Investigations: The Expanded Field of Writing in the Works of Robert Morris

Edited by Katia Schneller and Noura Wedell
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TO THE READER

Footnotes contain abridged references to Robert Morris’ texts and exhibition catalogues. They include the title and publication date of Morris’ writings, and the title, the mention “ex. cat.” and the publication date of his exhibition catalogues. Complete references can be found in the bibliography at the end of the book.
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A paradoxical body of work. A voluntarily self-contradictory body of work that forcefully resists the interpretations and labels to which we might wish to reduce it. An elusive body of work, impossible to pin down. A body of work, therefore, that does not lend itself to being compressed into a laudative preface to the proceedings of a symposium held on the 20th, 21st and 22nd of November 2008 at the Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art and at the École normale supérieure of Lyon.

The research center which hosted the symposium had always been keen on affirming its double mission: promoting research and welcoming practice of all sorts. The Center for Studies in Poetics provided a space where creative practice was considered an expression of research and research a major form of creative practice. Robert Morris embodies this double articulation. He is himself a visual artist creating work in a discursive field and a writer articulating the terms of that same field in which his artwork participates. Since the middle of the last century, he has theorized and clarified through numerous articles and seminal texts—such as his 1966 Notes on Sculpture—the evolution of art, its rapid transformations, decisive mutations, and its links to scientific, technical, logical, philosophical, and poetic knowledge. A poetic mode of access to understanding the real is also at the heart of this. Like Robert Morris has always done, the vocation of the center that endeavored to welcome and to honor him was to go beyond the borders between disciplines, between ways of doing, ways of working and making art. Just as the artist goes beyond his field to research disparate forms of knowledge production, the center went beyond its limits to work in direct collaboration with artists and their institutions (art schools, museums).

1. The Center for Studies in Poetics or Centre d’études poétiques (CEP) has since been replaced by the Center for Comparative Studies in the Arts (CERCC).
Morris has long maintained a close relationship to the Rhône region: the Saint-Étienne Museum of Modern Art organized his first significant exhibition in France in 1974, and the Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art extended three invitations to him in 1998, 1999 and 2000. Over three successive years, he produced three installations or groups of significant installations: Passageway and Portland Mirrors in 1998, Labyrinth in 1999 and White Nights in 2000. The final two projects related to one another, producing a hyper-reflexive space typical of the artist’s practice. Labyrinth was a wooden maze whose corridors led to impasses showing videos from his choreographic performances of the 1960s, and White Nights was a reworking of the former doubled by a mise en abyme of memory, through the projection upon its labyrinthine walls of approximately a hundred archival images of German-occupied Lyon from 1939 to 1945.

Morris is an artist who has, at times, been designated as an “intellectual artist” (one critic even went so far as to suggest that he might be “the intellectual artist par excellence.”) This description might warrant some suspicion were we to understand the work as encapsulated solely in its concept, or to think of its existence as minimally sensory, objective or material, or to read it as a simple exercise verifying an a priori theory of art. Instead, this characterization designates the fact that Robert Morris is an artist whose work explicitly converses with its culture, is nourished by it, and informs and transforms it in turn. He is an artist who has read Freud, Marcuse and Reich, the works of anti-psychiatry as well as Michel Foucault, but also Chomsky, Cage, Duchamp and Wittgenstein, who is steeped in German philosophy, in phenomenology, in the different structuralisms, in the classics of social critique and in the great actors and theorists of the modernist vulgate, as well as in the European pictorial tradition, Goya, Cézanne, the great Italians, and so on. At the same time, he immerses himself in scientific culture, as demonstrated by the almost obsessive presence of “entropy,” of entropic decay and disorder, from his Memory Drawings of the 1960s through White Nights in 2000.

He is thus an “intellectual artist” if by that one means an artist who is also a critic and a philosopher. Morris is an artist who permanently produces the theory of his practice and then invites us or incites us through his concrete “investigations,” material or immaterial, formal or informal, to consider the perpetual “alteration” and accumulation of his project. Even so, it is a project whose unity (whether formal, thematic, psychological) many commentators have struggled to grasp. The elusiveness is a consequence of the heterogeneity of Morris’ artwork. He has gone from painting to choreography, from sculpture to installation or performance, from autobiographical or auto-fictional writing to the different compositions of text and image with the mobility of a historical subject who has both initiated and traveled the major moments and movements of the adventure of modernity following abstract expressionism.
To identify only a few: minimalism, anti-form, conceptual art, land art. Morris’ project complicates further when, after his brilliant and decisive contribution to the accelerated change of forms and the radicalization of the new which occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s, this hero of the most acute experimental modernism performs a critical about-face against “modernist,” formalist, positivist, “progressive” and puritan practices and ideology, returning to painting, ultra-narrative or symbolic representation, baroqueness, apology of decorative art. The violence of this stylistic rupture has shaken many.

The meaning of this rupture, and whether, contrary to appearances, it was truly a rupture, remains to be determined. This is for exegetes and historians to assess. For Morris, there is always something of the past that returns and gnaws at the present. In the 1999 Labyrinth, we witness the return of “the baroque, Piranesi-like spaces of the stockyards, railroad yards and industrial spaces of Kansas City in the ’30s.” Kansas City, the city where he was born in 1931 and the setting of his childhood. Emergence and resurgence define Morris’ practice, his is a move against the illusion of linear development, against the illusion of a simply legible and naturally or immediately decipherable trajectory. I suppose one must take the artist at his word when he concedes to us, in an interview published in 1997, the freedom to reconstitute links and coherence in his work, and to locate dialectical connections between his successive, different or divergent formal choices. As he explains: “Life doesn’t make sense as a ‘whole’. Why should art?”

I began these remarks by speaking of a paradoxical body of work, one that gives itself to us as it resists us, one that perhaps even offends us, and that produces itself in contradiction. What better homage might we give this master of the labyrinth than to assure him that we accept his invitation (or at least attempt) to maneuver his work physically and in our imagination, to move with it, to grow disoriented among its corridors and mirrors, to enter into the network of questions it raises. To literally accompany him there.

For the last five decades, Robert Morris has remained unclassifiable, producing an œuvre in a variety of media and methods, an œuvre at turns qualified as minimal, post-minimal, conceptual, land art, anti-form, process art, and performance. The retrospective *The Mind/Body Problem*, organized in 1994 by the art historian Rosalind Krauss for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (later traveling to Paris at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1995, under the auspices of curator Catherine Grenier) established Morris’ resistance to formal categorization as an essential trait of his process. Although Krauss’s reading has become generally accepted, the methods for an in-depth analysis taking this complexity into consideration had yet to be imagined.

The lens of Morris’ writing practice seemed to hold this promise. Parallel to his career as a visual artist, Morris has written prolifically. He has published in multiple contexts, in art journals such as *Critical Inquiry, October, Art in America*, or *Artforum*, in exhibition catalogues, in academic contexts—as in a volume on Donald Davidson alongside Richard Rorty—, as well as in book format. His “enterprise” he tells us, “is piled as high with words on one side as with images on the other.” This writing practice has often led him to be labeled a “theorist,” even as his work mobilizes a wide variety of genres. Writing is a material for the artist. His texts range from statements of intent, however ironic or negative, through critical assessments of artworks and movements, to investigations in philosophy and aesthetics. Morris’ writings also espouse the genre of the polemic, sketching staunch political critiques of Western imperialism, of the increasing commodification of the aesthetic, or of monumentality in art under the auspices of what he calls the Wagner effect. Weaving throughout are autobiographical narratives, the biographical being a significant source to
which Morris often returns, varying his approach from the documentary to the fictive. Morris’ tone is rarely univocal, and his unreliable narrators significantly complicate the delivery of what meaning games they construct. Playing with its fragmentation into a multitude of personas, the voice of the artist contradicts itself, turns against itself derisively, entering into a labyrinthine game whose meanderings issue from a series of slippages of meaning, ironic disengagement, and smokescreens. Add to this a variety of narrative positions, a multiplicity of tone, a profusion of references and a discursive field of resistant unclarity unfolds.

The complex devices his writing performs aim, in fact, to produce distance and play of references, building a meandering architecture of gradual clarifications and obscuring. Morris’ prose unfurls as a series of investigations (a Wittgensteinian title that Morris borrowed in 1990), a kaleidoscope of inquiries and questions rather than straightforward demonstrations. If the texts from the 1960s and 1970s, reprinted by the MIT Press in 1993 under the title Continuous Project Altered Daily, are the most well-known, the idea with this colloquium was to take into account all of his textual production on the occasion of the release of the second volume of his writings, Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993-2007, by Duke University Press and thanks to the diligence of Nena Tsouti-Schillinger.

Morris’ textual production, however, is but one part of the equation; on the side of the image, text is also piling high. Indeed, since the early 1960s, the linguistic has been consistently inscribed within what, for lack of a better word, is labeled the “visual work.” In fact, a suspicion, and a conscious resistance to the image might even “have offered a certain purchase, a certain foothold” for the work, writes Morris in retrospect. His emphasis on the discursive arises out of such suspicion, as if the dangers of visuality could be averted, or at least lessened, by a strategy of textual inscription. Morris’ suspicion of the image is political. It arises as a preliminary, affective barrier against inurement to spectacle, and reflects Morris’ distrust of the entertainment industrial complex, the Mega Image, what is, he writes, “after all always too dangerous, too threatening, too irrational, too uncontainable, too freighted with ideological weight of one kind or another.”

Text finds its place within the “visual work” in a variety of ways. Text can, for example, be presented in lieu of image, as in the punning Memory Drawings (Fig. 24) from 1963. Subverting the representational procedure hinted to by its

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title, this series of “drawings” from memory consist in the repeated drafting of a scientific text about the physiological bases of memory which Morris had learned by heart. As the series unfolds in time, errors and omissions appear, manifesting the entropic nature of memory evoked by the text itself. The linguistic might also appear under the guise of the aural, in performances and installations, shearing text of its alliance with the iconic. And what of the works produced in dialogue with philosophers, as if such figures could lend an air of rationality to Morris’ image-making pursuit. The vast series of the Blind Time Drawings present an instance of obsessive probing of the blind underside of the image, below the visible. Morris, his eyes covered, executed these graphite drawings with his hands, leaning over a table, following a set of determined rules and guidelines. The texts inscribed below the drawings evolve alongside the series, and are borrowed from Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson. Morris’ ambition, he remarked, was to search for “a basis for drawing other than straightforward representation on the one hand, and the nonrepresentational on the other.” This could be read as an attempt to bridge a certain partitionning of text and image. But it also implied examining the psychological, philosophical, and political underpinnings of our constructed field of visibility. The texts which accompany the produced images are in no way illustrative, they are rather indicators of position in Morris’ somatic groping behind the visible.

The productivity of the negative is a significant Morrisian modus operandi, and not simply because of Morris’ affinity with irony and deflation. Only rarely does he enact a straightforwardly affirmative stance, and even then, he reflects upon his convictions with suspicion. The steadfast belief in eradicating all transcendence espoused in the early days of minimalism, for example, is later reviewed with a circumspect distrust as having left ajar a crack for a return of what it so emphatically rejected. Morris’ embrace of the negative can also be taken as indicative of his nuanced inscription within the field of aesthetic production. “Art has always been dependent upon and served one set of forces or another with little regard for the morality of those people of forces it served (pharaoh, pope, nobilities, capitalism).” Morris’ tonality, ranging from irony, skepticism, or virulent critique, to joking dismissal, displays a consciousness of the larger socio-political and economic implications from which his practice cannot be divorced. The negative tearing of gaps and interstices is meant to pry

7. On this question, see Miguel Hernandez-Navarro’s “Politics of Blindness: Robert Morris’ Antivision,” in this volume.
apart what appears unified as dominant social space. Skirting the abstract and the transcendent, the negative demonstrates an attachment to context, history, and the details of socio-political inscriptions. It is perhaps as well the most adequate tool to charting a minor history, or at least a conscious, cautious inscription within a narrative of domination that Morris is too realistic to believe he can escape. Indeed, there can be no utopian exteriority in which to claim refuge. Instead, Morris works from within to disrupt forms of invisibility couched in naturalized physical garb. “Spectacle is dedicated to avoiding consciousness, and is always transporting in delivering the phenomenological ride” he writes with characteristic charge.

Whenever historians have turned toward artists’ writings, they have “primarily searched for an ‘explanation’ there, a commentary, an instruction about form, a theoretical stance, in short, the confirmation of an aesthetic intention.” Morris’ textual corpus refuses to provide such intellectual reassurance. First of all, his artistic project resists the attraction of disguised or a posteriori justification. As he explains in “Professional Rules,” a 1997 article published in Critical Inquiry which looks to uncover certain family resemblances in his own work, and perhaps unearth a set of rules for these resemblances, “It is in forums like this one that the question, now in an altogether different form […] would illuminate the shaded space of the studio. […] There was something in the series of questions accompanying the making that responded to the conditions, the results, the accidents. It was as if the questions followed along without question. But in retrospect, and under the klieg lights, those steps taken reappear on stage to take their bows in the costumes of reasons.” A posteriori critical analysis is a theater, replete with the trappings of illusion and artifice of the genre, and Morris performs a humorous display of brilliance as he accounts for the many stylistic shifts in his work. The high disregard in which he holds the rationalization of action after the fact harks to many factors. Wittgenstein, of course, and the distrust of the illusion of a private mental space of known and rationalized intentionality, but also a long standing dialogue with Donald Davidson concerning the difference between reasons and causes. Surely there is also an emphasis on the experiential which Morris carries with him from his early minimalist days, as he refuses to create a hierarchy between embodied and material forms of aesthetic practice and more abstract ones.

Secondly, Morris’ attempt to reinscribe criticism within his own sphere of activity is an engagement with the larger economic and discursive frameworks of aesthetic production. Morris’ early Duchamp influenced works are emblematic of this positioning, and reflect upon the status of these objects within larger social-political frameworks. Examining the role of the critic, Morris sheds light upon mechanisms of symbolic valuation and validation which position the work of art in the hierarchy of culture. Morris does not directly engage with critiquing institutional (museums or academic spaces) or commercial (the gallery, or personal space of consumption) forms of validation. However, he answers to issues of power in the game of critical justification through distributing different roles to the critic, to himself, and performing spoofs of the artist as critic. His works provide a self-conscious reflection on his own uneasy position as a subject of analysis, on the implications that his theoretical practice might have in this game of power, and acknowledge the role of the art historian, and perhaps at times the artist-critic himself, in inscribing the work within a narrative of cultural relevance, status and dominance. A humorous deflation of the power of the analytical over the iconic, and by extension of the power-knowledge complex, ensues. It is difficult here to distinguish between the critical texts and the performances or video work as they often borrow the same elements to mount this critique. Morris has been engaged in such deflationary practice since the performance 21.3 (1964). Dressed in professor’s garb, he parodied a conference, speaking over a recording of a text by the eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky as it progressively fell out of synch. In the video The Birthday Boy (1994), he staged two art historians recounting the evacuation of narrative from the visual as a fundamental strategy of Western domination. Stumbling and increasingly drunk, the male and female narrators grow more and more perturbed as their story of domination unfolds, and end up insulting the screen behind them as it projects signs of their own alienation through the iconic. Morris also incorporated the critic within his own text. In “Robert Morris replies to Roger Denson (Or Is That a Mouse in My Paragone?),” he stages this as a cacophonous address between the anti-hero Ignatz the Mouse, and a number of figures lurking in the darkness in an asylum-like space. Morris continued this strategy during his intervention at the Lyon symposium. In oblique response to questions from the public, he retreated behind a dadaist move, reading quotes printed on pieces of paper blindly pulled from an envelope.

Morris spent his career considering the cohabitation of text and “visual” work (image, sculpture, performance, installations), as well as the repercussions of such cohabitation. This meant leaving behind the autonomy of each sphere in view of a contextualized, empirical, embodied inscription of meaning. Neither a user’s manual to the visual work nor truly immunized against iconic infiltration, text for Morris seems like a fabric full of holes, figuring the back-and-forth be-
between the visual and the written, each relaying its adjoining philosophical, historical, and social implications. Even when it seems to be dealing with the visual works directly, the artist’s text quite rapidly redoubles upon itself, with a more silent, opaque, underlying texture through which the visual work resurges in the shadow of the written work. Writing becomes a game of conceptual framing, disturbing the construction of stable and coherent meaning and, as such, unsettling the finality of interpretation. There are, of course, the visual works that do not mingle with text, the early minimalist sculpture, the anti-form felt works, the cenotaphs, there are also the texts that do not mingle with the iconic. But overall, the distinction between both domains, worn thin with passage, unfold as a labyrinthine complex. Even in the most restricted of linguistic spheres, as the philosopher Donald Davidson tells us, the metaphoric always slips the image back in from behind, for it shows, but doesn’t tell. Loose lips sink ships.

A recurring figure in his work, the labyrinth appears as one of the structural modes privileged by the artist. As an ancient form, Morris sees in it the possibility of bypassing a cultural ethos which he associates with Western modernism and links to the violence of humanism, colonialism, capitalism and the genocides that have left their bloody marks upon the 20th century. The labyrinthine form also provides a metaphor for the complexity of the interface between text and image, mind and body, inscribed within a narrative of the search for meaning. This labyrinth of meaning is indeed the stage for an encounter with desire and death, which we might define in psychoanalytic terms as origins and limits of the subject. The Minotaur at its center figures the uncertainty, fear, and sometimes violence that come when ethics collide with individual subjectivity. In its latest incarnation, *White Nights* (2000), this labyrinth took the form of a canvas structure at once fragile and monumental. We were invited to walk through it, and were drawn into its center. Under projected images of the German occupation of Lyon during the Second World War, we could see ourselves as projections of socio-historical circumstance, and perhaps feel the dangers, for ourselves and others, of our floating identities as they take shape in fields of power.

This labyrinthine interface swells as it traces the space of new practices, strategies as well of negative resistance. Throughout his career, Morris has ceaselessly invented new ways of doing, gone against established genres, attempted to break beyond enclosures. The subtitle of this book, “The Expanded Field of Writing,” references Rosalind Krauss’s seminal article of 1979. It proposed to redefine sculpture by taking into consideration the complexity of the new artistic practices that had appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, including

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Morris’ own. If we have taken up the title once again, it was not to force Morris’ practice into a system, but to make use of the openness of the semiotic square, so as to move from a binary opposition of text and image (or “visual” practice) to a space stretched between four, eight, even ten new poles. And thus, through a combination of contrasts, contradictions, complementary aspects and implications, a new field of hybridity could appear.

We have sought to travel the artist’s labyrinthine space through a pluridisciplinary approach, bringing together art historians, literary scholars, analytic philosophers, but also filmmakers and writers. The project of the symposium ran simultaneously to a critical writing studio at the Center for Studies in Poetics devoted to the work of Robert Morris. The aim of the workshop was to provide the conditions to generate knowledge as a collective, writing the text that the students read during the symposium, and preparing it for publication, with the difficulties and breakthroughs that collective writing implied. Our desire was also to provide a place for the equal collaboration of students with faculty, artists, scholars, and a larger field of experts against the partitioning of hierarchies and disciplines. The multiplicity of approaches that we wished to privilege in the symposium, and in this book, thus sought to answer and continue the radical investigations and debunking which Morris has impelled since the 1960s.

From this diversity of analysis, we defined three major pathways to examine Morris’ work: the place of writing in the “visual works,” the relations that Morris maintains with philosophy, and the experimentation of diverse textual genres. For the purposes of clarity, the texts in this volume appear in chronological order according to the period of Morris’ work that they reference.

The first of these pathways, entitled “Embedded Writing,” examines the different manners the visual works relate with writing. Christophe Cherix reflects on the series of prints *On Wheels* and *Morris Print* from 1962, where text and image are one. Katia Schneller turns to *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969), focusing on that isolated type in the artist’s textual corpus that is the log, written by Morris while he produced this ephemeral work, and which she analyzes in order to understand the devices through which the artist distances himself from intention and subjectivity. Gilles A. Tiberghien studies Morris’ relation to “land reclamation,” pitting together the different projects of outdoor works and the texts written about them during the 1970s. Rachel Stella presents another illustration of this interpenetration between text and image by considering, via the yardstick of Roman and Baroque cenotaphs, the installation *Preludes for A.B.* (1981), a series of texts engraved on marble plaques, with a skull mounted on each. Denis Briand reinscribes the autobiographical work from 1998, *Telegram: The Rationed Years, from R Morris KC MO Nineteen Forties to R Morris NY NY Nineteen Ninety-Eight*, in the context of the exhibition
held at the Leo Castelli Gallery for which the text was published. Finally, the students from the Critical Writing Studio at the Center for Studies in Poetics—Clementine Gozlan, Marie Cadalanu, Julia Klarmann, Emőke Simon, Thomas Spok and Luiza Vasiliu—address how *White Nights* (2000) interrogates the social construction of the symbolic through its labyrinthine form and its integration of archival photographs from World War Two.

Following this is a series of investigations concerning Morris’ complex relationship to philosophy, and in particular, to analytic philosophy, phenomenology, and art theory. Brian Winkenweder interprets the mechanisms Morris used in *Memory Drawings* and *Self-Portrait (EEG)*, both from 1963, and in the series of drawings called *Investigations* (1990) against Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Anaël Lejeune discusses Morris as a theorist, analyzing the evolution of Morris’ phenomenological approach in texts written between 1966 and 1975 in light of the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Anton Ehrenzweig. Jean-Michel Roy returns to the way in which Morris convokes the figure and the thought of the philosopher Donald Davidson in the series *Blind Time Drawings IV* and the text “Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts After Doing Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson,” both from 1993. W. J. T. Mitchell reflects on the plasticity of Morris’ theoretical thought by studying, notably, the logogram used in one of his more recent texts, “The Labyrinth and the Urinal” (2008). Miguel Hernández-Navarro passes the artist’s work through the sieve of Jay Martin’s arguments in *Downcast Eyes* (1994) concerning the rejection of an optical predominance associated with Cartesian thought in 20th century art. Finally, Ileana Parvu examines “Cézanne’s Mountains” (1998) and “Jasper Johns: The First Decade” (2007) as imbrications of the textual and the iconic, and seeks, via language, to approach Morris’ visual experience of these paintings.

More specifically textual, the final section brings to light Morris’ inventiveness as a writer. It looks at the multiplicity of his writing practices, at his way of going beyond established genres, and discloses the writing games that he invents. Cécile Mahiou focuses on the often indirect dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Morris around the notion of experience, examining issues of process and how a work is perceived in its environment. Noura Wedell seeks to localize, in Morris and Vito Acconci, the moment where poetry leaves the page to orient itself toward performance. The question of withdrawal, so central to Morris’ artistic process, is developed by Valérie Mavridorakis, who is interested in Morris’ textual role-playing. She interrogates the ironic use of *personas* in “The Art of Existence” (1971), “Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson”

(1993) and “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Inconscious” (2003), texts of an ambiguous nature that oscillate between pastiche, hoax, and “character drama.” Finally, Isabelle Alfandary provides a literary analysis of *Telegram* (1998) centered around the question of the address of oneself. Autobiography, espousing a logic contrary to the duty of memory, responds here to the need to forget a past whose specter has haunted the artist’s production since the 1980s.

The volume closes with the testimony of filmmaker Teri Wehn-Damisch as she looks back to her collaboration with Morris and Rosalind Krauss, a collaboration whose goal was to bring to light the paradoxes of the text/image relation. The script of the film which that collaboration gave rise to, *Robert Morris, The Mind/Body Problem*, on the occasion of the 1995 Guggenheim retrospective, is reproduced here.

Finally, this collection of essays is placed under the aegis of a series of unpublished texts by Robert Morris himself. These are autobiographical writings which condense the obsessive fears that have pursued and nourished him and his work for the entire length of their becoming. They are humorous notes of sorts, witnesses to the elegance of this master of trenchant irony.
Robert Morris

Elephant

Isn’t the question usually asked of Bartleby the Scrivener: why he wouldn’t and didn’t? But maybe it’s better to ask why the others around him would and did. Would a shift in the question locate Melville’s conceit? Didn’t Bartleby know what the others did not? Hadn’t he seen through the sham of the working world, of the very idea of participating in the life form of getting along? Hadn’t he seen the entire enterprise of existing as a certain identity in a certain class at a certain time as a sham? These thoughts came to him as he found himself less and less able to keep up with his own social conventions and the expected political reciprocities. And then he had had the dream in which he had sloughed off a thick animal hide from his body. It just dropped away. He recognized it as a thick “elephant skin.” In the dream it seemed to be necessary to rub up against the elephant hides of others. And then it just fell off his body. This elephant skin. More like scales from the eyes, although this was not in the dream. Not so much people as lumps rubbing blindly against one another. It was necessary to have the elephant skin to negotiate the world. Desire was lodged in the gray wrinkled covering and had to be carried around on the body. Why elephant? That it coded the need for memory seems too obvious for a dream. Although in the dream it seemed especially important to remember to have it, the elephant hide over the head blocking vision. Presumably such a heavy hide provided warmth as well as protection. That reassuring animal warmth of living, of knowing one was alive amongst fellow elephant hiders, knowing one was not alone, knowing one understood

1. When we solicited Robert Morris for unpublished texts to include in this collection, he very graciously offered these short prose pieces. Despite our prodding, he did not provide any information concerning the dates these texts were written, and the context in which they are inscribed.
the rules and expectations, knowing one did not forget and could perform the little jerky motions, those signals and signs of understanding and sympathy, aid and suggestions for improvement, all of which passed for communication between those rubbing hides. It was not so much that the shedding of the elephant skin had made him vulnerable as it had removed him from the species, from belonging to the same kind, to being another of the kind, of the elephant-hided kind, of those who rubbed and waddled along with their eyes hooded by the layer of translucent blubber, of those who involuntarily smiled at the sensed rub of another hide and automatically responded by moving in that little jerky way beneath the thick covering, which expressed nobody knew what but was universally regarded as communication.

New Drug

The exhibitions in the museums were thickened with stupidity. Either entertaining in obvious ways, infantile six-year-old ways, or else sticky with narcissistic, flesh-crawling indignation. The crowds moved in unison to the voices in their headsets. Like silent moo-cows. Doe-eyed, slack-jawed. They needed something. But what? Had today’s life attained such levels of overload that it had numbed their capacity for affect. Chocolate did not do it any more. Or sex. Or TV reality shows. Or movie explosions. Art was the easy new fun drug. One liner, get it quick, quasi-conceptual, brittle little numbers. Enough to scratch their itch. It did not take much. And the small focus was the limit. The big, old, loud spectacle installations were out in these days of no budgets. Less is more again. Cool. Very cool. Their adjective, as they look askance at one another. What lifestyles those artists lived over there in Brooklyn, and then telling about the times, these hurried, relentless, crushing times.

Moldy2ism

They told him he no longer had to worry about skepticism because now we all know so much. And they said this with a straight face. Besides, they told him, nobody bothers about epistemological questions anymore. Not after the “linguistic turn,” after Frege and Wittgenstein, which was already about a century ago. They admonished him to get with it. Now we only have to worry about meaning, or say we do, even if we don’t all that much. And intentionality can be naturalized after all, so they told him. Even
though he secretly thought Descartes’ corpse still twitched now and then. No, no, forget it. No more mind-body problem. Mind is supervenient on the brain and consciousness is just a natural emergent higher-order systemic function. Nothing to it really. They kept telling him. Anyway language is not what it has been cranked up to be. Chomsky and his minimalist program? All thought dependent on language? Forget it. You just have to get more down and dirty, they kept telling him. Get a little more biological, down there with perception and action and belief and desire. That’s where it’s at, they said. That’s where language bubbles up. Somehow. They really didn’t say much about the how. But they led him to believe that biological intentionality is where it’s at. They said he worried too much. He even worried about free will in a world of mindless, meaningless particles in fields of force. Well, they laughed, didn’t he remember old Kant saying that your denial of free will could only be intelligible as an exercise of it? But he wasn’t denying it; just worrying about it. Oh, it is so easy they told him. Just reach for quantum indeterminacy racketing around down there in those sub-sub-sub-brain particles. Itsy-bitsy little glitches we can’t at the moment see, but someday... There’s your free will. End of discussion. Lighten up. Get on the sunny side of the street. Dump the moldy dualism. Stop worrying.

**Tourettes**

Six men were in black formal attire. But their movements were spastic and frantic and seemed out of control. Some inhibition of the body had short-circuited and the normal repressions were misfiring and outlandish gestures were given free rein. Was this some sort of group Tourette’s syndrome? They did not speak and no sound escaped their lips, yet they seemed to exert considerable effort. Was this some kind of dancing? If so, where was the music? Silence. The harsh, bright light gave their black and white clothes too much contrast and made them hard to look at. Was this perhaps some kind of mime performance? But miming what? Did the tuxedos somehow bring out the thrashing, the falling down, and the undulating bodies writhing on the floor? Each man was doing something different, yet all were moving in a similar jerky, high-energy way. In fact it seemed quite demanding of the body. Perhaps these were athletes in the midst of attending a serious high-award ceremony when the drug (whatever it was) hit them all at once. But no explanation seemed convincing. This combination of solemn stiff dress and out-of-control motion. But was it out of control? Perhaps great skill was required to move so fast and with so many parts of the body. Perhaps intense pain was animating
these men and such movement was all that could relieve their distress. But
didn't this happen all the time in slightly different ways? Those solemn high
meetings of the powerful in their steely, formal dress. Hardly moving in their
secret rooms. And their whispered words and the barely audible strokes of
their pens writing in their secure spaces and resulting in far away bodies being
animated into sudden, uncontrollable motion. Or anyway parts of bodies.
I. EMBEDDED WRITING
Morris(‘s) Prints

CHRISTOPHE CHERIX

It may seem peculiar on my part to begin my presentation with a drawing that, even as it provides a key to Morris’ œuvre, also stands as a reminder of a painful moment in the history of the institution I work for, the Museum of Modern Art in New York. *Litanies*, a sheet covered with writing from 1961, is an important drawing by Robert Morris. It was part of our collection until it mysteriously disappeared during the long tour of the exhibition *The Drawings of Robert Morris*, organized by Thomas Krens in 1982 for the Williams College Museum of Art. That this fundamental piece by Morris should appropriate a text by Marcel Duchamp as if it were a ready-made is all the more apropos given that disappearance has been the fate of so many of Duchamp’s original ready-mades. Morris, like several other American artists of his generation including John Cage and Jasper Johns, was considerably influenced by Duchamp’s work. In the drawing in question, dated 18 February 1961, whose complete title is *The Litanies of the Chariot by Marcel Duchamp. A Two and One Half Hour Recitation by R. Morris*, Morris spent two and a half hours copying by hand in a totally repetitive manner a preparatory note by Duchamp for the *Large Glass*. A facsimile of this note was first published in 1934, in the *Green Box*, a flat case reproducing the artist’s writings of the years 1912–23. An English translation by the museum curator George Heard Hamilton appeared in 1960, the year before the creation of *Litanies*. There is a performative aspect to *Litanies*, as it takes Duchamp’s statement literally by accomplishing quite exactly what it states. If Duchamp associates chariot and litany, this is because the latter expresses by repetition a circular aspect of the thought process, two elements, repetition and circularity, which Morris expresses as literally as possible, and, I would suggest, materializes in the very space of his drawing. If such a strategy based on the almost literal visual

1. *Litanies* has since been recovered and was restituted to the Museum of Modern Art in May 2012.
translation of a statement or a concept can be discerned even earlier in the works of Jasper Johns—who has always appealed to Morris—its singular use by Morris anticipates that of Bruce Nauman a few years later. It is as if Morris were attempting to “contaminate” his drawing practice (and, as we shall see, his sculptural practice as well) with elements as foreign to visual art as time, exploited here in a manner comparable to that of a concert, or as the idea of repetition, in the theatrical practice of rehearsal leading to a representation, two notions which are intrinsic to the media of theater and dance.

Shortly before the creation of Litanies, in 1960, Morris gave up painting (in a style influenced by Jackson Pollock) and moved to New York City. During this period he explored new artistic fields, for instance experimental dance, which he practiced along with Simone Forti, his spouse at that time. This is also the period of the assemblage pieces sometimes described as “neo-dadaist” objects, various performances, and the first sculptures consisting of simplified volumes—works that often served, as was the case a few years earlier for Rauschenberg’s white monochromes, as stage accessories. This was also the period when Morris encountered George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus; their paths intersected for a brief moment. Thus we find Morris’ name in the table of contents of An Anthology of Chance Operations…, an anthology assembled by Maciunas and published by La Monte Young and Jackson MacLow. The book project, which included more than twenty participants, began some time in 1961 and finally was published in 1963, precisely when Morris disassociated himself from Fluxus and decided to remove his contribution from the production even though the printed pages were already stockpiled in his loft. Fortunately, a few copies were assembled earlier and thanks to these survivors, we can now appreciate Morris’ contribution after the fact. The original publication was meant to contain two texts by Morris, texts which anticipate some of his major works. The first, a score in a typically Fluxus style, proposes that the spectator “make an object to be lost[,] to put something inside that makes a noise and give it to a friend with the instructions: ‘To be deposited in the street with a toss.’” This proposition alludes to a 1916 work by Marcel Duchamp called With Hidden Noise and announces the work Morris made in 1961, Box with the Sound of its Own Making. This piece consists of a small wooden box from which emanates a recording of the noises created while in the course of the work’s fabrication, that is to say a tautological reflection on its own making. Morris’ second text in An Anthology of Chance Operations seems to have more to do with what art history has labeled minimal art. In Blank Form, Morris stated: “Blank form [sic] is like life, essentially empty, allowing plenty of room for disquisitions on its nature and mocking each in its turn. Blank Form slowly waves a large gray flag and laughs about how close it got to the second law of thermodynamics.” Follows a list of examples of empty sculptures includ-
ing “a column with perfectly smooth and rectangular surfaces, two by eight feet, painted grey,” which evokes another major piece by Morris from 1961: Two Columns, whose re-fabrication in 1973 was acquired by the Teheran Museum of Contemporary Art. Of particular interest is Morris’ evocation of the second law of thermodynamics, concerning entropy, that is the disorder inherent to all systems and which leads them ineluctably toward chaos. It appears that this is, to my knowledge, the first instance of such a notion expressed in visual art; and it will take on considerable importance not only in Morris’ career, but also in the works of a whole generation of artists including Robert Smithson, both a friend and admirer of Morris.

The first work by Morris to evoke the theme of entropy explicitly is a suite of experimental prints from a zinc plate made during the beginning of the 1960s and titled On Wheels (Figs.1-3). In this suite, Morris submits his initial text to a process of entropic nature by printing the plate over and over again without re-inking, until the final passage produces a sheet on which no remnants of text can be seen. The Cabinet d’arts graphiques in Geneva conserves a large part of this suite, and one can see clearly from print to print how the slowly exhausted text loses its legibility. And what does this text, authored by Morris himself (unlike Litanies) tell us? A brief extract: “On Wheels / Wheels, roll me along. Wheels, there’s nothing / like you. Wheels, you’re so full of rolling that / you can’t be rolled out. Wheels, you got / endless rolling. Wheels, you got rolling in / reserve. [And later] Wheels, we could go / almost anywhere, just the three of us. / Wheels, roll me along. Wheels, we ought to / go across Kansas.” And so on, as the text fills up the entire space of the sheet of paper. This filling up of the whole page with writing is similar to the procedure employed in Litanies, where the text was appropriated from Marcel Duchamp.

However, in the suite On Wheels, Morris no longer repeats a single sentence, but rather constructs a text whose logic is not temporal—i.e., the two and half hour time frame of Litanies—but rather spatial, since the process culminates when the text arrives at the end of the sheet, or shall we say page. In the course of an interview I undertook with Morris in 1995, he explained “On Wheels did not repeat the same phrase over and over again as did Litanies. But there is a refrain that gets repeated. […] On Wheels is more utopian than Litanies, a very airless and disenchanted text. That Wheels might have transported me across the country was also a romantic notion. […] I suppose I thought of this object as, in some fantastic way, related to Tatlin’s Glider—a kind of liberating vehicle.” Indeed, Morris’ text addresses an object, in this instance a sculpture, since Wheels is a sculpture made of laminated pine and moulded steel (collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto), perhaps created in 1962 rather than 1963 as is commonly attributed in most of the artist’s catalogues. This object, as Morris states in the text On Wheels, exists as a transitory form, and as such it
is probably the first clear articulation of one of the fundamental characteristics of the new relationship between spectator, object and space brought about by minimal art.

Wheels was exhibited, along with Column, Box With the Sound of its Own Making, and several other pieces in Morris’ first one-man show in New York, in 1963 at Richard Bellamy’s Green Gallery. The exhibition’s only photographic document known to me depicts the sculpture Wheels as well as a suite of prints from zinc plates whose fabrication process recalls that of On Wheels. Morris exhibits this second suite of ghost proofs as a counterpoint to his sculpture, a suite which demonstrates the entropic process taken to its extreme. Each sheet from the series Morris Prints (Figs. 4-6) contains the artist’s name (“MORRIS”), identifies the kind of object that is created (“PRINTS”), and bears a series number from 1 through 20, which the artist has inscribed in lead pencil on each sheet. A variant reading of the suite, “MORRIS PRINTS” describes the artist’s action. In either case, whether considering the work itself or the action that produces it, the viewer observes its slow disappearance, from proof to proof until the artist signs the final blank sheet, a disappearing act that should not be compared to Rauschenberg’s signing the erased sheet of a De Kooning drawing. Morris signed a sheet that never carried artistic marks, yet its immaculate state was the inexorable conclusion of the series. Morris is not advocating here the disappearance of the author, but rather the disappearance of the singular gesture, of any heroic or constitutive artistic act.

My final point is that the suite of Morris Prints brings to the exhibition space the temporal oscillation that was already perceptible in a work such as Litanies, even as it emancipates itself from the kind of illustrative relationship seen in On Wheels, which relates as much to the work of Duchamp as to Morris’ own sculpture. These prints inhabit the walls as if to indicate that what really matters is not what one sees there but rather our own movement through the room, a movement which leads to chaos, loss of reference points and to the fundamental existential difficulty that has resided in Morris’ work from this period until the present, and which allows his work to resonate beyond the constrictions of style and period.


Robert Morris’ entire œuvre is a single work—‘a continuous project altered daily.’ With this reference to Morris’ 1969 piece Continuous Project Altered Daily (Figs. 7a-7b), Thomas Krens summed up the complexity of the artist’s production in his preface to the catalog of the 1994 Morris retrospective held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In fact, Krens was renewing the artist’s own allusion to CPAD. Indeed, the previous year, Morris had given this title to an anthology of his writings published since the 1960s. In its title and its conceit, the 1969 piece—completed and shown over the course of twenty days in March in the warehouse of the Leo Castelli gallery in New York—had foregrounded the notions of perpetual motion and permanent calling-into-question that the artist and the commentator both designated as the essential ferments in Morris’ process. CPAD, considered one of his emblematic experiments of the 1960s, and categorized as process art, earth art, or anti-form, had acquired by the mid 1990s the additional value of being a pragmatic work, a veritable metaphor of Morris’ complexity.

In spite of this success, the work remains relatively undocumented. The information available in different critical sources is scarce and often marked by inexactitude and contradiction. Aside from the entry in the 1994 catalogue

2. Continuous Project Altered Daily will henceforward be referred to as CPAD.
Robert Morris: *The Mind/Body Problem*, no analysis of *CPAD* has really been undertaken. Why does such an analytical void surround this important work? Does the enigma come from the work itself? Might it in fact contribute to it? Such questions reinforce the hypothesis that *CPAD* might provide an emblematic reading of Morris’ body of work as a whole, one that “begins and ends as a text that consciously seduces, and ultimately resists, a definitive exegesis in any form.”

Writing plays a special role in the exegesis of *CPAD*. The only traces of the piece available today are photographs, published by Multiples Inc. in 1970, and a log that Morris kept during its duration. This log, as yet unpublished, is a different form of writing than the theoretical articles, works of fiction, or autobiographical writings that Morris has published throughout his career. It also deals with a different set of problematics. Examining this document against the photographs of *CPAD* will allow us to probe issues of intention and subjectivity, and to measure their place in Morris’ relation to materials he uses in his works.

If we are to resolve the enigma that is *CPAD*, a return to the facts is necessary in order to chart the unfolding of the piece. Once its workings are shown, and we are given a glimpse behind the scenes, examining the work’s architecture will help us understand how it was conceived to resist the exegete, and how it functions as a satisfactory metaphor for Morris’ process of creation as a whole.

**A Hermetic Device**

*CPAD* resists the exegete in multiple ways. The first obstacle is the difficulty that the exegete encounters upon attempting to clearly retrace the events that comprised it. Most critical appraisals indeed repeat the same litany of partial information, and it seems that nobody has truly examined the facts. Indeed, there is very little information concerning the work: as it no longer exists, what available traces we have of it are summed up in the photographs in the leaflet published in 1970 by Multiples. Morris’ archives do contain a few additional documents: thirty-three black-and-white snapshots, professional photographs of *CPAD*, and the previously mentioned log, which constitutes an invaluable account of the piece.

8. See footnote 22.
10. Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.


Upon examination, these different documents reveal contradictions in what has been commonly established about the work. The first inexactitude concerns the dating of the piece: although the different catalogues provide the dates of March 1st-22nd, 1969, Morris began his journal on Sunday February 23rd, entering preliminary reflections on CPAD’s aspect and on its method of completion. Above all, he designated Friday February 28th as his first day of work. Concerning the events that make up CPAD proper, we can only retrace a lacunar path since Morris does not make regular entry logs: although the different catalogues claim that Morris kept a daily journal, he did not comment on five of the twenty-three days during which the work was on view.\footnote{These are Saturday March 1, Friday March 7, Monday March 10, Sunday March 16, and Monday March 17, 1969.} Likewise, the catalogues explain that Morris worked on CPAD every morning during the production and presentation of the piece in the warehouse of the Castelli gallery, leaving space for public viewing in the afternoon, Tuesday through Saturday. Upon reading his log, however, it is apparent that each entry did not necessarily correspond to a day of work: the artist only really manipulated his piece over twelve of the twenty-three days, probably corresponding to the twelve images that Morris published in 1970. Clearly, the artist did not take pictures of his work at the end of each day, contrary to another idea that has been erroneously circulated.

If we combine the information offered by these twelve images and by the log, here is what we learn about the events that comprised the work:

–Friday February 28th, 1969, first day of work. Morris piled clay on the floor and mixed it with water, walked on it barefoot, and then, with the aid of a broom soaked in diluted clay, marked a square on the wall, which he continued on the ground. According to his journal, he then executed a square on the ceiling with oakum and fat—a square which lay beyond the frame of the photograph entitled “Stage 1” in the 1970 leaflet. Finally, assistants broke up cylindrical pieces of clay, some of which were mixed with water and were then dragged and broken up against the wall by Morris. The tools (a broom and a shovel), the materials (a table, barrels, and bags) and the sign indicating the title of the work, left on the scene propped up against the wall, punctuated by their presence the different stages of CPAD, as shown by the twelve images in the leaflet.

–Monday March 3rd, 1969, second day of work. The table that was set against the right-hand wall disappeared and was replaced, in the image entitled “Stage 2,” by a sheet of plastic, one edge of which was attached to the wall, while the other covered the pieces of clay and oakum lying on the ground.

–Wednesday March 5th, 1969, third day of work. The plastic was rolled into
a ball in the left-hand corner of the image entitled “Stage 3.” Morris wrote that he coated a square with grease and began to build platforms out of plywood.

–Thursday March 6th, 1969, fourth day. Morris placed two platforms on top of the material left on the floor and covered them with earth and felt.

–Monday March 10th, 1969. In his notebook, Morris considered this the sixth day of work; it corresponds to the image entitled “Stage 5.” The piece of felt disappeared while four additional platforms covered with earth were added.

–Wednesday March 12th, 1969. Morris, having lost count of his days of work, hesitated between the seventh and the eighth day, added oakum to the tables in less than an hour. The corresponding image is “Stage 6.”

–Thursday March 13th, 1969. As illustrated by the image entitled “Stage 7,” Morris unfolded felt on the platforms and spread earth on it.

–Saturday March 15th, 1969. Morris spread a veil of muslin above the platforms, installed lights above this and hung the “CPAD” sign on the wall. This stage corresponds to the image entitled “Stage 8.”

–Wednesday March 19th, 1969. Morris removed the veil, as shown in the image entitled “Stage 9.”

–Thursday March 20th, 1969. Morris dismantled the platforms, piled them against the wall, as shown in the “Stage 10” image.

–Friday March 21st, 1969. As illustrated by the “Stage 11” image, Morris continued to clean and the photographer Steve Balkan lined up eight enlarged photographs of the preceding states of the work along the wall, next to the “CPAD” sign.

–Saturday March 22nd, 1969. This date corresponds to the final image of the leaflet, “Stage 12.” Morris recorded on tape the sounds produced during the cleaning process, sounds which he then made available to visitors.

These are the main events that appear in the images and that Morris has described in his journal. Although this list shows the major stages of the work, it passes over a large number of more or less important events, a precise and daily transcription of which seems not only impossible but useless. The work preserves a certain opacity, never giving itself over to a complete reading. This is reinforced by the artist’s own attitude, for he did not lend sustained attention to the recording of events, and his practical indications were often vague, even incomplete. Writing nevertheless appears as another form of recording, different from that of the photographic process, one that can express a duration, restitute a feeling of this unfolding—thus recalling Morris’ experiments in the early 1960s at the interface of drawing and writing.
Showing the Working Process

The complex device that is CPAD invites us to experience a period of time. It walks us through its twenty-three days, instead of insisting that we pause upon one particular stage. For this reason, it is often presented as a project in which Morris’ investigations around process, which he clarifies in 1968 with the notion of “anti-form,” were pushed to the extreme. Following his April 1968 article in Artforum, and after the December 1968 9 at Castelli exhibition—where he brought together nine artists including Serra, Nauman, Hesse, Bollinger, Saret, and Sonnier, in the Castelli gallery’s warehouse (where CPAD would be shown two months later)—Morris appeared as the leader and theoretician of a new artistic trend called “anti-form” or “process art.” After having worked with the idea of Gestalt, Morris returned to his interest in the process of fabrication. He had already explored this at the beginning of the 1960s, for example, with Box with the Sound of Its Own Making. With CPAD, however, the process of realizing the work was more important than the completed object itself. Morris was no longer trying to produce precise arrangements, but, on the contrary, allowed the material to react to the force of gravity. The aesthetic of CPAD was that of a work in progress; this is what stands out in the brief enumeration of the stages of its production. It was only upon reaching “Stage 8” (fifteen days after the beginning of the piece) that the work was considered completed and its sign was affixed to the wall—the four final steps (or the eight final days) were devoted to its dismantling. Choosing to use the warehouse of the Leo Castelli gallery participated in this aesthetic of the working piece. Located at 103 West 108th Street, on the Upper West Side,3 it was not on the map of artistic New York city. The warehouse was located far from the museums of the Upper East Side as well as from the Castelli gallery, then located at 4 East 77th Street, near the Metropolitan Museum, in the city’s wealthy residential area. The simple fact that it bore the name of one of the most important New York galleries, however, legitimized Morris’ action and inscribed it within the art world sphere. Yet choosing this old warehouse linked artistic activity to the aesthetics of industrial space rather than to those of the White Cube, the norm in contemporary art galleries at the

The proposed artistic experience was not the pure contemplation of a completed object in a gallery setting, but was instead inscribed in a work space which reproduced the New York artist's studio of the 1960s—which a majority of artists occupied due to their cheap rents. While Morris showed *Untitled (Threadwaste)* and one of his felt series at the Castelli gallery between March 1st and 22nd, he made use of the warehouse as a laboratory, perfectly well-suited to the investigation of process, and created a construction-site aesthetic by using earth, shovels, or platforms that looked like scaffoldings. This aesthetic played a large part in the project; Morris wrote about it on Sunday February 23rd, 1969, before beginning *CPAD*: “leave materials from the working day as they are in the vicinity of what has been worked (‘transformed’) purposefully by me – i.e., include the ‘stored’ on hand aspect as part of the work. Remove only the tools at end of working.”

Morris thus proposed a mise-en-scène of the artist at work by using a space similar to that of the studio and by developing a construction-site aesthetic there.

