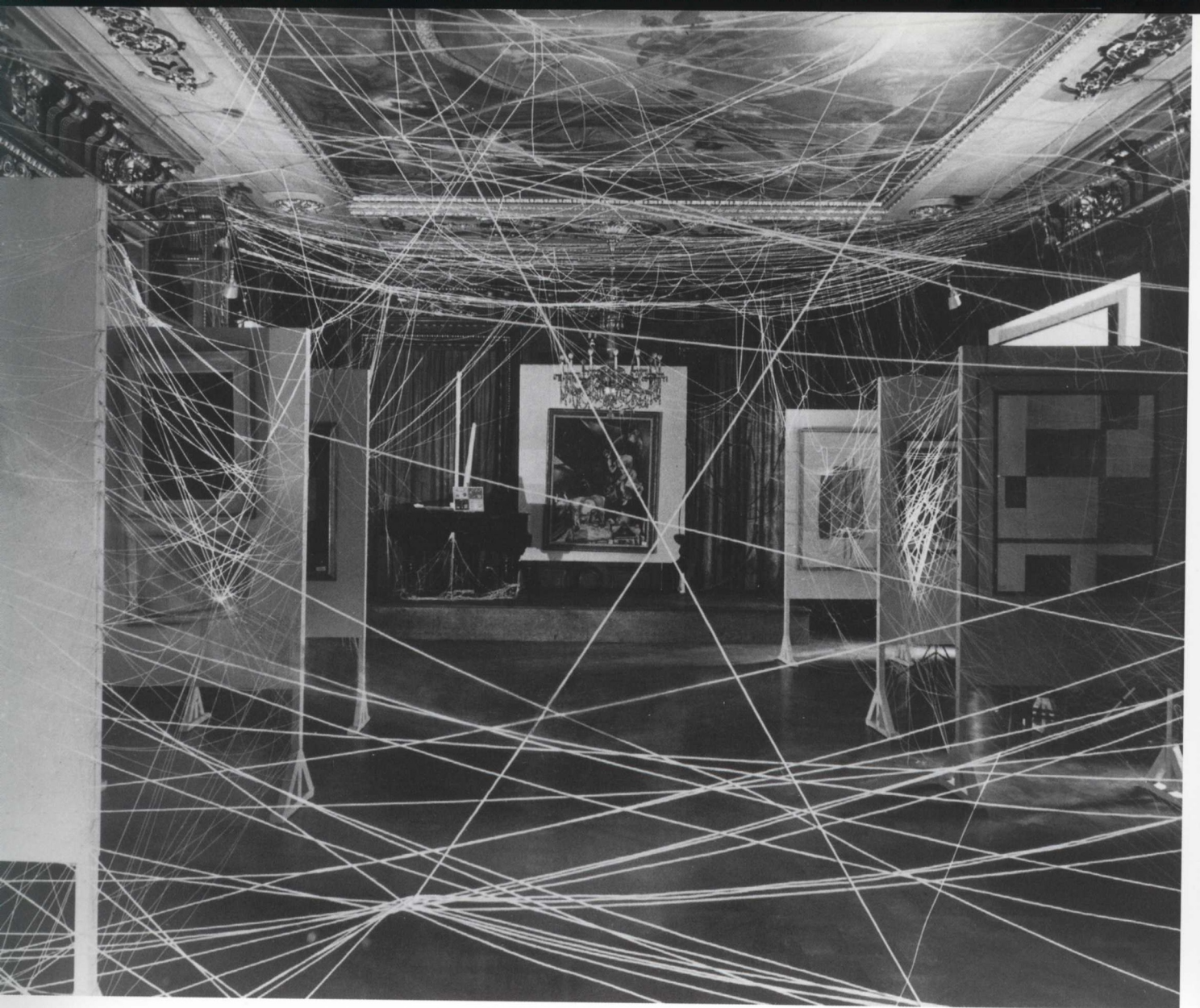


SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION : INTERVENTIONS

Some artists have made a practice of employing the medium of installation to investigate the physical, functional, intellectual, cultural, or institutional character of the locales at which they are asked to produce works. For these artists the site of the work of art is neither neutral nor without inflection, and installation's role becomes a critique and perhaps even transgression on the site. (Certainly Pardo's work at the Fabric Workshop is a crossover between an impersonation and an intervention.) With this approach, installation moves away from the conventional themes of art and addresses its literal surrounding spaces. Daniel Buren, a pioneer in this mode, rhetorically pleads: "Can art get down from its pedestal and rise to street level?"²⁴ Hence, in a work for the John Weber Gallery in New York, *Within and Beyond the Frame* (1973) (figs. 22a and 22b) Buren successfully invited the street into the gallery by extending his signature, striped sheets through the open window onto West Broadway. In so doing, Buren intended to undo the idea that art-viewing was a quasi-spiritual activity which occurred in a space isolated from life. Buren wanted to compromise the identity of the art space by having street life intrude into it.

Museums, in particular,—and not just art museums—offer fertile territory because historical tradition makes a good foil for the inquiring, even liberating power of the intervention. According to Buren: "The questioning work has an obligation ... to reveal the false discretion of these depersonalized architectures and to make them emerge from their false neutrality."²⁵ The museum and art become empty ideals in need of renovation if not outright destruction, as it were; but at the same time the opponent is the larger framework of society in which the museum and art are simply two of its respected totems. This type of installation is thus a tool of inquiry and even attack.

Interventions are an outgrowth of art that refuses to abide by conventional practices, art that makes for an unwelcome houseguest, as it were. They recall the aforementioned works by Duchamp: not only did he create confusion about the nature of a space, he played a behavioral game with the viewer's physical movements. Duchamp created a similar problem in his *Mile of String* (1942) (fig. 23) installation, for it would have been quite difficult for a viewer to maneuver around and through the string to see the more conventional works of art on the walls.



23 | Marcel Duchamp, *Mile of String*, 1942.
Gelatin silver print, 19.4 × 25.4 cm.
Installation: First Papers of Surrealism
