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ARTIST-PROPOSED MUSEUMS: POLEMICAL PROJECTS BY CLAES OLDENBURG, ROBERT SMITHSON, AND GORDON MATTA-CLARK, 1965-1978

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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POLEMICAL PROJECTS BY CLAES OLDENBURG,
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By

ROBIN CLARK

Advisor: Professor Anna Chave

During the 1960s and 70s, a number of young, New York-based artists engaged the physical and metaphorical structure of the art museum in a rough embrace. This thesis focuses on the work of three artists - Claes Oldenburg, Robert Smithson, and Gordon Matta-Clark - each of whom staked a unique claim within the genre of the artist-proposed museum. Distinguished from the practice of artists who imagined (and sometimes realized) museums that were idealized spaces for the display of their own work, this dissertation examines projects that take the modern art museum itself as a point of departure, assimilating and transforming its conventions in order to create new work. It is not a movement or an ism that is being described here; rather, the conceptual and material structure of the museum is being identified as a catalyst for new work that developed in the context of Pop art, Minimalism, and Conceptual art in New York during the 1960s and 70s. This

thesis examines the ways in which artist-proposed museums paradoxically depended upon the institutions they endeavored to critique, and considers the present status of works that have, with the passage of time, returned home to the very museums they set out to deconstruct.

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Introduction: Artist-Proposed Museums

Organizing their own exhibition spaces, and even proposing their own museums, is one means by which modern artists have endeavored to establish control over the context in which their work is received. For example, art histories of the avant-garde often begin with the tale of Gustave Courbet's angry withdrawal of eleven paintings that had been accepted for the 1855 Universal Exposition in Paris to protest the jury's rejection of three others, including the monumental canvas entitled *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory, Summing Up a Period of Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life*, 1854-55, which he considered a masterwork (fig. 1).[1] Rather than accept this censure, Courbet's response was to construct a pavilion directly opposite the Palais des Beaux-Arts for the display of his paintings.[2] Courbet's decision to act not only as an artist

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[1]Examples include H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Photography, Third Edition* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 13 and Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 16.

[2]While Courbet was not the first artist to exhibit work with private funds, it is the self-consciousness of his gesture, and the decision to insert his own exhibition within the larger framework of the Exposition that I am emphasizing here. For a detailed history of these events, see Patricia Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 59-61.

but also as his own curator and promoter further amplified the tension between genres (notably realism and allegory) presented within the frame of *The Painter's Studio.* This decision also signified a paradigm shift in terms of artists' relationships to exhibiting institutions and serves as a precedent for the genre of the artist-proposed museum as its own art form.

If Courbet insisted on his autonomy by creating a miniature salon mimicking the form of the official one, this notion was taken several conceptual leaps forward in the 1960s by artists who took the structure of the traditional art museum as raw material for their own work. While succeeding generations of artists would at times set up alternative exhibition spaces in the spirit of Courbet's outrage tinged with pragmatism, others would see the practice of appropriating and manipulating official exhibition spaces not simply as a desperate political act, but also as fertile aesthetic and conceptual territory.

During the 1960s and 70s, a number of young, New York-based artists engaged the physical and metaphorical structure of the art museum in a rough embrace. This thesis will focus on the work of three of those artists - Claes Oldenburg, Robert Smithson, and Gordon Matta-Clark -- each of whom staked a unique claim in the genre of the

artist-proposed museum. In 1965, Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) mounted found and fabricated replicas of common objects on a few shelves of his 14th Street studio and transformed the studio, through an act of nomination, into the *museum of popular art, n.y.c.* (fig. 3). In a 1967 *Arts Magazine* article, Robert Smithson (1938-73) proposed *The Museum of the Void*, noting, "museums are like tombs, and it looks like everything is turning into a museum" (fig. 4). And in 1970, Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-78) boiled seaweed, sugar, and street debris together, displaying the results in a moldering gallery installation entitled *Museum* (fig. 5). Distinguished from the practice of artists who imagined (and sometimes realized) museums that were idealized spaces for the display of their own work,[3] this dissertation will examine self-reflexive proposals and art works that critically engaged the form and content of the art museum. I focus particularly on certain projects by Claes Oldenburg, Robert Smithson, and Gordon Matta-Clark that take the modern art museum itself as a point of departure, assimilating and transforming its conventions in order to

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[3] I refer, for example, to projects such as "Beuys Block," a group of works selected and installed by Joseph Beuys at the Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, Germany; the installation of Donald Judd's work at the Chinati Foundation, which he founded in Marfa, Texas; and the Isamu Noguchi Museum, founded and initially installed by Isamu Noguchi at the site of his studio in Long Island City, New York.

create new work. A claim is not being made here for a movement, but rather for the identification of the physical and metaphorical structure of the museum as a major leitmotif that developed in the context of Pop art, Minimalism, and Conceptual art in New York during the 1960s and 1970s. My thesis will examine the ways in which these projects paradoxically depended upon the institutions they endeavored to critique, and will consider the present status of works that have, with the passage of time, returned home to the very museums that they were intended to deconstruct.

Legacies of Marcel Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (fig 2) served as a touchstone for virtually all of the projects that will be discussed in the pages that follow, therefore a brief discuss of the work is called for here. Begun in Paris in 1935, and completed in New York in 1941, *Boîte-en-valise* was a "portable museum" of which the artist made multiple copies. Duchamp described the genesis of this idea as follows:

> … a new form of expression was involved, instead of painting something new, my aim was to reproduce the paintings and the objects I liked and collect them in a space as small as possible … it occurred to me that it could be a box in which all my works were collected

> and mounted like a small museum, a portable museum so to speak.[4]

Conflating the forms of a traveling salesman's sample case and a museum retrospective exhibition, *Boîte-en-valise* is a cloth-covered portfolio (the *boîte*) containing reproductions of sixty-nine of Duchamp's own works. The box is itself contained within a leather suitcase (the valise). *Boîte-en-valise* trades on inversions of conventions and expectations. If the brilliance of the readymade lies in Duchamp's transposition of the art act from one of creation (as in making a painting or sculpture) to one of nomination (designating a preexisting, non-art object a work of art simply by saying it is), that gambit too is reversed in this work.[5] While Duchamp's early, Cubist-inspired paintings are unique canvases, they are

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[4] See James Johnson Sweeney, "A conversation with Marcel Duchamp," an interview at the Philadelphia Museum, constituting the sound track of a 30-minute film, 1955. Quoted in Dawn Ades, *Marcel Duchamp's Traveling Box* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1982), 3. For exhaustive documentation of the project, see Ecke Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp, The Portable Museum, The Making of the Boîte-en-valise, De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rrose Sélavy: Invention of an Edition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989).

[5] In the first important essay on Marcel Duchamp, "Lighthouse of the Bride," *Minotaure*, no. 6 (1934): 45-49, André Breton defines ready-mades as follows: "Manufactured objects promoted to the dignity of objects of art through the choice of the artist." Cited by Walter Hopps in "Concerning the Work of Art," *Marcel Duchamp Ready-mades, etc., (1913-1964)* (Milan: Galleria Schwarz, 1964), 17.

presented here as reproductions, some in mock frames. Conversely, the miniature "readymades" included in *Boîte-en-valise* only seem industrially fabricated; they were in fact laboriously constructed by hand.[6] Duchamp subsequently re-quoted himself by making additional copies of the *Boîte-en-valise*, which followed the same format but were simply boxes minus the elegant cases.[7] To further complicate the project, Duchamp authored the *Boîte-en-valise* under the pseudonym Rrose Sélavy (which translates phonetically as "Eros, that is life"), a feminine alter ego staged for and photographed by his friend Man Ray in 1920-21. Duchamp's play with personae parallels his play with form.[8] With the *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp/Rrose Sélavy assumed the guises of both artist and curator by taking the form and function of the modern art museum as raw material for a new work.[9] The

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[6] For example, the model for Duchamp's miniature *Fountain* was made of papier-mâché, varnished, and used to make a mold for casting the small replicas. See Bonk, *The Portable Museum*, 20 and 204.

[7] Bonk catalogues 24 *Boîtes-en-valises*, and 300 *boîtes*; the replicas themselves were fabricated by others. See Bonk, *The Portable Museum*, 21.

[8] For more on Duchamp's male/female personae, see Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge [England] and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[9] Another sense in which Duchamp functioned as his own curator was the careful placement of his work in specific

multiplicity of these identities serves to question the notion of a single, stable author while simultaneously reinscribing the oeuvre and its maker with each new iteration.

As with Alice in Wonderland, the shrunken retrospective in *Boîte-en-valise* was eventually restored to its original size. In 1963, Walter Hopps and Duchamp installed the full-scale works on which the miniature reproductions were based in a retrospective exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum. The exhibition, which received substantial coverage in the national press, was but one instance of Duchamp's pervasive presence during the 1960s.[10]

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collections. In particular, he made sure that a core group of his work was acquired by Louise and Walter Arensberg, and he worked closely with the Arensbergs on the eventual bequest of their collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and its installation there. For a comprehensive narrative of Duchamp's relationship with the Arensbergs, see Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, "Hollywood Conversations: Duchamp and the Arensbergs," in Bonnie Clearwater, ed., *West Coast Duchamp* (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1991), 24-45.

[10] On Duchamp's reception during the 1960s, see William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), and Pontus Hulten, ed. *Marcel Duchamp, Work and Life* (Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 1993), which includes an extensive bibliography of Duchamp's exhibition reviews during this period. Clearwater's *West Coast Duchamp* chronicles Duchamp's important exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, which made an impression on numerous younger artists, including Oldenburg. For the continuing influence of Duchamp's work on younger artists in New York during the 1950s and 1960s, see Catherine Craft, "Constellations of Past and Present: (Neo-)Dada, The

The Museum

How was "the museum" defined and used by artists in New York during the 1960s and '70s? Surely museums were not understood, or responded to, in exactly the same way by any two artists. A widespread crisis of faith in institutions during the 1960s and early 70s caused artists to call the political ties and agendas of the major art museums into question; museums were not exempted as sites of political protest during this period.[11] At the same time, an overtly activist stance was rejected by some artists, including Robert Smithson, who expressed a clear desire to keep his art separate from politics, although he

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Avant-Garde, and the New York Art World, 1951-1965" diss., University of Texas at Austin (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1996). For a consideration of Duchamp's influence across the United States from 1960-1980, see Robert L. Pincus, "*Quality Material* … Duchamp Disseminated in the Sixties and Seventies," in Clearwater, *West Coast Duchamp*, 87-101.

[11] *Bloodbath* was a demonstration staged by the Art Workers Coalition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1969. Artists dumped buckets of blood-like liquid on one another and distributed pamphlets "calling for the immediate resignation of all the Rockefellers from the board of trustees at the Museum of Modern Art," citing objectionable links between Standard Oil, a Rockefeller-controlled company, and chemical weapons used in Vietnam. The Art Workers Coalition also organized *Art Strike* on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art the following year, part of a city-wide demonstration protesting the war in Vietnam.

despaired of doing so.[12] In spite of frustration and disillusionment with art museums, many artists during the 1960s were still striving to have their work contextualized within the flow of art's history, be it encyclopedic (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) or modern (at the Museum of Modern Art). The institution as a framing device, and as raw material, intrigued a number of artists, some of whom devoted themselves to rendering visible the conventions and assumptions that underlie the art museum's exhibition spaces. During this period, artists critically considered not only the museum's financial and social policies, but also its archival, storage, and taxonomic functions, appropriating or adapting these functions to create new work. Often these inquiries referred to "the museum" in a general sense, but when "the museum" was meant literally, New York's Museum of Modern Art was most often the subject of analysis, functioning as it did (and still does) as the museum of record for living artists.

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[12] "Sooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying. My 'position' is one of sinking into an awareness of global squalor and futility. The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art. The trap is set. Direct political action becomes a matter of trying to pick poison out of a boiling stew." Robert Smithson, "Art and the Political Whirlpool, or, the Politics of Disgust," *Artforum* (September 1970), reprinted in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 134.

Literature on Artist-Proposed Museums

A body of literature concerning artist-proposed museums began to emerge in the 1980s, in tandem with a broader reappraisal of art from the 1960s and '70s. *Museums by Artists*, edited by A.A. Bronson (himself a conceptual artist), and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983) is an early and useful study of work by artists who address relationships between art museums and artists directly in their work. The texts are grouped into loosely defined categories that consider the museum as format, the museum as collection (both literal and conceptual) and the museum's ideology and history. Collecting landmark statements such as George Maciunas's history of the Fluxus movement and Daniel Buren's discourses on the various functions of the artist's studio, the museum, and architecture (specifically, the relationship between architecture and art that is placed within it), *Museums by Artists* is a reference work that compiles rather than analyzes a range of essays and documentation of projects produced in Europe and North America from the 1940s into the 1980s.[13]

[13] *Fluxus* was the name of a magazine founded in 1961 by George Maciunas (1931-78), a Lithuanian artist who emigrated to New York, and the term subsequently coined to describe the activities of a group of international artists

A recent exhibition and catalogue by Museum of Modern Art curator Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1999), casts a wider net still, enumerating "the ways artists have used the museum as subject" in the 19th and 20th centuries via photography(ranging from Roger Fenton's *British Museum,*

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who rejected the production of precious objects in favor of an art that privileged humor, spontaneity, and accessibility. It manifested in forms ranging from concerts, performances, and inexpensively produced games and puzzles. "Fluxus (Its Historical Development and Relationship to Avant-Garde Movements)," 1966, (the article reproduced in *Museums by Artists*) documents Fluxus production in relation to other parallel practices (such as Happenings, Kinetic Theater, and Acoustic Theater). With his emphasis on the dates when artists entered and left the fold, and his elaboration of their "motivations" for doing so, Maciunas's chart also documents, perhaps unwittingly, the importance of group loyalty even within a collective that identified itself with the notion of constant change. Oldenburg worked on the periphery of Fluxus from its inception in the late 1950s into the mid-1970s. Fluxus as an organization died with Maciunas, although a number of Fluxus artists are still active today.
Museums by Artist also includes an influential trilogy of essays by the French artist Daniel Buren (b. 1938): "Function of the Museum," 1970, "Function of the Studio," 1971, and "Function of Architecture: Notes on Works in Connection with the Places where it is installed taken between 1967 and 1975, some of which are specifically summarized here," 1975. These texts are notable for their analysis of the relationship of artworks to surrounding environments, and the ways in which institutions (particularly museums) confer value upon the works exhibited and collected there. In 1965 Buren developed a strategy for rejecting both painterly illusionism and the presumed neutrality of the exhibition space. He produced uniformly striped posters and canvases, the meanings of which were largely determined by their location and mode of installation.

Gallery of Antiquities, c. 1857 to Zoe Leonard's *Mirror #1 - Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1990), painting (including both Hubert Robert, *Vue Imaginaire de la Grande Galerie en ruines [Imaginary View of the Grand Galerie in Ruins]*, 1796 and Ed Ruscha, *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, 1965-68), and three-dimensional work (such as Christo's scale model for *The Museum of Modern Art Wrapped*, 1968 and Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum*, 1977). Reviews of the exhibition noted two predominant attitudes toward the museum evidenced by the work on view: a romantic, or poetic approach to object collections as catalysts for fantasy or memory (Joseph Cornell's *Romantic Museum*, 1946, serves as an obvious example) and works that attempted a more objective or polemical institutional critique (Michael Asher's brochure documenting all of the artworks deaccessioned by the Museum of Modern Art since its founding is a noteworthy example). While reviewers essentially agreed on these two themes in the exhibition, their analyses of the show's success differed widely. Roberta Smith found *Museum as Muse* to be "an unusually articulate, well-orchestrated theme show" offering "an unusually comprehensive outline of the development of Conceptual Art."[14] A less enthusiastic

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[14] Roberta Smith, "The Modern Looks at Artists Looking at Museums," *The New York Times*, 12 March 12 1999, 37(E).

Kirsi Peltomāki lamented "[*Museum as Muse*] does not strive for the status of meta-exhibition: it does not attempt to examine and highlight its own role in the construction of [the] exhibition."[15] Fraser Ward concurred that as an exhibition *Museum as Muse* did not perform a self-reflexive critique, noting that it was "an exhibition about collections and collecting, the very thing that institutional critique sets itself against." However, Ward was not put off by the show's relatively apolitical survey. "To insist that, as regards the museum, there must only be materialist and ideological analyses," Ward argued, "is to risk fetishizing critique (and a particular understanding of what it means to be critical), as much as anyone ever fetishized an object."[16] Precisely because of its survey quality, McShine's exhibition and publication provided a broad context within which artist-proposed museums, such as Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum*, could (and can) be considered. The binary set up in the critical response to *Museum as Muse* - poetic elaboration of the urge to collect vs. a

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[15]Kirsi Peltomāki, "Scenes from a Museum," *Afterimage* (July/August 1999): 11.

[16] Fraser Ward. "Critical Mass: Fraser Ward on MOMA's 'Museum as Muse' and the fate of institutional critique," *Frieze* (Summer 1999): 57-58.

critique of collecting institutions - is predicated partly on Benjamin Buchloh's essay, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From an Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," an excerpt of which reads:

> Just as the readymade had negated not only figurative representation, authenticity, and authorship introducing repetition and the series (i.e. the law of industrial production) to replace the studio aesthetic of the handcrafted original, Conceptual Art came to displace even that image of the mass-produced object and its aestheticized forms in Pop art, replacing an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization and institutional validation. [17]

While Buchloh's essay is both articulate and influential, he presents ever-narrowing definitions of "Conceptual Art" and "Institutional Critique." He does not (indeed he could not) discuss the work of Oldenburg, Smithson, or Matta-Clark during this same period due to the acutely diminished options he lays out, for in the work of these artists (each quite different from the others) material concerns were not sacrificed in pursuit of self-reflexive practices. Unlike artists such as Hans Haacke, for whom the documentation of disreputable business connections of museum trustees can constitute an artwork,

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[17] Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From an Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 119.

Oldenburg, Smithson and Matta-Clark each enacted a layered aesthetic and conceptual reappraisal of the art museum.

Among the most recent publications on museums by artists is James Putnam's *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001). Founder and curator of the Contemporary Arts and Cultures Programme at the British Museum, Putnam is interested in mapping what he describes as "an emerging museological tendency in art" beginning in the 1940s with Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* and concluding with Damien Hirst's use of vitrine displays for his controversial installation works of the 1990s. Putnam's text is broad rather than deep; in this sense his contribution is similar in scope and ambition to McShine's. This thesis will consider more heterogeneous works than Buchloh's analysis of "Institutional Critique" admits, and it will offer a more sustained analysis of the topic than the several extant surveys on museums by artists.

Chapter Outlines

Each chapter begins with a discussion of the relevant critical literature, and proceeds to explore the following avenues of inquiry.

Chapter 1

The Street, The Store, and the *Mouse Museum*: Permutations of Collection and Display in the work of Claes Oldenburg

This chapter considers the development of Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum* (completed in 1977), from a series of live performances staged for relatively passive viewers, to a static display activated by viewers moving through the exhibition space. Oldenburg's deadpan yet whimsical presentation of the *Mouse Museum* as an exhibition contained within its own architectural surround forces the host art museum to swallow this project whole, deflecting any significant institutional or curatorial intervention. Oldenburg's production is discussed here in the context of his work with Happenings (including *The Street,* 1960), his engagement with and development of various forms of Pop art (most notably *The Store,* 1961), and the debut of the *Mouse Museum* in the "Museums by Artists" section of Documenta 5, 1972. If the hermetic seal of the *Mouse Museum* guaranteed Oldenburg's autonomy within institutional frameworks, it also functioned as an organized repository for the results of his desires to create and collect. As such it affirmed a poetics of collecting while also resisting assimilation into a predetermined institutional program.

Chapter 2

Museums of The Void: Robert Smithson's History of Art and Artists

This chapter reveals the ways in which Robert Smithson adapted both the form and content of the modern art museum to structure projects as seemingly disparate as magazine articles and earthworks, even as he moved far afield in distance and scale from traditional forms and sites of artistic production. This chapter identifies three separate but linked strategies employed by Smithson in this endeavor. First, the museum structure is explored mimetically, when Smithson (along with his colleague Dan Graham) treats magazine pages as curated spaces (an important example being the article "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," 1966). Second, it may be said that the museum is appropriated literally by Smithson when he proposes an "aerial museum" as a component of his larger plan for the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, 1966-67. Third, and most influentially, Smithson engaged the museum (and art gallery) dialectically; his earthworks were not considered complete until they were represented by "nonsites" (collections of organic matter and documentation retrieved from the site, such as *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey*, 1968) in an art context. As expansive as the

territory Smithson claimed for his art became, it always referred back to a structured, organized space of collection and exhibition. On this topic Smithson said, "if art is art it must have limits,"[18] and his ultimate limit was the modern art museum.

Chapter 3

Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark

Gordon Matta-Clark did not endeavor to make his own museums in the manner of either Claes Oldenburg or Robert Smithson; he would say that he *unmade* them through large-scale architectural interventions. This inversion, or contradiction, of the traditional relationship between the artwork and the museum, nevertheless relied upon the art museum for legibility and meaning. Though Matta-Clark's museum cuts constituted a major rupture in the notion of both the artwork and the museum as discrete, self-contained entities, they were nonetheless indebted to earlier twentieth century projects as well as to influences from Matta-Clark's immediate environment. This chapter analyzes numerous sources that Matta-Clark mined to develop the ideas for his museum cuts including the following:

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[18] Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum* (September 1968), in Flam, 111.

Surrealist concerns with the psychological perception of space (most notably in the work of his father, the Surrealist painter Roberto Matta); installation work by artists including his godfather, Marcel Duchamp; the more recent legacy of minimalism (with its emphasis on a dynamic and embodied viewing experience); and the ambitious scale of land artists (such as Dennis Oppenheim, for whom he briefly worked as an assistant, and Robert Smithson). As was the case with both Oldenburg and Smithson, Matta-Clark used the form and content of the modern art museum as a structuring (and de-structuring) device in his work. However, to a degree that far surpassed their projects, Matta-Clark was concerned with the symbolic and phenomenological impact of domestic and public architecture, particularly the art museum.

Chapter 1: *The Street, The Store* and the *Mouse Museum*: Permutations of Collection and Display in the Work of Claes Oldenburg

Introduction and review of the literature

In 1961, Claes Oldenburg authored what would become a much-quoted manifesto of his artistic position:

> I am for an art that is political-erotical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.
>
> I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.
>
> I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top.
>
> I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary.
>
> I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.[19]

As we shall see, Oldenburg succeeded in creating work that democratically embraced all manner of appetites, wholeheartedly subscribing to the not particularly modern idea that more is indeed more. In spite of his rigorous education and piercing intelligence, in his art Oldenburg

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[19] Claes Oldenburg, *Store Days* (New York: Something Else Press, Inc., 1967), 39.

enthusiastically engaged and engages the pleasures of cheap and cheerful entertainment to be found in penny arcades, dime stores, and downtown street life. His attraction to hamburgers, ice cream floats, women's lingerie, and tourist souvenirs coupled with his strategy of recreating them as larger than life-sized sculptures or proposing them as absurd monuments (such as a skyscraper-sized teddy bear for Central Park, 1965, or toilet tank floats broad enough to span the Thames, 1967 [fig. 6]) demonstrate his penchant for an art that "does something other than sit on its ass in a museum." Humor here also served the stealth function of social critique, although by his own account Oldenburg often formed a concept first, and a rationale for it later.

While acknowledging the additive, associative, and open-ended elements operative in Oldenburg's practice during the 1960s and 1970s, in this chapter I will also discuss the ways that Oldenburg actually used the physical and conceptual constructs of the art museum to structure the contingency, randomness, and dissipation - or, as he put it, the accumulations, spits and drips - also embodied in his work of the period. The success of Oldenburg's work from the 1960s and 70s results in part from a productively unresolved tension between chaos and order. Both the heterogeneity and systems of classification operating in

the work are submitted to a kind of role playing in Oldenburg's practice; both function in a sense as characters in Oldenburg's environmental theater. The pages that follow seek to illuminate how Oldenburg's deployment of found and fabricated objects in performances and sculptural environments actually relied upon and incorporate the form of the art museum, both structurally and conceptually.

A Note on Collaboration and Biography

This thesis considers Oldenburg's oeuvre beginning with performance-based work in 1960 to the realization of the final form of the *Mouse Museum*, in 1977-78. During this period Oldenburg had three significant artistic collaborators who were also romantic partners, all of whom made contributions to his thinking about the *Mouse Museum*. In 1960, Oldenburg married Pat Muschinski, a dancer who was also his model, co-performer, and the seamstress for many of his soft sculptures (fig. 7). As Pat Oldenburg, Muschinski figures in each of Oldenburg's autobiographical chronologies, and he has acknowledged her importance as a collaborator in the soft sculptures in several interviews. For example, he explained to Barbara Rose that he wouldn't make a large soft sculpture of the Chrysler Airflow, a

favorite subject at the time, because "it doesn't seem to engage Pat and … I don't really want to find substitutes [to do the sewing]."[20] It was while living and working with Muschinski that Oldenburg developed his *museum for popular art, n.y.c.*, the precursor for *Mouse Museum* (Oldenburg and Muschinski separated in 1968).[21]

In the spring of 1969, Oldenburg and the artist Hannah Wilke began sharing a loft in New Haven, Connecticut. While Wilke was not as integral to Claes Oldenburg's work as Pat Oldenburg had been, they did several projects together, including the short films "Erasers and Snails and a Couple of Towels," 1969 and "The Great Ice Cream Robbery," 1970. They posed semi-nude in bed for a poster promoting "Artists Make Toys," a group exhibition to which they both contributed work at the Clocktower Gallery in Manhattan in 1975 (fig. 8). Like a number of Oldenburg's other artist friends, Wilke collected "ray guns" for Oldenburg, which he incorporated into his *Mouse Museum* collection. However, upon their separation in 1976, Oldenburg excised any

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[20] "Happenings, an interview with Claes Oldenburg and Barbara Rose, June 30, 1968," recorded interview transcribed by the author, *Barbara Rose Papers, 1940-1993*, (Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles).

[21] For an account of her collaboration with Oldenburg, see Muschinski (now Patty Muscha), "Memoir: Sewing in the Sixties." *Art in America* 90 (November 2002): 79-87.

reference to Wilke from his autobiographical narratives. When Wilke used Ray Guns in her own work, Oldenburg objected. Wilke explained that for her "So Help Me Hannah," series she "reappropriated back the ray guns that were gifts to Oldenburg."[22] As late as 1989, Oldenburg prevented Wilke from publishing works by her that contained images of him, claiming (perhaps belatedly) that they violated his right to privacy. Although he himself culled ideas from many sources, Oldenburg resisted being used as raw material for Wilke's art.

Oldenburg's next (and, as of this writing, ongoing) partnership has been with Coosje van Bruggen, the art historian who curated his *Mouse Museum/Ray Gun Wing* exhibition for the European venues of its tour in 1978 (fig. 9). Most significantly for this study, Oldenburg credits van Bruggen with the concept of the final form of the *Mouse Museum*, marking the beginning of what would become a sustained and intense collaboration with his art

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[22] Bonnie Finneberg, "Hannah Wilke Interview," *Cover* (September 1989): 16. Wilke often used her personal relationships as material for her art. An example is *Intercourse with …*, 1977, a 30-minute performance using music and the voices of friends, family and lovers from telephone messages left on her answering machine. For an analysis of this topic from a legal standpoint, see Tim Cone, "Life Over Art: Oldenburg's Privacy, Wilke's Publicity," *Arts Magazine* 64(September 1989): 25-26.

historian/curator wife. While I don't intend to dwell on Oldenburg's biography, I believe that his decision to artistically partner with his model, a fellow artist, and eventually with a curator of his and others' work lends another dimension to the notion of his studio as museum. The strategy of affiliation was further amplified when Oldenburg retroactively designated all works originating during their partnership as co-authored with van Bruggen. My consideration of Oldenburg's work ends in 1978, with the completion of the tour of the *Mouse Museum* in its final form in Europe.

Oldenburg has frequently acknowledged numerous sources; this approach is in keeping with the strategies of appropriation, transformation, and perpetual references back to his immediate environment manifesting in his work since 1960. On the occasion of his 1969 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Oldenburg credited the city of New York and all of his artist colleagues by claiming

> What I would like to have the show look like is not so much a view of my work as a view of the period, because along with developing opportunities I have developed suggestions that other artists have provided which is the nice thing about having a congested art climate like New York - whatever anyone comes up with someone else can use and I think there's an awful lot of collaboration in the work in the sense that I've just very freely

borrowed ideas from other people too.[23]

Oldenburg's work is often a response to an interior or exterior environment, and he is confident enough in the transformative power of his imagination not to fall victim to an anxiety of influence.[24] In fact, the dialectical relationship with his environment, including the urban landscape, everyday objects, and other artists is central to the work and sometimes the main operating dynamic in the work. In the terms of the museum environment, Oldenburg understands the museum to be the ultimate destination of most of his work, which at times he has seen as a negative result -- "any work of art has a phase where it's alive and then it has to pass into a museum phase which is when people have exhausted its function or can't see any new use for it and don't exactly want to throw it away"[25] -- but at

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[23] Oldenburg quoted in Jeanne Siegel, "How to Keep Sculpture Alive In and Out of a Museum: An Interview with Claes Oldenburg on his Retrospective Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art," *Arts Magazine* 44(September - October 1969): 24.

[24] I refer to Harold Bloom's important book, *The Anxiety of Influence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973). While he was speaking primarily of poets, Bloom's assessment is equally true of visual artists: "Weaker talents idealize: figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves," 5.

[25] Oldenburg quoted in Jeanne Siegel, "How to Keep Sculpture Alive In and Out of a Museum: An Interview with Claes

other times, as in the case of the *Mouse Museum*, the artist has absorbed the influence of the museum environment to again create new work.

