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MICHAEL ASHER AND THE CONCLUSION OF  
MODERNIST SCULPTURE

Concrete material reality and social meaning should always be the primary criteria of specification. Before all else, we see in ideological objects various connections between meaning and its material body. This connection may be more or less deep and organic. For instance, the meaning of art is completely inseparable from all the details of its material body. The work of art is meaningful in its entirety. The very constructing of the body-sign has a primary importance in this instance. Technically auxiliary and therefore replaceable elements are held to a minimum. The individual reality of the object, with all the uniqueness of its features, acquires artistic meaning here.

—*M. M. Bakhtin*, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*<sup>1</sup>

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## I

Sculpture traditionally differed from painting through its seemingly unquestionable three-dimensionality, its physical and physiological corporeality, defined as a literal “embodiment” of subjective plastic concerns. It was determined as much by the historically specific aesthetic conditions of the sculptural discourse as by the spectators’ (often the patron’s) ability to recognize their own corporeal being in the world in the sculptural embodiment. Or, as Rosalind Krauss recently stated:

The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning and the use of that place.<sup>2</sup>

As we will be dealing in the following essay with contemporary sculptural works in general, and in particular with two works by Michael Asher conceived in 1979 for two museums in Chicago, it seems appropriate to consider these works—while perhaps not immediately recognizable as sculpture—in Krauss’s terms, as they do in fact “sit in a particular place and speak in a symbolical tongue about the meaning and the use of that place.” The complexity of these works necessitates, however, closer attention to the material and procedural transformations that have taken place in the evolution of contemporary sculpture, and we will have to recapitulate some of the crucial paradigmatic changes that define sculpture in the history of Modernism.

Looking at the specific features of Modernist sculpture (that is, its materials and its procedures of production) as well as at its changing reception, one could almost come to the conclusion that sculpture, because of its more concrete “nature” than that of any other art practice, seems to lend itself to a particularly obdurate aesthetic: how can one—under the conditions of a highly industrialized society—continue atavistic modes of production (modeling, carving, casting, cutting, welding) and apply them convincingly to semi-precious or so-called

“natural” materials (bronze, marble, wood)? Only twenty years ago (if not more recently) the works of Alberto Giacometti and Henry Moore could seem the epitome of the sculptural, when in fact their archaic iconography and plastic structures revealed their authors’ (and the public’s) conviction that sculpture had not lost any of its historic credibility in the first decade of this century. Even a practicing sculptor and sculpture historian—commenting on Rodin—seems to acknowledge the specific dilemma of his own discipline, without, however, coming to an adequate understanding of its historical determination:

Thus, Rodin’s mature sculpture follows the effective emergence of modern painting, moreover, in comparison with the directness, simplicity, and objectivity of the new painting; the statement in sculpture seems tentative, half-formed and weighed down by a burden of Romantic and dramatic subject matter of moral and public “function”, which the Impressionists had been able to jettison from the first. The reasons for the late arrival and confused intentions of the new sculpture lie partly in the physical character of sculpture and painting, partly in their relative development in Europe since the Renaissance, partly in the specific conditions of patronage and public taste which obtained in nineteenth century France. . . . Sculpture became an art in which the taste and ambition of the public patron became the determining factor, and virtuosity and craftsmanship the criteria of artistic achievement.<sup>3</sup>

A more rigorous reading of the history of modernist sculpture would have to acknowledge that most of its seemingly stable paradigms, which had been valid to some extent until the late nineteenth century (i.e., the representation of individual, anthropomorphic whole or fragmented bodies in space, modeled of inert but lasting, if not eternal, matter and imbued with illusionary moments of spurious life), had been—in analogy to the abolition of representation in painting—definitely abolished by 1913. Vladimir Tatlin’s corner-counter reliefs and subsequent *Monument to the Third International* and Marcel Duchamp’s

readymades emerged logically from Synthetic Cubism, and they have constituted since then the extremes of sculptural reflection in Modernism: they recognize the dialectics of sculpture from now on to be operative either as a model for the artistic production of reality (e.g., sculpture's transition toward architecture and design) or as an epistemic model that investigates the status and conditions of aesthetic object production (the readymade, the allegory, the fetish). Or, more precisely: architecture on the one hand and the epistemological model on the other are the two poles toward which relevant sculpture since 1913 has developed, each implying the eventual dissolution of "sculpture" as a separate discourse and category.

The precarious condition of sculpture, if not the decline of the discipline, had been sensed as early as 1903 by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in his study of Rodin, conveyed, not surprisingly, in a tone of lament since the withering of the category was indicative for him of the vanishing privileges and esoteric experiences the autonomous art object seemed to have guaranteed:

Sculpture was a separate thing, as was the easel picture, but it did not require a wall like the picture. It did not even need a roof. It was an object that could exist for itself alone, and it was well to give it entirely the character of a complete thing about which one could walk, and which one could look at from all sides. And yet it had to distinguish itself somehow from other things, the ordinary things which everyone could touch.<sup>4</sup>

II

Sculptural materials, even before their iconic, formal, or procedural definitions, have to be considered as part of a symbolic system that is itself highly determined. For example, the "nobility" of bronze and marble in the late nineteenth-century work of Rodin was at least in part a result of his dependence on the class of bourgeois amateurs. Symbolic determinations of sculptural materials result not only from the author's professional idiosyncrasies—whether his or her individual psychosexual organization tends more toward modeling soft and palpable masses

(like clay) or whether he or she feels like cutting stone or carving wood—but also from the audience's expectations: whether the specific materials and the production procedures allow for a projective identification and seem in fact to embody the viewer's physical being in the world. In contradistinction to Rodin, the truly radical modernity of Medardo Rosso's sculptures resisted this incorporation into bronze in most of his works, and the sculptural production process itself was arrested and fragmented at the level of the wax and plaster model: materials that by their very nature quite explicitly reject any heroic or sublime connotations. Rosso often stated that he wanted the materials of his sculptures to pass unnoticed because they were meant to blend with the unity of the world that surrounded them. The actual fragmentation of the sculptural production procedure—whether deliberate or circumstantial—corresponds to Rosso's fragmentation of the sculptural representation itself. His reluctance to fulfill all the steps required by the traditional process of sculptural production, from modeling to casting, indicates an essential critical shift of attitude.

It reveals the increasing doubts about artisanally produced sculpture, namely that the completion of an organic cycle of production, conceived and executed by one individual, had become obsolete. The fragmentation of the production process coincided with the phenomenon of a heterogeneous materiality: prefabricated elements, alien to the craft of sculpture up to the nineteenth century, were introduced—or intruded—into the conventionally unified sculptural body. The only sculpture by Edgar Degas that was publicly exhibited during his lifetime and cast in bronze posthumously, his *Little Dancer of Fourteen* (1881), was the first to generate this modernist scandal. When it was exhibited at the Exposition des Indépendants in 1881, Joris Huysmans hailed it as follows:

At once refined and barbaric with her industrious costume and her colored flesh which palpates furrowed by the work of the muscles, this statue is the only truly modern attempt I know in sculpture.<sup>5</sup>

Both phenomena—the fragmentation of representation and the production process and the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials—would soon

emerge as the dominant traits of modernist sculpture. If they appeared exceptional at first, as in the case of Degas, it would soon thereafter, in Cubism and Futurism, become the rule to combine individually crafted sculptural structures with mechanically produced objects and fragments. Ultimately, in Duchamp's readymades, the aesthetic construct would be displaced altogether by the mechanically produced object.

