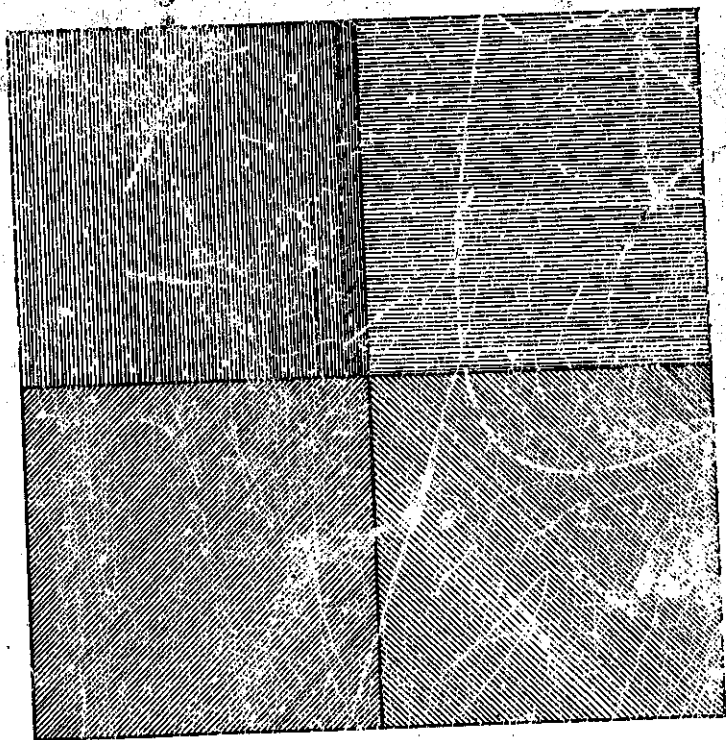


# Changing

essays in art criticism



**Lucy R. Lippard**

Foreword by Gregory Battcock

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## Lucy R. Lippard

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Lucy R. Lippard, who has been a free-lance art critic since 1965, was born in 1937. She received her B.A. from Smith College and her M.A. from New York University. In 1968 Miss Lippard was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to prepare her forthcoming book called *Ad Reinhardt: Art as Art*. She is also the author of *The Graphic Work of Philip Evergood* (1966), *Pop Art* (1966), *Tony Smith* (1970, being published in Germany), and the editor of two companion volumes, *Surrealists on Art* (1970) and *Dadas on Art* (1970). Miss Lippard's critical essays have appeared regularly in the leading art journals as well as *The Hudson Review*, and from 1965 to 1967 she was a contributing editor to *Art International*. She has organized numerous exhibition catalogues, including 557,087/955,000/3,549,000 in Seattle, Vancouver, and Buenos Aires. She teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

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their centers is perpendicular to the parallel planes of the triangles.<sup>10</sup>

The beauty of *Smoke* is that it displays but does not divulge its system. The patterns of space and patterns of linear solids change as one moves through it, but the changes are bewildering only if one insists on analyzing the very complex structure described above. The expected member never appears, and the eye is constantly led away into new configurations. Each new view challenges imagination and perception, opening up new geometrical vistas before the previous group are forgotten, so that one's experience takes on an almost musical dimension. From one angle, the arches line up to form a straight plane; move to the right and they break into hexagons, to the left and they become an angled series of disappearing planes; look up, and the patterns of the second story impose themselves on the first; stand away, and the whole thrusts itself up and out into space while the light picks up rows of tall triangular facets for an added countertheme of transparency.

Chaotic as this may sound, the overall impression is one of organic simplicity, of grace and calm. Smith's work is often, and justly, called *baroque* because of its emotional intensity, its rotating motion. *Smoke* controls these qualities, and its great size, by lack of volume and columnar equilibrium. Generically it may be closer to the alternating structures of the Banyan tree, but there is an interesting parallel in Islamic architecture. The mosque at Cordova, for instance, was expanded four times without its basic pattern being altered. Like *Smoke* it is an apparently limitless expanse of columns supporting a double layer of arches with great structural and spatial flexibility. H. W. Janson has written that the mosque's spatial "limits are purposely obscured so that we experience it as something fluid, limitless and mysterious."<sup>11</sup> Just as the space between the planets and the space between the molecules is the same space, *Smoke* makes no distinction between inside and outside, void and solid.

<sup>10</sup> From an unpublished manuscript on Tony Smith.

<sup>11</sup> *History of Art* (New York: Abrams-Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 187.

## The Dematerialization of Art\*

(Written with John Chandler)

During the 1960's, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete.

