

Conceptual art manifests itself in publications by Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham, and Lawrence Weiner, while Seth Siegelau organizes its first exhibitions.

Conceptual art emerged from the confluence of two major legacies of modernism, one embodied in the readymade, the other in geometric abstraction. Through the practices of Fluxus and the Pop artists, the first legacy was transmitted to younger postwar artists; through the works of Frank Stella and the Minimalists, a similar bridge was formed between prewar abstraction and conceptual approaches at the end of the sixties.

At the beginning of the decade, prior to the organized onset of Conceptual art in 1968, the fusion of Fluxus and Pop had led to works such as Robert Morris's *Card File* (1962) and Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* [1], in which certain positions that would subsequently determine Conceptual art were firmly established: in Ruscha's work this meant an emphasis on photography and the form of distribution of the printed book; in Morris's, it entailed a focus on a revised, linguistic definition of modernist self-reflexiveness—or art asserting its own autonomy through strategies of self-reference—which Morris pushed to the point of undermining the very possibility of aesthetic autonomy.

Both Morris and Ruscha are, in turn, indebted to the way Duchamp's readymade had yielded a more complex model of practice in the hands of Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. These two were also central to the subsequent unfolding of photographic and textual strategies as they were being put in place in the mid-sixties by the first "official" generation of Conceptual artists, namely Lawrence Weiner (born 1940), Joseph Kosuth (born 1945), Robert Barry (born 1936), and Douglas Huebler (1924–77). These artists formed the group that was shown in 1968 in New York by the art dealer Seth Siegelau (born 1941).

The second element that contributed significantly to the formation of a Conceptual aesthetic was Minimalist abstraction as embodied in the work of Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, and Donald Judd. In his manifesto-like essay "Art After Philosophy" (1969), Joseph Kosuth acknowledged all of these as predecessors in the development of the Conceptual aesthetic. What is at stake in this aesthetic is a critique of the modernist notion of visibility (or "opticality"), here defined as a separate, autonomous sphere



1 • Ed Ruscha, from *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, 1962
Artist's photobook

