INTRODUCTION

Modern art always projects itself into a twilight zone where no values are fixed.
Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public," 1962

THE GREAT STREAM

The development of modern sculpture can be imagined as an intricate web of artists' conversations, institutional endorsements, critical assessments, promotional strategies, and periodic reevaluations, or—as Jacques Lipchitz described it to James Johnson Sweeney after fleeing Nazi-occupied Paris and landing in New York—the "Great Stream." Innovation means different things to different people at different times, depending on an individual's aesthetic disposition and the culture at large. The trajectory of modern sculpture, admittedly a complex amalgam of social, political, and economic forces, is influenced by how artists react to circumstances around them, including changes in the way culture and technology interact. Since the turn of the last century, sculptors have deployed whatever tools, methods, and materials were available to them, all the while responding to vastly varied environmental conditions. The very definition of modern sculpture, unmoored by Duchamp's first Readymade, remains contingent.

Vanguard sculpture, not unlike experimental painting, architecture, dance, music, or theater, has grappled with its own inherent limitations, which is why the infusion of kindred disciplines at key moments liberated sculptors in extraordinary ways. Sculpture's defining virtue has always been its command of tangible space, its insistent mass and volume—in essence, its phenomenological presence. In its fundamental incarnations, well before the ephemeral conceits of Happenings, post-Minimalism, and Conceptualism, sculpture existed as the thing that shared our space. This has been its authority as well as its challenge. In the postindustrial whirl of consumer objects, how does sculpture distinguish itself? How does it persist? Seeing the word sculptural as signifying a malleable proposition—contested and expanded by artists unencumbered by theoretical dictates—offers one avenue of understanding. The modern sculptor, inherently skeptical, has no qualms about negating historical precedents to reimagine a sculptural future.

Sculpture may have preceded language as one of the first artifacts of human expression. Musk oxen, reindeer, and woolly rhinoceroses rendered in pigment on the undulating walls of Paleolithic caves joined pieces of bone, wood, and stone carved into flints, weapons, and fertility figures as shamanic talismans to assuage superstition and ensure survival. As Kiki Smith told me, "The whole history of the
world is about people making things.” Sculpture’s origins may well correspond to the origins of human consciousness. But such a distinction didn’t safeguard its rank as the practice of visual art became more codified. Leonardo da Vinci, consummate painter, demeaned Michelangelo, visionary sculptor, as plebeian, a lowly laborer covered in sweat, chips, and marble dust. Sculpture’s objecthood made painting’s illusionistic artifice moot. Judgments were inevitable. The streetwise aesthete Charles Baudelaire castigated sculpture—vapid portraits and full-length statues claustrophobically displayed at the Paris Salons during the mid-nineteenth century—as “boring,” which, considering the invigorating state of painting in the hands of Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault, these appeared to be.5

Modern sculptors thrived on intuitional hunches, unthinkable propositions, excursions into fantastic realms, and scrapes with new materials and techniques with no guarantee as to the outcome, propelled by an impulse to do something [anything] differently, even if it meant alienating other artists and members of the public and failing in the process. Most early modern sculpture, excepting Constructivist and Bauhaus models, eschews utilitarian expectations. No longer conceived as a singular monument or memorial, or as part of an ecclesiastical or civic ensemble, what is sculpture’s function? Who is its audience? Where and how should it be displayed? What differentiates it from an escalating stream of factory-line commodities?

Occupying the realm of aesthetic contemplation, the modern object became a rarefied entity, formally sophisticated but, lacking a site, vulnerable. Nonetheless, early modern sculpture is more than the sum total of its formal innovations. “What is it that sets modern sculptures apart from their predecessors?” asked Leo Steinberg when he reviewed Andrew Carnduff Ritchie’s catalogue for a 1952 survey of twentieth-century sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. “To suggest that modern sculpture shows a greater preoccupation with plastic first principles is not enough. . . . Modern sculpture is not merely more concerned with plastic form, but with a different kind of form, one answering to a radically new awareness of reality. The forms of contemporary sculpture are unstable and dynamic things: every transient shape implies a history, a growth, an evolution.” 6

The great stream of modern sculpture is buoyed by the timely resurrection of individuals whose work, rediscovered by sympathetic artists, museum curators, and critics, rises again. Lipchitz may have been one of the first to see Auguste Rodin’s torsos and fragments hidden away in drawers at the elder sculptor’s Meudon studio and to recommend this revelatory cache to the New York dealer Curt Valentin.7 Ritchie, likewise, acknowledged Rodin’s prescience in Sculpture of the Twentieth Century, describing him as “the father of modern sculpture.”8 Ritchie’s sculptural roundup opened at an auspicious time, as Manhattan superseded Paris as the New Art City, and MoMA’s ambitious exhibition programs showcased why.9 Ritchie elevated Rodin while praising Aristide Maillol, Constantin Brancusi, and Pablo Picasso as the medium’s prime movers. Six “stylistic streams”—“The Object
in Relation to Light,” “The Object Idealized,” “The Object Purified,” “The Object Dissected,” “The Object Constructed on Geometric Principles,” and “The Object and the Subconscious”—glorified the object as a manifestation of soulful genius, while providing a framework for assessing the sculptural tenets of Cubism, Futurism, Brancusi’s “organic abstraction,” Constructivism, and Surrealism.