These phenomena receive a meticulous description and precise historical analysis in Georg Lukács's attempt to define the conditions of reification in 1928:

Rationalization in the sense of being able to predict with ever greater precision all the results to be achieved is only to be acquired by the exact breakdown of every complex into its elements and by the study of the special laws governing production. Accordingly, it must declare war on the organic manufacture of whole products based on the traditional amalgam of empirical experiences of work. . . . The finished article ceases to be the object of the work process. . . . This destroys the organic necessity with which inter-related special operations are unified in the end product. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process: on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existent and self-sufficient; it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labour is progressively rationalized and mechanized, his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative. The contemplative stance adopted toward a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e., a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world: It re-

duces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space.<sup>6</sup>

## III

The intrusion of alien materials in Degas's sculpture established a very precarious balance between the conditions of subjective aesthetic creation and those of the reality of production pointed out by Lukács. Ever since, and most definitely since Duchamp's readymades, these historical conditions have been forced to their most logical extreme. Duchamp's work features most prominently the character of spatialized time in the object that Lukács talks about, since the arrest of temporal flux and passive contemplation are the modes in which the melancholic perceives the world and his increasing estrangement from it. Thus, paradoxically, a more traditional reading of Duchamp as the artist who continued the nineteenth-century tradition of the dandy, refusing participation in the collective production process, inverting his role as procreator into that of the flâneur who simply designates found objects as art, converges precisely with Lukács's observation. Inevitably, at this point, Walter Benjamin's observation on the interaction between allegory, commodity, and sculptural form has to be cited: "The devaluation of the world of objects by the allegory is exceeded within the world of objects itself by the commodity."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, from the first decade of the twentieth century onward, this precarious ambiguity between the apparent autonomy of sculptural constructs and the socially determined conditions of material production—between aesthetic object and symbolic space on the one hand and real object and actual space on the other—has determined the practice of sculpture. Aesthetic production, however, does not always evolve logically according to its own inherent laws, any more than it develops purely in response to the changing conditions of material production. Quite to the contrary, one of the essential features of aesthetic production—at least in twentieth-century art history—seems to have been a reiterated opposition to precisely an all too easy acceptance of those determinations. But

since the contradictions originating in the organization of the means of production cannot be resolved by aesthetic means alone, every generation producing within an obsolete paradigm generates increasingly mythical structures.

The history of post-World War II sculpture is particularly rich with these mythical forms, and only one should be briefly discussed as an example and as a link to the present: the type of postwar construction sculpture in which Constructivism's and Dada's attitudes toward the mass-produced object seem to coalesce, as, for example, in the works of David Smith and Anthony Caro.<sup>8</sup> If anything, the welding of metal and junk sculpture in their work seems to resolve in a most comforting manner the blatant contradiction between individual aesthetic and collective social production. This contradiction is, however, mythified by the work's apparent synthesis of the gesture of construction and the melancholic gesture of denial. In the same way, these artists, as public figures and biographical myths, combine the image of the proletarian producer, taming the elements and extracting wealth from the furnace, with that of the melancholic stroller in the junkyards of capitalist technology—an image that has persisted into the present in figures like Carl Andre and Richard Serra. The necessarily fetishistic character of this work had already been adequately diagnosed in the 1920s by the Russian productivist artist and theoretician Boris Arvatov, who wrote in his essay "Art and Production":

While the totality of capitalist technology is based on the highest and latest achievements and represents a technique of mass production (industry, radio, transport, newspaper, scientific laboratory), bourgeois art in principle has remained on the level of individual crafts and therefore has been isolated increasingly from the collective social practice of mankind, has entered the realm of pure aesthetics. The lonely master—that is the only type in capitalist society, the type of specialist of "pure art" who can work outside of an immediately utilitarian practice, because it is based on machine technology. From here originates the total illusion of art's purposelessness and autonomy, from here art's bourgeois fetishistic nature.<sup>9</sup>

Scrap metal assemblage sculpture and the technique of welding concretize the historic dilemma between obsolete means of artistic production and their fetishization, on the one hand, and the actually existing means of the social production of representation on the other. Their failure to solve this dilemma, inasmuch as it becomes evident in the work itself, is then the works' historic and aesthetic authenticity. Julio González, who had been trained as a stonemason, learned welding in the French Renault car factories during World War I and integrated the experience he acquired from alienated labor into his artistic production. Or, from a different point of view, one could argue that he adapted his aesthetic procedures to his experience of collective production. This "modernization" of the sculptural discourse was instantly successful because it seemed to respond to a desire within artist and public alike to achieve at least a symbolic reconciliation of sculpture's increasingly apparent contradictions. Picasso adopted this technique in the early 1920s and a new sculptural category and production technique was born. When David Smith "discovered" González's and Picasso's work through the mediation of the art magazine *Cahiers d'art* and imported the technique to North America, a further crucial step in the mythification of a sculptural procedure had taken place, one that had originated in Cubism's conceptualization and representation of spatial relations. To enhance the mythification, Smith, more than González, propounded the image of the proletarian producer by linking it to the mythical Hephaistos/Vulcan figure.<sup>10</sup>

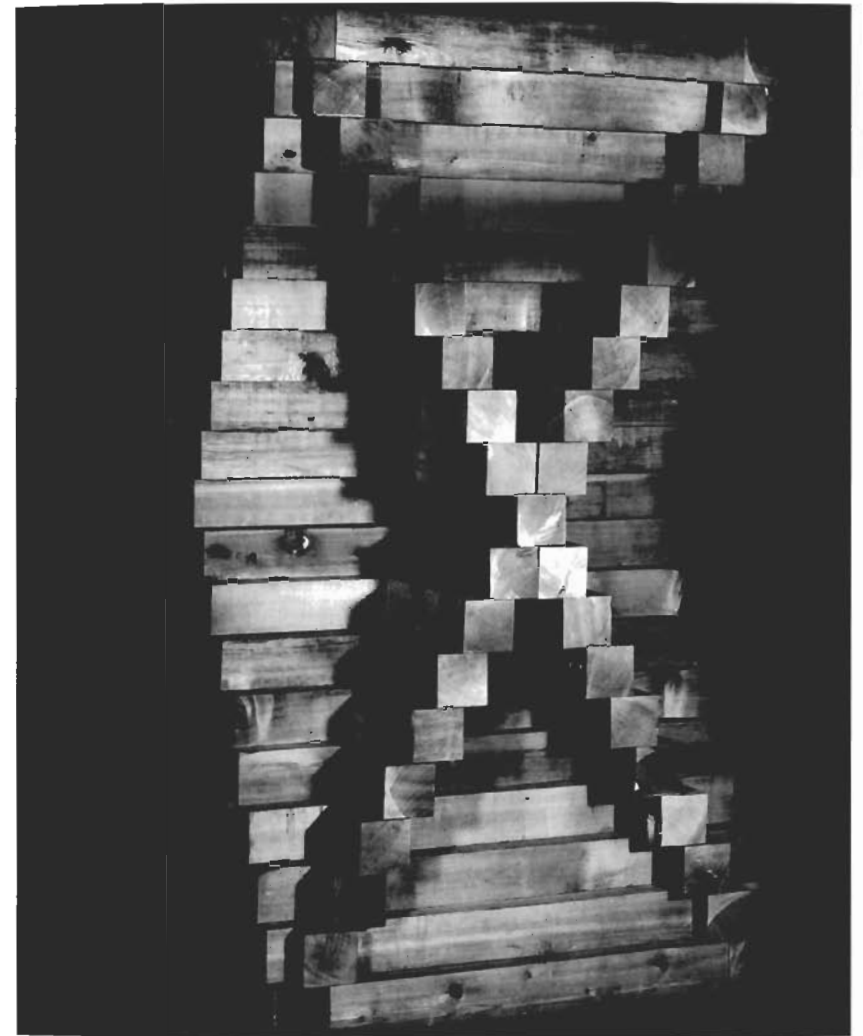
The next phase of mythification occurred when this modernized sculptural production procedure was "rediscovered" and "reimported" to Europe by Anthony Caro, after his encounter with David Smith in 1960, during his first visit to North America. Caro's overnight shift from figurative bronze casting to nonrepresentational welded assemblage sculptures made of scrap metal, and his subsequent step of investigating the decorative potential of gaudily painted arrangements of metalwork samples, accomplished historically the aesthetic falsification and "cultural" inversion of every single aspect that Constructivist sculpture had originally intended and achieved within its limited resources and political possibilities.

