1. The artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece need not be built
Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to
condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership

THE ARTIST IS ENGAGED IN THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS & OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS

WHEN THE CONFIGURATION PRESENTED BY THE SOCIETY DOES NOT IN FACT FUNCTION THE ARTIST PRESENTS THE SAME EXISTING MATERIALS WITHIN ANOTHER (OFTEN NOT NOTICED) CONFIGURATION TO BRING ABOUT ANOTHER PERCEPTION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS TO BRING ABOUT A CHANGE IN FUNCTION

THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST & ART IS TO PRESENT THIS CONFIGURATION WITHOUT USING HISTORY IMPOSE

AFTER A WORK OF ART HAS BEEN PRESENTED IT IS AS WELL THE HISTORY OF A SOCIETY

N.Y.C. 94

AS LANGUAGE IS UNDERSTOOD, AS THE RELATIONSHIPS PRESENTED BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS & OBJECTS ENTER INTO OUR AWARENESS WE HEAR WHAT WE ARE THINKING. THE SOUND OF THE MATERIAL RELATIONSHIPS AT THE TIME OF PRESENTATION IS WHAT WE HEAR.
Early Work
Interview by Lynn Gumpert

[The earliest work you acknowledge are the crater pieces in Mill Valley. How did those come about?]

[By virtue of generation, I was attempting to make Abstract Expressionist paintings in New York. I found myself not at all satisfied by the needs that I had in relation to material, but totally overwhelmed by the presence of painters who were in my eyes "successful" artists, I don't mean successful in monetary terms, but who were making real art. So I went to California and there was overwhelmed again, coming from New York City, by the landscape, and began to try to make work within the landscape. I had an idea that each crater constituted a specific piece of sculpture. For four or five years I thought that each individual act itself was what constituted the making of art. The craters came about as a way to make sculpture by the removal of something rather than by the normal intrusion of things.

[Did you make any other environmental works while in California?]

[There were large-scale environmental paintings, of which, happily, none seem to survive.]

[How long were you there?]

[In '59 and '60 I traveled a lot to New York and Denver. It was the time when people were going back and forth between the coasts and it was considered quite normal.

[Did you find the atmosphere much different than New York?]

[Much, much more American, I had been raised in an extremely cosmopolitan, intellectual atmosphere in New York and upon reaching California found myself dealing with more Americans: poets from Kentucky, artists from other places, with that time not the case in New York. Most of the artists had come from somewhere else and had totally developed a cosmopolitan presence. The influence was more from Europe than it was from the basic art thing in the U.S.; it was a good experience for me and provided an enormous amount of freedom.

[After the Bay Area, you went back to New York and started making paintings again.]

Poster for exhibition at Sott Siegel, New York, 1962.

Permanent installation at The New Museum, 1982.

period of a year and a half. I just accumulated things. I went to Provincetown, lost the studio to the Fire Department, and returned to California for a brief visit. I decided that there was a basic mistake in the fact that each crator I had made there in 1969 was specific, but I didn't know what the mistake was. Coming back to New York, I more or less succeeded in making paintings. I was quite content with them and they served a use for other people. Eventually those paintings were shown around in these little galleries that opened—it wasn’t the Lower East Side at the time—in the Village. Then Seth Siegelaub had a gallery on 56th Street and they were shown initially in 1964, then again in 1968. This series of paintings were multimedia, using whatever material was at hand. They were priced about the same, regardless of size and materials.

LH: So that was also a direct comment on the commercial aspects—

UK: It was a relationship with it. I was perplexed with how art was consumed within the society, and at the same time trying to make art myself.

LH: Was it at that time that you did the big propeller series?

UK: Yes. I was living on the Lower East Side—I moved to Bleeker Street by 1960—and somebody had given me an old television set. The only time it got any decent reception was in the middle of the night. I became totally involved with the test pattern—I think there were four or five other painters living in this area who were involved with test patterns as well. It became “We will just make paintings about this thing that we watch all the time.” I don't think I watched test patterns all as much as I convinced myself I did. It was a device, and I was impressed that [Despe] Johns had utilized the American flag as a means of breaking out of the device, so I tried the pattern of the test pattern, and they became the propeller paintings. The propellers themselves led to the problem that I was still just painting. I began to discuss it with other artists and other people and found that it was more propitious at that to talk to people about painting and to decide upon a format. The format then was to take the rectangle—again this was nothing terribly radical, other people were doing it—and begin, in a sense, to fuck it over. To decide then to remove one rectangle from another rectangle was a sufficient gesture. Then to discuss color with people was a sufficient gesture, then to decide about paint application. At that point, I had gotten rather good at applying paint and was afraid of any kind of virtuosity. I would ask them how intense they wanted this color and would hook up a compressor and spray it for a certain period of time. Then the other thing you could do to a painting, which was from the propeller paintings, was to stripe a line on the top and bottom, and that line would have varying angles and the angles were based on how you felt at a particular moment. If the person was happy with the painting, they accepted it. If not, I would strip it off the stretcher and start all over again.

