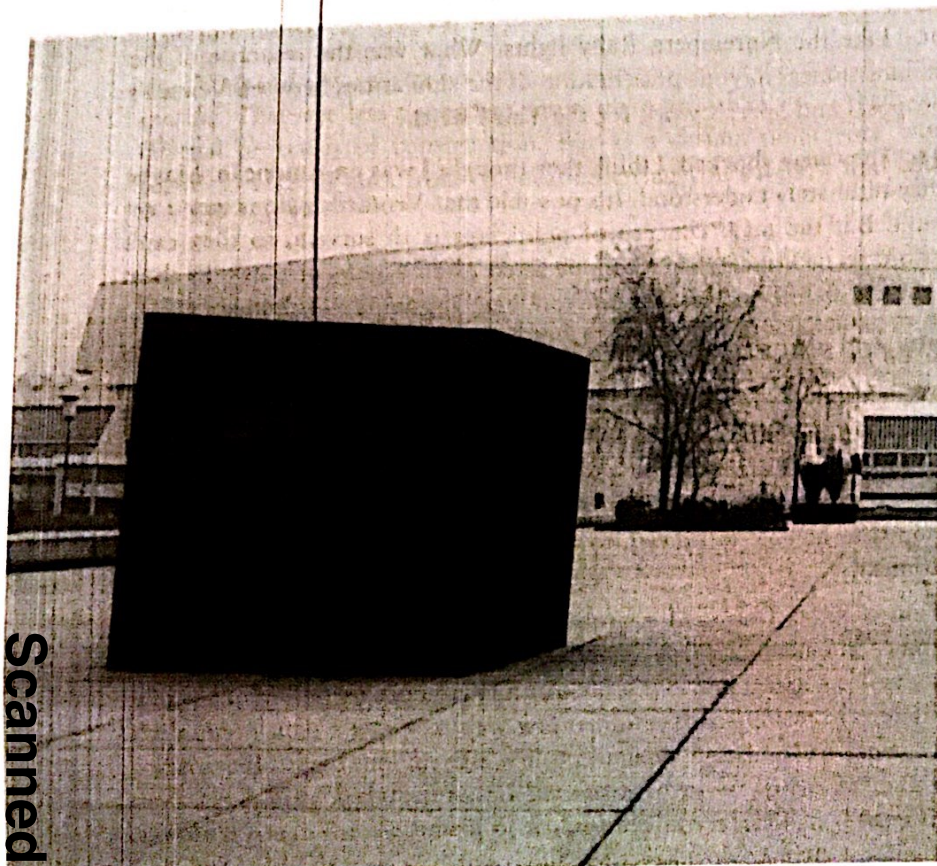


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Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin, 1977

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Interview

Peter Eisenman

I am not interested in the idealization of the perennial monuments of art history, emptied of their historical function and meaning, being served up by architects and artists who need to legitimize their aesthetic production by glorifying past achievements. Their "appropriate historical solution" is nothing other than kitsch eclecticism: so much for the cast bronze figure on the pedestal and the Ionic column. The return to historical images, icons, and symbols is based on an illusionary notion, the nostalgic longing for the good old days when times were better and more meaningful.

—Richard Serra
Perspecta 19 (1982)

PETER EISENMAN: In the past, figural sculpture—the figure on the pedestal—was concerned basically with the meaning inherent in the representation of the figure in the object. Modernist sculpture intended to break away from figuration or, let us say, representation in terms of figuration; any representation in modernist sculpture supposedly represented sculpture itself. You say that what you attempt to do is to bring forth sculptural intentions. Is this the representation of sculptural intentions?