▲ 1960, 1965a, 1964b

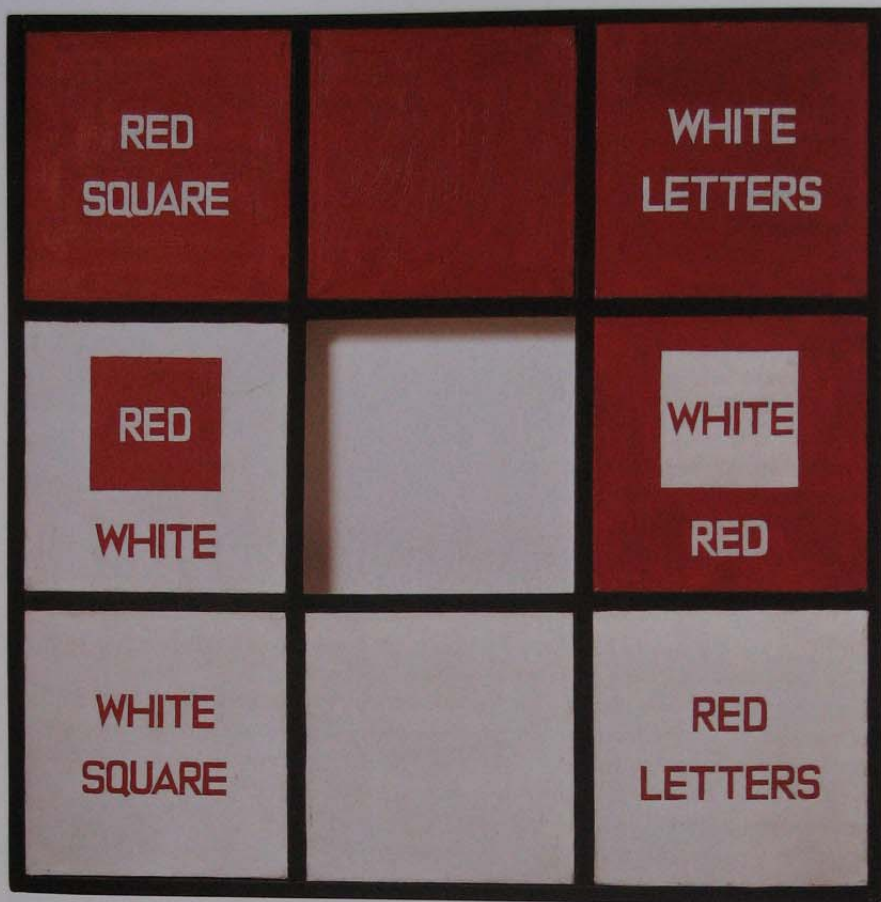
● 1968

■ 1965

▲ 1914

● 1958, 1964b

■ 1957b, 1958, 1965



2 • Sol LeWitt, *Red Square, White Letters*, 1963
Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 91.4 (36 x 36)

- ▲ of aesthetic experience. What is further at issue is the question of the problematic uniqueness of the art object as well as the new mode of distribution (the book, the poster, the journal) and the “spatiality” of that object—namely, the pictorial rectangle or the sculptural solid (despite Minimalism’s embrace of industrial production and technological reproduction, Minimalist work had ultimately remained wedded to the singular object).

Developing the critique

If visibility, physical concreteness, and aesthetic autonomy are some of the modernist aspects that Conceptual art began to critique from within, this critique had already manifested itself as early as 1963 in work such as Sol LeWitt’s *Red Square, White Letters* [2]. As a result of the extreme reductivism of late-modernist painting and sculpture in its drive to secure its autonomy through self-definition, it became a relatively plausible step to challenge visual and formal self-reflexiveness through a strategy of producing literal, which is to say linguistic, “definitions.” And if the idea of definition

as a basis for art practice started to enter the work of future Conceptual artists by 1965, the model of definition transmitted to them by the example of Sol LeWitt was clearly what one would call a *performative model*. This is because, in replacing the visual structure of the work by the color- and shape-names of its visual units (“White Square” printed on a white square; “Red Letters” printed in red on a white square, and so on), LeWitt transforms the work’s spectator into a reader: in the act of pronouncing the information inscribed on the canvas, the viewing relationship becomes a performative reader relationship. This in turn parallels the transformation of the visual object—as autonomous—into an understanding of that object as highly contingent, depending as it does on the context of its particular engagement with its receiver.

- ▲ of the readymade that had been overlooked in the history of Duchamp’s reception in the postwar period was that it already contained a performative, linguistic dimension—a work of art can be “created” merely by naming it so—which could open in turn onto what one could call the administrative or legalistic definition

▲ 1960b, 1993a • 1965

▲ 1914

of the work. Specifically, Morris's *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal* [3] canceled the artistic value of his slightly earlier work *Litanies* (also 1963)—because, as the notarized document contained in *Statement* attests, the collector of *Litanies* did not pay for it—thereby, in effect, voiding its “name.” This legalistic or administrative system of conventions within which meaning is (temporarily) fixed is one strategy that was then adopted by Conceptual art to displace the ontological or “intrinsic” definition of the work of art.

In the way such conventions are obviously external to the idea of the work as self-contained and autonomous, they participate in what could be called an “aesthetic of the supplement.” And it is this notion of supplement that operates in other ways in those works, such as Morris's *Card File* or his *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), that forms the immediate prehistory of Conceptual art. There, Morris's strategy is to point toward those features that so exceed the containment and the relative autonomy demanded by the modernist paradigm that it begins to break down in the face of this experience of excess. Thus in *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* the traditional sculptural cube (the classic correspondent to the traditional pictorial square) is presented, but—with the taped sounds of the process of its own production emanating from within it—this seemingly “pure” form is shown to be a hybrid of supplements of history, memory, texture, sound, and technology of fabrication that led to this supposedly self-contained object.

