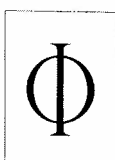
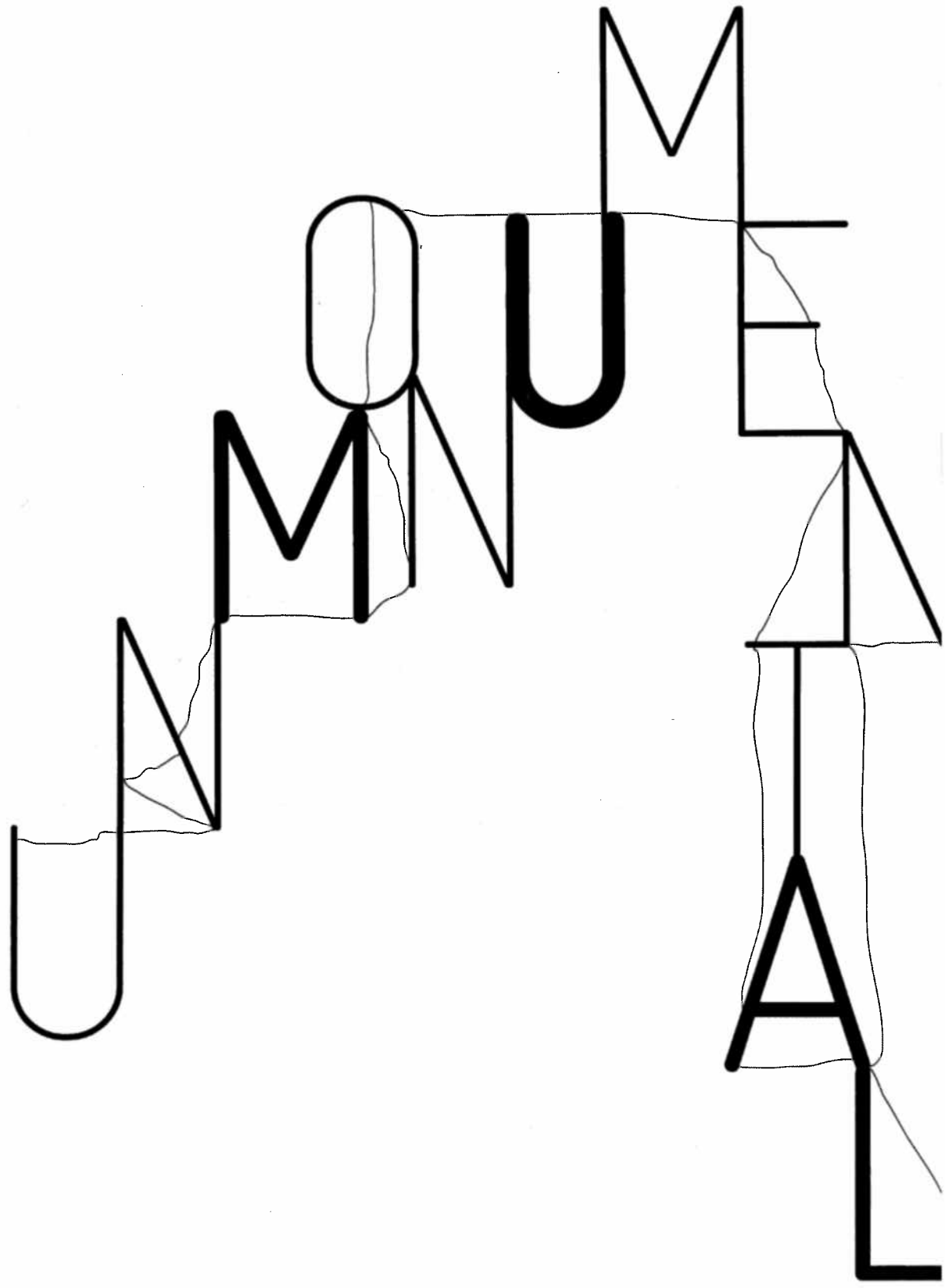


UNMONUMENTAL
THE OBJECT IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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7 Preface by Lisa Phillips