Primary Sources and a Selective Review of the Literature

For this project I was able to draw on a remarkable cache of primary source material, including unpublished interviews - fifty transcript pages of interviewers with various authors and twenty-eight heretofore untranscribed cassette tapes of conversations between Claes Oldenburg and Barbara Rose recorded from 1960 to 1990 (the bulk of the interviews date from 1960 to the late 1970s, the period under discussion here).[26] These extensive interviews are invaluable documents, since they record not only the ambience and zeitgeist of the downtown New York art world during those decades, but also because in them Oldenburg articulates his specific ambitions for the work at the time that he was making it. Using these interviews and Oldenburg's notebooks as source material, Rose wrote a book

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Oldenburg on his Retrospective Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art," 26.

[26] These transcripts and tapes are part of the *Barbara Rose Papers, 1940-1993* (Archive Number 930100) housed in Special Collections, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California. I am grateful to the GRI for two travel grants that supported my research there.

charting Oldenburg's development from the late 1950's to the late 1960s.[27] Rose's book, which interweaves biography and thematic interpretation (the text is broken into two sections: "Life and Art," and "The Metamorphoses of Form") was timed to coincide with Oldenburg's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1969. Although it was the most extensive text published on Oldenburg as of 1969, Rose could not begin to incorporate all of her research into it, so the tapes remain a key primary source. In regards to the present study, it is important to note that while the *museum of popular art, n.y.c.*, 1965 is mentioned in the tapes, Rose's book does not address it.

Other important archival sources on Oldenburg include the curatorial files at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The MCA organized two exhibitions of Oldenburg's work during the period that concerns us here: *Projects for Monuments*, 1967 and *The Mouse Museum/The Ray Gun Wing: Two Collections: Two Buildings*, 1977-78. The curatorial files contain exhibition checklists, slide documentation of the installations, press releases, and correspondence between

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[27] Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970). In addition to a standard clothbound catalogue, a deluxe edition of the book, bound in Crayola Crayon "flesh" pink rubber, was produced. Like many rubber objects made in the 1960s, including numerous sculptures, these book covers are physically unstable. Some develop a sticky ooze, while others powder and disintegrate.

the artist and curators, as well as notes and sketches for the exhibitions.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Oldenburg explored the structure of the museum in all the media with which he worked, so catalogues raisonnés of both his sculpture and works on paper have proved useful to this study. An important primary source for Oldenburg's work on paper is *Printed Stuff: Prints, Posters, and Ephemera by Claes Oldenburg, a Catalogue Raisonné, 1958-1996*, written by Oldenburg's archivist David Platzker in association with Richard Axsom. Susan Ginsburg's dissertation, "Claes Oldenburg: Sculpture, 1960-1969, A Catalogue Raisonné," takes advantage of her experience as an assistant to the artist during the mid-1970s.[28] Ginsburg's text groups the work thematically and, to the extent that she attempts an analysis, her approach is iconographic. Ginsburg notes that the same material "could be looked at with more 'stylish' methods, such as social history, Marxist criticism, certainly neo-Freudianism, and Deconstructivism," but makes clear that her project is more

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[28] David Platzker and Richard Axsom, *Printed Stuff: Prints, Posters, and Ephemera by Claes Oldenburg. A Catalogue Raisonné, 1958-1996* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1997) and Susan Ginsburg, "Claes Oldenburg: Sculpture, 1960-1968, A Catalogue Raisonné," diss., City University of New York (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1991).

descriptive than interpretive.[29] While I would argue that any description is in some sense already analytic, and Ginsburg's chapter seven, a "foray into the meaning of Ray Gun, overseer of all Oldenburg's work" does actually depart from the reportage approach used elsewhere in the thesis, the author is correct in stating that the main contribution her dissertation makes to the literature is its comprehensive catalogue of the sculpture from 1960-68. Indeed, no scholar has taken up the challenge of cataloguing Oldenburg's three-dimensional work after 1968. The closest approximation to a catalogue raisonné concerning the sculpture after 1968 is *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology,* the catalogue for a major exhibition organized by Oldenburg and the curator Germano Celant for the Guggenheim Museum in 1995.

The largest body of literature on Oldenburg is the steady stream of exhibition catalogues and exhibition-related publications written by curators in collaboration with the artist (and, by the late 1970s, also in collaboration with Oldenburg's second wife, Coosje van Bruggen). Among the most important of these are the following: Alicia Legg, *Claes Oldenburg* (Museum of Modern

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[29] Ginsburg, "Claes Oldenburg: Sculpture, 1960-1968, A Catalogue Raisonné," 5.

Art, 1970); Barbara Haskell, *Claes Oldenburg: Object into Monument* (Pasadena Art Museum, 1971); Martin Friedman, *Oldenburg: Six Themes* (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1975); Judith Russi Kirshner, *Claes Oldenburg: Mouse Museum/Ray Gun Wing* (Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977) and Germano Celant, *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995).[30] A survey of these catalogues illustrates the strong influence Oldenburg exerted on the interpretation of his work. As Susan Ginsburg pointed out when she surveyed this literature, it can at times "seem as if Oldenburg retains total control over what is written and thought about him and his work."[31] This dynamic is a result both of Oldenburg's extraordinarily articulate explication of his work and also of his strategic affiliation with curators so that their work becomes absorbed into his project rather than the other way around.

Although the critical literature on Oldenburg is scant in comparison to the more celebratory texts, some compelling analyses have been written, particularly on the

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[30] See also the extensive bibliography compiled by David Platzker in Germano Celant, *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 572-581.

[31] Ginsburg, "Claes Oldenburg: Sculpture, 1960-1968, A Catalogue Raisonné," 4.

use of metaphor in Oldenburg's work. Of these I would single out articles by Ellen Johnson and Mark Sladen. Writing in 1970, Johnson was perhaps the first author to identify specific instances of inference, metaphor, and analogy (strategies more commonly associated with literature) in Oldenburg's sculpture. On the intersection of concept and materials, Johnson notes that Oldenburg

> responds to words sensuously … occasionally a word is the sole subject of the work … a monument is constructed of a T, a tree a compact cluster of full-bodied B's, and a museum of its own letters. [32]

More recently, Mark Sladen has identified metaphor and metamorphosis as key elements of Oldenburg's practice. For Sladen,

> part of the excitement of Oldenburg's art is the way it moves between different registers, implying shifts between different material and conceptual states. However, what is truly exciting is the way this slippage draws attention to the metaphoric basis of meaning itself.[33]

Although Johnson and Sladen's arguments do not lead specifically in this direction, the freely associative and

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[32]Ellen Johnson, "Oldenburg's Poetics: Analogues, Metamorphoses and Sources," *Art International* XIV(April 1970): 43.

[33] Mark Sladen, "Meet Ray Gun: How Size Matters in the Work of Claes Oldenburg," *Art Monthly* 197(June 1996): 4.

self-reflexive qualities they identify in Oldenburg's work during the 1960s and 1970s are germane to my analysis.

Two dissertations, one recently completed and another in progress, treat Oldenburg's work in the 1960s and 1970s through a critical lens. As Ginsburg predicted, Oldenburg's oeuvre has invited a psychoanalytic reading. Lisa Frieman's dissertation, "(Mind)ing *The Store*: Claes Oldenburg's Psychoaesthetics," explores the ways that dream work informed Oldenburg's sculptural techniques of fragmentation, scale displacement, metaphoric substitution, and unexpected juxtapositions.[34] A forthcoming dissertation, Ellen Tepfer's "The Spaces of Everyday Life: Claes Oldenburg, 1959-69," considers Oldenburg's production in relation to the writings of Henri Lefebvre and Herbert Marcuse. [35]

Oldenburg's sculpture has also been productively read by scholars in the context of Bataille's notion of the *informe*, or formless. In their influential text, *Formless: A User's Guide*, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss

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[34] Lisa Frieman, "(Mind)ing *The Store*: Claes Oldenburg's Psychoaesthetics," diss. Emory University (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 2001).

[35] For a brief introduction to her thesis, see Ellen Tepfer, "The Banal and the Monumental: Reading Claes Oldenburg's Colossal Monuments," *College Art Association Abstracts 2000*, 144.

introduce formlessness as an alternative to the form/content dichotomy informing traditional art historical discourses. [36] The authors understand the inability of Oldenburg's soft sculptures to retain stable physical positions as entropic on both literal and conceptual levels. In this sense, the soft sculptures are said to successfully frustrate any attempts at interpretive closure. Thus, for example, the white formica centers slipping out of flaccid green vinyl sleeves in Oldenburg's *Green Beans*, 1964 (fig. 10), represent a deflation of the heroic modernist project and an embrace of the condition of flux.[37] I want to acknowledge this trend in Oldenburg's

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[36] See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), especially pp. 13-15.

[37] Oldenburg's own analysis of the intended effect of his soft sculptures resonates with Bois and Krauss' later notion that the soft works demand a profound shift in traditional approaches to the art object. However, Oldenburg complicates the concept of entropy with an emphasis on phenomenology and personal agency. In conversation with Barbara Rose, Oldenburg commented:

> Most collectors who are, say, brought up on rigidity, the idea that the thing should be rigid, rigid being, you know, defined for them by the artist, are very puzzled when I tell them that every morning they have to go and decide what shape they want the thing to be that morning. So most of them just let it go or they don't have time or they thought they bought property, or they are disappointed because it keeps changing shape, or they send it down to me to have it pushed into shape by me, but it keeps on sagging … if it really worked, it might change peoples ideas about rigid concepts … my work is very flexible, which is maybe

work but also to show how it functions in a dialectical relationship to the artist's organizational strategies, namely his appropriation of institutional frameworks that order disparate goods of varying quality, such as the store and the museum.

Overview

Having completed undergraduate study in art and English literature at Yale University in 1950, and while supporting himself as a reporter in Chicago, Claes Oldenburg intermittently studied painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. After six years in Chicago, Oldenburg moved to Manhattan, where he began staging performances and creating sculptural environments that responded directly to the sights, sounds, and smells of his lower east side neighborhood. The first of these works was *The Street*.[38] Together with *House*, an environment constructed by Jim Dine, *The Street* was featured in *Ray Gun Show* at the Judson Gallery, New York, in March 1960. *The*

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why it's irritating. "Interview with Claes Oldenburg, January 18, 1968, Track 1," recorded interview transcribed by the author, *Barbara Rose Papers, 1940-1993*, (Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles).

[38] *The Street* was first shown at the Judson Gallery, Judson Memorial Church, January 30-March 17, 1960. Oldenburg reprised the installation at the Reuben Gallery in May of that year.

Street included a three-dimensional mural of cartoon-like figures drawn and burned into cardboard (fig. 11). The exhibition opened with a performance staged in *The Street* entitled *Snapshots from the City*. This Happening consisting of thirty-two tableaux that were punctuated by pulses of light. Featured performers included Oldenburg, Pat Muschinski (who married Oldenburg the following month, taking his surname), and Lucas Samaras. Samaras, who appeared in Happenings organized by a number of different artists, described the experience of performing with Oldenburg as follows:

> You had the feeling of working for a romantic kind of circus, like *La Strada*. There was poverty and a feeling of intense love that was sublimated into art, not sex. Oldenburg had more of a traditional way of doing a Happening than the others - he had a novelist's thing. He understood sentiment, and such 19th-century things as being an immigrant, being a bum. He knew instinctively what people could do - gave them roles that allowed them to intensify themselves, to reveal their characters.[39]

Dressed in an old shirt and soiled bandages, Oldenburg played the character of Rag Man, while Muschinski, outfitted in a striped vest, garter belts, and papier-mâché mask with protruding beak, played the character of

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[39] Samaras quoted in Grace Glueck, "Soft Sculpture or Hard - They're Oldenburgers," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 21, 1969), 28-29, 100-15.

Streetchick (fig. 12). The circumstances of Oldenburg's Rag Man were grim; he lived on the street, suffering from both poverty and social ostracism. As an artist, Oldenburg's identification with social outcasts was certainly not new: it dates at least to Toulouse-Lautrec's loving depiction of desolate prostitutes and Picasso's melancholy renderings of circus performers. *The Street* can also be compared to Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937 (fig. 13), insofar as they are both mural-scaled, grisaille renderings of human suffering. Yet, while *Guernica* is a monumental canvas depicting the specific terrors of war, *The Street* was an ephemeral ode to anonymous desperation.

The anti-heroic statement of this performance, which Oldenburg described as "contemporary primitivism achieved through the exploitation of popular culture,"[40] was very much of its moment. In a thoroughly researched social history of Judson Church (home to the Judson Gallery and Judson Dance Theater), art historian Robert Haywood argues that the early 1960s marked an unlikely and felicitous conjunction of the concerns of a group of downtown artists

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[40] Transcript from a panel titled, "New Uses of the Human Image in Painting," Judson Gallery, December 2, 1959, Judson Memorial Church Archives, N.Y.; cited in Barbara Haskell, *BLAM! The Explosion of Pop* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 53.

and the objectives of a progressive church. "For the Judson Church, engaging the world meant renouncing a disembodied and domesticated Christian faith," Hayward writes, while "for Oldenburg and Kaprow, it required renouncing Abstract Expressionism's transcendental rhetoric and aspirations."[41] Engagement with popular culture, involvement of the audience, and the embrace of humble materials - all characteristics of Oldenburg's production at this time - rejected the model of the modern artist creating painterly masterworks in solitude. However, the momentum for this relatively chaotic, performance-oriented tendency in Oldenburg's work lasted only a short time before he imposed an organizational model upon it.

The year following *The Street*'s showing at Judson Church, Oldenburg made an exhibition entitled *The Store*. The first site for *The Store* was Oldenburg's studio at 107 East Second Street. While *The Street* referred to an impoverished outdoor environment, *The Store* both embodied and referred to an interior situation where objects were subjected to mercantile systems of classification. The installation, which opened on December 1, 1961, featured plaster sculptures roughly fashioned in the form of

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[41] Robert Haywood, "Heretical Alliance: Claes Oldenburg and the Judson Memorial Church in the 1960s," *Art History* 18 (June 1995): 192.

inexpensive dime store merchandise and deli foods which Oldenburg painted crudely before offering them for sale (fig. 14).[42] As is so often the case with Oldenburg's work, an element of the absurd was in evidence. In *The Store*, *Orange Juice* retailed for $199.95, and the artist asked $399.98 for his *Plate of Meat*. In addition to the outsized price scheme, Oldenburg highlighted the difference between his sculptures and their referents by presenting fragmented objects. He disrupted the unity of discrete packaged goods by marketing sculptures that represented only morsels of things, such as *Cigarettes in Pack Fragment* and *U.S. Flag Fragment*. He also made sculptures representing groups of things stuck together to form one entity, such as *Girl, Flag, and Cigarettes*. At times Oldenburg made the price of a work itself into a three-dimensional object, such as *39 cents* (fig. 15), and he also merged items and prices

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[42]The Italian collector Giuseppe Panza purchased a number of works from *The Store*. These works were subsequently acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, where they have been installed together in a tableau approximating the original exhibition. Seventeen of these works are published in *Panza: The Legacy of a Collector, 1943-1969; 1982-1994* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000). For an account of Panza's encounter with Oldenburg's work, see Caroline Jones, "Coca-Cola Plan, or How New York Stole the Soul of Giuseppe Panza," pp. 22-49 in that volume.

together as single objects, as in *Auto Tire with Fragment of Price*.[43]

Although *The Store* was a more static environment than *The Street*, an element of performance did carry over from the former into the later. On the public nature of *The Store*, Oldenburg commented, "it was open - anybody could come in at any time - and I worked there more or less in view of the people who looked in."[44] For the duration of *The Store*'s existence, Oldenburg adopted multiple personae including worker, artist, salesman, and producer. To complete his performance as shopkeeper, Oldenburg even made up business cards reading, "The Store/Claes Oldenburg/Prop." (We may understand "Prop." to refer both to Oldenburg's role as proprietor of *The Store* and also as a prop in his own performances). Mirroring the conceit of *The Store*, the cards were printed on a faceted aqua ground approximating the pattern of a formica counter, upon which

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[43] See "Inventory of Store Dec. 1961," in Oldenburg, *Store Days*, 31.

[44] Quoted in Benjamin Buchloh, "Interview with Claes Oldenburg," *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 36. For Robert Haywood, Oldenburg's shift in roles from *The Street* to *The Store* was alarmingly abrupt: "With the inauguration of Oldenburg's *The Store* in 1961, the artist, then, rather quickly and ironically, transformed himself from shaman and derelict into an entrepreneur and proud independent shop owner who produces and peddles his wares." Haywood, "Heretical Alliance," 208.

he superimposed a drawing of a slice of cake.[45] Pleasure in the performance and the making of the work was central to *The Store*. In answer to the question of why he did not simply present actual commercial goods rather than going to the trouble of fabricating them, Oldenburg replied

> Because my desire to imitate extends to the event or activity of making the thing I imitate. In one instance that is to be for a moment a sign painter, in another for a moment a baker of cakes, in another the cutter of suits, etc.[46]

Like *The Street*, *The Store* had a second act in a more refined space than that of its first manifestation. If the first *Store* (with its lumpen merchandise hanging precariously from hooks, crowding shelves, and lying unceremoniously on the floor) faithfully reflected the vulgarity and heterogeneity of its downtown environment, the uptown reincarnation similarly aped, critiqued, and rubbed elbows with its neighbors. *The Store* was installed for a second time at Green Gallery on 57th Street in September, 1962 (fig. 16).[47] Although the exhibited works

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[45] A copy of the business card, sleeved in a waxed paper envelope, was tipped into the endpapers of *Store Days*.

[46] Oldenburg, *Store Days*, 62.

[47] In between the downtown and uptown exhibitions of *The Store*, Oldenburg staged a series of happenings in his studio with *Store* items as props. These events included

were themselves spattered and amorphous, they were presented in a spare, orderly fashion with none of the bargain basement excess displayed downtown. In this space, sloppy items such as *Two Cheeseburgers with Everything (Dual Hamburgers)*, 1962, were tastefully lifted from the floor with low, white risers and other works were treated even more formally with placement atop traditional sculpture pedestals. Untraditional supports were also featured, as when Oldenburg rendered a rumpled shirt and tie in plaster, painted them unevenly, and displayed them slung over the back of a real wooden chair.

In this 57th Street installation the grand gestures of Abstract Expressionist painting (with its attendant expectations of deep psychic or spiritual content) were parodied through their application to cut-rate, mass market items, and the upscale midtown neighborhood was gently assaulted by Oldenburg's sculptures of down-market, lived-in consumer goods. In both of its configurations, *The Store* relied upon the structures of the (downtown) market

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Store (Version I), *Store (Version II)*, and *Nekropolis I*. For description and analysis of these events, see Jill Johnston, "Off Off-Broadway: 'HAPPENINGS' AT RAY GUN MFG. CO.," *The Village Voice*, April 26, 1962, 10, reprinted in Steven Henry Madoff, *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 217-218.

and the (midtown) gallery to simultaneously order its goods and to throw the conventions of those venues into relief.

The humor and materiality of *The Store* rooted it very much in the realm of lived experience, deflating any notion of art as transcendent or mystical. Although she was focusing primarily on Andy Warhol's career, art historian Caroline Jones might as well have been commenting on Oldenburg's *Store* when she said, "only by publicly sloughing off the romantic, isolated studio could the 1960s artist emerge as new in the saturated art market of the existentially unique."[48] While part of Warhol's strategy for "sloughing off" the romance of Abstract Expressionism was appropriation of the factory assembly line as a model for his artistic practice, Oldenburg conflated the persona of the expressive artist with the subject matter of assembly line products, remaking them as unique and misshapen, an unlikely alternative to uniformly-produced inexpensive commercial goods, or to Warhol's paintings and sculptures which partially relied upon mechanical means of reproduction for their cool and slick style.

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[48] See Caroline Jones, "Andy Warhol's Factory, Commonism, and the Business of Art Business," in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 213.

The painterly quality of Oldenburg's early sculpture may also be seen as paying a self-conscious, if backhanded, homage to Jackson Pollock. When asked about the legacy of Abstract Expressionism in relation to his work Oldenburg replied,

> Pollock acts in my work as a fiction. I objectify him: American Painter, Painter of Life, Painter of New York. I honor all the stereotypes about him. This extends to the edge of the magic procedures of identification, with which the stereotype receiving machinery more or less co-operates.[49]

While Oldenburg's appropriation of Pollock's drippy painterliness suggests parodic intent, it must be noted that Oldenburg's performance of the roles of artist and curator also serves to reinscribe and reinstate these identities as much as it debunks them.

Oldenburg's career rose with the ascendance of Pop Art in New York, and *The Store* is clearly an early instance of an artist co-opting elements of consumer culture for subject matter.[50] The store - from upscale shop to bargain

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[49] W.S. Lieberman, ed. "Jackson Pollock: An Artists's Symposium, Part 2," *Artnews* 66(May 1967), 27.

[50] While Pop Art as expressed in the assemblage sculptures of Oldenburg and Dine, as well as in paintings by Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosequist and Ed Ruscha was received as emblematically American art in the early 1960s, Pop was first developed in London in the mid-1950s by artists including Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi. For more on the British roots of Pop, see David Robbins, ed., *The*

basement, with goods ranging from designer clothing to remaindered trinkets - was mined thematically by a number of artists of Oldenburg's generation on both the east and west coasts. The supermarket was a particularly fertile subject for artists including Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Diebenkorn, and Richard Estes.[51] The momentum of this trend was demonstrated by the exhibition, *The New American Supermarket*, which ran from October 6 - November 7, 1964 at the Bianchini Gallery on New York's upper east side. It included work not only by Oldenburg but also by Andy Warhol, Robert Watts, and Billy Apple, among others. In contrast to Oldenburg's *Store*, the Bianchini installation juxtaposed Pop paintings and sculptures with actual packaged food stuffs, and further quoted supermarket layouts by labeling its aisles with signs for "bread" and "fresh vegetables." *The New American Supermarket* demonstrated that Oldenburg not only engaged ideas that

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Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty (Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 1990).

[51] For more on food as a major topic in Pop Art, see Sidra Stich, *Made in U.S.A.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), especially her chapter, "American Food and Marketing," pp. 77-109. For a discussion of Pop Art as a response to "consumer culture coded as feminine," see Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Whiting deals specifically with Oldenburg's *Store*, 22-30, and with *The New American Supermarket*, 30-49.

were relevant to his broader cohort, but also that the arrangement of his studio as a total environment in the form of a store was both groundbreaking and influential to other artists and their dealer/curators. [52]

Considering Oldenburg's work in the context of social and economic histories, Cécile Whiting has observed that *The Store* "united its class-stratified audience under the sign of desire." [53] Whiting suggests that a non-specialist audience might respond to Oldenburg's wares in terms of the desirability of their referents, while an art-savvy audience would appreciate them based on an appetite for conceptual and aesthetic sophistication. Oldenburg understood that he had multiple audiences that responded to the work based on their own experiences, and he deliberately worked on several levels simultaneously. In conversation with Barbara Rose, Oldenburg acknowledged that

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[52] Although Oldenburg united the works in *The Store* partly through their subject matter, he pointed out the importance of their formal qualities as well, with an emphasis on line and color. He noted, "*The Street* had a certain consistency because all the materials were found in the street and they were all the neutral colors of the street with an emphasis on line … *The Store* dealt more with color … [rendered in] plaster painted with enamel." Oldenburg quoted in Jeanne Siegel, "How to Keep Sculpture Alive In and Out of a Museum: An Interview with Claes Oldenburg on his Retrospective Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art," 25.

[53] Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture*, 30.

> Accepting the role of a professional artist, I am basically aristocratic or committed to an elite thing, at the same time as a political person or as a person in the world, in America, I am committed to the nonelite thing. My resolution tends to be to put the elite thing into something very populist and create a double object. And it depends entirely on your vantage point. If you are aristocratic you will see it as something directed towards you, and if you are populist you will see it as something directed towards you. So I expect people will say, oh boy a hamburger, finally they put a hamburger into art … [and then there is] the disappointment when they meet the artist who turned out to be an aristocratic fellow and it wasn't about [populism] at all.[54]

From *museum of popular art, n.y.c.* to *Mouse Museum*

In 1965, Oldenburg was again using his studio as a site for environmental work, but his paradigm had shifted from "store" to "museum." Oldenburg mounted found and fabricated replicas of common objects on a few shelves of his 14th Street studio and stenciled the following text on one of the shelves: "museum of popular art, n.y.c." Although Oldenburg would not have a solo show in a legitimate museum until the following year,[55] he anticipated that achievement by designating his own studio as a museum. The gesture was not merely preemptive, however: like *The*

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[54] "Interview with Claes Oldenburg, March 23, 1968, Track 1," recorded interview transcribed by the author, *Barbara Rose Papers, 1940-1993*, (Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles).

[55] *Claes Oldenburg: Skulpturer och teckningar* premiered at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, in 1966.

Store before it, the *museum for popular art, n.y.c.*, served both as a container and organizational model for the disparate objects and fragments comprising Oldenburg's oeuvre.

Oldenburg has written an account of the evolution of *museum of popular art, n.y.c*, from a modest installation on a set of shelves in his studio to a self-contained, traveling exhibit called *Mouse Museum*. This development involves the conflation and interplay of two themes, the museum as organizational system/container, and a cartoon-like, geometric mouse's head form. On his preoccupation with the mouse head form, Oldenburg has said, "the Mouse is cerebral. It's autobiographical. It refers, perhaps, to my thinking process."[56] Oldenburg's chronological narrative of the project, "History of the Mouse Museum," bears quotation at length:

> 1965
> Move into a large loft at 14th Street and First Avenue, New York City. Small objects and fragments of man-made artificial ("city") nature from different sources (found on the streets, bought in stores, the residue of performances, souvenirs of travel, gifts, etc., etc.) which have accumulated and been carried along with works and furnishings from studio to studio are placed into a set of shelves found on the premises. The shelves are painted white, giving an architectural, small-scale appearance, like a doll

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[56] Oldenburg quoted in Martin Friedman, *Oldenburg: Six Themes* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1975), 25.

high-rise, and stenciled "museum of popular art, n.y.c."

The collection increases during the four years that follow in the 14th Street studio, including the small studies and remnants from work processes.*

First application of the Geometric Mouse image in the form of a mask worn by players in the performance *Moveyhouse*.**

*For example, as a result of a project begun with George Maciunas for Fluxus, which was to be a box in an edition of one hundred containing selected examples of artificial vegetables, fruit and other food. The project itself was not realized, but several of the items collected for it were placed in the Museum.

**December 1, 2, 3 at the 41st Street Theater, New York City. For complete notes on the performance, see *Raw Notes*, published by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1973. The Geometric Mouse is derived from a combination of a movie-type cartoon mouse with the early movie camera.

1966
"As Found," an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, of objects collected by the artists stimulates the first museum-style cataloguing of fifty objects in the collection.

Plans are made to found a "museum of popular objects" using the collection as a starting point, including a committee for new acquisitions, a bulletin, and other museum procedures.

First drawing for a museum structure in the form of the Geometric Mouse on stationery designed for the museum using the Geometric Mouse image as letterhead.

Consider renting a store on First Avenue, New York City, to house the collection, but plans for the museum remain unrealized.

Continue using the Geometric Mouse image in studies towards a catalogue cover for a retrospective exhibition organized by Kasper König at the Moderne Museet in Stockholm. The letterhead Geometric Mouse is applied to stationery printed for the exhibition.

1967
Continue to use the Geometric Mouse image as a building in proposals made for an alternative façade for the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and other architectural studies.

1968-71
Development of the Geometric Mouse image as a sculpture. First studies in *Notes*, Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles. First large scale version in metal, *Geometric Mouse, Scale A, 1/6* shown 1969 in retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Banners in the form of the Geometric Mouse. Subsequently, Geometric Mouse sculptures developed in five different sizes to explore the effect of different scales.*

*For a survey of the Geometric Mouse sculptures, see *Oldenburg Six Themes*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1975.

1971
Object collection set up in Broome Street Studio, New York City.

1972
Development of the Mouse Museum, with Kasper König, in response to the announced program of the documenta 5 exhibition: "Inquiry into reality - today's imagery." Horizontal structures in the form of the Geometric Mouse image derived from rubber stamps made of the image.* Three hundred sixty-seven items from the object collection selected and catalogued by the artist with Kasper and Ilka König. Sounds of objects while they are being washed or taped to be played in the Museum. Plans drawn (by Bernhard Leitner and Heidi Bechinie) from which the structure is built in the Neue Galerie in Kassel. A separate catalogue is published.** At the end of the exhibition, the

collection is returned to Broome Street and the structure of the Mouse Museum is dismantled.

*The stamps were made in 1971 in five sizes as part of the first attempt to formulate the *Scales of the Geometric Mouse*.
**documenta 5 catalogue section 13, pages 8-10, Kassel, 1972 and Mouse Museum supplement, Kassel, 1972.

1975
Discuss the reconstruction of the Mouse Museum in Basel with the late Carlo Huber, director of the Basel Kunsthalle.

1976 Spring
Exchange of ideas with art historian Coosje van Bruggen about the Mouse Museum results in re-thinking of the Museum structure. A model is built in cardboard of the revised version.* Subsequently the exhibition of the Mouse Museum at the Basel Kunsthalle is canceled.

*The revised Mouse Museum is a plain, basic structure which forms its own traveling crate. The corrugated aluminum facing is a translation in scale of the corrugated cardboard of the model. The 'nose' becomes part of the structure and ventilation is improved through air conditioning. The elimination of the box enclosure brings the revised Mouse Museum closer to the drawing.

1976 Summer
The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago agrees to construct the revised version of the Mouse Museum, and arrange a tour of the U.S. with the aid of an N.E.A. grant. A separate wing is designed to contain the collection of Ray Guns. Plans for the two structures are drawn up by architect Stuart Cohen.

The revised version of the Mouse Museum and the new Ray Gun Wing are built in a loft on Chicago's west side under the supervision of John Obuck.