RICHARD SERRA: The biggest break in the history of sculpture in the twentieth century occurred when the pedestal was removed. The historical concept of placing sculpture on a pedestal established a separation of the object from the behavioral space of the viewer. "Pedestalized" sculpture invariably transfers the effect of power by subjugating the viewer to the idealized, memorialized, or eulogized theme. The need architects feel today to repress the history of sculpture since Rodin is based upon their desire to represent questionable symbolic values under the guise of a questionable humanism. The

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fact of the matter is that symbolic values have become synonymous with advertisements: witness Michael Graves' Portlandia logo for the Portland Building or Johnson/Burgee's "Golden Boy" for the AT&T Building. It is interesting to watch certain self-named and self-proclaimed postmodern architects trying to convince people that placing a contraposto figure atop a column serves humanistic needs. Old themes are firmly embedded: antiquated identification patterns support the expression of mediocre decor, both in public centers and private interiors. Social relevance, humanistic values, are the reinstated buzzwords, the new international shtick . . .

The credo is that architecture shall stabilize the status quo by appealing to pluralism: Let's decide that Chinatown needs a new pagoda and Central Park another equestrian rider. Exploitation and marketing strategy are protected under a populist umbrella. Decide what the people need and make them believe in your definition of their needs. Isn't Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, for instance, a little condescending?

One reason architects consume and use traditional sculpture is to control and domesticize art. Architects are openly reactionary in their adaptation of watered-down artistic conventions. Their continual misuse of art as ornamentation, decoration, and garnish denies the inventions of the past. Much of what purports to be new is in fact a derivative appropriation: The new zipatone has replaced art as appliqué. When sculpture and painting rely on their internal necessities and motivations, they have the potential to alter the construction, function, and meaning of architecture. At least Le Corbusier understood this (see his letter to Victor Nekrasov, 20 December 1932, in *Oppositions* 23 [1981], p. 133). As soon as art is forced or persuaded to serve alien values it ceases to serve its own. To deprive art of its uselessness is to make other than art.

PE: But to say that architecture cannot put forward its own internal necessity outside of either use or the misuse of artistic convention is, I think, a narrow view of architecture that presents the possibility of the realization of its own internal necessity precisely because in architecture the agglutination of parts such as rooms and corridors and the adjacencies of use and shelter are necessary elements. These necessities, which do not exist in sculpture, are what set my "site." To me, the challenge of a site is to overcome the limitations inherent in piling parts together according to use, and to produce an internal necessity that is outside of use. Both sculpture and architecture attempt to display their internal

necessity: how one achieves this in sculpture and architecture is very different though. This is why I am an architect and not a sculptor.

RS: What I wonder about architecture is whether people read the significance of its internal structure *perceptually* or *haptically*, physically.

PE: I don't understand your concern over whether or not people experience architecture haptically, especially since you have described the different reactions of pedestrians and drivers to your *St. John's Rotary Arc* (1980) in downtown Manhattan. Why can't you allow architecture the same differentiation in terms of the viewer's understanding?

RS: In an *Artforum* text we stated that the "viewer" is a fiction. Basically this is *my* response to my sculpture. I know that there is absolutely no audience for sculpture, as there is none for poetry and experimental film. There is, however, a big audience for products that give people what they want and supposedly need but not more than they understand. Marketing is based on this premise.

In terms of architecture right now, a lot of people have a need to build and a lot of clients are concerned with what's considered "relevant." This creates a situation in which both client and architect receive criticism and advice on how to serve. Since there is no audience for sculpture or poetry, no one demands that they resist manipulation from the outside. On the contrary, the more one betrays one's language to commercial interests, the greater the possibility that those in authority will reward one's efforts. Architects have justifying phrases for this behavior. They call it "being appropriate" or "compromising." When Robert Venturi's pylons for Federal Triangle in Washington, D.C., were criticized for not being symbolic enough, he returned the next day with the American flag atop each pylon. This is the kind of self-justifying pragmatic compromise I am talking about.

PE: You have said that your *House of Cards* project (1969) is an example of internalized necessity in sculpture, and yet it does make a metaphorical allusion—to something very fragile, almost self-critical. The phrase "house of cards" is traditionally used to imply a negative idea. My first projects were called "houses of cards" precisely because they were autocritical. Was the self-critical idea intentional on your part?