The visual arts at the moment seem to hover at a crossroad that may well turn out to be two roads to one place, though they appear to have come from two sources: art as idea and art as action. In the first case, matter is denied, as sensation has been converted into concept; in the second case, matter has been transformed into energy and time-motion. If the completely conceptual work of art in which the object is simply

\* Reprinted from *Art International*, Vol. XII, No. 2 (February, 1968).

an epilogue to the fully evolved concept seems to exclude the *objet d'art*, so does the primitivizing strain of sensuous identification and envelopment in a work so expanded that it is inseparable from its nonart surroundings. Thus the extremely cool and rejective projects of Judd, LeWitt, and others have a good deal in common with the less evolved but perhaps eventually more fertile synaesthetic ambitions of Robert Whitman, Robert Rauschenberg, and Michael Kirby, or the dance of Yvonne Rainer and Alex Hay, among others. This fact is most clearly illustrated by the work of Robert Morris, who has dealt with idea as idea, idea as object, and idea as performance. In fact, the performance media are becoming a no-man's- or every-man's land in which visual artists whose styles may be completely at variance can meet and even agree.<sup>1</sup> As the time element becomes a focal point for so many experiments in the visual arts, aspects of dance, film, and music become likely adjuncts to painting and sculpture, which in turn are likely to be absorbed in unexpected ways by the performing arts.

Another possibility that permits a combination of art as idea and art as action is the use of a serial scheme, though the recent "Art in Series" exhibition at the Finch College Museum of Art, organized by Mel Bochner, while a good show, indicated that only the most basic tenets of serialism have so far been adapted to the plastic arts. Static by tradition, painting and sculpture have until lately lagged behind music, poetry, and film in the use of serial methods.

Motion is the source of pattern-making, and it might seem that film rather than painting or sculpture would be the visual art most suited to the portrayal of motion and time. But paintings like those of Larry Poons and sculpture such as Sol LeWitt's offer successful means of presenting time-motion without anything actually moving (as, in another way, do Oldenburg's soft sculptures). They are like time exposures in photography, revealing time-space patterns that are invisible to someone seeing them in sequence alone. They are like chords in music, where the pattern is discovered in the vertical and

<sup>1</sup> See the *Tulane Drama Review* (Winter, 1965), which includes articles by Cage, Oldenburg, Rainer, Morris, Kaprow, Young, and a good general essay on "The New Theatre" by Michael Kirby.

simultaneous arrangements of the elements rather than horizontally and sequentially, as in melody. Thus these time exposures are double exposures or multiple exposures. LeWitt's serial projects are made up of parts which, though each part can be seen separately as sculpture, and in sequence, can also be seen simultaneously as one thing. (One of LeWitt's influences, and also one of Duchamp's, was Muybridge.) However, the parts do sometimes call attention to themselves with the unfortunate result that the whole lacks the unity of a chord; it is in the mind, or in the working drawing that sketches all the possibilities, rather than in the eye, that the whole attains its completely realized simplicity and unity. A series is an appropriate vehicle for an ultra-conceptual art, since thinking is ratiocination, or discovering the fixed relations, ratios, and proportions between things, in time as well as in space.

A highly conceptual art, like an extremely rejective art or an apparently random art, upsets detractors because there is "not enough to look at," or rather not enough of what they are accustomed to looking for. Monotonal or extremely simple-looking painting and totally "dumb" objects exist in time as well as in space because of two aspects of the viewing experience. First, they demand more participation by the viewer, despite their apparent hostility (which is not hostility so much as aloofness and self-containment). More time must be spent in immediate experience of a detail-less work, for the viewer is used to focusing on details and absorbing an impression of the piece with the help of these details.† Secondly, the time spent looking at an "empty" work, or one with a minimum of action, seems infinitely longer than action-and-detail-filled time. This time element is, of course, psychological, but it allows the artist an alternative to or extension of the serial method. Painter-sculptor Michael Snow's film *Wavelength*, for instance, is tortuously extended within its forty-five-minute span. By the time the camera, zeroing in very slowly from the back of a large loft, reaches a series of windows and finally a photograph of water surface, or waves, between two of them,

† No, not more time, though often equal time. As one painter has put it: "Is less ever any more than more, or is it only just as good?"

and by the time that photograph gradually fills the screen, the viewer is aware of an almost unbearable anticipation that seems the result of an equally unbearable length of time stretched out at a less than normal rate of looking; the intensity is reinforced by the sound, which during most of the film is monotonal, moving up in pitch and up in volume until at the end it is a shrill hum, both exciting and painful.

Joseph Schillinger, a minor American Cubist who wrote, over a twenty-five-year period, an often extraordinary book called *The Mathematical Basis of the Arts*, divided the historical evolution of art into five "zones," which replace each other with increasing acceleration: (1) pre-aesthetic, a biological stage of mimicry; (2) traditional-aesthetic, a magic, ritual-religious art; (3) emotional-aesthetic, artistic expression of emotions, self-expression, art for art's sake; (4) rational-aesthetic, characterized by empiricism, experimental art, novel art; (5) scientific, post-aesthetic, which will make possible the manufacture, distribution, and consumption of a perfect art product and will be characterized by a fusion of the art forms and materials, and, finally, a "disintegration of art," the "abstraction and liberation of the idea."<sup>2</sup>

Given this framework, we could now be in a transitional period between the last two phases, though one can hardly conceive of them as literally the last phases the visual arts will go through. After the intuitive process of re-creating aesthetic realities through man's own body, the process of reproduction or imitation, mathematical logic enters into art. (The Bauhaus dictum "Less is More" was anticipated by William of Occam when he wrote: "What can be explained by fewer principles is explained needlessly by more"; Nominalism and Minimalism have more in common than alliteration.) From then on, man became increasingly conscious of the course of his evolution, beginning to create directly from principles without the intercession of reproductive reality. This clearly cor-

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Schillinger, *The Mathematical Basis of the Arts* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 17.

responds to the Greenbergian interpretation of Modernism (a word used long before Greenberg, though his disciples insist on attributing it to him). The final "post-aesthetic" phase supersedes this self-conscious, self-critical art that answers other art according to a determinist schedule. Involved with opening up rather than narrowing down, the newer work offers a curious kind of utopianism that should not be confused with nihilism except in that, like all Utopias, it indirectly advocates a *tabula rasa*; like most Utopias, it has no concrete expression.

