ART IN THE MIRROR:
REFLECTION IN THE WORK OF RAUSCHENBERG,
RICHTER, GRAHAM AND SMITHSON

DISSERTATION

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By

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*****

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers the proliferation of mirrors and reflective materials in art since the sixties through four case studies. By analyzing the mirrored and reflective work of Robert Rauschenberg, Gerhard Richter, Dan Graham and Robert Smithson within the context of the artists’ larger oeuvre and also the theoretical and self-reflective writing that surrounds each artist’s work, the relationship between the wide use of industrially-produced materials and the French theory that dominated artistic discourse for the past thirty years becomes clear. Chapter 2 examines the work of Robert Rauschenberg, noting his early interest in engaging the viewer’s body in his work—a practice that became standard with the rise of Minimalism and after. Additionally, the theoretical writing the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides insight into the link between art as a mirroring practice and a physically engaged viewer. Chapter 3 considers the questions of medium and genre as they arose in the wake of Minimalism, using the mirrors and photo-based paintings of Gerhard Richter as its focus. It also addresses the particular way that Richter weaves the motifs and concerns of traditional painting into a rhetoric of the death of painting which strongly implicates the mirror, ultimately opening up Richter’s career to a psychoanalytic reading drawing its force from Jacques Lacan’s writing on the formation of the subject. Chapter 4 extends these considerations to address the role of the viewer and the question of time and
history through an analysis of the work and writing of Dan Graham, which draw on both Merleau-Ponty’s and Lacan’s theories of vision. And finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the work, writings and aesthetic theory of Robert Smithson, addressing the way that Smithson explicitly put his art and writing into an interdependent relationship, insisting that art is ultimately displaced into writing. Taken together, the case studies describe the way reflection both as a practice and as material choice defined some of the most notable trends in the artistic discourse of the last forty years.
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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

In 1965, Robert Morris exhibited a group of plywood cubes faced with mass-produced mirrors. For him, these Mirrored Cubes represented the perfect deployment of the new materials in such a way as to bolster his previous work’s pointed inquiry into visual perception. The mirrors manipulated the viewing experience more effectively than the painted plywood he had used up until that point. With this group, he turned his focus outward, visually incorporating the gallery space, as well as pushing his previous interest in spatial perception into an unavoidable situation of self-perception. A year later, Morris tackled similar questions, this time in his essay “Notes on Sculpture,” in which he considered the visual effect of his sculpture on his viewer.¹ His comments in this essay regarding the viewer’s spatial experience of his work are informed by the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenologist who used the mirror as a model in his description of the relationship between vision and art.² In both the mirrored cubes and the essay, Morris’s work was exemplary of larger trends that have defined the art world since the sixties. In 1965, not only were artists experimenting with machine-made materials, but they were also producing an increasing amount of writing, in marked contrast to the comparatively taciturn Abstract Expressionists. While both of these changes
have been well-noted, the related proliferation of reflective surfaces at this time has received far less attention, despite the fact that this trend offers a way of understanding how these two changes, the increasing use of mass-marketed new materials and the increasing trend of artists writing about their work, are related. Indeed, the mirror, over the course of the next decade, moved from a motif frequently employed within the writings of French theorists to a leitmotif for certain artists in their art and writing. While Morris was one of the first to read and allude to the writings of one of these theorists and to employ a mirror outright in his sculpture, he soon abandoned mirrors as a material. As a result, Morris’ brief but concentrated inquiry into reflection as a model for his viewer’s (self) perception serves only as an indication of the way French theory and the discourse of contemporary art in America could thrive in the presence of such literally reflective works.

This dissertation will consider the work of four diverse artists who used reflective surfaces and engaged actively in the discourse surrounding their work in ways that should be considered “reflective” as well. These artists are Robert Rauschenberg, Gerhard Richter, Dan Graham and Robert Smithson. While all four were active in the mid 1960s, their commitment to reflection continues to structure their work today, with the exception of Smithson, whose untimely death in 1973 necessarily ended his inquiry into reflection. As such, a careful account of their distinct uses of mirrors and reflective surfaces and their varied entries into the written discourse surrounding their work affords a glimpse into the import of the major shifts brought about by Minimalism—a movement in which none actively participated, but which proved pivotal for all.
1.1 Mirrors and Art

Throughout its history, from antiquity to the present, western art has been linked to the mirror. In the western canon, the analogy was introduced most memorably in Plato’s *Republic* and reached a zenith of sorts in the fifteenth century with Alberti’s famous metaphor, which tied the mirror specifically to painting. Such comparisons have historically drawn their force from an understanding of art as an essentially mimetic practice. At the height of the mirror’s popularity as a motif in Northern Renaissance painting, its protean nature, embodying both the positive and the negative, the magical and the mundane, became clear. Within this context, a mirror included in a painting would typically be understood in one of two ways: as a "moralizing" mirror or as a "painterly" mirror. For example, Laux Furtenagle’s *Portrait of the artist Hans Burgkmair and his wife Anna* (1529) includes a convex mirror in a double portrait of the couple. (Fig. 1) Double portraits were fairly common at this time and were sometimes divided into two panels hinged together. Furtenagle offers us an alternative to a diptych of husband and wife gazing at each other across the space between the panels in his composition by placing the two figures within the same panel. The mirror held in front of them serves to double their combined gazes from the edge of the single panel. By virtue of the mirror’s convex shape, the viewer is privileged with a glimpse of the couple’s reflection. Instead of presenting the couple as they appear at the time, however, the mirror offers a glimpse of their future. Far from the stuff of fairy tales, this couple is allegorically represented in the form of two skulls. The force of the image’s moral message relies on our knowledge of the mirror’s traditionally mimetic function. Thus, by thwarting our expectation to see those figures reflected on its
surface, Furtenagle underscores the inevitability of their demise. Consequently, the mirror image acts like a prophesy, reminding the viewer of the figures' mortality, and, by extension, the viewer's similar fate, thereby, warning us all of the vanity of worldly pursuits. The *Skull Reflected in a Mirror* from a fifteenth-century Book of Hours carries the same warning but with more immediacy. The anonymous artist accomplishes this by doing away with a pictorial intermediary, as the Burgkmairs had functioned in the Furtenagle, and turning the mirror to face the viewer directly. (Fig. 2) Thus, the devotee would be unavoidably reminded of her own mortality.

At the same time that the looking glass has been used to impart a moral message, the mirror also sometimes refers to the painter's goal of achieving an illusionism worthy of a mirror reflection and, as a tool employed to this end, often appears in depictions of the artist's studio. For example, Quentin Massys' *St. Luke Painting the Virgin and Child* (c.1530) gives us a view of St. Luke's "studio," in which a convex mirror hangs on the wall behind the painter. (Fig. 3) Its prominent position over the artist as he paints at his easel secures its association with a painter's tools. Frequently, such mirrors were employed to check the illusionistic coherence of paintings. As Leonardo da Vinci pointed out in his notebooks, flaws in composition were much easier to notice when they were reflected in a mirror. The inclusion of a mirror within a portrait then would carry along with it the invocation of the private space of the artist's studio. With this association in mind, the mirror in Furtenagle's portrait of the artist Hans Burgkmair would also signal the sitter's profession. Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the mirror still held a prominent position in certain painters' studios, as is evident in Henri Matisse's *Carmelina* (1903). (Fig. 4) The mirror, depicted within the artist's studio, parallel with the picture plane, offers
the viewer two vantage points from which to contemplate the model who is presented frontally by reflecting her back. By virtue of its placement, the mirror also captures Matisse's own reflection, presumably while he paints—a visual trope which we can trace back as early as 1402 in a French manuscript of Bocaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*.\(^9\) (Fig. 5) This miniature, referred to as *Marcia Painting Her Self-Portrait*, shows the artist using a small mirror to accomplish her task. Of course, the presence of a mirror is implied in any self-portrait. As a result, mirrors not only suggest the artist’s studio, but also the artist engaged in self-reflection.

One might expect that, with the rise of abstraction in the twentieth century, the mirror would no longer make sense as a signifier of the painter's practice, and consequently, we might expect fewer references to mirrors in painting.\(^10\) Nonetheless, the twentieth century has figured up its fair share of mirrors in the gallery. Indeed, the great majority of them are not depicted mirrors, but actual reflective surfaces. There are several instances of artist's employing reflective materials in the wake of synthetic cubism. Those that date before the 1960s typically included those materials for mimetic or expressive ends. For example, the mirror affixed to Juan Gris' canvas *Le Lavabo* (1912) conscripts the actual reflective material into a depiction of an ordinary bathroom mirror. (Fig. 6) After Picasso and Braque forsook trying to represent materials which they could simply employ in the painting, such as faux wood grain or newspaper, Gris decided to forgo the futile effort of trying to represent a mirror by inserting an actual piece of one into his composition.\(^11\) The polished metal of Vladimir Tatlin's painting relief, *The Bottle* (1913) is marshaled into a more mimetic service as well, no longer depicting a mirror but instead capturing the reflective quality of glass in its convex shape (Fig. 7); the curved piece of metal
mimics the reflection one sees on the curve of a glass bottle. At the same time, the reflective metal, which frames the bottle’s silhouette, emphasizes the transparency of the space next to it in our ability to see through the implied bottle where the metal has been cut away. In Gino Severini’s *Dynamic Hieroglyph of the Bal Tabarin* (1912), the sequins adorning the central figure’s dress act both mimetically and expressively. (Fig. 8) Not only are they understood to depict the sequins on the dancers’ dresses, but they also march across the surface of the canvas in tightly controlled loops, capturing actual fluctuations of light from the painting’s surroundings in this elaborately choreographed display of motion. And finally, Constantin Brancusi’s use of polished bronze in a sculpture like *Sleeping Muse* (1910) smoothes away textural individuations to reveal the essential and universal gesture of a head tilted in rest. (Fig. 9) The reflection of the viewer in the metal only underscores for her this universality when she sees herself within the gesture. Like Brancusi, these artists employed reflective materials in these cases to evoke effects that were impossible in mere paint.

1.2 Reflection and Minimalism

The widespread and sustained use of reflective surfaces in art arose concurrently with Minimalism, although not as a central practice within Minimalism. The only artists often associated with Minimalism who employed reflective surfaces were Morris and Judd—the former for only a single work; the other more consistently, if also more subtly, preferring reflective plastics to outright mirrors. Their sporadic or secondary use of such materials is partly due to the fact that both consider the addition of color or polish to be extraneous to their aims. Nonetheless, because of Minimalism’s dominance in art-related discourse at the
time that mirrors and reflective surfaces became increasingly prominent, the 
work and writings of Robert Morris and Donald Judd serve well to introduce the 
stakes of incorporating mirrors into art work in the early and mid-sixties.

Minimalism developed as a loosely related rejection of modernist painting 
and sculpture, not as a style or movement. As a result, the term “Minimalism” 
might more adequately define an artistic field consisting of both a practice and a 
critical discourse. What is certain is that a whole range of concerns was being 
addressed in art and the writing that surrounded it, creating a situation where 
both were responding to the other, broaching questions about perception and the 
institutional nature of the art world, two things that had, to a certain extent, been 
taken for granted previously.

Morris’ *Mirrored Cubes* raised questions about perception that he tackled a 
year later in his essay “Notes on Sculpture.” (Fig. 10) The cube’s reflections of 
the gallery space and the viewers’ legs pointedly draw the viewer’s attention 
both to her own embodiedness and to the gallery situation. As the cubes seem to 
nearly disappear into each other, they force the viewer to consider the 
disjunction between what she sees and what she knows, questioning the process 
of her own perception. Their shape forms an exemplary gestalt that not only 
conforms to Morris’ own preference for shapes that could be easily perceived, 
but also mimics the architectural container of the gallery. Moreover, the 
mirrored surfaces implicate the viewer in a public relationship with the work 
simply because they emphasize the viewer’s placement in a public space. While 
Morris elides this point in his “Notes on Sculpture,” he does argue that scale 
affects the intimacy or publicness of a viewer’s experience. Any object whose 
size is comparable to or larger than its viewer creates a public experience because 
it implies the space around it in a way that a smaller object does not.
Analogously, reflective sides not only imply their surrounding space, they actually incorporate that space into their surfaces; beyond simply mimicking the shape of the gallery, they also reflect its appearance.

In both respects, the Mirrored Cubes make explicit the perceptual emphasis of Minimalism, with its concomitant address to the viewer, as well as its implication of its immediate situation. It was not long before the address to the viewer within a public sphere extended to imply the broader institutions of the art world or any social or political institution. This extension introduced institutional critique into Minimalism’s frame of reference, thus broaching the possibility of a more generalized social project for these artists. Moreover, a critique of the institutions of the art world that takes the form of actual art works (as well as a discursive project) ultimately finds itself addressing its own history, particularly as that history was construed as modernist self-critique. As Barbara Rose already pointed out in her 1965 essay “ABC Art,” from its early stages this self-critique carried with it the socio-political utopianism of the Russian constructivists at one extreme and the irony of Duchamp at the other.

Minimalism’s engagement with the history of modern painting and sculpture, specifically with relation to the art criticism of Clement Greenberg, emerged in part out of Donald Judd’s art criticism. Working originally as an art critic, Judd had a complicated relationship to Greenberg, as James Meyer has noted. From the outset, the two were in opposing camps, with Judd embracing the same three-dimensional work that Greenberg rejected. Nonetheless, by claiming that the Specific Objects he championed were the logical extension of Frank Stella’s aluminum paintings, Judd implicitly accepted Greenberg’s core assertion that modernist painting aimed at exposing its essential nature. (Fig. 11) Stella’s paintings like Empress of India not only let shape determine composition,
but they also emphasized their flatness with evenly applied, nearly reflective paint. Contrary to Stella’s insistence that these works simply drew attention to their painted surface, making them emphatically *paintings*, Judd argued that the paintings’ flatness, along with their extraordinarily thick supports, announced their true status as material *objects*. And because these works revealed painting’s essence to be outside of itself not as art, but as objects, they also announced the end of painting. It is out of this realization that Judd claimed that Specific Objects, or Minimalist structures, were the necessary arena for any self-critical (which is to say, according to Greenberg’s terms, “modernist”) art-making.

Minimalism was deeply enmeshed in a written, critical discourse partly because some of its main practitioners, such as Morris and Judd, wrote art criticism. In formal terms, Minimalism demanded written explication. Coming on the heels of Abstract Expressionism, which thrived in the rarified air of psychological analysis and artistic intention, the emphatically machine-made, serial quality of Minimalism cried out for some explanation. Moreover, Minimalist artists typically simplified form and composition to geometric shapes, and similarly avoided all “content”, leaving the interpretative field open wide enough to encompass a host of possibilities, including oppositional and mutually exclusive readings. The reflective works which this dissertation addresses face a similar situation in their critical reception. Either as a result of this ambiguity or in complete acceptance of it, all engage with their discursive arena in one way or another. Thus, just as Minimalism should not be understood as a coherent style or movement, these artists’ commitments to reflective surfaces evince themselves in different ways, responding to the same discursive field, but emphasizing different questions and arriving at quite different conclusions.
1.3 Mirrors in French Theory

With the increasing importance of the perceptual experience that art works in the sixties constructed for the viewer, references to perceptual theory, particularly that of Merleau-Ponty and, later, that of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, became more frequent among the artists and critics writing about this work. Both writers employed the mirror as an important motif in their theories of vision. Merleau-Ponty, who was cited by Minimalism’s champions and detractors alike, was particularly interested in the role of vision in our knowledge of the world. The mirror was central to Merleau-Ponty’s description of visual perception—a perception he describes as voyant-visible or seeing-visible. According to Merleau-Ponty, the sensible world is by nature reflexive; one consequence of this fact is that it duplicates itself in vision. We are able to see only because of the world’s perceptual doubling. He envisions a folding of the flesh of the world back on itself as the condition of visibility. Not only does the fold in the flesh create vision, but it also casts that vision as distance, even while it should be registered as proximity. Thus, the reflectiveness of the mirror, which visually duplicates the viewer, makes the mirror an apt analogy for a medium, like modern painting, which concerns itself with visual perception. The mirror also becomes an emblem of the way painters see. The painter’s vision is invaded by the world which doubles back on itself; both the mirror and the painter's vision draw their effectiveness from this doubling. Yet the link between mirrors and painting is based upon their shared project of doubling, not on historical claims of painting’s illusionistic project—an analogy which presumes a perceivable, palpable world that exists whether or not we perceive it. Instead, according to Merleau-Ponty, the world produces vision out of its originary
reflexivity by lending to vision tactile associations. As one of the things in the world, or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, as part of the Flesh of the World, the painter is able to see, has vision, only because she already "feels" herself over there, in the mirror, in the painting, or in the other person. The painter paints out of this excess of self.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan also discussed the mirror’s role in self-perception. In his early and often-cited essay, "The mirror stage as formative of the I," he lays down the foundation for his later writings on the formation of the human subject within a nexus of language and visual reflection. In the mirror stage essay, Lacan argues that at about eighteen months the infant is made aware of herself as a finite subject whose limitations and social relationships do not correspond with the infant's own experience. This realization comes largely through the child's encounter with her own image in a mirror and is structured by language which makes the connection between the infant and the image. "That's you, Eileen" are the words spoken by the parent that serve to articulate the child from her surroundings, while at the same time establishing the child's identity over there, in the mirror, which is to say, outside of the child's body. As Lacan later shows, this external, and importantly exterior, identity constitutes the human subject. The theoretical system that bolsters Lacan’s account of the mirror stage comes from structural linguistics. Like structural linguistics, the world Lacan describes in front of the mirror is one made up of binary oppositions. The force of the gaze—that is, not the child’s gaze, but a gaze outside the child, which thus occupies a position similar to language—lies in the fact that it makes distinctions between things and between subjects.
1.4 Language, Writing and Vision

Lacan’s appeal to structural linguistics introduces another question into this study that deserves consideration. Roughly, Lacan suggests that vision’s social underpinnings function analogously to language. The articulations that words serve to create between two arguably similar things, say a tree and a bush, are also enacted in vision. Even more importantly, the articulations of vision are propped up by language. Thus, we begin to see the differences between trees and bushes only when we know their proper names, just as the child begins to see herself as distinct from others only when she begins to associate her proper name with her reflected image. Not all post-war theorists accept this analogy, however. For example, Michel Foucault’s essay on Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* focuses on the elision between the visual and the textual, or the linguistic. His description of the painting centers on the mirror represented at the back of this group portrait. In describing the painting and its spatial positioning of the viewer and of its subjects, both within and outside the depicted space by virtue of that mirror, Foucault suggests that the naming so common in analyses of the work is precisely what misses the specifics of the painting. That is,

> These proper names would form useful landmarks and avoid ambiguous designations...But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.

Thus, any description of an artwork delivered in language forces the flux inherent in visual perception into a static and simplified version of the work.
Jacques Derrida describes a similar problem in his text *The Truth in Painting* (1978). This study sketches a theory of painting that is framed within language. But it is important to note that he insists on the fact that he only circles around the question about the nature of painting. Not only does his writing function as a frame, but one of the central elements of painting which he discusses, line, or the *trait*, functions in the same manner. That is, like a frame, a line not only divides, but it also holds what it divides together in a spatial relationship. This *trait* preserves the fluidity which language has difficulty duplicating. It is for this reason that works like Stella’s aluminum paintings can be described in opposing ways by Stella and Judd, even though both are responding faithfully to what they see.

While the French theory imported into the United States during the sixties was by not means monolithic, it raised new questions and changed the face of art and criticism in America. Individual theorists were introduced to the American art scene sporadically. Those who concentrated specifically on the mirror, that is Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, had their greatest impact during the decade of the mirror’s largest influence, roughly between 1964 and 1975. In the early sixties, art critics were beginning to read Merleau-Ponty. Annette Michelson, a frequent contributor to *Artforum*, the leading American journal of contemporary art and criticism at the time, was attending lectures delivered by Merleau-Ponty in Paris, at the same time that another contributor, Michael Fried, was living in England and reading Merleau-Ponty’s writings. Additionally, with the translation of Merleau-Ponty’s writing into English by Northwestern University Press in 1964, more American artists and critics were exposed to his increasingly important theories on perception.
Jacques Lacan's essay on the mirror-stage came into the general discourse surrounding art through the magazine *Screen*, which made frequent references to the essay in the mid-seventies.\(^{32}\) Perhaps the best-known example is Laura Mulvey’s "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).\(^{33}\) In this essay, Mulvey stresses the role of viewer identification in narrative cinema, particularly with regard to the distinct models of gendered pleasure inscribed in popular film. Ultimately, Lacan's theories provided rich fodder for the feminist perspectives in art and art history that became more prominent in the late seventies and eighties.\(^{34}\) The writings of Foucault and Derrida were translated and introduced into the New York art world discourse at roughly the same time as Lacan’s.\(^{35}\)

### 1.5 The Discourse Surrounding Mirrors in Recent Art

It is surprising, given the mirror's prominence in art and in theory in the second half of the twentieth century, that the prolific use of reflective materials has received very little sustained attention in serious scholarship. Of the exhibitions and articles that have addressed the issue of reflection, most have skimmed the surface, merely figuring up a long list of artists using mirrors or mirror images in their work.\(^{36}\) Such surveys have tended to downplay differences among artistic practices in order to group the various works together as uncomplicated examples of a general theoretical or social framework. At best, they categorize the different ways mirrors have been employed, but they still fail to consider the implications of the ways in which the mirror is caught up in redefining the artistic practices of late twentieth century Post-Minimal art.\(^{37}\)
The exhibition “The Rebounding Surface” (1982) simply collected different examples of mirroring practices to point out the mirror’s popularity in art. Aside from a short introduction in the exhibition catalog that makes this point, there was no deeper consideration of the issue. Nor was there in any published reviews of the exhibition.

David Mower’s essay “Through the Looking Glass and What the Artist Found There” (1979), for all the title’s promise, also presents a gloss on the recent history of mirror imagery and reflective materials in art. Mower’s interest is in “mapping the extent of the spread” of mirror practices and not in providing an analysis of its significance. He sees the mirror as broadly encompassing various attitudes in art toward subject matter, materials and viewers. As a result, he makes very little differentiation between different artists or between modernism and post-modernism for that matter. Nonetheless Mower’s article is to be praised for its effort to extend the terms of the argument regarding reflection to include practices which are not constructed with reflective surfaces and do not have mirrors as their subject matter. For example, he considers Sol Lewitt’s mirror image cubes and Hans Haacke’s institutional critique both to be part of the general reflective trend. Ultimately though, the most interesting point he makes is only implied in his title—taken from Lewis Carroll’s story popularly known as Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland—which promises to show an art world dominated by inversions, as if post-modernism were simply a mirror-reversal of modernism. Unfortunately, Mower fails to make good on this promise by suggesting that, contrary to what one would expect, such early examples of including mirrors as the Juan Gris collage discussed earlier are simply early examples of the trend but are not inherently different from the work of the late twentieth century.
Mark Francis’ and Michael Newman’s 1986 exhibition *The Mirror and the Lamp* delved deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of the reflective trend in art. The show included a broad range of artists and artistic practices, all of which addressed “the way in which identity is constructed through vision and perception.” The show’s title came from the eponymous book by the literary theorist M. H. Abrams, which chronicled the ascendance of expression over mimesis in Romantic poetic theory. In addition to short entries on each artist, including Gerhard Richter, Newman provides a parallel text, which runs opposite the entries and outlines the rise and fall of mimetic theories of art. While the essay rises to its ambitious intent with grace, and the entries echo many of the issues raised in the essay, one is necessarily left wishing for a more penetrating treatment of the works rather than the gloss that provides an historical and theoretical framework for the artists’ activities. One of the main points this dissertation will make concerns the relationship of writing to art, in particular the relationship of the artists’ writings to their reflective works. Newman’s theoretical gloss, while it occupies the same pages as the artist entries, merely glances off of those entries and does not once address its own relationship to the art works.

Perhaps the most enlightening research into the proliferation of mirrors in the twentieth century has been conducted by French scholars. The earliest is an essay jointly written by a literary theorist and an architectural historian. Valentina Anker and Lucien Dallenbach consider both literary and visual reflection in their essay "Le réflexion spéculaire dans la peinture et la littérature récentes" (1975). They begin by stressing the modernity of art works about art, noting as their prime example André Gide’s *Les Faux-Monnaiers* (1925), a novel about, among other things, an author writing a novel. Of course, the idea that
counterfeiting coins is akin to the author's project of representing reality fuels the many parallels between the fictitious characters and the writer. But, as Gide points out in his notebooks, the heraldic term that he prefers to describe his project is the *mise-en-abyme*, in which an element is repeated inside another element. Anker and Dallenbach use Gide’s work to suggest that there are three ways in which reflection occurs in modern art: first with the straight depiction within a depiction; second, with parallels between interior and exterior; and finally with the unlikely event of dual reflection possible when one turns a mirror to face another mirror in a perfect *mise-en-abyme*. They proceed to break up the works they introduce into groups based on these three categories.

The other significant French work was an exhibition mounted by the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen. *A traverse le miroir de Bonnard à Buren* (2000) breaks the material up into four groups: “Mirrors and Femininity,” “Mirrors and Self-Fiction,” “The Mirror as an Object of Speculation,” and “The Mirror Used in the Appropriation of Space.” This exhibition and its accompanying catalog goes the furthest in its exploration of the topic mostly because it includes short essays by a variety of art and film critics who approach the topic from different angles; the most important are “The Mirror without Reflection” by Alain Cueff and “The Mirror and Self-Reflection” by Jaroslav Andel, which mention Smithson and Graham respectively.

Recently, the field of cultural studies made its contribution to the mirror phenomenon with Sabine Melchior-Bonnet’s *The Mirror: A History*. Translated into English in 2000, it coincides with other studies of the history of common objects. But its original publication in 1994 suggests its participation in the height of a second wave of mirrors in art. Melchior-Bonnet’s book begins with the history of mirror production from antiquity to the 19th century, focusing
particularly on France from its beginnings as a stolen trade-secret imported from Italy in the 16th century until the unparalleled mirrored hall at Versailles. Drawing from philosophy, literature, and moral and ethical guides, Melchior-Bonnet paints a picture of an object continually defined by its dual nature. She traces both the warnings against vanity and the error of illusion, as well as the suggestion that the mirror provides the best route to self-knowledge and truth. Occasionally using art that depicts mirrors as examples, typically from fifteenth-to nineteenth-century Europe (with the exception of the last image by René Magritte), Melchior-Bonnet unfortunately does little more than point out the art work's adherence to some theme articulated in writing.

1.6 The Reflective Work of Rauschenberg, Richter, Graham and Smithson

In focusing on the work and the related writing of Robert Rauschenberg, Gerhard Richter, Dan Graham, and Robert Smithson, this dissertation aims to flesh out the connections between the use of reflective materials and self-reflective writing in four specific cases. While the work of these artists differs in many ways, they can all be described as working along the edges of Minimalism—an important ground on which to bring them together. Their most mirror-centric work either hints at the possibilities explored in Minimalism or relies heavily on the social, political, historical and aesthetic stakes set by Minimalism. Moreover, their written practices all reflect their visual practices in important ways.

Like that of the Minimalists before them, the work of these four artists resists neat medium distinctions. Most raise the specter of painterly illusionism with their use of mirrors, among other tactics. But aside from Gerhard Richter,
none of these artists is easily described as a painter. And even Richter’s painting practice resists characterization in that it moves freely between abstraction and figuration. Rauschenberg’s work, which began in painting, pushes off the wall into his combine paintings and later sculpture and even extends to performance. Robert Smithson, who also began as a painter, was creating three-dimensional work by the mid 1960s, photo-essays by the late 1960s and, finally, site-specific earth works before his death in 1973, all of which frequently broached questions about illusionism and medium specificity, a term very closely associated with modern painting as it was described by Clement Greenberg. Dan Graham is the only artist of the group who has no obvious link to the history of modern painting. Nonetheless, his embrace of the media associated with Post-Minimalism, including his writing conceptual essays for journals, his performance pieces, video-installations and the small architectural models and pavilions he continues to produce all place him in an implicit dialogue with the critical discourse surrounding modern painting and Minimalism.

Like Graham, the other three artists share an interest in writing—an interest that seems closely related to the dispersal of their activity across media. This is not to say that all four artists write similarly or for the same reasons; like their varied uses of mirrors, their written reflections have quite different manifestations. Rauschenberg’s statements reflect the linguistic structure of the work but remain slippery for those who attempt to pin down their meaning or intentions. Similarly, Richter claims that his writings coincide with the work but in no way explain it. On the contrary, Graham's writing can substitute for and in some cases better explain the work, and for Smithson, the artwork can be displaced into a printed text.
This dissertation is interested in the way these artists’ mirrored works and their written reflections are hinged together. Because modern painting has traditionally been described as developing in opposition to other art forms and mediums—purging itself of the "literary" above all—the artists’ interest in writing may seem to contradict this study’s central claim that their use of mirrors closely links their work to the history of modern painting. In fact, this dissertation aims to show how the writings and mirrored works together make visible a history of modern painting that passes through Minimalism and ultimately unfolds into the disparate artistic practices often grouped under the rubric post-modernism.

In retrospect, the predominant use of reflective materials in art since the 1960s appears almost inevitable, for the mirror addresses many artistic concerns that arose in American painting just prior to the beginning of Minimalism. For example, the mirror, considered on its own, with its monochromatic, silvered back, adhered to the modernist prescriptive for flatness and abstraction. At the same time, for artists like Rauschenberg, the mirror was able to negotiate the terrain between abstraction and the reemergence of figuration. Moreover, the mirror also accommodated the expansion of both figurative and abstract art into a temporal dimension, an issue that became central to the work of artists like Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg. Because the mirror’s reflectivity implicates the viewer’s space as well as her experience of temporal immediacy, it also raises questions about the relationship of an artwork to its viewer. Such questions are crucial for Rauschenberg and definitive for Post-Minimal artists like Richard Serra, Adrian Piper and Graham, among others. It was not long before mirrors and reflective surfaces employed in art provided the opportunity to throw into question the mirror works’ identification as art and the role played by art
institutions in that identification by referring explicitly to their physical location, as they do in admittedly different ways in works by Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Richter, Graham, and Smithson. Ultimately, reflective materials offered attractive solutions for the goal of objectivity and the use of industrially produced materials associated with Minimalism.

Given all of these possibilities, it should not be surprising that in the late 1950s Rauschenberg, as well as later artists associated with Pop, such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, began employing mirrors, reflective surfaces or images of mirrors within their work. Meanwhile, a host of other artists working on the edges of Minimalism, were drawn to the use of mirrored and reflective surfaces in their work; for example, Michelangelo Pistoletto’s *Person Seen from the Back* (1962) shows a figure painted illusionistically on a mirror to suggest that he occupies an actual threshold to another space (Fig. 13). Acting as a different sort of a threshold, Judd's wall pieces often include an interior sheet of polished metal or plastic that invites the viewer into the work just as the work moves into the viewer's space (Fig. 14). Morris' mirrored cubes completed that break with the wall by occupying the floor of the gallery, implicating that space by their reflectivity (Fig. 10). In Lucas Samaras' *Room #2* (1966), the reflective cube swelled to room-size proportions and was given an interior in which the viewer finds herself in a dizzying hall of mirrors (Fig. 15). Robert Irwin pushed reflection to the limits of perception when he hung mirrors in darkened rooms. And finally, Adrian Piper’s room installations, like *Black Box* and *White Box* installed at the Wexner Center in 1992, turned visual perception on itself to question identity and community, when images in front of the viewer became reflective with a change in the structure's lighting. (Fig. 16 & 17) Piper also employed video in installations that questioned racial and cultural identity in
works like *Video Corner*, which consisted of a video monitor mounted in a corner against which an upturned table rested in such a way that Piper's image on the monitor appeared cornered; in the video, Piper discussed the ambiguities of her racial identity. While Piper's use of video often draws its critical power from its ability to address the viewer in a relationship of identification, we will see an even more pointed use of it in Graham for much the same kind of social critique.

The force of much of this work derives in part from the centrality of reflection in it. Because the mirror implicates its own surroundings as it becomes more prominent within the composition and conception, it is able to return the viewer's attention to the work's physical context. Not only are mirrors extending space within the gallery, as in Pistoletto's work, but in the 1960s artists moved mirrors increasingly off the wall and onto the floor of the gallery implying or sometimes even boasting an interior, as Samaras' room does. (Fig. 15) As a result, these artists emphatically presented the gallery space and its occupants as their subject with little alteration. In its ability to do this, the mirror makes explicit Minimalism's main interest in the cube, which, like the mirror, implicates its physical context. (This is all the more the case when the mirrors are themselves arranged in cubes.) Moreover, the mirror provided opportunities for the Minimalists and, even more, the Post-Minimalists to turn a critical eye to the larger art context, not only questioning the relationship between art works and the gallery system, but also introducing the possibility of deconstructing the supporting institutions of the art world such as art journals, as Graham and Smithson make perfectly clear in their magazine pieces.

