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Jessica Stockholder, 'Swiss Cheese Field – And Sculpture Mingled', *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 2009

Swiss Cheese Field—And Sculpture Mingled

JESSICA STOCKHOLDER

What is the field, and what is sculpture?

Rosalind Krauss invented the term *field* in an effort to articulate the wavering outline of sculpture that developed in the wake of Constantin Brancusi's pedestals, themselves objects running off into their locations, even while they served to delineate a line between the object they held aloft apart from the space around them.¹ The minimal works that Krauss points to in her essay—those of Mary Miss, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra—demand that we create a new level of abstraction in our minds in order to understand such works as separate from their locations; at the same time, the term *field* has contributed to an increased appreciation for the particularity of viewing the intersection of each artwork with its place.

I do not know who invented the word *sculpture*. The word has become increasingly difficult to define, and there are now many other words being applied to the activity of filling up the field—*performance*, *installation*, *sound works*, *conceptual gestures*. I would like to hang on to that word *sculpture* and enjoy

Rudolf Stingel, Untitled, 1996–97. Installed at Paula Cooper Gallery, January 15–February 22, 1997. Pink and red wall-to-wall carpeting, dimensions variable according to site

its expanded definition. The words we use in its place are no more meaningful.

The expanding field is both large and small. It can be engaged from the sky, from the edge with one's toe just touching, or from within the tumult of the game taking place on freshly mowed turf. The field is a net, a blanket, and a jungle of tall overgrown grasses.

The field is used to put things (sculpture) in. It is used to describe the picture plane (Color Field painting). It is used as a backdrop, or as a stage for things we make that have no other place to be. It is used as backdrop or stage for actions that need to be bracketed from the flow of life (performance). And it is used as an abstract idea that we share in order to, in mind only, bracket particular moments of life that would otherwise be lost, unremarked upon, in the flow of life.

All of these quite diverse endeavors sitting under the art umbrella, share, as a point of departure, an effort to articulate some particularity that is the result of subjective observation or noticing. This noticing includes observation of the visual, or of how our eyes observe; observation of modes of production and economy, or of conflicts of interest inherent in the economic support structures of exhibition spaces; observation of events; and observation of how viewers absorb art.



Liz Larner, installation view of *Selected Sculpture from the Early 1990s*, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, January 29–February 23, 2008

Sculpture is not the field, but it does not exist without the field. Sometimes the sculpture sits in the field, and we gaze at the sculpture. Sometimes sculpture sits on a pedestal in the field. Sometimes the pedestal is organized so that its job as mediator between the sculpture and the field is what is at issue. At other times, the sculpture's *raison d'être* is to point at the field.

We need the field—an idea, a convention, an abstract place—where we *collectively carve out* and explore the intersection of the real with the symbolic, between the flow of life and the narrative of fiction. It is a place primed for our projection, a place that serves to reify the structures of our experience. The field is actual space in which we look at

and walk around sculptures, and the field is a metaphoric description of the space, in mind and psyche, where the fictive dramas and emotive collages of our being must intersect our capacities and mechanisms for perceiving both the actual time and space and the shared fabrication we exist in. We make sense of this field differently, all of us, from different points of view in our different *fields* of study.

The field is not the frame. The frame, as it functions for painting and photography, superbly negotiates the relationship between the physicality of those images and the rest of the world they participate in. The frame establishes a dike that has been holding for centuries against the force of real life flowing on the other side. Both of these media, however, housed securely inside of their frames, do brush up against the flow of life, each in its own way. Photographs catch light and record events in the lives of real people. And



the skin of the painting can be understood to be fluid with the skin of the wall in the real room of the buildings we stand in. The intensity of meaning in Color Field painting derives from its brush with the reality of the wall that its skin of illusion bleeds into. This brush with the flow of time and life in both painting and photography is, however, quite contained. The frame has persisted in its function as a compelling and firm bracket in contrast to the gaping holes that have been carefully honed in the conventions that bracket sculpture.

The range of what we can imagine on the field has expanded in response to what we know from physics, DNA studies, and chemistry. Our experience of time and space, two essential components of sculpture, has been altered as microwave ovens and cell phones have entered our lives and as entire movies fly through the air to our TV screens and into our living rooms. The space of the

Francis Cape, *453 West 17th Street*, 2001. Installed at Murray Guy, New York, September 8–October 15, 2001. Wood and paint, 8 ft. 8 in. x 22 ft. 8 in. x 17 in. (264.2 x 690.9 x 43.2 cm)

Internet — a very real space in our lives — nevertheless exists only as metaphor.

