John Cage
Robert Barry
Pat Steir
Steve Reich
Tom Marioni
Hans Haacke
Robert Mangold
Chris Burden
Daniel Buren
Jannis Kounellis

View
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Interviews by Robin White
"Left to itself art would have to be something very simple–it would be sufficient for it to be beautiful. But when it’s useful it should spill out of just being beautiful and move over to other aspects of life so that when we’re not with the art it has nevertheless influenced our actions or our responses."

View
Well, I think I should ask you first of all about the prints and about the experience of making them. Kathan said that you were hesitant about coming out here to do them. Then when you did, you got very excited about it—excited enough to make one series and do another one. Maybe you can speak about what it's been like for you to do this.

It was an adventure with two guides: Stephen Thomas and Lilah Toland—actually three guides—and Kathan. I needed to be told all the possibilities so I could set them into some kind of activity by means of the chance operations. I was reluctant to depend on anything like gesture, though I knew, working on plates, something of gesture would come in.

Do you mean something of personality?

Well, the use of the hand. In this case it was the use of an untrained hand in a technique that is really quite specialized. Because of the obstacle of cutting into the metal all of a sudden the plate turns into an ice skating rink.

How?

You go very quickly over something because you're pushing too hard with an engraving tool or digging too hard in the drypoint. I made quite a number of experiments. Finally, I chose to remove that question of gesture and self-consciousness by not looking at the plate as I made the marks. I used the discipline of making a certain number of marks, chance determined, without looking, and Lilah kept count. When I finished one off I went on to the next. In that way I was able to engage, in the short space of the week, in all those various techniques.

But do you think that it's possible to get away entirely from gesture? If gesture doesn't mean personality, what do you mean by gesture?

Something connected with the knowing aspect of the person, as in a signature—when you sign your name, you just do it by habit. We keep thinking that we have effects upon what
we do, and I was trying to free what I was doing from such effects, from the mind. One of the principles, as I understand it, of Zen Buddhism is what Suzuki called nomindedness, the removal of the mind. Most people don't realize how difficult it is to make modern art—because the mind is so much in control that it keeps people unpoetic and unimaginative. At the time that I met Mark Tobey there was a show involving watercolors in Portland, Oregon, and the public was indignant because it was still in the thirties and they didn't take modern art seriously then. They said that it should not be shown in the museums and that it was no good. So the people in charge of the museum put up blank paper on the opposite wall, divided the show into what the public could do and what the artists had done—and the public quickly learned that they didn't know how to criticize.

For almost fifty years, you've been writing scores, and in that sense making visual things—but in the last, maybe, ten years it seems that you've been doing a lot more things entirely visually.

It's curious because when I was very young, and before I decided to devote myself to composing, I was also painting pictures. I did both music and painting for, I think, three years before I decided to give up painting and devote my life to music. I used to give lectures on both modern music and modern painting—that was during the depression in the thirties in Santa Monica. I sold ten lectures for $2.50. I was the salesman myself—I went from house to house and I explained to the housewives that I didn't know anything about either subject but that I was enthusiastic about both of them. And I promised to learn, faithfully, enough about each subject so as to be able to give a talk an hour long each week. I had an audience of sometimes thirty people—it was a marvelous way to study modern music in my opinion.

Because you had another impetus coming from outside.

I had a deadline.

That's the way I feel about interviewing. I would not have known anything, really, about Robert Barry, or very much about you, if I hadn't had to do this. But I'm very enthusiastic, too.

I came out of those lectures on modern music—I came out with a devotion to the painting of Mondrian, on the one hand, and the music of Schoenberg on the other. And it wasn't until I saw the painting, fifteen or twenty years later—I saw the painting of Bob Rauschenberg that I was able again to enjoy representation. I had become so devoted
to rigorous abstraction, something of which one feels again in this austere work of Robert Barry—don't you think?

Yes, that's true. Well, I would think that you two would have certain things in common.

Well, we do and we don't. I find his work very refreshing and beautiful and I've spoken to him about his work. He's interested, he says, in choice and he believes that I'm interested in chance. Most people who believe that I'm interested in chance don't realize that I use chance as a discipline—they think I use it—I don't know—as a way of giving up making choices. But my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask.

And also choosing how to follow the answers you get.

Well, my use of the I Ching in my work is just a mechanism of the chance operation. But I think if you use the I Ching as a book of wisdom, there, too, it's difficult to know how to ask the question.

Very often you can ask a question and then find out that it gives you an answer which makes you aware of another dimension you haven't thought of.

If I ask the I Ching a question as though it were a book of wisdom, which it is, I generally say, "What do you have to say about this?" and then I just listen to what it says and see if some bells ring or not.

So do you use if for...

On occasion when I'm troubled. But I haven't been troubled for quite some time—that is to say, I haven't been so troubled that I felt the need to ask it.

You kind of learn to know your intuitions about things.

Yes. And you could really answer it yourself. I think that might be very pleasing to the I Ching if it were a person.

I think so too. I think that the I Ching functions in a way that you suggest art should function—that we should use art because it's useful to us. It should free you so that you can be opened up to the things that are going on outside you. If you surrender yourself, it can make you aware of what you need to know or what you can know. In the work you compose, can you finally get a kind of coherent sense, or a color, about one piece as opposed to another? Obviously, 4'33" is different from HPSCHD but...
Everything is different—two things even if they're the same. If you take those cassette things—you can see that they're different. They're positioned differently, and the fact that they're positioned differently makes the light fall on them differently. Two identical things, and this was noticed by Duchamp, by other people too: identical things are different. And the more attention we pay to something, the more each thing is unique.

I have a friend who thinks that the fact that something becomes more interesting the more you look at it invalidates art—because obviously if you look at a spoon for long enough it becomes an object of interest and...

It invalidates art, perhaps, but it doesn't invalidate the experience of looking. And the experience of looking can be used aesthetically in situations that don't set out to be art in the first place. That water stain there can be used—not only that but the whole surface. All we have to do is pay attention to anything, it seems to me. Thoreau had this view—he said about music that music is continuous—only listening is intermittent. We could say about painting that art is everywhere; it's only seeing which stops now and then.

That's true.

It's magical what a frame does—and if you put something under glass it improves it.

It's true. Anything, almost anything. Is there anything in music that does the same thing as a frame?

Well, I suppose my silent piece does that. It's just an empty frame.

Is the work that you're composing now similar to things that you've been doing before, or is it more ordinary music?

It's, well, it's for violin, which I don't play, so that, like the work for etchings, it's dealing with something that I don't understand. I need in the case of the violin pieces to receive instruction from the violinist, just as I needed to receive information from Kathan and Stephen and Lilah.

I saw a score for violin based on the positions of the stars and I was so impressed—it seemed like such a logical idea. It's too trite to say it's music of the spheres, but...

It was in 1960 that I began using the star maps, which I'm still using. Stars are points—musical notes are also points, so the only difference is that the musical notes used to
have conventional stems attached to them. But nowadays we make a correspondence between space and time so the stems are no longer necessary and all we need are the stars. So I only use the stems to indicate that some of the stars are to be played at the same instant.

Oh, I see.

In the violin music though, I use stems and beams to connect notes in order to notate legato; then when the notes are not connected by stems it means that they're to be played in a detached fashion. I like to arrange my work in such a way that I make it possible to have some discoveries. First of all for myself, then hopefully for other people.

When did you start working with words? In January you gave a reading at Franklin Furnace and by chance I went.

Well, back in the thirties people found my music unusual and had questions about it, so my writings actually began as responses to people's questions in an attempt to let people know what it was that I was doing. More and more I began doing in writing what I was doing in music, so that I wouldn't answer questions literally but would give instances of how I was working. The "mesostics" on the name of Joyce are something else. They are a form of poetry which I devised that enables me to read all the way through a book that otherwise I would not read through. I find that if I involve myself in some kind of discovery, then I can get through a situation in which I otherwise have difficulty. If I had set out to try to understand Finnegan's Wake, I wouldn't have been so attracted to read it. But if through reading it I make something, which is a discovery, then I'm excited.

I wanted to ask you—since you seem to be interested in social change, to some extent, in politics and economics—were you active at all in the sixties in anything? In civil rights or anti-Vietnam War demonstrations?

No. My activity is anti-institutional. I work best as an individual, not as one sheep in a herd of sheep. I've made lots of statements of a social nature. They're all rather anarchistic. I was recently asked to sign a petition against atomic energy. But I wrote back saying I wouldn't sign it. I wasn't interested in critical or negative action. I'm not interested in objecting to things that are wrong. I'm interested in doing something which seems to be useful to do. I don't think critical action is sufficient.

Even if it...
Even if it's right.

What would be a good thing to do to counter. . .

Well, I think it's good to make etchings, I think it's good to write music, it's good to. . .

So there doesn't have to be a relationship between one thing and another?

I think it's important to do as Fuller does—to further the use of energy sources above ground. Unfortunately, we all—we all think it's so necessary to do what we do, but we continue the use of fossil fuels—even Fuller does. He's obliged, for instance, to drive to the airport and to fly from here to Australia, and the lecture he gives is against the use of the very energies which he has just used. That's the kind of situation we're involved in, and it makes us—what does it make us.

Hypocritical?

Well, we're not hypocritical—it makes us—it's more like helplessness. He's not hypocritical, it's just that he's obliged to do what he doesn't mean to do because of general circumstances. But if Fuller didn't give his talk, no one else would give that talk. So I guess he decides to give it, and to take the airplane that someone else is going to take in any case.

Yes, that's true. So it's more what you can accomplish by doing something.

We're surrounded by things that are hard to understand—health food stores that give you plastic bags to put rice in.

The one we went to the other day was better: paper bags and glass jars. One of the things that came out of the sixties, for me, was a consciousness about re-using things and trying to be more careful about what you throw away, to be more conservative in that sense. Also, you have been reading about—well, I have read that you've become interested in China recently—modern China.

A few years ago I was reading more about it than I am right now. I haven't read anything for some time on it. My impression is that since the death of Mao—well, I don't really know what's going on, but I have a theory that they're doing more or less what everyone else is doing, and that the aspects of power cause change—in other words, all the things that are wrong here will eventually be wrong there.
I wondered if you would be interested to go there?

Oh, I would, yes. Years ago, here in San Francisco during the period of the WPA—the early forties, I worked with children in the Chinese community, in the Italian community and in the black community. I got along best with the Chinese because I'm very permissive and the Chinese are highly organized. What would seem very constraining to us is not at all constraining but is very welcome to the Chinese. They enjoy being—having definitions.

Well, in a sense that's really antithetical to your own thinking. It's the total opposite of anarchy.

On the other hand, once I am with a Chinese or Japanese person, my ideas are very enlivening to them and they to me. We get along beautifully.

I'm interested to know more about—I don't know if you can speak any more about it—but about this idea of art being useful.

Well...

I mean all art—not just your art. Useful in the sense that...

Well, left to itself art would have to be something very simple—it would be sufficient for it to be beautiful. But when it's useful it should spill out of just being beautiful and move over to other aspects of life so that when we're not with the art it has nevertheless influenced our actions or our responses to the environment.

But the environment is so crowded—I mean people are...

Well, that's one of the reasons we need some help with it.

Yes, that's true.

Not only is it crowded but it is sometimes what you might call constipated. We get ourselves into traffic situations either on highways or in supermarkets where, even if we're in a rush, it does us no good, because we have to go at a snail's pace if any pace at all. Not so long ago in New York I was brought to a complete halt because of two trucks, neither one of which would give in to the other. At such points if we have paid attention to modern paintings and to modern music we can shift our attention to the things that surround us—things to hear, things to see.

So then it's an opportunity to slow down and look around.

That's a literal use of art in daily life. Very literal.
I tend to be literal-minded. I would like things to be what they are rather than standing for something that they're not. That's what I feel in Robert Barry's work. That each thing is precisely what it is.

I wanted to ask you about the future—I don't know if you ever think about the future—about the things you will continue to do, and if you're concerned that the things you've done will exist after you don't exist anymore?

I'm afraid they will. I've now done so much work in so many different directions that it would be very hard to—I mean writings, graphic work, and the music. All of that would be hard to get rid of now. Even for me, say I decided I wanted to get rid of it, that would be impossible—there's too much, and now too many copies of it. I'm afraid it's here for a long time. It could go into a decline as a person does who gets ill, but then it might recover.

Yes, everything does. The I Ching was in a decline for several hundred years and it came back.

Generally, if something does go into a decline a kind of sympathetic action takes place in some part of the population, and they take care of it and bring it back.

They resurrect it—exactly.

So that everything is bound to go on.

Does that please you?

I don't think it is a concern that I have. My own concern now is to live as long as I can, to do as much more work as I can, and to let my work that is already finished live, so to speak, its own life.

What do you think about contemporary popular music? I mean, do you think your work has had any kind of influence on it?

I don't know. I think that, finally, each action, whether the idea of doing it comes to the person via somebody else's work or not, each action is finally original even if it's an imitation. Don't you think so?

Yes, in a way.

And if it isn't, the person is very apt to drop the work. I mean it isn't interesting to do something that you don't do yourself.

Right. Well, I don't know, in the art world there are a lot of people who pick up on things that have been made before and change them slightly and present them again.
why doesn't
he stop painting?
somebody
will have
to spend years cataloguing, etc.

The girl checking in the baggage
reduced our overweight to zero
by counting it
on a first-class passenger's ticket, the heaviest handbag
had been hidden unnecessarily.

fortunately, we were with Hanna,
antoinette;
and hanna's two boys.
the girl at the counter
gave one of the boys a carry-on luggage tag as a souvenir.

my strategy:
act as though you're home;
don't ask any questions.

instead of music:
thunder, traffic,
birds, and high-speed military planes producing sonic booms;
now and then a chicken (pontoon).

each thing he saw
he asked us to look at.
by
the time we reached the japanese restaurant
our eyes were open.
Well, they might. Those people are very often in it, not in order to do something, but in order to make money with it. I noticed out at the airport there were a lot of works of art. The art all looked very much like art, say by Rauschenberg or Johns or Stella or Rosenquist but the names were different—they were different artists. I couldn't really believe it. Somehow when the imitation goes that far, I think it has gone too far.

*I think, really, that's about all. Oh, no, I still want to talk more about the frame, about life and...*

I was with De Kooning once in a restaurant and he said, "If I put a frame around these bread crumbs, that isn't art." And what I'm saying is that it is. He was saying that it wasn't, because he connects art with his activity—he connects with himself as an artist whereas I would want art to slip out of us into the world in which we live.

*Well, can you say that art in a way frames life?*

I think that modern art has turned life into art, and now I think it's time for life (by life now I mean such things as government, the social rules and all those things) to turn the environment and everything into art. In other words to take care of it, and to change it from being just a mess into being something which facilitates our living, instead of making us all miserable.

*Do you vote?*

I wouldn't dream of it. I'm looking forward to the time when no one votes. Because then we wouldn't have to have a president. We don't need a president. We can get along perfectly well without the government. What we need is a little intelligence which we don't have at all.

*It requires so much responsibility on the part of the people though.*

But the kind of responsibility that is given the government now is of no use to anyone.

*I agree.*

All the nations do is make trouble for each other,

*And for everybody else. O.K. That's it.* Thank you.
John Cage was born in Los Angeles in 1912. He studied with Richard Buhlig, Henry Cowell, Adolph Weiss and Arnold Schoenberg. He began to compose music while writing poetry and painting, traveling in Europe 1930-31. In 1943 he became musical director of Merce Cunningham's dance company. Also, in that year Cage gave his first concert at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1949 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and an award from the National Academy of Arts and Letters for having extended the boundaries of music through his work with percussion orchestra and his invention of the prepared piano (1938). In 1950 he moved into "chance operations" and began working with the I Ching. In 1951 Cage organized a group of musicians and engineers to make music on magnetic tape. In 1952, at Black Mountain College, he presented a theatrical event considered by many to have been the first Happening, with the collaboration of David Tudor, Mary Caroline Richards, Charles Olson, Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham.

A 25-year retrospective concert of his compositions was presented at Town Hall in 1958. In 1966, the New York Philharmonic commissioned Cage's Variations V, danced by Merce Cunningham and Dance Company at the French-American Festival at Lincoln Center. Variations VII had its premiere during the Nine Evenings sponsored by Experiments in Art and Technology, Inc., in the fall of 1966. Cage was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1966, and has been a Fellow of the Centers for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University and the University of Illinois, and Composer in Residence at the University of Cincinnati. His Song Books (solos for Voice 3-92) was premiered in October, 1970, at the Journees de Musique Contemporaine in Paris.


One of the Praeger Documentary Monographs in Modern Art, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, is devoted to his work. His music is published by the Henmar Press of C. F. Peters Corporation. Recordings are available on Columbia, Nonesuch, Folkways, Everest, Time and other labels.

Two recent works are in observance of the American Bicentennial: Lecture on the Weather (with the assistance of Maryanne Amacher and Luis Frangella), for twelve speaker-vocalists, tape and film, commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (1975), Renga with Apartment House 1776 for orchestra, chamber ensembles, soloists and four voices, commissioned by Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in collaboration with five other American orchestras and the National Endowment for the Arts (1975-76), and Quartets I-VIII for Orchestra (1976), each quartet in three versions so that it can be played by a chamber orchestra or 24, or 41, or by a full orchestra of 93. His most recent work includes The Freeman Etudes, written for violinist Paul Zukofsky.
"I’m talking about art—you know—what its function is in the world, what’s really going on when it’s there. It seems to me that the only thing that the artist does is to create a situation and we all kind of participate in it, like a relationship. And everybody gets out of it whatever they can."
I think we should start at the beginning.
The beginning?
Yes. Some ordinary questions that you've probably been
asked before.
I'd like to know what you think the beginning is.
Well, I think that the beginning is--how did it come about
that you decided to be an artist?
Oh, God!
Well, I thought about the question because this morning
when we were talking about teachers I wondered if you had
run into anyone along the way who really made you...
I think it was pretty natural--I don't think there was a
decision made. The real problem was the pressure to be
something else. But from the very beginning I was always
drawn toward drawing and things like that. As a student
that is what I did best and got the most feedback from.

Where did you study?
I studied at Hunter College and my teachers were people like
Robert Motherwell, Basoites, Richard Lippold. Then I went
into the army. When I got out of the army I went to graduate
school. Ray Parker was my first painting teacher. You ever
heard of Parker?
No.
You know Motherwell?
Oh, the others I know.
Tony Smith was probably the most interesting teacher I had
in graduate school.

When was this?
I think '61--I got my degree in 1963.
You were working on the idea of being a painter.
Not painter--I never thought in terms of painting that much.
The word was always artist. I don't--I think I felt more
at home in sculpture--although I did painting.
We talked a little bit yesterday about the painting--maybe
you could describe it, because probably not very many people
have seen it.

No, actually if you dug back in your Artforums--Gene Goosen
organized a show back--I think--in 1963 which I was in, and
he wrote an article that was published in *Artforum* around 1966 and they reproduced one of my paintings in it. It was two very large squares—I think about 6 foot squares which were put together to make a 12 X 6 inch rectangle.

12 X 6 foot.

12 X 6 foot, I'm sorry. I'm thinking in terms of etching sizes—you know, you go from feet to inches. The canvas stood out about three inches from the wall. It was cotton duck which was sized with very clear sizing so that you could see the cloth. At the two edges of the rectangle there was an orange line which began about 2" from the top edge and went down, stopping 2" above the bottom edge. So what you had was kind of a bar of bright orange which came down and it crept around the side of the canvas but didn't quite reach the wall. I did a whole series of paintings like that. And after that there were other things, like there might be a painted square right up against the ceiling and then directly below it against the floor there would be an identical square. They were arranged in different formations. It was really about framing the space of the wall. Those were the last paintings that I did, really. I did those from '65 through '67.

*I read an article written by Jack Burnham in a 1970 Artforum—*

Oh, that, yes. Barry is not as good as...

*No, he doesn't say that at all—he says you're less object-oriented, you're the most elusive and the most. . . He talked about what seemed to have been a pivotal point when you and Carl Andre and Larry Weiner went to work on a piece at Windham College.*

It wasn't so pivotal. I had already been involved in a spatial idea for quite a while.

*But it was kind of a radical change to go from the medium that you were using, and inside space, to the medium that you then used, and outside space.*

To change the medium?

Yes, and also to go from working inside to outside.

I had done some painting which spanned from corner to corner. There was one painting which was a large square and I just took a magic marker and drew from the corners a big X. That was a very early painting, like '64 or something. So the idea of spanning a space, trying to define the outer limits—somehow bridging that inbetweeness—was something I had been involved with. Going outside and doing it fell right
into line with what I was thinking about at that time. It
wasn't pivotal in terms of thinking--it was only important
in terms of actually doing it.

And did you use nylon, an invisible thread?

It wasn't invisible, it was like that white rope, thin
quarter inch white rope you've seen--shiny. The reason for
that of course was that it reflected whatever was going on.
For instance, in the sunset those white lines became orange.
And they were stretched between two identical buildings,
about a hundred yards apart. They were quite beautiful as
lines. At that time the college was still new and there
was all of this construction going on underneath us; they
were grading this big quadrangle between the two buildings.

So it was stretched across the... 

Yes, it was up from roof to roof, and pulled tight.

So space was really an integral part of the piece, became
woven into the piece. Was that something that had been
true in the paintings too?

Yes, I was dealing with space almost rather than the object
itself. It became more and more clear that they were almost
indistinguishable, I thought. Space became place. And it's
still true in my work--it's taking very basic ideas and
mostly going back to them over and over again.

Also the question of perception comes into play...

Sure, but not just perception in some kind of a scientific
way. I want to deal with a more human way of thinking of
it, that is to say my relationship to other people. Per-
ception is how they absorb the work--how they participate
in it. It has always been a concern of mine because any
work of art is extremely fragile in that its whole being
and future are very dependent upon almost everyone else.
I guess I'm talking about art--you know--what its function
is in the world, what's really going on when it's there.
It seems to me that the only thing that the artist does is
to create a situation and we all kind of participate in it,
like a relationship. And everybody gets out of it whatever
they can. There is, of course, overlapping of ideas and
interpretation. That overlapping is what we might call
communication, but everybody also adds their own dimension
to it.

There are certain intentions in your work which people can
pick up on.

But they're not definable and they're almost--in order to
clarify we'd probably have to sit down and talk a great deal. But that's not usually possible when your work is in an art gallery.

Would that be interesting to do?

Yes, I'm always interested to sit down with someone who really understands my work or has really looked at it very intensely and has specific questions about it. Because that's part of what happens when it's out there. It's created a kind of an energy--some sort of dynamic thing happening, so I like to participate in that if I can. It doesn't always happen.

You have a lot to fight against because there's always so much else that wants to take our attention away. It seems to me that on the one hand you want your pieces to function in the midst of everything else that's going on and then on another level you really want people to perceive this space and have a quiet time with the work.

With the projections you go into a very dark room--really you're in the space of the darkness, not the space of the gallery or the room, which the blackness, the darkness, hides, so you're only focusing on the piece.

It becomes the space of the piece.

Yes, it becomes the space of the piece. I think of the sound pieces as almost the reverse of that, in that you focus on the sound, you can't avoid it, but in focusing on the sound you're also aware of the room or the space around you--it becomes more alive. And in the drawings or the prints--most prints are about the image, while my work is about the print--it's about what a print is, and what images are when they are raised on the paper.

You never made prints before?

No, I had to think about what a print was.

Did you read anything about what a print was?

No. I don't like to read things about it, I just like to think about it. About what the heck goes on when you make a print, what is a print? Because making art is really sort of--it's about doing. It's not really about making things. And the thing must always just be what happens while you're doing something interesting. The art can't be the end--it can only be the residue of your activity. The activity must be what's important.

So, in fact, these prints that you're making for Kathan--the result is that you make an object, but for you it was
ROBERT BARRY, New York

Inert gas series, 1969; Helium (2 cubic feet)

Description: Sometime during the morning of March 5, 1969, 2 cubic feet of Helium will be released into the atmosphere.
the process that was really interesting.

Yes, it was.

When you filled up rooms with invisible things—with AM radio waves, FM radio waves, or with colorless, odorless, tasteless inert gases—things like that, were those pieces also about the process of doing it?

Yes, about defining as experiencing, and about the process, doing. Like for instance, how do you know that I really did them? The thing about the inert gas was that inert is an important word. It doesn't mix with anything else; one could say that a particular body of gas, although expanding and changing, is essentially the same. It's not going to change into something else. It's really permanent—it's the most permanent thing there can be, in a way. But there was also the idea that the gas comes from the atmosphere and what I did was simply to return it, complete the cycle of returning it to the atmosphere.

Letting it escape out of the room.

Letting it escape out of its container—it was always from a measured volume to an indefinite expansion.

Well...

When you have something which isn't perceived, then you're much more aware of what's going on. The object didn't get in the way. You know what I'm saying.

Well, there wasn't any object.

There wasn't any object. The thing didn't get in the way—it simply was what was going on.

Were you trying to convey some kind of information to people?

Yes. But I wasn't trying to teach them anything.

Do you want to talk about the radiation pieces?

Well, we bought some radioactive material and we planted it around in different locations and documented... Like photographing it.

Yes, we would photograph the location.

And the radioactive material was obviously...

Oh, just a little vial of stuff, it wasn't really very powerful stuff. You could buy it—you get it in these scientific supply places where they sell to high school chemistry classes. It was fairly safe stuff. But I kind
of like the idea of half life, zero time—zero time is when the stuff was actually made.

**Was this manufactured stuff?**

It was all manufactured. The time that it's made is its zero time, which means from that point on it starts losing its potency. So on the package you have a zero time, which I thought a great expression. And half life, which means for every half life it loses half of its potential. One half life could be two hundred thousand years or it could be a millionth of a second, depending on the material. It keeps halving, but goes on infinitely.

**Never getting down to zero.**

The idea of the infinity of these things: this gas endlessly expanding in the atmosphere, or the radio waves, or the radiation. You know, even when you turn the thing off it just continues endlessly going out into space. So it's... the only thing which lasts forever is really something which is intangible, that you really can't get your hands on.

**So you're concerned with things lasting.**

Yes, and other things. My work is about the elusiveness of anything, the absurdity of trying to understand or grasp anything which doesn't seem obvious. Well, it's all there until we really try and get hold of it. Like St. Augustine said, I understood what time was until I started to think about it. It's about—the irony of the fact of trying to hold on to something which really can't be held on to—so you don't try to fight that—you simply go with it. Use that aspect of reality, if you will, and accept it and it's really kind of a beautiful thing.

**I understand, and work with it and...**

Work with it, accept it and then just watch it grow. It's describing, that's all—it's about expansion—it's about people adding, not adding what, I don't care what they add. It's just about their adding.

**I understand. I can see, with the word pieces, which are about space and the expansion of space and the expansion of the meanings of words, that your work has a lot to do with communication.**

Now what do you mean by communication?

**Well, I get a feeling that you might say that it's difficult for people to communicate.**

If you begin to understand what's going on when people try
to talk to each other, and you understand the limitations and the possibilities of what can be done—what talking to each other is, really, then I think you might be able to begin to communicate to each other.

But your work doesn't deal with those things.

It's not about communication in terms of me trying to get my ideas across. It deals with words as words, not so much as speech.

We were talking last night about the difficulty of trying to translate pieces because each word has multiple meanings in one language. When you decide to translate that word into another language you have to choose one of the meanings and translate that meaning into another language, and then you will have... .

A specifically defined word, which is not what the piece is about. The words I use are very potent. They're not just something to look at. They carry meaning. They carry a life of their own. They announce themselves—words announce themselves. Just by being a word, it announces itself. I think that's part of its interest.

Words make you think. They engage you on a lot of levels.

They do when you allow a word to be a word. We don't usually allow words to be words. When we encounter one word it's for an advertising sign or something, it's to attract your attention to something else. Mostly we encounter words in reading, which is really kind of subliminal activity. You're focusing on the flow of a thought—the continuation of a thought; actually you're just kind of skimming over the words.

Yes, the words are always in the service of something else.

They're never words as words. The only people that really read words are little children. They read one word at a time, because they haven't learned the societal conventions for reading. Once you've mastered these conventions, you don't even bother to see words. That's what speed reading is about, or shorthand. My point is to allow a word to be itself. It is something. It's a dynamic something, I mean, it has energy and it's suggestive—it has a built in suggestiveness. But there's also this: we encounter words, they exist outside of us, yet they are also something that's generated from us. We're the only creatures that use words.

Well, they're symbols that we've manufactured.

Yes, but different symbols than, say, a square or an object,
a tree or sunset. Objects are something out there that we have to consider, but words come out of us—we don't find them except when people use them. The tree will be there whether anybody uses it or not, but a word won't be there unless somebody has to have it, has to use it.

How do you decide the way that the words are arranged on the paper? For instance, in your books the words are in a list-like form.

That's a first way of dealing with them.

And you have moved to another way of dealing with them, now, where they are placed...

When you're faced with the problem of putting two words down on the surface—I mean how do you do it—there are different ways. I never could just use one word because that, I felt, was too much of an announcement kind of thing—shouting. There was always a number of words. Well, o.k. instead of one word, then, you take 50 words or 10 or whatever, some round figure, and how do you organize them? That's what it's about, it's about organizing and arranging, which I think is basically a spatial problem. And if some are right side up as you read on a page, I might say, well, let's turn some of them upside down. The point is to kind of break out of the standard format a page has presented to us ever since we were little kids writing on those blue lined notebook papers.

So you change the way the words are presented on the page.

And you begin to activate the page also. You begin to activate that space around the word, the meanings as you go from one word to another. For instance, you have the words' oppositeness, or closeness. These words take on a being of their own as they announce each other—they have a—I don't want to say personality—they have something about them—a being or whatever you want to call it, so that they relate to each other in some way.

I've noticed it. When I was first looking at the prints—the ones from the set of six—really, I swear each page gives off a mood. I don't know how you choose your words but there was one print which really seemed to be optimistic and one which seemed to be rather sad. I don't mean to take these moods as some kind of simplistic attitudes, but each of the prints has a life and an emotion of its own which is really, really, impressive to me.

