

A LABYRINTH IN A BOX: ASPEN 5+6

Mary Ruth Walsh describes a radical tour-de-force at the word/image interface.

In retrospect, it [Aspen 5+6] summed up the sensibility of that decade and foretold much of what was to influence artists subsequently.

-Irving Sandler

In 1967, *Aspen 5+6*, a magazine in a box, was edited, or more properly compiled by Brian O'Doherty. *Aspen 5+6* is the first self-contained, portable conceptual exhibition in a box that dispenses with the gallery. The gallery is the box itself. The box and its contents, while it is a work of art itself, questions the role of its impresario. Is O'Doherty the author, the curator, or the artist – or all three? His presence is sometimes masked and indirect. The text that introduces the exhibition is from a book called **Language as Placement** (1928) by one Sigmond Bode. Bode, however, is one of O'Doherty's aliases, also used in a poem published ten years before in Dublin. The extract from the fictitious book provides a rationale for the 'exhibition' in a box. "It should be possible to construe a situation in which persons, things, abstractions, become simple nouns and are thus potentially objectified...conjugated in such a way that their positions imply 'verbs' in the spaces (silences) between them." We are advised that this 'invisible grammar' of the box's contents "can be read within and between categories." The box, as we shall see, has six categories or 'movements'. "To identify such a grammar, to read such a language," Sigmond Bode forewarns, "constitutes a test for the reader."

O'Doherty's *Aspen*, his one-man show for that year, is a pristine white box measuring eight by eight by two

inches, bisected mid-section so that the box when opened forms two identical halves which the recipient can arrange in several ways – longitudinally, symmetrically or asymmetrically, or vertically as miniature monoliths reminiscent of Tony Smith's (whose work the box also contains). The modules allow the recipient to ad lib his or her own combinations.

The small scale of the box is paradoxical in relation to the vast and complex exhibition it contains. The design is, however, reserved and pared down. The box contains four 8mm films, five records, a sculpture model, and printed matter. The printed matter is presented on eight-by-eight-inch square sheets and booklets. This arrangement has unmistakable echoes of the grid which Rosalind Krauss relates closely to the conceptual art of the sixties. The grid can be read many ways. Patrick Ireland (the identity O'Doherty took for his artwork in 1972 following the Derry massacre) describes the grid in all its contradictions as

grandchild of perspective and the Renaissance. It's supposed to be indexical of all that is rational, but I think it's as mad as many logical things turn out to be – artificial, hysterical, subsuming its own version of chaos. It's rigid but flexible, a measure of scale but scaleless, it's flat with imitations of depth, democratic about space but really absolutist, stamped with rigidity but alert with permutational virtuosity. It's a container that contains itself, that is both form and content. (Ireland, 1998).

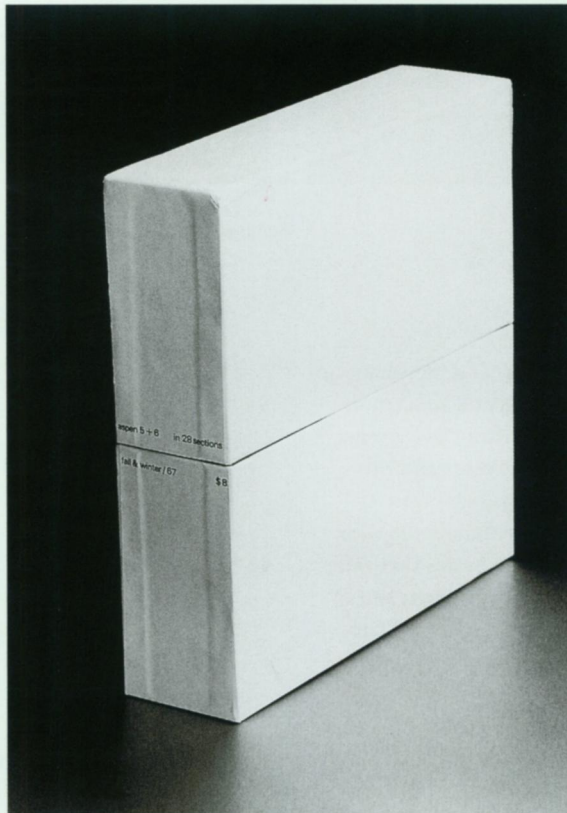
Pulling the conceptual grid of *Aspen*'s contents together forms a quasi-chessboard of 8 by 8 squares, exactly echoing the box's measurements. This analogy may prove helpful in exploring *Aspen* 5+6, since its conceptual 'moves' are complex and, like the black and white colours of chess, its operations are conducted through a dialogue of opposites. The box – if we call it a thinking box, as well we may – presents six 'movements' as categories. They are placed on the contents page, the key to the box, in two registers: 'constructivism', 'structuralism', 'conceptualism', 'tradition of paradoxical thinking' (presumably referring to Dada), 'objects' and 'between categories' (a title the composer Morton Feldman – also an inhabitant of the box – immediately borrowed for one of his compositions). Below, these are refined into three 'themes': 'time (in art and 'history)', 'silence and reduction' and 'language'. These three may be used as tools to decipher the hidden language of the box,

