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# Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions\*

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

*This monster called beauty is not eternal. We know that our breath had no beginning and will never stop, but we can, above all, conceive of the world's creation and its end.*

— Apollinaire, *Les peintres cubistes*

*Allergic to any relapse into magic, art is part and parcel of the disenchantment of the world, to use Max Weber's term. It is inextricably intertwined with rationalization. What means and productive methods art has at its disposal are all derived from this nexus.*

— Theodor Adorno

A twenty-year distance separates us from the historical moment of Conceptual Art. It is a distance that both allows and obliges us to contemplate the movement's history in a broader perspective than that of the convictions held during the decade of its emergence and operation (roughly from 1965 to its temporary disappearance in 1975). For to historicize Conceptual Art requires, first of all, a clarification of the wide range of often conflicting positions and the mutually exclusive types of investigation that were generated during this period.

But beyond that there are broader problems of method and of "interest." For at this juncture, any historicization has to consider what type of questions an art-historical approach — traditionally based on the study of visual objects — can legitimately pose or hope to answer in the context of artistic practices that explicitly insisted on being addressed outside of the parameters of the production of formally ordered, perceptual objects, and certainly outside of those of art history and criticism. And, further, such an historicization must also address the

\* An earlier version of this essay was published in *L'art conceptuel: une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989).

## Sonatine Bureaucratique

(BUREAUCRATIC SONATINA)

Erik SATIE

*Allegro* *He's off.*  
*f* *Le voilà parti.*

*PIANO*

*He goes merrily to his*  
*Il va gaiement à son*

*office*  
*bureau*

*\*) "en se gavillant"*  
*en se "gavillant"*

*with a contented nod of his head*  
*Content, il hoche la tête*

\*) "en se gavillant" is not translatable.

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TOUS DROITS D'EXÉCUTION PUBLIQUE DE TRADUCTION DE  
 REPRODUCTION ET D'ARRANGEMENTS RÉSERVÉS POUR TOUTS PAYS  
 Y COMPRIS LA SUÈDE LA NORVÈGE ET LE DANEMARK

Erik Satie. Bureaucratic Sonatina. 1917.

currency of the historical object, i.e., the motivation to rediscover Conceptual Art from the vantage point of the late 1980s: the dialectic that links Conceptual Art, as the most rigorous elimination of visibility and traditional definitions of representation, to this decade of a rather violent restoration of traditional artistic forms and procedures of production.

It is with Cubism, of course, that elements of language surface programmatically within the visual field for the first time in the history of modernist painting, in what can be seen as a legacy of Mallarmé. It is there too that a parallel is established between the emerging structuralist analysis of language and the formalist examination of representation. But Conceptual practices went beyond such mapping of the linguistic model onto the perceptual model, outdistancing as they did the spatialization of language and the temporalization of visual structure. Because the proposal inherent in Conceptual Art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone (the work as analytic proposition), it thus constituted the most consequential assault on the status of that object: its visibility, its commodity status, and its form of distribution. Confronting the full range of the implications of Duchamp's legacy for the first time, Conceptual practices, furthermore, reflected upon the construction and the role (or the death) of the author just as much as they redefined the conditions of receivership and the role of the spectator. Thus they performed the postwar period's most rigorous investigation of the conventions of pictorial and sculptural representation and a critique of the traditional paradigms of visibility.

From its very beginning, the historic phase in which Conceptual Art was developed comprises such a complex range of mutually opposed approaches that any attempt at a retrospective survey must beware of the forceful voices (mostly those of the artists themselves) demanding respect for the purity and orthodoxy of the movement. Precisely because of this range of implications of Conceptual Art, it would seem imperative to resist a construction of its history in terms of a stylistic homogenization, which would limit that history to a group of individuals and a set of strictly defined practices and historical interventions (such as, for example, the activities initiated by Seth Siegelaub in New York in 1968 or the authoritarian quests for orthodoxy by the English Art & Language group).

To historicize Concept Art (to use the term as it was coined by Henry Flynt in 1961)<sup>1</sup> at this moment, then, requires more than a mere reconstruction of the

1. As is usual with stylistic formations in the history of art, the origin and the name of the movement are heavily contested by its major participants. Barry, Kosuth, and Weiner, for example, vehemently denied in recent conversations with the author any historical connection to or even knowledge of the Fluxus movement of the early 1960s. Nevertheless, at least with regard to the invention of the *term*, it seems correct when Henry Flynt claims that he is "the originator of concept art, the most influential contemporary art trend. In 1961 I authored (and copyrighted) the phrase 'concept art,' the rationale for it and the first compositions labeled 'concept art.' My document was first printed in *An Anthology*, ed. La Monte Young, New York, 1962." (La Monte Young's *An Anthology* was in fact published in 1963.)

movement's self-declared primary actors or a scholarly obedience to their proclaimed purity of intentions and operations.<sup>2</sup> Their convictions were voiced with the (by now often hilarious) self-righteousness that is continuous within the tradition of hypertrophic claims made in avant-garde declarations of the twentieth century. For example, one of the campaign statements by Joseph Kosuth from the late 1960s asserts: "Art before the modern period is as much art as Neanderthal man is man. It is for this reason that around the same time I replaced the term 'work' for *art proposition*. Because a conceptual *work* of art in the traditional sense, is a contradiction in terms."<sup>3</sup>

It seems crucial to remember that the oppositions within the formation of Conceptual Art arose partly from the different readings of Minimal sculpture (and of its pictorial equivalents in the painting of Mangold, Ryman, and Stella) and in the consequences the generation of artists emerging in 1965 drew from those readings—just as the divergences also resulted from the impact of various artists within the Minimalist movement as one or another was chosen by the new generation as its central figures of reference. For example, Dan Graham seems to have been primarily engaged with the work of Sol LeWitt. In 1965 he organized LeWitt's first one-person exhibition (held in his gallery, called Daniels Gallery); in 1967 he wrote the essay "Two Structures: Sol LeWitt"; and in 1969 he concluded the introduction to his self-published volume of writings entitled *End Moments* as follows: "It should be obvious the importance Sol LeWitt's work has had for my work. In the article here included (written first in 1967, rewritten in 1969) I hope only that the after-the-fact appreciation hasn't too much submerged his seminal work into *my* categories."<sup>4</sup>

A second contestant for the term was Edward Kienholz, with his series of *Concept Tableaux* in 1963 (in fact, occasionally he is still credited with the discovery of the term. See for example Roberta Smith's essay "Conceptual Art," in *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. Nikos Stangos [New York: Harper and Row, 1981], pp. 256–70).

Joseph Kosuth claims in his "Sixth Investigation 1969 Proposition 14" (published by Gerd de Vries, Cologne, 1971, n.p.) that he used the term "conceptual" for the first time "in a series of notes dated 1966 and published a year later in a catalogue for an exhibition titled *Non-Anthropomorphic Art* at the now defunct Lannis Gallery in New York."

And then there are of course (most officially accepted by all participants) Sol LeWitt's two famous texts from 1967 and 1969, the "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," first published in *Artforum*, vol. V, no. 10, pp. 56–57 and "Sentences on Conceptual Art," first published in *Art & Language*, vol. 1, no. 1 (May 1969), pp. 11–13.

2. For a typical example of an attempt to write the history of Conceptual Art by blindly adopting and repeating the claims and convictions of one of that history's figures, see Gudrun Inboden, "Joseph Kosuth—Artist and Critic of Modernism," in *Joseph Kosuth: The Making of Meaning* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 11–27.

3. Joseph Kosuth, *The Sixth Investigation 1969 Proposition 14* (Cologne: Gerd De Vries/Paul Maenz, 1971), n. p.

4. Dan Graham, *End Moments* (New York, 1969), n.p. The other Minimalists with whose work Graham seems to have been particularly involved were Dan Flavin (Graham wrote the catalogue essay for Flavin's exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1967) and Robert Morris (whose work he discussed later extensively in his essay "Income Piece" in 1973).



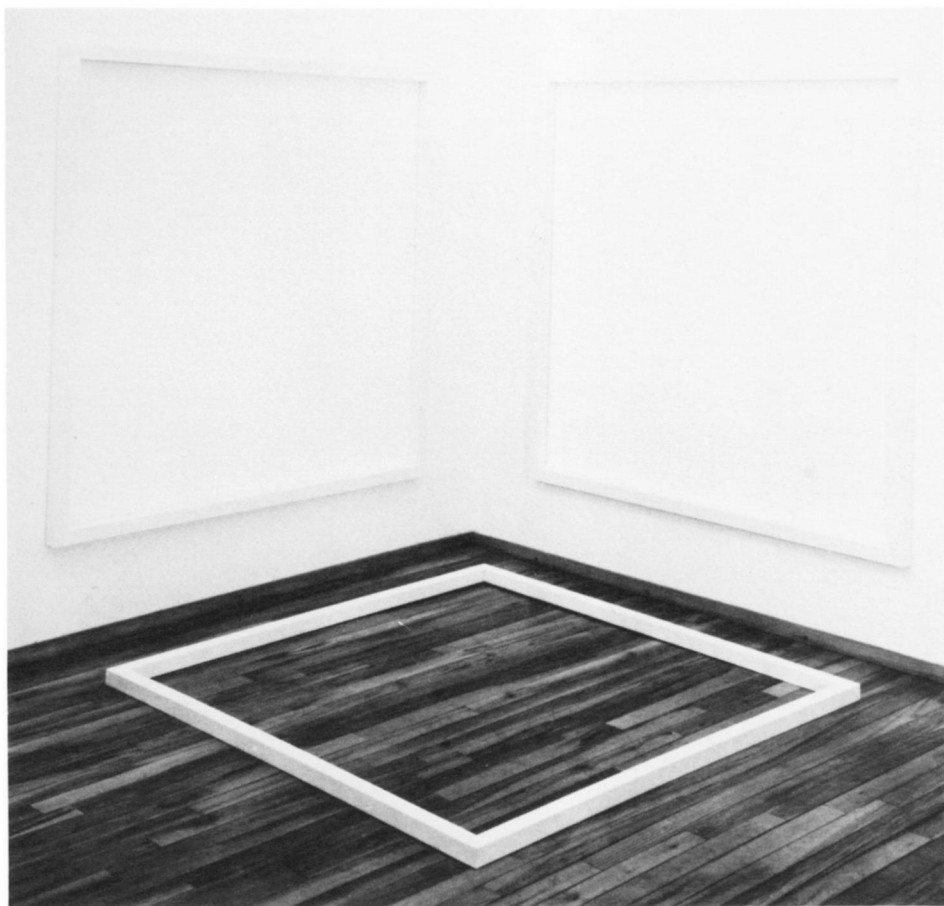
*Mel Bochner. Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art. Installation, School of Visual Arts Gallery, December, 1966.*

Mel Bochner, by contrast, seems to have chosen Dan Flavin as his primary figure of reference. He wrote one of the first essays on Dan Flavin (it is in fact a text-collage of accumulated quotations, all of which relate in one way or the other to Flavin's work).<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, the text-collage as a presentational mode would, indeed, become formative within Bochner's activities, for in the same year he organized what was probably the first truly conceptual exhibition (both in terms of materials being exhibited and in terms of presentational style). Entitled *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art* (at the School of Visual Arts in 1966), most of the Minimal artists were present along with a number of then still rather unknown Post-Minimal and Conceptual artists. Having assembled drawings, sketches, documents, tabulations, and other paraphernalia of the production process, the exhibition limited itself to presenting the "originals" in Xeroxes assembled into four loose-leaf binders that were installed on pedestals in the center of the exhibition space. While one should not overestimate the importance of such features (nor should one underestimate the pragmatics of such a presentational style), Bochner's intervention clearly moved to transform both the format and space of exhibitions. As such, it indicates that the kind of transformation of exhibition space and of the devices through which art is presented that was accomplished two years

5. Mel Bochner, "Less is Less (for Dan Flavin)," *Art and Artists* (Summer 1966).

later by Seth Siegelaub's exhibitions and publications (e.g., *The Xerox Book*) had already become a common concern of the generation of post-Minimal artists.

