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The Artist's Voice and the Written Word: Language in Art from 1960 to 1975

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Description
Between 1960 and 1975 there was an outpouring of artists writing critically in the United States, reflecting a mass desire to reclaim the voice of the artist in a critic-dominated art world. Texts in general rapidly spread throughout the artistic landscape during this period; as Conceptual artists challenged notions of visuality and viewership, we see a dramatic increase in artists engaging with experimental writing. This generation of artists, which included Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, had a fascination with the written word's potential as an art medium, many using the art magazine as an alternative venue to the "elitist" art gallery or museum. This thesis explores the fluid boundaries between art and text during this integral period, bringing to light the ways in which visual language and written language were seamlessly integrated through Conceptual Art in order to challenge the meaning of what art and art writing should be.

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The Artist's Voice and the Written Word:
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In his essay, "Language in the Vicinity of Art," Jeffrey Weiss observes that between 1960 and 1975 there was a proliferation of words that accompanied objects and installations in the museum world. Texts in general, it is true, rapidly spread throughout the artistic landscape during this period; as Conceptual artists challenged notions of visuality and viewership, we also see a dramatic increase in artists engaging in the world of art criticism and other forms of writing. This generation of artists, which included Dan Graham, Carl Andre, Vito Acconci, and Robert Smithson, appears to have had a fascination with the written word's potential as an art medium. In a time when war and politics enthralled the American public through mass protests and collective movements addressing issues of gender, race, and social justice, why is it that *words* distinguished the art of this time?

The links between art and language are not new to scholarly study, nor was this generation the first to experiment with text in visual art. Nor was the West the first location for this phenomenon; cross-culturally, art and writing together have played an intrinsic role in the long history of art and painting in China, for example. In this context, poetry and painting reflected one another in terms of both content and aesthetics, and from the Song dynasty onward, the idea of including poetry by the artist of a painting became extremely popular among literati painters. In the dynasties to follow, poetry became an essential aesthetic and academic component to the Chinese style, and in many cases it became a significant aspect of compositions. Here, the integration of poetic and visual arts served as a demonstration of the

artist's vast intellectual background, additionally showing the way the literati pursued a means of articulating a "resonance of the spirit" in both textual and visual mediums.[1]

The legacy the Conceptual artists drew upon can be traced back to the early twentieth-century Dada movements in Europe, where readymade objects often featured typographic material or handwritten proclamations as part of the artwork. Reacting to a postwar Europe, artists like Marcel DuChamp struggled to make sense of art's place in the wake of Word War I and on the brink of World War II, using language as a tool to emphasize themes of chaos and confusion. Neo-Dada artists in the 1950s would continue this aesthetic, with American artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg incorporating text into their paintings and collage works. Like their predecessors, Conceptual artists such as Graham, Andre, Acconci, and Smithson used text in order to disrupt previously held conceptions of visual art, linguistically conveying themes of chaos, disorder, and a lack of "logical" readability. Yet, while DuChamp, Johns, and Rauschenberg used language as a means of enhancing their paintings, these Conceptual artists instead made language the medium itself, introducing ideas of process and the viewer's active role as a reader in his or her experience with the artwork.

On a methodological level, American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce (1834-1914) and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) both applied semiotic theory to the visual arts during the nineteenth century. Semiotics, or the application of the science of signs, examines how cultures (and their corresponding cultural expressions like art, language, music, and film) are inherently composed of "signs," assuming that each sign has a meaning beyond its

[1] Yan Sun, e-mail message to author, April 11, 2014.

literal self.[2] Saussure believed that speech sounds and written words proceed in space and time, and therefore must be spoken or written in a sequence, each unit being distinct from its neighboring unit (units often referring to the separate component parts of a word, such as letters). He argued that language constitutes our reality, rather than reality constituting our language. Saussure's theories have been applied to painting, identifying the "unit" as the brushstroke, the "sequence" creating the whole of the work, etc.[3] Similarly, artists such as Smithson viewed both language and art in terms of units, using this underlying structure to facilitate new methods of Conceptual art.

I will argue that artists who engaged in writing during this period exhibited this linguistic interest in their art as well, and that similar pursuits to integrate language and the visual often took the form of the Conceptual. There is a connection between the proliferation of artists' critical writings in this decade and their use of language in Conceptual art practices; the sixties reflected an overwhelming desire of artists to reclaim control over their representation in art criticism, and to resist the "verbal imperialism" of the critic or professional writer.[4] Using print media and other less traditional approaches, artists such as Graham and Smithson pursued a form of art that explored the idea of an "alternative space" in opposition to the elitist professional world of art. This encompassed the sphere of the art critics as well as the physical settings of the museum and gallery, and explored the inherent links between the process of writing and the process of art making.

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[2] Laurie Schneider Adams, "Semiotics I: Structuralism and Post-Structuralism." In *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. Second ed., 159-191 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), 159.
[3] Ibid., 165.
[4] Goddard, Linda. "Artists' Writings: Word Or Image?" *Word & Image* 28, no. 4 (October, 2012), 409.

The Sixties and Seventies: A Time of Protest

According to Anna Dezeuze, the radical questioning of art and art methods in the 1960s was virtually indistinguishable from the social and political concerns of Americans during this time. There were a number of distinctly urgent battles to be fought, including women's liberation, gay rights, the promotion of civil rights, and the fight against the Vietnam War. "Revolution" became a term to be equated with most aspects of society during this time, as the activist force of the political New Left stepped forward in its abandonment of the more traditional strategies of the older, communist and socialist left.[5] Consequently, many artists sought to "open" the individual artwork to themes of chaos and disorder as well as broadening subject matter to everyday objects, the body, and language, in addition to considering sociopolitical issues.[6] Like the Dada and Neo-Dada movements, the idea of chaos, rooted in citizens' perspectives on war and sociopolitical issues, played a key role in establishing new artistic aesthetics. Ultimately, in this period this would lead to an in-depth questioning of the artist's role in the artistic process. While the artist in previous conventions had long held the role of a god-like, romanticized genius, this view shifted dramatically.

