective (i.e. safe) point of view is thus denied them. Art thus becomes the artifact of the life situation that brought it into being, rather than the object expressly made for aesthetic contemplation.

According to Rosenberg, the work of art is not only a means for the artist to find a unified sense of self in society, it is a vehicle for communication. It does this, however, not through the expression of common experience but common situations. In “The Herd of Independent Minds” (1948), Rosenberg argues that “to penetrate through common experience to the actual situation from which all suffer requires a creative act — that is to say, an act that directly grasps the life of people during, say, a war, that grasps the war from the inside, so to speak, as a situation with a human being in it.”¹⁵

What the authentic work of art does, therefore, is to suggest the difficulty of generalizing experience. In encountering authentic art, Rosenberg states that “along this rocky road to the actual it is only possible to go Indian file, one at a time, so that ‘art’ means ‘breaking up the crowd’ — not ‘reflecting’ its experience.”¹⁶ The result of forcing the individual to go “Indian file” reveals that

art communicate[s] itself as an experience to others, not because one man’s experience is the same as other men’s, but because each of those others, like the author, is unique to himself and can therefore recognize in his own experience the matchless experience of another human being and even perhaps the presence of some common situation and the operation of some hidden human principle.¹⁷

It is the individuality of the artist, who, in expressing himself, communicates to others by allowing the viewer to experience his own personal transaction of the life world. Like Oscar Wilde, who claimed that “to understand others you must intensify your own individualism,”¹⁸ Rosenberg states that “by way of his [the artist’s] own humanity he moves spontaneously toward the humanity of others.”¹⁹

Seen within this broad framework of art and social criticism, Rosenberg regards action painting to be the only way the modern artist can “break up the crowd” and see experience “from the inside.”

For Rosenberg, the concept of action

is also a means of probing, or going from stage to stage of discovery. If someone asks me a question, my answer will come from the surface of my mind. But if I start to write the answer, or to paint it, or to act it out, the answer changes ... The materials I use — words, paint, gesture — become the means for reaching new depths, for unveiling the unexpected.²⁰

Action, in Rosenberg’s articulation of it, is not simply a means for self-expression, but a tool to critically plumb the depths of experience. It is a way for the artist to retain his individuality — his critical consciousness — in the face of societal forces that continually exert pressure upon the self and attempt to hide raw experience under the veneer of a collective one. Action painting is Rosenberg’s way of showing that art goes beyond the aesthetic — leaves it behind in its wake, as it were. Attention to art is not a parlor game for him, but an activity that forces an encounter with experiential chaos. He seems to suggest this entanglement when he states that “one might say that an action painting begins by being complete and develops toward being a fragment.”²¹ By taking a seemingly unified, unquestioned view of the world, the action painter, through his probing, arrives at a deconstructive point where, in Wilde’s words, “no position is final.” And it is the purpose of action painting’s “critical spirit” to see things from the myriad of angles and perspectives that comprise the world of raw experience. When he claims that “art is an act of the mind in which the body has its part,” Rosenberg is regarding the act of painting as a critical act, not merely of mind but of body as well.²² Not a critical activity in the same sense as Fried, in which artists are seen as being critical with other art objects in the hermetic confines of modernist poetics, but as an activity that functions in the life-world. For Rosenberg, the action painter’s power to criticize is not relegated to the realm of the aesthetic, but is entangled with the totality of his being-in-the-world. Moreover, his whole existence as a human being — not just his “career” as an artist — is predicated on his ability to act freely and critically in order to uncover the ramifications of his own existence. For Rosenberg, it is all about space — psychic as well as physical. This is underscored in “Tenth Street: A Geography of Modern Art,” when he writes “the topic of largest interest is real-estate ... This concern with self location often dismays visiting friends of art who expect discourses on the ‘philosophy behind the new art’.”²³ Physical property — space — thus becomes the new art’s philosophy. It concerns itself with being-in-the-world rather than

aesthetics. And it is precisely the self's physical space that is threatened in the twentieth century. The artist can, by being critical through "action," restore his individuality — his authenticity and autonomy — in the face of an oppressively impersonal society.

From the perspective of Rosenberg's more general essays on culture and society, his critical reception of de Kooning takes on a complexity and depth that has been, for the most part, ignored. Rosenberg's theoretical notions of art as work; the artist and the bum as the ontological outsiders of post-World War II America; his notion of the dynamism of space; and his perception of action painting as an act of social criticism, are crystallized in his encounter with de Kooning's art.

The comparison of art to work as a process that identifies the human being as an individual is underscored in de Kooning's work by Rosenberg in "Art of Bad Conscience" (1969), which argues that "in his paintings and drawings of the 1960s, he has continued his experiments, begun in the thirties, in expanding spontaneity in the act of creation."²⁴ For Rosenberg, spontaneity is more than self-expression, it is a gesture of intentionality on the part of the artist in order to preserve his freedom, his individuality — in short, his capacity to make choices independent of a society that is becoming more and more resistant to the autonomy of the self. De Kooning's desire to spend his entire life on one picture underscores this notion of art as a liberating activity, not as a process geared towards the creation of a reified object.²⁵ For de Kooning, the work of art consists of a multitude of critical decisions only he could be in the position to make. Thus the picture becomes the field upon which de Kooning's being is emphasized and affirmed through the exertion of his free will in the process of pictorial decision-making. De Kooning thus creates everything — the context as well as the picture. Rosenberg's notion of art being without a beginning or an end reiterates the necessity of decision-making in art.²⁶ Rosenberg writes that de Kooning's *Woman* series seem to be "broken off at an unpredictable point."²⁷ Again, the "unpredictable point" emphasizes the existential freedom expressed in de Kooning's aesthetic choices. In other words, de Kooning's resistance to the institutional artistic values of "Art."

Rosenberg's comparison of the Tenth Street artist to the bum centers on the necessity of both to keep moving or risk problematizing their existence. De Kooning himself expresses as much:

Some painters, including myself, do not care what chair they are sitting on. It does not even have to be a comfortable one. They are too nervous to find out where they ought to sit. They do not want to 'sit in style.' Rather, they have found that painting — any kind of painting, any style of painting — to be painting at all, in fact — is a way of living today, a style of

living so to speak. That is where the form of it lies. It is exactly in its uselessness that it is free. Those artists do not want to conform. They only want to be inspired.²⁸

Thus for de Kooning as well as for Rosenberg, painting is a way to keep moving — to stay in the game of life. The composer Morton Feldman, in “The Anxiety of Art” (1965), echoes this same feeling, claiming that “for years I said if I could only find a comfortable chair I would rival Mozart.”²⁹ Feldman, as well as de Kooning and Rosenberg, signal art’s changing nature through the ages, from work unhinged from the problem of existence — e.g., Mozart’s classical court pieces — to work that actually uncovers existence. Or, more consequential for art, from a work which is created within and for a context (Mozart) to works that must achieve their own context in the process of creation (Tenth Street artists).

For Rosenberg, the energy and tension that define the artist’s creative activity make themselves strongly felt in the art. His notion of the dynamic quality of space is echoed time and time again in his interpretation of de Kooning’s pictures. Responding to similarities between de Kooning’s art and those of so-called classical pictures, Rosenberg explains that “without abolishing its elements of disorder, each of de Kooning’s paintings achieves unity anew as an organization of energies. It is this that lends to them the effect of Classical composition.”³⁰ For Rosenberg, classicism is not defined by its “noble simplicity” or “quiet grandeur” à la Winckleman, but by the way it harnesses energy. No art for Rosenberg is fixed or static and it is one of his primary projects to suggest this through the timbre of his critical voice. In one of de Kooning’s most well-known works, Rosenberg argues that “for all the protracted agitation that produced it, *Excavation* (1952) was a classical painting — majestic and distant, like a formula wrung out of testing explosives.”³¹ Here, the classical attributes of “distance” and “majesty” are juxtaposed with the notion of explosive power in order to focus attention on de Kooning’s dynamic — even violent — way of ordering experience.

The most important element of Rosenberg’s method, his concept of action painting, is articulated most poignantly in the art of de Kooning. De Kooning’s art reveals that action painting is not a romantic flight from society (which only codifies the false dichotomy between the individual and society), but a deeper engagement with it. For Rosenberg, de Kooning’s entire oeuvre is a critical undertaking, for it attempts to cut through the sludge of common experience in order to confront the maw of undigested experience. In summing up his art, Rosenberg states that it “is a refusal to be either recruited or pushed aside.”³² Rosenberg sees his art, in this manner, as being critical because of its refusal to be loyal to anything but the self-conscious process of decision-making and what that reveals to him on the canvas. De Kooning’s ambiguity — often regarded

as merely a stylistic mannerism, returns with a vengeance to its original context as the aesthetic residue of a deeper engagement with raw experience. Rosenberg argues that “testing whether it will satisfy his needs, he converts each existing solution into a hive of problems.”³³ De Kooning’s “hive of problems” are, for Rosenberg, the products of his ability to see things “from the inside.” In other words, Rosenberg sees meaning as disseminative — it flows unceasingly and cannot be grasped in its totality, for however much society seems to think it has a handle on it. De Kooning’s art, by exposing a myriad of viewpoints and perspectives, emphasizes the complex — even fragmented and inconsistent — nature of experience as well as the need to penetrate existence on an individual basis through an independent act of transaction. His art thus reveals the relevance of all possibilities but bestows centrality upon none, which, in the last analysis, is to be both poetic and critical.

Thomas B. Hess

In his essay “The *Critique-Poésie* of Thomas Hess” (1979), David Craven asserts that Hess’s critical writings suggest a close affinity with modernist poetry and prose.³⁴ Craven argues that Hess creatively constructed an “objective correlative” — much the same way that Eliot, Pound, and Joyce did — that could concretely express his encounter with the work of art. Craven goes on to say that “Hess’s poetic criticism is modernist because its poetry is a substance rather than an attribute, a *sui generis* component that carries its own nature within itself.”³⁵ Craven’s argument, however, neglects several points that are tantamount to fully understanding Hess’s critical task. And it is in his encounter with de Kooning, that these points are made most explicit.

The first point to be questioned is Hess’s supposed modernism. Craven sees Hess as a modernist because

his word usage ... was inextricably part of his cognitive process for approaching the art. These words concretely disclose Hess’s view of the art; they are not, as in classical writing, the decorative transcription of a possible prose.³⁶

Modernism has been explained by Donald Kuspit as “the point of view which sees art as the mastery of purity.”³⁷ The result, Kuspit argues, is presentness, which is “self-defeating” and “consumes all openness,” allowing it to exist “only as a Utopian aura to material presence.”³⁸ The notion that form contains, in its entirety, the full expression of feeling — that somehow the words actually are the feeling — results not in the open, complex free-play of ideas Craven sees happening in Hess’s criticism, but rather, the intensification of purity, as Kuspit hints, that

ultimately robs expression through the exclusive focus upon form. Craven's approach to modernism is not only highly problematical but even contradictory to what Hess suggests. To buttress his argument, Craven quotes Roland Barthes's comparison of modernist and classical poetry. In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Barthes states that

henceforth, poets give to their speech the status of a closed Nature, which covers both the function and the structure of language. Poetry is then no longer a Prose either ornamental or shorn of liberties. It is a quality *sui generis* and without antecedents. It is no longer an attribute but a substance, and therefore it can very well renounce signs, since it carries its own nature within itself, and does not need to signal its identity outwardly.³⁹

This "closed Nature," implying the hermetically sealed-off character of language for the poet, gives birth to "thought"

installed little by little by the contingency of words. This verbal luck, which will bring down the ripe fruit of meaning, presupposes therefore a poetic time which is no longer that of a 'fabrication,' but that of a possible adventure, the meeting-point of a sign and an intention.⁴⁰

Barthes underscores the modernist belief that in poetry there is no thought or feeling without language to express it. For Barthes, and evidently for Craven, classical poetry "described" or "translated" pre-existing thought or feeling while modernist poetry creates it with language — hence its "closed Nature" and its ultimate "renunciation of signs." Ultimately, Barthes truncates language from experience by suggesting that language doesn't signify or refer to anything outside of itself.

Applied to Hess's critical method, especially in his writing on de Kooning, Craven's Barthesian thesis strips Hess of his most provocative critical insights. His characterization of Hess as a modernist poet/critic, who creates concrete experience through words, blurs Hess's distinction between the visual and verbal in the experience of art. Rather, his criticism signals art's complexity — its open nature — as well as criticism's ultimate inability — because of its reliance on language — to fully articulate that experience. Hess's poetic language is thus wound loosely but firmly around his visual experience of art.

I therefore suggest that Hess's writing expresses a decidedly anti-modern approach to the critical experience of art. Seeing Hess's method in this way re-focuses attention on his attempt to signify — through language — the texture of his visual experience with works of art.

For Craven, Hess's modernism is demonstrated through his frequent use of oxymorons, paradoxical phrases, and other rhetorical devices. However, it would be more accurate to see these tropes not as attempts to play with style for its own sake — to create verbal music, as it were — but as ways to evoke the infinite complexity of the work of art. In other words, its refusal to be fully cornered by language. In his "On the Aesthetic Attitude of Romanesque Art" (1947), Meyer Schapiro uses the provocative prose of St. Bernard of Clairvaux to suggest the opaque — even impure — quality of aesthetic response:

The saint has perused these capitals no less attentively than have the monks whom he reproaches for meditating on the sculptures instead of the Bible or the Fathers. Only a mind deeply drawn to such things could recall them so fully; and only a mind with some affinity to their forms could apply to these carvings the paradoxical phrase: 'that marvellous deformed beauty, that beautiful deformity.'⁴¹

Schapiro's interest in Bernard's response to the works is bound by the saint's attempt to communicate his complex experience before them — one filled with both fascination and repulsion. Likewise Hess's response to art. In contrast to Craven's reading of Hess, which sees him as generating poetry from his visual experience of art, Hess's paradoxical language asserts that it is inextricably bound to experience and that its "poetic" use is due to its entropic relationship to experience. And unlike Craven, who sees poetic language as fully constituting, and even surpassing, visual experience, Hess suggests that far from being pure, it is always contaminated by experience and thus the best it can offer is a gesture toward art's mystery while trying to solve it. Far from being a modernist who searches for purity, unity, and concrete expression — the so-called "ripe-fruit of meaning," according to Barthes — Hess's writing brings to mind a major characteristic of Wilde's "highest kind" of criticism: that which acknowledges the tenuousness of every unified meaning or system, as well as the intensely personal nature of critical response. It is in his writing on de Kooning that Hess's criticality and his anti-modern bent shines most brightly.

Hess's *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (1951) provides a general introduction to the way he looks at art. Early on, Hess argues that

as soon as a painting is approached, interpretation begins — observation becomes translation ... So it is quite natural that the various problems presented by abstract painting have been discussed in an atmosphere filled with multiple-meanings, secret value judgments, and quite apparent contradictions.⁴²

It is Hess's aim to communicate his observation — his experience in front of the work rather than to articulate artistic intentions or universal meanings. For Hess, it is abstract art that makes this explicit as well as showing its implicit character in traditional painting. Instability and contradiction thus emerge from abstract painting. Writing about Chaim Soutine, Hess suggests that

like van Gogh, Soutine must produce failures, and must run the risk of boring or too quickly satiating some cultivated tastes. Being honest to his search for the sensation of the object, he must recognize that a bad picture can sometimes come off in these terms as well as a good one. But he is a persuasive reminder to artists of his generation and to the following one (he would be only in his late fifties if he were living today) that with the help of fury and dedication one can seal mysteries of nature within the mysteries of paint, and that the human subject can enter a painting through many different doors.⁴³

The creative “risks” that are communicated through Soutine's surfaces are what really interest Hess. Elsewhere, Hess praises Matisse's paintings, not for their effortless grace and, but for the tremendous emotion they harness.

The line from Impressionism is not only revitalized with new strength and justification but with a philosophy of bold and joyous action projects it into the future. The courage of Matisse is not in the heavy sweep of a brush or in ecstatically bringing of the twist of form that corresponds so perfectly with a twist of the spirit. There is a continual action of hesitancy in his painting — the final shape is left on the canvas after a settling down of approximations, after small strokes are ordered into agreement.⁴⁴

It is the “courage” of Matisse's art that appeals to Hess and spurs Matisse's creativity — the “bold and joyous action” that emerge from his “continual action of hesitancy.”

Through Hess's critical method, de Kooning's art becomes an apotheosis of the critical spirit in all its poetry — anti-systemic, fragmentary, and simultaneously constructive and destructive. Through his writing, de Kooning's creative process forms the basis for Hess's approach to art. His poetic account of de Kooning's creative process becomes in effect a metaphoric way to describe his process of critically experiencing art.

Hess underscores de Kooning's critical spirit when he states that “de Kooning's paintings are based on contradictions kept contradictory in

order to reveal the clarity of ambiguities, the concrete reality of unanswered questions, the unity of simultaneity and multiplicity.”⁴⁵ Hess thus focuses attention on de Kooning’s resistance to fixed or pre-existing systems of thought and feeling, and his desire to create and criticize as his spirit moves him. Subsequently, Hess’s “poetic” language attempts to reflect the resistance of de Kooning’s art to a univocal reading.

The fragmented nature of many images in de Kooning’s art also strikes Hess as significantly critical. His notion of “intimate proportions” that suggests a “no-environment of the body” is for Hess a critical act.⁴⁶ Unlike Greenberg’s interpretation of “homelessness” in “After Abstract Expressionism” (1962), Hess’s is a willed homelessness that allows de Kooning to perceive images that have not been filtered through generalized point of view. Hess explains “intimate proportions” to be, for example, when de Kooning “draw[s] a knee as a knee might draw itself, then as if it were seen for the first time, and then (here ambiguity re-enters) as seen by an eye sophisticated to the whole history of art.”⁴⁷ (It is not insignificant that Hess’s notion of “homelessness” is in many ways similar to Rosenberg’s comparison of the Tenth Street artists to bums. In both critics’ interpretations, there seems to be a recognition of a loss of institutional context out of which art is given meaning.)

Hess senses that this poetic criticality is emphasized through the technical means de Kooning employs. Commenting on his use of newspaper overlays, Hess suggests that “the method permits the artist to study possibilities of change before taking irrevocable steps. It also keeps a continuous if fragmentary record of where the picture has been.”⁴⁸ Hess’s writing reveals that de Kooning’s pictures are critical because the very techniques he uses retain — self-consciously — a record of his editing and interpretation. The free — anti-systemic — criticality of his art is also emphasized when he suggests that de Kooning follows a “programless program.”⁴⁹ Often, Hess intimates that de Kooning retains his process through destruction: “much of the pressure of the final image derives from this impetuous of continuity [of] destructions.”⁵⁰ Destruction in de Kooning’s hands is a way to preserve the finished work in the context of its entire creative voyage — a way of resisting the aesthetic hypostatization of the finished object by leaving evidence of his editing, deleting, and adjusting. In short, the record of his total experience of creation and the work that went into it, with all its complexity and contradiction.

This destructive process in de Kooning’s work is signaled by Hess through the comparison of his works to palimpsests. With its connotations of memory, historical process, and the erasure of meaning, the palimpsest underscores the notion of de Kooning’s surfaces as being a repository — not a purifying filter — for his creative development.

But if you paint on the same canvas over and over again, ghosts of old pictures begin to haunt it, the anguish of destruction remains evident even when the strokes are debonair enough to make a fencer tip his hat.⁵¹

Like his interpretation of Matisse's work, Hess sees de Kooning's flowing line as the result of a grueling process. Hess's use of the palimpsest metaphor stresses the creative function of de Kooning's destructive method. Like the palimpsest, de Kooning's surfaces leave only traces of once-prominent messages. Hess suggests that "de Kooning's whole enterprise aims at fusions, at stowing more and more into the unity of his art."⁵² This unity, however, is a taut one and is difficult to sustain because it is wrested from fragments. The palimpsest metaphor allows the associative and interpretative powers of the imagination to emerge.

Each invented shape changes in a new context but it never sloughs off any of its old significations. Suggestions become more and more dense, more and more textured by the variety of the concepts and contexts with them.⁵³

Hess's emphasis upon de Kooning's irony also highlights his critical approach to modernism. Hess argues that in de Kooning's *Women* series "the smile is the passport, the silly bit of paper which you must have with you at all times to continue the journey."⁵⁴ And it is the cut-out or painted smile, with its "detached semi-human way to meet the world" that possesses "a touching irony and humanity."⁵⁵ Hess implies that de Kooning, like the postmodern artist that author John Barth has in mind, "has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back."⁵⁶ Hess's critical encounter with de Kooning, therefore, articulates the fragments of the ironic, the paradoxical, and the witty in his art rather than searching for a totalizing, or so-called "logocentric" notions of modernism.