## IV

It took artists of the Minimal and post-Minimal generation like Andre and Serra in the mid to late 1960s to literally “decompose” these mythified construction techniques and production procedures. The aesthetic shock and subsequent relief that their work might have caused originally resulted precisely from the deconstruction of that type of sculpture, their persistent use of singularized, particular elements, their clarification of the constituent forces within the sculptural construct, and the transparency of the production procedures evident in their work. It is symptomatic in this context that Serra referred to the technique of welding as “stitching” during the 1960s and that he nevertheless readopted that very same technique in his later work in the 1970s, when he himself returned to the mythification of the constructivist legacy in order to pursue a problematic project of seemingly public monumental sculpture.

Radical sculpture, ever since the first decade of this century, has not only increased the fragmentation of sculptural representation and, as we have argued, the fragmentation of the production process itself as well, but it has also intensified the reflection on the constituent factors determining this process. Internally, the material elements assembling the sculptural phenomenon have become increasingly isolated, singularized, and specific; and the procedures of its fabrication, as well as the physical laws and forces (weight, mass, gravity, specific material properties) generating its appearance in space, have become more and more the center of sculptural investigation. Externally, as a result of the discovery of phenomenological thought, an analysis of the relations that connect the sculptural object with the perceptual acts of the subject was increasingly incorporated into the very conception of sculpture. A systematic reflection of the interdependence of the construct and its surrounding spatial/architectural container became again an integral part of sculpture’s project in the 1960s.

Despite numerous and reiterated affirmations by American critics and historians that Minimal and post-Minimal works are not to be seen in the historical context of Modernist sculpture, the contrary holds true: too frequent are the references by the artists themselves, both implicit and explicitly expressed in works and

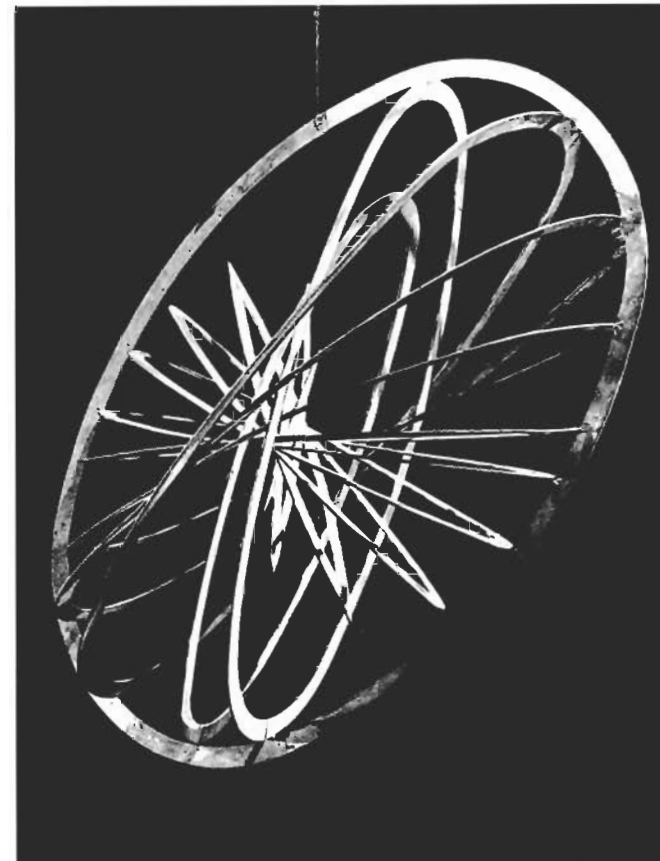


Carl Andre, *Cedar Piece*, 1960–1964. Cedar, 72 × 36¼ × 36¼ in. Collection: Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.

statements, that acknowledge the rediscovery of the sculptural principles and theoretical positions that had been articulated in Duchamp's work as well as in that of the Constructivists (for example, Andre's references to Rodchenko, Donald Judd speaking on Duchamp and Malevich, Dan Flavin paying tribute to Tatlin, and Robert Morris's scholarly interest in Duchamp and the adaptation of Duchampian principles in his early work). This was precisely the part of the modernist tradition that had been ignored and rejected by the neoformalist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried (the key champions and promoters of Smith and Caro). To reconsider these positions—in particular, to transform the dialogue with the positivist legacy of formalism into a laconic pragmatism—provided another essential element of the foundation for the new sculptural work of the mid-1960s. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's recently (1965) translated *Phenomenology of Perception* added to the paradoxical synthesis of philosophical legacies, ranging now from Modernism's empirio-critical skepticism investigating the epistemology of painterly and sculptural signs, to the artists' discovery of logical positivism and semiology. Frank Stella, in many ways the first artist to integrate all of these elements, articulated this condensation in his now famous, lapidary statement, "What you see is what you see."

## V

The formalist concept of "self-referentiality" had been a theoretical prescription by which art until around 1965 had to abide. What amounted to a pictorial or sculptural analogy to the semiological understanding of the sign, and the self-reflexivity resulting from that analogy in artistic production, had been achieved by both Duchamp and Malevich in 1913, at least in principle if not in an explicit theoretical project. One of the first Minimal works to considerably expand the notion of self-referentiality was Morris's *Mirrored Cubes* (1964).<sup>11</sup> It was against this background of a Minimal and post-Minimal aesthetic that Michael Asher's work was developed in the 1960s. When Asher went to New York for a year in 1963–1964, he became very interested in Flavin's and Judd's work, and, upon his return to California in 1966, he constructed several tapered wedge pieces that follow a similar logic of suspending the sculptural object between self-referentiality and contextual



Alexander Rodchenko, *Spatial Construction No. 12*, 1920. Plywood and wire, 83.5 × 43.3 cm. Costakis Collection, Athens.