A third example of the close generational sequencing would be the fact that Joseph Kosuth seems to have chosen Donald Judd as his key figure: at least one of the early tautological neon works from the *Proto-Investigations* is dedicated to Donald Judd; and throughout the second part of "Art after Philosophy" (published in November, 1969), Judd's name, work, and writings are invoked with the same frequency as those of Duchamp and Reinhardt. At the end of this essay, Kosuth explicitly states: "I would hastily add to that, however, that I was certainly much more influenced by Ad Reinhardt, Duchamp via Johns and Morris,



*Sol LeWitt. Wall Floor Piece (Three Squares). 1966.*



and by Donald Judd than I ever was specifically by LeWitt. . . . Pollock and Judd are, I feel, the beginning and end of American dominance in art.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Sol LeWitt's Structures*

It would seem that LeWitt's proto-Conceptual work of the early 1960s originated in an understanding of the essential dilemma that has haunted artistic production since 1913, when its basic paradigms of opposition were first formulated—a dilemma that could be described as the conflict between structural specificity and random organization. For the need, on the one hand, for both a systematic reduction and an empirical verification of the perceptual data of a visual structure stands opposed to the desire, on the other hand, to assign a new “idea” or meaning to an object randomly (in the manner of Mallarmé's “transposition”) as though the object were an empty (linguistic) signifier.

This was the dilemma that Roland Barthes described in 1956 as the “difficulty of our times” in the concluding paragraphs of *Mythologies*:

It seems that this is a difficulty pertaining to our times: there is as yet only one possible choice, and this choice can bear only on two equally extreme methods: either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or, conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetize. In a word, I do not yet see a synthesis between ideology and poetry (by poetry I understand, in a very general way, the search for the inalienable meaning of things).<sup>7</sup>

Both critiques of the traditional practices of representation in the American postwar context had at first appeared mutually exclusive and had often fiercely attacked each other. For example, Reinhardt's extreme form of self-critical, perceptual positivism had gone too far for most of the New York School artists and certainly for the apologists of American modernism, mainly Greenberg and Fried, who had constructed a paradoxical dogma of transcendentalism and self-referential critique. On the other hand, Reinhardt was as vociferous as they—if

6. Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy” (Part II), in *The Making of Meaning*, p. 175. The list would seem complete, if it were not for the absence of Mel Bochner's and On Kawara's name, and its explicit negation of the importance of Sol LeWitt. According to Bochner, who had become an instructor at the School of Visual Arts in 1965, Joseph Kosuth worked with him as a student in 1965 and 1966. Dan Graham mentioned that during that time Kosuth was also a frequent visitor to the studios of On Kawara and Sol LeWitt. Kosuth's explicit negation makes one wonder whether it was not precisely Sol LeWitt's series of the so-called “Structures” (such as *Red Square*, *White Letters*, for example, produced in 1962 and exhibited in 1965) that was one of the crucial points of departure for the formulation of Kosuth's *Proto-Investigations*.

7. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 158.



not more so—in his contempt for the opposite, which is to say, the Duchampian tradition. This is evident in Ad Reinhardt's condescending remarks about both Duchamp—"I've never approved or liked anything about Marcel Duchamp. You have to chose between Duchamp and Mondrian"—and his legacy as represented through Cage and Rauschenberg—"Then the whole mixture, the number of poets and musicians and writers mixed up with art. Disreputable. Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg. I'm against the mixture of all the arts, against the mixture of art and life you know, everyday life."<sup>8</sup>

What slid by unnoticed was the fact that both these critiques of representation led to highly comparable formal and structural results (e.g., Rauschenberg's monochromes in 1951–1953 and Reinhardt's monochromes such as *Black Quadruplych* in 1955). Furthermore, even while made from opposite vantage points, the critical arguments accompanying such works systematically denied the traditional principles and functions of visual representation, constructing astonishingly similar litanies of negation. This is as evident, for example, in the text prepared by John Cage for Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* in 1953 as it is in Ad Reinhardt's 1962 manifesto "Art as Art." First Cage:

To whom, No subject, No image, No taste, No object, No beauty, No talent, No technique (no why), No idea, No intention, No art, No feeling, No black, No white no (and). After careful consideration I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows. Hallelujah! the blind can see again; the water is fine.<sup>9</sup>

And then Ad Reinhardt's manifesto for his own "Art as Art" principle:

No lines or imaginings, no shapes or composings or representings, no visions or sensations or impulses, no symbols or signs or impastos, no decoratings or colorings or picturings, no pleasures or pains, no accidents or ready-mades, no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities—nothing that is not of the essence.<sup>10</sup>

Ad Reinhardt's empiricist American formalism (condensed in his "Art as Art" formula) and Duchamp's critique of visuality (voiced for example in the

8. The first of the two quotations is to be found in Ad Reinhardt's Skowhegan lecture, delivered in 1967, quoted by Lucy Lippard in *Ad Reinhardt* (New York, 1981), p. 195. The second statement appears in an interview with Mary Fuller, published as "An Ad Reinhardt Monologue," *Artforum*, vol. 10 (November 1971), pp. 36–41.

9. John Cage (statement in reaction to the controversy engendered by the exhibition of Rauschenberg's all-white paintings at the Stable Gallery, September 15–October 3, 1953). Printed in Emily Genauer's column in the *New York Herald Tribune*, December 27, 1953, p. 6 (section 4).

10. Ad Reinhardt, "Art as Art," *Art International* (December 1962). Reprinted in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Viking, 1975), p. 56.

famous quip: “All my work in the period before the *Nude* was visual painting. Then I came to the idea. . . .”<sup>11</sup>) appear in the historically rather unlikely fusion of Kosuth’s attempt to integrate the two positions in the mid-1960s, leading to his own formula, which he deployed starting in 1966, “Art as Idea as Idea.” It should be noted, however, that the strange admixture of the nominalist position of Duchamp (and its consequences) and the positivist position of Reinhardt (and its implications) was not only accomplished in 1965 with the beginnings of Conceptual Art but was well-prepared in the work of Frank Stella, who in his *Black Paintings* from 1959 claimed both Rauschenberg’s monochrome paintings and Reinhardt’s paintings as points of departure. Finally, it was the work of Sol LeWitt — in particular work such as his *Structures* — that demarcates that precise transition, integrating as they do both language and visual sign in a structural model.

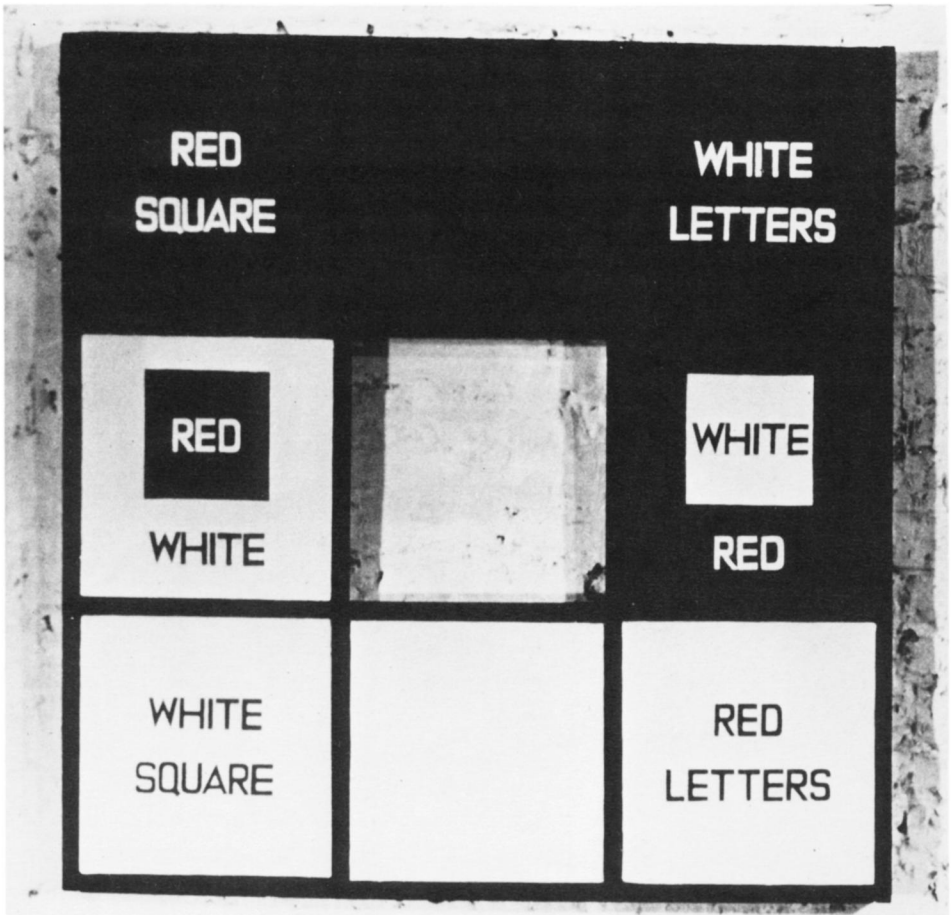
The surfaces of these *Structures* from 1961 to 1962 (some of which used single frames from Muybridge’s serial photographs) carried inscriptions in bland lettering identifying the hue and shape of those surfaces (e.g., “RED SQUARE”) and the inscription itself (e.g., “WHITE LETTERS”). Since these inscriptions named either the support or the inscription (or, in the middle section of the painting, both support and inscription in a paradoxical inversion), they created a continuous conflict in the viewer/reader. This conflict was not just over which of the two roles should be performed in relation to the painting. To a larger extent it concerned the reliability of the given information and the sequence of that information: was the inscription to be given primacy over the visual qualities identified by the linguistic entity, or was the perceptual experience of the visual, formal, and chromatic element anterior to its mere denomination by language?

