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by

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How Images Became Text in Contemporary American Art

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How Images Became Texts in Contemporary American Art

by

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Dissertation

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To my Grandfathers

*Here I am, trying to give an account of something, and as soon
as I pause I realize that I have not yet said anything at all.*

Elias Canetti

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Almost since the beginning of this dissertation, I've thought about how I would thank everyone who helped make it possible. Needless to say, as I now sit down to write, it's far more difficult than I ever imagined—some things simply evade words. Still, I think I can muster something, but I'm afraid that what I'll say will fail to fully express my gratitude.

This project began over a cup of coffee with my advisor Richard Shiff in the summer of 2000. It was then that he suggested that I should investigate the presence of written information in contemporary art. For this, I thank him. But where real thanks are due is how he guided me throughout graduate school. I could not have asked for a better experience, or a better person under which to study. The two years spent as his research and teaching assistant were the most important of my education. Here I not only learned what it meant to be a scholar in the truest sense of the word, but I also was shown how to do things with integrity, individuality, and intellectual rigor. I cannot imagine a better lesson to impart on one's student, and for this I am deeply indebted.

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My mother, father, and brother have been an incredible source of support throughout this entire process. They never wavered in their encouragement, and

were always there when I needed them. I don't think I ever tell them enough how much they mean to me. Needless to say, I am incredibly lucky, and a simple thank you seems inadequate, but Mom, Dad, Peter: Thank you.

Donald Judd features somewhat prominently in this dissertation, and as chance would have it, I happened upon a Judd show at Paula Cooper Gallery. It was here, almost three years ago to the day, that I met my fiancé, Simone, who truly enabled me to see this project through to the end. Simone was always the instant elixir to dissertation induced malaise. Her belief, her love, her commitment is remarkable. Bumsti meine Süße, it's so big... Danke für alles.

This last thank you is one that can only occur in writing. It's to two men who did not live to see me write this, or enter graduate school, or even attend college. They both died before I turned sixteen. But although I knew them for a relatively short time, they left an indelible impression on me. Both wanted to be academics. Both had life get in the way. I am honored to be able to do what I do, and I would not have had this opportunity without the many sacrifices they made. I dedicate this dissertation to my grandfathers, for whom I am named: Alexander Dumbadze and Robert Blair Maddox.

How Images Became Texts in Contemporary American Art

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This dissertation examines how and why written information in a visual context as well as various theories of language (namely poststructuralism) became so influential in contemporary American art. It argues that many artists and writers from the mid 1960s until the late 1980s believed that the use of language would dramatically alter the nature of art. But the converse, in fact, is true. Indeed, the reliance on language facilitated the rapid assimilation of these works (artistic and critical) into the broader fold of the contemporary American art world. What was radical became conventional in no time. *How Images Became Texts in Contemporary American Art* begins in the early 1960s by describing why a number of Conceptual artists (John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner) gave up painting in order to work with

written information. Part of this explanation derives from their reaction to the work of Donald Judd and Frank Stella. From here this investigation shows how in the late 1970s and early 1980s a select group of progressive art critics (primarily Hal Foster and Craig Owens) began to react against some of the aesthetic consequences generated, in part, from the linguistic endeavors initiated by the Conceptualists mentioned above. There was a concern shared by Foster and Owens that the situation known pejoratively as Pluralism was out of control. In order to redress this development they imbued their writing with numerous references and allusions to such poststructuralist philosophers as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. This had the effect of producing a body of literature that emphasized linguistic analysis of visual objects. It also neatly coincided with the continued use of written information by such artists as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, which made it possible to see that by the spring of 1988, images, at least rhetorically, had become texts.

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Chapter 1:

In the spring of 1988 the critic Robert Pincus-Witten observed that in New York, “the contemporary work of art was to be, before all else, a text.”¹ This is a curious claim. It seems, at first glance, counterintuitive. Why would something presumably visual be thought of in terms of something to be read or, at the very least, something literary? Are they not two separate qualities? Is it wrong to assume that they are incommensurable? Perhaps they are closer than one might think. Maybe a change has occurred in what people believe about art. Then if so, why?

* * *

In the spring of 2005 there is no problem with a work of art containing written information. Words are everywhere. They are on the wall. They are in paintings, in drawings, in photographs, in installations, in videos, in films. Where there is art there is always a chance of having something to read. And most seem comfortable with this possibility. But this relative comfort does not mean that today the use of language is the dominant idiom out there. It is just another feature that crops up regularly—similar to figuration, or abstraction, or any other formal or technical device an artist uses to express their intentions. It

¹ Robert Pincus-Witten, “Entries: Concentrated Juice & Kitschy Kitschy Koons,” *Art Magazine* 63, no. 6 (February 1989): 34. Although the article was published in February 1989, there are entries that date back to 1986. It is hard to know whether the entries are actually from the time he says. Most likely, they are. Even still, there is enough contextual evidence in the entries to make them, at the very least, reflective of that particular moment.

was not always this way, however. Conventions have origins. The presence of written information goes back quite a way—about forty years to be exact.

* * *

In the spring of 2005 many are also comfortable with poststructuralist theory. It is commonplace. But this does not take away from the fact that art history, and for that matter art criticism, and let me be frank, art, has had a dysfunctional relationship with poststructuralist philosophy. Those seductive theories with their sexy French names took on an exotic appeal for intrepid artists, critics, and art historians in the late seventies and early 1980s. To be able to use such words as “deconstruct,” “construction,” “textuality,” “rhetoric,” “signifier,” with a certain amount of panache really meant something back then. It put one on the cutting edge.

* * *

Yet today there does not seem to be as much at stake. Nor does there seem to be much doubt in the interpretations of poststructuralist theories made by critics and art historians in the not so distant past. Now it is no longer a problem to posit that an image is a text. Indeed, what seems to have happened over the years is that the idea of something visual as being something literary, or that an image could be a text, or that two incommensurables could be equivalent has taken hold to such a degree that we believe it to be true. We might say that this line of thinking has become a habit. But this is dangerous. Habits go

unchecked. We take them for granted, and for some, find great comfort in them.

Rituals reassure when everything else in life is chaotic.²

² One of the most serious investigations on the implications of habits comes in the writings of nineteenth century American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce. Throughout his career Peirce dealt regularly with the concept of habit. This idea, in particular, shows up in his series of essays entitled "Illustrations of the Logic of Science," which were published in *Popular Science Monthly* from November 1877 until August 1878. [Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* volume 1, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992): 109-199.] He also expounds on this notion in many of his fragmentary papers on semiotics. One of the most assessable essays in this regard is the posthumously edited "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs." [Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1955): 98-119.]

As with many of Peirce's ideas, he had a unique bent on this normalized concept. For Peirce, habit is another way of saying social convention. However, his concern differs from more recent discussion about the "constructed" nature of these conventions. Peirce takes this observation as a given, which is why, perhaps, he does not really question the foundation or potential ramifications of these agreed upon traits. Habits, though, Peirce asserts, have two interconnected functions. First, they represent a collective belief in things or ideas held by a society, or, we could say, a community of individuals. It is a covenant that can be taken as true. Indeed, he believes it quite possibly marks the closest we will ever come to actual, transcendental truth. [For more on this issue see Umberto Eco, "Unlimited Semiosis and Drift: Pragmaticism vs. 'Pragmatism'," in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): 23-43.] The second, interconnected aspect of habit is its role played in the interpretation of a sign, and by larger extension, thinking itself. Peirce's conception of signs revolves around overlapping groupings of threes: first, second, third; representamen, object, interpretant; icon, index, symbol. In this triadic system, Peirce claims that it is at the third stage where all interpretations, and thus, thinking occur. Here Peirce is quite astute to point out that our ability to make judgments, to determine symbolically what something is, results from social conventions, or as Peirce puts it, habits. Seemingly, each habit reflects the idea of truth, or correctness, for that particular moment. However, these are not fixed concepts. They change with the times, and we can obviously infer that symbolic interpretations also transform with evolving social conventions. Truth, then, is something we are always (unsuccessfully) striving towards.

I agree in principle with Peirce's formulation, and I think it helps explain, by analogy, the relationship between poststructuralism and contemporary art history. Indeed, it seems that many of the findings and claims advanced by poststructuralist authors have become a habit for many art historians. In fact,

* * *

History is chaotic. This particular history is no exception, since it asks a number of far reaching questions. Why did Conceptual artists like John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner give up painting for the chance to use language? Why did this decision stem from issues surrounding the problem of illusionism, especially the way Donald Judd and Frank Stella addressed it? Why did the perceived radical use of written information by Conceptualists get absorbed, almost immediately, into the broader conventions of the art world? Why, after the seeming failure of the use of language in a visual context, did critics like Craig Owens and Hal Foster turn to poststructuralist theories of language in the late seventies and early 1980s? How did this impact the understanding of art during this time? How did this effect Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, who, like Conceptualists before them, used written language as a way to express their ideas immediately, and, unambiguously? How could the very ideas advanced in support of Kruger and

many interpretations of poststructuralist texts by art historians have also become a sort of habit. Peirce, for his part, never really questioned the origins of habits. Nor did he ever suggest that habits might become ingrained. He also failed to entertain the possibility that some people might resist parting with something that has become, for lack of a better work, a habit. It seems that Peirce thought old habits would be replaced by new habits almost naturally. In many ways he had a laissez-faire approach to this social phenomenon as if “market demands” predicated the arrival of new habits and thus new conceptions of truth. But even the best of economies eventually stall and stumble into a recession. The same holds for intellectual tastes. As the cliché goes: old habits die hard.

One of the major goals of this dissertation is to investigate how these habits came into form. I have never felt comfortable with letting the market take care of itself. Peirce is right to link habits with beliefs and thus with conceptions of truth. But it is important to first know how these habits came into place. This is the task of the historian.

Holzer later be used to prop up the career of David Salle? How, and why, can all of this lead us to the claim made by Robert Pincus-Witten in the spring of 1988?

* * *

To answer these questions requires us to establish the reasons why so many abstract painters (Huebler, by this time had already moved on to sculpture) put down their brush (for Huebler, it was Formica) in favor of language around 1966. Strangely enough, this transition begins with Donald Judd. Judd, for all intents and purposes, was the most important figure for younger artists of the 1960s. His art and criticism set the terms for discussion. Whether or not people liked him was of little import. He had to be dealt with. His art was that powerful. As artist and critic Mel Bochner put it recently, “for my generation, Judd posed the same problem as Picasso did for Abstract Expressionists; you either had to go over, under, around, or through him.”³ But this notion of Judd did not come into shape without some help. His close friend (until around 1966) and peer, Frank Stella was equally important. The two, during an intense period from 1963-1966, radically rewrote the possibilities of painting. At the core of their project was the need to get rid of illusionism. It was false. It was insincere. It was European.

Young, would-be Conceptualists were paying attention. So much so, that they soon found it possible to do things they never before thought attainable. This is especially true with the use of language.⁴ Now, for the first time, written

³ Mel Bochner, “Conversation Starter,” *Artforum* 43, no. 10 (Summer 2005): 70.

⁴ Besides Baldessari, Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, and Weiner, there were others who started using language around this time. They include Mel Bochner, Ian Burn,

information entered the picture. What we were to see, or better read, were not graphic embellishments. This was not what Jasper Johns was doing. Instead, information was presented—like dictionary definitions, instructions for how to make a piece of art, a description of a specific activity, or a documentation for an invisible event. But how this came about must be explained. To detail why Baldessari, Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, and Weiner gave up more traditional working methods for, what we could say, were untraditional practices is the first step. Next is to recount why they thought language was a salve to their problems. And finally, the reception of these new text-based works must be accounted for because this gives us a marker for the efficacy of those daring decisions made around 1966.⁵

Dan Graham, Christine Kozlov, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Mel Ramsden, On Kawara, and Adrian Piper. But the ones discussed in depth here made the most significant commitment to the use of language. It defined their practices.

⁵ It is by now an assumed truth that Marcel Duchamp was the central precursor to American Conceptual art—a claim, I believe, that verges on ahistoricism, and in need of serious reevaluation. Indeed, in the case of New York Conceptualism the specter of Duchamp was almost non-existent. Sure, Joseph Kosuth admitted his debt to the Frenchman. But he also said his understanding of Duchamp came via Jasper Johns and Robert Morris and that he was equally influenced by Ad Reinhardt and Donald Judd. [Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy,” in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991): 29.] Many of Kosuth’s peers did not even share this passing interest in Duchamp. Sol LeWitt, for one, saw his early work as being antithetical to Duchamp’s: “I was not interested in irony; I wanted to emphasize the primacy of the idea in making art. My interest, starting around 1965, was in building conceptual systems, which grew out of Minimalism. Basically it was repudiation of Duchampian aesthetics.” [Saul Ostrow, “Sol LeWitt,” *Bomb* no. 85 (Fall 2003): 24.] Lawrence Weiner held a similar view. In a recent interview he remarked that “my is work is not Duchampian or anti-Duchampian. I had other concerns at that moment [the late sixties] and I still probably do.” [Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner [1998],” in Alexander Alberro, et al., *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998):

This takes us up to the mid 1970s. So much is still to happen. So much will necessitate another turn to language. This time in order to give some shape to what was known as pluralism—a result, in part, of the linguistic advancements made by Conceptualists. But whereas before artists led the way in the use of language in an art context, now critics like Hal Foster and Craig Owens took the lead. Or, at least, they tried. Artists, too, continued to use written information. Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger were the most noticeable.⁶ But the adhesive for this disparate era from the late seventies until the late eighties was poststructuralist theories of language. They were everywhere. And it seemed that everyone used them. It came to the point where

14.] On another occasion Weiner talked about how he liked that Sol LeWitt and Dan Graham transformed peripheral elements into content, which is why “I [Weiner] don’t find Duchamp an interesting artist: all he was interested in was the opinion of his elders, only in the *context*.” [David Batchelor, “I am not content: Lawrence Weiner,” *Artscribe International* no. 74 (March – April 1989): 52.] Lucy Lippard puts the case against Duchamp’s impact most convincingly: “The question of sources has since become a sore point. Marcel Duchamp was the obvious art-historical source, but in fact most of the artists did not find his work all that interesting... As responsible critics we had to mention Duchamp as a precedent, but the new art in New York came from closer to home...” [Lucy R. Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*... (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1997): ix.]

Of course, these claims were made in hindsight. They could be seen as an attempt at revisionist history. But I doubt it. In the course of my research I hardly came across a reference to Duchamp. Certainly, a few appeared but not enough to conclude that he truly was an important figure for young Conceptual artists in New York. In fact, I tend to agree with Lippard. Much of the Conceptual art under consideration here originated from sources “closer to home.” And this will be a theme of this project. However, there is still much work to be done on this question. It is far from clear cut. See footnote 115 for more on this issue.

⁶ Kay Rosen and Nancy Dwyer explored similar aesthetic issues as Kruger and Holzer. Richard Prince incorporated written information in his work beginning in the mid 1980s with his Joke paintings. The same holds for Peter Halley. Even David Salle used words now and then. But Kruger and Holzer explored the permutations of language more than others from this moment.

figurative works by David Salle could be described in linguistic terms. What is visual can now be conceived as textual. In a twenty-five year period, artists and commentators in the New York scene had dramatically shifted the way they thought about art.

* * *

An underlying concern of this dissertation is to figure out why the artists and commentators in question believed what they believed. At times there is a gap between belief and what might have really happened. Yet faith in the verity of one's assumptions can generally elide this divide with relative ease. Nuance rarely hinders conviction. Still, why did Kosuth think he was original? Why did Weiner? Huebler, Barry, and Baldessari also thought they were onto something. The same goes for those seduced by poststructuralism. Everyone thought language could radically change the nature of art. Why? How? Their particular beliefs provide a starting point. How we determine what they might be is difficult. Will it prove to be only a subjective conjecture?

But if we are to reasonably figure out what these artists and commentators actually held as true, right, and worth fighting over then we need to trust them a bit. To let them have their say, voice an opinion; express what is on their mind—even, depending on the circumstances, allow them to implicate themselves. This is the best way to see how certain patterns emerge. Occasionally, these sorts of things are not readily apparent. They tend to hide behind other convictions. The key then is to try to write a history that outlines the conventions of the moment while at the same time explain how those very

naturalized habits originated. It is, we could say, an examination between what a group of people believed as true and what in actuality the truth might be. This fundamental relationship, one that is in a constant state of flux, manifests itself in innumerable ways, and a history sensitive to beliefs can begin to express this.

* * *

Of course, some of this depends upon whether or not you choose to believe me. I speak in generalizations, while I ask for some trust. I have a more specific explanation. It derives from the claims above. However, it is personal, which often seems out of place in this forum. Yet history, whether we admit it or not, is personal. It reflects our particular feelings, our particular positions. And really, how long can we hide our cards? Someone is always counting, and eventually, they will figure out what we are holding. I might as well show mine now—even the ones tucked up my sleeve.

* * *

I am thirty-one years old. I did not have any stake in the art world until the late nineties, when I began to write criticism and dabble a bit in curating. Everything before that feels like history for me, as my own sentiment, convictions, and personal engagements tend to get less in the way. But this initial moment of self-awareness and, more particularly, the last few years have shaped the way I view the past and the methodological tools I could use to do so. Initially, the nebulous category known as “theory” seemed the most plausible option for a young art historian like myself. Texts derived from poststructuralism fueled the academic parlance, and in order to join this

intellectual vanguard some sort of mimicry seemed necessary. Obviously, this is nothing new. It has been this way for the last twenty years or so. Over the past several it seems to have reached an apex, which, I feel, made a lot of scholarly work repetitive. There was no longer, I thought, an edge to arguments laced with deconstructive undertones or subversive insights. These lessons have been learned; at least in the way art historians have interpreted them.

Indeed, the impact of art historical interpretations of poststructuralism has been strong. The writings of such authors as Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, and others have often seemed to me like an insurmountable barrier. They possessed such authority that it felt as if it could not be questioned. In much the same way, the arguments published in *October* held a certain amount of aura, even if it might have been false aura, which nevertheless can also be equally compelling. But the problem is not with these authors' work, nor with the journal's mission. What they have said and written has made a valuable contribution to art history and has provided the foundation for a meaningful debate. The problem lies, however, in the fact that there seems to be no space for a debate, or that no one wants to offer a rebuttal.

Obviously, I have not deferred much from my lapses in generalities, but this is the nature of explaining one's motives. I am sure that many will disagree with me, just as I am equally sure that there are those who share my opinion. I am only describing a sentiment, one where I felt there were few methodological options available. In some way or another everything seemed to revert back to a derivation of poststructuralism and its many interpretations. Studies were done

on the microscopic level. Specific artists received tremendous attention. Little regard was paid to more macro histories of contemporary art, for it was assumed that it might elide differences, or simply be a thing of the past. Yet these favored, introspective accounts in turn did not create, for my tastes, many possibilities for methodological reflection. It was hard to see, or even hear, that a good deal of art historical writing on contemporary art was becoming an exercise in rhetoric. Everyone comes to age intellectually some time or another. Mine occurred in a period when art history, I thought, was cast adrift on a sea of words.⁷

* * *

I realized this during the beginning stages of my research—a time when I thought my dissertation was dealing with a visual problem: the difference between reading written information and looking at objects in an art context. Soon, though, it became clear to me that my historical investigation was more about rhetoric than anything particularly visual. It was the way people talked about things that really seemed to count. Conviction was expressed in language, not images. In many ways it felt as if a swirl of words encircled the art under consideration and swept it away in a bustle of metaphors, declarations, and adamant statements. Of course, this allusion is slightly overwrought. Visual considerations were certainly evident. But I could not get over the power of elocution. And I began to pick up on the fact that the reservations I was having

⁷I should clarify. The issue here is not with poststructuralist theory itself, but how it has been used by art historians, critics, curators, and artists over the years. These interpretations have taken on their own life. It is this development that I doubt, and origins I discuss in Chapter 4.

about contemporary art history may indeed have some of its roots in the very discourses I was investigating from the sixties, seventies, and eighties.

This connection between my personal disquiet and my research led me to make specific methodological decisions. I choose to work only with primary materials and not to conduct any interviews of my own. I did this for several reasons. First, I wanted to deal with the received history, what was already out there, hiding in journals, catalogues, newspapers, wherever—anything that I, or presumably, anyone else could look up and read. These were the documents, I thought, that helped shape my own, and I assume for others, impression of the current intellectual state of art history. This, I figured, would give me some sort of plausible sampling of the rhetoric that laid the foundation for recent discussions of contemporary art. Second, I avoided interviews and stuck to primary materials because I thought it would be fairer to my subjects. I thought interviews done by me might be too subject to my personal motives, and, to a degree, the motives of the interviewee, who certainly have something at stake here. My topic is still alive. It has import in today's art world, where few of these issues are settled. Everyone has their own view of the past. I thought it was best to limit this dissertation to just my take of what might have happened. So whatever mistakes, misconceptions there might be are solely my own, for this dissertation, strangely enough is my own history as well.

* * *

Much of this dissertation revolves around individuals who really thought they were doing something different. That their practices (artistic or critical)

were radically changing the face of art. And what made this possible was language. Whether it came in the form of written information in a work of art, or philosophic theories imported from France, it did not matter. Both imbued their practitioners with that intoxicating sense of being original. Indeed, the very thing that made these individuals feel as if they were radical, as if they were on course to change the nature of art, was the source of their undoing: language. In fact, it was the everyday conventions of language that quickly brought these linguistic forays back into the fold of the larger art world, because whether we like it or not, we are subject to them. Indeed, language—even complex theories of language—gives commentators a sense of comfort. It is always easier to use language to talk about language than language to talk about something visual. It is an issue of something being commensurable versus being incommensurable. And deep down, I think, and it seems history is on my side, we often choose the former. It is the path of least resistance, even if we do not realize it.

This journey down the path well traveled takes us to many places. It begins in the early sixties and ends in the late eighties, when the difference, rhetorically at least, between an image and a text is no longer apparent. There was an erasure of incommensurable differences, and, we could say, an art world awash in ready-made interpretations. Indeed, everyone, it seemed, spoke the same language. There was nothing left to fight for. It was all clichés. We are still working through these implications today. But for now, we need to see how we got here in the first place.

Chapter 2:

Lawrence Weiner has a way with words. Hindsight, we could say, makes them more prescient. In 1989 he remarked in an interview with David Batchelor: "Let's say it was easier from 1966 onward to make good work. There was a *frisson*, a sense that if you didn't pull together and try to make the best culture you could we were going to live as abject animals. It was very hard to make bad art in the late sixties."⁸ Weiner's observation describes a moment fraught with urgency, an instance where a constellation of aesthetic and social issues emerged under the seemingly simple, but deceptively multivalent, rubric of anti-illusionism. Yet to fully understand the palpable energy coalescing around this formal problem we must first come to grips with Weiner's starting point for this liberating moment. Indeed what was our astute eyewitness himself up to at this time? He had just abandoned his series of "Propeller Paintings" (fig. 1). Works that led Donald Judd to suggest how "Weiner is able but isn't on his own yet."⁹ An opinion Weiner concurred with because his interests had shifted by 1966 to excising square "removals" from canvases, and rugs, and walls, and whatever else needed modification (fig. 2). These were Minimalist gestures that "[he] worked damn hard on... I mean, we are of our times as we are trying to find out

⁸ David Batchelor, "I am not Content: Lawrence Weiner," *Artscribe International*, no. 74 (March-April 1989): 52.

⁹ Donald Judd, "In the Galleries [January 1965]," in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975): 160. [Hereafter referred to as CW.]

who we are.”¹⁰ This existential self-discovery Weiner speaks of characterizes not only his efforts but also those of his soon-to-be Conceptualist peers as they attempted to find a mode of expression of one’s own.

* * *

But what are these times? In 1966 the notion of what is a work of art, let alone an artist, was up for grabs. Oddly though, considering the stakes of this aesthetic dilemma, the controversy revolved almost entirely around two figures: Donald Judd, and as we will see, Frank Stella. By now, Judd had established himself in the art world through the precision and certitude of his art criticism and the visual conundrum his work presented to viewers since he first started showing at the Green Gallery in 1963. But by the early half of 1966, some artists and critics found aspects of Judd’s work more unsettling than determining whether or not his objects were either a painting or a sculpture. In the eyes of many, Judd rescinded his position as an artist when he stopped fabricating his pieces himself, and placed the construction of his art in the hands of the Bernstein Brothers Company in Long Island City, Queens.

Hilton Kramer was the first to volley an attack against Judd’s perceived lack of effort when he reviewed his February 1966 exhibition at Castelli (fig. 3). He asked in response to Judd’s work, “what is a work of art.”¹¹ This might at first appear to be a trite query on Kramer’s part, but he was not an ill-informed viewer. He knew Judd’s work well from the years he served as his editor at *Arts*

¹⁰ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in Conversation with Lawrence Weiner,” in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998): 12.

¹¹ Hilton Kramer, “Art: Constructed to Donald Judd’s Specification,” *New York Times* (19 February 1966): 23.

Magazine. He also wrote a thoughtful review of Judd's work in 1964 where he noted that Judd attempted to exceed painting and sculpture: "One could say that they [Judd's art] represents a synthesis of Newman's imagery and Louise Nevelson's technology."¹² But what to make of Kramer's strong rebuke towards Judd's reliance on other individuals to complete his work? It was a non-issue for Judd. He turned to industrial materials because his carpentry skills could no longer provide the results he wanted. Plus, and more significantly for the development of Conceptual art, Judd found that "wood was a little bit absorbent, the way canvas is."¹³ Nevertheless, Kramer's opening salvo announced to the broader public the first signs of a rupture in the definition of art. But where Kramer's question really gains a pronounced sense of urgency is amongst artists themselves.

The sculptor, Mark di Suvero, found it inconceivable how Judd could so easily forego making his art by hand. His incomprehension came to a head during a symposium held in conjunction with the groundbreaking exhibition *Primary Structures* (fig. 4). At the age of thirty-two, Di Suvero, who was not included in the Jewish Museum's survey because his large-scale, multi-faceted constructions aesthetically and intellectually clashed with Kynaston McShine's selections, was considered by many to be "the best young American sculptor."¹⁴ But his reaction to Judd's work suggests that he knew that this honor was

¹² Hilton Kramer, "New York: The Season Surveyed," *Art in America* 52, no. 3 (June 1964): 112.

¹³ John Coplans, "An Interview with Don Judd," *Artforum* 9, no. 10 (June 1971): 44.

¹⁴ Corrine Robins, "The New Druids," *Newsweek* (16 May 1966): 104.

dissipating. When asked by Barbara Rose whether he found the anonymous and impersonal nature of some of the work on display objectionable, di Suvero shot from the hip. After first recognizing the importance of *Primary Structures* and praising his fellow Park Place gallery member, Ronald Bladen, di Suvero announced: "I think that my friend Don Judd can't qualify as an artist because he doesn't do the work."¹⁵ Judd's first words in response—"Now wait a minute"—convey the sting of di Suvero's assessment.¹⁶ Yet di Suvero was not malicious. He even later apologized to Judd for his comment.¹⁷ What his remark revealed was the growing reality of the fissure Kramer observed several months earlier.

Despite the contents of *Primary Structures*, sculpture was no longer the main issue. Even Hilton Kramer recognized this when he wrote, "[sculptural precedents] are less immediately relevant than the inspiration that has been drawn from recent painting." A bit further along he continues, "one might say that the new sculpture is, in effect, a species of abstract painting aspiring to the condition of architecture: it is sculpture only because the sculptural medium is the sole means by which this aspiration can be realized."¹⁸ By 1966 almost every major issue in the New York art world derived from painting, and di Suvero

¹⁵ Transcript of "The New Sculpture," 2 May 1966 The Jewish Museum Archives of American Art. In James Meyer's does an excellent job describing the rivalry between the Green Gallery and Park Place. This is a crucial, yet subtle, point that highlights the complexities of the mid sixties. James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ "The New Sculpture [2 May 1966]," *Archives of American Art*.

¹⁷ "Interview with Donald Judd," Lucy Lippard Papers, *Archives of American Art*.

¹⁸ Hilton Kramer, "'Primary Structures'—The New Anonymity," *The New York Times* (1 May 1966): X23.

knew it. Why else would he have gone for the jugular? Because by singling out Judd, di Suvero went to the core of the critique against painting *and* sculpture. And his only recourse to defend his position as a sculptor was to accuse Judd of not being an artist. He was, however, too late. By now, Judd had already ascended to the position of being the most important artist of his generation.

His critical reception certainly confirms this. But when he first started to exhibit his constructions in 1963 at the Green Gallery (first in a group show and then in one of his own) the responses were mixed. This is not surprising considering the heightened expectations derived from his writings. Michael Fried, for one, found this coexistence promising. “As one might expect,” Fried says early on in his survey of Judd’s first one-man exhibition, “on the strength of Judd’s monthly criticism published in *Arts Magazine* it is an assured, intelligent show; it also provides a kind of commentary on the criticism and is doubly interesting on that count.”¹⁹ Indeed, Fried infers from Judd’s reviews his discomfort with easel painting because Judd regularly advocated a form of painting that emphasizes objectness: an attribute, Fried agreed with. Yet despite this common ground, Fried could not determine how Judd made judgements of quality. And the works shown at the Green Gallery only complicated matters. Fried, as he has done in all of his writing on Judd, recognized the formal stakes at hand. He rightly saw how, “Judd likes: overall rectilinearity, regularity of structural pulses, play between positive and negative space and structural

¹⁹ Michael Fried, “New York Letter,” *Art International* 13, no. 1 (February 1964): 25.

mirroring of all kinds."²⁰ However, these observations did not convince him as to why Judd chose these forms. Perhaps Fried's uncertainty reflects the complexities of analyzing an exhibition filled with blunt objects, painted bright red (at times accentuated by purple), in a somewhat cramped space. It is no doubt daunting, to catch in a single view, a low-standing box excised of a right triangle, two rectangular shapes (one with an off-center, serrated, trough and the other with a pipe filling the previously empty space), as well as the metaphorically inclined "Bleachers" and "Kleenex Box" (fig. 5). Fried hesitantly went out on a limb: "Such judgements as I might make about individual pieces are therefore halting; but it seems to me, on the whole, the free-standing ones are stronger than the wall-pieces, in which I sense that an uneasy compromise has been made with certain norms of painting."²¹ This is a fair observation, so is his concluding remark, "Finally it is worth mentioning that this is Judd's first one-man show as well as one of the best on view in New York this month."²²

But Judd's uncompromising form of art writing also left him exposed to critical retribution. The painter and critic Sidney Tillim lead a brief, but sustained, assault.²³ Despite being Judd's colleague at *Arts Magazine*, Tillim never demurred his lack of patience for Judd's positions. He seized the opportunity to offer his own take on things when he wrote about Judd's

²⁰ Michael Fried, "New York Letter," 25.

²¹ Michael Fried, "New York Letter," 25.

²² Michael Fried, "New York Letter," 25.

²³ For an excellent overview of Tillim's career see Katy Siegel, "Critical Realist: Sidney Tillim," *Artforum* 42, no. 1 (September 2003): 208-211.

participation in the “New Work II” group show at the Green Gallery.²⁴ As an early supporter of pop art and realism, he prefaced his review with a discussion about the latest developments of Jim Dine—an artist Tillim supported. This gave him an aesthetic entryway into the “New Realist” work of Judd, Robert Morris, Lucas Samaras, and George Segal. However, it is Judd who Tillim singled out for special attention. In particular, he takes interests in *Untitled* (1962)—a wall piece that consists of a sizeable plywood panel (painted light cadmium red) bookended (on the top and bottom) by partially concaved galvanized iron and aluminum structures that make the object look like two shovels conjoined by a swath of red. Tillim says that this is Judd’s strongest piece in the exhibition, but he follows his restrained compliment with a pointed attack couched between formal observations. “Given the physical excrescence of the work,” Tillim begins, “the presence of paint is old hat, *vestigial with illusionism*; but the work’s claim upon space is real, an abstract object that verges on sculpture while retaining its pictorial axis.”²⁵ For Tillim too accuse Judd of succumbing to illusionism, something Judd repeatedly attacked in his criticism, was a well-conceived jab. But Tillim saved his best punch for last: “Perhaps Judd is too theory-bound—a tendency that invites violation. At any rate, even Judd is conservative compared to George Segal.”²⁶ Conservative—in relation to a figurative sculptor—Judd must have been livid.

²⁴ Sidney Tillim, “Month in Review,” *Arts Magazine* 37, no. 6 (March 1963): 58-63.

²⁵ Sidney Tillim, “Month in Review,” 62 [my emphasis].

²⁶ Sidney Tillim, “Month in Review,” 62.

Tillim did not stop there. Almost a year later he came out with a full-length article on Judd and Frank Stella entitled "The New Avant-Garde."²⁷ Tillim, like many others, realized that these two young artists initiated a significant challenge to the definitions of medium specificity. It was almost impossible to conclusively label their art as either a painting or a sculpture. They were objects, which offered the most cogent, if somewhat troubling (depending on one's perspective), response to Abstract Expressionism. In light of Tillim's professed tastes, neither Judd nor Stella's work seemed up to his liking. But Tillim's article was not a matter of expressing his preferences. Rather, it was an implicit acknowledgement of the waning of figurative realism and another chance to deflate Judd's growing reputation. Indeed, Tillim is skeptical about Judd's frustrations with painting. He attributes it to "a statement of belief [rather] than a qualification of one." Yet his personal slant does not prevent him from being attentive to the work. He sees how Judd and Stella "make claims on real space as opposed to painted, pictured space." He also acknowledges Judd's intelligence, but he dilutes this claim by adulating Stella's (apparent) ignorance "to ideological subtleties" as if Stella somehow continued the mythic intuitive investigations of the Abstract Expressionists.²⁸

Where Tillim, though, really begins to unhinge his true feelings is during his discussion of Judd's first solo show, which flummoxed Tillim by what he took to be the work's underlying passivity. He even suggests that Judd's

²⁷ Sidney Tillim, "The New Avant-Garde," *Arts Magazine* 38, no. 5 (February 1964): 18-21.

²⁸ Sidney Tillim, "The New Avant-Garde," 20.

aesthetic strategy of polarity—the unification of dissimilars in a whole work—is a ruse to cover up his art’s tacit idleness. “The contrast of the orifice to a plane,” Tillim says, “is a basic one and suggest that the work is a bit oversimplified and somewhat tense because of it. But it is necessary in order to avoid a completely monolithic passivity—which it only delays until the paradoxical vigor of the objects wears off.”²⁹ In contrast, Stella’s paintings stand out. They remain closer to the past, interact with the wall in new ways, and do not call to mind immediate precedents. But in the end, Judd and Stella fall pray to a similar disillusionment (“when painters try so hard not to be painters”). In a choice between two evils, Tillim concedes: “So it is with a certain lack of enthusiasm that I cast my ballot for Stella, even though Judd is the more powerful personality. In addition to the reasons I have given, I prefer his quite dignity, obtained despite an aesthetic in which a ‘morality’ of progress continues to reduce the human factor.”³⁰ Judd’s failure is more personal than artistic. He is a man without ethics. But it should not be overlooked that Tillim’s pronouncements were tinged with a bit of vengefulness.

Tillim could not have been pleased with Judd’s review of his latest paintings in November 1960. Judd, who had been writing for *Arts Magazine* for less than a year, quickly expressed his disdain for Tillim’s decision to abandon abstraction for figuration: “The change was a serious mistake.”³¹ Judd continues in his grave tone, “Previously he could advance; currently he is in a historical

²⁹ Sidney Tillim, “The New Avant-Garde,” 21.

³⁰ Sidney Tillim, “The New Avant-Garde,” 21.

³¹ Donald Judd, “Sidney Tillim,” CW, 23.

cul-de-sac.”³² In two sentences Judd completely dismissed Tillim’s work. But the tension between the two only intensified as the years progressed. In March 1963, Tillim wrote *Arts Magazine* a piercing letter-to-the-editor.³³ In it, he reprimanded Judd’s review of the figurative painter Walter Murch.³⁴ Judd, for his part, could not understand why Murch painted the way he did. The only plausible excuse, Judd concludes, is the belief in depicting essences. According to Judd, this is bankrupt reasoning, whereas for Tillim, this is not even an issue. “As far as I can discover in practice,” Tillim says, “art doesn’t have a damn thing to do with essences, whether they exist or not. We paint things because they are there, and because we can make something out of them.”³⁵ Tillim then finds recourse in an apple to further explicate his position, because to paint one, Tillim explains, is to engage with illusions, not essences. He seals his missive with a rather deriding conclusion: “I fear Mr. Judd has placed himself in the position of having once been disillusioned by an apple and now will have nothing to do with it.”³⁶ Judd had none of this. He flatly stated in his reply that figurative painting is no longer viable.³⁷ It just cannot stand up against the best in abstract art. He also finds it troubling how Tillim sidesteps the question of essences, however, to fall back on illusionism, is even more ghastly. It takes Judd a single sentence to cast his rejoinder. And with it, he sets out not only the conditions for the greatest

³² Donald Judd, “Sidney Tillim,” CW, 23.

³³ Sidney Tillim, “Letter,” *Arts Magazine* 37, no. 6 (March 1963): 7.

³⁴ Donald Judd, “In the Galleries: Walter Murch,” *Arts Magazine* 37, no. 5 (February 1963): 46.

³⁵ Sidney Tillim, “Letter,” 7.

³⁶ Sidney Tillim, “Letter,” 7.

³⁷ Donald Judd, “Letters,” *Arts Magazine* 37, no. 7 (April 1963): 7.

aesthetic problem artists in the mid sixties faced, but also the reason behind why so many young Conceptualists eventually gave up painting in order to explore language: "It's true that I am profoundly disillusioned with apples; Mr. Tillim is illusioned with them."³⁸

* * *

Obviously, the problem here is not with apples. It instead lies at the core of painting's role in contemporary art, for by the spring of 1963, it was clear to all who went to "New Work II" at Green Gallery that Judd was no longer painting. He had left it for good almost a year earlier. In his estimation, it was no longer viable, "because when I was doing painting I couldn't see any way out of having a certain amount of illusionism in the paintings."³⁹ But why would this bother him so much? Why would this become such a dominant aesthetic issue in the mid sixties? Why, more astoundingly, would it find a relatively quick resolution just three years later in the spring of 1966?

Illusionism, in theory, is a simple idea. But that does not mean it is without complications. It refers to an inherent contradiction existent in every painting. As Judd concisely describes, "[t]here [are] at least two things in the painting: the rectangle itself and the thing (image) in the rectangle..."⁴⁰ That is, a painting is the incommensurable relationship between a real physical thing (a stretched canvas on a wood frame, for example) and depicted space (whether figurative or abstract). More recently, commentators have located the concern

³⁸ Donald Judd, "Letters," 7.

³⁹ Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Artnews* 65, no. 2 (September 1966): 58.

⁴⁰ John Coplans, "An Interview with Don Judd," 41.

for this internal tension in the later writings of Clement Greenberg, who, for his part, did have something to say about illusion and the increasing pictorial flatness of advanced painting. However it would be wrong to think that the historical progression he outlined in "Modernist Painting" as well as his belief in the segregation of the arts was adhered to by younger artists like Judd.⁴¹ By 1963 Greenberg was no longer of great import for Judd and his peers. His name hardly, if ever, appeared in their writings, interviews, or reviews of their work. He was simply part of the past, and now a figure in the institution. Greenberg might have cut his teeth on Abstract Expression, but now he maintained his bite by supporting an ever-dwindling number of artists. Plainly put, he did not like what he was seeing in the early sixties, which was fine by most everyone else.⁴²

What Greenberg, however, shared with a number of young artists in the early 1960s was a deep respect for the achievements of the Abstract Expressionists (namely Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman).⁴³ Across the board, Pollock and Newman's influence was profound, and it is here that the struggle with illusionism developed. The dilemma, though, the new generation

⁴¹ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 101-108. Certainly one of the biggest strikes against the unwarranted historical import of Greenberg's essay came from one of his most admired follower, Michael Fried. "The claim that modernism in the arts proceeds," Fried begins, "by acts of self-criticism is at the heart of Clement Greenberg's essay 'Modernist Painting,' which was first made widely available in *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961) but which (like almost everyone) I didn't read until it was reprinted in slightly revised form in Gregory Battcock, ed. *The New Art: A Critical Anthology* [in 1966]..." Michael Fried, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996): 55.

