



Three Conversations in 1985: Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Robert Morris
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Three Conversations in 1985:
Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol,
Robert Morris*

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

Claes Oldenburg

Buchloh: Did you know Duchamp? Did you have any exchange with him at all?

Oldenburg: I had some interesting encounters with him, but not long talks or anything. In Pasadena, in 1963, was really the first time I saw the work, I mean really saw the work, except for rumors, and it was a very exciting show. Then he made himself available after the show to talk to people and sign things and so on. And he used to come, before that, to performances.

Buchloh: Yes, he does actually mention this, that he sometimes went to Happenings.

Oldenburg: He came to at least three performances that I had done. I remember one performance in 1965 which took place in a movie theater where the performance was in the seats and the audience had to stand. Duchamp asked if he could sit down because he was too tired to stand, so he became the only person in the audience sitting in the performance. Another performance, in 1962 in *The Store*, ended with performers in burlap bags, crawling out of the bags, expiring at the feet of the audience.

Buchloh: That was one of your performances?

Oldenburg: Yes. I found that I was expiring at his feet. So there were contacts, but never anything more than a cordial hello if I met him at a party, and so forth. I never played chess with him.

Buchloh: Also, if, as you say, in the early sixties the major points of departure in your own work were already clearly defined . . .

Oldenburg: Yes, he was a historical figure.

Buchloh: What about iconography? That is obviously an art-historical problem; you are, as I see it, the first sculptor after Duchamp who uses a kind of iconography that is completely alien to all preceding sculpture, which is the industrially produced, ready-made object.

Oldenburg: Well, I saw some of Duchamp's work at Yale when I was an undergradu-

* The following are excerpts from interviews that were conducted for the purposes of research in 1985. These conversations centered on the reception of the historical avant-gardes, specifically the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and the rediscovery of the work of the Russian and Soviet avant-gardes by American artists in the early 1960s.



*Claes Oldenburg. 1966.
(Photo: John Bryson.)*

ate there in the late 1940s. I did see that wonderful painting, that long painting [*Tu m'*, 1918] which has the brush sticking out of it. So I saw his work and was aware of it also through art history courses and such. And certain works had certainly stuck in my mind, like the dust-gathering pieces, and the *Three Standard Stoppages*.

Buchloh: Some of them were also in the Museum of Modern Art collection. I don't know if they were on display in the fifties, but the *Stoppages*, for example, have been in the collection for quite a while.

But your iconography, you would say, comes from a variety of sources, primarily from American art of the late fifties?

Oldenburg: I would say so.

Buchloh: Happenings, Rauschenberg, Johns—if anything, they parallel, rather than being a direct reference to Dada, or to Duchamp in particular. Your selection of materials, your iconography, your procedures or production, were all denying every single prevailing sculptural convention. If one compares what the literature at the time presented as sculpture . . .

Oldenburg: Yes, that is true. I don't think I took the word *sculpture* very seriously, because I don't think the issue was whether or not it was sculpture or painting. It was just construction of some kind, and I think that's the important thing because that gave you a sense of freedom.

Buchloh: Did you want your work to have stability and permanence, or did you consider it to be props that could be discarded?

Oldenburg: Well, that was an issue. Everybody was wondering whether things should be permanent. You had someone like Kaprow who maintained that nothing should be permanent, and yet he did manage to have a few pieces survive.

Buchloh: Luckily. Now we are glad that we can see them.

Oldenburg: In 1959 I worked a lot in papier-mâché, using newspaper and cardboard, which is all acid content, and yet some pieces have survived, at least up to this point. I wasn't trying to make perishable art; I was just trying to make an art out of perishable materials, or materials which under normal conditions were perishable. What I did to them made them less perishable.

Buchloh: Did your materials or your choice of materials have political connotations?

Oldenburg: Definitely, yes.

Buchloh: Like denying high art conventions and materials?

Oldenburg: Right. Art can be made out of rags. Eventually I put this all into a kind of programmatic statement.

Buchloh: The long statement in *Store Days*?

Oldenburg: Yes. That was directed against anybody's claim about sculpture. If someone had started an argument about sculpture, I would have maintained that I had a right to do this as sculpture. But that wasn't really the main issue. The issue was to make art, or to make something which reflected my presence in a certain context.

Buchloh: But the issue that is even more important than the question of permanence

is that of the “public-ness” of your sculpture. Since your works *The Street* and *The Store*, we have encountered a radically new definition of what public sculpture can be in the present. After all, *The Store* was meant to function potentially like a store. People from the street were allowed to come in, weren’t they?

Oldenburg: Yes, they were. But realistically speaking, it was stacked against that because people in that neighborhood just aren’t going to come in when they see something as strange as this. If people came in from the street, it was kids, or just curious people. I would see them at the window—they’d look in, but nobody would come in.

Buchloh: So it was more conceived as a private studio that could be open on certain occasions to art world people and friends.

Oldenburg: 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. Even at night I would be visible.

Buchloh: But wasn’t there an inherent assault on esoteric qualities of high art, in every aspect of *The Store*?

Oldenburg: Yes, but I think it was a matter of two things. One thing was to admit the commercial nature of art production by comparing it to ordinary production, and of course that was carried further because people came down and bought things at absurd prices. They bought a loaf of bread for ninety-nine dollars.

Buchloh: A loaf of bread *piece*, work.