**Visual Conceptualization**

*CPAD* was much more of a mise-en-scène, however, than a studio open to the public. The experience the public could have remained limited: the show's marginal geographic location and the minimal accounts in the press at the time did not, apparently, attract many visitors. Furthermore, the public was never present while the artist was working, since visits were only allowed in the afternoon. The desire to control the spectator’s experience was, to our understanding, central in the brochure that Morris published with Multiples in 1970. As an artist known to be extremely wary of photography, this is Morris’ only

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16. Earlier works, such as *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) or the performance *Site* (1964) already exhibited this construction-site aesthetic. This process was fully inscribed into the questioning of the artistic process that artists were then addressing, particularly the notion of the studio. One could cite several experiments that responded to performance, such as Bruce Nauman’s videos made in his studio, in which he executed simple and repetitive gestures. But this work by Morris had a more direct impact in the New York scene through the piece also entitled *CPAD* conceived by the dancer Yvonne Rainer—who visited the Castelli warehouse during the elaboration of *CPAD*.
brochure which presents photographs with no accompanying text. Indeed, in an interview with Lucy Lippard, he declared that “a purposeful replacement of [the work's] existence with a photograph has never been a working method […] Photographs function as a peculiar kind of sign. There is a strange relation between their reality and their artificiality, the signifier-signified relation they set up is not at all clear or transparent. One of the things they do is to give too much information and not enough at the same time.”

The brochure thus provided a mise-en-scène of the work’s evolution, and zoomed in more particularly on the movements of matter as if shooting a small film of a stage. The images, all taken by the professional photographer Steve Balkan (and not by Morris) follow each other like a kind of film breaking down movement. The brochure unfolds as follows: first the title “CPAD, 1969,” then the materials used in order of appearance (as if they were actors’ names listed by order of appearance in the closing credits of a film), “Earth, water, grease, plastic, felt, wood, thread, light, photographs, sound,” and then the twelve stages, always presented in the same way. The number corresponding to the stage in question appears on the right, and the room is presented as a panoramic view in the form of a long rectangle, with the ceiling cropped and a band of empty floor in the front to isolate the work. This framing, and the sepia-brown color of the photographs, lend uniformity to the brochure; Balkan’s photographs, conserved in Morris’ archives, are taken with a larger frame, showing the ceiling and unsorted piles of materials in the foreground, and have been intentionally cropped in order to correspond to the parameters of the brochure. The evolution of the work is thus brought out as a kind of game of seven errors.

This presentation effectively isolated and objectivized the work by flattening it into a bidimensional view. Paradoxically, it reproduced the aesthetic conditions of the “White Cube” in erasing the warehouse’s architectural characteristics and thus the studio metaphor. Only the four details of stages 2, 6, 8, and 11, inserted in the layout, broke with the rigidity, systematism, and seriality of the brochure. The piece effectively became encapsulated in these twelve steps, which corresponded to Morris’ twelve interventions. The temporality of the twenty-three days of work was effaced. This produced a visual conceptualization of the idea of process in accord with the theoretical distance of the

19. This process brings to mind the principle of the chronophotographs of Jules Etienne Marey or Eadweard Muybridge, in vogue at the time among artists on the New York scene; Sol LeWitt, for example, produced Muybridge I in 1964.
texts published by the artist at the time, notably “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects”21 (Artforum, April 1969), in which he described the experience of immersed perception proposed by the works presented in the article (paradoxically only visible or transcribed by virtue of details that zoomed in on their materiality). In this way, under the guise of a false objectivity, the machinery of art was exposed rather than conveyed without question.

The Artist Takes a Step Back and Leaves Matter to Decide

The CPAD leaflet presented the materiality of the work as if it acted independently of the artist. Procedures of mise en abyme—such as including photographs of the work into the work (as of “Stage 8”) or incorporating an audio recording which Morris understood as “inserting its memory into the piece, letting it think about itself, its past its youth, middle age, its wetness and dryness.”22 Morris’ log also functioned as a mise en abyme of the work. However, his own introspection opened a breach in the mise-en-scène. On Friday the 14th of March, he wrote: “I chart the profile of the course I’m following, the feelings, the changes, the fears, the disgust, the acceptance and the dread.”23 Unlike the texts published at the time by Morris, this piece of writing gave access to his intentions, or at least to the angst-Ridden conflict implied by the anti-subjective stance in the work.

Indeed, his working method consisted in not making decisions, letting the work occur of its own accord. By limiting his interventions to a select number of fixed constraints (produce a work, in so many days, in a specific space, working every morning with certain materials), he created a work situation similar to Simone Forti’s task performances, in which dancers executed tasks provided to them in advance. On his first day of work, Friday February 28th, 1969, he wrote: “No idea what to be done with it. Began aimlessly. […] The mess had no justification.” He then balked at giving birth to new identifiable forms and felt “[s]ome deep disgust with acting on matter”24 which he qualified on several occasions as “fecal.” He added, on Monday March 3rd, 1969: “I’ve driven out, finally, artifice and intention with this work and am left almost drilled with its

22. Notes by Morris on Thursday March 20, 1969 in his notebook, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
23. Notes by Morris on Friday March 14, 1969, in his notebook, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
sense of existence which unrelieved by the structure of form that makes all art human. The most inhuman work so far. Not a distinction, a description.”

Morris abdicated his decision making power in order to question the limits of art and to undertake a critique of the notion of style by constantly challenging the idea. On Sunday March 2nd, 1969, he wrote: “I fear nothing. […] I am still willing to torture myself inside out. Furthermore, I see it as the only method for advance. This, in spite of the irony of its being only welcomed as a new note of fashionability by my public.”

CPAD should be considered outside of all stylistic categories; to classify it under the terms process Art, anti-form, or earth art would reduce the complexity of Morris’ undertaking. The different vocabularies that Morris used throughout the 1960s, such as earth, felt, plywood, photography, or sound, confronted themselves for the first time as the artist’s personas. On Thursday March 13th, 1969, Morris wrote: “This work is like the layers of myself.” In its most developed state, CPAD was as an accumulation of layers, the photographs of the leaflet insisting on this aesthetic of the transverse cut. Its different vocabularies appeared as different facets of the artist. Morris engaged with a similar procedure in the last text of the 1993 collection Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris, “Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson (Or Is That a Mouse in My Paragone?)”, where he staged several personas, such as Body Bob, in reference to his performances, and Major Minimax, referring to his so-called minimalist works.

To create this theatre of materials, in which different vocabularies confronted one another, Morris remained withdrawn, knowingly producing a work that folded back on itself and resisted the spectator. To reveal his sentiments would have been “…as though [he’d] revealed [his] methods of masturbation.” He refused to seek reasons that would explain his work, which he claimed resulted only from the movements of his body, as he would later emphasize by citing Davidson: “We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature.”

27. See footnote 4.
30. Notes by Morris on Friday March 14, 1969, in his notebook, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
His was a conception of a decentered and fragmented self. As he specified on Sunday March 9th, 1969: “Get away from preciousness, so much come for the personal interaction, work, feeling for the thing – get in some sense ‘out’ into the cold. Don’t worry about the energy of the self center, just act.”

Morris reaffirmed this dislocation of the Self and of the unity of the creative act in a manifesto of sorts in the introduction to the collection Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris, presenting this assertion of a fragmentary self as an anti-humanist position.

With CPAD, Morris confronted what he calls “unmaking” and produced: “The most mythical thing I’ve ever done. Cain-like of dirt, a construction that goes nowhere, a constructed ruin built over an abandoned agricultural organization.”

He characterized CPAD on Wednesday March 5th, 1969, as “A reverse excavation, building up ruins,” an expression that cannot fail to recall the artist Robert Smithson and their common interest in entropy. Indeed, Smithson wrote, in his 1967 article “A Tour in the Monuments of Passaic,” of “ruins in reverse” described as “the opposite of the ‘romantic ruin’ because the buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built.”

CPAD set forth a metaphor of the vanity of creative combat as presented by romantic heroism. Morris’ desacralization was radical not only because the destroyed work persisted only in the form of a multiple, but above all because its consequence was the production of a new form of heroism, an entropic heroism in which the work, instead of being the positive achievement of a transcendent object, became only dejection; on Wednesday March 19th, 1969, he described it as: “Viscera, muscles, slime, primal energies, afterbirth, feces.”

CPAD engages with the paradox that the more one exposes what is in the wings of the production of a work, the more slippery and resistant to exegesis

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32. Notes by Morris on Sunday March 9, 1969, in his journal, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
33. Notes by Morris on Friday March 21, 1969, in his notebook, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
34. Notes by Morris on Saturday March 15, 1969, in his notebook, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
35. Notes by Morris on Wednesday March 5, 1969, in his notebook, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
36. Entropy is the second law of thermodynamics, theorized in the Nineteenth Century, which postulates the irreversibility of transformations and corresponds to the measure of the degree of disorder within a system: the higher the elevation of entropy of a system, the less its elements can be ordered, and this, irreversibly.
38. Notes by Morris on Wednesday March 19th, 1969, in his notebook, Robert Morris Archives, Gardiner, NY.
the work becomes. As Body Bob said in “Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson”: “The Whole story can never tell the whole story.” The log occupies a special place in the functioning of the work, reflecting the position the artist sought to occupy, participating in the work without being openly inserted into it. It gives access to the artist’s real-time reflections, a spontaneity which is absent in the images of the work, and which is often suppressed in Morris’ work. Although the log is not properly part of the work, it accompanies its process of completion, describes and comments upon it, and makes it explicit like a hidden memory. It gives access to the complex machinery of CPAD and to the philosophical complexity of the fragmentation of the self that is at play within it.

Robert Morris’ artistic activity is tangential to a great part of the artistic production of the last forty years. His work can thus be identified with minimalist art as well as with informal art, body art or land art, to cite only a few of the most well-known forms of this production, and those forms that appeared during the first part of Morris’ career. His production is to some degree “imbricated” or “layered.” Different directions and styles coexist in his œuvre so that one cannot think of these different moments as the clear beginning and ending of a period. Rather, in order to build these problematic groupings that Art History refers to as artistic movements, it seems to me that we must rely upon the activation of what Paul Veyne has called “plots.”

Whenever he is associated with a particular artistic movement, Morris singularizes himself and is never where one expects him to be. This same artistic strategy is at work in the way he writes his texts. Working with natural materials, dirt, grease, manure, as he did in 1968 when he participated in the Earth Works exhibition at Dwan Gallery along with, among others, Robert Smithson, Michel Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, and Walter de Maria, he situated himself within the register of a new genre. All the while he was simultaneously pursuing other kinds of works made of felt or mirrors. The texts that accompany this period, or the types of production that I will examine here, correspond generally to the theoretical genre of discourse, produced between 1966 and 1970, that Jean-Pierre Criqui considers to be in the service of “the registration of and dissemination of ideas” and which contain relatively little play with language.

as such, differing from the texts that will come later. These early texts set forth
the bases of an aesthetic that borrows much from Gestalt Theory and from
phenomenology. Although I might allude to these, I will situate myself, instead,
in a slightly later moment, the one during which Morris reflected, either in
interviews, or in articles and short texts, upon the outdoor productions that
have connected him to earthworks.

Robert Morris’ interest in this kind of production is longstanding. In 1966,
he sparks a friendship with Robert Smithson and Nancy Hold and accom-
panies them to the Great Notch Quarry in New Jersey. The same year, he re-
ponds to Smithson’s proposal for an “Air Art” project following a request by
the Tippets Abett MacCarthy-Stratton agency, which was working on the
construction of the Dallas-Fort Worth regional airport. His proposal, like that
of Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Smithson himself, would never be undertaken,
but a model remains, or at least a photograph of the model, which consists of a
circle of earth and lawn, as can be seen in Smithson’s 1967 article “Toward the
Development of an Air Terminal Site.”

It is easy to understand why creating a work visible from an airplane could
have interested Morris, for he had been reflecting for years upon the scale of the
sculptures that he had begun to produce at the beginning of the sixties and that
would be qualified as minimalist by the middle of the decade. His “Notes on
Sculpture II” addressed the issue of the relation of the object to the space sur-
rounding it, and to the spectator, and asked the question, “Why not put the work
outside and further change the terms?” A real need was felt to enter this new
stage, he added, and installing sculptures in courtyards or in front of architecture
was not sufficient. “Ideally,” he concluded, “it is a space without architecture as
background and reference, which would give different terms to work with.”

With Continuous Project Altered Daily (Fig. 7a-b), a work in constant evolu-
tion, composed of dirt and rubbish, exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery from
March 1st-22nd, 1966, and with his participation in the collective exhibition

3. Robert Smithson, “Toward the Development of an Air Terminal Site,” Artforum, vol. 5, no. 10 (June
projets pour l’aéroport de Dallas–Fort Worth,” in Christophe Cherix, Robert Morris, estampes et
multiples 1952-1998: catalogue raisonné (Genève/Chatou: Cabinet des estampes/Centre national de
aérien,” in Marc Dorian, Frédéric Pousin, ed., Vues aériennes. Seize études pour une histoire culturelle
5. Ibid.
Earth Art at Cornell University’s White Museum, Morris confirmed his interest in process and in working with natural elements. That same year, he had a piece made for the exhibition organized by Harald Szeemann When Attitudes Become Form, which brought together a number of artists under the banner of “land art.” Morris was also present in the Sonsbeek 1971 exhibition. On that occasion, he built Observatory (Fig. 8), in Santpoort-Velsen, a project he had begun to sketch out in 1965, and that would be dismantled at the end of the exhibition. It consisted of a circular structure, totaling 71 meters in diameter, made of earth and wood with elements of granite and steel. Writing about the work, in a brief text entitled “Observations on the Observatory,” published in 1971 in the booklet that served as the exhibition catalogue, Morris was already attempting to distinguish his work from the earthworks: “Observatory is different from any art being made today. It has a different social intention and esthetic structure from other art being made at present. I have no term for the work. A kind of ‘para-architectural complex’ would be close but awkward.”

The artist emphasized from the beginning that he did not intervene in inaccessible spaces; his work was made to be experimented by everybody. As for its aesthetic structure, it was inspired by ancient works and returned to a sensual exploration of space, allowing the viewer to experience, in a quasi-phenomenological way, the play of reversals between interior and exterior, the interior of one circle becoming the exterior of another.

Morris sought to distinguish the Observatory “from other large scale outdoor work which exist as static, wholistic, monumental artifacts.” It is likely that he was alluding here to Smithson’s Spiral Jetty or Heizer’s Double Negative, neither of which were truly static in the sense that, following the example of the Observatory, both supposed that the viewer move upon or around them in order to truly apprehend them. And even if at first glance the Spiral could pass for “a whole form that can be taken in at a glance,” the dialectic between what it was not and what constituted it in return—photographs, drawings, texts or films—clearly manifested its internal dynamism.

Finally, the Observatory referred to other cultural traditions: “The overall experience of my work,” he explained, “derives more from Neolithic and Oriental architectural complexes. Enclosures, courts, ways, sightlines, varying grades, etc., assert that the work provides a physical experience for the mobile human body.” In 1977, a permanent reconstitution of the Observatory was made. The walls of

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7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

the interior circle were built from a resistant tropical wood, and the work had now become larger, as the exterior circle’s diameter had stretched to 91.20 meters.

Between February 7th and February 28th, 1970, at the Leo Castelli Gallery, Morris had exhibited a group of drawings under the title Earthworks Projects. One could see, among them, a certain number of sketches made in 1969 destined for the Jacques Cartier park in Ottawa. That year, the National Gallery of Canada had commissioned him to make a work for this park, but had ultimately retracted the offer. The hillocks, trenches, pools, alignments of stone, and plantations of trees visible on the different sketches, the manner in which they would be situated in space in relation to the position of the sun, manifested a genuine engagement with this type of landscape project.

For a decade, Robert Morris maintained his interest in this type of work, all the while doing a great many other things. In 1974, in Belknap Park, Grand Rapids, Michigan, he completed the project he had presented the previous year at the Grand Rapids Art Museum. It was the first public commission of this type in the United States. And finally, in 1979, the King County Arts Commission launched a site rehabilitation program entitled Land Reclamation as Sculpture. Seven artists were invited to work on seven different sites, and to participate in a symposium. They included Herbert Bayer, Iain Baxter, Richard Fleischner, Lawrence Hanson, Mary Miss, Dennis Oppenheim, and Beverly Pepper. Morris was offered the rehabilitation of a gravel site in the county of Kent. He accepted, but his participation was subject to the obligation that he give a conference to be transcribed in the catalogue under the title “Robert Morris: A Keynote Address.” The text began not without frustration and a certain irony:

It has always seemed to me that when an artist is asked to speak about his work, that one of two assumptions is being made: one, that because he has made something, he has anything to say about it, or two, if he does, he would want to. Questionable assumptions, in my opinion. But in my case, I was not asked, I was told. It was part of my contract and I couldn’t get it changed. In any case one should not forget Claes Oldenberg’s remark that anyone who listens to an artist talk should have his eyes examined.°

This “Address,” as it is sometimes called, was republished under the title “Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation” in the spring 1980 issue of the journal October. In the preface of his book, published by MIT Press in 1994, Morris indicates that it constitutes a revised text. In fact, it is a completely different text.

11. Ibid., p. 11.
In the “Keynote Address,” Morris began by asking himself “what is public art?” This question, he said, posed more questions than it brought answers. How should one classify works found neither in galleries nor in museums, large scale outdoor productions, often using earth as primary material and referring as much to landscape as to architecture, and which were called earthworks or siteworks: “It would not be accurate to designate privately funded early works of Smithson or Heizer or de Maria in remote parts of the desert as public art. The only public access to such works is photographic.” But Morris immediately added that many works of this kind later benefitted from public funding and became accessible to all, so much so that one could say that they did indeed belong to the public domain.

The artist then undertook a sort of archeology of the genre, taking up Rosalind Krauss’s demonstration on Rodin and Brancusi, and leading up to minimal works by artists such as Andre, Judd, Smithson, Oppenheim, and Morris. This genealogy, Morris avowed, was a “narrative” that took these particular actors into account, although it might just as well have focused on others.

“To describe railroads accurately,” Kubler specified, trying to clarify what he meant about artist’s biographies, “we are obliged to disregard persons and states, for the railroads themselves are the elements of continuity, and not the travelers or the functionaries thereon.” Morris did just the same, declaring that one could just as well describe an interrupted chain “of burdensome marble, bronze and steel adorning architectural plazas, courtyards, sculpture gardens and fountains” linking Carpeaux to Oldenburg.

The difference, continued the artist, was that the question here was not one of ornamentation, since “in most cases [the work] has a dialectical relationship to the site it occupies.” One can nevertheless classify the different siteworks into two major categories. The first groups together “those who have chosen to work in inaccessible parts of the great Southwest to pursue various themes of Emersonian transcendentalism truly reminiscent of 19th Century attitudes, a kind of re-living of the pioneer spirit, of subduing the West in artistic terms.” These works were the products of obsessive individualists working with bulldozers toward the erection of “quasi-religious sites for medication.” No name was cited, but one thinks of course of Michael Heizer.

In the second category, one found “those working closer to urban sites and

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16. Ibid.
in less overwhelmingly romantic landscapes.” They have “produced work more often informed by social, economic, political, and historical awarenesses, as well as by concretely physical ones relevant to the site.”

This time, there followed an enumeration of artists belonging to this group: Tractis, Mary Miss, Alice Aycock, Singer, Vito Acconci, Richard Fleichner, Robert Irwin, and Nancy Holt. Their works were less known and yet, according to Morris, they possessed a much stronger critical impact than those that were more “pastoral and remote.” These were also, in Morris’ eyes, public works in the literal, social, and aesthetic sense of the term.

Having reached this point, I would like to point out three things. The first concerns the change of attitude, or point of view, between the two versions of the text on *Land Reclamation Art*. The second concerns the manner in which Morris distinguishes himself from a kind of production with which he partially identifies. The third examines his relation to time.

Concerning the change between the two texts, in the version published in *October*, the proposal is clearly more oriented toward the ecological problems that arise from mining, in the perspective of land “rehabilitation” with the understanding that *to reclaim land* signifies to reappropriate a territory, to enhance it (by clearing, for example) or to rehabilitate or “requalify” it (by depolluting, another example.)

In 1973, Morris recalled, the American Senate had proposed the following definition: “reclamation means the process of restoring a mined area affected by a mining operation to its original or other similarly appropriate condition, considering past and possible future uses of the area and the surrounding topography and taking into account environmental, economic and social conditions.” Now that same year, Smithson, with whom Morris was very close, had died in an airplane crash on the site of his last projected work, having tried for many years to interest mining companies in what some would later call *Land Reclamation Art*.

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20. Smithson had written to Ralph Hatch, president of Hanna Coal Company, proposing to intervene on the Egypt Valley site in Ohio. He had said, notably, that the “artist, ecologist, and industrialist must develop in relation to each other, rather than continue to work and to produce in isolation.” Robert Smithson, “Proposal, 1972,” in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, op. cit., p. 379. Conscious of the growing media sensitivity to these problems, he emphasized that it would not be sufficient to reforest the grounds in order to restore the site. On the other hand, an “earth sculpture” would have a positive visual value and would attract attention to the process of environmental rehabilitation. At the same time, he remained rather skeptical of results. “I’m thinking of another problem that also exists, that of mining reclamation. It seems that when they made up the laws for mining reclamation they wanted to put back the
Morris then observed the diversity of situations and legislation in effect, despite a 1977 Senate directive that recommended the rehabilitation of sites within a legislative framework whose modalities of application were left up to the state. We have here clearly left the context of the discussion of public art that had opened the conference Morris presented to the symposium.

Referring both to Galbraith and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Morris recalled that productivity signified the fragmentation of tasks, the decomposition of substances via chemical analysis of their elements in order to create synthetic products, whereas ecological thought fell within a fundamentally contrary vision, since “the very nature of the ecological concept is to consider any system as a whole.” This phenomenon of fragmentation, denounced here, is accompanied by the growing degradation of the environment and by a progressive and irreversible exhaustion of energy sources. An additional factor, among many others that might grow out of this phenomenon, was of course the “pollution of the earth.” But Morris added, far from any idealism, “This category is misleading insofar as it presumes a ‘clean’ world. This has naturally never existed and is moreover ecologically neither conceivable nor desirable.”

He then concluded this text with a strong detachment, almost cynicism, that he had not manifested in the “Keynote Address,” which ended with a warning against the good conscience that could animate such art given to returning a site to its “original state.” With this type of consideration, he added, one could understand that the mining industry might have fewer scruples in disturbing the landscape, knowing that an artist “(cheap, mind you)” was appointed “to transform the devastation into an inspiring and modern work of art.” And he thus insisted on the necessity of making moral as well as aesthetic choices that would not necessarily entail that the artists intervening in these operations “convert such sites into idyllic and reassuring places, thereby socially redeeming those who wasted the landscape in the first place.”

Nine years later, in the *October* text, reprinted in *Continuous Projects Altered Daily* in 1994, Morris seemed fairly disabused of a situation he did not wish to be fooled by. In 1994, he wrote, land rehabilitation was possible because money was easy to come by, since “the key that fits the lock to the bank is ‘land reclamation.’” One could think many things of this *ménage à trois* between art,
the State, and industry; one could think in particular that this kind of art was servile and that the practice of it entailed a loss of liberty. But, Morris specified, “art has always served,” to differing degrees. It served the interest of the mining industry and its relation to the public but it did not serve the galleries, who played the game of the art market, any less. Morris was wary of a position of withdrawal, or of disengagement in art, as much as he was of the social engagement of artists, because, in one sense, “art is always propaganda—for someone” and, in another sense, “Artists who deeply believe in social causes most often make the worst art.”

“If the only rule is that art must use what uses it, then one should not be put off by the generally high level of idiocy, politics, and propaganda attached to public monuments—especially if one is in the business of erecting them.” And he imagined, in an “art fiction” scenario, that all mines under the sun would have the duty to welcome artists-in-residence for the purpose of that additional aesthetic touch: “There must be crews out there, straining and tense in the seats of their D-8 Caterpillars, waiting for that confident artist to stride over the ravaged ground and give the command, ‘Gentlemen, start your engines, and let us definitely conclude the twentieth century.’”

This final irony on the social utility of artists and the redemptive role they could play in society marked a shift in tone, as if an earlier epoch had passed, and that the naïve attachment to certain convictions that could have been defended by Smithson just a few years earlier was no longer possible.

If Morris can be historically associated with land art—he had participated in the most important manifestations through which it became known, toward the end of the sixties—he had also always upheld the specificity of his contribution, as indicated earlier. In the 1971 catalogue of the Sonsbeek exhibition, he declared bluntly: “Observatory has nothing in common with what is being done in art today. Observatory is different from any art being made today.” The first difference was, as we have seen, Morris’ desire to situate himself near urban zones, refusing to create earthworks in inaccessible spaces. The second difference was his relation to the landscape, which was present above all in the views, the spaces that were chosen for the gaze in these constructions, which Morris hesitated to refer to as “para-architectural complexes.” An artist like Michael Heizer was not at all concerned with the landscape; he has stated that what Smithson referred to as such only interested him under a degraded or entropic form.

In 1977, in an interview with E. de Wilde, on the subject of the reconstituted Observatory, Morris remarked that Asian and Islamic cultures, to which he had already referred in 1971 in his “Observations…,” privileged paths and spaces: “there are passages and then there are places where you stop, there are views and then there are interruptions. There is always a concern about the access and the view, rather than the object. That’s true of Islamic mosque-architecture as well, and I feel much more related to that than to western traditions of buildings, objects to be looked at.” The third difference, according to Morris, was that, contrary to other creators of earthworks, what interested him was not “the shaping of the earth or the objects” and not “the idea of building an object, but of shaping space.” Without being architectural, the aim was akin to an architectural preoccupation. “[Observatory] lies in between sculpture and architecture […] so it’s about a place and about space.” In this case, and although he would refute it, he was perhaps not so different from someone like Michael Heizer.

To differing degrees, all of these works draw from Morris’ so-called minimalist period the desire to make the perception of the object and the one who perceives it coexist in space. Much more than the instantaneous apprehension of the object as expected by modernism, what was required here was a temporal experience.


29. Ibid.

30. Nevertheless, and for other reasons that we should take the time to analyze, Morris will stigmatize Heizer as the best representative of what he calls *The Wagner Effect*, which characterizes artists working in gigantism with truly exorbitant means. The list is long: Lichtenstein, Robert Wilson, Turrell, Serra, Kiefer, Gehry, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial. But *The Wagner Effect* can, insidiously, concern less spectacular works that nevertheless attempt to gain a central status in the history of art through “media manipulation.” Such would be the case of Yves Klein or Joseph Beuys. However, Michael Heizer’s *Complex City* in the desert “is surely one of the century’s most monstrous and egregious examples of the genre, and not to be forgotten are the works of the heirs of earth art.” Robert Morris, “Size Matters,” 2000, pp. 474-487, reprinted in Robert Morris, *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993-2007*, 2008, p. 129. In a text dating from 2003, “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Unconscious,” Morris furthers his attack. This time Heizer, alongside Robert Smithson, Gutzon Borglum, Frederic Church, John Ford, and even Bruce Nauman, among others, represent both a certain American Phenomenological Awe (AMPHENA) that cultivates the mythology of wide open spaces of the West and a pronounced taste for gigantism, at the same time as the imperialistic unconscious of American art (IMPUNC). Because in the sixties, “earth art recapitulated the conquest of the West as an aesthetic allegory [and] Michael Heizer’s grandiose City in the desert may be the most demented and blatant metaphor yet for the IMPUNC gesture.” See Robert Morris, “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Unconscious,” 2003, pp. 678-694, reprinted in Robert Morris, *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993-2007*, 2008, p. 174 and 176.

31. On the question of temporality in the work of Morris, in particular through the dimensions of memory and forgetting, see the interesting study by Katia Schneller, *Robert Morris, sur les traces de Mnémonie*. 

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This dimension had deeply preoccupied Morris since his earliest writings. In considering what space, scale, and time characterized these earthworks, he insisted in his inaugural conference at King County Museum upon the fact that “what may have been latent and unemphasized in interior work may come to the fore in an outside situation in quite different ways. Take the element of time, for example. It is not much emphasized in previous object sculpture. In fact, it was generally assumed not to be a formal parameter at all, as objects are pretty much apprehended all at once. But, as I indicated, as a space expanded in certain minimalist work, time began to emerge as a necessary condition under which the work is perceived. Complex and extended works which assumed the viewer’s presence from within, so to speak, locked time into space itself.”

In “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated”, published in 1970, Morris thought through certain identifications between the body and the object in usage in the 1960s, and commented on the phenomena of perception—which he had analyzed in his “Notes on Sculpture”—phenomena grounded in culture on the one hand, and linked to body weight, equilibrium and movement on the other. A certain tendency in Modern Art had attempted to uncover what this signified, he wrote in the same text, “and it has not achieved this through static images, but through the experiences of an interaction between the perceiving body and the world that fully admits that the terms of this interaction are temporal as well as spatial, that existence is a process, that the art itself is a form of behavior […].”

Here, we were still within a phenomenological register which Morris would subsequently abandon. Wittgenstein, Mitchell, Kripke, Goodman, Davidson, would soon become new conceptual resources. At which point, Morris’ interest in earthworks would cease. 1978 heralded the end of this period. The preceding year, in 1977, he had installed a piece made of granite stones and basalt at the sixth Documenta in Kassel and had not yet intervened in Seattle. Publishing “The Present Tense of Space” in volume 66 of Art in America, his stated intention in entering the game was to consider the relation to space in a certain type of work that had emerged in the seventies. That space was not merely physical, but also mental, and here Morris, leaving behind an understanding of consciousness in the phenomenological sense, opposed the operations of the “I” to those of the “me,” guided, this time, by the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Mead. The “I” corresponded to our present experience of time, whereas the “me” reconstituted it through memory thanks to words and images.

Although this point would warrant a longer development, we can see that, regardless of the thinker to whom he referred, the relation to time was rethought by Morris in order to understand his spatial explorations. The narratives he tried to produce so as to grasp works through complex genealogies, which he retraced while reflecting upon their legitimacy, were likely the inheritance of Kubler’s reflections in *The Shape of Time*. I have already mentioned Kubler and certainly by design, since we know that Morris, although he would later distance himself from Kubler, had been deeply impressed by the book *The Shape of Time*, which had inspired him for his essay on Brancusi, and which he often cites in his texts. Indeed, Kubler noted a mutual incomprehension among historians and artists: “the unprepared historian regards progressive contemporary painting as a terrifying and senseless adventure; and the painter regards most art scholarship as a vacant ritual exercise. This type of divergence is as old as art and history. […] To be sure, certain historians possess the sensibility and the precision that characterize the best critics, but their number is small, and it is not as historians but as critics that they manifest these qualities.”

We would have to add, thinking of Robert Morris, that a few artists also have the sensibility and the knowledge that characterize the greatest historians. But that is certainly another story.

When Kitsch Becomes Form

RACHEL STELLA

This paper treats the textual elements in Robert Morris’ multi-media installation, Preludes (for A.B.). Analyzing how text is deployed both as something to look at and something to read contributes to an understanding why this installation is a pivotal piece in the artist’s œuvre.

Preludes (for A.B.) is first seen in the spring of 1980 at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York City, in a group exhibition called 3 installations: Vito Acconci Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim. The work contains eight similar but not identical units, each consisting of a molded plastic skull-slab of Italian onyx (Fig. 9, Fig. 10). These are dispersed at regular intervals in a windowless room whose walls have been banded with black paint: a horizontal swathe around the circumference of the room intersects with eight vertical stripes, each one behind a skull and slab assembly. From the ceiling, eight spotlights focus their beams on these units, leaving the rest of the space in relative obscurity. A light affixed behind each onyx slab emphasizes the stones’ translucent quality while at the same time illuminating the text silkscreened upon their polished surfaces. These backlights also call attention to the repetitive iconography in play: eight variations upon cranium, cross and grave. The skull motif has, since Antiquity, appeared in visual or verbal tropes evoking death. The bands of black paint intersect to form eight cruciform shapes behind the stone and skull units, alluding to the preponderance of this form in the Christian death cult. As Morris places his skulls just above the inscribed slabs, tombstones come to mind.

To explain the prestige of the skull image in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, André Chastel wrote: “As death entered the world through Adam’s fault, a skull, that of the first man, was depicted at the foot of the Savior’s cross. This dizzying short take on human destiny was present in the still life paintings known as vanitas, which adopted this symbol when a vigorous reminder of man’s fate seemed indispensable to piety.”

Skull, cross, tomb: through dramatic lighting and clever manipulation of materials Morris enables his cheap and cheesy stage set to resonate with the full force of a seventeenth century vanitas. Close inspection, however, of the materials in Preludes shows them to be inexpensive and commonplace: metal brackets, electrician’s lights, industrial paint, plastic toys, and ersatz marble. The incongruity between the tacky means and the eschatological message turns out to be such an effective rhetorical device that Morris will exploit it variously for years to come.

Barely six months after Preludes debuts at Sonnabend, the two-part Study for a View from a Corner of Orion (First Study: Day, Second Study: Night) is shown at the Castelli Gallery in Soho. Here, the program is more complex than in Preludes (for A.B.). Steel trusses, stones, light fixtures, felt, aluminum tubing, and mirrors are placed, ostensibly in the formation of the constellation of Orion, around, not skulls, but complete human skeletons. In the Day version, the skeletons are silver-leafed; the Night version contains a single black skeleton in a pose taken directly from Bernini’s Tomb of Alexander VII, and likewise holding an hourglass. Although both pieces are large room-filling installations, no formal similarities link Study for a View from a Corner of Orion with Preludes (for A.B.). Yet, by citing Bernini explicitly in Corner of Orion, Morris clarifies the eschatological themes and art historical references that the Preludes do indeed announce. These themes persist and develop in his work throughout the 1980s. In 1981, he redeploy the same skull-over-slab configuration as Preludes in an installation called Jornada del Muerto. To capture the tone of this piece, one dares say Morris opts for bad taste and goes for baroque. Skull-slab units hang on the walls of the room, and in the


10. Robert Morris, Preludes (for A. B.): Roller Disco: Cenotaph for a Public Figure, 1979-1980 (detail). Italian onyx, silkscreened text, electric light, metal, plastic, paint, 35 × 34 × 7 inches (88.9 × 86.9 × 17.8 cm). Collection of the artist.
middle of the installation Bernini’s skeletons are back, wearing World War I helmets, astride giant phallic missiles, even as they evoke the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Mirrors, theatrical lighting, and black felt wall upholstery contribute to the dovetailing of high art references into a display that seems inspired by the carnival midway and funhouse. Unlike the Preludes arrangement, the slabs underneath the skulls are no longer silkscreened with texts, but rather with collaged images containing geometric motifs used by Southwest Indians, documentary images of nuclear explosions, and other allusions to the atomic tests carried out at the New Mexico site the piece is named after.

Preludes contain no such overt citations to a specific baroque artist; Morris quotes only himself in this installation. As mentioned, it is the theatrical display that sets up the viewer to feel, if not the catharsis of theatre, at least some kind of discomfort as the subject becomes clear. Repetition provides coherence to the display: eight crosses, eight skulls, eight slabs, eight texts. Whether or not the viewer perceives this repetitive structure as an allusion to stations of the Passion narrative, the installation is conceived in a manner to compel a closer look. Upon scrutiny, the silkscreened text at each station initiates a particular relationship with the work as a whole. One is no longer strolling or wandering through a decor. The act of looking must change from sweeping gaze to the focused stare required for reading.

The reader finds in each text a description of a non-existent, although potentially realizable, funerary monument. In literary terms, these texts belong to the minor genre known as ekphrasis, of which the most restrictive definition is the verbal description of visual art, real or imagined. In this sense, they relate directly to Morris’ hoax essay, “Three extra-visual artists,” which is nothing but one long ekphrastic expression in which numerous imaginary artworks by fictional artists are described.

The texts in Preludes confound the viewer who reads attentively (Fig. 11, Fig. 12). The vanitas theme explicitly conjured in the work’s iconographic program is not evoked specifically in the texts. Whereas the theatrical lighting of Preludes creates the illusion of a church-like or sacred space, the eight texts are crafted without any figurative language in order to eschew emotion and affect. These texts do not reference any other work of art, literary or pictorial; thus they give the impression they are free of esthetic ideology. The most important lexical aspect of these texts is the distinction between monuments meant to accommodate corpses (tombs) and purely commemorative structures in which there is no body (cenotaphs). Five of the projected monuments are tombs: A final tomb for Frank “Jelly” Nash, A tomb-garden outside the city, Tomb for a dismembered body, Project for a tomb—the towers of silence. Three descriptions concern cenotaphs: A cenotaph for cancer, Roller disco: cenotaph for a public figure, and A cenotaph for air crash victims.
Whether tomb or cenotaph, all eight texts refer to monuments that do not exist, honoring (with only one exception, Frank Nash, 1887-1933) persons whose death is as bogus as their life, which exists only in the author’s imagination. The four tomb projects, other than Frank Nash, concern not actual corpses but plausible ones. Indeed, the use of the euphemism “occasion” to describe death indicates an ambivalent attitude toward mortality, either stoic or cynical. Project for a tomb—the towers of silence provides no information regarding the persons whose “bodies are placed on the towers with cranes from outside the walls when the occasion arises.” The body composter described in A tomb-garden outside the city, is designed to treat unspecified “bodies from various places in the city—the morgue, hospitals, scenes of crashes.” Though the text for Tomb for a dismembered body addresses the viewer directly in the second person, the voice does not say whose “torso is to repose beneath this lacy white trellis.” Similarly, each of the cenotaphs commemorates a different category of disaster victim; but we don’t know who they are, or when they will inevitably succumb to the cancer, airplane accident, or flood announced in the texts. These are imaginary but potential, even likely, disasters conjured by the artist’s mind.

Should they be realized, the described artworks would take forms Morris has already practiced: either earthworks, architectural projects, or large scale installations. Although the blatant cynicism of A cenotaph for cancer, in which it is posited that the monument itself is financed by manufacturers of carcinogenic products, makes the idea of a commission to build such a monument
implausible, it is not materially impossible to make the works described by the
texts. Indeed, Morris did go so far as to execute several preparatory drawings
that share titles with the silkscreened texts of *Preludes*, among them are *Tomb
for Silence of 1978*, and *Cenotaph for Aircrash Victims of 1979*.

To consider feasibility or plausibility of giving form to imaginary artworks
brings us to the crucial aspect of these ekphrastic images. There are contradic-
tions between the verbal representations printed on the onyx slabs (the images
described by the texts) and the visual image created by the *Preludes*
installation. We confront the terrifying aspirations of the textual images (the probability of
finding corpses at any and all moments to fill the tombs, the potential disasters
to be commemorated by cenotaphs) with the cryptic visual image presented by
the installation. How do these verbal representations relate to the installation's
overt citations of art history, and a décor that alludes to churches and funerary
art, which are the salient visual aspects of *Preludes*? Visually, the work seems to
propose what funerary art is traditionally supposed to offer: that art can make
death dignified and provide consolation. Skulls, skeletons and other images of
mortality are beautiful in the baroque art that Morris cites because death is not
a repellent idea in Baroque culture. The corpus of macabre seventeenth century
iconography that Morris references contains the implicit message that death is
not shocking, vile or fearful, but rather an inevitable step towards redemption
and resurrection. However, Morris’ textual proposition is quite different: that
death is irreparable and that the circumstances of dying are horrible. His written

8 plates, silkscreen, Plate VII, 18 × 24 inches (45.7 × 61.1 cm), printed by Styria Studio, New
Courtesy of Robert Morris and Cabinet des estampes du Musée d’art et d’histoire, Genève.
© 2010 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
descriptions contain no image of the afterlife, no inscriptions to honor the dead or comfort the bereaved, no symbol of hope.

Is it possible to resolve the contradiction between the melancholic but optimistic view of death presented visually, and the despair expressed by the texts? Let us go back again to the traditional vanitas which provides, so to speak, the skeletal infrastructure of Morris’ installation. Such work often contained as a sub-theme the vanitas of visual art, that is to say the wasted (vain) effort of man’s impermanent creation, and the vanitas (hubris) of trying to compete with God’s creation. Preludes suggests that the true vanitas of making art lies not in its ephemeral nature, nor its comparative inferiority to the craftsmanship of a greater Maker, but that it is vain to believe that art provides any solace for the human condition. In the 1980s, critics began to use the terms “kitsch” or “bad taste” to qualify works such as Study for a View from a Corner of Orion, Jornada del Muerto, the Hypnerotomachia series, the Burning Planet series, the Holocaust series, to name a few. Being cheap, cheesy and tacky, Preludes would seem to be just that, a work introducing a whole œuvre in which bad taste is the stance of stoic resistance to hopelessness and despair. The despair is not only provoked by the human condition, but by the artist’s inability to endure or deny his ineffectuality. The artist’s ambivalent position in the world is the paradox expressed in the contradiction between image and text in the Preludes. It is a paradox that will find continued expression in later work, with the difference that authorial irony of the texts will leave place to visual irony and sarcasm in the form of bad taste. By affirming their strategy as kitsch, such works continue to contradict the idea that art can have any redemptive or consoling effect. Perhaps it is this grim message, even more than its stylistic expression, that has caused critics to reject so much of the work Robert Morris made during the 1980s.
“Like Laughter in a Ruin:” from Telegram to the Eighties

DENIS BRIAND

In any case there is now much in text and imagery that is a far cry from noble theory and elevated abstraction. It is a different appearance, not always easy to place or account for, like laughter heard in a ruin.¹

The contemporary interpretation of minimalism seems regularly to return to what Barbara Rose wrote in 1965 concerning the content of the new artistic sensibility in the United States, which she defined as a production of works that “look altogether devoid of art content.” She added, with respect to their authors, that they undeniably “attempt to suppress or withdraw content from their works,” and that quite clearly, “they wish to make art that is as bland, neutral, and as redundant as possible.”² This first analysis seemed to give minimal art the status of an art in which nothing happened.³ This “new art” appeared to be “without symptoms or period of dormancy,”⁴ akin to a kind of “white writing.”⁵ As a description of the minimal object, the

3. Ibid., pp. 281-282. Mel Bochner presents a similar idea during an interview on Jean-Luc Godard’s Vivre sa vie: “Here is a film that is so close to Flaubert, something where nothing happens.” Mel Bochner in Anne-Françoise Penders, “Rencontre avec Mel Bochner, New York, March 2000,” Pratiques, “Réflexions sur l’art,” no. 9 (Fall 2000), p. 74. The translation is ours.
5. As Catherine Francblin writes in a commentary on a 1983 Robert Morris exhibition at the Galerie Templon: “His wood or felt sculptures reflected exclusively formal preoccupations, creating an austere and extremely didactic art.” Catherine Francblin, “Robert Morris,” Le Quotidien de Paris (May 19, 1983). The translation is ours. In Writing Degree Zero, Barthes uses the term “white writing” to refer to the minimalism emblematic of certain post-World War Two writers. See
expression has become widespread: in the object, there was nothing else to see but its pure three-dimensional nature showcasing the phenomenon of its very presence. Each work constituted an indivisible and indissoluble totality. The sculptures of Robert Morris seemed the perfect “theoretical” example of this at first, Morris having written in 1966: “Their parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation.”

“I myself have done much to promote these reassuring idiocies.” This cutting remark is taken from Alain’s *Ghosts in the Mirror* (*Le miroir qui revient*). Describing his literary development, the declaration is a comment upon the writer’s fairly intransigent theoretical period. It indicates the degree to which Robbe-Grillet’s recourse to autobiography broke with the positions that his adventure with the *nouveau roman* seemed to have forever committed him to.

The orientation Morris’ work takes at the end of the seventies what might very well be viewed in light of what Robbe-Grillet writes on the “normalization” of the *nouveau roman*:

There’s a pressing need to call everything into question and put the pieces back as they were: we need to take writing back to its starting point, the author back to his first book: in the modern narrative we must once more question the ambiguous part played by the representation of the world and the expression of a person who is simultaneously a physical body, a conscious projection and an unconscious.

According to this point of view, the distance is great between Rose’s remarks cited above, and those she would formulate in 1991: “Morris the deadpan

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6. A “specific object” therefore needed to be equivalent to itself, as “the visual dream of the same thing.” Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, op. cit., p. 33. The translation is ours.


10. “Ideology, always masked, changes its face with ease. It’s a hydra-headed mirror: whenever one head is cut off it soon springs up again, presenting the adversary with his true face in the mirror, which he believed he had defeated.” Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Ghosts in the mirror*, op. cit., p. 15.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 16. “Now that the *nouveau roman* defines its values positively, decrees its law, brings its recalcitrant pupils back to the fold, enlists its guerillas, excommunicates its free thinkers, …” *Ibid.* “It’s strange though that so many readers, not all of whom were lacking in sensitivity and intelligence, were so easily taken in.” *Ibid.*, p. 33
literalist has become Morris the epic poet.” Isn’t Morris’ work emblematic of the expression of a person who is at once body, intention and unconscious? Isn’t “all sculpture, no matter how abstract, […] given over to creating an analogue of the human body?” Very early on, Morris’ work cast doubt upon the perfect logic and mathematic efficiency that seemed to define the “new art.” Indeed, during the course of the 1960s, such irrational homages to “logocentrism” were generally viewed, according to Rosalind Krauss, as a way “to direct the critical reception of this work down the misleading path of an aesthetic of ideal forms.” Any attentive exploration of Morris’ practices of the 1960s, already diverse and multiple, would show the difficulty of classifying his work. From the beginning, his artistic activity was always double-edged, requiring incessant re-readings. The stylistic ruptures in his work, beginning at the end of the 1970s, invite us to cast doubt upon every explanatory paradigm, and compel us to endlessly rethink our artistic categorizations. Nena Tsouti-Schillinger considers, for example, that the L-Beams are objects of a geometric nature that

13. Robert Morris in Rosalind Krauss, “Robert Morris: Around the Mind/Body Problem,” Art Press, no. 193 (July-August 1994), p. 25. “Since I would argue that all sculpture, no matter how abstract, is constantly working to build an analogue of the human form—to demonstrate the body’s relation to gravity, or its capacity for expressive gesture, or its potential for doubling back on itself in an act of self-description, or even its movements in the most ordinary types of labor. […] All sculpture, then, no matter how abstract, is constantly working to create an analogue of the human body—to demonstrate its relation to gravity, its capacity for expressive gesture, or even its movements in the most ordinary types of labor.” Rosalind Krauss, in Robert Morris, The Mind/Body Problem, film by Teri Wehn Damisch and Rosalind Krauss, 1995, produced by Centre Georges Pompidou, with the participation of Délégation aux arts plastiques, Ministère de la culture et de la francophonie, 1995, RMN, La Sept Video. See the script of the film published in this volume.
should be associated with Melancholy," indicating that Morris' preoccupation with his own demons, quite apparent in his most recent work, is potentially present as early as the 1960s. The artist's œuvre thus never stays long in the place one assigns for it. A recent interview clarifies this point. When Simon Grant asked what definition would best suit his practice, among the multiplicity that have been attributed, from minimalism to expressionism, Morris answered: “Nothing. Zero. What a list.”

Laughter in a Ruin

We cannot always take Robert Morris' writings at their word. He makes this impossible. One significant example is the unsigned critical commentary that follows the text “American Quartet” (1981). Another is the older text, “A Method for Sorting Cows.” At the time it was written, the piece suggested a methodical description of the unfolding of a performance, its style manifesting the distance, the precision and the impersonal tone befitting performance at the time. Retroactively, however, an additional layer surfaced as later writing foregrounded how childhood memories were entangled in the fabric of the text. The “virile” activity of sorting cows was evoked, this time with a more sensitive tone, without eluding its emotional dimension. Each evocation of the

18. “Consequently, Untitled (L-Beams), while an early work, still suggests that Morris' angst and preoccupation with his inner demons, though not as apparent as in later works, existed in his art as early as the 1960s.” Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, “Desublimating Art,” in Robert Morris and Angst (Athens/New York: Bastas Publications/Georges Braziller, 2001), p. 86.
pen being an homage to the artist’s father, we could retrospectively reexamine “A Method for Sorting Cows” in view of the recurrence of memories and their endless recomposition.

However, within Morris’ written work, the text of the book *Telegram* is of a particular nature, its density and diversity comparable to those of his “visual” production. His first truly autonomous book, it is the only publication that he has entirely conceived and controlled. This long text, written in capital letters with no punctuation or pagination, and adopting the telegraphic form announced by its title, is far from the laconic style of telegrams. Written in a resolutely literary form and according to that perspective, the text presents itself as a seventy-two-page telegram which Morris sends, from his childhood in Kansas City, Missouri, during the 1940s, to his adult self.