The repeated references to language point to the dedication of the box to Stéphane Mallarmé, which may well set a certain tone for the reading of *Aspen* 5+6.

While Mallarmé suppresses the author for the sake of the writing, Roland Barthes went much further in his immensely influential essay for *Aspen* 5+6, *The Death of the Author*. Indeed the thirty-two-page pamphlet of essays commissioned by O'Doherty from Barthes, Kubler and Sontag are in exact symmetry with the box's three themes – language, time and silence. Barthes' inclusion is a key work within the context of the box. In his essay he does away with the myth of the author's autonomy and reinstates the status of the reader:

Once the Author is gone, the claim to "decipher" a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is "explained," the

critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic...in a multiple writing, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, "threaded" (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated. (Aspen 5+6, Section 3)



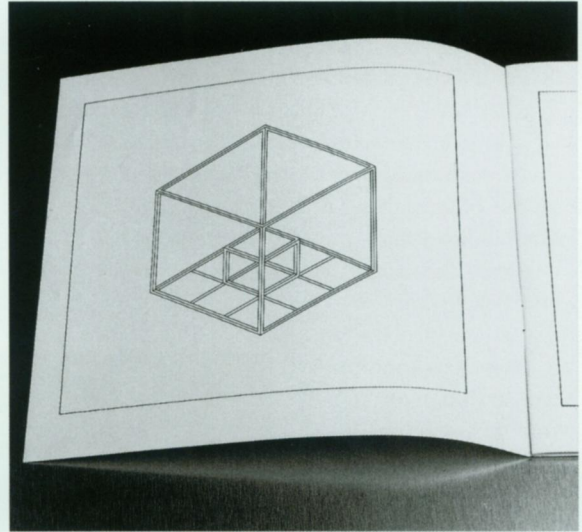
Aspen 5 + 6 in the original mail packaging, 1967; photo Cian McCann; courtesy the author

Barthes' notion of the work's reception rhymes in several ways with other components of *Aspen* 5+6, particularly with Duchamp's emphasis on the viewer who completes the artwork in his

Creative Act (1957), and Feldman's listeners who occupy what Feldman called "a plane of attention" in such a work as his *King of Denmark*, both specially recorded for *Aspen* 5+6. Barthes, whose spatial metaphors for reading are invigorating, projects a text into dimensions where the reading will be as varied as the reader's immediate experience. "There is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now" – two of the three words, it will be remembered, Patrick Ireland translated into ogham, and to which he



Aspen 5 + 6, randomised view of the contents;
photo Cian McCann; courtesy the author



Sol Le Witt: *Serial Project 1, Aspen 5 + 6*;
photo Cian McCann; courtesy the author

devoted some thirty years of drawings and paintings. Other commentators (Ashton in 1968 and Alberro in 2001) have emphasised Barthes' comment "everything is to be *distinguished*, but nothing *deciphered*" and the image of the "stocking that has run" as helpful in tracking the analogical runs and cross-references with which *Aspen 5+6* abounds. Among the books that were being read in 1967 by artists and art historians (and by O'Doherty and his friends) was George Kubler's **The Shape of Time** (1962), in which Kubler argues (convincingly) the need to see art and its changes in terms of very long durations, thereby undercutting the formal art history then still current, with its lists, schools, and styles. "Many have thought that to make the inventory would lead towards such an enlarged understanding" (Harrison, 1992).