In *Card File* [4], which consists entirely of a box of cards carrying notations of the production of the object itself (hence the self-referential stance), the supplement system appears through the written record of all the chance encounters that entered the process of production and opened it up to an economic, social, biographical, historical system that, in all its randomness and even in its triviality—related to Fluxus and Pop aesthetics—is not extrinsic to the aesthetic object but indeed *necessary* to it. In this, the resultant work is unimportant compared with the complexity with which its process of making intertwines with a variety of “external” structures. And it is the emphasis on these structures that one would call an aesthetic of the supplement. (A wonderful instance in *Card File* is the reference to Morris's chance meeting—on the way to purchase the file itself—with Ad Reinhardt who, as a key representative of the type of self-referential, late-modernist aesthetic to which Morris is saying farewell, is folded into the work as an “insider” who enters the object from outside to distance the “inside” from itself.)

With the first exhibitions organized in 1968 by Seth Siegelaub, who acted as both critic and manager of the Conceptual aesthetic, several additional aspects became evident that were to have a great impact on the definition of Conceptual art. One of these was the way Siegelaub's strategies made the supplement yield a shock value that produced the strange paradox of a simultaneous withdrawal from the field of the visual and a staging of that withdrawal as a form of spectacle. Saying “We show in an office space; we don't need a gallery. We show printed matter. We show work that is

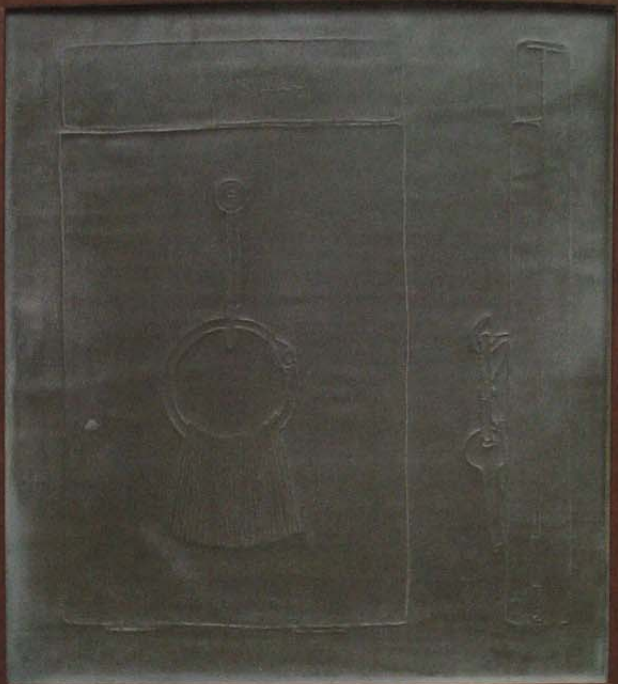
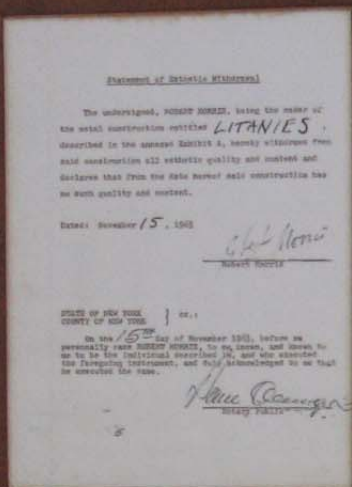
Artists' journals

The success of the Dada and Surrealist journals in forging an international audience and a far-flung network for artistic practice was not lost on New York artists who had also seen the prestige and publicity generated by Alfred Stieglitz's magazines *291* and *Camera Work*. In 1947, the year Peggy Guggenheim closed her “Art of This Century Gallery,” artists emerging with New York exhibitions at Samuel Kootz Gallery, Charles Egan Gallery and Betty Parsons Gallery felt the need to consolidate a movement using journals as its platform. Accordingly, *The Tiger's Eye* and *Possibilities* were founded as the support for the group practice of Abstract Expressionism. *Possibilities* had only one issue (Winter 1947–8) with statements in it by Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. *The Tiger's Eye* was somewhat longer-lived, with Barnett Newman writing and editing for it.