Morris produced this book on the occasion of a solo exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1998. This exhibition included an installation whose title, *The Rationed Years*, is also the subtitle of the book *Telegram*. The installation, in close relation to the text, was composed of several elements. First: five school desks and four radios, replicas of the model 60 B produced after 1935 and manufactured by Philco. Each of these radios was placed on a pile of painted wooden signs. The installation also included two paintings composed of many square panels of painted wood, placed on superimposed shelves affixed to the gallery walls (Fig.13). The radios played a series of twelve songs from the 1940s. At regular intervals, the sound of the music mixed with a percussive sound resembling the falling of bombs, the crackling of fire, and drone of an airplane. On each school desk lay a closed copy of the book *Telegram*. The installation, the text, and the drawings that appeared in the book referred explicitly to Morris’ memory of World War Two.

For Morris, language always expresses doubt. And *Telegram* allows him to find doubt within a personal history related as a trauma from which the author has “never healed.” The text tells of memories of a childhood confronted by

25. Ibid.
28. Songs arranged by Robert Candel and mixed by Robert Morris.
a “cascade of war’s fresh and naked images […] visual lesions settling in the brain that would not heal in a lifetime.” 29 As if bounced back through a mirror, a retrospective gaze is brought upon the years of carefree insouciance and play, “sapped” by the rationing of the war and by the slow emergence from a childhood subjected to the radical violence of the world. In a manner analogous to the development of his “visual” work, Morris finds himself, here again, running counter to modernism. He rejects neither his personal past nor History, but rather inserts his œuvre and his person in a chronology that, retrospectively, wholly determines them. Did Robert Morris not declare recently: “Early childhood experiences have always been central to my art making.” 30

Indeed, the narrator of Telegram seems fated to return ceaselessly to the same place, like a survivor returning, in spite of himself, to the scene of the
accident. In this way, the logic of the work imposes itself as though it had been produced “under the impact of an emotion,” an emotion that returns, interminably, expressing itself differently at every turn, as an after-effect that is always “in process.” If several aspects of Morris’ work had indeed provided clues, the text of Telegram integrates these aspects into a totality whose meaning relies upon the biographical.

The imprecision of memory and hesitant recollection are the central motifs of Telegram: The Rationed Years. The text participates in the reconstruction of memory, albeit partial and fatally gnawed by oblivion. In memory, everything is on the same plane; images, sounds, emotion. The blend of these sensations and memories cannot be untangled. How should one reckon with this chaos? The long continuous text of Telegram opts for a syntactical blurring, wherein the absence of punctuation makes it difficult to distinguish the caesuras that separate historical facts, primary emotions, and fiction. How can they be recomposed? This is the nodal question of Morris’ text. One passage in particular emphasizes this project: “there were facts millions of them,” the narrator tells us, “facts—millions of them so what?—Add them up all the millions—but the sum misses the sense of war that hung over Kansas City in the spring of forty-three.”

The text of Telegram traps us, perhaps, with its fiction. Or is it the artist himself who reconstructs a romanticized autobiography in order to orient the work, to englobe its heterogeneity under a single principle, thus unifying and ordering the fragmented totality and the set of disparate practices? Our doubts might be warranted if not for the other texts that are equally concerned with the question of memory. In the most recent published collection of his writings, Have I Reasons, we discover an unpublished text from 1993, “Indiana Street,” entirely devoted to the artist’s childhood memories. This text narrates a series of digressions and anecdotes about people who gravitated around Indiana Street in Kansas City, Missouri, where Morris and his family lived during the middle of the 1930s. Certain events which are present in Telegram were previously described in “Indiana Street” (Mr. Uzell’s tragic accident, for example). Likewise, this text, discovered after Telegram, although it probably predates it,

seems to bring additional pieces to the puzzle of Morris’ work. (That is, unless it is just a new facet of the kaleidoscope which endlessly deflects efforts at elucidation.) The pertinence of this hypothesis relates to the doubt in which the artist sometimes holds his own theoretical assertions: the text of *Telegram* might thus constitute a key to the whole of the artist’s œuvre, providing a common horizon to Morris’ successive artistic commitments.

At one point in the text, Morris tells an anecdote about a column that he constructed with a childhood friend in the school shop class storage room. This “endless column,” as they named it, was made out of a pile of drawing boards, glued to one another by coats of thickening shellac applied with a paintbrush, and rose to a height of two and a half meters. The author explains that, half a century later, he still discusses with his friend “the aesthetic merits of this long lost column—its mass its feathery serrated profile its classic composition its slight variation from symmetry its overdetermined phallic iconography its superiority to a compulsive Brancusi its economy and simplicity its compact minimalism.”

*The Rationed Years* installation might seem to evoke this column in the four bases upon which the radios are set. However, used to Morris’ literary strategies by now, we could well ask ourselves whether the installation provides an illustration of the column, or whether the text constructs its fictive anteriority. This anecdote is interesting in that it constitutes the most salient of a set of evocations of artistic practice, at times discreet, which seem to base their every aspect and development in the memories of this troubled and “exciting” period of childhood. In addition to the “minimalist” stacking of the drawing boards, another passage in *Telegram* indicates how, playing in the basement of the family house, “in this basement zone from which the reign of the totalizing visual had been banished,” Morris experiences absence and “its blind aggressivity.”

Another very precise reference to a recurrent motif in his œuvre, the labyrinth, is evoked in the form of a children’s game: “we build a six-foot tall labyrinth of old Kansas City Star bundles on the bricks of the school yard—hysterical exhausted half-frozen with palms black from the newsprint.” Tracing this perspective might provide a way to decode the text. In this regard, it enacts the same entanglement that we find in all of his “visual” work.

Let us return a moment to the episode of the superimposed drawing boards, paying special attention to certain physical components of the installation *The Rationed Years*. The drawing board seems to constitute a unity, that of a wood

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36. “In this basement zone from which the reign of the totalizing visual had been banished I turned porous to absence and felt its blind aggressivity spreading through and eroding the site of the self opening me to its flow,” *ibid.*, n. p.
panel whose format has been normalized by a century of drawing faced with the exigencies of industrial constraint. The shop class, a certain wavering of school activities, the identical format of the panels, perhaps these circumstances encouraged the two children in the anecdote toward construction? But the description that the author gives of it is less innocent than it seems. The aesthetic merits that he and his friend continue to accord to it in retrospect are, in fact, characteristics that in large part mock “its compact minimalism,” “its feathery serrated profile,” “fragmentary composition,” asymmetry, “phallic character,” “superiority to a compulsive Brancusi.”

From the visual point of view, might the drawing board in the anecdote not also represent a kind of “matrix” of the square panel that Morris often uses? In fact, several pictorial works make use of this process. Two paintings, both completed on several square wooden panels and leaning on shelves, are part of the exhibition *The Rationed Years and Other New Work* They appropriate two images from the war years and specifically invoke the climate that reigned in American society at the time. These paintings depict two well-known posters from the American war effort during the 1940s: “He’s Watching You” (Fig. 14) and “Loose Lips Sink Ships.” The two images might be taken as emblematic of Morris’ work, and also help us understand how a generation of artists sought artistic forms that might allow them to subtract themselves from “the reign of the totalizing visual.” These two images mark the limits of a reality inscribed between the domination of an enemy gaze, dissimulated but omnipresent, and the over-valuing of the culpability of speech. There is an unstable position, caught between “He is watching you” and “Talking too much costs lives.” But the way the panels are hung on rows of superimposed shelves reinforces a
fragmentation of the image, suggesting other possible layouts while materially manifesting lacunae and blank spaces, like so many disjointed fragments, re-directing, in the image, the narrative discontinuity of the memory fragments evoked by the *Telegram* text.

"My doubts form a system."\(^3^8\)

Reading *Telegram* thus opens a new approach to Morris’ work as a whole, like a cartography of all of its territories, revealing the networks of ramifications and allowing us to discover the discrete lines leading from one to the next. The same aesthetic of the fragment was already at work, in a more spectacular and dramatic, even ostentatious way, in the large compositions with molded frames made at the beginning of the 1980s (Fig.13). The alarm and the near-muteness one feels when standing before these works are not unlike what one feels in the face of catastrophe. Morris is obviously neither the first nor the only artist to confront death and destruction head-on, but he does so, during this period, with such intensity that the work becomes almost unbearable. “Their strangeness and brutal authority serve to bring to a peremptory conclusion the chapter of modern art.”\(^9\) Must we see a definitive exile from modernism here, as the critic Didier Ottinger suggests,\(^4^0\) or could these works be characterized as neo-expressionism, as has been occasionally proposed by several critical views at the time of their production?\(^4^1\) Are they at times too complacent?\(^4^2\) Clearly, this “dark face of the work” incites much less affirmation than questioning. If one is divided between skepticism and admiration in the face of such works it is doubtless because of their monumental, magisterial character, and the fact that they are thus almost too big

40. Ibid., p. 333.
41. According to Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, Morris’ works differ from the principal works of neo-expressionism in that they propose neither redemption nor transcendence. His images of chaos, destruction, and suffering project no renewal or hope. See Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, Chapter 5 “Breaking Rules: Morris’s Labyrinth,” in Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, *Robert Morris and Angst*, *op. cit.* , p. 117.
for us! The works produced during this period have sometimes been taken for a celebration of morbidity. And yet, all of Morris’ practices at the time share the same insistent, obsessive, motif—Continuities, five engravings from 1988, the series of drawings Firestorm and Psychomachia (1982) are developed parallel to the monumental works, which Donald Kuspit calls “the extinction works.” 43 Nena Tsouti-Schillinger describes Morris’ “lifelong thanatopsy (contemplation of death)” 44 as the heart of his artmaking, and the artist himself declared, in 1994, in an interview with Rosalind Krauss: “I do not think my art evolved into any humanist affirmations.” 45 Or again, as he writes in 1980 in October:

Art erodes whatever seeks to contain and use it and inevitably seeps into the most contrary recesses, touches the most repressed nerve, finds and sustains the

44. Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, Robert Morris and Angst, op. cit., p. 95.

15. Robert Morris, Untitled, Sans Titre, 1983. Painted hydrocal and pastel on paper, 84 × 100 inches (213.4 × 254 cm).
Photo: Courtesy of Robert Morris. © 2010 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
contradictory without effort. Art has always been a very destructive force, the best example being its capacity constantly to self-destruct.⁴⁶

Following the same orientation as the text of *Telegram: The Rationed Years*, the large frames of the 1980s already work with memory, and direct interpretation toward the “archeological.” The tormented, bulky bas-reliefs that compose these frames are a mass of body fragments, bones, objects, traces and even sections of prior works. The frames look as if a mold had been made of the earth on which were strewn the residues of an unspeakable chaos, as if these frightening reliefs had been seized in the precise instant that had fixed them thus under the force of some Leviathan. Such traces are not traces of an individual memory, but those of a memory “of the century,” even though, little by little, it becomes clear how the former constitutes the other—inseparable—face of the latter. The aesthetics of ruins which these works put forth unfailingly evokes Freud’s two principal metaphors of archeology. Without explaining them in detail here, let us recall that the two cities of Rome and Pompeii are, according to Freud, the archeological sites exemplary of the two modalities of access to memory conserved within the psyche. Rome provides the metaphor for the fragmentary memory of several different, non-contemporary moments, whose lacunae will forever remain inaccessible. Pompeii is that of the fixed memory of a single complete moment, yet one that is definitively cut off from its history. This whole period of creation, for Morris, could be summed up by a statement the artist makes at the end of that dark decade:

A few words suffice: World War I, the gulags, Stalin, the Bomb, nuclear stockpiles, and most of all, of course, the Holocaust. Such have been the productions of a century that would claim to have clung to the Enlightenment’s guiding lights of reason and truth, and where the sturdy divisions of the epistemological, the ethical, and the aesthetic separate and direct our inquiries.⁴⁷

But once again, nothing is quite that evident. It is plain in his works from the 1980s that Morris was initiating a dialogue with the history of art of much greater amplitude and trenchancy than he had ever done before. Such a dialogue is established with his own artistic history as well. A few critical takes on the cast-frame works have considered them a kind of parenthesis within the artist’s œuvre. Indeed, later works will seem more “pacified.” But during an exhibition at the Sprueth Magers gallery in London, Summer 2008, Morris again showed pieces that consisted of molded bas-reliefs similar to those from the 1980s (Fig. 16). Certain parts of earlier works are in fact taken up again and


recomposed with other more recent elements. These most recent pieces seem to recapitulate a large part of Morris’ artistic vocabulary (Fig. 17). In an interview with Simon Grant he answered: “I just could not not make these four works. […] I felt I had no choice.”\textsuperscript{48} Robert Morris will doubtlessly still have reason to confront history. The following quotation by the nouveau-roman writer Alain Robbe-Grillet might perhaps suit him equally: “I’m a sort of resolute, ill-equipped, imprudent explorer who doesn’t believe in the previous existence or stability of the country in which he is mapping out a possible road, day by day.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{48}  “Something to do with the shame of our barbaric and genocidal American foreign policy.” Robert Morris in “Interview with Simon Grant,” \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{49}  Alain Robbe-Grillet, \textit{Ghosts in the mirror}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 17.
A Theater of History

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Morris’ installation White Nights, commissioned by the Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art in 2000, is an important later work, a reconstructed theater of history which returns its public to the complexity of the region’s wartime history during World War Two. Lyon, whose role in unifying the resistance was memorialized in its title as “capital of the resistance” by de Gaulle upon the liberation of the city in 1944, was also an important center of deportation and collaboration, a fierce theater of repression by the German army as well as by the French Militia, and the scene of violent, extrajudicial purges after the war. White Nights’s reading of the Second World War questioned the rational linearity of the construction of the discourse of history in favor of an immersive and fragmentary experience of perception, problematizing the role of the aesthetic in memorializing processes.

The work was Morris’ third installment for a three-year open invitation from the Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art (1998-2000). Working from the museum archives—consisting of Morris’ plans and diagrams, images of the photographs projected within the installation, as well as the correspondence between Robert Morris and the museum director Thierry Raspail—we were able to reconstruct a view of the installation.¹ It consisted in a large labyrinthine space, with walls of white polyester fabric, in which the visitor was invited to wander (Fig. 18). Its curved corridors, the map of which evoked a spiral motif, led to a number of impasses and to a central area where a video projector was located. Several of Morris’ works were incorporated into the installation. The

¹. The work having been dismantled after his exhibition in 2000, we were unable to experience the installation directly. This methodological quandary led us to concentrate on the historical implications of White Nights, and to privilege the archive in our study.
1977 mirror work *Williams Mirror*, its original structure dismantled, was deployed in a new arrangement within the labyrinth, and on these mirrors and fabric walls two types of visual elements were projected from the central rotating machine. Moving in one direction you could see Morris’ 1969 film *Mirror*, in the other, eighty-six archival images from the Second World War were reproduced as slides (Fig. 19). *White Nights* played extensively with these references to Morris’ previous works, in terms of sound, visual, and structural elements. Wafting in the space of the installation was the aria from the 1857 opera *Simone Boccanegra*, which Morris had used in his 1965 performance *Waterman Switch*. Verdi’s music, aired in a loop, was distributed by speakers placed throughout the labyrinth. Formally, Morris was harking back to his long history of building labyrinthine spaces, initiated by his 1961 *Passageway*. The two works produced for the museum in 1999 and 2000, *White Nights* and *Labyrinth*, presented the additional characteristics of inserting video into this architectural framework: both consisted in a complex of walls delimiting paths and leading to impasses on which videos of earlier performances were projected. The presence of mirrors in *White Nights*, through both the 1969 film and the reconstructed 1977 work, linked to the recurrent motif in Morris’ œuvre. Additional mirrors were also placed in strategic parts of the installation. Through the rotation system of the projector, moving film images and still slides intersected at times on the white walls of the labyrinth. Spectators themselves became elements of the work, their bodies passing through the projected images to become its supplementary, mobile material support. In this space, images appeared to be hatched—invisible, reflected, treacherous—through the fragility and relativity of perception.

In his correspondence with Thierry Raspail in preparation for the show, Morris declared: “The slides I want to use will be images from the city of Lyon during WWII years. I want to present a sense of that time, a memory of the war years there.”

The eighty-six photographs that were projected in *White Nights* were selected by the artist from a series of 1500 photographs taken from the Lyon archives on the Resistance and depicting scenes which were for the most part set in the region. The photographs originated from different sources: thirty-eight from private collections, twenty from the Ministry of Defense, thirteen from museum archives or from the city of Lyon, eight from an anonymous collection, six from newspapers from the period (*Le Progrès, L’Humanité*), and three from the *Fédération nationale des déportés et internés, résistants et patriotes*. In Morris’ selection, public and private sources played a more or less equal part. This selection also sought to question the iconographic codes structuring the memo-

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rializing of Lyon's role during the war as a center of resistance, most well known through the arrest and torture of the resistance leader Jean Moulin. We propose to approach this selection by providing a table of the different photographs distributed according to thematic categories. In the formal heterogeneity of the pictures, a number of series appear that we have condensed here into themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes (categories are not mutually exclusive)</th>
<th>Number of photos within each theme, out of a group of 86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical Figures</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penitentiary Spaces</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propaganda</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Life</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence and Destruction</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With this selection, Morris extended his career-long investigation into the dangers of the image, and its problematic relation to ideology and violence. This categorization is based on the situations represented in the photographs, yet does not take into account the original context of the pictures, at times unknown because of the absence of captions in the installation. Numerous photographs of prisons, of executions, of soldiers, certain portraits, like those of Jean Moulin and Klaus Barbie were clearly recognizable signs of the barbarity of the period. Yet Morris’ selection did not limit itself to depictions of violence, and among these pictures of war were numerous images of daily life. The visual evidence Morris unearthed attested to the complexity of any subjective relation to the depiction of war (Figs. 20–21–22).

The chosen and arranged series of images denoted the violent reality of the confrontation, yet they also pointed to the ideological dangers inherent in the power of decontextualized visuality. With the lessening, through time, of an immediacy of experience connecting the facts behind the photographs, Morris seemed to be insisting upon the fundamental need for a discursive, narrative space of memorializing. As the (re)construction of a site where the relation of history to memory and identity might be questioned, *White Nights* unveiled the fragility of memory in its apprehension of traces, absence, oblivion and dispersal.

4. Katia Schneller affirms that the artist has always been preoccupied by the “feasibility of mnemonic reconstruction” (p. 80), and by its role in the interpretation of his work (“Morris’ work self-generates according to an interlacing mechanism: the work’s memory no longer references the unity of a single creation, but the multiplicity of the fragments that constitute it,” p. 74). Katia Schneller, *Robert Morris, sur les traces de Mnémosyne* (Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2008).

Morris dedicated *White Nights* “to Lyon and to the memory of the Resistance... to the great sacrifice and suffering endured by those who lived through those times,” seeking to present “a sense of that time, a memory of the war years there” while “trying to respect their memory and what those images meant.” The way the images were presented, projected on translucent white panels or diffracted through mirrors, did not question their power of suggestion or their role in the process of memory. Yet the fragility of their appearance denoted the necessity of the constant duty to remember. It also spoke to exercising caution toward the ideological usage of images, and to the crude obscenity of their violence. In his book *Telegram: The Rationed Years*, an autobiographical narrative that Morris addressed to himself from his own childhood, the images of the same war seemed to grow embedded in the mind of the child from Kansas City, shaping a raw vulnerability:

> a new obscenity blossomed in the cascade of war's fresh and nakes images—all the more real somehow for being in black and white—fascinating compelling wounding—visual lesions settling in the brain that would not heal in a lifetime.

*White Nights* sought to provide a place to examine, if not heal, such lesions. The strong presence of the eighty-six photographs in the labyrinth and their rapid passage through the visual field seized upon the consciousness of the spectator, hindering any escape from the landscape of death and emptiness of the war years. The labyrinth, a disorienting architecture and one that precludes all exit, responded to the function of memory, to its manner of unveiling and of hiding at the same time, of being “a past that does not pass.” The labyrinth also referred to a temporal construct. “I think of this work as extending...”

8. Robert Morris, *Telegram: The Rationed Years*, 1998, n. p. *Telegram* and *White Nights* complete each other as different sign systems, which are the result of the same poetics. Morris has always considered the relation between the visual and the verbal as conflictic, yet both function in an inevitable intertext. *Telegram* resembles a photographic text that negates white space, whereas *White Nights*, through the flow of images that saturate the projection space, might seem to present typographic lines following one upon the other at the speed of a typewriter.
9. “he will never leave the landscape of those war years never stop believing there is a need to defend himself against them.” *Ibid.*
time” wrote Morris,11 pointing to the labyrinth’s role as a symbol of cultural memory, “a form that recedes back memories.”12 We might also take it to have figured a structure of awareness whose white veil membranes brought to mind Morris’ “sense of nothingness as the surrounding membrane of existence.”13

As the only escape from the war images, the film Mirror seemed to offer a refuge to the gaze of the spectator. In it, one could see Morris walking in a circle in the Wisconsin snow, with an immense mirror in his hands. At the beginning of the film, the mirror reflected the landscape, and at times encompassed the cameraman’s reflection as Morris spun the mirror around, still fairly close to the camera. The very frame of the film was in permanent oscillation, so that no center to balance perception remained.14 Morris’ progressive spiral retreat from the camera, with the mirror growing smaller as he moved away, and his subsequent entry into the frame rendered palpable the indistinction between the reflection of the landscape and the landscape itself, the relation between reflection and reality further complicated by the fact that the landscape itself was recorded. Morris, with this reference to his early work, inscribed himself within the labyrinth of memory through both the physicality of his body and the allusion to his own artistic history. Symbolically, not only did the spectral image point to the fiction of a fixed and unchanging identity, but it also refused the illusion of purely “objective” work and referenced the constructed nature of memory in the present. Placing this entry into the frame within the structure of the labyrinth also pointed to the more abstract inscription of personal history into collective history, as historical images were projected onto the bodies of the spectators, turning these bodies into visual supports. As Hans Belting has affirmed, “every visible image is necessarily inscribed in a medium of support or transmission. This is true even for our mental or interior images, which might seem to be exempt from this rule: it is our own body that serves as living medium.”15 White Nights proposed a mise-en-scène of the incarnation of history onto body-supports, intimating that history must be actualized through individual and collective projection and identification.

Henri Bergson analyzed the intimate link between memory and the image by proposing the concept of the memory-image as an intermediary between

pure memory and memory reinscribed within perception, an essential form in the act of recognition and recollection, in the passage from the virtual to the actual. *White Nights* immersed its public in this process of self-reflection. Via the intermediary of mirrors, the public was led to remember itself, to reinscribe its own life into the background of history. Actualization, not only of the work, but of a reading of history, was incumbent upon the spectator. Indeed, the framing of memory in *White Nights* might have conformed to Bergson's model of actualization of the past: “essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day.”

Morris recalled this model in his own past. In *Telegram*, he spoke of a childhood refuge away from the image, “this basement zone from which the totalizing visual had been banished,” where the self could find anchoring in its own absence. Only in returning to the surface of the visual did “history [begin] to coagulate in those images,” and become a mental image through which to partake in the narrative of collective identity. This manner of reappropriating, for oneself, what is exterior, echoes the process of constitution of memory that structured *White Nights*, the work intimating that this might perhaps result from a confrontation with the traumas provoked by the visual lesions of collective memory.

“Collective memory” is a term introduced by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs to refer to the social role implicit in the constitution of memory. For Halbwachs, following Bergson, the past does not exist as such, but is necessarily reconstructed according to the present. “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” he writes, explaining that the memory of individuals are a function of their social context. According to Aleida Assmann, individual and collective memories have a flexible and transformative quality and are constantly in flux. Memory necessarily refers to representations of the past which are constructed, circulated and internalized through the institutional, sociological and political frameworks of the present. The mediations of these collective frameworks imply simplifications, inclusions, exclusions, hierarchies in ordering what is memorialized, a process of conjoined remembrance and forgetting. For the heterogeneity of memories to coexist it is necessary to create a publicly negotiated space in which the issues to be memorialized can be debated. The question is, in the changing social context of the present, how to maintain collective frameworks of memory as witness to the horrors of the past, and as


guarantors against their repetition. Although the criteria of selection for “collective memory” often fix upon heroic moments, Assmann notes that the distinction between the indispensable and the insignificant in the constitution of collective memory is illegitimate, for the task of collective memory after trauma is to form a common memory, shared by the guilty party and the victim, enabling both to coexist in a peaceful manner.18 The maxim of the curative power of forgetting “perpetua oblivio et amnesia” must give way to the ethical exigency of a common memory.19

Mediated by the institutional space of the museum, White Nights gave architectural form to this public arena. It situated the institutional deliberation of regional memory, reinscribing the city and its inhabitants within its own labile projections. The photographs in the installation presented the city as a mosaic of spaces carrying the memory of historical events. Through the memorializing architectural form of the installation, the public was incited to consider as history the manifestations of mediated discourses in space. White Nights could be read as a mise-en-scène of the confrontation of different memorializing narratives through an analysis of the tactics and strategies of space. According to Foucault, “to decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through, and on the basis of relations of power.”20 Inasmuch as power acts on space and in space, the formation of discourses could be analyzed “in terms of tactics and strategies of power […] deployed through implantations, distributions, demarcations, control of territories and organizations of domains.”21 Morris’ archival selection projected in White Nights was dominated by the presence of sites—from those which dealt with the Occupation to those dedicated to the Resistance or civilian populations—that lent themselves to being read as spatial metaphors, manifestations of tactics and strategies of power.

Among the different sites represented, bridges and public squares were privileged. Their symbolic dimension as sites of junction, or disjunction, unification or rupture served to narrate a history of the evolution of war. Bridges, deprived of their communicative function, and destroyed at the end of the war, served to

21. Ibid., p. 77.
protect the retreat of the German army (Fig. 23). The image of the bridge was thus charged with the geopolitical trace of the manifestation of power: the connective bridge became a border bridge. This was equally true of public squares, pivots of city life, spaces of popular assembly and activities. The archival images presented them as sites for the display of power, or as sites of confrontation of different discursive formations (Pétain appeared, as did Charles de Gaulle, on a downtown square in Lyon called La Place des Terreaux.) The projection of two similar photographs of this square showed the site as generating two different discourses. The first presented the crowd acclaiming Pétain in front of the City Hall in a composition that conferred an imposing position to the building. In the second, the crowd imposed itself and lessened the importance given to City Hall. These two photographs suggested that the same site could be invested and perceived according to diverging optics, manifesting two different discourses. The network of “spatial metaphors” in the installation was completed by images that seemed to escape the public exercise of power. This was the case, for example, for the private space of a bathroom. However, this site of refuge and of care, in the context of war, became a space of torture, theater of the violence of repressive power. In the same way, the apartment building at 1, Place des Capucins could be read as a space of resistance once placed into an accounting of historical events, as Jean Moulin’s headquarters. The same goes for a photograph of the cell in Fort Montluc, which acquired historical connotations following Jean Moulin’s internment there.

Showing the ambiguity implicit in reading historical documents served as a warning against monumentalizing memorials. White Nights, although a carte blanche given to Morris by the public institution of the museum, differed significantly from the form of interaction between artist and institution that often constitutes historical monuments. As a counter-memorial, it was destined to perpetuate the fragility of memory, the memory of memory, escaping the classical function of war monuments which for Morris implied a form of “domestication” of horror. With regard to Liberty Memorial Museum, for example, an obelisk in Kansas City dedicated to the First World War, he noted, “When killing becomes patriotic, national, and insane, perhaps only a sexualized memorial to it can keep its reality from full consciousness.”

Deconstructing the historical function of the monument allowed Morris to problematize the notion of monumentality, and he has often insisted upon the non-monumentality of his “monumental” works. When questioned on the relation of his Earth

22. The caption to the photograph of the bathroom (available in the archival material) proved the military use of this space: “The Military and Gestapo often use the water torture for interrogations.”
Projects to the monumentality of land art, Morris answered: “Monumentality for what? What is there to monumentalize in the 20th century? At the end of this century the idea is obscene. I don't think there is anything to monumentalize. My work has always been opposed to that kind of grandeur.” Morris’ investigation on the memorializing role of art, nourished by Foucauldian theories, has also always been aware of its own position within the field of power. “Every art discourse reveals its subordinate position to the ruling powers, whether these be the state or the various institutions of private money,” Morris had knowingly declared in the essay “Three Folds in the Fabric.” Yet in spite of the artist’s insistence, the gigantic dimension of the Lyon labyrinths belied an easy dismissal of the question. The description given by the Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art in the context of the acquisition dossier of Lyon Labyrinth and White Nights implied as much: “the two proposed works are unique in their configuration and their monumentality.” Yet the gossamer, spectral materiality of the installation tempers this view, as do the centrality of contexts and audiences to its construction of meaning.

As for the enigmatic connection between the title and the work, perhaps one could read a bilingual pun there, where the white nights of memory point to an active watchfulness in the face of history and of its tendency to sediment into the discourses of authority. The title might also refer to the short story by Dostoevsky, a meditation on the urban life of Saint Petersburg, designating the moment of the year in which the borders between night and day become indiscernible. White Nights seemed to deploy a fragile space-time in which the oppositions constituting perception were disrupted and became problematic, where one could lose one's bearings, and be enjoined to maintain a critical gaze.

25. The epilogue to this text was in fact a quotation from The Use of Pleasure, volume two of Foucault’s History of Sexuality, “The only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what is proper to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself.” Quoted by Robert Morris in “Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions),” 1989, pp. 142-151, reprinted in Robert Morris, Continuous Projects Altered Daily, 1993, p. 259.
II. THE TEXT/IMAGE PROBLEM UNDER INVESTIGATION
From September 3rd to October 2nd, 1963, Robert Morris produced a sequence of five *Memory Drawings*. Executed in ink on paper, the drawings consist of Morris’ distinct handwritten cursive script. The text established a sequence of angular lines, attenuated loops, and sharp dashes that can be seen as either gestural abstractions or as lexical units that correspond to a specific syntax carrying rhetorical meaning. In 1963, few would have accepted a hand-written text as a work of fine art. Morris’ *Memory Drawings* are significant because they anticipate what has now become a common strategy for artists seeking an experimental mode of expression. Morris’ early drawings initiate a career-long rebellion against the dominance of art critic Clement Greenberg’s theory of modern art in which honoring a medium’s “purity”—inherent qualities that distinguish it from all other media (including language)—guarantees aesthetic quality. In his landmark essay “Modernist Painting,” Greenberg insisted:

> The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered pure” and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. “Purity” meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.

In the case of two-dimensional art, *flatness* reigned supreme, resulting in an abundance of abstract art during the twentieth century: “Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition shared with no other art, and so modernist

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painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.”[3] By conceiving of a text as an image, Morris challenged the logic of late modernism: “Abstraction was and is [modernism’s] first commandment. The history of the development of abstract art is also one of the repression of words.”[4]

For the Initial Memory Drawing, Morris composed a text in which he summarized contemporary scientific theories regarding the physiology of memory. His caption for this first drawing in the series reads:

Drawing established and memorized 9/3/63, 8pm.[5]

The following day, Morris produced the First Memory Drawing (Fig. 24) by writing out the memorized sequence of words established previously. In this drawing, the artist made an error and corrected it by placing an asterisk where one sentence of the text was omitted and a second asterisk with a parenthetical explanation—“(Error. Insert the following above.)”—and wrote the sentence out of sequence. Four days later, the Second Memory Drawing was produced with increasing errors that were in some locations hastily corrected by striking

3. Ibid., p. 87.
5. The text of Initial Memory Drawing: “The physiological basis for memory has not been determined. Theories advanced to explain memory fall mainly into two classes: (1) Those which seek explanation in changes of composition of the brain cells; and (2) those which seek explanation in changes of electrical currents between cells. If one leaves the analogy at a crude level, comparisons can be made to the two basic ways in which man establishes a cultural memory, i.e. either spatially through preservation of models, pictures, maps, etc. or temporally through sequential records in print, audial recordings and more recently by electronic means. Theories have also been advanced which attempt to combine these two processes. Such theories attempt to discriminate between types of memories, assigning the coding of some to physical alteration of the molecular structure of brain cells and others to reflex electrical circuits. The latter process is sometimes appended with a hypothesis of a mechanical nature viz. through minute changes of synaptic fibers which grow larger or closer together and facilitate electrical pathways. Analog computing machines can be made to learn—a process impossible without storage of information. This storage is effected by specific variation in a time series together with a scanning device. Recent investigations in electroencephalography seem to point to such a scanning mechanism responsible for oscillating currents which tend to fade with concentration and attention. However the storing of visual images can be more easily ascribed to protein molecule alterations. All suggestions as to the locus of memory, either in terms of composition or action agree on the point that it is not held in any specific area of the cortex. Decimations of the cortex do not cut out particular memories, but the severing neural pathways between the visual cortex and the frontal regions, while not disturbing vision, reduces to the unrecognizable that which is seen. The richness of and necessities for the interconnections of all parts of the cortex will undoubtedly be part of whatever theory is eventually established. Drawing established and memorized 9/3/63, 8pm.”

them out and in others the mistakes remained uncorrected. Eight days elapsed before the Third Memory Drawing was made; in this version, although errors occurred, especially omissions and the use of synonyms of words present in the primary text, there are neither editorial insertions nor misplaced words stricken from the text. Sixteen days later, a month after executing the initial composition, the Fourth Memory Drawing was created. The final work repeated many of the same omissions and wording errors of previous efforts. Given the self-referential nature of this series, the viewer is encouraged to check each Memory Drawing against the Initial Drawing— for the work is premised upon a game of cross-referencing to determine the degree to which the artist successfully memorized the passage and the deterioration of his memory over the course of a month.

With the Memory Drawings, composition simultaneously and equally refers to the content as well as the form of the drawing; they are concurrently textual and visual structures. These textual drawings accord with Greenberg’s flatness rule, but far from his rule regarding “purity”, this series conflates two elements simultaneously with neither ascendant. Rejecting Greenberg’s theory, Morris found solace in Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations. In the opening passages of this book, Wittgenstein stressed that “purity,” in this philosopher’s terms “a simple,” could never be achieved (a “composite” is always implied). Through a careful and sustained reading of Wittgenstein’s language-game theories, Morris discovered a discourse that refuted Greenberg’s reductive formalism and promoted a set of ideas that initiated the beginnings of conceptual art: “Wittgenstein’s writing has changed me, and I continue to re-read his texts.”

By turning to language-games as an inspiration for the visual arts (in this sense, the art-game), Morris found a way out of the cul-de-sac of late modernism.

In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein challenged the possibility of a private language and emphasized the social uses of language within a “form of life.” The vibrant interplay between text and image through which meaning is made and understanding shared dominates the work of both thinkers. Wittgenstein’s aphorism—“We find certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough”— stimulates Morris’ repeated attempts to synthesize the Cartesian split between body

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen, 1953, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Philosophical Investigations, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), § 47. The first part of this book is divided into numbered remarks; therefore, my citations will reference the remark number rather than the page number. The second part is paginated, and the appropriate page numbers will be used for citations from this section.


and mind, or between phenomenological and semiological epistemologies. Beginning in 1962, Morris’ art utilized the vocabulary and imagery of Philosophical Investigations to initiate his own exploration of the inter-related dynamics between language and knowing.

Wittgenstein acknowledges that we can neither know nor understand something until we name it. However, the name is the equivalent of merely pointing to an aspect of a concept, but we never have certainty as to which aspect we point without a language-game that follows the rules of usage. Drawing on this theory, Morris considers art to be a pointing and naming game that never ends; great works of art always suggest a name that has no name, a tip of the tongue sensation within the grasp of the mind through the mediation of the body and its senses. Art, when it succeeds, viscerally affects the body even as it addresses the mind. Morris wants his viewers to embody Wittgenstein’s axiom: “If you search in a figure (i) for another figure (2), and then find it, you see (i) in a new way. Not only can you give a new kind of description of it, but noticing the second figure was a new visual experience.”

“Seeing-as” is Wittgenstein’s term for such linguistic vagaries; for any coded message—be it textual, graphic or sensory—facilitates multivalency in which different, even contradictory, aspects can be “seen.” To illustrate this, Wittgenstein discusses a drawing that can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck, but not both simultaneously: “There are certain things which fall equally under the concept “picture-rabbit” and under the concept “picture-duck.” And a picture, a drawing, is such a thing.—But the impression is not simultaneously of a picture-duck and a picture-rabbit.” Wittgenstein described differences between “continuous seeing” and “aspect blindness” emphasizing the degree to which all communication is open to competing interpretations. And, he stresses that language is both a visual and a textual game.

For Morris, Greenberg’s formalist theory of modernism, by celebrating “purity”, typifies Wittgenstein’s concept of aspect-blindness by not acknowledging that equally viable or “impure” interpretations can be extracted from abstract paintings. That is, Greenberg’s “purity” is impossible to achieve—an image always suggests a multiplicity of possible interpretations or aspects, each of them equally valid. Wittgenstein’s example of a triangle illustrates this point:

Take as an example the aspects of a triangle. This triangle can be seen as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as

9. Email correspondence with the artist, 1st February 2000 and 26th August 2000.
11. Ibid., p. 199.
hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant to stand on the shorter side of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things.\textsuperscript{13}

Greenberg’s “purity”, what Wittgenstein called “continuous seeing,” is sullied by the potential for its opposite, what Wittgenstein called “the dawning of an aspect,” that any abstract gesture on a flat surface might conjure in the viewer’s mind. The capacity for \textit{seeing} something as something else relates to modernist painting as much as to any other graphic system. Morris, recognizing this as leverage for his critique of modernism, made a point of exacerbating its implications.

A quarter century after making the \textit{Memory Drawings}, Morris returned to these themes in his essay “Words and Images in Modernism and Postmodernism.” This essay, his first publication to explicitly cite Wittgenstein, mused on the potential for a written text to become an image devoid of syntactical meaning: “Paragraphs turned on their side can function as pictures. Usage does determine the symbol system in force.”\textsuperscript{14} Yet, the \textit{Memory Drawings} eclipsed text and image, conflating them as different aspects of the same impulse. The \textit{Memory Drawings} constitute a key stage in Morris’ development as a conceptual artist: “I have kept a few early works, such as \textit{Memory Drawings}…They are markers along the way. Places I stopped, or signposts to what came after.”\textsuperscript{15}

The \textit{Memory Drawings} belong to a constellation of objects Morris produced in 1963 that challenged Greenberg’s rules of the art game by offering a set of paradoxes that established the foundations of conceptual art. Shortly after completing the \textit{Memory Drawings}, Morris produced several self-portraits exploring the interiority of self. For instance, Morris’ \textit{Self-Portrait (E.E.G)} (Fig. 25) consists of an electroencephalogram that is nearly 71” in length, the artist’s precise height. As the EEG was recorded, Morris claimed to have concentrated on himself, producing a drawing that shows what Morris “thinks like” as opposed to what he “looks like.” Given that there is no linguistic message in the electrically registered scribbles which merely measure the presence of brain wave activity but not the content of what the brain is thinking, Morris provided a self-portrait in which reference to the self is limited to objective measurement. With this image, we learn neither what Robert Morris looks like nor how he thinks. While we can interpret what the squiggles reference, we can not arrive at a subjective meaning for them. For Wittgenstein, the answer is emphat-

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{25.png}
\caption{Robert Morris, \textit{Self-Portrait (E.E.G)}, 1963. Electroencephalogram and lead labels, framed with metal and glass, 70 3/4 \times 17 inches (179.7 \times 43.2 cm). Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Robert Morris. © 2010 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 200.
ic: “any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.”

Certainly, Self-Portrait (EEG) alludes to the artist and his psyche, but it offers no insight. The apparatus drawing suggests a transparency but reveals itself to be opaque. That is, Self-Portrait (EEG) is an ironic gimmick whereby the promise of the title is deferred by the scientific objectivity of the EEG’s impersonal markings. A drawing directed by the mind is like a private language which must be directed by a grammatical structure: “It might be said: if you have given yourself a private definition of a word, then you must inwardly undertake to use the word in such-and-such a way. And how do you undertake that? Is it to be assumed that you invent the technique of using the word; or that you found it ready-made?” We cannot know of what precisely Morris thought while the EEG was recorded. He can claim to have thought of himself, but the squiggled lines do not offer a correlative to Morris’ thoughts which must be packaged by, and conform to, the rules of language in order for another to know of what he thought. His impressions and experiences during the EEG are neither a private language nor a part of a language-game with which his audience participates—as Wittgenstein stated: “To him his private impression of the picture means what he has imagined, in a sense in which the picture cannot mean this to others.” In this case, Morris claimed to point to himself with attention but such a claim can not be validated.

Here, Morris investigated the potential to visualize a private language, producing a work that defeats its own truth claims. Through irony, Self-Portrait (EEG) reveals the inability of “pointing-into-yourself” and the insignificance of a private language. Language, as a Deconstructionist might claim, is always already a social event.

Similarly, Morris’ Portrait (1963), consisting of eight bottles, painted grey, isolated by a compartmentalized wooden frame, also grey, provides neither insight into Morris’ outward appearance nor his mental, emotional, and behavioral disposition. While we are shown vials ostensibly containing blood, sweat, sperm, saliva, phlegm, tears, urine, and feces we have no means of testing the veracity of these claims, we must rely on the authority of the object that its

19. Wittgenstein wrote: “Look at the blue of the sky and say to your self 'How blue the sky is!'...And you have no hesitation in exclaiming that to someone else. And if you point at anything as you say the words you point at the sky. I am saying: you have not the feeling of pointing into yourself, which often accompanies 'naming the sensation' when one thinking about 'private language'. Nor do you think that you really you ought not to point to the color with your hand, but with your attention.” *Ibid.*, § 275.
truth-claim is unassailable. Here, Wittgenstein’s investigations bear markedly on the nature of Morris’ work. For the claims made by the labels of these bottles require an exchange between the viewer, the art work and the artist. Morris’ self-portraits fail as portraiture but succeed in revealing the inadequacies of private languages. This Portrait accords with Wittgenstein’s “beetle in a box” example. Both disprove the possibility of a private language—in this case, bottles of bodily fluids replace the “beetle in a box”:

Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a “beetle.” No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word “beetle” had a use in these people’s language?—If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all; not even as a something. … That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of “object and designation” the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.  

We do not need to verify the presence of tears, sweat, or blood etc in these vials to understand to what Morris points; the position of the term, in this case the names of bodily fluids, denotes a consistent grammatical function and whether or not he and we mean the same thing by it, ontologically speaking, is irrelevant. We agree to the rules by which the names operate; and, the rules of their operation, their syntactic reliability, are of greater significance than their ontological status. Or, the signified is irrelevant; the use of the signifier is all that matters. The use of a word trumps its denotative properties, as Wittgenstein declares: “One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that.”

Therefore, we must remember how signs have been previously used in order to ensure that we can properly use the same signs with accuracy in the future. Wittgenstein’s conception of memory parallels Ferdinand de Saussure’s explanation of synchronic and diachronic linguistics. For Wittgenstein, a “form of life” establishes synchrony, or the conventional, static rules of usage. However, each participant playing in a language-game can also reinterpret the rules, offering a new use for a word thereby allowing for a diachronic intrusion on a “form of life” and its rules of communication. Saussure rejected any attempt to systematically chart linguistic evolution between the interdependency of synchronic, static linguistics and diachronic, evolutionary linguistics.  

\[20. \text{Ibid., § 293.} \]
\[21. \text{Ibid., § 432.} \]
\[22. \text{Ferdinand de Saussure, } \textit{Course in General Linguistics}, \text{trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1983), p. 81.} \]
to Wittgenstein’s concept of a “form of life” as both are static, fixed and stable. Diachronic linguistics corresponds with “language-games” whereby the rules of usage are susceptible to evolutionary change. As Wittgenstein asks:

A rule stands there like a sign-post.—Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it show which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath, or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?—And if there were not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk marks on the ground—is there only one way of interpreting them?

“Form of life” amalgamates the semiotic concepts of synchrony and contingency as the matrix by which meaning is derived and stabilized. In the case of Morris’ art game, Greenberg’s “purity” theory of modern art established a “form of life”


that relied on a privileged set of maxims to which one must agree to participate. If modern art is a game, its first two rules are 1) Seek originality and 2) Maintain a unique signature style. Morris ignores these synchronic prescriptions adopting a diachronic stance that queries the logic of the modernist art-game. In its place he adopts a new art game in which the first rule is “re-write the rules.”

Wittgenstein’s analysis of language is so wide-ranging, his examples so numerous, that one could note connections between his writings and Morris’ art without exhausting either. However, such an exercise would neither produce relevant insight nor clarify the inspiration Morris draws from Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Instead, a more productive operation would be to apply the dynamic of seeing as to Morris’ own work. That is, to apply Wittgenstein’s philosophy to Morris’ œuvre generates insightful results revealing the polyvalent nature of his art and the nuanced interpretation of analytic philosophy that informs his objects. Given his reliance on Wittgenstein’s theories, Morris’ sixty years of significant artistic production can be described as an ongoing art game (a game of endgames with no end in sight).

Throughout his career, Morris has played games with the innovative techniques of, among others, Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns so as to critically interrogate the act of creation. He reveals a dialectical oscillation between the joint enterprise of making and thinking, or acting and contemplating. This aspect of Morris’ art was never more evident than during the early 1990s, when he produced a series of drawings that relied heavily on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (Investigations, 1990; Fig. 26) and quoted from this philosopher’s late work, as well as an encaustic from the same year: *Monument Dead Monument/Rush Life Rush* which appropriated both Johns’ signature medium—encaustic—and a Hans Namuth photograph of Jackson Pollock painting.

Most importantly, this period marked the beginning of his use of Wittgenstein’s writings. By repeatedly invoking Wittgenstein, Morris’ game encourages interpretations extending beyond traditional art historical parameters and demands the viewer to engage in advanced acts of seeing-as. Morris’ intertextual appropriation of iconic images associated with late modernism suggests he plays fast and loose with a tradition and discourse he mastered as a graduate student at Hunter College. Morris plays an art-game, a metaphorical chess tournament with Pollock and Johns which proceeds in a manner akin to Wittgenstein’s imaginary chess players:

It is, of course, imaginable that two people unacquainted with games should sit at a chess-board and go through the moves of a game of chess; and even with all the appropriate mental accompaniments. And if we were to see it we should say they were playing chess. But now imagine a game of chess translated according to certain rules into a series of actions which we do not ordinarily associate with a game—say into yells and stamping of feet. And now suppose those two people to yell and stamp instead of playing the form of chess we are used to; and this in such a way that their procedure is translatable by suitable rules into a game of chess.\footnote{Ludwig Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, op. cit., § 200.}

Now, I do not mean to reduce Morris’ art to a series of “yells and stamping of feet.” Rather, his approach to the art game is unexpected, if not unprecedented. Through the dynamic of \textit{seeing-as}, Morris produces enigmatic art works that suggest numerous interpretations and multiple uses.

By reproducing Namuth’s photographs of Pollock painting, Morris participates in the critical discourse that derives from the hagiography of Pollock’s life and work. On at least three occasions in 1990, Morris copies a Namuth photograph of Pollock painting. These works emphasize what Amelia Jones labels the “Pollockian Performatif”, whereby the painter’s process is recognized as greater than the finished product.\footnote{See Amelia Jones, “The ‘Pollockian Performatif’ and the Revision of the Modernist Subject,” in \textit{Body Art: Performing the Subject} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 53-102.} However, through the dynamic of \textit{seeing-as}, Morris’ images of Pollock painting can simultaneously be seen as an articulation of the “Contemplative Pollock.” Dialectics between the “Pollockian Performatif” and the “Contemplative Pollock” emerge in Morris’ work from this year. Furthermore, Morris’ appropriation of iconic images of the “Pollockian Performatif” can be \textit{seen as} a celebratory revival of the “Contemplative Pollock.” Operating as a Lyotardian anamodernist, Morris resuscitates an aspect of Pollock’s process, the contemplative mode which has repeatedly been eclipsed by the consecration of this artist’s physical encounters with pigment and canvas. More importantly, this can only be discerned by \textit{seeing} Morris’ representations of the “Pollockian Performatif” as the “Contemplative Pollock.” Indeed, Wittgenstein’s theories alone indicate the complex nature of Morris’ extra-aesthetic agenda. Additionally, the polyvalency of Morris’ art from 1990 extends the dynamic of \textit{seeing-as} to include intertextual engagement with Pollock and Johns. Therefore, by conflating the legacies of these two artists with his own work, Morris’ “art history as art” suggests an anxiety of influence that reveals critical continuities and consistencies between modernism and postmodernism.

Robert Morris’ \textit{Investigations}, a series of graphite on vellum drawings (consisting of more than twenty 18 × 18” examples) juxtapose a dizzying pastiche of
imagery with selected statements by Wittgenstein. Returning to underlined passages in his well-worn copy of *Philosophical Investigations*, Morris adopted these passages for this series of drawings. These works contain an overwhelming abundance of art historical and mass cultural imagery.

