

NEXT TO NOTHING

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Donald Judd wrote in 1965 that sculpture was faced with a choice. By that time much work that, in fact, drew its rationale from questions about what painting could be, had begun to take three-dimensional form. And if painting, hitherto confined within two dimensions, had started to encroach upon sculpture's territory, how was the latter to maintain its separate identity? It could, suggested Judd, either repeat itself – in which case, familiarity would enable us to recognise and distinguish it from everything else that happened to be three-dimensional – or it could change and become something else.¹ Whichever path it chose, sculpture, as the thing it had been up to that point, was finished. For sure, the word sculpture still has the air of solidity about it. All that bronze and marble, wood and welded steel; what could be more substantial, more real in an absolutely present, toe-stubbing way? But even as we think of wood, bronze, marble and steel, we know that things are not necessarily quite like that any more. Those substances are still around to be picked up and dealt with if desired, but they have long ceased to be, in and of themselves, the bearers of artistic authenticity. Too many photographs, too many DVD and video installations, too many long walks, too many piles of earth and knocked-about buildings, too much plastic, and too many shop-bought objects have been thrown into the game for the status quo ante to be restored. In the forty-odd years since Judd wrote of sculpture's choice, art makers have colonised all and every possible means by which to realise, construct, propose, intimate, or hint at an art work, or in any other way to engender an experience that a viewer might classify as aesthetic. But this corralling of ideas, words, photographs, walks, smells, computer programmes and everything else besides to legitimate art practice is only the latter stage of a much longer process of ostensible dissolution.

Time and again over a period stretching back to before the First World War we have heard and read that our efforts to comprehend the world, to hold it represented in its fullness in front of our eyes, have led us to increasingly attenuated results. And is it surprising? Here is just one example. The Austrian poet Georg Trakl enlisted at the start of World War I and was sent to Galicia on the Eastern Front. As a trained pharmacist he was put in charge of a field hospital containing scores of wounded and dying men. With little or no available medication to alleviate their condition, and distraught at their suffering, he attempted to shoot himself. Sent to a psychiatric hospital in Krakow, he was visited there by his friend Ludwig von Ficker. 'Would you like to hear what I wrote on the battlefield?' Trakl asked, showing him one of his last poems, *Grodek*. 'Es ist blutwenig', it is next to nothing.² Trakl's 'next to nothing' is an admission of inadequacy. Art seemed to have lost its capacity to act as a monument, to provide a focus for communal remembrance as a means to reconfirming shared values.

What does it mean to talk of the death of the monument? The idea is widespread and well established now. The idea, that is, that social circumstances militate against the making of such things. No universally shared sense of community; no universally shared understanding of history; no universally shared set of moral values. In other words, no common ownership of the very things that allow monuments to function as such. No widespread subscription to a system of habits and beliefs within which we are able to orient our lives. And, consequently, no possibility of embodying or representing those habits and beliefs in objects in such a manner that our encounter with those objects might help confirm a sense of who we are and where we stand. This has been a problem for art in general and sculpture in particular, since the two modes in which sculpture has functioned are as monument and as decoration. The waning of the possibility of the monument is symptomatic of both the problematising of the object, ensuring that its meanings and significance are endlessly and irresolvably contentious, and the disordering of relations. It concerns both things and the context within which they are encountered. It is a question both of matter and of space. Rosalind Krauss, in her well-known essay on 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', suggests that 'the waning of sculpture's capacity to act as 'monument' leads ultimately to a loss of 'place' [...] a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place.' This, she goes on, 'is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site.'³

The title of Krauss's essay could be misleading. Borrowed as it is from the concluding sentence of Part II of Robert Morris's 1966, 'Notes on Sculpture' we might suppose that she has transposed, along with the words, the meaning attached to them in that original use. Morris says: 'It is not surprising that some of the new sculpture that avoids varying parts, polychrome, etc., has been called negative, boring, nihilistic. These judgements arise from confronting the work with expectations structured by a Cubist aesthetic in which what is to be had from the work is located strictly within the specific object. The situation is now more complex and expanded'.⁴ In other words, what people had looked for in sculpture was not necessarily to be found in it in the same way any more, but that lack was no reason to disqualify it as sculpture. Cubism, in offering simultaneous perceptions of an object from a variety of positions and viewpoints, attempted a totalised image available to the viewer at each and every instant of viewing. But the work now dubbed Minimal, to which Morris is referring, is the occasion for a viewing experience that exists through time. 'By a more emphatic focusing on the very conditions under which certain kinds of objects are seen,' he says, 'the new work has expanded the terms of sculpture'.⁵ Krauss's essay proposes a theoretical structure in which sculpture is understood as just one among a