Artists' doubts about their roles as art-makers were closely tied to the idea of artistic labor, which was beginning to alter itself due to surrounding events of radical mechanization and the distribution of labor in the work force. Previously resulting in a rise of middle-class managers, artistic movements such as Minimalism began to turn to industrial materials, seeking methods of serial production as a way of further pushing the notions of artistic creation and

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[5] Anna Dezeuze, "The 1960s: A Decade Out-of-Bounds." In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, edited by Jones, Amelia, 38-57 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2006), 48.
[6] Ibid., 38-39.

installation practices. Minimalism, theorized collectively by its major practitioners Donald Judd and Robert Morris, reacted to the more emotion-driven forms of Abstract Expressionism in favor of hard-edged, geometric planes, artistic anonymity, and, as previously mentioned, industrial practices. Decisively abstract, the movement worked primarily in three dimensions, avoiding any and all figural associations.[7]

Often the brick, metal, or wooden structures by the likes of Andre could be fabricated at the site of the exhibition according to the artist's instructions, minimizing the artist's direct hand in the process. Such works often relied on a repeated set of units (much like Saussure's semiotic theory), or on a simplified, unique shape that could be grasped immediately by its viewers in its alluding to mass-produced goods.[8] As Conceptual art modeled its own questionings of the artist's role through experiments with text, photography, and other means of documentation, the question of an object's materiality became exceptionally present, and Conceptual artists became known distinctively for their negation of an artwork's visual qualities, directing the viewers attention instead toward process rather than product.

As the movement immediately preceding Conceptual art, Minimalism embodied yet another historical shift. By the mid-1960s artists were pursuing and obtaining university degrees, acquiring verbal skills as part of their training in studio practice and therefore making intellectual pursuits closely linked to the artistic process. This professionalization of the artist was a key factor in the move toward artists' engagement in art criticism, which in turn would influence the overall inclination toward the written word in artists' approaches to art making.

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[7] Frances Colpitt, "Minimalism." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. *Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 4, 2014, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0356

[8] Ibid., 44-45.

Art Criticism and Art Writing in the Sixties

The responsibility of critics, journalists, and publishing academics in the art world has long been, on a fundamental level, to create and hold together an artistic community of shared intellectual interests. Unlike the art publishing process of today, which requires a much longer and more laborious time frame, magazines and journals produced in the years from 1965 to 1975 featured regular contributors who wrote both quickly and consistently. While issues of publications like *Artforum* today reflect an increasingly globalized service economy and art world, in the late sixties the scale was much more localized (Figures 1 and 2).[9] Art magazines and journals such as *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine*, *October*, and *Art-Language* played a substantial role in the art community, as they facilitated engagement and active participation in the field. They certainly defined the nature of the artistic community of scholars, curators, critics, and artists themselves—but it was the artists who felt the least engaged and the most underrepresented when it came to such publications.

In his essay "Cultural Confinement" (1972), Smithson writes about this frustration with the impositions of the academic art world:

> Cultural confinement 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. Some artists imagine they've got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control.[10]

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[9] Crow, Thomas. "Art Criticism in the Age of Incommensurate Values: On the Thirtieth Anniversary of *Artforum*." In *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 85-86.

[10] Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement (1972)." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 154.

A similar mentality was frequent throughout visual artists during the mid- to-late sixties. Linda Goddard's investigation of a range of texts produced by artists in the twentieth century reveals that artists, as a form of resistance to this idea of "verbal imperialism," asserted the idea that as a practitioner, the artist offered more genuine insight into the field of criticism, and therefore should write critically in order to improve standards of interpretation.[11] Hal Foster points out that art and criticism were thought to together act as indices of historical change for present, past, and future generations, with the potential to serve as what he calls "agents of history." Art criticism, in this regard, was seen as a form of critical consciousness, at least in relation to the art world.[12] It is not surprising, then, that artists would seek to regain some kind of power over their roles in the history of art; those who wrote and engaged in art criticism, like Smithson, surely aimed to reclaim the artist's voice in publishing academic or critical work.

Artists become their own best witnesses, then, according to Weiss; as insiders, they provided commentary about art unique from that of any art critic. This surge of the artist's presence into the sphere of the written word would soon redirect itself toward more aesthetic goals.

"Alternative Spaces": Conceptual Art and the Magazine

Not long after the birth of Minimalism, 1968 marks the onset of Conceptual art, with the publication of text-related works by Graham, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner and its first exhibition being held and organized by Seth Siegelaub. It lasted roughly from 1965 until its

[11] This is in contrast to another assertion by artists in response to elite art critics, which demanded that art cannot or should not be described in textual form. Based on the plethora of artists' texts in the 1960s, which this essay examines, we can assume that during this period the assertion would have been less widely held.

[12] Hal Foster, "Critical Condition." *Artforum International* 51, no. 1 (September, 2012), 148.

temporary disappearance in 1975, building off of the wake of Modernism like a number of its contemporary movements. It emerged from the convergence of two leading legacies: first, the readymade, and second, geometric abstraction. Its predecessors, which in addition to Minimalism, included Fluxus (an early group of performance artists whose activities included public concerts and the distribution of eclectic publications), pushed one of these legacies in some regard—Fluxus with the readymade, and Minimalism with simplistic abstraction and conceptual approaches at the end of the 1960s.[13] Still, it was the Conceptualists who rejoined the two concepts into what is often perceived as a controversial questioning of visuality and the linguistic capabilities of art.[14] As examined by Benjamin Buchloh, Conceptual art proposed a replacement of the object experience by linguistic definition alone; in other words, they aimed to change our spatial and perceptual experience of individual artworks, making the role of the viewer a more actively analytic rather than observational process.[15]

Like Pop Art, Conceptualism in its early stages wanted to appropriate mass media forms like ads, newspaper photos, and photojournalistic essays, which led to experimental projects like Graham's *Homes for America* project and Smithson's essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967).[16] In particular, they were interested in establishing the publishing world as an "alternative space" to the museum or gallery, searching for new venues to exhibit

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[13] Michael Corris, "Fluxus." *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 4, 2014, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T028714

[14] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, "1968b." In *Art since 1900: 1945 to the Present*. Second ed. Vol. 2 (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 571.

[15] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." *October* 55, (Winter, 1990), 107.

[16] Liz Kotz, "Text and Image: Rereading Conceptual Art." *Words to be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 213-254.

their art in nonconventional ways while simultaneously protesting art world hierarchies and inner structures.

One other obvious direction this took was in Earthworks. For example, Smithson's famous *Spiral Jetty* (Figure 7) placed the artwork in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, displacing art into a geographic location of constant natural flux. This idea of displacement would permeate Smithson's work especially, but it is this same theme many artists like Graham and others had in mind when approaching new Conceptual mediums.[17] Referring to Terry Atkinson's 1968 article, "Concerning the Article: The Dematerialization of Art," Peter Osborne comments in his book: "At its best, 'Conceptual Art was never quite sure where *the work* was' because it was never just in one place, or even one *kind* of place."[18] Likewise, Conceptualism investigated place as a result of this curiosity toward an alternative space for art, which would spiral into what Osborne implies is an inconsistency of artistic spaces, often using the written page as one such space.