Oldenburg: Yes. Instead of paying a normal price for a loaf of bread, they would pay ninety-nine dollars for it. Then, on the other hand, it was an antimuseum situation, an antipedestal situation, with all kinds of jokes on pedestals, museum presentations, and so on. But it never was—and I think it would have been naive in a way to have made it—a real store. I think that would have meant *not* recognizing the realities of artistic existence. And I didn’t want to be a hypocrite about that; I wanted to air all of the issues.

Buchloh: Yes, I remember you referring in one statement to *The Store*, or any store—at the time you were looking at the Lower East Side—assuming the role or the function of the museum, so that you make an explicit equation between the museum and the store. So that means the commodity status of the work did become an issue; the fetishization of the singularized object, as it happens in the museum context, was an issue for you at the time. And I think probably very much in the way that it had become an issue in Duchamp’s work. Possibly you weren’t even linking it up to the full ramifications of the readymade in the late fifties.

Oldenburg: No, I think that’s very true. And it wasn’t so much against sculpture as against methods of dealing with the presentation of art, the definition of art.

December 21, 1985

Andy Warhol

Benjamin Buchloh: I am currently doing research on the reception of Dada and Duchamp's work in the late 1950s, and I would like to go a bit into that history if you don't mind. I read, I think in Stephen Koch's book, that in the mid-sixties you were working on a movie project on or with Duchamp which apparently has never been released? Was it actually a project?

Andy Warhol: No, it was just an idea. I mean, I shot some pictures, but not really. They're just little sixteen-millimeters. But the project only would have happened if we had been successful at finding somebody, or a foundation, to pay for it. Since I was doing these twenty-four-hour movies, I thought that it would have been great to photograph him for twenty-four hours.

Buchloh: You knew him well enough at the time to have been able to do it?

Warhol: Well, not well enough, but it would have been something he would have done. We just were trying to get somebody to pay for it, like just for the filming, and to do it for twenty-four hours, and that would have been great.

Buchloh: So it never came about?

Warhol: No. I didn't know him that well; I didn't know him as well as Jasper Johns or Rauschenberg did. They knew him really well.

Buchloh: But you had some contact with him?

Warhol: Well, yeah, we saw him a lot, a little bit. He was around. I didn't know he was that famous or anything like that.

Buchloh: At that time, the late fifties and early sixties, he was still a relatively secret cult figure who just lived here.

Warhol: Well, even all the people like Barney Newman and all those people, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, they were not well known.

Buchloh: In retrospect it sometimes seems unbelievable that the reception process of Duchamp's work should have taken so long.

Warhol: But some people like Rauschenberg went to that great school called Black Mountain College, so they were aware of him.

Buchloh: So you think that it was through John Cage that the Duchamp reception was really generated? One of the phenomena that has always interested me in your work is the onset of serialization. Your first paintings, such as *Popeye*

Andy Warhol at the Factory. Circa 1964.



or *Dick Tracy*, are still single images of readymades, and it seems that by 1961–62 you changed into a mode of serial repetition.

Warhol: I guess it happened because I . . . I don't know. Everybody was finding a different thing. I had done the comic strips, and then I saw Roy Lichtenstein's little dots, and they were so perfect. So I thought I could not do that, the comic strips, because he did them so well. So I just started other things.

Buchloh: Had you seen accumulations by Arman at that time, since he had just begun his serial repetitions of similar or identical ready-made objects a few years before, and that seems such a strange coincidence?

Warhol: No, well, I didn't think that way. I didn't. I wasn't thinking of anything. I was looking for a thing. But then I did a dollar bill, and then I cut it up by hand. But you weren't allowed to do dollar bills that looked like dollar bills, so you couldn't do a silkscreen. Then I thought, well how do you do these things? The dollar bill I did was like a silkscreen, you know; it was commercial—I did it myself. And then somebody said that you can do it photographically—you know they can just do it, put a photograph on a screen—so that's when I did my first photograph, then from there, that's how it happened.

Buchloh: But how did you start serial repetition as a formal structure?

Warhol: Well, I mean, I just made one screen and repeated it over and over again. But I was doing the reproduction of the thing, of the Coca-Cola bottles and the dollar bills.

Buchloh: That was in 1962. So it had nothing to do with a general concern for seriality? It was not coming out of John Cage and concepts of musical seriality; those were not issues you were involved with at the time?

Warhol: When I was a kid, you know, John Cage came—I guess I met him when I was fifteen or something like that—but I didn't know he did serial things. You mean . . . but I didn't know about music.

Buchloh: Serial form had become increasingly important in the early 1960s, and it coincided historically with the introduction of serial structures in your work. This aspect has never really been discussed.

Warhol: I don't know. I made a mistake. I should have just done the Campbell Soups and kept on doing them. Because then, after a while, I did like some people, like, you know, the guy who just does the squares, what's his name? The German—he died a couple of years ago; he does the squares—Albers. I liked him; I like his work a lot.

Buchloh: When you did the Ferus Gallery show in Los Angeles, where you showed the thirty-three almost identical Campbell Soup paintings, did you know at that time about Yves Klein's 1957 show in Milan where he had exhibited the eleven blue paintings that were all identical in size, but all different in price?

Warhol: No, he didn't show them in New York until much later. No, I didn't know about it. But didn't he have different-sized pictures and stuff like that? But then Rauschenberg did all-black paintings before that. And then before

Albers, the person I really like, the other person who did black-on-black paintings.

Buchloh: You are thinking of Ad Reinhardt's paintings?

