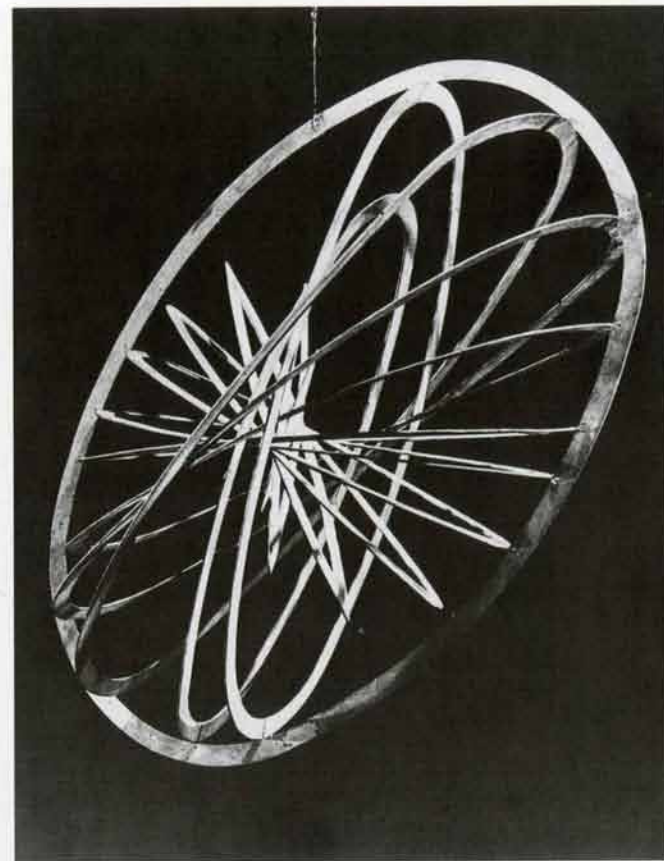


statements, that acknowledge the rediscovery of the sculptural principles and theoretical positions that had been articulated in Duchamp's work as well as in that of the Constructivists (for example, Andre's references to Rodchenko, Donald Judd speaking on Duchamp and Malevich, Dan Flavin paying tribute to Tatlin, and Robert Morris's scholarly interest in Duchamp and the adaptation of Duchampian principles in his early work). This was precisely the part of the modernist tradition that had been ignored and rejected by the neoformalist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried (the key champions and promoters of Smith and Caro). To reconsider these positions—in particular, to transform the dialogue with the positivist legacy of formalism into a laconic pragmatism—provided another essential element of the foundation for the new sculptural work of the mid-1960s. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's recently (1965) translated *Phenomenology of Perception* added to the paradoxical synthesis of philosophical legacies, ranging now from Modernism's empiro-critical skepticism investigating the epistemology of painterly and sculptural signs, to the artists' discovery of logical positivism and semiology. Frank Stella, in many ways the first artist to integrate all of these elements, articulated this condensation in his now famous, lapidary statement, "What you see is what you see."

V

The formalist concept of "self-referentiality" had been a theoretical prescription by which art until around 1965 had to abide. What amounted to a pictorial or sculptural analogy to the semiological understanding of the sign, and the self-reflexivity resulting from that analogy in artistic production, had been achieved by both Duchamp and Malevich in 1913, at least in principle if not in an explicit theoretical project. One of the first Minimal works to considerably expand the notion of self-referentiality was Morris's *Mirrored Cubes* (1964).¹¹ It was against this background of a Minimal and post-Minimal aesthetic that Michael Asher's work was developed in the 1960s. When Asher went to New York for a year in 1963–1964, he became very interested in Flavin's and Judd's work, and, upon his return to California in 1966, he constructed several tapered wedge pieces that follow a similar logic of suspending the sculptural object between self-referentiality and contextual



Alexander Rodchenko, *Spatial Construction No. 12*, 1920. Plywood and wire, 83.5 × 43.3 cm. Costakis Collection, Athens.

