The *Double Negative:* 7
a new syntax for sculpture

In 1969 a young sculptor named Richard Serra made *Hand Catching Lead* (fig. 179), a three-minute film which is repetitive, austere, and nearly without incident. Extending in from screen-right to almost fill the frame are a hand and forearm that perform the totality of the action, which is Serra's attempt to catch a sequence of falling strips of metal as they drop through the space of the image. The pulsating rhythm from open hand to clenched fist, as Serra tries to stop the falling objects, is the sole punctuation of the temporal/spatial sequence of the film. Sometimes his hand misses its target and the lead slips by it. Sometimes he makes his catch, arresting the strip for a moment before opening his hand once more

to allow the lead to continue its fall. The film is composed entirely of those catches and misses—that, and the sense of the visually disembodied hand's intense concentration on the deed.

One of the striking aspects of this film is its quality of relentless persistence—of doing something over and over again without regarding "success" as any particular kind of climax—of simply adding one very specific action to the next, the way a nautilus adds on the chambers of its shell. In regarding repetition as a way of composing, as a demonstration of almost absurd tenacity, Serra's film is continuous with a sculptural tradition that had developed during the seven or eight years prior to his film. And not only his film, but also some of the sculpture he did in that year as well: such pieces as the 1969 *Casting* (fig. 180) made by flinging molten lead into the angle between floor and wall, pulling away the hardened shape into the center of the room, repeating the gesture, and thereby building a succession of lead strips, as sequential and near alike as waves following one another toward shore.

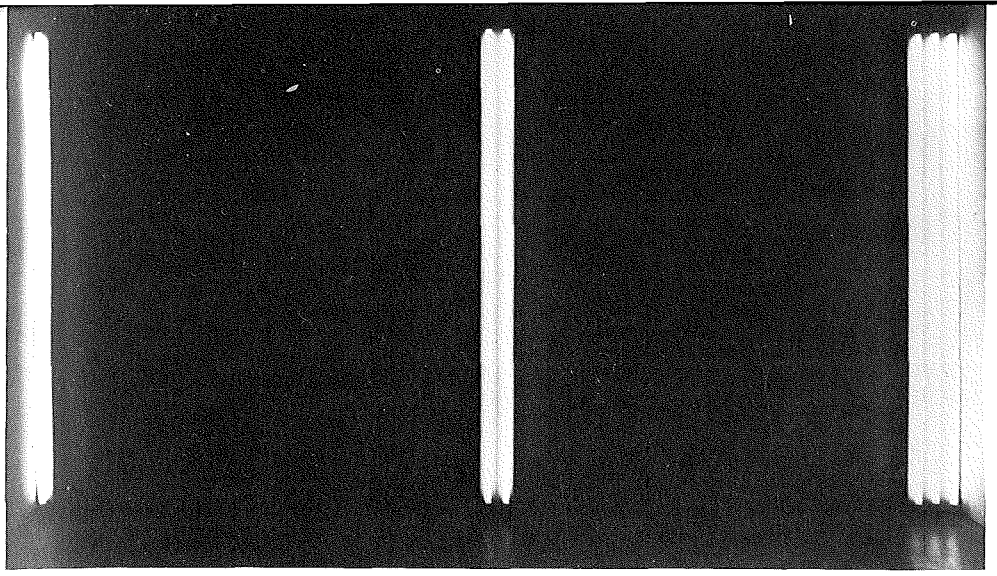
In 1964 Donald Judd spoke of that quality of repetition, both in his own sculpture (fig. 181) and in the paintings of Frank Stella (see fig. 196). "The order," he wrote, "is not rationalistic and underlying, but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another."[1] Somewhat later in a joint interview, he and Stella elaborated on their interest in this composition by means of "one thing after another." It was, they said, a strategy to escape relational composition which they identified with European art. "The basis of their whole idea is balance," Stella said of European formalism. "You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner."[2] In explaining why he objected to relational composition, Judd followed with, "It is that they're linked up with a philosophy—rationalism, rationalist philosophy. . . . All that art is based on systems built beforehand, *a priori* systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world's like."

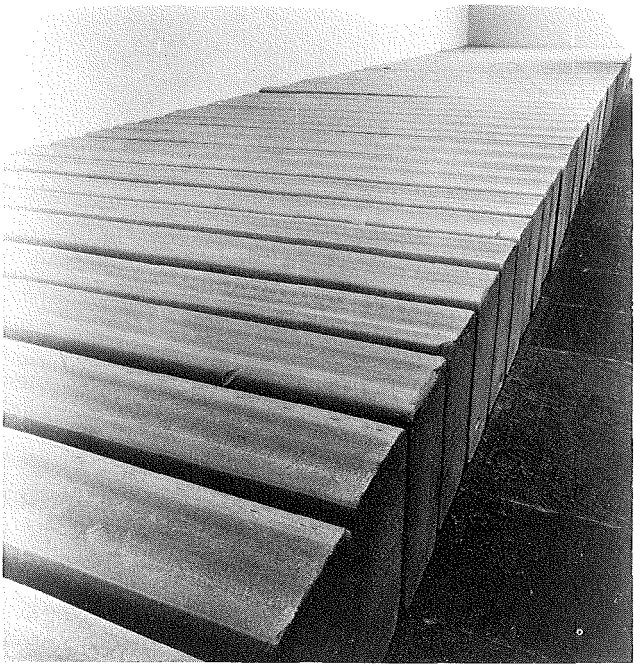
So "one thing after another" was a way to escape from setting up relations. It was at work in the paintings Stella

made after 1960, with their concentric or parallel rows of identical stripes, filling out the canvas surface with what appeared to be mechanical repetitiveness. One found it in the early 1960s in the sculpture of Donald Judd, through wall-bound rows of boxes in which the sameness of the units and the regularity of the intervals between them seemed to drive the possibility of "significance" out of the act of placing or arranging forms. Dan Flavin's use of commercially produced fluorescent tubes (fig. 182) continued the approach of Stella and Judd. Like the prosaically painted four-inch-wide band or the mundane prefabricated box, the tube seems not to have been shaped or given special significance by the artist. The resistance to meaning that is a feature of the single tube carries over into the compositions Flavin built from groups of them. The tubes are mounted on the wall in simple sequences: one tube isolated, then a space, then a pair of tubes, and then, after another interval of wall, a triple unit. What is characteristic of the approach taken by the minimalist sculptors is that they exploited a kind of found object for its possibilities as an element in a repetitive structure. This is true not only of the works just described but also of Carl Andre's rows of Styrofoam planks (fig. 183) or fire-bricks, and of Robert Smithson's stacks of plate-glass panes (fig. 184). In the late 1960s one finds it as well in certain of the works of Serra and in Mel Bochner's use of written numbers extended in a chain across the space of a wall (fig. 185). "One thing after another" was undeniably present as a compositional strategy, but that it might be in Judd's words, "a way of finding out what the world's like," is far more open to doubt.

179. *Richard Serra (1939–):* Hand Catching Lead *(stills), 1969. Film.*

That is because we tend to think that the act of finding out what something is like means that we give it a shape, propose for it a model or an image that will organize what seems on the surface merely an incoherent array of phenomena. This was obviously the conviction held by the constructivists as they proceeded to build abstract models through which to depict the organization of matter. "One thing after another" seems, on the other hand, like days simply following each other without anything having given them a form or a direction, without their being



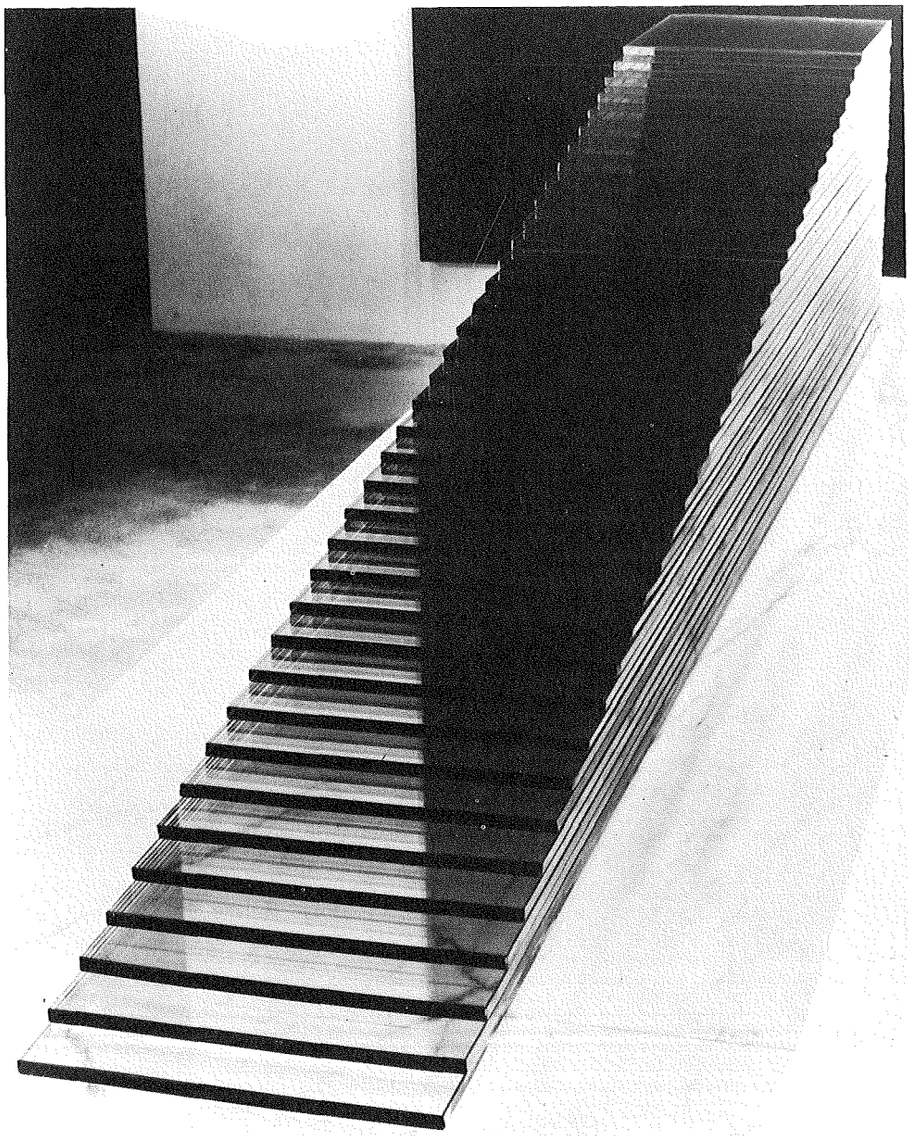


180. LEFT *Serra:* Casting, *1969. Lead, 4" x 210" x 300" (now destroyed). (Photo, Peter Moore for Leo Castelli Gallery, New York)*

181. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP *Donald Judd (1928–):* Untitled *(four boxes), 1965. Galvanized iron and painted aluminum, 33" x 141" x 30" Collection, Philip Johnson, Connecticut. (Photo, Leo Castelli Gallery)*

182. THIS PAGE TOP *Dan Flavin (1933–):* The Nominal Three (To William of Ockham), *1963–64. Cool white fluorescent light, 96" x 264" x 4". John Weber Gallery, New York. (Photo, John Weber Gallery)*

183. THIS PAGE BOTTOM *Carl Andre (1935–):* Reef, *1969. Sixty-five Styrofoam planks, 20" x 9" x 10". John Weber Gallery, New York. (Photo, John Weber Gallery)*



184. LEFT *Smithson:* Glass Stratum, *1967. Glass, 12" x 108". John Weber Gallery, New York. (Photo, John Weber Gallery)*

185. ABOVE *Mel Bochner (1940–):* Three Ideas and Seven Procedures *(now destroyed/dismantled), 1971. Felt pen on 1" masking tape on wall at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Sept. 27–Nov. 1, 1971. (Photo, Eric Pollitzer)*

186. RIGHT *Andy Warhol (1928–):* Brillo Boxes, *1964. Acrylic silk-screened on wood, each box 17" x 17" x 14". Collection, Peter M. Brant, New York.*

inhabited, or lived, or meant. With that thought, we might be led to ask whether Judd is proposing, by his row of identical boxes, an analogy with inert matter—with things untouched by thought or unmediated by personality? In asking the question in that way, we begin to find a connection between what Judd is doing with his rows or stacks of boxes and what Duchamp did almost fifty years earlier in his readymades.

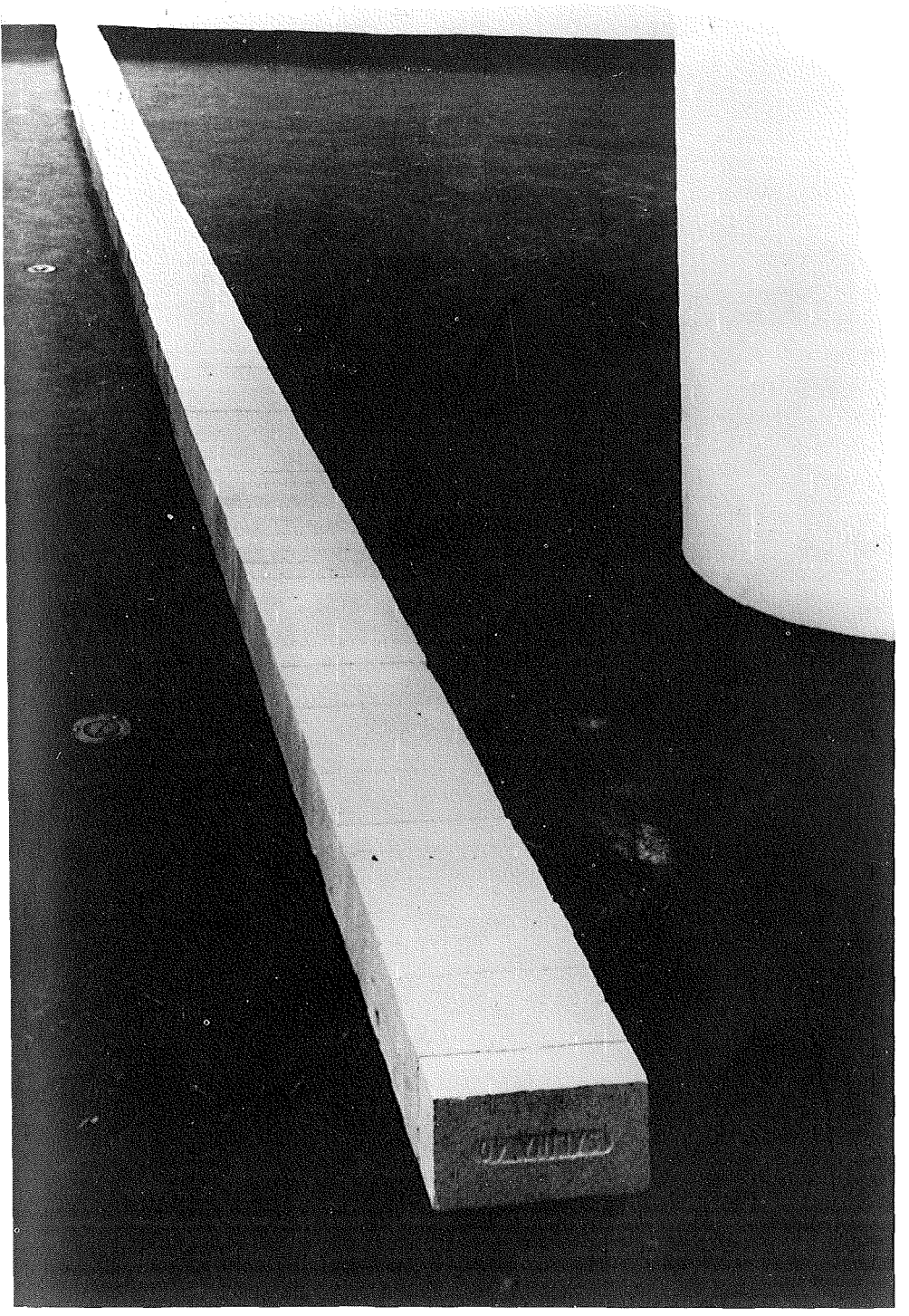
Given its tendency to employ elements drawn from commercial sources, minimal art thus shares with pop art a common source: a newly awakened interest in the Duchampian readymade, which the work of Jasper Johns in the late 1950s had made available to artists of the early 1960s (fig. 193). But there is an important difference between the attitude of the minimal and the pop artists toward the cultural readymade. The pop artists worked with images that were already highly inflected (fig. 186), such as photographs of movie stars or frames from comic books, while the minimalists used elements

