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Zero-G  
When Gravity Becomes Form

6

Gravity anchors objects in relation to fields of mass. This seemingly innocuous property of existence nonetheless weighs heavily in the practice of art, which manifests such physical and intangible aspects of gravity as floating/falling, liquidity/rigidity, and action/inertia. Some artists foreground gravity as central to a work's conception, while others use it for its often startling effects. Despite the diverse range of the artists' interpretations, there seem to be two main trajectories: one a sculptural and conceptualized use of gravity, the other a more two-dimensional, literal performance of gravity.

The movement in the late 1960s toward a Postminimalist aesthetic sensibility<sup>1</sup> reflects the first, conceptualized trajectory where artists interrogated notions of softness, pliability, and formlessness as integral to both the creation and effect of a work of art. As artist Robert Morris stated: "An object hung on the wall does not confront gravity; it timidly resists it. One of the conditions of knowing an object is supplied by the sensing of the gravitational force acting upon it in actual space."<sup>2</sup>

Many artists of this period, among them Morris, Louise Bourgeois, and Lynda Benglis, acted on a similar impetus, freeing the work of art from representational and exclusively aesthetic concerns and instead emphasizing its

# **Gravity's Draw: A Look at the 1960s and the 1990s**

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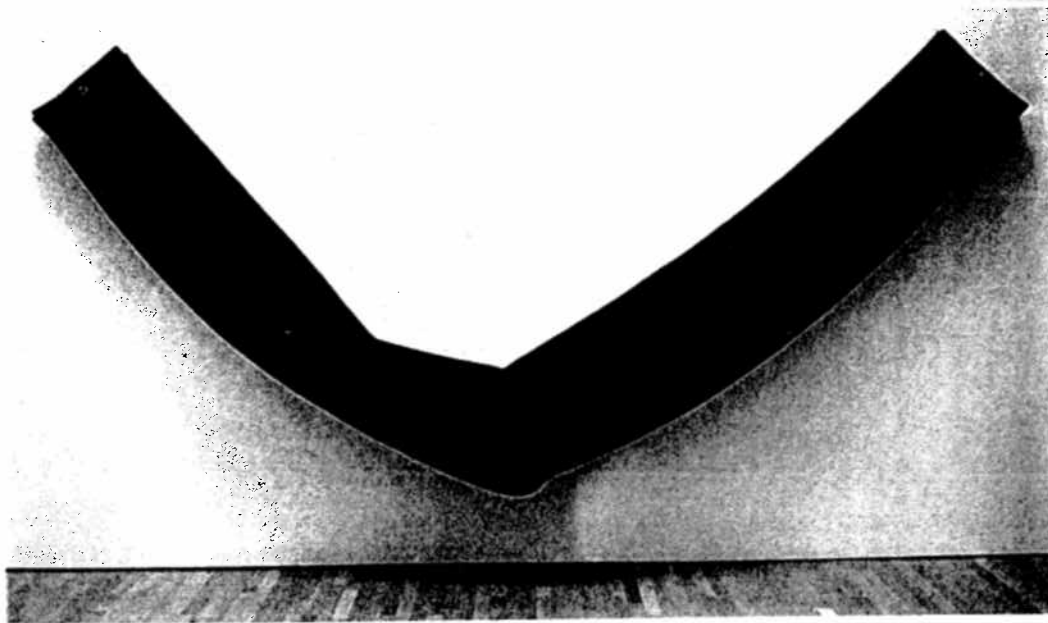
7

relationship to external conditions—to the viewer, the space around it, or its process of creation. They often used malleable, molten, or heavy materials to enact a physical and temporal representation of the effects of gravity. For example, in *Soft Landscape I* (1967), Bourgeois imagines what the puddling and localization of intense gravitational pull might look like, as she depicts a tiny plastic diorama of undifferentiated softened forms melted and fused by the insufferable pressure of heightened density and weight. The object's lack of armature or support, which drives it toward a state of entropy and chaos, is closely linked with the perceived effects of gravity. Similarly, Benglis' *Wing* (1969) and Morris' *Untitled* (1974; but close in appearance to works created

in the late 1960s) tackle the sculptural depiction of an object in the process of losing its structural integrity—sculpture made subject to the constraints of gravity's downward pull. For Benglis, a normative relationship to gravity is violated in favor of the impossibly frozen instant, as poured aluminum, launched from the wall, remains forever fixed in a moment of descent. In Morris' *Untitled*, two strips of coarse gray felt are tacked to separate ends of the wall. Connected at mid-point, they form a sagging rendition of a gravity-inflected chain link; their tenuous interlacing prevents a total capitulation to gravity's force.

One of the immediate historical precursors to this

Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1974



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Lynda Benglis, *Wing*, 1969

trend in art of the late 1960s was Claes Oldenburg, whose *Soft Toilet* (1966) evokes the possibility of familiar objects gone strange. Using new sculptural materials such as vinyl, Oldenburg created limp and lifeless replicas of household staples that become dissolved by the powerful dematerialization of gravity's draw. Aligned with this tendency is Richard Serra's 1968 *Prop*, where the balanced arrangements of weighty objects precariously manages to counteract gravity. Employing lead, one of nature's densest materials, *Prop* is a reminder that opposition to gravity is indeed possible, albeit contingent and ultimately uncertain.

During the 1970s and 1980s, artists' interest in con-

ceptual explorations of gravity seems to have abated. It was only in the 1990s that artists again began to probe gravity's effects on sculptural objects. Postminimalism's juxtaposition of the bodily and the synthetic, the familiar and the strange, seems particularly fruitful for contemporary artists, laden as it is with ambiguity and inconsistency, yet provoking playful reassessments. Looking anew at the 1960s, artists such as Ernesto Neto, Charles Long, and Lee Boroson are creating objects that surrender structural coherence, reverting to a state of inertia or horizontality. Appropriating the soft materials of Postminimalism, such as rubber, latex, and vinyl, these recent efforts are fraught with a similar ambivalence about the ability of an object to resist gravity's attraction.

