Artist Writings: Critical Essays, Reception, and Conditions of Production since the 60s

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy—History of Art

Department of Art
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation uncovers the history of what is today generally accepted in the art world, that artists are also artist-writers. I analyse a shift from writing by artists as an ostensible aberration to artist writing as practice. My structuring methodology is assessing artist writings and their conditions and reception in their moment of production and in their singularity. In Part 1, I argue that, while the Abstract-Expressionist artist-writers were negatively received, a number of AbEx-inflected conditions influenced and made manifest the valuing of artist writings. I demonstrate that Donald Judd conceived of writing as stemming from the same methods and responsibilities of the artist—following the guiding principle that art comes from art, from taking into account developments of the recent past—and as an essayistic means to argumentatively air his extra-art concerns; that writing for Dan Graham was an art world right of entry; and that Robert Smithson treated words as primary substances in a way that complicates meaning in his articles and in his objects and earthworks, in the process introducing a modernist truth to materials that gave the writing cachet while also serving as the basis for its domestication. In chronicling the reception of these artists’ written production at the time of its writing, I conclude that writing that could be related to artists’ visual practices is what resonated in the late 60s. In Part 2, I explore Frank Bowling’s public deliberation on the relationship of black experience to modernist painting in
*Arts Magazine:* Art & Language’s supposition that an editorial might count as art—arguing that it always already came up for the count as secondary-primary artist writing; female artist-writers’ disclosure of their art and writing in new feminist-founded magazines; and critics’ recognition of artist writings as a critical space. I conclude by proposing that the profusion of and demand for artist writings were constituted by the poststructuralist death of the author along with a persistent meaning-limiting author-function. This study confirms that critical engagement with writing by artists is a challenge: to viewers/readers, to art writers, and to artist-writers during the nascent era of artist writing.
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Introduction: Writing about Artist Writing

Toward the end of the twentieth century and today, artists are recognized for their writing. The 2012 College Art Association Artist Award for Distinguished Body of Work was awarded to Adrian Piper in recognition of her art as well as her writing: she “has produced art and writing that makes us question our constantly shifting contemporary social landscape.” The Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing on Art was given to artist Allan Sekula: he “has devoted his life as an artist to writing, photography, installation, and film. While his multidisciplinary approach to problems of representation and politics has earned him accolades as an artist, his writings have helped students, scholars, and the public to think critically about interventions in the political and social realities of our world” (College Art Association 2012). This is a far cry from the cultural resistance toward artists who wrote, in the form of accusations of being too intellectual or art-world savvy, producing difficult art, or leaving critics with nothing left to say, as Barnett Newman, Robert Morris, Martha Rosler, and Adrian Piper experienced.1

Artists are also writing, training, and continuing to operate within academia. In addition to MFA and PhD studio art programs requiring written theses, in September 2008 Goldsmiths College, University of London, instituted an “MFA in Artwriting,” the first fine arts degree worldwide dedicated to this practice. The program promises to “address art as writing, writing as art, and writing about art” in what it describes as “the new field of contemporary artwriting,” which is “an intrinsic element of contemporary art production and its distribution.” The program website includes the following student quotation: “I came to Goldsmiths not only for its good

1 On Newman’s reception, see Part 1 sections 1 and 5 of the present study. On the reception of the latter three, respectively, see Kolbowski in Krauss et al. 1994, 11-12; Alberro 1999a, 79; and Storr 1996, xiv.
reputation but because it had the most critical approach” (Goldsmiths 2008). To be an artist is to situate, to identify trends, to use theory, to be critical. We may ask, what is new about the field of contemporary artwriting? What precisely is the relationship between artwriting by artists and art production and its distribution? Is writing about art necessarily more critical than making it, and might such training enhance critical capacities or merely reproduce codified theoretical, art-critical, or art-historical concerns? My study analyses how such questions came to be possible and pressing. It uncovers for the first time the post-1965 history of what is today generally accepted in the art world, that artists are artist-writers. I assess what writing and what conditions constituted a shift from writing by artists as an ostensible aberration to artist writing as practice.

The questions that guide this study are how was writing-as-an-artist conceived—what did artists write about, through what modalities, with what points of intersection with their work, and under what conditions—and how were the writings treated and received during their moment of enunciation? How and in what way was writing a part of the artist’s practice in the 60s versus the 70s? By closely reading and carefully analysing a few examples of artist writings per decade in their singularity, I aim to discover what implicit thoughts can be located in the writings. I seek to offer a more detailed understanding of writing’s role in what it means to be an artist in these periods, without the expectation that overarching or tidy conclusions or paradigms can be elaborated. I take the practice, conditions, and reception of artist writings in their moment of production and in their singularity as a topic in itself, as opposed to subsuming artist writings in advance under general functions such as primary source, merely explanatory, simply wonky, or another angle into an artist’s visual practice. I have divided the material strictly chronologically. Even discussion of the subsequent reception of artist writings is reserved for the sections treating its moment of enunciation to endeavour to better appreciate and distinguish definitions of and implicit ideas about artist writing operative since the 60s.
Thus far, post-60s artist writings have received little sustained scholarly attention. Most studies of individual artists’ oeuvres do not mention the artists’ writings more than in passing, usually in support of an argument and not metacritically. David Carrier (2003) has done much important work on “artwriting” but he does not address writings by artists at length. A number of anthologies of artist writings have been published in recent years—Stiles and Selz’s *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings* (1996), Harrison and Wood’s *Art in Theory: 1900-2000* (2003), as well as the single-artist “Writing Art” series from MIT Press and the “Positions Series” from JRP-Ringier—but scholarship on the writings is lacking. Short essays on artist writing that I analyse in the pages that follow offer only a cursory overview (Alloway 1974) or are restricted to a handful of male artists working in the 1960s and early 70s (Owens 1979; Weiss 2004). This is so despite the fact that, while often in less well-circulated venues, female artists produced much writing in the 70s. Some of the most suggestive, although terse, treatments of the subject are in fact by artists: Mel Bochner’s 2005 *Artforum* essay on “Judd’s Writings” (2008) and Jeff Wall’s introduction to an anthology of Dan Graham’s writings (1999). Two French-language books have recently appeared. Ann Guilló’s *Écrits d’artistes au XXe siècle* (2010) raises interesting questions but, organized as it is to conform to the fifty questions series, is not meaningfully structured and provides more summary than analysis. Françoise Levaillant’s edited colloquium proceedings *Les écrits d’artistes depuis 1940* (2004) is comprised of discrete, monographic essays, and likewise Helen de Preester of Ghent University is planning a collection of essays on artists’ words and writings. It is tempting to claim that the paucity of extended scholarship on this topic attests to its originality, but the fact that it is “underexplored” merely indicates that the discursive frames in which I work now afford such a study.

The corpus of artist writings I analyse in the sections that follow contribute to critical
discourses on art, culture, identity, or class, seeming to offer a challenge to some aspects of these discourses and/or have generated ongoing debate for reasons that are useful to analyse. My principle of selection is neither comprehensiveness nor canonicity. The artists considered are predominantly American but also British and European, as they appear in the English-language art magazine context. I consider but do not restrict myself to writings in artist-run magazines; for this topic, see Gwen Allen’s recent book (2011). While the present study usefully accommodates artists working in a wide range of visual media and belonging to a variety of art movements, those working primarily in related fields such as dance and architecture are not addressed due to limitations of space. In delimiting my corpus, I have found Ann Temkin’s discussion of Barnett Newman and Donald Judd as polemicists to be useful. Temkin observes that for them “it was not merely a matter of words as a private platform,” but rather “writing was part of who you were as a very public person” (2009, 155). I use the term “artist-writer” to refer to such an individual. I am not particularly interested in writings offering retrospective assessments of movements or of other artists since these are often invited, usually after an artist is established, as opposed to forming a sustained, self-motivated, parallel practice. This sustained and parallel character is also lacking in writings by artists who do not consistently write and by art writers who do not consistently produce art or who are far better known for their art critical practice. I do not include instances of language in art (see Kotz 2007), such as Lawrence Weiner or John Baldessari’s conceptual works that include text printed on a wall or canvas, or even “artists’ books”—works of art realized in book form. Poetry or novels seem separate, if concurrent and influential, practices. Texts from works of installation or performance art operate under specific, not only textual, conditions, although all of these forms of writing play a role in constituting the discourse of their respective periods. I am also not primarily concerned with artist interviews as these would greatly expand the list of applicable artists: more significantly, the interview is a
multidisciplinary subgenre with its own history and conventions (see the “Thematic Investigation” in the fall 2005 edition of *Art Journal*: Burton and Pasquariello 2005; Allen 2005; Griffin 2005; Anastas 2005). Likewise, letters are ubiquitous, as are writings that convey the type of information one might typically encounter in an artist’s statement or during an artist’s talk: a chronological survey of his or her career, biographical details, influences, motivations, sources, processes, intentions, and any other inside information from “behind the scenes.”

While all of these types of writing have their own appeals, uses, and audiences, critical essays afford greater access to the changing rules that condition what counts as artist writing while also mutually conditioning those rules. The phrase “contribute to the critical discourse on . . .” suggests a transformative potential. I take this not in the early twentieth-century sense of avant-garde progress but rather in a more local sense, particularly Thierry de Duve’s understanding of critical function: “when not severed from a *maxim* [as opposed to a project] of emancipation, artistic activity does have a critical function,” and “when I sense that a critical function is active in the work of art I am beholding, it prompts me to activate in myself a similar critical function” (1996, 443, 448). I focus on what I consider to be salient examples that allow me to identify how particular definitions of artist writing came to the fore.

I employ David Carrier’s term “artwriting” only where appropriate, since not all artist writings are artwriting: they are not all writings about visual art, whether art historical, art critical, or fictional in type, as Carrier’s term is designed to encompass (2003). Instead of the genitive *artists’ writings*, I employ the compound noun *artist writing*—read not as a subject and verb but as a modifying noun adjunct and gerund, as a type of writing—when discussing the post-1960s practice of writing by artists. I use *artist writings* when referring to those texts themselves. Compound nouns indicate a single entity and type, as in *art history* or *art criticism*, without possession or agency—*art’s history* or *art’s criticism* would awkwardly endow art with
power in relation to its history or criticism. *Artist writing*, like *police brutality*, can highlight a profession without pointing to the agency of particular individuals, while the genitive *artists’ writings* misleadingly emphasizes individual agents over a type of practice particular to a profession. At moments since the 60s, writing by artists came to match the work of contemporaneous art writers, critics, and historians in style, content, and method, seeming to blur the lines between an artist’s and an academic’s activities, yet they never shed their designation as “artist” texts. They may not have had “value and practical application,” in Michel Foucault’s useful phrase (1970, xiv), as anything if they were not penned by author(ities) with (visual) art practices always already belonging to a market-, museum-, or media-driven art world. In short, *artist writing* means writing-as-an-artist. *Artist writing* acknowledges the status accorded to the writings by the dominant art world discourse—the recurrently separate position of the artist and the interests of marketers and art historians in “primary sources”: authority, expertise, revelation of intentions, and inside information—without specifying individual possession, leaving open to analysis the critical efficacy of the writing. *Artist writing* also usefully suggests “writing the artist,” or writing’s role in what it means to be an artist in various moments.

In charting changes in the status of artist writings and discovering how they came to have cultural cachet, my overarching aim is to assess the changing role of the artist. Yet the writings bear art historical interest in themselves; for example the ways in which the concerns conveyed in artist writings inspired changes in the practice of art history would be an important facet of any history of art history in the twentieth century. Additionally, by thinking about artist writings in their singularity and contingency, art historians—whose discipline happens almost exclusively in writing—may begin to see *all* artwriting as a space that is as complicated and susceptible to change as art objects. As Carrier has shown in *Writing about Visual Art*, it is “unfortunate” that artwriting “remains a relatively unexamined literary genre”: meta-study of artwriting in any form
is an important endeavour because artwriting “defines, informs, and structures our experience of art”; “apart from its intrinsic value, its intimate relationship with museums and galleries gives this literature a very important role in contemporary culture” (2003, 22, 108-9). My study questions longstanding art historical biases that elevate visual production and dismiss writing as merely supplemental or divorce writing from visual production altogether, specifically in terms of an artist’s total oeuvre and, more broadly, in terms of a failure to acknowledge the historical significance of writing about visual art. An art movement is located as much in the writing that “surrounds” it as in the body of objects that apparently “comprise” it.
Part 1: 1965-1968

One of the stark contrasts in post-World War II American art is the attitude toward writings by artists expressed by the Abstract-Expressionist generation and the 60s cohort that followed. Robert Motherwell (1915-91), a young first-generation AbEx painter, and Donald Judd (1928-94), a mature Minimalist, died within three years of one another and were about as far apart in age as were Judd and his younger peers who also wrote: Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, and Mel Bochner. Motherwell published nearly forty essays and articles on art, not including the customary artist’s statement, between 1942 and 1965 alone. Yet he resisted having his writings collected. The first collection appeared in 1992, a year after his death. “He often told [Stephanie Terenzio] that he would have been better off if he had not written a single word about art.” And he deemed the fact that he wrote as much as he did “the tragedy of his life” (Terenzio 1992, v-vi). Judd’s Complete Writings 1959-1975 were published in 1975 by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design at Dan Graham’s suggestion (Graham 1997, 32). Judd lamented: “I’m sorry now I stopped writing just when I should have continued. It left the field to Smithson and Morris”; “The artists my age, who are not only of the 60s, incidentally, but of right now, have not written and talked enough, myself included” (1989b, 66; 1987a, 76).

While Motherwell’s and Judd’s attitudes may not be representative of all artist-writers in their respective generations, their marked differences nevertheless underscore the changing role of writings by artists and of the artist. In the case of Motherwell, to be “better off” if he had not “written a single word about art” implies better off in his career as a painter. To have “not written a single word” would be to be closer to someone like Jackson Pollock: to have made statements about art making in interviews but not to have “written” “about art.” Judd’s lament is also vis-à-vis other artists. He regrets having “left the field to Smithson and Morris.” However, Motherwell’s writing about art—typically art before his time—unfavourably singled him out,
whereas Judd’s writing about art—reviewing current exhibitions for Arts Magazine and Art International and synthesizing his position on the year’s trends for Arts Yearbook—favourably allowed Judd to occupy a field.

Here I chronicle and contrast the reception of the Abstract Expressionist generation of artist-writers with that of the 1960s generation; it is beyond the scope of the present project to perform a close reading of Abstract Expressionist artists’ writings themselves. I explore conditions of artist writings’ production that are specific to the 60s, contrast sharply with the 40s and 50s, yet in part have a continued pertinence throughout the rest of the century and are therefore raised at the outset. These include an American model of professionalization, 60s antiauthoritarianism, and the new affordability of magazines printed in small runs.

I then analyse writings by Donald Judd, Dan Graham, and Robert Smithson in their singularity. I discern unique relationships between the artists’ writing and art and examine the artists’ writing philosophies. I argue that Judd conceived of writing as artwriting that stemmed from the same methods and responsibilities of the artist and as an essayistic means to argumentatively air his extra-art concerns; that writing for Graham was an art world right of entry; and that Smithson treated words as primary substances in a way that complicates meaning in his articles themselves as well as in his objects and earthworks, in the process introducing a modernist truth to materials that gave the writing cachet. I conclude by considering the reception of artist writing during this period when artists were first expected to be able to write about their work and that of their peers.
1 From AbEx Hostility to 60s Canonicity

1.1 “A Sense of History”

Sixties artists-writers admired certain AbEx predecessors. Judd revered and frequently visited Barnett Newman, and Ann Temkin suggests that Newman’s example motivated Judd to become so involved in writing (2009, 155; see Raskin 2010, 137n59, 90-91). In 1966 Newman stressed, “I don’t think we know enough about the younger artists. I’ve been trying to urge them to come forward and speak for themselves, so that the dialogue could include them” (1992, 279). But the most widely celebrated AbEx generation artist-writer, at least among 60s artists, was Ad Reinhardt. Barbara Rose marvelled at the New York art world veteran’s sudden popularity among the younger generation in her survey article on Minimalism, “ABC Art” (1965; see also Sandler 1966, 46). Bochner recalled that, for Smithson and him, “the precedent for the artist/writer had already been firmly established by two major practitioners”: Reinhardt and, more prominently, Judd (2008, 199). Reinhardt was a visiting professor at Hunter College while Robert Morris was a Master’s student there between 1961 and 1966. Reinhardt, Morris, and Smithson curated the 1966 Dwan Gallery exhibition Ten. Smithson, in addition to discussing and illustrating Reinhardt’s work in his articles, remained in close contact until Reinhardt’s death in August of 1967 (Reynolds 2003, 276n69). One of the quotations Reinhardt chose for his 1966 Art News review of George Kubler’s The Shape of Time, a favourite of both Morris and Smithson, was: “the most valuable critic of contemporary work is another artist engaged in the same game” (1991, 226). These associations and chance encounters are noteworthy; however, the negative reception of the AbEx generation of artists who wrote certainly would not have made writing an appealing option to 60s artists.

There is no shortage of reviews that derogatorily mention the Abstract Expressionist artist-writers’ intellectual or philosophical interests or backgrounds in discussions of their
paintings, and this is likely the crux of Judd’s and Motherwell’s divergent sentiments toward writing. Reinhardt was isolated, although as the self-proclaimed conscience of the art world, it is unlikely that he was troubled by the idea that writing might thwart, or at least stall, his art world success.

Motherwell’s intelligence and education in philosophy are often mentioned in reviews as foils to painting (see Anonymous 1944, 26; Bird 1951, 6; Fitzsimmons 1954, 20). He had an undergraduate philosophy degree from Stanford; did a year of graduate work in aesthetics at Harvard, during which he worked on the journals of Delacroix; and studied for a year at Columbia with Meyer Schapiro, with whom Reinhardt also studied. More visibly, Motherwell was the editor of the Documents of Modern Art series and of the single-issue journals possibilities, with Harold Rosenberg, and Modern Artists in America, with Reinhardt. Implying that Motherwell’s academic side was detrimental to his painting, critic Clement Greenberg admonished at the early date of 1944, “Only let him stop watching himself, let him stop thinking instead of painting himself through” (1986, 1:241). One 40s painter apparently protested, “We artists were getting along just fine until Motherwell came along with a sense of history” (Terenzio 1992, vi). Motherwell’s 1944 Partisan Review essay on early twentieth-century French painters’ thoughts on abstraction and a 1951 catalogue preface in which Motherwell coined the term “School of New York,” which begins with the assertion “[e]very intelligent painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head,” are probable sources for such a complaint (2007, 40-43, 154).

Newman had written letters and catalogue forewords for artist friends and published five essays in the magazine The Tiger’s Eye before his first solo exhibition at Betty Parsons in 1950. That he was considered first and foremost a theoretician is often cited as the cause of the suspicion and hostility he faced when he began exhibiting. Newman was labelled an intellectual,
philosopher, gadfly, homespun aesthetician, and genial theoretician (Reed 1950, 16; Preston 1951, 2:6; Krasne 1951, 16; Goossen 1958, 30; Hess 1950, 48; Hess 1951, 47). The first monographic article on the artist, published at the late date of 1958, is titled “The Philosophic Line of B. Newman.” In 1945, Newman did describe himself in a New York-based, Spanish-language journal—for which he wrote three essays—simply as a “writer and critic of New York art” (Leja 1993, 87). A letter from Mark Rothko dated the same year indicates that he and Newman contemplated getting Newman hired as the New York Times art critic and compares Rothko’s output of paintings to Newman’s of chapters (Leja 1993, 338n63). In 1947, when the New York Times critic Edward Alden Jewell devoted both a Thursday and Sunday article to an exhibition for which Newman wrote the catalogue introduction, and which happened to include his work as well, he quoted Newman at length, thus encouraging the perception of Newman as a writer. One can appreciate how he may have appeared to be a “Johnny-come-lately,” as Thomas Hess characterized the sentiments of Newman’s peers (1971, 31)—an observer strategizing from the sidelines, gathering information before entering the game. In retrospect, statements from a 1944 essay suggest that he gleaned a direction from the painters he discussed or projected onto them the achievements he wished to attain, in any case paving the way, albeit ineffectively as it turned out, for his future production. Newman wrote: “The art of the future will, it seems, be an art that is abstract yet full of feeling, capable of expressing the most abstruse philosophic thought. [. . .] These artists are doing what seems impossible, expressing feelings and thoughts with abstract forms and flat space. Here is the art of the future” (1992, 69, 70). Of course the fact that Newman’s sudden contribution to a field of gestural and action painting was “one stripe” may not have helped.

Yet upon analysis, Newman’s writing and painting chronology may be described as methodical as opposed to strategic. In a statement solicited by The Tiger’s Eye on his “own art
and times,” Newman submitted one sentence: “An artist paints so that he will have something to look at; at times he must write so that he will also have something to read” (1992, 160). While humorously implying that if the artist did not paint or write there would be nothing worth looking at or reading, it is important to note that Newman spent eight or nine months studying his breakthrough 1948 painting Onement I, and his total writing and painting output is a fraction of that of his peers. It is then perhaps more accurate to think of his practice as responses to careful looking and reading than as a strategic taking up of brush or pen.

The AbEx artist-writers each responded differently to their negative reception as intellectual painters that resulted from their writing. Newman, who, in a 1925 college newspaper exhibition review titled “Critic Turned Artist,” defended the renowned art critic Roger Fry’s painterly ability and chastised critics for their preconceived notions that this critic surely is a poor painter, must have known what to expect. However, when Reinhardt listed Newman, Motherwell, and others as conforming to an “artist type” he described in the Summer 1954 College Art Journal as “the artist-professor and traveling design salesman, the Art Digest philosopher-poet and Bauhaus exerciser, the avant-garde huckster-handicraftsman and educational shopkeeper, the holy-roller explainer-entertainer-in-residence” (1991, 202), Newman responded by suing Reinhardt for libel. Motherwell quit writing for a time and stated on a few occasions that he resented the anti-intellectualism expected of artists in the English-speaking world (1979, 241; 1965; 36; 2007, 27, 80). By contrast, for Reinhardt and other literary artists, the cliché of the inarticulate painter was an inside joke. In response to Reinhardt’s question of to whom he is sending copies of their correspondence, his friend Abe Ajay wrote: “I mailed life-size carbons to seven hard edge abstractionists and to the three or four action painters I know about who can read” (1971, 109). Reinhardt’s response was relentless satire.

Interestingly, it was acceptable for a woman artist to double as a critic. Elaine de
Kooning—painter, critic for *Art News* beginning in 1948, and wife of Willem—was admired for her intellect. In a 1963 review, critic John Canaday recalled, “she combined the functions of mascot, sybil and recording secretary of the movement, and at the same time managed to bat out a considerable oeuvre of her own with less effort, so far as I can deduce, than less ambitious ladies expend in knitting sweaters while sitting around and talking” (X13). Certainly and perhaps reasonably, the quality and contribution of her paintings are still deemed inferior to that of her peers’ work; she did not receive wide recognition as a painter until after the age of sixty. If gender and/or the quality of her painting prevented her from being seen as a “real painter” anyway, perhaps appreciating her as a writer was unproblematic. Celia Stahr’s research indicates that she was more likely to be quoted than to have her paintings discussed (1997, 203). The case of Elaine de Kooning is further evidence that this art milieu had trouble accepting an individual who took on both roles equally.

