

Language Between Performance and Photography

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Efforts to theorize the emergence of what can properly be called Conceptual art have struggled to determine the movement's relationship to the linguistic, poetic, and performative practices associated with the prior moment of Happenings and Fluxus. More is at stake here than historicist questions of influence or precedents. The tendency to take at face value various claims—about the Conceptualist suppression of the object in favor of analytic statements or “information”—obscures what may be some of the most important accomplishments of this work.

To understand how the use of language in Conceptual art emerges from, and also breaks with, a more object-based notion of process and an overtly performance-based model of spectatorial interaction, we must understand it in a crucial historical context: the larger shift from the perception-oriented and “participatory” post-Cagean paradigms of the early 1960s to the overtly representational, systematized, and self-reflexive structures of Conceptual art. Although there is a tendency to see language as something like the “signature style” of overtly Conceptual work, it is important to remember that the turn to language as an artistic material occurs earlier, with the profusion of text-based scores, instructions, and performance notations that surround the context of Happenings and Fluxus. Only in so doing can we understand what is distinct about the emergence of a more explicit and self-consciously “Conceptual” use of language, one which will employ it as both iterative structure and representational medium. This turn to language, I will argue, occurs alongside a pervasive logic structuring 1960s artistic production, in which a “general” template or idea generates multiple “specific” realizations, which can take the form of performed acts, sculptural objects, photographic documents, or linguistic statements. This logic, though embedded in the early “event scores” of artists like George Brecht, Yoko Ono, and La Monte Young, only comes to the fore in the later 1960s work of Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, On Kawara, and other artists, whose readings of the “linguistic” underpinnings of Minimalist art allows them to comprehend the potential equivalence of different forms of signifiers—object, photograph, text—which can be subjected to analogous operations of reduction, placement, replacement, and iteration.

In what follows, I would like to propose one trajectory through this art, in which uses of language vector toward the conditions of “photography,” on the one hand, or toward the conditions of “performance,” on the other—not that these are clearly separable, as we will see. To map this out, I will compare two very different projects—Brecht’s *Three Chair Events* (1961) and Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* (1965–66). The first is a relatively little-known work associated with the moment of Happenings and (proto-)Fluxus, the second a canonical and much-reproduced landmark of early Conceptual art. Both could be said to *explore the relationship between language and the object by playing it off a third term*—in Brecht’s case, performance, in Kosuth’s, photography. Not only will comparing these two artists destabilize movement-based approaches, but it will cause the terms “performance” and “photography” to become unstable in unexpected ways.

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Best known through his affiliation with the Fluxus “group,” Brecht was active in New York’s downtown art scene since the late-1950s, when he attended John Cage’s class in “Experimental Composition” at the New School (along with Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Al Hansen, Jackson Mac Low and Toshi Ichiyangi). Inspired by works such as Cage’s legendary 1952 “silent” composition *4’33”*, Brecht pursued a focus on the spontaneous unfolding of everyday events, a heightened perceptual attention that would open diverse phenomena—performances, but also objects and installations—to different kinds of participation and potential interaction. While still in Cage’s class, Brecht began making “rearrangeable assemblages” which later served as prototypes for the endless editions of FluxBoxes, kits, and games. Most consisted of cabinets or cases of small everyday objects—such as blocks, cards, bells, and balls that could be picked up and played with—introducing the various tactile, auditory, and ludic dimensions characteristic of Fluxus object production.

Brecht also produced a number of more prosaic table and chair pieces that point more toward something like Minimalism. In the fall 1961 exhibit *Environments, Situations, and Spaces* at the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, Brecht presented one of his ongoing series of chair “events.” In a 1973 interview, Brecht recalled the initial gallery installation:

[Chairs] interest me because they can pass unnoticed: you can’t tell if they’re works of art or not. One day, again in 1960 [*sic*] at Martha Jackson’s, I showed three chairs . . . one black, one white, one yellow. The white one was presented under a spotlight, very theatrically, like a work of art. The black chair was in the bathroom and I have the impression that no one noticed that it was part of the exhibition. But the most beautiful event happened to the yellow chair that was outside on the sidewalk in front of the gallery. When I arrived, there was a very lovely woman wearing a large hat comfortably sitting in the chair and

talking to friends. And do you know who it was? It was Claes Oldenburg's mother.¹

The piece was a realization of Brecht's *Three Chair Events*—one of the many “event scores” that he composed in the early 1960s and circulated in printed form:

THREE CHAIR EVENTS

- Sitting on a black chair
Occurrence
- Yellow Chair
(Occurrence.)
- On (or near) a white chair
Occurrence.
—Spring, 1961

Like other Brecht pieces of the time, *Three Chair Events* could be “realized” both by actually orchestrating it, as Brecht did at Martha Jackson's, but also by simply noticing it taking place in the world, as a kind of perceptual readymade, in keeping with other scores in which simple everyday occurrences—faucets dripping, phones ringing, “exit” and “no smoking” signs—were reframed as “events.” Indeed, the “object” and “performance” modes of Brecht's “events” are so nearly fused—“every object is an event . . . and every event has an object-like quality”—that I may be tendentious in distinguishing them.² But I do so in order to propose an implicit three-part structure internal to Brecht's works and many related proto-Fluxus projects. Such an analysis, conceptually separating dimensions—the temporal performance from the material prop or residue—that are programmatically merged in Brecht's work, is enabled by the very mechanisms of preservation and documentation that convey Brecht's work to the present: museum exhibitions and photography, each of which tends to produce an “original” (the actual chair, the initial gallery staging) that is effaced by the ongoing temporality of the “event.” What are the stakes, the, of comparing it with the elegantly articulated tripartite structure of Kosuth's early *Proto-Investigations*?