Ritchie’s postwar survey enables one to flesh out Rodin’s innovations within the tidal stream of art history. The sculptor’s sensitivity to light, an impressionistic conceit to dematerialize form, became a battle cry for someone like Medardo Rosso, who denied any work “not concerned with light” the right to exist. And Rosso’s enabler, Umberto Boccioni, proselytized for light’s vibrational force as an essential component of Futurism. Boccioni understood that light had the potential not only to energize inherently static mass but also to function aggressively, even theatrically, as energy illuminated—an idea developed in László Moholy-Nagy’s *Light Prop for an Electric Stage* (also called *Light-Space Modulator*), 1930, and later dramatized in Dan Flavin’s neon installations, Bruce Nauman’s video corridors, and James Turrell’s luminous crater, where light rematerializes as a palpable presence.

Any analysis of modern sculpture must account for shifting dynamics of space. Here’s how Steinberg, during the early 1960s, described Rodin’s contribution: “Rodin’s implied space equips sculpture in three distinct ways for the modern experience. Psychologically, it supplies a threat of imbalance which serves like a passport to the age of anxiety. Physically, it suggests a world in which voids and solids interact as modes of energy. And semantically, by never ceasing to ask where and how his sculptures can possibly stand, where in space they shall loom or balance, refusing to take for granted even the solid ground, Rodin unsettles the obvious and brings to sculpture that anxious questioning for survival without which no spiritual activity enters this century.” Rodin conceived of space as active rather than passive, temporal rather than transcendent, as an arena in which sculpture and the spectator interact. Space was humanized, infused by spirit. Boccioni’s desire to “break open the figure and enclose it in [the] environment” defers to Rodin’s anxious space at the same time it anticipates an environmental interface. With Julio González’s assistance and practical know-how, Picasso conceived of sculpture as the equivalent of drawing in space, thus enabling it to breathe. And Alexander Calder animated the object through kinetic activation. The phenomenology of sculptural space, from a static, hermetic envelope to one contingent on temporal systems, defines and redefines the character of modern and postmodern sculpture, from Rodin to Calder, Allan Kaprow to Robert Smithson, and Hans Haacke to Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Olafur Eliasson.

By 1963 Steinberg could recognize Rodin’s accumulation of figures, limbs, torsos, and heads as “a reservoir of readymades and self-made *objets trouvés*” and see his protean output as “constellations of interchangeable parts” foreshadowing assemblage. Rodin’s tendency to recycle certainly presages Picasso’s sculptural reliefs and his later wartime trophy—the bicycle-seat-and-handlebar *Bull’s Head*,
1942. But to see Rodin’s “constellations” as the prelude to a then-prevalent urban-based junk aesthetic was a stroke of art historical brilliance. Still, enlisting the elder as the überbricoleur didn’t mitigate his romantic disposition, a skepticism about mechanical technology that would haunt sculpture’s progression like a humane specter.

Ritchie described his fifty-year survey as “an anthology of sculptors,” based on admittedly “subjective choices.” This may explain the curious omission of Marcel Duchamp, whose brother, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, had two Cubo-Futurist bronzes, *Rider*, ca. 1913, and *The Horse*, 1914, in the show. Why nothing by Marcel, by then far better known in art world circles, and described by Willem de Kooning a year earlier as “a one-man movement . . . a movement for each person and open for everyone”? By the time *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* opened in 1952, utopian-inspired revolutions and manifestos had come and gone, leaving the promise of progress through advances in science and technology seriously in question. Particularly in the devastating wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some artists found the Bauhausian prospect—of artists “being trained to take their place in the machine age”—problematic, if not untenable. If the death-dealing potential of the military-industrial complex shadowed a generation of post–World War II sculptors, Duchamp’s mass-produced urinal, bottle dryer, and bicycle wheel signaled another kind of sculpture: conceptual, common, confounding. The Readymade, designated anti-art, was nothing more than a Dada gesture riddled with doubt. But even the most radical tendencies, once consumed by the art system, are assimilated—amoeba-like—into the mainstream. Duchamp remained anathema to most artists, curators, and critics from the end of World War I until the tide began to turn in the mid-1950s, beginning with the Arensberg Collection of Duchampiana opening at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1954, continuing with the appearance of Robert Lebel’s book on the artist in 1959, and culminating with his retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1963.

**SCULPTORS AT THE TABLE**

During the run of *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, Ritchie moderated a symposium with David Smith, Theodore Roszak, Herbert Ferber, and Richard Lippold. The transcribed contents of *The New Sculpture* offer an excellent primer for postwar sculpture. When sculptors gathered, their conversations varied. At MoMA one heard nuts-and-bolts shoptalk about tools, materials, and techniques. A discussion of space and of sculpture’s relationship to architecture also ensued. The topic of subject matter came up as well, but aside from general remarks—such as Smith saying, “the work is a statement of my identity” and Roszak admitting, “the forms I find necessary to assert are meant to be blunt reminders of primordial strife and struggle, reminiscent of those brute forces that not only produced life but in turn threat-
ened to destroy it”—most sidestepped precise descriptions. The reciprocity between sculpture and painting was another matter altogether; strong opinions were voiced. “Outside of Brancusi,” Smith declared in his opening remarks, “the greatest sculptures were mostly by painters,” adding, “I do not recognize the limits where painting ends and sculpture begins.” Even as Smith defended painting’s compatibility with sculpture, biases resurfaced.