exhibition, New York.

Starting in the early 1960s, there were many assaults on conventional thinking about the previously decorous nature of a work of art. Frank Stella's shaped canvases suggested extension beyond the painting (forget a frame, for there was none) to the wall itself and the room. This strategy was quickly picked up by the many strands of sculpture that are loosely known as minimalist, post-minimalist, earth, and conceptual art, in all of which the sculptural objects spread out aggressively into the spaces of exhibition. Rather than existing as self-contained structures in which the only spatial concerns were illusory or internal, these works engaged with real places, at times intervening in the physical space.²⁶ The viewer co-habits with these works of art and the spaces holding them.

24 | Carl Andre
Foreground: *100 Pieces of Copper*, 1968.
Background: *100 Lead Square*, 1968.
Installation: Wide White Space Gallery,
Antwerp, 1968.
© Carl Andre / Licensed by VAGA,
New York, NY



A floor-bound work by Carl Andre creates a complex situation for the viewer, especially those who saw these sculptures for the first time alone in a gallery. Initially the work seems virtually unnoticeable in a space, so that the room itself assumes great prominence and fills the vision of the viewer (fig. 24). Banal in character, the machine-made, modular components seem to possess scant aesthetic interest, their very anonymity speaking to the apparent objectivity of the dialogue with space. Robert Morris described the onlooker of Andre's sculpture observing "two domains simultaneously: that of the work's shallow blanket of space, and those upper regions free of art from which he commands a viewpoint outside the work."²⁷ The beholder even engaged Andre's work physically—by walking on it—an unimaginable transgression in the history of sculpture, a transgression with many implications to do with the viewer's role and the artist's own conception of himself *vis-à-vis* the beholder. The viewer experiences or consumes the art with his or her feet.

In Andre's extended lines on the floor, he led the viewer through the gallery, meanwhile calling attention to various prosaic aspects of the room-as-undistinguished-room, rather than as art gallery.²⁸ In effect, the work of art frames the space,²⁹ a fascinating reversal of fortunes, and emphasizes its physical dimension instead of its aesthetic function. Numerous writers have noted the theatrical aspect of such encounters, in which one becomes aware of one's own experience of such objects.³⁰ That quality of beholding oneself beholding is often a crucial behavior associated with much installation art, especially of the site-specific variety.