- 6 Johanna Burton, 'The Urmaterial Urge' in *Parkett*, no 70, 2004
- 7 Umberto Boccioni et al, 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto' in Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California, Berkeley, 1968, p.290
- 8 Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophy of History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999
- 9 Kasimir Malevich, 'The Non-Objective World' in Chipp, op.cit., p.341
- 10 Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, Architectural Press, London, 1967, p.51

number of approaches to making art in three dimensions. For her it is not that sculpture has changed to accommodate such things as land art, installation, and so on, but that these other practices have grown up alongside it. The context changes, but the object remains the same. The work being made now, at the beginning of the subsequent century, demonstrates that her line of argument no longer holds good. Judd was right; sculpture had to change, and it has done so through its embrace of the conditions that apparently herald its demise.

The words and phrases, then, have been coming with increasing frequency for a century now: abstraction, non-objective art, less is more, concept art, minimalism, conceptualism, dematerialisation, the immaterial. Most recently the art historian Johanna Burton, discussing the work of several artists including Wade Guyton, has suggested that we now start to think in terms of 'Urmateriality'.⁶ The placing of that primal 'ur' as prefix is symptomatic of a widespread need to make sense of the way in which artists nowadays appropriate and manipulate the range of diverse materials at their disposal. The 'ur' is not so much an expression of chronological priority as of semantic openness. Prior to the processes of selection, construction, fashioning, editing, incorporation, juxtaposition, assembly, and so on, involved in the making of work, nothing used can be assumed to enjoy any incontrovertible value as to its physical, historical, cultural, psychological or fictive status. Take a quick, partial glance across the work of Katie Grinnan, Wade Guyton, Christina Mackie, Bojan Šarčević and Hiroshi Sugito. Katie Grinnan uses photographs as sculptural material, or creates the human figure from the hypertrophic repetition of the pattern of an object as mundane as a car's hubcap; Hiroshi Sugito makes paintings and then installs them in such a way as to generate dialogue between the imagery they contain, the spaces they describe, the space they occupy, and their physical presence and inter-relation within that space; Christina Mackie assembles a variety of materials using the surrounding architecture as support, but in such a way as to subvert the physical immediacy of fittings, surface colour, and detailing, casting them as psychical projections of the work's internal narrative. Bojan Šarčević sees in the proliferation of a formal detail within a photograph of a sober, socially responsible, post-war, Bauhaus-inspired interior, the possibility of decorative excess; Wade Guyton prints an X onto a magazine illustration, overlaying an infinitely repeatable computer instruction onto what is itself already a reproduction to make a unique image; and – magazines again – Paul Sietsema reconstructs an interior from a magazine illustration for his film *Empire*. In all these instances it is less that we are uncertain as to whether we are confronted by the physical or the mental, object or image, real or imaginary, than that we accept these dichotomies to be no longer useful as tools with which to build the narrative

of our experience of the works.

The world of solid, enduring things as embodiments of persisting ideals has receded. 'Who can still believe in the opacity of bodies?' asked the Futurists in 1910.⁷ By that time Curie and Röntgen had already given us the X-ray, and Einstein had published the most famous formula in history, showing that mass is a form of energy. Only a few years after that he would suggest in his *Foundations of the General Theory of Relativity* that masses cannot be thought of as existing in uniform space; they warp space-time and move in accordance with the resultant curvature. Kasimir Malevich, in his book *The Non-Objective World*, wrote that 'to the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth'.⁸ It is, then, not just that we were witnessing the demise of the object. The very ground on which it was encountered had also begun to lose its importance. Even were we to manage to fashion something, how could we decide where to place it when any there that we choose is ultimately just another nowhere? Central to the theory of relativity is the acknowledgement that events cannot be described in relation to a fixed external frame of reference. There is no fixed external frame, and the fact that we cannot rely upon any absolute standard of orientation has led to what Edward Casey has identified in *The Fate of Place*, as one of twentieth century's predominant philosophical themes: the active nature and structured quality of space.⁹