Clearly this “mapping of the linguistic onto the perceptual” was not arguing in favor of “the idea” — or linguistic primacy — or the definition of the work of art as an analytic proposition. Quite to the contrary, the permutational character of the work suggested that the viewer/reader systematically perform all the visual and textual options the painting’s parameters allowed for. This included an acknowledgment of the painting’s central, square element: a spatial void that revealed the underlying wall surface as the painting’s *architectural* support in actual space, thereby suspending the reading of the painting between architectural structure and linguistic definition.

Rather than privileging one over the other, LeWitt’s work (in its dialogue with Jasper Johns’s legacy of paradox) insisted on forcing the inherent contradictions of the two spheres (that of the perceptual experience and that of the linguistic experience) into the highest possible relief. Unlike Frank Stella’s response to Johns, which forced modernist self-referentiality one step further into the ultimate *cul de sac* of its positivist convictions (his notorious statement “what

11. Marcel Duchamp, interview with Francis Roberts (1963), *Art News*, (December 1968), p. 46.

Sol LeWitt. Untitled (Red Square, White Letters).  
1962.



you see is what you see” would attest to that just as much as the development of his later work),<sup>12</sup> Sol LeWitt’s dialogue (with both Johns and Stella, and ulti-

12. Stella’s famous statement was of course made in the conversation between Bruce Glaser, Donald Judd, and himself, in February 1964, and published in *Art News* (September 1966), pp. 55–61. To what extent the problem of this dilemma haunted the generation of Minimal artists becomes evident when almost ten years later, in an interview with Jack Burnham, Robert Morris would still seem to be responding (if perhaps unconsciously) to Stella’s notorious statement:

Painting ceased to interest me. There were certain things about it that seemed very problematic to me. . . . There was a big conflict between the fact of doing this thing, and what it looked like later. It just didn’t seem to make much sense to me. Primarily

mately, of course, with Greenberg) developed a dialectical position with regard to the positivist legacy.

In contrast to Stella, his work now revealed that the modernist compulsion for empiricist self-reflexiveness not only originated in the scientific positivism which is the founding logic of capitalism (undergirding its industrial forms of production just as much as its science and theory), but that, for an artistic practice that internalized this positivism by insisting on a purely empiricist approach to vision, there would be a final destiny. This destiny would be to aspire to the condition of tautology.

It is not surprising, then, that when LeWitt formulated his second text on Conceptual Art—in his “Sentences on Conceptual Art” from the spring of 1969—the first sentence should programmatically state the radical difference between the logic of scientific production and that of aesthetic experience:

1. Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.
2. Rational judgments repeat rational judgments.
3. Irrational judgments lead to new experience.<sup>13</sup>

*Robert Morris's Paradoxes*

*The problem has been for some time one of ideas—those most admired are the ones with the biggest, most incisive ideas (e.g., Cage & Duchamp) . . . I think that today art is a form of art history.*

—Robert Morris, letter to Henry Flynt, 8/13/1962

Quite evidently, Morris's approach to Duchamp, in the early 1960s, had already been based on reading the readymade in analogy with a Saussurean model of language: a model where meaning is generated by structural relationships. As Morris recalls, his own “fascination with and respect for Duchamp was related to his linguistic fixation, to the idea that all of his operations were ultimately built on a sophisticated understanding of language itself.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Morris's early work (from 1961 to 1963) already pointed toward an understanding of Duchamp that transcended the limited definition of the ready-

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because there was an activity I did in time, and there was a certain method to it. And that didn't seem to have any relationship to the thing at all. There is a certain resolution in the theater where there is real time, and *what you do is what you do*. (emphasis added)

Robert Morris, unpublished interview with Jack Burnham, November 21, 1975, Robert Morris Archive. Quoted in Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 25.

13. Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” first published in 0-9, New York (1969), and *Art-Language*, Coventry (May 1969), p. 11.

14. Robert Morris as quoted in Berger, *Labyrinths*, p. 22.

made as the mere displacement of traditional modes of artistic production by a new aesthetic of the speech act (“this is a work of art if I say so”). And in marked distinction from the Conceptualists’ subsequent exclusive focus on the unassisted readymades, Morris had, from the late 1950s when he discovered Duchamp, been particularly engaged with work such as *Three Standard Stoppages* and the *Notes for the Large Glass (The Green Box)*.

Morris’s production from the early 1960s, in particular works like *Card File* (1962), *Metered Bulb* (1963), *I-Box* (1963), *Litanies*, and the *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal*, also entitled *Document* (1963), indicated a reading of Duchamp that clearly went beyond Johns’s, leading towards a structural and semiotic definition of the functions of the readymade. As Morris described it retrospectively in his 1970 essay “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making”:

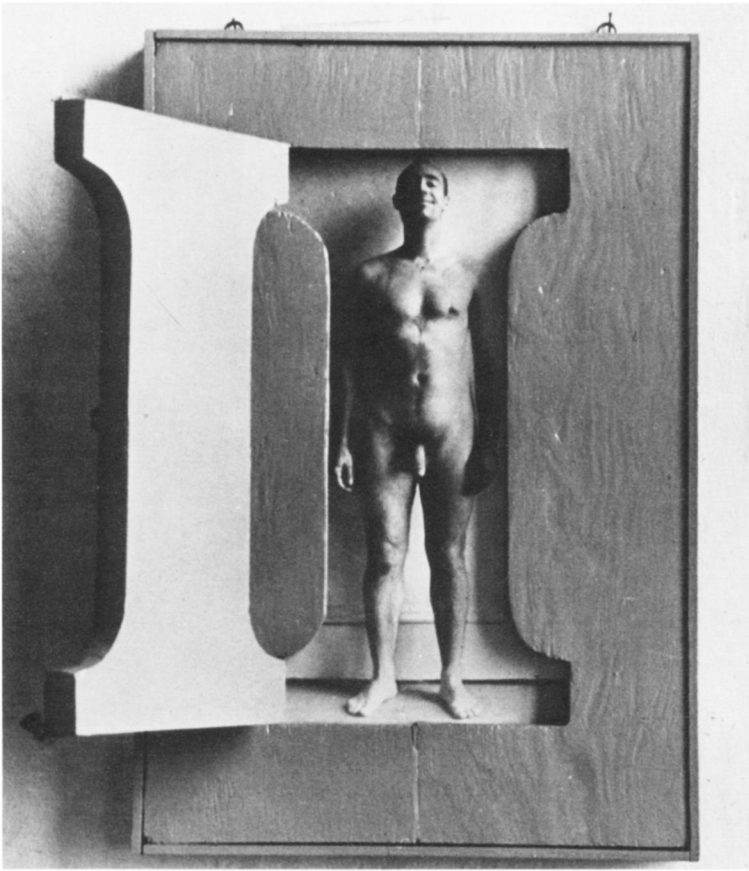
There is a binary swing between the arbitrary and the nonarbitrary or “motivated” which is . . . an historical, evolutionary, or diachronic feature of language’s development and change. Language is not plastic art but both are forms of human behavior and the structures of one can be compared to the structures of the other.<sup>15</sup>

While it is worth noticing that by 1970 Morris already reaffirmed apodictically the ontological character of the category “plastic” art versus that of “language,” it was in the early 1960s that his assaults on the traditional concepts of visibility and plasticity had already begun to lay some of the crucial foundations for the development of an art practice emphasizing its parallels, if not identity, with the systems of linguistic signs, i.e., Conceptual Art.

Most importantly, as early as 1961 in his *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, Morris had ruptured both. On the one hand, it dispenses with the Modernist quest for medium-specific purity as much as with its sequel in the positivist conviction of a purely perceptual experience operating in Stella’s visual tautologies and the early phases of Minimalism. And on the other, by counteracting the supremacy of the visual with that of an auditory experience of equal if not higher importance, he renewed the Duchampian quest for a nonretinal art. In *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, as much as in the subsequent works, the critique of the hegemony of traditional categories of the visual is enacted not only in the (acoustic or tactile) disturbance of the purity of perceptual experience, but it is performed as well through a literalist act of denying the viewer practically all (at least traditionally defined) visual information.

This strategy of a “perceptual withdrawal” leads in each of the works from the early 1960s to a different analysis of the constituent features of the structured object and the modes of reading it generates. In *I-Box*, for example, the viewer is confronted with a semiotic pun (on the words *I* and *eye*) just as much as

15. Robert Morris, “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated,” *Artforum*, vol. 9 (April 1970), p. 63.



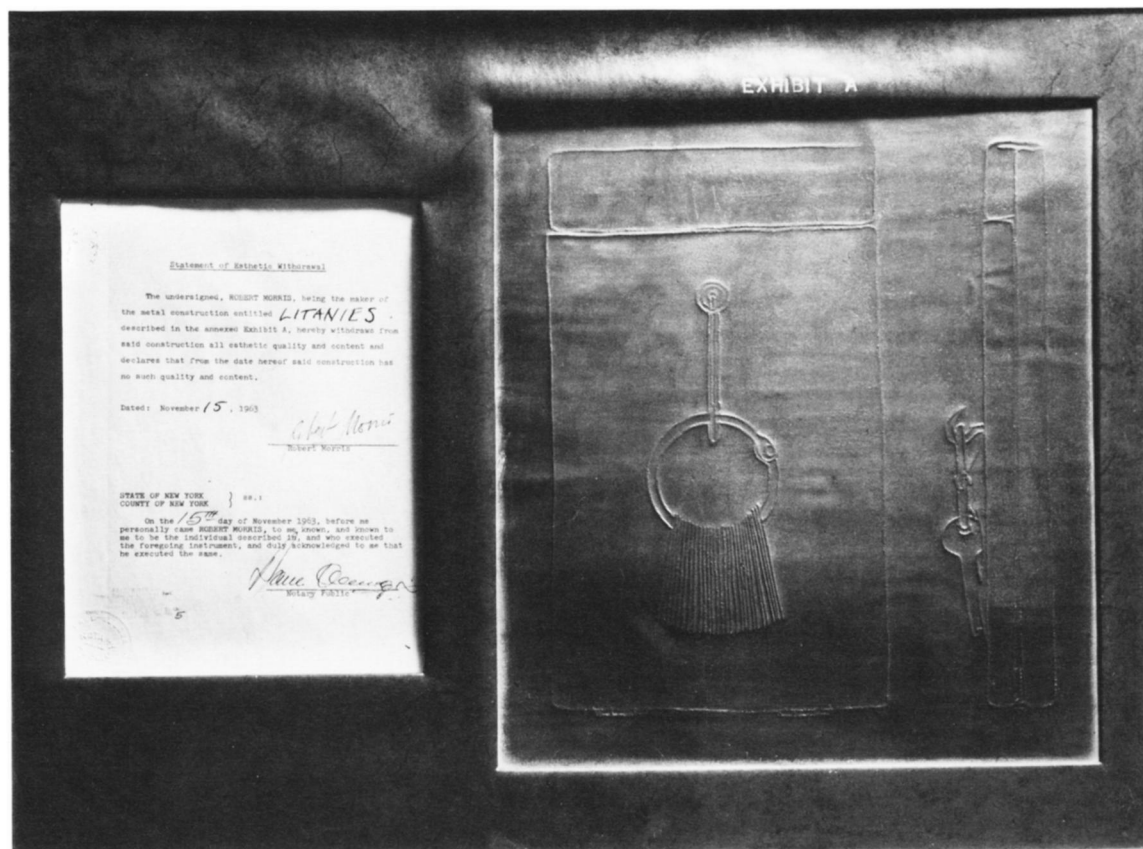
with a structural sleight of hand from the tactile (the viewer has to manipulate the box physically to *see* the *I* of the artist) through the linguistic sign (the letter *I* defines the shape of the framing/display device: the “door” of the box) to the visual representation (the nude photographic portrait of the artist) and back. It is of course this very tripartite division of the aesthetic signifier—its separation into object, linguistic sign, and photographic reproduction—that we will encounter in infinite variations, didactically simplified (to operate as stunning tautologies) and stylistically designed (to take the place of paintings) in Kosuth’s *Proto-Investigations* after 1966.