Dematerialized art is post-aesthetic only in its increasingly nonvisual emphases. The aesthetic of principle is still an aesthetic, as implied by frequent statements by mathematicians and scientists about the *beauty* of an equation, formula, or solution: "Why should an aesthetic criterion be so successful so often? Is it just that it satisfies physicists? I think there is only one answer—nature is inherently beautiful" (physicist Murray Gell-Mann); "In this case, there was a moment when I knew how nature worked. It had elegance and beauty. The goddam thing was gleaming" (Nobel prizewinner Richard Feynman).<sup>3</sup> The more one reads these statements, the more apparent it becomes that the scientist's attempt to discover, perhaps even to impose order and structure on the universe, rests on assumptions that are essentially aesthetic. Order itself, and its implied simplicity and unity, are aesthetic criteria.

The disintegration Schillinger predicted is obviously implicit in the breakup since 1958 or so of traditional media, and in the introduction of electronics, light, sound, and, more important, performance attitudes into painting and sculpture—the so far unrealized intermedia revolution whose prophet is John Cage. It is also implied by the current international obsession with entropy. According to Wylie Sypher, for example: "The future is that in which time becomes effective, and the mark of time is the increasing disorder toward which our system tends. . . . During the course of time, entropy increases. Time can be measured by the loss of structure in our system, its tendency to sink back into that original chaos from which

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Lee Edson, "Two Men in Search of the Quark," *New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 1967.

it may have emerged. . . . One meaning of time is a drift toward inertia." <sup>4</sup>

Today many artists are interested in an order that incorporates implications of disorder and chance, in a negation of actively ordering parts in favor of the presentation of a whole.<sup>5</sup> Earlier in the twentieth century the announcement of an element of indeterminacy and relativity in the scientific system was a factor in the rise of an irrational abstraction. Plato's anti-art statements, his opposition to imitative and representational art, and his contempt for the products of artists, whom he considered insane, are too familiar to review here, but they are interesting to note again in view of the current trend back to "normalcy," as evidenced by the provocative opening show of the East Village cooperative Lannis Museum of Normal Art, where several of the works discussed here were seen. Actually, the "museum" would be better called the Museum of Ad-normal Art, since it pays unobtrusive homage to the late Ad Reinhardt and to his insistence that only "art-as-art" is normal for art. The artist-director, Joseph Kosuth, admits his pedantic tendency, also relatable to Reinhardt's dogmas, in the pun on normal schools.) However, "no idea" was one of Reinhardt's rules and his ideal did not include the ultra-conceptual. When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves but symbols or representatives of things. Such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself or "art-as-art." The medium need not be the message, and some ultra-conceptual art seems to declare that the conventional art media are no longer adequate as media to be messages in themselves. The following list, randomly selected from a horde of examples of widely varied kinds of ultra-conceptual or dematerialized art, includes some which have almost entirely eliminated the visual-physical element:

<sup>4</sup> Wylie Sypher, *Loss of Self in Modern Literature and Art* (New York: Vintage, 1962), pp. 73-74. The word has also been applied to differing areas of recent art by Robert Smithson and Piero Gilardi; it appears as the title of a short story by Thomas Pynchon and as a theme of Beckett's, etc.

<sup>5</sup> In the New York art world, the idea seems to have originated with Don Judd.

*Robert Rauschenberg*: erasure of a de Kooning drawing then exhibited as "erased de Kooning by Robert Rauschenberg."

*Yves Klein*: "empty gallery" show at Iris Clert, April, 1958; and his smoke, fire, and water sculptures.

*Christo*: "Temporary Monuments," such as the packaging of the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, to take place in March, 1968.

*Claes Oldenburg*: numerous monument projects, including *Placid City Monument*, a trench dug and filled in again by union gravediggers behind the Metropolitan Museum (accepted by the New York City sculpture exhibition, fall, 1967).

*Robert Morris*: numerous projects in the early 1960's, including his cross-referenced *Card File*, and his four mirror cubes which disappeared into their reflections; his project for jets of steam as sculpture (refused by New York City sculpture exhibition, 1967), and for a circular low earth wall, to be erected at a Texas airport.

*Carl Andre*: 120 bricks to be arranged according to their mathematical possibilities; the negative of the first brick show in which empty space was the substance of the forms and the empty space from the first show was filled by bricks (Tibor de Nagy, New York, 1966, and Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1967); scattered ceramic squares; a conical pile of sand in the Museum of Contemporary Crafts monuments exhibition, spring, 1967, formed by gravity when the sand was dropped from the floor above, which would disintegrate at the rate the body buried below would decompose (see Dan Graham, *Arts*, January, 1968).