With the Surrealists Tanguy, Matta, Ernst, and Man Ray in New York in the early forties, it was not surprising that two journals devoted to the movement would be founded: *View* and *VVV*. In April and May 1942, *VVV* published special issues devoted to Ernst and Tanguy, while the first issue of *View* in 1945 was devoted to Marcel Duchamp, who designed its cover; extracts of André Breton's essay “Lighthouse of the Bride,” were included. *VVV* and *View* were vehicles for the Abstract Expressionists to voice their concern with subject matter and to wonder whether it would be possible to forge new structures of myth based on American Indian narratives. In 1944, Pollock wrote: “I have always been very impressed with the plastic qualities of American Indian art.” Barnett Newman joined him and organized an exhibition of Northwest Coast Indian painting at the Betty Parsons Gallery.

By the late sixties the evolving practice of Conceptual art was focusing on print as the support for its work, with books and magazines as mass-circulation, inexpensive supports for the publication of material centered on photography's own logic of the multiple. Not only were Ed Ruscha's books (*34 Parking Lots*, *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, *Various Small Fires*) the reasonable outcome of this new conviction, but the publication of manifesto-like essays in established art journals formed part of the Conceptualists' activities. Joseph Kosuth's “Art After Philosophy” was a three-part statement of the way art was being refocused by a new set of issues, published in *Studio International* (1969). It was thus a next step for Kosuth to found the movement's own journal, *The Fox* in 1975, as well as becoming the American editor of *Art-Language* (1969).

The centrality of photographic documentation as evidence of the existence of geographically remote Earthworks led to the frequent publication of artist statements and essays in magazines such as *Artforum*. Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria were all published there, as were the Minimalists Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Donald Judd. This in turn encouraged the development of a journal devoted to Earthwork art, *Avalanche*, edited by Willoughby Sharp and Lisa Bear from 1970. In addition to its interviews with Earthwork artists, *Avalanche* also introduced Joseph Beuys to Anglophone readers.



3 • Robert Morris, *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal*, 1963

Typed and notarized statement on paper, sheet of lead over wood, mounted in imitation leather mat, 45 x 60.5 (18 x 24)

ephemeral, that is only temporally defined, that is textually based and does not need an actual material institution," Siegelaunder scored the historical obsolescence of the visual work in favor of a mass-cultural, reproduced object; but in doing so, he produced the kind of impact on art audiences that one associates with the most effective kind of advertising. Thus the first few exhibitions of the Siegelau Gallery repeated what had already appeared in the mid-[▲] to late fifties in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Yves Klein, in which the gesture toward the supplement also came across, paradoxically, as a "spectacular" withdrawal from visibility and from traditional concepts of artistic production.

Strategies and *Statements*

When Siegelau published Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* in 1968, a broad spectrum of strategies had thus been put into play. And clearly one of these strategies was the focus on the distribution form as it had been laid out by Ruscha. For in resisting a merely painterly engagement with technical reproduction, such as Warhol's, where the outcome turned out to be no different from

previous forms of art, Ruscha was demanding that the product itself partake in the technologies of reproduction. He thereby shifted from Warhol's "Campbell's Soup" paintings to his own photographic books in which the photograph defines the distribution form rather than merely redefining the pictorial structure (as in Warhol) to resuscitate it, paradoxically, from within.

Weiner's book *Statements* carries the idea of distribution even further. Broken down into two halves—the first including works that are in "the public freehold domain" (that is, never able to become private property), which Weiner called "General Works," and the second including those he called "Specific Works"—everything in *Statements* is guided by a tripartite formula in which Weiner pronounces: (a) the artist may construct the piece; (b) the piece may be fabricated; (c) the piece may not be produced at all. In doing so, he indicates that it is the condition of receivership that controls and ultimately determines the material status of the work of art, thereby completely reversing the traditional hierarchy of artistic production. For Weiner, "the owner [receiver] of the work contributes to what the material status of the work will be to the very same extent as its producer."