Prepared by Claes Oldenburg, September 1977.[57]

What do we learn from this narrative? On the level of form, Oldenburg is choosing to act as his own historian, in addition to curating his own museum. This strategy is both creative and pragmatic. On the one hand, acting as his own biographer is an extension of the role playing that was central to Oldenburg's practice beginning in the late 1950s; a note written by Kirshner on top of a letter from Oldenburg (which suggests she was following up with him by telephone) says "treat inventory as epic poem."[58] On the other hand, it represents a profound desire to control the context of both his production and reception. A letter from Oldenburg in the same file suggests that the text "need not go much into interpretation."[59] The narrative also highlights the organic and associative nature of Oldenburg's practice; from a small group of thematic nodes,

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[57] Claes Oldenburg, "History of the Mouse Museum," in Judith Russi Kirshner, *The Mouse Museum, The Ray Gun Wing/Two Buildings by Claes Oldenburg* (Chicago: Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977), 5-17.

[58] Letter from Claes Oldenburg to Judith Russi Kirshner, dated May 22, 1977. Curatorial files, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

[59] Letter from Claes Oldenburg to Judith Russi Kirshner, dated May 22, 1977. Curatorial files, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

any number of projects can spin off and mutate, combining and recombining.

With the pedestrian act of stenciling a bookshelf in 1965, Oldenburg set in motion a project that continued to develop for over a decade. The following year he elaborated the idea by investigating the components that comprise a museum as an institution. After a collection, what does it need? Oldenburg imagined an acquisitions committee and a bulletin; he also designed letterhead (fig. 17). The opportunity to propose an actual architectural surround as a museum presented itself on the occasion of Oldenburg's solo show, *Projects for Monuments,* which was the inaugural exhibition of the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (an inverted statue of Oldenburg himself served as the exhibition poster [fig. 18]). This exhibition, which ran from October 24 - November 26, 1967, included 34 drawings and four models. Oldenburg's projects for monuments reflected free associations developed in response to the built environments, climates, and industries of several major cities including New York (*Colossal Monument for Lower East Side: Ironing Board,* 1965 and *Study for Colossal Monument: Moving Pool Balls, Park Avenue,* 1967); London (*Leg Monument, Thames Estuary, Low Tide,* 1966); and Chicago (*Colossal Monument for Grant Park,*

Chicago: Windshield Wiper, 1967) [fig. 19]).[60] In addition to the indoor installation, *Projects for Monuments* also included an image of a Pop-Tart painted on a 22 x 15 ½ foot billboard mounted on the exterior wall of an adjacent building. For this work, Oldenburg selected an image from a magazine advertisement and the museum hired a sign painter to execute the project. Jobbing out the sign painting was a nod toward the industrial fabrication favored by his circle in New York at that time, including Donald Judd and Robert Smithson. The selection of Pop-Tart advertising for his subject, with its references both to Pop Art and to "tarting up" the museum, is typical of Oldenburg's interest in simile, metaphor, and old-fashioned double entendres.

Oldenburg also made several proposals for the façade of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Two proposals realized only in text form read as follows:

> 1. In technique this proposal reminds one of the Falls at the Olson Rug Co., or of the famous Bond Clothes sign which used to be on Times Square. The Contemporary Museum is overflowed continuously by water released from the roof near the alley, forcefully, and pouring into a moat at the front of the Museum (along Ontario Street). The water may be controlled by the use of soap or chemicals. On nights of special events, Ontario Street may be flooded and an illuminated Geyser rise at intervals from the roof.

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[60] From the exhibition checklist, curatorial files, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

> The effect should be as unnatural and artificial as possible. Entrance will be directly through the water, or one may choose to enter behind the falls by a stair at the west end.
>
> 2. The building is completely covered with a mirror.[61]

Oldenburg's waterfall façade for the museum employs the aggressive whimsy that was the hallmark of his colossal monuments. The museum as public fountain is almost bucolic, but when the artist directs the museum to be "overflowed continuously by water … forcefully" and suggests that the "entrance will be directly through the water" the proposal takes on a sharper edge. Oldenburg's second idea, covering the building completely with a mirror, is elegant in its simplicity yet also aggressive. While allowing the museum to literally reflect its community, mirrors would also be blinding in noonday sun and allow for no visual penetration of the building, thus rendering the institution formidably opaque.

While all of the above mentioned proposals were inspired by some aspect of the cityscapes for which they were intended, another proposal for the Museum of Contemporary Art grew more out of Oldenburg's preoccupation

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[61] Curatorial files, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

with certain forms independent of the built environment. Through several drawings and an altered photograph, Oldenburg proposed a façade for the museum in the form of a geometric mouse (fig. 20). The mouse-shaped museum idea percolated for a decade, traveling to Kassel in 1972 before being realized in its final form in Chicago in 1977.[62]

Interlude: Oldenburg's Museum Machinations, ca. 1968

Oldenburg's museum-inspired work of 1968 includes two proposals made in the form of lithographs. *Untitled (New Pasadena Museum)*, 1968 adopts chewing tobacco and cigarette packages as the new forms for the Pasadena Museum, which was contemplating an expansion at that time. Riffing on an advertisement for Half and Half tobacco printed in the *Los Angeles Times*, Oldenburg imagined an auditorium in the

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[62] One of the curators at the museum was also apparently keen on the idea of Oldenburg producing museums as artworks. An unsigned note in the curatorial file reads as follows: "Telephone Oldenburg and ask him if he would undertake a commission of the Museum of Contemporary Art and make for us a prototype of a 'soft' museum that can be executed in an edition of multiple versions - 100 to commemorate the opening and to be given to the important donors who have made the construction of this museum possible. In principle we would buy the prototype and at least one drawing and obtain the artist's permission to have it executed in 100 copies by qualified craftsmen ..." In the event that Oldenburg was not interested in the soft museum proposal, this resourceful curator also had a contingency plan: "if Oldenburg declines, write Tinguely ..."

shape of half a tobacco tin, an exhibition wing in the shape of half a cigarette pack, and a bookstore/restaurant inserted into the cylinders of half cigarettes (fig. 21). The point of departure for Oldenburg's second idea for a museum in Los Angeles was the proliferation of large-scale type on the billboards that litter the cityscape. In a print inscribed *(MU)SE(UM)/Ed/pat/City as alphabet*, 1968, Oldenburg suggests a museum made of the block letters MUSEUM (fig. 22). In an explanation of the project, Oldenburg commented,

> A city is all words - a newspaper, an alphabet. It would allay the strain on the imagination of architects and their clients if a law were passed requiring all new buildings to have the shape of a letter or several letters, or a word. Seen from below, like the unfinished freeway connection ending against the sky, the result would be modern *and* traditional, elementary, graceful, and informative.[63]

In the case of these two proposals, the museum served as the ostensible subject, rather than the form of the artwork. Rethinking the museum in terms of tobacco

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[63] Oldenburg, *Notes: Twelve Original Color Lithographs/Thirteen Pages of Text* (Los Angeles: Gemini G.E.L., 1968), XI. Cited in David Platzker, "Catalogue Raisonné," in Richard Axsom and David Platzker, *Printed Stuff: Prints, Posters, and Ephemera by Claes Oldenburg, A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1997), 135.

advertising or typography are two humorous examples of free association in Oldenburg's practice.

In between signing the first (February 29) and last (September 30) proofs for *(MU)SE(UM)/Ed/pat/City as alphabet,* Oldenburg participated in Documenta 4 in Kassel, in the summer of 1968.[64] He showed a number of soft sculptures in that exhibition, but of more interest to the present study is an unrealized proposal for Documenta 4 that Oldenburg titled *The Garden.* This work involved fabricating 100 "like objects" and burying them in a plot of earth. The objects were to be dug up at different times, on a schedule, and their various states of decomposition would vary relative to how long they were buried. Collectors were to be allowed to purchase the object they wanted, and return for it at a prearranged time. Though rejected from Documenta 4, this idea was subsequently included in *Art in the Mind,* a project organized by Athena Spear at the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio, in 1970. The exhibition catalogue featured Oldenburg's proposal and two drawings: a grid pattern showing the proposed distribution of the objects

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[64] Arnold Bode, Max Imdahl, Jűrgen Harten, J. Leering, and Janni Műller-Hauch, *Documenta 4* (Kassel: Druck + Verlag, 1968).

(fig. 23), and a large square indicating "the object, as yet undetermined"(fig. 24).[65]

The conceptual bent and the digging idea evident in *The Garden* proposal for Documenta 4 probably grew from a work that Oldenburg actually succeeded in executing a year earlier. In the autumn of 1967, Oldenburg contributed *Placid Civil Monument* (a grave-sized ditch dug behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art) to the outdoor exhibition, *Sculpture in Environment*. This show, sponsored by the New York City Administration of Recreation and Cultural Affairs, featured a number of large-scale, traditional sculptures, as well as Oldenburg's piece. *Placid Civil Monument* was more of a performance than an artwork, since the hole was refilled almost as soon as it was dug out on October 1, 1967 (fig. 25).

The dynamics at play in *The Garden* and *Placid Civil Monument* would seem to stray a bit from the topic of Oldenburg's engagement with the museum. Yet *Placid Civil Monument*, as a grave dug behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, can be read as a grave for the museum, however ephemeral. [66] *The Garden* is relevant as an unsuccessful

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[65] Athena Spear, *Art in the Mind* (Oberlin, Ohio: Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1970), n.p.

[66] Thomas Hoving, then director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and former Park Commissioner, quipped that perhaps

proposal to Documenta 4; as we shall see, Oldenburg triumphed in Kassel in 1972 by embracing and exaggerating the theme of Documenta 5. His strategy was to structure his proposed entry in the form of a museum.

Documenta 5

The theme of Documenta 5 was "Inquiry into Reality: Today's Imagery." The catalogue, comprising projects by 166 participating artists and collectives, is unwieldy.[67] It takes the form of a bright orange two-ring binder, the cover of which features a group of black worker ants loosely forming the numeral "5," while the back cover sports five additional worker ants, randomly distributed. Across the spine, "1972 documenta 5" is printed in lowercase Times Roman font in white ink. Inside, the catalogue is divided into 25 labeled sections, including, "*Politische Propaganda* (Political Propaganda);" "Science

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the grave was intended for him, "a grave right in back of the Metropolitan … whether I'm supposed to jump into it I don't know," to which Mayor Lindsay is said to have replied, "the hole has been dug … as a final resting place for ex-Park Commissioners." Robert E. Dallos, "Sculpture Stirs Interest, Sight Unseen," *The New York Times* (October 2, 1967) cited in Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 7.

[67]*Documenta 5: Befrangung der Realität* (Kassel: Documenta GmbH, 1972).

Fiction;" "*Utopie* (Utopia);" "*Realismus* (Realism);" and "*Idee + Idee/Licht* (Idea + Idea/Light)."

Advance publicity for the exhibition included, "Draft program for documenta 5 as a thematic exhibition," authored by exhibition organizers Jean-Christophe Amann, Arnold Bode, and Harald Szeemann. It was published in *Informationen*, an art magazine based in Kassel.[68] In their tri-lingual (German, French, and English) summary, the authors explain "the structure of the theme for d5":

1. reality of the image
2. reality of "what is portrayed"
3. identity or non-identity of the image and of "what is portrayed"

or

1. the system of images, objects, signs as a reality
2. the "portrayed," the signified, and the objectivated [sic] as a reality
3. the unity or difference between the content of reality which characterizes the image or "what is portrayed"

or

1. the autonomous, free world of images, imaginations, and projects which have no or very little relation to any other reality than their own.
2. visual representations, which are essentially instruments and procedures in one's dealing with a given reality
3. Congruents of the images and "what is portrayed" because
   a) the faculty of distinguishing between these varying levels of reality is either not yet developed or has been lost through illness
   or

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[68] Jean-Christophe Amann, Arnold Bode, and Harald Szeemann, "Konzept documenta 5," *Informationen* (March 1971), n.p.

> b) Because it is the only way to resolve certain historical problems. Conversely a series of cognitive processes are determined by the necessity of establishing the irremovable difference between the image and "what is portrayed."[69]

The draft goes on for nine pages in this list format, endeavoring to articulate the range of issues addressed by the exhibition. In spite of the rational rhetoric of categories and subcategories, and perhaps inevitably (given the scope of their ambition) the result is remarkably convoluted. The organizers expressed an interest in using semiotics to structure their exhibition of visual art and popular culture; to make a broad international survey addressing the "significance of art in connection with the attempt to resolve social problems;" and, finally, "to be clear about what reality consists of."[70]

In the most thoroughgoing and dispassionate review of Documenta 5 that I have come across, Lawrence Alloway mapped out some of the conflicts that developed between various constituencies with investments in the exhibition:

> It should be noted that the organizers, owing to their theme, are to an extent in opposition to the dealers because they are not interested in 'nonartistic images' and the artists because their work is being

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[69] "Konzept documenta 5," *Informationen*, n.p.

[70] "Konzept documenta 5," *Informationen*, n.p.

> set into a theory apart from their intentions. The profit motive and the defense of esthetic autonomy are aligned against the ambitious thematic control of the organizers.[71]

It was in fact the "ambitious control of the organizers" that chafed so many who came in contact with Documenta 5, including critics on both the left and the right. Comparing the art fair to the epic Wagner festival, Hilton Kramer described the event as "the Bayreuth of the Neo-Dadaists." Before engaging in what one suspects from the outset can only be a bitter critique, Kramer commented

> Kassel has this year become the Bayreuth of the Neo-Dadaists and their myriad *groupuscles*. One may be elated or depressed by what one discovers to be the constituents of this giant shrine consecrated to the spirit of Dada, but one cannot help being impressed - impressed, above all, at the size of the budget that the higher councils of an advanced industrial state are willing to lavish on a mockery of their own values. [72]

Kramer was discomfited by the organization of Documenta 5 and its catalogue, which, he noted, sports "dozens of learned references to Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Lenin, and, of course, enough bibliographic data to

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[71] Lawrence Alloway, " 'Reality': Ideology at D5," *Artforum* 11 (October 1972): 30.

[72] Hilton Kramer, "Documenta 5: The Bayreuth of the Neo-Dadaists," *The New York Times*, section 2 (July 9, 1972), 15.

keep the graduate schools humming for years." He also had little use for much of the art on view, concluding, "most of the show is alternately nasty and boring."[73]

Writing for *Artforum*, both Carter Ratcliff and Lizzie Borden found the exhibition thesis an entirely useless apparatus for apprehending the actual work on display; in separate reviews, they proposed alternative strategies for navigating the exhibition. Ratcliff found that "one can challenge [Documenta 5's] organizational principles, but the experience of individual works can be lost in the attempt to defend them from their setting."[74] For him, works that functioned as entirely self-contained environments fared best in the exhibition. Ratcliff singled out room-scale installations by Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, and Michael Asher as best in show. Serra's *Circuit*, 1972 (fig. 26), consisted of four large steel plates projecting diagonally from the corners of a square gallery and almost meeting in the center of the room. Nauman's *Elliptical Space*, 1972, comprised two plywood arcs that initially seem parallel but narrow almost to a point at one end. Michael

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[73] Kramer, "Documenta 5," 15.

[74] Carter Ratcliff, "Adversarial Spaces," *Artforum* XI (October 1972): 40.

Asher's *Environment*, 1972, was a dimly lit gallery, painted black on one side and white on the other. These works were each total environments that manipulated sensations of spatial disorientation and claustrophobia. Ratcliff lauded the autonomy of these three installations, which by his lights were the only wholly successful works in the entire exhibition. "Serra, Nauman, and Asher begin with spaces physically independent, which they elaborate until they are rich enough to reveal a conceptual aspect: their challenge to Documenta is complete."[75]

Ratcliff's phraseology - "adversarial spaces," "defend them from their setting," and "challenge to Documenta" - demonstrates that he experienced Documenta 5 as an environment hostile to the viewing of art. In her review, entitled "Cosmologies," Lizzie Borden was similarly prepared to abandon the twenty-five categories offered by the exhibition organizers. For these, she substituted four categories of her own: "art as invention of a personal mythology, art as the objective investigation of form and material, art as the literal objectification of the world, and art as definition through language and pictographic

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[75] Carter Ratcliff, "Adversarial Spaces," 40.

signs."[76] With these flexible categories, Borden could allow for the success of more artists than Ratcliff's single, rigorous criterion, yet she shared with him the need to remap the show before she could make any sense of it. Under the sign of mythology Borden was able to consider the diverse projects of H. C. Westermann (fig. 27), Yoko Ono, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and Vito Acconci; "investigation of form and material" encompassed Eva Hesse's sculpture and Robert Ryman's painting as well as Richard Serra's installation; "art as objectification" included work by Richard Estes and Duane Hanson; and Borden's discussion of "definition through language and pictographic signs" focused on pieces by Hanne Darboven and Mel Bochner. For Borden, whose response to the exhibition was less defensive than Ratcliff's, "the most successful pieces are those that define personal conventions or traditions as structures for invention."[77]

In spite of the misgivings voiced by the critics, perhaps the most violent reaction to the exhibition's thesis was expressed by a group of artists. Ten artists based in New York signed the following manifesto, which was

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[76] Lizzie Borden, "Cosmologies," *Artforum* XI(October 1972): 45-50.

[77] Lizzie Borden, "Cosmologies," 50.

published as an advertisement in the June, 1972 issue of *Artforum*:

> The undersigned affirm the following points, prompted primarily in response to Documenta 5, but pertaining to all exhibition conditions.
>
> 1. It is the right of the artist to determine whether his art will be exhibited. It is the right of an artist to determine what and where he exhibits.
> 2. A work of art should not be exhibited in a classification without the artist's consent.
> 3. An artist must have the right to do what he wants without censorship in the space allotted in the catalogue.
> 4. A complete, itemized budget of all institutional expenses - including allocations to participants, transportation, curatorial fees, etc. - should be made public immediately after the exhibition.
>
> Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Don Judd, Sol LeWitt, Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, Dorothea Rockburne, Fred Sandback, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson.[78]

All ten of these artists had been invited to show in Documenta 5, therefore their objection cannot be read simply as a case of sour grapes. Rather, the wildly baroque classification systems for the work seemed for some too onerous to bear. It is interesting to note that of the ten signatories to the manifesto, four of them (Haacke, LeWitt, Le Va, and Rockburne) participated in the exhibition anyway, and a fifth, Smithson, drafted a second

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[78] Advertisement, *Artforum* X (June 1972): 92.

statement. Since Smithson's statement was featured along with his biography, bibliography, and exhibition history in the exhibition catalogue, his wordy "withdrawl" also functioned as Smithson's contribution to Documenta 5. I suspect that Smithson's text was born of unmitigated annoyance as it lacks the humor, subtlety, and layered meanings that are the hallmarks of his best polemical essays.[79] Smithson described the organization of Documenta 5 as "Cultural Confinement," which he says

> takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories … this causes acute anxiety among artists, in so far as they challenge, compete, and fight for the spoiled ideas of lost situations.[80]

Yet not all of the work in the exhibition was diminished by the organization of Documenta 5. Kramer singled out one artist, Claes Oldenburg, for not only overcoming but actually capitalizing on the context of the exhibition. "Sifting through the rubbish," Kramer wrote,

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[79] The most famous example of Smithson's use of polemics for virtuoso grandstanding is his letter to the editor in response to Michael Fried's article, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* VI(October 1967), reprinted in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 66-67. This topic is discussed in depth in the following chapter, "Museums of the Void: Robert Smithson's History of Art and Artists."

[80] *Documenta 5: Befrangung der Realität,* section 17, 74.

> examples of artistic merit are not hard to find … foremost among them, certainly, in Claes Oldenburg's *Maus Museum*, in which the artist's own miniature kitsch inventions and collections perform a reverse parody on the general theme of Documenta 5.[81]

Oldenburg himself admitted that the theme of the show happened to allow him to realize a project he had been developing for seven years. In an interview with Angela Westwater, he explained his response to the advance publicity for Documenta 5 as follows:

> It seemed to be an exhibition about art as a form of knowledge rather than a survey of quality in art. It included a study of non-art or near-art materials from popular culture. It seemed ideal for my museum and I doubt that I would have pulled the museum together if this occasion had not presented itself. Also an overscholarly approach was evident in the original prospectus. At first this put me off, and then I realized that I could apply the same approach to my museum.[82]

Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum* (fig. 28) was included in section 13 of Documenta 5, "*Museen von Künstlern* (Museums by Artists)." Occupying a prominent location in the main entrance hall to Kassel's Neue Galerie, "Museums by Artists" also included work by four other artists - BEN (Ben Vautier), Marcel Broodthaers, Herbert Distel, and

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[81] Kramer, "Documenta 5," 15.

[82] Angela Westwater Reaves, "Claes Oldenburg, An Interview," *Artforum* 11, no. 2 (Oct. 1972), 37.

Duchamp -- whose contributions I will outline here to provide a context for Oldenburg's work. [83] Vautier contributed *L'Armoire*, which contained a number of real and imagined objects "signed" by the artist to claim them as his own artwork (fig. 29). The items Vautier signed included "truth," "death," "the contents of the Larousse dictionary," "two steaks and a salad," and his own signature. The piece aspired to the avant-garde tradition of nomination as creation which had been persuasive not only in the case of Duchamp's readymades, but also in the work of Yves Klein (whose *Le Vide*, 1958, was an empty gallery that Klein designated as an exhibition), and Piero Manzoni(whose *Socle du Monde (Pedestal for the World)*, 1961, consisted of an inverted iron and bronze base that he imagined to be holding up the earth). However, Vautier's *L'Armoire* lacked ambition of its predecessors. Lawrence Alloway described it as "a lame piece of Flux-tat," before allowing, "it does equate museum ordering with a low level of domestic arrangement, which Szeeman probably wanted." [84]

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[83] See *Documenta 5: Befrangung der Realität*, section 13, 1-18. Daniel Spoerri is included in the index to section 13, but no exhibition entry by him appears in the catalogue, nor does Spoerri's work appear in the 80-page catalogue insert, which indexes both the artists and their exhibited works while also showing floor plans of the exhibition halls. I conclude therefore that he did not participate.

At Documenta 5, Marcel Broodthaers staged the closing of his *Musée d'Art Moderne Département des Aigles (Museum of Modern Art, Eagle Department)*, 1968-72. Broodthaers's project had begun as an installation at his home in Brussels in 1968, and had traveled peripatetically to venues in Paris, Cologne, Antwerp, and Düsseldorf, as well as to a beach in Belgium. In each place a different department of the museum was exhibited, including *Section XIX siècle (Ninteenth-century Section); M.U.S.É.E. D'A.R.T.CAB.INE.T D.ES.E. STA.MPE.S. (Museum of Art Print Department); Section Littéraire (Literary Section); Section Documentaire (Documentary Section); Section XVIIe siècle (Seventeenth-century Section); Section Folklorique/Cabinet les Curiositiés (Folkloric Section/Cabinet of Curiosities); Section Cinema (Cinema Section), Section Financière (Financial Section)* -- in which the museum declared bankruptcy; and *Section des Figures [Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute] Figures Section [The Eagle from the Oglicene to the Present])*.

Broodthaers installed sections of his museum in two separate areas of Documenta 5. *Section Publicité (Publicity Section)* of the *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles*

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[84] Lawrence Alloway, " 'Reality': Ideology at D5," 34.

(fig. 30) was included in "Museums by Artists," while *Section d'Art Moderne (Modern Art Section)* (fig. 31) appeared in "Individual Mythologies." *Section Publicité* considered the museum as a form of public relations, while *Section d'Art Moderne,* consisting primarily of a black square painted on the gallery floor with the words "Private Property" (in English, French, and German) spelled out in gold letters.[85] The performative aspects of Broodthaers's project which he nevertheless persisted in calling a museum, and its engagement of multiple sites at Documenta 5, link his work to that of Oldenburg, who also engaged multiple sites at Documenta 5.

Herbert Distel's *Schubladenmuseum für moderne Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert (Drawer Museum for Modern Art in the twentieth century),* begun in 1970, included miniature works by 178 contemporary artists displayed in twenty drawers, including Oldenburg's tiny *Geometric Mickey Mouse,* 1972 (fig. 32). Distel would continue to add to his museum collection until 1977. By the time he pronounced the work complete, it contained five hundred artworks by different artists, with a focus on work from the 1960s and 1970s.

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[85] See Kristen Erikson, "Marcel Broodthaers," in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 64-69, for an extended narrative of Broodthaers's museum projects.

Distel imagined the 500 compartments within the drawers, which each measured roughly two inches square, as "tiny rooms." [86]

Oldenburg's contribution to "Museums by Artists" was, of course, *Mouse Museum (Maus Museum)*, 1972 (fig. 33). Oldenburg credited part of the success of this version of the *Mouse Museum* to his collaboration with Kasper König, organizer of the "Museums by Artists" section of the exhibition. "I was fortunate to have a German advisor, Kasper König, who could clarify the problems, deal with the laborers, and plead my case with the higher-ups."[87] As he mentions in his chronology, Oldenburg initially discussed a geometric mouse theme with König in 1966. In Kassel, Oldenburg was able to realize the *Mouse Museum* as an independent work. To recognize König's contribution, and to make the analogy more compelling, Oldenburg named König Director of the *Mouse Museum*.

The *Mouse Museum* in Kassel comprised 367 found, donated, and fabricated objects from Oldenburg's collection. To further mimic the hyper-organization of

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[86] For Distel's narrative of the project, see Kynaston McShine, ed., *Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, 76.

[87] Angela Westwater Reaves, "Claes Oldenburg, An Interview," 36.

Documenta 5 over all, Oldenburg and König, together with Ilka König, painstakingly inventoried the collection in both English and German. In addition to the five pages devoted to the *Mouse Museum* in the official Documenta 5 catalogue (more space than was allocated to any other artist in the section), Oldenburg and König created a separate publication complete with two rings which enabled it to be inserted into the larger catalogue.[88] The thirty-two page insert includes a floor plan of the museum, an introduction by König, installation photos of the work at Documenta 5, and the inventory of the objects. The inventory divides the works into three categories: unaltered objects, altered objects (marked "AO"), and studio objects (marked "SO" in the inventory -- these include fragments of sculptures, models for sculptures, and left-over pieces from sculptures). For König, "the *Mouse Museum* is intended as a microcosm of the museum experience."[89]

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[88] Claes Oldenburg and Kasper König, *Maus Museum, Eine Auswahl von Objekten gesammelt von Claes Oldenburg/A selection of objects by Claes Oldenburg* (Kassel: documenta GmbH, 1972).

[89] Claes Oldenburg and Kasper König, *Maus Museum, Eine Auswahl von Objekten gesammelt von Claes Oldenburg/A selection of objects by Claes Oldenburg*, 5.

What did viewers experience inside the *Mouse Museum*? Oldenburg described the movie camera, with its reel-to-reel spools attached on either side of the camera's body like two circles gently overlapping a square, as one inspiration for the geometric mouse shape. The *Mouse Museum* seems to omnivorously include all manner of small-scale flotsam and jetsam, as a movie camera taking in all the quotidian details of a city. In the darkness of the *Mouse Museum*, the lighting of objects inside the vitrines leads curious viewers around the internal perimeter of the display (fig. 34). Black framed and back-lit, the static tableau of objects in the vitrines seem to unfold like a panorama that is activated by the motion of the viewer's body. Visitors tend to travel the perimeter at a slow, steady pace, as in a languorous, panning movie shot.

The objects comprising the displays in the *Mouse Museum* (three examples include a bunch of plastic bananas, a harmonica in the shape of a banana, and a dog toy in the shape of a banana with a face and hat) range from the banal to the whimsical. There is a predominance of soft and hard phallic objects, in the forms of bananas, cigars, socks, and gizmos rendered in plastic, plaster, wood, and fabric. The other overriding dynamic in the installation is the chain of associations between otherwise dissimilar objects.

Groups are assembled based on a common shape, color, texture, or subject matter. A visual rhythm is established which, if translated to text, might read, "a is like b is like c is like d is like e is like f …" Items clustered together segue into another group of seemingly endless associations of objects that speak simultaneously to specificity and contingency. These things all depend, more or less, on context for their meaning. While bananas will read as bananas most anywhere, peel-off tabs from soda cans are unlikely to read as bananas (or light switches, or what have you) outside of this context.

How did the *Mouse Museum* relate to the other works in "Museums by Artists"? As with Distel's project, Oldenburg's work relied partly upon donations by other artists; unlike Distel's project, the donations Oldenburg collected tended to be unaltered trinkets rather than tiny works of art (it will be recalled that Oldenburg actually donated a miniature geometric mouse to Distel's *Drawer Museum of Modern Art*, so that Oldenburg figured in two of the four displays in the section). Duchamp's seminal *Boîte-en-valise* was influential for Oldenburg; and the *Mouse Museum* can be seen as an inversion of the Duchamp piece. If, with the *Boîte*, Duchamp replicated his oeuvre for easy portability, in the *Mouse Museum* Oldenburg amassed

too many items to travel with (the Mouse Museum's contents were chosen from over 1000 objects)[90] and which had yet to become, strictly speaking, sculptures. Donald Judd credited Oldenburg with "thoroughly corrupting his sources," and with providing a distorted reflection of Documenta 5 as a whole. [91] The *Mouse Museum* managed both to assimilate with yet hold its own in the context of the exhibition.

Oldenburg's success at Documenta 5 was partly a result of his collaboration with König, and partly a result of his unwitting adherence to the prescriptions that Ratcliff and Borden would subsequently lay out in their reviews, although neither of them discussed Oldenburg specifically. Ratcliff suggested that artists "begin with spaces physically independent, which they elaborate until they are rich enough to reveal a conceptual aspect" and Borden found that "the most successful pieces are those that define

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[90] Kasper König, "Introduction," in Claes Oldenburg and Kasper König, *Maus Museum, Eine Auswahl von Objekten gesammelt von Claes Oldenburg/A selection of objects by Claes Oldenburg*, 5.

[91] Donald Judd, "Review for the Oldenburg exhibition at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm," July 1966, unpublished until its inclusion in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Statements, Complaints* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 191-92.

personal conventions or traditions as structures for invention." By these criteria, the *Mouse Museum* stood out at Documenta 5 when many other works could not.

