

ENVIRONMENT, SITE, DISPLACEMENT

"Whatever happened to the art object?"

– Carl Andre¹

What do we mean when we talk about "objects"? This seems a crucial issue in today's art world. If there still exists a vestige of Conceptual art in the Nineties, it is probably dependent on the general notion that objects no longer have the kind of presence they once did.

Objects, of course, exist everywhere in the environment. They are in our past and in our future. They, in fact, represent a *presence* between past and future, and they exist in opposition to absence. Objects are generally, but not always, manufactured or fabricated. We now accept production-line objects as the norm. Even those objects that appear as intimate to us exist through some form of replication, some detached process. We cannot escape replication. Objects virtually define who we are and who we think we might become. Whereas in the late 19th century there was the notion that objects had an essence, some form of *eidos*, today we talk instead about objects without originals.² Objects have come to mean that which has been reproduced by way of some industrial prototype or a computerized rendering, a concept on a screen.³

After a hiatus of several years in which objects achieved obsessional attention, a new approach to Conceptualism has emerged in the art world. Whether Conceptual art exists in any pure form today is open to debate. Even so, there exists a diverse group of artists who are continuing to work in this manner by appropriating ideas from the early Conceptualists.

Whereas in the Sixties, when Conceptual art was involved primarily in trying to dispense with the object as a form of artistic practice, the advanced work of the current decade has revealed a much different orientation. Rather than dismiss the object as a viable form or statement, many artists have tried to assimilate objects or, at least, include references to objects into their work. Recognizing the preeminence of the material world in relation to the structure of language, more established artists, such as Weiner, Graham and Anastasi, along with relatively new artists, are either using objects directly in their installations or providing a material basis for the understanding of a particular site as an object transformed.

Lawrence Weiner was one of the first American artists to become identified with Conceptual art in the late Sixties. He has always maintained a connection or relationship with the object. He either represents objects through language or presents language as an object.

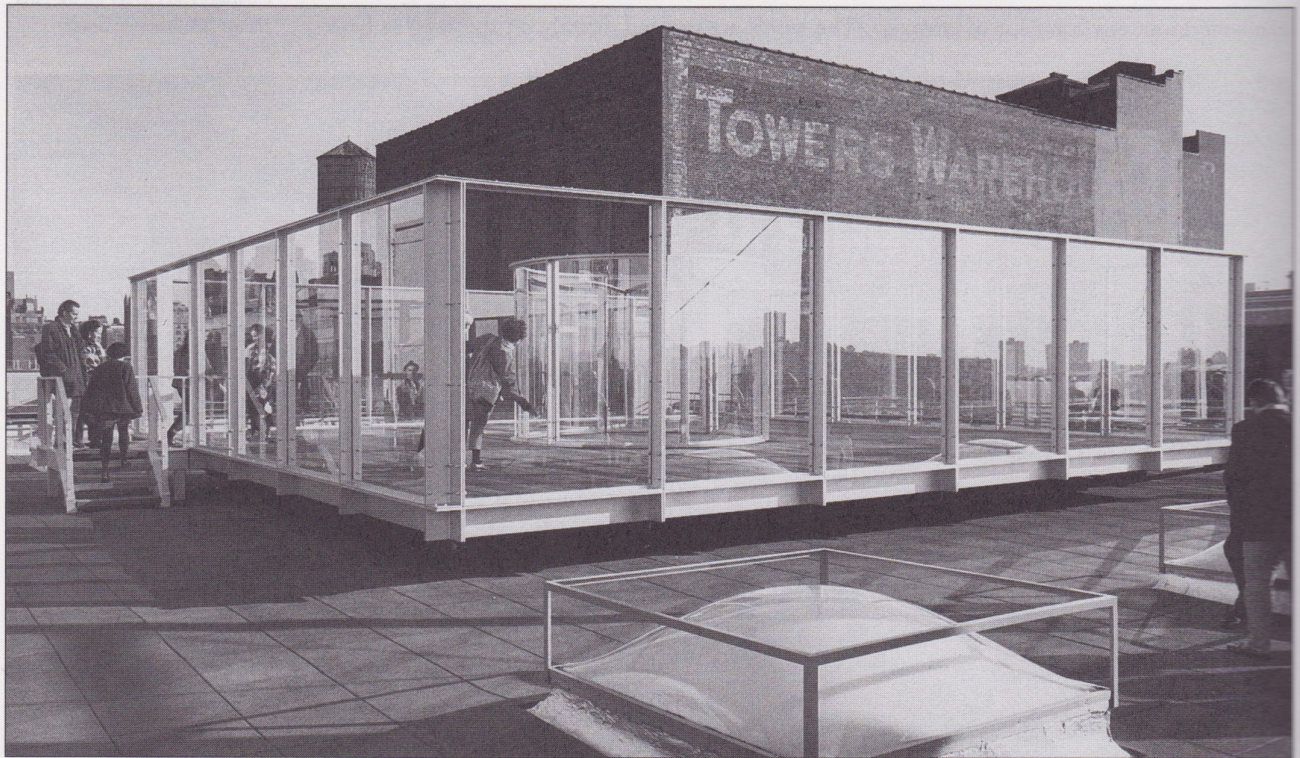
He uses the syntactical manipulation of words in order to arrive at a meaning or to suggest several meanings, often by bracketing how language is signified within a given architectural space. For example, in Weiner's early artist's book, *Statements* (1968),⁴ the idea or the concept was signified as language on the page. The object was, in a sense, disguised through language, that is, dematerialized. A statement in the book reads: "One sheet of plywood secured to the wall or floor." This is it. There is nothing else. No image. No explanation. The reader is expected to construct a meaning or a signified in relation to the given signifier. The language becomes the object – a surrogate of the action and the material.