▲ 1953, 1960a

Deskilling

The term deskilling was first used in Ian Burn's essay, "The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (Or the Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)" in *Art & Text* in 1981. It is a concept of considerable importance in describing numerous artistic endeavors throughout the twentieth century with relative precision. All of these are linked by their persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation. Deskilling appears for the first time in the late nineteenth century in the work of the Impressionists and of Georges Seurat, when the traditional emphasis on virtuoso draftsmanship and painterly finish was displaced by a breakdown of the application of pigment into visibly separate brush-strokes, displacing the smooth surfaces of academic painting with the marks of manual labor in an almost mechanically executed and serially deployed arrangement of pigment. Deskilling first climaxed in the context of Cubist collage, as found cut-paper elements displaced both painterly execution and the function of drawing altogether, substituting the "merely" found tonalities and found graphic schemes that the cut papers took on. The second major moment—perhaps the high point of such a critique of virtuosity and manual skill—came in the immediate wake of Cubist collage with the assumption of the readymade. With this declaration of the found, industrial object from which all artisanal (manual) process has been banished as the work of art, the creative production of the serialized, mechanical object took the place of the exceptional work crafted by the gifted virtuoso.

Here, then, is a logical expansion of the initial collaborative or contingency model that had been introduced in the postwar reception of Duchamp that began with Johns and extended through Morris to LeWitt. For *Statements* emphasizes that neither collaboration, nor industrial production, nor the elimination of authorial originality alone are sufficient to define the condition of contextuality within which the work of art functions. The fact that from *Statements* onward Weiner's work became exclusively language-based corresponds, precisely, to that complex definition inasmuch as the reading of the work, its presentation on the printed page, and its distribution in book form all point to the multiplicity of performative options that the work can assume. All of the work in *Statements* maintains the possibility of a material, sculptural definition [5]; all of it could in fact be executed by anyone who cared to: yet all of it retains its full definition as "art" even if it does not acquire a material form. A typical example is a piece such as "A 36 inch \times 36 inch square removal from a wall," which was in fact installed in the exhibition \blacktriangle "When Attitudes Become Form." In this work the transition in Weiner's own history—he had started out as a painter/sculptor—is rewritten as the move from Minimalist and modernist self-reflexive and highly reductive visual practices to the linguistic transcription of such practices. For the square as the quintessential topos of



4 • Robert Morris, *Card File*, 1962

Metal and plastic wall file mounted on wood, containing forty-four index cards.
86 1/2 \times 25.5 \times 5 (27 \times 10 1/8 \times 2)

\blacktriangle 1969

1960–1969



5 • Lawrence Weiner, *a square removal from a rug in use*, 1969
Installation in Cologne, West Germany, dimensions unknown

modernist self-reflection is still in play but now it is literally “inscribed,” or written. It is thus linked with the quintessentially antimodernist strategy of visual withdrawal. Inasmuch as the “statement” ties the form to the wall that constitutes its frame, it denies the possibility of a separate visual entity by integrating it into the display surface as much as into the institutional support structure. That paradox, in which the quintessence of visual self-reflexivity is embedded within the contingency and the contextuality of these supports, is a classic conceptual strategy in Weiner’s *Statements*.

Another major strand in Conceptual art was photoconceptualism, ▲ developed by figures such as Douglas Huebler, also a member of the Siegelau group, Dan Graham (born 1942), and John Baldessari (born 1931). These artists introduced models of photographic practice that once again performed a peculiar fusion of Minimalist, late-modernist, and Pop art strategies manifestly derived from a more complex understanding of the implications for photography of Duchamp’s readymade. Insofar as Graham’s photographs, starting in 1965, focused on the peculiar echoes of modernity in its most debased forms of vernacular architecture—suburban housing developments—the readymade can be seen to be operative. In a work such as *Homes for America* [6], produced in several parts in 1966–7, Graham recognized the coding system of Minimalist sculpture—simple geometries arranged through serial repetition—in the found structures of vernacular architecture in New Jersey and elsewhere. That was the first subject of his photographic inquiry, but at the same time he also introduced an approach to photography that was then to be dominant in both Huebler’s and Baldessari’s use of the medium.