Final form of the *Mouse Museum*

At the close of Documenta 5, Oldenburg packed up his collection and demolished the exhibition booth. While his collecting never ceased, the *Mouse Museum* was not shown again for five years, until Oldenburg decided that the collection deserved its own exhibition. At van Bruggen's urging, Oldenburg abandoned the box shape of the 1972 version of the *Mouse Museum*'s exterior. With the support of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and an NEA grant, a new display case was fabricated that revealed the geometric mouse form on the exterior of the booth (fig. 35).[92] Judith Russi Kirshner organized "The Mouse Museum, The Ray Gun Wing, Two Collections/Two Buildings by Claes Oldenburg," which opened at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in 1977. The exhibition traveled to Phoenix, St. Louis, Dallas, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.[93] An

[92] Extensive photographic documentation of the *Mouse Museum*'s fabrication is housed in the curatorial files of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

expanded version of the exhibition catalogue was compiled by Coosje van Bruggen for the European leg of the exhibition, which included venues in Otterlo and Cologne.[94] The *Mouse Museum* and *Ray Gun Wing* were both acquired for the Peter Ludwig collection in Cologne, where they remain.

Oldenburg's collection of enigmatic ray guns (found and fabricated objects incorporating a right angle [fig. 36]) had grown to a point where the artist decided to build for them a revolver-shaped building, which he named the *Ray Gun Wing* (fig. 37). Again, the process of inventorying the objects was integral to the piece. Although the sequence and categories of the 1972 version of the *Mouse Museum* were retained, the inventory had to be renumbered, "following the removal of the Ray Gun objects and the loss and deterioration of certain others."[95]

Unlike the *Mouse Museum* proper, the *Ray Gun Wing* included a number of photographs of ray guns that were "too fragile to move or fixed to their sites" (fig. 38).[96] Ray

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[93] See Judith Russi Kirshner, *The Mouse Museum, The Ray Gun Wing, Two Collections/Two Buildings by Claes Oldenburg* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977).

[94] See Coosje van Bruggen, *Claes Oldenburg: Mouse Museum/ Ray Gun Wing* (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 1979).

[95] Note in curatorial file, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

Gun is a fitting conclusion to Oldenburg's analysis of the form of the museum, since it functioned both as a category and as an alter ego in his oeuvre beginning in the late 1950s. "Ray Gun MFG Co." had been a pseudonym for the studio on East Second Street, and *Empire (Papa) Ray Gun*, 1959, was one of his first sculptures (fig. 39). Oldenburg claimed that Ray Gun "is ultimately the unknowable pursued futilely through all its disguises";[97] this could account for its omnipresence in his work up to a certain point, as well as for his decision finally to end the project in 1977.

Conclusion

In a letter to Judith Russi Kirshner, Oldenburg described the *Mouse Museum* and *Ray Gun Wing* as "small museums-on-my-own-terms."[98] The form of the *Mouse Museum*, with its ability to encompass anything that captured Oldenburg's attention, fueled the artist's creative process

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[96] Judith Russi Kirshner, *The Mouse Museum, The Ray Gun Wing, Two Collections/Two Buildings by Claes Oldenburg*, 50.
[97] Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg*, 62. For a longer discussion of the Ray Gun theme, see Susan Ginsburg, "Ray Gun," in "Claes Oldenburg: Sculpture, 1960-1968, A Catalogue Raisonné," 95-100.

[98] Letter from Claes Oldenburg to Judith Russi Kirshner, dated May 22, 1977. Curatorial files, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

for over fifteen years. Oldenburg's museums may be understood as conceptual art in their reliance on archival systems to organize information, and as Pop art in their use of consumer goods as source material. By embracing these categories Oldenburg absorbed and moved beyond them, taking what was useful and discarding the rest. The art historian Briony Fer finds in Oldenburg's work of the 1960s, "a dream map of commodity culture and its projected desires."[99] While Fer was speaking of Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963, this is nowhere more apparent than in the *Mouse Museum*. For Oldenburg, the *Mouse Museum* functioned as an organized repository for the results of his impulsive desires to create and collect. For the viewer it provides a hallucinogenic experience of scale (the world viewed from the perspective of a mouse) as well as an open-ended and associative discourse concerning the different levels on which objects speak to us.

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[99] Briony Fer, "The Somnambulist's Story: Installation and The Tableau," *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2002), 75-92.

Chapter 2: Museums of the Void: Robert Smithson's History of Art and Artists

Introduction

Robert Smithson's address of the modern art museum, and his critique of the construction "art history" are two of the most compelling aspects of his oeuvre. Surveying the possibilities offered by a second generation of New York School painters and by Clement Greenberg's ever-narrowing prescriptions for modernist painting after Pollock (the Scylla and Charybdus for artists coming of age in New York in the early 1960s) Smithson worked to articulate and realize a paradigm shift beginning in the mid-1960's.[100] Smithson's oblique and accumulative texts collage together words and images from eclectic sources to create a series of manifestos against historical determinism in art making and art history. The ways in which Smithson both adopted and subverted the form and content of the modern art museum will be analyzed through

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[100] Smithson's reception of Greenberg, is a topic which warrants further study; I deal with it briefly in what follows through an analysis of Smithson's use of Michael Fried. One archival point of departure for such a study would be Smithson's heavily annotated copy of Greenberg's *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), which is on deposit in his library at Archives of American Art. On the reception of Greenberg in the 1960s, see *Art Criticism in the Sixites: A Symposium of the Poses Institute, Institute of Fine Arts, Brandeis University* (New York: October House, 1967).

close readings of specific works - drawings, writings, film, and three-dimensional projects - in context. Smithson's use of the magazine page as a curated space will be discussed, as will his development of authorial/artistic personae. Smithson's Dallas-Fort Worth airport proposal (1966-69), which was conceived as an aerial museum, will be examined. Smithson's signature work, *Spiral Jetty* will be considered as a four-part project: earthwork (1970), film (1970), essay (1971), and museum proposal (1971).

A cursory summary of the literature reveals that Smithson's work has not suffered a lack of scholarly attention. Arguably the most articulate and influential criticism on Smithson was written by Craig Owens, whose "Earthwords" (*October*, fall 1979), functioned as a review of Smithson's collected writings.[101] Citing two of Smithson's own essays - "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" ("The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum.

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[101] See Craig Owens, "Earthwords," October 10 (Fall 1979): 120-132. *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, edited by Nancy Holt, with an introduction by Philip Leider and designed by Sol LeWitt, was published by New York University Press in 1979. The book was re-released in 1996 by University of California Press, edited by Jack Flam as part of the Documents of Twentieth Century Art series (which was first edited by Robert Motherwell and also includes the collected writings of Hugo Ball, Ad Reinhardt, and Pierre Matisse, among others). The Flam edition includes more previously unpublished texts by Smithson and an introduction by Flam. Leider's introduction and LeWitt's design for the 1979 publication were not retained in the Flam edition.

Embedded in the sedimentation is a text …") and "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" ("In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost …") - Owens persuasively argues for the critical (in both senses of the word) importance of writing to the whole of Smithson's endeavor. It is not surprising that Owens, whose own writing was deeply informed by structuralism, would be attracted to Smithson's use of language, which Owens described as "worthy of Borges or Barthes."[102] It is interesting, however, that the trope of the museum, so prominent in the citations selected by Owens ("the earth is a jumbled museum," "a museum of language") should remain invisible to him. This chapter will explore Smithson's repeated, incantory address of the museum as a third point, in addition to the earth and word metaphors, with which to triangulate the topography of Smithson's theoretical landscape.

Owens' words are undeniably resonant for readers today, but they did not seem to influence the art historical literature that immediately followed his landmark essay.[103] Robert Hobbs' exhibition catalogues

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[102]Owens, "Earthwords," *October* 10(Fall 1979): 121.
[103] This is not to say that Owens was alone in his praise of Smithson as an author. Two other reviews of the

(*Robert Smithson Sculpture*, Cornell University, 1981, and *Robert Smithson, A Retrospective View*, Cornell University, 1983) tend to segregate the three-dimensional works from the writings, although two of Smithson's essays find their way into Hobbs' catalogue of the sculpture as items on the list of 74 major "works."[104] Following Owens, and explicitly critiquing Hobbs for focusing on Smithson's sculpture ca. 1965-1973 to the exclusion of early work and work in other media, Eugenie Tsai's dissertation, "Reconstructing Robert Smithson" re-places Smithson's early

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posthumously published writings, appearing outside of the art press, paid homage. "How exhilarating to find an art criticism that couches itself in terms of adventure," wrote David Shapiro in "A Poetics of the Earth," *Bennington Review* 13 (June 1982), 38. Peter Schjeldahl echoed this response, "in a man of such intellectual energy and tenacity, the incessant mental swooning unnerves and exhilarates. It is also incredibly seductive: a disembodied voice insinuates blissful rest in 'tired distances.'" "Monuments of a Metaphysical Dandy," *Village Voice Literary Supplement* 8(June 1982), 8.

[104] These are "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic" (first published as "The Monuments of Passaic"), *Artforum*, (December 1967), 68-74 in Flam and "Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan," *Artforum* (September 1969), 119-133 in Flam. Also included in Hobbs is an entry on "Hotel Palenque," 1969/72, a slide lecture delivered to architecture students at the University of Utah. The text of the lecture is not printed in Hobbs or Flam, but a slightly edited version may be found in "Robert Smithson: Hotel Palenque, 1969-72," *Parkett* 43 (1995), 117-32.

drawings, collages and writings within the context of his monumental works.[105]

Until recently, Ann Reynolds was the only author to give significant attention to the trope of the museum in Smithson's work.[106] In her article, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History as Nonsite" Reynolds argues that Smithson's conception of natural history and of museums in general begins with childhood visits to the American Museum of Natural History.[107] Sidestepping the issue of influence (she admits he may never have seen them) Reynolds discusses an intriguing affinity between Smithson's nonsite works (containers of earth and rock samples from outdoor locations brought into the gallery space) and the natural history museum's so-called

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[105] Eugenie Tsai, "Reconstructing Robert Smithson," diss., Columbia University (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1995).

[106] The newest addition to this literature is Jennifer Roberts, "Mirrored Travels: Robert Smithson and History," diss., Yale University (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 2000). Although Roberts' primary interest is the construction of history and time across Smithson's oeuvre, she does persuasively read *Spiral Jetty* as a specific critique of the nearby Golden Spike national historic monument.

[107] Ann Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History as Nonsite," *October* 45 (Summer 1988), 109-27. This article became a chapter of Reynolds's dissertation which has lately been published as a book, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 2002).

"musettes" - traveling carrying cases containing "representative specimens of mammals, birds, insects, minerals and wood drawn from the museum's collection" sent to public school teachers for use in preparing their students for visits to the museum. From there, Reynolds discusses Smithson's site/nonsite works as a sympathetic critique of the museum's exhibition practices. Having identified the museum as a structuring principle within Smithson's work, Reynolds then telescopes back to consider the treatment of Smithson's nonsites by art museums.[108] In what follows, I will pick up the trails marked but not followed by Owens, Tsai, and Reynolds, exploring the trope of the museum as a it runs through Smithson's history of art and artists.

Museum

In 1960 Smithson made a drawing titled *The Museum* (fig. 40). Related in style and concept to contemporaneous works such as *Agony*, 1960 and *Man of Ashes*, 1961, which deal with intersections of science fiction and Catholic

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[108] Reynolds convincingly argues that to show the nonsite objects without the accompanying photographs that Smithson considered integral to the work, as the Whitney Museum of American Art has done, is to strip them of their dialectical and didactic functions.

mysteries, *The Museum* is significant as Smithson's earliest address of the institution.[109] As such, it bears a close look.

The pencil drawing is rendered on a large (18 x 20") sheet of paper and comprises a rudely sketched assembly of grotesque characters astride the back of a serpent. The snake doubles back on itself, in the form of a counterclockwise circle, or a compressed, inverted "S" shape. The snake has broad lips drawn back in a grimace across human teeth. Scanning from left to right, the viewer encounters the following: a woman giving birth, an anthropomorphic pagoda with fangs and a drill-like tongue, a doorway framing a grimacing man's head with mismatched organs dangling from his shoulders (a Frankenstein project gone awry?), a man in a suit, and a plucked ostrich with human feet and a woman's face. Glancing upward one

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[109] These works and others are illustrated in Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). For a discussion of how the eroticism in Smithson's drawings of this period is sublimated in his later work, see Caroline Jones, "Post-Studio/Postmodern: Robert Smithson and the Technological Sublime," in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Post-War American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a discussion of the early drawings (and Smithson's subsequent abandonment of figuration) in relationship to his Catholicism and theories of time, see Jennifer Roberts, "Mirrored Travels: Robert Smithson and History," diss. (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 2000,)especially "Part II: The Deposition of Time," 56-107.

encounters a grimacing rhomboid, which connects along the serpent's back to a strange, stage set village. Stripe forms suggest narrow planks hastily nailed together, from which arms, hands, and eyes protrude. The circle of the snake feeds back to a sloppily rendered, open-jawed monster. Visual interest, in the form of meticulous detail, has at this point has dissipated significantly. One gets the sense that Smithson, and the viewer, have become bored with the apocalyptic excess of the imagery. The decadent adventure ends in collapse.

Why was this sketch of grotesques and exhausted architecture entitled *Museum*? Like a Medieval illuminator drawing for the glory of God but more intrigued by the imagery of damnation, Smithson here works to redefine his relationship to both modern art and the church. In what follows I hope to show that while Smithson's simultaneous assault upon and identification with the museum became more nuanced as he matured, it remained a key structuring element in his work, from the early magazine pieces to the multiple forms of his influential *Spiral Jetty*.

Conscious Artist

Although his first solo gallery show was held in 1959, Smithson later recalled that he "began to function as a

conscious artist around 1964-65."[110] It was in 1965 that Smithson began spending time with many of the artists he then defined himself in relationship to, including Dan Graham, Donald Judd, Eva Hesse, and Sol LeWitt. Smithson's first publications, including a catalogue text on Judd, came out during this year. In one short essay, Smithson admires what he describes as Judd's "crystalline state of mind ... far removed from the organic floods of action painting,"[111] projecting his own interests in the science fiction of crystallography and antimatter onto Judd's work. Displaying a certain technology fetish, Smithson also praises both the industrial surfaces and industrial methods of fabrication evident in Judd's work. The following year Smithson and Judd, accompanied by Nancy Holt and Julie

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[110] Paul Cummings, "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution," in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 283 (hereinafter cited as Flam). The first posthumous show of the overtly religious and figurative work Smithson retroactively designated "unconscious" was "Robert Smithson: The Early Works: 1959-62" at Diane Brown Gallery, New York, January 19 - February 23, 1985. The matter of Smithson's self-censorship is problematized in Eugenie Tsai's exhibition catalogue, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings*. While I agree with Tsai's contention that Smithson's early work is integral to his oeuvre, it is Smithson's self-presentation ca. 1965 that concerns me here.

[111] Robert Smithson, "Donald Judd," 7 *Sculptors* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1965). Reprinted in Flam, 4-5.

Judd, went on a rock-hunting expedition in New Jersey. A narrative of this trip was published by Smithson as an article titled "The Crystal Land."[112] While Judd's work is discussed in "The Crystal Land," Smithson chose to illustrate the article with one of his own sculptures, an untitled work constructed with mirrored plastic and steel. Smithson saw in Judd's sculpture an alternative to the expressionist, figurative style in which he had previously been working and with which he had become frustrated and dissatisfied. Judd, who published criticism regularly in art magazines beginning in 1959, also provided Smithson with the model of an influential artist/writer.[113] Eager to expand his role on both fronts, Smithson co-organized and participated in the important "10" show at the Dwan Gallery (October 4-29, 1966). Smithson intended to articulate the

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[112] *Harper's Bazaar* (May 1966). Reprinted in Flam, 7-9. For a discussion of Dale McConathy, the art editor who published Smithson's work in *Harper's Bazaar*, see James Meyer, "The Mirror of Fashion: Dale McConathy and the Neo-Avant-Garde," *Artforum* (May 2001), 134-138. For an essay that links "The Crystal Land" and other works by Smithson to a tradition of glass symbolism in modern architecture, see Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "Mies and Dark Transparency," in Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, *Mies in Berlin* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 350-57, 381-83.

[113] See Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Statements, Complaints* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975).

importance of this exhibition as he saw it by drafting the press release. The group of exhibiting artists -- Carl Andre, Jo Baer, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Ad Reinhardt, and Michael Steiner - resisted Smithson's effort to speak on their behalf. In a letter to the critic John Canaday, gallery owner Virginia Dwan wrote:

> Because we were not able to get the ten artists in our current exhibition, "10," to arrive at any sort of manifesto (Manifesto being appropriate only to cohesive groups with mutual intent) we were not able to send you a press release which would in any way sum up this aggregate of work.[114]

Donald Judd put it even more succinctly in a letter to the editor of *Arts Magazine*, by stating simply, "Smithson doesn't speak for me."[115]

Curated Spaces

If Smithson was initially stymied by other artists resisting his lead, he soon found a solution in his work for magazines. In addition to "The Crystal Land," he published six major articles in 1966, each developing a

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[114] Dwan Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, New York.

[115] Donald Judd, letter to the editor, *Arts Magazine*, February 1967.

different aspect of his aesthetic position.[116] Two of these articles -- "Domain of the Great Bear" and "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space" -- address the omniscient narrative of museums with equal parts of humor and rigor. One is a deconstructive satire and the other itself a curated space in which Smithson discovered the freedom to organize quotations and images of works by other artists with impunity.[117]

"Domain of the Great Bear" was written collaboratively with the artist Mel Bochner. In this piece Smithson and Bochner use deadpan descriptions and photographs of the architecture and installations at the Museum of Natural

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[116] "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Artforum* June 1966; "The X Factor in Art," *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1966; "The Domain of the Great Bear," *ArtVoices*, Fall 1966; "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," *Arts Magazine* November 1966; "The Cryosphere," *Primary Structures*, 1966; "Interpolation of Enantiomorphic Chambers," *Art in Process* 1966, Finch College, 1966. These texts are all reprinted in Flam.

[117] For Smithson, who said "high seriousness and high humor are the same thing," ("What is a museum? A Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson," *Arts Yearbook*, "The Museum World," 1967, reprinted in Flam, 50) these conditions were not contradictory. He may have been familiar with, and was certainly sympathetic to, Borges's citation of Bernard Shaw, "all intellectual labor is inherently humorous … unintentional in the works of [some] but intentional, even indulged, in the works of [others]." "Preface to the 1954 Edition of 'A Universal History of Iniquity (1935)' " in Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, Andrew Hurley, translator, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 4.

History, particularly the Hayden Planetarium, to deconstruct the teleological narrative of "natural history" presented there. Taking pains to credit the museum -- "all photos are courtesy of the Museum of Natural History," they make the institution complicit in its own critique. After experiencing what they describe as "vertigo at contemplating man's most futile gesture -- patrimony of the infinite" the authors note a sign above the stairway reading, "Solar System and Rest Rooms." Forging ahead they take in the planetarium show titled "The Domain of the Great Bear." The authors obtain a copy of the show outline -- "courtesy of the Hayden Planetarium" -- and interject droll commentary throughout. Where the program reads, "Sunset, stars of the spring sky, the Domain of the Great Bear," Smithson and Bochner note, "Rapid motion of false stars produces a mild nausea or seasickness. Canned 'classical music' adds to the effect." With unabashed glee, Smithson and Bochner advance an oblique argument for cultural and historical relativism by exposing the arbitrary constructs of the museum's exhibits. There is in this sense a sympathy between the authors and the enthusiasm with which a certain T. Voter, an illustrator employed by the Museum of Natural History to paint dioramas, imagines the end of the world. Reproduced in

"The Domain of the Great Bear" are illustrations of not one but three of Voter's apocalyptic fantasies - "a bombardment of meteors," "an increase in the sun's energy," and "the earth doomed to frigid death." At the same time, Smithson and Bochner replace these dramatic conclusions with anticlimax. When describing the exhibits, Smithson could just as well be describing his own circular, proliferative mode of writing: "The supposed factuality yields no information. Nothing is known but the impenetrable surfaces."[118] This preoccupation with surface can be understood as self-referential, because the list of materials noted in the planetarium's design (formica, flourescents, chrome and Plexiglas) sound suspiciously like the materials of Smithson's own sculpture from around this time (for example, *The Eliminator*, 1964, made from steel, mirrors, and neon or *Quick Millions*, 1965, made from plexiglass and corrugated acrylic).

In a recent interview, Mel Bochner credits Sam Edwards and Susan Brockman (then editors at *Arts Magazine* and its sister publication, *Art Voices*) with granting Smithson and himself the flexibility to blur the boundaries between artwork and magazine article:

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[118] Flam, 28.

> The change occurs … when artists take the magazine and use it as a site for an artwork. Smithson and I did that first, in the piece we did together, the "Domain of the Great Bear," in *Art Voices*, September 1966. It's the first artwork as magazine article, where the artists write the text, choose the illustrations, do the layout and present it as a work of art in itself. It's not a reproduction of something, it's a reproduction as the thing itself. The art magazine, which is supposedly a secondary source system, becomes a primary site. It's an interesting way of intersecting one's art with the culture, a more subversive way. [119]

A contemporaneous work combining humor with polemic is "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space: For many artists the universe is expanding; for others it is contracting."[120] Smithson self-consciously describes the formal construction of the piece in his opening sentence, "Around four blocks of print I shall postulate four ultramundane margins that shall contain indeterminate information as well as reproduced reproductions."[121] A layout for the article, now in Sol LeWitt's collection (fig. 41), shows how carefully Smithson considered this arrangement. Independent from their content, the text blocks are imagined as abstract masses densely packed, "7 to 8 words across and 40 to 42

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[119] Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: SoHo Press, 2000), 205-206.

[120] *Arts Magazine*, November 1966. Reprinted in Flam, 34-37.

[121] Flam, 34.

lines vertically." The images were to be numerous but barely legible: "photos no larger than 1 ½ x 1 ¾ inches, photos should be as small as possible, miniature photos." A related, perhaps earlier sketch titled *Map Ruins* reveals an even further reduced conception of the dynamic between center and circumference in the layout. It shows a central block of text encircled by nine unidentified chunks of text and images. The cartographic reference, a recurring theme is Smithson's work, would suggest that one function of the peripheral illustrations is to serve as iconic "legends" to the central text, or "map." As published, the visual impact of this four-page piece is reinforced by the absence of advertisements on or between its pages (a situation which bears out Bochner's claim that these articles are artworks in themselves, unbroken by the standard format of the magazine). A virtuosic example of the footnote as literary device, the article stages a dialectic between the periphery and the body of the text, in which one continually referencing the other without ever adding up to a cohesive whole. The marginalia, ranging from reproductions of ancient Roman and neo-classical French architecture to citations from science fiction film and literature, threaten to overwhelm the text. The "footnotes," expand to encompass, if not engulf, the

article on all sides. In the notes, sources including Samuel Beckett, John Cage, George Kubler, and Paul Valéry are quoted appreciatively; Clement Greenberg less so. By reproducing the works of many artists in his margins, Smithson leapfrogs his earlier ambition of drafting a manifesto and proceeds directly to curating his own two-dimensional "museum." In a later interview, Smithson explained: "A museum could exist just as well as a magazine, it is just a matter of changing context, and more and more this will happen." [122] The "10" group is represented in this article by the work of Reinhardt and Judd; they are joined by their contemporaries Dan Graham, Eva Hesse, Lucas Samaras, and Ruth Vollmer. Historical modernism is absorbed through the inclusion of Alberto Giacometti, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock. Taking on nothing less than the critical framework and space of exhibition for mainstream modern art in the 1960s, Smithson claims that there is "nothing abstract about a de Kooning

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[122] Paul Toner, "Interview with Robert Smithson," 1970, in Flam, 236. Although André Malraux's "musée imaginaire" -- discussed in the first volume of Malraux, *Le voix du silence* (Paris: Galerie de la Pléide, 1952) and widely available in English as Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, translated by Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) -- would seem an obvious source for this notion, Malraux is not mentioned in Smithson's writings nor are his books to be found in Smithson's library.

or a Pollock. To locate them in a formalist system is simply a critical mutation based on a misunderstanding of metaphor -- namely, the biological extended into the spatial."[123]

What was Smithson's objection to art being understood through a biological metaphor? For an alternative model of time and history, Smithson looked to George Kubler's slender but influential volume, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*.[124] In this book, Kubler advances a method for considering art's history which is "expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world"[125] and he suggests that the language of physical science may be more useful to this study than a formalism based on an organic

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[123] Elsewhere in the article, Smithson finds the organic shapes of the Guggenheim Museum inappropriate to its surroundings, exhibiting a "nostalgic anti-urban attitude." In a footnote he comments, "the Guggenheim is perhaps Wright's most visceral achievement. No building is more organic than this inverse digestive tract. The ambulatories are metaphorical intestines. It is a concrete stomach."

[124] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962). Smithson owned an enthusiastically annotated paperback version of this book, issued in 1964.

[125] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 1.

model, "the biological metaphor of style as a sequence of life-stages was historically misleading for it bestowed upon the flux of events the shape and behavior of organisms."[126] For Kubler, and for Smithson, the language of electrodynamics, which deals with the transmission of energy, leant itself surprisingly well as an apparatus for understanding art's history. In a similar vein, Smithson also embraced Kubler's notion of "actuality":

> Actuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between the ticks of the watch: it is a void interval slipping forever through time: the rupture between past and future: the gap at the poles of the revolving magnetic field, infinitesimally small but ultimately real. It is the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events.[127]

Rupture - interchronic pause - void. For Smithson these concepts were liberating pathways away from a notion of history, and art's history, as a coherent, seamless narrative. Smithson took particular note of Kubler's observation, "the decision to discard something is far from being a simple decision … it is a reversal of values"[128] and, later, "the precursor shapes a new civilization, the

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[126] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 8.

[127] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 17.

[128] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 77.

rebel defines the edges of a disintegrating one."[129] Smithson's influence on his contemporaries and his continuing influence on artists today qualify him for the former of Kubler's definitions, yet the almost delirious pleasure he took in applying to art the mechanics of disintegration, which he called entropy, would indicate that he was perhaps more fully the later.

Smithson concludes his article with a discussion of an avant-garde that is always collapsing but never collapsed. He makes his point by illustrating a formula borrowed from Borges in "Avatars of the Tortoise."[130] Borges takes as his topic the horror of infinity and uses "10 + 1 + 1/10 + 1/100 + 1/1000 + 1/10000 + :::" to express the "second paradox of Zeno," a theory which holds that a piece of string, for example, may be cut in half an infinite number of times, always getting closer to the end but never arriving at an end. Borges concludes his brief rumination by replacing this equation with a parable:

> We (the undivided divinity operating within us) have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time; but in its architecture we have allowed

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[129] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 91.

[130] Jorge Luis Borges, "Avatars of the Tortoise," in *Labyrinths: Selected Short Stories and Other Writings*. (New York: New Directions, 1962, 1964).

> tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason which tell us it is false.[131]

Although he elsewhere absorbs the poetic elegance of Borges' parable, for this text Smithson appropriates a cool, graphic equation that in objective mathematical language illustrates an existential idea, the notion of an infinite repetition paradoxically diminished with each iteration. This inversion fulfills the subtitle of Smithson's article, "waning of space" and proposes an alternative, however bleak, to positivist-inspired notions of progress in art.

Spokesman to Alter Ego

If Smithson initially solved the problem of persuading artists to agree on a united agenda by curating his own "museum" for magazine pages, he also found a way to exorcise this demon even more directly. With the Dwan Gallery exhibition, "Language to be looked at and/or things to be read," (June 1967) Smithson realized his delayed opportunity to draft a press release that claimed to speak for the group. Having discovered the freedom of fictional narrative through his magazine work, particularly his travelogue of the hallucinogenic journey through New Jersey

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[131] Jorge Luis Borges, "Avatars of the Tortoise," 208.

published as "Entropy and the New Monuments," he shifted from the role of legitimate spokesperson to that of alter ego. Drafting a "press release" which slipped between the modes of rant and poetry, Smithson met no resistance from his fellow artists when he signed this manifesto with the pseudonym "Eton Corrasable" (fig. 42). There was no need for consensus once Smithson replaced problematic "straight" journalism with a kind of performative writing. The press release is a delicious work of fiction, which in its languorous discourse on futility and "mental bogs of meaning" anticipates the entropic and earth metaphors that characterize the bulk of his subsequent work.[132]

Some Void Thoughts on Museums

In 1967 Smithson published two articles on art museums and possible alternatives to them: "Some Void Thoughts on

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[132] Smithson's self-presentation in magazine pages was not limited to text. In the March 1967 issue of *Arts Magazine*, he is featured in John Perrault's article, "Union-Made: Report on a Phenomenon." Smithson poses with the workers at Arko Metal Products. On a table in front of them is a unit, presumably freshly minted, of one of his untitled sculptures of 1966. With this image Smithson exchanged the romance of the studio for the grit and power of the workshop. In the article, Perrault (also an artist who writes), applauds Smithson's work as a sculptor but has harsh words for his talents as an author, "Although his works are of high caliber, Robert Smithson's writings are boyishly pretentious and distract from the validity of his actual work," 31.

Museums" and "What is a Museum? A Dialogue Between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson." The first article constitutes a cathartic purge of the museum, while the second extends the purge to a deliberately "pointless position … [because] to try to make some kind of point right away stops any kind of possibility."[133]

Smithson's ambition for "Some Void Thoughts on Museums" appears to be two-fold: to create a space for contemporary American creative endeavor by clear cutting through the forest of European art history, and to exploit the poetic possibilities of this conceptual devastation (as he said elsewhere, "dread can be an almost ecstatic state").[134] Like "Domain of the Great Bear" and "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," the prose in "Some Void Thoughts on Museums" departs from a typical art magazine article, but unlike those works, this one does not rely upon an imaginative layout; its innovations are

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[133] "Some Void Thoughts on Museums," *Arts Magazine* (February 1967) and "What is a Museum? A Dialogue Between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson," *Arts Yearbook*, "The Museum World" issue, are reprinted, with some changes to the original layouts, in Flam, 41-42, 43-51.