LH: Were these in varying sizes?

UK: Yes. They ran from quite tiny, a couple of inches, made on metal—spray enamels from automo-

LH: Were these prices also the same?

UK: Same price for whatever painting. Again, it's a moot point. Most of the paintings were traded with other artists and were done for other artists, but the price was always the same when they were put up for commercial.

LH: When did you first begin to turn words as a medium or as a means of conveying your ideas?

UK: Well, it became necessary with the advent of the paintings. I came from a sort of literary back-

LH: Did you go to Hunter uptown?

UK: It was after Korea at that time and they were letting men in. They also had a very good philosophy department. In conversations with teachers, and my own intuition ("I give myself some credit"). I realized I was not going to spend four or five years in school expressing myself, since the schools were still run by leftover Abstract Expressionists, and at sixteen, I didn’t have anything to express. At Hunter I studied philosophy and humanistic literature, helped a lot by very well-meaning and, it turns out, it did. Then I began to realize that much of the work I was interested in sculpturally was not capable of being built. I don’t like imaginary things, futurist sort of ideas, where the impossible then becomes the possible. I started to think a little more about the history of painting, and I realized that there was a tradition of making paintings that were not stories of painting, but they didn’t tell the story, so the titles began to refer to the work itself. They began “A Painting with a Piece Removed, etc., for So-and-so,” “A Painting Done in California for So-and-so,” which explained why it existed, or at least I thought it did.
out, absolutely correct teachers who took an interest. I was very involved in wanting to be the "Great American Artist." That's what somebody at sixteen and seventeen wants to be. I can also give credit to New York City for that, too. As a kid, I would take the subway or trolley and go to the Metropolitan and the Frick. The only thing that interested me was the attempt to deal with the presentation of information by use of materials—paint, canvas, steel, stone, etc.—which had nothing to do with the presentation of information. With the opening of the Museum of Modern Art—I knew this was it, this was what I wanted to do. I wanted to make this stuff and the first couple of years I made a bit of a stuff like everybody else made.

LE: When did you first realize that words themselves were sufficient?
BB: Around '66 was the time I was committed to trying to figure out a way to use language instead of trying to build things. I must admit I'm not convinced that it supersedes anything else. I consider painting and sculpture in its physical sense the same kind of language as I do verbal language, it's just that it suits me better to work generally with materials. I never saw it as a radical change. By '67 we were flogging the words to try to sell them to people, and I think that Seth had even sold some to Raymond Danziger. Before that I still made paintings, but mostly only for artists or for an occasion like the Bradford show with Robert Barry and Carl Andre. I made two very large paintings for that show. One is in London with Jack Wenderlich and one is with Seth Siegelaub. The Windham show was after that. Chuck Ginnever, the sculptor, had come to the symposium at Bradford and had found things in the conversation of Robert Barry, myself and Seth Siegelaub interesting. He invited Barry, Andre and myself to build three pieces using materials easily accessible to the school since they had no budget. We made this show with another symposium which had included a few people in the classic turning point—at least it fits historically. I built my piece, which consisted of stakes and twine in the form of a rectangle with another rectangle removed, where the jocks practiced their touch football (see pls. 17, 19). It's very hard to play touch football with those stakes and twine, so they cut it at this time. The last vestiges of heavy metal macho sculpture stickiness still existed and that led to some sort of vigilante group getting ready to undo the philistine's damage. When I got there and looked at it, it didn't seem as if the philistines had done the work any particular harm. And that was it. From that moment it was an emotional decision, whereas it had been intellectual. There was this emotional transition right then and there when I realized it didn't matter. And it certainly didn't constitute a reason to go out and best somebody up.