In *Document (Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal)*, Morris takes the literal negation of the visual even further, in clarifying that after Duchamp the ready-made is not just a neutral analytic proposition (in the manner of an underlying statement such as “this is a work of art”). Beginning with the readymade, the work of art had become the ultimate subject of a legal definition and the result of institutional validation. In the absence of any specifically visual qualities and due



to the manifest lack of any (artistic) manual competence as a criterion of distinction, all the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgment—of taste and of connoisseurship—have been programmatically voided. The result of this is that the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and an institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste).

This erosion works, then, not just against the hegemony of the visual, but against the possibility of any other aspect of the aesthetic experience as being autonomous and self-sufficient. That the introduction of legalistic language and an administrative style of the material presentation of the artistic object could effect such an erosion had of course been prefigured in Duchamp's practice as well. In 1944 he had hired a notary to inscribe a statement of authenticity on his 1919 *L.H.O.O.Q.*, affirming that “. . . this is to certify that this is the original



Robert Morris. *Untitled (Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal)*. 1963.



‘ready-made’ *L.H.O.O.Q.* Paris 1919.” What was possibly still a pragmatic maneuver with Duchamp (although certainly one in line with the pleasure he took in contemplating the vanishing basis for the legitimate definition of the work of art in visual competence and manual skill alone) would soon become one of the constituent features of subsequent developments in Conceptual Art. Most obviously operating in the certificates issued by Piero Manzoni defining persons or partial persons as temporary or lifetime works of art (1960–61), this is to be found at the same time in Yves Klein’s certificates assigning zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility to the various collectors who acquired them.

But this aesthetic of linguistic conventions and legalistic arrangements not only denies the validity of the traditional studio aesthetic, it also cancels the aesthetic of production and consumption which had still governed Pop Art and Minimalism.

Just as the modernist critique (and ultimate prohibition) of figurative representation had become the increasingly dogmatic law for pictorial production in the first decade of the twentieth century, so Conceptual Art now instated the prohibition of any and all visuality as the inescapable aesthetic rule for the end of the twentieth century. Just as the readymade had negated not only figurative representation, authenticity, and authorship while introducing repetition and the series (i.e., the law of industrial production) to replace the studio aesthetic of the handcrafted original, Conceptual Art came to displace even that image of the mass-produced object and its aestheticized forms in Pop Art, replacing an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization and institutional validation.

#### *Edward Ruscha’s Books*

One major example of these tendencies—acknowledged both by Dan Graham as a major inspiration for his own “Homes for America” and by Kosuth, whose “Art after Philosophy” names him as a proto-Conceptual artist—would be the early book work of Edward Ruscha. Among the key strategies of future Conceptual Art that were initiated by Ruscha in 1963 were the following: to chose the vernacular (e.g., architecture) as referent; to deploy photography systematically as the representational medium; and to develop a new form of distribution (e.g., the commercially produced book as opposed to the traditionally crafted *livre d’artiste*).

Typically, reference to architecture in any form whatever would have been unthinkable in the context of American-type formalism and Abstract Expressionism (or within the European postwar aesthetic for that matter) until the early 1960s. The devotion to a private aesthetic of contemplative experience, with its concomitant absence of any systematic reflection of the social functions of artistic production and their potential and actual publics, had, in fact, precluded any exploration of the interdependence of architectural and artistic production, be it



Edward Ruscha. *Four Books*. 1962–1966.

Andy Warhol. *From Thirteen Most Wanted Men*. 1964.

even in the most superficial and trivial forms of architectural decor.<sup>16</sup> It was not until the emergence of Pop Art in the early 1960s, in particular in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Claes Oldenburg, and Edward Ruscha, that the references to monumental sculpture (even in its negation as the *Anti-Monument*) and to vernacular architecture reintroduced (even if only by implication) a reflection on public (architectural and domestic) space, thereby foregrounding the absence of a developed artistic reflection on the problematic of the contemporary publics.

In January 1963 (the year of Duchamp's first American retrospective, held at the Pasadena Art Museum), Ruscha, a relatively unknown Los Angeles artist, decided to publish a book entitled *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*. The book, modest

16. It would be worthwhile to explore the fact that artists like Arshile Gorky under the impact of the WPA program would still have been concerned with the aesthetics of mural painting when he was commissioned to decorate the Newark Airport building, and that even Pollock tinkered with the idea of an architectural dimension for his paintings, wondering whether they could be transformed into architectural panels. As is well known, Mark Rothko's involvement with the Seagram Corporation to produce a set of decorative panels for their corporate headquarters ended in disaster, and Barnett Newman's synagogue project was abandoned as well. All of these exceptions would confirm the rule that the postwar aesthetic had undergone the most rigorous privatization and a reversal of the reflection on the inextricable link between artistic production and public social experience as they had marked the 1920s.



in format and production, was as removed from the tradition of the artist's book as its iconography was opposed to every aspect of the official American art of the 1950s and early '60s: the legacy of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. The book was, however, not so alien to the artistic thought of the emerging generation, if one remembers that the year before an unknown artist from New York by the name of Andy Warhol had exhibited a serial arrangement of thirty-two stenciled paintings depicting Campbell Soup cans arranged like objects on shelves in the Ferus Gallery. While both Warhol and Ruscha accepted a notion of public experience that was inescapably contained in the conditions of consumption, both artists altered the mode of production as well as the form of distribution of their work such that a different public was potentially addressed.

Ruscha's vernacular iconography evolved to the same extent as Warhol's had from the Duchamp and Cage legacy of an aesthetic of "indifference," and from the commitment to an antihierarchical organization of a universally valid facticity, operating as total affirmation. Indeed, random sampling and aleatory choice from an infinity of possible objects (Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*) would soon become essential strategies of the aesthetic of Conceptual Art: one thinks of Alighiero Boetti's *The Thousand Longest Rivers*, of Robert Barry's *One Billion Dots*, of On Kawara's *One Million*

*Years*, or, most significantly in this context, of Doug Huebler's life-long project, entitled *Variable Piece: 70*. This work claims to document photographically "the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner. Editions of this work will be periodically issued in a variety of topical modes: '100,000 people,' '1,000,000 people,' '10,000,000 people,' . . . etc." Or again, there are the works by Stanley Brouwn or Hanne Darboven where in each case an arbitrary, abstract principle of pure quantification replaces traditional principles of pictorial or sculptural organization and/or compositional relational order.

In the same manner that Ruscha's books shifted the formal organization of the representation, the mode of presentation itself became transformed: instead of lifting photographic (or print-derived) imagery from mass-cultural sources and transforming these images into painting (as Warhol and the Pop Artists had practiced it), Ruscha would now deploy photography directly, in an appropriate printing medium. And it was a particularly laconic type of photography at that, one that explicitly situated itself as much outside of all conventions of art photography as outside of those of the venerable tradition of documentary photography, least of all that of "concerned" photography. This devotion to a deadpan, anonymous, amateurish approach to photographic form corresponds exactly to Ruscha's iconographic choice of the architectural banal. Thus at all three levels — iconography, representational form, mode of distribution — the given forms of artistic object no longer seemed acceptable in their traditionally specialized and privileged positions. As Victor Burgin put it with hindsight: "One of the things Conceptual Art attempted was the dismantling of the hierarchy of media according to which painting (sculpture trailing slightly behind it) is assumed inherently superior to, most notably, photography."<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, even in 1965–66, with the earliest stages of Conceptual practices, we witness the emergence of diametrically opposed approaches: Joseph Kosuth's *Proto-Investigations* on the one hand (according to their author conceived and produced in 1965);<sup>18</sup> and a work such as Dan Graham's *Homes for*

17. Victor Burgin, "The Absence of Presence," in *The End of Art Theory* (Atlantic Highlands, 1986), p. 34.

18. In the preparation of this essay, I have not been able to find a single source or document that would confirm with definite credibility Kosuth's claim that these works of the *Proto-Investigations* were actually produced and existed physically in 1965 or 1966, when he (at that time twenty years old) was still a student at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Nor was Kosuth able to provide any documents to make the claims verifiable. By contrast these claims were explicitly contested by all the artists I interviewed who knew Kosuth at that time, none of them remembering seeing any of the *Proto-Investigations* before February 1967, in the exhibition *Non-Anthropomorphic Art by Four Young Artists*, organized by Joseph Kosuth at the Lannis Gallery. The artists with whom I conducted interviews were Robert Barry, Mel Bochner, Dan Graham, and Lawrence Weiner. I am not necessarily suggesting that the *Proto-Investigations* could not have been done by Kosuth at the age of twenty (after all, Frank Stella had painted his *Black Paintings* at age twenty-three), or that the logical steps





By contrast, Graham's work argued for an analysis of (visual) meaning that defined signs as both structurally constituted within the relations of language's system *and* grounded in the referent of social and political experience. Further, Graham's dialectical conception of visual representation polemically collapsed the difference between the spaces of production and those of reproduction (what Seth Siegelaub would, in 1969, call primary and secondary information).<sup>19</sup> Anticipating the work's actual modes of distribution and reception within its very structure of production, *Homes for America* eliminated the difference between the artistic construct and its (photographic) reproduction, the difference between an exhibition of art objects and the photograph of its installation, the difference between the architectural space of the gallery and the space of the catalogue and the art magazine.

*Joseph Kosuth's Tautologies*

In opposition to this, Kosuth was arguing, in 1969, precisely for the continuation and expansion of modernism's positivist legacy, and doing so with what must have seemed to him at the time the most radical and advanced tools of that tradition: Wittgenstein's logical positivism and language philosophy (he emphatically affirmed this continuity when, in the first part of "Art after Philosophy," he states, "Certainly linguistic philosophy can be considered the heir to empiricism . . ."). Thus, even while claiming to displace the formalism of Greenberg and Fried, he in fact updated modernism's project of self-reflexiveness. For Kosuth stabilized the notion of a disinterested and self-sufficient art by subjecting both—the Wittgensteinian model of the language game as well as the Duchampian model of the readymade—to the strictures of a model of meaning that operates in the modernist tradition of that paradox Michel Foucault has called modernity's "empirico-transcendental" thought. This is to say that in 1968 artistic production is still the result, for Kosuth, of artistic intention as it constitutes itself above all in self-reflexiveness (even if it is now discursive rather than perceptual, epistemological rather than essentialist).<sup>20</sup>

19. "For many years it has been well known that more people are aware of an artist's work through (1) the printed media or (2) conversation than by direct confrontation with the art itself. For painting and sculpture, where the visual presence—color, scale, size, location—is important to the work, the photograph or verbalization of that work is a bastardization of the art. But when art concerns itself with things not germane to physical presence, its intrinsic (communicative) value is not altered by its presentation in printed media. The use of catalogues and books to communicate (and disseminate) art is the most neutral means to present the new art. The catalogue can now act as the primary information for the exhibition, as opposed to secondary information *about* art in magazines, catalogues, etc. and in some cases the 'exhibition' can be the 'catalogue.'" (Seth Siegelaub, "On Exhibitions and the World at Large" [interview with Charles Harrison], *Studio International*, [December 1969].)