*Sol LeWitt*: "nonvisual" serial projects incorporating conceptual logic and visual illogic; exhibition at the Konrad Fischer Gallery, Düsseldorf, January, 1968, of a series of hidden cubes indicated by lines drawn from their bases; project for a buried cube to be interred at a Texas airport.†

*Mel Bochner*: five negative photostatic panels of a block project for the "Monuments" show noted above, one of which consisted of facsimile quotations (Duchamp, Sartre,

† This was finally buried near the Visser house in Amsterdam.

and "John Daniels") and the dictionary definition of the word "block," spring, 1967.

*Joseph Kosuth*: painting as idea as idea, a negative photostat on canvas of the dictionary definition of the word "water," etc., 1967; his Lannis Gallery Book Show, consisting of favorite books chosen by a group of artists, many of which were dictionaries, manuals, lists, mathematical works, a leaning sheet of glass.

*Christine Kozlov*: "Compositions for Audio Structures"; open film can containing a reel of transparent film.

*On Kawara*: canvas with longitude and latitude of a spot in the Sahara desert painted on it; the date paintings: a canvas a day with dates painted on them (his journal notes one headline from newspaper of the day).

*Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin*: conceptual drawings based on various serial and conceptual schemes, among them a map of a thirty-six-square-mile area of the Pacific Ocean west of Oahu, scale three inches to the mile (an empty square); a rectangle with linear depictions of the states of Iowa and Kentucky, titled "Map to not indicate: Canada, James Bay, Ontario, Quebec, St. Lawrence River, New Brunswick . . ." and so on.

*Hans Haacke*: kinetic sculpture where the "motion" is provided by grass growing on a plexiglass cube; condensation, frost sculptures.

*John Van Saun*: *Falling Fire* object.

*William Anastasi*: exhibition of paintings of the walls on which they are hung in the gallery, slightly smaller scale, Dwan Gallery, New York, 1966.

*Walter de Maria*: drawing drawing, a white sheet with the word "drawing" lightly penciled in the center, lines in the desert.†

† As soon as this was written, in the autumn of 1967, we were told about other artists who should have been mentioned, and since that time the genre has continued to multiply rapidly. Among those who should have been noted above at that time, or soon after, are: Gene Beery's word paintings from the early sixties, the Rosario group in Argentina, Iain Baxter in Vancouver, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, Luis Camnitzer in New York and environs; Barry Le Va's scatterpieces in Los Angeles, Richard Long and Bruce McLean in England, Jan Dibbets in Amsterdam, etc.

New York Graphic Workshop  
(Camnitzer, Castillo, Porter):  
First Class Mail Art Exhibition.  
1967.

250 METERS OF THICK  
CHAIN ACCUMULATED  
IN A CUBE OF HEAVY  
GLASS, IN ORDER THAT  
HALF OF THE SPACE  
IS FILLED.

A STRAIGHT THICK  
LINE THAT RUNS  
FROM HERE THROUGH  
YOU TO THE END OF  
THE ROOM.

THIS IS A MIRROR.  
YOU ARE A WRITTEN  
SENTENCE.

A PRISMATIC BEAM  
OF BLUE LIGHT, WITH  
A SECTION OF 10  
METERS SQUARE, THAT  
GOES FROM ONE HOUSE-  
FRONT TO THE ONE  
ACROSS THE STREET.

A SURROUNDED  
SPACE THAT  
EXPANDS IN THE  
DIRECTION YOU  
WALK.

FOUR BRIDGES,  
1 KILOMETER LONG,  
FORMING A SQUARE  
WITHOUT EXIT, OVER  
POPULATED AREA.

A PERFECT CIRCULAR  
HORIZON.

A ROOM WITH THE  
CENTER POINT OF  
THE CEILING  
TOUCHING THE FLOOR.

A TEN STORY BUILDING  
WITH STYROFOAM  
FLOWING OUT OF THE  
WINDOWS.

The following, more aesthetically oriented, are notable for their denial of painting's and sculpture's *expected* substance, or identity:

*Dan Flavin*: fluorescent light aggregations in which object has both material and immaterial identities.

*Robert Ryman*: hanging unstretched canvases, 1962; white painting, on paper, attached to the wall with roughly torn masking tape, in order to avoid elegance, slickness, and objectness (1966-67).

*Michael Kirby*: sculptures "as visual instruments" involving photographs and mirrors; also his performances.

*Forrest Myers*: searchlight sculpture projected over Tompkins Square Park, fall, 1967; his "lines" stretching between distant points in the streets or landscape.