RS: No, the title of the piece is *One-Ton Prop*. I wrote "House of Cards" in parentheses. In my work at the time, I had been propping lead elements against the wall. Even in those wall-props, it was easy to

understand that the "how" was defining the "what." But these pieces were still related to the pictorial plane of the wall. When I decided to build a freestanding work using the same principle of point load and compression, I wanted to define a space, to hold a space.

PE: Then the *space* and not the wall becomes an implied armature—a negative substance. Armature is usually thought of as solid, but it could be a void.

RS: I wouldn't say the space is the armature. There never has been an armature. Armature and pedestal are old solutions to old problems.

PE: In the *House of Cards* was it your intention to present the object *in process*, as opposed to having the object *represent* a process, as is done in what is commonly known as "process" art?

RS: As I said, I was interested in the "how" defining the "what." I do not believe in the mystification of the creative process. I would just as soon have the work involved available to anyone's inspection as part of the content. Not that it *is* the content, but that it would be discernible to anyone wanting to deal with that aspect of my work.

PE: The idea of the object in process was not part of the intention?

RS: I wouldn't call these works "objects in process" because I don't think of the works themselves as performing. Although when you use lead, it does have a high order of entropy. Obviously it's not going to last, and is going to deflect. That's all implied. I'm more interested in the implication of collapse than in the actual fact of it. You can build a structure under compression that implies collapse and impermanence and yet in its mere existence denies this. What I find interesting about the *House of Cards* is that as its forces tend toward equilibrium, weight is negated. When something is truly balanced, it becomes weightless.

PE: You say you are interested in the notion of the impermanence of the object. Do you think that when the men in the shipyards knocked down your pieces they did so because they were nervous about the limit—whether the pieces would fall on them? They did not want the objects to be out of their control, so they knocked them over before they had a chance to fall over on them. Whether or not the pieces actually fall down, they create the anxiety of the maker and the viewer not being in control. These pieces are interesting to me because they control. The objects have their own power. But it seems that you ultimately reject

this idea of disequilibrium in your work and that you reject it because it implies formalist notions of balance, symmetry and, finally, composition.

RS: I use gravity as a building principle. I am not particularly interested in disequilibrium.

PE: But for you gravity also has formal overtones of convention.

RS: No. Gravity has always been a problem in sculpture. How that problem is resolved is part of any definition of making sculpture.

PE: Again going back to the *House of Cards*, you argue that pictorial illusion is being expunged, and yet the notion of implosion and collapse is itself an allusion.

RS: Allusion is different from illusion. If something has the potential to decay, that can be allusion. Smithson's *Buried Woodshed* (1970) and its potential to collapse is an example of an allusion. SITE alters Smithson's concept from one of allusion to one of illusion.

PE: I would think SITE alters Smithson's concept from illusion to something very literal. In talking about large-scale sculptures other than those of Smithson—those of Noguchi or Calder, for example—you say that they remain little more than model enlargements. Thus the large scale in their work is arbitrary. Are you suggesting that inherent in sculptural concepts there is a notion of scale specificity that is not anthropomorphic, not related to man, but related to the intrinsic being of the sculpture?

RS: I don't think it's related to the intrinsic being of sculpture. I think it's related to site and context. Whether something is large or small has nothing to do with scale. Large or small has to do with size. Scale deals not only with the interrelationship of the parts of a sculpture but also, more importantly, with the sculpture's relationship to its context. The context always has its boundary, and it is in relation to that boundary that scale becomes the issue. When I talk about Calders and Noguchis what I am saying is that those are studio-made pieces. In the studio they might have scale. To take those sculptures out of the studio and site-adjust them is conceptually different from building on a site, where scale relationships are determined by the nature and definition of the context. You can't build a work in one context, indiscriminately place it in another, and expect the scale relation to remain. Scale is dependent on context. Portable objects moved from one place to another most often

fail for this reason. Henry Moore's work is the most glaring example of this site-adjusted folly. An iron deer on the proverbial front lawn has more contextual significance. Architects suffer from the same studio syndrome. They work out of their offices, terrace the landscape, and place their buildings into the carved site. As a result the studio-designed then site-adjusted buildings look like blown-up cardboard models. There are exceptions: the work of Le Corbusier, Wright, Kahn, Gehry. . .