20. This differentiation is developed in Hal Foster's excellent discussion of these paradigmatic differences as they emerge first in Minimalism in his essay "The Crux of Minimalism," in *Individuals* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), p. 162–183.

At the very moment when the complementary formations of Pop and Minimal Art had, for the first time, succeeded in criticizing the legacy of American-type formalism and its prohibition of referentiality, this project is all the more astounding. The privileging of the literal over the referential axis of (visual) language—as Greenberg’s formalist aesthetic had entailed—had been countered in Pop Art by a provocative devotion to mass-cultural iconography. Then, both Pop and Minimal Art had continuously emphasized the universal presence of industrial means of reproduction as inescapable framing conditions for artistic means of production, or, to put it differently, they had emphasized that the aesthetic of the studio had been irreversibly replaced by an aesthetic of production and consumption. And finally, Pop and Minimal Art had exhumed the repressed history of Duchamp (and Dadaism at large), phenomena equally unacceptable to the reigning aesthetic thought of the late 1950s and early ’60s. Kosuth’s narrow reading of the readymade is astonishing for yet another reason. In 1969, he explicitly claimed that he had encountered the work of Duchamp primarily through the mediation of Johns and Morris rather than through an actual study of Duchamp’s writings and works.<sup>21</sup>

As we have seen above, the first two phases of Duchamp’s reception by American artists from the early 1950s (Johns and Rauschenberg) to Warhol and Morris in the early 1960s had gradually opened up the range of implications of Duchamp’s readymades.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore all the more puzzling to see that after 1968—what one could call the beginning of the third phase of Duchamp

21. See note 5 above.

22. As Rosalind Krauss has suggested, at least Johns’s understanding at that point already transcended the earlier reading of the readymade as merely an aesthetic of declaration and intention:

If we consider that Stella’s painting was involved early on, in the work of Johns, then Johns’s interpretation of Duchamp and the readymade—an interpretation diametrically opposed to that of the Conceptualist group outlined above—has some relevance in this connection. For Johns clearly saw the readymade as pointing to the fact that there need be *no* connection between the final art object and the psychological matrix from which it issued, since in the case of the readymade this possibility is precluded from the start. The *Fountain* was not made (fabricated) by Duchamp, only selected by him. Therefore there is no way in which the urinal can “express” the artist. It is like a sentence which is put into the world unsanctioned by the voice of a speaker standing behind it. Because maker and artist are evidently separate, there is no way for the urinal to serve as an externalization of the state or states of mind of the artist as he made it. And by not functioning within the grammar of the aesthetic personality, the *Fountain* can be seen as putting distance between itself and the notion of personality per se. The relationship between Johns’s *American Flag* and his reading of the *Fountain* is just this: the arthood of the *Fountain* is not legitimized by its having issued stroke-by-stroke from the private psyche of the artist; indeed it could not. So it is like a man absentmindedly humming and being dumbfounded if asked if he had meant that tune or rather another. That is a case in which it is not clear how the grammar of intention might apply.

Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility,” *Artforum*, vol. 12 (November 1973), pp. 43–52, n. 4.



reception—the understanding of this model by Conceptual Artists still foregrounds intentional declaration over contextualization. This holds true not only for Kosuth’s “Art after Philosophy,” but equally for the British Art & Language Group, as, in the introduction to the first issue of the journal in May 1969, they write:

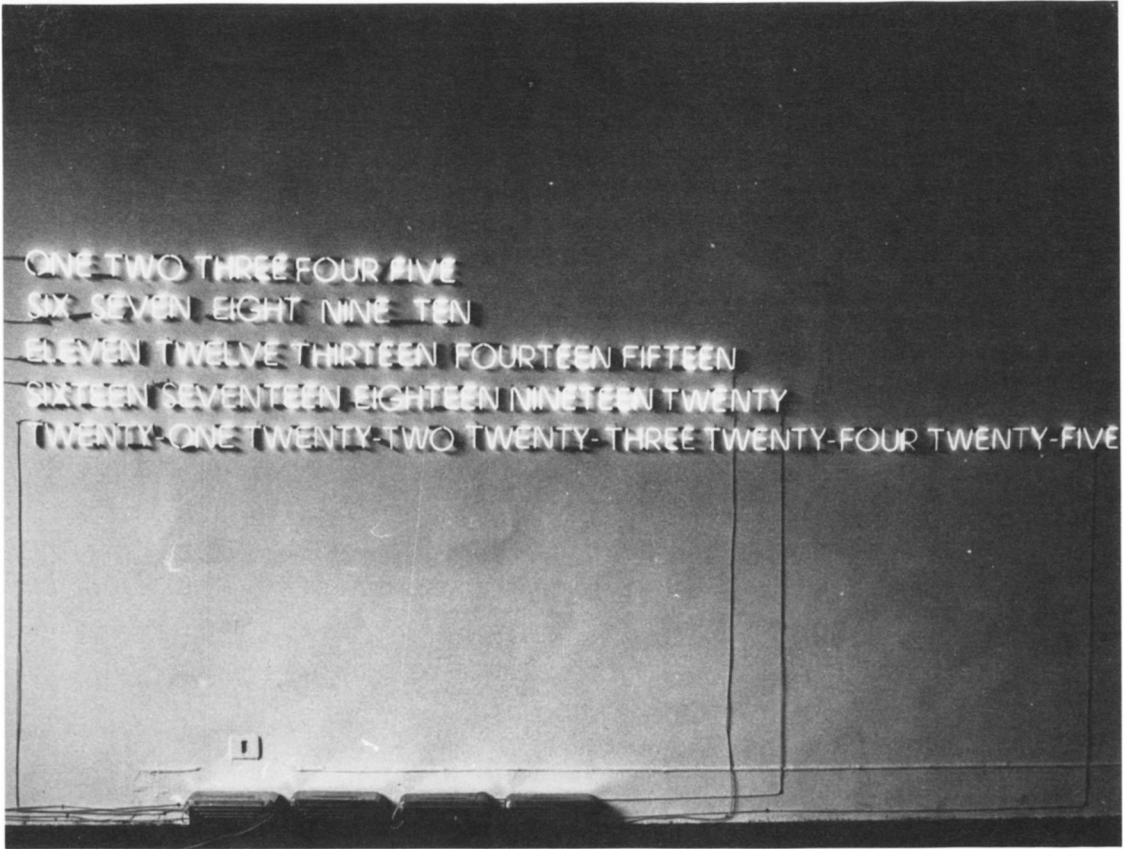
To place an object in a context where the attention of any spectator will be conditioned toward the expectancy of recognizing art objects. For example placing what up to then had been an object of alien visual characteristics to those expected within the framework of an art ambience, or by virtue of the artist declaring the object to be an art object whether or not it was in an art ambience. Using these techniques what appeared to be entirely new morphologies were held out to qualify for the status of the members of the class “art objects.”

For example Duchamp’s “Readymades” and Rauschenberg’s “Portrait of Iris Clert.”<sup>23</sup>

A few months later Kosuth based his argument for the development of Conceptual Art on just such a restricted reading of Duchamp. For in its limiting view of the history and the typology of Duchamp’s oeuvre, Kosuth’s argument—like that of Art & Language—focuses exclusively on the “unassisted readymades.” Thereby early Conceptual theory not only leaves out Duchamp’s painterly work but avoids such an eminently crucial work as the *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913), not to mention *The Large Glass* (1915–23) or the *Etants donné* (1946–66) or the 1943 *Boîte en valise*. But what is worse is that even the reading of the unassisted readymades is itself extremely narrow, reducing the readymade model in fact merely to that of an analytical proposition. Typically, both Art & Language and Kosuth’s “Art after Philosophy” refer to Robert Rauschenberg’s notorious example of speech-act aesthetics (“This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so”) based on the rather limited understanding of the readymade as an act of willful artistic declaration. This understanding, typical of the early 1950s, continues in Judd’s famous lapidary norm (and patently nonsensical statement), quoted a little later in Kosuth’s text: “if someone says it’s art, then it is art. . . .”

In 1969, Art & Language and Kosuth shared in foregrounding the “analytic proposition” inherent in each readymade, namely the statement “this is a work of art,” over and above all other aspects implied by the readymade model (its structural logic, its features as an industrially produced object of use and consumption, its seriality, and the dependence of its meaning on context). And most importantly, according to Kosuth, this means that artistic propositions constitute themselves in the negation of all referentiality, be it that of the historical context of the (artistic) sign or that of its social function and use:

23. Introduction, *Art & Language*, vol. 1, no. 1 (May 1969), p. 5.



Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context-as-art, they provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a *definition* of art. Thus, that it is art is true *a priori* (which is what Judd means when he states that "if someone calls it art, it's art").<sup>24</sup>

Or, a little later in the same year, he wrote in *The Sixth Investigation 1969 Proposition 14* (a text that has mysteriously vanished from the collection of his writings):

If one considers that the forms art takes as being art's language one can realize then that a work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art. An analysis of proposi-

24. Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," *Studio International*, nos. 915–917 (October–December 1969). Quoted here from Joseph Kosuth, *The Making of Meaning*, p. 155.

*Joseph Kosuth. Five Fives (to Donald Judd). 1965 (?).*

tion types shows art “works” as analytic propositions. Works of art that try to tell us something about the world are bound to fail. . . . The absence of reality in art is exactly art’s reality.<sup>25</sup>

Kosuth’s programmatic efforts to reinstate a law of discursive self-reflexiveness in the guise of a critique of Greenberg’s and Fried’s visual and formal self-reflexiveness are all the more astonishing since a considerable part of “Art after Philosophy” is dedicated to the elaborate construction of a genealogy for Conceptual Art, in and of itself a historical project (e.g., “All art [after Duchamp] is conceptual [in nature] because art exists only conceptually”). This very construction of a lineage already contextualizes and historicizes, of course, in “telling us something about the world”—of art, at least; that is, it unwittingly operates like a synthetic proposition (even if only within the conventions of a particular language system) and therefore denies both the purity and the possibility of an autonomous artistic production that would function, within art’s own language-system, as mere analytic proposition.