*Investigations* consists of four overlapping elements: 1) Wittgenstein’s words—hybrid marks straddling the fence between text/image operating in a liminal space in between both sign systems (just like the *Memory Drawings*) emphasizing Wittgenstein’s exempla of pain and memory; 2) photographs culled from mass media—the choices include political figures such as FDR, Joseph McCarthy, and the Rosenbergs or media celebrities whose popularity may be fleeting like deceased aviator Charles Lindbergh, retired running back Franco Harris (holding his Football Hall of Fame bust), and the contralto Marian Anderson (as photographed by Richard Avedon); 3) *intra*textual representations of Morris’ previous works, and, of all his diverse signature styles it is his labyrinths that dominate the series; one appears in each drawing. Clearly, Morris had Wittgenstein’s aphorism in mind: “Language is a labyrinth of paths.” But more aptly, the kind of labyrinth *Investigations* suggests is not a traditional one of a continuous line that is “ruled by a blind necessity.” And 4) intertextual allusions to art history, particularly 5th-century Greek statuary, notably the *Three Goddesses* from the East pediment of the Parthenon and *Nike Adjusting Her Sandal*, a relief from the balustrade of the Temple of Athena Nike, Timothy O’Sullivan’s Civil War image *Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, PA*, Antonio Giulio Bragaglia’s “Photodynamics” and, most importantly, Hans Namuth’s photographs of Jackson Pollock painting.

Morris’ painterly touch is evident in these self-consciously stylized drawings. This spectacular barrage of imagery is unified by Morris’ evocation of transfer rubbings (a process using lighter fluid to dissolve and transfer ink from a mass media source by pressure). Here, Morris adopts a technique associated with Robert Rauschenberg, adding yet another layer of art historical intertextuality. By stylizing his drawing to look like the indexical mark of the nub in the transfer process (a kind of *seeing-as*), Morris adds rich layers of meaning regarding representation, reproduction and the ubiquity of mass media imagery as the definitive features of postmodern culture. These drawings of photographs are a simulacrum creating an illusion as if rendered by a transfer technique when in fact they are drawn directly by hand.

Despite their montaged appearance, these drawings bear many compositional consistencies as Morris divides the ground into three “loose” registers. Similar

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27. The quotes from *Philosophical Investigations* were taken from passages Morris had underlined while preparing the text for *Hearing* in 1972.

types of images often reappear in the same register of each drawing. The upper register consistently serves as the locus for mass media imagery. Images from Morris’ œuvre frequently appear in the central register. And, iconic art historical imagery appears in the lower register. The texts, in contrast, do not adhere to such compositional constraints as they are situated in multiple locations throughout the series. Certainly, numerous variations to this formula exist, but the consistent redundancies between them enable the viewer to perceive the series as a whole.

Given this onslaught of multivalent signifiers and indices, the viewer is bewildered by polysemy. No reading of these works can be complete, as not all of the elements could ever be accounted for coherently. More importantly, an autobiographical reflexivity dominates this series which suggests Morris is exploring the
possibility of a private-language. Given that the main thrust of Wittgenstein’s theory is to disprove concepts of a private-language, Morris’ idiosyncratically arranged, carefully considered, sources communicate in some way, or in too many ways. The paradox here is that some of the sources must carry far more personal meaning for Morris than others. For instance, Morris consciously includes numerous canonical images from the history of photography, such as O’Sullivan’s *Harvest of Death*, Eakins’s *Double Jump*, and Hans Namuth’s photographs of Pollock at work. Since Morris’ advanced degree is in art history, these images must certainly resonate with him. But, in what way do these historical documents offer insights into Morris’ understanding of philosophy in general and Wittgenstein in particular? *Investigations* are documentary in nature, as the artist reviews his career revealing continuities that had heretofore remained beneath the surface. Predictably, the over-riding theme, as determined by the philosophical aphorisms, regards relationships between language, meaning, and representation. A tone of despair and anguish, as well as melancholy and nostalgia, pervades this series.

Throughout his career, Morris has conceived of art history as a discourse and a form of life, treating its flexible rules as comprising a language-game. Emboldened by Wittgenstein’s concept of *seeing-as*, Morris recognizes that the interpretation of a set of rules is open-ended, incomplete and inconclusive. There is always interpretive wiggle room: “No course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made to accord with the rule.”

Perhaps as a clue to the *Investigation* series, Morris includes this quote in one of the drawings that deviates the most from the series’ conventions (Fig. 27). Only the obscured overlay line-drawing labyrinth represents Morris’ œuvre. Instead of referencing his previous work, Morris includes such images as a fragment of a Renoir painting, Thomas Jefferson’s visage on Mt. Rushmore, a Paul Strand photo and the Parthenon’s *Three Graces*. This drawing does not follow the compositional “rules” of the *Investigation* series—it shares few family resemblances. While not included in the drawing, the remainder of the passage Morris quotes clarifies Wittgenstein’s understanding of the relationship between rules and interpretation: “Every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term ‘interpretation’ to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.”

In this regard, Wittgenstein touches upon what Julia Kristeva indentifies as intertextuality: “the transposition of one or more *systems* of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position.”

31. This definition is supplied by Leon Roudiez in his introduction to Julia Kristeva, *Desire in
For both, substituting one expression for another, and what is gained or lost in this transformative act is a key to their analysis. This idea is echoed by Jean-François Lyotard, who recognizes that artists “move from one game to another, and in each of these games they try to figure out new moves. And even better, they try to invent new games...for example, proposes new rules of the painting game.”32 Translating rules in the theories of Wittgenstein and Lyotard, or shifting texts in Kristeva’s model, is always already underway. Each time we engage a rule in the language-game, we can “obey it” and remain aspect-blind, or “go against it”, and notice a new aspect or see the rule as something else: “Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought.”33 A “flashing of an aspect” is simultaneously directly seen, as the obscure but identifiable imagery in the *Investigations*, and a sudden insight based on an unexpected shift in focus. The permutability of seeing-as reiterates that the rules of language-games are unstable. Throughout his career, Morris has examined both sides of this paradox—oscillating between “obeying the rules” (Aspect-Blindness) and “going against them” (seeing-as).

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The Subject-Object Problem in “Aligned with Nazca”: On Phenomenological Issues in Robert Morris’ Artwork

ANÆL LEJEUNE

In his essay “Aligned with Nazca,” published in October 1975 in Artforum, Robert Morris writes: “Our encounter with objects in space forces us to reflect on our selves, which can never become the objects for our external examination. In the domain of real space the subject-object dilemma can never be resolved.” It is with this admission of failure that we would like to start, and remark that if this was indeed one of the main issues at stake in the artist’s activity since the middle of the 1960s, its formulation in his writings was partly delayed.

A famous point in the historiographical doxa of American minimal art is that the work and the spectator unfold in the same space, that is to say that they both share the same conditions of existence. The meaningfulness of minimalist works rests in large part on the knowledge spectators themselves possess, thanks to the experience of their body, of the physical conditions of existence on which this kind of sculpture plays: weight, spatial extension, proportions, etc. From this point of view, and with regard to historiography again, it was reasonable to insist upon the role played by the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the formulation of such a proposition. The philosopher’s project was to return to the world, to return to a pre-reflexive consciousness of the world prior to its idealization or conceptualization, in order to unveil that unreflected life that supports our behavior and thoughts. In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty sought to provide a description of the world based on the experience of the body, this experience being the only way by which humans have

2. Robert Morris would have learned of this work by Merleau-Ponty from its translation into English in 1962. E-mail addressed to the author, November 12, 2007.
1966 is diametrically opposed to this model. On the contrary, the artist asserts the fundamental tridimensional and tactile nature of the medium and insists upon the formal autonomy and upon the “literality” of the relationships established between the constitutive elements of sculpture: the space, the light, and the materials.4 The sculptures in which the artist perceives the most eminent accession to this nature are unified geometrical shapes whose economy enables the unveiling of the extrinsic factors that actually affect the form of the work as it is perceived by the viewer.5 Among these elements are the space, the scale, the light, etc. The form of the work, and thus, its meaning, cannot be separated from its conditions of perception; that is to say that its meaning does not precede its experience. Yet, we would like to suggest that Morris’ use of the notion of gestalt when referring to these unitary shapes seems to hinder in part this interdependence between the form and the perceiving subject.

This notion of gestalt, borrowed from gestaltpsychologie with which Morris was familiar since the middle 1950s,6 refers to the dynamic process through which perception is organized. Wolfgang Köhler or Kurt Koffka argued that an object is directly perceived as a whole and not reconstituted a posteriori. They stated that the whole shape possesses greater properties than the sum of its parts. What’s more, beside this unitary quality, the notion of gestalt emphasizes two points. First, it insists upon the fundamental interaction that exists between the perceived object and the perceiving subject. Indeed, gestalt psychologists no longer dealt with phenomena per se but rather with the way they appear during the perceptive experience, since stimuli alone do not suffice to explain the perception of forms.7 For instance, the rays of light that hit the retina being independent from one another, one cannot infer from the unity or the homogeneity of an object the unity of its retinal image, if not through such a process of primary perceptive organization. Second, the notion of gestalt also refers to the causal relationships that exist between the parts which compose the form as well as between the parts and the whole. A gestalt is a structure whose unity results from the parts it totalizes. Yet, in turn, these parts occur only through the whole they compose. Therefore, the parts and the whole occur

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simultaneously at the moment of perception—form and meaning occur at the moment of experience. Morris, for his part, writes that:

Even its most patently unalterable property—shape—does not remain constant. For it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work. Oddly, it is the strength of the constant, known shape, the gestalt, that allows this awareness to become so much more emphatic in these works than in previous sculpture. A baroque figurative bronze is different from every side. So is a six-foot cube. The constant shape of the cube held in the mind, but which the viewer never literally experiences, is an actuality against which the literal changing, perspective views are related. There are two distinct terms: the known constant and the experienced variable.⁸

Indeed, this piece of writing constitutes a penetrating description of the viewer’s encounter of a work such as Untitled (Battered Cubes) (1965) (Fig. 28) which causes a tension between the mental anticipation of its shape and the deceptive nature of its experience. Nevertheless, it seems that his critical claim against modernism might have benefitted from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of the gestalt in order to make it even more consistent. In fact, this kind of oscillation between what is “inalterable” and what “does not

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remain constant” and, what is more, the scission between “the known constant” and “the experienced variable” are at odds with this second hermeneutic tool used by the artist in his analysis. Two examples will highlight this point.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explains that perceiving the world does not consist in making a choice between an empirical mode according to which the thing coincides with the raw stimuli, and an idealist mode according to which the thing perceived must conform to the characteristics of a mental model known in advance. Perception consists neither in limiting oneself to physiological information nor in comparing reality with an object of consciousness. To take an example common both to the philosopher and to the artist, when one sees a cube, neither are the perspective deformations of its sides raw data, nor does one see all the sides of the cube simultaneously.10 Merleau-Ponty here calls upon gestalt theory which demonstrates that it is perception itself, and not the intellect, that “generalizes” the singularity or the specificity of experience. The identity of the perceived squares and circles with a conceptual category, he argues, does not happen a posteriori by an act of the intellect but at the very moment of perception. Gestalt is not a projection of our consciousness on the world, but inheres in its experience. Merleau-Ponty writes:

But although the gestalt may be expressible in terms of some internal law, this law must not be considered as a model on which the phenomena of structure are built up. Their appearance is not the external unfolding of a pre-existing reason. It is not because the “form” produces a certain state of equilibrium, solving a problem of maximum […] that it enjoys a privileged place in our perception; it is the very appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility; it is the birth of a norm and is not realized according to a norm; it is the identity to the external and the internal and not the projection of the internal in the external.11

Thus Morris’ formulation, while it does insist upon the constant changes that happen at the moment of experience, seems to preserve this dualism, or this “idealism” as Hal Foster has aptly noticed.12 Gestalt or the “known constant,” as Morris put it, seems to be similar to a model of the mind, as bearer of the truth of the shape, against which the perceived appearance or the “experienced variable” is checked. Whereas for Merleau-Ponty, the gestalt provided a way to avoid this dualism, and this, no less for a cube than for a baroque figurative bronze. There is

9. Tensions which had already been raised by Lizzie Borden in “The New Dialectic,” *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 6 (March 1974), pp. 44-45.
thus a kind of caesura occurring in the structure of the experience as described by Morris, between the form in itself and its mode of appearance to the spectator. A caesura whose origin would have to be found in modernist theory, a theory that the will to counter, perhaps too frontally, forced the artist to preserve implicitly.\textsuperscript{13}

Our second remark on the use of this notion by Morris concerns the organization of the perceptive field. The primary principle upon which \textit{gestalt} perception rests is its \textit{structuring} in a \textit{ground} and a \textit{figure}. It consists in a discrimination that operates with regard to the qualities of the field: homogeneity, regularity, and the eventual symmetry of one zone in contrast with another more heterogeneous and undefined one. Thus, a figure on a ground can only appear insofar as they both determine \textit{one another}, the same way neither the whole nor the parts of a form can precede one another. This is a fundamental characteristic of the notion upon which Merleau-Ponty insisted as early as 1945. Perception, he said, is not based on absolute terms but on \textit{relationships}, that is, on a differential mode. He wrote: “The perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a ‘field.’”\textsuperscript{14} This is to say that \textit{gestalt} does not so much designate a form as it does a \textit{figure-ground structure} that is not ensured once and for all. \textit{Gestalt} quality is not an exclusive and positive quality of the object but rather depends upon the relations established by the perceiving subject, according to his or her temporary perceptive interest. There is no world, Merleau-Ponty writes, “without an existence that sustains its structure.”\textsuperscript{15} That is to say that there is no world without a gaze focusing on a portion of the perceptive field and thus instituting it simultaneously into a form on a ground. For his part, Robert Morris, close to the common understanding of gestalt theory notably accentuated at the time by its vulgarization by Rudolf Arnheim,\textsuperscript{16} tends to identify the notion of \textit{gestalt} with simple geometric forms that are considered stable. Morris refers to the \textit{gestalt} as the “strength of the constant” and writes that “once it is established it does not disintegrate. […] it remains constant and indivisible.”\textsuperscript{17} But to base the quality of \textit{gestalt} upon formal geometry or upon the material unity of the work, and to consider this quality to be immutable once established, still partially

\begin{enumerate}
\item See also Alex Potts, \textit{The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist} (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 244-246.
\item Maurice Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 432.
\item Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture,” 1966, p. 228 and 234.
\end{enumerate}
consists, it seems, in considering the shape of the work to be independent from the perceptive act that isolates it from its environment.

These remarks, however, might seem quite unfair, had Morris himself not been aware of the issue. This is particularly salient in his essay “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects,” published in 1969, in which Morris criticizes the somewhat geometrizing understanding of the phenomenon of perception that had formerly been his own. Henceforth, he clearly states that fundamental condition of perception, according to which “Without the concentration of a figure, any given sector of the world is a field. Objects are distinct and differentiated more according to this or that local interest rather than according to any general characteristics.”

Thus, while minimal art “took the conditions within individual things—specific extension and shape and wholeness of one material—for the project of reconstituting objects as art,” Morris goes on to say that “some new art now seems to take the conditions of the visual field itself (figures excluded) and uses these as a structural basis for the art.” It would seem that “a shift from a figure-ground perceptual set to that of the visual field” had occurred, shifting “closer to the phenomenal fact of seeing the visual field.” From then on, this kind of “figure-ground” organization would be inevitably associated in Morris’ mind with a simplistic understanding of the phenomenon of the perception of a work of art. In that regard, Morris’ position is similar to the one espoused in Anton Ehrenzweig’s The Hidden Order of Art. In that essay, Ehrenzweig criticizes the simplistic comprehension of the phenomenon of vision defended by gestalt theory. He accuses this theory of having decreed general rules based on specific cases characterized by regularity, homogeneity and the unity of the object of perception. Against such a model of vision, which breaks the field into pieces and decisively separates a meaningful figure from an unmeaningful ground, Ehrenzweig defends a “syncretistic” or “dedifferentiated” vision, one that grasps the totality of the structure of the field of perception. It involves a phenomenon of “scanning,” thanks to which the environment is simultaneously apprehended as a whole as well as by parts, impartially embracing figure and ground. This mode of vision is like an unresolved dialectic between the grasping of the whole and localized focusing. Morris himself would refer to it, a few months later, in terms

19. Ibid., p. 57.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. Ibid., pp. 55-66.
of a “rhythmical alternation,” which is to say, in terms of a permanent oscillation between order and disorder, between differentiation and dedifferentiation, between containment and scattering. According to Morris, this understanding of visual perception better conforms to the actual conditions of perception. And as the artist advocates, the necessity is henceforth to carry on, in sculpture, the kind of immersion in matter or in the field that is characteristic of the actual phenomenological mode of confrontation between the spectator and his environment and the objects that compose it (Figs. 29-30). One must then reconsider the immersed standpoint from which perception takes place, a situation to which the artist testifies in his essay when he mentions a field that exceeds peripheral vision, and the “wholeness” of the field that is no longer “perceived as an image” but rather “sensed.” The mode of visual perception that results from this situation is fittingly designated by the artist by the notion of “landscape mode.” A mode to which Morris would bear witness at length in his essay “Aligned with Nazca.”

The article describes a trip the artist took to Peru in order to visit the famous archeological site of the Nazca geoglyphs. The first part of the text consists of a personal account of the discovery and visit of the site that Morris undertook

26. Ibid., p. 57.
by car and then on foot. Sensations, impressions, and anecdotes on the region are mixed together in this account. Then, the singular experience of these lines is reported in details. In fact, Morris discovers that the perception of the lines blurs the order of orientations on which space is usually, or rather a priori, organized. It is from afar, he notices, that the lines, or the “gestalts of linearity” emerge most clearly (Fig. 31). The lines are only perceptible at a distance. They are thus a function of distance. Yet, by virtue of this extension, the horizontality of the lines is troubled insofar as they are no longer only perceived as inscribed on the ground but also on the vertical plane. “The horizontal becomes vertical through extension,” Morris writes. Thus, the orthogonality of the vertical and horizontal planes that usually organize objects in space is blurred here—a traditional spatial framework also to be found in the Western artistic

28. Ibid., p. 154.

tradition according to Morris, a reference justified by the formal similarities between certain recent works and the Nazca site. Indeed, all perceptive experience of art, Morris explains, is traditionally reduced to the frontality of the plane in which paintings and sculptures stand, parallel to the body of the viewer and perpendicular to his or her gaze. He writes, “All twentieth-century art seems compelled by a type of Cartesian projection that will net every visual experience by a vertical plane interposed between the viewer and the world.”

But beyond the mode of perception, what is at stake in such an orthogonal organization is an a priori way of thinking. Morris writes, “The Cartesian grid of rectilinear room space involves a mental as well as a perceptual focus […].”

Morris cites as evidence the recent art, including minimal art, whose geometric, serial and analytic characteristics reveal the logical sequences that have led, in an a priori manner, to the formation of these works. These are mental operations which belong more to the domain of writing and of notation than to the field of manipulation of matter in space: “Systems of notation are used by us at the distance that makes them intelligible; they are extra-spatial.”

From this point of view, Morris’ critical claim against minimal art becomes clear: “minimal art’s diagrammatic aspect was derived from plans generated by drawings on flat pages. Most minimal art was an art of flat surfaces in space.”

What is here problematic for Morris is that these shapes were determined and known prior to their concrete realization, “diminishing,” he writes, “the density of the physical.” Such conditions of creation presupposed that the forms were determined in advance and could be translated into matter and transposed into physical space without apparent modification, as though their physical and spatial nature were contingent. However, Morris now insists that “neither space nor consciousness is a medium in which objects or thought are constituted. For we know space by the objects in it […]”—the corollary of this assessment being that there cannot be objects except in space. Therefore, contrary to the framework of production underlying minimal art, artistic forms could no longer be imagined independently of their mode of appearance—this despite the fact that minimal art did constitute an attempt to mediate between the surface and the issue of space.

29. Ibid., p. 158.
30. Ibid., p. 158. Our emphasis.
31. Ibid., p. 166.
32. Ibid., p. 164.
33. Ibid., p. 159. Morris renews here with the issue of the primacy of form over substance which he had raised as early as 1968 in his article “Anti-Form,” pp. 33-35.
34. Ibid., p. 166.
35. Ibid., p. 169. Let us note that the continuity between the world and the space of the self supposes a more pronounced interest for physical space rather than for psychological space, following the
In order to explain this shift in artistic sensibility, Morris proposes an interesting conceptual couple. He writes: “The physical world divides for us between the flat, where notational information exists perceptually outside of space, and the spatial, where perceptual relativity is the constant,” and goes on, saying that “fixity is a function of notational systems, and notational systems exist in the flat world of surfaces.” Two models are thus brought into tension. On the one hand, there is the mode of flatness, convention and writing, through which things are thought in their fixity and objectivity. The function of notation, Morris insists, is to record the facts, to control, but also to “shut out the physical world.” Whereas on the other hand, the spatial mode designates the immersion in the sensitive world and the willingness to “venture into the irrationality of actual space.” That is, two models mediated by the singular site of Nazca, a site of inscription in the landscape. This seems to us a way to recall, intuitively, two modes of apprehension of space well described by the phenomenological tradition: the “geographical space” and the “space of landscape,” which the eloquent example of the labyrinth mentioned by Morris renders perfectly explicit. We read, “A labyrinth is comprehensible only when seen from above, in plan view, when it has been reduced to flatness and we are outside its spatial coil.” What is thus at stake is the distinction between the apprehension of objects in space by the spectator inserted in this space, and the understanding one gets of the same objects from the plane view, as seen from an overhanging position.

It was the German neuropsychiatrist Erwin Straus who coined these two concepts in his book *Vom Sinn der Sinne* (1935), quoted by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. “Geographical space,” according to Straus, designates a modality of space through which space is apprehended as a closed and finite ensemble, a space in which each element possesses a well-identified and coordinated position. Every position is constantly determined by its situation within the whole space, and related to a zero point on the grid. The “geographical space” is a space that is already known, translated into a neutral and symbolic mode. By analogy, it is similar to a plan or a map. Merleau-Ponty describes this spatial mode as the “being […] which we know,” “the network of facts

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36. Ibid., p. 166. Our emphasis.
37. Ibid., p. 169.
39. Ibid., p. 166.
subject to laws.”

It belongs, as its etymology echoes, to the domains of writing and flatness that Morris has conceptualized. The “space of landscape,” on the other hand, designates the lived space, the space experienced by the spectator who is inserted in it and surrounded by a horizon that constitutes the limit of what he or she can see. This is to say, it is a space whose limits are traced by his or her own perception of it: the space that opens up to the observer is organized around him or her, it unfolds from his or her position and shifts as he or she shifts. Morris attests to such a shift of horizon when he realizes the deceptiveness of distances in that immense space, and that the approach toward a motif is always postponed when one attempts to reach it on foot. Merleau-Ponty writes about this “space of landscape” that it is that “through which the world impinges upon us, and by means of which we are in vital communication with it.”

The essential point lies here in the insistence that this last mode of perception, the “space of landscape” or the “spatial,” brings to bear on the relation that exists between the way objects appear and the standpoint of the perceiving subject. A relation Morris testifies to when he writes, for example, that “After an hour or so of walking and observing, one becomes very aware of how one’s behavior as an observer affects the visibility and definition of the lines,” or again, when he affirms that the perception of lines is a “function of distance,” which is to say a function of the distance between the object of the gaze and the viewer. The shape of the objects of the gaze, and through them, space itself, are a function of the particular point of view adopted on them by the viewer. Besides, it is symptomatic that the concept of the “spatial” coined by Morris here is immediately articulated in his essay with the notion of “depth,” a notion that is absent from the artist’s earlier texts. This notion allows the artist to place even more emphasis on the link between the point of view of the perceiving subject and the object’s mode of apparition, insofar as depth refers to the very situation of the spectator in the world, the standpoint from which the distance with surrounding objects is counted. Morris writes: “The perception of things in depth returns us to our consciousness of our own subjectivity [...]. An object has no stable perceptual place or size or relation to other objects.

46. Unless we are mistaken, the only other occurrence of the term among the group of texts that address this question of perception is in “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making” (1970, p. 89), in which it is not expanded upon.
For these are a function of our own positions as perceivers.⁴⁷ And this reference to the notion of depth is not unlike Merleau-Ponty’s use of this same major concept, the articulatory node of his conception of space. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, depth is not a dimension of the object of perception itself, it does not belong to it the same way height and size do. Depth can be equated to a “breadth seen from the side,” in Merleau-Ponty’s words, only by a spectator who has abandoned his or her point of view on the world; the same spectator who can see the labyrinth in the plan view in Morris’ text. On the contrary, depth is established by the subject. It is the sign of the distance of an object for a subject situated in the same space. It refers both to the situation of the perceiving subject in the world and to his or her relation to objects. Merleau-Ponty writes: “[depth] is not impressed upon the object itself, it quite clearly belongs to the perspective and not to the things. Therefore it cannot either be extracted from, or even put into that perspective by consciousness. It announces a certain indissoluble link between things and myself by which I am placed in front of them.”⁴⁸ Depth is thus a clear sign that the way an object unfolds in space and its formal characteristics are in fact inherent to the way it appears to the spectator. That is to say that the former are inseparable from the spectator himself or herself and from his or her place in the very same space, a space of which depth constitutes the primary experience—one only knows space by the objects in it, writes Morris. Depth designates the mode of perception of objects by a subject in the same space: that is, the “spatial” mode described by Morris.

To conclude, we might suggest that it was this experience of the Peruvian site, of horizontality and of depth, which led Morris to address once again the issue of the relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. From this experience, he learned that the lines on the ground, their shape, cannot be separated from the movements of the spectator. The reason is that these things do not appear to a spectator withdrawn from the world but rather to a spectator implied in the coil of the labyrinth, perceiving the world according to a “landscape mode.” The neutral and objective model, the plan or the diagram upon which every side of a thing appears as though seen simultaneously, no longer structures experience the way formalist modernism would have it. Such an objective model can only be designed after the wandering, afterwards, as the act of writing always implies, as Morris insists.⁴⁹ And in his opinion, that is what compels him to consider the site of Nazca and its lines both as concrete landscape

and as symbolic abstraction. As we can read in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, in order to close the parallel, “To return to things in themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.” To argue then that it is impossible to resolve “the subject-object dilemma in real space,” as Morris does, is to say that there is no object or form independent of the way it appears. But it also refers to the proximity in which things stand around us. Indeed, at the end of “Aligned with Nazca,” the artist stresses the centripetal and intimate nature of the site, in spite of its immensity. For if the site seems close or familiar, it is doubtless because it is from the one who discovers it and according to his or her standpoint that it unfolds.

Triangulating Morris’ Intention?
Davidson on Morris
Quoting Davidson

JEAN-MICHEL ROY

What Is Davidson Doing in *Blind Time Drawings Series IV*?

“What am I doing there?” This is how Davidson opens “The Third Man,” the critical piece he was invited to write for the 1992 exhibition of the fourth of the *Blind Time Drawings Series* (Fig. 32), in each element of which Morris inserted a quotation of one of Davidson’s philosophical writings. Davidson’s question is a very natural one to ask, because it constitutes an immediate reaction, shared by all viewers of the work, to a presence felt as incongruous on many counts. And this incongruity calls for an explanation on each one of these different counts, that can be ordered by level of generality from the more specific to the more general.

We want to understand, in the first place, why Morris picked up those specific texts of Davidson, and not other ones. But we also want to understand why he picked up texts by Davidson, and not by any other philosopher. Further, we need to make sense of the fact that he used philosophical texts, and not literary or scientific ones, as he in fact did in other parts of the overall *Blind Time Drawings Series*. But providing answers to these questions will not suffice to fully satisfy our curiosity. Assuming that Morris needed to resort to certain elements of Davidson’s philosophy in order to realize this particular work, we also need to understand why he opts for this specific way of making use of them, namely incorporating them in his drawings, and incorporating them in a quite specific manner.

All these questions are the different facets of one single general problem, that of understanding the relation between Morris’ *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* and the philosophy of Davidson. But solving this problem obviously requires a further enlargement of the scope of inquiry to the general relation between the whole of Morris’ artistic output and the philosophy of Davidson. As a matter of fact, the incongruous insertion of Davidsonian quotations into *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* is not the only way in which the work of the philosopher interferes with that of the artist. Morris also refers on several occasions to Davidson’s thought in his own writings, and even dedicates two specific pieces to it. In order to be fully understood, the incorporations offered by *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* must clearly be compared with these other, apparently more classical, forms of the presence of Davidson’s philosophical work in Morris’ artistic one.

But they must also be confronted with the attention paid by Morris to other philosophical figures. For he not only refers to Davidson, but also to a non-negligible number of prominent philosophers, most of whom belong to the twentieth century, and even more specifically, to the analytical side of twentieth century philosophy. A rather incongruous fact also, given, on the one hand, that the analytical tradition largely neglected the problem of art and was essentially centered around issues of knowledge and, on the other hand, that it was the continental tradition that was essentially drawn upon by artists of his


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generation, especially in their efforts to come to terms with the issue of post-modernism versus modernism.

In short, a full elucidation of the mysterious incorporation of Davidsonian writings in Morris' *Blind Time Drawings IV*, that undoubtedly constitutes the central point of the impact of Davidson's philosophy on his work, can only be achieved by means of a broader scope investigation of the relation that his complex artistic itinerary as a whole entertains with philosophy. Such an investigation should be organized around the systematic exploration of four basic questions:

a/ the what question: What philosophical theories does Morris make use of? And what ones, by contrast, does he exclude? What is, in particular, the exact place of Davidson among them?

b/ the how question: How does he make use of them? What are the various modalities of this use, and how do they relate one to the other?

c/ the when question: When does he start resorting to philosophy? Is there a specific moment when philosophy shows up in his artistic evolution? Is there an evolution in his use of philosophy, and if so, how does it correlate with his artistic evolution itself?

d/ the why question: Why does Morris use the philosophical theories he makes use of, in the way he does and at the times when he does?

This is a project for a book that, to the best of my knowledge, is still to be written. My ambition must naturally be a much more limited one. As a matter of fact, I will venture into no more than a tentative critical analysis of the answer that Davidson himself provides in “The Third Man” to the question he raises. This answer obviously constitutes a precious starting point for the elucidation of his textual form of presence in *Blind Time Drawings Series IV*, and it is moreover of particularly topical interest for a conference dedicated to “the expanded field of writing” in Morris’ œuvre. Furthermore, Davidson’s answer is anything but straightforward and therefore stands in need of an interpretation. But if its meaning cannot be taken for granted, neither can its correctness. Davidson might very well misunderstand what he is doing there. And such is the question that I ultimately wish to address: did Davidson understand what he was doing there?

**What Does Davidson Think He Is Doing There?**

In spite of the ignorance that he initially professes as to what might account for the presence of pieces of his own theoretical writings in *Blind Time Drawings IV*, Davidson does eventually offer an hypothesis about it. But this hypothesis is based on a preliminary interpretation of the meaning of the drawings, a preliminary interpretation that constitutes in fact the essential part of his article. In other words, he draws a tentative answer to the question: what am I
doing in these Blind Time Drawings IV? from an answer to the question: what is he (Morris) doing with those Blind Time Drawings IV? In addition, this preliminary answer developed by Davidson is an attempt to interpret Morris’ work in terms of his own philosophical theories, and in particular of what is known as his thesis of triangulation.

The Theory of Triangulation

The thesis of triangulation is introduced by Davidson in several different contexts in the course of the 1980s and then assumes a growing importance in his subsequent writings. It first appears as such in 1982 (“Rational Animals”) in an analysis of the concept of rationality as a means to elucidate the notion of objective truth, defined as “the concept of an objective reality which is independent of my belief.” It is reasserted in particular in a 1990 defense of the thesis of externalism, according to which the content of a person’s mental states is determined by elements of the environment of this person and not by the inner mechanisms of her own mind (“Epistemology externalized”). Of great importance also for understanding the basic meaning of the thesis of triangulation is a 1992 essay (“The Second Person”) dedicated to the demonstration that a language cannot be private, in the sense that a language that would be understood by a single person is impossible.

Despite this variety of contexts of introduction, the thesis of triangulation is an answer to a single and time honored philosophical question that can be formulated as follows: under what conditions can something be categorized as an object, in the sense of an entity different and independent from a living creature, and to which the mental states and language of this creature refer? And the answer offered by the thesis of triangulation is that something can be categorized as an object only to the extent that it can be related to two living creatures, and not one, and two living creatures interacting one with each other. The thesis of triangulation is thus a new version of the anything but new idea that an object is something essentially intersubjective, so that nothing could count as an object in a universe inhabited by a single living creature, or a single living subject if we assume—as Davidson seems to do—that the notion of subject itself can be defined independently from that of an object. In other words, according to the thesis of triangulation, an object is necessarily an element of a triad including, in addition to itself, two subjects, and three relations: one between each of the two subjects and the object, and one of interaction between the two subjects themselves. Eliminate any of the two subjects

or any of the three relations and nothing is left that can be categorized as an object, in the sense of an element different and independent from a subject.

Two aspects must in reality be distinguished in the thesis of triangulation. The most basic one, corresponding to the characterization just given of the thesis, claims that something can be categorized as an object only if, in such a triangular structure, the relation between the two subjects is one of interaction. The second one claims that the two subjects involved in such a structure can themselves categorize the object as such, that is to say can themselves have the concept of an object, only if they not only interact, but also communicate linguistically one with each other.

In order to clarify this double content, let’s consider the case of a creature interacting with its environment. The basic question addressed by Davidson is: under what conditions can this interaction be categorized or interpreted as an interaction with a world of objects? But this question involves in fact two different ones, corresponding to the two aspects of the thesis.

One question, answered by the first aspect of the thesis, can itself be formulated in the following terms: under what conditions can this interaction be interpreted as involving a relation with a world of objects?

The other question, answered by the second aspect of the thesis, can in turn be put as follows: under what conditions can we interpret this interaction as one in which the creature itself considers the world it is interacting with as a world of objects? As emphasized by Davidson, the sheer existence of such an interaction with the environment, even if it is a successful one, does not imply that it is based on the apprehension of the environment as an objective one by the creature itself:

A creature may interact in complex ways without entertaining any propositions. It may discriminate among colors, tastes, sounds, and shapes. It may learn, that is change its behavior, in ways that preserve its life and increase its food intake. It may “generalize,” in the sense of reacting to new stimuli as it has come to react to prior stimuli. Yet none of this, no matter how successful by my standards, shows that the creature commands the contrast between what is believed and what is the case, as required by belief.1

A central example used by Davidson in order to support his twofold triangulation answer to this double interrogation is that of the learning of a language by a process of conditioning and reinforcement, such as the learning of the word “table” by a baby with the help of his parents: “The child babbles, and when it produces a sound like ‘table’ in the evident presence of a table, it is rewarded; the process is repeated and presently the child says ‘table’ in the presence of tables.”2

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This process is usually analyzed as one of causal interaction between an objective stimulus, the object table, and a verbal behavior of the baby, his pronouncing the word “table.” In this perspective, many objects belonging to the category of table cause in the baby specific visual percepts of a similar kind, and through rewarding, the baby is taught to associate to these table percepts specific verbal behavioral manifestations, that can also be grouped in virtue of their similarities into one category, namely that of pronouncing the word “table.” But what is the basis, Davidson asks, for postulating the presence of such an objective stimulus as a set of independent tables? In his opinion, the sheer interaction of the baby with the world offers none, because there is no reason to say that the baby is stimulated by objective tables instead of other objective stimuli offering an equal degree of similarities, such as patterns in the light waves transmitted to the eye of the baby, or of stimuli deprived of any objectivity, such as patterns of activity in the nerve endings of the child. Consequently, the only reason for objectifying the stimulus, that is to say for locating it in tables considered as objects, and therefore as entities different from and independent from the baby, is the fact that this stimulus is considered as common to the baby and the parents. Indeed, for Davidson, what is chosen as a stimulus of the baby’s reaction in such an analysis is what the parents would also react to, so that they can teach their baby to react to it.

A first claim is thus that there is no way to locate the stimulus unless a reference to another creature is introduced, and that the determination of what stimulates one creature is thus intrinsically dependent on what stimulates another creature having some interaction with the first one (such as teaching a language). To put it differently: what can count as a stimulus for one creature can only be something that counts as a common stimulus for another creature interacting with the first one. A second claim necessarily follows from this first one, namely that the common stimulus must be different from and independent from these two creatures, precisely because it is common to them. In “The Third Man,” Davidson writes for instance that the “object is the common cause of the responses,” and immediately adds: “a cause that must have a location in a shared, interpersonal word.” And in “Locating Literary Language” (1993), he mentions “the objectification of parts and aspects of the world which is made possible by intersubjective triangulation.” This transformation of a stimulus into an object by means of an appropriate triangular structure is what Davidson calls the triangulation of an object. Triangulating something thus really means objectifying that something through an appropriate triangle structure.

6. Ibid., p. 177.
Davidson’s argument for the first aspect of the triangulation thesis can be thus summarized as the conjunction of the three following assertions:

1/ the notion of stimulus of a creature’s behavior only makes sense if it can refer to something determinate;

2/ it can only refer to something determinate if it is understood as the notion of a stimulus common to two interacting creatures;

3/ the moment it is so understood, it refers to something objective, i.e. different and independent from these creatures.

The process of word learning under consideration is however also usually analyzed, according to Davidson, as one in which the tables to which both the baby and his parents respond visually and linguistically (for instance by saying: “here is a table” or “this is a table”) are apprehended by both of them as objects. Such an apprehension is in his opinion a matter of belief: apprehending the perceptual stimuli as objective tables means that they believe that there is something such as an objective table. And for a number of reasons exposed in “Rational Animals,” Davidson also contends that a creature cannot be endowed with the capacity to have beliefs without having the capacity to forge the concept of belief, that itself implies the concept of “an independent reality which is independent of [the] belief.” As a consequence, two creatures can only be considered as seeing their interaction with the world as an apprehension of objects if they can be credited with having the concept of an object. And the second part of the thesis of triangulation is precisely that they can only be credited with it under the condition that they communicate one with each other linguistically, that is to say if the basis of the triangular structure necessary for the emergence of objectivity is not only one of interaction, but also one of linguistic communicative interaction. The idea behind this second assertion, although it is not phrased in a satisfactory way by Davidson in my opinion, is that, since the object is a common source of stimulation, it has to be recognized as such to be recognized as an object, and that this can only be achieved through a relation of communication, that Davidson readily assimilates with a linguistic one. I need to communicate with the other in order to know that we have common sources of stimulation, and then come up with the very notion of a common and independent source of stimulation. In addition, what holds for the very notion of an object also holds for concepts of particular objects. In order to obtain the notion of a table as a common source of stimulation, I need to know that what I apprehend as a source of stimulation of a particular kind is also what the other apprehends as such, and I can only know it, according

7. Donald Davidson, Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, op. cit., p. 104.
8. See in particular “The Second Person,” op. cit., p. 121.
to Davidson’s analysis, through linguistic communication with the other. Objectification requires mutual linguistic interpretation between the two subjects involved in the triangular structure.

**Art Object and Triangulation**

This triangle, that Davidson calls “primal” or “primitive,” only captures “the origins of intentionality and objectivity.” We also have conceptual relations with objects that do not immediately fit the situation that it describes. However, according to Davidson, all forms of objectification—the term is his, cf. supra—can be ultimately referred to such situations and analyzed as modified forms of a primitive triangularity. “Language soon reaches far beyond what can be immediately and jointly experienced” and contributes to the elaboration of a “conceptual space,” a set of specific assumptions about what is out there in the objective world, that plays a crucial role in making communication possible in all these situations where we “talk and think about what is too small or distant to be seen or touched,” or where the “interaction between perceiving creatures that is the [basic] foundation of communication is lost.”

The apprehension of artworks corresponds to one of these modified forms of the primitive triangle, because “works of art… are among the objects in the world.” In other words, we relate to artworks as objects, and as such artworks presuppose particular kinds of triangulation, of which Davidson only offers a coarse-grained analysis in his writings, focusing in addition almost exclusively on the case of literary works as well as on that of Morris’ *Blind Time Drawings Series IV*, considered as a “plastic” type of artwork. All of them seem to share in Davidson’s eyes a number of specific features however. Three of these features must be mentioned in order to understand his analysis of what Morris does with the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV*.

In the first place, the two creatures involved are the artist and what we might call, for lack of a better generic word, the spectator. A resulting difference with the primitive triangle is that one of the apexes of the base of the triangle is a producer of the object triangulated, and not an observer of it. An

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additional consequence is that there is often no immediate interaction that can serve as a basis for their mutual interpretation, since the artist is usually not there when the spectator apprehends the work, although performance art clearly is an exception. This is one of the reasons why their communication relies heavily on the concepts they already and knowingly share, taking advantage of the fact that, as Davidson puts it in his unquestionably precious style, art “enters the conceptual scene at an advanced stage.” This conceptual scene or space serves as what he calls the background of the communication.

**Triangulating Morris**

This notion of artistic triangulation lies at the core of Davidson's interpretation of Morris' *Blind Times Series IV*, as well as of his own presence in it. As far as I can understand it, this interpretation includes four complementary aspects.

In the first place, Davidson sees the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* as an illustration of Morris' notion of process art, making explicit reference to his article “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated,” where Morris very clearly articulates the project of an art that, in Davidson's own words, carries out “the project of bringing the act of their making into the works themselves.”

But Davidson also thinks that the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* carries out such a project “one step further, or at least in a new direction” compared to other artists with a similar orientation or to Morris' earlier works, such as *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*. This new step or direction is described as follows: “Not only do these pictures graphically display some of the essential features of all intentional actions, but they also engage the collaboration of the viewer in a way that connects with the origins of the concept of an object.”

Accordingly, the second aspect of Davidson's interpretation is twofold. It first consists in claiming that Morris lays bare not only the process of the making of the drawings, but the intentional dimension of this process, that is to say what he intended to do with these drawings. As a result, “…viewers… know [not only] how they were produced, but… why.” This intention is not the deep one that motivated Morris, more or less consciously, to embark into this ground-breaking artistic experiment, but “for each object, the detailed intention it was meant to realize.” It is expressed above all through the last two of the four elements that

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17. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 164.
22. Ibid.
Davidson distinguishes in the drawings, and which are: the drawing itself, the marks disposed on the paper before the act of drawing, the description of the task and the Davidsonian quotations. Indeed, the description of the task (element 3) has as one of its functions, according to Davidson, to “express an intention, the intention to perform a certain action within a given (subjectively estimated) period, and with the eyes closed.” While the texts (element 4) are excerpts of “an attempt to make explicit the everyday conceptual apparatus with which we all operate, the part of this apparatus some philosophers like to call ‘Folk Psychology,’” 23 and that Davidson sees as an apparatus centered around the concept of intention. In other words, the originality of Morris’ drawings would be to contain an explicit linguistic communication of the mental state that presided over their creation.

In addition, the consequence of this exposition, within the art object itself, of the intentional dimension of its process of creation is for Davidson to elicit what he variously qualifies as a collaboration, an interaction, or a participation of the viewer. Given the information that is provided to him about the intentional dimension, the viewer can firstly retrieve from the drawing the act of its production, he can “vividly picture” it. 24 But this picturing is furthermore an understanding, and therefore a penetration of the inner essential nature of the act, that is normally reserved for the subject of this act. Finally, and this is the key point of Davidson’s analysis, “what ensures the participation of viewers is the fact that the accomplishment can be directly measured against the intention…we cannot help being involved, as he must be, in the question of how close he did come. We can see where his patterns fall, and we can see, because he provided us with the targets, by how much he missed the marks.” 25 In other words, given that we have access to the immediate intention of the artistic act, we also penetrate its logic of failure and success, we get an insider view of it.

It is at this point that Davidson clarifies what I take as the third aspect of his interpretation, according to which the collaboration of the viewer is engaged “in a way that connects with the origins of the concept of an object.” 26 But in what sense exactly is there here a connection with the theory of triangulation?

It is first to be observed that Davidson’s formulation is ambiguous: does he refer to the basic triangulation that locates a stimulus as an object or to the establishment of a communicative link, in addition to an interactive one, at the base of the triangle, through which the concept of an object emerges in each of the two elements of this base? As a matter of fact, both count as origins of the concept of the object. It seems that the first option is the correct one. Indeed, Davidson

23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 163.
concludes his interpretation with the following sentences: “Morris has depicted, then, the essential element on which the concept of an autonomous object (and world) depends: an intersubjective measure of error and success, of truth and falsity. He has put his viewers in a position to triangulate with him the location of his creative acts.” 27 But the intersubjective measure of success and failure mentioned here seems to be Morris’ intention, given that he also wrote earlier in his analysis that “what ensures the participation of viewers is the fact that the accomplishment can be measured directly against the intention.” 28 In other words, the idea apparently put forward is that Morris’ intention is itself objectified by being included in the drawing. It so to speak benefits from the triangulation of the drawing. And this is the reason why Davidson can write that the Blind Time Drawings Series IV lays bare the intentional dimension of the act of artistic creation “in a way that connects with the origins of the concept of an object.”

The final aspect of the interpretation addresses at last the role of the Davidsonian quotations. Davidson offers to read them in this perspective as an element of specification of the background of this process of triangulation or objectification of Morris’ intention. “This leaves me with the question with which I began: what is my work doing here? I hazard this answer: it expands the background against which we encounter Morris’ ‘actions’ . . . all our thoughts and actions occur within, and derive their meaning from, a vast system of largely communal assumption and ideas. Perhaps the quotations from my writings, which are concerned with the nature of thought and of action, hint at this larger canvas.” 29 Such an interpretation implies that there is a close connection between what these texts talk about and what Morris does. For they specify what we assume an intentional act to be, and Morris’ artistic act is an intentional action: “the ‘action,’ Davidson adds, illustrates and exemplifies what the texts say.” 30

In the perspective expressed in “The Third Man,” the role played by the philosophy of Davidson in the 1991 work of Morris should therefore be seen as a threefold one of interpretation, inspiration and illustration.

On the one hand, Davidson’s philosophy can interpret Morris’ work, inasmuch as this philosophy can provide an explanation of what Morris does in the Blind Time Drawings Series IV, including an explanation of his incorporation of Davidsonian quotations. This is a standard case of theoretical clarification of the nature of a piece of art by a philosophical theory.

In addition, this interpretation is not external to the work of Morris in the sense that his work is considered to be itself theoretically based on the

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27. Ibid., p. 165.
28. Ibid., p. 164.
29. Ibid., p. 165.
30. Ibid., p. 164.
philosophy of Davidson. Indeed, a work of art can be interpretable by a philosophical theory, even though it is elaborated in complete ignorance of such a theory. And this could be true in the present case in spite of the presence of quotations by Davidson. For instance if the incorporation of these quotations was seen as a purely decorative or mischievous device. Such is not the reading of Davidson, who therefore thinks that the *Blind Times Drawings Series IV* illustrates another type of standard relation between a philosophical theory and a work of art, namely that of providing a theoretical resource for the very process of artistic creation. The texts quoted correspond to elements of theoretical inspiration. They are sorts of footnotes at the bottom of the drawings where Morris reveals his sources.

Finally, these texts could be used theoretically by Morris without illustrating directly what he is doing. But, as already mentioned, this is here again not the option taken by Davidson who sees the drawings as exemplifying them.

**Does Davidson Correctly Understand What He Is Doing There?**

How satisfactory is Davidson’s explanation of his textual presence in Morris’ *Blind Time Drawings Series IV*, and more generally of the meaning of this work? The question is complex and a full answer to it must unfortunately be left for another occasion. I will content myself with indicating some of the tasks that must be carried out in order to provide one and with making a few critical observations that point to an alternative interpretation yet to be fully worked out.

It seems to me, in the first place, that this answer must be developed on the basis of the preliminary examination of an additional question that can be put in the following terms: what could Davidson be doing there? Or more generally: how could the philosophy of Davidson and the work of Morris be in principle related? For, as Bertrand Russell—a founding father of analytical philosophy that Morris scarcely mentions, if at all—used to say, exploring the realm of the logically possible is often the best tool to understand the realm of the real. Indeed, Davidson’s interpretation is entirely predicated on the unquestioned but questionable assumption that, if Morris quotes him in his works, it is because these works are inspired by the content of these quotations, to the point of even directly exemplifying them. And Davidson also clearly assumes that this is not only the right way to understand his presence in the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV*, but also to understand any reference to his work by Morris. These assumptions are, however, disputable and the benefit of a preliminary exploration of the possible relations between a piece of art and a piece of philosophical the-
orizing is that it liberates the imagination and therefore helps to see how these assumptions can be disputed. Such an exploration is all the more important since Morris’ work is closely vinculated with the current of conceptual art, that made very strong claims about the articulation of artistic activity with theoretical reflection. According to its most radical versions at least, conceptual art defends indeed the view that an artwork is reducible to a concept, and accordingly that the artist is a conceptualizer, that is, a thinker just like the philosopher.