Warhol: Right. Was he working before Albers?

Buchloh: Well, they were working more or less simultaneously and independently of each other, even though Albers started earlier. There is another question concerning the reception process which I'm trying to clarify. People have speculated about the origins of your early linear drawing style, whether it comes more out of Matisse, or had been influenced by Cocteau, or came right out of Ben Shahn. I was always surprised that they never really looked at Man Ray, for example, or Picabia. Were they a factor in your drawings of the late 1950s, or did you think of your work at that time as totally commercial?

Warhol: Yeah, it was just commercial art.

Buchloh: So your introduction to the work of Francis Picabia through Philip Pearlstein took place much later?

Warhol: I didn't even know who that person was.

Buchloh: And you would not have been aware of Man Ray's drawings until the sixties?

Warhol: Well, when I did know Man Ray he was just a photographer, I guess. I still don't know the drawings really.

Buchloh: His is a very linear, elegant, bland drawing style. The whole New York Dada tradition has had a very peculiar drawing style, and I think your drawings from the late fifties are much closer to New York Dada than to Matisse.

Warhol: Well, I worked that way because I like to trace, and that was the reason, just tracing outlines of photographs.

Buchloh: That is, of course, very similar to the approach to drawing that Picabia took in his engineering drawings of the mechanical phase around 1916. I wasn't quite sure to what degree that kind of information would have been communicated to you through your friend Philip Pearlstein, who had, after all, written a thesis on Picabia.

Warhol: When I came to New York I went directly into commercial art, and Philip wanted to too. But he had a really hard time with it, so he kept up with his paintings. And then you know, I didn't know much about galleries, and Philip did take me to some galleries, and then he went into some more serious art. I guess if I had thought art was that simple, I probably would have gone into gallery art rather than commercial, but I like commercial. Commercial art at that time was so hard because photography had really taken over, and all of the illustrators were going out of business really fast.

Buchloh: What has really struck me in the last few years is that whenever I see new works of yours, they seem to be extremely topical. For example, the paintings that you sent to the Zeitgeist show in Berlin depicted the Fascist light architecture of Rudolf Speer. When—at the height of Neo-Expressionism—you sent paintings to Documenta in Germany, they were the Oxidation paintings.

Then slightly later I saw the Rorschach diptych at Castelli's. All of these paintings have a very specific topicality in that they relate very precisely to current issues in art-making, but they're not partaking in any of those issues.

In the same way, to give another example, your series of de Chirico paintings is not really part of the contemporary movement that borrows from de Chirico; it seems to be part of that, and yet it distances itself at the same time. But nevertheless the paintings are perceived as though they were part of the same celebration and rediscovery of late de Chirico. Is this critical distance an essential feature that you emphasize, or does the misunderstanding of the work as being part of the same attitude bother you? Or is the ambiguity precisely the desired result?

Warhol: No, well, I don't know. Each idea was just something to do. I was just trying to do newer ideas and stuff like that. I never actually had a show in New York with any of those ideas. No, well, I don't know. I've become a commercial artist again, so I just have to do portraits and stuff like that. You know, you start a new business, and to keep the business going you have to keep getting involved.

Buchloh: Vincent Fremont just mentioned that you got a number of commissions going for corporate paintings. That's very interesting because in a way it leads back to the commercial origins of your work.

Warhol: Well, I don't mean that, I mean doing portraits, that sort of thing. Because, I don't know, now I see the kids, you know, just paint whatever they paint, and then they sell it like the way I used to do it. Everything is sort of easier now, but you have to do it on and on. So those other things were just things that I started doing and doing on my own.

Buchloh: So do you still make a distinction between commercial commissions and what you call the "other things"?

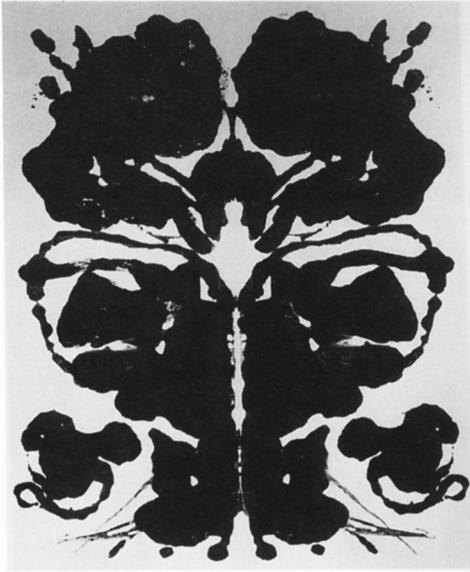
Warhol: Yes. The next idea for a show I have here is going to be called "The Worst of Warhol"—if I ever have my way with Paige [Powell], you know this girl in our advertising department at *Interview*.

So it would just be all of those things, you know, the little paintings. Except most of those things were supposed to be in that show, but then they got a little bit bigger, and then everybody always . . . I sort of like the idea. The Rorschach is a good idea, and doing it just means that I have to spend some time writing down what I see in the Rorschach. That would make it more interesting, if I could write down everything I read.

Buchloh: Yes, but aren't they also commenting in a way on the current state of painting, in the same manner that the Oxidation paintings are extremely funny, poignant statements on what is currently going on in the general return to painterly expressivity and technique?

Warhol: Oh, I like all paintings; it's just amazing that it keeps, you know, going on. And the way new things happen and stuff.