That separate life is what it's about I would say. Because you say, well how were the words chosen? It's not that I am
in a mood when I do something. The words choose themselves once I get started in it. I work clockwise—I go around the page. I kind of like that aspect of going around the edge, and turning it. And I build on a word. I have these lists of words that I've compiled—I start that way. So this is the current list, which is changing. Sometimes a word may just look dried up, and I'll remove it and add something else. The list has between a hundred and two hundred words, words which somehow mean something to me now. When I begin to work I look at the list and something will just jump out, and I'll start with that and see where that goes. Then add something to it and see what happens. Then I'll think, these are kind of downers—I'm going to come up with something that will brighten it a little bit. Or there may be too many four syllable words—we'll do a one syllable—that kind of thing. The point is always, always to be in a situation where I'm making choices. It's the process of choosing—it's not a question of how do you choose. The point is, what is it to choose, how does anyone choose, what are you doing when you choose? When you really have to make a choice—what's going on? Is it all up to you, or is it up to the situation? Do the words make the choice for you? Have you allowed yourself into a situation where the words will take care of themselves? I don't believe that there is only one right, absolute, correct word. But there could be wrong words—sometimes you'll do something, and it just doesn't look right. So you reject it. Somehow it just didn't work that time.

So you have different experiences at different times when you're doing different pieces.

It's the experience of making the piece—it's not the experience of happiness or sadness or something like that.

I meant that perhaps sometimes the words will choose themselves, or maybe other times you'll make conscious choices?

It's not a question of always my imposing myself, or the words always imposing themselves on me. I don't know where one starts and the other ends, because you have a relationship. You're in a situation and something is moving along. And obviously I'm the one who's making the choices, and obviously the list of words were chosen before—and yet they are alive. They're all sort of speaking. Sort of announcing themselves and you never really quite hear what's happening until it's over, and you step back, and you look at it, and it's o.k. And somehow the space sets it off nicely, so that the word and the space function. I don't
it has an origin
it has limitations
it has some possibilities
it has continuity
it has been adjusted
it has been announced
it can be avoided
it can be destroyed
it can be restricted
it can be isolated
it can be separated
it can be removed
it can be replaced
it can be repeated
it might seem familiar
it might seem strange
it might be affirmed
it may seem to be uncertain
it might be discussed
it will probably be presented again
think that there's that much difference between the word and the space. They're both really in the same family. They kind of help each other out—the color of the word or the size of the space. They all interrelate, they're all part of the situation.

Then would you say words should or should not stand on their own?

There's the irony of the situation—when you try to say whether it stands on its own. Only by standing it on its own can you see how it relates to other things, its context. For instance, in order to really understand art, I tried to negate the term art. In a funny way by negating it you come closer to what it is.

You're doing it. Yes.

Then it becomes clear what art is—that it is what people do, essentially. You have to deal with what doing is, and what is it to do—what do I have to do? What is there to do next? Then you're getting closer to what art is about. But when you keep using the term art, it's so loaded with historical crap that you get bogged down with that stuff and you get away from the act of doing, and you're bogged down with what can't be done because you're doing art. So you want to get back to what you're doing, so you've got to put art aside, and then when you put it aside and deal with what has to be done—then you can get to what art is really about.

By putting so much emphasis on doing you've added the concept of time to your work.

Time, oh, yes, time has always been a major function, always in all my work. What's going on there, the inbetweeness, is what time really is. You can only really deal with time as an inbetween—we have this—and then later we have that—and the inbetween is when you can begin to get a hold of time. Because it's in the inbetween that you can remember what happened, and you can anticipate what's going to happen.

And the drawings and prints?

What's going on inbetween those words on the paper—is it just paper? Meaning of the words is what's going on inbetween. It's the space which allows the meaning to be other than just the drawn lines of the word—other than just the drawing.

Yes.

The same is true of the time experienced in the projections
promptings
or the sound pieces.

*Especially, in those works, you're in anticipation.*

Time is where anticipation takes place, because if there was no time you couldn't anticipate what was coming next. So time manifests itself as anticipation or as memories. I mean, you're always in the present but you're not always dealing with the present. I don't know—this is all sounding very metaphysical and I don't really mean it to be at all.

*Well, the thing is, that obviously you're dealing with concepts of space and time.*

I'm dealing with them, but in a very real way.

*Yes, you are.*

For instance, you asked me why are the words arranged that way, and I tried to explain that they have to be that way so that they can be allowed to be what they are. If you run it all together nothing is going to take place. There isn't going to be any room to move, to interpret, to grow. That's why I like a lot of space between things. Space becomes very dynamic—it's that in which we can function, you know, we can move, interpret, we can find out. And time is when we listen. We really have to listen—we don't usually listen. We can only listen when we don't have anything to hear, you know, then we're really listening. Otherwise, what we're listening to gets in the way. In the same way, we can only get close to things when they aren't things. So long as there's objects around you really can't...*

*Well, your work often finally becomes an object. It doesn't bother you that you've made these prints that are objects?*

I don't just make objects. What you see as an object is only a step that leads to other things.

*Then, how do you see the prints?*

You're saying, making prints. I think that's different from printmaking. In other words we're interested in printmaking—printing, what it is to print, what the experience is.

*You're right. I phrased it incorrectly.*

And naturally when you do printmaking, prints are going to come out, and they'll be honest, I think.

*How are they different from drawings? Are they?
Oh yes, very different. But I didn't know that they would be—I kind of assumed that they would be different, but I didn't know what that difference was, until I actually did it. That's the thing, you have to do something before you can do anything else.

Sure, before you can understand it, you've got to do it.

For one thing the drawings are much more fluid. They flow along. We had been talking about the idea of carving words into a wall; but I like the idea of cutting into the metal. It's much slower for one thing. Part of the frustration of making prints is the fact that I have to stop often to pull a proof so I can see what it looks like. So the development is slower, more thoughtful.

Because the process is much slower, because it takes longer to cut...

It becomes very much involved with the actual making of the word...especially when you have to do it backward, you know. It's really hard and you think very much more about making each one—they don't flow. You have to be much more disciplined, have an incredible amount of concentration. I've gotten to the point with the drawings where I really don't have to concentrate that much—I'm only thinking of the meanings of the words and their spatial relationships. Here I had to focus very much on the actual making of it—the inscribing—the making of the word itself. I hadn't really thought about this at all before, except sometimes in the sound pieces, where you really—after a while you just think about the air coming up out of your throat, coming out of your mouth, your tongue, the dampness on your lips or something like that. And in the sound pieces, there also has to be a lot of concentration, especially after a long period of time. After recording for 45 minutes or 1 hour (and you still have a long way to go), not missing a word on your list becomes a real challenge. So anyway, printmaking was just a different kind of process from drawing.

Because the process itself was so demanding.

Also, let me just say one thing more about printmaking and sound recording. In recording, the human voice is an important dimension—the presence. I have a piece with a woman's voice which is soft and really nice, and in an intimate place the presence of the person begins to manifest itself—it's almost as if she is there in some way, that her aliveness—some aspect of her is there in the room talking. So that's a different kind of a presence. And
explain

acceptance

Two word projections from *16th Century*, 1974.
the quality of the word printed—specifically in etching especially where it's such a very fragile medium, you get that kind of delicate quality—it's almost like, I think of the etchings like those are female voices, you know. I mean, it's not a feminine version, no, but, it just has a particular presence on the page. And that idea of presence is important.

One thing I wanted to say to you, last night in the sound work you presented at MOCA, one of the words I noticed in the piece was "fabulous." That's a word that people use all the time without ever thinking of its significance. But when I heard it last night, I was at first irritated because I thought "fabulous," that's an awkward word to use because people use it in a meaningless way. And then the more I thought about it, I thought it was terrific that you used the word because it made me stop and think, immediately, about the word fabulous, and how misused it is and where does it come from. Does it come from fable? Do you ever think of the origin of words?

Yes, in some, but not in that one. I mean, I don't go back into the history of all of them. Some of the earlier works were based on origins of words. Like for instance, there's a piece called American Words where all of the words are words which originated in this country rather than in England. Most of our words originated in England, but some are just American words. There's one called 16th Century in which all of the words in the piece originally came into the English language in the 16th Century. That's a rather nice piece, I mean they're perfectly normal words—words that you use all the time. But they're some of the oldest words in our language, from before the language began to change from middle English.

Well, do you have anything else that you want to say? I had a couple more questions to ask you.

Well, ask.

Before I did this interview, I went to Castelli and looked in your file. There were lots of announcements and invitations for exhibitions of your shows, and they were from all over the world except in the United States. And I wondered if that concerns you, if you can explain it.

I haven't really pinpointed that. I'm trying to understand it myself a little bit. I did have some shows and, of course, the two galleries that I showed in both closed—financial reasons. A lot of European museums own my work—
not a single museum in this country owns any of my work. I think it's sort of strange in a way, as this is really where my roots are. I've been accused of being mystical or too personal or something like that. People just really don't allow themselves to deal with the work as such here in this country. I think the people who are the establishment now were just getting started in the sixties...

You mean, the artists?

No, I'm talking about curators, critics, collectors, the establishment, not the artists. These people were young in the sixties and they're still relatively young. But now they're really the establishment and I don't think that they've changed their thinking very much. And now they want to look at the neo-minimalists and the miniature minimalists and the fourth generation color field people and also, and this seems odd to me, the second or third generation of conceptual people. In a funny way some of us were sort of bypassed, you know, but not in Europe at all. There are a lot of museums showing my work there, and collectors and so forth. In the late sixties a couple of good dealers that were moving out on their own were interested in showing this kind of work, and I have to say that Seth Siegelaub was very good at that time because he travelled in Europe and he somehow found these people and showed them the work and they became very interested. I guess Europe was kind of like what New York was, maybe in the early sixties and the late fifties, when that whole abstract expressionist thing finally faded away and people got sick of looking at the second generation, the third generation abstract expressionists, and there were some new galleries coming along which were more open. The problem is, that didn't happen in the sixties in New York. But it did happen in Europe, so it has been very good, as far as acceptance, for me in Europe.

But you've had a lot of shows with Castelli.

I've had a few shows. I believe now he's thinking about my work a lot more. In the beginning he was sort of giving me a show through his European gallery connections. But now I think he really kind of likes the work and is more into it, you know.

I was surprised to find there is not much material written about your work. There are seldom any photographs.

You can't photograph it. It never has been satisfactorily
photographed. You can't even photograph the drawings. They just don't look like anything. They're so involved with the scale of themselves, they're the right size and if you make them any smaller they're going to die, they will disappear unless the reproductions are the same size as the drawings. In many of the pieces, there was never really anything to photograph. I never got very much publicity because magazines like photographs of things.

It has something to do, of course, with the fact that very often there's no object at the end.

You have to have some really adventurous, creative buyers who can see beyond just filling up their houses with things. People who would get what you were doing—the participation that was requested of them.

That's right, that's exactly right. They have to understand there can be more than just having something on the wall, shapes, forms, colors—what I call corporate art. I get a reaction from other artists, and from students, you know, but I've always said I'm never going to get recognition until all the current curators retire.

But how do you live, I mean most artists try to live by selling their work.

Fortunately, I have been able to sell in Europe, but not that much in the States.

Well, what kinds of things do they sell in Europe?

Everything—they sell drawings, but only one sound tape has ever been sold. To a very fantastic German collector—a marvelous person.

One other thing to ask would be if you can, I don't know quite how to say this, if you think that you might be moving on to some other manifestation of your ideas.

What I'm thinking about now is a few things which are in the process of being developed—one is the wall drawings and I'm going to do a lot more of those.

You mean like the one at Castelli's.

Yes, I have a long way to go in that. There's some new projections that I'm working with where I'm using black and white direct positive film which is projected. It's trickier than I thought it would be to use. I have some other ideas I want to work out on that, and it's keeping me busy right now. Plus some new soundpieces.
O.K. We've been talking for a long time. Thank you very much.

Is everything clear?

Yes, it's good. Thank you.
Robert Barry

One Man Exhibitions

1964 Westerly Gallery, New York
1969 Seth Siegelaub, Los Angeles, California
Art and Project, Amsterdam, Holland
Galleria Sperone, Turin, Italy
1970 Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles, California
Galleria Sperone, Turin, Italy
1971 Art and Project, Amsterdam, Holland
Yvon Lambert, Paris, France
Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
Leo Castelli, New York
Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles, California
1972 Leo Castelli, New York
Galerie MTL, Brussels, Belgium
Galleria Toselli, Milan, Italy
Art and Project, Amsterdam, Holland
Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
Tate Gallery, London, England
1973 Yvon Lambert, Paris, France
Galleria Sperone, Turin, Italy
Galleria Toselli, Milan, Italy
Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
Gian Enzo Sperone & Konrad Fischer, Rome, Italy
Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, Poland
Im Kabinett Für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Germany
1974 Yvon Lambert, Paris, France
Leo Castelli, New York
Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
Art & Project - MTL, Antwerp, Belgium
Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne, Switzerland
Rolf Preissig, Basel, Switzerland
Gian Enzo Sperone, Turin, Italy
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland
1975 Gian Enzo Sperone, New York City
Curzak Gallery, Houston, Texas
Leo Castelli, New York City
1976 Rolf Preissig, Basel, Switzerland
Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome, Italy
Julian Pretto, New York City, "Portrait" Part I
P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York, "Portrait" Part II
1977 Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
1978 Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco

Group Exhibitions

1964 American Federation of Arts (traveling exhibition)
Hudson River Museum and Bennington College, "Eight Young Artists" (org. by E. C. Goossen) (catalogue)
1965 Westerly Gallery, New York, "The New Edge"
1966 Stephen Radish Gallery, New York
Guggenheim Museum, New York, "Systemic Painting" (org. by Lawrence Alloway) (catalogue)
Tibor de Nagy Gallery and Stable Gallery, New York, "Distillation" (org. by E. C. Goossen)
1967 Muller Gallery, Stuttgart
1968 Bradford Junior College, Bradford, Massachusetts
Windham College, Putney, Vermont
American Federation of Arts, "The Square in Painting"
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (org. by Lucy Lippard)
Siegelaub-Wendler, New York, "Xerox Book"
1969 Seth Siegelaub, New York, "January 5-31, 1969" (catalogue)
Seth Siegelaub, New York, "March, 1969" (catalogue)
Kunsthalle, Bern and The Institute of Contemporary Art, London, "When Attitudes Become Form..." (catalogue)
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and Folkwang Museum, Essen, "Op Losse Schroeven" (catalogue)
San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (org. by Lucy Lippard)
Simon Fraser University, Vancouver (org. by Seth Siegelaub) (catalogue)
Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles, "Conception-Perception"
Seth Siegelaub, New York, "July, August, September" (catalogue)
Seattle Art Museum Pavilion, Seattle, "557.587" and Vancouver Museum of Art, Vancouver, "557.587" (catalogue)
/org. by Lucy Lippard) (catalogue)
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, "Prospect 69" (catalogue)
Städtische Museum, Schloss Morsbroich, Leverkusen, "Konzeption - Conception" (catalogue)
School of Visual Arts Gallery, New York, and "Studio International", May 1970 (pp. 93-99), "Groups"
/org. by Lucy Lippard)
Group Exhibitions

1970
- Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, "String and Rope" (catalogue)
- "18 Paris IV, 70," Paris (org. by Michel Claura) (catalogue)
- Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, "Art in the Mind" (catalogue)
- The La Jolla Museum of Art, La Jolla, California, "Projections: Anti-Materialism" (catalogue)
- New York Cultural Center, New York, "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects" (org. by D. Karshaw) (catalogue)
- Museum of Modern Art, New York, "Information" (org. by Kynaston McShine) (catalogue)
- Galleria Civicà D’ arte Moderna, Turin, "Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art" (catalogue)
- Kyoto Municipal Museum of Fine Arts, Kyoto, "Nirvana" (catalogue)
- Art and Project, Amsterdam, "Summer Exhibition" (catalogue)
- Jewish Museum, New York, "Software" (org. by Jack Burnham) (catalogue)
- Galleria San Fedele, Milan, "Concept and Concept" (org. by Tommaso Trini) (catalogue)
- Nigel Greenwood Gallery, London (org. by David Lamelas)
- New York State Council on the Arts, "Critic’s Choice" (traveling exhibition)
- Studio International, July-August (a magazine exhibition organized by Seth Siegelaub)
- Art and Project, Amsterdam, Holland, "December, 1970"

1971
- Sir George Williams University, Montreal, Canada, "Conceptual Art"
- Zagreb, Yugoslavia, "At the Moment"
- Kunsthalle Nurnberg, "Artist, Theory and Work" (catalogue)
- Francoise Lambert, Milan, Italy, "Eight Proposals" (catalogue)
- Galerie 16, Kyoto, Japan, "Conception Extension"
- Westfalischer Kunstverein Zu Munster, "Concept Art" (catalogue)
- "Art Systems," exhibited at Centro de Arte y Comunicacion and Museum of Modern Art of Buenos Aires
- Museum of Modern Art, New York, "Project: Pier 18" (catalogue)
- Gallery SKC, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, "In Another Moment" (catalogue)
- "Prospect 71," Germany (catalogue)
- Biennale de Paris, Paris, France (catalogue)

1972
- "Notes and Scores for Sounds," Mills College, Oakland, California
- "Documenta 5," Kassel, Germany (catalogue)
- "Koncept Art," Basel, Switzerland (catalogue)
- Cologne Art Fair, Cologne, Germany
- Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
- "Kunst Als Boek," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland
- "Actualite D’un Bilan," Paris, France
- Art and Project, Amsterdam, Holland
- "Das Konzept Ist die Form," Westfälischer Kunstverein, Landesmuseum, Munster, Germany
- "Ninth Anniversary Exposition," Art & Project, Amsterdam, Holland/MTL, Brussels, Belgium
- "De Mathematika," Galleria dell’Obelisco, Rome, Italy
- "Project: 74 Artists," Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
- "Concept Art," Kunstverein Braunschweig
- Art and Project/MTL, Antwerp, Belgium
- "Kunst bleibt Kunst," Project '74, Kunsthalle, Cologne, Germany

1975
- "Language and Structure in North America," a circulating exhibition opening at the Kensington Arts Association, K.A.A. Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- "Painting, Drawing and Sculpture of the 60s and 70s from the Collection of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel;" The Clocktower, New York City
- Also exhibited at The Institute for Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio
- "Word, Image, Number," Sarah Lawrence Gallery, Bronxville, New York
- "Survey Part II," Sable-Castelli Gallery Limited, Toronto, Canada
- "Projects/Drawings/Diagrams," Paul Maenz, Cologne, Germany
- Fruit Market Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland (catalogue)
“I start with a mark, and the mark is a universal desire to speak or communicate. . . . The mark-making that I do in the paintings, in the drawings, in the prints, has to do not with self-expression but with a kind of human expression.”
So far, I've done three interviews, and you are the first painter. So I was thinking I might ask you why you paint. Actually, I am assuming the reason you paint is that it is the easiest way to express yourself.

No. The paintings are not an expression of myself. Paint is just a material, it's not a philosophy, it's a material. The paintings I make speak about painting, so it's not an entertainment or a self-expression. Not like those people who say "Oh, I love to paint." I don't particularly love to paint any more than I love to do anything else.

So it's the subject of painting that really attracts you.

The subject of the paintings is painting, so they have to be in paint.

So your work is about painting?

No, my paintings are about painting.

And the drawings are about drawing and the etchings are about etching.

Right. All the art that I make is really about desire. I start with a mark, and the mark is a universal desire to speak or communicate.

Symbolizes it?

No. Doesn't symbolize it, is it. I think that the first cave man who marked on the cave wall made a mark that was his desire to communicate. It was not the picture of his desire to communicate. It was the thing—pre-formation of the alphabet. It's like somebody tapping, or, a drawing you find in the sand on the beach, or a scribble in the margins of a book, or an ape taking a stick and dragging it across the ground trying to tell his companion ape where the ants are—they do that, they do. Or the first cave drawing, the first drawing of a horse. They didn't make a drawing of what had happened; they made a drawing of what would be tomorrow. If a man drew a man killing a horse, he would draw the horse he would kill tomorrow. The picture was the horse to be, not a symbol but
IT, THE HORSE, magic. It was a picture of a desire. It was the desire formed, made physical, made manifest. That's magic. I think it's also a desire to transcend the limits of a single human being, and a desire to make multiple human beings into a single being. The urge for art, for me, is the urge for language.

The urge towards language.

Yes. The Bible says, "In the beginning there was the Word." The word was the first thing in creation. The mark-making that I do in the paintings, in the drawings, in the prints, has to do not with self-expression but with a kind of human expression.

So it doesn't express your personality?

They're not expressionistic physically. The line is just a mark and I try to make it static.

What do you mean by static?

It's not moving. It's not filling a space and developing forms in space. In a sense you could say it's an expressionism that came out of conceptual art. Of course, all art is conceptual. But in New York now conceptual is the name of a certain kind of minimal art that we've been used to recently.

But you would use the word expressionism?

Yes, but it's a thoughtful expressionism, not an unconscious expressionism like surrealism and not a physical expressionism like abstract expressionism; it's done with impulse, but it's a thought or a germ of a thought. So the mark is the first mark ever made, and almost everything I do starts with a mark.

Yes, I can understand it.

Always the way in which the mark is made is what the mark says. It is my desire to sit in the mud and make a mark. It is an expression of awe at the universe.

Is there a difference in the marks? For instance, in the proof that we just pulled upstairs, there is a frame which has a lot of marks which go around the square that's in the center. And in the center of that square there is one mark. Is there any difference between that one mark and the marks that go around it in the frame?

There's a difference because they're different sizes, but they're equally emphasized, with only the size different. I'm making out of these etchings a dictionary of marks, and then framing each page of the dictionary in a frame made of itself.
And so it is a communication, a way of going outside of yourself and trying to touch somebody else or something else.

Right, a desire to somehow transcend the limits of a single being. I feel that the mark is the first and the least abstract letter of the alphabet, and the single mark is the subject of all the work I do now. Even when the work is like a poem, and you can read it, and there are words that have other meanings, those words are always made of marks.

Yes. But when the word is your name, it looks like self-expression to some people.

It's not self-expression even when the mark becomes the word and the word becomes my name written over and over again. My name is just an example of the human desire to identify each self; it isn't self-expression.

But if you did the drawing, could it be somebody else's name or would it have to be your name?

Well, if it were a love letter it could be somebody else's name. But I'm dealing with my humanness, my desire, because I am like you. If I made one with your name and sent it to you, then it would change the meaning a great deal. But I could do that.

Everybody has gotten a love letter that was just their name written over and over again. Oh God!

It's like name is a magic word. Names ARE magic words, abstractions.

I want to ask you what your feeling is about the criticism of your work that's been written recently. Because it seems to point to psychological implications, and you've said that your work is not about that.

A woman named Vivian Raynor, who wrote a long article about me in the New York Times, just tore the work apart—which brought a lot of people to the gallery and I sold work because of it, but she so completely misunderstood.

Criticism is superimposed, in a way, over the art.

I think it's an easy way out to see my forms as expressionist, an easy way out for the critic. I mean, you can look at anything and see it—it's as though the critic is using it as a mirror for his/her own primal scream. It's not being seen from an objective distance.

So that rather than judge your work in terms of art and art history, they judge it...
Etching with drypoint, image size: 36 x 36" on 41 x 41" sheet. Published by Crown Point Press, 1978.
On whatever basis they happen to cook up.

Yes, haphazardly.

Yes, well, it's very--I felt that they're--the recent review by Jeff Perrone in Artforum is a positive review, but it is completely off the wall. And he even made up a quote and put it in quotation marks, as my quote. He said writing my name over and over again meant "I, Pat Steir, lapsed believer." Writing my name had nothing to do with my name and nothing to do with believing or not believing--it's simply MY name--I wrote it over and over--I could have written, I suppose "human" over and over...

It's your humanness, not your ego.

It was a much worse review than an out and out bad review where someone clearly doesn't understand your work. A review that is in praise for the wrong things just makes people who did understand think they didn't. I think many younger critics have been schooled on minimalism and so they have to see a simple logic to understand it. They're not able to understand layers and layers of logic, and they certainly can't see a logic that refers to history.

Artists should speak for themselves, like you're doing here.

I think it's a good idea. Talking is really a form of--it's like kissing, close contact. Artists might not be generally so verbal, but it happens that recently there are a lot of verbal ones.

I think that's been something of a myth, too, that was propagated by the critics.

That's true, they think that they know better than the artists...

...and that artists are inarticulate and can't speak, all they can do is make art and it's up to the critics to come along and interpret everything.

Well, it's kind of masturbation criticism, these days. Criticism is so badly paid that art historians are going back to teaching. They don't want to write criticism. There are lots of art writers who do a good job, but you know, they don't write so much criticism.

They write articles and then...

Kids who just got through art school and can't make art write art criticism for the art magazines.
You spoke earlier of a logic that refers to history. Would you explain that?

The paintings in my last show were about Vermeer and Rembrandt and Goya. They were each in series of 6 or 8 paintings, and in the center of each painting was the subject matter, which was a kind of a mark, and the frame around the marks was an ode to a painter. The paintings were glazed in transparent layers, working from dark to light, and they were done according to the way that paintings were painted by Vermeer or Rembrandt or Goya. They were done in that way, not in the way that painting has been since the impressionists, in one layer. They were about history and they were about a love that I have for art and a closeness to the various traditions of art. They were symphonies to other artists.

It seems to me that your titles are very significant and these paintings are a kind of affirmation of painting.

Well, the titles are words, and the mark can become a word. I think that in naming them, the words are not titles but co-existing poems, a part of the painting that should not be separated from the painting.

Do you think that your paintings have become more complicated, because they seem to be more abstract now, in that they don't include images of things?

I don't think they are more abstract, they are more realistic. If I paint a picture of a red firehouse, it's very abstract because I have gone through a transformation in my mind. My mind has to transform and to control the muscles of my hand to draw a symbol that reads as a red firehouse and, the painting is not a red firehouse, the painting is a symbol of a red firehouse. But if I paint a square of red, it's very realistic, it is red. It's not a symbol; if I paint a square of red I've made red, not a symbol of red. And so I think that they are less abstract now, not more. If you think of abstraction as a certain number of steps that the mind has to go through to come to a certain conclusion, my paintings are now more direct and less abstract because they are not pictures of anything. They are the thing.

Marcia Tucker described your earlier work as being journals that record your experience. The new work is not about things that have happened to you anymore?

We are all what happens to us and so everything we do, if it's dig a hole, build a building, make a picture, is about what we've been through. But I'm not symbolizing what I have been through. Those paintings are much older, they're eight years
Drawing Lesson, Part II, Color, 1978. 5 etchings with drypoint, each image: 12 x 12" on 16 x 16" sheet. Published by Crown Point Press.
older, and at that time they were incidentally diaristic. That was the least important part of them. The most important part was that I was painting a symbol, and then I was making a list of colors and the number of strokes and shapes. If you paint a bird, that's abstract, subjective and abstract. If you paint the color red, it's objective reality, and I was painting the two side by side. The fact that the symbols came out of my life was the thing most noticed about the paintings, but for me the least important. It was only natural that the symbols would come from my life--after all my view of the universe is the only view I know.

Yes, it's the only thing you can do--present a view of the universe--ordered by your experience.

But in those paintings I was trying to make a disorder rather than order. That was my subject matter, chaos. I wanted to make chaos clear. I mean it really in a scientific sense. I was trying to make a flood of objects and markings that were all equal, equally flowing across the field of the painting, with the flow from one direction to another or from top to bottom, the way the flow of the universe is.

I've been talking to John Cage recently--the flow of the universe was his subject matter too--

He was very influential to me early on. I was studying music so I knew about his work. And in those early paintings I was putting a box over a portion of activity, just confining the chaos. That was related to his ideas. When I was studying music, I thought, well, he's done the next thing in music, and I couldn't think of anything else.

He says that when he saw the paintings of Mondrian that was when he decided he wouldn't be a painter.

That's interesting because when I heard his music I decided I wouldn't be an inventor of music.

But your paintings--how were people to read that chaos, if not as symbols coming out of your life?

I wanted the viewer to pick the foreground and the background by concentration. In other words, in the universe since all things are placed in it equally we really pick our foreground and background. We pick what we are interested in, I wanted the interest of the viewer to create the subject of the painting.

Were you concerned that then each person would see the paintings or the drawings...
...differently. I expected that. What they concentrated on would slow it down. I got interested in destroying the symbol when I realized that people saw the objects I used as symbols. So I chose the rose because I thought it was a universal symbol, and the cross to cross it out. That's another universal symbol. I did a series of rose and cross paintings. They also could be translated very romantically. I tried to make them very beautiful as well, so they had many kinds of translations, but mine was to kill the icon.

What does that have to do with the fact that you have lived your life in a way that has broken rules at times? I mean is it related to breaking out of conforming patterns?

No. Just when I realized that people saw the figures as icons, then I wanted to destroy the icon. I didn't want to break their necks or cut holes in my paintings or other paintings. I decided to paint an icon and to destroy it and I picked something that has a lot of meanings—religious, romantic, advertising, all kinds of meanings. I mean it was just fun to do that.

You say one of the meanings was romantic. Would you say that the attitude that you have toward art is a romantic one?

I think that anything subjective is romantic. Certainly an investigation of Vermeer is a romantic investigation, because it is dealing with the past. In a sense, I want to put myself in those shoes and experience that past.

Being a woman and being a painter, have you run across difficulties along the way? Were there difficulties right from the beginning, or encouragement from your family?

My father had studied art and wanted to be an artist, but considered himself a bad artist and stopped. When I decided to become an artist he was very upset, feeling it was no life, you know. Fearing and hoping, I think, that I wouldn't succeed. I later became friends with a friend's father who is a very well-known artist, and he, in a discussion, (his daughter and his sister are both artists, and his son-in-law, too) said, "Well, a woman could never be as good an artist as a man, you know that." He goes to all my shows and he likes my work. Maybe it has helped him change his ideas.

Do you think that it is important to say something about being a woman artist?