LE: Had you been exhibiting the words at that time?
BB: Yes, within catalog structures and things, and by that time I had published this book where the work was presented within that context. I had talked to other artists about participating within this group with Seth Siegelaub and other artists and by this time it was already a normal thing.

LE: But at this point you hadn't yet used words on the wall.
BB: Words on the wall is something else. I had always had them typed on a sheet of paper or in a notebook. A collector in Italy, Panza (Giuseppe Panza di Biumo), had been collecting quite a bit of work of mine from the early stages. I finally met him after he had acquired a lot of work, and I asked the obvious question: how did he 'see' this to other people? He said, "Well, I wanted to talk to you about it and I've tried this and that, I've tried having it typeset, etc." Finally I made a deal with him that since we had such good conversations, whatever way he wanted to present it was fine with me. He found an architect who put it on the wall. I arrived in his house to look at the collection, and there was a work of mine either painted or preprint, I never figured it out, on the wall. I think it was a little distressed, walked around Milano for a while, and realized that what was just about as good as anything else. It wasn't anything I figured out. It was something that just came about by someone who was using the work. I think I was also tired of carrying these wrinkled typeset papers.

LE: In this show, you included a set catalog structure consisting of a table and a block of limestone.

BB: How did that particular work come about?

BB: I was dealing with this idea of specific and non-specific materials that one had access to in the studio. I remember buying a full set of stonecutting tools and teaching myself how to cut stones. I still couldn't figure out what that had to do with making art. I became very involved with it, enjoyed getting up at six a.m. getting on to construction sites, starting limestone, marble, and bringing them back to the studio. I built a table, put my gaggle on, and cut stone after month after month. I learned a lot about stone. And I didn't make one piece of sculpture that I wanted to show anybody. People would come to the studio and I would throw everything over whatever I was working on. I took this piece into the bathroom here, set it up, and started to cut the final piece of limestone. I began to move the limestone around the table and it became an activity. Every day I would go outdoors and move this piece of limestone from one corner of the table to the one occasionally hitting it with a hammer, occasionally getting sort of angry at it, and literally bashing it up and looking it in the right position to be cut into this unmade sculpture. After a couple of weeks I realized that that's what it's all about, and literarily just placed it on the table, paying absolutely no attention to how I placed it. In fact, I went out for a drink and told people that I had finally solved my problem about how to make a limestone sculpture. I invited a lot of artists back and, with flashlights and candles, presented my piece of sculpture. Surprisingly enough, not only did it satisfy my needs at the moment, it satisfied theirs. I realized sculpture was about "Put in Place," volume or mass put in place. It's a matter of transportation; you move it from one place to the other, which was a rejection of the Duchampian ethic. I still find myself engaged in rejecting the idea that changing the context of a material constitutes an aesthetic gesture. I think that all materials normally change their context and it's not necessarily an aesthetic context. There is nothing that's not out of context.

LE: Can you explain further your interest in materials?

BB: Sure. I honestly cannot explain it in the terms that I would have explained it in the sixties because I don't remember them. For me, it seems to be now that art essentially is the relationship of human being to objects and objects to objects in relation to humans. One of the ways that human beings understand their relationship is to materials always relates back to a human being's use of it. If that's our activity as artists, then there is no other need for justification. It took a long time to get that straight. Art is not a metaphor, although it can function as a metaphor in the culture sometimes. It also functions as illustration in the culture. But just because something functions as something within a culture does not mean that's inherently only what it is. Human beings function as soldiers and as rapists, but that is not the definition of human being. Sometimes I used material as metaphor. The nice thing about using language is that you don't have to subjugate your own personality to make an objective piece of work. The work itself is objective in its relationship of one material to another, but you know what things stand for. A reasonable example is RED AS WELL AS GREEN AS WELL AS BLUE. A book I did in '72, where for the purpose of building the sculpture, I completely ignore the context of what red, green, and blue mean politically. When the book

*For the two symposiums see pp. 13–20 in the present volume.
**Cumpert is referring to the exhibition Linyid Dongle, Joan Drown, Luis Jimenez, Gary Strophi, Lawrence Weiner: Early Work (The New Museum, New York, 3 April–3 June 1962) in which a re-invention of the work mentioned was shown.