PE: Rosalind Krauss has written that in recent sculpture, such as that of Robert Morris and David Smith, there is a changed relationship of viewer to object. Because a change in the viewer's position provides a change in the sculptural object, the space of the viewer becomes part of the space of the object. The viewer and the object are seen as occupying the same space.

RS: Changing the content of perception by having viewer and sculpture coexist in the same behavioral space implies movement, time, anticipation, etc. This wasn't started with David Smith or Robert Morris. This concept was developed by Brancusi in Tirgu Jiu and has continued throughout the twentieth century.

When sculpture enters the realm of the non-institution, when it leaves the gallery or museum to occupy the same space and place as architecture, when it redefines space and place in terms of sculptural necessities, architects become annoyed. Not only is their concept of space being changed, but for the most part it is being criticized. The criticism can come into effect only when architectural scale, methods, materials, and procedures are being used. Comparisons are provoked. Every language has a structure about which nothing critical in that language can be said. To criticize a language, there must be a second language dealing with the structure of the first but possessing a new structure.

PE: You want architecture to be a neutral background. When architecture comes off the wall and off the pedestal, you seem to want it to remain as a discrete object, to maintain its neutrality. When architecture becomes both figural and contextual, it worries you because it leaves the sculptor with little room to operate.

You say that architects—and specifically Robert Venturi—claim to be dealing with context, yet are never critical of it. In other words, their “site-specific” architecture is simply objects that fit into the site or attempt to fit into the site. This is what in architecture is called “contextualism.” I see a difference between what you mean by “site-specific” in

your work and what Venturi or the contextualists mean by “site-specific” in their architecture.

RS: What they call contextualism I call affirmation in the guise of social justification. For “contextualists,” to build site-specific means to analyze the context and the content of the indigenous cultural situation, then to conclude that what's needed is to maintain the status quo. That's how they seek meaning. They give a great deal of priority to the person who laid down the first rock as well as the last person who put up a signboard.

PE: And the nostalgia for that!

RS: Nostalgia, and the willingness to augment the existing language. In my work I analyze the site and determine to redefine it in terms of sculpture, *not* in terms of the existing physiognomy. I have no need to augment existing contextual languages. I'm not interested in affirmation.

PE: But you are also not interested in negation.

RS: No. I'm interested in sculpture; site-specific sculpture.

PE: There could be site-specific architecture that is critical, that attempts something other than an affirmation of the fact that everything preexisting on the site is good. Piranesi's recreations and Palladio's redrawings were inventions and not so much concerned with what had actually been on a site. What interests me in your work is that it is neither affirmation nor negation. Most architects do in fact say that whoever laid the first stone made the context. You do not say that. You try to analyze the context in a way that might necessitate the removal of the first stone.

RS: Absolutely.

PE: To allow for meaning in architecture, the material itself may be covered up; this is departing from materialism. In this way, to do in architecture what Richard Serra does in sculpture could mean to do the reverse. That is, the actual fact of covering up materiality may bring the object closer to architectural as opposed to material necessity. You do this when you cover up foundations of certain pieces because the foundations literally hold up the pieces, but the work is not conceptually intended to be seen that way.

RS: All my pieces will stand if they are placed into the ground and the earth is then backfilled. The reason for the fixtures and foundations is to satisfy engineering codes laid down by cities, the federal bureaucracy,

and so on. For example, *Rotary Arc* was required to have a foundation in order to meet city codes, although it is apparent that a 100-ton quarter-circle will "freestand" anywhere.

