Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics

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TRISHA BROWN has during the past year toured with her company throughout Europe and America. She is currently preparing a new work, in collaboration with sculptor Fujiko Nakaya, to be seen in New York this spring.

DANIEL BUREN has exhibited his site-specific works perhaps more extensively than any other contemporary artist. A collection of his writings, *Scritti 1967–1979*, has recently been published by Idea Editions, Milan.

HUBERT DAMISCH, professor of the history and theory of art at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, is currently preparing a book on chess, theory, history, and art, *Hors-mat*, of which the essay published here is the final chapter.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD teaches philosophy at the Faculté de Vincennes, Paris. His most recent book is *La Condition postmoderne* (Editions de Minuit, 1979).

BABETTE MANGOLTE, filmmaker, cinematographer, and photographer, has documented the work of Trisha Brown, as well as that of other major choreographers and performance artists, throughout the seventies.

YVONNE RAINER will present the work print of her new film *Journeys from Berlin/1971* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, this November.

RICHARD SERRA began making films in the late sixties at the same time that his sculpture was first exhibited. A retrospective of his films was held last spring at Film Forum in New York City.

CLARA WEYERGRAF, who collaborated with Serra on *Steelmill/Stahlwerk*, also edited the catalogue of the comprehensive exhibition of Serra's work mounted last year in Tübingen and Baden-Baden. Her book on Mondrian and Van Doesburg will be published this fall by Fink Verlag, Munich.

More than a decade has passed since the stability and coherence of the aesthetic field, as well as its continuity with its past, were disrupted by artistic practice which resists the reified and reifying categories (painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.) according to which art has traditionally been recognized, classified, and assimilated. During that time we have witnessed the proliferation of art outside of the precincts to which it had been consigned for over a century. Artists have launched explorations of mediums whose aesthetic potential remained uncharted (video, for example), moved with increasing freedom into previously proscribed territory (photography and filmmaking, performance, writing), and situated their work outside of those institutions, the museum and gallery, built to receive and to neutralize it during the era of modernism. Contemporary practice thus challenges the notion of art as a continuous field composed of contiguous areas of competence; and insofar as it has been understood to be inseparable from its specific practices, the very notion of Art itself appears compromised.

More than a decade has passed. . . . Yet now we hear proclamations of renewed faith in the permanence and transcendent powers of the aesthetic impulse. The credo of the faithful echoes throughout the pages of *Artforum*, the very journal in which the radical events of the sixties and early seventies were chronicled. We are offered a demonstration of the cleansing properties of linseed and turpentine, for American artists of the eighties will, we are told, again emerge paint-spattered from their studios. A new academy claims the walls of our galleries and museums: artists whose works had been consigned to deserved oblivion during the sixties have reemerged to claim the "legacy of Abstract Expressionism." And the black-and-white specter, photography, is once again to be exorcized.

The message is clear. Attempts to reestablish continuity in a field which has suffered dispersion and to reerect the toppled statue of the Artist at its center are, in fact, symptomatic of a desire to reverse history, to return to a less complex state of affairs in which art is understood as the expression of wholly personal concerns. Thus we are reassured that the social, political, and "intellectual" issues addressed

by the art of the recent past have been superseded and that the primacy of the artist's "vision" and of the senses has been restored.

The questions raised by advanced aesthetic practice thus reassert themselves today with continued, intensified urgency. It is to those questions that the essays, interviews, and reviews assembled in this issue of *October* are addressed. It has become increasingly apparent to us that the arts can no longer claim a unified field. This perception, stated at the outset of Jean-François Lyotard's "Preliminary Notes on the Pragmatic of Works: Daniel Buren," is assumed in every text published here. Moreover, it is recognized throughout that the crisis thereby precipitated extends to criticism as well. Lyotard observes, "As the contemporary arts can no longer be organized and identified by Aristotelian categories, so the interpretations brought to bear on them can no longer be distributed among the various types of discourse which have been used to speak in the past." (page 59.)

The necessity of constructing a model of commentary based not on notions of tradition and continuity, but on dispersal and discontinuity motivates every contribution to this issue. Lyotard's sketch for a pragmatics rather than an aesthetics of works of art, based as it is on Wittgenstein's language games, is paralleled by Hubert Damisch's investigation of the importance of the *game* (of chess) to Duchamp, whose confusion of genre anticipated the aesthetic activities of the present. Neither of these readings represents an arbitrary application of theory to work; rather, as in Birgit Pelzer's reading of Dan Graham through phenomenology and psychoanalysis, theory is demonstrated to be embedded in the work. Duchamp's, Graham's, Buren's works do not address aesthetic issues per se, but the ways in which those issues conspire with an idealist mythology of timelessness and transcendence.

Here Richard Serra discusses not his sculpture but his films. Trisha Brown is interviewed about her recent work by Yvonne Rainer, choreographer turned filmmaker. Robert Smithson is treated as a writer, and not as a sculptor who also produced texts. These facts are not to be interpreted as confirmations of the supposed pluralism of contemporary art. For the texts and interviews published here actually disclose a single, coherent position: the necessity of coming to terms with, rather than repressing, the ways in which recent work progressively disabuses us of our inherited ideas about art. For these artists and critics, art is not a timeless manifestation of human spirit, but the product of a specific set of temporal and topical, social and political conditions. The investigations of these conditions defines for us the activity of postmodernism and distinguishes it from that nostalgic attachment to a set of exhausted conventions which characterizes today's neomodernism.

THE EDITORS

The Duchamp Defense

HUBERT DAMISCH

translated by ROSALIND KRAUSS

1. "Check" to Painting

> And perhaps it was because she knew nothing at all about chess that chess for her was not simply a parlor game or a pleasant pastime, but a mysterious art equal to all the recognized arts.
>
> —Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense*

At a very early age Marcel Duchamp became interested in chess. It was, he told his biographer Arturo Schwarz, his two brothers--Jacques Villon and Duchamp-Villon—to whom he owed this initiation at age thirteen, the same moment as his introduction to painting. We know an etching by Villon, dated 1904, which represents the young Marcel playing a game of chess with his sister Suzanne. A few years later, in 1910, the first large oil that Duchamp painted was a portrait of his two brothers seated across from one another at a chessboard set up on the family tea table in the garden of the house at Puteaux. If, in the Duchamp household, chess seems to have been a family affair, in the same way that art or painting was, Marcel, the youngest of the three brothers, was nonetheless the only one to take openly the name of their father, to enter his very field (*champ*) in order to use it as a signature (Duchamp). But it is not this aspect—which if overplayed would make a mockery of psychoanalysis—that we will focus on. Of the 1910 *Chess Players* Duchamp himself said that one could easily discern the influence of Cézanne. Now it is with regard to *this* father (Matisse: "Cézanne is the master of all of us . . . a sort of Good Father of painting"), whose works he saw for the first time this same year at Vollard's, that Duchamp will have to establish his independence as a painter.[1] In 1911, Duchamp produced no fewer than six drawings or sketches and two paintings on this very subject. But in looking at these canvases or

1. "CABANNE: Your 'Chess Players' are highly influenced by Cezanne's 'Card Players.'
"DUCHAMP: Yes, but I already wanted to get out of that." (Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett, New York, The Viking Press, Documents of 20th Century Art, 1971, p. 27).

drawings how could one fail to recognize (for what is given in them is still meant for vision) the operation with which he was at that moment already engaged? And for this operation it was not so much a question of rearranging the playing cards as it was a matter of changing the rules, or, more simply, of changing the game, beginning by substituting for the cardplayers the opponents in chess, with everything that would follow from that.

To change games (preferring chess to cards) . . . Arturo Schwarz reports that in 1915 at the time of his arrival in New York, Duchamp had already reached the level of a good amateur chessplayer. It seems that he played quite often with the man who was to become his principal supporter in the United States, the collector Walter Arensberg. Photographs of his New York studio show a large chess board affixed to the wall, which must have served him as a tool for studying games and "problems." And by 1917 there is the readymade called *Trébuchet* (*Trap*, cat. no. 248),[2] which was inspired by a ploy that is well-known to chessplayers: the offer of a pawn to one's opponent in the hope of trapping him. No sooner had he landed in Buenos Aires in 1918 than Duchamp had nothing more urgent to do than to join the local chess club and to obtain specialized literature for studying, among other things, the games of the greatest celebrity of the time, José-Raoul Capablanca.[3] It was during this same stay in Argentina that he sculpted the pieces of a chess set—with the exception of the knight, perhaps because the memory of Duchamp-Villon's *Cheval* was a deterrent, or because the task was beyond his skills. Upon returning to New York, he soon became a regular at the Marshall Chess Club, where he must have spent all his evenings up to his departure for France four years later. Soon a member of the club's team, he took part in many matches, often successfully, with the notable exception of the one in 1922 where in simultaneous play the twenty-five members of the club opposed Capablanca, who beat twenty-one of them, among whom was Marcel Duchamp. . . . But it was not until his return to Europe, when he had stopped working on the *Large Glass*, leaving it in the States unfinished, that Duchamp conceived real ambitions in this domain, ambitions which he continued to entertain until the end of the '30s, at which time he understood that "it was hopeless, there was no more use in trying."[4] His stay in Brussels was his initiation as a professional player. Elected Master in 1925 by the French Federation of Chess, he served for many years as a member of the team which represented France at the "Olympiad." This was the same team on which there figured the celebrated Alekhine, one of the greatest players in chess history, whose name is associated with the "hypermodern" revolution that the Russian champions introduced into the world of chess at the beginning of the 1920s, a revolution which seemed for some time to have definitively changed the

2. All catalogue references for Duchamp's works are to Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1969.
3. "I play night and day and nothing in the world interests me more than finding the right move. . . . I like painting less and less." (quoted in Schwarz, *ibid.*, p. 58).
4. Quoted in Schwarz, *ibid.*, p. 59.

Marcel Duchamp. Portrait of Chess Players. *1911.*
(Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.)

whole conception of strategic play. In 1932, in collaboration with Vitaly-Halberstadt, Duchamp published a very searching study of a particular case of endgame (to which we shall return). In 1933 he was named the winner of the Paris Tournament after defeating one of the best players of the time, Znosko-Borovski, whose classic work on openings, *How to Play the Chess Openings*, Duchamp translated and published in a "French version" the following year. In the 1940s his ambitions declined progressively, but not in such a way that he completely retired from the scene. He was to organize or sponsor various exhibitions with a view to collecting money for the American Federation of Chess. In the 1950s Duchamp took part in various "performances," sometimes at the behest of his friend John Cage (who had been taught by Duchamp to play chess but who despaired of becoming his equal). Finally, in 1967, he coached the American team at the International Tournament in Monte Carlo, the scene of the beginning of Bobby Fischer's rise.

These are the facts, told not for the love of anecdote or for setting out a narrative, but rather to try to understand what the stake of such a fiction would have been. Because if Duchamp gave himself over to chess in this way, it was not as an amateur but, on the contrary, with all the ambition and single-minded passion of a professional. The fact that needs stressing above all is his belief that he was never more interested in chess than after he had ceased being interested in painting.[5] But maybe one should turn this proposition around—because, taking the facts into account, Duchamp devoted much less time to painting than he did to chess. In 1919, at the time of his departure for Buenos Aires, "the traditional idea of painting, with brushes, palette, the smell of turpentine, had already disappeared from [his] life."[6] And even supposing that he had continued working on it, the *Large Glass* itself had nothing any longer to do with "painting" in the traditional sense of this term (which is not to say that he owed nothing more to painting). But chess? How are we to take the fact that after having, without great conviction, tried his hand at the task of art, Marcel Duchamp was able to devote twenty years of his life to something that was no more than a game? It is as if a man who seemed quickly convinced of the emptiness of the definitions of painting that were current in his time, this man who was passionately committed to never playing the fool, had found no other defense against an art which was nothing but a game for him than to leave it to take up still another game, but one whose rules were perfectly explicit and binding (and not without lamenting, in the end, that chess had become less an affair of art than of science). It is as if, even while claiming to escape painting, he had found it necessary to find a substitute which was not simply an antidote for it. And in this sense chess obviously seems to have functioned for him as a model of art itself, in the compulsive mode: there where painting—at least in its "modern"

5. Cabanne, *Dialogues*, p. 23.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

version—had only the appearance of a game (and often a ridiculous one), would chess not be the example of a game to which one could apply the name "art" with total rigor, an art where mastery could be verified?[7]

The explanations Duchamp himself gave for his enduring passion for chess deserve some examination. One might begin with the sense of fellowship he had with chessplayers: "These people are completely cloudy, completely blind, wearing blinkers. Madmen of a certain quality the way the artist is supposed to be, and isn't, in general."[8] Or to put it another way: *all chessplayers are artists, but not all artists are chessplayers.*[9] In passing from one realm to the other, Duchamp thus renounced neither the notion of "artist" nor that of "art." If chess seduced him it was because it did not seem to be socially useful, and, at least at that time, because it was not very profitable financially. But it was also because a game of chess, as "beautiful" and as close to being a work of art as it was, had nothing about it of the museum object, could not be preserved except in the completely theoretical form of memory that is offered by a specialized literature. "At the end of the game, you can cancel the painting you are making."[10] Still, there was more there than just a metaphor. Because, as Duchamp said to James Johnson Sweeney, chess *resembles* painting in many ways: "Actually when you play a game of chess it is like designing something or constructing a mechanism of some kind by which you win or lose. The competitive side of it has no importance, but the thing itself is very, very plastic and it is probably what attracted me in the game."[11] And in the same vein he told Pierre Cabanne:

> A game of chess is a visual and plastic thing, and if it isn't geometric in the static sense of the word, it is mechanical, since it moves; it's a drawing, it's a mechanical reality. The pieces aren't pretty in themselves, any more than is the form of the game, but what is pretty—if the word "pretty" can be used—is the movement. Well, it is mechanical, the way, for example, a Calder is mechanical. In chess there are some extremely beautiful things in the domain of movement, but not in the visual domain. It's the imagining of the movement or of the gesture that makes the beauty, in this case. It's completely in one's gray matter.[12]

Thus chess is "plastic" in a sense that has nothing to do with the sensible or

7. "Luzhin watched . . . feeling vaguely that in some way or other he understood the game better than these two, although he was completely ignorant of how it should be conducted, why this was good and that bad, and what one should do to penetrate the opposite King's camp without losses." (Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense*, trans. Michael Scammell, New York, Capricorn Books, 1970, p. 49).
8. Quoted in Cabanne, *Dialogues*, p. 19.
9. Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 68.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
11. Marcel Duchamp, *Salt Seller: the Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 136.
12. Cabanne, *Dialogues*, p. 18.

the pictorial realms. And as for painting, "painting should not be exclusively retinal or visual; it should also have to do with the gray matter, with our urge for understanding."[13] Although visual in form, painting is really shaped by something else. "There is a mental end implied when you look at the formation of the pieces on the board. The transformation of the visual aspect to the gray matter is what always happens in chess, and what should happen in art."[14] In a toast made in 1952 at a banquet of the New York State Association of Chess, Duchamp succeeded in giving to this double aspect of the game, simultaneously plastic and mental (as it pertains to the kind of chess called blind), its full dimension as a kind of *writing*:

> Objectively, a game of chess looks very much like a pen-and-ink drawing, with the difference, however, that the chess player paints with black-and-white forms already prepared instead of having to invent forms as does the artist. The design thus formed on the chessboard has apparently no visual aesthetic value, and is more like a score for music, which can be played again and again. Beauty in chess does not seem to be a visual experience as in painting. Beauty in chess is closer to beauty in poetry; the chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chessboard, express their beauty *abstractly*, like a poem. Actually, I believe that every chess player experiences a mixture of two aesthetic pleasures, first the abstract image akin to the poetic idea of writing, second the sensuous pleasure of the ideographic execution of that image of the chessboards.[15]

Chess is what painting ought to be: *cosa mentale*. The drawing traced on the chessboard has no meaning in and of itself; it *resembles* nothing (not even a painting). And if it makes an "image" or a "picture," this is offered less to the eye than to that thought which can decipher the ideogram, which can read it, interpret it, as a musician does a score, without requiring that there be a "performance." Only someone who knows the rules of the game will, from a given position, understand the mechanism. For this purpose neither statics nor dynamics will suffice. There is no possible analysis without seizing the machine in its operation. Whether or not it is in equilibrium (as one sees it, by definition, before a game begins, since the simple advance of one pawn is enough to destroy the symmetry which characterizes the initial position and to start up the machine), the design never describes anything other than a transitory state of things to which the brain, not the eye, gives life by hypothetically submitting it to a series of variations whose possibility is inscribed in the mechanism. Strange bachelor machine that it

13. Duchamp, *Salt Seller*, p. 136.
14. Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 69.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

is, it must go through a series of regulated transformations, by which the scheme of operation will be progressively modified and will deteriorate, but not in such a way that the principle is in any way altered. Paradoxically, an early checkmate could stall the mechanism when it is still almost intact, while on the contrary, if reduced to a very small number of pieces, it would be exposed to a type of perpetual motion (this is the subject of the book by Duchamp and Halberstadt).

But what about thought? If I want to know what "thought" means, and I wish to observe the process in myself, I might place myself—following Wittgenstein[16]—in the situation of an observer totally ignorant of the rules of chess, who tries to understand the word "mate" by looking at the move through which it is made within the game. But the comparison has a significance beyond the semantic: does this mean that in a game—if not in thought itself—*movimentum* can be understood only in the *momentum* of its last contraction, of its final climax? What could be the interest, for thought, of a game that was not bound by any rule of termination, of a game played *"hors-mat"* (without the rule of mate)? Is play—and even that of the "artistic faculties"—ever really free, disinterested? And if thought were able to grasp itself as only it grasps all things, by tabular organization (and by organizing all things according to a table), must it not reckon with the moment when play simply breaks off, by default or—what amounts to the same thing—the neutralization of one of its poles? There is no process of thought, no mental performance, that does not—before any conception of mechanics—obey a specific geometry, for in order to function, every mental process must find its place of inscription. Thought is always dependent on the field that it opens for itself and where it operates, just as it is dependent on the means that it invents to establish, in this delimited field, a more or less precisely defined system of exchange, not to mention a rule of termination.

At a very superficial level, one can draw a parallel between Duchamp's interest in the mechanism of chess and his attempt to produce a static image of movement in the *Nude Descending a Staircase:* "Movement is an abstraction, a deduction articulated within the painting without our knowing if a real person is or isn't descending an equally real staircase. Fundamentally, movement is in the eye of the spectator, who incorporates it into the painting."[17] Thus, at the opposite pole of the illusionist project of the futurists, the idea of the "instantaneous state of Rest" functions as the principle of the *Large Glass,* of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,* a state of rest given by an "extra-rapid exposure" in the manner of Marey's chronophotography: a succession of static shots which in order to be presented to vision synchronously must work visually

16. "In order to get clear about the meaning of the word 'think' we watch ourselves while we think; what we observe will be what the word means!—But this concept is not used like that. (It would be as if without knowing how to play chess, I were to try and make out what the word 'mate' meant by close observation of the last move of some game of chess.)" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, New York, The Macmillan Company, §316, p. 104).
17. Quoted in Cabanne, *Dialogues,* p. 30.

and cognitively on the boundary between mechanics and geometry.[18] The confusion between sequentiality and causality which sets narrative action in motion justifies itself in the case of the *Nude* by the appearance of a mechanical deduction so that it seems to be a geometric projection achieved by the elimination of duration, but without the movement seeming arbitrary and "purely decorative."

But while the *Nude Descending a Staircase* still makes its primary appeal to the eye, this has changed with the *Bride*. The "instantaneous state of Rest" is here only, in the terms of the *Green Box*, as the "allegorical appearance of a *succession* [of a group] of *various facts* seeming to necessitate each other under certain laws," this *allegorical* (no longer *mechanical*) appearance intending to "*isolate the sign of accordance between*, on the one hand, this *state of Rest* (capable of all the *innumerable* eccentricities) and, on the other, a *choice of Possibilities* authorized by these laws and also *determining them*."[19] If in following the thread of the story all narrative process leads from one *state* to another, then in the *Large Glass* we have a kind of fable such that we cannot determine if the passage from the Virgin to the Bride corresponds to a simple random succession, or if it obeys a regulated order: all the work of the "art" here being to create this confusion, at the price of the same logical error of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, through which we read the motto of Destiny.[20]

Now, if there is a model of action which justifies this confusion of consequence with succession, it is certainly the one inscribed within the game of chess. In all the games through which it is produced, it never fails to appear as a narrative pursued through a succession of states arising from each other by a series of logical transformations. In each successive state, the same laws that regulate these permissible transformations produce a finite group of possible choices, a move, as defined by game theory, being only the totality of legitimate transformations among which the choice determining the next state occurs. For which—as Saussure emphasizes—the shift of one piece suffices. But for Duchamp: "A deviation is an operation."[21] The problem, then, is to know the nature of this operation, to address it as pure performance, without however losing sight of the goal to which it is compelled—one which drives the system towards the final state of rest, one which regulates all its moves. We must note the fact that Duchamp left the *Large Glass* unfinished, asking with ever greater insistence what the rule of termination for the "picture" might be. Is it either thinkable or possible to have a

18. "The distinction between mechanics and geometry, beyond the fact that in mechanics the generation of figures by movement is, so to speak, arbitrary and purely decorative, lies also in the fact that geometry only considers movement in terms of space traversed, while in mechanics one is more focused on the time that a moving object takes to traverse this space." (Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Oeuvres de d'Alembert*, Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1967, vol. XIV, p. 209).

19. Duchamp, *Salt Seller*, pp. 27–8.

20. See Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 94.

21. Duchamp, *Salt Seller*, p. 26.

painting for which the operation would be suspended in some way or, as Duchamp also says, delayed, so that the Nude never finishes descending the stairs or the Virgin never ends her passage to the Bride? The progressive form, the form which denotes an action in the time of its unfolding, is the one that English imposes on the noun *painting*. And this form appears—to the extreme of the pleonasm *action painting*—as the index of a task that modernism bequeathed to theory as well as to practice.

2. *Theory in All Its States*

> Only much later did he clarify in his own mind what it was that had thrilled him so about these two books; it was that exact and relentlessly unfolding pattern.
>
> —*The Defense*

But let us return to chess, to chess insofar as it supplies thought with a model that one would have to term epistemological, taking into account the effects it transmits into the domain of theory. Two examples will suffice here to organize the discussion—the prelude to an interruption before an eventual return to playing, but on new grounds.

1. We have mentioned that game theory regards chess as the typical representative of the class of games called "games of perfect information": that is, a given position on the chessboard supplies any player with all the information that is necessary and sufficient for him to decide—for perfectly explicit reasons—on his move, that being the case even if he had picked up the game in the middle and knew nothing of its course up to that point. Chess exemplifies a two-person strategic game which in its realization bases itself on the clash of two antagonistic strategies. In the terminology of Von Neumann, the theory will arise from a sharp distinction between *game* and *play*: the totality of rules which describe it suffices to define the game as such, to the point where a given play will correspond—from its beginning to its end and in a particular way—to a unique instance of the application of these rules. But the unavoidable paradox is that the theory can only be constructed by eliminating from the *exact* concept of the game those elements of struggle and surprise, not to mention trickery, which characterize all concrete strategic reality. The theory therefore succeeds by including in any definition of a given strategy the strategy of the opponent, but without thereby eliminating that conflictual contradiction which is the wellspring of the game.[22]

22. "A strategy is a plan permitting one to respond to any move taken by the other player, one which already contains in itself all the possibilities which might arise." (Anatole Rapoport, *Two-Person Game Theory*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1969, p. 26).

2. But before having been adopted by a theory striving to impose the paradigm of a game on the human sciences, the model supplied by the example of chess had already been introduced into this domain. This begins with linguistics, where it occurs at the very moment when for the first time this discipline—through Saussure—makes a claim to being a science, aspiring to a status which is no longer historical but theoretical and *general*. And this presupposes that it was able to find an object which allowed it to give order to the heterogeneous facts of language. Now, it is to this that the parallel between language (*la langue*) and chess, established by the *Course in General Linguistics*, responds: "Just as the game of chess is entirely in the combination of the different chess pieces, language [*la langue*] is characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units."[23] Yet upon examination one discovers that in fact the comparison concerns less the game itself than the plays of chess, and less the system of language than its play, a play, as Saussure says, which demands of an individual a complete apprenticeship in the game from which he will be able to remove nothing or in any other way modify the rules. "But of all comparisons that might be imagined, the most fruitful is the one that might be drawn between the functioning of language and a game of chess. In both instances we are confronted with a system of values and their observable modifications. A game of chess is like an artificial realization of what language offers in a natural form."[24]

Without anticipating the analysis this comparison calls for—because we must underscore that what we are dealing with here is *comparison* and not metaphor, and further, that it is a comparison which is developed, worked through to the end in order to explore the difference between the two types of "game" which it signals—we must for the moment simply call attention to another paradox. This paradox arises from the fact that language—which from a Saussurian point of view is supposed to correspond to the domain of competence—is compared here not to a game as a rule-bound system (one understood in the restricted sense of a code constituted of the ensemble of its elements and their rules of combination, or in the expanded sense of game theory, as the totality of the "plays" which could be generated within the compass of a grammar so defined), but to its realization, at least in theory. And this only serves to erode, if not the received distinction between *langue* and *parole*, then at least the distinction between synchrony and diachrony which the comparison was made to shore up.

We might profit, as does the *Course*, from the ambiguity which is associated in French with the notion of *jeu* (game/play): "First, a state of the set of chessmen [*état du jeu*] corresponds closely to a state of language [*la langue*]. The respective

23. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin, New York McGraw-Hill, p. 107.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

value of the pieces depends on their position on the chessboard just as each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms. In the second place, the system is always momentary; it varies from one position to the next. . . . Finally, to pass from one state of equilibrium to the next, or—according to our terminology—from one synchrony to the next, only one chesspiece has to be moved; there is no general rummage."[25] A state of the set? Let us be clear: in this comparison with the state of a game, language can only be thought of in its realization, that is, in its "play." But in order to preserve the opposition synchrony/diachrony, Saussure argues from that feature which characterizes chess as a game of perfect information: if a position, during the course of a game, may be reckoned in and of itself, without respect to the foregoing ones, then the diachronic fact (of which the displacement on the board of one piece and only one is the counterpart, with, as Saussure insists, "all its peculiarities") can actually appear, still by comparison, as a move "absolutely distinct from the preceding and the subsequent equilibrium. The change effected belongs to neither state: *only states matter.*"[26]

3. The Time of the Action

> When playing blind he was able to sense these diverse forces in their original purity. He saw then neither the Knight's carved mane nor the glossy heads of the Pawns—but he felt quite clearly that this or that imaginary square was occupied by a definite, concentrated force, so that he envisioned the movement of a piece as a discharge, a shock, a stroke of lightning—and the whole chess field quivered with tension, and over this tension he was sovereign, here gathering in and there releasing electric power.
>
> —*The Defense*

Position is of extreme importance for the game of chess. Yet shortly after the publication of the *Course in General Linguistics* something like a profound revolution in tactics, if not in strategy, occurred to the game—and this in a context which was itself revolutionary. One of the first decisions of the newly established Soviet regime had been to institute a national chess team. The photograph which shows us Lenin at Gorki's house at Capri in 1908, deep in a chess game with Bogdanov, or the street theater of the Constructivist era, finds confirmation in the imagery which, like that of Renaissance Italy, shows human pawns arrayed on a chessboard enlarged to urban scale—a demonstration, if one were needed, that the game had lost nothing of its mythic force as a planet-wide source of passionate enthusiasm, most recently proved when the Soviet Karpov and the "dissident"

25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 89, italics added.

Kortchnoi confronted one another in a deadly duel in the confines of an island in the China Sea. Yet the comparison, as it functions in Saussure's text, corresponds to an extremely dated conception of play which, at the time when Saussure was giving his *Course,* seemed to have reached an impasse. For chess (as for language?) static states alone were of importance; by the beginning of the century theory had made this a kind of dogma: the essential thing for each player was to achieve the most secure position possible for himself, always keeping a watch out for the flaw in his opponent's defense. In this way the game could only be static, which gave an advantage—as Clausewitz showed—to defense over attack. For this reason theory, in addition to the extraordinarily developed science of openings, was able to appear as definitively formed, with the result that it had become more and more difficult to decide on a move—to the point where someone as clear-sighted as Capablanca could see no other cure for the paralysis that was threatening the game than a modification of the rules (which themselves had been restructured in the West at the time of the Renaissance to introduce more movement into the game). Then came the "hypermoderns," whose spectacular contribution was to have the merit—even though its influence seems long since to have waned, and it appears to have been integrated into theory—of making it unnecessary to change the rules of play because it was simply enough to play differently. For the static, defensive idea of position the Russians substituted the notions of dynamism and offense, position no longer appearing as a state of equilibrium but rather as a reserve of accumulated energy, a wound-up spring ready to be discharged. The main thing was no longer to gain control of the strongest square, but to construct a position which would produce the maximum mobility and yield for one's pieces. To quote Znosko-Borovski, whom Duchamp translated, "The statics of the positional game were succeeded by the dynamism of hyper-modern play."[27] The theory of this conception was set forth in the book of one of the best representatives of the new school—*Modern Ideas in Chess* by Richard Reti—which Julien Gracq saw as "the Surrealist Manifesto of chess." Yet, to judge from one of his last paintings, *The King and Queen Surrounded* [no longer *traversed* as in the title of the sketch for the work] *by Swift Nudes,* Duchamp seems to have had a presentiment of this conception as early as 1912, three years before the publication of the *Course in General Linguistics.* And if he himself apparently played in a relatively classical manner, if not still an entirely positional one, we recognize in this the mark of a kind of prudence which will surprise only those who simplistically wish to regard Duchamp as the spirit of the tabula rasa. The chessboard might be emptied of pieces (as it is in *Homage to Caissa,* sold for the benefit of the American Federation of Chess, cat. no. 391); yet in the labyrinth ruled off into alternate squares of black and white, this *tabula* corresponds even less to the definition of a mnemonic device, a system of spaces in which figures may be inscribed as

27. E. A. Znosko-Borovski, *How to Play the Chess Openings,* trans. and ed. J. du Mont, London, Pitman, 1958, p. 88.

Marcel Duchamp. The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes. *1912. (Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.)*

appealing to memory of the game, to its history insofar as that history gives rise to theory. Through the relay of the artificial exercise of the *ars memorativa,* founded on the conjunction of images and a regulated order of places, did not the Middle Ages establish memory as one of the cardinal virtues of Prudence?[28] But this prudence should not keep us from dreaming of transformations which would be susceptible to the Saussurian comparison, if one were to accept that in the material of language, as in chess, states alone were not important. These are transformations which can only be analyzed in dynamic and developmental terms: the accent having to be placed on the time of the action, the time—to repeat the

28. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory,* London, Routledge and K. Paul, 1966.

expression of Sun Tzu—of a trigger.[29] In Znosko-Borovski's terms, this is primarily a question of preventing the opponent from taking the offensive; he who has a temporal advantage is able to increase considerably the danger to his opponent, who is prevented from making up lost time. He who has a spatial advantage is unable to unlock his position, to move his pieces out.

Finally, as Znosko-Borovski continues, "Chess is a game of understanding, not a game of memory." Applied to the study of openings, this formulation suggests that it is less important to learn the variations on them than to get through to the meaning, the controlling idea, the characteristic style. And against the cult of books: "By playing the openings automatically, relying only on memory instead of looking for the solution in the understanding of the play, one would not even know how to respond to an inferior move, because that move doesn't appear in the books. The dogmatism of the book has turned into a despotism. Amateur players get used to considering the moves made by this or that master, described by this or that book as the obligatory moves, to the point where any deviation is considered beforehand as dangerous or unlucky."[30] Or another remark which calls for a kind of pragmatics so that the choice of a particular opening would depend on the mood of the player: "One doesn't choose a Caro-Kahn when one feels aggressive, and one must never risk a gambit if one is not wide-awake."[31]

4. Chance and Necessity

> He plunged with gloomy passion into new calculations, inventing and already vaguely sensing the harmony of the moves he needed: a dazzling defense.
>
> —*The Defense*

But at this point another aside, as much theoretical as historical, is necessary. In 1924, Marcel Duchamp believed that he had discovered a system of betting—a martingale—that would assure him modest but regular winnings at roulette. Provided with the capital that he got from publishing the "rectified readymade" called *Monte Carlo Bond* (cat. no. 280), he took himself to this bastion of the games of chance to try out and perfect his combination. In the absence of the advertised dividend of 20%, the subscribers were reduced to a theoretical profit. And in a letter to Picabia, Duchamp has to admit that in fact "the Martingale is without importance. They are all either completely good or completely bad. But

29. "Its potential is that of the crossbow pulled back to the maximum; its time of action is that of the release of the mechanism." (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, New York, Oxford University Press, V, p. 16).

30. Znosko-Borovski, *Chess Openings*, preface, n.p.

31. *Ibid.*, p. xiii. Znosko-Borovski characterizes the Caro-Kahn Defense as *passive*: the position of black has no weakness and can withstand a strong attack (see p. 121). Gambit is the sacrifice of one piece in order to develop the rest of the pieces.

with the right number even a bad Martingale can work. . . . It's delicious monotony without the slightest emotion. The problem consists in finding the red and black figure to set against the roulette . . . and I think I've found the right number. You see I havn't quit being a painter, *now I'm sketching on chance.*"[32] And to Jacques Doucet: "Don't be too sceptical, since this time I think I have eliminated the word chance. I would like to force the roulette to become a game of chess."[33]

Such was the illusion that Duchamp harbored for some time, before he understood that what is thought to be the truth in Paris was not necessarily the truth once the system was put to the test in Monte Carlo. His illusion was that he had discovered a figure which would allow him, if not exactly to abolish chance, then at least, by drawing on the thing, to eliminate the word—meaning that he would foil chance though a type of calculation into which the definition of that term could not enter. Now he does not seem ever to have wholly relinquished this illusion. Thirty years later he returned to this theme in his talks with Arturo Schwarz. In order for the two activities to combine, one would need only to reduce the randomness of the wheel and to enlarge that of chess.[34] It was as if he had needed to blur the distinction between the two types of game, one arising from the calculation of probabilities and the other involving the calculation of strategy (this even in situations which seem from the strategic point of view to be more efficiently left to the operations of chance). With regard to chess, we have seen that Duchamp hoped to insert the idea of chance into a game for which the development of theory was threatening to spoil its ludic aspect, if not its "artistic" character. But roulette? Duchamp thought he had discovered a technique which would allow him the "exploitation of Trente-et-Quarante and other mines on the Cote d'Azur" by means of "a cumulative system which is experimentally based on one hundred thousand rolls of the ball; the system is the exclusive property of the Board of Directors."[35] It was soon necessary for him to change his tune, but without in any way giving up his *strategical* project: that is, as he stated the problem, to replace the word *chance* (the word, not the thing) with that of *decision.* Roulette is not simply a matter of chance; at each moment the player must choose, must decide on a color, on one number or another. And what is a martingale if not a strategy for an a priori definition of a series of moves based on a combination of a probabilistic sort, but one intended to counteract chance, to trick it, catching it up in its own laws, to treat it finally as an opponent, and roulette as a two-party game, one that obeys an actual geometry? This is the same "geometry of chance" that Pascal founded at the moment when he devised the calculus of probabilities, demonstrating that the combinatory properties of the Arithmetic

32. Duchamp, *Salt Seller,* p. 187, italics added.
33. *Ibid.,* pp. 187–8.
34. Schwarz, *Complete Works,* p. 60.
35. Duchamp, *Salt Seller,* p. 185.

Triangle—the Triangle that is a picture/table in the cellules of which a series of whole numbers is distributed—extend to the value of the stakes that have to be divided when two players decide to break off the game of heads and tails, to give up the expectation of chance, the adventure of the game, to cut their losses.[36] This demonstration astonished the Chevalier de Méré, who, though very intelligent in Pascal's view, was not a geometer.

Now, to speak of geometry is to speak of figure (and, with reference to Pascal, of tables if not pictures), a figure which in relation to Duchamp seems to have had the purpose of reducing a complex probability to a simpler one. On a roulette table, where the zero is suppressed, the game of red and black (or any other simple combination) is reduced to the game of heads or tails. Based on the law of large numbers, the hypothesis is equivalent to the elimination of chance ("a system tested on 100,000 rolls") and states that one should be able to bet with ever greater certainty the larger the number of games, since the chance of winning increases proportionally with the length of time. Now, as Emile Borel recalls, it is the belief in the inevitable restoration of a final equilibrium from which the fantasy of the martingale derives; yet in practice one could hope to profit only from a long series of successes which would seem to defy any probable equilibrium.[37] The very idea of charting chance, of demanding that it behave as if it had a memory (when in heads and tails each throw amounts to a new player starting off a new game), of restricting it to a limit hoping for rewards that are themselves limited, this idea means still treating chance as a background which resists control and effacement by any figure.