Printed matter, in its diverse forms of criticism, interviews, photographic reproductions, documentation, and advertisements, became subsequently a new medium of distribution for artists. Challenging formalist models of medium specificity, it prompted new dialogues about the institutions and audiences engaged in the art world. Magazines were cheap and accessible to the public, and also embodied the radical politics of the sixties, making them the ideal venue for Conceptual artists. The physicality of the portable magazine would have been attractive to

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[17] Craig Owens addresses Smithson's ideas of art displacement in his article "Earthwords," published in *October* 10, (Autumn, 1979), 123. Smithson would use the phrase "politically lobotomized" in referring to artworks subject to the conventional museum space and its "warden curators" while writing "Cultural Confinement" in 1972. In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 155.
[18] Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2002), 31.

Conceptualists, who like their contemporaries on the Pop and Minimalist ends of the spectrum (as well as the Modernist movements before them) were very interested in the materiality and tangible nature of an artwork. Print enabled them to make strides in democratizing the experience of art, empowering the viewer through encouraging their active participation in the work, which manifested itself in the reading process.[19]

These artists sought wider audiences, particularly ones existing outside the mandates of profit, and active means of engaging the viewers within those audiences.[20] The page contained abundant potential in this regard, with its reproducibility and its ties to mass production, and additionally, its true material (language and its meanings) was believed to exist in a cerebral lens beyond the scope of tangible sculpture or even illusionistic painting. Beyond inserting their art in remote locations (as with Earthworks) to be documented only by photographic means, they wished to insert their art into the public consciousness through mass distribution as a gesture of mass displacement.[21] It makes sense, therefore, that these artists were drawn to the printed page—specifically, those in mass publications—as a solution to issues of art world elitism and exploring the potential of language as a medium.

Published in a December 1966 issue of *Arts Magazine*, Graham's *Homes for America* confronted these questions of presentation and distribution, but also addressed questions of audience and authorship. It eliminated the difference between the physical, more architectural

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[19] Osborne, 31.

[20] Gwen Allen and Cherise Smith, "Publishing Art: Alternative Distribution in Print." *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2007, 2007), 41.

[21] Smithson typically documented his Earthworks projects through photography, and often included these images as a key part of his essays like "A Cinematic Atopia" (1971) and "The Spiral Jetty" (1972). Photography, as a tool of the media and a symbol of mass distribution, was also an interest of many Conceptualist artists, as it was often paralleled to language in its innovative artistic potential.

space of the museum and the space of a catalogue or art magazine.[22] Described by Ruth Blackwell as a work that is held up as one of the "seminal pieces" of text-based Conceptual Art, it uses photojournalistic writing and image techniques in order to more directly engage the viewer, like Smithson's "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" would a year later.[23] Each page, in style with the conventions of the publishing industry, consists of columned paragraphs of text accompanied by Kodak photographs (taken by the artist) that depict housing units throughout New Jersey. Graham begins the first column with the bold title "Homes for America: Early 20th-Century Possessable House to the Quasi-Discrete Cell of '66," followed by a list of what are presumably the photographed housing sites. His first paragraph (un-indented, as all of his paragraphs to follow remain) begins by proclaiming: "Large-scale 'tract' housing 'developments' constitute the new city. They are located everywhere. They are not particularly bound to existing communities; they fail to develop either regional characteristics or separate identity."[24] Why might an article about housing developments appear in *Arts Magazine*? The goal of the project, in fact, was to draw a Conceptual parallel between the American housing industry and the Minimalist style of art.

There are a number of moments where the viewer/reader encounters visible Conceptual techniques, such as lists and experimentations with letters as sequence; one only has to look to that same first page, where Graham identifies the "permutational possibilities" of

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[22] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." *October* 55, (Winter, 1990), 122-124.
[23] Ruth Blacksell, "From Looking to Reading: Text-Based Conceptual Art and Typographic Discourse." *Design Issues* 29, no. 2 (-03-01, 2013), 64.
[24] Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, *Arts Magazine*, December 1966.

four house model types in an eight-house section settlement (Figure 3).[25] The letter sequences begin with AABBCCDD, and continue over the course of two twenty-four-line columns, ending with DCBADCBA; a lengthy list for a journal article. Graham beforehand also lists the names and number of house models, exterior colors, and later on the lists of "likes" and "dislikes" between male and female homeowners. Graham additionally includes photographs, specifically taking those that he felt "anyone could produce."[26] These images serve as a functional part of the magazine layout, rather than individual artistic works, and are a component to the piece as much as the text, navigating the viewer/reader throughout as illustrations.

In Graham's decision to harness the format of a photojournalistic text, while integrating Conceptual techniques, *Homes for America* can in fact be defined as a Conceptual work, making it a fitting example of this time period's fascination with using print and writing as a new artistic method. *Schema (Poem, March 1966)*, also by Graham, would fall under this category as well, presenting itself as a structure that catalogs its own presentation through a compiling of the number of adjectives, adverbs, columns, and so forth that make up its form (Figure 4).[27] This work in particular conveys the close-knit relationship between experimental poetry and Conceptual art, which was explored more fully by Vito Acconci and Carl Andre.

Poetry and Art in the Works of Andre and Acconci

In addition to exploring the published nature of language, some artists like Acconci and Andre made strides in forms beyond the specified structure of the published essay. These

[25] Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, *Arts Magazine*, December 1966.
[26] "Dan Graham, "Walker Art Center Collections, 2005," Walker Art Museum, accessed March 14, 2014, http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artists/dan-graham.
[27] Liz Kotz, "Poetry from Object to Action." In *Words to be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 135.

experiments, primarily in poetry, were a transitional approach, a way of studying the fluidity of words and testing what language could do as something both visual and cerebral, in turn influencing the actions of the Conceptualist Art movement. It was not uncommon for artists in this generation to transfer their skills among disciplines; Graham and Smithson both wrote poetry in addition to writing in essay formats. It is important to note that both Acconci and Andre were writers either before or while they were establishing themselves as artists, which would in turn influence their artistic pursuits. Their individual backgrounds in language would become the foundation for their larger projects, such as Acconci's performance, video, and architecture works and Andre's Minimalist sculptures.

Grammar and punctuation, or lack thereof, played a key role in their writings, as the physical labor of the typewriter became an artistic process in itself. Materiality was key, as was the idea of space, represented by the page (as was addressed earlier in the context of alternative spaces for art). As a result, Andre became most interested in "principles of incremental identical units" as they applied to words, which is most famously attributed to the work of Gertrude Stein. As pointed out by Liz Kotz, syntax is what subordinates the individual elements (words) into a larger message when we communicate; a syntagm, correspondingly, she defines as a chain or string of elements that are intentionally linked together to serve a larger function. It is all about parts, or individual units, and their relationship to the whole.