This dissertation analyzes the mirrored and reflective work of Rauschenberg, Richter, Graham and Smithson within the context of the artists' larger oeuvre and also the theoretical and self-critical or self-reflective writing
that surrounds their art; all of this is done with a view to understanding the multi-layered, visual and perceptual possibilities introduced with the decision to employ the mirror. Chapter 2 will address the work of Robert Rauschenberg as a proto-Minimalist, setting the stage for many of the issues that arise with the other artists. Chapter 3 considers the questions of medium and genre in more depth, using the mirrors and photo-based paintings of Gerhard Richter as its focus. It also addresses the particular way that Richter weaves the motifs and concerns of traditional painting into a rhetoric of the death of painting, which strongly implicates the mirror. Chapter 4 extends these considerations to address the role of the viewer and the question of time and history through an analysis of the work and writing of Dan Graham. Finally, chapter 5 focuses on the work, writings and aesthetic theory of Robert Smithson, addressing explicitly the relationship between his art and writing. Many of these issues emerge and re-emerge in more than one chapter. In this way, the flexibility of these concerns and their resistance to containment within one chapter mirrors the protean nature of reflexive art, at the same time that this study attempts to describe the way all of these artists draw from the same discourse, not so much to name the artists or the discourse in a Lacanian imposition, but more to reflect in words something of the nature of the reflective discourse of the last forty years.

1.7 A Short Note on the Terms of the Argument

As it has already become apparent, the terminology associated with mirrors and reflection resists easy containment. This is partly based on a long history of use and partly based on the multi-faceted character of their definitions. Not only is reflection a term associated with visual perception, but it has also been taken up
somewhat allegorically by the discipline of philosophy to describe mental contemplation as well. Both common usages are closely associated with the linguistic sense of the term. Although English lacks reflexive verbs per se (although not reflexive constructions), French and other Romance languages do have verbs that are reflexive and imply a duality between the subject and object. That is to say, when one does something to oneself, the action effectively divides the self into actor and acted upon. When one bores oneself, an example that Sartre uses, the construction of the sentence implies a split within the subject that divides the unified identity of the subject. Reflection implies a similar duality in this sense, which also corresponds to the philosophical use of the term in a discussion of knowledge or consciousness of self.

Reflection, used as a noun in its purely mimetic sense, derives from its early scientific usage, where it can also be spelled with an "x" as reflexion, and this is perhaps the more precise spelling as the bilaterally symmetrical chiasmus reflects itself. The Latin root "flex," meaning to bend or fold, dominates the scientific usage. In optics, light bends back. In biology, reflexes name those automatic responses like bending arms or legs when the elbow or knee is struck, respectively. But there are other reflexes, namely those associated with vision, that have nothing to do with bending. Some of them are so subtle they are rarely observed, such as the dilating of the pupil. Others are much more perceptible, such as blinking—an act which makes vision possible at the same time that it interrupts it.

There are also common uses of the word, based on optical reflection as the bending or folding of vision back to its source. Mental reflection, for example, implies the bending or folding back of thought on itself. The extension of the common usage of reflection, when one describes any contemplation, is
instructive. For in this usage, when one reflects on something that is not a self, the subject, by implication, has identified with his or her object of contemplation. But it is important to note that this sort of mental engagement, in which thought is bent back on itself, ultimately drives the subject and object more deeply into themselves in distinction from each other. Thus, within this common usage, the irony of reflective contemplation is most obvious. Just when one attempts to get closer to one's object of study, one becomes more deeply cognizant of oneself. And so, even as this dissertation attempts a penetrating analysis of the mirrored and reflective art works along with the phenomenon that made them possible, it acknowledges the limits to that goal. For a written reflection on visual reflection will necessarily be driven more deeply into is own writing in the end.
Mirrors and reflection have played an important role in Robert Rauschenberg’s work since the beginning of the fifties. As a motif, Rauschenberg has depicted mirrors in his silkscreens compositions and employed actual mirrors in his combine paintings. Meanwhile, the theme of reflection in his work ranges from meditations on duplication as the main goal of representation in works like *Crucifixion and Reflection* (1950) and the identical *Factum I* and *Factum II* (both 1957), to the use of reflective surfaces as a support in the viewer-activated, technological works of the late sixties and his synthesis of the silkscreen and combine processes in three series from the late eighties, *Urban Bourbons*, *Galvanic Suite*, and *Shiners*. The works on reflective materials highlight Rauschenberg’s social interests with their increased emphasis on the gallery space and the role of the viewer in that space. The external emphasis of these works on reflective materials go a long way toward achieving his oft-repeated goal to work in the gap between art and life. His reflective supports bridge that gap visually by implicating the viewer in the work. Moreover, Rauschenberg’s commitment to the viewer hints at his desire to abdicate his own artistic authority to his viewers, a fact that becomes clear in his written and oral statements.
As an artist working in the fifties and sixties, mirrors and reflective surfaces held an interest for Rauschenberg that is nearly as complex and multi-layered as one of his collages. Historically, the mirror’s association with the tradition of western painting and one-point perspective, in particular, provided Rauschenberg with an important ground from which to stretch and reverse these traditions, at a time when illusionism had been completely discredited by the avant-garde. Moreover, the mirror’s inherent spatial ambiguities and contradictions also appealed to his interest in compositional oppositions and spatial reversals. Ultimately, reflective surfaces functioned for Rauschenberg both as a stimulus for experimenting with spatial perception and as a model for working within dichotomies, most importantly the dichotomy he aims to collapse by working in the gap between art and life.

This chapter addresses Rauschenberg’s persistent interest in mirrors and reflection, focusing on four key issues. First among them is the artist’s incorporation of actual mirrors into his combine paintings as collage materials as part of an early effort to reinstate depth, in the form of real space, into painting. Second, Rauschenberg’s choice to reproduce depictions of mirrors in his silk-screens clarifies the relationship between his three-dimensional combines and his foray into purely pictorial space, where layered space and depicted depth square off in one composition. Third, the combination of the silk-screen technique with reflective grounds explicitly engages the viewer through her reflection, making her image and her movement central to the art work. It is here that Rauschenberg’s commitment to work in the gap between art and life dovetails with his refusal to limit the interpretations of his work, bringing the argument to its fourth and final point. That is, by combining reflective statements with compositions that suggest linguistic strategies, Rauschenberg creates works that
beg to be “read” but which also leave themselves open to divergent interpretations—interpretations which end up reflecting the interests of their viewers just as much as the artist’s.

2.1 Mirrors as a Collage Material

The first actual mirrors appear in Rauschenberg’s work as collage material in his combine paintings beginning in late 1953 and continuing until 1962. The title he gives to this style of composition foregrounds its artistic roots in painting while it also acknowledges their intermediary nature with the descriptor “combine.” As part of his avowed purpose of bridging the gap between art and life, Rauschenberg attempted to collapse the distinction between painting and sculpture, or between two and three-dimensional media, in the combine paintings, making his work an important precedent for the Minimalist rejection of painting in favor of three-dimensional objects. Despite his influence in this development, Rauschenberg never abandoned painting and two-dimensional art completely, preferring instead to work between the pictorial and the real, combining significant aspects of the two. The early combines begin as two-dimensional constructions, which introduce three dimensional passages, literally combining common objects on the surface, allowing the work to be considered painting and sculpture simultaneously.

When Rauschenberg first incorporated mirrors into these works, they played a minor role in his compositions, which were by and large taken over by the combination of disparate images collaged together with seemingly little attention paid to their visual or referential coherence.\(^5^9\) For example, the combine Charlene (1954) includes part of the front page of *The Sunday News* bearing the
headline “Beyond Mars,” various comic strips, postcards of art objects like Hokusai’s *Great Wave*, a Degas dancer, ceramic vases and the Statue of Liberty, as well as bits of lace and printed fabrics, not to mention an umbrella, an electric light and a large mirror. (Fig. 18) Rauschenberg’s inclusion of such diverse materials, arrayed across the support in a haphazard manner, contrasted starkly with Cubist collages which subordinated their collage materials to a coherent motif such as a still-life. Rauschenberg’s composition is much more closely related to the all-over painting technique of Jackson Pollock. In Rauschenberg’s combines, the viewer’s eye is drawn episodically across the surface, falling on one and then another image, pausing at the particularly thick passages of color-laden brushwork, with no central focus. As a result of this compositional style, the viewer may find herself comparing groups of things in an attempt to make sense of the combine. For example, in *Charlene*, Rauschenberg included five different pages of comic strips. However, he aligned the grid format of each section differently, sometimes squaring them with the frame, at others wrinkling them to destroy the pristine grid, or turning them on an angle. Thus, while the images and text of the comic strips might be painted over or simply incomprehensible, taken out of context as they are, the grid format remains readable even where it is altered or misaligned. In this way, Rauschenberg introduced a dialogue of sorts based on similarity and difference among different parts of the composition. By repeating the compositional device of the grid format, if not the imagery contained in the comics, the composition encourages visual comparison across the work.

In a similar manner, Rauschenberg deployed mirrors in his combines as part of a larger compositional strategy. In this respect, *Charlene* and *Minutiae* (1954) both serve as good examples of his early use of mirrors. In *Charlene*, the
more traditional collage materials already discussed, such as newspaper clippings and lace, mingle with somewhat less conventional elements such as the umbrella splayed out in the top right and the functioning electric light placed in a shallow box on the left-hand side. Neither the umbrella, which has been completely flattened and affixed to the wood panels, nor the electric light focus the viewer’s attention on any one central aspect of the work. This is partly because of their placement at opposite ends of a rather large composition. The lack of central focus is also due to the fact that all individual elements are muted by the raucous celebration of color and brushstroke occupying the left and the center of the composition. The mirror, as a result of the brushwork, is even less noticeable, despite its size. A full-length mirror mounted below the umbrella, it is almost entirely covered by paint. It is literally overtaken by the dripping pool of unmixed blue and white paint that covers its top and stretches more than halfway down its length. Under this layer of drips, a thin wash of white paint masks the limpid reflectivity of the mirror, creating a light-filled, hazy passage of white paint.

Across the canvas, the clouded mirror finds its luminary counterpoint in the electric light placed in a box recessed back into the support. Like the flattened umbrella with its implied volume and its pendant recession which reveals the actual volume of the work’s wooden frame, the contrast between the flat surface of the mirror and the revealed depth of the recessed box introduces a subtle spatial tension in the work between surface and volume, and between reflected depth and actual depth. Moreover, the behavior of the light that establishes their relationship also contributes to the spatial tension. As the electric light sits recessed into the thickness of the support, it simultaneously throws light out into the viewer’s space. In a witty compositional inversion,
Rauschenberg deployed the mirror as a reversal of the electric light, by virtue of the fact that the mirror draws the ambient light of the viewer’s space into the panel instead of casting light outward. Thus, the reflected light appears to fall behind the picture plane, introducing an illusionistic depth in contrast to the actual shallow depth of the recession on the other side.

Like Charlene, Minutiae (Fig. 19) also downplays the mirror in the composition, although the mirror in this piece, in contrast to the full-length mirror of Charlene, is much smaller. Hung in the center of the front panel, which extends out about 2 1/2 feet from the rear panels, the small round mirror, characteristic of more personal uses such as examining one’s face, is notable for the way that Rauschenberg employed it, rendering it unusable for its typical purpose. Suspended within a circular hole in the panel about waist-high, the mirror seems to encourage reflection on the construction of the piece instead of self-reflection. In Minutiae, the emphatic three-dimensional thrust of the combine painting is made self-reflective by the mirror. In its suspended position, the small mirror can twist to reflect partial glimpses of the viewer’s body as she stands in front of the work. From another vantage point, it reveals the thickness of the front panel or, turned backward, the riot of colors in the two back panels. Thus, in this work the mirror serves two functions, drawing the viewer into the work while it also holds the two panels together in a visual relay across real space. In both Minutiae and Charlene, the mirror is used to highlight the spatial tensions that characterize all of Rauschenberg’s combines, but in neither is its role a central motif in the viewer’s perception of the works.
2.2 Depicted Mirrors in the Silk-screens

Between the fall of 1962 and the spring of 1964, Rauschenberg set aside the three-dimensional combines to experiment with the spatial possibilities of the two-dimensional silk-screen, a technique popular in graphic design at the time. But unlike Andy Warhol, who also took up the technique during this period, Rauschenberg deployed multiple silk-screened images across his compositions in much the same manner as his combines did. Rarely did he employ one large, central element. Instead, the silk-screens pile up across the canvas like a collage, often with seeming randomness. The resemblance that the overlapping images share with the way photographs might pile up on a table forms the basis for Leo Steinberg’s important analysis of Rauschenberg’s work. Steinberg cites Rauschenberg’s silk-screens as exemplifying the fundamental shift in post-war art from the depiction of nature to the collection of culture, or from the human-structured verticality of modern art to the culturally structured horizontal flatbed of post-modern art. Steinberg’s description of Rauschenberg’s canvases as a “flatbed picture plane,” rather than as a window on to the physical world, also implies the physical act of pressing down that was instrumental in producing collages, combines, silk-screens and blueprints. Whether the horizontal action was the affixing of paper or object with glue by pressing it against the surface, or the pressure of the squeegee as it forces paint through the silkscreen, or the force of gravity upon the object left on light sensitive paper, all left their trace upon the support in one way or another, setting in motion an inevitable chain of events. The act of pressing down in one place effects an equal release from the flatness of the canvas in other parts of the composition, rendering the otherwise flat surface a site of spatial tension. Rauschenberg retooled his collage and combine
technique of physical accretion in the silk-screens, focusing his attention on the problems of applying pigment to a flat, traditional canvas ground. As a result, the silk-screen works provide some interesting insights into his understanding of the nature of the ground as a receptive and supple surface where spatial reversals play out with profound consequences. Whereas the combine paintings materially altered the ground, transforming it into a figure by embedding objects into it, the silk-screens use the technique of applying pigment to the negative space, while leaving the positive space unpainted. This technique reverses the traditional figure/ground relationship of pigment to surface, by visually transforming the unpainted ground into a figure. In the logic then of Rauschenberg’s figure/ground reversals, the ground reaches out to the viewer.

Rauschenberg’s deployment of the silk-screened images reinforces the spatial tension already implicit in the silk-screen process. The various images silk-screened onto Rauschenberg’s canvases are typically of differing scale and disparate content, and seen from various perspectives, hindering any coherent sense of spatial recession as a result. For instance, *Retroactive II* from 1964 features images of John F. Kennedy, a detail of Rubens’ seventeenth century panel painting *The Toilet of Venus*, a glass and a crate of oranges, all seen from eye level. (See fig. 30) A parachuting astronaut, next to the central image of Kennedy, is seen from above, and a military truck placed above Kennedy is seen from below. These conflicting vantage points destroy the illusion of a unified depth, violate the flatness of the picture plane and require the viewer to reassess each image in order to understand the pictorial space.

In addition, the thick strokes of paint applied over the silk-screened images rest firmly on the surface of the canvas, emphasizing its flatness in contrast to the figurative depth of each image. For example, the white paint
surrounding Kennedy’s pointing hand isolates the image, negating the foreshortening of the photograph from which it was taken and making the hand appear to hover detached from the rest of the composition. The band of white paint over the crate of oranges just to the right of the disembodied hand also breaks up the illusionistic space of the photograph. In an inversion of traditional technique, Rauschenberg’s thick heavily applied white paint calls attention to the surface of the painting, rather than creating illusionistic depth. Moreover, where exposed canvas typically reinforces the flatness of the surface, in Rauschenberg’s silk-screens the roles are reversed. That is, because the heavy brushwork has been applied so methodically and so thickly white, it flattens out the paintings. The canvas that shows through the silk-screening ink, on the other hand, appears to advance and thereby accentuate the illusionistic three-dimensionality of the represented images. \(^{63}\) Nor is it a coincidence that the heavily applied paint is white. The white paint calls to mind the unpainted canvas, and, in contrast to the actual canvas, the passages of white paint appear more emphatically flat than the unpainted canvas does.

The use of white to depict solids and to recall the flat surface of the canvas visually enacts some of Wittgenstein’s observations in his *Remarks on Color*. \(^{64}\) It seems logical to argue that Rauschenberg’s close association with Jasper Johns introduced him to some of Wittgenstein’s ideas, and this seems particularly true of the philosopher’s reflections upon the nature of white. \(^{65}\) Wittgenstein held that the color white is opaque, while a color such as green can be transparent. As such, in Wittgenstein’s opinion, the application of white paint to a surface flattens out the composition, because the white denies a sense of recession through transparent colors. Meanwhile, colored inks applied to a canvas often
give the impression of transparency, because they create an atmospheric hue that begins to recede visually. This theory is brought to stunning realization in Rauschenberg’s *Tracer*.

The upper part of *Tracer’s* composition is dominated by a silk-screen of Rubens’ *Venus*, reproduced in blue ink. (Fig. 33) The supporting bars, evidently left under the canvas during the silk-screening process, leave bands of deeper blues across Venus’ back. This effect, coupled with the uneven application of paint through the silkscreen, produces a flickering impression that underscores the transparency of the blue and the elusiveness of the white support underneath. The white canvas, still visible through the silk-screening ink, takes on the blue tone of the silkscreen and remains spatially coherent with the rest of the silkscreen. In marked contrast, the thick white oil paint framing and mixing with the blue ink insists upon the flatness and opacity of the canvas. As if to heighten this effect, Rauschenberg employs a schematic box at the site of the tension between the white ground and the white paint, its proximity suggesting that Rauschenberg intended for it to underscore this disjunction. The schematic box, like the composition of the Venus at her mirror, allows the viewer an impossible view of both its front and back. While the box does this by virtue of its transparency, in contrast to the deployment of the depicted mirror in the silkscreens, both share the spatial device of a pivot between the two views. Thus the box and the silk-screened Venus and her reflection operate spatially to disrupt the flat canvas ground at the same time that the thick application of white oil paint reinforces the opacity and obdurate flatness of that ground.

The schematic box occupies an important position in *Transom* as well, but this time actually framing the site of that tension. (Fig. 34) In *Transom*, a red silkscreen of Velazquez’s *Rokeby Venus* occupies the center of the composition.
Rauschenberg pressed the squeegee across the screen vertically and horizontally highlighting the tactile surface of the canvas, at the same time that the movement suggests hand swipes across foggy glass—a gesture usually employed to reveal what lies behind the glass—and lends the swipes of paint the appearance of semi-transparency. Directly over this image, Rauschenberg painted the now familiar rectangular box shown in perspective. This time one side, the lower long side, has been filled almost entirely with white paint. Additionally, drips of white paint run across the image and the box. Rauschenberg introduces the perception of volume by way of the box, only to cloud that suggestion with the vertical path of the dripping paint as it stretched down the flat canvas. Additionally, the white side of the box clings relentlessly to the surface of the painting, rendering Velázquez’s illusionistic space problematic. The other sides of the box would continue to give the sense of three dimensions, were it not for the drips of paint that destroy the illusionistic recession of the box into space. The schematic box in these works foregrounds the tension between the illusionistic space of the photographs, from which these silk-screens were made, and the flat, tactile physicality of the paint, as well as the tension between figure and ground and transparency and opacity.

Rauschenberg’s focus on the varying degrees of transparency and opacity that canvas and paint can suggest reflects the dual attributes of illusionistic painting’s two main analogies: windows and mirrors. Despite their differences, both the window and the mirror convey the same sense of a framed view into a space that appears outside the picture plane, just as the mirrors in the Rubens and Velázquez provide the viewer with a framed view of Venus’ turned face. Nonetheless, the mirror and window analogies function differently, with the window providing a view into space by virtue of its transparency and the mirror
by its opaque reflectivity. Rauschenberg layering of transparency and opacity evokes both analogies by creating a visual experience based on both the opacity of the white paint and its associated canvas and the transparency of the silk-screening ink. However, by applying the white paint so thickly as to encourage an analogy between the white canvas and the opaque white paint, Rauschenberg tipped the scales towards an opaque, reflective experience. At bottom, both paint and canvas are opaque in Rauschenberg’s silk-screens. And by extension, all vision is defined by opacity. Transparency is only an illusion that Rauschenberg continually undermines in this works. In this way, Rauschenberg’s silk-screens favor the mirror analogy for illusionistic representation and prefigure his later use of reflective materials as a ground.

2.3 Silk-screening on Reflective Materials

More than thirty years after these allusions to the window/mirror dichotomy, Rauschenberg combined the silk-screening process with the use of reflective materials, this time as a ground, intensifying the spatial tensions and figure/ground reversals, as well as the tension between transparency and opacity that he had begun to explore in his combines and silk-screens. Three series from the late 1980s, Shiners, Galvanic Suite, and Urban Bourbons, employed aluminum supports, which were frequently polished to a high reflectivity or even mirrored. Big D Ellipse (1990), a triptych from the Shiners series, consists of silk-screened images applied to one mirrored panel and two anodized aluminum panels, with an object affixed to the mirrored panel. (Fig. 20) In this case, Rauschenberg included only one main figural element, an ordinary chair shown in four different orientations across the painting. Each panel features a
chair painted right side up at the bottom, echoing the viewer’s orientation to the
work, with other chairs that are upside down at the top. The mirrored panel at
the left and the central panel, which is white-coated aluminum, also have chairs
shown on their sides with their tops meeting at the seam between the panels.
The chairs on the white and black aluminum appear almost ghostly compared to
the red, silver and white chairs on the mirrored panel. Rauschenberg has
heightened this effect by painting over the chair at the bottom of the white panel
with brushy passages of black and white paint.

As the viewer approaches the painting, her own body comes into view in
the mirrored panel, reflected in an illusionistic relationship to the painted chairs,
as if all occupied the same implied three-dimensional space behind the picture
plane. These empty chairs, one even appearing to sit on the reflected floor of the
gallery, create a visual experience made implicitly corporal by the complex
network of depicted and actual chairs, which present the illusion of a physical
reality in the reflective sections. Although the non-reflective panels and the
presence of heavy brush work deliberately negate the illusion of space, neither
can completely eliminate the sense of physical immediacy and spatial illusion
confronting the viewer who encounters her reflection within the ground of the
painting. The complex spatial construction is reified in the silver chair, an actual
chair (its silver paint echoing the silvered appearance of the mirror) affixed on its
side to the mirror’s surface. Both the white chair, which beckons the viewer into
the reflected space behind the surface, and the silver chair, which shares the
same three dimensional reality as the viewer but is rendered non-functional by
its horizontal orientation, are inaccessible despite their individual appeals to the
viewer’s physical presence, in one case illusionistically, in the other, sculpturally. Thus the viewer is invited into a space which she cannot enter but on which she does have a visible effect.

Another work from the *Shiners* series, *Ballast* (1987), (Fig. 21) exhibits similar strategies for constructing spatial ambiguities in the work that attempt to bridge the gap between art object and viewing subject. To accomplish this, again Rauschenberg incorporated both three-dimensional objects affixed to the surface of a reflective metallic ground (in this case stainless steel) and silk-screened versions of a similar object. In *Ballast*, the object is a schematic cube consisting of the cube’s frame and four internal supports. Like the chair, the cube has very strong spatial associations, and both, in fact, are reprises of chairs and schematic boxes from earlier works. The actual cube attached to the surface of *Ballast* is repeated as a motif in the illusionistic drawing of a square, hollow brick box reminiscent of a section of chimney, providing a counterpoint to the actual shape occupied by the cube in the shallow, depicted space of the illusionistic box. A further variation of hollow boxes occupies the center of the work in the silk-screened photograph of an open food cart with a pitched canopy on top. All three are either depicted in white or painted white, chromatically unifying them. Unlike *Big D Ellipse*, Rauschenberg did not complicate the spatial relations in *Ballast* by making the cubes appear readable in multiple orientations. Both depicted box forms can only be perceived in one way, refusing shallow spatial inversions. Nonetheless, the play between the real and the represented echoes the confusion between figure and ground that arises with a mirrorized support. As the viewer stands in front of the work, her own reflection destroys the readability of the silk-screens which rely on the surface’s neutrality and stasis for their visual effectiveness. Thus, the ground of the image undermines the figure
when it is viewed, and, paradoxically, the viewer is encouraged to abandon her optimal vantage point directly in front of the work in order to better see the images from a position out of the area reflected in the support. Of course, such evasions do little to remedy the situation in most cases, simply because other works in an exhibition or other objects in the same room will invariably enter the work through their reflections.

Rauschenberg employed similar figure/ground reversals as those noted in *Big D Ellipse* when he silk-screened images of sculpture onto reflective grounds in *Favor-Rites* from the *Urban Bourbon* series. (Fig. 22) Made up of two aluminum panels, one mirrored, one enameled, this work is comprised solely of silk-screened images. As in his other works from this period, the juxtaposition of differing vantage points and varying scales destroys any sense of a unified and coherent painted space. Just as he did in the silk-screens on canvas, Rauschenberg uses the support to reverse figure/ground relationships. However, the reflective surfaces complicate the space without needing a substitute like the heavily applied white paint of the silk-screens. The reflective surfaces Rauschenberg uses in the eighties reacts with the applied paint in ways distinctly different from the way paint would appear on a canvas. For example, on a canvas, passages of unpainted ground tend to assert the literal surface flatness of the support, while the painted area (in illusionistic paintings) tends to recede into pictorial depth. When Rauschenberg paints on mirrored aluminum, on the other hand, the mirror reflects the flat application of paint, highlighting its opacity and materiality. In contrast to the unpainted area in the center, the paint clings to the surface or even appears to move forward from the surface. Meanwhile, the unpainted area recedes into reflected depth. This effect is further underscored by the emphatic spiraling movement of the raptus group at the left,
which asserts a powerful physical presence. The painted figures’ presence is juxtaposed to the adjacent reflection of the viewer’s body in the center. That unpainted area provides the most emphatic recession into depth in the work, as the reflection of the gallery floor rising to meet the wall near the center of the composition pulls the space backward. Unlike silk-screens on canvas, the flat surface of the support is not apparent when that support is reflective, except where Rauschenberg’s thick strokes of paint are reflected on the surface, drawing the viewer’s eye back to the surface. Moreover, the presence of the blue grid of a barred window silk-screened over the place where the two panels meet would also emphasize the flat surface of the support, except for the slight angle and bend in the grid. Both of these passages introduce a shallow depth into the composition. The viewer is drawn into the unpainted space by virtue of her reflection. Rauschenberg even included the word “personal” across the top of the bus, perhaps to suggest the personal, even corporal, involvement of the viewer in the painting. As the painted space by turns recedes, advances and flattens, the relationship of the viewer to all of these images fluctuates in much the same way one must change vantage points to view Rauschenberg’s work. And yet, as the viewer moves in front of the work, she effects changes on the surface, rendering the unpainted ground figural as well. Through these strategies, Rauschenberg ensured that the gap between art and life, or more pointedly between the art object and the viewing subject, is bridged.

2.4 Reflection and Viewer Interaction

The three series on reflective supports from the eighties have another precedent in Rauschenberg’s career from the late sixties. After Rauschenberg won the
grand prize at the Venice Biennale in 1964, he destroyed the collection of silk-screens that had gone into the works he exhibited there and began concentrating on the possibilities that technology offered him for bridging the gap between art and life. Like the works on reflective materials from the 1980s, his technological works strove to acknowledge and involve their viewer, thus aligning them with the work of Minimalists like Morris, which dominated the discourse of art at that time. The technological works were also predominantly constructed of reflective materials, which encouraged self-contemplation during the viewing experience. The technological works, however, made the viewer’s active involvement necessary to viewing. For example, three works from 1968, Soundings, Solstice, and Revolver, all require some action from the viewer to activate them.\footnote{68}

*Soundings* (Fig. 23) consists of one long partially mirrorized panel, eight feet high and 36 feet long, behind which 18 panels of Plexiglas are arranged in two rows.\footnote{69} The two rows of Plexiglas are silk-screened with images of common chairs shown from multiple vantage points. These panels are arranged in a darkened room with a sound-activated spotlighting system designed to respond to the level and pitch of noise inside the room. When visitors enter the space, the entire room is dark, allowing the mirrorized panel to reflect the visitors’ ghostly presence. As the noise level rises and falls different lights go on and off, revealing the various images of chairs, which appear to tumble through space as the lights change.

At 120 inches high and 192 inches long and wide, the cubic construction of *Solstice’s* (Fig. 24) mimics the Minimalist cube, so prevalent at the time. However, rather than having an alienating effect by excluding the viewer and creating obstacles in the gallery, *Solstice* attempts to eliminate completely the gap between art work and viewer. Consisting of five automatic doors mounted
parallel to each other on a low platform lit from below, the work beckons its viewer to enter into it, activating each door. As the automatic doors open and close, the images silk-screened on each door are recombined as each layer adds and removes images in a fluctuating composition that depends upon the movement of the gallery visitor through its interior. Just as *Soundings* is best viewed with a large audience that could produce the broadest variety of lighting combinations, *Solstice* is almost entirely dependent upon more than one viewer because its viewer and participant cannot be synonymous. To witness the shuffling of images that occurs with the participant’s passage through the work, the viewer must remain outside the work for the best vantage point. For the participant, the layers of images become less dense as each successive layer is left behind. Without a cooperative effort, the viewer’s experience of the work is limited.70

The third work from 1968, *Revolver* (Fig. 25), also employs multiple movable panels of silk-screened Plexiglas. However, this work is viewed on a more intimate scale. Only 78 inches high by 77 inches wide and relying on the ambient lighting of the gallery, the work is technologically less complex, while it allows for an even greater variety of image reconfigurations than either *Soundings* or *Solstice*. The four panels of circular Plexiglas are mounted one before another on a base that rotates them vertically as the viewer stands a few feet away at a console controlling the direction of rotation for each panel. As a result, the viewer has a greater effect on the work, because she can adjust the panels at will to display any number of image combinations.

Finally, Rauschenberg produced *Carnal Clocks*, a late technological work dating to 1969, consisting of fifteen large-scale clocks with silk-screened Plexiglas faces. (Fig. 26) Like *Revolver*, *Carnal Clocks* is more intimate than *Soundings* or
Solstice, although the degree of intimacy has more to do with the images chosen rather than the scale or operation of the work. Reflection plays an important role in Rauschenberg’s technological works, not only because it provides a surface which is continually in flux and reflects the viewer, but also because it reflects the prevalent theme of collaboration. While this work does not respond to the viewer, its face is reflective, and its appearance does fluctuate over time. The clock mechanisms installed in the works activate different combinations of lights based on the time, most often leaving the majority of the faces of the clocks dark and semi-reflective. It is the subject matter that makes them the most infamous and least discussed works. Closely cropped and enlarged photographs of the artist’s friends’ genitals interspersed with suggestive photographs of bull’s eyes, turtles, tulips and Janus-headed stand-pipes are only visible in glimpses through most of the day; twice a day, at noon and midnight, they are illuminated fully.

To a certain extent, the work functions like a technological peep show. The clocks’ near invisibility in the literature on Rauschenberg is directly related to the embarrassment experienced by the viewer, who not only witnesses these very personal exposures, but also sees herself looking in the reflection on the surface of the clocks. Indeed, the clocks were made in an effort to use embarrassment as a medium. One would imagine that photographing a friend’s body at such close range would involve a certain amount of embarrassment for both parties, regardless of the evident willingness to collaborate on the project. Nonetheless, it is this spirit of collaboration that produces the works, just as the viewer’s collaboration is necessitated by the other technological works. It is important to note that the same spirit of collaboration can be found earlier in Rauschenberg’s
career, not only in his many performance collaborations with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, but also in a particularly important interpretation of the White Paintings of 1951.

2.5 The White Paintings as Empty Mirrors

When the White Paintings (Fig. 29) were first exhibited at the Stable Gallery in 1953, critical reaction was decidedly negative. The exhibition was Rauschenberg’s second show in New York. The first show in 1951 was at the Betty Parsons Gallery, following a show by one of her better-known artists at the time, the Abstract Expressionist, Barnett Newman. Rauschenberg’s 1951 show attracted the attention of John Cage, an experimental composer who visited the exhibition. After their first meeting, when Rauschenberg gave Cage a collage from the show which the composer requested, Rauschenberg found a strong ally in Cage and each had a profound impact on the other. The series of White Paintings, usually multi-paneled works painted in white house paint with a roller on canvas, was begun in the summer of 1951, after Rauschenberg’s first exhibition. It seems likely that they were inspired by Newman’s zip paintings, which Rauschenberg would have seen at the Betty Parsons Gallery. In her essay on Rauschenberg’s early work, Roni Feinstein quotes Rauschenberg’s letter to Betty Parsons from October 1951 in which he describes his paintings as follows:

“`They are large (1 white as 1 God) canvases organized and presented with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement, and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends...It is completely irrelevant that I am making them--Today is their creator.”' $^{73}$
By the summer of 1952, the paintings took on a new significance when they inspired Cage to write 4’33”.

The composition consisted of three movements of silence, lasting four minutes and thirty-three seconds. For the duration of the work, the pianist, David Tudor, sat at a piano, decidedly not playing it. Cage had indicated that he had wanted to compose silence. Evidently, his encounter with the White Paintings encouraged him to do so. Suddenly the paintings were no longer referring to God, instead Rauschenberg said they were “...hypersensitive...So that one could look at them and almost see how many people were in the room by the shadows cast, or what time of day it was.”