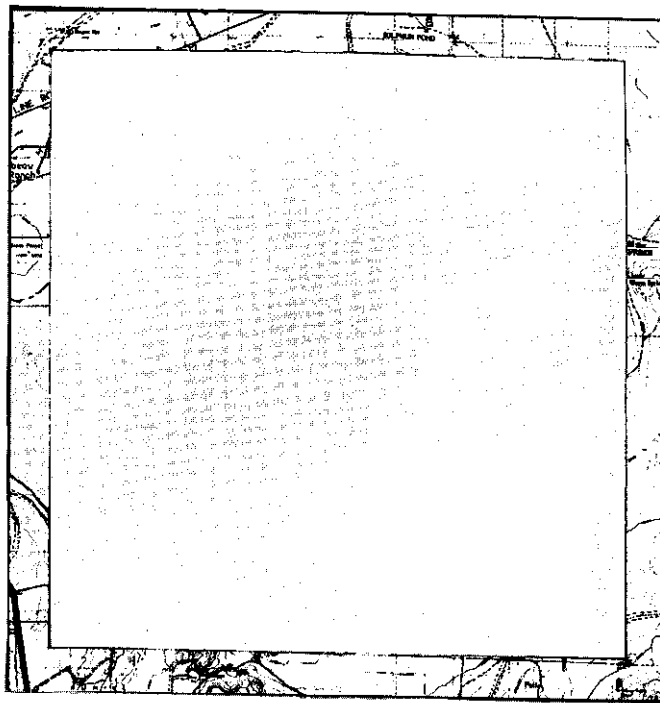
*Robert Smithson*: project for mercury pool; map projects; earthworks.

*Rick Barthelme*: floor-ceiling sculpture of metallic tape in rectilinear U-form on floor, opposite U on ceiling; gift of the artist to the Lannis Museum of Normal Art.

*Robert Huot*: two-panel "painting," the first panel of unpainted textured nylon through which a muted shadow of the stretcher optically hovers, and next to it an empty stretcher; tape paintings.

And on the more literary side: Dan Graham's concrete poems and his poem-object with sliding letters covered by the word "one" so that all the possible permutations are equally acceptable within the ratio one-as-one-as-one-as-one; Ed Ruscha's books, such as *Various Small Fires and Milk* or *Every Building on Sunset Strip*; Bruce Nauman's unassuming book of his work and his projects in collaboration with William Wiley; Frederick Castle's article "illustrated" by dummy squares with descriptive captions in them; Daniel Spoerri's *Anecdoted Topography of Chance*; George Brecht's "events"; Ray Johnson's "mailings"; and innumerable other books, objects, and projects listed in the Something Else Press's catalogues.

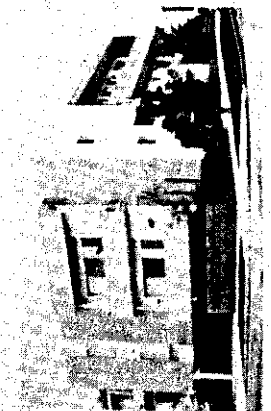
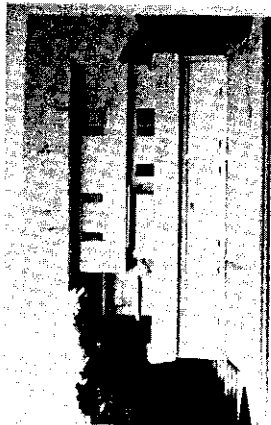
The performance arts and film abound in related material, among them Gustav Metzger's "acid art," Ralph Ortiz's de-



Robert Smithson: *Map for Nonsite—Mono Lake*. 1968. Photograph courtesy of Dwan Gallery, New York.



Edward Ruscha: "1850 S. Thayer Ave." and "2014 S. Beverly Glen Blvd.," two pages from *Some Los Angeles Apartments*. 1965.



structions, and Elaine Sturtevant's revival of Erik Satie's Dada ballet *Relâche* (*Cancellation*), which in its New York performance consisted of a cancellation of the performance.

There is a decided element of humor in most of this work which is by no means to say that it is not serious; the best comedy is always serious art; one would completely misunderstand Aristophanes, Swift, Chaplin, or Beckett if one assumed that they were not serious artists, just as one would misunderstand Democritus if one did not keep in mind that he was known as the "laughing philosopher," or the cynic Menippus if one forgot that he was known as "the secret dog who bites as he laughs" (*ridendo dicere verum*). The sort of humor these artists are concerned with is really wit, an Anglo-Saxon word that originally meant "mind" or the powers of reasoning and thinking. One of its meanings is "the mental faculties in their normal condition of sanity," as in "to keep one's wits about him," and the word gradually came to designate "the ability to make clever, ironic, or satirical remarks usually by perceiving the incongruous and expressing it in a surprising or epigrammatic manner."

Taking this literary parallel into consideration, it is not surprising that the main twentieth-century sources for a dematerialized art are found in Dada and Surrealism. One can cite the Dada insistence on a *tabula rasa* at the aesthetic as well as the social level, in reaction to the physical emphasis of Cubism which, despite its initial shattering of solid form, aimed at re-creating the object in another, equally physical form. The Dadas adopted the anarchist Bakunin's slogan "Destruction is Creation"; later even Mondrian declared that the destructive element had been neglected in art. Picabia erased a poem as it was written on a blackboard at a Dada demonstration, and his 1913 *Amorphist* manifesto was illustrated by blank canvases because total opposition of color had canceled out color and total opposition of form had canceled out form; in 1920, Max Ernst made an object with a hatchet attached and spectators paid to take whacks at it; Schwitters hid rather than destroyed the Dada-Expressionist inner core of his first *Merzbau* by surrounding it with a *Stijl*-oriented framework. The par-

allels go on and on. But as is so often the case today, one must return to Marcel Duchamp for the most valid prototype. Younger artists probably do not consider Duchamp a particular influence or force as Johns, Dine, and others did around 1960; this is due to the almost total absorption and acceptance of Duchamp's aesthetics into the art of the present. He is no longer particular; he is pervasive.