A first issue to be addressed on the basis of such a preliminary examination is that of determining whether the Davidsonian interpretation of the Blind Time Drawings Series IV, even if it is correct, can be extended to the other forms that Davidson’s presence takes in Morris’ work. And here a text such as The Art of Davidson31 clearly recommends a negative answer, since Morris considers in this text Davidson’s thought as a system that has an artistic value beyond its theoretical value.

A second task to be undertaken is to confront Davidson’s interpretation with the response that Morris himself offered to it in “Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts After Doing Blind Time Drawings IV.” Here the question to be considered is: does Morris think that Davidson understood why he put him there?

Finally, the third and main requirement is to analyze, whatever Morris’ opinion is in this respect, whether Davidson’s interpretation of the Blind Time Series IV is convincing enough, or whether a more appropriate one can be recommended.

I personally do not find his reading in terms of the theory of triangulation very convincing, because I do not find in the first place the theory of triangulation itself very convincing, for a number of reasons that I will nevertheless leave aside. For even if one accepts this theory as a specific hypothesis about the origins of the concept of objectivity, it is more deeply the very idea that the Blind Time Drawings IV should be interpreted in a way that “connects with the origins of the concept of an object,” as Davidson puts it, that seems to be wrong headed. In other words, I believe that the notion of an objectification of the artist’s intention is not the appropriate conceptual tool for understanding the series. A correct element in Davidson’s interpretation is that the drawings should be primarily apprehended in connection with Morris’ long-standing concern for a process-oriented art versus a product-oriented one, and that the intentional dimension of this process is central. But I think we should read this unquestionable importance of the process of art making and of its intentional dimension differently.

In my opinion, what Morris is after is not only an art that lays bare the process of production or even puts the emphasis on the process rather than the product, but also an art that analyzes this process and experiments artistically with it. And in the case of the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV*, the artist’s intention is at the core of what we might call this artistic analysis, because the process of drawing is apprehended as an intentional one. Using philosophical terminology, I would say that the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* constitutes an artistic analysis of the intentional action of drawing, or of drawing as an intentional action.

When approached from this perspective, it seems further that Morris’ whole point in realizing the drawings is to challenge a certain way of understanding and practicing the intentional action of drawing that dominated the whole tradition of art, and that he sees as intrinsically linked with “that rotting sack of Humanism’ that always provided a target” for him.  

According to this traditional conception, a drawing is a *direct* product of an intention, which consequently is to be defined as an intention having that very drawing for an object. And the visual perception of the emergence of the drawing by the artist plays for this reason an essential role in guiding the realization of his intention. The gestures by means of which the drawing will be produced are on the contrary left indeterminate, and in that sense are considered as inessential to defining and understanding what the artist does. Similarly, the amount of time needed to obtain the drawing is left indeterminate and is considered as inessential. It might be short or long, depending on the agility and the inspiration of the drawer, and many other purely circumstantial elements. In other words, the art of drawing is conceived on the standard model of what philosophers of action call a transitive action, that is to say an action defined by a certain state of affairs to be obtained and external to the action itself. When to the question, “what is this man doing?,” I answer, “he is building a house”, I am defining his doing by means of an intention to bring into the world a certain object.

Now, when we look at the drawings of *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* before knowing anything about them, either through their title or through Morris’ written comments, we are spontaneously driven to understand them in this traditional manner. We apprehend them as the fulfillment of an intention to produce, and to produce under the guidance of visual perception, what we precisely see on the piece of paper. Not because this is the only way they could have been produced, but because this is the way what we call drawings are traditionally produced. They could, for instance, have been the result of an accident, or of a purely mechanical process with no artist involved, or of many other processes.

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To use a concept that plays an important role in Davidson's philosophy, the drawings as such underdetermine their conditions of production, in the sense that they are theoretically compatible with countless possibilities regarding the nature of these conditions. And this is precisely why we need the information provided by Morris in the title or in the writings that accompany them. Without them we cannot rightly interpret their mode of production. And I think that the whole point of the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* is to exploit this underdetermination and to explore a new way of realizing drawings. A way in which the visual guidance is rejected, in which the time of execution is somehow limited, in which the discrepancies between its objective and its subjective determinations are taken into consideration, and, above all, in which there is no intention of realizing the drawings themselves that we see. That is to say where the act of drawing is not a transitive kind of intentional action. Indeed, a striking fact in what Morris communicates of his intentions is that these intentions are only defined in terms of gestures. The drawings themselves are just the consequences of these gestures, they are so to speak the by-products of the artist's intentions and not its products. In short, what I am suggesting, is that the right way to apprehend the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* is by way of confronting them with the way we should understand them if they were drawings realized according to the traditional conception of drawing, because they fundamentally constitute a critical analysis, of an artistic kind, of that traditional conception. Now, if this interpretation is on the right track, it suggests a fairly different reading of the relation of these drawings with Davidson's theory of action, and consequently, of the role played in them by the Davidsonian quotations. For, if indeed that theory is an analysis of our folk psychology—that is to say of the way we ordinarily understand action considered as intentional behavior,—, these quotations speak directly to the inadequacy of that ordinary conception for capturing what is essential in the nature of the artistic action of drawing, and in Morris’ act of drawing the *Blind Time Drawings Series IV* in particular.
Robert Morris and the Spaces of Writing

W.J.T. MITCHELL

What are the “spaces of writing”? Do they have any limit? Or are they all-pervasive, an infinite continuum so vast that, as Jacques Derrida famously put it, there is nothing outside the text? A familiar trick of language, of course, immediately substantializes that “nothing,” the void beyond writing, and seeks to explore the abyss that separates writing from whatever negates it, whatever erases or contradicts or simply stands apart from it, indifferent to the rule of language.

My own view is that the spaces of writing are not infinite, but they do approach and sometimes cross over definite borders in the realm of sensory experience and semiotic signification. I think of writing’s place as a product of the intersections of the eye and ear, and the Peircean categories of icon and symbol, as illustrated by this fundamental “square of opposition,” (Fig. 33) a figure to which we will return. Writing, then, is centered in just one of the four arcs of expression generated by these intersections, consisting primarily of symbols for the eye as distinct from the icons for the eye known as drawing, the symbols for the ear known as speech, and the icons for the ear known as music.

Michel Foucault also found a fundamental limit to writing in the image, and in the image’s treasonous refusal to play by the rules of writing, its insistence on playing by different rules, or perhaps even more radically, its resistance to any rules whatsoever. In Foucault’s reading of Magritte’s The Treason of Images the prim, well-schooled script that declares the basic law of language, the rule of negation, of “thou shalt not” and “this is not” (cf. Lacan’s “non” and “nom” of the father) is confounded by the drawing’s stubborn affirmation: “but yes, indeed, it is a pipe after all.” This revelation has two consequences. First, it introduces anarchy into the classroom. The teacher loses control as the image of the pipe begins to generate vaporous likenesses of itself. One might see a similar dynamic in Poussin’s famous painting of the Golden Calf, in which the delivery of the written law on its stone tablets, and most essentially, the law against the making of graven images, is shattered by the eruption of the image, and the uncontrollable energies it unleashes.
A second consequence of Magritte’s revelation, according to Foucault, is the opening of a new space, a third space between writing and drawing that is difficult to name, except in the most elusive, metaphoric terms: it is a beach, an empty margin, and a no man’s land across which missiles and arrows are launched from the respective domains of the word and the image. It is a space of incommensurability, untranslatability which nevertheless serves as the seam between the great enduring orders of human understanding: for Foucault, the basic “strata” of the seeable and the sayable, the visible and the articulable; for Kant, the basic modalities of human perception in space and time; for Lacan, the blank, unrepresentable space of the Real that opens as an abyss between the Symbolic and Imaginary.

Foucault’s thumbnail history of modern painting tells a story of the re-shuffling of the boundaries of word and image from Kandinsky to Klee to Magritte, culminating in Andy Warhol’s Campbell soup cans, and the emergence of a new regime of simulation and repetition in the spaces between writing and the graphic arts. But Foucault could just as easily have settled on the work of Robert Morris as the site of a new exploration of the irreducible dialectic between words and images. In contrast to Warhol, Morris is not so much interested in the merging of word and image in the soup of repeatable icons and logos—“Campbell, Campbell, Campbell”—as he is in tracing the trade routes and missile tracks across the no man’s land between writing and image. More than any other artist of his generation, Morris seems to have recognized that this blank space was, to echo Jack Kennedy’s hopeful slogan for the 1960s, a “New Frontier” for artistic exploration.

Probably the most notorious announcements of this blank space were the gray plywood slabs that Morris fabricated in the early sixties. Impassive, hollow, and non-committal, these objects simultaneously refused both the Foucauldian regimes of the seeable and the sayable. John Cage went to the Green Gallery to view Morris’ new work, and reported back that he had not seen any art there. Michael Fried declared them “merely interesting” objects, utterly sterile and annoying in their literalness, their defiant lack of both figuration and readability. Even worse, Fried argued, the legibility of the works as art depended, not upon anything intrinsic to their material or visual properties, but to a whole discourse elaborated elsewhere, in the writings of the minimalists, most conspicuously Morris himself, in his series of Artforum essays, “Notes on Sculpture.” Morris had violated the fundamental rule of the modernist cult of the genius artist exemplified by Jackson Pollock: the artist must be seen and not heard, must produce images and not words, and insofar as the artist becomes a writer, elaborating a discourse to make his work readable, in that measure he is engaged in a “theatrical” performance that fatally mixes the arts of vision and language.

Of all the minimalists, Morris seemed like the most egregious offender against the fundamental modernist rule of medium specificity and purity. Had he not ridiculed the modernist idea of the pure self-referential opticality of the
work in *Card File*, a literal compilation of the topics and considerations that went into the work entitled *Card File*, arranged in strict alphabetical order?¹

Even worse, when *Card File* escapes the realm of readable, touchable utility by sealing itself in a glass box, thus entering the world of display and depiction, it seems to thumb its nose directly at the laws separating the verbal and visual media. In a similar way, the rule of the silent artist and artistic object was flouted by *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, which once again invoked the modernist rule of self-referentiality while violating the boundary between auditory and visual media. The tape recording inside the *Box* constituted another kind of writing emanating from the artist, the phono-graphic traces of the hammering, sawing, and painting that went on during the making of this appropriately colored Black Box. (Needless to say, a slide cannot do justice to this work!)

The only critic who seemed to glimpse the real meaning of the gray minimalist slabs was Annette Michelson, who compared them to the mysterious slabs of Stanley Kubrick’s classic sci-fi film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Kubrick’s slabs function as enigmatic teaching machines, transmitters of indecipherable messages from an evolutionary future. Their appearance signals the arrival of newness in the world, the onset of handtools among primitive human beings, the birth of a new, embryonic human form in a future realm beyond earth’s gravitational field.

Morris’ slabs do not, I think, aspire to quite such grandiose or monumental stature. They remain within the scale of the human body, and are not generally posed vertically, but occupy the more humble position of a plinth, or a floating “Cloud.”² They resonate simultaneously with overtones of innovation and primitivism, echoing the famous “slabs” of Wittgenstein’s canonical language games, on the one hand, and the ideograms of structural linguistics, on the other, as if they were three-dimensional sculptural embodiments of the Greimassian Square or the Lacanian L-Schema. They are not, in short, quite “dialectical images” in Benjamin’s sense, because they are not images at all. Call them “dialec-

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2. Here I must disagree with those commentators who think that *Card File* has its most authentic status when it is touchable and readable. I regard its confinement under glass as its true destiny, like those enigmatic cupboards that Morris designed, in which the key to open the door has been locked forever inside.


tical objects” that inhabit the blank, invisible and unreadable space between words and images, between an unnameable thingliness and an all too literal objecthood.

If the slabs provided something like totemic figures for the new space of writing that Morris was opening up, many of his later works explored this space in the most intricate and loving detail. It may be helpful here to remind ourselves that the distinction between the spaces of writing and the spaces of drawing can be rendered visible and concrete in the most familiar and material supports for these distinctive activities. I’m thinking, of course, of the ruled writing tablet, and the unruled drawing tablet. Each is a “tablet,” a rectangular blank space or tabula rasa awaiting the arrival of marks. And of course, each is open to the marks of the other: one may draw on a writing tablet and write on a drawing tablet. No doubt the notes being taken during this lecture will veer back and forth between legible notations and random scribbles or doodles, with various pictorial, ornamental, and diagrammatic inscriptions occupying a kind of middle space. The blank space between the words and images of Magritte’s *This Is Not a Pipe* shades insensibly between the invisible ruled lines that govern the carefully measured, trained script of the legend, and the unruled space where the pipe makes its appearance.

I call the space of the image “unruled” but of course it might be more accurate to say simply that it follows different rules, and is governed by constraints of resemblance, analogy, similitude, and by what Nelson Goodman called density and repleteness of inscription. But Goodman’s rules, as you can see at a glance, open the door to the most unruly effects and practices. The space of the image is infinite and infinitesimal; the tiniest mark or accidental blur is filled with potential significance. Every difference makes a difference, whereas the rule of the space of writing is a finite, defining, and negative rule: it rules out the accident, at least at the level of inscription, and it limits significance to the iterable, repeatable, and recognizable characters, limited in number, of a writing system. The scale, color, and texture of a written inscription are, in principle, irrelevant to its decipherment, and when they become relevant, we have moved across a threshold into calligraphy and typography, where the wide-open, unruly space of the graphic opens out into its infinite space of possibility. With alphabetic and most forms of pictographic or hieroglyphic writing, by contrast, there is not only a rule of unambiguous inscription, but a rule of sequential order, not to mention rules of spelling, and more or less firmly stipulated rules of compliance with phonetic utterances.

It seems to me that Morris’ work is all about following rules, often blindly, to see what results they lead to, and to see exactly where they break down. This is the meaning of his distinction between what might be called “procedural” works that follow a set of instructions, as opposed to “process” works that allow for free, expressionistic improvisation. The series of *Blind Time* drawings perfectly exemplify this disciplining of the unregulated hand gesture by first setting
out an array of spatial targets, measured amounts of graphite, or even a pre-imposed mental image to control the motions of the hands. This is then coupled with a set of temporal constraints that are completely independent of whatever the graphic results of the drawing might be. When the drawing is completed, a verbal description of the procedures employed, along with an estimation of the time error in the performance, is hand-written on the lower margin, often accompanied by quotations from philosophers, especially Donald Davidson.

Morris’ approach to the spaces of writing may be usefully contrasted with Magritte, who insists on its rigorous separation from drawing, and with Paul Klee, who (as Foucault argues) achieves an ambiguous merger of the two orders in certain works. In the composition Foucault discusses, Klee deliberately confuses the marks of drawing or painting and writing, by inscribing lines that can function ambiguously as edges or boundaries of masses and forms, on the one hand, and as written characters, on the other. But Klee is exploring the writing/drawing encounter, not from the side of writing, but from that of painting. He has inserted his written characters in the unruled space of the image where they seem strewn about like so many letters from a Scrabble game. Klee shows us the elements but not the space of writing. The letters cannot form words, much less phrases or sentences.

Consider, by contrast, a set of four ink drawings by Morris that combine expressionistic smears, stains, and blurs with rigorously stenciled inscriptions that form a continuous proposition running from one drawing to another: “THE SOFTEST/RULE SHEATHES/THE RAZOR/EDGE OF ERROR.” (Figs. 34–37) The inscription of the statement itself violates one of the “softest rules” of pictorial space, namely that everything in the image should remain inside the frame. The notion of the singular autonomy and self-contained perfection of the individual pictorial composition is literally violated by each picture’s insertion into the space of writing, and indeed, of printing. Like a medieval triptych, this polyptych or “quadtych” must be hung in a certain order to render it readable as a proposition as opposed to a set of phrasal units. But the readability is not that of a depicted narrative, like the Stations of the Cross, or a panoramic spectacle like the Last Judgment, but of a single proposition with its much more rigorous syntactical constraints.

And then, lurking in the waves, cascades, and veils of ink, there is yet another space of writing. Not the stenciled, printed writing of the master-legend, but a nervously hand-written text, a transcription of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” a Xerox transfer print of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s notebook transcript of Poe’s text. The “bleak December” of the poem seems perfectly attuned to the dark skeins of ink through which it looms, and what I have called its “nervous” handwriting was Peirce’s playful experimentation with the
boundaries of rule-governed penmanship. In contrast to the carefully measured schoolboy hand of Magritte, Peirce allows his hand to trail off in involuntary, spasmodic motions, so that the letters seems to sprout meaningless ornamental tendrils. The boundary between voluntary and involuntary, intentional and automatic writing is delineated in the inscription of the text.

Morris is, of course, “finally” a visual artist, if we insist on some sort of closed finality about the location of his work. But the clue to his real achievement, in my view, is his effort not only to bring the spaces of writing to bear on the realm of images, but to open up the question of the limits of those spaces, mapping both their internal and external boundaries, the rules by which they are governed, and the moments when those rules are broken. Morris is well aware that writing is not always composed of letters, that the history of writing evolves from the pictogram through the ideogram to the hieroglyph to what is sometimes thought of (wrongly) as its final, perfected stage, the phonetic alphabet. Beyond letters and literacy, however, is the rule of numbers and numeracy, the writing of code, and the moment when the space of writing becomes virtual and cybernetic, when the graphic mark is not only graphic and grammatic, but pro-grammatic, involving self-executing commands, procedures, and routines. These automatisms can produce a melt-down of the medium and the space of writing, especially when a command such as “copy” or “send” is unleashed into a string of ciphers. Like the fatal letter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carry from Prince Hamlet of Denmark to the King of England, it commands the immediate execution of the bearers upon receipt. The dreaded “.exe” file extension in an attachment threatens to unleash a self-executing virus waiting to infect your operating system and bring it down with a crash.

So far I have been assuming that there are basically three spaces of writing: first, the one-dimensional string of characters that obeys a set of sequential rules co-
ordinating spatial position with temporal ordering; second, a two-dimensional coordination of the visible mark with the auditory utterance, exchanging, as Marshall McLuhan once put it, “an eye for an ear”; and third, the virtual spaces of description, narration, and both figurative and logical language that open out as the meaning of a text is taken in by a reader. If writing converges with or borders on the space of the image at the level of inscription (as we saw from the example of Paul Klee), it re-converges with the image at the level of a world projected by a text. This is the place where the ruled space of writing once again moves into the unruly space of depiction.

But I want to conclude with a fourth space of writing, one in which the rules move to another level, that of metalanguage and perhaps the geometry of thought itself. Morris had hinted at this sort of ruled space in the most literal way when he tried drawing rulers themselves, estimating the discrepancy between a standard foot long ruler and one drawn free-hand. But perhaps the most comprehensive version of this move brings us back to the quadrilateral shape of the slab, and its relation to the system of dialectical operations that make writing, and indeed, language itself, possible. I’m thinking, of course, of the famous Greimasian Square of Opposition, and its many adaptations in narrative and psychology, from Fredric Jameson’s readings of ideological allegories to Jacques Lacan’s use of it to map the relations of subjects and objects. Morris used it in an essay entitled “The Labyrinth and the Urinal” to produce what he calls “The Quadratic Logogram of Almost Everything.” (Fig. 38) This diagram maps the intersecting oppositions of Space (S) and Objects (O) with Language (L) and Image (I). But the diagram becomes most interesting when Morris “deflates” it to “The Quadratic Logogram of Less than Everything,” and exemplifies it with a fourfold array of totemic emblems or badges: the Labyrinth for Space, Duchamp’s Urinal


I will not try to reconstruct here the thumbnail history of modern art that Morris develops around this quadrilateral. In some ways it recalls the whimsical table of oppositions that produced the 4 legged table with Duchamp, Edward Hopper, Joseph Cornell, and Jackson Pollock at its corners in Morris’ hilarious *Art in America* hoax of 1981, in which his tabulation of the most important American artists degenerated into a food fight with an angry editor (also played by Morris himself). What interests me is the question of exactly what sort of “space of writing” is constituted by this sort of logogram. In the history of Chirography, this is known as “asemic writing,” a “wordless, open form” that has “no semantic content.” It is associated with the contrary forms of, on the one hand, “primal scripts” such as doodling, scribbling, everything from the enigmatic scripts of cave paintings to children’s drawings. On the other hand, it is linked with “postliterate” forms of writing, pictograms or ideograms that await filling in with discourse, and that operate as the fundamental structures of systematic thought, insofar as it involves what Nicklas Luhmann called “drawing a distinction,” tracing the contraries and the negations of a concept, so that (in a famous instance drawn from Lévi-Strauss), the category of the Living is opposed by its Contrary, the Dead, but also by its Negative, the Inanimate, or that which has never been alive. Finally, the fourth corner of the diagram remains to be discovered as a perhaps surprising “negation of the negation.” In this case, I have proposed the category of the “Undead” as the only logical solution.

The asemic ideogram, then, forms a kind of limit case for the spaces of writing. It offers a machine for the generation of both discourse and narrative, and it is open to the rule of both logic and rhetoric, both the strict negations of S and not-S (we might think of this as Site and Non-Site), and the more qualitative, experiential oppositions of S and O, Spaces and Objects, or Subjects and Objects. In this regard it shows how, even at the farthest reaches of metalinguistic abstraction, writing re-engages with imagery, and the duplicitous figure of the Duck-Rabbit re-appears, not merely as one corner of the square of opposition, but at its very heart. In this final drawing by Morris (Fig. 39), we see his answer to a challenge I posed to him some years ago, to give the Duck-Rabbit, which has always appeared simply as a detached head, a body as well. I should have guessed what Morris’ solution would be. As a sculptor, the only way to produce an adequate body for an ambiguous two-faced figure like this is to employ the time-honored trick of contrapposto, and allow the figure to twist around its own axis. Is it a duck or a rabbit? Or a third or fourth thing for which we do not yet have a name? Like the enigmatic slabs that inaugurated Morris’ fame as an artist, this ideogram will remain open, a teaching machine the lessons of which are still being invented.

![Image of Robert Morris' Quadratic Logogram of Almost Everything](Image)

Politics of Blindness: Robert Morris’ Antivision
MIGUEL ÁNGEL HERNÁNDEZ NAVARRO

Scotomic Archive of Modernity

Through the cycle of renewal and settling that has marked recent years in visual culture studies, a school of thought has emerged which, reversing what in principle seems to be the object of this “discipline,” focuses its efforts on examining and reflecting upon what escapes vision. Taking as a point of departure W.J.T. Mitchell’s affirmation that the object of visual culture is not exhausted in the visible, but rather extends to “blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked,” theorists such as Georgina Kleege, Akira M. Lippit or Malcolm Bull, to mention only a few, converge upon a series of issues that share an interest in what extends beyond the visible. They address that which is not perceived, the barely perceptible and even up to the imperceptible: visual disabilities, blindness, the haptic, the audible, that which is hidden, camouflaged, veiled, immaterial, infra-visible or that which has disappeared. It is the space that Jacques Derrida calls the invisible-visible: that which, without being plainly visible, always remains, nonetheless, within the order of visibility, constitutively visible.¹

The core thesis that emanates from the majority of these proposals—although each initiates a particular discourse—is that this series of “shadow optics”—to use Lippit’s term—functions to create sites of alternative scopic regimes opposed to the hegemony of the visible and the ocularcentrism of modernity. They are regimes of resistance that expose the faults of modern vision and, consequently, of any system constructed on luminous epistemologies.

As Jonathan Crary has highlighted, throughout the nineteenth century, the Western world was witness to an unprecedented revolution in the field of vision. An essential change occurred in what we will call, following Michel Foucault, the “visual archive”—the “law” of what can be seen, formed by the interpenetration of technology, power, subjectivity and knowledge. The change is characterized by the emergence of a new status of observation after the gradual abandon of the cognitive model of the camera obscura, which promoted a decorporalized onlooker, fixed and monocular, in favour of other procedures based on the physiology of the eye and body of the observer. Advances in technology, physiological optics and even the history of ideas contributed to a drastic change in ways of looking at the world, and, particularly, in the modes of visual knowledge. This drastic change might be summarized as a kind of crisis of visual truth.

In very broad outlines, the characteristics of this scopic archive can be reduced to two. First, the eye gradually proves itself an insufficient tool for knowing the world. The technologies of vision (from photography to medical imagery) demonstrate that there are things that the eye can not see (the optical unconscious to which Walter Benjamin referred). The eye ceases to be the privileged instrument of knowledge and access to truth.

Second, advances in technology and knowledge about vision also reveal the possibility that the eye can be an object of deceit and manipulation. Accumulated knowledge about vision made evident the real limits of human perception (its failures, such as for example, saccadic perception) and the way in which the eye could be normalized and docilized.

In this way, the new visual archive is characterized by the ineludible presence of a blind spot, a visual scotoma, something that cannot be known by the eye itself. This “law” is articulated in two ways: through discrediting the eye and by means of a distrust of the visual. I have observed elsewhere how, from the same visual archive, there emerge two scopic regimes or two apparently con-


trasted sites: a dominant regime and a regime of resistance. In the face of the certainty of the eye’s insufficiency, there emerges a regime of light that takes advantage of the docility of the gaze and that, little by little, configures the society of the spectacle; and a regime of shadows, that distrusts all that is visible and proposes alternate models of visibility.

The first of these regimes tries to take advantage of the insufficiency of vision. It does this through the strategy of the ellipsis—the illusion of continuity—and tries, by all means, to pretend that this insufficiency does not exist and that vision is a totality. Through light, it avoids the shadows of the gaze. It could be said that the regime of light attempts to “correct” and “expand,” by means of illusion, the primary fault of vision. From the outset, this regime of the docility of the gaze tries to conceal precisely this aforementioned obedience, exposing everything, omitting faults, eliminating down times, silences. A regime of continuous repetition, it ceaselessly tries to fill the vacuums by means of merchandises, objects and images. It is a regime of plenitude that is based, on the one hand, on the search for transparency, pure visuality and the vigilance of the panopticon as established by Foucault; and, on the other, on the specularization and transformation of reality into image, in “place of the deceived gaze,” exactly as Guy Debord indicated in *The Society of the Spectacle.*

The second site of the insufficiency of vision enables an alternative scopic regime, a regime of resistance. Unlike the regime of light, that tries to conceal the deficiency of vision, this regime of shadows tries to expose precisely that blind spot of the gaze, the scotoma that arises from the confirmation of the visible’s untranslatability. In this “scotomic” regime, the crisis of visual truth, the idea that sight is no longer sufficient, does not attempt to conceal itself, but strives on the contrary to be exposed. Thus, against the regime of light appears a regime of shade and visual skepticism, revealing the insufficiency of sight, the shadow of the gaze. Against transparency, it presents opacity; against light, darkness; against perfect translatability, illegibility; against chatter, silence; against plenitude, emptiness; against entirety, the fragment. It is a regime of deficiency that shows that sight is not enough, that appearance is deceptive, that there is more than what we see, and what we see is not all there is.

The whole face of modern and contemporary art, through a variety of strategies and not always in a conscious way, responds with an implementation of

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8. Foucault sustains that, against every dominant regime, there always emerges a regime of resistance, a deviation from the norm, a *paradoxical* site of the archive.
this “scotomic” regime of resistance to the new ocularcentrism of vigilance and the spectacle, attempting to present what it conceals, what it does not show, its damned part. It would be possible to chart a history of modern and contemporary art through the analysis of these artistic practices that, with Rosalind Krauss, we could call anti-visual. This history would follow strategies or tactics of “blindness” whose presence can be tracked throughout the whole of the twentieth century, like a correlate to the denigration of the gaze of which Martin Jay speaks with respect to philosophy. The forms of the anti-visual are varied: from Malevich’s monochromatic reduction to the miniaturizations of Liliana Porter or Cildo Meireles, from Duchamp’s works of dust and air to the literal dematerializations of Yves Klein or Teresa Margolles, from the concealment and camouflage of a certain surrealism to the concealment and obstruction of Santiago Sierra, or from Francesca Woodman’s attempt at disappearance to Jochen Gerz’s poetics of ash.

With this text, I wish to observe how the work of Robert Morris constitutes one of the most convincing and articulated implementations of this regime of shadows. Morris’ work is peppered with anti-visual references, with the metaphor of blindness present in the Blind Time Drawings being only the most direct and literal allusion to this issue. Throughout his work, however, we also come across the presence of text, sound, mirrors, mazes, imprints, vacuums, concealment and even desubstantiation. These are elements that take the work of art beyond the limits of vision. Morris’ articles and interviews, even at a quick glance, are teeming with constant references to a conscious rejection of vision: “iconophobia,” “blindness,” “visual anorexia,” “suspicion of the image.”

One way or another, art criticism has provided an account of the presence of the anti-visual in Morris’ work. Many critical studies on the artist have lingered on this rejection of vision, although often in the context of other arguments: the presence of the body, language, memory, anti-form. From Annette

Michelson's early circumscriptions to the celebrated ones of Rosalind Krauss, via the intelligent vision of W.J.T. Mitchell and the political criticism of Maurice Berger, to mention just a few, the vocabulary of art criticism has also grown replete with metaphors telling of an attack on vision and of the rejection of the image. However, the question of the anti-visual, in itself, as a way of approaching Morris' work, has not been discussed in a completely satisfactory manner. In spite of the aforementioned fact that practically all of the critics have touched on the issue, it continues to be one worth studying in detail, for a careful analysis will disclose many keys to Morris' artistic practice.

Perhaps one of the few to have discussed the problem decisively and directly is Jean-Pierre Criqui. In his introduction to the *Blind Time Drawings*, Criqui placed these drawings as part of a body of work articulated upon a ‘reduction of the optical function (as an essential element of the creative act, but also, for the beholder, as an aspect of contemplation and of its related pleasure), out of a kind of devaluation of what Duchamp stigmatized as the ‘retinal.’’ Criqui’s argument is that the suspension of the gaze that takes place for a few moments in the *Blind Time Drawings* can be extended to all of Morris’ production, characterized by a rupture with the predominance of the ocular so fundamental to modernism. Morris’ works after his abandon of painting are distinguished by a deception of the look, “an apparent withdrawing of visuality, a marked tendency towards ‘not much to see.’” Criqui goes on to see the rupture of pure visuality in Morris’ use of language, writing, the movement toward the acoustic, the introduction of real time in production, the elimination of the ocular image in his self-portraits, the obstruction of the gaze in his Photo Cabinets or the dispersion and distortion of vision in mirrors. And of course, in a literal way, in the meditation on blindness that takes place in the *Blind Time Drawings*.

Following the path shown by Criqui, which, as I have said, adds to that initiated by many others, I would argue that the meditation on sight and blindness present throughout Morris’ work hinges on a double articulation. If

carefully observed, not all blindesses have the same meaning. There are blindesses and blindesses. It could be said that Morris’ anti-vision goes “against” two visions: the modernist vision and vision itself. On the one hand, Morris’ work articulates an attack against the optical paradigm of modernism. On the other, his work proposes strategies for supplanting the privileged hegemony of the sense of sight as a tool for knowing the world. The first attack is shared by a majority of art produced since the sixties. The second embodies a concern that is common to the whole face of modern thought, the recognition of vision’s obsolescence as responsible for the universe that surrounds us. The two attacks are related however, since modernist optics are one site of modernity’s ocularcentrism.

Restoring Impurity

Morris’ work presents itself as a rejection of modernism, refusing its paradigm of visual purity and everything it entails. As has been highlighted on more than one occasion, this rejection is common to much artistic production since the early sixties, and is shared by the neo-avant-garde. In his study of the demolition of modernist ocularcentrism and “the attack against the idea of pure opticality” in the latter third of the twentieth century, Martin Jay indicated three fundamental categories under which the new artistic practices attack the sense hierarchy instituted in academic modernism: “one that stresses the importance of language as opposite to perception; one that highlights the forgotten role of the body; and another that stresses the political implications of certain visual practices.” These issues—language, body and politics—characterize much of the art of the second half of the sixties as it reacted against the pure visuality of modernist thought epitomized by Clement Greenberg. They appear synthesized and expressed in the work of Morris and others concerned with the reversal of ocularcentrism.

First of all, the body is a constant in Morris’ work. This is evident in the way that the real and ordinary body is assessed in his choreographies and performances, and in how the body of the onlooker figures in the sculptural works, in the gestalt forms of minimalism. And, of course, it clearly appears in the imprints and traces of the body in his lead works and of his hands in the drawings, in the body molds in the hydrocal works, as well as in the self-portraits made

with the organs, the excesses or energetic impulses of the body. The body can be present or absent, but it always constitutes a structuring element of the work. Morris’ use of the body breaks with the disembodied perception of modernism, which functioned as a replica of the divine eye perceiving the world in its entirety, remaining at a remove from the world that it perceived. Morris “stains” the field of vision through the body, imprinting a field that can only be visible in its entirety if the body is cancelled.

Second, there is the presence of language. Greenbergian modernism banished from art all trace of narration, story or content, anything that was not purely optical and visual. Language referred to something more than the optical specificity of painting and sculpture. It was conceived as one of the forms of impurity and contamination par excellence. Morris’ work fought against the expulsion of language from the outset, and introduced it into the space of the visual in the most diverse ways. In the early Memory Drawings, he did this through the almost pictorial presence of the “word” and the transformation of the work itself into writing. One of his most widely used strategies was the coexistence of writing and image, as can be appreciated in the Blind Time Drawings and the Investigations series. Language is also introduced in its oral dimension: voice and hearing, transformed through the visual in works such as Voice or Hearing (Fig. 40). Perhaps one of the keys to understanding Morris’ art could be found precisely in the relation established between the readable and the visible, between text and image. It is a relation that, undoubtedly, supplants the pure visuality of modernism.

Third: politics. Modernism, in its effort to banish everything extraneous to a unique and irreducible artistic experience, of art in general and of the medium in particular, also left out politics. Politics as life, that is, the social order of experience. Life, the “real” world, was one of the biggest threats to modernist critics. Greenberg and Michael Fried conceived an art that avoided being confused and connected with the objects, spaces and times of reality. Faced with this modernist noli me tangere, one of the central tenets of art after modernism became the dissolution of borders between art and life. Morris’ contribution here is inestimable. Maurice Berger has astutely observed Morris’ connection with politics. He has analyzed not only the inclusion of issues such as work, war and money in Morris’ œuvre, but also the artist’s committed social role, leading protests and exposing institutional involvement in the forces and interests that dominate the social.¹⁹

Body, language and politics are thus key elements in Morris’ art, inscribed within the movement of artistic protest, in the sixties and seventies, against the

hegemony of the pure vision of modernism. Perhaps we should add the issue of time to Martin Jay’s list, as it constitutes a central problem in contemporary artistic thought. Body, language and politics are permeated by the presence of time as the real time of real bodies, the time of language and the time of the social. In comparison, the time of Greenbergian modernism resembled an eternal, atemporal time. Works of art remained separate from the temporality of their production and reception. Modernist works were like ghosts, abiding as intemporal, incorporeal apparitions completely unconnected to the world of life, and subject to chronophobia, as Pamela Lee has suggested.

Robert Morris introduces time in his work. His is real time: the time of reception and experience, the time of reading, the time of interpretation. And of course, it is also the time of production, of process, what remained unseen in the modernist image, hidden behind, or underneath, away from the light. Morris’ processual works, but also the objectual ones, give an account of that which is unseen. What results is only a fiction, one out of many possible states, never definitive. Morris’ work has a before and an after. It is enmeshed with the issue of time in his work.


of memory, with the interval, the lapse, the time out, the time of the interlude, the time beyond vision.

All of these points might be condensed in the notion of “anti-form” and what it implies. If we affirm, as Martin Jay has done, that form and vision are synonymous terms, anti-form will be a mode of anti-vision. Breaking the formal, total, fixed, clear and identifiable entity of the work could be understood as a strategy of questioning the purity of vision.

Upon close observation, defaming vision by introducing what modernism had expelled may be seen as “restoring” the “impure” values of art. W. J.T. Mitchell’s declaration that there is no pure medium might be read in this sense. The image has always been interlaced with text, politics and the body. The ocularcentric and pure visualist perception of modernism was an artifice, because all perception is impure by nature.

Rupturing the Privileges of Sight

Such anti-vision could be understood as a kind of impurity, an attempt to return to vision and to the image those elements that naturally belong to them and that modernism had removed. If vision in modernism was raised to the rank of the sacred, to an issue of faith, then the impurity of vision is perhaps related to a certain profanation. A profanation in Giorgio Agamben’s sense: the rupture of the most sacred, the making ordinary of that which constitutively belongs to the space of the sacred.

This first anti-vision is, therefore, a kind of profanation and defilement of modernism, a re-establishment of the impurity of vision. Yet Morris’ art also exudes another type of anti-vision: the rupture of the privilege of sight as a way of knowing the world, an epistemological anti-vision. And here, more than impurity, the mechanism used is that of the cut: a shaking, a tear to mobilize the eye and make it conscious of its own failures. It constitutes an attack on the very foundations of knowledge through vision. In a way, Morris’ work is here directly linked to the list of thinkers that Martin Jay calls to in Downcast Eyes: thinkers that suspend the sense of sight and acknowledge the validity of other

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senses such as touch (Jean-Luc Nancy), hearing (Jacques Derrida) or blindness itself (Georges Bataille). These are other ways of knowledge where sight is insufficient, where the eye is of no use for observing a world that, on the one hand, can no longer be known, and on the other, is deceiving. Morris’ strategies for disorienting vision are manifold, but they can be summed down to four: the mirror, obstruction, the labyrinth and voidance.

The presence of the mirror in Morris’ works has been widely studied. Nevertheless it is worth mentioning. The mirror in Morris’ work is used to disperse the gaze more than to concentrate it. The mirror works in a centrifugal way: it sends the gaze towards the outside, repels it and returns it. The mirror makes it impossible for the gaze to penetrate it: it exposes its exteriority. As Octavio Armand has indicated, the mirror cuts the gaze as if it were a blade.

The way Morris uses the mirror to obstruct the path of the gaze leads us to another strategy: concealment and obstruction. From the Box with the Sound of its Own Making, whose inside is inaccessible, to the cabinets, or even the early columns, Morris’ work blocks the path of sight, as it does in Passageway. It cuts the flow of the gaze, obstructs it, and denies access to it. The anxiety created in the onlooker has to do with the fact that Morris indicates the presence of the thing that is behind the veil of the work. He leaves an imprint of a place where vision should be. As in the fable of Zeuxis and Parrhasius narrated by Pliny, the onlooker wishes to draw back the curtain to find the subject that gives meaning to the work. But the complete meaning is denied. The gaze is always unsatisfied. The desire to see lingers on in time. And the gaze never arrives where it would like to go.

In a transparent society in which everything can be seen and known (according to the fictive logic of the panopticon), Morris insists on breaking the illusion of transparency, showing opaqueness, closing access to absolute knowledge. Morris works almost inversely to Heidegger’s model of the work of art. Instead of a “de-concealing” of the truth, Morris “conceals it again,” closing, shutting down the illusion of access to the ultimate meaning of things. His is a “re-concealment.” When considered carefully, this re-concealment also has a lot to do with a game, the game of showing oneself and hiding, fort/da, presence and absence, plenitude and loss.

The mirror and obstruction disorient vision, leaving spectators completely
insecure about what is in front of them, inducing uncertainty. This is also the procedure through which the logic of the labyrinth operates, a blindness metaphor par excellence, at least in the sense conferred by Bataille.28 The labyrinth is a place where one gets lost, but also where one finds oneself at the centre. It is a place for loss and reunion. Once again, it is a place of centripetal forces leading into the center towards the encounter, and of centrifugal forces pushing away from the center. But it is a center, when reached, that is nothing but a vacuum, a blind spot of meaning.

Thus we get to the vacuum or the blind spot, the strategy at the heart of all anti-visual poetics. Mirrors, time, movement, the trace: everything is articulated around a blind spot that Morris conveys time after time. “Blank form” was one of the essential concepts in Morris’ principles, a concept that Morris himself distinguishes from “anti-form.”

Annette Michelson has examined the issue of frames as central focuses of Morris’ production.29 She talks of the frame as a threshold: the threshold of the look, the place where there is nothing anywhere and, at the same time, everything is everywhere. In works such as Pine Portal, the subject is in the process of finding him or herself but not his or her truth, as if they were gazing in the mirror of Snow White’s stepmother, seeing illusion, or seeing the nihilism of vampire’s mirror that shows death transformed into an image. The mirror of Morris’ threshold reproduces the subject on its surface. Like a reversion of Lacan’s mirror stage, the image of the subject at these thresholds (and in Morris’ mirrors) “de-subjects” the subject, dismantles it, breaks it up, and shows it what it can see: not the nothingness of the vampire or narcissistic illusion, but the pure exteriority of its image multiplied to infinity. That is, it shows that which “stains” the scopic field, but also that which bestows meaning upon it.

A video installation such as the Finch College Project (1969) could serve to sum up all that I have mentioned until now. Reflection, time, motion, trace or memory, concealment, and in the middle of it all, a blind spot, a space that cannot be completely inhabited. Morris himself acknowledges it as an “iconoclastic and iconophobic” work: “a work that tried to get rid of the image, suppress it, remove it.”30 It is an attempt to destroy the image; an attempt that is never complete, however. Erasure, the cut, always leaves a mark. It is not a perfect crime. The eye continues to see, although with difficulty. Morris himself

affirms: “For us mortals, divine blindness can only be a goal toward which we strive.”

There is always something that is left over, something that is in the shadow, a sort of “shadowaste.”

**Politics of Blindness**

I have left behind many issues on the way. They are left for future, more extensive and in-depth investigations. I would not like, however, to finish this text without a reflection that makes express reference to its title. Both the poetics of blindness as a fight against modernist optics and the epistemology of blindness as a fight against the hegemony of vision can basically be considered forms of politics, a politics of blindness. They represent a political positioning of resistance to hegemonic scopic regimes, regimes that not only concern the look, but also power, control and domination.

Perhaps it was Maurice Berger who best observed Morris’ links with the politics of resistance, particularly through his choreographies.\(^{31}\) In this sense, the political aspect of his work could be summarized as a constant attempt to stand against the established order of the world, an order which, since the seventies, Foucault has illuminated with his archeologies of knowledge and genealogies of power. In a way, Morris’ art provides strategies for conquering the transparency of the panopticon and escaping the logic of domination, control and normalization of bodies that Foucault observed in *Discipline and Punish*.\(^{33}\) The series of engravings *In the Realm of the Carceral* (Figs. 41-42) show this interest for vigilance and discipline in our contemporary world where, as Morris himself indicates, “there is now no place to hide.”\(^{34}\)

Branden Joseph has recently observed the issues that arise around this formulation of the dialectics between the domination and freeing of bodies. In “The Tower and the Line,” he contrasts the political positionings of John Cage and Robert Morris.\(^{35}\) And he maintains that “whereas Cage argued for a strategy of exodus […], Morris sought ‘empowerment through a subversive relation to […] institutional connections.’ The difference is between a ‘major’ and

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31. Ibid., p. 150.
33. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, op. cit.
a ‘minor’ politics, the former operating within a restricted, Oedipal economy predicated on there being one immutable mode of power’s operation.”

Joseph’s criticism continues concerning the normalization and docilization of bodies in their apparent status of greater freedom. This is how the system of vigilance and discipline works. The body is not a place for freedom, but a place for the site of power. As Joseph indicates, Morris was conscious of this early on: “the dissolution of transcendent form does not effect or guarantee the dissolution of power, but only (and at best) the dissolution of a certain type of sovereign power.” That is, as Morris himself maintains, “Resistance, not utopia, was the order of the day.” That resistance, and this is a personal position, has certain possibilities for success in the arenas of blindness. But not within blindness as a transcendent place that tries to avoid power, but in blindness as a game, like hide-and-seek, or fort/da, a game that suspends visibility for a moment, that suspends for a moment the inclemency of light. It is a moment of suspension in which the subject becomes blurred, desynchronizes and moves around. It is a stolen instant: a moment that passes, only leaving a record of its absence. Just as in the Blind Time Drawings, everything returns to its own place. But not in the same way. The artist looks at the clock and checks the results. There is a difference. Something has been lost, a time lag, minimum, at times almost imperceptible. This time lag is the space for a politics of resistance.

36. Ibid., p. 73.
37. Ibid., p. 75.

A Parallel Unfurling: The Problem of Description in the Work of Robert Morris

ILEANA PARVU

The recourse to writing might be explained by a disdain for the image which Robert Morris has sometimes invoked. The same could be said of his texts as of works that possess a tactile or acoustic character: a way to avoid falling into the order of the visual. This paper treats another facet of Morris’ writings. In question, here, are texts brought to bear upon “visual” works. These invite us to rethink the relations between sight, image, and writing.

If we examine what the preposition “upon” means in the expression “brought to bear upon visual works,” we notice that Morris’ texts generally allude to a referent exterior to the world of writing. Their referential character distinguishes them from the writings of Ad Reinhardt, for example. A text like End, which poses the question of the end of painting, makes use of a layout and a quality of handwriting which liken it to a painting. It is in this way comparable to the artist’s canvases in which the superimposed layers of color produce a luminous blackness. The page of text appears as a painting made of words. The equivalency that exists in the work of Reinhardt between painting and text has to do with the problem of abstraction. The refusal to include the figure makes writing a different space of pictorial abstraction. Morris’ texts do not present such closure. The artist did not turn to writing for its capacity for abstraction. His texts spread beyond the system of writing to forge links with what is found beyond it. We cannot take them to be art criticism, however, inasmuch as they are not entirely absorbed in the relation with their referent.

1. Robert Morris, “Professional Rules,” 1997, pp. 307-308: “Could we say you always had a suspicion of the image? […] Still, there seems to have been in the past a certain conscious resistance to the ‘image,’ as if this offered you a certain purchase, a certain foothold (pardon the image here) from which to work.”

All the while commenting “upon” works, these texts also exist independently of them. They trace an intermediate path, halfway between art history and the literary text.

In the 60s that mode of abstract sculpture, later termed “minimalism,” began its ascendancy. Much of the accompanying textualizing of this late phase of abstract art was produced once again by the artists themselves. It seemed to some at the time that visual incident was being reduced in inverse proportion to theoretical elaboration.³

Morris often ironically presents texts written by artists in the 1960s as resulting from the excessive simplicity of minimal art. The American critic Craig Owens takes them more seriously, considering that the generation of minimalist artists was responsible for the passage of the visual arts from the visual to the written.⁴ Most emblematic of this linguistic turn is the work of Robert Smithson: Owens describes the geophotographic fiction entitled Strata (1972) as the transformation of blocks of text into geological sediment, while inversely, disproportionally enlarged photographs of fossils seem to resemble a text. A similar reversal occurs when, referring to a note by Smithson on Spiral Jetty (1970) that compares the non-site to a system of signs, Owens concludes that the non-site constitutes a text and that, in consequence, Smithson’s texts should be considered non-sites.⁵ Sculpture thus transforms itself into text and artists’s writings take on the status of sculpture.

In Morris’ work, there is of course Card File (1962) which the artist, in his article “Professional Rules,” juxtaposes to the following questions:

Then language was also used as sculpture? Or would you say that sculpture was used as language? […] And what about these remarks? Do they make a kind of sculpture of words?⁶

But it is difficult to imagine that Morris would be content with these reversals, which transform sculpture into text and visual art into literature. If Owens believes that there is nothing outside of language, Morris is not satisfied with this progressive textualization of the visible. Without giving in to this reduction, he postulates the existence of something completely other.

Postmodernism, first theorized in France, was dedicated to textualizing experience by a reduction to “reading.” Experience then becomes an empty signifier, a mere effect of language and power. But on the other side, from the empiricism

⁵. Ibid., p. 128.
of Locke and Hume down to American Pragmatism, experience is claimed to be all there is.7

In texts by Morris which concern visual works, such as Paul Cézanne’s landscapes or Jasper Johns’ paintings, the notion of experience is central. It implies that one opens oneself to something that is not already akin to text. This alterity of visual work is what writing must seek to preserve. But how can one establish the back-and-forth between sight and speech? Before such artworks, Morris ponders the relation between visual perception and language. Citing the findings of cognitive science, which pose the existence of two different systems, he concludes that these will perhaps never be able to determine how the interface between the visual and language functions, not only in regards to a fluid relation between sight and speech, allowing for exchange between the two domains, but also concerning the complex and endless conflict that opposes them.8 In his article on the relationship between image and language, Morris is more interested in the way the iconic and the textual, although distinct, are blended and imbricated. According to Morris, the disdain they manifest for each other is explained by the interpenetration of their borders. And there is a danger in considering visual art as text, a process of “textualization” which he qualifies as linguistic imperialism.