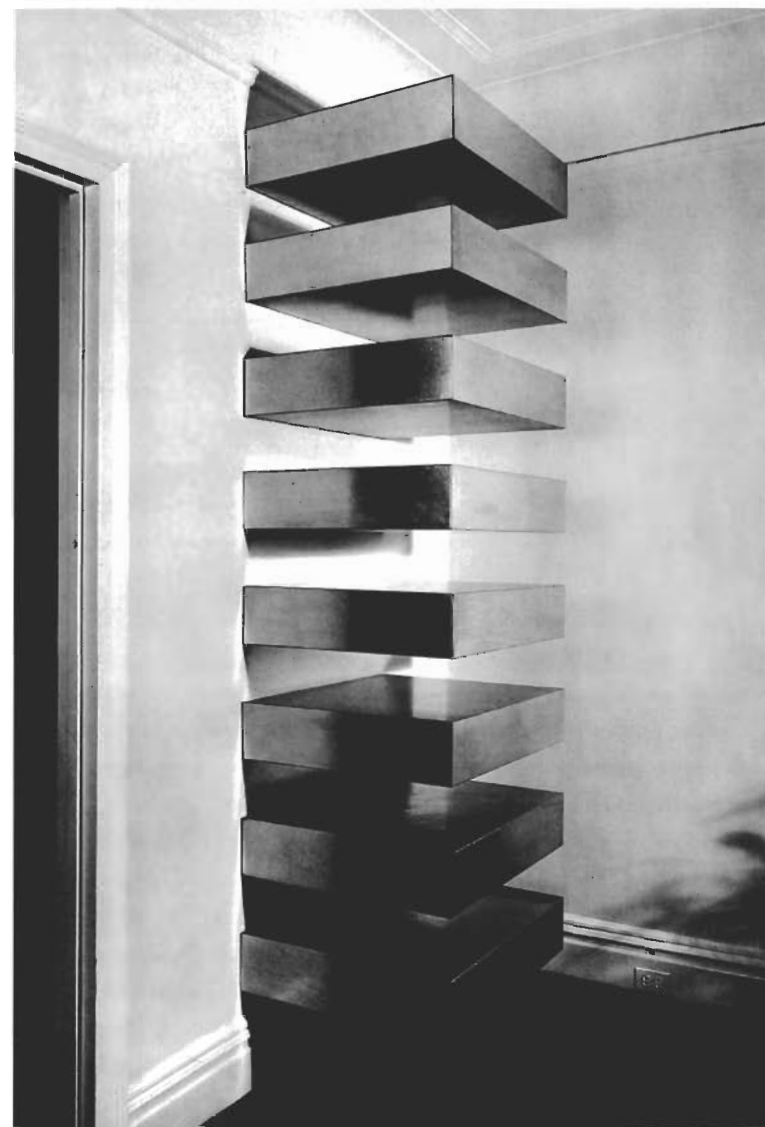
contingency. These wedges were installed flush against the wall and painted over with a color identical to the wall that supported them. As in Morris's and Larry Bell's mirrored cubes, the most prominent characteristic of Asher's early work would be its analytical approach to the triadic condition of the sculptural phenomenon: to function as an autonomous aesthetic/spatial sign; to be constituted within a larger architectural context, which may or may not purport its own and different order of signs; and to be activated only through the spectator's individual act of perception. The sculptural sign itself, at least in Morris's early work and in Asher's wedge pieces, negates any inherent sculptural value and merely demarcates the difference between subjective perception and objective spatial conditions.

Dan Graham, later to become a close friend of Asher's, underwent a similar development in his work, leading gradually out of formalist and Minimal aesthetics. He described his conception of a sculptural structure as follows:

There is a "shell" placed between the external "empty" material of place and the interior, empty material of language: systems of information exist halfway between material and concept without being either one.<sup>12</sup>

In this critique, the formalist notion of self-referentiality was replaced by an increasingly complex analytical system (semiological, sociological, systems-analysis) that would make the work operative rather than self-reflexive. The idea of a "situational aesthetics" (a term coined by the English artist Victor Burgin) implied that a work would function analytically within all the parameters of its historical determination, not only in its linguistic or formal framework. Three concepts would become crucial for the definition of "situational aesthetics": first, the notion of material- and site-specificity; second, the notion of place; third, that of presence. A similar transition had already occurred in the shift from Russian formalist methodology toward a new materialist semiology and productivist theory.<sup>13</sup>

When Judd defined his understanding of material specificity by almost literally transferring a key term of Russian formalist criticism to sculpture, his



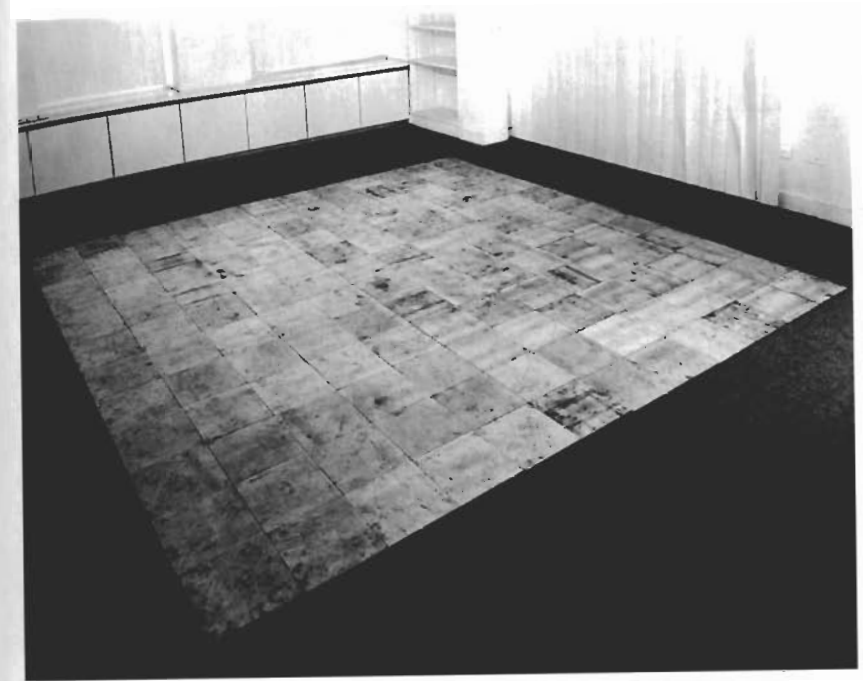
Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1968. Galvanized iron, 10 × 27 × 24 in. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Schwartz. Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.



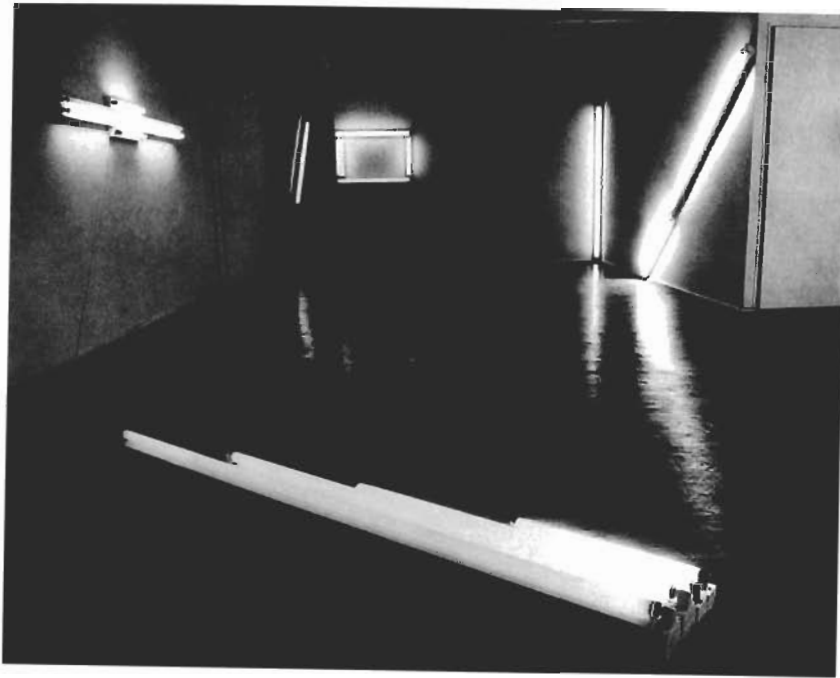
definition still resounded with the impact of Modernism's positivist pragmatism. He wrote, for example, in his 1965 essay "Specific Objects": "Materials vary greatly and are simply materials—formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, plexi-glas, red and common brass and so forth. They are specific. Also they are usually aggressive."<sup>14</sup> Shortly afterward, Michael Asher and a whole generation of artists set out to prove that materials are not simply materials but are procedurally and contextually determined. For example, Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn argued already in their early critique of Judd:

Aren't you saying you want the association to be restricted or localized to the object or its immediate (i.e. architectural) environment? Along with an autonomous form of art, you wanted a more autonomous art object, what you would call more objective. Traditionally, art objects are associated with other art and art history by way of their materials and by being a conventional type of art object. Such associations would, I suppose, in your words, be specific. But this was the last thing you wanted. The autonomy you developed for your objects had to function in respect to your presupposition of an art (historical) context and hence you still needed a means of associating the object with that context. Since the object itself denied any associations, the physical situation became a more important vehicle. That is to say, the object had to be circumstantially associated with its art context.<sup>15</sup>

The second concept, that of place (as opposed to object or anthropomorphic representation), was developed mainly by Andre and Flavin.<sup>16</sup> Pointing to the *spatial* specificity of the sculptural work (as opposed to the *material* specificity that Judd talked about), Andre's definition also originally implied (as did Flavin's practice) a subversive assault on the commodity status of works of art (given that they were movable objects, contextless, offering themselves to every kind of transaction). Sculpture as place was supposed to integrate into its actual formation the spatial conditions into which it inscribed itself as constituent elements. Graham observed with lucidity:



Carl Andre, *144 Copper Square*, 1969. Copper,  $\frac{3}{8} \times 144 \times 144$  in. Collection: The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Dan Flavin, view of the installations in the Green Gallery, New York, 1964. Cool white fluorescent light; various dimensions. Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt.

I liked that as a side effect of Flavin's fluorescents the gallery walls became a canvas. The lights dramatized the people (like spotlights) in a gallery, throwing the content of the exhibition out to the people in the process of perceiving; the gallery interior cube itself became the real framework.<sup>17</sup>

Independently reflecting on similar issues, the French artist Daniel Buren wrote a perspicacious critique of Duchamp's readymade concept in 1970. If read along with Graham's description of Flavin's work, the essay reveals the hitherto unreflected and problematic points of the minimalist concept of place, in particular its unconscious indebtedness to Duchamp. Furthermore, it identified exactly those issues on which Asher would focus, and the essay's almost literal correspondence to Graham's statement points to the objective nature of these artistic concerns of the post-Minimal generation:

The Museum/Gallery for lack of being taken into consideration is the framework, the habit . . . the inescapable "support" on which art history is "painted." Wishing to eliminate the tableau/support, on the pretext that what is painted can only be illusion, Duchamp introduces into a new framework/tableau a real object, which at the same time becomes artificial, motiveless, i.e., artistic.<sup>18</sup>

Temporal specificity is defined as the third condition for a situational aesthetics—presence—which is closely interrelated with its spatial and material counterparts. Again, the term refers not only to the fact that an installation is determined by the specific temporal circumstances into which it is introduced, but equally, if not more, to the fact that it obtains within these circumstances a temporally specific, limited function, and that the work might become disposable after its appearance in time. Again, it was Graham who pointed this out when writing about an exhibition of Flavin's work in Chicago in 1967:

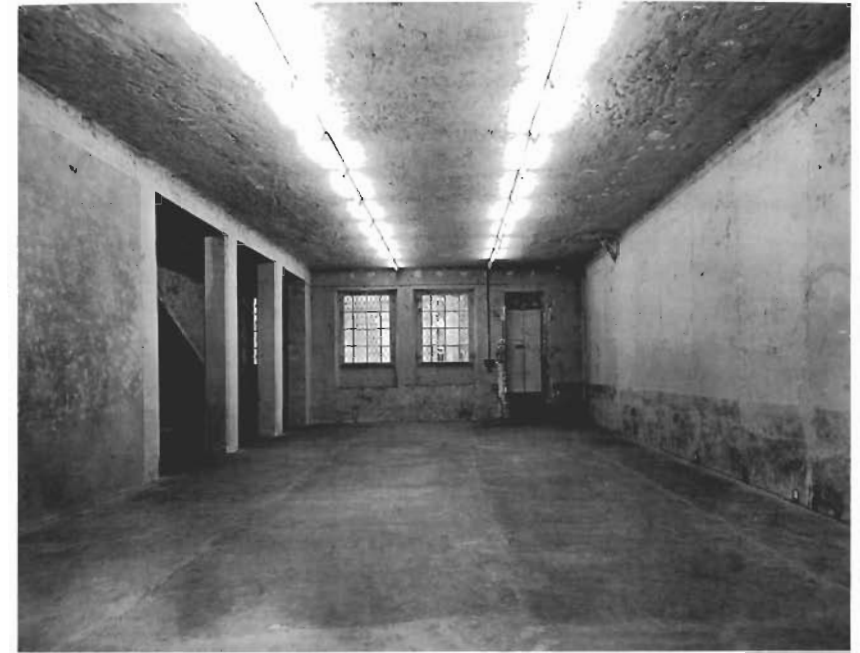
The components of a particular exhibition, upon its termination, are replaced in another situation—perhaps put to a non-art use as a part of a different whole in a different future.<sup>19</sup>

## VI

Asher later adopted the term “situational aesthetics,” integrating the concepts of both spatial and temporal specificity. It had become fairly clear by 1968 that the Minimalists had abandoned the original implications of these aesthetic strategies by adapting their work increasingly to the needs of the art market. It had also become evident that these strategies would have to be radically modified, if they were to maintain their critical function of investigating the social and institutional framework that determines the production and the reception of art. Thus, on the occasion of his first exhibition, at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1969, Asher applied the Minimalist principles of self-referentiality and specificity with a new literalness and immediacy to the architectural container of the exhibition space itself. Thereby he not only revealed Minimalism’s latent formalist heritage, but also defined a new understanding of sculptural materiality:

The presentation at San Francisco was clearly dictated by every element which was available and it suggested a way of working for the future: using just elements which already existed without a great modification to the space.<sup>20</sup>

If Asher’s work overcomes the Modernist legacy (i.e., the neopositivist formalism originating in the Constructivist legacy and embraced by the Minimalists), then the work of Broodthaers and Buren critically transcends the limitations of Duchamp’s concept of the readymade, which had kept almost all object-oriented art in its spell.<sup>21</sup> Both positions—the constructive and the allegorical—seem to coalesce and henceforth determine the historically relevant work in contemporary art production. It is therefore crucial to comprehend first of all that the two critiques are fused in Michael Asher’s installations at the Art



Michael Asher, *Galleria Toselli, Milan, 1972*. Sand-blasted gallery walls. Courtesy of the artist.

Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and to read them at the same time from the historical perspective of sculpture rather than merely within the context of “conceptual art” or, worse yet, to align them, as has been suggested, with a Dada-environment tradition.