Hess's critical reception of de Kooning's art exposes two more elements that not only demonstrate a highly critical viewpoint of modernist expression, but even anticipates post-structuralist readings of art. First, Hess suggests art's ability to disseminate interpretations. Second, he suggests the work's tenuous relationship to the artist. With regard to interpretation, Hess argues that "his creative process of prolonged addition of meaning and interpretation can be compared with James Joyce's writing of *Finnegan's Wake*. At no point will the image finally come to rest."⁵⁷ The refusal of the work to rest keeps it open for interpretative discourse rather than being corralled by a single meaning. This emphasis allows Hess to perceive de Kooning's art as "cumulative," "mnemonic," and "all of a piece — a continually growing edifice of memory and invention."⁵⁸ Elsewhere he argues that

the image of the paintings themselves may not completely expose the philosophical premises, just as the writings of Kierkegaard or Coleridge never exhausted their insights. This openness attracts other artists, and, in time, may create schools and conventions.⁵⁹

Hess's perceived "openness" is similar to Umberto Eco's notion of art as "a machine for generating interpretations."⁶⁰ It is not modernism's utopian endeavors of social revolution and aesthetic purity that Hess finds in de Kooning's art. Rather, he discovers and is drawn to his ability to create problems and to ask questions — to seize upon and expose the problematic language of the visual arts. Hess's writing, therefore, is an attempt to reproduce de Kooning's goal of revealing ambiguity rather than articulating clarity.

In his Postscript to *The Name of the Rose* (1984) Eco argues that:

When a work is finished, a dialogue is established between the text and its readers (the author is excluded). While a work is in progress, the dialogue is double: there is the dialogue between that text and all other previously written texts (books are made only from other books and around other books).⁶¹

For Hess the relationship between the work and the viewer can be fully experienced only after acknowledging the creative process that produced the finished work. In his 1959 monograph (the first book published on de Kooning), Hess claims that "when the artist is finished, the picture begins its own life."⁶² Hess perceives the work of art in much the same way Eco and other semiotic critics and theoreticians do: as texts that emphasize the dialogue between the work and the reader or viewer rather than seeing the work as merely a record of the artist's monologue. Hess's most provocative statement on this relationship between the artist and his work occurs in the same 1959 monograph:

The artist feels he must keep off-balance in front of his work. The picture is a bet kept riding on rolls of the dice. It can be lost at any throw. When it can no longer be lost, the picture is finished. The artist is outside. And to keep his bet on the table, the most dangerous methods must be used.⁶³

The artist, Hess is suggesting, paints himself out of the picture. Eco, in *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), views critical interpretation as a dialectic between the work and the reader.⁶⁴ Hess's criticism of de Kooning focuses upon the same dialectical relationship between the work and the viewer. However, Hess's articulation of de Kooning's artistic "journey" suggested in the picture is not a reconstruction of artistic intention — the *intentio auctoris* — but a metaphor that articulates Hess's

own process of experiencing the art.⁶⁵ Hess's belief that the artist in effect separates himself from the finished work, underscores the point that it is the work of art's "impressionistic" power — its ability to evoke experience within the viewer — that critical interpretation is ultimately concerned with. And it also raises the important issue that the finished work may no hold meaning for the artist — that it is only in the process of creation that it achieves meaning for the artist. After it is finished, it becomes the viewer's possession.

Hess's critical encounter with de Kooning, then, focuses attention upon the works themselves rather than the personality of their creator. Hess's criticism reasserts the primacy of the viewer's experience in front of the work, and his ultimate inability "to pluck the ripe-fruit of meaning" directly through interpretation. Hess's writing on de Kooning's art signals its complexity by attempting to reproduce the texture of its visual language in onomatopoeic fashion. Thus Hess's critical reception of de Kooning's work demonstrates that his project is neither a Barthesian program of unhinging language from experience nor a "traditional" desire to reconstruct artistic intention by wrapping the artist in the flag of genius. Rather, it is embedded in his understanding that criticism, after doing battle with the work — experiencing it and being entangled by it — must lay down its arms in front of it: that ultimately aesthetic experience can never completely be consumed by language. And it is through Hess's encounter with de Kooning's art that this becomes most clear. Hess's writing acknowledges criticism's greatest problem: the relationship between word and image.

Therefore, to return to Craven's claim that Hess's criticism is poetic, it can only be regarded as such if poetry is not defined as the experience itself, but as the result of lived experience. The French literary critic Ives Bonnefoy provides a sonorous echo to this belief when he suggests that poetry "attaches itself ... to what cannot be designated by a word of language."⁶⁶ It is Hess's profound understanding of this "lack" imbedded in language that makes his criticism so compelling.

Notes

- 1 Hilton Kramer, "A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg," *Arts Magazine* 37 (October 1962): 60.
- 2 Lawrence Alloway, "De Kooning: Criticism and Art History," *Artforum* 13 (January 1975): 46.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 31.
- 5 Lawrence Alloway, "De Kooning, Criticism, and Art History," *Artforum* 13 (January 1975): 46-50.

- 6 Harold Rosenberg, "Art and Work" (1965), in *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973),62.
- 7 Ibid., 65.
- 8 Rosenberg, "Hypothesis for Criticism," *Artworks and Packages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 130.
- 9 Rosenberg, "Art and Work," 67.
- 10 Ibid., 68.
- 11 Rosenberg, "Tenth Street: A Geography of Modern Art" (1964), in *Discovering the Present*, 105.
- 12 Rosenberg, "On Space" (1949), in *Discovering the Present*,72.
- 13 D.W. Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience" (1967), *Playing and Reality* (New York, 1971), 371.
- 14 Rosenberg, "The Critic Within the Act" *Art News* 59 (October 1960): 28.
- 15 Rosenberg, "The Herd of Independent Minds" (1948), in *Discovering the Present*, 19.
- 16 Ibid., 19.
- 17 Ibid., 27.
- 18 Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Walter J. Black, 1927), 570.
- 19 Rosenberg, "The Herd of Independent Minds," 27.
- 20 Rosenberg, "The Concept of Action in Painting," *Artworks and Packages*,222.
- 21 Ibid., 217.
- 22 Ibid., 219.
- 23 Rosenberg, "Tenth Street: A Geography of Modern Art," 107.
- 24 Rosenberg, "Art of Bad Conscience," *Artworks and Packages*, 159.
- 25 Rosenberg, "Willem de Kooning — Painting is a Way," *The Anxious Object* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964),119.
- 26 Rosenberg, "De Kooning — On the Borders of Art," *The Anxious Object*,125.
- 27 Rosenberg, "Willem de Kooning — Painting is a Way,"118.
- 28 Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," reprinted in Thomas Hess, Willem de Kooning (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 145-46. (Originally printed in the Museum of Modern Art Bulletin 28.3 (Spring 1951). More recently, it is reprinted in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, eds. David and Cecile Shapiro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 29 Morton Feldman, "The Anxiety of Art," *Art in America* 61 (Sept-Oct. 1973): 91.
- 30 Rosenberg, "Willem de Kooning — Painting is a Way,"116.
- 31 Ibid., 118.
- 32 Rosenberg, "Art of Bad Conscience," 161.
- 33 Rosenberg, "Willem de Kooning — Painting is a Way," 110.
- 34 David Craven, "The *Critique-Poésie* of Thomas Hess," *Art Criticism* 1.1 (Spring 1979): 83-100.
- 35 Ibid., 84.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Donald B. Kuspit, "The Unhappy Consciousness of Modernism" (1981), *The Critic* is

- Artist: *The Intentionality of Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 227.
- 38 Ibid., 228.
- 39 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith (1953; New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 42-43.
- 40 Ibid., 43.
- 41 Meyer Schapiro, "On the Aesthetic Attitude of Romanesque Art" (1948), *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers*, vol. 1 (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 8.
- 42 Thomas Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), 10.
- 43 Ibid., 70.
- 44 Ibid., 72.
- 45 Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: George Braziller, 1959), 8.
- 46 Ibid., 21.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Hess, "De Kooning Paints a Picture," *Art News* 52 (March 1953): 32.
- 49 Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, 13.
- 50 Hess, "De Kooning's New Women," *Art News* 64 (March 1965): 64.
- 51 Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, 26.
- 52 Hess, "De Kooning's New Women," 65.
- 53 Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, 15.
- 54 Hess, "De Kooning Paints a Picture," 66.
- 55 Ibid., 67.
- 56 John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction," *The Literature of Exhaustion* (Northridge, Calif.: Lord John Press, 1982), cited in Eco, Postscript to *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1984), 71.
- 57 Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, 104.
- 58 Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, 14.
- 59 Ibid., 9.
- 60 Umberto Eco, Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, 1-2.
- 61 Ibid., 47.
- 62 Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, 24.
- 63 Ibid., 27.
- 64 Eco, "The State of the Art" (1987), in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 44-63.
- 65 Hess, in "De Kooning Paints a Picture," 65, suggests that de Kooning's voyage "was long but the tempo was hectic." Lawrence Alloway, in "De Kooning, Criticism, and Art History," *Artforum* 13 (January 1975): 46, states that Hess's "poeticized gossip" made "the image of de Kooning very near." Alloway, however, fails to see that Hess's focus is upon his experience before the work, not a recreation or glorification of de Kooning's intention.
- 66 Ives Bonnefoy, "Lifting Our Eyes from the Page," *Critical Inquiry* 16. 4 (Summer 1980): 798.

A Psychoanalytic Approach to Charles Burchfield¹

Jay Grimm

Charles Burchfield (1893-1967) has been admired since the '30s for his deep responses to nature and the expressionistic quality of his landscapes. Art historians note the correlation between Burchfield's love of nature and the artist's desire to recapture his childhood reactions to the landscape. But what does that mean? Why was childhood so important to Burchfield? And furthermore, why did the artist move away from his landscapes to paint American scenes, only to return to nature in his later life? This paper will argue that art, nature, and religion acted together as an emotional crutch for Burchfield, who suffered from neurotic anxieties throughout his life. Using object-relational psychoanalytic theories, I will make some guesses about why these emotional problems existed. Burchfield's paintings and stylistic changes also will be explained in the psychoanalytic context.

Burchfield's problems began early in his childhood. Later in his life, Burchfield always described his boyhood as "lonely."² He spent much time wandering about the woods near his small-town Ohio home accompanied only by his dog. This inability to relate to others plagued Burchfield throughout his life, and the artist never really overcame his monumental shyness. Furthermore, when he later attempted to access his earliest childhood memories (in 1917 and after 1943), they often consisted of terrifying fantasies about anthropomorphized trees and houses. These fantasies, too, remained with Burchfield until his death. Thus, it can be assumed that the hallucinations and guilt in Burchfield's life, which will be discussed below, had their roots in the artist's earliest experiences.

Yet, despite the deep-rootedness of these troubles, it seems unlikely that Burchfield's development was traumatized before the oedipal phase. Many aspects of Burchfield's behavior point to his having developed a "true self." For example, Burchfield had a love of solitude, which (as mentioned above) turned into loneliness on occasion, especially as an adolescent.³ This alternating like and dislike of solitude do not hint at a

problem with the primal scene. According to D.W. Winnicott, the ability to be alone stems from infancy, where the infant has enough ego-support from its mother to allow for a narcissistic existence, out of which the spontaneous gesture occurs. This is to say, there must be an ego (an "I") in order for a person to say "I am alone." In Winnicott's words, "An individual's capacity to be alone depends on his ability to deal with the feelings aroused by the primal scene ... there would naturally be a capacity on the part of the individual to identify with each of the parents."⁴ That Burchfield could, at times, be alone indicates a high level of maturity. Yet, because this solitude often became loneliness (in other words, object need), it can be conjectured that Burchfield had a problem which stemmed from his oedipal period.

Other aspects of Burchfield's personality indicate an oedipal, rather than pre-oedipal disturbance. For example, he was creative. This demonstrates the existence of a "true self," the ability to move between the "me" and "not me." Also, Burchfield was always experiencing guilt for his actions — he worried that he had hurt other people. Winnicott argues that "The ability to be concerned is a matter of health, a capacity which, once established, presupposes a complex ego-organization which cannot be thought of in any way but as an achievement in terms of the internal growth-processes in the baby and child."⁵ In other words, Burchfield's guilt, which caused him immense pain, demonstrates a high degree of maturation.

However, this guilt, as well as Burchfield's chronic depressions (which as a young adult bordered on a more serious disorder) point to a developmental problem with the super-ego. It seems that Burchfield never successfully passed through the oedipal phase. One strong piece of evidence supporting this hypothesis is that Burchfield's father died in 1898 when Burchfield was 5½ years old. In both a classic and an object-relational sense, this event could have adversely affected development. Burchfield, like all young boys, would have fantasized about his father's death and been aggressive towards the man while at the same time feeling guilt and fearing retribution. When his father died in reality, Burchfield might well have fantasized that he himself had caused this death. This probably explains why Burchfield repeatedly castigated himself for his failings throughout his life.⁶ The artist probably never really mourned his father's death—the event was too traumatic for him to work through.

Furthermore, in a more purely object-relational point of view, Burchfield's loss would have resulted in the creation of an internal object (i.e. a mental father-figure) which was pathological. According to W.R.D. Fairbairn,⁷ "It becomes too painful to long for and depend on an object which is physically or emotionally absent a good deal of the time.

Therefore, the child establishes internal objects inside himself, which act as substitutes and solutions for unsatisfying relationships with real external objects.”⁸ To paraphrase Fairbairn further, individuals with unnatural internal objects instead of parents will resist giving them up lest they be left alone again. In this case, relations with other people will be problematic. The “bad” aspects of the parent will be repeatedly experienced in lieu of new, more healthy human contacts.⁹

I feel confident that this was part of the reason Burchfield continued to feel lonely long after his father died. Indeed, with five other siblings, he didn’t have to be lonesome; the problem was that he never fully abandoned his internal object. Burchfield learned a pattern for relationships that continually undermined his ability to form bonds with other people.

In a psychoanalytic view, Burchfield’s mothering would be of even greater importance than his fathering. Again, there seems to have been some abnormalities in the mother-child relationship. Burchfield was quite attached to his mother, confiding in his journals that she was a “genius.”¹⁰ When Burchfield left home in 1912 to go to the Cleveland School of Art, he became unusually homesick. And in 1916, when his engagement to another art student ended, one account suggests that the woman decided against marrying Burchfield because he was “hung up on his mother.”¹¹ These events suggest that the artist might have over-idealized his mother, a situation which would have interfered with his relationships with others, especially his wife. Indeed, this strong attachment probably made expressing himself sexually, even within his marriage, difficult.

Another related factor which must have interfered with Burchfield’s development was the birth of his brother in 1898, the same year his father died. Burchfield’s object loss was thus doubly painful, as maternal affection was withdrawn at that time. Again, this demonstrates that Burchfield had an unusually difficult oedipal phase, and can explain his later psychological problems.

Religion also left an indelible mark on the young boy. Burchfield’s family was Presbyterian, and brought him to Sunday School when he was quite young. Burchfield later termed this experience “one of the nightmares of my childhood”¹² because of the harshness of the curriculum and the teachers. “He was taught there that playing cards, dancing and the theater were all manifestations about Satan, and that there ‘wasn’t a Catholic living who wouldn’t kill a Protestant if he thought he would go undetected’.”¹³ It can be imagined what was taught regarding masturbation, homosexuality, or even thinking about sex at all. Undoubtedly, these teachings inhibited Burchfield in his later life and contributed to the guilt he experienced. Burchfield’s super-ego, already at risk of being overly harsh, was reinforced in its power by this early

experience with the church.

Religion seems to have played a deeper role than simply making Burchfield fear sin. In addition to chastising himself for his moral failings, the boy began to conflate nature and god, engaging in what Townsend terms “neoprimitive animism.”¹⁴ Nature became a living, independent life-force for Burchfield, and he began to worship it. On one level, this stems from the boy’s fear and rejection of organized religion. On another level, the extent of his feelings and the timing suggest that religion was transformed into a father surrogate for the young boy. Burchfield projected his fantasies and feelings upon the trees and bushes; the woods became a place where God punished Burchfield for becoming an oedipal winner.

The way out seems to have been art. According to Burchfield, he painted in the woods “before first grade.”¹⁵ This means that Burchfield felt comfortable being creative (occupying potential space) in the woods. Perhaps the boy felt that if he brought nature into his field of play, he could somehow contain it. In fact, Burchfield was obsessive about wanting to record the local landscape. As he wrote, “In the spring of my junior year [of high school] I undertook to making drawings of all the local wild-flowers and blossoming fruit trees. I was not content to draw single flowers. I made big bouquets of them and sketched each flower in the most meticulous detail. This coupled with my school work brought on a collapse which lasted for several weeks. It was termed ‘brain-fever’ by the doctor, but I wonder now if it would not simply be called ‘nervous exhaustion’.”¹⁶ Whatever the actual problem was, in psychoanalytic terms, this was a somatization of a psychological conflict. It would seem that Burchfield felt overwhelmed by his feelings towards nature and thus broke. In short, art was not a complete cure. It allowed him an outlet for — but not an escape from — his unusual and unhealthy linkage between nature and religion, which was in turn, linked to his father figure.

When Burchfield entered art school in 1912, he was homesick and still quite shy. The artist would sometimes skip class and wander around the public parks of Cleveland in search of scenes to sketch. While Burchfield did make some friends, most notably becoming friendly with a clique known as “the Family,” it seems that he still kept his distance from others. As he entered in his journals, “People invariably love the artificial more than the natural. They respect superficiality more than deeper feelings ... So I go to Nature when I want sincerity. In nature we find not only sincerity but also innocence.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Burchfield intensified his pantheistic worship. Another journal entry stated, “If I stopped to admire or sketch a tree, [which can be seen as a phallic symbol] ... it [is] ... more of a prayer than meaningless phrases mumbled in a church.”¹⁸ Thus, the artist continued to seek solitude and nature rather than human contacts for a feeling of community.

The last two years of art school were difficult for Burchfield. He began to suffer from a series of depressions and wild mood swings. The artist was experiencing many conflicts at that time. Among them was a love interest, a woman he had met in art school named Alice Bailey. Burchfield's strict upbringing precluded having sex with her, but it is clear that he wanted to. This conflict between id and super-ego is seen in the following journal entry. "While fired with the lofty enthusiasm of a ... painting, all at once I am overcome with lustful desires. My whole body seems to cry out for the cool arms of a woman — everything is upside down."¹⁹ This frustration was compounded by the fact that he couldn't afford to marry her, and by her own misgivings about the marriage.

The journal entries for the last two years of art school demonstrate Burchfield's suffering. Although he later went back and altered these journals, the original entries can still be read. Burchfield wrote, "Were it not for Alice, my mother and my art, surely I would kill myself. These may be enough to encourage me to live, but some can live for themselves whereas if I should live for myself, what would be my excuse? Living for these three things, yet I know how unworthy I am of any of them."²⁰ Then, five days later, Burchfield entered into his journal, "It is an Elysian Day — I am feeling boundlessly happy — I can laugh at my suicidal [also erased] entry of several days ago — yet I feel so inanely joyous that I feel sure I must pay for it later."²¹ Burchfield also wrote of hallucinations; his rapid mood shifts continued for about two years.

These symptoms suggest a medical condition, perhaps bi-polarity or cyclothemia, a less extreme form of bi-polarism. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III-R), Burchfield does fit most of the criteria for a diagnosis of cyclothemia.²² Furthermore, the DSM suggests that these mood disorders are hereditary. This might shed light on the cause of Burchfield's father's sudden death. It seems logical that he committed suicide. Virtually nothing can be discovered about the event, suggesting a cover-up.²³ This guess is made more likely given that one of Burchfield's daughters committed suicide in 1977. It may well have been that Burchfield had inherited a tendency to be depressed. But developmental factors must have also played a significant role in causing these problems with Burchfield's mental health.

When Burchfield graduated in 1916, he went back home. While he continued to be on the verge of a mental breakdown, the suicidal entries no longer occurred. Instead, he claims to have been quite happy, harnessing his imaginings and fears as material for his art. Apart from a brief abortive trip to New York City, where he took a scholarship to the National Academy (and which aggravated his mental condition), Burchfield spent 18 months between 1916 and 1918 living contentedly in

his mother's house, his facilitating environment.

In fact, Burchfield termed this period his "golden year" as an artist. During it he executed more than 500 watercolors, about one-quarter of his entire oeuvre, despite working 5½ days a week as an accountant. Furthermore, it was these pieces which Burchfield returned to again and again for inspiration; in his late career, he even went so far as to actually use the older pieces as centers for new, larger works by gluing additional paper around the original watercolor.

Turning to Burchfield's art of this period, it seems as if he was trying to cure himself by regressing back to his childhood, deliberately going back to the point where his environment failed him. In *Cricket Chorus in the Arbor*, for example, Burchfield consciously strove to recreate his childhood response to nature. On the back, Burchfield wrote the following. "Sunday Afternoon, August ... the child stands alone. Insects are all his world, so to his mind all things become saturated with their presence. The boy looks with fears at the black interior of the arbor, not knowing what terrible thing might be there."

In *Cricket Chorus in the Arbor*, one can see the awe with which Burchfield viewed the landscape. The dark shadows of the vegetation seemingly consume the innocent looking fence. A gentle path ends abruptly at the leafy entrance of the arbor. The calligraphic lines, representing insect noises, give a sinister personality to the trees. The childhood memories Burchfield has here represented convey fascination and fear. The artist exhibits a desire to empathize with the woods, to unite with his totemic father-figure. But this desire is mixed with a loathing of what that merger would entail — the ultimate loss of his desired object, which Burchfield was conditioned to expect.