“When an artist at the Eighth Street Club talked about art,” Irving Sandler told me, “and meant painting, Ibram Lassaw would get up and stomp out.” It’s a telling remark. American sculptors living in postwar Manhattan could be extremely sensitive, skittish even, about their perceived exclusion from the conversation. Nonetheless, the perception that they were, if not excluded, at least marginal to a discourse dominated by painters just isn’t so. One has only to review the records of panels and symposia organized during the 1950s and early 1960s, or the contemporaneous artist-run journal *Tiger’s Eye*, to see that sculptors were indeed integral to the conversation generated around the new art. Sometimes (during the Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35 in 1950), they took their place at the table next to the painters. At other times (during the *New Sculpture* symposium and the *Waldorf Panels on Sculpture* in 1965), they had the table to themselves. Either way, their voices, heard and transcribed, sound a distinct chorus.

Despite real or perceived differences, most postwar sculptors remained deferential to painting for two reasons, one inevitable, the other instinctual. A notable number of them—Ferber, David Hare, Roszak, Smith, Louise Bourgeois—started out as painters, and even after sculpture became their focus, they never relinquished their painter’s eye for color; some of them—Smith, Ferber, and Hare—never stopped painting. Even the most hypersensitive sculptor sensed the importance of solidarity, of being part of a like-minded group—painters, poets, composers, dancers, and musicians—sharing the same cultural challenges: small audiences, sporadic sales and commissions, and the optic that any modern artist living south of Fourteenth Street could be a communist. To be gay was even more suspect. Their creative tribe met and mingled at watering holes like the Cedar Tavern, jazz clubs like the Five Spot Café, and a forum like the Club, a safe haven for free expression at a time when any kind of radical discourse was suspect. The Club’s programmatic agenda during the 1950s—an eclectic menu of lectures on Existentialism, panels on Abstract Expressionism, and one-off talks about creativity, mythology, psychology, detachment, and involvement—flew in the face of conservative politics at the same time it empowered all of those present to be who they wanted to be.

Sculptors and painters wrestled with the same biases that fueled heated discussions around representation versus abstraction. The figure was to sculptors what the loaded brushstroke was to painters: a fundamental gesture, a medium through which existential questions about the self and humankind could be explored. The figure’s viability as a leitmotif remained unquestioned by many artists even after an influential critic like Clement Greenberg dismissed it as retrograde. The 1950s
may have been a glorious decade for abstraction, but it was also a watershed for a new kind of figuration, the zeitgeist behind the New Images of Man exhibition at MoMA in 1959. Curator Peter Selz’s polemical brainchild—figurative, literary, and philosophical—posed a threat to the preeminent status of the New York School, even though much of the featured international work incorporated expressionistic flourishes. Rodin’s humane pathos again feels germane, incarnate in Alberto Giacometti, whose Tall Figure, 1947, graced the exhibition catalogue’s cover. Of the twenty-three artists represented, eleven were sculptors (four American, three British, two French, one Swiss, one Austrian). De Kooning’s ferocious women, Jackson Pollock’s sly referential oils from 1951–52, and Francis Bacon’s gaping pope joined personages by Giacometti, Roszak, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Germaine Richier, infuriating die-hard advocates of Abstract Expressionism. That so much of the work on view appeared anguished made it easier for most critics to dismiss. The show’s confessional tone, a curatorial sermon on the bewildering state of humankind, confirmed that by the decade’s end, some of art’s most vital streams were full-bodied propositions.

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

Carl Andre, poet and soon-to-be sculptor, accompanied his high school friend Hollis Frampton, photographer and filmmaker, on a journey from New York to the Philadelphia Museum of Art during the fall of 1962 to see sculptures by Rodin, Brancusi, and Duchamp. That evening a bantering conversation, transcribed on a manual typewriter at Andre’s kitchen table in Brooklyn, ricocheted between Rodin and Duchamp (jump-started by Duchamp’s Large Glass and a small plaster model of Rodin’s Gates of Hell), with passing references to Brancusi. The two twenty-something-year-old candidly debated the merits and pitfalls of these modern masters. Both agreed that Rodin and Duchamp were “champions of the gift.” Andre considered Duchamp’s bicycle wheel and stool “one of the greatest sculptures of our time” [a perception that would dramatically change]. Brancusi comes up toward the end of the conversation. Frampton mentions the Romanian’s short but formidable apprenticeship with Rodin and speculates on what he drew from the French master, to which Andre replies, “Brancusi did indeed escape the protection of Rodin but in doing so he confirmed and illuminated a few seconds of ink stroke in Rodin’s output. . . . We are the sons of our fathers; it is not their protection which we require, but their seed.”

“Brancusi had a much more immediate influence because it was possible to go to Philadelphia and see the Arensberg Collection,” Andre later recalled when asked about his affinity to Russian Constructivism. “This was a direct and immediate influence because I started making sculpture carving in wood inspired by Brancusi’s wood carving.” Andre would eventually negate the monumental verticality of Brancusi’s Endless Column by envisioning it on the ground, flattened like a carpet. Still,
Brancusi’s seeds did indeed proliferate, before and after his death, in the hands of younger sculptors who gravitated to the ambiguity of reductive forms rendered in bronze, stone, and wood, polished and sanded to perfection, and elevated on custom-made bases: poetic objects grounded to their site or sited in the environment as architectural premonitions. Brancusi’s organic abstraction—the synthesis of amphoric and geometric configurations, his insistence on truth to materials and direct carving, and his receptiveness to diverse sculptural sources (folk, African, Cycladic)—spawned a stream of vitalistic sculpture that took flight in the teens, gained momentum in the 1920s and 1930s with Jean Arp, Noguchi, and Henry Moore, and flourished throughout the 1950s in the brazed-metal morphologies of Roszak, Ibram Lassaw, and Seymour Lipton.  