The white cube exhibition space and the field, full of not-architecture and not-landscape, have created a very exciting playing field with ever-shifting and permeable boundaries. Much of the gaming that takes place here includes the lassoing of small parts of life's flow to posit next to or as part of art. Perhaps religious ritual, football games, playing board games, and displaying good manners at the dinner table do this, too.

The word *sculpture*, now as difficult to define as the undulating field it sits in, encompasses carved lumps of wood and stone, plaster and poured bronze, any material one can

think of perched on a pedestal or set within the white cube or field.

We can add to that any gesture that manipulates the space, mass, volume, void, or solids within the white cube and the field. The word *material* can include light waves, temperature, and sound waves. Johanna Burton describes this elaborated version of sculpture as “Installation.” She defines *installation* as a “work that creates a kind of triadic skin between itself, its viewers, and the space or place in which it . . . situates itself.”² I find the word *installation* now to be as loosely defined as the word *sculpture*, so instead of using the word *installation*, I prefer to use the term *sculpture*, and I prefer to think about the entire range of activities taking place within the field as sculpture. Those art objects concerned with picture making on a flat surface surrounded by a rectangular frame are something different, though they, too, exist in the field.

The pedestal sitting on the same floor we walk on, in the same space our bodies move through, provides a space above, elevated from the floor, that is proposed as separate from the flow of life. This space has not proved to be as charged and enduring as the space inside of the frame on the wall. Perhaps this has something to do with the relative levels of abstraction enabled by the two conventions. The framed space on the wall addresses the eyes that move separate from the body. The static image addressed by the eyes moves into the static “space” of the mind where we imagine the experience separated from the flow of time. The space on top of the pedestal, however, requires the movement of the body through space, circling around the pedestal, in time to apprehend. The time taken to make the experience whole remains insistent as the memory or knowledge of the object takes shape “in mind.”

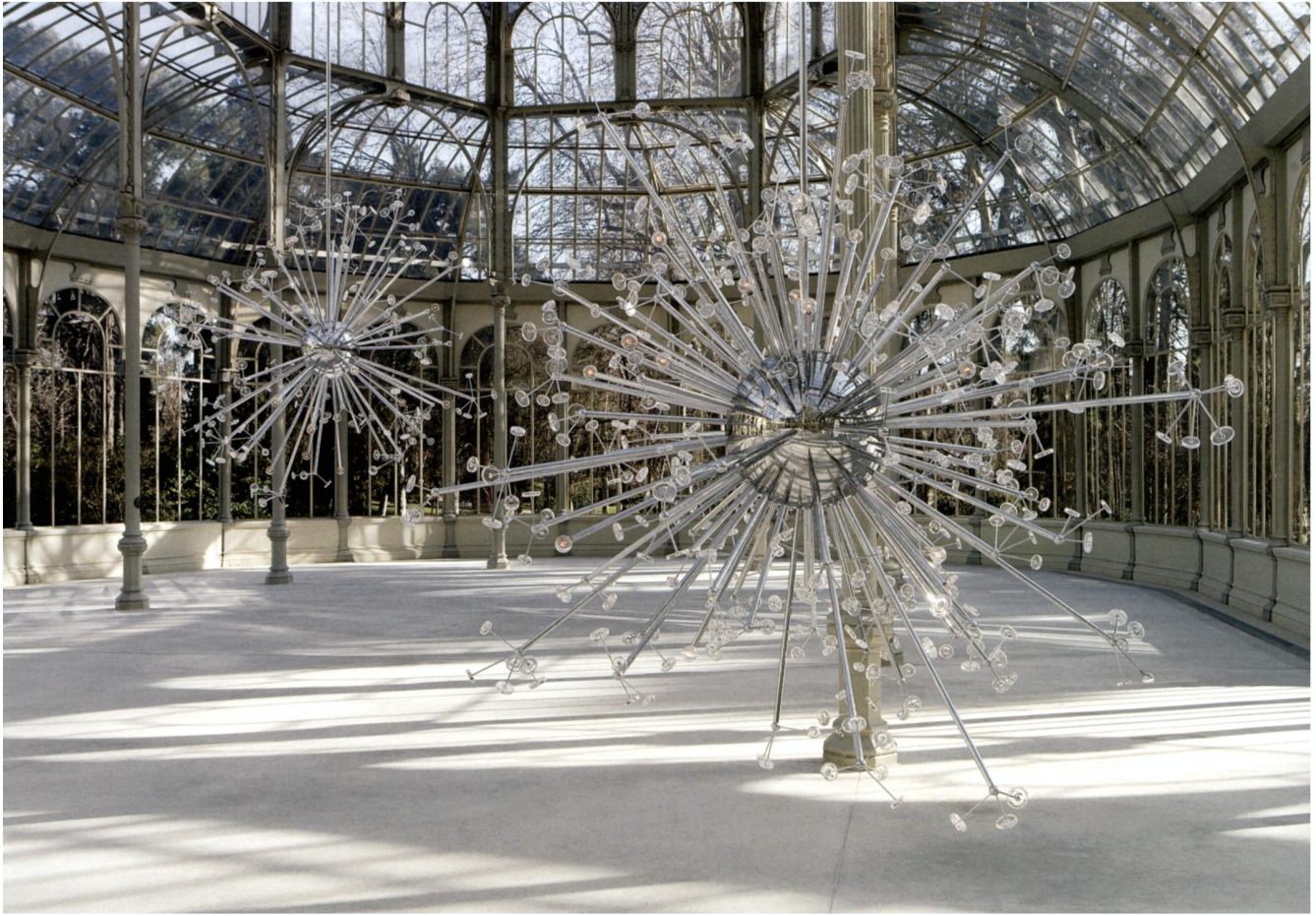
Sculpture presents a series of images over time in space. Unlike film, we the viewers are left to choose sequencing and duration. The agency that is given to us in this process is not possible to document visually.