[134] Suzaan Boettger, ed., "Degrees of Disorder, a previously unpublished interview between Robert Smithson and Willoughby Sharp, recorded in 1968," *Art in America* 86 (December 1998), 75-81.

embedded solely within the text.[135] Smithson sets the mood by opening with a quote from Kubler: "Tomb furniture achieved apparently contradictory ends in discarding old things all the while retaining them, much as in our storage warehouses, and museum deposits, and antiquarian storerooms." Then, in his own words, Smithson describes a decimated cultural landscape:

> History is a facsimile of events held together by flimsy biographical information. Art history is less explosive than the rest of history so it sinks faster into the pulverized regions of time … visiting a museum is a matter of going from void to void … blind and senseless, one continues walking around the remains of Europe only to end in the massive deception, 'the art history of the recent past' … museums are like tombs and it seems that everything is turning into a museum.[136]

As it was originally published, "Some Void Thoughts on Museums" appeared beside a similarly brief and unillustrated piece by Allan Kaprow titled, "Death in the Museum: Where Art Thou, Sweet Muse? (I'm Hung Up at the Whitney)." Kaprow and Smithson agree that the art museum is moribund, but they express profoundly different attitudes toward it. In contrast to Smithson's stubborn

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[135] Smithson did make a related drawing, "Museum of the Void," which was reproduced together with the article in Flam, 41. The drawing did not appear with the article as it was originally published in *Arts Magazine*.

[136] Reprinted in Flam, 41-42.

passivity, Kaprow enacts a protest against the "aristocratic manners of curators, the hushed atmosphere, the reverence with which one is supposed to glide from work to work …"[137] (p. 40) and concludes with a call for change.

Smithson and Kaprow reprise their *pas de deux* in "What is a Museum? A Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson." Kaprow's position on the question of museums by this time was well-known; he had been advocating an extra-museum art for nearly a decade. He began staging events called Happenings in 1958, and reached a broad audience when "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" was published in *ArtNews* that same year.[138] The article claims that Happenings are a logical extension of Pollock's "environmental paintings." Kaprow's book, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, serves as a primary document for that collective activity, both as a first-hand account from a participant and as a rich source of photographic

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[137] Flam, 40.

[138] For an account of the early Happenings, see "Allan Kaprow interviewed by Sidney Simon," in Benjamin Buchloh and Judith Rodenbeck, *Experiments in the Everyday: Allan Kaprow and Robert Watts - Events, Objects, Documents* (New York: Columbia University, 1999). "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" appeared in *Art News* 57(October 1958): 24-26, 55-57 and was reprinted in Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1-9.

documentation of the ephemeral Happenings (which, per Kaprow's definition, can only occur once).[139] Although the book was written in 1959 and revised in 1961, it was not released until 1966, the year before this dialogue with Smithson took place. Not surprisingly, Kaprow opened the *Arts Yearbook* conversation with an attack on museums as mausolea, hoping to incite Smithson to join his cause. But Smithson, contrariwise, replied that his interest lies in "what's not happening," and suggested that "a museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness could be developed."

Kaprow's comments are subverted throughout by Smithson, who plays the role of laconic straight man ("Kaprow: Do you like wax works? Smithson: No, I don't like wax works. They are actually too lively"). However,

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[139] Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1966). The casual quality of this burlap-covered volume is belied by its generous trim size and deluxe printing. The title of the book is stamped on the cover in "stencil" font letters, slightly off-register, like a shipping crate. The ink used on the cover is the color of "flesh" tone Crayola crayon. The book opens with the boldface invitation, "STEP RIGHT IN" and features a photograph of Kaprow pulling aside a curtain, almost certainly quote of Charles Willson Peale's famous self-portrait, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822 (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts) which depicts the painter and curator Peale beckoning viewers into his natural history museum. For more on Peale, see Roger B. Stein, "Charles Willson Peale's Expressive Design: The Artist in His Museum," in Miller and Ward ed.s, *New Perspectives on Charles Willson Peale* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

Kaprow is allowed the last word, which he uses to suggest two escape routes from commodity art: idea art or continuous activity. Although he does not reply in the article, we may suppose that neither of these solutions were viable for Smithson. If wax works are too lively, it follows that continuous activity would be all but unthinkable. In a later interview, Smithson also disregards an entirely ideational art:

> I'm not really interested in conceptual art because that seems to avoid physical mass. You're left mainly with an idea. Somehow to have something physical that generates ideas is more interesting to me than just an idea that might generate something physical."[140]

For a time, however, the self-reflexive magazine article - existing on a boundary between abstract idea and substantive object - was a form that held Smithson's attention and which he developed in unusual ways. The "Museum World" issue of *Arts Yearbook* contained twenty seven articles grouped under headings such as "The Function of the Museum," "The Cultural Explosion," and "Policy and Politics." No other article in the issue attempted, in Mel Bochner's words, to function as a "primary site" rather than as journalism. "What is a Museum" employs a parallel

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[140] Robert Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City: Interview with Gianni Pettena," *Domus* (November 1972). Reprinted in Flam, 298-99.

image/text/image construction across eight pages, so that the text recording the debate between Smithson and Kaprow is sandwiched between two neat horizontal rows of images (fig. 43). Although the design is uncredited, Smithson is undoubtedly responsible for the picture selection and layout. Images appearing in the upper and lower registers include the following: Philip Johnson's private underground gallery beside a "Memorial to the French Soldiers at Verdun" (museum as crypt), Claes Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble* beside a tradeshow bathroom display (museum as department store), and a rendering of a satellite captioned "proposed museum for outer space" beside an exterior view of the Guggenheim Museum (museum as science fiction fantasy). The sequence ends, as it began, with reference to internment - an across the gutter spread captioned "Burial Mounds." If this is a compulsively reiterated desire to bury the museum, it is also a testament to the museum's inescapable influence.

While the formal structure of "What is a Museum" is anomalous within its issue of *Arts Yearbook*, it did appear in a broader context of related work, including Dan Graham's article "Homes for America" which was published in

a roughly contemporaneous issue of *Arts Magazine*.[141] Graham's layout for "Homes for America" is presented as a two-page spread laid out on a syncopated grid (fig. 44). Graham periodically uses text for its graphic qualities, often in the form of lists. Thus his text oscillates between an opaque textural element and an apparently transparent envelope for the type of coherent narrative one might expect from an expository article. Banal images of housing developments are juxtaposed and repeated by Graham to quote the blunt forms of minimalist sculpture. Unlike much minimalist production, which implicitly glorifies the impersonal and mechanized means of its fabrication, "Homes for America" aims to expose the dark effects of industrialization on American culture.[142] "Both

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[141] *Arts Magazine* 41(Dec-Jan 1966-67): 21-22. Graham's layout was significantly altered by the magazine editors, who replaced seven of Graham's photographs with a photograph by Walker Evans. Graham's original layout is discussed and reprinted in Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion: Writings and Projects, 1965-1900*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 1993), 14-23. Both versions are reproduced and compared in Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 183-190. Before the first publications of "Homes for America," the project was presented as a slide show in the exhibition "Projected Art" at Finch College, November 1966.

[142] For an influential analysis of multiple aspects of minimalism, including the potentially coercive vocabulary of its materials and modes of manufacture, see Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 (January 1990): 44-63. Chave revisited and

architecture and craftsmanship as values are subverted by the dependence on simplified and easily duplicated techniques of fabrication and standardized modular plans," Graham writes; "there is no organic unity connecting the land site and the home. Both are without roots - separate parts in a larger, pre-determined synthetic order." Dan Graham and Robert Smithson first met in 1964, and Graham included Smithson's work in a show called "Plastics" at the John Daniels Gallery the following year.[143]

From 1966 to 1968, Graham and Smithson both developed the magazine article as a primary site for their work. Their articles appear in the pages of the same magazines, and can be read as a dialogue of sorts. "Early 20th-Century Possessable House to the Quasi-Discrete Cell of '66," which is Graham's subtitle for "Homes for America," echoes the title of Smithson's "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," published a few months earlier. Likewise, Smithson borrows from Graham by reproducing one of his photographs (a housing development in Jersey City used in the Graham's layout for "Homes for America") in his own layout for "What is a Museum?" and uses another of

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expanded her thesis ten years later in "Minimalism and Biography," *Art Bulletin* 82 (March 2000): 149-163.

[143] Dan Graham, "My Work for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art,'" in *Rock My Religion*, xviii-xx and Robert Hobbs, "Chronology," in *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 235.

Graham's photographs the following year in "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art."

A Museum of Language

"A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" is one of Smithson's most complex and densely layered plays with the museum concept.[144] This article repeats the museological compendium approach used in "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," and it reintroduces a number of the same sources. All attempts at comprehension are frustrated in the universe Smithson describes; yet this state is seen as desirable. "In the illusory babel of language," he explains, "an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes." Likening his article to a "monstrous 'museum'," in which "a brick = a word, a sentence = a room, a paragraph = a floor of rooms, etc.," Smithson concludes that "language becomes an infinite museum whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere."[145]

Smithson fills the first floor of his museum, entitled "Marginalia at the Center: Infra-Criticism," with the words

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[144] "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," *Art International* (March 1968), reprinted in Flam, 78-94.

[145] Flam, 78.

of nine artists who also write: Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Peter Hutchinson, Dan Graham, Andy Warhol, and Ed Ruscha. The disparate projects of these artists are described in excerpts, which are made to reflect Smithson's own practice. Dan Flavin's writing is described as "a pure spectacle of attenuation"; Carl Andre's writings "bury the mind under rigorous incantory arrangements"; an exhibition announcement by Sol LeWitt becomes a "grid plan … submerged under a deluge of simulated handwritten data"; and two articles by Peter Hutchinson participate in a "mannerist science of obvious disguises and false bottoms." Dan Graham is seen to "isolate segments of unreliable information into compact masses of fugitive meaning"; Warhol's dialogue with Gerard Malanga is "dis-synchronized talk," and Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* (which documents, in words and photographs, the ejection of a typewriter from the window of a speeding Buick) exhibits a "counterfeit Russian nihilism." Among the many texts he cites in "Marginalia at the Center," Smithson appropriates "Specific Objects" (the signature essay of his erstwhile model, Donald Judd) for his own purposes by equating Judd's term "specific" with his own

"central" and Judd's term "general" with his own "periphery."[146]

What is meant by "infra-criticism"? *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* contains no entry for this term, but defines "infra" alternately as "below" (e.g., "*infra*human") and "within" (e.g., *infra*territorial).[147] Smithson's technique exploits both of these possibilities. His descriptions of the work of his colleagues, such that their projects all manage to reflect his own practice, tunnels "below" (or undermines) the objective appearance of

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[146] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (New York: *Art Digest*, 1965), 189-192. Smithson cites "Specific Objects" several times in print. The first time is in his October 1967 "Letter to the Editor" of *Artforum* in which Smithson uses Judd's article, among others, in his attack on Michael Fried's essay, "Art and Objecthood": "Fried has declared his sacred duty to modernism and will now make combat with … Judd's Specific Objects and Morris's gestalts … the terrors of infinity have taken over the mind of Michael Fried," in Flam, 66. In the present essay Smithson recounts, "Donald Judd at one time wrote a descriptive criticism that described "specific objects," and then, declining to analyze Judd's thesis, Smithson instead undertakes his own "descriptive criticism" of Judd's mode of writing. He discovers there, to his apparent satisfaction, "a language that ebbs from the mind into an ocean of words. A brooding depth of gleaming surfaces - placid but dismal," in Flam, 80. By the time of his 1970 interview with Paul Toner, Smithson revises his relationship to Judd's ideas by commenting dismissively, "my work has always been an attempt to get away from the specific object" in Flam, 240.

[147] *Webster's Third New International* Dictionary, Philip Babcock Gove, editor in chief (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1993), 1161.

traditional criticism. Just as Smithson prefers "something physical that generates ideas" to an "idea that might generate something physical," he here allows fragments of texts by other artist-writers to suggest a new work, which he forms by juxtaposing (or curating) the fragments from "within" his own text. As Smithson said in a later interview:

> I'm concerned with the physical properties of both language and material, and I don't think they are discrete … language is not a secondary instrument that is going to disappear and leave the work there. Language grows like a barrier reef, it has its own physical processes.[148]

This double meaning of "infra-criticism" embodies a tension that Smithson particularly enjoys: the dialectic, and interdependence, between inside and outside. Each concept relies entirely upon the other for meaning: without either half of a binary equation, the other cannot exist. Similarly, the rebellion against or revision of an institution necessarily depends upon the institution. Craig Owens notes that in Smithson's writing "we encounter again the unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced precisely in order to

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[148] "Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969-1970)," in Flam, 208-209.

denounce it."[149] Smithson himself acknowledges, "every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes - ad infinitum."[150] If this museum of language is a deconstruction of the modern art museum, it is also a reinscription, however distorted, of the institution.

Subsequent "floors" of Smithson's museum are devoted to other artists. Ad Reinhardt's cartoon, "A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala" (a collage made in 1955, published in *Art News*, May 1956), (fig. 45) is discussed under two headings, "Teratological Systems" and "The Center and the Circumference." Smithson is transfixed by Reinhardt's "teratology" ("fantastic mythmaking of storytelling in which prodigies and monsters play a large part," per Webster's *Dictionary*) particularly his diagram of the art world in the form of a zodiac. "A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala" is reproduced as a full page illustration, unlike the paltry thumbnail images assigned to Reinhardt and others in Smithson's layout of "Quasi-

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[149] Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2," *October* 13 (Summer 1980). Reprinted in Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, Scott Bryson, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 85.

[150] "Letter to the Editor," in which Smithson objects to Michael Fried's essay, "Art and Objecthood," published in *Artforum*, June 1967." In Flam, 66-67.

Infinities and the Waning of Space" (which, one recalls, are "as small as possible, miniature photos").[151] Indeed, Smithson enjoins the reader to "examine Reinhardt's 'Portend' and take this 'Joke' seriously." If in the earlier article Smithson focuses on the "voids" manifested in Reinhardt's black paintings, endorsing on some level their hermeticism, here he recuperates everything that by Reinhardt's definition is not art, including Reinhardt's own writings, for the Museum of Language.[152] Although the cartoon can be most readily understood as a still-resonant critique of the pitfalls menacing young artists, Smithson embraces it as an autonomous work of fiction, claiming that

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[151]One of a series of cartoons commissioned from Reinhardt by *Art News*, "Portrait of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala" appeared in the May 1956 issue.

[152] Ad Reinhardt's famous dicta on art include the following: "The one thing to say about art and life is that art is art and life is life, that art is not life and life is not art … the one direction is fine or abstract art today is the painting of the same form over and over again." Ad Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," *Art International* (Lugano), December 1962, reprinted in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt,* Barbara Rose ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, 1991), 53-58. Conversely, Smithson says, "I find what's vain to be more acceptable than what's pure. It seems to me that any tendency toward purity also supposes that there's something to be achieved, and it means that art has some sort of point. I think I agree with Flaubert's idea that art is the pursuit of the useless, and the more vain things are the better I like it, because I'm not burdened by purity." From "What is a Museum?" Flam, 47.

here "history breaks down into fabulous lies … there is no order outside the mandala itself." His pleasure in the work also stems from a perceived tension between center and periphery: "everything mad and grotesque on the outer edges encompasses the present Art World in an abysmal concatenation." Several months after the publication of "A Museum of Language," Smithson expands this line of inquiry into three dimensions with the creation of his first "nonsite."[153] For this project, sand and aerial photographs from the "grotesque outer edge" of New Jersey were visited

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[153] Smithson articulated the site/nonsite dialectic as follows: "The range of convergence between Site and Nonsite consists of a course of hazards, a double path made up of signs, photographs, and maps, that belong to both sides of the dialectic at once. Both sides are present and absent at the same time. The land or ground from the Site is placed in the art (Nonsite) rather than the art placed on the ground. The Nonsite is a container within another container - the room. The plot of yard outside is yet another container. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional things trade places with each other in the range of convergence. Large scale becomes small. Small scale becomes large. A point on a map expands to the size of the land mass. A land mass contracts to a point. Is the Site a reflection of the Nonsite (mirror) or is it the other way around? The rules of this network of signs are discovered as you go along uncertain trails both mental and physical." A footnote in Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," 1972, first published in Gyorgy Kepes, ed. *Arts of the Environment* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), 222-232, also in Flam, 143-153. As he said in "A Nonsite (The Palisades)," 1968, "Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art," Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 110.

upon a bona fide "Art World" site, the Dwan Gallery (and later, modern art museums) in Manhattan.

An Aerial Museum

A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey, 1968, was developed during a group expedition to a government-owned airstrip surrounded by scrub pines. Smithson's companions on this outing were Carl Andre, Virginia Dwan, Nancy Holt, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Mary Peacock.[154] Sand was removed from the site for display in specially fabricated bins at Dwan Gallery. The pilgrimage to the Pine Barrens falls in the middle of a period, 1966 to 1969, during which Smithson wrote seven articles (four of which were published during his lifetime) on the topic of the airfield as a site for earthworks, including an "aerial museum."[155] To realize

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[154] Hobbs, 105. Nancy Holt subsequently returned to the area to film, "Pine Barrens," 1975, collection MOMA film department. In contrast to Smithson's use of this material, Holt's project is closer to a social history or "straight" documentary of the region and its inhabitants, known locally as "Pineys." In this film the trees and the people become metaphors for one another - eccentric, knarled, and solitary.

[155] These are, in chronological order: "Proposal for Earthworks and Landmarks to be built on the fringes of the Fort Worth-Dallas Regional Terminal Site," 1966-67 (unpublished during his lifetime), Flam, 354-355; "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site," *Artforum* (June 1967), Flam, 52-60; "Untitled (Air Terminal - Windows)," 1967, (unpublished), Flam, 355-356; "A Thing is a Hole in a

the aerial museum, Smithson affiliated himself with a firm contracted to design a new airport. In a later interview, Smithson recalled:

> I had given a talk at Yale … an architect from Tibbetts, Abbott, McCarthy, and Stratton was sitting in the audience and he asked me if I would like to participate in the building of the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, in terms of trying to find out what an airport is. So I invented this job for myself as artist-consultant, and for about a year and a half, from 1965 through 1966, I went there and talked with the architects … my final proposal was something called "aerial art" which would be earthworks on the fringes of the airfield that you would see from the air.[156]

The first iteration of Smithson's airport plan, "Proposal for Earthworks and Landmarks to be built on the fringes of the Fort-Worth Dallas Regional Terminal Site (1966-67)," specifies four art works, two above ground, two below.[157] Smithson did not choose to own the creative

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Thing it is Not," *Landscape Architecture* (April 1968), Flam, 95-96; "Untitled (Site Data)," 1968, (unpublished), Flam, 362-363; "Minus Twelve," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 402-406, Flam, 114-115; and "Aerial Art," *Studio International* (February-April 1969), Flam, 116-118.

[156] Paul Cummings, "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, July 14 and 19, 1972," Flam, 290-291.

[157] Flam, 354-355. Smithson may have been familiar with Isamu Noguchi's proposals for art to be seen from the air, developed in the 1930's through the 1950's. In 1935, Noguchi proposed an untitled earth sculpture to be seen from the airplanes at Newark Airport. In 1943, he built a

endeavor by himself. Rather, he curated the project by soliciting proposals from three of his colleagues. The works, proposed by Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson, were to be located at the edges of the site: "before any major construction starts on the air terminal building, the above artists will draw attention to the fringes of the entire project." Smithson specified that Dwan Gallery would supply the cost of materials, announcements for the project, and gallery space for the exhibition of maps and models; Tippets-Abbott-McCarthy-Stratton would supply land for the projects, equipment and labor costs for the artists, and transportation. In this version of the proposal, Smithson summarized each artist's contribution as follows:

> Robert Morris, "Project to be Made of Earth"
> Elevation cross-section: packed earth of a trapezoidal form, 6 feet at base, sloping sides about 45 degrees, height 3 feet. Sodded.

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model for *This Tortured Earth*, of which Noguchi said, "The idea of sculpting the earth followed me for many years, with mostly playground models as metaphor, but then there were others. *This Tortured Earth* was my concept for a large area to memorialize the tragedy of war. There is injury to the earth itself. The war machine, I thought, would be an excellent equipment for sculpture, to bomb it out of existence." Noguchi took the manipulation of scale even further when he imagined a *Sculpture to be Seen from Mars*, 1947. From Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1987), 152-153. See also Isamu Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor's World*, forward by Buckminster Fuller (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 23.

Carl Andre, "Proposal for an Explosion"
An appropriate contractor is retained to place and fuse an explosive charge sufficient to produce a crater 12 inches deep and 144 inches in diameter. The charge is detonated by sculptor Carl Andre.

Sol LeWitt, "Proposal for Earth Project"
Encase a 6 inch wooden cube containing something in an 18 inch cement cube and bury it someplace on The Tract. The precise spot would not be designated - but only that it is somewhere within the area and 3 feet underground. I would send the 6 inch wooden cube to a cement company either here or on the site (if in Texas).

Robert Smithson, "Proposal for Seven Aerial Pavements"
Measure a line 81 feet across the gated ground. Measure seven squares flush along the entire length of the line. (3 feet sq., 5 feet sq., 7 feet sq., 11 feet sq., 13 feet sq., 15 feet sq.), leaving between each square an interval of 3 feet. Squares are to be made of 16 inch thick asphalt paving - 8 inches above ground and 8 inches below ground.[158]

The airport project is a further exploration of the site/nonsite concept in that Smithson planned to bring the large-scale works at the edge of a large-scale site (the site itself being midway between two cities in Texas, at the outer edge of cosmopolitan consciousness) into an exhibition at Dwan Gallery. In "Aerial Art," (*Studio International*, February-April 1969), which Smithson considered the final version of the proposal, the artists'

[158] Flam, 354-355.

project descriptions are modified somewhat.[159] Scale and point of view are emphasized in this discussion of Morris's piece, such that the "radius may be extended as much as a thousand feet - easily viewed from arriving and departing aircraft," and the Judd-inspired linear progression of paving stones in Smithson's piece is abandoned in favor of a spiraling form which is "built as large as the site would allow, and could be seen from approaching and departing aircraft."[160] Andre's explosion is expressed even more aggressively: "a crater formed by a one-ton bomb dropped from 10,000 feet" but also offset by this gentle alternative: "an acre of blue-bonnets (the state flowers of Texas)."[161] LeWitt's proposal is unchanged, but Smithson articulates it in a manner which fixes the gesture more firmly within the conceptual framework of his overall project: LeWitt's buried cube becomes "non-visual and involves the sub-stratum of the site. He emphasizes the 'concept' of the art rather than the 'object' that results from its practice. The precise spot in the site would not be revealed - and would consist of a small cube of unknown

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[159] Flam, 116-118.

[160] Flam, 117.

[161] Flam, 117.

contents cast inside a larger cube of concrete. The cube would then be buried in the earth."[162] LeWitt's "non-visual" proposal was made to echo the non-site (or non-sight) thesis of Smithson's aerial art plan. In addition to the four earthworks, in this article Smithson proposed an

> 'aerial museum' that would provide visual information about where these aerial site are situated. Diagrams, maps, photographs, and movies of the projects under construction could be exhibited - thus the terminal complex and its entire airfield site would expand in meaning from the central spaces of the terminal itself to the edges of the airfields.[163]

Although neither the airfield construction nor the aerial museum were realized, Dwan Gallery did host an exhibition called "Earthworks" (October 5-30, 1968), which was significantly informed by the airport proposals. Smithson showed *A Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey*, 1968, consisting of an aerial photo of the site, trapezoidal wooden bins containing materials from the site, twenty instamatic snapshots of the "five sites of the non-site" and a text explicating the piece.[164] Sol LeWitt managed to

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[162] Flam, 118.

[163] Flam, 116-117.

[164] In the gallery price list, Smithson described the work as follows:

create his buried cube with the cooperation of patrons in Holland far from the original Texas site; photographic documentation of this was also included in the "Earthworks" exhibition. Thus, the Dwan Gallery was the only place that the "Aerial Museum" was physically manifested.

Smithson's most literary presentation of his air field-inspired ideas is the article, "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site," (*Artforum*, June 1967). Appearing in the "American Sculpture" issue of *Artforum*, cheek by jowl with several other essays which

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"5 sub-divisions based on the mineral ore deposits in the vicinity of Franklin Furnace Mines as shown on an aerial map (Robinson Aerial Surveys) at a scale of 1 inch = 200 feet. Of the more than 140 minerals found in this site, at least 120 are found in the sinc ore deposits, and nearly 100 are found only in those deposits. The 5 sub-divided parts of the Nonsite contains raw ore from sites 1.A, 2.B, 3.C, 4.D, 5.E, -- sites are shown on the map. Container sizes in inches are as follows: 1.12 x ½ x 20 ½) x 8, 2.15 x (20 ½ x 32 ½) x 10, 3.18 x (32 ½ x 46 ½) x 12, 4.21 x (46 ½ x 63 ½) x 14, 5. 24 x (63 ½ x 82 ½) x 16. The map is three times smaller than the Nonsite. Tours to the site are possible. The 5 outdoor sites are not contained by any limiting parts - therefore they are chaotic sites, regions of dispersal, places without a Room - elusive order prevails, the substrata are disrupted (see snapshots of the five sites). The rocks from the 5 sites are homogenized into the Nonsite. The entire Nonsite and site map in the Room are contained within two 70 degree perspective lines without center point (the center point is at the end of a deadend street somewhere in Franklin not shown on a map). An unexhibited aerial photo of this point is deposited in a bank-vault. This photo can be seen - a key is available." "Earthworks Exhibition Price List," Dwan Gallery, October 5-October 30, 1968, Dwan Gallery Exhibition Archives, Archives of American Art, New York.

were soon canonized (Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood"; Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art"; and Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part Three") Smithson's complex article explores the materiality of language, discusses the museum as both linguistic and earth-scale site, and hijacks the rhetoric of science to redefine the limits of art.[165] Rejecting "rational categories of painting, sculpture, and architecture," he instead appropriates Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone as an important precedent for the notion of art he advocates. "Bell's awareness of the physical properties of language, by way of the telephone, kept him from misunderstanding language and object relationships. Language was transformed by Bell into linguistic objects."[166] In a gesture akin to Duchamp's designation of readymades, Smithson claims for art the unlikely subject of

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[165]Smithson did this already in "Entropy and the New Monuments," 1966, when he read the work of his colleagues through a hybrid vocabulary of art history and mathematics. "Math is dislocated by these artists in a personal way, so that it becomes 'Manneristic' or separated from its original meaning … this synthetic math is reflected in Duchamp's 'measured' pieces of fallen threads, *Three Standard Stoppages*, Judd's sequential structured surfaces, Valledor's "fourth dimensional' color vectors, Grosvenor's hypervolumes in hyperspace, and di Suvero's demolitions of space-time. These artists face the possibility of other dimensions, with a new kind of sight." Flam, 22-23.

[166] Flam, 52, 55.

a massive dam under construction. He insists, however, upon the following caveat: "This dam is seen as a functionless wall. When it functions as a dam it will cease being a work of art and become a 'utility.'"[167] The process by which the future utility enters the province of art is called "Site-Selection," a designation which locates art as a function of the artist's vision. Yet, amidst the radical dislocations of materials, spaces, and processes, Smithson's project is never a solely extra-museum art. He discusses it always in relation to the modern museum. In the conclusion of his essay, Smithson notes:

> 'Sculpture,' when not figurative, also is conditioned by architectural details. Floors, walls, windows, and ceilings delimit the boundaries of interior sculpture. Many new works of sculpture gain scale by being *installed* in a vast room. The Jewish Museum and the Whitney Museum have such interiors. The rooms of these museums tend away from the intimate scale of connoisseurship, toward a more public value. The walls of modern museums need not exist as walls, with diseased details near or on them. Instead, the artist could define the interior as a total network of surfaces and lines. What's interesting about Dan Flavin's art is not only the 'lights' themselves, but what they do to the *phenomenon* of the 'barren room.'[168]

Even as construction sites and telephone communications are claimed for his art, Smithson highlights

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[167] Flam, 53.

[168] Flam, 60.

the importance of the museum space, the "phenomenon of the barren room," in constructing meaning in his work. Discussing Smithson and his contemporaries, the art historian Tom Crow articulates a paradox of this self-reflexive work by noting that it was

> … not being arrayed in the free spaces of a philanthropic institution like the Judson Church. After Happenings and Fluxus, it represented a return of the experimental artist to the confines of the commercial gallery and the pristine museum … in an art without significant internal relationships, it was necessary to dominate a context of sufficient order and clarity to make a light-fixture or a stack of bricks register as an art event … if the Minimalists were interrupting the supply of rare, portable objects, they were conferring an importance on the traditional space of display - and on curatorial activity in general - that no one had ever witnessed before.[169]

How does the concept of the modern art museum structure Smithson's projects, even as he moves farther afield in distance and scale from the traditional forms and sites of art production? In addition to Crow's observations, at least three separate but linked modes can be identified. First it may be said that the museum has literally (and literarily) been appropriated by Smithson, in that he proposes an "aerial museum" as a component of his larger work, the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. Second,

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[169] Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties* (NY: Harry Abrams, 1996), 143-44.

the museum (or gallery) has been engaged dialectically, in that the works are not complete until they are represented as nonsites in the museum or gallery space which must also refer back to the exterior site. Third, the museum structure is explored mimetically, when Smithson curates "exhibitions" on the magazine page or in the landscape. When four monumental earthworks are proposed for the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, the vast airstrip transforms into a curated space. As expansive as this territory becomes, however, it must always collapse back to a structured, organized space of collection and exhibition - a museum. On this topic Smithson said, "if art is art it must have limits. How can one contain an 'oceanic' site? I have developed the non-site, which in a physical way contains the disruption of the site. The container is in a sense a fragment itself, something that could be called a three-dimensional map."[170] This map refers to points far beyond the museum, but can only be grasped within its boundaries.

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[170] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum* (September 1968), Flam, 111.