At New York's Dia Center for the Arts fall, 1991, Weiner took his mode of inquiry from language on a page to language on the floor of the museum. The viewer walks on the piece as if one were in an environment of language. The words are painted directly on the floor as large-

Lawrence Weiner, installation view of "Displacement" exhibition at Dia Center for the Arts, April 4, 1991-February 2, 1992. Courtesy Dia Center for the Arts. photo: Bill Jacobsen Studio



scale signs. They compose an environment that the viewer interprets in order to become part of the work. One might discuss this site by Weiner as a form of *displacement* (the title of the installation) whereby objects are abstracted as language. The terms reveal the status of language. One can only interpret the language on the wall by experiencing its *displacement*, not in relation to its referent – in this case, chemical elements – but in relation to a conceptual space on the third floor of the museum. In other words, one can only interpret the language by being at the site and by one's desire to reconstitute the object (elements) as referring to basic elements. Weiner is, in effect, making the viewer aware of him- or herself in the process of *both* looking at and interpreting language as the basis for understanding the site. This process of engagement with the object in space – or, more appropriately, with *space as the object* – has a phenomenological resonance in that one moves from the immanence of being in relation to the object to a state of perceiving oneself in the act of perceiving such immanence.



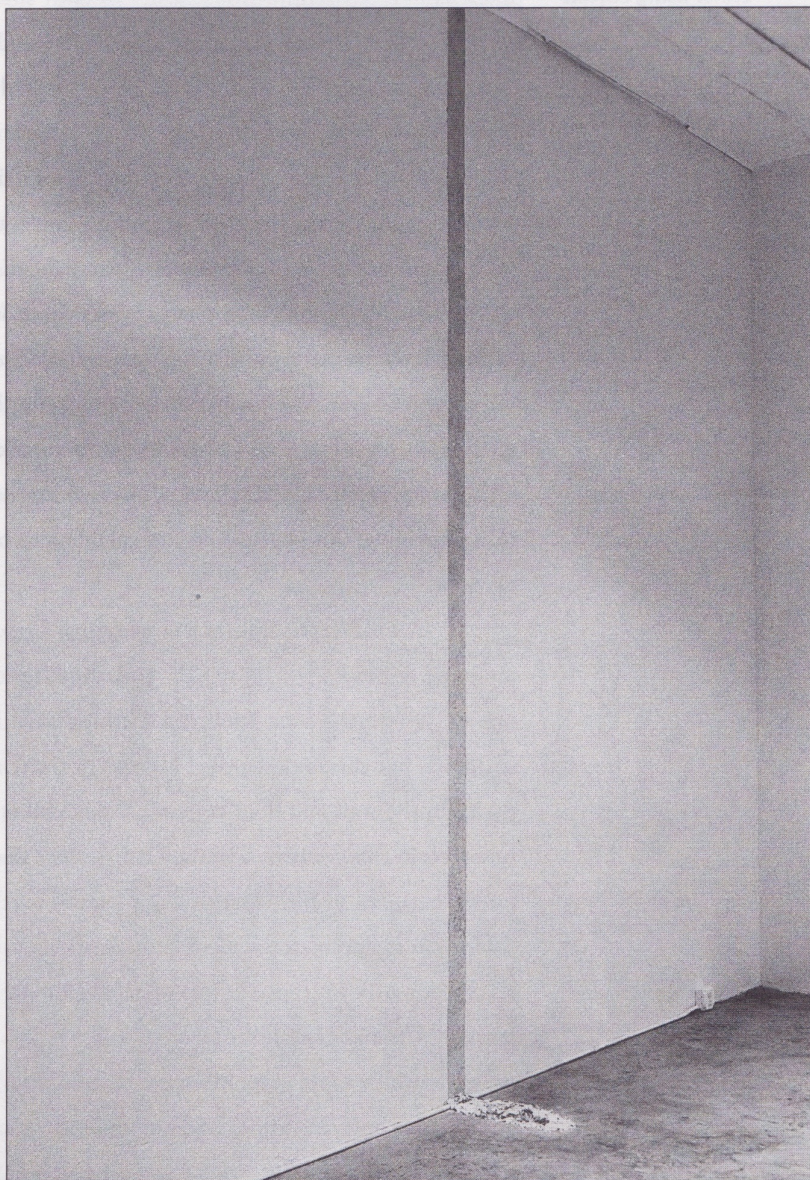
Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Cylinder Inside Cube*: Rooftop Urban Park Project, opened September 12, 1991, Dia Center for the Arts, 548 West 22nd St., New York City. Courtesy Dia Center for the Arts. photo: Bill Jacobsen