I'm doing this because I'm interested in the concept of 'place.' Place is a central idea in architecture and urban planning. It's about the physical environment we inhabit, the buildings we live in, the streets we walk on. But it's also about the intangible aspects of place - the memories, the stories, the relationships that are woven into the fabric of a community. When I think about place, I think about the way it shapes our lives and our experiences. Place is not just a physical location; it's a psychological space as well. It's where we belong, where we feel connected to something larger than ourselves.

But my interest in place goes beyond the intellectual. I've always been drawn to the idea of the '90s. It's a time period that I remember with a certain nostalgia. The music, the fashion, the movies - it all feels so... '90s. And yet, the '90s is also a time that feels distant and foreign to me. As a child of the '80s, I grew up in a very different world. So, I'm fascinated by the idea of recreating a space that reflects the '90s, not just physically, but also emotionally.

That's why I decided to make a video game set in the '90s. I want to recreate a world that feels authentic and familiar, but also challenging and new. It's a way to explore the concept of place in a different context. And it's a chance to tap into a part of myself that I find very fascinating - the memories and emotions that are associated with the '90s.

But making a video game is a daunting task. It requires a lot of skills and knowledge that I don't possess. So, I'm working with a team to help me bring my vision to life. We're experimenting with different game mechanics and graphics to create a world that feels true to the '90s, but also visually appealing.

It's been a challenging process, but I'm excited about the potential of this project. I hope that when people play it, they'll feel transported to a different time and place, just as I felt when I first started working on it. And I hope that they'll find something in it that resonates with their own experiences of the '90s.

Ultimately, I'm doing this because I believe in the power of art to connect us with each other. Place is a universal concept, and I believe that we all have a need to belong and to feel a sense of community. So, I'm using my art to explore these ideas, to challenge our understanding of place, and to create something that brings people together.
old "Let's leave it be the side of the road." The trees lent themselves well to this. When I found myself in Oregon or Oklahoma, I could legitimately go out, make art, and leave it behind to the society that was not interested in it. In Europe it was a different sort of situation. I first went to Europe in '63, had a Eurail Pass, did the whole number. I wasn't terribly impressed by the activities, so I came back to the U.S. and stayed in New York until I went to Europe for the Attitudes show (see ill. p. 72). The first people who were interested in what I was doing, besides Seth Siegelbaum and a few individuals here and there, were people from Europe. When I went to the Attitudes show in Bern and to the Square Pegs in Round Hole show in Amsterdam, I found myself around people who had been following what I had been doing for the last two or three years. I began to work there a lot, I came back and did a show in Halifaix." Then my daughter was born, and I began to notice that a lot of people were having enormous difficulties with this problem of New World and Old World. I was also having difficulty with it and didn't want my daughter to grow up with those problems. We went to Holland, since I felt it was the closest to a cosmopolitan situation. By chance, and through the help of people, I fell into staying in Amsterdam part of the year and raising a child in Europe and the U.S. It was quite exciting for someone who had lived in New York for so many years, knowing twenty to twenty-five people really well, and going to another culture and working.

**IL:** Living in Europe would also seem to be related to an idea of transportation.
**UR:** I must say that I don't start with a preconception. I don't start to prove that a piece of wood in Germany functions the same as a piece of wood functions in the U.S. I start off accepting all the divergencies of that piece of wood, and see where it leads. I genuinely don't mind overthrowing all my preconceptions from research, or I wouldn't bother doing it. The support has been a lot more concrete in Europe for my generation of artists than it has been in the U.S. In the U.S. you show a bit, you have a lot of opportunity to talk about what you're trying to do. But in Europe there was a different tradition, where people supported what they were using. It became economically necessary to work in Europe as well.

**IL:** Have you found that other aspects of your life enter directly into your art?
**UR:** I can't imagine that it wouldn't. We claim that we're artists or that we're involved in the art world, and that means that the amount of alienation necessary to get through each day is minimized. If that occurs, then of course your daily existence will have some interaction with your work. I try not to let the personal aspects of my existence interfere with the making of art, but one of the loopholes I have is making movies. And I can expunge excisions if the movies or at least make them public to the extent that it becomes a forum where other people talk about it. With sound tapes and radio programs you can also use things that you can't use in your art.