Considering Rauschenberg’s earlier statement that they embodied the “plastic fullness of nothing,” his new claims about their ability to reflect the mundane details of their exhibition might seem a far cry from the poetic absence he first imagined. However, his final statement where he claims that “Today is their creator” leaves the possibility open that the works are more than simply Rauschenberg’s intention. Cage echoed Rauschenberg’s later interpretation of the works as a blank slate on which atmospheric effects were condensed when he described them as “airports for lights, shadows, and particles,” and it seems likely that Cage’s response to these paintings deeply influenced Rauschenberg’s own interpretation of them. Thus, an interpretive collaboration between the two revealed one of the directions Rauschenberg’s art would follow.

The works visual similarity with Newman’s broad fields of evenly applied color and the White Painting’s flat white color has everything to do with Rauschenberg’s early influences between 1948 and 1951. During his first visit to Black Mountain College, he heard Josef Albers’ lectures on color and on materials, which had a lasting impact on Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg also frequented the Cedar Bar to listen to the Abstract Expressionists debate about
painting as well, believing before his first exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery that his work related to theirs. The jump then to Cage’s and Rauschenberg’s later interpretation of the works may seem a larger one than it really was. As Dorothy Gees Seckler suggested as early as 1966, Rauschenberg’s use of white and his awareness of the viewer before that work may have found its roots in Albers’ lectures on color and its perceptual effect on the viewer. The relationship between Rauschenberg’s statements may best be understood in light of a third statement, cited fairly frequently, in which he announces his commitment to work in the gap between art and life. By relinquishing his own authority and playing up the viewer’s role in perceiving the works, Rauschenberg paves the way for his works to bridge the perceived gap between his art and its viewer.

Moreover, Rauschenberg’s two statements about the White Paintings merely define the edges of the area in which he intends to work, an area somewhere between divinely inspired art and an aesthetic of the random and prosaic. Such a perspective also explains how it is that Rauschenberg’s work can be described by different critics as entirely given over to a Duchampian irony or to heavy-handed symbolism. Such a divided, contradictory character is possible within the perceptual emptiness of the whitewashed canvases that make up Rauschenberg’s White Paintings. By draining the canvases of all associations of shape and color, even texture, Rauschenberg creates a surface that not only collects lights and shadows from its environment, but one able to reflect the movement, and even the interests, of those before it. That is, if one wants to see these paintings as belonging to the mystical project of the Abstract Expressionists, continuing a tradition of aesthetic transcendence, then Rauschenberg’s first statements about the paintings in their purity and divinity
are probably most accurate. But if one wants to imagine the paintings as wiping that slate clean to begin anew, without the emotional, psychological baggage of Abstract Expressionism, then a reading inspired by Cage that foregrounds the work’s emptiness and mutability certainly makes more sense. In their ability to inspire both interpretations, the *White Paintings* function like an empty mirror, reflecting the interests of the viewer, as well as her shadow. It should be clear that Cage’s reading of the *White Paintings* as empty and reflective has had sustained importance throughout Rauschenberg’s career—an importance which is all the more pointed because the *White Paintings* inspired the viewer to collaborate on the work’s meaning, and Cage’s particular collaboration on this project was embraced entirely by Rauschenberg.

The *White Paintings* also foreshadow Rauschenberg’s own fascination with the white canvas and its duplication within his combine and silk-screen compositions. Seen in light of the later silk-screens on reflective surfaces, the white surfaces of the *White Paintings* assert their reflectivity and opacity over the transparency canvas takes on when combined with color. There is an important corollary to Rauschenberg’s perceptually opaque and reflective surfaces in the writings of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s writing on visual perception and art asserts that vision begins with opacity, and, consequently, the self-knowledge that comes through that vision before a mirror begins also with opacity. “It is not a self through transparence, like thought... It is a self..., that is caught up in things, that has a front and a back, a past and a future.”\(^8\)

In his late essay, *Eye and Mind* (1961), Merleau-Ponty asserts that all vision is essentially seeing at a distance.\(^8\) That is, we automatically envision a void of empty space between us and the object we contemplate. But, as has been
discussed in the introduction, Merleau-Ponty argued that this perception is wrong. Everything in this world, whether visible or not, shares a single flesh, which he calls the Flesh of the World. A particularly helpful example of what he means by this Flesh comes from a passage in *Eye and Mind* where he describes looking into a full swimming pool and contemplating the tiles on the floor of the pool. It is through and because of the transparent water, which Merleau-Ponty would call the Flesh of the World, that we see what lies behind it. Thus, like the pool full of water, empty space is actually full, despite the fact that we can see through it.

As a result, for Merleau-Ponty, the question of absolute space, that is, space beyond one particular perspective, and its relation to painterly depictions of depth is central to the act of painting, particularly modern painting. As he points out, Paul Cézanne and Robert Delaunay both sought some way of representing depth in painting, despite the fact that Renaissance one-point perspective offered what seemed to some to be the perfect solution. Instead, what interests these painters, and Merleau-Ponty, is the way that each object we see, even when one partially occludes another, we know to be autonomous, and that despite the fact that they may appear to be layered into a single space, we know them to exist in two separate spaces, one further away than the other. According to Merleau-Ponty, both spatial interpretations are possible simultaneously because depth is the first and only dimension that contains height and width.

Depth thus understood is...the experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global ‘locality’...from which height, width and depth are abstracted, of a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is *there*. 
If we extend this description of a painterly project in search of depth to an interpretation of Rauschenberg’s work, the layering of the silkscreen images from 1962-1964 suddenly come to view as conceptually continuous with the combine paintings’ emphatic three-dimensionality. In this continuum, the technological works, which followed the destruction of the silk-screens, stretch Rauschenberg’s exploration of depth into a series of orchestrations of room-sized environments. Moreover, the works from the late eighties employing both the silkscreen and combine techniques make Rauschenberg’s interest in a lived depth more explicit. By employing reflected, illusionistic and actual depth together, Rauschenberg forces the viewer to analyze her perceptions and test them with her fluid experience of the work. Thus, the absolute space of the viewer’s experience is made continuous with painterly space. This spatial continuity undermines the perception of a gap between Rauschenberg’s art and his viewer; or, as the artist would say, it works in the gap between art and life, connecting the two.

In both Rauschenberg’s oeuvre and Merleau-Ponty’s writing, the mirror functions centrally within perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, the mirror is a prerequisite for vision.

The mirror image anticipates, within things, the labor of vision…the mirror arises upon the open circuit [that goes] from seeing body to visible body…The mirror itself is the instrument of universal magic that changes things into a spectacle and spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself.85

This passage, written in 1961, could be a description of the viewer’s experience in front of *Big D Ellipse* were it not for the fact that it predates the painting by nearly 30 years. The mirrored aluminum in this work both causes and condenses the perceptual ambiguities Rauschenberg returns to time after time. One can
imagine the perceived distance between the viewer and the art work—a distance that is at one and the same time reified by the actual chairs affixed to its surface and undermined, in this case, by the viewer’s reflection in the mirrored panel (by a literal “drawing in” of the spectator)—as analogous to the perceived dichotomy between art and life in a more general sense. It becomes clear that one way Rauschenberg attempted to work within this dichotomy, or “gap” as he puts it, is through the use of mirrors and reflective surfaces. Seen in this light, Rauschenberg’s choice of Rubens’ Venus at Her Toilette and Velazquez’s Rokeby Venus is even more pointed. Both images recall the western painterly tradition that reached a pinnacle in the works of the Baroque artists represented here. At the same time, these icons of this tradition cavort with media images of life in the United States in the 1960s, highlighting spatial and temporal tensions within the collages. The substantive juxtaposition of “high” art and kitsch is paralleled in the formal pairing of the illusionistic representations of depth with the modern valorization of surface-clinging brushstrokes. As an extension of these tensions, the depicted mirror calls to mind its function to represent depth ironically by virtue of its flat, monochromatically applied silvering. In the silk-screens, the painted mirror thwarts the transparent passage of vision by reflecting, or bending back, Venus’ gaze to the viewer. By contrast, the single image of transparency in this series occurs in the image of an average drinking glass, filled with water. While the mirror analogy is represented repeatedly (even presented out of the context of its original composition), but always with the reflection intact, the window is transferred to an image of roundness, fullness, and reflectivity, again replacing the expected passage of vision through a surface, which necessarily disappears in the process, with a transparency that fills out and blocks that passage. While Rauschenberg rejects the vertical and transparent
window that structured art since the Renaissance, it is not in favor of a hard, horizontal picture plane. Instead, Rauschenberg’s surfaces collect the imagery of culture, as Steinberg argued, doing so typically on a shifting, supple ground, one which itself reflects the flux of that culture.

In this sense, the silk-screens on reflective surfaces, employed in the technological works of the late sixties and again in the eighties, are quite distinct from the collages, which Rosalind Krauss suggests place them into the simultaneity of past time, by their very materialization, as she puts it. Though the silk-screened images may in fact act as delays (i.e., they are part of a present that is now past; they have been fixed onto a surface), their placement on a reflective surface sets them into a space continually in flux, changing with the presence of a viewer. The images are thus fixed in the continuous present of the world that faces them, even if only acting as reminders of some past action or desire. Their relationship to the present will continue to change, not only reflecting but also necessarily exerting effects on that present. The temporality in the varying perspectives of the silk-screens and the constant tensions of their surface has been extended in the reflective surfaces to include the space/time of the viewer in the much the same way the White Paintings did. In the same manner that the organizing structure of the mirror provided a space in which to make the past and the future present, Rauschenberg’s reflective works provide a space in which to reassess his silk-screens of 1962-1964 and to notice his continuous attempt to explore depth as an integral element in the simultaneous attachment of and estrangement between art and life.
2.6 Mirrors and Language

While Rauschenberg has not produced a large body of writing, what he has produced has been very illuminating, despite its frequently contradictory nature. As was the case with his own contradictory interpretations of the White Paintings, Rauschenberg frequently posits different possibilities and then leaves the final decision up to the viewer, whose responsibility it is to collaborate on the ultimate meaning gleaned from the work. The works themselves beg to be read. Not only does his use of diverse images invite interpretations to explain their appearance in one work, but his compositional technique of layering images and painting over them functions in a manner akin to language. That is, the stringing together of seemingly arbitrary images echoes the way that language links together arbitrary marks to create words. These words then refer to something outside themselves, just as the silk-screened images appear to function as symbols in some larger allegory.

In her essay “Perpetual Inventory,” Rosalind Krauss addresses both the prominence of reflection in Rauschenberg’s works as well as the stimulus to “read” these works as if they were intended as a veiled message. Using Random Order as a manifesto of sorts, Krauss illustrates how Rauschenberg combines the index—that is the physical trace of an external appearance as it is marked by the photographic process or as a reflection in a mirror—and the symbol—the associations which, she claims, well up from within the viewer. Indexical images abound in Rauschenberg’s work not only through the photographic process of silk-screening and light-sensitive paper, but also in the reflections which register...
the presence of the viewer. The mark of the silk-screening ink on the canvas and
the silhouette of the nude who once lay on the light-sensitive paper for Female
Figure (fig. 30) all bear the indexical trace of their absent referents. Moreover,
Rauschenberg’s compositional strategy of combining these indexes and his
seemingly expressive brushwork invite the symbolic response in the viewer. In
this way, Rauschenberg’s work layers the exterior and the interior of vision and
interpretation in a way more analogous to allegory than iconography, a strategy
that disguises deeper meaning through predominantly textual references. Thus
for Krauss, the interpretation of Rauschenberg’s work happens between the art
work and the viewer and only involves external references, including textual
ones, if the viewer brings them to the experience, implying a collaborative effort
from the beginning.

The index, that is the physical mark left on a sensitive surface, shares
much with the strategy of reflection as well. Activating the surface so that the
images continue to affect each other as well as the viewer, the works on reflective
surfaces extend their interpretive space into the space of the viewer. It is a
distinctive feature of Rauschenberg’s statements about his work that he resists
definitive interpretation. Instead, he prefers to redirect the question back to the
viewer, just as a mirror redirects the viewer’s gaze back to its origin. By
extension, the process of finding meaning in the work should be understood in
terms similar to those used for the technological pieces, that is as viewer-
dependent or even collaborative. In this way, the critics and historians of
Rauschenberg’s work become collaborators as well. Like the viewer who re-
combines images in the layered disks of Revolver or the participant who literally
calls up different layers of imagery in *Soundings*, Rauschenberg’s critics respond to and effect changes upon his work when they write about it. The reflective quality of all of these works not only unfixes their surfaces and thus the meanings of the images, but it also visually implicates the viewer in that interpretation through her reflection. Arguably, Rauschenberg himself participates in the unfixing of his own surfaces. Rauschenberg’s later reflective combines reinterpret the collages in the same manner in which his conflicting statements about the *White Paintings* reinterpret that series. Moreover, his sometimes contradictory statements often function in the same reflective way that the mirrored combines and the *White Paintings* do. His statements about the *White Paintings* are instructive here. The earlier statement in which he claims they are “white as...God,” embodying the “plastic fullness of nothing,” is intended to position these works in view of Newman’s exhibition in the same space. When Rauschenberg changes this emphasis in light of Cage’s response to the same paintings, he reveals for the first time his commitment to leaving the interpretation of his work up to his audience. More recently, he simply answers questions about meaning and intention by referring the viewer back to her own interpretation.

While Rauschenberg has eschewed the textual for the visual in his work, his writing about his work shares two characteristics with the art work discussed here: the compositional inversions so central to his silk-screens and the reflectivity of many of his supports. This is evident in his two statements about the *White Paintings*, discussed above. The earlier statement about the series’ transcendent qualities firmly connects them to the Abstract Expressionist project.
That is, it establishes their association with the dominant trends in art in the early 1950s. But his later statements about the work’s reflective qualities foregrounds their position on the side of life in the art and life dichotomy, while it reflects Cage’s interpretation of the paintings. Thus, not only do the two statements contradict each other, but they also play up different emphases, one that is indistinguishable from the art historical precedents that it cites and another that claims to favor all that falls outside art. With his use of reflection, in addition to the non-linear, pictorial syntax of collage, Rauschenberg visually achieves his goal to work within the gap between art and life by posing oppositions and comparisons that are fluid, moving between the two seemingly opposed realms through the collaborative agency of the viewer.
CHAPTER 3

GERHARD RICHTER’S MIRRORS: MEMENTO MORI OR MONOCHROME?

In the same way that reflection offered Robert Rauschenberg a way of responding to Abstract Expressionism with his own abstract, monochromatic paintings in 1951, while simultaneously working in the gap between art and life, it also provided a unique opportunity for Richter to respond to the current discourse surrounding painting. Working in West Germany from 1961 on, Richter was responding to a somewhat different context. On a fundamental level, the terms of the argument had changed drastically. This was reflected in the fact that, in the 1960s, the question was not what or how to paint; it was whether to paint at all. After his emigration, Richter found himself in the midst of a major shift away from painting in the wake of Minimalism, whose practitioners declared painting dead. In the face of such statements, Richter’s decision to paint was perhaps avant-garde in itself, however his themes increasingly underscored their deep roots in the history of modern painting and in the longer history of German painting. These themes became evident in the years following Richter’s visit to a Duchamp exhibit in 1965.

Scholars generally agree that Richter’s exposure to Duchamp at this point caused an important shift in his work that was most immediately visible in his change in subject matter. Up until that point, Richter had painted figuratively,
copying photographs and describing his work as a German form of Pop. Shortly after visiting the Duchamp exhibition, however, Richter introduced abstract themes into his painting and, notably for this study, began producing works made of glass, materializing the analogy between painting and a window or mirror.

Since 1965, Richter has covered the gamut of painterly subjects and allusions, making photographically based and abstract paintings, as well as works on glass, sometimes in turn, sometimes simultaneously. The variety of his work has garnered a good amount of scholarly attention. What has not drawn as much notice, however, is Richter's repeated return to mirrors and other works on glass. While it may seem obvious to point out the mirror's ability to produce figuration even while it remains entirely abstract, it is useful to consider this in light of Richter's movement between abstraction and figuration. He has claimed that photography allowed him to paint without stylistic choices; similarly, the play of images across his mirror's surfaces release Richter from compositional choices at the same time that the images appear as styleless as photography. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of the artist's mirrors chromatically mimic his gray monochromes, suggesting their relation to both the photographic works and the monochromes. Nonetheless, the mirror's function as a mediation between abstraction and figuration, while important, is by no means Richter's only motivation. Instead, a complex knot of art historical references informs each mirror group, with different motivations taking the fore at different times.
3.1 Glass, Windows and Curtains

The mirrors that Richter began producing in 1981 had their roots in glass constructions from 1967 and 1977, which implicitly referred to the metaphors that linked illusionistic painting with windows and mirrors, respectively. Given Richter’s shifts between abstraction and figuration, these references deserve some careful attention. In 1966, Richter introduced abstraction into his repertoire with the first color chart paintings. Not only did these color charts reference the splayed color samples from Duchamp’s *Tu M’,* but they also referenced the modernist grid-like compositions of Mondrian in a rigor and flatness more typical of Minimalist art. Moreover, their use of “ready-made” color, their standardized style, and their arbitrary arrangement within the grid recall the industrially produced and serially organized objects of Donald Judd. Coming after his paintings copied from found photographs, the color charts signal a significant shift in Richter’s works away from Pop-inspired subject matter to a Minimalist sensibility that appears to have been instigated in part by Richter’s visit to the Duchamp exhibit in Krefield in 1965.

After a year-long preoccupation with color charts, a handful of photo-paintings based on pornography and a few quasi-photographic, abstracted depictions of tubes, corrugated iron and doors—of which the first two groups strongly resembled Frank Stella’s stripe paintings from the late fifties and early sixties—Richter produced a single work in glass, entitled *Four Panes of Glass* (1967). While the work was not followed up with another in glass for ten years, judging by the twelve drawings which led up to it and the reappearance of the motif in a recent exhibition, the work provides a single glimpse into an issue which held the artist’s attention for more than thirty-five years.97
Richter was pursuing two related interests at the time, both of which inform this work. First of all, the issue of representation, which implicitly informed his photo-paintings, figures prominently in Richter’s work of this period. In addition to the panes of glass, two other series reference the metaphor that links illusionistic painting and windows. The first dates to 1965, when Richter painted a short group of Curtain paintings, in addition to his photo-based paintings. Consisting of closely cropped views of presumably curtained windows, the paintings merely suggest the window the curtains cover, obstructing the view through it. Even as they suggest an illusionistic view of the world, they deny that view into deep space, providing in its stead nothing more than the shallow folds of a cloth hung before it. Some of the curtains occupy the entire composition, creating a nearly abstract image. One of these, #163/1 by Richter’s own numbering system, was painted right after the Four Panes of Glass. Other curtains were given a spatial referent across the bottom where a dark band suggests a floor cast in shadow by the thickness of the curtains. In both cases, the series blurs the boundaries between representation and abstraction. Moreover, their referent, a curtain, suggests the obscuring of a view, veiling it behind a semi-abstraction.

The curtains call to mind a historical account of illusionistic virtuosity that features at its culmination a common curtain. That account originates in the Roman historian Pliny the Elder’s Natural History, in which Pliny described the competition between the two great Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. As the story goes, Zeuxis painted a still-life of grapes that was so well executed it even tricked birds into believing the painted grapes were real. Parrhasius was not to be out-done, however. When Zeuxis came to examine Parrhasius’ effort, he asked Parrhasius to pull away the curtain that covered the painting only to find
out that the curtain was painted, not real, at which point Zeuxis conceded victory to Parrhasius. The story implicitly suggests that illusionism is closely associated with tricking the educated eye into believing something is there that is not. As a result, it was Zeuxis’ previous knowledge that curtains often covered paintings that fooled his eye. By painting the series of curtains, Richter altered the stakes by positioning the curtain between illusionism and abstraction, drawing on the viewer’s knowledge of both the story and the current trend toward complete abstraction in painting.

Richter returned to a similar line of thought, coupling the shallow depth of shadows with references to traditional illusionistic representation in 1968, when he painted a series of windows set just before a wall onto which their mullions cast shadows. In this series, Richter employs two compositional devices to refer to oppositions between figuration and abstraction and surface and depth. By allowing a view through the window, in this case implied by the mullions, Richter reinforced the association with illusionism. However, the view provided is not into a deep space but is in fact blocked by the abstraction most favored by the Minimalists, the monochrome. Thus, the windows reveal a fact that was hinted at in the nearly abstract curtain series; that is, all figuration is inherently abstract. It is only the shadows in the window and curtain series that suggest any figuration. The grid structure of the mullions and the monochromatic plane retain their references to modern abstract art, echoing the grid format that dominated the work of such high modernists as Piet Mondrian and contemporary artists like Agnes Martin and Robert Ryman and the monochromatic planes of artists like Ryman and Rauschenberg. With regard to the grids, Rosalind Krauss has suggested that every modernist grid represses a symbolist window and that this window, and ultimately the grid, emblematize
the desire to freeze the flow of “reality” in art.\textsuperscript{101} As a result of this cessation, Krauss suggests, the grid also emblematizes a shift in modernism away from the idea of development, precisely because it resists aesthetic development and its interpretive narrative. Thus, Richter’s windows couple the grid and the window in a way that emphatically denies any sense of development or transcendence by blocking it all with a monochrome.

In a more narrow sense, the modernist grid could also be seen as the herald of the death of figuration in painting. While it would be a stretch to describe a Mondrian composition as mourning that death, it does not seem so far-fetched as a description for Richter’s gridded windows, which open on to nothing. There is no space that extends or transcends our limited space before the painting. These windows reveal nothing more than a monochromatic gray plane set inches from the surface grid. Where Mondrian’s primary colors and grids suggest the possibility of creating a endless number of color and line possibilities by combining the elements provided in a single composition, Richter’s claustrophobic space yields a monochrome that appears more like the irreversible muddying of all colors, holding no promise of ever recreating anything. The curtains seem to offer no hint of visual plenitude either. Where historically curtains in art provided a view into a private sphere because they were pulled back to reveal this view, Richter’s curtains appear immovable. Their folds hang down heavily and regularly to the floor. His use of extreme cropping also discoures the hope that they conceal anything that might satisfy the eye.

In tone, Richter’s windows differ drastically from Mondrian’s compositions. As Krauss noted, the avant-garde promise of originality and groundbreaking advancements was only a myth. That fact is evident when one considers that once Mondrian began his compositions, his work ceased to evolve at anything
near the pace it had up until that point. Instead, each painting merely presented altered compositional details, while his basic style remained the same for the next twenty years. Within this context, the larger question regarding Richter’s shifts between abstraction and figuration makes sense as part of a modernism that recognized the myth of its own originality, to borrow a phrasing from Krauss. That is, by accepting the breadth of motifs and stylistic choices available to the artist, Richter acknowledges the false sense of historical necessity that drove both Abstract Expressionism and even early Minimalism. Moreover, by withholding the visual transcendence associated with windows, Richter acknowledges the false promise of historical progression, forcing the eye to remain in the time and space of visual perception in much the same way a mirror does.

Seen in this light, the *Four Panes of Glass* provides a perfect transition between abstraction and figuration. Structurally, they participate in the pivot between the unified tableau inspired by Aristotle, with its single space in which a cohesive narrative unfolds, and the anti-historical, anti-narrative abstract plane. The conceptual pivot between these two modes of artistic endeavor materializes in the spatial pivot that Richter built into the work. All four panes of glass are mounted on freestanding iron frames and are attached on a horizontal hinge, which allows the viewer to pivot the glass panes up and down. Depending upon the lighting and the orientation of the glass panes to the viewer, the glass can appear either transparent or reflective, allowing for their association with both windows and mirrors in turn.

Because Richter claimed to have based his paintings on photography in order to tackle the problem of what to paint—a particularly thorny problem when many were declaring the medium dead—as opposed to using photographs
to reach a higher degree of illusionism, his choice to represent the metaphors and
metonyms of painting in the form of windows and curtains seems calculated to
explore the illusionistic possibilities still available to painting. But in their
actual appearance, these windows and curtains all present themselves as two-
dimensional hindrances to the unmediated experience of the world that they
would seem to promise. The Four Panes of Glass, like the windows and curtains,
consciously relies upon these invocations of the window at the same time that
Richter’s deployment of the glass undermines certain aspects of its association
with a window. That is, when the Four Panes of Glass are turned parallel to the
viewer’s gaze, they present themselves as tableau in an endless process of
becoming, as Rainer Rochlitz suggests when he describes them as empty.
However, when the panes are turned upward, they begin to reflect the light, thus
evoking their association with the reflectivity of mirrors. The light obscures the
illusion of a “tableau” behind the glass and renders its surface more nearly
abstract. That is, by virtue of the small detail of their hinges, these panes present
the possibility of both a narrative tableau and an abstract plane.

The second interest, and perhaps the most obvious painterly influence for
Four Panes of Glass, is the work of Marcel Duchamp, in particular the work on
glass, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass) (fig. 44).
Richter’s knowledge of this work can be traced to the Duchamp exhibition in
Krefeld in 1965 that included a photograph of it. When questioned in 1991
about the relationship between the two works, Richter stated,

I knew Duchamp’s work, and there certainly was an influence. It
may partly have been an unconscious antagonism...I think
something in Duchamp didn’t suit me—all that mystery-
mongering—and that’s why I painted those simple glass panes and
showed the whole windowpane problem in a completely different
light.
It is clear that both the associations with the windowpane (and by extension the
drawings and paintings of windows with their mullions) and with Duchamp are
at work in the *Four Panes of Glass*. The most obvious difference between them is
the absence of collaged materials in Richter’s glass. In terms of its production,
Richter’s glass is more comparable to Duchamp’s ready-mades, which were
industrially produced rather than handcrafted. For Duchamp, the ready-mades’
categorization as art was bestowed by the artist verbally when he declared them
art and not by the touch of his hand. Richter, on the other hand, claimed to
have abandoned choice in his photo-painting technique, evidently to avoid
personal taste by painting found and banal photographs. It is Richter’s hand that
makes them painting, not his assertion. In light of this, Richter’s decision to
present glass panes that were fabricated for him, according to his instructions,
appears to be a complete renunciation of his methods and a sudden embrace of
Duchamp’s ready-made technique. Nonetheless, Duchamp’s influence is evident
even earlier, haunting Richter’s shift from photo-based paintings to abstraction.

In 1966, the last photo-painting Richter produced before he began the first
color charts was a work titled *Ema (Nude and Staircase)*. (Fig. 43) It revisits the
theme of an earlier work based on a photograph in a fashion magazine from 1965
titled *Woman Descending the Staircase* (fig. 44). Together, they unmistakably refer
to Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, a work which depicts the progression
of a nude down a staircase in successive moments, interpreting Cubism as a style
devoted to depicting movement in time (fig. 45). In both of Richter’s paintings,
the action had already been frozen by the photograph on which the painting was
based. As a result, the suggestion of the woman’s movement is only implied in
Richter’s versions. The actual movement registered by the blur suggests the
accidental movement of the photographer’s hand, not the movement of the
women down the stairs, despite the fact that the blur does not exist in the original photographs. The movement, therefore, is grafted onto the surface of the paintings in the space/time of the process of copying the photograph. Richter, thus, fixed the flow of reality, just as Krauss argues the modernist grid does, in a controlled and contrived movement born in the space of the artist’s studio. And the movement emphasizes the hand of the artist rather than the life of the subject.

Michael Edward Shapiro has suggested that *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)*, exhausted the possibilities of the photo-paintings. It is worth noting that the work is based on a photograph of Richter’s first wife on a staircase in his studio. Richter certainly employs photographs that are personal to him, but at this point in his career they were few and far between. The most notable at this early date was *Uncle Rudi* (1965), which was painted from a photograph of Richter’s uncle in his Nazi uniform taken a few months before he died in combat (fig. 46). The main difference between *Ema* and *Uncle Rudi* is the huge disparity in their temporal immediacy. By 1965, Richter’s uncle had been long dead. Because he died when Richter was only a boy, Richter’s memories of the man were more than likely rather distant. Moreover, the political implications of the Nazi uniform were removed at two degrees from Richter’s immediate situation. By this point, Richter had lived through the end of National Socialism with the Nazi’s defeat in World War II and had escaped Communism in East Germany with his flight to the West in 1961. The photograph of his nude wife in the private space of his studio, however, would have certainly carried more immediate personal associations with it and as such hints at the increasingly introspective mood of 1966 and 1967.
Indeed, even the window paintings hint at such a mood. Their illusion of shallow space defined by the shadows of the mullions suggest a space that is analogous to the apparatus Richter employed when painting some of his photopaintings. Positioned with a projector behind him and the photograph projected onto the canvas, Richter occupied a shallow area between the original image and his reproduction of it. Additionally, Richter’s studio practice imbues the finished work with a new depth, that is the depth of the projection. It is through the limited space between projector and wall that the shadows of the original fill out around the artist.\footnote{111} Thus, just as Richter’s main discovery is that all representation is an abstraction, the related thought that all painted representations of space are always flat also holds true within these works.\footnote{112}

Because Richter followed up the portrait of his wife with Ten Colors, his first foray into abstraction, it seems likely that he employed them as \textit{ready-made} abstractions, in a conceptual continuation of the choice of photographs as \textit{ready-made} figurative motifs and as a sort of homage to Duchamp. The short series of photo-paintings based on pornography which follows the color charts, however, suggests also that the color charts, with their close association with artists and art supplies, were merely another personal motif which Richter exposed much the way he exposed his wife in \textit{Ema}, his complex Duchampian sympathies in his two versions of \textit{Nude Descending a Staircase} and even his family skeletons with \textit{Uncle Rudi}. Moreover, Richter’s interest in color at this point could be seen as the exposure of a repressed chromatic desire among the mostly gray photopaintings, which occupied him to that point.

The works Richter produced between 1965 and 1968 set the stage for Richter’s later works on glass. Just as the curtains and windows evoke the metonyms and metaphors of painting, the later glass and mirror works all
meditate on the history of painting, as well as reveal more personal concerns, sometimes with both professional and personal references tinged with a thematic of mourning. For example, Richter took up the motif of free-standing glass panels again in 1977 in three consecutive works, two titled *Pane of Glass* (415/1 and 415/2) and one titled *Double Pane of Glass* (416). (Fig. 47 and 48) Unlike the earlier *Four Panes of Glass*, these three works were painted gray on one side, rendering the panes of glass even more reflective than before and not at all transparent. These works were preceded by a short series of landscapes devoted to Mount Vesuvius (404-410) and a series of cloud paintings (411-414). Shortly after the painted glass works, Richter painted a single flower still life (425/3) and two portraits of his daughter Betty (425/4 and 425/5). (This is the first time since the photo-paintings of Ema and Uncle Rudi that Richter returns to undeniably personal subject matter to paint photographs of family members.) There is a melancholic mood that pervades these works devoted to the volcano, which entombed a Roman town, and the very personal images of the artist’s daughter. In fact, the second portrait of Betty (425/5) closely resembles in format and blurring treatment a later self-portrait from 1996 (836/1). (Fig. 49 and 50) In both cases, the blurring suggests an evasion right at the point when some presumably telling detail of the sitter’s personality should be revealed. The blurred quality of the photopaintings from this period is matched in the gray-painted glass which returns the viewer’s reflection in a chromatic haze reminiscent of his black and white photopaintings of the sixties. Like the portraits, the mirror works produced at this time withhold definition, imbuing the reflection with a sense of melancholic loss, which had everything to do with the modern conviction of the impossibility of figuration and portraiture in particular.
3.2 The Silvered Mirrors of 1981

In 1981, Richter employed glass again with emphatically reflective properties when he commissioned four silvered, industrially produced mirrors. The first two (470/1 and 470/2) were fairly large in scale, both measuring 225 x 318 cm. (Fig. 51) The second group (485/1 and 485/2) was somewhat more intimately scaled, measuring 100 x 100 cm each. (Fig. 52) These two groups were produced while Richter was engaged in a sustained project of abstraction, interrupted only by a handful of mountain landscapes and these mirrors. Not long after the mirror series, however, Richter turned to a new motif, the memento-mori, concentrating first on a series of candles in 1982 and then adding skulls to the still lifes in 1983. (Fig. 53 and 54) Robert Storr has suggested that Richter’s preoccupation with the motif could have been prompted by the artist’s 50th birthday, which would suggest that the photo-paintings, and perhaps the mirrors too, had a highly personal resonance for the artist. But Storr also notes the similarity between the skulls and an early drawing by Richter that seems almost undeniably a reworking of some of Picasso’s skulls, adding a professional dimension to Richter’s motivations.113

The candle and skull, as well as the mirror, were all fairly common motifs in the traditional genre of the *memento mori* or *vanitas* painting. Typically consisting of a painted still-life, these works were meant to remind the viewer of the transience of the physical world. All living creatures will be extinguished, just as a candle will, and ultimately reduced to nothing more than a pile of ashes. The mirror figures within the symbolism of *vanitas* paintings as a reminder of the
vanity of mere appearances and occasionally acts as the means of warning of our mortality. Such is the function of the mirror in the Furtenagle portrait discussed in Chapter One.