Gyrostasis

Smithson's interests in spirals and cartography converged in *Gyrostasis*, 1968 (fig. 46). A painted steel object measuring about six feet tall (roughly Smithson's own height), *Gyrostasis* comprises twelve three-dimensional isosceles triangles, which diminish in size as they approach the invisible center of the spiral. The industrial materials and regular geometry of the piece suggest that it might be a useful object -- perhaps a tool or a template -- while the spinning and shrinking movement implied by the diminishing elements suggest an organic entity. One of the dualities expressed in the piece was neatly summed up by Virginia Dwan when she said that Smithson's works from this period were "hand-made, but they were not hand-made by him."[171]

Reflecting on *Gyrostasis* two years after its completion, Smithson wrote

> The title GYROSTASIS refers to a branch of physics that deals with rotating bodies, and their tendency to maintain equilibrium. The work is a standing

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[171]Virginia Dwan Interview with Charles Stuckey," March 21, 1984, Archives of American Art, unpublished transcript, 15. Doug Johns, the fabricator of the piece, recalls that Smithson was very particular about the finish on *Gyrostasis*, which needed to be reworked several times. Conversation with the author, San Francisco, May 2002.

> triangulated spiral. When I made the spiral I was thinking of mapping procedures that refer to the planet Earth. One could consider it a crystallized fragment of a gyroscopic rotation, or as an abstract three dimensional map that points to the SPIRAL JETTY, 1970, in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. GYROSTASIS is relational, and should not be considered an isolated object.[172]

That Smithson should retroactively describe *Gyrostasis* as a map to *Spiral Jetty*, built two years later, is but one of many instances of his manipulations of the notion of linear time, famously articulated as "ruins in reverse." As will be demonstrated in the forthcoming discussion of *Spiral Jetty*, *Gyrostasis* is interesting in another regard: it is an artwork in a museum pointing to another artwork outside the museum, which contains within itself another museum.

Art and Technology

Smithson's engagement with notions of an entropic landscape, and his interest in introducing thematics of collapse into the modern art museum, escalated throughout the second half of the 1960's. Resonances between post-industrial dereliction and pre-historic cataclysms informed such works as *Tar Pool and Gravel Pit*, 1966; *Mirror with*

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[172] Written in 1970, published in *Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Catalog*, 1974. Flam,136.

Rock Salt (Salt Mine and Museum Proposal), 1968; and *Portland Cement Sites: A Dearchitectured Project*, 1969. The floor-bound tar pool (fig. 47) quotes the vocabulary of minimal sculpture as well as the geometry and hue of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, yet it is neither a specific object nor a pristine canvas. All attempts at transcendence are foiled by the tar pool's amorphous and untoward materiality, which puns on viewers' desire to "lose themselves" in art. Similarly, *Mirror with Rock Salt (Salt Mine and Museum Proposal)*, 1968 (undertaken for the "Earth Art" exhibition at Cornell University) also involved displacing inchoate materials into the gallery space (fig. 48). For this work, Smithson removed rock salt from a local mine and displayed it, along with mirrors, in the university art museum. Mirrors were placed in the mine itself, and the doubling of mine and museum was multiplied when Smithson created a twin salt and mirror display above the mine (in an exposed quarry) and another below the museum (in its basement). Mirrors were also placed along a pathway, explicitly connecting the museum and the mine. The relationship of museum and quarry, which on one level was meant in jest ("back to the salt mines," he may have said, on the way to either venue), also served to highlight the process of the artist's labor. In an article from the same

year, Smithson wrote, "The existence of the artist in time is worth as much as the finished product. Any critic who devalues the *time* of the artist is the enemy of art and the artist." [173] Just as important was Smithson's emphasis on interrelationships between the works made out of doors and the commissioning museum, which differentiated his contribution from those of the other artists (including Dennis Oppenheim and Michael Heizer) participating in "Earth Art."[174] Lawrence Alloway aptly described Smithson's strategy:

> He was able to use the gallery not simply as a container for preexisting objects but brought it into a complex allusive relation to the absent site. Earthworks depended for their financing and for the distribution of information concerning them on the traditional resources of art dealers, but only Smithson found a way to use the support system as part

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[173] Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum*, (September 1968). In Flam, 112. For a discussion of other American artists manifesting anxieties about the utility of artistic labor in their own practice during this period, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Art/Work: Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Artistic Labor in the Age of Vietnam, 1966-1975" (forthcoming diss., University of California, Berkeley).

[174] Heizer and Oppenheim expressed their disinterest in the potential dialectic between earthwork and museum in "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," edited by Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, December 1968 and January 1969. Published in *Avalanche* I, (Fall 1960), in Flam, 242-252.

> of the meaning of the work … Smithson's nonsite is epistemological.[175]

Smithson's interest in this epistemology, or grounds for knowing art lead him to further test the physical and aesthetic boundaries of the art museum with *Portland Cement Sites: A Dearchitectured Project*, one of two proposals he made for the Art and Technology program at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The project sought to link the La Brea Tar Pits (a natural history tourist destination on the grounds of the art museum), a mine shaft located some 50 miles away, and the interior of the art museum. As Smithson noted on a working drawing, "the museum and park will give limits to a widely displaced nonsite … no single focus but many focuses" (fig. 49). The multi-part plan began by collapsing a mine cavern, collapsing a concrete structure, and facilitating a landslide of limestone boulders. The rubble from these activities was then to be placed adjacent to the tar pits (into which mammoths sank in prehistoric times, and where they now mingle with the more recent additions of shopping carts and soda cans). Smithson intended to photograph and map the sites of collapse (mine shaft, concrete building, and landslide) as

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[175] Lawrence Alloway, "Robert Smithson's Development," *Artforum* XI (November 1972), 52-61.

well as the sites of the displaced materials (museum grounds), and, finally, to display these maps and photographs in a museum gallery.

As a proposal, *Portland Cement Sites, A Dearchitectured Project* combined Smithson's ongoing interests in entropy, dispersal, collapse, and the limits of the art museum with a specific investigation of the physical and institutional ecosystem of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the physical make-up of cement, the product of Smithson's potential sponsor, American Cement Company. In addition to satisfying an undeniably aggressive impulse, the dynamiting of cliffs for calcite and the collapse of the limestone mine served the purpose of extracting the raw materials of cement and bringing these to the museum. In an interview Smithson explained,

> My interest in the site was really a return to the origins of material, sort of a dematerialization of refined matter. Like if you took a tube of paint and followed that back to its original sources … [to] the particles and rawness of matter itself.[176]

Smithson unabashedly subverted the tools and methods of industry in the service of his art, which is perhaps why

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[176] "Fragments of an Interview with P.A. [Patsy] Norvell," 1969, in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87 (first published in 1973).

American Cement declined to support his project.[177] As he claimed elsewhere, "all technology is matter built up into ideal structures. Science is a shack in the lava flow of ideas."[178] Although neither of Smithson's Art and Technology proposals were accepted (a project submitted to Kaiser Steel, involving an industrial roll of tin unwinding across heaps of its own raw materials, was also rejected) many of the ideas developed through the Art and Technology Program did come to fruition in his most ambitious address to the modern art museum, *Spiral Jetty*.

Spiral Jetty

Spiral Jetty was (and still is, in dissipated form) a 1500-foot coil constructed at Rozel Point in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, in 1970. Its base initially consisted of 6,650 tons of mud on top of which salt crystals from the lake immediately formed. Smithson's New York dealer, Virginia Dwan, covered the construction costs of the earthwork and his Los Angeles dealer, Douglas Christmas of Ace Gallery,

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[177] See Maurice Tuchman, *A Report on the Art and Technology Program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967-1971* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1971), 320-321.

[178] "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," edited by Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, December 1968 and January 1969. Published in *Avalanche* I (Fall 1960), in Flam, 249.

funded the 35-minute eponymous film.[179] *Spiral Jetty* also takes the form of an essay written in 1971 (published 1972).[180] In all three versions of the work Smithson conflates the conventions of monumental outdoor sculpture with his penchant for prehistory. Initially attracted to the site by its saline water stained red with algae, Smithson was also fascinated by the abandoned oil rigs nearby, which he likened to rusting dinosaurs. Close-up views of *Spiral Jetty* included in both the film and the essay reveal that scale is another major theme of the work. The jetty is photographically documented from the air, from the ground, and in microscopic detail (fig. 50). The loss of coherent form experienced at close range echoes the way the spiral shape of the earthwork is dissolving over time. Yet, the spiral is also preserved in the mechanics of the film's presentation: celluloid spooled around projection wheels.

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[179] The muscular gesture of inscribing monumental works on vast expanses of the western landscape may be read as an emancipatory project, in which these artists shook off their dependence on the urban gallery/museum system. However, as indicated by the funding Smithson received from his dealers to create *Spiral Jetty*, he was not in a position to create them independently. In this sense, earth scale artists were even more dependent than artists working in traditional forms on the patronage of institutions.

[180] "The Spiral Jetty," in Gyorgy Kepes, *Arts of the Environment*. Reprinted in Flam, 143-153.

On a superficial level, the *Spiral Jetty* film can be understood as a documentary record of the relatively inaccessible earthwork. Indeed, the film begins by transporting the viewer by truck to the site of the jetty. However, the travelogue mode of the piece is soon belied by apparently random juxtapositions. Early on one suspects that if this film is, in fact, "documentary," what it actually records are the artist's subjective musings. In the opening sequence, torn book pages are seen to float over dry, mud caked earth. The pages are map fragments referring to the land; clots of earth echo the incomplete maps. Elaborate orienteering directions are recited in the laconic monotone of the movie's soundtrack; a surfeit of detail makes these directions almost impossible to follow. An elaborate ritual of discovery is employed to locate the site, yet (like the tesserated earth and unbound maps) there seem to be no stable points of reference. Upon arrival, extreme detail views of the site are intercut with long views, contributing to a sense of proleptic disorientation. A close-up shot of unwinding string reveals Smithson, like Theseus, to be navigating the maze of the spiral with little more than a ball of twine. A cacophony of earth moving machines intrude while Smithson placidly stakes out the jetty - the film cuts back to glittering

shallow water, the gentle lapping of waves - and then back again to monstrous pile-driving vehicles. The pastoral is ravaged by anthropomorphized industry "ripping the *Spiral Jetty*" (as the narrator helpfully intones). In a simultaneous quotation of two iconic sequences from Alfred Hitchcock films - the crop dusting scene from *North by Northwest* and the spiraling plunge in *Vertigo* - Smithson has himself filmed by a menacing helicopter as he staggers into and back out of the completed jetty. The film ends, self-referentially, with a still life of the editing studio: a photograph of the jetty is tacked to a wall, its shape mimicked by the reels of a film projector (fig. 51).

Smithson undertook the construction and filming of the earthwork simultaneously, and to a remarkable degree the two projects inform one another. As much as the moving of boulders and shaping of soil, the materiality of film itself was a source of interest and inspiration for Smithson. Filming and building fed back onto each other, so that the conventions of cinema and construction became inextricably intertwined. Soon Smithson imagined a "cinematic borderland, a landscape of rejected film clips"[181] and conceptually pushed the juxtaposition of the

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[181] "A Cinematic Atopia," *Artforum* (September 1971). In Flam, 139.

monumental work with its filmic representation to a Bacchanalian state of joyful collapse

> The disjunction operating between reality and film drives one into a sense of cosmic rupture … Adrift amid scraps of film, one is unable to infuse into them any meaning, they seem worn-out, ossified views, degraded and pointless, yet they are powerful enough to hurl one into a lucid vertigo.[182]

For one critic, the jetty functioned as the film's motif, while the film emerged as "the sculpture's consciousness."[183] Certainly the film is the means by which most viewers encounter the sculpture. [184]

The *Spiral Jetty* essay, written a year after the completion of the earthwork and film, is (if possible) even more given to subjective reverie. Just as the film seems

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[182] "The Spiral Jetty," in Flam, 152. Vertigo was one of Smithson's preferred states, as he demonstrated when he used it as high praise in describing the work of a friend and fellow artist: "The art of Eva Hesse is vertiginous and wonderfully dismal." In "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," Flam, 36.

[183] Joseph Masheck, "The Spiral Jetty Movie," in *The Historical Present*. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1984), 138.

[184] As Elizabeth Childs has explained, "with his film, Smithson didactically structures each viewer's experience of the of the site. In contrast to the spontaneous viewing of a sculpture in a gallery, a film about an absent work inflexibly determines the pace and path of the viewer's discovery." See Childs, "Robert Smithson and Film: The Spiral Jetty Reconsidered," *Arts Magazine* 81(October 1981), 69.

to document the making of an earthwork, the essay seems to document the making of the film, and it does so in the sense of partaking in the aesthetic abandon of previous manifestations of the project. The essay begins with a lengthy discussion of color.[185] Citing G.K. Chesterton, Smithson notes, "red is the most joyful and dreadful thing in the physical universe," and he admires in passing the black basalt, purple volcanoes, and grey beaches that he imagines in Bolivia.[186] Smithson advises the reader that he became interested in the Great Salt Lake in Utah after being told that it "was the color of tomato soup." Upon arrival, Smithson is not disappointed to discover that "under the pinkish water is a network of mud cracks supporting the jig-saw puzzle that composes the salt flats," yet his interest mutates into a full-on swoon when

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[185] Color played a significant role in Smithson's conception of his earthworks. He often made notations regarding color on working drawings. He described the site of a subsequent earthwork, *Broken Circle - Spiral Hill*, 1971, as follows: "the area was made up of red, yellow, white, brown and black earth … the piece itself was developed from a small sand peninsula that extended into the green lake," in Interview with Gregoire Müller, "…the earth, subject to cataclysms, is a cruel master," *Arts Magazine* (September 1971). In Flam, 257.

[186] It is interesting that Smithson began the *Spiral Jetty* essay with a quote from Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936). A Slade School-trained British artist turned protean critic, biographer, and fiction author, Chesterton wrote at length about his conversion (late in life) to Catholicism.

he begins to understand the visceral potential of the landscape itself:

> As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape seem to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the *Spiral Jetty*. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other.[187]

More than in the earthwork or in the film, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* essay invests the desolate landscape (rendered infertile by the salt content of the lake and scarred by failed oil prospecting) with a displaced eroticism. These willful poetics color the project with a romantic irony and subjectivity that resist categorization of the works in modes to which they might otherwise be attributed: monumental sculpture, documentary film, and art historical essay. Lest the reader of the essay still be searching for a stable author, Smithson relates the process of being filmed on the jetty as follows: "I was slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral."

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[187] Flam, 146.

I would like to suggest that the disparate manifestations of *Spiral Jetty* cohere when read in relationship to the modern art gallery (and, later, museum). Just as Smithson relied upon the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to "give limits" to the "widely displaced nonsite" of his Portland Cement proposal, simultaneous screenings of the *Spiral Jetty* film at Dwan Gallery, New York and Ace Gallery, Los Angeles in the autumn of 1970 contained and reinscribed a project (and an artist) which was always threatening to scatter or evaporate past the point of recovery.[188] *Spiral Jetty* assumes its meaning only in relationship to, and within, the museum; the awkwardness of this test is itself an important component of the piece. William Rubin, then director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Painting and Sculpture, explained that the challenge of "collecting" *Spiral Jetty* was particularly vexing:

> One of the things I find surprising, if understandable, is how often artists who create things which really don't want a museum environment - indeed,

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[188] Per the Dwan Gallery exhibition announcement, "A 35 min. 16 mm COLOR AND SOUND FILM ON THE SPIRAL JETTY WILL BE SHOWN DAILY AT 2:00 STARTING OCTOBER 31 THRU NOVEMBER 25, 1970 AT DWAN GALLERY NEW YORK ACE LOS ANGELES AND VANCOUVER," Dwan Gallery Archives, Archives of American Art, New York. Copies of the film, See also advertisements for the exhibition in *Artforum* (November 1970) and *Art in America* (November/December 1970).

> are alien to it - nevertheless want them exhibited in a museum … We have, for example, just recently bought Robert Smithson's film of the *Spiral Jetty*, because we want to have a record of it and feel that this is a way in which the museum can participate, in which the people in the museum can see this work. But it is a far cry, I'm sure, from experiencing the real thing … the museum concept is not infinitely expandable. I don't feel, myself, that it is possible for museums to 'evolve' so that they can accommodate Earthworks, to take an extreme example. There's simply a contradiction here. So what *can* you do? You get the film of the Earthwork. It's not much but it seems to me the most you can do.[189]

As a painting and sculpture curator working in the early 1970s, Rubin could not accept the notion of the *Spiral Jetty* film (or essay) as "the real thing," nor could he imagine that the slippage between media and the difficulty of assimilating the work into the museum was central to its meaning. *Spiral Jetty* rests with difficulty, but of necessity, inside the modern art museum. At the same time that *Spiral Jetty* is an art work intended for the museum, it is also an artwork which contains a museum.

Spiral Jetty museum

In addition to nearly seven tons of mud, a film, and a published text, there was a fourth corner to Smithson's

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[189] Lawrence Alloway and John Coplans, "Talking with William Rubin: The Museum Concept is Not Infinitely Expandable," *Artforum* XIII(October 1974): 52-53.

thinking about *Spiral Jetty*: a suite of sketches exists for a *Spiral Jetty* museum. *Plan for Museum Concerning Spiral Jetty* (fig. 52), and *Underground Projection Room (Utah Museum Plan)* (fig. 53), both 1971, each diagram a roughly pyramidal pile of boulders, bored through by a metal shaft which encases a spiral staircase.

Underground Projection Room, 1971, depicts the museum's only exhibit, a continuously running film projected onto a wall of boulders turned white with salt encrustation. The nature of the film is not specified in this drawing, but in an essay written the same year Smithson explained, "what I would like to do is build a cinema in a cave or an abandoned mine, and film the process of its construction. That film would be the only film shown in the cave."[190] A related drawing, *Toward the Development of a Cinema Cavern (The Moviegoer as Spelunker)* (fig. 54), also specifies a "film on the making of [the] cinema cavern." The speculation I would like to make, that the topic of the film running in Smithson's museum is the making of the "museum" itself, seems well grounded based on this evidence. Having traveled great physical, intellectual, and professional distance from his early

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[190] Robert Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia," *Artforum* (September 1971). In Flam, 142.

attempts to redefine art and historical discourses, with the *Spiral Jetty* museum Smithson establishes his most complex dialectic yet between artwork and museum. While Smithson imagined various projection sites for the *Spiral Jetty* film (the most whimsical of which was probably the Staten Island Ferry, sailing "back to the port in a spiraling voyage while the film was showing"), [191] the intended screening room was always the Museum of Modern Art. When the museum shows the film, it becomes, in effect, the *Spiral Jetty Museum*, which is lodged conceptually, if not physically, under Smithson's weighty work of art.

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[191] See "...the earth, subject to cataclysms, is a cruel master," Interview with Gregoire Müller, in Flam, 262.

Chapter 3: Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark

Introduction

Gordon Matta-Clark is known primarily for his "building cuts," interventions that transformed architecture into environmental sculpture. The earliest of these works, including *Bronx Floors*, 1972 (fig. 55) were guerilla actions in abandoned buildings; it was not long before Matta-Clark turned to art museums as the sites and objects of his deconstructions. By the later 1970s, this shift from unsanctioned activity to work within the institutional realm took the form of commissions from sponsors including the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. If Oldenburg managed to slip his own museum unaltered within larger institutions, and if Smithson developed an extra-museum practice that could be completed only upon its return to the museum, Matta-Clark proposed to carve the museum space itself into an experiential environment. In so doing, he dramatically redefined the terms of both the discrete artwork and the modern art museum.

Review of the Literature

Matta-Clark's positioning of his work relative to the art museum is a rich topic that has not been substantially addressed in the critical literature. During his lifetime and in the course of the two major retrospectives that followed his death, writing on Matta-Clark's work often took the form of celebratory social histories, publishing numerous interviews with colleagues and friends.[192] A notable exception is an article and interview with the artist written by Donald Wall. Although Wall does not specifically discuss Matta-Clark's work in relation to the art museum, he does productively locate Matta-Clark's work in the context of contemporaneous projects by Vito Acconci, Michael Asher, Mel Bochner, Les Levine, Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson, and others who "explored the behavioral

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[192] See Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, with an essay by Robert Pincus-Witten and numerous interviews conducted by Joan Simon (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985). An invaluable primary source, the catalogue includes interviews with Matta-Clark's contemporaries including his dealers, Horace and Holly Solomon; colleagues such as Jackie Winsor, Susan Rothenberg, Chris Burden and Robert Wilson; and family members Roberto Matta, Anne (Clark) Alpert, and Jane Crawford. It also includes useful catalogue entries on many works. Much of the same material, with additional interviews and better photographic reproductions, was published in Corinne Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1993).

and definitional aspects of place." [193] Wall's interview with Matta-Clark, the most focused and in-depth conversation published with him, touches on a series of topics that are relevant to the question of Matta-Clark's proposals for museums. In this interview, Matta-Clark discusses the importance of Dada in general and Duchamp specifically as major influences on his work; he proclaims his strenuous objections to modern architectural practice; and he addresses the problems of exhibiting and collecting site-specific works. These themes will be developed in the pages that follow.

The most recent addition to this literature is Thomas Crow, et. al., *Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003). This robustly illustrated book is anchored with a biographical essay by Crow, and also features short texts on Matta-Clark's use of film and photography by Christian Kravagna, and on Matta-Clark's community participation and political activism by Judith Russi Kirshner.[194] At times Crow's essay, which he describe as a survey, analyzes Matta-Clark's personality more than his production (e.g.,

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[193] Donald Wall, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," *Arts Magazine* 50 (May 1976): 76.

"his abiding dilemma as an artist lay between these two poles, one a life lived in and for outward appearances, the other a life engaged by an inward path of self-transformation barred from external vision"),[195] so that a number of his findings are not relevant to the present study. Nevertheless, Crow makes two points that are germane to this thesis. As Crow observes, "the attitude that unifies [Matta-Clark's] output from start to finish is an acute dissatisfaction with the inert quality of conventional sculpture and architecture," and, consequently, Matta-Clark's building cuts constituted "an open-ended narrative in real time with real consequences."[196] While Crow does not relate these dynamics specifically to Matta-Clark's work on museums, this thesis will trace the ways that Matta-Clark reinterpreted both sculpture and architecture through his work on art museums. Where minimalist objects (such as Donald Judd's series of industrially fabricated boxes) did away with sculptural pedestals, invited visitors to move around the work and consider the specific ramifications of their bodies' position relative to the sculpture and to the environment

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[195] Crow, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 15.

[196] Crow, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 19.

in which it was engaged, Matta-Clark's museum proposals went several steps further by interpenetrating/ splicing/weaving together the art work, the museum, and the visitor. By cutting the museum walls (both conceptually, in numerous proposals, and literally, in several projects that will be discussed here), Matta-Clark merged the artwork and the exhibition space; by creating environments that could only be fully experienced by passage through them, the visitor completed the piece by moving through, over, or around the cuts.

The most substantive, theoretically informed writing on Matta-Clark since his death is Pamela Lee's *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*.[197] A direct reference to Man Ray's assisted ready-made of the same name, Lee's title links Matta-Clark's production to the legacies of Dada and Surrealism; her title also refers to her more controversial strategy of reading Matta-Clark's work in terms of Bataille's notion of a sacrificial

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[197]Pamela Lee's 1996 Harvard Ph.D. dissertation was revised and published as a book, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 2000). Lee's other publications on Matta-Clark include "On the Holes of History: Gordon Matta-Clark's Work in Paris," *October* 85 (Summer 1998): 65-89 and "Drawing Inbetween," in Sabine Breitwieser, *Reorganizing Structure by Drawing Through It: Zeichnung bei Gordon Matta-Clark* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1997), 26-32.

economy. A methodological tour-de-force, Lee performs biographical, formalist, and social historical interpretations of Matta-Clark's work only to undermine them. Throughout, and in the end, Lee maintains, "Matta-Clark's work presupposes its own destruction."[198]

Yve-Alain Bois concurs; "it was essential to [Matta-Clark's] project that the buildings he transformed be urban waste marked for early destruction."[199] The elegance of this crisp, even ruthless interpretation is partially achieved, however, by focusing on a limited body of work and range of activity within an already truncated oeuvre. Before, during, and after Matta-Clark proposed to cut buildings (including several museums) he also drafted proposals that focused on proliferative growth and levitation manifested by interwoven trees (fig.s 56 and 57) and skyways held aloft by zeppelins (fig. 58). To limit discussion of Matta-Clark's oeuvre to the dynamics of excision and loss even when focusing primarily on the building cuts is to present an ultimately nihilistic narrative that rests uneasily with expansive and performative qualities also manifested therein.

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[198] Lee, *Object to be Destroyed*, 55.

[199] Yve-Alain Bois, "Threshole," in Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 189.

In what follows I emphasize the organic and performative tendencies in Matta-Clark's work on museums. To date, these elements of Matta-Clark's production have been eclipsed in the critical literature in favor of a focus on the ephemerality and loss that is also to be found there. The multiplicity of Matta-Clark's approach will be explored through an analysis of his projects for and relating to museums in a variety of media, including drawing, photography, installation work, and film. As the critical literature on Matta-Clark is limited, and since the artist did not theorize his own work as systematically as the numerous artist-writers in his generation (including Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, and Michael Asher), my analysis will be largely based on primary source materials (which include the artist's archive and the archive of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago) and sustained consideration of key works in Matta-Clark's oeuvre as they related to his work in and on art museums.

Matta-Clark's films, which to date have attracted very little focused attention, function both as significant art works of the period and as documents of vanished performances and environments.[200] The films are invaluable

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[200] Christian Kravagna, the first author to compare the roles of various modes of documentation in the work of Matta-

resources, particularly for individuals such as myself who were not able to experience the cut buildings first hand.

To Cut the Museum

If someone in the museum were truly interested in my work they would let me cut open the building.[201]

It would seem, judging from this comment made during his interview with the aptly named Donald Wall, that Gordon Matta-Clark had difficulty securing sponsorship for his building cuts. This was not, strictly speaking, the case. Matta-Clark's earliest works date from 1968, when he was an architecture student at Cornell University, and his first distressed architecture piece was performed at a museum only three years later. *Untitled Wall Cutting*, 1971, was created at the Museo de Bellas Artes, in Santiago, Chile. According to Jeffrey Lew, Matta-Clark's friend and fellow traveler to Santiago, the two artists were invited by the

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Clark, points out that while Matta-Clark's films give more information about the projects they document, his photographic collages correspond more closely to the deconstructive intention of the cut buildings themselves. Kravagna does not describe or analyze any of Matta-Clark's films or photographs in depth, but he does identify a topic ripe for further study. See Kravagna, "On the Documentary Nature of Photography and Film in the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark," in Crow, et. al. *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 133-46.

[201] Gordon Matta-Clark quoted in Donald Wall, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," *Arts Magazine* (May 1976): 77.

museum's director, Nemesio Antúnez, to take advantage of the museum's closure for renovation by creating works in the space. On the main floor, Lew displayed pottery and tools that he found in the museum by installing them atop pieces of glass, which he lit from underneath. Lew described his piece as something that could "only be really appreciated at night, when it reflected on the glass dome ceiling."[202] In contrast to Lew's nocturnal installation, Matta-Clark's work was activated by sunlight. With the aid of mirrors installed in an architectural cut, he directed a shaft of light from the glass ceiling toward a lavatory in the cellar twenty meters below. Lew recalled that Matta-Clark thus "created a camera obscura effect where the sky, seen through the transparent dome, was reflected in the urinal in the basement."[203] With this whimsical and muscular gesture, the 28-year-old Matta-Clark reversed

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[202] Jeffrey Lew, letter to IVAM, in Corinne Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1993), 370.

[203] Lew, in Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 370. With their various excavation projects, both Matta-Clark and Lew were playing with the conventions of archaeology as well as those of museum display. While Lew exhibited artifacts discovered in the museum, Matta-Clark's cuttings revealed the strata of the building itself.

Marcel Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain* gambit by bringing the museum to the urinal (fig. 59).[204]

Until recently, Jeffrey Lew's memories of this trip, as published in the Jacob and Diserens catalogues, were the only documentation available regarding the project. However, twelve photographs taken by Matta-Clark of his installation have recently surfaced in the artist's archives (one of the photographs, fig. 60, includes a self-portrait in the mirror). Measuring only 2 ½" x 3 ¼ ", these snapshots were meant as visual references for the artist and as of this writing have not been exhibited or published. They reveal neither the glass dome nor the commode described by Lew, but one photograph does show the museum's rotunda viewed through a doorway featuring its distinctive iron grillwork (fig. 61). As Lew relates, several mirrors were installed in the rotunda to capture light and reflect it down to mirrors installed in an

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[204] Of course, Duchamp's *Fountain* did not proceed directly to a museum. The first version was lost after its submission to (and rejection by) the organizers of the 1917 Armory show. The ready-made was subsequently re-made both full-scale (a second version was show at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1950, and a third version, with eight signed and numbered replicas, was produced for Galleria Schwarz, Milan, in 1964) and also as miniatures that were included by Duchamp in his "portable museums." See "Index of Works," in Pontus Hulten, ed. *Marcel Duchamp, Work and Life* (Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 1993), n.p.

architectural cut. Other photographs feature mirrors that have been installed on walls to continue bouncing light through the museum. Matta-Clark's use of mirrors in the Santiago museum was the culmination of his interest in catoptrics (the study of mirrors and reflected light); mirrors do not figure substantially in his subsequent work. The Santiago museum project relates to Smithson's *Mirror with Rock Salt (Salt Mine and Museum Proposal)*, 1968, realized as *Mirror Displacement (Cayuga Salt Mine Project)*, 1969, (see Smithson chapter, fig. 48). Matta-Clark saw this work when it was installed at Cornell University. If Smithson's mirror displacements signify nonsites, "reflecting" sites which are always elsewhere, Matta-Clark's mirrors foreground the material specifics and phenomenological experience of the museum's architecture, accentuated by cuts and reflections. Rather than creating an object for exhibition, Matta-Clark presents the altered museum space itself, intended to be experienced over time and from multiple vantage points, as his work of art.