In 1913, Apollinaire described Duchamp as "detached from aesthetic preoccupations" and "preoccupied with energy." Duchamp remembers:

... the basis of my own work before coming to America in 1915 was a desire to break up forms—to "decompose" them much along the lines the Cubists had done. But I wanted to go further—much further—in fact in quite another direction altogether. This was what resulted in *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and eventually led to my large glass. . . . [*The Nude*] is an organization of kinetic elements, an expression of time and space through the abstract presentation of motion. A painting is, of necessity, a juxtaposition of two or more colors on a surface. I purposely restricted the *Nude* to wood coloring so that the question of painting per se might not be raised. There are, I admit, many patterns by which this idea could be expressed. Art would be a poor muse if there were not. But remember, when we consider the motion of form through space in a given time, we enter the realm of geometry and mathematics, just as we do when we build a machine for that purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Duchamp did not consider his *Nude* Futurist because for him Futurism was:

... an impression of the mechanical world. It was strictly a continuation of the Impressionist movement. I was not interested in that. I wanted to get away from the physical

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *Collection of the Société Anonyme*; *Museum of Modern Art 1920* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1950), p. 148; and J. J. Sweeney, "Eleven Europeans in America," *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, Vol. 13, Nos. 4-5 (1926); interview with Duchamp.

aspect of painting. . . . I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind. And my painting was, of course, at once regarded as "intellectual" and "literary" painting. It was true I was endeavoring to establish myself as far as possible from "pleasing" and "attractive" physical paintings. . . . Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude.<sup>7</sup>

Among the issues raised by Duchamp and still valid and continuing today are: his *Dust Breeding*, 1920; his *Hidden Noise* ready-made, 1919; his string installation of the 1942 Surrealist show; his preoccupation in the *Large Glass* with shadows, with perception and the cinematic, with invisible, conceptual structures that connect by association or "electricity" the visible forms; his idea of provisional or temporary color (as in the malic molds that were painted in red lead "while waiting for each one to receive its color"); his interest in the transparency and immateriality of air as a medium; a note suggests the expansion of his 1919 *50 cc of Paris Air*: "Establish a society in which the individual has to pay for the air he breathes (air meters; imprisonment and rarified air, in case of nonpayment, simple asphyxiation; if necessary cut off the air)"; (souvenir stores in Maine sell bottles of Maine air). And finally, his preoccupation with definition: "Take a Larousse dictionary and copy all the so-called abstract words, i.e., those that have no concrete reference; substitute for them schematic signs to form the basis of a new alphabet." (The signs were to be arrived at by chance via the method that produced the *Three Standard Stoppages*.) In the *Green Box*,<sup>8</sup> from which these notes were drawn, Duchamp also talked about serial and snapshot effects applicable to art, and about the time element of inscription, such as his plan "for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date, such a minute), to inscribe a ready-made. . . . The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what oc-

<sup>7</sup> Duchamp interviewed by Sweeney, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> *From the Green Box*, translated and introduced by George Heard Hamilton (New Haven: Ready-made Press, 1957).

casion but at *such and such an hour*. It is a kind of rendez-vous."

The danger, or fallacy, of an *ultra*-conceptual art is that it will be "appreciated" for the wrong reasons, that it will, like Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* or *Large Glass*, come to be mainly an ingratiating object of aesthetic pleasure instead of the stringently metaphysical vehicle for an idea intended. The idea has to be awfully good to compete with the object, and few of the contemporary ideas listed above are finally that good. Nevertheless, the "thinness," both literal and allusive, of such themes as water, steam, dust, flatness, legibility, temporality, continues the process of ridding art of its object quality. Some of these artists hold that the idea is self-generating and self-conclusive, that building the sculpture or painting the painting is simply the traditional, expected step finally unnecessary to the aesthetic, but very little of their work is really conceptual to the point of excluding the concrete altogether. On the other hand, ideas like Oldenburg's trench or LeWitt's buried cube are both tangible and intangible, simple and complex. They open up art to the intellect without delivering it into any other cultural or transcultural area. Visual art is still visual even when it is invisible or visionary. The shift of emphasis from art as product to art as idea has freed the artist from present limitations—both economic and technical. It may be that works of art that cannot be realized now because of lack of means will at some future date be made concrete. The artist as thinker, subjected to none of the limitations of the artist as maker, can project a visionary and utopian art that is no less art than concrete works. Architecture provides many precedents for this kind of unmaterialized art; Wright's mile-high skyscraper is no less art for not having a concrete expression. Moreover, since dealers cannot sell art-as-idea, economic materialism is denied along with physical materialism.