Viewed in retrospect, from the perspective of late-sixties Conceptual art, one is struck by the relative *repression* of photography in most proto-Fluxus and Fluxus-related work. Although many early and mid-1960s performances were pho-

1. Brecht in Irmeline Lebeer, “Interview with George Brecht” (1973), in Henry Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire* (Milan: Edizioni Muthipla, 1978), p. 87. Despite Brecht's recollection that the piece occurred in 1960 (when he participated in two group shows at Martha Jackson Gallery), documentation shows that *Three Chair Events* was part of Jackson's exhibition *Environments, Situations and Spaces*, held in fall 1961. An undated page from Brecht's notebook of spring 1961 shows him working out the piece, and available photographs and the score all date the piece to 1961. My thanks to Julia Robinson for her assistance with materials on Brecht's work.

2. Brecht in “An Interview with George Brecht by Michael Nyman” (1976), in Martin, *An Introduction*, p. 106.

tographed—by Peter Moore, Manfred Leve, George Maciunas, and others—photography was rarely systematically employed or addressed by Brecht or other Fluxus artists, who apparently regarded photographs as secondary, documentary records of an experience that was primarily *perceptual* and *temporal*—not representational and static.³ An almost moralistic aversion to the photographic reduction of experience was widespread around Minimalist art as well, as is evident in Carl Andre's comment that "art is a direct experience with something in the world, and photography is just a rumor, a kind of pornography of art."⁴ In a sense, Cagean and Minimalist projects were united by an ambivalence to inscriptive technologies and representational media: despite Cage's use of radio broadcasts and magnetic tape in certain compositions, he famously refused to own phonographic records, which he viewed as falsifications of music, and many of his own performance protocols (such as the orientation to the visual and theatrical, to environmental sound and so forth) focus precisely on those elements which evade sound recording. Despite Hans Namuth's widely circulated 1950 photographs of Pollock painting, or Yves Klein's staged *Leap into the Void* (1960), the artistic investigation of postwar conditions of representational media and "publicity" was gradual, intermittent, and highly resistant. It is this hierarchical relationship, between what Seth Siegelaub referred to as "primary information" and "secondary information," which would be programmatically inverted (and perhaps deconstructed) in Conceptual art.

In 1965, Joseph Kosuth had just moved to New York, and was a twenty-year-old student at the School of the Visual Arts when he made, or at least initially envisioned, several of what were to become foundational works of American Conceptual art. (The dating of some of these early works remains contested, since many were not actually fabricated, or publicly shown, until considerably later.) These early works, such as *One and Three Chairs*, *One and Three Brooms*, and *One and Five Clocks*, combined objects, photographs, and enlarged photostats of dictionary definitions. They were retrospectively titled the *Proto-Investigations* after Kosuth initiated his late-sixties *Investigations*, in which basic properties of art, meaning, intention and reference were systematically probed in procedures drawn from logical positivism and linguistic philosophy—mapping out categories, establishing definitions, diagramming statements and relationships, testing out contexts of use and so forth.

Anne Rorimer describes Kosuth's *Proto-Investigations* as extensions of the

3. This exclusion of photography is by no means total. Robert Watts used photography extensively, and even Brecht used photographic and mechanically reproduced materials in his rearrangeable boxes and objects such as *Blair*. His September 1959 notes contain extensive breakdowns of materials whose "treatment" is "photographic"/"reproductive" ("newspaper, magazine, book, maps . . . play card, signs, stamp pad), "autographic" (i.e., self-writing: crayon, pencil, watercolor, tempera, ink, lacquer, oil paint, typewriter) and "in-itself" (i.e., objects) (George Brecht, *Notebook IV*, September 1959–March, 1960, ed. Hermann Braun [Cologne: Walther König, 1998], pp. 11, 25). Yet Brecht's sustained interest in printed materials, and his subsequent reconceptualization of his boxes as "pages" of the ongoing *Book of the Tumbler on Fire* project suggest that he would fundamentally try to align photographs to the (three-dimensional, tactile, interactive) space of the object rather than vice versa.

4. Carl Andre, interview by Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche* 1 (Fall 1970), p. 24.

readymade principle, in which functional, everyday objects are situated within a tripartite system:

Having been extracted from the ‘real’ world of use and re-placed to function within the world of art, the objects re-present themselves. Kosuth thereby represented the idea of representation per se through photographic and/or linguistic means. As the combination of three equal parts, a photograph, an object, and a text, these works are statements of fact, not simply about external reality, but about the means to represent it.⁵

In his extended essay on Conceptual art, Benjamin Buchloh argues that Kosuth’s three-part structure systematizes the “tripartite division of the aesthetic signifier—its separation into object, linguistic sign, and photographic reproduction”—found in earlier works like Robert Morris’s *I-Box* (1962), which presents a grinning nude photo of the artist behind a door shaped like the letter “I.”⁶ While any number of previous assemblage-based projects collocated language, object, and photograph within a single work (for instance, Joseph Cornell’s boxes and Robert Rauschenberg’s combines), the pared-down, unified forms of Morris and Kosuth structurally *equate* these terms. In *One and Three Chairs* the object “re-presents” itself—it functions photographically, positioning them as comparable or substitutable, as a sign pointing to itself, as well as quasi-linguistically, offering something like the statement, “this is a chair, presented as art.” Despite Kosuth’s tight calibration, the three terms are *not* exact equivalents: what makes the tripartite structure compelling is the simultaneous *redundancy* and *divergence* among its different “messages.”