Buchloh: But don't you think that there is a different attitude toward technique in



Untitled (Rorschach Series). 1984.

the Oxidation paintings or in the Rorschach paintings? They don't celebrate technique; if anything, they celebrate the opposite.

Warhol: No, I know, but they had technique too. If I had asked someone to do an Oxidation painting, and they just wouldn't think about it, it would just be a mess. Then I did it myself, and you—and it's just too much work—and you try to figure out a good design. And sometimes they would turn green, and sometimes they wouldn't; they would just turn black or something. And then I realized why they dripped—there were just too many puddles, and there should have been less. In the hot light the crystals just dripped and ran down.

Buchloh: That's a different definition of technique.

Warhol: Doing the Rorschach paintings was the same way. Throwing paint on, it could just be a blob. So maybe they're better because I was trying to do them and then look at them and see what I could read into them.

Buchloh: So the shift that has occurred in the last five years has not at all bothered you? The return to figuration, the return to manual painting procedures—that's nothing that you see in conflict with your own work and its history?

Warhol: No, because I'm doing the same . . . If only I had stayed with doing the Campbell Soup well, because everybody only does one painting anyway. Doing it whenever you need money is a really good idea, just that one painting over and over again, which is what everybody remembers you for anyway.

Buchloh: The fact that people are now pretending again that painting is something

that is very creative and skillfully executed and that depends on an artist's competence—I mean the reversal of all the sixties' ideas that has taken place—you do not consider that to be a problem at all? Because the statements I see in your recent paintings seem to distance themselves from all that. In fact, the Oxidation paintings or the Rorschach paintings seem very polemical.

Warhol: No, but at that time they would have fit in with the Conceptual paintings or something like that.

Buchloh: It's too bad that the Oxidation paintings weren't shown in New York.

Warhol: Well, when I showed them in Paris the hot lights made them melt again; it's very weird when they drip down. They looked like real drippy paintings; they never stopped dripping because the lights were so hot. Then you can understand why those holy pictures cry all the time—it must have something to do with the material and stuff that they were painted on, or something like that. They look sort of interesting. I guess I have to go back to them. But the thing I was really trying to work on was the invisible painting, the invisible sculpture that I was working on. Did you go see the show at Area?

Buchloh: No, not yet.

Warhol: Disco Art? You haven't done Disco Art yet? Really good art—you should see it. It's going to be over soon. A lot of work by about thirty artists; it's really interesting.

Buchloh: What did you do at Area?

Warhol: The invisible sculpture, but it's not really the way I had planned it. I've been working on it with the electronic things that make noises go off when you go into an area. But this one down here, it's just something or nothing on a pedestal. But Arman has a beautiful bicycle piece down there at Area. It filled one whole window, one whole window filled with bicycles. It's really beautiful. I think he's such a great artist.

Buchloh: So you are aware of his work later on, just not in that early moment of the early 1960s accumulations. And you think that the early work is interesting as well, the work from the late fifties and the repetition of the ready-made objects?

Warhol: Yes, well that's what he always does.

Buchloh: The earlier ones are more direct and poignant than the later work, which is kind of aestheticized.

Warhol: The earlier ones I saw were like a car. What was that, a cop car or something?

Buchloh: He put a package of dynamite under a car, a white MG, and blew it up. There was a collector in Düsseldorf, an advertising man who gave him a commission to do a work. So Arman said, "OK, Charles Wilp, give me your white MG car," and blew it up. It's called *White Orchid*—it's a wonderful piece.

Warhol: But his work now is really great.

Buchloh: I would be interested in discussing how you saw the subsequent development in the 1960s with the rise of Minimal and Conceptual art,

before the rather rapid inversion of all of these ideas in the early 1980s. Do you have any particular relation to those artists that came out of Conceptual art? Did you follow up on these issues? Do the nonpainterly artists who are now working interest you as much as the painters do?

Warhol: Yes, but there are not many. There are less Conceptual artists around now for some reason.

Buchloh: But at the time when Conceptual art was done—people like Lawrence Weiner for example—does that kind of work interest you?

Warhol: Yeah, that was great. But are they still working? Are they doing the same thing?

Buchloh: Yes, they're still working; they've continued to develop these approaches. In public you seem to support painting more than anything else.

Warhol: Oh no, I love that work. They're all great.

Buchloh: So you don't see painting now as contrary to your own work.

Warhol: Nowadays with so many galleries and stuff, you can just be anything. It doesn't matter anymore; everybody has taste or something like that. There are so many galleries. Every day a new one opens up, so there's room for everybody. It's amazing that you can go in every category and it's just as good, and just as expensive.

Buchloh: So you don't attach any particular importance to one principle any longer? In the sixties, there was a strong belief system attached to the art.

Warhol: In the sixties everything changed so fast. First it was Pop, and then they gave it different names, like Conceptual art. They made it sound like it was modern art or something because it changed so fast, so I don't know whether Pop art was part of that, or whether it was something else, because it happened so fast.

Buchloh: But the question of the original for example—the artist as an author, as an inventor, or as somebody who manufactures precious objects—was a question that was really criticized in the sixties. You were always the central figure in these debates, or at least you were perceived as the central figure who had criticized that notion in the same way that Duchamp had criticized it. And now things have turned around, and now it seems that this is no longer an issue at all.

Warhol: Well, certainly I would like to think that I could only work that way. But then you can think one way, but you don't really do it; you can think about not drinking, but you drink, or something like that. And then I hear about this kind of painting machine a kid just did, and then I just sort of fantasize that it would be such a great machine. But you know Tinguely did one sort of like that.