5. *The Other's Part*

> But the notion of composing problems himself did not entice him. He dimly felt that they would be a pointless waste of the militant, charging, bright force he sensed within him. . .
>
> —*The Defense*

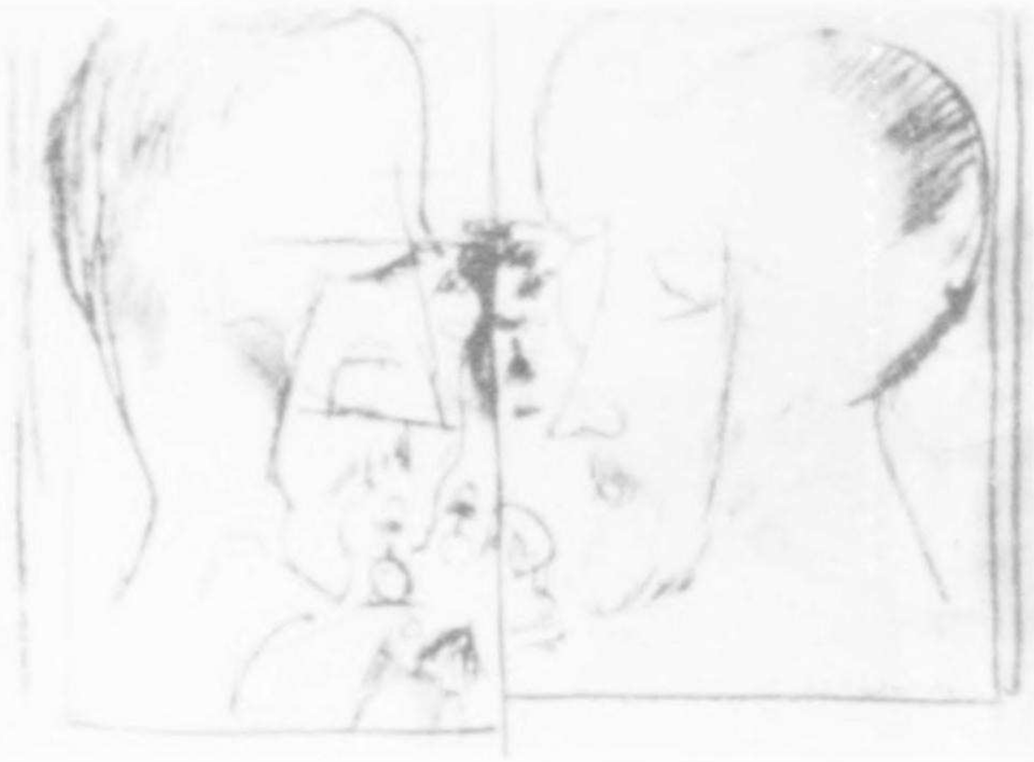
The importance of the figure here—and in this instance one that is binary: red and black—comes from the fact that it led Duchamp to focus on the fundamental element of the game. This is the element that Von Neumann as well as Saussure chose to overlook, or at least to reduce or bracket out for the sake of theory. That element is that a chess position, like every game situation that is regulated by the Pascalian *règle des partis,*[38] occurs as a two-headed, bipolar apparatus, the energy for the game stemming from a contradiction which is

36. Pascal, *The Arithmetic Triangle, Oeuvres,* p. 115.
37. See Emile Borel, *Le Hasard,* Paris, Alcan, 1938, pp. 46–8.
38. Pascal's system for figuring the division of gambling stakes should the game stop in mid-play. See above.

conflictual. The difference between chess and the game of heads and tails is that in chess the two heads in question are ones that think. Now if theory shows that there is an optimal method for playing this game, it has not, on the other hand, solved the problem of knowing what would happen if the opponent were to have a *different* optimal method at his disposal.[39] There is an echo of this in the aesthetic domain, where Duchamp thought that the Other, which is to say the public (not to speak of *others*, by which I mean other artists who are themselves party to the game), would represent "50% of the problem."[40] To H. P. Roché, Duchamp confided that he often lost the first round of a match because he was absorbed in figuring out his opponent, in trying to understand the other's game.[41] For him (no less than it would be for Bobby Fischer) chess was not simply a question of calculation. Access to the mastery of chess is mysterious. Just as in language, as Benveniste has shown, where the speaking subject acquires identity by designating himself as "I" and the other as "you," so in chess, mastery can be acquired only on the condition that one give up a transcendental perspective, placing oneself opposite one's opponent at one of the two poles of a double-sided, or better, a two-headed apparatus.

That in its structure the game can only function by satisfying the conditions of any performance, as well as of any enunciation (and as we have seen in chess, *speaking* is the mode of *doing*), is illustrated in the series of drawings and paintings that Marcel Duchamp made in 1911 on the theme of chess players. The first two drawings in the series (cat. nos. 165 and 166) eliminate the datum of the chessboard so that the two partners can be arranged with respect to one another in a singular space scattered with a few chess pieces and established at the crossing of the two arms of a drawn X, the neatly disengaged brows of their heads, modeled on Marcel and his brother Duchamp-Villon, inscribed in two distinct rectangles. In the first of the two drawings the emphasis is on a hand touching a piece, and in the second it is on the facing off of the two players on either side of a median line. In the next two drawings the situation becomes more complex, either due to Duchamp's having given up the use of perspective as far as the players themselves are concerned (cat. no. 167), or to his having further developed the X-schema previously introduced (cat. no. 168). The last two drawings in the series (cat. nos. 169 and 170) finally superimpose the faces of the two opponents; the fragmentary traces of a chessboard and "some simplified forms of chessmen placed at random" are all in the same square which is in turn flanked by two smaller squares that appear grafted onto it and where the sign of the players appears again. In the painting based on these studies, the chessboard is completely eliminated, strength-

39. Rapoport, *Game Theory*, p. 2.
40. "Every situation that presents the formal characteristics of the decision-problem, as it appears during the course of the game, can equally be called a game." (*Ibid.*, p. 4).
41. H. P. Roché, "Souvenirs," in *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Robert Lebel, trans. George Heard Hamilton, New York, Paragraphic Books, 1967, p. 83.



Marcel Duchamp. Study for "Portrait of Chess Players." *1911. (Collection Jacqueline Monnier, Paris.)*

Marcel Duchamp. Study for Portrait of Chess Players. *1911. (Collection Louise Varèse, New York.)*

ening the picture which in this way becomes the simple theater of confrontation. This is true whether it takes an almost square format (cat. no. 171) or whether it comes from a sketch that is oblong but only by virtue of two black vertical bands like the sliding drawers of a wooden chessboard which flank the field where the bodies of the players, split and multiplied into several successive profiles, confront one another. As Duchamp explained, this painting was done by gaslight in order to achieve a grayish tonality: gray like the matter from which both game and painting derive their validity.

Duchamp himself said that the book he published in 1932 in collaboration with Vitaly Halberstadt was a matter of a "linguistic study" with no practical utility. And in fact this work, which made an important contribution to the theory of endgames, turns entirely on the idea of opposition, whose role in the Saussurian tradition of linguistics we are well aware of (a given term having, for Saussure, no value except through difference and through its opposition to the other terms in the language). But if there is opposition, in chess terms, this opposition plays an enormous role in endgame situations, when the chessboard is almost empty and nothing is relevant except the conflictual structure of the game. In chess one speaks of opposition, in effect, only where there is a situation of symmetry. Would this mean that the opening position can be reduced to a problem of opposition, the solution consisting in maintaining the equilibrium? For Znosko-Borovski, the number of pieces and the number of possible moves at this stage of the game require that one not conceive of it this way, since experience teaches that to imitate one's opponent's choices, to repeat them so as to preserve a positional symmetry, is impossible. At one moment or another, the player whose

move it is is necessarily given the advantage. But it is not the same in endgames where different types of opposition appear which constitute as many principles of operation: 1) *virtual opposition,* when the two kings occupy two squares at the diagonally opposed corners of a rectangle whose four corners are the same color; 2) *real opposition,* when the kings are positioned in the same file—straight or diagonal—and separated by an odd number of squares; 3) *immediate opposition,* when they are separated by only a single square. This book, whose subject is the "position at two poles," has a title which Duchamp had cast in perspective by means of a particularly sophisticated use of typography. That title is a whole program in itself: *Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled.* As Duchamp said to Pierre Cabanne:

> The "opposition" is a system that allows you to do such-and-such a thing. The "sister squares" are the same thing as opposition, but it's a more recent invention, which was given a different name. Naturally, the defenders of the old system were always wrangling with the defenders of the new one. I added "reconciled" because I had found a system that did away with the antithesis.[42]

The problem might seem one of theory. Nonetheless, by means of diagrams where a determining role is played both by color and by transparencies which allow for superposition, and through graphs which sum it up, Duchamp was able to sketch a topological model of play. The presentation of this model was enough to ruin all attempts to reduce chess to a linear mnemonic schema. The power of this picture was such that it was not exclusively a question of simultaneity—a notion, Duchamp insisted, that had nothing to do with cubism—but rather one of movement whose "successive images" the picture allowed one to grasp and to reduce to a kind of diagram. In distinguishing what he called the principal and the secondary domains of the two kings—each in turn made up of different categories of "critical squares"—and in showing that these domains, which look like a mosaic of sister squares, are in fact symmetrical, and that they are congruent subject to *rabattement* (in the geometric sense) either with or without shifting along a common hinge, the two authors introduced into chess theory the idea of an underlying pattern or figure, the same idea that Duchamp had already tried to use to beat roulette. All this was done through recourse to typography and a partially chromatic geometry, which gave a demonstrative form to the "geometry of opposition," the groundwork for which, as Duchamp recalled, had been laid by Father Durand in the nineteenth century. Duchamp was opposed to the separation of the study of opposition from that of sister squares, or briefly put, from the analysis of the properties of the field corresponding to a given position. And Duchamp's term *reconciliation* indicates that one would no longer know how to

42. Cabanne, *Dialogues,* p. 77.

replace the notion of opposition with that of sister squares if one could not replace an active verb ("to oppose") with a noun of situation ("similar squares").

However, if this is the case, it shows that one cannot consider a game of chess—to say nothing of language, if we want to capture its "play"—solely as a series of states. Opposition, as it has been defined, appears as a number or a graph, which allows the a priori establishment of an intangible balance between the two kings. This is the necessary, but never, as Duchamp stresses, the sufficient condition to win. (At this point, how can we not evoke that other graph—no less topological and "coordinated"—which Raymond Roussel introduced in 1932, the same year as Duchamp and Halberstadt's book appeared, after having played chess for less than three months: the "Knight in the position of a Cedilla" which gives the formula for the bishop and knight's mate?) For the player who is not satisfied with a draw and wants to win, it would be necessary to break the balance and introduce a tactical disequilibrium into the situation. But this is possible only by judging the situation in terms of movements or of possible developments. Opposition cannot function as the basis of the system unless it can be broken at any moment. This is the price one has to pay for the possibility of a play inside the structure—a structure which is nothing else but the possibility of play.

We see then the contradictions which plague all description of the game in terms of states. Apart from not necessarily being paired with the notion of symmetry (there are other types of balance besides the symmetrical one), equilibrium, which has no other value besides that of defense, is far from being the rule for chess. One could only avoid this contradiction by ignoring the bi-polar structure of the system as well as the conflictual nature of opposition. Now that is what Saussure implicitly does when he remarks that the comparison between the play of language and a game of chess is not absolutely tenable: "At only one point is the comparison weak: the chessplayer *intends* to bring about a shift and thereby to exert an action on the system, whereas language premeditates nothing. The pieces of language are shifted—or rather modified. . . . In order to make the game of chess seem at every point like the functioning of language we would have to imagine an unconscious or unintelligent player."[43] *One* player and not *two*. And what is even more remarkable is that in the domain of language, as Saussure conceives it, another type of bi-polarity asserts its rights, to the point of confrontation:

> This sole difference, however, makes the comparison even more instructive by showing the absolute necessity of making a distinction between the two classes of phenomena in linguistics. For if diachronic facts cannot be reduced to the synchronic system which they condition when the change is intentional, all the more will they resist when they set a blind force against the organization of a system of signs.[44]

43. Saussure, *Course*, p. 89.
44. *Ibid.*

This holds for language (although the distinction between the system's *ratio* and the "blind force" governing its development is far from evident). But as for chess? The exact concept of strategy which theory imposes implies—under the rubric of the Other—that the unconscious be given its share. In the case of strategic games, the unconscious is the strategy of the other. Duchamp's aspiration—to introduce chance into chess—makes sense as a project only in playing with the bi-polar structure that is the condition of the game: chance here being nothing but the given name of the unconscious and, through it, of the trickery which is at the base of all surprise as it is of all thought. Paradox is at its fullest when the *ratio* of the system—but a system in which the Saussurian dichotomy between synchrony and diachrony is not at work—takes on itself, in the conditions of a given performance, the appearance of a "blind force." This would have been the case during the "reunion" held in February 1968 at Toronto, where Duchamp submitted to John Cage's game and agreed to a game of chess played according to his rules and, leaving nothing to chance, set a performance in motion that was strictly aleatory. Through several speakers the musical compositions of David Tudor, Lowell Cross, and others were broadcast so that the switchings on and off were directed by the movement of pieces on a chessboard whose squares were equipped with a photoelectric cell. This machine for the production of chance presupposed the meeting of two programs each of which obeyed its own logic. It was an unpredictable meeting, but one which was still bound, significantly, to the grid of the chessboard.

6. The Chessboard as Diagram

> The class bully filliped Luzhin on the back of the head and simultaneously with his other hand knocked the board onto the floor. For the second time in his life Luzhin noticed how unstable a thing chess was. "Everything will be spilled, that's certain," said Luzhin, again taking possession of the handbag.
>
> —*The Defense*

But what of the chessboard in all this? The chessboard which is the "underpinning" of the game of battle, as it is also the floor of the perspective construction and through that, as Alberti would have it, the very stage of *istoria*? The poster which Duchamp devised for the Third French Championship in Nice in September 1925, during the course of which he was given the title of Master, shows the photographic reproduction of a silhouette of a chess king onto which Duchamp has pasted the enlargement of another photograph taken of a pile of cubes thrown at random in a string bag. Arturo Schwarz recognized this image as one illustration among many of the Duchampian project of combining the two factors of play and chance. But beyond this, the image demonstrates a remarkable

Marcel Duchamp. Poster for the French Chess Championship, Nice, 1925.

inversion of the figure/ground relation. Because what is figure here, raised to the third power, is constituted of the squares of the chessboard, the coloristic opposition of three terms—white, black, and gray—corresponding to the three visible faces of the cubes. And as for the ground (which however lifts off the white of the paper), it is made up of the phantom shadow of the master piece of the game, a piece whose value is absolute since it is not open to exchange, but one which is treated here only in gray, thus escaping the binary opposition that gives the game its meaning.

Ordinarily the ground for the figures it supports, the chessboard itself attains the value of figure here. This operation is possible, however, only by disturbing its order as well as bestowing volume on each of its elements. Now, the image of these cubes distributed at random in a string bag has some relation to the strange object Duchamp constructed in 1921 at the request of Dorothea Dreier (who seems never to have appreciated it): a rectangular birdcage containing a thermometer, a cuttlebone, and 152 little marble cubes in the form of sugarcubes, underneath which was attached a paper carrying the words, in capital letters: WHY/ NOT / SNEEZE/ ROSE/ SÉLAVY. Was this readymade making fun of cubism—that cubism which had ignored simultaneity? The relationship with the poster for the Nice tournament of four years later suggests another interpretation, one which I am not sure that Duchamp was thinking of when he made this object—a readymade that he was to term "very assisted," for which the production would

Marcel Duchamp. Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy? *1964. Replica of 1921 original. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Galleria Schwarz.)*

have taken a great deal of care and an extremely sharp saw (how else the cuttlebone?) at the same time as a great expenditure of caloric energy (why else the thermometer?). If one pays attention to the description that Alberti proposes for the *construzione legittima,* one sees that a perspective cube constructed on the ground of a chessboard of $8 \times 8 = 64$ squares can be divided—in the manner of the standard meter-cube defined by the dictionary as composed of $10 \times 10 \times 10 = 1{,}000$ decimeter cubes—in $8 \times 8 \times 8 = 512$ little cubes whose sides are equal to those of the squares of the chessboard. Given the fact that the number of marble pieces enclosed in the birdcage adds up to 152, the parallel that is suggested is the anagram of the number of little cubes in the perspective cube defined as $8 \times 8 \times 8$. Now these cubes, if they were to fill the corresponding volume, would allow for one and only one principle of distribution, a perfectly regular one. In order for them to be arranged according to a diagram that would not be symmetrical (under the effect, for example, of a sneeze that disrupts their order), it would be necessary to withdraw a certain number in order to give to the others a margin of play. This operation goes well beyond an overturning of the pieces on the chessboard, since it makes an attempt on the very structure of the gameboard (but not on that of the cage). Now this is the very operation which the readymade brings about, and which can be interpreted in two ways: either it can be situated in the line of Duchampian speculations on geometry of n dimensions, the two-dimensional

chessboard seeming like the projection onto a flat surface of a perspective cube in three dimensions (but that, in its turn, as the projection in three dimensions of a hypothetical structure in four dimensions?). Or, in greater depth, it is an allegorical manifestation of the truth that there is no game, neither painting nor action, and even less history, which can be thought about solely in terms of space, even if it be in *n* dimensions. But that demonstration was not to be provided by Duchamp. It remained for others to show, through painting alone, and along lines that were neither those of allegory nor a geometry limited to graphic vision, in fields other than those deriving from point, line, and plane. It remained for those released as far as the figure of the chessboard is concerned to break through into new exercises where color would be ascendent. But that is another history, another game, another theory.

A Conversation about *Glacial Decoy**

TRISHA BROWN and YVONNE RAINER

Rainer: Considering how long it took you to make *Watermotor, Glacial Decoy* seems to have been made in a surprisingly short time.

Brown: Watermotor was an exploration of new territory, so hesitation was built into it. I knew more of what my material was in *Glacial Decoy.* And I have been frustrated for years about how slowly my work proceeds. I decided to hammer this one out and to push myself as hard as I could. Actually, I started the movement a very long time ago—August 1st [1978]. I set up a regime and a pace that was unstoppable. I think that I choreographed every day for eight or nine months.

Rainer: Was the dance made in the same sequence in which we saw it?

Brown: No. The opening section presents the outside edges of the so-called dance; the middle, the center of the phrases, is missing. The most recent thing we worked on was a slow duet and trio. Out of that, when the dust settled, the duet which is the core of the dance emerged. And that is one continuous phrase of about seven minutes length . . . I complain that I don't want to talk about structure, but here I go.

Rainer: Why?

Brown: Because it obscures the movement. Few people who write about dance discuss movement. I eventually stopped telling people what the structures were, so that they were left with their own perceptions. In the last few articles, some kind of language about movement is finally beginning to develop.

Rainer: Still, when you read about how *Locus,* for example, was made, what the invisible spatial considerations were, the work *is* illuminated to some extent. It

* *Glacial Decoy,* choreography by Trisha Brown, set and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg. First performed at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, on May 7, 1979, and subsequently in New York City at Marymount Manhattan College on June 20, on a program which also included *Accumulation* (1971) *with Talking* (1973) *Plus Water Motor* (1978), *Planes* (1968), and *Line-Up* (1977). This conversation took place at the time of the first New York performance.

probably isn't necessary to know this explicitly, but I am curious about the structure of *Glacial Decoy.*

Brown: First you get the outside edges of the phrase; next you get the core of the dance. This second section is never seen again, except . . . every time I talk about dance, I think I'm lying. It's too complex, but I'll simplify. The second section is never seen again. The third section is a duet which gives you the center of the dance, and in the final section, all the parts appear at once.

What I'm doing in an individual movement is reflected in the phrases I use and in the entire piece—which is to interrupt. The dance is permeated with sliding movements, interruptions of movement, place, and direction. It's always going in an unexpected direction. My dancing is always unpredictable, unlikely, continuous. Phrases are minutes long without stopping or even slowing down. In this context, a four-count phrase becomes a climax.

My work is about change—of direction, shape, velocity, mood, state. There are total, instantaneous shifts from one physical state to another. This is tumultuous to perform, but if the momentum is just right, there is an ease.

There's more to say about the making of the piece. That core duet was taken apart and dancers would learn movement of the same genre at the instant that I would—we call it "throwing." I would improvise and each would take from it what she saw. Each sees differently. I don't know if you recognize them in the piece, but that's what I was working with in choreographing the main phrase: without thinking, to cast the body into space. . . . This material was then set and incorporated.

Rainer: Using movement that had already been learned?

Brown: No. That was my reference in making *Watermotor:* the intelligence of the unknown, of the body moving in an unknown place. Not only place, but also shape.

Rainer: So that in rehearsal you would do that kind of movement, and they would do versions of it at the same time. But they're different.

Brown: They're different, and they're brief, and they appear within the overall phrase in such a way that non sequitur slips into logic and back, with no clue as to which is which.

Rainer: In your dancing, the energy for the beginning of an impulse occurs so suddenly that one thinks that maybe it is *about* the impulse at the beginning of a phrase, but that isn't right. Rather, the impulse constantly arises from different rhythms and therefore it's unpredictable. Much of the movement concerns the weight at the end of the previous movement, the transitions. The impulse comes from either flinging or dropping a limb.

Brown: From falling, and its opposite, and all the in-betweens. Tilting and rising and the like are a logical order of movement which often functions as the motivation.

Rainer: And that impulse is constantly moving all over the body.

Brown: There is a kind of democratic distribution throughout the body. I'm always looking for what we've left out—the backside of the knees, for example. There is an inevitability at work; I set up a tilt and all of the instinctive moves that follow in an improvisational choreographic process give you the base for a phrase which can then be amplified and altered. That's one of my basic tools. I'm constantly altering the meaning of move *a* by the introduction of move *b* . . .

Rainer: . . . while *a* is still going on . . .

Brown: . . . which sets up something that will occur in move *f*.

Rainer: So that it has the look of improvisation in the very free use of body weight to generate movement, but then there are incredibly virtuosic details that show the total control which informs every part of it. Nothing is really left to fall where it may, even though the look is supple, soft, relaxed. That's very amazing and new to behold. You're actually making a new dance grammar.

Brown: Since *Watermotor*, I have not been coining phrases as I go along. The movement comes from an intuitive physical base. It's like Steve Paxton, after completing one of those miraculous concerts of his, saying that he doesn't know what he did. I work in a similar way, but I also try to know what I'm doing. In setting my material, I lose some things, but gain others. I lose those moments of extraordinary good luck, the gorgeous coincidences. I've caught a few, though, and the ones I catch I get to keep.

Rainer: Yet Steve certainly gives the impression of a kind of spontaneous "knowing." I mean the fact that you see him making decisions on the spot, which is a characteristic of improvisation. His method has very much to do with references to modes of dancing and moving. Maybe references is not the right word, because he actually *does* those things—fragments of tumbling, T'ai Chi, Cunningham, Akido, et cetera. Whereas the references in your work—and I think your work is chock-full of them—occur more as a consequence or by-product of a way of working than as primary meaning. They occur within the flow. This is especially evident in *Glacial Decoy*.

Brown: Sometimes my dancing is metaphoric, using memory as a resource. Yet what may have been traumatic in, say, 1941 makes hardly a ripple today when it is put through the mind and out the body. Still, memory gives a phrase a reality for me and modulates its quality and texture.

However the image, the memory, must occur in performance at precisely the same moment as the action derived from it. Without thinking, there are just physical feats. I also distinguish between public and private gestures. I perform both, but you are not supposed to see the private ones. I am telling you this because it accounts for coloration or nuance and the appearance of universal eccentricity.

Rainer: The jokes which occur in your work—are they public or private?

Brown: I have in the last two years excluded jokes from my work. Walking like a duck used to be fair game, but no longer. Jokes come to mind so easily that there must be something wrong with them. There are ducks in *Decoy,* beyond the title, but they are performed so quickly that the humor is perceived subliminally, if at all.

What did you think of the costumes in *Glacial Decoy*?

Rainer: The costumes bring in another dimension . . . of, not exactly a persona, but an association with personae created elsewhere and earlier, somewhere between *Les Sylphides* and *Primitive Mysteries,* maybe even *Antic Meet,* which has that take-off on *Primitive Mysteries.* And it is the dress that produces this association. There's a recurring, fleeting transformation from a body moving to a flickering female image. I think that because the dress stands away from the body—Bob [Rauschenberg]'s design kept it sculptural—the image is never totally integrated or unified. So one goes back and forth in seeing movement-as-movement, body-inside-dress, dress-outside-body, and image-of-woman/dancer. Which is not the same thing as seeing, or not seeing, your work in terms of your being a woman. Femaleness in *Glacial Decoy* is both a given, as in your previous work, and a superimposition.

The translucency of the costumes at first seemed somewhat lascivious, but then I thought, "It works because the dancing doesn't display the body statically and there are no moments of exhibitionist posturing." On anyone else the dresses might be "effeminate" in an idealized way. But that's where Bob's gift is so evident, his wit in putting a version of ballet tulle on *your* movement. The unique personal style you've always had, when caught in photographs, sometimes comes close to classical dancing—one-legged, perfectly balanced. The primary difference, of course, is that some area of your body is always in motion. There are none of those recognizable freeze-frames that ballet and Cunningham aspire to, none of that holding with incredible tension and strength and that undercurrent of willful determination.

You used to say that you did not make movements that cover space. I don't know how your dancers get around, but they do. The only word I can think of is *skitter.* They skitter around. I don't know what the steps are, or how, in *Glacial Decoy,* the dancers cover the entire stage at one point or another.

Brown: There are only so many traveling steps: walk, run, hop, skip, jump, slide, gallop. I try to combine all of them in varying tempos, speeds, and qualities.

Rainer: Perhaps I have lost my capacity for taking in movement—my kinetic memory. I become so absorbed in looking at the shifting relations of body parts that I don't see how the traveling happens.

Brown: But I'm always trying to deflect your focus. When 99% of the body is moving to the right, I will stick something out to the left to balance or to deflect it, or to set up some sort of reverberation between the two. Another way to effect change is through cancellation. The cancellation of a thrust generates a small explosion of possibilities. To determine what comes next, I study two poles—the easiest way out, which is the logical progression or instinctive recovery, and the hardest, which is usually another cancellation, which creates its own subsidiary fireworks. By understanding the extremes, the entire field in which my choices lie is spread out before me.

Thus there is a kind of conscientious fragmentation, a delicate balance between chaos and order. If fragmentation is too consistent, it becomes regularized. One solution is to overlay one dance with another, which produces a density of action and detail. In the end, it looks like one dance has been poured into every crack of another one. In the standing *Accumulation*, I talk. The rigor of the accumulation is juxtaposed with the telling of stories in a conversational way, which are interrupted by attention having to go back to the movement. And now I have spliced in the completely different movement quality of *Watermotor*, which breaks it up more. Something happens between all of these elements. I'm working with a lot in that piece—timing, meaning, and stillness.

Rainer: I accept the idea of tinkering with one's own work, especially if it's something that you've been performing for a long time and is very exquisite and complete. Certainly I have done a lot of that. But when I see it, it seems that you're trying to destroy those exquisite pieces.

Brown: I'm not tinkering and I'm not destroying. I'm making something new every time I add new material. I'm both a choreographer and a performer. And the standing *Accumulation* is a performer's tour de force. If it goes flat, I can't keep doing it. I'm not that kind of artist. I can't achieve an exquisite piece and just crank it out every time. I have to keep doing something which has meaning for me. So I add. When it goes flat, I add.

Rainer: Or you make it more difficult.

Brown: It *is* more difficult . . . but every step has been more difficult. Earlier, talking while doing that dance was monumentally difficult. Now I'm glib. What's

difficult today will be easy tomorrow.

The standing *Accumulation* is the most meaningful piece for me, it has so . . . I can't really talk about it; I'll have to write about it at some point and get everything down. It feels like I'm holding reins to about six horses, that they are going out from my body in a 360-degree angle on all sides, so I can't really see what I'm holding. It's wonderful to have all these materials at my fingertips, and know that I have them, but not know how they're going to come out, how I'm going to deal them in.

Rainer: It really does go beyond patting your head and rubbing your belly.

Brown: That was one thing I said last night in performance. I mentioned that some people compared it to patting my head and rubbing my belly, but that in fact it's more like driving my grain harvester while reciting my French.

I try to go for fifteen minutes, to establish the beginning of the piece, how it evolved, and then I move into all of the elements that I am using now. I say I tell two stories at once; I don't say I'm doing two dances at once. There's a whole litany of humorous stories, and the new section about my father's death, which comes up naturally in talking about the evolution of the piece. The first time I talked while doing the accumulation I said, "My father died in between the making of this move and this move." Which knocked me out. I was amazed that my body had stored this memory in the movement pattern.

Rainer: This came out in performance?

Brown: In performance. I became silent and composed myself. I was devastated that I had said that.

Rainer: Do you rehearse with the speaking?

Brown: I don't rehearse it at all. Who can do that to themselves? I do however start talking to my audience the afternoon before a performance. I've been known to be quite eloquent at four.

Rainer: Were the problems of teaching the movement in *Glacial Decoy* different from those of previous dances?

Brown: I taught the dancers as I went along. That's been a very big issue: how to teach this movement. I really did teach it and they really did learn it.

Rainer: That's the most amazing thing. I was impressed early on, in *Locus*, by how people seemed to be doing your movement, how the kind of virtuosity that was visible years ago, your ability to do utterly unexpected things like standing on your hands and drawing up your legs as if you were sitting in a chair upside down

and then instantly getting out of it and into something else. One almost doesn't believe what one has seen; it isn't like a circus trick where there's a build-up and then a climax and there the person is, in an impossible situation. You're always on to something else. It seemed impossible that anyone else could do that, but you've found dancers who . . .

Brown: I've become more articulate, and they trust me when I tell them to do those things. Some people might say, "I can't do that," or "That simply can't be done."

Rainer: And it can't be slowed down, or it becomes something else. They have to catch the speed that's part of it. I've never been to rehearsal, so I've no idea what your teaching process is like. It must involve constant analysis.

Brown: Every dance is different. *Locus* was really like a work table: we all had hammers and nails and fine glasses on. We talked about every aspect of the movement, broke it down . . .

Rainer: But wasn't it much simpler?

Brown: It was, but at the time it was very complex. I was determined that I was going to go all the way in teaching this movement, which I had never done before. I would sit in my chair and say, "Well, are you going to tell them or not?"

Rainer: Was it a matter of telling them, or of finding a language in which to tell them?

Brown: Of telling them this way and that way and another way. What you have is a constant flow of energy with precise multiple maneuvers along the way, and they're just so, and they're right here, and they're not somewhere else. That took a long time. But once I taught that, we had a language, we had built up a rapport that really broke new ground.

Rainer: Does *Line-Up* keep changing? Do you insert and edit?

Brown: No. Only one thing comes and goes—the building section, which is a segment of process.

Rainer: Why do you take it out?

Brown: This time I used the excuse that the program was too long. But it's very difficult to do, and I don't think we do it well. What we do in the studio when we're working together is too fragile to take out and set under lights and pretend that this is what we do. This is not what we do. We don't go around with four hundred eyes glued on us. So in fact we're faking it. What's the point? We all know what

process is, we all know that people have used rehearsal behavior, choreographic behavior, et cetera.

Rainer: I used to find *Line-Up* very fragmentary. Now one thing seems to flow out of another.

Brown: Pieces homogenize. *Line-Up* has other, formalized dances inserted into it. The transition between the two has always been a question: does one really amplify the other? When I put *Spanish Dance* in there, I held my breath. We are lying on the floor, we look at each other and then get up and do this . . .

Rainer . . .specialty dance . . .

Brown: . . . which always brings down the house. Then we return to our original positions, look where we were looking and at each other, and then we go on. I wish I had not inserted those formal dances. I wish I had had time to make an unending shifting of people.

Rainer: But now that I finally begin to accept the episodic quality of *Line-Up*, it doesn't seem so episodic.

Brown: This has been the case with my work for a long time. It takes about three years for people to say . . .

Rainer: . . . "That's whole." A very good friend of mine, who has come very late to the dancing that came out of the sixties, attended your concerts both last year and this year. Last year she couldn't get over the look of the bodies; she couldn't see past a body that she had never associated with dancing before: the lack of the taut, delineated look in the hips and buttocks that modern dancers used to have. This time I asked her whether she had become accustomed to the bodies, and she said, "Oh yes!" The relaxation of the body makes it look as if it can't do those things, especially if you haven't seen that kind of movement and physical presence before.

I remember getting that in the sixties: slack, it was called. A Boston newspaper reviewer referred to our "slack bodies," which at the time was a very pejorative thing to say.

Brown: That puzzles me. If I go to a concert and see someone beating his body or blasting it against the floor, I'm horrified, aesthetically and physically. I can't believe that people still do that sort of thing and that other people sit and watch them. But I'm aware that that's still 80% of dance. I do not participate in that. I do have very sharp, dynamic movement in my dances, but it doesn't come from that look like you're going to explode.

But I'm encouraged to hear that it only takes a year to turn someone around. The walking, running, sitting, standing movement vocabulary of *Line-Up* feels dated, because of the articulation of the movement I'm doing now. I enjoy it for

that reason. It's like bringing my own history with me. You see the seed of *Watermotor* in a section of *Solo Olos.*

Rainer: I would miss *Line-Up* if it were not on the program, because it really functions as you say as the seed of a whole range of things. You don't simply sit, walk, run, lie. It's very nice to see the way that you go down to the floor, the fluidity that informs all of your movement, brought to bear on everyday action.

Brown: It would be interesting to do another *Line-Up* with the knowledge of what's come since and the days of building yet to come. The section which we call "Humming"—the delicate part near the end in which we simply touch each other—is quite complex but executed so delicately that you hardly know it's happened. That would have been a good starting point for the making of *Line-Up.* It only came about because we had worked in that vocabulary for so many months.

Rainer: Trisha, what are you going to do with those two men?*

Brown: I'm going to dance with them. My company is now filled with wonderful dancers. Some of them are men and some of them are women. I was working on *Glacial Decoy* when I held the first men's audition, and it affected me. A couple of moves felt a little girlish. Instead of mediating them with a stereotyped infusion of how a man moves I took them out altogether, because I had already begun to think of a different kind of line, a different weight, a different size. I look forward to working with them.

Rainer: I'd hate to see you censor a certain part of yourself because of the men.

Brown: I hope that I'll be able to make a distinction between one dancer and another regardless of sex. They all have different qualities that I hope I can put my finger on. Next year we begin making a new piece.

Rainer: Would you ever collaborate with a designer again?

Brown: I am, with Fujiko Nakaya. She makes fog sculpture, cloud sculpture. She works with steam, which is very much in keeping with the evanescence of dance.

Rainer: And the quality of your movement.

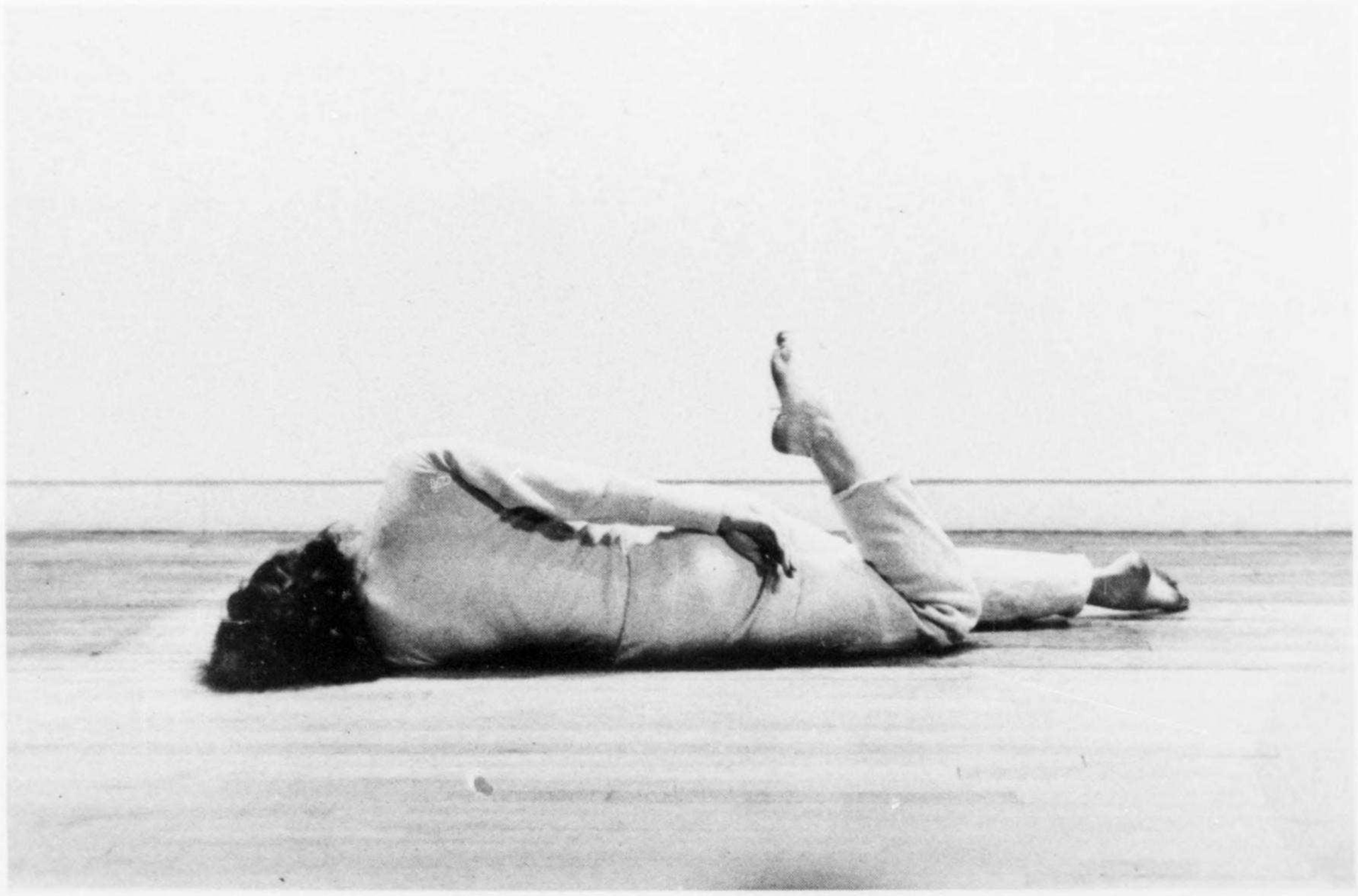
Brown: And my having grown up in a rainforest. I think her environment will be special, that it won't interfere with but will augment what I do. And I'm looking for music. I think that the rhythmic structure of my dancing can hold its own now.