⁴² Greenberg's greatest impact on the younger generation of the sixties was on critics, especially Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried.

⁴³ See Richard Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," in *Barnett Newman*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002): 76-111.

of artists faced was not to repeat their elders. It was imperative to find an idiom of their own. And since Abstract Expressionists raised the stakes of American art via painting, many felt that painting was the only serious way to answer this challenge. But how was one to do this? It was not feasible to try and recapture the spontaneity and vigor of Pollock. As Judd said in light of this issue, "Pollock and those people [other Abstract Expressionists] represent actual chance; by now it's better to make that a foregone conclusion—you don't have to mimic chance."⁴⁴ This observation signals the jettisoning of touch and metaphysics, and offers an explanation for the increased interest in the three-dimensionality of painting. Here was a way to avoid illusionism as well as redundancy. It also furthered the break from the European painterly tradition initiated by Abstract Expressionists, since thinking about shape and structure minimized the role of composition—a quality seen as the legacy of European painting. But most importantly, it was a way to be original, which is an intoxicating motivation. Nevertheless, these developments arose in fits and starts, and when critics appraised this occurrence it was as an aesthetic of simplification. An artist associated with this reductivist tendency was Frank Stella. He shrugged off this somewhat pejorative tag with typical, if not fitting, nonchalance: "There's always been a trend towards simpler painting and it was bound to happen one way or another. Whenever painting gets complicated, like Abstract Expressionism, or

⁴⁴ Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," 58.

Surrealism, there's going to be someone who's not painting complicated paintings, someone who's trying to simplify."⁴⁵

Stella makes it sound so easy. Of course, it is not. After all, it takes a certain degree of effort to suggest that Ted Williams is a genius because he could see the seams of a ninety-mile per hour fastball racing through the air.⁴⁶ But this has been Stella's game since he came onto the scene in 1959. He was an instant sensation, and before he knew it, he was the center of numerous debates. None was more pressing than the one over illusionism because even though others explored similar issues, it was the art of Stella and Judd that caught everyone's attention.⁴⁷ Stella's radical, depersonalized, and ambiguously object-like paintings of the early to mid sixties represented one plausible solution to the illusionism dilemma, while Judd's constructions offered another. Initially there were more similarities than differences in their aesthetic propositions. However it did not take long for the discrepancies to emerge, and because of this widening

⁴⁵ Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," 58.

⁴⁶ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993): 7.

⁴⁷ Besides Stella, perhaps the other really hot young painter in the early to mid 1960s, was Larry Poons. Despite their similarity in age, Poons deferred to Stella. In an interview from 1965, Poons recalls, "Well, I walked into Sixteen Americans show at the Museum. I remember walking into a very dark room and think of Albers and like I was out of the room and I didn't go back and see the paintings. Then I was in Leo Castelli's maybe sometime after that. And I saw a silver painting with the corners cut out and the two squares cut out from the center of the painting and all of a sudden it just made great sense to me. And I was moved by it as a painting. It was a painting. It was a painting that had space and also had the potential, the potential of Newman's paintings." [Dorothy Seckler, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Larry Poons, March 18, 1965," *Archives of American Art*.] Poons was not alone, however, with his praise. Another young painter flirting with the objectness of painting was Robert Mangold. He too had a profound interest in Stella, but soon moved away from Stella's way of doing things as the sixties advanced.

divide, artists and critics found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to choose sides. Not that it was so clear of a choice, and as we will see, for many young Conceptualists the decision was made for them. For painters in the mid sixties, anxiously searching for a way around the logical contradictions of illusionism, Stella and Judd provided hope. It would be too strong to say that they hung on Stella and Judd's every move. But they were acutely aware of what was transpiring. Everyone was. And unbeknownst to these soon to be Conceptual artists, the "tete-a-tete" between Stella and Judd made it possible for them to eventually give up painting for language.

* * *

"I actually started cutting parts out of the aluminum paintings to make the paintings flatter; by cutting away corners I hoped to reduce the illusions of the paintings and keep the paint on top."⁴⁸ This is Stella's description of how he arrived at his monochromatic shaped canvases shown at Castelli from December 1963 until January 1964. For Stella, as well as for viewers, these works proved to be a significant departure from the more traditional, though still highly regulated rectangular paintings from the year before.⁴⁹ Stella's modifications led to a series of geometric works (a trapezoid, a pentagon, and an octagon, for example) all

⁴⁸ Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Frank Stella [1964]," in *Making It New: Essays, Interviews, and Talks* (New York: Turtle Point Press, 1994): 56.

⁴⁹ Stella: "I don't ever think about scale. I use three different scales. One is the graph paper sketch scale. And then two blow-ups, one 3/4-inch stripe small paintings and then a larger stripe, 2 3/4 inches that I've used since 1958. These determined the scale of all my paintings. It started because the first brush I used was a 2-inch Sash Tool that spread to 2 3/4 inches. I liked that width brush and built my paintings around it. That is the module of my work." Geldzahler, "An Interview with Frank Stella [1964]," 56.

painted in a metallic violet, and still delineated with his trademark stripes. However, his innovation, and cause for shock, was to cut out the painting's central interior in a shape that follows the form's perimeter (fig. 6). This subtraction nudged his paintings ever so closely to being solely identified as objects—something with which Stella was not so comfortable. He believed he made paintings, hence all the brushwork and lack of straight lines. (Stella never taped and proudly insisted that he never drew with the brush.)⁵⁰ Perhaps more telling was the fact that he left the sides of his works bare. Even Rothko, Stella reminds us, painted his edges. And nobody suggested he made objects.⁵¹ But it is hard to ignore what these works lack. Their gaping holes prove to be a stinging censure of illusionism. The very fact that Stella allows the viewer to actually enter the pictorial plane instead of imagining what it might be like to pass through depicted space is a very literal expression of the objectness of painting.

The *New York Times* critic, Brian O'Doherty, did not feel the same way. "By cutting a void," O'Doherty contends, "into the center of each canvas, the eye's natural point of focus, they induce a sort of Pavlovian frustration."⁵² What O'Doherty means is that viewers (or really O'Doherty) expect Stella's work to be a complete work of art, but because of their structure they foster an indifference

⁵⁰ "The way my own painting was going, drawing was less and less necessary. It was the one thing I wasn't going to do. I wasn't going to draw with the brush." Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," 58.

⁵¹ "I don't paint around the edge; Rothko does, so do a lot of people; Sven Lukin does and he's much more of an object painter than I am." Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," 60.

⁵² Brian O'Doherty, "Frank Stella and the Crisis of Nothingness," *New York Times* (19 January 1964): sec. 2, 21.

to the viewer and negate the value of art. These are strong claims. And O'Doherty is obviously not comfortable with paintings that explore their three-dimensionality. He still holds hope for something more emotive and sensual. Yet Stella's art will not suffice. It possess "an excess of objectivity [that] turns his pictures into mere objects, the artist into a conditioned reflex, transforming heaven and hell into a new sort of spiritual vacuum that is only modified by his willingness to share it. Art apparently has nowhere to go but down."⁵³ O'Doherty's position clings to the past, while Stella's exploration of shape points somewhere else: to say where in January 1964 was not yet clear. However, Stella's "ambition" held a quality of the unknown. For some this caused excitement, for others, consternation.

Max Kozloff was of the latter persuasion. He resisted change. Like O'Doherty, he was put off by Stella's lack of individuation. But where O'Doherty characterized him as indifferent, Kozloff qualified him as having an aversion to critical interpretation. In fact, Kozloff goes so far as to claim that Stella "abdicated" the responsibilities of a painter—a type of judgement, that shows how Kozloff lingered with older criteria, while also tingeing his remarks with a sense of morality.⁵⁴ Indeed, this righteous traditionalism masked in the guise of progressive cynicism causes Kozloff to stumble over the physicality of Stella's work. For Kozloff, a Stella shaped canvas "destroys the picture convention of rectangularity," which, as we might infer, is not a good thing.⁵⁵

⁵³ O'Doherty, "Franks Stella and the Crisis of Nothingness," 21.

⁵⁴ Max Kozloff, "New York Letter," *Art International* 7, no. 3 (25 April 1964): 64.

⁵⁵ Kozloff, "New York Letter," 64.

Perhaps Kozloff's prognostication is bit strong, but it reveals the pressure generated by Stella's advances. His paintings were posing questions that eluded standard answers. Kozloff's response was to mournfully announce that what constitutes Stella's latest paintings "all point to a view of painting as artifact."⁵⁶ Thus Kozloff was left, in his estimation, with only one thing to say about Stella's work: it was simply there.

However, for someone like Lucy Lippard, this meant a lot. During the 1960s, she had a tremendous knack for writing about major aesthetic developments before anyone else. Some of this, of course, is due to luck. But it also arose from her ability to balance shrewd observations with the humility to sit back and listen to what artists had to say. Her review of Stella's Castelli show is an example of the former with a bit of the latter thrown in. Writing for *Artforum*, where critics covered several shows at a time, Lippard grouped her remarks on Stella with reviews of Donald Judd and Robert Mangold. She posited that these individuals, along with several other younger artists, shared an interest in "environments"—a novel word at this time.⁵⁷ With the term's roots in Happenings, it certainly must have seemed for some a bit out of context in her discussion of recent painting. But as Lippard contends, this is an apt label: "There is a growing tendency, even 'in straight painting' exhibitions, to surround

⁵⁶ Kozloff, "New York Letter," 64.

⁵⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, "New York," *Artforum* 2, no. 9 (March 1964): 18. Lippard was close friends with Robert Mangold, which probably led her to review his show. They became friends through her then husband, Robert Ryman, who befriended Mangold when they worked together at the Museum of Modern Art. During this time, Robert Mangold and his wife Sylvia Plimack Mangold lived in the same building as Lippard and Ryman.

the spectator, whose increased physical participation, or immediate sensorial reactions to the work of art, often operate at the expense of the more profound emotional involvements demanded by New York School paintings in the fifties.”⁵⁸ Space was the next frontier, and its exploration came in two major forms. The first extends out of Happenings, Process and Junk art, where artists, using non-traditional materials, make work that “physically invades the exhibition space and often the audience actively participates in the resulting game or spectacle.”⁵⁹ The second, where Lippard sees Stella, Judd, and Mangold, “retains traditional formats, but the pictorial domain is more subtly enlarged by means of formal, optical or coloristic simplifications, which serve to intensify the bonds between one man’s work as exhibited in a group and provide a general ambient.”⁶⁰ This begins to show why O’Doherty and Kozloff had such problems with Stella. Instead of a collection of individual pieces, Stella presented a total work that took on the exhibition space, and made viewers acutely aware of their own presence. The boundaries of what a painting could be were quickly eroding.⁶¹

⁵⁸Lippard, “New York,” 18.

⁵⁹Lippard, “New York,” 18.

⁶⁰Lippard, “New York,” 18.

⁶¹ It is interesting to note that Lippard describes Judd and Stella’s work in terms of theatrical metaphors: “The effect [of Judd’s show] is that of the scattered units of a stage set. Some of the pieces resemble the kind of podium upon which Greek drama is often enacted in the modern theater. Deadpan, even mute, three box-like forms in a white room are an odd combination of the clinical and the dramatic” [18]. As for Stella: “They [Stella’s paintings] are about three inches deep, which gives them a great width and solidity, accented by the cut-out center, but at the same time romanticized and dematerialized by the tinselly, theatrically lurid color” [19]. One has to wonder if Michael Fried was paying attention to this? Lippard, “New York,” 18-19.

Lippard was fast to point out—just as Stella had himself—that Stella was still a painter. But she added an extra caveat: he could both paint and investigate the permutations of shape at the same time. This was not a contradiction to her. And unlike other commentators, she attended to Stella's technique. She liked that he never taped. She also liked the amount of effort he devoted to brushwork. His attention to touch, "with its trace of deliberate hesitancy, suggests the path of the brush the line has never felt."⁶² This was where, Lippard suggests, Stella broke away from the New York School Painters. He no longer constrained himself to drawing with the brush. He instead painted with it. But he also moved contemporary American painting away from its forebears. As Lippard notes, "these paintings are real objects."⁶³ These implacable, geometric forms, devoid of their centers, were almost like sculptures hung on the wall. What kept them from being entirely so was his commitment to painting. Nevertheless, an ambiguity prevailed, as Stella's paintings defied categorization. Judd enjoyed a similar fate, perhaps even more so. However, by the early part of 1964 it was not yet clear that these two had such different ambitions for their art.

It became more so on February 15, 1964. In the studios of WBAI-FM, Judd and Stella, along with Dan Flavin sat down with Bruce Glaser for an interview. Their conversation turned out to be quite revealing. Stella and Judd jumped on the chance to present their views in their own words. And after receiving so much critical attention during the previous months, it must have been refreshing to be able to layout their cases. Flavin, for his part, was somewhat new onto the

⁶² Lippard, "New York," 19.

⁶³ Lippard, "New York," 19.

scene, and remained relatively quiet during the interview. In fact, he recused himself from the published transcript of 1966 (edited by Lucy Lippard) because he did not like his limited remarks.⁶⁴ But his inclusion in the initial interview was not far-fetched. Flavin too had been generating a buzz. He was just a month away from his decisive solo show at Kaymar Gallery, and his recent move to fluorescent light tubes had put him in the spotlight of savvy artists and commentators (fig. 7). Naturally, it also did not hurt that he was a good friend of Judd's. Yet despite Flavin's presence, the interview belonged to Stella and Judd. And by the end of the hour, the differences between the two were clearer. The state of painting, on the other hand, was not. But one thing that was not in doubt was that Judd offered a radical stance that rejected the past and looked towards the future.

Initially, Stella and Judd stood on common ground. They both had problems with illusionism, and located an example of what they deemed wrong in the work of French painter Victor Vasarely. He served as Judd and Stella's whipping boy. In comparison to another optical painter they both approved of—Larry Poons—Vasarely fell short of the newest advancements in American art because unlike younger painters on this side of the Atlantic, Vasarely still composed—the pictorial trait that made European art regressive. Stella claimed that instead of trying to balance the canvas “we [Americans] strive to get the

⁶⁴ See the accounts of Flavin's participation as well the history of this interview in James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) and Caroline A. Jones, *The Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

thing in the middle, and symmetrical, but just a kind of force, just to get the thing on the canvas.”⁶⁵ What was to be avoided was “fussiness.” Flavin, it turns out, did not care one way or another. He was fine with either symmetry or asymmetry. Judd, though, clearly denied an interest in symmetry. And he also did not approve of the European reliance on rationalism. He just could not see the rationale behind preconceiving a work of art. Indeed, this is why he was so against composition. He wanted it out of his work at all costs. Of course, this is a tricky stance. It depends upon us seeing the finished product above anything else, which is certainly possible. But it is also conceivable to be skeptical here. Judd stuck to his convictions, which makes his arguments compelling. Stella, as we will see, waffled in his views. Part of this is due to the fact that he tended to think out loud, and spoke, it seems, before his ideas were fully formed. He talked with a palpable excitement. But his proclivity towards verbosity revealed his true feelings about painting.

It is strange, though, how Flavin remained comparably quiet during the interview. His autobiographical writings suggest a loquacious, if somewhat cantankerous, individual, who was never lost for words, and had a penchant for talking about himself. Perhaps the situation made him feel a little out of place. After all, the interview was really about painting—something Flavin believed he had little to do with anymore. Indeed, he seemed to have taken Robert Rosenblum’s words to heart: “Bob Rosenblum said to me recently that I had

⁶⁵ Bruce Glaser, “New Nihilism or New Art,” *WBAI-FM*, 15 February 1964, Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

destroyed painting for him. Well, I'm just getting a real sense of this."⁶⁶ And Rosenblum's observation seemed to have buoyed Flavin's confidence enough to say that Stella does not make objects. He paints, which, for Flavin, no longer seems plausible, and makes it difficult to have a conversation with Stella because "I don't think in the terms in which he's thinking at all, and it's a surprise to me that I had considered myself a painter in a sense."⁶⁷ Stella, as one might expect, disagreed with Flavin's assessment of painting's status. Nevertheless Flavin continued. He thought Stella was too preoccupied with paint, while he, on the other hand, avoided this complication by arranging objects. Stella was still not convinced by Flavin's polemic, and was not ready to abandon his position. He felt that Flavin was a bit naïve and devoid of historical perspective. Stella argued, in contrast to his earlier statements about Vasarely, that "how do you deal with structural things, compositional things? We're all left with that."⁶⁸ He follows this up by saying, "I still have to compose a picture, and if you make an object you have to organize the structure." "I don't think," Stella continues, "our work is that radical in any sense."⁶⁹ Indeed, for Stella, they have not really devised anything new—at least on a compositional and structural level. Stella's change of course is revealing. In a way, what he said is right. You cannot reinvent the wheel. However the issue now was not how to be original, but how to believe you are original.

⁶⁶ Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

⁶⁷ Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

⁶⁸ Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

⁶⁹ Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

This is why, when pressed by Glaser, Judd had to disagree with Stella's opinion. The grounds for his opposition were as much aesthetic as a matter of conviction. He stated that "[I'm] totally uninterested in European painting and think it's over with."⁷⁰ His lack of concern released him from any obligation to the past and even if, "for example, they [Europeans] might have used a diagonal, but no one there ever used a diagonal as Morris Louis did."⁷¹ What matters, for Judd, is how a form is used. Stella, however, could not come to the same conclusion. He tried to press Judd into believing that the idea of the diagonal has always been there. Judd, as he remarked just before, agreed, to a point: "That's true; there's always going to be something in one's work that's been around for a long time, but the fact that compositional agreement isn't important is rather new."⁷² Judd wanted to create something that was "interesting to me in a lump."⁷³ He was prepared to abandon European composition and go it alone, whereas Stella, it seems, was not entirely. Towards the end of the interview Stella describes how when he paints he often loses sight of the canvas. Its material properties dissolve as if what he is doing is only for vision alone. This echoes something he said earlier in the discussion. Here he talks about the reason why he removed the middle of his shaped canvases in 1963. He wanted to emphasize the surface. Stella, we should not forget, was resolutely a painter. He reinforced this point when he told both Flavin and Judd that "you two make

⁷⁰ Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

⁷¹ Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

⁷² Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

⁷³ Glaser, "New Nihilism or New Art," Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

objects.”⁷⁴ Perhaps Stella said this to be different. But it is hard to ignore that he was becoming more and more conservative, at least compared to Judd. By the end of the conversation it was clear who was the most daring of the two.

Was everyone listening to this interview when it aired on March 24, 1964? I doubt it, but that does not really matter. Word gets around. Ideas and gossip spread when artists meet on the street, sit together and drink, visit each other’s studios, and see one another at openings. Stella and Judd were moving in opposite directions. Young painters noticed.

* * *

Judd’s art kept pace with his rhetoric. It was around this time that he began to collaborate with fabricators, and eschewed the presence of his touch. Not that this was the central issue for him, but by allocating the construction of his pieces to skilled machinists, Judd was able to create objects that previously were impossible. In one of his first pieces built outside of his studio (*To Susan Buckwater* [1964]), Judd retained, at least metaphorically, some familiar painterly elements. The inherent pattern of the galvanized iron recall gestural brushstrokes, while the blue, aluminum beam connecting the four boxes acts like a literal horizon line. But despite these allusions, and they are those of the interpreter not Judd’s, it is difficult to get by the fact that this is a whole object almost twelve feet in length and projecting from the gallery wall at a distance of two and a half feet—no painting has had a presence quite like this.

⁷⁴ Glaser, “New Nihilism or New Art,” Pacifica Radio Archives, BB3394.

But whatever pictorial associations arose, one thing was certain: there were no illusions. During the time since the Glaser interview, Judd continued to develop anti-compositional, anti-illusionistic works in the form of progressions and single stacks. One of the most impressive features of this new, more industrial body of work, was its color. When he was not relying on the inherent hue of the material, he would use auto body paint in order to obtain a textureless coat that adhered to the surface as if it was originally part of the aluminum or galvanized steel. The following year, Judd took his investigations a step further. He began to incorporate Plexiglas into his constructions, turning color into an object. This is best exemplified in his floor pieces from 1965-1966, where two side panels made of stainless steel were conjoined by three sheets of amber Plexiglas (the base remained empty). Holding the object taught, were several steel cables that descended in a fashion reminiscent of his "Bleacher" piece from 1963 (fig. 8). This produced a remarkably present work of art that furthered Judd's incursion into the realm of neither painting nor sculpture. Judd, however, was not alone in his forays. Critics watched his every move, some with breath abated.

It is upon viewing a similar work that Lucy Lippard proclaimed that "the most impressive work [on view at the group exhibition "Plastic" at the John Daniels Gallery], and by far the most fully resolved, is a fluorescent pink plexiglas rectangular floor box by Donald Judd."⁷⁵ Lippard continued with a detailed analysis of the formal qualities of Judd's new work. She was impressed,

⁷⁵ Lucy Lippard, "New York Letter," *Art International* 9, no. 4 (May 1965): 53.

and her initial comment marked the beginning of increased critical praise for Judd. Like Lippard, Barbara Rose was equally keen on these category-defying objects. When writing a preview of Judd's inclusion in the 1965 São Paulo Biennale, Rose attempted to place Judd in a historical tradition. "But looking for the roots of Judd's work in sculpture alone," Rose concludes, "is liable to end in frustration: like everything that is genuinely original, the pieces when viewed for the first time seem to exist without precedent."⁷⁶ Perhaps Judd's self-promotion was finding converts. Rose's observation is not too different from Judd's professed lack of interest in European art and his belief in the originality of non-compositional work. Indeed, Rose's remark places Judd in the forefront. Where else could he now be? Just a few months later, Judd seemed to have ascended to a similar post for Lippard. In her estimation, Judd had become the unofficial leader of the non-illusionistic critique against painting.⁷⁷ And with this commendation, Lippard added another when she said, "Judd is deservedly the best known of the structurists."⁷⁸ She then went on to describe another piece similar in spirit to the one she reviewed nearly a year before. This time, however, she was even more enthusiastic: "His metal and plastic boxes are among the most factual and radically assertive works today, but they are far more positive in their accomplishments than his iconoclastic writings would lead

⁷⁶ Barbara Rose, "Donald Judd," *Artforum* 3, no. 9 (June 1965): 30.

⁷⁷ Lucy Lippard, "New York Letter: Recent Sculpture," *Art International* 10, no. 2 (February 1966): 48.

⁷⁸ Lucy Lippard, "New York Letter: Recent Sculpture," 50. "Structurists" was Lippard's term for Minimalists. She arrived at this term in conjunction with Kynaston McShine with whom she laid out the original groundwork for *Primary Structures*. Meyer, *Minimalism*, 22.

one to believe.”⁷⁹ This is a very strong statement about Judd’s art, especially since it follows the publication of his most famous essay, “Specific Objects.”

Written in the months following the Glaser interview, but not published until the end of 1965, “Specific Objects” soon became seen as a manifesto about both Judd’s work and those he considered of the same ilk. From the onset, Judd repudiated this interpretation. He explained, in an interview with John Coplans from 1968, that “I was earning a living as a writer, and it’s a report on three-dimensional art.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the facts are on his side. He never mentioned himself, the tone, while harsh on painting, is far from a call to arms, and the photographic reproduction of one of his pieces was an editorial decision, not his. Of course, in many ways it is hard to believe that Judd did not have his art in mind. He just had the tact not to write about it. Nevertheless, what cannot fall into dispute is that Judd presents a strong case for the power of three-dimensional works and explicates why painting is no longer viable: “actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on flat surface.”⁸¹ While a great deal of attention has been placed on Judd’s antagonistic relation with painting and the clarity with which he laid out his ideas on materials and the power of wholeness, what often goes unremarked, or unnoticed because of its striking obviousness, is the profundity of his opening sentence: “Half or more of the best new work in the last few years had been neither painting nor

⁷⁹ Lucy Lippard, “New York Letter: Recent Sculpture,” 50-51.

⁸⁰ Coplans, “An Interview with Donald Judd,” 44.

⁸¹ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 78.

sculpture.”⁸² With this terse turn of phrase, Judd both encapsulated the latest developments in contemporary art, and more significantly, provided a formula for younger artists to do whatever they imagined. Now, what one did or made could be known simply as art.

Judd was honing these ideas in public well before the appearance of “Specific Objects”—a good example is his February 1965 review of “The Shaped Canvas” exhibition at the Guggenheim of which Stella was one of five participants.⁸³ Judd correctly singles out Stella’s work as the best, and emphasizes how Stella “was the first to use a canvas that wasn’t rectangular” (fig. 9).⁸⁴ But the relatively positive qualifications stop here. Judd questions the curator’s (Lawrence Alloway) narrow understanding of the shaped canvas’s permutations. And even if the show were to include some historical precedents like Lee Bontecou and Robert Rauschenberg, Judd still could not get around the fact that “the shaped canvas is essentially a technical aspect, the material the work is made of. But if the shaped canvas continues to incorporate aspects of painting,” Judd deduces, “it is already behind the developments of three-dimensionality.” He finishes with a more telling admonishment: “The shaped canvas as a three-dimensional painting is unnecessary, and, like all forms which develop too late from radical sources or keep older elements, it’s full of problems.”⁸⁵

⁸² Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” 74.

⁸³ Paul Feeley, Sven Lukin, Richard Smith, and Neil Williams were the others.

⁸⁴ Donald Judd, “In The Galleries,” *Arts Magazine* 39, no. 5 (February 1965): 56.

⁸⁵ Donald Judd, “In The Galleries,” 57.

In Los Angeles, just a few months after Judd's review came out, Nancy Marmer weighed in with a similar verdict, but this time it was about Stella's show at Ferus Gallery. She found the work boring and thought, "the shaped canvas, in other words, remains subordinate and ancillary to picture plane interests."⁸⁶ Her remarks testify to the difficulties confronting Stella as he tried to remain a painter, while still exploring the permutations of shape. Despite Stella's pleas to the contrary, a number of critics read his paintings as objects. And in that regard, they were not making the grade: "Stella's art might even be reproached as illusionistic since without eschewing paint and canvas, he approximates the look of polychrome, metallic sculpture."⁸⁷ Marmer's remark suggests a muddleness in the perception of Stella's art. Of course, there were other opinions. Philip Leider complimented the various moods Stella's paintings evoked as Lucy Lippard praised the new work's "unity and execution."⁸⁸ And writing about the same show as Marmer, Robert Rosenblum suggestively described how "with lean perfect precision, these swift forces seem to be caught just before take-off, clinging to each momentarily, as if magnetized."⁸⁹ The mixed bag of responses should come as no surprise. But the nature of the critique is startling in light of the aesthetic issues advanced (wittingly or unwittingly) by Stella and Judd over the past several years. The waning of Stella's avant-garde status seemed to have increased. But none of this could

⁸⁶ Nancy Marmer, "Los Angeles Letter," *Art International* 9, no. 4 (May 1965): 44.

⁸⁷ Marmer, "Los Angeles Letter," 44.

⁸⁸ Philip Leider, "Frank Stella," *Artforum* 3, no. 9 (June 1965): 26; Lucy Lippard, "New York Letter," *Art International* 9, no. 2 (March 1965): 46.

⁸⁹ Robert Rosenblum, "Frank Stella: Five Years of Variations on an 'Irreducible' Theme," *Artforum* 3, no. 6 (March 1965): 25.

anticipate the critical fallout from his solo show at Castelli in the early part of 1966. It also did not help matters that it followed on the heels of Judd's far more positively received effort.

* * *

Judd was nervous on the eve of his first show at Castelli gallery in February 1966 (fig. 10). The closing of the Green gallery just a couple years earlier forced Judd to find new commercial digs. However, this move was more than just out of necessity. It signaled a new step in his career. Castelli was *the* gallery. And to show here marked a certain degree of institutional acceptance. After all, Johns and Rauschenberg had shown with Castelli since the mid fifties. Other members of Castelli's stable included: Lichtenstein and Warhol, and of course, the most important young painter of the sixties, Frank Stella. Still, the magnitude of this change was not what put Judd on edge. It was more the fact that "[he] had several brand new pieces in that show and they got done, as they always do, right on the deadline of the show."⁹⁰ There was no chance to edit or revise. Everything had to be right the first time. And, by Judd's own admission, he was unpleasant to be around when a work was first unveiled, which made installation under these extenuating circumstances all the more difficult.⁹¹ This put Judd in no mood for friends to come by and offer their opinions, even if it was someone as dear to Judd as Barnett Newman: "Barney came by while I was setting up the piece, you know, and I was just about ready to tell Barney to get

⁹⁰ Lucy Lippard, "Interview with Donald Judd," Lucy Lippard Papers Archives of American Art.

⁹¹ Lucy Lippard, "Interview with Donald Judd."

the hell out of there... I was trying to get it together and he was just walking around."⁹² One could also imagine how a talker of Newman's magnitude could not help but to opine every once in a while. But even if Newman held his thoughts in check, Frank Stella, when he too stopped by the gallery, did not. With his perceptive eye Stella commented upon an aesthetic detail that Judd himself found troubling. Judd noted, with a bit of annoyance (more for the schoolboy eagerness Stella displayed, than any sort of malice towards his artistic "rival"), "Frank walked into the show and the first thing he said, as he does all the time, 'you know they're bowed [referring to a four-box wall piece].'"⁹³ Stella was right, and Judd knew it. But he did not let this little hiccup deter him: "[it] was my work and I really didn't give a bloody damn about anything else."⁹⁴

This probably extended to what critics had to say as well. What they intoned, though, would most likely have pleased Judd because the tenor of their reviews treated him as a major figure. There was a sense that he was here to stay, and more importantly, whether they liked it or not, Judd was the one everybody had to deal with. Indeed, he seemed to possess all the qualities to justify these claims. What could be more auspicious than to ruffle the feathers of Hilton Kramer?⁹⁵ But if this was not enough, and certainly by this time a number

⁹² "Interview with Donald Judd."

⁹³ "Interview with Donald Judd."

⁹⁴ "Interview with Donald Judd." The original transcript contains an ambiguity. The second to last word of the sentence 'anything' replaced 'anybody.' This could be cause for differing interpretations. I think, however, 'anything' is more open, and allows for the possibility of both aesthetic and personal concerns, which were often under the same purview for Judd.

⁹⁵ This was noted in a couple of texts. "Art: That Sinking Feeling," *The Architectural Forum* 124, no. 2 (March 1966): 27; Dore Ashton, "The Artist as

of artists had gotten under Kramer's skin, it surely could be found in the way Dore Ashton bemoaned Judd's eschewing of tradition.⁹⁶ Ashton thought this led to aesthetic predictability, but on the other hand, it also placed her in the uncomfortable position of assessing a work without recourse to obvious historical precedent. Yet if Judd was really able to escape the burden of the past, it only served to make him the leader of this new three-dimensional movement, as James Mellow observed.⁹⁷ But despite this front-running position, Mellow still found Judd's art ambiguous enough to come back to the very problem that tripped up Kramer. Just as Kramer began his *New York Times* review with the question of whether or not Judd's work could be considered as art, Mellow followed suit by stating how the show "raised the philosophical question of what constitutes a work of art."⁹⁸ Judd already had his visual answer. And just a few months later, in his statement for the *Primary Structures* catalogue, he had a written one as well: "'Non-art,' 'anti-art,' 'non-art art' and 'anti-art art' are useless. If someone says his work is art, it's art."⁹⁹

Stella's art no longer asked these questions. In fact, after his show at Castelli, many believed he took a step backwards. His new series of "Irregular Polygons" were monumental canvases, bursting with aggressive color.¹⁰⁰ And as

Dissenter: New York Commentary," *Studio International* 171, no. 876 (April 1966): 165.

⁹⁶ Ashton, "The Artist as Dissenter: New York Commentary," 165.

⁹⁷ James R. Mellow, "Hostage to the Gallery," *The New Leader* (14 March 1966): 32.

⁹⁸ James R. Mellow, "Hostage to the Gallery," *The New Leader* (14 March 1966): 32.

⁹⁹ Kynaston McShine, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966): n.p.

¹⁰⁰ Stella's choice of Day-glo colors was mentioned in several reviews. This provoked both positive and not so positive (Hilton Kramer: "Like a good deal of

with his previous paintings, he continued to eschew taping, which made the lines between colors feather and almost bleed together.¹⁰¹ Stella also maintained his canvases' standard 2 3/4-inch width. This made the paintings protrude from the walls as before (fig. 11). To a certain degree, these new paintings acted like pictorial objects, but Stella's new visual innovation overshadowed the three-dimensionality so readily present only a year or so ago (fig. 12). Indeed, these works confounded viewers. The various juxtapositions of different geometric shapes made it difficult to determine whether the painting was one entire canvas, or two separate canvases seamlessly conjoined. The visual result was nothing less than an illusion, and a decided tip of the hat towards painting. The critic, Rosalind Krauss, excitedly picked up on this development. Of course, Stella's turn dovetailed with her own effort of trying to update her formalist point of view—one that combined a nascent interest in phenomenology with a hint of Greenberg's concern for opticality as well the suggestion of Michael Fried's belief in the virtue of shape as such over objecthood. Whatever it might be, Krauss' views were not necessarily vanguard. They suggested an air of academicism, and lacked the familiarity of the downtown scene of someone like Lucy Lippard, or even Barbara Rose. But Krauss had a perceptive eye. She also had an agenda. She valued illusion because it meant the work played for the viewer's optical

current color painting, Mr. Stella's new work delivers a quick visual assault to one's optical sensibilities...) feedback. Hilton Kramer, "Representative of the 1960s," *The New York Times* (20 March 1966): sec. 2, p. 21; Rosalind Krauss, "New York," *Artforum* 4, no. 9 (May 1966): 47; Lawrence Campbell, "Reviews and Previews," *Artnews* 65, no. 3 (May 1966): 22.

¹⁰¹ As in her earlier reviews of Stella, Lucy Lippard continued to emphasize his brushwork. Lucy Lippard, "New York Letter," *Art International* 10, no. 6 (Summer 1966): 113.

pleasure. She also held for a distinction between painting and sculpture. In the beginning of her review she describes how dangerously close Stella's work from the last years came "to suggesting that the picture was really an object that billowed away from the wall and lifted itself, or parts of its surface, literally into the viewer's space."¹⁰² Fortunately, for Krauss that is, Stella got a hold of himself, and his new work proved to be a critique of paintings that strove for objecthood. They accomplish this by "[offering] once more the illusion of sculpture."¹⁰³ But this is not your typical illusion. Stella's originates from "the flatness of the picture and that opens up the viewer to a voluptuous and moving experience of color."¹⁰⁴ While Krauss takes a particular bent towards illusionism, she was not the only one who noticed. For her, it affirmed her view of how pictorial experience should work. For others, those with a deeper investment in the problems of illusionism and the struggle to push beyond the limitations of medium specificity, Stella's latest offering was, to say the least, troubling.¹⁰⁵

They seemed to sense that Stella's paintings were no longer going to open up new possibilities. The contrary, in fact, appeared more accurate. Stella was now passé. He was not initiating new pictorial developments, but instead

¹⁰² Krauss, "New York," 47.

¹⁰³ Krauss, "New York," 47.

¹⁰⁴ Krauss, "New York," 47.

¹⁰⁵ Krauss was not alone in her positive appraisal of Stella's illusions. Lawrence Campbell wrote: "Frank Stella showed huge, thick canvases, irregularly shaped, yet also geometrically, as though children's building blocks (greatly enlarged) had been put together, and paint added. The colors are very bright. He is working in Dayglo, a paint with a radiating substance on it. On the surfaces he plays games with bands, stripes and forms repeating the shapes he has assembled, and these sometimes twist into trompe-l'oeil illusions. This show was frankly amazing. Earlier, Stella was amazingly dull. Now he is amazingly bright." Lawrence Campbell, "Reviews and Previews," 22.

imitating those individuals who turned previously towards him for inspiration. Lucy Lippard recounts this as if she was revealing a bit of gossip: “Word was going around at the time of the exhibition that Stella was finally catching up with his followers...”¹⁰⁶ Perhaps more revealing, and certainly more damning, was the suggestion made by Lippard and *Village Voice* critic David Bourdon that Stella’s new paintings “[took] a cue... particularly [from] the Park Place painters.”¹⁰⁷ This moved Stella into the realm of pictorial composition and the quest for the fourth dimension. The slightly new-age nature of the Park Place collective was, for many at the time, opposed to the values of such artists as Judd, Flavin, Andre, and LeWitt. But by far the harshest comments along these lines came from Mel Bochner. He refused to mince words and wrote with a similar conviction that allowed him to state—just a month after his Stella review appeared in print—in his review of “Primary Structures” that: “In this exhibition the best work is by Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Don Judd, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson.” Bochner deemed, on the other hand, the contribution of those affiliated with Park Place as clearly out of the loop.¹⁰⁸ With this sort of perspective, it is easy to see how Stella could not escape Bochner’s condemnation. He characterized Stella’s illusionistic turn as “unfortunate.” And even worse, he concluded that, “by trying to ‘do something with Stella’ he appears to have joined his imitators and variationists.”¹⁰⁹ This marked the end of Stella’s descent from the peak of the avant-garde. It also, in part by default, left

¹⁰⁶ Lucy Lippard, “New York Letter,” 113.

¹⁰⁷ David Bourdon, “A New Direction,” *Village Voice* (24 March 1966): 17.

¹⁰⁸ Mel Bochner, “Primary Structures,” *Arts Magazine* 40, no. 8 (June 1966): 32.

¹⁰⁹ Mel Bochner, “In the Galleries,” *Arts Magazine* 40, no. 7 (May 1966): 61.

Judd, and a few others, there alone. Still, the question remains: were young, would-be Conceptualists paying attention? Mel Bochner's student, and eventual colleague at SVA, the inimitable Joseph Kosuth described in an interview from 1970 what this artistic debate meant for him, a young painter

At the time I started [Frank Stella] was—to me—one of the most important figures, and extremely radical, but it was as if he moved in two directions. One direction had to do with his radicality—it seemed as if he really had an answer to some of the most important questions. But at the same time it went on all being painting, all of it, and it can be assimilated in a tradition, and that was his weakness, of course. Judd—and others, but in my mind chiefly Judd—was working in the same direction and was far more radical, and it was as if he forced Stella in a conservative direction. Stella's latest things are excellent examples of this—one great heap of answers to pretty irrelevant questions—answers to *formal* questions—painting, not art.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Stig Brogger and Erik Thygesen, "Art as Idea as Idea: Conversation with Joseph Kosuth [1970]" in *Joseph Kosuth: Interviews, 1969-1989* (Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwarz, 1989): 23-24.

Chapter 3:

“Joseph, what’s up with the can?”

‘Another residue of the activity. This got left behind—put aside—in my studio after I finished my last painting. I stuck the brushes back in the can and they dried out that way. After twenty some odd years they now look petrified. Of course, at the time I didn’t know it would be my last painting.’

‘When was that?’