This aspect of language was alluring to Andre, partially due to his own interest in the idea of a single word as both a "discrete unit" and an element removed from a larger set.[28] In his sculptural oeuvre we see this interest most in his early works *Negative Sculpture* (1958), as

[28] Liz Kotz, "Poetry from Object to Action." In *Words to be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 142.

well as *First Ladder* and *Last Ladder* (1958-1959) (Figure 5). In both, we find the "units" are missing; for *Negative Sculpture,* these refer to the holes in the Plexiglas, and for the *First Ladder* and *Last Ladder* works the units are the series of cavities chiseled from the timber. Similarly, in his work with language, Andre began in 1960 by taking found texts and "cutting" directly from them as he did from his sculptures at the time. Soon, however, he would shift his energy towards the idea of "constructivism," which focused on the building up of units rather than their removal.[29] Some of Andre's poems, therefore, functioned by massing, lining up, or dispersing a single, referential word in ruled typewritten forms, as in *One Hundred Sonnets (I…Flower)* (1963/1969), where he presented each single noun in a block of letters composed on a typewriter (visually much like a grid).[30] Later he would break down language further to the basic level of the word, his methods producing the poem "woods lands meadows rivers brooks to them and their heirs forever," which begins with the lines: "woods woods lands woods lands meadows / lands meadows rivers rivers brooks to / meadows brooks to them and their."[31] Each word, being a unit, is a key unit in the poem, which, in addition to emphasizing the components of language, minimizes the artist's hand as the phrases make little narrative sense to the reader. In a conversation with filmmaker Hollis Frampton, Andre comments that what he wanted to emphasize in his poetry was material that "any man can see," and further explains: "The poetry I am trying to write is poetry which eliminates the poet."[32] Later in the same

[29] Kotz, 143-144.
[30] Kotz, 145-146
[31] As reproduced in Liz Kotz, "Poetry from Object to Action." In *Words to be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 152.
[32] Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton, "On Certain Poems and Consecutive Matters." In *12 Dialogues: 1962-1963* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1980), 79. Reprinted

dialogue, Andre insists on the viewing of literature as an art, because of its inherent occupation of psychological space.

The majority of Acconci's poetry has been preserved in its original form from the typewriter, reflecting his affinity for the material space of the page and emphasizing the tactility of his letters, a quality Andre was also interested in. Trained first as a poet, Acconci was highly influenced by contemporaries Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer, and Aram Saroyan, who all were seeking alternatives to what were called the gestural models of New York School poetry. He returned to New York, in fact, from the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the 1960s, just as Minimalism was taking hold, and correspondingly experimented with the nature of words as units, like Andre did.[33] Time and time again his work displays consistent literary techniques (or rather, visual motifs), such as the use of parentheses, often using them as a container for individual snippets of words or phrases. In "RE" (1967), the technique is evident in his bracketing of phrases "here," "there," "here and there -- I say here," and "I do not say now," all the while using parentheses to enclose other blank spaces on the lines (Figure 6). The language in itself is simplistic and reflective of the "literalness of the page" he so desired to convey; in other poems, such as "Untitled (he had gone)" (1968), this is even clearer as he gradually reduces language into basic particles of shifters and punctuation marks. In a 1993 interview, he remarks:

> It started to seem impossible to use on the page a word like "tree," a word like "chair," because this referred to another space, a space off the page. Whereas I could use words like "there," "then," "at that time," …words that referred to my activity on the page, my act of writing on

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passage from Liz Kotz, "Poetry from Object to Action." In *Words to be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 151.

[33] Ibid., 154

> the page. So, in fact, toward the end of the time I was writing, I was driving myself into a corner… when in order to preserve the literalness of the page the only thing I could use on the page were commas, periods, punctuation points.[34]

The performativity of language was closely tied to his use of the page as a "performance space" of encounter, which would ultimately influence his career in working with performance, video, and other new media forms of Conceptual art. He believed that all language, written and spoken, was an extension of pragmatic human action and interaction, making it a dynamic opportunity for the exploration of a more modern, active viewer.

Smithson's Writing and Artistic Practice

Robert Smithson is perhaps the artist who best encompasses all of the aspects of this push toward language and text as art in the period between 1960 and 1975. While he was engaging in Earthworks, producing dramatic works like *Spiral Jetty* and *Asphalt Rundown* (Figures 7 and 8), simultaneously he was pursuing the artistic potential of language through poetry, essays, and the manipulation of the art magazine. It is through a number of his essays that we learn firsthand his views on the language as a subject to focus on; in "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," for example, published in *Art International* in 1968, he attempts to break down the consciousness of the art world in this context of language. Subsequently, he critiques the writing methods of artists like Graham, Andre, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, and even Andy Warhol to make his point. He argues that the art world has no center,

[34] Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Vito Acconci." In *Self-Construction* (Vienna: Museum fur Moderne Kunst, 1995), 113. Reprinted passage from Liz Kotz, "Poetry from Object to Action." In *Words to be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 156.

paralleling the tension and uncertainty between the artist and the medium of language, but emphasizing the necessity of language as a means of "centering" art goals:

> In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge…but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures…at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations...Or *language becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere*.[35]

This idea of a center, according to Craig Owens, was contrasted by themes in the essay of *decentering*, a dizzying experience in which everything becomes dialogue. Owens argues for a connection between these articulated concepts and Smithson's push to dislocate art from its conventional environments; this may certainly be the case, particularly as Smithson himself made a point to mirror his Earthworks goals in works that experimented with language.[36]

In 1967 Smithson published another essay, "Language to Be Looked At and/or Things to Be Read" as a press release for an exhibition at the Dwan Gallery in New York. More an example of an experimental essay than a press release, Smithson proclaims: "The power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tension of disparates."[37] He believes that words, like art, are most powerful and effective when placed in an unstable context or setting that establishes a tension between the object and the surroundings. The title of the essay itself draws a parallel between text and the visual; suggesting the interchangeability of looking and reading, he is recognizing the processes

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[35] Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 78.
[36] Craig Owens, "Earthwords." *October* 10, (Autumn, 1979), 122.
[37] Robert Smithson, "Language to Be Looked At and/or Things to Be Read." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 61.

that were so desirable to Conceptual artists in encouraging active viewers. Works such as *A Heap of Language* (1966) display this kind of dynamic tension, in addition to illustrating the profound connections Smithson saw between language and artistic practice (Figure 9). In this particular pencil drawing, Smithson handwrites in elegant cursive script synonyms and other words pertaining to language, the list (without commas) forming a pyramid shape in contrast to its gridded background. The surrounding background of cold squares that make up a mathematical grid, charted with numbers at the top from one to twenty-one, stands out as starkly different from the slanting, organic curves of the language Smithson has sketched before us. In piling words he is also destroying their signifying function, giving the visual effect of linguistic rubble on the page.[38]

Smithson signed and dated this work, additionally inscribing the title on the bottom left of the pyramid of words and identifying it in this way as an intentional work of art equal to one of his Earthworks projects. Here, the artist's hand is indeed present, a trait unusual in Smithson's work. The effect is obvious: as one of Smithson's earliest experiments with language, he is drawing attention to the process of writing, literally showing how both the *act* (here, in the form of handwriting) and the *activity* of the words themselves can function as a Conceptual work of art.