Inseparable from this process of effacement in which the landmarks of a familiar cultural landscape were cast into ruin, another process equally destructive of established social relationships was visited upon us; that is, the phenomenon Le Corbusier called the 'hurricane' of industry. It blew upon the world, and 'overturned on us without restraint the miraculous fruits of the first industrial age'.¹⁰ In our visiting and revisiting of Duchamp, we continue to clear up in the wake of this storm. Sculpture, as it loses its capacity to memorialise, to hold the present in coherent relation to the past in such a way as to assist in orienting us towards the future, takes on the form of the commodity. How can any art practice compete against the voracious expansiveness of industrialised production? What territory is left to what used to be thought of as works of sculpture when society provides us with so many things to use and to use up? And what possibility is there of establishing a reflective relationship with them when all object relations are increasingly characterised by patterns of consumption drawn out and reinforced by the market imperative of obsolescence? Robert Smithson, echoing Judd, thought that the traditional categories of art-making – painting, sculpture, architecture – were 'finished'. Things still got made and shown in galleries, but this was more to do with the fact that 'the art habit' had persisted beyond the death of its expressive forms. He famously linked the transient

nature of modern production to the loss of the monument:

Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present. This kind of time has little or no space; it is stationary and without movement, it is going nowhere, it is anti-Newtonian, as well as being instant, and is against the wheels of the time-clock.¹¹

On the heels of the hurricane of industrial commodity production, came the shift from mechanical to electronic to digital forms of organisation and control. With each successive stage in that sequence, it seems, there is a greater degree of separation between thought and matter. This decoupling is given a negative cast by Benjamin Buchloh, who sees the 'heretofore unimagined level of electronic and digital abstraction, giving rise to the mirage of the transformation of matter into mathematical and digital "equivalents"'. Like Krauss, he sees sculpture as therefore relegated to an 'abandoned zone' outside of the territories colonised by over-production and digitisation:

Any spatial relation and material form one might still experience outside the registers of overproduction and electronic digitalisation will now appear as an abandoned zone, a zone of remnant objects and leftover spaces, rather than as elementary givens from which new spatial parameters and object relations could be configured.¹²

But what we see in *Real World* is a number of practices within which the mindset that would wish to make moral distinctions between real and abstracted, or between real and illusory, has little place. How, otherwise, could we make sense of Terry Myers's oxymoronic description of Sugito's paintings with their combination of almost naïve figuration and infinitely modulated surface, or with their stage curtains painted down either edge making a fictive space of a fictive space, as 'strangely tactile hallucinations'?¹³

Attempts to characterise recent sculpture invariably find themselves challenged to overcome what at first sight announces itself as the insurmountable obstacle to continued production: the assertion, courtesy of Lucy Lippard, that what we witnessed in the late 1960s and early

1970s was the 'dematerialisation' of the art object. What price an art of form in space, an art that played on tactile qualities, on surface and structure, on mass, volume, and the inescapability of gravity when whatever it is that we wish to call a work of art has so comprehensively escaped the need to rely on any material substrate within which to find its form? In the preface to her now classic book, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object 1966-72*, Lippard acknowledges that to a certain extent the dematerialisation witnessed not only in Conceptualism, but also in post-Minimalist tendencies such as Process and Land Art, was more apparent than real. We need to recall the childhood riddle – Which is heavier, a pound of lead or a pound of feathers? – and remain aware that a typewritten text on a piece of paper, or a photograph, are no less objects or material presences than lumps of lead or stacks of bricks. Notwithstanding her acceptance that even a photograph or a sheet of typewriter paper enjoys a palpable presence, Lippard stuck with her description: 'For lack of a better term I have continued to refer to a process of dematerialisation, or a de-emphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness).'¹⁴ The term would not have had the startling appeal it did if there were not some element of truth in it. It would not have become embedded in the field of recent art history as one of its few unquestionable fixed points, if it were not seen to offer at least a partial description of what occurred in the art of that period.

But perhaps we should not let the piece of paper or the photograph slip away so easily without examining more closely the extent to which their apparent ephemeral qualities such as impermanence and ease of substitution serve to constitute a reality that is in its own way no less material. The truth of this is amply demonstrated in, for example, Dan Graham's 1966 work *Schema* (fig. 1 overleaf), a table of facts that enumerate the properties of the table itself on its appearance in various magazines. As well as the textual and symbolic features it contained – number of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, participles, number of numbers, number of mathematical symbols, and so on – it also detailed such things as the size of the page, the kind of paper stock and the thickness of the paper, as well as the depth to which the type depressed into the paper surface. In his original note on this work of March 1966, Graham wrote that: 'The work defines itself in place only as information with simply the external support of the facts of its external appearance or presence in print in place of the object'.¹⁵ In that it was conceived not to be hung on the wall of a gallery but to be published in a magazine, its appearances would necessarily be ephemeral and transitory, fated to last only until the release of the next issue. But as Graham stressed, *Schema* and his other magazine works were not Conceptual, if we understand that word to indicate an aesthetic phenomenon restricted to the mind alone: 'They weren't for a hypothetical art