The Abstract Expressionist generation explicitly believed that to describe their work or define their practice in words would detrimentally limit it—or, implicitly, paintings speak for and produce self-sufficient experiences in themselves. While the popularity of discussion groups and lectures at “Studio 35” and “The Club” suggests that talking about art and artistic and creative processes was widely accepted, guiding viewers with the use of commentary in print was another matter. Mark Rothko sent the following note to a curator in 1954:

> There is the danger that in the course of this correspondence an instrument will be created which will tell the public how the pictures should be looked at and what to look for. While on the surface this may seem an obliging and helpful thing to do, the real result is paralysis of the mind and imagination (and for the artist a premature entombment). Hence my abhorrence of forewords and explanatory data. (Kuh 1954, 68)

Notably, Newman, Motherwell, and Reinhardt concurred. Art historian Ann Gibson has focussed on Abstract Expressionism’s apparent evasion of language (1988); however, in light of
Newman’s, Motherwell’s, and Reinhardt’s written output, it is more precisely verbal interpretation of paintings that was insistently avoided.

A letter to the *New York Times* from Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb that Newman helped write but did not sign—according to his wife Annalee because his work was not in the exhibition in question (see Barnes 1993, 3)—reads:

> easy program notes can help only the simpleminded. No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The point at issue, it seems to us, is not an “explanation” of the paintings but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance. (in Jewell 1943, X9)

In response to Greenberg’s reference to ideas from Newman’s recent catalogue essays, Newman explained in a 1947 letter to the critic: “The only reason for a literature is that this work cannot be described within the present framework of established notions of plasticity. Any formulation that I have attempted I have done to help meet this need; I have never tried to speak à la Breton as program maker” (1992, 162). In a 1944 draft for a friend’s catalogue, Newman observed: “The history of modern painting, to label it with a phrase, has been the struggle against the catalogue” (in Hess 1971, 15). This of course did not prevent him from writing them. As art historian Richard Shiff proposes, “No explanation did not mean no commentary. Newman believed that it was especially interesting to talk about painting for the sake of the intellectual challenge” (2002, 92). That Newman valued the informative, while not specifically ekphrastic, function of his written production is demonstrated by the fact that he attached two of his essays, “The Ideographic Picture” and “The First Man Was an Artist,” to a refusal to a request for permission to use his painting for “sales, promotion work, reproductions, trade marks, etc.” in relation to the collector’s manufacturing business. He explained that these essays should indicate how such permissions “would violate my deepest aesthetic convictions” (in Temkin, ed. 2002, 152).
Motherwell devoted careful attention to the relationship between writing or thinking and painting. He explained in 1954,

I have never had a thought about painting while painting, but only afterwards. In this sense one can only think *in* painting while holding a brush before a canvas, and this symbolization I trust much more than the thinking that I do *about* painting all day long. And I think most artists tend to trust the canvas much more than the words about it. [. . .] As Whitehead wrote, we suffer from a “deficiency of language. We can see the variations of meaning, although we cannot verbalize them in any decisive, handy manner.” (2007, 170)

Like Newman, Motherwell believed artists had a responsibility to write and speak. At a 1949 MoMA-sponsored conference on art education, Motherwell justified his participation this way:

“I accepted the invitation for tactical reasons, from a sense of intellectual responsibility. When the artist refuses to speak at these forums on art, they are generally taken over by professional ‘horners in’” (75). Motherwell acknowledged the functional purpose of making statements but was careful to reserve for painting a primary significance. In a letter printed in the catalogue for his 1965 MoMA retrospective, Motherwell wrote: “Barnett Newman for years has said that when he reads my writings, he learns what I have been reading, but when he wants to know what I am really concerned with at a given moment, he looks at my pictures. He’s right. To have the discipline to shut-up, and just paint the pictures!” (in O’Hara 1965, 70). Whether sincerely or to ameliorate his intellectual reputation, painting is here emphasized as the privileged term in the mutually exclusive set of writing and art making.

As for Reinhardt, in a 1966 interview he argued, “[A painting] says what it says and one doesn’t have to say anything about it. And I never say anything about my paintings. I never explain them or interpret them” (1991, 14). Reinhardt did acknowledge that his paintings, cartoons, and satires “can be viewed as aspects of a unified stance” (in Corris 2008, 12). But since, for him, art “is art” and emphatically separate from everything else, which is “everything else,” talk or writing about art has no bearing on art, as art (1991, 51). The behaviour of artists
and art world professionals belonged to “everything else” and was the prime target of his satires.

A nuance of artwriting that was for the most part impossible for Newman, Motherwell, and Reinhardt’s commentators to perceive in the 40s and 50s is that “perhaps through the medium of this grey, anonymous language, always over-meticulous and repetitive because too broad [one might] keep the relation of language to vision open, [. . .] treat their incompatibility as a starting-point for speech instead of as an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, [. . .] and preserve the infinity of the task,” as Foucault would phrase it in 1970 (9-10). Verbal interpretation that forecloses meaning is only one possible subject artwriting may address, and one that Newman, Motherwell, and Reinhardt insistently wished to avoid. While a fuller discussion of what they did write about falls outside of the scope of the present study, it is evident that Newman, Motherwell, and Reinhardt shared their peers’ concerns about the detriments of “verbalizing” paintings yet saw that this should not preclude them from writing about art—provided they “preserve the infinity of the task,” in the case of Newman and occasionally Motherwell—or from writing about the art world, art history, or art education, in the case of Reinhardt and Motherwell. Evidently commentators took issue less with what AbEx artist-writers wrote than with the mere fact that they wrote. The label of writer or, worse, intellectual would seem to be the crux of the issue.

*Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, a 1963 book by Richard Hofstadter, offers a contemporary analysis of the understanding of “intellect” in popular writing and the sources of its denunciation that is relevant to the reception of the AbEx artist-writers. Hofstadter reports that “the man of intellect” is regarded, as was Newman, with “resentment or suspicion” and “may be called unreliable, superfluous, immoral, or subversive” (24). The first in Hofstadter’s list of professions and vocations to which intellect is attributed are writer and critic, followed by professor, scientist, editor, journalist, lawyer, and clergyman: the “brief-case-carrying
professions” (26). Intellect “evaluates evaluations, and looks for the meanings of situations as a whole.” It “examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines” (25). Hofstadter demonstrates that “a set of fictional and wholly abstract antagonisms” is the basis for the downgrading of intellect: it is “somehow inconsistent with warm emotion”; it is mere cleverness and so against solidness of character; it is theoretical and so against practicality; it is distinguished and so against egalitarianism and democracy (45-46). The latter antagonism in particular, Hofstadter notes, is raised regarding education (51), which is noteworthy regarding Motherwell’s resented “sense of history.”

Hofstadter observes that intelligence, by contrast, is celebrated. Intelligence is understood as a practical and discipline- or task-specific “excellence of mind.” Thus artists who write could be seen to lack devotion and determination, as having opted for the less difficult route of part-time painter and mere mouthpiece. Intelligence “seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust,” and “will seize the immediate meaning in a situation and evaluate it” (25). A tough painting practice consisting of an automatic and unencumbered act of self-expression through an immediate, tactile medium on an engrossingly large format would seem to be conceived in these terms. Abstract-Expressionist urgency, seriousness, and commitment to the arena of paint on canvas is intelligent, not intellectual.

Intelligence also “can be praised as a quality in animals” (25), and one of the sources Hofstadter identifies for anti-intellectualism is primitivism and its “persistent preference for the ‘wisdom’ of intuition, which is deemed to be natural or God-given, over rationality, which is cultivated and artificial” (48). Art historian Michael Leja has recognized the primitive, along with the unconscious, as two of the most prominent interests of the New York School, pointing out that these interests had “rich and complex lives and roles” in the national culture and in fact served to secure the artists’ place in this culture (1993, 6-7, see chap. 2). Thus, a key concept
motivating the painters’ visual practices is one of the very sources of the prevalent anti-intellectualism in American culture generally.

Hofstadter also argues that it is business society, which “put a premium upon rough and ready habits of mind, quick decision, and the prompt seizure of opportunities,” that maintained the prominence of anti-intellectualism (1963, 49, 50). Interestingly regarding the acceptance of Elaine de Kooning as a writer, Hofstadter asserts that “[i]t was business, finally, that isolated and feminized culture by establishing the masculine legend that men are not concerned with the events of the intellectual and cultural world. Such matters were to be left to women” (50).

1.2 American Self-Presentation: A Critical Mass of Minimalists

In addition to anti-intellectualism, capitalist thought required a different kind of artist than an intellectual artist-writer. T. J. Clark has argued that Jackson Pollock, by contrast, signified facets of self-representation including “the wordless, the somatic, the wild, the self-risking, spontaneous, uncontrolled, ‘existential,’” and unconscious in a more stable way than had occurred previously and that clarification of these concepts is what was required for everyday life to be further colonized by capitalism (1990, 180). Compare that description of Pollock to Motherwell on artist-writers:

Poets, for example, have traditionally been involved in writing criticism. In the same way that, say, T. S. Eliot wrote criticism as well as poetry, there is no reason, if one regards one’s paintings as “poems,” that a university-educated painter cannot write criticism as well, and become involved with theoretical issues. I never met an outstanding artist not interested in ideas, as well as in sensuality. (et al. 1983, 26)

The figure of the artist-writer, while plainly in evidence, was incompatible with 40s and 50s anti-intellectual, capitalist America.

It is precisely with 60s audiences that the bohemian, spontaneous artist was championed and his paintings were sold. Further, with its “cultural inferiority complex” assuaged by
European acceptance of AbEx (see Robson 1995, 257-58, 262-63), America was primed for an art world boom in artists, audiences, collectors, prices, galleries, media attention, mid-career retrospectives, and must-see shows—or openings—complete with television crews and paparazzi (see Newman 2000, 7-8; Meyer 2001a, 13, 24; Wells 1986; Elkoff 1965). The avant-garde, having been embraced to the point of “dissolution” (Seitz 1963), “disrupt[i]on” (Alloway 1966, 36), disappearance (Rose and Sandler 1967, 44), and “demise” (Ackerman 1969), became an impossible position and a model that, as Katy Siegel has demonstrated, “did not really ‘take’” (2011, 31). With the realization that Abstract Expressionism achieved not understanding but “American success,” namely “money, publicity, and celebrity,” 60s artists instead “embraced and emulated commercial pursuits, middle-class life, and self-presentation,” and collected direct subsidies from the National Endowment of the Arts (94, 105).

Art world professionalization and celebrity were received with resentment by Brian O’Doherty (1963; [1968] 1995, 252) and by Reinhardt, who explained in 1966 interviews: “I haven’t done any cartoons or satires for a long time because it doesn’t seem possible. The art world is no longer satirizable. I suppose there isn’t much going on except business, and that’s not very funny. [. . .] De Kooning is living like Elizabeth Taylor. Everybody wants to know who he’s sleeping with, about the house he’s building and everything” (1991, 14, 27). Allan Kaprow offered a more sustained if ambivalent analysis when he asked in *Art News* in 1964, “Should the Artist Be a Man of the World?” (2003), while Dan Flavin praised the shift from “neurotic ‘loner’” to “public man” (1968, 32), and Smithson regularly listed the art magazines in which he had published and his position as “artist consultant” for the engineering and architectural firm Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton in biographical notes and on museum forms (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3833:238, 3832:982).

The new self-presentation entailed “facility with language” and “opportune moves”
While one might assume that such competencies would have struck a public still infatuated with the bohemian, expressive artist as disagreeable, Kaprow explained that this public was also “still afraid of being foolish in its new-found culture, [. . .] hav[ing] its doubts allayed only by a reassuring word from the horse’s mouth” (2003, 55). Thus the short-lived publication *Art Voices* (1965-67) offered a recurring segment titled “The Artists Say,” *Art International* started an “Artists on their Art” department in 1968, while *Art in America* ran “The Artist Speaks” from 1968 through 1970. These venues, combined with *Artforum’s* circulation doubling to nearly 11,000 in 1967 compared to 1963 and the readily available catalogue and anthology reprints of, for example, Judd’s “Specific Objects” and Robert Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture,” made interviews and writing key to making oneself known in the expanded art world. The maxim “one reproduction in an art magazine is worth two one-man shows” (Walker 1976b, 51), or what Chuck Close called “the *Artforum* good housekeeping seal of approval” after a 1969, illustrated review of his first group show prompted media attention from the major art magazines (Newman 2000, 452-53), would have been an appealing enough reason to publish. While Judd refrained, Smithson and Morris frequently illustrated their essays—of which Morris wrote five for *Artforum* between 1966 and 1969—with their own work. This got Smithson’s *First Mirror Displacement* from his essay “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan” on the front cover of the September 1969 *Artforum*. And Smithson instructed, “Drop the Rembrandt print but print the photos of my art-work” to the secretary at *Metro* magazine when he sent a revised version of his 1968 essay “The Establishment” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3834:1146).

Writing was also a useful way to ensure that one stood out among artists producing apparently similar works in this newly lucrative art world. Judd’s and Morris’s identities as writers were also used by catalogue essayists to parse the differences amongst Minimalists (Rose...
Commentators soon singled out individual artists as spokesmen for entire movements. Whereas multiple critics might function as respondents or even advocates, when it came to artists, commentators seem to have assumed, first, that they were spokesmen and, second, that one artist-spokesman dominated. Elizabeth C. Baker identified Judd as the “frequent spokesman” for “what is generally known as the Primary Structures movement” (1968, 44). Martin Friedman reported that “[s]o-called Minimalistic sculpture, essentially a reduction of form to three-dimensional, geometricized shapes, is largely an outgrowth of propositions advanced by Morris” (1966, 23). Jeanne Siegel identified Smithson as “[t]he spokesman for the so-called ‘minimal sculptors’ (Judd, Morris, Flavin, LeWitt)” (1966-67, 61). The latter prompted a “Who’s in Charge” segment in *Arts Magazine’s* February 1967 letters to the editor. Flavin wrote-in that “Smithson is not my Mortimer Snerd,” a ventriloquist’s dummy. “Ask him.” Judd directly declared, “Smithson isn’t my spokesman.” And Smithson himself stated that artists, and especially the artists listed, “do not need a ‘spokesman’” (1967, 8).

Critics also found in artist writings conveniently packaged ideas and quotes for their articles, giving the artists further, secondhand exposure (see Mellow 1966; Friedman 1967). It seems Smithson used his own articles as a kind of media kit. He wrote to an interested gallerist, Konrad Fischer, “I have an article coming out in the Sept. ARTFORUM on Earth Projects, that will give you more of an idea as to what I’m up to,” and to an interested author, Germano Celant, “see *Artforum: Earth Projects* Sept. 1968, *Passaic* Dec. 1967, *Air Terminal Site* June 1967” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:1096, 1105 on 9 Aug. 1968, 1189, 1192 after 16 Jan. 1969). And he told an interviewer: “My first interest in earthworks came about by going out into large areas and developing large-scale ground systems, which I called ‘Aerial Art.’ I have a paper on it” (Smithson, Boettger, and Sharp 1998, 77). Consistent contributions to art magazines
also endowed certain artists with authority. When Jo Baer wrote a letter to *Artforum* critiquing Judd’s and Morris’s grounds for dismissing painting, Green Gallery owner Richard Bellamy exclaimed to Baer, “‘Who the hell do you think you are, attacking Robert Morris?’” (Baer 1967, 5-6; 2003, 111).

I explore the contemporary reception of specific artists’ writings throughout this study, but a reaction I want to highlight here is critics noting the phenomenon of 60s artists writing with neither praise nor denigration. The sheer number of so-called Minimalists who wrote—Judd, Morris, Smithson, Andre, LeWitt, Flavin, Bochner—made it a noteworthy detail to report: see, for example, Gregory Battcock’s preface to *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* ([1968] 1995) and Annette Michelson’s exhibition review of *Ten* (1967, 31). While it was still possible in 1967 for critic Max Kozloff to emphasize at a symposium on art criticism that “critics are intellectuals after all, and not artists [. . .] [:] the critic is neither a scientist, with his necessary independence from emotion, nor an artist (as I’ve said), free from the responsibilities of verbal articulation,” there came a point at which it would be irresponsible of critics not to identify writing by artists as a trend (in Seitz 1967, n.p.). The move in the reception of writing by artists is not so much from AbEx hostility to 60s jollity as from group identity to prompt canonicity: artists who did not provide a quotable position paper did not make it into the group and lacked publicity. As Minimalism historian James Meyer puts it, “the other artists, who wrote far less, could not compete” (2001a, 166).

The New York art world had grown from a community of artists into an industry to be navigated with the aid of art magazines, an expansion largely precipitated by the American-type success achieved by the Abstract Expressionists themselves. Any insights artists provided in published writings served as shortcuts for movement-making critics, curators, and dealers. In a gallery scene that was too large to visit entirely in person, writing by artists mattered. It set one
apart.

1.3 “The State of Affairs in Art Criticism”: Criticizing, Bypassing, and Subbing for Critics

Artists critiquing critics in writing may not share the momentousness of mass protest movements, more on which in Part 2, but it does exhibit the antiauthoritarian sentiments of the 60s. An explicit motivation to take over the masters’ tools and often critique those pioneers in the process is evident. Artists’ criticisms of critics ranged from sustained analyses to grouchy letters to the editor. The latter, evident in Carl Andre’s 1967 letter regarding Barbara Rose as well as Jo Baer’s 1969 letter on Robert Pincus-Witten, were not new to the 60s: Eugène Delacroix in 1829 and Barnett Newman in the 1950s and into the 60s voiced similar criticisms of commentators on their work. This cantankerous character is apparent in almost all of Flavin’s writings, although with an added 60s antiauthoritarianism. He wrote, “I know of no occupation in American life so meaningless and unproductive as that of art critic,” and, when an editor named Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and Sidney Tillim the “finest minds of contemporary art,” he asserted, “Significantly, none of these preposterously praised, presumptuous, self-appointed, self-indulgent, self-inflicting appraisers and moderators on art is known as an artist first” (1966, 28; 1969, 174). But the more sustained analyses are new. Less vindictively, yet sincerely, Michael Snow and Sol LeWitt identified a desire to correct critics’ misunderstandings of their work as their primary motivation for writing in the 60s (1994, 17; 1974). As I explore further in the sections that follow, it was seen to matter—as it had not in the immediate past and eventually would not again—that critics got it wrong. And Bochner asserted much later, “Why let the critics speak for you when you are perfectly capable of speaking for yourself?” (2008, 196). Capability trumps perceived authority.
While critics Max Kozloff (1963) and Barbara Rose (1968) themselves eventually challenged Greenberg, Rose recalled why the Greenberg-Fried model held sway. In the early 1960s, she was “nauseated by what was passing for art writing[,] it was obviously total garbage [. . .]. It had no solid grounding, it was not intellectual, it was not respectable.” While the examples Rose cites—“mental doodling by poets and Harold Rosenberg’s sociology”—were not equally or commonly disparaged, the general complaint was shared (Newman 2000, 59). Bochner remembers playing a game with his art school peers in the late 50s that entailed someone reading out loud from *Art News* while others guessed who was the artist being reviewed: “I can still remember one, ‘X dumps live chunks of landscape steaming hot into the gallery.’ (Give up? Helen Frankenthaler.)” (2008, 196). When Rose read Greenberg’s 1961 essay “How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name,” it hit her “like the revealed truth”: “Clem’s writing made so much sense mainly because there was aesthetics anchoring it and it was in concrete English” (Newman 2000, 59). While Greenberg’s lack of receptivity for Pop and Happenings meant that he had lost much of his art world power by this time, the young graduate student critics Rose, Fried, and Rosalind Krauss resurrected him. “Their espousal of Greenberg as Guru provided an implicit corroboration of his methodology by gilt-edged academic credentials,” London-based American art historian Barbara Reise cuttlingly explained in 1968 (255). This fact did not escape Judd’s notice and made it into his April 1969 *Studio International* article aptly titled “Complaints, Part I”: “I didn’t think about Greenberg much in the early sixties and he didn’t write much. I suppose Fried and Philip Leider, the editor of *Artforum*, kept him going. When *Artforum* moved to New York it revived the roster of New York hacks. [. . .] Greenbergers such as Krauss review all the shows; [. . .] and articles come steadily out of the Fogg” (1975,
Leading up to his “Complaints,” Judd told Lucy Lippard that he would write “just one” letter to the editor because he was “fed up with Artforum and Greenberg and Fried” and that a recent article by Greenberg about sculptor Ann Truitt in Vogue is “so bad you can’t really let it go” (1968, 25). What was so bad? In four sentences, Greenberg denigrates the layout of Judd’s three-dimensional work, deems his writings “doctrine,” implies his work is derivative, and suggests he is inept as a critic (1986, 4:289-90). One may wonder why Judd would even dignify this with a response. But at the time Greenberg was “an obsession,” a “foil” for mental sparring, even to Smithson, according to Nancy Holt (in Reynolds 2003, 64, 253n120).

The Greenberg-Fried model, which, as John Coplans apparently put it, “rather amazing[ly]” results in “the entire history of Western art funnel[ling] through four artists showing in one or two New York galleries,” was indeed unlikely to benefit very many artists (Newman 2000, 196). More specifically vis-à-vis artist-writers, Greenberg wanted nothing to do with artists’ statements: “I don’t think I quote living painters. And I don’t pay any attention to what they say in connection with their art” (quoted in Gibson 1987, 64). “I like them better without the soundtrack” (in de Duve 1996, 247). But, perhaps worse, Fried relied heavily on the words of Morris and Judd as well as Tony Smith in interview but blatantly failed to distinguish between them in his June 1967 Artforum essay “Art and Objecthood.” Not wanting to “litter the text with footnotes,” Fried listed his sources and explained: “in laying out what seems to me the position Judd and Morris hold in common I have ignored various differences between them, and have used certain remarks in contexts for which they may not have been intended. Moreover, I have not always indicated which of them actually said or wrote a particular phrase” (Fried [1968]

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1 “Fogg” here refers to the Fogg Museum at Harvard University where Krauss and Fried were studying for their doctorates and where in 1965 Fried curated and wrote the catalogue for Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella, which was reprinted in Artforum.
Fried’s article generated a strong response from artists, followed by critics and academics (see Carroll 2007, 44-55). Barbara Novak, art historian and wife of critic/artist Brian O’Doherty/Patrick Ireland, recalled: “I remember distinctly how our friends reacted. Everybody called. Dan Graham, and Mel Bochner, everybody. They disagreed. So did I” (Newman 2000, 201). Fried claimed that “what motivated the essay were my feelings about their art [and] I never would have bothered writing ‘Art and Objecthood’ against a bunch of texts” (Newman 2000, 198-99). However, I have argued elsewhere that Morris’s February and October 1966 Artforum essays “Notes on Sculpture, Part 1” and “Part 2,” which the artist has stated began as a parody for formalist criticism (Meyer 2001a, 155), indeed mock Greenbergian medium specificity and thus goaded Fried to react, to codify his position and list artists whose works he deemed degenerate (Carroll 2008). Likewise, in effect if not means, it mattered that Judd’s “specific-objects” objections to the primacy of painting appeared in Arts Magazine and Arts Yearbook as opposed to through Happenings, Fluxus, and other art practices developing at the time that were radical enough not to warrant the attention of Greenberg, Fried, and their followers.