Buchloh: Yes, in the late 1950s, at the height of Tachism, when it became too absurd.

Warhol: I still think there is another way of doing that painting machine. This kid has done it, but it falls apart. But I really think you could have a machine

that paints all day long for you and do it really well, and you could do something else instead, and you could turn out really wonderful canvases. But it's like . . . I don't know, this morning I went to the handbag district, and there were people that spend all day just putting in rhinestones with their hands, which is just amazing, that they do everything by hand. It would be different if some machine did it and . . . Have you been going to galleries and seeing all the new things?

Buchloh: Yes, I go fairly consistently, and I have never really quite understood why everything has been turned around in that way, why all of a sudden people start looking at paintings again as if certain things never happened.

Warhol: It's like in the sixties when we met our first drag queens, and they thought they were the first to do it. Now I go to a party and these little kids have become drag queens, the younger people now being drag queens. They think they are the only people who ever thought of being a drag queen, which is sort of weird. It's like they invented it, and it's all new again and stuff, so it makes it really interesting.

Buchloh: Are your TV program and your paintings then in a sense the extreme opposite poles of your activities as an artist?

Warhol: Yes, we are trying to do two things, but the painting is really exciting. I don't know, I'm just really excited about all the kids coming up, like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel [Basquiat] and Kenny Scharf. The Italians and Germans are pretty good, but the French aren't as good. But like you were saying about Yves Klein and stuff being . . . But the French do really have one good painter, I mean, my favorite artist would be the last big artist in Paris. What's his name?

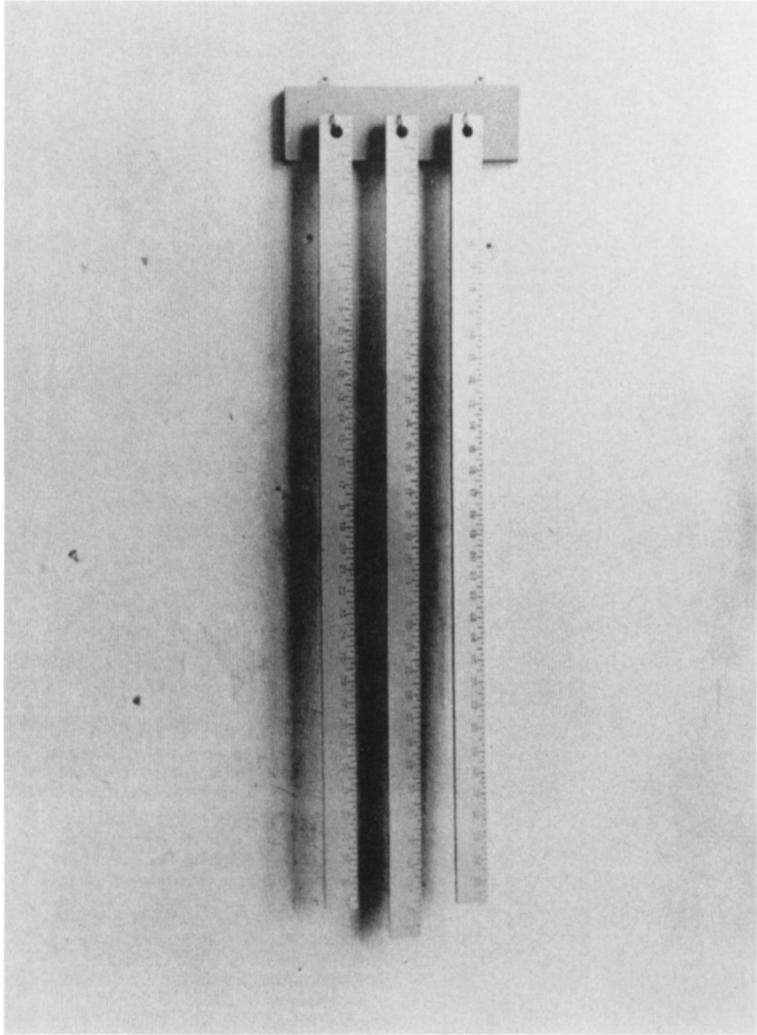
Buchloh: A painter?

Warhol: Yes, the last famous painter. Buffet.

Buchloh: Many of the new painters seem to imitate him anyway.

Warhol: Well, I don't know, I don't see any difference between that and Giacometti. Somewhere along the line people decided that it was commercial or whatever it was. But he's still painting, and I still see the things; the prices are still \$20,000 to \$30,000. He could still be there. His work is good; his technique is really good; he's as good as the other French guy who just died a couple of days ago, Dubuffet. What do you think has happened? Do you think it is not that good?

May 28, 1985



Robert Morris. Three Rulers. 1963.

Robert Morris

Benjamin Buchloh: I just read something rather peculiar yesterday which I might as well quote to start with. In a book on sculpture from the 1950s, the author referred to Duchamp as “the first Constructivist sculptor,” literally stating: “The first Constructivist sculpture is Duchamp’s Water Mill.” I suppose he was referring to the Glider. And while I was amused at first, I then thought perhaps this is more interesting than just an art historian’s mistake. Perhaps there was less of a division in the reception of the Dada avant-garde and the Russian and Soviet avant-garde in the mid-to-late 1950s. To what degree did you know Duchamp’s work and the work of Russian and Soviet Constructivists, and when did you first become aware of these avant-garde legacies?