PE: Let's go on to another subject. You say you reject chance, which is totally random, and you reject judgment, which is totally closed. You say experimentation is somewhere in between, but that your experiments with chance, influenced by William Burroughs and John Cage, led you to a dead end. What is the difference between a judgmental viewpoint and a viewpoint of chance? Would you say there is chance in Jackson Pollock's action paintings, for example?

RS: Absolutely not. I saw Pollock's retrospective in Paris recently. In these paintings the skeins don't touch the edge, they never leave the border or boundary; the passage of paint is absolutely controlled. People misunderstand the "how" of the process and think that because someone is standing over a canvas working on the floor in a spontaneous manner, he must be out of control. But the decisions as to how much paint to use, where to put it, in fact, all the formal conditions that go into making paintings—line, massing, overlaying—are tightly organized. In hindsight it's obvious how much structure is contained within the overall field and how much the overall field is a structure. It's not an amorphous field.

PE: When Pollock says that his paintings are not *representations* of his feelings but *expressions* of his feelings, you know that they must be controlled by an unconscious reality. The imagery that comes up—the black holes that appear larger, the white and black, the pulsations—finally overtakes him.

RS: I have great difficulty with spurious psychological interpretations. One's psychological makeup at a given moment is developed from the womb on; and one's activity at a given moment is an intersection of congruences that will vent certain emotions. But to say that works are the result of an emotional state is to use a knee-jerk causality that simply does not follow. Critics have tried to explain one of my works—splashing molten lead—as a temper tantrum. It's hard to keep up a temper tantrum for seven days, the time it took me to complete the sculpture. The same confusion surrounds Pollock. Pollock was never out of control. Look at his paintings.

PE: You used the term "noncompositional" in reference to Pollock's work.

RS: There is no hierarchy of parts in Pollock. There is no relation of part to whole in terms of composition, as there is, for example, in Malévich, in whose work forms float on the ground in compositional relation to each other and the framing edge. There are other examples of European compositional tradition that are more pertinent: the work of Matisse, the Cubists, Mondrian.

PE: Your *Belt* pieces seem to be based on a noncompositional idea; only when you get far enough away from them is there a whole image. For me it is not the elements of composition in architecture—the bay, the column, the window—that are interesting, but what is between them. Similarly, in the *Belt* there seems to be a serial structure, without beginning or end, and the important consideration is not the elements but the spaces in between—the negatives, the voids.

RS: Although nonfigurative, the *Belt* piece, done in 1966–67, is structurally related to Pollock's University of Iowa painting. If my origins as a painter culminated in anything, they culminated in Pollock. Then I felt a need to move into literal space.

PE: The open spaces you moved into were cuts in the landscape, cuts that were seen as substance, not void. These cuts try to create substance out of nothing. An open field has a certain neutrality about it because of its insubstantiality. When a cut of some kind is introduced—a wall, a line, whatever—you are not creating a figure in the ground, but you are creating *out* of that ground. It is not the figure/ground nature that is important, but giving substance to the void.

RS: My elevational pieces point to the indeterminacy of the landscape. The sculptural elements act as barometers for reading the landscape. They are not viewed as discrete sculptural units or as parts in a larger composition. It's impossible to have an overview of the work in its entirety. In different proximities the work functions and is perceived differently. At a close distance the elevational fall of the landscape is experienced step by step. From a further distance the elevational fall seems measured by the sculptural elements.

PE: Don't the actual physical pieces, the sculptural objects, then become the pedestal or the frame for the landscape? Isn't there a reversal whereby the object itself now becomes the frame?