‘Late 1964. I found it a year or two later and added the word “dead” on it—meaning painting was dead.’”¹¹¹

* * *

“Robert Barry, a New Yorker with an M.A. degree from Hunter College, paints rows of small squares or dots on large or sometimes very small canvases. He is interested in placement (the rows of squares are slightly uneven) and with minor variations in shape and color (the squares are not straight edged, the dots may vary slightly in tone)” (fig. 13).¹¹²

* * *

“I showed one series [of paintings] in New York in ’64, which was just paintings of propellers. It was a standard formula that I took off the television set. It seemed a very apt form to utilize for a painting and I painted them in different colors, different sizes, different materials and so on so forth, and hung a

¹¹¹ Thomas Beller and Margaret Sundell, “Kosuth,” *Splash* (February 1988): n.p.

¹¹² E.S., “Robert Barry,” *Artnews* 63, no. 7 (November 1964): 53.

show. It didn't work. It didn't work due to my misunderstanding of the problem of presentation, not to the public's misunderstanding of me."¹¹³

* * *

"Just in terms of where I started from—I started rather conventionally as a drawer, painter, and so forth. The reason I go into that is because the painting, at a certain point, like six or seven years ago, moved toward what became known as hard-edge or reductive painting. And when I reached that point with my own painting, I think it was about seven years ago, I painted stripes around the edge of the canvas, about three or four colored stripes, just to restate the edge, which is something that, you know, you've seen since that time. At that point, rather than make a style or an issue out of that aspect or reductiveness, it occurred to me that the painting had become in itself an object."¹¹⁴

* * *

Joseph Kosuth titled his last painting *Post Painting*. Perhaps he was a bit retroactive here. He has been accused of that before.¹¹⁵ But what cannot be

¹¹³ Willoughby Sharp, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam," *Avalanche* no. 4 (Spring 1972): 67.

¹¹⁴ Patricia Norvell, "Interview with Douglas Huebler: July 25, 1969," in *Recording Conceptual Art* Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 135.

¹¹⁵ Kosuth would occasionally date a work with respect to when he had the idea, not when the actual piece was made. This would cause, for example, a work made and exhibited in 1966 to be dated 1965. The art historian, Benjamin Buchloh found this problematic, especially when trying to locate a specific origin for Conceptual art. (Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105-143.) This essay drew sharp rebukes from Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub. Their responses dealt with what they perceived to be an egregious misrepresentation of Kosuth practice. Buchloh took issue with Kosuth's interpretation of Duchamp. He believes Kosuth was misguided (Buchloh,

called into question is the work itself. A small structure, that despite its diminutive status (only 8" x 8"), has a degree of presence on the wall. Painted black, with two white lines that bisect the canvas's horizontal and vertical axis to form a cross, *Post Painting* is clearly an ode to Stella. Its width is exactly 2 3/4 inches.

* * *

Robert Barry found Stella, as well as Newman, Rothko, and Pollock, quite interesting. "I identified with their work," Barry said, "and thought it was the best art around." It also gave him an artistic foundation. While at Hunter, he took classes with Robert Motherwell and William Bazotes.¹¹⁶ Tony Smith, he thought, was the most interesting teacher. But it was not only artists who had an impact on Barry. He had contact with critics and curators: one, Gene Swenson, liked Barry's work enough to include him in a group exhibition in 1963. This paved the way for his first solo show in 1964.¹¹⁷

* * *

Lawrence Weiner shared Robert Barry's taste in painters. Like Barry, he was influenced by Abstract Expressionists: "this was the generation that formed

"Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 124-130). Several years later, in an interview, Siegelau weighed in again on Buchloh's assessment: "[Buchloh's] problem with Kosuth has to do with what he sees as the 'correct' reading of Duchamp. Buchloh thinks he has it and Kosuth doesn't. In fact he is establishing a Duchampian line for the whole history of modern art, as if the whole world is only Duchamp Unfolding. I think he didn't do any original research on the period." Ute Meta Bauer and Maria Eichhorn, "Interview with Seth Siegelau," in *Art Gallery Exhibiting: The Gallery as a Vehicle for Arted*. Paul Andriess and Mariska van den Berg (Uitgeverij De Balie: Paul Andriess, 1996): 216.

¹¹⁶ Robin White, "Robert Barry," *View* 1, no. 2 (May 1978): 3.

¹¹⁷ Robert Barry and Robert C. Morgan, "Discussion," in *Robert Barry: An Artist Book* Erich Franz ed. (Bielefeld: Karl Kerber Verlag, 1986): 63.

me."¹¹⁸ He appreciated how they dealt with the war, international culture, even their own feelings. "They presented psychoanalysis as a kind of understanding, not self-indulgence."¹¹⁹ This respect for other painters extended to his peers. Robert Ryman, his neighbor from around the Bowery, was a case in point. Weiner admired how Ryman made painting "a viable thing that had something to do with our own sense of ourselves."¹²⁰

* * *

Douglas Huebler had a striking sense of what was going on around him. His early work seemed to channel the debate between Stella and Judd. One in particular, *Untitled (relief painting)* (1963), looks as if it could have hung besides Judd's wall pieces in his first Green Gallery show. Huebler, like Judd, placed an object on the wall. It eschewed associations with painting. Perhaps this was because it projected into the viewer's space. It could also be due to how the paint laid clumsily on the wood surface. Another possibility might rest in the fact that the pictorial surface looked like an oversized washboard. Whatever it might be, he knew he was not embarking into uncharted aesthetic territory, "but [nevertheless] they were discoveries to me at the time."¹²¹ And this is what counts. Because he soon recognized that an object like *Untitled (relief painting)* (1963) "jump[ed] right off the wall." It was then only a matter of time before Huebler "became involved with the whole form that got to be very reductive

¹¹⁸ Batchelor, "I am not Content: Lawrence Weiner," 53.

¹¹⁹ Batchelor, "I am not Content: Lawrence Weiner," 53.

¹²⁰ Buchloh, "In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner," 10.

¹²¹ Norvell, "Interview with Douglas Huebler: July 25, 1969," 135.

sculpture, and I made forms that were called, had been called, are called Minimal or Primary Structures, and so forth and so forth, that whole genre.”¹²²

* * *

Painting did not jump off the wall for Kosuth. It fell off. “It was my belief,” Kosuth revealed, “that painting had been dried up, used up.”¹²³ But what really got him was the authoritative nature of painting. It was the institution, and it seemed virtually impossible to add anything new to it.¹²⁴ Kosuth’s conclusion did not come from lack of effort. As he consistently claims, “I always say that I was painting seriously for 10 years before I quit at the age of 20.”¹²⁵ This sounds a bit far fetched. What does a twelve-year-old know about the intricacies of painting? If you are Joseph Kosuth, it seems a fair amount: “I mean, when I was twelve I was doing Pollocks, you know.”¹²⁶ Despite any suspicions concerning Kosuth’s precociousness, several key points stood out to him during his self-taught course in the history of art. First, it was impossible to get beyond the connotations of painting. Second, “You begin to realize these were no longer windows to another world, to realize the paint on the painting and the paint on the wall were the same paint.”¹²⁷ Maybe this explains why his

¹²² Norvell, “Interview with Douglas Huebler: July 25, 1969,” 135.

¹²³ Thomas Beller and Margaret Sundell, “Kosuth,” n.p.

¹²⁴ Aiden Dunne, “Conceptual Intercourse,” *The Sunday Tribune* [Ireland] (March 1997).

¹²⁵ Dunne, “Conceptual Intercourse.”

¹²⁶ Joseph Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth: October 1969,” in *Artists Talk: 1969-1977* ed. Peggy Gale (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004): 9.

¹²⁷ Luke Clancy, “Conceiving Conceptualism,” *The Irish Times* (13 March 1997).

first work after his abdication of painting was a clear piece of glass leaning against a wall.

Kosuth describes this period between his last painting and his first conceptual work using language as “[coming] out of very formal concerns in painting, and I guess what could be referred to as interests in painting and sculpture.”¹²⁸ Essentially, Kosuth wanted to push the limits of abstraction—an interest, as we know, shared by many. But to continue to churn out geometric or gestural compositions was unacceptable. He desired an art that did not rely on form or color. This was a tall order. Judd already provided an example, and Kosuth seems to have taken a cue from it. *Five Foot Sheet of Glass Leaning Against the Wall* (1965) was simply what it said it was. It was neither painting nor sculpture. Yet it was less the objectness of this work that struck him as significant. For Kosuth, it was a revelation to see the piece as “pure information... that was all transmutable back to a situation of language, and I got interested in the idea of using language to bypass language.”¹²⁹ It now seemed possible to present an idea without any material interference.

* * *

During this time Robert Barry was still making paintings.

¹²⁸ Joseph Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth: October 1969,” 3.

¹²⁹ Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth: October 1969,” 4. Of course there was a catch to the piece. It was not what it really said it was. As Kosuth describes: “You see, the most amusing thing is, like this was a five-foot sheet of glass, right? I mean, it’s 1965 and I used it for windows in Antwerp, and like nobody’s interested. And there wasn’t any need to keep me around. But this photo, it’s really a three-foot-square piece of plexiglass. But you know, as long as I tell you it was a five-foot sheet of glass it doesn’t really matter.” Joseph Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth: October 1969,” 5.

* * *

So was Weiner.

* * *

Douglas Huebler was making sculptures.

* * *

Kosuth was done with both. Or so he said. Language was his new medium, but the way he employed it borrowed from what he left behind. What he wanted now was to get at the essence of art. What was it? And how does one find out? Language was the way. "It seemed to me," Kosuth said while reflecting on those halcyon days of late 1965, "that if language *itself* could be used to function as an artwork, then that difference would bare the device of art's language game."¹³⁰ His first go at this was in his *One and Three Chairs* from the latter half of 1965 (fig. 14). This was an important work for Kosuth. He liked how it used photography as a substitute for painting.¹³¹ But the photograph was just an aspect of this piece. *One and Three Chairs* contains: an actual chair, a photograph of a chair (possibly the one on display), and a dictionary definition of a chair. These three seemingly identical yet different presentations question the very nature of representation in art. It does this successfully, albeit in a pretty rudimentary way. However it stands out in light of what Stella and Judd

¹³⁰ Joseph Kosuth, "Intention(s)," *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 3 (September 1996): 407 [note 3].

¹³¹ André Ducret and Catherine Queloiz, "L'Art de le presentation (de l'art) [March 1985]," in *Joseph Kosuth: Interviews, 1969-1989* (Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwarz, 1989): 75.

were doing at the time.¹³² It brings a more literal philosophical engagement into the visual arena. This was Kosuth's ambition, even if it was a bit naïve: "My early work, in both theory and practice, was the work of a very young man. I tended to accept the institutionalized view of the world, be it Modernism or academic philosophy. It was, perhaps, my interest in both of these which permitted, or maybe necessitated, a critical relationship with both."¹³³ Still, the work had remnants of painting and sculpture. The photostat hung like a painting, and the chair was not so far removed from a sculptural object. But Kosuth upped the ante. He brought a new dimension to visual art. There was information meant to be read. It was a conduit to a greater idea about art—one that purely visual works, in Kosuth's estimation, could not achieve.¹³⁴

¹³² Kosuth often mentions how young he was when he began to work conceptually. It seems a source of pride. However, he never told anyone his age at the time. He was afraid no one would take him seriously: "I didn't tell anyone my age until I was 28, otherwise nobody would have taken me seriously. Otherwise there is no way I would have had something purchased by MoMA when I was 20." He's referring to *One and Three Chairs*. Clancy, "Conceiving Conceptualism."

¹³³ Kris Linders, "Three Questions and One Answer [September 1981]," *Joseph Kosuth: Interviews, 1969-1989* (Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwarz, 1989): 70.

¹³⁴ For Kosuth, visual objects were stand-ins for ideas about art. He wanted to avoid the middleman. He describes this thought in relation to the work of Judd and other Minimalists: "Then I began to realize, in the work of people like Judd... look, you take a box, for instance, which has been used by Judd, by Morris, by LeWitt, by Andy Warhol: you can probably name eight or ten artists who use boxes very legitimately, and all for different reasons. Then you begin to realize that the differences between the boxes has to do with the differences between artists and intentions; outside information is very necessary in seeing it as art. For instance, if you took a Judd box out of the gallery and put it in the middle of the street, it wouldn't be art any more—although it'd be the same object. So whereas Rodin has a particularization—a Rodin has aspects with the object that make it a unique *object d'art*, a unique, individual object—most contemporary art doesn't function that way. It's used as a stand-in for language, so that the box becomes a stand-in for Judd's idea about art. But in itself, it's not

* * *

Barry still found the visual power of painting worth exploring. In particular, he was captivated by the intricacies of the edge and how it activated the space surrounding the canvas. As he put it, “my paintings related always to the edge of the canvas as though I wanted to blend them into the wall.”¹³⁵ Certainly, he was not alone with this concern. It was a pressing extension of the debate regarding the objectness of painting, for the canvas edge was at once a specific pictorial trait as well as the attribute that alerted viewers to the paintings three-dimensional properties. This interest became noticeable in his *Orange Painting* from 1966—a work four feet square, it consists primarily of a flatly painted orange surface, where the top and the bottom edges are covered (fig. 15).¹³⁶ Barry, however, left the sides untouched. And this unpainted surface creeps into the main pictorial field. It is as if the edges begin to encroach upon the rest of the work, and it is only a matter of time before the exterior overwhelms the interior. For now, the picture plane holds its own. But the die is cast. This subtle decision marked a change in Barry’s art. It would see Barry rapidly diminish the material properties of a work. In a matter of less than two years, he traveled from abstract painting to FM carrier waves. Along the way, he

a work of art. It’s a material used within the conception of art, i.e., whatever his conception of art is.” Joseph Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth: October 1969,” 4.

¹³⁵ Ursula Meyer, “Robert Barry, October 12, 1969,” in *Conceptual Art* ed. Ursula Meyer (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972): 35.

¹³⁶ See John T. Paoletti’s discussion of this work in his “Space Liberated from Thought,” in *Some Places to which we Can Come: Robert Barry Works, 1963 to 1975* exh. cat. (Nürnberg, Kunsthalle Nürnberg, 2003): 23.

made several stops. They are important to consider as they help explain why he will eventually need words to show what cannot be seen.

* * *

Weiner too had a predilection for edges. So much so, that he began to remove them from his paintings. During this time, after his *Propeller* series and before his move to language, Weiner remained committed to painting. It allowed him a degree of autonomy. It also gave him a certain amount of political currency. "I was in a very distressed state about the political relation of the artist to society," Weiner said, "and I knew that the artist's lifestyle was something that I was determinedly going to hold on to because in fact it was a better lifestyle than that of the lower middle class from which I had come."¹³⁷ But despite this resolution, he was struggling with what to do. He found that he was making works "[that] were just the visualization of what a painting should be."¹³⁸ Perhaps this quandary arose from a desire to eliminate the uniqueness associated with painting. He began this quest with his series of "Removal" paintings. They provided a chance to cede some creative control to the viewer (or collector) in an effort to dissociate the work from the individual decisions of the artist. Indeed, by now, Weiner only cared about the idea of the painting, not the actual thing, which is why he could have it that, "the person who was receiving the painting would say what size they wanted, what color they wanted, how big a removal they wanted."¹³⁹ As one might imagine, the results varied. But despite this

¹³⁷ Buchloh, "In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner," 9.

¹³⁸ Sharp, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam," 67.

¹³⁹ Norvell, "Interview with Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," 101.

workshop like quality of the paintings, they still looked like art. In fact, they looked like Stella's.¹⁴⁰ How could they not? They were shaped canvases. Against his best efforts, Weiner had made something distinct with individual attributes. He was understandably frustrated because "I began to realize that I could no longer just say 'This painting is not a unique object,' because it was accepted as a unique object."¹⁴¹ There was no getting around it; Weiner would have to do something else.

* * *

After eighteen months in operation, Lawrence Weiner's first gallery, Seth Siegelau's, closed in 1966. Siegelau had had it. He was tired of losing money. Of course, he expected this. After all, few, if any, galleries actually turned a profit. "What was a surprise," Siegelau admitted, "was that I found it boring; it was an uninteresting thing to do."¹⁴² It was only a matter of time, though, before Siegelau found something that held his attention. Weiner would be a part of it. So would Kosuth, Barry, Huebler, and several others.

* * *

Huebler stuck with sculpture for the time being (fig. 16). It was still working for him. It got him included in *Primary Structures*, which, even before it

¹⁴⁰ I thank Olivier Mosset for this observation. Thanks are also due for his wonderful exhibition *Before the End (The Last Painting Show)* at the Swiss Institute in New York. It brought together examples of the last paintings made by several Conceptualist artists. Artist in the show included: Ian Wilson, Art & Language, Douglas Huebler, Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth, Ian Burn, and Lawrence Weiner.

¹⁴¹ Norvell, "Interview with Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," 101.

¹⁴² Bauer and Eichhorn, "Interview with Seth Siegelau," 208.

opened, was being hailed as the most important show of the year.¹⁴³ It was an exhibition “that [helped] further erase the already blurred boundary between painting and sculpture”—an issue, as we know, that was on the minds of almost anyone connected to the most recent comings and goings of the downtown art scene.¹⁴⁴ Even skeptics, like Hilton Kramer, acknowledged *Primary Structure’s* currency.¹⁴⁵ And he too, recognized its debt to painting: “one might say that the new sculpture is, in effect, a species of abstract painting aspiring to the condition of architecture: it is sculpture only because the sculptural medium is the sole means by which this aspiration can be realized.”¹⁴⁶ Certainly, this applied to Huebler. He left painting, like many others, for more object-like considerations. He also embraced a nonchalant attitude towards his work’s place in the world: “I wish to make an image that has no privileged position in space and neither an ‘inside’ nor an ‘outside.’”¹⁴⁷ But in the end he was not considered a Minimalist. He did not make Mel Bochner’s list of artists to watch: “In this exhibition the best work is by Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Don Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson.”¹⁴⁸ Nor was he associated with the emotive, sci-fi work of Park Place

¹⁴³ Grace Glueck, “Anti-Collector, Anti-Museum,” *The New York Times* (24 April 1966): sec. 2, 24.

¹⁴⁴ Glueck, “Anti-Collector, Anti-Museum,” sec. 2, 24.

¹⁴⁵ Despite his misgivings about the show, Kramer wrote that it is “one of those exhibitions that defines a period and fixes it irrevocably in one’s consciousness.” Hilton Kramer, “‘Primary Structures’—The New Anonymity,” *The New York Times* (1 May 1966): X23.

¹⁴⁶ Kramer, “‘Primary Structures’—The New Anonymity,” X23.

¹⁴⁷ Kynaston McShine, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966): n.p. It is an interesting coincidence that Huebler’s artist statement precedes Judd’s.

¹⁴⁸ Mel Bochner, “Primary Structures,” 32.

Gallery members like Robert Grosvenor and Ronald Bladen.¹⁴⁹ Instead, he was one of the top picks, along with Larry Bell, Judy Gerowitz, and Ellsworth Kelly, of *The New Yorker* critic Robert Coates.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps Huebler was doing something wrong.

He eventually thought he was. Huebler, during this period, made cumbersome objects that evoked the look of Sol LeWitt's unfinished cubes. Huebler's, however, seem much more solid. But because of this, they without fail caused logistic problems. Some of these technical difficulties go back to the fact that he did not train as a sculptor. At the time, he did not have the presence of mind, until after the fact and a little experience under his belt, to take into consideration such things as how to get the object from his basement to the back of his car, or how to apply Formica without scratching other sections of the work, or even finding a more efficient way of getting things done. Indeed, Huebler labored over these pieces for months. That is why he completed very few, and an untold number remain unrealized in his sketchbook.¹⁵¹

But what got Huebler in the end was how these objects related to both architectural and outdoor space. Neither proved to be entirely satisfactory. There were formal issues he had difficulty resolving. Part of the problem rested in the fact that he was a bit out of touch from what was happening in New York.

¹⁴⁹ Corrine Robins, who was writing for *Newsweek*, liked the "emotional punch" of Bladen's contribution to the show. Corrine Robins, "The New Druids," 104.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Coates, "The Art Galleries: Art and the Machines," *The New Yorker* (May 21, 1966): 179.

¹⁵¹ Huebler discussed this issue on at least a couple of occasions. Norvell, "Interview with Douglas Huebler: July 25, 1969," 136-137, and Douglas Huebler, "Douglas Huebler, April 1973," in *Artists Talk: 1969-1977* ed. Peggy Gale (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004): 231-232.

At the time, he was living outside of Boston. Yet he was still savvy enough to think about his work in terms of what Judd and Morris were doing: "And then again—consistent with ideas that I think Morris and Judd have expressed perfectly well, but I'll have to talk about them because they were my concerns—what did become of interest in the work then was where it was located in relationship to the viewer... being off the pedestal, that kind of thing, but also, as I say, the fact that it had this multipositioning aspect to it as well."¹⁵² Although Huebler broke with traditional sculptural conventions, and brought up similar concerns as Judd and Morris, especially with regard to the viewer, he still had problems judging the appropriate scale for his work. How his objects interacted with its architectural surroundings was his major preoccupation. "But once they began to get larger in scale," Huebler remarked, "let's say larger than four by eight feet, which is what I wanted to do with them, the architectural aspect of the piece would seem to, rather than locate the room, would almost eliminate it, smother it."¹⁵³ He then tried to move his pieces out in nature. But this did not work either because placing a sculpture outdoors caused several problems. First, the vastness of the space swallowed it up and second, "you know, there was the rest of the world, and trees were more interesting than the sculpture, and the sky was—and so forth."¹⁵⁴ It would take a stroke of Kantian ingenuity for Huebler to figure out a way to reign in nature. Language would prove key.

¹⁵² Norvell, "Interview with Douglas Huebler: July 25, 1969," 136.

¹⁵³ Norvell, "Interview with Douglas Huebler: July 25, 1969," 136-137.

¹⁵⁴ Norvell, "Interview with Douglas Huebler: July 25, 1969," 137.

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Kosuth knew the roots of his art. “What *I’m* doing,” he said in an interview from 1970, “is a logical development of certain aspects of painting and sculpture...”¹⁵⁵ Like his peers he struggled with the same problems. Kosuth, however, seemed to resolve them faster than the others. Perhaps this is because from the moment he gave up painting one of the most important issues for him was how to eliminate, or at least regulate, the experience before a work of art. Of course, Weiner was after something similar with his “Removal” paintings. And obviously, Judd and Stella provided some working models as to how to do this too.¹⁵⁶ But Kosuth still came up with his own, more transitory, take on this on this dilemma. It came in the form of his *Water* series, where “[he] wanted to remove the experience from the work of art.”¹⁵⁷ This was a multivalent project—one that took many forms. Some of these included a map of the world where every body of water marked with the letter “A” was the art context. Others constituted projects like melting cubes of ice on a radiator: “it was nine cubes of ice which were left to melt, and its arthood would remain from the ice all the way to the moisture in the atmosphere.”¹⁵⁸ These experiments were not

¹⁵⁵ Brogger and Thygesen, “Art as Idea as Idea: Conversation with Joseph Kosuth,” 28.

¹⁵⁶ Stella did this via his “mechanical” way of applying paint, especially in his earlier work. By the time of his *Irregular Polygons*, his touch was quite noticeable. This is something Lucy Lippard perceptively picked up upon. Judd was not interested in removing the experience from his work. He was a disciple of Barnett Newman. However, many interpreted his use of fabricators as critique against expression or visual experience.

¹⁵⁷ Arthur R. Rose, “Four Interviews,” *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 4 (February 1969): 22-23. It is important to note that Arthur R. Rose was a *nom de plume* for Kosuth.

¹⁵⁸ Kosuth, “Joseph Kosuth: October 1969,” 5.

entirely satisfactory. There was a disconnect between what Kosuth thought and how he presented it. This led him “to present a series of photostats of the dictionary definition of water. I was interested in just presenting the *idea* of water.”¹⁵⁹

Kosuth had already introduced this mode of presentation with his *One and Three Chairs*. Indeed, if something were to register as a signature style for Kosuth, it would be these pieces. It is funny then that he only worked in this medium for a couple of years. He gave it up because “with my dictionary definition works it became evident to me that the form of presentation (photostats) were often being considered ‘paintings’ even though I continually attempted to make it clear that the photostats were photostats and the art was the idea.”¹⁶⁰ But until this time, he thought that this was the best way to convey his ideas. Certainly, he has a point. Enlarged, Xeroxed words, taken from a dictionary (sometimes Webster’s, sometimes the Oxford English) placed on a black background do seem a bit devoid of artiness (fig. 17). There is no gesture. It is hardly an object. There is even no signature. In a way, Kosuth succeeds. After all, “the reason for this was an important part of my intention: eliminate the aura of traditional art and force another basis for this activity to be approached as art, conceptually...”¹⁶¹ But there was more to it than just that. Kosuth began to realize that language was a legitimate means of expression in an art context. In fact, he thought it always had had a profound impact on things. It

¹⁵⁹ Rose, “Four Interviews,” 23.

¹⁶⁰ *Prospects* 69 exh. cat. (Düsseldorf, Städtische Kunsthalle, 1969) in *Joseph Kosuth: Interviews, 1969-1989* (Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwarz, 1989): 18.

¹⁶¹ Kosuth, “Intention(s), 407 [note 2].

was just that no one really said anything about it. Kosuth describes this moment of self-recognition: “My linguistic interest, for example—I felt that art had been functioning on a linguistic level for some time, and that had created a lot of ‘problems,’ and so finally I said: what the hell!—why not just *use* language instead of circling around it all the time.”¹⁶²

And he did. The chance to use language through his photostats opened up untold possibilities for Kosuth: in particular, how to question the nature of art. Of course, in 1966, Judd had raised these issues in the most significant manner. And many artists were inspired, or at least, felt like they had to deal with his conclusions. Kosuth, obviously, was one of these individuals. Photostats, he decided, would be his conduits into this discussion. It was a means of getting outside of the art system. And considering the amount of non-representational work going on in New York at the time, it was certainly something different, especially, because Kosuth had it out for Formalist criticism. He felt its rhetoric, particularly what was espoused by Clement Greenberg, was irrelevant, and worse, detrimental to art. His photostat interventions, in his estimation, offered hope. “Originally, simplistically applied, this got us out of formalism,” Kosuth reflected, “it permitted a meaning for our work *other* than compositional or expressionistic ones, while (originally only theoretically) it began a movement toward where the art-making process had to be seen within a larger cultural and finally social and political context.”¹⁶³ But it is not entirely

¹⁶² Brogger and Thygesen, “Art as Idea as Idea: Conversation with Joseph Kosuth,” 25-26.

¹⁶³ Kris Linders, “Three Questions and One Answer,” 70.

clear why this was so important for Kosuth. Certainly such an ardent admirer of Judd would have realized that Judd had made Formalism, chiefly amongst progressive artists, obsolete. Also, Kosuth was in close contact with Mel Bochner, who made it clear which artist he favored and where he thought the status of painting resided. Most likely, Kosuth initiated this opposition as way to be original. How better else to contextualize his new photostats. But it is somehow more. Kosuth believed he was doing something original in light of what he perceived to be the prelacy of Formalism. His sentiments were those of a painter—a painter who wants to be unique, a painter who wants to question the nature of art.

* * *

In National City, California, just south of San Diego, another painter was having doubts. John Baldessari was not sure why he should continue putting paint on canvas. By the early part of 1966 he had become “weary of doing relational painting and began wondering if straight information would serve.”¹⁶⁴ This realization did not come out of nowhere. It happened over time.¹⁶⁵ Although, fear played a part too, the fear that “I might be painting for the rest of my life.”¹⁶⁶ But this heightened trepidation was as much about lifestyle as it was about aesthetic issues because for a long time, Baldessari assumed he would just be an art teacher who paints on the side. He even considered changing careers:

¹⁶⁴ John Baldessari, *John Baldessari* exh. cat. (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, 1981): 6.

¹⁶⁵ Mirelle Thijsen, “Life and Art: Open Ended an Interview with John Baldessari,” *KTG* (December 1994): 52.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Hunter Drohojowska, “No More Boring Art,” *Artnews* 85, no. 1 (January 1986): 62.

“at one time I wanted to be an art historian, another an art critic.”¹⁶⁷ Slowly, being an artist was becoming a realistic option. Part of this was due to the fact that he was resigned to the reality that no one would ever see his work. He was living in his hometown, with no viable art community in the area, and to add to this sense of isolation, his studio was in the back of a windowless laundromat. In a strange way, though, his circumstances liberated him. He could now follow his natural inclination towards words: “I think it was always there, it is simply a matter of coming to terms with yourself and trusting your genetic code.”¹⁶⁸ Indeed, Baldessari had always been an avid reader. Plus he wanted to see if it was somehow possible to make high art connect with a broader segment of the population. Language seemed to be a plausible way. That is what the people want, he figured. Baldessari recounted this “epiphany of sorts”: “I just said, ‘I wonder what’d happen if you just gave people what they ostensibly want?’ Which is not a lot of paint smeared around. They want to recognize things. And I said what, you know, just take people [for] what they are. I guess they do read. I guess maybe that was too big of an assumption, but... ‘Magazines, Newspapers,’ I said, ‘Well, I’ll make it look like that.’”¹⁶⁹ But there was also another reason for his move towards language. “In the mid-‘60s, little by little, I deserted painting,” Baldessari reflected, “I did it not because I thought painting

¹⁶⁷ James Hugunin, “A Talk with John Baldessari,” in *Photography and Language* Lew Thomas ed. (San Francisco: Camerawork Press, 1976): 80. The interview was originally published in *The Dumb Ox* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1976).

¹⁶⁸ Hugunin, “A Talk with John Baldessari,” 80.

¹⁶⁹ Christopher Knight, “Interview with John Baldessari, April 4, 1992.” *Archives of American Art*.

died a sweet death, but because I believed art was more than painting and sculpture alone.”¹⁷⁰

This formulation sounds familiar. It seems to follow a precedent—one that Kosuth also eagerly embraced. Baldessari, it seems, was referencing Judd’s opening salvo in “Specific Objects.” But how would Baldessari have known about Judd in National City? Judd had not yet shown in southern California. And certainly he was not a topic of conversation in art scenes (National City, San Diego, and even parts of Los Angeles) still dominated by gestural abstractionists. Yet Baldessari found a way to pay attention to what was happening in New York. He read *Artnews*. He also read *The Nation*. But this was less for the politics. Instead, he subscribed to it for the reviews by Judd. At least, that is what he remembers. Judd, of course, never wrote for *The Nation*. Somewhere along the way, Baldessari must have confused matters. Nevertheless, Judd, we are led to assume, was quite important for Baldessari. “I followed the writings of Don Judd in *The Nation*,” Baldessari said, “subscribed to it particularly for that reason... I mean, if you consider the absurdity of the situation this guy teaching high school, whatever, down in National City, subscribing to *The Nation* to read Don Judd, it is pretty bizarre... But I was very taken the first time I saw this work of his at the Green Gallery in New York, and, I don’t know, maybe it’s just my alter ego or something like that, but I’ve been very much influenced by him.”¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰Thijssen, “Life and Art: Open Ended an Interview with John Baldessari,” 52.

¹⁷¹ Knight, “Interview with John Baldessari, April 4, 1992.” It is also not clear if Baldessari went to New York in the early 1960s, especially when Judd showed at the Green Gallery. On other occasions, Baldessari said his first trip to New York was in 1969, after his show at Molly Barnes, and after Dick Bellamy encouraged

This helps explain Baldessari's interesting aesthetic departure. In the early part of 1966, he started to combine words and images on canvas (fig. 18). However, these were not paintings in the traditional sense. He would have to paint them if this were to be the case. But Baldessari had no interest in this. What mattered was that he was the one pulling the strings: "someone else built and primed the canvases and took them to the sign painter, the texts are quotations from art books, and the sign painter was instructed not to attempt to make attractive artful lettering but to letter the information in the most simple way."¹⁷² But despite this seemingly disparaging attitude towards painting, he still played upon its connotations. This was crucial "because [if] they're done on canvas, they might be equated with art."¹⁷³ Yet even though he hoped for some connotative efficacy, he knew from the start that he was onto something: "the first one I did was a text piece, and I had it up on my wall, and I said, 'That...' I mean, aside from doing what I wanted to do, I said, 'it actually looks pretty good.'"¹⁷⁴ One of the interesting things about this series, which includes text-only pieces as well as works juxtaposing photographs (taken by Baldessari) and texts, is Baldessari's views on the relationship between words and images. It is not a matter of one being superior to the other or, as might have been the case for a Kosuth, a chance to use language as a radical critique of painting. Instead, Baldessari could not choose between the two. "I would feel hard pressed to give

him to meet people like Lawrence Weiner. Whatever the case, memory tends to blunt the details over the years.

¹⁷² Baldessari, *John Baldessari* exh. cat. (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, 1981), 6.

¹⁷³ Quoted from Coosje van Bruggen, *John Baldessari* exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990): 29.

¹⁷⁴ Knight, "Interview with John Baldessari, April 4, 1992."

allegiance to words over visuals and vice-versa," Baldessari said. "It's basically," he continues, "finding out what one can do that the other can't."¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, it could simply be that "the thing that seems to keep me from just being a writer is that I still need the nonverbal image."¹⁷⁶

Baldessari's work raises a number of interesting points, many of which will become visible when he first exhibits in Los Angeles, the same time, it turns out, Kosuth opens at Eugenia Butler's Gallery 669. How fate works in strange ways. And as we will see, the contrast between the two is telling. But even before this fortuitous coincidence, Baldessari brings voice to perhaps one of the most crucial implications of the use of language by Conceptualists. It was simply another material worth exploring, and a valid substitute for images. Indeed, Baldessari saw a free play between the two. Obviously, he will not be the only one to share this opinion. He is, though, perhaps the first to come up with it. Baldessari, and his peers, took language literally. Words meant what they mean. Ambiguity was an afterthought. If there happens to be any, it is merely a technicality—one our Anglo-American, analytical tradition is more than happy to overlook. However, the philosophical implications are of less importance here. Baldessari knew his stuff. But he was not working as a philosopher. He approached materials (and words count here) indiscriminately. What mattered was the best way to express himself. And, as it turns out, at least when it comes to language, it is in a straightforward manner. Yet this attitude has to be tracked.

¹⁷⁵ Hugunin, "A Talk with John Baldessari," 81.

¹⁷⁶ Nancy Drew, "John Baldessari: An Interview," in *John Baldessari: Work 1966-1980* exh. cat. (New York: The New Museum, 1981): 63.

It is something so simple, almost innocuous. Yet its reach is far. Language has begun to enter the fray without question. It is as if it had a standing invitation. Remember, Baldessari said the transition was natural, as others will also. Certainly, Kosuth found it easy. How this gradually unravels is important to see, for it is only a matter of time before it spins out of control.

* * *

Tailspins usually have a starting point. We are beginning to see some already. They also, at times, have an accelerator. The opening of Max's Kansas City on December 6, 1965 was one of them (fig. 19). But to fully recount its importance is like attempting to recall a night of excessive drinking: much has happened, some of it important, but gaps appear in the story, some never to be filled. Needless to say it was memorable, but with that said, where to begin.

With a simple fact: Max's was the epicenter of the New York art world in the mid to late sixties. Anyone who was someone was there—usually all the time. There was an incentive to all of this. Mickey Ruskin, the owner, wanted artists to be part of the scene. He realized that it was good for business because it brought in an interesting crowd, and to encourage this he gave his artist friends an open tab, which for many this was their only way of getting a drink (for some, like John Chamberlain, several) and a meal. Of course, the food was notoriously bad, but no one seemed to care, or cared enough to really complain. Often, as a way of repaying Ruskin, many would give him a work of art. That is why a Flavin hung in the back room, a Judd above the bar, and a Chamberlain (made out of discarded Judd) in the middle. There were many other pieces too. In a

sense, Max's Kansas City had one of the more impressive collections in town. But that still does not explain why it was so significant.

What made it so special was that everyone would meet here, almost nightly, and talk about art. Of course, there were different camps. Warhol and the Factory crowd sat in the back room and tended to keep to themselves. Sitting at the bar, which was just to the left of the front door, were the color-field painters and followers of Clement Greenberg. On any given night it was possible to find Larry Poons, John Chamberlain, Jules Olitski, Mark di Suvero, Ronald Bladen, and even Greenberg himself having a drink. To the right of the painters was where the real action occurred. Here, usually from around midnight until closing, Carl Andre, Mel Bochner, Dan Graham, Donald Judd, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson, and Lawrence Weiner amongst others met to discuss, but often it was really to argue, about art.¹⁷⁷ These were heated conversations, and their impact should not be discounted. As Kosuth recalled, "I think a lot of very important conversations that constructed the discourse of art that was to have a major effect in the next thirty years, really took place in Max's—the big battles, the great intellectual struggles."¹⁷⁸ Within this mix,

¹⁷⁷ For the best history of Max's Kansas City see Bruce Kurtz, "Last Call at Max's," *Artforum* 19, no. 8 (April 1981): 26-29. It not only gives a history of the bar, but recreates the environment: where everyone sat, who were the personalities that made the place so interesting. It is sad to note that Max's no longer exists. In its place, on 213 South Park Avenue, is a convenient store.

¹⁷⁸ Quoted from Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin, *High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max's Kansas City* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1998): 68. It seems that Robert Smithson led many of these conversations. He tended to hold court. What everyone thought about him is up for debate. Some, like Dorthea Rockburne, did not have much patience for him, or at least thought he was a bit hypocritical. It is also not clear how the group dynamics played out. Andre and

milling about Max's, often where the restaurant was located and young art dealers and painters like Barnett Newman, Larry Rivers, and Brice Marden hung out, was Seth Siegelau, who had a knack for being in the right place at the right time. Max's was a small world. And it only intensified things. It also, we could imagine, made it easier to give up painting. By now only Weiner was still painting, and this was not for much longer. Kosuth had already put it aside, and one could picture him absorbing information from Judd. But not every conversation was about art. Sometimes they would move onto other topics, like philosophy. And the authors that came up had a predilection for language: Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These were structuralists and analytic philosophers. Language had a code. It could provide some meaning and order in a wildly confusing world, while its scientific rigor could do something that images could not. This is what they believed at least.

* * *

Barry was not reading the same things. Philosophies of language did not hold his interest. Phenomenology was more his speed. "In the 60s," Barry recalled, "most of my readings centered around Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and I guess the reason was because they dealt not so much with language but what it was to be a speaker, to be a talking person... to function in the environment of language, and what relation language had—what aspect of our

Smithson generally fought with one another. How much Kosuth and Weiner participated, as well as Bochner, is still to be determined. Either way, what transpired was lively and massively influential.

being was language.”¹⁷⁹ In relation to the work he was doing at this time, this makes sense. He was still painting, although not for much longer. And he was furthering his investigation of edges. However, now he was more concerned with the space surrounding his paintings. This is readily apparent in works like *4 Red Squares* and *4 Yellow Squares* (both from 1967 with the latter exhibited in the famous Bradford Junior College show of 1968). In each, Barry placed four, four by four-inch squares towards the corners of a wall (fig. 20). Where he located them depended upon the wall. There was no set rule. This allowed these small canvases to act like a border, or the corners of an imaginary frame, transforming the wall into the object of attention. This is a compelling strategy. It allowed Barry to ask more fundamental questions about the nature of painting. “It [also] was meant to totally involve the viewer, and it’s not just the wall itself, which I thought is even a painting convention, but to get into the real world, the world around the work of art or the world in which the work of art is articulated, in which it is situated.”¹⁸⁰ But this growing engagement with the world beyond the canvas made painting increasingly irrelevant. He was running out of options. He felt “[he had] to eliminate painting to deal with some of the things that painting is about, which is... what art is about.”¹⁸¹ And in the summer of 1967 he did.

This was a momentous time for Barry. He took a breather from New York and his studio and spent the time at an artist-in-residence program in

¹⁷⁹ Barry and Morgan, “Discussion,” 64.