Robert Morris: I think it is easier, or at least it seems more immediate, to address Duchamp, because he was more present in my mind at that time. Not at the end of the fifties—I was a painter then—but in the beginning of the sixties when I was beginning to make objects. Duchamp was definitely a presence, while the Russian work was really very incidental to me, and I think that I didn’t really focus on it at all.

Buchloh: The question of influence is not really of primary interest to me. Rather I would like to clarify your awareness of historical parallels and historical repetitions. When it comes to your relationship to Duchamp, that parallelism seems in many instances more explicit.

Morris: Right.

Buchloh: Did you ever meet him?

Morris: Yes. I did know him and his work. I didn’t know him very well. I met him a few times.

Buchloh: He talks about you and Yvonne Rainer as “terrific people.” Would your work at that time have directly related to Duchamp, or would Jasper Johns have been an important mediating figure?

Morris: Johns, yes, to some extent, but I think it was Duchamp who was a freeing influence for me to be able to explore the different ways of letting process come in. The first lead relief I made was a small object which had keys on it,

and each key had stamped on it one of the words from the litanies. So at that time my work had very definite references to him. In those works it is to be seen, but in the large works it would be much more mediated, and I don't quite know how you would get at that.

Buchloh: Let us talk, for example, about the *Mirrored Cubes* from 1964. I always assumed that they were almost a literal translation of an idea that Duchamp had scribbled in the *Green Box* at some point in 1919. How do you see your relation to Duchamp in the *Mirrored Cubes*? Is this work more explicit in its quotation and transformation, or is the Duchamp influence again much more mediated than one might think at first?

Morris: Well, I think it is more explicit. When I was doing the so-called Minimal pieces, some of those had definite references to Duchamp.

Buchloh: So when it comes to the larger works, the *Mirrored Cubes* for example, you may not have been aware of the Duchamp note in the *Green Box*?

Morris: I did read the *Green Box*, but can you tell me what it is that he says?

Buchloh: He says, "To place mirrored pieces of glass on the floor so that the room and the viewer are mirrored simultaneously." And there's another note right next to it, which is also very interesting but doesn't relate to your work, that says, "To make boxes of colored liquid."

Morris: Where you shake them and look at them. Yes, I knew that. I certainly read that, and actually the first mirror piece I did certainly referred to Duchamp. It's been destroyed. It was a small piece of wood about two or three feet long. It had two rearview mirrors—round, simple, truck-type mirrors—and in the center it had a piece of glass with a pharmacy face, one side blue and one red, so when you looked in the mirror you saw into infinity, red-blue, red-blue, red-blue, because it reflected back and forth. So that was the first piece.

Buchloh: The base was made out of glass as well?

Morris: It was painted, one side being red and the other blue. In the mirror it alternates to infinity. So that was the first use of the mirrors that I can recall. Then before the mirrored boxes there was also a portal piece from very early 1961 that was in my notebooks, but I never made it until later. Pine portal. There was a version that had mirrors on the inside, so as you walked through it you saw your reflection. But that came from an image I saw in *Citizen Kane* where he walks through, and you see his image immediately reflected to infinity. But that was never made until the 1970s. There's one without the mirrors, and that's the 1961 version. But that little piece was the first one I actually fabricated.

Buchloh: The diversity of your work has been frequently misunderstood by critics and some art historians as a kind of historical eclecticism. In fact, what one could see in your work now—after a period of delay—is that the two major avant-garde positions of the twentieth century, which definitely had been largely excluded from American reception until the late 1950s, gradually entered the consciousness of the younger generation of artists of the early

1960s. But you would probably explain this in totally different terms, not as some kind of historical eclecticism that draws on Duchamp and Dada and Russian Constructivism simultaneously?

Morris: No, I would say it's not. As I said, there are very literal references to Duchamp in some of these earlier pieces. In the Minimal-type pieces that are going on at the same time, there is not necessarily any influence from European art or even much of the reaction to it. If there's a reaction, it's a reaction to what's going on in American art at that time.

Buchloh: Sculpture in particular?

Morris: Yes.

Buchloh: Like who?

Morris: David Smith.

Buchloh: A negative reaction.

Morris: Yes. If there was some kind of "Oedipal rage," it was against Smith. I wanted to do something absolutely different, to wipe him right out.

Buchloh: What about other sculptors held in high esteem by Greenberg and New York School modernism, such as Anthony Caro? Did you have a similar or stronger aversion against him?

Morris: I didn't take him as seriously. When I was in San Francisco before I came to New York, I was still painting, but I was also involved in a group of dancers and theater people, and Simone Forti, then my wife, was involved in this. Subsequently, this kind of concern came to be known as the Judson Church. Simone Forti then pursued some of the structural ideas that she had introduced me to, and I think that some of her ideas influenced me a lot and got transposed into sculpture. She was trying to generate dance movement in a different way, a way that didn't involve the use of a trained balletic type of movement that's prearranged, choreographed, and presented. She came up with the idea of making up rules, the rule game. I remember being in one of her pieces where there were two performers, and my instructions were to lie on the floor. The instructions given to the other person were to tie this person to the wall. So what you got was this incredible fight that went on, and that was the movement. That was one aspect. Another aspect was a building of objects that had to be negotiated. I built some of these for her. Some of these boxes I used as sculpture. It wasn't just the form; it was the notion, how do you go about making something? I wanted to do this in a way that had nothing to do with the art scene, and it occurred to me to use this principle of construction and think about how things are formed in a very simple, straightforward way. You accept an *a priori* set of conditions, you fulfill those conditions, and you have a sculpture. I think that's why I related to what she was doing in dance, and so I chose construction. Not Constructivism but construction.