The issues that Morris raises concerning the articulation between perception and language are properly those of description. In “Professional Rules,” certain remarks that accompany the Labyrinth of the Fattoria di Celle in Pistoia (1982), attest to his interest in this question: “And we are trying to give descriptions here and not explanations.”9 How can one reflect upon a visual work without hastening its transformation into a text? How can one say something about it while respecting what in it resists verbal language? It is important to note, in this regard, the attention that Morris lends to the silence of Cézanne’s or Johns’ paintings: one must write about these works without being loquacious.

That [Cézanne’s last works] show more than can be said we readily admit; that they admit more than can readily be seen allows us to wedge the foot of a word in their doorway. But what does the attempted precision of our descriptions have to do with getting in the doorway?10

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8. Ibid., p. 250: “What may never be made clear by cognitive science is how the interface between the visual and verbal operates, in terms not only of the seamless connection that facilitates the interchange between what is seen and said, but the complex and endless conflict between the one and the other.”
Morris’ text on Cézanne’s *Montagnes Sainte-Victoire* (1998) poses the problem of description in terms of the impossible equivalence between an element of painting and a word.

If our urgency for a description is irrelevant to the activity that engaged Cézanne in producing the works, we nevertheless have an object before us that should, we think, submit itself to description. But we flounder in the metaphysics of identity in our descriptions. Identities in these works begin to implode in this field of ruptured, virtual objects (sky/sky? mountain/mountain? ground/ground?) that exchange forces with one another.11

The sequence of the three words “sky,” “mountain,” and “ground,” repeated on each side of the slashes, and followed by a question mark, shows the impossibility of finding an adequate term to render what is happening in the upper portion of the picture. The sky blends in with the mountain, there is some mountain in the sky, and what about the background? The green brushstrokes of the mountain overflow onto a portion of sky, bluish reflections appear in the mountain. In the upper part of the painting, is it a sky, a mountain, or a background that we see? A bit earlier in the text, Morris had already wondered about how to designate this so-called sky that is transformed, with almost no change, into a so-called mountain.12

For Morris, this impossible equivalency between a word and an element of the painting is linked to the problem of representation. He establishes a parallel between two kinds of relations: on the one hand, between word and image, and on the other hand, between the work and its referent. Between the painting by Cézanne and the Sainte-Victoire, we find all the distance that the term representation comprises. But the work is not deprived of resemblance. How can one understand the articulation between representation and resemblance, if, according to Nelson Goodman, whom Morris cites frequently, the two notions do not intersect? Indeed, anything can refer to anything else, and one twin never represents the other. Resemblance is not necessary in representation, and there is no representation in resemblance.13

To make sense of the relation between Cézanne’s landscapes and the world, Morris introduces a third term:14 the verb *re-call* which is particular in that it is both transitive and reflexive. It assumes a double function, on the one hand, of holding together representation and resemblance, whose relation seem to be one

12. *Ibid.*, p. 815: “What name is there for this so-called sky that transmutes with so little transition into this so-called mountain?”
of mutual exclusion, and on the other hand, of referring to an image on the point of disappearing, which Cézanne reconstitutes from memory.\textsuperscript{15} The *Sainte-Victoire Mountains* represent less than they recall a landscape. But what about the resemblance that links them to the motif? Morris has recourse to the image of a mirror that has perhaps been fogged up.\textsuperscript{16} How should the notion of reflection—even if disrupted by fog—be understood before paintings that Cézanne qualified as attempts to build a harmony parallel to that of nature? The painter insisted upon the principle of equivalency in representation, but his assertion does not answer the question of knowing where the painting and its referent might meet.

The image of the fogged-up mirror links the problem of representation and of resemblance to the question of seeing. Reflection had been able to pass for a true image (at the end of the 19th century, in the painting of Gustav Klimt, to cite one example): when the real is redoubled, one sees better. In Morris’ work, however, mirrors are often associated to non-seeing. When Thierry Raspail and Thierry Prat inquired about the way mirrors had appeared in his work, Morris answered: “*Mirror Cubes* [1965] utilized the capacity of mirrors set below eye level to reflect the floor and disappear in the space.”\textsuperscript{17} The film entitled *Mirror* (1969) also included moments of invisibility associated with the movements of a mirror in a snowy landscape.

The writings of the German art historian Gottfried Boehm on the relation between sight and description can be aligned to Morris’ own reflections on the issue. To describe is not merely to render what one sees, in the sense of what one recognizes or identifies, writes Boehm, but to give more to be seen.\textsuperscript{18} It means to move beyond what we already know. It is not a matter of consigning in the text what we manage to identify in the painting, but rather to linger in spaces that resist the act of naming in order to widen the field of understanding. Boehm borrows this model of a kind of sight that goes beyond identification from another German art historian, Max Imdahl.\textsuperscript{19} The latter opposed a form of sight based on the tautology of identification (*wiedererkennendes Sehen*), to a form of sight taken up in the process of seeing (*sehendes Sehen*), borrowing in turn from the theories of Konrad Fiedler. Imdahl’s form of sight implicates the spectator in a visibility that is under construction. The identification of pictorial elements supposes a spectator who is faced with completed facts: there is

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.: “What is being reflected from them as the mirror of resemblance is perhaps dimmed?”
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 27.
nothing left to do but to record them. In the *sehendes Sehen*, through the process of seeing, the spectator participates in the very construction of the pictorial visible. Morris uses the adjective “inchoate” to describe Cézanne’s painting. (It is perhaps necessary to mention that it was also through Cézanne that Imdahl developed his notion of the *sehendes Sehen*. Cézanne’s motif is under construction, it takes form before our eyes.

Sight is the guiding thread of the text that Morris devotes to Jasper Johns’ first paintings. In it, Morris revisits several moments of a thematic of sight that is very present in Johns’ œuvre. He mentions Johns’ comparison between seeing and eating, and describes the piece *Target with Four Faces* (1955)—plaster casts of faces cut just below the eyes, and to whom vision is thus refused—as an incarnation, a becoming-flesh of the sign. For Morris, the turning point of Johns’ art, not quite three years after his first works, occurs in a painting entitled *Tennyson* (1958). Its surface, coarsely painted grey, seems to Morris like a screen, an obstacle that prevents the viewer from seeing what is beneath: as if a shade had been drawn to forbid access to a more brightly-colored painting that shows through at the edges.

Morris presents the lithograph entitled *Voice I* (1966–1967) as a descent into the interior of the body, into the throat, to the origin of the voice. At first, there is nothing to see. But, if one spends a long time in front of *Voice*—and Morris here uses the pronoun “I” in order to signify that the formation of these motifs depends on the spectator—monstrous faces start to emerge, comparable to the black paintings of Goya. To gain access to the image, one must cross through the opaque membrane of the black and white drawing, which Morris likens to a skin, to an epidermis. The acoustic dimension of *Voice* is not the flow of words, it is not language. What Morris hears is a melancholic, barely audible song, what a child murmurs to give herself courage in the dark. Like *Tennyson*, *Voice* draws the gaze toward the interior, toward the past, turning away from the exterior, public images of flags, numbers, and targets.

What Morris says of *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) goes beyond description: he gives us a glimpse of his own position as descriptor. According to him, this work is Johns’ subtle revenge for his experience in the army, and in it, he derides targeted vision, vision that aims to shoot.

The kind of vision the target invites, focused and conscious, will always deliver the fragmented, the partial thing in its box. The targets impugn conscious thought itself insofar as the “targeted,” what one consciously focuses on, is a kind of tunnel vision condemned to miss the whole.

Concentration on a fragment causes the totality to fall from view. This charge against targeted vision, a gaze that goes straight to its goal, perhaps recalls Johns’ assertion that looking at a painting should not require a particular kind of attention, a focussing such as the one required in church. The term that Johns employs—and that often recurs in his remarks—is “focus.” It is in the context of this focused vision that he formulates his noted phrase about looking at a painting in the same way one would look at a radiator. Johns seems to indicate that one does not need to concentrate on paintings, to look at them head-on, or to pay them any attention: the better approach would be to have them in the viewer’s peripheral zone of vision.

In his own descriptions, Morris makes use of this fluid, unfocused vision, which is also a side-vision: either the spectator perceives the work in her peripheral zone of vision, or she herself adopts a side position in relation to the painting.

Morris’ vision is not simply opposed to touch. It possesses a haptic quality, converts into touch. This leads to some surprising things, such as that sense of touch, in front of Cézanne’s Montagne Sainte-Victoire, that gains access to color perception.

This landscape becomes an abyss where visual depth darkens into touch, where touch is registered as color, as though touch could read color, as though color was accessed by touch, or as though Mnemosyne herself arrived by the touches of colors.²²

Touching the page as though he were touching Cézanne’s painting, in 1997 Morris produces Blind Time V and VI, with the Montagne Sainte-Victoire in mind, calling upon, as he notes at the bottom of the drawings, the memory of the first Cézanne he had ever seen (Fig. 43). These works are possessed of a surprisingly visual quality for works executed in the dark, with blindfolded eyes. What we have here, it seems, is sight transmuted into touch or touch that becomes vision.

Morris works with a form of sight that is intermingled with touch; for description, he uses the method of lateral vision, side vision. This describing from a slant, which he adopts in relation to paintings, gives him access to their different strata. Morris does not approach them frontally, in a face-to-face that is almost an attack. His descriptions do not attempt to clarify everything, to shed complete light on a work, or to have the last word. He accepts a position that does not allow him to see everything, that includes zones of invisibility. From the side, he gives the work time to accumulate thickness and to form strata. Johns’ first paintings resonate with the visual and acoustic environment of his


time spent in the American army. Cézanne's paintings thicken with the memory of the child's gaze that had previously settled upon the motif. (To re-call is also to remember.) But this return to the past also offers a glimpse of what is to occur in the near future: the Montagnes Sainte-Victoire shed light upon the imminent disappearance of that landscape that was so dear to Cézanne.

Johns' military experience, Cézanne's childhood landscapes, or the last gasp of a world at the beginning of the 20th century might all seem to be references exterior to the work. But this is not the case. They are not snippets of information that might take us away from the work in a movement of escape. It is not a question of avoiding looking at the work, of turning one's back on it in order to concentrate on what is exterior, the life of the artist, the historical context. In Morris' descriptions, what seems not to come exclusively from the order of painting is in fact anchored in the work, proceeding from the work itself and deepening our gaze upon it.

Moreover, for Morris, seeing is a constant test of certainty. In Earthwords, Owens introduces a distinction between the writings of modern artists and the writings of postmodern artists.\(^{23}\) If Malevitch, Mondrian and Kandinsky wrote, it was to compensate for the elimination, in their work, of everything that was not “purely” pictorial. Their writings were thus dependent upon their paintings, and took on an explanatory role. Owens describes them as “statements,” and opposes them to the “texts” of the postmodern artist. If Morris' writings, however, do not constitute statements, it is not, as Owens would have it, because they are postmodern texts. Indeed, according to the critic, they enact a kind of modernist closure, insofar as nothing escapes the process of textualization. What Morris opposes to the statement is the question. The beginning of his article “Professional Rules” shows the intrication of these two types of propositions.\(^{24}\) For Morris, it is a matter of advancing hypotheses while immediately calling them into question. In his writings, to describe is to question, to dare to advance into where one sees poorly in order to push ever further the limits of seeing and knowing.

Owens's argument is obviously directed against the modernist autonomy of the arts.\(^{25}\) If Smithson makes the verbal and the visual interchangeable, it is, according to him, in order to compromise the integrity of both domains. When it comes to Morris' writings, things are less simple. In closing, let us examine the relation between text and visual work in light of the layout of the article.


\(^{24}\) Robert Morris, “Professional Rules,” 1997, p. 298: “It is as if I wanted to say that my actions in making art fell on the side of the question rather than of the statement. But I don’t know whether to allow this feeling to remain in the form of a statement, or to recast it as a question.”

\(^{25}\) Craig Owens, “Earthwords,” op. cit., p. 129.
“Professional Rules” in *Critical Inquiry* (Fig. 44). Image and text unfold in parallel, forming two distinct columns that follow different modalities: the text is continuous, the band of images proceeds by addition. A back-and-forth starts to happen between the artwork and the text. The relation is not direct, Morris does not write “about” his sculptures. Rather, it is with his artworks in mind that he rethinks his work. This juxtaposition, without any direct link between artwork and text, calls to mind certain talks by Rosalind Krauss, which avoided reducing the artwork to an object of targeted commentary, unfolding instead an argumentative thread while images were progressively displayed on-screen. In her essay on Morris’ work in the Guggenheim exhibition catalog, there is—but this is probably a unique occurrence—this same lack of direct relationship between an artwork (*Mirror Cubes*) and a segment of text (on Freudian *Unheimlichkeit*). What links Morris’ sculptures to his text, in *Critical Inquiry*, remains subterranean, implicit, and sometimes mysterious. Each follows its own path, but at moments and in certain places, image and word meet. This series of meetings between an artwork and a piece of writing within their own distinct unfolding is perhaps Morris’ contribution to the postmodern idea of text.

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III. DISPLACING GENRES
Robert Morris and Allan Kaprow: Experience, from Theory to Performance Art

CÉCILE MAHIOU

As a maker of sculptures, of performances, dances, as well as conceptual art objects, Robert Morris is an unclassifiable artist who, although an active participant in theoretical reflections on the artistic innovations of his day, nevertheless cannot be assimilated into a determined school or current of thought, whether it be minimalism or conceptual art. Experimentation is at the heart of his artistic process, which could explain the eclecticism of his œuvre. To analyze the ambiguous rapport of Robert Morris to performance, or, in a larger sense, to the performing arts, it would be interesting to examine the often indirect dialogue the artist began, during these years of intense theoretical reflection, with Allan Kaprow, who is considered the creator of a new participative artistic practice, the happening. In a 1983 text published in Artforum, Kaprow, examining what constitutes “the real experiment,” as the title states, wrote:

Western art actually has two avant-garde histories: one of artlike art and the other of lifelike art. They’ve been lumped together as parts of a succession of movements fervently committed to innovation, but they represent fundamentally contrasting philosophies of reality […]. Simplistically put, artlike art holds that art is separate from life and everything else, whereas lifelike art holds that art is connected to life and everything else. In other words, there is art at the service of art and art as the service of life.¹

Kaprow places himself resolutely on the side of an art that chooses experimentation in order to question the borders separating art and life, and the formulation of this distinction is in some sense an answer to another directive, that of a formalist avant-garde that protected, during the 1950s, the specifically artistic nature of an art that aspired to purity and quality, of which Ad Reinhardt’s formulation is particularly characteristic:

The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else."

“Lifelike art” in the sense that Kaprow understands it unites the different artistic practices that come out of performance. Broadly defined, we are considering performance less as a particular artistic genre than as the paradigm of practices that reveal the procedural force of artistic making. In this sense, performance art comes out of an interest in creative and interpretive activity rather than a concern for the object that would result from this activity.

I will first discuss the theoretical debates surrounding minimalism, in which Morris and Kaprow played a part. Michael Fried, in a well-known article, proposed the paradigm of “theatricality” to account for the anti-formalist avant-garde art practices, which Kaprow grouped under the banner of “lifelike art.” This paradigm seems particularly useful in understanding Morris’ different productions as well as the experimental dimension of his artistic practice.

Morris’ work distinguishes itself from those artistic productions associated with minimal or conceptual art by privileging process over the object, the perception of the work within its environment over the idea. Moreover, his œuvre is marked by the necessity to reflect upon the possibility of broadening the artistic field, either by taking art out of the museum or by moving, according to the subtitle of the fourth part of his article “Notes on Sculpture,” beyond objects—beyond the art object. In the choice that Morris made of an art that he himself qualified as “vital art,” we can read the same interest Kaprow had for the question of experience. In this sense, the pragmatic theories that had directly influenced Kaprow might very well shed light upon Morris’ œuvre. Secondly, I will therefore attempt to demonstrate this by examining a few of the ideas formulated by John Dewey in his work Art as Experience.

6. Pragmatism is a theory of referentiality that studies meaning from the point of view of the relation of the object to the context in which it is situated, rather than from the point of view of the relation between the object and the idea.
Kaprow, Morris and the Paradigm of “Theatricality”

“Theatrical” Art or the Degeneration of Art?

In “Art and Objecthood,” Fried analyzed the productions associated with the current of minimalist sculpture, and in particular works by Morris, who had himself proposed, in an important article dating from 1966, a theoretical reflection on these formal innovations. Fried takes issue with the “literality” of these objects, which are above all simple and “unitary” forms according to Morris’ own terminology. Morris writes in “Notes on Sculpture”:

Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them. If the predominant, hieratic nature of the unitary form functions as a constant, all those particularizing relations of scale, proportion, etc., are not thereby canceled.

Fried considers this attention paid to the external relations maintained by the object with its context characteristic of a will to approach “non-art” and what he calls “objecthood.”

The experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.

This art is “neither painting nor sculpture” for Fried, who makes use, here, of the notion of “theatricality” to define what he considers a degeneracy of form. Indeed, according to the modernist perspective, form must be self-sufficient. His article proclaims the necessity of a resistance on the part of artists to what, within contemporary artistic experimentation, endangers the necessary aspiration of art toward purity and quality. Here are the conclusions of his analysis:

Theater and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such—and to the extent that the different arts can be described as modernist, with modernist sensibility as such [...].

The success, even the survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater [...].

The concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theater.\textsuperscript{13}

The threat to be countered is, for Fried, the will to collapse the barriers that exist between the arts. Fried also describes more radical attempts at a synthesis of the different arts, of which the event organized by John Cage in 1952 is particularly representative. Cage had brought together different artists at Black Mountain College, in a complex assemblage of events including the white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, the dancer Merce Cunningham, the projection of slides and films, the broadcasting of recorded music, radio programs, and declamations of poetry. The audience, placed at the center of these diverse activities, was left free to react at will. As Irving Sandler wrote,

It was Cage who had championed a theatrical art; he claimed that all of the arts ought to break down the barriers between art and life and aspire to the condition of theater.\textsuperscript{14}

However, the alignment of Cage’s experiments and of minimalist sculpture under the same accusation of “theatricality” is what sheds the most light on the singularity of Morris’ undertaking, and establishes the coherence of his questions concerning art and his position on the avant-garde scene.

\textit{Theatre, Dance, Experimentation: Defending the Performing Arts}

The paradigm of theatricality proposed by Fried in his article, within a critical perspective and as a manifesto for an elevated artform, or one deemed as such, is particularly useful in grasping the importance of the experimental dimension of Morris’ œuvre. In a 2000 article entitled “Size Matters,” in which he reflects on the minimalism of the day, Morris writes:

In retrospect the only fault I find with Fried’s essay is that it did not extend the concept of theatricality far enough.\textsuperscript{15}

There is a piece by Morris that especially echoes this association of “theatricality” to minimalist sculpture. It is the 1961 piece entitled \textit{Columns}, which was in fact a performance presented at the Living Theater in New York, and organized around Morris’ first minimal sculpture. The object is a rectangular column,

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 164.
made of plywood and painted gray, which was positioned at the center of the stage. The actual performance was divided into two distinct movements: first, the column stayed as it was, for three minutes, at the center of the stage, and then during the three ensuing minutes, knocked down by a stage device, it was left lying onstage—Morris had at first thought of putting himself inside the sculpture, to topple it over himself. The idea was to substitute for the dancer, in a specific kind of choreography, a sculpture that could bring the spectators to perceive space in a different way, as would the movements of the dancer’s body onstage, through their relation to the “unitary form” of the sculpture. This work possesses a meta-artistic dimension that repeats, by its staging, the role played by the external relations of the object in its elaboration as an art object. During this period, Morris was following the experiments at the Judson Dance Theatre, notably those of Simone Forti, around the development of a “new dance,” an experimental practice that privileged ordinary movements to the art of composition that characterizes traditional ballet. The innovations of “new dance” and those of “new sculpture” are very similar, and Morris’ first sculptures were objects meant to help elaborate choreographies. One can read in both a similar conception of the properties of the work of art as relational—and no longer formal—in nature. Oldenburg has defined the happening as “a theater of action or of things (people too regarded as things),” a definition which takes into account the filial relation between happenings and the choreographies/performances of the Judson Dance Theater.

Therefore, and despite the fact that minimalist sculpture has been reproached for maintaining a certain formalist bent, experimentation is indeed what characterizes Morris’ artistic endeavor. The evolution of his practice is witness to this: his plywood structures, marked by a certain rigidity, are followed by sculptures in felt, whose material dimension is particularly present insofar as the artist leaves the material to arrange itself according to its own physical nature.

**How to “Get Free of the Rectangle”**

He comes to grips with this evolution in a new article entitled “Anti-form,” published in *Artforum* in 1968. The title of the article, which is not the doing of Morris himself, refers to the quarrel within the avant-gardes and to the opposition to formalism mentioned above. The article that Kaprow writes as

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a response, “The Shape of Art Environment,” returns to important aspects of this theoretical debate. Analyzing Morris’ felt sculpture Untitled 1967, Kaprow criticizes Morris for failing to refresh his reflection on form, contrary to what is suggested by his title-manifesto. For Kaprow, the formal problem that the artist confronts should not lead him to explore the dialectic of form and formlessness in his work, but rather to ask how he might “get free of the rectangle,” which is to say, free of the white cube, of the delimited space of the gallery or the exhibition hall. According to Kaprow’s analysis, “amorphous” sculptures exhibited in a “rectangular studio” cannot be viewed in any way other than through the formal relations that they maintain with their rectilinear environment. He thus blames Morris for not being radical enough in his taking-to-task of the formal limits defended by the adherents of “art-Art,” to use his term, that is, the form of art that would seek to preserve the autonomy of art and of the work of art.

Kaprow’s article bears witness to a circumstantial opposition, more directed toward the unfortunate, and eminently polemical “title” of the article. All the same, the diversity of Morris’ artistic production during this period would seem to refute Kaprow’s claim. Morris announces, as early as his article “Notes on Sculpture,” that getting sculpture out of the museum will necessarily follow upon the experimentation characteristic of the new sculpture. Continuous Project Altered Daily is a work in progress that prefigures other experiments to come, those of the earthworks. Morris plays with, and mocks, the borders between exterior, natural space and the interior space of the museum. His outdoor work, Observatory for example, seems to be a symmetrical answer to the installation, during the Spaces exhibition at MoMA, of a pine forest in a museum space.

Observing the works and theoretical writings of Morris through the paradigm of theatricality reveals the importance of experimentation to the articulation of his practice. Participatory art and the critical relation to the museum institution are preoccupations common to both Kaprow and Morris, as is the necessity of conceiving the artwork as an interaction between the object, the environment, the artist, and the spectator. This conception of artwork echoes certain theses formulated by the philosopher John Dewey in his book Art as Experience. Taking into account Morris’ criticism of this aesthetics and of the manner in which it nourished the evolution of artistic practice, I shall attempt to shed light upon the similarities and differences between Morris’ and Kaprow’s artistic and theoretical practices by confronting them to the issue of experience.

18. For an example of a Morris felt, see Fig. 54.
Art and Experience: Robert Morris and the Pragmatist Aesthetics

“*The Legacy of Jackson Pollock*”

We are concerned here with the title of an article by Kaprow dating from 1958, which returns to the decisive importance of Pollock for artistic avant-gardes. In this article, which is both an homage and an aesthetic program, Kaprow presents Pollock’s formal innovations as the foundational moment of the experimental arts. Morris himself has often acknowledged Pollock’s influence on his work and, just like Kaprow, produced abstract expressionist paintings in the 1950s. Both artists, in their theoretical writings, inscribe their approach within the continuity of Pollock’s and in accordance to Rosenberg’s analyses of “action painting:” the artwork contains the experience of its making—it is a fact, an action, and not an image. Pollock’s artistic approach interests them especially for the attention it brought to the dimension of process in artistic creation. The technique of “dripping”—a way of projecting paint with sticks or pots of paint with holes in them onto canvases spread out on the floor—attested to the importance accorded to the physical act of painting as process. The “all-over” technique, which sought to spread the painting uniformly over the surface of the canvas without considering its edges as limits, marked the refusal of composition and the importance of chance and the arbitrary in the making of the work, in opposition to the *a priori* idea that presides over representation and figuration.

As Kaprow explains in his article, these innovations of Pollock’s had a direct influence upon artists within the avant-gardes of the sixties. One of Kaprow’s first happenings, in 1960, entitled *An Apple Shrine*, took place in an environment that Kaprow himself linked to abstract expressionism. An accumulation of newspaper, cardboard, and straw, were scattered at random, nearly filling the space that contained them. Morris’ work *Threadwaste*, from 1968, consists in a layer, covering all the exhibition space, of different kinds of waste material and scraps of cloth, among which mirrors were placed. The resemblance with the paintings of Pollock is striking. Whereas the importance accorded to the process was in some way “annulled” when these canvasses were hung on the wall of a museum—which prevented the spectator from perceiving them in any way other than as paintings, in an essentially optical manner—Morris’ installations, and

Threadwaste in particular, are characterized by the displacement Morris operates from optical perception—where only the sense of sight is engaged—to haptic perception, which also engages the other senses.\textsuperscript{21} This way of thinking, essential for Morris, who sees therein the specificity of his contribution to the minimal art movement, is opposed to Clement Greenberg’s purist manifesto in favor of a “visual art that should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience.”\textsuperscript{22}

**Experience: the Continuity between Art and Life**

This taking-into-account of the dimension of experience, “inherited” from Jackson Pollock, owes an equal debt to pragmatist aesthetic theories, in particular to John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934). Pragmatism supposes that the primary reality to which we have access is that of relations and not of things, which is to say, that of interactions; it is thus opposed to dualist metaphysics, which seizes first upon entities in order to put them into relation. I quote Dewey here, from Chapter III of *Art as Experience*, entitled “Having an Experience”:

> Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living.\textsuperscript{23}

Dewey applies to art this primacy accorded to experience. In the first chapter, entitled “The Live Creature,” Dewey opposes the art object or “art product” to the “work of art” to formulate the following definition:

> The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties.\textsuperscript{24}

Art, just like experience, is therefore considered as a relation, an interaction between an object and an individual. In his article “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making,” Morris acknowledges this primacy, in experimental art, of the process and of the issue of materiality:

> Whatever else art is, at a very simple level it is a way of making. So are a lot of other things.\textsuperscript{25}


\textsuperscript{23} John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, op. cit., p. 35.


This is a rewording of what Dewey exposes in *Art as Experience*: art is but one example, among others, of human activities. As such, there is no necessity to preserve, as Fried attempts to do, the autarkic status of the work, and beyond that, the autonomy of the artistic sphere. The need to blur the boundaries between art and life, to take up the title of the collection of articles by Kaprow, results from Dewey’s critique of this radical separation between the domain of art and that of ordinary experience:

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.  

According to his pragmatist theory, experience is at the heart of aesthetics and establishes a continuity between the artistic, conceived as the act of producing the work, and the aesthetic, which designates the act of perception and the sensation of pleasure and more generally whatever comes from the aesthetic relation. The artwork cannot be perceived as a thing physically independent of experience. The task of the philosopher, like that of the artist, is to reestablish this lost continuity between art and life:

The understanding of art and of its role in civilization is not furthered by setting out with eulogies of it nor by occupying ourselves exclusively at the outset with great works of art recognized as such. The comprehension which theory essays will be arrived at by a detour; by going back to experience of the common or mill run of things to discover the esthetic quality such experience possesses.  

**Ordinary Aesthetic Experience**

So, the critique of the artistic, for Dewey, goes with a valorization of the properly aesthetic dimension of all experience:

We have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only it is integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished

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in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience.28

According to this definition, the aesthetic experience is differentiated from ordinary experience only because it constitutes a totality that integrates the elements of ordinary experience and confers on them a unity and particular intensity. The aesthetic experience is a moment in which consciousness seizes upon ordinary experience for itself, as though detached from all finality. In this, it possesses a specific sense and a value. A text by Morris seems to me useful to illustrate this definition given by Dewey: “A Method for Sorting Cows,”29 which was written to be read onstage in Arizona,30 the first dance that Morris choreographed and executed in 1963. We might have questions about the status of this particular text, which factually relates the procedure of the ordinary and very codified task of sorting cows. It is a childhood memory—that of the fascination that Morris felt when watching his father completing the task, and of his father’s feeling of happiness and excitement in doing so. It is also the description of an ordinary action that possesses the characteristics that Dewey associates with aesthetic experience—closure, individualization, totality, and its immediate perception as unitary experience. One could hypothesize that the reading of this text onstage in a theater during a performance is a kind of mise en abyme of the paradoxical aesthetic dimension of the described experience. The way Morris accounts for the “instructions” corresponding to the method of sorting cows calls to mind the “scores” that Kaprow conceived as the framework of his happenings and on which the instructions for participants in the performance appeared.

The practices that foreground participation and the mechanisms of perception are emblematic of a conception of art as an art of doing, poïèsis. A practice that “maximizes the existential values of art rather than only the visual and formal values”31 is truly a form of experimental art that is developed at the moving border that separates art and life and whose goal is to change art as much as to change life. One can see, here, a form of art engaged with life rather than

28. Ibid., p. 35.
with art—a form of art that Dewey would seem to have wished. As Richard Shusterman writes:

By rethinking art in terms of aesthetic experience, Dewey hoped we could radically enlarge and democratize the domain of art, integrating it more fully into the real world which would be greatly improved by the pursuit of such manifold arts of living.32

Allan Kaprow has the same objective: the artist should not preoccupy himself with the specific nature of what the artistic might be in relation to aesthetics, but rather he should seek to not make art. The happening is not necessarily an artistic category—art in the act of its making—but it can also be life in the act of being lived:

The happening could easily have been called a game or a psychological amusement. I often said when asked that it wasn’t art at all.33

What Limits Can Be Ascribed to the Broadening of the Artistic Field?

Morris’ approach is not marked by the same contradictory radicalness as that of Kaprow, who ultimately rejects the term “happening,” which had become generic, preferring “activity,” less susceptible to being recuperated by artists to designate new practices that would once again come to separate art from the ordinary. Morris’ position with regard to Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics and the manner in which Dewey influenced artistic practice is nuanced. According to him, the critique of the elitist partitioning between art and life has led to the proclamation that everything is art and that everyone is an artist. Aesthetics are of course no longer considered to be isolated in a “separate realm” that would have no connection to the rest of existence, as Dewey had denounced. On the contrary, its omnipresence in urban life and the importance of what Morris calls “lifestyles” testify to an aestheticization of space that poses its own problems for art and artists. In “Size Matters,” Morris elaborates upon his questions:

What role is art to play in an arena where the self-conscious shaping of a lifestyle already frames an aesthetic space around the body? If today the values of entertainment and fashion mediate the merger of art and life, didn’t these two always squeeze pretty close together in the heated environment framing an

earlier more elite, autonomous art? If art and life have merged in unprecedented ways today the question arises as to what kind of art is present in the merging and what kind of life is being lived in the midst of a new aesthetic saturation?\(^{34}\)

These questions are not in disaccord with the pragmatist conception of aesthetic theory, which considers that, “rather than defining art or justifying critical verdicts, the concept is directional, reminding us of what is worth seeking in art and elsewhere in life.”\(^{35}\) The question of the “quality” of the aesthetic experience, in art and the arts of daily life alike, is present in the philosophy of Dewey and in his calling-into-question of the dualism between art and aesthetics. For the philosopher, the difference between an aesthetic experience and an ordinary experience is qualitative, and the art that is inscribed within this moving space between art and life and which seeks to redefine its contours cannot economize on a reflection based on art and life at the same time. For Morris, however, the aestheticization of life questions the pragmatist conception of an empirical experience which would coincide with the limits of art. Morris asks essential questions that stress the utopian nature of Kaprow’s radical desire to elaborate a form of artistic behavior that would constantly play with the borders separating art and life, always seeking to enlarge the field of the artistic and to open it to the whole of human activity.

The experimental dimension of Morris’ œuvre exemplifies the impossibility of reducing postmodern art to a conceptual art in which the work would only be in relation to an idea. For the artist Joseph Kosuth, the value of an artist after Duchamp is measured by the force of his interrogation on the nature of art itself, as he wrote in his famous 1969 article *Art After Philosophy*, in which he defined art by the tautological formulation—“art as idea as idea.”\(^{36}\) Such conceptual art in some way maintains the problematics of art-for-art’s sake and rejects properly aesthetic modes of questioning, to focus solely on the artistic.

In the alternative proposed by Kaprow, the artistic approach of Robert Morris is situated on the side of a performing art that seeks to carry existential values, and stands opposed to an essentialist conception of art, or a conception of art as a theory of art. As a committed practice, performance turns “lifelike art” into a means of knowledge, and thus goes further than questioning the notion of art itself.

Writing through Space: the Literal Practices of Robert Morris and Vito Acconci

NOURA WEDELL

Traveling the works of Robert Morris, we are led to discover that metaphors and labyrinths are inexorably intertwined. In the text accompanying the *Five Labyrinths* prints of 1993, we learn that a labyrinth is an image that is both form and metaphor: metaphor for our tortuous passage through life, form of the passage of time and the constitution of memory, it reverberates with Gnostic preoccupations.¹ We read that labyrinths have to do with truth, and that their walls erect as truth the sum of human relations or social practices that have passed into fixed, canonical and binding form. Yet we are warned about the pitfalls of relativism, and the real dangers that lie in wait for those who dally with the truth status of language. Looking back to the stockyards where his father worked, one Kansas City labyrinth of his childhood, Morris recounts his own dangerous navigation of that razor’s edge.

I was stopped from taking a short cut through a pen containing a single bull. “Don’t go in,” a man said. Retracing my steps half an hour later I came upon a group of men discussing the best way to extract the body of a man who lay dead at the feet of this massive black bull in the pen I had nearly entered. He had not heeded the warning and had been gored to death.²

The labyrinth is also an image of the search for the rational; it maps the edge of thinking, that groping attempt to catch the thread to a chain of truthful propositions. Such is the labyrinthine status of questions raised by Morris in his practice, and described in a footnote that reflects on its own oblique

referencing: questions that, “if announced, [are] seldom articulated; if articulated, seldom followed up; if followed up, seldom answered.” As you see, we enter without much of Ariadne’s thread to take us far.

Investigating these premises, we will consider labyrinths as images of complex social practices. Such images abound in Morris’ work and grow increasingly more complex: the soundtrack to the 1963 performance Arizona recounting the stockyards of Morris’ childhood—a man’s world of animals, dust, danger and stench where his father was more himself than he was at home—the early labyrinth prints from the 1970s that depict what Morris has called the “present tense of space” as it becomes memory, the 1993 labyrinths laying square, circular, ovoid or triangular shapes of social practice onto paper, the 12 prints In the Realm of the Carceral with their titles evocative of disciplinary regimes. Morris has constructed labyrinths of stone, wood, cloth, and language, and an art historian’s totalizing impulse could draw its shape in the entirety of Morris’ work.

Since Plato’s cave, Morris tells us, Western thought has kindled the desire for all “dark and shadowy metaphor to die, and be resurrected into the light of rational truth.” Now what is a metaphor, that labyrinthine complexity of shadows we want to replace with rational truth? For Donald Davidson, there is nothing shadowy there: “Metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more.” We must listen to this nothing more. It can show us which path to take, or at least, point out that in attempting to understand metaphorical truths, we were heading in the wrong direction. “No theory of metaphorical meaning or metaphorical truth can help explain how metaphor works... What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use.” Once acknowledged that there is nothing more, and weary of our steps, we can avoid the error of defining metaphorical meaning, and say along with Davidson that “A metaphor does its work through other intermediaries... Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight.” Inspiring or prompting the insight means that we pass from linguistic meaning to showing. At issue is asking the correct question. Trying to find meaning in metaphor is asking a question about prop-

3. The footnote is to a passage in an article by Morris about his usage of Donald Davidson’s writings in his Blind Time Drawings IV entitled “Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts after Doing Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson,” Critical Inquiry, vol. 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 617-627. The footnote in question evokes the existence of a different order of questioning than that addressed in the article, and explains that absence thus: “if such questions are suppressed here by remaining inarticulated—the very suggestions of their existence buried in an oblique footnote devoted to Morris commenting on Morris writing on Morris—they are nevertheless typical of those Morris raises throughout: if announced, seldom articulated; if articulated, seldom followed up; if followed up, seldom answered.”

ositions when we seek an answer that is not propositional in character. “Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.”

Let me sidestep this logical development and turn my attention to Vito Acconci for a moment. Acconci begins his career as a poet; in this role, the metaphor and other linguistic oddities constitute the rhetorical devices that he uses as impetus for his linguistic production. Acconci discovers a use for the strangeness of ordinary language as part of a “program of defamiliarizing poetics.” By this, I mean that he starts interfering with metaphors, figures of speech, and idiomatic expressions very early on.

His hand was raised and
(and then) in a manner of speaking and
(and then) he put his foot in his mouth

Such a poem remains within the realm of the proposition; it only plays at moving in and out of textual space, space in which we encounter a raised hand, a manner of speaking, and then come upon the idiomatic expression “he put a foot in his mouth.” Such an expression can be explained as a metaphor, although no longer active, based on a homology of relations (the same relation exists between a inopportune comment interjected into a conversation, for example, than between a foot inserted in a mouth) rather than on an analogy, as is the case in classic metaphors. If we follow Davidson’s logic, what we should see at the end of the poem, what the metaphor nudges us into noticing is thus not of a propositional nature. In fact, we should actually see something like this, (Fig. 45) or this (Fig. 46), except that it’s a foot in his mouth and not a hand. If what a metaphor does is show in the mind, here what I will call the “literally metaphoric” does in space-time.

It is this literal slip of the metaphor that Acconci will continually emphasize, and that will eventually bring him out of the specifically linguistic labyrinth and into performance and body art. In a letter to Clayton Eshleman (March 26, 1969) he writes:

[…] words have charge, they develop an orientation in the reader. Therefore it is the work of the art situation to jolt the reader out of that orientation. That work cannot be accomplished by playing up to that orientation, by repeating that charge.⁸

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5. All of the above quotes are from Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” Critical Inquiry, vol. 5, no. 1, Special Issue on Metaphor (Autumn 1978), pp. 31-47.
This continuous jolting of readers out of their orientation will end up by jolting Acconci himself into another kind of practice altogether. But before that final jolt pushed him off the page, let us look more closely at an intermediary stage of the transition.

That day, the pen I used was made of plastic, you see. The writing could be stretched in any direction—“elastic,” they said. That didn’t refer to the words so much As to me, while writing, at my desk, with my desk-chair, desk-blotter, desk-top, desk-toy, desk-ball, etc., I mean.⁹

The charge of this text directs us in such a manner that we see the writing becoming stretched in any direction, “elastic,” they said,’ and so elastic that it moves from the page to Acconci’s own body, sitting at his desk, with desk-chair, desk-blotter, desk-top, desk-toy, and meaning. As he plays with the multiple meanings that can be ascribed to words, and the contexts between which of these meanings incite us to switch, Acconci himself starts doing what language does, that is, meaning or issuing propositional statements.

And so to return to the case at hand, to our rational groping forward, I will

⁹. Vito Acconci, Writing to Cover a Page, op. cit., p. 4.
latch back onto Davidson’s thread and ask “What kind of intermediaries does the metaphor conjure to do its work?” What happens when the metaphor does not simply nudge us into noticing, but actually forces the transformation, going from meaning to showing. I posit that at this point it is helping us navigate the labyrinth. If the labyrinth is an image of thought (a form or a metaphor, as was stated at the beginning of this text), it is also the form of that ancient disquiet “between the image and the word, the propositional truth of verbal statement and the elusive and illusory visual depiction.” And further, it maps the sinuous transformations not only from the linguistic to the visual, but between sense media as well. And of course so does the work of Robert Morris.

In a letter to John Cage in February 1961, we find a project for what was entitled a “Frugal Poem:” “On a page of dark paper the words ‘words words words’ are written, filling the entire page.” Morris’ description goes on to specify that “When read aloud one substitutes the word ‘talk’ for ‘words.’” Furthermore, “A tape was made of the scratching of the pencil as [the poem] was written—it is intended to be several superimposed images, i.e., drawing and/or poem and/or musical score and performance.” The poem “talk, talk, talk” is a labyrinthine form of the metaphor in its process of becoming literal. If a metaphor is what allows us to show in language, and the literal form of the metaphor the actualized passage from one medium to another (in this case from text to speech), then Morris’ poem as “several superimposed images” involves actualizing multiple metaphoric processes at once. Its multiple images (drawing, poem, musical score and performance) are the intermediaries that the metaphorical usage of language works with as it moves off the page.

Vito Acconci, introducing the 2006 reprint of the magazine 0 To 9 co-edited with Bernadette Mayer in New York City between 1967 and 1969, provides a description of each of the 6 numbers of the magazine to have been published. As indicated by its title, the magazine was meant to run from number 0 to number 9, but Acconci stopped being a poet before he could finish the series. The six numbers of the magazine provide an empirical map of the environment Acconci moved in as a poet, before he jumped from work strictly limited to the written word to work that came to encompass conceptual art, performance, video, film and architecture. By the time issue number 5 comes around in January 1969, Acconci explains that he “could only use words to make a place on the

11. Ibid.
12. Morris’ poem provided for a humorous performance during this talk, as the reading of the text “words words” as “talk talk” was its own labyrinthine joke.
This negative stance inaugurates a point of rupture. That nothing more could be done within language except negation, that linguistic activity could only occur on the borders or against certain conventions of literary production (the production of meaning and of narrative; the convention of the author as creator of the work) precipitate Acconci’s jump off the page as it is performed in issue number 5 of *0 To 9*. Staying within the propositional usage of language, that is, staying within the metaphor in language would have led to language turning in upon itself, or against itself. The issue will not cease to haunt Acconci, and will be developed in the problematics of violence that runs throughout his work. Indeed, the performance *Rubbing Piece*, that I might provisionally entitle the danger of the metaphor, attests to the damaging effects of remaining within impermeable disciplinary boundaries (scriptural practices as opposed to visual ones, poetry as opposed to performance, etc.). Unnoticed in a crowded restaurant, rubbing obsessively at the skin of his forearm until he develops a sore (Figs. 47-48), Acconci is performing the violence of stalled transformation and the quiet social approbation it receives.

Precisely where does the jump off the page occur? The table of contents of issue number 5 of *0 To 9* mentions two Acconci pieces. The first is entitled “Four Pages,” and consists of just that, four pages of Acconci’s experimentations in literal usage of language as was his practice at the time. These pages remain within the confines of the propositional, even though they rub up against those confines.¹⁵ The

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¹⁵. They enact a literal usage of writing as the content of that writing, for example, the 3rd page of the series begins as follows: “In the first place, he wrote, from left to right: Afghanistan occupies...”

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Courtesy of Acconci Studio.
second piece is entitled “Act 3, scene 4”, and runs from pages 65 to 70 of the issue. It consists of a series of white pages, the line “across the lake region, the middle Mississippi Valley, and” printed on page 68, and the note, appearing on the bottom of page 70, “(The line you have read is the 208th line of a 350 line piece; the rest appears in the other 349 copies of 0 To 9 number 5).” The content of the entire poem is a broadcast of hourly New York telephone weather reports running from sunrise December 26th, 1968, to sunrise January 2nd, 1969. Although the language is in no way metaphorical, the poem has sutured itself to the form of the journal, and has thus left the two dimensionality of the page to open onto three dimensionality in another way than through linguistic reference or metaphorical showing.

But there is a third poem in this issue of 0 TO 9 that is not mentioned in the table of contents. This invisible poem can be taken as a token of the parting of the ways with the propositional. It is a “moving” poem that runs throughout the magazine, a kind of viral structure that repeats the last word of the text printed on the page on which it appears. Mobile within the magazine issue, it also travels locally in space along the arc of the page flipped over as it read. On pages 61 and 62, for example, two elements of the poem, “moving lightning” and “moving warehouse,” appear (Fig. 49). The section printed on the right page works in a literal way, as it is turned during reading. On the left, the literal movement of the line is lost, and its action remains only within the propositional meaning of the phrase “moving lightning.” However, in one segment of this issue-long poem, a semantic echo combines to push the words into contradictory actions. Thus, in the syntagm “not moving,” which is Acconci’s capture of the last word of John Perreault’s three performance scripts (Match, Tate Event, Rainbow) printed on page 11 of issue number 5, the word “not,” asserted as immobile in the proposition,


Courtesy of Robert Morris and Cabinet des estampes du Musée d’art et d’histoire, Genève.

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literally moves as you turn the page. Let us take this negative “not” as the event that pushes propositional meaning away from metaphoric “seeing as.”

I am aware that I have been using a fairly loose conception of metaphor. I am aware that I should inquire as to the diverse contexts of its use, distinguish what forms are dormant, dying, submerged, absolute, implicit or extended. But that is not my issue here. My question is, what happens when metaphoric use of language passes into the literal? With metaphor, as we have seen, we pass “from seeing that to seeing as.” Rorty notes that metaphors are gaps in logical space. Let us consider Robert Morris’ article “Threading the Labyrinth” as a case in point.16 This text builds on Morris’ earlier text on labyrinths, the aforementioned text accompanying “Five Labyrinths” in 1993. But where the latter consisted of five neatly partitioned sections, the former spins in one uninterrupted thread a maze of geodesic surveys, mirrors, Chomskyan axes, Duchampian standard stoppages, Kantian categories, ethics, esthetics and “extreme fluidity of theory.” The gaps in logical space of this labyrinthine thread are where we can see the whole of Robert Morris’ work reflected.

And yet, if these gaps mark the passage from one medium to another, or between different logical spaces, why then is the labyrinth of the metaphor always so dark? Why is death lurking at its center as the myth proclaims? Metaphorically perhaps, the labyrinth puts us in a state of blindness, groping along in thinking, as we look for a way out from within. With Ariadne’s thread as our only guide, we are led back to where we started, inside, endlessly treading the same domain. The labyrinth is the confinement to a single medium, whether it be language, the visual, the haptic or art itself. And yet the possibility that it may contain its own exit, the passage from “seeing that to seeing as,” is at hand, provided we can extract ourselves enough from our horizon to even contemplate the possibility of another through the gaps.

In “Threading the Labyrinth,” Morris writes that it gives the spatial representation of the pathway we meander to try to represent ourselves. Kant’s a priori schematism of understanding is invoked, as is Chomsky’s rationalist position in the language-acquisition debate. The labyrinth gives us the form of a structural impossibility, for we can never discover the real mode of activity of this a priori schematism, this art “concealed in the depths of the human soul.” That self-representation may be terminally foreclosed is that labyrinthine difficulty, for which, as Morris tells us, the mind may not be wired at all. As such, the labyrinth is the spatial form of that thwarted desire to bring to light the workings of our understanding, inasmuch as that understanding can allow us to represent ourselves.

Morris’ *Blind Time Drawings* take the shape of this difficult reflexivity. Let us look at an example from the 1985 series *Blind Time III* (Fig. 50).

Working blindfolded for an estimated 7 minutes, a grid is attempted in the lower left area. Then the left hand applies twice the amount of pressure as the right in an estimated one-third area of the page. The right hand follows the movement of the left, expanding and elaborating on its motion.

Searching for a metaphor for the occupation of that moment between lapsed time and possibilities spent on the one hand, and an imagined but un-occupable future on the other, both of which issue from that tightly woven nexus of language, tradition and culture which constructs our narrative of time.

Time estimation error: -35 sec.  

According to a metaphorical reading, the drawing with the left hand, executed with twice the amount of pressure than with the right, reads as a representation of lapsed time and spent possibilities, darkness. The opening on the right, still metaphorically, reads as the imagined but un-occupable future. The process of the drawing is the search for a metaphor for itself: the present in that gap between the action of the two hands. In this metaphorical reading, if the right hand, following the left, represents the future, then it cannot carry with it any significant change. The future in that case is but a repetition of the past, less of its substance spent, more ethereal and open. Neither of these two forms, staying at they do within the nexus of language and simple repetition, can show or represent anything about the present. Let us metaphorically posit that the tight grid in the lower left corner is a form of the labyrinth, a form of the control exerted over what is beyond our control. It is thus precisely a metaphor standing in place of the labyrinth, and the reason for our wanting out.

And yet, Morris writes that what metaphors lead us to see, which is often not of a propositional nature, is what opens onto the creative and that distinguishes them from the truth.  

