THREE ASPECTS OF MY
RECENT WORK IN SCULPTURE

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Introduction

To generate a better understanding of my work and my position as an artist, the following pages will address the significant concerns which have effected my development. Of these, three seem to be of particular importance: 1) the use of given information as a foundation for investigation, 2) the structuring of resulting information into clarified ideas, and 3) consideration for the presentation of these ideas in terms communicating potential and my role as an artist. These intertwined concerns have been present in all of the seemingly different types of work with which I have been involved. The changes my work has undergone reflect changes in my awareness brought about by continued adaptation of these concerns rather than a change in basic attitudes.

The concerns I refer to have precedent in twentieth century sculpture. Beyond the material and formal relation to my work, the expressed intentions of the Russian Constructivists and contemporary environmental artists seem in agreement with my own. To clarify this point I will first attempt to describe how the significant differences in the work produced by these movements represent the effect of the different social setting in which they occurred.

Following this, four works will be considered representing the transition of my involvement in sculpture during the past four years. Through a description of each situation the changing parameters of "given" information
and "structuring" should be noted. Discussion of the affective nature of each work indicates the "communicative" aspect's continued importance.

Consideration of the motivations behind my work in sculpture may provide a better understanding of my past effort and an indication of the possible directions for work yet to come.

As in any specialized field of study, the contemporary artist owes a great deal to the efforts of those who have gone before. My work, the images and ideas with which I have been involved, could be related to numerous movements and individuals. It is my intention, however, to address the motivations behind relevant artists rather than the identification of specific likenesses in form.

The transition which has taken place in my work indicates a change from what could be termed "Constructivist sculpture" to what is currently referred to as "site sculpture" or "site specific sculpture." Like all conveniently categorized "movements" these encompass a wide variety of attitudes and activities. Rather than become involved in a presentation of the conflicting interests of various Russian Constructivists, I will limit my references to the group allied with Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko using Tatlin's original term "Productivists." Equally confusing, "site sculpture" is a term used to describe radically different works of art placed in a public environment. The attitudes which hold the most relevance for a consideration of my own work are provided by Robert Smithson.

Despite the obvious differences in their work, I believe Smithson and Tatlin approached art with similar concerns which can be identified
in my own work as well. Both Smithson and Tatlin found logical rationales for work derived from given information. For Tatlin, Rodchenko, Mikhail Larinov and others this given information was provided by the physical properties of materials. They attempted, through experimentation, to employ the basic qualities of materials as the concept of a work of art. The particular nature of each material would then determine the structure of the work. For Smithson and other environmental artists a specific location became the determining information. Particular aspects of topography, architectural features, function and history were considered rather than material properties. Smithson's comments on the nature of structuring a site indicates the primary role of the given information: "The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts out of existing sense data through direct perceptions.... One does not 'impose' but rather 'exposes' the site -- be it interior or exterior."

The similarity in thinking is directly reinforced by the fact that Tatlin actually constructed works into the architectural features of his studio (Plate I). These "corner reliefs" demonstrate at least a limited consideration of site as a compositional element. More significant, however, is the fact that constructions using architectural elements presuppose the discarding of a base or pedestal.

For the Productivists the elimination of frames and bases for works of art signified the assimilation of art and life. Building into an environment, discarding a base, using common industrial materials, were all part of a conscious effort to create a new art and a new social role for artists. It must be remembered that these works were created in a
society undergoing not only political and economic revolution but industrial revolution as well. Machine images, materials and direct industrial fabrication processes were embraced as symbolic of the new industrial age which would discard the elitist concepts of the past. It was their idealistic hope that artists would become an integral part of the new society, contributing to all aspects of life as the new "culture of materials" contributed to art.⁴

Perhaps only a little less idealistic was Robert Smithson's vision of the social role of the artist in the contemporary world. Like the Productivists, his work developed during a period of rapid social change. Unlike Russia in the 1910's, the United States in the late 1960's was experiencing the results of rapid, successful industrialization. Consciousness of ecological systems represents one aspect of the new sense of scale which has developed in the contemporary world. Mobility has also changed our concepts of time and distance. Architectural constructions now encompass spaces which were unthinkable at the time of the Constructivist movement. The steel suspension bridge which once symbolized industrial achievement is now found incorporated in highway systems which cut through mountain ranges and glide over oceans. The use of machine images in the 1960's had radically different implications from those used in the 1910's. That industry transformed people's lives was an established fact. The new awareness was that it was also in the process of transforming the world. Technology currently provides the means for radically altering physical scale. At the same time, the chemical by-products of industrialization have been inadvertently dis-
tributed over the entire surface of the planet. Arguments over land utilization, reclamation and pollution standards presuppose the fact that it is now within our power to preserve or destroy the natural order of our environment. The basic concept required for this type of thinking is that the environment itself has taken on the significance of a material available for our use.