A recent overview of Conceptual art describes Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* as an example of documentation, where the “real” work is the concept—“What is a chair?” “How do we represent a chair?” And hence “What is art?” and “What is representation?” It seems a tautology: a chair is a chair is a chair, much as he claimed that “art is art is art” was tautologous. The three elements that we can actually see . . . are ancillary to it.⁷

This account, I think, is exactly how the piece is conventionally understood: as a collection of three states or examples of the “chair,” which causes the viewer to reflect on the conditions of representation of this or any object, and on art in general. This ascending spiral of abstraction is, of course, what is authorized in by Kosuth’s own statements on his work, as well as the subsequent trajectory of his work, in which the object would be eliminated altogether, in favor of first the photograph, then the

5. Anne Rorimer, “Joseph Kosuth,” in *Reconsidering the Object of Art* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 150.

6. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From an Aesthetic of Administration to a Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990), p. 117.

7. Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 10.

photographically reproduced text.⁸ Yet one could read works like Marcel Broodthaers's witty and rather nasty "museum fictions"—particularly the *Musée d'art moderne, département des aigles* (1972), with its ragtag assortment of every manner of eagle insignia, object, figurine, photograph, and image, which were accompanied by numerous labels reading "fig. 1" and "This is not a work of art"—as a very different excavation of the implications of Kosuth's *Proto-Investigations*, one which systematically probes and proliferates the semiotic instabilities that Kosuth's "idea" attempts to reign in.

In a 1969 self-interview, Kosuth described his turn away from working with objects and materials as a result of the inherent difficulty of controlling their meanings and reception: "the separation between one's own ideas and one's use of materials . . . becomes almost uncommunicatively wide when confronted by a viewer. I wanted to eliminate that gap."⁹ Noting that "there is always something hopelessly real about materials," which prevents them from functioning as bearers of abstract ideas, Kosuth described his adoption of language as a more effective means of transmitting a kind of "art information" that could be increasingly detached from any concrete, material condition:

It was the feeling I had about the gap between materials and ideas that led me to present a series of photostats of the dictionary definitions of water. I was interested in just presenting the *idea* of water. I had used actual water earlier because I liked its colorless, formless quality. I didn't consider the photostat as a work of art; only the idea was art. The words in the definition supplied the *art information*; just as the shape and color of a work could be considered its art information. . . . In this series, I went from presenting an abstraction of a particular (water, air) to abstractions of abstractions (meaning, empty, universal, nothing, time).¹⁰

In this peculiar process of reduction, first a basic material ("water") and then a linguistic abstraction ("meaning") is pared down to its "idea," as represented by a dictionary definition—a format that inevitably (and fundamentally inadequately) defines it in relation to other words, in an unending circuit of references which the photostat conveniently crops and "stills." Just as Rosalind Krauss insisted on the

8. In subsequent projects through the mid-1970s, Kosuth almost exclusively pursued the linguistic, dictionary (and later thesaurus) material: the enlarged photostats of *Art as Art as Idea* became a kind of signature material for the artist, before he abandoned them in the early 1970s for fear that they had simply turned into another form of "paintings." In addition, Kosuth's reputation would increasingly rest on his polemical and theoretical writings, such as the highly influential "Art After Philosophy," published in three parts in *Studio International* in 1969. While it may be problematic to attempt to separate Kosuth's art production from his critical writings—given the very nature of his project interrogating the status and definition of art—it is surprising to what extent Kosuth's writings have not only directed the reading of his "art" works, but completely overshadowed them: critical accounts of his work usually focus on the texts, and actual readings of individual pieces or projects are rare.

9. Joseph Kosuth, interview by Arthur R. Rose, "Four Interviews," *Arts Magazine* (February 1969), p. 23.

10. *Ibid.*

immense *irrationality* of Sol LeWitt's *Incomplete Open Cubes*, with their implacable demonstration of every single instance of a permutational model, Kosuth's seemingly invincible logic of ever-increasing abstraction begs the question of just what kind of materiality is being abandoned, and why.¹¹ It is tempting to decry this logic for its repression of the very historicity and semiotic materiality of language, as in Mel Bochner's famous 1970 piece, *Language Is Not Transparent*, which perhaps all-too-easily reads as a rejoinder to Kosuth, his former student. Indeed, Kosuth's work would seem to serve as the template for the kind of Conceptual art that aims, in Buchloh's terms, "to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone."¹² Yet the very interest of such efforts—by , Robert Barry, Adrian Piper, LeWitt, or Kosuth—is their inevitable failure: to rephrase Hollis Frampton, language is not a substitute for anything.¹³