Andre wasn’t the only sculptor who came of age during the 1960s looking at Brancusi. Richard Serra, recalling his student days in Paris (1964–65), told Hal Foster, “Any way you wanted to think about sculpture, it was available in Brancusi. If you wanted to go abstract, it was there; if you wanted to go figurative, it was there; if you wanted to go vertical, it was there; if you wanted to go horizontal, it was there. It was all there.” Serra drew every day for four months in Brancusi’s reconstructed studio in the Musée National d’Art Moderne, which he later described as manifesting “a total working process in which there is no separation between working and living space.” In the studio, one’s sculptural progeny interact like an extended family, a lesson Brancusi gleaned from Rodin, realized in his “compound of sculptures” (Serra’s words) at Târgu Jiu, and passed on to others like Noguchi, Smith, Ann Truitt, Serra, Petah Coyne, and Ursula von Rydingsvard. When it came to moving the work beyond the studio, Brancusi was a master at presenting precious objects in the controlled setting of his atelier. He even deployed a rotating platform to display smaller pieces, a device no doubt endorsed by his art world advocate Duchamp.  

It was Duchamp who guided the design of Brancusi’s legacy ensemble at the Philadelphia Museum in 1955 and liaised between Walter and Louise Arensberg and the various institutions vying for the couple’s remarkable collection featuring both artists. Duchamp’s association with Brancusi began with the infamous 1913 Armory Show, where both generated a scandal, and continued until Brancusi’s death. The two became close friends. Brancusi’s association with the Brummer Gallery (1926, 1933–34) was enhanced by Duchamp’s astute intervention. So, too, was his inclusion in Katherine Dreier’s Société Anonyme. Duchamp championed Brancusi in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, facilitating exhibitions and the sale of key works to prestigious collections. Making sure that the Arensberg Collection eventually found a respectable home and that, in the final act, he and Brancusi would be seen together (as they were in 1962, when Andre and Frampton saw them, and still are to this day) became a strategic move to ensure his own legacy.  

Duchamp—artist, entrepreneur, chess-playing intellectual, mentor, philosophical provocateur—had an uncanny ability to navigate the burgeoning arena of modern art: to make a splash, reap the publicity, and then withdraw, only to reappear
later on, having sustained a calculated presence all along. From his spectacular coming out at the Armory Show until his death in 1968, Duchamp cultivated advantageous relationships in the right circles. His appearance, disappearance, and reappearance, in Paris, New York, and Los Angeles, the ebb and flow of his own creative stream, is one of the most intriguing narratives of the modern era. His “common objects slipped into the stream of aesthetic discourse, as a series of questions to which there is no certain reply,” helps to explain his evergreen stature as an artist lauded, loathed, and still relevant.33

Sightings of Duchamp were legion. Ken Price told me that during the 1960s, Duchamp was revered by his Ferus Gallery comrades and that one day the Frenchman appeared unannounced at his Ventura studio door, led there by Ferus cofounder and curator Walter Hopps, who was hiding several blocks away.34 Duchamp had been invited to California to initiate a late-in-life tribute at the Pasadena Museum of Art.35 If Hopps’s 1963 retrospective provided him with a monolithic boost, William C. Seitz’s thematic survey The Art of Assemblage, two years earlier at MoMA, lionized the mercurial cosmopolitan in his adopted city, where a choice selection of Ready-mades (several borrowed from Philadelphia) joined a battery of rough-and-ready Combines by a brazen breed of bricoleurs and dumpster divers.36

Seitz enlisted every vanguard tenet to bolster an art of detritus: French and Futurist “calligrammatic” poetry, Picasso and Georges Braque’s papiers collés and Picasso’s sculptural still lifes, Kurt Schwitters’s Merz, African fetishes, Dada provocations, and Surrealist morphologies: any form of creative enterprise that reflected an anarchistic, nihilistic, or subversive sensibility. In doing so, he may have inadvertently divined the first tremors of a 1960s youth rebellion: the sea change from Cold War conformity to wanton acts of impatient seekers hell-bent on testing the limits of what art could be, how it got made, and where it got shown. Here’s how he described some of assemblage’s aesthetic and cultural attributes:

The vernacular repertoire includes beat Zen and hot rods, mescalin experiences and faded flowers... and hydrogen explosions. Such subjects are often approached in a mystical, aesthetic, or “arty” way, but just as often they are fearfully dark, evoking horror or nausea: the anguish of the scrap heap; the images of charred bodies that keep Hiroshima and Nagasaki before our eyes; the confrontation of democratic platitudes with the Negro’s disenfranchisement; the travesty of the Chessman trial. Indeed, in the United States, a network of artists could be identified who, quite independently and with no special political affiliation, incorporate or represent in their work flags, shields, eagles, and other symbols of democracy, national power, and authority, with mild amusement or irony, with unconcealed resentment and scatological bitterness, or simply as totally banal images.37

Among a roster of wildly disparate works—by Arp, Lee Bontecou, John Chamberlain, Jasper Johns, Edward Kienholz, Marisol, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, Smith, Richard Stankiewicz, and Joaquín Torres-García—Duchamp claimed
pride of place, along with Schwitters and Duchamp’s Francophile friend Joseph Cornell. Thirteen Readymades accompanied Tu m’, 1918, a friezelike painting violated by graphite, a bottlebrush, a nut and bolt, and safety pins used to suture an extensive rent in the canvas. Reproduced as the only color foldout in the show’s catalogue, Duchamp’s swan song to painting became the curatorial billboard for a freewheeling sensibility fueled by the urban milieu.