15	adjectives
0	adverbs
96%	area not occupied by type
4%	area occupied by type
2	columns
4	conjunctions
0mm	depression of type into page surface
0	gerunds
0	infinitives
23	letters of alphabet
25	lines
3	mathematical symbols
39	nouns
29	numbers
4	participles
300 x 230 mm	page
Hello matt	paper sheet
170gsm	paper stock
3	prepositions
0	pronouns
9 and 10	size type
Egiziano Classic Bold, Rockwell Light/Italic	typeface
70	words
9	words capitalised
2	words italicised

fig. 1

DAN GRAHAM*Schema (March 1966)*, 1966 (variant 2004)

Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London

'in the mind', they were about the 'physicality' of printed matter'.¹⁶ And he goes on to point out that the unavoidable adjunct to this proposition that an artwork might be generated as the consequence of occupying the site of the magazine page, however calculatedly short-lived that occupation might be, was that we are required to recognise that a reproduction has its own kind of physicality. It is not an effacement of the real object for which it stands as substitute, a sign for or visual approximation of that to which it refers, nor is it, as Roland Barthes says of the photograph, 'pure contingency and nothing else'.¹⁷ Insofar as it is any or all of those things, Graham says that it is so as part of its own (physical) reality. On the face of it *Schema* is self-contained, a closed system. What breaks the purity of this apparent circularity, Graham tells us, is that the work requires interpreting. 'There is a fictional element,' he says. Real and fictional aspects of the work's physicality are not confined to separate realms, but exist together, each feeding and feeding off the other. The fictional, the interpretative element, has real consequences in that it helps 'dismantle Establishment structures'.¹⁸ Such structures are themselves, as Graham insists on pointing out, hidden, and so their revelation contributes further to the erasure of any clear and distinct boundaries that may have been thought to exist between what is visible and real, and what is invisible and imaginary.

Far from being a zone of hesitancy, or of a frantic search for some other criterion of assurance, this is now recognisable as the space of our everyday habitation. A decade and a half ago William Gibson could talk expansively about cyberspace, that space where telephone conversations happen, as something transcendently apart, a place to which our 'meat bodies' could only gain access through McLuhan-esque prosthetic assistance. Nowadays a figure such as the science writer Michael Shermer talks of the body in more realistic terms as 'electric meat', a shift in terminology that more closely identifies the complex infolding of immediate sensory perceptions with imaginative constructs and media projections in our constant formulation and reformulation of spatial awareness.¹⁹ Grinnan's sculptures and installations utilising DVD projection as light, colour as material, photographic image as plastic space, pattern as form, and sound as place, work with an understanding of this multivalent reality, offering an articulation of its modalities and transformational potential. Sietsema talks of a 'landscape of books, images, and histories' out of which the film *Empire* emerged. A mirror-lined French Rococo interior, a metal structure whose form sits half-way between the 1950s Geometry of Fear sculpture of Lynn Chadwick and Reg Butler, and Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes of the 1960s, an organic sculptural form and a stylish 1960s apartment are the objects and scenes painstakingly created for his camera to pore over. Sietsema's choice of the 1964 *Vogue* illustration of critic

Clement Greenberg's New York apartment as one of the film's 'scenes' evokes that same moment of decision that Judd announced for sculpture:

The main reason for using him and this particular time period is that there was a lot of cultural change, you know. The Beatles in music, and the changeover from geometric abstraction to Pop. There was this sort of letting go of the idea of a utopian society Le Corbusier and others had been designing for.²⁰