Let me give you Morris’ argument, leading us back to Davidson. The metaphor does not mean anything; it leads us to see something, but this is not simply a novelty that might fall back into habitual understanding. “In its context, a word once taken for a metaphor remains a metaphor on the hundredth hearing, while a word may easily be appreciated in a new literal role on a first encounter. What we call the element of novelty or surprise in a metaphor is a built-in aesthetic feature we can experience again and again.” And so we arrive at the vexed question of the esthetic.


the article “Threading the Labyrinth,” can we infer that the esthetic is that art of *a priori* categories on which we can exert a molding hand before they are hardened into truth? Is the esthetic our capacity to rewrite a fiction for our structures of inhabiting space-time? Is the element of novelty in esthetics what allows us to move *in fact* out of rigid media delimitations, thus finally out of the metaphor into the literal and out of the labyrinth? Robert Morris’ moving through the labyrinth, even in essayistic form, does not necessarily provide answers to these questions. Neither does this particular labyrinthine thread we have followed up till now. And perhaps these meanderings are failures, and I have overlooked some perilous gaps in their logical space. The illusion of control is what recurs under the form of the labyrinth. I could pull all of its logical strings tight, but there is no getting out of it, as Francis Ponge writes, firmly anti-metaphorically. I must let myself be guided by I don’t know what.
Is there at least something like a ‘family resemblance’ among these works? If so, I would like to meet the other relatives. What thematic gene links such apparently disparate family members? Could it be that they share a kind of questioning of certain rules that, in some way yet to be determined, make the noses, as it were, of these works resemble one another? But I see no rules that have been questioned.¹

Such are the questions that, among many others, Robert Morris addresses to his reader as well as to himself in his article “Professional Rules,” published in 1997. They are, as we can hear, tinted with irony, if not self-irony.

If the melancholic dimension of Morris’ work has often been pointed out, the ironic register in which it is expressed offers an approach that is no less illuminating. And if, as Jankélévitch writes, “irony affirms the right to a refined and almost imponderable “amateurism” that touches all keyboards in turn,”² it allows us to grasp the multiple new developments in Morris’ work from an angle that is no less unifying than paradoxically logical: the ironical dialectic, in fact, implies the lability, autoreflexivity, and comedy of a subject quick to turn against himself. Contradiction is his ethos, the arabesque his preferred motif. Univocity, norms, immediate rationality, serve as foils.

It is David Antin, in particular, who, in his text, “Have Mind, Will Travel,” published in 1994, points to an ironic strategy that recurs throughout Morris’ texts and discursive processes. In so doing, Antin remarks upon the extent to which “Irony is a difficult figure to control, perhaps impossible. Once its presence is located in an artist’s work, it threatens to appear everywhere within it, casting the possibility of doubt over any and every assertion or representation

the artist makes.” Playing with ambiguity, the ironist naturally runs the risk of finding himself misinterpreted. Wishing to enter into his game, his reader, reciprocally, runs that of being mistaken. On this matter, Lynda Hutcheon goes one step further: “irony is ‘risky business’: there is no guarantee that the interpreter will ‘get’ the irony in the same way as it was intended.” Or, as Eco remarked: the quality (and the risk) of irony is that “there is always someone who takes ironic discourse seriously.”

It is therefore with the required prudence that I, in turn, wish to examine several ironic procedures in certain texts by Morris, whether their targets are the palinodes of the art of his time, his own recantations, or more broadly, the historical context. An array of characters, a few of whom seem to be the author’s doubles, evolve in those texts, texts that emblematize a theater where roles are exchanged and identities blurred.

**Three Characters in Search of Artists**

Until January 1971, when “The Art of Existence. Three Extra-Visual Artists: Works in Process” appeared in *Artforum*, Morris had, to my knowledge, published only theoretical texts that one could characterize, rather rapidly, as “serious,” that is, borrowing from the criteria proposed by Philippe Hamon, assertive, persuasive, argumentative, referring more or less to canonical works and sources. These articles accompanied the development of his work and bore witness to the evolution of his artistic and aesthetic preoccupations. The artist Morris wrote them, signed them, published them, but he did not appear within.

An autobiographical motif arises indirectly in his writing, with the publication of “A Method for Sorting Cows” in *Art and Literature* in 1967. And its publishing context provides for some situational irony. Indeed, this tribute to the ability of cattleworkers breaks quite strikingly, by its trivial factuality,
with the other poetic or theoretical texts that figure in the table of contents in the avant-garde magazine. Compared to the contributions of Eleanor Antin, Hubert Damisch, Fernand Léger, or Jean Rhys, to cite but a few, Morris’ description of cow triage appears even more abrupt as the journal does not mention that a recording of his text had been aired in the performance Arizona, which premiered at the Judson Memorial Church in New York, June 23rd, 1963. There is nothing, either, to indicate its autobiographical component, Morris having frequently been present at such events during his childhood, when he accompanied his father to the Kansas City stockyards. But perhaps I am inclined to overinterpret the contextual, if not political, irony of the realist intrusion of a proletariat led astray by the Western, into the inner circle of international culture that is Art and Literature. Let us gage that the contrast of tone and content this text deals into the magazine would not have displeased its author…

Be that as it may, it was with “The Art of Existence” four years later that the game of irony really began. Quite often commented upon, this text puts a rhetorical strategy into action that is altogether singular in the field of artists's writings of the same period. In it, Morris adopts the genre of the report, in the first person singular. He recounts his visit to three art students engaged in ambitious experimental projects on extra-sensory phenomena. For some time, Morris himself had been focusing on processual installations as attested, notably, by his Continuous Project Altered Daily at the Leo Castelli Warehouse in 1969; his earthworks, shown at the Leo Castelli Gallery in February 1970; and, that same year, his solo show at the Whitney Museum which included monumental “evolutive” sculptures. He was also thinking about projects in nature, or outside. It is therefore plausible that he was interested at the time in research on environments that were “very visually pared down,” and that required, on the part of the spectator, the experience of a certain duration, as he expounded and problematized at length in the introduction and the conclusion of his essay. As an art school professor (principally at Hunter College), it would not be very surprising that Morris had gotten wind of projects undertaken in confidentiality in the Midwest and on the West Coast by unknown artists. Up to this point, the argumentation is altogether coherent. As for the genre, that of the report, it had already been exploited by others, notably Robert Smithson, in his famous “The Monuments of Passaic.”

However, as we know, these unknown radical artists, who are seeking at all cost to preserve the “extra-visual” character of their art to the point of a

reluctance to see images of them published, are fictional. Morris’ trip is an invention, the plans and drawings that accompany the text are proofs fabricated by the artist, who had applied himself to varying the handwritten elements and graphic styles. The author skillfully constructs his narrative by a piecemeal dispensation of clues: the neutrality of his point of view shifts during the course of his experiences, which are described in great detail. Through these experiences, he goes from the status of witness to that of guinea pig. First of all, Morris witnesses the capture of the light of the sun, orchestrated by Marvin Blaine, from his observatory, set up inside a hill in Ohio. His second excursion, this time to San Diego, takes him to the laboratory of one Jason Taub, virtuoso of electromagnetic energy and radio frequencies. He appears, to tell the truth, more puzzled by the abstruse scientific explanations of this “engineer-creator” than by the “extra-auditive” perceptions the latter allows him to test. The third round finds him in the studio of a young Doctor Strangelove, practically blind, moreover, after several failed attempts to paint with acid. When this Robert Dayton invites him to enter his “gas chamber” to experience the effects of his immaterial art, Morris admits to not feeling at ease. He later declares having left this extreme sensory episode “exhausted,” no doubt as much by the dubious humor of Dayton as by the effect of the gases that had been administered to him. At this point, the account of his visits to these experimental “monuments” of the burgeoning 1970s has become crazy enough, if not grotesque, that even an ill-informed reader would have some doubts about its veracity and would acknowledge it as parody.

But why would he have chosen such an oblique discursive mode, and what is the target of this parody? Answering this question is problematic in principle. I will trace but a few hypotheses. It is true that Blaine and his friends ironize Joseph Kosuth’s “art as art as art,” which they transform, after being witness to the repression at Kent State University, into “pig art as art as art.” “It was explained that they were going to consider ‘what they were able to do to the pig as their art,’” writes Morris. It is true that, in comparison to Blaine’s knowledge and archaeological methods, Michael Heizer’s kindred preoccupations provide but a pale reflection. Likewise, the works of Michael Asher and Bruce Nauman, which illustrate the first pages of Morris’ article, seem timid in com-

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11. On May 4, 1970, Kent State University in Ohio became the theatre of protests and demonstrations against the United States’ invasion of Cambodia, protests which were violently repressed. Four students were killed and nine others were severely wounded by the National Guard, who opened fire on the protesters.

The parody, however, operates here in complicity with the majority of its referents, since Morris is also working on similar projects: he has been thinking about his observatory for several years and will complete it a few months later, on the occasion of Sonsbeek 71. Why would he mock his own orientations? Clearly, the object of the parody is probably not its real target. A mysterious reader’s reaction, a certain Mark N. Edwards, in the March issue of *Artforum*¹⁴, might perhaps enlighten us. He writes to the editor: Morris develops his career by stealing from other artists. He had done it two years earlier, with the exhibition *9 in a Warehouse*¹⁵ at Castelli, and he is doing it again with this article. Morris’ response, published after this aggressive charge, is laconic: “Mr. Edwards is evidently into rescuing damsels in distress. I’m not.”¹⁶ Did Edwards really exist or was he just a new intermediary in an apparatus that was meant to make Morris’ detractors the real victims of his parody? In this case, Blaine, Taub, and Dayton would be quite justified in joining the ranks of the real artists hostile to Morris’ directional reversals. With “The Art of Existence,” Morris might well be answering them in a tone of sarcastic auto-derision.

But this is only one aspect, for the political dimension of the text proves equally complicated. In fact, its irony might also verge on satire if we focus on the radical arguments of the partisans of the overcoming of art that Morris depicts there. All three refuse to compromise with the institution, promising themselves, as did Blaine (a friend of whose was killed at Kent State University), to destroy their works in order to preserve them, or moving, like Taub, toward scientific projects more and more distanced from any artistic value, or finally, concluding the encounter with “Screw the MOMA”¹⁷ in the case of Dayton. With Morris, being a member of the Art Workers Coalition and, among other militant activities, co-organizer of the New York Art Strike in May 1970, which protested the collusion of museums with hawkish governmental politics, the positions attributed to his fictive artists might just be the reflection of the polemics agitating the general assemblies and art schools of

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¹³ Neither Michael Heizer nor Robert Barry are mentioned in the text, but here, the former’s use of radio frequencies (in the exhibition *January 5-31, 1969* organized by Seth Siegelaub, for example) and volatile gases is immediately brought to mind.


¹⁵ *9 in a Warehouse*, Leo Castelli Warehouse, February–April 1969.


the period.\(^{18}\) Although he closed his exhibitions prematurely or retracted his works from the American Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, Morris, himself, did not quite choose desertion.\(^{19}\)

But the account of his participation in the *Art & Technology* program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which he completed in 1971, appears almost worthy of the research of his three playacting artists. Morris had envisaged the creation of an outdoor environmental space whose thermal situation would be modified, causing the visitors to pass from hot to cold through devices hidden in the ground. LACMA was in charge of finding an isolated piece of land of about one square mile. The shooting of two films from a helicopter, one in color, the other in infra-red, was planned… These tribulations seem just as flavorful as those related in “The Art of Existence:” the museum team revealed itself to be imperturbably tenacious, the artist resolutely megalomaniac, the different companies approached (most of which supply high-tech equipment to the army), inexorably discouraged by the cost of the project. Reading *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1967–1971*,\(^{20}\) one could think that Morris had deliberately nudged his project toward failure and driven the museum into a corner. Although he is acting from within the artistic institution, Morris neither submits to its authority, nor adopt its liberal utopias—in any case not the utopia of an angelic communion of art and cutting-edge industry. Does this mean, as Jean-Pierre Criqui suggests,\(^{21}\) that Blaine, Taub, and Dayton

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18. The “Newsletter” number 3 of the New Art Association in *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 3 (November 1970), p. 39, proclaims, for example: “We are against the confinement of the esthetic experience to isolated, heavily guarded, disinfected objects contemplated under conditions of benign satisfaction. […] We are against the use of museums by self-interested wealth for its own prestige and financial aggrandizement, and the subservience of museum directors and curators to those interests.” See also “The Artists and Politics: A symposium,” *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1 (September 1970), pp. 35–39.

19. Morris closed his solo show at the Whitney Museum (*Robert Morris. Recent Works*, April–May 1970) two weeks earlier than planned in order to protest against the politics of the American government in Vietnam, the murderous suppression of the Kent State University protests, and the way museum institutions were run. A bit earlier, he had opted for the closing of the group show *Using Walls* at the Jewish Museum for the same reasons. He was one of the organizers, with Poppy Johnson, of the “strike against racism, war, and repression” (New York Art Strike) on May 22, 1970, orchestrated by the artistic community, which forced museums to close for one day in protest against the Vietnam War, the invasion of Cambodia, the repression at Kent State University, and censorship in museums. This strike was followed by the boycott of the Venice Biennale, on July 14, 1970, by 26 artists, including Morris, who decided to retract their works from the American Pavilion.


play the role of heteronyms, in part? Or are they to be likened to three archetypes reflecting their author in different ways? I see them, rather, as extremist figures, outrageously synthesizing the debates raging at the time.

The Artist as Héautontimoruménos

But how should we understand the violence that progressively insinuates itself in the text, culminating in fine with the gas chambers invoked by the final protagonist, whose “Screw the MOMA” ends with “but see what you can do for me at Auschwitz!”? The chilling cynicism of this formulation and its stupefying provocation brutally return all of the artistic considerations presented by the text to the tragedy of history. A borderline irony that we find, for example, in the Free War Memorial prints (1970): a portfolio of five alugraphs, completed in reaction to the invasion of Cambodia, in which Morris imagines monuments to the dead, each more symbolically violent than the last (Trench with Chlorine Gaz; Infantry Archive—To Be Walked on Barefoot, because, apparently, in that monument one had to walk on a plaza made of transparent boxes with cadavers in them; ½ Mile Concrete Star With Names; Crater with Smoke, Scattered Atomic Waste). Scathing and desperate, this irony filters through the rest of his work, reaching a peak, no doubt, in the famous 1974 poster announcing Morris’ double exhibition at Castelli and Sonnabend, showing the artist as the perfect sadomasochistic icon, his torso oiled and in chains, wearing a German Army helmet.

“The Art of Existence,” we realize, multiplies the levels of irony to the point of blurring its goals. All the more so as Morris’ persona is presented in the role of an eirôn, questioning his interlocutors while remaining withdrawn. “Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson (Or Is that a Mouse in My Paragone?),” published in 1993 in the first collection of his writings, connects him more to the romantic ironist (all idealism set aside) who, out of his contradictions and
of chaos, fashions an aesthetic and a philosophy of everything and its opposite. Let us recall that, according to Friedrich Schlegel, “[irony] is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself […]. It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.”

In his text, Morris reacts to thirteen interminable questions submitted to him by the critic Roger Denson. They seem somewhat of a chore, calling upon their addressee to reconstruct, from a cavalier perspective, a career perceived as erratic. If Denson did not actually exist, we could take this questionnaire to be a pastiche of the art of the interview, in which the critic tries to put his intelligence of the artworks on display by getting his interlocutor to confirm the analyses he has himself prompted. The answer is a play for which Morris sets up the scene: it is reminiscent of an asylum; “incomprehensible” constructions are underway; the ground is strewn with materials (plywood, steel, dirt, grease); mirrors are balanced precariously on top of these; fragments of bodies overwhelm the whole; a cacophony of voices and construction noises contribute to the chaos, with occasional silhouettes passing by, carrying objects, or fighting one with another.

A retrospective of Morris’ work, as exhaustive as it is anarchic, in which characters inspired by the world of illustrator George Herriman do battle (Fig. 51). In this unpublished performance, it is the old Vox (maker of sound pieces) who, in a monologue almost as dizzying as that of Molly Bloom, inveighs against an Ignatz occupied, as is customary, by the arrangement of his bricks. Helped by Ignatz and Krazy Kat, Vox attempts to force all of Morris’ doppelgängers to punch customs tickets (do they want to cross the border of posterity?) all the while calling them names: a dozen characters who, in turn, incarnate Morris as a minimalist, a performer, an “anti-formist,” an earth-artist, a blind draftsman, a cataclysmic painter, etc. And to add another twist to this already complex text, two of these characters are presented as female.

Through the course of all this, Blaine, Taub, and Dayton reappear in the memory of the main actor (Vox) who learns that they are working together on a grandiose temple of vapor in Pittsburgh, in comparison to which Morris’ real-life Steam (created for the first time in 1967 at Western Washington University in Bellingham) is something of a miniature—once again the vastness of

their enterprise, as if seen through a carnival mirror, has stretched beyond any possible coincidence with reality.

The scattered “I’s” of this figure of the schizoid artist are gathered here, but naturally not reconciled, in what Freud would have called a psychopathological drama. This dramaturgical answer only adds confusion to the ridiculed questions of an already confused critic. We know that the cartoon by Herriman, himself an unrepentant ironist, rests on an equally psychopathological love triangle. The androgynous cat is infatuated with an egotistical mouse. The latter disdains the cat’s affection and throws bricks at it obsessively. Their unfortunate addressee, blinded by his feelings, interprets the bricks as symbols of affection. A dog, the guardian of the law and secretly infatuated with Krazy Kat, tries to protect him from Ignatz by putting himself between them regularly. Their relation is pandemoniac nonsense.

What does Ignatz represent in Morris’ text? His outraged conscience? The critic, ready to throw new bricks while he prepares his large Guggenheim retrospective? What is most interesting here is that the self-reflexive function of irony is running full tilt. And to such an extent that the artist multiplies to become his own target and thus his own executioner, “the wound and the dagger!,” “the blow and the cheek!,” “the members and the wheel,” “the sinister mirror / In which the vixen looks.” The screaming voice of irony covers the whole scene, condemning the victim to laughing at his own fragmentation. Before the curtain falls, Vox expires under the assault of the other characters in a final scramble. “Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos,” we could conclude with Schlegel. The masks that Morris often puts on, both in the literal and the metaphorical sense, the mirrors and the labyrinths that punctuate his whole œuvre, do they not suggest a delectation for doubling that paradoxically signals a cohesive identity?

If the use of irony recurs in Morris’ writings, it is a text published in 2003 in Critical Inquiry that might synthesize the few points we have taken up here. “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Unconscious” lays out a

new setting, that of the office of Doctor Chomsky, a psychoanalyst on whose couch the artist is stretched, in what is doubtless his most authentic role.

The session is less a matter of treating a supposed schizophrenia than the trauma incurred after 9/11. A political therapist appropriate to the circumstances, Dr. Chomsky expresses himself, quite loquaciously, by quoting his own books. Morris answers his rejoinders by developing upon the role played by the United States in the violence of contemporary history, based on a series of notions he invents (“Mega Image” or MEGIG; “American Phenomenological Awe” or AMPHENA; “American Art of the Imperialistic Unconscious” or IMPUNC; “Art Installation of the Spectacle” or INARSE, etc.) whose recurring acronyms blur the reader’s experience, once again, and not without sadism.

The subsequent question of knowing how art participates in an imperialist unconscious particular to American culture evokes the background of the texts previously mentioned: the Vietnam war for “The Art of Existence;” the first Gulf War, after which “R. Morris Replies to Roger Denson” was written.

Analyzing the underlying ideology of most of the artistic orientations in which he had himself been engaged since the 1960s, unified by a tropism toward monumentality and the spectacular, Morris includes himself in this essay, which is, for once, eminently collective, by shifting to the first person plural. A generational “we” accentuates the melancholy of his reflection, and seems to turn irony into a politeness of despair. His tragic consciousness of history, which had incongruously torn apart the parody of 1971 and has spread through his work ever since, is the subject of his cure. “Is this a critique or a confession?” the analyst asks him. “Is there a difference?” replies Morris.

Certainly, many American artists, naïve but sincere in their past struggles, unconsciously nourished an ideology of national domination. Their works serve these demonstrations of power, achieved, notably, by excessive scale, in a more innocent manner than when expressed in architecture or public space. Plunged into his somber reflections on a century of “unimaginable violence,” Morris is not afraid to establish parallels between the grandiose American monuments and the staging of the grandeur of the Third Reich; two of his illustrations juxtapose the beams of light symbolizing the twin towers absent from the nocturnal Manhattan skyline, as sublime Jacob’s ladders, and Hitler himself, whose silhouette is cut into luminous columns at a celebration of the National Socialist party, in Nuremberg, 1936.

How can art dissociate itself from the open nationalism that emerged after

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text is linked to the exhibition Robert Morris: American Beauty and Noam’s Vertigo, Joseloff Gallery, University of Hartford, October-December 2002.

34. Ibid., p. 173.

9/11, asks a Morris-Krazy Kat overwhelmed by the rubble of the Twin Towers? How should one struggle against the effects of IMPUNC, this imperialist unconscious pushing art toward the spectacular, inscribing it into the present of entertainment and, therewith, instilling oblivion? The only answer seems to be to exacerbate historical consciousness. “Memory is the trace of a wave goodbye made with a slightly clenched fist. Memory is politics. Memory is a loss. Memory is hunger,” as he once declared.

For Morris, the exercise of memory is never without pain. The incessant exigency of justification and explanation fueled by the arabesques of his œuvre can hardly be painless either. Beyond his strictly theoretical writings, his ironic strategies become formidable critical weapons: first, they allow him to point out the limits of what his immediate contemporaries propose, without excluding his own suggestions. In this respect, irony deconstructs the comedy of illusions. Furthermore, these strategies furnish the critical conditions of the plastic lability of his work, from then on impossible to assign to any single fixed form. And finally, their overview opens a gap towards the untimely. This is how irony becomes a weapon against the forgetting of history.

36. In this text, page 692, Morris literally cites “Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson (Or Is That a Mouse in My Paragone?),” op. cit.
Addressing Oneself: 
On *TELEGRAM* by Robert Morris

ISABELLE ALFANDARY

*TELEGRAM: THE RATIONED YEARS* hits the reader like a meteorite. The pages of the book, unnumbered, are covered with a continuum of phrases written in capital letters in a typography that remains unchanged from the first to the final page, an interminable succession of paragraphs almost without margins, an undifferentiated mass of black marks on white paper, scantily accentuated by dashes and a few asterisks (Fig. 52). Cast in once piece, the text seems made to be read in one sitting. It is impossible to orient oneself, to circulate in any way other than the linear and oriented will of the author. The reader of this text, following the intimation of its double title, has the right to question the status of these declarative and lapidary utterances. *TELEGRAM* is a pell-mell of memories, reflections, facts, and judgments. The first person singular is at first deliberately discrete, only to become more insistent. What lies in wait in this war-past revisited by the voice is actualized, liberated as the telegram is inscribed on the page, and the confession is embodied.

The poetic project, what Philippe Lejeune calls the autobiographical pact, is affixed in a dedication, which consists of a few words, initials and other acronyms presented on the so-called bastard title page:

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TELEGRAM
THE RATIONED YEARS
FROM R MORRIS
KC MO NINETEEN FORTIES
TO R MORRIS/ NY NY NINETEEN NINETY-EIGHT
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1. Denis Briand analyzes *Telegram* in its installation context, in his essay “Like Laughter in a Field of Ruins: from *Telegram* to the Eighties” in this volume.
WE WERE MORAL THEY WERE IMMORAL — FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY AGAINST SLAVERY AND FASCISM — THEY SAID GOD WAS ON OUR SIDE — ALLIES AGAINST THE AXIS — WE WERE RIGHT AND THEY WERE WRONG — OUR WAY OF LIFE — NOT EXACTLY THE WAY NORMAN ROCKWELL PAINTED IT — MAIN STREET QUIET HOUSES ON SHADED STREETS TURKEY THANKSGIVINGS WITH THE EXTENDED FAMILY — DAGWOOD AT THE OFFICE JIM CROW AND ONLY SO MANY JEWS AT HARVARD — KAISER WAS GOING TO DO ALL RIGHT BUILDING THOSE SHIPS — THE WAR WAS GOING TO BE ALMOST OK EXCEPT FOR THOSE WHO DID THE ACTUAL FIGHTING — CHRYSLER WAS GOING TO MAKE TANKS AND PRATT AND WHITNEY COULDN’T FIND ENOUGH PEOPLE FOR THE NIGHT SHIFT — THE GREAT DEPRESSION WAS A THING OF THE PAST — MAYBE THE GERMANS HAD BETTER EQUIPMENT BETTER TRAINED SOLDIERS BUT WE HAD MORE — MORE OF EVERYTHING TO WASTE — AND SINCE WAR IS WASTE WE WOULD WIN — LOCAL LIFE WENT ON — RATION STAMPS — EVERYWHERE POSTERS REMINDING TO SAVE THIS OR THAT SUPPORT OUR BOYS BUY BONDS LOOK OUT FOR SPIES AND DON’T HAVE LOOSE LIPS — HOLLYWOOD DID ITS PART AND EVERYBODY WENT TO THE MOVIES — MOVIE STARS DIED BRAVE DEATHS OVER AND OVER AGAIN ON SATURDAY AFTERNOONS AT THE BIJOU — THE CHILDREN TRUDGED TO SCHOOL CARRYING CHURCHILL ROOSEVELT AND STALIN

The text that follows is constructed like a telegram that the subject addresses to himself, an express missive that R MORRIS of Kansas City, Missouri, from the forties, sends to R MORRIS of New York, New York, from 1998. The text is thus not conceived as a gift of oneself, but rather as a gift to oneself, a gift from self to self. In TELEGRAM, a subject literally addresses himself and this address has the form of a given, of a pledged, dedicated present: the entire project takes place in the interval that separates two prepositions, “FROM/TO.” The title of the book thus acquires all its meaning: TELEGRAM is this letter, understood as an alphabet letter, autograph, R MORRIS, as well as epistle, that the subject addresses to himself from a distance, in the difference between self and self, and for which time and, secondarily, distance, are the conditions of possibility. R Morris writes to R Morris from the past of his ten-year old youth, from the 1940s, from those years of war and rationing: what the narrative voice will later call “THE NINETEEN FORTIES—GROWING UP IN IT UNDER IT AGAINST IT.” The telegram is by definition difference, deferment, and alterity, what Jacques Derrida has conceptualized and spelled as “differance:” the very paradigm of the writing process, of any writing process.

If we pay it close attention, the dedication, which is at the same time a narrative scheme and an enunciative device, turns out to be both impossible as well as accurate. Impossible, the specular address at a distance of nearly sixty years would certainly be so, were it not written under the guise of the enunciative and altogether singular fiction, referred to as prosopopeia, which is “a rhetorical device by which an imaginary, absent, or dead person is represented as speaking or acting:” only in this case could the possibility be validated that R MORRIS address himself from the past. Yet it is no less accurate, for the textual apparatus seems to coincide with an undeniable subjective reality: not only does the dedication suggest the existence of a schism at the heart of the subject R MORRIS, it also considers the subject R MORRIS to be an effect of the telegram—its writing, therefore, is in no way a stylistic artifice. Only as the effect of conversation, of communication with self, even at the price of a division, can the advent of the subject R MORRIS, not as himself, but as himself as though another, take place. Identity appearing in the course of the text as a convenient and tenacious fiction. In Memoires: for Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida writes:

But we are never ourselves, and between us, identical to us, a “self” is never in itself or identical to itself. This specular reflection never closes on itself; it does not appear before this possibility of mourning, before and outside this structure of allegory and prosopopeia which constitutes in advance all “being-in-us,” “in-me,”

between us, or between ourselves. The *selbst*, the *soi-même*, the self appears to itself only in this bereaved allegory, in this hallucinatory prosopopeia—and even before the death of the other actually happens, as we say, in “reality.”

*TELEGRAM* is an impending letter that can no longer wait. The urgency is perhaps not what one might think: “IS IT THAT I CAN’T FORGET OR THAT THE OLDEST PART OF ME LIVES ON IN THAT TIME?” *TELEGRAM* is a letter on involuntary memory, about the dread of the past, whose specter inhabits the text. The text proceeds therefore according to a logic that is inverse to that of the duty of memory: it answers to the need to forget. Paradoxically, Morris’ memory is anxious, full of holes: “BUT CAN MEMORY DELIVER WHAT IT WAS REALLY LIKE? REALLY LIKE WHAT?” *TELEGRAM* bears witness to a memory of childhood in the sense of what Freud comes to understand on the subject of Leonardo da Vinci, a small autobiographical detail whose incongruity only finds an equal in subjective truth: “AND HOW I TOOK OFFENSE AT SOMETHING JOE DID AND JUST WALKED HOME AND FOR YEARS DIDN’T WANT TO SEE THEM—AND I CAN’T REMEMBER WHAT JOE DID.” The cause of the dispute with Joe is lacking, memory defaults on this point; causality is lost, the chain of reasoning interrupted, only the offense, certain, haunting, remains. *TELEGRAM* is a return to the self, as it convokes the memory of a becoming: that of a consciousness in the process of developing into itself, a consciousness that returns to the historical and material conditions of its traumatic genesis.

The penultimate page, printed in the same capitalized typography as the text of the confession, is the one traditionally assigned to the publisher, on which the conditions of the book’s fabrication are specified. Here, the legal note seems diverted in the service of poetic performance:

> **THIS BOOK WAS COMPLETED ON THE 21ST OF SEPTEMBER 1998. IT WAS TYPESET IN ROTATION AND PRINTED ON Z-OFFSET PAPER BY LETTERPRESS AT LA QUEUE DU TIGRE, ARTAMIS-GENEVA. THE COVER WAS SILK-SCREENED IN MILITARY GREEN. THE VIGNETTE AND FLYLEAVES WERE PRINTED AFTER THE ARTIST’S DESIGN. BINDING BY MAYER ET SOUTTER SA, RENENS. THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY JRP EDITIONS, GENEVA, IN AN EDITION OF FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES. TWENTY NUMBERED COPIES INCLUDE A SIGNED ORIGINAL BOUND TOGETHER WITH THE BOOK.**

Midway between artist’s book and book by an artist, **TELEGRAM: THE RATIONED YEARS** deliberately inscribes itself in an interloping space, in a genre which is rendered undecidable, and remains so until the final word of the book: “A SIGNED ORIGINAL DRAWING BOUND TOGETHER WITH THE BOOK.” A graphic collage of new, superimposed ration cards, forms that have never been filled out, food ration stamps, gasoline ration stamps, provides the opening and closure of the book on the inside front and back covers, the only minimal trace of the artist’s physical intervention.

The subtitle of the work, which comes from the context of rationing during the war years, could be interpreted as a poetic program of invitation into that economy, a prescription of measure. “A ration book” is a book of ration stamps. The reader could, however, also be tempted to hear in **THE RATIONED YEARS** its Latin etymon: *ratio, nis*, which signify reason, the rationality inseparable from the experience of privation that participates in the constitution of consciousness as an instance of refusal:

A WORLD WAS THERE MADE UP OF THE ANXIETIES THE PORCHES HUBCAPS SWEATERS BLACKBOARDS FIST FIGHTS ICE ON THE MORNING MILK BOTTLES BICYCLE FALLS GREY GRAINY PHOTOS OF THE NUREMBERG RALLIES THE BROWN AND BLACK HOCKEY SKATES WET DREAMS MR OGG FALLING ASLEEP IN THE MIDST OF FACTORING A QUADRATIC EQUATION LUMPS OF BLACK COAL IN THE SNOW—LIKE THAT—BUT ALSO A VAST HOLE IN ALL OF IT—THE “LIKE THATS” OCCUPIED THE PERIPHERY AROUND A SENSED VOID—THE NAGGING DOUBTS THE CONSTANT ANXIOUS TURNING OVER OF QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE PATTERN—A SCOTOMA OF UNVOICED SKEPTICISM OCLUDES THE CENTER FOR THE CHILD PHILOSOPHER—AN IRREPRESSIBLE SUSPICION THAT A PERVERSIVE TIDE OF THE ARBITRARY PULSED BENEATH THE GIVEN FORMS—that the apparent densities were suspect and that this arbitrary form of life had accreted out there prior to one’s will—the grainy mass of “LIKE THATS” did not cohere in any convincing way—not that they partook of the nature of the dream—formulations of coherent skeins of skepticism or arguments for reflexive solipsism were beyond the ten-year-old—what nagged was the intense desire for a convincing holism—just what was missing in the daily wash of “LIKE THATS”—it was when the teachers and parents opened their mouths to speak that the void itself became nearly visible their words surrounding it and lofting out the maddening gaseous platitudes of nothingness—
THEN THE EDGE OF WAR THE COMMON URGENCY AND NOVELTY OF IT THE VIOLENCE OF ITS IMAGES AND THE PUBLIC VOICE WITH WHICH IT SPOKE SWELLED INTO THE ABSENCE AT THE CIVIL CENTER

The experience of excess, manifested by the text’s heavily paratactic syntax, is not the least of the paradoxes encountered in a period of food rationing, but excess barely hides the void from which it issues. The metaphysical inclination of the “CHILD PHILOSOPHER,” as the voice calls him, originates in the derealizing, if not psychoticizing, experience of discourses that literally do not hold up: the void, for R MORRIS, is an experience that is anything but abstract,—TELEGRAM could be read in its entirety as an account of the genesis, not of time, as one might expect from reading its subtitle, but of space—it is the almost hallucinatory vision of the yawning hole from which issue the words of authority, escaping from a void rendered perceptible by its border of words. An intuition, not merely critical, but fully phenomenological, takes place: “AN IRREPRESSIBLE SUSPICION THAT A PERVERSIVE TIDE OF THE ARBITRARY PULSED BENEATH THE GIVEN FORMS.” The arbitrary in question here cannot be understood simply as the expression of a social arbitrariness in the form of an injustice done to the child-philosopher. At the origin of forms, at the source of the given, R MORRIS suspects an arbitrariness beyond phenomena, a pulsation of the thing in itself without legitimacy, which he experiences in the ritornello of “LIKE THATS.” Indeed, “THIS ARBITRARY FORM OF LIFE” bears Schopenhauerian traces of incontestable will.

The utterances that compose the Morris TELEGRAM do not say where they come from, they are catapulted onto the page and taken up as loops detached from the act of enunciation—itself identified with a vision of horror—from which they come. Thus the first phrases in the text: “WE WERE MORAL THEY WERE IMMORAL—FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY AGAINST SLAVERY AND FASCISM—THEY SAID GOD WAS ON OUR SIDE—.” What is immediately striking, from the first page of the book, is the place and the status of discourse, of reported speech in the strict sense of the term, of discourse repeated without precaution or distance: the discourse of ideologies, that of Uncle Sam as well as that of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini; appeals to authority on the part of parents, the Church, the school principal, or the burgeoning media: news, local press, magazines. War propaganda is deconstructed in the very form of Morris’ enunciation, by putting reported speech in perspective, aligned paragraphs after paragraph, with punctual analyses of great semiological rigor: “LANGUAGE WOULD WEAVE ITS OWN CURTAIN OF IMAGES AGAINST THE DREAD OF CERTAIN VISUAL ONES—NARRATIVES OF SENSE ARE HELD UP AS SHIELDS—[...] WAR IS ALWAYS A WAR OF WORDS AND IMAGES.” And yet
the obscenity of the death-bringing image does not criticize itself, does not turn against itself without difficulty. R MORRIS, narrator, indeed harbors no illusions on the subject. “A FEW TRIED TO TWIST THE IMAGES INTO WHAT THEY CALL ART—HIGH ART FINE ART FIT FOR THE MUSEUM ART—BUT THE HAM-FISTED GUERNICA CAME OUT A JOKE UNINTENTIONAL OF COURSE.” What is unbearable in the image has nothing to do with its realism: “PHOTOGRAPHS AT AUSCHWITZ IN FORTY-FIVE ARRIVED WITHOUT COLOR OR THE STENCH—EVEN SO AT THIRTEEN I DISCOVERED THERE WERE ODORLESS BLACK AND WHITE IMAGES I COULDN’T LOOK AT.” Clearly, obscenity has nothing specifically sensory about it, although puritanical morality has bent over backwards in an attempt to demonstrate just this: the obscene image, it would seem, always already possesses an abstract dimension, the effect of the unbearable that sustains it.

TELEGRAM points to an intertext that no American reader could miss: I am referring to alternation with narrative focalization of the “camera eye” and “newsreels” as developed by John Dos Passos in USA. USA contains no punctuation and no capitalization. The all-capitals in which TELEGRAM is written proceeds, for that matter, according to a similar logic. Morris’ project is to install the reader in a space without location and without relation, the space of writing, cut off from the world and ruled by its own laws. To do this, with an extreme economy of means, he resorts to two procedures for scansion: the dash and the asterisk. The dash systematically cuts and separates all of the utterances in the text; asterisks arrive like ellipses to fill the emptiness in the last line of a paragraph, supplementing nonexistent marks.

The distinction between the discourse of ideology and the speech of the subject to come occurs progressively within the stream of consciousness of Morrissian memory. In the flow of discourses, the omnipresence of images, of the mass image, the media image par excellence that is the poster, the epiphany of consciousness takes place, a critical, minimal consciousness flowers in spite of the bludgeoning of which it is the object: “EVERYWHERE POSTERS REMINDING TO SAVE THIS OR THAT SUPPORT OUR BOYS BUY BONDS LOOK OUT FOR SPIES AND DON’T HAVE LOOSE LIPS—HOLLYWOOD DID ITS PART AND EVERYBODY WENT TO THE MOVIES.” As early as the fourth line, the name of an American painter is negatively invoked: “NOT EXACTLY THE WAY NORMAN ROCKWELL PAINTED IT—MAIN STREET QUIET HOUSES ON SHAD-ED STREETS TURKEY THANKSGIVING WITH THE EXTENDED FAMILY.” The reference to the painter ruins the picture by introducing into it the ferment of critique. The metonymic sequence that is released in the process is worth emphasizing: ration tickets have the effect of training the imagination,
of unfolding series of images, the support of images. Thus one passes from the stamp to the poster, from the poster to the screen; from the reduced model to the large scale, from the fixed image to the movement-image. The rest of the narration is, for that matter, made of vignettes of news items in the manner of Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*, images pursuing the children even on their way to school: “THE CHILDREN TRUDGED TO SCHOOL CARRYING CHURCHILL ROOSEVELT AND STALIN SITTING TOGETHER AS A MONUMENT INSIDE THEIR HEADS WHILE HITLER MUSSOLINI AND TOJO MORPHED INTO GROTESQUE.”

Images, more than discourses, are in perpetual becoming in the imagination, their more labile material in constant metamorphosis. These haunt the subjects, inhabit their interiors, in the silence of consciousness or in the noise of a group of children on their way to school. The images are not only in their heads, but also wherever they turn their heads: “EVERYBODY SAW THE PICTURES IN LIFE AND READ THE SATURDAY EVENING POST—ELSEWHERE OTHER MAGAZINES BLEW UP IN THE BOWELS OF SHIPS INCINERATING SCORES.” The whirlwind of the image masks the invisible reality that needs no subtitle: “AND THE TRAINS RAN ON TIME IN GERMANY AND ACROSS POLAND.”

Coincidentally, the advent of the subject occurs precisely through the experience of a lack of sight:

IN THIS BASEMENT ZONE FOR WHICH THE REIGN OF THE TOTALIZING VISUAL HAS BEEN BANISHED I TURNED POROUS TO ABSENCE AND FELT ITS BLIND AGGRESSIVITY SPREADING THROUGH AND ERODING THE SITE OF THE SELF OPENING ME TO ITS FLOW—EMPTYED OF IMAGES I BECAME VAST WITH ABSENCE LOSING THE SELF AND RECOGNIZING IT BECOMING ONE WITH ABSENCE—RESTRAINT AND A SENSE OF LIMITS WERE THEN VALUES

Morris’ relation to the world is inseparable from an inaugural gesture, his first aesthetic intervention—cutting up a local newspaper: “AT GRACELAND GRADE SCHOOL FROM FORTY ONE ON WE GOT TO KNOW PAPER—THE PROGRESS OF THE WAR A CONSTANT TOPIC TO BE DISCUSSED IN CURRENT EVENTS AND WE CLIPPED THE WAR THE WAR DISPATCHES FROM THE KANSAS CITY STAR.” The experience can be characterized as originary for the artist. Its ambiguity is foundational: “WE GOT TO KNOW PAPER” could be understood figuratively or literally. The paper, that out of which newspapers are made, is an object of fascination, of fixation: “I FOLDED THEM IN MY BIG CHIEF TABLET NEXT TO THE CRAYON DRAWINGS OF THE DIVINE STUKAS PILOTED BY GRINNING AND GOGGLED MANIACS MACHINE GUNNING
MURDEROUS BLACK DASHES THROUGH THE LONG DIVISION.” The colored pencils and the color of the lines leave their indelible imprint on the indifference of memory: “THE MEMORY BANK OF UNCHANGING HOUSES THE TWO B YELLOW PENCILS THE RED BIG CHIEF TABLETS WITH BLUE-LINED PAGES MADE WAY FOR IMAGES OF MARINES FLOATING FACE DOWN OFF CORREGIDOR AND EUROPEAN CITIES BLAZING OUT OF CONTROL.”

TELEGRAM is the account of a sensual education. What R MORRIS designates as “PROPOSITIONAL NARRATIVES,” “THESE NARRATIVES OF FAR AWAY VIOLENCE” blend with experiences of matter and materials: pencils, paper, nylons, condoms. Certain displaced synesthesias are worth noting: all of R Morris’ senses are alert and in turmoil every time he spends a Saturday afternoon at the library on Ninth Street: “A SQUAT BEAUX-ARTS PILE WITH OPEN STACKS LEADED WINDOWS MASSIVE OAK TABLES AND LADY LIBRARIANS WHO SEEMED AS OLD AS THE BUILDING […]—UP THERE IN THE STACKS THE FLOORS WERE THICK GLASS SLABS POLISHED TO TRANSLUCENCY BY DECADES OF SHUFFLING SHOE LEATHER.”

In the library, the ten-year-old child is struck by its architecture, impressed by its material aspect, even the smell of the books. R MORRIS is constantly on alert, arrested—in his discovery of the world through his perceptions, which assail him and hold him fast, hobbling this process of the transcendence of matter that is called knowledge. At the local museum, the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, memory is impregnated with the same sensations, this time olfactory: “INSIDE THE VERY FEW VISITORS THE SILENCE OF THE TOMB THE SMELL OF THE POLISHED FLOOR WAX THE GRAY FLOOR WAX THE GRAY-SUITED ZOM-BIE GUARDS IN THEIR SIXTIES ALL COMBINED TO PRODUCE THE IMPRESSION THAT ART WAS A SOLEMN AND A DEAD BUSINESS.”

The narrative voice recalls its excessive sensitivity, its sensorial excitability in the environment: “THE HAPPY PHYSICALITY WAS EVERYWHERE—EVEN GASOLINE SMELLED GOOD—YOU TRIED TO REMAIN UNFOCUSED WITHIN THE IMMEDIACY MOVING ACROSS THE NARROW DIMENSIONS OF TOUCH AND SMELL—‘PAY ATTEN-

TION!’ THEY CONSTANTLY REMINDED—but attention was what you didn’t want to pay.” The development of the artist is not indifferent to this impossibility of neutralizing the sources of sensorial stimulation: “YOU’VE GOT TO FEEL THE HEFT OF A BOOK SMELL IT MAYBE TEAR OFF THE CORNER OF A PAGE AND TASTE” recommends R Morris’ friend Roger. The book from the local library remains a
worldly object, a bundle of stimuli and appetites that could never totally reduce itself, or become fully abstracted from its materiality. The physical sobriety that characterizes the book can be read as a resistance to this impulsive tendency. The typography and the layout, plus the framing effect produced by the narrowness of the margins function to neutralize the material dimension of the book, inhibiting all sensorial becoming of the book-object. It is a matter of circumscribing the creative act only to the process of writing, to the exclusion of any other perceptive process.

The first act of creation commemorated by R MORRIS is an act of transgressing the law, a forfeit committed on the occasion of a shop class, an act that was repressed by a paradoxical and counter-productive injunction.

THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT WAS TO FASHION THIS PLANK INTO A CUTTING BOARD FOR MOM IN THE SHAPE OF A PIG—INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE WHITE SMUG SMOKED STOCKY SHOP TEACHER INCLUDED REMINDERS NOT TO WASTE—THERE WAS A WAR GOING ON—ROGER AND I RETIRED TO EXPLORE THE STORAGE ROOM—THERE IN THE QUIET AND THE GLOOM WE PROCEEDED TO FASHION AN OBJECT OF OUR OWN TASTE.—FROM A RACK WE WITHDREW ONE DRAWING BOARD AFTER ANOTHER AND BEGAN TO STACK BOARD ON BOARD—UTILIZING A CAN OF THICKENING SHELLAC AND ITS FOSSILIZED BRUSH WE APPLIED A LAYER OF THE VISCOUS LIQUID BETWEEN EACH LAMINATION STANDING ON A LOW TABLE TO TOP OFF OUR EIGHT-FOOT TALL “ENDLESS COLUMN”—FOR A WHILE STANLEY HOWELL WAS BLAMED AS HE WAS BLAMED FOR EVERYTHING FOR HAVING TRANSFORMED THE TOTALITY OF THE SCHOOL’S DRAWING BOARDS INTO A BRISTLING INDIVISIBLE COLUMN—FOR THIS TERRORISTIC SCULPTURAL ACT THE PRINCIPAL OF THE KUMPF SCHOOL WITHDREW HIS INVITATION TO ANY FURTHER WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON VISITS BY THE GRACELAND GANG—EVENTUALLY WE WERE FOUND OUT—AS PUNISHMENT WE WERE REQUIRED TO STAY AFTER SCHOOL ON FRIDAY AFTERNOONS TO SAND ALL THE PICTURE FRAMES THAT COULD BE FOUND IN THE GRACELAND BASEMENT—

The punishment being no less manual than the crime, it was doubtless no less jubilant. Here we are given to understand that the poetics of recuperation is an inheritance from the ration years; here it is confirmed that all confessions unfailingly involve an episode that could be classified under the Rousseauist category of the stolen comb, of the crime hidden in vain and ultimately discovered.

The war years were for R MORRIS the years of an experience of space, of a constitution of space as a form of withdrawal. For example, in this episode, in
which R MORRIS describes his surprise at discovering a place of withdrawal well suited to suspension, to the fading of the subject:


At the same time, the war, for Morris, is the opening of the world: “WAR WAS ANOTHER BACKGROUND SPACE THAT SWELLED OUT THE LIMITS OF THE PERIPHERAL” or again: “WAR DELIVERED ANOTHER SPACE—DIFFERENT FROM FAMILY TEDIUM AND THE LOCAL MINI-DRAMAS OF THE INDIANA STREET NEIGHBOURHOOD—DIFFERENT FROM THE GRINDING BOREDOM OF GRACELAND GRADE SCHOOL—A SECOND SPACE—EXOTIC ROMANTIC WORDLY ON THE FACE OF IT—MOVIES FULL OF EXPLOSIONS AND GOODBYES ON STATION PLATFORMS SHROUDED IN STEAM.”

The war opens the era of what Marshall McLuhan called the global village: “THE NEW BARBARISM MARCHING THROUGH EUROPE AT THE BEGINNING AT THE FORTIES WAS MARKING THE WORLD WITH DIFFERENT FEATURES AND ITS REVERBERATIONS EVEN CHURNED THE AIR OVER INDIANA STREET.” The war is the power of affect: it informs consciences, displaces sites, exposes the world to itself in every sense of the term. For this little American boy of ten, whom nothing had predisposed to exposure to the vast world, it literally opens horizons, not merely geographical, such as Europe, but imaginary and unexpected spaces; it allows him to experience space as form, an alternative regime of intensity and privation: “AND IN THIS NEW SPACE OF WAR WE BEGAN TO SEE A DIFFERENT PATTERN—HERACLITUS—FLUX—CONFLICT—RISK—DANGER—IT PUT AN EDGE ON US THAT IT WOULD TAKE A LIFETIME TO DULL DOWN.”
In the final paragraph of the text, which unfolds across nearly three pages, the narrative voice returns to itself, abandoning the posture of prosopopeia in order to interrogate its very process and to grasp anew the meaning of what preceded it. It is the status of memory that engages and preoccupies Morris: “IS IT THE CHILD WHO REMEMBERS OR SOMETHING OLD THAT STILL EXISTS IN THOSE LOST YEARS?” The question on which TELEGRAM ends is no longer that of memory itself, but of its subject, its origin: who is the subject to whom the past returns? Who speaks when he remembers, “THE CHILD OR SOMETHING OLD?” Knowing who is enunciating what Augustine would call “the present of the past,” this past that only has existence in the pure present of the analepsis, is undecidable. The device of initial address returns only to be dismantled. The subject of the enunciation confesses in order to end his dread: “I HOUSE HIM RELUCTANTLY LISTEN TO HIM RETELLING FROM HIS PLACE HIDDEN IN THE SHADOWS—I PITY HIM A LITTLE AND STILL FEEL A DREAD IN HIS PRESENCE—SOOTY AND REEKING OF THE MOST ACRID NOSTALGIA—THIS CREATURE WHO LIVES AMONG THE DEAD—THIS CREATURE OF CONSIDERABLE AGE MADE ENTIRELY OF ANCIENT CHILD.”