¹⁸⁰ René Denizot and Robert Barry, “Discussion,” in *It’s About Time [Il est temps]* (Paris: Yvon Lambert Gallery, 1980): 15.

¹⁸¹ Denizot and Barry, “Discussion,” 37.

Belmont, Maryland.¹⁸² He began to experiment with film. Earlier in his career, he had made a couple of shorts with Twyla Tharp. Now he was working on his own. One piece, *Scenes* (1967 and eventually exhibited in *Information*), was almost entirely dark. Towards the end of the film several images, and even some words, flash up momentarily, only to again fade away into blackness. For Barry, “the film itself is meant to deal really with the darkness of the room, the act of looking, the passage of time.”¹⁸³ This, in many ways, continued what he started in paintings like *4 Yellow Squares*. And it is this curiosity to investigate the world at large that led him to forego painting. Although, in retrospect, it seemed like a smooth transition, Barry initially had a hard time explaining why he choose to do so.¹⁸⁴ In an interview with Patricia Norvell from 1969 he defensively said, “essentially it’s really none of your business, you know.”¹⁸⁵ Fortunately, as the years went on, he was better equipped to respond to this question: “I wanted not so much to be a painter as to be an artist.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Barry and Morgan, “Discussion,” 65.

¹⁸³ Robert Nickas, “Robert Barry,” *Journal of Contemporary Art* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 5.

¹⁸⁴ In the 1986 interview with Robert Morgan, Barry says, “It wasn’t a deliberate act to leave painting [in 1967-68]. My work gradually moved into the realm of sculpture, I think, is what happened... A kind of architectural sculpture, I suppose. I became more aware of the situation that paintings were in... So I became involved in the whole situation, rather than say, just making a painting.” Barry and Morgan, “Discussion,” 64.

¹⁸⁵ Patricia Norvell, “Interview with Robert Barry, May 30, 1969,” in *Recording Conceptual Art* Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 88.

¹⁸⁶ Denizot and Barry, “Discussion,” 29. In an interview with Ursula Meyer from 1972 Barry said: “I found that paintings—my paintings were different in the way they were hung or exposed to light. I wanted to incorporate that idea into my art. Also my paintings related always to the edge of the canvas as though I wanted to blend them into the wall. I wanted to get involved with the entire

* * *

Weiner was also moving in this direction. So was Huebler. Both made sharp changes in 1968 as they left sculpture for language. However, their solutions, or new directions, did not entirely leave sculpture behind. That would have been too drastic. But they both realized that if they were to investigate the world (and thus art) the way they wished, written language would be necessary.

Weiner came to this conclusion somewhat gradually. In the spring of 1968, Weiner, along with Carl Andre and Robert Barry, participated in a show organized by Seth Siegelaub (Weiner's former dealer) at Windham College in Putney, Vermont.¹⁸⁷ Weiner had already taken part in a couple of Siegelaub productions that year: a solo show in New York and another group exhibition (also with Andre and Barry) in Bradford, Massachusetts. Unlike in Bradford, where he presented paintings from the year before, Weiner saw Windham College as a chance to make a site-specific installation. His piece, *Staples, Stakes, Twine, Turf* formed a grid seventy by a hundred feet (fig. 21). Weiner placed it outside of the exhibition space, where to the left and right of the piece were buildings. A parking lot adjoined another side, while an open field closed off the rest of the space.¹⁸⁸ At the conclusion of the show, Weiner destroyed the work. Yet the idea still persisted. Weiner soon revisited the piece in the form of

room, the entire space. Also I wanted to get away from the concern with color. The idea is to work with the space in which the art occurs. I did not want to control space variables, I wanted to incorporate them in my art. And I did not want to impose myself on my material or on the space. I was trying to get away from some sort of style." Ursula Meyer, "Robert Barry, October 12, 1969," 35.

¹⁸⁷ The show ran from April 30th to May 31st.

¹⁸⁸ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003): 88-91.

drawings with linguistic descriptions. These were exhibited in the annual end of the season show at Dwan Gallery.¹⁸⁹ Weiner was now able to capture linguistically what he previously presented visually. He described this transition while summarizing his career thus far (it was 1970 when he made this comment). In it, he laid out his development from exploding craters in the Californian landscape in the early 1960s to struggling with painting back in New York.

Finally I realized I was dealing with the *idea* of the explosions or paintings—forgetting specifics. So the new series of my work are traces of what an artist does. Somehow the shit residue of art history made me make paintings and sculptures. But now I feel no contact with or relevance or need of a place in art history.”¹⁹⁰

This was the beginning of what has turned out to be a very long exploration of language.

Huebler’s linguistic turn also began outdoors. Of course, it was here that he saw the limitations of his sculptures. They could not compete with nature. In light of this, he wanted to find something that would blend in better with its surroundings. So, in the early part of 1968, “as an experiment, I drove some very long nails (spikes) into the ground, configuring them into the shape of a large oval but, because the nails could not actually be seen, I made a drawing of that shape and beneath it printed words which described its measurements, the location of the site, and the date; of course, what I quickly recognized was that

¹⁸⁹ Alberro, 93. See also John Chandler, “The Last Word in Graphic Art,” *Art International* 12, no. 9 (November 1968): 25-28. Chandler addresses the implications, in part, of this show.

¹⁹⁰ Jack Burnham, “Alice’s Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 8, no. 6 (February 1970): 40.

the drawing was, in fact, a *map*.”¹⁹¹ During this time, Huebler was teaching art history, which made him sensitive to the fact that language was so essential for an individual’s understanding of art. It also seemed to Huebler that much of the art of the 1960s was driven by critical rhetoric. Critics did the talking, while artists passively received. Huebler decided that this was not for him. He wanted to be more active and use language to his own devices. “As a consequence of what I have discussed since 1968,” Huebler recounted, “I have brought language into the literal foreground of my work regardless of the kind of visual imagery with which it was associated: no matter how seemingly disparate the imagery may be it is language that permits the percipient to reconstitute the forms of information into a conceptually comprehensive text.”¹⁹²

* * *

Congruencies in the art world occasionally come together fortuitously. The timing of these burgeoning Conceptualists’ move to written language coincided with an art world becoming more receptive to this very aesthetic possibility. Of course, outside of Kosuth, and to a degree Christine Kozlov, and to another degree, On Kawara, none of these linguistic excursions had been made public.¹⁹³ Kosuth’s debut occurred at the gallery jointly operated by

¹⁹¹ Douglas Huebler, “Douglas Huebler,” in *Origin and Destination: Alighiero e Boetti, Douglas Huebler* ed. Marianne Van Leeuw and Anne Pontégnie (Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, 1997): 126.

¹⁹² Huebler, “Douglas Huebler,” 127.

¹⁹³ The role of On Kawara is curious here. He began his famous date paintings around 1964 -1965, and according to New York City lore Kosuth was a frequent visitor to his studio. This was even implied in Michel Claura’s letter to the editor’s of *Studio International* in regard to Kosuth’s seemingly infamous “Art After Philosophy” [Michel Claura, “Correspondence: Conceptual

himself and his cousin. The Lannis Gallery, which later became known as the Museum of Normal Art, opened its doors in 1967.¹⁹⁴ An outpost in the East Village, the small space provided Kosuth and his friends from SVA a place to present their work. These often took the guise of groups shows entitled “Non-Anthropomorphic” exhibitions. Needless to say, they did not garner much attention initially. The only review they received was a brief, two-paragraph account tucked away towards the back of the review section in *Arts Magazine*—a publication, by the way, Kosuth wrote criticism for. Strangely, Gordon Brown’s assessment did not deal directly with the art.¹⁹⁵ He seemed more intrigued by

Misconceptions,” *Studio International* 179, no. 918 (January 1970): 5-6.] I personally see a distinction between Kawara and Kosuth’s practices. On the one hand, Kosuth and Kawara provided very different information. Indeed, Kosuth offers much more to read. But perhaps the most telling distinction is that Kawara actually paints. Each work is meticulously crafted. No stencil or other mechanical devices were used. While resemblances are strong, and perhaps even a closer connection between the two artists exists, in the context of the prevalence of written information in more pictorial situations, Kosuth is of greater import. His work pushes this topic further. It was his concern. And in the discourse of Conceptual Art, whether commentators like it or not, Kosuth is central. In many ways he set the terms and no historical investigation of the subject can overlook him. Strangely enough, especially in light of Kosuth’s antipathy to Modernist painting and formalist criticism, his position is not so different than that of Michael Fried’s. What discussion of High Modernism, or Minimalism, has excluded, at least from initial considerations, Fried’s “Art and Objecthood?” Notwithstanding the fact of the texts seeming irrelevance for a majority of the artists it considered.

¹⁹⁴ Alberro, 27-8.

¹⁹⁵ Gordon D. Brown, “Kosuth, Kozlov, Rinaldi, Rossi,” *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 7 (May 1967): 61. The space and Kosuth’s work were also mentioned eight months later in Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* 2, no. 2 (February 1968): 31-36. Alexander Alberro suggests, “for an upstart gallery with no budget to speak of, the Lannis garnered a surprising amount of media attention, a phenomenon clearly attributable to Kosuth’s masterful organizational and promotional abilities” (27). A review and a mention in an article do not seem to be an excessive amount of media attention.

the window coverings and the general austerity of the work. Visual details were left to intrepid viewers who actually made it to the gallery, and for those who did go (the number was probably low) they were able to see a photostat dictionary definition of water hanging on the wall. It was hardly an illustrious entry for Kosuth. Nevertheless, it got the word out.

The start of 1968, however, brought a change in attitude. This issue of language began to creep up in art magazines. Granted, what was written at this time generally did not deal with Kosuth and his peers. Still, it suggests a shifting sensibility—one that was more attuned to the option of words. Take James R. Mellow's "New York Letters," written for *Art International*, from January and February of that year. Mellow had been an astute observer of the New York scene for a while. What he said had some respectability, which is why his review of Arakawa's show at Dwan Gallery is so interesting. Arakawa had been with Dwan for some time.¹⁹⁶ Almost always, his paintings and graphic work contained some element of writing. Though, there was not the same degree of reading material in these works as in those of Kosuth or Huebler for example. But words were visible. They had a presence, and for Mellow, a somewhat disconcerting one. He did not like how "in a brilliantly perverse way, [Arakawa] has reduced painting to a literary genre."¹⁹⁷ Yet Mellow's apprehension was less about Arakawa's work and more about the direction it suggested art was

Kosuth was plugged into the art world and wrote for the magazine that covered his show.

¹⁹⁶ For a recent history of the Dwan Gallery see Suzaan Boettger, "Behind the Earth Movers," *Art in America* no. 4 (April 2004): 54-63.

¹⁹⁷ James R. Mellow, "New York Letter," *Art International* 12, no. 1 (January 1968): 62.

heading. "The next phase," Mellow laid out, "could well be art criticism and it involves long critical disquisitions about works of art which never existed in exhibitions which did not take place." Mellow is remarkably prescient here. He continues, "Failing that, Arakawa could perhaps produce paintings about paintings which incorporated their own critical reviews."¹⁹⁸ He is not too far off here either.¹⁹⁹

But what he wrote in February is even more striking, since Mellow is mostly speaking about Minimal art. And he is a bit flummoxed by Minimalists' predilection for writing. Not that it is necessarily bad. He just never thought art history would work this way: "Who would have thought, for instance, that the present trend toward rational, systematic or programmatic art would bring painting and sculpture so close to those 'literary' concerns that have been anathema to modern art for so long a period of time?"²⁰⁰ When he wrote this, he was thinking about the recent *Art in Series* show at Finch College Museum of Art. However his comments seem prepared for just such a phenomenon: "but the

¹⁹⁸ Mellow, "New York Letter," 62.

¹⁹⁹ In 1971, Robert Barry exhibited a work at Yvon Lambert Gallery entitled *Robert Barry Presents Three Shows and a Review by Lucy R. Lippard*. Along with the catalogue texts for several of Lippard's curatorial efforts, the piece also contained a review, by Lippard, of Barry's work. Obviously, this is not quite the same thing as Barry himself writing the review. But certainly it raises some questions. At least for Lippard, who asked, at the end of her review: "Is a review which is not published in a journal but constitutes part of an exhibition itself a fake review? Can it view itself objectively? Or is it valid anyhow because people read it, because it does comment directly upon the show it is part of? Is the writer of such a review an artist even if he/she has not made art?" Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1967 to 1972...* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973): 233.

²⁰⁰ James R. Mellow, "New York Letter," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 73.

drawings and diagrams [of Judd, Smithson, Andre, and Stockhausen, for example] pointed up an interesting aspect of the conceptualizing art of the present—its increased reliance upon written support. There seems to be a relationship: the more conceptual art becomes, the more the physical object itself becomes a matter of secondary importance.”²⁰¹ Mellow is, of course, equating conceptual with the fact that many Minimalists, namely Judd, did not make their own work. If touch was to be devalued, it stands that the importance of the idea increased proportionately. This position tends to negate the visual impact of Minimal art. But Mellow was not an adversarial commentator. He was instead nervous about what was potentially to come:

This hardly means that artists have stopped creating physical works of art: we haven’t yet reached the stage at which a thousands words is worth one picture, but it does reinforce the notion that literature (if not art criticism) is more amenable to art than it has been in the past. A further clue is the astonishing number of practicing and respectable number of artists who have taken to the editorial pages of magazines. One begins to wonder if the whole anti-literary stance of modern art is beginning to weaken. Language, after all, in its written form remains a system of visual information.²⁰²

Mellow’s growing trepidation hearkens to another related development. For two other elements, or categories, central to the appearance of written information in works of art, began to appear in the early part of 1968. They were the claims for invisibility and plurality. These terms, in their context, are not nearly as severe as they may seem today. In a way, their grandness enabled commentators to express broadly this new aesthetic transformation occurring

²⁰¹ Mellow, “New York Letter,” February, 73.

²⁰² Mellow, “New York Letter,” February, 73-74.

before their eyes. Invisibility, for example, is an idea that ghosts in Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's "The Dematerialization of Art."²⁰³ Although they never champion, or even directly suggest that works of art will become completely immaterial, they do propose that art, as it is currently known, may become a thing of the past. Part of this has to do with the changing role of the studio. For the newest work makes it no longer necessary. In fact, for many, it is more of "a study." This intellectualization of the artistic activity, one easily subsumable to future linguistic demands, threatens the presence of perceivable objects. "Such a trend," they argue, "appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete."²⁰⁴ Obviously, this did not happen. But certainly a number of works to come stretched the notion of visibility. They also often demanded the use of words to bring forward what could not be seen.

But if invisibility seemed to require language, then the concept of plurality gave it room to do so. Indeed, this notion got a big boost when Howard Junker's made it his central thesis in his *Newsweek* exposé on the latest trends shaping the art world.²⁰⁵ Junker, in a somewhat causal, in-the-know sort of way, stated, "last season it was mixed media, the season before that it was primary structures."²⁰⁶ Right now, he surmised, it is hard to tell. Nothing distinctively stands out, except "for the fact... that contemporary art has moved into a fascinating period

²⁰³ Lippard and Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," 31-36.

²⁰⁴ Lippard and Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," 31.

²⁰⁵ Howard Junker, "The New Art: It's Way, Way Out," *Newsweek* 72 (July 29, 1968): 56-63.

²⁰⁶ Junker, "The New Art: It's Way, Way Out," 56.

of pluralism that has produced unlimited options for the generation of artists who have started to appear.”²⁰⁷ This observation allowed Junker to simultaneously deal with Earth artists, Post-Minimalists, and nascent Conceptualists all in one fell swoop. In fact, for Junker, they seemed to share more similarities than differences. “The new young artists,” he describes, “are not infatuated with technology, nor are they interested in painstaking craftsmanship.” “Art is no longer a trade to be patiently mastered,” he continues, “it is a matter of doing what no one has done before.”²⁰⁸ This need to be original was infectious. Perhaps this is why they were so savvy about the art world, or why romantic myths failed to appeal, or why they were professionals first and foremost? It seems so. It also seems, according to Junker, that they prized the idea before all else.

Certainly, this accounts for Kosuth’s inclusion in the article. But he benefited from more than just a passing mention. A photograph of Kosuth, seated before one his photostats (this time of the word “idea”) occupies a half of a page. While Junker incorporates some cheeky comments from Kosuth (“the interesting things about Picasso are his ideas, not the objects he made”), and also explains Kosuth’s process, as well as how his photostats are mere vehicles for his ideas, Junker’s commentary pales in comparison to the photograph of Kosuth (fig. 22).²⁰⁹ Its impact cannot be underestimated. And it seems Kosuth had a hard time living it down

²⁰⁷ Junker, “The New Art: It’s Way, Way Out,” 56.

²⁰⁸ Junker, “The New Art: It’s Way, Way Out,” 56.

²⁰⁹ Junker, “The New Art: It’s Way, Way Out,” 63.

The article scared the living crap out of me because of the way I was being treated in it. I was dealt with as a kind of eccentric artist and it made me realise the whole body of ideas I thought I was fighting for was being subsumed under the usual art-historical model of the expressionist artist, all the usual clichéd crap that they like to talk about instead of the art, right?²¹⁰

Kosuth had a point. The picture, by Lawrence Fried, is a real number. But one cannot help and wonder if Kosuth did play a small part in all of this. His outfit—a suit, slightly loosened tie, and his trademark black sunglasses—could not have helped his cause. It gave an air of pomposity. But perhaps the most damning aspect, and one assumes beyond Kosuth's control, was how Fried manipulated the photo in order to make it appear as if the words from the photostat, radiating from Kosuth's head, fly out at the viewer. This is sheer spectacle. The seriousness and rigor of Kosuth's work was deflated by Fried's irreverent gesture. In light of the other photos in the article, Kosuth looked, at best, somewhat full of himself.²¹¹ This was not an auspicious beginning to a career in the public eye.

Indeed, just a few months later Kosuth took a lashing from Los Angeles based critic Jane Livingston. In October 1968, Kosuth opened his first solo show at Eugenia Butler's Gallery 669 (fig. 23). But there was an unsuspected complication for Kosuth. Scheduled to open at the same time, on the same night, was John Baldessari. This was also to be his first one-man exhibition. It was held

²¹⁰ Clancy, "Conceiving Conceptualism."

²¹¹ Other photographs included: Fred Sandback, Bruce Nauman, Stephen Kaltenbach, Robert Gordon, Neil Jenny, Alan Saret, Ronnie Landfield, James Turrell, Richard Serra, Bill Bollinger, Dan Christensen, Frank Stella, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Morris, Kenneth Noland, Michael Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim.

at Molly Barnes Gallery, which was just doors down from Gallery 669. How strange it must have been to see two shows so seemingly similar in their form and content, yet so different from almost everything else going on around them. The odds for this to occur had to be small.

Indeed, the last thing Baldessari expected was the attention of a gallery. He had just completed his new body of work: photos and photo-text combinations on canvas. And no one in L.A. was interested in them. A colleague of Baldessari's at the University of California at San Diego, David Antin, gave Baldessari a hand. Antin had been a fan of Baldessari's for a while. He believed Baldessari was the best thing going in L.A., and thought he could get him a show. He was right. Antin was able to persuade Molly Barnes, but on the condition that Baldessari's exhibition was to be up for just a week. She saw it as filler between the closing and opening of two other shows. Despite these initially unflattering circumstances, Baldessari's exhibition was extended two extra weeks. It also was well received.²¹²

Jane Livingston was, at the time, working for the L.A. County Museum and writing for *Artforum*. She made it to both Baldessari and Kosuth's openings. But the gulf in her opinions for these two artists was wide. Baldessari came off well. She spent time attentively describing the features of his work (fig. 24). She did not offer great praise, but neither did she come out with outright condemnation. That was left for Kosuth. Certainly, some of her disdain for his work shows up in the fact that she paid it so little attention. And after initially

²¹² Knight, "Interview with John Baldessari, April 4, 1992."

describing Kosuth's arrangement of twelve four by four foot, black (with white lettering), photostat dictionary definitions of "Nothing," she concludes her observation (at the very end of the review) with one of the harshest, but most subtle, turns of phrase:

Kosuth's most moving definition is from the Oxford Dictionary:

NO' THING (nu-), n. & adv.

No thing (with adj. Following, as ~ *great is easy*).²¹³

Fortunately, for Kosuth, his other review was more enthusiastic. Melina Terbell spent more time with the work and even thought, "the show has considerable visual impact."²¹⁴ But it is her conclusion that is of some interest. It seems to refer to what so many Conceptual investigations were to be about: "Intellectually the concept of the show is ironically provocative—how can nothing remain nothing when there is so much of it that it must be dealt with as something?"²¹⁵ That is what words are for.

* * *

For artists, that is. Critics still remained reticent about addressing this nascent phenomenon. Certainly they began to acknowledge its presence, but few, if any, delved into its implications. Perhaps it was too new? Perhaps they lacked enough perspective to figure out what to say? But a consequence of this indecision is that written language as information in an art context was accepted. It was art. Of course, it was not always popular. Some thought it normal, while others dismissed it as trite—an example of youthful exuberance. There was,

²¹³ Jane Livingston, "Los Angeles," *Artforum* 7, no. 4 (December 1968): 66.

²¹⁴ Melina Turbell, "Joseph Kosuth," *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 6 (November 1968): 61.

²¹⁵ Turbell, "Joseph Kosuth," 61.

though, in New York a more receptive audience for this art. There was even a positive vibe swirling around Seth Siegelaub's latest ventures. And in the art business, any publicity is good publicity.

Kosuth found it good to be back in New York. He had supporters here. One was *Village Voice* critic John Perreault, who differed sharply from Livingston in his opinion about Kosuth's photostats: "Joseph Kosuth, whose photostat blow-ups of dictionary definitions I have followed with considerable interest, takes one step and no longer makes paintings."²¹⁶ This comments refers to Kosuth's latest effort in a group exhibition that also included Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, and Lawrence Weiner. Seth Siegelaub organized it, and needless to say it caused a stir. Indeed, it led Perreault to ask some pretty fundamental questions about art. He began his review: "Art as idea. Art as information. Art as literature. I don't know where to begin. Conceptual art takes one more step and becomes completely non-visual art; poetry becomes visual."²¹⁷ This led him to surmise, "artists are writers and poets are artists."²¹⁸ This might not be readily obvious, but for Perreault it became so on viewing the *January Show*. "Here are four artists," Perreault describes, "working at the extreme limit of conceptual art that have produced works that are as much literature as they are art."²¹⁹ Perreault was one of the first critics to remark upon this development in print. He takes the use of language seriously, and he likes it. Barry's use of documentation to make visible his FM carrier waves, Huebler's photographic

²¹⁶ John Perreault, "Disturbances," *The Village Voice* (January 23, 1969): 14.

²¹⁷ Perreault, "Disturbances," 14.

²¹⁸ Perreault, "Disturbances," 14.

²¹⁹ Perreault, "Disturbances," 14.

record of displaced sawdust, Kosuth's newspaper ads, Weiner's artistic contract, all caught Perreault's eye. But this is just what he saw in the gallery. The real show took place in the published catalogue, and this is what he liked most.

Indeed, the gallery part of the show was just supplementary material. These were artifacts. Siegelau was in the business of selling ideas. Objects, then, are secondary. Siegelau explains this position quite reasonably:

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, size, scale, 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 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.'²²⁰

This is a pragmatic perspective. It brings art to the people. But more importantly, it lends itself to the work of Kosuth, Barry, Huebler, and Weiner. The catalogue as exhibition seems a direct response to this newfound reading condition in art. If people generally see art through words, why not facilitate a situation where the words take top bill.

The catalogue itself is quite simple. It has a regulated format. And each artist was allotted four pages. They could use them as they wished. Barry led

²²⁰ Charles Harrison, "On Exhibitions and the World at Large: Seth Siegelau in Conversation with Charles Harrison," *Studio International* 178, no. 917 (December 1969): 202.

off. He listed the titles of eight works, three of which were illustrated. Huebler followed. He too recorded eight works, although he chose to represent only two. He used the remaining space for a text—a sort of collection of little aphorisms, including Huebler’s most famous dictum: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.”²²¹ The rest refer to the matter-of-factness of his work and how it is “beyond direct perceptual experience”, where to “see” it requires documentation, and “this documentation takes the form of photographs, maps, drawings and descriptive language.”²²² The “literary,” or more accurately, informative language, element of this show only increased with Kosuth’s contribution. After his eight catalogued works, and two illustrations, Kosuth sets out to explain his recent explorations. They are telling:

My current work, which consists of categories from the thesaurus, deals with the multiple aspects of an idea as something. I changed the form of presentation from the mounted photostat, to the purchasing of spaces in newspapers and periodicals (with one ‘work’ sometimes taking up as many as five or six spaces in that many publications—depending on how many divisions exist in the category.) This way the immateriality of the work is stressed and any possible connection to painting are severed. The new work is not connected with a precious object—it’s accessible to as many people as are interested, it’s non-decorative—having nothing to do with architecture; it can be brought into the home or museum, but wasn’t made with either in mind; it can be dealt with by being torn out of its publication and inserted into a notebook or stapled to the wall—or not torn out at all—but any such decision is unrelated to the art. My role as an artist ends with the work’s publication.²²³

The photostats were no longer viable because people thought they were painting. Despite his best efforts, they were commodities like anything else. Kosuth’s new

²²¹ *January 5 – 31, 1969*, exh. cat. (New York: Seth Siegelau, 1969): n.p.

²²² *January 5 – 31, 1969*, exh. cat. (New York: Seth Siegelau, 1969): n.p.

²²³ *January 5 – 31, 1969*, exh. cat. (New York: Seth Siegelau, 1969): n.p.

method, placing a work in the form of an ad was a way, he believed, to circumvent this problem. It is a radical gesture—one matched by Weiner's addition. Here, for the first time, his famous statement, created the year before, appeared in print. It set conditions.

With relation to the various manner 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

Each work in the *January Show* raises a number of issues on their own. This is known. But it is revealing when they are taken as a whole. This is less known. What does it mean when the implications of their mode of presentation are put forward? Written language is primary. It is no longer some ancillary material used to illustrate an actual object, and going to a gallery seems less important even if there was still something to see. Though, in this case, it was not much, mostly reading material and forms of documentation. Language made visible what was absent. Yet to keep it at this would only give part of the picture. Written language for all intent and purposes became the object. It at once represented and was the thing itself. In a sense, the latter of this formulation soon came to the fore. This is only natural. Language is our medium of communication. The art of Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, and Weiner began to exploit this. Viewers thought what they saw. Commensurability ensued. And something that is so comfortable, so natural—our everyday language—tended not to unsettle, even after the initial shock of seeing it in an

unfamiliar context, like an art situation. For all the radicality in the new work, it slipped into the normal usage of language pretty easily. No theory is needed to explain this. That would miss the point. Language, written information, is still, at this time understood as common sense. Words have meaning, sometimes, a single meaning. They can limit ambiguity it was thought, which allowed it to be taken for granted so often. How else could Conceptualists transmit ideas?

* * *

Siegelaub's activities continued to get the word out about these artists. Throughout 1969, Siegelaub regularly organized shows, which led to a nice blurb in Rosalind Constable's article "The New Art: Big Ideas for Sale" in *New York Magazine*.²²⁴ There was even, appropriately enough, a picture of the young gallery operator, just twenty-six at the time, reading a text on the wall. But Constable's was a neutral account. It refrained from any aesthetic positions. As usual, it was caught up with the novelty of an idea as art. Still, despite this sense of faddishness, Perreault remained, throughout these months, one of the most impassioned supporters of this new text-based art. He seriously took up the language question: "But why even a photograph? Why not just a verbal description or a set of instructions? (The difference between 'description' and 'instruction' is in itself worth investigation.) If the visible aspect of a work of art is verbal, gallery is not need at all—only a catalog."²²⁵ He said these words in response to the *One Month* show at Siegelaub's. Of course, the exhibition did not

²²⁴ Rosalind Constable, "The New Art: Big Ideas for Sale," *New York Magazine* (March 10, 1969): 46-49.

²²⁵ John Perreault, "Off the Wall," *The Village Voice* (March 13, 1969): 13.

have a physical existence in the traditional sense. It too, as before, existed in catalogue form with an artist (one for each day of the month) responding, verbally (and writing counts here too), to a question sent by Siegelau. Other commentators were not so excited.²²⁶ None shared Perreault's assessment that this was a "remarkable show." Nor did they discuss the language issue at any length. It is strange that it did not come up more, especially because it seemed to be the source of the non-plussed response it received. The question of written information was just overlooked—skimmed—like a story of little interest in the daily paper.

But, as the year progressed, it became harder and harder to ignore this issue. Perreault maintained his support. In a review of two summer shows Perreault led off his remarks with: "I have spent some time this past week reading—not at home, however, but strangely enough at the Dwan Gallery where Language III a third group show devoted to language, is now on display and also some time (almost an equal amount) at the Paula Cooper Gallery downtown where there is a large show selected by Lucy Lippard."²²⁷ Again, Perreault remained in the minority, for just a few months later a scathing review by London-based critic Norbert Lynton appeared in *The New York Times*. His target was Harold Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form*. Lynton had no patience for it, especially when it came to language: "Of all the inflations that plague us, I am most troubled by the accelerating verbal inflation in the art

²²⁶ See Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: Neublist," *The New York Times* (March 16, 1969): D23; and Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation* 208, no. 14 (April 7, 1969): 444, 446.

²²⁷ John Perreault, "Para-Visual," *The Village Voice* (June 5, 1969): 16.

world. Minimal art had already produced what looked like an absolute maxim of wordage, and here we have what is acclaimed as a newer movement still—another verbal monsoon is upon us.”²²⁸ This apocryphal writing is a tad strong, but no doubt impassioned. Indeed, the end of the world seems signaled by the fact that “some of the exhibits consists of nothing but words.”²²⁹ All of this language, Lynton concludes, puts too much attention on the artist and not the work. There is nothing to look at, nothing to contemplate. Perhaps, he hypothesizes it is the fault of critics. Whatever the cause may be, he takes comfort, for now, in his observation, “in any case, there is not enough thought content in most of these things to satisfy a donkey.”²³⁰

Lynton’s stance was conservative. And much to his chagrin, written information was here to stay. It certainly made an appearance in Lucy Lippard’s monumental *557,087*. Held at the Seattle Art Museum, and locations scattered throughout the city, *557,087* ran the month of September as a sort of compliment to the World’s Fair occurring at the same time. The show took, as might be expected, a radical stance to what constituted a work of art, an exhibition, even a catalogue. It also brought together the latest trends in Conceptual art. Needless to say, Lippard’s expectations for the show were far-reaching. She was thinking about the world-at-large, and how these works bring art and life closer together. She even mentions the role of language: “The visual artist uses words to convey information about sensorial or potentially perceptible phenomena; his current

²²⁸ Norbert Lynton, “Impossible Art—Is it Possible?” *The New York Times* (September 21, 1969): sec. 2, 29.

²²⁹ Lynton, “Impossible Art—Is it Possible?” 29.

²³⁰ Lynton, “Impossible Art—Is it Possible?” 32.

preoccupation with linguistics, semantics, and social structures exposed by anthropology is not surprising. The fact that it is indeed structural patterns that are the basis of these fields brings them into visual range."²³¹ This last line seems to refer to developing interests in structuralism—allusions to Claude Levi-Strauss and Alain Robbe-Grillet rise to the fore. She certainly is of her times. But it is important to remember that many of these artists were still influenced by analytic philosophy. Structuralism is another thing entirely. Its prominence is to come, only too soon be eclipsed by poststructuralism. Nevertheless, she broaches the language topic. It is one among many. For Lippard, it is another medium for artists to explore. Her stance is not far off from many artists. Words are a tool, a technique, a thing with which to work.

Reviews for this show were mixed. It was the West Coast's first large-scale exposure to Conceptual art. One commentator, William Wilson, writing for the *L.A. Times* was generally enthusiastic.²³² He linked the works in the show to the nascent Computer age. This transformed Conceptual art, for him, into "Information Art." This is catchy nomenclature, but perhaps too cute. Wilson is right, though, to see this work as a critique of illusionism. In fact, he thinks that this is its greatest contribution. However, another L.A. writer, Peter Plagens, did not share this assessment. Maybe this is because Plagens was also an abstract painter. What he saw, or read as the case may be, did not jibe with his aesthetic worldview. In fact, he was skeptical about it from the beginning because it was

²³¹ 557,087exh. cat. (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1969), unpaginated.

²³² William Wilson, "Seattle Celebrates Concept Style," *Los Angeles Times* (September 21, 1969): Calendar, 52, 63.

too New York.²³³ But this west coast bias aside, Plagens did not feel confident in the staying power of any work that eschews objecthood: "No one, it seems, is quite *sure* of the staying power of non-corporeality; 557,087 requires a hell of a lot of *reading* (revolution floats on a sea of words)."²³⁴ Language is the only thing that makes this work tangible. And quite simply, this is not enough for Plagens because to use words, or written information, is to not fully engage with aesthetic problems. It is merely taking the easy way out

The relationship of art to objecthood, perhaps the true problem of 557,087, is solved in a literary way, by literature. The concepts in concept art are either so large, general, profound, abstract, permanent *or* so small, personal, complex, trivial, particular, ephemeral as to mock any rationale for an art object. Into the vacuum abandoned by the art object comes 'concept,' made manifest by literature (specifications, photo-documentation, formulae, and, infrequently, ordinary narrative prose).²³⁵

In Plagens' estimation, Conceptual art aspires for deep thinking, but invariably falls flat on its face. He is extreme with his views. But it suggests the sensitivity of the issue. Words stir.

The end of the year brought a greater recognition of this development. It quickly became part of the avant-garde vernacular. This does not mean it was accepted. On the contrary, if it was even noticed, it often met with resistance. But it is the issue of recognizability that is of interest. Written information just seems to slip by. It will not be the case for long, but by then a new situation will have arose.

²³³ Peter Plagens, "557,087," *Artforum* 8 no. 3 (November 1969): 64.

²³⁴ Peter Plagens, "557,087," 65

²³⁵ Peter Plagens, "557,087," 65-66.

* * *

By 1970, critics were reading or, at least, were aware of the need to read. The issue made appearances in some very public situations. In an article for *Artforum*, Jack Burnham led off his thorough examination of the Siegelau four with this claim: "Conceptual art resembles literature only superficially. What it really characterizes is decided shift in sensory ratios. As a result Conceptualism poses a paradox: Can art free itself from the effects of the page in type only by adopting the printed form?"²³⁶ Burnham relished the opportunity to link Conceptual art with the sort of Information Theory advanced by the likes of Marshall McLuhan. It makes the art a little sexier. It also makes it possible to avoid the content of this work because what really matters is how the message is delivered. This is how he could explain away viewers' disinterest in Kosuth's latest work. "Few gallery goers," Burnham surmises, "want to read a series of typed riddles or thesaurus entries."²³⁷ Kosuth's tautologies provide art information. Their lack of traditional, or recognizable, content says as much, if not more, about the viewer as it does about the work. Lucy Lippard speaks well to this point: "The responsibility lies with the audience instead of an intermediary. Maybe that's what people don't like about it. The public likes everything explained for it, sorted out for it, value judgements made, which is why all this quality bullshit is dominant."²³⁸ Reading, Lippard suggests, makes

²³⁶ Jack Burnham, "Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," 37.

²³⁷ Burnham, "Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," 43.

²³⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, "Symposium moderated by Lucy R. Lippard with Douglas Huebler, Dan Graham, Carl Andre, and Jan Dibbets, WBAI-FM (March 8, 1969)," in Lucy Lippard, ed. *Six Years...*, 158.

the viewer think. More standard forms of representations, or even objects, engender a passive audience. The assumption was that written information kept spectators on their toes. This might have been true—but not for very long.

Lippard made her remarks during a symposium for which she moderated on WBAI-FM. The same radio station Stella, Judd, and Flavin had their famous conversation with Bruce Glaser. The context, though, for this discussion was different. Lippard had invited Carl Andre, Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler, and Jan Dibbets to talk about the relationship between language and art. Obviously, the prevalence of written information in an art context had reached such a degree that a public roundtable was even plausible. The participants represented various degrees of engagement with the topic. Huebler had the most immediate. Andre, who was associated with concrete poetry, and Graham, who had earlier done some magazine art, were less attached to the language problem. They made distinctions between their activities. Whereas Huebler found them more integrated. Dibbets offered a European perspective. But in light of the present discussion, it was Lippard who chimed in with the most perceptive comments. She made a clear distinction between what was happening in Conceptual art and Concrete poetry. At the time, no one had really said this. “Certainly,” Lippard begins, “there are at least twenty people using either words or written things as vehicles for their art, but there is a distinction between concrete poetry, where the words are made to *look* like something, an image, and so-called conceptual art, where the words are used only to *avoid* looking like something, where it

doesn't make any difference how the words look on the page or anything."²³⁹

She was right. And this meant something for other Conceptualists. Both Barry and Kosuth, for example, wanted nothing to do with Concrete poetry.²⁴⁰ More importantly, it sorted out the stakes. Lippard suggested a real rigor in Conceptual art. Language was used for a reason, and it was not decorative.

When Andre responded to Lippard's observation he said Weiner is a good poet.

She reaffirmed her position eloquently:

I think the difference between poetry and something like Larry's pieces, or those by any of you who use words primarily, is the isolation of a single visual experience. In poetry the words form continuing relationships. Anyway, one thing I like about a lot of so-called conceptual art is that while it communicates itself, or else it doesn't, just as objects do or don't, it gets *transmitted* much more rapidly. Print, photos, documents get out faster and more people see them. Then critics become unnecessary because the primary experience is their audience's own.²⁴¹

It is about dissemination. Content, formal structure, are all of little import.

Language transmits information, and it does so quickly.

Perhaps too quickly it seems. The critic (and poet) Carter Ratcliff certainly thought so. He was surprised by Conceptual art's rise from obscurity in only two years. He also was not smitten by its intellectual pretensions. He made his views known in a review of the large group exhibition "Conceptual Art and

²³⁹ Lippard, "Symposium moderated by Lucy R. Lippard with Douglas Huebler, Dan Graham, Carl Andre, and Jan Dibbets," 157.

²⁴⁰ Franz-W. Kaiser, "Fragments of Language as Visual Material," in *Robert Barry: Words, Space, Sound, Time, ...* exh. cat. (The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1990): 21, and Joseph Kosuth, "Footnote to Poetry [1969]," in Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991): 36.

²⁴¹ Lippard, "Symposium moderated by Lucy R. Lippard with Douglas Huebler, Dan Graham, Carl Andre, and Jan Dibbets," 157.

Cultural Aspects," in part organized by Kosuth, and held at the New York Cultural Center. Ratcliff sets the scene: "Their works [over twenty artists] occupy two floors of the museum; they consist mostly of documents attached to the wall."²⁴² There are, in addition, tables loaded with reading material. Most of the stuff he considered trite, "boring imitations of 'common sense philosophy,' linguistics, and 'information theory' are the typical offerings here."²⁴³ However, Kosuth, at least, gave something to sink one's teeth into. Unfortunately, Ratcliff concludes, the taste is bitter. Indeed, he takes Kosuth to task. Kosuth's tautological definition of art seems unnecessarily limiting. Ratcliff struggles to see the point in this restriction, especially when the goal of Kosuth's art is just to say it's art. If Kosuth tried to expand upon this idea, Ratcliff suggests, "the attempt would bring the ludicrousness of his ideas out into the open."²⁴⁴ But in Ratcliff's diatribe against Kosuth, he begins to raise some legitimate concerns about the consequences of working with language. Kosuth, in this particular case, exacerbated the situation with his philosophical program. Nevertheless, what Ratcliff proposes is interesting. It gets at the ease with which language can be assimilated in an art context. Its otherness does not last long.