Greenberg's living room is lined with large abstract paintings of the kind that he was and had been championing, a Barnett Newman, a Kenneth Noland, and a Morris Louis among them. Though a domestic space, the size of the canvases and their regular spacing around the walls of the room fit well with Brian O'Doherty's analysis of the way such art was displayed in galleries. 'Color Field painting,' he wrote in *Inside the White Cube*, 'is the most imperial of modes [...]. The pictures recur as reassuringly as the columns in a classic temple. Each demands enough space so that its effect is over before its neighbor's picks up'. As important as the experience of the viewer in front of the paintings in the gallery, however, is the way in which the entire exhibition looks in the publicity photograph. 'The Color Field installation shot,' says O'Doherty, 'should be recognised as one of the teleological end points of the modern tradition. There is something splendidly luxurious about the way the pictures and the gallery reside in a context that is fully sanctioned socially. We are aware we are witnessing a triumph of high seriousness and hand-tooled production, like a Rolls Royce in a showroom that began as a Cubist jalopy in an outhouse'.²¹

At times throughout the last century, of course, the rhetoric of attenuation was flipped. Less is more, Mies van der Rohe told us, and we see in his buildings – superficially at least – the results of his attempts to realise architecture according to the watchword '*beinahe nichts*', nearly nothing. But we should not let pass the conviction that such a slim phrase, less is more, contains much promise. Notionally, we read it as a statement that if you make do with less in physical terms, you will reap greater rewards on the spiritual level. Think, for instance, of Solomon R. Guggenheim's advisor Hilla Rebay proclaiming in the 1930s of the collection that was destined for Frank Lloyd Wright's museum that 'non-objectivity is the religion of the future'.²² But less is more is also a statement about process. Take Mies's 1950 Farnsworth House, the ultimate in steel and glass construction; a glass box raised above the flood plain of the Fox River, Illinois. Richard Sennett sees the building as 'offering no promise of refuge', and of being formally so pure and refined that any attempts at normal domestic occupation appear as 'obscene'.²³ Sennett's unease is

- 24 Jörg Heiser, 'Dogs in Space' in *frieze*, Nov/Dec 2000, p.93
- 25 Walter Gropius, 'The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus' in *Bauhaus 1919-1928*, Charles Branford (ed.), Boston, 1959, p.22
- 26 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Matter and Time' in *The Inhuman*, Polity, London, 1993, p.45

heightened because of his recognition that the building is nonetheless a 'modern expression of the sublime' by a 'great artist'. It is unease at what Jörg Heiser refers to as 'the dark aftermath of modernity', a darkness that keeps 'desire locked in and the cracks eagerly stuffed'.²⁴ And it is these locks that Bojan Šarčević unpicks, these stuffed cracks that he eases into in order to prise apart the hermetic self-containment of late modernist space. The collages of Šarčević's 1954 break up and reassemble a sequence of images taken from an edition of the German architecture journal, *Baumeister*, from that year. It was the same year in which the Hochschule für Gestaltung, the Design College in Ulm, was nearing completion, a post-war attempt to re-establish Bauhaus principles in design education that would quickly lead to ideologically prescriptive creative stagnation. Šarčević's disruption of the serene coherence of the domestic and public spaces of post-war reconstruction depicted in *Baumeister*, reveals that in its structuring, space is every bit as susceptible to personal, poetic or decorative impulse as to political or ideological imposition. Similarly, the metal and wood sculptures of Guyton's that reference Bauhaus design principles do not do so simply as a model to be either slavishly adhered to or implacably opposed. Gropius's belief that 'through his intuition, through his metaphysical powers, man discovers the immaterial space of inward vision and inspiration,' is too distant from today's sensibility.²⁵ Bauhaus design, just like Dan Graham's Pavilions to which he also alludes, offers a set of terms and references within an overall visual resource for the construction of narratives pertinent to the present moment.

All of which is to say that recourse to the language of disappearance is as much evidence of certain kinds of complexification of materiality as it is an indication of loss. 'If,' according to Jean-François Lyotard, 'it is true that matter is energy and mind is contained vibration,' then we are dealing nowadays with 'an immaterialist materialism.'²⁶ And if the term sculpture has any descriptive purchase nowadays, it does so in respect of art practices which admit the relevance of this truth to any usable understanding of the nature of contemporary space. To maintain that such an admittance acquiesces in a falling away from longed-for certainties is to indulge, as Lyotard reminds us, in human narcissism. We are not the masters of meaning and should not fall prey to the belief that we are either 'an origin or a result.' We are, rather, 'transformers' whose actions ensure 'a supplement of complexity in the universe.'

'And this is a shadow,' says Christina Mackie, running her hand along the band of darker grain running down the centre of a wooden plank. The line of the plank is continued in the tiller of a ferry seen in the DVD image that is projected onto the wall behind her. It's in Canada, and/or maybe not.