For all its powerful referential dimensions and its capacity to indicate and describe objects and experiences, language structurally entails certain gaps, between "word" and "thing," between "meaning" and "intention," which cannot be eliminated in even the most precise communicative act or philosophical proposition. What Kosuth termed "the gap between materials and ideas" persists in language as well—despite his dogged determination to subject linguistic categories to the operations of a "perceptual positivism" analogous to the "systematic reduction and empirical validation of the perceptual data of a visual structure" that has characterized abstract painting from Piet Mondrian to Ad Reinhardt.¹⁴ As Michel Foucault proposed in *The Order of Things* (1966), the search for purely formal languages of logic "transparent to the forms of knowledge," initiated by Bertrand Russell, is a paradoxical result of the nineteenth-century attention to phonology and the specific historicity and material density of languages; both represent the "fragmented condition of language in modernity, no longer identical to the objects it represents, after the break-up of classical forms of knowledge."¹⁵

Rather than taking Kosuth's famed tautologies at face value, however, we can instead read the three-part structure of *One and Three Chairs* as diagramming the structural specificity of each element—language, object, and photographic inscription—in their radical incommensurability, and as providing terms that permit us to better assess how the use of linguistic materials shifts from performance-based or "performative" modes to explicitly "photographic" models. Despite the enormous differences in their tripartite structures, *both* Brecht and Kosuth implicitly privilege language over the material concreteness and variability of the other terms. Although Kosuth, like most Conceptualists, appears to dismiss

11. Rosalind Krauss, "LeWitt in Progress," in her *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

12. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," p. 107.

13. Frampton's celebrated remark (from his published dialogues with Carl Andre) that "photography is not a substitute for anything" was later recited and reused in a project by Sherrie Levine and Louise Lawler.

14. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," p. 111.

15. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966; New York: Random House, 1970), p. 299.

any relationship between his work and that associated with Fluxus, making it pointless to speculate about influence, the shifts between the two pieces manifest a crucial series of transformations that occur in 1960s art: from the heightened perceptual attention to phenomena and participatory models of post-Cagean projects to the systematic and self-reflexive investigation of representational media characteristic of self-consciously Conceptual engagements. Brecht's model is explicitly *temporal*: the pieces are "events," not timeless ideas, concepts, or definitions. Drawing on the modern scientific understanding of matter as energy, Brecht's scores shift seemingly inert objects into a context of process, duration, or imperceptible change—as in *Three Aqueous Events* (1961), which reads simply "• ice/• water/• steam."¹⁶ And Brecht's increasingly pared-down texts emphasize the implicitly performative, event-like nature of language, as well as the temporal, event-like structure of materials. Yet as we look closer, the apparent dichotomy between "performative" and "photographic" modes becomes complicated

For Brecht, the printed score retains the identity of the piece across any number of ephemeral realizations which may be "performed" by others, somewhat analogously to the way that a musical score retains its identity across unlimited performances—except that, in many of Brecht's works, the ongoing perceptual experience *precedes* the writing of the events, which provide a kind of linguistic frame that directs attention to preexisting phenomena. Thus the event "score" unexpectedly aligns with the operation of the index, the gathering of a sample from an underlying continuum—functioning much like "the way the word *this* accompanied by a pointing gesture isolates a piece of the real world and fills itself up with meaning by becoming, for that moment, the transitory label of a natural event."¹⁷ Brecht's extension of the Duchampian readymade model to include not only objects but also temporal and perceptual phenomena derives from Cage's aesthetics of "indifference," in which meaning is constructed by the listener or receiver, not the artist or "author." From the outset, Brecht's realizations emphasized the near imperceptibility of the objectively staged "events"—a quality Donald Judd picked up on when he compared the "extreme understatement" of Brecht's sculptural pieces to Robert Morris's early plywood constructions in their ordinariness, antihierarchical attitude, and near nonpresence as art. Yet Judd carefully differentiates between the deliberateness of Morris's sculptures—"made on purpose, not found, to be minimal, unimportant, relatively unordered objects"¹⁸—and the readymade structure of works like Brecht's, which extend "the

16. Despite the counterexample of *Three Aqueous Events*, modeled on the three distinct physical states of an element, Brecht's predilection for three-part structures appears more *aesthetic* than *structural*—there is no internal reason for there to be three chairs, three gaps events, three light events, etc. Like Yvonne Rainer's *Three Satie Spoons*, these are probably modeled on Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913), or the three movements of Cage's *4'33"*. Yet as Judith Rodenbeck notes, "Three makes a system, where two only makes an opposition" (Rodenbeck, "Re: Language," E-mail to the author, March 18, 2001).

17. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes of the Index, Part II," (1977), *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 216.

18. Donald Judd, "Robert Morris" (New York: Green Gallery, February 1965), reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 165.

importance of art . . . to everything, most of which is slight, ordinary and unconsidered.”¹⁹

If Brecht is programmatically unable to recognize the extent to which the indexicality of the “events” structurally aligns them with the photograph, Kosuth’s *Proto-Investigations* rest on an unacknowledged relation to something like “performance.” Kosuth himself is continually at pains to elaborate that “only the idea was art,” not any of the temporary physical manifestations: “The idea with the photo-stats was that they could be thrown away and then re-made—if need be—as part of an irrelevant procedure connected with the form of presentation, but not with the ‘art.’”²⁰ These particular materials are merely *specific presentations*—he later uses the term “props”—for a general *idea* that is the work. To the extent that this idea can be instantiated, it presumably exists in language—although some descriptions approach the pure interiority of mental intention, as in Kosuth’s statement that “all I make are models. The actual works of art are ideas . . . the models are a visual approximation of a particular art object I have in mind.”²¹ And although Kosuth asserts that the published pieces, for instance, may be used however others see fit—“it can be dealt with by being torn out of its publication and inserted into a notebook or stapled to the wall . . . but any such decision is unrelated to the art. My role as the artist ends with the work’s publication”²²—they remain grounded in a model of authorship that Brecht disclaims in his repeated assertions that “any realization is acceptable to me.”