The sculptural tide was indeed shifting, from rarefied objects to environmental and theatrical tableaux, but not everyone was inclined to rise. Philip Pavia, for one, remained obstinate during the Waldorf Panels on Sculpture (1965), ridiculing the coming ethos as “ass-emblage.” The Waldorf sessions assembled a small group of sculptors, along with an audience of about 125, to discuss the state of sculpture. Both panels, moderated by Pavia, generated contentious debate, as though one’s artistic identity was on the line. When stone carver Noguchi, during the second panel, incited by Claes Oldenburg’s Floor Burger (1962) [canvas filled with foam rubber and paper cartons and painted with Liquitex and latex], asked, “What is sculpture?” his perplexity was palpable. Pavia, a staunch advocate for abstract art, couldn’t disassociate his own cast bronze and carved marble objects from the ethos of Abstract Expressionism; he repeatedly invoked Pollock as the paradigm for artistic integrity, argued for the purity of abstraction (against the Surrealist “jungle”), and equated one’s choice of material and subject matter with moral judgment. As far as he was concerned, any sculptor susceptible to mass media and junk culture was anathema. Duchamp hovered over the first session, unnamed like some vague menace, until Ad Reinhardt, with a contrarian’s delight, decried, “I want to continue on his [Pavia’s] drubbing of immorality and Surrealism. Traditionally, there is a morality: it is not the everyday morality, but an art morality. And most immoral of all the immoral traditions in art is the anti-art tradition: that is Surrealism programmatically, and it is immoral. Now, I suppose the Duchamp Urinal is immoral, too. And the mixture of the arts has traditionally been immoral, especially romantic ideas. Also the mixture of fine art with commercial art and industrial art. There’s something immoral about fine artists jobbing. . . . Also, sculptors making paintings is immoral; painters making sculptures is immoral, too.” What Reinhardt candidly called out was art’s increasingly pluralistic tendencies. During the second session, Oldenburg, having scripted and directed improvised productions [Ray Gun Theater performances] at his former East Second Street storefront, tried to explain a spectator-inclusive art deferential to life. Some younger members of the audience may have concurred; most just listened, probably unconvinced.

LETTING THE OUTSIDE IN

Some conversations carry profound implications. During the first of five “Radio Happenings,” John Cage and Morton Feldman talked about being composers. Cage
recalled something Erik Satie had said about needing a kind of music that “will not interrupt the noises of the environment,” then proposed that the environment was just another source for compositional sounds rather than “an intrusion.” Feldman demurred, preferring “the old-fashioned role of the artist—deep in thought.” But Cage persisted, imagining a concert room with one door open. “Let’s imagine,” he continued, “that the concert is in a room, and that one door from that room is open, and in the room upon which it opens, radio music is audible. Now, must the door be closed or may it be left open?”

Outside the door, intrusion rains—every distraction that could potentially deflect a traditional composer deep in thought—the stuff of life, a rainbow of influences. The invitation challenged any artist still sequestered in their studio. Cage’s metaphorical door had been open since the late 1940s. Having communed with dancer Merce Cunningham, visual artists de Kooning and Rauschenberg, poet Charles Olson, and architect Buckminster Fuller at the countercultural breeding ground that was Black Mountain College (1933–57), the composer returned to New York to sow the seeds of sound and silence like a Zen master who expects nothing and encounters extreme skepticism. His benign detachment, a quality he shared with Duchamp and Reinhardt, coupled with a playful, Dadaesque spirit inclined toward chance, explains his heightened relevance during the 1960s. It also explains why some of his earliest admirers—George Brecht, Al Hansen, Richard Higgins, Johns, Kaprow, Charlotte Moorman, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, and Rauschenberg—some of them would-be sculptors, preferred to mine the nebulous gap between art and life.

Kaprow, for one, approached Cage’s open door as an invitation to see and accept rather than to judge and reject. “In Cage’s cosmology,” he recalled years later, “the real world was perfect, if we could only hear it, see it, understand it. If we couldn’t, that was because our senses were closed and our minds were filled with preconceptions.” There was nothing preconceived about Kaprow’s [or, for that matter, the Japanese Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai’s] take on Pollock’s legacy. The arena that had been Pollock’s floor-bound canvas, in Kaprow’s mind, morphed into the grand arena that is life; Pollock’s gestural choreography opened the perceptual doors to other spontaneous acts. Sculpture, likewise, faced a new arena of material and methodological possibilities. “Happenings are events that, put simply, happen,” was how Kaprow and others (Brecht, Jim Dine, Red Grooms, Oldenburg, Robert Whitman) described their theatrical-like productions, though not everyone agreed on the details. As the 1960s rolled into the 1970s, with the art world’s global expansion and insatiable appetite for commerce, Kaprow saw the Happening—transient, improvised, chance-driven—as a “state of mind” that knows no boundaries between disciplines, artist, or spectator. As with Harold Rosenberg’s association with “Action” painting during the 1950s, the Happening became Kaprow’s calling card to recognition during the 1960s, a creative philosophy he returned to, rethought, and eventually relinquished to others—Yayoi Kusama, Joseph Beuys, Paul McCarthy, Gilbert and George, Janine Antoni—who invented their own performative personae.
Kaprow's call for "the creation of a total art" involved tuning in to one's total surroundings—in other words, the environment, the cultural arena animated by people's behavioral patterns and psychological dispositions. That an increasing number of artists—Nevelson, Beuys, Kienholz, Kusama, Marisa Merz, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Paul Thek—projected themselves into enclosed spaces during the late 1950s and the 1960s may have been a sign of the times, a survival instinct akin to stockpiling a fallout shelter, a way to construct and control their immediate surroundings. Assemblage spurred immersive architectural spaces cobbled together from materials no one else wanted. Some captured the stillness of a private sanctuary; others emulated playgrounds or referenced political issues in provocative tableaux. Andy Warhol’s Pop Factory at East Forty-Seventh Street epitomized an environmental crossroads, just as his Exploding Plastic Inevitable troupe, fronted by the Velvet Underground, was touted as the ultimate Happening. Kaprow had his finger on the cultural pulse when he spearheaded Environments—Situations—Spaces at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1961, filling Jackson's Upper East Side courtyard with a mound of old tires [Yard], and, six years later, when he reiterated an insight in response to Barbara Rose and Irving Sandler’s questionnaire polling artists about a 1960s sensibility: "The newest energies are gathering in the cross-overs, the areas of impurity, the blurs which remain after the usual boundaries have been erased."