▲ 1964a

This is what one could call the extreme forms of “deskilling” photography that supplanted both the tradition of American documentary and that of American and European fine arts photography. Photography in the hands of these artists—post-Warhol and post-Ruscha—becomes a mere randomly accumulated set of indexical traces of images, objects, contexts, behaviors, or interactions in an attempt to make the complexity of both the architectural dimensions of public space and the social dimensions of individual interaction the subject matter of conceptual approaches. The third figure to be mentioned in this context, in dialogue with those figures mentioned above as photoconceptualists (although clearly positioning himself ▲ outside of their immediate circle), is Hans Haacke, who also deployed systems of photographic records in a deskilled production as an integral element for a “documentary” approach. In the work of these artists, documentation certainly claims no continuity with the ● documentary traditions of, say, FSA photography.

Joseph Kosuth deduced his own theory of Conceptual art from a dogmatic synthesis of the various, and contradictory, strands of modernism, ranging from Duchamp to Reinhardt (for Kosuth, Duchamp’s readymades were the “beginning of ‘modern’ art” because they changed the nature of art “from ‘appearance’ to ‘con-



6 • Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, “Split Level” and “Ground Level,”
“Two Home Homes,” 1966

Two photographs, 25.5 x 17.5 (10 x 17)

▲ 1971, 1972b

● 1936



7 • Joseph Kosuth, *The Second Investigation*, 1969–74
Installation view



THIS IS NOT TO BE LOOKED AT.

8 • John Baldessari, *This Is Not To Be Looked At*, 1968
Acrylic and photoemulsion on canvas, 149.9 x 114.3 (59 x 45)

ception”)). In *One and Three Chairs* (1965), he extended the ready-made by breaking it into a tripartite set of relations—object, linguistic sign, and photographic reproduction—and in works such as *The Second Investigation* [7] he put into practice his assertion, as expressed in “Art After Philosophy,” that the work of art is a “proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art.” Influenced by linguistic models, the laws of mathematics, and the principles of logical positivism, Kosuth defined his project—“and, by extension, other artists’”—as an “inquiry into the foundations of the concept ‘art,’ as it has come to mean.” And yet, while valid for his own investigations, such a rigorously analytical approach was hardly applicable to any of the other practices emerging at that time. One artist who was explicitly excommunicated from Kosuth’s late-modernist doxa was John Baldessari. Instead of turning Duchamp into doctrine, as Kosuth had done, Baldessari took his subversive legacies and applied them to the false orthodoxies with which Conceptualism was about to install itself as the new authoritative movement. Baldessari’s work anticipated these new art-world pieties early on: he annihilated them with an antiartistic humor in both his paintings and his books [8].

FURTHER READING

- Alexander Alberro**, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001)
Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell (eds), *Recording Conceptual Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000)
Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October*, no. 55, Summer 1995, reprinted in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001)
Michael Newman and Jon Bird (eds), *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001)
Peter Osborne (ed.), *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002)
Blake Stimson and Alexander Alberro (eds), *Conceptual Art: An Anthology of Critical Writings and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000)

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with 637 illustrations,
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modernism antimodernism postmodernism

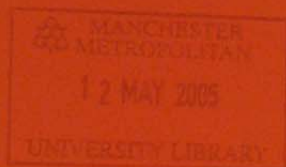


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To Nikos Stangos (1936–2004), in memoriam

With love, admiration, and grief, we dedicate this book to Nikos Stangos, great editor, poet, and friend, whose belief in this project both instigated and sustained it through the course of its development.

We would like to thank Thomas Neurath and Peter Warner for their patient support, and Nikos Stangos and Andrew Brown for their editorial expertise. The book would not have been begun without Nikos; it would not have been completed without Andrew.