9 Acknowledgments by Richard Flood, Laura Hoptman and Massimiliano Gioni

10 NOT ABOUT MEL GIBSON by Richard Flood

14 SCULPTURES by

ALEXANDRA BIRCKEN JOHN BOCK CAROL
BOVE MARTIN BOYCE TOBIAS BUCHE CARLOS
BUNGA TOM BURR ABRAHAM
CRUZVILLEGAS AARON CURRY SAM DURANT

Biographies by Sara Reisman

64 ASK THE DUST by Massimiliano Gioni

78 SCULPTURES by

URS FISCHER CLAIRE FONTAINE ISA
GENZKEN RACHEL HARRISON ELLIOTT
HUNDLEY GABRIEL KURJIM LAMBIE NATE
LOWMAN SARAH LUCAS MATTHEW
MONAHAN

128 UNMONUMENTAL: GOING TO PIECES IN THE 21ST CENTURY by Laura Hoptman

140 SCULPTURES by

KRISTEN MORGIN MANFRED PERNICE ANSELM
REYLE MARC ANDRÉ ROBINSON EVA
ROTHSCHILD LARA SCHNITGER GEDI
SIBONY SHINIQUE SMITH NOBUKO
TSUCHIYA REBECCA WARREN

184 SCULPTURE: A MINOR PLACE by Trevor Smith

192 YESTERDAY'S NEWS by Benjamin Godsill

206 A CRITICAL GLOSSARY OF SPACE AND SCULPTURE By Eva Díaz

210 Notes

212 Contributors

214 List of works in the exhibition

By Eva Díaz

Though the twentieth century feels distant at moments, many artists included in Unmonumental are, to this day, metabolizing the formal and political ambitions of modernism in order to represent the complexity of contemporary life. This project of looking backwards to see a glimmer of the now, of thinking historically in the present, is a key motivation for this critical glossary.

ASSEMBLAGE: Amassed rather than fabricated or mass-produced, bricolage is an improvised object, composed by trial and error out of the materials at hand. Allan Kaprow's 1966 compendium *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* described assemblage as a concept of collaged sculpture much like that of bricolage and introduced the idea that sculpture was on a trajectory towards process, performance and social events.¹ Assemblage, as such a grouping of disparate objects, was a starting point in a series of contexts telescoping out of the single, unitary and materially homogeneous object that defined much previous sculpture.

Rather than being cause for alarm, the elimination of distinctions between media changed the nature of what was understood as art. Art was henceforth accepted as a relationship of space to an ever-shifting environment. As a side effect of this revolution in spatial relations, objects once ignored as extraneous to art production could be considered as part of a work of art, as could social relations, which were once seen as superfluous.

ATLAS: The concept of the atlas as a collection of juxtaposed images, not merely, as in typical English usage, a set of maps, is gaining prominence in the growing reassessment of the work of Aby Warburg. A German social anthropologist, photographer and influential art historian, Warburg worked on a series of moveable picture panels that could be placed in various spatial relationships – sometimes arranged as sculptural objects propped against one another – which he called the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The screens contained reproductions of famous art-historical works, various antique and modern maps, astrological charts, photographs of festivals and technological diagrams. They were organized not by stylistic continuity, but rather by thematic correspondences or common historical transformations. Together the panels formed a networked relationship encompassing a sweeping field of inquiry – the entirety of human memory.

Warburg was attempting to preserve connections between things that were being threatened with a relativistic leveling of commodity culture that sucked out meaning in favor of consumption. He explored the merits of the endless technological reproduction of images (his *Atlas* contained mostly photographs, not original works) that others had warned would lead to

a degradation of mnemonic retention. The *Mnemosyne Atlas* contrasted images to create a scholarly archive that was as elusive as it was partial and fragmentary.

CRITERIA: The critic Clement Greenberg once argued that “a stretched or tacked up canvas already exists as a picture – though not necessarily a successful one.”² Michael Fried approvingly quoted Greenberg in his 1967 *Artforum* article “Art and Objecthood.” The essay represented Fried’s watchful effort to define the limits of artistic practice in an attempt to fight the incursion of Minimalist arguments favoring the machine-produced “specific object” advocated by Donald Judd. In his article, Fried (in)famously termed Minimal art “theatrical” and reiterated Greenberg’s belief in the preeminence of composition and atemporality as the ontological conditions of modernist art.