With its emphasis on the channeling of light through space, the Santiago museum installation relates conceptually to Matta-Clark's "energy drawings" the same year (fig. 62). With its invitation to explore aspects of the museum building that typically remain hidden from view,

the Santiago installation also anticipates *Meander*, 1976, a proposal Matta-Clark made for an art museum in Athens, Georgia. As shown in two altered blueprints and a photographic collage, the *Meander* proposal incorporated diagonal cuts through walls, floors and ceilings to create "free passage from ground to sky" (fig. 63). One blueprint shows the development of several ideas for the shapes of these cuts, including parallel zigzagging or lightning bolt forms, but the final proposal was simplified to resemble a simple triangle imposed upon the floor plan of the building. *Meander* "opens" the museum to light and air, formally and literally reflecting the political theme of the broader project to which it was contributed, "Open to New Ideas: A Collection of New Art for Jimmy Carter."[205]

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[205] In honor of Jimmy Carter, newly elected president of the United States, twenty-seven artists were invited by Les Levine and Dennis Oppenheim to donate work to a new museum in Athens, Georgia. A symposium was organized on this occasion to discuss the role of federal funding in the arts. See Carter Ratcliff, "The American Artist from Loner to Lobbyist," *Art in America* 65 (March 1977): 10. Matta-Clark's other attempts to politicize the museum through activism included participation in a signed protest of the cancellation of a Hans Haacke exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. The May 15, 1971 petition, signed by 110 artists, read as follows: "Believing that by canceling Hans Haacke's show, Thomas Messer, director of the Guggenheim Museum, has betrayed the cause of free art and the charter of his own institution, we the undersigned artists join in refusing to allow our works to be exhibited at the Guggenheim until the policy of art censorship and its advocates are changed." See Barbara Reise, "A Tale of Two Exhibitions: The Aborted

Forebears

One of the motivations for Matta-Clark's trip to Santiago was a search for his father, the Chilean surrealist Roberto Matta, who was said to be traveling there (another was to research the possibility of developing a biennial art exhibition in Santiago).[206] Matta was not to be found in Santiago, but Matta-Clark and Lew turned their frustrated search for him to creative advantage by taking the opportunity to make their own exhibition at the museum. Raised in bohemian neighborhoods in New York and Paris, Matta-Clark could also claim Marcel Duchamp and his wife Alexina ("Teeny") Duchamp as godparents; the British surrealist Gordon Onslow Ford is his namesake.[207] Given his lineage, the aesthetic,

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Haacke and Robert Morris Shows," *Studio International* 182 (July 1971): 34.

[206] Matta-Clark organized a boycott of the 1971 São Paolo Biennale as a protest against the repressive government of Brazil. He wrote an open letter rejecting his invitation to participate in that biennale, and gathered the signatures of fifteen other American artists including Carl Andre, Robert Morris and Richard Serra. His letter concluded with a call to organize an alternative Biennale in Santiago. Crow, *Gordon Matta-Clark*,40.

[207] Jane Crawford, Gordon Matta-Clark's widow, confirmed that she learned this from Matta-Clark's mother, Anne Alpert (née Clark). Telephone conversation with the author, June 5, 2002.

political, and metaphorical presence of the modern art museum was extremely potent for him, and the projects of the historical avant-garde provided rich raw material for his work. Using both his paternal heritage, and his architectural training at Cornell University (1962-68, punctuated by study at the Sorbonne during 1963) as a kind of trampoline to push against, Matta-Clark rebounded from the physical and symbolic walls of the art museum. His famous surname opened doors but his proposals were difficult for most museums to accommodate. Thus, his practice was energized by the creative tension generated by occupying an outsider position from within the system.

As his son would do after him, Matta first trained as an architect, only to reject the career of a builder for that of an artist. Because the similarities and differences in their oeuvres are instructive, I will briefly summarize Matta's transition from aspiring architect to Surrealist painter. A native Chilean, Matta studied architecture at the Universidad Católica in Chile before moving to Paris. Beginning in 1935, Matta worked for two years in the studio of Le Corbusier on projects including the Ville Radieuse. He abandoned architecture in 1937, having befriended Surrealist painters Gordon Onslow Ford and Salvador Dalí and having been invited to officially join the Surrealists

by André Breton. As a sort of transition between these two pursuits, Breton commissioned Matta to write an essay that applied Surrealist principles to architecture. Matta's essay, "*Mathématique Sensible - Architecture du Temps*" was published in a 1938 issue of *Minotaure*, illustrated with an untitled collage of the same year (fig. 64).[208] This work depicts an International Style interior infected by bulbous biomorphs, which are suggestive of human internal organs. In the accompanying article, Matta wrote, "*Il nous faut des murs comme des draps mouillés qui se déforment et épousent nos peur psychologiques*" ("We must have walls like wet sheets that get out of shape and fit our psychological fears"), and later in the text he spoke of "*un parcours informulable qui dessine un espace nouveau, architectural, habitable*" ("an unformulated course delineating a new architectural, habitable space"). Since Matta had given up architecture proper he did not endeavor to create these environments in three dimensions himself. Rather, he turned to rendering fantastic spaces on canvas, a series he referred to as "psychological morphologies," an example of which is *Psychological Morphology no. 104*, 1939 (fig. 11). Gordon Matta-Clark took up the challenge of constructing

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[208] Roberto Matta, "*Mathématique Sensible - Architecture du Temps*" *Minotaure* 11 (Spring 1938): 43.

"walls that get out of shape and fit our psychological fears," although not through the womb-like forms imagined by his father, who concluded his essay with the statement, "*Et nous demanderons à nos mères d'accoucher d'un meuble aux lèvres tièdes*" ("we'll ask our mothers to give birth to a piece of furniture with lukewarm lips"). While Roberto Matta painted a universalizing, amniotic environment with fixed, if otherworldly, axonometric coordinates, Gordon Matta-Clark's building cuts were contingent upon the specific experience of a particular subject moving through three-dimensional space and time.[209]

If Duchamp in his Dadaist mode informed Matta-Clark's early building cuts, two installations designed by Duchamp in his Surrealist guise also anticipated Matta-Clark's subsequent practice in interesting ways.[210] Duchamp was named *Générateur-Arbitre* (Producer-Referee) for the 1938

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[209] Matta-Clark articulated the changed terms as follows: "why hang things of the wall when the wall itself is so much more a challenging medium?" in Florent Bex, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Antwerp: Internationaal Cultureel Centrum, 1977), n.p.

[210] I refer both to my specific interpretation of Matta-Clark's Santiago museum cut as an inversion of Duchamp's *Fountain*, and also to Matta-Clark own more general acknowledgement of Dada in his work: "its influence has been a great source of energy … Dada's devotion to the imaginative disruption of convention is an essentially liberating force." Quoted in Wall, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," 77.

"International Exhibition of Surrealism," held at the Galerie Beaux Arts in Paris. The exhibition took place the same year that Matta's article and collage appeared in *Minotaure*, and featured work by numerous official and honorary Surrealists, including Matta. However, in spite of the wealth of material on view, Duchamp's suspension of 1200 pendulous and dusty coal sacks from the gallery ceiling succeeded in eclipsing the other works in the show (fig. 66).[211] Duchamp's infamous installation for the "First Papers of Surrealism" exhibition (held in New York four years later) was even less generous toward his fellow exhibitors. Performing as an arachnid, Duchamp obstructed passage through the exhibition with a tangled web of string looped through the galleries (fig. 67). Having engaged the ceiling (and, by extension, the floor) with his Paris coal installation, in New York Duchamp's string also commanded the space and works in between.[212]

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[211] For an account of the genesis and reception of this exhibition, see Bruce Altshuler, "Snails in a Taxi," in *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 116-133.

[212] The phenomenological implications of Duchamp's installation proved influential for many artists working in the second half of the twentieth century. For a discussion of American artists such as Eva Hesse, Oldenburg, and Fred Sandback, each of whom responded to the formal and environmental possibilities of Duchamp's use of string, see my essay, "Hanging Works," in Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *Eva*

Duchamp's strategy of co-opting the entire gallery was taken up decades later by Gordon Matta-Clark. The nature of Matta-Clark's gestures could range from exquisitely subtle to bluntly aggressive. For example, Matta-Clark's entry in one 1973 group show consisted simply of washing a single quadrant of a four-paned window, allowing more light to enter the room (fig. 68).[213] Matta-Clark's contribution to another group show, while related to *Window Wash*, had an entirely different effect. "Idea as Model," an exhibition held at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in 1976, included maquettes by Richard Meier, Charles Gwathmey, and Michael Graves.[214] Matta-Clark's submission for the show, a series of photographs of broken windows in

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Hesse (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 272-277.

[213] In a review of the exhibition, Laurie Anderson referred to this as a "stubbornly flat-footed piece" which nonetheless "allowed for more visibility." *Artforum* (September 1973), reprinted in Jean Dupuy, ed., *Collective Consciousness: Art Performance in the Seventies* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1980), 100.

[214] The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies was a study center for architecture located on 40th Street, south of Bryant Park. At the time of "Architecture as Model" Peter Eisenman was the director of the institute, and Andrew MacNair was the curator of the exhibition. According the MacNair, Matta-Clark's hostility toward the other exhibition participants was extreme. He quotes Matta-Clark as saying, "these are the guys I studied with at Cornell, these guys were my teachers. I hate what they stand for." MacNair quoted in Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 98.

Bronx tenements (allegedly broken by their own residents to protest their living conditions), was intended to implicate the other architects in the exhibition for building housing projects that failed to serve the needs of their inhabitants. Opting to escalate the thrust of his photographs, Matta-Clark went to the gallery before the opening and shot some of the windows out with a BB gun. While this action boldly illustrates Matta-Clark's famous hostility toward the profession of architecture, it says even more about his strategy of making a work that must be experienced viscerally before it can be theorized intellectually.[215] From a more dispassionate viewpoint, it is possible to consider the inevitable, immediate repair of the windows by the gallery administration as part of the piece. *Window Blow-Out* then can be read as an exhibition of newly replaced windows at the Institute, which in turn references the Bronx projects where the windows remained broken. This continuum of possibility, from *Window Wash* to

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[215] Matta-Clark repeatedly voiced objections to architecture as a profession, especially as it was practiced in New York City. "Architecture is a big business. It's an enormously costly undertaking and, therefore, like government, comes equipped with its entire panoply of propaganda … what I am reacting to is the deformation of values (ethics) in the disguise of Modernity, Renewal, Urban Planning, call it what you will." Quoted in Wall, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," 78.

Window Blowout, and from *Window Blowout* to the replacement of the windows was an important component of Matta-Clark's work on buildings and is an important example of the role of temporality in his work.

Contamination

Before Matta-Clark began cutting museums, he challenged them with metaphoric - and literal - contamination. In the summer of 1970, the year before his trip to Chile and his "deconstruction" of the fine arts museum there, Matta-Clark created an installation for the Bykert Gallery entitled *Museum* (fig. 69). In a gesture sympathetic in spirit, if not in form, to Smithson's *Museum* of 1960 (see Smithson chapter fig. 40), this work assaulted the gallery with base materials. *Museum* comprised pieces of agar (seaweed gelatin) into which an unsavory combination of food ingredients (yeast, sugar, corn oil, dextrose, V-8, cranberry juice, and chicken broth form one list), metals (gold leaf, screw hooks, and thumb tacks form another) and active cultures with frightening Latinate appellations (*Mucor Racemosus, Rhizopus Apophysis,* and *Penicillium Notatum*, for example) were added.[216] Once the moisture

[216] The ingredients of *Museum* were published, together with an installation photograph, in the first issue of *Avalanche*

evaporated from these mixtures, the desiccated remains were hung from vines strung like clothesline along the gallery wall. Matta-Clark remarked that he was hanging the objects salon-style (in reference to 19th-century paintings galleries) and by supplying microscopes in the installation so that viewers could closely examine the in-process chemical reactions, he also appropriated conventions of science exhibit display for his *Museum*. In spite of its undeniable physicality, Klaus Kertess - then director of Bykert Gallery - found *Museum* less than satisfying on an aesthetic level:

> The installation was a little literary for me. By literary, I mean that the process that was going on was more significant than the wall itself - which was not very powerful in terms of visual impact. Even though his works were more head games than visual, I liked the way Gordon thought and what he was doing.[217]

The "process" to which Kertess referred was that of a directed but ultimately uncontrollable transformation. It was both empirically chemical and allusively alchemical. Matta-Clark owned several books on alchemy and would have

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(New York: Fall, 1970), 4-5. *Land of Milk and Honey*, 1970, which does not appear in the installation photograph, is the only object from this group that survives. It is in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

[217] Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 27.

been familiar with the permutations of Webster's definition:

> Alchemy: 1: the medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy whose aims were the transmutation of the base metals into gold, the discovery of a universal cure for diseases, and the discovery of a means of indefinitely prolonging life 2: a great or magic power of transmutation [no dishonest candidate could, by means of a ~ election, be converted into an honest president -- A.E. Stevenson, 1965] 3: archaic: a golden-colored alloy b: *obs*: a golden-colored trumpet [put their mouths the sounding ~ -- John Milton] *syn*: see magic[218]

Museum was not Matta-Clark's first alchemical work. For "Documents," an exhibition held at John Gibson Gallery in the summer of 1969, Matta-Clark fried Polaroid photographs of a Christmas tree in oil, garnishing them with gold leaf. The piece was called *Photo-Fry*, and the resulting objects -- molten photographic emulsion coated in lard - were mailed to friends as "best lated" Christmas cards, a year and a half later (fig. 70).[219] A wry reversal

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[218] *Webster's Third New International* Dictionary, Philip Babcock Gove, editor-in-chief (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1993), 50. Matta-Clark's library included the following books on alchemy: Mark Graubard, *Astrology and Alchemy: Two Fossil Sciences* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953); Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968) and Arthur Edward Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy* (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1969).

[219] The version sent to Robert Smithson was postmarked February, 1971. Another recipient, the critic Peter Schjeldahl recalled, "I regret having thrown away, as

of alchemy (turning gold to dross), the piece foregrounded process and performance at the expense of aesthetics. In its use of fat, gold, and performance, *Photofry* also relates to Joseph Beuys's work, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965, in which that artist covered his head with honey and gold and silently explicated modern art to a motionless rabbit (fig. 71). In contrast to Beuys's project, Matta-Clark's ritual was neither didactic nor shamanistic; it did not attempt to address the heavy weight of post-World War II European history. Yet, while it was both irreverent and humorous, Matta-Clark's contribution to "Documents" did make the gallery and the objects created there into sites of on-going inquiry and transformation.

Among his contemporaries, Matta-Clark's application of the language of science to art was not unique. For example, Peter Hutchinson (who also showed in "Documents") and Alan Sonfist both harnessed chemical and bacterial processes in gallery installations. In 1970 Hutchinson exhibited his *Paricutin Project* at Gibson Gallery. For this work Hutchinson traveled to Mexico where he distributed "100 yards of carbohydrates" (in the form of

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disgusting, my copy of his famous 1969 Christmas card: a photo of a Christmas tree, fried in grease." Peter Schjeldahl, "Gordon Matta-Clark, Brooklyn Museum," in *The '7 Days' Art Columns, 1988-1990* (Great Barrington [Mass]: The Figures, 1990), 54.

fresh bread crumbs) packaged in plastic bags along the edge of a crater. The steam from the crater caused the bread to sprout multicolored molds, which were then unwrapped and photographed; the photographs were shown at John Gibson Gallery.[220] At about the same time, Alan Sonfist exhibited *Aging Canvas* (a stretched, unprimed canvas) on which he cultivated mildew and fungus, as well as *Microorganism Enclosure*, a Plexiglas box in which bacteria and fungus competed for dominance inside a sealed environment.[221] Although Hutchinson and Sonfist shared with Matta-Clark the strategy of privileging process and systems while simultaneously testing the limits of painting and sculpture, neither Hutchinson nor Sonfist addressed the museum directly in their work. By titling his agar

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[220] Hutchinson displayed molds themselves in a subsequent exhibition, "Moldworks & Sketchbook." Again using carbohydrates as his medium, Hutchinson covered the wall of a gallery in Rotterdam with plastic bags containing moistened bread crumbs which changed color as the show progressed. See Brian O'Doherty and Ann Wilson Lloyd, *The Narrative Art of Peter Hutchinson: A Retrospective* (Provincetown, MA: Provincetown Arts Press, 1994), 56. See also Peter Hutchinson, "Paricutin: An Ecological Work," 1970, in *Dissolving Clouds: Writings of Peter Hutchinson* (Provincetown: Provincetown Arts Press, 1994).

[221] For a cogent discussion of these works, see Robert Joseph Horvitz, "Nature as Artifact: Alan Sonfist," *Artforum* XII (November 1973): 32-35. Dating Sonfist's work can be difficult, since the artist himself opposed the practice. On this see Alan Sonfist, *Autobiography of Alan Sonfist* (Ithaca: Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1975).

installation *Museum*, Matta-Clark made clear that the institution itself was in his crosshairs. For the next eight years, until his early death in 1978, Matta-Clark performed a series of stress tests on both the physical and conceptual structure of the art museum. While his approach would shift from infiltration (the introduction of infectious systems) to dissection (or what he referred to as "undoing") this engagement remained central to Matta-Clark's practice.[222]

Food and Anarchitecture

As an installation work, *Museum* made humorous yet critical reference to the institution. *Museum* was also an adventurous culinary experiment. Matta-Clark's interest in buildings and food informed a number of otherwise disparate projects. The following discussion about Matta-Clark's involvement with an eatery called Food, and a group that met there to eat and discuss ideas about art in the context of the urban environment, is intended to illuminate these

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[222] On the subject of process in Matta-Clark's work, Robert Pincus-Witten has written, "... as with all Conceptual masters, process, not iconography, encodes doctrine -- in Matta-Clark's case, collegiate liberalism as it was perceived by the greenest of romantics." Pincus-Witten in Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 11.

interrelationships, and will subsequently feed back into an examination of Matta-Clark's work on, and for, museums.

Food was an artist-run soup kitchen that Matta-Clark co-founded in October of 1971 with his friends Caroline Gooden, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris and Rachel Lew (all of whom were dancers).[223] Food was a restaurant where artists and dancers were the cooks, waiters and, often, clients. Not surprisingly, it was the site of performances and a place where artists met to discuss their work. Food was the base of a group of artists interested in exploring psychological aspects of the built environment, as well as analyzing received ideas about structural and social systems. This project was called Anarchitecture, and its participants included Matta-Clark, Gooden, Harris, and Girouard, as well as artists Jene Highstein, George Trakas, Richard Nonas, Richard Landry, Jeffrey Lew, Laurie Anderson, Susan Weil, Robert Grosvenor, Neil Jenney, Susan Rothenberg, and Keith Sonnier.[224] Examples of Anarchitecture's word play vis-à-vis the urban environment

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[223] Food was located at 127 Prince Street, at the intersection of Prince and Wooster streets. See Catherine Morris, *Food* (Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst and Kulturgeschichte, 1999), 12.

[224] Morris, *Food*, 19-20.

include this definition of keys: "a catalogue and apology of locked spaces to be carried in the pocket."[225] Although resistance to closure was a significant element of Anarchitecture - "working in several dimentions [sic], making the discussions the show and the work - keeping it an ongoing open process, not finishing, just keeping going and starting over and over,"[226] the Anarchitecture roundtable did conclude with an exhibition at 112 Greene Street in March, 1974 (fig. 72).[227] The show consisted of standard-size photographs exhibited anonymously to represent the project as a collective endeavor. The actual installation of the show was described by Richard Nonas as "totally dull,"[228] a criticism that echoed Kertess's analysis of Matta-Clark's *Museum*: both projects were

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[225] Loose notecard #1335, Gordon Matta-Clark Archive.

[226] Loose notecard #1218, Gordon Matta-Clark Archive.

[227] 112 Greene Street was an alternative exhibition space run by Jeffrey Lew where many of the Food-affiliated artists showed. For a history of the space, see Robyn Brentano and Mark Savitt, ed.s, *112 Workshop/ 112 Greene Street* (New York: New York University Press, 1981). 112 Greene Street evolved into a venue now known as White Columns, located at 320 West 13th Street. *Avalanche,* a magazine published between fall 1970 and summer 1976 by Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, specialized in conceptual and performance art. Food was a regular advertiser in *Avalanche;* activities at Food often cropped up in the editorial sections as well.

[228] Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark,* 398.

considered to be long on ideas and short on aesthetic accomplishment. In an interview with Liza Bear, Matta-Clark articulated the conceptual nodes around which Anarchitecture was organized, while himself admitting that the physical manifestation of these ideas had not been entirely persuasive:

> The Anarchitecure show at 112 Greene Street last year - which never got very strongly expressed - was about something other than the established architectural vocabulary, without getting fixed into anything too formal … when you're living in a city the whole fabric is about metaphoric voids, gaps, left-over spaces, places that were not developed.[229]

Following *Museum*, Matta-Clark moved from creating alchemical environments for gallery spaces to direct interventions in architectural sites, such as the Museo de Bellas Artes in Santiago. His work within museums was deeply informed by the ideas developed within the Anarchitecture group: Matta-Clark focused on voids, gaps, and left-over spaces within these buildings, which he sometimes merely indicated and at other times amplified through architectural alteration.

One application of the Anarchitecture approach was *Proposal for Well in Museum*, Gordon Matta-Clark's

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[229] Gordon Matta-Clark interview with Liza Bear, *Avalanche* May 21, 1974, n.p.

contribution to a Yoko Ono project called *Water Event*, which was itself part of her exhibition "This is Not Here" at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York. The text of the invitation that Ono sent to artists soliciting their collaboration in this event was typeset in the shape of a bottle (fig. 73). It read as follows:

> yoko ono with john lennon as guest artist will have a show titled *this is not here* to commence at the everson museum, syracuse, on oct. 9 '71. yoko ono wishes to invite you to participate in a water event (one of the events taking place in the show) by requesting you to produce with her a water sculpture, by submitting a water container or idea of one which would form half of the sculpture. yoko will supply the other half - water. the sculpture will be credited as water sculpture by yoko ono and yourself. the sculpture will be displayed throughout the duration of the show. please reply before sept. 20 to: yoko ono/apple, 1700 broadway n.y., ny. 10019 tel: (212) 582 5533

Ono's participant list of 120 art and culture luminaries (each of whom was informed, "you are water/i'm water/we're all water in different containers/that's why its so easy to meet/someday we'll evaporate together") reads like a *Who's Who* of New York's avant garde cultural community. John Cage's submission was "himself"; Dick Cavett, "a tophat"; Joseph Cornell, "an India Ink bottle"; Gregory Corso, "a spider"; Nam June Paik and Shigeko

Kubota, "their hands."[230] Three artists on the list addressed the museum's own architecture with their submissions: Jan Penovitch submitted "the museum boiler," and Ben Vautier submitted, "the museum" as his water container. Gordon Matta-Clark's container, a proposed "well in the museum," extends the exhibition to a conceptual sub-basement, and reflects Anarchitectural concerns with the spaces above, below, and in between traditional galleries. While Matta-Clark's *well in the museum* could function as a water container, per Ono's request, it is also closely related to Matta-Clark's work that same year at the Santiago museum, which linked that museum's main exhibition hall with a basement commode. Digging beneath the museum also signified internment, resonating with the then fashionable metaphor of art

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[230] The exhibition was controversial. Everson Museum director James Harithas and his assistant David Ross were compelled to explain Ono's Fluxus works as art, and to defend the unprecedented $1 admission fee, which was criticized as crass commercialism - yet it was also very well attended, largely due to Lennon and Ono's celebrity. Several works were stolen and damaged early in the exhibition (for example, a Venetian glass vase sent by Peggy Guggenheim as a "water container" was broken); these were replaced only with labels documenting the dates of their disappearance. See Grace Glueck, "Art by Yoko Ono Shown at Museum in Syracuse," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1971, 48.

museums as crypts, as can be seen in a roughly contemporaneous drawing for a "sun crypt" (fig. 74).[231]

Another project that subjected the form of the traditional exhibition space to creative indignity was *Open House*, an environment installed between 98 and 112 Greene Street in May of 1972.[232] Also called *Drag-on*, and *Dumpster*, *Open House* was an installation and series of performances that did in fact take place in a dumpster. Growing out of Anarchitecture ideas about new uses for disused spaces, and riffing on the idea of the art museum as a moldering construct, *Open House* was an environment elaborated with wood scraps and doors found on the street and animated by impromptu dance performances. As an experiential environment that viewers could comprehend only by moving through the space, *Open House* was a clear precursor to Matta-Clark's subsequent work on museums. However, the assemblage approach to *Open House* is something

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[231] The sketch is in notebook #2208, Gordon Matta-Clark Archive. The burial theme in Matta-Clark's work was literalized six years later. Shortly after Gordon's twin brother Sebastian ("Batan") Matta fell to his death from the window of Gordon's loft, Gordon staged a memorial performance titled *Descending Steps for Batan*, 1977. For this piece Matta-Clark cut open the floor of the Yvon Lambert Gallery in Paris, and worked on digging a stepped hole beneath the gallery each day during the course of the exhibition.

[232] See "Open House," in Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 372.

that Matta-Clark abandoned when he began to focus, shortly thereafter, on deconstructing buildings. Unlike the undone buildings in Matta-Clark's oeuvre, *Open House* lends itself to refabrication. As a result, *Open House* has been remade repeatedly for posthumous exhibitions of Matta-Clark's work.[233]

Splitting

While it was neither a museum proposal nor an intervention into museum architecture, Matta-Clark's mature practice emerged with *Splitting*, 1974, a work which manifested not only as a performative architectural intervention staged for live audiences, but also as an experiential environment, a film, and a book. For this work, a remarkable fate was visited upon an unremarkable structure: a two-story residence in suburban New Jersey was bisected from its roof to its foundation. Two cornerstones were removed and half of the house was set lower than its counterpart. The result was a striking negative space in the form of an inverted acute triangle, wide at the top of

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[233] Exhibitions for which *Open House* was reconstructed include: *Alternative in Retrospect: An Historical Overview, 1969-1975* at the New Museum, New York, 1981; *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1985; and *Gordon Matta-Clark*, IVAM, Valencia, Spain, 1993. See Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 372.

the house, terminating in a sharp point at its base. If *Museum* lacked visual impact, the formal strength of Matta-Clark's split house was undeniable (fig. 75). Matta-Clark concluded the piece by chopping out four corners from the roof. Holly Solomon, Matta-Clark's dealer and the owner of the property, bussed a Soho audience to New Jersey to see the completed work. The performance role initially belonging to the artist, as he wielded chainsaw and crowbar in the course of the building's deconstruction (or, as he described it, "undoing") was transferred to viewers as they moved through the space. Observing one another across the ever-widening gap of the interior, visitors animated the space with their movements and were in turn animated by the sense of danger inherent in the exploration of a destabilized structure. As we shall see, this dynamic carried over into Matta-Clark's subsequent work on museums. With this approach, Matta-Clark presented viewers with unprecedented ways of perceiving both artworks and the modern art museum.

A useful point of entry into the piece for contemporary audiences is the eponymous film. Employing both documentary and experimental modes of filmmaking, *Splitting* reflects the conceptual and visceral experience

of moving through severed architecture.[234] Running just short of eleven minutes, the film (which is silent) opens with white block letters on a black ground:

SPLITTING

The primitive signboard format conjures expectations of silent melodrama or comedy dating from the turn of the last century (and indeed, both of these elements are to be found in the work). The first in a series of intertitles flashes on-screen:

FIRST OF THE TWO PROJECTS
DONE IN 1974, SPLITTING USED
A TYPICAL ONE-FAMILY HUOSE [sic]
IN ENGLEWOOD, N.J., A NEW
YORK CITY BEDROOM SUBURB

Shooting color film, the camera pans right to left, across the exterior of a homely, faux clapboard building. It centers on a ladder leaning against the house, pulls back, and cuts to the second intertitle:

BEGINNING AT THE CENTER OF
THE HOUSE TWO PARALLEL
LINES WERE CUT THROUGH ALL
THE STRUCTURAL SURFACES

The camera pans to equipment that will be used for the cutting. While everything else in the shot has a bluish tint, the gaze of the camera comes to rest on a bright red

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[234] *Splitting*, and Matta-Clark's other films, can be viewed at Electronic Arts Intermix in New York.

toolbox. Next, Matta-Clark is shown cutting the building, starting just underneath the eaves. A dramatic interior shot shows sunlight burning through the fissure in the otherwise dark interior. The camera closes in on the red handle of a saw. The next intertitle reads:

> THE ABANDONED HOME WAS
> FILLED BY A SLIVER OF SUN -
> LIGHT THAT PASSED THE DAY
> THROUGHOUT THE ROOMS

The camera captures more dizzying flashes of sunlight in the otherwise gloomy interior, then captures a reverse shadow where sunlight flooding through the split is projected on the lawn.

> BEVELING DOWN FORTY LINEAR
> FEET OF MASONRY, 322
> HUMPHREY ST. WAS GENTLY TIP-
> PED BACK ON ITS FOUNDATION

The camera captures Matta-Clark and another worker cutting through the building, amidst billowing clouds of dust. Big red jacks supporting the building are then lowered and a crowbar are used to encourage the house to split along the line of its bisection. Cornerstones are knocked out (not especially "gently") with a sledgehammer (fig. 76). From inside the basement, the camera pans around the incised foundation. A figure, functioning as a surrogate for the viewer, is seen passing through the vertiginous spaces of the fragmented house. The camera

cuts again to Matta-Clark on the exterior, working the fissure. From inside, a saw blade is seen penetrating the ceiling. In addition to the main vertical bisection, corners have been removed where the walls of the house meet the roof. The last frames of the film reveal green vegetation visible through square cuts:

> THE FINISHED WORK LASTED
> THREE MONTHS BEFORE BE-
> ING DEMOLISHED FOR URBAN
> 'RENEWAL'

With its shifting angles and jarring pulses of light, *Splitting* (the film) emphasizes the constant slippage between the haptic and optic disorientation that many visitors experienced while touring *Splitting* (the house). Alice Aycock recalled her exploration of the piece:

> Starting at the bottom of the stairs where the crack was small, you'd go up, and as you'd go further up you'd have to keep crossing the crack. It kept widening as you made your way up the stairs to the top …you sensed the abyss in a kinesthetic and psychological way.[235]

Another artist friend, Susan Rothenberg, characterized her experience of *Splitting* as follows:

> It had psychological and formal punch. Robert Morris's box piece made you walk around the edges of the room, but forced you out of participation, while

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[235] Alice Aycock in conversation with Joan Simon in Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 33.