Not surprisingly, Fried’s lumping together of artists made it into Judd’s “Complaints.” Judd was not the first respondent, however. In addition to Allan Kaprow, Smithson wrote a letter reacting to Fried in the subsequent, September 1967 issue of Artforum (Smithson 1996, 66-67). Smithson’s letter does not suggest the perspective of a disgruntled and misrepresented artist who writes. Rather, Jennifer Roberts has perceptively proposed that Smithson’s “sarcasm and condescension” were meant to hide his own prior experience with Fried’s “quasi-religious aims at revelation” (2004, 34). Smithson continued his critique of Fried in the following year’s September issue. “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” offers clever digs at Fried and his preferred artists (1996, see esp. 102-104, 107-109).

Along with Smithson, other artists noted the need for, and often suggested, a more

For Bochner and others, Judd’s review writing primarily as a staff critic at *Arts Magazine* from 1959-65 had set an example. Dan Graham recalls: “Judd’s writing, as much as his art, was a huge influence on me. I always liked his articles. I would go to the library because I didn’t have any money for photocopying and copy all the articles [by hand]. And when I went to Nova Scotia College of Art I convinced Kasper König to publish his writings” (1997, 32). In late 1965, when Bochner was “out of work, out of prospects, and out of money,” Judd came to mind: “I thought the one thing I might be able to do was write the short reviews that appeared in the back pages of art magazines. Knowing that the artist Donald Judd reviewed for *Arts Magazine*, I decided that was the first place to try” (2008, xvii).

Bochner wrote short exhibition reviews for *Arts Magazine* but in 1966 teamed up with Smithson to produce a pastiche of text—including a parody of Judd’s writing—and found materials from the planetarium at Manhattan’s Museum of Natural History, titled “The Domain of the Great Bear” (*Art Voices*, Fall). Bochner recalls that the idea for this literary hoax or reproduction-as-work-of-art was conceived when the artists were complaining of dealers who could not be bothered to visit studios and instead asked the artists to “just send some slides” (Bochner 2008, 199-200). Graham also conceived of bypassing the gallery after his job as a gallerist taught him the significance of garnering magazine reviews, as I explore below.

In addition to criticizing and bypassing critics, artists subbed for critics at editors’
requests. That the technological and economic infrastructures of magazine publishing underwent changes in the late 60s is not without significance. When advertisers dropped general-interest magazines in favour of television, causing *Saturday Evening Post, Life,* and *Look* to go under in the late 60s and early 70s, spates of special-interest magazines had already been filling stands and mailboxes for a decade. Improvements to printing technology had made small print-runs affordable, and specialized content guaranteed just the right audience for specialized products (Abrahamson and Polsgrove 2009). The implicit thought behind this technological development requires analysis: perhaps a post-50s belief in defining and differentiating oneself through one’s interests and pastimes would be part of it. But the new technology may have influenced a salesman for a San Francisco printing firm to come to Philip Leider, then a gallery assistant with no art background, looking for business. The niche ad exposure may have influenced the expansion of ad pages from six in the debut 1962 issue to over 40 by 1970 in the resulting publication, *Artforum*—which, unlike the more comprehensive but hodge-podge *Art News,* offered a setting specifically for the discussion of West Coast and eventually New York contemporary art. Whether to contribute to the advancement of the field or fill the space between ads, *Artforum* and *Art News,* in addition to *Art International* and *Arts Magazine,* needed writing every month. Certainly eager young art critics helped fill the void. According to Amy Newman’s 1993-99 interviews with the “*Artforum* group,” from which I will be quoting, critics reported being delighted to be offered the opportunity to write, for example, the “New York Letter” or “London Letter” for *Art International* while only in their twenties (2000, Max Kozloff, 54; Barbara Rose, 60; Michael Fried, 73). But artist writing did the job too.

It is not surprising then that most published artist writings were solicited by editors. In the late 50s, editors sent word or placed ads indicating that staff reviewers were needed. Judd raised his hand when his *American Painting from 1940-1950* Professor, Meyer Schapiro, asked if
anyone might be interested in writing reviews; Thomas Hess at *Art News* was seeking reviewers. Painter Sidney Tillim became an art critic by twice responding to a want ad in *Arts Magazine*: one editor had fired him in the interim for wearing sneakers to a gallery. He also wrote a book review for the *College Art Journal* when he found out you got to keep the book; he wanted Michel Seuphor’s book on Mondrian (Newman 2000, 68). Graham recalls of *Arts Magazine* in the late 60s: “It was a time when everybody was writing for *Arts Magazine*, and I think that had a lot to do with [associate editor] Susan Brockman” ([*et al.*] 2009, 100). Bochner and Smithson’s “The Domain of the Great Bear” was not solicited but the artists were granted permission to produce it for *Art Voices* on the condition that they do the layout themselves (Bochner 2008, 200). At *Harper’s Bazaar*, literary editor and former Betty Parsons Gallery employee Dale McConathy sought to elevate high fashion through bricolage-style juxtaposition with obscure reading. To this end, he sought writing from concrete poets, Robert Smithson—whose wife, artist Nancy Holt, worked briefly as McConathy’s assistant—Sol LeWitt, and Dan Graham (Meyer 2001b; Crow 2004a, 49n72). At this time Leider was soliciting writings by artists for *Artforum* on an article-by-article basis. His repeated attempts to entice Judd to publish failed—Judd detested Tillim’s and Fried’s criticism in *Artforum* (Leider 2000, 103). Sol LeWitt, referred by Smithson, obliged with “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (June 1967). Leider had asked Smithson for “the names of a few of your colleagues who you feel might have something to contribute” to the renowned June 1967 sculpture issue (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:947). Leider recalled of Robert Morris’s writing that “he did it himself, on his own initiative. I never knew when it was coming, it just came over the transom” (Newman 2000, 236). However, influential *Artforum* contributor Barbara Rose encouraged and had some input into Morris’s first “Notes on Sculpture” of February 1966 (see Meyer 2001a, 155 and Carroll 2008, 7-8).

Leider’s solicitation of artist writings for *Artforum* is a significant condition of their
production. Leider was neither experiencing a staff shortage, as at *Art News*; offering a try-out to those who inquired, as at *Arts Magazine*; nor seeking avant-garde prose to add cultural cachet to fashion ads, as at *Harper’s Bazaar*. When Leider asked Smithson to recommend artist contributors, he specified that he was “hoping to have a lot of articles (not ‘statements’ or that sort of thing) from artists” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:947). According to Amy Newman’s interviews, Leider envisioned *Artforum* above all as a forum. While Leider revered Fried, the editor maintained: “I was always conscious at the time that it was a huge part of my job to keep the magazine from being simply the vehicle for Michael and Clem” (2000, 223).

Initially, Leider was not any more interested in the new art than were Fried and Greenberg. But he felt duty-bound to cover it, and this was where artist writings came in: “Sol LeWitt had ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.’ I detested his work but I knew that there was a part of the New York art world that admired this guy—for example, the whole group around Eva Hesse, who loved LeWitt. The magazine was called ‘forum’ for a very good reason. I wasn’t Michael, I was much broader than Michael. And I was an editor, I didn’t have an ax to grind” (157). Leider did eventually support the new work himself, by all accounts thanks to Smithson’s influence. His staff critics at the time did not, however. “I encouraged the artists to write because there were no critics,” Leider explained. “Some of them wrote naturally like Bob Morris. But Michael Heizer! I couldn’t get anybody to write about Heizer’s work, and if you look at the first thing published on Heizer, he wrote the captions” (313). Leider was, according to the opening of LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” “in favor of avoiding ‘the notion that the artist is a kind of ape that has to be explained by the civilized critic’” (1967, 79). In retrospect, Leider noted that “the artists who wrote for me were artists directly opposed to the criticism I was publishing [. . .]. So you could say with some truth that the state of affairs in criticism is the most immediate cause of the rash of artist’s writings I published” (in Allen 2011, 29 on 19 Mar. 2001).
There are at least a few underlying assumptions at play here. Significance is accorded to artwriting. More specifically, editors and readers recognize that contemporary art can and should be conscientiously addressed in writing in the present. Leider told the salesman from the printing firm, “‘Look, if you really want to make money as a printer, publish a West Coast art magazine. That’s what we really need. […]’ Every week or so it would come up some place: ‘Why don’t we have a magazine on the West Coast?’” (Newman 2000, 46). Another, conflicting assumption is that “the shock of the new” renders critics incapable of appreciating new work. A solution to this conflict for Leider is to enlist artists as default art reporters. Competent coverage, without any quantifiable expertise in writing, is his main criterion for artwriting. There would seem to be no question or hesitation as to whether artists were capable of producing such writing in some form; artists who produce radically new, or at least non-critic-friendly, work are expected to be able to write about their work and that of their peers. But it is implied that this is a make-do, not ideal situation.

In the end, even with artist writings, the critics’ lack of interest overcame Leider. He contends that it was when he could not convince anyone at *Artforum* to review the important 1968 exhibition *9 in a Warehouse* that he loved and reviewed for *The New York Times*—“the fact that I had to assign a show like that to Max [Kozloff] because I couldn’t get anybody to write about it”—that he started to contemplate leaving the magazine (246). The implication is artist writings are not sufficient to sustain a community. They could fill the gaps in his forum for a newly expanded and information-hungry art world for a time, but the enterprise fails if non-artists do not eventually join the debate. The function of the artist-writer is to stand-in for, entice into action, and be replaced by the critic.
1.4 Temp Work and the Linguistic Turn

The aforementioned example of Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture” points to another condition of production that would be of increasing pertinence to artist writing during the latter half of the twentieth century: education. After reporting Morris’s recollection that his “Notes” “had begun as a parody of formalist criticism,” James Meyer continues, “Only at [Barbara] Rose’s urging did [Morris] transform the text into a bona fide formal analysis” (2001a, 155). This is an odd suggestion coming from Rose, given that in her own criticism at this time she pursued non-formalist directions and drifted apart from Michael Fried. Asked about the advice, she responded: “Yes this is true. I urged Bob to be serious not ironic. His MA thesis was on Brancusi so obviously he could write cogently about sculpture. There was a certain amount of mockery about academic criticism among artists but as an art historian I knew that what Bob had to say about sculpture would be worth reading not as a joke but as a serious text” (email to author on 28 June 2007). Here, the expectation and recognition that artists “could write cogently” is based on academic credentials. In attempting to account for the influx in intellectual artists who write, commentators frequently cite artists’ higher education (see McShine 1966), in some cases facilitated economically by service in the Korean War. Judd had a Bachelor of Science in philosophy and started an MA in Art History at Columbia; Jo Baer did graduate work in Gestalt psychology; Robert Morris received an MA in Art History from Hunter College; Claes Oldenburg went to Yale; Frank Stella, Princeton. “[A]rt had gone to college,” observed art critic and historian Robert Pincus-Witten: “This is a very smart moment. These guys are smart. It’s like you had to learn composition, figure drawing, perspective, color mixing, and smartness. It was like a constituent feature of how to be an artist” (Newman 2000, 234). But it was also a

2 Judd, LeWitt, Morris, and Flavin served in the Korean War.
constituent feature of being a critic. Kozloff, Krauss, Lippard, Rose, Fried, and Pincus-Witten were all pursuing graduate degrees in the 1960s. As Irving Sandler noted: “An academic generation of art critics, trained in your most elite schools, particularly Harvard, is a new thing” (Newman 2000, 167). It seemed like the whole art world went to college. Moreover, autodidacticism was also common among the artists who wrote. Avid readers like Smithson and Graham found intellectual stimulation in music magazines, the *Evergreen Review*, French “new novels,” and French literary theory before such material was studied in institutions. Alexander Alberro describes the literature section of Smithson’s library as looking like that of a Comparative Literature Professor in the late 1960s (2004, 247). While Judd’s education was sited in the institution, the motivation—intellectual stimulation—was the same as that of the autodidacts. He took evening classes in analytical philosophy only after he decided to become an artist. As Thomas Kellein explains, Judd studied philosophy because the knowledge he gained “was a tool for decision-making and the recognition of quality in the arts and in culture” (2009, 143). The emergence of artists with letters behind their names is less significant than the fact that the conception of the artist at this moment now, or once again, accommodated individuals with philosophical, literary, and theoretical interests.

Mercenary motivations are another important condition of production, elaborated most famously by Judd. In his 1974 introduction to his *Complete Writings*, Judd asserts, “I wrote criticism as a mercenary and would never have written it otherwise” (vii). Commentators are sceptical of this statement (see Smith 1976, 36). By 1989, Judd was only slightly more forthcoming: “For me writing reviews was a part-time job, and I’d always liked writing” (1989b, 66). Responding in 2005 to Judd’s original statement, Bochner declared: “I don’t believe him. Sure, he had to make a living, but there were a lot easier and more lucrative part-time jobs” (2008, 196). Judd would have disagreed. He told Lippard in 1968: “Any little job would have
been fine but there weren’t any little jobs.” “How come you were never a guard in the museums?” Lippard asks—a fair question given that this was how a number of artists, including Robert Ryman, Flavin, and Bochner, earned a living. “Oh, I was a guard in the Army now and then and I hated it. [...] We had some guard duty. And it’s torture” (14-15). Noting the artist-guards and Frank Stella’s work as a housepainter, Ann Temkin points out that “[w]riting was a skill at his disposal” and that “[t]here certainly is no reason to doubt” Judd’s statement that he wrote as a mercenary (2009, 160). Moreover, Judd’s response to Lippard’s question “[h]ow has the teaching been working out?” is equally mercenary: “I only teach in case of future poverty” (1968, 36). It is worth noting that only a decade earlier he described his great financial difficulties in letters to his girlfriend and let Professor Schapiro know he was interested in writing reviews for *Art News* because the private school where he taught shop and world history part time “was getting rid of part-time people so I thought maybe I had better take what I could just in case” (Kellein 2002, 18n17; Judd and Lippard 1968, 9). Less structured than working as a guard, housepainter, or teacher, writing reviews was as convenient for Judd as for the *Artforum* critics writing graduate theses: “Since there were no set hours and since I could work at home it was a good part-time job. It took three or four days to see the shows and perhaps a week or so off and on to write the reviews, which I always put off until the deadline” (1975, vii). But he could always use more work. Even during his fourth year as a reviewer at *Arts Magazine* and his first solo exhibition of his three-dimensional work in late 1963 and early 1964, Judd inquired about working as a critic for *The Washington Post* (Kellein 2002, 34). In interviews from the late 60s and early 70s, Judd frequently mentions his need for more money to make more art (see Glueck 1968, D23 and Judd 1971, 45).

While Judd’s biographical chronologies state that increasing sales of his art allowed him to stop writing for *Arts Magazine* (Kopie 2004, 251), and while editor James Mellow had
resigned, owing to new ownership, the same month as Judd in March 1965, it is important to note that Judd already had another writing gig when he left. He had been hired on at *Art International* that January to write the “New York Letter.” It was not until after his departure from *Arts Magazine* that he was fired for his “shambling basic-Hemingway” style in a termination letter from *Art International* editor James Fitzsimmons, dated April 21, 1965 and made famous by Judd’s inclusion of a facsimile in his *Complete Writings* (170). Nevertheless, by July he had been picked up by dealer Leo Castelli, and two-and-a-half years later he could afford a $68,000 five-storey, cast-iron building at 101 Spring Street (Kopie 2004, 253).

Writing was convenient temp work for artists and did pay off, although *Arts Magazine* apparently had no set rates. When first hired at the magazine in 1959, Judd was paid $6 for 300-word reviews, $4 for 150, and $3 for one sentence, eventually making about $120 or $180 a month. Rent was $100 (Judd 1975, vii; Judd 1987b, 35). Michael Fried received $75 a month as the London correspondent in 1961, which covered his rent while a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford (Newman 2000, 73). Sidney Tillim received $240 a month for writing the major “Month in Review” in addition to shorter reviews for the review section (Newman 2000, 68-69). Later, in 1965—and at the same magazine—Bochner, by his own account, received a measly $2.50 per review. Although, with a list of thirty shows, this paid his rent, too, which was only $28 a month (2008, xvii). Beginning in late 1966, *Arts Magazine* paid Graham between $35 and $100 for articles. Rock criticism in newspapers drew $25, plus complimentary tickets. Graham had many articles rejected from magazines but noted, “there’s normally a thing called a ‘kill fee.’ If your article is killed, they give you some money” (Graham *et al.* 2009, 282). Graham made most of his money offering his exhibition-mounting services, including plastering, lighting, and hanging, at about $3 an hour. His rent was $200 a month (Graham 1992, 22, 24; Graham 1998, 31). In 1965 *Art International* paid a flat rate of $10 per review included in each “Letter,” which

Writing represented more than rent cheques, of course. Just because remuneration is one reason for doing something does not mean it is the only reason. Writing also figured prominently in 60s culture generally, and visual artists were not the only ones who joined the written discussion. Artists working in new media, film, dance, and music wrote in order to document, define, and share new developments. Sounding a lot like “Specific Objects” and written the year Judd’s essay was published, Dick Higgins’s essay on “Intermedia” in the inaugural, 1966 issue of *Something Else Newsletter* opens with the announcement that “[m]ost of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media” (2009, 196). LeWitt and Graham both read structuralist music criticism in *Die Reihe*, 1955-62, also available in an English edition, 1957-68 (Graham 1989, 10). “A periodical dedicated to developments in contemporary music,” *Die Reihe* was founded and edited by two composers and featured the writings of young composers. The humanities and social sciences underwent a linguistic turn following a new awareness of structural linguistics in France in the 50s and an interest in Wittgenstein’s investigations on the use value of language. It is “beyond the bounds of sense even to entertain the idea that a form of art could maintain itself outside a society of language-users,” wrote philosopher of art Richard Wollheim in a 1967 book review that Smithson quoted in a draft essay (19; Smithson and Holt
With the surge in print culture, art was more than ever accessed and mediated through reproductions and text in magazines and books. In 1965, Henry Geldzahler avowed: “Now we no longer have trade routes; we have *Art News*, Harry Abrams, Phaidon, André Malraux, and jet travel—instant international communication. Between them nothing is unavailable” (1973, 98).

In contrast to the Bourdieusian position that “distinction” is attainable only through upbringing and education, the field of art in 60s America was discursive—in the ordinary sense, as in proceeding by reasoning—and accessed through discourse—again, as in written debate. It is not surprising then that, apart from Leider, the entire “*Artforum Group*” began as painters but instead found criticism “an arena in which to act” (Newman 2000, 47, 50, 53, 56, 61, 71, 75). Similarly, the growth of the discipline of art history, especially the art historical study of twentieth-century art, increased the need for documents to consult. Note the 60s appearance of Robert L. Herbert’s *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays*, one selection criterion of which was “classroom use and experience” (1964, vii) and Herschel B. Chipp, Joshua C. Taylor, and Peter Selz’s *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, which, the editors explained, “came into being in response to a need, voiced by art historians and students, for access to the fundamental theoretical documents of twentieth-century art” (1968, v). The expanded art world machine worked more efficiently when artists provided contemporary documents themselves. Being well versed in art’s history and criticism became a prerequisite for art production, for making works that can be “visible” to the art community. Art becomes a supplement to art discourse, and not the other way around. Geldzahler identified “the artist as art historian, as scholar of the history of art” based on the advancements in communication and travel that “multipli[ed] incalculably the amount of visual material that can, and in many cases must, be brought to bear in the intelligent appreciation of contemporary art” (1973, 98). In 1962, Robert
Morris wrote to Henry Flynt “I think today art is a form of art history” (1968, n.p.).

Self-presentation based on an American model of “making it” followed AbEx sales and celebrity, and an expanded art world thrived on publicity. The critical mass of artist-writers necessary for trend-reporting was achieved. Antiauthoritarianism was prevalent. Smaller print-runs, and thus special-interest magazines, were newly economical. Writing criticism was convenient and satisfactorily remunerative temp work. And art was more than ever accessed as printed reproductions accompanied by written text. These are some of the late 60s conditions that, in contrast to the 40s and 50s, influenced and made manifest the valuing of artist writing. To determine the particular definition of artist writing operative at a particular moment, we must turn to the writings themselves.

2  Donald Judd’s Gallery Conclusions

“A form can be used only in so many ways.” This is the guiding principle of Donald Judd’s “Specific Objects,” which was written for the 1965 edition of Arts Yearbook (in Judd 1975, 181-89). It is also the guiding principle of evaluation in his art reviews and of the work he would go on to produce: his wall progressions and stacks and his serial floor works.

Judd’s “Specific Objects” argument is that most sculpture is compositionally still like early twentieth-century painting, consisting of distinguishable parts that are positioned in relation to one another. It is not “seen at once” but “part by part.” In 1965, both painting and sculpture are “circumscribed,” “producing fairly definite qualities.” The rectangular plane of painting “is given a life span.” From the implied perspective of gallery observation as opposed to a strictly personal artistic agenda, Judd asserts that “[m]uch of the motivation in the new work is to get clear of these forms.” Judd could indeed speak from visual experience about “the new work.” He had written over 600 exhibition reviews on over 500 artists’ works when “Specific Objects”
appeared. Forty of the 48 artists mentioned in “Specific Objects” had been the subjects of his reviews. He could also speak to “get[ting] clear of these forms.” His reviews primarily offer evaluative formal analysis, identify precedents, and denounce derivation. In his own painting too he could not conceive of carrying on with part-by-part relations on a rectangular ground without being derivative. His painting practice was expanded by the first reliefs and floor objects in 1962, the first wall-mounted “progressions” in 1964, and the first vertical “stack” pieces between September and November 1965.

Judd’s viewpoint as an “artist” and his viewpoint as a “critic” were one and the same. In a mode of art making that depended on identifying, through careful formal analysis, “dilut[ing] inherited formats” versus significant developments, and then evaluating whether these developments had been successfully “taken into account” in the new work, the artist’s methods and responsibilities were the same as the critic’s. Judd noted, “I did see a lot of work which helps,” when Lucy Lippard pressed him to talk about how writing may have helped “crystallize” or “sharpen your ideas of where you were headed.” He added, “I don’t learn any more by writing it then I did by thinking of it without writing. It’s just harder work” (1968, 24-25). Putting down and turning in review copy was challenging, but the gallery thinking behind it, Judd suggests, is something he would have done anyway as an artist.

To be sure, there are no grounds for bifurcating artist Judd and critic Judd, apart from when we consider their reception: that is, how he was seen to occupy the role of artist and/or of

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3 This concluding sentence from a 1961 review of Sidney Wolfson’s paintings is typical: “Although the colour has a certain peculiarity, which is partly vitiated by its tone, as in a purple and soft greenish-gray, the degree to which the planes are warped—the most radical factor—is the element of interest” (Judd 1975, 32). Dorothy Eisner, Gérard Schneider, Robert Goodnough, Ilya Bolotowsky, Milton Avery, and Sondra Beal were criticized for producing derivative work (Judd 1975, 33, 34, 53, 100, 106, 123).
critic circa 1965. But the fact that both his artistic directions and his art critical judgments stem from the same conclusions drawn in the gallery points to an underlying assumption in both modes of Judd’s practice: art comes from art, from taking into account developments of the recent past.