Another of the original Conceptualists, Dan Graham, recently installed a new piece, titled *Two-Way Mirror Cylinder Inside Cube* (1981-91), on the roof of the Dia Center's renovated warehouse building. Graham's piece is less about the explicit use of language and more given to the structural references of language as concretely manifested in architecture. The artist created a rooftop pavilion that consists of an open-air cylindrical space, made of translucent plastic, centered in relation to a large rectangular "fence." Graham designed a coffeehouse adjacent to

this open space in which people could go and watch a selection of videotapes, such as his well-known quasi-documentary *Rock My Religion* (1982-83). For several years Graham has been involved with the design and construction of these "pavilions" – places where people can go, walk through, observe one another and generally get in touch with themselves through a kind of psycho-corporeal interface. For Graham, the challenge of art seems to center itself in the relationship between individual language and the language of the group, the self and its society. Identity is not so much contingent upon our relationship to objects per se, but on our relationship to the relationship between objects, the spaces in which objects exist and in which people interact in relation to one another. The psycho-corporeal sensibility is the basis from which people find their identity with one another. The sense of the body as the premise of perception is opened up to include the problematic of cognition. As with Weiner's, Graham's work is largely dependent on the phenomenological basis of experience.

William Anastasi, another artist associated with early Conceptualism, recently reconstructed his 1966 work *Issue* for the inaugural show at the new Sandra Gering Gallery in New York. This work extends beyond the boundaries of environmental art into the realm of "site" and "displacement." *Issue* consists of a vertical stripe of plastered wall that has been chipped away, revealing the material aspect of the wall behind the surface, with remnants of debris piled up on the floor directly beneath it. One might speak of this as a formal operation, but the work has definite Conceptual associations. The object is not the "issue." Instead, the alteration of the site becomes the object. *Issue* is less an environment than a site. The piece means to be situated in a specific place, given the nature of the material with which the artist is working. It is also a displacement to the extent that the wall is literally opened up.

William Anastasi, *Issue*,
1981, 198 x 4 ½ inches,
wall displacement, installation
Sandra Gering Gallery
Courtesy Sandra Gering
Gallery.



Recognizing the preeminence of the material world in relation to the structure of language, more established artists, such as Weiner, Graham and Anastasi, along with relatively new artists, are either using objects directly in their installations or providing a material basis for the understanding of a particular site as an object transformed.

When one speaks critically about site, there is the suggestion of a transformation of a space, generally a specific place, that is understood structurally in relation to how language is imposed upon it. Sometimes this placement of language incites a displacement of the initial place so that one reads the space of the words as a "site," as in the case of Weiner. Other times, the language is more embedded in the use of abstract signs, in which "objects" or shapes substitute for words and function syntactically as a site. Site-related work is about expanding the frame of reference in sculpture from the object into a site-specific area, what might be understood more fully as a "time-space environment" that the spectator enters, either physically or arbitrarily, thereby becoming part of the work. This is precisely what Allan Kaprow called "environments" back in 1961.⁵ Whereas his Happenings, which often contained incisive social commentary, were determined according to both site and event, the environment consisted of a place that had been altered in its appearance, a place that had become displaced. An example would be *Yard* (1961), in which a gallery courtyard was transformed into a tire yard – a junk pile – where mechanics might throw automobile parts.