RS: It does become an element defining the landscape within its given boundaries, but it does not become the frame. If you use the word

"frame" in referring to the landscape, you imply a notion of the picturesque. I have never really found the notion of framing parts of the landscape particularly interesting in terms of its potential for sculpture. Smithson was interested in the picturesque. His *Spiral Jetty* (1969–70) not only spirals you out into the landscape, framing vistas of the landscape, but as it dovetails back on itself, it also leads you to concentrate on its internal structure. The nautilus, being a centripetal structure, leads you into its vortex bit by bit. That's an interesting notion in terms of its relation to the narrative of seeing but it's not of particular concern to me.

PE: Bringing an object to reality is certainly the opposite of abstraction, which is not an aspect of your work. Your work has an immanence—that is, a latent other structure in the real material. Abstraction deals with transcendence, the opposite of immanence. While a Brancusi may be an abstraction of a column, your work is not an abstraction of anything. You are in fact making abstract ideas real.

RS: Van Doesburg articulated a difference between abstraction, which derives its impetus from nature, and concretion, which is based on an inventive order. I am not interested in this kind of distinction. However, I don't begin with a correlative and abstract from it. I don't work from a given in that way. But since it has become a convention to call nonfigurative work abstract, I don't object to that definition of my work.

PE: But it could be argued that you are a "realist" artist, although not in the way the term is conventionally used. It could also be argued that you are a postmodernist (little *p*, little *m*) in that your concerns are not derived from modernist conventions. You are interested in self-referentiality, but not in a modernist sense. Your objects produce an inherent, internal necessity structuring the landscape; this necessity has to do with self-referentiality. In fact you have said that the context invariably returns the work to its sculptural necessities. The work may be critical of the context but it always returns to sculpture as sculpture. These ideas could be seen as leading to a self-referential, autonomous, or closed system.

RS: My works do not signify an esoteric self-referentiality. Their construction leads you into their structure and does not refer to the artist's persona. But we might be discussing a bogus problem. As soon as you put a work into a museum, its label points first to the author. The visitor is asked to recognize "the hand." Whose work is it? The institution of

the museum invariably creates self-referentiality, even when it's not implied. The question of how the work functions is not asked.

The problem of self-referentiality does not exist once the work enters the public domain. Even negative controversy is evoked by the site-specificity of the sculpture; how the work alters the site is the issue, not the persona of the author. It's a curious fact that all the petitions against my piece in the Federal Plaza dealt with aspects of the work, whereas the art press didn't criticize the work but attacked the person. Here we have another form of promulgating self-referentiality. Once the works are erected in a public space, they become other people's concerns. By their implicit and explicit values they become judgmental by what they exclude. They simultaneously criticize what they neglect and pass judgment on other works.

PE: The self-referentiality that I am speaking about in your work is not narrative. It is not telling Richard Serra's story. It is telling its own story. Modernist self-referentiality created a split between author and object. James Joyce was thought to be non-narrative in the sense that he removed the imposition of the author between the reader and the object. I believe the same thing exists in your work, although it is not modernist. The object tells me how to see it—that is its self-referentiality.

If you don't want to use the term self-referential, you could say your work is "structural" in that the dialogue it opens up is an archaeology of its own structure. This kind of structure is not an abstraction. If anything, this archaeology reveals what has previously been hidden in the classical closed or contained object.

RS: For the same reasons that I am not interested in the distinction between concrete art and abstract art, I am not interested in whether my art is called structural or abstract. I don't subscribe to labels and "isms," although many have certainly been applied to my work.

PE: I would call your work "structuralist" in the sense of looking for the structure inherent in a text. It is a matter of searching in the structure not so much for the text or the meaning of the text as for the inherent structural capacity of the text. What is the internal necessity, the inward feeling that you have talked about? What is it other than the work's own structure? What is the sculptural identity that these things are revealing?

RS: I can't answer that question. It depends on one's knowledge of the condition and history of architecture, painting, and sculpture; it depends on what one brings to a specific work. I don't think there is any ideal

interpretation: I don't think I need to articulate a dogma of how to see my sculptures.

PE: I am trying to get at the notion of structure as part of the ineffable condition of an object. The presence of the structure itself is no guarantee of art. What is it that makes art out of structure? It seems that is what you concern yourself with.