Fried revisited Greenberg’s reference to the tacked-up canvas to reinforce the important codicil that such a work is “not necessarily a successful one.” The term “success” is crucial. It insists that criteria for judging a work do exist, that is to say that art has not slipped into a deskilled, anything-goes arbitrariness. Here Fried resists Robert Rauschenberg’s insertion of seemingly random elements in his sculptural Combines. (Rauschenberg claimed in 1959, “A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than with wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric.”)³ Fried’s notion of “success” indicates that judgment is qualitative, not universal, and that the measure for making decisions about the success or lack of success of works of art is one of taste. For there is no objective reason why a painting should avoid the dimensionality of sculpture or relief, or why paintings and sculptures should evade narrative associations.

DESKILL: “There are no more geniuses. We are finally free of these malevolent dummies.”⁴ French artist Jean Dubuffet’s 1945 attack on intellectualism and exceptionalism was nothing less than a sweeping condemnation of culture itself. Couched in a language of radical democracy, Dubuffet’s *Art Brut*, or “crude art,” proposed a notion of art unmarred by thought (“Let there be as few ideas as possible!”) – an art expressive of an inner vision produced by children, the mad and the unschooled.

Dubuffet’s polemic surfs a wave of discontent rising in the immediate post-war period. In the topsy-turvy world of a damaged civilization traumatized by holocaust and nuclear devastation, new criteria were demanded. *Art Brut*’s embrace of abnormality radically relativized artistic production, introducing criteria of emotional authenticity over reason, anonymity above genius, subjectivity before communicability, impulse over technique or tradition.

Traditionally, technical competence articulated through the use of specific materials in a particular

media was often the baseline criteria of judging a work of art. A sculptor's skill, for example, was demonstrated in specialized knowledge of metallurgical casting or stone carving. In sculpture, the turn away from bronze or marble towards clay, wood and found objects is a two-pronged move, the outcome of which is not at all certain. On the one hand, deskilling can represent an expansion of art from rarified materials towards the quotidian and the common. On the other hand, deskilling turns specialized production towards a radical democratization of authorship, alerting spectators to their potential role as creators. Deskilling art collapses it into life, yet such a life may be itself impoverished by the leveling out of distinct positions from which to maintain critical distance about social-political hierarchies which themselves are not questioned.

DESUBLIMATED: To Sigmund Freud, artistic practice was made possible by processes of sublimation. Instinctual drives, in particular sexual impulses, are converted into productive mental activities and long-term strategic thinking that do not necessarily provide immediate pleasure. According to Freud, "The sexual instinct ... is endowed with a capacity for sublimation: that is, it has the power to replace its immediate aim by other aims which may be valued more highly and which are not sexual."⁵ Sublimation comes from the Latin verb *sublimare*, "to raise up," and Freud's conceptualization of the term was part of his topographical understanding of the unconscious as a foundation upon which higher consciousness is erected.⁶ In contrast, desublimation is often expressed in horizontally-based objects: as laid-down forms and sprawling, prone bodies.

In some cases, however, a condition of "repressive desublimation" results. Excess and sexual abandon are marshaled towards the soporific ends of entertainment culture and organized leisure, and the appearance of freedom is accommodated and, indeed, actively cultivated as a substitute for more potent forms of genuine protest. Mess, filth, scatter and decomposition in this case are mere scatological regressions, rather than emancipatory gestures.

FOUND OBJECT: Andre Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928) recounts his wanderings through Paris. Throughout the book, Breton is drawn to seemingly random people and objects that are charged with inexplicable but powerful affect. *Nadja* herself is a cipher of the mysterious and mundane; the items Breton obtains throughout the course of the story are haunted with presentiments of her tragic end. Breton does not acquire these found objects; they seek him out. Previously lost to history, their outmoded, no longer useful forms embody, personify even, the aspirations and longings of their former owners. A found object, then, is a deeply poignant piece of someone's repurposed trash, an unwanted/outmoded object still pregnant with prior use. As opposed to forms of

casual recycling, the found object is a form of historical recovery that activates highly charged aspects of the past in the service of the present.