Kosuth's 'art' retains its perfection, of course, but it's a very local and dubious perfection confined—as Ayer's distinction suggests—to the single proposition that 'a work of art is a tautology.' The moment one goes beyond these words, their perfection, their validity, is lost. They have nothing to say—only a pathetic example to provide—in regard to the history of artistic

²⁴² Carter Ratcliff, "New York," *Art International* 14, no. 6 (Summer 1970): 133. See also Wallis Domingo, "Conceptual Art," *Arts Magazine* 44, no. 7 (May 1970): 54-55. This is also not a very favorable review.

²⁴³ Ratcliff, "New York," 133.

²⁴⁴ Ratcliff, "New York," 134.

style and function; as for the future—Kosuth's proposition is effective only in denying itself a future.²⁴⁵

Ratcliff also asserted that what he said about Kosuth holds for the others in the show. He regards the use of written information in a visual situation as self-defeating. It does not advance anything. It is for the moment, and only that. He was not the only one to share this opinion. Others, like the French critic Michel Claura, were a bit wary of this new artistic tool. Claura did not question its legitimacy. He suspected its efficacy because it had no staying power, just as Plagens had argued earlier. Except Claura's contention was more nuanced. Language in an art context, he held, was doubly susceptible to rules and regulation: first to the art world, and second to the laws of language. Claura made these thoughts in a somewhat ironic situation. It was not in a review like Ratcliff, nor in a separate article. Instead, he participated in what might be considered, in light of all of this, a work of art. The British-based artist, David Lamelas, asked artists and critics, around the same time "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects" occurred, to respond to several questions about the relationship between art and language. Claura was one of those queried. He believed the mere presence of words in an art situation conferred the status of art on these pieces. There was no doubt here. What ran into some distrust was their use value, or ability to hold viewers' interest.

Nevertheless, as an art form, the use of spoken or written language runs the risk of becoming more quickly exhausted than another form. Indeed, it implies obedience to absolute laws constituting the written or spoken language to which obedience to the laws of art is

²⁴⁵ Ratcliff, "New York," 134.

added. This double yoke inevitably leads fairly soon to the observation of what is called an 'academicism.'²⁴⁶

This is a stark assessment—one, however, that is fairly observant.²⁴⁷ In fact, this is what essentially happened. Seth Siegelaub, a bit closer to the action in New York, pretty much concurred with Claura: "'Watering down comes with the intermediaries between the artist and the public. That's what culture is about... culture is probably about watering down.'²⁴⁸ Either way, it did not look good. Written information was becoming subsumed into the fabric of everyday life. It went from radical to normal in a matter of months. So why did they use it in the first place? Why, after its domestication did they keep with it?

* * *

²⁴⁶ Michel Cluara, "Outline of a Detour," in David Lamelas, *Publication* (London: Nigel Greenwood Inc. Ltd., 1970): 16.

²⁴⁷ In the spring of 1970 Lawrence Weiner had a show Yvon Lambert Gallery in Paris. A review by Bernard Borgeaud appeared in *Arts Magazine* the same issue the as Wallis Domingo's report on "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects." In fact, they were on facing pages. Borgeaud's comments are telling in relation to Claura's claims. "Lawrence Weiner, also showing at Yvon Lambert, offers an ambiguous mixture that is attractive and repellent. The entire exhibit is textual: a statement of principles printed on the invitation to the show and in the gallery, descriptions of the 'works,' couched in deliberately obscure language. Isn't such an extreme strand dangerous? Even granted that it matters little whether or not a work is executed (although this position, too, is highly debatable since the execution even of invisible or imperceptible works somehow fires the imagination more than the simple statement of an idea could) how can we also grant that the work itself, be it object or idea, is of no importance? Weiner is exceedingly vague in describing his works, as though they concerned no one but himself. Perhaps, for him, artistic activity is simply a means of self-realization. Or perhaps he is trying to say that every man can be his own artist if he wants to. His exhibit does seem to offer some sort of comment on artistic creation, if I have understood correctly. But I'm not at all sure that I have." Bernard Borgeaud, "Paris," *Arts Magazine* 44, no. 7 (May 1970): 53-54.

²⁴⁸ Quoted in Burnham, "Alices's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," 43.

Well, in the case of Baldessari, we already know. And, anyway, by now, he had moved onto other things. Written information was an experiment. A fruitful one for sure, but it was not his calling. As for the others, that is a different story.

* * *

With Robert Barry, the use of written information arose from a visual problem. His works were impossible to see. This was the case for much of his art from 1969 and 1970. Pieces like the *Inert Gas Series* (1969)—where he would release, for example, helium into the air—or his *Microcurie Radioactive Installation* (1969)—where he buried the slightly radioactive element, Barium-133, in locations throughout Central Park—needed some form of documentation. Language proved helpful here, since this allowed them to “exist” (fig. 25). As Barry remarked in 1969, “language can be used to indicate the situation in which the art exists.”²⁴⁹ But he did not haphazardly pick his words. This would have belied his rigor, and how much he thought visually. Indeed, in order not to eclipse what people “saw,” Barry strove for a type of technical language that made his statements “as impersonal as possible.”²⁵⁰ Still, this was not an ideal situation. He would have preferred to avoid words all together. But he felt, at the time, that he had little choice, “you see language is really sort of like symbols devised by other people which I’m forced to use.”²⁵¹ Perhaps this is true.

²⁴⁹ Quoted in Robert Barry, *Robert Barry*, exh. cat. (Luzern: Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1974): unpaginated.

²⁵⁰ Norvell, “Robert Barry: May 30, 1969,” 90.

²⁵¹ Norvell, “Robert Barry: May 30, 1969,” 87.

Perhaps Barry just wanted people to know what he was doing—that is certainly fair.

Indeed, the lure of invisibility began to wear. Barry started to make more and more text-only pieces (fig. 26). Some showed up on gallery walls, others in artist books, still others appeared as exhibition invites, or simple catalogue entries (fig. 27). There was also, beginning around 1972, more traditional works on paper that relied on language. He locates this linguistic shift to his *Inert Gas* pieces. He describes it at some length in 1973

I photographed the sites, the places, where the gas was released, and some of these photographs were published, well, for instance I did one in the Mohavi Desert, and I took a photograph, but it was just a photograph of the desert, and the information in the caption words under the photograph stated that this was the location of such and such an inert gas (like helium, for instance, or argon, or xenon, or neon, all are inert gases). Now I photographed the places, but after that I realized that really all the information is in the caption, in the words under the photograph. So then for a while I just stopped using photographs, and just used language to convey my work. In my most recent work, the slide pieces, I used photography again, but I just photographed words.²⁵²

Words were all he needed now. And he used them with respect. He wanted to call attention to how often we overlook what we read: “Mostly we encounter words in reading... you’re focusing on the flow of a thought—the continuation of a thought; actually you’re just kind of skimming over the words.” And by isolating them, sticking them in an art context, Barry is then able “to allow a word to be itself.”²⁵³

²⁵² Achille Bonito Oliva, “Robert Barry,” *Domus* no. 525 (August 1973): 56.

²⁵³ White, “Robert Barry,” 10.

He said this in 1978. In 1973, he was thinking along similar lines, but back then he was more concerned with the use of language. "I try to use the language," Barry said, "as common a way as possible, I try to use it in a way I suppose is fairly close to, I think of it as being fairly close to a kind of conversational language, rather than an artificial jargon, or something like that."²⁵⁴ Barry was interested in analyzing culture, which enabled him to bring art and life closer together. As he describes, "language is fascinating to me, because it is something that everyone has... it's an extension of our being, it expresses us in the things that are going on in other times, in other places, and things like that, you see."²⁵⁵ An ironic colloquialism slipped into Barry's speech. "You see" seems out of place in all of this discussion of language. Yet for Barry, words were visual. They were something at which to look. So it makes sense, then, when he surmised about his use of language as, "just another point of view about how we can look at the world, and we look at art."²⁵⁶

* * *

Huebler too saw an emancipating aspect in language. He thought it expanded one's relationship with the world. As the critic, painter, and future editor of *October*, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe noted, "in Huebler's sociology—events in the real world—become a sort of phenomenological linguistics—language in the real world."²⁵⁷ And Huebler extended this sensibility to an engagement with

²⁵⁴ Oliva, "Robert Barry," 10.

²⁵⁵ Oliva, "Robert Barry," 10.

²⁵⁶ Oliva, "Robert Barry," 10.

²⁵⁷ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Douglas Huebler's Recent Work," *Artforum* 12, no. 6 (February 1974): 59.

images. Unlike Barry, Huebler invested himself in the relationship between pictures and their corresponding texts. Indeed, his work was rife with this tension.²⁵⁸ But what he strives for is a situation where words can free pictures of their obligations. Huebler explains: "I use language with the work to release the photographs or the drawings from carrying the burden of being anything about aesthetics. The words allow the visual signs, which are always the least possible, to return as themselves to the world, as only some things that were appropriated mechanically. That way they can be fresh again, and the people who see them can see them freshly again, too."²⁵⁹ This puts a lot of pressure on language. It assumes that words are devoid of connotations. But his stance is interesting because he believes that words mean what they mean. They are something we use to communicate effectively. Images, on the other hand, are fettered by the weight of interpretive associations, which makes words, from Huebler's perspective, wonderfully liberating.

This accounts for the directness in his art. The *Duration* pieces say what transpires, just as the *Location* works describe where something is (figs. 28, 29). Huebler's is not a frilly language. It is starkly efficient. Gilbert-Rolfe puts it well: "one is tempted to say, in traditionalist terms, Huebler seems long on metonym but short on metaphor."²⁶⁰ This point is echoed by April Kingsley when she suggests that "Huebler uses language to make his intentions explicit, to instruct

²⁵⁸ Lucy Lippard, "Douglas Huebler: Everything about Everything," *Artnews* 71, no. 8 (December 1972): 30.

²⁵⁹ Douglas Huebler and Budd Hopkins, "Concept vs. Art Object: A Conversation between Douglas Huebler and Budd Hopkins," *Arts Magazine* 46, no. 6 (April 1972): 52.

²⁶⁰ Gilbert-Rolfe, "Douglas Huebler's Recent Work," 59.

his viewers about the particular conceptual model of reality his establishing with a given piece—not as a self-sufficient medium for his art.”²⁶¹ Huebler concurs. He does not want things to be ambiguous. He does not want his work to be too open to interpretation. He has something to say, and that is it. Critics make a meal of enough things. His art should not be one of them. This is why, “it is important for me to use the medium in the most literal way possible, and though I mean my work to be mind-expanding and expressionistic and kind of beautiful things, it is didactic too.”²⁶²

* * *

Kosuth could be rightfully accused of didacticism. He, like Huebler, wanted his ideas efficiently conveyed, since images created interference. Words did not. And over the years, Kosuth has laid out many reasons why written texts enthralled him so. Certainly, some of it has to do with his reading list. Wittgenstein can be seductive stuff. And if that proved too difficult, there was always A.J. Ayers, who formulated things in a more user-friendly way. But Kosuth also had a romantic side. Some of his justifications for language were almost wistful. On a couple of occasions, he made it seem like the cultural climate precluded the possibility of images. In an unpublished note from 1969, he wrote, “In our time, of course, the artist cannot compete with flying to the moon by rocket, or by jet to Los Angeles, nor with the lights of Las Vegas or even Times Square, or even colored television or movies. The visual experiences of

²⁶¹ April Kingsley, “Douglas Huebler,” *Artforum* 10, no. 9 (May 1972): 78.

²⁶² Huebler and Hopkins, *Concept vs. Art Object: A Conversation between Douglas Huebler and Budd Hopkins*, 53.

the modern day man make paintings impotent and pathetic trophies to forgotten aristocracies."²⁶³ He made this feeling public in 1970, where in an interview with Danish radio he said, "I don't want to compete with the rest of the world about visual experiences, or anything else either."²⁶⁴

But this is only a part of it. There are more substantive reasons. Perhaps the most compelling is that language made Kosuth feel original. It was his. Judd had his boxes, Stella, his paintings. Leave Heizer or whoever else wanted it, Earth art. But written information, that was Kosuth's. Of course, this is not the case, but it is how he felt. And he made sure to fight for his self-ordained privilege. There is a lone wolf sensibility that shaped Kosuth's persona. He talked about this in 1986. There is a touch of humility, or at the very least self-referentiality here, which is saying something for Kosuth

Having started alone with [Conceptual art], I continued alone with it. It was no problem, and it is no problem because it is mine. At the beginning I had to go out and put together a group because nobody would take me seriously as an individual. Everyone who knows me from that time knows that I was such a prick because I had to do that. At least this is my excuse! I was a proselytizing son of a bitch."²⁶⁵

Certainly, this helps explain the way he so causally dismissed Baldessari's work in his essay "Art After Philosophy" from 1969. He claimed the Southern Californian's art was not serious enough. Obviously, it struck a nerve. It was too close to home. But beyond this sort of rhetorical self-preservation, Kosuth

²⁶³ Joseph Kosuth, "Footnote to Poetry," 36.

²⁶⁴ Brogger and Thygesen, "Art as Idea as Idea: Conversation with Joseph Kosuth," 32.

²⁶⁵ Paul Taylor, "Joseph Kosuth," *Flash Art* 127 (April 1986): 39.

consistently claimed that he was original. He worked without precedent. (Never mind that Weiner had said this too.) Indeed, some of Kosuth's assertions are a stretch. They suggest a delusion of grandeur. Although that is not the case, he, at times, seemed to believe the myths he worked so hard to create.

But if Kosuth was a legend in his own mind, he did not keep it to himself. He had no problem telling others of his merits. In 1969 he remarked, "in other words, my two main interests are really without relevant tradition, and that certainly makes original thinking much more possible... and an artist today without an original notion of art is, well, an interior decorator." This is a tad brash. However he did happen to preface this statement with the disclaimer: "I feel that I am perhaps the first artist to be out of the grip of the 19th century." And, he conceded, "of course I couldn't have done without the benefit of 'American art' since Pollock..."²⁶⁶ Some of this cockiness we can attribute to youth. He was on the cusp of twenty-five when he said it. With the temperance that comes with age, he did say in 1997, reflecting upon the early part his career, "Oh God, I was 25. I knew everything. I was a bit of a manic in those days."²⁶⁷ Yet this strand of restraint came relatively late in life. Again from the same interview from 1986, he reminds everyone, "language as well as the use of photography were devices I brought in that hadn't been used in some time

²⁶⁶ *Prospect* '69, 17.

²⁶⁷ Dunne, "Conceptual Intercourse."

‘formally,’ and never before at all with the implications I gave them.”²⁶⁸ Needless to say, not everyone took him for his word.²⁶⁹

* * *

Weiner, though, fared better. It did not hurt that he worked with other things besides written language in the early seventies. Something Kosuth did

²⁶⁸ Taylor, “Joseph Kosuth,” 37.

²⁶⁹ This was especially true right after he published “Art After Philosophy.” Understandably, the essay drew some strong reactions. Its philosophical pretensions can be off putting. It also situated Kosuth in an originary position for Conceptual art. But Kosuth should be given some leeway. He was undoubtedly one of the founders of Conceptual art. He just tended to say this every time. And the subsequent letters to the editors of *Studio International* showed that it was not appreciated. Michel Claura, for one, took exception with Kosuth’s supposed originality. Claura contends that On Kawara had been using language since 1964—at least a year, if not a whole two, before Kosuth ever set words on a photostat. Claura even glibly interjected that, “henceforth, when we wish to say Conceptual art, we must say ‘Art Kosuth.’” [Michel Claura, “Correspondance: Conceptual Misconceptions,” 6.] Dore Ashton agreed. She could not stand Kosuth. In her letter, which appeared a month after Claura’s, she added that not only was Kosuth, in 1965, “a student at the School of Visual Arts where he was engaged in trying to make paintings that were distantly related to the de Stijl philosophy (as he likes to talk philosophy),” he also lifted his best ideas from Mel Bochner. [Dore Ashton, “Kosuth: The Fact,” *Studio International* 179, no. 919 (February 1970): 44. Her comments should come as no surprise. Just a year earlier she ripped Kosuth’s work in a review of a group show at Siegelau’s. Here she said, “Joseph Kosuth who has gotten a lot of mileage out of his ‘Art as Idea as Idea’ by inserting thesaurus definitions into the newspaper, is too bored or muddled to make even that much of a statement and in content to repeat a dadaist formula ad nauseam.” Dore Ashton, “New York Commentary,” *Studio International* 177, no. 909 (March 1969): 136.] But the harshest comments came from Barbara Reise. She had no problem airing her dirty laundry in public. In September of 1970 she wrote: “Come on Joseph. No one with any mature *sense* took your art-critical, art-historical, art-philosophical generalizations *seriously* when you got them published last fall—no matter how excited they got over their ‘controversial’ nature.” She continues: “If you’re going to whitewash your own reputation as artist and human being in the near future in *my* mind’s eye, you’ll have to work harder at doing good art and keeping your mouth and/or typewriter shut when it comes to this sort of inept dirty politics.” [Barbara Reise, “Joseph Kosuth,” *Studio International* 180, no. 925 (September 1970: 71.) Indeed, as Kosuth discovered, originality is a tough gambit to sell.

not, and it seems, to his detriment.²⁷⁰ Weiner, in fact, started making films. They were, nevertheless, based upon his written statements. But at least he gave people something at which to look. And this helped pacify a potentially skeptical audience.²⁷¹ Perhaps it also helps explain why Susan Heinemann could make a sharp distinction between Weiner and Kosuth: “yet Weiner’s use of language differs from that of Joseph Kosuth of the Art-Language group in its dependence on a direct reference to the physical properties of a thing.”²⁷² Indeed, Weiner has always been a materialist, for him, “Everything,” and this includes language, “is a physical object.”²⁷³ But words had other appeals for Weiner. “Language,” he said in a symposium with Barry, Huebler, and Kosuth in 1969, “because it is the most non-objective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops.”²⁷⁴ In fact, it has a certain “ambiguous” quality. When

²⁷⁰ Kosuth continued, in the early to mid seventies, to create language-based situations. Some entailed elaborate installations with tables, clocks, and an assortment of reading materials. A couple of critics, however, found that the visual presentation occluded what was to be read. Another, thought it would have been better if Kosuth just exhibited his summer reading list. This, at least, would have been a more honest gesture.” Henry Martin, “From Milan and Turin,” *Art International* 15, no. 10 (December 1971): 76; Paul Stitelman, “Joseph Kosuth,” *Arts Magazine* 47, no. 4 (February 1973): 70; Kenneth Baker, “Joseph Kosuth,” *Artforum* 10, no. 4 (December 1971): 86-87.

²⁷¹ The films were, in general, well received. One particular critic, Ann Wooster, took them quite seriously. In 1973 she compared him to Jean-Luc Godard. And in 1975, she talked about how the film helped “make the written word more accessible.” Ann Wooster, “A First Quarter: Lawrence Weiner’s First Film,” *Arts Magazine* 47, no. 7 (May – June 1973): 32-36; Ann-Sargent Wooster, “Lawrence Weiner at Castelli downtown,” *Art in America* 63, no. 2 (March – April 1975): 93.

²⁷² Susan Heinemann, “Lawrence Weiner: Given the Context,” *Artforum* 13, no. 7 (March 1975): 36. A month later she wrote quite a negative review of Kosuth’s *Tenth Investigation*. She thought it lacked a self-critical posture. Susan Heinemann, “Joseph Kosuth,” *Artforum* 13, no. 8 (April 1975): 76-77.

²⁷³ Norvell, “Lawrence Weiner,” 109.

²⁷⁴ Alexander Alberro, ed., *Lawrence Weiner*, 98.

Weiner employed it in his work from around 1969 he thought, “the language, really, in my eyes, helps to get away from this thing of what something should look like and just deals with it as a general thing.”²⁷⁵ In fact, language cuts to the chase (figs. 30, 31, 32). It strips away unnecessary connotations, and allows the idea to come forward. He also liked the fact that language resists commodification. It cannot be owned. If one was to buy a Weiner, they purchased the idea, not an object. Collectors, in this sense, became supporters—a situation far more palatable for Weiner. Some of this, of course, sounds like Kosuth. But, as both should know, presentation is everything. Even when it comes to what one reads. Weiner, however, seemed to understand this best.

During this nascent cinematic period, Weiner began to crystallize some of his ideas on language. He makes a distinction between his work and what we might assume is Kosuth’s because Weiner insists, “[my art] is not based on linguistics,” which Kosuth’s in many ways was, “but [that my work] uses certain knowledge that we have about linguistics.”²⁷⁶ This is, for Weiner, a big difference. It keeps his work engaged with culture, but prevents it from becoming a type of “aesthetic fascism.”²⁷⁷ Most importantly, language remains just another material. It is like a piece of wood or a dab of paint so that he can “utilizes language both as a material, and as a means of presenting [his] ideas.”²⁷⁸ In a sense, he made sculptures out of words—at least, this is how he liked to think of it.

²⁷⁵ Norvell, “Lawrence Weiner,” 107.

²⁷⁶ Sharp, “Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam,” 68.

²⁷⁷ Norvell, “Lawrence Weiner,” 105.

²⁷⁸ Sharp, “Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam,” 72.

He also knew his materials well. Of course, he had preferences. During this time he discussed them—that is, what he liked to read, and how they might have influenced him. He admits to enjoying linguistic philosophy, but only that of an analytic bent. Chomsky is a favorite. So is Wittgenstein. The same goes for Whitehead, Weissman, and to a certain extent, Piaget. There was, however, no room for what was becoming known in America as poststructuralism—something that was soon to sweep the late seventies and 1980s New York art world in a sea of “textuality.” In an interview from 1998, Weiner recounts the formulation for his understanding of language: “It is pre-Derridian and it is certainly non-Freudian. The argument between Piaget and Chomsky provided me with my definition of the language model.”²⁷⁹ Obviously, some of Weiner’s central ideas were formulated before Derrida came into prominence in America. And Weiner was not one to change his views simply because of fashion. But in 1979 he commented upon the growing presence of French philosophy in the New York art world. Needless to say, Weiner was not too keen on this development. Maybe he is just a product of his generation. Perhaps he is still close to the sentiment that enabled Judd and Stella to bash Vasarely in 1964 because he was too European. Whatever it might be, Weiner thought writers like Lacan and Barthes, for the most part, “are full of shit.”²⁸⁰

* * *

This marks, what we might call, a generational divide.

²⁷⁹ Buchloh, “In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner,” 30.

²⁸⁰ Robert C. Morgan, *Conceptual Art: An American Perspective* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Inc., 1994): 170.

Chapter 4:

What happens next in many ways we already know intuitively. Its relevance still quietly reverberates for contemporary art historians today. Indeed it is this legacy, for better or for worse, which shapes much of our current practice because this moment from 1976 until the end of the eighties is remembered, especially by art historians, more for the critics and commentators than for the individuals upon which these writers made their names. There are reasons for this, much to be discussed here. Now we are in an era caught up in a swirl of discourses. Rhetoric dominated. And language exercised power.

This can be attributed to the sway of poststructuralist philosophy: nothing was held in greater regard. It was an intellectual tool that made this period what it was. But the actual theories of Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and others are, in essence, not very important for this discussion. What matters is how they were interpreted. And how they were used. Poststructuralism allowed critics, well a certain group of critics, those savvy enough to see its potential, to set the terms for what would turn out to be an “avant-garde”—one not really derived from the times, but one that seemed to be a product of nostalgia. How distant the dreams of these writers seemed. But in an era of words this was of little consequence. What counted was how one fought the encroachment of the specter haunting this postmodernist moment: late capitalism.²⁸¹ Poststructuralist

²⁸¹ It is important to note that the words “postmodernism” and “poststructuralism” soon became synonyms. Of course, there are many

theories fueled these critics and their nascent avant-garde. This was serious business. So it is funny then, with all this sensitivity to market demands that intellectual capital imported from France was never accounted for. Indeed, who would have ever thought that the very language used to fight the hegemonic force of late capitalism would in actuality create its own hegemonic presence?

* * *

This did not happen by chance. It stems, in large part, from the critical assimilation of Conceptualists' use of written information. Words in a visual context helped bring art and life closer together. It allowed the outside world to enter the relatively hermetic confines of the art world. Language expanded possibilities, but, as we have seen, it quickened its eventual contraction. But its presence was still felt. Many artists continued to employ language, although now, in a slightly different way. Information as such was no longer prized. Narratives, however, were. Storytelling in conjunction with photographic images became popular. Exhibitions like "Narrative" at John Gibson Gallery highlighted this development. A review for this show, held in the summer of 1974 (it included such artists as David Askevold, Robert Cummings, and Peter Hutchinson), was of a decidedly different tenor than those for Kosuth, Barry, Weiner, even, Baldessari. Expectations were different—both on the part of the reviewer, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and the artists. Indeed, Gilbert-Rolfe was taken by the variety of works and lack of a dominant style. He celebrated their

distinctions between the two, but in the everyday parlance of the late seventies, and especially, 1980s New York art world, the difference, if any, was slight.

“trivialities” and “triteness.”²⁸² “They’re non-heroic, small-time stuff,” he said. And, “they are about commonplace insights giving particular artists’ lives meaning. But the commonplace of everyday life, as Jasper Johns discovered, is a rich vein.”²⁸³ He seems right, especially since so many other artists continued to explore these possibilities.²⁸⁴ Still, this does not entirely explain the rise of philosophic theories of language.

That also owes its presence to the other major fallout from Conceptual art. As many commentators have noted over the years, Conceptual art opened the aesthetic floodgates. Anything seemed possible. And every effort was essentially valid. It could be said that this was an extreme democratic moment in the New York art world. Performance stood on equal ground with text-based works, which shared a space with sculpture, right next to paintings that were in close proximity with photographs that just happens to record a massive Land art project, and lest we not forget all the other imaginable combinations at the time. And as Gilbert-Rolfe’s review suggests, many of these forays had a decidedly personal element to them. Gone, in large part, were the works with grand ambitions. There was no longer such an urgent need to change the nature of art. In this aesthetic utopia, which many have labeled derisively as pluralism, it was just enough that everyone had a chance to have their say.²⁸⁵ But, of course, if

²⁸² Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, “Narrative 2,” *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (September 1974): 75-6.

²⁸³ Gilbert-Rolfe, “Narrative 2,” 76.

²⁸⁴ See for example, Duane Michals, Dotty Attie, James Barth, and Allen Ruppersberg.

²⁸⁵ This idea of pluralism should not be confused with Junker’s from his 1968 article in *Newsweek*. In the late seventies and early eighties, pluralism became, in

democracy is to work, it needs checks and balances. No democracy is truly democratic. How would it function? Some semblance of order was needed or, so it was thought by a handful of critics. And language was now seen as a good way of getting one's point across. In a morass of visual clutter, the precision of words could cut through this aesthetic bog. This was the critic's moment. Not only did what he or she had to say count, how they said was worth even more points. This is the moment when poststructuralist philosophies of language really made their presence known. And it was a chance for writers to use radical theories based upon varying critiques of language as a way to give some form or order to the dizzying array of works being created. Of course, this sounds a bit heavy handed. It is only a matter of time before it will become much more subtle and pervasive. But what we can say here for sure is that the mid to late seventies brought a revival in the belief in language. That it can help thoroughly change the face of art. Whether it did is up for debate. It is not important now because belief is so often not related to fact.

* * *

Something indisputable is that the widely influential journal *October* published its first issue in the spring of 1976. Its reach cannot be underestimated. And it, seemingly from its inception, found a wide audience among progressive academics and a bevy of theoretically inclined artists. Under the guidance of Rosalind Krauss, it helped define a generation, where the critic was privileged.

a way, a stylistic category much like Minimalism or Conceptualism. However, the negative connotations remained with pluralism.

The first issue laid out its mission. The editors (Krauss, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and Annette Michelson) wrote a sort of manifesto of the critic in the pluralistic, late seventies New York art world. This allusion is not so far-fetched. These individuals had an admiration for the radical days of a bygone Modernism. In fact, it was central to their project. The very name of the journal conjures images of the proletariat struggle in Russia during those momentous days in the fall of 1917. Yet *October* was not named in honor of the Bolshevik triumph. Instead, it arose from the film, of the same name, by Sergei Eisenstein, which celebrated the ten-year anniversary of the Revolution.²⁸⁶ This distinction is important, for it links the journal and its writers to the idea that art, and artists, (especially those individuals and media excluded from the traditional Modernist canon) can be instrumental in instigating social transformation. Indeed, as their first sentence of the introduction states: “We have named this journal in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique.”²⁸⁷ But it was more than just that. There was unfinished business at hand. Not only unresolved developments from the 1960s, but as they said reflectively, “Rather we wished to claim that the unfinished, analytic project of constructivism—aborted by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, distorted by the recuperation of the Soviet avant-garde into the mainstream of Western idealist aesthetics—was required for a consideration of the aesthetic

²⁸⁶ Annette Michelson, et. al., “Introduction,” in *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987): ix.

²⁸⁷ The Editors, “About *October*,” *October* 1 (Fall 1976): 3.

practices of our own time.”²⁸⁸ This sounds a tad messianic. As if they could redeem fragments of the past—a past where a dominant ideology propelled a historicist account that excised from the record the very elements these editors wished to recover. Modernism was now a renewed site of contention. And the outcome, they believed, had broad implications on the present.

Since the present was also not safe. There were leveling accounts threatening to obscure current progressive efforts. At the heart of this problem was the role of criticism. An activity, they surmised, that had weakened in import over the last few years. Art magazines eschewed sophisticated content. They wanted pictures—lots of pictures. This change in taste signaled a capitulation to the market demands of late capitalism. But it also marked a muting of writers. Criticism was becoming journalism, which made little, if any contribution, to current intellectual debates. *October* would put a stop to this. As the editors put it: “*October’s* structure and policy are predicated upon a dominant concern: the renewal and strengthening of critical discourse through intensive review of the methodological options now available.”²⁸⁹ Much of this would become theory with a decidedly French accent. But to magnify this new direction, the editors made particular decisions regarding layout. Images were to be limited. Texts were to be prized.

October will be plain of aspect, its illustrations determined by the considerations of textual clarity. These decisions follow from a fundamental choice as to the primacy of text and the writer’s freedom of discourse. Long working experience with major art journals has convinced us of the need to restore to the criticism of

²⁸⁸ Michelson, et. al., “Introduction,” ix.

²⁸⁹ Editors, “About *October*,” 4.

painting and sculpture, as to that of other arts, an intellectual autonomy seriously undermined by emphasis on extensive reviewing and lavish illustration. *October* wishes to address those readers who, like many writers and artists, feel that the present format of the major art reviews is producing a form of pictorial journalism which deflects and compromises critical effort. Limited and judicious illustration will contribute to the central aim of *October's* texts: the location of those coordinates whose axes chart contemporary artistic practice and significant critical discourse.²⁹⁰

This “significant critical discourse” refers in large part to the growing interest in the latest intellectual developments coming out of France. *October* moved into the vanguard. They were the first, in an art context, to regularly discuss these new discoveries, which bolstered their political stance, “for it seemed to us that the most cogent response to the return to tradition Western values in every sphere of social and cultural life was the critique of the presuppositions of those values made by French theorists, those who had come to be called poststructuralists.”²⁹¹ How appropriate, then, that the first article of the inaugural issue was a translation of Michel Foucault’s essay “Ceci n’est pas un pipe.”²⁹²

October was a product of its environment. Or, we could say, its very deterioration.²⁹³ Soho, the heart of the downtown art scene, was undergoing a major transformation. This once afterthought of a neighborhood was fast becoming the center of the New York gallery scene. Everyone who was anyone was there. Space was big; rent was cheap. And it certainly beat the stuffiness of

²⁹⁰ Editors, “About *October*,” 4.

²⁹¹ Michelson, et. al., “Introduction,” x.

²⁹² Michel Foucault, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 7-22.

²⁹³ Michelson, et. al., “Introduction,” x.

uptown. Indeed, it is quite a different experience seeing a work on the ground floor of a cast iron building than in the former living room of an Upper East Side town house. But as new galleries began to fill the storefronts, it became clear that Soho was no longer just for artists and a few intrepid dealers. Others wanted a piece of the pie and the telltale signs of gentrification began to appear: trendy restaurants, fashionable stores, and of course, higher rents.²⁹⁴ The antipathy this caused is understandable. These sorts of changes are not only upsetting but throw into question one's identity—to live amongst these nineteenth century celebrations of iron, where fires used to be common and the closest thing to nightlife, let alone a place to eat, was blocks away, was a badge of honor. But this economic expansion was, of course, unsympathetic to artists. Frustration amongst those who lived there began to take hold. Gentrification not only signaled an irreversible loss but also had implications on the art world, or, at least, its perception, for, just as the neighborhood seemed to move towards commercial interests, so, it seemed, did the galleries.²⁹⁵

This made the *Pictures* show curated by Douglas Crimp in 1977 at Artists Space all the more poignant. A non-profit gallery entrenched in Soho, Artists Space provided Crimp a sense of curatorial freedom.²⁹⁶ There were no obligations to collectors. The demands of museum directors, boards of trustees,

²⁹⁴ For a history of Soho in relation to the downtown art scene see Richard Kostelanetz, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artist Colony* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

²⁹⁵ Michelson, et. al. xi; and Nancy Foote, "The Apotheosis of a Crummy Space," *Artforum* 15, no. 2 (October 1976): 28-37.

²⁹⁶ This was probably quite important for Crimp. Before doing *Pictures*, he worked previously at the Guggenheim Museum. He stepped down from his curatorial position there during the Daniel Buren controversy in 1971.

and an ever-fickle public were non-factors. And in a climate of the commodification of the art world (this was the feeling, but obviously, it has always been the case) it was a snub to the traditional system. It also rides the success of the newly opened P.S. 1 art center in Queens. P.S. 1's appearance on the scene just a year before, in the remnants of an abandoned public school, was for many a return to an art world thought lost. It captured some of the grittiness of those earlier days in Soho. Sure, it is romantic. But in the insecure years of the late seventies it really meant something. The same holds for *Pictures*.

Crimp seized the opportunity. In a small show with just five artists (Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith) Crimp laid out the foundation for a nascent postmodernist art. The implications of the exhibition, and his essay, increased when he published an expanded version of his catalogue essay in the Spring 1979 issue of *October*, which included a discussion of Cindy Sherman.²⁹⁷ This helps explain, in part, why the show grew in significance throughout the eighties. It became a reference point for a generation, which was certainly aided by the decision of Helen Winer, then director of Artists Space, to open her own gallery, Metro Pictures, with a number of artists either in "Pictures" or associated with it after the fact. Indeed, artists as diametrically opposed (depending on which side of the critical fence one sat) as Barbara Kruger and David Salle were linked at various times to this category of artists. The reason being is that they played with images, or pictures, from mass

²⁹⁷ Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88. See another take on this essay by Crimp in his Douglas Crimp, "About Pictures," *Flash Art* 88-89 (March-April 1979): 34-35.

culture. They, to use a word fraught with meaning in the 1980s, appropriated. However, not every artist connected with appropriation was keen on Crimp's formulations. Richard Prince, a leader in this form of institutional critique, wanted nothing to do with Crimp. In an interview from 2003, Prince reflected, "I've never said this before, but Doug Crimp actually asked me to be in that show. I read his essay and told him it was for shit, that it sounded like Roland Barthes. We haven't spoken since."²⁹⁸ But despite Prince's reservations the essay is important. It was an early attempt at making a claim for a postmodernist avant-garde.

In order to do this Crimp needed to set the artists he supported against a Modernist paradigm. Not surprisingly, he chose Michael Fried's infamous essay "Art and Objecthood." The lame-duck article was a perfect foil for Crimp's claims. Fried's earnest defense of Stella and muddled critique of Minimalism gave Crimp an easy target to turn on its head. If Fried had consigned Minimalism, or theatricality, to the dustbin of history, Crimp wanted him and everyone else to know that the late seventies art world was a very dusty place. As Crimp advances, "the work that has laid most serious claim to our attention throughout the seventies *has* been situated between, or outside the individual arts, with the result that the integrity of the various mediums—those categories of exploration of whose essences and limits constituted the very project of modernism—has dispersed into meaninglessness."²⁹⁹ But where the break with the past most significantly comes to the fore is the apparent disinterest in formal

²⁹⁸ Steve Lefreniere, "Richard Prince," *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003): 70.

²⁹⁹ Crimp, "Pictures," 76.

concerns. Artists no longer think along these lines Crimp concludes. Now it is about content and temporality.

It is sort of ironic, then, that Crimp's discussion of individual works is fairly descriptive. Yes, issues of content do surface, but there still is a lot of formalist talk. This contradiction, however, is no matter. What counts is the overall claim Crimp makes. It is bold and slightly prescriptive. In many ways Crimp's ambition is no different than Fried's before, and even Greenberg's before that. He tried to set the terms for a newly developing phenomenon. And more importantly, carve out a niche in the wildly multivalent, pluralistic art world. But what he posits as postmodernist art should not be confused with the ruse of pluralism. Indeed, "there is a danger in the notion of postmodernism which we begin to see articulated, that which sees postmodernism as pluralism, and which wishes to deny the possibility that art can any longer achieve a radicalism or avant-gardism. Such an argument speaks of the 'failure of modernism' in an attempt to institute a new humanism."³⁰⁰ In fact, what makes these "Pictures" artists different is that they are beyond the institution. Pluralism seduces museums and their community. Postmodernism, for Crimp, by contrast, is always skeptical and on alert. It is this speculative doubt that makes Crimp's artists antagonistic to the mainstream. As he says with a tone of defiance, "so if we now have to look for aesthetic activities in so-called alternative spaces,

³⁰⁰ Crimp, "Pictures," 87 [n. 15].

outside the museum, that is because those activities, those *pictures*, pose questions that are postmodernists.”³⁰¹

Lines like this cannot help but be associated with such famous remarks as Greenberg’s plea in 1947: “Their [Abstract Expressionists] isolation is inconceivable, crushing, unbroken, damning. That anyone can produce art on a respectable level in this situation is highly improbable. What can fifty do against a hundred and forty million?”³⁰² Certainly, there are some analogies between Greenberg’s anxieties about middlebrow culture and Crimp’s fear of pluralism. And it is fair to say Crimp was far from alone with his trepidation. Others also wanted a more defined sense of the art world. Perhaps the most noticeable voice in this matter in the late seventies was Rosalind Krauss. During these years she published several influential essays that demarcated what in her estimation could be constituted as avant-garde practices. Some things were in, other were out. A simple way to look at her strategy was that she reversed traditional hierarchies. If painting was at the forefront, and photography marginalized, then the opposite should be true. Of course, there was a bit more nuance to her arguments. But motivations are hard to hide when one’s mode of presentation was primarily formalistic. This allowed her to be ahistorical.³⁰³ As her former

³⁰¹ Crimp, “Pictures,” 88.

³⁰² Clement Greenberg, “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* v. 2 ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986): 170.