A recent development that Judd and, according to Judd, other artists he reviewed deemed significant enough to “take into account,” a development that was perhaps “undeniable and unavoidable” the way that painting and sculpture once were, was “singleness.” Judd found this quality of compositional wholeness or elimination of composition in the work of Arp, Brancusi, Duchamp, Johns, and Rauschenberg, and the paintings of Pollock, Rothko, Still, Newman, Reinhardt, and Noland. This mid-century painting achieved singleness by employing fewer compositional elements and stressing the rectangular plane. However, this “sense of singleness also has a duration, [. . .] it is only beginning and has a better future outside of painting.” This is because, with the wall plane one or two inches behind the canvas, the painting plane is not single but only “nearly single,” although “[t]he relationship of the two planes is specific.” In contrast to three-dimensions in actual space, painting “suggests an object or figure in its space, in which these are clearer instances of a similar world.”

Pressed at a critic’s colloquium to explain “[w]hat is wrong with painting,” Judd replied, “It is somewhat contemplative, slightly passive” (Rose et al. 1966, 6). Judd believed that singleness would be more single in three dimensions and more aggressive, a word he uses three times in “Specific Objects.”

An important feature of the new, three-dimensional work that employs singleness is new materials, not because they are newly available or because their newness is revered—they are

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4 Michael Fried’s “literalness” is relevant here, although, as I discussed above, Judd and other artist-writers took issue with Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” on different grounds (Fried [1968] 1995).
“simply materials”—but because they are non-traditional.

Oil paint and canvas aren’t as strong as commercial paints and as the colors and surfaces of materials, especially if the materials are used in three dimensions. Oil and canvas are familiar and, like the rectangular plane, have a certain quality and have limits. The quality is especially identified with art.

In a draft for “Specific Objects,” Judd wrote that industrial paints “can be stronger and more specific than oil, which is [. . .] generalizing. Canvas is a quiet material. Many materials are more powerful, more strange” (quoted in Shiff 2009, 83). The underlying assumption that art comes from art is once again at play here: the new materials and new technologies are not “something mysterious or something the work sanctions” (Judd 1971, 45); they are meant to solve a weakness caused by conventionality in recent art.

The singleness of the best mid-century painting, achieved in three-dimensions, using non-traditional materials, results in the new specific objects. By “specific,” Judd aims to distinguish an emphatically distinctive, particularized, “obdurate” quality: Pollock’s paint; the shapes, unity, projection, order, and colour of Stella’s shaped paintings; actual space; Formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, Plexiglas, red and common brass, more so “if they are used directly.” And in reviews leading up to “Specific Objects,” Lee Bontecou’s relief objects, Johns’s paintings, Flavin’s lights, and the “occupancy of space” of Robert Morris’s Untitled (Corner Piece) (1964) are seen by Judd as specific, while Ellsworth Kelly’s work “has some of the new specificity of colour” (Judd 1975, 65, 90, 124, 165, 202).

Having achieved singleness in non-traditional materials and in three dimensions, the new work is “interesting,” which for Judd is the only viable criterion for judging art: “A work needs only to be interesting.” Based on an interview with Judd—in which the artist elaborated, “Does the work hold your interest?” and “Do you want to live with it and think about it?”—James Meyer concludes that this statement from “Specific Objects” is evaluative in the sense that “a
work that was interesting was worth looking at” (2001, 140-41). Hal Foster argues that “interest is apparently to be judged according to the self-consciousness of a given art work or form regarding its own conventionality” (1986, 172). Meyer’s reading is I think too broad, while Foster’s allows too much. In a footnoted idea attributed to Howard Singerman, Foster adds, “Perhaps ‘interest’ does not displace [Greenbergian] ‘quality’ so much as provide the first term of its normative scheme” (181n20). This is closer to Judd’s more specific evaluative meaning:

It isn’t necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting. The main things are alone and are more intense, clear and powerful. They are not diluted by an inherited format, variations of a form, mild contrasts and connecting parts and areas.

Or in a 1963 review of the work of Jean Arp:

Because of the sensation of sensuous wholeness, Arp’s work is never unspecific, although it is unusually general, even empty in a way. The emptiness suggests that if you are interested in a thing it is interesting, and if you are not it is not. That isn’t as obvious as it sounds. You have to like Arp’s sculptures as single things or they are not going to appear interesting. There aren’t any entertaining bits and pieces. Because of the sensation of wholeness, the sensation of the surface is highly developed in Arp’s work. The single surface dominates the distentions and indentations. (Judd 1975, 92)

A work is “interesting” if the whole form is interesting without relying on “entertaining bits and pieces.” It is not a matter of unmitigated self-consciousness regarding conventionality as Foster asserts but of achieving the new singleness or wholeness without using traditional materials—without the “somewhat contemplative, slightly passive” combination of familiar oil and quiet canvas.

In an even more expansive version of “interest,” Foster claims that it is “an avant-gardist term, often measured in terms of epistemological sophistication. Far from normative, it licenses intensive critical inquiry and transgressive aesthetic play” (1986, 172). On certain levels, this licensing is apparent. Greenbergian medium specificity is replaced with specificity as a mode—
singleness or wholeness—that traverses media. Judd put it this way in a 1963 review: “Painting has to be as powerful as any kind of art; it can’t claim a special identity, an existence for its own sake as a medium. If it does it will end up like lithography and etching” (Judd 1975, 93). And in a 1964 exhibition review of work involving mobile and audible components, he wrote: “I don’t see why movement shouldn’t have the scale and the importance that the elements of the best painting and sculpture now have” (115). “Specific Objects” accommodates a range of practices, including Stella’s paintings, Pop art, and Minimalist sculpture—although Judd would never designate work this way—with a total of 48 artists listed. In this sense the quality of specificity is itself general: “Because the nature of three dimensions isn’t set, given beforehand, something credible can be made, almost anything.” Richard Shiff observes that, “[a]s a category apart, it was no proper category at all; the members of this class were each too specific to adhere to a category” (2009, 88). Judd is also consistently averse to movement making:

The new three-dimensional work doesn’t constitute a movement, school or style. The common aspects are too general and too little common to define a movement. The differences are greater than the similarities. The similarities are selected from the work; they aren’t a movement’s first principles or delimiting rules.

Robert Smithson wrote the following on Judd’s “licensing” in an undated, handwritten draft, presumably for a 1965 exhibition catalogue entry apparently requested by Judd (Crow 2004a, 49):  

The confinement that has been imposed by the specialisms of “painting, sculpture drawing etc.” has been projected onto art by an artless value system more concerned with marbles than esthetics. At any rate, esthetics will replace morals as the value of the future. Donald Judd has disclosed this future. (Smithson and

5 This was a more considered list than the number suggests given that a draft included five more artists (Smith 2009, 68).

6 A very different final draft was published in the catalogue 7 Sculptors (Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1965) (in Smithson 1996, 4-6).
The compliment was short-lived. Five years later, Smithson would state, “My work has always been an attempt to get away from the specific object. My objects are constantly moving into another area. There is no way of isolating them—they are fugitive” (1996, 240). While not teleological, medium-specific, or antagonistic, Judd’s underlying assumption that the direction art takes will have to be found in the gallery is one that other artist-writers, specifically Graham and Smithson, would discourage.

Earlier I wrote that the artist’s and critic’s viewpoint, method, and responsibility were the same according to Judd. Writing-up his gallery conclusions was just “harder work” than thinking them. But the process and value of the final product, of art versus writing, differed for Judd.

The artist has to go a step further. The artist has to “take into account” and integrate new developments found in the gallery into his or her art practice without sacrificing his or her previous achievements:

An artist cannot develop a style if he must always jump to newer things, assuming he started with something fairly contemporary. (1975, 84)

The only possibility for Goodnough or anyone is to make his own rules. Goodnough probably believes that his stylistic licentiousness is freedom. Actually it is subservience. The inventions and quality particular to Goodnough have never acquired a context and force of their own. (53)

Brooks, De Kooning, Guston, and Motherwell are adding poor paintings to their earlier good ones, and the loss of the good ones they aren’t painting is a major loss for American art. (149)

There should be applause. [Stuart] Davis, at sixty-seven, is still a hot shot. [. . .] The “amazing continuity” of Davis’ work does not seem to have been kept with blinders [. . .]. Neither has Davis been startled into compromises with newer developments. [. . .]. Instead of compromising, he kept all that he had learned and invented and, taking the new power into account, benefited. His painting, certainly not by coincidence, gained in scale, clarity and power after 1945 [. . .]. It takes a lot not to be smashed by new developments and a lot to face power and learn from it. (55)
While artwriting performed an important function in service to art, according to Judd, it was not beholden to this degree of genuine innovation.

Judd’s descriptions of the process of writing art criticism, by contrast, highlight the incompatibility of word and image: what Foucault described as “the medium of this grey, anonymous language, always over-meticulous and repetitive because too broad” (1970, 10). After asserting “[o]f course, finally, I only believe my own work,” Judd explained in 1965 that “[i]t is necessary to make general statements, but it is impossible and not even desirable to believe most generalizations. No one has the knowledge to form a comprehensive group of reliable generalizations” (1975, 181). Generalizations are the necessary evil of artwriting. Judd also described art criticism on more than one occasion as necessarily a construction. In a 1967 article on Pollock in which he offered his most extended observations on artwriting, Judd drew the following distinction:

there’s a big difference between thinking about someone’s work and thinking about it in a way that others can understand. It would take a big effort for me or anyone to think about Pollock’s work in a way that would be intelligible. A thorough discussion of Pollock’s work or anyone’s should be something of a construction. It’s necessary to build ways of talking about the work and of course to define all of the important words. (1975, 193-95)

In a 1983 lecture he reiterated that

in order to discuss what I think or what another artist thinks it is necessary to isolate and construct verbally communicative ideas. In fact, the more you can construct a philosophy the better. But this is a great effort to make for my work, and even more to make for someone else’s. I’ve never done this. A little article on John Chamberlain’s work long ago is the nearest I’ve come to this effort. Such a construction, along with a judgement as to quality, would be art criticism. (1987a, 27)

And finally in a 1990 interview he said of his 1964 Barnett Newman article,

I did not want to get into a lot of speculation, philosophizing about what he meant. It’s a real construction to talk about what an artist really means. I have hardly ever done that. It’s a real speculation that you have to build. You have to build a philosophical framework to say this means this, this has this attitude, that attitude
is in the work. (1990, 55)

It was important for Judd to point out that to communicate to others what images or objects mean or what their producers thought in the incompatible medium of words is necessarily to build ways of talking, to define, to isolate, to construct. In the same 1990 interview he even suggested that the incompatibility of word and image is perhaps more troubling and challenging for the producer of the art: separating form and content in discussion destroys what should be together and it’s destructive in the work of art. The artist is trying to make a totality. It’s a bad idea for the artist to demolish that totality. That’s the main reason, I think, why artists don’t want to talk about their work. They put it all together and it’s sort of perverse to sit at a table and take it apart again. It’s a legitimate activity, or it should be, when an art critic does it. To discuss it, they have to demolish it, in thinking about it you reduce it. It’s perhaps necessary to do that. (55)

In his 1975 Complete Writings he was careful to point out instances where he was not performing this difficult work. At the end of the essay “New York City—A World Art Center” for Envoy: The Cosmopolitan Magazine of Hotel Corporation of America, Judd specifies: “This article is a commissioned report and not art criticism” (65). After “Young Artists at the Fair and at Lincoln Center” for Art in America, he stresses, “The comments on these 9 artists are commissioned reporting and not art criticism” (131). And in the 1967 Pollock article, he offers the disclaimer, “I’m not going to write here, in only a small article, what I think should be written about Pollock. Anyway I can’t write it. That would take a book and complete attention” (193). Contra Dan Flavin, Judd valued the role of critics and stated on more than one occasion that they should be better paid (1975, vii, 207; 1987b, 35).

In Judd’s understanding of artwriting, art is the privileged term. Writing is subservient to art and is significant only insofar as it elucidates and promotes the development of art. Judd continues his Pollock article by pointing out that an essential component of good artwriting is evaluation including a comparison of artists because, “even though much is incommensurable[,]
comparisons lead to ideas of how art develops” (195). Understanding how art develops is clearly crucial for an artist and critic operating under the assumption that art comes from art. “A form can be used only in so many ways” is not only the guiding principle of evaluation in Judd’s art and artwriting; it is also the guiding principle of his conception of the practice of artwriting. Similar to Barnett Newman’s letter to Greenberg explaining that new literature is necessary because “this work cannot be described within the present framework of established notions of plasticity,” Judd elaborated in 1968:

Somewhat new work is usually described with the words that have been used to describe old work. These words have to be discarded as too particular to the earlier work or they have to be given new definitions. Occasionally new terms have to be invented. I discarded “order” and “structure.” (1975, 196)

Judd once told an interviewer when asked if he considered himself a sculptor, “No, it means carving to me . . . I never had a word; I don’t know” (in Shiff 2000, 19n16, quoted in Katharina Winnekes, “Interview mit Donald Judd,” Kunst and Kirche [April 1993]: 136). A form, or term, can be used only in so many ways not because artwriting must develop for artwriting’s sake but because to fail to update the terms would be a disservice to the art; it would obfuscate the new art’s developments and contributions. Judd believed in artwriting as art stewardship. Judd-gallerist Paula Cooper espoused the view that “[b]ehind his mania as a collector, his need to become a patriarch of values, was this idea of responsible stewardship” (in Judd et al. 1994, 75). Judd’s former assistant Roberta Smith professed that “mainly Judd writes as an artist considering the work of his fellow artists, with an artist’s sense of urgency and of community about the development” (1975, 10). It is in this sense of community service that Judd reflected, “The artists my age, who are not only of the 60s, incidentally, but of right now, have not written and talked enough, myself included” (1987a, 76).

Thus when Judd complained about the state of art criticism—or when he opened his
Pollock article with “[n]ot much has been written on Pollock’s work and most of that is mediocre or bad. And not much more has been written on anyone’s work and usually not with any more thought. Art criticism is very inferior to the work it discusses” (193)—he was complaining about the insufficient mental effort critics extended to the art and thus the lack of community service in benefit of art. Art criticism is always already subservient to art, for Judd, so it is a failure to uphold these art-serving roles that makes art criticism, qua art criticism, inferior to art, qua art. Judd had also noted the same failure on the part of critics to extend critical attention to new art practices that Philip Leider perceived. Judd resented Artforum’s apparent policy of only offering space for artists’ occasional takes on the non-Fried-backed work because no critics took it seriously. Leider saw no other option when it came to the new work: “the only thing I could think of doing was to say to [Judd and Flavin], ‘Listen, the magazine is open to you, write in it’” (Newman 2000, 257). Judd indicated that although Artforum would take an article by Flavin it would never have someone write an article on Flavin: “Flavin plays Reinhardt, entertaining but not worth an article on his work” (“Complaints” 1975, 198). This was a fair complaint coming from someone who covered all manner of new early 60s practices as a reviewer for Arts Magazine: Judd may have had his own “specific” spin, but he did treat the work seriously, as Leider well knew and respected (see Leider 2000, 102-103). For Judd, it came down to demanding that critics, whether they also happened to be practicing artists or not, be committed to rigorous criticism of contemporary art. It is not a matter of an artist-writer role versus a critic role for Judd but rather that someone other than the producer engage seriously with the work. “[A] propos of interviews,” he told Ludy Lippard, “I do all the talking and nobody else sits down and thinks about the work, you know, and I’m sort of beginning to resent explaining it myself. [. . .] [W]hy should I pass out all these explanations?” (1968, 1). As Judd saw it, editors and critics treat artists’ statements as conclusive: not exactly pre-empting further critical discourse
but letting them off the hook. Whereas, instead, artwriting meant or should mean that individuals are performing the difficult work of thinking carefully about the art and producing frameworks through which to discuss the art’s meaning, a producer’s thinking, or art’s development and around which a community may be built, thereby tacitly assisting art’s development. It is specifically to artwriting, and to this understanding of artwriting, that Judd refers when he lamented, “I’m sorry now I stopped writing just when I should have continued. It left the field to Smithson and Morris” (1989b, 66). Since these latter artist-writers neither strictly adhered to Judd’s assumption that art comes from art nor identified singleness as the recent development or power to face, as Stuart Davis did, and from which to productively learn throughout their life’s work, they were bound to describe art’s development in ways that were disagreeable to Judd.

Referring to argumentative writing more generally as opposed to artwriting specifically, Judd explained what he deemed the proper subjects and modes of art and writing in a 1987 interview. In contrast to Hans Haacke’s mode of critiquing institutions through his work, Judd specified:

The way I differ from his [approach] is that I don’t want it in my work. I think it undermines the work to deal with it directly as something within the work in a very literal fashion, as Hans Haacke does. I think the points are fine, and to do good work you have to be aware of what the society’s like. The fundamental thing is to resist.

Asked how he resists, Judd continued:

I write. You object, you try to control the shows and what happens to the work. Object and fight back, I have fights galore. I am in favour of doing things directly. The art has to be done as a whole and literal things of almost any kind undermine the fundamental strength, the meaning of it. To me, Haacke’s work is literature and not very good art. As art it’s not interesting. I’m sympathetic with the points that are being made. I object very much when my work is said to not be political because my feelings about the social system are in there somewhere. The idea is to have it all in there together—you can’t pull it out. (1987b, 36)

Art was not the place for showcasing authoritative resistance: for that, “I write,” Judd replied.
Besides artwriting—“Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles”—writing is for resistance and critique in the mode of argumentative essays—“Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints”—as the long subtitle of Judd’s 1975 Complete Writings spells out. Judd could take advantage of his art world status by using publications as a public platform to present his concerns. From 1968 to the time of his death, Judd expressed anti-war—including Vietnam, the threat of nuclear war, and the Gulf War—sentiments and a belief in citizen rather than interest-group action in published symposia, lectures, and statements and in exhibition catalogues (see Raskin 2010, chap. 4 “Citizen Judd”). Regardless of his opinion of Haacke’s work, Judd dutifully and sincerely wrote a letter of complaint to Guggenheim director Thomas Messer protesting the cancellation of Haacke’s exhibition and reprinted the letter in his “Complaints: Part II” of 1973 (1975, 208). He explained that up until the late 60s his political position had been one of isolation, “in reaction to the events of the fifties: the continued state of war, the destruction of the UN by the Americans and the Russians, the rigid useless political parties, the general exploitation and both the Army and McCarthy” (1970, 36). Curiously yet characteristically, given Judd’s prioritization of art, the fact that his artistic practice was gaining clarity, ease, and interest joins the civil rights movement; the Vietnam war; and “the realization that politics, the organization of society, was something itself, that it had its own nature and could only be changed in its own way” in Judd’s list of reasons why he became more politically active in the late 60s (37). In a 1989 essay, Judd excused the lack of newness of his writing on art, architecture, and the treatment of the land in contrast to his “very new” art, “new, but not as new” architecture and “fairly new” furniture by explaining that “nobody listens. And neither to new advice” (1989a, 207). “A form can be used only in so many ways” did not apply to authoritative resistance through argumentative essays. Such statements could be used repeatedly until society proved responsive.
Letters and complaints “can be communication, but the work of art itself cannot be” (Judd 1990, 53). Communication—of “discrete ideas,” he clarifies elsewhere (1987a, 26)—“is a totally alien aspect of visual art, I think” (1990, 53):

Fundamentally at this point art is not made to fortify the society, to fortify individuals, to be religious, to be political, to be all the different things that it’s been over the centuries. [. . .] Of course it does reflect being in the society, [. . .] and yet—it’s not part of it [. . .] like true religious art would have been part of religion in the Middle Ages. (1990, 53)

For 200 years or so art has been freeing itself from being obliged to say things about the world which are properly in the area of science. Some recent artists, Robert Smithson for one, have revived this dying anthropomorphism by incorporating scientific ideas and terms into their work. This is an anthropomorphic sentimentalism. (1987a, 32)

Social Realist works such as Ben Shahn’s printlike drawing, with text, of Sacco and Vanzetti [. . .] are cute parodies of the situation they represent; nothing could be less social-minded. All good art has a certain amount of social content; this has none. (1975, 44)

Communicating a subject such as discrete social or political ideas in an authoritative mode is ineffective according to Judd; while on topic perhaps, the means are antithetical to the ends, as art historian Allan Antliff demonstrates in an essay that situates Judd’s work within an “anarchist genealogy” (2009, 182). On the contrary, Judd explained,

I wanted work that didn’t involve incredible assumptions about everything. I couldn’t begin to think about the order of the universe or the nature of American society. I didn’t want work that was general or universal in the usual sense. I didn’t want it to claim too much. [. . .] A shape, a volume, a color, a surface is something itself. It shouldn’t be concealed as part of a fairly different whole. The shapes and materials shouldn’t be altered by their context. One or four boxes in a row, any single thing or such a series, is local order, just an arrangement, barely order at all. The series is mine, someone’s, and clearly not some larger order. It has nothing to do with either order or disorder in general. Both are matters of fact. The series of four or six doesn’t change the galvanized iron or steel or whatever the boxes are made of. (1975, 196)

The proper mode for art according to Judd is strength- and interest-generating directness and wholeness, which does not prevent it from being political. The end, as Antliff describes, is to
“inscribe” agency aesthetically, “to foster a consciousness that will empower our ethical agency in the world” (2009, 182, 192n51).

It was not that art is autonomous, for Judd, but rather that art is for promoting agency and criticality using a stripped down, singular—both whole and unique in its obdurate non-art quality—local order to be experienced phenomenologically, or, as Judd would prefer, empirically: “the pragmatic, empirical attitude of paying attention to what is here and now” (1990, 56). This aesthetic agency-inscribing, consciousness-fostering anarchist mode elucidates Judd’s late 60s statements:

I’ve always thought that my work had political implications, had attitudes that would permit, limit or prohibit some kinds of political behavior and some institutions. (1970, 36)

Most people know nothing about the war in Vietnam except that it’s sponsored by the government. They think the government should do little thinking and planning at home but abroad should be omniscient and powerful. It’s difficult to moderate a police chief in a little town in Mississippi but easy to destroy a government in Guatemala. My work has qualities which make it impossible for it to be in agreement with all of this. It couldn’t exist, wouldn’t have been invented, in agreement or acceptance of this. (1975, 196)

The work’s broader perception- and consciousness-stimulating mode has been identified particularly by recent commentators on Judd’s art (see Serra in Judd et al. 1994, 114; Hogan 2008, 156; Antliff 2009, 174; Raskin 2010, 6, 34). But writing plays no role in this aesthetic agency-inscribing mode. While Antliff convincingly likens Judd’s aesthetic anarchist mode to John Cage and Jackson Mac Low’s poetic anarchist modes, thus providing a useful framework for it, it is unclear whether Judd believed one could inscribe agency poetically.