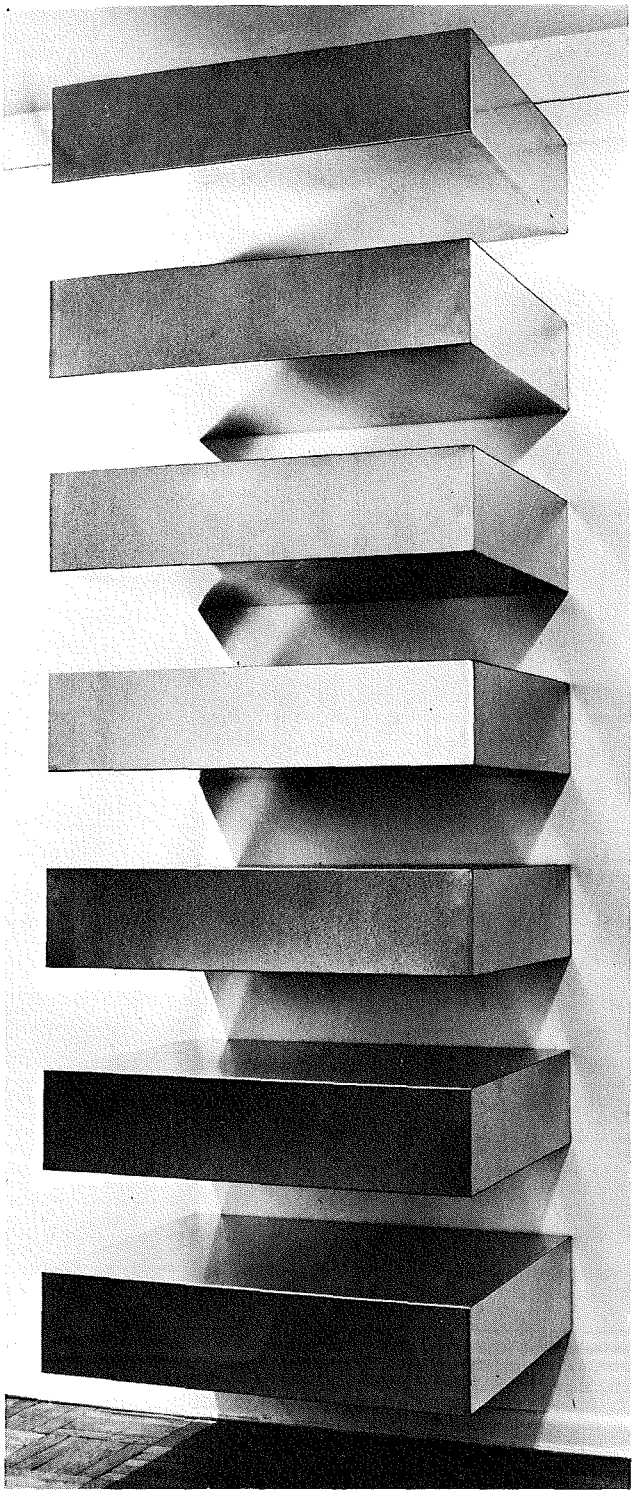
into which content of a specific kind had not been built. Because of this they were able to deal with the readymade as an abstract unit and to focus attention on the more general questions of the way it could be deployed. What they were doing was exploiting the idea of the readymade in a far less anecdotal way than the pop artists, considering its structural rather than its thematic implications.

The first of these implications concerns the basic units of a sculpture and the discovery that certain elements—fire-bricks for example—will resist the appearance of manipulation. The idea that they were not fabricated by the artist but were made instead for some other use within society at large—constructing buildings—gives to those elements a natural opacity. It will be difficult, that is, to read them illusionistically or to see them as alluding to an inner life of form (the way eroded or chiselled rock in a sculptural context might allude to inner biological forces). Instead the fire-bricks remain obdurately external, as objects of use rather than vehicles of expression. In this sense the readymade elements can convey, on a purely abstract level, the idea of simple externality.

In combining several of these elements together to form a grouping that might be called a sculptural composition, the minimal artists exploited yet another implication of the readymade element. Mass production insures that each object will have an identical size and shape, allowing no hierarchical relationships among them. Therefore, the compositional orders that seem to be called for by these units are those of repetition or serial progression: orders that are without either logically determined points of focus or internally dictated outer limits. We have already seen how the minimalists were attracted to sheer repetition as a way of avoiding the inferences of relational composition. To string elements together without emphasis or logical termination is clearly to defeat the idea of a center or a focus toward which forms point or build. One arrives at a mode of composition from which the idea of *inner* necessity has been removed: the idea that the explanation for a particular configuration of forms or textures on the surface of an object is to be looked for at its center. In structural or abstract terms, compositional devices of the minimalists deny the logical importance of

187. *Andre:* Lever, *1966. Fire-bricks, 4" x 360" x 4". Installation, "Primary Structures," Jewish Museum, New York. (Photo, John Weber Gallery)*



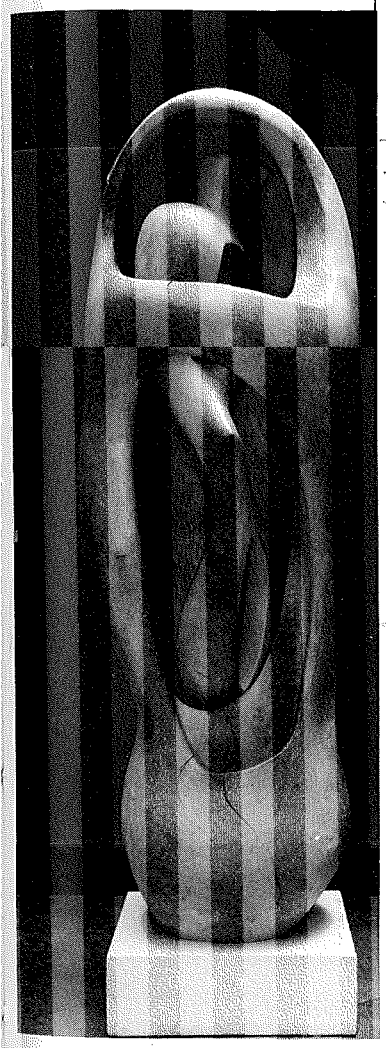


188. LEFT *Judd:* Untitled, *1965. Galvanized iron, 9" x 40" x 31" (each block; 9" between each block). Collection, Gordon Locksley. (Photo, Rudolph Burckhardt)*

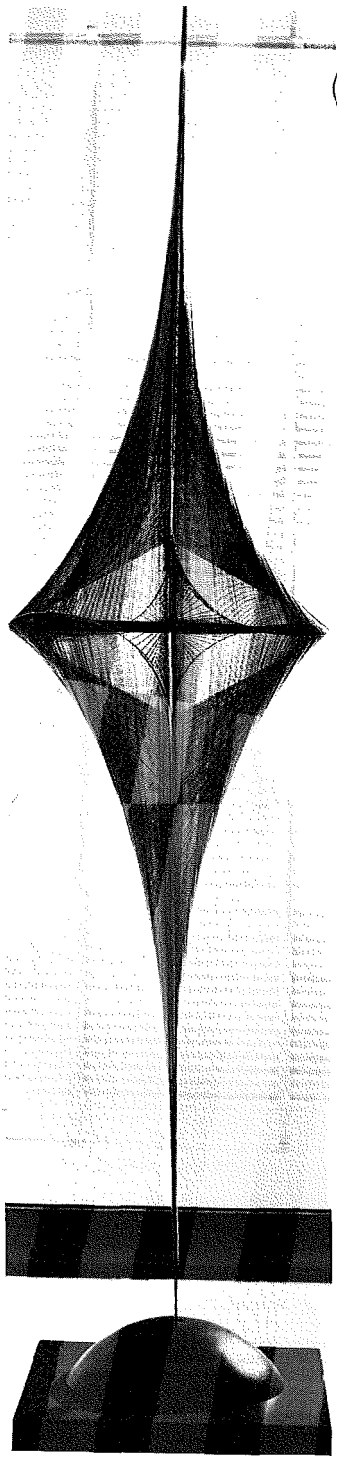
189. RIGHT *Moore:* Internal and External Forms, *1953–54. Elm wood, 103" x 36". Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. Consolidated Purchase Fund. (Photo, Greenberg-May Prod. Inc.)*

the interior space of forms—an interior space which much of previous twentieth-century sculpture had celebrated.

The symbolic importance of a central, interior space from which the energy of living matter derives, from which its organization develops as do the concentric rings that annually build outward from the tree trunk's core, had played a crucial role for modern sculpture. Because, as twentieth-century sculpture discarded realistic representation as a source of major ambition and turned to far more generalized and abstracted plays of form, the possibility arose—as it had not for naturalistic sculpture—that the sculpted object might be seen as nothing but inert material. If Henry Moore or Jean Arp made conspicuous use of eroded stone or rough-hewn wooden block (fig. 189), it was not to serve this material, untransformed, to the viewer of their work. Instead, they wished to create the illusion that at the center of this inert matter there was a source of energy which shaped it and gave it life. They wanted to establish an analogy between the slow formation of the rock's strata or the wood's fibers, and the growth of organic life from the tiny seed that is its inception. In using sculpture to create this metaphor, they were establishing the abstract meaning of their work; they were saying that the process of creating form is, for the sculptor, a visual meditation on the logic of organic growth itself.



In the case of artists such as Gabo and Pevsner, who employed a much more geometric vocabulary and used the synthetic materials of the industrial age, the immediate content of the work is different, but the ultimate meaning is similar. Gabo's (fig. 190) and Pevsner's sculpture is no more *about* plastic and plywood and sheet tin than Moore's is *about* limestone or oak. For the Russians, the logic of construction, with its symmetrical building outward from revealed centers, was a way of presenting visually the creative power of thought, a meditation on the growth and development of Idea. *Behind* the surface of their abstract forms an interior was always indicated, and it was from this interior that the life of the sculpture emanated. This was the kind of order, or constructive principle, that Judd had spoken of as being "rationalistic and underlying" and tied to an idealist philosophy.



Contrary to the procedures of Gabo or Moore, the minimalist sculptors, in both their choice of materials and their method of assembling them, were intent to deny the interiority of the sculpted form—or at least to repudiate the interior of forms as a source of their significance. Their notion of what it really meant to find out "what the world's like" precluded our making any aesthetic hypotheses by which to plumb to the center of matter and metaphorically bring it to life.

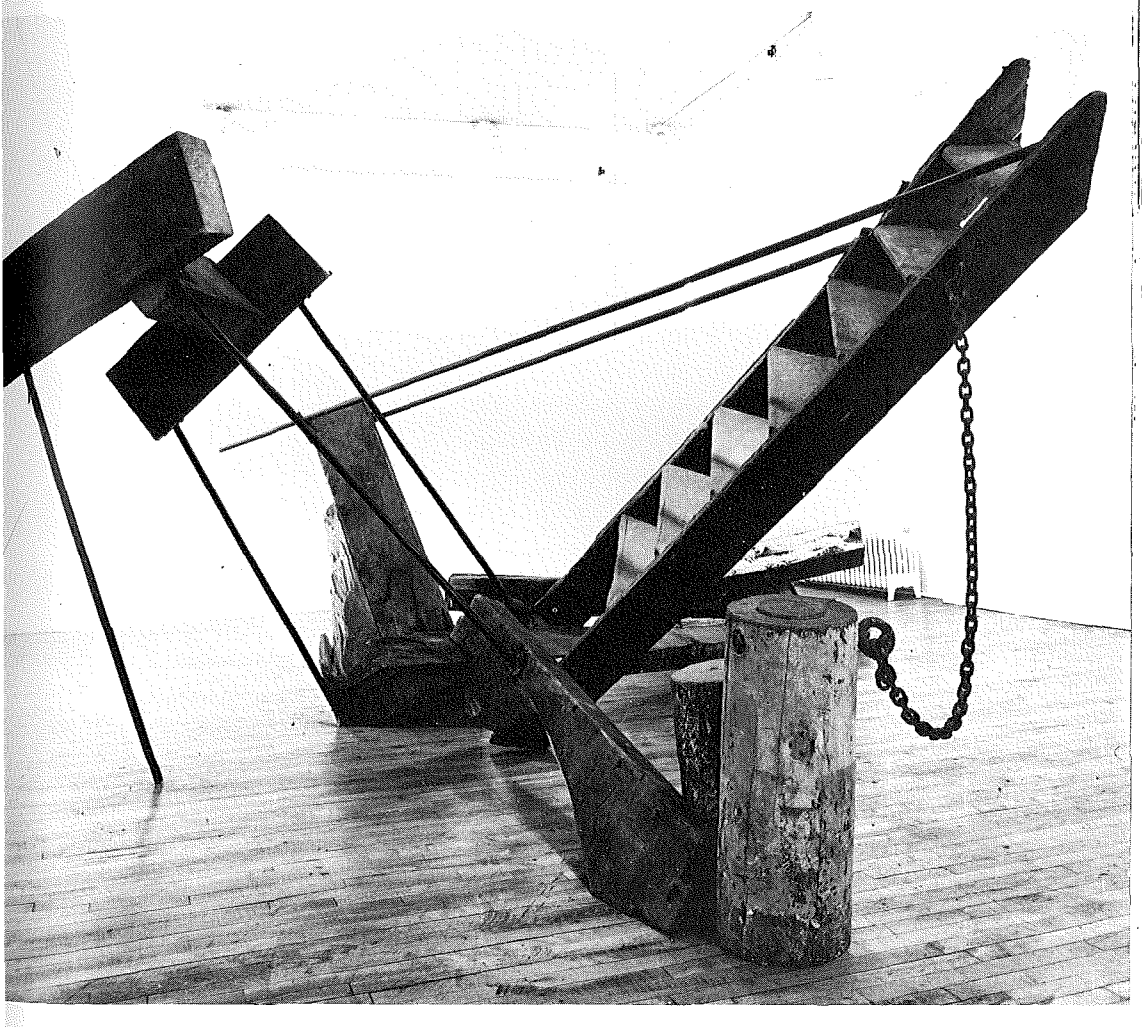
Not surprisingly this stance affected the critical response of these artists to the work of their contemporaries. Writing about the sculpture of Mark di Suvero (fig. 191), for example, Donald Judd objected that "[he] uses beams as if they were brushstrokes, imitating movement, as Franz Kline did. The material never has its own movement. A beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image."[3]

In the early 1960s, when Judd issued that negative judgment, most of the public for modern sculpture found the terms of his criticism highly perverse. If, they argued, meaning is not to derive from the illusion of human movement, or of human intelligence attaching itself to material through the power of the sculptor to create metaphor, then how is the work of art to transcend its status as mere stuff, as inert and meaningless matter? Isn't Judd, in his critical stance, denying to sculpture its only source of significance? Isn't he advocating that sculpture has no meaning at all? Indeed, this assumption that minimalism stood for an attack on the very possibility of art's meaningfulness formed the basis of the initial response to minimalism—both by its supporters and its detractors. The very term minimalism itself points to this idea of a reduction of art to a point of emptiness, as do the other terms such as "neo-dadaism" and "nihilism" that were used to characterize the works of these artists.[4]

Yet Judd was being neither perverse nor nihilistic in his assessment of di Suvero. He was simply looking at the work of a contemporary with an entirely new set of values in mind. In order to understand the nature of Judd's objection, and thus to become a little clearer