I started to show earlier in time than a lot of women. My first show was when I was still a student, in 1964, and I feel that I had good fortune, and, also, I didn't do the things
that women do--I didn't marry and have children. In the years between 1964 and 1972 it was very difficult to prove that you were serious, if you were a woman artist. I remember once I was, as an artist, invited to a dinner for "the artists and their wives," and I joked "Well, where should I sit, should I sit with the artists or the wives?" I feel that things are changing now. My concern is not only for women artists--it's really for more women to have a chance at a profession.

Did Richard Lindner help you at all, was he an influence on your work? You said you met him when you were young.

He felt that women were more prepared to be artists, and men who were artists were exposing a feminine part of their nature, and I agree with him. I don't know if it's women's chemistry, but certainly their lives have allowed them to reflect in a certain way about life.

Perhaps that helped you, having heard him say that. Many women artists, until recently, have felt they had to play down the fact that they were women. Which is something you have never done, I don't think.

After I stopped studying music, I first studied art, then I studied philosophy and there were no women philosophers either, very few. I always liked the things that were of the mind, and the mind was considered a male thing. In my early days that was a problem, because it affected the way I thought of myself.

Sure, because you could see that you were not doing what the girls did, and also what the men expected girls to do.

So I think that it was an early decision that I made that, well, living is important, and life is how you feel about it. I can understand someone falling in love with the kitchen table and staying married. I think the whole idea of marriage has changed, I am not against marriage, not very much.

Don't you think that the issue is finally not whether a person is a good woman painter but whether the person is a good painter?

A good artist. I think that now I don't have to be a good woman artist, I can be a good artist. But I am a woman, and in the early days I think it made it more difficult. But I'm lucky, too, because I developed later than other women in my generation. People helped me a lot, and some of those people were men, because that's all there were.

How is making etchings different from making paintings, other
than painting is about painting and etching is about etching?

I think that the best way to make etchings is the most primitive way, digging into them to make the mark. Like digging into the earth or into a tablet. I feel that etching is the most basic and the most intimate way for me to work. And that's why I like it. I feel that way only about the etchings, not about lithos or silk screens. Silk screening is far from my way of thinking, and the way you work with litho is less solid, more like drawing. Litho and silk screen don't offer me a new way of working and seeing like etching does.

You said to one of the printers that making etchings was easier than making paintings. Did you mean because of this digging thing?

Well, physically it's easier for me, because paint drips. And a dug mark doesn't drip.

Do you want to comment on the fact that there are so many people in the art world who feel that painting is a dead end, that the best and most interesting work that contains the most possibilities is not painting?

When they say it's dead, they're talking about painting as a philosophy, not as a material that can be used to make an historical statement--or even better, if you're lucky and smart, you can make a new statement, you can make paintings that have never been made before. But still I think that they would relate to history. When they say painting is dead they are really talking about abstract expressionism, and a certain kind of philosophical state of being that controlled the paintings. I don't think everything has been done in painting. But painting is not a way of life. It is a material. Sometimes I paint, when what I want to say can be said in painting. When I think of something to say about a material I use that material. So it depends on what I have to say, what I use.

So, then you can also write poetry and do drawings and make etchings.

Yes, right, it's all the same.

I understand, that's very good. In an article that Marcia Tucker wrote in Art in America in 1973 she prefaced it by saying, "History, myth or fable is perhaps our most profound means of expressing and sharing with others not only aspects of our lives but aspects of our experience." In the article she picks up on the relationship that exists between history, myth and fable and your work, and I thought that was very
interesting.

I think that was interesting, too, that she did that. It was more obvious in my early work, in the work she was writing about. But I feel it's still true that the mark and the transformations that I bring it through are mythical, or are fables. They are fables about life in the same way that a story could be a fable about life.

The story of the life of a mark? Or is that too simplistic?

Well, it is the story of the life of the human, not the life of the mark. Sometimes the mark can become a whole painting, a whole black or blue or gray painting that becomes a poem that tells some truth or falsehood. So in a way, still, for me the feel of the intention has to do with fable and myth, because it has to do with the universe and history and constant change and growth, and that's what makes a fable.

Some kind of basic universally experienced human truth.

That's right. I would say that that's still the feeling. The compulsion is to make a fable, just as the cave man who made his first mark in order to tell another person, made a fable.

It becomes a fable.

It's the beginning of a story.
Pat Steir

One Person Exhibitions:
1964  Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York City
1968  Bienouville Gallery, New Orleans, Louisiana
1971  Graham Gallery, New York City
1972  Paley & Lowe, Inc., New York City
      Douglas College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey
1973  Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
      Max Protetch Gallery, Washington, D.C.
      Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana
1975  Fourcade, Droll, Inc., New York City
      John Doyle Gallery, Paris, France
1976  University of Maryland
      Max Protetch, Washington, D.C.
      Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York City
      Morgan Thomas, Santa Monica, California
      Galerie Fardeh Cadot, Paris, France
      White Gallery, Portland State University, Oregon
      Otis Art Gallery, Los Angeles, California
1977  Galerie Fardeh Cadot, Paris
      Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio
      Made an etching at Crown Point Press for Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
      Made Murals at:
      Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
      Kentucky State University, Lexington, Kentucky
      Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio
      "Remember Me" Mural, Outside wall of Fine Arts Gallery B, California State University, Long Beach
1978  Droll/Kolbert Gallery, New York
      Galerie Fardeh Cadot, Paris
      Galeria Marilena Bonomò, Bari, Italy

Selected Group Exhibitions:
1963  Atlanta Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia
1964  Annual Exhibition, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
      Finch College, New York City
      "Drawings," Museum of Modern Art, New York City
1966  Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York City
1969-70  Graham Gallery, New York City
1970  French & Co., New York City
      Glauber Poon Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
      Graham Gallery, New York City
      "Landscapes," Museum of Modern Art, New York City
      Drawing Exhibition, Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.
      "New Landscapes," Cincinnati Art Institute, Cincinnati, Ohio
      Annual, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
      The Topography of Nature, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
      "Three Painters," University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island
1973  Cusack Gallery, Houston, Texas
      The Museum of Modern Art, New York City
      "Recent Acquisitions," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
      Biennial Exhibition: Contemporary American Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
1974  Painting and Sculpture Today 1974, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio
      Joan Snyder & Pat Steir, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts
1975  "Recent American Drawings," traveling exhibition sponsored by the American Federation of Arts, organized by Elke Solomon
1976  Painting and Sculpture Today 1976, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
1977  Drawings of the 70's, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
      Biennial Exhibitions: Contemporary American Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
      "Invitational Drawing Exhibition," Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, San Diego, California
      "New in the Seventies," University Art Museum, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
      The Museum of Modern Art, New York City
      "Recent Works on Paper by Contemporary American Artists," Madison Art Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin
1978  Museum of Modern Art, New York City

16
I believe that the music has to work completely by itself for a person who has absolutely no "training in music" or who has no background. If it doesn't work on a completely naive level, then it's a failure.
To start out, I was wondering why you chose to make etchings of the scores for Clapping Music and Pendulum Music. What is significant about those particular pieces?

Well, the score of Clapping Music contains musical notation and handwriting, and Pendulum Music is all handwriting. I thought the people interested in etchings would primarily not be musicians. People who would want to buy a musical score in a conventional sense would buy printed music, not as an object of art but as a means of playing a piece of music. The handwriting and so on would be of very little consequence.

So, you chose them because they were visually interesting.

Yes, they seemed visually suited to etching. But also both of those pieces are emblematic of certain kinds of esthetics that I have had. Quite apart from the way the scores look, these are pieces which I think have some relevance to art and artists of the 60's and 70's, as well as being pieces of music of interest to musicians. Pendulum Music is, on one level, audible sculpture. It's my only electronic piece made to be performed live that still exists. The tape pieces I made earlier were speech, and they are tape, they are not something you could do in performance. Pendulum Music is something that performers must do, although all they do is to release the mikes and step aside, the rest just happens. The performers then leave the stage. When the mikes have stopped moving and there is just a steady tone the power plugs are pulled out and that's the performance—so basically it's...

Instructions. This music, the score itself, is an instruction for how to make a performance.

Yes, there were a number of pieces of music done in the 60's where verbal instructions sufficed. John Cage, Alvin Lucier, La Monte Young, myself and many other people have used scores where the necessary and sufficient information was contained in words and not musical notation.
Because we were dealing with something not traditionally musical. Pendulum Music was done at the Whitney Museum in '68, as part of a show called "Anti-Illusion". But it was actually done earlier as part of a theatrical event with William T. Wiley out in Colorado and California in the summer of '68. Bill Wiley's work couldn't be classified as anti-form or anti-illusion.

No, not at all...

First, I was just swinging a microphone in front of a tape recorder and noticed that the feedback, which is usually a continuous tone, could be a pulse, and a pulse is something that I was interested in. At the time, back in '68, I was very interested in things that would run down by themselves, with a minimum of personal involvement. And this, more than any other piece I ever did, was an embodiment of that. I would say that since that time I have moved further and further away from that. I've moved towards making more and more esthetic choices in the conventional sense of the word. I have moved away from a kind of severe working out of the process towards a more lenient working out of the process. My recent Music for 18 Musicians, which is probably the most emotionally moving piece I've done so far--people have said that--is at the opposite end of the scale from Pendulum Music.

Yes?

Still there are many processes working themselves out in it. I could tell you what they are, but they're not necessarily the focus of the listener. They are simply the way it was done.

What about Clapping Music? How does that exemplify your esthetics?

Clapping Music is also emblematic—but of a very different set of esthetics. It only involves two people clapping. There are no instruments, just the human body. Two musicians can play Clapping Music anywhere in the world with nothing further than their bodies and the score. This is something that was and still is important to me. It's further expressed in Music for 18 Musicians in the sense that there are no electronics used in that piece.
other than microphones. In other words, I've made a conscious effort to move away from electronics. Clapping Music was not the beginning of that, but it was a very marked embodiment of it. We often use it as the first piece in a program--because it's a way of saying, "How do you do" and "Here's who we are."

In your book, Writing About Music, you said that the reason you were drawn to electronics in the first place was to tape the human voice. But you took a stance that was opposed to things that were going on in the 60's. I sensed that you were despairing of the trend toward electronic music, that you wanted to make music in another way, to show that acoustical music was just as good, and could be better. And you were very concerned that the music be beautiful--and that was a very traditional and unpopular attitude to hold in the 60's.

Well things are changing.

Are there people who have continued to, or who have come back to, working without electronics?

I think that there has been a reaction away from electronics, chance and serial music. Some composers have gotten into neo-romantic music of the nineteenth century. I
think they are experiencing dissatisfaction with these things, but their means of expressing that dissatisfaction is totally different from my own. The Western music that I am most attracted to is from the period before 1100, with roots in Hebraic chant, extending to Bach, and then I tend to lose interest around 1750 until the music of Stravinsky and Bartok. Much earlier Western music tends to have a more or less steady pulse; and a more or less clear tonal center. It is music which is constructed rather carefully, in a canonic way perhaps. These aspects were present in Western music up to the Baroque period, then a process of moving away from them began with the Classic period, was accelerated in the Romantic period, and finally, through the twelve tone and serial and chance schools, was quite thoroughly dissolved.

I know about your interest in African music, in Balinese and other kinds of oriental music, and it struck me that this music is tribal, I mean it is very old music and, in that sense, derives from very basic needs. I'm trying to say it's not necessarily primitive music, but it's religious music, or it's spiritual.

I think it's both of these things.

I felt a spiritual, religious quality in Music for 18 Musicians. It is a kind of meditation; there is the possibility of listening to the music and becoming totally involved in it so you can step outside yourself—inside to yourself in a certain sense. Do you know what I mean?

I hope so...

You've said that music should be beautiful and that for you it is very important that there be intensity in the listening experience. And one thing I like very much is that you said music can focus the mind to a very fine point. To do that you use repetitions, constant...

Also, change, not just repetition...

Yes, obviously. It's something that has also been prevalent in the visual arts in recent years, the ideas of repetition and gradual change which cause you to focus sharply on something and see beyond it.

Well, basically I would agree with what you're saying.
The study of African music and Balinese music, in a curious way, led me back into an interest in my own background as a Jew, which led to a trip to Jerusalem in February, 1977, where I made recordings of chanting of Hebrew scriptures by Jews who were in their fifties and sixties who had been born and raised in Yemen, Kurdistan, Bagdad and Cochin, India, and moved in 1948 or '51 to Jerusalem. And I'm now letting my study of that kind of music float around inside me and see what effect it will have. But certainly music at an earlier point in history was not art...

No, exactly.

It served a purpose, a religious purpose. It was shared, not imposed, shared by the community, whether it was Judaic, Hindu as in Bali, or another religion.

Yes, chanting was also important in the Greek tragedies-

We don't know that much about Greek music because the Ancient Greeks died and we are only left with their treatises on tuning. We do know about Hebraic music because the Hebraic tradition is alive. The African traditions have also survived, and the Balinese traditions. They all were originally religious music and not art music. Hebraic chant still is, and African and Balinese music are to varying degrees, less so because of the political changes within those countries. The people I studied with in 1970 in Africa were, in fact, members of a national company that performed on tour frequently. Those musicians, prior to 1957, when Nkrumah became head of Ghana, would have been employed by the local chiefs and would have been full-time musicians in the context of rural villages.

Alright, do you want to talk about the other etchings?

Sure.

The Freehand Watermark Tracings— I'd be interested to know how your thinking processes in terms of music relate to them.

Well, I would say that they look very much the way my music sounds, both on a metaphorical level and on a more specific one as well.

The wave-like feeling that washes over you sometimes,
listening to the music, came back to me when I looked at the Watermark Etchings, especially the ones with the wider lines.

The lines are wider in one pair, because the paper used had a wider watermark. How the etchings came about is actually kind of amusing and unexpected. When I went to Crown Point I had intended to do the two scores, Clapping Music and Pendulum Music. In order to do something that had not been done before I was going to hand write a little essay for etching, talking about the things we just talked about in relation to these two pieces...

So, this interview...

This will take care of the essay I never got to write. I made some notes on the plane out to California. Before I went to Crown Point, I spent a week in Santa Barbara preparing some pieces with some local musicians and we performed them in concert. During that time I had a little time to try to work on the essay; it wasn't coming along too easily. I arrived in Oakland, went down to the press the first day and spoke to Kathan and the printers at the shop. I guess Doris Simmelink gave me some paper to write my essay on, back in my hotel room. I took the paper when she gave it to me—I looked at it—it had a familiar look and feel. It looked and felt like the paper on which I got my reject letters from the Guggenheim Foundation every year, a certain commercial brand of paper. I held it up to the light to see the watermark and sure enough, it was that paper—it had that watermark. I put it back in the bag and made a crack about another reject letter from the Guggenheim, and went back to the hotel room. I thought about the essay. I began doodling on the watermark. I laid the paper on a darkish imitation wood table in the hotel room and the watermark was quite clear. I had one of those 89¢ Pentel Roller Writer pens and I just began tracing the watermark itself—not with a ruler, just using my hand.

While you were thinking about what you were writing?

While I was thinking about what I was going to write. But, by the time I got five or ten minutes into the tracing, I began to get interested in the process of doing it; I liked the way it looked and I liked... there's a certain kind of repetitious, methodical action
that I can get into that is a kind of exercise, like doing exercises in the morning. For me it was a physical act, very much marking on the sheet of paper, not really drawing anything. And when I had covered the entire sheet, I thought to myself this might, in fact, be better than the essay I had been working on. I wondered, "I'm not a visual artist, should I do this"? I spoke to Beryl on the phone, and she encouraged me to go ahead with it. I brought it in the next day and the printers and Kathan encouraged me to go ahead with it. And I went ahead with it, re-drawing it on paper laid over a wax ground. There was also a second kind of paper which had a similar but somewhat different watermark, where there were many horizontal lines with a few vertical lines spaced considerably wider apart. It gave a quite different effect because my hand had to move further and the control I had over keeping it steady became even less, and therefore, the lines began to move even more. Of course, that movement became a real plus the more I did it. It produced that wavelike motion that you mentioned.

**What would be a correspondence in music to tracing the watermark freehand?**

The musical equivalent is what I call resulting patterns. It occurs in *Drumming*, it occurs in *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* and it occurs in *Music for a Large Ensemble* that's in progress right now. It begins by playing a musical pattern and then playing that same pattern on top of itself a beat or two away so that it forms a kind of canon. When you listen to that little canon, you hear a multitude of sub-patterns; they are literally there.

*It's the interaction of the notes, because they're a couple of beats apart.*

Right. You hear this web of melodic patterns created by one pattern on top of itself at a particular rhythmic distance. And which particular pattern you hear depends on whether you are focusing on the lower notes or the higher notes or the ones in the middle. And if someone sings or plays a particular pattern to you, you will hear it, very much as you can see patterns within a grid if you choose to construct them with your mind's eye.

*Which is what you do when you use a doubling procedure.*
Right. What the women's voices are doing in Drumming or what I'm doing in the drum section with my voice, is to simply pick out certain patterns that pre-exist; they are really there. The voice is used to sound like one of the instruments that is already playing, and to raise one of these patterns to the surface of the music so that you can hear it for a moment. And then at other times, two at a time are brought out as duets. It can get rather complex. So the visual equivalent of this is to simply show by underlining, or by drawing in more boldly, something which is in fact in the substance already. A watermark tracing is a literal equivalent to this because it's reinforcing that which was already marked in the paper before I ever got it. By doing it freehand, without a ruler, the irregularities become interesting. Doing it freehand is important in the same way as my using human performers rather than a synthesizer, which would keep the rhythms perfect, match the timbres identically, and make perfections which are deadly. Even if the human voice is singing perfectly in tune and it's perfect to your ear, if you were to measure it with an oscilloscope it would be, in fact, full of micro-variations. It would not be precisely the same pitch all the time. Nor would each repetition be the same. Without those microvariations, a kind of deadliness sets in. And this deadliness, you don't need an oscilloscope to tell.

No!

The micro-variations in live music, cause your ear and your heart to respond without further prompting. This also relates to the kind of attraction I've had to certain styles of "primitive art" where something is done geometrically; but, as in much non-western geometric art, it's realized in such a way that there are many irregularities and imperfections in that geometric pattern. It isn't perfect. If you count the number of strokes, for instance there are not always exactly the same number on the left and on the right; the thickness of the strokes may vary and the edges may be blurred and irregular. It's just that irregularity that gives those drawings or paintings or weavings a richness that they would not have if they were done on a commercial machine loom or if they were done by a mechanical stamp or something else.

This makes me think of something you spoke of in Writings about Music—your feelings about the musicians
being able to improvise within a score as opposed to having to stay within the confines of a score that's been composed so that every conceivable possibility has already been predetermined.

Not every conceivable possibility, believe me.

No. But there has been an effort made in the score to give as much form as possible. I was thinking about
this just in general, and then I read something in your book that interested me especially--this relationship between freedom and choice and limits, and how freedom and choice operate in a situation where there are limits and you can't go beyond them...you know?

I'm going to get a book by Stravinsky to quote to you.

O.K. Shall I turn this off for a second?

No, no. I've got it nearby. It's called The Poetics of Music.

I'm listening...

In 1956, I bought this book. Let's see if I can only... Here we are...

In art, as everything else, one can only build upon a resisting foundation. Whatever constantly gives way to pressure, constantly renders movement impossible. My freedom, thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings. I should go even further. My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action. The more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit."

To that I would only add that those limits have to be self-imposed. If they are imposed by a government, or what have you, then you're dealing with totalitarian politics. But when those limits are self-imposed, then I think they become extremely useful. When I begin a new piece, they are what I am looking for. I'm trying to find out what I will be working with, what the confines are within which I will be composing. Usually the answer comes to me when I go back to the last piece I've completed.

So there is a kind of organic growth in your work?

Yes, there is that, and limits are definitely something I don't see as a negative factor. If one keeps poking around inside those limits, one discovers more and more. For instance, when I completed It's Gonna Rain, I thought,
"That's the end of phasing. The first part is from unison back into unison and the second part goes out of phase as much as possible; I've done it all; the process is completed. That's the end of that." Well, that was 1965, I believe. It wasn't until 1971 with Drumming and an enormous amount of development that I actually dropped the process of phasing.

Yes.

I found many other developments within that particular technique, that particular limit, but you have to persist in your search; if you take the superficial view, then of course you will go through a technique rather quickly.

By going from one extreme to the other?

Well, there are people who believe, that any one work within a given style exhausts that style, and one is duty bound to go on to something different. And there are others who work within certain styles and develop them. That really is a more natural way of working. Most people seem to work that way, and I certainly do.

But there is such an emphasis on the "new".

Yes. In fact, I think that it can be harmful.

I was reading a very thoughtful article today. The author, Kenneth Baker, speaks about your music and the work of three other people, and he says, "Such works discover a freedom in the unforeseeable effects of repetitive, deliberate activity although they seem also to accept the impossibility of knowing what you are doing when it is anything but the simplest activity." *

I can partially agree with that. One of the criteria I have for pieces is that they have to continue to sound good on repeated hearings. If they don't have that depth then I know that they are not going to be very interesting for very long—for me or for anybody else. I am also fortunate enough to have been working with a performing ensemble of musicians since 1966. So I get a lot of criticism and feedback in the process of rehearsing. I notice the other musicians playing intensely, or yawning, or whatever it happens to be, and that is also a very real, valuable criticism.

I would say by the time we get to performance, the criticism, as far as I am concerned, is over.

Well, the music is compelling, even without an intellectual appreciation of the work.

I'm somebody who writes prodigious program notes as you may have noticed. But on the other hand, I believe that the music has to work completely by itself for a person who has absolutely no "training in music" or who has no background. If it doesn't work on a completely naive level, then it's a failure.

Do you really feel that way? I haven't heard many artists express any concern that the "public" be able to respond to their work.

Well, I do. I feel that generally speaking a piece simply has to work for many listeners. A situation that comes to mind was Pamplona, Spain in the summer of 1972; there was a festival called Encuentros. It was a very interesting festival because it included not only avant garde music, art and dance, but also the Kathakali from India, and primitive Basque music played on pieces of wood. And it also included classical music of medieval Spain, and it included John Cage and video tapes. It was a very widespread event—the first and last of its kind. The first that happened in Spain since the Civil War. It was organized by a composer named Luis DePablo. We performed there in a basketball court. Now there were about, I would say, three thousand people in that room, at that time an astounding audience for us. And I would say 500 of those three thousand were artists and critics from all over Europe—sophisticated types. But twenty-five hundred of those people were natives of Pamplona and what they knew about was bull fights. And that's it.

Incredible.

They were just coming because it was free and held in the Palacio de Sportes. The first piece we played was Four Organs, which involves four loud electric organs, and they started to really boo. The next piece was Piano Phase for Two Pianos and I figured they were just going to drown us out completely because there were two thousand five hundred of them against two pianos. But, they all started going, "Shh, Shh", because it was "culture"—it was pianos, so it was O.K. The next
piece was *Drumming* which takes an hour and twenty minutes, I guess we got fifteen or twenty minutes in, and I started to hear, "Ole" periodically. At the end of the piece they were jumping around, jumping onto the court and the police were trying to restrain them. It was an extremely positive response. To me this response was worth a great deal, because it acted as a kind of barometer to the music that I generally don't have in terms of audience. I usually have people who have heard some of my music before and generally like it.

The idea that the music should appeal to people who are naive, or uneducated about contemporary music, ties in with things that you wrote several years ago, about music coming out of a certain center and then appealing to that center.

It's something like... if I love the music, then hopefully you will too—which is something I think Pollock said about his paintings. Finally you are left with that.

*I wanted to ask you, as you studied philosophy, does that relate to your interest in African, Balinese, and Oriental music?*

I didn't get that as a philosophy student. That was acquired later.

*How does the background that you had in philosophy relate...*

To my being a composer? Well, it gave me a taste for detailed close work on something of universal significance.

*What philosophers were you really interested in?*

Really only one. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his later work. This was in 1954, '55, '56 and '57. I'll just mention to you that during the week I studied Wittgenstein and on the weekends I played the drums. At the time I was listening to Stravinsky, Bach and bebop—Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis and John Coltrane. In highschool I listened to Kenny Clarke. His quality was a feeling of time. He simply played the ride cymbal most of the time. Clarke was able to generate a buoyant, vibrant feeling of time, which moved the entire group he was playing with. And this impressed me more than others who could play technically more complex material.

*I'd like to go back to something we spoke of earlier. Can you expand a little bit on the importance of new*
music being beautiful?

Well, that's always important, but for me beauty doesn't exist without structure.

So by beautiful you mean there is a kind of completeness to it. It has to have both things.

It has to satisfy your mind and your heart.

Yes, that is right. Would you talk a little bit about your personality in the recent music? I realize that in the early work you felt that choosing the process was enough of an imposition of your personality.

Well, I think that this can be related to an aspect of music in general. Personality or the personal part of a piece, as I see it, is often expressed in terms of notes—what pitches composers choose. Many composers have written symphonies and yet their symphonies sound different. I am obviously oversimplifying. But certainly the choice of notes for me has been the part that was not systemized. In Western music many forms have revolved around the basic traditional tonal system, the harmonic system as we know it from Bach to the present time. Even its aberration, the twelve tone music of Schoenberg, is concerned with a system of organizing pitch. But, for me, pitch has been an intuitive choice and basically my music has been organized around rhythmic systems. The changes in rhythm were the subject matter, both intellectually and in terms of what you would hear. Now, in 1978, I am working with a larger ensemble with many different sounds...

Including this piece that you are working on now...

Right, definitely including Music for a Large Ensemble which was commissioned by the Holland Festival. Although there are rhythmic processes working themselves out in this piece, the expanded choices of notes and instruments are really what I'm focusing on. I'm involved with those aspects I hadn't worked with as much before. So perhaps my music has become more personal in terms of more elaborate choices of melody, harmony and timbre, while it has maintained its universal base in rhythmic structure with a steady pulse.

I look forward to hearing it. Thank you.

Thank you.
Steve Reich

Steve Reich was born October 3, 1936, in New York and raised in California and New York. He graduated with honors in Philosophy from Cornell University in 1957, studied composition with Hall Overton from 1957-58 and at the Juilliard School of Music from 1958 through 1961, and then received his M.A. in music in 1963 from Mills College in California, where he studied with Darius Milhaud and Luciano Berio.

In 1966, he began his own ensemble with three musicians. Since that time, he has performed his music with this group, STEVE REICH AND MUSICIANS, now grown to eighteen musicians, throughout the United States, Canada and western Europe. In 1971, the premiere performances of Drumming were presented at the Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Town Hall. Also in 1971, Phase Patterns was performed in Pierre Boulez's first series of Prospective Encounter concerts, and Four Organs was performed with Michael Tilson Thomas, Steve Reich, and members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Symphony Hall in Boston. This latter performance was repeated in New York at Carnegie Hall in 1973.


During the summer of 1970, with the help of a travel grant from the Institute of International Education, he studied drumming with a master drummer of the Ewe tribe at the Institute for African Studies in Ghana. During the summer of 1973, he studied Balinese Gamelan Semar Pegulingan with a Balinese teacher at the American Society for Eastern Arts Summer Program at the University of Washington. He studied the traditional forms of cantillation (chanting) of the Hebrew scriptures in 1976-77. In 1974, he was awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and was an artist in residence in Berlin at the invitation of the D.A.A.D. In 1975, he received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and, in 1976, a second grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1978, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Discography


Right now my main activity is social, and what I’m trying to do is make art that’s as close to real life as I can without its being real life.

View

I wanted to ask you about your interest in Leonardo Da Vinci and I wondered what it is that is fascinating you about him right now?

My father had a Da Vinci Society he started...

Oh, you're kidding!

No.

In Cincinnati?

Yes. It was a big influence on me.

What did they do there?

Well, they gave grants for Italian Americans to go to college to study art, or science, or anything that Leonardo was involved in, which is everything practically. My father started that club 25 years ago; he's dead now and it's still going on. He was always interested in Da Vinci from a medical point of view because he was a doctor. I used to look at Da Vinci drawings and anatomical drawings a lot when I was a kid. But I'm mainly interested in Da Vinci because he was a conceptual artist... he was an idea artist.

He was an inventor, too. Do you think that artists should be inventors? Are they inventors?

Well, I think that artists are supposed to do everything, or anything. I mean, an artist, a real artist, is somebody who wants to be able to realize his idea, and he realizes it in the best way he can. And if it means doing something outside of painting or sculpture, then if he's a good artist he finds out how to do it and he does it.

You wrote once that the role of the artist is to observe life and comment on it poetically.

Well, I used the word "report", instead of comment.

Oh, yes, that's true. How do the things that you do meet that description?
Right now my main activity is social, and what I'm trying to do is make art that's as close to real life as I can without its being real life.

So what you do is, in Breen's, set up a structure where something can take place, and the structure, the set-up, makes what takes place there art.

I think that Cezanne said that art is an imitation of nature. I've lately tried to imitate it as closely as possible. Picasso said that art is a lie that reveals the truth. I believe that.

Well, you've called your Wednesday meetings "Cafe Society", and that is a term that connotes a kind of chicness and people who have a lot of time on their hands to socialize.

Plato said that leisure is necessary to wisdom.

That's true.

I suppose I could be criticized for calling it "Cafe Society" because it's so high-falutin'. But my concept of "Cafe Society" is drunken parties where ideas are born.

And does it also tie in with your calling Breen's a saloon, which is very close to the word "salon"? People like Gertrude Stein used to have salons which were gatherings of people who liked to discuss ideas, who were creative. And it seems that your "Cafe Society" in Breen's is that kind of thing--trying to set up a situation where people can come and talk to each other and exchange ideas and energy.
But "salon" is too high-sounding a word for...

Breen's is a saloon. But it becomes a salon in a way, you know? It's a kind of salon/saloon at the same time.

There's a German word for it, "Stammtisch". "Tisch" is table and "stamm" is a tree-trunk, in this case, a trunk that has branches going out like a family. Hans (Haacke) told me that word. So, it's a place, a particular table, where similar people gather.