In many other works of this period, Burchfield can again be seen reaching back into his childhood and finding a conflict. In *The Night Wind*, for example, the artist depicts a child's view of a windy winter night. The house bends in the face of the forces of nature, and the windows are transformed into glaring yellow eyes. The trees in the background also have eyes and appear to be creeping up on the house.²⁴

Symbols are often employed in these early works. Burchfield developed his own iconography, inventing pictographs for "fear," "dangerous brooding" and "insanity." Called *Conventions for Abstract Thoughts*, these drawings demonstrate the depth of Burchfield's dark moods. The feelings of his early years were dredged up, and re-experienced.

These forays into memory were not done with any sort of detachment or objectivity. It seems that the nightmares of childhood had been re-awakened in the artist. Burchfield wrote in his journal in 1917, "One night last week I lay in bed fearing to go to sleep for fear I would wake up

insane.”²⁵ He had, to some extent, lost his ability to test reality.

In short, Burchfield’s “Golden Year” was, from beginning to end, inextricably tied up with his childhood.²⁶ Burchfield’s attempts to recover his boyhood through his art, and re-experience childhood, were, in my view, a self-cure. As Winnicott wrote, “The breakdown that is feared has already begun ... The patient’s fear of breakdown has its roots in the ... need to remember the original breakdown [which] took place at a stage of dependence.”²⁷ And further, “In character disorder there is ... the individual’s correct perception at a time in early childhood that at first all was well ... and then that all was not well.”²⁸ In other words, Burchfield continually probed his childhood for the feeling of merger and completeness that he had once felt. The terror stemmed from the negative aspects of his childhood, but he kept at it for that was all he had. The paradox of the “Golden Year” is that it really wasn’t such a happy time. In a Fairbairnian sense, Burchfield continued to cling to his infantile objects despite the rather terrifying existence they seemed to afford him.

The “Golden Year” ended in 1918 with Burchfield’s conscription into the Army. Again, the prospect of leaving home — and dying in a war — caused mental turmoil. But, the artist was able to swing an easy assignment to the camouflage division in South Carolina, and within eight months he was discharged. This experience seemed to have changed him in a profound manner. As he wrote, “The new life threw my mind in utter chaos, so that I was like unto a primitive man ... I forget when the Mind began to rise above the military straight jacket. But one night ... I heard with amazement the wild, silvery notes of the bugle winging out over the immense stretches of brilliant white sands ... Then someone said that the war was over & someone said it wasn’t; but I left camp one day & became lost in Negro Fairyland ... When I got back [to Ohio] I found that the flowers could think more than they had in childhood, & even the hills were not dumb.”²⁹

Returning home did not make Burchfield happy, as had previous homecomings. Instead, his army days seemed to weigh heavily on the man, and he was depressed from January to October 1919. Burchfield never was able to explain this depression, but some inferences can be made. In his 1919 works, as he later wrote, “I was obsessed with ... expressing the feelings of birds.”³⁰ Burchfield once attempted to show a bird, with an egg containing a baby bird visible inside it.³¹ In another work, *Budding Cottonwoods and Brick Kilns as if the Branches Were Growing out of the Kilns*, Burchfield deliberately denies the separation of animate and inanimate objects. It seems, from these works and the above quotation, that Burchfield was becoming more intense in his regression, projecting his own emotions onto the woods. The Kilns piece demonstrates what Marion Milner terms the desire for overlap between

mind and body.³² As Milner wrote, this overlap “perhaps can be seen as the aim of all therapy, the bringing together of both the accepted and the rejected part of the personality ... to allow the interpenetration of opposites to form a new whole.”³³ The artist was now trying with all of his might to merge with nature, to work through his early environmental deficiency towards a unified self.

In October, 1919, the mood broke. Burchfield became happy, and his style — or at least his subject matter — changed. He began to paint townscapes and people, executing far fewer landscapes. At first these views were somewhat satirical, but as time went by he began celebrating the American scene.

This shift can be argued two ways. On the one hand, his mood lifted, and he broke the repetitive depressions. This seems to evidence a cure; perhaps he had regressed to the point at which development ceased and matured, using art and nature. On the other hand, it could be argued that this shift was a withdrawal of the true self, and that the false self became a caretaker, an idea to which I will return below.

The middle period can be viewed as a move towards maturity and health. This view is further supported by Burchfield’s marriage in 1922, and the subsequent birth of five children. It seems that the artist had mastered his conflicted self, and had given up his infantile attachments to his parents and recognized the existence of humanity. Burchfield was now able to celebrate America, and feel a sense of community with other humans rather than nature.

Black Iron, 1934, evidences this shift. Now, a man-made object fills the picture plane, the strong bridge enables the roaring steam engine to pass over the river-to overcome the forces of nature. The bridge itself, though rusted, exudes solidity. Gone is the decrepit unsteadiness of Burchfield’s earlier structures. Perhaps these later buildings were Burchfield’s attempt to “repair” the damage he had done to his earlier houses — a definite sign of maturity. In works such as *Black Iron*, Burchfield identifies with America, and can thus live without many of the conflicts that had troubled him as a young adult, and live a relatively normal, healthy life.

If this is the case, however, it was an incomplete cure, as Burchfield relapsed into fallow periods and continued to be overly self-critical. He continued to experience unhappiness and dissatisfaction with his situation. For example, Burchfield did not become a good father. From reading his journals of the '20s and '30s, it becomes clear that he was ambivalent about being responsible for five children. At one point Burchfield wrote of “uninteresting problems at home” and also complains of the endless chores of fatherhood.³⁴ Furthermore, the artist was forever taking day trips alone, feeling happiness only in solitude. Also, the

portraits he executed of his children are among the most ambiguous family portraits in art history. In *Portrait Study in a Spring Landscape*, 1930, for example, Burchfield's five-year old daughter Mary Alice stares out at the viewer with an expression that can only be termed stolid. While the landscape radiates energy, the child slumps on a stump apparently bored. The artist here betrays his dislike of being a father.³⁵

In situations of employment, Burchfield also shied away from being an authority figure. He instigated his discharge from the army upon being made a sergeant, and he quit his job at the wallpaper factory when he was promoted to the head designer position.

Furthermore, Burchfield was more of a son than a husband to his wife. Sex seems to have played a very small role in their relations. Burchfield wrote in his journal of relationships, "all. ... creative powers are centered ... in establishing a normal life with a woman [one] can love, respect and trust. Any perversion of ... sexual life must be reflected in ... the ability ever to realize the actuality of love."³⁶ Indeed, Burchfield routinely referred to his wife as "Mother" and lavished attention upon her at Mother's Day. His college sweetheart was also a mothering type. As Townsend notes, "The older, sustaining, maternal woman played an important role in Charles Burchfield's life."³⁷ In short, Burchfield had difficulty combining sex and love, indicating that he had not fully matured into a father figure.

The lack of maturity can be seen in Burchfield's repeated conflicts in relation to sex, which he wrote about in his journals. In 1930 he wrote about a nighttime walk in the woods: "I raise my eyes to the sky, fling wide my arms and pray to God to forgive my sins, my lusts, my hideous thoughts ... I fall on my knees — it is not enough — I fall on my face — press my forehead to the snow — at last the tears come ... I grow cold and rejoice in being cold—I come away in peace."³⁸ This statement indicates a fundamental inability to express his sexual urges, even to his wife.

Undoubtedly, religion interfered with Burchfield's sex life. The religious teachings of his childhood, and his wife's beliefs, may well have precluded sex for any reason except procreation. Obviously, Burchfield's marriage was not evidence of complete maturity. Furthermore, this type of behavior indicates that God and nature continued to act as emotional crutches. In fact, he converted to Lutheranism in the mid-30s, only to quickly renounce his decision, preferring his own brand of pantheism. As he wrote, "A pine grove recalled to me the truth ... that here only can I be with God; the spirit coming through these trees is both me, and my creator, merged."³⁹ In other words, Burchfield was still trying to merge with the landscape and was unable, at times, to distinguish between the "me" and the "not me."

What all of this indicates is that Burchfield's artistic self-cure, which led to an identification with America and a feeling of community with other people, was only partially successful. In 1943, Burchfield essentially renounced America in his art, returning to pantheism full-time. *The Coming of Spring, 1917-43*, has been seen as the first step in this process. In this work, Burchfield actually used an early piece as the center, which he expanded in "the 1917 manner." Gone are any references to humans. The forces of nature are now the only subject matter. The artist pretends that the seasons are changing in front of his eyes.

On the one hand, this move can be seen as a regression. Burchfield returned to his infantile objects and no longer sought community with others, reverting instead to the style which marked his original struggle with unresolved childhood issues. Works such as these also mark a return to primary thinking, as time and motion are shown in action. Furthermore, Burchfield became more and more of a recluse in his late life, shunning contact with all but his closest family and friends. Indeed, the artist often became bed-ridden with back pain and the flu, which were, arguably, somatic regressions to dependence.

Yet, the whole issue of Burchfield's middle and late period can, perhaps, be seen in another way. It might have been that the middle period, with its reliance on rules of perspective and a constructed, unnatural community, was evidence of Burchfield's false self. According to Winnicott, the act of play and spontaneity belong to the true self, while socialization is a false self mode. In his late period, as in his early period, Burchfield would execute watercolors in a single day. In his middle period, however, the artist labored over works for years. Furthermore, the middle works are indeed socialized — illusions of a harmonious nation where agriculture and industry peacefully coexist. Thus, the later switch perhaps was a valiant attempt on Burchfield's part to allow his true self to be expressed.

In conclusion, Charles Burchfield lived a life full of pain. He repeatedly felt guilt and was lonely. Mostly, Burchfield was happy only when painting alone in the woods. In my view, this was due to an early childhood marred by his father's death and his religious upbringing. Burchfield's paintings, then, can be seen as records of his desire for a sense of belonging and security. Although it might seem clichéd, Burchfield's art was his therapy, and he might have become mad without it.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Dr. Cordelia T. Grimm and Dr. Brian Asalami for sharing their knowledge of clinical psychiatry with me.
- 2 See J. Benjamin Townsend, editor, *Charles Burchfield's Journals* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 65. Also John Baur, *The Inlander* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984),

- 18.
- 3 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 63,65.
- 4 D.W. Winnicott, "The Capacity to be Alone," *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1965), 31.
- 5 D.W. Winnicott, "The Capacity for Concern," *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 74.
- 6 Burchfield's recurring dreams about angry old men with mean sons also point to an oedipal disturbance. See Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 88.
- 7 I realize it is problematic to use Winnicott and Fairbairn as if they are interchangeable. In my paper, I have tried to use parts of one theory that would not be completely at odds with the other's.
- 8 Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 159.
- 9 Greenberg and Mitchell, 174.
- 10 See Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 124.
- 11 Alice Bailey's step-daughter made this remark at a symposium held on Charles Burchfield at the Drawing Center in New York City, June 10, 1993.
- 12 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 72. See also "Burchfield, Famous Modern," *Buffalo Evening News* (17 February 1934).
- 13 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 72. See also Nancy Weekly, *Charles E. Burchfield, The Sacred Woods* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 42.
- 14 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 243.
- 15 *Charles Burchfield Autobiographical Manuscript*, Whitney Museum Archives, 3.
- 16 *Burchfield Autobiographical MS*, 2.
- 17 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 60. Journal entry 12/25/14. A particularly misanthropic entry for Christmas Day.
- 18 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 646. Journal entry 12/5/15.
- 19 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 128. Journal entry 4/24/15. This statement indicates that painting may have been a means for Burchfield to discharge his sexual urges. This may well explain the periodic lapses the artist experienced throughout his life where he could not create: Burchfield was experiencing guilt over satisfying his forbidden desires.
- 20 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 75. Journal entry 4/24/15.
- 21 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 76. Journal entry 4/29/15.
- 22 See the DSM III-R, 217, 222.
- 23 No coroner's report exists, nor are there any stories about the death which the Burchfield family can recall (although much information is known about most of the other members of the family). Admittedly, this is no more than an educated guess. I would like to thank Nancy Weekly of the Burchfield Art Center for allowing me to use her research on Burchfield's father's death.
- 24 Not incidentally, this nightmarish view is of Burchfield's neighbor's house. The neighbor, according to Burchfield, was a single woman who lived with her daughter and two grandsons "who had been abandoned by their husband and father" (Townsend,

- 166). It would seem that Burchfield projected his own terror of losing his father onto his neighbor's house.
- 25 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 83. Journal entry 9/23/16.
- 26 Burchfield's keen interest in boyhood, which he saw as "innocent" and "pure," and his "idealization of prepubescent boys" (Townsend 182, 189) points to, perhaps, latent homosexuality, yet another conflict with which Burchfield was burdened.
- 27 Winnicott, "Classification" *The Maturation Processes*, 139.
- 28 Winnicott, "Character Disorders" *The Maturation Processes*, 207.
- 29 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 112. Journal entry January 1919.
- 30 Baur, *The Inlander*, 92.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 32 Marion Milner, "Winnicott and Overlapping Circles." *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* (New York: Tavistock, 1990), 285.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 286.
- 34 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 135. Journal entry 8/23/29.
- 35 Burchfield executed a portrait in 1930 of two of his other daughters, Catherine and Martha, with similarly blank expressions. In 1960 the artist cut the paper in half, perhaps further demonstrating his association of loneliness with childhood.
- 36 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 129. Journal entry 6/9/21.
- 37 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 124.
- 38 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 87. Journal entry 2/14/30.
- 39 Townsend, *Burchfield's Journals*, 413. Journal entry 12/19/35.

Scopophilia, Exhibitionism, and the Art of Sophie Calle

Katie Clifford

After briefly meeting a man in Paris and learning that he was about to take a trip to Venice, French artist Sophie Calle set out to secretly follow him. In Venice, she made hundreds of phone calls to locate the hotel in which he was staying. She even persuaded the owner of the house across the street to let her use a window from which to watch her subject. When out on the street, she disguised herself in a blonde wig and dark sunglasses and kept her distance. She made copious notes of this man's activities and photographed him, using a hidden-lens camera. She did this everyday for two weeks until he returned to Paris. With her findings, she compiled a running documentary of her pursuit, entitled *Suite Venetienne/Venetian Suite* (1980), which was subsequently exhibited in galleries and later, bound into book form.¹

The photographs and text are rather unremarkable. Although the project was undertaken in secrecy, her subject, who turned out to be a rather dull fellow, had no secrets to hide. But what of the artist and the great lengths she took to carry out this venture? What of the tedium she must have endured, not to mention her apparent disregard for this man's privacy?

In response to works of this nature, one critic wrote: "Plain and simple, Calle is not only a voyeur who gets off on compulsive prying and spying, but an exhibitionist who must show trophies of her exploits, in the forms of photographs and diaristic texts enlisting us as accessories to her perverse transgressions."² Indeed, exhibitionism and voyeurism are strong components of Calle's art work. And in Western culture, these traits are often viewed with suspicion. In extreme cases, exhibitionism and voyeurism are considered perversions in the field of psychology, and can be criminal in the eyes of the law.

In more moderate terms, however, voyeurism, also referred to as scopophilia, and exhibitionism have been considered integral to the artistic process. Dr. David Allen, who has studied the psychodynamics of these impulses, states: "Creativity demands free-ranging associational thinking. The individual becomes creative only if he possesses that untimidated, bounding scopophilia that sees beyond the immediate

focus of learning.”³ Furthermore, “bounding scopophilia must be balanced with an assertive exhibitionism,” in that exhibitionism is the willingness to show what one has created, seen, and/or learned.⁴ One who has strong voyeuristic and exhibitionist tendencies is able to channel those energies into the creative process. Someone who has a limited voyeuristic interest would be less likely to be markedly creative. Allen states: “hovering hypercritical rationality and perfectionism are the enemies of creativity. They are too censorious and inhibit the creative process.”⁵ Premature judgment must be suspended for creativity to be unleashed.

In addition to artistic creativity, exhibitionism and voyeurism can produce sexual energy. The industry of pornography, for example, has capitalized on the phenomenon of how voyeurism and exhibitionism can induce sexual excitement in human beings. Take for example the following scenario: a man masturbates while he looks at erotic pictures of a naked woman. Not only is he turned on by what he sees but as part of his sexual fantasy, he imagines the nude woman is in rapture because she is watching him get off. The man looks for pleasure and gains pleasure from the notion of being watched. Exhibitionism and voyeurism work together to create this total sexual experience.

What is unique about this situation is that it is a solitary exercise. For individuals who fear intimate relations with a partner, this situation is non-threatening and therefore ideal. When acts of voyeurism and exhibitionism constitute the sole means by which sexual arousal is achieved, they are considered symptomatic of mental disorder.

In clinical terms, exhibitionism involves “repetitive acts of exposing the genitals to an unsuspecting stranger for the purpose of achieving sexual excitement, with no attempt at further sexual activity with the stranger.”⁶ Voyeurism, its counterpart, is characterized by “repetitive looking at unsuspecting people, usually strangers, who are either naked, in the act of disrobing, or engaging in sexual activity, as a method of achieving sexual excitement; no sexual activity with the person is sought.”⁷ In these scenarios, the voyeur or exhibitionist acts out what the socially deemed “healthy” man entertains in private and in his imagination.

Literature on the psychosexual dimension of voyeurism and exhibitionism goes back to the work of Freud. In “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905), he discusses voyeurism and exhibitionism as partial impulses of the sexual instinct.⁸ That is, two seemingly opposite impulses actually complement each other, and operate together to fuel sexual desire. For example, sadism and masochism are the paired components of sadomasochism. “The most remarkable feature of this perversion,” Freud writes, “is that its active and passive forms are habitually found to occur together in the same individual ... a sadist is always at the same time a masochist, although the active or the passive

aspect of the perversion may be the more strongly developed in him and may represent the predominant sexual activity.”⁹ Similarly, Freud noted, scopophilia, pleasure in looking, is paired with its active counterpart, exhibitionism, pleasure in self-display. In that every active perversion is accompanied by its passive counterpart, someone who is an exhibitionist is at the same time a voyeur.

Although both voyeurism and exhibitionism can develop into perversions, in less extreme cases, scopophilic and exhibitionist impulses are deemed normal and part of one’s psychosexual development, beginning as early as with infancy.¹⁰ For example, an infant is prone to make eye contact with the mother’s face while nursing. It is a way for the infant to lock on to the nursing experience because it provides pleasure in the form of food and warmth. That is, to secure that pleasurable feeling, the infant seeks to internalize the source of that pleasure, to visually incorporate it into him or herself so s/he will never be without.

In the nursing situation, while sucking the mother’s breast, the infant strives to incorporate the object orally, but at the same time, in that the infant also makes eye contact with the mother, the baby also incorporates the object visually. Therefore, not only the mouth but the eyes develop as erotogenic zones that serve the sexual drive. Looking and being looked at is indeed one of the earliest of libidinal experiences.

Separation, or the threat of separation from that pleasure producing object, the mother, can be experienced as highly traumatic for the infant. The infant does not yet have a separate sense of self but exists in a symbiotic relationship with the mother. Separation can occur when the mother weans the infant off her breast, or when the infant sees a rival sibling being nursed by the mother. An emotional rather than physical separation can also occur if the mother is depressed and is therefore distanced from the baby. If the infant’s natural process of incorporation is hindered or halted due to separation, object constancy is not achieved. The loss of the object amounts to a critical loss of an integral part of the ego itself; without the mother, the infant is incomplete.

When separated, the infant is anxious to retrieve the now lost object and therefore, in a sense, looks for it. This intensified “looking” is a hypercathexis of the visual function. An “inconclusive search” can then develop into voyeurism in adult life.

As with voyeurism, the phenomenon of object loss can also be determined as the root of exhibitionism. In males, exhibitionism is a reaction to the fear of castration. Exhibitionism is a way of being re-assured against feeling castrated by compelling another to react.¹¹ Dr. David Allen, in his study on the scopophilic-exhibitionist conflict, illustrates this point accordingly: “The boy or man can reassure himself about castration anxieties by exhibiting genitally or by demonstrating a big thing about

himself, such as an accomplishment. How far can he project his urinary stream in competition with other boys? How accurately and how far can he throw a rock? How high can he rise in his profession?"¹²

Exhibitionism among women is considered derivative of penis envy—an effort to prove that one has something despite not having a penis.¹³ To compensate for this lack, according to Allen, the girl or woman diverts attention away from her genitals and directs attention to other things about herself, such as her clothes, "which may have phallic symbolic meanings."¹⁴

The scopophilic-exhibitionist does what he or she does as an attempt to regain the lost object. But there is a conflict: just as much as one wants to repossess that lost object, at the same time, one also fears it. If the object is regained, there is the danger of reliving the trauma of losing it all over again. The object, therefore, is kept at a distance, in view but out of reach: "The patient with perverse and compulsive forms of scopophilia and exhibitionism is not only attempting to achieve libidinal contact across distance but is also keeping a distance. In order to achieve some gratification, the activity of this special looking will be accompanied by complex inhibitions and ritualized practices."¹⁵ The patient in this conflicted state must take extra measures to satisfy otherwise basic desires. Stalking a stranger over a period of time could be one such obsessive behavior.