190. LEFT *Gabo:* Vertical Construction and Kinetic with Motor No. 2, *(Photo, Musées Nationaux)*

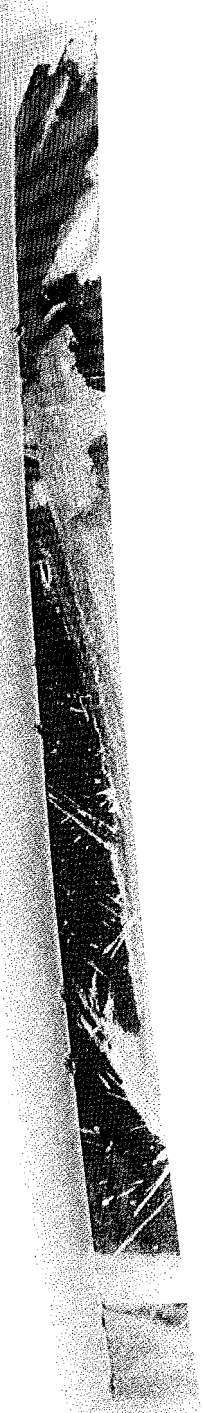
191. BELOW *di Suvero:* Ladder Piece, *1961–62. Wood and steel, 75". Collection of Philip Johnson, Connecticut. (Photo, Rudolph Burckhardt)*



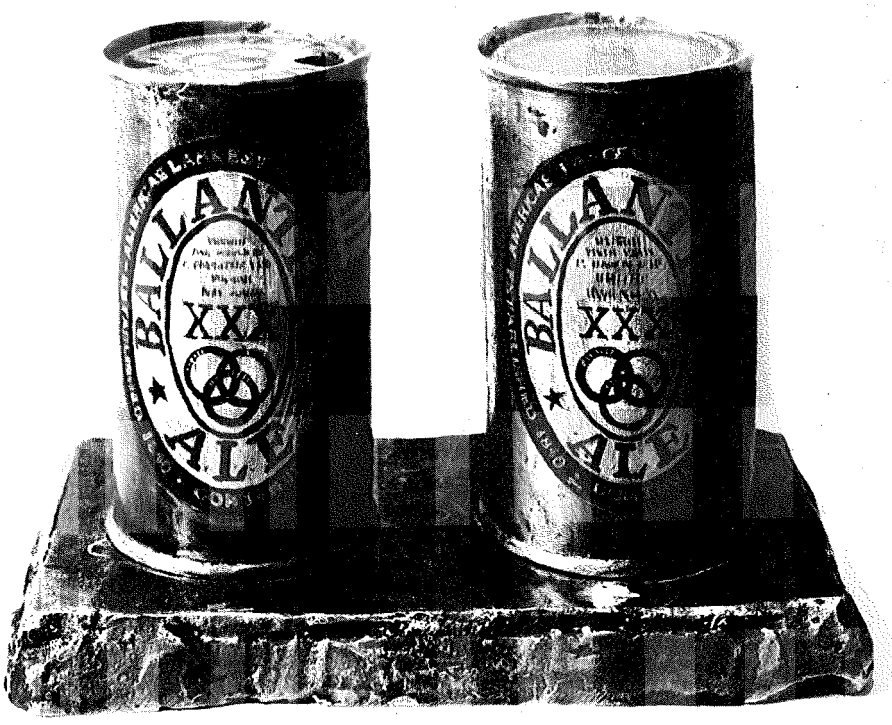
about what minimalism was working toward as the positive value of a newly conceived sculpture, it might be well to look again at what he says about di Suvero. The important key in Judd's assessment is the reference he makes to Franz Kline and the parallel he draws between Kline's slashes of black paint on a white ground and di Suvero's juxtapositions of steel and wooden beams. Judd's accusation, if spelled out, is that it is no longer possible to work with the rhetoric of Kline's art—a rhetoric identified with the American artists of the 1950s, the abstract-expressionists—for, as Judd continues, "[a] fair amount of their meaning isn't credible."[5]

The meaning that Judd is talking about as not being "credible" is a meaning that was attached to abstract-expressionism by some of its earliest supporters. Harold Rosenberg, for example, described this meaning as the transcription of an artist's inner emotions by means of a pictorial or sculptural "act." "A painting that is an act," Rosenberg wrote, "is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of his life." Or, again, "Art . . . comes back into painting by way of psychology. As Wallace Stevens says of poetry, 'it is a process of the personality of the poet.' "[6]

In speaking this way Rosenberg is equating the painting itself with the physical body of the artist who made it. Just as the artist is made up of a physiognomic exterior and an inner psychological space, the painting consists of a material surface and an interior which opens illusionistically behind that surface. This analogy between the psychological interior of the artist and the illusionistic interior of the picture makes it possible to see the pictorial object as a metaphor for human emotions that well up from the depths of those two parallel inner spaces (fig. 192). In the case of abstract-expressionism Rosenberg sees every mark on the canvas or angled placement of steel in the context of an intense inner experience. For him, the outer surface of the work demanded that one look at it as a map on which could be read the privately held cross-currents of personality—a kind of testimony to the artist's inner, inviolable self. Because the sculpture or the picture was understood as a surrogate for the



192. *Willem De Kooning (1904–): Door to the River, 1960. Oil on canvas, 80" x 70". Collection of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of the Friends of The Whitney Museum of American Art. (Photo, Oliver Baker Associates)*



artist, who uses the language of form to report on his experience, the meanings that were read into abstract-expressionism depended on the analogy between the inaccessibility of illusionistic space and an intense experience of the privacy of the individual self.

By claiming that these meanings are no longer credible, Judd is rejecting a notion of the individual self that supposes personality, emotion, and meaning as elements existing within each of us separately. As a corollary to his rejection of this model of the self, Judd wants to repudiate an art that bases its meanings on illusionism as a metaphor for that privileged (because private) psychological moment.

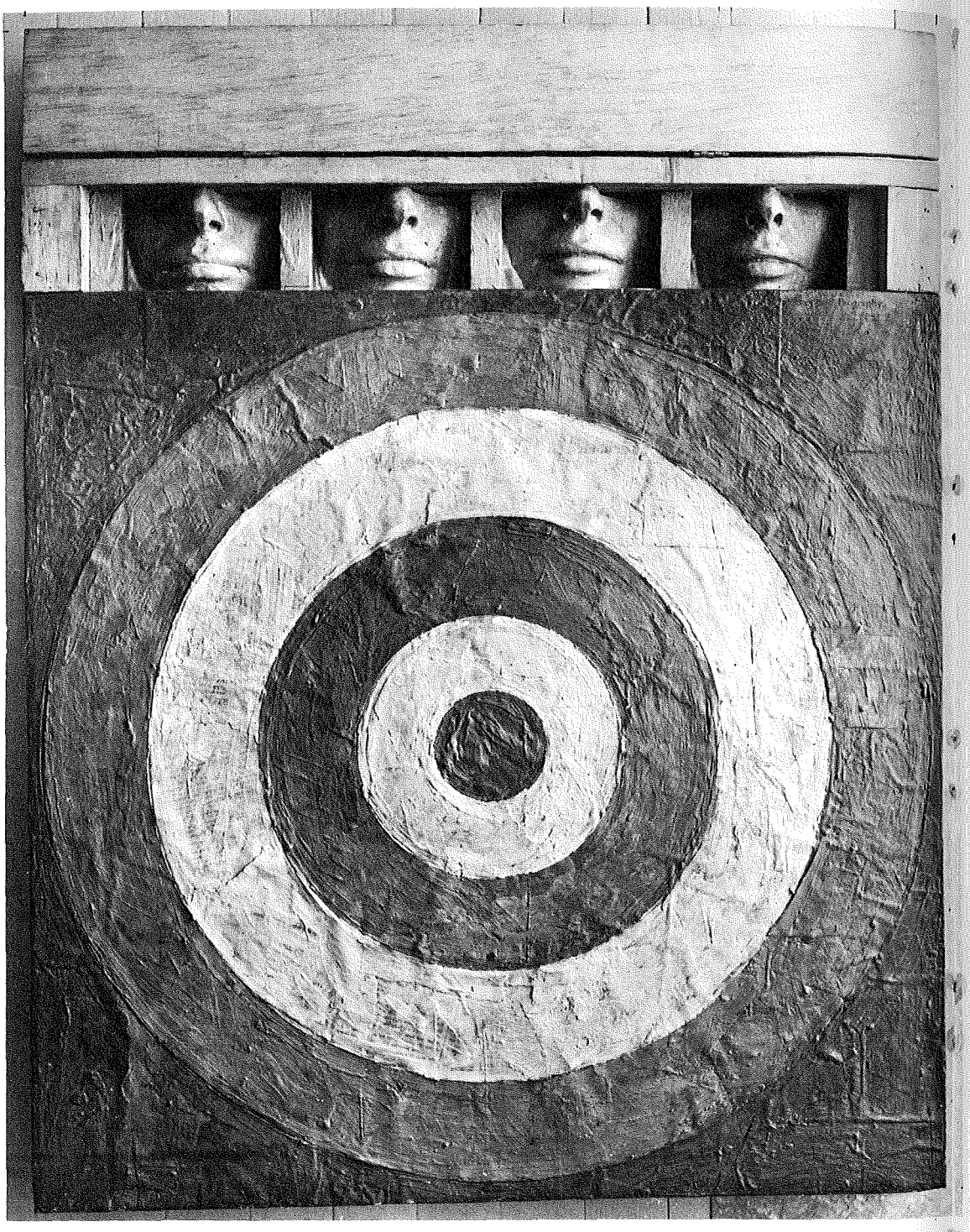
In thinking about that attack on the credibility of an illusionistic (or interior) model of meaning in art, it is useful to consider the immediate sources of minimalism, particularly the work of Jasper Johns, which developed in the mid-1950s and constituted a radical critique of abstract-expressionism. Sculpturally, this critique was

performed through such works as the 1960 Ale Cans (fig. 193) in which Johns cast two cans of Ballantine Ale in bronze and then painted their surfaces to replicate the appearance of the tin originals. In painting Johns used a similar method. In the 1955 *Target with Four Faces* (fig. 194), for example, Johns's drawing simply replicates the internal divisions of a commercially produced object; his exploitation of the design of a readymade, flat target deprives the painting of the specific kind of suggestive illusionistic space that had infected postwar American art.

Johns's *Target* or *Ale Cans*, in negating the internality of the abstract-expressionist picture, simultaneously rejects the innerness of its space and the privacy of the self for which that space was a model. His was a rejection of an ideal space that exists prior to experience, waiting to be filled, and of a psychological model in which a self exists replete with its meanings prior to contact with its world. Johns's reading of the readymade reinforced his opposition to the whole idea of art as pure expression; his understanding of it led not toward but away from the expression of the self. Indeed, Johns saw the readymade as pointing to the fact that there need be *no* connection between a final art object and the psychological matrix from which it issued, since in the case of the readymade this possibility is precluded from the start. The *Fountain* (fig. 195), for example, was not made by Duchamp, only selected by him. Therefore, there is no way in which the urinal can "express" the artist. It is like a sentence that is put into the world unsanctioned by the voice of a speaker standing behind it. Because maker and artist are evidently separate, there is no way for the urinal to serve as the externalization of the state or states of mind of the artist as he made it. And by not functioning within the grammar of the aesthetic personality, the *Fountain* can be seen as putting distance between itself and the notion of personality *per se*.

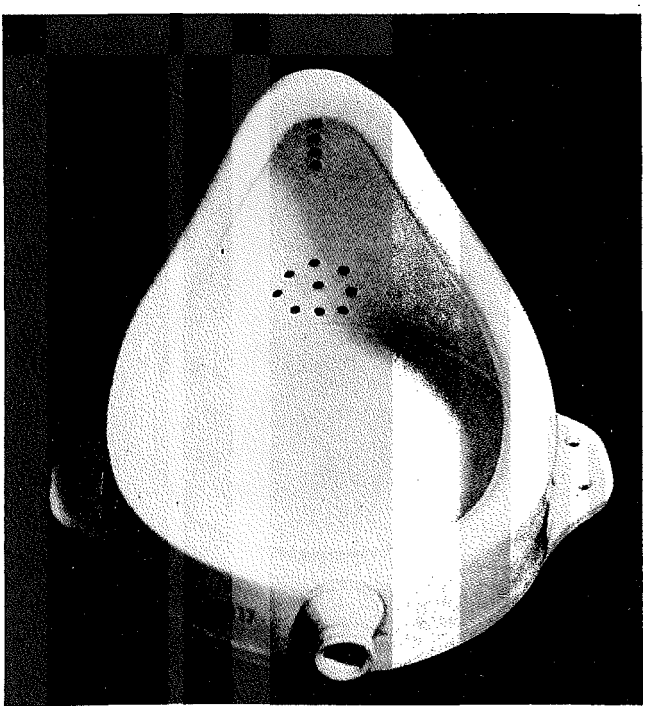
193. *Jasper Johns (1930–): Untitled (Ale Cans), 1960. Painted bronze, 5½" x 8" x 4¾". Collection, Dr. Peter Ludwig, New York. (Photo Rudolph Burckhardt)*

Johns and the minimal artists insisted on making work that would refute the uniqueness, privacy, and inaccessibility of experience. In this refutation they were echoing, within the visual arts, questions that had been raised by philosophers concerned with the way verbal language



communicates internal, personal experience. The late work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, questions the notion that there can be something we might call a private language—a language in which meaning is determined by the uniqueness of an individual's internal experience in such a way that, if others cannot *have* that experience, they cannot really know what a person means by the words he uses to describe it.