Acceptance of this idea demands primarily an awareness of relative scale. Robert Smithson was very much aware of this an indicated by the statement "Size determines an object, but scale determines art. A crack in the wall if viewed in terms of scale, not size, could be the Grand Canyon. Scale depends upon one's capacity to be conscious of the actualities of perception." The direct utilization of environment as material represents a response to the new scale relationships technology has provided.

Smithson's eventual formulation of a social role for artists developed as his work moved out into the environment. Activities prior to this, including the "non sites," indicated a rejection of the traditional "separation" of art and life. As stated in 1972, "Art has tended to be viewed in terms of isolation, neutralization, separation, and this is encouraged. Art is supposed to be on some eternal plane, free from the experiences of the world, and I'm more interested in those experiences of the world, not as a refutation of art, but as art as part of that experience, or interwoven, in other words...."
Much of the rationale for the development of "earthworks" was to create an art form which could not be incorporated into the gallery system. Irregardless of the eventual results, this type of thinking seems a contemporary version of the earlier rejection of base and frame. Both activities seek greater public accessibility.

The eventual role Smithson hoped to play was a mediator of industrial and environmental concerns. For him the long-term interaction of elements in the environment rendered ecological arguments irrelevant. To isolate one area for "preservation" was as foolish as isolating another for thoughtless destruction. Smithson saw the possibility of working with industrialists as the only solution. Given the available technology, artists/consultants could direct the development of enriching environments created from industrial wastelands.7

As mentioned earlier, the idealism of the Productivists and the early environmental artists can now be recognized. The motivations of both, however, stem from an honest desire to make art available to the uninitiated viewer, and through this art to bring him in closer touch with the realities of his world.

The investigation of given information implies a wide variety of activities. What is "given" depends upon the awareness of the artist. For the Productivists as well as myself the initial "given" is the physical properties of materials. The "structures" derived from these properties are similarly effected by the artist's conscious and subconscious attitudes. Of the conscious factors, one of the most significant must be the ultimate intentions of the artist's work, i.e., who
makes up his audience and what does he wish to say to them. In the following presentation of several works I will attempt to illustrate the process and intentions which determined the work, and how the results of these efforts effected later work.

Constructivist Sculpture

A work completed in 1976, entitled Spring Tension No. 3 (Plate II), seems to recall Constructivist work in several ways. In terms of form, the linear extension of space could be related to various Constructivist sculptors. More significant, however, is the fact that this work was one of a series of constructions developed around the inherent properties of steel, i.e., weight, rigidity, flexibility. The structure was developed by and for these properties. In its material, direct fabrication technique and symmetrical configuration, the work resembles a machine. This was allowed not for symbolic association, but to enhance viewer participation. By providing recognizable functioning elements I hoped to avoid the preconceptions which limit the perception of art. The utilitarian details combined in an unusual configuration might induce the viewer to investigate the intent of this "machine."

Undisturbed the work remains motionless and balanced. The slightest contact causes a rocking motion in the "V" shaped end (Plate III). This movement in turn exerts pressure against the long steel rods until their tensile strength pulls the V back up in reaction. Without viewer involvement the spring principle would remain unrecognized.
The problem with this work is the complexity of the structure. The machine image may intrigue the viewer, but it also obscures the concept. The simple principle of flexibility and strength is overpowered by the system which supports it.

Material Installation

A recent installation entitled 15 Squares (Plate IV), represents a similar situation in which the viewer's perceptions are approached much more directly. The material, asphalt saturated felt, possesses qualities I found immediately intriguing: flexibility, strength, rich texture, color and surprising weight. In its common function as roofing material it is easily ignored and its properties rarely considered.

The installation consisted of 15 squares (1500 square feet) of the material cut in 12 ft. lengths. These pieces were evenly stacked, forming a mass 12 ft. long, 3 ft. wide and 5 in. thick. First standing this "stack" on its long edge, the ends were folded down and in as a group until the triangulation provided stability.

The simplicity of the resulting form allows consideration of the process and material. The structural principle is evident; layering provides strength and mass, weight and friction between layers provides stability. The material is familiar, but recognition causes surprise. Removing the material from its utilitarian context and providing an alternative perception of its nature challenges the viewer's preconceptions.
Simple placement of the material in a gallery could indicate my interest. Complex configurations would demonstrate my ability to organize space. This installation attempted to structure the material in a way to exemplify its specific qualities and induce the viewer to see the material as I have seen it.