And Breen's and MOCA (Museum of Conceptual Art) and "Cafe Society" all perform this function of a meeting place.

When I started MOCA in early 1970, it was underground, because it dealt with something that no one else was doing.
... I mean, there weren't other places that were providing a situation for this kind of art. So, because of where it was, and the style of it, and the name of it, and the nature of it, and the esoteric and ephemeral quality of it, it was an underground museum. But now, later, when there are lots of other museums and galleries that are providing space for the same kind of art, it started to become above-ground, it became real academic, and I have found myself in the position of being a kind of grandfather in this scene! So, the only way I can stay underground is to do things disguised as non-art. So that's what I'm trying to do now. Like Lowell Darling's Dinner while he was running for governor—it was seen by the people in the neighborhood as not having anything to do with art. And the same with "Cafe Society", which is just meeting in a bar. And the "Chinese Youth Alternative" and "Restoration" shows. I don't want to do any more things that are...

Overtly art.

Overtly art. So by disguising them I can go back underground.

So there are things that you would do at MOCA, you still do things there—but they just won't be conceived of as art things?

Oh, it's the same as in the beginning, when nobody thought direct actions had anything to do with visual art.

It's changed a lot since then. I mean performance has really gained in popularity especially in the Bay Area. The things that you did, were they responsible for stimulating an understanding and an interest in performance?

Well, I don't want to... that's not discreet!
Okay, but there are about four or five alternative art spaces here all specializing in performances.

It's true that a lot of people here believe that conceptual art is performance art. Somebody came up to me at Sol LeWitt's opening -- a man who's a member of MOCA and an art collector -- and said, "Well, somebody told me this was conceptual art, but this isn't conceptual art because it doesn't move." So, a lot of people in San Francisco's idea of what conceptual art is, is based purely on what happened at MOCA.

Oh, I see... so in fact...

People aren't always so well-read, you know, to know that there's another scene other places in the world.

You were just at a festival in Vienna of performance art, right? That was called the First International Festival or something...

Yes, First International Performance Festival; not theatre, but visual art... I always have to add that because people say, "First Performance? -- people've been doing performances since the beginning of time."

It is confusing.

I don't call what I do performances.

What do you call them - actions? Okay. So, this was in fact a festival of actions.

Actions implies a directness, without illusion. I approach it that way, as a sculpture form. But there are also a lot of people who do performances in art galleries who are doing theatre--who are doing skits and plays--but I, for myself, make distinctions.

So you wouldn't describe yourself as a performance artist?

I'm a sculptor.

A sculptor. Well, how would you define the term sculpture then?

Sculpture is about the relationship of elements in space. That's what sculpture is. But more recently, it's the relationship of elements in space and time; so it's evolved into the fourth dimension.
So it's a four-dimensional thing now, not just an object.

For some time now it has included process as a direct element. For instance, old bronze sculptures gained a patina over the years; they gained this nice, old, crusty patina look. That was always known by artists, but the process of that aging was a less important element than the object itself, whereas in the new art -- the art that I'm involved with -- process is a key element.

And so it's the activity that's important and whatever is left over is a kind of document of it, or a record of it, but the sculpture is the activity, would you say?

Well, the activity is...

Is the art?

Yes. Is the work.

Yes.

There is something that results. The end result isn't the art, but it has a history and that gives it power.

So, the people...

What people can witness is the artist expressing his intelligence through the activity.

From whatever's left over, would there necessarily be any way to tell how the leftover came about?

Well, you can know if an artist is a good craftsman by the way he manipulated materials.

But, for instance, an early piece that you did, "Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art." What was left over?

Debris.

Is there, in that piece, a piece of sculpture?

The debris told the story. What happened. For instance, if you went into a bar where there had just been a brawl, and everything was all broken and upset, immediately you would know what activity had taken place. And the same was
true of the debris from that piece. You knew what activity had taken place, even though the activity wasn't shown to the public. I would not subject my friends to being performers.

Did "Cafe Society" evolve out of pieces like that?

It was a key piece for me, yes. But that was in 1970.

Still, it relates to the idea of sharing and socializing and communicating, interchanging ideas and energies, all the things that would happen in a salon or a saloon. And what about MOCA?

I think of MOCA as a social work.

It obviously came out of your experience at Richmond, being a curator.

That gave me a larger sense of scale. When I went to work as a curator in '68 I thought of sculpture in terms of, at most, an environment, a single room; but after working as a curator, I thought on a much larger scale. I was concerned with all elements of an exhibition, with the publicity, with the arrangements, with the catalogue -- even with aspects that reached outside the space itself. And maybe I would never have had that awareness if I hadn't gotten that job as curator.

It's an unusual situation for an artist to have spent time as a curator. How did it happen?

I always had jobs, art-related jobs, you know, and there was this job for a curator in Richmond. I applied for the job. And so did a lot of other people. They gave me a test, they did an interview, and I got the job. I mean, I just passed their exam.

And the exhibitions that you put on there, what were they like? I assume that you had an idea of what you wanted to do.

I wanted to do new things. It was an educational institution and the only way to educate people is to give them something they don't already know.

What kind of people go there? I mean, what is Richmond... it's not...

It's an industrial city; the biggest cultural events were
midget wrestling and the Roller Derby.

So this museum you were operating wasn't exactly in an environment which was friendly?

Luckily for me the people in Richmond never came to the Arts Center.

Oh, they didn't?

No. Because they just assumed they weren't interested in going into an art gallery. If they had gone inside in some cases they might have been interested. At least they would have seen things that they never thought were art before. Dirt on the floor, things like that. I did an earth art show, invisible art show, conceptual art show, things like that. Mostly people from Berkeley and San Francisco came over there to see the exhibitions.

Were you interested to get the people from Richmond? Did you see yourself on a mission to make these people who like midget wrestling and Roller Derby understand new art?

It was really impossible to reach the public; I mean directly. The public gets the information later on, after it's been translated into the more popular forms...

Yes, watered down...

Advertisements, TV, everything like that. Because people in
theatre and movies and TV, you know, they take from the other arts indiscriminately, they just steal without thinking about it... I'm just being realistic, you know. I think it's not realistic to say that you're trying to reach the public.

The public would never believe "Cafe Society" is art?

It's never been advertised as art. I haven't advertised it as art. I've advertised it as an activity of the museum.

Well, on the one hand there's that kind of activity that you sponsor, or promote, or are responsible for in some way, and then there's another side of...

Arrange.

Arrange, not promote. Okay.

Arranging is manipulating which is what art is -- not promoting or sponsoring. When I organize shows of artists I don't think of it as my art. But MOCA's social activities and the idea of this museum are my art.

I understand. But there's another side to things that you do, which is different; the sound works, the drum brush drawings.

Serious. The serious art.

The serious art?

I have to do serious art to be accepted as an artist in the community.

People think of you as a curator?

Yes. And the serious art gets me accepted a little more as an artist. I want to be accepted as an artist. I don't want people to see me as a lecturer, or an organizer, or editor, or curator. For me, those things are all a part of being an artist; those aren't the things that I am. I am and have always been an artist and those are some of the things that I do as an artist.

I understand. I was just thinking...in a description I've read of the drum brush drawings you speak of the sound that they produce as connected to the rhythms of your body, of your heartbeat and your breathing, and, amplified, that sound and that rhythm become available to people who are
listening, and perhaps they align their rhythms with yours and there's a kind of communication and connection there. Your work is always about communication; the drawings are a kind of record of interior life, and subliminal communications. And "Cafe Society" is about exterior, social life and social energy—but also about communication.

Both of those activities come out of the things I did most in art school. And that was drink beer and play the bongos.

So there's continuity there?

Drumming is a primitive form of communicating. Primitive cultures do drumming, and I see it as a kind of talking drumming, and...

And drinking beer is also...?

Well, stimulants have always been used in religion and in ritual, and that's really important...

That's another thing I was thinking also--the idea of "Cafe Society" meeting every Wednesday. It is a ritual, you know, bringing people together.

When I do the drumming pieces I smoke dope, and when I do the social pieces I drink beer, because they both have opposite effects. For me, anyway, alcohol makes me more outward and dope makes me more inward. So I use both these stimulants. I always smoke grass when I am doing an action.

You should provide grass for the audience, too.

Well, I have. Only once, but I did. The audience wasn't too big, it was about 25 people but I had a lid's worth of joints, enough for everybody there. We passed them around and watched a videotape on the floor. I did that once in a gallery a while ago. ("F Space", Santa Ana, 1972)

A videotape of you, playing?

It was the first videotape I made; it was of me eating. It had a jazz, Cecil Taylor, soundtrack, and, it had a light going on and off which cast shadows on everything, and an electric fan going on and off which blew everything—hair mainly; I had longer hair then. It was about rhythms, and the eating was just natural I was trying to put a rhythm into a regular daily thing like eating; I ate dinner.

Well, I think that your music—the tapes that I've heard—
you described them and Tom Garver in the DeYoung show catalogue describes them as keyed to your heartbeat and your breathing; but to me, the first time I heard a tape it sounded like jungle music, like drums... but I was really moved by the intense energy there. And it didn't sound at all as sedate as you would think a heartbeat and breathing would sound.

Well, I wasn't ever trying to make it sound like that. I do things by instinct, which is body orientation, and in the drumming work, my own body impulses, my own breathing and heartbeat and other internal things were just used to set my pace.

Are you going to keep doing those?

I'll always be a drummer but I don't know if I'm going to make... I don't know for sure, but I don't think I'm going to do any more drum brush pieces. Continuing the social work is more interesting to me now.

Did you do drum brushing in Vienna? At the Performance Festival?

Well, I tried to combine the two elements we've been talking about, the social element and the -- I guess it's the more private emotional element, the work with sound. I replaced all the lights in the gallery with yellow light bulbs to give a warm atmosphere. I had a rectangular-shaped light beam projected on the wall behind me, and I sanded the lighted part of the wall to make it smooth and indented so I could stick on those black letters galleries use for artists' names. The sanding made a rasping percussion sound, a little like drum brushing. It was like I was a worker. Then I pasted up the letters of my name and I announced, "Now we'll have a party." I opened the refrigerator that was full of beer (I had 300 beers) and started passing them out. I turned on some jazz tapes and we had a party that went on 'til all the beer was gone.

So you signed the party! Now, could you talk about the etchings? Were you interested in etching as a process?

I did a process print in '69 with a commercial offset press. I ran a stack of paper through the press with no image on the plate and the water was turned off so it would scum. It took 225 sheets to go from blank to solid brown ink. It was brown for earth; I wanted to make a landscape by exhibiting the entire edition in a room. In the etchings I made more directed percussion actions. It was ritualized action.
How do you feel about the idea of editions?

I'm a lot more capitalistic now than I was ten years ago. It was necessary then to make a political statement against materialism... My honest answer is that I like the etching process, it's a beautiful process, but I don't like editions so much. But I can see doing an edition for something that's... Like, I want to do an edition of beer bottles. That's something that is supposed to be an edition. I have designed a label for a beer bottle (the label would be the print); I'd like to do an edition of beer bottles with beer that people could drink, you know.

Well, that would be a very appropriate symbol for you. Before I met you I'd heard of a piece of yours that has almost become a legend—which was the announcement that you sent out about your appointment as Director of the San Francisco Museum of Art. How did it come about? What were the circumstances?

Well... let's see... I got fired from Richmond as a curator in 1971, and ever since '71 I've been looking for a job. I'm
still looking for a job. So, Jerry Nordland left the San Francisco Museum in '71, maybe '72, but anyway, about then; and they were looking for a new director. Actually it was almost two years before they hired Henry Hopkins. So they were looking for a new director, and after about a year had gone by, everybody was expecting that they'd have a new director by then. So I printed these cards up that said the Board of Trustees was pleased to announce my appointment as director and put my name and the date, it was January, 1973. It was the same date that I had moved into the new space of MOCA, that's why I picked that date. And I mailed it out in an envelope.

Who did you mail it to?

I mailed it to all of the Board of Directors, I mailed it to the press, I mailed it to the American Association of Art Museums; it was printed in "Museum News" under announcements and new appointments. So everybody in the museum world read it and some of them believed it and some of them didn't. In the museum world it's kind of like musical chairs, the museum directors just change jobs. Mostly they've been bred to be directors, went to private schools, they are part of a certain level of society. Boards of Directors only want to hire people in their own image. Then after awhile they get bored, and they want somebody who is a rebel, they want someone who's going to do something exciting, innovative...

Put their museum on the map.

Yes, put their museum on the map. Then whenever they get somebody who does do that, they fire them right away, you know.

So, what was the response? Were they angry, the Trustees, were they furious that you usurped their prerogative?

Well, what I heard was that the first thing that they did was all start calling each other up and saying, "How come you went ahead and hired someone without notifying me?" I loved hearing stories later of what different people's reactions were to it. It was... I really wanted to have the job as director of the museum, you know. And at least, I thought, maybe at best it would make them think, and hire somebody a little more liberal than they would normally do, because relative to me everybody in the museum business would be conservative.

Do you ever think about moving to New York, it's less conservative, or would that have made it impossible to be
underground?

Well... it took me so long to become integrated into this environment that I don't know if I'd want to go through that again. Just finally got a handle on San Francisco, and it's a comfortable size and I can deal with it. And I've got a good set-up here. But I don't want to get soft.

What do you mean, to get soft?

Well, when you're comfortable, you get soft. When things start to come easy, you get soft. That's what I mean.

It doesn't seem as if things are so easy.

Well, if things were easier maybe they wouldn't be any fun.

Yes, I suppose that if the challenge is big enough in San Francisco there's no point in going to New York.

It's quite a challenge. San Francisco is so conservative, you know, because it has such a history and such a past. People are into antiques here; they resist any new things. Like Vienna, or any city that has a past culture that people hang onto.

There's much more space here, I think.

It's a compact city, but it's not a crowded one.

Yes, psychologically there's more space here.

I just think that New York is all over. It would be crazy to move to New York now. It would be like moving to Paris in 1950, instead of to New York.

What about some place in Europe? Do you think that's where the energy is going?

It's dispersed. I wouldn't live anywhere else but San Francisco. I like to go other places to spent a little time, but I wouldn't even want to live anywhere else for more than six months. I love Europe, though. I like going there as much as possible.

Yes, so do I! Well, can you think of anything else to say right now?

Not right now.
Tom Marioni

born May 21, 1937, Cincinnati, Ohio

1946-50 studied violin privately
1954 studied violin, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.
1955-59 studied commercial and fine art, Art Academy, Cincinnati, Ohio.
1959 moved to San Francisco, California.
1959-60 worked as commercial designer, designed rug for Mayor's office.
1960-63 U.S. Army, Ulm, Germany, painted murals for library, post office, dining halls, studied German language.
1963 first one-man show, Bradley Memorial Museum of Art, Columbus, Georgia; sculpture.
1963-66 worked as freelance graphic designer.
1965 worked as lay-out artist, Daily Commercial News.
1966 one-man show, Beep Gallery, San Francisco, California.
1966 worked in night club, sketching nude model.
1966-68 worked as industrial designer, architectural sculpture.
1968 one-man show, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California; sculpture.
1968-71 worked as curator of art, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California.
1969 the creation of a non-existent artist (Allan Fish) until 1971 when it was no longer politically necessary to exhibit under another name (artist X curator).
1970 The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art, as Allan Fish, Oakland Art Museum, Oakland, California.
1970- establishment of a large-scale social and public work of art, MOCA, Museum of Conceptual Art, a tax-exempt corporation, a museum with a membership and collection, a museum for actions and situational art.
1971 became self-employed; began lecturing on art in other institutions of art.
three-man show Fish (allan) Fox (terry) Kos (paul), DeSaisset Museum, University of Santa Clara, Santa Clara, California. Identity transfer, Allan Fish-Tom Marioni, Berkeley Gallery. Identity permanently stored on videotape.
The preposition of a situation and environment while becoming increasingly more intoxicated, Reese Palley Gallery, San Francisco, California; action.
1972 Sunday Scottish Landscape, Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, first one-man show in Europe; drawings and markings as a result of actions, with sound.
My First Car, DeSaisset Museum, Santa Clara, California, the museum purchased a car for me that I exhibited (Fiat 500).
The Creation, a 7-day performance, Reese Palley Gallery, San Francisco, Calif.; living in the gallery for one week; experimenting with the elements as described in the Bible.
Christmas Poem, (mailed out) card announcing my appointment (untrue) as director of the San Francisco Museum of Art.
established the MOCA Ensemble, a music group.
concert St. Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh Festival, Scotland.
Concert/Lecture/Demonstration, University Art Museum, Berkeley, California.
1974 The Sun's Reception, the preparation of a copper plate as a ritual; later printed as drypoint print at Crown Point Press.
The activity was broadcast on Marin (California) cable TV.
A Sculpture in 2/3 Time, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, Yugoslavia.
One Minute Demonstration, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, Yugoslavia.
Drum Lecture, 630 Quixote Street, San Francisco, California.
Duelogue, sound action with Terry Fox, CARP, Los Angeles, California.
Opening Action, Salon of the Museum of Modern Art, Belgrade, Yugoslavia.
East-West, with Peti Stermera, Prague, Czechoslovakia.
Thinking Out Loud, Galerie Fokstal, Warsaw, Poland.
1976 Bird in Space, a psychic sculpture, and/or Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
1977 Yellow is the Color of the Intellect, Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, Oregon.
The Sound of Flight, M. H. DeYoung Museum of Art, San Francisco, California.
Draftings, Paule Anglim Gallery, San Francisco, California.
Artist in Residence, BGSU, Media, New York, sound recording.
Guest Composer, KPFA, Radio, Berkeley, California.
Now We'll Have a Party, First International Performance Festival, Vienna, Austria.

Published Writings:
Invisible Painting and Sculpture, 1969, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California.
The Return of Abstract Expressionism, 1969, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California.
Notes and Scores for Sounds, 1972, Mills College, Oakland, California.
The San Francisco Performance, 1972, Newport Harbor Art Museum, California.
"Art is part of those elements that in one way or another create values, shape beliefs, form goals, and just in general, how should I say it, have an effect on the understanding of oneself and one's role in the social environment . . . on how we see ourselves in the world."

Hans Haacke
Do you like being interviewed?

I don't mind it.

You don't? I read in your book, Framing and Being Framed, in the article by Jack Burnham, that you were trying to be anonymous. So I thought perhaps you wouldn't like to answer questions. You don't like to have your photograph printed; you don't like to sign things.

Yes, but an interview is an elaboration on some of the things that are implicit in the works; and is hopefully not contributing so much to the...

**Personality cult?**

... to the personality cult that is associated with photographs and signatures.

**Is that one of the things that you object to in the art world today?**

Yes, the personality cult takes away from the significance of the work. Hero-worship and gossip both make a fetish out of the producer. It's often more important who sleeps with whom, and what gallery you exhibit at than what the work means.

**Will you explain some things about the two groups of artists called the "New Tendency/Zero" and the "New Realists"? Was what you began doing when you got out of art school related to what they were doing?**

Yes, it was related and partially influenced by them.

**What were they doing?**

Well, the group in Germany, "Zero", was interested in light phenomena and reflection, and motion, and also works that were taking place with a public outside of the gallery space. It was somewhat romantic in approach. In Paris, the "New Tendency" people or, as they also called them—
selves, the "Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel", had some-
what scientific ambitions. It was trying to examine
perceptual phenomena—making it clear to people that
there is no mystique in art—that there is nothing mys-
terious about it. It was an attempt to demystify art.

Are you still doing that? Are you still trying to
demystify art? Or, is that a concern that is already
out of date and now has nothing to do with what you
are working on?

Well, it's complex. On the one hand, what I am doing is
revealing the mystification that art works have generated
and are subject to, the mystification that surrounds them.
On the other hand, such attempts, it seems, are effective
in a contemporary context only if these revelations have
a bit of a mystification of their own.

In other words, so that everything isn't completely
spelled out for people?

Yes, but that's not, no... you see, if I bring these things
into the holy precinct of the gallery, for instance, the
Tiffany object, if that is presented, practically as if on
an altar, then it uses mystifying techniques of traditional
works of art, or rather the way we have come to experience
them. But I believe in doing so it also mocks and in turn
exposes these mystifying mechanisms. It sort of bites the
hand that feeds it.

Yes, I understand. Would you explain, if you can, how you
put things together? The Tiffany piece—how did it come
into your mind? You were looking through the paper one
day... You have a penchant for reading newspapers...

I saw the ad and immediately I realized that it was an
extraordinary statement—something that I always suspected
corporate executives believe. But I never had seen it
spoken out so blatantly. And it's always better to get
it from the horse's mouth than to interpret somebody's
attitudes, because interpretation can always be denounced
as a misinterpretation. Here I could quote; there's no
question about its authenticity, there's no doubt.

Right, there's no doubt. You read the ad, and then you...

I clipped the ad out. I had noticed already, for a while,
that Tiffany, aside from advertising diamonds and Valen-
tine's Day pendants, had also put editorial advertisements
Wood, metal, fabric, 32 x 22 x 22.
in the *Times*. So I called up to see if there was a collection of these advertisements in print. Sure enough there was, and I got it in the mail. And then I had to think about how to present it. First I thought of making a big photomural with a photograph of the facade of Tiffany's which is this fortress up on Fifth Avenue, and somehow fit the ad into it, maybe in the frame of the door. But, that wasn't interesting enough. So I finally came up with the idea that I should use the same approach that Tiffany takes when it offers its wares; and, that would be to build a box, a precious box—not just some "schlocky" box...

*Like a jewelry box.*

And I searched my memory for what kind of fabrics are appropriate in this context: satin, velvet... and then I went out to find the proper wood for it.

*Proper wood? It had to be a special kind of wood?*

Well, it had to be a wood that would look as if it was at least a hundred years old: solid, reliable and gentle. No Danish design.

*No, no Danish Modern.*

So I found this incredible stuff in a specialty lumber place up in the Bronx. A very red wood which when it ages turns darker and is no longer as fiery as when it is cut. It is very important that you get the right materials because the materials have a connotation. It's not just a dumb material.

*No!*

Canvas has a meaning, velvet has a meaning and satin has a meaning, too. You have to choose the materials that can carry the message that you want to get across.

*And the text itself is... is copper that's silverplated?*

It's etched in copper and then it was silverplated. And the text on the satin is gold-stamped.

*So it cost a lot to produce. Is it for sale?*

It is for sale, sure.

*How much is it for sale for?*
Oh, upwards from ten thousand. It was very funny when I brought it into the gallery and John saw it and said, "It's a terrific piece and whoever wants to have it should damn well pay for it."

Well, I wonder if he has anybody in mind. I mean, all your works by implication directly attack the people who would be likely to buy art.

I have been told by a friend of mine who goes to high-powered art parties that one big collector in New York once remarked to him that he was intrigued by what I was doing, but he didn't quite see why he should put money into something that he felt was aimed at him.

Would it bother you if someone wanted to buy your work just because they felt that it would make their collection complete? Do you care why anyone would buy it?

That depends. Obviously the context in which the work, and not only mine, appears has an effect on how the work is read. So I would wonder if in the context of a particular collection the message that I intended would be subverted or...

Or rendered powerless.

Or rendered powerless. Or perhaps it would survive and might even play the role of a Trojan horse.

Would you reserve the right to say that the work cannot go to a particular collector?

Oh, yes. Also I sell my works only with the so-called "Siegelaub contract" so...

The "Siegelaub contract"? What's that?

It's a model contract that Seth Siegelaub and Bob Projansky worked out in the early 70s which stipulates that the artist retains some control over his work even though it is the property of somebody else. For example, if the work is to be exhibited publicly it requires that the artist be informed and agree with the particular context in which the work is exhibited; that is very important.

Yes. Yes, I can see that, especially for your work. Is your work aimed at artists primarily or is it aimed at the entire art world? Or a larger world than that?
ARE THE RICH A MENACE?

Some people think they are, so let’s look at the record.

Suppose you inherit, win or otherwise acquire a million dollars net after taxes. That would make you rich, wouldn’t it? Now, what’s the first thing you’d do? Invest it, wouldn’t you—
in stocks, bonds or in a savings bank.

So, what does that mean? It means that you have furnished the capital required to put about 30 people to work.

How is that? National statistics show that for every person graduating from school or college, at least thirty thousand dollars of capital must be found for bricks, fixtures, machinery, inventory, etc. to put each one to work.

Now, on your million dollar investments you will receive an income of sixty thousand, eighty thousand, or more dollars a year. This you will spend for food, clothing, shelter, taxes, education, entertainment and other expenses. And this will help support people like policemen, firemen, store clerks, factory workers, doctors, teachers, and others. Even congressmen.

So, in other words, Mr. Rich Man, you would be supporting (wholly or partially) perhaps more than 100 people.

Now, how about that? Are you a menace? No, you are not.

Tiffany & Co.

Advertisements in the New York Times, June 6, 1907

The 9,260,000 Unemployed in The United States of America Demand The Immediate Creation of More Millionaires

Well, it is immediately understandable, I imagine, by everybody who belongs to the art world, but I believe it's open enough so that people who are not part of this particular parochial network will understand what I am talking about—although not every element. But in turn "outsiders" might get things the art crowd would miss because the clues are not all of an art-derived nature.

Yes, perhaps they might miss some of the refinement and subtlety. Compared to most other art which involves social criticism, your work is subtle. In spite of that do you feel in any way that this is a crusade on your part?

No, I would be a megalomaniac if I thought this was going to radically change things. I would be very naive to assume that a couple of pieces of a particular artist could essentially change the flow of events.

Well, don't you get very frustrated? You are very serious about what you do, and your work should produce some kind of reaction. And yet you seem quite fatalistic about the fact that it won't...

I don't think it is in vain, but I also don't think one should have overblown expectations. One needs to see it in a larger context, that is to say there are quite a number of people in practically every profession trying to look at things from an alternate point of view different from the one we are constantly presented with. Seen in this larger context, it is not quite insignificant. It is like a piece in a mosaic, potentially giving the whole pattern an ideologically somewhat different coloration. But even without this, I find it personally gratifying to spell out the things that rub me. It is almost therapeutic. Alienation needs to be articulated rather than suppressed.

Your name is never really mentioned in conjunction with other people's names except sometimes with the Art Workers' Coalition, so you seem to have always been on your own. Is that, would you say, is that a fair description?

Yes, to a certain degree, that's true. I'd say this kind of work is not very popular. So you really have to look all over the country, even look across the ocean, to see—to find people who have—who are working in a related fashion. Not that they do exactly the same kind of thing but where there is a similarity of spirit.

In Europe there are political connotations in almost
every aspect of life, much more so than in the United States. So would that be something that has helped to form the way you think: the fact that you were brought up in the midst of a greater political awareness?

Yes, possibly, possibly. But also, I don't know if you were in New York in the late 60s and you somehow went through all that political turmoil. The Art Workers Coalition was for instance--after the beginning--was totally American. Well, if these people were to take seriously what they were talking about then, eventually, it had to enter their work and general outlook and how they shaped their lives. But it's very difficult if the work you do at a particular time (and you have a certain amount of success and get gratification from it) leads you in a direction that does not allow for the deliberate inclusion of social issues. Then to abandon all you have done and start from a totally different angle, an angle about which you know very little, would be extremely difficult. And it could fall flat on its face, not only economically, but as art. So I understand that some artists, although they might have liked to move into a socially oriented direction, simply didn't see a possibility for themselves.

Most of the artists I've talked with are concerned with the way that their art interacts with life, but the direct relationship doesn't usually exist, or isn't so clear as it is in your work.

You know, interaction with life doesn't always imply social life on a large scale, but it usually does, because you don't live as an isolated entity; you live also beyond the circle of family and friends. Then, invariably you get into these things; it's unavoidable.

The title of your book, Framing and Being Framed, has a lot of levels of meaning. You frame information from daily life and bring it into the art gallery...

On the one hand you, as an artist, pick out things that are of interest to you and possibly to others by focusing on them, putting them into a frame. At the same time the art world frames you insofar as all the forces at work there have an impact on what you are doing and how it is received. But the title not only makes reference to this outlining of things but also the slang understanding of "framed".
Yes. "I've been framed."

It's aggressive and essentially exploitative... An example would be--let's take Paine Webber, the stock brokerage firm. This year's annual report is illustrated with photographs of the Depression--people standing in lines for unemployment or handouts. The theme for this public relations gimmick is that a good investment climate will reduce unemployment; therefore it is important that, as Paine Webber views it, capitalism is made more powerful. It is the same message that Walter Hoving is presenting: you have to have a small number of people making tremendous fortunes so that they can put other people to work. It's sort of the handout theory to legitimate exploitation.

Oh, God, it's really shocking!

And then you find corporate ads in the newspapers--like the one from Allied Chemical where "profits are for people", or Mobil advertisements appealing to liberals not to attack the corporate world because, after all, welfare programs are also paid out of their profits, not mentioning, of course, that a reduction of corporate power might in fact reduce the need for vast welfare programs. It's all the same line.

We're being framed, we're being exploited. But this Tiffany piece is going away from the subject of the art world. Most of the work up to now that you have done, your political works, that is, have had to do with the art world, except perhaps the works about slumlords.

When I did the real estate piece, that was done at a time when I had a one-man show coming up at the Guggenheim (which as you know didn't take place after all). I wanted to do something at the Guggenheim that made reference to buildings and power structures that are totally opposite from what one usually expects at the Guggenheim.

Why did you choose that particular subject?

* editor's note: This exhibition, organized by Edward Fry, was to include a documentation of slum properties. The exhibition was cancelled and the curator was fired for defending the artist's right to exhibit this work.
214 E 3 St.  
Block 345 Lot 11  
5-story walk-up old law tenement  

Owned by Hanpex Realty Inc., 600 E 11 St., NYC  
Contracts signed by Harry J. Shapolsky, President (1963)  
Martin Shapolsky, President (1964)  
Principal Harry J. Shapolsky (according to Real Estate Directory of Manhattan)  

Acquired 8-21-1963 from John the Baptist Foundation, c/o The Bank of New York, 40 Wall St., NYC, for $257,000. (also 7 other blgs.)  
$150,000 mortgage at 6% interest, 8-13-1963, due 8-13-1983, held by the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Convention, 124 Riverside Drive, NYC (also on 7 other blgs.)  
Assessed land value $20,000., total $79,000. (excluding 212 and 216 E 3 St.) (1971)  

Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, excerpt.
Well, the Guggenheim is physically a very clean building, it has white walls, and everything is taken care of. It's also a place of almost cathedral-like attributes. It is turning art almost into a religion, the museum as a place for religious experiences, and thereby creating a very distinct psychological separation between what you experience and think inside and outside, in the "everyday" world.