Perhaps one might try to argue that, in fact, Kosuth’s renewed cult of the tautology brings the Symbolist project to fruition. It might be said, for example, that this renewal is the logical extension of Symbolism’s exclusive concern with the conditions and the theorization of art’s own modes of conception and reading. Such an argument, however, would still not allay questions concerning the altered historical framework within which such a cult must find its determination. Even within its Symbolist origins, the modernist theology of art was already gripped by a polarized opposition. For a religious veneration of self-referential plastic form as the pure negation of rationalist and empiricist thought can simultaneously be read as nothing other than the inscription and instrumentalization of precisely that order—even or particularly in its negation—within the realm of the aesthetic itself (the almost immediate and universal application of Symbolism for the cosmos of late nineteenth-century commodity production would attest to this).

This dialectic came to claim its historical rights all the more forcefully in the contemporary, postwar situation. For given the conditions of a rapidly accelerating fusion of the culture industry with the last bastions of an autonomous sphere of high art, self-reflexiveness increasingly (and inevitably) came to shift along the borderline between logical positivism and the advertisement campaign. And further, the rights and rationale of a newly established postwar middle class, one which came fully into its own in the 1960s, could assume their aesthetic identity in the very model of the tautology and its accompanying aesthetic of administration. For this aesthetic identity is structured much the way this class’s social identity is, namely, as one of merely administering labor and production (rather than producing) and of the distribution of commodities. This class, having be-

25. Joseph Kosuth, *The Sixth Investigation 1969 Proposition 14*.

come firmly established as the most common and powerful social class of postwar society, is the one which, as H. G. Helms wrote in his book on Max Stirner, “deprives itself voluntarily of the rights to intervene within the political decision-making process in order to arrange itself more efficiently with the existing political conditions.”<sup>26</sup>

This aesthetic of the newly established power of administration found its first fully developed literary voice in a phenomenon like the *nouveau roman* of Robbe-Grillet. It was no accident that such a profoundly positivist literary project would then serve, in the American context, as a point of departure for Conceptual Art. But, paradoxically, it was at this very same historical moment that the social functions of the tautological principle found their most lucid analysis, through a critical examination launched in France.

In the early writing of Roland Barthes one finds, simultaneously with the *nouveau roman*, a discussion of the tautological:

*Tautologie.* Yes, I know, it's an ugly word. But so is the thing. Tautology is the verbal device which consists in defining like by like (“*Drama is drama*”). . . . One takes refuge in tautology as one does in fear, or anger, or sadness, when one is at a loss for an explanation. . . . In tautology, there is a double murder: one kills rationality because it resists one; one kills language because it betrays one. . . . Now any refusal of language is a death. Tautology creates a dead, a motionless world.<sup>27</sup>

Ten years later, at the same moment that Kosuth was discovering it as the central aesthetic project of his era, the phenomenon of the tautological was once again opened to examination in France. But now, rather than being discussed as a linguistic and rhetorical form, it was analyzed as a general social effect: as both the inescapable reflex of behavior and, once the requirements of the advanced culture industry (i.e., advertisement and media) have been put in place in the formation of spectacle culture, a universal condition of experience. What still remains open for discussion, of course, is the extent to which Conceptual Art of a certain type shared these conditions, or even enacted and implemented them in the sphere of the aesthetic—accounting, perhaps, for its subsequent proximity and success within a world of advertisement strategists—or, alternatively, the extent to which it merely inscribed itself into the inescapable logic of a totally administered world, as Adorno's notorious term identified it. Thus Guy Debord noted in 1967:

The basically tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are simultaneously its ends. It is the sun

26. Hans G. Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft* (Cologne, 1968), p. 3.

27. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 152–53.

which never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory.<sup>28</sup>

*A Tale of Many Squares*

The visual forms that correspond most accurately to the linguistic form of the tautology are the square and its stereometric rotation, the cube. Not surprisingly, these two forms proliferated in the painterly and sculptural production of the early- to mid-1960s. This was the moment when a rigorous self-reflexiveness was bent on examining the traditional boundaries of modernist sculptural objects to the same extent that a phenomenological reflection of viewing space was insistent on reincorporating architectural parameters into the conception of painting and sculpture.

So thoroughly did the square and the cube permeate the vocabulary of Minimalist sculpture that in 1967 Lucy Lippard published a questionnaire investigating the role of these forms, which she had circulated among many artists. In his response to the questionnaire, Donald Judd, in one of his many attempts to detach the morphology of Minimalism from similar investigations of the historical avant-garde in the earlier part of the twentieth century, displayed the aggressive dimension of tautological thought (disguised as pragmatism, as was usual in his case) by simply denying that any historical meaning could be inherent in geometric or stereometric forms:

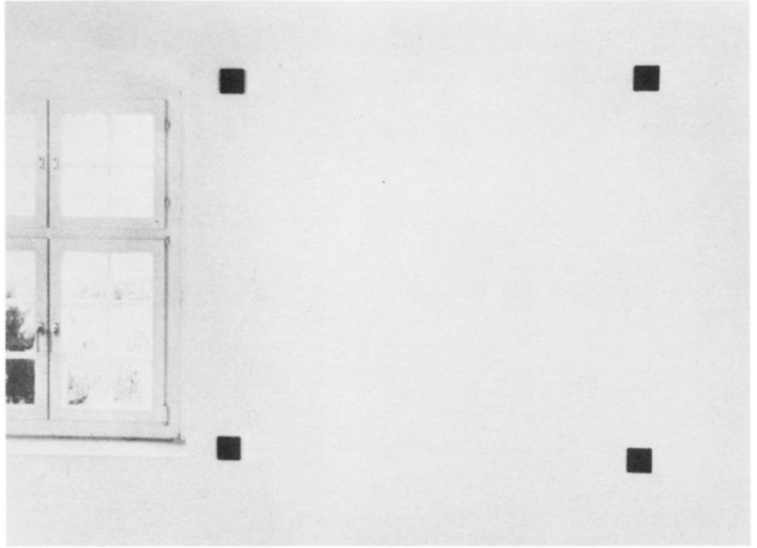
I don't think there is anything special about squares, which I don't use, or cubes. They certainly don't have any intrinsic meaning or superiority. One thing though, cubes are a lot easier to make than spheres. The main virtue of geometric shapes is that they are not organic, as all art otherwise is. A form that's neither geometric nor organic would be a great discovery.<sup>29</sup>

As the central form of visual self-reflexiveness, the square abolishes the traditional spatial parameters of verticality and horizontality, thereby canceling the metaphysics of space and its conventions of reading. It is in this way that the square (beginning with Malevich's 1915 *Black Square*) incessantly points to itself:

28. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970), n. p., section 13. First published, Paris, 1967.

29. Donald Judd, in Lucy Lippard, "Homage to the Square," *Art in America* (July–August, 1967), pp. 50–57. How pervasive the square actually was in the art of the early- to mid-1960s is all too obvious: the work from the late '50s, such as paintings by Reinhardt and Ryman and a large number of sculptures from the early 1960s onwards (Andre, LeWitt, and Judd), deployed the tautological form in endless variations. Paradoxically even Kosuth's work from the mid-1960s—while emphasizing its departure from painting's traditional object status and visual/formal design—continues to display the definitions of words on large, black, canvas *squares*. By contrast one only has to think of Jasper Johns's or Barnett Newman's work as immediate predecessors of that generation to recognize how infrequent, if not altogether absent, the square was at that moment.

Robert Barry. Painting in Four Parts. 1967.



as spatial perimeter, as plane, as surface, and, functioning simultaneously, as support. But, with the very success of this self-referential gesture, marking the form out as purely pictorial, the square painting paradoxically but inevitably assumes the character of a relief/object situated in actual space. It thereby invites a viewing/reading of spatial contingency and architectural imbeddedness, insisting on the imminent and irreversible transition from painting to sculpture.

This transition was performed in the proto-Conceptual art of the early- to mid-1960s in a fairly delimited number of specific pictorial operations. It occurred, first of all, through the emphasis on painting's *opacity*. The object-status of the painterly structure could be underscored by unifying and homogenizing its surface through monochromy, serialized texture, and gridded compositional structure; or it could be emphasized by literally sealing a painting's spatial transparency, by simply altering its material support: shifting it from canvas to unstretched fabric or metal. This type of investigation was developed systematically, for example, in the proto-Conceptual paintings of Robert Ryman, who employed all of these options separately or in varying combinations in the early- to mid-1960s; or, after 1965, in the paintings of Robert Barry, Daniel Buren, and Niele Toroni.

Secondly—and in a direct inversion and countermovement to the first—object-status could be achieved by emphasizing, in a literalist manner, painting's *transparency*. This entailed establishing a dialectic between pictorial surface, frame, and architectural support by either a literal opening up of the painterly support, as in Sol LeWitt's early *Structures*, or by the insertion of translucent or transparent surfaces into the conventional frame of viewing, as in Ryman's fiberglass paintings, Buren's early nylon paintings, or Michael Asher's and Ger-



hard Richter's glass panes in metal frames, both emerging between 1965 and 1967. Or, as in the early work of Robert Barry (such as his *Painting in Four Parts*, 1967, in the FER-Collection), where the square, monochrome, canvas objects now seemed to assume the role of mere architectural demarcation. Functioning as decentered painterly objects, they delimit the *external* architectural space in a manner analogous to the serial or central composition of earlier Minimal work that still defined internal pictorial or sculptural space. Or, as in Barry's square canvas (1967), which is to be placed at the exact center of the architectural support wall, a work is conceived as programmatically shifting the reading of it from a centered, unified, pictorial object to an experience of architectural contingency, and as thereby incorporating the supplementary and overdetermining strategies of curatorial placement and conventions of installation (traditionally disavowed in painting and sculpture) into the *conception* of the work itself.