Buchloh: Even though they might have something in common after all?

Morris: Yes.

Buchloh: Material specificity, transparent construction, even procedural elements, once again were clearly present in Duchamp's work, like the *Three Standard Stoppages* from 1913, which obviously had been considered by you as one of the most consequential sculptural works of the twentieth century, even though nobody else had really picked up on it. Are you suggesting that this reductivist project in your work (if we can call it this, and I know it's a problematic term), grew out of task-oriented performance aesthetics more than out of historical awareness?

Morris: It grew out of task-oriented procedure, behavior, and also I think it came out of a reexamination of a very, very early art—Neolithic art, Egyptian art, early Buddhist art, columns, gateways, platforms, and such things. They were more important to me than anything that was going on in contemporary art.

Buchloh: For example, the idea of constructing something according to the law of transparency, or even, according to the law of a possible utilitarian function or a task performance—these ideas are not quite as alien to Constructivism as they might have seemed at the time. There was a large number of people in the Soviet Union thinking about that even though it probably was not known in New York in the late fifties.

Morris: I did not know that about them. I certainly knew the positions they had taken, to be utilitarian and so on, but the methodology is what I'm talking about, just taking the way common materials are put together for utilitarian purposes, not to build a utilitarian form but to use the structure of that kind of making. That's what I think I drew on in the early and middle pieces.

Buchloh: Was the use of plywood and cheap materials at the same time also polemical in the sense that at that time the sculptor was the torch-bearing welder of steel? To make it gray meant to differentiate it as much as possible from official avant-garde sculpture?

Morris: Yes, absolutely. But I also didn't have any money, and it was expedient. I found plywood quite congenial, since it allowed you to make things to scale and cheaply. I worked as a carpenter, and I knew how to deal with that kind of technology.

It wasn't complicated. All you needed was a hammer and a skill-saw, and so that's why I used it. I didn't make a point of showing beautifully grained plywood; I always wanted to cover it up. Also I think the gray functioned against the mass of the thing, and it worked with light in a way that I was interested in. I also liked the idea that it was easier to reconstitute the work than to ship it. When these things started to be shown, and let's say somebody was doing a show in Milwaukee, I would say: "Just make another one of it. Go to the store and get a light gray—just get what is in the store—and paint it with oil paint so that it doesn't raise the grain." I liked the idea of the thing being completely reconstitutable at any moment and place, and the lack of precious materials.

Buchloh: So that was a very important aspect of your position at the time as well, since it defied the idea of the unique, valuable, original sculptural work?

Morris: Absolutely. I wanted that aspect.

Buchloh: So, to be a bit more specific, what exactly was rejected from the sculptural legacy that you saw yourself surrounded by?

Morris: The arbitrary aesthetic attitude. You put this here; you put that there; you do not make an *a priori* decision beforehand, and then carry it out, but you make decisions in a process.

Buchloh: And the decisions do not appear necessarily as very definitive to the viewer. Whereas in your case the *a prioris* were defined for the audience as well as for the work. So it also implied a different relationship to the audience. Was that a concern of yours at the time? Did you want to have different types of interaction with your viewers?

Morris: No, I wasn't concerned about that. I was concerned about generating work.

Buchloh: That was a concern for Simone Forti? To alter the relationship with audiences, to make them more aware, to give them more control?

Morris: No, I don't think so. I don't believe it was.

Buchloh: So, in none of these approaches would you see the breakdown of traditional modes of viewing or listening that was clearly addressed in Cage's or in Cunningham's work—to involve the audience in a more direct manner or to make them aware of their own physical presence—those issues would not be of primary concern? If we go back to the mirror piece, for example, I've always looked at the mirror piece as the work that—more than anything else that I know in this period—establishes an incredible awareness of the viewer's activity in the reading of a sculpture.

Morris: I knew John Cage; he was one of the few people I knew when I came to New York. So when I was showing my first floor slab in the Green Gallery, I asked John to be sure to go see this work. Later I heard that he told somebody: "I went to see Bob Morris's sculpture, but I didn't see any sculpture; I only saw this slab, this pipe form." I don't know if he was being completely ironic or not, but I always enjoyed that comment.

Buchloh: It must have been wonderful for him to have an opportunity to make that kind of comment that people always made about his music. So in this instance you would say that audience played a part in defining the structure of the work?

Morris: Yes, if you mean by audience behavior those kinds of assumed perceptual phenomena with which people would approach the work. Absolutely, this kind of phenomenological formalism was of the utmost importance to me. To make something that had a scale necessary for the body to encounter. That was there in the beginning. The relationship to scale is a relationship of the viewer's body to this thing. Also, it's both optical and physical. That definitely was a very conscious kind of adjustment that was going on in the work.

Buchloh: Also, it establishes a triad, so to speak, between the object, the viewer, and the surrounding container with a programmatic clarity that no other sculptures that I know had established before. It seems almost like a manifesto-type work.

Morris: Yes, those things are based on what I call phenomenological formalism, and they are very important to me.