In summary, the phenomena of scopophilia and exhibitionism are twofold. On one level, one indulges in voyeurism and/or exhibitionism to achieve sexual pleasure. On another level, voyeurism and exhibitionism are compensatory activities, a means to keep at bay the anxiety of object loss. Looking and showing are libidinal impulses that develop in infancy. As the child grows into an adult, the impulses either are sublimated with maturation, or if inhibited, they are conflicted, intensify, and manifest as perverse preoccupations.

Given the mechanics of the scopophilic-exhibitionist impulses outlined above, and before returning to the case of Sophie Calle, it is helpful to look at one application of the theory. Dr. Renato Almansi, who has studied patients with voyeuristic-exhibitionist related pathologies, has examined Alfred Hitchcock's 1953 film, *Rear Window* as such a case.¹⁶

In the movie, L.B. Jeffries, the character played by James Stewart, is a free-lance photographer who is temporarily confined to his apartment with a broken leg. He is periodically visited by a matronly nurse, Stella, and his breathtakingly beautiful girlfriend, Lisa, played by Grace Kelly. At the opening of the movie, he has been in a cast for six weeks and has one week to go. He is restless and bored.

He spends a great deal of his time looking out the rear window of his second-story Greenwich Village apartment and into the windows of the

buildings across the way. This view, Almansi interprets, is a “scopophilic paradise.”¹⁷ His neighbors, who carry on with their blinds raised, are on display for Jeffries’ visual pleasure. To get a closer look at the neighborhood activities, Jeffries uses either binoculars or his camera with an attached telephoto lens.

Jeffries in his wheelchair is rather helpless and child-like and depends on nurse Stella to feed and clean him. According to Almansi, Jeffries represents the regressed individual and, with a broken leg, he is symbolically castrated. He suffers object loss and is in psychosexual conflict. His girlfriend Lisa passionately woos him but he is unresponsive, even irritable; he would rather look out the window. His libidinal energy has been displaced and is channeled into the act of looking.

Jeffries’ condition of object loss is compounded when he can no longer see one of his neighbors, a sickly older woman, Mrs. Thorwald. He is accustomed to seeing her lying in bed, an invalid, awaiting the return of her travelling salesman husband, Lars Thorwald, played by Raymond Burr. This absence causes great anxiety in Jeffries. In theory, the missing Mrs. Thorwald represents the potentially lost object, triggering associations of the infant’s loss of mother. Jeffries responds to this re-enacted trauma by obsessively searching for the lost object.

Over the course of four days, Jeffries discovers that Mrs. Thorwald was murdered by her husband. At a climactic point in the movie, Thorwald learns that Jeffries is on to him and storms over to Jeffries’ apartment with, we assume, an intent to kill. Jeffries tries to fight off Thorwald by repeatedly setting off his camera flash, thereby blinding him. The police arrive.

Almansi interprets this fight as the classic Oedipal struggle between Jeffries, the child, and Thorwald, the father figure. In the end, Thorwald goes off to prison and Jeffries reunites with Lisa; he gets the girl. In this Oedipal drama, the child prevails and becomes a man. By using Hitchcock’s movie as an example, Almansi is able to illustrate how voyeurism has not only a sexual dimension but also functions as an effort to compensate for the psychic lost object.

In context of Almansi’s reading of *Rear Window*, one can more clearly examine the case of Sophie Calle and the prevalence of exhibitionism and voyeurism in her work. Although her nursing conditions are not known, the artist herself has supplied biographical material in an ongoing artwork, appropriately named *Autobiographical Stories* (1988-89, 1992). After her parents divorced when she was still very young, she lived with her mother. In the text of one of her *Autobiographical Stories*, Calle recounts a childhood memory of being uncertain of her father’s identity because she rarely saw him. This kind of absence of the father could be experienced as object loss.

The method of her art making in itself can be perceived as an effort to

repossess the conceptual lost object. For example, combining photographs with text as a means to document her experiences could be interpreted as a repeated way to make permanent the otherwise fleeting experience. Three photo-text pieces in particular, which are part of the *Autobiographical Stories* series, illustrate the theoretical link between Calle's personal experiences with loss and the role of her art as a means to compensate for that loss. In a piece entitled *Autobiographical Stories (The Dessert)* (1992) the text reads:

When I was fifteen I was afraid of men. One day in a restaurant, I chose a dessert because of its name: "Young Girl's Dream." I asked the waiter what it was, and he answered: "It's a surprise." A few minutes later he returned with a dish featuring two scoops of vanilla ice cream and a peeled banana. He said one word: "Enjoy." Then he laughed. I closed my eyes the same way I closed them years later when I saw my first naked man.

The photograph which accompanies this text is of a banana and two scoops of ice cream arranged on a plate in the shape of a penis.

Her aversive reaction to seeing the penis, experienced in her adolescence, stays with her and her work as she grows older, as evident in *Autobiographical Stories (The Bathrobe)* (1992). This photograph is of a white bathrobe hanging on a peg on a wall. The text reads:

I was eighteen years old. I rang the bell. He opened the door. He was wearing the same bathrobe as my father. A long white terrycloth robe. He became my first love. For an entire year, he obeyed my request and never let me see him naked from the front. Only from the back. And so, in the morning light, he would get up carefully turning himself away, and gently hiding inside the white bathrobe. When it was all over he left the bathrobe behind with me.

In this narrative, the bathrobe, the lover, the father, and the penis, all signify one elusive, fetishized object.

In one other piece, *Autobiographical Stories (The Amnesia)* (1992), again Calle alludes to the penis. The text reads:

No matter how hard I try, I never remember the color of a man's eyes or the shape and size of his sex. But I decided a wife should know these things. So I made an effort to fight this amnesia. I now know he has green eyes.

The accompanying photograph is that of a male torso, presumably her husband's. His penis is tucked in between his legs and hidden from view.

The fetishized object is made conspicuous in its very absence. There is an effort to retrieve this experience/object (penis/lover/father) but, at the same time, an impulse to keep it hidden, so as not to re-enact the infantile trauma of object loss. As evident in *Autobiographical Stories*, from Calle's adolescence through her adulthood, the sight of the penis is feared, avoided, even missing. In its absence, it is everywhere present, in view but out of reach.

In tracing the origins of scopophilia and exhibitionism, its development, and its degrees of intensity, Calle's work can be perceived as a reaction to a psychic loss. Whether or not one judges her work to be creative or perverse, that exhibitionism and voyeurism are recurring aspects in her oeuvre make it rich for psychoanalytic evaluation. What remains a question is, if she indeed experienced a trauma and suffers from an arrested development of her sexual impulses, is her work a restaging of the trauma of object loss? Or, is it a way of working through the trauma, in which her art is the object found?

Notes

- 1 Sophie Calle, *Suite Venetienne* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).
- 2 Jan Avgikos, "Review," *Artforum* 29, (Summer 1991): 109.
- 3 David Allen, *The Fear of Looking: Scopophilic-Exhibitionist Conflicts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974), 109.
- 4 Allen, 109.
- 5 Allen, 19.
- 6 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Third Edition, Revised) (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1987), 272.
- 7 DSM-III-R, 273.
- 8 Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905), in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1991), 239-292.
- 9 Freud, *Sexuality*, 252-253.
- 10 In addition to Freud, this account of the development of scopophilia and exhibitionism is drawn from the contemporary psychoanalysts, Dr. Renato Almansi and Dr. David Allen.
- 11 Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 47.
- 12 Allen, 31.
- 13 Rycroft, 47.
- 14 Allen, 31.
- 15 Allen, 69.
- 16 Renato Almansi, "Alfred Hitchcock's Disappearing Women: A Study in Scopophilia and Object Loss," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 19 (Spring 1992): 81-90.
- 17 Almansi, *Hitchcock*, 81.

Public Things in the Atopic City

Late Notes on Tilted Arc and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

D. S. Friedman

'Being rooted in the absence of place.' Only in this way, says Simone Weil, is it possible 'to grasp, like all the saints, what is length, breadth, height and depth.' The absence of place is therefore what paradoxically allows us to 'grasp' space in all its extensions, to capture its specific 'reality.' It is necessary, then to remove from the 'place' that which renders it such ...

The 'de-situated' — and therefore atopic — space is not boundless, however. It contains the limit in itself which no longer passes to its exterior, like a line of defense, but to its interior. In this sense 'atopic' is the truth theorized by Florenskij as the space that comprises everything that can erase it ...

The modern city has no confines but is traversed by a plurality of limits. The modern city is an atopic space which, precisely because of its bewildering character, has always been perceived as a labyrinthine space. The Italian poet Leopardi celebrated cities precisely because a thousand limits break up the habitual view, the gaze of reason which orders everything into hierarchies and categories. One is thus forced to proceed beyond these limits with the imagination ...

Franco Rella

1. What better place to open the question of public art than Rosalind Krauss's "expanded field."¹ In 1979, Krauss modified a Klein Group diagram to extend binary categories of art practice beyond canonic sculpture.² The Klein Group is a simple-looking square that Krauss describes as a kind of structuralist cartography, "a way of picturing the

whole of a cultural universe in the grip of two opposing choices.”³ Krauss’s variation on the Klein Group maps discrete, artistic objects that transgress conventional sculptural production: out and away from sculpture, the starting point in her “logically expanded [quaternary] field,” she arrays architecture, not-landscape, not-architecture, site-construction, axiomatic structures, and marked sites.⁴ To the margins of Krauss’s diagram this paper brings two controversial public works — Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*. More so than most, these two projects animate what attorney Barbara Hoffman calls the paradox of public art, within which fiercely individual and independent self-expression is coupled with “the community, the social order, [and] self-negation.”⁵ My aim here, at least initially, is to use Krauss’s “little motor of double negatives”⁶ to further agitate this contradiction.

Any question about public art must of course provide some account of publicity; in this paper, roughly following Seyla Benhabib, I shall briefly offer three.⁷ The first draws from Hannah Arendt’s analysis of “the social occlusion of the political,” which renders public space on the basis of agonistic and associational distinctions; Arendt situates public experience and events in a “space of appearance,” by which she means not only being and acting in open view of strangers, but also acting “together in concert,” irrespective of topography or institution.⁸ The second account draws from Jürgen Habermas’s critical theory, which renders the public world as a discursive “sphere” — neither spatial nor agonistic, but communicative and steadfastly democratic, arising out of participation and practice: reasoned, open, plural discourse. The third account of public experience is more tenuous and heterodox; it follows attempts to locate the frontier of the public in the subjective interior.⁹ This account, which proceeds from phenomenological inquiry, begins to indicate the psychological magnitude of the “public” body and points to the unconscious transactions between self and Other that comprise an essential condition of contemporary metropolitan life. Each of these accounts implies a slightly different estimation of the relation between figure and ground, which determines the contours of the public object, and which invariably affects the valuation of public art, especially in its urban aspect.

2. To summarize Rosalind Krauss on the matter of contemporary sculpture: “We know very well what [it] is,” she reminds us: it is an “historically bounded category” no longer characterized by the “commemorative representation” of the classical monument.¹⁰ Logic once internal to the production of both sculpture and monuments presumes a thickening of meaning bound to place, particular to a physical and cultural setting. Krauss uses Rodin’s *Balzac* and his *Gates of Hell* to

demonstrate the collapse of this logic. Both of these works were commissioned as monuments, yet neither ever occupied its intended site. Ensclosed in museums, they have become self-referential, their commemorative program supplanted almost entirely by Rodin's irrepressible subjectivity.

Released from the duty of commemoration, sculpture steps off the pedestal, crosses "the threshold of the logic of the monument," and enters modern space, its "negative condition — a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place."¹¹ The nomadism and autonomy that develop in modern sculpture in the sixties and seventies give rise to Krauss's "expanded field." Sculpture ceases to be a "positivity," and becomes instead "the category that result[s] from the addition of the not-landscape to the not-architecture"; 'sculpture,' no longer privileged, is "only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities."¹² These "other, differently structured possibilities," she argues, "can no longer be described as modernist."¹³ To the work of Morris, Smithson, Heizer, De Maria, Irwin, LeWitt, Nauman, and Serra, she credits an "historical rupture and structural transformation of the cultural field," which she names "postmodern" — "there seems no reason not to."¹⁴

It is tempting to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a product of this rupture, part of the same "brisure" that yields Serra's *Tilted Arc*.¹⁵ Not a few critics take such a position, but perhaps the most conspicuous and authoritative attempt to pair the two works occurs in W. J. T. Mitchell's *Art and the Public Sphere*, an anthology of essays culled from the journal *Critical Inquiry*, which Mitchell edits.¹⁶ In his introduction Mitchell states:

[T]he unavoidability of the public sphere [is] an issue that goes well beyond 'public art' in the narrow or traditional sense [and] is thus the unifying agenda of these essays ... Many of the critical gestures discussed in this volume attempt to locate the convergence of the utopian and the critical, the intersection of aesthetic disinterest and the most violent and passionate expressions of public and private interest. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial ... seems perfectly poised between utopia and critique: it can be experienced both as an object of national mourning and reconciliation that is absolutely inclusive, embracing and democratic, and as a critical parody and inversion of the traditional war memorial. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* can be seen as a classic instance of the high modernist transformation of a utilitarian public space into an aesthetic form (with predictable reactions from the philistines), or as a signal that modernism can no longer mediate public and private spheres on its own terms, but must submit to social

negotiation, and anticipate reactions from violence to indifference.¹⁷

Mitchell couples the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and *Tilted Arc* as complementary objects that inhabit the same historical moment.¹⁸ John Hallmark Neff, who organized the symposium “Art and Public Spaces: Daring to Dream” (for which many of the essays in Mitchell’s anthology were originally written), elaborates this coupling in a second introduction to the same collection. Neff argues that *Tilted Arc* and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are emblematic of the changing conditions for commemorative and artistic production. Neff’s decision to hold the symposium in the first place derived from “issues raised by [*Tilted Arc* and] by the very different response now accorded the once-controversial Vietnam Veterans Memorial.”¹⁹

Mitchell (as editor) and Neff (as conference chair) twin these projects as equally demonstrative constructions, one successful in overcoming its detractors despite its “cunning violation and inversion of monumental conventions,”²⁰ the other “failed — failed as art and as art for a civic site.”²¹ Controversy is the adhesive element in this connection. Mitchell and Neff would probably agree that what links the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and *Tilted Arc* is not form, but status, due as much to publicity as artistic merit. Other critics, however, speak directly to the question of Lin’s “minimalism,” often to the influence of Serra and others on her design.²² Such comparisons require a closer look.

As artifacts, these two works would occupy different positions in Krauss’s expanded field. *Tilted Arc* is neither architecture, landscape, nor site-construction, nor is it an “axiomatic structure” (Serra calls his work sculpture). It defies sculptural convention, yet, by Krauss’s definition (and Serra’s), it is not “modern,” in the sense that it is not siteless. “Sculptures by Noguchi and Calder ... have nothing to do with the contexts in which they’re placed,” Serra states, echoing Krauss. “At best, they are studio made and site adjusted. They are displaced, homeless, overblown objects that say ‘We represent modern art’.”²³ *Tilted Arc*, like most of Serra’s later work, is vehemently specific to its site, though not the least bit deferential to it.

In my work, I analyze the site and determine to redefine it in terms of sculpture, not in terms of the existing physiognomy. I have no need to augment existing contextual languages. I’m not interested in affirmation ... Sculpture ... has the potential to create its own place and space, and to work in contradiction to the places and spaces where it is created. I am interested in work where the artist is a maker of ‘anti-environment’ which takes its own place or makes its own situation, or divides or declares its own area.²⁴

Serra's comment is concentric with Robert Morris's earlier declaration, in "Notes on Sculpture," that "minimalism realizes the autonomous and literal nature of sculpture ... that it have its own equally literal space."²⁵

For Morris, minimalism provisionally resolves the apparent contradiction between autonomy and specificity. As Hal Foster observes, the "paradoxicality of this argument," which indicates both the contradictions of minimalism and the "instability of the categories of art," leads to a simultaneous contraction and expansion of sculpture.

Here a new space of 'object/subject terms' opens up ... it is a 'death of the author' (as Roland Barthes would call it two years later) that is at the same time a birth of the reader: 'The object is but one of the terms of the newer aesthetic [Morris writes] ... One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions under varying conditions of light and spatial context.' Here we are at the edge of 'sculpture in the expanded field'."²⁶

In the case of *Tilted Arc*, autonomy and specificity converge into an ideological vector; *Tilted Arc* seizes Federal Plaza like a slash or deletion, "effacing it even as it presents its legibility."²⁷ Serra's sculpture is not concerned merely with intensification of perception, but with the critical transformation of the physical and institutional context of the site. Thus the *fortississimo* of *Tilted Arc*, like all of Serra's sculpture, intends some "critique of context." This critique and the material and formal properties of the work are indissoluble, part of a single thought, a dialectical opposition of memory and anticipation that "prevents 'good form,' [or] a Gestalt image, or a pattern of identity from taking over."²⁸ Serra's work sublates Gestalt not through figural or allegorical devices — "no work by Serra seeks to create a picture"²⁹ — but through the motor reality of the subject, through the interruption and displacement of the body's perceptual trajectories. This encounter is always transitive, never static. The "paradoxicality" of *Tilted Arc* derives precisely from the way it presupposes a passer-by: on its site, it becomes a ceaseless jolt; it jostles the pedestrian, continually interrupting the perception of a whole.³⁰ As Yve-Alain Bois notes, Serra's sculpture "has no full-stop."

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is also obviously not siteless, nor autonomous, nor homeless, although it is almost universally acknowledged as "modern"; but where does it belong on Krauss's diagram? It marks the site (as a form it depends upon manipulated contours); it is a "site construction"; its "structure" is axiomatic (it is a fairly simple, granite-clad, concrete retaining wall). It is fiercely commemorative. It is embedded in its landscape, which is inseparable

from the monumental iconography of the Washington Mall. Its form is figural, narrative: “a V-shaped gash or scar, a trace of violence suffered,” as Mitchell sees it:

Does V stand for Vietnam? For a Pyrrhic ‘Victory’? For the Veterans themselves? For the Violence they suffered? ... Is it possible to avoid seeing it as a quite literal antitype to the ‘public sphere’ signified in the traditional phallic monument, that is, as the Vagina of Mother Earth opened to receive her sons, as if the American soil were opening its legs to show the scars inscribed on her private parts?³¹

In figure and fact the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a wall (the *Wall*, for many); it inheres a certain utility — it holds back earth; it holds up 57,939 names, the “writing on the wall.”³² Its structure and form belong both to architecture and to landscape, although it oscillates between the two, tempting us to attach Krauss’s negative prefix to our categorization.

The black granite cladding of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a positive element, polished to a mirror finish; it reflects light. *Tilted Arc*, on the other hand, has a dull, nonreflective, absorptive surface. Unlike Lin’s memorial, it has no utilitarian or functional value whatsoever: “Any use is a misuse,” says Serra.³³ He vehemently rejects the monumentality of sculpture.

When we look at [my work], are we asked to give any credence to the notion of a monument? [These pieces] do not relate to the history of monuments. They do not memorialize anything. They relate to sculpture and nothing more. They do not cry out to called monuments. A steel curve is not a monument.³⁴

Contrariwise, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is immersed in historical references — to the Mall; to the war, of course; to the individuals who died in the war; to the other monuments and the visitors it reflects in its mirror finish; and, not least, to its self-conscious appropriation of “minimalist syntax,” as Robert Storr puts it.³⁵ *Tilted Arc*, on the other hand, resists any sort of narrative or representational figuration; like *Rotary Arc*, “its form remains ambiguous, indeterminable, unknowable as an entity”³⁶: “all his work,” Bois tells us, “is based on the destruction of notions of identity and causality.”³⁷ For Serra, history weakens *Erlebnis*:

[T]he weight of history ... dissolves weight and erodes meaning to a calculated construction of palpable lightness ... It is the distinction between the prefabricated weight of history and direct experience which evokes in me the need to make things

that have not been made before. I continually attempt to confront the contradictions of memory and to wipe the slate clean, to rely on my own experience and my own materials even if faced with a situation which is beyond hope of achievement. To invent methods about which I know nothing, to utilize the content of experience so that it becomes known to me, to then challenge the authority of that experience and thereby challenge myself.³⁸

Notwithstanding the fact that the two are both long, black, abstract, and planar, *Tilted Arc* and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are constitutively different: figure, not figure; wall, not-wall; historical, not-historical; monument, not-monument. If Lin's Memorial offers a mirror, *Tilted Arc* turns out the back of the tain.³⁹

3. The form of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was determined by a national competition that attracted 1,421 entries. Yale undergraduate Maya Ying Lin had submitted her third required project from a senior studio on funerary architecture.⁴⁰ Anyone familiar with the bibliography on funerary architecture might recognize in Lin's project a debt to the eighteenth-century French theorist and "revolutionary" architect Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799):

An idea, as new as it was daring, came to me ... I would create buildings that gave the illusion of being buried ... As I considered the problem, I realized that only low and sunken lines would be appropriate. After pondering on the rule that the first element of architecture is a wall totally bare and unadorned, I decided that my sunken architecture would be exemplified in a building that was satisfactory as a whole yet gave the appearance that part of it was below ground.⁴¹

This excerpt (a passage from Boullée's treatise, *Architecture, essai sur l'art*) is by itself a remarkable guide to Lin's intentions. However, it appears beneath a haunting ink and wash drawing in a well-known 1968 exhibition catalogue, *Visionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu*. This image typifies Boullée's architecture des ombres; its elevation depicts a huge, obtusely shaped pyramid, "MONUMENT FUNERAIRE (sic) Caractérisant Le Genre D'Une Architecture Ensevelie," one of three such images to be included in the catalogue. Noteworthy is the similarity between the profiles of these funerary monuments and the V-shape of Lin's plan.