Yet commentators have indeed noted a poetic agency-inscribed quality in Judd’s artwriting. Richard Ford asserts that “Judd has a predilection for pithy, categorical, often paradoxical or hyperbolic statements that beg to be examined for their validity, their subtleties of meaning, their ultimate implications” (2009, 47). Roberta Smith proposes that Judd “used
language as a kind of specific object” and intended the reader to experience words “in a very local way.” His use of pronouns and avoidance of repetition requires the reader “to be acrobatic” and “constantly thinking about what he’s saying” (2009, 69). Judd’s writing gave Philip Leider the impression that Judd wrote “with a determination to force the reader to read everything twice,” citing as examples the phrases “‘considered less,’” “‘compared backwards,’” and “‘new things are more.’” “It’s a system unique to Judd,” Leider observes, “and it guarantees a careful reading.” Leider goes on to note that in his experience Judd’s writing “is almost incomprehensible” to foreigners who read “‘ordinary’ English” without difficulty (2000, 103n2). Finally, Ann Temkin observes that Judd’s sculptures, like the writings, “do not build to a climax or wind down to a denouement” (2009, 162). Judd does not point to key phrases or supply handy summaries or guiding transitions.

As productively challenging as Judd’s artwriting may be, it is so in service to the art. It may encourage one to think carefully about art and its development but not so much about oneself vis-à-vis objects and the world the way the sculpture might, and it certainly does not quite “foster a consciousness that will empower our ethical agency in the world” (Antliff 2009, 192n51). Given Judd’s way with words, though, perhaps the implicit thought of his writing is that it could potentially inscribe agency poetically the way his art objects might aesthetically, or even somehow in combination with one another. However, this potential was curtailed by his late Modernist, inherited assumption that art comes from art, from knowing what has been done and then joining the conversation through art or criticism. Other artists’ writing and art would intersect quite differently as a result of dismissing this assumption.

3 Dan Graham’s Minimal Suburbia

Subtitled “Early 20th-Century Possessable House to the Quasi-Discrete Cell of ‘66,” Dan
Graham’s “Homes for America” (*Arts Magazine* 1966-67) is a less than 1000-word essay. It consists of a collection of information concerning the origins, method, taxonomy, layout, standardized permutations, and serial logic of suburban housing. Only the final paragraph offers an evaluation of these properties: such housing developments are “peculiarly gratuitous” architecturally, not individualized, and designed to be obsolescent.

Graham had been invited to publish his slides of suburban homes in *Arts Magazine* but suggested that “it would be more interesting to do an article about the city plan of the suburbs,” using the images to illustrate the article (*et al.* 2009, 280). The project started as a series of slides of suburban house exteriors shot in New Jersey, where Graham was evading his bankrupt gallery’s creditors. He first showed the slides at Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt’s salon: Smithson marked “Dan 6:30 slides” on his calendar for 28 October 1966 (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:521). Next, the series was included in the exhibition *Projected Art* at the Contemporary Study Wing, Finch College Museum of Art, New York, from 8 December 1966 to 8 January 1967. Through Smithson, Graham met Bochner whose girlfriend, *Arts Magazine* assistant editor Susan Brockman, invited him to publish the photographs in the magazine and accepted Graham’s proposal for an accompanying article (Graham 2001, 71).

The meeting with Brockman apparently took place at *Projected Art*. The exhibition ran concurrently with the Dec. 1966-Jan. 1967 *Arts Magazine* issue in which the resulting article, “Homes for America,” appeared. This might explain why Graham “had to write the thing very quickly” based on one or two days of research on tract housing, including contacting a Florida developer who provided a brochure (Graham *et al.* 2009, 280; Graham 1998, 32; 2004b, 109; 2009, 25). The short notice may also explain the space restrictions that resulted in significant cuts to Graham’s layout (*et al.* 2009, 280). Robert Smithson had received accommodating correspondence regarding “Quasi-Infinites and the Waning of Space,” published in the
magazine’s previous issue. Yet with “Homes for America,” the editors chose the title and used Walker Evans’ *Wooden Houses*, Boston, 1930, in place of Graham’s photographs, according to Graham to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the magazine (2009, 25; in Dercon *et al.* 1992, 6). All that remained were the brochure illustration and Graham’s text.

Graham has frequently noted that the transparent quality of slides appealed to him because of its similarity to that of Judd’s Plexiglas works (1996, 76; *et al.* 2009, 100, 280; in Alberro 1994, 25n5). In 1991 he recalled noticing that people such as Sol LeWitt, Flavin, [. . .] were interested in [the] films of Antonioni, Fellini, Godard, which themselves alluded to post-World War II architecture as kind of bureaucratic fascist architecture. I saw one content of Sol’s work as an allusion to *clichés* of bureaucratic fascist vernacular architecture. I saw that Donald Judd might be alluding to suburban architecture. But they didn’t want to consciously represent that there was a subject matter or source for their abstract forms. Possibly by taking photographs of these phenomena it came to be more conscious to me. (1996, 185)

Suggesting a less critical and more complementary relationship to Minimalism, he pointed out in 1990 that the project “was a parallel to [Judd’s and LeWitt’s] concerns” and in 2009 that “what I was doing wasn’t anti-Minimal art. I was trying to make Donald Judds with photographs” (1996, 170; 2009, 29).

Yet these and many more retrospective reflections are not well supported by the 1966 text. It is only the last few sentences of “Homes for America” that hint at a reference to Minimalism:

Designed to fill in “dead” land areas, the houses needn’t adapt to or attempt to withstand Nature. There is no organic unity connecting the land site and the home. Both are without roots—separate parts in a larger, pre-determined, synthetic order.

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7 “Dear Bob: [e]nclosed are the first galleys [. . .]. [G]ive me a call first thing Monday morning to let me know if you have any major revisions or comments [. . .]. [Y]ou can drop by to work out the layout with the production man either on [T]uesday afternoon or [W]ednesday” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:913-14).
On the surface, that is to say without a more nuanced argument, the localness as opposed to largeness of the “pre-determined, synthetic order” of a Sol LeWitt lattice or a Judd floor series, wall progression, or wall stack would seem to preclude them from sharing anything more than a formal affinity with suburban planning. And this formal affinity may well constitute the depth of Graham’s intended point about Minimalism. Even if the article had been published as Graham intended, his layout lacks distinction from Arts Magazine’s standard three-column, continuous versus fresh page, photo-inset, newspaper-style layout. The subject and mode of the text offered little to distinguish it as a “fake think piece”—one of Graham’s many stated intentions (2009, 25)—as opposed to an ordinary but uncontentious think piece.

The appeal for Graham of publishing an article as opposed to his photographs alone as originally invited may have been an article’s potential as an artwriting right of entry. Graham has stated on a number of occasions that during this period he had wanted to be a writer, and the essay did indeed lead to further publishing opportunities at the magazine (1992, 22; 2004a, 211; 2001, 69; 2009, 27; et al. 2009, 171; 2011). Following “Homes for America,” in 1967-68 Graham published a few short, single-artist reviews for Arts Magazine and one for Artforum, as well as some rock criticism. However, many of his articles were rejected. Nine of the ten from the late 1960s, eventually published as Articles in 1978 by the Municipal Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in an edition of 750, had been rejected or drastically cut by editors at some phase. In 1969, Graham published five of his rejected articles himself in a 125-edition booklet titled End Moments (1992, 22).

Like Judd, Graham considered writing a kind of community service. He encouraged musician and artist Kim Gordon to write. Gordon recalls: “writing was one of the first things that I also did, because he would say: ‘You have to do something! Because otherwise you are just
taking from the community. You have to have a position. It is the only honest thing to do.’ And I thought that was quite an interesting sort of motivation” (interview in Graham 2001, 19). In 2006, Graham told Nicolas Guagnini: “In fact, I really believe in artists writing. I thought that was very, very important. [. . .]. I think the main thing for writing, and Judd did this brilliantly, was to support your fellow artists and to learn about their art” (Graham et al. 2009, 282-83).

More frequently than the motivation of stewardship, Graham points to three circumstances when discussing his foray into writing: his seven-month stint as director and for the most part sole staff member of John Daniels Gallery, beginning in late 1964; his lack of art training; and his exposure to other artist-writers. Two of Graham’s friends came up with the idea of starting a gallery based on what they read about the art world in magazines like *Esquire*, but, being busy with their own jobs, gave the responsibility of running the gallery to Graham (1998, 31; 2004a, 211; 2001, 88). Graham noticed firsthand that it was only after advertising in art magazines that the gallery was the subject of reviews accompanied by exhibition photographs (1999, 69; see Anastas 2009, 119). He thus observed that “in order to be defined as having value, that is as ‘art,’ a work had only to be exhibited in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine” (1999, 12). He conceived of circumventing the gallery altogether by creating works for magazine pages (1999, 69). The latter include “Schema,” a poem that lists “(Number of) adjectives,” “(Percentage of) area not occupied by type,” and so on that appear in the specific magazine issue in which the poem is published, first in *Aspen*, 1966-67; “Detumescence,” a description of the male body’s physical and psychological state after sexual climax in the *National Tatler*, 31 November 1966; and “Figurative,” a portion of a cash register receipt in *Harper’s Bazaar*, March 1968. Three other such works were in fact exhibited in 1966-69 first and thus did not bypass the gallery system (see “Index,” Graham 1975).
Graham cites his lack of art training as a reason for turning to “naïve” activities “like writing, putting words or pages in magazines,” as he put it in 1973 (1996, 78), photography with an Instamatic camera, slides as artwork rather than of artwork, and eventually film and video using portable cameras (1989, 8; 1997, 36; et al. 2009, 171). It seems it was possible to conceive of writing as a default practice for an untrained “artist,” or it was possible to conceive of writing as having an art practice. In 2001, Graham asserted: “It seemed that art was an area where you could do everything and anything, with no education” (et al. 2001, 9-10). Graham told an interviewer in 2009, “I didn’t think of myself as an artist until much later. I saw myself as a writer. It was [gallerist] John Gibson who asked me to write an article about work dealing with ecology. He thought I could be an artist and supported me as one, but I really didn’t have a sense of myself as an artist” (28).

It is difficult to ascertain the currency these retrospective thoughts from the 1990s and 2000s would have had in 1966. Nevertheless, there is an evident shift from Judd’s assumption that art comes from art—from conclusions about art’s development drawn in the gallery—to artistic practice comes from artistic practice—from what other artists do, whether inside or outside of the gallery, whether visual, auditory, cinematic, or literary, and whether the result is potentially permanent or ephemeral. The status of the producer—artist—trumps and determines the status of the product—art. Artist Michael Snow humourously expressed anxiety over lacking the status of professional in his 60s statements:

> Words seem absolutely devoid of information. Of course I’m not a writer. That next to last sentence for example. (1994, 24, from “Around about New York Eye and Ear Control, 1966, previously unpublished)

> Yes, 2000 words, up to, for the catalogue. Just had a lot of trouble with the type-writer ribbon. Now the usual disclaimer about not being a writer. Stress the visual aspect, being an artist. See See See See. Well I am a writer. Attempt to prove it: I’m probably not as much of a writer as some other people, but this is writing and what if this was the only piece of writing that I ever did but that it was really
remarkable in terms of style and content and that it was really memorable would that make me a “writer”? Shit, that isn’t even a sentence! Being memorable might qualify it for someone who loved writing to list it with other writing as exceptional writing though not by a writer. That (writing not by a writer) certainly gives it some distinction even if you’ve only read this far . . . (and don’t plan to go any farther). I can’t seem to make myself clear. I’ve been trying. That’s what I’ve been trying to do. I am not a professional. My paintings are done by a filmmaker, sculpture by a musician, films by a painter, music by a filmmaker, paintings by a sculptor, sculpture by a filmmaker, films by a musician, music by a sculptor . . . sometimes they all work together. Also many of my paintings have been done by a painter, sculpture by a sculptor, films by a filmmaker, music by a musician. There is a tendency towards purity in all these media as separate endeavours. Painting as fixity, the static image. Sculpture’s objectness. Light and Time. Walking Woman Works were an attempt to have variety. The painting *Just Once* is the same (?) forms represented in four different mediums. Four different meanings. As depiction it’s the subdivision of an instant. Does my writing seem obscure? I’d like it to be eloquent. Words are Baffling. Portable. (1994, 26, from *Statements/18 Canadian Artists* [Regina: Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1967])

Duchampian deskilling, the dead-end of Greenbergian medium-specificity, and institutional criticism may have played roles in this shift that saw the expansion of activities that constituted artistic practices. But for Graham in 1966 writing represented an art world or artwriting, as opposed to artist, right of entry. The artists who came into Graham’s John Daniels gallery gave him the impression that “you could be an artist and you could be a writer at the same time,” and not quite that you could be an artist by being a writer (1992, 22; 2001, 71; *et al.* 2001, 8; 2009, 27; *et al.* 2009, 171; 2011). Those artists were Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Robert Smithson.

4 Robert Smithson’s Writing in the Vicinity of Art

As artist-writer Thomas Lawson aptly described in 1982, Smithson “shift[ed] attention away from the presentation of a well-crafted object in the gallery to a broader nexus of concerns and activities” (2005, 122). Looking and reading farther and further afield than Judd’s gallery conclusions—although staying abreast of recent developments in the galleries and in artwriting
too, as the quotations in “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” (Artforum Sept. 1968) for example evince—this broader nexus included fiction, science fiction, pulp fiction, travel writing, modernist poetry and prose, contemporary literary theory, popular and B-grade films, scientific literature on entropy, geology, natural history, philosophy, and cartography. But what is less clearly understood is the function in the late 60s of Smithson’s mode of writing and the conditions under which he published.

Smithson’s “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” which I will be examining, was the lead article in the March 1968 issue of Art International (Smithson 1996, 78-94). Here Smithson playfully describes the ways in which contemporary artist-writers use language. The article begins as follows:

In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge . . . but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures . . . at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations.

When artists write, Smithson continues, language “covers” and “closes” rather than “discovers” and “discloses.”

I consider the critical function of “getting lost” in Smithson’s “illusory babels of language” below, but, in sum, Smithson endeavours to show that artist writings lack sincerity, do not bear relevance to art interpretation, or employ words in strange ways. Dan Flavin’s autobiographical writings are “disarmingly useless” in the way that the vases Gustave Flaubert describes in Salammbo are “of no possible use,” and his “slapstick” letters to the editor recall the

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8 Thomas Crow reports that Smithson was a “tireless reader,” “renowned for devouring a book on any subject in a single night and retaining nearly everything he read with uncanny clarity,” based on a 2003 interview with Smithson’s friend and a Spiral Jetty film and earthwork co-sponsor Douglas Christmas (2004a, 34n7).
“assorted humors” of Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Carl Andre’s use of typographic arrangement and repetition in his poems emphasizes “the words” over reference. Robert Morris “enjoys putting sham ‘mistakes’ into his language systems,” namely in his art object *Card File* (1962). Smithson uses Judd’s words with dry humour to describe Judd’s language or its effect:

> When he wrote about Lee Bontecou, his descriptions became a language full of holes. “The black hole does not allude to a black hole,” says Judd, “it is one” (*Arts*, April 1965). [. . .] Judd brings an “abyss” into the very material of the thing he describes when he says: “The image is an object, a grim, abyssal one.” The paradox between the specific and the general is also abyssal. Judd’s syntax is abyssal.

Smithson deems Sol LeWitt’s thinking, writing, and art production “inconsistent and contradictory” and his announcement card for his April 1967 Dwan Gallery show “an indication of a self-destroying logic”: “He submerges the ‘grid plan’ of his show under a deluge of simulated handwritten data. The grid fades under the oppressive weight of ‘sepia’ handwriting. It’s like getting words caught in your eyes.” Ad Reinhardt’s Chronology for his 1966 Jewish Museum exhibition catalogue, which humourously mixes personal with world events, provides “a negative knowledge that enshrouds itself in the remote regions of that intricate language—the joke.” Smithson deems Peter Hutchinson’s method in his 1966 articles “highly artificial and [. . .] composed of paralyzed quotes, listless theories, and bland irony”: “his language usage deliberately mocks his own meaning, so that nothing is left but a gratuitous syntactical device. His writing is marvelously ‘inauthentic.’” Smithson describes statements from Dan Graham’s unpublished *Carl Andre* as “the kind of depraved metaphor that Andre tries to bury in his ‘blocks of words.’ Graham discloses the metaphors that everyone wants to escape.” Of “Homes for America,” Smithson states: “Each syntax is a ‘lightly constructed “shell”’ or set of linguistic surfaces that surround the artist’s unknown motives.” Perhaps commenting on Graham’s lack of a physical art object-making practice, Smithson continues, “The reading of both buildings and
grammars enables the artist to avoid out of date appeals to ‘function’ or ‘utilitarianism.’” Lastly, Smithson notes of Andy Warhol’s interviews, “he seems too tired to actually grip a pencil, or punch a typewriter” and of Ed Ruscha’s 1967 book *Royal Road Test* that is “about the sad fate of a Royal (Model ‘X’) typewriter,” “[h]ere is no Warholian sloth, but rather a kind of dispassionate fury.”

Although later in the article Smithson refers to his 1966 publication “Entropy and the New Monuments,” he does not discuss his own writing here. However, an archived draft version of “A Museum of Language” titled “Fiction and Language in Art” includes a paragraph on Smithson and Bochner’s article “The Domain of the Great Bear” from *Art Voices*, Fall 1966, in this first section and later an epigraph from Bochner’s portion of “The Domain” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3834:434, 439). Smithson also intended to include small reproductions of all eight pages of “The Domain” as illustrations for “A Museum of Language,” and *Art Voices* had granted permission (3832:1000, 1003). Smithson’s correspondence to *Art International* editor James Fitzsimmons states “[s]peaking of ‘misery’, I guess you got my letter regarding Bochner” and concludes “I would prefer that The Domain be excluded from the article, along with any references to Bochner” (3832:1033). Since Bochner evidently thought of “The Domain” as “an intellectual time bomb inside the art system’s machinery” and as “subversive because it was camouflaged” (2008, 200, 171), perhaps Bochner saw its inclusion in “The Museum of Language” as equivalent to defusing the bomb or blowing their cover. In the draft, Smithson observes that he and Bochner “got lost along false trails, that we ourselves contrived, in fictive hallways that we ourselves perpetrated, and in time tenses that broke down into empty mental fragments. It was like making a movie without a camera or a script” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3834:434).

This first section of “A Museum of Language” on artists who write is followed by
sections on fiction influenced by Roland Barthes and including a paragraph on the Museum of Natural History; on dinosaur illustrator Charles R. Knight, who “is also an artist who writes”; on Reinhardt’s cartoon “A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala”; on atemporality in the movies of Roger Corman; on the suburbs, including the photographs of Ed Ruscha and Dan Graham; and finally a section on “mapscapes or cartographic sites” that relates the work of several artists “to Reinhardt’s mandala, Judd’s ‘device’ of the specific and general, or Pascal’s universe of center and circumference.” The topics of these sections reflect the range of Smithson’s interests, also evidenced in his other published essays.

Smithson’s discussion of artist writings may seem ambivalent—at times critical, at times celebratory, mostly playful. It is at times unclear whether Smithson is simply in agreement with the stereotype of artist-writings-as-wonky or is celebrating it. But Smithson also clearly supported artist writing in practical ways. He told *Art International* editor James Fitzsimmons, “I could be on the look-out for ‘artist’s writings’”—the scare quotes implying “so-called” to indicate that such writing is a different animal entirely from art or from artwriting by non-artists (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:1003-1004 in Oct. 1968). Smithson’s offer is essentially what *Artforum* editor Philip Leider had asked him to do in January of 1967; Leider requested “the names of a few of your colleagues who you feel might have something to contribute” to the June 1967 sculpture issue (3832:947). Smithson’s work as ostensible agent for artist-writers would seem to extend to connecting friends to other editors as well. In addition to introducing Graham to Bochner and Susan Brockman, Smithson connected Graham with Dale McConathy at *Harper’s Bazaar*, where Graham’s magazine-work *Figurative* was published in March 1968 (Graham 2001, 93). Graham had sent Smithson his poems with a note explaining “[i]f they like any of these, they should feel free to cut it up any way they please” and thanking Smithson again “for providing this chance” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3834:1240 undated). Smithson also
submitted *Art & Language*-member Michael Baldwin’s “Remarks on Air-Conditioning” to *Arts Magazine*, where it was published in November 1967 (Rorimer 2001, 107). And he promoted artist writings by helping to organize the 1967 Dwan Gallery exhibition *Language to Be Looked at and/or Things to Be Read*. He apparently expressed his desire for a complete collection of his own writings several years before his death (Linker 1979, 60).

While “A Museum of Language” may read as ambivalent on the topic of the quality of artist writings, the draft version is written in more straightforward prose. In contrast to the “illusory babels” opening, the draft commences:

In a sense I am dealing with the exact opposite of what is generally consider[ed] good writing or good criticism. Because as everyone knows artists “write badly, and have nothing to say,” yet their usage of language as language is beginning to develop into one of the most important esthetic mutations ever to happen to art. Why is this? Artists do not have to maintain “histories of taste” in order to preserve the myths of tradition. They know that “traditions” are fabricated like so much merchandise. This week’s myth is next week’s tradition. Such an awareness makes art criticism and history look false. But this falseness doesn’t cause despair—it causes celebration. The only actual thing about writing on art is the language. The best writing by artists doesn’t set out to explain or discover, instead it might offer tautologies, slow-witted jests, pseudo-exactitudes, languid problems, and contentless word facades. The meaning of single words, phrases, sentences may be emptied, reversed, damaged, changed by the use of an odd syntax. Meaning upsets meaning. The whole apparatus of grammar is taken not in terms of “truth,” correct statements, or true principles, but rather as syntactical arrangements or moods, that could be right or wrong, but are probably wrong. [. . .]. Artists employ all kinds of problematic situations, which can only “disappoint” the rational mind. Simple-minded platitudes, transparent philosophies, opaque remarks, unexpected sabotage, hackneyed metaphors, lusterless pedantry, all these serve to protect the art from rational interpretation. [. . .] One will find nothing but stupefying enigmas and baffling surfaces in the writings of artists. (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3834:429-30)

Identified in the draft as “one of the most important esthetic mutations ever to happen to art,” artist writings are clearly championed by Smithson in their wonkiness. But the final version, in illustrating this point, purposely obfuscates it. As Smithson explains in the opening paragraph of “A Museum of Language,”
The following is a mirror structure built of macro and micro orders, reflections, critical Laputans, and dangerous stairways of words, a shaky edifice of fictions that hangs over inverse syntactical arrangements . . . coherences that vanish into quasiexactitudes and sublunary and translunary principles. [. . .] The entire article may be viewed as a variation on that much misused remark [from Pascal, “Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere”]; or as a monstrous “museum” constructed out of multi-faceted surfaces that refer, not to one subject but to many subjects within a single building of words—a brick = a word, a sentence = a room, a paragraph = a floor of rooms, etc. Or language becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere.

Since “[t]he best writing by artists doesn’t set out to explain or discover” but rather “protect[s] the art from rational interpretation,” Smithson protects this point itself in the final version.