**IL:** Earlier you were talking about problems with the term "conceptual art." Why haven't you ever used documentation in an exhibition?
**UR:** Because it seemed rather silly to me. I still consider as a great fault, these people running around day after day screaming that they're not interested in "objects," and we all know that even a sentence is an object. Everything's an object. Then when you go to their exhibitions, you're confronted with the most incredible amount of documentation which are again objects, framed, signed, dated, numbered, all addressing the fact that they're not objects and they're against objects. I don't understand the term "conceptual art," there is nothing that human beings do that is not essentially conceived of first. It's an attempt to explain the art people were making that didn't look right in the context of art history as we know it. They attempted to elevate it into some sort of radical position. The strength of the majority of the art of that time made that unnecessary. The art did carry itself, it has, in a sense, carried itself to the point that it has entered into art history to be reacted against. Art becomes a useful thing for its time and must develop in its own time. But "conceptual art" is like the old joke about the person who says the children are the best conceptual artist. It's a silly term. Some artists use it in a rather ironic sense, and they use it so consistently that it may and they can have it. I truly don't understand it, but if you want to call it anything else, it's very realist art, since it deals with real materials and real relationships of human beings to those materials.

**IL:** Can you explain the term "Collection Public Freehold"?
**UR:** That started off as a rather crude attempt to justify in my own eyes my existence within society, by making art that wasn't being merely accepted. I am a socialist, or political, or I don't know how to think, but I think that the needs of the populace should be taken care of by the production of the populace. I began to feel, strangely, that here I was working every day, fully participating in my culture, yet everything I was making could be owned by anyone who read it. It was not necessary to buy it. But I still felt there had to be some sort of gesture and that gesture was to not let a certain percentage of the work, approximately half, it was my own attempt to stay pure. Just because a piece was in the Guggenheim doesn't mean it should be more expensive than a piece that wasn't. It makes more and more sense to me, and I still do "Public Freehold" work. They enter into the body of the work the same as any other piece of work, and when we worked together putting on the show, I didn't let it influence me whether the work is for sale or whether it's in a collection—it's the work. It seemed much easier, instead of later saying, "Well I choose not to sell that particular work," to say right at the beginning, "That one is not for sale." I designate those works as "Public F freehold." When most people see things exhibited that way, they have no idea what it means.

**IL:** How did you come up with that term?
**UR:** It's a contradiction of terms. In places like Britain which are autocratic, people can't own property; they can only lease it from the state. Common property that's owned by people, a laissez-faire ninety-nine years, become public freeholds. It's a comment on the fact that art is essentially authoritarian in the sense that if you want to own it you have to buy it and there is no "art for the people."