RS: It's not something I program into my work, although I may recognize it. I am most interested in selecting structures that define the context in question.

PE: But aren't you interested in their self-selection rather than your selection of them? You do not make an arbitrary selection; they select themselves from a range of possible archaeologies.

RS: I am confused. They don't select themselves. They are the responsibility of the person who is formulating the problem and making a decision as to the solution. You imply that I'm just there to somehow receive structures?

PE: No. You are not passive. I am arguing that you engage in another activity. You do not invent or select but rather uncover a range of possibilities.

RS: By implication the selected solution is an attempt to resolve all of the possible solutions to a problem. The decision (selection) process differs according to the context, although there is never any certitude.

PE: You did not invent the *Rotary Arc*. You found it. It was preexistent.

RS: Preexistent in the world? That sounds strangely Calvinistic.

PE: No, preexistent in the context and in the universe of sculpture.

RS: No. A titled arc didn't exist in the history or repertoire of sculpture.

PE: It preexisted. It was there and you found it.

RS: Where?

PE: It preexisted conceptually. It is possible to conceptualize it before you make it "become." The inherence that you constantly refer to—the inherence of sculpture, the inherence of a landscape, the inherence of an object—don't you think they preexist and that your work gives them substance?

RS: I don't believe that my sculptural concepts are found objects. They are inventions. Of course they are related to the tradition and history of sculpture, but they are still inventions.

PE: In the universe of sculpture the concept suggests itself. Let us say you and I were playing a game of chess. All potential lines exist, but all lines are not necessarily winning lines nor are they necessarily elegant. Some are more elegant or beautiful than others. But the context for the invention of the poetic—the art of the winning game—lies within the rules of chess itself, lies on the board in those pieces. We have to find it, but it does suggest itself to us. What you call invention I call scanning, choosing a limited range of possibilities from an infinite number.

RS: I don't subscribe to the chess-board theory. There aren't any rules. I make them up as I go along, and I never consider "beauty" in my solutions. Beautiful solutions are about taste. I have my own methods of working that allow me to make decisions once the problem is posed. One method I employ is a large sandbox I have built in which I work out solutions for constructions. The sand allows me to shift, tilt, and lean elements on their plane and axis. The practice of working in the sandbox does not rely on theory.

PE: You say your sandbox—my "chess board"—is a methodology and not merely a series of images. The methodology seems to be finding differences in things rather than similarities. You seem to be looking for those seemingly useless differences that fall in between the similarities. But your intervention is limited by the sandbox. Your sandbox, for instance, is defined very differently from Robert Morris's.