As specific material presentations of a general linguistic “idea,” Kosuth’s Conceptual work structurally resembles certain aspects of Brecht’s “events.” Yet for the *Proto-Investigations* to function they must be “realized” in material form (i.e., constructed and exhibited), since they operate as representational materials in a display context, whereas the “events” can exist in, and as, language alone. For Kosuth, it is precisely through photography that the “performative,” temporal operation enters what is presented as a static, tautological structure: since the photograph documents the actual object in its specific exhibition location, the *Proto-Investigations* have a dimension that is both site-specific and temporally recreated. While the *idea* of *One and Three Chairs* remains fixed, what Kosuth terms the “form of presentation” is remade each time it is shown. A statement from his studio, replying to my questions, elucidates this as follows:

When you say that a piece is largely remade in each site what is actually remade is the “form of presentation.” The reason to have the “form of presentation” remade at each site is so that the chair (or photograph, table, or other objects used in this series) can be photographed in the

19. Donald Judd, “Nationwide Reports: Hartford” (March 1964), in Judd, *Complete Writings*, p. 118.

20. Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy” (1969), in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966–1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 31.

21. Kosuth, “Statement” (June 1966), in *Collected Writings*, p. 3.

22. Kosuth in Rose, “Four Interviews,” p. 23.

exact location where it will be installed in the exhibition. This way the specific conditions, i.e., the wall, floor, lighting, etc., will be correctly incorporated into the photographic component. The date of the “form of presentation” is immaterial because the certificate is the constant.²³

Thus behind Kosuth’s apparent equivalence of object, photography, and text, there is *another text*: the “production instructions” or drawings which double as a certificate of ownership and are not exhibited. In a 1996 essay, Kosuth explains, “I’ve made it clear that these certificates are never to be exhibited, and they rarely are. The art itself, which is neither the props with which the idea is communicated, nor the signed certificate, is only the *idea* in and of the work.”²⁴ For Kosuth, the general linguistic “statement” that permits specific realizations lies on the boundary between the music score/performance “instruction” and the (mythic) Minimalist model of the fabrication order sent to the factory, or the certificates of ownership that certain Minimalist artists such as Dan Flavin and Judd used to authenticate works that could be reconstructed. A similar ambiguity haunts Sol LeWitt’s instructions for wall drawings. That these very models, of “performance instruction” and “production instruction,” are not fully separable points to the performative and linguistic underpinnings of the Minimalist “specific object”—introducing iterative dimensions which become overtly apparent in the post-Minimalist art of Bruce Nauman or Richard Serra, or the Conceptual art of Lawrence Weiner.

If, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, the breakdown of medium-based practices provides one model of an historical shift from “specific” to “general” forms of art, another logic is at play right alongside it, in which a “*general*” *template or notational system*—be it musical scores, fabrication instructions, architectural diagrams, or schematic representations—*generates “specific” realizations in different contexts*. While I have traced this model from the use of the text as a “score,” the wider duality between “template” and “realization” can be shown to have structured countless 1960s projects—from Graham’s *Schema* (March 1966), which systematically records its production in various publication contexts, to Weiner’s ubiquitous “Statements,” Douglas Huebler’s *Location, Duration, and Variable* “pieces,” and On Kawara’s endless series of postcards, telegraphs, journals, and paintings.

23. Joseph Kosuth New York Studio, fax to the author, November 30, 2000. The memo proceeds to note: “The certificates have instructions as to how to produce the ‘form of presentation’ but the studio usually assists in the fine points of reproducing these for museum and other exhibitions.” A follow-up letter from Kosuth cites a wall label from his recent retrospective at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, produced under his supervision, which declares, “It is the intention of the artist that the photographs be made and remade, so that the object itself takes on *no importance other than as the conveyor of an idea*. That is, as a ‘form of presentation.’ Thus, the perceptual change permits the viewer to continually see the ‘same’ work” (Kosuth, fax to the author, December 14, 2000, p. 1 [italics mine]). Kosuth explains that rephotography is necessary so that “when you look at the object and the photo of it you should see the same thing,” but he then qualifies this: “For a few of them, such as *One and Three Photographs*, it is not necessary.”

24. Joseph Kosuth, “Intention(s)” (1966), reprinted in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 466.

Unlike in photography, with its logic of original and copy, the relationship between a notational system and a realization is not one of representation or reproduction but of *specification*: the template, schema or score is usually not considered the locus of the “work,” but merely a tool to produce it; and while the “work” must conform to certain specifications or configurations, its production necessarily differs in each realization.²⁵ As we can see in projects like Ed Ruscha’s *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963), Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, and Huebler’s *Variable Pieces*, such notational systems dislocate photography from the *reproductive logic* of original and copy to reposition it as a *recording mechanism* for specific realizations of general schemas. If photography as a means of documentation is so ubiquitous in late-1960s art, this is not simply due to the proliferation of Earthworks, Conceptual practices, site-specific projects, and ephemeral realizations, but is a result of the fact that the “work of art” has been reconfigured as a specific realization of a general proposition.²⁶