Focusing on the language of psychological response—the words used to describe sense-impressions, mental images, and private sensations—he asked if it were true that there could be no possible outside verification of the meaning of words we used to point to our private experience—whether meaning itself had to be hostage to that separate video of impressions registered across the screen of each individual's mental monitor. For if this were true, language would be mired in a kind of solipsism in which the "real" meaning of words would be conferred on them by each of us separately. In that sense, my "green" and my "headache" would point to what *I* see and feel, just as your "green" and your "headache" would name only



194. LEFT *Johns:* Target with Four Faces, *1955. Encaustic on newspaper over canvas, 26" x 26"—surmounted by four plaster faces. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Scull.*

195. RIGHT *Duchamp:* Fountain *(second view, see fig. 58).*

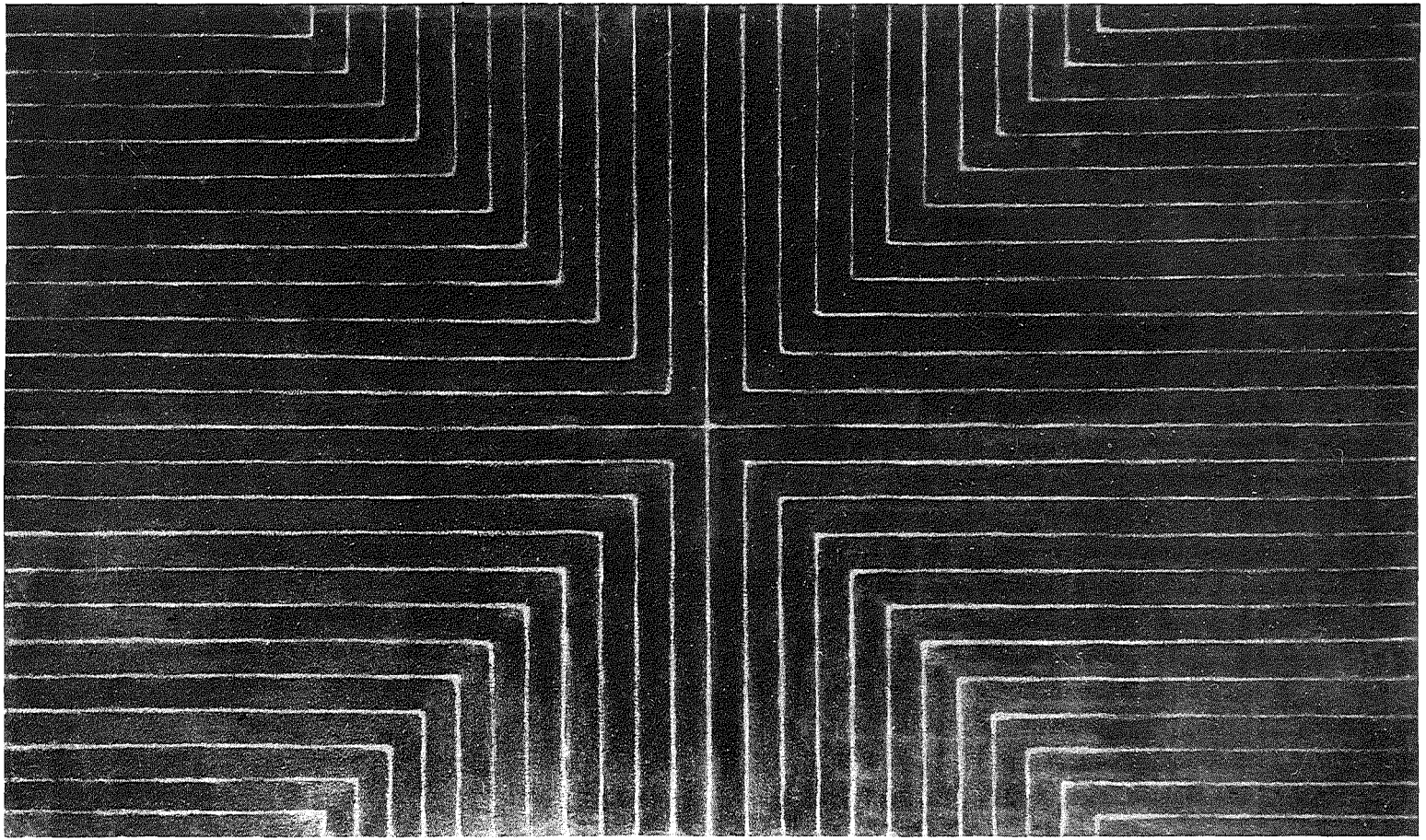
what you alone sense. Since neither of us has any way of verifying the separate data to which these words point, neither of us can verify the meanings of these words, and thus the words that operate in a public space—passing between individuals—have meaning conferred upon them from what is, in fact, a private space within each speaker.

This question of language and meaning helps us by analogy to see the positive side of minimalism's endeavor, for in refusing to give the work of art an illusionistic center or interior, minimal artists are simply re-evaluating the logic of a particular *source* of meaning rather than denying meaning to the aesthetic object altogether. They are asking that meaning be seen as arising from—to continue the analogy with language—a public, rather than a private space.

196. *Frank Stella (1936–):* Die Fahne Hoch! *1959. Enamel on canvas, 121½" x 73". Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene M. Schwartz, New York. (Photo, Rudolph Burckhardt)*

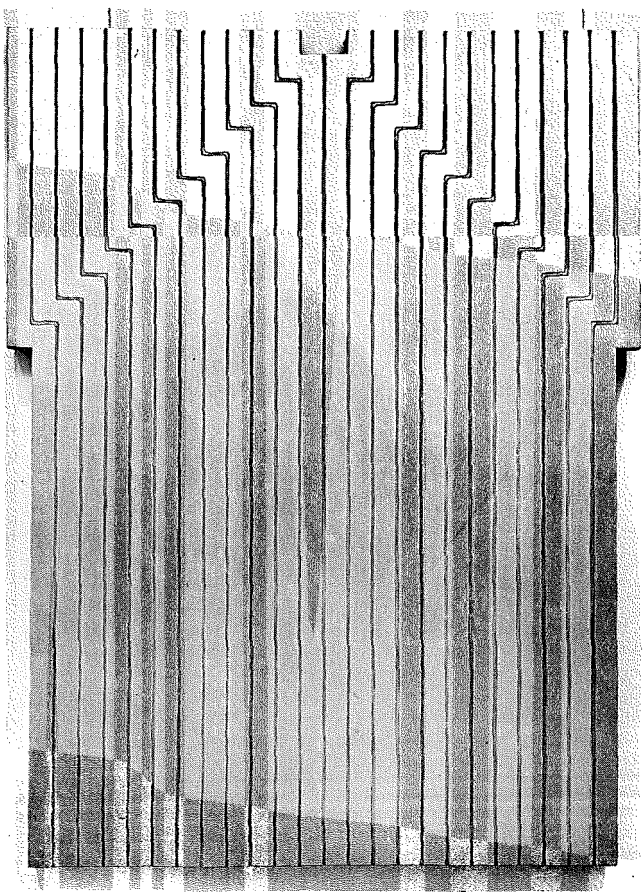
To see how this is done in a visual medium, it might be helpful to examine a pictorial example before turning to the sculpture produced by the minimalists and the artists who succeeded them in the early 1970s. The work of Frank Stella performed an important service to sculpture in showing how Johns' use of the readymade cultural object could be employed for more abstract, more wholly generalized purposes.

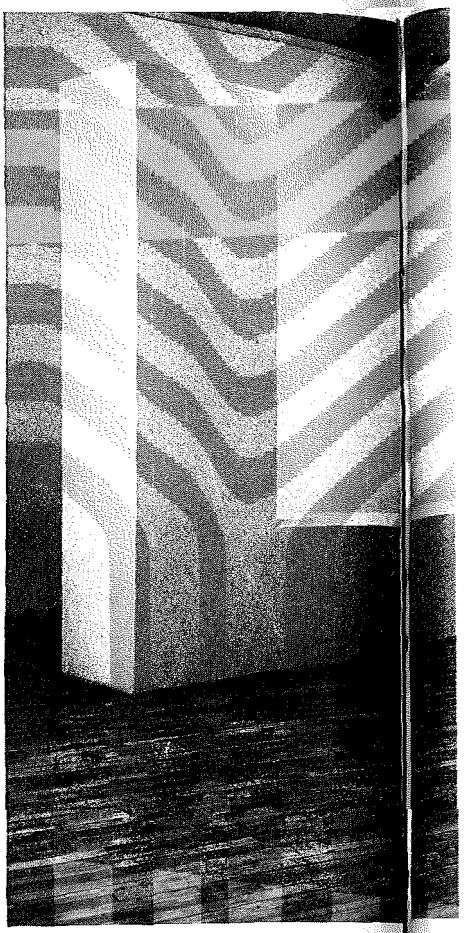
Die Fahne Hoch! (fig. 196) a black painting by Stella from 1959 is related to Johns's exploitation of the readymade as an externally given structure, particularly the series Johns based on the American flag. However, instead of using a known flag-pattern, Stella arrives at his own configuration by deriving a pattern of stripes from the external, physical fact of the canvas's own shape. Beginning with the midpoints of the vertical and horizontal sides, he forces the stripes into a repetitive, unbroken declaration of the expanse of the painting's four quadrants in a double set of mirror reversals. In the later aluminum paintings, where the canvases are shaped, with notches cut out of the traditional pictorial rectangle, the stripes perform a more self-evident reverberation inward from the shape of the frame, and thereby seem even more nakedly dependent upon this literal feature of the picture's support. The effect of this kind of surface, flashed continually with the sign of its edge, purges itself of illusionistic space, achieving a flatness that is an adamant



presentation of the painting's space as something external only.

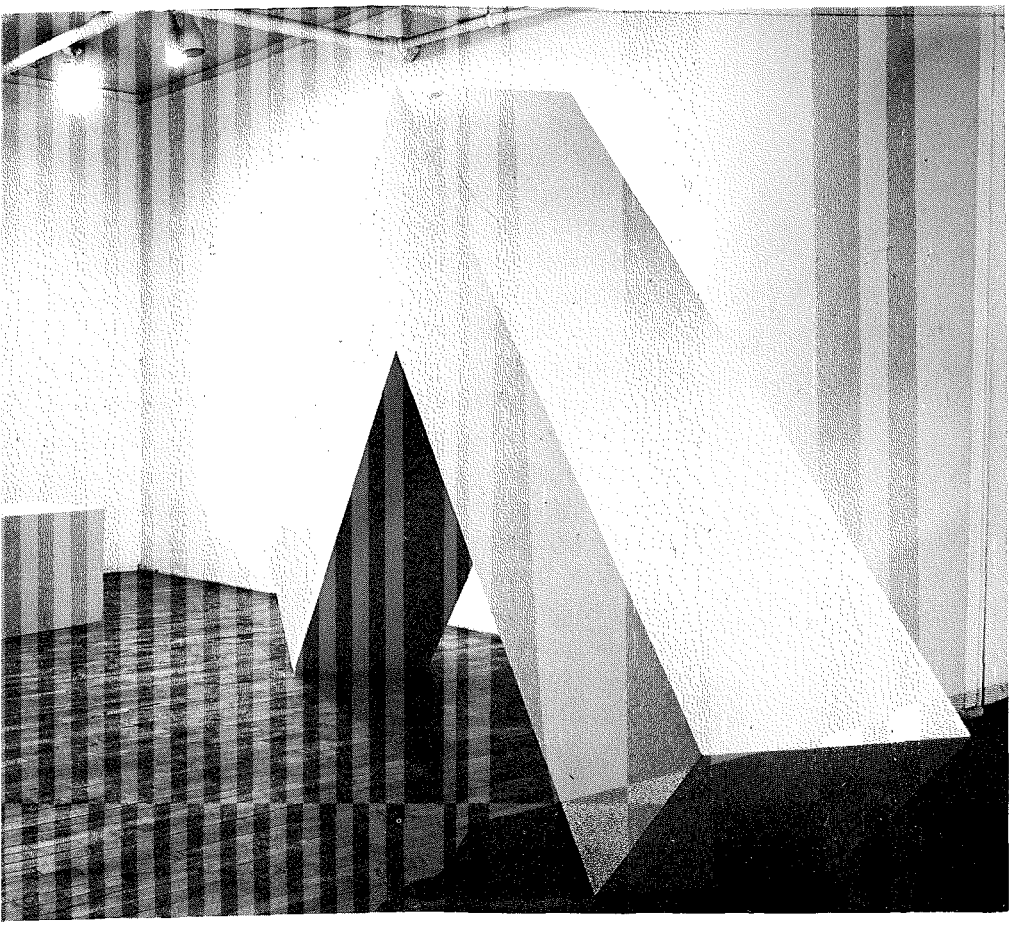
But the signs that haunt Stella's early striped paintings are more than simply signifiers of their literal shapes or the flatness of their surfaces. *Die Fahne Hoch!* (like many other of Stella's canvases) arrives at a particular configuration, which is the configuration of a cross. We could call this accidental, of course, just as we could conceive it as accidental that the Cross itself relates to that most primitive sign of an object in space: the vertical of the figure projected against the horizon-line of an implicit background. But the three-way relationship that fuses along the striped surface of these pictures is a kind of argument for the logical connection between the cruciform of all pictoriality, of all intention to locate a thing





197. LEFT *Stella:* Luis Miguel Dominguin, *1960. Aluminum paint on canvas, 96" x 72". Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Burton L. Tremaine, Connecticut. (Photo, Rudolph Burckhardt)*

198. ABOVE *Morris:* Untitled (L-beams). *1965. Painted plywood, 96" x 96" x 24" (each). Collection, Philip Johnson, Connecticut. (Photo, Rudolph Burckhardt)*



within its world, and the way in which the conventional sign—in this case the Cross—arises naturally from a referent in the world. In canvas after canvas one finds oneself in the presence of a particular emblem, drawn from the common repertory of signs—stars, crosses (fig. 197), ring-interlocks, etc.—part of a language that belongs, so to speak, to the world rather than to the private, originating capacity of Stella to invent shapes. What Stella convinces us of is an account of the initial genesis of those signs. Because in these paintings we see how they are given birth through a series of natural and logical operations.

The logic of the compositional structure is therefore shown to be inseparable from the logic of the sign. Both

seem to sponsor one another and in so doing ask one to grasp the natural history of pictorial language as such. The real achievement of these paintings is that they have fully immersed themselves in meaning, but still succeed in making meaning itself a function of surface—of the external, public space that is in no way a signifier of the contents of a psychologically private space. The meaning of Stella's expurgation of illusionism is unintelligible apart from this intention to lodge all meanings within the conventions of a public space.

The significance of the art that emerged in this country in the early 1960s is that it staked everything on the accuracy of a model of meaning severed from the legitimizing claims of a private self. This is the sense in which these artists understood their ambition to be tied to a new set of propositions about "what the world's like." Therefore, if we read the work of Stella, Judd, Morris, Andre, Flavin, or LeWitt merely as part of a text of formal reordering, we miss the meaning that is most central to that work.

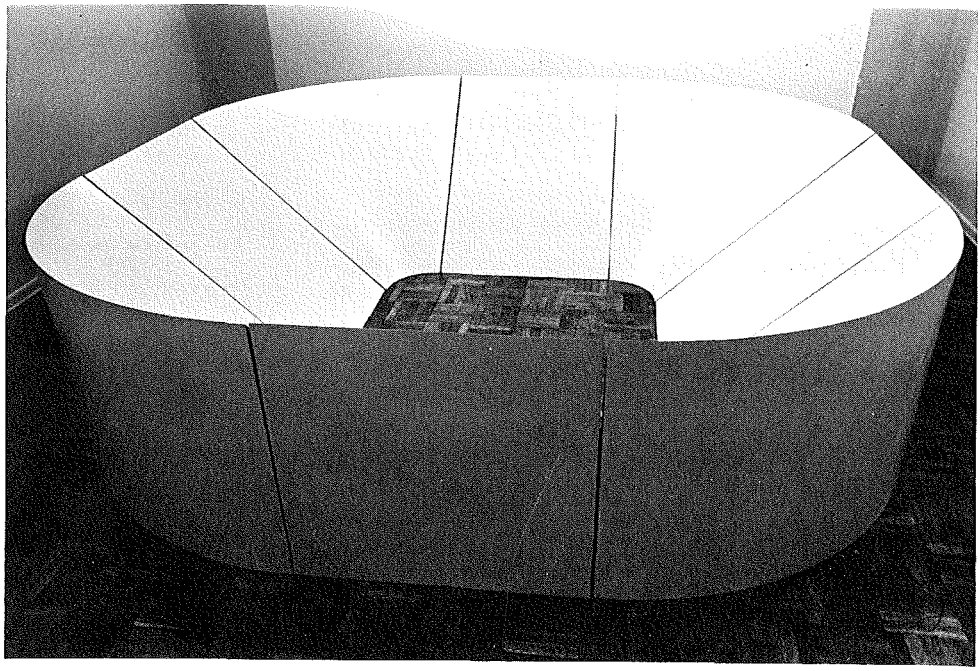
Minimalist sculptors began with a procedure for declaring the externality of meaning. As we saw, these artists reacted against a sculptural illusionism which converts one material into the signifier for another: stone, for example, into flesh—an illusionism that withdraws the sculptural object from literal space and places it in a metaphorical one. These artists refused to use edges and planes to shape an object so that its external image would suggest an underlying principle of cohesion or order or tension. As with metaphor, the implication of this order is that it lies beyond the simple externals of the object—its shape or substance—endowing that object with a kind of intentional or private center.