Though minimal art was rarely site-specific in the sense discussed here, these sculptures work in tandem with and even embrace literal space, if only in a generic sense—wall, floor, ceiling, corner. On reflection, one often thinks of these works in relation to their surroundings, the sculptures depending on the environment and being so much about space. But most minimal works are in fact quite movable, with each simply forming a new, still pointed, relationship with the next set of surroundings.

Just after the first burst of minimalism, a number of artists rebelled against the predictable regularity of its structures and grids, though they were strongly influenced by the spatial explorations of this breakthrough movement. With wall drawings, which came early in his career, Richard Serra expressed the wish to displace architecture,³¹ an aspiration much in keeping with the spirit of intervention. He wanted to “establish and structure disjunctive, contradictory spaces,” and to “engage ... attack and restructure” a given space,³² this an implicit goal of much minimalist sculpture. In effect, the medium of installation is an ideal technique for this type of investigation because it can go outside itself literally and figuratively, and can, in effect, be anything. In his sculpture Serra tended to create an internal, hermetic composition of parts, which must be circumnavigated to be appreciated. But with *Delineator* (1974–75) (fig. 25), the spectator is surrounded in a highly threatening manner, an experience that is rarely found in the art context.

Serra's *Delineator* as well as Bruce Nauman's *Double Steel Cage* (1974), and *Clown Torture* (1987) (fig. 26), indicate the confluence of a filled-space-type installation (one that could fairly easily be moved) with a site-specific intervention. These are deliberately aggressive toward the viewer, insisting on an uncomfortable and unwanted participation, and are transgressive with regard to the particular art sites at which each is installed at any one time. Whereas with Andre, the viewer might have a kind of walk in the park (or a museum), with Nauman and Serra there could be an assault. Movable in the same way that minimalist works were, these

sculptures are composed of a freestanding arrangement of parts that form an enclosure. Though seen within a larger space, each has its own internal logic and formal integrity. Again, the viewer has a real time and space experience of that location in particular.

Beside the physical aspects of a museum building, its sociological character offers a highly fertile area of exploration. Within the field known as conceptualism, beginning in the mid 1960s, numerous individuals questioned the exalted contexts of art, and in their questioning, the art object itself became incidental to the larger field of interest. In effect, the context had supplanted the primacy of the art object. Whereas for many earlier artists, the museum had been a grand goal ("the museum as muse," as a recent exhibition proclaimed), now it became the object of criticism and even anger. Artists felt their art institutions had stood too far apart from issues present in daily life. To redress what was at times seen as "wrong," certain installation artists sought to intervene in the sacred precinct of the art space. Their works were absolutely site specific; indeed, the site was more than an accomplice to the work, it was the subject itself.

Buren was among the first artists to examine this content in Europe: "The questioning work has an obligation ... to reveal the false discretion of these depersonalized architectures and to make them emerge from their false neutrality."³³ In the United States, Michael Asher shared this subversive ambition; in fact, he was even more diabolical about the art scene and desirous of undercutting its pretensions. Asked to participate in a 1977 exhibition of large-scale sculpture in Münster, Germany, Asher hired a camper van and relocated it on a weekly basis, nineteen times in all, on the perimeter of the city. Here was literally the largest sculpture one might imagine, making scale and interest in it a kind of perverse preoccupation of the organizing curator and the art audience. For an exhibition in Los Angeles at the Claire Copley Gallery in 1974, Asher emptied the gallery of all internal walls separating the front viewing area from the rear offices for gallery business (fig. 27). Upon entering, the unsuspecting visitor simply found a group of people engaged in conversation and coffee drinking. Asher's installation brilliantly critiqued both functions that occurred in the gallery: the clandestine activity in back was brought forward for exposure, and the usual public activity was circumvented. Instead of beholding a transcendent object, the viewer beheld merchandizing practice in an empty storefront. Rather than an enchantment, we have the actual space, warts and all.³⁴

Other manifestations of this kind of approach occurred throughout the 1970s. For instance, at an exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery, New