GRAVITY: In 1969, Whitney Museum curators Marcia Tucker (future founder of the New Museum) and James Monte organized "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials," an exhibition of what came to be known as post-Minimal sculpture, process art, or scatter art. Tucker described the title as having been taken from artist Robert Morris's description of his use of drooping industrial felt as "anti-form." The exhibition showcased new work by sculptors such as Morris, Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va and Richard Tuttle. In contrast to Minimalism's rigid and autonomous forms, post-Minimalism emphasized the entropic, the organic and the malleable, and accentuated the random and pliable qualities of objects as they related to their surrounding space and environment. Morris's emphasis on the effects of elementary forces such as gravity signaled a shift in focus from the optical registration of a work to an understanding of the field of relations – physical and possibly ideological – in which an object is situated.

MERZBAU: "Merz," a nonsense fragment derived from a German financial institution called *Commerzbank*, was the name that the artist Kurt Schwitters gave to his abstract collages made of urban detritus composed immediately after World War I in Hannover. Not content with producing mere objects, Schwitters transformed several rooms of his house into a work of art. Dubbed the *Merzbau*, he built nooks, cabinets and grottoes, filling the spaces with found objects, as well as collaged and assembled works of art. Schwitters first used strings to connect objects throughout the space, then used wires and planks to integrate them more permanently. In Schwitters's *Merzbau*, the structure itself housed curious shelters for objects with deeply personal – and thus often inscrutable – associations. Schwitters's sculptural and architectural hybrid redefined the very notion of home and of sculpture. The *Merzbau* integrated furniture, art and architecture into one inclusive setting. Yet Schwitters's total habitat was subjective, expansive and heterogeneous, unlike parallel modernist projects that stressed mass-production and broad consumer availability of prefab architecture and decor.

MONUMENT: The artist Tony Smith remarked of his sculpture *Die* (1962) that he didn't want to make it so large that it would become a monument, and he didn't want to make it so diminutive it would exist merely as an object. Smith argued that sculpture ought to be "related to ordinary everyday measurements – doorways in buildings, beds, etc.," and at six feet square, the steel cube's dimensions mirrored the human form. His description still serves as a useful definition of the scale of sculpture.⁸

on, and effectively supercede, the essential flatness of painting. To Judd, specific objects worked through the obsolescence of painting and emerged on the other side, not as "successful" paintings but as works created under the aegis of a new criteria, that of "interest." Yet arguments against the "merely interesting" were forwarded by Michael Fried.¹² In particular, Fried bemoaned that art making would be so degraded by "interest" that an interesting experience alone would soon be perceived of as art.

TRUTH TO MATERIALS: The disciplined study of the material constitution of form was, to the artist and teacher Josef Albers, the necessary condition of art production. First at the Bauhaus and then at Black Mountain College and Yale University, the sculptural exercises that Albers gave to students concerned the immanent capacities of materials, studied structurally and analyzed according to features such as compression, elasticity and firmness tested through folding and bending. The internal organization of forms and their relation to one another was underscored, encouraging dynamic relations rather than strictly symmetrical or mathematically predictable ones.

As Albers stated, "Every art work is based on a thinking out of the material."¹³ Though the appearance of any material could mimic another, the underlying structure and technical capacity of a material can never be successfully imitated. Thus an object's structure should always be in conversation with its appearance. A trompe-l'oeil wood-grain drawing on paper, however naturalistic, can not to be mistaken for actual wood in its strength or durability. Playing with such illusions, however, encourages attentive spectatorship that challenges ingrained habits of perception (for example, at first glance treating trompe l'oeil as what it represents).

THEATRICALITY/"NOTES ON SCULPTURE": Artist Robert Morris's experiences with Judson Church theater and dance performances, and his workshops with choreographers, such as Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, encouraged him to think about the performativity of the body in relation to set design and props. Morris's second one-person exhibition in 1965 included a corner piece slightly set off from the wall so it appeared to be floating, two large "L-beam" shaped sculptures and a large floating rectangle, among other pieces. All were painted a uniform pale gray color. In his series of essays "Notes on Sculpture" (1966-69), Morris elaborated his interest in the phenomenological conditions of art spectatorship.¹⁴ To Morris, of primary importance was the manner in which his audience related to the objects, and a scale based on human perception and experience was ideal for encouraging this. Shape was another important element for Morris as it encouraged viewers to perceive his sculptures as immediately intelligible, whole, "gestalt" forms. This, to Morris, prevented the interpretation of his sculptures as