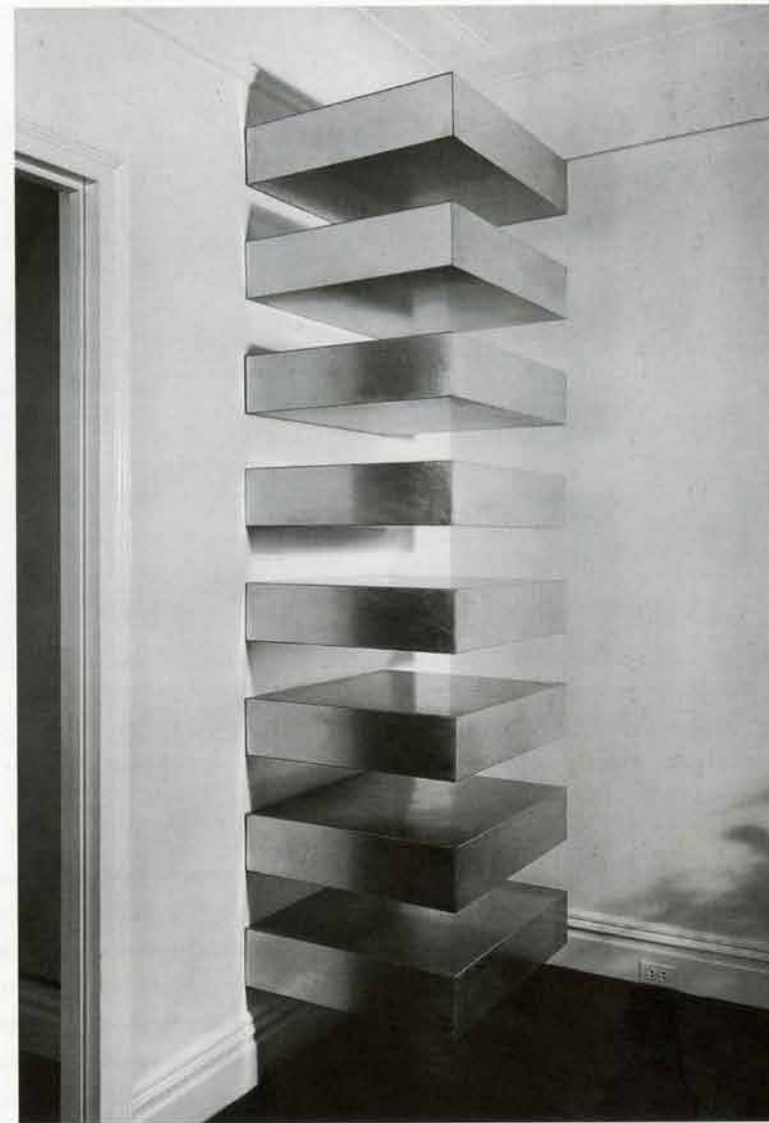
contingency. These wedges were installed flush against the wall and painted over with a color identical to the wall that supported them. As in Morris's and Larry Bell's mirrored cubes, the most prominent characteristic of Asher's early work would be its analytical approach to the triadic condition of the sculptural phenomenon: to function as an autonomous aesthetic/spatial sign; to be constituted within a larger architectural context, which may or may not purport its own and different order of signs; and to be activated only through the spectator's individual act of perception. The sculptural sign itself, at least in Morris's early work and in Asher's wedge pieces, negates any inherent sculptural value and merely demarcates the difference between subjective perception and objective spatial conditions.

Dan Graham, later to become a close friend of Asher's, underwent a similar development in his work, leading gradually out of formalist and Minimal aesthetics. He described his conception of a sculptural structure as follows:

There is a "shell" placed between the external "empty" material of place and the interior, empty material of language: systems of information exist halfway between material and concept without being either one.¹²

In this critique, the formalist notion of self-referentiality was replaced by an increasingly complex analytical system (semiological, sociological, systems-analysis) that would make the work operative rather than self-reflexive. The idea of a "situational aesthetics" (a term coined by the English artist Victor Burgin) implied that a work would function analytically within all the parameters of its historical determination, not only in its linguistic or formal framework. Three concepts would become crucial for the definition of "situational aesthetics": first, the notion of material- and site-specificity; second, the notion of place; third, that of presence. A similar transition had already occurred in the shift from Russian formalist methodology toward a new materialist semiology and productivist theory.¹³

When Judd defined his understanding of material specificity by almost literally transferring a key term of Russian formalist criticism to sculpture, his

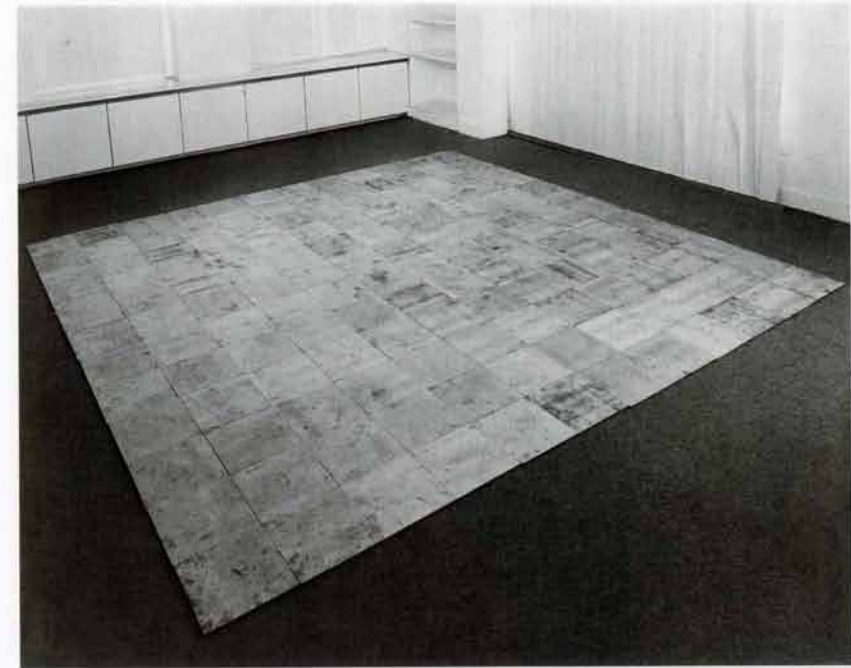


Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1968. Galvanized iron, 10 × 27 × 24 in. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Schwartz. Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.