Smithson's unpublished poetry reveals a great deal about the artist and reflects much about his own artistic process through his choice of diction, use of imagery, and grammatical decisions. In "From the Temptations," an original manuscript held currently in the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C., Smithson matches simple, colloquial language with the

[38] Craig Owens, "Earthwords." *October* 10 (Autumn, 1979), 123.

elevated language of prayer, recreating the aforementioned dichotomy between image and object as well as context and setting. Displaying his visual arts influence, he makes use of vivid, often violent images as well. Smithson writes: "The mother / Did not spare / The infant / Sucking at her breast / But devouring it, / Took back / Into her stomach / Flesh and Blood / Which her womb / Had just brought forth." [39] In some ways, this form of poetry he writes, with its abundant Biblical allusion later ("And so, / Saint Jerome / Returned to the desert / All through the night Rome went burning / O lamentable misery! / O mournful misery") and its consistent ending on the word "Amen," seems unusual in comparison to the artist's other works. It appears more connected to his earlier ink drawings, which were more illustrative than Conceptual or even Minimalist. [40] But we do see evidence of both movements subtly introducing themselves in his writing, particularly through the repetition techniques most visible in "From the Walls of Dis": "Crushed under infernal / Rocks. / Crushed under infernal / Rocks. / Eye in the crack of doom. / Ear in the crack of doom. / mouth in the crack of doom."[41] Similar to Andre, he is using the concept of unit parts in his poetry, although the unit lies in the structured phrases rather than individual words or letters. He is also using a listing approach as he writes, "Filled with Pride / Filled with Envy / Filled with Usury" and so on.[42] Listing would become a typical characteristic of Conceptual art texts, like those by Sol LeWitt, and would occur in his own "Sites and Settings" and "Untitled (Site Data)," both written in 1968 along with his more magazine-oriented works.

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[39] Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 315.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Smithson, 316.
[42] Ibid.

Like Graham, Smithson would harness the art magazine and art journal as an alternative venue for his work. His most distinctive essays—or rather, text-as-artworks—include "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," published in *Arts Magazine* in 1966, just a month before Graham's *Homes for America* made its *Arts Magazine* debut (Figure 10). Addressing the published essay as a work of Conceptual art, he accompanies the body of his text with images, much like Graham, using illustrations with some relevance to the material he is addressing (the idea of art being trapped by the obstacle of a labyrinth, and its fate in the context of physical space). And yet, Smithson challenges the format of the published text even further through nontraditional formatting and the manipulation of page layout.

Unlike Graham's multiple-column pages, Smithson draws the viewer's eye by including only one column per page and additionally placing a thin black border around the text. Outside of this border we see the illustrations and their captions, creating a multigenerational frame through the inclusion of contextual DeKooning and Pollock paintings, photographs of museums and galleries, and assorted detailed footnotes. The heading on the first page foreshadows the photojournalistic techniques Graham would take on just a month later, with its large, bold title taking up the width of the frame. Its subtitle reads: "For many artists the universe is expanding; for some it is contracting."[43] The typography corresponds with the shape and form of the page, a trait reflective of design conventions in its time, but also functioning to navigate the viewer/reader to the start of the work. It is important to note that the first phrase in the text is "Around four blocks of print," or in more accurate typographic format: "AROUND FOUR BLOCKS of print." Smithson here has rendered "Around four blocks" in all capital letters, making the

[43] Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 34.

print to which he is referring (his own article) distinctively material and drawing upon a Minimalist aesthetic in form.

Another article, published a year later in a December 1967 issue of *Artforum*, is closer to what Graham aimed to accomplish in *Homes for America*: "The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." In this essay Smithson focused on the monotonous landscape of the United States through the microcosm of New Jersey, much like Graham. Instead of looking at the housing industry, however, he examined the town of Passaic, New Jersey through the "monuments" he photographed, which were in fact not conventional monuments at all but found objects and places that depicted remnants of industry mingling with geology. Described as a "mock travelogue," Smithson documented what his thought of as "monuments to decay," revisiting the theme of entropy, which fascinated him in both his art and writing.[44] Among the "monuments" selected were an industrial bridge, titled in its caption *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks*; hollowed pipes in a lake, titled *Monument with Pontoons: The Pumping Derrick*; more sewage piping, titled *The Great Pipe Monument* and *The Fountain Monument*; and the barren, wasteland-like landscape of an empty playground, aptly called *The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert)*. He uses the straightforward diction of a photojournalistic narrative, but still describes many of the subjects in detail through poetic imagery:

> Nearby, on the river bank, was an artificial crater that contained a pale limpid pond of water, and from the side of the crater protruded six large pipes that gushed the water of the pond into the river. This constituted a monumental fountain that suggested six horizontal smokestacks that

[44] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, "1967a." In *Art since 1900: 1945 to the Present*. Second ed. Vol. 2 (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 549.

> seemed to be flooding the river with liquid smoke… It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed "homosexual tendencies," but I will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, "It was there."[45]

This passage in particular is interesting in that he goes to such poetic extents to "anthropomorphize" *The Fountain Monument* (Figure 11), while disclaiming at the end of the paragraph that he does not aim to characterize it in that way. This is because, like Andre and Acconci, he is distancing himself from his subject matter, removing the presence of the artist from the text despite his role as a narrator. Instead, playing out his intended role as an observant narrator and "passive" artist (further distancing himself from his material), he makes the simple statement: "It was there," letting the subject speak for itself and communicate its own message to the viewer/reader.