"installation" or, worse yet, an "environment." It was just such a claim that critic Michael Fried leveled against Morris.¹⁵ To Fried, environment was linked to theatrical space, and theater was not part of the specific competency of art production, generally, and painting and sculpture, specifically. The dangerous lure of theatricality was, to Fried, the way in which it broke down the contemplative space of art, that is to say the dialectical relationship between the work's autonomy and the beholder's contemplation of it. Theatricality also emphasized a work's temporality, which opposed the absolute present-ness and attention that contemplation encouraged.

WASTE: In the years around 1900, the photographer Eugene Atget used the figure of the *chiffonier*, or ragpicker, to reveal the uneven development of capitalist modernity in urban settings. Ragpickers, though poor, were not beggars. Roaming through the terrain of the metropolis, the ragpicker attended to the overlooked, gathering not just literal rags but anything of value: cans, bottles, paper and everything else that wealthier inhabitants treated as trash that could be converted into scrap. Atget, without romanticizing their poverty, recognized a remarkable freedom of movement in the ragpickers' seemingly destitute condition. He saw in their longevity, in spite of frequent persecution, a public refutation of the claims of capitalism to rationalize inequality and bureaucratize labor in routinized production schedules.

Extracting the final value from objects deemed outmoded or useless, the ragpicker participates in an informal economy of recycling, furnishing the cast-off of the rich with a new, and often final, life. To Walter Benjamin, the ragpicker's recovery of the overlooked constituted an alternative form of history, as he wrote in *The Arcades Project*, "I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse - these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them."¹⁶ An art made of humble materials participates in this cycle of reuse, yet care must be taken to avoid fetishizing the appearance of poverty. If necessity is the mother of invention, scarcity is unfortunately the taskmaster of survival.

The monument-sculpture-object declination that Smith sets forth indicates how increasing the scale and location of something changes its social meaning. Attitudes towards monumentality have varied depending upon the political, economic, social and cultural context. At the turn of the century, the Austrian writer Robert Musil noted that monumental public art suffers from being "so conspicuously inconspicuous," and concluded that "there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument."¹⁰ Musil called for modern forms of address in public sculpture, irreverently appealing for modern, attention-getting monuments outfitted by the latest "gimmicks" of advertising: rotating, animated sculptures that "comprehend our age of noise and movement." This dream is somewhat elegiacally recalled in Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920), a mixed-use monument that was at once a radio tower, a suite of offices and a valediction for the successful worker's revolution. It was never realized.

In the 1960s, Robert Smithson turned a critical eye to the discourse on monuments, seeing them in the overlooked detritus of decaying rust belt areas – drainpipes, slag heaps and overgrown rail yards all had their wasted splendor. These post-industrial colossi, elaborated in his text and photo essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic" (published in *Artforum* in 1967) were to Smithson a sign of the entropic degradation of all human initiative, even as they possessed a majesty that scarred the landscape with the pride of industrial power.

ORNAMENT: In J. K. Huysmans's 1884 novel *À Rebours*, the young aristocrat des Esseintes sequesters himself on his country estate and proceeds to redecorate his apartments with a compulsive attention to every detail. His folly reaches such heights that he gilds a live turtle to match a brilliant Oriental rug. Not satisfied, he employs a jeweler to encrust the reluctant turtle's carapace with rare gemstones. With this coup de grâce the reptile dies, proving that a decadent surfeit of ornamentation kills what it attempts to enhance.

Disdain of ornament was intensified by Viennese architect Adolf Loos's 1908 treatise "Ornament and Crime," which equated ornament with cultural atavism and decay. Prohibitions against ornament often feminized it as indulgent, even narcotic, opposing the imperatives towards productivity and efficiency in sleek and austere modernist design. Yet in the twin engines of International-style modernism and geometric abstraction something was lost; ornament ultimately re-emerged in biomorphic design and flowered in the sixties with neo-Jugendstil psychedelia. In sculpture, ornament returns as a long-repressed pleasure in surface and decorative pattern, opposing the 1950s/1960s modernist non-representational sculpture of Anthony Caro and David Smith as well as the austere serial structures of mid-1960s Minimalism.