**IL:** You date your work from the time it's first publicly exhibited. Besides exhibitions, how else does it enter the culture?
**UR:** That's the nice thing about using language to present art, it can enter the culture on the radio, in a book, an exhibition, within the context of a movie or videotape. Once it has publicly been presented as a piece of art, that's its state. I've had exhibitions, as every artist has had, where only twenty-five people come for the duration of the exhibition. But it is still entering the public. I try to have the work itself on the invitation card. Another aspect of the professional activity of being an artist is to present the work with as many accoutrements as possible to help people understand it. When you put the work itself in language on the invitation card and send it off, you then transcend the gallery without rejecting it. There's nothing more silly than an artist who says they don't like the standard gallery situation where work is presented for sale. Personally I like galleries more than museums, they're less
authoritarian. People can come in off the street, see work on the wall, laugh if they don’t find it interest-
ing, scoff. do anything they want, walk out, and they don’t have any guilt about it. When you go into a
museum, and you walk out, you still have a fun-
y feeling because the culture has already put its
stamp on it. Also, there has to be a place to sell the
product, but I don’t like the way galleries are nor-
mally run. To transcend the gallery structure, you
make sure that a majority of work is also quite pub-
lic. People don’t have to go to the gallery to find out
what you did in Düsseldorf.
16: If you go out to the Bowery and make some of your
works there, and there are ten or fifteen peo-
ple who listen to you, would that also enter the
public context? Or is that not an art contest?
17: That’s rather complicated. I’d say yes, that con-
stitutes a public presence, but I wouldn’t want to
impose it on the people unless there was a re-
sponse and it became obvious what it was being
used for. I have an anecdote that is relevant to this.
In the harbor in Holland where I lived, there were
no other artists. One day I went to buy a pack of ciga-
rettes in a local bar in the harbor. I walked in; peo-
ple were always polite, they’d say hello, goodbye;
that’s it. Finally one of them grabbed me and said,
"Okay, what the fuck do you do for a living?" Mean-
while, the other constituents of the harbor were
either medical students, smugglers, refined sailors,
or purveyors of forbidden merchandise. And they
were getting a little nervous that we were surviving
so long, but not too well. I had a choice. I could
explain to them what I did, or give some sort of an-
swer that I knew would fit into that kind of working-
class mentality since I come from it. I decided to
tell the truth, and in imperious Dutch, spent about three
hours explaining the relationship of human beings
to objects and using language as a means of pre-
senting the work, etc. It was not the friendliest at-
mosphere I’ve ever seen in my life. They pointed to
a calendar on the wall and said, “That’s the kind of
art we like.” By that time I figured I’d blown it any-
how, there was no reason for any conciliatory ges-
ture. I paid for my cigarettes and considered myself
quite lucky not to have gotten involved in fistfights! I
went back to the boat, and didn’t go back to that
bar for a couple of weeks. I ran out of cigarettes
again in the middle of the night, went into the bar,
and the same crooks were sitting around. They
came over to me and said, “We’ve discussed this.”
And they pulled out a newspaper article from a cou-
ple of weeks or months before, of an exhibition
I had made some place in Holland. And they pulled
out a book of mine that one of them had bought
from an alternative bookshop, and said, ”My daugh-
ter said that she had heard of you and we bought
this, and you know anything? It makes sense! But
it’s not art!” That was it.
In another instance, we did a radio program where
we got a comedian to say that there’s this artist (no
names, no gallery, no nothing) who says that—and
read work of mine—‘Art. About five years later, I
met somebody who was now an art historian whose
parents were butchers, and they had heard this
comedian on the radio. They laughed and laughed
and laughed, and they repeated it to her. She later
realized that I was the artist. She said it really in-
fluenced her because it made sense. It wasn’t the
kind of art that she was interested in, but it made
sense. That’s all you can do as an artist. You pro-
vide a methodology for the relationship of human
beings to objects and that methodology, in its re-
jection or acceptance, becomes an applied part of
the way people learn how to deal with their world,
and that’s all you want from art. As long as it’s not
authoritarian, if it gives somebody a methodology
to survive, I think that’s entering the public context,
I don’t think we have to justify it any further. That’s
the “Archie Bunker” principle on the television. if
you can present something that you can identify
with enough to reject it, you’ve succeeded. I don’t
know why we can’t apply to visual arts what we’ve
learned from Bleek and from Lautreamont.
18: Does it have to do with not imposing something
on somebody? Rather by presenting it...
19: Presenting it so completely it shatters their illu-
sions about their previous relationships. Of course
they will either accept it or they will rebuild their
own perceptions to the point that it can argue with
your presentation. You don’t want converts, you
want people to essentially counter with formal ar-
guments.
20: That seems related to what you have said about
an artist having a dialectic with society.
21: What is an art historian, what is a curator?
Someone who has a dialectic with the products of
society. We’ve got caught up in middle-class Marx-
ism in the U.S. where certain words became radi-
cal or romantic, but they are still decent words. You
attempt to understand what something’s all about.
Artists, however, are not supposed to be responsi-
bile, but artists are responsible. There are butchers
out there. There are people who make the accept-
bance of material and the understanding of material
impossible by obstruction and by a Jesuit sort of
thinking, e.g., “I know, and if you work hard, you’ll
get to the point where you’ll know as much as I
know.” It’s not true. If you know, you should be cl-
}
Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist


[...]

90. Well, let’s start with collaboration since it has already come up. You have been influential in this area, not only through your collaborations with musicians, but in so many other areas. Could you tell me about the history of collaboration in your practice?

Obrist. Okay, but I have to personalize it. My own practice is based on my relationship to materials. It’s a studio practice. The studio might be the North Sea, but it’s still a studio practice. There’s no difference between a landscape painter carrying their easel out into the landscape or staying inside and looking at a photo—it’s the same for me. It’s very good for contemporary artists when you are trying to have a conversation with the world as it is—not as it was—to work with other people. You can’t make music, you can’t make film—you can’t even make a book without working with other people who have skills that are on the same level as yours. And I like that. It takes you out of the ivory tower. I’m also in the position where I have a reasonably good life, but I don’t have a lot of extra money, so somebody is working with me on a project, they’re not going to be making a lot of money. I have to entice them. I have to make it of labor. One of the things you do in that division of labor is accede to another person’s concept of context, because if your work cannot exist within their context, then it cannot exist as a universal that you claim it can when it goes into another world. I see context and content as inherently different. I used to believe that aesthetics were ethics, but the more I’ve worked, the more I’ve realized that this is the reason for a lot of the political malaise that we have. In fact, aesthetics are not ethics; aesthetics are aesthetics. Ethics seem to be something that can cross aesthetic lines, and I’d like to have an aesthetic that can cross ethical lines.