The last essay I will mention is one of Smithson's later written works, published in a Fall-Winter issue of *Aspen* and edited, in fact, by Dan Graham. Titled "STRATA: A GEOGRAPHIC FICTION," this work visually appears the most artwork-like out of those mentioned in this paper (Figure 12). Revisiting an interest in history as a cumulative succession of disasters, he breaks up his pages into horizontals, dividing the space into sections that each begin with a cross-section of an image corresponding to a different period in geology: Cretaceous, Jurassic, Triassic, Permian, Carboniferous, Devonian, Silurian, Ordovician, Cambrian, and Pre-Cambrian.[46]

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[45] Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 34.

[46] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, "1967a." In *Art since 1900: 1945 to the Present*. Second ed. Vol. 2 (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 549-550.

These headings float to the left-hand side of the paragraph captions that follow the cross-sections, disappearing into the binding in an illegible manner. The text in this work for the most part is illegible, in fact, making the textual aspect more of a visual technique. At the same time, due to the nature of text within a publication, the viewer feels compelled to read the text in the captions despite the difficulty. In line with the goals of Conceptualism, the work forces an active role upon its viewer/reader as they read excerpts from the fragmented sections, such as: "Globigerina ooze and the bluish muds. Creta the latin word for chalk (the chalk age). An article called Grottoes, Geology and the Gothic Revival. Philosophic Romances."[47] Using all capital letters throughout, Smithson uses his unique combination of typography, layout, and Conceptual text in order to again examine the layers of context, language, and visual art, which would be explored by other artists soon after, to some capacity, but never again to the same great extent.

Aftermaths

The later half of the sixties and early seventies saw an extension of the experimental writing practices used by Graham, Andre, Acconci, and Smithson in the form of the "readymade text," most drastically re-interpreted by the famous Andy Warhol. In two of his "literary" projects, *a: a novel* (1968) and *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (1972), Warhol introduced technology as a means of manipulating language and text into an artistic form. It was with his tape recorder that he gathered the material for the projects, having his assistants merely transcribe what they heard on the recorder as the body of the books. This

[47] Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Flam, Jack. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 75.

procedure was most emphasized in *a: a novel*, which was purportedly based on twenty-four hours worth of recorded tapes documenting Factory groupie Ondine, living out his daily routine (and getting wired on amphetamines).[48] Raising a number of questions pertaining to authorship that were commonly surrounding Warhol's oeuvre, the book in fact was produced with the same assembly-line mentality and minimal sense of the artist's hand that was constant at the Factory. In fact, the Warholian approach to artistic production parallels the rising tendency of writers and artists in the 1960s and 1970s to distance themselves from their work (Andre's desire to remove the "poet" from the poem, for instance). In this way, the legacy of experimentation with language continued beyond the scope of Conceptual and Minimalist artists, manifesting itself in more distinctive Pop forms as well.

Conclusions

Artists wrote in the sixties and seventies for a multitude of reasons. First, they wrote to establish their voices in an evolving art community, which was in need of firsthand commentary by practicing artists. Second, they were seeking to find a solution to issues of elitism in this same art community, using art publications that they were meanwhile inserting themselves into as an alternative space for their art. Third, artists wanted to experiment with text, words, and language as an artistic medium, looking to change the role of the viewer from passive to something more active. There is indeed a correlation between an artists' visual style and his or her style of writing, as shown in particular by Smithson as well as by Andre and Acconci; Smithson used both his essays and his Earthworks in order to explore issues of displacement

[48] Charles Reeve, "Andy Warhol's Deaths and the Assembly-Line Autobiography." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2011), 664.

and decay, while Andre's and Acconci's approaches to their artistic processes mirrored their earlier formal approaches to poetry writing. Formal elements of language were also applied to essays by Graham and Smithson, which, combined with design and layout elements, created a distinctly new form of art through the lens of publishing.

Language served multiple roles in art during this period, particularly in the sixties. It functioned as a means of giving birth to a new kind of viewer, who engaged with the artwork on a more mental, active, and cerebral level, and also to challenge visuality, as Conceptual artists aimed to do. In looking at this important period of art history, we can as a result gather that art and language have a relationship that is fluid and communicative, as this sampling of artists discovered for themselves.