MINIMAL/POST-MINIMAL

The description “ABC Art” implies simplicity, an anyone-can-do-it mentality, a child’s ritual, an art of fundamental sequence. By 1965 Barbara Rose noticed a sensibility, decidedly at odds with Kaprow’s "blurs," emerging from New York and the West Coast. With art historical acumen and journalistic flair, she set out to articulate what she saw: constructing a genealogy [Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, Duchamp, Barnett Newman, Reinhardt], naming current practitioners (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Andre, Flavin), and citing critical preludes (by Greenberg, Michael Fried, Richard Wollheim). As someone who spent a lot of time in studios and at live performances, Rose could see that a reductive impulse extended beyond the domains of sculpture and painting. The process-driven choreography of Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer, an eight-hour film of the Empire State Building shot with a stationary 16 mm camera by Warhol and John Palmer, Satie’s "Vexations," and the endless continuum of La Monte Young’s "Dream Music" were all incarnations of a minimal expression, sometimes laced with sexual and humorous undertones. That Rose offered sculptors (Richard Artschwager, Andre, Ronald Bladen, Flavin, Judd, Morris, Truitt, Richard Tuttle) and painters (Frank Stella and Larry Zox) column space to explain what they did confirmed a confluence of ambition.
A flurry of opinions followed Rose’s article, as others weighed in on the subject. The initial discourse generated around Minimalism by critics Lawrence Alloway, Michael Benedikt, Fried, Greenberg, Lucy Lippard, Brian O’Doherty, Annette Michelson, John Perreault, Rose, Rosenberg, Sandler, Willoughby Sharp, Wollheim, and Martial Raysse was tempered by sculptors Judd, Morris, LeWitt, and Flavin, all of whom felt compelled to state their point of view. Seeing Minimalism, as James Meyer does, “as a debate, an argument if you will, that initially developed in response to the three-dimensional abstraction of, among others, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Anne Truitt, and Sol LeWitt during the period 1963–68” and “as a shifting signifier whose meanings altered depending on the moment or context of its use” is instructive. [So is seeing how the discourse expanded through theoretical and feminist critiques.] Some individuals were more tolerant when it came to how the discourse evolved and eventually encompassed Conceptual art. “The more that artists write about their own work and ideas,” Lippard penned in the prefatory notes to a compilation of her critical essays in 1971, “the livelier the dialogue between artist and critic, work and words, is likely to become.” Someone like Mel Bochner saw the situation as black-and-white, even though linguistic-based ideas would soon be marketable. “Whatever art is,” Bochner wrote, “it is, and criticism, which is language, is something different.” And LeWitt, progenitor of Conceptual art, remained pragmatic. “The only reason that I did any writing,” he told Paul Cummings in 1974, “is really the fact that the critics had not understood things very well. They were writing about Minimal Art, but no one defined it. . . . People refer to me as a Minimal artist but no one had ever defined what it meant or put any limits to where it begins or ends, what it is and isn’t.”

Judd, together with LeWitt and Morris, set the tenor of Minimal art through copious reviews, notes, statements, and, in due course, a series of diagrammatic objects fabricated by others from anodized aluminum, stainless steel, polished brass, metallic paints, fluorescent Plexiglas, and honey-lacquered finishes. In his “Specific Objects” piece (written in 1964, published in 1965), Judd advocates for threedimensional work that toggles between painting and sculpture—objects that negate formal categories, a uniform “movement, school, or style.” “The use of three dimensions,” he proposed, “opens to anything.” If Morris’s four-part “Notes” (1966–69) argued for sculpture as a medium in flux (materially and phenomenologically), and LeWitt’s “Paragraphs” and “Sentences” (1967, 1969) sowed an open field for conceptually based, diagrammatic objects, Judd’s steady stream of statements reflects someone who stuck to his aesthetic guns, even when it meant taking others to task. Which is ultimately what he did in his “Complaints” column. Lamenting the deplorable state of art criticism, he took aim at Jack Burnham, Fried, Greenberg, Max Kozloff, Hilton Kramer, Rosalind Krauss, Philip Leider, Rose, and Sandler. By 1969, as far as Judd was concerned, most critics were suspect, decidedly those who still shared Greenberg’s formalist bent. Anyone who viewed creativity as a closed rather than an open system, whose approach to art and art history appeared too determin-
istic, or who deferred to groups rather than individuals for determining the pulse of contemporary art was either misguided or just plain wrong. It was time to name names, rectify earlier judgments, and set the record straight. That sculpture had the “power of actual materials, actual color and actual space,” above and beyond painting, gave Judd’s diatribes a distinct focus.58