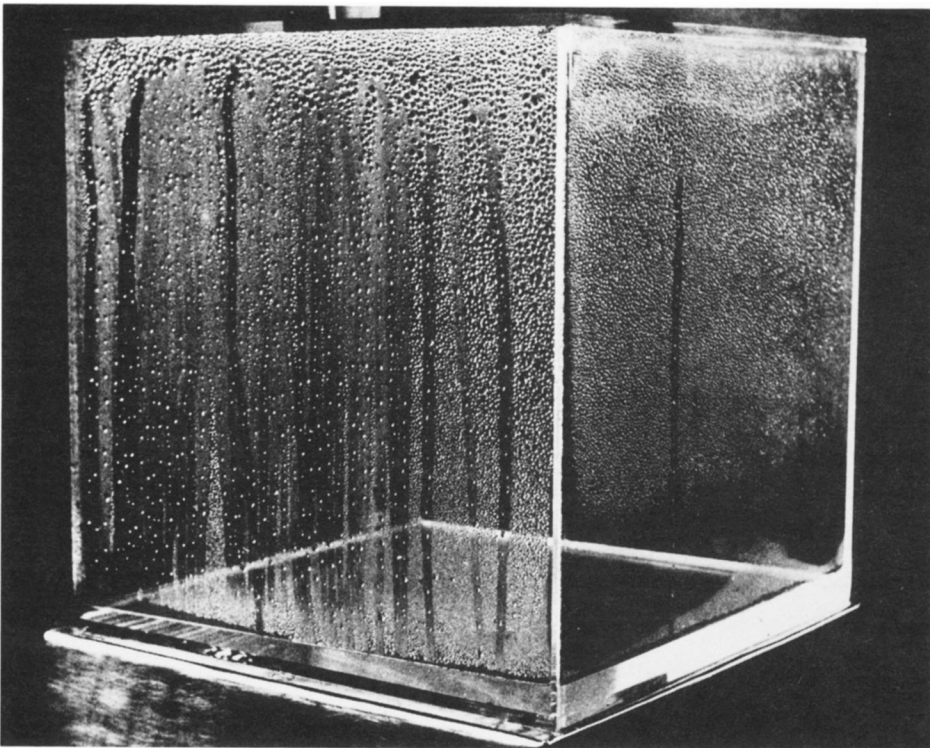
And thirdly—and most often—this transition is performed in the “simple” rotation of the square, as originally evident in Naum Gabo's famous diagram from 1937 where a volumetric and a stereometric cube are juxtaposed in order to clarify the inherent continuity between planar, stereometric, and volumetric forms. This rotation generated cubic structures as diverse as Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963–65), Robert Morris's *Four Mirrored Cubes* (1965), or Larry Bell's simultaneously produced *Mineral Coated Glass Cubes*, and





Sol LeWitt's *Wall-Floor Piece (Three Squares)*, 1966. All of these (beyond sharing the obvious morphology of the cube) engage in the dialectic of opacity and transparency (or in the synthesis of that dialectic in mirror-reflection as in Morris's *Mirrored Cubes* or Larry Bell's aestheticized variations of the theme). At the same time that they engage in the dialectic of frame and surface, and that of object and architectural container, they have displaced traditional figure-ground relationships.

The deployment of any or all of these strategies (or, as in most cases, their varying combination) in the context of Minimal and post-Minimal art, i.e., proto-conceptual painting and sculpture, resulted in a range of hybrid objects. They no longer qualified for either of the traditional studio categories nor could they be identified as relief or architectural decoration—the compromise terms traditionally used to bridge the gap between these categories. In this sense, these objects demarcated another spectrum of departures towards Conceptual Art. Not only did they destabilize the boundaries of the traditional artistic categories of studio production, by eroding them with modes of industrial production in the manner of Minimalism, but they went further in their critical revision of the discourse of the studio versus the discourse of production/consumption. By ultimately dismantling both along with the conventions of visibility inherent in them, they firmly established an aesthetic of administration.



The diversity of these protoconceptual objects would at first suggest that their actual aesthetic operations differ so profoundly that a comparative reading, operating merely on the grounds of their apparent analogous formal and morphological organization—the visual topos of the square—would be illegitimate. Art history has accordingly excluded Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, for example, from any affiliation with Minimal Art. Yet all of these artists define artistic production and reception by the mid-1960s as reaching beyond the traditional thresholds of visibility (both in terms of the materials and production procedures of the studio and those of industrial production), and it is on the basis of this parallel that their work can be understood to be linked beyond a mere structural or morphological analogy. The proto-conceptual works of the mid-1960s redefine aesthetic experience, indeed, as a multiplicity of *nonspecialized* modes of object- and language-experience. According to the reading these objects generate, aesthetic experience—as an individual and social investment of objects with meaning—is constituted by *linguistic* as well as by *specular* conventions, by the institutional determination of the object's status as much as by the reading competence of the spectator.

Within this shared conception, what goes on to distinguish these objects from each other is the emphasis each one places on different aspects of that deconstruction of the traditional concepts of visibility. Morris's *Mirrored Cubes*, for example (once again in an almost literal execution of a proposal found in Duchamp's *Green Box*), situate the spectator in the *suture* of the mirror reflection: that interface between sculptural object and architectural container where neither element can acquire a position of priority or dominance in the triad between spectator, sculptural object, and architectural space. And in so far as the work acts simultaneously to inscribe a phenomenological model of experience into a traditional model of purely visual specularly and to displace it, its primary focus remains the sculptural object and its visual apperception.

By contrast, Haacke's *Condensation Cube*—while clearly suffering from a now even more rigorously enforced scientific reductivism and the legacy of modernism's empirical positivism—moves away from a specular relationship to the object altogether, establishing instead a bio-physical system as a link between viewer, sculptural object, and architectural container. If Morris shifts the viewer from a mode of contemplative specularly into a phenomenological loop of bodily movement and perceptual reflection, Haacke replaces the once revolutionary concept of an activating "tactility" in the viewing experience by a move to bracket the phenomenological within the determinacy of "system." For his work now suspends Morris's tactile "viewing" within a science-based syntagm (in this particular case that of the process of condensation and evaporation inside the cube brought about by temperature changes due to the frequency of spectators in the gallery).

And finally, we should consider what is possibly the last credible transformation of the square, at the height of Conceptual Art in 1968, in two works by



Lawrence Weiner, respectively entitled *A Square Removal from a Rug in Use* and *A 36" × 36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (both published or "reproduced" in *Statements*, 1968), in which the specific paradigmatic changes Conceptual Art initiates with regard to the legacy of reductivist formalism are clearly evident. Both interventions—while maintaining their structural and morphological links with formal traditions by respecting classical geometry as their definition at the level of shape—inscribe themselves in the support surfaces of the institution and/or the home which that tradition had always disavowed. The carpet (presumably for sculpture) and the wall (for painting), which idealist aesthetics always declares as mere "supplements," are foregrounded here not only as parts of their material basis but as the inevitable future location of the work. Thus the structure, location, and materials of the intervention, at the very moment of their conception, are completely determined by their future destination. While neither surface is explicitly specified in terms of its institutional context, this ambiguity of dislocation generates two oppositional, yet mutually complementary readings. On the one hand, it dissipates the traditional expectation of encountering the work of art only in a "specialized" or "qualified" location (both "wall" and "carpet" could be either those of the home or the museum, or, for that matter, could just as well be found in any other location such as an office, for example). On the other, neither one of these surfaces could ever be considered to be independent from its institutional location, since the physical inscription into each particular surface inevitably generates contextual readings dependent upon the institutional conventions and the particular use of those surfaces in place.

*Lawrence Weiner. A 36" x 36" Square Removal to the Wallboard or Lathing from a Wall. 1968.*

Transcending the literalist or perceptual precision with which Barry and Ryman had previously connected their painterly objects to the traditional walls of display, in order to make their physical and perceptual interdependence manifest, Weiner's two squares are now physically integrated with *both* these support surfaces and their institutional definition. Further, since the work's inscription paradoxically implies the physical displacement of the support surface, it engenders an experience of perceptual withdrawal as well. And just as the work negates the specularity of the traditional artistic object by literally withdrawing rather than adding visual data in the construct, so this act of *perceptual* withdrawal operates at the same time as a physical (and symbolic) intervention in the institutional power and property relations underlying the supposed neutrality of "mere" devices of presentation. The installation and/or acquisition of either of these works requires that the future owner accept an instance of physical removal/withdrawal/interruption on both the level of institutional order and on that of private ownership.

It was only logical that, on the occasion of Seth Siegelaub's first major exhibition of Conceptual Art, the show entitled *January 5-31, 1969*, Lawrence Weiner would have presented a formula that then functioned as the matrix underlying all his subsequent propositions. Specifically addressing the relations within which the work of art is constituted as an open, structural, syntagmatic formula, this matrix statement defines the parameters of a work of art as those of the conditions of authorship and production, and their interdependence with those of ownership and use (and not least of all, at its own propositional level, as a *linguistic definition* contingent upon and determined by *all* of these parameters in their continuously varying and changing constellations:

*With relation to the various manners of use:*

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

What begins to be put in play here, then, is a critique that operates at the level of the aesthetic "institution." It is a recognition that materials and procedures, surfaces and textures, locations and placement are not only sculptural or painterly matter to be dealt with in terms of a phenomenology of visual and cognitive experience or in terms of a structural analysis of the sign (as most of the Minimalist and post-Minimalist artists had still believed), but that they are always already inscribed within the conventions of language and thereby within institutional power and ideological and economic investment. However, if, in Weiner's and Barry's work of the late 1960s, this recognition still seems merely latent, it was to become manifest very rapidly in the work of European artists of the same generation, in particular that of Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans

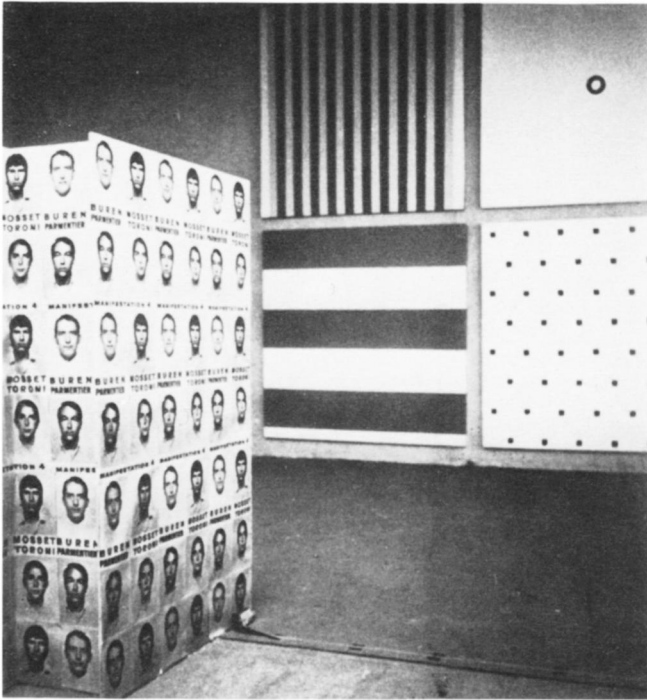


Haacke after 1966. In fact an institutional critique became the central focus of all three artists' assaults on the false neutrality of vision that provides the underlying rationale for those institutions.

In 1965, Buren—like his American peers—took off from a critical investigation of Minimalism. His early understanding of the work of Flavin, Ryman, and Stella rapidly enabled him to develop positions from within a strictly painterly analysis that soon led to a reversal of painterly/sculptural concepts of visibility altogether. Buren was engaged on the one hand with a critical review of the legacy of advanced modernist (and postwar American) painting and on the other in an analysis of Duchamp's legacy, which he viewed critically as the utterly unacceptable negation of painting. This particular version of reading Duchamp and the readymade as acts of petit-bourgeois anarchist radicality—while not necessarily complete and accurate—allowed Buren to construct a successful critique of both: modernist painting and Duchamp's readymade as its radical historical Other. In his writings and his interventions from 1967 onwards, through his critique of the specular order of painting and of the institutional



*Daniel Buren. Installation at the Guggenheim International Exhibition. 1971.*



*Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni.  
Manifestation Number Four, September  
1967, Fifth Biennale de Paris, Musée  
d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris.*

framework determining it, Buren singularly succeeded in displacing *both* the paradigms of painting and that of the readymade (even twenty years later this critique makes the naive continuation of object production in the Duchampian vein of the readymade model appear utterly irrelevant).