As Chapter One also noted, mirrors had a practical function as painter’s aids, particularly in the painting of a self-portrait, and, in this capacity, frequently appeared in depictions of the artist’s studio. As a result, they often carried with them both a general warning about the brevity of life, as well as the invocation of the private space of art production. Storr’s suggestion then that the skulls embodied a personal anxiety about the approach of death and a professional ambition is in tune with the dual aspect of the mirror in Richter’s work within the early eighties as well, if traditional mirror tropes are any indication. A passage by the artist from 1983, when the motif of the memento mori is at its height in his career, is revealing with regard to the increasingly personal and private nature of these works. Writing about Matisse’s later work, Richter rails “...most of the paintings are vacuous or positively irritating. They show a painter engaged in privatizing his work.” Richter’s irritation may reveal a concern about the direction of his own work and its continued relevance. It is worth noting that the memento mori are followed in 1983 with landscapes and abstractions, both of which could generally be said to have a more universal appeal and, particularly in terms of the landscapes, suggest a less personal sphere than the artist’s studio, if only through their photographic referent.

That said, it is important to note that the silver mirrors were not solely laden with personal concerns. Their reflectivity also rendered their surfaces emphatically public and universally relevant. Richter’s apparent association between the mirrors and memento mori and his related attempt to approach his personal concerns from a more public, universal standpoint, has an interesting
counterpart in the writings of Jacques Lacan, a psychoanalyst whose work was gaining increasing importance among many artists and art historians at the time. As mentioned in Chapter One, Lacan used the mirror as a means to describe how the subject finally recognizes herself when she realizes her divided nature. In his early essay on the mirror stage, Lacan described the mirror revealing the false nature of the child’s self-perception by delimiting her body and making her body appear complete outside of herself in a way that the child does not experience it. Thus, the mirror confronts the private imaginary experience of the child with her public image, encouraging her to fuse those disconnected experiences into one. This is, of course, what Richter attempted to do with his memento mori, as he universalized his own private concerns regarding death in vanitas motifs—a motif with a long history in German and Northern European painting.

It is important to note, however, that according to Lacan, the appearance of these two realms, one private, or imaginary, and one public, and in some senses real, is structured by a third realm, that of the symbolic. The tensions between these realms constitute each subject. Within the imaginary realm, the subject imagines herself whole. The real is the realm that abuts the imaginary realm, exposing the fallacy of the subject’s sense of completion. With the realization of this lack of completion and fullness comes a desire for something outside the subject to complete her—what Lacan refers to as the objet petit a. The desired thing can take the form of another person or even an object of which possession seems to ward off feelings of incompleteness or even the inevitability of death. Structuring the real and the imaginary realms, but largely invisible to both, is the symbolic realm. This is where social structures over which the subject has no control, such as family relations or language, work entirely
outside the subject, situating her within institutions that transcend her immediate experience. It is also the realm of the gaze. The gaze, as a structuring device, is the visibility that envelops the subject and defines her.

When Lacan described the gaze, he tended to rely on examples drawn from art in order to discuss its power. Situated outside the subject, the gaze does not originate from the viewer, but instead materializes in inanimate objects, like paintings. In one example, Lacan discusses the anamorphic skull which cuts across the bottom of Hans Holbein’s *French Ambassadors* as functioning like the gaze. The use of one-point perspective in the double portrait creates a space visually continuous with the viewers’ space. We are meant to identify with the two figures, positioned next to the possessions of their rank and status. And yet, the skull painted anamorphically across the bottom of the painting blocks the viewer’s sympathetic entry into the space of the painting and implicates her in another space before the painting, a space impossible to occupy from the viewer’s privileged position before the painting, but instead set at an angle dramatically oblique to the painting. This second vantage point has the effect of disrupting the painting from within, reminding the viewer that she is viewed and articulated as a subject outside of herself, from a vantage point which she cannot share. The skull’s invocation of the *vanitas* motif is important in this regard as well. For, it is at the moment that the viewer recognizes this other vantage point that she also becomes acutely aware of her imperfect control over the situation. When one stands in front of a painting, it is easy to imagine being one’s own master. However, this alternate view effectively undermines the viewer’s sense of self-mastery. Just at the moment the viewer acknowledges her
own visual and physical limitations—i.e. she cannot be in two places at once to view both the portrait and the skull from the prime vantage point—she also has a hint of her own mortal limitations.

Holbein’s anamorphic skull has stylistic similarities to Richter’s early work as well as thematic similarities to the *vanitas* paintings of the eighties. Just as the skull disrupts the illusionistic space of Holbein’s painting by calling attention to another vantage point, Richter’s blurring also disrupts the photographic space of his photopaintings, and his monochromes destroy the promise of illusionistic space in the windows. Critics such as Gertrud Koch have recognized the melancholic tone of the blurring technique as well. Stylistically, Richter’s paintings re-cast the fundamental terms of Holbein’s era in a contemporary warning of the death of “modernist” painting. The historical necessity of abstraction continues to flirt with illusionistic representation, just as Krauss suggested. And inversely, photographic illusionism is always in danger of slipping into abstraction.

In the same way that Richter’s compositional and stylistic obstructions evoked a general sense of loss, the practical invisibility of Holbein’s anamorphic skull was crucial to Lacan’s theory of the gaze. Its invisibility to the subject is what allows the gaze to retain its power over the subject, not because it harbors a voyeuristic element, but because, once it becomes visible, it enters into the real and is always susceptible to sliding into the position of the *objet petit a*, a place where it no longer articulates the subject in the way it had when it was invisible. This is not to suggest that the gaze is a fixed position within Lacan’s structure. The symbolic realm, like the imaginary and the real, is given over to slippage. Because they are contiguous with one another, the three seep into each other as well. Within a visual sphere, the realm of the symbolic is that to which the
Subject is compelled, but that which must remain elusive. In an effort to reach the symbolic, the artist is driven to create pictures that act as a screen for the gaze, making the gaze visible through a substitution.\textsuperscript{120} Art can function as a screen because it functions to capture the gaze in a form that acknowledges the impossibility of representing the gaze. The skull in the Holbein functions this way by making the image strange. Its strangeness is affected by its anamorphic orientation to the rest of the image and to its viewer. That very strangeness offers the possibility of recognizing an image of that which cannot be represented. Thus, the gaze is not represented; it is only referred to by the absence of spatial coherence.

Richter’s silvered mirrors mimic the elusive manifestation of the gaze in Lacan’s theory. By virtue of their reflectivity, they present an image with which the viewer is encouraged to identify, ultimately creating a situation akin to the mirror-stage. While the identification relies on the silvered back of the mirrors, that material effaces itself in reflectivity. Like the gaze, the tain of the mirror props up and makes possible the identification between the viewer and her reflected image. However, it is difficult to see the tain at the same time that one sees the reflection. Likewise, the gaze can only be revealed in a flash of light, in much the same way that a glare across \textit{Four Panes of Glass} disrupts the “tableau” presented behind each panel in an assertion of the materiality of glass.

The association between the silvered mirror and the gaze calls to mind a story of visual disruption related by Lacan about his desire to identify with a group of fishermen with whom he was working for a summer.\textsuperscript{121} It is ultimately through a revelation about his own invisibility within the group that Lacan realizes his inability to fit into the picture. What is important to Lacan is that this revelation comes from outside, when one fisherman asked whether Lacan could
see a sardine can glinting on the water. When Lacan replied in the affirmative, the fisherman retorted, to the amusement of the other fishermen, that the can could not see Lacan. Thus, the can is a gaze that, like the social classes one is born into, or the names bestowed on children, structures and articulates the subject. A mirror functions the same way when it reflects nothing but a blinding light. Once there is a clear reflection, it begins again to offer itself as a screen on which to project desires. The dual nature of the mirror as a ground upon which the surface either disappears to reveal an illusionistic depth through the act of reflection or arrests the eye on the surface through the use of glare is prefigured in Richter’s work with his *Four Panes of Glass* (fig. 40) and in his photo-paintings.

As Pelzer has explained with regard to Richter’s flower paintings (another *vanitas* motif), the real passes into painting at the moment of the recording of original movement, at the trace of the artist’s hand.

Thus the gesture as a movement given to vision is stoppage—something where a movement has ended. This temporal progression of haste, momentum, and forward movement concludes with a frozen gesture, a terminal point, a dimension of *fascinum* where the power of the gaze comes fully into play.122

The symbolic crystallizes the flux of the real. In the case of the flower paintings, the real is evident in the decay that has begun to bend the flowers. With its representational arrest, the decay becomes eternal and universal. Just as Richter’s blurring in his photopaintings crystallize movement while they recall its necessary flux, the photo-paintings stop an individual death on canvas, referring in this way to death in general. The silver mirrors also participate in a sort of fixing. However, that fixing does not fix an image. Instead, they aim to fix the viewer, both situating her within their boundaries and stopping her in her
tracks before her own image. They achieve this by virtue of their ability to return
the viewer, presumably lost in thought about the art she has been contemplating,
to an awareness of her embodied, and thus mortal, state.

3.3 Painted Mirrors in the Early 1990s

Richter returned to the theme of death that was raised with the *memento mori*
again in the late eighties just prior to his second group of mirrors. With series 18
*October 1977* (1988), Richter addressed the highly publicized and politically
charged deaths of imprisoned members of the Baader-Meinhof Group, a terrorist
cell of the Red Army Faction.123 While Richter claims to have approached the
subject with little sympathy for the terrorists or the government, he does assert
that the series condemns the ideologies of both sides.124 As such, the series
functions as part of a critique of the social and political institutions that structure
our lives, particularly when these institutions require or invoke radical
responses.

It is notable that one year later, Richter returned to the mirror motif,
producing two large-scale silvered mirrors, titled *Mirror 1* and *Mirror 2*. While it
is tempting to suggest that these silvered mirrors from 1989 were somehow tied
to his ruminations on death, it is perhaps more worthwhile to note that in the
wake of what must have been a difficult and draining enterprise, he returns to
the mirror. This series also prompted Richter to paint another personal
photograph taken about ten years earlier of his daughter, reviving an earlier
series of portraits of her. While these works will be discussed in more detail
below, the retrospective character of this period suggests a personal and
professional introspection that expands the stakes of the mid-eighties.
In 1991, Richter began a new group of mirrors, more closely associated with his early monochrome series from 1976 and his glass panes of 1977. (Fig. 55) This series includes 31 sets of mirrors, which are mostly composed of a monochromatic field of paint applied evenly to the reverse side of a pane of glass. Of all of his series, this group goes the furthest, both in terms of length—he produced 23 gray mirrors or mirror groups between 1991 and 1992—and in terms of its obvious links to the monochromes from fifteen years earlier. When he was questioned in 1991 about the mirror paintings’ relationship to his *Four Panes of Glass*, Richter states,

> It’s about glass again. This time the glass doesn’t show the picture behind it but repeats -- mirrors -- what is in front of it. And in the case of the coloured mirrors, the result was a kind of cross between a monochrome painting and a mirror, a ‘Neither/Nor’ -- which is what I like about it.\(^{125}\)

It is evident from this statement that Richter acknowledged and may have even intended the reference back to two earlier interests here, the gray monochromes and the works on glass of 1967 and 1977. The invocation of both the glass panels, with their dual reference to the Renaissance window of painting and Duchamp’s ready-mades, and the monochrome, the quintessential abstract motif of modern art, suggests the complex character of the painted mirrors within a history of modern painting.

According to Yve-Alain Bois, painting, as a medium, found itself in its modernist end game with the development of photography and with industrialization.\(^{126}\) The peril represented by the development of photography is fairly easy to understand. Photography’s accuracy and comparative speed in capturing likenesses and ultimately in representing a convincing image of an event in space posed a threat to portraiture and history painting to be sure. The
threat that industrialization poses is a bit less obvious. As Bois points out, Meyer Shapiro was the first to describe how industrialization brought about a direct reaction in art to elevate the mark of the artist’s hand in texture and gesture to the defining feature of art. But with Marcel Duchamp’s first ready-made, the mentality that valorized the artist’s craft was served the blow that would prove fatal. The ready-made shifts the art paradigm from a mode of production to a nominalist mode. No longer is it the touch of the artist’s hand that bestows value and differentiates art from industrially produced commodities; it is now the declaration of artistic value by the art profession, whether in the museum, gallery or studio, which makes the industrially-produced object transcend use-value.

Painters had begun to embrace the benefits and techniques of industrialization before Duchamp. The fashion of painting en-plein-air in the 19th century was made possible by the industrialized packaging of oil paint in portable tubes. And as Thierry de Duve has argued, by employing these tubes, painters “‘internalize[ed]’ some of the features and processes of the technology threatening” their craft. Even the application of paint was affected. The Impressionists, to a limited extent, and Seurat, to a much greater degree, regularized their brushstrokes, as Bois points out. Though it takes some time before both photography and industrialization were internalized in painting, the process was set in motion very early on and the dominance of abstraction, according to Bois, was dependent upon it.

Bois outlines three moments in modern art that in turn deconstructed important aspects of painting. First, art’s claims to authenticity were undermined by the ready-made; painting’s claims to reach the realm of the real object were refuted with Alexander Rodchencko’s three monochrome panels; and finally Mondrian’s utopian canvases deconstructed the hierarchies of the
elements of painting in hopes of carrying a similarly liberating effect toward the social order. All three moments aimed at the end of painting, but, as Bois points out, that end continues to be deferred. Simply put, painters continue to paint. Bois casts the continued practice of painting as a task of mourning, one intended to find a way to continue in the wake of modernism’s claims. And it is here in the convergence of the death of painting’s authenticity at the hands of Duchamp and the mourning of that death in the practice of painting that Richter’s career begins to yield some interesting patterns.

Not only did Richter embrace the two threats to painting that Bois discusses by painting from photographs, even employing a photographic style, and by creating paintings in the form of industrially produced mirrors, but he continuously probed painting’s relationship to the real. This is one reason why the thematic of mourning is a leitmotif in Richter’s works, as well as the scholarship with surrounds it. From *Dead* (1963), to the Helga Matura group and *Eight Student Nurses* (all 1966), to the skulls of 1983 and the series *18 October 1977* (1988), not to mention the Venice landscapes (1985) and the views of the industrially-threatened German countryside (1983-85), the theme of death and loss is regularly evident in his subject matter. Moreover, other scholars have noted the fact that Richter’s photopaintings force the question regarding the relationship between photography, painting and the real. While every photograph implies an actual referent, the referent in a painting of a photograph is not the same. Instead, the referent has shifted from the object represented to the photograph itself, highlighting the absence of an “original” in the photograph and even more so in the painting. Richter’s blurring technique simply emphasizes this sense of loss, where the painting acts as a sort of memorial to the original object now twice removed. Because mourning,
particularly in its visual aspect, is a way of remembering, Buchloh increasingly has emphasized the role of memory in Richter’s work, particularly as it relates to a more general sense of a social or cultural memory in works like *18 October 1977* and *Atlas*. Buchloh in particular takes this issue as his starting point for his discussion of Richter’s mirrors.

In his catalog essay for *Eight Gray* (2002), an installation of eight large-scale gray mirrors at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Buchloh couches his discussion of the mirrors within his earlier interpretation of Richter’s *Atlas* project. *Atlas* is a collection of photographs amassed over forty years from which Richter draws his source material. Attempting to show the difference of Richter’s collection of photographic source material from Aby Warburg’s famous life-long atlas project in which he collected and organized photographs of similar visual motifs from ancient art through to contemporary design, Buchloh stressed the contradictory nature of photography, which can both recall the past to mind, as it does in Warburg’s project, and provide a means to forget it. That is, the photograph provides the viewer with the excuse to not remember on her own because there is something to remind her. Or worse yet, the photograph allows the viewer to remember only in the circumscribed flatness of the photographic image. Buchloh made a similar claim about some of Richter’s mirrors. Focusing on the issue of site specificity and the problematic nature of the “specularization and institutionalization of memory,” Buchloh insists that Richter’s *Eight Gray* throws the viewer back on herself to “perform acts of commemoration on...her own.”

His interpretation of *Eight Gray* is deeply informed by Richter’s earlier commission for the Reichstag of 1998. Preliminary drawings for the project suggest that Richter intended to create an anti-monument to commemorate the horror of the Holocaust out of which contemporary Germany was formed.
proposed paintings were to be based on photographs of concentration camps, but ultimately Richter favored symbolic abstractions, in lieu of the charged subject matter of the photopaintings. The final works installed were six colored mirrors in the black, red and gold of the German flag. As a result, Buchloh argues, these mirrors refused comment on German politics and recent German history and, as a result, ultimately refused to serve as surrogates for public memory, thus forcing their viewers to remember for themselves. According to Buchloh, then, Richter’s choice of mirrors refuses to present his viewers with images whose reception could prove to be too complicated and, paradoxically, too easy. If he had painted the photographs of the concentration camps, the resulting images could be perceived as a political statement—something which Richter avoided most of the time. Rather than opening up a debate necessarily limited to the question of Richter’s political sympathies, Richter produced the more enigmatic mirrorized reference to the flag, leaving the task of interpretation, commemoration, or mourning to the viewer. These mirrors, in their installation, refuse the viewer even more than a politically fraught image. They also refuse to reflect the viewer’s image. By hanging these large-scale mirrors high above the floor, Richter avoids superimposing the viewer’s reflection on the German flag, obviating the kind of identification such a configuration would imply. Instead, the colors of the flag reflect the light from the clerestory high above the entry. Whether Richter intended to suggest that the mirrors represented a high ideal towards which Germany should strive or that the idea of Germany towered over its mere citizens is unclear. What is clear is that both possibilities avoid the pitfall of creating a surrogate for public memory.
3.4 History, Death and Memory

Perhaps it is not surprising, given Richter’s frequent use of memento mori and his famous invocations of highly publicized deaths, that critics such as Sean Rainbird have discussed Richter’s oeuvre as mourning the impossibility of painting. It is certainly the case that, in addition to his morbid subjects, a sense of the history of painting sets the stakes of this artist’s work. This chapter has already noted the ready-made character of the glass panels and gray monochromes. Some of the colored mirrors also revisit another early group of paintings, which also have strong associations with the ready-made, the color chart paintings. In 1991, Richter completed eighteen mirrors in two sets commissioned for the Hypo-Bank in Dusseldorf. *Six Mirrors for a Bank* (741) consists of four gray mirrors flanked by slightly smaller crystal glass mirrors. (Fig. 56) *Twelve Mirrors for a Bank* (740) includes four crystal glass mirrors interspersed with eight mirror paintings of different colors. (Fig. 57) While the four gray mirrors from the set of six mirrors refer back to the monochromes, the twelve mirrors chromatically recall the color charts begun shortly after seeing the Duchamp exhibition, which often have a high gloss to their surface, rendering them partly reflective as well.

About the same time, however, Richter makes the following statement about the state of his work in August of 1990:

Since the Rotterdam exhibition [October 1989 exhibition of the series 18 October 1977], painting has become more laborious...Since then there have been small and medium-sized pictures—very few big ones—nothing special, on the whole. Alongside this the work for the Hypo-Bank design, not very exciting either. A kind of aimless drifting.
The ambivalence he expressed about his sense of whether his work was moving forward is interesting given the highly retrospective character of the *Twelve Mirrors for a Bank*. It is hard to imagine that Richter saw this late group of colored mirrors as an important innovation in his work, despite the fact that there are so many produced in this period. Instead, the more fertile ground seems to have been laid just before his *Four Panes of Glass* and in the early 1980s. Still, Richter’s return to the mirror in the early 1990s suggests the importance of the motif, even if it was one through which he cast about for the threads of previous lines of development to take up.

Recently, Richter produced more mirrors, a new glass arrangement based on the glass pane drawings from the 1960s and a new window for two exhibitions. The first, *Eight Gray* revisits the colored mirrors of the 1990s for an exhibition at Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin through the autumn of 2002. (Fig. 39) Consisting of eight gray mirrors mounted 50 centimeters off the wall and in view of the windows in the gallery space which were uncovered for the exhibition, the work asserts its material presence through its distance from the wall even while the surfaces themselves begin to disperse among the reflections of exterior views which permeate the gallery. The second exhibition, at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York through the Spring of 2003, dusted off some sketches for the *Four Glass Panes* for exhibition along with a newly produced version titled *Seven Standing Panes* which deployed seven large-scale glass panes placed one before another in one row, emphasizing the glass’ increasingly reflective character with each row. (Fig. 58) Richter also rounded out the exhibition with a new large-scale *Window* painting. It is striking that these works follow a high-profile American retrospective, just as the 1991 mirrors were exhibited in London in a small show titled *Mirrors* at the Anthony d’Offay
Gallery concurrently with a large retrospective at the Tate Gallery. Both groups feel extremely retrospective, not to mention introspective, in character compared with the conceptually inspired *Four Glass Panes* and the silvered mirrors that preceded the memento-mori paintings in the early 1980s. Moreover, the Dia exhibition, subtitled “Refraction,” is actually an exhibition within another exhibition. The Richters are placed within a gallery space designed by the artist Jorge Pardo. It is useful to note that the younger Pardo’s retro-style space evokes the colors and glossy surfaces of the 1960s, the very era to which Richter (nostalgically, perhaps) returns for material in this show.

Some critics have described Richter’s photo-paintings as engaged in recording a world so given over to nostalgia that experience in the present tense is continually haunted by the plus-perfect. Nonetheless, for all the opportunity for self-reflection that the mirror offers, Richter’s mirrors insist on the public aspect of that introspection. Even while his mirrors refer back to Richter’s previous works, they also address the viewer entirely within the present situation. Beginning with the sketches for *Four Panes of Glass*, Richter recognized the spatial possibilities opened up with the use of glass and mirrors, particularly in terms of its physical address of the viewer. *Four Panes of Glass* took this recognition to the support, mounting the glass in the center of the gallery space on a metal embrasure with hinges attaching the panels to the mount. In 1977, Richter repeats the freestanding installation of *Four Panes of Glass* in *Pane of Glass* and *Double Pane of Glass*. Two of the works produced in 1991 and intended to be shown in a corner are appropriately titled *Corner Mirror, Brown-Blue* and *Corner Mirror, Green-Red*. (Fig. 59) Richter also produced four multi-paneled mirror paintings at this time. *Gray Mirror* (765), from 1992, consists of two panels hinged to the wall so that they can be pulled away from the wall as
if pulling open shutters on a window. (Fig. 60) The arrangement of the panels alters the effect created by Richter’s choice to hinge the *Four Glass Panels* on a horizontal axis, as the later works were hinged on a vertical axis. Where the *Four Glass Panels* presented themselves as windows until they were tilted, rendering them reflective, Richter’s *Gray Mirror* presents itself as a mirror of sorts, that is until the viewer attempts to treat them as a (shuttered) window, and all reflection or transparency is superseded by the material reality of the wall behind the panels. The installation choice in this case also suggests a conceptual similarity to the window and curtain paintings from the late 1960s, which likewise refused to deliver on the promise of a view into depth. In this way, Richter asks the viewer to recall those earlier interests buttressing the mirror from behind.

As a professional ambition then, Richter’s references to his own career are couched within a material that allows him to explore the painterly limitations imposed by modernism, at the same time that the material operates explicitly in the present situation of the viewer through reflection. It is useful to note the difference in spatio-temporal strategies at work here in Richter’s oeuvre, as opposed to Rauschenberg’s. For Richter, the historically recorded past, in the form of photographs or visual references to his own work, and the reproduced present are equally available to him as subject matter not just as a collaged, flat and ever-present pastiche, à la Rauschenberg, but more nearly because human experience, which attempts to organize itself chronologically (that is, into a logical temporal sequence), favors the organized, planar tableau to the depth-dependent collage aesthetic. Even when Richter approaches the very principle of collage in his atlas project, the grid structure dominates the compilation. And when Richter actually experiments with cutting photographs
and rearranging them in the sources for the seascapes of the early 1970s and again in the late 1990s, he adheres to the spatial logic of the seascape, cutting them down the horizon, pairing different seas and skies, and then obliterating the fissure when he paints the resulting photo-montage (fig. 61). The logic of the tableau structures Richter’s work on glass and with mirrors, as well. From the beginning with the *Four Panes of Glass* from 1967, these works evoke the defining analogy at work in historical tableau, that between painting and windows or mirrors, even as they expose its emptiness.

Spatially, Richter’s tableau often function within the shallow space defined by the surface and either a monochromatic plane or a photographically flattened subject. Richter's use of two layers of space in his blurred photo-paintings has been discussed above, and that same spatial construction recurs throughout Richter’s career. The use of the primarily monochromatic field, however, shows up most often when Richter is producing glass and mirror works. The window grids discussed above are the best early example of the concurrence of monochromes and works on glass. (Fig. 62) The grid structure coincides perfectly with the surface of the painting and, as if to underscore their association with the ready-made, real-objectness of the *Four Panes of Glass*, Richter paints the grid’s fictional shadows on a gray ground, not unlike his later gray monochromes, that appears to be set at a shallow depth defined by the grid. The window grids are conceptually in tune with the trompe l’oeil curtains of the same period. It is their spatial structure, however, that Richter repeats in two portraits of his immediate family. In *Betty* from 1988 and *I.G.* from 1993. (Fig. 63 and 64) Richter employs the shallow space of the tableau defined by a figure placed at the surface plane and a shallow, mostly monochromatic, ground. *I.G.* bears a striking resemblance to the window grids in this respect by virtue of his
deployment of the figure as the horizontal and verticals of the surface grid and the use of harsh light and deep shadow to highlight the figure’s visual quotation of the grid structure.

Moreover, the two figures in both of these works occupy a space analogous to the actual space Richter would have occupied while painting. The surface plane is analogous to the originating image as it is projected onto the canvas; the canvas’ spatial counterpart can be found in the monochromatic ground that serves as a backdrop. Within this tight space of painterly production, the figures with their heads turned away become the surrogate first for the painter in the act of painting and then for the viewer in the act of viewing, who is denied a full view of the object of their gaze.\textsuperscript{143}

Richter’s interest at these points in depicting members of his family only underscores the very personal nature of his professional ambitions. And it is the struggle between the personal and the professional impulses driving the work surrounding the mirrors which ultimately provide the possibility of making that personal ambition at once fully professional and public in their external reflections, at the same time that they employ a personal address to the viewer.

3.5 Reflection as an Interpretive Practice

Richter’s brand of mirroring bears some remarking in relation to his writing. While the mirror, as he claims, probes the relationship between painting and photography, allowing Richter an objective and disinterested stance in relation to his subjects, Richter still refuses to relinquish a certain artistic agency.\textsuperscript{144} That is, Richter is unable from the beginning to remain completely disinterested. He needs the mirror, as well as the spatulas he creates for his abstract works and the
cache of photographs he collects for copying, to maintain a distanced control—as if there were a viable relationship between distance and objectivity. He makes claims in his writing about the lack of relationship between his writing and his artwork—claims that fly in the face of art-historical methodology. And yet, that behemoth of art historical method, objectivity derived through distance, is embraced as a means to Richter’s need for objectivity. His use of techniques such as choosing from pre-existing images and blurring them, along with producing mirror works of pure reflection guarantee his own objectivity and the viewer’s supreme power of interpretation. This interpretation can only take place within a gallery or museum and not in the artist’s studio. And yet, Richter’s denial regarding the relationship between his writing and his painting rings hollow, especially when Richter persistently disagrees with his interpreters.146

Perhaps Richter takes his desire for objectivity a little too much to heart. As this chapter has suggested, Richter’s use of glass and mirrors has always carried with it highly personal associations. The first is the artist’s simultaneous antipathy and affinity for the work of Marcel Duchamp. As such, it expresses itself in works that question the validity of representation and carry with them strong allusions to the private space of the studio. With Richter’s mirrors from the early eighties and their association with memento-mori, Richter’s personal reflections on death tapped into a more universal concern. By 1990, when the mirrors appear to comment on his early series of monochromes and color charts, one senses that Richter’s friendship with Buchloh has finally brought the artist around to the ironic repetition that Buchloh read in the artist’s choices from early on. And finally, the most recent works, which recreate earlier works or ideas, finally fail to address any external considerations. No longer does irony seem to be the point, because irony requires a certain amount of distance. Richter no
longer is reflecting on earlier work; instead, he is merely repeating it. Perhaps Richter finally embraced the true nature of the ready-made, which is not just banal and completely available, but is also infinitely repeatable.

As we know from Freud, repetition is one way of denying death. What is telling is Richter’s continued attempts, albeit through different means, to hold death at bay. In a letter to Jean-Christophe Ammann from 1973, Richter describes death in more compositional terms, associating it with formal fixity.

To cause something to change and flow, to make it relative: this has something to do with the ‘Informel’—which suits me very well, because it is the antithesis of death: death being a thing that does not exist because it is uninteresting...As I now see it, all my paintings are ‘Informel’ (the Four Panes of Glass included...)

While Richter goes on in that passage to point out that the Four Panes of Glass should be followed up, the suggestion is that they will continue to change and it is the case that they do. But what happens when Richter’s work does become fixed and even retrospective or, worse yet, repetitive? It is tempting to suggest that the works of the 1990s and later degenerate into a fixed, repetitive movement caught in the circularity of denying death—a denial he made in 1973. However, Richter’s present conviction seems to be that it is necessary to deny death through the compulsive repetition of the flow he was committed to in 1973, a flow that proved to be limited and perhaps untenable. Put another way, one might claim that Richter’s mirrors function two ways at once, sometimes as a straightforward memento mori, or stimulus to remember one’s mortality, and at other times as an attempt to suppress or forget that very knowledge. Benjamin Buchloh has pointed out that Richter’s Atlas functions much the same way, both as a memory aid and simultaneously a mode of forgetting.
forgetting then as a way of liberating oneself from the constraints of history, of wiping the slate clean, even, we might see how the mirrors also open outward for Richter, allowing him to move on from a logic which provided him nowhere to turn. The mirrors operate emphatically in the present tense and are incapable of capturing anything in a future perfect, a will-have been. In such a context, one’s historical roots and obligations, and the looming specter of the biological and ultimately conceptual death of the painter, seem far less constricting and definitive.

Throughout this chapter, the writing of art historians, the claims of the death of painting by other artists and the history of modern painting have figured prominently. It is important to note that Richter’s decision to continue to paint in the early sixties reveals a belief on his part that his art work could remain somewhat autonomous from this broader context. Considering his friendship with Buchloh, his most prolific and political critic—even while Richter avoided political associations—which began in the late seventies around the time that Richter produced his first colored mirrors, and his increasing acceptance of Buchloh’s initial interpretation of his art work, one might say that Richter’s career reached its own mirror stage in the early nineties. It was at this point that he acknowledged that his work was produced and received within a wider, symbolic discourse over which, as with the gaze, the artist has no control, but through which he might secure his position within the history of art.
Like Rauschenberg and Richter, Dan Graham has employed mirrors or reflective glass in his work repeatedly, beginning with his *Body Press* of 1970. (fig. 65) Indeed this artist’s intense production of installations fitted with video cameras and display monitors in the mid-1970s extends the motif of reflection into a time-based medium as well. While he constantly alters the visual effects of reflection, it remains throughout the defining theme of all of his work, whether or not any reflective materials are actually included. This theme also spans his medium shifts between performance, film, installation and architectural pavilions.

Graham’s use of reflective media creates an explicit address to the viewer, in particular a viewer engaged in a publicly acted drama of perception. The viewer is confronted with her own image, just as she is in Rauschenberg’s and Richter’s work, and forced to take account of it in some way. But, unlike Rauschenberg’s and Richter’s mirror-works, Graham’s video-enhanced installations and architectural pavilions extend reflection from Rauschenberg’s and Richter’s references to painting, sculpture and photography, to include architecture. Graham’s mature work in installation and architecture structures the viewer’s perceptual experience, creating a theater of vision, into which Graham introduces temporal or social elements. These added elements disrupt the antipodal mirror experience of viewer and viewed, opening up explicit gaps.
that throw into question the identification between the individual viewer and her image, as well as between viewing subjects, at the same time that they force the layering of these positions within the same space. By relegating both the subject and the object to the same position, Graham puts in motion a complex perceptual scheme which sets a trap not only for the viewer before it, but also for his work’s many interpreters, including the artist himself, often leading to hasty conclusions about the general import of Graham’s brand of mirroring.

4.1 Published Art/Public Viewing

While most of the scholarship on Graham acknowledges his use of mirrors and reflection, very few scholars have addressed at length the effect these materials have on Graham’s viewer. It is commonplace to note that, in the mirrors, viewers occupy the position of both subject and object. Some scholars use this fact as a springboard to claim that this perceptual synthesis leads to others, such as the synthesis of different media and of past and present. One of the most considered accounts of Graham’s synthesis of different media comes from Benjamin Buchloh, who claims that Graham’s early magazine piece *Homes for America* asserts the possibility that photography could justly be characterized as Minimalist art. Noting the ready-made quality of the magazine format and the similarity between the tract houses Graham photographed and Minimalist objects, not to mention the serial format of the lists included in the accompanying texts, Buchloh makes a convincing case for this synthesis. Nonetheless, Graham frequently introduces a public aspect into his work that tends to undermine any synthesis between a viewing subject and her reflection. More than simply attempting to appeal to a broad audience and thus transcend
the private sphere of the studio as Richter’s work did, Graham’s appeal to the public had deeply social underpinnings. One part of this public aspect was already present in *Homes for America*, where Graham introduced the public nature of the “art system in general,” by placing the article in the public forum of an art magazine. \(^{152}\) “When…exhibitions are reviewed and made a matter of record in the art magazines, the works shown are guaranteed some kind of value as ‘art’ and can be sold on the art market.”\(^ {153}\) This strategy of making public informs all of Graham’s work, determining the themes of his performance works, installations and architectural pavilions as well. Where Graham appears to collapse subject and object in the works, he frequently does so within a public situation, analogous to the art and mass culture publications in which his magazine pieces were placed, that emphasizes the social aspect of art viewing, thus underscoring the distance between the original positions of viewing subject and viewed object. \(^ {154}\) Moreover, when he seems to be synthesizing different media, or past and present, he does so with a textual intervention that simultaneously attempts to suture those oppositions together even while maintaining their distance from each other.