For a younger generation, Judd posed a formidable figure. “Most sculptors of my generation,” Serra recalled in a heartfelt tribute, “spoke openly of their admiration for Judd’s work. We all acknowledged his importance by either coming up against him, going around him, or using his work in ways he could not have imagined or intended. Most of us treated him with respectful disrespect.”59 Serra’s “us” refers to friends and acquaintances like Eva Hesse, Nauman, Michael Heizer, Smithson, Tuttle, Warhol, and Artschwager, each of whom acknowledged Judd’s Euclidean “box,” the gestalt of a “specific object,” only to subvert and transpose it according to their own imaginations. There were others, as well, on both coasts and in Europe, who violated strict geometry with material gesture, a cohort of post-Minimal sculptors whose eccentric objects were sought out and discussed by Lippard, Marcia Tucker and James Monte, and Germano Celant.60 Serra, for one, never considered what Judd did as “an end in itself, a mere visual representation of theoretical propositions, intentions, or concepts.” The work remained open for him. “His empiricist prescriptions exclude too much, leave too many questions unanswered,” he wrote.61 This was particularly true of the monumental steel, concrete, and plywood units that eventually occupied Judd’s Marfa, Texas, barracks, which Serra saw as portals to an “expanded field” for sculptural ideas to thrive in.62

MACHINE IN THE GARDEN

Between 1966 and 1969 Smithson and his wife, Nancy Holt, organized a series of “site selection trips” with friends to various locations in New Jersey: Upper Montclair Quarry with Judd and his wife, Julie (spring 1966); Great Notch Quarry (near Paterson) with Morris (December 1966); the Pine Barrens and Atlantic City with Morris, Virginia Dwan, and Andre (April 1967); and Passaic with Claes and Patty Oldenburg and Allan and Vaughan Kaprow and their kids (January 1968). There were other trips, too, to Franklin mineral dumps, Bayonne, Little Falls–Cedar Grove, and Edgewater, most documented by Holt with an Instamatic camera.63 Smithson’s first trip to Passaic, a solo effort, netted twenty-four snapshots—of smokestacks, slag heaps, piled objects, bridges, and sandpits—some of which were used to illustrate his published account “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey.”64 Shortly after the piece appeared in Artforum, Smithson retraced his steps, this time with Holt and two sympathetic artists in tow.

Like a Happening, the second Passaic Tour rolled out as a loosely scripted event—participants traipsing through a postindustrial landscape with guides.
Smithson's association with Kaprow and Oldenburg at this juncture, as he was formulating his own ideas around Site/Non-Site, would have confirmed his own instincts about an impure art without boundaries. Happenings could take place anywhere: at someone's chicken farm, on a college campus, or even on the Brooklyn Bridge. Likewise, each Tour claimed its own terrain and set its own pace. Transient and peripatetic, both challenged what art (and by extension sculpture) had been, where it got made, how it got displayed, and the role of the spectator. The matter obviously appealed to Smithson and Kaprow, because it inspired a dialogue about the museum's relevance for an ephemeral art conceived in the environment. “I should like to pursue the question of the environment of the work of art,” Kaprow stated up front; “what kind of work is being done now; where it is best displayed, apart from the museum, or its miniature counterpart, the gallery.” Both realized that Happenings and Tours were antithetical to the museum's mandate to classify, categorize, and preserve. A graphite drawing by Smithson made around this time, Museum of the Void, illustrates the moribund trajectory of august institutions, what he and Kaprow referred to as “tombs” and “mausolea.” With wry humor, Kaprow nailed the quandary. “'Life' in a museum is like making love in a cemetery,” he said, before offering a prophetic alternative: “I wonder if there isn’t an alternative on the fringes of life and art, in that marginal or penumbral zone which you’ve spoken so eloquently of, at the edges of cities, along vast highways with their outcroppings of supermarkets and shopping centers, endless lumberyards, discount houses, whether that isn’t the world that’s for you at least.”

The rules of the art game changed significantly after Smithson returned from a trip out west with Holt and Heizer during the summer of 1968 and wrote “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects.” “The earth’s surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art” was his opening salvo for land projects spawned from “abstract geology.” That Smithson and Heizer gravitated to the earth’s geological fabric as the matrix for human existence during the late 1960s, as the death toll in Vietnam escalated, civil rights riots erupted in Los Angeles and Newark, and “whole earth” ecologies mobilized tribes of hippie youth in off-the-grid communes, isn’t surprising. To even the most benign survivalist, reconnecting with nature using “dumb tools” like shovels and pickaxes, and, when a project required it, construction machinery, was a promising alternative. But Smithson was no utopian dreamer, though he did possess a dreamer’s cosmic perspective, where everything is relative and nothing is stable, including language. “Look at any word [Smithson’s italics] long enough,” he wrote, “and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.” An autodidact of profound sophistication, Smithson surmised that most aesthetic propositions, his own Earthworks included, were riddled with uncertainty. Entropy dismantles “ideal systems.” Death levels “technological miracles.”