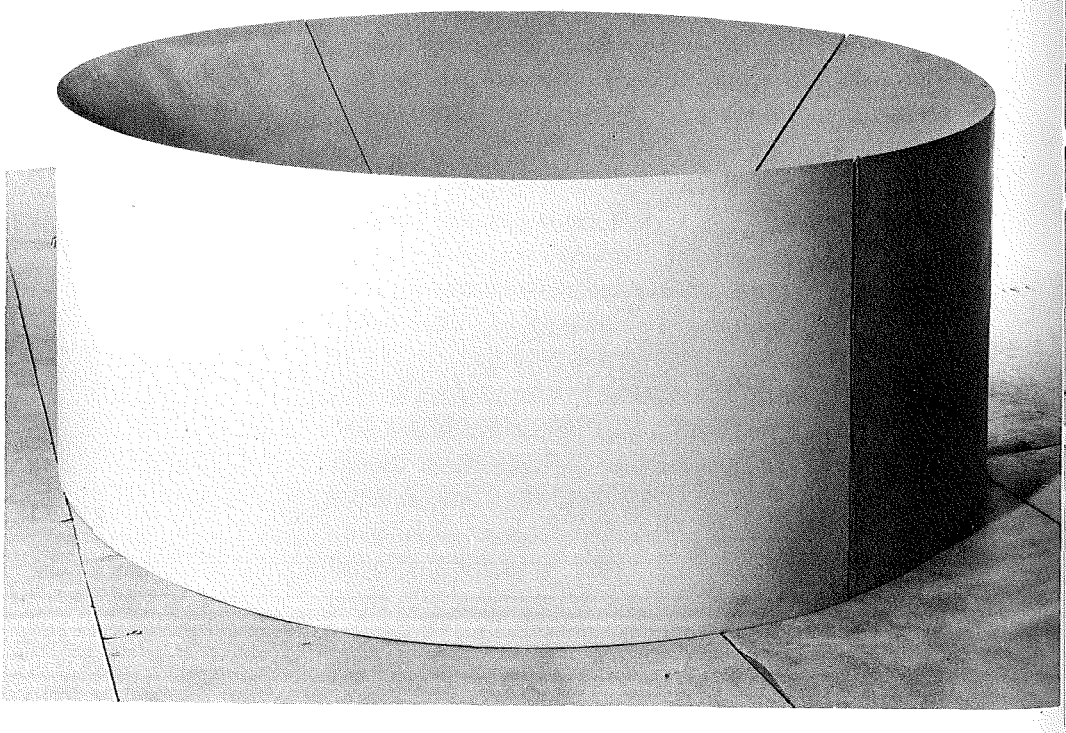
This extraordinary dependence upon the facts of an object's exterior, in order to determine *what it is*, occurs in the untitled sculpture that Robert Morris made in 1965 using three large plywood Ls. In this work (fig. 198), Morris presents three identical forms in different positions relative to the ground. One L is up-ended, the second lies on its side, the third is poised on its two ends. This placement visually alters each of the forms, thickening the lower element of the first unit or bowing the sides of the third. Thus no matter how clearly we might

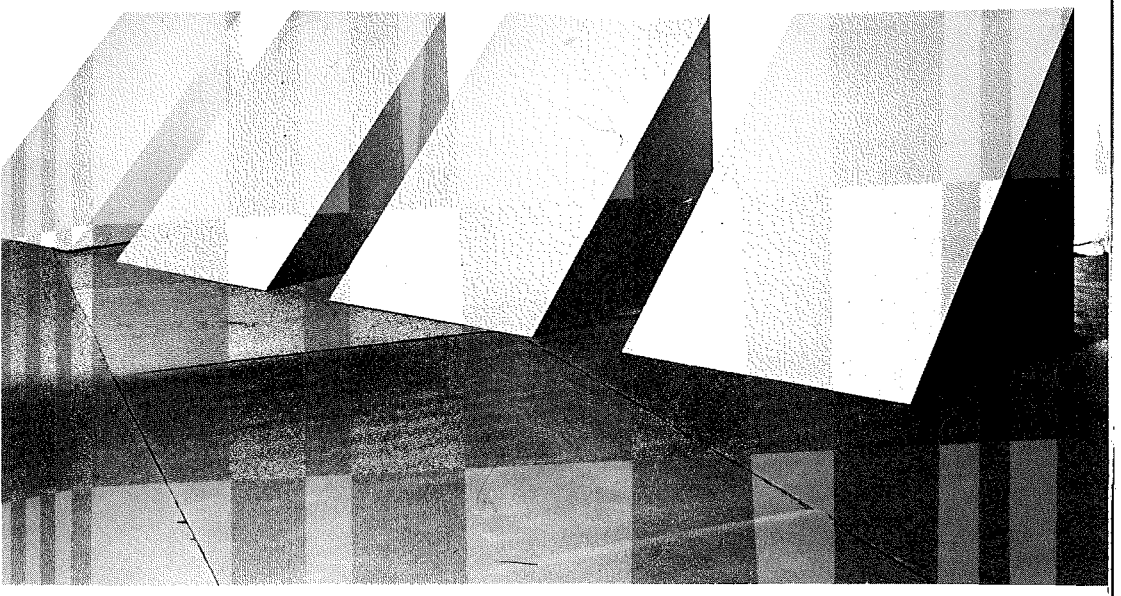
understand that the three Ls are identical (in structure and dimension), it is impossible to see them as the same. Therefore, Morris seems to be saying, the "fact" of the objects' similarity belongs to a logic that exists *prior* to experience; because at the moment of experience, or *in* experience, the Ls defeat this logic and are "different." Their "sameness" belongs only to an ideal structure—an inner being that we cannot see. Their difference belongs to their exterior—to the point at which they surface into the public world of our experience. This "difference" is their sculptural meaning; and this meaning is dependent upon the connection of these shapes to the space of experience.

Insofar as sculpture is constantly forming an analogy with the human body, Morris's work addresses itself to the meaning projected by our own bodies, questioning the relationship of that meaning to the idea of psychological privacy. He is suggesting that the meanings we make—and express through our bodies and our gestures—are fully dependent on the other beings to whom we make them and on whose vision of them we depend for them to make sense. He is suggesting that the picture of the self as a contained whole (transparent only to itself and the truths which it is capable of constituting) crumbles before the act of connecting with other selves and other minds. Morris's L-beams serve as a certain kind of cognate for this naked dependence of intention and meaning upon the body as it surfaces into the world in every external particular of its movements and gestures—of the self understood, that is, only in experience.

In focusing on the work's moment of appearing within a public space, Morris defeats the way that surface in traditional sculpture is understood to be a reflection of a pre-existent, internal armature or structure. In his sectional Fiberglas sculptures of 1967, he creates a type of structure (figs. 199a, b, and c) that has no fixed internal order, for each sculpture can be (and was) continually rearranged.[7] Therefore, the notion of a rigid, internal armature that could mirror the viewer's own self—fully formed prior to experience—founders on the capacity of the separable parts to shift, to formulate a notion of the self which exists only in *that* moment of externality within *that* experience.

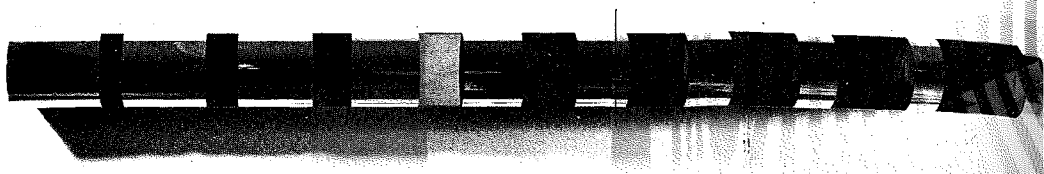






199a, b, and **c.** *Morris:* Untitled (Sectional Fiberglas Pieces) *(three views), 1967. Fiberglas, 47" x 48" x 47½" for four pieces; 47½" x 85" x 47" for four pieces. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. (Photos b. and c., Rudolph Burckhardt)*

Richard Serra's *One-Ton Prop (House of Cards)* of 1969 (fig. 200) continues the protest of Morris's work against sculpture as a metaphor for a body divided into inside and outside, with the meaning of that body dependent upon the idea of the private, inner self. The simplicity of the sculpture's shape initially suggests the presence of an underlying, ideal armature, for it assumes the configuration of a cube, a form that seems to belong to a timeless logic, rather than a moment of experience. But Serra's aim is to defeat the very idea of this idealism or this timelessness, and to make the sculpture visibly dependent on each passing moment for its very existence. To this end, Serra constructs the *House of Cards* by balancing four five-hundred-pound plates of lead against one another, creating points of contact only at their upper corners and using no permanent means of locking them into position. In this way, Serra creates an image of the sculpture as something that is constantly having to renew its structural integrity by keeping its balance. In place of the cube as an "idea"—determined a priori—he substitutes the cube as an existent—creating itself in time,



totally dependent upon the facts of its surface in tension.

With this work Serra seems to be declaring that we ourselves are like the *Prop*. We are not a set of private meanings that we can choose or not choose to make public to others. We are the sum of our visible gestures. We are as available to others as to ourselves. Our gestures are themselves formed by the public world, by its conventions, its language, the repertory of its emotions, from which we learn our own. It is no accident that the work of Morris and Serra was being made at the time when novelists in France were declaring, "I do not write. I am written."

The ambition of minimalism was, then, to relocate the origins of a sculpture's meaning to the outside, no longer modeling its structure on the privacy of psychological space but on the public, conventional nature of what might be called cultural space. To this end the minimalists employed a host of compositional strategies. One of these was to use conventional systems of ordering to determine composition. As with Stella's use of conventional signs, these systems resist being interpreted as something that wells up from within the personality of the sculptor and, by extension, from within the body of the sculptural form. Instead, the ordering system is recognized as coming from outside the work.

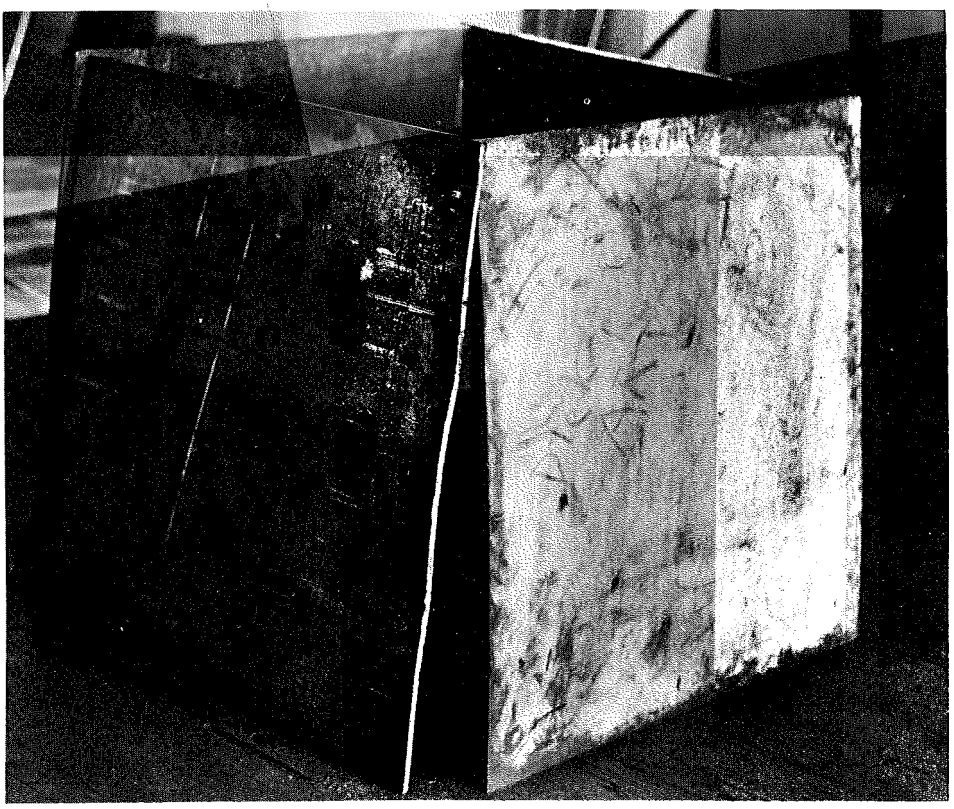
200. RIGHT *Serra:* One-Ton Prop (House of Cards), *1969. Lead, 48" x 60" x 60". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. (Photo, Peter Moore)*

201. ABOVE *Judd:* Untitled, *1970. Copper, 5" x 69" x 8¾". Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. (Photo, Eric Pollitzer)*

Judd's wall sculpture in which arithmetic progressions are used is a good example of this (fig. 201). The progression itself determines the size of the elements, which project serially, from smallest to largest, along the expanse of the sculpture. The same progression determines (but in reverse order) the size of the negative spaces between the elements. The visual interpenetration of the two progressions—one of volumes and the other of voids —itself becomes a metaphor for the dependence of the sculpture on the conditions of external space, for it is impossible to determine whether it is the positive volume of

the work that brings the intervals into being, or whether it is the rhythm of the intervals that establishes the contours of the work. In this way Judd is depicting the reciprocity between the integral body of the sculpture and the cultural space that surrounds it. The systems of permutation that Sol LeWitt (figs. 202a and 202b) explored in his sculpture of the 1960s are another instance of this strategy to externalize the meaning of the work.

For Carl Andre, divesting sculpture of the implications of an internal space was not only a matter of additive composition but involved exploiting the real weight of materials as well. Confronted by one of Andre's "rugs," in which plates of differing metals are laid edge to edge to form flat, extended squares that rest directly on the floor (fig. 203), the viewer comes to feel that internal space is literally being squeezed out of the sculptural object. The strategy of this work is to make weight a function of material even while the materials themselves

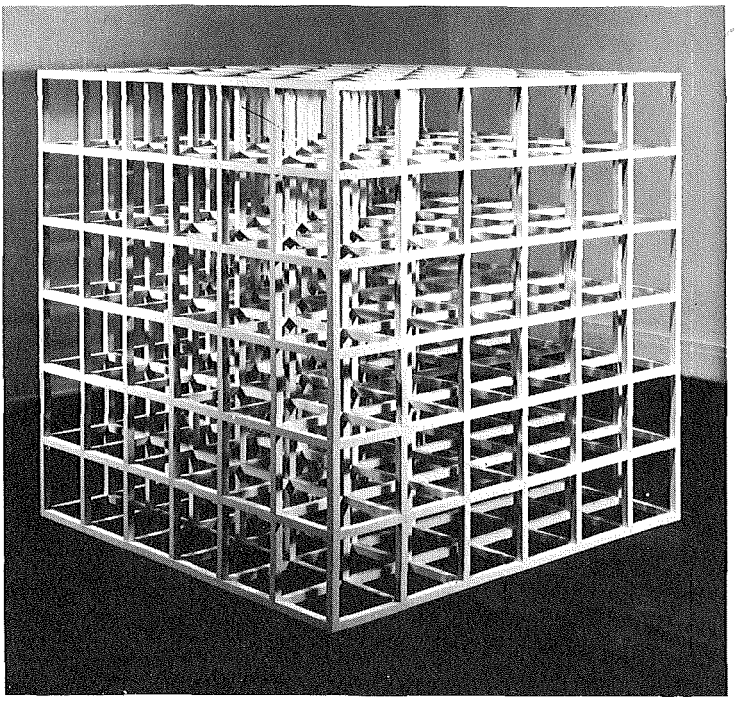


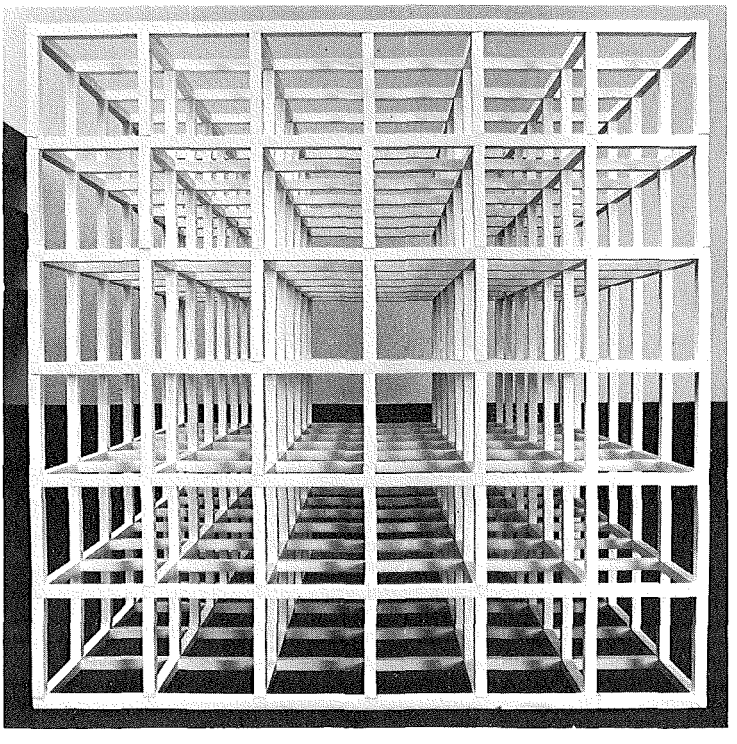
seem paradoxically to be stripped of mass. The flatness of the rugs leave these sculptures with no sense of depth or thickness, and therefore with no appearance of inside or center.[8] Rather, they seem to be coextensive with the very floor on which the viewer stands. Yet the difference that reads from plate to plate is a difference in the color and the reflectivity of the separate metals, so that what one sees in the works is the registration of material as a kind of absolute. The quality of specific weight, of differing pressures with which each metal plate pushes against the floor, presses illusionistic space out of the sculpture.