Recent works evince various forms of dematerialization of the art object. One might begin to discuss these works by suggesting that there is a formal Conceptualism that is distinct from a more narrative or poetic one. Karin Sander's *Floor Piece* (1991), for example, clearly deals with a formal positioning by elevating the floor of the S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery in SoHo a few inches above normal height. At the same time, Sander's formal strategy does not try to conceal what she has done. Rather, she makes it apparent by revealing the space around the raised floor so that one can see that the walls descend further down than the cement-covered plywood platform, which seems to be the basis of physical support for walking through the gallery. Sander further augmented this physical-perceptual dilemma by doing the same thing to the floor inside the elevator.

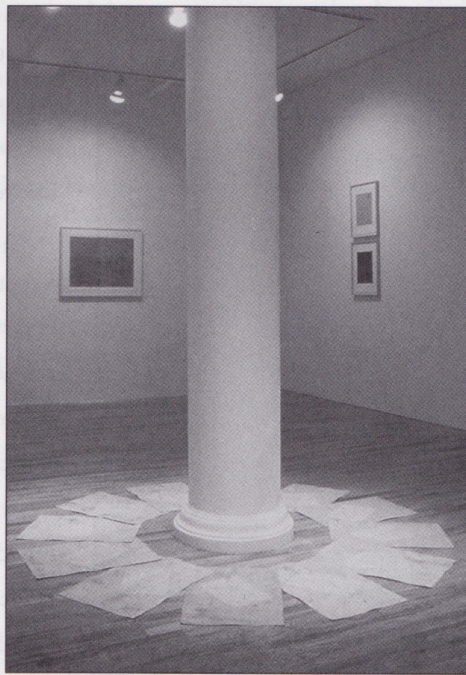
In another example of a more formal Conceptualism, Andromahi Kefalos's recent paper sculpture at Stark Gallery in New York displaces the notion that the drawing for a sculpture is one thing and the form itself is something else. Kefalos's drawings on paper are, in fact, the sculpture, but this only happens because of the contextual circumstances; the placement of the paper on the wall and floor contains the lateral arrangement indicated by other types of sculpture seen in this context. Clearly, Carl Andre's floor pieces from the Sixties serve as a reference for these works, even though Kefalos focuses on the aesthetic issue of the displacement of the drawing as sculpture or the recontextualization of the sculpture as drawing.

Cyrilla Mozenter's installation *Homage to Francis Ponge* (1990-91), shown at the Jamison Thomas Gallery in New York last fall, is about concept and design, narration and its projection into a formal arrangement. It comprises a grid of bars of soap of different sizes, shapes and colors, confiscated from hotel rooms and various other sites. All of them have been used in a specific location by the artist, illustrating an autobiographical element in this dematerialization

process. To take a single bar of soap from Mozenter's installation and call it "art" would miss the point. As the objects have been "displaced," moved from one environment to another, the site is not singular but plural, the "site" being the initial place from which the soap was retrieved.

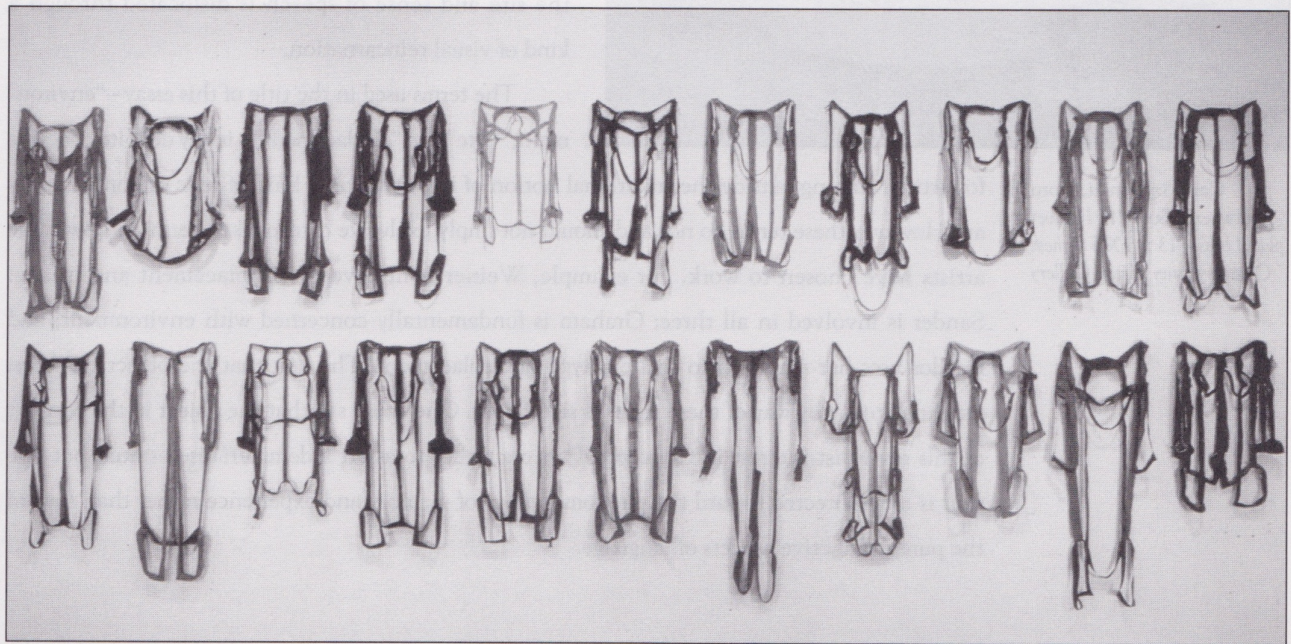
Jesse Goode's installation, called *Coats* (1991), is another example of a strategy that is fundamentally Conceptual while also having the narrative quality of Mozenter's installation. Goode placed 22 coats of various shapes and sizes in a grid on one wall of Postmasters Gallery. The arrangement had the effect of theatrical absurdism, but as in Kaprow's work, there was also embedded social commentary.