That's exactly the notion that John Cage and other artists I've talked with are trying to break down.

I wanted to bring into this cathedral something that is of concern to a great number of people in the City, but not the kinds of people who go to the museum... that would have put the museum into perspective.

For the people who do go to the museum.

Right. For the people who do go. I was dealing implicitly with this peculiar art world phenomenon—the separation of spheres of social life. The social forces that have an effect on the art world naturally are the same social forces that affect everything else in the country, and in the world. The art world is not an isolated entity. (I hope this comes through in the pieces specifically dealing with the interface between the art world and the larger social environment.) Therefore, I feel that there is justification for also making direct references to these "outside" determinants. If you are interested in revealing ideology, you don't have to restrict yourself to just one small segment of society where this ideology is in force. Ironically, and maybe not accidentally, there is a design ambition with Tiffany's, to the point that Walter Hoving, the chairman, is publishing books on good design.

Oh, I didn't know that.

Oh, yes. And most likely a number of the people who come to art galleries, not so much the artists, but rather the collecting public, are clients of Tiffany's, so there is a link.

Why did you want Walter Hoving's picture on the cover of this issue of View instead of your own? Don't you think it is misleading?

Misleading in what sense?
Just to single him out in a certain way. Is it just particularly timely right now because of the Tiffany sculpture and the Tiffany etching?

Hoving is the author of most Tiffany editorial ads. Also this photo, I think, shows in a way, that he assumes that there is such a thing as an isolated individual existence, a sort of super-hero.

So does society in general.

For a while this has been a very common American Myth--Individualism. If you look at the "doing one's thing" league and the psychedelic movement--self-salvation, you know, psychological push-button redemption schemes for the individual--all of this follows the same line. Also the born-again Christians like Walter Hoving speak primarily about their personal relationship to what they consider God. Sideways, as to their fellow human beings, whatever there is gets drowned in sentimentality and symbolic gestures like philanthropy.

It's not that he is going to physically offer to help anybody else himself--his help is such a corporate gesture, so removed from the human level.

There is very little feeling of responsibility beyond one's own relationship to God and that in turn is not the outgrowth of a responsible act, but an epiphany. But as Hoving's own testimonial reveals this "rebirth" is quite profitable. In a recent New York Magazine article he is quoted, "It's quite simple. You open yourself to the Lord and the Lord helps. At one time, when I had to buy Bonwit Teller I was $2.5-million short and I didn't know how to get it and I was shown how to get it." Our trouble is only that "He" doesn't like us, otherwise we would also be chairmen of profitable companies.

And you think the art world has also done that?

It's certainly a characteristic of the art world. The artist is still celebrated as the genius, the source of individual superhuman achievement. That is also the source for the personality cult in which the admirers vicariously participate in the great act of their hero.

Well, okay. I understand. Do you see your role as an artist as one of informing people, to make them more aware and thus hopefully, eventually, the by-product of
"...‘Religion is really very simple,’ says Walter Hoving. ‘You open yourself to the Lord and the Lord helps. He does with me’..."
this awareness will be some activity to improve the situation we have been talking about?

Only in the sense that it might change the climate a bit. After all, the art world, or to speak more specifically, the art industry, (it is an industry) is part of what Enzensberger, a German writer, has called the "consciousness industry". Because art is part of those elements that in one way or another create values, shape beliefs, form goals and just in general, how should I say it, have an effect on the understanding of oneself and one's role in the social environment; as the press does, as the priest does, as the judge does, the movie industry and so forth. All these agents have an effect on how we see ourselves in the world. Therefore, I think it is not negligible what kind of consciousness is promoted in this peculiar world that is the art world.

What about other artists--I mean what do you think about what they do? Do you think that they have a responsibility to make art more than just self-referential?

I would be glad if more people would be sensitive to these things. But it's a very touchy thing. I certainly don't want to come out and demand that everybody get into line!

Well, as you said before, it's not possible for everyone. How did you feel when you were asked to come out here and make etchings, why did you decide to do that?

On the one hand, I had a sentimental thing going because 'way back in the early 60s I did etchings myself. But more important was that etching is a medium by which high society today communicates. If they want to call their friends to a reception, to a party, or a benefit ball then this is done by way of an etched invitation. So if I choose a verbal quote that reveals the attitudes of some of the members of that particular segment of society, I think it also appropriate to use their visual style and that would be the etched invitation.

Like you were saying you used velvet and satin and certain kinds of arrangements because these things carry a kind of meaning. People relate to the material that you use in a specific way.

Oh, yes. On the one hand, etching is an established art medium with a long history; and, at the same time, today, it's a medium associated with a certain segment of society.
It is very important for these things to take the proper form. That, however, doesn't mean that the form is what makes them art. As I indicated I often quote not only the words of certain people or institutions, but also the style in which they address the public. So in the case of Mobil, for instance, I printed on plastic and the corners of these panels are rounded like the rounded edges of the Mobil gas station signs. The facsimile reproduction of the Mobil P.R. man's address was positioned and also headlined in the same way in which Mobil addresses the public in the New York Times. So I am not in the business of inventing new forms but I am very concerned about form.

Yes. Attention to detail and a sense of the visual.

Or you could also put it this way--the form is in itself part of the content.

Something that seems to run through all your work is a concern about the environment, and how in all of our activity we interact with the environment, both physical and social, around us. And I wondered if you would describe one of your early pieces you think particularly successful in pointing out this interaction?

Well, as an example I could refer to the condensation pieces that I did in the early 60s. I made boxes that had some water enclosed. It evaporated and condensed on the inside of the transparent walls of these containers. They are affected by environmental conditions--light, air drafts, temperature, the space in which these boxes are displayed.

Things that you don't have any control over.

Well, I can, of course, influence the environment. I can turn on the light or I can put the container in the window or I can blow air on it. But whatever I do there will be a reaction to these environmental conditions.

And the pieces you did outside you would have even less control over because weather becomes important.

Yes. Sure. So one could maybe say that implicit in these things (and this is the way I look at it) is an understanding that there is no such... that everything is in a way connected with everything else. That there
are no isolated phenomena; that these are not closed systems—they are all open and interacting. That was happening on the physical level in the early pieces. Later on, in works that deal with social phenomena, the social environment (in which these things are displayed)—the gallery (as a peculiar social organization), or the city or the country—has an effect on how they are read.

So that's just related to what we were talking about earlier, that is, the contemporary stress on the individual, on the ego, on an isolated individual functioning in the world, not simply the art world, but society in general. Your work is very much about saying that's just not true.

I feel that this is also not in contradiction to contemporary science, be it psychology or sociology. All those sciences that deal with human behavior seem to point to the fact that people are in fact not isolated entities, but are always responding to outside factors and in a dialectical fashion influencing them—although usually in a minor way because we are small elements in a much larger cosmos.

I understand. Your work has been related to general systems theory. I want you to explain a little about that.

Well, I am not an expert in systems theory, but I got interested in it in a layman's fashion in the middle 60s when I read Ludwig von Bertalanffy's book, General Systems Theory. What fascinated me is that general systems theory as a basic tenet has the understanding that everything is connected. There are interdependencies of all the elements, those in the physical world, the biological, and also in the behavioral, social world. This goes so far that the mathematical equations that are used in the physical world to describe certain phenomena can be used also for phenomena in economics, for instance plotting of political developments. According to general systems theory the phenomena of the world have an isomorphic quality.

What does isomorphic mean?

It means that forms and patterns of behavior in one set of phenomena have an equivalent in another set. So that one can view the world as a whole rather than as autonomous departments.
So when you found his book, you had already expressed these concerns in your work?

Oh yes. I sort of felt confirmed then.

Jack Burnham quotes from a letter that you wrote to him after the death of Martin Luther King. You wrote you had become aware that traditional art, painting and sculpture, couldn't be used as a political tool or as a medium of communication for changing people's attitudes about things. Were you active in the 60s? Did you demonstrate?

Not very active. I went to a lot of the civil rights rallies in Washington, I remember that. I participated on the fringes a little bit in New York, but not very actively, partially because I was a foreigner and it seemed a little touchy to participate in national politics. There was also a political climate that could have put my alien status in jeopardy if I had been very active.

Sure. But you obviously sympathized?

Sure. Very much so.

Do you think that because you... You grew up in Germany during the Nazi period, and your father was invited to become a member of the Nazi party but he refused. How has your family's political background affected what you do now, if you think it has? Because it's quite--it's an unusual circumstance among people in the art world, I think.

Well, my father was not a political activist, but it obviously had affected his life, and it sort of set a moral standard for me. I guess you could say that. And, so I was maybe tempted to live up to such a standard. When I saw something that was wrong, I would speak about it--maybe that has something to do with it... I don't know.

Then why didn't you become a lawyer or a politician? They seem to have a bigger voice in terms of getting to the public than artists do, you know.

Sometimes it becomes a problem (now that I am working in this area)---people forget that I have always been working in the art world, as an artist. This is what I chose to do right from the beginning. That's why I went to art school, and that's what seemed to gratify me most. And
there is not really any reason to regret it, because the same sense of alienation that you would find as an artist who is sensitive to certain things, you find as a doctor, as a lawyer, as a politician, because people in every one of these professions find themselves in peculiar, compromising situations and it takes a certain amount of, maybe, courage and also stubbornness to break with the standard mode of behavior, to do things different from the way most others do.

Yes. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Well, I was just going to--when I made the remark that the form doesn't make it art, I underlined that by intonation, and I would like to elaborate a little bit. What makes something a work of art is probably a social consensus that has nothing to do with intrinsic qualities of a particular object or activity.

What about the content?

Or even the content, for that matter. It's--what is required is that some people who happen to have cultural power (and in the case of the art world, that means certain critics, certain artists and galleries, certain curators, journals, etc., not without influence from those on whom they might depend) that they come to an informal, unorganized agreement that something that was done by somebody who is participating in this fluid, funny thing that is called the art world is now to be considered art, and not something else.

Well, that is easy to see when the content of the art is other art. People in the art world can see that certain issues that have been raised by one artist have been taken up or rejected or taken further by the work of another artist.

Yes, but that is again resulting from a consensus of the power group, because, for example, one could also assume that someone who is referring to the ideas of his predecessors is therefore not an artist. That would be as viable a position as long as it had the consensus backing. What we are talking about, of course, is so-called "high art".

Elite...

That's right. If you were to take these things we are
The Mobilization 1975 cover features a prominent display of the Mobil logo and the word "Mobil" in large, bold letters. The cover includes two columns of text, each discussing different aspects of mobilization.

The text on the left column is as follows:

"Mobilization 1975"

The text on the right column is as follows:

"Mobilization 1975"

The cover also includes a smaller section at the bottom, possibly containing additional information or details related to the Mobilization 1975 event or campaign.
thinking of to the Washington Square Art Fair—they would no longer be art, because there a different cultural power group would set standards. They would think it is just ridiculous what we are getting excited about, and something else would be elevated to the pinnacle of what they consider art. If you go to still another cultural context—if you go to the ethnic communities, they again would have a very different standard for what is art. It would be up to the ones who, in that particular social segment, set standards and decide what is art and what is something else.

The thing that is disturbing about high art today is that there are a lot of well-educated, intelligent people who, when they walk into an art gallery, don't understand what's going on. That is because the art seems to have no reference to them or to what goes on around them. Because so much of the art is self-referential, as we said, just dealing with issues from one artist to another...

If artists are only concerned with developing forms that speak about art, then if you are not part of this conversation, you don't get the idea of what they're talking about. I think that there is no obligation on anybody's part outside of that group to learn...

No. That's right, there's no obligation.

The notion of art for art's sake is new, at best, a hundred years old. And even within the history of the last hundred years, there were movements which we now recognize as major movements that had very distinct socio-political ambitions—you take the Dadaist movement, you take the Surrealists, and for that matter, also the Constructivists. It's really only very recently that their ideological aspects are talked down or almost suppressed; in the writing of contemporary art history, often only the formal aspects receive attention.

The point is that artists have to change, and the whole art world has to change, in order to continue to be vital. The whole world has to change.

Yes. If things continue as they are (of course, there are a number of exceptions) it looks as if what we consider art now is on a suicidal course. Because the more ingrown it becomes, and the more it remains a matter of refined conversation and witticisms among experts and
initiates, the less vital it becomes. It's turning around itself in circles. It's eating itself up, and eventually there is going to be nothing left.

Perhaps there is going to be a new generation of people who are more concerned.

I hope so, but I am not really proposing that everyone now should go out and make explicitly "political" things.

No, I didn't think that.

That would be a naive understanding of what I am saying.

No, I think the work has far greater implications than just that. Well, thank you, Hans. It's been a pleasure.
Hans Haacke

Biography
"It was that whole idea I had about painting—about the uniqueness of flat art, that it could be taken in completely, at once... In other words, one of the reasons people gave for saying that painting was dead seemed like the very thing that made it extremely unique and important."
This interview took place at Robert Mangold's house in September. While I was there he showed me some early, small maquettes for larger works, and later in the studio I saw two canvases he was working on at the time. We have referred to these works during the interview.

* * *

What was it like to be at art school at Yale in 1959, '60?

The only reason I went to art school was that—there was a whole formative period of five or six years when I first thought that I'd go into the art world, somehow. I thought at first maybe I'd be an illustrator or something. It wasn't until I was at art school that I became aware that painting could be a serious, full-time occupation. Something more than a hobby. So when I realized that one could be a painter, or an artist, the art school was like a community of other people who were interested in similar things. It was possible to get scholarships—it didn't cost a lot of money to go to school—and you could work and you could get people to come in and talk to you about your work, and it seemed like the best situation at that time.

So, when you were there, were you making abstract expressionist paintings?

Well, yes, I was at first. One of the things at Yale that helped was access to some of their art history classes. Up to that point I had tried to assimilate Abstract Expressionism and make paintings close to what I saw, but of course the works had no real meaning. At Yale I got involved in Cubism and Surrealism and I spent a lot of time looking at Early American art.

I wonder—whomever looked at painting first and said, "Oh, it's just a painting. It's an object." I mean, did you get that when you were at Yale, or did that come after?

When I was at Yale, the students talked about painting as moving a brush.
Yes.

Painting was...

The activity, the arena. People talked about your brush-strokes. You can't really think about when the lightbulb first went on about painting as an object?

I think everybody talked about it in relationship to Johns' things.

So it wasn't until then?

I don't think of people talking about it that way until then. The language about painting as an object I think, really started with Johns and there were others, too, Ortman and Jensen.

A point was reached where it's no longer a painting about something; it's an object.

Johns did paintings that were particularly about that issue. To understand that time you have to remember that there was an incredible division between painting and sculpture. I mean, painting was really the avant garde area of art. If you think of abstract expressionist painting and the sculpture that went with it—for instance, David Smith was out of Picasso. Sculpture was really in a retarded position in relation to painting. Then in the sixties, sculpture really mushroomed, and in a sense, was filling a void. It was at that time people said, "Well, painting is dead" you know, and everybody was going into sculpture.

Sculpture is much more of an activity, really, than action painting....

Yes, right. Anyway, at that time, I had been working you know, on those kind of wall pieces, and there was a real question about how three-dimensional I should make them. And then I remember I did one very, very flat painting. In fact, I showed you that little model of it upstairs. It was a red one that was cut out on the bottom and notched at the top, 8' by 8', about two inches thick, it was made out of masonite on two-by-twos and was very flat against the wall. And—l—you know, something really clicked in me and I decided that that flat frontality, that was really the issue I was interested in—I mean that totality of image, an image that you can see completely was, to me, the unique thing, and that was what I wanted to do. And so,
I stopped doing the more three-dimensional things—and that was really the big...

That was the big decision.

That was the big decision for me.

That was in nineteen-sixty—what? Five?

Yes, it would be '64 or '65; it would be around that time. It was funny, because a critic came down one day and he really wanted me to keep going in the three-dimensional direction. He said—oh, you know, those pieces were terrific, but the flat one there—he really didn't like it at all!

That made you like it?

Actually, that really clarified my mind about it. It really wasn't just being perverse. It just somehow...

He cleared up the issues.
Yes. He cemented it clearly in terms of what I wanted to do.

So, you were pursuing this question of two-dimensionality and also, it appears, a kind of metaphysical concept of scale, something that concerned both painters and sculptors.

Yes, scale was one of the things I was trying to clear up in my art. It was confusing to me for a period of time because a lot of the painters, also sculptors, who talked a lot about scale did extremely large works. And I kept saying, "Well, you're really talking about size, aren't you?" and they'd say, "No, I'm not talking about size, I'm talking about scale." I found it difficult—you see, if they were talking about scale, why did they always work large? And—so I did a series of pieces, none of which were shown—where I did a work in different sizes. There was one three-panel piece which had an 'X' on each panel, and I did them all on the same proportion panels at one-inch intervals between—I guess I started out with a twelve-inch and went up to two or three foot panel size. And I had them spread out in the studio; the whole studio had this one piece over, and over, and over. I was investigating, I guess, two things: one was, is there a perfect size—now when I get all through with these, is one size going to be more meaningful than the other? And, the other thing was the idea of just what happens when you repeat yourself. I wanted initially to do all these pieces and then give them away or something, have them go to different places. I was thinking about the idea of painting as a unique thing. Since you could repeat a thing, since you could maybe do the same thing four times, is it still unique? I was investigating those issues. Actually, I don't know what it accomplished. I spent a year doing them.

Al Held, Robert Grosvenor, Ronald Blayden—there were a lot of people who were doing very large size work, and talked a lot about scale.

I was trying to pinpoint in my mind why they were not talking about size, size is tangible, specific—scale was talked about spiritually. If you're talking about scale as the ability of something to read larger than it is, that's illusionism. But, all I'm saying is it's something I went through a long time ago. I'm not very involved in issues of scale anymore. It had to do with a changeover—there was a whole set of values that sculpture was bringing in and I was trying to figure them out in terms of painting. Also, this
was a time when every dealer was advertising his square footage, you know, Reese Palley and all those people opening up with enormous spaces, and everyone wanted to do bigger and bigger works. And I was trying to figure out for myself what relationship the size of the work had to the work, or to the idea. I came to a kind of decision that I wanted to make pictures, pieces that were of roughly human size, you know, five, six feet.

The big things, the big walls in 1964, were—the proportions of those were according to the size of the masonite panels that you...

Yes, the building materials I was using came in a standard four-foot by eight-foot size, so whatever other structural decisions were made I knew the work would have a seam every four feet.

Right. You said that the division was there because that's where the panel ended and there had to be a line there. And then that became interesting to you as an idea, this line—and so you started putting in the line in other ways later.

Yes—there was a period, that time when I was working on all those works of the different sizes it seemed natural to explore certain serial ideas, too, which I did for about a year or two and then I decided that I really wanted to go back to making single objects, single paintings. They might be related to other pieces—you know, there could be variations that I might do, but I didn't explore system in a really tight way. I wanted to do just single paintings.
But I've found it hard to work that way; I tend to think of an idea or a painting that suggests variations, so I have to do them in groups. What I explore in one painting, if I do it in a different way in the next painting, then maybe do it in another way, the experience of all of them is more interesting and involving than if I had just done one.

Diane Waldman in a catalogue for the Guggenheim show spoke about how you needed to see the painting as an object, and how you were making a static declaration of the painting as an object. But I was thinking that your art, however much each painting is an object, is really a representation of a series of ideas.

I start first with an idea, a kind of structural idea, and it satisfies certain criteria that maybe I apply to ideas to decide what makes an idea a good one or a bad one. But there's nothing interesting for its own sake in the idea; it's the idea in the context of my work, and also in the size that I do it and in all the other decisions that are made in the doing of it. And if it's done right then the final object is really somehow much more important than the idea.

How do you decide which ideas to go with?

It's not always a formal choice. It could be just a sense that I have that the work is wrong this way, or something, or that it would be better another way, and I don't have any--there isn't any formal logic when you look at a page of drawings to decide on one idea as opposed to another.

For instance, in the early paintings, in '64 and '65, you were working with an idea about edges--that the edges not be sharply defined, that the painting expand out on to the wall?

I think that--yes--well, I think that the key thing about my paintings is that I've always had the desire to make the work be a unity, and I wanted nothing to be ahead of anything else. The reason that in those early works I used very low-key colors, in most cases, was I didn't want you to walk in and see color, and I didn't want you to walk in and see shape. I wanted the elements, which were the periphery line and the internal line, the surface color, etc., to be equal. I wanted them to be so totally locked together that they were inseparable. No one area of the painting should be more important than another--even the idea--you know, I didn't want to put the importance on the idea.
On what area is the importance, then? On the unit?

The importance is on the linkage between idea and process, and on the materialization of it, the final object. It's not as if the painting process is the most important part of the work. It isn't. And it isn't as if the idea is the most important part of the work. The only thing that matters is the work, in the end, and it should present itself as a unit. In a frontal, in a complete way. It was that whole idea I had about painting—about the uniqueness of flat art, that it could be taken in completely, at once. That doesn't mean that you don't have to read it, that you don't spend time looking at certain things about it, but the point is that it seemed terribly unique and terribly important to me that painting was, along with drawing, prints and maybe photography, the only art form that you could experience that in. Everything else involved time and space. In other words, one of the reasons people gave for saying that painting was dead seemed like the very thing that made it extremely unique and important.
Your last show--at John Weber--when I walked in, I almost flipped! The colors were--very bright.

Very bright.

And unlike anything you've done before. You said earlier that color isn't too terribly important, the choice of color. You started using very pale colors, and then they got bright--er, but they were still muted. I wondered if this use of very bold colors was... well, Dorothea (Rockburne) had a show not too long ago where she started using color, and two or three years ago, Sol (Le Witt) started transforming walls with very bright, bold color--is this some kind of trend? What do you think?

At one point, I really thought I could use color arbitrarily, that I could switch it all around. My only justification for using different colors was I wanted to separate the works one from the other. And I thought, "Well, the green could just as easily be on the pink painting, and the pink could be on the yellow painting." But, you know--the color had to be keyed some way to right relationships. Sometimes a shape could take a strong color, or it might have to be toned down. At a certain point I began to think about color more--

In '69, '70?

Right. Since then I've concentrated more on colors, and I've thought about color earlier in the process, so that now when I do a little drawing of a piece, I begin then thinking about what color I'd like it to be. I really try very hard to make the color very specific for that specific work.

Okay, but what made you...?

Oh, the bright colors. Actually, I'm not so sure they are that much brighter than previous work. I worked in similar reds and yellows before, but as a concentrated group of works they were intense. What happened is I used a bright cerulean blue in the first painting. I had that on the wall and I started doing models for some of the others, and I just couldn't get a system of color to work for all the pieces. I knew I wanted them as a group. So then I did a yellow one, and then I saw that I could try to deal with primary and secondary colors. In these pieces I had six working ideas and I decided to do each in a primary and secondary color; red, yellow, blue, green, orange, violet
and each would be done in three ways: a small masonite panel, a larger painting on paper and a still larger painting on canvas. The initial worry about them was that the color was going to overpower everything else.

Yes.

But I don't think it happened. I was pleased with the way the smaller works held their own against the large canvasses. What I'm doing now is a little quieter in color again.

Why?

But I don't—it's not as though I really consciously—I didn't set out to do those in bright colors. It just occurred to me, in the process of making them and I did it for the sake of that group of paintings and I was very happy with them.

Okay, something else that I wanted to ask you was—well, this work over here—that's a new work?

Yes, that's just—I'm not sure whether it's going to be done or not. I have to work fairly slowly because I get ideas that I think are absolutely terrific. But spontaneous responses aren't always good. They generally don't even get
worked out until a couple of days later... I like to sit with an idea for awhile and I usually make it into a drawing or something, then after a week or so I'm pretty sure about what it is. I usually develop a lot of confidence, I'm quite sure that it's really going to be a good work at that point, you know, so that I'm able to proceed. And at that point, like that one behind you, there still could be changes made—I might change the color—but I'm more or less getting everything figured out so I can do the final work.

I remember you had said somewhere before that the act of painting was the thing that took the least amount of time—it took much more time in working the idea out.

The painting part to me is a little like the printing part in printmaking. It's like, you know, it's just something that's needed to arrive at the work.

I know, one thing, very important that I wanted to ask you about—the line, the line down the center.

We started to get into this before, and never did.
Yes, right. Did the line that's down the center give you the idea of the other lines—which finally developed into arcs and then triangles and circles within squares and squares within circles and other variations?

With those early pieces I got involved in sectioning and when you section a painting, certain things happen. One of the things is that it makes everything stay on the surface—it helps everything stay on the surface. The other thing that the division of panels does, it keeps reinforcing the edge. It keeps making you think about the edge, because the edge is in the center. If the edge were just on the edge, you could drift into the painting. As we said earlier, the sectioning started out as a material thing. But I realized that there were certain formal and psychological things that the line does and the way that it affects how you read something became more and more important.

So, sectioning now is really an integral part of your work?

It's one of the elements that I work with. I do paintings that don't have a section.

Yes, but those are all small, for one thing, and also deal with complete geometric forms.

When I do a larger painting, it's always sectional. It's always two or three panels put together.

It seems to have fairly different subject matter altogether, you know.

What does?

The smaller paintings which have complete geometric forms on them as opposed to the paintings with the sectional slash.

Geometric art always makes me nervous, I don't think of my work in that way. I think all of my works are about things fitting or not really fitting together, with the structural shape either dictating the terms of the interior structure or setting up a framework the interior structure plays off of. In these new arc paintings the positioning of the arc is determined by the distortions occurring on the frame.... Of course, whenever you do an arc there's an implied gigantic circle, you know, but in a sense—I deny that. Even though an arc goes from side to side you don't visually extend it.
I wonder why you don't, perhaps because the arc is such a small section of the entire implied circle?

Part of the reason for having the painting not just a simple rectangle painting is that if it were a simple rectangle then I think it would be much more of a frame and you'd see an arc and, extend it. But when the painting is constructed from sections with distortions, then the edge becomes much more powerful.

Yes.

And dynamic. And then whatever happens inside, happens in relation to the edge so you're always brought back. Even though the arc—the gesture of the arc—seems to imply that the line would be like a hundred-foot circle if it were a complete circle.

So, the content of the paintings that you're working on now is still basically the same ideas that you've been working with for a long time.

I think so. The work has changed but it's very circular, in
that things that I have dealt with before keep coming back. I don't think that if I dropped a painting from 1965 into a new exhibition it would look out of place.

No.

I don't think it would, I don't know--it would be interesting to do it.

Well, if anything, it would be more complex than the new work.

Maybe. I had this feeling that my work was moving toward a more complicated image--I was--I've been going through this whole thing in my mind for awhile, I've been trying to do two-color paintings.

Oh?

Every springtime, maybe it happens seasonally or something, I do all these sketches for two-color paintings, and they're just disasters. And then I give it up until next spring. I had the feeling that the paintings were becoming more and
more complex—so I tried to force one in that direction. The results were not at all good. I was working on it one day and it occurred to me that my next paintings were going to be even more simple—I mean, rather than the direction I felt I was going in, that it would be the opposite of that.

You've made three groups of etchings at Crown Point. How do you feel about printmaking?

Making prints is difficult for me because I am not used to working with other people.

You feel more removed from the work?

Yes. But it's nice—the removedness is all right. It's just an adjustment I have trouble with.

But you try to get in there as much as you can. I noticed you were mixing your own inks.

Yes.

You've made prints enough now so that perhaps you could even try to pull your own plates?

I guess I could, but I've seen them wipe those plates and I could never wipe those plates like that. It is really a skill. I wouldn't attempt to do it because I know that I would be out there for months trying to do a set of prints, and I'd never get results. It's interesting, because it's the only thing I do that involves other people. Otherwise it's done totally in my studio with me talking to myself.

Getting back to the edges and the line down the center—is that, is that the thing that got you started on working with edges?

Well, I think that the division, the panel division line, allowed me to put a certain kind of pressure on the edge by having that edge interiorize itself, allowed me to put emphasis on it and not allow you to forget that it's there. And that allowed me—that kind of pressure then allowed me to do other kinds of things inside, because the edge would constantly be re-asserting itself. Even with gradations in the surface I could achieve a kind of flatness. I did gradations which were—well, when I first came to New York City, I told you, Sylvia and I were building superintendents uptown. And one of the things that used to fascinate me was those architectural sections between the buildings, sections
of air that would glow, you know--

I know.

Sunsets or mornings, or whatever, you'd see these incredible areas of light and they were architectural shapes and yet they were nothing, because they were the voids of architecture.

Those are what people take photographs of all the time.

And I used to see those and I used to think about them, and I used to think about a painting that would be atmospheric and architectural. So the first ones that I did that way were literal translations almost of building gaps. And so when I had that show called "Walls and Areas" they were really that.

They really were.

They were pieces of architecture and the space between them. Although I don't think people really see them that way. It's just a secondary content, it isn't even really very important.

Well, that is interesting because other people were also working with space, I mean, when I was talking to Bob Barry he said he was very concerned with space at that time. So even though it was only a secondary concern, it's interesting that it was a concern at all.

It was only after that point that I really re-focused on the flat plane and the reference to buildings and all of that disappeared in the next few works.

Did you do many paintings that relate to something outside of painting?

I was really enthralled with New York City and excited by the industrial imagery when I first came there. I loved the way the subways---not the cars---the station walls were two levels of color; they always put a light color above and a dark color down below. I did a lot of naturalistic paintings in New York. When I lived in the city, certain things I'd see interested me. I used to take the color directly off of something. There were paintings I did--very big wall paintings that had that typical dark paint on the bottom and light paint at the top. I did a piece in a paperbag brown, and I did--oh, I remember, I think I still have this green
stapler whose color I used. You know, I would try to take colors that you're used to having around all the time—manila envelope tan, and so on, and I think that I got a lot of the color that I put into those works from seen things. Not so directly anymore, but I must say that living in the country I'm very aware of seasonal color and light and...