Environmental Installation

My initial attempt to work with the environment involved weather systems. As the realization of a continuing interest in the psychological and physical effects weather has on people and the environment, I attempted to create a situation structuring a common weather phenomenon.

Based on local weather data, two wall structures were designed to effect the formation of snow drifts. The first structure (Plate V) formed an arc to collect snow. The second structure (Plate VI) consisted of two tangent, open angles to funnel and conduct snow. Both were oriented to take advantage of the prevalent wind directions. The location was flat, featureless farm land without interfering obstructions. Since the entire construction was in a remote area, the only public presentation of the results would take the form of documentary photographs.

In terms of creating snow drifts, the piece "worked." Drifts did form, indicating some unanticipated interactions of snow, wind and the walls. Each trip to the site was filled with anticipation of the latest results. As a personal experience the construction on the site, the anticipation of the effects occurring, the recording of results, the completion of the project, all were extremely rewarding. The presentation of
documentary photographs later seemed like an entirely different activity. With the photographs the viewer could see only the drifts that had formed. The interest that I maintained throughout the winter could not be expressed in a statement about the project. The true value of the work became a private experience about control, chance and anticipation.

Beyond this, significant realizations occurred during this project. I became aware of a new sense of scale. The creation of a "snow topography" recalled earlier interest in landscape. More important than either of these, however, was the recognition of my concern for communication in my work. For some time before the completion of this project I had maintained a consideration of the audience's perception of my work. From this point on I have become more aware of the communicative potential of art as a motivating premise.

Site Sculpture

It was my good fortune to be invited to participate in an exhibition of environmental art at the University of Georgia Botanical Garden in the Spring of 1980. As part of the planning for this exhibition, my work was designated to be installed in the area adjoining the Botanical Garden entrance road. This presented a given situation in the truest sense. One positive aspect of this location was the opportunity to present work to people who might never visit an art gallery. The obvious limitation of this location was that the work would primarily be seen from moving vehicles.
The portion of the road eventually used formed a gradual S-curve as it slowly descends a hillside (Plate VII). Construction of the road had created a cut embankment along the sides of the road. The height and width of this embankment increased as the road descends.

The embankment suggested to me a curved plane connecting the natural hillside beyond the cut to the flat regular road surface. In order to convey this interpretation I installed an evenly-spaced series of thin wooden posts and rails; these rails became lines describing the imaginary plane. Each post is the same distance from the road edge and the same height about the road surface. These create a consistent lower edge for the intended plane. From the top of each post and rail extends to the unaltered ground above. This line determines the width and angle of the implied plane. The structure begins at the first noticeable change from "natural" to "imposed" ground level as the road begins to descend the hillside. At the lower end of the hill the structure ends as these two ground levels again become indistinguishable.

From the vantage point of an automobile passenger, the lines converge to create the illusion of a solid plane. As the automobile moves the "solid" portion appears to move ahead of it. The area nearest to the viewer always breaks down into individual lines which frame segments of the embankment.

The use of separate linear elements creates a variety of visual information. Seen as a series of separate lines, the rails visually "tie"
the natural bank to the roadway. Individually, each post and rail defines the adjacent ground by providing a consistent, regular frame of reference. Seen as an imaginary plane, distracting details are eliminated, allowing consideration of the entire embankment as an idealized form. Through the lines the actual embankment remains visible, its irregularities being emphasized by contrast.

The intention of this structure was to convey my response to the physical situation provided by the roadway. That the embankment remains visible is essential. To alter or conceal the actual situation would imply an entirely different motivation. The alteration I hope to achieve was in the viewer's perception of the situation. By creating a noticeable connection between natural hillside and the regularity of the roadway, the configuration and quality of the site becomes apparent. For the viewer, I wanted the structure to work as a catalyst for the active perception of a situation which normally receives little consideration.

Sculpture provides an outlet and a framework for the pursuit of my interests in materials, processes and ideas. Although their significance has only become apparent in retrospect, the three determining factors presented on the previous pages have operated throughout the development of my work. The identification of continuing concerns is intended to give the reader insight, not to imply the use of a formula for art-making. Personal involvement in each project obscures its relation to previous efforts. Work which seems radically different at the time of its incep-
tion can later be recognized as part of a continuing development, responding to earlier work and suggesting what is to come next.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


FOOTNOTES


Corner relief, suspended type. Collation of materials, iron, aluminium, primer. 1915.

Plate I