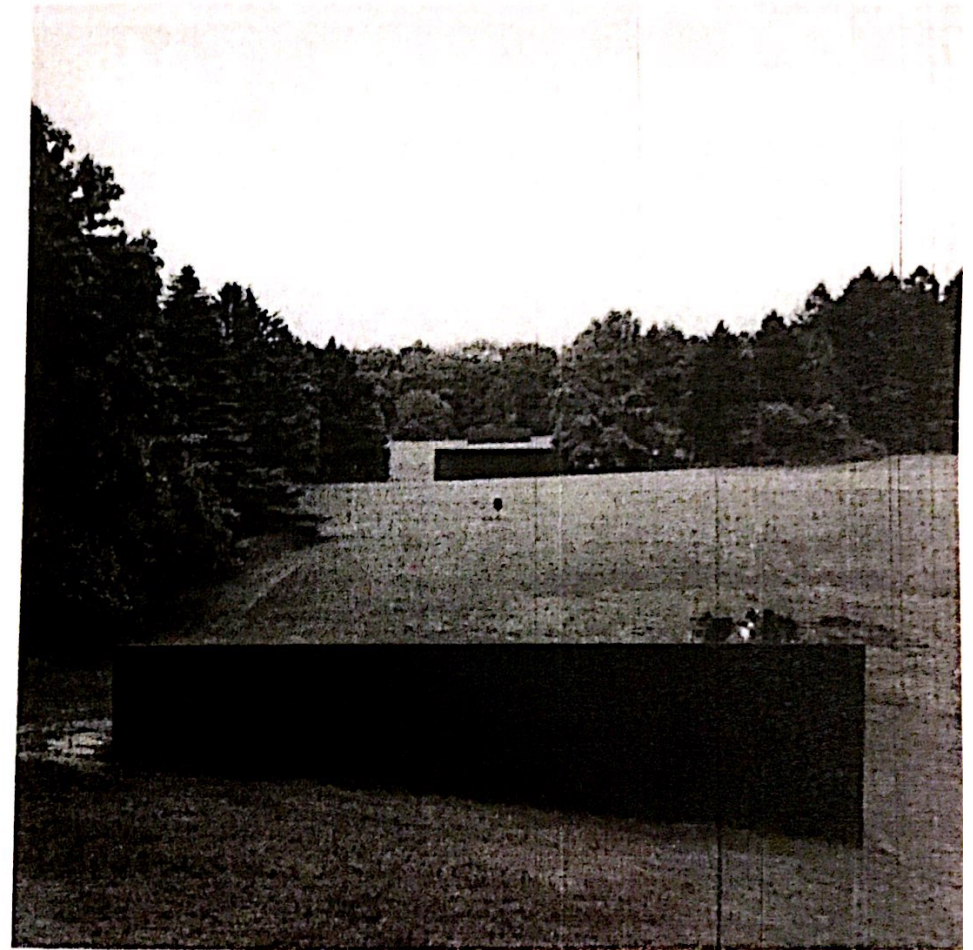
RS: I would hope. The problem is that Morris plays in my sandbox and everybody else's. I call that plagiarism, other people call it mannerism or postmodernism. Those who play in others' sandboxes, or who play with the icons, form, or thematics, or history, labor under the assumption that history can be dispensed. The source and center of work no longer derives from the necessity of invention but from strategical game plans.

PE: I wanted to ask you about ideology in relation to structure. It seems to me that the notion behind the landscape pieces you do is anti-ideological in the literal sense of ideology. I believe that your urban pieces are anti-ideological, but that in their anti-ideology they become ideological.

RS: Art is always ideological, whether it carries an overt political message or is art for art's sake and based on an attitude of indifference. Art always, either explicitly or implicitly, manifests a value judgment about the larger sociological context of which it is part. Art supports or neglects, embraces or rejects class interests. Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* is no more ideological than a black painting by Ad Reinhardt. Ideological expression does not limit itself to an affirmation of power or political bias. To answer your question about the ideological content of my work, there is no difference in the degree of ideological content in my urban and landscape pieces.

PE: I would argue that your work is non-ideological in the sense that it does not speak to the meaning of man's condition today vis-à-vis the natural and physical world. Man has unleashed physical forces that can destroy him at a greater rate now than ever before. This idea has changed the former relationship of man to God and to the natural world. Modernism always spoke of the future, but now we are in what I call a futureless present, a condition of immanence, in that we face the biological extinction of the entire civilization. Man's relationship to God and nature has traditionally been mirrored in architecture. But I don't believe you address this issue in your work, nor do most architects. It seems to me that underlying postmodernist architects' return to history is their intuitive realization that the postnuclear condition of man is greatly changed. It seems that the anxiety of man's present condition has caused architects to abrogate their responsibility and to go back to history as if they were ostriches sticking their heads in the sand.

RS: You can't construct a causality between the fear of biological extinction and postmodern architects thumbing through history books. That's doomsday philosophy. True, modernist architects believed in a better future; they developed utopian ideas for city planning as well as pragmatic solutions for workers' housing. But postmodernists also believe in the future: the future of AT&T and corporate America.



Plumb Run: Equal Elevations, 1983