> Gordon invited you in to some very macabre participation.[236]

Interpretations of this work, on which Matta-Clark's art historical reputation is largely based, vary widely. Although *Splitting* had a great deal to do with extraction, emptiness, and the ultimate disappearance of all architectural traces from its original site, Richard Nonas understood it to be an essentially accumulative project:

> [Matta-Clark] cut the Humphrey Street house in half, looked at it, called an audience in to experience it - then continued cutting, removing a huge wedge from one end of the foundation and tilting one half of the house outward. He photographed that, arranged a public reception for it - and kept cutting. He cut all four corners off the house - greatly reducing the strength, and meaning, of the sculpture - photographed it and them, arranged another public showing of the cornerless house - then organized a gallery show of the four corners (arranged in a square and almost touching), then turned it all into a book. It was all art for Gordon, even the documentation. And it was not equally strong. Gordon knew that too; admitted it. And he did not care. Each piece was *more*, all part of the same more. Each referred to the rest.[237]

In an otherwise laudatory article published shortly after Matta-Clark's death, Ted Castle voiced outright disdain for the architectural fragments, referring to them as "souvenirs which could be crated and hauled and pushed

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[236] Rothenberg interviewed in Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 73.

[237] Richard Nonas, "Gordon's Now, Now," in Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 400.

into art galleries like inanimate cattle."[238] Although Matta-Clark exhibited the fragments he extracted from *Splitting* and other buildings, he was at times vexed by their tendency to make "confusing reference to what is not there." In contrast to Robert Smithson, who in his site/nonsite works thematized the disjunction between the objects he exhibited and the time and place from which they originated, Matta-Clark expressed a hope that "the desire for exhibiting the left-over pieces will diminish as time goes by - amazing, the way people steal stones from the Acropolis. Even if they are good stones, they are not the Acropolis."[239]

Splitting was undeniably performative, yet the nature of the performance has been hotly contested. The debate centers on questions of anthropomorphism and violence. Matta-Clark went to some lengths to dissociate his project from the personal histories of the people for whom the

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[238] Ted Castle, "Gordon Matta-Clark," *Flash Art/Heute Kunst* 86/87(June-July 1979): 39.

[239] Quoted in Wall, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," 77. Not surprisingly, as Matta-Clark's reputation has grown and his influence among working artists has continued to spread, the interest in exhibiting the "left-over pieces" is likewise increasing. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art recently acquired *Splitting: Four Corners* and exhibits the four architectural fragments together with the *Splitting* film.

house had been a home. Discarding belongings left behind by former tenants, he commented, "I didn't want to go sorting through the fragmenting biographical garbage heap."[240] He also disclaimed the anthropomorphic associations drawn by the harshest critics of the piece, "I find it very funny that so many people have drawn sexual allusions from what I did at the Humphrey Street building, when the process was anything but illusionistic."[241] Yet, if Matta-Clark wanted to distance himself from accusations of metaphoric violence through literal dismemberment of the house, he complicated this assertion himself by personifying the house as feminine. While describing the process of setting the structure back on its foundations he recalled, "she came down like a dream … it was like a perfect dance partner."[242] In the same interview he also confirmed that pleasure in aggression was integral to the endeavor, "spending those weeks and weeks with a machine in your hand as an extension of the physical event makes it a hardhat performance, producing clean-line brutality."[243] Referring to a

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[240] Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark,* 376.

[241] Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark,* 376.

[242] Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark,* 376-77.

[243] Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark,* 376.

subsequent project, Matta-Clark again acknowledged an aggressive tendency in the work but also expressed a desire to transcend it:

> Tackling a whole building even with power tools and a couple of helpers is as strenuous an action as any dance or team sport … the violence turns to visual order and hopefully, then to a sense of heightened awareness … my hope is the dynamism of the action can be seen as an alternative vocabulary with which to question the static inert building environment.[244]

Splitting also took the form of an artist's book. The text in the book largely echoed the text in the film, and formally the two projects were parallel in their alternations between image and text. Yet the *Splitting* book made evident, far more than the film, the sad and vaguely tawdry nature of the house as Matta-Clark found it. Two photographs in the book document a basement strewn with abandoned junk and appliances (fig. 77); a sequence of four exteriors shots reveals broken windows, rubbish, peeling paint, and sagging power lines. These pathetic details, not particularly visible in the film, frame Matta-Clark's

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[244] Interview in Bex, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 12. Team sport as performative and transformative aggression has proved a potent metaphor for subsequent artists including Matthew Barney. See for example the horse race and demolition derby sequences in Barney's *Cremaster 3*, 2002. Robert Smithson used a similar technique of toggling between destructive and contemplative modes in sequences that depicted the "ripping" of *Spiral Jetty*.

cutting of the building "from its gaggle to its latch" as an ennobling gesture. These images support Matta-Clark's assessment that

> While this small not so happy house got cut and shifted out of place, the action took only minutes of the building's history. Yet in my view the tiny cramped rooms were suddenly flooded with direct sunlight.[245]

How were these strategies specifically applied to Matta-Clark's work on the architecture of museums? Following are several case studies.

Contoured Xhibition Playground for Queens of All SeXs and *Doors Through and Through*, 1976

For a project at P.S.1, an alternative exhibition space in Queens, Matta-Clark proposed an exhibition *of*, rather than *in* the museum. An altered photograph and blueprint (figs. 78 and 79) show that through a series of inverted catenary cuts, *Contoured Xhibition Playground for Queens of All Sexes*, 1976 would have left the left the corners of this massive former schoolhouse intact, but would have opened the structural walls from the street into the interior courtyard. A bold suggestion, this project clearly could not be carried out if the structural

[245]From an undated statement explaining Matta-Clark's work with abandoned structures. Gordon Matta-Clark Archives.

integrity of the new art center was to be maintained. Matta-Clark's subsequent proposal, a simple idea which was still beyond the scope of what most art venues could allow, was *Doors Through and Through*, 1976. For this work, Matta-Clark took the perimeter of a doorway on the top floor of the building and projected it onto the floor. This form was then cut through three floors down to the basement of the building. Visitors to any floor could look up to the interior of the roof or down to the basement by leaning across the cut. This straightforward, rectilinear cutting away within an exhibition space was the first in a series of ever-more elaborate schemes which explored overlapping and interpenetrating planes presented both haptically and optically to the viewer.

Founded by Alanna Heiss in 1971, P.S. 1 was conceived specifically as an alternative exhibition space where artists could make non-commercial, large-scale work in a studio/laboratory setting. In 2002, the Museum of Modern Art merged with P.S.1, linking Matta-Clark's *Doors Through and Through*, as well as other works site-specific to P.S. 1, to its own permanent collection.[246]

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[246] Alanna Heiss was recently asked why she decided to join forces with the Museum of Modern Art when her organization had so aptly occupied an outsider position for almost three decades. She cited financial stability as a major

Conical Intersect, 1977

Matta-Clark's entry in the Paris Biennale of September 1975 was *Conical Intersect*, a project that involved slicing through twin townhouses at 27-29 rue Beaubourg. Matta-Clark's first proposal was to cut a hole through Renzo Piano's Centre Georges Pompidou building, then still under construction. Instead he was given use of the townhouses, only two weeks before their scheduled demolition. These seventeenth-century residences were among the last to be razed in a neighborhood that was being cleared for new construction. Matta-Clark pierced the two buildings with a cone shape, the base of which was a circular cut measuring four meters in diameter in the north wall of the building. A working drawing (fig. 80) shows how the cone spiraled in an upthrusting diagonal direction, piercing walls and floors, diminishing as it progressed, to end as a pin prick in the attic roof of the adjoining house. Formally *Conical Intersect* was Matta-Clark's most complex work to date, working with an unbroken form carrying throughout two

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motivation, but also commented that P.S. 1 had been guaranteed programming autonomy by the Museum. Asked how she felt about the merger, Heiss replied, "we are sleeping with the prince, and it makes us feel sexy." Question and answer period during a lecture on P.S. 1 at the Saint Louis Art Museum, October 24, 2002.

buildings. On a political level the piece was intended to criticize the erasure of an historic neighborhood. In both senses *Conical Intersect* can be said to address the modern art museum, in that it served to physically and politically frame the technologically inspired design of the Pompidou.

It is especially fitting that Matta-Clark made a film of *Conical Intersect*, since the cutting was itself inspired by a film, Anthony McCall's half-hour black and white *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973. McCall's film features the drawing of a circle onto the wall of a room. The circle is traced around a beam of light emanating from a film projector. When a misty atmosphere wafts into the space, the shaft of light from the projector is rendered visible, manifesting as a three-dimensional form. McCall's film considers projected light as sculpture, while Matta-Clark's building cut uses optical projection as its model for reorganizing mass. McCall's film of a film is echoed by Matta-Clark's film of a sculptural environment which thematizes mechanics of vision.[247]

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[247] Gerry Hovagimyan, who assisted Gordon Matta-Clark with *Conical Intersect*, explained that Matta-Clark named the piece "*Conical Intersect*, because the idea came from a film by Anthony McCall called *Line Describing a Cone*," in Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 88. For a discussion of McCall's film and five still images taken from it, see Chrissie Iles, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in*

What is being seen with, and through, *Conical Intersect*? Shot by Gordon Matta-Clark and Bruno DeWitt, *Conical Intersect, Etant d'art pour locataire* (a color film running eighteen and a half minutes) endeavors to frame "the skeletal steel backdrop of the soon-to-be Centre Beaubourg." The film opens with white text in block letters superimposed upon an image of the rue Beaubourg:

> THE SITE WAS AT 27-29 RUE BEAUBOURG
> USING TWO BUILDINGS CONSTRUCTED FOR
> MR AND MRS BONNVILLE IN 1690.
> WHICH WERE AMONG THE CAST [sic] TO BE
> DEMOLISHED IN A DECADE OF GAULIST
> "RENOVATION" OF LES HALLES.
>
> THE PROJECT WAS FOCUSED TOWARDS THE
> STREET ANGLED UP WITH PASSERS BY AS A
> SILENT 'SON-ET-LUMIERE'/AND NON-
> U-MENTALLY CARVED THROUGH
> PLASTER AND TIME TO MARK THE SKELETAL
> STEEL BACKDROP OF THE SOON-TO-BE
> CENTRE BEAUBOURG

The camera zooms in on a small hole in the townhouse wall, which slowly grows larger. The dark face of the building is slowly overwhelmed by an expanding white orifice in its center, which spews white dust, as plaster is knocked out from the inside. Wielding hammer and chisel Matta-Clark rounds out his plaster cut (see fig. 81, stills from the film). From inside the building, cars are seen

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American Art 1964-1977(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000), 120-125.

passing by on the rue Beaubourg. From outside the building, a second hole opens in the wall. Inside, workers chisel away, bathed in blue-green light. An arc-shaped dotted line emerges. Cut plaster raises a small cloud above the rubble. As people look on from the street, a thin rainbow shape arches over a small round hole. Then the space between the arch and the whole is knocked out to create a lunette-shaped void. Two workers perform a brief cancan in the lunette. The lunette folds over on itself, doubling, and becomes a circle. Some bystanders snap photos; others look on quizzically. Matta-Clark, in dusty coveralls, engages a bystander in conversation. Work on the building continues as handsaws cut through timbers. A circular cut frames passing traffic. From the point of view of a passing car, a flat wall with a large puncture is visible. In this tracking shot, the puncture takes on depth and becomes legible as a cone-shaped core. Seen from various angles, the cut reveals itself as complex and volumetric. Through this frame the girders of the Pompidou loom large and menacing; by contrast the rough plaster edges of *Conical Intersect* appear homely (fig. 82). The camera pauses to capture patterns of blue and white wallpaper and the frosting-like textures of plaster.

A large bulldozer starts taking down a side of building. The film cuts to an almost empty room, which is lit and arranged like a series of intimate still life images. A small, orderly stack of wood inhabits one corner, perhaps invoking an early Carl Andre sculpture. Sunlight streams in as the camera navigates through cuts. In a contemplative and formal mode, patterns, textures, and shadows cast on walls are explored with the camera.

The building collapses slowly, pushed by the bulldozer. A zigzagging staircase is briefly revealed. Through a dust cloud, the wide end of a cone remains visible, a monstrous void which then envelopes the entire screen. The film fades to black.

Conical Intersect performs and internalizes the inevitable destruction of its subject more than any of Gordon Matta-Clark's other architectural interventions. Given the way the work served as an ephemeral and polemical frame for the Pompidou, the violence it embodied is critical to its import. The conceit of the work as an optical device, or aid to seeing the complicated narrative of urban archeology, is also key to its meaning. As Dan Graham commented

> With the aid of this 'periscope,' viewers could look not only into the interior of the Matta-Clark sculpture building, but through the conical borings to

these other buildings that embody past and present eras in Paris.[248]

Prevented from absorbing the Pompidou Center into his oeuvre by cutting the building, Matta-Clark responded by temporarily "framing" the building with the periscope of *Conical Intersect*.[249]

Office Baroque, 1977

While *Office Baroque* (an elaborate cut building in Antwerp, Belgium) was not initially conceived as a museum project, it eventually became one when an effort was made to build a contemporary museum around the work. The trajectory of that doomed effort will be related here, following a description and analysis of the work itself.

The site for *Office Baroque* was an empty five-story office building that faced one of Antwerp's main tourist attractions, a historic fortress called the Steen. As with most of Matta-Clark's cut building, the best surviving

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[248] Dan Graham, "Gordon Matta-Clark," reprinted in Brian Wallis, ed., *Rock my Religion* (Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 1993), 202.

[249]For architecture critic Michael Sorkin, *Conical Intersect* was an "x-ray exposing the property at the heart of architectural propriety." See "Decon Job," in *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings* (New York and London: Verso, 1991), 306.

document of *Office Baroque* is a film. Shot in both black and white and color and running forty minutes, the film is not strictly by Matta-Clark; it was filmed and edited by Roger Steylaerts and Eric Convents, who also added a soundtrack by electronic musician Andre Stordeur. Matta-Clark never saw the finished film, but his voice serves to narrate the piece throughout, giving the viewer the sense of taking an intimate walking tour with the artist through his work in progress.

The film opens with Matta-Clark raising window shades inside a building with a view overlooking a large public square and the Steen. The process of bringing light inside first through opening a window and, later, through large-scale cuts to the building repeats the amplification of an initially subtle gesture (such as *Window Wash,* 1973) to something aggressive (such as *Window Blowout,* 1976). Gazing out the window at tourists with cameras, Matta-Clark comments, "Everyone photographs the statue across from the Steen." For *Office Baroque*, Matta-Clark chose a banal structure as the site of his work. In so doing he wagered that through his intervention a pedestrian structure could become a more intriguing plastic form than the historic fortress that it overlooks.

Matta-Clark is next seen precariously perched a small window-washer's rigging, several stories up on the exterior of the building. In a process that emphasizes the relationship between drawing and the building cuts, he is inscribing the building's façade to indicate the parts of concrete to be cut. Two photographs overdrawn with black marker (fig. 83) show how Matta-Clark envisioned these removals, although his plans for external alterations to the building, and thus his ambition to temporarily rival the Steen as a tourist destination were subsequently thwarted. To his annoyance, Matta-Clark was compelled by local authorities to limit his cuts to the building's interior. On the film's soundtrack, Matta-Clark explains how these troublesome restrictions ultimately served to focus his project:

> The actual piece went through all of these transformations, some of it imposed by basically the mistake of letting anyone in the city administration know that something was happening … since it had to be an interior piece it turned out to be a culmination of a whole series of interior attitudes and projects that I wanted to do.
>
> Using the limits imposed by the city (that the cuts not be visible from outside the building) Matta-Clark continued to work through some of the problems that he felt had been unresolved in his work for P.S.1 [*Office Baroque*] is *very much like a layered drawing that the viewer participates in* [emphasis added] by moving on each floor in and out of the drawing on the way - I did one work about a year ago at a large group show [at P.S. 1] which was like one small detail in

> this way, but it neither penetrated the roof nor went through to the sky … the difference is that the [overlapping teardrop] shape I am working with here intrudes or plays with the building in a much more interesting way

As seen in a group of three photographs, the interpenetrating forms of the "layered drawing" constantly shift in relationship to one's viewpoint, as if in a game of three-dimensional chess (fig. 84). One of the elements that Matta-Clark particularly cultivated in *Office Baroque* was a sense that one could not fully comprehend the whole piece from any single position. It demanded and rewarded viewer participation. As Matta-Clark said

> one has to continuously pass from space to space and try to piece it together in a memory process … people who like to have self-explanatory or almost anecdotal works will not appreciate it

A further obstacle to interpreting the piece from the historical vantage point of 2003 is that the building no longer exists and the documentation is necessarily fragmentary. As related in his narrative, Matta-Clark delighted in this paradox

> in a sense this piece is almost undocumentable, which is one of the things I like about the whole documentary process. I mean there's nothing worth documenting if it's not difficult to get

Office Baroque reprised a series of issues raised by earlier works. Matta-Clark continued to grapple with the status of the architectural fragments that he had once likened to the stones of the Acropolis. The *Office Baroque* film records two attempts at excavating large teardrop-shaped fragments from the building. Matta-Clark narrates:

> the thing that's going to be most important for us to do now is to get these very fragile pieces out of here. It's curious to think of a building as being fragile but the combination of materials makes it into both a very clumsy and completely delicate operation to save any of these chunks.

As a carefully maneuvered fragment is hoisted out of a window but then falls unceremoniously to the street below, workers gather around it in solemn, mock grief. A second attempt proves successful, as this subsequent gallery installation photograph makes clear (fig. 85).

A publication accompanied the exhibition of *Office Baroque*. In an interview published in that catalogue, Matta-Clark articulated the performative aspect of his architectural works, which he described as "intrusions":

> The direct expression of a strong gestural act is in all the works to such an extent that the nature of each intrusion is the whole work. *Splitting* was a split, *Bingo X Ninth* was removed a ninth part at a time, *Days Passing* at Pier 52 was 'opened' to the elements and populace, *Conical Intersect* created a sort of street theater during its creation and *Office Baroque* is a walk-through panoramic arabesque. I cannot separate how intimately linked the work is with

> the process as a form of theater in which both the working activity and the structural changes to and within the buildings are the performance.[250]

As was mentioned previously, Matta-Clark did not conceive of *Office Baroque* as a museum project, yet it did become one. Although it was not Matta-Clark's last building cut (*Circus*, at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art proved to be the last large-scale work he completed) *Office Baroque* happened to be the only cut building extant at the time of Matta-Clark's death in 1978. At that point Matta-Clark's family and friends organized a foundation in an intense effort to save *Office Baroque* from demolition. They intended to save the building as a work of art, and to annex a contemporary art museum to it. Artworks were pledged to the city by over 200 artists in exchange for the donation of the building and its upkeep.[251] To the dismay

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[250] "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark," in *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Antwerp: International Cultureel Centrum, 1977), 11-12.

[251] The list of artists who donated works to save *Office Baroque* includes Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Alice Aycock, Christian Boltanski, Chris Burden, Daniel Buren, Sarah Charlesworth, Christo, Nancy Holt, Joseph Kosuth, Jeffrey Lew, Sol LeWitt, Roberto Matta, Robert Morris, Isamu Noguchi, Robert Rauschenberg, Susan Rothenberg, Carolee Schneeman, Joel Shapiro, Victor Vasarely, Ben Vautier, Lawrence Weiner, William Wegman, Mia Westerlund, and a large number of Belgian artists. See typed list titled, "Gordon Matta-Clark Fund - Center for Contemporary

of the coalition, *Office Baroque* was demolished without warning in 1980.

A "preserved" *Office Baroque* would have shifted the piece out of the realm of Matta-Clark's other building cuts, that is, a revealing deconstruction staged between a building's being condemned and demolished. Instead, *Office Baroque*, constructed outside of an immediate museum context (although with the assistance and collaboration of Florent Bex, a local museum curator) would have traveled full circle and become its own museum. Such a move would not necessarily have negated the work, but would have recontextualized the piece in a historically defined moment, a moment in the past. Visiting a preserved *Office Baroque* as a relic or document of anti-institutional practice in the mid-1970s would be akin to the experience of visiting a period room where the physical evidence serves as a catalyst for the imaginative work of the viewer.

Circus, 1978

Matta-Clark's last completed large-scale project, *Circus*, also called *A Carribean Orange*, was undertaken

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Art Antwerp, List of artists and collectors who donated works of art until now," Gordon Matta-Clark Archive.

during a bitterly cold winter early in 1978. The site was a townhouse adjacent to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago that had been acquired by the museum to serve as additional exhibition space (fig. 86). For this cut, Matta-Clark explored the form of a bisected sphere; his own associations included those of citrus fruits and a three-ring circus.[252] Drawing upon and complicating the diagonal axis running from roof to basement that he had used in Santiago, Matta-Clark projected three slightly overlapping orbs onto an elevation of the narrow, rectangular townhouse. Where the circles happened by chance to fall across doorways and stairwells the geometry of the cuts became more complex (fig. 87).[253] After the piece was completed, visitors were led through the museum by guard staff, several of whom were themselves artists, including Lawrence Weiner. The performative aspect of the piece

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[252] "This is a Caribbean orange - or a winter circus … it's a circus because it sets a kind of stage from the ground up … that's the way I understood this piece, that people were given a kind of circular stage to look at or to circulate through." Gordon Matta-Clark interviewed by Judith Russi Kirshner on February 13, 1978. Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 392.

[253] These circular forms, seen from below, reminded some museum employees of flying saucers. Documentation of these views were referred to as "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" photographs. Letter from Alene Valkanas to Gordon Matta-Clark, carbon copied to Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art curatorial files.

became clear to viewers as they moved through the building and experienced the multiple floating islands as stages on which to be viewed and from which to view others, moving through the space. Visitors remarked upon the insistent, hazardous physicality of the piece. As the interior was more void than plane, vigilance was required to successfully navigate it (fig. 88). Contributing to the carnival aspect of *Circus*, Matta-Clark's Anarchitecture and Food compatriot Tina Girouard choreographed *Spread*, a dance performance staged in the shop window in the front of the building (fig. 89). The dance referred to the act of cutting, using construction tools as props. After the props were used they were hung from the ceiling amongst a tableau of frisky manikins (fig. 90). Girouard recalls that the performance ended in a flour fight, the drama of which was compounded by snow, which poured in through the open roof. Snow and flour covered the architecture and performers alike.

The conditions of *Circus* pulled Matta-Clark further toward opposite extremes - entropy and institutionalization - than any of his previous works.[254] Constructed as it was

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[254] Unlike Robert Smithson, who elaborately theorized and integrated the notion of entropy in his practice, Matta-Clark incorporated entropy as an inevitable, though not central, aspect of the work.

in winter, and including snow as it gathered, melted, and warped the structure, *Circus* rendered explicit the vulnerability of the building's exposed infrastructure. However, as the first elaborate cutting to be performed in a space not slated for demolition (although it was subsequently renovated) and the first to incorporate guided tours and an organized performance, *Circus* was more continuous with than a challenge to the museum. Judith Russi Kirshner, the exhibition curator, commented, "it is our intention to inaugurate the new building as a work of art itself and not merely as a museum."[255] Pursuing this degree of collaboration with the museum further would have changed the nature of Matta-Clark's building cuts fundamentally, a move it would seem he was actually ready to make.

Museum of Modern Art Proposals, 1977-78

By 1977 Gordon Matta-Clark was in fact preparing to take his projects in a new direction. Where the building

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[255] Kirshner saw *Circus* as part of a series of commissioned artist interventions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, beginning with Christo wrapping the museum in 1969 and continuing with a subsequent project by Michael Asher. Letter from Kirshner to Robert Betts at the Illinois Arts Council requesting grant support for *Circus*, January 10, 1978. Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art curatorial files.

cuts began as radical political and aesthetic gestures, they had over several years become the artist's trademark. Following *Circus*, Matta-Clark was asked to propose a Project Room show for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He hired Peter Fend to explore the feasibility of a project that would incorporate pneumatics and architecture.[256] Matta-Clark imagined a completely open architecture, consisting only of platforms supported by hot air balloons sited between the Museum of Modern Art and a neighboring building. Matta-Clark was interested in dissolving not only the "white cube" of high modernism, but also walls of any kind in favor of levitating disks from which to view the city below. With this proposal he further developed the trope of floating islands created with isolated floor spaces in *Circus*. Such a work would emphasize the corporeality of the viewer who might experience exhilaration, vertigo, or both upon mounting the platform. It would interlock, or invert, architectural parameters of inside and outside. The project would have been an example of "accumulation reduction," one of Gordon Matta-Clark's Anarchitecture hypotheses. The oxymoronic phrase

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[256] For Peter Fend's account of this project see his essay, "New Architecture from Matta-Clark," in Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *Reorganizing Structure by Drawing Through It: Zeichnung Bei Gordon Matta-Clark, Catalogue Raisonné* [of drawings] (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1997): 46-55.

"accumulation reduction" refers to the notion that the more material is moved from a site - as was demonstrated, for example, in *Splitting*, or *Circus*, the more space - in an active, interventionist sense - was left behind.

The "balloon building," as Matta-Clark referred to his zeppelin project (fig. 58), was rejected by Kynaston McShine at the Museum of Modern Art, who specifically requested a proposal to cut the museum. Plans were underway for an expansion that would have entailed the removal of the museum's building designed by Philip Johnson in 1964; this was the site that McShine suggested to Matta-Clark.[257] Thus, perhaps inevitably, what had begun as an anti-institutional strategy had been absorbed, in seven short years, by the modern art museum of record. Matta-Clark complied with a series of six drawings (fig. 91). A note by the artist explains that a synthesis of proposals 2 and 5 was intended to be his final design (fig. 92). The gently levitating disks proposed for the balloon building were thus transposed, at the curator's request, to a more aggressive proposal. Matta-Clark's counterproposal consisted of tattooing the museum's international-style façade with a stylized version of the coat of arms of the Rockefeller family, who were among the founding patrons of

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[257] Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 122.

the museum. Insofar as this gesture branded the museum with guilt associated with some of the sources of its funding, it was linked thematically to Matta-Clark's early activist work, although on a formal level the floating disks were also a continuation of the "flying saucer" forms used in the preceding *Circus* project, which was more experimental than polemical in tone. Events conspired against the realization of any of Matta-Clark's proposals for the Museum of Modern Art. The artist became ill early in 1978, and although he was still corresponding with McShine regarding the logistics of the project in April, he died in August of that year.

Gordon Matta-Clark's proposals for museums crystallized as dynamic, playful, sometimes aggressive inquiries into the nature of both the artwork and the site of its display. Matta-Clark's rejection of traditional forms of both sculpture and architecture resulted in a new modality, which focused on the physical and psychological perception of space rather than a disembodied appreciation of discrete objects. Matta-Clark's work on the museums in Santiago and Chicago, as well as his proposals for the Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere, demanded a willingness on the part of the viewer to suspend their expectations of seamless, reassuring architectural spaces with clear

boundaries between inside and outside; their ideas about museums as containers of collections; and their ideas about artworks as coherent, self-contained objects. Although he chose the most obdurate and imposing of media for this work - our built environment - the results were almost evanescent. Matta-Clark's stated his challenge to architecture by saying "a building is really a moment in time through which I carry my ideas."[258] This was never more true than when he worked on museums.

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[258] Kirshner quotes this comment back to Matta-Clark in a letter dated May 25, 1978. Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art curatorial file.

Conclusion

While I have focused on specific works by a few artists in this dissertation, I do not mean to imply that their production unfolded in a vacuum.[259] Rather, it has been my project to discover what could be revealed by close studies of works such as Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum*, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty Museum*, and Matta-Clark's *Circus* when questions regarding the artists' relationships to the museum were raised. What was the nature of the claim each artist staked within the genre of the artist-proposed museum? What strategies, or preemptive strikes, did each employ to influence the reception of their work? How did humor operate in the work? How did each artist function as a curator of his own career?

Claes Oldenburg's intense collaborations with his model/wife, fellow artists, and curator/wife resulted in the *Mouse Museum*, an artwork as exhibition contained within its own architectural surround. A consummate insider, Oldenburg developed a museum that must be accepted on its own terms by any institution that would serve as its host.

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[259] Two excellent studies approach this topic from a broader cultural perspective than my own: Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 1995) and Julie Ault, Ed., *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985* (New York: The Drawing Center and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

While the *Mouse Museum* exists almost autonomously within its host, it is also interactive, since its assembly of homely and shopworn objects provides a distorted reflection of the curatorial connoisseurship to be found just outside its walls.

In his early work, Robert Smithson "curated" the working premises of other artists, carefully selecting their position statements to develop his own ideas. Later, Smithson treated sites as unlikely as the Great Salt Lake and the La Brea Tar Pits as curated spaces. Smithson's points of reference frequently shifted, yet his position was always rigorously (and sometimes perversely) articulated. Creative use of the museum as a structuring element was a hallmark of Smithson's work, and his explorations of the museum's form (which were by turns mimetic, literal, and dialectical) were unique. The multiform *Spiral Jetty* (essay, film, earthwork, museum proposal) came full circle when a print of the film was acquired for the Painting and Sculpture department of the Museum of Modern Art.

A sense of play and experimentation permeated Matta-Clark's engagement with the form and function of the art museum. From the moldering *Museum* installation, to the proposed subbasement tunnel in the Everson Museum, to the

exhibition and performance space created in a dumpster, Matta-Clark endeavored to engage the viewer both intellectually and viscerally. In *Circus*, his last major work, Gordon Matta-Clark spliced the museum architecture and his artwork into an integrated environment activated by the viewer's movements through the space. He transformed the annex of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art into a three-dimensional chessboard to be played by the visitors.

With projects that incorporated a wide array of media, spanned two decades, and intersected with a number of loosely defined movements including Happenings, Pop art, Performance art, Earth art, and Minimalism, these artists produced nuanced critiques of the institution rooted in specific material and conceptual concerns. Each insisted with their projects on the agency of an embodied and empowered viewer. As much as these works questioned the form and function of modern art museums, they also depended upon them, and have in fact enriched museums by returning home to the institutions they once endeavored to deconstruct.

NOTE TO USERS

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