Notwithstanding its ingeniously simple composition and elegant interpretation of historical precedents, the selection of Lin's design was unwelcome to many, even some among the leadership of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. A small, bitter, and widely publicized war of

opinion quickly erupted around Lin's proposal: fogs of commentary rose from media personalities of every ilk. Politicians took positions, the Commission of Fine Arts held hearings. In a compromise engineered to placate powerful lobbyists (including H. Ross Perot, who doubtless never heard of Boullée), a sculpture group depicting three "battle weary GIs," rendered with a sort of *Saturday Evening Post* realism, was added to the Memorial site, along with a flagpole, both placed seventy feet from Lin's composition, a remove that satisfied both parties.⁴²

As built, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial occupies a clearing in Constitution Gardens, in the northwest corner of the capital Mall. It's well-known V is composed of two identical walls, each 247 feet long, open to an angle of 125 degrees. The walls begin at grade; the ground in front slopes toward the vertex, where the height of the wall reaches ten feet. In plan, the composition's two horizontal axes intersect the centerpoints of the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. Visitors walking east or west along the wall with their backs to its vertex find themselves trained on the capital's most celebrated iconography, an obelisk and a classical temple. In this way the form of the Memorial both engages and defers to the surrounding perspective of neoclassical Washington, playing into its baroque geometrization.

Standing in front of the wall, Lin declares, visitors are "surrounded by America, by the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. I don't design pure objects like those. I work with the landscape."⁴³ The landscape in question is Pierre Charles L'Enfant's plan of 1791, to the extent that the 1901 Senate Park Commission remained loyal to it. Few if any American architects could claim greater authority in matters of classical composition than two of the commission's members, Charles Follen McKim (1847–1909) and Daniel Hudson Burnham (1846–1912), still glowing from their triumph at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition;⁴⁴ the third member, of course, was Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., son of the Chicago Exposition's landscape architect. Their proposal was "the first expression of the City Beautiful movement inspired by the [Chicago] fair and ... 'the country's first modern city planning report'."⁴⁵ They strengthened their loyalty to L'Enfant through assiduous research and travel — to Virginia, to inspect cities that had served as models for the capital; and to Europe, where they immersed themselves in monumental antecedents:

The group toured Paris, turned to Rome where they studied the great Piazza of St. Peter's, then, to Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, and from there, to Venice, a plan of which had been among the papers Jefferson lent L'Enfant. In Vienna they toured the Schoenbrunn and the Ringstrasse. Some time was spent in Budapest before the group returned to Paris, where they

measured the grounds at Fountainbleau and Vaux-le-Vicomte. The gardens and grand allees and the great basin at Versailles one of L'Enfant's primary sources, were also carefully studied.⁴⁶

In 1900, the younger Olmsted “pleaded for an understanding of L'Enfant's original plan,” although, according to McKim's biographer, Charles Moore, who accompanied the commissioners on their European junket, “the problem in Washington [would have to] be worked out along Roman rather than Parisian lines.”⁴⁷ The commission aimed to restore “visual reciprocity” between the major monumental elements of the Mall.⁴⁸ Visual reciprocity accurately describes the manner in which Lin's memorial incorporates the diagonalization of L'Enfant's scheme.

The memorial's relationship to the Lincoln and Washington monuments is frequently discussed by critics and no less frequently documented by photographers. In his extensive analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall, for example, philosopher Charles Griswold argues that Lin's composition — which he abbreviates “VVM” — “points to, indeed cites, the two earlier [monuments].”⁴⁹ Griswold notes that “one's eye is naturally drawn to the Washington Monument” and that “one's reading of the VVM ... is interrupted halfway through by the sight of the two other symbols,” which “on a bright day one also sees [in the surface of VVM] ... along with one's own reflection”;⁵⁰ he adds that Lin's memorial “invites one to pause midway and consider the names in light of our own memories of Washington and Lincoln”;⁵¹ he further observes that “the Washington and Lincoln Memorials are continually present as one enters [the] region [of the VVM]”; and that “they help give shape and direction to our questions.”⁵² Griswold claims that the greatest accomplishment of Lin's design is its interrogative character, which “encourages us to question America's involvement in the Vietnam War on the basis of a firm sense of both the value of human life and the still higher value of American principles so eloquently articulated by Washington and Lincoln.”⁵³ Not all critics are so enthusiastic:

Despite the reflections of the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument that play across the names, Maya Lin's beautiful wall transcends the possibility that the war is yet another element of our common life — like those structures of gleaming white marble with their affirmation of hope and healing — precisely by deciding that thousands upon thousands of deaths of soldiers names Willie J. Washington, Gary Lincoln, and Jose Antonio Castro should remain ‘a personal and private matter.’ Her scheme included no mention of Vietnam, no hint that America had sent the men and women listed on the *Wall* to meet their fate, no clue — except the odd

reflection of official Washington — that someone, all of us, might bear responsibility. Instead, she proposed to list the names in the order of death, to chart the dying that made up the unnamed war, and, as she told *Art in America*, ‘to return the vets to the time frame of the war.’ ‘The mode of listing the names makes them individual deaths, not deaths in a cause,’ the *National Review* rightly concluded; ‘they might as well have been traffic accidents.’⁵⁴

Yet Lin’s innovative interpretation of the listing of the names is nearer to the essence of the memorial than its formal style, which is idiomatic (not typological). Like all monuments, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial can be traced to ancient species of architecture that include “cippi, herms, termini, landmarks, flagpoles, obelisks, gravestones, [and] boundary stones,” vertical elements often distinguished by the presence of writing on their surfaces.⁵⁵ Griswold notes that “monument” derives from the Latin *monere*, “to remind” — “to admonish,” “warn,” “advise,” “instruct.”⁵⁶ People who visit monuments are travelers, pilgrims, and tourists who reside elsewhere. They do not stay long. They read, they move on.

Monuments have no interior in the domestic or psychological sense; they are positive and solid. They are “something appearing in the place of death, to point out its presence and to cover it up”; they address both “the victory of death and the victory over death.”⁵⁷ Monuments are constructed under the sign of Mercury: they guide, point, guard the way. Like cemeteries, they are “loci of movement, of swift and quick commerce, of confrontation, war, and death.”⁵⁸ The function of a monument is not to aid memory so much as furnish presence of mind, to stand forth before the living.⁵⁹

The Memorial’s V-shape; its funereal descent; its mirror finish; its ethereal virtuality in which the chiasmic reflection of visitors is “blurred into spectres of the dead standing behind their names”:⁶⁰ these are devices that dramatize the primary operation of the Memorial, which is to symbolize one magnitude of the Vietnam war before the public, so that the public may decipher its message and move on. This it does primarily through inscription: Lin explains that the point of using polished granite “is to see yourself reflected in the names.”⁶¹ Its mirror finish does not absorb the reflection of the living, as death does, but rather hands it back, returns it to the viewer: “Forever empty, the mirror receives everything but retains nothing.”⁶²

Through inscription and reflection, the inarticulability of death is thus deferred: memorials are legible substitutes for the illegibility of the void. Not granite, which is substrative, but names are used to face the wall. Visitors come to face the names, which transform an incalculable cost

into an interpretable quantity, so as to delimit the immeasurability of death and re-establish its boundaries. "Inscriptions on herms are the consequence and index of their exposure to movement and exchange," Xavier Costa writes. "The resulting friction, however, does not destroy the monument, but rather preserves it as an event rather than an object."⁶³ Writing supersedes formal and stylistic considerations. "White marble may be very beautiful," Maya Lin said, "but you can't read anything on it."⁶⁴ Reflection is secondary; mourning, in and of itself, is secondary: black granite is better for reading; one sees oneself reflected in the reading of the names. This concern for legibility — and its participation in the "scopic regime" of the Washington Mall — is precisely the thing that sets the Vietnam Veterans Memorial apart from minimalist sculpture. Lin's project lists names; *Tilted Arc* lists.

4. Richard Wollheim's early definition of minimalist objects is worth repeating here:

they have a minimal art content: in that either they are to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves and therefore possess very low content of any kind, or else the differentiation that they do exhibit, which may in some cases be very considerable, comes not from the artist but from a non-artistic source, like nature or the factory.⁶⁵

Minimalism rejects Abstract Expressionism and the privilege of interior emotion over external fact; it rejects the *a priori*; it rejects idealism and illusion. The rhetoric of minimalism is phenomenological. It repudiates all classical notions of a prior self (and of prior space and ground upon which the visibility of objects and events is founded)⁶⁶ and calls for practice that takes the question back to things. Minimalist materialism externalizes meaning and declares that "there need be no connection between a final art object and the psychological matrix from which it issued."⁶⁷ This expurgation of ideality and interior intention violently displaces the mythology of the "artist."

Minimalist ideology abjures commodification, scandalizes art as 'capital', and sets out to expose the institutional luster of galleries and museums. Wollheim's definition of the minimal object resonates most accurately in Serra's early work — lead splashing, manipulated rubber sheeting, rolled lead, extensions of the limits of art that, like other Minimalist works, "[appear] to many observers as not art at all."⁶⁸ In 1969, Serra shifts scale. He begins to arrange materials of enormous weight, hot rolled steel plates usually, into precisely (often precariously) balanced "constructions," such as *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969) and *Skullcracker Series* (1969). These constructions do not define but rather dilate "the boundary of [their] tendency to overturn."⁶⁹ Serra's art "is not

an art of punctuation,” as Bois writes, “it is an art of montage, an art that is not satisfied to interrupt the continuity of temporality, but produces continuity by double negation, by destroying the pictorial recovery of continuity through discontinuity, dissociation, and the loss of identity within the fragment.”⁷⁰

Serra carries his project further into this dilation of time in later works, which Bois interprets on the basis of their parallax effect, the “displacement of the apparent position of a body, due to a change in position of the observer.”⁷¹ Bois traces this phenomena through the picturesque garden into the optical rupture of Piranese’s *Carceri*, and documents its elaboration in the work of Eisenstein and Le Corbusier. Having established this genealogy, he reminds us that “all of Serra’s oeuvre is an implicit reply” to the critic Michael Fried, who in the June, 1967 essay, “Art and Objecthood,” launched a “fundamental and vehement attack on minimalism,” which he condemns as theatricality.⁷²

Fried, after Greenberg, correctly hangs his defense of modernism on Kant, in the Critique of Judgment, first book, first section, first part. Bois suggests that Greenberg and Fried might have read a little further to discover criteria more appropriate to minimalism than those grounded in beauty; he directs us to book II, “Analytique of the Sublime,” which Bois notes “is the only passage in the whole *Critique of Judgment* where Kant speaks in temporal terms ... of the mechanism of the aesthetic imagination.” There Kant writes that “the sublime can be found in the formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented in it, and yet its totality is also present to thought.”⁷³ Eco has called art which permits “the merest order within maximum disorder” the richest form of communication there is, “richest because most open”; Serra’s sculpture satisfies Eco’s description and Kant’s: it is “problematic, liminal ... characteristic of a kind of [art] that thrives on ambiguity, indeterminacy, the full fecundity of the informal.”⁷⁴

5. Like his colleague Robert Smithson and other earth-workers, Serra for a time moved his production well outside the sphere of gallery commerce. *Shift*, Serra’s most ambitious rural installation, was planned and produced around the same time as Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, built at Rozel Point on the Great Salt Lake, and Heizer’s *Double Negative*, a pair of huge notches cut out of the edge of Nevada’s Virgin River Mesa; like these works *Shift* exercises questions of perception, habitation, and boundary on a geographically remote site. As Douglas Crimp notes, however, Serra found the vast, rural expanse “unsatisfactory ... a mock heroism”: “‘No,’ he said, ‘I would rather be more vulnerable and deal with the reality of my living situation’.”⁷⁵ Serra lives in Manhattan, which Max Weber described as the perfect “metaphor for capitalist modernity: magnificently ... fragmented, ‘a mad pell-mell’.”⁷⁶ Both the vulnerability

and the volatility of *Tilted Arc*, perhaps Serra's most notorious urban work,⁷⁷ is perhaps a consequence of Serra's "real aspiration": to relinquish the "protective moral envelope" of the cultural institution, to take sculpture "into a greater dialogue, for better or for worse, with the general condition of where people are," and to "deal head-on with their architectural sites."⁷⁸

Tilted Arc was a curved Cor-Ten steel plate, twelve feet high, two-and-a-half inches thick, 120 feet long. Cor-Ten is a highly refined, corrosion-resistant weathering steel that oxidizes over time to a dark amber color, often mistaken for rust. The sculpture nearly bisected the small, semicircular, granite-paved Federal Plaza, which is located next to Foley Square in lower Manhattan. The curved plane of *Tilted Arc* listed one foot off perpendicular concave-wise, in the direction of the Jacob Javits Federal Office Building and the U.S. Court of International Trade, which bound the north and west sides of the plaza. *Tilted Arc* stood for seven years, four months, and fifteen days.

The dismantling of *Tilted Arc* on the Ides of March in 1989 ended Serra's long battle to enjoin the GSA Regional Administrator from removing the sculpture. The first serious objections to the work immediately followed its installation. They were issued primarily by Edward D. Re, chief judge of the U.S. International Court of Trade. After an initial flurry of petitions, these early protests subsided. Under the Reagan Administration, however, with the appointment of a new regional administrator, the chief judge found a more receptive ear. At his inquiry, the regional administrator proceeded to build a case against *Tilted Arc* based on several facts and claims: there had been no public review of the proposed work prior to its installation; once installed, the sculpture incommoded the plaza; it precluded concerts and other public events; it rendered the plaza uninhabitable; it attracted graffiti, trash, and homeless loiterers; it created a security hazard, made surveillance of the plaza impossible, and (by virtue of its material strength, concavity, and inclination) could be used to direct the force of a terrorist bomb toward the opposing federal office buildings.

Serra argues that *Tilted Arc* is permanent and site-specific: to remove it is to destroy it. In the brief he before the U.S. Court of Appeals, Serra sought to reverse the unfavorable findings of the U.S. District Court; there he filed a complaint "for violation of [his rights under] the First and Fifth Amendments, for breach of contract, and for violation of the trademark and copyright laws and the Moral Rights Law of the State of New York."⁷⁹ He claimed he was protected under the original contract and denied due process. The courts agreed with the government: the GSA owned the work and could do with it what it sought fit, notwithstanding public sentiment (3,791 people had signed petitions for relocation of the sculpture, 3,763

against).⁸⁰ The debate and litigation surrounding *Tilted Arc* and coverage of the case in the press and in journals — more than 350 articles in local and national publications⁸¹ — would indicate something of the vitality of the question of publicness in contemporary rhetoric. Like the favor of the gods, the “public good” always authorizes the cause of both sides in a conflict, and always in the end becomes the victor’s to define.⁸²

7. Hannah Arendt finds two meanings for the word “public,” the first concrete, the second abstract. Publicness first of all is a form of appearance that presupposes the widest possible exposure, “the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others,” an unconditional being seen or being heard beyond the domestic shelter of familial and intimate relations; in this sense of the public, “appearance ... constitutes reality.”⁸³ In its second sense, public means “the world itself” — not the natural, but the artifactual world. The “space of appearance” is always structured, always a space between things. It is the space-made-visible to contain speech and action that are concerned with things-made-visible — equipment, art, institutions, language, politics, “space” itself — common things by which and around which diverse peoples gather. According to Arendt, this plurality enjoys a public world only to the extent that it endeavors to immortalize that world beyond its own transience, as distinct from a world in which life and its accumulations are elevated as the highest good.⁸⁴ Disinterest in the immortality of the world (a modern development) privileges bodily happiness (a short-lived, private matter) at the expense of political excellence. Excellent works and courage, in Arendt’s view, are characteristics of a kind of action undertaken in the space of appearance on behalf of its durability, upon which the public world depends. The implications of the decline of this world provide the scaffolding for Arendt’s political and philosophical research.

Insofar as it identifies “appearance” as an irreducible characteristic of publicness, Arendt’s conception of a public world still finds vitality in the Greek conception of space. Even Habermasian critical theory shares this “emphasis on public participation and the widest-reaching democratization of decision-making processes” with “republican or civic virtue.”⁸⁵ For Habermas, the durability of public life depends on “communicative reason”; he shifts the question from the space of appearance to the house of language, preferring, as Richard Rorty notes, its “problem-solving [as against its ‘world-disclosing’] function.”⁸⁶ Habermas argues for a democratic society that embodies “the universalism, and some form of the rationalism, of the Enlightenment,” which he wants to “update,” declaring (in a well-known moment) that “the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled.”⁸⁷ Habermas cannot accept Rorty’s alternative, a “poeticized culture” that accommodates

“reason and its other.”⁸⁸ We can abandon the opposition between reason and its “other,” Rorty says, only

when we abandon the notion that ‘reason’ names a healing, reconciling, unifying power — the source of human solidarity. If there is no such source, if the idea of human solidarity is simply the fortunate happenstance creation of modern times, then we no longer need a notion of ‘communicative reason’ to substitute for that of ‘subject-centered reason.’ We do not need to replace religion with a philosophical account of a healing and unifying power which will do the work once done by God.⁸⁹

Habermas would “insist that the transcendent moment of universal validity bursts every provinciality asunder,” but the “contingency of language,” Rorty argues, makes that “implausible”: in Rorty’s poeticized culture, as Dewey has written, “imagination is the chief instrument of the good ... art is more moral than moralities. For the latter either are, or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo ... The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets.”⁹⁰

An alternate account of the modernization of the public world (one that Habermas considers to be a “blind alley”⁹¹) might argue that the complex social and political transformations of late-capitalism preclude any hope of reconstituting an authentically democratic public sphere; in this account (Foucault’s, primarily), power rends visibility from classical models of communication and incorporates it into new mechanisms of control. Foucault seeks to demonstrate that space in the “postmodern polity” emerges out of a modern, panoptical “physics” that lightens and economizes the administration of power through a technology of “generalized surveillance.”⁹² This technology accelerates and intensifies supervision, such that all relations within a political or institutional “body” can be determined as disciplinary relations between observer and observed.⁹³ Anna C. Chave argues that this view “admits no possibility of a radical dismantling of systems of power and undertakes no theorizing or imagining of a society or world without domination.”⁹⁴

Clearly the potential for domination is a well-researched and theorized conflict of the primal scene. If we were to redraw the panoptical schema as the diagram of the gaze, what would the power relations look like?⁹⁵ In the diagram of the gaze, watcher and watched are central to accounts of visuality developed at the level of the subject, whose self-enclosure and spatial command are menaced and decentered by the appearance of (an)other in the same visual field; in the gaze of this other (this “irruption of alterity”) the subject becomes a spectacle, becomes object.⁹⁶ Such a thing as “postmodern appearance” would necessarily involve some account of the intersubjective dynamics between subject and other

(watcher and watched), such that power relations correspond to plural “visualities” inscribed by class, age, gender, capital, and other factors.

8. *Tilted Arc* was not just a speck in the tissue of Judge Re’s eye. His complaint that *Tilted Arc* was not art — that whatever art was not that “[‘awkward, bullying’], rusted steel barrier”⁹⁷—belies a likelier possibility: art is exactly what he and Diamond wanted out of sight. Mr. Diamond’s anaphylactic sensitivity to *Tilted Arc* legitimates Serra’s aims. *Tilted Arc* contradicted the policies of the federal bureaucracy just as belligerently as it contradicted the flat grids of glass and time that seek to (en)close Federal Plaza.

Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence and are not only most intimately connected with its money economy and intellectualistic character. These traits must also color the contents of life and favor the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without.⁹⁸

George Simmel’s prescience directs us to another, more essential site of Serra’s work. *Tilted Arc* irritated the visual and psychological field of its site at a more fundamental level. As I picture the sculpture standing in front of the Javits Building and the U.S. Court of International Trade, I am reminded of a fragment from Lacan’s discussion of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, when Lacan asks:

What do you see? What is this strange suspended, oblique object in the foreground in front of these two figures? The two figures are frozen, stiffened in their showy adornments. Between them is a series of objects that represent in the painting of the period the symbols of *vanitas*. At the same period, Cornelius Agrippa wrote his *De Vanitate scientiarum*, aimed as much at the arts as the sciences, and these objects are all symbolic of the sciences and arts as they were grouped at the time in the trivium and quadrivium. What, then, before this display of the domain of appearance in all its most fascinating forms, is this object, which from some angles appears to be flying through the air, at others to be tilted?⁹⁹

Widely published black-and-white photographs of *Tilted Arc* — no substitute for the thing itself, but all that we have left — reveal something of its uncanny “anamorphic deformation,” this phallic slash that cuts an umbral swath across the otherwise articulate, mathematized fabric of the site.