York, in 1972, Vito Acconci hid beneath the floorboards of a ramp that visitors crossed (figs. 28a and 28b). Otherwise empty, the gallery was enlivened by Acconci's groans as he masturbated. Called *Seedbed*, this installation included the sphere of performance art,³⁵ all for the purpose of subverting "the 'innocence' of space."³⁶ Hans Haacke has often investigated what lay behind the impassive face of the museum institution. In 1971, he created an uproar at the Guggenheim Museum with his proposal to show photographs of the slum dwellings owned by a member of the Board of Trustees of that institution in order to air the dirty laundry of the Museum and its financing. Not surprisingly, this impolite work was rejected by the Museum staff.

The impetus toward intervention has continued with enthusiasm in recent years. For instance, Vanessa Beecroft made the infamous "male gaze"—the viewer examining the female body—the subject at a variety of art venues. At the Guggenheim Museum, 1998, women in Gucci bikinis and panty hose paraded before an audience made to feel voyeuristic rather than aesthetically minded, all this on Fifth Avenue no less (fig. 29). Here the nude in Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* has stepped out into the viewer's space.

There are also freestanding, albeit interventionist installations. For example Alfredo Jaar juxtaposed photographs of Brazilian mine workers and nineteenth-century paintings of Indians in landscapes in a work entitled *Spheres of Influence* (fig. 30), made in 1989 for the 1990 Sydney Biennale. Martha Rosler unexpectedly brought images of homeless people into the hallowed halls of an art space, with *Home Front*, at the Dia Center



29 | Vanessa Beecroft. Installation detail:
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1998.



30 | Alfredo Jaar, *Spheres of Influence*, 1989.
Set of six lightboxes with color transparencies,
each 30.5 × 182.9 × 17.8 cm.
Installation: Sydney Biennale, 1990.

in 1989. Similar to the effect Minimalist sculptures have on their environs, these works engage each art context, and, likewise, any space will do for these movable installations. Most important is that installation serves a fascinating and far-reaching purpose: to provide a “lingua franca” of the nomadic art scene, whereby itinerant artists, many from non-Western cultures, participate on world stages and effectively “communicate inter-culturally.”³⁷ Thomas McEvilley has noted that installation is ideally suited to this role “because it does not unambiguously proclaim any particular cultural hegemony.” “Much of it is rooted in the ritualistic environments of cultures outside the industrialized West.”³⁸ Given the increasing occurrence of transcultural experiences, the art technique of installation can effectively investigate the multiple realities and points of view common to one’s experiences of life.

When Rebecca Horn was asked to participate in the sculpture exhibition for Münster in 1987, she made *Concert in Reverse* (figs. 31a, b, c) for an

old prison that had been reused in the Nazi years. Her installation consisted of improbable objects and somber lighting to bring the macabre site back to the present for viewers. Similarly sociological in ambition, Fred Wilson organized a landmark, site-specific exhibition called *Mining the Museum* (fig. 32). Asked to create an installation for the Maryland Historical Society in 1992, he, like an archaeologist of mores, found in the store-rooms of this institution a wealth of material showing the lives of African Americans in United States history. These works were introduced into the usual displays of the Baltimore Historical Society to riveting effect; it was as if the other side of the coin had been revealed for the first time in that museum's history.³⁹

There is a quasi-analytical, cultural, and impersonal character to many interventions. Such works seem to possess a moral integrity, too, that is reinforced by the fact that often they cannot be bought or sold, if only because each is utterly rooted to one place. Compared to the commodity status of so many other objects within a museum (and in life), this type of installation is an obdurate entity, with elusive physical borders, that is unlikely to be co-opted by the marketplace.

Deeply subversive, the intervention often upsets the bourgeois expectations of the audience, who might seek solace in art-viewing spaces and in the potential for works of art to offer escape. These artists do not want to cooperate in satisfying such expectations, and are anti-elitist in the extreme, both about art and the audience for it. All connotations toward timelessness and privilege—for art and its history, for the sites of art, and for its audience—are under attack, as the social spheres of life are introduced into these areas by the technique of installation.