The coats were incomplete garments; the bulk of the fabric in each piece had been cut out so that only the contours remained. Like Duchamp's "assisted readymades," Goode's objects are altered beyond function. These 22 coats were like skeletons or ghosts. The contours signified their presence, but they could no longer function for their intended purpose. Goode's piece operated in a way that recalls the piles of garments used by Christian Boltanski, yet without the baroque appeal. With Goode the garments are stark, and through their starkness they suggest a



Andromachi Kefalos, The Second Chance Machine, 1991, floor drawings, white chalk on bark paper, 23 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches each. Courtesy Stark Gallery

Jesse Goode, Coats, 1991, installation view Postmasters Gallery, wool, cotton, nylon, polyester, leather, 22 parts, dimensions variable. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery





Carol Szymanski, *Horn between "f&v"*, 1991, silver plated brass, 13 x 6 X 5 inches. Courtesy Amy Lipton Gallery

for artists working outside the traditional notion of the object as a kind of relic or container for art. However these terms do not and should not imply exclusive categories in terms of how these artists have chosen to work. For example, Weiner is involved in displacement and in site; Sander is involved in all three; Graham is fundamentally concerned with environment; and Kefalos uses her materials to incite a type of displacement. The fact that the object has been redefined today by way of these terms is significant. One could say that the object in the context of this revivalist interest in Conceptual art continues to assert a dematerialized status, but one that is more directed toward the phenomenology of memory and experience rather than toward the purely reductive aspects of language.

story, a possibility of an event, a social concept.

Goode's remnants of garments operate as the detritus of something real, something worn and discarded, something old, an inoperable sign, not dissimilar to the refuse used by Rauschenberg in his "combines." With Carol Szymanski, objects function in quite a different way. They are not detritus; they are fabricated objects, and they have a definite purpose. Her pieces are not so much concerned with the dematerialization of the object as they are concerned with the concrete reification of sound. In conceiving her sculptural instruments – each of which is capable of making a sound or sounds – Szymanski visualizes selected phonetic consonants and vowels as decontextualized sounds. She then takes these visualizations and transforms them into objects, which she calls "After the Vowels." The final important transmutation is when the instruments, constructed out of brass and copper, are used musically within the context of an actual performance. The circle of sound to object to sound is thus complete.⁶ The objects only possess meaning in the context of this cycle of dematerialization; that is, the site and sense of speech is dislocated through a kind of visual reincarnation.

The terms used in the title of this essay – "environment," "site" and "displacement" – imply definite concepts

- 1 Carl Andre. *Statement in Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, exhibition catalog. New York: New York Cultural Center, 1970.
- 2 This reference refers specifically to the invention of the philosophy of phenomenology in the work of Edmund Husserl. The term *eidos* is used by Husserl to describe the essence that is sought through making contact with the object through a method known as the eidetic reduction. See Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964.
- 3 This statement refers directly to the work of the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. See Baudrillard, *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.
- 4 Lawrence Weiner, *Statements*. New York: Seth Siegelau, 1968.
- 5 See Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings*. New York: Abrams, 1965.
- 6 The performance, *Antiphony*, was composed and directed by Ben Neill. Thread Waxing Space, New York City, December 7, 1991.