³⁰³ Krauss’ relation to history is problematic. And it is something with which her critics have found fault. Upon the publication of her collected writings from the late seventies and early eighties (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*) in 1985, her lack of interest in history was noted. Part of this was attributed to her continual engagement with formalism. As Angela

student Craig Owens described in 1987, her seminal essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" from 1977 "was an attempt to systematize, to find some kind of nice logical model from which one could generate and circumscribe the possibilities of postmodernism. It's a text which actually misses completely Fried's usage because it ends with the possibility of looking at historical process from the point of view of *logical* structure, finding a mathematical and purely logical method for dealing with the mapping of certain postmodern practices."³⁰⁴

Written in 1978 (published in 1979), Krauss' essay was the product of detailed visual analysis. She recognized that sculpture was now radically different from how it was just ten years ago. It could no longer be called Modern. The term postmodern seemed more apt. It helped also ward off what Krauss referred to as historicism. Obviously the specter of Walter Benjamin was

Partington remarked, "In this sense, Krauss' work is a contribution to, and an extension of, the formalist tradition." [Angela Parington, "Book Review," *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 2 (1986): 66.] Craig Owens also picked up on this. He, though, criticized her for not analyzing ideology historically—a methodological lapse he feels undermines her arguments. [Craig Owens, "Analysis Logical and Ideological," *Art in America* 73, no. 5 (May 1985): 25-31.] Even her supporters commented upon her lack of empirical evidence. Yve-Alain Bois recognized her writing as being somewhere between criticism and history despite the fact that "[Krauss' method] has often been criticized, especially from a Marxist front, for being ahistorical." [Yve-Alain Bois, "Book Review," *Art Journal* 45, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 369.] And David Carrier, a great admirer of her work, does concede that some more historical work needs to be done in order "to substantiate this extraordinarily imaginative account." [David Carrier, "Book Review," *Burlington Magazine* 127, no. 992 (November 1985): 817.]

³⁰⁴ Anders Stephanson, "Interview with Craig Owens [1987/1990]," in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, eds. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1993): 299.

felt here.³⁰⁵ Indeed, she was wary of those commentators who overlooked historical distinctions. One example she mentions is how critics rushed to make connections between Russian Constructivism and Minimalism. Krauss thought this was patently false. As she describes at some length, “Never mind that Gabo’s celluloid was the sign of lucidity and intellection, while Judd’s plastic-tinged-with-dayglo spoke the hip patois of California. It did not matter that constructivist forms were intended as visual proof of the immutable logic and coherence of universal geometries, while their seeming counterparts in minimalism were demonstrably contingent—denoting a universe held together not by Mind but by guy wires, or glue, or the accidents of gravity. The rage to historicize simply swept these differences aside.”³⁰⁶ For the moment, we will ignore her lapses into historicism. But the point is made. She has announced an opposition, something with which to frame her argument.

How she goes about this is problematic. As Owens mentioned, Krauss had little concern for history. Instead, she favored the advancements of structuralism, which gave her an intellectual tool that allowed her to translate her formalist skills into a more theoretical form of argumentations. This had the added benefit of giving intellectual weight to her claims. And, most likely, was part of her larger project, which Owens describes, of “[dissociating] herself from

³⁰⁵ Craig Owens describes the influence of Benjamin: “Initially [during the late 1970s] what was informing the debate anyway was Frankfurt school stuff, and Walter Benjamin.” Stephanson, “Interview with Craig Owens,” 300.

³⁰⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 32.

Fried."³⁰⁷ How personal histories, it seems, so often effect larger histories. But it explains why, throughout the essay, she makes use of Klein groups, which neatly schematize her argument. This provides a way to come up with a short-list of postmodernist artists, and, we could add, the makings of an avant-garde. Yet the fact that she chooses to eschew history is troubling. She justifies this decision towards the conclusion of her essay, where she admits "the expanded field of postmodernism" occurs in a historical moment, but this development has a "determinant structure." This visual and, a bit tenuously, theoretical realization allows her to probe deeper, she believes, into the subject matter. Only now is it possible to understand how postmodernism in the arts came about. Most importantly, "it presupposes the acceptance of definitive ruptures and the possibility of looking at historical process from the point of view of logical structure."³⁰⁸ "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" gives a sense of Krauss' methodological tendencies. Structuralism was her way of going about things. But it did not stop her from defending poststructuralist thinkers, especially when she thought they were being publicly vilified. In the summer of 1980, Krauss reprinted in full a response she gave at a symposium dedicated to the "State of

³⁰⁷ Stephanson, "Interview with Craig Owens," 299.

³⁰⁸ Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 44. Craig Owens delves into at some length the problems with Krauss' idea of "logical structures." He finds, in particular, her conclusion to "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" problematic. He says: "But insofar as logic proceeds formally, presenting its rules without reference to time, place or circumstances of their use, is it not the mode of analysis most *inimical* to understanding historical process." Owens, "Analysis Logical and Ideological," 29 [emphasis in the original].

Criticism."³⁰⁹ Her contribution marks a move in her thinking towards a more poststructuralist sensibility. Certainly, there was something about it she liked. Perhaps it was the oppositional stance it engendered.³¹⁰ Indeed, she describes how most of the conference, retrenched in its more conservative disposition, feared the impending onslaught of poststructuralist writings. Krauss, however, was suspect of the conference organizers' claim that poststructuralism has spread beyond the borders of the academy. It was still, in her eyes, under the provenance of a select few, in part because she thought the works of Barthes and Derrida, for example, defy traditional use value. They do not lend themselves to hermeneutical endeavors. She credits this to their initiation of "a paraliterary genre."

The paraliterary space is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of literature. For both Barthes and Derrida have a deep enmity

³⁰⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 36-40. The symposium was sponsored by the *Partisan Review*.

³¹⁰ Krauss' position on poststructuralism was not always clear. At times, she seemed to embrace it, at others, not. Sometimes this was confused by her continual reliance on structuralism, which in many ways was antithetical to poststructuralism. Commentators like Bois did not find this troubling. In fact, he praised how she employed a number of French thinkers: "one of the great charms of this book [*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*] is the great voices of the French modern *épistémè* (Barthes, Foucault, Lévi-Struass, Derrida, Lacan) are taken as allies." [Bois, "Book Review," 369.] Carrier sided with Bois' assessment: "the range of these essays [in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*], most published in the journal *October*, is as impressive as is her command of the texts of Barthes, Derrida and Foucault, dangerously scholastic influences for so many academics." [Carrier, "Book Review," 817.] However, Owens, for example, could not concur. Her insistence on logical structures clashes with the thinking of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. [Owens, "Analysis Logical and Ideological," 29.] And Angela Partington thinks Krauss' marriage of Foucault and Derrida is unsuccessful. [Partington, "Book Review," 66.]

towards the notion of the literary work. What is left is drama with Play, voices without the Author, criticism without the Argument. It is no wonder that this country's critical establishment—outside the university, that is—remains unaffected by this work, simply cannot use it. Because the paraliterary cannot be a model for the systematic unpacking of the meanings of work of art that criticism's task is thought to be."³¹¹

Krauss goes on to argue that the writings of Barthes and Derrida can never match up with the current state of American criticism.³¹² How can the formalism espoused by these writers, which Krauss finds hopelessly out of touch with the latest intellectual currents, find council with French thinkers, who in her eyes, dismiss these naïve American notions with a Continental sense of propriety. It cannot. Yet Krauss' own position here is tricky. How far removed is she from the type of writing she bemoans? It would seem, not very. Her structuralist approach, one that finds full voice just a year ago in her "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" essay is a thinly disguised version of formalism. There is no history. There is no discussion of reception, let alone artistic intent. There is only the description of the logical will-of-forms. And like her American peers, from whom she quickly wishes to disassociate herself, Krauss too has an inclination for looking for deeper, singular meanings. But she does not locate it in the individual artist. This would smack of humanistic sensibilities. Instead her desire to detail the internal, ahistorical logic of contemporary sculpture leads us invariably to her own authorial intent, which is fitting, especially because

³¹¹ Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," 37-38.

³¹² This, of course, refers to everything that was not inflected with either structuralism or poststructuralism. Krauss, especially, reviled the traditional nature of art history and made it point to rectify the situation.

Krauss' poststructuralist defense is built around a belief in a possible avant-garde—one she wanted to be a part of.³¹³ She sets herself apart from mainstream currents, and publicly aligns herself with progressive intellectual tendencies.

Her conclusion for "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary" is interesting. It continues in the spirit of her "us against them" polemic.³¹⁴ She announces that there is a place where the works of Barthes, Derrida, and others have found a wide audience: graduate schools. "These students," she outlines, "having experienced the collapse of modernist literature, have turned to the literary products of postmodernism, among the most powerful examples of which are the paraliterary works of Barthes and Derrida." She continues, "And what is clear is that Barthes and Derrida are the *writers*, not the critics, that students now read."³¹⁵ One can only wonder what she had her students read.

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³¹³ Owens comments on the opening paragraph to her introduction for *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. He says, "with this series of rhetorical questions, Krauss not only establishes the seriousness of her own critical practice; she also claims for herself a position on the front-line of the critical avant-garde." [Owens, "Analysis Logical and Ideological," 25]. The British art historian, Paul Wood, pokes fun at Krauss' "seriousness:" "Rosalind Krauss must be counted among the heavy artillery of contemporary art criticism and history. The liner notes confirm it: *Artforum* in its heyday, founder and editor of *October*, Professor at Hunter College, New York, author already of an acclaimed book on modern sculpture—and the ferocious jacket photograph will help clear up any lingering doubts that we are meant to take this new work SERIOUSLY." [Paul Wood, "Howl of Minerva," *Art History* 9, no. 1 (March 1986): 119 [emphasis in the original].

³¹⁴ Both Wood and Diane R. Karp have commented upon Krauss' "evangelical" writing style. Wood, "Howl of Minerva," 120; Diane R. Karp, "Book Review," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 427.

³¹⁵ Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," 39.

From the writings of Hal Foster and Craig Owens it is fair to say that both Barthes and Derrida were on their reading lists. Indeed, these students (albeit at different times) of Krauss shared her inclination towards poststructuralist writings, perhaps even more so.³¹⁶ Foucault, as well as Lacan, were strong influences. At times, Louis Marin made an appearance, even if he was just an art historian. Still, it was the theorists, or philosophers, who really counted. They shook things up. And for Foster and Owens, they knew the intellectual currents well. They could navigate its waters with relative ease and realize when to add a rhetorical flourish, or how to administer a proper dose of theory. This was their domain. Indeed, in the early 1980s they shaped most of the theoretical discussion about contemporary art. During this time they regularly published articles in *Art in America*, where they both happened to be editors. They took cutting edge academic discussions and applied them to the most recent artistic development. Poststructuralism became a source for a radical critique against a postmodernist culture that had compromised artistic production. It was thought that these radical critiques of dominant ideologies through new understandings of the mechanisms of language could be a salve to the dire state of American art. This is a romantic aspiration. A call for an intellectual and artistic avant-garde poised to rescue advanced culture.

³¹⁶ Her influence cannot be underestimated. James Meyer points out that Craig Owens developed his ideas about appropriation, "in concert with fellow CUNY graduate students Douglas Crimp, Benjamin Buchloh, and Hal Foster under the tutelage of Rosalind Krauss (in a 1984 interview with Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, Owens characterized his early work as 'a series of footnotes to [Krauss's] writing, writing in the margins of her writings.')." James Meyer, "Outside the Box," *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003): 65.

They were not alone in the advocacy of poststructuralist theory. Others like Benjamin Buchloh and Douglas Crimp, both students of Krauss, followed suit. But their goals were slightly different. They did not focus, at least initially, on issues of language because for them, it was not fully entrenched in the critique of dominant culture. Buchloh, for his part, was transfixed by Walter Benjamin.³¹⁷ Crimp, on the other hand, was smitten by Michel Foucault.³¹⁸ What these two commentators though shared with Foster and Owens was a deep skepticism towards the inner workings of the New York art world. There was mutual distrust with the seemingly irrepressible market forces holding sway. There was suspicion of artists so willing to succumb to the palliations of the system. There was a fear that rigorous criticism would become obsolete.

Even in the early 1980s, pluralism still reared its ugly head. The headway made by Crimp, and more significantly Krauss, in the late seventies was noticeable. And a critical criterion began to emerge. But it still was not enough to fully prevent pluralism's onslaught. If something was to be done about it, it had to be soon. Foster wasted no time in an essay entitled "The Problems with Pluralism" from January 1982.³¹⁹ It was written with a palpable sense of urgency. As Foster decries, "my motive is simple: to insist that pluralism is a problem, to specify that it is a conditioned one subject to change, and to point to the need for

³¹⁷ See, for example, his essay "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 43-56.

³¹⁸ See his "On the Museums Ruins," *October* 13 (1980): 41-57; Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (1980): 73-86.

³¹⁹ Hal Foster, "The Problems of Pluralism," *Art in America* 70, no. 1 (January 1982): 9-15.

cogent criticism.”³²⁰ Indeed, he believed pluralism created an illusion of aesthetic freedom. This had the effect, he argued, of radically diminishing the need for criticism, which he suggested is partially the fault of the many compliant art writers who too easily bought into the deceptions of the art world. This is a serious claim—one he backs up by describing how this current attitude equivocates on any distinctions between works of art, and more importantly, insincerely engages with past Modernist precedents. There is merely pitiful imitation: a shabby bit of pastiche that feeds a market with an insatiable appetite for what Foster sees, and to use a term fraught with meaning in the eighties, a simulacrum of progressiveness.

Owens had a similar feeling towards the East Village art scene: “What has been constructed in the East Village is a simulacrum of the *social* formation from which the modernist avant-garde first emerged: I am referring, of course, to *la bohème*, the milieu in which exchange between high and low sectors of the cultural economy take place.”³²¹ Owens made this statement in 1984, the apex of the East Village’s popularity, and the moment before a number of galleries made the short move west to Soho. Like his cohort Foster, Owens sees the lack of aesthetic authenticity in economic terms. The two cannot be separated. “If we regard the East Village art ‘scene’ as an economic, rather than esthetic, development,” Owens claims, “we can account for the one characteristic of that ‘scene’ which seems to contradict more conventional notions of avant-garde

³²⁰ Foster, “The Problems of Pluralism,” 9.

³²¹ Craig Owens, “Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism,” *Art in America* 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984): 162.

activity.”³²² Both Owens and Foster obsessed over the delusional myths infiltrating the New York art world. Their critical output suggests that they saw themselves as the last line of defense. Radical theories of language—namely French in origin—would arm them. Their pressing target, however, was not the trials and tribulations occurring in the East Village. Graffiti art and the various permutations of painting, sculpture, and performance were of little concern. They lacked seriousness in their estimation. And they did not have large-scale economic support. The real problem, instead, was painting especially those sold at such galleries as Mary Boone. Prices were out of control, which only accelerated the appeal of artists like David Salle and Julian Schnabel (fig. 33). They soon became media darlings. And in the eyes of many, they were the avant-garde. Of course, as it might be expected, collectors showed no hesitation in buying into this association.³²³

Owens took aim at Salle in an attempt to redress this situation with a long review that appeared in the same issue of *Art in America* as Foster’s “The Problems with Pluralism.”³²⁴ The occasion was a group show held at Cal Arts in

³²² Owens, “Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism,” 162.

³²³ Recently, Cindy Sherman described her frustration with this development: “Within the art world I was certainly visible, I never felt unrecognized there. But I was competitive when it came to the recognition *outside* the art world that these other artists got. I don’t think that had to do with male versus female, though, but with painting. People outside the art world thought artists like me who were using photography were quirky upstarts and that the real artists were the romanticized painters who happened to be guys. And the guys played up to that image: Julian [Schnabel] in his pajamas...” David Frankel, “Cindy Sherman talks to David Frankel,” *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003): 55.

³²⁴ Craig Owens, “Back to the Studio,” *Art in America* 70, no. 1 (January 1982): 99–107. One has to wonder if the aggressive tone in this essay was more personal than aesthetic. The year before, Owens and Salle had an interesting public

Los Angeles. It celebrated the school's tenth anniversary with a selection from its most famous alumni, and to add a little spice to the exhibition, Cal Arts invited outside curators to arrange various sections. Helen Winer was in charge of painting. Much, it turns out, to Owens' chagrin. She ran Metro Pictures and

debate, where Salle ripped into Owens' conception of postmodernism. The occasion was a symposium on postmodernism held by the Young Architects Circle on March 30, 1981. Along with Owens and Salle, Sherrie Levine and Julian Schnabel also participated. Owens' role was to act as a respondent. He begins somewhat contentiously: "I was asked to be a respondent rather than to present material, but I'm not sure that I want to respond at this point. I feel that it is my responsibility to redress an impression that may have been given to you by the previous presentations, and that is the notion that Post-Modernism in the visual arts (a) doesn't exist, or (b) is something that nobody really thinks about, or (c) that a certain kind of Modernist rhetoric that we've been treated to tonight can be somehow re-injected with some personal as opposed to abstract rhetoric and therefore become Post-Modernist" [p.7]. He then moves into a neo-Marxist discussion about production. He makes references to Daniel Bell and Robert Rauschenberg. This then allows him to advocate the merits of photography in a postmodernist society. Conversely, painting adds nothing to our understanding of postmodernism, nor does it provide any means of critique. As Owens argued: "I would propose to you that the paintings we saw tonight are examples of pure academism, and that they attempt to preserve an activity that is moribund. It's not a situation of everything is OK. It's not a situation of there are all these activities going on, and they are all Post-Modernist, and they are fine. No" [p.8]. Needless to say, Salle did not take this lightly. And after a heated discussion between Schnabel and Levine, Salle gets in his say. "I think there has been a lot of wishful thinking in this discussion tonight," Salle begins. "First of all I'd like to say that for someone to give a 15 minute monologue that's based on a 1959 sociology text, to call anyone else academic is ludicrous. Second of all I'd like to say that I think positing a polarization between production and information is a hopeless debasement of anyone's enterprise, whether it's mine, or Sherrie's, or Smithson's. It's hopeless, it's nowhere." Owens asks why. Salle responds: "Why? Because nothing is either one thing or the other, that's why. Because Sherrie's work is as much produced as mine or Julian's. Because my work is as much about the resonance of information. We might as well all start cutting up newspapers. I mean, what you're describing, Craig, is just pure Conceptual Art, which is extremely academic." A bit further on Salle adds, "I'm saying that in my work that it is still possible, and you're saying [Sherrie Levine] in your work that you don't care to deal with it. I just don't think it's fruitful to say that information has replaced production as a measure of art because some Marxist critique of the evolution of industrial society" [p. 10]. This could not have sat well with Owens. "Post-Modernism," *Real Life* 6 (Summer 1981): 4-10.

avored artists who already had a high profile.³²⁵ There were no surprises here, just works that sold really well. And needless to say, Salle took a place of honor. His standard tactic of juxtaposing naked women (often lifted from the pages of soft-porn magazines) with various, seemingly random art historical references were finding not only a wide audience but also critical success. Owens, however, could not be counted among Salle's fans. Part of the problem was that Owens abhorred Salle's emphasis on his studio practice. The idea of laboring alone, cut off from the rest of the world, only to later emerge with heroic paintings that invariably emphasize the artist-as-genius was a delusional pipe dream for Owens. Furthermore, he saw traditional studio activity as being absolutely connected with both the deleterious effects of late capitalist society and in line with the revamped conservative politics sweeping the country.

It is not possible enough to stress the earnestness in Owens' claims. He really meant it. As James Meyer has pointed out, "[Owens'] writing suggest a utopic belief in criticism as redemptive form—as if one could write one's way to a more just existence."³²⁶ Perhaps this is why Owens could suggest with such conviction that Salle was pulling a fast one on the art world: "indeed, we are asked to witness a mock art-world tragedy, with Salle himself cast in the role of the alienated artist."³²⁷ Owens is not pulling any punches, and he goes for the knock out when he attacks Salle's method of "re-presenting" images—a term that

³²⁵ Metro Pictures was founded along with Janelle Reiring. The core group of artists they showed came from those who had exhibited at Artists Space. For an oral history of Metro Pictures see Paul Taylor, "Conversations with Art Dealers: Metro Pictures," *Flash Art* no. 133 (April 1987): 78-79.

³²⁶ Meyer, "Outside the Box," 63.

³²⁷ Owens, "Back to the Studio," 104.

suggests Salle possesses a degree of theoretical sophistication. But just as sophistication originally meant a type of deception, so, in Owens eyes, is Salle's practice: "But unlike other artists engaged in similar acts of appropriation, who work to deconstruct the rhetoric of the image, Salle views the purloined image as the site of a potential subjective reinscription. He thus works to empty the image of every residue of its shared public significance in order to replace it with a meaning that is entirely private in origin."³²⁸

Foster could not have agreed more with this assessment. He shared Owens' mistrust of Salle. It was an insincere practice. And like Owens, Foster did not limit his displeasure to just him. Other painters like Julian Schnabel, Sandro Chia, Thomas Lawson, and Francesco Clemente (all quite different pictorially, but not, Foster stresses, politically) also worked under false precepts. But to expose this deception, Foster needed methodological help. He turned to poststructuralist theories of language. This allowed him to argue that "rather than explore this condition of clichéd styles and prescriptive codes (as critics like Barthes and Derrida have done), many artists today merely exploit it, and either produce images that are easy to consume, or indulge in stylistic references—often in such a way that the past is entertained precisely as publicity." But Foster does not stop there, "today's innocent, then, is a dilettante who, bound to modernist irony, flaunts alienation as if it were freedom."³²⁹

Yet this ill-conceived notion of freedom and inability to reap the critical benefits of writers like Barthes and Derrida were not the only problems here. As

³²⁸ Owens, "Back to the Studio," 103.

³²⁹ Foster, "The Problems with Pluralism," 11.

Foster admits, painters like Salle had an inkling of knowledge about French theory—or, so claimed writer and painter Thomas Lawson. Indeed, Lawson thought Salle's painting did exactly what Foster thought they did not. Foster tries to set the record straight. Painting, he argues, could not be subversive, for it enjoys too privileged a position in society. How could it possible deconstruct anything? Even, Foster claims, if we were to accept Lawson's contention that painting's very complicity in the inner workings of the art world makes it ripe for deconstruction. Instead Foster counters, "This theory of complicity is based indirectly on the deconstructive criticism of Jacques Derrida: in particular, on the idea that any critique of a tradition must use the forms of that tradition—must commandeer them, in effect." This seems well and good. Perhaps Lawson, and thus Salle, are correct. However, Foster continues, "but where deconstructionists like Derrida would reinscribe these discredited forms, 'complicity artists' like Lawson and Salle submit to them. And although this submission may be corrosive to tradition, it is submission nonetheless."³³⁰ This is a strange claim. It seems as if Salle's fault lies in his toughness, or perhaps, masculinity. Foster does give a bit and says works like Salle's do rub against the grain and unsettle hierarchies, but this does not deny the fact that he is submissive, and that is unacceptable.

Owens concurred, well, at least, on the critical need to use poststructuralism as a way of dealing with neo-expressionism. He details this in

³³⁰ Foster, "The Problems with Pluralism," 17.

an essay from 1982 entitled "Representation, Appropriation, & Power."³³¹ But the thrust of the article focuses primarily on the recent comings and goings of art history. Owens, as Krauss before, lamented art history's slow acceptance of poststructuralism. He frames his discussion in terms of the persistent return of representational forms in painting—a development, he thinks, that should not go unheeded. Indeed, the problem lies in the very fact that, "criticism, however, has subsumed this impulse under the dubious banner of a revival of figurative modes of expression; for a theoretical discussion of the issues raised by contemporary art, we must therefore look elsewhere—to the group of Continental critics known as the poststructuralists, whose work has also been identified as a critique of representation."³³² This sounds like a call to arms, where Owens stands on equal grounds with his French thinkers because he too is a critic. This is, what we might call, an interesting rhetorical flourish, since it tries to elevate Owens' practice to the level of a philosopher such as Derrida. Still, whether Owens succeeds or not is of little import, because this mode of argumentation is suggestive. Foster was convinced by it. And he too continued to think that it was the best way to demystify contemporary painting. As he

³³¹ Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, & Power," *Art in America* 70, no. 5 (May 1982): 9-21.

³³² Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, & Power," 9. Owens use of poststructuralism tends towards the didactic. The fact that he uses the category poststructuralism is a case in point. At times there appears to be some misreadings, or certain nuances elided, in his textual interpretation. This point is made in Stephan Melville's review of Owens' posthumous collection of essays, *Beyond Recognition*. Occasionally, Melville found fault with Owens' reading of Derrida. He also thought, in Owens more polemical essays, like this one, that "he fails to do justice to his antagonists." Stephan Melville, "Contemporary Theory and Criticism," *Art in America* 81, no. 7 (July 1993): 30-32.

remarked in 1983, "I want to look at Expressionism less as a historical style than as a specific *language*."³³³ This sort of claim allowed Foster to bring Louis Marin into the fold and have his theories help clarify the differences between classical and expressionistic representation. Foster picks up on the fact that expressionism presents a double bind. It is a mode of presentation that connotes immediacy, as if it was a natural occurrence. But of course, as Foster councils, this is impossible, since nothing is natural. Everything, he reminds us, in life is a social construction, which leads him to offer, "perhaps, in the end, Expressionism's denial of its rhetorical nature is simply the repressed recognition of how thoroughly language invades the natural, mediates the real, decenters the self."³³⁴ We should add to Foster's list that theories of language had by now "thoroughly invaded" the New York art world.³³⁵

However, Owens, around this time, began to move away from the linguistic side of poststructuralism, at least, as a method of critique. He associated this with an earlier part of his career. As he reflected in 1987, "[the

³³³ Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (January 1983): 80. [Emphasis in the original.]

³³⁴ Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," 81.

³³⁵ In a review of Foster's collected criticism, *Recodings*, David Luljak has harsh words for Foster's methodology. He spends some time discussing Foster's indebtedness to poststructuralism. He makes this telling observation: "Among concepts/terms familiar in poststructuralist writings we find in the 26 pages (includes illustrations) of this essay [he is referring to Foster's essay "The 'Primitive' Unconscious"] 'rupture' 17 times, 'difference' 18 times, 'transgression' 29 times and 'other' 57 times. Not only would this repetition provide a field day for a deconstructionist, it represents a restricted and ossified conceptual framework" [90]. Luljak then goes on to describe an instance where Foster is able to include Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Bataille, Mauss, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Derrida in a single sentence. See David Luljak, "Hal Foster, *Recodings*," *Art Criticism* 3, no. 1 (1986): 85-92.

late seventies] was my time as a Derridian. It seemed that poststructuralist theory offered a very good critical language for dealing with contemporary practices."³³⁶ He did, though, keep it as a tool to advance the work of artists he liked. One in particular, Barbara Kruger, received a lot of his attention (fig. 34). Indeed, Owens felt connected to her practice. It was as if they were working towards a common goal, but in different ways. Owens describes this development in some detail. What he outlines, it seems, is somewhat unique to the 1980s. That is, in the grandness of its aspirations. Sure, someone like Lucy Lippard was inextricably linked to Minimal and Conceptual art, and some even mistook her, especially with some of her dealings with Conceptualists, as an artist. But she never saw herself in this way. Nor did she, despite her advocacy for artists, abdicate her critical distance. There was a difference between what she did and what her Conceptualist peers, for example, did. But in the early 1980s this dynamic had changed. The separate roles of critics and artists became elided.

Getting back to the earlier moment, the split between critic and artist, then, had been compromised, and we were writing not necessarily *about* these critical and oppositional practices but *alongside* them. There was an exchange there, and one's criticism was conducting the same work in a different arena and in a different way. I feel that way about, say, Barbara Kruger's work and my work. This is not a question of always writing about them, or always promoting them, but whether one chooses to ally oneself with oppositional practices or talk about mainstream cultural activities.³³⁷

³³⁶ Stephanson, "Interview with Craig Owens," 301.

³³⁷ Stephanson, "Interview with Craig Owens," 307.

Foster was of a similar disposition. In an interview from the mid nineties, he looked back on the sensibility of the moment. He describes how not only himself, but also Owens, Buchloh, and Crimp really felt like something was at stake. And that their criticism contributed to social transformation. Perhaps, just as with Conceptualist before, this was a bit naïve. But they believed in their potential efficacy. As Foster said, but surely this could apply to the others, “for years, I was seduced by the idea that I need not be confined to art only, that I could be a cultural critic.”³³⁸

Much of this attitude comes out in the way Foster and Owens discussed such artists as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. And in their advocacy for Kruger and Holzer’s progressive, socially engaged art we see a wider application of theories of language (fig. 35).³³⁹ Of course, their linguistically infused art lent themselves to this sort of assessment. But more importantly, their work coincided with what Foster and Owens were doing in their own writing. It was as if Kruger and Holzer were producing something to read rather than something at which to look. Take Foster’s observation from 1982, “indeed, Kruger and Holzer are manipulators of signs more than makers of art objects—a shift in practice that renders the viewer an active reader of messages more than a

³³⁸ Miwon Kwon, “The Return of the Real: An Interview with Hal Foster,” *Flash Art* no. 187 (March – April 1996): 62.

³³⁹ As Foster remarks in the introduction to his edited anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic*: “As the importance of a Foucault, a Jacques Derrida or a Roland Barthes attests, postmodernism is hard to conceive without continental theory, structuralism and poststructuralism in particular.” In Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983): x.

contemplator of the esthetic."³⁴⁰ Owens' position on Kruger is not so far apart. He sees her involved in a similar activity of exposing the fallacy of cultural myths. What Owens did for neo-expressionism, for example, she does for typically held stereotypes: "Barbara Kruger propositions us with commonplaces, stereotypes. Juxtaposing figures and figures of speech—laconic texts superimposed on found images (Kruger does not compose these photographs herself)—she works to expose what Roland Barthes called 'the rhetoric of the image:' those tactics whereby photographs impose their message upon us, hammer them home."³⁴¹

What is revealing is the very language they use to present this art. Foster, for his part, stays close to poststructuralists' take on language. He outlines Kruger's mode of address in terms of linguistic shifters.³⁴² This allows him to make such claims as "if Kruger is concerned with power and the rhetoric of images, Holzer," his discussion has moved on, "is concerned with the Babel of social discourses."³⁴³ It is all about language. What is presented visually, or in a visual context, finds explanation in terms of linguistic theories. Indeed, as he continues to describe Holzer's artistic endeavors his language-based analogies increase. This is especially noticeable when he talks about her *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-1982): "in short, the Essays are concerned with the *force* of language rather than its truth value: they exhibit its complicity with power—how one

³⁴⁰ Hal Foster, "Subversive Signs," *Art in America* 70, no. 10 (November 1982): 88.

³⁴¹ Craig Owens, "The Medusa Effect or, The Specular Ruse," *Art in America* 72, no. 1 (January 1984): 97-98.

³⁴² Foster, "Subversive Signs," 90.

³⁴³ Foster, "Subversive Signs," 90.

perverts the other.”³⁴⁴ As Foster winds his way towards the end of his analysis he concludes with dramatic flair. He makes bold proclamations about both Holzer’s and Kruger’s art, and fittingly concludes with a quote from Barthes.

The work of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger displaces language, disorients the law. This is what ideology in general cannot afford, for it tends to work through language that denies its own status as such: stereotypical language. Holzer and Kruger question stereotypes in work that, though it does not conform to political art conventions, is acutely critical, i.e. political. For ‘setting the stereotype at a distance is not a political task, inasmuch as political language is itself made up of stereotypes, but a critical task, one, that is, which aims to call language into crisis.”³⁴⁵

Owens would have sympathized with Foster’s reading. He too relied on theory to explicate the intricacies of Kruger’s latest work. But unlike Foster, Owens went beyond references to Barthes. He also brought in Lacan, Foucault, Helene Cixous, and Emile Benveniste. In fact, the linguistic maxims of Benveniste became a methodological conduit that enabled Owens to bridge the thoughts of Lacan and Foucault. For example, Owens can say “deixis is not, however, the only point of physical entry into Kruger’s work, which is ultimately addressed to the struggle over the control and *positioning* of the body in political and ideological terms—a struggle in which the stereotype plays a decisive role.”³⁴⁶ With which he then follows up by taking a cue from Foucault, “the stereotype inscribes the body into the register of discourse; in it, the body is apprehended by language, taken into joint custody by politics and ideology.”³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Foster, “Subversive Signs,” 91.

³⁴⁵ Foster, “Subversive Signs,” 91.

³⁴⁶ Owens, “The Medusa Effect or, the Specular Ruse,” 98.

³⁴⁷ Owens, “The Medusa Effect or, the Specular Ruse,” 100.

There are more examples of this type of argumentation. But the point is made. Owens and Foster helped initiate a new way of talking about contemporary art. And poststructuralist theories of language were central to this cause. By now, they had already set off an intellectual ripple effect whose repercussions were to be felt only later. For the moment, they were in the vanguard. Of course, not everything they wrote was met with open arms.

* * *

"My question, finally," Foster asked towards the end of 1982, "is simple: Do critics today engage postmodernist art as its textual narrative would seem to demand."³⁴⁸ In the spring of 1983, one response would suggest no. Donald Kuspit, a supporter of painters like Salle, had had enough of Foster and Owens' linguistically charged rants.³⁴⁹ Kuspit's defense of Salle is hard to understand. But his biting critique of Foster and Owens' work is, for the most part, compelling. However it is hard here to ignore the personal nature of Kuspit's attack. He spares nothing. Perhaps that is necessary when one claims that two individuals ply their trade on clichéd radicalism. Indeed, Kuspit attacks the heart of, Foster's in particular, radicalism: poststructuralism. As he begins to outline the ways Foster misconstrues neo-expressionism, Kuspit asserts, "Foster

³⁴⁸ Hal Foster, "Re: Post," in *Art After Modernism* ed. Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker (Boston: Godine Press, 1986): 196.

³⁴⁹ Donald Kuspit, "Rejoinder: Tired Criticism, Tired 'Radicalism,'" *Art in America* 71 no. 4 (April 1983): 11-17. Carter Ratcliff is also a target for Kuspit's claims. However, Ratcliff's concerns are far removed from either Foster or Owen's. First he started writing regular criticism in the late sixties. He is almost a generation older than Foster or Owens, which invariably gives him a different perspective on recent developments. Second, Ratcliff was not nearly as consumed with poststructuralism as either of Krauss' students, and for that matter, Kuspit himself.

implies as much in the defense he constructs against the 'psychosocial' interests of expressionism by regarding it as another kind of 'rhetoric.' (This is a typical misuse of deconstruction, reducing all art to linguistic interests, thus neutralizing art's relevance to experience.)"³⁵⁰ Kuspit does not stop there. After suggesting that Foster and Owens unwittingly mimic the work of Michael Fried—a stinging comment in those heady days of postmodernism—Kuspit goes on to say that "the article by Hal Foster is an extreme example of the linguistic fallacy in art—the assumption that all is language about language, the best of it a self-deconstructing language." "The by now," he continues, "overworked idea that language determines thought, including art-thought, leads to the idea that language is not simply 'second nature,' but primordial nature."³⁵¹ Kuspit holds out for the importance of experience. Foster, Kuspit feels, negates it.

Owens, however, was not immune from Kuspit's venom. He too fell under harsh criticism. Kuspit suggested that Owens' writing has an air of propaganda to it: "Owens' silly, supercilious parroting of Lacan, turning him into an oracle, is another example of Owens' fashionable 'radicalism.'"³⁵² But still, Foster receives the brunt of Kuspit's diatribe. "It is Foster's linguistic artists," Kuspit contends, "with their specious intricacies of quotation, with their slight changes in syntax of display, that show a 'frustrated, defeated consciousness' trying 'to cover up its own negativity.' For they have the 'entranced, distracted naiveté' of believing that all art is language, a socio-

³⁵⁰ Kuspit, "Rejoinder: Tired Criticism, Tired 'Radicalism,'" 11.

³⁵¹ Kuspit, "Rejoinder: Tired Criticism, Tired 'Radicalism,'" 15.

³⁵² Kuspit, "Rejoinder: Tired Criticism, Tired 'Radicalism,'" 15.

linguistic game. They suffer from linguistic solipsism.”³⁵³ Kuspit gets in a few more digs. He disputes the way they conceive Modernism as a series of progressions. He also has a hard time with the way Owens interprets Sandro Chia’s *The Idleness of Sisyphus*. It is too predetermined, as if Owens did not give the painting a chance to have its say. But Kuspit saves his best for last. He concludes with this observation: “it is clearly the ‘radical’ critics who are conservative in attitude and expectations, not the new Expressionists.”³⁵⁴ In some ways he is right, but theories of language were here to stay. It is only a matter of time before the whole of the eighties art world is awash in a sea of texts.

* * *

Artists, too, had been swept away by this theory thing. Barbara Kruger commented in 1987, “I get great pleasure out of reading certain theoretical work. Some texts seem to interface with the moments of my life on the most apparent

³⁵³ Kuspit, “Rejoinder: Tired Criticism, Tired ‘Radicalism,’” 15.

³⁵⁴ Kuspit, “Rejoinder: Tired Criticism, Tired ‘Radicalism,’” 17. It seems that Kuspit had rehearsed some of these ideas in a review of Salle’s paintings from the Summer of 1982. His description of Salle’s work suggests that he felt it reflected accurately on the state of criticism. It is simply impossible to be radical anymore. It is a false stance. Salle, it seems, is on to this. His ambivalence towards about everything makes him incredibly a propos. As Kuspit describes, “But this is his triumph: his own dubious criticality, his own failure to be revelatory, show how worn out criticality and vision have become in art and society. They are unnecessary in a world of total manipulation, which is what Salle’s art is. Salle’s message is that there is no longer any inner necessity for criticality, no longer any point to straining all one’s sense in the hope of some special illumination. Such efforts are only part of one’s gamesmanship as a manipulative artist. The artist can never be a seer again, not even a sightseer; he can only be a strategist within a field of familiar images, all of which instantly lose whatever unconventionality or perversity they had the moment they become a part of the art game—the seeing game.” Donald Kuspit, “David Salle,” *Art in America* 70, no. 6 (Summer 1982): 142.

and pleasurable levels. It really feels quite uncomplicated and seldom intimidating. I especially experience this with Barthes, Kristeva, and Baudrillard to name a few.”³⁵⁵ Her peer, Jenny Holzer, had somewhat similar feelings. Theory, indeed, played a role in her art. Her famous *Truisms* series from the late seventies and the early part of the 1980s evolved out of her encounter with this dense material. In fact a major influence “was an extremely erudite reading list that I received at the Whitney Independent Study Program. The Truisms were, in part, a reaction to that reading list which was impenetrable but very good. I kind of staggered through the readings and wrote the Truisms as a way to convey knowledge with less pain.”³⁵⁶ The very particular rhetoric of critics like

³⁵⁵ Jeanne Siegel, “Barbara Kruger: Picture and Words,” *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 10 (June 1987): 21. An interview just a few month later, Kruger said something similar: “years later, I happily discovered “Screen” [the British film journal], and with a lot of self-help and a bit of peer pressure, I became demi-fluent in its readings. Since then, theory has intermittently become a source of both pleasure and rigor for me, but I have *never* illustrated it.” [Anders Stephanson, “Barbara Kruger,” *Flash Art* no. 136 (October 1987): 58.] It is hard to know if this chronology is entirely accurate. Her interview with Stephanson makes it seem as if she came to theory relatively late. However, in a discussion with Monika Gagnon from 1985, Kruger describes how her introduction to theory came earlier in her career. It occurred pretty soon after she gave up painting and moved from New York for a series of teaching jobs. This must have been during the late seventies. “At Berkeley,” Kruger said, “I read a lot (Barthes, Benjamin, etc.) and went to the movies all of the time...” [Monika Gagnon, “A Conversation with Barbara Kruger,” *Border/Lines* no. 2 (Spring 1985): 13.] Another interesting fact to note is the way Kruger’s way of speaking changes over the years. By the time of her interviews in 1987 it is hard to miss her theoretically inflected discourse. It is far different from the way she converses in the early eighties. Perhaps this suggests a degree of comfort with the material, or perhaps, a degree of pretension.

³⁵⁶ Jeanne Siegel, “Jenny Holzer’s Language Games,” *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 4 (December 1985): 65. See also Bruce Ferguson, “Wordsmith: An Interview with Jenny Holzer,” *Art in America* 74, no. 12 (December 1986): 111. Just a couple of years ago, she describes this experience with a bit more detail: “I came to New York in the late ‘70s for the Whitney Independent Study Program. Ron Clark

Foster and Owens had found a parallel engagement in the practices of artists. But the specific nature of Holzer and Kruger's art played a part too. It is no accident that poststructuralist theories found safe harbor in works of art grounded in written information. The continued use of language in a visual context remains central to the larger realization that the 1980s art world can be defined in relation to ideas of textuality. The very fact that words could be seen only amplified a rhetoric that stressed that images should be read.