Asher’s sculptural installations seem to be constituted solely by conceptual gestures and directives, deploying “found” objects and materials or, more correctly, the “given” conditions of a particular museum/exhibition context. The specificity of sculpture’s materials or its production processes is now totally negated. The consequence of Asher’s contextual orientation surpasses even the most radical conceptual definitions of sculptural processes outlined in Lawrence Weiner’s *Statements* from 1968, where one can still detect remnants of traditional sculptural concerns, as in, “A field cratered by structured, simultaneous TNT explosions.”<sup>22</sup> Rigorously denying spatial and temporal transcendence, Asher’s works are constituted first of all within their own spatial, institutional context, the museum; and they become the performative articulation of their actually given historical time, the allocated exhibition period itself.<sup>23</sup>

Asher’s work at the Art Institute of Chicago bracketed three different situations of display with three different experiences of perceptual discontinuity. The first phase of his contribution to the 73rd American Exhibition consisted of the removal of a bronze cast (after Jean-Antoine Houdon’s marble representation of George Washington from 1788), which had been installed at the main entrance of the Allerton Building—a late nineteenth century neo-Renaissance building—on Michigan Avenue in 1925. The resulting work ruptured the message of aesthetic authority and national heritage that the sculpture had conveyed as an integral part of the museum’s facade.

The second step of the installation was to place the bronze within its original art historical context in a period room (Gallery 219) featuring European paintings, furniture, and the decorative arts of the eighteenth century. The cast was placed in the center of the gallery on a wooden base, identical in height and color to the other wooden bases in the gallery, while its “original” marble pedestal was put into storage. In this second display situation, a reconstruction of an imaginary eighteenth-century interior, the contextualized sculpture caused a

different rupture: even though its bright green-blue patina almost matched the turquoise of the painted walls and some of the silk covers of the eighteenth-century furniture, the patina made it all the more obvious that the sculpture had been put to a different use in the past and had therefore acquired material features that conflicted with its definition as an object of high art in a well-guarded museum interior. Its function as a monument made itself felt in a way that Proust had once described: “all the gazes that objects have ever received seem to remain with them as veils.”

The third element of the work consisted of a plexiglas box inside the gallery containing leaflets that identified this installation as Asher’s contribution to the 73rd American Exhibition, and they directed the viewer to this show of contemporary work in the Morton Wing of the museum. Downstairs, at the entrance to the exhibition, another box contained leaflets (see appendix A) that gave a description of the work but directed the viewer upstairs to the eighteenth-century period room in Gallery 219.

The visitor who had been circulating in the survey of contemporary work displayed in the 73rd American Exhibition, experienced the third rupture in Asher’s piece when confronting the sculpture contextualized in the setting of Gallery 219 in tandem with the installation method in the Morton Wing. This passage through history juxtaposed a more or less stylistically homogeneous group of conceptual and painterly work with the equally homogeneous group of artistic objects from the eighteenth century. The confrontation historicized the actuality and dynamic immediacy that contemporary works generate in the viewer’s perception and emphasized, by contrast, the historicity of their present aesthetic experience.

A second work by Asher was coincidentally installed at the same time at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. In their *modus operandi*, the two works were clearly similar: both dismantled a given architectural display system embodied within the elements of a facade. If the Art Institute had appropriated an eighteenth-century work of sculpture (or more precisely a twentieth-century bronze replica) for its facade, then the architects of the new Museum of Contemporary Art had appropriated what they believed to be the stylistic idiom of Minimal sculpture as a reference for their design of a modular system of



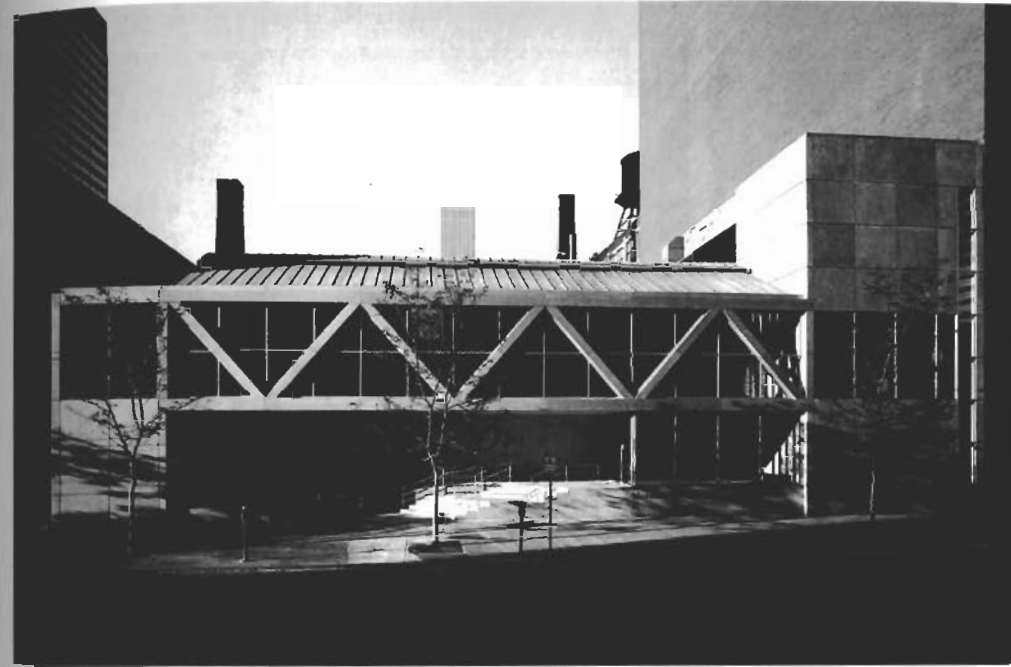
Michael Asher, *73rd American Exhibition*, 1979. Art Institute of Chicago, Michigan Avenue entrance, showing the 1917 bronze replica of Jean-Antoine Houdon's *George Washington* (1788) in its original location. Photo: Rusty Culp.



Michael Asher, *73rd American Exhibition*, 1979. Art Institute of Chicago, Gallery 219, showing the 1917 bronze replica of Jean-Antoine Houdon's *George Washington* after its relocation to the eighteenth-century period room. Installation view. Photo: Rusty Culp.



Michael Asher, *Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1979*. Facade before installation. Photo: Tom van Eynde.



Michael Asher, *Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1979*. Facade after removal of panels during exhibition. Photo: Tom van Eynde.

architectural decoration. This appropriation of the serial modular elements of Minimal sculpture sought to convey a technocratic notion of progress (whether this notion was embedded already in the idiom of Minimal sculpture is disputable).

As his work for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Asher stipulated (see appendix B) that during the exhibition the two horizontal rows of aluminum panels that were in line with the Bergman Gallery windows should be removed from the facade and should be placed on the interior wall of the gallery. The ten panels from the east side of the building and eight panels from the west side were to be arranged on the inside in the same formation and sequence, placed sequentially as a planar relief.<sup>24</sup> The entire work, both its exterior elements (the withdrawn parts) and its interior elements (the displayed parts), could be viewed from the street. Once the panels were placed on the walls within the interior they became subject to the same perceptual conditions that determine the reading of material constructs as discursive (i.e., sculptural) objects. Again, the juxtaposition of the exterior elements (the remaining cladding) and their semifunctional architectural usage and the interior elements (their defunctionalized sculptural display) resulted in a double negation of both architectural and sculptural discourses. As in the work at the Art Institute, there was a third element of deconstruction: the Museum of Contemporary Art had agreed—five months prior to actual installation—to buy the work for its permanent collection. Therefore, a paradoxical situation occurred: once the exhibition was finished and the cladding was reinstalled in its proper place as architectural decoration, the work seemed to cease to exist while, in fact, Asher's "sculpture" was simply placed in a different institutional register, generally identified as "storage." Yet, since it was placed on the museum's facade, it remained accessible to public view at all times, as distinct from conventionally stored work which remains inaccessible. Moreover, being bound into the specific situation of the given institutional architecture, the work—according to the artist's instructions specified in the acquisition contract with the museum—would cease to exist as part of the collection as soon as the institution's architecture was altered. (Plans for an expansion were then already being discussed and have since been executed; the work, therefore, has to be considered no longer extant.)