Images

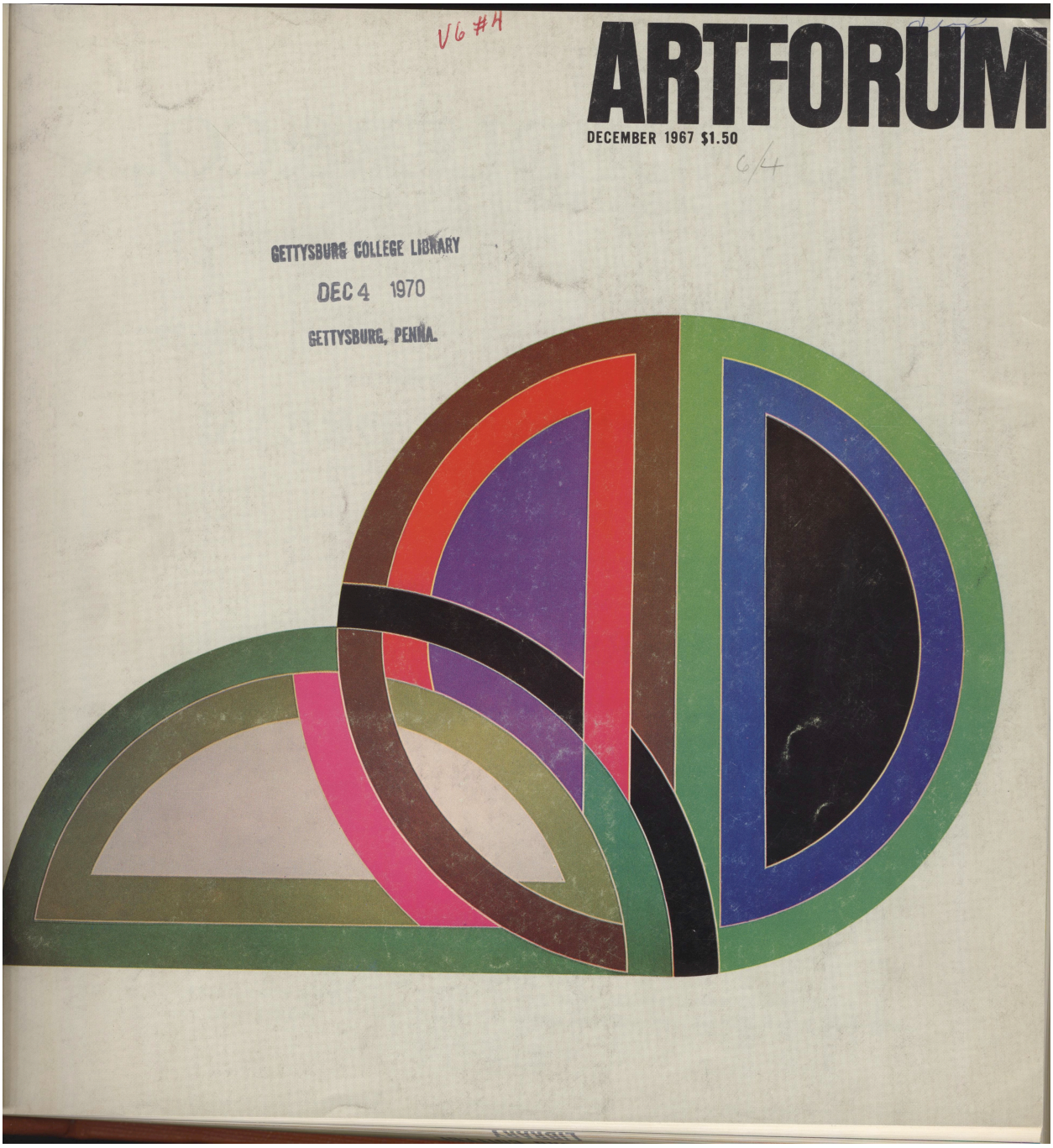

Figure 1. Cover of *Artforum* magazine, December 1967 issue. Musselman Library.

Figure 2. Cover of *Arts Magazine*, Volume 1 No. 1, 1966. Musselman Library.

Figure 3. Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, 1966. Published in *Arts Magazine*. Image from *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art.*

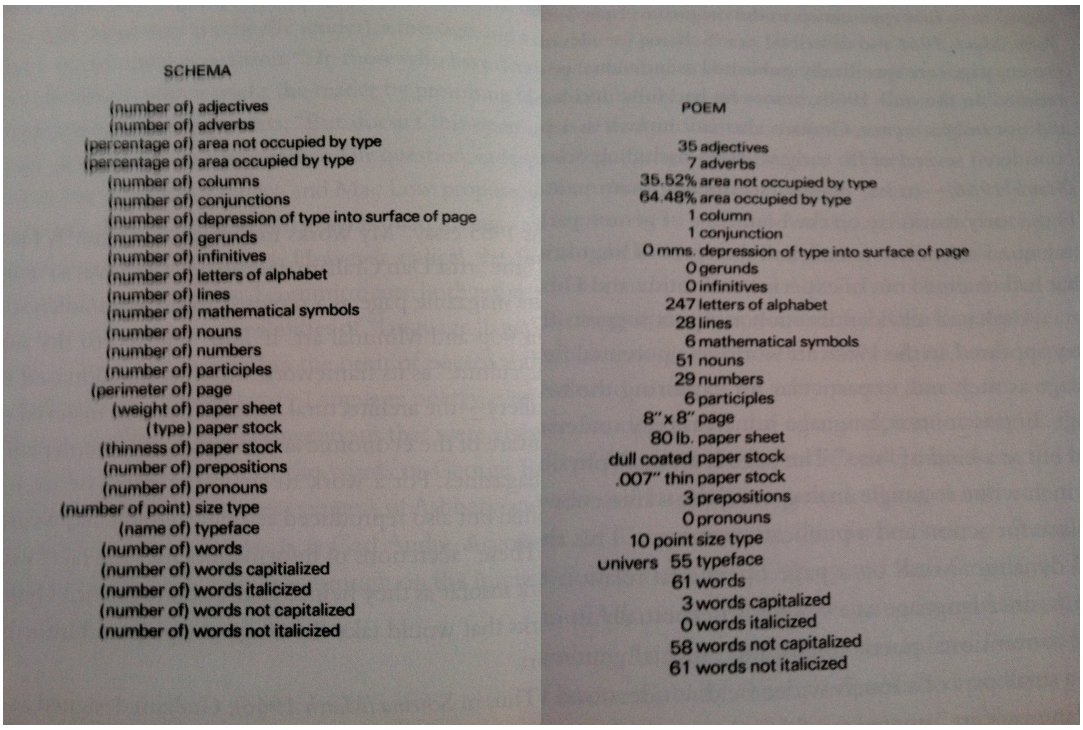

Figure 4. Dan Graham, *Poem, March 1966*, 1966. Image from *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art.*

Figure 5. Carl Andre, *Last Ladder,* 1958-1959. Image from www.tate.org.uk

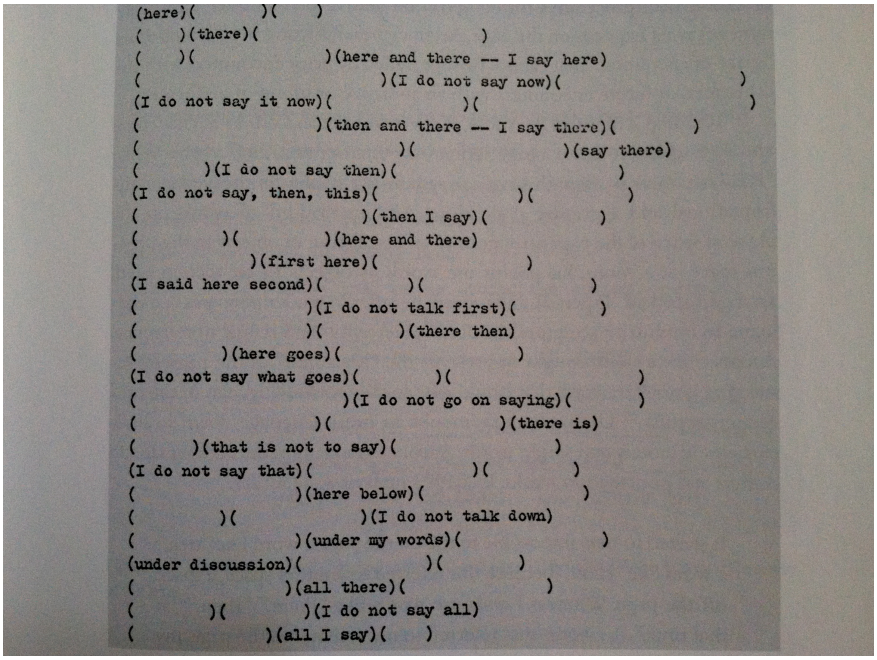

Figure 6. Vito Acconci, "RE," 1967. Image from *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art.*

Figure 7. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty,* 1970. Great Salt Lake, Utah. Image from *ARTstor Collections.*