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By 1960, an already quite developed program of participatory and interactive aesthetics could be found—in certain of Jasper Johns’s and Rauschenberg’s constructions, Brecht’s assemblages, Kaprow’s happenings and environments, and any number of other related neo-Dada projects. But these earlier, more utopian efforts to dismantle the conventionality of art through direct, participatory interaction did not yet “comprehend” the kind of structural equivalence among object, language, photograph, and *self* found condensed in Morris’s *I-Box*. It is no historical accident that self-consciously Conceptual and linguistically oriented art emerged from prolonged engagements with *Minimalism*, rather than directly from Cagean or neo-Dada practices.²⁷ Perhaps more than its situational or perceiver-

25. In this context, we can better understand Seth Siegelau’s early-1970s advocacy of an organization like ASCAP that would collect royalties for artists whenever their work was shown—since he understands art to operate analogously to the commercial performance or recording of music.

26. Thus the endless complaints by more traditionally oriented critics—that the “work of art” is no longer fully available to immediate sensuous perception, that we must read the score or understand the “concept” or compositional procedures to appreciate a work—is not that the work becomes merely an “idea” or intellectual exercise, but that the “work” itself is reduced to a plan and its realization, even in projects like abstract painting, which explicitly disavow this serial logic of production. The fact that there may be only one instantiation—as in architecture—does not mean that this “plan” or “template” is not present. The programmatic dismissal of the material realizations of a work by many Conceptual artists reverses this culturally normative expectation of sensuous plenitude. Regarding projects by Huebler and other artists, Siegelau describes the photographs and other aspects of the material realization as completely inessential: “Because all this is a record of the work of art, which is right behind it, in a way. It’s not the work of art” (“Seth Siegelau, April 17, 1969,” in Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelau, Smithson, and Weiner* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001] p. 34).

27. As Kosuth and other younger artists were aware, Morris’s plywood constructions—“made on purpose, not found, to be minimal, unimportant, relatively unordered objects”—function like a linguistic proposition, or an “idea,” realized in specific but replaceable material forms. These “conceptual” or “lin-

centered aesthetics, the systematic structures and repetitive forms of Minimalist sculpture represent a crucial intervention, which allows the conditions of the (industrially produced, repeatable, contextually determined) readymade to be read as a general principle of all experience.²⁸

As subsequent controversies around authentication and re-fabrication have made clear, the inherent reproducibility of Minimalist sculpture implicitly links it to the iterative structure of the post-Cagean “event,” introducing “linguistic” dimensions on several levels: (1) the works are composed of separable units, rearranged and manipulated analogously to linguistic units like words or letters; (2) the work is repeatable, just as a statement is recreated in each specific utterance; (3) the works acquire their meaning contextually, in relation to site and viewer, the way a linguistic statement accrues meaning in specific use; (4) the work operates within a set of artistic conventions in relation to which it forms a kind of statement about art; and (5) the works also exist as fabrication instructions, which are analogous blueprints, drawings, and/or diagrams. Conceptual art transfers these iterative principles from industrially-produced objects encountered in the gallery to the mechanically-reproduced images and signs, including language, typically encountered on the page and in the informational context of mass media. Part of the paradox of Weiner’s work comes from his insistence on using language explicitly positioned within a communicative function while nonetheless remaining “sculpture.” He acknowledges this contradiction when he states, “the only thing that interested me was the attempt to deal with the presentation of information by use of materials—paint, canvas, steel, stone, etc.—which had nothing to do with the presentation of information.”²⁹

Within the discourse of Conceptual art, the classic articulation of the “work” as a specific realization of a general proposition is of course Weiner’s 1968 “Statement of Intent,” that declared: “1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built.”³⁰ Yet when Weiner states

linguistic” aspects of Minimalist art were not only apparent to sympathetic younger artists, since it was precisely on such terms that Clement Greenberg protested that “Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper. Yet it would seem that a kind of art nearer the condition of nonart could not be envisaged or ideated at this moment. That, precisely, is the trouble. Minimal Art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough anything else. It remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered” (Greenberg, “Recentness of Sculpture” [1966], in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968] p. 183).

28. In “The Crux of Minimalism,” Hal Foster reads Minimalist sculpture as instituting this general structure of repetition, and as releasing temporal, perceptual, and situational concerns into art. Yet minimal sculpture may ultimately be a fairly odd place to look for a “perceiver-centered” or temporally driven aesthetics—particularly given the more powerful precedents of Cage’s work, or La Monte Young’s extended experiments with loud single tones and durational structures. Minimalism is where these diverse temporal, perceptual, and site-based procedures are reconcondensed *back into the sculptural object*—thus explaining the contradictions in Morris’s account, such as his otherwise peculiar assertion, “That the space of the room becomes of such importance does not mean that an environmental situation is being created” (“Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (October 1966), p. 22).