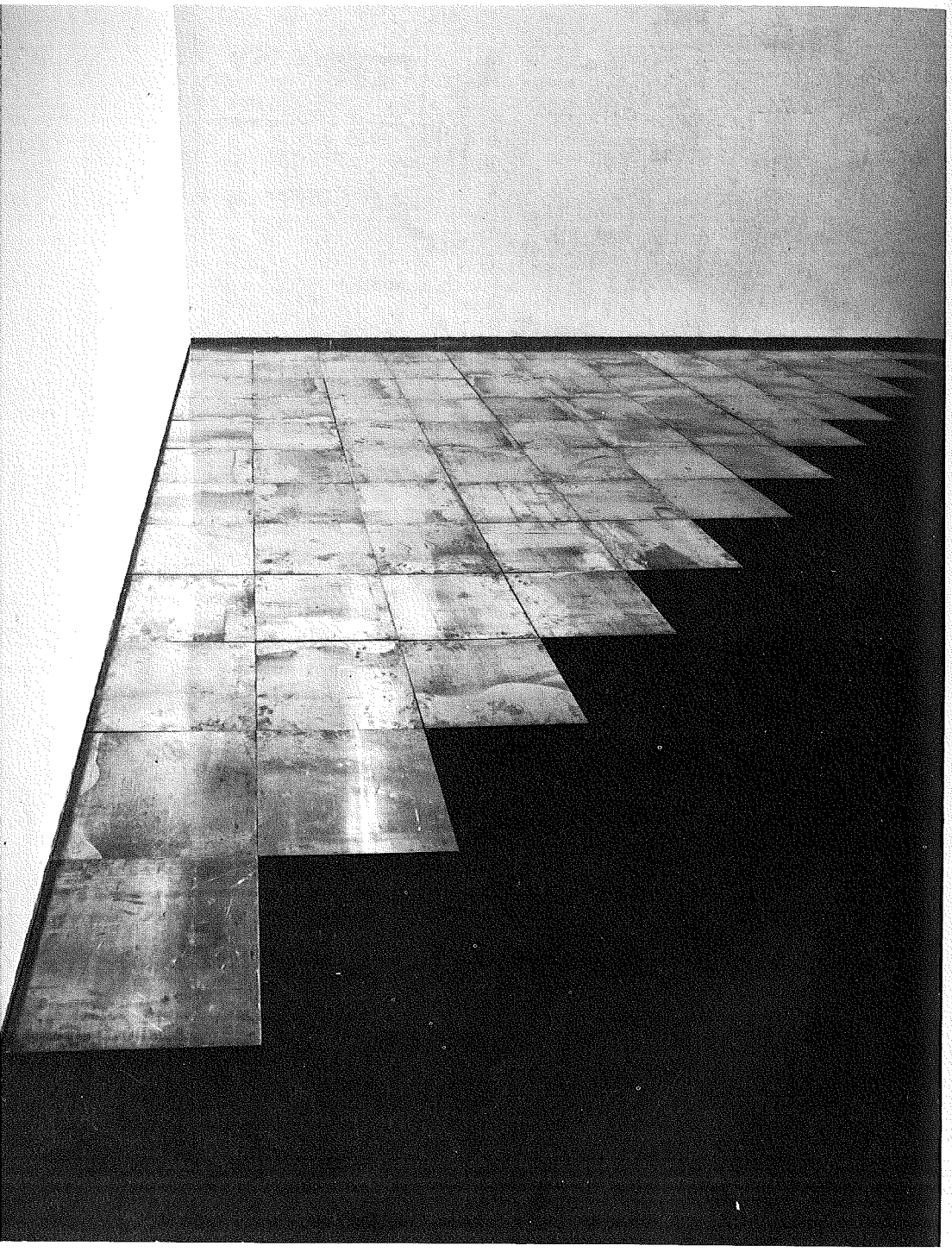
Generative for much that was important to younger artists, Andre's work touched off speculation about sculptural composition that would be neither relational nor "one thing after another," in a potentially endless chain. Instead, the properties inherent to a specific material could be used to compose the work, as though what was being tapped was nature as a readymade, instead of some aspect of culture. This work, which came to be known as process art, of which Eva Hesse was a major proponent (fig. 204), was interested in the principle of transformation as the observable logic of the work.[9] The kinds of transformation that were employed were mainly those that cultures use to incorporate the raw materials of nature, such as melting, in order to refine, or stacking in order to build. Working with processes of melting and rolling, or melting and molding, Hesse gives her objects an anthropological imagery, as though attention to that initial change from raw to processed brought her into a sculptural space that was itself extremely archaic.

Similarly, Serra's work with molten lead is involved with the forms created as the material solidified, although, as we saw earlier, the arrangement of the hardened waves of lead in *Casting* had less to do with the inherent properties of the metal than with the minimalist compositional device of repetition. But the stacked steel pieces Serra made later in the same year combine Andre's use of weight to force illusionism out of the work, with a use of the evident properties of material to determine from inside the sculpture where its composition ends. For Serra's 1969 *Stacked Steel Slabs* (Fig. 205) terminates

202a and **202b.** *Sol LeWitt (1928–):* Open Modular Cube *(two views), 1966. Painted aluminum, 60" x 60" x 60". Collection, Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada. (Photo a. John D. Schiff; b. Ron Vickers Ltd.)*







when the addition of one more to their number would unbalance and destroy the structure. In that each slab's response to gravity is the only stabilizing (and potentially destabilizing) aspect of the sculpture, Serra's work is limited to another of Andre's notions of how to make sculptural composition a function of materials: "My first problem," Andre says, "has been to find a set of particles, a set of units, and then to combine them according to laws which are particular to each particle, rather than a law which is applied to the whole set, like glue or riveting or welding."[10]

Despite their similarity of principle—the principle of nonartificial adherence of the separate units of the work —Serra's *Stacked Steel Slabs* and Andre's floor-bound pieces are grammatically distinct. Serra's work seems to inhabit the realm of the transitive verb, with its image of activity and effect, while Andre's sculpture occupies an intransitive state: materials perceived as expressions of their own being. Because of this, one encounters without

203. LEFT *Andre:* Twelfth Copper Corner, *1975. Copper, ¼" x 236¼" x 236¼". Sperone Westwater Fischer, Inc., New York.*

204. ABOVE *Eva Hesse (1936–70):* Contingent, *1969. Fiberglas and rubberized cheesecloth, 8 units, each 114–168" x 36–48". Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Victor Ganz, New York.*

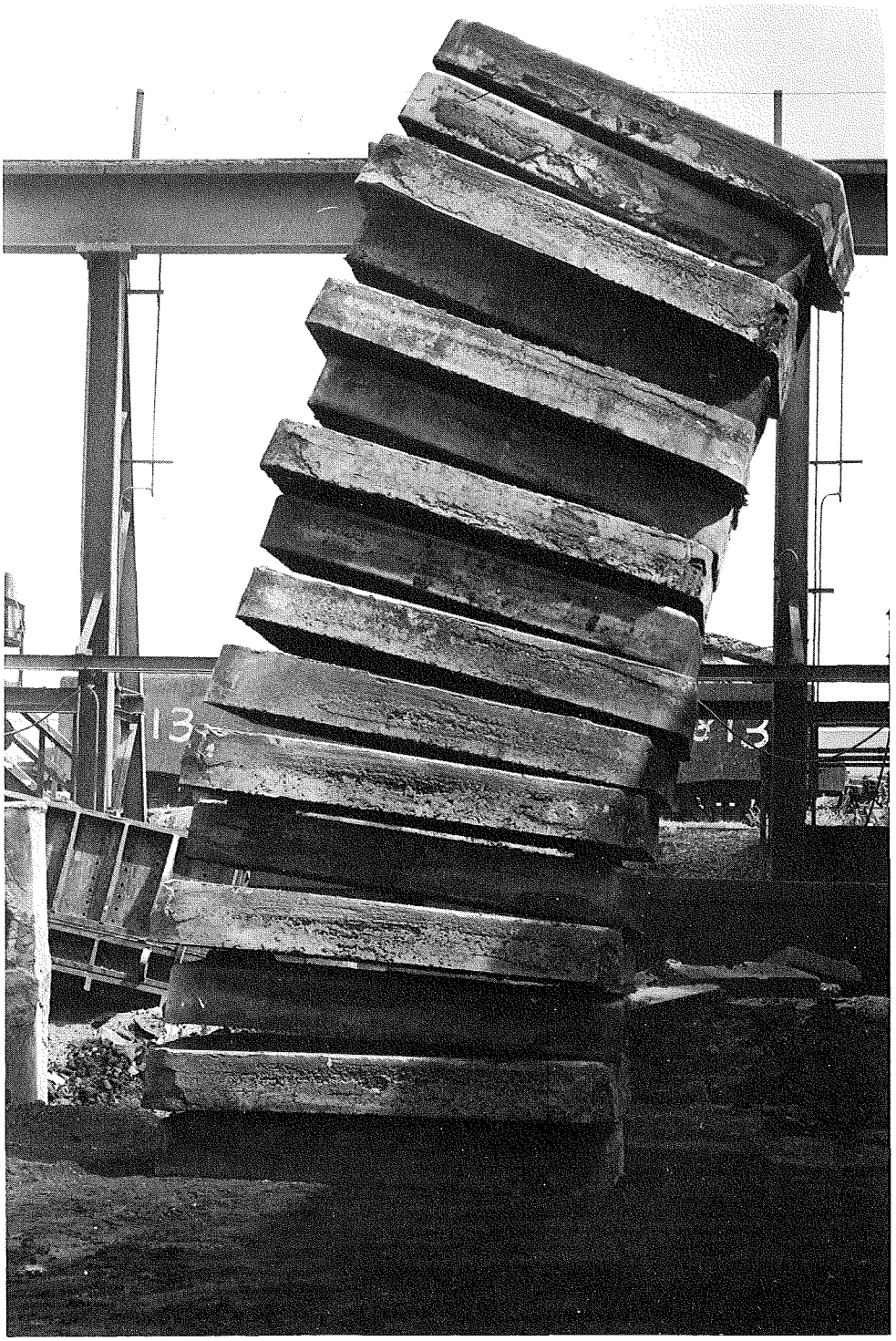
surprise a long list that Serra made for himself in 1967–68 —a working notation, the beginning of which reads:

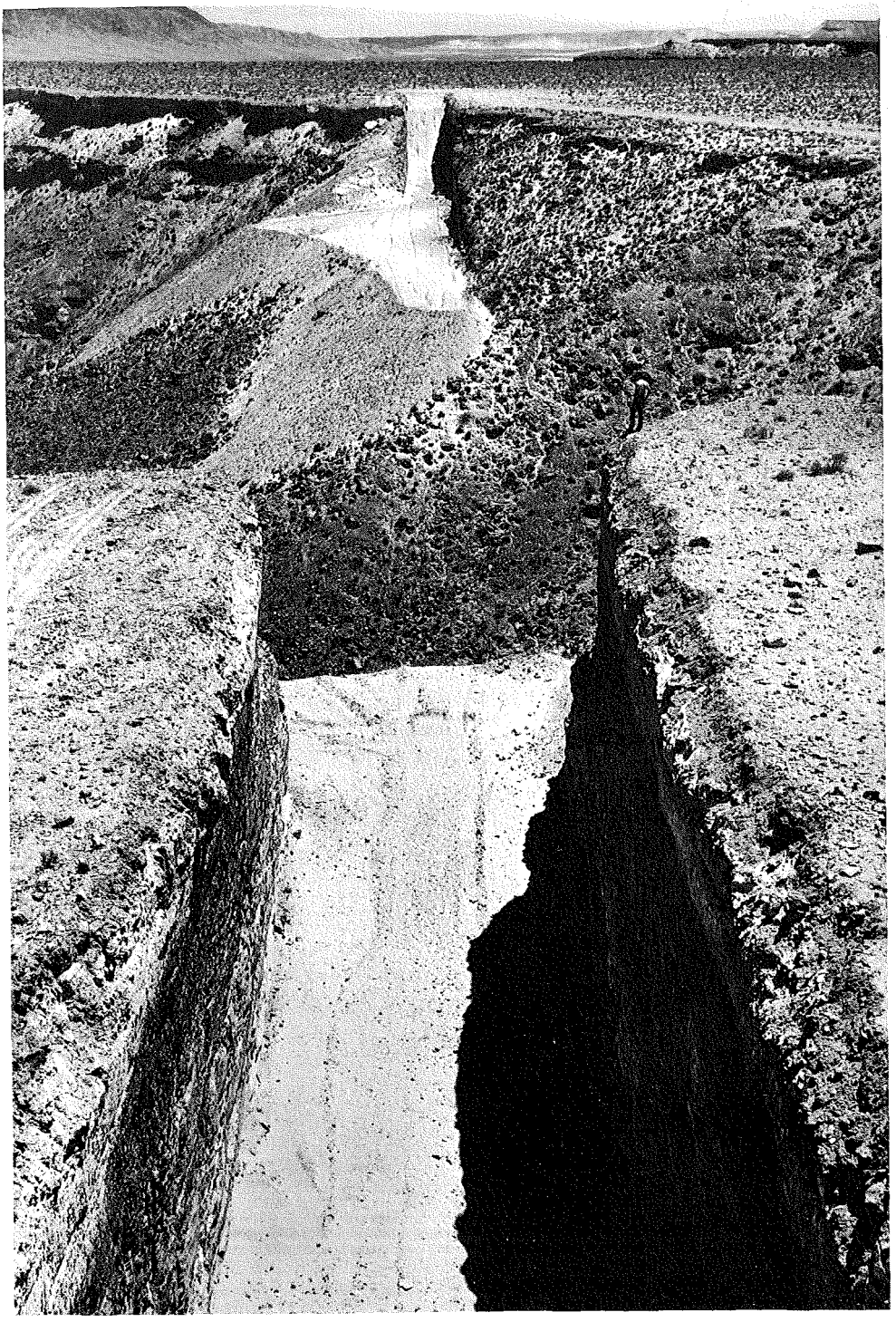
TO ROLL
TO CREASE
TO FOLD
TO STORE
TO BEND
TO SHORTEN
TO TWIST
TO TWINE
TO DAPPLE
TO DAPPLE
TO CRUMPLE
TO SHAVE
TO TEAR
TO CHIP
TO SPLIT
TO CUT
TO SEVER
TO DROP . . .[11]

205. *Serra:* Stacked Steel Slabs, *1969. Steel, 240" x 96" x 120". Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.*

Contemplating that chain of transitive verbs, each one specifying a particular action to be performed on an unspecified material, one senses the conceptual distance that separates this from what one would normally expect to find in a sculptor's notebook. In place of an inventory of forms, Serra has substituted a list of behavioral attitudes. Yet one realizes that those verbs are themselves the generators of art forms: they are like machines which, set into motion, are capable of constructing a work. They remind one of Duchamp's admiration for Raymond Roussel's art-making machines in *Impressions of Africa*, and of Duchamp's own insistence on a speculative attitude toward the procedures of making. In this sense one can see the last direction—"to drop"—paired with a later member of Serra's list—"to grasp"—as the double-image that produced the film *Hand Catching Lead* (fig. 179).