Yes, I would say that you use a lot of earthy colors.

At certain times of the year, you know, in the fall you're bathed by this kind of golden quality and so on, and some of that must get into the work although it doesn't happen in any direct way. For instance, there's no relationship to hills in those arcs the way it might have been, you know, at the time of those wall-area paintings.

That's not so much what I was thinking about. I was trying to think if the changes in your work reflect something aside from formal painting concerns. If they reflect changes in the way that you've lived, or the way you think about life. I don't know how to say this, except that—are they metaphors for something?

I don't know. I worried about leaving New York City and I thought, "What's going to happen?" I associated making art with living in the city. I lived there for a number of years and I was nervous about the idea of going to the country. I grew up in the country and I always thought of it as a difficult place to make art in. And I thought, "Am I going to end up painting sunsets or something? Who knows?"

And I gradually realized that it really doesn't matter where you are, that after a certain point you carry a kind of envelope around with you which you live in and which—it's not so easy for other things to penetrate as it once was. When you're starting out, I think, you're much more easily knocked over by everything—that's why I think it's probably still very important for a young artist to go to the city, and live in the city.

You're much more easily impressed when you're young.

You're open to everything. But after a while you carry everything around with you and you can kind of set up camp anywhere you are and the work probably doesn't change a great deal. But then it probably does, too. I'm sure that if I were to live in a totally different environment for five years the work would change.

Because the input would change.
Because it would change. But it's not a quick thing. My leaving the city was really because I wanted to get away from the art world. It came to be a negative thing, I didn't want to think about it at all—whether I was on the cover of something or I wasn't, or whether I was in a group show or wasn't—I really began to get to the point where I just wanted to get rid of all this, you know. Not that moving away gets rid of it, but...

*It removes it.*

It removes it a certain distance and you don't have—this was a peculiarly funny time, too, when you had dealers coming in from Germany every month or something, Italy, or wherever they happened to be. You were always getting called and you felt like you were a gallery, you know; they kept coming in to see what you were doing. I don't know, it was just—it got to be very distracting.

The ideas that you are working with are things that you've been dealing with in one way or another throughout the time that you've been painting and having exhibitions. Do you think that the concerns that you have—do you think that younger painters are still dealing with the same things?

No—yes, I know what you mean. Well, I don't know, I don't think they are. Because I think my work comes out of another context somehow as an extension of Abstract Expressionism. My entry into the art world was at a time when, you know, this was the art I saw and it involved me.
Sparked you.

Yes, right. And then, of course, other things happened to me other things involved me and interested me, but still I think of my work as somehow an extension of the initial spark. I think that Abstract Expressionism was the initial impetus for everything that has gone on here; up to this point there have been reactions against it and further reactions but still all coming from the same source. So, in a way I think that the malaise, or something, that's in the art world now is because all that has worn off. That initial, generating energy which caused Pop Art and everything that followed for a number of years; all the movements were really an extension of one energy movement. And, there's no way someone coming in now--it's a generation where a person coming in now hasn't experienced that.

I think it's interesting that you say that because people speak of a much more linear progression, I mean--from Abstract Expressionism, then the reaction to Pop, then the reaction to Minimal, then the reaction to Conceptual, and then the reaction to Post-Conceptual, whereas what you're saying is that all of them really sprang from this big...

Not stylistically, but...

Generating ideas.

There was a kind of power, ambition, positive feeling about making art. I think that--Abstract Expressionism created a sense of—that it was wonderful to be an artist. There was
something terrific about it. I think that that really created a whole series of years of really great ambition and work and drive in terms of the arts. Now I think that influence has worn thin, and I'm not exactly sure what will happen. I think that people go to galleries now and feel relatively unexcited, and wonder what's wrong. But I think that--well, that's just my idea of why it is that way.

Many people sense that lack of excitement. Well, there's not much more I wanted to ask you....

One other thing that I thought of...

Good-

Is--I think a lot about the relation of drawing to painting. I got very involved in this a couple of years ago. I was really concerned about whether drawing was a meaningful category, how drawing was separated from painting. What actually defines a drawing and what doesn't define a painting. And I don't particularly like the term 'painting', because I think it does put the emphasis on this old idea of process, or applying paint.

Well, don't you feel connected to the tradition of painting?

I only do in the sense that I'm doing a two-dimensional, flat, object that has a frontality, and so on. But I don't feel a connection to painting as using certain materials, oil paint or acrylic paint or whatever. I just think it's a wrong emphasis. And I don't see what separates--why is one
work I do a painting and another a drawing?

One last thing to ask you—are you interested to communicate your ideas to a public beyond the immediate art world? Is it important that people who aren't artists or critics understand what you're doing (and saying) in your work?

I believe that making art has to do with a relationship of one—me and the work. My most important audience is me, while I'm working, this is where the pleasure, struggle and excitement of art lies. Once I remove the art, hang it in a gallery, I'm detached from it. I'd like it to be accepted by the widest possible audience but the gratification in that is really another thing, it has to do with my "career", my place in the world; not my sense of discovery or the pleasure of realization that making something tangible out of my ideas gives.
Robert Mangold

One-Man Exhibitions:
1964  Tribut Gallery, NY
1965  "Walls and Areas", Fischbach Gallery, NY
1967  "Recent Paintings", Fischbach Gallery, NY
1968  Galerie Muller, Stuttgart, Germany
1969  Fischbach Gallery, NY
1970  "X Series Drawings", Fischbach Gallery, NY
      "Robert Mangold: Recent Work", Fischbach Gallery, NY
1971  "Paintings", Fischbach Gallery, NY
      "Robert Mangold", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY
1973  Fischbach Gallery, NY
      Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris
      Galerie Tosselli, Milan
      Lisson Gallery, London
      Annemarie Verna, Zurich, Switzerland
      "27 Design", Galeria Marliena Bonomo, Bari, Italy
      Max Protetch Gallery, Washington, D.C.
      Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, CA
      La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA
      Galerie Konrad Fischer, Dusseldorf, Germany
      John Weber Gallery, NY
1975  Gusack Gallery, Houston, TX
      Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
      Lisson Gallery, London, England
1976  Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris
      Galerie Swart, Amsterdam, Holland
      D’Allessandro Ferranti, Rome, Italy
      Konrad Fischer, Dusseldorf, Germany
      John Weber Gallery, NY
1977  Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany
      Portland Center for the Visual Arts, OR
      Kunsthalle Basle, Switzerland
      John Weber Gallery, NY
      Young-Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL
1978  Annemarie Verna, Zurich, Switzerland
      Jean & Karen Berner, Athens, Greece
1978  Yarlow/Sabzian Gallery, Toronto, Canada
      Studio La Citta, Verona, Italy
      "Paintings, Drawings, Prints", Galerie Schellmann & Kluser, Munich, Germany
      Protetch, McIntosh, Washington, DC
1979  John Weber Gallery, NY

Group Exhibitions:
1962-63  "Hard Edge Painting", Fischbach Gallery, NY
1963  "According to the Letter", Fischbach Gallery, NY
1966  "Systemic Painting", Guggenheim Museum, NY
1967  "Twelve Yale Artists", Yale University School of Art & Architecture, New Haven, CT
1967  "A Romantic Minimalism", Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA
1967  "Primary Structures", New Haven Jewish Community Center
1967  "New Art", Lammi Museum of Normal Art, NY
1968  "First Annual Exhibition", Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY
1969  "Group", Bykert Gallery, NY
1968  "Focus On Light", New Jersey State Museum, Trenton
1968  "Cool Art", Aldich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT
1968  "Recent Acquisitions", Whitney Museum of American Art, NY
1968  "Highlights of the 1967-68 Season", Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT
1969  "Contemporary Drawings: Pop, Op and Other Trends", American Federation of Arts travelling show
1969  "Konstruktive Kunst: Elemente und Prinzipien", Nurnberg Branalde, Nurnberg, Germany
1969  "Concepts", Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY
1970  "Recent Trends in American Art", Westmoreland County Museum of Art, Greensburg, PA
1970  "Drawings", Fort Worth Art Center, Fort Worth, TX
1970  "Recent Acquisitions", Museum of Modern Art, NY
1970  "Modular Paintings", Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
1972  "25th Anniversary Exhibition of the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture", Colby College, Waterville, ME;
      Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
1972  "Documenta V", Kassel, Germany
1972  "Painting and Sculpture", Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY
      "Actualite d’un Bilan", Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris
Group Exhibitions:

1973
Galleria Diagramma, Milan
- "Contemporanea\text"; Rome, Italy

1974
- "Choice Dealer's/Dealer's Choice, New York Cultural Center\text"
- "Art Now F74\text", J. F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.
- "Drawings\text", Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- The Scottish Arts Council, Edinburgh, Scotland
- "Aquatints\text", Galerie de Gestilo, Hamburg, Germany
- Lisson Gallery, London, England

1975
- "Color As Language\text", organized by MoMA, NY for exhibition in South America: Columbia, Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico
- "Four from the East, Four from the West\text", University of California, Santa Barbara
- Galerie Aronowitsch, Stockholm, Sweden
- "Limited Editions: Dated, Numbered, Signed\text"; (prints) Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY
- "Fourteen Artists\text", Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
- Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City, Kansas
- Graphic Work, Stadtisches Museum, Monchengladbach, Germany
- "Drawings 3\text", Stadtisches Museum, Leverkusen, Germany
- "Tendances Actuelles de la Nouvelle Peinture Americaine\text", Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris
- Galeria Peccolo, Livorno, Italy
- "Locate/Order/Measure\text", University of Colorado, Boulder
- "Painting, Drawing & Sculpture of the '60s and the '70s from the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection\text", University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH

1976
- "Prints\text", Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada
- Hatfields, Buffalo, NY
- Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, Italy
- "Drawing Now\text", Museum of Modern Art, NY
- "Line\text", Visual Arts Museum, NY; Philadelphia College of Art, PA
- Wright State University Art Gallery, Dayton, OH
- "Contemporary Abstract Art: Works on Paper\text", Baltimore Museum of Art, MD
- "Prints\text", University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
- "Prints\text", Museum of Modern Art, NY
- "Drawing/Disegno\text", Canaviele Studio d'Arte, Rome, Italy
- Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- "Art Works\text", Milwaukee, WI
- "Phototations\text", Rosa Esman Gallery, NY
- May Protetch Gallery, Washington, DC
- "Today/Tomorrow\text", Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, FL
- "Prints\text", University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA
- "Choice\text", Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT

1977
- "Prints\text", Young-Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL
- "Inaugural Exhibition\text", Drawing Center, NY
- "Less is More\text", Sidney Janis Gallery, NY
- "Painting 75-76-77, Part II\text", Sarah Lawrence Gallery, Bronxville, NY
- "Documenta VII\text", Kassel Germany
- "Phototations II\text", Rosa Esman Gallery, NY
- "American Postwar Painting in the Guggenheim Collection\text", Guggenheim Museum, NY
- "Selected Prints 1960-77\text"; Brooks Alexander Gallery, NY
- "New York, the State of Art\text", State Museum, Albany

1977
- "View of a Decade\text", Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
- "Prints in Series\text", Brooklyn Museum, NY
- "Critic's Choice\text", Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University, NY
- "Recent Works on Paper by Contemporary American Artists\text", Madison Art Center/University of Wisconsin Michael Berger Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
- "Works from the Collection of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel\text", University of Michigan
- "Curator's Choice\text", Lockhaven Art Center, Orlando, FL
- Thomas Segal Gallery, Boston, MA
- Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, Germany
- "Recent Acquisitions 1974-1977\text", La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, CA
- "Artists Salute Skowhegan\text", Kennedy Galleries, NY
- John Weber Gallery, NY

1978
- "Three Generations: Studies in Collage\text", Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- "New York Now\text", Mead Art Gallery, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
- "Recent Works\text", John Weber Gallery, NY
- "Four Major Works\text", Chicago, Ill. Young Hoffman Gallery
- "Works on Paper\text", Margo Leavin Gallery, CA
- The New Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio
- Ink Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland
- "Major Recent Works\text"; Richard Hines Gallery, Seattle, Wash.
- "Artists of the Seventies\text", Yarlow/Salzman Gallery, Toronto, Canada
"Yes I know. I often think of myself as sort of training for some sort of—you know, outer space program. I mean, I feel like, in some way, I’ve done some of the same things."
One of the things that impressed me most about the work that you do is...

Yes?

That you are constantly doing things that other people would never dream of doing to themselves and yet are inevitably curious about. I feel compelled to ask you what it was like, what did it feel like to be shot in the arm?

It was just a flesh wound and it didn't really feel like anything. Maybe like being hit by a huge truck, you know, if you imagine standing on the freeway--

All that pressure located in one little spot.

Yes. It's like somebody hit me very hard, actually pushed me back. Other than that, it wasn't—it wasn't particularly painful.

You said the other night, in the lecture, that the piece that was most, I think, unnerving for you, was the piece, called "Doomed", that you did at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

Yes.

And—when you think about that in relation to all the other pieces you've done, it doesn't seem to be particularly dangerous. Why was that so much more difficult than the others?

Because I didn't know how it would end. I had made a commitment to stay there until they removed me, and there didn't seem to be any indication on their part they were ever going to do that. So that, you know—I didn't eat or drink anything for almost three days.

How did you prepare yourself for that?

Well, I never imagined that it would go on that long. I just thought it would be a matter of hours after the end of what they considered the performance, maybe ten or eleven o'clock at night, they'd impose the structure of this institution. But they bent over backwards to keep going, so...

So what you expected was that they would tell you it was time to get up and go home, or, move the glass that was—in fact, did it protect you?
The glass was there as a formal element of the piece. There was me, the glass and this clock, and those were sort of—it was a real formal set-up. One way of stopping the piece would have been to stop the clock; I would have gotten up.

Was it a clock that could wind down?

No, it was battery-operated. They had to interrupt the piece. That was the whole premise of the piece. They had to stop it. Not me.

And then it took three days for someone to come and stop it. Right.

What would you have done if they hadn't stopped it? If they were really afraid to penetrate the integrity of the piece, or something?

Well, I don't know. I wouldn't have died or anything for them, you know. I guess eventually I would have done something about it. I was getting pretty near to that point when they stopped it. Maybe another night, and that would have been about it.

Why did you stop doing pieces that related to your body, using your body as the sculpture, as the object in the work?

I never really realized that—I—I've never really thought of
myself as exactly a "body artist", I just did work, you know. And I did whatever seemed like the best idea at the time.

Well, the first piece that brought you public attention was the one where you were locked in a school locker for five days, with a five-gallon bottle of water in the locker above you, and an empty five-gallon bottle in the locker below. You were still a student then, and it was your first devised endurance test. It was a very dramatic non-action. But almost all of the work you've done since then was done alone, and involved the idea of isolation. Are these works a premeditated statement about your own life, about the individual in society—this idea of isolation?

Yes, but it's real formal, it's real dramatic; I mean, it isn't the same as being isolated in real life.

It's a dramatization of being isolated. Particularly the one you called "White Light/White Heat".

"White Light/White Heat" was a perfect conceptual piece. You'd see a platform in this room and—

You didn't see anything.

You didn't see anything except this platform and you could look at it as a piece of minimal art. You heard that the artist was lying on top of it, but you couldn't see him. That information totally changed the way you looked at it.

Of course. Absolutely, because then this kind of presence filled the room and there were all these doubts and questions about "Is he really there?"—which makes you think about other set-ups that we have given to ourselves, like, "Is God really there?"—although I don't really know if that was in your mind at all. What did you think about when you were spending three weeks up there without being seen or being heard? Did you bring books with you?

No, no. I didn't have anything. I could have, but I was interested to see how I would deal with the time. I was breaking up with my wife then and a lot of the time was spent thinking about that. As it worked out, I participated kind of like a ghost, in everything that would happen in the gallery, because I could hear everything. So I would actually get tired from listening to people. I had day after day where the gallery opened up, and people would start coming in, and business would happen in the gallery, and I would participate in everything on a vicarious level.

In the lecture you gave last night, I felt that there was a slight sense of irritation in your voice when people kept harking back to stuff that you'd done a long time ago, and
that what you really want to get across to people is what you're doing now.

Right. Yes.

Things that you're doing—making, I mean. You've made a car—and built your own television.

Television system. I think when you say "television" people get the wrong idea. They think you can get channel 4 and, you know, CBS News and stuff on it. It's not quite like that.

No.

It's more—it's sort of like—doing your own—you know, as a child—your own sort of telephone—

With two cans and a string.

Right. It has that kind of relationship to what we think of as a television set.

Anyway, that and the car and the etching that you made at Crown Point, which was basically making your own money, those works are about three things that we are completely saturated with all the time. TV, cars and money. So, there's a whole different focus. It's not so much a focus on your own—

Self.

On your own self.
No. It's more about things that we take for granted, manipulating them in a new way.

Yes. And also, they are the opposite of--mass--

Mass-produced? Yes. They're hand-made.

I was wondering if part of why you are doing those things is that art has a basis in craft, and that making things is a way of reinforcing the idea that what you are is an artist. Because you've made something.

I think I just wanted to make something. I haven't made anything since I got out of graduate school and--it felt real good to make something. And have it exist. It's there. I mean, you can't--it's not so easily gotten rid of. Right now the car is in a warehouse in New York--it's being stored. I don't know, I think it was a way of trying to get people to look at one of the things that they do every day, which is, you know, drive a car and stuff, look at it in a different way. And it'd be nice if everybody made their own car, sort of like the way people cook, or the way people used to make their own clothes. I think everybody gets real dependent on all these things and they don't have any idea of how they come about.

So it's really important that you yourself learn how to make them, to try to make them your own, in a sense?

Well, yes. Learning to make them--the TV and the car--what would it be like if I was on a desert island, and I only knew that those things existed in the past and then I had to reconstruct them? I mean, it's that kind of thinking that was behind them.

You actually did spend some time on a--on a kind of desert island when you did the piece "B.C. in Mexico".

Yes, it's not a desert island, though.

No, it's not, but it was a beach and you went in a kayak with some water and you were isolated by yourself for eleven days. To go into that kind of isolation in nature is such a traditional thing to do! I mean, people did it to have religious experiences, or to go out there and meet the devil, resist temptation. Did you have any kind of religious experiences?

I'm not sure it was a religious experience, but it was Hell on earth. It was about 126°, and most of my effort was spent trying to stay out of the sun so I wouldn't get sunburned.

Well, what kind of insight do you think you have gained from doing these--these things, you know, these endurance tests? These risk situations? These isolations?
What kind of insights?

Yes, I mean, what have you learned?

I don't know. I'm not sure I can--you know, spew it out in a few words or something.

Well, I think that it's a reasonable question to ask you, because people have fears and fantasies about things like that and then you--did them. I mean, they're as extreme, in a way, as going to the moon or something like that.

Yes, I know. I often think of myself as sort of training for some sort of--you know, outer space program. I mean, I feel like, in some way, I've done some of the same things.

Yes, yes, that just occurred to me right now. But it seems to me that it would be impossible to do things like that and not feel that you've understood something more about human nature, or about the cosmos, or--

I think one of the things I learned is that human beings really need other human beings. I mean, actually the thing I missed most on the platform wasn't food, or anything, it was actually seeing other people. Seeing them. Seeing other human faces. And so maybe that's the thing I think I've learned the most, is that people need people.

Yes.

In some fashion. And--also that some of the things that you can't believe you can get through, you often can.

Yes.

Because a lot of times, in those pieces I couldn't believe that I could actually make it through those things. I decided I would, so I was going to, but at the beginning they seemed totally gargantuan, and--you know, I had a lot of fear about being able to do them. And then I would adapt somehow to them.

In 1973, in November, you got time on television in L.A. to run a commercial.

Yes, it was the first time I did that.

This was a ten-second clip of "Through the Night Softly" which, contrary to its title, is not at all gentle and romantic.

But you can't tell that by looking at the film.

Well, the idea of someone walking across fifty feet of broken glass...

No, no, no. I was crawling on my stomach.
On your stomach? That is not at all clear from the photograph.

I was holding my hands behind my back, and sort of wiggling, and then pushing with my knees and legs.

For fifty feet?

Yes.

Across broken glass?

Yes.

And what kind of response did the television station get to this commercial?

Well, you couldn't tell by looking at the commercial what the material was. They were just white, shiny things. They looked sort of like stars, or they could have been balls of cotton, or little pieces of marshmallow. It was in black-and-white film, there's no—it's not gory at all. I don't think the people who saw it realized what was going on, in any way. I mean, I don't think they thought it was an art piece, and I don't think they understood that I was crawling across glass, or anything.
Oh, I'm sure they didn't think it was an art piece!

People saw something really weird, but they couldn't tell what it was—"Yes, I just saw something really weird on TV"—but it was gone before they could grasp it.

Sounds like a dream, in a way.

It was like a dream. Sort of like an apparition or a dream, just really quick—and something really strange that wasn't TV, was coming out of their TV set.

Well listen, there's just one more thing I really wanted to ask you about this body art—since we've gotten back to talking about it. The violence and the brutality that is in some of the pieces that you've done is clearly reflecting the violence and brutality that exists in life all the time. But, obviously a big difference is that you set up the situations and you manipulated them. They were tightly controlled. And you minimized the actual danger. For instance, the piece "Trans-Fixed", when you had yourself crucified to the back of a Volkswagen—that's a—that's a dramatic thing to do, but in terms of life and death it isn't dangerous, really. But in some of the other situations, what kinds of precautions did you take? Like in the piece, "Doorway to Heaven", that surely involved a very great risk! How did you know that you wouldn't be electrocuted when you stuck live wires into your chest?

Well, I had this whole elaborate sort of fantasy worked out. I thought that as the wires crossed, it would make a big sort of explosion, and that would sort of—you know, burn my chest and it would jerk my hands away. That was the fantasy of how I was protecting myself. But what actually happened is that the wires short-circuited right as they went in.

They did actually go in?

Yes. And the short circuit cut the circuit breaker. I had experimented for about a week in my studio, touching the wires together over and over and—you know, only occasionally would they pop the circuit breaker, most of the time they wouldn't. They just—

Smoked and--

Yes.

Sparked and--

Yes. I would just touch them briefly, and they'd spark. Most of the time the circuit breaker didn't go. I guess I was really lucky in that one. Because I think that was pretty dangerous, actually.
When you went to Europe with the car that you built, were people disappointed that you had stopped doing what they called "body art"?

Yes, I think they were, actually. I think they were pretty shocked at De Appel in Amsterdam. I never told them what to expect, and here I pop off the plane with a four-hundred-pound crate following. You know, though, since the car wasn't really completed and also since I had to put it back together, they could see some of the process I went through, so they could sort of stand behind it. But the people in Paris, where I went after Amsterdam, I think were disappointed that, you know, I wasn't doing a traditional body piece for the gallery.

I wonder how Europeans saw your body art pieces. It seems to me your work has very little in common with European body art. There are several artists, like Gina Pane, involved with self-inflicted injury or stress. And the Austrians (Gunter Brus, Otto Muele, Herman Nitsch for instance) starting about 15 years ago, have done very shocking body art related to guilt--Austrian political guilt. But there's a big difference between that and your work. It would seem to me that the motivations are not at all the same.

No, I don't think mine has anything to do with political guilt. Obviously! But the results are somewhat similar in that the shock value and catharsis, in a way, and the sensationalism are also in your work. The motivations are different.
It's really hard for me to figure out some of their motivations, I mean, like Gina's work. I think she knows what she's doing, but I don't really understand—exactly, you know. It seems much more complicated than the things that I do. Mine are very simple.

Are you friends with those people?

Well, I'm friends with Gina. I don't know Herman Nitsch or the others. In fact, Nitsch had a performance in L.A. and I didn't want to go see it.

Why?

Well, I'd already seen his work in photographs. I'm not really into that at all.

That seems evident, especially looking at your work as a whole. You used to make art that was, in a way, acting out people's death-defying fantasies, and now you seem much more concerned to make art that's about people's materialistic daydreams, you know—cars, or money, or TV. In 1977 you made at Crown Point Press an etching called "Diecimila". Why did you make Italian money?

I guess for a number of reasons. When I lived in Italy as a child—

You did?

Yes. I remember using vast amounts of money—you know, the actual amounts, the number of bills anything cost. And it was a joke about, you know—

How worthless paper money is.

Ten thousand lire sounds like it would be a whole lot of money, but it's not. When I made it, it was worth a little over ten dollars. Also I liked the idea of making counterfeit money.

Yes.

It was like, you know, having the thrill of being a counterfeiter without the real risk.

Yes.

And I guess it's also sort of an indirect statement about, you know, prints, where you're actually manufacturing money, in some sense. But, for me, it was mostly a big thrill to see this whole art workshop turn into a counterfeiting shop. Everybody's working on bills, and—the whole place had sort of a paranoia about it. I remember the doors were locked, and all the trash had to be sort of taken care of, and the ragman came once and they let him in and he walked by and he just looked, and then he was quiet, and—you know, it was just—
it was fascinating.

You did another piece lately that involves money.

Oh, you mean "In Venice Money Grows on Trees"?

Yes. Will you describe it, since it wasn't really documented?

Well, let's see. I got a hundred dollars in brand-new one-dollar bills. And I folded them lengthwise, so they fit into the palm leaves—in the palms, into the creases, you know how
they're sort of folded like an accordion? So each bill had about four or five folds and would fit in.

Very precise.

And each palm had about twenty dollars in it, I guess. The leaves were like fans, with money. And it looked like the money was actually growing right out of the tree. They weren't just hanging from the tree, you know, they were glued in.

They were glued in?

Well, with rubber cement. You could pull them off. And the idea was just that, for one moment in time I could contradict the old cliche about "money doesn't grow on trees".

And it took two days for the money to disappear, which is--

Pretty amazing.

Another thing that seems different now about your work is that there's much more of a sense of humor. For example in the lecture you described a recent piece called "The Citadel"--a totally dark room with four chairs for people and hundreds of tiny spaceship models suspended on black thread from the ceiling and then at the end of the room--a brick wall painted black. And that was the citadel, that was the end of the universe! Have you been reading--
Science fiction?

Well, science fiction, yes. And science, and philosophy?

Oh, a little bit, but not that much. The room was actually pitch dark, and you were led in there. Literally you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Then I lit candles and moved through the room to the wall. It was in three dimensions (it wasn't like watching a movie or anything) and it surrounded them; it was a real sensual experience, I think, for the people who got to see it. Because people's experiences of outer space, and traveling through the universe are usually just films, or fantasies, and there's something—something flat about them. And this is real, you know, it was almost voluptuous in a sense, because you couldn't see what was holding the spaceships up, so they really did appear to be hovering and—you could almost place yourself there, sort of at the end of the universe. And... I don't know, I was really happy with that.

I liked the idea of all the questions it touches on, theories of whether the universe is going to keep expanding, or whether gravity's going to keep it from expanding altogether and eventually it will start closing in on itself again....

Well, it's certainly an absurd fantasy. I mean, that there could be a brick wall at the end of the universe—but who knows?

Who knows!.... You corrected me earlier when I said that you built a TV—you said that it was a television system. Perhaps it isn't really clear. What exactly does it mean, that it's a television system?

It's a closed system. All I've done is transmit a moving image at point A, and you're able to see it at point B.

So actually—

Simultaneously.

Okay.

It has a wire that connects it.

So, it only works for itself, then.

It only works for what you put in front of the camera.

So, you have sort of a home system.

Yes. It's like a neanderthal porta-pak.

You made both the camera and the receiver?

Yes. The definition of television is you're able to transmit a moving image—not just an image—but a moving image, instantaneously so you can see at B what's happening at A. So, it's
the fact that the image is moving that's important. And that it's instantaneous.

And yours does that. How did you come to make it?

Well, I don't know. I guess I was talking to a friend, and he said, "I wonder who invented television?"--and so we went and we looked it up, and it said that popular credit's given to Jenkins, but actually John Baird invented TV thirty years before. He did an experiment in his home where he sent a real crude image from the basement to his living room, using household items. It was like he stuck some pie pans together with an electric motor, and he invented TV. And so I said, "Well, good grief, that's incredible!", you know. And wanted to re-duplicate that.

Yes.

There's something really fascinating about something that we think is so--

Complicated, and--in fact--

Well, it is complicated, but--you know, I thought by going back to the real primitive one, I could sort of--see how it worked or something.

Which you did.

And explain it to people a little better: in order to have an image, it's formed, and it's broken down, and reconstructed.

And when people understand things, then they get a greater sense of their own power.

Yes.

While we're on the subject of TV, can we talk again about the commercials?

My TV commercials?

Yes. One thing that you said in the interview in Art in America was that if G.M. can produce a thirty-second commercial and reach 200 million people, it's pathetic to compare that with the attempts of artists to reach people with one small exhibition in one small gallery--put these paintings up on the wall and have no impact at all. So, one real way for art to have an impact is to use the mass media.

Yes, but I think really my interest has more to do with television than--I mean, I don't--I'm not sure that people who see my commercials who aren't artists know exactly what's going on. I think--it doesn't fit, it doesn't look like a normal ad in any way, so that people watching TV all of a sudden are struck by the fact that something else is on, you
know. It sort of sticks out like a sore thumb.

Yes.

And it might change their idea of what's possible with television because television always comes at you, it's sort of like a one-way street. And--it's probably more true for people who know me--but all of a sudden here's somebody on who shouldn't be on TV. And my motives aren't the same, you know. And I'm not trying to sell them something.

You're not even trying to sell them yourself?

Well, maybe I'm trying to sell them myself in the sense that I exist, you know, but--it's not like I'm trying to sell them a product that they have to spend money on, or something. I'm trying to sell them--

A concept.

Yes. And so, well--it's probably mostly for people who know me. But all of a sudden that sort of monolithic, one-way aspect of television--that grip it has--is broken. And people realize that it is possible to answer back. And that's what I was doing, by putting the ads on TV, I was answering back to that sort of monolithic structure that television has. I do have some control over this.