* Daniel Lepkoff and Terry O'Reilly, who appeared as guest performers with the company in the spring 1979 performances.

A Portfolio of Photographs of Trisha Brown's Work

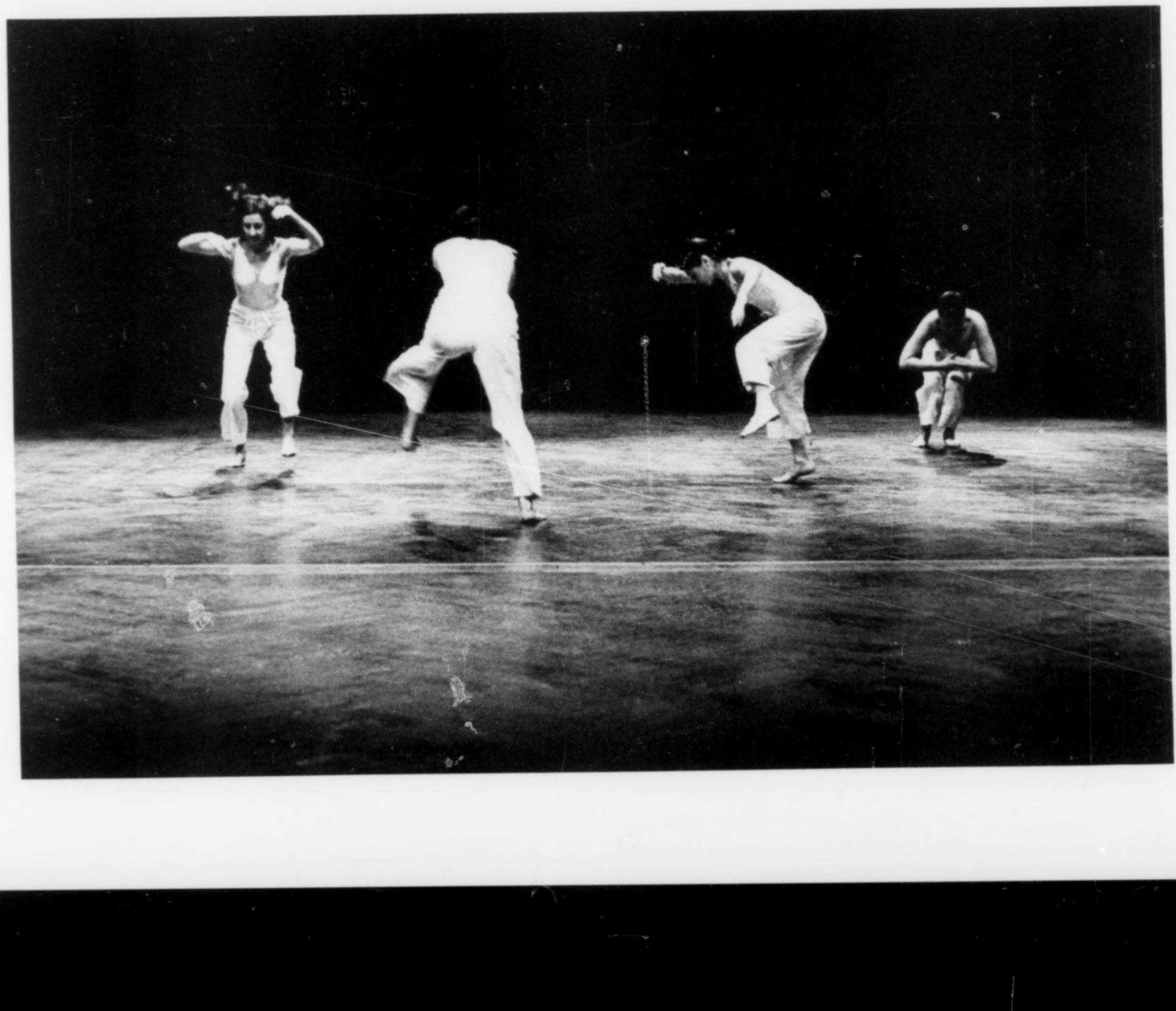
BABETTE MANGOLTE

Accumulation, 1971



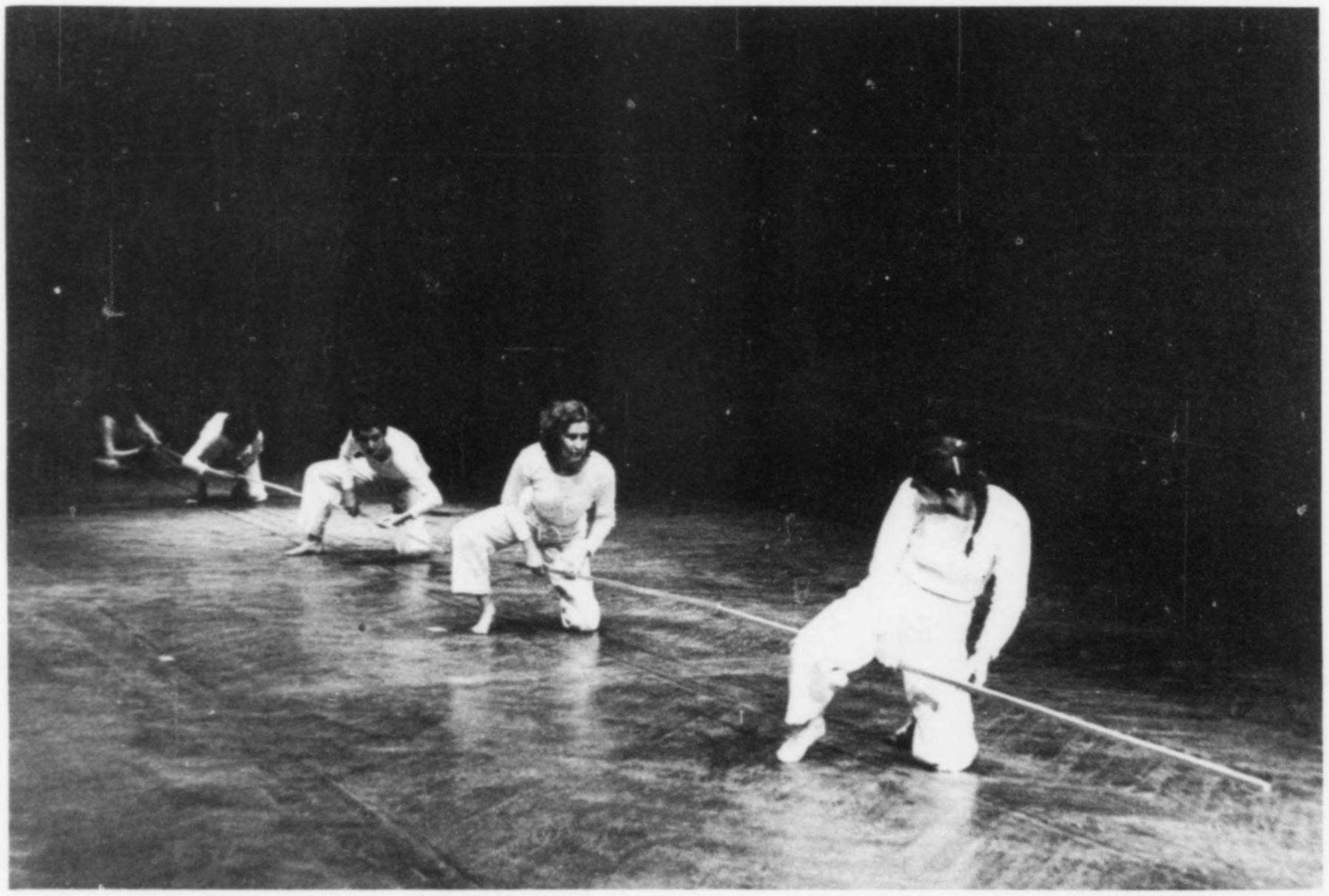
Locus, 1975

Dancers: Trisha Brown, Elizabeth Garren, Judith Ragir, Mona Sulzman.

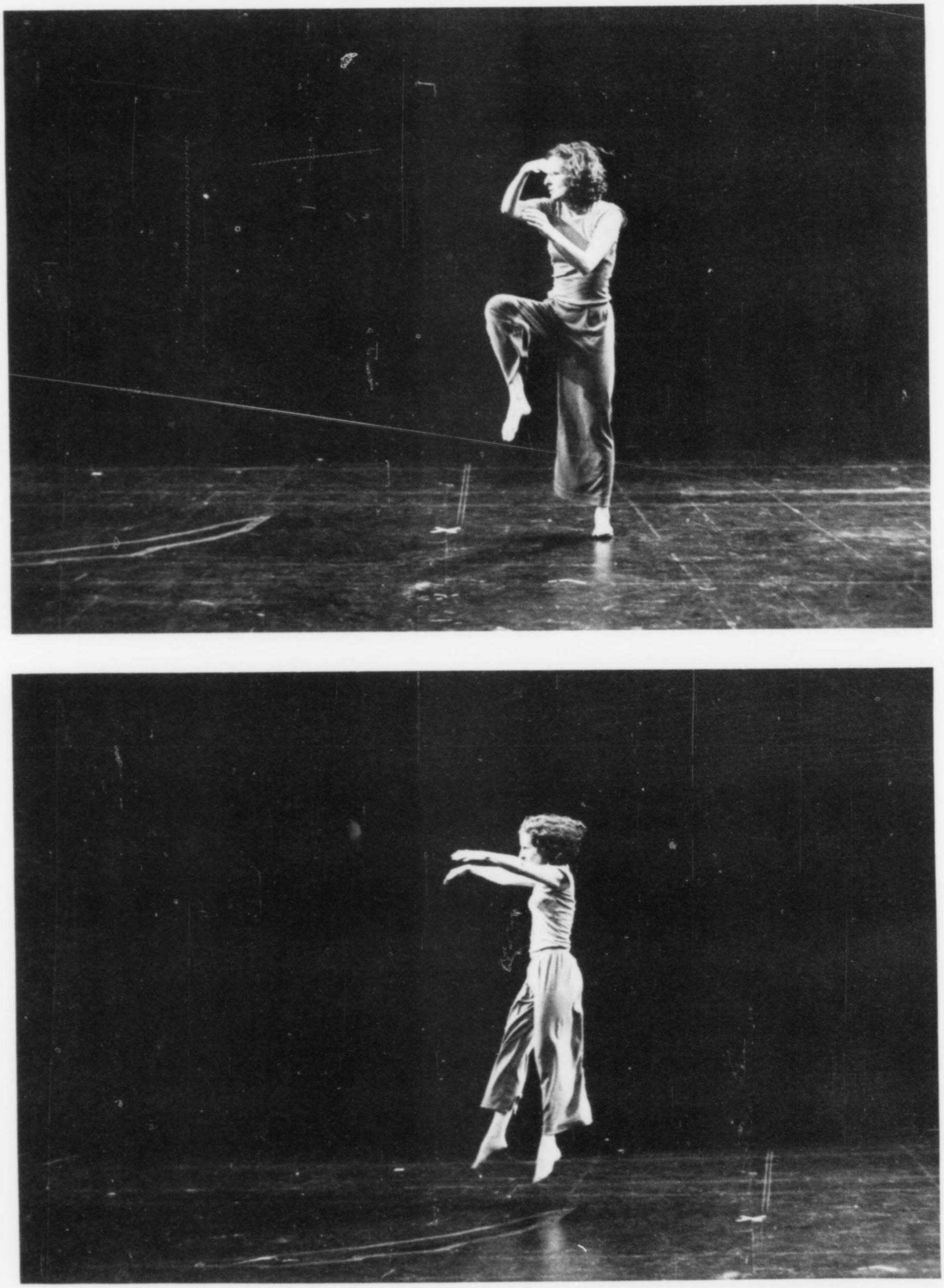


Line-Up, 1977

Dancers: Trisha Brown, Elizabeth Garren, Lisa Kraus, Wendy Perron, Judith Ragir, Mona Sulzman.

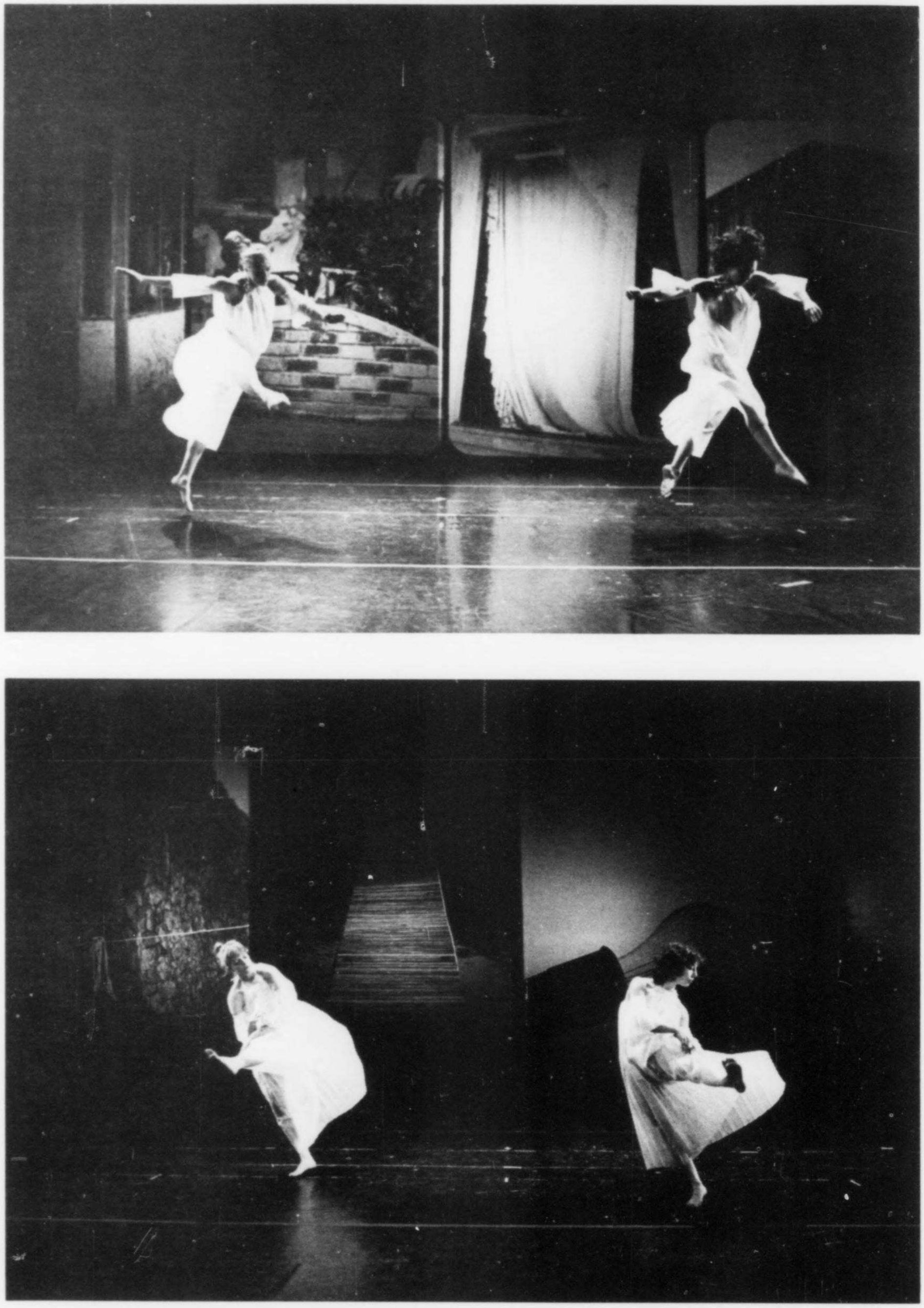


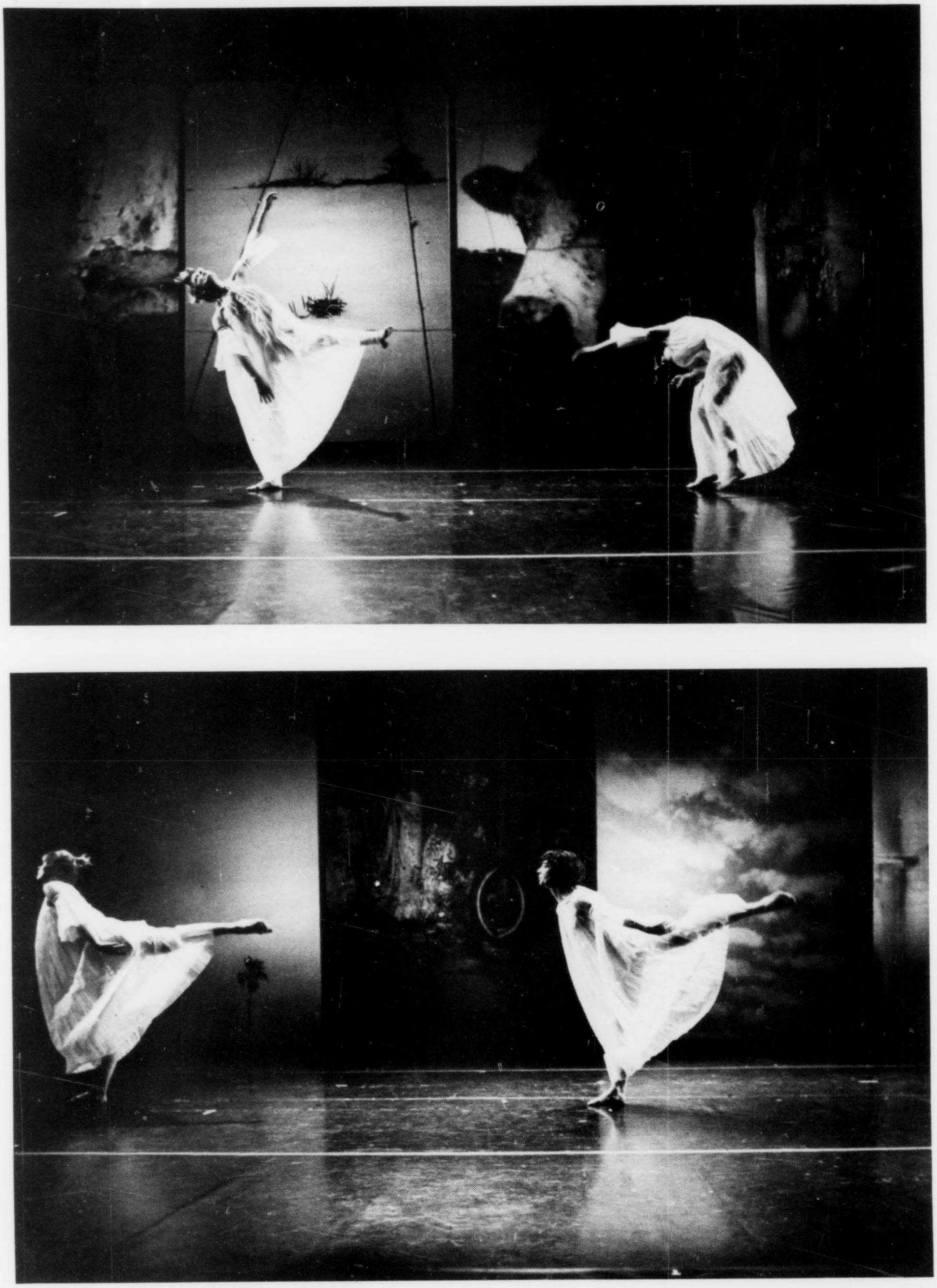
Water Motor, 1978



Glacial Decoy, 1979

Dancers: Trisha Brown, Elizabeth Garren, Lisa Kraus, Nina Lundborg.





The Function of the Studio*

DANIEL BUREN

translated by THOMAS REPENSEK

Of all the frames, envelopes, and limits—usually not perceived and certainly never questioned—which enclose and constitute the work of art (picture frame, niche, pedestal, palace, church, gallery, museum, art history, economics, power, etc.), there is one rarely even mentioned today that remains of primary importance: *the artist's studio.* Less dispensable to the artist than either the gallery or the museum, it precedes both. Moreover, as we shall see, the museum and gallery on the one hand and the studio on the other are linked to form the foundation of the same edifice and the same system. To question one while leaving the other intact accomplishes nothing. Analysis of the art system must inevitably be carried on in terms of the studio as the *unique space* of production and the museum as the *unique space* of exposition. Both must be investigated as customs, the ossifying customs of art.

What is the function of the studio?

1. It is the place where the work originates.
2. It is generally a private place, an ivory tower perhaps.
3. It is a *stationary* place where *portable* objects are produced.

The importance of the studio should by now be apparent; it is the first frame, the first limit, upon which all subsequent frames/limits will depend.

What does it look like, physically, architecturally? The studio is not just any hideaway, any room.[1] Two specific types may be distinguished:

1. The European type, modelled upon the Parisian studio of the turn of the century. This type is usually rather large and is characterized

* This essay, written in 1971 and published here for the first time, is one of three texts dealing with the art system. The others were "Function of the Museum," published first by the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, and subsequently in *Artforum*, September 1973; and "Function of an Exhibition," *Studio International*, December 1973.

1. I am well aware that, at least at the beginnings of and sometimes throughout their careers, all artists must be content with squalid hovels or ridiculously tiny rooms; but I am describing the studio as an archetype. Artists who maintain ramshackle work spaces despite their drawbacks are obviously artists for whom the *idea* of possessing a studio is a necessity. Thus they often dream of possessing a studio very similar to the archetype described here.

primarily by its high ceilings (a minimum of 4 meters). Sometimes there is a balcony, to increase the distance between viewer and work. The door allows large works to enter and to exit. Sculptor's studios are on the ground floor, painters' on the top floor. In the latter, the lighting is natural, usually diffused by windows oriented toward the north so as to receive the most even and subdued illumination.[2]

2. The American type,[3] of more recent origin. This type is rarely built according to specification, but, located as it is in reclaimed lofts, is generally much larger than its European counterpart, not necessarily higher, but longer and wider. Wall and floor space are abundant. Natural illumination plays a negligible role, since the studio is lit by electricity both night and day if necessary. There is thus equivalence between the products of these lofts and their placement on the walls and floors of modern museums, which are also illuminated day and night by electricity.

This second type of studio has influenced the European studio of today, whether it be in an old country barn or an abandoned urban warehouse. In both cases, the architectural relationship of studio and museum—one inspiring the other and vice versa—is apparent.[4] (We will not discuss those artists who transform part of their studios into exhibition spaces, nor those curators who conceive of the museum as a permanent studio.)

These are some of the studio's architectural characteristics; let us move on to what usually happens there. A private place, the studio is presided over by the artist-resident, since only that work which he desires and allows to leave his studio will do so. Nevertheless, other operations, indispensable to the functioning of galleries and museums, occur in this private place. For example, it is here that the art critic, the exhibition organizer, or the museum director or curator may calmly choose among the works presented by the artist those to be included in this or that exhibition, this or that collection, this or that gallery. The studio is thus a convenience for the organizer: he may compose his exhibition according to his own desire (and not that of the artist, although the artist is usually perfectly content to leave well enough alone, satisfied with the prospect of an exhibition).

2. Thus the architect must pay more attention to the lighting, orientation, etc., of the studio than most artists ever pay to the exhibition of their works once they leave the studio!

3. We are speaking of New York, since the United States, in its desire to rival and to supplant the long lamented "School of Paris," actually reproduced all its defects, including the insane centralization which, while ridiculous on the scale of France or even Europe, is absolutely grotesque on the scale of the United States, and certainly antithetical to the development of art.

4. The American museum with its electric illumination may be contrasted with its European counterpart, usually illuminated by natural light thanks to a profusion of skylights. Some see these as opposites, when in fact they merely represent a stylistic difference between European and American production.

Thus chance is minimized, since the organizer has not only selected the artist in advance, but also selects the works he desires in the studio itself. The studio is thus also a boutique where we find ready-to-wear art.

Before a work of art is publicly exhibited in a museum or gallery, the studio is also the place to which critics and other specialists may be invited in the hope that their visits will release certain works from this, their purgatory, so that they may accede to a state of grace on public (museum/gallery) or private (collection) walls. Thus the studio is a place of multiple activities: production, storage, and finally, if all goes well, distribution. It is a kind of commercial depot.

Thus the first frame, the studio, proves to be a filter which allows the artist to select his work screened from public view, and curators and dealers to select in turn that work to be seen by others. Work produced in this way makes its passage, in order to exist, from one refuge to another. It should therefore be portable, manipulable if possible, by whoever (except the artist himself) assumes the responsibility of removing it from its place of origin to its place of promotion. A work produced in the studio must be seen, therefore, as an object subject to infinite manipulation. In order for this to occur, from the moment of its production the work must be isolated from the real world. All the same, it is in the studio and only in the studio that it is closest to its own reality, a reality from which it will continue to distance itself. It may become what even its creator had not anticipated, serving instead, as is usually the case, the greater profit of financial interests and the dominant ideology. It is therefore only in the studio that the work may be said to belong.

The work thus falls victim to a mortal paradox from which it cannot escape, since its purpose implies a progressive removal from its own reality, from its origin. If the work of art remains in the studio, however, it is the artist that risks death . . . from starvation.

The work is thus totally foreign to the world into which it is welcomed (museum, gallery, collection). This gives rise to the ever-widening gap between the work and its place (and not its *placement*), an abyss which, were it to become apparent, as sooner or later it must, would hurl the entire parade of art (art as we know it today and, 99% of the time, as it is made) into historical oblivion. This gap is tentatively bridged, however, by the system which makes acceptable to ourselves as public, artist, historian, and critic, the convention that establishes the museum and the gallery as inevitable neutral frames, the unique and definitive locales of art. Eternal realms for eternal art!

The work is made in a specific place which it cannot take into account. All the same, it is there that it was ordered, forged, and only there may it be truly said to be in place. The following contradiction becomes apparent: it is impossible by definition for a work to be seen in place; still, the place where we see it influences the work even more than the place in which it was made and from which it has been cast out. Thus when the work is in place, it does not take place (for the

public), while it takes place (for the public) only when not in place, that is, in the museum.

Expelled from the ivory tower of its production, the work ends up in another, which, while foreign, only reinforces the sense of comfort the work acquires by taking shelter in a citadel which insures that it will survive its passage. The work thus passes—and it can only exist in this way, predestined as it is by the imprint of its place of origin—from one enclosed place/frame, the world of the artist, to another, even more closely confined: the world of art. The alignment of works on museum walls gives the impression of a cemetery: whatever they say, wherever they come from, whatever their meanings may be, this is where they all arrive in the end, where they are lost. This loss is relative, however, compared to the total oblivion of the work that never emerges from the studio!

Thus, the unspeakable compromise of the portable work.

The status of the work that reaches the museum is unclear: it is at the same time in place and in *a* place which is never its own. Moreover, the place for which the work is destined is not defined by the work, nor is the work specifically intended for a place which preexists it and is, for all practical purposes, unknown.

For the work to be in place without being specially placed, it must either be identical to all other existing works, and those works in turn identical among themselves, in which case the work (and all other identical works) may travel and be placed at will; or the frame (museum/gallery) that receives the original work and all other original—that is, fundamentally heterogenous—works must be adjustable, adapting itself to each work perfectly, to the millimeter.

From these two extremes, we can only deduce such extreme, idealizing, yet interesting formulations as:

1. all works of art are absolutely the same, wherever and whenever produced, by whatever artist. This would explain their identical arrangement in thousands of museums around the world, subject to the vagaries of curatorial fashion;
2. all works of art are absolutely different, and if their differences are respected and hence both implicitly and explicitly legible, every museum, every room in every museum, every wall and every square meter of every wall, is perfectly adapted to every work.

The symmetry of these propositions is only apparent. If we cannot conclude logically that all works of art are the same, we must acknowledge at least that they are all installed in the same manner, according to the prevailing taste of a particular time. If on the other hand we accept the uniqueness of each work of art, we must also admit that no museum ever totally adapts itself to the work; pretending to defend the uniqueness of the work, the museum paradoxically acts as if this did not exist and handles the work as it pleases.

To edify ourselves with two examples among many, the administration of the Jeu de Paume in Paris has set impressionist paintings into the museum's

painted walls, which thereby directly frame the paintings. Eight thousand kilometers away at the Art Institute of Chicago paintings from the same period and by the same artists are exhibited in elaborate carved frames, like onions in a row.

Does this mean that the works in question are absolutely identical, and that they acquire their specific meanings only from the intelligence of those who present them? That the "frame" exists precisely to vary the absolute neutrality of all works of art? Or does it mean that the museum adapts itself to the specific meaning of each work? Yet we may ask how it is that, seventy years after being painted, certain canvases by Monet, for example, should be recessed into a salmon-colored wall in a building in Paris, while others in Chicago are encased in enormous frames and juxtaposed with other impressionist works.

If we reject numbers 1 and 2 proposed above, we are still faced with a third, more common alternative that presupposes a necessary relationship between the studio and the museum such as we know it today. Since the work which remains in the studio is a nonentity, if the work is to be made, not to mention seen in another place, in any place whatsoever, either of two conditions must apply; either

> 1. the definitive place of the work must be the work itself. This belief or philosophy is widely held in artistic circles, even though it dispenses with all analysis of the physical space in which the work is viewed, and consequently of the system, the dominant ideology, that controls it as much as the specific ideology of art. A reactionary theory if ever there was one: while feigning indifference to the system, it reinforces it, without even having to justify itself, since by definition (the definition advanced by this theory's proponents) the space of the museum has no relation to the space of the work; or
>
> 2. the artist, imagining the place where his work will come to grief, is led to conceive all possible situations of every work (which is quite impossible), or a typical space (this he does). The result is the predictable cubic space, uniformly lit, neutralized to the extreme, which characterizes the museum/gallery of today. This state of affairs consciously or unconsciously compels the artist to banalize his own work in order to make it conform to the banality of the space that receives it.

By producing for a stereotype, one ends up of course fabricating a stereotype, which explains the rampant academicism of contemporary work, dissimulated as it is behind apparent formal diversity.

In conclusion, I would like to substantiate my distrust of the studio and its simultaneously idealizing and ossifying function with two examples that have influenced me. The first is personal, the second, historical.

1. While still very young—I was seventeen at the time—I undertook a study of Provençal painting from Cézanne to Picasso with particular attention given to

the influence of geography on works of art. To accomplish my study, I not only traveled throughout southeastern France but also visited a large number of artists, from the youngest to the oldest, from the obscure to the famous. My visits afforded me the opportunity to view their work in the context of their studios. What struck me about all their work was first its diversity, then its quality and richness, especially the sense of reality, that is, the "truth," that it possessed, whoever the artist and whatever his reputation. This "reality/truth" existed not only in terms of the artist and his work space but also in relation to the environment, the landscape.

It was when I later visited, one after the other, the exhibitions of these artists that my enthusiasm began to fade, and in some cases disappear, as if the works I had seen were not these, nor even produced by the same hands. Torn from their context, their "environment," they had lost their meaning and died, to be reborn as forgeries. I did not immediately understand what had happened, nor why I felt so disillusioned. One thing was clear, however: deception. More than once I revisited certain artists, and each time the gap between studio and gallery widened, finally making it impossible for me to continue my visits to either. Although the reasons were unclear, something had irrevocably come to an end for me.

I later experienced the same disillusion with friends of my own generation, whose work possessed a "reality/truth" that was clearly much closer to me. The loss of the object, the idea that the context of the work corrupts the interest that the work provokes, as if some energy essential to its existence escapes as it passes through the studio door, occupied all my thoughts. This sense that the main point of the work is lost somewhere between its place of production and place of consumption forced me to consider the problem and the significance of the work's *place.* What I later came to realize was that it was the reality of the work, its "truth," its relationship to its creator and place of creation, that was irretrievably lost in this transfer. In the studio we generally find finished work, work in progress, abandoned work, sketches—a collection of visible evidence viewed simultaneously that allows an understanding of process; it is this aspect of the work that is extinguished by the museum's desire to "install." Hasn't the term *installation* come to replace *exhibition*? In fact, isn't what is installed close to being established?

2. The only artist who has always seemed to me to exhibit real intelligence in his dealings with the museum system and its consequences, and who moreover sought to oppose it by not permitting his works to be fixed or even arranged according to the whim of some departmental curator, is Constantin Brancusi. By disposing of a large part of his work with the stipulation that it be preserved in the studio where it was produced, Brancusi thwarted any attempt to disperse his work, frustrated speculative ventures, and afforded every visitor the same perspective as himself at the moment of creation. He is the only artist who, in order to preserve the relationship between the work and its place of production, dared to present his work in the very place where it first saw light, thereby short-circuiting the

Constantin Brancusi. Photograph of his studio taken c. 1925.

museum's desire to classify, to embellish, and to select. The work is seen, for better or worse, as it was conceived. Thus, Brancusi is also the only artist to preserve what the museum goes to great lengths to conceal: the banality of the work.

It might also be said—but this requires a lengthy study of its own—that the way in which the work is anchored in the studio has nothing whatsoever to do with the "anchorage" to which the museum submits every work it exhibits. Brancusi also demonstrates that the so-called purity of his works is no less beautiful or interesting when seen amidst the clutter of the studio—various tools; other works, some of them incomplete, others complete—than it is in the immaculate space of the sterilized museum.[5]

The art of yesterday and today is not only marked by the studio as an essential, often unique, place of production; it proceeds from it. All my work proceeds from its extinction.

5. Had Brancusi's studio remained in the Impasse Ronsin, or even in the artist's house (even if removed to another location), Brancusi's argument would only have been strengthened. (This text was written in 1971 and refers to the reconstruction of Brancusi's studio in the Museum of Modern Art, Paris. Since then, the main buildings have been reconstructed in front of the Centre Baubourg, which renders the above observation obsolete—author's note.)

Preliminary Notes on the Pragmatic of Works: Daniel Buren

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD

translated by THOMAS REPENSEK

Any work may be read, and there are many ways to read a work. This does not imply that all possible readings may be applied to every work, nor that every reading may be applied to all works. Neither does it mean that the act of interpretation has lost its value. Rather it announces the disintegration of critical typologies, a breakdown in the conventions that separate kinds of interpretation. As the contemporary arts can no longer be organized and identified by Aristotelian categories, so the interpretations brought to bear on them can no longer be distributed among the various types of discourse which have been used to speak in the past. Each of these types has come to be seen not only as a discipline but also as a deficiency: art history, art criticism, aesthetics, the philosophy of art, not to exclude from the field our *homines novi*: the politician of the Left, the semiotician, the psychoanalyst.

*

At the same time it does not necessarily follow that because anything may be read and reading may be anything, the work escapes designation, the benefaction of meaning; rather, designation is an inevitable result of reading, obtained through a relentlessly imaginative elaboration and use of letters, words, and syntactical structures. Consider the sophistication of Starobinski's so-called psychoanalytic reading of *Oedipus Rex* with *Hamlet*, or the burgeoning Marxism of Adorno's combination of Schönberg and Stravinsky! Perhaps Adorno didn't know his Freud, nor Starobinski his Marx (nor his Adorno). But we can no longer expect a single view of a collection of works to reveal one complete and exclusive truth. Traditionally the goal of art criticism and theoretical writing in general, this ideal is unable to survive (if it ever truly existed) the dissolution by contemporary artistic practice of the principle of the proper point of view (or audition).

*

The arts cannot claim a unified field: not only do they speak numerous languages, but within each language different games are played. Call language all

systems of signs transmitted by means of a specific medium and support: pigment on a two-dimensional surface, light falling on an object, the impression of photons on film sensitive to their movement. While within such a language many "sentences" may be generated, it is possible to group these "sentences" according to categories corresponding to Wittgenstein's language games.

> But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)[1]

The languages of art may be distinguished according to their material (taken in the immediate sense of medium and support). In a given language, painting for example, many games are possible. If we limit ourselves to the intelligible categories proposed by Wittgenstein for language games, we may imagine

> a painting that commands
> a painting that tells a story
> a painting that defines
> a painting that questions and answers
> a painting that is its own adornment
> a painting that is its own painting
> a painting that quotes.

But such a list remains subordinate to the linguistic model. There is no reason whatsoever that an example drawn from language should become a paradigm (in the modern sense).

Reverse the situation then. If anything may be taken to exemplify the game of language, it is literature, poetry, indeed all the linguistic arts including scientific idioms—wherever experimentation takes place. What is literature? That immense laboratory of experience where language games are produced—a conspiratorial formulation against communication. Understood in this way, literature comprises the vernacular as well: to it belongs the invention of slang, argot, jargon, idiolects, "tales." Both the Butor of *Mobile* and the Guyotat of *Prostitution*—each in his own way—defy the communicability of the word.

*

For every game (of language, painting, cinema . . .) there exists a group of

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York, Macmillan, 1953, p. 11e.

actual or possible effects which constitutes its *pragmatic*. For example, the intradiegetic and homodiegetic properties of the narrative apparatus of Books VIII through XII of the *Odyssey* cannot be described without an analysis of the displacements effected in the position of the narrators (Odysseus, Homer), the audience (the Phaeacians, Homer's audience to which we as readers belong), and the diegesis (what happens to Odysseus among the Phaeacians according to Homer, what happens to Odysseus according to Odysseus before his arrival among the Phaeacians).