PROUN: In the early days of the Russian Revolution, art forms were called upon to reflect the conditions of a nascent socialist culture. This was undertaken in order to incorporate the social and material conditions of modernity – steel, commodity and industrialized labor – in the hopes of fostering a new image world. Traditional media and hierarchies of genres were dispensed with in favor of interdisciplinary explorations of space and material. El Lissitzky, a Russian artist active during the early days of the Revolution in Kasimir Malevich's UNOVIS organization, coined "proun" to define his hybrid practice of spatialized painting. Initially emphasizing dimensional elements such as volume and the illusion of dynamic movement, the proun moved out into an architectonics of space. Abstract wall-bound sculptural forms and paintings depicting architectural forms were integrated into room-sized installations. Vectoring the surrounding space, Lissitzky's hybrid amalgamated the perceptual effects of painting with the phenomenological, spatial conditions of sculpture.

READYMADE: In 1913, Duchamp famously proclaimed that a bicycle wheel he had affixed to a stool was art. A commercially available bottle rack, a snow shovel and most notoriously a urinal signed R. Mutt soon followed, all of which he called "readymades." This provocative and quixotic gesture underscored the contradictory nature of art – that it is based on a community of understanding rather than any innate quality of the work. The arbitrary nature of the readymade was its key attribute; according to Duchamp, the work should be as random and affectless as possible. As he wrote, "It is necessary to arrive at selecting an object with the idea of not being impressed by this object on the basis of enjoyment of any order. However, it is difficult to select an object that absolutely does not interest you, not only on the day on which you select it, and which does not have any chance of becoming attractive or beautiful and which is neither pleasant to look at nor particularly ugly."¹⁰

To Duchamp, an artists' nominative act – the declaration regardless of the object – was itself the art. He could choose anything regardless of, or even in spite of, its aesthetic merits. Thus began a conceptual leap of faith that continues to define the condition of sculpture, and art more generally.

SPECIFIC OBJECT: In 1964, the artist Donald Judd described his sculptures, consisting of aluminum boxes arranged serially on a wall, as neither painting nor sculpture but a hybrid of the two. He called this interstitial kind of work "specific objects."¹⁰ According to Judd, specific objects were concerned with what Clement Greenberg had termed "the delimitation of flatness."¹¹ Painting had become so flat in color field painting, Judd argued, that a new category of work needed to be explored that could reflect

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods), Les Presses du Réel, Dijon, 2002, p. 113. Originally published in French as Nicholas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon, 1998.

A CRITICAL GLOSSARY OF SPACE AND SCULPTURE
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- 2 Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International*, October 25, 1962, pp. 30-2, quoted in Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, no. 5 (June 1967), pp. 12-23.
- 3 Robert Rauschenberg, "Untitled Statement" (1959), in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents in Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, p. 321.
- 4 Jean Dubuffet, "Notes for the Well-Lettered" (1946), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Blackwell Publishing, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, pp. 590-593.
- 5 Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910), W.W. Norton & Co., New York and London, 1961, pp. 26, 99. Freud clarified later in the text, "Artistic talent and capacity are intimately connected with sublimation."
- 6 Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci*, p. 99. Freud continues, "We are obliged to look for the source of the tendency to repression and the capacity for sublimation in the organic foundations of character on which the mental structure is only afterwards erected."
- 7 Tony Smith, "Talking with Tony Smith: Conversations with Samuel Wagstaff, Jr." (1966), in Stiles and Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents*, p. 128.
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- 12 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," pp. 12-23.
- 13 Josef Albers, "Truthfulness in Art," from a talk given at Harvard Graduate School of Design, ca. 1937-38, p.7, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.
- 14 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," *Artforum*, no. 4 (February 1966), pp. 42-44; "Notes on Sculpture, Part II," *Artforum*, no. 5 (October 1966), pp. 20-23; "Notes on Sculpture, Part III," *Artforum*, no. 5 (June 1967), pp. 24-29; and "Notes on Sculpture, Part IV," *Artforum*, no. 7 (April 1969), pp. 50-54. Reprinted in *Robert Morris, Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, pp. 1-94.
- 15 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," pp. 12-23.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, p. 460. Originally written 1927-40 and published as *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1982.