So you were using TV to answer back to TV.

Yes.
It has much more impact, I guess, than taking an ad in the newspaper or something.

Yes, because--

Nobody reads!

No, it's not that. You know, printed stuff—I mean, people are used to that. Television has sort of a slickness, or something. You just don't expect something raw to be on there.

I saw one of your commercials in New York, the one with: Leonardo, Rembrandt, Picasso—names of famous artists flashed on the screen. Then, Van Gogh, Chris Burden. Right?

Did you see it by accident?

Yes, by accident. I was just watching TV, it was a Sunday morning. I knew who you were but I wasn't expecting that! And I—I was sure at first that I'd made a mistake, that I hadn't read your name right. And then it just grabbed me, right out of the screen, you know. I walked around thinking about that for a few days. But I thought you had a lot of nerve! You know, I mean, Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci, Van Gogh, Picasso—

Well, that was part of it. That's what it was for, it was also to do that.

Yes, well, you surely have a reputation—if you weren't an artist you'd probably have been locked up.

Well, don't you have to—I mean, why would I be locked up? I mean, I'd have to do something harmful to somebody else, wouldn't I?.... I mean, in nothing have I—I mean I've never aggressed against anybody.

Well, it's true, you never have. It's just that I think you could be construed to be crazy for wanting to do the things that you've done. Perhaps it's that you treat the things that everybody else treats sacreligious, like the body, and money—with a certain amount of—well, not necessarily disrespect, but with a—sacreligious or blasphemous kind of attitude. They're not so sacred to you, you know, as they are to everybody else. Which kind of means that you're subscribing to a different morality. And—and when you do that, then people start to get uptight. If you're not like us, you know, you must be against us. Have you encountered that a lot?

Yes—well, yes and no. I mean, I have had people who've been scared to come and see me. I think it's—I think what happens is that people confuse what I do with me; what I do is separate from me as a person.

Well, it's separate, but only so far, because you did con—
ceive of it, and you did do it.

Yes, but it's pretty formalized. You know I set them apart: this is art and this is life. I've had real strange experiences going places where—before I got there, there was a lot of publicity, and the whole place was hostile. That's what the piece, "Working Artist" came out of. I got to this school and there was a big sign: "Artist or Fraud?" There had even been discussions on local TV about me and all this kind of—

Really?

Yes, by the head of this school, and they were outraged—

Before you did the piece.

Yes, that was before I even got there. So I thought the best thing I could do was to show them, you know, what I really do—which is sometimes just type letters, and sit in my studio and answer mail, and organize my photo files, and that kind of stuff. And so, for that piece, I put up in the gallery all the past documentation of work and I just talked to people about it. And—I mean, from the people I talked to I got a positive response. Instead of being removed from them, I wanted to be totally accessible.

And accepted.

In a sense, yes.

Okay, well....

I'm going to tell you about something I'm going to do. I think it's going to come off this weekend.

Good!

I'm going to—I have these small model airplanes that I make. They're not—these are real rudimentary, but they fly really incredibly well, I mean, amazingly well.

What are they made of?

They're just made out of—tissue paper, and a little piece of balsa wood. I made a whole bunch of them. I'm going to go down to Calexico, near the Mexican border—actually Calexico and Mexicali are one city but they're divided in half; there's a barbed-wire fence that runs between the two. This piece will be called "Coals to Newcastle". I'm going to hang some really great grass that's grown in Topanga, you know, Sense-milla—like a torpedo from the fuselage and going to write "Hecho en U.S.A." which is "Made in U.S.A." and "Fumenlos Muchachos" and I'm going to fly this—I'm going to be an international smuggler, and I'm going to fly this across the fence to Mexico.
From California!

To Mexico. They would expect the reverse.

Absolutely. That's going to be great.

I'm an international smuggler, in addition to being a counterfeiter.

And are you going to have people on the other side to receive them?

No, no, no. They're just there for anyone to--

Smoke!

Right.

Oh--are you going to document it?

Yes, I'll take some pictures, I guess. Try to. Hope I don't get caught.

Well, I want to wish you luck, okay?

Sure.
Chris Burden

Performances:
Five Day Locker Piece. University of California, Irvine; April 26-30, 1971
Bicycle Piece. University of California, Irvine; May 6-20, 1971
Shout Piece. F Space: August 21, 1971
Prelude to 220, or 110. F Space: September 10-12, 1971
I Became A Secret Hippy. Museum of Conceptual Art; October 3, 1971
220. F Space: October 9, 1971
You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City, Morgan Gallery; November 6, 1971
Shout. F Space: November 19, 1971
Disappearing. December 22-24, 1971
TV Hijack. February 9, 1972
Match Piece. Pomona College. March 20, 1972
Dos Equis. October 16, 1972
Deadman. Mizuna Gallery. November 12, 1972
747. January 5, 1973
Movie on the Way Down. Oberlin College. May 1, 1973
B.C. Mexico, Newspace, May 25-June 10, 1973
Through the Night Salty. Main Street, Los Angeles; September 12, 1973
TV Art. Channel 9, Los Angeles; November 5-December 2, 1973
Doorway to Heaven. November 15, 1973
Trans Fixed. Venice, California: April 23, 1974
Velvet Water. School of the Art Institute of Chicago; May 7, 1974
Kurt Klick. Feldman Fine Arts. Basel; May 19, 1974
Oh Dracula! Utah Museum of Art. October 7, 1974
Dreamy Nights. Arts as Living Ritual. Graz, Austria; October 15, 1974
The Visititation. Hamilton College, New York; November 9, 1974
The Confession. Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati; December 12, 1974
White Light/White Heat. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. February 8-March 1, 1975
Doomed. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; April 11, 1975
La Clarificazione. Galleria Alessandra Castelli, Milan; May 5, 1975
Oracle. Schema Gallery, Florence; May 14, 1975
Poem for L.A. Carp. Channel 9 and Channel 5, Los Angeles; June 23-27, 1975
Art and Technology. De Appel, Amsterdam; October 16, 1975
Yonkee Ingenuity. Stadler Gallery, Paris; October 23, 1975
Working Artist. University of Maryland, Baltimore; November 22-24, 1975
The Rise and Fall of Urban Industrialism as Seen Through the Automobile. Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York; December 5, 1975
Natural Habitat. Portland Center for Visual Arts; January 8-15, 1976
Do You Believe in Television? Alberta College of Art, Calgary, Canada; February 26, 1976
Shadow. Ohio State University, Columbus; April 25, 1976
Barcon! Hansen-Fuller Gallery, San Francisco; August 3-7, 1976
Death Valley Run. Death Valley, California; October 14, 1976
Studio Tour. Venice, California; November 25, 1976
Merry Christmas from Chris Burden. U.S. Mail; December 14, 1976
Wiretap. KPFK Radio, Los Angeles; January 1977
Discrimia. Crown Point Press, Oakland, California; May 1977
C.B.T.V. Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany; June 1977
Full Financial Disclosure. Channels 2, 4, and 11, Los Angeles; September-October 1977
The Curse of Big Job. Los Angeles; December 14 - June 22, 1978
The Citadel. Los Angeles; August 8-12, 1978
In Venice. Money Grows on Trees. Venice, California; October 6, 1978
To Newcastle Calexico, California; December 16, 1978

One Man Exhibitions (not performances)
Riko Mizuna Gallery, Los Angeles; January, 1974
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; February, 1974
Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati; November-December, 1974
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; March, 1975
Riko Mizuna Gallery, Los Angeles; April, 1975
Galleria A. Castelli, Milan; May, 1975
Galleria Schema, Florence; May, 1975
Galerie Stadler, Paris; October, 1975
De Appel, Amsterdam; October, 1975
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; May-June, 1976
Broxton Gallery, Los Angeles; September-October 12, 1976
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; April, 1977
Jan Baum-Kris Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles; 1977
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; November, 1977

Group Exhibitions
Via Los Angeles. Curated by Peter Plagens. Portland Center of Visual Arts; January, 1975
20 Years of California Art. Curated by Henry Hopkins. San Francisco Art Museum; September, 1976
New Talent Award Winners 65-76. Los Angeles County Museum of Art; September, 1976
Whitney Biennial; 1977
Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany; June 1977 (demonstrated C.B.T.V.)
Daniel Buren

“That is why I reject art in general. Because it, in fact, leads you to think through somebody else. Maybe you could say that I do the same. But at least what I try to show is something else—which is yourself.”
I have seen almost all the exhibitions of yours that were in New York during the last four years, but until I started to prepare for this interview I hadn’t read any of your written texts. And so, while I was aware, in the back of my mind, of a kind of political aspect to your work, I always reacted first of all on a visual level. The texts add so much information—how do you weigh their importance compared to the installations themselves?

Well, that’s an interesting question. Because I certainly have a problem with the texts, in a way. And the problem is on two different levels. To begin with (at the beginning of my work) I understood some aspect of the work that no art critic was able to deal with at that time.

In the late ’60s?

Yes. There was a kind of necessity for the text in order to try to avoid misinterpretation.

Yes.

And I was really sure that my work—it was a necessity to try to explain what was going on.

Yes.

Now, the second problem with the texts is that it’s easiest to have—almost everyone or anyone could have all my texts; no one could have all my work. So it’s become like a distortion—which is, of course, a little hilarious because the texts compared to the work—are very much smaller. They would never exist without the work, while the work could exist, and exists for many people in fact, without the texts.

The text though is a thing to keep, to refer to.

Yes, right, right. And not to say that you cannot keep my work, but if I show with a gallery, or in the street, or with a museum, almost 99% of the time, after the show, the piece doesn’t exist anymore.

So, it is right that my first reaction to what you do is always visual. It’s after all, visual art, you know?

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It's visual—except for some art critics who are blind, as you know!

In one piece that you did at John Weber in New York, you hung banners inside the gallery and continued them out through an open window to hang over the street. It was a thrill to see something so unusual, and it occurred to me that this was such a clear way to say that the building wall there was a completely false wall. It doesn't need to exist. The wall represents a certain kind of authority—the authority of the art gallery. And you've put things inside the gallery and outside the gallery, and they are the same things inside and outside. And yet there are two different contexts, which means that perhaps the work has two different meanings. So you have raised all these questions. And in the piece you've just done at the Berkeley Museum, you've shown the museum clearly; it looks like—it's a maze, you know, it's a totally difficult place to show art, because it competes with the art. And you've pointed out the contradictions in the architecture. And, also, you've made something that's very beautiful. Perhaps you don't like that word applied to what you do, but you can't get away from it, in a sense.

That's depending. It would be ridiculous as a work of art when it's only beautiful. If a certain idea for a work in a certain space makes some sense as to describe something, to reveal something, to contradict something... if the logic of the work keeps itself, holds itself very well, then with a little advice (or even no advice at all) a viewer could re-read, and say, "Okay, it's done like that, like that, like that"—and follow the thing. If this is possible, then I think a lot of things could happen. First of all, the viewer is free to think.
Second of all, the work could even eventually be—good-looking, or beautiful. Or ugly, it's almost of no real interest. And then of course I wouldn't be ashamed of that, because—that is not the first intention. And I'm almost sure that even the reaction of people who say "It's really beautiful"—I think this reaction is not only about physical beauty.

It comes from the way that you've revealed what you've revealed.

For example, the Berkeley show I think has a logic that works well.

So do I.

I don't think it's especially beautiful in terms of beautiful objects or something like that. I think the logic, at one point, starts to work so well that it's a certain kind of beauty, maybe it's a classic beauty, I don't know.

Yes! In almost every installation, the logic of the way that you've thought through something, is so clear. It's like why didn't anyone think of that before?

It's funny because it's also often something I think about, myself.

Yes?

When I work for one year to find what I could do, when I find it, I just feel ridiculous because I think I could have found
that to begin with. It was so simple, I don't know why I did not find it immediately.

So, then, the most important thing in making the work that you make, is to think the system out.

That really has to be done. And it's not always working with the same principle. But I think when I get the principle of what I want, then the interest in what would make this thing visible for people is to follow the logic. That's one of the reasons I always make available to people who see any show, especially in a specific place, what I call the key to how the piece was built— as a little text where you could read the title, the material used, etcetera— for doing the work. Then everyone can follow the process. From that point they can then see if the process is correct, and then be interested by the process and the piece, or dislike it, etcetera. But they cannot just guess what I did.

No.

I am really against that for various formal reasons. I think art in general is based on a kind of mythical ideology and I am really fighting against that. So, it's no myth, it's not working by chance— it's not a game or a play for the viewer to just look around and say, "Oh, I like that. What a nice way to install the piece on the wall or in the space," or to ask "Where is the work?" In fact, it's not a nice way, nor is it a treasure hunt. If it's nice, then they must understand why. If they don't see immediately where the work is because of its unusual placement, for example, someone must say where it is.

It seems to me that the main theme in the work that you do is to make people aware of all the forces that are operating on the way that they think. For instance, in "A Partir de là", (Mönchengladbach Museum, West Germany, 1975) you applied striped linen to the walls of the museum, but left blank any spot where a painting had been hung in the past ten years. It became clear that no matter what art is placed in the museum, it is always displayed in the same way. This is the way the museum operates, behind the scenes, this is the way culture operates. The structure is imposed on us in ways that are completely unseen. So, in a way, museums can rob art of the content which the artist who made it thought it had, and they are able to superimpose their own content on it. So, basically then, would it be that every time you do an installation, you expose a different part of the structures being imposed on us?
My ideas come, really, from the context--the context could be the people, the situation, the place, what's happening at the time, some of these elements all together, etcetera, etcetera. For example, when I conceived the work I did for that show in Cologne in '74, "Project", I was thinking of a work playing with the city, because the city was involved in the show. I was thinking of using the tramway of Cologne, for example. Then it turned out that another artist, Hans Haacke, was excluded from the show because the work he did, documenting the history of a painting in the museum's collection, revealed Nazi connections of one of the trustees. So, when I knew that, my full piece and its concept changed. All of a sudden I was confronted with a completely different reality. So at the last minute, just before the opening, I pasted a facsimile of Hans Haacke's work over the stripes I had installed as my work. In doing so, my own work--instead of being something on a wall--became a wall on which something (Haacke's work) was installed. I used, more or less, what I wanted to do--and then I twisted the full thing to something else. And then the museum officials, after the opening, covered the work with white paper. The work then, because of the situation, opened a lot of questions.

Well, the thing--

It is important to catch the best idea at the best moment. That story also reveals something which I think is evident with a succession of different works; they are often ambivalent or "polyvalent". There's not only one way to do it or to see it.
Oh, no, it seems to me there are very many ways to see it. You raise very many questions—but do you have any answers? I mean, you’re speaking about the way that galleries and museums function, and how they are such a dictatorial and authoritative force in the art world. And that’s clearly not the right function, the right role that they should play. Do you think that there should be no museums at all?

That I don’t know. It’s a kind of ping-pong game between the producer and what we call the system, which includes the artist (the producer). And it includes as well the critic, the collector, the gallery and the museum. So that’s the big frame of the art field. So to say then the museum must not exist, would be like truly dreaming of Utopia. I don’t care about that. I don’t know, even, what the future will be. What I could say, and what I think makes sense, is the fact that if the work—and not the work of one artist or two, but the work of many artists—gets very different from what we know, then by force the museum will change. They have already changed. Or, eventually they could disappear—what if, for example, works of art (or so-called) no longer needed any protection? Or if works of art come to be museums?

Yes, there are artists working, through their art, against the status quo.

But I don’t think that in general you have the system on one side and on the other, the artists as a group against that system. In fact, and more often than one supposes, artists support the system more than the museum does! Don’t forget that when my work was excluded from the VI Guggenheim International it was after the pressure of a tiny minority of the artists exhibiting there, including Dan Flavin and Donald Judd, against the majority of the other sixteen who wanted to keep my work in the show. We had, in that case, a minority of important New York artists who were influential enough to force the museum director to censure the work of an artist against the will of the majority. When the museum and its supporters are weak, they react against those who would break down their authority by censuring their work. When the museum and the system are strong, then they adapt to any new situation. I think in most cases the system is strong enough to adapt. But after it has adapted there will be a new, strong struggle from younger artists to fight against the new way.

So, in other words—

I just guess a lot of boundaries exist, and maybe we break,
now, some of these, and it puts us in front of another wall.

Well, it's kind of like scientific pursuits where one discovery inevitably leads to more questions, which inevitably leads to more discovery, and more questions.

Exactly. It's absolutely—I think it's a good analogy, it's certainly close to that. But it takes a long time. I don't think I even really convince the curators who help me, because I see the kind of work (shit) they are still showing.

Well, that's what I was wondering, I mean—because there have been people who have cooperated with you; has that changed, in fact, the way that they operate within the museums that they operate?

Maybe it just requires more time. Maybe we are too close to see what are the effects.

How do you account for becoming as acceptable as you are, even though you are doing radical work?

That is difficult to say. I know that, perfectly in contradiction, my work is very well accepted by the museum. Even if it's contradictory with the museum's premises—my work could look original and attract some attention. Also museum directors and curators are sometimes really interested by new stuff, new ideas, even if it may be completely opposed to that system which they are supposed to maintain. If it is contradictory to my work to be installed in a museum,
there might be some contradiction in the museum's politics to invite me in the first place. So it's always a kind of thing you have to see in dialectic. I had to find a way to work and a way to even accept some compromise, still keeping in mind a line for the longer strategy. Anyhow, even—even if I was never invited by the so-called "system", I think I could still work and be effective against the system. But, being invited, I think it's interesting to show some contradictions within the system, which, in fact, if you succeed to do that—are immediately much more visible than if you do it as a theory someplace else.

Yes, yes, I'm sure.

Theory could be important, I don't at all make that less important than it is—but people who are able to make the practice as well as the theory are immediately more effective.

Yes.

But, no one knows what will happen—now or in the future. I would just guess that we will have in the future people as producers who will struggle against the status quo—against the system, against the way of making (supposedly) art. I don't understand why we still see people making painting and sculpture as with a mind which was the mind of the 19th, 18th, 17th century—which I think is exactly what is happening today with so-called (even) avant-garde art.

Okay, but is it possible to use the traditional media of painting and sculpture to do the things that you're talking about? You call what you make, for the most part, painting, I believe.

No.

Well, in many of the texts you refer to it as painting.

I refer to it—

And Rudi Fuchs referred to it as painting—he even called it "metapainting", I think.

Yes, but that, I think, is wrong.

Oh, you do.

I think it's wrong because—it's classifying. To say my work is painting is a very easy way to escape from the prob-
lems my work poses. It's like finding a solution without answering the question. Not to say that my work is not possible to classify, but you cannot, certainly, say it's painting. What painter will accept that, anyhow? If it's painting, Frank Stella or Robert Ryman are singers.

I agree with you--

And then you have to say it's sculpture also. Or it's posters, or it's wallpaper... or it's anything else--but it's not--sometimes maybe it's dealing closest to painting--sometimes it's dealing closest to sculpture. As soon as it's really marginal it cannot be a painting anymore.

No.

I always present what I am doing as "work". Not to say this is the most interesting word possible but at least it's a word which refers to an activity without framing or giving a ready-made image of its result, as the words "painting" or "sculpture" do. When, to the word "work" I add the words "painting" or "sculpture" or "drawing" it's to open a dialogue--with what someone expects a painting, a sculpture or a drawing to be. Nevertheless it's always related to a very specific situation.
But sculpture would be a more appropriate traditional term?

Yes. To add something here, I think any interesting art—no, I don't like the word—any interesting work which has been done the last fifteen, twenty years is work that is dealing with this boundary.

Yes.

Even if, today, there's a survival of painting (which I think is, in fact, a complete regression), the big—the profound way, where the thing is going, is not dealing with any specific traditional aspect. It's not specifically sculpture, in the traditional sense, it's not specifically painting in the traditional sense. It's something even not inbetween. It's just something else.

Yes, it straddles other fields. Is your work connected to art history, I mean, is that important to you?

No. If you speak about the art history made by the art historian, I personally really don't care.

It doesn't come from nowhere.

No, no, that's for sure.

I mean, how did you become interested in the problem of context, art context?

I was always interested by what's happening in a specific place where you are supposed to look at something, and you see a lot of other things. I was thinking, like a joke in a certain way, it was difficult to look at a painting in a museum without taking care of the color of the hat of some woman.

That's good.

Or, the uniform of the guards—you go to the Louvre in Paris, (and some other places like that) and you have a window, and all of a sudden you see in that window frame the landscape of Paris, absolutely gorgeous.

In other words, you can understand what's outside the window much more clearly and feel much more related to that, actually, than you would, then, to what's on the wall.

Right. But there's another problem which is even more concrete. You cannot see a painting without seeing the wall.
No, because nothing exists without stuff around it, without a gestalt.

Art is supposed to open your eyes, to make your eyes one of the main instruments in your body, active to the spirit, to the mind. But instead, traditional art makes your eyes blind. Art historians, museums, and even most artists say: "See the paintings (and that's all)." They don't care where they are, what makes them visible to begin with, their placement, their money value, etcetera. As if these problems were meaningless or outside of the question. For me they are inseparable from the meaning an artwork could have. If you follow art history and traditional art as we know them, you have to be blind to everything else outside the immediate content of the artwork.

Yes.

And from that point—which is very basic in a way—as a producer, I get involved with a lot of problems. For that reason, for example, no one of my works is independent of a wall where it is to begin with.

No, you've incorporated the context into the piece.

And it's impossible—unless you are intellectually as dishonest as an art critic—to speak about my work as "stripes".

No, of course. It's the stripes in the situation.

The work is not only a fact of gluing some paper or installing a piece of linen. And, once again, you cannot take that as an object—as a transportable object which could be put, like it is, anywhere else. It is always obliged to relate with something. And I think this relation opens a lot of questions, even if it doesn't give any solution, it opens a lot of questions.

Yes, I know. Do you have any answers for all the questions that you have raised?

No, I just think that I don't put now all the same questions I was putting to begin with. In the early beginning of the work, the work was much more systematic and wanted to prove something, but I don't think the work has this tendency anymore.

What do you mean—to prove something?
It was against this idea of painting; it was for the idea of doing something new.

And so...

I think now it's more—maybe more interesting and less dogmatic as well as less formal.

Okay. So an example perhaps would be this piece in Berkeley. It's an installation of the striped paper in specific loca-
tions on walls, floor, ceilings and on the--I don't know what you call the top of the ramps?

The rail or something.

The rail--I don't know. Anyway, some of the stripes are facing up because they're on the rails, and some face down from the ceiling; you see the back of the paper on the floor. The stripes follow certain structural elements of the museum. And so, the parts that are on the ceiling, are called stalactites and the parts that are on the ground level, facing up toward the ceiling, are called stalagmites.

That's right. Except the exact words used are the adjectives: "stalagmitic" and "stalactic".

Those things, stalagmites and stalactites, exist in caves. And so, immediately, you have this connotation of the museum becoming a cave, which makes it seem primitive and uncivilized.

That museum looks like a cavern to begin with.

Yes.

You could also make the relation with the Ali Baba cavern,
which is to store treasure. There are always different aspects of one thing. The title was more or less given by the facts. The stalactites and stalagmites are suggested by the architecture. You move down from the ceiling and you come up from the ground floor, with the rail of the ramps which lead you around the museum and are found everywhere.

Yes.

The work I did, first of all, follows this structure, and when the structural supports go vertically they more or less connect top to bottom, which is exactly what stalactites and stalagmites do.

*If your work has changed over the years and become more subtle, does that have anything to do with the reaction that people have to it? When you started to use stripes, which must have been thirteen or fourteen years ago now, you must have had a very violent reaction, if there was any reaction at all. You install the works often in places where people don't usually place artwork. I mean, on the floor, on the ceiling, outside.*

Artworks, even when outside, are always installed in the same places. There are very, very few exceptions. It seems to me very extraordinary that with all these hundreds and even thousands of artists working—they all end at exactly the very same place. Not to say it would change very much if you just show your work in a right upper corner, or in the ceiling. But it is funny to see that there is so little variation. All the artists, from the Sunday painter to the supposedly most avant-garde painter—they are all installing their pieces at the same level on the wall.

*It's usually eye-level.*

A level which seems to be "natural" or "normal" and which in fact is completely historical and cultural. Works were not installed twenty years ago as they are now. Two hundred years ago paintings covered the walls from ceiling to floor, and in ten years from now they will be installed differently. Unless works stipulate exactly and forever how they must be installed and where, they will always and endlessly be manipulated by anyone. So what is the meaning of these manipulations? Do they change the works? Etcetera....

*How does the etching that you have just made illustrate the things you're trying to work with?*
This has been an extreme experience for me, because I always rejected the idea of prints, to be involved in such a thing. In this case, first of all I took the chance. And then, working with this idea, I found something which I am not against at all. I asked myself what it means, exactly, is it just something I would like to do, or just a fantasy, or just fitting in with other etchings that have been made? I knew I could make a choice, and that I could also do something which doesn't fit at all with the rest. I considered all these things with all the curiosity I could, and I decided then, I could do it. I think people who will have the etching will have something which, as an etching, is very close to a contradiction with any other etchings they have had, but still as perfect as possible as an etching.

*How?*

Because they will be aware of the installation of the etching and its framing as part of the piece, when usually (and especially with etching) this is not the case.
Yes. The installation is an integral part of the piece as it is with all your work.

Completely. Usually, as far as I know, the installation of an etching has just nothing to do with the piece.

Right.

Sometimes artists do prints in sets, and then you might have three pieces to install in a row; you will put the three pieces in a row, but that's the maximum obligation you will have. But I think through my print--through the etching--people will be aware of the installation as a problem, and not any more as an habit. And at least I'd like to put the question, what this habit means. And I guess that's the minimum reason why I accepted to do that etching.

Okay.

And then, it's an etching so that maybe you could see it as an etching--and as an etching it's going to be absolutely different. I think the etching is there--the principle and the process are there, the technique is represented. Some people, who have never been aware before, could be more aware of that, all of a sudden. Because it is something which is produced traditionally, by principle, but all of a sudden it is going to lead people to something else.

Which is exactly what Kathan is hoping to do, by asking certain people to come and make etchings.

I guess so!

There was also something about the framing that was very important, too.

If you touch something close to painting, there is always the question of the frame. You can't avoid the frame. From at least Pollock we see painting with a very minimum frame, maybe just to keep the border straight, but not a frame, as we knew before, with the very beautiful line around, a huge frame turning toward the light. To go from a big, gold frame to a very flat wood frame--it's still the same problem, and even to skip the wood frame and to just install your piece on the wall, remains the same problem, because then the full wall begins to be the frame. So that's something you have to take care of; to work with in some way, and not just ignore it, as if it was not existing. Because my feeling is that when you don't know what you are doing, you are trapped by what you are doing.
And in the etching you've made it very obvious by removing part of the print to accommodate the frames. You're saying, "And, there is a frame, pay attention--there is always a frame."

I had to think about what's happening with any etching, any etching I have ever seen; they are all framed and under glass. Absolutely all. And I rarely see the frame going with the etching. It is there by force, but not by necessity. So then I got the idea that the only way to not avoid that problem is to take it completely and to make the frame part of the piece. I think then--of course, I never did this before--but I think it's impossible for me to exclude the problem of the frame. The frame of my work is, for example, usually the wall, or the structure of the building. Sometimes my work frames something else.

Exactly, exactly.

In the etching I think people will find it impossible to take the frame as a protection having nothing to do with the piece, because the frame cuts and, in fact, mutilates the etching, breaking it into parts. The question raised about etching in general is does the frame enhance the value and the beauty of the etching or destroy the "purity" of the etching? And then why have the frame to begin with? All etchings are presented under glass and framed, yet no one has pointed out the contradiction in the relationship between the etching and the use of the frame.

Yes. Well, listen--there's one other thing that I wanted to ask you, and that is, you've put stripes in museums, you've put them in galleries and you've also done pieces where you put the stripes in public places in the subways, on buses, trams, billboards. What kind of reaction do you get from the public, from uninformed people?

That's very interesting for me to know, and very difficult to know.

Yes.

When I do "Ballet", what I call the "Ballet"--the work where people walk around with stripes on the picket signs--we get a direct reaction. People come and just put questions. Even if some people look at that and laugh, it's a very strong information. If they yell, it's another information, etcetera. So, if we get a very--at least we get reaction. With other works--there's the one in the subway...
Wait--before you go on--what kind of reaction? I mean, can you be specific? One thing that was interesting about the ballet piece was the timing. You went to Wall Street at lunch time and you went to Central Park on a Sunday afternoon, you went to Soho on Saturday in the afternoon, and Times Square in the evening. But what were the responses?

In fact the response was framed by the location. For example--I don't remember exactly the word, and we could find it if I asked the people who walked with the signs--when we were in Times Square at night people made remarks and related the signs with sex.

Yes, really!

And when it was in Chinatown, it was after a kind of battle with Little Italy, between the Italian groups and the Chinese, and the Chinese made some relation with that. Some said, "Is that a provocation?" or "Is that a flag?"
People saw in it whatever they wanted to see.

And don't forget also the picket sign has a signification by itself. You know, the people who are carrying this work are not supposed to say it's a work of art. It's very difficult—and, I did it myself, so I know it's difficult, because you don't want to be aggressive to the people, who look very nice and say, "Well, what is it? I don't understand?" or, "It's very interesting, what is that?" And then you say, "It's vertical stripes" and they are hurt, almost, they say or think, "But, I saw that! What is it?"

Yes.

Which is also very interesting because that means that people see things and they want to see something else.

And the stripes—I was thinking about this—are very—they're unyielding. They don't give at all, you know. They're just stripes—that's all they are.

And I think that's the reason that the people who carried the signs were unhappy to make a blank response. But I said, "Just realize, if you said what it is. If you said, it's a work of art—which I don't pretend it is—then immediately the people are not interested anymore."

Really?

Because a work of art for them means—

Answers, not questions.

Exactly. They will say, "Oh, bullshit! Art? I know that's shit!" Or they will say "Oh, it's beautiful!", or they will say, "Oh, who did that?" But all the responses they will have are absolutely, in fact, uninteresting, because society has given to them a kind of way to respond to a "work of art".