By meditating on the action of a (visually) disembodied hand, the film explores a very particular definition of the human body throughout the three minutes of its projection. As one watches, one shares the real time of the sculptor's concentration on his task and one has a sense that during this time, the artist's body *is* that task: his very being is represented by this outward show of



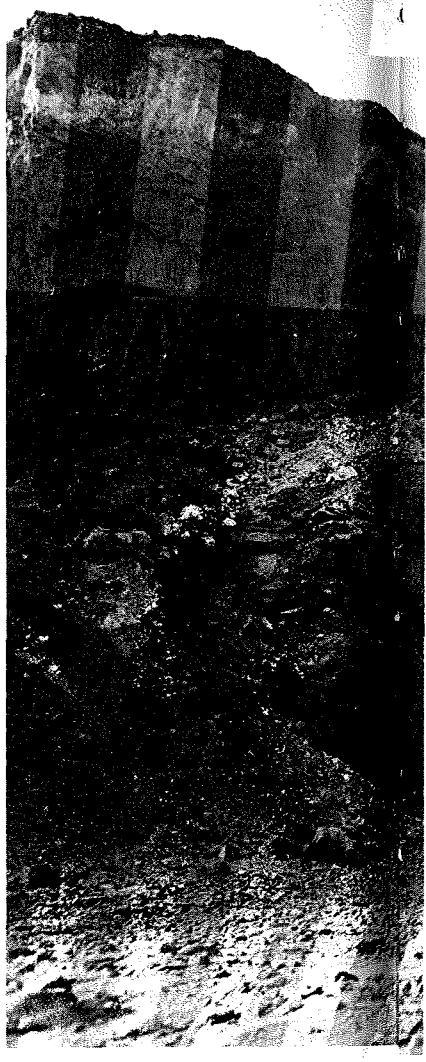


behavior contracted down to a single extremity. The time of this film is the "operation time" of the "new dance" described in Chapter 6, and its image of the body is similarly contoured by "task-performance." Like Serra's *One-Ton Prop* (or Morris's three Ls) the film presents an image of the self as something arrived at, something defined in and through experience. In severing the hand from the body, Serra's film participates as well in a lesson taught previously by Rodin and by Brancusi: the fragmentation of the body is one way of freeing the meaning of a particular gesture from a sense that it is preconditioned by the underlying structure of the body understood as a coherent whole. Though its style is very different, *Hand Catching Lead* is close in meaning to works such as the *Balzac* (fig. 25) in which Rodin visually frees the head from the pedestal of its body or the *Torso of a Young Man* (figs. 75 and 76) in which Brancusi renders the adolescent figure as a moment of pure eroticism by use of a fragment.

If I have been presenting the minimalist-based work of the last ten years as a radical development in the history of sculpture, that is because of the break it declares from the dominant styles that immediately precede it, and because of the profound abstractness of its conception.[12] But there is another level at which this work can be seen as renewing and continuing the thinking of those two crucial figures in the early history of modern sculpture: Rodin and Brancusi. The art of both men represented a relocation of the point of origin of the body's meaning—from its inner core to its surface—a radical act of decentering that would include the space to which the body appeared and the time of its appearing. What I have been arguing is that the sculpture of our own time continues this project of decentering through a vocabulary of form that is radically abstract. The abstractness of minimalism makes it less easy to recognize the human body in those works and therefore less easy to project ourselves into the space of that sculpture with all of our settled prejudices left intact. Yet our bodies and our experience of our bodies continue to be the subject of this sculpture—even when a work is made of several hundred tons of earth.

206a. *Michael Heizer (1944–); Double Negative, 1969. Mohave Desert, Nev. (Photo, Gianfranco Gorgoni)*

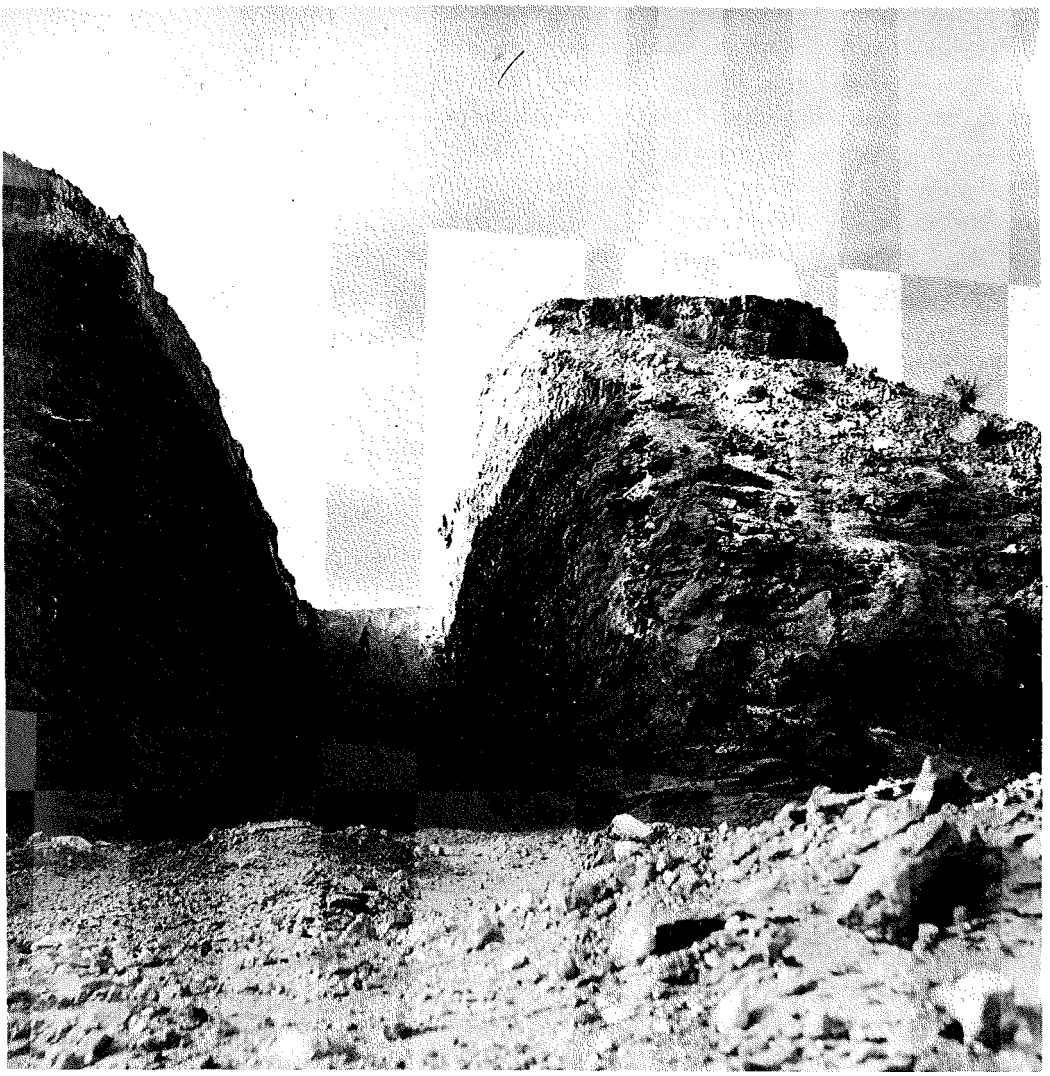
The *Double Negative* (figs. 206a and 206b), an earthwork sculpture by Michael Heizer, was made in 1969 in the Nevada desert. It consists of two slots, each forty feet deep and a hundred feet long, dug into the tops of two mesas, sited opposite one another and separated by a deep ravine. Because of its enormous size, and its location, the only means of experiencing this work is to be in it—to inhabit it the way we think of ourselves as inhabiting the space of our bodies. Yet the image we have of our own relation to our bodies is that we are *centered* inside them; we have knowledge of ourselves that places us, so to speak, at our own absolute core; we are wholly transparent to our own consciousness in a manner that seems to permit us to say, "I know what *I* think and feel but *he* does not." In this sense the *Double Negative* does not resemble the picture that we have of the way we inhabit ourselves. For, although it is symmetrical and has a center (the mid-point of the ravine separating the two slots), the center is one we cannot occupy. We can only stand in one slotted space and look across to the other. Indeed, it is only by looking at the other that we can form a picture of the space in which we stand.



By forcing on us this eccentric position relative to the center of the work, the *Double Negative* suggests an alternative to the picture we have of how we know ourselves. It causes us to meditate on a knowledge of ourselves that is formed by looking outward toward the responses of others as they look back at us. It is a metaphor for the self as it is known through its appearance to the other.

The effect of the *Double Negative* is to declare the eccentricity of the position we occupy relative to our physical and psychological centers. But it goes even further than that. Because we must look across the ravine to see the mirror image of the space we occupy, the expanse of the ravine itself must be incorporated into the enclosure formed by the sculpture. Heizer's image therefore depicts the intervention of the outer world into the body's internal being, taking up residence there and forming its motivations and its meanings.

Both the notion of eccentricity and the idea of the invasion of a world into the closed space of form reappears in another earthwork, conceived contemporane-



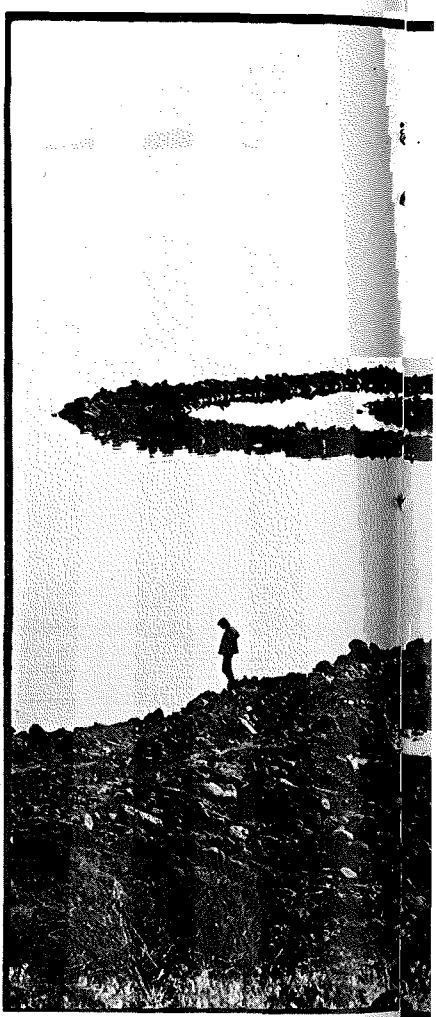
206b. *Heizer:* Double Negative *(second view).*

ously with the *Double Negative* but executed the following year in the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is a heaped runway of basalt rock and dirt, fifteen feet wide, which corkscrews fifteen hundred feet out into the red water of the lake off Rozelle Point (figs. 2 and 207). Like the *Double Negative*, the *Spiral Jetty* is physically meant to be entered. One can only see the work by moving along it in narrowing arcs toward its terminus.

As a spiral this configuration does have a center which

we as spectators can actually occupy. Yet the experience of the work is one of continually being decentered within the great expanse of lake and sky. Smithson himself, in writing about his first contact with the site of this work, evokes the vertiginal response to perceiving himself as de-centered: "As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No idea, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that phenomenological evidence."[13]

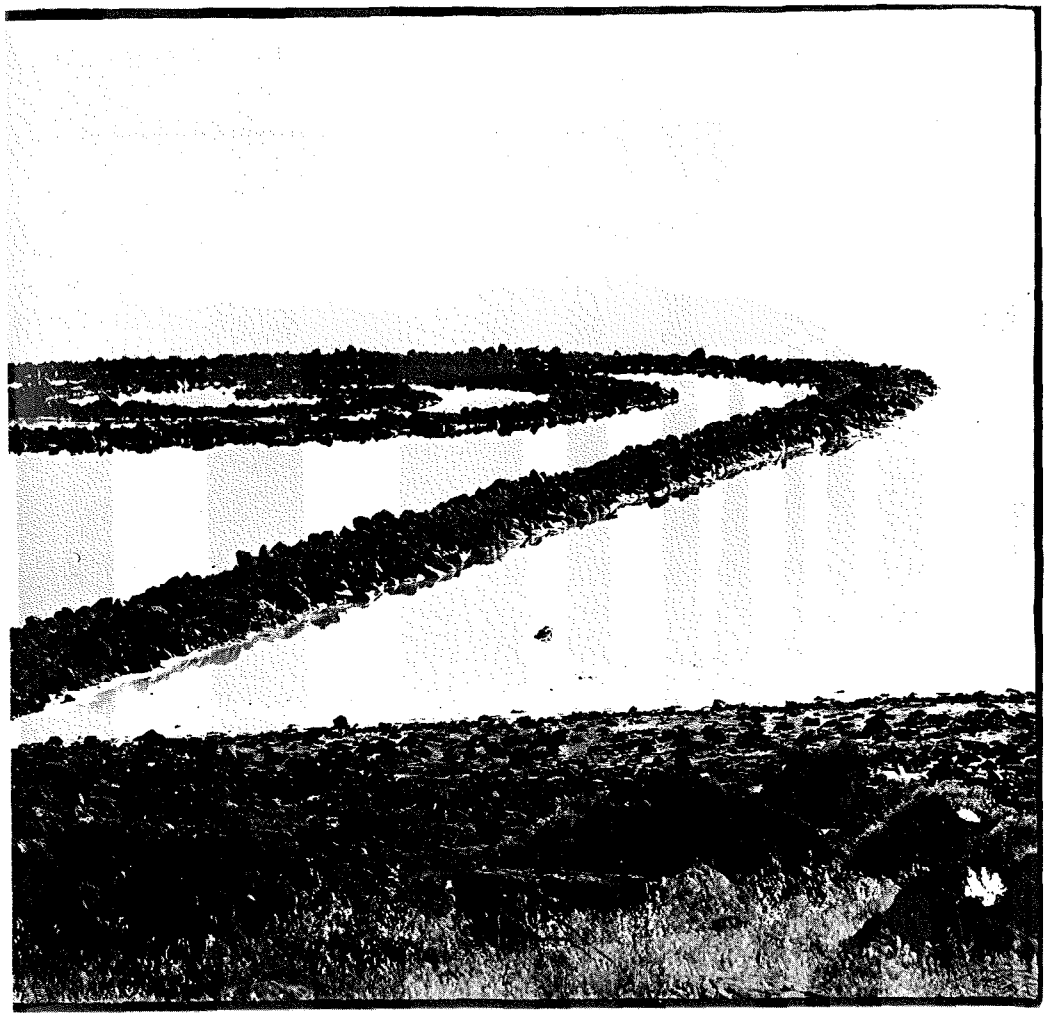
The "phenomenological evidence" out of which Smithson's idea for the *Jetty* came, derived not only from the visual appearance of the lake, but also from what we might call its mythological setting, which Smithson refers to in his terms "immobile cylone" and "gyrating space." The occurrence of a huge interior salt lake had for centuries seemed to be a freak of nature, and the early inhabitants of the region sought its explanation in myth. One such myth was that the lake had originally been connected to the Pacific Ocean through a huge underground waterway, the presence of which caused treacherous whirlpools to form at the lake's center. In using the form of the spiral to imitate the settlers' mythic whirlpool, Smithson incorporates the existence of the myth into the space of the work. In doing so he expands on the nature of that external space located at our bodies' centers which had been part of the *Double Negative*'s image. Smithson creates an image of our psychological response to time and of the way we are determined to control it by the creation of historical fantasies. But the *Spiral Jetty* attempts to supplant historical formulas with the experience of a moment-to-moment passage through space and time.