An artful game requires not only dismantling the narrative apparatus but also understanding its effect. The pragmatic will provide our terms of analysis.

*

Interpretation itself should be reconsidered in this light: whatever its content, it is one effect of a game of visible forms. One result of cinema and contemporary painting is that they give rise to speech, elicit it about themselves. Yet this effect does not necessarily apply universally. If, for example, we were to subscribe to Leroi-Gourhan's theory that figures in paleolithic cave paintings are pictographs, plastic *designata* of gestures accompanying a narrative, then we must not see them as copies or representations of absent objects. The narratives are not about the images themselves, but what they refer to; the figures do not give rise to interpretation, they merely illustrate a story.

If interpretation is an effect of the work, and if the interpretation is itself a work, the theory that guides interpretation may be seen as a filter, a transforming agent or operative placed between the work and its effect, that is, between the interpreted work and the interpretation. This agent has the obvious effect of transforming the receiver of the work of art into the sender of the interpretation of that work. It also transforms the sentence which constitutes the work into a quote, the image of the work within the sentence constituted by the commentary.

These two results are so elementary that they seem to be inevitable no matter what theory may be at stake in the interpretation, that is, whatever meaning may be promoted by a particular reading. They must exist, although their specific nature may vary. They depend on the operational apparatus (theory) inserted between the work and its interpretation, allowing passage from the plastic work to the discursive work which interprets the former. Interpretation here becomes a language game that functions in relation to a plastic game; it is the nature of this correlation that articulates the question, what do we do when we speak *about* a work? We do not assign meaning to the work; we transform it.

*

Since interpretation is a pragmatic effect, the work, by being reduced to its own effect, may be said to be its own interpretation. The work ought perhaps to be

present at least as the absence to which the interpretation refers. But it is in fact only the interpretation that is present (and not only for Art & Language). Presenting the work and presenting the effect of the work, however, are not the same thing. In the presentation of the effect of the work, the recipient receives not the message, but the reception of the message through the intermediary of a primary recipient. Is it not the initial reception that is at issue here? In this case, the work can be said to have no efficacy in and of itself, but through its effect: the interpretation which finally replaces it. This efficacy to the second power is such that the recipient himself becomes a metarecipient, and the pragmatic of the work a metapragmatic.

*

Adorno repeatedly states that modern art was made possible by the decline of metaphysics: Schönberg and Beckett in Hegel's vacant succession. Is the incorporation of the pragmatic of the work into the work itself a result of this crisis of metaphysics? The pragmatic escapes signification if it is true that it concerns the meaning that a sentence may lose when it is described, still remaining intact by virtue of its signification. This aspect of meaning determines that I stand up when someone says to me "Stand up"; yet disappears when I read the sentence "He said, 'Stand up'"; or, what amounts to the same thing, when I assume that the command was not addressed to me. Does art, by giving pride of place to its pragmatic, reveal how little it is concerned with what a work means? In any case it declares its interest in those situations which call forth the efficacy of the work.

Daniel Buren uses the same material in all his works: canvas or paper with alternating colored and white vertical stripes of equal width. It is at the periphery, however, that Buren carries on his experimentation with the pragmatic condition of the work: on the reverse side of the canvas, its material and moral supports, the artistic confines of the museum and gallery, and what Buren calls the cultural limits. Each of his works from the last ten years is an attempt to reveal a pragmatic moment in the efficacy of the work. By pragmatic moment I mean operational devices such as the following:

figure/ground: the same striped paper taken as a ground for other works and/or as the work itself (*Documenta 5*, Kassel, June-October 1972);

inside/outside: the part of a roll of striped canvas hung indoors taken as the work; the part extended out a window and suspended across a neighboring street taken as an advertising or indeterminate sign (New York, October 1973);

present/absent: the same piece of striped cloth placed in exactly the same position relative to the North Pole in three different museums (Otterlo, Amsterdam, Eindhoven, May-June 1976).

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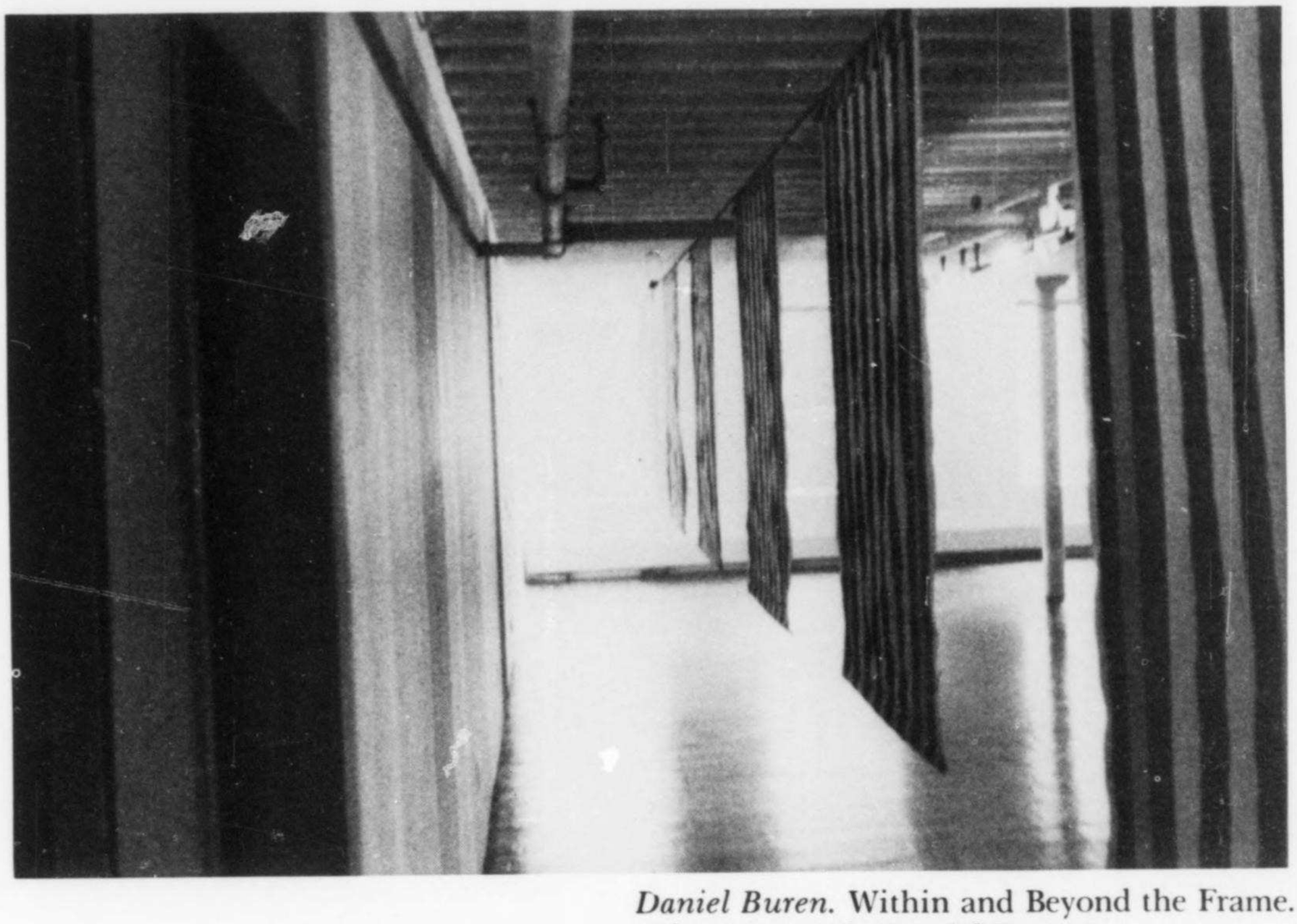
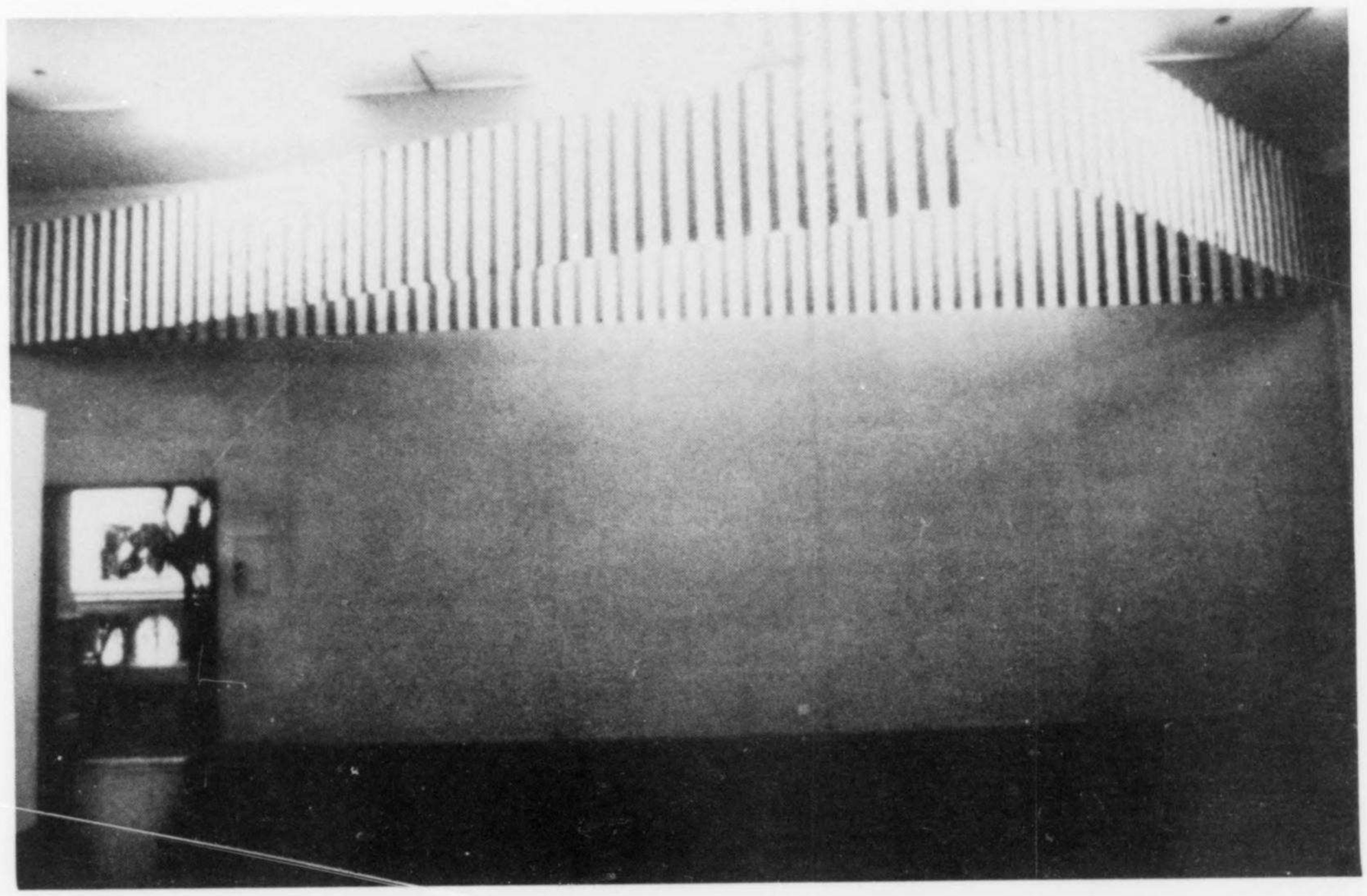


Daniel Buren. Within and Beyond the Frame. *1973.*
(Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren.)



Daniel Buren, Fragment of Ici, Désormais, Ailleurs.
1976. (Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren.)

We would be mistaken to assume that the metapragmatic function of contemporary works of art is the critique of ideological superstructures, the calling into question of institutions, and other critical strategies of that order. Buren, who once held such a position, concludes one of his recent texts as follows:

> The work in progress has the ambition, not of fitting in more or less adequately with the game, nor even of contradicting it, but of abolishing its rules by playing with them, and playing another game, on another or the same ground, as a dissident.[2]

The function of the work of art, therefore, is not reconciliation, enlightenment, or veracity, but the invention of another language game, another artifice.

In a certain sense every work, insofar as it is placed within an artistic context, is dogmatic: it teaches how to see and to understand a work of art. In this sense, the museum and the gallery are the new Academy prescribing the discourse of knowledge. Here the metapragmatic functions as a didactic. In Buren's work, however, the paradox of a nondogmatic art is assumed.

Buren uses the metapragmatic in another way. His art is the exposition of the hidden pragmatic of art, veiled by the context of exposition. But since the pragmatic is covered over, almost invisible, its exposition must be so as well. "Any work attempting so ambitious an undertaking," he writes calmly in the text cited above, "obviously doesn't get seen or if it does, it is attacked, sometimes censored, always disavowed, which is normal under the circumstances."[3] For Buren, support, context, and ideology are all the more emphatic when they are not directly perceived; and the same may be said of their exposition. We are not dealing here with education but with the refinement of the strategies that give efficacy to a work of art. But to what purpose if not to be seen? What is the pragmatic of this metapragmatic work?

*

In a group exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, January 8 to February 3, 1974, eight of Buren's blue-and-white striped canvases, each measuring two and one-half by five meters, were hung horizontally beneath the glass roof of three connecting halls of the museum. Buren's canvases remained in place until June 1975 without alteration, except for two periods of one month each when they were taken down. From July 1975 to June 1977 occurred a second "developmental" phase, during which the canvases were modified and rearranged in various ways. Finally, on September 6, 1977, for two hours, from 6 to 8 PM, the canvases were reexhibited in their original arrangement, this time unaccompanied by the

2. Daniel Buren, *Reboundings*, trans. Philippe Hunt, Brussels, Daled & Gevaert, 1977, p. 73.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Daniel Buren. PH Opera. *1974–77.*

work of any other artist. In all, a forty-four-month experiment, some three and a half years.

The outcome was a booklet produced by Buren entitled *PH Opera* (*PH = peinture horizontale*), bound in red, in which all the stages of the work (26 + 1) are described. Photographs, diagrams, and graphs illustrate the text which is preceded with an introduction by the Director General of the Société des Expositions, K.J. Geirland. Inserted separately on green paper chosen to complement the color of the cover is a commentary by Birgit Pelzer.

Although the work merits detailed analysis, the following points may be noted provisionally:

1. Buren shapes the medium: dyes and paints were used in the alterations effected in the second and following stages.

2. Buren shapes the support: the canvas was hung not vertically but horizontally like a tent.

3. Buren shapes the subject: although there was no visible subject, the subject is logically conceivable—the visibility of the painted work. The subject is a question that bears on the entire pragmatic.

4. Buren shapes the space: the museum (in other instances, the gallery) is part of the pragmatic of the visibility of the work.

5. Buren shapes the time of exposition: the duration of the exposition properly speaking, that is, the reexposition, was short (two hours), that of the unperceived exposition immeasurably long. From experience we know that the time of exposition forms a part of the cultural limits of vision. It may be necessary to conceive of various temporal axes: the duration of the event, its periodicity, its order.

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Work is to be understood here as a set of strategies brought to bear on an aesthetic. This is not a transcendental aesthetic. Is it anti-ideological then? I am afraid that the word, formerly used by Buren, is a comfortable reversion to the opposition between ideology and criticism. By locating the problem in the confines of the senses, Buren's work does not take issue with artistic theory, but with the sensible presence of the work of art, and for this reason his is an aesthetic in the Kantian sense, occurring *before* an analytic or dialectic. In like manner his work is not critical in the sense of Brecht, Adorno, Marx, or even Kant.

Buren's work is not Marxist since Marxist critical theory and practice oppose the irrational surface of things with an underlying rationality attempting to emerge. I assume that today Buren, like his contemporaries worthy of the name, would want to know just what this rationality of the visible is that is being stifled by its perceptual framework (pigment, frame, support, exhibition space, etc.) and from which it is attempting to free itself. For Buren there is no primary view in a hierarchy of vision. Nor does he recognize a priori categories of space and time.

Today's cinematic spatiotemporal vision—binocular, intermittent, serial—differs radically from the optical order represented by Alberti and Dürer: we could hardly allow ourselves to see in a Cézanne (I am thinking of Merleau-Ponty), or a Buren, the transcendental givens of vision.

What is lacking today is a concept of nature that would make possible the formation of an aesthetic, and yet the need for an aesthetic is felt, an aesthetic not grounded in a reality of the senses.

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Painting game and *language game* are only analogous terms. This does not mean that painting speaks nor that language chromatizes. Yet it does suggest that artists today are engaged not in the deconstruction of significations but in extending the limits of sense perception: making visible (or audible) what now goes unobserved, through the alteration of sense data, perception itself. The same question may be asked of sense perception that is asked of language: when may we say that it is complete?

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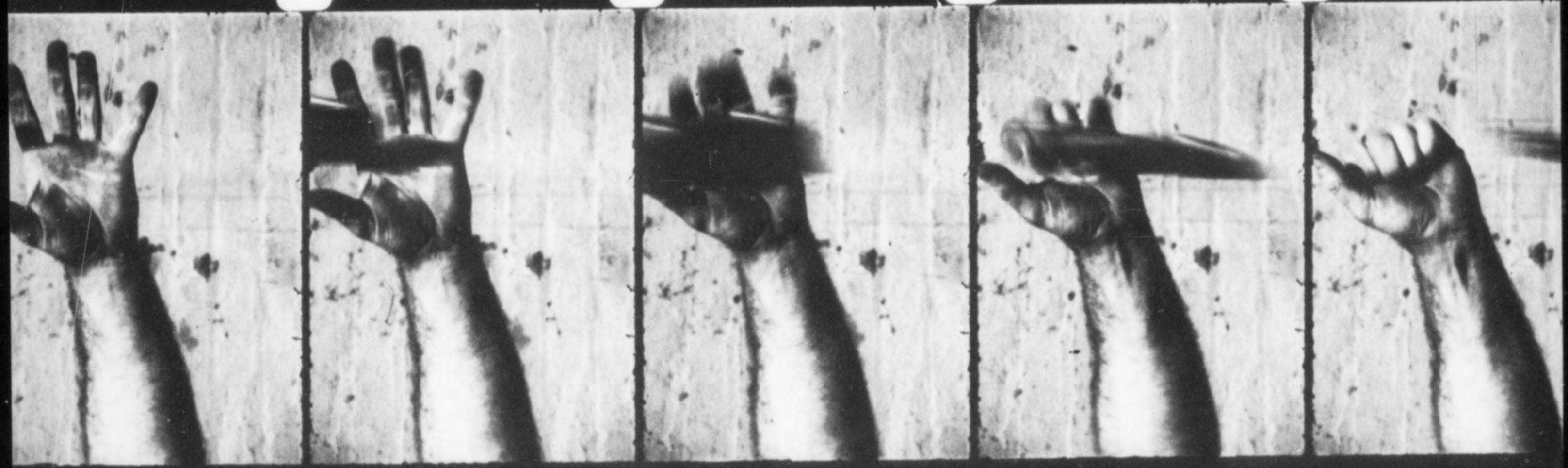
By incorporating its pragmatic, even producing it, the work reveals how it says something, or how it is made to say something. The only message the work must convey is how it conveys its message. Of course this metamessage in turn may become the object of devotion, belief: a new faith in processed information, renewed hope in communication.

A work of art may perhaps be called *bad* whenever it elicits belief; then it is not of its time. Even if it incorporates its pragmatic, it remains merely amusing. It does not communicate how to communicate but the inverse: how to believe in communication. The work says, "You will not understand me"; or perhaps only, "It will take time to understand me"—an aspect of the alteration that it necessarily imposes on temporal form.



The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview

ANNETTE MICHELSON, RICHARD SERRA,
and CLARA WEYERGRAF

Michelson: Let us begin with the narrative of your filmmaking. How and when did you come to filmmaking?

Serra: The first year that I was in New York, in 1967–68, I went to see the films that were being shown around St. Marks Place. I saw [Bruce] Conner's films, Ron Rice's films, and Jack Smith's films, and then I started to go to Anthology [Film Archives]. Maybe that was a little later, but I think it was in the same year. One thing probably influenced me more than anything else to go get a camera and do something about it. I saw a film by Yvonne [Rainer] called *Hand Movie.* Do you know the film?

Michelson: I'm not sure I do.

Serra: There is a film that Yvonne made very early, of a finger exercise, where she puts one hand in front of the camera and manipulates her fingers, hand straight out. And then she did another film with a woman, all in white, measuring a line on a white wall. I can't remember what the third film was. It may have been a film about a chicken coop, but that may have been a year later.[1] The same week, I saw Warhol's *Chelsea Girls.* At that point, I was building sculpture, using material for the sake of its manipulative possibilities. Seeing *Chelsea Girls* and Yvonne's hand film, I felt that making film was open to me. Up to that point, I'd felt a deference for film, and maybe I was a little bit frightened of it; I wouldn't have picked up a camera. That must have been in '67, and then we started to shoot film in '68.

1. Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie,* 1968, was shown as part of the final version of *The Mind is a Muscle* at the Anderson Theater, New York; the second Rainer film mentioned by Serra is *Line,* 1969, which was shown, independent of any performance, at an exhibition organized by Hollis Frampton for the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; the third film is *Rhode Island Red,* 1968, which was shown as a part of *Rose Fractions* at the Billy Rose Theater, New York, in 1969. For Rainer's early filmography, see her *Work 1961–73,* Halifax and New York, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1974, p. 212.

Richard Serra. Hand Catching Lead. *1968.*

Michelson: I see. Actually, you would not have been going to Anthology at that time, because it didn't open, I think, until 1970. But of course I do remember that from the time Anthology opened, particularly in its early years, you were the one New York artist whom I saw most frequently looking at the films in repertoire.

Serra: I would also go to the Cinémathèque in Europe.

Michelson: When was that?

Serra: '65–66.

Michelson: Was that in Germany?

Serra: No, in France. Then I spent one year in Italy, where I saw an Olmi festival. I saw *Il Posto,* and I saw a lot of Italian '30s films. That gave me some notion of the potential for communicating social propaganda in film while still epitomizing a reality that seemed matter-of-fact.

Michelson: Let's go back to your looking at films at Jonas [Mekas]'s [Filmmaker's] Cinematheque, or wherever it was, in 1967. You saw Jack Smith and Bruce Conner and so on. What was it in those films . . .

Serra: What do you mean, "What was it?" Do you mean how did those films differ from commercial films?

Michelson: Yes, for you.

Serra: There was an aspect of unpretentious, indigenous American poetry that was difficult to deny, and it spoke so directly that I was moved by the people who were making it, and by the images that were brought forth. The spirit and joy of it were simply not to be questioned.

Michelson: It is my feeling, though, that your experience of those films was fairly singular in comparison with that of a number of other artists of your generation. I don't think that a great many other artists involved just then in pictorial and sculptural enterprise were particularly struck by those films.

Serra: I really wanted to have some grasp of the history of film, and when Anthology opened, there was a real possibility to understand at least one historical viewpoint. I probably saw everything they showed for the first couple of years. I used to go early and stay for both programs.

Michelson: Yes, I remember that I would see you there quite often, and I think from time to time we would talk about the Russian films in particular. I think that in the late '60s, or perhaps around 1970, however, you were directly involved with a number of people who were active in filmmaking. I'm not speaking so much of Conner and Warhol; I am thinking of Michael Snow, possibly [Hollis] Frampton. Did you know Frampton?

Serra: I knew Hollis, but through Michael Snow; I knew Michael very well. I knew him when he was working on *Wavelength* and when the rushes were coming back from *Back and Forth;* I saw the rushes before he put the film together. I knew him because he was in the neighborhood; we used to see each other on the street. He had an interest in my sculpture, and I became one of the in-the-neighborhood audience for his films. He was the only filmmaker I knew who was working in New York, and he was just emerging. When I went to Europe for the second trip, in 1969, I took *Wavelength* with me and showed it at various places. Michael thought that would be interesting for me to do, and so I showed it at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where it stopped the house. They knocked over the projector. I showed it in Cologne and Düsseldorf. In a period of a year and a half, I showed *Wavelength* twelve times, not because I thought I was Michael Snow's promoter, but because I really wanted to see the film again and again, and because I thought it was an important film. If there was going to be an audience for contemporary work—at the time [Phil] Glass was playing concerts in Europe and I was putting up sculpture in Europe—then they might as well understand what was happening in film, and as far as I was concerned, *Wavelength* was the most interesting thing that was happening.

Michelson: Well, those of us who have been interested in, let's say, Glass's work, Snow's work, your work, Reich's work, often feel that the late '60s was a time of . . . partial coalescence. To someone like me, involved with the history of independent filmmaking in this country over the past fifteen years or so, it is evident that the relationship of pictorial and sculptural enterprise to film is extremely important; that is, film has been nourished by that enterprise. It is, for example, very difficult to understand earlier work such as Brakhage's and Deren's without some kind of reference to abstract expressionism. It is very difficult to understand the films of Snow, Frampton, etc., without some reference to the painting and sculpture of the mid- and late '60s. It was a time of considerable interaction.

Serra: I read Mekas's interview with Brakhage,[2] and I think it was brought out

2. Serra is referring to the exchange between Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage that took place at Millennium, New York, on November 4, 1977, an edited transcript of which was published together with commentary by Jonas Mekas as "Brakhage and the Structuralists," New York, *Soho Weekly*

there that Brakhage had a relation to the abstract expressionists. And someone like Snow or Frampton has a relationship to another kind of aesthetic that was developing within the larger framework of art. It is easy to deduce certain influences and to make assumptions about why people formulate a particular language at a particular time, but I think that kind of reasoning can only be taken so far.

Michelson: Okay, but it seems to me that it's never been a matter of influences. That's a touchy, delicate, and not very interesting subject. But what I think one does see is a certain number of presuppositions and formal strategies which are shared at a given moment. Last week there was a festival of new music at the Kitchen;[3] there were a number of people from Europe in town for it, and I gathered them together to show them some films. These are people who have been listening to Glass, Reich, Terry Riley, a lot of post-Cage American music. I showed them three of your films, *Hand Catching Lead, Railroad Turnbridge,* and the one about gathering up . . .

Serra: Hands Scraping, which was actually made with Glass.

Michelson: Exactly. I showed them a film by Paul Sharits, *Touching;* I showed them one by Ernie Gehr, *Serene Velocity* . . .

Serra: Yes, I know it.

Michelson: I showed them a film by George Landow . . .

Serra: Which one?

Michelson: Institutional Quality.

Serra: That's beautiful.

Michelson: Yes, it's marvelous. And I also screened *Wavelength,* which some of them had never seen. What fascinated them was that in that period, between about 1966 and 1971, our concerns in music seem to be related to what had been happening in film. Well, obviously this is a very approximate kind of perception, but it's not totally erroneous. I think that there are a certain number of concerns

News, November 24, 1977. An exchange of letters between Brakhage and Mekas about the published transcript appeared in the *Soho Weekly News,* December 8, 1977; a further exchange of private letters between Brakhage and Mekas is on deposit at the Anthology Film Archives, New York.

3. *New Music, New York: A Festival of Composers and Their Music* at The Kitchen Center, New York, June 8–19, 1979.

and presuppositions which do animate those films and the American music with which those Europeans have been involved. But as far as your own filmmaking is concerned, you've cited Yvonne's films as a very immediate example.

Serra: The films that I saw at that point were what she would probably call experimental, tentative films, but I felt a very direct relationship to them, yes.

Michelson: I want to ask you about your view of Snow's films for the following reason: I've been looking at this essay on your work by Buchloh,[4] which I find not uninteresting. He is concerned with the relationship of your films to sculpture, and not just to your sculpture, but to the project of epitomizing sculpture at a time when the discrete sculptural object seems to have dissolved into the sculptural field, a field which is experienced in time. Now, the films of Snow are often sensed as sculptural; that is, they are presented in terms of pictorial and sculptural strategies. Snow himself speaks, for example, of *Back and Forth* as a kind of sculptural film. One might talk of his films as being sculpturally inflected, of the way in which *Wavelength*, for example, is about procession and depth. Did that aspect of Snow's films strike you when you were looking at them?

Serra: No. I simply thought that Snow was a complex and interesting artist with a high ability to entertain contradiction within a very limited strategy. As soon as the term *sculptural film* comes up, I get very confused about what I understand sculpture to be and what I understand film to be. When someone uses a slow dolly with a camera, or progressively moves into a foreshortened space, it still seems to me that you are dealing with an illusion on a flat plane which you can't enter into. The way it is understood denies the progressive movement of your body in time. It's from a fixed viewpoint. It takes into consideration the very flatness of the screen. I've always thought that the basic assumptions of film could never be sculptural in any way, and to beg the analogy between what is assumed to be sculptural in sculpture and what is assumed to be sculptural in film is not really to understand the potential of what sculpture is and always has been. I have always thought it was a bit journalese to discuss it in that way. That is not to say that you can't talk about languages that people share, languages in different material manifestations. But to say that an experience of sculpture can be similar to or influenced by the illusion in film—I've always thought that was nonsense.

Michelson: I'm interested and, I suppose, glad to hear you say that, because it seems to me that those claims are very vulnerable, to say the least.

4. B. H. D. Buchloh, "Processual Sculpture and Film in the Work of Richard Serra," in *Richard Serra*, Tübingen, Kunsthalle, and Baden-Baden, Kunsthalle, 1977.

Serra: That's not to say that I don't think people approach the notion of materiality similarly. I think that Landow, in the film which disintegrates, and in which there are hairs and whatever on the leader . . . I think that in that film and even the earlier film by Brakhage, *Mothlight*, one can speak of a strategy which could be compared to the materiality of some painting, the way in which material is handled as an end in itself. Because of the direct manipulation of the material, that is an analogy that I can accept more easily than the sculptural analogy.

Michelson: Well, the question then remains, and maybe it is even sharpened and intensified, as to the nature of the impulse to make film. Given that your sculptural pursuits were developing very rapidly, very intensively, that film for you represents a discrete and separate mode . . .

Serra: I know exactly how it happened. Someone said to me that he was going to make a film of the construction of *House of Cards.* At that time Glass and I were standing it up in my loft and we were worried about the possibility that it would collapse, and so there was a lot of dollying around and leaning plates and poles with linchpin accuracy. A great deal of concentration was needed just to assemble the pieces. Someone wanted to make a film of our doing that, but I thought that such a film couldn't be anything other than an illustration or depiction. I thought that if I was going to deal with some sort of filmic analogy—I was using lead to construct those pieces—that I could probably do that just by using my hand as a device. That, coupled with having seen Yvonne's films, and Warhol's great freedom to pick up the camera the way he did, with the detachment that he had, made it seem possible, made it seem like something I could really entertain. I hadn't shown any work publicly in New York at that time. I think I had just shown some pieces with [Richard] Bellamy,[5] and there was going to be a museum show at the Whitney called *Anti-Illusion.*[6] So when I first presented work there, I did the *House of Cards* and the splash piece. At the same exhibition I presented the hand films, and I think Snow presented *Wavelength* or *Back and Forth* or both.

Michelson: Back and Forth had its premiere at the Whitney. I remember seeing it there.

Serra: At that time I was very interested in dance. I had just got to know Joan Jonas and I was seeing her every day. She had a particular relationship to film that differed from mine. We decided that we both wanted to continue, and Anthology provided a place for us both to grow together.

5. Richard Bellamy is a private art dealer in New York City.
6. *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (organized by Marcia Tucker and James Monte), New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969.

Michelson: Just one more question about the films you were looking at, and then we can start talking about your films. As I said, we would meet from time to time at Anthology, and the films that you talked to me about most, and were most enthusiastic about, were films which I think you knew I was working on at that time, the Soviet films. It seemed to me that you were discovering, or perhaps rediscovering, the films of the immediately postrevolutionary period, that is to say, 1924–1929, early Eisenstein and Vertov. Is that so?

Serra: That is so. I think that sometimes films connect with experiences you've had and you are able to make a leap into the filmmaker's imagination. As a kid growing up I'd worked steel mills, and I knew that Glass, who was a friend of mine, had also worked steel mills. There is a generation of American artists who had grown up that way. Andre had worked the railroad and Morris had worked steel mills, or railroads. So we came from a postwar, postdepression background, where kids grew up and worked in the industrial centers of the country. The first films I saw that connected with that working experience were Eisenstein's films. That hadn't happened before. I thought that for all of their disjunction and cutting, and all of the beauty of the black and white, they were also portraying a human condition that I had some knowledge of, although I wasn't totally aware; I just joined the union, paid my dues, and made my money like everyone else. But I thought, "Oh, someone has found a way to construct an illusion to influence our understanding of what those people do and what that condition is." I thought it was fascinating.

Michelson: Have you since seen all of Vertov's films on industrial construction. the films made between 1924 and 1929: *The Eleventh Year; One-Sixth of the World; Stride Forward, Soviet?*

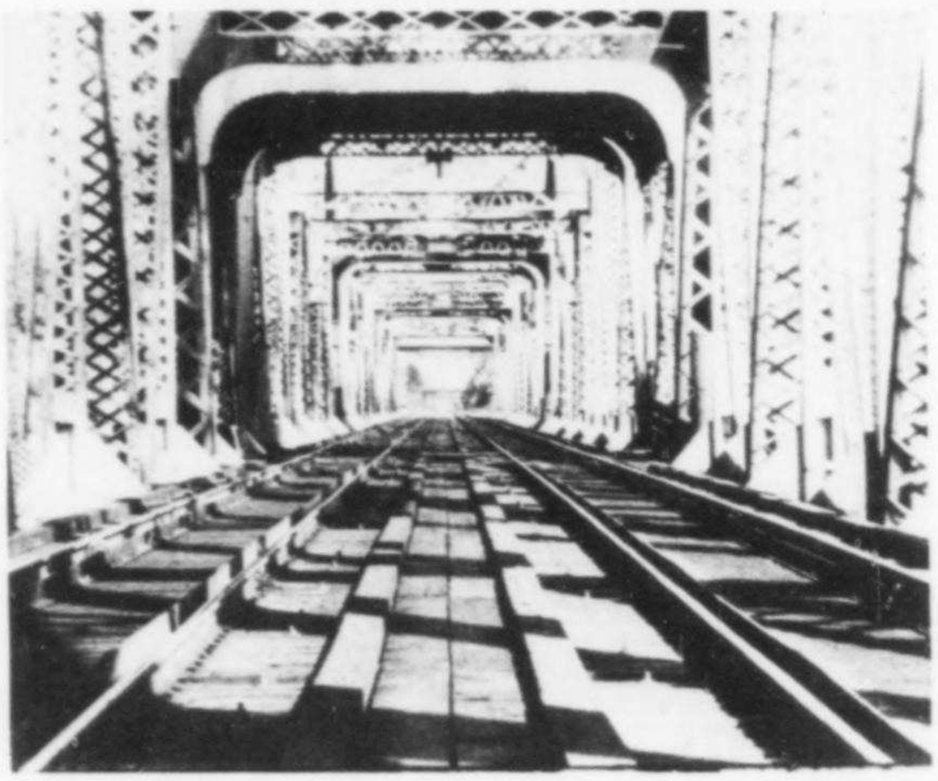
Serra: No, I haven't seen those.

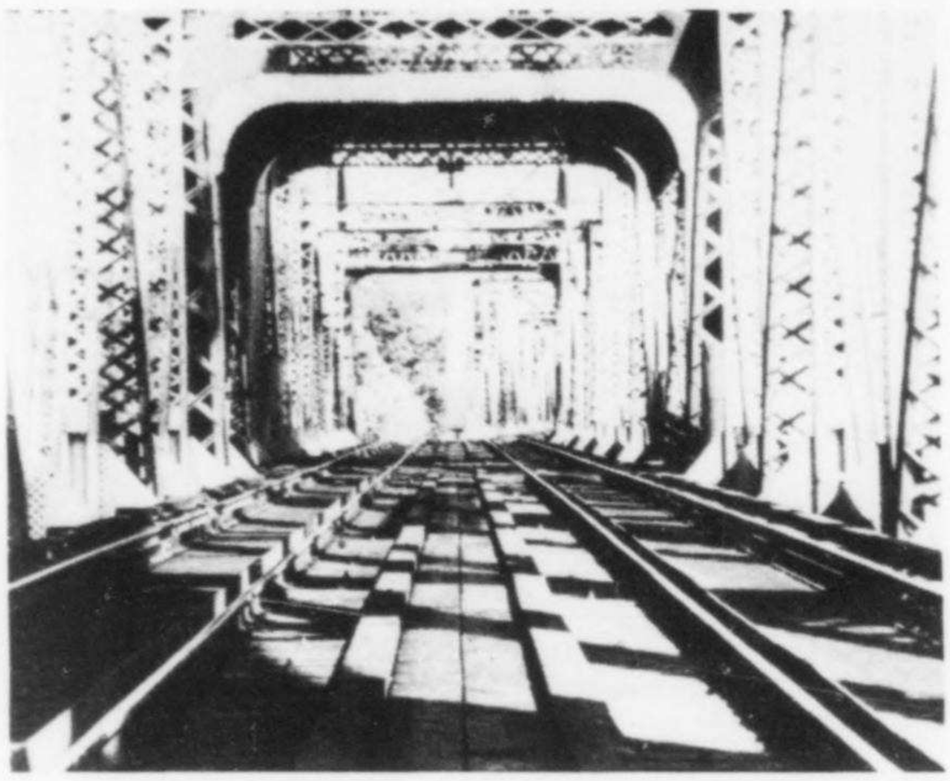
Michelson: Those are the films which are most involved with the actual industrialization of the Soviet Union in the period following the revolution and should be extraordinary for someone like you. But obviously, when one sees *Railroad Turnbridge,* one also feels that it is made by someone who must have been very struck by that extremely important sequence in Eisenstein's *October* of the lifting of the bridge, in which the bridge is analyzed and described in detail.