The past is heavy: it has weight, it is a dead weight that the subject cannot dismantle, yet which he must dismantle. The telegram is understood then as a gesture of impossible dispatch that is nevertheless attempted and forcefully maintained. TELEGRAM puts memory to work in writing—the work of mourning. It is through the intervention of the letter—gramma—the difference that it implies—tele—that the subject seeks to free itself from the demon of the memory of a past that will not pass, of a past that is its own, but that no longer is. The device of prosopopeia is completed when it becomes flesh, incarnating itself in a final convulsion: “HIM.” The undecidable gives birth to a being, a being from the past in the present, from the present in the past, which Morris names with this fine oxymoron: “ANCIENT CHILD.” The ancient child inhabits, we might note in passing, the kind of subterranean space in which R MORRIS liked to nestle, in the manner of a deus absconditus. TELEGRAM will have consisted in pulling this in-between creature out of his hiding place, out of his cave: “I’VE PULLED HIM INTO THE PRESENT WHERE HE IS CONFUSED OBSTINATE BLINKING HIS ANGER AT THE LIGHT—HE REMAINS FOR BRIEF MOMENTS BEFORE HE SLIPS BACK TO HIS DARKENED LANDSCAPE—.”

But the creature, in variance with the Platonic philosopher in the allegory of the cave, cannot forgive his exposure to the light of day and incessantly attempts to return whence he came. The Morrissian ontology which *TELEGRAM* proposes is an *hauntology*. The war years were years of development and germination for Morris, a kind of education unbeknownst to him, sensual and formal, in which Morris the subject is constituted secondarily to the event of an unimaginable and death-bringing violence. *TELEGRAM* is the account of an originary experience, psychic and aesthetic, as much a theater of the confrontation of impulses as the memory of a consciousness in the act of becoming writing.
IV. EXCHANGES: TEXT TO SCREEN AND BACK AGAIN
Many of the American artists of Robert Morris’ generation, Robert Smithson, Hollis Frampton, Donald Judd, Brian O’Doherty, were prolific artist/critics who reacted against the idea that artists were “strong, silent and dumb.”1

Between 1966 and 1970, Morris published an extraordinarily influential series of essays in four parts called “Notes on Sculpture” including: “Anti-Form,” “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making,” “The Search for the Motivated,” all of which appeared in Artforum and were later reprinted in the volume of collected essays Continuous Project Altered Daily.2 I first became interested in Robert Morris through this textual production as well as through the critical texts by Annette Michelson3 and Rosalind Krauss, who were writing about Morris in art catalogues and in Artforum. In fact, I could admit that I came to look at Morris’ art through the lens of the vivid prose of his critical works and autobiographical texts, which fascinated me from early on.

It was in the late seventies that Rosalind Krauss and I met and became close friends. When Thomas Krens invited her to co-curate the Morris retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in April 1994 (with the second venue planned for 1995 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris), she immediately thought there should be a film based on The Mind/Body Problem, the title she gave to her show. With seed money provided by a grant from la Délégation des Arts Plastiques du Ministère de la Culture Française, the Pompidou

center agreed to produce the film, judging that this was an opportune moment to make the work of this important American artist more visible in France.

Rosalind Krauss and I agreed that this was to be a film about layers: layers of irony, layers of media set in relation to each other, dance, performance, sculpture, conceptual notes, film, video, but also layers of artistic personae behind which and through which an artist both reveals and conceals, in short, invents his identity.4

On the six-hour plane trip from Paris to New York, in April of 1994, I read through Krauss’s essay and entries in the Guggenheim catalogue5 and reread several of Morris’ essays. The challenge of bringing theoretical texts to screen was one I had never envisaged before. How was I to integrate the Morris and Krauss writings, spoken by their authors, in a mixture of forms—something between an art documentary, a cinematic essay—in a mise-en-scène that used the spiral architecture of the Guggenheim Museum as a structural form or device? It occurred to me that Morris’ performance 21.3 (1964), where he plays Professor Erwin Panofsky, might serve this purpose.

Rosalind arranged for a coffee meeting with Bob as soon as I landed, warning me that I would have only 15 minutes to convince Morris, who wasn’t too enthusiastic about the project, to participate in a film on his work. At that first and only meeting, I sketched out some preliminary ideas scribbled on the airplane: this was to be a film based on writing as much as on sculpture. I would not interview the artist, nor would there be an invisible narrator. Krauss and Morris were also to represent several personae or fictional aliases.6 Rosalind Krauss would be herself, as an art history professor and critic. She would provide continuity in a straightforward lecture on Morris’ work, based on a collage of her own texts.7 A professional crew at the Guggenheim would be hired to film the works and the in situ film performances as the show is being dismantled. Morris would be the last (ordinary) visitor to his own exhibition.

Morris listened silently through my explanations. When I appeared to be finished, he said simply: “It sounds like a real film. Ok I’ll do it.” After which he rose and quickly left the coffee shop. This was the beginning of what I cannot quite call a relationship, and certainly not a friendship, but which at least ended up (in) being a film.

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6. The opening credits of the film designate their roles.
The next time we met was on the first day of the shoot at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum on April 17th, 1994. The exhibition, the Mind/Body Problem, was about to come down. The museum allotted us two days for the entire shoot—not a single day more! We had to work fast.

Morris turned up in an austere black suit and a flat Quaker-like hat, bearing no resemblance to the shaggy Soho artist I had met in the coffee shop several weeks earlier. Adopting the persona of the “Ordinary Visitor,” he walked down the ramp of the museum with all the inherent grace of the dancer he had been in his youth. Our supple and agile cameraman followed Morris unobtrusively, with his hand-held camera. I walked behind him following the shoot through a miniature control monitor. The sound man recorded the direct sound of the noise of hammering, screwing, drilling, and on another track, the sensuous aria sung by Victoria de Los Angeles from Verdi’s Simon Boccanegra, which was drifting from the Waterman Switch dance performance, encased in one of the museum walls. Morris, mindless of the camera, naturally interacted with his works—sensuously touching, caressing his sculptures.

He sometimes stopped to perform everyday tasks such as sweeping the floor, folding and unfolding or untangling felt pieces—true to the tradition of Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer and the Judson Memorial Church dancers of ordinary bodily movement.

In the Blind Time drawing sequence filmed independently (Work in Progress: Blind Time by RM) and subsequently edited into the film, Morris performs the graphic task of “making a mark” with his eyes closed, smearing powdered graphite and plate oil on the white sheet before him.

Morris occasionally delivers literary and philosophical sound bites or aphorisms citing Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Wittgenstein, or Beckett, or making his own remarks about the methods of Jackson Pollock.

8. Rosalind Krauss, off camera, to Morris standing in front of the sensuous felt piece, The House of Vetti: “If this is anti-form, why is it so beautiful?” Morris quipping: “Nobody’s perfect,” in a pastiche to Duchamp’s reply to Alfred Barr who had asked why the readymade is so beautiful? Or is Morris quoting Joe E. Brown to Lemmon in the last scene of Some Like It Hot, written by Billy Wilder?
9. Morris spoofing Robert Rauschenberg’s defense of his White Paintings: “If you don’t take this seriously there is nothing to take.”
10. Morris citing Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations, “What is it like to be a body?” and “The human body is the best picture of the human soul.” And again: “Have I reasons? The answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons.”
12. Robert Morris, “Anti Form,” 1968, in Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris, 1993, pp. 45–46. Morris voice-over as we see him untangling a felt piece, taking the same position as Namuth’s photographs of Pollock painting: “Of the abstract expressionists, only Pollock was
At one point, Morris enters Tower 7, a side gallery where Krauss and Krens reconstructed Morris’ 1963 Green Gallery New York installation. Morris describes the first minimalist works: “In the beginning when I made such works as Slab, I worked alone, using cheap materials and simple tools… Working with standard materials and producing objects I could manipulate myself delivered the scale.” Then Morris walks under *Cloud* and continues: “Horizontality is the space available to the body. We don’t easily move up but instead out, across, it is the vector of bodily movement that is the least impeded, that requires the least effort…”  

As Morris continues to walk down the ramp of the Guggenheim, the film cuts back and forth to Rosalind Krauss, in the role of professor and critic, for the film’s visual and narrative structure is based on the seminal performance *21.3*, first staged at the Surplus Theatre New York, in 1964, the year Morris began to teach art history at Hunter College. Dressed as a professor, Morris stands at a podium and lip-synchs a famous 1939-taped lecture by the German-American art historian Erwin Panofsky on how meaning can be read from works of art. While “Professor” Morris mouths Professor Panofsky, Professor Krauss—in a mise en abyme—stands at a similar podium in the Centre Pompidou thirty years later, miming Morris miming Panofsky. Only instead of delivering a lecture based on Panofsky’s *Studies on Iconology*, Krauss lectures on how “abstract sculpture comes to signify.”

The layering of scenes and cross cutting of texts continues as Krauss’s image is duplicated by the giant image projected behind her of Michael Stella performing in the 1993 version of *21.3*. Although it appears that Michael is mouthing Panofsky’s text, it is, in fact, Morris’ voice out-of-synch we hear coming from Michael. Suddenly, Morris himself appears standing in front of the projection SCREEN where Michael is performing. Morris refers to the multiple personae he adopts by quoting Samuel Beckett’s “I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me.”  

This layered image is itself redoubled in a television monitor posed on the edge of the stage where Krauss is lecturing.

At another moment, slides of Morris’ series of the human brain are flashed on the front of Krauss’s lectern as she explains how “Morris’ work is taken up with a consistent conceptual dilemma,” which she calls ironically, “the Mind/
Body problem,” which according to Krauss has to do with the emphasis minimalist sculpture put on the physical body.

Perpendicular to Krauss’s lecture-continuity is set another axis, which uses Morris’ performance *Arizona* (1963) as its basis. Although very indirect, this is a discretely autobiographical work by Morris which ends with the haunting image of two blue lights whirling round the utterly darkened space of the filmed performance. Using this image as a kind of leitmotif, Morris delivers an inner monologue based on the written accounts of his childhood, adolescence and first sense of artistic ambition: “At thirty I had my alienation, my Skilsaw, and my plywood. I was out to rip out the metaphors, especially those that had to do with ‘up’—as well as every whiff of transcendence.”

With this second trajectory, the film goes on to explore the temporality of the artistic career and persona. Yet even this idea of the artist revealing something about himself through autobiographical reminiscence is bracketed by the visual relationship of these passages to the recurrent performance image in *Arizona*.

From the beginning of the film, Krauss constantly changes jackets and glasses in a spoof or pastiche of Marcel Duchamp’s Rrose(salind) Sélavy. (Very few spectators realize this until she doffs a pair of outrageous rhinestone spectacles and looks seductively into the camera). Unfazed, she continues her lecture, pointing to the slides or referring to the screen deployed behind her. Morris, who is sole auditor to her discourse, is bored and impatient. When he can stand it no longer, he calls forth his own roster of personae in ironic self-reference, many of whom are revealed in the dance performances that were restaged by Morris and filmed by Babette Mangolt in 1993, in preparation for the Guggenheim show.

The “Soho artist” Morris addresses his own personae:

Body Bob: standing naked in the *I-Box*: 1962. “At least, I think we should get Body Bob up here maybe they have his number: the heroic—does that ring a bell Ignatz?”

Meatball: “Well, it wouldn’t be that meatball from *Waterman Switch* (1965-1993) greased up, bare-assed and overweight, inching down the tracks?”

Pseudo-Worker: “How about the pseudo worker in the dirty white suit hoisting the plywood in *Site* (1964).”

17. All texts quoted in this sequence are collaged from Morris’ biographical texts: “Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions),” *Art in America*, vol. 77, no. 9 (November 1989), pp. 142-151.
Pedantic Professor: “Then what about the pedantic professor mouthing Panofsky in 21.3?” (1964)

Blind Man: “And don’t forget Blind man and his greasy drawings. I know how to get him going. Just tell him he is farting phenomenology.”

Vagrant, tramp and clown-Morris enters Passageway (1961) reading from Samuel Beckett as he is progressively squeezed into the cul-de-sac curving corridor: “I know I am seated, my hands on my knees, because of the pressure against my rump, against my knees. Against my palms, the pressure is on my knees; but what is it that presses against my rump, against the soles of my feet.”

Krauss, in her text, tells us that “this sense of moving through layers and personae, to find the ‘real’ thing or the authentic Morris, only to find another layer is also explored visually via the use of mirrors.”

Morris’ first appearance in the film occurs with him crossing Fifth Avenue towards the Guggenheim Museum holding a large flexible mirror in which the building is uncannily reflected. Morris appears again holding the mirror towards the film’s end—only this time Morris’ mirror reflects a distorted Centre Pompidou as we hear Krauss and Morris seated inside the museum auditorium in a kind of Beckett-like “infinite regress,” repeating nostalgically and in unison:

“Ah, those were the days. Yes, those were the days. Those were the days” – and Morris to conclude with a chuckle, “Ah, yes, those were the fucking days.”

19. Ibid.
22. This shot mimes Morris’ black and white film, Mirror, 1969.
Script of the Film Robert Morris: The Mind-Body Problem

ROSALIND KRAUSS AND TERI WEHN DAMISCH

Opening Credits.

Screen 1: Title slides projected on a black screen.
“Le Centre Georges Pompidou, la délégation aux arts plastiques présentent”

Interior night: an empty auditorium at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. A pitcher of water and a glass sit on a small table on the stage of the auditorium. On the audio track: sound of water being poured into the glass. A blinking television monitor emits a squeaky sound.

Screen 2: Title card “Robert Morris.”
A theatrical spotlight seeks out Robert Morris (RM), a solitary spectator, seated in the audience.
Rosalind Krauss (RK) walks on stage toward the lecturer’s podium. She is lit by a single spotlight. She adjusts her glasses, clears her throat and taps her papers on the lecturer’s podium.
Cut to close up of RM in black suit, hatless.

Screen 3: Title card “The Mind/Body Problem.”
RM, sole spectator, sits in the auditorium as he listens to the “Mind/Body Problem,” a lecture delivered by “pedantic professor” RK.
On the sound track, the noise of construction workers drilling with jackhammers—from the performance Site.
RK In: “Suppose I were to ask you ‘what is modern about modern sculpture?’ You would probably tell me that it’s modern because it has become abstract. And, you would add, in so doing, it has broken off all contact with the function and purpose of traditional sculpture, which was to represent the human body.”
As RK speaks, the film Site is projected on a large screen behind her. Andrew, the young dancer in Site in white work clothes, is superimposed by RM in white work clothes.
RK voice over (VO): “This is where we would differ. Since I would argue that
all sculpture, no matter how abstract, is constantly working to build an analogue of the human form—to demonstrate the body’s relation to gravity, or the body’s capacity for expressive gesture, or even the body’s movement in the most ordinary types of labor.”

Cut to the giant screen projection of the performance Site (1964) (recreated in 1993 at the Hunter College television studio and filmed by Babette Mangolte).

Andrew as RM or “Bob” walks upstage center to a large structure composed of white-washed plywood board. He slowly begins to dismantle it. He takes the first board off stage.

Interior Pompidou Auditorium:
RK behind podium stands in the dark, lit by a single source of light. Site continues to be projected behind her on the screen.

RK In: “All sculpture, then, no matter how abstract, is constantly working to create an analogue of the human body—its gesture, its weight, its labor. Robert Morris’ sculpture is no exception to this rule. And given the fact that what prompted him, as a young artist maturing in the late 1950s, to turn away from painting and engage with the third dimension was his experience in avant-garde dance, this commitment to the body has been doubly reinforced.”

Cut to Site projected on full screen.

Andrew as Bob (RM) removes the rest of the plywood boards. He removes the last panel revealing the performance artist, Carolee Schneeman, reclining on a white sheet propped up by pillows. She is naked except for a dusting of white powder and a ribbon around her neck; Carolee is RM’s recreation of Manet’s Olympia.

Cut to black.

Interior Auditorium: RK appears at the podium. At each tap of her professo- rial baton, images of Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer and the Judson Dance Theatre dancers performing “ordinary tasks” are projected on the front of the podium.
RK In: “There are of course bodies and bodies…”

Cut to interior ramp in Guggenheim Museum: RM in dirty white work clothes sweeping the floor of the Guggenheim ramp.

Cut to floor of the museum: RM in black suit and hat unfolds Felt Piece.
RK VO on slides of Judson Dancers projected on the front of the podium:
RK: “And the kind of dance Morris began to explore in the late 1950s with Simone Forti and then in the early 1960s with the Judson Dance Theater was engaged in a reform of gesture such that the outcome would be a different idea of the human body from ballet or even from modern dance.”

Cut to Interior Guggenheim Museum ramp:
RM as “Task Performer” in worker’s uniform sweeps the floor. Squeaking sounds.
RK In: “The New Dance” (as it came to be called) turned to what its practitioners called task performance.

Cut to “Task Performer” RM in black suit and hat, unfolding felt mattresses on Museum floor.

RK VO: “…which meant finding wholly ordinary things to do, like walking up and down stairs, sweeping the floor or folding and unfolding things. It would be these tasks that would generate movement.”

Cut to Site on screen.

RK VO: “Such movement, they reasoned, would not seem to ‘express’ the interior of the dancer, externalizing his feeling or ideas held prior to the gesture; it would derive its significance instead from the task at hand, such that meaning would arise at the place of connection.”

Cut to RK In standing at the podium wearing horn rimmed glasses:

“The place where the body actually hits the world not before the gesture, but as a function of the task.”

RK turns to screen behind her. On the sound track, strains of Verdi’s Simon Boccanegra—Soprano Gloria De Los Angeles is heard off screen.

RK turns from the camera to the screen.

Opening credits in French slide on to the black screen behind her:
Robert Morris dans le rôle de Task Performer, Ignatz le Sceptique, Ordinary Spectator.
Rosalind Krauss dans le rôle de la critique d’art “Roz” Sélavy, Professeur Pédant.
Title: Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem.
Extrraits du film de Babette Mangolte Four Pieces by Morris.
Montage: Christian Girier.
Un film de Teri Wehn Damisch.

Exterior Day: 5th Avenue and 89th Street.
Sync. Sound: heavy traffic noise, honking. A strangely distorted view of the Guggenheim Museum occupies the screen. The camera pans slowly upwards to discover RM in a black suit and black Quaker-like hat holding a large-sized distorting mirror. He crosses the street, walks towards the Guggenheim Museum, which is seen distorted in the mirror.

Dissolve to Interior Guggenheim Museum.
RM in black stands before Column.
Sound track from Site.
RK VO: “Morris’ earliest sculpture was called Column, which he then used for a performance at the Living Theater.” RM runs his hands along Column’s edge.
Cut to Site: Andrew stands in same position as RM.
Cut to Auditorium at Centre Pompidou.
RK VO: “We could say here that the ‘task’ was simply to occupy the stage for
the seven minutes allotted to Morris for his performance.”
RK In (wearing different eyeglasses):
“So he thought about the simplest possible division of time, and the most basic
possible gestures of this surrogate body—meaning the *Column*.”
Cut to RM in Guggenheim Museum, who sticks his head out from behind
*Column* and says:
“What?” (an intended pun of *Watt* by Beckett cited later in the film).
The action is reflected within the TV monitor.
RK at podium—new change of glasses:
RK In: “Accordingly, the hollow plywood object occupied the otherwise empty
stage for 3½ minutes before falling on its side…”
Cut to Andrew the dancer in *Site* who falls over.
RK VO and In: “…remaining prone for three and a half minutes.”
(RK mimes the action with tilted head).
RK In: “Whereupon the curtains closed.”
Cut to TV monitor onstage.
RM appears on the television monitor: “As Bob Rauschenberg once said: ‘If
you can’t take it seriously, there is nothing to take.’”
RK glances at RM in scruffy clothes, seated alone in the audience; he looks
dubious:
RK In: “*Si vous ne prenez pas cela au sérieux, il n’y a rien à prendre.*”
RM disappears from screen.
Interior Day: Guggenheim Museum.
Camera sweeps across the title of the exhibition inscribed on the museum wall:
RK VO: “Morris’ work is taken up with a consistent conceptual dilemma which
I call, ironically, the Mind/Body problem.”
RM in black hat and suit enters the reconstitution of the 1964 Green Gallery
exhibition.
RK VO: “In 1964, Morris installed a group of sculptures in the Green Gallery
in New York. These simple objects were soon to be called minimalist and
were spoken of as abstract.”
Cut to RM bareheaded, sitting inside *Window* and looking towards the other
sculptures in the Green Gallery space.
RK VO: “But Morris always thought of these sculptures in relation to the body
and to movement.”
RM rises from *Window*, puts on his hat and walks toward *Slab*.
RM VO: “In the beginning when I made such works as *Slab*, I worked alone,
using cheap materials and simple tools. Following the a priori task of how the simplest objects got made delivered the structure. Working with standard materials (e.g. the 4 × 8 feet sheet of plywood) and producing objects I could manipulate myself delivered the scale.”

Cut to end of performance Site.

RM/Andrew moves one of the plywood boards into various positions. He carries it on his back. He kneels next to it. He puts the board down. He walks upstage center. He covers the nude Olympia with a plywood board. He walks downstage left, and turns his back to the audience.

Cut to RM walking through the Green Gallery space to Cloud. He is intercut with a female dancer dressed in a man’s suit and hat walking in Waterman Switch (first performed by Lucinda Childs).

RM VO: “But horizontality is the space available to the body. We don’t move up but instead out, across. Of course we climb, go up in elevators as well.”

Cut to RM walking towards Cloud then under it.

RM VO: “But horizontality is the vector of bodily movement that is the least impeded, that requires the least effort. Running and walking is done best on a flat surface. Both visually and kinesthetically the horizontal, open expanse invites the secular impulse, the mundane beginning, the practical invitation.”

Cut to Site. Andrew as RM covers Olympia with the plywood board.

RK VO: “Morris wanted to find a single, simple shape, that he called a gestalt—a shape that could not be subdivided and would not seem to be unified around an internal armature. It would just be the outside, the gestalt, that would provide the unity. So the gestalt refuses the picture of the body as animated by an interior, it insists on a body that is all surface, all on the skin. There is a parallel between this refusal and that of the philosopher, Wittgenstein; he had also rejected the model of the human subject as directed from within.”

RK In at podium: “Wittgenstein refused this model of mental space as well as what goes along with it, which is that words and their meaning are also a function of this internal space of the mind.”

Cut to RM listening to RK lecture.

RK In at podium: “He thought instead that the meanings of words are not dependent on what we have in our heads but rather are a function of the public space in which we speak to one another. The public space of conversation. The public space that in fact Morris’ dancers would have called task performance.”

RM wearing black hat, points to the shape of the sculpture called Corner Piece; he traces the outline of the sculpture with his pointed finger.

RM VO citing Philosophical Investigations by Wittgenstein: “There are of course what can be called characteristic experiences of pointing to
the shape. For example, following the outline with one’s finger or with one’s eyes as one points—but this does not happen in all cases in which I mean the shape and no more does any other one characteristic process occur in all these cases.” Wittgenstein.

Cut to final sequence in Site. Sync sound from the film dissolves to black; a rhythmic metallic hammering sound, introduces Ring with Light which is shot from all angles.

Mesh Piece is shot from different angles.

RM’s hand caressing Mesh Piece.

Cut to RM walking around Mesh Piece; he walks off screen.

Cut to RK at the podium, who taps her papers in rhythm to the metallic sound from previous sequence.

RK In (new eyeglasses): “Wittgenstein refusing the mental was one source of support to which the minimalists turned. Another was the work of the writer Samuel Beckett, whose world of tramps and clowns and outcasts was also devoid of a comforting notion of an inner world of meanings. As Beckett wrote of Watt, one of his early fictional characters: ‘Watt had seen other people smile and he thought he knew how it was done.’”

Cut to RK. RM looms large on screen behind her, grinning.

RK In: “…and he thought he knew how it was done.” (This last phrase is repeated in echo).

Cut: RM in black hat, standing in front of Passageway, reads from Beckett.

RM In: Beckett wants to know “what is it like to be a body?”

The camera follows RM into the curving corridor of Passageway (1961). He reads a text from Beckett’s The Unnameable: “I know I am seated, my hands on my knees, because of the pressure against my rump, against the soles of my feet, against the palms of my hands, against my knees. Against my palms, the pressure is on my knees; but what is it that presses against my rump, against the soles of my feet?”

Close up of RM’s feet pressed against the wall of Passageway.

RM In continues to read from Beckett but one hears him reading in reverse mode.

RK VO: “Let’s follow Morris into Passageway. Can you see then that it is a curving corridor that narrows to a point? Can you feel it both welcoming and refusing your simplest expectations about motion, namely that you can act on your desire to traverse this channel of space? Instead it exerts a kind of pressure on your body that makes you aware of the way space itself shapes both your physical being and your desires. In this sense one might

say that *Passageway* is, precisely, a task performance: it is nothing but a bodily gesture caught in the act of surfacing into the world.”

Cut to RM as he exits *Passageway*; he resumes his former position and speaks to the camera:

“What is it like to be a body?”

RK In: “What is it like to be a body?”


Cut to a free standing doorway lined with mirrors, nothing but threshold, doorjamb and lintel.

RM in black hat walks through the door leaving the ‘trace’ of his passage registered in the mirrors.

RK In: “In 1961 Morris also made *Pine Portal*, a freestanding doorway, nothing but threshold, lintel and doorjamb which Morris has lined with mirrors. So when he walks through the door, it means that each time he does so he leaves the trace of his passage registered, in the mirror, like a weird afterimage: the memory of his transit is wrenched away from his body and seems to appear strangely out-of-synch with it. “What is it like,” his reflection seems to be asking, “what is it like to be a body?”

RM inside *Pine Portal*; he appears and disappears and reappears in a slide of a younger RM.

RM inside the original *Pine Portal* (1961).

RK VO: “When Morris fashioned the ironic self portrait called *I-Box* he made the door out of this pronoun, this ‘I’, this reference for the Cartesian ego, the self. Yet as I open the door what I find is not the soul, but Morris grinning back at me.”

RM collaged into the *I-Box*—nude—grinning.

RK VO: “…as though he were saying…”

Cut to auditorium: Bearded RM in black hat seated in Pompidou auditorium.

RM In: “‘The human body is the best picture of the human soul.’ Wittgenstein.”

Cut to Interior Guggenheim. Water swishing in ground floor pool. Reverse angle shot of Guggenheim atrium with *L-Beams* in the center.

RK In: “Three *L-Beams* from 1965 is a case in point. The positions assumed by its identical elements are entirely gestural.”

Cut to various views of *L-Beams* (1965-1994), shot from different ramps, various points of view. The camera zooms into the three *L-Beams*.

RK In: “We immediately sense that whatever the L’s are modeling, it is not ‘abstract’ geometries that are in question but a picture of the gestural subject, of the human subject assuming a position: sitting up, lying down, and crouching on all fours.”

The positions of the *L-Beams* dissolve into one another. RM’s hand sets black

hat down on L-Beam. Camera in reverse angle shoots RM from above sitting on L-Beam. He rises, leaving the three L-Beams, and walks off screen.

RK VO: “So counter to what we might expect—that the simple block would look the same through all its possible rotations in space, like a kind of changeless ideal Platonic solid—each L’s appearances dependent upon its orientation to the world and its relation to us, its viewers.”

Dissolve to black, RM in scruffy clothes appears seated in auditorium, looking very bored.

RM VO: “What is it like to be a body? What is it like to be a body?”

RK In at podium holding a professor’s pointer: “And if the Platonic shape is an analogue for the ‘mental idea’ of the solid form, Morris’ erosion of the permanence of that shape is intended as an attack on such a conception of the space of previously held and permanent ideas, the space that is, of the mental, the mind, consciousness…”

RM taps impatiently on the arms of his seat.

RK (with still another jacket and eyeglasses) addresses herself to RM: “Are you doubting what I am saying?”


RK VO: “At the same time that Morris generated the large-scale, plywood works that fed into the minimalist movement, he was also working on a type of smaller, conceptual object that would address the ‘mental’ more directly and with far more evident irony. The Self-Portrait (EEG) he made in 1963 by having his electro-encephalogram recorded is a perfectly skeptical or ironic self image.”

RM appears beside Self-Portrait (EEG). Interior Guggenheim: Close-up of Morris grinning. He covers his eyes with his hands.

RK VO: “It mocks the convention whereby the portrait conveys the inner being of its sitter, the facial expression understood as a gateway to the mental events that shape it.”

RK In at podium with giant screen and RM portrait behind her: “Instead of showing us this inner soul, Morris’ portrait seems to ask…”

Cut to RK at podium in still another jacket holding a pointer, slides of Brain are projected onto the front of the podium:

RK In: “…’what is it like to be a brain?’”

TV Monitor begins to blink: RK turns to the screen behind her and “reads” her own text projected on the screen:

“I am conscious of myself thinking. But how does this consciousness hook onto my physical body? The Mind/Body Problem is the philosophical marker for this question. Can the mind simply be made equivalent to the brain the way for example?”
Close-up of RK’s hand pouring a glass of water from the pitcher.
“…that H2O is equivalent to water?”
RM flips the card “conception” from Card File.
Very tight close up of Morris reading:
VO: “Forms... Future”
His finger follows the cards alphabetically:
VO: “Index, Interruptions, Locations, Losses.”
Close-up of card “Losses.”
RM VO: “July 14, 1962, Losses: discover small pack of 3 x 5 cards missing, unable to remember what was written on them.”
Very tight close up of Morris reading: “Interruptions, July 18th, 2:45 PM: on trip to find file met Ad Reinhardt on corner of 8th Street and Broadway. Talked with him until 5:30 by which time it was too late to continue trip (see Names).”
Slide: Thinking in Public.
Duchamp’s Notes for the Large Glass: Sketches, scribblings, notes filmed in rapid succession.
RK VO: “The idea of a work that would be nothing but the notes of its own conception and making—thinking out loud in public, as it were, comes from Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Notes for the Large Glass.’”
RM in silhouette walks rapidly in front of the camera from left to right and then from right to left—in front of 3 Standard Stoppages.
RK VO: “And in the early 1960s Morris made works specifically to honor Duchamp. Like Three Rulers, his homage to Duchamp’s Standard Stoppages—his three yard sticks deformed by chance.”
Three Rulers dissolve into Three Standard Stoppages.
Cut to shot of Metered Bulb.
RK VO to the sound of ticking electrical meter: “Or Morris’ version of the perfect Bachelor Machine: the closed circuit of a light bulb and an electric meter that records the bulb’s energy.”
RK In behind podium (change of eyeglasses):
“Maybe it was the dancer in Morris that was attracted to Duchamp’s love of role-playing…”
Slide of Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy.
RK In: “…of travesty of cross-dressing…”
RK In (appears first without glasses, then slips on flashy rhinestone glasses):
“…of being in turn: the artist, the inventor who copyrights her work ‘Rose Sélavy,’ the champion chess player, the traveling salesman, the art dealer, the crook.”
Cut to brief shot in black and white of Michael Stella removing his glasses in the performance 21.3.

RK In with pointer at podium, about to show slides:
“Morris liked playing the laborer…”
(As RK is about to continue her lecture, the cardboard screen tacked on to the podium, on which the slides are projected collapses.)
RK giggles, pours herself a glass of water, coughs, and resumes her talk with stern professorial tone.
Slide of RM in Site dressed in worker’s clothes.
RK In: “Morris liked playing the laborer. But he also cast himself—satirically of course—as the professor…”
Slide of Morris as Erwin Panofsky in original performance of 21.3.
RK In: “…Professor Erwin Panofsky, lecturing to us on how we can be certain we’ve figured out a work’s meaning.”
Slide of Michael Stella in same pose as above performing in 21.3.
RK VO: “Although, since Morris mimes a previous recording of the Panofsky text, making sure to get the sounds and the movements of his mouth out of sync, this very idea of meaning—the meanings of words—is comically eroded.”
Cut to reconstitution of seminal performance 21.3.
Michael Stella parodies RK who parodies RM who parodies Panofsky’s course 21.3.
Michael Stella (MS) VO: “Iconography.”
Cut to Pompidou auditorium.
RM as ordinary spectator in work clothes listens to Michael Stella’s lecture.
MS VO: “Iconography is that branch of the study of art…”
Cut to Michael Stella In: “…which concerns itself with the subject matter of the meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form.”
Cut to RM in black hat facing miniature film screen encased in Guggenheim wall on which MS continues to lecture as Panofsky:
MS In: “When an acquaintance greets me on the street by removing his hat…”
RM removes his hat.
Cut to Michael Stella at podium.
RM/MS VO: “what I see from a formal point of view…”
RM facing camera puts hat back on.
MS on screen: “…is nothing but the change of certain details…”
RM and MS VO—exchange of voices:
“(…)within a configuration forming part of the general patterns of colors lines and volumes…”
Cut to large view offstage with MS on screen. RK faces giant screen behind her and looks at the double images of MS and RM incrusted on the screen. At the same time, the same image of RM is repeated in the TV monitor sitting at the edge of the stage.
RM VO: “…which constitutes my world of vision.”
Idem—with RM off:
“I seem to speak, it is not I, about me…”
TV Monitor: MS and RM:
“…it is not about me.”
Slide of nude RM and nude female dancer in original performance of Waterman Switch.
Slide of RM as Comic Warrior.
RK VO: “Morris has given his various personae different names, from Body Bob to the Comic Warrior. My personal favorite is a character from Beckett, the tramp, the vagrant, the clown.”
RM plays the clown—full body fall to the ground he quickly rises up again as MS continues to silently mouth Panofsky on wall screen in the background.
Old postcard of The Nelson Gallery, Kansas City, flashes on to screen.
RM VO: “Many museums in the Midwest, like the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri…”
RM In: “…the first I ever knew, occupy sites of former baronial estates. On certain long-ago Saturday mornings, fortified with a mother’s encouragement, I made my way from the eastern part of Kansas City on the trolley towards the Nelson Gallery. I had my crayons and two nickels, one for each way. I got the drawing paper at the museum. I was eight years old and would spend the morning drawing in the galleries…”
Interior Guggenheim: RM as an “ordinary visitor” to his exhibition walks through the minimalist Portal towards Battered Cubes.
RM VO: “I remember most drawing from the Egyptian objects. In 1961, I made my first works that would later come to be called minimal sculpture. Those grey columns and slabs I copied directly from the photographs of the ruins of the King Zoser complex at Saqqara, Egypt.”
Different views of the cubes.
RM walks off screen.
RM VO: “At thirty I had my alienation, my Skilsaw, and my plywood. I was out to rip out the metaphors, especially those that had to do with ‘up,’ as well as every other whiff of transcendence. When I sliced into the plywood with my Skilsaw, I could hear, beneath the ear-damaging whine, a stark and refreshing ‘no’ reverberate off the four walls: ‘no’ to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decision, historicizing narrative, valuable artifact, intelligent structure, interesting visual experience.”
Cut to close-up RM in black hat and beard reading in:
“Large unitary sculptures take relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer’s field of vision. The viewer is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he
apprehends the objects from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.” “Notes on Sculpture.”

Frozen frame of Morris facing the camera.

RK VO: “Morris’ generation rebelled against the popular notion of the artist as strong, silent and dumb. They were all articulate about their work, particularly Morris who was an important theorist of minimalism writing many essays.”

RK In and VO (the titles of RM’s texts are flashed on screen):

“These texts have names like ‘Notes on the Phenomenology of Making,’ ‘Some Splashes in the Ebb Tide,’ ‘American Quartet,’ or ‘Is that a Mouse in my Paragone?’”

Slides of Ignatz, Krazy Kat are flashed on screen.

RK is wearing glitzy rhinestone glasses:

“Who’s the mouse you want to know? Why it’s Ignatz from the comic strip Krazy Kat, the mouse who’s always being mean to Krazy, who’s always puncturing the balloon of Krazy’s love for him, the ironic mouse…”

Slide of Ignatz throwing a brick at Krazy Kat.

RK VO: “…the destructive mouse…”

Shot of Andrew/RM in Arizona dissolves to RM in same position—finger pointing upwards.

Dissolve to Andrew/RM facing camera.

Dissolve to RM with back to camera.

Interior Guggenheim: RM in work clothes gives numerical gesture to introduce Arizona. Andrew/RM performs Arizona.

RK VO: “In the dance called Arizona, Morris begins by rotating his upper torso so slowly that we can’t even tell he’s moving. It’s an image of the body centered, curled around its own interior, while the voice in the work ‘remembers’ scenes of Morris’ childhood watching his father work in the stockyards. But the dance progressively moves away from this idea of an inner center, until Morris creates an image of the body’s projection into outward space, like the noose of the lasso the cowboy whirs around his head and flings over the neck of the running animal.”

Andrew in Arizona rotating the “lasso”; whirling sound continues under RM reading in and off:

“As a child, it seemed a long streetcar ride to the gilded Loewe’s movie palace downtown. I would sit stiff and sleepy, sometimes lucky enough to be over a rare heater that warmed my bottom through the cane seat, staring out at the lights in the crystalline night air. At one point in the trip I would look out and see high up, formed in blue and white incandescent bulbs, an enormous sphere—a disc actually, but meant to read as a globe—a hieroglyph of the earth itself.”
Animation of old advertising sign for Sherwin-Williams Paints.

RM Off: “Suddenly, out of nowhere, at the top of the globe, a small can of paint materialized and tipped forward in a most wonderful syncopation of coordinated lights. Out of this little deus ex machina flowed a quantity of red paint wildly incommensurate with the volume of the can. The entire globe demonstrated with a thousand red lights the triumphant words that flashed above the whole scene: ‘Sherwin-Williams paints cover the Earth.’”

Cut to Interior Guggenheim: Whirling pool.

RM bends towards small pool and assembles the individual pieces of Stadium Piece on the pool’s rim.

RK Off: “A sculpture without a center is a sculpture programmed for constant change. It can be permuted infinitely, and each permutation is a repetition of the work in different form.”

RM at pool edge permutates the individual blocks of Stadium Piece, and finally pushes the separate pieces into the pool one by one.

Interior of Guggenheim Museum. Leaning against the ramp, RM reads from “Notes on Sculpture.” He begins to walk down the ramp passing numerous felt works; the music of Verdi’s Simon Boccanegra is heard in the distance.

RM VO: “Recently, materials other than rigid industrial ones have begun to show up. Sometimes a direct manipulation of a given material without the use of any tool is made. In this case, considerations of gravity become as important as those of space. The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms that were not projected in advance. Random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to the material.” “Anti-Form,” a text from 1968.

RM stops in front of the reconstitution of the video performance Waterman Switch projected on the wall of the gallery.

RM continues to walk down the ramp sometimes stopping in front of one of the felt pieces.

The aria from Simon Boccanegra sung by Gloria de Los Angeles continues on the soundtrack.

The felt piece Catenary (1968) is raised then lowered by the art handlers of the Museum.

RK VO: “So if this is anti-form, why is it so beautiful?”

RM standing before the felt pieces responds:

“Nobody’s perfect…”

Cut to Auditorium Centre Pompidou.

RK In standing before podium—a scene from Waterman Switch is projected on the screen behind her.

RM sits in the audience with back to the camera looking at the scene.

RK In: “The human body is the best picture of the human soul.”

Sequence from the 1990’s filmed performance of Waterman Switch: two nude
dancers impersonating Beckett’s “Watt and Sam” move back and forth in a narrow channel of space.

RK In, in yet another change of jacket and RK off:

“Waterman Switch, another of Morris’ dances, occupies a strange frontier between sensuous eroticism and the painful concentration of the dancers glued to their task. It called up many pictures for its audience in the mid 1960s, particularly ones from Samuel Beckett—like the scene from Beckett’s novel Watt where the two main characters (Watt and Sam) are described as moving back and forth in a narrow channel of space, pressed, as Beckett says, ‘pubis to pubis,’ while Watt tells Sam what happened to him in a world he didn’t understand.”

On the soundtrack the aria from Simon Boccanegra is superposed and doubled back on itself. The tramp character in Waterman Switch walks back and forth along the narrow channel unraveling a ball of string, paying no attention to the nude dancers on the track.

Cut to Interior Pompidou auditorium. The last images of Waterman Switch are projected on screen behind RK. Music fades out.


Cut to felt piece Tangle.

RM VO: “Of the abstract expressionists, only Pollock was able to recover process and hold on to it as part of the end form of the work. Pollock’s recovery of process involved a profound rethinking of the role of both material and tools in making.” “Anti-Form.”

RM rearranges the tangles of felt in several fixed images miming Hans Namuth’s photos of Pollock painting. The sequence ends with RM throwing a pack of felt tangles towards the camera lens, blocking the lens.

RM VO: “The stick that drips paint is a tool that acknowledges the nature of the fluidity of paint.”

Camera floats over Floor Grid.

RK VO: “What was marked in Pollock’s canvases was the paint’s yield to gravity, and the possible loss of form that results. The horizontal had always been Morris’ preferred dimension as well. Now he would exploit it for the sense it could produce of form yielding to its opposite: anti-form, as in this grid that seems to spread across the floor as if in the grip of a kind of capillary action.”

Cut to interior auditorium of Centre Pompidou: A mound of powdered graphite. RM smears the powdered graphite onto a glass plate. The camera pulls back to show RM with eyes closed “making” a Blind Time Drawing.

RK VO: “The Blind Time Drawings arose from Morris’ continuing ambition to find a new way to make a ‘mark,’ one that would not be imitative, but would emerge self-evidently from the process of its own creation. Executed in
powdered graphite and made with his eyes shut, the resulting configuration was based on a task that he set about performing within an estimated time, smearing the velvety medium across the surface of the paper.”

A series of Blind Time drawings appear on screen.

“The first series of drawings came about in 1973. In the end Morris made four series of Blind Times, comprising a total of several hundred drawings to date.”

RM VO: “Yes, that was pretty obsessive.”

RM VO: “But perhaps these ceaseless and sightless repetitions echo a kind of laughter not permitted in the light. Not every dark itch can be scratched in the daylight.”

Wide shot of RM bent over the drawing paper as he begins to smear the powdered graphite over the surface of the paper. Only the sound of rubbing and tapping is heard. The sequence draws to an end.

On black screen: Drawing with Davidson.

RM VO: “I like the Professor Donald Davidson’s insistence that we will never find reasons both sufficient and necessary for our action. Take, for example, the reasons I always gave for why I make Blind Time Drawings in the first place. I would always explain it as an attempt to put drawing on a new footing, a new basis. But now, I think such reasons sound too much like rationalizations after the fact. After all, those reasons would not account for the obsessiveness of the production. Perhaps I was really looking for a way to renounce control and judgement. Perhaps there were feelings of guilt that were alleviated in this underworld of blindness. Perhaps there was in it a kind of Beckett-like humor that can only be honed behind the mask with no eye-holes. Or again, does drawing ‘blind’ have an oedipal explanation; is it a form of holding up the evil eye in order to ward off the punishment one fears? So in 1992 I decided to ‘draw with Davidson.’ I liked his conclusion that ‘a man’s motives for acting in a certain way may cause him to act in that way without it’s being the case that those were his reasons for performing the act.’”

RM begins the Blind Time Drawings on camera.

RM lifts the drawing and presents it to the camera.

RM In: “Gee Mom, waddya think?”

A second series of Blind Time Drawings appears on screen.

RM VO: “Working with my eyes closed estimating the lapsed time and summoning up the memory of the first Cézanne I ever knew—Montagne Sainte-Victoire.”


RM VO: “I touch the page as though I were touching the Cézanne. In 1988 I went to Cézanne’s studio in Aix in order to touch his cloak.”
Wide shot of pool and ramp with RM sitting at a corner of the pool.
RM VO: “I stood there with my fingers against the cloth for as long as I could bear the desire, the embarrassment and the dread of being discovered.”
Fade to black, sound of rhythmic metallic hammering: Andrew/RM in Arizona circles the space with long spear in hand; he stops to face the camera.
Bearded RM reading an autobiographical text:
“The Kansas City of my pre-teen youth was divided into two quite distinct realms, two life spaces. One was more continuous, often grayed out by stretches of school’s tedium and mini-dramas of family life.”
Andrew/RM in Arizona continues to circle the space with a spear in hand.
RM VO: “Then there were the stockyards. Father was a livestock man. Mother thought it was a bad influence on me to go down to the stockyards. So I went there every chance I got. Father himself was transformed body and soul upon entering this malodorous and exotic zone. The men who worked in the stockyard arrived in drab and proper attire, but in the locker room these ordinary looking men metamorphosized, donning their various shaped stetsons, their lizard boots, their pearl snapped shirts, their chaps and belts. There, witnessing cattle whips and wet towels flicked at unguarded rears, the boasting, the cursing, I knew I had entered a different—a secret—zone. There Father glowed beneath his Stetson. I could see that he was far more at home than at home.”
Andrew in Arizona halts to take a stance.
RM looks up toward him. Andrew throws a javelin against a plywood board. RM looks towards Andrew/RM. Fade to black. RM in seated in Pompidou auditorium:
“The whole story can never tell the whole story.”
RK In (change of jacket and glasses):
“That’s right, the whole story can never tell the whole story.”
On screen: slide projections of Mirrored Portal, Mirror Cubes, Untitled (Portland Mirrors), Threadwaste, Curved Mirrors.
RK In: “In fact, the whole story of Morris’ work I’ve told so far could be told all over again, using only the works he made with mirrors.”
A hand inserts a slide into the slide projector.
RK VO: “The work with mirrors folds minimalism into anti-form and the object into the world. In this sense it is both a reprise of Morris’ entire œuvre and the expression of the title Morris once used for a work of his Continuous Project Altered Daily. The film called Mirror made in 1969 is yet another variation.”
Cut to Mirror.
Cut to RM sitting in Pompidou auditorium, in scruffy clothes looking disabused and bored:
“It’s time to get Body Bob back up here: maybe they have his number. The ‘heroic,’ does that ring a bell Ignatz?”
Cut to Body Bob lifting a heavy cannon ball.
RM In: “It wouldn’t be that meatball from Waterman Switch, greased, bare-assed, overweight, inching down the tracks?”
Cut to Waterman Switch: Nude male dancer pours liquid mercury down the back of female nude dancer.
Cut to RM seated in the audience his arms crossed; he is wearing sunglasses:
“How about the dirty white worker hoisting the plywood in Site. Huh?”
Andrew/RM in Site.
RM In: “And what about the pedantic professor, mouthing Panofsky?”
Cut to MS in 21.3.
Camera zooms out to discover MS projected on screen behind RK at her podium.
RM In: “That’s three… guess he strikes out. Oh! Those were the days, though Ignatz, those were the days.”
RK VO: “Oh yes, those were the days, those were the days.”
Cut to exterior Guggenheim Museum and Steam Piece.
RK VO: “The days in the late 1960s when art was less an object than it was a process. When art was not an idea frozen into solid forms, but a state of transition…”
RM in black hat and beardless, emerges from the steam.
RK VO continues: “…like liquid evaporating into a cloud of steam, pure process, pure anti-form.”
Same image of RM standing in Steam Piece but incrusted in TV monitor.
Cut: RM seated in Pompidou auditorium:
“Whatever art is on the simple level it’s a way of making,”
RK In at podium: “Oh, those were the days though, Ignatz. How we used to dance with our mouths on tippy toes, your bricks sailing by to remind us of what old Neech the Screech used to say about the idiocy of positing a doer for every deed. ‘The illusion of identity.’”
On soundtrack—Gloria de Los Angeles aria finale. Pedantic Professor RK gathers her papers and exits right of screen. Screen goes to black.
RM VO: “Oh yes, those were the days.”
Cut to exterior Pompidou esplanade. RM in Black hat carries distorting mirror as he did at the beginning of the film—but this time it is the Centre Pompidou that is reflected in the mirror.
RK and RM VO: “Ah yes those were the days. Those were the days. Yes, those were the days.”
RM VO: “Yes those were the fucking days (giggle). Oh yes, those were the days…” Screen fades to black.

The end

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