Though much is made of the difference between representational art and abstract art, I propose that it is the abstraction inherent in all art that makes it useful and powerful. Art posits form to describe something particular even as it is generalized in order to transcend the experience of an individual to be shared by many. Our ability to create whole abstract structures is the foundation of our capacity to think and to speak. The abstract nature of art enables it to share visions, thoughts, fantasies, and feelings over time and space. Any single artwork functions quite differently in this regard; some works reach farther over time and space, even transcending particular cultures, while others exist for only very small groups of people in particular moments.

Our capacity for abstraction is core to the internal workings of any single artwork and to the various shifting conventions, frame, pedestal, field, and white cube that outline each work. The structures of thought, of buildings, of language, of monument, of social interaction, of composition on picture planes, of the body, determine what the world is for us. We are not Spock of *Star Trek's* USS *Enterprise*; our internal lives are large and volumetric, swimming with various levels of viscous emotions, dry strings of information housed in scientific method, time lines of our own life span, time lines of history, our crashing and banging desires, wishes, and creation stories. We need the playing field of art to gather the intelligence of this complexity of our beings and bring it to bear on life.

The invention of the field to represent the abstract place our artworks occupy parallels the use of the figure in art. The figurative sculpture provides a site for us to imagine our own subjectivity mirrored back to us. The notion of a field, as the container for our

Josiah McElheny, *Island Universe*, 2008. Installed at the Palacio de Cristal, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, January 28–March 30, 2009. Chromed aluminum, handblown glass, and electric lights, dimensions variable



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abstract play with physical material, mirrors our sense of our thoughts as abstractions occurring in the space of our hearts and minds. Perhaps Melanie Klein's and Jacques Lacan's impulse to use diagrams to describe human subjective experience in the space of mind is convincing because it, too, uses physical tangibility or the diagram to mirror our subjectivity back to us.

The permeability of the field we have invented in some ways parallels the abstract space inside of the head of our physical body. We need that abstract space in our heads—our minds. The abstract structures we build posit a reality that is firmer than our swimming internal lives. The abstract structures we invent transcend the moment. The inventions of the frame, the pedestal, and the field create circumstances where we can make things that mirror this duality of our being back to us. A place is created where our real-time bound bodies can over time build virtual and physical abstractions that transcend our life span. Art achieves this mirroring by tending to the line between the thing made and the flow of the world it is made in.

Krauss, in her description of the site/nonsite polarity, describes an evolution of our capacity for abstraction. She writes that the loss of site produces “the monument as abstraction.”³ She seems to understand the

Robert Morris, *Untitled (Version 1 in 19 Parts)*, 1968/2002. Felt, 8 ft. 7 in. x 85 in. x 44 in. (261.6 x 215.9 x 111.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund, 2002.76.2a–q

Nancy Dwyer, *LATE*, 1989. Leather, Formica, and wood, 25 in. x 9 ft. 6 in. x 42 in. (63.5 x 289.6 x 106.7 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, The Twigg-Smith Collection, Gift of Thurston Twigg-Smith, B.E. 1942, 2001.148.99a–d

development of this abstraction as a loss of place. Perhaps there is truth to this, but our capacity for abstraction allows us to think, enables us to transcend the particularity of who we are and to gather the experiences of our multiple subjectivities together. In the face of a shrinking, more global human world, and with an urge to address this largeness, art practice has furthered the self-conscious use of abstraction.

It became possible for the site of sculpture to be abstracted from the particularity of place. For it to refer to “not-landscape” and “not-architecture,” as Krauss calls it, is to acknowledge the largeness of the world and our limitations as individuals as we attempt to speak past the smallness of our unique experience.