Tilted Arc resides along limina that traditional thought has constantly sought to draw out, as Mladen Dolar has suggested: "All the great philosophical conceptual pairs — essence/appearance, mind/body, subject/object, spirit/matter, etc. — can be seen as just so many transcriptions of the division between interiority and exteriority."¹⁰⁰ This threshold is the virtual site of all of Serra's sculpture. Serra resituates the "interior" of the work from the object to the viewer. He creates a disturbance, a transitive oscillation which fills the space between them and renders this radical division indistinct. His work opens up a "phenomenological fissure," within which emerges the "preobjectival condition for meaning" Krauss calls "the abstract subject."¹⁰¹

9. *Tilted Arc* presupposes a passerby.¹⁰² What was the nature of their encounter such that the passer-by was made to feel anxious or threatened by the work? What did Judge Re see? Serra's consideration of this encounter was primary in his preparation for *Tilted Arc*: "My sculptures are not meant for the viewer to stop, look, and stare at ... *Tilted Arc* was built for the people who walk and cross the plaza, for the moving observer."¹⁰³ Serra wants *Tilted Arc* to interrupt the passer-by; he wants it to operate on the space of a distracted encounter; he sites it to provoke intercorporeity, which shocks and then reorients the viewer:

Space becomes the sum of successive perceptions of the place. The viewer becomes the subject. One's identity as a person is closely connected with the experience of space and place. When a known space changes through the inclusion of a site-specific sculpture, one is called upon to relate to the space differently ... This experience may startle some people.¹⁰⁴

Serra's "startled" subject has encountered what might be called the "uncanny" dimension of the work.¹⁰⁵ It is uncanny in the sense that it blurs the line between subject and object, points "neither to interior nor exterior," and gives rise to a moment in which "the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior."¹⁰⁶ Serra's sculpture operates in the crevice between comfort and unease, where the uncanny takes root. He draws the viewer into the flesh of the work (what the work "is") at precisely the same moment he or she is awash in the absence of figuration (what the work "isn't"). Richard Sennett would not suffer this reading of Serra's work; he "disagree[s] with the idea that there is an unconscious to art and architecture which unleashes the uncanny or the unexpected of the city when analyzed by people like myself."¹⁰⁷ For Dolar, however, postmodernism is "a new consciousness about the uncanny as a fundamental dimension of modernity."¹⁰⁸

Essential to the question of the uncanny is the problem of the eye itself, the primal organ that engenders the seeing-being seen dyad.¹⁰⁹ It is

thus to the intersubjective dimension of the visual conflict between *Tilted Arc* and the administrative/judicial apparatus that we might next turn: *Tilted Arc* was not just a nasty speck in the authoritarian eye of its chief detractors, it was the embodiment of the gaze of the Other. Dolar develops this thought when he writes: “Lacan’s specification that the best presentification of the object is the gaze ... names the object and thus assigns it a place, but the gaze in its formal structure is rather a device to open a ‘non-place,’ the pure oscillation between an emptiness and a fullness.”¹¹⁰ Notwithstanding the phenomenological anchorage of minimalism or Serra’s determination to wipe the slate clean, “there is no direct apprehension of the real, no possible liberation from imagoes, no unmediated reading of a text.”¹¹¹ “Vision is socialized,” Bryson tells us;¹¹² “vision ... is not just ‘seeing,’ but expresses a prior relation to the object”:¹¹³ “You never look at me from the place from which I see you,” Lacan says. “Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see.”¹¹⁴

In consciousness [writes Ellie Ragland-Sullivan] the intersubjective element involved in ‘seeing oneself seen’ has to do with knowing that the other knows that one is being looked at. The intersubjective element appears mysteriously to consciousness when a person experiences self as an object of an-other’s gaze — whether present or absent — and the gaze catalyzes a phenomenology of judgment in the form of shame, modesty, blushing, fear, prestige, rage, and so on. The Other’s gaze triumphs over the eye, subjectivizing the relationship between gaze and eye, or seeing and knowing. Such a radical subversion of consciousness by the unconscious is the antithesis of the transparency and continuity between self and world that phenomenology assume.¹¹⁵

Provisionally, at least, we might conclude about Serra what Lacan concludes about Holbein, that “[he] makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated — annihilated in the form that is, strictly speaking, the imaged embodiment of the minus-phi $[(-\phi)]$ of castration, which for us, centres the whole organization of desires through the framework of the fundamental drives.”¹¹⁶

10. One could argue that Maya Lin’s composition recodes the Mall; or that by virtue of its color and severity it constitutes a sort of non-narrative “Other” that criticizes Washington’s white monumental precinct; or that the sleek, black, half-buried “V” — gash, book, polyvalent initial — inscribes an iconographical symbolism directly into the Mall’s surface, one that embodies both the tragedy and ambiguity of the Vietnam war without compromising the heroism or dignity of those who fought in it, both living and dead. Many critics and journalist have cleaved to this view.

True enough: Maya Lin's composition dramatically minimizes the use of conventional tectonic elements; it dramatically minimizes its intervention in the landscape of the park; but on this basis alone it cannot be said to participate in the art practice called Minimalism. What Lin's composition does participate in (thoughtfully so) is the visual dominion of the capital Mall. Its "modern" form, as even Charles Griswold concedes, "is no more [controversial] than many other monuments in the same area."¹¹⁷ Its plan is so conspicuously contrived from the center-points of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial that its own space and form become adjunctive, not disruptive. It participates in the "visual reciprocity" prescribed by Burnham and McKim. It schematizes the Mall and sustains it, even though there is no life there.

Lin's monument clearly and effectively expropriates the style of minimalist art and earthworks, but I am not ready to concede that its differences from Minimalism can be explained on the basis of a Bloomian "poetic misreading or misprision proper."¹¹⁸ It takes along little else from Serra's (or minimalism's) lessons but form; on examination, its phenomenological affect reduces to several, binary, compositional devices, including its mirroring effect.

The visitor's own reflection in the highly polished granite, and the reflections of the adjacent Lincoln and Washington Memorials, also pull each viewer dramatically into the experience. These simple but powerful connections helped a nation heal itself.¹¹⁹

Here we should perhaps take the question of the Memorial's mirror finish one step further. Against the chaos of absolute loss (the reality behind the list of names), Lin's mirror finish "[reflects] back to the subject ... the organization and order of the good Gestalt always there in potentia, and, by means of its reflection, always assuring the viewing subject a concomitant logical and visual control."¹²⁰ In the face and listing curve of *Tilted Arc*, on the other hand, Serra confronts the viewing subject with "a kind of amorphousness, the threat that a body 'that suffers in being organized in no way at all' lies behind the surface."¹²¹ Serra "breaks the mirror," Lin polishes it.

At any rate, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is no *Shift*, no *Skullcracker*. Anna C. Chave would not hold that against it; she criticizes the patterns of violence, domination, aggressiveness, and negation that characterize minimalist "rhetoric" (although, according to Mitchell, "violence may be in some sense 'encoded' in the concept and practice of public art").¹²² Chave notes that "minimalism dismays viewers by its obdurate blankness, by the extreme limitations of its means, by its harsh or antiseptic surfaces and quotidian materials, and by its pretensions, in

spite of all of this, to being fine art.”¹²³ On the basis of a reading like Blum’s, which traces Lin’s composition back to work by Carl Andre, Donald Judd, David Smith, Richard Serra, and Robert Morris, one might initially conclude that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial belongs in the same group as those so Chave indicts. Although the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was initially attacked for many of the features Chave condemns, it renders the minimalist style in a manner that is more-or-less acceptable to the “bourgeois” sensibilities Tom Wolfe claimed it ignored, the same sensibilities that governed the selection and subsequent adjudication of the monument’s design.¹²⁴ In other words, Lin’s design successfully domesticates the minimalist idiom — Mitchell and Hess even suggest that she “feminizes” it. Certainly, the survival of Maya Lin’s design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial against such formidable opposition as Ross Perot, the Secretary of the Interior, and a phalanx of senators, representatives, and influential celebrities, indicates the extent to which her proposal successfully ameliorates what Chave calls the “dismay” of the public. As Elizabeth Hess notes (contrary to Blum, perhaps), the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is “totally nonaggressive.”¹²⁵ In its own right, it has become “a place of pilgrimage and an icon of national healing.”¹²⁶

Certainly this alternate view has some merit: that Lin’s domestication of minimalist “rhetoric” is, in fact, an effective criticism of it — that, for Lin, as some have argued, what is minimized is the disturbance of the landscape, the heroizing of the war, the glorification of its violence, and any further valorization of war’s infernal commerce. Such an assessment of Lin’s artistic strategy, notwithstanding the Memorial’s minimalist palette, seems to satisfy Chave’s call for resistance to “the unyielding face of the father”: “A persuasive case can be made, after all, that the patriarchal overvaluation of power — at the expense of mutuality, toleration, or nurturance — can be held to account for almost all that is politically reprehensible and morally lamentable in the world. The case can be made as well that what is most badly needed are, at least for a start, visions of something different, something else.”¹²⁷

Mary Miss seems to have “something different” in mind when she enumerates questions aimed at the reform of public art: “How can it be made accessible? ... What role can art have in the development of the built environment? ... Can we provide some sort of physical or psychological relief and create intimate spaces that are approachable in such a context? Can we introduce alternatives into our culture — reintroduce human scale or time for reflection?”¹²⁸ Richard Sennett is sympathetic with this view: “One thing I would love to see modern sculptors play with is how, rather than marking an urban space — marking the fact that it is windswept, cold and empty — rather than being

a critic, they could become a creator, actually creating spaces of sanctuary, create something people want to sit on, that makes people feel secure ... A lot of public sculpture is concerned with a critique of the public realm rather than a much more active, and, to my idea, resistant role of actually attempting to create a good social space.¹²⁹ Scott Burton, a vocal advocate of “new public art,” calls for a more aggressive insistence on the “usefulness” of public installations: “All my work,” Burton asserts, “is a rebuke to the art world.”¹³⁰

Rosalind Deutsche is suspicious of the “distinctly moralistic cast” of Burton’s demand for a greater degree of social responsibility in the production of public art. Artists and developers who collaborate in an attempt to reconstitute the “beautiful city” certainly come together around familiar classical principles: the didactic compass of public art and architecture; the dignifying role of sculpture and ornament; the ordering of the constructed world as a prerequisite for social stability and productive public life.¹³¹ Such collaborations seem to want to condense into small, artistic interventions the ultimate ethos of the Albertian city, which is to create an exemplary stage for the acting out of political duty — virtuous, correct, ennobled by geometry and proportion. And how different are the objectives of contemporary market-driven practices that trumpet reformist themes — e.g., new, highly controlled and regulated urban and neighborhood development models (such as Battery Park City, Seaside, or other similarly scripted projects); community or urban design review; and aesthetic legislation in general. Certainly such aims underlie the mission of the GSA, whose Art-in-Architecture program funded Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (and who ultimately removed it over Serra’s objections). But, as Deutsch accurately observes, “this is the real social function of the new public art: to reify as natural the condition of the late capitalist city into which they hope to integrate us.”¹³²

11. In the contemporary West, in Nietzsche’s “evening land,”¹³³ even Habermas agrees that the chances for a democratically driven cultural modernism — the ability of the life-world “to become able to develop institutions out of itself which set limits to the internal dynamics and imperatives of an almost autonomous economic system and its administrative complements” — are “not very good.”¹³⁴ Public experience, whether spatial or communicative, is overshadowed not only by a radically different description of appearance and subjectivity, but by the dissolution of the ideas of progress and overcoming inherent in the historicity of neoclassical and modern urban structures. One view describes the extreme secularization of postmodern experience, where progress is routine and where all unities splinter into diverse micro-narratives, where “everything tends to flatten out at a level of contemporaneity and simultaneity, thus producing a de-historization of

experience.”¹³⁵ In this world, the baroque monumentality of the Washington Mall obtains only as a sepulchral precinct. Contemporary urban topology is shaped by “disproportion and incommensurability”; it describes an “accidental, heterogeneous space where parts and fractions become essential.”¹³⁶

Detractors who argued that at least in relation to Federal Plaza *Tilted Arc* was disproportionate and incommensurable were correct. The site-specificity of *Tilted Arc* consisted precisely in its fractious occupation of a trivial urban space, which Serra intended to alter:

I'm not interested in augmenting the site or in decorating the site, I'm not interested in the work being subservient to the site. I'm interested in declaring my own place and space, which is specific to sculpture and nothing else. I'm interested in sculptural conditions, in sculptural spaces and places, and in making those conditions possible. I'm not interested in doing monuments, because monuments usually memorialize a person, a place or an event, and I don't attribute any descriptive symbolism to my works. People call my works monumental because they're large, but in no way do they have anything to do with the history of monuments.¹³⁷

Serra declared: “After [*Tilted Arc*] is created, the space will be understood as a function of the sculpture.”¹³⁸ *Tilted Arc* did not affirm but rather negated the sense of “belonging” that persists in the notion of space and place as sanctuary, home, or genius loci; it opened “a hole in reality which is immediately also that which comes to fill it with an unbearable presence, with a being more being than being, vacuum and plenitude all in one, the plenitude as the direct consequence of emptiness.”¹³⁹ As art, it anticipated (even provoked) the reformulation of public/private distinctions, which characterize the changing conditions for urban habitation.

In the postmodern city, electronic flux and spectral projections have diminished the political significance and efficacy of static urban representations such as monuments and memorials — such as architecture: “The emergence of form and volume intended to exist as long as their physical material would allow has been replaced by images whose only duration is one of retinal persistence.”¹⁴⁰ The rise and fall of *Tilted Arc* — the prosecution of its case within the increasingly interconnected structures of law and publicity (here used in both senses of the word) — constitutes a vivid episode in the epochal shift from city to post-city: “I know that the centres of the polis, those of power, religion, knowledge,” Gianni Vattimo says, “for the very reason that they become

plural, are no longer conceivable in the same terms.”¹⁴³

Paul Virilio describes the postmodern city as the “city without gates.” To the extent that the contemporary city “still occupies a piece of ground,” Virilio writes, “it no longer corresponds ... to the opposition between center and periphery.”¹⁴² Virilio’s analysis of the contemporary city extends especially to structures of communication. Modern machines and teletechnologies — elevators, subways, electronic media, “the transmissions revolution of the absolute speed of electromagnetic waves” — distort the dimensions of proximity between peoples and communities.¹⁴³ Virilio warns of an “unnoticed pollution of distances that [not only] organize our relationship to others but equally to the world of sensible experience”; he calls this degradation of time and distance “gray pollution.”¹⁴⁶ Teletechnologies “abolish directions” within a geographical scope, leaving open the problem of orientation: “transformation into a metropolis cannot constitute a pure and simple loss of the centre,” Vattimo notes, “but a requalification of the very idea of a centre, in a condition of multi-centrality; not only of the external spaces, but first and foremost, of the interior space of the ‘subject’.”¹⁴⁵

The primary difference between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and *Tilted Arc* is that the former still occupies “‘the origin of coordinates’” — it still positions the eye “at the privileged viewing point of an optico-geometric mastery of space.”¹⁴⁶ *Tilted Arc* both created and occupied differently constituted space. Like other works by Serra, it dismantled the “projective point of Renaissance perspective, which suspends a disembodied single ‘eye’ before the visual array,” and activated instead a felt relation to the object that “thickens the world for the perceiver.”¹⁴⁷ I would only add that this encounter invariably activates a thickening within the subjective, self/other complex, so that the phenomenal reorientation suggested by the art also reverberates, even if subconsciously, in the communicative and political dimension.

If Krauss’s “historical rupture” occurs in the vicinity of the question of the subject, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and *Tilted Arc* appear to sit on opposite sides of it. It would be convenient to conclude that the former is a modernist work, the latter postmodernist. Yet to divide them this way suggests more than simple differences: it suggests that one is discontinuous with the other, even foreign to it; that they are not coupled within a homogenous historical moment, but temporally disjunctive; that they do not indicate a common temporality or the line of a common horizon, but rather the line of some epochal fissure. I am thrown back from this extreme conclusion, much as I’d hoped it would galvanize important differences between the two works, by a thought from Franco Rella. Rella argues, quoting Lyotard, that “the postmodern ‘decidedly forms part of the modern’ and that ‘a work cannot become modern if in

the first place it is not postmodern.’ Postmodernism understood in this way is not, as Gianni Vattimo has said, ‘modernism at its end,’ but modernism in its nascent state.’¹⁴⁸ Dolar might add: “[Postmodernism] doesn’t imply a going beyond the modern, but rather an awareness of its internal limit, its split, which was there from the outset.”¹⁴⁹

Lin’s Memorial ends at, and Tilted Arc opens to, such modern, mongrel times as these, the plural time of splintered public spheres.

We live in a period in which what in the past was unthinkable [Rella writes], owing either to distance or to its dimensions, is today rendered visible on a mass level. After centuries of interrogating the value of the image in relation to its referent, we are now confronted by images that have no object-referent whatever. Traversing the modern really leads us to go beyond its limits, even if these limits are not external but rather an internal frontier. More than ever, to think the modern is to think the limit: it is liminal thought ... Liminal thought, precisely because it is poised on the point at which the visible and invisible touch each other, where place and nonplace are tangents, is atopic thought. Atopy is perhaps the fundamental word of contemporary modernity.¹⁵⁰

Notes

- 1 Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 31–42.
- 2 Krauss returns to the Klein Group in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 14ff, where she examines it in relation to Lacan’s L schema; see also pages 104, 220, 320, and 189 ff., where she plots the oppositional structure of “value” using Greima’s semiotic square, which is extrapolated from the Klein Group. For a discussion of the Klein Group diagram, see (as Krauss recommends) Marc Barbut, “On the Meaning of the Word ‘Structure’ in Mathematics,” in Michael Lane, ed., *Introduction to Structuralism* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 367–388.
- 3 Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 21.
- 4 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 37. She begins with a square delimited by four oppositions: landscape (in the upper left-hand corner) opposes architecture (in the upper right) and creates the top horizontal (or “complex”) axis; not-landscape (in the lower left-hand corner) opposes not-architecture (in the lower right) and creates the bottom (or “neuter” horizontal axis. Krauss “expands” this field by superimposing a diagonally skewed square comprised four additional oppositions: site-construction (at the top, between landscape and architecture); axiomatic structures (on the right, between not-landscape and landscape); sculpture (at the bottom, between not-architecture and not-landscape); and marked sites (on the left, between architecture

- and not-architecture). Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in Foster, ed., 36–38.
- 5 Barbara Hoffman, "Law for Art's Sake in the Public Realm," in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 113.
- 6 Ibid., 104.
- 7 My discussion of the first two of these is especially indebted to Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the *Liberal Tradition*, and Jürgen Habermas," in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 73–98.
- 8 Ibid., 75, 78.
- 9 Worth noting here is the organization of the meanings of the word "subject" and its adjective form, in the third and latest edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. Had I written instead "in the constitution of the subject," as I did in an earlier draft, I would be depending upon second sub-definition in the last of eight discrete definitions found under the noun form of the word "subject": "8.(b) Philosophy: The mind or thinking part as distinguished from the object of thought." In *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (2d edition) this meaning appears as the seventh definition of "subject" — "in philosophy, that in which any characteristics inhere; a thing considered as apart from its attributes or qualities; hence, the ego; the thinking agent; the self, or personality of the thinker, as distinguished from everything outside of the mind." In the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the first definition under "subject" is "one who is under the rule of another or others"; in Webster's, "one who or that which is under the power, control, influence, observation, or action of some other person or thing." Norman Bryson demonstrates how both definitions operate in his essay, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in Hal Foster, ed. *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), when he elaborates Sartre's story of the watcher in the park:
- "Sartre's narrative involves two stages. In its first movement, Sartre enters a park and discovers that he is alone: everything in the park is there for him to regard from an unchallenged center of the visual field. All of the park unfolds before this absolute center of a lived horizon: the subject resides at the still point of the turning world, master of its prospects, sovereign surveyor of the scene. In this initial exhilaration of self-possession, nothing threatens the occupancy of the self as focus of its visual kingdom. But in Sartre's second movement, this reign of plenitude and luminous peace is brought abruptly to an end: into the park and into the watcher's solitary domain there enters another, whose intrusion breaks the peace and fractures the watcher's self-enclosure. The watcher is in turn watched: observer of all observers, the viewer becomes spectacle to another's sight. Now all the lines of force which had converged on the center of the watcher's lived horizon turn, reverse, and reconverged on the space of the intruder and his irruption. Before, all of the perspective lines had run in from the horizon towards the watcher in the park; now another perspective opens up, and the lines of flight race away from the watcher self to meet the new point of entry. For the intruder himself stands at his own center of things, and draws towards and into himself everything he sees; the watcher self is now a tangent, not a center, a vanishing point, not a viewing point, an opacity in on the other's distant horizon. Everything

reconverges on this intrusive center where the watcher self is not: the intruder becomes a kind of drain which sucks in all of the former plenitude, a black hole pulling the scene away from the watcher self into an engulfing void.” (88–89)

Bryson’s use of words like “master,” “sovereign,” “kingdom,” and “reign” seem to suggest the first definition of “subject,” the one related to “power, control, influence, and observation,” and yet Sartre’s watcher is clearly the subject of the (seventh and) eighth definitions, “the ego, the thinking agent.” The entrance of the intruder literally collapses the eighth definition into the first. This transaction between the two meanings of subject suggests certain psychoanalytic schema. Rosalind Krauss confirms as much when she uses a different section of *Being and Nothingness* (about 50 pages after the section analyzed by Bryson) in her discussion of Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant donnés*, in *The Optical Unconscious*:

“It is Sartre’s chapter on ‘The Look’ that, inadvertently of course, tells us quite a lot about Duchamp’s ‘voyeur.’ For here is the passage where Sartre, arrested in front of a door just like Duchamp’s participant in the *Etant donnés*, depicts himself poised at a keyhole that has become nothing but a transparent vehicle for his gaze to penetrate ... And if, in this position, hunched and peering, Sartre is no longer ‘for’ himself, it is because his consciousness leaps out beyond him toward the still unseen spectacle taking place behind the as yet unbreached opacity of the door. Yet in this scenario, as we know, what comes next is not the capture of the spectacle but the interruption of the act. For the sound of footsteps announces that the gaze of someone else has taken him both by surprise and from behind.