Figure 8. Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown,* 1969. Rome, Italy. Image from *ARTstor Collections.*

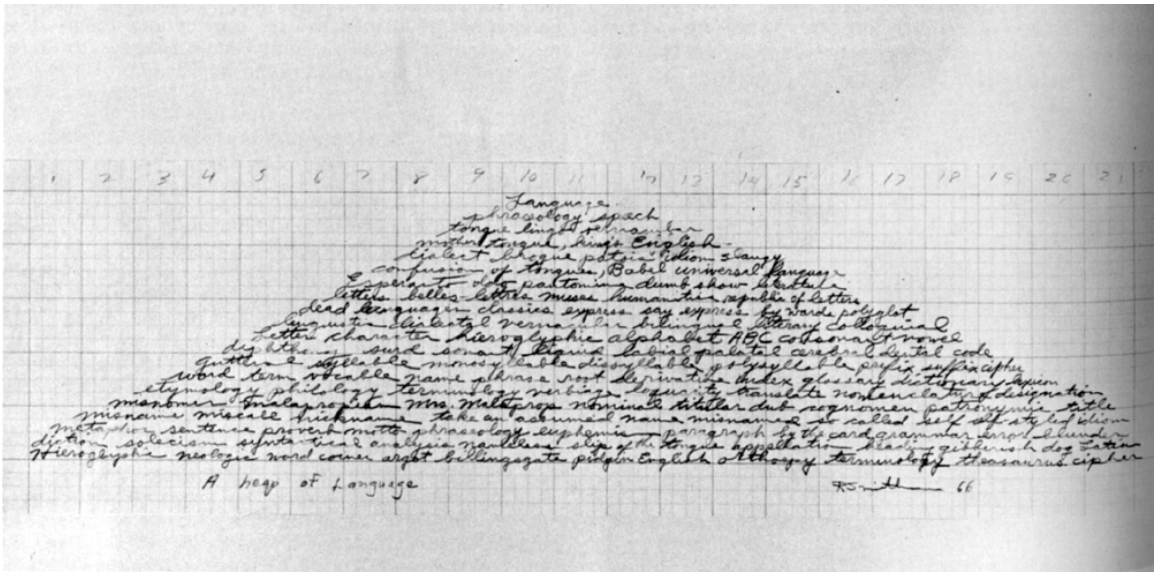

Figure 9. Robert Smithson, *A Heap of Language,* 1966. Image from www.robertsmithson.com

Figure 10. Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," Arts Magazine, November 1966. Image from www.rci.rutgers.edu

Figure 11. Robert Smithson, *The Fountain Monument*, 1967. Passaic, New Jersey. Image from *ARTstor Collections*.

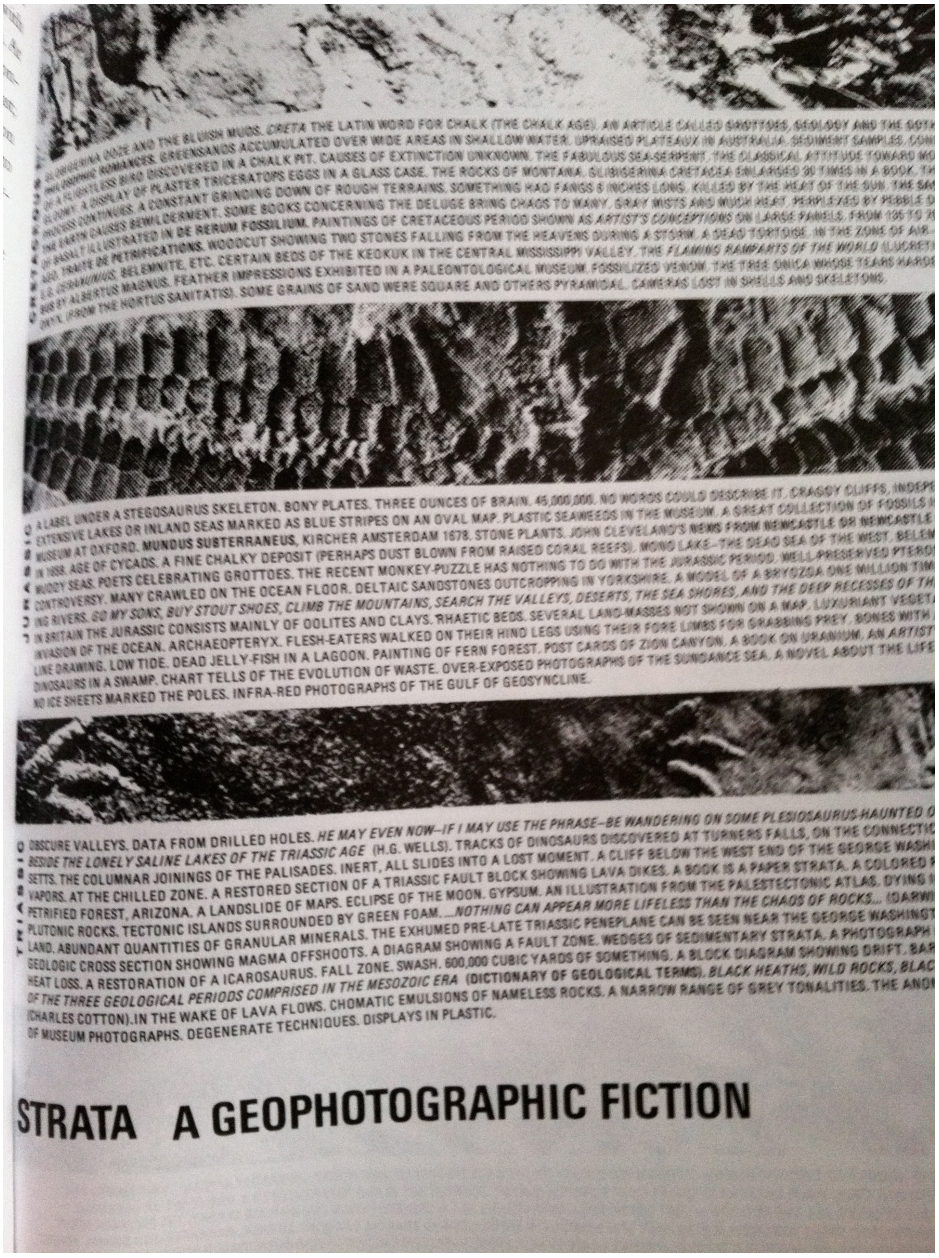

Figure 12. Robert Smithson, "STRATA: A GEOGRAPHIC FICTION," 1971-72. Image from *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings.*

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