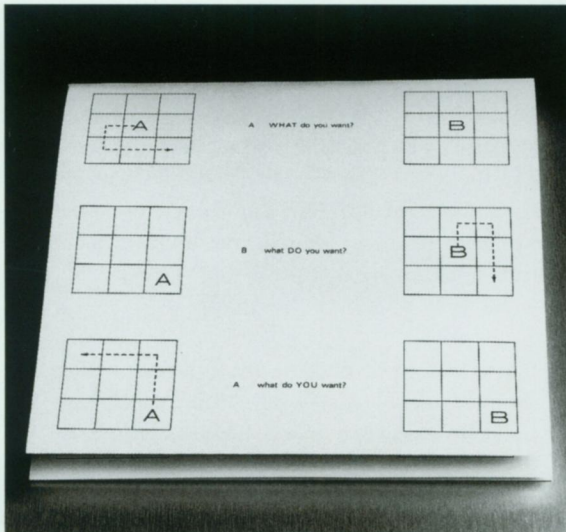
Kubler observes our dependence on the object with a focus on the idea of series. Series, an important early conceptual idea, describes a stretching across time, frustrating a linear historical reading. "Like crustaceans we depend for survival upon an outer skeleton, upon a shell of historic cities and houses filled with things belonging to definable portions of the past... The oldest things made by men are stone tools. A continuous series runs from them to the things of today." (Harrison, 1992)

The essay O'Doherty commissioned for *Aspen 5+6*, *Style*

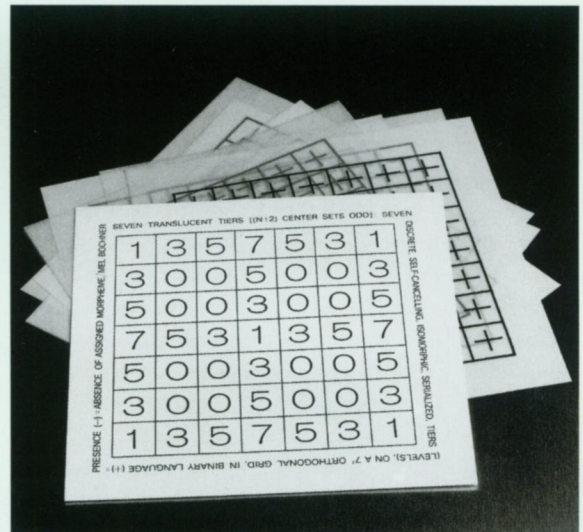
and the representation of historical time, signals Kubler's wit and humour in a cautionary epigraph:

Humans surely are not unique in their capacity for identifying different events as being recurrent. Other animals also project their organic needs under the same guise of identity among successive stimuli. G.A. Brecher showed in 1932 that the snails read space into succession. As an art historian, I am overly familiar with the notion of style, which is another way of imposing space upon time and of denying duration under the illusion that successive events are similar events. To spatialize time is a faculty shared both by snails and by historians. (Aspen 5+6, Section 3)

The third in this remarkable trinity of essays, also commissioned by O'Doherty, is Susan Sontag's *The Aesthetics of silence*. She articulates, unavoidably using language, which she describes as "something shared and something corrupted" (*Aspen 5+6*, Section 3), the idea of reduction and the silence, the zero that lies beyond language. She parses the variety and valences of silence: satisfied silence, silence as renunciation, superior silence, provoking silence, punishing silence, permanent silence, loaded silence (with aggression or comfort), metaphoric silence, but goes far beyond such taxonomy, quoting two of her colleagues 'in the box': Cage ("there is no such



Brian O'Doherty: *Structural Play # 3, Aspen 5+6*;
photo Cian McCann; courtesy the author



Mel Bochner: *Seven Translucent Tiers, Aspen 5 + 6*;
photo Cian McCann; courtesy the author

thing as silence”), who points out that in a soundless chamber he still hears his heartbeat and the coursing of the blood in his head; and Beckett, whose entropic desire is for an art consisting of “the expression that there is nothing to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (*Aspen 5+6*, Section 3). From where, Sontag asks, does this obligation derive? “The very aesthetics of the death wish seem to make of that wish something incorrigibly lively” (*Aspen 5+6*, Section 3).

The artist creating silence, she suggests, inevitably produces something dialectical and she postulates “a full void, an enriching emptiness.” Closely aligning her idea of silence and perception, she “sketches out new prescriptions for looking, hearing etc., – specifically, either for having a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or for confronting the art work in a more conscious, *conceptual way*.” Sontag senses an urgency and spiritual restlessness in art, that “through its advocacy of silence, reduction, etc...art commits an act of violence upon itself, turning art into a species of auto-manipulation, of conjuring – trying to help bring new ways of thinking to birth.” “As the prestige of language falls, that of silence rises” (*Aspen 5+6*, Section 3). The revolt against language is a search for a revision or a new language and Sontag cites the (mainly French) examples of Mallarmé, Alain Robbe-Grillet, William

Burroughs, Beckett and Duchamp (all of whom, in one medium or another, share with her the space of the white box).