Perhaps one of the main reasons scholars have emphasized Graham’s synthesis of subject and object begins with Graham’s own writing about his works. In many instances, he prompts such interpretations when he describes the positions set up by the works in binary opposites. This is the case when he describes *Two Adjacent Pavilions*, which he installed at Kassel for the outdoor exhibition at Documenta VII in 1978 and now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterloo. (fig. 67) The work’s twin pavilions placed side by side and distinguished from one another only by their ceiling materials—one made of transparent glass, the other of a dark, opaque material
that does not emit light—encourages comparison between the different perceptual experiences available to the viewer in each of these pavilions. Depending on the external light, she is either fully or partially visible in one and invisible in the other. The play between the public exhibition experienced in one of the pavilions and the private viewing—just shy of voyeurism—offered by the other leads some critics to employ a Sartrean model in their analysis of the work.\textsuperscript{155} In Graham’s own descriptive interpretation of the work, he plays up a variety of dichotomies that functioned as inspiration for the pavilions.

Contemporary office buildings use transparent or reflective glass “curtain walls” to eliminate the distinction—and contradiction—between inside and outside…Two Adjacent Pavilions reflects on the materials and forms of the modern city—glass and reflective-glass with steel supports—in relation to an arcadian (“natural”) or utopian setting.\textsuperscript{156}

According to Graham, the pavilions were meant to mediate between interior and exterior, just as the modern glass office building does. Additionally, their exhibition in a natural setting introduced an urban corporate architectural style into a decidedly non-urban, non-corporate environment. This dichotomous experience is encouraged in other works by the artist and in his writing as well. In his writing, the dichotomies arise from his heavy reliance on Sartre’s description of a visual experience defined by the polar positions of viewing subject and viewed object.\textsuperscript{157} Sartre’s theory of vision implies an inherent power in the position of viewer that intrigues Graham and appeals to his social agenda.

Nonetheless, one should not lose sight of the fact that Graham usually introduces a third factor which operates between the two supposed opposites, typically underscoring their inability to be assimilated.\textsuperscript{158} In the case of Two
Adjacent Pavilions, the reflectivity of the structures themselves negotiate between their opposite references. But more often the third position is more ambiguous, functioning as a publicly social element in the work or through a temporal intervention as in an appeal to history. One work serves as an important example of both strategies, the installation Present/Continuous Past[s].

4.2 The Viewer in Time and Place

Present Continuous Past[s] (fig. 68 & 69) from 1974 is one of the most intriguing of Graham’s video installations employing mirrors. Comprised of a single room with two adjacent mirrored walls and a video camera and monitor system, it is one of Graham’s most economical deployments of these media within his oeuvre and, despite its disarmingly simple construction, produces an amazingly complex perceptual environment. Within the installation, the viewer is confronted on two sides with images of herself through the two mirrors, and, on a third side, a monitor displays the image of the room recorded eight seconds previously by the camera mounted above it. Initially, it appears that the viewer is asked passively and narcissistically to contemplate her own image from two sides. However, it quickly becomes apparent that not all of the images are equally present. That is, the monitor displays the room eight seconds after the camera tapes it, producing a lag of eight seconds between the viewer’s actions and their display on the monitor. Because a reflection of the monitor appears in the mirror opposite the video camera, this reflection is further caught within the time delay; each reflection of the monitor within the monitor creates a continual
regression into the past at eight-second intervals. At each remove, the visual information becomes condensed and, practically speaking, lost, even while the past images keep returning in smaller and smaller versions of itself. Like the reflection in the pool that disappears with Narcissus’ advances, the time-delayed image also recedes and, ultimately, is rendered imperceptible. When Graham describes the temporal sense he is trying to achieve with the time delay, he calls it an extended present-time, however, the continuous regression made possible within this installation builds into the system a temporal drain, which pulls the present into the past, creating, more accurately, an ever-passing present.159

The visual effect created on the monitor of views of the room placed within views of the room is similar to the types of static mise-en-abyme exemplified by the image of the Morton Salt girl, who carries a container of Morton Salt with her image on it, carrying a container of Morton Salt and so on. But, as Thierry de Duve has pointed out, the installation is never a perfect mise-en-abyme, because Graham’s installation adds time and movement. These spatial/temporal dimensions in the installation introduce the possibility for the viewer to intervene into the recording of her actions. Compositionally, the earliest images are at the center; through the time delay apparatus, they become embedded within those literally framing moments set continually at the exterior of the image on the monitor. The viewer thus occupies the position of viewed object and viewing/writing subject in turn. The gap created by the time delay structures these opposing roles by allowing a split in the viewer’s perception of herself; that is, by virtue of the time delay, the viewer can perceive herself as she acts before the camera, even if she has turned away from it. Thus, not only has
Graham thrust both roles of a traditional viewing situation onto the position of the viewer in the mirror, but he also holds open the possibility of dividing that viewer against herself in time.

Moreover, this division ensures that the viewer has the opportunity to interpret and rewrite her reaction (or lack of reaction) to the installation. As her image is played back to her on the screen, the viewer continues to be recorded. Even if she does nothing, she will eventually witness her reaction to her recorded image. Her continual recording provides a rare opportunity for the viewer to respond in different ways, as if she is assuming different identities, and then assess those self-images. She even has the potential to reject her position as viewer altogether for an active role, overturning the passive role of narcissism. Thus, in an ironic reversal of Sartre’s voyeuristic scene, the active viewer consciously seizes the power to act while she is being seen. Conversely, the viewer who merely sees appears to surrender a position of interpretive power to her paralyzed desire to look and not act. It is this active response that the installation inspires that has led critics like de Duve to suggest that Graham introduces a version of history writing with the video apparatus. That is, as the viewer reacts to her image, she literally and figuratively reframes her own image with her responses to that image. With each response, her interpretation of her previous actions reshapes her past, supplanting it with her reactions. This process is similar to the process of history writing, in which events are reshaped and reinterpreted in a textual frame that necessarily supplants the original actions.
In addition to the possibilities for the viewer’s interventions into her recorded history, the time delay, paired with its reflection, also affects the installation’s space, making the structuring effect of the architecture more pliable. According to Graham, the integrity of the architectural structure is threatened by the video’s time drain.

Architecture defines certain cultural and psychological boundaries; video may intercede to replace or rearrange some of these boundaries. Cable television, being reciprocally two-way, can interpenetrate social orders not previously linked; its initial use may tend to deconstruct and redefine existing social hierarchies.”

As Graham sees it, video and architecture are at odds with each other. In contrast to architecture’s role as a static container and codifier of social hierarchies, video, at least to begin with, bears the promise of transgressing the social order it reflects (for example, the static roles of viewer and viewed), because it allows for greater flux within that order than architecture does. Additionally the space/time continuum, which Graham refers to elsewhere, is also affected by this shift from an architectural code to a video code. Instead of perceiving past events as fixed and future events as completely given over to chance, Graham sets up a temporality in which both past and future are enmeshed in the influence on and interpretation of the present.

Within the context of Present/Continuous Past[s], the social dynamics of the installation completely change when one viewer (or group of viewers) enters the installation while another viewer (or group of viewers) already occupies the installation space. The active responses the installation instigates in the first group are different enough from typical viewing behavior that the second group
finds itself in the unusual situation of being unable to ignore the first group. Not only is each group aware of itself, but, with the addition of unconventional behavior, each group becomes increasingly aware of its relationship to the other. Because the architectural container forces an identification between the two groups by virtue of their shared space, the active behavior inspired by the video time-delay creates a situation where the identification between the two groups is arbitrary, arising more from their occupying a shared space than from a sense of shared experience. In this way, Graham hones Minimalism’s implicit contextual critique to the fine point of specific social critique.

As Graham noted in the passage quoted above, the crux of Present/Continuous Past[s] lies in the interaction between architectural and video media. The central problem of medium arises with the shift in American art in the 1960s from the dominance of painting to the dominance of three-dimensional objects brought about by Minimalism; but also integral to the question is the shift in viewer roles—something Graham alluded to when he suggested that the shift from an architectural to a video code could also reinterpret the social order. Not surprisingly, medium shifts mark the course of Graham’s career. But, rather than probing the question of medium, the most recent exhibition catalogs and anthologies focusing on his work accept medium at face value, tending to divide his work into medium categories which loosely follow his chronological development, from conceptual work, to performance, to video, and most recently to architectural pavilions. Admittedly, these classifications do describe fairly well certain aspects of the appearance of Graham’s explorations; yet, they are deceptively easy, demarcating somewhat arbitrary breaks within an oeuvre that
tenaciously probes questions of visual and written reflection—motifs that are central to Graham’s larger project addressing the interaction between perceiving subjects and art objects. Graham’s interest in reflection and social critique originated within the very specific context of Minimalism and its main detractor, Michael Fried.

4.3 Theater of Vision

It is no coincidence that Graham’s interest in architecture focuses on perceptual forums associated with leisure activities. Most often, his architectural pavilions are related to museums and theaters. As such, they constitute a pointed response to Fried’s critique of Minimalism, which focuses on the theatricality of the situation constructed by the exhibition of Minimalist objects. Fried condemns Minimalism on the basis that it tries to occupy a position outside of modernist painting and sculpture, while the Minimalists claim that they have shed all relational decisions in their compositions, presumably including their categorical relationship to modernist painting. And yet, Fried argues, Minimalism’s defining feature is its relativity. Not only does it define itself in distinction from other media, but the objects also create a situation that demands recognition from a viewer. It is this relationship between object and viewer, in which the object relies on the viewer, that Minimalism is theatrical rather than pictorial. The experience before a Minimalist object subsumes the pictorial, crowding it out of the merely spatial situation. According to Fried, painting, and sculpture for that matter, exist autonomously from their viewers and, thus, imply an autonomous viewing subject. The situation of viewing in this description is not constructive of a particular positionality within a subject/object relationship.
Instead, these positions simply exist prior to that situation. Theater, on the other hand, insists on its audience and depends upon it. Theater constructs a situation. But, as Fried points out, Minimalism’s viewer experiences the work within a situation that she believes to exist for her alone. This is an important distinction that Fried does not push very far. Nonetheless, it is instructive for understanding just how radical Graham’s installations are. Because Graham’s viewers are unable to take for granted a shared experience simply based on witnessing the same events from the same space, they become acutely aware of the situation of viewing the work, to a degree that would seem absurd in front of a painting or even a play. This disjunction more fully disrupts the viewer’s assumptions than the false autonomy that Fried describes in front of a Minimalist object, a condition he would call “subjecthood.” In Fried’s description of Minimalism, the subject/object relationship cannot be taken for granted because both subject and object depend upon each other to situate themselves in opposition to each other. He designates that lack of autonomy with the terms “subjecthood” and “objecthood,” rather than subject and object. In fact, Graham’s explicitly social version of this situation demonstrates that relationality defines subject and object, as well as subject against subject. This is why Graham focuses on the public architectural spaces of art viewing and of theatrical and cinematic performance.\textsuperscript{166} By insisting on the public nature of their exhibition, Graham’s installations undermine a viewer’s expectation of experiencing the work in solitude precisely by confronting her with the fallacy of that belief.

Graham also embraces Fried’s pendant claim that Minimalism’s emphasis on time is theatrical. “…the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality, of time passing and to come…”\textsuperscript{167} On the other hand, according to Fried, modernist art is “at every moment, wholly manifest...I want to claim
that it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre.”

But it should be clear that, despite the unavoidable presence and presentness represented in the mirror in Present/Continuous Past[s], the introduction of video’s temporal medium undermines the mirror’s presentness and instantaneousness. Where the Minimalist cube simply showcases the viewer’s embodiment by crowding her within the situation of exhibition, Present/Continuous Past[s] returns the balance of power back in favor of the viewer through the time delay. The delayed feedback demands that the viewer position, even reposition, herself sometimes in opposition to her reflection or in relation to other viewers. Once another viewer is introduced into the equation, the social implications of Present/Continuous Past[s] are unavoidable. And by virtue of the promise of historical agency implicit in the time delay apparatus, the question of group cohesion becomes inextricably bound up with the fact that the viewers share a space, as well as the shared recent history that is recorded and presented within the work. Through the work’s temporal and social interventions, Present/Continuous Past[s] subverts the modernist emphasis on the autonomous art object, viewed in a suspended state of uninterrupted private contemplation in public. Graham addresses the nature of private viewing in a public space most explicitly in his 1981 model for a Cinema and its accompanying essays.

Because the actual cinema modeled by Graham has never been realized, one must rely on Graham’s description of the cinema along with his small-scale model to imagine how a viewer might respond to Graham’s introduction of two-way mirrors in place of two walls in the theater. (figures 72 and 73) Graham’s essay “Cinema” outlines how he intends the structure to work. The dimming and raising of lights that typically accompany a movie screening allows Graham
to alter the perceptual information available inside and outside the theater. When the lights are down, the audience (a group of viewers unified by their shared activity) watches a film on the screen and also has a ghostly view of the street outside, depending upon the lighting conditions of the street. Passers-by see only a mirrored building similar to the many semi-reflective glass office buildings found in most cities. But, the projected image of the film is also visible in reverse to those on the street—a fact that virtually determines that the project will never be realized. Moreover, during nighttime screenings, the audience members would also be visible from the street. As Graham describes it, the movie viewer is “‘lost’ to his immediate environment in its identification with the film.”

Psychologically, the cinema puts the audience into the role of the voyeur. While viewing the film the spectator projects her own idealized body into the world of the spectacle (filmic or real) identifying with it. In this identification, the spectator is released from her real body and rendered free, perfect and complete. Once the lights come up, the mirrored walls of the interior insure that she is returned to a visible body determined in its relationships to the other spectators on the inside and the passers-by on the outside. The oscillations between subjective viewer and viewed object and interior and exterior revolve around the alternately reflective or transparent nature of the screen and screening walls. Graham even states,

In my cinema project it is the screen, instead of the machine, and the system of voyeuristic identifications that are exposed. It is assumed that the cinema is prototypical of all other perspective systems that work to produce a social subject through the manipulation of the subject’s imaginary identifications.

Graham’s wording suggests that he has a Lacanian understanding of the production of a subject. The screen which Graham exposes is literally that of the
Cinema, and yet, Lacan understands the screen as the location of our projections of our “ideal I”\textsuperscript{172}. This “ideal I” is a construct resulting from the subject’s identification with an object of desire. In the case of Cinema, this object would presumably be the projected image. The displacement of the subject into an “ideal I” which exists outside the self is destroyed by the audience’s visibility to an exterior audience and by the changing light within these two-way mirror walls. Both the audience’s visibility and the raising of the interior lights have the effect of the Lacanian gaze, resituating the viewer as a body, but one that is displaced from itself and visible outside itself.

It is this second phase, when the theater lights come up, that interests Graham most. At this point, all illusions embodied in our identification with a hero or heroine in the film are shattered, but even more emphatically than usual. This is because in Graham’s Cinema the mirrored walls, completely reflective once the lights are up, force us to identify with our own reflected image within a larger audience, destroying the isolation created by the dimmed lights. Thus, the alternation between viewing subject and viewed object in this instance explicitly places the viewer at the juncture of public and private viewing, exposing the public nature of film-viewing, and art viewing in a gallery or museum by extension, as was evident in his installation Present/Continuous Past[s]\textsuperscript{173}.

The collapse of the distinction between public and private, which in Graham’s work plagues the process of identification, goes hand in hand with the critique of the viewer and the problematization of the viewer’s perception in Graham’s performance and early video installations. The perceptual model apparently at work in Present/Continuous Past[s] is based on psychoanalytic appeals to the Greek Narcissus myth. Viewers are encouraged to identify with their own images when viewing the installation privately. But that model is
complicated when another viewer enters the installation space. Like the 
audience abruptly returned to the actual public viewing situation of the cinema 
when the lights are raised, the viewer of Present/Continuous Past[s] is reminded of 
the public nature of art viewing in galleries and museums by her forced social 
interaction with her fellow viewers. But even when a viewer is alone in the 
installation, the phantom of public exposure is present in the recorded image of 
the viewer. Not only does the installation carry the threat of exposure to an 
Other embodied in the inhuman gaze of the camera, but also the delayed display 
of that recording on the monitor while the image rebounds around the 
installation makes that threat real. In all three of the works already discussed, 
Graham's viewer is forced to acknowledge her own visibility, either to herself or 
to a larger community. And, in both cases, the public, external description of the 
viewer brings to mind the viewer's public, externally visible self at the very 
instant when she is supposed to lose herself in contemplation of the work. The 
supremely private moment of viewing is interrupted by the persistent reminder 
of one's public display, much like the work's display. Ultimately, because 
Graham makes the implicit identification between the viewer and the artwork 
explicit, the viewer's own visibility and display becomes unavoidable. It is 
through this insistence on the public nature of viewing that Graham constructs 
his most rigorous social critiques when he tackles the issue of recreational sites of 
viewing.

The emergence of the theater as an enclosed architectural form in 
the sixteenth century coincided with the codification of new 
perspective laws and with the political emergence of the bourgeois 
city-state. For the first time, architecture froze the positions and 
seating arrangements of spectators viewing the dramatic spectacle 
into an orderly perspective that reflected not only a visual 
coherence, but also a new political hierarchy.\(^{174}\)
The above quotation introduces Graham’s essay “Theater, Cinema, Power,” and clarifies his own sense that the history of theater as a built environment is inextricably linked to particular social and political modes of visual identification. The essay outlines an episodic history of theater design up to the emergence of film in the twentieth century, analyzing the political uses to which these ideologically burdened forms of spectacle have been put. What is most interesting in the essay is Graham’s insistence that the built environment structures social interaction and models political realities. The type of one-point perspective which influenced set design and posited a single privileged vantage point exactly opposite a central vanishing point takes on political connotations in Graham’s essay, as he stresses the fact that the prince had traditionally been given this single privileged position in the audience. Moreover, because the traditional stage setting of sixteenth century plays was the plaza outside the ruler’s palace, the theater mimicked the vantage the prince enjoyed daily of the actual plaza from an upper balcony in his palace. All other audience members identify with the prince as spectators, but from an inferior position within the theater.

By the end of the essay, Graham’s interest in popular spectacle has turned toward the twentieth century version of theater, film. As such, the artist becomes less interested in the effect that the architectural design of the spectacle’s staging has in structuring a political reality than he does in the role film plays in promoting a particular interpretation of political history. He points out that no longer is the prince doubled on stage by an actor playing the prince. Instead, in the actual historical reality of American politics of the 1980s, when Graham wrote this essay, the American President was in fact a Hollywood actor. Graham uses this fortuitous (or perhaps instigating) fact to suggest that the roles of
politician and performer, which had occupied positions on opposite sides of the theater, have collapsed into each other. Meanwhile the real power, which Graham argues is the corporate defense business, lies elsewhere, invisible, like a puppeteer behind the ruler.

Graham’s paired insistence on time and on the social nature of vision makes clear his interests in the processes of perception. This is at the heart of his concerns with history and with medium. In his writing about the modes of perception that inspired his work, he cites Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre with little distinction between the two, despite their philosophical differences regarding the nature of vision. The import of both for his work is the exposure of the gaze within a viewing situation as a position of power. But Sartre’s and Lacan’s descriptions of the gaze do little to explain certain early works by Graham, particularly those works like Body Press (fig. 65). In this work, two nude camera operators, one male, one female, stand inside a reflective cylinder and film the perspective from every part of their bodies. They are instructed to press the back of the filming cameras against their flesh, beginning at their feet and circling upward to their heads and then downward to the starting position. At each rotation, the two cameras are exchanged. The films are then projected simultaneously on opposite walls of a small room.

In a discussion about the nature of the gaze, Merleau-Ponty puts the question to the reader, “How does it happen that my look, enveloping them, does not hide them, and, finally, that, veiling them, it unveils them?” The cameras record the perspective from the camera operators’ flesh as if the film were a seeing flesh, with which the viewer is asked to identify. If we understand vision to be embodied in the cameras, then as it covers parts of the flesh, it films the camera operators’ bodies as they are reflected in the mirror, or
as they are presented to the opposite camera. With the exchange of cameras performed at the completion of each circumscription of one body, the camera, mediating for the viewer, becomes tangled between subject and object. Both are made continuous with each other in a way that recalls Merleau-Ponty’s description of the Flesh of the World.

Graham conflates Merleau-Ponty’s flesh-bound gaze with Lacan’s articulating gaze in another architectural environment. *Public Space/Two Audiences* (fig. 72), constructed for the Venice Biennale, consists of a single room with a mirror on one wall, parallel to which a wall of glass divides the space into two. Both sides have an entrance which arbitrarily divide the audience into two groups. Both audiences can see each other through the glass partition, although they cannot hear each other. Graham insists that the audiences are positioned so that they must identify with each other, either through their “other” on the opposite side of the glass (which, importantly, vaguely reflects each viewer anyway), or through a reflected self in the mirror, thrown with all the other inhabitants of the space into a single reflection. Within this installation, the glass partition functions in two ways. First, on its surface, which vaguely reflects one group while it conveys a view of the other group, Graham captures the essence of Merleau-Ponty’s flesh of the world. At one moment the groups can imagine themselves distanced by the glass and at another the glass can appear to be a physical manifestation of the fold of the flesh of the world that casts vision as distance, even while it should be registered as proximity. And yet, Graham states that the glass is the site of identification that is not so different from that described in Lacan’s mirror-stage essay. Nonetheless, the identification is not simply between an individual subject and her image; it is necessarily more social than that. By separating the rooms, he intends that viewers on each side of the
glass will begin to form a group identity in opposition to the group on the other side. But, the spectator, then, is not truly hidden behind the glass or even necessarily revealed by the glass. Rather, the glass, like Graham’s mirrors, functions as an articulating Gaze. Like the mirrors, it becomes the scene of external identification, dividing the groups from each other, as well as dividing the subject from her image. “…in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture.” Nor is the glass a transparent transmitter of meaning that lays hidden behind its surface. Instead, the semi-reflective quality of the glass reveals that the reality of each group’s identification lies on its surface. Because the difference between the two groups, based on their location, is constitutive, identification and meaning are played out across the surface of the glass. The reflective glass refuses deeper meaning. The distance introduced into the work by the glass accomplishes two things. First, it thwarts a sense of community across the two spaces. The scene of identification is one involving displacement and otherness. Second, the glass announces the presence of the work to its audience, refusing to disappear into transparency. Thus, Graham unveils the gaze as an agent of separation and displacement. The glass of the gaze refuses its own transparency by affecting the separation of the groups, screening them from each other; and the surface of the glass screen is rendered opaque as the two audiences project their group identities onto the group facing them.

As *Present/Continuous Past[s]* makes clear, group dynamics are at the heart of many of Graham’s installations and performances. Graham explored the public aspect of subjecthood and its underlying structure when he employed much the same equipment in a little discussed theater set that he designed for a play by James Coleman and performed at Dun Guaire Castle in Kinrara, Ireland.
The stage set crystallized the complex perceptual games Graham had been working with since the early 1970s. Constructed in the former throne room of the castle, the set echoed the courtly entertainments the kings would have enjoyed centuries ago. But never content to reconstitute a past without some tangible reinterpretation, Graham reversed the physical locations of viewer and performer. Instead of placing the audience where the royal viewer once sat, Graham set them in the former performance space and placed the performer where the throne had been. On a purely spatial level, Graham has replaced whole productions involving multiple troupe members directing their efforts to entertain one viewer with a single performer acting in the space reserved for the king and directing her performance toward a group of viewers seated on what once functioned as a stage. Thus, in a reflection of modern European history, the royal “we” has been transformed into an actual “we,” although this group needn’t necessarily function cohesively as a unit. On a structural level, Graham and Coleman have substituted a performer and Graham’s stage set for the absent king. In the performance, the actor wears the king’s death mask, making that substitution explicit. Graham’s stage set, constructed of a two-way mirror and a video camera and monitor, extends the reference to the dead king into the Lacanian structure he had been exploring throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In its position as a backdrop, when the lights were on, the curved two-way mirror reflected the audience anamorphically, rendering them involuntary (and distorted) performers in the play, able, like their princely progenitor, to influence the other viewers’ experience of the play. Once the lights are dimmed for the performance, the reflection of the audience is replaced with the projection of a live video recording of the audience from the king’s former point of view in
the performance space from behind the two-way mirror. The backdrop continued to change in appearance during the play. In the second phase, the view of the throne room from the king’s original perspective behind the mirror was gradually replaced with a recorded image of the king’s death mask—a mask that the performer wears during part of the performance. The next phase begins when the lights are turned on during the performance. The image of the king’s death mask continued to be projected onto the mirror, but the raised lights caused the superimposition of the reflection of the audience and the reflection of the performer over the recorded death mask. In the fourth phase the lights are dimmed again and the projected image changes to show the performer eight seconds delayed, recorded from a camera set to the side of the stage. At this point,

the performer lifted her mask. Turning back to the video image in the mirror she saw a masked image of herself, and made a gesture as if she could not bear to look at herself. Then, as she looked back at the mirror, the image appeared to catch up in time and become simply a reflection.”

In this phase, the performer acted as a surrogate for the viewer of Present/Continuous Past[s] (fig. 68 & 69), in that the role of viewer and viewed were both by turns forced onto her. Her scripted reaction of turning away, refusing to see her masked reflection thus takes on a new significance. It seems to parallel the viewer’s periods of blind action in Present/Continuous Past[s]. Both seem to choose action over viewing, as if both were not possible simultaneously (and in the context of the installation and the stage set, that is mostly true.) But, perhaps more tellingly, it is the masked version of herself that the performer chooses not to see.
Vision and blindness are important aspects of this performance. The
death mask, with its perpetually closed eyes, does not see, even while it positions
the viewer as seen. Instead, the mask, like the mirror, doubles the viewing
subject.\textsuperscript{182} The king, that is to say the structuring element, is absent, dead. His
substitutes, in the form of the mirror and video apparatus, which duplicates his
perspective, the performer, who acts in his space opposite the audience, and the
mask she wears double, even triple, his gaze. When the performer rejects her
masked image, it is because she refuses to recognize herself outside of and
divided from herself. In this single movement she occupies both viewer and
viewed, standing in as a performer for the audience, who has been caught within
a similar division from their position.

Like Lacan’s interpretation of the effect of the anamorphic skull across the
bottom of Holbein’s \textit{French Ambassadors}, the disruptive effects of the mask in the
performance are predicated on a one-point perspective system, which renders
the viewing subject autonomous and complete. By introducing other vantage
points through the mirror and video camera, not to mention the unseeing mask,
Graham and Coleman throw into question the viewing subject’s perceived unity
and autonomy. The subject suddenly finds herself outside herself, displaced and
fragmented. Her new status as a “picture” undermines her perceived autonomy.

\textbf{4.4 Photography as Symbolic Form}

Graham’s installations with video cameras, like \textit{Present/Continuous Past[s]},
employ video-time to create a similar effect of displacement and loss. While the
installations are sheer presence in one respect, they are continually marked with
a temporal loss. This is particularly notable in the context of a gallery or
museum. One expects to find a suspension of the outside world inside a gallery or museum. Suspension is the stuff of which galleries and museums are made. Not only are there physical suspensions within the museum in the form of paintings hung on walls, but, more importantly, the viewer is caught in her own suspended reactions to the work. We know we are not to touch and not to proclaim judgment too hastily; often we feel we should even suspend our communication with others so that the work can communicate with us. Such suspensions create a mental distance within the viewer’s experience that promises to offer objectivity. The figure of objectivity looms large not only within the museum and gallery context, but also within historical approaches, providing Graham with yet another ground on which to stage a disruption of the socio-political order.

To this end, Graham presents time as a series of feedbacks, interruptions, repetitions and sudden changes in direction, undermining the expected flow of historical narrative. He creates a narrative alteration of temporality in works like the performance pieces (*Past Future/Split Attention*), installations (*Present Continuous Pasts*, the *Time Delay Rooms*) and videos (*Rock My Religion*). All undermine the suspension of time normally present in a viewing situation, not just to make it visible but also to show how vision is caught up in time and how both disrupt each other. He shows what the Minimalists do not; that is, how we, as viewers, might want to believe in the suspension of time in a visual experience. *Present Continuous Past[s]* at once attempts to secure both the present and its not so distant past, by using the time-delayed video to cover over the loss associated with a continually fleeting present.
At the heart of the issue for Graham's work is the explicit swerve backward to layer the subject onto the object, thus destroying any distancing maneuvers or mental suspensions necessary for such a traditional historical project. This destruction is part of a particular turn from one model for history to another. The models, interestingly representational models that for a time were considered to flow one from the other, are scientific perspective and photography. In a scientific perspective model, particularly as understood by Erwin Panofsky in his essay “Perspective as Symbolic Form,” there was a measurable distance between a subject and object, which held the two in separate and distinct roles. As Panofsky argues, such a model mirrored, or more accurately, as we now understand, constructed, the relation of a subject to an historical object. In a photographic model, however, the distances of Panofsky’s historical object are rendered close in proximity. This occurs through the photographic process as well as within the viewing situation of the end result. Like the indexical process of the medium, photographs serve to bring close what could be imagined to be temporally, or even spatially, distant partly because of the medium’s refashioning of temporal and spatial continuity. The subject then is faced with an object suspended, removed, because sundered, from its original historical moment by virtue of its photographic marking. Thus, subject and object are brought into proximity, temporally and spatially.

Although Graham does not mention Panofsky per se, Panofsky’s understanding of the historian as a privileged viewer within a one-point perspective system informs Graham’s work in increasingly interesting ways. While Graham begins his career attempting to represent the present as a sequence of contextual moments in his work for magazines, his performance and installation work gives up trying to depict the present, instead using time as one
of its materials. These works become increasingly complex until Graham fully understands the architectural pressure exerted on time and perception. Ultimately, Graham abandons the presence of a performer within his architectural installations, realizing that video deployed in architecture becomes the best model for showing the absence of any privileged vantage point. Also, Graham’s use of architecture allows him to refer to our desire to see the work presented within the suspending context of a museum or gallery as timeless at the same time that he undermines that perception. Despite the fact that the presence of a performer, who described the viewing audience, explicitly threw into question the viewer’s position as a detached eye viewing a timeless and fixed work, that performer’s presence also introduces the possibility that the performer occupies that position. Such a reversal is not, evidently, what Graham sought to exploit. Instead his choice of architectural models without performers in recent years suggests Graham is trying to show the absence of any privileged vantage point. That position, like time, is always in flux, always on the verge of loss. Not surprisingly, Graham’s recent pavilions and models favor curves and reflective panels, which constantly throw the viewer, as well as the work, into a state of flux. There is no possibility for fixing either the work or one’s experience of it in the past. When Graham substitutes subject for object, while embracing spatial and temporal alterity, he mirrors a photographic construction of history.

The question of history has been a feature of the two of the most prominent accounts of Graham’s work, those by Buchloh and de Duve. Most likely, their acceptance of Graham’s interest in history stems from a comment made by the artist. In the late 1960s, when Graham was just beginning to garner serious attention within the art world, he referred to his photographic practice as
"photojournalism". Like many early artist statements, this classification held, coloring many interpretations of his art work since, whether the work was photographic or not. One outgrowth of such an interpretation has remodeled the photojournalism Graham referred to as historical art, in the tradition of history painting. And while it is definitely true that Graham seems to want to address broader histories of contemporary life, like current housing trends in *Homes for America* (fig. 66), a work whose classification as photojournalism is not all that surprising, far less of his work engages that explicitly with current issues. Moreover, Graham seems less than interested in documenting for posterity. Instead, his interest in history, although very real, is strikingly different from what many would like to suggest. Buchloh’s main interest is in Graham’s early photographic work, specifically the photo-essay *Homes for America*. Buchloh points out that Graham uses photography in a Minimalist (that is ready-made and apparently documentary) way, ultimately conveying more about art history than about the society that creates the tract-housing projects Graham photographs and writes about. Because of the work’s greater relevance to the history of art, Buchloh suggests that Graham’s work participates in history, rather than documents that history. However, in contrast to the Minimalists, who were, according to Buchloh, resurrecting the revolutionary style of the Russian avant-garde, without the social commitment associated with that style, Buchloh asserts that Graham does raise social issues about suburban domestic architecture with the publication of his photo-essay.