It is as this pinioned object, this body bent over a keyhole, this carnal being trapped in the searchlight of the Other’s gaze, that Sartre thickens into an object, and thus an outsider to his own eyes. For in this position he is no longer pure, transparent intentionality beamed at what is on the door’s far side, but rather, simply as body caught on this side, he has become a self that exists on the level of other objects of the world, a self that has suddenly become opaque to his own consciousness, a self that he therefore cannot know but only be, a self that for that reason is nothing but a pure reference to the Other. And it is a self that is defined by shame. ‘It is shame,’ Sartre writes, ‘which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look. It is the shame ... which makes me live, not know the situation of being looked at.’

To be discovered at the keyhole is, thus, to be discovered as a body; it is to thicken the situation given to consciousness to include the hither space of the door, and to make the viewing body as object for consciousness. As to what kind of object, Sartre defines this only in relation to the Other — the consciousness of the one who discovers him, and in whose look he ceases totally to master his world. As for himself, this thickened, carnal object produces as the content of his consciousness the carnation of shame. (111–112)”

In light of these accounts of vision, the first dictionary definitions seem to describe the subject as object, the (seventh and) eighth, the subject as “master:” Here the persistently reflexive mechanism of the gaze reveals the instability of the term “subject” in all its restless contours.

- 10 Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 33.
- 11 Ibid., 35.
- 12 Ibid., 36.
- 13 Ibid., 39.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in Howard Singerman, ed. *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945–1986* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 162: "minimalism ... figure[s] not as a distant dead end but as a brisure of (post)modern art, an in-between moment of a paradigm shift."
- 16 These two projects are discussed at length, often jointly, in several of the contributions to W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), which contains essays from past issues of *Critical Inquiry*, including material originally presented at an August 1989 symposium sponsored by Chicago Sculpture called "Art and Public Spaces: Daring to Dream." In addition to numerous references to both the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial and *Tilted Arc*, Mitchell's anthology contains an article by Richard Serra called "Art and Censorship," which is also published in *Richard Serra: Writings, Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and an often-cited essay by Charles L. Griswold entitled "The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," which I discuss at some length below.
- 17 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Introduction: Utopia and Critique," in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.
- 18 W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: Do the Right Thing," in Mitchell, ed., 32–37.
- 19 John Hallmark Neff, "Daring to Dream," in Mitchell, ed., 6–7.
- 20 W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art," in Mitchell, ed., 36–37.
- 21 Neff, 6.
- 22 Testifying against relocation at the March 1985 public hearings convened to debate the future of *Tilted Arc*, Roberta Smith pointed to the Memorial as evidence of Richard Serra's stature: "[*Tilted Arc*] is an excellent example of Minimalism, which has already been watched by the influential. The Vietnam Veterans' Monument [sic], which has been such a hit in Washington, is a result of someone working with Serra's ideas. So now we have the real thing, the original, genuine article right in our midst" [Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 103]. Art critic Robert Storr seems to concur. In his essay on the hearings, published several months later, he noted that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial "not incidentally ... owes its sculptural syntax to Serra" [Robert Storr, "'Tilted Arc': Enemy of the People?" in *Art in America* (September 1985): 93]. In the extensive commentary on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, art magazines especially resort to the adjective "minimalist" to locate Lin's design. Elizabeth Hess calls Lin's design "a combination Minimalist sculpture-earthwork"; later in the same article, she notes that "Tom Wolfe, who published a well-timed article in the *Washington Post* ... [called] Lin's memorial 'non-bourgeois art,' or art 'that baffled the

general public.' Wolfe compared Lin's experience to that of Carl Andre in Hartford and Richard Serra in downtown Manhattan. He concluded that her memorial, too, was abstract and elitist. Yet no one, including Wolfe, has actually been baffled by the memorial," [Elizabeth Hess, *A Tale of Two Memorials*," *Art in America* (April 1983): 122, 126]. Critic Shirley Neilsen Blum, writing in *Arts Magazine*, goes somewhat further, putting Lin squarely into the Minimalist "school." She identifies the influence of Carl Andre, Donald Judd, David Smith, and Robert Morris (also, I must add, Corot, Monet, Stieglitz, the Wailing Wall, and most of funerary antiquity — see note 22): "the highly charged message of the Vietnam War Memorial [sic]" Blum writes, "is contained within the cool spare language of minimal art ... As in works by Richard Serra or Robert Smithson, the viewer must actively participate within the space defined by the work" [Shirley Neilsen Blum, "The National Vietnam War Memorial," *Arts Magazine* (December 1984): 125, 128].

Storr and Smith are obviously not suggesting that this construction derives its form from *Tilted Arc*, a twelve-foot-by-20-foot curved steel plate. No doubt they are thinking about a concrete sculpture by Serra called *Shift*, constructed between 1970 and 1972 on a farming field in King City, Ontario. *Shift* consists of six five-foot-high, eight-inch-thick concrete sections Serra calls "stepped elevations," which end-on-end span 815 feet [Rosalind Krauss, "Richard Serra, a Translation," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1985), 264]. Serra's theme in *Shift* is transitivity, action that is "carried from the subject to the object." [*American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "transitive."] In the making of the piece, the locations of the walls are established through the bodies of Serra and an associate, who by walking the field configure and then map the boundaries of contact between their two lines of sight within the existing topography. The walls register this mapping and therefore delimit a set of transitive, internal horizons that change and "shift" in relation to a lived engagement between viewer and art work.

Thus inscribed, *Shift* operates to supplant the "machinery of renaissance space," which depends on fixed and immutable measurements [Krauss, "Richard Serra, a Translation," 267]. In *Shift*, this idea of measurement as something external to the body is negated. The sculpture is not representational in any conventional sense, not an illusion, not a picture of anything that exists prior to bodily engagement. It is rather an armature for perception, purged of any figurative or symbolic baggage. Its content is precisely the "being-near-to" or "being-far-from" that knots body, wall, and field into a sort of temporal suspense, a vivid presence or "continuing" that Krauss calls an "erotics of process" [Krauss, "Richard Serra Sculpture" in Laura Rosenstock, ed., *Richard Serra/Sculpture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986), 21.] In this process, the body's motor project displaces vision as the singularly dominant mode of contact; no "conic vice" holds the wall in an idealized, anterior space [Amelia Jones, "The Absence of Body/The Fantasy of Representation," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 9 (May 1991): 12]. The wall "appears" only in its internal, ever-changing aspect, only in its proximity to the body, which activates the dialectic between made and found horizons. Both sculpture and field take place "as walked," permitting the viewer/subject to measure

- herself or himself “against the indeterminacy of the land.”[Krauss, “Richard Serra, a Translation,” 264.]
- 23 Richard Serra, “Richard Serra’s Urban Sculpture: An Interview by Douglas Crimp,” in *Richard Serra, Writings Interviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 126. This interview was first published in *Arts Magazine* in November, 1980; Krauss’s “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” was first published in *October* 8 (Spring, 1979).
- 24 Richard Serra, “Interview: Peter Eisenman,” in *Writings Interviews*, 147, 171.
- 25 Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” 172; see also Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), 224.
- 26 Foster, 172–73; Morris, 232.
- 27 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xviii. In respect of Serra’s antipathy toward architecture, see for example “Interview: Peter Eisenman,” 132, 146, 163, and 188; and in the same volume also see “Richard Serra and Alan Colquhoun,” 235. Yve-Alain Bois writes that “the relationship between architecture and Serra’s work is one of conflict: he says of his *Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin*, placed in Mies van der Rohe’s National Galerie in Berlin, that it was all done so that it would contradict the architecture” [Yve-Alain Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara,” trans. John Shepley, in Annette Michelson et al., eds., *October: The First Decade, 1976–1986* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 349].
- 28 Bois, 363.
- 29 Bois, 346.
- 30 “Elsewhere described by Walter Benjamin as the experience par excellence of modernism,” *Ibid.*, 362–363.
- 31 Mitchell, “The Violence of Public Art,” in Mitchell, ed., 37. Elizabeth Hess has also acknowledged the genital metaphor: “To add insult to injury, the eight male jurors had chosen a memorial with a distinctly female character, placing at the base of Washington’s giant phallus a wide V-shape surrounded by a grassy mound” [Hess, “A Tale of Two Memorials,” 126].
- 32 I am grateful to Nadir Lahiji for exercising the distinction in this instance between writing on the walls and writing of the walls. Here, of course, we are citing the title of Anthony Vidler’s seminal work on eighteenth century French architectural theory.
- 33 Serra, “Extended Notes from Sight Point Road,” in *Writings Interviews*, 171.
- 34 “Interview: Peter Eisenman,” 135.
- 35 See note 20.
- 36 Richard Serra, *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970–1989* (Yonkers, NY: The Hudson River Museum, 1980), 161, quoted in Krauss, *Richard Serra Sculpture*, 37.
- 37 Yve-Alain Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara,” 344, 346.
- 38 Richard Serra, *Richard Serra: Sculpture* (New York: The Pace Gallery, 1989), 67. The passage leading up this thought is important to repeat here: “It’s hard to convey ideas of weight from the objects of everyday life, for the task would be infinite; there is an

imponderable vastness to weight. However, I can record the history of art as a history of the particularization of weight ... I have more to say about the history of sculpture as a history of weight, more to say about the monuments of death, more to say about the weight and density and concreteness of countless sarcophagi, more to say about burial tombs ... more to say about Mycenaean and Incan architecture, more to say about the weight of the Olmec heads ... Everything we choose in life for its lightness soon reveals its unbearable weight. We face the fear of unbearable weight: the weight of repression, the weight of constriction, the weight of government, the weight of tolerance, the weight of resolution, the weight of responsibility, the weight of destruction, the weight of suicide, the weight of history which dissolves weight and erodes meaning to a calculated construction of palpable lightness."

- 39 Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 238.
- 40 Robert Campbell, "An Emotive Place Apart," *AIA Journal* (May 1983): 151. Campbell writes: "The story of how this unlikely and wonderful design came into existence is one of the classic competition stories, too familiar to need much detailing. Maya Ying Lin was 21 and a senior at Yale, planning a career as an architect, when some students (she wasn't one) persuaded an instructor, Andrew Burr, to offer a design studio on funerary architecture. Lin enrolled. The Vietnam competition was Problem Number 3 in the Burr studio." Burr's students visited the site in Washington, and Lin concluded that "a landscape solution seemed better" than "some big monument ... The notion of making the angle and aiming the wall at Washington and Lincoln came later, back in the studio ... 'Andy said, you have to make the angle mean something [Lin recalled]. And I wanted the names in chronological order because to honor the living as well as the dead it had to be a sequence in time.'" Campbell notes that "these were powerful intuitions, and they led directly to a powerful design. The briefest talk with its creator makes it clear that nothing about the memorial is either casual or lucky." He makes no mention of Boullée.
- 41 Helen Rosenau, ed. *Boullée's treatise on architecture: a complete presentation of the "Architecte, essai sur l'art,"* which forms part of the Boullée papers (MS 9153) in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (London: A. Tiranti, 1953), 80–81, quoted in M.J.C. Lemagny, *Visionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu* (Houston: The University of St. Thomas, 1968), plate 18, "Funerary Monument, typical of sunken architecture," 38. See also plates 15 ("Entrance to a Cemetery") and 17 ("Chapel of the Dead"). I have double-checked, but I am still not convinced that I have not overlooked, in my review of nearly a dozen articles on Lin's work, some reference to Boullée lying before me in plain sight. Most surprising is the absence of any mention of Boullée in Blum, "The National Vietnam War Memorial," which elaborates at great length the historical precedence for Lin's design (see note 22 above). Blum, for instance, is careful to mention that "Lin [had] taken a course in funerary architecture at Yale and surely was not unaware that the Wall evokes a whole history of funerary monuments. Blum proceeds to connect Lin's scheme to Mother Earth, to ancient Egyptian and Greek antecedents (pyramid, tholos, dromos, tumulus), to the graves of the Kings of Lydia in

Sardis, to the nine royal tombs at Mycenae and specifically to the tombs of Agamemnon, Alyattes, and Cephren, and to modern architecture and sculpture, but not, strangely enough, to Boullée. The writer's generosity and her great enthusiasm for Lin's project may help account for these attributions.

Worth mentioning here is a parenthetical remark made by Yve-Alain Bois in "A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara": at the beginning of his discussion about Serra and the sublime, Bois writes, "(I might add that a whole parallel could be traced between the idea formulated by Boullée of a buried architecture and Serra's sculptures that are sunk in the ground)." This coincidence was not the source of my argument about Lin and Boullée; in this case, Bois does not support his reference to "buried architecture" with a citation (it is commonly enough known).

- 42 For articulate accounts of the controversy surrounding Maya Lin's winning design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, see Elizabeth Hess, "A Tale of Two Memorials," *Art in America* (April 1993): 121–126; and especially Karal Ann Marling and Robert Silberman, "The Statue Near the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Art of Remembering," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1 (Spring 1987): 4–29.
- 43 Hess, 123.
- 44 For a tangential discussion of the relationship between McKim and Burnham, see my "Pennsylvania Station," *VIA* 10 (1990): 137–145.
- 45 Leland Roth, McKim, Mead & White Architects (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 251.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 253.
- 47 Richard Guy Wilson, "Architecture, Landscape, and City Planning," in *The American Renaissance 1876–1917* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1979), 84–85.
- 48 See Roth's succinct and useful discussion of the Washington Mall (*Ibid.*, 251–259), especially his conclusion: "In surveying the gradual development of Washington over half a century following [Theodore Roosevelt's] establishment of the Fine Arts Commission, one discovers that, except for the clearing and planting of the Mall, few of the Park Commission's specific proposals have been carried out literally, yet their basic scheme (and L'Enfant's original design) have been consistently reinforced. The essential qualities of space, order, and harmony among the parts have been maintained and 'reciprocity of sight' restored. Even the exigencies of two major world wars have not materially altered the pursuit of this plan. Fortunately, before the chance to reclaim this legacy had passed altogether, Burnham, Olmsted, and McKim rekindled L'Enfant's vision" (258); also see R. G. Wilson, 82–92.
- 49 Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," in Mitchell, ed., 92.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 102–103
- 51 *Ibid.*, 103, 108.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 54 Marling and Silberman, "The Statue Near the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Art of Remembering": 11.

- 55 Xavier Costa Guix, "Mercurial Markers," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1990), 1-7.
- 56 Griswold, 83.
- 57 Denis Holier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 6 (my italics).
- 58 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 59 Costa Guix, 4.
- 60 Donald Kunze, "Architecture as Reading; Virtuality, Secrecy, Monstrosity," *Journal of Architectural Education* 41 (Summer, 1988): 28.
- 61 Hess: 123. Lin adds: "Also the mirror image doubles and triples the space."
- 62 Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 281.
- 63 Costa Guix, 4.
- 64 Hess, 123.
- 65 Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art," *Arts Magazine* (January 1956). Reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art* (London: Studio Vista, 1969; New York: Dutton, 1968), 387, quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, "Tanktotem: Welded Images," in R. E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 198.
- 66 Krauss, "The Fountainhead," *Oppositions* 2 (January 1974): 64.
- 67 Krauss, "The Double Negative: A New Syntax for Sculpture," in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking, 1977), 266, 259.
- 68 Francis Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 101.
- 69 Serra, "Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture: An Interview with Douglas Crimp," in *Writings Interviews*, 129. On transitivity and the temporal dimension of Serra's work, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *Richard Serra / Sculpture*, ed. Laura Rosenstock (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986).
- 70 *Ibid.*, 364.
- 71 Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara," 350.
- 72 *Ibid.*, 368. See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), 116-147; Hal Foster also takes up Fried's argument in "The Crux of Minimalism," 173-175.
- 73 Bois, 370.
- 74 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 90.
- 75 Douglas Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity," in Rosenstock, ed., *Richard Serra/Sculpture*, 47.
- 76 Ira Katznelson, "Reflections on Space and the City," chap. 12 in *Power, Culture, and Place: Essays on New York City*, ed. John Hull Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 285.
- 77 Serra was awarded the commission for a permanent sculpture in Federal Plaza in 1979 after having been nominated by a National Endowment for the Arts-appointed panel. *Tilted Arc* was one of several hundred works to have been commissioned under the

Federal government's Art-in-Architecture program since its inception in 1963. For a description of the Arts-in-Architecture program and the projects completed under its aegis between 1972 and 1979, see Donald W. Thalacker, *The Place of Art in the World of Architecture* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1980); for a discussion of the legal implications of conflicts that have emerged between artists and tenants of buildings included in this program, see John Henry Merryman and Albert E. Elsen, *Law, Ethics, and the Visual Arts*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987): 353-374. The program was inaugurated and is still administered by the U.S. General Services Administration, which, to pay for public art, established an allowance of one-half of one percent of the estimated cost of construction for new and renovated Federal office buildings. "Such works," reads the GSA fact sheet on this program, "are intended to be an integral part of the total architectural design and enhance the buildings environment for the occupants and the general public" [General Services Administration Factsheet Concerning the Art-in-Architecture Program for Federal Buildings, " in Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk, 23]. Having won the commission, Serra immersed himself in the site, which he regarded as "undistinguished ... a total confusion of scale" [Richard Serra, "Paper Presented by Richard Serra to Tilted Arc Site Review Advisory Panel, December 15, 1987," in Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk, 184]. The banality of Federal Plaza by no means diminished his enthusiasm for the project. Studying the plaza and its patterns of use and traffic, he "found a way to dislocate ... [its] decorative function ... and actively bring people into the sculpture's context ... After the piece is created," he said, "the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture" [Storr: 92]. Full-scale mock-ups were built to determine the impact of the work on pedestrian activity. The GSA approved. On December 1, 1981, after seven months of construction, the installation of *Tilted Arc* was complete.

78 Serra, "Interview: Robert C. Morgan," in *Writings Interviews*, 187-88.

79 "Appeal Filed by Richard Serra in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, December 15, 1987," in Weyergraf-Serra and, 232. Serra's personal account of the *Tilted Arc* case serves as the introduction to the Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk documentation; it is also published as Richard Serra, "Tilted Arc Destroyed," in *Writings Interviews*, 192-214 (first published in *Art in America* 77 [May 1989], 34-47); see also, following in the same volume, Richard Serra, "Art and Censorship" (reprinted from *Critical Inquiry* 17 [Spring 1991], also reprinted in Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, 226-233).

80 Serra, "Introduction," in Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk, 9.

81 Ibid.

82 The transcripts of selected testimonies before Diamond's panel published in Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk suggest the possibility of multiple interpretations of "public": speaking in defense of *Tilted Arc*, Richard Serra testified before the hearing that *Tilted Arc* was "constructed so as to engage the public in a dialogue" (65); Gustave Harrow, Serra's attorney, argued that the acts of the hearings "disregard the responsibilities of public office and violate the terms of its trust" (71); Douglas Crimp testified at the hearing "not as a professional but simply as a member of the public" (73); Suzanne

Delehanty, director of the Neuberger Museum of the State University of New York at Purchase and a member of the original NEA nominating panel, testified that their decisions were informed by “a principle that has guided public art since antiquity — the spirit of place” (83); Benjamin Buchloch, professor of art history, testified that he did not “feel confident to judge the public’s taste [or] the public’s dislike of and discomfort with [*Tilted Arc*]” (91). Annette Michelson, professor of Cinema Studies, addressed “the notion of public interest as it relates to the situation at hand”; she argued that “Serra’s work has always been public,” and that it was constructed in a tradition that “redefined sculptural practice and its theorization [through] large-scale, publicly oriented and publicly challenging works” (95); artist Frank Stella addressed “the extension of visual culture into public spaces,” concerned that “no public dispute should force the gratuitous destruction of any ... civilizing effort” (100); William Rubin, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, testified that *Tilted Arc* “obliges us to question received values in general, and the nature of art and art’s relation to the public in particular” (101); Roberta Smith declared that *Tilted Arc* was “one of the two best public sculptures in New York City” (103); Betty St. Clair, an attorney, noted that “in the public sphere the privacy issue doesn’t exist. Once a piece of sculpture is erected in the public sphere there is no longer any privacy interest” (106).