29. Weiner in Lynn Gumpert, “Interview with Lawrence Weiner,” in *Early Work* (New York: New Museum, 1982), p. 47.

30. Lawrence Weiner, in *January 5–31, 1969* (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1969), n.p.

that “the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the condition of receivership,” he adopts the terms of postwar media theory—a communicative model which, though aimed at securing the faithful transmission of information, effectively displaces the locus of meaning of an utterance from the private intention of an author (or “source”) to the public context of channels of transmission and reception. As Dieter Schwarz has argued, Weiner’s tersely worded protocol

defines a structure, and within it, the positions of the artist, the work, and the recipient. The construction of a work is not contingent upon the person of the artist; it is a function of reception. *The statement of intent is the logical consequence of insight into the linguistic form of artistic production.* If the work is to function linguistically, then every executed piece acquires the passing significance of a specific context that embraces both artist and user.³¹

Weiner insists, in a 1971 interview, that “the work itself is information.” He goes on to say, “It would be a fascist gesture on my part if I were to say, you can accept things only on a verbal information level (type on the page). . . . If the information is conveyed, then the piece exists. And it doesn’t matter if it’s physically conveyed or whether it’s conveyed verbally or orally.”³² Thus, like Kosuth, the “information” of a piece is understood as something that can be abstracted from any individual manifestation. However, while Kosuth’s concern is to extricate his production from any specific, “morphological” definition of art (e.g., the aesthetic formalisms of Greenberg, Michael Fried, et al.) Weiner targets the underlying structures of meaning production:

Anyone who imposes a unique condition for receivership, for interpretation, for seeing a work, is placing art within a context that is almost nineteenth century. There is the specific, unique, emotional object

31. Dieter Schwarz, “Learn to Read Art: Lawrence Weiner’s Books,” in *Lawrence Weiner, Books 1968-1989: Catalogue Raisonné* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung, 1989), p. 142. As Weiner insists, for this dynamic to work, his sculptures must be realizable in order to function: “If they were not possible to be built, they would negate the choice of the receiver as to whether to build them or not” (Weiner, statement for *Prospect ’69*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf).

32. “Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam,” *Avalanche 4* (Spring 1972), p. 66. Weiner appears to equivocate greatly about the formalization required by ownership, declaring: “There is never a document that passes that’s signed. Quite often, I’ll give a piece of paper with the piece written on it, but that’s just, you know, my own little quirk in case they forget the exact wording. But it’s never signed. It’s only got my name in block letters, which is the assumption of responsibility, or it’s on a typed piece of paper. . . . The only record that someone owns the piece is filed with a lawyer on a typewritten sheet.” (“Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969,” in *Recording Conceptual Art*, p. 102). And he consistently poses purchase of his work as a moral commitment rather than a commercial transaction: “What I’m doing is setting up a situation where any way that the piece is built is alright. . . . If you were to purchase it, all you would be doing would be to accept responsibility for my product, which is a moral commitment, rather than a narrowly aesthetic commitment” (“Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam,” p. 69). He even likens it to signing a petition: “The fact of buying one of my works is comparable to a signature at the bottom of a petition and is, in this sense, to accept responsibility that the conclusions . . . are correct” (Weiner in Michel Claura, “Interview with Lawrence Weiner,” *VH-101*, no. 5 [Paris: Spring, 1971], p. 65).

produced by a prophet, produced by the only person who can make this. . . . Aesthetically, it is not viable in 1971 . . . to have a prophetic object which insists that its uniqueness constitutes its artness.³³

As Buchloh notes, Weiner “detached sculpture from the mythical promise of providing access to pure phenomenological space and primary matter by insisting on the universal common availability of language as the truly contemporary medium of simultaneous collective reception.”³⁴ By adopting as his form “an abstract formulation that allows unlimited realizations,” Weiner opens his practice up to temporality, contextuality, and the constant possibility of reinterpretation frequently foreclosed in versions of Conceptual art that pursued the linguistic certainty of an entirely self-enclosed, self-defined system.³⁵ In so doing, Weiner implicitly draws on the Cagean principles of “indeterminacy” that animate Brecht’s work and other performance practices. Schwarz links Weiner’s work to the interactive modes that emerged around Cage, arguing that “Weiner’s statement of intent is aligned with the development of reception-oriented artistic practices, exemplified in the U.S. by the rise of the Happening in the late fifties.”³⁶

Legend has it that Weiner articulated this model after a 1968 exhibition at Windham College, Putney, Vermont, in which his project, an outdoor installation of posts and strings, was destroyed—a situation which led him to decide that the “work” still existed as a basic structure or idea, regardless of its material state. In his book *Statements* (1968), Weiner lists a series of short past-participle phrases describing possible uses of materials, many of which he had previously constructed; examples include *One quart exterior green enamel thrown on a brick wall*, *One aerosol can of enamel sprayed to conclusion directly upon the floor*, *One standard dye marker thrown into the sea*, *A field cratered by structured simultaneous TNT explosions* and *A removal to the lathing or support wall of plaster or wall board from a wall*.³⁷ A later example, *The residue of a flare ignited upon a boundary*, was realized on the Amsterdam city boundary for the 1969 exhibition *Op Losse Schroeven*. Language thus permitted Weiner to create work that could retain its identity across multiple manifestations and which was not subject to the uniqueness of the traditional art object, whether painting or sculpture. Weiner’s transition from the Minimalist “specific object” to linguistic representation is similar to both the “event score” and Kosuth’s “ideas.” Yet Weiner’s works are also “sculptures” (since 1972, each piece is described as “language + the materials referred to”). They have a basis in the procedural use of materials, in doing things with objects, that links them to post-Minimalist art.

As Kosuth has argued, Weiner’s work with materials around 1967–68 potentially allied him with post-Minimalist artists like Serra, Nauman, or Barry LeVa.³⁸

33. “Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam,” p. 70.

34. “Benjamin Buchloh in conversation with Lawrence Weiner,” *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 19.