Like Buchloh, de Duve insists on the mildly revolutionary flavor of Graham’s work. Where Buchloh cited Marx, De Duve describes a psychoanalytically inflected agent of history (à la the Frankfurter School) in Graham’s installations. According to de Duve, it is Graham’s historical subject
who is caught up within the time regression, in works like *Present/Continuous Past*[s], that undermines the conventional narrator, objective and external, who sees from a distance. Operating on this assumption, de Duve positions the camera, as an agent of the broadcast media, in the role of the narrator. It is telling that in de Duve’s description Graham’s apparatus works best when there is no one in the room. The critic argues that this is the only time that there is no one to block the view from the camera. The installation, when working perfectly, displaces the viewer from herself into the monitor or the mirror. But, this displacement is thwarted by the viewer’s very presence. If the visitor can interrupt this circuit, then the video apparatus may not make any superior claims to narration. Instead, the camera becomes nothing more than a recording device. Meanwhile, any visitor who remains in the installation long enough to respond to her recorded image finds herself taking on the role of the narrator. In this way, Graham undermines the role of the conventional narrator, because, where contemporary broadcast media, which the work invokes, sets itself up as a conventional narrator, Graham’s apparatus, in striking contrast, establishes its own space/time into which the narrator is drawn. External objectivity is impossible in this situation. Thus, the reflections that Graham puts into play here do not objectively record the present. Instead, they serve to draw in the visitor, isolate her within a space/time continuum specific to the installation—frame her, one might say, analogously to the repetition of Venus’ face reflected in the mirrors of Rubens and Velazquez that Rauschenberg isolated in his silk-screens—and encourage her to respond to the version of the viewer which the video monitor presents. All the while, the viewer exerts an increasing amount of control in her representation of that image on the monitor.
Graham orchestrates a similarly deconstructive model of history in *Past Future/Split Attention*.\(^{191}\) (Fig. 74) In this recorded performance, two performers are engaged in a dialog of sorts. While one performer predicts the second’s future behavior, the second recounts the first’s past behavior. The performance is videotaped, confining the time bending to a set interval. The tape is then presumably played back to an audience at a later date, although the video medium Graham employed allowed nearly simultaneous recording and playback as well. The ripples of time intervals between past, present and future inform the video medium with its possibility of presentness and its potential for recalling the past for the future. Thus the performers, in their split roles of recording and predicting within sight of each other’s present/presence, at once structure and reflect the multiple time dimensions of the medium. Moreover, they act as interpretive mirrors for each other. In this performance work, neither position is granted any privileged status as an agent of history. Instead, both record separate histories that depend upon each other.

A slightly different version of mirroring and history writing is acted out in *Performer/Audience/Mirror Sequence* (fig. 75 & 76), except, in this instance, there is no time delay or reference to the past or future. In this performance, the artist, or his proxy, stands before an audience and reflects [upon] the audience’s [and his own] behavior by turn. According to Graham’s instructions, published often with documentary photographs and recently released as a recording, the performer begins by describing his own behavior for a set period of time and then turning to the audience to describe their behavior, both individually and collectively. During the second phase of the performance, the performer turns to
the mirror behind him and describes, by turns, himself and the audience. The audience, according to Graham and de Duve, is thus faced with either accepting or rejecting the performer’s description, not only of the group or individuals in it, but also of the performer. They are expected to assess the performer’s interpretation and, ideally, part of this assessment becomes material for the performer to interpret. Again for de Duve, the mirror provides the objective view for the audience through which they maintain some autonomy as individuals so that they are not inscribed into a history beyond their control.

Graham’s explicit references to history vary considerably. Instead of discussing his magazine works or even his installations as history, Graham is more likely to discuss history in terms of the given context for his work.192 As a result, he addresses the architectural context of the modern glass building when he describes Two Adjacent Pavilions (fig. 67) as well as the eighteenth century concept of the rustic hut and the Rococo symbolism of mirrors in architecture,193 and the social impact of Renaissance theater design when he describes the model for Cinema in “Theater, Cinema and Power.”194 Graham also couches his historical reflection on his early magazine pages within the Minimalist and Pop art scenes of the sixties.195

Graham asserts his own prerogative to shape the dialogue about his work through his interpretive and socio-historical essays, sometimes even limiting the references and structures used to interpret the work. As a result, Graham’s writing occupies a defining position because he insists on beginning the dialogue about the art work. His first word on the work shapes subsequent responses to it, particularly written responses. It is in this way that Graham’s writing
structures, in an almost architectural fashion, the art historical fate of his art work. In a manner similar to the Minimalist work that Graham exhibited in his short-lived gallery, Graham’s writing on his work reflects on the institutional context of the art world, not just in terms of where art work is shown and sold, but also in terms of where art work is commodified, that is, in art journals. What is more, Graham’s architectural structuring of the viewer’s visual experience forces the viewer to become more aware of herself both in time and in space.

Graham’s viewer-cum-historian then, sometimes embodied in a performer, but always prone to the flux of time, ends up having a responsibility to the work she describes. Like the viewer, the historian depends upon the work as much as the work depends upon the historian. As a result of this interdependent relationship, Graham’s work presents itself as a series of delays, repeats and refashionings whose medium breaks are as arbitrary as the time limitations imposed on his performances.

By being the first writer as well as the first viewer of his works, Graham secures some leverage in the historical fortune of the works. Additionally, by naming the essays with the same title bestowed on the art works, he undermines their autonomy while repositioning himself as father and his essay as the image for which the art work needs to account. It seems likely that Graham’s need to write about the works arises out of the same slippage or gap which compelled the viewer to act or “rewrite” in Present/Continuous Past[s]. That is, the compulsion to act arises from the need to reclaim one’s experience in front of these works, essentially to seal the circuit between the viewer and her reflected or projected image.
The gap already exists for the viewer in front of the mirror. But with the addition of a time delay and/or the public exhibition of the site of identification, Graham ensures that the viewer is exposed to the realm of the symbolic, thus forcing the issue by compelling an act of reclamation on the part of the viewer. For the viewer’s experience is wrested from her and either made the subject of exhibition or subsumed within a communal experience. In the act of “writing” or renaming her experience, the viewer positions herself in the role of the father of the mirror stage, in effect removing herself from the visual circuit for a framing or structuring textual intervention. It is in this way, by compelling the viewer to provide some framework, that Graham secures the works’ positions as art. For, as he has already pointed out when discussing his magazine pieces, it is not simply the exhibition that determines art’s fate but also its public-ation.
CHAPTER 5
ROBERT SMITHSON: THE ABSTRACT MIRROR

Dan Graham’s first exhibition occurred at the home of the artist Robert Smithson, where Graham projected the slides that illustrated *Homes for America*. Smithson responded two years later with his own travelogue/aesthetic meditation, the photo-essay *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan*, a work that came toward the end of the artist’s profound interest in mirrors. Just as Rauschenberg, Richter and Graham tested the boundaries of traditional media, Smithson’s oeuvre pushed painting, sculpture, film and even writing beyond their limits, blurring distinctions between them and staking out new territory in earthworks and writing. However, his use of mirrors and reflection differed considerably from these artists. Rather than using mirrors to reflect the viewer, Smithson disrupted the viewer’s reflection, ultimately destabilizing the vertical reference to painting that remained a persistent feature of all three artists discussed thus far. Through his angled deployment of the mirrors, Smithson introduced a perceptual drain into the seemingly closed system of one-point perspective, which bolstered the mirror work of most artists of the 1960s.
As the previous chapters have noted, one-point perspective created a perceptual system in which the viewer was expected to identify with a reflected image. For Rauschenberg, this image highlighted the ambiguity between the two-dimensional images and the three-dimensional objects that comprised his work. The reflected image also bridged the gap between art and life by engaging his viewers in the activation and completion of his interactive installations. One-point perspective also bolsters the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan—theories that exposed the implicit identifications that leant illusionistic painting its appeal to the viewer. Richter used the mirror to expose those identifications as well by denying the viewer the clarity she sought in his photo-paintings and in his colored mirrors. Graham also exposed the institutionalization of these identifications by undermining them through temporal and social disruptions.

For Smithson, one-point perspective represented but one of the flawed systems his work aimed to expose. His *Alogons* materialize one-point perspective, as many scholars have noted. However, that materialization serves to turn the process back on itself. By returning the three-dimensional object to its original status, after it has been translated in to two dimensions, Smithson exposes the loss of accuracy, underscoring the failure of that system. As Reynolds argues, the *Alogons* show how a perspective system based on a single point, or eye, does not fully account for the reality of the space it attempts to duplicate. Like the sandbox that Smithson describes in his *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, filled half with black sand and half with white sand, there is no return to the original equilibrium once the sand is mixed.
sandbox example introduced Smithson’s interest in the physical process of entropy. According to this process, every system is characterized by its deterioration or energy loss. In the *Alogons*, Smithson shows how the illusionistic system of painting according to one-point perspective is subject to entropy as well. While a viewer may mentally reconstruct the three-dimensional object depicted, a faithful projection of that object after it has been filtered through one-point perspective yields an object that is a-logical, an alogon, as Smithson refers to them.

There is another level on which the identification process inherent in one-point perspective provides a counterpoint for Smithson. As Reynolds notes, Smithson rejected the biological metaphors in art criticism that typified Greenberg’s and Fried’s descriptions of abstraction. Instead, according to Smithson, abstraction is more accurately associated with the inhuman, non-biological structure of crystals. To a certain extent this attitude is visible in the *Alogons* simply by virtue of the fact that their materialization pays no heed to the viewer’s position in front of, or around, the works. This chapter will demonstrate that Smithson’s use of mirrors manages, surprisingly, to avoid the empathetic identification that typifies the work of other artists using reflection in the 1960s, in favor of a more abstract and entropic deployment.

Smithson’s use of mirrors as a primary material covers the period from 1964 until 1970. While his work consistently presents mirrors in distinctly different ways than Rauschenberg, Richter or Graham, his interests in the visual possibilities available through the mirror evolve during these five years. As such, the work can be divided into three separate, although undeniably related,
phases. From 1964 to 1965, Smithson’s use of mirrors mainly explored interiority, unearthing a hidden component of Minimalism that was inherent from the beginning in Robert Morris’ early works. Unlike Minimalism, however, Smithson’s exploration of interiority undermined empathetic visual perception by refusing to return to the viewer the reflected image of herself that she expects. From 1966-1968, Smithson focused on undermining pictorial conventions associated with Euclidean Geometric Perspective. By refusing to employ mirrors and glass in the service of one-point perspective and by materializing the rules of perspectival illusions, freezing them into a situation in which there is no single vantage point, Smithson attacks these conventions, showing up their limitations. From late 1968 to early 1970, a very productive time for Smithson in terms of his mirror work, Smithson concentrates on absence as the single most important trait of the mirror, that which defines the viewer’s experience in front of all mirrors, for when one stands in front of a mirror, despite that fact that one sees oneself there, one is not in the mirror. Smithson seeks to heighten this experience, by thwarting the viewer’s reflected appearance as well. Less reflection than refraction, these works are typically angled away from the viewer or positioned on the floor or low on the wall, providing an unexpected view of either the gallery or some other space.

5.1 1964-1965: The Vestiges of Minimalism

Smithson’s first work employing mirrors, The Eliminator, introduced two motifs which became reference points in his later work: contextual specificity in the vein
of Minimalism and the reflection of light. (Fig. 78) Composed of three mirrors supported by a steel frame, the structure implied an architectural corner of sorts with two mirrors positioned upright, flanking a horizontal mirror that rests on the floor. Positioned halfway between the two vertical mirrors, a steel frame supports neon tubing arranged in a zigzag pattern. The neon light was designed to flash on and off when the work was displayed. In its overall design, it prefigured the mirrored Nonsites Smithson constructed as corner installations. Moreover, Smithson’s use of neon in *The Eliminator* introduced a later interest in light even as it distinguished this sculpture from the rest of Smithson’s work. Never again did Smithson use neon or other artificial light in his work, despite the fact that the neon gained him some popular attention in 1964. Nonetheless, his pairing of neon and mirrors introduced the theme of reflected sunlight, a theme that pervaded his Mirror Displacements, the essay *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan*, and the film *Spiral Jetty*.

Robert Hobbes has suggested that Smithson’s sculptures from this period are in a constant dialogue with Minimalism. Indeed, Smithson’s structural choice of a corner does mimic the Minimalist predilection for corners and other recognizable architectural references to the gallery space. There are two other relationships to Minimalism here, one that should be evident at this point and another that may not be. First, the reflexive shape and reflective materials of Minimalist objects are referenced in Smithson’s choice of mirrored materials and in the reflexive positions of the upright mirrors. In fact, Smithson takes this reflexivity even further. Because the mirrors face inward, they not only refer to each other, they actually reflect each other. This stress on the object’s interiority
continues an undercurrent in Minimalism that was implicit in the Minimalist cube, as Michael Fried pointed out three years later, when he discussed Robert Morris' *Untitled* from 1965-66.\(^{206}\) (Fig. 79) The work consists of two halves of a ring that are positioned a few inches apart. The gaps between the two sides glow with their own fluorescent lights, which had been incorporated into the structure. As Fried puts it, that light suggests “an inner, even secret life.”\(^{207}\)

Fried’s description not only responds to the object’s implied hollowness, but also its repression of that hollowness, making it seem like a secret aspect of the work, simply because the interior is not entirely understandable from, or transparent to, its exterior. While it predates Morris’ object, Smithson’s *The Eliminator* responds materially to Dan Flavin’s employment of fluorescent lights and conceptually to two earlier Morris works that do not employ light, his *I-Box* (1962) and *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961). (Fig. 80 and 81) *I-Box* is a simple wooden box in the shape of a capital letter I. A door with a small handle is cut into the box and when opened it reveals a nude photograph of the artist. Functioning a bit like a peep show, although Morris’ confident, conspiratorial gaze admittedly undermines that impression, the work delivers an ego in the form of the artist to the viewer. The appeal of Morris’ *I-Box* is more explicitly visible in its contemporary, Rauschenberg’s combine *Icon* of the same year, which also uses the box format, in this case rewarding the curious viewer with a mirror reflection of herself. While Smithson’s work, like Rauschenberg’s, incorporates reflection on its interior, it does not reward the viewer with a reflection of herself. Instead, it plays reflection off of itself in a dizzying effect akin to the distorting and perceptually confusing configurations of the halls of
mirrors found in amusement parks. The viewing subject is thwarted altogether when she tries to fix herself spatially within the art work’s configuration, either through identification with the artist or with her own image.

*The Eliminator’s* relationship to *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* may not be as obvious, but it is equally important for understanding just how radical Smithson’s “Minimalist” work is. The wooden box that Morris exhibits as *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* is an entirely autonomous system, both spatially and temporally. The cube shape of the box suggests the visual gestalt so important to the Minimalists, which, they believed, secured its autonomy from the viewer and from its context. Moreover, the tape recording of the making of the box renders the work entirely self-referential, even to the point of incorporating the temporal duration of its construction. Morris’ box appears to hide nothing, suggesting its complete transparency in its presentation of itself to the viewer.\(^{208}\) In contrast, Smithson opens up the cube, leaving only three sides in *The Eliminator*, making any suggestion of the work’s transparency unnecessary. And yet, unlike *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*, *The Eliminator* is anything but transparent. Its reflective sides complicate the instant readability of the cube shape that Smithson exposes, undermining the spatial autonomy and self-referentiality of the cube. But it is in Smithson’s interpretation of the work’s temporal status that his critique of the temporal specificity of the recording is most striking.

*The Eliminator* is a clock that doesn’t keep time, but loses it. The intervals between the flashes of neon are “void intervals”…*The Eliminator* orders negative time as it avoids historical space.\(^{209}\)
The flashes of the neon light appear to track time, in this case the present time of the viewer, not a pre-recorded duration. Nonetheless, Smithson places the emphasis in his description on the negative intervals when the light is off. This is partly because, according to Smithson, when the light is on, “The viewer doesn’t know what he is looking at, because he has no surface space to fixate on.” As a result, the work appears to devour both time and space, but, because it is turned in on itself, the time and space it consumes are its own, making the work function like the mirror vortexes Smithson produced a year later, which will be discussed below. Should the viewer wish to identify with the piece, she is met only with the absence of her own reflection and the disruption of her suspended sense of time in front of the work. Thus, even this early three-dimensional work, which predates Smithson’s most “Minimalist” objects, not to mention his essays on Minimalism, already reveals his profound differences with the movement.

Another work from this period also employed mirrors to effect a perceptual abyss in front of the viewer. The now lost Enantiomorphic Chambers (1965) have been analyzed at length by Tim Martin. Martin analyzes photographs and descriptions of the work, along with a drawing/collage Smithson completed, titled After-Thought Enantiomorphic Chambers and Drawing Y, a schematic drawing that Martin believes relates to the chambers. Martin describes the enantiomorphic chambers as part of a psychoanalytic event in which the viewer is presented with her own desire to see herself—and by extension to be seen by the inhuman gaze of the work—precisely through the confounding of this desire. Martin extrapolates the viewer’s experience in front
of the work through a Lacanian analysis that is informed by the pictorial
convention of Renaissance perspective, a convention Smithson alludes to with
the mirror, even while he deploys the mirrors so that the reflexive confined space
of one-point perspective is opened up to infinite drain. Citing Smithson’s 1967
essay “Pointless Vanishing Points,” Martin notes that the artist intended the
work to provide three vantage points. Nonetheless, Smithson never explicitly
stated where they would be. Martin sets himself the task of extrapolating these
positions from Drawing Y, reaching the conclusion that at least one of the vantage
points effectively divided the viewer’s vision right down the middle. The
diagram marked six positions in relation to each other, three of which are
marked by the letter “m” and three by the letter “e,” suggesting the conceptual
splitting of the word “me” in reference to a two-eyed viewing subject. Martin
grafts an eye onto each letter and then suggests that Smithson intended to
heighten the viewer’s perceptual splitting with the work. To be sure, Smithson
was interested in the fact that physiologically vision is divided between two eyes
that mentally suture these two slightly different vantage points together in a
process known as retinal fusion. Nonetheless, there is little to suggest that
Smithson would have expected the viewer to experience the work from some of
the positions Martin describes. In particular, his second stage, during which
Martin imagines the viewer will walk right up to the edge of the sculpture and
willingly position one eye so that it gazes into the internal mirror vortex and the
other so that it gazes at the exterior of the sculpture. It is true that Smithson has
a particular interest in enantiomorphs. However, this interest does not seem to
be limited to a concern about an inhuman gaze, particularly one styled after
Lacan’s symbolic gaze. Instead, Smithson seems to be more interested in revealing the actual split in perception, not in the subject. As Smithson puts it, the work explores “…all the different breakdowns within perception.” Moreover, such an interest in the subject would open the artist up to the same critique he levels at Greenberg and psychoanalysis, that is of relying too heavily on biomorphic descriptions.

The other works from this period frequently take the shape of crystals, a shape that Smithson favors because of its non-biomorphic associations and because of his long-standing interest in geology. It is from the sciences that the artist also picks up his concept of entropy. Borrowed from physics, the term offers an alternative to the biological metaphors that dominated art criticism and art history. As a state of continual energy drain, entropy begins with a mistrust in cycles as well as in stasis. In the second respect, Smithson structurally incorporates entropy and his interest in crystals into his critique of Minimalism. By giving his objects crystalline forms, he undermines the implied transparency of the Minimalist cube in favor of a perceptually opaque interplay of surface and interior. Works like *Mirror Vortex* and *Four Sided Vortex*, both 1965, insert mirrored vortexes into simple stainless steel rectangular or triangular containers. (Fig. 83 and 84) Like *The Eliminator* and *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, the vortexes refuse viewer reflection. The internal reflections create the appearance of crystalline shapes within these boxes. But the continual deferral of the static subject/object relationship a viewer expects in front of one of these works inserts a perceptual hole in the work, in effect draining the certainty of that relationship away into the vortex. Smithson makes much of the abstract nature of the
Minimalists’ work in a 1965 essay on Donald Judd that bears remarking, for his description of Judd’s work is perhaps more accurately a description of his own work with mirrors.

Space in Judd’s art seems to belong to an order of increasing hardness, not unlike geological formations…Judd has brought space down into an abstract world of mineral forms. He is involved in what could be called, “The Deposition of Infinite Space.” Time has many anthropomorphic representations, such as Father Time, but space has none…Space is nothing, yet we all have a kind of vague faith in it.215

In the above quotation, Smithson sets up an opposition between abstraction and anthropomorphism.216 True abstraction, according to Smithson, conveys no anthropomorphic references and is instead better suited to geological metaphors. Indeed, his vortexes more closely resemble crystals than the biomorphic figures they refuse to figure forth. Moreover, as a result of their failure to reflect anything other than mirrors or fragments of objects and people reflected in other mirrors, they are perhaps the most abstract mirrors discussed thus far. Where Rauschenberg, Richter and Graham all ultimately understood that their works would reflect their viewers and in some cases actively sought this effect, Smithson worked to achieve a more radical, non-humanist abstraction with his mirrors.

Smithson also posited that Judd’s work deposes the particular kind of space that Smithson explores the next year in such works as the Alogons and, in 1968, Pointless Vanishing Point.217 In the essay on Judd, Smithson calls the space that Minimalism deposes infinite, but in the essay “Pointless Vanishing Points” he makes clear that this space is that of Euclid.218 Euclidean space, as Smithson
describes it, is two-dimensional and, at least by implication, infinite. In opposition to the Euclidean space of one-point perspective, Smithson offers up what he calls enantiomorphic space, which is three-dimensional and finite. It is, in fact, more like the actual world we inhabit, as opposed to the world we attempt to conceptualize when figuring it. It would seem that Smithson has in mind the camera obscura when he describes one-point perspective. The structure of the camera obscura, a box on the interior of which a convincing image of the external world is projected, is mimicked in Smithson’s box-like structures of 1964 and 1965. However, when Smithson builds his own finite structure, he undermines the perceptual effects of the camera obscura. While Smithson’s works posit a correct vantage point, they also leave themselves open to an infinite number of incorrect vantage points—all of which are possible even if they do not participate in the original illusion. In doing so, Smithson undermines the veracity of the analogy on which the camera obscura operates, between infinite space and its finite representation. By exposing the lack of cohesion within this analogy, Smithson underscores the ruptures and gaps that structure the pictorial device of one-point perspective. The exposure of these gaps becomes Smithson’s defining concern when he uses mirrors. Instead of constructing an enclosed system where vision presents itself as unified, Smithson created perceptual devices, like the Enantiomorphic Chambers, in which vision is forever split from itself in an open and infinite circuit of reflection. Between 1966 and 1968, Smithson turns his attention to finite, three-dimensional structures, further undoing the defining analogy of Euclidean space and its representational tool, the camera obscura.
5.2 1966-1968: Limits and Layers

Beginning in 1966, with the Alogons, Smithson abandoned the mirror briefly to materialize the techniques of one-point perspective in three-dimensions. (Fig. 77) The result was a series of repeated forms of diminishing scale, exhibited together in sequence. Due to the visible remnants of the system of one-point perspective, all of the Alogons are structured according to a particular vantage point. However, a viewer is free to stand wherever she chooses while viewing the work, leaving open the likelihood that the “illusion” of spatial recession into depth—an illusion which is redundant and unnecessary in three dimensions—would unravel. By returning the forms back to their three-dimensional reality after cycling them through the illusionistic system of traditional western painting, Smithson exposes the limits of one-point perspective. As such, these works are an extension of the same concerns with perception and one-point perspective that defined Smithson’s early mirrored works. Speaking of his interest in Jorge Luis Borges’ writing, Smithson describes the author’s writing and the artist’s art making as essentially similar in method.

I was always interested in Borges’ writings and the way he would use leftover remnants of philosophy. That kind of taking of a discarded system and using it…as a kind of armature.\(^{219}\)

Smithson’s employment of one-point perspective, a system that was all but discarded within the history of modern painting, became Smithson’s armature as he explored a radically abstract art.
Additionally, Smithson suggested that his art process involved the compositional strategy of layering, just as his writing did. That is, the process of materializing one-point perspective adds another layer of meaning by exposing perspective’s entropic nature and its ultimate failure. Structurally, the stacked composition of the *Alogons* and the other works from this period, including *Plunge, Pointless Vanishing Point*, and *Terminal*, informed Smithson’s return to mirrors as a sculptural material. Beginning in late 1966, Smithson produced a series of strata made of glass and mirror. The series combined Smithson’s interest in space and time. Linked to crystals, the strata offered Smithson a model for the spatial and temporal disruptions he noted within modernist painting. The layered structure of crystals he likened to the geological evidence of time in the strata visible in core samples. The defining element of geological stratifications is the layering and disruptive shifts which put two temporally distinct periods in contact with one another. He describes a similar effect of historical disjunction in his essay “Ultramoderne.” The essay posits the existence of “two types of time—organic (modernist) and crystalline (Ultratist).” Modernist time depends upon the idea of advance. It is the linear time that gives rise to concepts like the *avant-garde*, whereas Ultratist time arises out of the object from the various layers of time embedded in the object.

Smithson describes this crystalline structure in the architecture of the 1930s, which combined elements of “the many types of monumental art from every major period—Egyptian, Mayan, Inca, Aztec, Druid, Indian, etc.”

With *Ziggurat Mirror*, Smithson layers mirrors together in the rough form of a stepped pyramid, or ziggurat. (Fig. 85) The architectural reference to the pyramidal structures of Mesopotamia and the Aztecs reveal Smithson’s interest in the pre-historic past. By building the ziggurat out of a mirror, Smithson
acknowledges his debt to the architecture of the thirties as well. In the essay on “Ultramoderne” architecture, he notes the profusion of mirrors, suggesting that the material’s ability to repeat what appeared before it made it a particularly apt choice for this architectural style which repeated so many different styles—implicitly rejecting the originality sought after by the avant-garde. In the same essay, however, Smithson also notes the mirror’s ability to “contain everything” while it nonetheless is in fact “a vain trap, an abyss.”

This description, Janus-like, refers back to the mirror vortexes at the same time that it prefigures Smithson’s later work with mirrors. As such, it is important to understand his particular interest in this layered mirror. It functions like a mirror in that either side reflects the viewer, albeit with the layered edges of the mirrors disrupting the reflection at points. However, in order to experience the primary title reference, i.e. the ziggurat shape, one must leave one’s reflection in favor of a side-view, which emphasizes instead the thickness and color of the glass mirrors, as opposed to the reflectivity of the sides. Thus, the prehistoric reference, which on one side displays a permanently present reality in the mirror, retains a spatial thickness on its side. Time and space are united in one object that combines a view of the present and a reference to the distant past.

The divided structure of ziggurat mirror is hinted at by its combination of two nouns in its title. It is both a ziggurat and a mirror. The viewer cannot experience both directly from any one side. The ascendance of either title reference is determined by her vantage point, just as that position determined her experience of the Alogons. Moreover, the ziggurat format evokes the well-known biblical ziggurat, the Tower of Babel, functioning as a shorthand for Smithson’s interest in the confluence of stylistic languages in the architecture of the 1930s and his conviction that art and language can never be seamlessly and
In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge...but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures...at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations. The following is a mirror structure built of macro and micro orders, reflections, critical laputas, and dangerous stairways of words...Here language “covers” rather than “discovers” its sites and situations. Here language “closes” rather than “discloses” doors to utilitarian interpretations and explanations. The language of the artists and critics referred to in this article becomes paradigmatic reflections in a looking-glass babel that is fabricated according to Pascal’s remark, “Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” The entire article may be viewed as a variation on that much misused remark; or as a monstrous “museum” constructed out of multi-faceted surfaces that refer, not to one subject but to many subjects...Or language becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere.\textsuperscript{228}

In this passage, Smithson combines references to Borges in the stairways with the motif of infinite reflection, which somehow manages to miss its subject, to imply the endless interpretations of his art, translations from the visual to the linguistic, that can arise in the face of it. In contrast to Graham, Smithson’s writing refuses to limit the discourse that surrounds his work. Instead, it continually introduces new layers of interpretation.

Smithson’s other strata were oriented horizontally, adding another dimension to his references. Like \textit{Ziggurat Mirror}, the later strata are formed in pyramidal configurations, with their apex typically positioned in one corner. (Fig. 86) Their effect is to accentuate the materiality of the mirror, exposing the thickness of the mirrors through the repetition of layers. Thus, the process of spectral reflection is exposed as dependent upon thickness and materiality.\textsuperscript{229}
Reynolds points out, these strata, especially *Untitled (Map on Mirror)* Fig. 87, which can be viewed both as immaterial and flattened from above and thick and substantive from the side, extend from Smithson’s experience as a consultant on the proposal for the air terminal for Dallas/Fort Worth, particularly with regard to the aerial maps he encountered on this project, which stood in for the architectural environment he was helping to plan. Like the *Alogons*, whose stacked and splayed construction these strata repeat, the mirrors reverse the tendency to optically flatten the world through a mirrored surface or map. This map on mirror also functions to reverse the mapping process, rendering that flat image in three-dimensions. Smithson’s choice to back each successively smaller mirror with maps that correspondingly decreased in scale renders the map inconsistent and emphatically layered in appearance, suggesting instead the geological shifts which rendered the earth’s surface inconsistent and ultimately influenced the features described on the map. Ultimately, Smithson’s interest in maps, a place where geological time meets contemporary space, led him to an interest in more spatially distant relationships between the gallery and an actual site.

5.3 1968-1970: “A Thing is a Hole in a Thing It is not”

In 1968, Smithson began using mirrors in his Nonsites, works he referred to as “three dimensional logical picture[s] that [are] abstract, yet represent an actual site…” *Red Sandstone Corner Piece* consists of three mirrors, each four feet square, placed into a corner. (Fig. 88) The mirror that rests on the floor is nearly covered with sandstone from the Sandy Hook Quarry in New Jersey. As a corner piece, the work echoes Smithson’s early neon work *The Eliminator*. In this
case, however, the mirrors reflect the sandstone, making it appear to extend into a single floor piece approximately 16 feet square. Because the work is larger than *The Eliminator* and all three mirrors meet on a 90-degree angle, the work actually reflects more of its surroundings than its predecessor. As a result, the distinction between site and non-site is blurred, because the sandstone from the site is reflected in the mirror together with the non-site context of the gallery. The mirrors turn the geological samples from the site into a picture. Moreover, they incorporate the viewer’s legs and feet into that site as well, creating a sense of physical displacement for the viewer from the gallery to the unbounded, uncontained site. While Smithson emphatically maintains that his art is abstract and, therefore, non-empathetic, he does invite the viewer to imagine traversing the site mentally. By refusing to provide the viewer with a reflection of her face, Smithson avoids the pathos and anthropomorphism he criticizes Greenberg and Fried for having appealed to in their discussions of abstraction. By fragmenting the viewer and, to a certain extent, de-personalizing her self-projection towards the Nonsite, Smithson maintains a delicate balance between site and Nonsite as well as between the object and the viewer’s mental experience. As he puts it:

> My work is impure; it is clogged with matter. I’m for a weighty, ponderous art. There is no escape from matter...nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are in a constant collision course. You might say that my work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter.\(^2\)

When Smithson insists on the non-empathetic nature of abstraction, he does not deny the viewer’s mental projection into the work. Instead, he merely refuses to provide an object with which easy identification can happen between the two.
In most cases, his Nonsites involve gathering samples of rocks, dirt or other geological specimens from a site full of such materials, a site which typically seems unbounded and “oceanic” in comparison with the bounded Nonsite into which that material is incorporated. Thus, the dialectic between site and Nonsite, is also one between the limitless and the contained, and, because the works are exhibited within the confines of the art gallery system, between the peripheral and forgotten and the central and historically relevant. Because the materials gathered do not usually leave any sort of absence on the site, the works also put into play a dialectic between the visible and the invisible. That is, by virtue of having moved the sandstone from the quarry in New Jersey, Smithson has actually made it visible to many who would never have access to that quarry. All of these contrasting concepts are held together in the “non” part of the site, an emphatic object that refers to a fact we only know conceptually. As he puts it,

An object to me is the product of a thought; it doesn’t necessarily signify the existence of art. My view of art springs from a dialectical position that deals with whether something exists or doesn’t exist…There is this dialectic between inner and outer, closed and open, center and peripheral. It just goes on constantly permuting itself into this endless doubling, so that you have the Nonsite functioning as a mirror and the site functioning as a reflection.223

His sense of the mirror then is largely determined by the mirror’s object status, as opposed to its reflective ability. The mirror, like his Nonsites, contains a remnant of the site in the form of a reflection. However, the mirror can also suggest the limitless site through its multiple reflections.

The Nonsites, because they set up these dualities that they attempt to contain, have a very different feel than the early works like the Enantiomorphic Chambers, which refuse to maintain a closed system of viewer and viewed, or
even the vortexes, which seem to draw the viewer into a sieve through which perception appears to drain out the bottom. Given the fact that the sites are sometimes indistinguishable after they have been mined by Smithson, the structure of the Nonsites in relation to the sites appears to be one very close to a more traditional mirroring situation, in which nothing is lost from the origin[al] even while it is referred to from a place outside of itself. And, perhaps more importantly, Smithson often carefully includes the name of the location from which the material was gathered, rendering the Nonsite unambiguously attached to a specific space. There is no possibility for attachments between the Nonsite and a multitude of possible original sites. In some ways this is similar to the effect of the Alogons, which fix the point of perceptual origin. However, the Alogons always leave open the possibility, indeed even encourage it, that the viewer will choose another vantage point. In the named Nonsites, such possibilities are excluded.