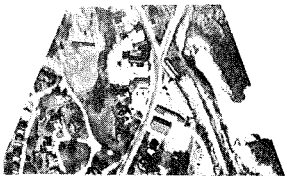
Contemporary sculpture is indeed obsessed with this idea of passage. We find it in Nauman's *Corridor* (fig. 178), in Morris's *Labyrinth* (fig. 209), in Serra's *Shift* (figs. 211a and 211b), in Smithson's *Jetty*. And with these images of passage, the transformation of sculpture —from a static, idealized medium to a temporal and

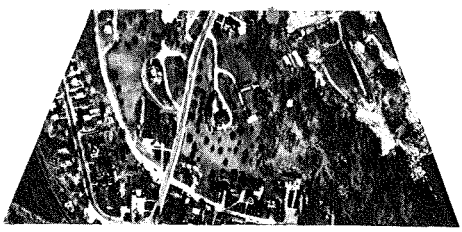
material one—that had begun with Rodin is fully achieved. In every case the image of passage serves to place both viewer and artist before the work, and the world, in an attitude of primary humility in order to encounter the deep reciprocity between himself and it.

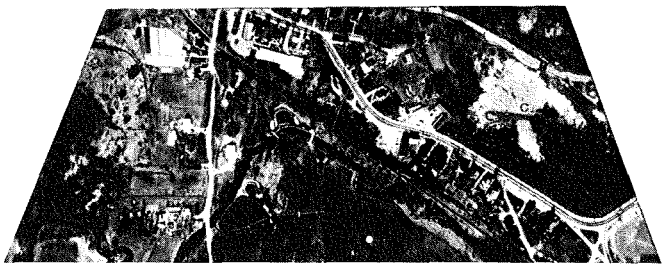
There is nothing new in this attempt. Proust speaks of it in the incident in which the adult Marcel tastes the *madeleine* and, through the involuntary memory triggered by this object, re-experiences his childhood in Combray. Proust tells us that he had often attempted in vain to will these memories. But, he says of the voluntary

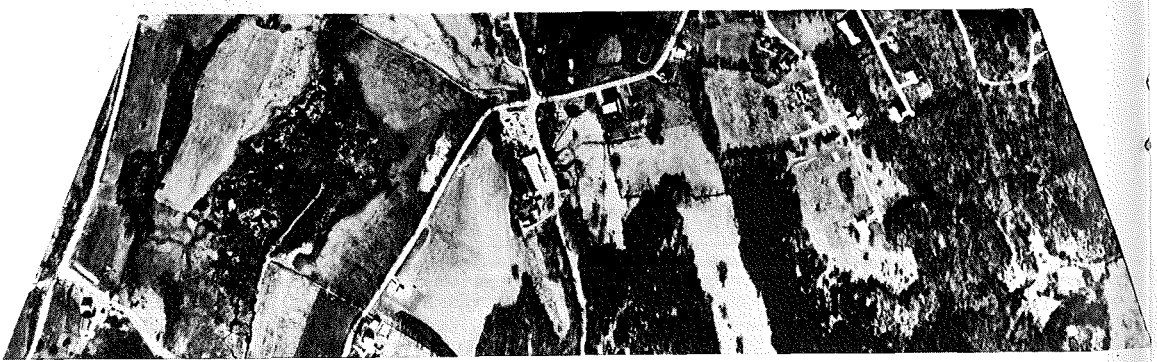


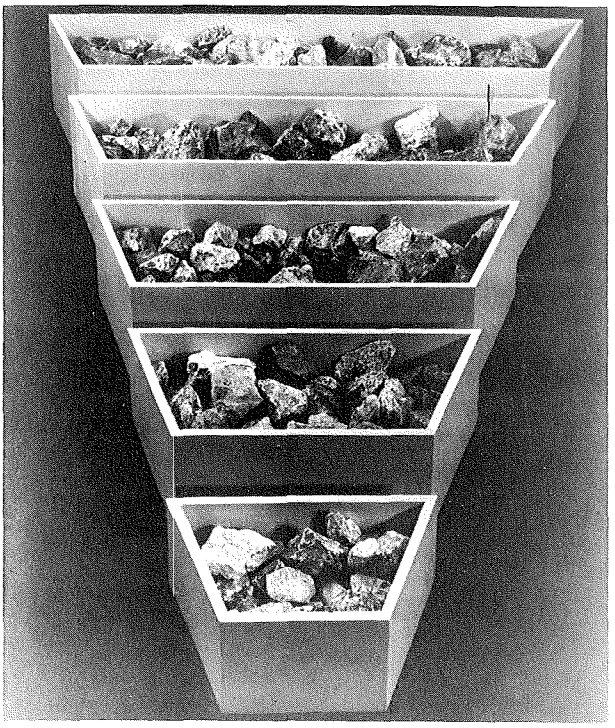
207. *Smithson:* Spiral Jetty *(second view, see fig. 2). (Photo, Gianfranco Gorgoni)*





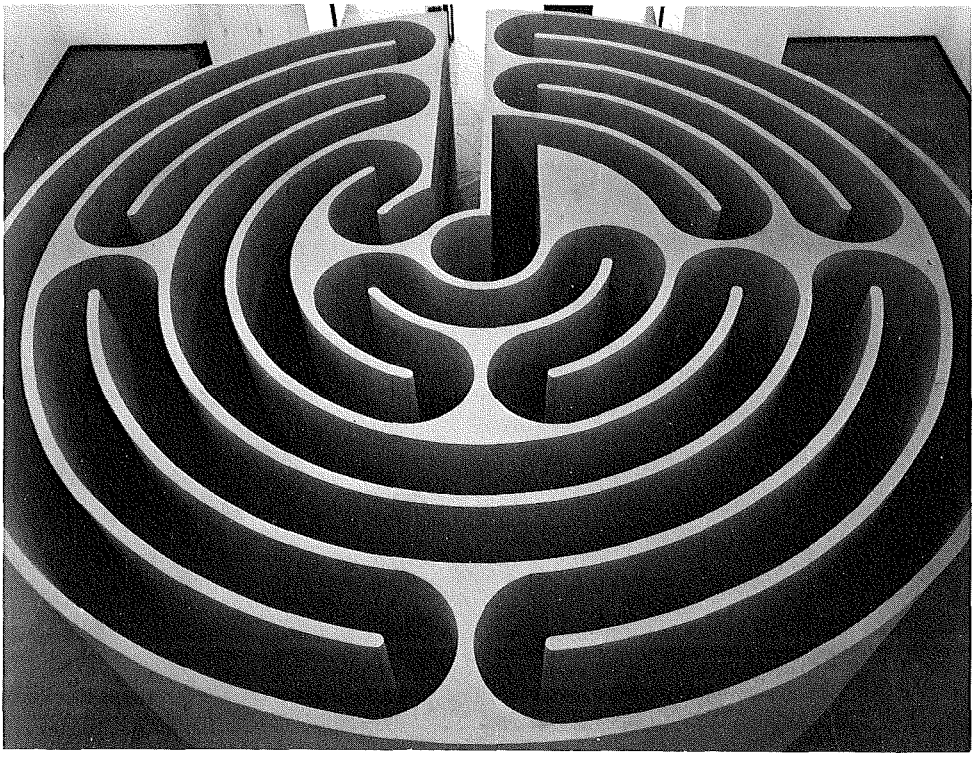


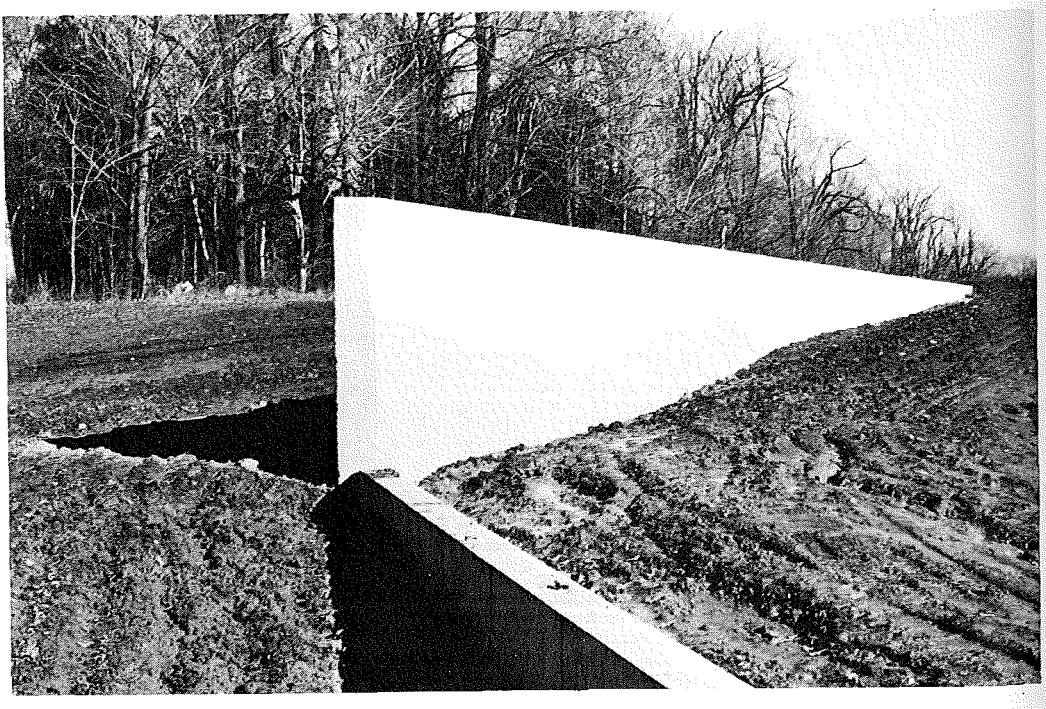


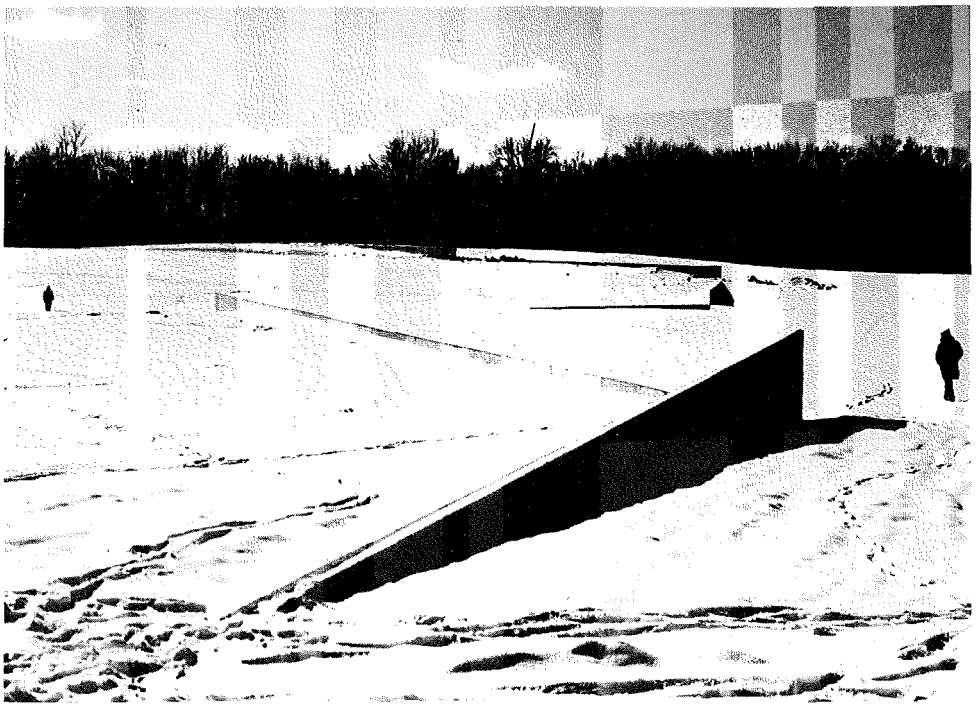


208a and **208b.** *Smithson:* A Non-Site (Franklin, New Jersey), *1968. a. Aerial map; b. Beige-painted wood bins filled with rocks, 16½" x 110" x 11". Estate of the artist. (Photos, John Weber Gallery)*

209. BELOW *Morris:* Labyrinth, *1974. Painted masonite, plywood, and two-by-fours, 96" x 360" (diameter). Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. (Photo, Will Brown)*



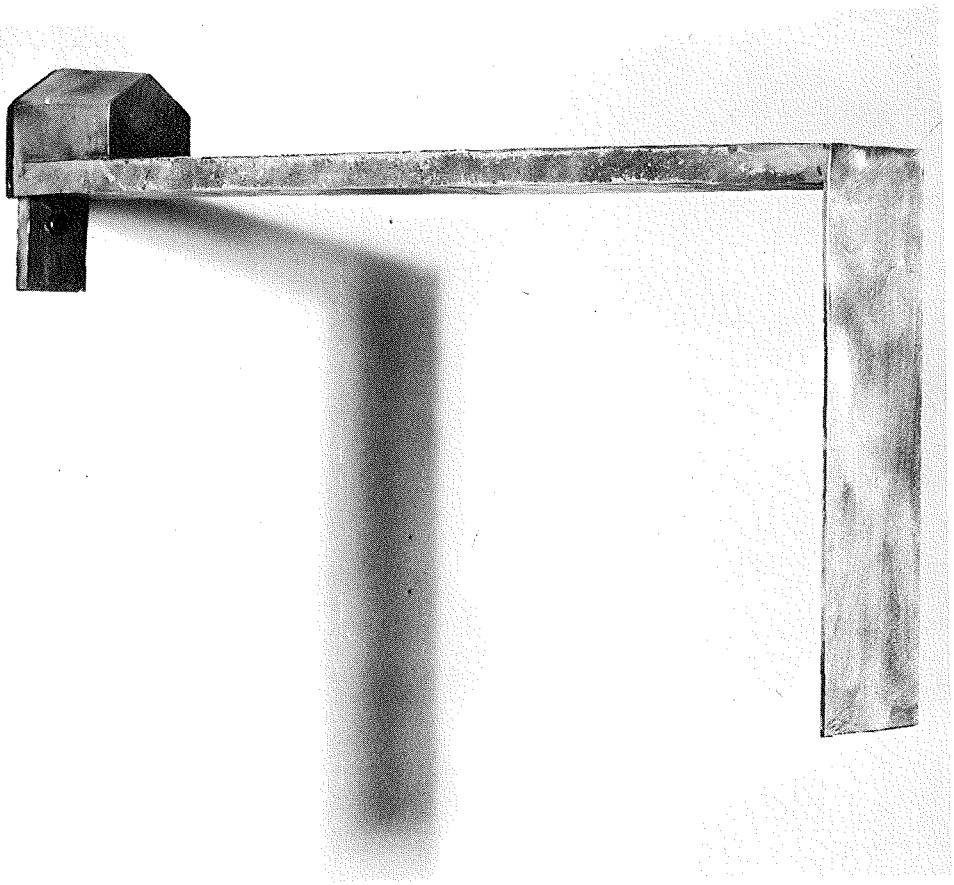




210. ABOVE LEFT *Smithson:* Amarillo Ramp, *1973. Red sandstone shale, 1800" (diameter at top). Estate of the artist. (Photo, Gianfranco Gorgoni)*

211a and **211b.** *Serra:* Shift *(two views), 1970–72. Cement, six rectilinear sections, each 60" x 8". Collection of the artist, King City, Ontario. (Photo b., Gianfranco Gorgoni)*

memory, "it is characteristic that the information which it gives about the past retains no trace of it."[14] We might think of classical ideas of formal organization as a species of voluntary memory, in which there is "no trace" of experience as it is lived. And we might analogize the modes of cognition formulated by modern sculpture to the encounter with the *madeleine*. That sculpture asks us to experience the present in the way that Proust finds the past: "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die, or whether we never encounter it."[15]



212. *Joel Shapiro (1941–):* Untitled, *1974. Bronze, 13½" x 27¾" x 2½". Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photo, Geoffrey Clements)*