Thus, while we celebrate the field, the huge elaborate variation on frame or pedestal



Trisha Donnelly, *Untitled*, 2008. Plaster, horse hair, paint, pillow, belts, and lamp, in two parts, each 36 x 60 x 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (91.4 x 152.4 x 57.9 cm)

we have made for ourselves, we also feel that we have lost touch with the particularity of place and of audience. We feel the rug slide from under our feet. We are left wondering about the ground that we are not standing on. Wondering where the rug is that used to be by the fireplace that might now be an electrically powered image of a fire.

Perhaps the more stable pedestal of yore was not so different from the immaterial pedestal at work today. Now, as then, it serves to mark a difference between the actual and the represented, as Krauss points out. But now either we have developed more complicated ways to think about the intersection between these two realms or we have in fact morphed into another kind of being. Perhaps we are now beings whose survival depends on the many layers of plastic, air filtration, water

treatment, molded foot beds in our shoes, curved metal boxes moving us through the landscape, myriad of pictures telling us what to do and why, and the specially engineered sweet plants and plump animals that we eat. We are anxious about where to draw this line between the “actual” and the “symbolic” as so many of our symbols turn up in the mundane passage of our daily lives.

Krauss proposes that through the loss of the base sculpture becomes siteless. I wonder if this is true. By expanding the bracket placed around objects to include the floor, the walls, duration, visitor participation, events in the world past the parameters of the object presented, there is an effort to bring the abstraction of the artwork closer to the actualities of lives lived in particular places or sites.

With the invention of the field as a bracket for art, together with its intense permeability and shifting edges, in addition to being able to call any thing art as Marcel

Duchamp did by moving the urinal into the space of exhibition, we can also call any moment in the flow of life art. These are the facts of art practice now. These facts reflect a sophisticated cultural understanding about the flow between our fantasy lives, our dreams, and our feeling of, for, and about subjective spaces and how they do indeed flow with, and affect the materiality of, the earth we live on. We nevertheless struggle with where we should draw lines to preserve the privileged space that mirrors our subjectivity back to us. This space allows us to think, to feel, to experience, and even to re-create ourselves moving forward.

The shifting boundaries we have invented between art activities and the performance of life are valuable to us and at the same time fraught. One function art provides is to allow for the expression of the parts of us that, unbounded, might hurt us and destroy the social fabric. This bounded site enables us to transgress safely. When the boundaries are vague or punctured, the content of our gestures brush more closely up against life, letting us understand and feel their relevance; but at the same time the transgression becomes part of life, giving rise to troubling ethical questions. Sometimes art is *used* to affect life, proposing that its practitioners, like social workers, give something to other people designed to direct the course of their living. The action of the sculpture is injected into the flow of life. This practice raises the same ethical problems that other “helping” professions deal with regarding human dignity and individual choice. This work, depending on how the boundaries are drawn, risks losing the protected space of art.

How any single work negotiates its relationship to this line between itself and the flow of life is part of its content. Spectacle without transgression is about skillful personal achievement at its least interesting, and public or cultural achievement at its best. Spectacle laced with transgression crosses over the line between art and the flow of life, with tendrils of sculpture hanging off the

playing field into life. If we ourselves do not transgress, then the voyeuristic consumption of someone else’s transgression is hard to resist. Art absorbs, reflects, and embraces all the parts of our humanness—pleasant, uncomfortable, and horrific—providing a privileged space, place, or moment in time in which we can imagine, postulate, recast, notice, and remember, in order to enjoy, entertain, manage, structure, and make sense of our lives. Art is beautiful, luscious, mesmerizing, hypnotic, horrific, painful, shocking, cold, boring, dry, and romantic—eliciting the full range of human feeling and embracing all things. Though it is clear that we can, and do regularly, lasso real space and time with the abstract, siteless field like a big netted blanket—a sort of grid, thrown over bits and pieces of the world flowing outside the edges of the field—there are times when the lasso drags so much of the real into the protected arena of art that the safe zone allowing all things to be imagined is broken.

Because the formal conventions defining the place of the object or of sculpture in art are so full of holes, so permeable and elastic in space and time, there is an edgy quality to the practice of sculpture that is particular to it. Though it is essential that we protect the space of the field as separate from life, it is also pressing to recognize and allow actions on the field to be fully resonant with life’s flow. The ragged edge where the fantasy lives of creative people crash into the order and protected agreements of civilization needs to be constantly tended.

1. See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

2. Johanna Burton, “Sculpture: Not-Not-Not (Or, Pretty Air),” in Anne Ellegood and Burton, *The Uncertainty of Object and Ideas: Recent Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2006), 14.

3. *Ibid.*, 280.