Michael Asher, *Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago*, 1979. Installation interior view, showing aluminum panels from the museum's facade installed in the Bergman Gallery. Photo: Tom van Eynde.

## VII

Conditions of collective reification change gradually (or, under the particular circumstances of crisis, rapidly and drastically). Their aesthetic representations appear accordingly: no single object—whether individually crafted or mass-produced—can at this time reflect appropriately upon the degree of abstraction within which collective reification is operating and institutionalized. The production of art itself has become an activity that shares the conditions of the culture industry, on the one hand embellishing corporate public image and on the other depending on an elaborate corporate support system amounting to a cultural civil service. Art production thus helps to channel any attempt at critical negation into a hermetically sealed ideology of culture. During those historical periods in which the governing powers want to convey a sense of conclusion (more precisely, that history as process and change has been concluded), the experience of subtle oppression and stagnation is extrapolated in monumental public structures. Amnesia, the loss of memory at the origin of the destruction of historical dialectics, tends to incorporate itself in false public commemorative representations. Their stability and weight seem to balance the insecurity that individuals and society at large experience once they have been totally deprived of active participation in the decision-making process of history. At this point sculptors seem to be tempted to offer their services for monumental public commissions that embody those latent tendencies; they fill the gaps of historic identity with gigantic monuments. The recent increase in public commissions for monumental sculpture confirms this hypothesis, and the critics rhapsodize already in a new ideology of postmodernist populism:

The root of the difficulty would seem to lie back at the turn of the century with the disappearance of the monument. Avant-garde art in general, with its oppressive neutrality of content, has a long history of being perceived by the public at large as irrelevant. Its abstractness, however, is not the problem as much as its failure to conduct a public dialogue. Belief or conviction on the part of the artist, while perhaps the most important single ingredient of a great work of art, is not, as far as the

public is concerned, a substitute for symbolic content. . . . The artists who succeed there . . . will be those who are willing to come to terms with the notion of public commitment, who realize that such a stance, far from compromising their work, can infuse it with non-esthetic content which has absented itself from modernist art.<sup>25</sup>

Michael Asher's works operate with increasingly analytical precision on the threshold between symbolic space and actual space, continuously increasing the ambiguity between functional object and aesthetic object, as though to prove from within the analysis of sculpture itself that it has lost its material and historical legitimacy. In his two installations in Chicago, Asher did not adapt to these historic tendencies but incorporated them manifestly into his work to make them transparent. The specificity of his installations identified all the elements that enter the conception, production, and reception of a sculptural construct, resulting in a model case of historical analysis. This analytical model dismantles the new historicism of postmodernity, where regressions into a mythical language of the transhistorical validity of the monument merely cover up the problematic conditions of sculptural production and perceptual experience in the present.

## APPENDIX A

Handout prepared by Michael Asher for Art Institute installation

Michael Asher  
*73rd American Exhibition*  
 The Art Institute of Chicago  
 June 9 to August 5, 1979

The sculpture of *George Washington*, cast in 1917, is a replica of the marble sculpture of 1788 by Jean Antoine Houdon. In 1925 it was installed in front of the Michigan Avenue entrance of the Art Institute.

As my work for the 73rd American Exhibition (June 9–August 5, 1979), I have moved the sculpture of *George Washington* into the galleries. The sculpture is on the second floor in Gallery 219. For directions please ask one of the guards.



In this work I am interested in the way the sculpture functions when it is viewed in its eighteenth-century context instead of in its prior relationship to the façade of the building, where it has been for fifty-four years. Once inside Gallery 219, the sculpture can be seen in connection with the ideas of other European works of the same period. By locating the sculpture within its own time frame in Gallery 219, I am placing it within the framework of a contemporary exhibition, through my participation in that exhibition.

APPENDIX B

Handout prepared by Michael Asher for Museum of Contemporary Art installation

Michael Asher

*Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago*

June 8 through August 12, 1979

The newly remodeled building of the Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by the architectural firm of Booth, Nagel and Hartray, was completed in March 1979. The façade of the museum is planned on a five-and-one-half-foot-square grid pattern and is constructed with glass and aluminum. Tyvo rows of aluminum panels, which are attached to and cover an underlying brick structure, line up horizontally with the two rows of glass windows of the Bergman Gallery. The glassed-in Bergman Gallery functions as a showcase so that art is visible from the street.

In this work, I have removed from the façade the two horizontal rows of aluminum panels that are in line with the Bergman Gallery and have placed them on the interior wall of the gallery. The ten panels from the east side of the building and the eight from the west are arranged inside so that they correspond exactly to their previous positions outside. After August 12, 1979, the aluminum panels will be reinstalled on the exterior of the building.

This work belongs to the museum's permanent collection. It is intended to be repeated each year for approximately two months, or the length of a temporary exhibition.

NOTES

1

M. M. Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 12.

2

Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (1979), p. 33.

3

William Tucker, *Early Modern Sculpture* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), pp. 15, 19.

4

Rainer Maria Rilke, quoted in Tucker, *Early Modern Sculpture*, p. 9.

5

Joris K. Huysmans, "L'Exposition des Indépendants en 1881," in *L'art moderne* (Paris, 1908), pp. 250–255, quoted in C. W. Millard, *The Sculpture of Edgar Degas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 124.

6

Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 88f.

7

Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, part 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), p. 655.

8

On the subject of procedures and materials, it seems only a matter of time before the return to traditional artisanal techniques (including bronze casting and wood carving) is celebrated as a return to the unalterable traditions of sculpture. It is noteworthy that even five years ago such a shift would have been inconceivable, but that for somebody like Caro it is now the fully acceptable *modus operandi*. For more recent examples see the work of Barry Flanagan, the Italians Enzo Cucchi and Sandro Chia, or the Germans Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz.

9

Boris Arvatov, *Kunst und Produktion* (1926; Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1972), p. 11 (my translation).

10

On frequent occasions Smith pointed to the importance of factory labor in the development of his work, in particular his experience as a welder in a World War II tank factory. He referred to his welded sculptures as constructions on the same historical order as locomotives. To what degree this self-image of the welding-mask-wearing proletarian producer and twentieth-century Vulcan possessed mythical attractions for Smith is revealed by his widow, who argued that most of his claims of having endured extended work periods as a factory welder were, in fact, exaggerated. Thus we read in Cleve Gray, ed., *David Smith* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968):

Smith often made a point of his poverty during the thirties and forties and his consequent need to work. In his statement for Elaine de Kooning's article "David Smith Makes a Sculpture" in *Art News* (no. 50, September 1951, p. 37) he wrote: "All of my life the workday has been any part of the twenty four hours on oil tankers, driving hacks and the shifts in factories." His first wife, Dorothy Delner, has said that Smith exaggerated this aspect of his life greatly and that due to a small income of hers at this time Smith's obligation to work at odd jobs was almost non-existent.