Comparison of the published article to the draft reveals that editorial alterations served to amp-up the wonkiness. Smithson’s obscuring changes are especially conscious given that his writing process can be described as flowing. Edits are more foreign to such a process; in the case of a laboured process, by contrast, editing differs little from writing. Whereas in the final version “Dan Flavin deploys writing as a pure spectacle of attenuation,” in the draft it was a pure spectacle of “decomposition.” “Flavin’s Carthage is an arsenal of expired metaphor and fevered reverie” but began as one of “hackneyed metaphor and banal image.” “His grandiloquent remembrances play on one’s poetic sense with a[n],” oxymoronic, “mournful giddiness” in the final version while in the draft his “exquisite cacophonous observations fall upon one’s auditory sense with mock lyricism” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3834:430). In the draft introduction quoted above, Smithson explains that artists use various evasive modes and devices that “serve to

9 Nancy Holt recounted, “I was Bob’s first editor—not that his work needed much editing. He would sit down and it would just flow, it was almost like automatic writing. But he didn’t know how to type and I did. When I was typing, I might suggest a change here or there” (in Newman 2000, 250). His handwritten first draft of “The Monuments of Passaic” includes only the occasional stroked-out sentence and insertion in smaller print (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, Addition: Box 2 of 2, blue spiral notebook titled “Jan. 10, 1970-Sept. 19, 1970 + Monuments of Passaic 1st Draft” 12-24).
What may read as ambivalence in the final version of Smithson’s “A Museum of Language” is a promotion of writing that does not claim too much, that thwarts rational interpretation, that acknowledges and celebrates the fact that traditions are fabricated, and that recognizes language as material. Mel Bochner had arrived at these conclusions through his review-writing for *Arts Magazine*. I noted above that it was seen to matter to artists that critics got it wrong, but Bochner learned that it was “impossible” for a work “not to be misunderstood” after an artist objected vehemently to Bochner’s interpretation of his art in a positive review. Bochner then gave up art criticism and became interested in “testing the boundary between writing-as-criticism and writing-as-visual-art” in “The Domain” and in articles consisting entirely of rearranged, found text such as “The Beach Boys—‘100%’” (*Arts Magazine* Mar. 1967) or of quotations, some misattributed, some fake, such as “Less is Less (for Dan Flavin)” (*Art and Artists* Dec. 1966) (2008, xvii-xviii). In addition to implying that mode determines status—straight writing constitutes criticism while playful writing constitutes visual art, more on which later—Bochner’s principle is that if word and image are incompatible, then instead of labouring over “grey, anonymous language” in order “to treat their incompatibility as a starting-
point,” why not play with text? (Foucault 1970, 9-10).

Yet, Smithson arrived at the perhaps more nuanced conclusion that writing and visual art both have material existences that should be taken into account, a point he often stressed in interviews (See Smithson 1996, 235-26, 265, 294; 2004, 89; Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, Addition: “Robert Smithson, artist, Interview in his studio with two students” 4-6). If materials, including words and images, are fundamentally incompatible it is because their physical existences or artifactuality are singular. Also, the meaning of words is as unstable as the meaning of objects. Smithson arrived at these conclusions through extensive, cross-disciplinary reading, stating in an interview:

I’m more in favor of a phenomenological, structuralist view of language as, not even a fact, but a terrain, a patch of ground within the page that you could extract various meanings from, according to your temperament. So that my articles really don’t explain or educate, they generate. [. . .] [I]f the words are well put together, you can extract different kinds of meanings from that, and not one of these meanings will have any priority. There’d be no certainty about any of them, so that the language is always tending to crumble. If you set out to try to convince somebody, like a lawyer—which is the way Michael Fried writes—you keep them for a while, but eventually it doesn’t hold up. It may sound very convincing, very true and deep, but eventually you see all the holes in it. Why not write knowing that writing is full of holes, writing is full of contradictions. Talking is even more of a tangle. (2005, 154)

Whereas curator and critic Bryan Robertson would write in a 1966 Motherwell review, “[a]s in all writing by good artists, the language disappears almost immediately and only the ideas stay in the mind” (9), Smithson argued that language is not a secondary instrument that is going to disappear and leave the work there. Language grows like a barrier reef; it has its own physical [. . .] processes[; it is] material, and there’s no escape from that, and to try and escape from that leads you into a kind of neo-platonic, neo-idealism. . . . Language is as primary as steel. And there’s no point in trying to wish it away. And when you invoke it, it’s dangerous. It’s always like running amok. (1996, 209, 214)

Whereas for Judd the artist and artwriter’s analytical methods and responsibilities—formally
parsing developments in the gallery—were the same, for Smithson the commonality lies in the understanding of both words and visual-art-making materials as primary substances. The artifactuality of these substances needs to be recognized (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3833:1104). Their meaning is unstable. They grow, crumble, and run amok. And they are approached in both cases using the working method of accumulation or assemblage (See Smithson 1996, 294; 2005, 158; 2004, 93; Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, Addition: “National Institute of Chicago [School of the Art Institute of Chicago] Robert Smithson, artist Q & A” 5).

Asked about the relationship of his written work to his object work, Smithson responded with a vagueness that suggests the relationship is no different than writing to writing or work to work:

Paul Cummings: Do you find it [the writing] augments your work? Or is it separate from it?
RS: Well, it comes out of my sensibility—it comes out of my own observation. It sort of parallels my actual art involvement. The two coincide; one informs the other. (1996, 272-73)

Art historian Caroline Jones proposes that if Smithson’s art “were not so discursively based” his writings “would not seem to participate so strongly” in his art (1996, 318). Firstly, this ostensible participation of the writing figured into Smithson’s reception later, as will become apparent below. Next, I would suggest that it goes both ways. His artworks—such as the drawing *A Heap of Language* (1966) and some of the non-sites—including textual components, and his writings—such as “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space” (*Arts Magazine* Nov. 1966), “Ultramoderne” (*Arts Magazine* Sept.-Oct. 1967), and “Strata: A Geographical Fiction” (*Aspen* Fall-Winter 1970-71)—included visually as well as discursively meaningful typography. This served to endorse the relevance of one to the other, although, in his reception in the 70s and after, usually the writing to the art. Moreover, the intended effect of producing both articles and objects as well as the chiasmic character of them was, it seems, not enlisting writing as a supplementary co-
participant but rather stressing the understanding of language as material.

Asked about the status of his writing, Smithson returned to writing’s physicality:

Student: I think you are saying that your writing is your work just as much as I would say your Earthworks are your work.
RS: Yeah, I’m just saying they’re of a different order. One informs the other. There are all kinds of mediums that one can work in. My idea isn’t to escape from the physical; it’s to gain greater access to the physical actually. (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, Addition: “Robert Smithson, artist, Interview in his studio with two students” 6)

In addition to the singularity of the physicality of Smithson’s articles and objects, the two do not necessarily achieve or treat complimentary, let alone supplementary or equivalent, effects or subjects. Asked again about the relationship between the two, Smithson conceded to an informing effect of language, that the objects have their origin in notation, and then jumped to curating:

PC: But did the writing affect the development of things that you made?
RS: The language tended to inform my structures. In other words, I guess if there was any kind of notation it was a kind of linguistic notation. So that actually I, together with Sol LeWitt, thought up the language shows at the Dwan Gallery. (1996, 294)

Cummings asks about “the writing,” presumably Smithson’s articles, but Smithson’s answer is about language. While, in the case of “A Museum of Language,” Smithson identifying the wonkiness of recent artist writings is not, in principle, all that different from Judd identifying the specificity of recent three-dimensional work, other pairings and trios of articles and works we might consider intersect differently. “The Monuments of Passaic” (Artforum Dec. 1967) is not “about” the non-site works that would follow. There is, however, if not quite an elevating impetus, at least a common notion that identifying banal materials and locales affords contemplation of contingency in the writing about “The Monuments of Passaic” in Artforum and in the citing of sites as nonsites in the gallery. If they are not altogether independent, one is not subordinate or preliminary to the other either. Nor is the essay “The Spiral Jetty” (Arts of the
Environment [1972]) or the film Spiral Jetty (1970) “on” the jetty Smithson had constructed in Utah in 1970; like the edits to “A Museum of Language,” they complicate and obfuscate the jetty and vice versa.

Considering the chronology of Smithson’s practice, neither the articles nor the objects consistently hold an originating status. He produced paintings and poems with Christian images concurrently in the early 60s. He had his painted steel, Plexiglas, and mirror works such as Enantiomorphic Chambers (1965) fabricated in 1964 and 1965, published “Entropy and the New Monuments” in June of 1966, and had the Alogons and other “Minimalist” geometric work constructed in 1966 and 1967. A collaged and drawn plan of aerial art for the Dallas-Fort-Worth Regional Airport and “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site” (Artforum June) both appeared in 1967. Considering the singularity of the physical substances Smithson used, including the artifactualty of the articles, it is not teleologically significant that he presented “Some Void Thoughts on Museums” (Arts Magazine) in February 1967, discussed “What is a Museum” in the Arts Yearbook of 1967, and toured “The Monuments of Passaic” in early October of 1967 before bringing pieces of Pine Barrens and Franklin, New Jersey into the gallery in the non-sites of 1968; nor that he staged and photographed a Mirror Trail in Ithaca in February of 1969 and a Mirror Shore in Florida in April of 1969 while en route to the Yucatán where he created nine Mirror Displacements and upon returning home from which scheduled May 5 through 9 in his datebook to “rest / write article on Yucatan” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:532); nor that “Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction” (Fall-Winter 1970-71) coincides temporally with the earthworks: Partially Buried Woodshed (January 1970), Spiral Jetty (April 1970), Broken Circle, Spiral Hill, and Amarillo Ramp (all 1971); nor that the film Spiral Jetty picturing the jetty followed shortly after the latter’s construction and that the essay “A Cinematic Atopia” (Artforum Sept. 1971) was commissioned after he had created a few films. A
complicating and perhaps generating of ideas may be evident in these clusters of works but
neither Smithson’s articles nor objects function as proposals to be carried out in a different
medium.

This singularity of artifactuality, means, and subject has been understood clearly in the
more recent Smithson literature. Lynne Cooke describes the Spiral Jetty trio as “[l]ess
equivalents than interrelated variants on a set of ideas” (2005, 66). Lytle Shaw points out that
Smithson’s essay “The Spiral Jetty” moves not “toward” basic “how” and “why” questions about
the jetty but rather “through a series of physicalized encounters with sites and ideas” (2005, 123).
Noting a compilation of quotations about or including the term “spiral” in Smithson’s notebooks,
Thomas Crow asserts that it “would be far truer to his sense of his own mission” to consider the
jetty in Utah “as just one more addition to this nested array of inscriptions, its divergent scale and
material being no more than the contingencies of one particular iteration” (2004a, 34). These
iterations “plunge us into the world’s flow of contingencies, the swarm of irreducible particulars
to which no system, no method of analysis, is adequate,” as Carter Ratcliff sums up Smithson’s
point (2005, 161).

What is not acknowledged is an underlying thought behind Smithson’s aim to
demonstrate that words as well as visual-art-making materials from rocks to graphite and glass to
photographs are equivalents qua artists’ materials in that their materiality is significant and
singular and in that their meaning is unstable. That underlying thought is a modernist truth to
materials. When artists write articles, according to Smithson, they respect, embrace, and
demonstrate a truth to language: which is that it is an unstable material. Instead of carving stone
until it looks like skin, or “set[ting] out to convince somebody” like critics or lawyers, artists
exhibit stone’s inherent properties and stay true to words’ inherent instability.

Smithson’s application of the modernist “truth to materials” principle to writing made his
articles appealing to the literary-minded editor of *Artforum* and of *Art International* and is a significant condition of their publication. Like Philip Leider and his fellow fifteen-year-old high school peers who read T. S. Eliot to one another (Newman 2002, 43), Smithson read Eliot as well as Jorge Luis Borges and others. Smithson was well-primed to build interrelated art and writing practices. As a young adult, Smithson studied at the Art Students League and hung out with the Beat generation poets, illustrated a couple of books, designed covers for a small poetry magazine, admired painter-playwright Oskar Kokoschka and poet-painter William Blake, worked at the Eighth Street Bookshop, wrote poetry, and produced a series of pen-and-ink drawings incorporating words and human figures (Tsai 1991, 7-8, 21-22, 49-50).

Leider’s background was in the humanities generally, but he leaned toward poetry and expected to end up writing a literary column. He viewed his schooling in the 1940s New York City public system as preparing him for “anything in the humanities” and “would have been just as excited if it was a magazine called ‘Jazz’ or ‘Bach’ or ‘Leonardo,’” but “[t]hat it wound up being an art magazine was a total surprise” (in Newman 2002, 46-47; see also 42-43). In late March of 1966, Smithson sent an essay to Leider likely for the first time: an early account of Minimalism that touches on Judd’s writing titled “Entropy and the New Monuments.” Leider responded with “[y]our article got here this morning; I like it very much—its full of so many impudent ideas. [. . .] [I]f there is some chance of getting it into the June issue I will,” and he did (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:859). Smithson’s subsequent *Artforum* essays were commissioned by Leider and later by Annette Michelson and John Coplans, although Smithson volunteered “The Monuments of Passaic” after *Harper’s* rejected it (3832:1092). It does not appear as though Leider specified his requests for articles. Leider concludes a letter dated 9 December 1968 with “[h]ow about a nice article for, say, April?” (3832:1166). Even for the themed “sculpture” issue, Smithson was advised only that his submission “should deal in any
way you please with the situation in sculpture today” (3832:947). Leider recalls, “I remember taking the first thing he sent me and everything else, and I remember sending back only one thing. I wish I knew what that was, I’m sure I was wrong” (Newman 2000, 252).

By the time Smithson mailed “A Museum of Language” to James Fitzsimmons in August of 1967, Smithson had already published two articles in Harper’s Bazaar, including “The X Factor in Art,” a collection of quotations from Morris, Hutchinson, new novelist Robbe-Grillet, Reinhardt, Flavin, Goethe, and two from Smithson himself; three articles in Artforum; “The Domain” with Bochner in Art Voices; three articles in Arts Magazine; and one in Arts Yearbook. He would go on to publish five more articles and the famous letter to the editor in Artforum and one each in Aspen, Landscape Architecture, Metro, and Studio International before his accidental death in 1973. With Smithson’s publishing record, it is not surprising that Fitzsimmons wanted a Smithson article in Art International. It is not clear whether Fitzsimmons directly solicited “A Museum of Language”; however, his response was “Jesus! Here it is the 5th of October and I have still not acknowledged receipt of your excellent article, posted the 13th August. I’m sorry. [. . .] The article is very interested [sic] indeed, and I’d like to use it” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:1000).

The “range of [. . .] informed interest” Smithson displayed in “A Museum of Language” also “encouraged” Fitzsimmons to invite Smithson to write a new, bimonthly report he was considering on “what’s happening” in art, literature, and philosophy in America “that would meet the intellectual standards of Eliot, Stevens, Pound, Valery, or of the best literary critics” (3832:1000 5 Oct. 1967). Smithson declined, describing Fitzsimmons’s idea as “excellent” but explaining, “I don’t think I could manage it on a regular basis at the moment because I have to plan and work on my shows. Although I could write some more articles—perhaps a Museum of Language-Part II. Also, I could be on the look-out for ‘artist’s writings’” (3832:1003-1004 Oct.
Fitzsimmons understood and appealed, “please send us whatever you do write, and whatever written material by other artists you think of special significance” (3832:1005 16 Oct. 1967). He later informed Smithson he was starting two new departments, “Artists on their Art” and “Art in the Environment,” adding, “if you have anything for either dept or both, please send” (3832:1048 on 5 Feb. 1968). In response, Smithson mentioned his unfinished “3 page piece called Aerial Art—proposals for Dallas Fort Worth Airport. It involves Bob Morris, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre and myself” (3832:1183 undated). “Aerial Art” was eventually published in the Feb.-Apr. 1969 issue of Studio International.

Fitzsimmons also remained committed to “A Museum of Language” throughout the lengthy process of obtaining a high quality copy of the Reinhardt cartoon and the expensive process of cutting “The Domain” after some of the illustration printing plates had already been made and the text set for the January issue (3832:1047-48; see also 1002-1003, 1033, 1070, 1183). It terms of editing, it appears as though he asked Smithson only to double-check the Pascal quote (3832:1024). This was the same editor who had fired Judd after only two “New York Letters” for his “shambling basic-Hemingway” style, cut Lucy Lippard’s reviews without warning, and sent a virulent letter to Jo Baer (Judd and Lippard 1968; Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3832:1081-82). It seems “impudent ideas” and modernist difficulty interested Leider and Fitzsimmons more than comprehensive gallery reports.

But Smithson was no Borges or Eliot, nor a Dadaist poet. Barbara Rose recalled of Smithson’s writing, “really his writing wasn’t radical; it was campy. It was high camp and I found it hysterically funny” (in Newman 2002, 249). In a 1982 review of the first edition of Smithson’s collected writings, Peter Schjeldahl remarked: “Nothing in this book is to be confused with ‘good writing,’ except by way of conscious parody. Smithson was fantastically talented with words, but his use of them is high-handed and self-subverting.” Schjeldahl went on
to assert that Smithson’s writing “has a pedigree” in the modernist literature of Nabokov, Borges, Joyce, and Burroughs but that “[w]hat makes his writing unique—almost freeing it from the whammy of being ‘literature’ at all—is the specific matrix of art works and art criticism that contains it and gives it bite.” Schjeldahl deems Smithson’s writing “remarkably unalienated [. . .] because his coruscating skepticism leads always into the practice of art, into the world” (1991, 139).

Yet, especially in light of Smithson’s and his editors’ predilections leading up to and during the 1960s, I would argue that it is not the “real world” of art that excused the writing from being “literature” and gave it “bite” but the modernist pedigree and wonkiness that excused it from being art criticism and domesticated it as artist writing. Also writing in 1982, Thomas Lawson argued that, through mixing writing styles and genres, “Smithson muddied the waters, disrupting the flow of an art criticism that derives its authority in great measure from its apparent freedom from mediation and ideological content” (2005, 122). However, Mike Kelley, another artist-writer, offered a more tempered remark concerning language in conceptual art that bears relevance to Smithson: “Oddly, the irony associated with conceptualist language only seemed to add legitimacy to the notion that art criticism was a more serious endeavor than fine art production” (2003, 222). The cachet of quasi-modernist literature and truth to materials did not open up artwriting—that would arguably have to wait until artists, critics, and academics themselves read the French philosophy of which Smithson was an early reader. And it was not the artifactuality of articles but rather thinking about their possible art status and the “broader nexus of concerns and activities” now introduced into the field of art that would become the take-away points for 70s artists.
5 From a “Johnny-Come-Lately” to a “Critic-Sculptor” and an “Artist and Writer”

The negative art critical reception of the Abstract Expressionist artists as writers interestingly continued into the 60s, in spite of the increased presence of writings by younger artists. Reinhardt was more often referred to as a polemicist and satirist than an intellectual, and a connection rather than a tension is regularly perceived between Reinhardt’s writing and painting (Kramer 1966a, D17; Kramer 1963, 534; Monte 1963, 44; Colt 1964, 34; Sandler 1966, 46). However, it was often remarked that Reinhardt was better known for his writings and that these are more interesting than his paintings. In 1963, Rose pointed out that “[t]o what degree his articulateness has obscured the way these paintings actually do operate visually remains to be investigated,” and James Monte observed that “he has been in print the last few years with such regularity that one tends to see the paintings through written filters” (77; 44). In 1966, Irving Sandler described the fact that “the rancor of polemic has obscured [the paintings’] extraordinary quality” as “deplorable” (1966, 41).

Barnett Newman was referred to as “a kind of midwife” in reference to his presentation of written support for the paintings of others, among other insults in a 1966 review by Dore Ashton (4). In 1969, Elizabeth C. Baker observed that Newman’s “reputation as a philosopher and polemicist have tended to deflect attention from the specific nature of his art” and that “[h]is various writings have sometimes seemed to supersede his paintings”: “He himself is somewhat responsible for this, of course—he has supervised his historical standing with unflagging vigilance” (38). Just a year after the artist’s death, New York Times art critic John Canaday described MoMA’s 1971 Newman retrospective as “the strongest argument I have ever seen in favour of artists keeping their mouths shut entirely” (D21).

A reviewer of Motherwell’s 1965 MoMA retrospective indicated that the artist’s writings
hindered the reception of his paintings: “Motherwell’s strength and variety are something you are not led to expect, either, from his widely publicized articles and lectures on the subject of ‘modernism’; [ . . . ] Motherwell’s forte is not the making of masterpieces, but a very high level of performance. He knows (although heaven knows, he doesn’t know how to say it in words) what he is doing” (Kaufman, 383). While art historian H. H. Arnason praised Motherwell as the “outstanding instance” of the “new American artist-critic-historian” in the first of two 1966 Art International articles devoted to the artist, he included the disclaimer: “Despite his unquestioned contributions to the literature and the teaching of modern art and in fact his prolific activities in these fields, they have never, since he first began to paint seriously, constituted anything more than an avocation, almost a relief from the concentration of thought and energy which for 25 years have been dedicated to the problems of his own painting” (17). In a 1967 critique less of the artist as writer/intellectual and more of the content of his claims, sculptor David Hare accused Motherwell of using his spokesman-historian role to lay claim falsely to innovations, essentially writing himself into art history. In the “Letters” section two issues later, a total of five readers, including Lee Krasner and Barnett Newman, congratulated Hare and Art News for publishing the scathing critique, thus testifying to the perceived accuracy of Hare’s accusations. It is precisely this affair that may have caused Motherwell to wish he had remained silent. Even as Minimalist sculptors were quoted and their writing activity noted, Abstract Expressionist painters were concurrently renounced even more vehemently than before based on the identification of this generation with instinctive painting, to which writing, identified with intellectualism, was perceived as necessarily antithetical.

If the fact that Barnett Newman the “Johnny-come-lately” expressed aims for art in writing before exhibiting paintings was viewed as deeply problematic in the 40s and 50s, this was not the case for artists beginning their art and writing practices in the 60s, even though their
career moves appear more strategic than Newman’s. Judd began reviewing in 1959 and in 1962 was still making paintings while beginning reliefs and floor objects (Smith 1975, 17). He turned down invitations for solo exhibitions for seven years before agreeing to his first, which premiered his Plexiglas work at the Green Gallery from December 1963 to January 1964 (see Meyer 2001a, 35, 56). When “Specific Objects” was published in 1965, the essay would have indeed seemed to explain and establish the perceptions that guide the three-dimensional work he was beginning to develop: the “real” or “actual” space of three-dimensional work “is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.” “The problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors” is avoided, as are “any neutral or moderate areas or parts, any connections or transitional areas.” Industrial materials “are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific. Also, they are usually aggressive. There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material. […] They aren’t obviously art.” John Chamberlain’s “crumpled tin,” for example, may appear chaotic and neutral, not “especially identified with art,” at first. The material conceals the composition and imagery. When these become apparent, “there seems to be too much tin and space, more chance and casualness than order.” Presumably this shift from neutral, non-art disorder, to composition, and back again is what Judd is referring to when he uses the term “redundancy” in the next sentence: “The aspects of neutrality, redundancy and form and imagery could not be coextensive without three dimensions and without the particular material.” Judd’s own three-dimensional work produces this shifting effect. Also calling to mind Judd’s work is the discussion of Frank Stella’s paintings that concludes the article—although the Chamberlain and Stella paragraphs are moved to the middle to open the discussion of the new work in the version printed in Complete Writings: “The stripes are nowhere near being discrete parts. […] The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another. A painting isn’t an image. The
shapes, the unity, projection, order and color are specific, aggressive and powerful” (1975, 183-84).