Smithson’s environmental consciousness, shared by Holt, Heizer, Walter De Maria, and Turrell, is metaphorically linked to earlier epiphanic road journeys taken...
by Beats and fellow travelers. Jack Kerouac went “on the road” during the late 1940s to find America’s soul, something Henry Miller, likewise, had done to write The Air-Conditioned Nightmare, 1945, a more sobering portrait of postwar America. Tony Smith’s nocturnal cruise during the early 1950s on an unfinished section of the New Jersey Turnpike, with “no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings . . . rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights,” now seems like a quixotic voyage to some uncharted realm beyond the studio. Kerouac’s cross-country pilgrimage and Smith’s night drive correspond to a tumultuous time in American history, as mechanization took command, as preparations for “total war” and “mass retaliation” against an evil foe (Communism) coexisted with the feverish construction of suburbs, shopping malls, interstate highways, and expanding horizons of television—some of the same cultural signposts Kaprow mentioned to Smithson.

One of the many boons of postwar technology, the highway symbolized mobility and freedom. It also signified one’s ticket out of the studio. It beckoned Smithson’s departure from the Port Authority building on September 30, 1967, when he boarded the bus to Passaic with a copy of Brian W. Aldiss’s Earthworks in hand, and it figures prominently, shot from inside a moving vehicle, in multiple frames of the Spiral Jetty Film, as well as in Holt’s films Mono Lake, 1968/2004, and Pine Barrens, 1975. Highways and byways led Smithson, Holt, Heizer, De Maria, and Turrell to remote locations (in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah) and accommodated the machinery necessary to move earth and boulders, drive stainless steel poles, orient four concrete tunnels, excavate a crater, and construct a pharaonic city complex. The difference between driving and walking, particularly when it comes to how artists interact with the natural environment, can be extreme. A compact driftwood circle assembled in Alaska by Richard Long (1977), an Andy Goldsworthy Ice Piece (January 1987), a body silhouette fashioned from mud by Ana Mendieta in a wildlife preserve in Iowa (1979), a random arrangement of painted aluminum rods planted among riverbed reeds in Connecticut by Maya Lin (Aligning Reeds, 1985), and three saplings lovingly intertwined by Giuseppe Penone (Tre alberti intrecciati, 1968) are all unobtrusive interventions when compared to Smithson’s Asphalt Rundown, 1969, Heizer’s Double Negative, 1969–70, Holt’s Sun Tunnels, 1973–76, and De Maria’s Lightning Field, 1977. Still, even the most monumental Earthwork, if left unattended, eventually disappears.

Since the end of World War II, the dance between art and technology remains fraught. Most artists, given the opportunity, will take what they need from any viable source. Technology’s products and platforms—industrial, electronic, cybernetic, digital—are no exception, but what if the transaction has Faustian overtones? K. G. Pontus Hultén sensed the expanding shadow side of technology when he organized The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age at MoMA in 1968, a year before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. An attempt to illustrate the history of the machine through the ages, Hultén’s exhibition, in retrospect, feels like a clarion warning, summed up in a passage from his introduction:
By the year 2000, technology will undoubtedly have made such advances that our environment will be as different from that of today as our present world differs from ancient Egypt. What role will art play in this change? Human life shares with art the qualities of being a unique, continuous, and unrepeatable experience. Clearly if we believe in either life or art, we must assume complete domination over machines, subject them to our will, and direct them so that they may serve life in the most efficient way—taking as our criterion the totality of human life on this planet.75

More than twenty years have passed since Hultén’s curatorial prognosis, and art’s role in the “technium” remains vexed.76 What if the machine in the garden is actually the machine of civilization—the relentless progression of technological progress with all of technocracy’s discontents? What if technology, as some have observed, operates according to its own deterministic biases, constantly optimizing what it wants, eliminating what’s inessential, and, in the process, altering the course of culture?77 Smithson called out industry’s myopic obsession with perfection in 1968, by way of describing the empirical properties of steel versus rust: “In the technological mind rust evokes fear of disuse, inactivity, entropy, and ruin. Why steel is valued over rust is a technological value, not an artistic one.”78 Disuse, inactivity, and ruin have enormous artistic potential when it comes to postindustrial sites like mines, quarries, dumps, and landfills. Canadian philosopher and theorist Marshall McLuhan proselytized for mass media while scrutinizing its psychic, social, and environmental impact. “Each new technology,” he wrote in the introduction to Understanding Media, “creates an environment that is itself regarded as corrupt and degrading. Yet the new one turns its predecessor into an art form.”79 Smithson’s Spiral Jetty still exists near an old mining region; Holt’s Sky Mound, were it ever to be realized, would transform a landfill dump; and Goldsworthy’s Hanging Stones reclaims a dilapidated farm. Reclamation is one ostensible way to stem the tide of technological exploitation—which explains why a cohort of concerned individuals, Agnes Denes, Mel Chin, Harriet Feigenbaum, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and others have undertaken related ecological projects since the late 1960s. The spirit of reclamation is redemptive. It’s also purposeful, engaged, and, when necessary, activist.

SCULPTURAL CONSCIENCE

During a symposium at the Drawing Center in 1992, Felix Gonzalez-Torres addressed head-on the problem of divisions of cultural labor. The optics surrounding labor bring us back to Leonardo, who demeaned Michelangelo as a lowly carver of stone, and forward to David Smith and Richard Serra, both of whom identified with the factory laborer and deployed industrial modes of production. But on this occasion, with the culture wars raging, it was the artist’s responsibility as a would-be activist that