35. Schwarz, “Learn to Read Art,” p. 131.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

37. Lawrence Weiner, *Statements* (New York: Seth Siegelbaum/The Louis Kellner Foundation, 1968), n.p.

38. Kosuth even suggests that Weiner’s early “process” pieces were a direct influence on Serra’s

While Weiner would publicly deny any relation to “anti-form” works—“they are primarily concerned with making objects for display—which has nothing to do with the intent of my work”—certain affinities between his early “Statements” and Serra’s *Verb List* (1967–68) suggest how Weiner’s linguistically “performative” model emerged from, and broke with, a more object-based notion of process.³⁹ Serra’s handwritten list of more than one hundred procedures are mostly written as infinitive verbs: “to roll, to crease, to fold, to store, to bend, to shorten, to twist. . . .”⁴⁰ First published in *Avalanche* in 1971, they inevitably call to mind the fifty isolated verbs, presented in the past participle, that Weiner published in his *Traces* (1970): “ignited, fermented, displaced, transferred, breached, painted, smudged, flushed. . . .”⁴¹ Both artists would construct pieces that involved these material, sculptural processes—except that for Weiner, the abstract formulation, in its continual openness to rearticulation, takes precedence over the realization, however transitory or compelling.⁴²

In a 1977 interview, Serra described writing down the verb list “as a way of applying various activities to unspecified materials. . . . The language structured my activities in relation to materials which had the same function as transitive verbs.”⁴³ Serra relates these sculptural procedures to *drawing*, because in both methods the expressive dimension “results from the act of doing”; he elaborates, “The making of the form itself, whether lead rolls or poles for the *Prop Pieces*, was implied . . . within the physical transformation of material from one state to another.”⁴⁴ For Serra, this emphasis on the not-fully-foreseeable results of physical procedures linked his project to his friend Robert Smithson’s interests in site and entropy; both artists explored beyond the “closed systems” of Minimalist art which, in their view, left “no room for anything that could not substantiate a general proposition.”⁴⁵

Unlike Kosuth’s efforts to control signification, to “fix” ideas in dictionary definitions and self-enclosed, self-referential systems, Weiner’s “statements” pro-

work, recounting: “I suppose that his [Weiner’s] desire to lean toward conceptualization and lean away from materialization had in part to do with his failure to get the recognition he deserved for the ‘process’ or ‘anti-form’ pieces. (Robert Morris has since told me that Weiner wasn’t included in those shows because he felt Weiner’s work was ‘too pretentious and gestural’; although I took Morris to Weiner’s studio as early as November of 1968, and Richard Serra’s liquid lead pieces came out of Morris’s transfer of that information)” (Kosuth in “Influences: The Difference Between ‘How’ and ‘Why’” [1970], *Collected Writings*, p. 81).

39. Weiner in Rose, “Four Interviews,” p. 23.

40. Richard Serra, “Verb List Compilation, 1967–68,” *Avalanche 2* (Winter 1971), p. 20.

41. Lawrence Weiner, *Tracce/Traces* (Torino: Sperone editore, 1970).

42. While Weiner often dismisses the photographic documentation of his works—whether in early sculptural enactments or in a wide range of installation and publication formats—the collection of such images in catalogs like *Lawrence Weiner (Obras): En La Corriente/In The Stream* (Valencia: IVAM, 1995) nonetheless offers an important view of Weiner’s work as it functions in diverse settings and contexts.

43. Richard Serra, “About Drawing” (1977), in *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970–1980* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Hudson River Museum, 1980), p. 77.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Richard Serra, “Interview by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel” (1980), in *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970–1980*, p. 135.

grammatically accept the inherent “abstraction” of language, the relative instability of reference, and the capacity of utterances to “signify” differently in each act of enunciation. Paradoxically, Weiner relies upon reduction, since it is the most minimal structures that permit the most diverse uses or realizations: “broken off,” “to the sea,” “over and under,” “over and over. . . .” As Schwarz notes, “If a piece functions linguistically, each performance will draw its momentary significance from a specific context. The more abstract a piece, the greater its potential to reach beyond the present.”⁴⁶ It is this openness to the unanticipated, to the uncontrollable effects of time, such as erosion and decay, that links Weiner’s work to post-Minimalist artists like Smithson, Serra and Nauman—and that marks the reemergence of Cagean models in the visual art of the late 1960s. In this reengagement with temporal and perceptual phenomena, a wide range of “conceptually oriented” artists would situate their explorations of process at least partly within the space of representational media—whether in Smithson’s photographic “non-sites,” Serra’s films, or the videotaped performances of Vito Acconci, Nauman, Weiner, and many others.⁴⁷ This “performative” mode returns with a difference—no longer the unique “live” performance, it reemerges marked by the properties of reproductive media, structurally subject to inscription, iteration, and repetition.

46. Dieter Schwarz, “Moved Pictures: Film & Videos of Lawrence Weiner,” in *Show & Tell: The Films & Video of Lawrence Weiner, A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Bartomeu Mari (Gent: Imschoot, Uitgevers, 1992), p. 96.

47. Serra’s video *Television Delivers People* (1973) is his only independent “word piece,” composed entirely of language. The political analysis it offers, of individual viewers as the unwitting commercial “product” of mass-communications media, disallows any meaningful interface between artistic processes and the telecommunications industry—perhaps marking the end of the sixties-era “media optimism” that propelled Conceptual artists to engage with mass-media forms and techniques.