Serra: That has been mentioned before. Either that or Leger's *Ballet Mécanique.* It always seemed to me that Leger was involved with quick-cut collage that was akin to his cubism, and that he could throw in anything from lipstick to wine bottles, intercut with someone swinging back and forth on a . . .

Michelson: It never occurred to me to think of Leger.

Richard Serra. Railroad Turnbridge. *1976.*





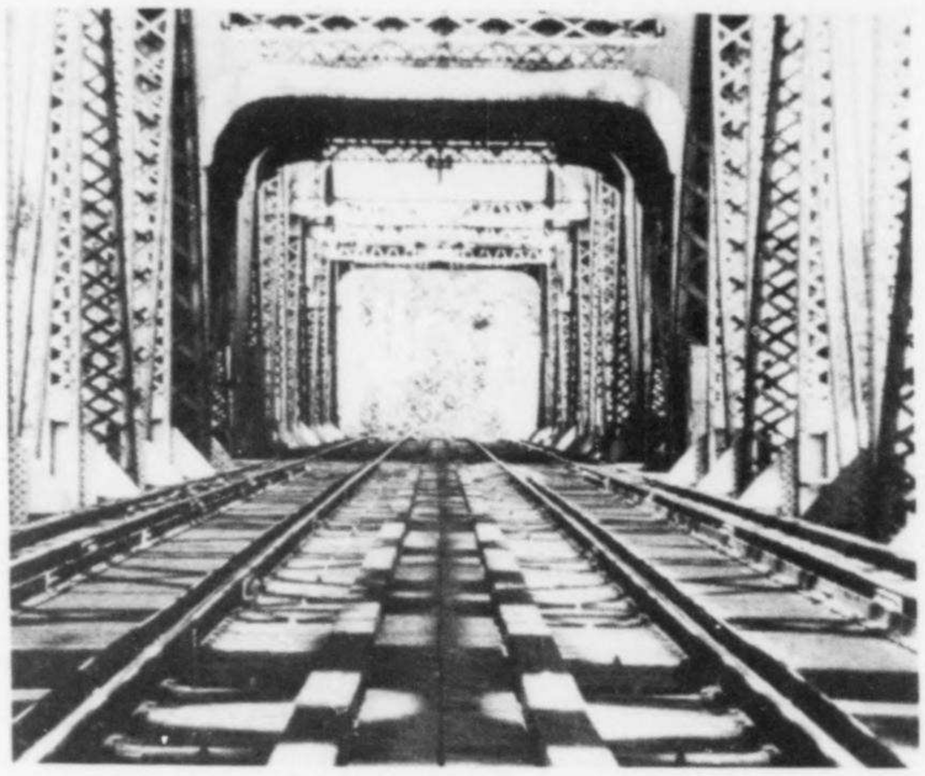
Serra: The film has been connected to that because of its "industrialness." But in fact my film probably couldn't have been made if it hadn't been for Michael Snow. It has to do with the long take.

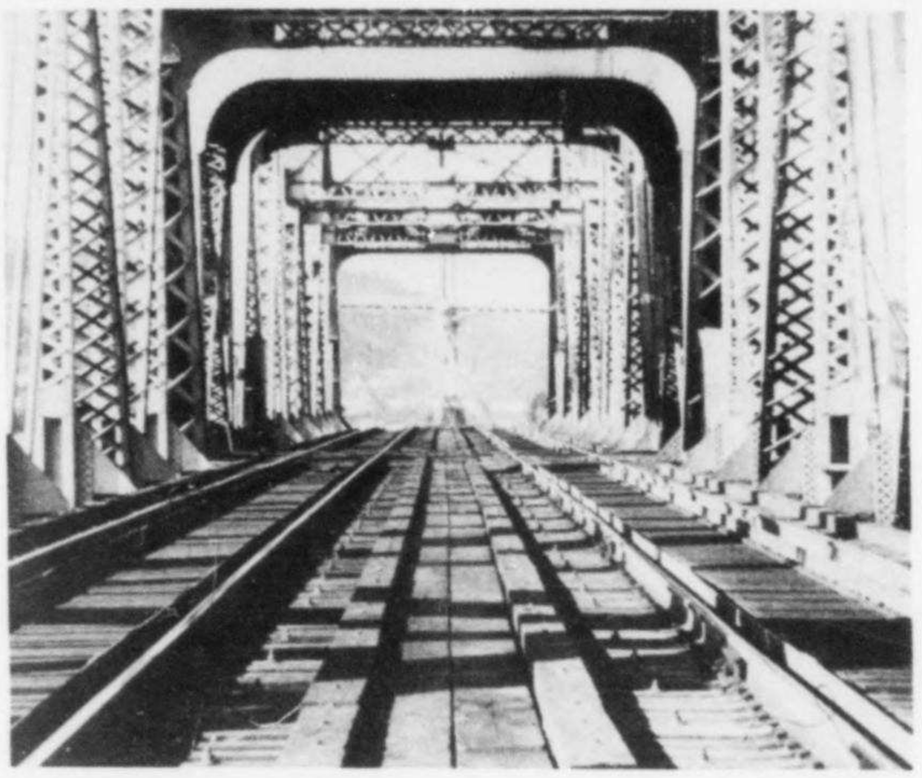
Michelson: Those of us who know Michael's work well are aware of that, but I think that fewer people today are aware of the fact that you had seen and considered the Soviet films of the '20s.

Serra: Also, when you make something, you know your reasons for making it. You know the direct sources of what you are doing, and you can only work out of where you find yourself. In the shooting of the film, I never thought about the Russians; I thought about the Russians in cutting the film, and I wanted to avoid that relationship, and for that reason we dropped many shots.

Michelson: You have just raised a very interesting question having to do with the relationship, in *Railroad Turnbridge,* between shooting and cutting, and between the long take and framing, a Snow strategy par excellence. This is a film which frames the landscape through a turnbridge revolving within it. For me, it is fascinating in that it seems to be very much involved with the basic strategies which were laid out in the early '60s. But it seems as well to synthesize—quite remarkably I think—a great deal more in film culture than just the local concerns of American filmmakers in the 1960s.

Serra: I think that's true. Not only does it use the device of the tunneling of the bridge to frame the landscape, but then it returns on itself and frames itself. In that, there is an illusion created that questions what is moving and what is holding still. Is the camera moving and the bridge holding still? or vice versa? That is contained within the framing structure of the material of the bridge itself,





right down to its internal functioning element—the gear. We put the gear in the center so that everything that came forward would be understood as being propelled by that gear, and everything that came after it was also understood in relation to it. I think the logic of the film, the way it was constructed, probably owes a great deal to the filmmaking of the late '60s and early '70s. But the content of the film has to do with the transition, between 1905–6 and 1925, from welded iron construction to riveting; and as soon as they began riveting, they built extraordinary steel structures, epitomized by the bridges we have in this country. Those bridges were built during a ten or twelve year period, and they are the most obvious representatives that we have of indigenous, unpretentious American building. They are built for efficiency and support and for nothing else. You don't have to understand what sculpture has been in this country to have a love affair with American bridges. You grow up being in complete wonder of them, especially in this city, with Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge.

I grew up in California, and I've been on the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge all my life. I think, if it comes down to little girls liking silk and little boys liking corduroy, that little boys like bridges. Later on a bridge becomes more than simply a steel artifact spanning two points; it begins to assume symbolic connotations. I think if you investigate the notion of a bridge, even if you are a sculptor and you are particularly interested in a structural analysis of the bridge, you are also investigating an important psychological icon. *Railroad Turnbridge* took a year to shoot: I went out to Portland six times. I didn't go out and shoot a bridge because I thought it was an interesting industrial object, or an indigenous American relic. I think there was really a need to investigate what "bridgeness" meant to me.

I found something else very curious at that time. Joel Shapiro started to carve little bridges out of balsa wood, maybe even a couple of years before. When he did that, I asked him where it was coming from and he said that it was coming from

dream imagery. I wouldn't go that far, but I do find that at certain points something in one's experience prompts the need to materialize something. When I first saw that bridge over the Willamette River, I went out onto it and passed the bridge tender. I asked him if he would turn it around for me, and he did. He just gave me a ride on the bridge, and at that moment I thought, "Oh, I just have to look at this in another way. There has to be some other way to grasp this, since it is all happening too fast." So I immediately went and got a camera, and the first shot I took became the first shot of the film. When the rushes came back two days later, I saw what had happened in the illusion of the first shot—I was shooting with a CP 16, which has a flicker, so that what you see through the lens is very close to a film image—I thought that that in itself was sufficient cause to continue.

Michelson: One central aspect of this film is the manner in which it amplifies the strategy of framing in a much earlier work of yours. You made a film in the early '70s called *Frame* . . .

Serra: In '69. It took me several years between *Frame* and *Railroad Turnbridge* to put my eye behind the camera, to understand that I could put the frame between my eye and what I was experiencing. At the time that I made *Frame,* I was curious about what the parameters were for the person who was looking through the camera as distinct from those of the subject who was being filmed, and how each of those viewpoints was contradictory (if the film was edited) to what the person viewing the film sees. Watching something happen as it is happening while being aware that it is going to end up as another structure defined by the frame of the camera seemed reason enough to use the frame as a device to determine the entire making of the film. I found the illusion of measurement to be very interesting for the contradictions it posed in relation to the illusion of film. At that time I was also making a sculpture called *Base Plate Measure* in which I was using measurement, and it didn't seem to be very difficult to go from one measuring device in one material to another device in film. We used a small ruler in order to make it very clear that the film was about the increment of measurement.

Michelson: Here is a description of the film from the Castelli-Sonnabend film catalogue . . .

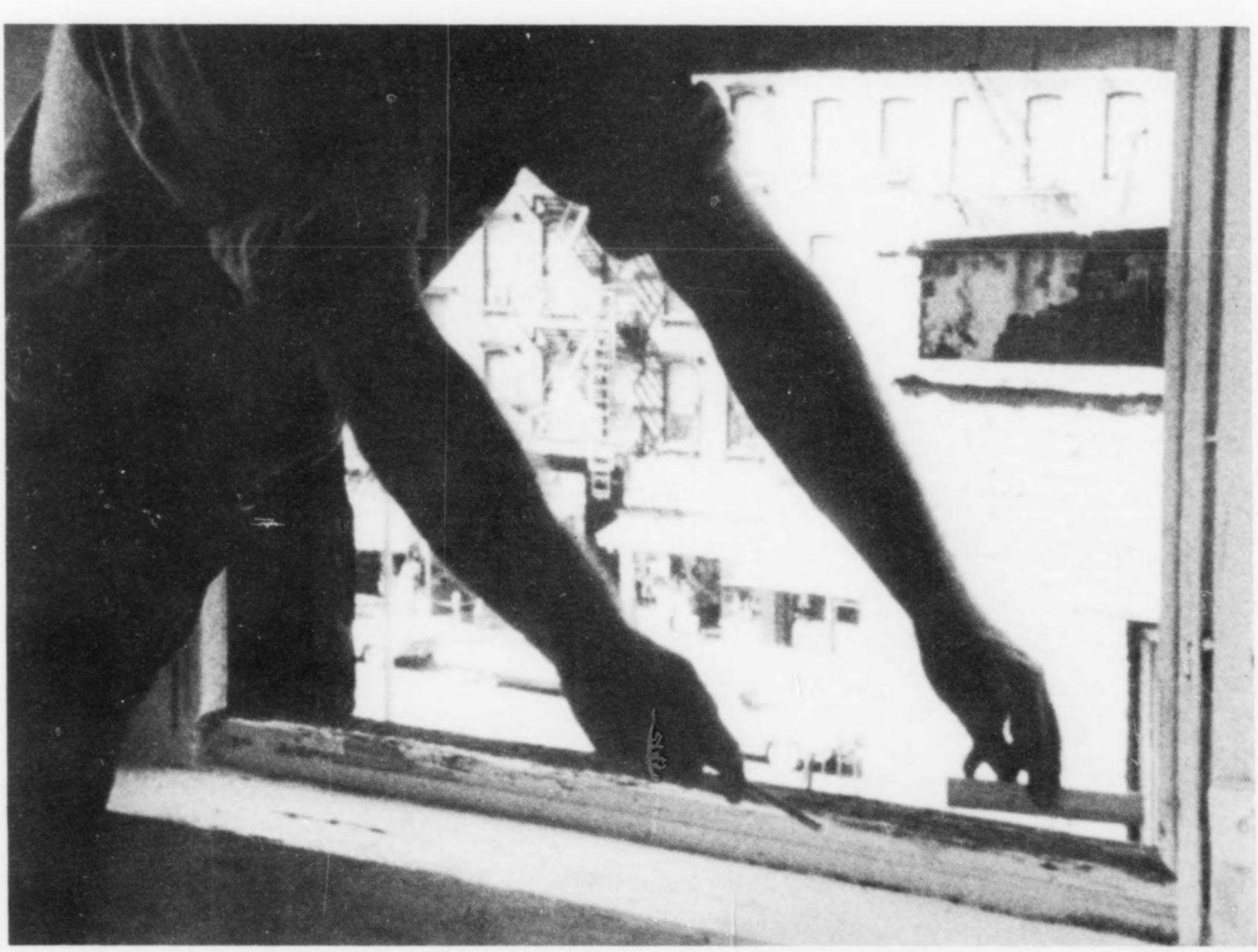
Serra: I think that's a very good description.

Michelson: "Richard Serra, *Frame,* 1969, black and white, 22 minutes, sound. Camera: Robert Fiore.

"The structure of *Frame* demonstrates the disparity in perception between what is seen by the cameraman looking through the lens and what is seen by a person looking directly at the same space.

"Serra has written: 'Perception has its own abstract logic and it is often necessary to fit verbal and mathematical formulation (in this instance measuring) to things rather than the other way around. The size, scale and three dimensional ambiguity of film and photographs is usually accepted as one kind of interpretation of (reality). These media fundamentally contradict the perception of the thing to which they allude. Objective physical measurement of real and physical depth, coupled with apparent measurement of film depth, points to the basic contradiction posed in the perception of a film or photo. The device of a ruler which functions as a stabilizing or compensating system in the film is the subject of its own contradiction.' (*Avalanche,* Winter 1971).

"In *Frame,* four sets of measurements are made with a six-inch ruler. In the first, the rectangle of the camera frame is measured and perceived untrue from the camera viewpoint. In the second, the camera is placed at an angle, and the trapezoid measured is perceived as a rectangle. (Although one views the measurement of a totally white frame, it is in fact the angle of the camera to the wall which is being measured. [I'm not sure I understand that.] Thus at the end of the sequence the measurements spell out a trapezoid.) In the third, the rectilinear window frame is measured as a rectangle but perceived as a trapezoid. In the



Richard Serra. Frame. *1969.*

fourth, the film image of the window is measured as a trapezoid but perceived as a rectangle (the reverse of the second image)."[7]

Serra: Which point didn't you understand? The camera had dollied to the side and was at an angle to the wall.

Michelson: I think that movement was not clear to me when I saw the film.

Serra: When the person measures up the vertical measure of one side of the frame and then goes across and comes down the vertical of the other side, you understand that the vertical that is being measured on the outside of the rectangle is a different dimension. That means that he is measuring a trapezoid. I didn't even realize that while doing it until after I was asked to pull the board away and compute the figures. When I computed the figures I thought, "Oh, this leg is longer than that leg by a great degree." In fact what he is measuring is his angle of incidence to the flat wall.

I think that what the film points out is that there is a basic flat illusion of film, there isn't any real space. And I think that probably my need to demonstrate that was the need to make the distinction from sculpture even clearer to me. At the time I probably didn't realize it, but it has since seemed to be one of the reasons for doing that film. I've had my sculpture down to a tape measure, a snap line, and maybe a level for about the last four or five years; I've reduced my tools to just what's needed. But measurement has always been integral. The necessity of being precise about measurement has always been in the work, at least in certain pieces. Even though I consider measurement as a sort of metaphysical necessity, I don't pay too much attention to it. I know it because I need to know it.

Michelson: Then it's a *real* necessity.

Serra: It's a *real* necessity, but I don't believe it totally. I don't believe in measurement totally. It's a real imposition that I use.

Michelson: But in this film you were implying a strategy of measurement to make a demonstration about the nature of film, about the fact that depth is not there.

Serra: Or the fact that if someone is shooting at an angle to the lens, what he sees if he moves his head beyond the lens is a trapezoid. The framing device itself is flattening the trapezoid out so that it is coincident with the frame of the picture, which is the frame you see. And so everything relates to that rectangle, not to the

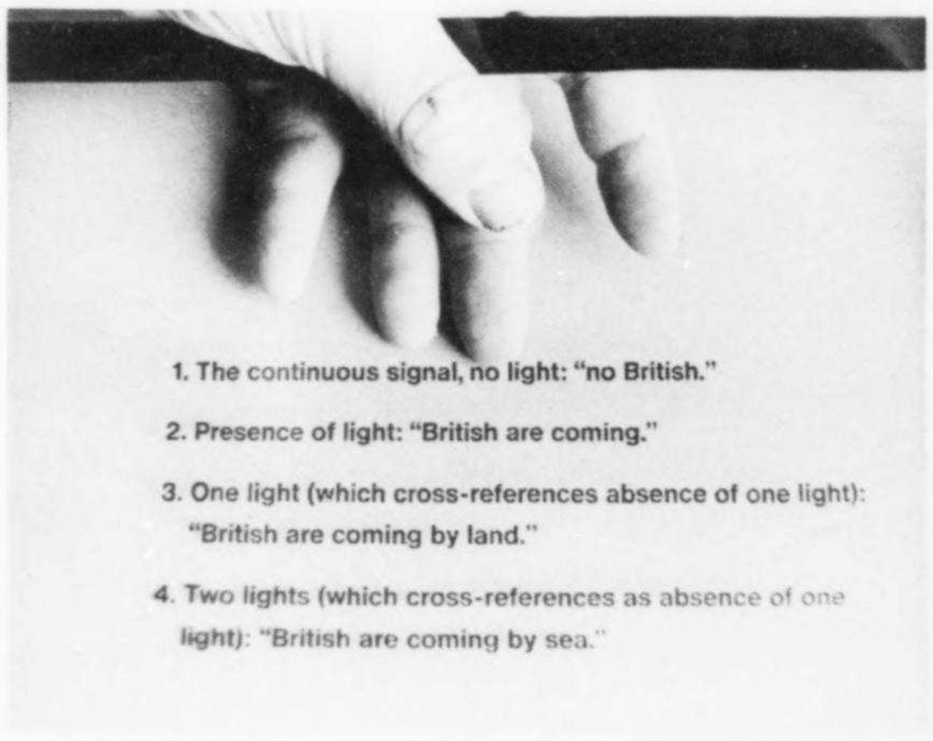
7. *Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films.* New York, Castelli-Sonnabend, 1974. p. 191.

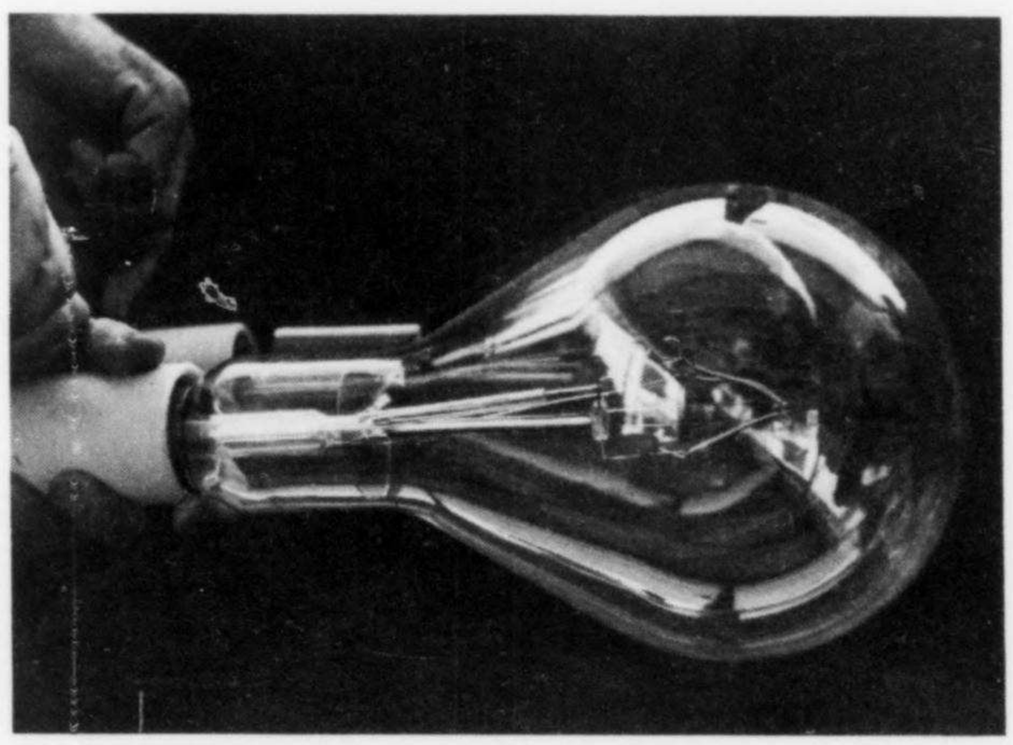
actual trapezoid (or parallelogram, or whatever space you are in), which is why I think there is no possibility for the frame to be thought of as sculptural. It denies the possibility of experiencing the actual physical space that *is* sculptural.

Michelson: In 1971, I was invited by Phil Leider, who was just about to leave *Artforum,* to do a special film issue of that magazine. It provided the first opportunity to introduce a large audience to developments that seemed to me to be of prime importance in independent American filmmaking. My emphasis was on those people who were giving their lives to making films, not to the artists who, at that time, were beginning to turn to film. I was concerned with those who had put all their energy into it and were radically inflecting that medium. I mean of course Snow, Sharits, Frampton, and so on. But there were two other artists who seemed to me to be of fundamental importance, and whom I asked for texts for that issue. One was Smithson, and the other was you. The text you published was descriptive of *Paul Revere.* I'd like you to describe what that project meant for you at that time.

Serra: I had been living with Joan Jonas for several years and was involved with her work in performance. I had found the *Paul Revere* script in Birdwhistell;[8] that's where it comes from. I had read Birdwhistell in relation to Joan's work—how one could analyze body movement and body language, what the body's signals are. We used certain devices—cards to be read, lights to be turned on and off—which were related to Joan's development of what one might call the performing cut; she used cinematic devices as transitions from one scene to another within her performance structure.

8. Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context; Essays on Body Motion Communication,* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970.





Richard Serra and Joan Jonas. Paul Revere. *1971.*

Richard Serra. Boomerang. *1973. (Left.)*

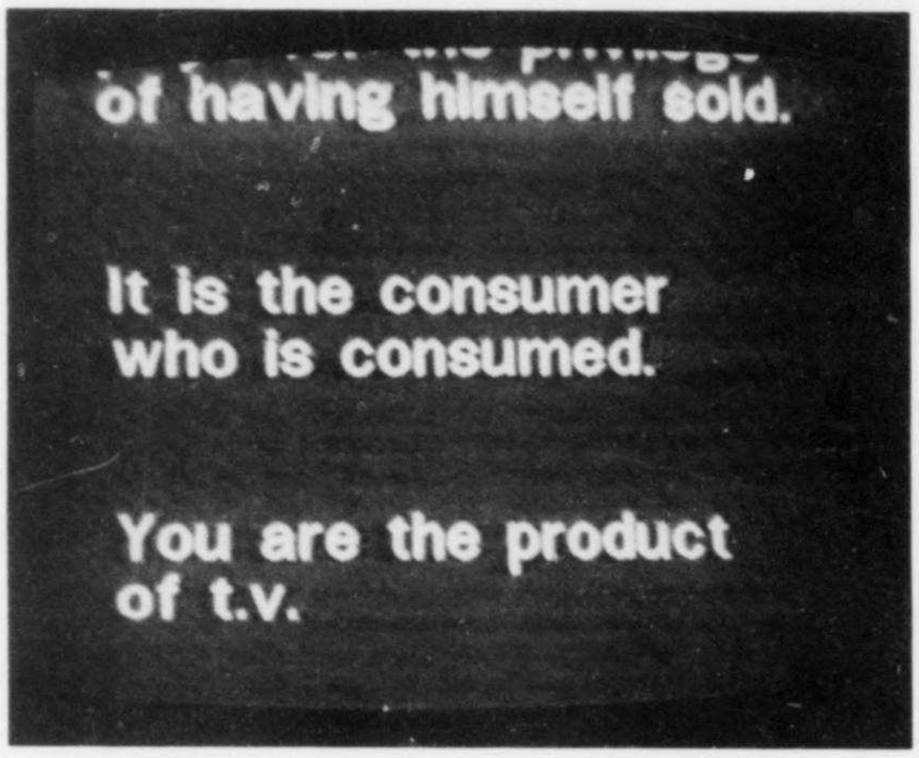
Richard Serra. Television Delivers People. *1973. (Right.)*

We made the film together. To me it represents a sketch of the possibilities of using theatrical devices within a specific language framework. I think the films and tapes that were more successful in that respect were those which, instead of imposing a script, originated out of a loosely defined scheme. For example, there is a videotape called *Boomerang,* done later with Nancy Holt, in which she is asked to respond to her own words which she hears through a feedback system. In a very detailed and clear way, she states what is happening to her as it is happening: her relation to herself as subject. *Boomerang* has proved more interesting in the long run than *Paul Revere,* which is more analogous to theater. I think the other tape which is more successful, where I did work directly from a script, but which doesn't have that analogy to theater, is the one called *Television Delivers People.* There we decided to use language together with muzak to say something definite about the different natures of video and TV, and why artists find themselves in a dilemma when dealing with broadcast television.

Michelson: I should perhaps explain that *Television Delivers People* is a text which unrolls, to the accompaniment of muzak, on the screen before the spectator.

Serra: Something becomes really clear in hindsight, as you look at *Television Delivers People* in relation to *Steelmill:*[9] in neither film was I worried about the self-reflexive quality, the material as such. I decided that there was something worthwhile to say directly to people, and I just chose devices for presenting the material that I thought could reach a large audience. I thought that the easiest way to do that was the most direct way. And I think that in both the steel mill film, curiously, and this early tape there is an explicit, graphic quality. In the steel mill film it is more an iconic/graphic quality, while this tape consists of pure graphics.

9. The full title of the film is *Steelmill/Stahlwerk.*



With some work, I have decided to use the medium to communicate explicitly. I have used that form when I've felt there was something politically valid to say.

Michelson: I saw the film about the making of the sculpture, about the steel mill, first; in other words, I saw them out of their chronological order. *Television Delivers People* was made when?

Serra: 1973.

Michelson: I was struck by the way in which you had revived, in a very different and interesting way, for the steel mill film the notion of a central message that unrolls before the spectator together with a sound track which is disjunct from the text. Here is the beginning of the text of *Television Delivers People* . . .

Serra: I like the text very much.

Michelson: "The product of television, commercial television, is the audience. Television delivers people to an advertiser. There is no such thing as mass media in the United States except for television. Mass media means that a medium can deliver masses of people. Commercial television delivers twenty million people a minute. In commercial broadcasting the viewer pays for the privilege of having himself sold. It is the consumer who is consumed. You are the product of TV. You are delivered to the advertiser, who is the customer. He consumes you. The viewer is not responsible for programming. You are the end product. You are the end product delivered en masse to the advertiser. You are the product of TV."

Serra: Very good! If I ever need audio, Annette, I'm getting you.

Michelson: I've worked for Snow, Rainer; Why not work for Serra? (*Laughter.*)
How did you come to make this tape?

Serra: There had been a meeting in New York of people from NYU, Columbia, National Broadcasting, and they all presented papers. The papers were printed in various journals and I cut them up and put them together to form a script. Then I went with Carlota Schoolman to Channel 13 where we got a character generator. I figured how much space I would want between each sentence. I asked the people at Channel 13 what color would be most effective for a readout, and they said yellow and blue. We sat down in the morning with four cans of beer and made it.

When it first went on the air—it was put on briefly as a sign-off in Amarillo, Texas—the reaction to it prompted me to send it to the government for censorship verification. It was passed for television under an anti-advertisement provision. That means that if there are advertisements, there can be anti-advertisements: equal time. And this year it was shown in Chicago.

Michelson: What kinds of reactions did you get?

Serra: It was shown in Chicago on WTTW, a station similar to Channel 13 here, and it received newspaper reviews the next day, which made me very happy.

Michelson: So this was made in '73.

Serra: In '73 I was looking into video; I had gone to Japan and bought video equipment. I immediately began to understand that what people call video and what people call television are very different things, that television in this country had a stranglehold on anybody who wanted to make video. There was an idealistic notion that there would be home video transmitters and alternative stations, but the fact of the matter is that it's controlled by the government. If you want people to see work, you have to contend with those structures of control; and those structures of control are predicated on the capitalist status quo. I simply decided to make that explicit.

Michelson: I began by asking you about your early work, and *Paul Revere* in particular, because it seemed to me that the role of information communication through a very concise and conventionalized form of signalling was extremely important and extremely interesting. I therefore asked you about that film with the intention of establishing a relation between it and another videotape called *Prisoner's Dilemma.* When we began to talk about *Paul Revere,* you explained how it came out of certain concerns with performance, and with Joan Jonas's work in particular, and you went on to say that you felt that other tapes had been more interesting and more successful in that regard. But it strikes me that *Prisoner's Dilemma* is perhaps, together with *Television Delivers People* and the recent film on the steel mill, one of a triad of works which are, within the general spectrum of your work, most concerned with social issues. They seem to have a particular status within your work that has to do with document, that has to do

Richard Serra. Prisoner's Dilemma. *1974.*

with engagement with specific concrete social issues in a way which is less elaborately mediated by formal concerns than your other work.

Serra: That's absolutely true.

Michelson: Could we talk about *Prisoner's Dilemma* as part of that spectrum?

Serra: Prisoner's Dilemma was done as a performance at 112 Greene Street in '74. It was done by dividing the space with paper between the audience watching the monitors on one side and the TV crew, the special-effects generator, the participants, and me on the other. The audience could hear what was going on through the paper, but could see it only on the monitors. It was my way of switching multiple cameras—I had three cameras—of being able to direct in a way that was similar to putting together shows for live television. The effect was probably more exhilarating for the live audience than is that of the resulting tape. I was fortunate enough to work with very good people—Spalding Gray, Richard Schechner, Babette [Mangolte], [Robert] Fiore, [Mark] Obenhaus. That was a very tight crew; and, for my own needs, I thought that there was something interesting about putting Bruce Boice, who was a critic at that time, opposite Leo Castelli, who epitomized the art dealer. To have them both in the cellar of a warehouse building with the audience wondering what their fate was going to be satisfied something that I suspect I needed to work out about art dealers and critics. Actually, it

angered some people. Towards the close of the performance, they tore down the paper and demanded Castelli's release from the basement, which I thought was curious.

I think at certain times you feel the need to extend yourself in various ways, but you never get too far out of your own backyard. Right after that I found that I was much more interested in the disciplines that had always been closer to me and more self-reflexive. Now the tape looks dated to me. I saw it in Berkeley six months ago, and to see Schechner and Spalding and [Joel] Shapiro (who is also in it) and [Jerry] Hovagymyan and Jeffrey Lew—to see those people at that time in their lives, and to see Leo [Castelli] at that age, is something of a document of what my life was then. It is nice for me to have, but I don't know if it has broader relevance. I think that, in order to be relevant, those works which you refer to as dealing with social issues have to speak not of a personal repressive situation, but of a collective repressive situation.

In showing the steel mill film in New York I found that everyone wants to beg the comparison between what they call agit-prop or social documentary and my earlier films. In Germany the response to the film had nothing to do with my earlier work. The audience responded directly to the problems of industrial repression.

When the film was shown in Oberhausen, it was shown on the same day as a pro-union film. As a result, my film elicited hostility, but also support. The film is being shown continually in Germany now, not as a film that is solely about the issues of art, but rather to speak of the steel situation in a country that hadn't had a steel strike for fifty years, until this film had been made. Not that one fostered the other, but it is true that I was aware of a condition that needed alleviation. It could be that the response that people are having in Germany to the film has to do with their knowing that it was made right before the steel strike that nearly crippled the country. You can imagine what a prolonged steel strike would do to this country right now. It would break the back of the country.

At this point, Clara Weyergraf, who made Steelmill/Stahlwerk *with Serra, joined the conversation.*

Michelson: A few minutes ago you were asking me about the film by Yvonne in which I'm working, and I was telling you that it was a convergence of things, that it comes very largely out of her experience of politicization in Germany. It's a special kind of politicization that takes place on a particular level, and I think that the film's structure epitomizes the difficulty of that politicization; the film is the work of someone at a stage where political synthesis is not yet possible. It attempts to establish a relationship between personal situations of a traumatic nature, mediated through the psychoanalytic process, and public issues of violence, repression, and political terrorism.

After the retreat of most artists of your and Yvonne's generation following a brief encounter with politicization in the late '60s, it is interesting to see both of you working in modes which involve an extension of concerns to very large political areas. It is also interesting that this should come out of an experience of working in Germany. I thought we might begin by talking about that. In what way did your experience in Germany act as a kind of precipitant or catalyst for this direction?

Serra: I didn't go to Germany with a particular political attitude, nor did I plan to address issues other than the usual material ones, such as getting a support situation together, cross-referencing it with the workers, and finding a place for the piece. In this instance there was support from the National Gallery in Berlin. I worked briefly in Thyssen, which is a mill in the Ruhr valley. The working conditions in this mill were obviously oppresive. I think that there are always internal and external contradictions involved in work, and I always try to determine how to continue to work and not exclude those contradictions.

Michelson: That may be; but, Richard, the conditions of the workers in the steel mill, which is very largely the subject of your most recent film, are conditions which prevail everywhere. You have a long-standing personal knowledge of the experience of the worker in that industrial situation. How did it come to be that suddenly, to outside appearances, you became involved in the way you did, making this film instead of, say, a film about the working experience in the decade previous to ours?

Serra: You mean there are always contradictions, and there is never a possibility of excluding them, so why in this situation did I find it necessary to become involved with the nature of the oppression and the contradiction?

Michelson: That's right. Particularly since you had the experience. You work in very particular circumstances, on a very particular scale, in a very particular way. One can understand why a number of other painters or sculptors would not normally encounter in their work the kind of structures that engender those contradictions. But you had.

Serra: I think that I really wanted to demythologize for myself an ideal that I had about the working class. As a kid I worked steel mills. I worked when I was 17, 18, 19, and 24, 25. And it could have something to do, on a very personal level, with the fact that my father, who was a factory worker all of his life, had cancer and was dying. So I began to think about his relationship to his work in order to understand what that had meant, to understand what a worker's life is about.

When I first went there, I met Clara, and Clara said, "Richard, before you go

into the factory and work on your sculpture, why don't you find out who those people are, what they are about, and what their situation might be." So, before I started working, I accustomed myself to the place for four or five days, and what I found was that they didn't identify with the function of their labor, with the product they were making, or the function of the end product. In effect, it was as though they were automatons which were being worn down. The situation seemed quite hopeless, very repressive.

But still, if you ask me why I decided at this point in my life to investigate the fact that these people's efforts were going into building my work. . . . Certainly when you go to a steel supplier in America, you don't trace the product back to its origins, to where that steel was poured in Akron. You simply accept the fact that labor has afforded you a product that you can then remanipulate and offer to another class for another kind of consumption. Here I had an interest in following the product from its inception, through the making, pouring, and forming of the material, and in observing the workers' relation to all of those steps. The source of the need to do that is very hard to define. I didn't think of making a political point of it. It just seemed apparent to me that all of the luxuries or commodities that one class has are produced by the oppression of the class below it. We form notions of what we think a class is, what's right for that class, without ever really investigating the working experience of that class. Having worked in steel mills in America, and having some admiration for the working class, I thought I was going to find the healthy, happy, heroic German worker who lived for his work. In fact I found a situation that probably hasn't changed for two or three centuries.

It's hot. It's like an enormous cavern, tremendously loud. I was there at one time for three days straight, and on the fourth day I could hardly hear. I was coming back on the plane and I actually could not hear what they were saying on the airplane. The men themselves know that they can't do it for too long at a time. They have no sense of self-esteem. They are reduced to a dehumanized function necessary to the world economy, and no one examines it. If a film is made about it, there is a narration explaining to the class that is in the film what they are doing in a way that is beneficial to the union, or the administration, or the power that is funding the film. So most documentaries flagrantly support the status quo, thereby keeping the worker oppressed, or they function as advertisements for the class that wants to sell the products to the class that is dying making them. The workers do not identify with what they are making, and moreover have naive good will and good-heartedness about being good workers that is tragic, absolutely tragic. I thought that this needed to be voiced and that the only people who could voice it were the workers themselves. Clara decided to interview the workers and I felt at that point that I had been there long enough to establish a working situation that would not interfere with or compromise the workers. If they took a half-hour off to answer questions, that would at least give them a half-hour of leisure. They chose not to be identified, probably for fear of retaliation.

Michelson: I would like, at this point, to have some vital statistics of the film: when it was made, the name of the factory, the general product of that factory, its market orientation, how large a factory it is, how many workers it employs, etc. We are talking about a steel factory which is located where?

Serra: Hattingen.

Michelson: And this is in the Ruhr valley?