definition still resounded with the impact of Modernism's positivist pragmatism. He wrote, for example, in his 1965 essay "Specific Objects": "Materials vary greatly and are simply materials—formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, plexiglas, red and common brass and so forth. They are specific. Also they are usually aggressive."¹⁴ Shortly afterward, Michael Asher and a whole generation of artists set out to prove that materials are not simply materials but are procedurally and contextually determined. For example, Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn argued already in their early critique of Judd:

Aren't you saying you want the association to be restricted or localized to the object or its immediate (i.e. architectural) environment? Along with an autonomous form of art, you wanted a more autonomous art object, what you would call more objective. Traditionally, art objects are associated with other art and art history by way of their materials and by being a conventional type of art object. Such associations would, I suppose, in your words, be specific. But this was the last thing you wanted. The autonomy you developed for your objects had to function in respect to your presupposition of an art (historical) context and hence you still needed a means of associating the object with that context. Since the object itself denied any associations, the physical situation became a more important vehicle. That is to say, the object had to be circumstantially associated with its art context.¹⁵

The second concept, that of place (as opposed to object or anthropomorphic representation), was developed mainly by Andre and Flavin.¹⁶ Pointing to the *spatial* specificity of the sculptural work (as opposed to the *material* specificity that Judd talked about), Andre's definition also originally implied (as did Flavin's practice) a subversive assault on the commodity status of works of art (given that they were movable objects, contextless, offering themselves to every kind of transaction). Sculpture as place was supposed to integrate into its actual formation the spatial conditions into which it inscribed itself as constituent elements. Graham observed with lucidity:



Carl Andre, *144 Copper Square*, 1969. Copper, $\frac{3}{8} \times 144 \times 144$ in. Collection: The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Dan Flavin, view of the installations in the Green Gallery, New York, 1964. Cool white fluorescent light; various dimensions. Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt.

I liked that as a side effect of Flavin's fluorescents the gallery walls became a canvas. The lights dramatized the people (like spotlights) in a gallery, throwing the content of the exhibition out to the people in the process of perceiving; the gallery interior cube itself became the real framework.¹⁷

Independently reflecting on similar issues, the French artist Daniel Buren wrote a perspicacious critique of Duchamp's readymade concept in 1970. If read along with Graham's description of Flavin's work, the essay reveals the hitherto unreflected and problematic points of the minimalist concept of place, in particular its unconscious indebtedness to Duchamp. Furthermore, it identified exactly those issues on which Asher would focus, and the essay's almost literal correspondence to Graham's statement points to the objective nature of these artistic concerns of the post-Minimal generation:

The Museum/Gallery for lack of being taken into consideration is the framework, the habit . . . the inescapable "support" on which art history is "painted." Wishing to eliminate the tableau/support, on the pretext that what is painted can only be illusion, Duchamp introduces into a new framework/tableau a real object, which at the same time becomes artificial, motiveless, i.e., artistic.¹⁸

Temporal specificity is defined as the third condition for a situational aesthetics—presence—which is closely interrelated with its spatial and material counterparts. Again, the term refers not only to the fact that an installation is determined by the specific temporal circumstances into which it is introduced, but equally, if not more, to the fact that it obtains within these circumstances a temporally specific, limited function, and that the work might become disposable after its appearance in time. Again, it was Graham who pointed this out when writing about an exhibition of Flavin's work in Chicago in 1967:

The components of a particular exhibition, upon its termination, are replaced in another situation—perhaps put to a non-art use as a part of a different whole in a different future.¹⁹

VI

Asher later adopted the term “situational aesthetics,” integrating the concepts of both spatial and temporal specificity. It had become fairly clear by 1968 that the Minimalists had abandoned the original implications of these aesthetic strategies by adapting their work increasingly to the needs of the art market. It had also become evident that these strategies would have to be radically modified, if they were to maintain their critical function of investigating the social and institutional framework that determines the production and the reception of art. Thus, on the occasion of his first exhibition, at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1969, Asher applied the Minimalist principles of self-referentiality and specificity with a new literalness and immediacy to the architectural container of the exhibition space itself. Thereby he not only revealed Minimalism’s latent formalist heritage, but also defined a new understanding of sculptural materiality:

The presentation at San Francisco was clearly dictated by every element which was available and it suggested a way of working for the future: using just elements which already existed without a great modification to the space.²⁰

If Asher’s work overcomes the Modernist legacy (i.e., the neopositivist formalism originating in the Constructivist legacy and embraced by the Minimalists), then the work of Broodthaers and Buren critically transcends the limitations of Duchamp’s concept of the readymade, which had kept almost all object-oriented art in its spell.²¹ Both positions—the constructive and the allegorical—seem to coalesce and henceforth determine the historically relevant work in contemporary art production. It is therefore crucial to comprehend first of all that the two critiques are fused in Michael Asher’s installations at the Art



Michael Asher, *Galleria Toselli, Milan, 1972*. Sand-blasted gallery walls. Courtesy of the artist.