Nonvisual must not be confused with nonvisible; the conceptual focus may be entirely hidden or unimportant to the success or failure of the work. The concept can determine the means of production without affecting the product itself; conceptual art need not communicate its concepts. The audience

at a Cage concert or a Rainer dance performance will never know what the conceptual framework of the work is. At the other extreme is LeWitt's contention: "Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that he understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as logic versus illogic). The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable."<sup>9</sup>

Thus the difficulty of abstract conceptual art lies not in the idea but in finding the means of expressing that idea so that it is immediately apparent to the spectator. In math or science, the simpler the explanation or formula, the more satisfying it seems to be, and to reduce the great complexity of the universe to a single simple equation or metaphor is the goal. Even the simple progression of 1, 2, 3, in Dan Flavin's 1963 fluorescent piece *The Nominal Three; To William of Occam*, or the 1, 2, 3, 4 of David Lee's dark hanging plexiglass panels at Finch, are enough to satisfy the initial demands of a rational art. Even the most apparently elaborate schemes, such as Larry Poons's multiple inversions, though they require more deliberation to detect, once found are only slightly more complicated than the simple ones. Perhaps this, or the "camouflage" mentioned by LeWitt, is the reason for the popularity of hermetic motifs today. Hermeticism of one kind or another, manifested as enclosure or monotonicity and near invisibility, as an incommunicative blank façade or as excessive duration, helps maintain the desired aloofness in a work confronted by the ordinary or suspiciously avid spectator, while at the same time it satisfies the artist's desire for difficulty and endears itself to the spectator willing to commit himself on a deeper level.

Much recent conceptual art is illustration in a sense, in the form of drawings or models for nearly impossible projects that will probably never be realized, or in many cases, *need* no further development. According to Joseph Kosuth: "All I make are models. The actual works of art are ideas. Rather than

<sup>9</sup> Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* (Summer, 1967), p. 80.

'ideals,' the models are a visual approximation of a particular art object I have in mind."<sup>10</sup> Mel Bochner's contribution to the Finch serial show—*Sixteen Isomorphs*—is a model after the fact—a model for a piece already executed, and dismantled. Its sixteen modules are serial photographs of a project set up in small black blocks specifically to be photographed.

The interest in rough working drawings, which has become something of a fetish among Primary Structurists, is indicative of a sneaking nostalgia for a certain executionary éclat denied them in the work itself. On the other hand, Bochner's working drawing show at the School of Visual Arts last year [1967], consisting of five identical loose-leaf notebooks filled with Xerox copies of the "exhibits" (including lists, notes, specifications for and bills from fabricators, contributions by poets and architects) brought up another point: the concept of drawing as pseudo-painting was banished and drawing was brought back to its original function as a sketch or medium for working out ideas—visual or intuitive. Nevertheless, the emphasis on diagrams and projects, on models and working drawings rather than the finished pieces, is usually accompanied by the existence of the finished pieces, and these are finally successful only if the idea—original or not—has been successfully translated into visual terms. All of the artists mentioned here were presumably attracted to visual art in order to express something concretely. They began by making work strongly visual in character—conventional painting and sculpture—and they may return to it at any time. Duchamp's example of almost total abstention is not likely to attract many, although certain highly intelligent but formally unoriginal artists will continue to make "art" that is largely an illustration of ideas rather than either visual or ultra-conceptual; their œuvre becomes a veritable Smithsonian of collected fact and invention—technological artifacts. Of course the use of the object of art as a vehicle for ideas is nothing new. In the course of art history it was only in the late nineteenth century that an alternative was offered by the proposal that art is strictly "retinal" or sensuous in effect—a proposition that has come down to us as the formal or mod-

<sup>10</sup> *Non-Anthropomorphic Art by Four Young Artists: Four Statements* (Lannis Gallery, February, 1967).

ernist mainstream.<sup>11</sup> Throughout history, art has been not merely descriptive but has been a vehicle for ideas—religious, political, mystical; the object has been taken on faith. What something looks like and what it is about may be complementary but not necessarily (rarely) identical.

Sol LeWitt sees ultra-conceptual art as a "blind man's art" or "nonvisual art" whose logic is conceptual and whose visual appearance is incidental, regulated entirely by the concept rather than by the appearance. "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," he has said. His most recent projects, like a good deal of other serially based art, are planned entirely conceptually but contain a few visual aspects that make no "sense" to the viewer, such as a shape that must be completely contained in another one and taken on faith rather than seen, or an odd proportion that just doesn't seem to work visually. A "nonvisual structure" is nonvisual because it does not inspire the usual response to art; it does not make compositional sense, just as the nonrelational primary painting or structure disregards compositional balance. In this way it may incorporate the irrational as well as the rational, disorder as well as order.