Mineralogically, the non-sites that feature mirrors with sand or sandstone refer to the continual permutational flow between the sample and the mirror. Both sand and sandstone form the basic materials in the manufacturing of glass. As a result, a work like Red Sandstone Corner Piece presents two points in an irreversible process—one that could be said to be entropic in its irreversibility. The original structure of the sandstone in particular cannot be recouped once the stone has been melted and fired into glass. Moreover, sandstone is a particularly appropriate material, simply because its geological structure mimics the layered composition of the strata. As a sedimentary rock, it exhibits the depth and disruptions of time in its very structure.
In another type of mirror work from the same period, Smithson structures his work out of flux and flow as a primary material. In his *Cayuga Salt Mine Project*, Smithson employs both Nonsites and mirror displacements which marked the site.\(^2\) Additionally, he creates a *Mirror Trail* between the gallery that exhibited the Nonsite and the site, actively encouraging travel to the site. \(^3\) \(^4\) \(^5\) (Fig. 89) *Eight Part Piece* consists of eight square mirrors cantilevered horizontally a few inches above the floor and supported by the salt collected at the site. \(^6\) \(^7\) (Fig. 90) The mirrors reflect only a small percentage of the sample from the site. Instead, the Nonsite functions like a reflection of the site; that is, Smithson’s deployment of the mirrors and salt echoes the arrangement of the same materials in the displacement he photographed at the mining site. In his displacements at the site, Smithson photographed the mirrors on the floor of the salt mine, sometimes laying them flat on the floor of the mine and at others slanting them diagonally rising from the floor. The photographs of the mirrors are in all cases taken at an angle that provides a view of a part of the mine that is beyond the frame of the camera. Typically, the mirrors reflect areas of the mine which are bathed in light, and occasionally they reflect the light more directly, bathing their own surroundings with refracted sunlight, bringing the celestial down to the subterranean in the same way the salt brings the site into the Nonsite or gallery.\(^8\) The mirror displacement from the mining site was then disassembled. The same mirrors used in the mine were probably used in the Nonsite. Nonetheless, even if they were not the same, the fact that the mirrors were only temporarily placed on the site and similar mirrors were used in the Nonsite creates a strong impression of the gallery’s Nonsite simply functioning as yet another displacement from the site by way of the mirror.\(^9\) Smithson notes
the material’s conceptual aspect, as well, suggesting the work functioned as a reflection of the site, despite the fact that an actual reflection of the site did not appear in the mirror.  

Smithson does alter the exterior of the gallery in this work, unlike Red Sandstone Corner Piece. His Mirror Trail, a path between the gallery and the Cayuga Salt Mine site marked only by mirrors placed periodically in the landscape connected site to Nonsite, exhibition to referent. These mirrors functioned differently than the mirrors in the gallery, which simply emphasized the materiality of the salt that supported and rested on them at the same time that they reflected more mundane architectural aspects of the gallery, such as its ceiling and lighting. The Mirror Trail, however, offered the possibility of reflecting the viewer, but in this case the viewer was en route and the emphasis on the viewer’s travel to the site, as opposed to the viewer within a gallery, or even at the site, tended to downplay the viewer’s identification with her reflected image for a more dynamic experience of flux. In this way, Smithson offers the viewer the visual experience of her own displacement, creating a more conceptual projection into displacement as a process, rather than an anthropomorphic image with which one identifies. Smithson states “A lot of my pieces come out of the idea of covering distances.”  

He referred to the distance separating the site from the Nonsite as an abyss, “a kind of oblivion” As such, the Mirror Trail punctuated that abyss, giving it form. The abyss in this sense ties in closely with Smithson’s argument about the limitless. As he states in an interview conducted two months later in April of 1969, art cannot be limitless. “All legitimate art deals with limits. Fraudulent art feels that it has no limits.” Earlier in the same article, when he is discussing his Nonsites, he states,
It seems that no matter how far out you go, you are always thrown back on your point of origin...You are confronted with an extending horizon; it can expand onward and onward, but then you suddenly find the horizon is closing in all around you, so that you have this dilating effect. In other words, there is no escape from limits.241

The passage quoted above notably echoes another passage from the published version of another displacement, which also occurred in April of 1969.

Driving away from Merida down Highway 261 one becomes aware of the indifferent horizon...One is always crossing the horizon, yet is always remains distant...A horizon is something else other than a horizon; it is closedness in openness...242

The essay, “Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan,” from which the preceding passage is taken, is a multi-part work that is primarily about limits and secondarily about the systems that impose limits. The photo-essay, which is the only form in which it survived at the end of Smithson’s life, documents a trip Smithson took with his wife, the artist Nancy Holt, and his dealer, Virginia Dwan.243 During the trip, Smithson assembled between nine and thirteen square mirrors in the landscape across the Yucatan peninsula, typically near, but not in view of, Mayan and Aztec ruins. (Fig. 92 and 93) His manner of assembly was similar to his displacements in the Cayuga Salt Mine. The mirrors again were nestled into embankments of rock or dirt, or sometimes propped up by vegetation, reflecting the sky above them and any incidental rocks, dirt, flora or fauna which happened to fall before them. After the displacements were photographed, the installation would be disassembled and brought to a new location for yet another displacement. Unlike the Cayuga Salt Mine Project, no materials were collected from the sites, and the mirrors were never exhibited
elsewhere. Instead, the only record Smithson left Mexico with was his large-format film. Rather than exhibiting the photographs, Smithson wrote the hybrid essay “Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan.” Part travelogue, part documentation, part aesthetic pronouncement, the essay echoes many of Smithson’s interests up to that point.

The passage the Yucatan essay opens with, quoted above, situated the work in a debate current in Minimal art at the time. Revolving around the experience of the infinite and art’s inability to reconstruct that experience, the debate begins with a comment made by the Minimalist artist Tony Smith in an interview published in *Artforum* in December of 1966. Describing a revelatory experience he had while driving, Smith states:

...someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike...It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats...This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done...its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art...I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that’s the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.

While Smithson described a similar experience during a car ride, it is important to note that he consistently described his movement through space in terms of a horizon. That is, as he traveled down the road, the horizon continually slipped underneath his wheels. Horizons are, aside from being perceptual facts, pictorial conventions. It is typically along the horizon that the vanishing point would appear in a picture constructed according to the rules of one-point perspective. This point on the horizon organizes the pictorial space, just as the road on which
Smithson traveled organized the space through which he passed. Thus, the vanishing point, the furthest visible point on the road, became Smithson’s goal, yet as he moved, he continually occupied a previous vanishing point. Time and space collapsed. Poised always at the threshold of the infinite which promised to open out beyond the vanishing point, Smithson’s experience revealed the limits of perception, as well as the limits of the art form which seeks to convey that experience.

Smithson’s placement of the mirrors in the Yucatan echoes his displacements in the *Cayuga Salt Mine Project*. For the most part, they were placed on the ground so that the sky is reflected into them. Smithson suggests it was a way of painting with light.

Particles of color infected the molten reflections on the twelve mirrors, and in so doing, engendered mixtures of darkness and light. Color as an agent of matter filled the reflected illuminations with shadowy tones, pressing the light into dusty material opacity...The word “color” means at its origin to “cover” or “hide.” Matter eats up light and “covers” it with a confusion of color...Real color is risky, not like the tame stuff that comes out of tubes.

The mirrors thus become uncontrollable and irrational. “Reflections fall onto the mirrors without logic.” The mirrors keep confusing rational space. “The mirror surfaces being disconnected from each other ‘destructuralized’ any literal logic.” They are a far cry from Leonardo’s mirror, which secured the rationality of his painting’s illusionistic space.

The publication of the Yucatan essay further undermines the system of one-point perspective through its layout of the photographs and the inclusion of text. As Reynolds notes, the grid format of the publication of the photographs overlays a separate system on the photographic space that structures each image,
creating a disjunction between the two. The mirrors further disrupt that space by creating a hole in the photographed landscape. Beyond that, Smithson’s writing also overlays another system over the original “hole.” “One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing.” None of these systems perfectly reflect each other; there is always a disjunction. “Writing the reflection is supposed to match the physical reality, yet somehow the enantiomorphs don’t quite fit together.” Or to quote from the passage by Levi-Strauss used as an epigraph for the essay:

The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness; its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other...although without being strictly parallel.

While Strauss is commenting on a non-western conception of time, the image he uses to describe it is particularly telling. The figure of the enantiomorph and the lack of fit between two poles of a system like one-point perspective both open up a trap door into the “dialectics” that Smithson presents, introducing an illogical entropic loss in the logical systems. What is particularly fitting about the choice of this passage for the epigraph, however, is Smithson’s equally disruptive employment of mirrors to accomplish a similar effect. Instead of angling the mirror so that it artificially creates a static and apparently complete space, Smithson manages to leave an opening. His mirrors do not complete the scene before the mirror the way that the painted mirror in Van Eyck’s double portrait does, suggesting an infinite continuity of similar space outside the painting. (Fig. 94) Instead, Smithson effects the sort of temporal and spatial disruptions that are
common in geological strata by displacing the sky onto the earth. The mirror
displacements thus fail to preserve the spatial autonomy of the picture, allowing
time and space to bleed from sky to ground, from mirror to camera, from
photograph to writing, and all into the art magazine, finally fixing the
displacement with an admittedly arbitrary publication date.

Smithson continues his interest in the displacement of light and the
natural occurrence of reflective surfaces in his film and essay *Spiral Jetty*. The
reflective possibilities of water seem to have informed the Yucatan
displacements, despite the fact that no photographs displaying this effect were
actually published with the essay. Nonetheless, the photograph *Roots and Rocks, Palenque* was taken during the trip. (Fig. 95) Sometime around the *Fifth Mirror Displacement*, Smithson assembled a small pile of rocks and roots in a nearly dry, rocky riverbed. Smithson then photographed the pile aiming the camera
outward to include a long view of the landscape and the horizon towards the
top. Next to the pile of rocks, a small puddle of water reflects the hazy sun into
the camera. In a similar manner, the Great Salt Lake functioned as a mirror in
the film of *Spiral Jetty*. (Fig. 96) When Smithson filmed it from above, the water
reflected the sun displacing it into the spiral of water that was contained by the
jetty. “The helicopter maneuvered the sun’s reflection through the Spiral Jetty
until it reached the center. The water functioned as a vast thermal mirror.” In
this one shot, Smithson layers one of the sources for the spiral motif onto the
final spiral.

As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to
suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire
landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the
fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement.
This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness.
From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty.
No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and Nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other…The shore of the lake became the edge of the sun, a boiling curve, an explosion rising into a fiery prominence. Matter collapsing into the lake mirrored in the shape of a spiral.  

The spiral shape of the jetty was in part inspired by the spiraling tendrils of fire that rise from the edges of the sun, in part inspired by the local myth of a whirlpool at the center of the Great Salt Lake, and in part by the spiral structure of the salt crystals which would ultimately form on the jetty. Nonetheless, the spiral motif had appeared before in Smithson’s art, most notably in the 1970 sculpture Gyrostasis and in proposals for an air terminal site, and would appear again in his subsequent earth works. The flickering of light that inspired the spiral movement Smithson described, however, also had early precedents in The Eliminator, where the flashing lights lost space and time. Like the viewer before The Eliminator, Smithson found himself losing his spatial and conceptual markers, losing himself in his experience of the site. And yet, his experience was not conveyed through a limitless medium. Instead, it was caught in two enantiomorphs, two imperfect reflections: his essay “Spiral Jetty” and his film Spiral Jetty. Both essay and film have a bounded materiality of their own. Indeed, the film’s structure of multiple frames of photographic exposure mimics the flickering of light that the artist described in the essay. The materiality of the essay may not be as clear in this respect, but Smithson described it particularly well in a passage about his earth works.

The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the
print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, in a terrain of particles each containing its own void.  

In a similar manner, Smithson imagined his own writings like “Spiral Jetty” and “Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan” to be structured out of the same kind of fissures and disruptions that constituted the jetty and the mirror displacements. Instead of mirroring his works, as Graham’s writing attempts to do, Smithson’s writing opened up the terrain, exposing the lack of cohesion and the deep fissures that drain away authoritative meaning, revealing chaos rather than logic, inverting the typical function of the artist essay to make sense of the work. In sight of each other, the works and the writing are in constant dialogue, but in the end the system is given over to entropic loss. Levi-Strauss’ description of a room filled with mirrors that partly reflect each other captures some sense of the effect of Smithson’s writing on his sculptures, non-sites, displacements, earth works and film. Rather than lining up perfectly, Smithson’s writing circles his works, but the works always exceed the terms of his writing. In fact, Smithson stated definitively that he does not subscribe to the view that art works can be done away with entirely and replaced by a concept. It is more accurate to claim that the writing is capable of being translated into the art work’s terms. That is certainly what he claimed in the quotation above, where he described words in the material terms of the rocks he so frequently employed. And it was also his claim in the 1966 poem, “A Heap of Language.” (Fig. 97) Consisting of layers of words structured in a pyramidal shape, the work resembles his mirror and glass strata of the same year. The words are all related to language but are
not exact definitions of the word “language” placed at the apex. Instead, each word expands the references in the same way that each consecutive line, as the poem is read, increases the scale of the pyramid. For Smithson, words were material and thus could not be a perfect reflection of that to which they refer. This position is remarkably similar to Derrida’s claim that language frames art but does not perfectly reflect it. It would be a mistake to believe that any written description exhausts all that there is to see in an art work.

To push Smithson’s work and writing even further afield, but strangely enough back to his intellectual roots, it might be useful to consider two stories about the impulse to make art. One originates in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, while the other was proposed by the same philosopher who provided Smithson with the term “dialectic,” G.W.F. Hegel. The story of Narcissus, who mistook his own reflection for that of another, transfixed in his desire for the other, is rather well known. Hegel’s story, briefly related in the introduction to the *Aesthetics*, is perhaps less so. It comes within a discussion of the need to produce works of art. Hegel claimed that this need arises from a thinking consciousness that must reproduce itself in order to have itself as an object of contemplation. In the story, a boy throws stones into a river. His action produces circular ripples across the surface of the water. In these ripples, the boy recognizes his own agency. That is, he understands that he has extended himself out into the world through the effects caused by his action. Hegel’s story contrasts sharply with the Narcissus myth. When the protagonist reaches out to touch the face of his paramour, the image of his beloved disappears among the ripples caused by the youth’s contact with the surface. The Narcissus myth is based on a fundamental
mis-recognition of one’s own reflection. Not only does this mis-recognition occur when Narcissus believes his reflection is actually the face of another, but it also happens when he fails to recognize the effect of his own action in the ripples on the water—the same effect in which Hegel’s stone-thrower recognizes himself. The Narcissus myth operates on the level of illusionism and is best suited therefore to figuration. The system of illusionism that the Narcissus story implies is one related to one-point perspective in which a correlation between viewer and image is maintained in a closed and static system—one haunted by the implied anthropomorphism of the image. By contrast, the stone-thrower’s agency is far more abstract and open to flux and, as a result, more closely resembles the entropy which structures Smithson’s writing. What all of these theories and examples, Derrida’s parergon, Hegel’s stone-thrower, Levi-Strauss’ mirrored room and Smithson’s entropy, have in common is an internal slippage, an excess that resists articulation and containment. It is, by extension, the brute fact of being unable to fully capture in words how an art work articulates itself from all that is not art. One might argue, in light of such preoccupations since the 1960s in the discourse of art, that that fact was the central problem of Minimalism. For, if the Specific Objects that Judd described were to be embraced into the history of art, then their identity became a theoretical problem. The questions of identity and reflection thus ripple outward from Minimalism’s point of entry, just as artists in the sixties turned their attention outward toward viewers and the institutions of the art world that made their work visible.
Chapter 6:
Conclusion

Since classical Greece, mirrors have been linked to art through a linguistic device, the analogy. With the widespread use of industrial materials into art and the insistence on the part of the Minimalists that their work was related to the history of modern painting even while their art was dubbed “objects” and “structures” rather than painting or sculpture, a need arose to redefine the relationship between art and everything else. It is in light of this need that the concurrent use of mirrors and reflective surfaces, along with the more frequent appeals to written reflection by artists engaged in these practices, is particularly revealing of the way that these issues were knotted together in the second half of the twentieth century.

All artists working in any sort of community produce art within a written discourse that attempts to explain their work in hopes of revealing all of its visual interest. For artists working in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, this written discourse had become particularly important. Artists in the United States saw the rise of subtle, incisive, and, importantly, influential art criticism after World War II, along with the need for ever more explication of the abstract art that found recognition among these critics. While this circumstance in some ways was not unique to this period—after all, French artists had been working in
a field dominated by influential art critics since Diderot—the difference is that
the art world of the sixties and seventies focused increasing attention on its own
discursive and institutionalized context. Like the viewers who encountered the
work and the institutions that showed the work, the broader written context of
the art world (and the history of art) became increasingly implicated within the
art work. Rauschenberg, Richter, Graham and Smithson all understood this, and
the mirror functioned centrally in their responses to this situation, albeit in four
quite different ways.

By refusing to comment about his work, except to chime in with
contradictory statements every so often, Rauschenberg encourages his viewer to
make connections between the diverse and sometimes perplexing visual
elements in his work, bridging the gap between art and life. Additionally, his
compositional style of layering and combining images and objects invites the
same type of “reading” one does when interpreting a text. Rauschenberg
exploited a constant tension between divergent readings of his work by leaving
open as many interpretations as possible, thus engaging the viewer in an on-
going act of interpretation. Within the visual tensions he composed, the mirror,
either as a reflective material or in depicted form, often functioned to play up the
ambiguities of subject matter and spatial relations. Thus his deployment of the
mirrors reflects his strategy of allowing, sometimes even introducing, a
discursive tension.

Richter’s production of mirrors also parallels his writerly strategies. The
mirror’s blankness and continual deferral of clarity and fixity—attributes Richter
tends to play up in his photo-paintings and, to a lesser extent, in his abstract
paintings—mimic Richter’s intention to write without fixing the meaning of his works. Just as she is when facing the mirrors, Richter’s viewer is thrown back on herself when trying to glean intentions and meaning from his writing. This is not to say that Richter never makes definitive statements about his intentions or what he believes to be the import of his work, but such claims tend to occur in interviews when the artist is drawn into a prolonged conversation about his work, rather than in his notes and statements. Ultimately, the external discourse that arose in view of his art work, particularly as it was articulated by Benjamin Buchloh, gained a more permanent hold later in his career when Richter embraced the critic’s suggestion that his work was ironic. This acceptance changed the tenor of Richter’s work, resulting in a decade of works that replayed earlier motifs in a somewhat ironic manner.

Where Rauschenberg and Richter shied away from limiting the discourse surrounding their work, Graham repeatedly attempts to set the stage for those writing about his work. To a certain degree, this is probably related to his introduction to the art world as a gallerist and his early commitment to writing art criticism. For Graham, his writing establishes for the record his intentions. However, because his intentions predominantly relate to the viewer’s experience, which may or may not bear out the artist’s statements, and because many of his installations have been disassembled and are only available through diagrams, documentary photographs and the artist’s descriptions, his writing has an unbalanced affect, often deeply influencing later interpretations of his work. In this way, his writing participates in structuring the viewer’s or the reader’s experience, the second of which must imagine her viewing experience, just as his
use of mirrors and mirror-like video cameras and monitors did. But more importantly, Graham’s writing participates in the same kind of interpretive activity that the viewer finds herself pursuing in installations like *Present/Continuous Past[s]*.

While Smithson published essays with the same titles as his work, just as Graham did, the relation between the two is far more complex than Graham’s interpretive and declaratory writing. Smithson tended to favor an opacity in his writing that mimicked the materiality of his work or of the temporary installation. Like his mirrors that displaced reflections, his writing often reflected on the visual work while introducing additional information as well opening up the circuit of subject and object, or object and reflection. Conversely, his writing never claimed to exhaust the visual implications of his art work. Instead, the two existed as supplements to each other, forever displacing art into writing and his writing into the art criticism that surrounds his work.

As this dissertation has shown, the various appeals to theory in art discourse since the 1960s arise from a desire to explain the appeal to the viewer that occurred in front of these works. Additionally, it has appealed to theory in order to explain the importance of writing within the field of contemporary art. These theories of perception have also helped to describe how it is that one work could implicate the viewer physically, as Rauschenberg’s and Graham’s work does, while another might withhold the very identification a viewer came to expect, as Richter’s and Smithson’s work does. More generally, they also provided a model for the way an art work constructs meaning, whether or not reflective surfaces were a dominant feature of the work. Because of the varied
ways that theory has been taken up by artists and critics, this dissertation has
found it preferable to treat each artist uniquely in terms of his use of theory,
ultimately revealing the breadth of theoretical approaches to art perception and
interpretation, as well as pointing to the way that each artist and their
interpreters might reinterpret these theories. For Rauschenberg, whose work did
not refer to Merleau-Ponty, or any other writer, Merleau-Ponty’s theories about
vision and embodiment functioned as an analogy to understand how
Rauschenberg constructed space in his effort to work in the gap between art and
life, engaging the viewer all the while. For Richter, the discussion of Lacan
fleshed out the arguments of the critics, some of whom have appealed to the
psychoanalyst, in hopes of showing how the mirror functions within the artist’s
and his critic’s preoccupation with the death of painting and, more universally,
widely publicized and highly politicized deaths. Graham’s frequent appeals to
various theories of perception required explanation, particularly where they
failed to materialize in the ways that he imagined they would. And finally,
Smithson’s supplemental writing, which reflected a truth about the art work,
found additional supplements in the writings of Derrida and Hegel.

To end with a visual example, this dissertation has attempted to construct
a virtual gallery of sorts that materializes one aspect of the artistic discourse
begun in Minimalism. Thus, the four chapters might function as walls, each
occupied by the reflective works of Rauschenberg, Richter, Graham and
Smithson, respectively, with a Minimalist cube in the center. All four walls
reflect different aspects of the cube in their own way. On Rauschenberg’s wall,
the cube’s relationship to modernist painting is evident in the *White Paintings,*
while its three-dimensional appeal to the viewer is visible in the viewer-activated technological works and the silk-screens on reflective surfaces. Richter’s wall reflects in reverse the main claim of two Minimalists that painting is dead, or at best irrelevant. His insistence on continuing to paint, albeit without claims to historical or aesthetic progression, ends up embracing the repetition, in one photo-painting, monochrome or mirror after another, that typified Minimalist compositional strategies. Graham’s wall reflects the social implications of Minimalism’s physical address of the viewer, and through Minimalism, extends Rauschenberg’s project to a more explicit and pointed social intervention in Graham’s installations and architectural pavilions. Smithson’s wall displaces Minimalism into the discourse that surrounds it, revealing the disjunctions between the two, distantly reflecting Richter’s work, which found Minimalism a way to continue to paint.

While this imaginary scene serves to exemplify certain ways in which the sometimes widely divergent work of these artists might be seen within the same discursive space, there are other ways in which they relate to each other, responding, for example, to the long repressed illusionistic strategy of one-point perspective and to its related mirror and window analogies, as well as to contemporary appeals to perceptual and psychoanalytic theory, that remain invisible within this room and can only be fleshed out in writing. Thus, as the reader has surely noticed, the walls of this proposed gallery are necessarily constructed of words that prop up, even while they distort, the internal reflections they seek to describe. Like the mirrors used by all four artists, the words frame the works they hope to reflect and necessarily exclude some
considerations. Nonetheless, if they have been successful in reflecting some of
the wider discourse in which the mirror, reflection and theories of perception
came to figure in art since the sixties, they can claim to mark out their own
discursive space in the same way that the imaginary gallery does.
ENDNOTES


5 Northern Renaissance scholars have long noted the ambiguous nature of the depicted mirror in painting. One early text that attempted to exhaust the topic is Heinrich Schwarz’s study “The Mirror in Art” (Art Quarterly 15 (1952): 96-118.) For a more recent study, see Hope B. Werness, The Symbolism of Mirrors in Art from Ancient Times to the Present. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, c. 1999.)

6 Of course, sorting that question out is no simple task. The scholarship surrounding Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Betrothal provides a particularly good example of this debate. Erwin Panofsky used this painting to advance his theory of disguised symbolism. (Early Netherlandish Painting. New York: Icon Editions, 1971: 201-203) Panofsky suggests that the mirror functions on two levels. First, in conjunction with the signature, it testifies to the painter’s presence as a witness to the marriage. But, he also asserts, the mirror, or speculum sine macula, is a well-known symbol of the Virgin’s purity. This interpretation has come under attack of late in Jan Baptist Bedaux’s The Reality of Symbols (The Hague: Gary Schwartz/SDU, 1990: 21-67) and Edwin Hall’s The Arnolfini Betrothal: Medieval Marriage and the Enigma of van Eyck’s Double Portrait (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994.) Bedaux argues that van Eyck was simply depicting a bridal chamber complete with all of the trimmings, some of which would be standard devotional objects, like a mirror surrounded by scenes of Christ’s Passion. While Hall disagrees with Bedaux’s identification of the moment depicted and the
significance of the setting, he follows Bedaux’s opinion regarding the mirror. At any rate, everyone who addresses the work agrees that the signature and the reflection are related in that they both belong to the painter, marking his presence at the moment depicted.

7 According to an apocryphal story, St. Luke painted a portrait of the Virgin and Child from a vision, thus providing a prototype for all depictions of that subject. Based on this legend, he was considered the patron saint of painters. Interestingly, the guild of St. Luke in Bruges included glassmakers and mirror makers in addition to painters.

8 The close association of the painter and illusionistic studio practices and the mirror gave rise to a more general understanding of the mirror as metonymically standing in for the painter, the painter's studio or even the visual conceit of illusionism, as Gregory Galligan has suggested in his essay, “The Self Pictured: Manet, the Mirror, and the Occupation of Realist Painting” (Art Bulletin LXXX/1 (March 1998): 139-171.)

9 Indeed this practice continued in the work of such modern artists at Pierre Bonnard, who painted a series of self-portraits in mirrors.

10 M. H. Abrams argues that illusionism was in decline as an aesthetic theory in poetry as early as the Romantic period.

11 As Gris puts it: “You want to know why I had to stick on a piece of mirror? Well, surfaces can be re-created and volumes reinterpreted in a picture, but what is one to do about a mirror whose surface is always changing and which should reflect even the spectator? There is nothing else to do but stick on a real piece.” (quoted in David Mower, “Through the Looking Glass and What the Artist Found There,” Art International xxiii/5-6 (Sept. 1979):64)


13 Judd even goes so far as to suggest that while the work responds to one or the other medium, it should not be considered either painting or sculpture.

14 This is, in fact, the way James Meyer has recently addressed Minimalism, both in Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) and in his edited collection Minimalism (Themes and Movements). (London: Phaidon, 2000.)

16 Morris, 230.

17 This is one way of understanding the development of Hans Haacke’s career. It is also the basis of Hal Foster’s article about the continued importance of the Minimalist task in the eighties. (See “The Crux of Minimalism,” in The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996.)


19 Meyer,

20 During Bruce Glaser’s interview with Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and Frank Stella, Judd states “I always thought of [Stella’s paintings made with] aluminum [paint] as slabs in a way, they seemed almost objects to me...I think that was a first.” (For Stella’s and Judd’s exchange, see “Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella, New Nihilism or New Art? Interview with Bruce Glaser,” in Meyer, 2000, 198.)

21 Fried refers specifically to Merleau-Ponty’s The Phenomenology of Perception in his 1965 essay "Three American Painters" (also in Art and Objecthood. Chicago, Univ. Chicago Press, 1998: 264, n. 26.) His anthropomorphically determined descriptions of Anthony Caro’s sculpture, a body of work he pits against Minimalism in "Art and Objecthood", develops Merleau-Ponty’s description of vision as embodied to its visual parallel within the sculpture. He describes one of Caro’s sculptures as "open as widespread arms and then as a door is open." ("Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro," in Art and Objecthood, 180.) He goes on...


23 Merleau-Ponty, 152.


One is either "in the picture" or not. And that of course is the shock at the end of the story about the sardine can and at the bottom of the painting. Lacan thought he was a fisherman, while the sardine can refused to see this identification.


Mel Bochner, who was studying philosophy at Northwestern University at that time, has indicated that he was involved in many conversations about Merleau-Ponty’s work and that the writing was very important to his artwork ultimately. (See Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*. New York, Soho Press, 2000; 34.) John Coplans, also a frequent contributor to *Artforum* was also reading the writings of Merleau-Ponty shortly after they were translated. (See Newman, 117).

Dan Graham in particular has noted the importance of that journal to his understanding of Lacan’s theories. (In conversation with the author, December 6, 2001).


The artist/theorist Peter Halley discussed the importance of what came to be known as French Theory, a loosely-connected group of French philosophers, historians and sociologist, including Foucault and Derrida, in the discourse of the


38 Weintraub, unpaginated.

39 Mower, 63.

40 Francis and Newman, 5.


42 The text also mentions the work of Dan Graham, although none was included in the exhibition.

43 It is important to note the multitude of literary borrowings in the exhibition. Not only does it owe its title a work of literary criticism, but many of Newman’s references come from literary criticism as well.


46 Alain Cueff, “Miroir sans Reflet,” in A Traverse le miroir de Bonnard a Buren; 70-79; and Jaroslav Andel, “Miroir et Autoreflexion,” in A Traverse le miroir de Bonnard a Buren; 80-87.

47 The late 1980s and early 1990s saw Rauschenberg return to his interest in the mirror and Richter produce a large series of mirrors, both of which will be discussed below. Additionally, younger artists have been producing mirrors as well, among them Jim Hodges and Yayoi Kusama.
The recent exhibition of the photographs he has collected from which he draws his subject matter for his paintings makes clear the importance photography plays in his work. See Atlas of the Photographs, collages and sketches. Ed. Helmut Friedel and Ulrich Wilmes. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1997.

While his most recent retrospective at the Guggenheim (1997) did include some of the works painted on aluminum and many of the authors who contributed to the catalogue mentioned these works, noting his continued interest in depicted and actual space, no one did much to see them as consistent with his more painterly interests in collage and silkscreen.

Stephen Melville has convincingly traced the roots of Smithson's non-painterly practice to painterly concerns in his "Robert Smithson: a literalist of the imagination," (reprinted in Seams: art as a philosophical context. Amsterdam: G & B, 1996.)

For the most part, essays on Graham have traced social motifs across these media without explaining the need for such divergence. The most recent catalogue is no exception. See Dan Graham. exh. cat. Ed. Gloria Moure. Barcelona: Fondacio Antoni Tapies, 1998.

I am thinking specifically of his artist statement, "Note on Painting," of 1963 where he mimics the structure of an artist's statement while the content is intended to be nonsense (in John Russell and Suzi Gablik, Pop Art Redefined. New York: Praeger, 1969: 101-2.)


Here, of course, I am referring to the critical writing of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. While the two critics differ on a number of points, both champion painting that acknowledged its two dimensional character. See Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" and Fried "Three American Painters." Both


60 Other combine paintings that incorporate mirrors include *Collection* (1953-54), *Untitled* (1955), *Canyon* (1959) and *Icon* (1962). The late combine *Icon* consists of a small box with a door on the front. When the viewer opens the door she is confronted with a mirror that Rauschenberg had mounted inside. In the same year, Robert Morris produced a similar box with a door. In this case, the door was cut in the shape of a capital letter “I”. Mounted inside, instead of a mirror, was a nude photograph of the artist. Incidentally, Morris, like Rauschenberg, explored performance at about this time as well.

61 Rauschenberg’s early works have been repeatedly discussed in terms of their similarity to Dadaist and Surrealist collage. Both Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and Kurt Schwitters’ *merzbild* provide historical basis for the work. While Rauschenberg did not meet Duchamp until 1959 or 1960, he was familiar with Duchamp’s work. Rauschenberg, surprisingly, had not known Schwitters’ work at this point either, despite the fact that an exhibition of the artist’s work was shown at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1952--the same gallery where a year later Rauschenberg saw Duchamp’s work for the first time. (Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*. New York: Penguin, 1980; 129.) Moreover, the juxtaposition of the umbrella at one side and the electric light opposite it echoes the Surrealist inspiration from Lautremont’s now famous image, “The chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.” Another very early work from the Elemental Sculpture series (exhibited in 1953) recalls Giacometti’s *Suspended Ball* from 1930-31. The sculpture, or more accurately the installation, which is now lost, consisted of a stone tied and hung from the ceiling by a rope. Below the rope, Rauschenberg placed a square mirror raised on a small base. The potential for contact between
the two elements is underscored by the stone’s reflection in the mirror, which visually connects them, like the wedge-shaped groove of the suspended ball which echoes the wedge placed directly below it. Moreover, the suggestion of a certain amount of violence which hovers around the suspended ball, a ball which appears to have already made contact with the wedge and been split by that contact, is echoed in the danger of the stone’s potential fall onto the mirror, most likely resulting in the destruction of the mirror. Here, the potential for motion, like in the Giacometti, is also a potential for violence, despite the fact that the movements implied are directionally different and the fact that the relationship of threat between the suspended object and its other half is reversed. Walter Hopps illustrates the work in Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s. Houston: The Menil Collection, c. 1991: 193.