But information on this subject seems contradictory, since we read in Rosalind Krauss's dissertation, published as *David Smith: Terminal Iron Works* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), the following (p. 60, n. 16):

In the three years in Schenectady during which he worked eight hours a day in a factory as a welder on M7 tanks and locomotives, Smith identified himself increasingly with his fellow workers. Not only was he fiercely proud of his status within the factory unit and a "first class armor plate welder" (see Archive IV/280), but his sculptural output dropped off radically at this time, as he became absorbed in his work in the munitions plant. From 1942 to 1944 he made almost no metal sculpture, beginning instead to learn stonecutting and carving, and in the entire span of these years, he produced only fifteen pieces.

11

Morris's work refers explicitly to an unexecuted project by Duchamp, which he had defined in the *Green Box*, suggesting the placement of mirrored glass on the floor of a room. Duchamp's notes in the *Green Box* read as follows:

Flat container in glass—holding all sorts of liquids. Colored pieces of wood, of iron, chemical reactions. Shake the container and look through it. Parts to look at crossed eyed, like a piece of silvered glass, in which are reflected the objects in a room.

See Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., 1960), n.p.

The project found an independently conceived parallel echo on the West Coast in the early mirrored cubes of Larry Bell, an artist who would be of temporary relevance for the development of Michael Asher's critique of Modernist self-referentiality.

12

Dan Graham, "Other Observations," in *For Publication* (Los Angeles: Otis Art Institute, 1976), n.p.

13

See, for example, Bakhtin and Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, or, to give another example, the radical changes in the writings of Osip Brik, who also shifted from a purely formalist position to one of a committed productivist practice in essays such as "Into Production" as early as 1923.

It is symptomatic that by contrast, artists, critics, and historians in the present and recent past seem to respond in a defensive or conservative manner when confronted with such a radical paradigmatic shift in sculptural production.

For example, Rosalind Krauss, whose book *Passages* (New York: Viking, 1977) can be rightfully considered the most complex and advanced reading of Modernist and post-Modernist sculpture to date, literally excludes all of those sculptural activities that question the materials and production procedures of traditional sculpture and that conceive "sculptural" phenomena (i.e., perceptual and actual subject/object interactions) within a historically and socially defined set or system of time-space coordinates. Krauss does not once mention the work of Asher, Robert Barry, Dan Graham, or Lawrence Weiner—artists who have all substantially redefined the idea of the "sculptural" in their work.

Ten years earlier, Jack Burnham's *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), also considered the most advanced critical study of modernist sculpture at the time, *omitted equally the crucial innovations within the very discipline of sculpture to which it was dedicated*. Published at a time when crucial steps in the definition of Minimal sculpture had been taken, this book did not mention Andre once and only randomly dealt with the work of the other Minimalists.

It seems, then, that—in such situations of radical epistemic shifts—critics and historians displace their attention to derivative, secondary, or academicized forms of artistic production. Even if they are conspicuously obsolete, at least these forms seem to reaffirm the validity of aesthetic categories and the corresponding critical concepts.

By analogy, sculptors tend to make apodictic statements in such situations that shift the category of sculpture from the historical to the ontological level. See, for example, a recent

statement by Richard Serra (*October* 10 [1979], p. 73), reaffirming the universal and trans-historical validity of sculptural notions:

I have always thought that the basic assumption 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.

14

Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" (1965), in *Complete Writings* (New York and Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 181.

15

Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn, "Donald Judd," *The Fox* 2 (1975), p. 130.

16

The notion of "place" in sculpture was originally defined by Barnett Newman in regard to his sculpture *Here I* (1951). It can be assumed that both Andre and Flavin, fervent admirers of Newman's work, derived their concept of place in sculpture from him. For Newman's discussion of his understanding of sculpture as place, see Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Abrams, 1978), p. 63.

17

Dan Graham, letter to the author, July 22, 1979.

18

Daniel Buren, "Standpoints," in *Five Texts* (New York: John Weber Gallery; London: Jack Wendler Gallery, 1973), p. 38.

19

Dan Graham, in *Pink and Yellow: Dan Flavin* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1967), n.p.

20

Michael Asher, unpublished notes. See also *Michael Asher: Writings 1971-1981 on Works 1966-1976*, ed. Benjamin Buchloh (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981). Asher divided the allocated exhibition space at the San Francisco Art Institute into halves by constructing a wall from the existing display panels that normally served as additional support surfaces in the gallery's exhibition spaces. One half of the room contained a door and was fairly dark, because of the

wall construction, while light flooded into the other half of the room through windows and a skylight. The bright half of the room was accessible only by a passage left open between Asher's constructed walls and the permanent walls of the gallery.

21

The very same year as Asher's San Francisco debut, Marcel Broodthaers, a hitherto almost totally unknown artist, embarked on, as it seemed at the time, a fairly eccentric adventure: he had printed a well-designed letterhead that announced in conservative typography the foundation of a new museum in Brussels: "Musée d'Art Moderne (Section XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle), Département des Aigles." He appointed himself director of this museum, and guests, among them Daniel Buren, were invited for an official opening. The opening speech was delivered by the director of a "real" museum in Broodthaers's former "studio," a room filled with empty wooden picture-crates that museums use for the transport of works of art, a number of postcard reproductions of mostly nineteenth century paintings tacked to the walls, and regular installation equipment, such as ladders and lamps.

Broodthaers, perhaps even before Buren, had quite clearly developed an awareness of Duchamp's dilemma: his seemingly eccentric activity turned out to be the beginning of a systematic analysis of the myth of the museum and its transforming capacities in the process of acculturation. As early as 1966 he had pointed to the various hidden frames that determine the perception of the art object: "Every object is a victim of its nature: even in a transparent painting the color still hides the canvas and the molding hides the frame."

As much as Asher's and Broodthaers's installations seem to be incomparable initially, they do reveal upon closer analysis their actual historic connection in the critical reflection on the Duchamp legacy, despite the major morphological and stylistic differences that had developed in this regard between European and American art since the 1940s.

22

Lawrence Weiner, *Statements* (New York: Louis Kellner Foundation/Seth Siegelau, 1968), n.p.

23

Jack Burnham, while discussing Hans Haacke's works, which were equally concerned with the museum and its institutional practices, described the necessity of the methods of institutional critique developed by these artists:

The questions had to be asked in the galleries and the gallery public had to be confronted with its self-portrait in that same environment. The walls of the



Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'art moderne, Département des aigles, Section XIXème siècle*, Brussels, 1968. Photo: Maria Gilissen. © Estate of Marcel Broodthaers/SABAM, Belgium/VAGA, NY, NY.

museum or gallery are as much a part of his work as the items displayed on them. These works also need the "impregnation" of the gallery to set them in opposition to other contemporary art.

See Jack Burnham, in *Hans Haacke: Framing and Being Framed*, ed. Kasper König (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 137.

24

On the east side, ten panels extended twenty-two feet along the wall; for the part beginning on the west side, eight panels extended twenty-four feet, nine inches toward the center of the wall. This left thirty feet of unused wall space on which Sol LeWitt—whose work was exhibited simultaneously in a retrospective show at the Museum of Contemporary Art—executed a black wall drawing.

25

Nancy Foote, "Monument, Sculpture, Earthwork," *Artforum* 18 (October 1979), p. 37.