91. That is something that has been present in your work since the very beginning.

Obrist. That was the reason for making it, and my reason for becoming an artist. You’ve seen my biographies, so you know that I was educated in the New York City public school system, but through my own devices and through the generosity of a lot of other people, I am reasonably well educated. But I had a choice as to my real involvement at a certain time, which was an attempt to set up situations that were more amenable than civil rights and labor organizations, and the making of art. I made the decision that art was what I was going to do: it was not a vocation from heaven; it was an intellectual decision. Of course, Benjamin [Buchloh] had the same problem, he just didn’t understand that the systems he believed in as a youth did not fail him—they got worn out, and that’s its failure. It’s a funny thing, you can’t personalize that. You can’t say, “I wasted my time thinking that.” All those people that were caught up in the Structuralist rage, they didn’t waste any time, but if they spend any more time trying to defend a theory that didn’t work, then I think it’s fair to say that they’ve wasted time. But having gone through a legitimate, sincere analysis of the society that they lived in—that is not a waste of time. And I don’t think that any of my endeavors are designed to succeed or to fail. I don’t really know. I don’t like being responsible for other people. [...]

92. Another issue I’d like to discuss with you is the fact that you describe yourself as a studio artist.

Obrist. I have always been a studio artist. I am a materialist and I am not a Conceptual artist. The people whose work has continued to have value and use within our structure are all materialists, from Robert Rymon to Daniel Buren—he is involved in the material history. But his reference is always to history. I like to have a practice that doesn’t have to refer to history. That’s the difference.

93. What about context and site-specificity?

Obrist. No, I don’t see it. Site-specificity. I don’t understand it. If someone says to me “Lavrova, we have a city, and we’d like you to deal with it,” then that’s a context. So I’ll say, “Look, this is what I am working on at the moment; this is something I can do best right now, because it’s the thing that is closest at hand, so I’ll place it within your context. Let’s go for it.” And I try to do the best job that I can. I try to find out all I can about drainage, city planning, and things like that, for that site, and I’ll put the work in, but I’m going to change the work for them. There’s no reason why I should, and I don’t think people expect it, although they like to think it’s special for them. No, it’s special after it’s made. Then it becomes something else. But it’s not site-specific: it comes out of a studio practice. [...]

94. In an interview with Buchloh, you rejected the studio as a metaphor for the outside world [see p. 92].

Obrist. Nor is the academy a metaphor for anything—it’s the academy. That’s why my relationship to people is teaching becomes rather a hatred situation. I don’t see the museum and the gallery as a metaphor. I see it as a reality, and as a reality it will have facades that are viable and facades that are false, as a metaphor it can have nothing except your hatred. Your hatred is worth shit; my hatred is worth shit. The only thing is—because of the privileges that artists and intellectuals have of being able to talk to larger groups of people than the average person in the supermarket—is: that is that anger can inform you. But it cannot be a reason for existence. It’s not enough. You really better be able to say “The emperor has no clothes on.” You can’t say that if you are part of the academy because you’re part of the emperor.

95. This is something you often repeated in public talks and conferences.

Obrist. You know in conferences, when somebody asks you a question and you don’t know the answer?

You don’t say, “I don’t know the answer”—you say, “Wittgenstein!” You know what I’m talking about, don’t you! The ones that say, “John Cage!” “Do you have a proposal?” I have no fucking idea what kind of an answer that’s supposed to be. Say there’s a hole where you’re asking me to put my foot: “Wittgenstein!” (Laughs)

— (Laughs)

96. I’m sorry if I’m sounding silly, but it’s the truth! I’m so fed up with this; they’ve taken these people who were dignified people and turned them into idiots! I must say that most of the people I know who teach as hell earn their money. I’m not saying this is a rip-off, I’m saying that nobody has questioned the academy to such an extent without using silly words like “free” and “open.” I don’t think that it’s a scam. I just don’t see it as a functioning entity. I don’t want to join the establishment. I feel very much like Groucho Marx. “What would I think of a club that would have me as a member?” It’s a joke, but it’s not much of a joke. I think the same thing. My job is really to be a pain in the ass. [...]
to have worked. I like it. I like what happened. I was a little nervous about sending it off, but it's true: What is Utopia? This is Utopia, one, two, three. Right now. Utopia now.