Some of the most rationally conceived art is visually nonsense. The extent to which rationality is taken can be so obsessive and so personal that rationality is finally subverted and the most conceptual art can take on an aura of the utmost irrationality. Hanne Darboven makes sheets of serial drawings on graph paper—endless permutations based on complex numerical combinations; the more she makes, the more offshoots become possible, and even hundreds of drawings based on a précis of a précis of a précis of one combination only imply the ultimate infinity. Her decisions on which to follow and which to leave are aesthetic. Darboven's is a kind of blind man's art too; the works themselves have analogies with Braille; they pass directly from the intellectual to the sensuous, almost entirely bypassing the visual. The illegible but fundamentally orderly tangle of lines connecting point to point is *felt* by the mathematical layman more than it is understood rationally or visually. Often there is not even a perceptible

<sup>11</sup> Duchamp, interviewed by Sweeney, *op. cit.*

pattern. Carl Andre's bricks and metal plaques appear simple but stem from an extremely complex motivation; he offers clastic art as an alternative to plastic art: "Whereas plastic art is a repeated record or process, clastic art provides the particles for an ongoing process."<sup>12</sup> Like Darboven and Andre, and like Eva Hesse in her infinitely repeated identical shapes or rows of curiously exotic but understated forms, many ultra-conceptual artists seem to saturate their outwardly sane and didactic premises with a poetic and condensatory intensity that almost amounts to insanity. How normal is normal art, after all?

These artists are far more "inside of" their work than are others, such as Peter Young in his binary number paintings or Bernar Venet in his faithful copies or blowups of recent scientific diagrams and formulas obtained from Brookhaven Laboratories. Their work represents a simple idea simply put but remains, deliberately, outside—a comment on idea art, as was some pre-Pop work like Dine's or Magritte's. (John's number and letter series seems to have more in common with the first group.) Venet's "paintings" are visually simple and even, in spite of his intentions, decorative. They are beyond the intellectual comprehension of the artist himself, who, knowing that his audience is equally uninitiated, provides taped "explanations," which only compound the bewilderment of a spectator demanding "meaning" from the work.

Idea art has been seen as art about criticism rather than art-as-art or even art about art. On the contrary, the dematerialization of the object might eventually lead to the disintegration of criticism as it is known today. The pedantic or didactic or dogmatic basis insisted on by many of these artists is incorporated in the art. It bypasses criticism as such. Judgment of ideas is less interesting than following the ideas through. In the process, one might discover that something is either a good idea, that is, fertile and open enough to suggest infinite possibilities; or a mediocre idea, that is, exhaustible; or a bad idea, that is, already exhausted or with so little

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Dan Graham, "Carl Andre," *Arts* (January, 1968).

substance that it can be taken no further. (The same can be applied to style in the formal sense, and style except as an individual trademark tends to disappear in the path of novelty.) If the object becomes obsolete, objective distance becomes obsolete. Sometime in the near future it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist as well as for the artist to be a writer. There will still be scholars and historians of art, but the contemporary critic may have to choose between a creative originality and explanatory historicism.

Ultra-conceptual art will be thought of by some as "formalist" because of the spareness and austerity it shares with the best of painting and sculpture at the moment. Actually, it is as antiformal as the most amorphous or journalistic expressionism. It represents a suspension of realism, even formal realism, color realism, and all the other "new realisms." However, the idea that art can be experienced in order to extract an idea or underlying intellectual scheme as well as to perceive its formal essence *continues from* the opposing formalist premise that painting and sculpture should be looked at as objects *per se* rather than as references to other images and representation. As visual art, a highly conceptual work still stands or falls by what it looks like, but the primary, rejective trends in their emphasis on singleness and autonomy have limited the amount of information given, and therefore the amount of formal analysis possible. They have set critic and viewer thinking about what they see rather than simply weighing the formal or emotive impact. Intellectual and aesthetic pleasure can merge in this experience when the work is both visually strong and theoretically complex.

Some thirty years ago, Ortega wrote about the "new art": "The task it sets itself is enormous; it wants to create from nought. Later, I expect, it will be content with less and achieve more."<sup>13</sup> Fully aware of the difficulty of the new art, he would probably not have been surprised to find that a generation or more later the artist has achieved more with less, has continued to make something of "nought" fifty years after Male-

<sup>13</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1956), p. 50.

vich's *White on White* seemed to have defined nought for once and for all. We still do not know how much less "nothing" can be. Has an ultimate zero point been arrived at with black paintings, white paintings, light beams, transparent film, silent concerts, invisible sculpture, or any of the other projects mentioned above? It hardly seems likely.

## Art Within the Arctic Circle\*

September 24: From New York to Edmonton, Alberta, with Lawrence Weiner, artist, to meet Bill Kirby, Director of the Edmonton Art Gallery and the N. E. Thing Company (Vancouver artist Iain Baxter and his wife Elaine), and then fly to somewhere within the Arctic Circle, where Weiner, NETCo., and Harry Savage, an artist from Edmonton, will execute works of art proposed for that location. Virgil Hammock, an Edmonton journalist and professor, and I will document the proceedings. The trip is sponsored by the Art Gallery as part of their "Place and Process" exhibition, which features outdoor and temporary work; the show itself will consist primarily of film and photographic documentation of works done in Edmonton and other parts of the world by the participating artists (places range from the Sahara to the Arctic Circle to New York, processes from an inane cornflake-spreading piece to the rather more provocative contributions of artists such as Richard Long, Dennis Oppenheim, and Robert Morris). The Arctic expedition arose from Weiner's piece, conceived before

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