As James Meyer succinctly puts it, “Wholeness, new materials, large scale, seriality: the reader could easily conclude that the most specific of objects were Judd’s” (2001a, 138). The same sequence describes Newman’s and Judd’s activities—teaching and the odd contribution of early painting to an exhibition; a sustained writing practice; mature artwork. Yet this chronology only rarely figures into Judd’s reception, with approval as opposed to the suspicion Newman faced, and retrospectively (see Bochner 2008, 197; Weiss 2004, 216).

That Graham and Smithson used writing as an art world right of entry likewise does not figure negatively, if at all, into their reception. Graham stated of Smithson in 1995, “he also wanted to succeed very badly and he knew he couldn’t; he could succeed with the writing politically but also the art was important because he wanted to get in galleries. He was a desperately ambitious person” (1997, 38). I noted above how “Robert Smithson: Artist and writer”—as he begins a biographical note handwritten in 1971 or later—used his writings as a kind of media kit in letters and interviews with art-world professionals (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3833:238). He received complimentary feedback and many requests for articles and permission to reprint and translate from editors. His archived correspondence pertaining to publications—25 letters between 1966 and 1971—vies in number with those regarding invitations to exhibit and loan requests, although this changes after 1970, after Spiral Jetty. Like Judd, Smithson wrote less once his “mature” work gained momentum, critical acclaim, and/or funding. As noted, he declined Fitzsimmons’s invitation to contribute a bimonthly report because he had exhibitions to prepare, and, in January of 1970, Friedrich Wolfram Heubach at Interfunktionen responded to what must have been another polite refusal from Smithson with “I can well understand that you don’t find the time for writing” (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005,
81

3833:66). When Paul Cummings pointed out in a 1972 interview that it appeared Smithson was writing articles for publications on a monthly or bimonthly basis, Smithson responded: “Yes, that sort of encourages you” (Smithson 1996, 290). This was a radically different reception of and demand for the writing-artist than occurred in the 40s and 50s.

Nevertheless, the contemporary reception of 60s artist writings cannot be characterized as immediate celebration any more than can that of the AbEx generation. As Bochner put it: “It wasn’t only the older generation that responded with hostility. At a Whitney opening I was accosted by a friend, a serious young painter, who announced, ‘You’ve joined the enemy, I’ll never speak to you again. You’ve become a writer’” (2008, xvii). Critic John Perreault included commentary on artist-writers in his “A Minimal Future? Union Made: Report on a Phenomenon” of 1967. He began by sharing what I identified as Judd’s understanding of the artist’s and critic’s common methods and responsibilities. However, unlike Judd, he did not view the fact that artists were writing as a natural progression that is “just harder work”:

Artists are by nature critics. And a work of art, if it is really new, achieves its newness to a large degree through its implied criticism of its immediate predecessors. But an artist functions best in his critical capacity as an artist not as a writer. Minimal art is burdened by a great deal of pretentious writing that only clouds the real value of the art itself under a haze of abstraction, invective, and sloppy thinking. Donald Judd’s statements are clever polemics and often illuminating “manifestos.” His Logical Positivist posturing, however, is naive. Robert Morris’ writings, although pedantic, labored and colorless, at least have the virtue of seriousness, and offer illuminating insights into the theoretical aspects of his own style. Although his works are of high caliber, Robert Smithson’s writings are boyishly pretentious and distract from the validity of his actual work. (30-31)

Just two years later, for an upbeat, day-with-the-artist piece for New York magazine, Perreault revised his assessment of Smithson’s writings deeming them instead “youthfully polemical, learned and even slightly arrogant. His writing has always been dense, controversial and very influential” (44). In the interim, Emily Wasserman reviewing for Artforum described Smithson’s
writing as “[e]laborate conceptualizing about non-sites and pointless vanishing points, that in view of the poverty of sculptural achievement or invention, seems marginal to the issue of the work itself” (1968, 62).

It was also argued at the time that the austerity of the work prompted a plethora of writing. A disgruntled reader of *Artforum* pointed to the devaluing or eliminating of manual dexterity in the new austere work when responding to Flavin’s “. . . on an American artist’s education . . .” (*Artforum* Mar. 1968):

> He could do the whole art world a favour if he’d spend more time on his light objects and less at his typewriter. This is a danger; for we’re giving the artist more leisure time. He doesn’t have to use his hands, he buys his stuff, or sends it out and has nothing to do. So in desperation he turns to writing. Actually, this is a benefit to some of us because lots of lofts may now become available. After all, those rigorous mathematical computations, ideographs diagrammed on legal paper and, of course, those typewriters don’t take up much space. (Gerd 1968, 4)

Outsourcing sculptural fabrication may have allowed more time for writing, the production of which is indeed a less site-specific activity. As noted, Judd did have more time to devote to political causes because his work “became easier, clearer, more interesting” (1970, 37). And Smithson wrote “The Monuments of Passaic” while on a short period of jury duty (Reynolds 2003, 263n70). However, they were both prolific. What is interesting is this *Artforum* reader’s choice of words: “we’re giving the artist more leisure time”—by not policing in print work that does not require manual dexterity?; such quick work creates a void in the artist’s life; he is desperate; he “turns to writing,” as one might an addictive substance? Or a menial part-time job?; but this might free up working space for the “some of us” who still value manual dexterity.

For the *New York Times*, Hilton Kramer asserted that Minimalist art, with “its surpassing visual simplicity and utter lack of expressive or symbolic elaboration,” would not be garnering the attention it is without the artists’ theoretical explanations, that the austerity of the art gives
these explanations an importance unequalled in the history of art, and that “one wonders if there
may not be a ‘law’ operating here to the effect that, the more minimal the art, the more maximum
the explanation” (1966b, D23). This argument might have some traction in the case of Robert
Morris’s 1962-64 neo-dada slabs and boxes re-appropriated as parodically serious Minimalist
sculpture in 1966 through “Notes on Sculpture” (see Carroll 2008, 5-7). However, it clearly fails
to engage with Judd’s and Smithson’s writing, not to mention failing to conceive of writing as
producing something other than explanation. Barbara Rose more accurately observed that
“[s]tatements from the artists involved are frequently couched in these equally factual, matter-of-
fact descriptive terms; the work is described but not interpreted and statements with regard to
context or meaning or intention are prominent by their omission,” yet she sympathized with Art
in America readers by adding, “For the spectator, this is often all very bewildering” (1965, 61-
62).

Contemporary commentators on 60s art were not constrained by artist writings in that
they did not take the writings to be the definitive accounts of the art. In 1966 Barnett Newman
expressed an interesting belief in the democratizing effect of statements by artists: “If artists talk
to each other, it makes it possible for writers and everybody else to join the dialogue. But if
artists don’t speak and they depend on their lawyers to speak for them, it makes it impossible for
anybody else to move into the conversation” (1992, 279). As Newman saw it in the late 60s,
critics, not artists, were the ones with the critical discourse-pre-empting, lawyer-like authority.
While not constrained by artist writings, and certainly not viewing them as pre-emptively setting
artists’ own stages for their critical reception or serving a careerist agenda, 60s critics did engage
with artist writings: they expected all of the artists’ art-critical statements to bear relevance to
their art.

For Judd, if the artist’s and critic’s methods and responsibilities of formally analysing
what the significant developments are and assessing how well or poorly one’s work, in the case of the artist, or exhibited work, in the case of the critic, take these developments into account are the same, this did not mean that each assessment would be applicable to every work of art. Yet that is just how commentators treated his art review statements. Critics seemed to delight in using Judd’s reviews of other artists’ work against his own. Tillim quoted Judd on Stella—“[i]t is something of an object, not a field with something in it, and it has almost no space”—and then remarked: “By the standards implied in that favorable description, Judd’s work fails and Stella’s succeeds” (1964, 21). In her 1966 article on Judd, Rosalind Krauss quoted from, without citing the subject of, Judd’s reviews and, based on the “extraordinary beauty” of Judd’s work, concluded that Judd’s “theoretical line” is “inadequate” (24). Elizabeth C. Baker asserted: “Were Judd’s work to be as limited as his pronouncements have suggested, it would fail. Fortunately there is more to it. [. . .] [T]he distance between his stated aims and his current lavishness is unavoidably disconcerting” (1968, 62, 63). By contrast, albeit in the traditionally praiseful context of an exhibition catalogue foreword, curator William C. Agee avowed: “Judd has been an intelligent and articulate writer since 1959, and many of the most pertinent issues of his and the art of the 1960s have been discussed effectively by him” (1968, 8). Michael Fried precisely demonstrates that art-practice-related artist writing is what resonated in the 60s in his review of Judd’s first solo exhibition. Fried plainly stated, “As one might expect on the strength of Judd’s monthly criticism published in Arts Magazine, it is an assured, intelligent show; it also provides a kind of commentary on the criticism and is doubly interesting on that count” and then made it evident that he expects the work to clarify “what has not clearly emerged in the criticism,” namely “how exactly Judd means to discriminate between the objects he admires and those he does not” (26). Artist writings were taken to delineate artists’ aims for their own art and were judged based on their pertinence to that art.
There are a number of contextual factors that are important for understanding the reception of Judd’s writing. “Specific Objects” was a “Positions and Trends” feature essay in the 1965 edition of *Arts Yearbook*, an annual, themed publication from *Arts Magazine*. Judd was hired by *Arts Magazine* in late 1959 when three months of editorial restrictions at *Art News* earlier that fall prompted him to look to *Arts Magazine* for writing work (Judd and Lippard 1968, 9-10). The points raised in the article come right out of his 1963-65 reviews and articles. (See especially Judd 1975: Jan. 1963 on Lee Bontecou, 65; Feb. 1963 on Ronald Bladen, 75; May-June 1963 on Jasper Johns, 89-90; Sept. 1963 on Kenneth Noland, 93; Apr. 1964 on Dan Flavin, 124; Feb. 1965 on Robert Morris, 165; Apr. 1965 on Bontecou, 178.) Moreover, his article “Local History” for the previous *Arts Yearbook* contains a section devoted to a new category of “three-dimensional work, approximating objects”: the same reservations about defining movements are expressed, the “singleness” of early 50s painting is identified as a precedent, and 24 of the “Specific Objects” artists are discussed (Judd 1975, 150-56). “Specific Objects” is thus an amplification of a section of “Local History” from *Arts Yearbook* 1964, themed “New York: The Art World,” for *Arts Yearbook* 1965, themed “Contemporary Sculpture.” Whereas “Local History” may have seemed less distinctive in a section on “New York Now: Observations, Reviews, Notes” by fellow *Arts Magazine* staff critics Vivien Raynor and Sidney Tillim and London correspondent Michael Fried, “Specific Objects” may simply have stood out against Robert Goldwater’s discussion of pre-40s sculpture (64-73); Sidney Geist’s thoughts on colour in sculpture (91-98); and William Seitz’s introduction to the yearbook, which, while making similar observations on the new three-dimensional work, is distant and academic in comparison to Judd’s more urgent tone (7-11).

The most notable of the articles’ contextual differences is Judd’s status. In the 1964 *Arts Yearbook* contributors page, Judd was described as “a ‘constructivist’ painter of the rising
generation” who “reviews New York gallery shows regularly for ARTS; he had a one-man exhibition this season at the Green Gallery” (8). More visibly, a January 1965 Newsweek article titled “Vanity Fair: The New York Art Scene” pictured artists such as Noland, Rosenquist, Pollock, de Kooning, Johns, and Rauschenberg working or posing in their studios while Judd’s photograph and quotes were included on the final pages in a bottom sidebar with critics Thomas Hess, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, and Henry Geldzahler (O’Doherty 1965, 58-59).

Yet the 1965 yearbook included Judd in the first main entry, “A Survey of Recent Sculpture: An International Selection of Artists, Reproductions and Biographical Sketches,” and the contributors page stated that “Donald Judd’s work figured in the United States representation at the 1965 Sao Paulo Bienal. A critic as well as a sculptor, he has written for art publications both in this country and abroad” (6). Judd went from a painter who reviews to a critic-sculptor outlining the characteristics of a new art of which, according to the final “Specific Objects” captioned illustration, “Donald Judd, Untitled 1963,” he was a practitioner.

Judd has stated on a number of occasions that “Specific Objects” was not intended as a statement on his work. In 1968, Judd told Lucy Lippard:

Incidentally and to get it down, that “Specific Object” article despite what people think was not meant to be a doctrinaire, or dogmatic, or definitive, or anything article.

LL: It wasn’t? The tone of it was doctrinaire and definitive.

DJ: I didn’t think so. But people keep using it that way. The magazine wanted something [on] what they called a big bunch of three-dimensional art that’s being done and so they asked me to do it since they knew I was doing something like that. And [its] just really meant to report [on] all of that stuff and all of it was very diverse and really not capable of coming under any heading but an extremely general one. And “Specific Objects,” which is my title, and I like, isn’t meant to be about my work; it’s just meant to be about any of that kind of thing that isn’t painting or sculpture. (38)

In 1971, when John Coplans asked, “Wasn’t that a declaration of your situation?” Judd responded, “I don’t know. They just gave me a job of reporting. People talk about it being about
my work, a manifesto and things like that; but really, I was earning a living as a writer, and it’s a report on three-dimensional art” (43-44). And by 1989 he claimed: “I was given that essay as a job in 1964: it was not a manifesto” (1989b, 62).

Art historians are often sceptical of such statements. Indeed it was Judd who prompted Rosalind Krauss to trot out the Leo Steinberg line “if you want the truth about a work of art, be sure always to get your data from the horse’s mouth, bearing in mind that the artist is the one selling the horse” (1998, 11; Steinberg 2000, 15). Yet, Judd’s statements are important not because they are true intentions or untrue damage control but for demonstrating how it was and was not possible for 60s audiences to read his writings. It is worth noting, regarding the mercenary angle, that “Specific Objects” was not Judd’s only assignment for Arts Yearbook 1965: he also wrote “To Encourage Sculpture: The Howard and Jean Lipman Collection,” one of five essays on “The Collector’s Role” in contemporary sculpture.

To be sure, Judd’s often short sentences, rarely interrupted by qualifying clauses, indeed make certain of his statements stand out as definitive pronouncements. However, while perhaps urgent, the tone of “Specific Objects” strikes me not as “doctrinaire and definitive” but rather full of qualifications. Before distinguishing the new work from recent painting and current sculpture, Judd warns:

The objections to painting and sculpture are going to sound more intolerant than they are. There are qualifications. The disinterest in painting and sculpture is a disinterest in doing it again, not in it as it is being done by those who developed the last advanced versions. [. . .] Obviously, three-dimensional work will not cleanly succeed painting and sculpture. It’s not like a movement; anyway, movements no longer work; also, linear history has unraveled somewhat.

Contrary to its reception as a definitive manifesto, “Specific Objects” contains many qualifying adjectives and adverbs that temper its conclusiveness:

*Half* or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture. *Usually* it has been related, *closely or distantly*, to one or the other.
The work is *diverse*, and much in it that is not in painting and sculpture is *also diverse*. But there are some things that occur *nearly* in common. (my italics)

Also, Judd’s speaking voice had very specific, tempering qualities that are lost in his writing.

The range of his intonation within a medium pitch is wide, his pace slow, his tone calm, almost melancholic. One commentator noted that “the artist speaks with a soft voice and a humor rarely evident in his writings” while a friend recalled, “There was a certain thin sweet sad quality in Don’s soft voice that was very beautiful” (Failing 1990, 148; Hannah Green in Judd *et al.* 1994, 76). Imagine, as perhaps the handiest popular cultural comparison, a soft-spoken, tenor as opposed to bass “Eeyore” from the Walt Disney cartoon version of *Winnie the Pooh* explaining:

> Painting and sculpture have become set forms. A fair amount of their meaning isn’t credible. Since sculpture isn’t so general a form, it can probably be only what it is now—which means that if it changes a great deal it will be something else; so it is finished.

Without these qualities his written statements read as declarative.

While it was possible in the 60s to conceive of artist writings as not strictly applicable to the author’s practice, they were not perceived in this way, and Judd noticed. His 1968 conversation with Lippard continues:

DJ: I’m in favour of being certain, or definite, or whatever, but I think it’s important as to whether it’s about your own work or someone else’s. And I think I have a right to be as definite about my own as I want to be.
LL: Yes, well it wasn’t interpreted as being about anybody else’s.
DJ: But I don’t think it deserves to be carried over without qualification as to other people’s work. Which people love to do all the time. Or to say or to be used without any distinction as to whether you were saying it about your own work or somebody else’s.
LL: Well, you have more trouble with that because of the critic thing. I mean you’ve obviously had more to say about other artists than any other artist has because nobody else has had to do reviews, so it’s—
DJ: It’s getting to be a long time ago now, though.
LL: Yes. Before I was.
DJ: I don’t mind saying that I think somebody’s work is lousy or mediocre or something if I think so. That’s all right. But I wouldn’t say—
LL: But that article made it so clear—like you talked about Oldenberg that you
couldn’t possibly—
DJ: Yet that’s not talking about my work. (39-40)

In the reprint of “Specific Objects” for the 1975 *Complete Writings*, Judd endeavours to change this perception of his artwriting necessarily pertaining to his own art. He adds a note: “The editor, not I, included the photograph of my work” (189). He also buries the strong paragraphs on Chamberlain and Stella in the middle, so that instead of ending with “[a] painting isn’t an image. The shapes, the unity, projection, order and color are specific, aggressive and powerful,” he ends on the Oldenburg paragraph, the last sentence of which is a decidedly non-manifesto-like, throwaway line reminiscent of his review conclusions: “George Brecht and Robert Morris use real objects and depend on the viewer’s knowledge of these objects” (189). That the ideas presented in “Specific Objects” are found in Judd’s earlier writing, that Judd’s sculptural practice was becoming recognized around the time “Specific Objects” was published, and that Judd took efforts to challenge its manifesto-like reception indicate that writing that could be related to artists’ visual practices is what resonated in the late 60s.

Given this mode of reception, it is no wonder that Graham’s “Homes for America” received little attention in the 60s: Graham had no art practice to which critics could apply his writing. One photograph was included as an illustration for LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967, 79), Flavin likewise used one image and also discussed the photographic component of “Homes for America” (1967, 20-21), and the series was reproduced in Gregory Battcock’s *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* ([1968] 1995). Although Smithson briefly discussed Graham’s writing in “A Museum of Language,” the text itself was otherwise ignored. One thing it was not possible to say as an artist in the mid 60s, one thing that did not have “value and practical application as [art] discourse” (Foucault 1970, xiv), is a statement not explicitly about art. And “Homes for America” is neither artwriting, nor reproduction-as-work-of-art, nor
intended as art. Graham asserted in 1977, “I think the fact that ‘Homes for America’ was, in the end, only a magazine article, and made no claims for itself as ‘Art,’ is its most important aspect” (in Buchloh 1992, 211). The article would, however, go on to have great “value and practical application” to collectors of and artists and art historians writing histories of conceptual art.
Part 2: 1969-1979

A fine art object from the “classic” period of conceptual art: this is Graham’s supposition about why his 1971 lithograph edition of “Homes for America” appealed to buyers. Graham had stated that his initial interest in magazine works stemmed in part from their disposability, following LeWitt who instructed Graham the gallerist to use his grid sculptures for firewood once the show closed, or Flavin who wanted the florescent lights returned to the hardware store (1969, 34, 42; 1989, 8; et al. 2009, 94-95, 170). But Graham condoned the typical sale of one or two “Homes for America” per exhibition because the funds allowed his galleries to finance his more expensive installation works (1992, 27; 1989, 8). The lithograph edition is a monochrome version of his original verso and recto mock-up with photographs, complete with an “ARTS MAGAZINE December 1966–January 1967” footer. It was printed at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where it was a tradition for visiting artists to produce a lithograph until Graham suggested that the college instead start up a press devoted to publishing artist writings (1997, 44; et al. 2009, 93; 2009, 31). Moreover, the 1970s saw the collection and publication of Graham’s (1969; 1972; 1978), Reinhart’s ([1975] 1991), Judd’s (1975), and Smithson’s (1979) writings, to say nothing of their pedagogical applications. Richard Shiff reported for instance that “Specific Objects” “has a continuous history of being used in the classroom since the time that it was written” (2009, 11). Artist writing, by 1969, signalled contemporariness.

Artist interviews in Avalanche (1970-76) would feed the growing fascination with “the image of the artist as star” (Allen 2005, 216). Publicity-seekers such as Joseph Kosuth would produce position papers in addition to other tactics (see Alberro 2003, 26-27, 41-42). But artists Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn would also note in 1975 that the writings of Judd, Morris, Smithson, Bochner, and Kosuth “became a historical point of reference for many of the so-called
conceptual artists, providing a model for how to assume a responsibility for the ‘language context’ of the art they produced” (140n1).

Burn had also observed in an essay commissioned for his native Art and Australia that although Minimal art “seems not to have been understood in Australia” because it has not garnered the sufficient “critical response” that typically facilitates understanding, “Minimal artists are concerned enough with the conceptual content of their art to write about it themselves; they do not need critics to write it for them” ([1970] 1991, 224n2). Vancouver conceptual artists recall the influence of Smithson’s and Graham’s articles in advance of any exhibited or ephemeral, in situ works (Teitelbaum et al. 1995, n.p.). In addition, for members of the United Kingdom’s Art & Language Group who were dissatisfied with the English art scene and education, artist writings in Artforum were a key artist’s activity to which they had access, beginning in 1965 (Harrison and Orton 1982, 19; Art & Language 1969, 10). Artforum’s new editor, John Coplans, continued to solicit writings by artists (Newman 2000, 119), and the splinter-publication October, founded in 1976, would also publish artist writings, as did spates of other new magazines with smaller print-runs and shorter lifespans.

Here I demonstrate that writing was conceived by artists in the 1970s as the mode in which to lay claim to the significance and urgency of art issues concerning race, analytical philosophy, and gender. I argue that artist writings and their contemporary reception in this period consolidated the shift from the notion of artistic activity defined by “medium” to the notion of “practice” encompassing artistic activities. I explore Frank Bowling’s public deliberation on the relationship of black experience to modernist painting in Arts Magazine, Art & Language’s supposition that an editorial might count as art, female artist-writers’ disclosure of their art and writing in new feminist-founded magazines, and critics’ recognition of artist writings as a critical space.
1 Frank Bowling’s Modernism

A significant issue Graham does not address in “Homes for America” is that not all United States citizens were welcome in suburbia. Graham and his family moved to the suburbs so that he could attend a better high school in 1955, a time when many post-Depression and World War II prosperous whites fled urban decay for shopping malls, superior schools, and copious jobs (Graham et al. 2001, 10). Black Americans were excluded owing to racially discriminatory lending and implied understandings among homeowners and developers (Scott 2001, 264). Legally or legislatively, schools were desegregated as a result of Brown v. the Board of Education in 1954 and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts were passed in 1964 and 1965 thanks to the nonviolent civil rights movement. However, by the end of the 60s persistent racial discrimination in the form of inadequate housing, police harassment, and high unemployment prompted some to adopt a more aggressive, separatist “Black Power” stance (268). This stance celebrated and advocated for black culture. By 1969, contemporary “Black Art” was discussed and exhibited with some regularity as well as anxiety.