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1960–1969

- 434 **1960a** Critic Pierre Restany organizes a group of diverse artists in Paris to form *Nouveau Réalisme*, redefining the paradigms of collage, the ready-made, and the monochrome.
box • The neo-avant-garde
- 439 **1960b** Clement Greenberg publishes "Modernist Painting": his criticism reorients itself and in its new guise shapes the debates of the sixties.
box • Leo Steinberg: the flatbed picture plane
- 445 **1960c** Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol start to use cartoons and advertisements as sources for paintings, followed by James Rosenquist, Ed Ruscha, and others: American Pop art is born.
- 450 **1961** In December, Claes Oldenburg opens *The Store* in New York's East Village, an "environment" that mimicked the setting of surrounding cheap shops and from which all the items were for sale; throughout the winter and the following spring, ten different "happenings" would be performed by Oldenburg's Ray Gun Theater in *The Store* locale.
- 456 **1962a** In Wiesbaden, West Germany, George Maciunas organizes the first of a series of international events that mark the formation of the Fluxus movement.
- 464 **1962b** In Vienna, a group of artists including Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, and Hermann Nitsch come together to form Viennese Actionism.
- 470 **1962c** Spurred by the publication of *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922* by Camilla Gray, Western interest revives in the Constructivist principles of Vladimir Tatlin and Aleksandr Rodchenko, which are elaborated in different ways by younger artists such as Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and others.
box • *Artforum*
- 475 **1963** After publishing two manifestos with the painter Eugen Schönebeck, Georg Baselitz exhibits *Die Grosse Nacht im Eimer* (Great Night Down the Drain) in Berlin.
- 480 **1964a** On July 20, the twentieth anniversary of the failed Stauffenberg coup against Hitler, Joseph Beuys publishes his fictitious autobiography and generates an outbreak of public violence at the "Festival of New Art" in Aachen, West Germany.
- 486 **1964b** *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* by Andy Warhol is installed, momentarily, on the facade of the State Pavilion at the World's Fair in New York.
- 492 **1965** Donald Judd publishes "Specific Objects": Minimalism receives its theorization at the hands of its major practitioners, Judd and Robert Morris.
box • Maurice Merleau-Ponty
- 496 **1966a** Marcel Duchamp completes his installation *Etant Donnés* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art: his mounting influence on younger artists climaxes with the posthumous revelation of this new work.
- 500 **1966b** The exhibition "Eccentric Abstraction" opens in New York: the work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Yayoi Kusama, and others points to an expressive alternative to the sculptural language of Minimalism.
- 505 **1967a** Publishing "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," Robert Smithson marks "entropy" as a generative concept of artistic practice in the late sixties.
- 509 **1967b** The Italian critic Germano Celant mounts the first *Arte Povera* exhibition.
- 515 **1967c** For their first manifestation, the four artists of the French group *BMPT* paint in public, each artist repeating exactly from canvas to canvas a simple configuration of his choice: their form of Conceptualist painting is the latest in a line of attacks against "official" abstraction in postwar France.
- 521 **1968a** Two major museums committed to the most advanced European and American art of the sixties—the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach—exhibit the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, placing them at the forefront of an interest in Conceptual art and photography.
- 527 **1968b** Conceptual art manifests itself in publications by Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham, and Lawrence Weiner, while Seth Siegelaub organizes its first exhibitions.
box • Artists' Journals
box • *Deskilling*
- 534 **1969** The exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" in Bern and London surveys Postminimalist developments, while "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials" in New York focuses on Process art, the three principal aspects of which are elaborated by Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Eva Hesse.

1970–1979

- 540 **1970** Michael Asher installs his *Pomona College Project*: the rise of site-specific work opens up a logical field between modernist sculpture and Conceptual art.
- 545 **1971** The Guggenheim Museum in New York cancels Hans Haacke's show and suppresses Daniel Buren's contribution to the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition: practices of institutional critique encounter the resistance of the Minimalist generation.
box • Michel Foucault
- 549 **1972a** Marcel Broodthaers installs his "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures," in Düsseldorf, West Germany.
- 554 **1972b** The international exhibition "Documenta 5," held in Kassel, West Germany, marks the institutional acceptance of Conceptual art in Europe.