Sontag’s rich discourse, which continually tests the ideas it generates, is of course conducted in the medium of her inquiry, language itself. The self-consciousness that this necessarily invokes (as words mirror and obscure themselves in the labyrinths of past usage) becomes one of the most stirring parts of her inquiry. “...speech,” she says, “provokes further speech. But speech can silence too.” A circular progression through silence and language can be identified with arresting time, inducing varieties of awareness, of consciousness – and self-consciousness. Most frequently, Sontag views these matters from the perspective of the artist whose “art thus transmits in full the alienation produced by historical consciousness. Whatever the artist does is in (usually conscious) alignment with something else already done producing a compulsion to continually re-check his situation, his own stance with those of his predecessors and contemporaries. Compensating for this ignominious enslavement to history, the artist dreams of a wholly ahistorical and therefore unalienated art.” (*Aspen 5+6*, Section 3)

Do the three texts elucidate the art proffered in *Aspen 5+6*, or does the art illustrate the texts? The relationship

is, of course, as with many other dialogues in the box, reciprocal. The artworks and commentaries included in *Aspen 5+6* exhibit distinct polarities. O'Doherty has frequently spoken of the dialectical spine on which he hung movements and themes, an armature of opposites that can be summarised as excess and reduction. These opposites run through the box's many media and artforms: the novel (Burroughs and Robbe-Grillet); music (Cage and Feldman); film (Richter/Morris and Moholy-Nagy/Rauschenberg); poetry (Butor and Graham). The box's cross-references prompt numerous other readings: What relationship does Burrough's collaging in *Nova Express* have to Rauschenberg's practice? Does the theory of dance advanced by Cunningham have anything in common with the text and motion of O'Doherty's structural play? And to what degree does the psychological identity of opposites dissolve the polarities set up within the box, which ultimately become a shifting mindscape of contingent relationships? To take one example, why, we may ask, are Richter's *Rhythm 21* and Morris' performance, *Site* (recorded by the avant-garde filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek), on the same 8mm reel?

What of Gabo and Pevsner's manifesto *space and time are reborn to us today?* (*Aspen 5+6*, Section 4). O'Doherty, one can assume from his choices – what he called his “election of ancestors” (Ireland, 1993) – was concerned to establish a paternity of ideas that would build a bridge between European and American avant-gardes. And who were to be the children of such ancestors?

O'Doherty's answer lies in his selection of his immediate colleagues, most of them at that time (1967) not widely known. Morris's film can be said to relate to O'Doherty's *Structural Play* (both, by the way, are examples of the very few performance works in the vicinity of minimalism). Morris' *Site* can be used to illustrate one aspect of the LeWitt and Bochner contributions. The time in the Morris piece is real time. Both LeWitt and Bochner construct time through building (Bochner's *Seven translucent tiers*) and through exhaustive permutations (LeWitt's *Serial Project 1*). To these influential, pioneering ventures, Graham's 'poem' adds an appropriate linguistic coda.

The ingenuity of the box is such that to fasten or isolate one artwork or project is to rearrange the system of relationships within its components. Perspectives shift,

analogies touch, chimeras appear and disappear. The dense, provocative networks of overlaid systems in the box are so rich and complex that they are self-supporting. A quotation from one of O'Doherty's notebooks (Patrick Ireland, La Jolla Museum, catalogue) goes “To look in the mirror and see no reflection.” O'Doherty, as if on cue from Barthes' essay *The death of the author*, seems finally to absent himself from his own creation. Derrida might be speaking of the spaces within the box when he says:

Let us space. The art of this text is the air it causes to circulate between its screens. The chainings are invisible, everything seems improvised or juxtaposed. This text induces by agglutinating rather than by demonstrating, by coupling and uncoupling, gluing and ungluing rather than by exhibiting the continuous, and analogical, instructive, suffocating necessity of a discursive rhetoric.
(Kamuf, 1991).

The release from discursive rhetoric enables the work to open into a medley of views using the conceptual tools of time, silence and language. The breadth and richness of material from these multi-perspectives, created in *Aspen 5+6*, opens up the notion of art history.

Regrouping all the people in *Aspen 5+6* into the 'movements' as outlined in O'Doherty's contents produces another set of opposites, ahistorical time via the 'themes' and historical time via the 'movements'. Both views of history are valid, even when viewed from these opposite perspectives. The dialectic in *Aspen 5+6* is the medium in which time, silence and language are suspended. These three 'themes' have been the main concerns of twentieth-century art practices and continue to be so. A view through the ahistorical 'themes' has the effect of melting chronological links and perhaps comes closer to the artists' intentions as opposed to the view of stylistic similarities. This new multi-view frees the spectator from a single linear historical reading and opens the past and future into a kaleidoscope of ideas.

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