Buchloh: Would you be willing to consider a more theoretical notion of audience as well? One could say that the audience is a potential group of people that a work addresses; or is that totally unacceptable for you, like when Apollinaire says about Duchamp that his work will reconcile art and the people, which was of course even in 1913 a fantastically hilarious statement? But let us say, for example, Andy Warhol's boxes that are at the Guggenheim right now—I always thought they had a potential for addressing a nonspecialized audience. It is an art that addresses a general condition of experience first, and then it inserts itself into the cultural division of mass culture and avant-garde art. But if you look at the *Mirrored Cubes*, you don't have to know Duchamp or the history of nineteenth- or twentieth-century sculpture, or any other historical formation. If you walk into a room where the mirrored cubes sit, potentially everybody can understand the work. The fact that hardly anybody did at the time doesn't falsify what I call the audience potential of the work. You don't have to know the history of Western European and American art in order to experience the art. So in its direct address, it is different from a David Smith.

Morris: I wrote about that. I said that this kind of work is potentially more democratic. In "Notes on Sculpture" I wrote that this work presents itself in a more democratic, open way and that it is more available. So I did indicate that I felt that it was there; it was plain to be seen. I thought it had those possibilities.

I remember doing a performance in Stockholm at a huge museum. I did a thing called *Check*. I got forty people from the local community and rehearsed them for a week. When the audience left for the intermission, I rearranged all the chairs at random in the center, and the activities went around on the periphery with these two groups of people, two teams that occasionally did things simultaneously, then dissolving into the audience, and then reconstituting themselves. So the whole breaking down of the elevated stage and eroding of the dividing line between performer and perceiver, the specialized movement—all those things were attacked in the piece, and I think a lot of people were addressing those issues.

Buchloh: It has been mentioned that you were pretty close to some of the Fluxus people in the early sixties, that when you were actively involved in performance and dance, you were aware of certain ideas, let's say those of George Maciunas. Did you know him? Were you friends with him?

Morris: I met him; I wasn't friends with him.

Buchloh: Because Maciunas was dealing with a number of ideas very early on that always suggested that he had gone much further in his historical reception of the Russian Constructivists, that, in fact, he was one of the first artists of the sixties to rediscover the legacy of Lef and the Productivists.

Maciunas happened to be the one person who knew something about the aesthetics of the Lef group in the early sixties and who discussed the idea that artists should not be socially delegated specialists of creativity. According to Maciunas an artist should hold a nine-to-five job and should work the rest of his time on his art. He had these incredibly radical, often grotesque and unacceptable transformations of Russian Constructivist thinking in mind. I was wondering if the other members of the Fluxus generation with whom you were in contact at the time were discussing these issues at all?

Morris: I was not close to any of those people in Fluxus. I was asked to contribute a few times, but I don't think I ever did. I had met Dick Higgins, George Brecht, and the only contact I had with Maciunas was him wanting me to go into buying a building. I was aware that they were doing these magazines, and there was a lot of activity in Europe, but I was not very aware of what was going on.

Buchloh: So your involvement with performance work and dance . . .

Morris: Was never under the influence of Fluxus. It was done through the contact with dancers and not with musicians, except for one performance I did at the Living Theater which was organized by LaMonte Young and which was in fact a kind of Fluxus event. That was the only time I performed with them. So I didn't really have any contact with them that was of any real consequence for me.

Buchloh: But when you talk about task-oriented performance or building an object that was based on an *a priori* and was transparent in every respect—material, procedures, construction—and producing a sculpture which was bordering on the utilitarian, what kind of motivations were behind this thinking at the time? Weren't they argued in opposition to the traditional notion of the art object as well?

Morris: Of course. It wasn't programmatic though, or defined by an ideology that I identified with. I never proceeded along those kind of programmatic lines, and I don't think I ever conceived of these things as in any way utilitarian. Utilitarian only in the sense of procedure, but not in the sense of how they were received. I never saw it as something you would set plants on for example. Those things are there, but I guess I'm using utilitarian in a narrower sense. For me they were art objects; you see them in an art context. While they take on other art and stand for certain things that are rather critical, they are still art objects.

Buchloh: Did the fact that you emphasized in many of your works of the late sixties a condition of ephemerality have an impact on your subsequent activities? Did you realize that the work would ultimately disappear and that you would

have to do a different kind of work? Did thinking about institutional structures have an impact on your work?

Morris: Well, I think about those kinds of things. Those pieces couldn't even be handled very well by the media because they couldn't be photographed too well. So if it can't be handled through one of those distribution systems, either the media or the museum, then I think the work is in real trouble; it's going to disappear, and I think those pieces have in a way. I mean Philip Johnson owns one of those pieces. He keeps it in a little corner. So it's like a little postcard of what it was, and when I first showed it people weren't sure whether they could go into the room or not. It filled the entire room, and most people didn't go in.

Buchloh: One was supposed to walk through it?

Morris: It would have been OK with me. But that kind of work disappears. It was considered heavy-handed by the systems that were supposed to represent it. I think the fact that it disappears can't help but have an impact. I don't know how consciously it goes on, but it's got to be there because our visibility depends on institutions—that's how we present ourselves—and if you work outside, you can't present yourself. I think there's always pressure from these institutions that one has to deal with from the very beginning all the way through. They don't let up. Either you are inside or outside, and there are contradictions that you have to deal with all the time. I don't think making some of those pieces that disappeared radically changed how I regarded institutions. But it certainly became clear what kinds of things will disappear.

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