Weyergraf: Yes, the Ruhr valley. The next larger town is Bochum. It's a small village, actually; it's not even a real town.

Serra: There are steel villages in the interior of the valley.

Michelson: And these are what we would call company towns, in which the entire village . . .

Serra: Absolutely, yes.

Weyergraf: Everyone has something to do with the company.

Michelson: There would be more than one steel mill per town, or is each town dominated by a particular firm?

Weyergraf: In this town there is only one mill. It had been the property of Rheinsthal but then was taken over by Thyssen.

Michelson: What is the production of this factory? How large is it? How many workers, would you say?

Weyergraf: A couple of thousand workers.

Serra: Five thousand, I think. I was in the forging plant, but there are other parts of the factory. There is a pouring part; there are two or three rolling mills; there is a scrap mill; there is a finish-down mill where they have a tool-and-die shop; there is a burning section. They produce train wheels, turbines, a lot of . . .

Weyergraf: There is a special part for nuclear reactors; that's new.

Serra: In fact, there was one of those on the floor during the first shooting of the film; and during the second shooting it wasn't there anymore; they immediately got it off. But it was in the first tracking shot.

In the forging mill the material is only compressed; the final tooling of the product is not explicit, so the worker has no way of knowing what he is making. It's done very primitively. It is forming a large-scale turbine using a handicraft tradition. It's still a matter of the labor of one's back. They export turbines all over the world, to Saudi Arabia, to Canada, to South America, some for bridges, some for dams, some for reactors, who knows what. But these turbines are hand-tooled, and the fact that Germany can hand-tool efficiently on a large scale is in part a function of her labor force's being kept in the position of not quite knowing what they are doing, of being paid well to enslave themselves.

Michelson: What do you mean "not knowing what they are doing"? I mean it's hand finishing, which presumably is a highly skilled . . .

Serra: You can have a 650-ton block of steel, molten hot, and it would be formed with a jet of oxygen from a machine on the end of something that looks like a fork lift. It is comparable to turning a wooden table leg on a lathe, only here it is a compressed material and everything is overemphasized. But the people who are turning this turbine have no notion of how it works, no notion of where it's going, no real idea of what they are making. They only know that it has to be cut a certain way at a certain point. They handle five or six in one afternoon, because you can keep them hot for only so long, and if you heat them up to 1280 degrees, you can only keep them that way for maybe two hours. There is a bank of six or seven ovens where they are coming in and going out. So the workers don't really pay much attention to what they are actually making.

Michelson: In other words, what you are describing is a classic instance of alienation of the worker in relation to his work through a system of division of labor, which is probably intensified by the extremely difficult physical conditions of this work.

Serra: I think you are right. The division of labor is what reinforces the alienation.

Michelson: It is generally considered to be the basic condition of the alienation . . .

Weyergraf: It is the cause.

Michelson: I guess what is striking is that the extraordinary noise, heat, etc., work in a way that conditions in, let's say, a dress factory or even an automobile factory might not. These are extreme physical conditions involving specific health hazards—growing insensitivity to sound and so on—which intensify the process of alienation.

Serra: The place is so loud it precludes dialogue, so that people can't talk to each

other unless they have a break, and when they have a break they usually just drink water. So most of the communication is done through hand movements, or whistling, or body motion.

Michelson: Tell me how you came to work there.

Serra: I wanted to build a piece for Documenta '77, and I met a dealer there from Gallery m called Alexander von Berswordt-Wallrabe, and I decided to present him with a project. He said he would fund it if he could get support from some people here; but when they decided to back out, he funded it himself; and that piece has recently been installed in Bochum. It's right near the train depot. The streetcars miss it by a foot and a half. I was very happy with the installation.

Michelson: So it was installed in the large town nearest to where it was manufactured.

Serra: That was my choice. Actually it was my preference the first day I got there. The piece could have gone to Kassel or to Cologne, next to the church. It would have given it some sort of picture-postcard, tourist visibility. I thought it would be best to go right back to the situation where it was made. Most of the workers go in and out of that train depot, and I wanted very much to put it up there.

When we did the piece for Documenta, the work was not so extreme. We just had to order, cut, and tool the plates. I saw the forge while I was there, and I'd never seen a machine like that. The forge was probably sixty to seventy feet high. And I had never seen anyone singly hand-tool a forty- or fifty-ton block of steel. In the interim I was asked to go to the National Gallery in Berlin and propose a piece for them. I saw that the Mies van der Rohe deck was already a rectilinear construction, interior to the building, a square within a square, so it didn't seem possible for me to build still another construction on that construction. I didn't want to add another fabrication, yet I wanted to make something that in its own right would hold its volume and its weight and specify a certain gravity; so I decided to sink one edge of the cube three inches into the cement deck. In the forging process I wanted to get the edge of the cube down to ten millimeters, so that it didn't look like a sugar cube, so I went to the factory with a proposal. They had never made an exact cube before, although they had made things that approximate cubes. They were able to get it down to five millimeters on the edge, but besides making it more precise than usual, their labor was absolutely no different from what they do every day.

Michelson: You said, as you began to answer my first question, something that amazed me: that you had entered the situation with no intentions other than to document it, with no particular presuppositions except one, which you mentioned: the expectation of finding the healthy, happy, heroic German worker.

Serra: Something else happened to me, which I should mention here. I had just come out of a situation in this country in which the government had asked me to build a piece for Pennsylvania Avenue.[10] I found that greed was unaccountable to anything but a desire to preserve one's job, that the power that had run amok in this country was horrendous—I'm not sure whether that situation politicized me, but it made me think about who made what, how and where it was placed, and what all the contradictions were. And I felt that I was being sacrificed to a power structure in this country that has no use for anything we would call art. I was very angered by it. This government operates in a way which is all about its own internal consumption. Everything is for sale in this country, and that makes for a horrendous condition for the artist when he confronts his relation to the government.

I went to Germany thinking about my relation to my work in America, and what it was to be in Germany. I wanted to take a more explicit look at where I stood in relation to a museum commission for a piece which people kill themselves to make. I think the situation in this country is more covert in some way, more hidden, probably just as horrendous, just more hidden.

Michelson: Well, Richard, it may be more hidden to you, but is it more hidden to the steel worker in Pittsburgh than it is to the German worker in the Ruhr valley? How is it that you, who worked in steel mills in your youth, expected to find healthy, happy, heroic workers when you went to a German steel mill?

Serra: When I worked in the steel mills there were a lot of people who had just come through the Second World War wanting to find money by joining the labor force. I was working my way through school; and there did seem to be an ethos of putting in a day's work for a day's pay. When I was seventeen or eighteen I guess I believed the idealistic notions that had been fostered in me. I think that the way conventional values are propagandized to the working class in this country is an example of our more covert repression. Popular films like *The Deerhunter,* which shows steel mills, or *Norma Rae* foster a false, soap-opera identification with

10. Serra is referring to a sculpture commission from the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation in which it was intended that he collaborate with the architects Venturi and Rauch, with George Patton, and the landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg, with Jerome Lindsey, for the improvement of the western end of Pennsylvania Avenue. When it became clear that Serra's and Venturi's plans were incompatible, the P.A.D.C. withdrew Serra's commission. As it stands, the Venturi and Rauch scheme for the plaza will include two pylon structures that will frame the portico of the Treasury Building. Serra was quoted in the *New York Times* about the failed commission: "It's not the nature of my work to reassert ideological values of the government. The value of my art isn't other value—it's contained within the structure of the work. Nor do I feel there is any need to 'frame' the Treasury Building—the notion is a reactionary and rhetorical device. The pylon concept is an attempt to direct the viewer's eye toward the symbolic function of government in a way that's dictatorial, that plays with human needs and historical values." (quoted in Grace Glueck, "A Tale of Two Pylons," *New York Times,* April 7, 1978, section C, p. 20).

heroes and heroines of the working class. And when workers see those films they are persuaded by a kind of weekend indoctrination. I think it's more covert, whereas the misery is quite explicit in Germany. There is more of a sell-out here.

Weyergraf: We talked to a black guy in the elevator, and we got three or four straightforward sentences which absolutely described his relationship to his work. I guess that every worker you talk to here in America gives you more or less the same answers you get from German workers. If you really confront the situation of the American steel mill, I'm pretty sure that it is no different from the German steel mill. I just think that you happened to have had a personal experience in a German steel mill. It was a learning process that everybody went through while this piece was being forged.

I remember that the first time we went to the mill something made me very angry, and that was the fact that you projected your fascination with your work onto the workers. You kept telling me that they were totally into their jobs, that they did their jobs in a fantastic way, and that they really seemed to like doing their jobs. I just couldn't believe it. I had never worked in a mill, but I had worked in other factories, and I just couldn't believe that there was joyful labor done there. It was at that time that we had a lot of discussions and began to do the film. We knew we wanted to document something, but for a long time nobody was very clear about where it would end. I think we finally figured out how the film would have to be when we looked at the shooting of that German camera team, when we saw that that was absolutely the wrong way to go about it.

Michelson: What did you see there?

Weyergraf: The gallery wanted to document the making of the piece, and they brought in a German camera team, who did a lot of shooting. We looked at their footage and we realized that they only dealt with the big block. They shot beautiful images of the mill, and when the workers appeared, it was in such a way that they seemed heroic. You can manipulate everything with a camera. They looked like what the cameraman wanted them to look like—heroes; big, happy German workmen.

Then we began to discuss the purpose of the film and decided that the shooting had to be different too. So it was a long process. For months I didn't think that I was going to work on the film. We didn't go into the mill with a very clearly defined purpose; the purpose developed while working, quite slowly.

Serra: Also, initially the solidarity the workers must have in order to survive is something I felt a certain regard for. You can walk in and say, "My, don't these people work hard together," without going a step further and saying, "they *have* to work that way together in order to survive and it doesn't change the fact that they are doing this every day and the conditions are horrible." But initially one is

impressed with their ability to move that efficiently with that much tonnage, everyday, confronting those conditions. I was very impressed with it. I think anyone would be. I've worked a lot of steel mills all over the world; that is the most difficult task I've ever seen. I've never seen a group of people work in those conditions that well, and I guess I was taken in with that. In the course of my being there, my romantic notion of the worker, who he is, what he does, and why he does what he does was totally . . .

Weyergraf: I don't think you can say that that is a romantic notion. I think it's a notion that is based on projection. You are an artist, and you are one of the rare people in this society who does not have to cope with alienation. You can identify with what you are doing, and you have actually chosen to do what you are doing. I think for you and for a lot of other artists it is very hard to imagine that at least seventy-five percent of the people living in this society are living a totally different life, that they are really the Other. They have a completely different relationship to their work. That is something that you can only learn about theoretically. You can read about their lives.

Serra: They don't choose to do what they are doing, and their needs are not satisfied by their work. Is that what you mean?

Weyergraf: That's right.

Michelson: There is a question related to what Clara has said, and which returns to one I asked before. When you were working in the steel mill in your teens, did it not occur to you that your coworkers were not involved in an identificatory relationship to their work? That they too were involved with piecework? That they too were involved in a process determined by the division of labor, in the course of which their relation to what is produced in the end, to the whole product, is attenuated? Did you not feel that?

Serra: My first experience of that was when we were building the Crown Zellerback Building in San Francisco. We were building it at Bethlehem Steel. I was on a bucker, which is the other end of a rivet gang: the hot rivet would be thrown up and we'd catch it and put it in a hole, and what they call the buck, or the bull, would compress the rivet on the other end to make its head. At the end of the day they go around with a ball-peen hammer and hit the heads and listen to the sound to determine if there are any that are put in wrong or are otherwise defective. If so, you have to spend about an hour taking them out. We were getting some piecemeal over the clock, so the older workers would say, "Okay, you can make a dime a rivet for an hour, and after that just put in a couple of cold rivets and we'll sit out a couple of hours." That was my first glimpse of the fact that the people who had to be there all the time, who weren't just temporarily employed, needed

to react in some way to a condition which enslaved them to the clock. But I would come and go, and I felt I had nothing at stake. Also I found that the steel mills in this country hired foreign workers—Irish, Italians—right off the boat. That's probably still true.

Michelson: Did you draw any conclusions from that? There are two conclusions one might draw. One is that this country welcomes all foreigners to its hospitable shores. The other is that this country badly needs cheap labor, and it will get it cheapest when it is fresh off the boat.

Weyergraf: Not only cheaply. In Germany, the worst jobs in the factory are always done by the foreign workers. There are jobs that German workers simply would not do, and these are exactly the jobs that are done by the workers who don't speak the language, or who come from countries that are extremely underdeveloped, not Italians, but the Turkish workers, for example.

Michelson: Turkish, Yugoslav, Greek.

Weyergraf: They do the worst jobs you can imagine.

Michelson: Are these what you call the *Gastarbeiter*?

Weyergraf: Right.

Serra: If you're from California, you see it all the time in the Mexican labor force. You just accept the plantation system. I used to summer in a place called Oxnard, California, where I picked beans with Mexicans. I saw those conditions there, but I don't think that when you are that young you understand it. You don't think about the fact that you are in a class system in which foreign workers are brought in and oppressed in the most horrible ways. In California, but for Cesar Chavez, it still goes on every day.

Michelson: You were saying before that when you began to work in the mill in the Ruhr valley you had just had a difficult and very negative experience in Washington, that in a way the experience in Germany seemed perhaps to have been conditioned by that.

Serra: That's right, and also the Schleyer murder had just taken place. In order to drive to the mill, I had to drive next to the prisons where three of the people who had supposedly just shot Schleyer were incarcerated, and so it was on my mind constantly. I think that when you are in a political situation, in a country that is being politicized, there is no way that you are not affected by it.

Michelson: And you said that one of your preoccupations while there, one which that led to making the film, was "Where do I fit in?" That's the phrase you used.

Serra: Did I say that?

Michelson: That is a very interesting phrase.

Serra: What is the role of the artist?

Michelson: Where in fact do you fit in? Arriving in that situation, witnessing extreme repression, alienation, confirmed by things that were happening around you in a wider social arena, feeling undoubtedly privileged, as you are as an artist, would you regard the making of this film as, in a sense, the repayment of a debt—"What can I do? Well, I can offer testimony to this condition." I'm not asking you where you fit in, because I don't think you are going to find that you fit in any place. But what I can ask is what is the function of this film? Does it have a function?

Serra: The function for us so far has been educational, and I think probably its extension will be to provoke dialogue from the audiences that see it. Also, Ulrich Gregor of Kino Arsenal Berlin has decided to distribute it in several ways. One way is to distribute it with other films of mine; but then also independently, as a film that could go to teaching institutions for workers, which I find very encouraging. The Kommunale Kinos in various cities, Frankfurt, Munich . . . , want us to travel with the film and speak about it.

When the film was shown in Oberhausen, it provoked heated discussion in the news media. The media referred to what they considered to be our indifference, which was in fact our not identifying with the people in the film. That made them feel that we were dehumanizing the people in the mill. If you show someone attached to a machine without showing what he's making, or why he's making what he's making, one might think that the viewpoint of the filmmaker only reinforces that tragic condition. I don't think so. I think that is what you actually see. You see parts of people attached to machines, day in and day out. That seems to be the clear way of looking at it, and the alternative way of looking at it—by saying, for example, "these people have their lunch breaks and they have their children and their gardens"—is simply false. That is not what you see when you are there. You see people serving machines. You see them fragmented, and you see the machines fragmented.

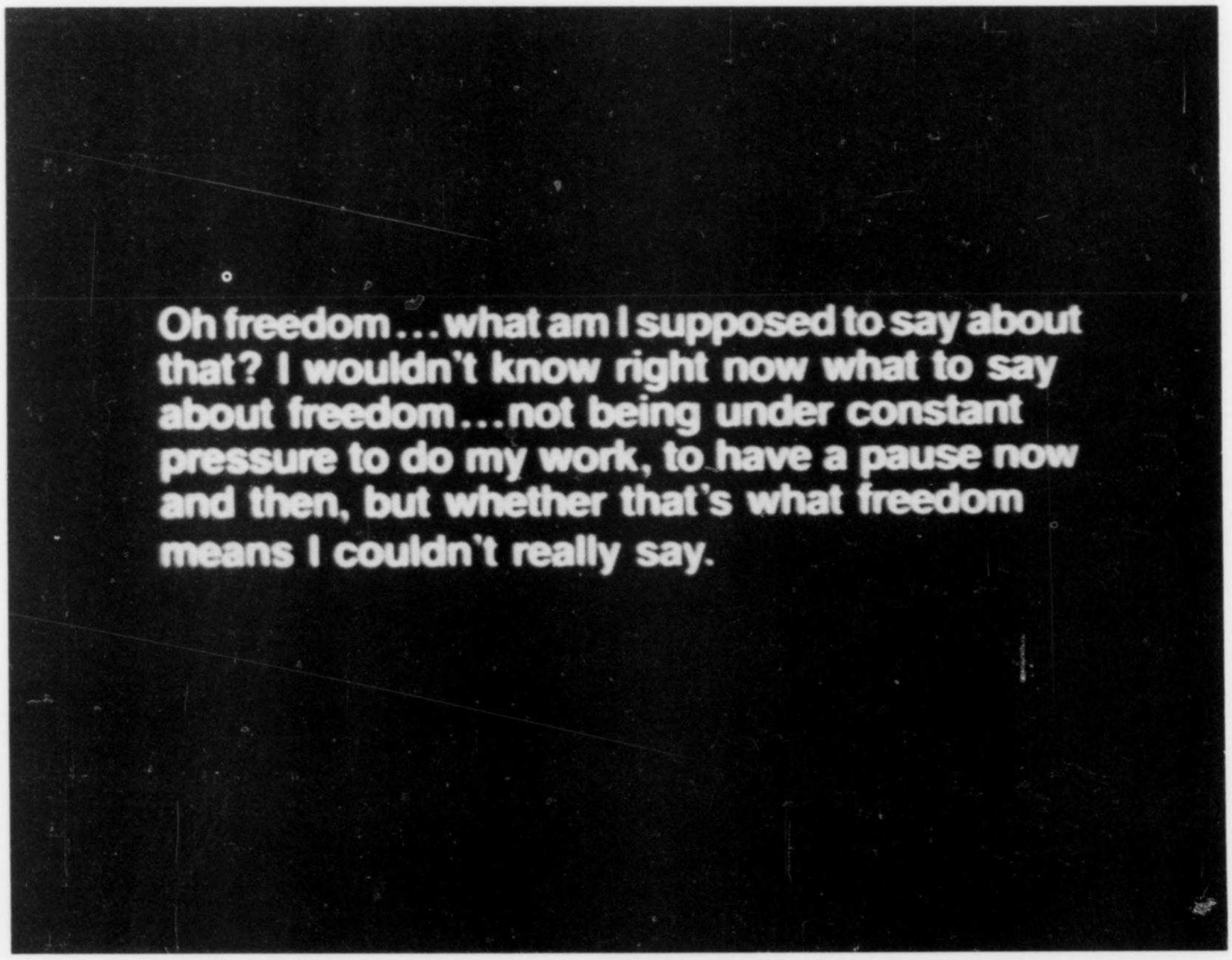
Michelson: This leads us to some considerations that are specific to the film.

Serra: The distancing of the shots: that is what I was talking about.

Michelson: In the first part of the film you hear the voices of the workers but you don't see them; you see in print what they are saying in response to Clara's questions. I realize that this is conditioned in part by the double audience for which this film is made, but what it does is focus what is being said: one hears, if one understands the German, and one reads at the same time, thereby attending very strongly to what is being said, and the disjunction between the printed titles and the screen image and the sound makes one focus on what is being said.

Then in the second part of the film one is introduced into that sound environment, which is so extraordinary. So there is a necessary disjunction, one that is simply inscribed within that situation, between any one worker and what he says, because you cannot hear him anyway, anymore than his comrades hear him. They communicate, as you said, by whistles and signals, so there is a primary distance or disjunction that is inscribed in the film.

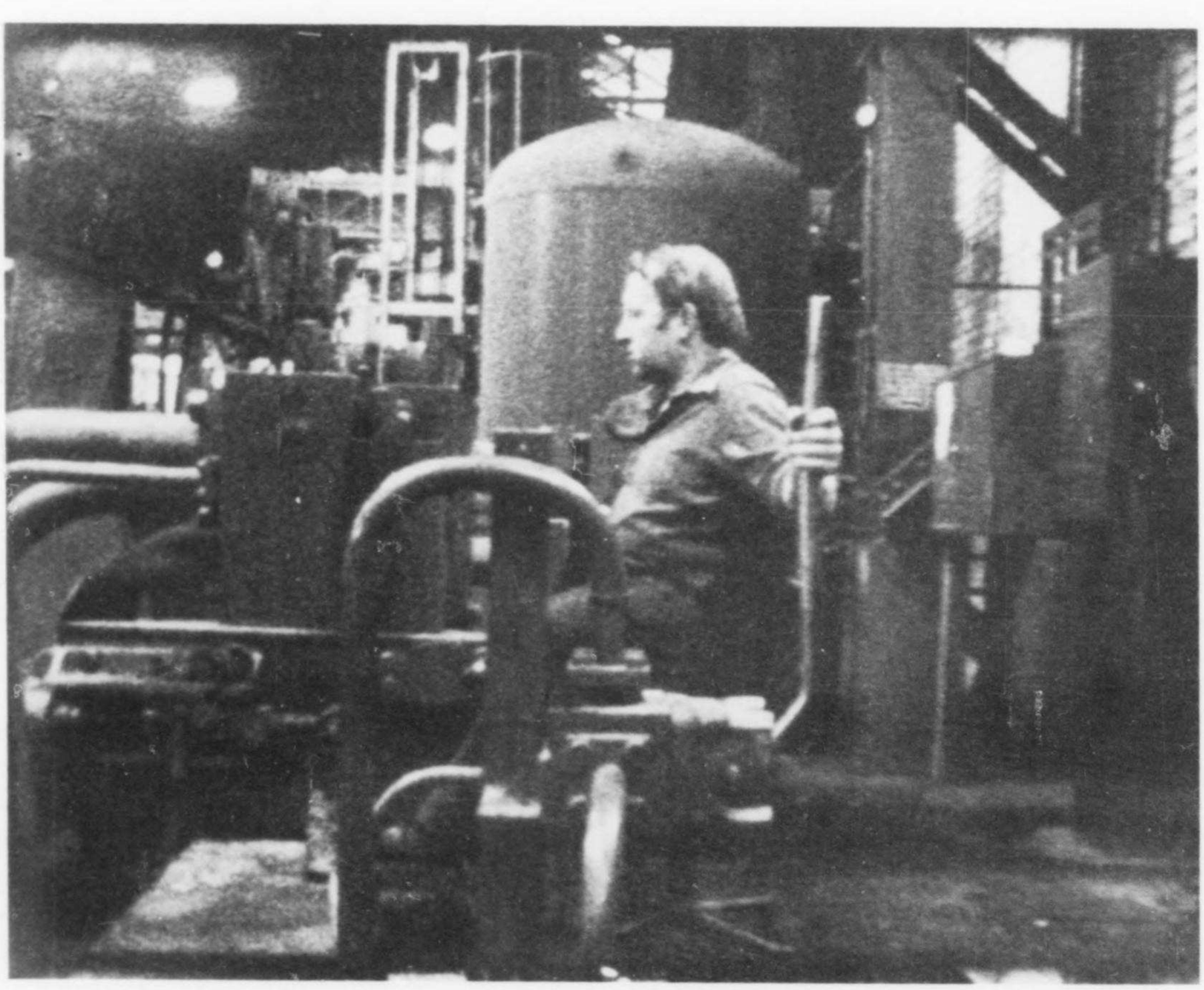
Serra: We were interested in reinforcing that disjunction, not only between text and image, but also within the image structure. We tried to do it in other ways. When we tried to put the language interior to the film, it seemed to break the film



Richard Serra and Clara Weyergraf. Steelmill/Stahlwerk. *1979.* *(Continues through p. 100.)*

and to be even more redundant. In that case the language seemed to point specifically to either the frame that was coming or the frame that had just passed. Or, if we put the language on the film, which we tried, that seemed to depict or illustrate the frame in a false way. So we had the information, or the voices of the workers, and we had their condition, and I think that became the biggest problem of the film: how to retain the clarity of the disjunction and yet achieve the impact of the information we wanted to put across.

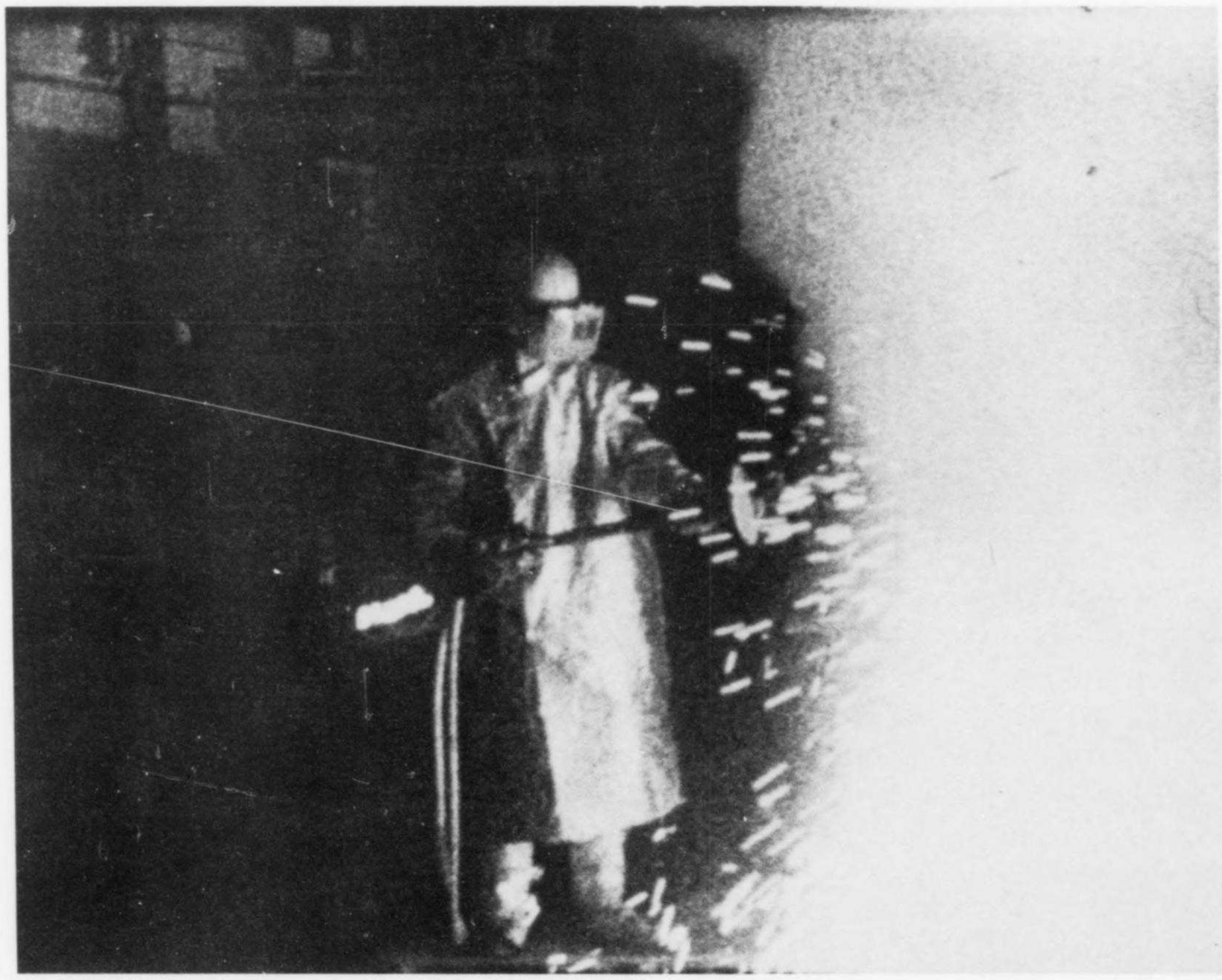
When we got to the cutting of the film, I wanted to give a very definite sense of place, similar to that in the bridge film, to track the place one or two times and then to locate the working process. If you follow the cutting process, the block is introduced, it tracks down, it goes into the forge, people work on it, it's taken out of the forge, it goes back into the oven, they burn it, it comes back into the forge, they work on it, they take it across it the other side, and they flame it, and that's the end. The cutting was done in a linear way to approximate what was done in the mill on a given day. However, the images are put together so that, had you never been in the mill, you would never know that those juxtapositions were, in effect, following the operation of the shop.



In the same way, if you hadn't been on the turnbridge—you see it open, a boat goes by, it closes, a train goes over it—you might not understand that that follows the linear operation of the bridge. You might just think that those are random shots. So there was a coherent plan for the sequence of images, from which images had to be excluded, to keep the logic of the place consistent. I don't think that anyone who hasn't been to the mill follows it, but I've found that people who come from working backgrounds understand it immediately. They have no problem knowing where they are in relationship to the place, what is near and far, who is on the right and who is on the left. People who haven't been in those working conditions seem to see it only as juxtaposed pictures.

We also tried to keep some of the images complete within themselves, and then to cut them very abruptly to enforce the way you see each image, or each development in each image. We tried not to run them together to make a relationship in which one image would be predicated on another, where one shot would demonstrate what is to come in the next. We tried to avoid all those linear, functional descriptions in the film.

We structured the language and image sequentially to avoid explanations



and illustrations. The text and image separation prompted the need in the viewer to connect the two parts of the film, to dig out the ideas for himself, out of his own inner necessity, and derive meaning from these connections.

Weyergraf: Also, the purpose of the cut is to function as a metaphor for alienation, so that you don't abstract a false linearity. We tried to get the message across that the different working processes that you see, for the workers who are doing them, don't really follow one another and fit together and achieve the notion of a whole.

Serra: When people see the film, one of the first things they say is, "How is it that I didn't understand what the people were doing?" People who have not been around industry want to make a story out of it, want to have it make sense, want to understand the language in relation to the image. Whereas, if you are there, that would seem false; that isn't the reality.

Weyergraf: It *doesn't* make sense.

Serra: Also, we cut it abruptly at the end to give the sense that it is ongoing. I think that of the nineteen shots, probably seventeen—that is, not including the two tracking shots—have men working in them. We excluded shots that were just about the mill, particularities of place, color, or light, and we tried to focus on the men's relationship to their work. And in each shot the manifestation of that is divorced from any identification with them. That came about for two reasons: one, from having seen the TV cameraman overglamorizing them; and two, just my predilection in shooting. I think I wouldn't have shot it that way if I had not seen the earlier cameraman's footage, but once I began to shoot the film, once I got the distance of the camera that I needed to maintain, the film came quite readily. The ratio of shooting to image went probably from 6/1 down to 4/1.

I think I got closer to the working process in shooting the film. I went back to shoot several times, and I would stay there all day and shoot maybe 400 feet. So it became a matter of synthesizing, on a given day, what it was that allowed you to see the interior mechanism of the plant. It might even come down to a detail in a shot which allows you to see the larger framework. I don't think you can understand that detail unless you have a distance with the camera. It's hard to understand detail if you are in really close. If you are doing something very personal, I guess you can handle detail in that way.

When I was in Germany I looked through a lot of old German photographs by [Heinrich] Zille. I think that may have a lot to do with the way this film was shot. Do you know Zille's photographs?

Michelson: No, tell me about them.

Weyergraf: Actually, Zille is not really known as a photographer. He is known for drawing. He lived in Berlin at the turn of the century, and he made photos as studies for his drawings. The photos are all of the working class—not even the working class, the sub-proletariat, the lowest of the low. You feel when you look at the photos that, on the one hand, he sympathized with them; on the other hand, he always kept an objective distance. He doesn't emotionalize the subject matter, which would be quite easy, because poor people can be quite picturesque.

Michelson: Especially at the beginning of the century.

Serra: I was impressed by the black and white of his photographs. There always seems to be an internal light within the photographs.

Michelson: Why did you use black and white?

Serra: I am really interested in black and white. When I shot the turnbridge film, almost everyday the sun was obscured by fog; there were no shadows. So there was a flattening and compressing of space. In the steel mill, I realized that all the large

blocks would be the light source of the film. And that light source, as it moves, makes for a very strong black and white contrast. An internal light source was something I really wanted to explore. I think color distracts from the way light structures and restructures form. Also, when something is 1280 degrees, it is white hot, not red, and I wanted the whiteness of it as a light source and a volume in the frame. I am not sure about color, about color stops, about what I think of color, the illusion of color. I've never been able to deal with it. Maybe I see the world more clearly in black and white. Some people see the world in color. I taught the Albers color course; but I don't think about it much. I do think about black and white. I think about the range, the nuances of black and white, certainly in regard to drawing.

Michelson: I want to discuss something else, still in relation to this film, though. I remember once, during the period that I so often saw you at Anthology, your telling me that *Strike* was a very good film.

Serra: Oh, yes. I still think it's a great film.

Michelson: I think it's a very great film; and of course it's a film which takes place in a factory. It is one of the most powerful images of a factory. It is a factory in which the issues of repression and alienation are explored in some detail, in some depth.

And then I remember your having telephoned me from California one night and telling me that you'd just read a piece I'd written on Vertov and that you'd liked it. Vertov's *Enthusiasm* is a film that I gather has meant a lot to you.

Serra: Oh, yes. I think that's a great film.

Michelson: Enthusiasm is, of course, a film about the production of steel and coal—coal mining, by the way, is another job done under conditions as bad or worse that those of the steel mill. But there is a way in which it is almost impossible for someone at this point in the century to make a film about the industrial process at its most hyperbolic—which is to say a steel mill—that is not fraught with a sense of the difficulty, the alienation, the incredible tension under which that kind of work has to be done. But the two Soviet films you looked at, and particularly the Vertov, are films which heroicize that productive process. Do you look at those films differently, now that you have made your film?

Serra: I haven't seen those films since I've made my film, but I'm sure I would look at them differently. I might even find them reactionary. I might admire their form, their cutting, their energy, but I might find the content reactionary. I might find suspect the idealistic narrative about the heroic worker even though it's in the service of the revolution.

Michelson: Are you saying that there are some forms of labor which are, independent of their political and social context, by their very nature alienating?

Serra: Yes, I think so.

Michelson: Would you not think, however, that to have been a worker in a Soviet steel mill in the 1920s, even under very difficult conditions, might have been very different from being one in Helmut Schmidt's Ruhr valley?

Serra: I'm sure it's different. But if you're asking what I'd think of those films now, after having made this film, I might be very suspicious of the filmmakers' intentions. You can manipulate the portrayal of a steel mill or a coal mine to conform to any party ideology you want, but the result might not have anything to do with the realities that exist.

Weyergraf: But those films were done in very different political circumstances. If *Strike* or *Enthusiasm* were made in the Soviet Union today, they would be reactionary films, but made at that time they were quite realistic, because there was a lot of genuine hope for the working class. Those filmmakers didn't invent it, and at that time they didn't illustrate the party ideology. They dealt with something which was really there. There were prospects for the working class which, though they may be lost now, at that time affected not only the working class, but also many Soviet artists. Artists who had been preoccupied with formalistic concerns before the revolution responded to that atmosphere of hope. I don't think they were reactionary at all. You have to see them as films made in a certain situation at a certain time. I think it was a very great time.

Serra: If you come back to what you asked—"Is there something in the nature of the work itself?"—no matter how you serve it up, for whatever hope or idealism, if you're using it to enforce those references, that may be a falsification.

Weyergraf: I think it depends on the relationship that you have to your work. I think it's more difficult when you work very hard, under very difficult conditions, knowing that you are working for the profit of someone else.

Serra: I don't know whether someone in a coal mine or a steel mill is any less alienated after the revolution than before the revolution.

Weyergraf: Perhaps he isn't less alienated, but there is a great hope that things will change in his life, in the way he relates to his work, in who makes the profit from his work, and even in the way he works.

Serra: Do you think anything has changed in the steel mill for a hundred years?

Michelson: Not in that steel mill, but in Russian steel mills things changed.

Serra: How much did it change?

Weyergraf: I think it changed for a while. It changed in China for a while too.

Serra: I saw that film that was shot in a steel mill in China recently by . . .

Michelson: Joris Ivens.

Serra: . . . and I thought it was theatrical propaganda to have the performance in the steel mill. It seemed so artificial, so heavy-handed. That's a party-line film. There was no clear picture of the alienation in those plants.

It may be the privilege of the filmmaker to foster hope in a situation where the conditions are hopeless, even though the political ideology has changed. It may come down to the politics of the filmmaker.

Yvonne [Rainer] saw my film and found it interesting because it overlapped various areas of filmmaking—social document, agit-prop, various artistic conventions. And in being a hybrid, she said, it pointed to various ways of dealing with various circumstances.

I think probably in Vertov and Eisenstein there is a point of view which can never really coincide with the reality of the situation. They're taking a point of view about a particular subject to serve other ends. *Enthusiasm* does it; I guess our film does it also. To what degree are we involved with making propaganda? And how conscious are we of it?

Michelson: That's not a question I would ask, because I take it for granted that ideology is inscribed in the work of art.

Vision in Process

BIRGIT PELZER

A Grammar of Space

> Here then is a space that is infinite for a Euclidean observer but finite for an elliptic observer. What are we to conclude? That finitude and infinitude are not properties of space itself but depend upon the way in which objects and especially observers move within that space.
>
> —Gustave Verriest, *Numbers and Spaces*

Dan Graham's video installations might be described as attempts to reveal the reserve of unconscious relations which underpins the figurative choices proscribed by spatial codes. While aspiring to the greatest possible degree of transparency, these installations—like so many textual implements—isolate, confront, and recompose the signs which constitute those codes. This decomposition and recomposition of structural elements attempts to establish a model of investigation which, through a topography of symptoms, will reveal those laws according to which space acquires symbolic form, and which define a specific historical reality. By materializing their texture, Graham isolates the language of extralinguistic phenomena, which prove to be linguistic because they insinuate rather than reflect reality.