63 It is important to note that Rauschenberg uses the silk-screens graphically. That is, in drawings, as in the silkscreen process, the untouched ground tends to advance from the areas where drawn marks serve as shadows or contour. There is a sense in which the silkscreen was the perfect companion to Rauschenberg’s collage technique. Both work on the similar principle of the original division that ultimately holds the composition together. Moreover, such an analogy can be extended to the way that reflection operates in these works. Just as drawn lines divide while they hold together, Rauschenberg’s reflective surfaces accomplish the same feat. The viewer identifies with the reflected image of herself, which exists entirely outside herself. Acting as an aesthetic model for his project— that is to work in the gap between art and life— the mirror serves to hold these two realms together.


65 Tomkins, 197.

66 It is useful to note that the flatness and opacity of Rauschenberg’s white passages found a counterpart in the contemporary work of Robert Ryman and Frank Stella, the second of whom had even experimented with metallic, and thus reflective, paint, thus placing Rauschenberg within the more painterly manifestations of Minimalism.

67 Armin Zweite’s essay on Robert Rauschenberg’s series Shiners and Urban Bourbons addresses Rauschenberg’s use of reflective materials dating back to the combines. (Armin Zweite, “Art Shouldn’t Have a Concept,” in Robert Rauschenberg. Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1994; 17-60.) But Zweite takes an overly focused approach, concentrating solely upon these two points in the
artist’s career, and observing only that there is a very different motivation which informs each period. According to Zweite, the mirrors in the combines function to bring together diverse elements in an attempt to create a unified work. Rauschenberg’s employment of reflective materials in the 1980s, however, foregrounds the disparity in an otherwise unified composition, rather than glossing over that disparity, according to Zweite. Ultimately, Zweite relies on the sense that the later works lack a “uniform center of subjectivity”. (Zweite, 112) While Zweite does describe the series from the 1980s fairly accurately, he does not explain how Rauschenberg’s interest in reflection fits into the rest of his career. Moreover, the question of why the artist became interested in these effects again is conspicuously absent from his assessment.

68 Like the Carnal Clocks, which are from 1969 and also make use of the same backlit Plexiglas covered with silk-screened images, Solstice is also the result of a collaborative effort. But in the case of Solstice the collaboration occurs at the time of viewing, not of making the work. Collaboration is an important leitmotif in Rauschenberg’s career, with the 1960s being the heyday of his technological collaborations with other artists and with engineers like Billy Klüver. For an account of his work with Klüver, see Billy Klüver with Julie Martin, “Four Collaborations,” in Robert Rauschenberg: Haywire. Ostfildern-Ruit: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997; 59-101.

69 Like many of Rauschenberg’s technological experiments, this installation piece had not functioned in many years when it was restored for the Haywire exhibition.

70 There is a sense in which this work fully reflects Rauschenberg’s penchant for collaborative work at this time.


72 Craft, 20.


74 Tomkins, 71.

75 Cited in Tomkins, 71.

While Rauschenberg admits the influence, it would probably come as a surprise to Albers, who never really understood the young artist’s work. See Tomkins, 56.

Seckler, 74.


Merleau-Ponty, 166.


Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 179.


Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 168.

Krauss, 1974, 43.

Rosalind Krauss was perhaps the first to point this out in her essay, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” *Artforum* 13 (December 1974): 36-43. While Krauss, merely notes this trend, Charles Stuckey, Roni Feinstein, Kenneth Bendiner, Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis have notably attempted to interpret individual works or groups of works by Rauschenberg using an iconographic approach. (See note 58 above.)

In addition to Krauss’ invocation of allegory, Benjamin Buchloh (“Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* 21 (Sept. 1982): 43-56) and Craig Owens (“The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (Spring 1980):67-87; and *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 59-80) both argue that artists after the era of Abstract Expressionism turned to allegory as a way of addressing the problem of meaning in their work.

His most public assertion of his intention to turn interpretation back to the viewer occurred in his interview with Robert Hughes for *American Visions*, the popular series on American art that aired on PBS in the late nineties. When asked about his inclusion of disparate subject matter in works like *Rebus*, Rauschenberg replied, “You’re the one who has all the references, because of your experience.” Hughes then asked for clarification, “And so you’re happy to let people make [the meanings] up as they go along.” To which Rauschenberg stated, “I insist on it.”

This analysis of Rauschenberg’s work also responds to his art as well as the critical arena which has risen in view of the art, self-consciously positioning itself as a collaborator, albeit one with a view to understanding the wider trend of reflective surfaces in the art of this era.

See note 87 above.

The most prominent among the scholars to address Duchamp’s influence on Richter is Benjamin Buchloh, whose essays in the three volume publication issued for the 1993 retrospective argue for an interpretation of Richter’s ironic employment of both figurative and abstract modes, as if each genre, i.e. landscapes, portraits, still lifes and abstraction, not to mention history painting, were all equally available and equally empty of meaning and importance for Richter. Buchloh largely forms this opinion based on Richter’s own statement, from 1964, about his decision to paint from photographs because it “seemed to [him] the most moronic and inartistic thing that any one could do.” (Richter, 22.) This statement, along with others about not knowing what to paint, registers the artist’s recognition of a crisis in painting in the early sixties and fuels Buchloh’s sense that Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades figured prominently in Richter’s approach. Starting from Duchamp allows Buchloh to suggest that whether figurative or abstract, all stylistic choice could be chalked up to passing fancies in different motifs, none of which were exploring new ground within the medium of painting simply because all the territory had already been marked out. All that was left for painting to do was to expose the impossibility of the myth of progress that fueled modern art from the start. Such a stance can only interpret the work of an artist who continues to paint after the progress-driven history of painting had come to an end as an ironic project. Quite a few of the essays that flesh out Buchloh’s interpretation appear in volume 2 of *Gerhard Richter*. Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1993.

Richter, 16.


96 Richter claimed in a series of notes written between 1964 and 64 “I like everything that has no style: dictionaries, photographs, nature, myself and my paintings.” (Richter, 35.) Nonetheless he has made stylistic alterations to his pictures by blurring the photographs. While he has admitted this, he claimed not to have been creating them but rather to have been making his pictures more “credible” by highlighting their photographic origins. (Richter, 37.)

97 Richter executed twelve drawings of the *Four Panes of Glass* and a related *Glass Wall* between 1965 and 1967 (numbers 65/12 and 65/13 and 66/1 through 66/10 from *Gerhard Richter Drawings 1964-1999. Catalogue Raisonne*. Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1999.) Although the *Glass Wall* was never executed, its influence is felt in the *Four Panes of Glass* with Richter’s decision to mount the panes to the floor and ceiling, effectively dividing the gallery space like a wall.

98 “Perhaps the Doors, Curtains, Surface Pictures, Panes of Glass, etc. are metaphors of despair, prompted by the dilemma that our sense of sight causes us to apprehend things, but at the same time restricts and partly precludes our apprehension of reality. Richter “Note 1971”, in Richter, 64.

Critics have noted a similar division of space between implied depth and surface facture in Richter’s photo-paintings. See Stefan Germer (“Retrospective Ahead” in *Gerhard Richter*. London: Tate Gallery, 1991: 22-32) and Gregg Horowitz (see note 2, above.)

Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986; 9-22. Historically speaking, the grid has been used as an illusionistic device for mapping recession into depth, as is evident in Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut *Artist Drawing a Reclining Model* (1525), where an artist is shown viewing a reclining woman through a gridded frame and drawing what he sees onto a gridded sheet. By isolating the grid, rather than the volumetric view the author was representing, modernist artists drained the representational goal from the project, even while they referred to its absence.

For example, when Richter discusses the relationship between his *Curtains* series and his photopaintings, he points out that the blurring in the curtains stems from the stylistic effects he copied from photography. (Richter, 24.) In this way, painting can imitate a photographic reality just as it creates the illusion of a three-dimensional reality.


The exhibition *Marcel Duchamp: Ready Mades* was shown in April and May of 1965 in Krefeld at the Museum Haus Lange, and it included, along with the photograph of *The Large Glass*, the painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*.


Richter introduces personal photographs into his painting in 1965. By 1968, he was employing his own photographs exclusively. See Antoine, 1993, 165.
Paul Jaskot recently argued that the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann had a profound impact on Richter, making the Nazi past an immediate question at this time in his paper “Gerhard Richter/Adolf Eichmann: Art and the Nazi Past in Postwar West Germany” (presented at the College Art Association’s 91st Annual Conference, February 22, 2003.) While this seems likely, I would stress that any political relevance this event had for Richter must have been subject to the same distaste Richter showed for Communist politics, with both having a more abstract interest for Richter by 1965.

The resemblance between the window grids and the actual grid support that Richter employs in his stretchers also suggest the private space of his studio, where finished paintings and unpainted stretched canvases might lean against the wall exposing the back side.

In a 1972 interview, Peter Sager asked Richter if his “paintings of objects are really abstract paintings.” Richter, 68. Richter is noncommittal but had suggested this himself in a note from 1964-65 in which he states, “The photograph has an abstraction of its own...” in Richter, 30.


In further support of this claim, Richter writes in February of 1986, “I am a popular artist...and I want to remain just that, successfully; with all my discontent and desperate longing; with all my fear of death and of ‘crossing frontiers’.” (Richter, 125.)

In 1978, Richter travelled to the Nova Scotia College of Art to work as a visiting artist at the invitation of Benjamin Buchloh. Through Buchloh, Richter became acquainted with the artist Dan Graham, who was exploring Lacanian themes in his work at the time. While Richter does not mention Lacan in his writings, it seems likely, based on the appearance three years later of the silvered mirrors, that he was at least introduced to the main arguments in the psychoanalyst’s writing.

Lacan’s theories about the importance of vision in the formation of the subject can be found in his essay “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” (in Lacan (1977), 1-7) as well as in the section “Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a,” (in Lacan (1981), 67-119.)

Indeed, it is to a 16th century German painting that Lacan’s refers when he discusses the role of the gaze as a disruptive agent in painting, describing the


120 Birgit Pelzer has convincingly interpreted Richter’s work using Lacan, addressing his mirrors in particular as manifesting the gaze or its screen. (Birgit Pelzer, “There is No There: Gerhard Richter at the Carre d’Art in Nimes,” from Gerhard Richter: 100 Pictures. Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1996; 133-141.) Pelzer introduces these themes in a short reflection on Richter’s work that appeared in an issue of Parkett Magazine on Richter. (See Birgit Pelzer, “The Tragic Desire,” Parkett 35 (1993): 66-71.) Other critics have addressed the mirrors briefly, mostly arguing that the blurred quality of the painted mirrors should be read as a critique of painting. (Koch “The Richter-Scale of Blur,” (ibid) and “The Open Secret: Gerhard Richter and the Surfaces of Modernity,” in Gerhard Richter. Trans. Brian Holmes. Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1995: 9-27.) Desa Philippi argues that as the glass and mirror works evolve, they critique the evolving associations to which painting has found itself attached.

“Each of these bodies of work isolates one of the qualities that, in shifting constellations, constituted oil on canvas as painting at different historical moments: transparency, materiality of the two-dimensional surface, and reflection. The pieces thus call attention to the entirely arbitrary and conventional relation of these qualities to painting. (Desa Philippi, “Moments of Interpretation,” October 62 (Fall 1992): 117.)

Such a reading, to be sure, relies on the presumption that Richter’s entire production has been concerned solely with this crisis in painting. Johannes Meinhardt comes to much the same conclusion about the groups, even going so far as to point out that the installations of glass and mirror paintings are much better than the photo paintings at calling attention to the essentially arbitrary and conventional qualities of painting because the installations employ the optical ambiguity of their context in a way the photo paintings cannot. (Johannes Meinhardt, “Unmögliche Malerei,” Kunstforum International 131 (August-October 1995): 236-246.)

121 Lacan, FFC, 95.


123 These paintings have generated a great deal of attention in Richter scholarship. A particularly useful source of information on the series can be found in Gerhard Richter: 18. October 1977. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts in association with Anthony d’Offay Gallery, 1989.
One thinks of Courbet’s belabored brushstroke and Rodin’s finger-marked surfaces as overt reactions to industrialization to name but two. Later in Bois’ essay, he calls Courbet’s one-man exhibition outside the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855 an act of defiance against the ever-growing realm of the commodity. (Bois, 234)

Critics have noted this fact as well. See Michael Kelly, “Richter and Buchloh Under the Shadow of Adorno,” (The Fold Wexner Center for the Arts. (Oct. 1997) 13 pp. Online. Internet. http://www.wexarts.org/thefold/theory/kelly-f.html) where Kelly claims the theme of mourning in Richter’s art does not materialize simply because Richter believes the medium of painting to be finished in terms of its own relevance, as Buchloh would argue, but rather that a particular history of painting which assumes transcendental meaning is lost, whether that meaning is “political, social, epistemological, psychological, [or] religious.” Kelly bases his argument on a passage in the 1986 interview between Buchloh and Richter in which Richter corrects Buchloh’s assessment of painting as inadequate and bankrupt, insisting that while painting is not bankrupt it is “always” inadequate. (Richter, 146.) Bente Larsen is another critic who disagrees with Buchloh while also pointing out the difference between mourning art and mourning in art. (See Bente Larsen, Gerhard Richter. Oslo: For Art (The Institute for Research within International Contemporary Art), 2001.)

His blurring technique in the photo paintings has also been tied in with loss as well. Gertrud Koch argues that the blurring negates the photograph’s original referent in which the referent stands for meaning. “The destruction of all
meaning provides the justification for its own specific meaning in terms of an aesthetics of negativity.” (See Koch (1992), 133-142.)


136 Kaja Silverman has recently suggested that Richter ultimately did begin the process of painting the concentration camp photographs. (“How to Paint History” lecture presented at the City University of New York and Columbia University, December 5 and 8, 2003.) Using the Baader-Meinhof photographs as a model, she suggested that Richter typically transfers key elements of the photographs he finds difficult to paint into less politicized, more personal, subjects in an “analogical” process.


138 Richter, 220.

139 Koch, 1995.

140 This is of course what Minimalist artists like Robert Morris had long recognized in the placement of their objects in the space of the gallery. Discussing Minimalism, he states, “The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive, because one’s awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships.” (See Robert Morris, Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993: 15.)

141 The tableau paradigm dominates interpretations of the Four Panes of Glass, which most critics see as a tableau waiting to happen. (Rochlitz, note 102, above.)

142 Richter does not obliterate such a fissure in the gray mirror that was exhibited at Documenta IX. Instead he foregrounds the break between the two panels by affixing them on hinges, which allow the panels to pivot away from each other evoking a shutter rather than a window.
The spatial configuration of these two works seems to support Jean-
Philippe Antoine’s invocation of Friedrich as an important precursor for the
landscape paintings. (Antoine, who citing Richter’s statement that “...one can
painting like [Caspar David Friedrich] today,” (78) claims that Richter’s
landscapes employ the tactics of Friedrich in order to explore the bounds of
painting and photography. “If the function of landscapes is to have us
experience natural beauty, its projective character, and the mendacious character
of the transfiguration worked on Nature, the abstract paintings in fact intimate
the possibility of another relationship to Nature...Abstract paintings, writes
Richter, are ‘fictional models,’ for they make our senses aware of a reality which
we can neither see nor describe, but whose reality we can infer.” (83)
“Landscape thus remains the nexus where the paradoxes attending in the
relationship between photography, painting and the real all come together.” (89)

Richter, 270-272.

In a letter from 1973, Richter states the relationship between his writing and
his painting. “Pictures are the idea in visual or pictorial form;...However, none
of this means that pictures function as illustrations of an idea: ultimately they are
the idea. Nor is the verbal formulation of the idea a translation of the visual: it
simply bears a certain resemblance to the meaning of the idea. It is an
interpretation, literally a reflection.” (quoted in Richter, 78) Like Foucault and
Derrida, he does not imagine that verbal or linguistically based interpretations
can completely capture what goes on in a work of visual art. “Pictures which are
interpretable, and which contain a meaning, are bad pictures.” (Richter, 35).

Richter repeatedly disagrees with Buchloh in their 1986 interview. See in
particular the section titled “The rhetoric of painting,” (Richter, 161-166.)

Richter, 80.

Prato, Italy: Museo Pecci, 1999; 155-163.

While Rauschenberg did produce installations that incorporated reflections,
they typically addressed the viewer in a manner analogous to the way painting
would address a viewer, from a single angle within an uncomplicated temporal
sequence. As will become clear, Graham’s installations function on a level more
accurately described as architectural in their deployment of all-encompassing
spatial-temporal reflections.

Anne Rorimer makes all these claims in her, “Dan Graham: An
Introduction,” in Buildings and Signs/Dan Graham. Chicago: Renaissance Society
at the University of Chicago, c. 1981. Nabuo Nakamura echoes this assessment
in his Thoughts and Action. Tokyo: Kokusai Koryu Kikin, 1982. John Vinci also


153 Ibid, xx.

154 This is not to suggest that no critics have noted the social nature of Graham’s work. Indeed, Buchloh acknowledged it as a serious intention on the part of Graham, both in his works for magazines and in his use of video (see Buchloh, “From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works,” Art Journal. Fall 1985: 217-227.) Moreover, Thierry de Duve has written eloquently about the role of the video medium in Graham’s work in disrupting the system of power bolstered by the television news media. (de Duve, “Dan Graham and the Critique of Artistic Autonomy, “ in Dan Graham, Works 1965-2000. Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2001: 49-66.)

155 This is certainly the case for de Duve, who concentrates on the blurring of public and private roles of viewing made possible by the two-way mirror. (de Duve, 64.)


157 Another work that encourages a Sartrean interpretation can be found in Two Viewing Rooms from 1975 in which two rooms are divided by a two-way mirror. A video camera is set up in the darker of the two rooms, recording the lighter room. This recording is shown on a monitor set up in the lighter room. Thus the visitor to the lighter room becomes a viewed object for herself in the monitor and for any visitors to the darker room, who, because they are invisible to the other visitor, occupy a position similar to the voyeur of Sartre’s description. Still, the visitor to the lighted room is aware of her recording, even if she cannot see who may be watching her.

158 With the addition of this third party, which often takes the form of a social factor, Graham’s work more closely follows the perceptual theories of Jacques Lacan. Graham himself cites Lacan in his “Essay on Video, Architecture and

159 “Video feedback time is the immediate present, without relation to past and hypothetical future states--a continuous topological or feedback loop forward or backward between just-past or immediate future.” (Graham, 1999, 56.)

160 Photographs of the installation typically show viewers jumping, pointing and smiling broadly, bearing out my own experience viewing the work when I interrupted some enthusiastic dancing and laughing as I entered the already occupied room.

161 Graham, 1999, 53. In Graham’s recent installation at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Children’s Day Care, CD-ROM, Cartoon, Computer Screen Library Project, the virtual world of the internet is substituted for video, also allowing a flux that transcends spatial boundaries.

162 It is telling that when Graham addresses architecture, he chooses sites in which the play between public and private is most powerful: corporate office buildings, museums and theaters. In each case, the interiors of these spaces appear to promise privacy for action and perception, however, they do so only within their public circumstances. The least interesting case is the modern glass office building that appears to offer a transparency in its glass construction that metaphorically suggests a corporate transparency just as reflective as the glass walls prove to be. Museums and theaters are far more interesting in this respect and are the main interest of this chapter.


164 Graham himself emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the different positions set up by his work in titles making use of slashes to mark positions that are in continual flux, such as Projection/Reception and Performer/Audience/Mirror. To a certain extent, he continues this in medium terms in Pavilion/Sculpture for Argonne and Three Linked Cubes/Interior Design for Space for Showing Videos. In both cases he seems to be trading between the appearance and the function of the works to arrive at a classification.

165 Michael Fried critiqued Minimalism’s physical implication of its viewer along with its dependence upon its viewer to recognize the objects as art in his
166 Graham’s magazine pieces should also be viewed in light of his rejection of Fried, a point that is discussed later in this chapter.

167 Fried, 167.

168 Fried, 167.

169 The essay “Cinema” can be found in *Rock My Religion* (Graham, 1993, 168-169) along with his contemporaneous essay “Theater, Cinema and Power” in which Graham discusses his interest in historical theater architecture and its sociopolitical underpinnings (see Graham, 1993, 170-189.)


173 There are, of course, gender issues at work within the apparatus set up in many films, an issue explored most famously by Laura Mulvey on the pages of *Screen*, a journal Graham did read with some regularity. (See particularly, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975).) This analysis deliberately sets these issues aside, except to point out that gender, visual perception and audience identification are topics Graham has explored throughout his career in works like *Two Consciousness Projection[s]* (1972), “New Wave Rock and the Feminine,” (Graham, 1993: 116-137) and to some extent in *Children’s Pavilion*, which is addressed below. However, Mulvey’s essay had an important influence in that it and other essays in *Screen* introduced Graham to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which Graham openly adapted in discussing his own works.


175 Erwin Panofsky’s well-known essay on one-point perspective argued that the technique ultimately opened up the possibility for the viewing subject to imagine himself autonomous and provided a model for objectivity in historical research. See Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Trans. Christopher S. Wood. New York: Zone Books, 1991.


178 It is such a perceptual conundrum that structures a perspectival model of history, incidentally.

179 Graham, 1993, 190-191. Graham states: “Each audience sees the other audience’s visual behavior, but is isolated from their aural behavior. Each audience is made more aware of its own verbal communications. It is assumed that after a time, each audience will develop a social cohesion and group identity...Psychologically, for an audience, the glass divider represents a visual window showing (objectifying) the other audience’s behavior (so that the observed, second audience becomes, by analogy, a ‘mirror’ of the outward behavior of the audience observing; at the same time the mirror at the end of one space allows the observing audience to view itself as a unified body (engaged in looking at the other audience).”


181 Graham (1999), 137.


183 See note 166, above.

184 Roland Barthes describes this effect in his Camera Lucida (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982.)

185 Hubert Damisch has argued that there never was any such vantage point in his response to Panofsky (The Origin of Perspective. Trans. John Goodman. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1994.)

186 Graham’s interest in the impact photography and film have on memory is evident in his essay “Theater, Cinema, and Power” in which he quotes Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault on the difference these media make for history. While Graham’s essay follows Benjamin’s and Foucault’s rather pessimistic view of history’s prospects in an age devoted to these media, this chapter argues that Graham’s work actually presents a far more optimistic view.

187 Brian Wallis’ introduction to the collection of Graham’s writings in Rock My Religion also addresses Graham’s utopian project of restoring historical memory in the form of the artist’s insistent references to the “just past.” (See Wallis, “Dan
Graham’s History Lessons,” in Graham (1993): viii-xvi. On a biographical note, Graham and Buchloh seem to have met while both were teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1978. Incidentally, Richter also taught at the school that year.


189 There is a similar trend within the news media to blur the distinction between reportage and historical inquiry. This is perhaps most evident during elections in the United States when the broadcast media consults historians to comment on the elections as they unfold. The obverse relationship also holds with the reliance on televised or broadcasted reportage to fill out historical documentaries that consider events of the last hundred years.

190 De Duve contends that Dan Graham includes three ways to resist what de Duve perceives as the pretension of the media in claiming to be the exclusive narrator of history. First, Graham rendered the medium explicitly auto-referential exposing its deficiencies. Second, the spectator can perform history by passing a hand in front of camera. And third, the lateral mirror provides a view of the present in the installation, deconstructing the continuous regression into history. (De Duve, 298-302.)

191 De Duve does not address this work.

192 While this would suggest that the ready-made context of the art magazines in which he published his magazine works might be of interest in a discussion of Graham’s interest in historical context, it is the magazines’ place in the art world context that most interests the artist. Dan Graham writes about his early interest in magazines, “unlike art framed by the museum or gallery which is defined as ‘timeless’, ‘eternal’, the contexts of magazines reflect (possibly help to define) an unfolding historical chronology as a series of incomplete ‘present-day’ intervals. (quoted in Rorimer, 12.)


198 The issue of medium distinction plagues descriptions of Smithson’s work, just as it does for Rauschenberg, Richter and Graham. Robert Hobbs, writing on the occasion of Smithson’s first retrospective exhibition, acknowledges the wide range of work Smithson did; nonetheless, he maintains that all of it evolved out of the three-dimensional, post-minimalist structures he completed between 1964 and 1968. As Hobbs puts it, “before being a writer, filmmaker, social commentator and critic, Smithson was a sculptor.” (23) Smithson’s Nonsite pieces have inspired many critics and historians to focus on the oppositions implied by the dialectic. But it is important to note that categories for Smithson do not fall into such simple oppositions and are not material for a conceptual synthesis on his part. Stephen Melville takes issue with Hobbs’ classification of Smithson as a sculptor. (Melville, 30-40.) Pointing out the undeniable fact of Smithson’s early work—work which since has been the subject of an exhibition—along with Smithson’s interest in materializing the painterly strategy of perspective, Melville argues that Smithson must be considered within the context of painting, but not as some synthesis of the two media. Instead, the chronological movement from making two-dimensional works to three-dimensional works (from painting to sculpture to put it crudely) operates through the logic of displacement, not a Hegelian dialectic. “Smithson aimed always at impurity—at contaminating sculpture with the terms and problems of painting.” (Melville, 33.) Others focus on his film as the defining medium (Elizabeth Childs “Robert Smithson and Film: The Spiral Jetty Reconsidered” *Arts Magazine*, 56, no. 2 (October 1981): 68-81; and Marjorie Perloff “The Demise of ‘and’ Reflections on Robert Smithson’s mirrors,” *Critical Quarterly*, 32, no. 3 (1990): 81-101.

199 See Hobbs, 20; Melville, 32-33; and Reynolds, 15-22.


201 Flam, 74.

202 Reynolds, 71-72.

203 While the construction formed an acute angle, the reference to the later corner pieces also constructed of three mirrors and displayed on the floor is fairly evident.

204 This work was reproduced in the May 21, 1965 issue of *Life*.

205 Hobbs, 19.
Admittedly, Fried has shown that such a suggestion is false, nonetheless, at the time that Smithson responds to works like Morris’, Fried has not made this statement yet.

Smithson, “The Eliminator” in Flam; 327. While the work predates Rauschenberg’s Carnal Clocks, the artists’ shared pairing of a temporal device with a reflective material highlights the emphatic temporal presence of the mirror.


Reynolds discusses this interest at length. (See Ann Reynolds, Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003; especially 59-64.)

While he did describe the works as “alien eyes,” Smithson has little interest in psychoanalysis. (Flam, 359.)

Smithson, “Interview with Dennis Wheeler,” in Flam, 208.


Reynolds discusses at length Smithson’s singular understanding of abstraction in opposition to anthropomorphism. (See Reynolds, 64-75.)

Reynolds analyzes in depth the way that Smithson undermines one point perspective with the Alogons. (See Reynolds, 15-31.)

Smithson, “Pointless Vanishing Points,” in Flam, 358-359.

Paul Cummings, “Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution (1972),” in Flam, 294. In this interview he indicates that his interest in Borges began around 1965, just before his first Alogons.

“And my writing, I guess, proceeded that way [layering like Glass Strata]. I thought of writing more as material to sort of put together than as a kind of analytic searchlight, you know.” (Flam, 154.)
In 1966 and 1967, Smithson was serving as an artist-consultant for the construction of an air terminal between Dallas and Fort Worth. In his writing about this project, he claims the core samples done at the beginning of the project have an aesthetic value. (See “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site,” in Flam, 56.)

See “Ultramoderne,” in Flam, 63.

See “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,” in Flam, 36-37.

See “Ultramoderne,” in Flam, 63.

Krauss has demonstrated since the publication of Smithson’s essay that the avant-garde in fact embraced repetition. See “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985; 151-170.

“Ultramoderne,” in Flam, 65.

Smithson recalls this temporal convergence in the mirror later in one of his epigraphs for “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” when he quotes Claude-Levi Strauss: “The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness: its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other...although without being strictly parallel.” (See “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” in Flam, 119.)


Smithson’s revelation is in tune with Rauschenberg’s similar insistence on opacity, reflecting a widely held belief in the inherently three-dimensional nature of vision that informed Minimalism, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s theory of visual perception.

Reynolds, 134-143.

Flam, 364.

Flam, 194.

Flam, 192-193.

The work was originally proposed with photographs of the interior of the salt mine in place of the mirrors in both spaces. It seems right to surmise that the
mirror offered more possibilities for inserting another layer of mirroring into the work without focusing disproportionately on any one aspect. “I’m going to use a room and a salt mine...and tomorrow I’ll go down there and put on an exhibition in the salt mines and arrange these mirrors in various configurations, photograph them, and then bring them back to the interior along with rock salt of various grades. As you can see, the interior of the Museum somehow mirrors the site and I’m actually going to use mirrors. Most sculptors just think about the object, but for me there is no focus on one object so it is the back-and-forth thing.” (Flam, 161.)

235 Of course, this particular work, with its cave-like features and its reflections of the sun calls to mind Plato’s cave. Nonetheless, Smithson never mentions any interest in levels of truth or even pictorial illusionism. Instead, the sun simply seems to be an extension of an earlier interest in the reflection of light here. Later in the film Spiral Jetty, light takes on a more interesting role.

236 The photographs of the original installation of the mirrors in the mine were also displayed at the gallery, in some cases distributed on a pile of rock salt, just as the mirrors were displayed.

237 “I’m using a mirror because the mirror in a sense is both the physical mirror and the reflection: the mirror as a concept and abstraction...Here the site/non-site becomes encompassed by mirror as a concept—mirroring, the mirror being a dialectic.” (Flam, 190.)

238 Flam, 192.

239 Flam, 190.

240 Flam, 194.

241 Flam, 192.

242 Flam, 119.

243 Dwan recounts a stop the three made in Florida to meet Rauschenberg at his home and studio. This was their first and only meeting. According to Dwan the two had a surprising rapport and even collaborated on one of Smithson’s upside-down trees. (Oral History Project, Interview with Virginia Dwan for the Archives of American Art)


245 It is clear that Smithson associated the horizon with the road in the paragraph following the one quoted above. “Looking down at the map (it was
all there), a tangled network of horizon lines on paper called ‘roads’…” (Flam, 119.)

246 Flam, 124-25.

247 Flam, 124.

248 Flam, 128.

249 Reynolds, 179.

250 Flam, 129.

251 Flam, 131.

252 Claude Levi-Strauss from The Savage Mind, quoted, Flam, 119.

253 The theme of water and puddles had interesting Smithson prior to this trip with regard to the question about the limitless discussed above. In the “Sedimentation of the Mind” essay, Smithson obliquely attacks Fried again when he contrasts “wet” and “dry” art—terms that he introduces here. Claiming that “The wet mind enjoys ‘pools and stains’ of paint,” he suggests a project called “The Mud Pool Project” in which an area of earth is broken up and then saturated until it turns to mud. When it is left to dry it turns to clay. He follows this proposal with a quotation from the geologist Fredric H. Lahee, “When dried under the sun’s rays for a sufficiently long time, mud and clay shrink and crack in a network of fissures which enclose polygonal areas.” (109) The fissures and cracks of the clay impose their own frames and disruptions into the “pools and stains” of mud. Ultimately, these wet pools reveal themselves as riven with cracks in their desert-like aridity. As the pools of Pollock’s paint dries, the sediment of his mind is visible with all its cracks and fissures. “The rational idea of ‘painting’ begins to disintegrate and decompose into so many sedimentary concepts…A sense of the Earth as a map undergoing disruption leads the artist to the realization that nothing is certain or formal. Language itself becomes mountains of symbolic debris.” (Flam, 110.)

254 Flam, 149.

255 Flam, 146.

256 Flam, 147.

257 Flam, 107.

258 The inverse is true as well. Smithson’s mirror displacements certainly do not exhaust the essay, “Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan.” In fact there
are whole aspects of the essay that are simply invisible to the mirror displacements. For example, while the displacements carry the index of space and time, other spatial and temporal travel is described in the essay, such as the drive on the highway (119-120) and the flight between the sites of the fifth and sixth displacements (126-127), neither of which is marked by the photographs. Additionally, Smithson’s visions of Quetzalcoatl (131) and the remnants of the Mayan past (119-120) are also suppressed in the displacements.


260 This is the general argument of his book The Truth in Painting (Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.) While it is extremely difficult to extract a short quotation from any of Derrida’s arguments, the following passage where Derrida highlights the very problem of language as an articulating system when used as a means to penetrate into the essence of anything that is not language: “Discourses on painting are perhaps destined to reproduce the limit which constitutes them, whatever they do and whatever they say: there is for them an inside and an outside of the work as soon as there is a work.” (11) Generally speaking, once anything has been called an art work, it has been distinguished from everything else, including language.

261 Gary Shapiro has discussed Smithson’s debt to Hegel and also his profound difference from Hegel, even when he uses Hegelian terminology. “Just as Smithson displaced and expanded the sense of entropy, so he adapted the concept of dialectics to his own purposes. What he finds useful in dialectics is not the idea of a higher synthesis or attained totality, as in Hegel or some versions of Marxism, but rather the idea of a play or movement that breaks down fixed oppositions...Much of what Smithson finds helpful in the concepts of entropy and dialectics is sometimes better expressed by the notion of dedifferentiation...” a process by which, “conventional differences are broken down not to create an undifferentiated unity, but to articulate a fluid and multidimensional system of differences.” (See Gary Shapiro, Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995; esp. 83 and 89.)


263 He cited this as one of his main aims in writing about his installation on the rooftop of the Dia Center in New York City. (In conversation with the author, Dec. 2001.)


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APPENDIX A

FIGURES
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Figure 69. Graham, “Present/Continuous Past[s]”

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