[...]

I: Here and now.

W: Here and now. Not in the future, I'm so oppressed with what I don't believe in, I don't believe in footnotes and I don't believe in stealing. And I don't believe in building your whole case on somebody else's quote.

I: And you're against appropriation?

W: I don't approve. To this day, I'm really sorry, I don't believe in appropriation. I think appropriation is theft. If it's good enough to be appropriated, then it's good enough to be used as it is. A copy of a Walker Evans is just telling me that it's a reproduction of a Walker Evans. I'll give credit if the person does a good reproduction, but I can't say it's their work. But at the same time, if the Walker Evans is still inherent in your work, it's because you can't think of anything else to do. Making a replica of something else doesn't work. In fact, if people knew a little bit more about this art history that they adore so much, but that they know shit about, all of these fantastic artists have been abused and misused by people making copies of them. That's appropriation. The artist has a right to the profit and maybe they have the right to not having their work recreated. Reproduction is something very different. I've said it too many times, and it sounds silly, but if you work on the factory floor and you steal, you go to jail. If you steal someone's idea, you're a thief. But if you're the bourgeois managerial class and you steal, they reward you because if they don't they're afraid you'll do something even worse. Only an asshole steals when it would be just as easy to use. Coming back to Rauschenberg, I think it was a gesture but it wasn't a necessary gesture. He took a de Kooning drawing that he said he was going to erase [Erased de Kooning Drawing, 1953]. This was not something that he did as a vicious act, and that is not appropriation.

I: It was a subtraction.

W: It was something else, and he got his permission.

I: One of the things that you have done which inspires many young artists is that you constantly work without hierarchy.

W: I can't accept the hierarchies. I don't believe in them. Money is the only reason for the hierarchies. I'd like to figure out a way to have the financial rewards without having to go against my usefulness in what I am representing. A poster is a poster, a book is a book, and a piece of sculpture is a piece of sculpture. Where is the hierarchy? The market has given these things a financial hierarchy, but they are all necessary. You were turned on by Lautrec posters before you were turned on by Lautrec's paintings. If he hadn't paid attention to those posters, he wouldn't have been able to communicate with you what he was trying to communicate. I mean, what is the big deal? I really don't get it. [...] I: The idea of appropriation was prominent in the eighties and then in the nineties there was much more talk about infiltration, which is something you have pioneered a lot.

W: Yes, but I don't think it is a good word. If you're infiltrating, what you're doing is taking the trouble to place something within context. But then again, we're talking about financial things that might not really repay the effort, but once it goes in, if it really functions, it will be accepted and adapted by people because most people are not particularly prejudiced against things that artists make. Often they have no idea that it is the work of an artist. When I say I'm doing social services, I'm doing a show for a small Kunstenverein, say, where I have to put in three months' work. I design and do everything—there are no financial rewards, but I think the cultural situation could use it. That's social service. When I make a poster or do a show for the Whong Gallery [in New York], that's not social service. That's not a structure; that's just placing something out for people to be able to see or to use. Again, I prefer to make shows in commercial galleries rather than in museum structures most of the time, because people can come in, look at it, laugh, and go home. In a museum, they think they missed something. I don't want people to feel that they missed anything. If they didn't get it, they didn't get it and it has no use for them. Coming back to the "Utopia Station," I'd like to see what happens with my colleagues. We're going to be in Venice, within a context, and that context has to prove itself not as exotic, but as a context that is in the mainstream context, but at the same time, doesn't say it's not art. I don't know if we can do it. It's very complex and it's a real challenge. But if it weren't complex, why would everybody get so much work? You have the same problem as most artists—you have to have three or four jobs just to pay for your passions! [...] I: What do you think of the instructions of John Cage, which referred to the "open score"?

W: Cage was in a different situation. With the mise-en-scene, the camera can go outside of the mise-en-scene. Cage was involved much more in a moral sense—very much like Charles Ives—of how to get through life and notice what's going on whilst still getting to where you're going. That's interesting. I discovered whilst working on the book for Tel Aviv— I was in Arabic, English, and Hebrew—that in Arabic it's almost impossible to talk about some-