From the perspective of the present, it seems easier to see that Buren's assault on Duchamp, especially in his crucial 1969 essay *Limites Critiques*, was primarily directed at the conventions of Duchamp *reception* operative and predominant throughout the late 1950s and early '60s, rather than at the actual implications of Duchamp's model itself. Buren's central thesis was that the fallacy of Duchamp's readymade was to obscure the very institutional and discursive framing conditions that allowed the readymade to generate its shifts in the assignment of meaning and the experience of the object in the first place. Yet, one could just as well argue, as Marcel Broodthaers would in fact suggest in his catalogue of the exhibition *The Eagle from the Oligocene to Today* in Düsseldorf in 1972, that the contextual definition and syntagmatic construction of the work of art had obviously been initiated by Duchamp's readymade model first of all.

In his systematic analysis of the constituting elements of the discourse of painting, Buren came to investigate all the parameters of artistic production and reception (an analysis that, incidentally, was similar to the one performed by Lawrence Weiner in arriving at his own "matrix" formula). Departing from Minimalism's (especially Ryman's and Flavin's) literalist dismemberment of painting, Buren at first transformed the pictorial into yet another model of opacity and objecthood. (This was accomplished by physically weaving figure and

ground together in the “found” awning material, by making the “grid” of vertical parallel stripes his eternally repeated “tool,” and by mechanically—almost superstitiously or ritualistically, one could say with hindsight—applying a coat of white paint to the outer bands of the grid in order to distinguish the pictorial object from a readymade.) At the same time that the canvas had been removed from its traditional stretcher support to become a physical cloth-object (reminiscent of Greenberg’s notorious “tacked up canvas [which] already exists as a picture”), this strategy in Buren’s arsenal found its logical counterpart in the placement of the *stretched* canvas leaning as an object against support wall and floor.

This shifting of support surfaces and procedures of production led to a wide range of forms of distribution within Buren’s work: from unstretched canvas to anonymously mailed sheets of printed striped paper; from pages in books to billboards. In the same way, his displacement of the traditional sites of artistic intervention and of reading resulted in a multiplicity of locations and forms of display that continuously played on the dialectic of interior and exterior, thereby oscillating within the contradictions of sculpture and painting and foregrounding all those hidden and manifest framing devices that structure both traditions within the discourse of the museum and the studio.

Furthermore, enacting the principles of the Situationist critique of the bourgeois division of creativity according to the rules of the division of labor, Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni publicly performed (on various occasions between 1966 and 1968) a demolition of the traditional separation between artists and audience, with each given their respective roles. Not only did they claim that each of their artistic idioms be considered as absolutely equivalent and interchangeable, but also that anonymous audience production of these pictorial signs would be equivalent to those produced by the artists themselves.

With its stark reproductions of mug shots of the four artists taken in photomats, the poster for their fourth manifestation at the 1967 Biennale de Paris inadvertently points to another major source of contemporary challenges to the notion of artistic authorship linked with a provocation to the “audience” to participate: the aesthetic of anonymity as practiced in Andy Warhol’s “Factory” and its mechanical (photographic) procedures of production.<sup>30</sup>

The critical interventions of the four into an established but outmoded cultural apparatus (represented by such venerable and important institutions as the Salon de la Jeune Peinture or the Biennale de Paris) immediately brought out in the open at least one major paradox of all conceptual practices (a paradox,

30. Michel Claura, at the time the critic actively promoting awareness of the affiliated artists Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni, has confirmed in a recent conversation that the reference to Warhol, in particular to his series *The Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, which had been exhibited at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in 1967, was quite a conscious decision.



incidentally, which had made up the single most original contribution of Yves Klein's work ten years before). This was that the critical annihilation of cultural conventions itself immediately acquires the conditions of the spectacle, that the insistence on artistic anonymity and the demolition of authorship produces instant brand names and identifiable products, and that the campaign to critique conventions of visuality with textual interventions, billboard signs, anonymous handouts, and pamphlets inevitably ends by following the preestablished mechanisms of advertising and marketing campaigns.

All of the works mentioned coincide, however, in their rigorous redefinition of relationships between audience, object, and author. And all are concerted in the attempt to replace a traditional, hierarchical model of privileged experience based on authorial skills and acquired competence of reception by a structural relationship of absolute equivalents that would dismantle both sides of the equation: the hieratic position of the unified artistic object just as much as the privileged position of the author. In an early essay (published, incidentally, in the same 1967 issue of *Aspen Magazine*—dedicated by its editor Brian O'Doherty to Stéphane Mallarmé—in which the first English translation of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" appeared), Sol LeWitt laid out these concerns for a programmatic redistribution of author/artist functions with astonishing clarity, presenting them by means of the rather surprising metaphor of a performance of daily bureaucratic tasks:

The aim of the artist would be to give viewers information. . . . He would follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome. The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions *merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise* (italics added).<sup>31</sup>

Inevitably the question arises how such restrictive definitions of the artist as a cataloguing clerk can be reconciled with the subversive and radical implications of Conceptual Art. And this question must simultaneously be posed within the specific historical context in which the legacy of an historical avant-garde—Constructivism and Productivism—had only recently been reclaimed. How, we might ask, can these practices be aligned with that historical production that artists like Henry Flynt, Sol LeWitt, and George Maciunas had rediscovered, in the early '60s, primarily through the publication of Camilla Gray's *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*.<sup>32</sup> This question is of particular importance since many of the formal strategies of early Conceptual Art appear at first glance

31. Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966," *Aspen Magazine*, nos. 5–6, ed. Brian O'Doherty, 1967, n. p.

32. The importance of this publication in 1962 was mentioned to me by several of the artists interviewed during the preparation of this essay.

to be as close to the *practices* and *procedures* of the Constructivist/Productivist avant-garde as Minimal sculpture had appeared to be dependent upon its *materials* and *morphologies*.

The profoundly utopian (and now unimaginably naive) nature of the claims associated with Conceptual Art at the end of the 1960s were articulated by Lucy Lippard (along with Seth Siegelaub, certainly the crucial exhibition organizer and critic of that movement) in late 1969:

Art intended as pure experience doesn't exist until someone experiences it, defying ownership, reproduction, sameness. Intangible art could break down the artificial imposition of "culture" and provide a broader audience for a tangible, object art. When automatism frees millions of hours for leisure, art should gain rather than diminish in importance, for while art is not just play, it is the counterpoint to work. The time may come when art is everyone's daily occupation, though there is no reason to think this activity will be called art.<sup>33</sup>

While it seems obvious that artists cannot be held responsible for the culturally and politically naive visions projected on their work even by their most competent, loyal, and enthusiastic critics, it now seems equally obvious that it was precisely the utopianism of earlier avant-garde movements (the type that Lippard desperately attempts to resuscitate for the occasion) that was manifestly absent from Conceptual Art throughout its history (despite Robert Barry's onetime invocation of Herbert Marcuse, declaring the commercial gallery as "Some places to which we can come, and for a while 'be free to think about what we are going to do'"). It seems obvious, at least from the vantage of the early 1990s, that from its inception Conceptual Art was distinguished by its acute sense of discursive and institutional limitations, its self-imposed restrictions, its lack of totalizing vision, its critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception without aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions. This became evident as works such as Hans Haacke's series of *Visitors' Profiles* (1969–70), in its bureaucratic rigor and deadpan devotion to the statistic collection of factual information, came to refuse any transcendental dimension whatsoever.

Furthermore, it now seems that it was precisely a profound disenchantment with those political master-narratives that empowered most of '20s avant-garde art that, acting in a peculiar fusion with the most advanced and radical forms of critical artistic reflection, accounts for the peculiar contradictions operating within (proto) Conceptual Art of the mid- to late-1960s. It would explain why this generation of the early '60s—in its growing emphasis on empiricism and its scepticism with regard to all utopian vision—would be attracted, for example, to

33. Lucy Lippard, "Introduction," in *955.000* (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, January 13–February 8, 1970), n. p.



*Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni. Installation at Marcel Broodthaers's Museum (Plaque). 1971.*

the logical positivism of Wittgenstein and would confound the affirmative petit-bourgeois positivism of Alain Robbe-Grillet with the radical atopism of Samuel Beckett, claiming all of them as their sources. And it would make clear how this generation could be equally attracted by the conservative concept of Daniel Bell's "end of ideology" and Herbert Marcuse's Freudo-Marxist philosophy of liberation.

What Conceptual Art achieved at least temporarily, however, was to subject the last residues of artistic aspiration toward transcendence (by means of traditional studio skills and privileged modes of experience) to the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration. Furthermore, it managed to purge artistic production of the aspiration towards an affirmative collaboration with the forces of industrial production and consumption (the last of the totalizing experiences into which artistic production had mimetically inscribed itself with credibility in the context of Pop Art and Minimalism for one last time).

Paradoxically, then, it would appear that Conceptual Art truly became the most significant paradigmatic change of postwar artistic production at the very

moment that it mimed the operating logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality in an effort to place its auto-critical investigations at the service of liquidating even the last remnants of traditional aesthetic experience. In that process it succeeded in purging itself entirely of imaginary and bodily experience, of physical substance and the space of memory, to the same extent that it effaced all residues of representation and style, of individuality and skill. That was the moment when Buren's and Haacke's work from the late 1960s onward turned the violence of that mimetic relationship back onto the ideological apparatus itself, using it to analyze and expose the social institutions from which the laws of positivist instrumentality and the logic of administration emanate in the first place. These institutions, which determine the conditions of cultural consumption, are the very ones in which artistic production is transformed into a tool of ideological control and cultural legitimation.

It was left to Marcel Broodthaers to construct objects in which the radical achievements of Conceptual Art would be turned into immediate travesty and in which the seriousness with which Conceptual Artists had adopted the rigorous mimetic subjection of aesthetic experience to the principles of what Adorno had called the "totally administered world" were transformed into absolute farce. And it was one of the effects of Broodthaers's dialectics that the achievement of Conceptual Art was revealed as being intricately tied to a profound and irreversible loss: a loss not caused by artistic practice, of course, but one to which that practice responded in the full optimism of its aspirations, failing to recognize that the purging of image and skill, of memory and vision, within visual aesthetic representation was not just another heroic step in the inevitable progress of Enlightenment to liberate the world from mythical forms of perception and hierarchical modes of specialized experience, but that it was also yet another, perhaps the last of the erosions (and perhaps the most effective and devastating one) to which the traditionally separate sphere of artistic production had been subjected in its perpetual efforts to emulate the regnant episteme within the paradigmatic frame proper to art itself.

Or worse yet, that the Enlightenment-triumph of Conceptual Art—its transformation of audiences and distribution, its abolition of object status and commodity form—would most of all only be shortlived, almost immediately giving way to the return of the ghostlike reappearitions of (prematurely?) displaced painterly and sculptural paradigms of the past. So that the specular regime, which Conceptual Art claimed to have upset, would soon be reinstated with renewed vigor. Which is of course what happened.