9

In Neto's *Poff* (1997), a powder-filled, droopy disklike form has dodged structural responsibility, locating itself in an inert pile. Long's *Blow-up* (1995) consists of a vertical pole approximately 4 1/2 feet high that maintains perfect rigidity until it reaches floor level, where it becomes irrepressible and disorganized, twisting and buckling against the flawless uniformity of its upper hemisphere. Boroson, in his pliant *Chair* (1995), affixes a many-legged creature to the wall, allowing its tendrils to drip and dangle to the floor. Only by reflecting on the title and carefully appraising the object, does one realize that this alien creature in fact represents a sagging chair. Like Oldenburg before him, Boroson inserts the flaccid where once existed rigidity, retaining the recognizable within

defamiliarized conditions. Responding to Postminimalist work of the late 1960s, Neto, Long, and Boroson employ a remarkably similar visual vocabulary, accentuating the soft, slack qualities of sculpture that has been transformed by gravity.

Representations of gravity, according to Yve-Alain Bois, operate "against the traditional verticality of the visual field of paintings,"<sup>3</sup> reorienting the subjective experience of the spectator toward new possibilities of interpretation. Although usually accomplished through sculptural means, this conceptualized assault on verticality can also, in certain circumstances, be achieved through two-dimensional works that re-situate the viewer in a

Ernesto Neto, *Poff*, 1997



## 10

relationship that challenges stable readings of the upright, vertical field. Mounting such an attack, Michal Rovner's images of vaguely defined bodies seen in a state of free-fall against ambiguous backdrops locate the spectator in a warped and impossibly subordinate position. The silhouetted forms have no stable orientation—they linger transfixed in an equivocal moment of either ascent or descent. Likewise, Paul Henry Ramirez's liquid paintings render vertical what can only be comprehended in the horizontal—aqueous strokes, dripping and fluid, yet somehow crystallized in unrealizable wall-bound situations.

Overall, much of the work in the “conceptualized” category is nonrepresentational and rarely attempts overt allusions to the body. Yet a more literal, two-dimensional, and often more performative direction can also be mapped. In works from the late 1960s by Robert Rauschenberg and Vito Acconci, gravity is literalized as falling in a very human sense—the body's motion is enforced by the physical constraints of gravity. In *Autobiography* (1967), Rauschenberg

collages documentation from a prior performance art piece in which, strapped to a parachutelike contraption, he unsuccessfully attempts to impel his body to flight in a move reminiscent of early aviation ventures. Acconci likewise alludes to the pitfalls of counteracting gravity: *Throw* (1969) is a series of prints photographed, as the accompanying text notes, “holding a camera while reaching back as if to throw a ball.” Acconci here records the skewed “vision” of an object as it temporarily leaves the earth.

Several artists in the 1990s picked up on this tendency, among them Martin Kersels and Tom Friedman. *Untitled (Falling Photos-Triptych)* (1994–96) portrays Kersels, leaning at precarious angles, captured just prior to his loss of balance and inevitable fall. Friedman's *Untitled* (1994) depicts an anxious moment of resistance to gravity: a man impossibly pinned face first to the ceiling, seemingly oblivious to his untenable position. Both Kersels and Friedman treat the bodily sensation of falling as Rauschenberg and Acconci had, accentuating the body's defiance,

opposite page: Peter Garfield, *Mobile Home (Manifest Destiny)*, 1996





Erwin Wurm, *One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman)*, 1998

and inevitable compliance, to the demands of gravity. Peter Garfield, although he depicts objects rather than humans in a state of free-fall, also makes gravity literal. In *Mobile Home (Manifest Destiny)* (1996), his plunging house, photographed a mere moment before disaster, starkly contrasts with its placid desert

surroundings—a straightforward depiction of a whimsical and wholly preposterous situation.

Beyond a mere depiction of the “fall,” gravity in a literalized representational structure can also elucidate the body’s interaction with weight and overburdened

physicality, evoking both the fascinating and menacing aspects of a gravity-bound aesthetic. Artists such as Byron Kim (in his *Belly Painting [White]*, 1998) and John Coplans (in his *Self-Portrait [Upside Down No. 1]*, 1992) depict bodies in tense dialogue with gravity, where flesh struggles to maintain vertical integrity in the face of gravity's inexorable pull toward the horizontal. Erwin Wurm, in his photograph *One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman)* (1998), demonstrates gravity's conquest over the human form as everyday objects, in a perverse reversal, become weighty, inescapably constraining human mobility.

These two tendencies in gravity-oriented representation—the conceptualized use of gravity on the one

hand and its literal representation in photography and painting on the other—address the intersection of gravity on sculptural objects as well as on the human form in the 1960s and the 1990s. The force of gravity's draw continues to attract, captivate, tantalize, and repel artists and viewers alike. As Richard Serra maintained, the art object's necessary relationship to gravity records "the history of art as a history of the particularization of weight."<sup>4</sup>

1. The term Postminimalism (sometimes referred to as Process Art) refers to an informal movement—predominantly manifest in sculpture—that can be dated roughly from 1965 to 1975. Postminimalists emphasized the entropic, the organic, and the malleable. Where the forms of Minimalism were cold, rigid, and autonomous, Postminimalism's "soft" forms accentuated the random and pliable qualities of the art object.

2. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (1968; ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 224.

3. Yve-Alain Bois, "Thermometers Should Last Forever," in *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966–1969*, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1993), p. 29.

4. Richard Serra, *Writings, Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 184.