The paradoxical nature of space stems from the fact that it is not visual, even while existing as a function of a visual structure. Space does not belong to the order of representation; still, it must be sustained by representation. Descriptions of space generally proceed from a minimal articulation, most commonly that which differentiates an outside from an inside. This articulation, however, is invisible: it defines a "body" whose sole characteristic is its transparency. As Lissitzky formulated it, "Room: not what is seen through the key-hole, not what is seen through the open door. Room-space is not there for the eyes alone, is not a picture."[1]

1. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky, Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall, Greenwich, New York Graphic Society, 1968, p. 361.

Among the many consequences of this state of affairs is the fact that space escapes the privilege of vision (which is especially compelling in Western civilization, dominated as it is by notions of the subject and of consciousness), but remains the arena in which that privilege is most subtly operative. The most flagrant example of this is orthodox modern architecture, which sought to abolish the paradox. It is well known that, on the authority of a unitary conception of space which postulated its continuous depth, modern architecture was built upon a pathos of functionalism and transparency, which in fact is related to an ideology of camouflage. Through transparent junctures which effaced all visible articulation between interior and exterior and instead manifested their continuity, the "cube" was exploded. The will to surpass division resulted in denial of the tension and contradiction which arise from the passage from one reality to another.[2]

Despite the failure of most of its objectives, this ideology persists. And with good reason. Apparent transparency yields an immediacy in which attention is lost. This loss reduces any given structure to a superstructure offered to a distracted vision as an asyntactic field which, when "consumed," inevitably generates a pluralist monotony which denies difference and from which new dimensions of collective behavior emerge. Uncontrolled, this literally invisible conditioning leads either to the mystifications of propaganda or to useless, decorative rhetorical messages.

Graham's video works attempt to expose these more or less repressive structures, of which space, particularly architectural space, is the locus. This vivisection is necessarily indirect, since it is less a question of explicit significations than of cryptic connotations, furtive and equivocal. Since the perception of space is a function of its limit, even and especially when the limit is effaced, it is to the notion of *limits* that Graham opposes elliptical coexistence.

In other words, the video works consist of so many variations on partition. The limit may be manifest (the wall) or simultaneously negated and redoubled in another dialectic (dealing with a mirror or a pane of glass). These three elements—to which video and a general reflection on light and lighting must be added—are the basic materials of most of the installations, whether constructed (*Public Space/Two Audiences*) or inscribed in a given context (*Video Piece for Glass Buildings*). These elements are investigated as much in their physical as in their semantic components; still, we can hardly speak of them as objects.

Beyond their declarative immateriality, their presence is entirely dissolved by the spectator's movements. These works are brought into existence by a spectator who is simultaneously absorbed in and distanced from his own ambiguous situation: both inside and outside of what he sees; presented with and differentiated from other spectators. Transparent and almost imperceptible at first, this placement must lead him to unfamiliar conclusions. The distinction between

2. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1966.

contemplation and use is eradicated; one completely envelops the other. At the same time, space is demonstrated to be less a function of sight than of movement; it is constituted through the body or, more precisely, the actions of a subject. We thus return to an elementary topological percept: the deformability of perception, based on notions of contiguity and separation, of envelopment and continuity which exist independently of any fixed scale of measurement.[3] It follows that space is less a thing than a force field. As such, it comprises a temporal rather than a visual contiguity.

The fact that every spatial field is the extension of a temporal field is translated here into an immediate modality of experience by means of the perceptual delays that can be engineered with video. Invariably derived from body movements, these delays demonstrate that space is primarily an original subjectivizing relation, a differential and allusive position, an ensemble of virtual and variable situations. This is diametrically opposed both to Kantian a priori consciousness[4] and to the idea of a common sense of a permanent external reality which is susceptible to change only in the form of its notation.

Thus the video works essentially compromise the unitary notion of space. They effectively prevent the assumption of any exterior point of view or fixed focus. On the contrary, foci are dispersed within a system of reflexive reflections which upset spatial hierarchies and situate the spectator at the center of an almost inexhaustible web of visual relationships which confound all attempts at totalization. Totalization is, however, repeatedly suggested, since we also see to an extraordinary degree what is usually hidden from us (behind, before, or separated from us).

In the end, window, video, and mirror function as so many contracting and expanding stages. Alternating dominant and subordinate axes change point of view, direction, or screen, so that images contradict their boundaries and enclose within themselves the space they generate. They thereby create a virtual volume whose ultimate ambiguity is primarily a result of the destabilizing role of reflections:

> The complexity of this relation of spectators to their image, and to the image of the "Other" (reciprocal spectators), is a product of/echoed in the relation of the material properties of mirror and glass. Because glass as a material is itself mirror-reflective, observers in the room distant from the mirror, looking in the direction of the mirror through the glass divider, see a double reflection of their image, first in the glass and then, smaller in size but more distinct, in the mirror. From within the other room (with the mirror) an observer looking towards the glass and

3. See Piaget's work on child psychology, as well as Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et société, Naissance et destruction d'un espace plastique*, Paris, Denoël, 1977, pp. 40–43.
4. "Space is nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London, Macmillan, 1961, p. 46.

> at the other space's opposite white wall, will see partially reflected on the glass's surface a projection of the space of his room (and also of the other room seen behind it) . . . this image being reflected from the mirror's surface to illusionistically fill in the blank wall surface behind the glass.[5]

Thus what appears at first to be only a complex spatial configuration is revealed to be in reality a reciprocal short-circuiting of all the visual systems under investigation. For example, the symmetry created in the field by the mirror—a symmetry which apparently contradicts the reality it extends—refers, as Graham frequently points out, to the perpendicular system of perspective that petrifies the viewer by determining measurable distances between objects and by simultaneously negating that distance.[6] By organizing the evanescent, all the other visual relays—the whole constellation of reptile-reflections; others with their simultaneously searching and evasive eyes; our own eyes snatched from us only to be returned via video—effectively neutralize the mirror's vanishing point and the subtle violence it does to all who contemplate themselves in it. What at first seems to be total redundancy turns out to be its interdiction: there are too many images and reflections.

We cannot melt into them, deny them, or elude their effects. A continual inversion of orders of reference challenges the focalization and linearity which are the basis of perspective. It is difficult to abandon either; photography systematizes both. The cubist grid only multiplies them without challenging their authority; the grid cross-rules a space which always emanates from the point from which we look, thereby repeating the stabilizing exteriority of point of view.

Conversely, the video works juxtapose both perspective and its simulated subversion to a positional system in which it is impossible to determine distances by any finite measure, as well as to a topological system in which all structural elements are subjected to continual deformation without losing their constitutive properties (thanks to the incorporation of variations in lighting). Because of the spatial ambiguity established between the image and its continual disappearance, between the objective representation and its constant reinsertion in inverted form, the result is an indefinable totality.

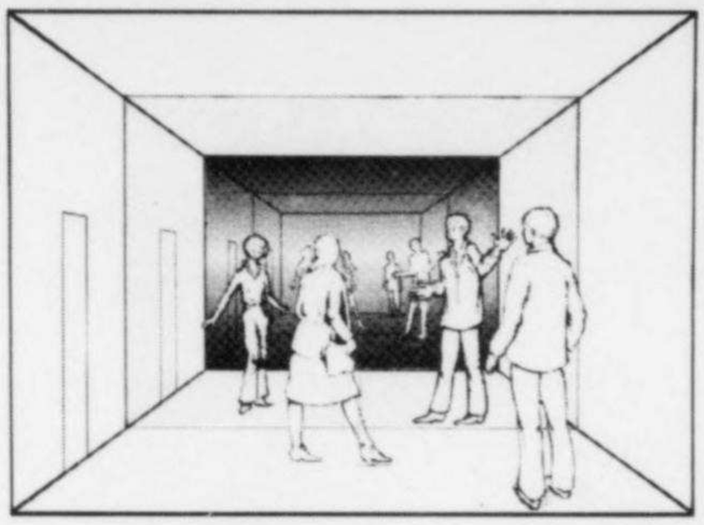
In this simultaneous citation and revocation of diverse spatial systems, the contradiction which grounds our visual conventions in the fixed point of view is made "visible." The video pieces present the exceptions which prove the rule, but also demonstrate their deceptiveness: while we usually see ourselves only through

5. Dan Graham, "Public Space/Two Audiences," *Tracks*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1977), p. 57.

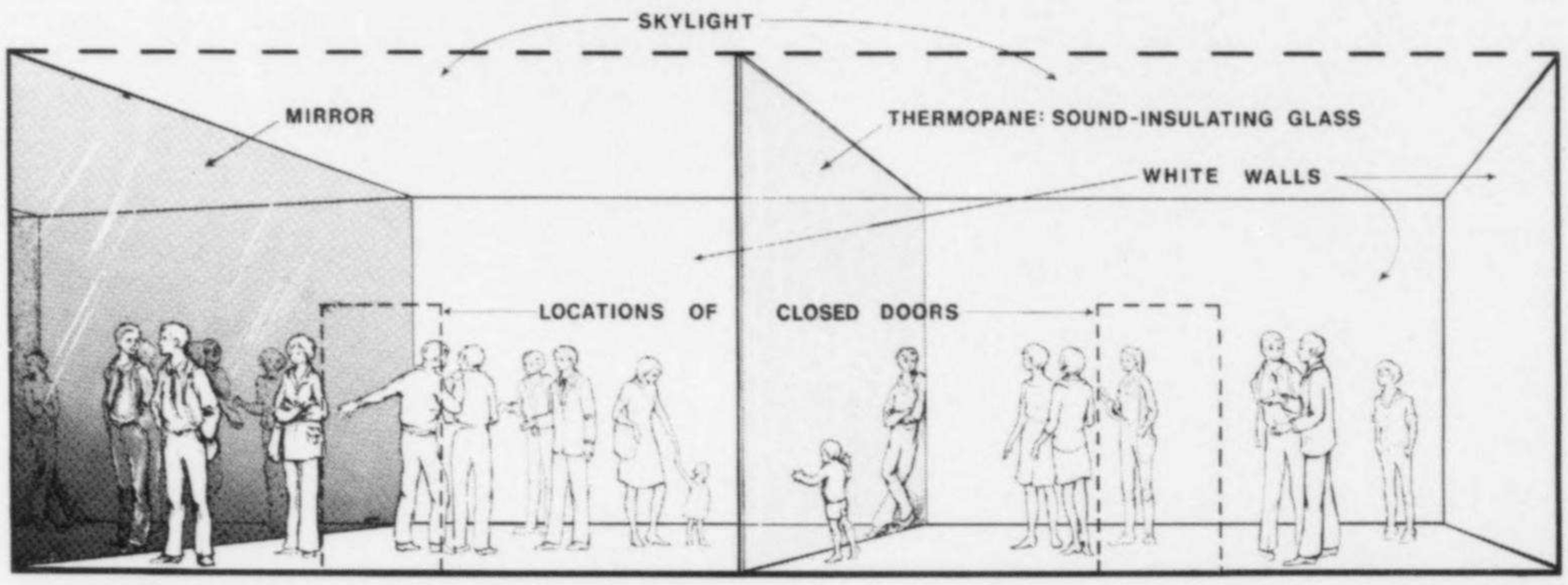
6. "For us, perspective is the ability to represent several objects along with their ambient space, in such a way that the notion of the painting's material support is completely subsumed by the *notion of transparency*, so that we believe our gaze passes through and penetrates an imaginary exterior space, containing all these objects in apparent succession, and that would not be limited but only bordered by the edges of the painting." (Erwin Panofsky, "Die Perspektive als symbolische Form," *Hamburg*, 1927, pp. 258–330, italics added).

PUBLIC SPACE / TWO AUDIENCES

THE PIECE IS ONE OF MANY PAVILIONS LOCATED IN AN INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBIT WITH A LARGE AND ANONYMOUS PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE.



EACH AUDIENCE SEES THE OTHER AUDIENCE'S VISUAL BEHAVIOR, BUT IS ISOLATED FROM THEIR AURAL BEHAVIOR. EACH AUDIENCE IS MADE MORE AWARE OF ITS OWN VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS. IT IS ASSUMED THAT AFTER A TIME, EACH AUDIENCE WILL DEVELOP A SOCIAL COHESION AND GROUP IDENTITY.



a foreclosure of reality, here our gaze is forced to integrate that space it ordinarily takes in only by a series of rejections.[7]

Yet all this does not imply a fantasy of total reversibility, beyond subjectivity, in which meaning would no longer be a function of position. The visual consciousness of each spectator remains the central and centralizing coordinate. Rather it is his field that is decentralized. Graham's specific contribution to the spatial investigations of contemporary art seems to reside in this decentralization of the field, not through an amorphous "all-over," but through an extremely precise articulation of its possible structural states.

And if there is still continuity in this space, it is not a function of physical constancy, but of a constancy of *information.* Likewise, its limits are informational; information replaces form. Graham releases the energetic tension, that is, the communicative potential, of all given materials—materials that are otherwise of the most ordinary sort.

If visual and architectural codes entail an imperceptible channeling of perception and the behavior contingent thereupon, here we witness so many alphabetical displacements, as if we were straining for a glimpse into a world where the reciprocal relationships between things and space were abolished, or attempting a powerful magic through these installations so bare of all connotations, aesthetic or otherwise—a magic without deception that would really transform the relations that bind us to ourselves and to others.[8]

Graham proceeds by unveiling, through an inventory of our tracks—that is, our appropriation by objects and their representation—the restrictions which petrify these relations, just as they radically prevent all possibility of experience. Denouncing the conservative and totalitarian nature of all language, these "environments" which on one hand seem so functional represent on the other a virulent attack on functionalism—the function of which is to submerge its own basic hypotheses in the parasitic and purely mechanical nature of the machine, which henceforth will assimilate everything, beginning with those who use it.

Graham's recourse to video is undoubtedly equivocal, since he rebels against its technological prestige while remaining subject to it. Clearly the existence of a medium like video transforms our notions of space and communication. This transformation must be articulated. Graham often underlines video's abstract possibility of abolishing the conventions which fix public/private identity, even the possibility of the autodetermination of information.[9] But this transformation

7. Nietzsche underlined the dangers of perspective illusion by taking it to its logical conclusion: "The most extreme form of nihilism would be the understanding that every belief, everything perceived as truth, is necessarily false, because a true world does not exist. Thus a perspective view whose origin lies in ourselves (insofar as we need to construct for ourselves a narrow, condensed, and simplified world.)" (Nietzsche, *Werke,* III, ed. K. Schlechta, Munich, 1969, p. 617).

8. This is the argument of works like *Two Consciousness Projections,* 1972.

9. The reader is referred to Graham's essays "Centralization/Decentralization of Information," "Architectural Code/Video Code," and "Public/Private Codes," *Dan Graham: Video, Architecture, Television,* Halifax and New York, Nova Scotia and NYU, 1979.

also implies that we can alter our pragmatist-positivist-behaviorist attitude towards video and truly understand what is at stake. One of the questions raised by these installations concerns how to employ technical equipment so as to escape the consequences it ordinarily automatically produces, to avoid becoming a mere reflection of its authority.[10]

> We can with the assistance of telescopes observe through the medium of photography nebulae which are 500,000,000 light years distant. Thus it would not even be necessary to increase our telescopes' power to be able to perceive the backs of our own necks, at least as they were 30,000 years ago, provided that at that time they emitted as much light as a spiral nebula, and that the dimensions of the universe have not changed since.
>
> —Gustave Verriest, *The Dimensions of the Elliptical Universe*

We have seen that Dan Graham's video works exist only by virtue of the participation of a spectator confronted with his own image fractured in circuits of reflections, circuits which weave identity and identification into a simultaneously continuous and dispersed *entre-deux*. But what is the nature of the resultant subjective experience? What are its ramifications?

By providing a glimpse of the subject's multiple incarnations, these installations "materialize" the space of mistaken identity (*méconnaissance*) that struc-

10. There are, of course, historical precedents for work such as Graham's, in particular, the attempt of Russian constructivism to transform the function of art from aesthetic to use value. (This affinity was already signalled by B.H.D. Buchloh in "Moments of History in the work of Dan Graham," Eindhoven, 1978.) Indeed, El Lissitzky's texts on his *Exhibition Rooms* read like introductions to Graham's video works, which seem to be literal illustrations of what Lissitzky hoped to realize. Lissitzky called for a new spatial reality, not three but four dimensional, since time and movement would be included. This new reality would abolish the sanctity of easel painting and of the object about which one moves in order to place the spectator at the center of events. The *Proun Room* (Berlin, 1923) compelled the spectator to move, to confront physically what he saw, so that at each step the effect would be modified.

Similarly, Graham defines his *Public Space/Two Audiences* as follows: "One of the intentions was that the spectators, instead of contemplating art objects within the room environment (the architectural enclosure), be themselves displayed by the container. . . . The spectator is made socially and psychologically more self-conscious. This is the inverse of the usual loss of 'self' when a spectator looks at a conventional art-work. . . . In 'Public Space/Two Audiences' the work looks back; the spectator inversely sees his projection of 'self' (conventionally missing) returned specularly by the material (and structural) aspects of the work." (*Tracks*, pp. 57–8.)

According to Lissitzky, it was no longer a question of decorating life but of organizing it. We can recognize his basic injunctions in the video works: the suppression of the wall, the destruction of those axes which organize space univocally in favor of multiple movements and dynamics that depart from the inertia of material and the passivity it begets; the will to eliminate illusionism: "When the desire is to obtain the illusion of life within an enclosed space, then this is how I do it: I hang a sheet of glass on the wall; it has no painting behind it, but a periscopic device which shows me what is actually happening at any given moment, in the true colour and with the real movement." (El Lissitzky in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 361.)

tures subjectivity. In other words, they describe our inevitable lie, since the place where we see ourselves is never that from which we see. Mirroric in nature, these works confront the spectator with his or her own reduplicated image, which is distributed through circuits of exchange in such a way that each element—simultaneously subject and object, inside and outside—is affected with a persistent reciprocity. This reciprocity is, in the end, illusory, since interior and exterior revolve around some central point whose focus remains virtual, postponed by the entropic series of its own projected shadows.

Thus Graham creates strange, plotless scenarios in which a difference without terms emerges. Is that difference anonymous? Dispossessed in the calm hallucination of a double uncertainty, deprived of our habitual relation to space, we undoubtedly see ourselves. But in seeing ourselves we exclude ourselves from the field we occupy. There is no way to avoid this confrontation, so that we must finally deal with what is really being demonstrated here. Must we simply contemplate this overabundance of parallel images? Or are we dealing with what is missing from those images, with that eccentric, intangible, but nevertheless extremely persistent knot in which the eye is only a metaphor for something which is presented to vision but which constantly eludes it?

It is clear that the point of these works is not to be found in their manifest aspect—the way in which I appear to myself, through the eyes of others, as a stranger, an exposed object alienated from other objects (it is, despite appearances, quite the contrary)—but in the hollow created by the tireless confrontation of perspectives. What finally emerges is the nonspecularizable dimension which situates the subject in the very locus of its nonidentity with itself, a dimension which emerges when a spatial code is continually revoked but continues to function as an empty ensemble, as a free play of structure.

Not that we literally see this zero degree of spatiality. It is impossible to see what we can neither question nor hold unquestionable. However, the repeated inversions to which the eye is subjected in Graham's environments, as well as the obstinacy with which Graham uncovers one by one the spatial ruses which place the eye where it can never be, seem constantly on the verge of proving a point.

Who, finally, is seeing? The subject from which we begin, or that to which we come? And what is this subject supposed to see (*sujet supposé voir*)? To know? When questioned about the theoretical issues raised by his work, Graham refers to both phenomenology and psychoanalysis.

Perception and Its Other

The phenomenological aspect of Graham's work investigates the nature of visual consciousness, emphasizing the intentionality which governs it. His goal is, at least in part, to facilitate recognition of the role of intention as such. He thus creates a cause-and-effect relationship between the ego and itself, between the ego

and the other, which is open to control and intervention.[11] Nevertheless, if Graham's work is related to certain aspects of phenomenology, the two are closest when phenomenology questions its own fundamentals and inclines towards something else.

We know that phenomenology, characterized in Husserl by reflexivity, sees in all givens (image, object of perception) an intentional index of a system of operations produced by consciousness. This relationship, termed intentionality, between a given and consciousness must be discerned if we are to grasp the facts (one of the major examples of the privileging of vision), that is, the object itself given to a consciousness present both to itself and to the object. Retracing the intentional processes by which it is constituted, phenomenological description becomes self-consciousness.

This argument is not without its weaknesses. Time is the one phenomenon that cannot be reduced according to this process. Time is not just any phenomenon. If every phenomenon is defined as relative to subjectivity, then time, far from being relative, becomes an absolute of consciousness, its ultimate dimension.[12] Might this not be applied to other phenomena as well, especially vision, which seems to be relative to the eye but which nevertheless precedes it and which is never fully constituted but evasive, a nonbeing which inheres in being as a lack?

The phenomenological ambition is eroded from within by recognition of such alterity: the very ground of phenomenology is not consciousness present to itself, but its difference. This difference means that perception always implicates nonperception, which alone renders perception as such possible.[13]

It is precisely this split that is staged by Graham's video works, which reveal its invisible elisions. Video, which permits simultaneous reproduction in a continuous experiential temporal flux, is never simply a mechanism. It demonstrates certain perceptual processes by investigating their unconscious development. Hence the simultaneously parallel and delayed presentation of past and present condenses the successive order to time into the coexistent order of space, presenting me by ricochet as the other that I am. (The degree to which a method of "displacement" and "condensation" cuts through those mechanisms which avoid censorship and which, for Freud, control the functioning of the psychic apparatus is striking.)

The processes that video displays always exist independently. If perception is paradox (we do not see vision), video does not resolve paradox, but amplifies it—so well that it almost manages to make it speak for itself, especially since video constitutes an inversion of mimesis: not only does the object no longer precede its reproduction; it appears to be preceded by it.

11. The reader is referred to the performance *Intention Intentionality Sequence* at the Lisson Gallery, London, in March 1972.
12. Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, trans. James S. Churchhill, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1964.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

In short, video exposes the paradox as paradox: perception never apprehends itself, but this only gives more weight to its enigmatic authority. But where does perception—which belongs to neither the subjective nor the objective order, but to an order of ambiguous interchange that undoes the certainties in question by revealing their fragility—lead us in the end?

In *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty describes perception, sight in particular, as the reciprocal insertion of two concentric spheres, which are decentered only when I question myself. There is between the seer and the seen a fusion, an interlacing, a fundamental transitivity which means that I see only because I am seen:

> . . . as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces since each is only the rejoinder of the other and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them. Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision . . . my activity is equally passivity—which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism . . . the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.[14]

In other words, the eye is stripped of the presence which constitutes it in order to return to a preexistent vision which submits it to sight well before all visual centering. As an eye, I only emerge from a vision in which, in the beginning, I participate. I see because in an omnivoyant world I am seen from all sides. This proposition shatters phenomenology, or at least its reflexive privilege—an explosion which, in the video works, takes the form of flagrant irony.

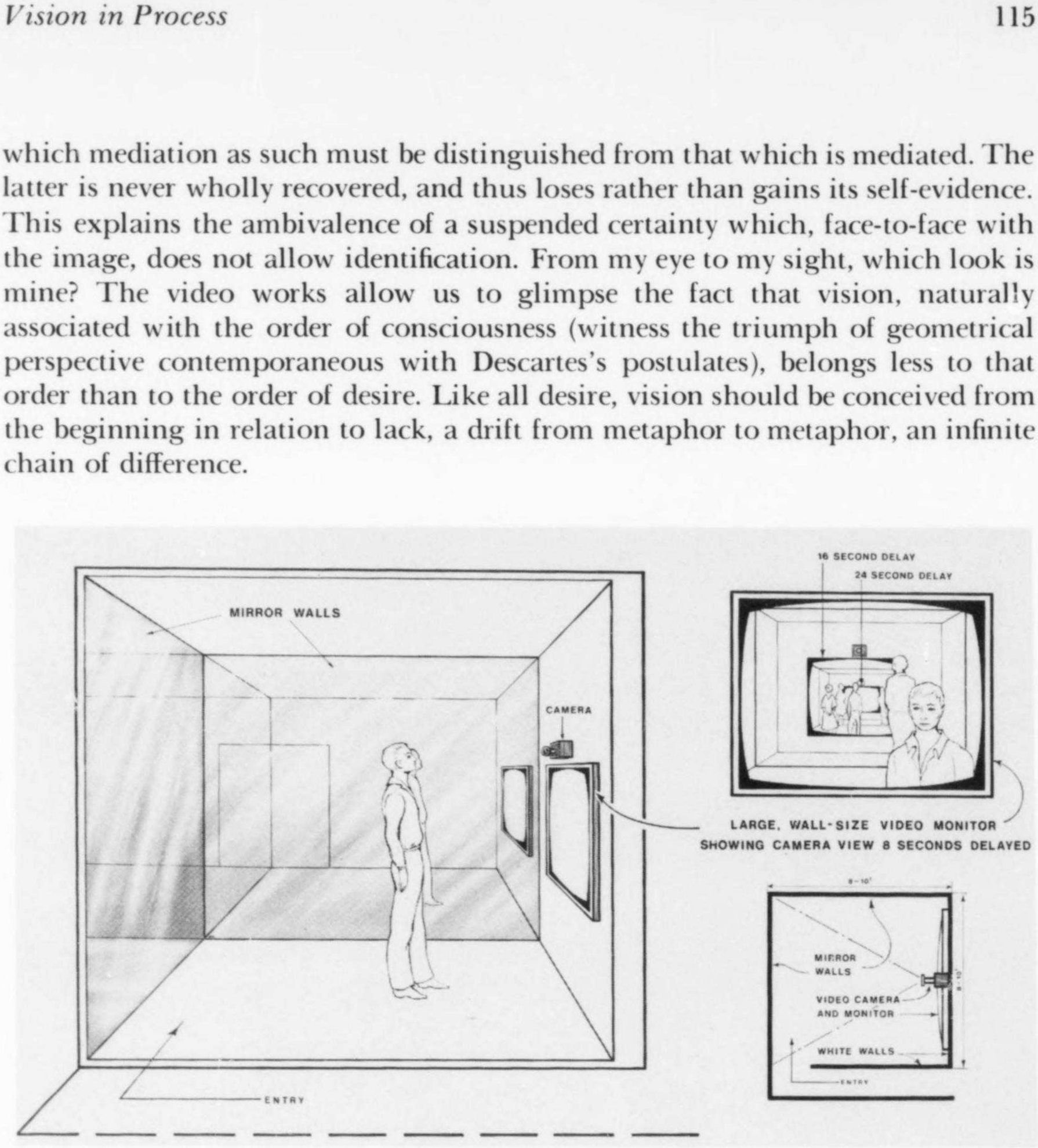
The idealist postulate for reaching the certainty of the *ipse* resides in reflection, that is, in the redoubling of a subject that identifies with itself only by holding itself at a distance, thus, a subject which accedes to itself only by observing that view of itself. Based on deception, this process remains virtual by definition, since reflexivity never completely succeeds in making explicit what is implicit in experience. For Graham, this apparently impregnable virtuality results in a sort of final sophistry, that of the actual manifestation.

However the consequence, far from a certainty, is a strange dispossession. Graham's handling of the problem that subjectivity exists for itself successfully demonstrates the extreme violence of its major characteristics: that consciousness of self is always linked with consciousness of its dispossession—that of being beyond oneself at the moment of self-confrontation.

Thus the problem of subjectivity is posed as the problem of a relationship in

14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* trans. Alfonso Lingus, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 139.

which mediation as such must be distinguished from that which is mediated. The latter is never wholly recovered, and thus loses rather than gains its self-evidence. This explains the ambivalence of a suspended certainty which, face-to-face with the image, does not allow identification. From my eye to my sight, which look is mine? The video works allow us to glimpse the fact that vision, naturally associated with the order of consciousness (witness the triumph of geometrical perspective contemporaneous with Descartes's postulates), belongs less to that order than to the order of desire. Like all desire, vision should be conceived from the beginning in relation to lack, a drift from metaphor to metaphor, an infinite chain of difference.



Dan Graham. Present Continuous Past(s). *1974.*

The Eye Traversed

Even if the destruction of a particular reflexive mode of thought results in an assertion of alterity, this assertion remains unarticulated—with good reason, since it is logically irreducible. Thus recourse is necessary to the other theoretical discourse which Graham invokes: the work of Jacques Lacan.

Graham refers primarily to "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I" in *Ecrits.* It will be remembered that, for the child, the mirror stage (which is genetic and unlikely to be repeated as such) is the moment at which subjectivity is constituted; it is also a stage at which an irredeemable split is effected. The child, its motor development as yet incomplete, can recognize its image. This is not

however a simple doubling; the relationship is triangular: the child recognizes itself as unique and doubled only because it simultaneously recognizes another next to it. Two subjects are necessary, and not just one, as presupposed by reflexive thought. The ego is secured only through a relation with the other.

But if self-recognition is also recognition of the other, it is above all recognition of the negativity which traverses both. Henceforth everything will be played out "in relation to," in an abyss where the real becomes impossibility itself. The mirror, which functions to introduce the unstable reflection of that which is in essence absent from it, can never be transcended, just as we will no longer cross the boundary it establishes: that of the inaccessible object and the lost affect.

What is begun at the mirror stage—in addition to the emergence of the symbolic—is the illusory structure of the subject which constitutes it as unified, when it is in reality multiple and fragmented. Lacan describes that unity as a rigid and alienating armature:

> The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.[15]

Thus the mirror stage defines the mystifying passage from fragmentation to identity, a transition which means that the subject's relation to the real will henceforth be caught up in a system of decoys which both mask and reveal it. But it also means that the screen formed by this image between the subject and the real is indispensable. The illusory identity, inevitable and final, according to which the subject sees itself in a constitutive reflection as other and yet whole and autonomous has a protective function against the real as a mass of indeterminations which threaten the subject's fictitious unity.

Thus the subject exists as subject, but in such a way that, like a screen, the ineluctable closure of fantasy intervenes between it and the real. Fantasy also prevents access to that which will henceforth always be absent. Thus that void is opened in which the labyrinth of desire will grow and rest intact—a desire which is aimless, since its object (the real, or even the drives as irreducible causes of structure) exists precisely at the fantasy's origin and can be neither grasped nor controlled, since it is what grasps and controls.

The impossible relation of the subject to the object of his desire—which Lacan calls *l'objet petit a*, meaning the ambiguous, empty object of the drives whose lack enables the subject to "function"—is the precise index of that division

15. Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I," *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Norton, 1977, p. 4.

which constitutes the subject as structured. In other words, the *Ichspaltung* that displaces the subject and makes it a stranger to itself allows it access to itself only through misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of this fantasy, that deception of which "consciousness" is an elaborate mode.

The video works almost manage to enclose the fantasy screen which separates every gaze from the real towards which it is turned. Not that they unveil it: we never "see" the fleeting incidence of that which in its essence cannot be objectified. But strategies in which the gaze is constantly deflected from its object and turned back on itself to be overwhelmed by an excess of contradiction pursue it until transgression seems possible. In other words, if the subject is always there where it avoids itself, Graham confronts it with its elisions, with the profound relativity that renders it a conscious subject always out of sync with itself and delayed in relation to its own causality.

In the end, the circuits in which images and their reflections are interchanged articulate the subject's division in its real locus: not in the mirror-video-pane of glass or in the reflected object, but in the subject looking at it. The division is between the subject's knowledge and the active truth of the split that allows its existence, and which it deflects. By intersecting its evasions, Graham derouts the "one eye too many" that conceals from us, as from Oedipus, our blinding truth.

A game of subtle doublings creates an environment in which the subject's perceptual structure is presented as yet another spectacle, as the very distance inserted between image and subject. Thus the subject is forced to experience its constitutive duplicity, which is not exactly that of subject and object, but that between itself and its insuperable fall when faced with what it sees—the perpetually renewed internal exclusion which supports its essential double.

Graham achieves this through a staging in which various absent representational systems are exchanged. He relies upon parallelisms created through imperceptible displacements which cloud and trouble the transparency of the ruptures which, like the window, only present what they divide after framing it, thus accentuating the dissimulated short-circuit through which passage is both forbidden and suggested, or even the constraint which is all the more effective when forgotten.

The window both opens and does not open onto something. The mirror, according to Graham, opens onto nothing if not the spatial enclosure where the ego perceives its illusory eternity. On the other hand, video functions simultaneously as window and mirror, while subverting the effects and functions of both.

In the video works, the screen reflects the mirror image I have of myself, as well as (due to continuous transmission) the effect this redoubled view has on my behavior, to which the multiplication of the image must be added—which leads us back to Lacan. Indeed, my image in the mirror and the image on the screen are not the same. The mirror, like a painting, petrifies the gaze, captures and fascinates it by a simultaneous illusion of power and unity in irreversible time. It thus

reproduces the lure of alienating identity described by Lacan. On the other hand, video plays on the reversibility of time, on duration experienced as both continuous and delayed, and therefore undoes this protective armature: I see myself without seeing myself where I don't expect to see myself. By turning the eye back onto the instability of its illusion, video, in a brief, elusive moment, leads the subject back to a vision of its fragmentation and plurality.

It might be said, in the most general of terms, that if the mirror clothes the subject with his image, video strips him of it. But how is it recovered? How is it known? The gaze does not have time to domesticate its appearance on the screen, which suddenly begins to dissolve, no longer offering a delusion of omnipotence, which is abandoned in a distance without distance, forever the same.

We do not know how to explode this screen. The illusion it perpetuates is an integral part of the subject, the mark of the unconscious upon it. But Graham has momentarily dislodged it. Unity is undone and protection ceases in that furtive moment of hallucinatory junction which occurs at the very boundary which separates identity and fragmentation.

When all is said and done, the video works place us face to face with one of the mechanisms which constitute the subject. In so doing, they reveal the extent to which that mechanism is by definition a trap, since unification is always disjunction as well, and since this oscillation is responsible for its power. A semantic inversion is at work in most of Graham's investigations, an inversion which postulates equivalence between linguistic and figurative material. Through it, Graham reveals that the image, like the signifier, establishes discontinuity. Image and language perform an identical disruptive function. Consequently, their common structure presupposes an exclusion, an empty ensemble, a particular negation which is the very condition of their functioning. (To which it must be added that if the mirror image is analogous with the signifier, its signified is to be found in what cannot be mirrored; it is not identical with language, but represents it.)

These installations place the subject at the very locus of that exclusion by opening a sort of passage through negativity by means of an image which is indefinitely dispersed between a temporal continuum and an atemporal discontinuity. It is demonstrated spatially, but literally, that this subject can never be referred to except by revealing that it is a difference defined in relation to reference itself, and that it will never transcend the ensemble of differences which institute it. The signifier is always inadequate to the signified, continuity always irreducible to discontinuity.

The subject's absence from the image explains both its alienating power and our obsession with it. It is there where it is not that the subject is constituted as identical with itself. That the inevitable succession of spatial captures proceeds from this fact is brilliantly illustrated by Graham, who nevertheless undoes the fascination which usually governs such captures. He appears to withhold the magic code of identity, whose paradoxical origin remains impenetrable.

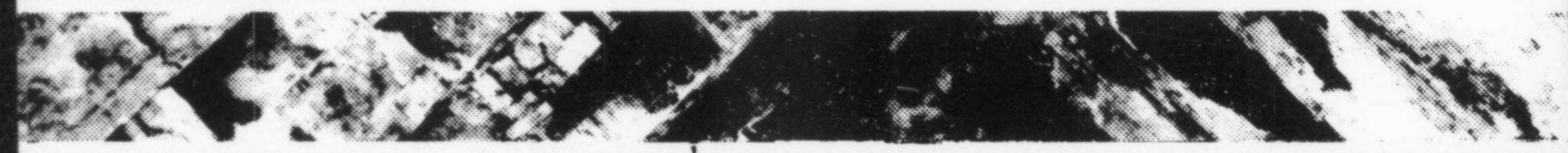
These works also illustrate the futility of turning away from the image and towards the other as towards our efficient cause. While it is true that without the presence of the other—the relation that I establish between "my" image and "its" body—my spectacle remains foreign to me, still this other is no more singular than I. All the same, it is the necessary witness to specular identification. Appropriation as mine or its remains ambiguous since, for our gazes, our images are respective objects. Thus the other appears as a guarantor of triangulation only insofar as it represents a law to which it itself is subject.

The video works are the abstract instrumentalization of this law, that is, the way in which alienation is inscribed in the very structure of the exchange, in its synchronic principle. And if the exchange foregrounds such alienation, the specular image seems to offer means of escape from this subjection: I can both offer myself up to it and take possession of myself from it. Thus spatial alienation is proven to be especially formidable, the silent revelation of a freedom whose power remains equivocal. To pretend, in a furious reiteration, to possess is to prevent the emergence of the real. The specular image is a deceptive signifier because it is proposed as universal discourse. However this discourse excludes all possibility of temporal succession, even if it continually mimes it, so that the subject finds no room to function. The video works counter this universal discourse with a proposition of the extreme instability of the terms of communication.