That's exactly right.

But, on the other hand, if you said "It's vertical stripes", in fact, if they go a little further, they will have to confront it themselves. What are they doing?

They, themselves?

Themselves. They cannot see it through someone else. That is why I reject art in general. Because it, in fact, leads you
to think through somebody else. Maybe you could say that I do the same. But at least what I try to show is something else—which is yourself.

Your own understanding and awareness.

In fact, all the questions of doing a work in situ tell the viewer, "You are where you are". And what does that mean, to be in a museum? On a subway? Or in the street? What is more visible around a city than vertical stripes? You see them strictly everywhere, every place in the world. Occident, Orient, north and south. Not to say that that makes any sense in itself.

No.

But, they are used everywhere. I am not making a discourse which is so elaborate that you don't understand anything. I would like to make the same discourse that an awning is doing.

But, when people look at an awning they don't think about it as being art. If they see vertical stripes that they are told is art, perhaps they think that you're hiding something from them. Most people want the answers given to them. In most art, depending on how much you want to think, you can penetrate beyond the initial response. But initially there is something very obvious, and you can get a certain message right away. But stripes don't give anything of themselves, they just are.

No, it's true. But don't forget again that the main point of the stripes is just maybe a little signal for something else.

Yes.

But not something else which is in the future, or some other places. But for something else which is right there.

Yes, yes, exactly.

So, if I put the stripes on a billboard—even if you don't know who did it, even if you don't know it's a work of art, or whatsoever, you notice stripes in the billboard. And it's a place where you are expecting advertising for a cigarette. So then, even if you don't care what's happening in the art world, immediately you get an idea that something else is happening there, in that place. And even if you see it as bad advertising, you will see it—

You will see it.
In a certain context.

Yes.

And this context will make you aware of something.

Yes.

Even if you have no background--

Even if it doesn't have anything to do with art.

For sure the people who see the work I did with the billboard never relate to it as art, but they relate to the function of a billboard.

Yes, right.

And--and that is, I think, as interesting as the function of a museum.

Of a museum. Yes. Of course.

It's a different discourse. That's all.

###

Why are you doing interviews?

Because I think it is a real and direct means of communi-
cation. People reading these will have, I hope, an insight
into the artists--as makers, as poets in the original sense
of the word--and into their art or the work they do. This
perspective is completely different from that of art criti-
cism. It's about primary information, not personal or art
historical judgements.

Do you think you speak--ask questions for yourself or for a
certain public? In other words, when you ask questions, have
you an idea of who is going to read the interview? If it is
for a certain public, who is it? How do you know it?

Those are good questions. I ask myself that all the time!
Who is going to be reading this?! The first questions that
come to mind are usually off the top of my head--based on a
general awareness but usually not a lot of specific know-
ledge. You are a good example. I started thinking about my experiences of your work and I went on from there. I read several of your texts and a couple of catalogues that were in English. I pretty much decided to ask both my first questions and also those arising from the reading because I think there are a lot of people, like me, who haven't had the right conditions to get the background and the specifics for a lot of the activity happening today. The questions I end up asking are ones I really want to know the answers to. Anyway, about the audience—I know there are some people who already will know most of the material in the interview with you, and I know that there are some who know very little about your stuff. And there are a lot of people inbetween with some knowledge. What I'm trying to do is make it seductively easy for an uninitiated audience to understand and appreciate what you're doing, and at the same time to give even those who know a lot something new to think about. So I keep these goals in mind when I prepare for the interview.

Are all the interviews published? Do you imagine impossibilities for publishing them?

So far not all the interviews have been published. Sometimes if there's not a kind of rapport established... then we don't have an interesting conversation. One time we got sidetracked. I thought it would have been fit to print but the artist didn't. So we're going to have another go at it. The impossibility would be if the artist refused to be interviewed or if we ran out of money to publish.

Are you paid for interviewing?

I'm paid for making View—and getting it to people's desks or bedside tables or into their hands to read on the subway.

Do you get anything from the interviews which has changed your previous point of view?

I don't know—it's a process—I've learned so much that I didn't know a year ago—in terms of assimilating information, in terms of understanding—well, I have a lot to think about. It's terrific—I've learned something from each of the artists I speak with—but the point is—I hope the people who read these do too—not just about art, but about being in the world, everyday, you know?
DANIEL BUREN
Born in Boulogne Billancourt Seine, France
Lives and works in situ

Artist's Publications


Position-Proposition, ed. Städtisches Museum, Mönchengladbach, German. 555 copies.


"C91 "Interviews under the hand of the word," written in August 1973. (see C119).


"C94 "Commemorative," letter April 20, 1974, on defaluation campaign launched by Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris, with aid of false invitations, letter, signature, etc.


"Pour la façade du musée d'elles, illustration for a work installed in Musée d'elles, Brussels, May 1975. 3 colors, 1000 copies.


"Notes sur les travaux de par rapport aux lieux où s'inscrit, prises de 1967 et dont certaines sont spécialement recaptées ici, Centre d'art contemporain, Salle Simon I, Geneve, 500 copies.


"Hier (ici)," ed. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, April 1976.


Place and Placement, Milwaukee Art Center, Summer 1977, text and photography.


Rebondissements (same as above) in English.


*artist's numbering system as published in C125

Sources

Selections given at the specific request of the artist.
"One needs to consider that the gallery is a dramatic, theatrical cavity... My work is not surrealistic, the effect is theatrical, it is Baroque."

Jannis Kounellis
This interview was translated with the invaluable help of Michelle Coudray.

Since you have come here from Italy, I want to ask you first what your feeling is for San Francisco, for California?

It is beautiful. This is a beautiful city to live in and to work in.

Okay. The reason that I am asking this question--

I want to say that I have been in San Francisco ten days and it is too short a time to see the contradictions; I am fascinated but I don't yet have a critical detachment.

No. I understand. The reason I'm asking is because, if I understand your work correctly, it is always related to the historical environment. So I'm assuming that the etchings you are working on deal, in some way, with your response to San Francisco. And I was wondering if you could speak about that.

It's very difficult to describe sensations and desires.

Yes. It's true. But--well, then, for example, speak about the photographs. I mean, why are you using those photographs, where do they come from, and what do they mean?

In doing this work with the photos, I am thinking about a certain kind of fascination that I have not only in San Francisco but also in New York, a fascination with the kind of epic intensity expressed by these photos, photos of people with whom it is normal that one identify oneself--it is very difficult to explain the reason for my choice of photos. The interest is in the solution that has been given; in the problems raised about the language of art, and about ethical questions of historic identity, identity that one manages to find again--and so identify oneself.
Manifesto Per Un Teatro Utopistico. 1979. Photocetching and aquatint, image size 29" x 21", paper size 35" x 26".
Published by Crown Point Press.
I understand.

What is perhaps even more interesting than the photos (the people represented), is the structure.

That you have created.

The frame. It is the same as a medieval icon.

As a medieval icon?

In order to understand what I am saying one should have in mind the structure of an icon with its golden bottom, and the lives of the saints who make a frame to the image of the madonna.

The frame is of normal people in the society, ordinary people.

Yes. People of everyday life with their things and movements. I give to this frame a symbolic meaning.

Are you trying to raise the people up, in a certain way? Or, to celebrate...?

I think they are great people, I'm not trying to make them bigger. I am not trying to celebrate them. One identifies oneself. It is very difficult to say today if Van Gogh identified himself with the peasants he painted or not.

So, also, for you, it's very difficult to--

No, no, no. I say—that it is difficult to say.

But is this place (the United States)—the subject, in a way, of the etching?

If the etching were only about this place, it wouldn't belong to my work. First of all it belongs to my work, and then to the place where I do the work. But in Italy, I would never have done such a work.

Why are the etchings not centered? Both etchings have a structure which is not centered on the page.

The position of the image comes from a consideration of the space. The printing paper provides an hypothesis. I think centrality is too definitely affirmative. Affirmation can be found, instead, in more hypothetical points.
In one of the etchings, there's a black square and around it are flowers. Now, if I am understanding, there's a contradiction between the flowers and the black square. It's the same contradiction that existed between the parrot and the gray, iron structure behind it, or between the horses and the gallery. In your work there is always a very formal structure that exists, and in contrast to that something which is, or represents, the opposite of something formal: something alive.

In all my work there is a contradiction. And in this work it is obviously visible. Clearly, there is a contradiction between the two elements.

And so that would suggest--

The black square in this work here has a--symbolic character.

And does it symbolize a formal and artificial structure, as the gallery did, as the--?

No, no, no. It's more mysterious. More enigmatic. It's like--the person with the blindfolded eyes.

As in the work at Ink*, for example.

It's not the same kind of image, but it's the same kind of symbolic figuration, and it has the same frontality.

Though I saw the work that you did at Ink--the blindfolded Classical head, I don't really understand what--what was meant by that.

This work at Ink was a collective, not a personal, exhibition; I was interested in putting an accent on the diversity, in accentuating the different kind of logic that exists between my work and the work of Ryman, LeWitt, or Penck, the choice of the pieces was made on purpose.

This is something I was thinking: about ten years ago, you were very interested to make a contrast between a rigid structure and something living, something alive. Now there seems to be more emphasis on contrasting the present and the past. In 1974 at the Contemporanea in Rome, you used pieces of stylized Greek sculpture and in the piece at Ink you used a classical head. So, I would ask, then, is this a shifting concern: from contrasting something artificial with something living, to contrasting the present with the past--bringing

* Halle für Internationale neue Kunst, Zurich, Switzerland.
forth the past in the present?

The problems are today not different, but it is also not possible today to have the same problems...

The problems are equal?

The elements of the dialectic have changed. The elements of the dialectic that make the work, that give birth to the work, have changed.

Perhaps the dialectic has matured, in a certain way. I was reading a description of arte povera, which explained that in arte povera, which translates "poor art", the artist was concerned with natural materials, with earth and other primary materials. It was the beginning of conceptual art as we know it today. But arte povera is over now, in a way. So you can
no longer work with the same materials.

It's not a question of material, I don't like the idea of--the material is not really so important.

At that time, using "poor" materials was a political statement against a plastic and commercial culture. You made installations with piles of coal, piles of wood, with carbon, with cotton, hair.

But now the elements of the language have changed. It doesn't matter if the problems have the same nature, if the same contradictions are still being born. And of course in some ways many of these conditions have actually changed. The work of mine that you are speaking of was done 10 or 12 years ago.

But you would say that your work is still basically dealing with the same themes?

Yes.

In an interview you did with Willoughby Sharp that was in Avalanche in 1972, you said you were dealing with structure and sensibility. Are you still concerned with those two things?

They are not the only problems. I was speaking with him as with someone who absolutely did not understand the mentality or the situation in Italy, although he did have a certain way in through his understanding of Fluxus.

I think there are many people who will read this interview who also don't have an understanding of--the Italian milieu you are coming from. And that's why I asked you first to speak a little bit about the etching--because it's here, it's concrete, we can see it--and we could use it as an example to illuminate the concerns that are in your work.

I came here with the light heart of a writer of travel novels. If I wanted to do something really different in America I would eventually need more time.

You have often used fire in your work. Could you speak a little about fire?

The problem of the fire is a very peculiar problem. My interest in this element is not only in fire as a problem, but also in its references to medieval legends. Fire, in the medieval legend, goes with punishment and purification.
For example, the work you did of the woman covered by a blanket with a fire tied to her foot, was that about punishment?

No, not in the least way. That work has qualities of equilibrium and loss of equilibrium at the same level. It's like an acrobat who walks—balances, walks on the--

Tightrope. Oh, yes!

In a medieval church, there is a painting on the wall—there is the Earth on one side and Paradise on the other side—and between them there is a very narrow bridge. Under the bridge are the fires of Hell. And people have to pass from one side to the other. So, this is the kind of danger in which I placed the woman with the fire.

This element of disorientation is something that I've felt in the exhibitions that I've seen of your work. In a way the viewer loses his equilibrium, because you come into a space—and the expectations that you have are completely disarranged.
Perhaps my shows are disorienting because they are completely lacking in centrality.

Yes, that's true! I went with a friend to the Sonnabend Gallery in 1975 and we saw the exhibition of the one horse. The room was painted yellow and you were sitting on the horse holding the mask of Apollo in front of your face. And my friend thought it was perfect, it was the best thing he had seen all year. But he saw it as a satire on galleries and on art, and on things that are shown in the gallery. Is that—that must be an incorrect interpretation?

At that time I had an exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery and upstairs there was an exhibition of Flavin, and also downstairs another one of Flavin. So, it could be interpreted as satirical in that way. But this was not the meaning of this work. For me, the "Cavaliere Blue"

Ah, right. The Blue Rider.

The Blue Rider of Kandinsky is nothing else but the Sant Giorgio cavaliere.

Saint George killing the dragon. That one.

That's it.

So the piece with a rider sitting on the horse was following in that tradition?

You say that my new work is dealing with the past and the present, but I think my work has always done that. This is also shown by the work with fire.

The fire...You are from Greece and though you moved to Italy when you were 19 years old, you must have been affected by the atmosphere of Greece and its history. It seemed to me when I was in Greece that only there could people have developed the philosophies, the mathematics, the art that they did. There's a sensibility that's in the air, it's just everywhere. In the place. The Parthenon could only have been built there.

It is a representation of that philosophy.

So, when you use fire, or when you use horses, it's not only a reference to medieval iconography, but also a reference to very ancient and primitive rites. Your work must be touched by your Greek background.
In the Middle Ages the figure of the artist was a public figure. But I do not want to speak either about the Greek influence or the medieval because that would be a blind alley. Anyway, I like the visionary artists of the Middle Ages. But this is a minor thing. We are mixing too many things up—it's outside of the central problem.

A European writer has labeled your work "individual mythology," implying that you are expressing yourself and your own individuality. But to me it seems that the work is really universal, and that it's not so much a personal statement, because—

I don't know this writer, but I have always considered my work with horses, for example at L'Attico, as dealing with the mentality of the Enlightenment.

So, at least it's always related to cultural conditions,
clearly it's beyond the concerns of the personal. You have said that when you first came to Italy you were really taken with the work of Alberto Burri. How did he influence you?

I was looking at Burri as a fascinating figure, very open for that time. His work helped to introduce me to the problems of Italian art, how things there were born—where they were coming from—the problems and the contradictions. He opened me to what was there in Italy, to a whole series of very basic thoughts.

Were Burri and Lucio Fontana the fundamental influences then?

Certainly. Burri and Fontana represented at that time, a radicality.

Were they like Jasper Johns in America? Were they that kind of radical influence?

For me Jasper Johns is a conservator, not so radical as Pollock.

So, for you—Pollock is the true American radical artist?

He is a matrix.

He mapped out the geography? Is that it?

He's the father and the mother of American art.

Is that just your opinion, or do you think many Europeans have that opinion?

It is my own opinion. But I think that lots of European artists would agree with me.

Even though he was a painter, and you—you would never have considered yourself a painter?

Yes, I do consider myself a painter—mostly out of custom.

Could I ask what custom?

For me, a good writer is also a painter.

When you first came to Italy, in 1956—

Yes.
You went to Rome, and--was there a community of artists working there then? For instance, in America, in the late '50s and early '60s, there was a group of artists who have subsequently become famous, I mean, Ryman and Brice Marden, LeWitt and Mangold, Flavin and Judd--and all these people. They are all more or less the same age; they all began showing at about the same time and there is a certain sensibility that they share in common. Is the same thing true in Italian art?

A community would have been impossible, because Italy doesn't have any structures. There was not a school of artists. But there was a group, a group of younger--friends.

Who were they?

Lo Savio, Pino Pascali, Paolini, Manzoni, Fabro, Castellani.... All these people had a common condition.

Which was?

It's an historical one, because Italy had just come out of a disastrous war. Because of this they had acquired a critical vision.

This vision--it's a kind of awareness? You have said that creativity is an act of awareness.

The awareness is about history. This is a base on which the work is put.

So, it's to be--

It's important to talk about the role of the artist.

Is it the role of the artist to give other people this awareness?

Awareness is a global argument...! Masaccio dealing with perspective and chiaroscuro, Goya when he made the Caprichos, Gericault when he made the portraits of mad people, Delacroix in his feeling for color, Picasso in Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, Bernini combining the obelisk with the little elephant--that is what I mean by awareness and creativity.

Does it follow then, that--

It's the same for Rimbaud. I think that the artist is always an ethical figure.
So the role of the artist, then, involves breaking through certain limits. It's more about expanding understanding and awareness than it is social criticism.

An artist must not make an apology.

For the system. He must stand in opposition, make a critique.

But at the same time one knows also that artists are nourished by ancient dreams.

And—in America, is that the role that artists have had?

Pollock, yes.

He was making a revolutionary statement, or a criticism, against the vision of artists before him. But is it more
than just a criticism of art? You’re speaking of a criticism of the whole society?

He was doing both things at the same time and he could not do otherwise. One cannot separate the story of art from the story of society... how can you separate the funerals of black people from blues music?

Of course.

Before Pollock, in America, art reflected the colonial attitude of the country. Pollock made a very strong criticism of this kind of mentality. Pollock went to Mexico and discovered the murals, and he discovered the Indian paintings, and he understood Mondrian, and he lived all this very strongly. And this is the way Pollock criticized society. I consider in any case that culture is part of the history of the people, it determines and is determined by events. Do you see?

Yes, I do see. For so many years there has been a kind of open-door policy in Europe where American artists have gone overseas and have been accepted, but very few European artists exhibited in America. There has not been much of a dialogue, it's been mostly a monologue from here--to there. But now things are changing, people here are beginning to see the strength and influence of European artists, and there is a possibility for there to be a dialogue--more than just a dialogue between markets. I mean, it's not just a question of selling European art here, and not selling American art in Europe. It's much more a question of--of--what kinds of things can be learned.

It is obvious that sometimes it is necessary to knock down a mentality in order to have a dialogue.... Arshile Gorky, in one of his interviews, listed the things that he liked in art. I discovered when I read the interview that I shared most of his loves. There are ghosts and loves that are the bases for a discussion between American and European artists. But as you pointed out, naturally there are many difficulties and the considerations of the market do have a big influence.

What you are saying is that artists can see that even though they approach problems differently (and solve them differently), the problems are still the same problems; that there are common bonds. Do you think that artists are teachers, teachers for society?
The artist recounts his vision of history in metaphors. I like to think that Joyce's *Ulysses* is an example of the historical and literary conditions, the linguistic conditions, and as a consequence is interpretive. Of course the problems of Kafka and Musil are the same.

*Is that what you do? Give an interpretation?*

The difficulty with the interviews is usually that one has to give an affirmative answer, which is something that I do not intend to do. Anyway, I think that the problems are already interpretations.

*So, we'll go back a little bit. You have called yourself a painter, but instead of painting pictures of things you put the things themselves in the gallery space, and--this produces a kind of disorientation in the person who sees these things. And it destroys the neutrality of the gallery space. To put something that's living, that eats, and that smells--in a gallery, destroys the classical, cold, artificial space of the gallery. Are those works meant to destroy in some*
way the neutrality of the gallery?

One needs to consider that the gallery is a dramatic, theatrical cavity.

So there was not an intention to destroy—in any way—the formality, the artificial quality?

No, no, no. I never wanted to, and anyway, it wouldn't be possible. It's not possible.

Does everything that's in a gallery become art, by virtue of the context?

Art is made by artists, not by the gallery.

In your work, in its experience, I had the feeling of walking across a threshold into a sort of surrealistic space. A different sense of time, actually—it's kind of like a mirage, or an oasis. Is that something that you're trying to—to—make happen, trying to elicit?

Surrealistic? I don't think it's surrealistic. No, my work is not surrealistic, the effect is theatrical, it is Baroque.

Baroque? Can you explain that, I don't understand—why Baroque?

Baroque is: the cupolas of Borrommini, Bernini's obelisque with the little elephant, a few works of Michelangelo, the fronts of many Venetian churches, the Neapolitan Madonnas, the Roman fountains, and this kind of dramatic artifice that is around all the baroque art.

Is it important to you that the elements that you use to make an exhibition are left as much as possible to themselves? Do you make an attempt to leave out the hand of the artist as much as possible?

I do not leave the elements to themselves. I bring these things into the gallery—my work has always been structured. I don't think I am at all concerned with the problem you are talking about.

I was thinking about the etchings; you didn't do anything by hand on the plate.

When I have an idea, or an image, I look for the best means
of presenting that idea. If I were to have in mind an appropriate image, for example like those of Piranesi, I would make an etching in the traditional sense of the word.

But there was a time in the beginning of your work when you did painting, when you did apply paints to canvas, and made drawings in a more traditional sense.

I have absolutely nothing against the idea of painting... a long time ago I did paint some black letters on canvas. But actually painting is a mentality that exists both within and outside of the canvas.

Perhaps this has to do with the frontality of your work. Even though it is objects in space, you often indicate a viewpoint, and the photos of your work always emphasize this frontal quality. Minimal art, by contrast, is sculptural. Is arte povera a European equivalent to minimal art in America?

Arte povera, first of all, was born in an extremely different social and historical context, and represented a different kind of consciousness. The interpretation of the political demonstrations of 1968 was the context for arte povera after its birth, and stimulated, later on, the initial critical analysis of minimal art.
Before arte povera, you were making paintings, the canvases with the letters and symbols, until about--the 1960s.

I stopped in '62, '63.

And then, what were you doing between 1963 and 1966 when I know that you began to work with fire?

Because the paintings of the letters began to be seen as a style, I stopped making them and in the next three years I made six seascapes.

Six seascapes! And you showed this work at La Tartaruga in Rome?

Yes. But it was of no consequence.

And then you began to show at L'Attico. Was it kind of like Castelli, or some of the early galleries in New York?

It was different, very different. Castelli was very structured. L'Attico was not a structure at all, it was just a place where--

It was just a place. Well, now it's 1979, and we have talked quite a bit about the early things; perhaps we should talk about the things that you are doing now. However, it's interesting to me that you have recently re-made pieces from around 1967 in order to show them at the Mönchengladbach Museum, West Germany, and at the Venice Biennale.

There are two different situations. At Mönchengladbach the works existed as objects and I orchestrated them in that space like a ballet. In the most recent Biennale I was invited to be in the historical show and to reconstruct that piece of 1967 exactly.

Also, in the Biennale in 1976--you remade a work from 1969. But do you think of it as a different work when it is put in a different space?

In the Biennale of 1976 I made the work of the horses again because the right conditions were present again; I felt it was the right response at that time. The section was dedicated to works about the environment.

Then it seems that European artists are connected to their old works in a way that American artists are not. There is a different attitude in America--an emphasis on the new.
This is what I mean about consideration of the work. European artists have a way of considering the past and drawing from that vital source.

*Is this because the idea in the work is—is timeless, is universal, is not related to a specific art argument that was taking place at a specific date?*

One must have a consideration of the importance of the idea of accumulation in the work.

*Accumulation?*

For example, there is a sculpture by Bernini near the Pantheon. It is this little elephant, and upon his back there is this little Egyptian obelisk. Bernini used this element of the obelisk—-it's a very old element—with an elephant that he made from a drawing by Raphael. This is an idea of accumulation. This is something that minimalists do not have. In the works of American artists in these last fifteen years they have voluntarily eliminated the idea of accumulation. They have chosen another kind of logic. The square eliminates completely the possibility of accumulation.

*Perhaps so. But it also reduces these very complexities to fundamental things.*

The problem is much more complicated than it seems. I think it's not possible to clearly define a notion that is so vast.

*Well—to speak about the work that's more recent, would you—to begin, describe the piece at Konrad Fischer's in Düsseldorf?*

It's impossible to explain an exhibition. It's easier for me to say that I was walking in the streets and my hat was blown off by the wind and went into a tree, and the tree became blue.

*Okay. Then let's go back to the piece you did at Ink. We have already spoken about it. We spoke about the fire, and we spoke about the Classical head. There was another element: music. What is the function of the music, why is it there?*

It is a repeated fragment of the "Nabucco", the opera by Verdi. Music is ephemeral in its execution, ephemeral like the name of the poet Keats written in the water.
Ephemerality because it's intangible, because you hear it, it lives, and then it's gone.

Yes, and my work does not come out of the place where it's done. I am much more precise. When I go somewhere to make a work, I already know what—I have an idea.

So the work responds not so much to the place where you are as it does to your vision, your concept of history.

I'm not really talking about the mentality of historians, we are not historical. But it is impossible not to realize that everything is consequent. For example, the painting of Masaccio comes from a perfect philosophic interpretation of the Renaissance; Caravaggio does not exist without the Reformation; El Greco and Velasquez exist for Picasso; Caravaggio exists for Rembrandt. I think of making an exhibition as trying to make a contribution.

Yes.

That is my ethical idea about my work as an artist.

Yes.
And if that is not so, it would be meaningless for me to come and do a work in America, or for an American to come and do a work in Europe. There would be no sense in it if not for the idea of adventure and of giving a contribution—that's the point. Ezra Pound gives the exact interpretation of this.

Yes?

His idea of the world, his idea of understanding—of giving a contribution—I think this is the kind of artist who must come forth today.

Yes, yes.

Because any other thing is rather banal. For us it is a custom, it is a tradition to read the past.

Yes.

And I think it is important, in this moment, to read the past.

Yes.

Not only today, but it was, also, yesterday.

Yes.

Mondrian was born into a very precise cultural condition; he does not begin from a square, anyway, but from a tree, and from the earth. And America really helped him, because then he was able to do a work like Boogie Woogie—because of being in America. That's America for me. You see what I mean—it is difficult for me to explain. The present condition, the place where one was born and the cultural adventure that one has in his head—that is the point. That is why I go on insisting on Pollock.

Yes.

Because he was above a formal scheme. He lived with great drama, an extraordinary adventure. But one must acknowledge the minimalists' will toward radicality. Obviously I have a very different image of radicality, less formal, more fluid, less dogmatic, without protections—more crazy.
Sono logico e voglio essere folle come l'Orlando.

Jannis Kounellis

Born in Piraeus, Greece, has lived in Rome since 1956.

Personal exhibitions

1960 Galleria la Tartaruga, Rome
1964 Galleria la Tartaruga, Rome
1966 Galleria l’arco d’Alibert, Rome
1967 Galleria l’ Attico, Rome
1968 Galleria Iolas, Milan
1969 Galleria l’ Attico, Rome
Galleria Sperone, Torino
Galleria Iolas, Paris
1969/70 Galleria Modern Art Agency, Napoli
1971 Galleria Sperone, Torino
Galleria l’ Attico, Rome
1972 Galerie Skulima, Berlin
Galleria Modern Art Agency, Napoli
Sonnabend Gallery, New York
Galleria la Sallita, Rome
1973 Sonnabend Gallery, Paris
Galleria l’ Attico, Rome
Galleria Modern Art Agency, Napoli
1974 Galleria Stein, Torino
Sonnabend Gallery, New York
Galleria l’ Attico, Rome
Galerie Skulima, Berlin
1975 Galleria Modern Art Agency, Napoli
Galerie Zwirner, Köln
1976 Galleria l’ Attico, Rome (Hotel Lunetta)
1977 Galleria Ala, Milano
Kunstmuseum, Luzern
Group Exhibitions

1963  Stedelijk Museum, "Schrift en Beeld", Amsterdam
Staatliche Kunsthalle, "Schrift und Bild", Baden-Baden
Biennale di San Marino
Galleria Torri, Torino

1965  "Reali del Immagine", Feltrinelli, Rome
"L'Art actuel en Italie", Cannes

1966  "Aspetti del Arte contemporanea", Roma, Tel-Aviv, Koln, Bergen, Stockholm
Museum am Ostwall, "Moderne Kunst aus Italien", Dortmund

1967  Galleria l'Attico, "Lo spazio degli elementi, fuoco, immagine, acqua, terra", Rome
Palazzo Anziani, Spoleto, "II artisti italiani degli anni 60"
Musée d'art moderne, VI Biennale de Paris
Galleria la libertà, "Arte Povera", Genova

1968  "Young Italians", Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
Galleria del Deposito, Torino
Rassegna d'arte figurativa 3, Amalfi, Italy
"Arte povera", Galleria de Foscherari, Bologna
"Qui arte contemporanea: Fabro, Paolini, Kounellis", Rome
Recent Italian Painting and Sculpture, Jewish Museum, New York
Italianische Kunst des XX Jahrhunderts, Bochum, Berlin, Koln
Fünf romatische Kunstler, Extra, Staatliches Museum, Wiesbaden
"Dal Futurismo alle tendenze attuali", Warsaw, Berlin, Rome

1969  "Op Loose Schroeven", Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
"When Attitudes Become Form", Kunsthalle Berne, Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, and ICA, London
Zwol Italianische Bildhauer, Kunstinstitut Hamburg
"4 artistes italiens plus que nature", Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris
Prospect 69, Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf

1970  3 Biennale della giovane pittura, Genoa 70, Bologna
"Conceptual art, Arte povera, Land Art", Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, Torino
Amore mio, Palazzo Ricci, Montepulciano
Due decenni di eventi artistici in Italia, 1950-1970, Prato
Biennale of Tokyo, 1970
"Processi di pensiero visualizzati", Kunstmuseum, Luzern
Arte e critica, Moderna, Italy
"Vitalità del negativo", Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome
"Arte povera", Kunstinstitut, Munich
"At the moment!", Zagreb, Yugoslavia
7 Biennale de Paris

1972  Documenta 5, Kassel
X Quadriennale Nazionale d'arte, Palazzo delle Esposizione, Rome
Galleria l'Attico, Rome

1973  Contemporanea, Rome

1974  Biennale di Venezia
Musée Galliera, Paris
Ada II, Berlin

1976  Biennale di Venezia
Galleria l'Attico, Rome
Prospect-retrospect: Europe 1948-1975, Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf

1978  Galleria Mario Diaco, Bologna
INK, Zurich
Biennale di Venezia
Teatro con Carlo Quartiucci, Arancera di San Sisto

1979  Group exhibition with Gino De Dominicis and Ettore Spalletti, Galleria Mario Pironi, Rome