Kruger, though, came to words somewhat belatedly. Initially, in the mid seventies, she worked in a more craft-like manner. These pieces were received favorably as they amalgamated well with the pluralistic ethos sweeping the New York art scene. One commentator described these works as "wall explosions," while another thought that "their formal unity, achieved despite their clutter appearance and multifarious evocations, bespeaks skill, maturity and esthetic command."³⁵⁷ Kruger, perhaps, did not share the same assessment because eventually she became cut off from these works. It no longer resonated for her as something was missing. Painting was unable to present what she wanted to

handed us an enormous list of serious and sometimes opaque books, everything from Marx to structuralism. I wanted to sort out what I was to do, or what anyone was to do, with that much dense and sometimes contradictory information. So I rewrote his library. I did a self-help maneuver, and posted the results—the 'Truisms'—in the streets." [Steven Henry Madoff, "Jenny Holzer Talks to Steven Henry Madoff," *Artforum* 41, no. 8 (April 2003): 82.] While Clark's list certainly contained a number of poststructuralist texts, it is hard to know if she read them. It would seem that she did. But recently, when talking about this experience, she commented, "I didn't read much of the French stuff. Couldn't appreciate it. I read some of the Marxist offerings." Joan Simon, "Interview," in *Jenny Holzer* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998): 22.

³⁵⁷ Peter Frank, "Barbara Kruger," *Art in America* 63, no. 4 (July – August 1975): 103; Noel Frackman, "Barbara Kruger," *Arts Magazine* 49, no. 7 (March 1975): 7.

express. Indeed, she “stopped painting because I was becoming alienated from my own production.” But it was not like she was inactive. In fact “I was writing at the same time and this became far more pleasurable for me. When writing I was on the tip of a particular decision-making process, whereas it took me ten weeks to do each painting and it was all manual labor.”³⁵⁸ This issue of speed is obviously very important for her. She brought it up once again in another interview: “I felt that when I was writing I was just on the edge of my production. Everything was accelerated—there was no postponement of any decision making process. I couldn’t help but compare the exhilaration, liveliness and generativeness of the writing activity with this manual labor, this busy-work.”³⁵⁹ Her comment represents a certain attitude towards language, and writing in particular. It seems that in an art situation Kruger feels that writing could convey her ideas in a more satisfying way. Words are fast whereas images are slow. Kruger’s sentiments sound hauntingly familiar. It echoes the cries of Conceptualists from just a generation ago. Many writers in fact have made this connection.³⁶⁰ Kruger, however, is not so sure of its accuracy.

“People say that I came out of conceptualism,” Kruger describes, “but by the time that conceptual work peaked, I had only just caught sight of it since I was working in magazines and was totally intimidated by the art-world.”³⁶¹ Perhaps, this is true. Or perhaps it is willful naiveté. It is always prudent to

³⁵⁸ Gagnon, “A Conversation with Barbara Kruger,” 13.

³⁵⁹ Kate Linker, “Barbara Kruger,” *Flash Art* no. 121 (March 1985): 36.

³⁶⁰ Foster, “Subversive Signs,” 88; Jean Fisher, “Barbara Kruger,” *Artforum* 23, no. 1 (September 1984): 115-116.

³⁶¹ Gagnon, 14.

seem original. It certainly worked for Conceptualists. But her claim is slightly problematic. Her first show was in 1975. And one would assume that she had a sense of what was going on around her by the time of her opening. Conceptual art was still the name of the game. And artists like Kosuth, Weiner, and Barry were showing regularly in New York during this time.³⁶² But Kruger's reference to magazine work is telling. It provides a non-art historical lineage. And without doubt, it definitely informed her practice. She credits this period for teaching her about such things as direct address, something, as we know, that defines her work. As she recounts in 1987, "My confrontation with these methodologies [here she is referring to Althusserian theory of appellation] was a non-circuitous one, and began in my early twenties when I started working at a magazine." She goes on, "My usage of the imagistic and textual strategies of advertising was *not* mediated by ten years of "Screen" [the British film journal] theory or any other critical writing, but rather, by a relentlessly hands-on need to have a job and pay the rent."³⁶³ But just because she roots her practice in her previous professional career, she is not so imprudent as to completely eschew all association with Conceptual art. "When I did see conceptual works," she describes, "it seemed like a pataphysical grammarian mania; this language that I don't understand, it wasn't accessible to me at all." Fair enough, "but now that I

³⁶² See the reviews and articles by Susan Heinemann. Susan Heinemann, "Lawrence Weiner: Given the Context," *Artforum* 13, no. 7 (March 1975): 36-37; Susan Heinemann, "Joseph Kosuth," *Artforum* 13, no. 8 (April 1975): 76-77; Susan Heinemann, "Robert Barry," *Artforum* 13, no. 9 (May 1975): 76.

³⁶³ Stephanson, "Barbara Kruger," 55.

have learned the language," which is always important, "I appreciate and support this work..."³⁶⁴

Holzer also had an ambivalent relationship to Conceptual art. And she too had to fend off associations with her linguistic predecessors. Of course, as with Kruger, the link is somewhat obvious, especially to someone like Joseph Kosuth. Jeanne Siegel asked Holzer about this in 1985. Holzer was hesitant to acknowledge any sort of aesthetic lineage. She mentioned how in graduate school she happened upon a copy of *The Fox*. Here, for the first time, she realized that it was possible to make art out of language. Yet still, she did not feel an immediate kinship with Conceptualists. As she said to Siegel, "yes, but often in Conceptual art they excerpted meaning, they used prepackaged meaning, as when Kosuth showed a dictionary definition of art. It was language on language." Holzer did concede to Siegel that her work is "a crossover from Kosuth's and Daniel Buren's efforts to find ways to convey meaning to a large public."³⁶⁵ But on another occasion, about five years later, she refined her position, "I didn't want to grow up and be Kosuth."³⁶⁶ Conceptual art posed

³⁶⁴ Gagnon, 14.

³⁶⁵ Siegel, "Jenny Holzer's Language Games," 65.

³⁶⁶ Paul Taylor, "Jenny Holzer: I wanted to do a Portrait of Society," *Flash Art* no. 151 (March – April 1990): 117. Still she occasionally linked herself to Conceptualism. In an interview from the end of 1988 she says, after making a distinction between her work and was becoming known as neo-conceptualism, "I don't get called conceptual too often, but I do agree that there are conceptual components of my work that could rightly be called the son or daughter of conceptualism." [Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Jenny Holzer: Language Communicates," *Flash Art* no. 143 (November – December 1988): 112.] In an article from just a few months before this interview, John Howell weighed in on Holzer's relation to Conceptual art: "By revitalizing the rich tradition of language art without churning through its thick Conceptualist history, Holzer has

Holzer a problem of precedent. She hoped to sidestep this by doing what she thought Conceptualist did not: to make art visually interesting.³⁶⁷

This might be why she explains her entrée to the use of language in a visual context as somewhat by chance. In 1983, she said, “it wasn’t a plan; it happened when I moved to New York... I had a desire to do these public works, and also to be more explicit about things.” Indeed, the need to be direct was her main motivation. And as with Kruger, writing presented itself as the best way to go about this: “I thought if I really wanted to be explicit about things, why not *just* write it. I’d always thought it was a little questionable to write on paintings... If I wanted to talk about the stuff it seemed reasonable to just say it or write it.”³⁶⁸ Painting, though, proved to be a major obstacle for Holzer.³⁶⁹ She is of her times with this sentiment, or at least in line with critics like Foster and Owens. Just as they embraced poststructuralist theories of language to advance criticism and to alter the way art is understood, so did Holzer turn to language

managed to make connections between word and world as much as between word and idea.” [John Howell, “The Message is the Medium,” *Artnews* 87, no. 6 (Summer 1988): 126.] This idea is not totally new. It’s been around since the early eighties. As Rex Reason wrote in 1982, “The fact that in the truisms Holzer employs words ‘alone’ would seem to indicate a continuation of the language-as-art-as-language investigations of Weiner, Kosuth, Barry, etc. In fact, though, the truisms have little precedent in the art of the past.” Rex Reason, “Democratism, or I went to see *Chelsea Girls* and Ended up Thinking about Jenny Holzer,” *Real Life* no. 8 (Spring – Summer 1982): 5-13.

³⁶⁷ David Nemiroff, “Personae and Politics, Jenny Holzer,” *Vanguard* 12 no. 9 (November 1983): 26.

³⁶⁸ Nemiroff, “Personae and Politics, Jenny Holzer,” 26.

³⁶⁹ Holzer at one time did paint. Most of her work from graduate school revolved around painting of some sort. She even did some paintings with written texts. It was not until she entered the Whitney Independent Study Program that she decided to give up painting. That was in 1976. In 1978, she had a relapse, and made another stab at painting. That was for an installation at P.S. 1. Needless to say, after that, she has only worked in words.

as a way to eviscerate the ambiguities of visual depictions and to present something with unfettered clarity. She describes this recognition at some length.

There was a political and aesthetic reason for doing it. From a political standpoint, I was drawn to writing because it was possible to be very explicit about things. If you have crucial issues, burning issues, it's good to say exactly what's right and wrong about them, and the perhaps to show a way that things could be helped. So, it seemed to make sense to write because then you can just say it. From an aesthetic standpoint, I thought things in 1977 were a bit nowhere. No painting seemed perfect. In particular, I didn't want to be a narrative painter, which maybe would have been one solution for someone wanting to be explicit. I could have painted striking workers but that didn't feel right to me, so painting at that stage was dead-end.³⁷⁰

Painting was no longer possible. It was now only about written information. It is an aesthetic decision that tied Holzer's work to the fate of the art world's belief in language. But once that faded, so, we might say, did Holzer's art.

Words, unlike images, allowed Holzer to fully express herself. Even though, at times, she was not sure how to exactly define what she was doing. She hesitated to call herself a writer, but at the same time, "I don't completely think of myself as an artist." Nor does she think of her work "in terms of literature." "It's more," she describes, "just basic communication done well enough that it's not unbearable."³⁷¹ But her self-deprecation aside, Holzer does have an idea of the type of experience she was after. "When I show in a gallery or a museum," she says, "it's almost like my work is in a library where people can go to a set place and know they'll find it and have a chance to study."³⁷² This

³⁷⁰ Siegel, "Jenny Holzer's Language Games," 64-65.

³⁷¹ Nemiroff, "Personae and Politics, Jenny Holzer," 27.

³⁷² Siegel, "Jenny Holzer's Language Games," 64.

is a revealing association. It comments on the very nature of her art. From her “Truisms” to her “Survival” and “Living” series, Holzer gave her viewers a lot to read (fig. 36). These aphoristic texts, presented in a variety of formats (from simple posters to Time Square Jumbotrons), were designed to entice viewers: “I realize that people’s attention span, especially if they are on their way to lunch, might be 2.3 seconds and so I try to make each statement have a lot of impact and stand on its own.”³⁷³ Still, different contexts call for different solutions. Just as different media pose different possibilities. Certainly one she took advantage of was electronic signboards.³⁷⁴ She liked how they could move, “which I love because it’s so much like the spoken word: you can emphasize things; you can roll and pause, which is the kinetic equivalent to inflection in the voice.”³⁷⁵ Viewing was now to be like listening, or even speaking. It is an interesting proposition. But even Holzer knows it is a difficult one. She understands what it is like to read texts in a gallery: “it’s miserable.”³⁷⁶

But she is often far too hard on herself. Indeed, many commentators did not share her assessment. They, in fact, enjoyed her work quite a bit. Dan Graham, without doubt a knowledgeable reader, sang high praise for her early

³⁷³ Siegel, “Jenny Holzer’s Language Games,” 68.

³⁷⁴ The excitement over this form of technology seems almost funny now. The type of signboards she used are antiques now. They look incredibly dated, just like the first computers. It is, however, interesting to examine people’s enthusiasm for new technologies. One commentator, Richard Armstrong, spent a good chunk of his review of Holzer’s 1983 show at Barbara Gladstone discussing the actual machines she used. This curiosity seems to mimic the same celebratory discussion in the 1960s about the Xerox machine. Richard Armstrong, “Jenny Holzer,” *Artforum* 22, no. 6 (February 1986): 76.

³⁷⁵ Siegel, “Jenny Holzer’s Language Games,” 66.

³⁷⁶ Siegel, “Jenny Holzer’s Language Games,” 68.

pieces. He liked how “[her] work used the common code of vernacular discourse, the written and the spoken text, permitting it to be read by both the art public and the general public.”³⁷⁷ He also appreciated how her texts evinced multiple meanings. There was no clear position. At times, Holzer seemed to contradict herself. Where she stood was hard to determine. But this elevated her work from mere politics. And Graham recognized this, “unlike most ‘political’ art, which a priori begins with a worked-out belief and then employs a methodology to prove it, Holzer’s statements deconstruct *all* ideological (political) assumptions.”³⁷⁸ His reference to deconstruction is appropriate. Her work, at least in the eyes of many critics, was plugged into this Continental discourse. And surely they made a commensurable pairing.

Holzer had her first major gallery show at Barbara Gladstone’s towards the end of 1983. She used the opportunity to present a full range of her work. There were, of course, her iconic posters from the Truism series. There were also electronic signboards scrolling, in all their digital glory, aphorisms straight from Holzer’s hands (fig. 37). Some more permanent objects appeared too. She engraved several of her terse phrases onto aluminum panels, while several paintings were even on display. These she did in collaboration with graffiti artist, Lady Pink.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Dan Graham, “Signs,” *Artforum* 19, no. 8 (April 1981): 38.

³⁷⁸ Graham, “Signs,” 39.

³⁷⁹ Pink, ostensibly, created her images in reaction to Holzer’s text. However, Richard Armstrong thought the division of labor between the two was hard to determine. See Armstrong, “Jenny Holzer.”

Overall, the show was well received. Although some, like Ellen Handy, did not think it was quite as radical as her earlier projects. But that did not keep her from professing that Holzer was one of her favorite artists.³⁸⁰ And in many ways, the exhibition lived up to Handy's high expectations. Indeed, there was a certain intellectual savvy to Holzer's presentation. Lynn Zelevansky picked up on this. She mentions how "Holzer is fluent in the cultural rhetoric of the day, and she parodies it well. She frequently changes attitudes, purposely making it irritatingly difficult to tell where she stands on the actual issues she addresses."³⁸¹ Obviously, Holzer could successfully navigate the theoretical language circulating throughout the art world, even if she was not entirely committed to it. She still managed to incorporate theory, at times ambivalently, into her work. And this gave commentators something onto which to hold.

Yet confusion arose from her use of imagery. Richard Armstrong, for one, disapproved. He saw the importance of her work in the larger context of text-based art. In fact, she, in his opinion, had already secured herself a spot in history: "from their humble origins on photocopied colored paper to their latest incarnations in state-of-the-art electronic message machines, Jenny Holzer's home-made truisms—part homily, part syllogism, all confounding—have been the most intriguing variant on the final apotheosis of word art."³⁸² But this only applies to her words. Her choice of pictorial forms was problematic (fig. 38). "The images Holzer had programmed to go with the slogans," Armstrong

³⁸⁰ Ellen Handy, "Jenny Holzer," *Arts Magazine* 58, no. 5 (January 1984): 56.

³⁸¹ Lynn Zelevansky, "Jenny Holzer," *Artnews* 83, no. 1 (January 1984): 152.

³⁸² Armstrong, "Jenny Holzer," 76.

remarks, “ameliorated their impact, somehow neutralizing their otherwise considerable powers of disruption by sweetening the message.”³⁸³ The same holds for the paintings done with Lady Pink: “the word-to-picture transformation lost something in translation.”³⁸⁴ These are revealing statements. While it on the one hand suggests that Holzer simply did not have a good visual sensibility, it also speaks to the power of words in the early 1980s. Their presence was welcomed. There was nothing contentious about them. They seemed to be just another artistic technique to employ. Perhaps this apparent lack of gravity struck a chord with Armstrong: “Holzer’s cheery send-ups of Orwellian newspeak serve a double purpose: their humor lets the last of the air out of the work of Joseph Kosuth and company, even while facing the future, dateline 1984, with an optimistically exploitative attitude.”³⁸⁵ But just because they lack the philosophical pretensions of Kosuth does not diminish their seriousness. Holzer was hopelessly sincere, and in some small way, she really hoped to change the way people understood the world. At any rate, she gave commentators something to talk about.

Kruger, perhaps even more than Holzer, was absolutely serious about what she was doing. She addressed urgent social issues in her art. And the climate in which she worked was, all in all, hostile to her subject matter.³⁸⁶ Still

³⁸³ Armstrong, “Jenny Holzer,” 76.

³⁸⁴ Armstrong, “Jenny Holzer,” 76.

³⁸⁵ Armstrong, “Jenny Holzer,” 76.

³⁸⁶ Of course, it depends on the context. Kruger often addressed her art to a larger social situation. However, her work, most of the time, was presented in an art context. For some, this neutralized its impact. Tamar Garb discussed this in a review of Kruger’s ICA London show of 1984. As she remarked “the gallery

she found the juxtaposition of text and stock images very effective. They provided a potent way to reinforce her didactic messages. As she said in relation to the state of the art market in 1985, “[she felt it was necessary to] address that situation in the most forthright language possible.”³⁸⁷ And she did, as written information gave her the means to do so. She explains this in a bit of detail. “I think the use of the pronoun,” Kruger says, “really cuts through the grease on a certain level.” She adds, “it’s very economic and forthright invitation to a spectator to enter the discursive and pictorial space of that object.”³⁸⁸ She also puts it in these terms: “I see my production as procedural, that is, a constant series of attempts to make certain visual and grammatical displacements.”³⁸⁹

The language aspect of Kruger’s work always caught the attention of critics, which makes sense since it was the most noticeable feature of her art (fig.

context, of necessity, domesticates and weakens what is essentially an art of confrontation.” Garb does, however, concede that Kruger’s art does have relevance in the art world, and that in and of itself is worth something. Tamar Garb, “Barbara Kruger at the ICA,” *Artscribe International* 45 (February – April 1984): 64-65. A similar sentiment was expressed a year earlier by Lynn Zelevansky. In her review of Kruger’s solo show at Annina Nosei, Zelevansky thought Kruger’s was too close to the idiom of advertising, which made her work complicit to the very system she was critiquing. Lynn Zelevansky, “Barbara Kruger,” *Artnews* 82, no. 5 (May 1983): 154.

³⁸⁷ Linker, “Barbara Kruger,” 36.

³⁸⁸ Jeanne Siegel, “Barbara Kruger: Picture and Words,” *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 10 (June 1987): 21.

³⁸⁹ Siegel, “Barbara Kruger: Picture and Words,” 17. Certain words and phrases reoccur in Kruger’s speech. Obviously, “forthright” means something to her. Just as the phrase “cutting through the grease” must also. In an interview from 1997, twelve to fourteen years after the ones mentioned above, Kruger, remarkably returns to the same clichés: “The brevity of the text is about cutting through the grease. I just want to address people in a very forthright manner. It is why I always use pronouns, because they cut through the in the same way.” See Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve, “The Art of Public Address,” *Art in America* 85, no. 11 (November 1997): 92-99.

39). As Therese Lichtenstein noted in 1983, "this desire to experiment with language for the purposes of social change (more specifically, in order to alter the position of women within a patriarchal cultural hegemony) has been a major concern of Barbara Kruger's work for a number of years."³⁹⁰ Kruger's images were seen as secondary, or not nearly as powerful as her choice of words. Tamar Garb observed that, "the words exist, not to explain the image but to subvert it, erecting an opposition between image and text which echoes the opposition within the text itself."³⁹¹ This sentiment was echoed a couple years later by Shaun Caley when he wrote about her 1986 solo show at Annina Nosei: "Barbara Kruger's new work consistently explore image and text, focusing on the subtext, which emerges in dynamic bravado: the violence of the word undermining the more subtle, and therefore more insidious, media image."³⁹²

These are striking comments. Time and time again, it is the words of Kruger that received attention. Partially this is due to the type of picture she made. Words were laid over images, which gave an implicit hierarchy, where obviously, language was on top (fig. 40). But it also spoke to the sensibilities of the time. Critics were looking for the chance to talk about language, and maybe even, theories of language. There were certain pressures to mention linguistic theories, or really, any type of literary jargon—a simple association was good

³⁹⁰ Therese Lichtenstein, "Barbara Kruger," *Arts Magazine* 57, no. 9 (May 1983): 4. Tamar Garb also saw this in Kruger's work: "'We won't play nature to your culture' is the defiant title of Barbara Kruger's exhibition at the ICA—words which have a familiar ring to all who are acquainted with recent feminist theory." Garb, "Barbara Kruger at the ICA," 64.

³⁹¹ Garb, "Barbara Kruger at the ICA," 64.

³⁹² Shaun Caley, "Barbara Kruger," *Flash Art* no. 128 (May – June, 1986): 55.

enough for most. Barry Schwabsky sums up this development best. He too reviewed Kruger's latest show at Nosei's. And in many ways his observations are not too different from Caley. But unlike his colleague, he thought Kruger was on the decline. He also was not so sure if he got much pleasure out of what Caley describes as "one-liner social commentary."³⁹³ In fact, that was most likely the source of the problem. This is what Schwabsky saw: "Barbara Kruger's work is losing in force what it is gaining in complexity. Her images have usually been little more than effective counterpoints to her words. Think about it; how well do you remember the image that went with, say, 'Surveillance Is Your Busywork'? That's still the case."³⁹⁴ No matter what image Kruger filched, the words she incorporated resonated to such a degree that there was, in a way, nothing left to see. But Schwabsky's observation also suggests a diminished edge in Kruger's latest effort. There is no more shock. Viewers expect what he or she sees. And even though she gives a lot to read, there is nothing left to talk about.

It makes sense, then, that by 1987 her radicality was coming into question. Certainly her decision to show with Mary Boone did not help her cause. How could an artist with such professed political commitment show with the gallery known for advancing the careers of David Salle and Julian Schnabel? This was definitely on the mind of Anders Stephanson in an interview with Kruger from 1987. He was flummoxed by her choice. Yet Kruger saw no problem with it. It

³⁹³ Caley, "Barbara Kruger," 55.

³⁹⁴ Barry Schwabsky, "Barbara Kruger," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 9 (May 1986): 117.

did not trouble her to exhibit along side Salle whose work seems so antithetical to her own. Indeed, she even provided a quasi-defense for his paintings.

I decline the role of moral regulator, a kind of scrutinizing monitor whose task is to remind people of their 'responsibilities.' David is an important, generative artist whose work has foregrounded the abjection, the totting stuff of sentiment that leaks out of every cliché and every 'feeling.' Sappy humanism becomes a joke, as does the notion that art can be based *solely* on either ideas *or* the wild and crazy virtuosity of the forearm. I *don't* subscribe to the riff that naked ladies constitute just another phylum in the perpetual parade of 'empty signifiers,' but I certainly won't fall in line with a kind of censorious, rampaging, self-righteousness which wants to excise sexuality from the representational realm. Anti-porn and censorship campaigns constitute the first wave of imminently repressive social and sexual legislation which accompany the establishment of a global homo/fluid-phobic culture. Considering this, I think it wise to refrain from uncritically punitive polemics in as complex a field as sexuality and its images.³⁹⁵

This is hard to believe. Owens must have been shocked. Kruger seems to have suspended her critical judgment. And in the process hidden behind a theoretical justification of a brazenly economic move on her part. But perhaps this is too strong, since her comment also reveals that Salle's position in the 1980s art world was quite complex. Everyone had an opinion on him. Indeed, as Dan Cameron describes, he was one of the most written about artists of his generation.³⁹⁶ And much that was written had a decidedly literary bent to it. More often than not commentators mentioned such issues as frustrated narratives, heterogeneity of meaning, deconstructive sensibilities, and allusions to linguistic systems. If

³⁹⁵ Stephanson, "Barbara Kruger," 55-56.

³⁹⁶ Dan Cameron, "The Salle Academy," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 3 (November 1985): 74-76.

anything, the rhetoric surrounding Salle was a water-downed poststructuralism. It was theory light. And a sign that images were rhetorically becoming texts.

Salle's work was initially caught up in the debate over whether or not painting was a valid postmodern art. As we have seen, writers like Foster and Owens thought no. Yet painter and critic, Thomas Lawson, for example, thought yes.³⁹⁷ Lawson, in fact, went so far as to suggest that Salle should be considered a member of the "Pictures" generation. Not everyone agreed with this assessment. But Salle's connection with Lawson was pronounced. Lawson, who was also a figurative painter, edited a theoretically inclined magazine called *Real Life*.³⁹⁸ It was, at least in the beginning, a counter to *October*. Whereas *October* generally touted photography, *Real Life* held out for painting.³⁹⁹ And by 1982, when Salle had simultaneous shows at Mary Boone and Leo Castelli, many had realized his connection to Lawson's magazine.⁴⁰⁰ Salle, for his part, never aligned himself with any one group. It was not his style. And he left his reception to others. Of

³⁹⁷ See Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 40-47.

³⁹⁸ Lawson was a much better writer than he was a painter.

³⁹⁹ *Real Life* covered many of the same issues addressed in *October*. They made a concerted effort to review the non-profit gallery scene, there were articles against pluralism, many writers dealt with postmodernism, film took a place of prominence. There were of course articles that differed from what appeared in *October*. For example, Richard Hertz wrote a scathing critique of Benjamin Buchloh's writing style (Richard Hertz, "A Critique of Authoritarian Rhetoric," *Real Life* no. 8 (Spring – Summer 1982): 15-17.) In the following issue, Howard Singerman, wrote a defense for the recent revival of painting. Also artists like Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, and Dan Graham wrote regularly for *Real Life*. In addition, Sherrie Levine, a central figure of the appropriation art scene, exhibited with the "*Real Life* artists." In a 1981 show, held in London, Levine was placed along side artists such as Richard Bosman, Eric Fischl, Michael Hurson, Neil Jenny, Thomas Lawson, Gerry Morehead, Walter Robinson, and David Salle—a combination, that just a few years later, would seem unimaginable.

⁴⁰⁰ Donald Kuspit, "David Salle," *Art in America* 70, no. 6 (Summer 1982): 142.

course, he made it difficult on himself. He made images that were overtly sexist (which he denies, “I think it’s a predictable ‘shoot the messenger’ type of misreading”).⁴⁰¹ And he was coyly ambiguous in his interviews. Perhaps this why Donald Kuspit equated Salle with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous character Jay Gatsby.⁴⁰²

But in 1985, Salle’s reception changed markedly. Textual associations that ranged from narrative befuddlement to comparisons with Derrida defined him. During this period, he enjoyed enormous exposure. He was everywhere. And it was captured in a flurry of articles and reviews over the last half of the year. Part of the reason for this was his solo show at Mary Boone’s. Another must have been the taboo aura surrounding his paintings. They were dirty (fig. 41). And someone like Catherine Millet liked that. But she did not let pleasure get in the way of theory. Indeed, she was dead serious when she said, “through these un-unified assemblages Salle seeks to come as close as possible to the mechanisms of language.” A bit further along she adds, “we decode the painting, not be referring to a reality that is both a criterion of truth and the location of a certain homogenization, but by referring exclusively to the systems of codes, which do

⁴⁰¹ Robert Rosenblum, “David Salle,” *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003): 265. In an article from the Summer of 1984, Salle revealed to Gerald Marzorati that he always liked porn: “I know that I have always loved pornography. Not all pornography—one develops a certain taste. But there is something about pornography that is very compelling.” Gerald Marzorati, “The Artful Dodger,” *Artnews* 83, no. 6 (Summer 1984): 54.

⁴⁰² Kuspit went on to say, “The subtle, and subtly assertive, redirecting of attention away from the model to the artist, the subject matter to the art—the other to the self—is also the heart of his [Salle’s] Gatsby-like showmanship, and perhaps the paradigm of art.” See Donald Kuspit, “David Salle: The New Gatsby,” *Art Criticism* 5, no. 1 (1988): 59-60.

not conceal their arbitrariness, characteristic of any language.”⁴⁰³ Salle, though, in Millet’s estimation, did not come to this without precedent. Indeed, he learned a great deal from Conceptual art. Just as, some might say, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer did. But Millet is only interested in Salle because “he is also one of today’s young painters who has best learned the lessons of conceptual art, that is to say, analysis of the process of language that participate in our perception of the work of art.”⁴⁰⁴

Millet though was not working in a bubble. Others found her linguistic analogies to the point. Dan Cameron suggested that, “like a critic, David Salle, implicates his viewer into a process of visual thinking that is obsessed with formulae and linguistics, yet equally obsessed with facing the unknown.”⁴⁰⁵ Certainly, this “unknown” Cameron speaks of applies to the difficulty commentators had in interpreting Salle’s works. Salle, for his part, stressed repeatedly in 1985 that “there’s no narrative. There really is none, there isn’t one.”⁴⁰⁶ But, of course, that did not stop critics. It only egged them on. Case in point is Nancy Grimes’ comment: “Visual puns and provocative juxtapositions of styles and subjects entice viewers into frustrated attempts at interpretation—if we regard Salle’s images as words, their sum doesn’t add up to a logical

⁴⁰³ Catherine Millet, “David Salle,” *Flash Art* no. 123 (Summer 1985): 34.

⁴⁰⁴ Millet, “David Salle,” 34.

⁴⁰⁵ Cameron, “The Salle Academy,” 76.

⁴⁰⁶ Robert Pincus-Witten, “Interview with David Salle,” *Flash Art* no. 123 (Summer 1985): 36. Just recently Salle recounted what he has been trying to achieve in his work from the very beginning: “Ever since I started painting, I have tried to get the fluidity and surprise of image connection, the simultaneity of film montage, into painting. It’s that basic alchemy of imagistic syntax—two things in the right sequence make a third thing or, rather, allow the mind to make a new thing.” Rosenblum, “David Salle,” 264.

sentence. Instead of a coherent reading, the works elicit associations that often expose contradictory attitudes and values."⁴⁰⁷ These narrative discontinuities were usually explained away by pithy analogies to poststructuralist thought (fig. 42). Granted, by now, some of these ideas first interpreted by Foster and Owens several years earlier had begun to drift into cliché. But not entirely, as there was still some cache to these French associations. Indeed, Kristin Olive remarked in her essay "David Salle's Deconstructive Strategy" that, "a comparison of [Salle's] painting with Derrida's deconstruction demonstrates that Salle's methods and intentions share some traits with poststructuralist writings, and reveals crucial aspects of contemporary thinking in philosophy and the arts."⁴⁰⁸ Kuspit would agree with this assessment. In fact, he turned to Derrida in order to defend Salle's depiction of women. Salle's paintings, Kuspit claims, "[are] also a deconstructive odyssey—as full of unpredictable adventures as those of Ulysses and Leopold Bloom—of his own relation to that personally most dramatic, socially most vivid object, woman."⁴⁰⁹ This is, at best, a tenuous defense. And obviously Kuspit would not concur with Robert Storr's claim that Salle's art is complicit with the sex industry (fig. 43).⁴¹⁰ Most likely, neither would Janet Kardon and Lisa Phillips, who in their catalogue essays for Salle's exhibition at

⁴⁰⁷ Nancy Grimes, "David Salle," *Artnews* 84, no. 7 (September 1985): 133.

⁴⁰⁸ Kristin Olive, "David Salle's Deconstructive Strategy," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 3 (November 1985): 82.

⁴⁰⁹ Donald Kuspit, "David Salle," *Artforum* 24, no. 3 (November 1985): 103.

⁴¹⁰ "It is these qualities and this failure, not just its centerfold luridness, that the work of David Salle shares with the products of the sex industry." See Robert Storr, "Salle's Gender Machine," *Art in America* 76, no. 6 (June 1988): 24.

the ICA Philadelphia fail to find fault with his representation of women.⁴¹¹

Phillips in fact defends him, while Kardon argues that “work as complex and elusive as Salle’s tends to set the conditions for writing.” She continues, “[his works] are related to the elisions and discontinuities of linguistic structures.”⁴¹²

It is all about language. No discussion of Salle, it now seems, can be complete without some sort of allusion to linguistics, narrative, or for the bold, deconstruction. Whatever happened to the radicality of poststructuralist theory? Was it not the intellectual impetus behind the radical critique of Salle’s art in the first place?

* * *

Critical ambivalence would soon shape the Salle discourse, especially after his mid-career survey at the Whitney in 1987. Indeed, no one really knew what to do with him.⁴¹³ But, nevertheless, an important intellectual transformation occurred. Poststructuralist theory no longer knew boundaries. However, to still call it poststructuralism was a bit of a misnomer. What was being written by critics and what actually was said by someone like Derrida, or Barthes, or Foucault was often miles apart. This thing known as “poststructuralism” or “theory” in the art world had taken a life of its own. Perhaps this is why, around 1985,

⁴¹¹ Janet Kardon and Lisa Phillips, *David Salle* exh. cat. (Philadelphia: ICA, University of Pennsylvania, 1986).

⁴¹² Lisa Phillips, “His Equivocal Touch in the Vicinity of History,” in Janet Kardon and Lisa Phillips, *David Salle* exh. cat. (Philadelphia: ICA, University of Pennsylvania, 1986); Janet Kardon, “The Old, the New, and the Different,” in Janet Kardon and Lisa Phillips, *David Salle* exh. cat. (Philadelphia: ICA, University of Pennsylvania, 1986): 9.

⁴¹³ Nancy Grimes, “Teasing Images, Hip Estrangement,” *Artnews* 86, no. 4 (April 1987): 173; and Ronald Jones, “David Salle,” *Flash Art* no. 133 (April 1987): 82.

Foster and Owens began to retract themselves from day-to-day criticism for more academic endeavors. Their opinions counted for less and less. There were new “theorists” filling the pages of art magazines, some were artists others were journalists. Neither, most likely, met with Foster and Owens’ approval. What critics currently bandied around, as evinced by the reception of Salle, was a string of poststructuralist clichés. In 1996, with the benefit of historical distance, Foster looked back on the moment. A certain degree of resentment, one could infer, rang in his voice as he said, “By the late 1980s my conjuncture had become a scene of clichés, as the postmodernist models of art as text and image as simulacrum melted down into cynical ploys and endgame moves.”⁴¹⁴ Foster is right. That is what happened.

* * *

But the critic Robert Pincus-Witten puts it even better. Time was on his side. Unlike Foster, he had the benefit of seeing the ebbs and flows of several generations of artists. He began his career with the art of the late sixties, made his name with the art of the early seventies, and by the end of the eighties what he was witnessing now must have seemed like old hat. Throughout the decade he occasionally wrote an article entitled “Entries.” They took on a diaristic form. At times, they were a bit dandyish, certainly they veered towards the gossipy, and without doubt, Pincus-Witten must have, at least in his own mind, envisioned himself as a sort of Baudelaire for his times. All that aside, it is often the casual remark, or the smallest detail that proves to be so revealing. That is

⁴¹⁴ Kwon, “Return of the Real,” 63.

what makes Pincus-Witten's observations so poignant. In an entry dated from March 12, 1988, he tries to come to terms with the latest trends shaping the New York art scene. With a resigned tone, he mentioned Dan Cameron's most recent curatorial effort, *Art and Its Double, A New York Perspective*, which was shown in Barcelona and Madrid at the end of 1987 and the beginning of 1988. Pincus-Witten did not care for the exhibition and what it said about the current state of contemporary art, for he concludes, and this is important, "the contemporary work of art was to be, before all else, a text."⁴¹⁵ Finally, without any sense of interference, images had become texts. They were one and the same thing—rhetorically that is.

Pincus-Witten elaborates, a bit further along, on his earlier pronouncement. It was not positive. He did not like how, "an art that takes deconstruction on faith, has become a style—for all that deconstruction is said to mitigate against so bourgeois a notion. All those photographs, appropriated images, texts, geometric deployments, framing gambits, found objects, conceptual revivalisms, enlarged fields of organization, all those strategies mean that deconstruction as style is," and this really is the most appropriate ending for this story, "as Joseph Kosuth, sitting alongside me on the banquette of Mr. Chow's murmured, 'As dead as dog spelled backwards.'"⁴¹⁶

* * *

⁴¹⁵ Robert Pincus-Witten, "Entries: Concentrated Juice & Kitschy Kitschy Koons," 34.

⁴¹⁶ Pincus-Witten, "Entries: Concentrated Juice & Kitschy Kitschy Koons," 34.

I came across Pincus-Witten's remarks early in my research, before I had a real idea in which direction my project would go. I had a sense, but it was still too early to make any firm commitments. But his terse little phrase, "the contemporary work of art was to be, before all else, a text," struck me instantly. I duly recorded it, and filed it away with the rest of my notes. As my writing progressed, Pincus-Witten's observations became more important for me. I realized that it represented a marker for the end of an era. I also liked how Kosuth was able to have the last word. It seemed fitting, and I imagined Kosuth would appreciate it.

Towards the final days of writing I returned to the actual article. I had not seen it in its original context since I first wrote that quotation down nearly three years ago to the day. I believe I needed to check a page number, or volume number, something technical. Needless to say I was not looking for much, but I was surprised by what I found. It seems that the issue of *Arts Magazine* in which Pincus-Witten's article heralded the symbolic close of poststructuralism's influence on eighties art and criticism, was also reevaluating the legacy of Conceptual art. Not only was Duane Michaels' photograph, *Seth Siegel* (1969), on the cover, but there was a reprint of Arthur R. Rose's famous interview with Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, and Weiner. Accompanying that was another interview with the same individuals, discussing their art twenty years after the publication of that legendary, highly contrived, conversation.

The coincidence moved me. Everything seemed to come full circle, as the twenty-five year period from Judd's first solo show in 1963 to Pincus-Witten's

diary entry from 1988 appeared to mold into one form. Of course, they did not actually. But for a moment—especially from the perspective of seeing the past take shape sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, page by page—it did. This recognition was like becoming aware of a previously inaudible drone, or humming. The sound, for example, a cheap fluorescent light makes or, perhaps, the faint buzz of the art historical rhetoric that initially unsettled me. Once I hear it I cannot put it out of my mind; and as it grows louder and louder the more I dwell on it. When it comes to fluorescent lights, I leave the room. When it came to art history, I wrote this dissertation.