The simultaneity of sender and receiver presupposed by the mirror—a simultaneity which results from the fact that the exchange is never irreversible—is amplified by a series of overinvestments which are so displaced that their reverberation truly overlooks the subject. Since the image is to be contemplated and not identified with, can the subject appropriate its metaphoric representation with no assurance of really finding itself there? The video works decisively deprive us of this deception, which turns out to have been in fact only a delusion. Both the disappearance of the subject and the disruptive function of the signifier can no longer be avoided. An infinite succession of incomplete sketches, a spatial collection of multiple yet mutable identifications, are here translated in a temporal contiguity which prohibits summarization. The video works embody that exclusion which is the very condition of the effective emergence of a subject restored to its own nonidentity. As if, freed from the domination of the gaze, we wanted to teach it to speak, that is, to see, with one eye, its blind spot, which is located on this side of mistaken identity—if such a thought may be entertained.

PERM IN RUSSIA. EVAPORATION CAUSES LAND TO SHRINK. CONTINENTAL DRIFT. A DRAWING OF THE SKULL OF THE REPTILE ELGINIA (RELATED TO ROM PERMIAN SANDSTONE IN ELGIN, N.E. SCOTLAND, DRAWN TO ONE-QUARTER NATURAL SIZE). THROUGH THE EYES OF DIMETRODON. PERMIAN ICE AGE. *TING MOVEMENT OF GLACIERS IS DUE TO THE PROPERTIES OF ICE ITSELF AND IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PERIODIC ACCUMULATION AND REMOVAL OF ELAST YSTALLINE AGGREGATE* (P.A. SHUMSKI). HOT DESERT CONDITIONS. NOTES REGARDING FORAMINIFERA. REMAINS OF SLOW WADDLING CREATURES FOUND H AFRICA. SEAS WERE CUT-OFF FROM THE OCEAN, UNTIL THEY BECAME INCREASINGLY SALINE. DRASTIC CHANGES OF THE LANDSCAPE TAKE PLACE. A VOLC TTON IS A SPIRACLE TO A SUBTERRANEAN FURNACE. FANTASTIC IDEAS WERE LATER CAST ASIDE BY THE PLUTONISTS. SOLIDIFIES IN GRANITE. FAUST SAYS K.... THE NEPTUNIAN THEORY. THE SYMMETRY OF THE EARTH WAS THOUGHT TO BE SPOILED. MODERN ORDERS OF INSECTS EMERGE. A SPIRALLY COILED BA ED TO HELICOPRION. DWARF FAUNA. ONE SENTENCE DEVOTED TO INSECTS IN A CHAPTER ON THE PERMIAN PERIOD. STEREOSCOPIC VIEWS OF THE GUADALC CHANGING LIGHT OVER RECONSTRUCTIONS OF DECIDUOUS TREES. SNAPSHOTS OF POISON GAS. DIORAMA OF ASH HEAPS. DAGUERREOTYPE SHOWING VAST AND GYPSUM. EQUATOR IN OKLAHOMA. SPOILED PHOTOGRAPHS OF SAND DUNES. PHOTOMICROGRAPHIC STUDIES OF FOSSIL FROST. AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS TIGRAPHIC MAP OF OIL DEPOSITS. MISPLACED BOUNDARIES. SHIFTS IN POLAR AXIS RECORDED. EVAPORATION OF SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE. MARATHON HED. JOURNALS DEVOTED TO RADIATION DAMAGE. UNDEVELOPED FILM OF DRY LAND MASS. NEGATIVES OF SHELLY ORGANISMS. A BOOK ON EDAPHOSAURU PERMIAN PRAIRIES.

GEOGRAPHY OF THE LOWER CARBONIFEROUS PERIOD SHOWN ON AN OVAL MAP, WITH BLACK DOTS SYMBOLIZING *LAND PLANTS*. SLUG-LIKE CREATURES GL MITES. TERRIGENOUS CLASTIC SEDIMENTS EXTENDED TO A LINE PASSING WEST OF MICHIGAN. EARTH WARPAGE. PHOTOGRAPH OF LIMESTONES NEAR BLOOM TURE IS NOT THE STARTING POINT. *ALL ROUND THE COAST THE LANGUID AIR DID SWOON...* (TENNYSON). PURELY STATIC SHAPES, CLUMPS GLIMPSED THROU PS. THE BRITISH MUSEUM BUILT 1824. THE GLYPTOTHEK IN MUNICH 1816-1834. *AS DECAY AND DEATH OVERTOOK THESE FOREST GIANTS THEY EVENTUALLY E MUD AND OOZE SURROUNDING THEM* (CHARLES R. KNIGHT). THE IMMUTABLE CALM IN THE STEAMING SWAMPS. THINGS FAIL TO APPEAR. WORDS SINKING I RE. *COLLECTING THE FOSSIL AND SENDING IT TO THE MUSEUM IS ONLY PART OF THE STORY* (EDWIN H. COLBERT). A CAMERA OBSCURA REPRODUCES A PALE E SPLITTING OF MARINE BEDS. ERODED OUT. DIAGRAM SHOWING EUSTATIC MOVEMENT—RISE AND FALL OF SEA LEVEL OF 100 FEET IN 400,000 YEARS. EPEIR *S IN THE MUSEUM-URGE THAT OUR LEARNING SHOWS A FACE TURNED TOWARDS THE THINGS OF DEATH* (ERNST JUNGER). A HEAP BETWEEN FORGETFULNE ECONSTRUCTION OF AN EARLY CARBONIFEROUS (MISSISSIPPIAN) SEA AS IN NORTHWESTERN INDIANA. (THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION). *IN THESE NATURAL ~~AND WERE EVENTUALLY BURIED...~~* (~~MARSHALL KAY AND EDWIN H. COLBERT~~). ~~EFFLUVIUMS OF GEOLOGIC TIME. SLEEPING AMPHIBIANS DREAM NOTHING. A~~ THE CANADIAN APPALACHIAN REGION. UNSTABLE CONTINENTS. SEDIMENTS ON THE EAST SHORE OF THE BAY OF FUNDY AT JOGGINS, NOVA SCOTIA. SOUNDL LIGHT. AQUATINT ENGRAVINGS OF FOSSILS.



F PEBBLES, SAND AND MUD. DEVONSHIRE. ....*APPARENTLY THE WRECK OF SOME GIGANTIC STRUCTURES OF ART...* (POE). THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF FISH. POLISHED PIECES OF SILICA ROCK. FUNGAL THREADS AND RESTING SPORES. SUNSHINE ON THE PETRIFIED DEPOSITS. A LAKE LOST UNDER THE DEBRIS. SIL FOREST EXHIBITED IN A DIORAMA IN THE NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM. EOSPERMATOPERIS IS PROMINENT. MOSS. ANTERIOR MEMORIES. LAYER UPON *INFORMATION GAINED FROM THE COLLECTING AND PREPARING OF FOSSILS IS MADE AVAILABLE THROUGH THE PRINTED PAGE, ASSEMBLAGE SPECIMENS IS E OF MEANINGLESS JUNK* (EDWIN H. COLBERT). A DOUBT WHICH TURNS TO NEGATION, BUT FEIGNED NEGATION. DENDROIDS AND GRAPTOLITES DISAPPEAR. LATES. A MODEL SHOWING HOW A VOLCANO ERUPTS. TREE FERNS DECAY INTO FLORA CEMETERIES. RECONSTRUCTION OF LATE DEVONIAN SEA BOTTOM IN K; DIORAMA (CHICAGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM), A FAINT ILLUSIONISTIC BACKDROP EXTENDS A FALSE UNDERSEA LANDSCAPE. JAWLESS FISHES IN GRA AL TO SPACE. THE BURDEN OF MILLIONS OF YEARS. ONLY THE GREAT HORIZONS OF THE ABSENT WORLD REFLECT IN THE MIND. THE POTHOLES OF A WEAK GES ON THE VOLCANIC PLAINS. FOSSILIFEROUS ROCKS CRUMBLE IN MAINE. QUARTZ IN THE BRAIN. **ACADIAN DISTURBANCE.** THE AGE OF FISH. THE AGE OF CALMS. MILLIONS OF YEARS PAST. A FAMOUS FOSSIL DELTA IN THE CATSKILLS. SPIDERS AND WINGLESS INSECTS ALSO ARRIVED. UPLIFT IN THE MIDST OF T NDNESS. AN UNKEMPT CEMETERY OF ANNULARIA. THE DEVONIAN PERIOD IS A SUCCESSION OF LOSSES. AT OUTSKIRTS OF MUD. SPASMODIC CHRONOLOGY. TION OF PLACODERMS.

Y SKELETONS. SUBMARINE TROUGHS DEEPEN. STONE-LILIES. BRIGHT COLORED POLYPS SPREAD. NEW MOUNTAIN RANGES APPEAR, THEIR NAMES ARE DESCRIPTIONS IN A BOOK. THESE SILURIAN TERRAINS EXIST BY CONCEALMENT. NOTHING BUT BLAND REFERENCES TO A VAGUE SET OF GEOLOGIC ARTH DIPS OUT OF SIGHT, ALL THE ACTIVITY IS LOST UNDER THE LIMPID OCEANS. ALL IS SEDIMENTATION AND AIMLESS EFFORT. THE SILURIAN NIGHT T SEA SCORPIONS INTO TOTAL DARKNESS, WHERE THEY LIVED MAINLY IN ESTUARIES AND COASTAL LAGOONS. SILENCE, DARKNESS, AND DISMAL PERFEC- *COVER THIS* OCEANIC *FEELING IN MYSELF* (FREUD). MASSIVE HEAPS OF SKELETONS CAPABLE OF WITHSTANDING BUFFETING IN ROUGH WATER. CORAL TING GRAPTOLITES. MANY SANK TO THE BOTTOM. SHALE. 400 MILLION YEARS AGO. PERIODIC ALTERNATION OF THE LEVEL OF LAND AND SEA. LESS VOLCAN RDOVICIAN TIMES. UNDERSEA MOUNTAINS, RAVINES AND VALLEYS. CRUSTAL MOVEMENT. TRAVERTINE. SWAMP TREASURE. DRAWINGS OF SINKHOLES AND

Earthwords*

The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations. *Edited by Nancy Holt, with an introduction by Philip Leider, designed by Sol LeWitt. New York: New York University Press, 1979.*

CRAIG OWENS

The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum.
Embedded in the sediment is a text . . .
—"A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects"

Precisely at the center (page 67 of 133) of the first section of this collection of Robert Smithson's writings, we encounter the following words on language, worthy of Borges or Barthes:

> In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge . . . but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures . . . at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations.

This passage, the opening of the essay "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," contains a number of topoi explored in Smithson's art: history, fiction (the fictive explanation of the origin of the Great Salt Lake, from which the form of the *Spiral Jetty* was derived), architecture (Smithson's obsession with construction), and counter-architecture (or *de-architecture*, "entropy made visible," as in the *Partially Buried Woodshed*). Yet here they radiate from a meditation on the labyrinthine, abyssal nature of language, which therefore appears to occupy both

* This word is Smithson's, and it describes the alphabetic chasms at the conclusion of Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*: "His descriptions of chasms and holes seem to verge on proposals for 'earthwords.' The shapes of the chasms themselves become 'verbal roots' that spell out the difference between darkness and light. Poe ends his mental maze with the sentence—'I have graven it within the hills and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock.'" (p. 88.)

Robert Smithson. Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction
(detail). 1972.

the literal and the thematic center of the book.[1]

"A Museum of Language" is, in fact, a description of what occurs when language comes to occupy the center. This text about language is thus also about the notion of the center, specifically, the dialectical relationship between center and circumference to which Smithson's non-sites were also addressed. In an interview, Smithson described the non-site, which catapults the mind out to "the unfocused fringe" where it "loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades," as the center, and the site itself as the fringe or edge. (p. 176.) Moreover, in a footnote appended to his essay on the *Spiral Jetty*, he identified the non-site as a "network of signs . . . discovered as you go along" (p. 115.)—that is, as a *text*. If the non-site is also a text, "A Museum of Language" is also a non-site; it thus propels us outward to the peripheries of Smithson's writings—circumscribed by the 1965 essay on Donald Judd and the essay on Central Park, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," published five months before its author's death in July 1973—and beyond, to his works.

Whenever Smithson invokes the notion of the center, however, it is to describe its loss. The non-site is only a vacant reflection of the site; "A Museum of Language" reveals absence at the center—of Roger Corman's films (his actors reflect the empty center"), Ad Reinhardt's *Jokes*, suburban sprawl, and finally the dots on Buckminster Fuller's *World Energy Map*, centers signifying "a concentration or dilation of an infinite expanse of spheres of energy":

> Yet the dot evades our capacity to find its center. Where is the central point, axis, pole, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure, or decided goal? The mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo. (p. 78.)

Paradoxically, the concept of a center can occur only within language; at the same time, language, which proposes the potentially infinite substitution of elements *at the center*, destroys all possibility of securely locating any center whatsoever. Thus what is described by Smithson in this text is that dizzying experience of *de*centering which occurred "at the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse."[2] If this collection of Smithson's writings testifies to anything in our present culture, it is to the eruption of language into the field of the visual arts, and the subsequent decentering of that field—a decentering in which these texts themselves play a crucial part.

All of Smithson's work effected a radical dislocation of art, which was removed from its locus in the museum and gallery to remote, inaccessible

1. The two sections which follow, the first devoted to interviews, the second to previously unpublished texts, are essentially appendices to the first, devoted to Smithson's published texts, which therefore constitute the book per se.
2. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 280.

locations. This displacement is not only geographic, but economic as well: the "value" of the work of art is no longer determined by its status as a portable commodity; it is now the work itself which bestows value (upon the depreciated site where it is installed). Physical decentering is also one theme of his work: the spectator's experience of the *Spiral Jetty*, for example, is "one of continually being decentered within the great expanse of lake and sky."[3] Yet "A Museum of Language" describes what is perhaps the most significant displacement of all—that of art from the visual to the verbal field. For this is in fact a collocation of artists who write: Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt. . . .

That all of these artists are minimalists is a point to which we must return, since the proliferation of artists' writings in the 1960s is clearly to be connected with minimalism. For the moment, however, I want to concentrate on the fact that all are sculptors (despite the extremely incisive argument which questions the degree to which their production can be assimilated to the rational category "sculpture").[4] Painting and writing share a common origin in inscription; sculpture, however, involved as it is in the experience of three-dimensional space, could not seem more distant from language—linear, two-dimensional, located at the intersection of two axes (of selection and combination) which describe a plane. Yet Smithson regards language as something solid and obdurate, a three-dimensional projection: "My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas." (p. 104.) Aping Pascal, he writes: "*Language becomes an infinite museum whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere.*" (p. 67.) Not only does this metaphrase spatialize language by substituting it for a geometric *solid*, Pascal's infinite sphere; it also mirrors the eclipse of Nature by language which lies at the root of our modernity (Pascal: "*Nature* is an infinite sphere . . .").[5]

Smithson's perception of language as substantial characterizes his manipulation of its signifiers—what some might call his literary "style." He frequently employs language as purely visual material, as in a pencil drawing of, literally, *A Heap of Language*, in which synonyms for *language* are piled up like rubble, thus destroying their signifying function. In this collection of writings, *A Heap of Language* is used to illustrate a press release for the 1967 exhibition *Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read*, a title which suggests the reciprocal translatability of verbal and visual phenomena. In the text "Strata," Smithson's "geophotographic fiction," blocks of text are presented as geological deposits on the page; lines of print read as stratified layers of verbal sediment. At the same time, the accompanying photographs—of fossils—disintegrate, due to overenlargement, into the photomechanical "language" of the half-tone screen.

3. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York, Viking, 1977, pp. 280–2.
4. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, 8 (Spring, 1979), pp. 31–44.
5. "The threshold between Classicism and modernity . . . had been definitively crossed when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things. Once detached from representation, language has existed, right up to our own day, only in a dispersed way." (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Vintage, 1973, p. 304).

Smithson's words are thus offered to vision, and not to audition; it is this attention to the visual aspects of language that identifies him as a *writer*, and reveals the reciprocity of his visual and verbal practices: "I thought of writing more as material to sort of put together than as a kind of analytic searchlight. . . . I would construct my articles in the way I would construct a work." (p. 154.) Here Smithson may appear to echo the poet, who is also engaged in the manipulation of purely linguistic *substance*. Yet for Smithson poetry represented the desire for totalization, the idealization of language; to it he opposed an allegorical "language of fragmentation" in which words occur as graphic, as opposed to sonorous and therefore poetic, facts:

> The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. (p. 87.)

What the fissures in Smithson's "earthwords" disclose is the disjunctive, atomizing principle which, according to Walter Benjamin, defines allegory. In allegory, language is broken up, dispersed, in order to acquire a new and intensified meaning in its fragmentation. But if allegory "opens up a gulf in the solid massif of verbal meaning and forces the gaze into the depths of language,"[6] it is because it is in essence a form of *writing*; allegory "at one stroke . . . transforms things and works into stirring writing" and, conversely, writing into an object: in allegory, "the written word also tends toward the visual."[7] For Smithson the appeal of the allegorical lay not only in this reciprocity of verbal and visual, but also in the fact that it offers an antidote to the totalizing impulses of art: "It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script."[8]

Smithson's admission that both his articles and his works were the result of a process of accumulation of material reveals the fundamentally allegorical nature of his aesthetic activity, whether visual or verbal. For it is the allegorist who "pile[s] up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal." The allegorical work is therefore "the calculable result of the process of accumulation. . . . The writer must not conceal the fact that his activity is one of arranging."[9] But Smithson's view of language as material also discloses the absolute congruence, and hence interchangeability, of writing and sculpture.

6. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London, NLB, 1977, p. 208.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

This is the recurrent theme of "A Museum of Language." Carl Andre, for example, is shown to be involved in a similarly allegorical pulverization of language which parallels his sculptural practice: "Thoughts are crushed into a rubble of syncopated syllables. Reason becomes a powder of vowels and consonants. His words hold together without any sonority. . . . The apparent sameness and toneless ordering of Andre's poems conceals a radical disorientation of grammar." (p. 67.) Not only does the observation that the poet's "words hold together without any sonority" align his activity with writing and not speech; it also reflects the sculptor's refusal to affix to one another in any way the separate integers of his work. Likewise, the lack of inflection in the poems mirrors the paratactic nature of the work, and the disorientation of the grammar of *sculpture* which results. In demonstrating that Andre deploys linguistic signifiers as he would the cinderblocks, logs, or metal plates of his sculpture, writing and work are made to confront each other like parallel mirrors mounted in series, opening onto an infinite play of reflections in which the distinctions between writing and sculpture are, in effect, dissolved.

Smithson's description of Andre's writings—or Flavin's ("a pure spectacle of attenuation"), Judd's ("a brooding depth of gleaming surfaces—placid but dismal"), for that matter, his own ("material to sort of put together")—indicates that their texts are not illuminations, explanations, or even extensions of their work, or vice versa. Their writings do not stand, despite all assertions to the contrary, in a complementary relation to their work, mutually supplying each other's lack. It is frequently maintained that it was the highly elliptical nature of minimalist production that propelled these artists toward language, which was either incorporated into the work itself, or deployed in explanation of it, in response to an absence at its heart.[10] According to this argument, Yvonne Rainer, for example, would have both written about and introduced spoken and written texts into her performances because the pared-down dance vocabulary she developed in the 1960s severely limited the possibility of expression, communication. Language, and writing in particular, is thus assigned a compensatory role; it restores to the work everything that has been eliminated from it. The artist/writer's desire would thus be the desire for content, which the reductivist tendencies of sixties production appear to preclude.

But as Rainer herself wrote, in the Introduction to her *Work 1961–73*, "Let it be said simply 'She usually makes performances and has also made a book.'"

The argument which reduces these artists' writings to a secondary, derived position vis a vis their work might be diagnosed as one symptom of a modernist aesthetic, specifically, of its desire to confine the artist within the sharply delineated boundaries of a single aesthetic discipline. This desire is sanctioned by an unquestioned belief in the absolute *difference* of verbal and visual art. The

10. In Smithson's case, this absence might be construed as the physical inaccessibility of most of the work.

genealogy of modernist theory, especially of its assumption that each of the arts occupies a specific area of competence, may be traced to that moment in the eighteenth century when it appeared necessary, for complex, but always ethical, reasons, to distinguish poetry from painting and sculpture. For strategic reasons that distinction was made according to time: in Germany, Lessing, and in France, Diderot, located poetry and all the discursive arts along a dynamic axis of temporal succession, and painting and sculpture along a static axis of spatial simultaneity. Consequently the visual arts were denied access to discourse, which unfolds in time, except in the form of a literary text which, both exterior and anterior to the work, might supplement it.

Although such distinctions were made in the name of establishing the relative merits of each of the arts, and while there may have been differences concerning the superiority of either the visual or the verbal arts, the aesthetic hierarchies which followed were without exception based upon this verbal/visual polarity, and thus upon an ultimately *linguistic* criterion. It is not difficult to recognize in the temporal axis which defines poetry and in the spatial axis which defines painting and sculpture what Roman Jakobson would later distinguish as the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language. However, the linguistic origin of the principle which made distinctions between the arts, and thus modernism, possible *had to* remain unconscious; were the subordination of all the arts to language exposed, the visual arts would effectively be denied a proper territory, and the thesis that the arts are rigorously isolable and definable would be challenged.[11] Thus repressed, language became an invisible reserve which constituted, in the visual arts at least, modernism's unconscious. And the eruption of language into the aesthetic field in the 1960s would occur with all the force of the return of the repressed.

When late in that decade it was recognized that a break with modernist practice had taken place, the late modernist critic Michael Fried diagnosed it as the invasion of the static art of sculpture by duration, temporality. What his post-mortem actually discloses, however, is the emergence of *discourse*: after all, the pretext for Fried's violent reaction against minimalism was an artist's *text* (Tony Smith's infamous narrative of a ride on an unfinished extension to the New Jersey Turnpike.) What I am proposing, then, is that the eruption of language into the aesthetic field—an eruption signalled by, but by no means limited to, the writings of Smithson, Morris, Andre, Judd, Flavin, Rainer, LeWitt—is coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism. This "catastrophe" disrupted the stability of a modernist partitioning of the aesthetic field into discrete areas of specific competence; one of its most deeply felt shocks disloged literary activity from the enclaves into which it had settled only to stagnate—poetry, the novel, the essay . . .—and dispersed it across the entire spectrum of

11. However, the almost universal ranking of poetry as the supreme art reveals, albeit in a displaced way, the priority of language in every hierarchy of the arts.

aesthetic activity. Visual artists thus acquired a mine of new material, and the responses ranged from Morris's language *File* and the linguistic conceits of Art & Language and conceptual art, to the autobiographical perambulations of narrative or "story" art and the fundamentally linguistic concerns of performance art, such as that of Laurie Anderson (also an artist who writes). And it is within this massive return of language that Smithson's writings—and his art—are to be located.

It might be objected that artists, and modernist artists in particular, have always written, produced texts which explain their work, expound theoretical positions, engage in discussion or debate with other artists. And that, especially within modernist quarantine, these texts are indeed secondary, appended to and dependent upon visual production. The texts of modernist artists do read more often than not as responses to what had been eliminated from visual practice. They testify to a mounting sense of loss; as painting became more "pure," the desire for a supplement increased. For the modernist artist, however, writing was not an alternative medium for aesthetic practice; through it, work might be explained, but never produced. So that even if we maintain that these complements to work are essential to its understanding, Malevich's *The Non-Objective World*, Mondrian's *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. . . , remain statements and not *texts*: "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."[12]

Smithson's writings, on the other hand, are indeed texts, dazzling orchestrations of multiple, overlapping voices; as such, they participate in that displacement of literature by the activity of *writing* which also occurs with Barthes, Derrida, Lacan. . . . This is not, however, the only value of these texts, for they also reveal the degree to which strategies which must be described as *textual* have infiltrated every aspect of contemporary aesthetic production. In his 1973 review of a Frederick Law Olmsted exhibition at the Whitney Museum, Smithson observes that "the maps, photographs, and documents in catalogue form . . . are as much a part of Olmsted's art as the art itself" (p. 119.)—which might be applied with equal validity to Smithson's art. I have already mentioned that the non-site, a "course of hazards, a double path made up of signs, photographs, and maps," is a text. Not only does this complex web of heterogenous information—part visual, part verbal—challenge the purity and self-sufficiency of the work of art; it also upsets the hierarchy between object and representation: "Is the Site a reflection of the Nonsite (mirror), or is it the other way around?"

Significantly, these remarks, which reveal the textuality of the non-site, occur in a footnote appended to Smithson's text on the *Spiral Jetty*, itself a graphic

12. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 146.

document inscribed on the surface of the Great Salt Lake. Like the non-site, the *Jetty* is not a discrete work, but one link in a chain of signifiers which summon and refer to one another in a dizzying spiral. For where else does the *Jetty* exist except in the film which Smithson made, the narrative he published, the photographs which accompany that narrative, and the various maps, diagrams, drawings, etc., he made about it?[13] Unintelligible at close range, the spiral form of the *Jetty* is completely intuitable only from a distance, and that distance is most often achieved by imposing a *text* between viewer and work. Smithson thus accomplishes a radical dislocation of the notion of point-of-view, which is no longer a function of physical position, but of the *mode* (photographic, cinematic, textual) of confrontation with the work of art. The work is henceforth defined by the position it occupies in a potentially infinite chain extending from the site itself and the associations it provokes—"in the end I would let the site determine what I would build" (p. 111.)—to quotations of the work in other works.

That Smithson thus transformed the visual field into a textual one represents one of the most significant aesthetic "events" of our decade; and the publication of his collected writings constitutes a challenge to criticism to come to terms with the textual nature of his work, and of postmodernism in general. That challenge is formidable, since it requires the jettisoning of most of our received notions about art; it can only be acknowledged here. I would however in conclusion like to sketch briefly the critical significance of one issue raised by Smithson's texts, and his work, and that is the allegorical impulse which shapes both. Smithson was not unaware of this impulse. His allegorical reading of the suburban New Jersey industrial landscape begins with a visual epigraph, Samuel Morse's *Allegorical Landscape.* In a previously unpublished text, "From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman, or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema," Smithson acknowledged this impulse, as well as its heretical nature:

> The very word allegory is enough to strike terror into the hearts of the expressive artist; there is perhaps no device as exhausted as allegory. But strangely enough Alan Kaprow has shown interest in that worn-out device. Jorge Luis Borges begins his *From Allegories to Novels* by saying, "For all of us, the allegory is an aesthetic error." (p. 214.)

It was, however, from its exhaustion, its "erroneous" status, that allegory, for Smithson, derived its aesthetic potential.

I have already described the way in which allegory motivates Smithson's perception of language as material. But it is also manifest in his involvement with history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay—his fascination with entropy and entropic systems; his attraction to both prehistoric and postindustrial ruins; his recognition of the forces which erode and eventually reclaim the work of

13. See my discussion of Smithson's photographic "documentation" of his work in "Photography *en abyme*," *October*, 5 (Summer, 1978), pp. 86–8.

art, for which the rust on Smith's and Caro's steel sculpture and the disorder of Central Park were taken as emblems. As Benjamin writes:

> The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history . . . is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. . . . In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting.[14]

Thus Smithson's desire to lodge his work in a specific site, to make it appear to be rooted there, is an allegorical desire, the desire for allegory. All of Smithson's work acknowledges as part of the work the natural forces through which it is reabsorbed into its setting. When the Great Salt Lake rose and submerged the *Spiral Jetty*, the salt deposits left on its surface became yet another link in the chain of crystalline forms which makes possible the description of the *Jetty* as a text.

This desire to embed a work in its context characterizes postmodernism in general and is not only a response to the "homelessness" of modernist sculpture;[15] it also represents and explains the strategic importance of allegory at this moment in history. For in the arts allegory has always been acknowledged as "' a crossing of the borders of a different mode,' an advance of the plastic arts into the territory of the rhetorical arts. . . . Its intrusion could therefore be described as a harsh disturbance of the peace and a disruption of law and order in the arts."[16] Thus allegory marks the dissolution of the boundaries between the arts; by proposing the interchangeability of the verbal and the visual, the integrity of both is compromised. This is why it is an aesthetic "error," but also why it appears, at present, as the organizing principle of advanced aesthetic practice.

This is not simply a claim that may be made for allegory, but a structural fact. Allegory is traditionally defined, following Quintillian, as a symbol introduced in continuous series, the temporal extension of metaphor. It is useful to recast this definition in structuralist terms, for then allegory is revealed as the projection of the metaphoric, or static, axis of language onto its metonymic, or temporal, dimension. Although Roman Jakobson defined this projection of metaphor (the synchronic system of differences that defines the structure of a language) onto metonymy (the activity of combination in which structure is actualized in time), as the poetic principle,

> . . . and while Jakobson goes on to associate metaphor with verse and romanticism, as opposed to metonymy which he identifies with realism

14. Benjamin, pp. 177, 8.
15. Krauss, "Expanded Field," pp. 33–6.
16. Carl Horst, *Barockprobleme*, quoted in Benjamin, p. 177.

> and prose, allegory would cut across and subtend all such stylistic categorizations, being equally possible in either verse or prose, and quite capable of transforming the most objective naturalism into the most subjective expressionism, or the most determined realism into the most surrealistically ornamental baroque.[17]

Yet this capacity to "cut across and subtend," all aesthetic categories is due to the fact that allegory implicates the two poles, spatial and temporal, according to which the arts were distinguished at the advent of modernism.

Following the logic of allegory, then, Smithson's work stands as an investigation into what occurs when structure is actualized in time: the *Spiral Jetty*, for example, takes a particular mythic structure—the fiction of an enormous whirlpool at the Lake's center—and projects it as a temporal experience. This aspect of his practice coincides with the techniques of poststructuralist theory—Derrida's deconstructive reading, for example, or Foucault's archaeology. This correspondence is not simply the result of contemporaneity, for Smithson's activity was a thoroughly *critical* one, engaged in the deconstruction of an inherited metaphysical tradition, which he perceived as more or less ruined. And the success of his enterprise may be measured by the critical rigor with which his relation to inherited concepts is thought in these texts. Yet the failure of contemporary theory, which too often operates in a vacuum, to see its own realization in Smithson's practice is, and remains, a scandal.

17. Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," unpublished manuscript. Throughout, I am extremely indebted to Fineman's psychoanalytic reading of allegory.

A Letter from Yvonne Rainer

To the Editors:

I find it necessary to correct certain impressions that may have resulted from the advance publication of segments of my filmscript, "Journeys From Berlin/1971," in *October* 9. As of the date of this writing, Sept. 10, 1979, the film has been shot and is being edited. When I submitted the script to *October*, sometime in early spring, although the main body of the film had not yet been shot, I had reason to believe that there would be no further revisions of any importance in the text. How wrong I was can be measured by comparing the opening titles as published with the latest, and hopefully final, revision:

> Let's begin somewhere:
>
> In 1950 a draft for a political criminal law in the Federal Republic of Germany contained the following sentence: "The danger to the community comes from organized people."

In the intervening months I underwent a quite radical shift in my sense of priorities with regard to how Germany would be "presented" in this film. Previously I thought I had a plentitude of reasons for keeping my distance from the "German question." After all, the film was not going to be an analysis of why political violence occurred in West Germany when it did, and after all my work is more or less autobiographical, isn't it, and Germany is not my country, and besides, most of the information available to me in English was hearsay or, worse yet, in the style of *Time* magazine condescension. Well, yes, I did have direct contact with a few victims of police harassment and surveillance tactics when I was living in Berlin; in fact the woman whose apartment I rented had fallen under the *Berufsverbot* and was forced to find work outside of the country in order to continue her profession; but, yes, I had mentioned some of these things in the film. Hedging aside, I felt a caution. Insofar as the reasons for the emergence of the Baader-Meinhof people and the RAF (Red Army Faction) did not seem central to the concerns of the film, I could conveniently evade entanglement with what might after all be "nothing more" than a prolonged McCarthy era. And, for the same reason, I didn't see how the reality of the situation could be accurately conveyed in the space I was willing to allot to it in this particular work. And, of course, the old dichotobears of form and content, art and politics were cooking—and continue to cook—my porridge just like that of a lot of other people these days, in many cases compounding the problem of political analysis.

But then a book came into my hands that changed all that: Sebastian Cobler's *Law, Order, and Politics in West Germany* (Penguin, 1978). This book is a meticulous, obsessed, painstaking documentation—by way of endless quoting of constitutional amendments and public utterances by police and government officials—of the augmentation of police and military powers, the perfecting of surveillance techniques, the growing influence of police "experts" on criminal legislation, and the consequent constriction and elimination of civil rights. It describes a situation in which social conflicts have since the end of World War II

been consistently "translated into the practical logic of permanent, latent threats and dangers" to the State. So what else is new? Two things were new to me: One was the indisputable proof of the *extent* to which both a climate of repression and outright anti-libertarian legislation predated the events of, and following, 1968, a relationship the liberal press in America has always concealed by playing up the Baader-Meinhof violence and *subsequent* moves by the German government.

And the other new thing was the language, the language in which the curtailments of civil liberty have been recommended and brought into law in West Germany. It is indeed a language of technocrats, as Hans Magnus Enzensberger points out in his revealing piece on Germany in the same issue of *October*, for the police are a new breed of academically trained "scientist." But even more horrifying to me is the combination of a technocratic "detachment" with an Orwellian double-bind religiosity. The term *State* appears everywhere. The State has supplanted God. The State is absolute, unchanging, sacrosanct, apart. The evidence for this impression is overwhelming, and in its light one can readily unmask the lie contained in the vicious tautology "The danger to the community comes from organized people." Decoded, it says, "The danger to the State comes from the community, and the community is, by definition, people under suspicion."

One final example from my revision of "Journeys From Berlin/1971" is in order. The film closes with crawling titles:

> The aim of all enemies of the State is the deliberate creation of an opposing power over and against this State, or the denial of *the State's monopoly of force.*
>
> —H. Herold, head of the Federal Criminal Investigation Bureau (BKA), 1975 (italics added)

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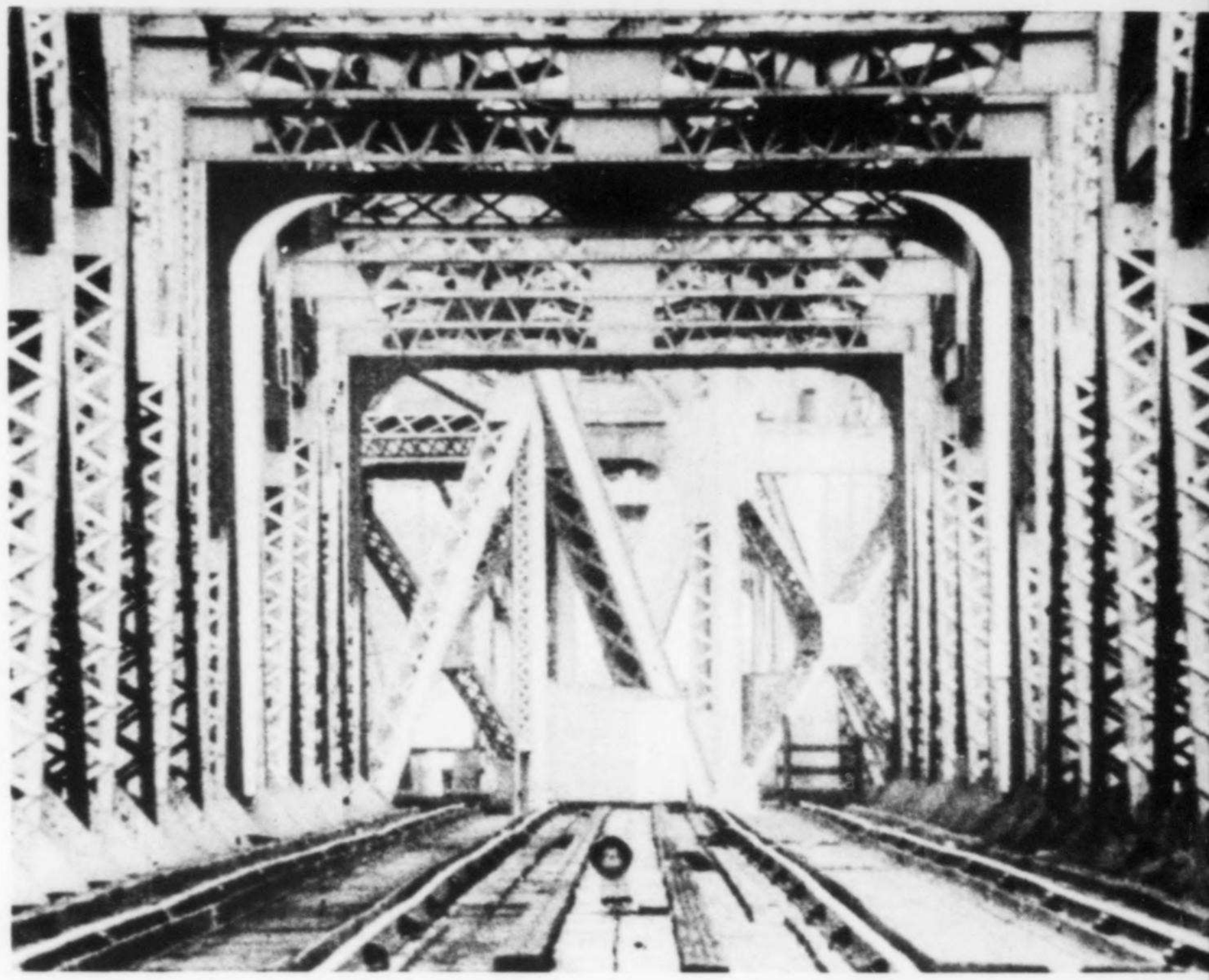

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