Speaking against *Tilted Arc*, Jessie Gray, an artist, complained that “our public money is being squandered” (121); Peter Hirsch, an attorney, declared that “the public has not been given [the choice to buy art that it likes]. The public is saying, we don’t like [*Tilted Arc*]” (123); Margo Jacobs, a physical anthropologist, spoke to the panel “as a member of the public” and addressed “the sculpture’s effect ... on the public and the plaza, the public’s space,” which was “designed ... as a place for ... public assembly,” the effectiveness of which, she argued, was reduced by *Tilted Arc* (124); Shirley Paris, an area employee who decried *Tilted Arc* as “the Berlin Wall of Foley Square,” demanded that Federal Plaza be returned to its “original state: that of a public amenity” (126); and after the hearings, in his letter to the chief GSA administrator accounting for his decision to remove *Tilted Arc*, William Diamond invoked the “public” 19 times (142-149).

- 83 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50-51.
- 84 *Ibid.*, 319.
- 85 Benhabib, 86.
- 86 Jurgen Habermas, “Modernity — An Incomplete Project,” in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 113; and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 67.
- 87 Rorty, 67
- 88 *Ibid.*, 68. Reason’s “other,” Rorty writes, includes “the passions, Nietzsche’s will to power, Heidegger’s Being.”
- 89 *Ibid.*
- 90 *Ibid.*, 68–69.

- 91 J. Habermas, "Concluding Remarks," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 477–78.
- 92 See Michael J. Shapiro, "Language and Power: The Spaces of Critical Interpretation" and "Spatiality and Policy Discourse: Reading the Global City," in Michael J. Shapiro, *Reading the Postmodern Polity: Political Theory as Textual Practice* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 1–17; and 86–103.
- 93 For the seminal discussion of panopticism, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 195–228.
- 94 Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 (June 1990): 56.
- 95 Take, for example, Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Rear Window*. Slavoj Žižek notes that "the fascinating object that drives the interpretive movement"—Jeff's (James Stewart's) obsessive voyeurism, his rejection of Lisa (Grace Kelly), his determination to expose the murder he believes has taken place in the apartment across the courtyard — "is ultimately the gaze itself." Stewart plays a middle-aged, action photographer confined to his New York apartment by a work-related accident that leaves him in a cast up to his waist. "*Rear Window*," Žižek continues, "is ultimately the story of a subject who eludes a sexual relation by transforming his effective impotence into power by means of the gaze, by means of secret observation ... What we encounter here is ... one of Hitchcock's fundamental 'complexes,' the interconnection of the gaze and the couple power/impotence. In this respect, *Rear Window* reads like an ironic reversal of Bentham's 'Panopticon' as exploited by Foucault. For Bentham, the horrifying efficacy of the Panopticon is due to the fact that the subjects (prisoners, patients, schoolboys, factory workers) can never know for sure if they are actually observed from the all-seeing control tower — this very uncertainty intensifies the feeling of menace, of the impossibility of escape from the gaze of the Other. In *Rear Window*, the inhabitants of the apartments across the yard are actually observed all the time by Stewart's watchful eye, but far from being terrorized, they simply ignore it and go on with their daily business. On the contrary, it is Stewart himself, the center of the Panopticon, its all-pervasive eye, who is terrorized, constantly looking out the window, anxious not to miss some crucial detail." There is more to be said about this relationship, to be sure. Not unimportant is Stewart's use of teletechnology (first binoculars, then a huge telephoto lens) to further penetrate the rear windows across from his. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 91–93.
- 96 Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality*, 88–92, 95.
- 97 Edward D. Re, Chief Judge, U.S. Court of International Trade, in a letter to Gerald P. Carmen, Administrator, General Services Administration, August 18, 1981, in Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk, 26.
- 98 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. Richard Sennett (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 51.
- 99 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain

- Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 88.
- 100 Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night: Lacan and the Uncanny," *October* 58 (Fall 1991): 6.
- 101 Krauss, "Richard Serra Sculpture," 21, 37.
- 102 See Bois, 346.
- 103 Richard Serra, in "Selected Statement Arguing in Support of *Tilted Arc*," in Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk, eds., 65.
- 104 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 105 "I disagree with the idea that there is an unconscious to art and architecture which unleashes the uncanny or the unexpected in the city ... I think precisely that the problem for artists who are making public art, public sculpture, public architecture is that the repressive activities that are always bound up in making form have now been marshaled, mobilized and become functional in society. The repressions that a sculptor would engage with — or more particularly that an architect would engage with — are things that are understood by other people as the way buildings should look, the way they should function." Richard Sennett, "Richard Sennett with Bruce Fergusen," interview by Bruce Fergusen, in James Lingwood, ed., *New Works for Different Places: TWSA Four Cities Project* (Bristol: TWSA, 1990), 143–145.
- 106 Dolar: 6.
- 107 Sennett, "Richard Sennett with Bruce Fergusen," 143.
- 108 Dolar: 10.
- 109 See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, volume XVII (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 219–256; E.T.A. Hoffman, "The Sandman," in *Tales of Hoffman*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books), 85–125; and, generally, Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).
- 110 Dolar: 20. The rest of this paragraph is worth repeating here: "Frankenstein's story again reveals this simply and efficiently. The principal source of the uncanniness of the monster, for Frankenstein, is precisely the gaze. It is the being of the gaze. The point that Frankenstein cannot endure, during the creation of the monster, is the moment when the creature opens its eyes, when the Thing renders the gaze — it is this opening that makes it the Thing. When seeing 'those watery eyes, that seemed almost the same color as the dun-white sockets in which they were set,' Frankenstein runs away in horror. But the gaze comes to pursue him in his bedroom; the monster comes to his bedside — 'his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were set on me.' The emergence of this impossible subject is the emergence of the gaze — the opening of a hole in reality which is immediately also that which comes to fill it with an unbearable presence, with a being more being than being, vacuum and plenitude all in one, the plenitude the direct result of the emptiness."
- 111 Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 70.
- 112 Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality*, 88–92, 95.
- 113 Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana,

- IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 158.
- 114 Lacan, "The Line and Light," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 103.
- 115 Ragland-Sullivan, 95.
- 116 Lacan, 89.
- 117 Griswold, 81.
- 118 Harold Bloom, "Six Revisionary Ratios," in Harold Bloom, *Poetics of Influence*, ed. John Hollander (New Haven, CT: Henry R. Schwab, Inc., 1988), 101–103.
- 119 Sarah J. Rogers, "Public/Private: The Poetry and Prose of Maya Lin," in *Maya Lin: Public/Private*, catalogue of the exhibition, October 17, 1993–January 23, 1994 (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1994), 12.
- 120 Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 319.
- 121 *Ibid.*, 320.
- 122 Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art," in Mitchell, ed., 37.
- 123 Chave: 54.
- 124 Much to the satisfaction of Lin's defenders, the Memorial was built. Many such critics, who have perhaps prematurely lionized its designer (for example: Sarah J. Rogers, 6–21; and Mark Alden Branch, "Maya Lin: After the Wall," *Progressive Architecture* [August 1994]: 60–65), are understandably moved by the emotional and sentimental power of the war and its aftermath. Certainly the philosopher Charles Griswold is: "Even as the speakers expressed fears of entangling foreign alliances, most everyone [at the Memorial's dedication] seemed to feel that America is still like a ray of the sun in a somber world. In this way the ceremony and the Memorial once again served the cause of union. Complete strangers embraced each other. I repeatedly heard people saying 'welcome home' to veterans, as though they had not been back all the while. I shall never forget the sight of Vietnam veterans who, though looking somewhat tired in their tattered combat fatigues, proclaimed by their very costume that they were proud to have accepted the call of their country. One veteran was dressed partly in combat fatigues and partly in the sort of leather attire favored by motorcycle gangs. His lined face and disheveled hair spoke of countless trials and difficulties undergone since returning home. He stood there silently during the dedication staring at the ground with one arm raised high, holding for all to see a miniature American flag. At the conclusion of the ceremony he joined in the refrain of "God Bless America." Those words swept boldly through the chill air, expressing the belief that, in spite of everything, America remains fundamentally good [Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," in Mitchell, ed., 111]. "Vietnam," Eugene Matthews says, "is a country, not a war" [Michael Shapiro, "Pioneer Financier Eugene Matthews," *The New York Times Magazine* (28 August 1994), 35]: without further belaboring the many compelling implications of Professor Griswold's "philosophical thoughts," one need only juxtapose his view to an image of Chris Burden's "The Other Vietnam Memorial" (1991). Burden etches three million Vietnamese names — Phan Tuongtan, Vin Duc Vo, Bao Luong, and so forth — on the front and back of twelve 9-by-13-foot brass

“pages.” “I just thought somewhere there should be a memorial to the Vietnamese that were killed,” he says: “So I wanted to make this book ... that would be an official record of all these three million names. I would suspect that we will be lucky if we get twenty-five percent of the names; other ones would be nameless, basically faceless, bodies. They weren’t even written down. Little x’s as opposed to names. There will be more x’s, and that says something right there.” Robert Storr writes: “Maya Lin’s work lists by name every one of the American losses — 57,939 men and women. The Vietnamese figure is vastly larger and ultimately unknowable. At a minimum, it comes to 3,000,000 dead during just the American episode of the generations-long Indochina war. Derived from conversations with journalist and historian Stanley Karnow, former members of the South Vietnamese government, and contact with delegates of the present Vietnam regime, this number includes some 250,000 soldiers and 1,500,000 civilians and refugees in the South, some 700,000 military dead and 250,000 missing in action in the North, plus estimates of civilian losses in the North and along the heavily embattled border regions. Exact records equivalent to those kept by the Pentagon are not available from the various Vietnamese sources, although its own losses are remembered by virtually every family on both sides” [Robert Storr, *Dislocations* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 29].

- 125 Hess: 126.
- 126 Mark Alden Branch, “Maya Lin: After the Wall,” *Progressive Architecture* (August 1994): 63.
- 127 Chave: 55, 56.
- 128 Mary Miss, “On a Redefinition of Public Sculpture,” *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 59.
- 129 Sennett, “Richard Sennett with Bruce Fergusen,” 144.
- 130 Rosalyn Deutsche, “Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City,” *October* 47 (Winter 1988): 18; also reprinted in Diane Ghirardo, ed., *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 157–219.
- 131 For perhaps the most cogent discussion of these themes, see Joseph Rykwert, “Inheritance or Tradition?” *Architectural Design* 49 (1979): 2-6; also Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988); very helpful is Jonathan B. Riess, “The Civic View of Sculpture in Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 32 (Spring 1979): 1-17.
- 132 Deutsche, 19.
- 133 Jon R. Snyder, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. J. R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), lv.
- 134 Habermas, “Modernity — An Incomplete Project,” 13.
- 135 Vattimo “Introduction,” *The End of Modernity*, 10.
- 136 Paul Virilio, “The Overexposed City,” trans. Astrid Hustved, from *L’espace critique* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1984) reprinted in *Zone 1/2* (n.d.): 29.
- 137 Serra, in *Domus* 662: 77.
- 138 Storr: 92.

- 139 Dolar: 20.
- 140 Virilio: 29.
- 141 Gianni Vattimo, "Philosophy of the City," *Epaulinos* 6 (1986): 4.
- 142 Virilio: 17.
- 143 Paul Virilio, "Gray Ecology," in *Anywhere*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 188–89.
- 144 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 145 Vattimo, "Philosophy of the City": 5.
- 146 Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 320.
- 147 Krauss, "Richard Serra Sculpture," 28.
- 148 Rella, 142.
- 149 Dolar: 23.
- 150 Franco Rella, "The Atopy of the Modern," in Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 119.

The Many or the One?

Stephen Eskilson

I. The standard policy statement on deaccession of late-20th-century art museums includes a strongly-worded reference to the fact that the proceeds of any sale from the collection will be used only to finance the purchase of new artworks. Museum professionals are adamant in condemning the use of sale funds for general operating expenses, building renovations, etc. To do so would for them befoul the artworks by allowing the material aspect of the collection to slip to the surface. One cannot simply sell what is considered to be a transcendent signifier of cultural triumph. Instead, the auction and subsequent purchase will be described in the annual report as a kind of holy barter, as if a few pieces of the True Cross had been solemnly exchanged for a slip of Shroud.

Nominally, the funds from deaccessioning are used to acquire works which are of a “higher quality” and can be “better integrated into the collection and the museum’s mission.” In two recent noteworthy deaccessions — the MOMA’s sale of works by Mondrian, Picasso, et al to finance the purchase of Van Gogh’s *Portrait of Joseph Roulin*; and the Art Institute of Chicago’s auction of several pieces in order to buy Brancusi’s *Golden Bird* — the sale of several “less significant” works was used to purchase one more famous piece. Take a closer look at this process. I argue that the “masterpieces” which supplant the sometimes eclectic groupings of “lesser” works are not chosen on the basis of some (transcendent) graduated scale of quality, but rather these “masterpieces” are favored because they better represent the mythical completion of meaning toward which the museum strives. The simple recipe is this: take several “lesser” works, works which do not adequately simulate a desirable larger meaning, and exchange them for one (One?) object ontologically closer to the “Whole,” a node which can by itself secure a larger chunk of the hi/story of art. The works which are so gracefully disposed of have failed, they are not Whole enough in themselves.¹ Surely the new “masterpiece” can be more effectively “integrated into the museum’s mission,” in so far as that mission is tautological in its effort to lock-down cultural meanings into the most secure cell it can afford.²

Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal have argued that art objects are “put into their context” by historians in a manner which tries to fill out their meaning, utilizing the object as a point of aesthetic (for the formalist) or

cultural (for the social historian) convergence.³ “The factors involved may be many; they may belong to all sorts of domains; but they all finally arrive at the artwork, conceived as singular and as the terminus of all the various causal lines or chains.”⁴ I argue here that museums like the MOMA are at pains to purchase the most thoroughly documented (contexted) terminal artworks, discarding objects which show any divergence from what Kirk Varnedoe calls “The story of modern art which we are telling.”⁵ The MOMA wants works which can close down meaning — terminal pieces which can support a litany of articles and color reproductions. In an essay on what he calls the “Museum,” Eugenio Donato has detailed the failure of representation which those institutions strive to stave off:

For the MOMA, this representational order can be attained most effectively by collecting strategies which focus the totality of meanings on a few “seminal” artworks. In a spirited application of modernism’s “less is more” dictum, the MOMA has tried to secure its onto-theology by directing all meaning towards a smaller and smaller set of representations.⁶

For a moment follow this collecting strategy to its endpoint, and see my vision of the (endlessly displaced) conclusion to this epistemological evolution; year by year the museum can sell off a group of undesirable works in order to gain a more “complete” and “integrated” collection; thousands are winnowed down to hundreds, then the hundreds are sifted into tens, finally only a handful remain. Until the day when the One becomes available, and the last remaining works which “do not quite fit” are cashed-out at the auction house — on that day history will be closed, and the One will take its long-awaited place.⁷ This work would succeed in representing what the MOMA implicitly acknowledges the larger group of Great Works has failed to simulate — the totality of artistic and cultural meanings. Clearly, the failure lies not in the eclecticism of the collection of Great Works, but in the project as a whole. As much as dominant institutions would like to, and in spite of the vast resources at hand, it is not possible for the MOMA or its ilk to homogenize such a disparate number of voices into such a broad paradigm which, in the U.S., it is apt to call “democracy.” There will always be someone to intervene. Still, the MOMA will continue to attain partial success through its assertion that the denouement of meaning is just around the corner, and it will keep its patrons focused on the chase — the various representations of this self-perpetuating story.

II. This trope of convergence can also serve to drive a critique of the current brand of social-historical blockbuster exhibitions. These exhibitions, taking the decentering of the art object as their credo, have

broadened their material spectrum considerably, filling rooms not only with works on paper and other “lesser” art objects, but with extensive documentation in the form of period magazines, photographs, posters, etc. Curators have also broadened the scope to include other artistic genres. For example, L.A. County’s *Entartete Kunst* exhibition devoted a great deal of space to the music, literature, and film of fascist Germany. This strategy would appear to succeed by extrapolating from Benjamin’s dictum on the loss of the artwork’s aura, while also obviating a single authentic convergence point for meaning, scattering meanings across a range of productive practices. However, I argue that exhibitions of this sort have in fact succeeded in turning Benjamin on his head — the glass cases and omnipresent security surrounding the “artifacts” of Germany attest to this fact. Now in the galleries we have mechanically reproduced “works,” which by their location and care have been accorded an aura and have been annointed as sites of historical convergence.

But even if the aura remains — at least this sort of contextual eclecticism has avoided the trope of convergence — are there not now more works with an aura, their numbers expanding daily, spreading the terminals among a whole society of objects? The metonymic power of the few *Great Works* has been effectively diffused and sown democratically among a whole range of objects. However, the number of possible meanings has been winnowed down to at most a few short vignettes. One need not even look at (or hear or read) any objects at all in most cases, for the proffered pamphlets can explain everything in a few simple statements.⁸ I would argue that this type of installation functions as the inverse of my formulation of the convergence of the One. No longer are a select few objects expected to secure a whole range of meanings, metonymically signifying a broad variety of aesthetic and cultural beliefs. Instead, the number of significant objects has been extended; the aesthetic history which was dialectically encapsulated in the One has been evacuated while the cultural history of the One has been reduced to the definitive statements of a 500-word pamphlet (or, for those who can afford it, a 25,000-word catalogue which increases the number of objects with more photos and captions). This strategy puts a new spin on Derrida’s notion of “supplementarity,” in that the curators of *Entartete Kunst et al* have maximized the number of signifiers in a vain attempt to obscure the fact that the signified can never be satisfactorily conjured. In semiological terms, the One is a god-signifier, capable of fixing within itself all necessary signifieds. The many have a less ambitious mission, which is to hide the non-presence of the signified by their very proliferation. In both cases the lack of closed meaning is disguised by elaborate representational strategies.⁹ The One speaks declaratively with a masculine voice of authority, while the many exchange declarative

closure for tautological supplement. The divine right of the One or the parliament of objects — both feign wholeness until closing time.

Notes

- 1 In Kirk Varnedoe's words: "We didn't feel any of the works we are letting go had an enormous *singularity* within the careers of these artists [my italics]," (*New York Times*, 9 October 1989)
 - 2 In the *New York Times* article Michael Kimmelman reported that "Mr. Varnedoe emphasized that in return for a work of *singular* importance, the museum is selling paintings for which there has rarely been room on the Modern's walls.[my italics]" In a similar fashion, Varnedoe felt justified recently disposing of Kuniyoshi's *Upside Down Table* and *Mask* because MOMA also owns the artist's "much more important — even central — painting in Kuniyoshi's oeuvre," *Self-Portrait as a Golf Player* (Varnedoe in *Art in America*, March 1992). MOMA exchanged the Kuniyoshi for an oil sketch for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.
 - 3 Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* (Summer 1991).
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 179.
 - 5 *New York Times*, 9 October 1989.
 - 6 Eugenio Donato, "The Museum's Furnace: Notes Toward a Contextual Reading of Bouvard and Pécuchet," in Josué Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979). Elsewhere in the same article Donato details what he calls the "archaeological" epistemology of the museum. "Archeological origins are important in two ways: each archeological artifact has to be an original artifact, and these original artifacts must in turn explain the 'meaning' of a subsequent larger history. Thus, in Flaubert's caricatural example, the baptismal font that Bouvard and Pécuchet discover has to be a Celtic sacrificial stone, and Celtic culture has in turn to act as an original master pattern for cultural history (p. 220)." In a like manner, the One at the MOMA must explain the meaning of all art and culture as it is represented by Varnedoe's "story."
- Another excellent discussion on the failure of representation in the museum is Douglas Crimp's "On the Museum's Ruins," revised for Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic/Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983). Crimp's article first steered me towards the work of Donato.
- 7 Perhaps the One exists now in an abridged form in the spectacle of the blockbuster exhibition. There the quantity of artworks is reduced to a short title or a name, as in "The Monet show," a reductive action which converges Monet's visual production (and France in the 1890s) into a monolithic whole, capable of being consumed in one piece. The One would expand this limited example diachronically across the visual and cultural landscape. Perhaps this collecting strategy is yet another search for the artistic Grail or *Gesamtkunstwerke*?

Furthermore, this type of condensation is also prevalent in a large part of recent

university scholarship. To cite one example, Marcel Franciscono introduces his recent book *Paul Klee: His Work and Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) with the statement "If one had to choose a single artist to embody the goals and ambitions of art in this century, the ways it has been shaped by its engagements with the past and present, and its ensuing complexities, that artist might well be Paul Klee." When/why need this hypothetical situation arise? I shudder to think that there may well be a single work of Klee's which for Franciscono "embodies" his entire oeuvre, and by extension, the "goals and ambitions of art in this century."

- 8 The objects here are no longer of the suprasocial formalist-defined variety, lounging in their transcendence, but more of the reflective historically defined type, and the reflection has been extended to several new classes of production.
- 9 While the carriers of meaning/signifiers have expanded in the latter case, the variety of meanings/signifieds has been reduced to a few "takes on history." I do not mean to imply here that the meanings converging on the One are in any way substantially diverse. Rather, I want to point out that the One is invested with meaning along a diachronic axis, while the many are invested with only a synchronic "take" on this (slightly) larger whole. For example, while "fascism" is only one of several cultural traces which is encoded in the One, it is one of a total of only two or three fixed meanings present in the plethora of objects at *Entartete Kunst*.

Contributors

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