Figures



Fig. 1. Lawrence Weiner, installation of *Propeller* paintings at Seth Siegelaub Fine Arts (1964)

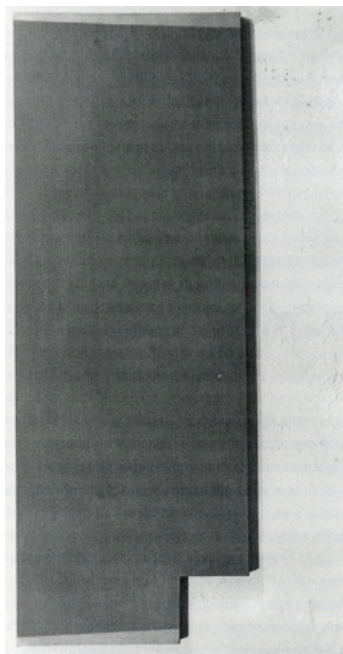


Fig. 2. Lawrence Weiner, *Untitled* (1966)



Fig. 3. Donald Judd, installation Leo Castelli Gallery (1966)



Fig.4. "Primary Structures," [from left to right] Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Robert Grosvenor (1966)



Fig. 5. Donald Judd, installation Green Gallery (1963)

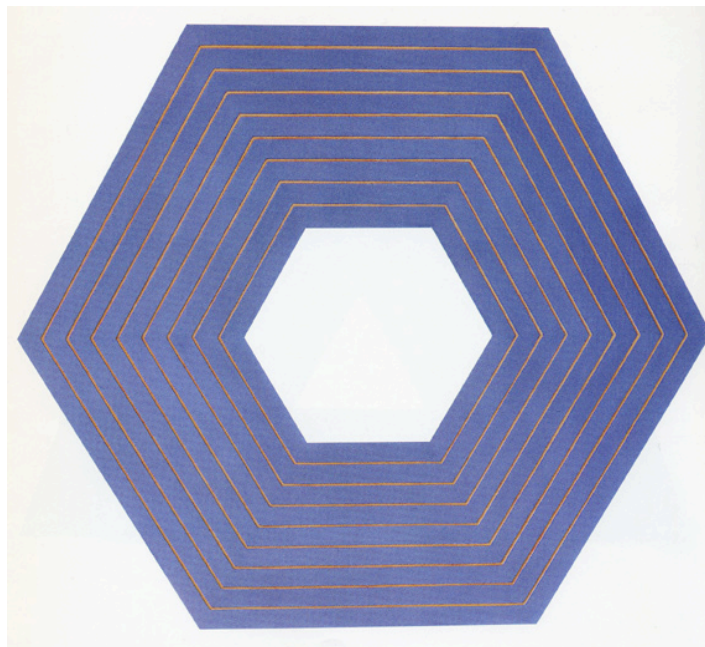


Fig. 6. Frank Stella, *Sidney Guberman* (1963)

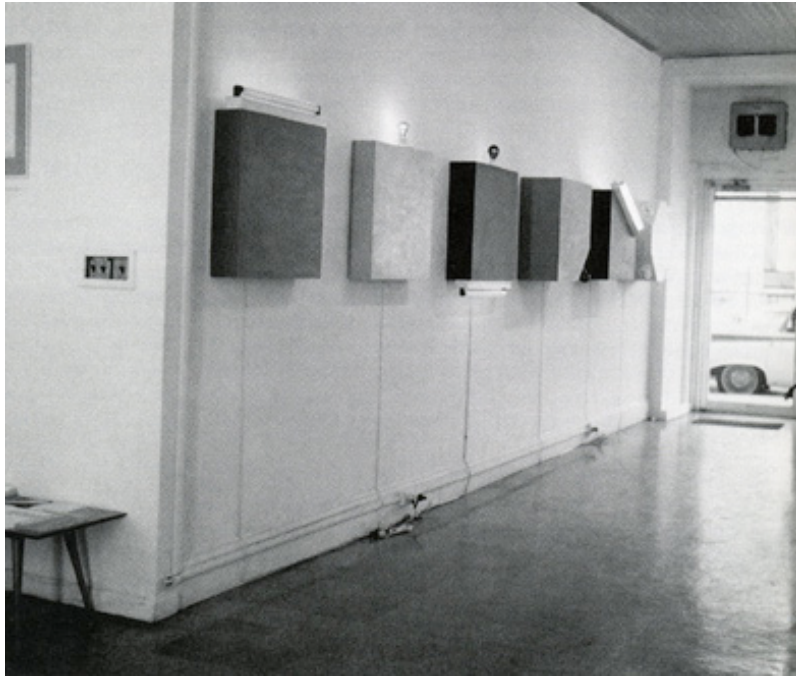


Fig. 7. Dan Flavin, installation Kaymar Gallery (1964)



Fig. 8. Donald Judd, *Untitled* (1966)

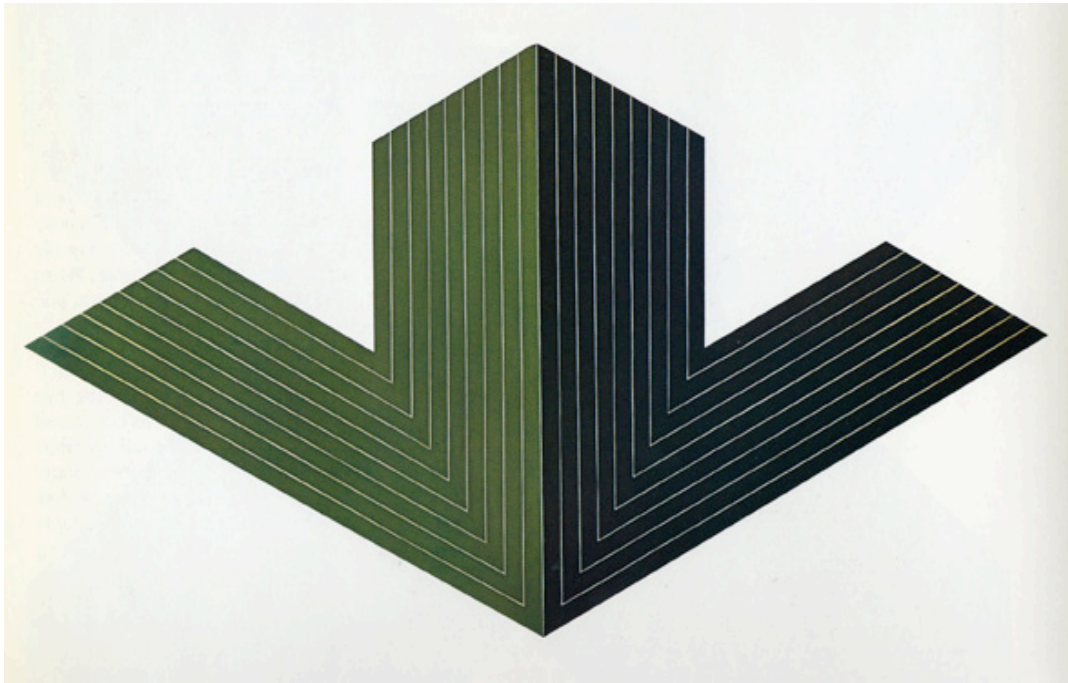


Fig. 9. Frank Stella, *Ifafa II* (1964)

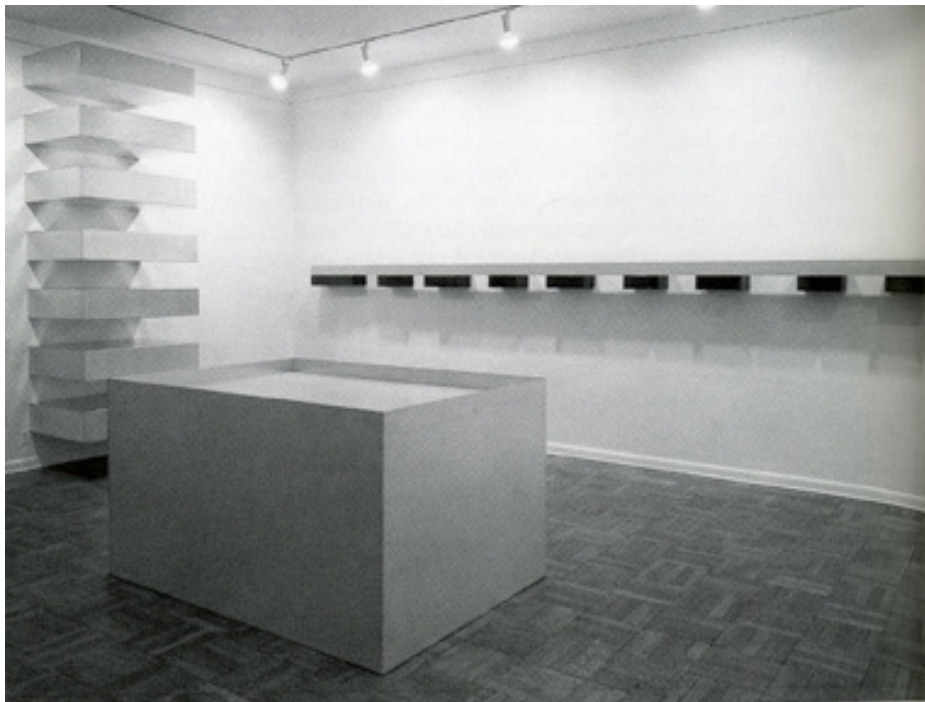


Fig. 10. Donald Judd, installation Leo Castelli Gallery (1966)

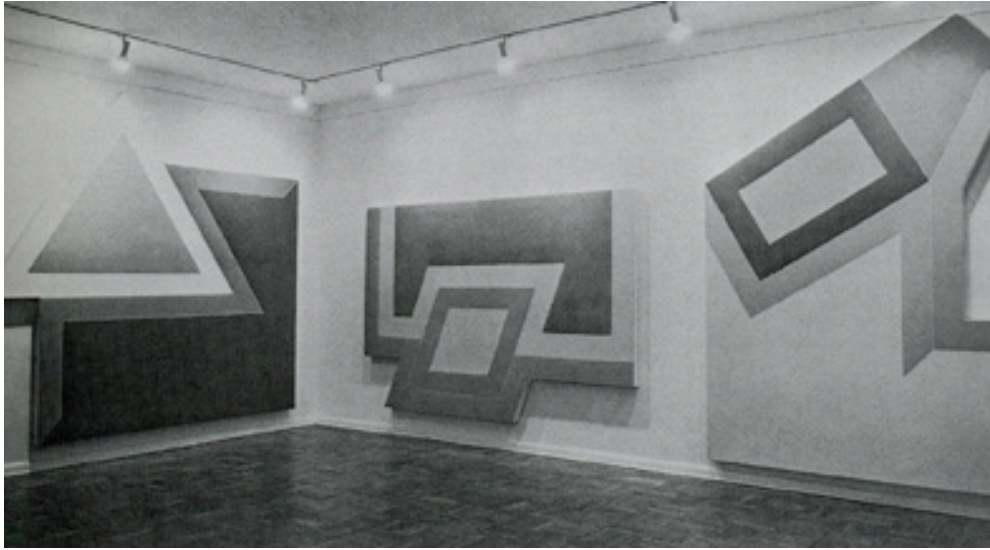


Fig. 11. Frank Stella, installation Leo Castelli Gallery (1966)

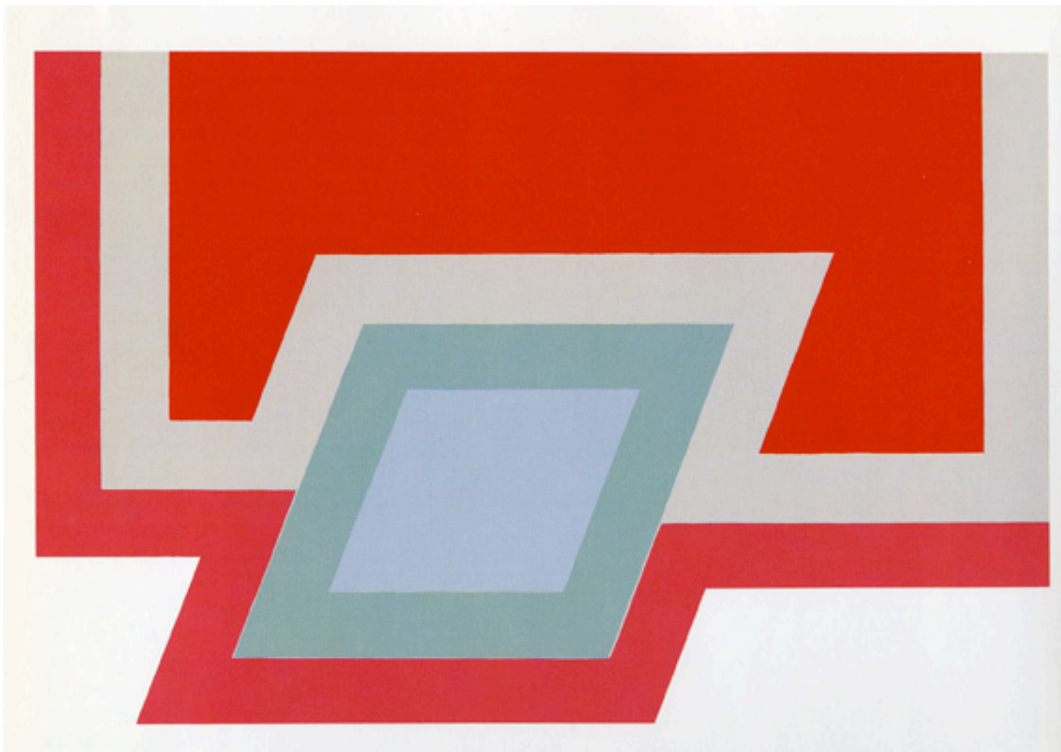


Fig. 12. Frank Stella, *Conway I* (1966)

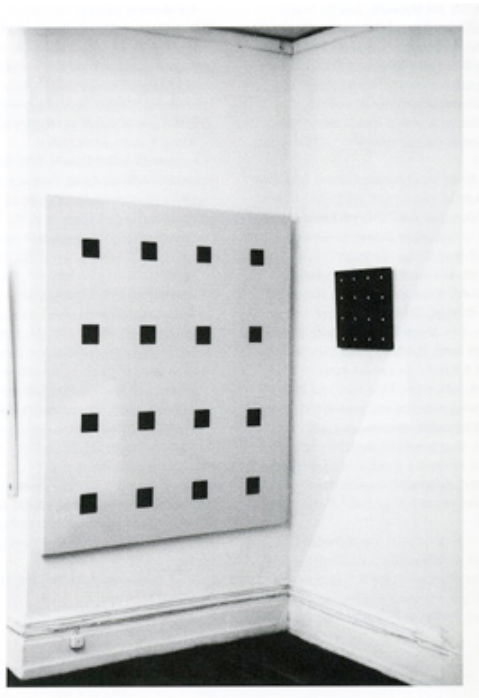


Fig. 13. Robert Barry, installation Westerly Gallery (1964)

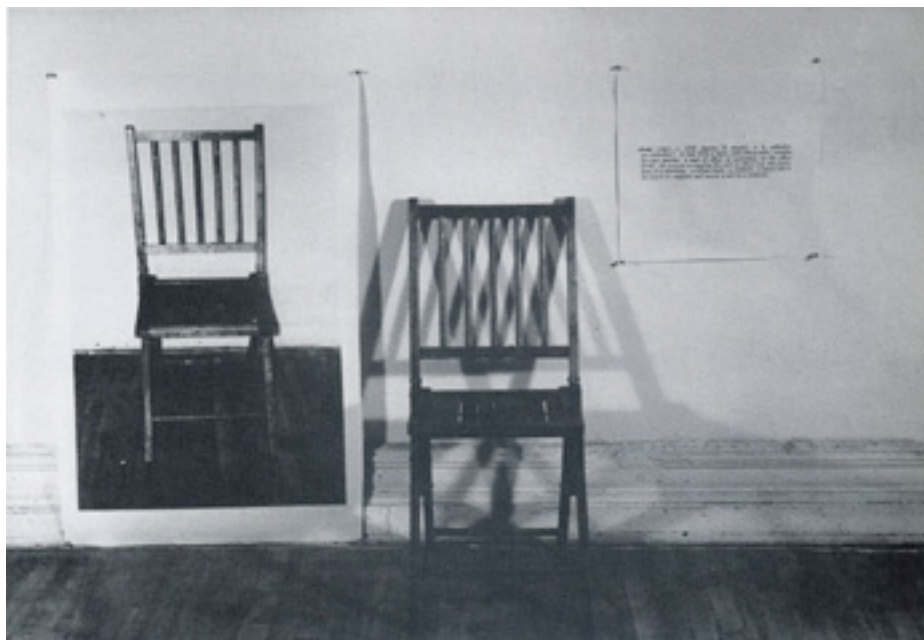


Fig. 14. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (1965)

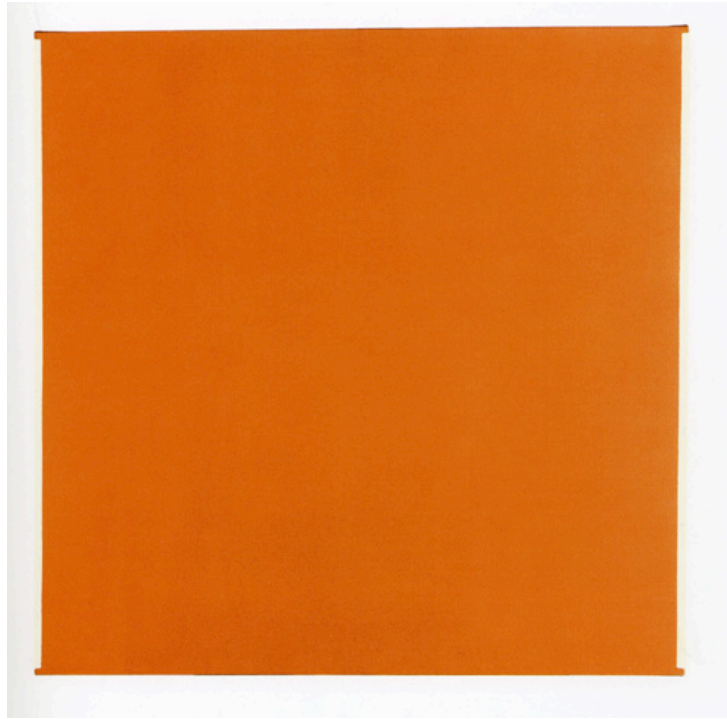


Fig. 15. Robert Barry, *Orange Painting* (1966)

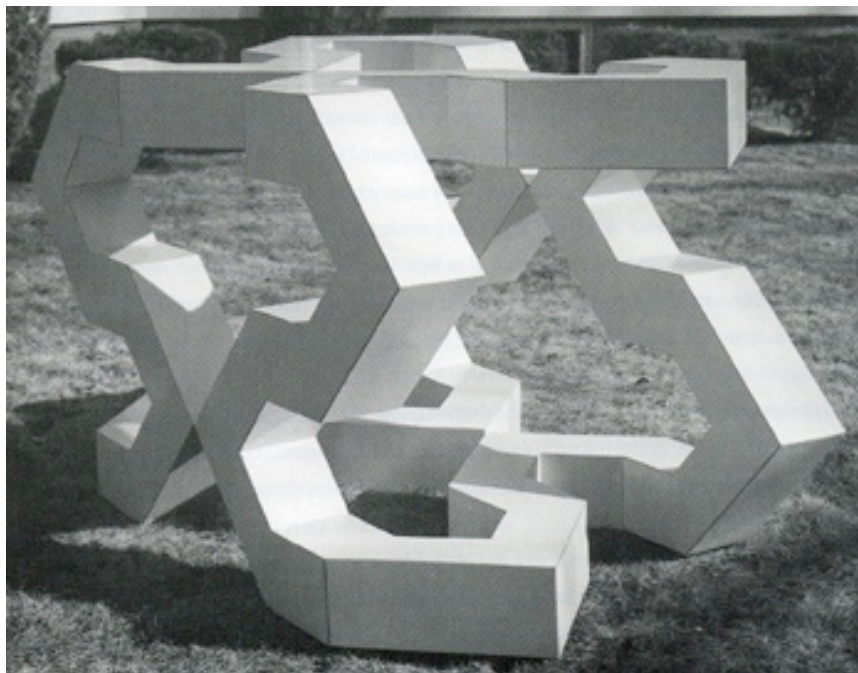


Fig. 16. Douglas Huebler, *Truro Series 3-66* (1966)

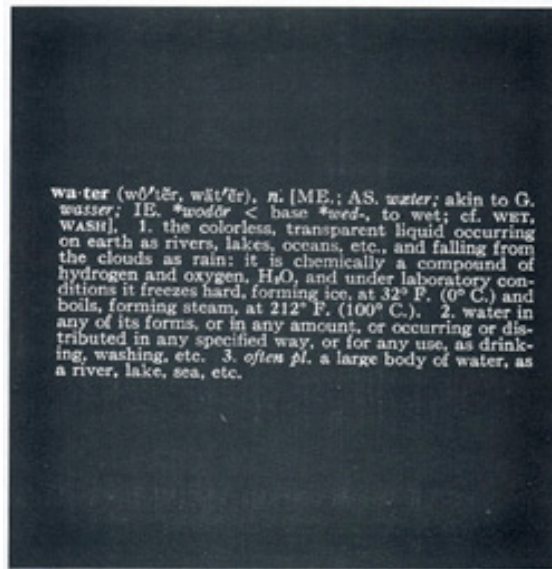


Fig. 17. Joseph Kosuth, *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [water]* (1966)

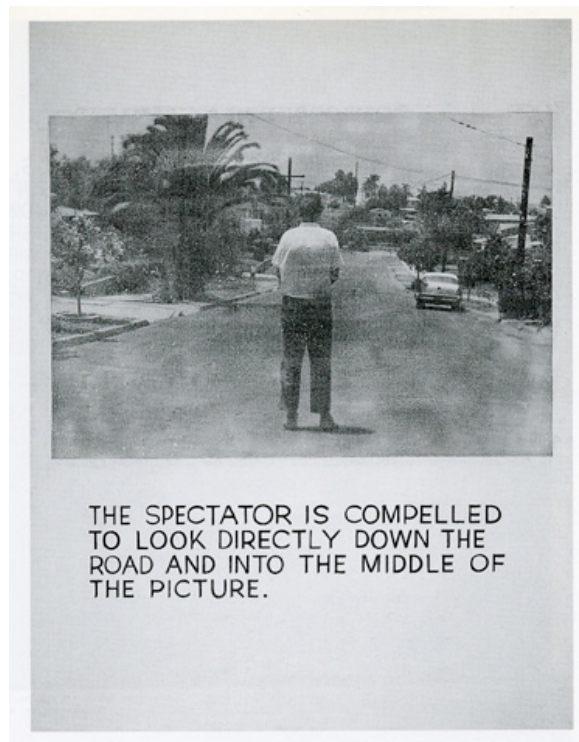


Fig. 18. John Baldessari, *The Spectator is Compelled...* (1967-1968)



Fig. 19. Max's Kansas City

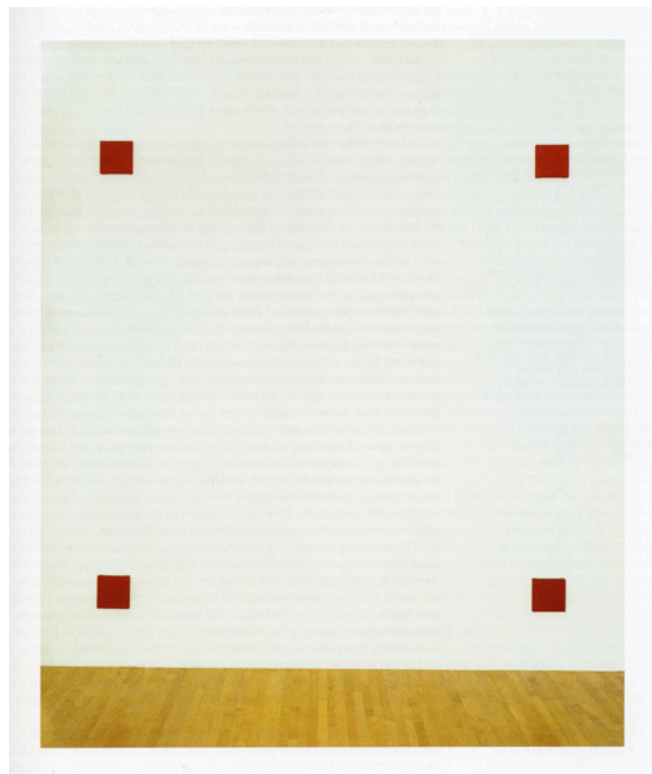


Fig. 20. Robert Barry, *4 Red Squares* (1967)



Fig. 21. Lawrence Weiner, *Staples, Stakes, Twine, Turf* (1968)

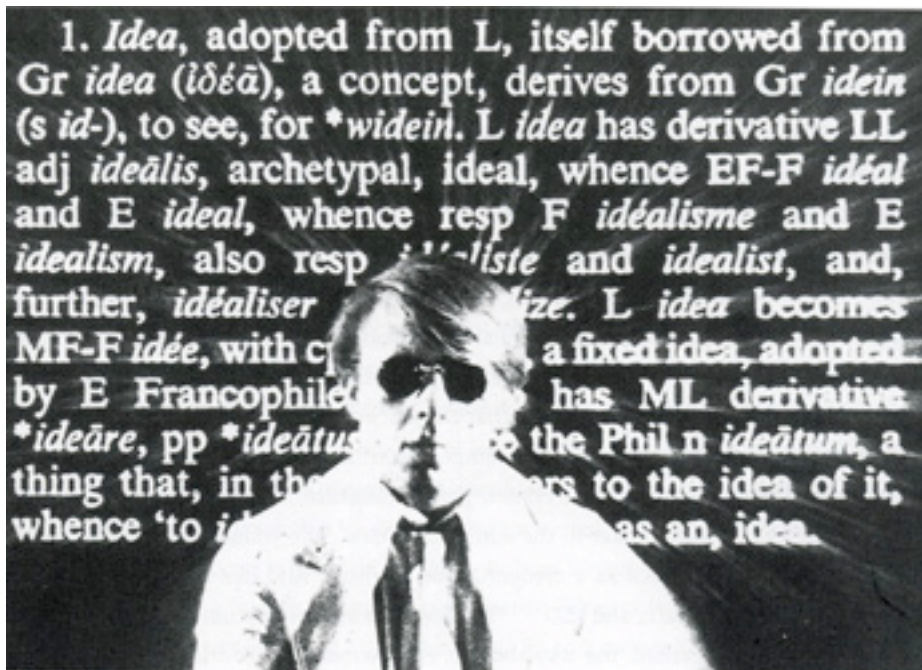


Fig. 22. Joseph Kosuth in *Newsweek* (29 July 1968)



Fig. 23. Joseph Kosuth, installation Gallery 669 (1968)

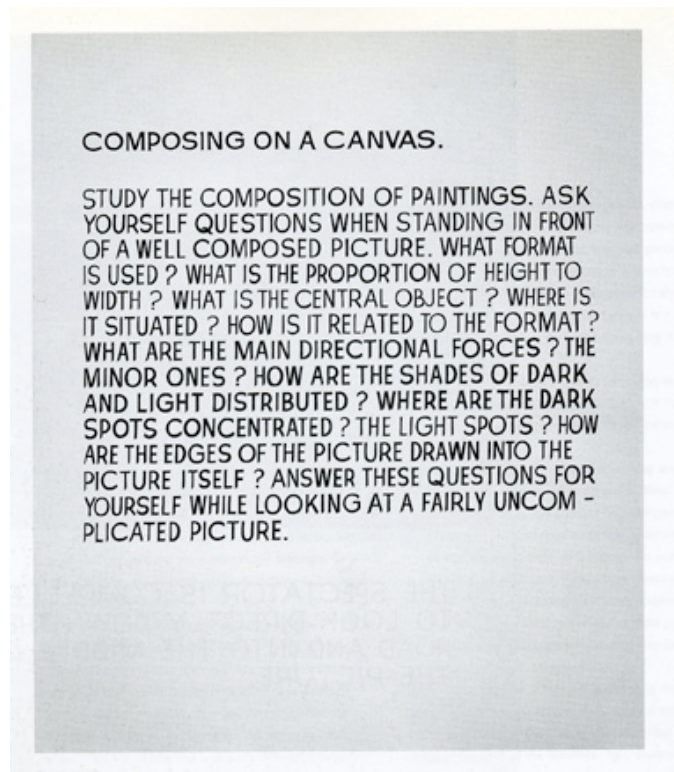


Fig. 24. John Baldessari, *Composing on Canvas* (1967-1968)

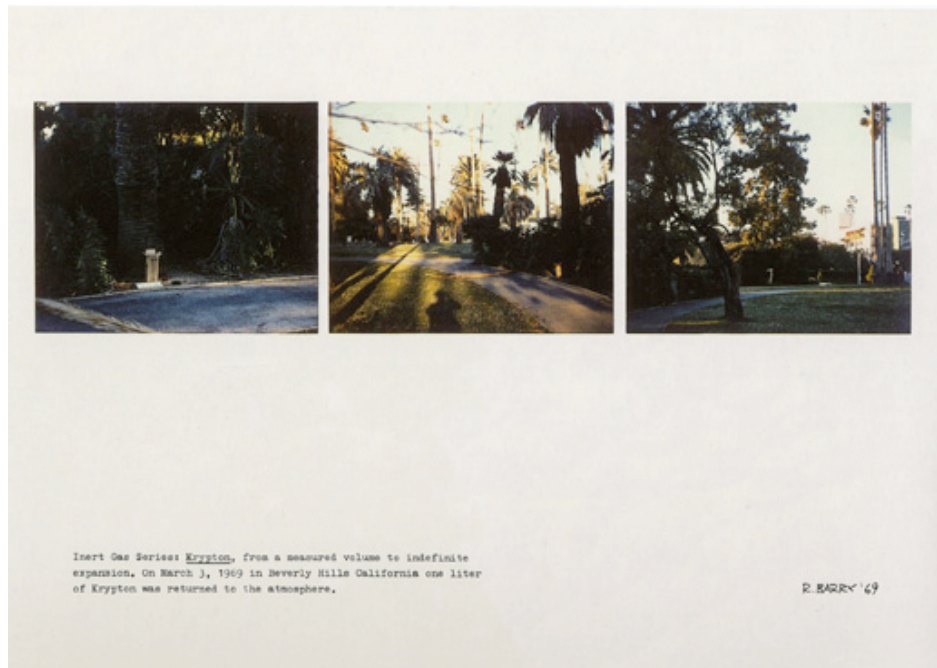


Fig. 25. Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series: Krypton* (1969)

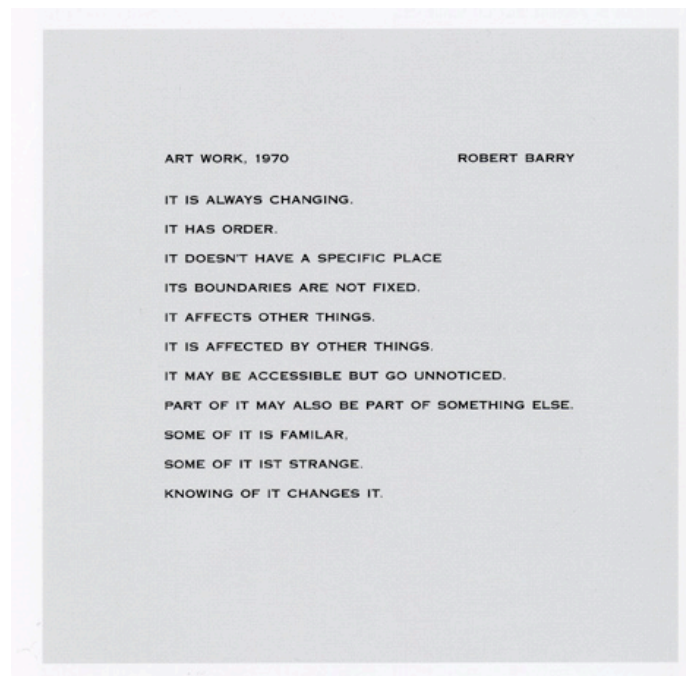


Fig. 26. Robert Barry, *Art Work* (1970)



Fig. 27. Robert Barry, *Invitation Piece* (1972-1973)



Fig. 28. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #1* (1968)

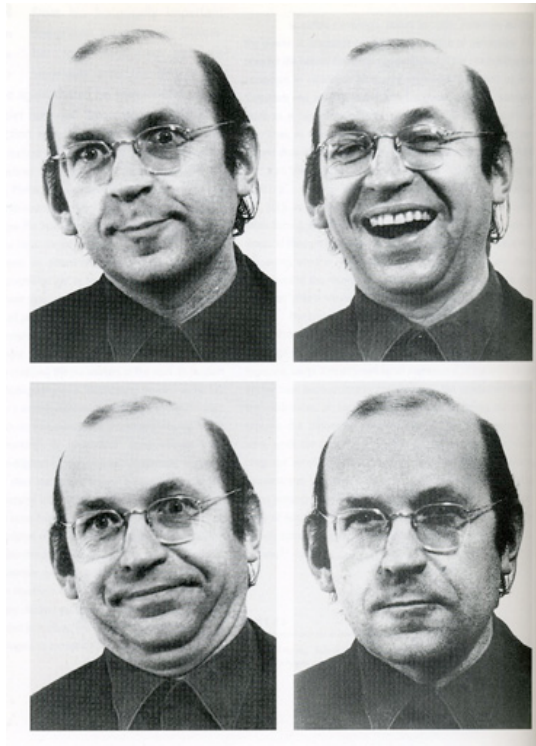


Fig. 29. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #101 West Germany* (1973)



Fig. 30. Lawrence Weiner, *A 36" x 36" Removal to the Lathing or Support of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (1968)



Fig. 31. Lawrence Weiner, *Overdone, Doneover, and Overdone, and Doneover* (1971)



Fig. 32. Lawrence Weiner, *From Major to Minor...* (1974)

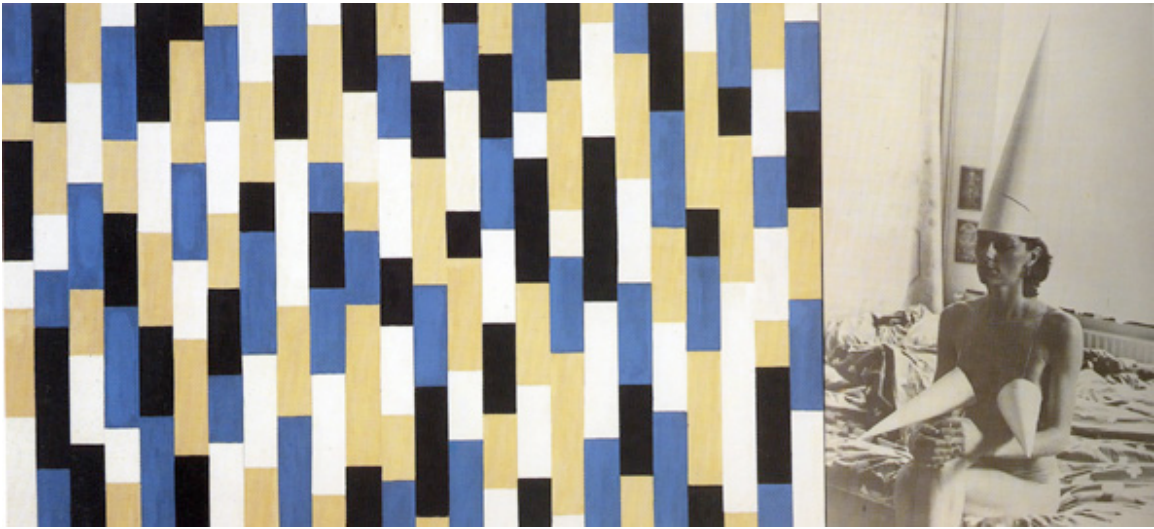


Fig. 33. David Salle, *Autopsy* (1981)



Fig. 34. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We Have Received Orders Not to Move)* (1982)

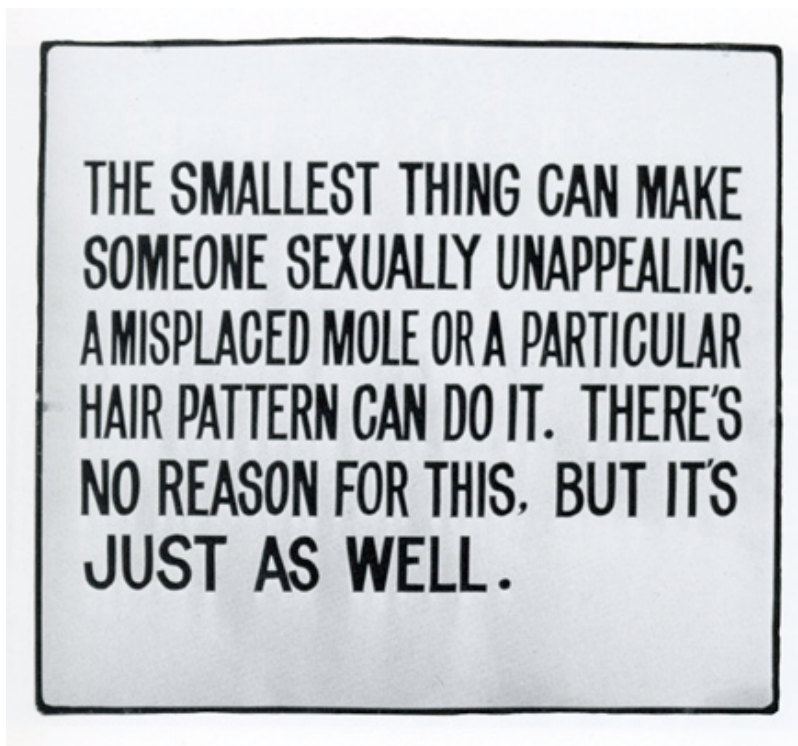


Fig. 35. Jenny Holzer, selection from *The Living Series* (1980)



Fig. 36. Jenny Holzer, *Truisms* (1982)

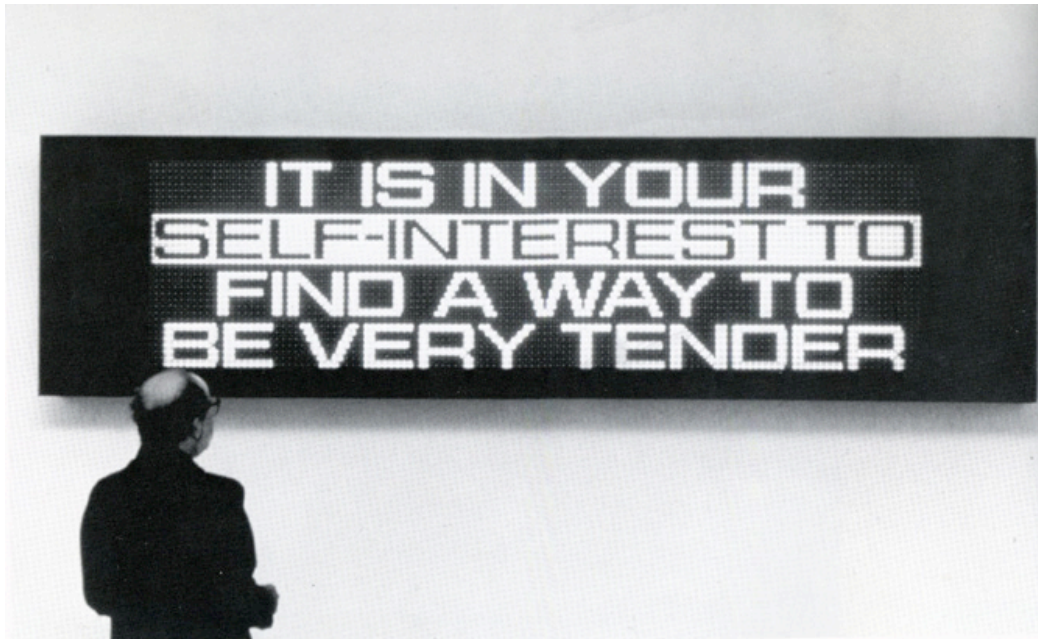


Fig. 37. Jenny Holzer, selection from *The Survival Series* (1983)



Fig. 38. Jenny Holzer, selection from *The Survival Series* (1983)



Fig. 39. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (You Kill Time)* (1983)



Fig. 40. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Help I'm Locked Inside this Picture)* (1985)



Fig. 41. David Salle, *Tulip Mania of Holland* (1985)



Fig. 42. David Salle, *Géricault's Arm* (1985)



Fig. 43. David Salle, *Schoolroom* (1985)

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