African American artists had been for the most part debarred from exhibitions, commissions, or art employment since the phasing out of the 1930s and 40s Works Progress Administration. Thus 60s artist activist groups had demanded exhibition opportunities, prompting the founding of the Studio Museum in Harlem, the opening of a Community Gallery at the Brooklyn Museum, the exhibition In Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and a preview of the exhibition Harlem on My Mind at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, all in 1968 (Jones 2006, 155). However, the former exhibition contained the work of black artists only in a separate, smaller room and only after complaints were made (155). The latter exhibition was denounced by the Harlem Cultural Council: “We disagree with the lack of Negro scholarly participation and the projected use of photographs in place of original art
works in the show” (155). This was indeed all that the January 18 through April 6, 1969 exhibition, the first devoted to African American production, would include. As historian Eugene D. Genovese observed in Artforum, “Mr. [Thomas] Hoving set out to do a show on Harlem for the Metropolitan Museum of Art but decided to ignore black painting and sculpture” (1969, 34).

That this Met exhibition seems noticeably more offensive than MoMA’s concurrent, non-consensual display of a mid-60s, permanent collection Vassilakis Takis sculpture instead of a more recent one as planned, which instigated the formation of the Art Workers’ Coalition, highlights the disparity of the institutional challenges artists faced as well as the commonality of means they employed: picketing and making demands of museums. In addition to advocating for greater involvement by living artists and free admission, the Art Workers’ Coalition also did pressure museums to exhibit and collect more art by black, Latino, and women artists. Meanwhile the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition “was formed by a group of black artists for the purpose of making sure there would be no more ‘Harlem On My Mind’ exhibitions,” as artist Benny Andrews reported for the group in Arts Magazine in 1970. They met with and convinced officials at the Whitney Museum of Art to “1. stage a major exhibition of ‘Black Art Works,’ 2. establish a fund to buy more works by black artists, 3. show at least five annual one man exhibitions, in the small gallery off the lobby, of black artists, 4. have more black artists represented in the ‘Whitney Annual.’ 5. consult with black art experts” (18-19). In 1970, artist Faith Ringgold helped create the group Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation, whose protest against the fact that work by black, women, and student artists was omitted from a School of Visual Arts exhibition was successful. Ringgold and other women artists and critics also effectively advocated for equal representation at the Whitney Annual through the Ad Hoc Women Artists’ Group. In 1971, Ringgold went on to cofound the group and exhibition “Where We At”: Black Women Artists, providing black women with the opportunity to share concerns,
ideas, and resources apart from the mainly white feminist art movement and male black art movement (Smith 2007, 402).

In the midst of the *Harlem on My Mind* controversy, *Arts Magazine* asked black artist Frank Bowling for an editorial on black art (Mercer 2003, 143). Bowling, who early in life wanted to be a poet or literary critic, had been in New York for three years and had previously written a book review and a “Letter from London” for the magazine (Gooding 1995, 40). He was born in Guyana in 1936 and moved to England in 1950 to complete his high school education, finishing his Master’s studies on artist-theorist Piet Mondrian at the Royal College of Art in 1962, in addition to attending other art institutions. In England, his work was well received by critics. He won “Painting of the Year” at the 1966 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. He also received the Grand Prize for Contemporary Art at the First World Festival of Negro Art in Senegal in 1966. That year, he moved to New York, taught at Columbia University in 1968-69, and in 1967 and 1973 received Guggenheim Fellowships. Bowling’s three-instalment “Discussion on Black Art” followed by other reviews and articles touching on black art would be published in *Arts Magazine* in 1969, and “It’s Not Enough to Say ‘Black is Beautiful’” appeared in *Art News* in 1971.

While artist Benny Andrews was happy to take advantage of the exposure the new interest in black shows afforded, noting that when the excitement fades, “the artists who are good” will be noted, and artist Raymond Saunders viewed “black shows” as “a euphemism for second-class,” Bowling criticized the exhibitions’ reception (in Glueck 1969, D34). He noted the lack of awareness of, commentary on, and interest in exhibitions of the work of black artists (1969a, 18, 20). He criticized Gregory Battcock’s, Barbara Rose’s, and Peter Schjeldahl’s responses to black art and stated that neither the Metropolitan nor the Studio Museum “believed in Black artistic effort; both merely tried it on” (1969-70, 20-22).
In his late 1968 review of two books on African art, in which he identifies himself “as a colonial product myself,” Bowling noted the current “vogue” for “Black,” suggesting the authors were engaged in the “avoidable and dangerous” activity of “indulging in the fashion of the times” and “pandering to something outside scholarship” (1968-69, 10, 12). That “something” is perhaps what Bowling identified in his first article on contemporary black art as a “guilty secret” of the art scene, namely the “neglect of the black artist.” Bowling stated that it was “[b]y a rare piece of luck (perhaps it’s an historical imperative)” that there had been a surge in “black shows,” thus exhibiting a cynical and objective distance from the civil rights and black power movements that betrays his non-American outsider status, perhaps intended—either on Bowling’s part or on his editors’ in choosing him—to indicate a less partisan discussion. “[I]t is neither possible nor desirable to separate this sudden appearance of black shows from the extant political mood,” Bowling coolly explained, although he went on to “point to the urgency of the situation”: “The weight of exposure being given black people in all walks of life is second to none in Western history of which they are now firmly a part. [. . .] [W]e are witnessing a revolution, a black revolution of unmanageable scale” (1969a, 16). By the time of a conversation with Larry Rivers published in the February 1971 Arts Magazine, however, Bowling observed, “Everyone was talking about black art a little while back; it is now clearly a dead issue,” yet later asks, “is there such a thing as Black Art? Your [one’s] relative position forces this question” (21).

Bowling’s take on black art—vogue, pandering, luck or historical imperative, and inseparable from the extant political mood yet urgent; a dead issue but a forced question—is not so much ambivalent as necessarily nuanced. He wanted to argue that black artists can be modernist painters while at the same time asserting that black experience has to count. “[W]hat distinguishes or creates the uniqueness of the black artist is not only the color of his skin, but the
experience,” “the socio-cultural philosophy,” and, as Bowling later phrases it, “the philosophical and psychological content of all the influences” “he brings to his art that forge, inform, and feed it and link him essentially to the rest of the black people” (1969a, 18; 1971b, 308).

Comparing work by black and by white artists that is somewhat similar in technique or appearance but different in effect, Bowling suggested that the artists’ different experiences are responsible for the resulting “never identical aesthetic.” Jack Whitten’s paintings are like Jackson Pollock’s but “[t]he time is different; the tempo is different” (1969a, 20). William Williams’s paintings, although “rather like [Kenneth] Noland’s [. . .], painted in that no nonsense flat masking tape and all process are,” by contrast, “so irrational” (1969b, 21). Nor is Williams’s work influenced by Frank Stella: “The off-hand nature in the order of a Stella is very much a shrug. In Williams it’s a ‘holler’” (21). Mel Edwards’s work is akin to that of David Smith, but Edwards “produces a kind of ambivalence unknown in Smith” (21). Danny Johnson “express[es] a similar complementary, perhaps, but never identical aesthetic” as Edward Kienholz (22).

Bowling characterizes the mode of black art as one of “natural curiosity”:

Since time immemorial blacks have had to content themselves with the “sneaky” approach. It is a tradition of subtle, driven awkwardness, now stretched to the breaking point, now suddenly a moment not of release, but of explosion of voluptuous, cynical amusement. Irony and sudden change, complete many-leveled contradiction are stock-in-trade and automatic. This is part genesis of the species and the finely wrought articulation of the sensitive. Most completely successful works by black artists can be viewed as direct, arrogant spoofs generated from a complete understanding of the issues involved in the disciplines. The game of white-face is not the same as black-face. Desperation takes on the image of survival and makes for grim touching irony in the face of extinction. (1971c, 83)

It is in the third instalment of his discussion on black art for Arts Magazine that Bowling offered a description of black existence.

Threatening though “anarchism,” which someone defined as “permanent revolution,” may sound it defines Black existence—not Black struggles, but Black existence itself. Black life has had the spirit of anarchism as its content for centuries. Our history (this “historylessness”) within a framework of degradation
and oppression is a creative self-perpetuating process of anarchist, pro-life zeal. (1969-79, 20)

Prejudicial judgments of black art as inferior are deemed groundless by Bowling because they do not take black experience into account:

Earlier criticism, in every book and article, confirmed a deeply held opinion that, in the plastic arts, Black endeavor didn’t exist or, when it did, was “lesser.” At present there is no support for any such prejudice, suggested or real, for no contemporary art criticism deals with Black history or experience with its indelible anarchist content. (1969-70, 20)

Bowling critiqued Michael Fried’s art criticism in 1972, noting that “much modernist criticism lacks the bite which would enable the critic to tell us what the picture is about. On confronting pictures one asks oneself not only are they good? are they bad? but now ever more crucial: are they relevant, in what sense, and to whom?” (1972a, 35-36).

It seems it was necessary in the late 60s to somehow reconcile modernist formalism with the expression of experience. One way in which Bowling argued for the importance of a black artist’s attitude and life experience to the work is by pointing out that the work of Jackson Pollock and David Smith likewise relies on their attitudes and philosophies:

There is no use denying that Abdias de Nascimiento is right when he argues that much of the work done by black people (in Brazil) cannot he completely understood in critical terms without careful attention being paid to the attitude which produced it. There can be no doubt that this is exactly what people like Frank O’Hara did for a master like Jackson Pollock. And say what one likes about the recent book, “David Smith on David Smith,” it seeks to define Smith’s art as coming out of a deliberate, intelligent mind, conscious of a socio-cultural philosophy. (1969a, 16)

Bowling also pointed out that experience, especially race-specific experience, may be an accepted quality of literature:

The Jewishness of a Jewish novel can be controversial, polemical, attractive, and embraced. However, it remains valid and establishes itself continuously as such, so with Chinese-ness or Japanese-ness. In art, this is not so. In the hierarchy we are led by, art doesn’t allow the color or ethnic lines—except at its peril. This is clearly a questionable position in the changing, fermenting world in which we
At issue with art as opposed to literature is that “[a] confrontation on purely aesthetic terms could not be avoided.” This is what Bowling implies his Columbia students demonstrated when he took them to see an exhibition of Bob Thompson’s work, seeking to solicit objective responses from his students to work he greatly appreciated. Yet “[o]ne had to be initiated in order to understand this work,” Bowling determined (1969a, 18).

The “hierarchy we are led by” accepts the “purely aesthetic terms” that “could not be avoided” as an endpoint, as “understanding.” On this model, informing, black experience is perilous. In critiquing this “questionable position,” Bowling did not want to reject aesthesis or modernist formalism but rather acknowledged the latter as the confrontation the viewer experiences and as a “first-order activity” that the artist performs (1971b, 316), while at the same time recognizing a race-based attitude, experience, and socio-cultural philosophy in which the viewer has “to be initiated” and that the artist holds. But what is the relationship between the viewer’s aesthetic experience and the artist’s “first-order activity” of modernist formalism, on the one hand, and the viewer’s understanding and the artist’s race-specific experience on the other? If modernist painting is, as Bowling puts it, a “first-order activity”—there is nothing ranked above it of which it is a function—race-specific experience may seem a superfluous, second-order, and therefore not truly modernist, concern. How does experience inform form?

Bowling looked to an article by philosopher of art Richard Wollheim, referencing Wittgenstein, for insight. Bowling took the following from Wollheim:

“a man can express y-ness by x-ing, only if x-ing stands to y-ness in a relation which is, or analogous to, that of meaning. . . .” Experience has no literal meaning, only “subtle” meaning (idiosyncratic, personal, etc.). Though it accommodates literalness, this is only part of the whole story. Literal shape for instance has no meaning, it’s just shape, but it can in one sense stand (has stood, does stand) for painting through being “depicted” (painted). I-was-aiming-at often turns out not to be I-did, after literal action, except in the limited sense. Blackness
is therefore no more expressed in the literal sense by painting a black face than by a black line, for it is the depiction of a face or a line that we are witnessing; hence, the experience a painting “carries” through literal and depicted shape is generally a painting experience (time, color surface/area, perimetric demarcation points etc.). The black experience must therefore be operating on a different, more subtle, level, or not at all (1970, 32).

Only painting experience—the application of paint—can convey black experience. This confirmed Bowling’s growing conviction about the viability of modernist formalism. For Bowling, black experience informs only the effects or results the activity of painting produces. The first-order-ness of the activity of painting is not fundamentally challenged: “what hones and essentially distinguishes black art is the spirit that informs the activity inside its separate and special disciplines. It is completely intrinsic to artistic expression” (1971b, 311-12). By extension, Bowling bemoaned the fact that “[t]he only area being significantly ignored in discussions [of black art] is art” (1969a, 16-18). He deemed social realist black art retrograde and derivative, as did Barbara Rose concurrently in *Art in America* (1970, 54). Bowling opposed social realism because it lacked “art”: “That most of the figuration of these social artists could be put to better use in say graphic design is signalled by the fact that most of the works appear evidently better, more explicit, more accomplished in reproduction. This is because the qualities of paint, of collage etc., do not engage one” (1970, 31). Social realist painting does not “measure up to the impact or immediacy of a television newscast” (1971c, 54). Bowling stated that all of the works associated with black art “had their merits and usefulness, but as painting and sculpture few if any could or did carry those disciplines and the black experience” (1970, 32). “I cannot, I don’t,” he exclaimed, “see that being committed to black is quite the same as being a painter or sculptor. The two can often exist in the same body, which is right, but with the maximum will in the world I cannot get past this skin-deep bombast. This is really beyond my powers” (1971b, 319-20). “Should works of painting and sculpture continue to be a black issue
and not an art issue,” he concluded, “it is my considered opinion that these works will suffer” (1971b, 320).

In sum, representational depiction is unstable in that we can “imagine ourselves using one phrase and meaning another by it” (Wollheim quoted in Bowling 1970, 32). Social realist content is better conveyed through television. And only painting experience—different time, different tempo; irrational; a “holler” as opposed to a “shrug;” ambivalence; subtle, driven awkwardness; voluptuous, cynical amusement; irony and sudden change; contradiction; direct, arrogant spoofs—can convey black experience, but only if one is initiated, “‘only if x-ing stands to y-ness in a relation which is, or analogous to, that of meaning.’”

Having worked out this position, Bowling was evidently compelled to explain that black artists could be modernist artists. Cynically quoting a brochure from the Center of Inter-American relations—visual art “transcends language barriers, its origins trace back to our common European cultural heritage”—Bowling suggested that black artists necessarily operate in relation to Western modernism; dominant discourse is the only discourse. But he also endeavoured to demonstrate that black artists are capable of contributing to Western modernism by observing that they are influenced by and well versed and trained in European art (1968-69, 10; 1969a, 18-20; 1969b, 20). They are also “the natural inheritors of modernism through the contributions of their ancestors in traditional African and modern art.” But Bowling was quick to point out that “[i]t would be foolish to assume, as some do, that the development of modern art through the contributions of African ancestors is solely the property of blacks, for it is evident that the filtering process must include white consciousness” (1971c, 53). Bowling proposed that the only thing restricting black artists’ potential as modernists is the fear of “being considered white”:

The question really is, Are black people missing many links, in dealing with
modernism? Since a prevailing aesthetic expression in paint is completely identified with whites, the honest answer is that were we not afraid in many ways of being considered white, we would be truly black. We would be wholly black (this new entity) and tackle our “instruments” and language the way the leading jazz musicians and writers do, and with whom we are constantly being equated to our detriment—like Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud. (1971b, 320)

In his 1971 article “It’s Not Enough to Say ‘Black Is Beautiful,’” Bowling pointed out that although the artists he would discuss “all are black, they have been grouped together almost entirely in relation to their role as artists” (1971c, 53-54). Bowling’s subsequent writing discussed black artists and white artists together without distinguishing them based on the colour of the skin but rather his conviction about the colour in the work. In his 1972 article “Revisions: Color and Recent Painting,” he asserted that the “most exciting and perhaps the most important art works being made in this last quarter of the 20th century are paintings: paintings which convey the universal structure and feelings therein almost entirely in terms of color” (1972b, 45).

In a 1971 interview Bowling stated,

I don’t believe, as a painter, in the idea of black art; but it’s obvious the black experience is universal. [. . .] I feel very political about a lot of issues, and I’m certainly political about what it means to be an artist, an artist who happens to be black, as such, and I think a lot of the things which have gone down makes what I’m doing a reflection of a much wider spectrum. (1971a, 2)

By 1976, Bowling avowed in a published conversation: “I’ve come away knowing that there is something which is very distinctly Black—as there is something very distinctly Jewish, or Scots/Irish. But there is no Black Art. There is Classical or Tribal African Art, but not Black Art. I believe that the Black soul, if there can be such a thing, belongs in Modernism” (65). Bowling was compelled to argue that black artists belonged to modernism and that they could take into account recent developments in an innovative enough way to be counted.

Thus, the question of “why the black artist has contributed so little to the mainstream, or to the most relevant aspects of contemporary art,” why, “given their historical role in art,” “they
contributed so little to the great body of modern or modernist works,” had to be addressed (1969a, 16; 1969b, 20). In his April and May 1969 articles on Black Art—a year-and-a-half before Linda Nochlin asked in *Art News* “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”—Bowling asked these questions and argued that “it’s surely simplistic to state [. . .] that ‘we don’t have a visual tradition.’” As Nochlin would note regarding women artists, Bowling observed, “Almost without exception the black middle class, now vocal and militant, is profoundly uneducated and (in many instances) ‘. . . can’t spare the time . . .’ for high art and plastic values.” Bowling went on to argue that black artists now are contributing to the mainstream because the black and white middle class are both alienated: “the American dream has failed and all these badly misled people are not so much wrecking as getting together: hence questioning and feeding off each other” (1969b, 20, 21).

Working out his position through commissioned writing and the encouragement of Clement Greenberg led Bowling to turn to abstraction in his own painting. His paintings had included images of his mother’s home in Guyana, childbirth, and a dying swan. “We (Hockney, Kitaj, Jones and others of that generation) tended to look at abstract painting as though it was only part of the real thing,” he told Jeanne Siegel (1975, 24). “One was directed to join the liberal British thing of holding up a mirror to the awfulness of life” (in Gayford 1995, 100). Yet, while Bowling considered himself part of this Royal College group, he was excluded from group exhibitions and told, “‘England is not yet ready for a gifted artist of colour’”:

We were all painting from newspaper cuttings, photographs, films, etc., but I wasn’t allowed to be a Pop artist because of their preoccupation with what was Pop. Mine was to do with political things in the Third World. I chose my own themes, such as the death of Patrice Lumumba, because this was where my feeling was. So I was isolated. It was a racist thing anyway, the whole thing. . . . I did not paint Marilyn Monroe because she did not interest me. Kitaj did not paint Marilyn Monroe either; he painted *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg*. Kitaj was closest to me in political preoccupation, and he was leader of the Pop. But what I was doing was not considered as such. (in Araeen 1989, 40, 37)
Beginning in 1964, Bowling depicted maps of Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Australia. When he moved to New York in 1966, he was “anti-Greenberg,” as influenced by John Latham.

Reading Greenberg in New York, however, Bowling recalled, “I couldn’t believe that anyone else thought more clearly about the ideas I was thinking about, confusedly.” They eventually met, and Bowling attests, “Clem was able to make me see that modernism belonged to me also, that I had no good reason to pretend I wasn’t part of the whole thing. My ambitions as a painter, and being part of the New York scene, and even to influence it is legit” (Bowling and Thompson 1976, 65). Bowling explained, “I began to feel that it wasn’t enough to say that what is urgent is the distortion of human life by political regimes, or that life and death is urgent, but that the pictures had to be substantial within the confines of the material itself, within the history of what was the best” (1983, 56). Bowling’s conviction about the superiority of modernist formalism is noteworthy vis-à-vis the English context and his new New York one. Although six of the eleven solo shows of black artists’ work the Whitney presented between 1969 and 1975 were of abstract works, black artist Howardina Pindell was told by the director of the Studio Museum in the late 60s that she was “not doing black art” because she was “not using didactic images” nor “dealing with information that would be helpful to the black community” (in Smith 2007, 411 on 2 Apr. 1989).

Yet leading up to Greenberg’s consolidating vote of confidence, it was writing and painting that allowed Bowling to determine what direction his art would take. When Jeanne Siegel asked Bowling, “was there anything specific that made you make the final leap into abstract painting?” he responded:

I had been doing a lot of writing for *Arts Magazine*—expressing dissatisfaction with the current spinelessness of pure painting. Of course, I felt the concerns were only partly mine because I had my maps that allowed me to stay in my own back yard. I was preoccupied with color but where I could, so to speak, hide behind my
own private world. But perhaps I was no longer so concerned by the social dilemma. So when I got this space to do a show I began to tackle all those things like pushing, dragging, spilling, dripping that actually was the way I had been working, as an answer to the problems that I’d been writing and thinking about for two seasons before. I felt that the opportunity had been given to me—the others had said “Here’s the ball, you run with it now.” So I just went ahead and took on the whole kaboodle. (1975, 26)

Writing helped him identify the problems while concurrently painting offered solutions. A year later he told Bill Thompson,

You must remember that I spent from late ‘67 to ‘71 suffering through the whole nonsense about Black Art. I used up an awful lot of physical and psychic energy trying to get that together, and I found most of it had nothing to do with my real self. If I hadn’t been in New York, I wouldn’t have been able to get to grips with Black Art; there would have been no way of doing it had I remained in London. (1976, 65)

A city facing civil rights and Black Power urgency afforded commissioned writing—publically working through a way for him to understand the relationship between black experience and modernist art, in writing—an important function.

2 To Come Up for the Count

A number of so-called Conceptual artists writing concurrently with Bowling could not bring themselves to engage in a first-order art making activity, period. This was particularly the case for the collective Art & Language. Beginning in May 1969, the group instead produced a journal titled Art-Language, primarily presenting analytic discussions of what the term art can encompass. Art historian and Art-Language editor as of 1971 Charles Harrison suggested, with Fred Orton, that the “intuition” that “the production of a first-order art was a virtual impossibility” most unified the Art & Language founders. The only acceptable course of action was to “develop [...] a ‘second-order’ discourse” that could describe and explain the “fraudulent conceptualisations” of first-order art (1982, 21). Even when Art & Language (re)turned to
painting, producing portraits of V. I. Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock, Harrison and Orton deemed the use of “antecedently available graphic resources, and the characteristically ironic deployment of these as ‘mention’ rather than ‘use’” to be “preserv[ing] the ‘second-order’ character typical of A & L work since its commencement” (1982, 57).

In the editorial “Introduction” to the first issue of Art-Language, the question is posed as to whether the editorial itself—the form of which has up until this point in history been considered second-order—can count as art. The essay was primarily written by Terry Atkinson (Alberro 1999b, xxxi n8); no author is listed for it on the table of contents that serves as the magazine’s cover, although the editors’ names are listed on the masthead, which is also on the cover: Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin and Harold Hurrell. “The essay below,” we are told,

is specifically directed toward indicating the development of a number of artists in Britain who have worked in this field for the past two years. The formation of this magazine is part of that development and the work discussed in this essay is the work of the founders of this magazine. (Art & Language 1969, 1)

Forming a magazine is part of that which is being developed by these artists but is distinguishable from “the work” discussed in the essay. It is not the magazine as a whole that will be considered for art status, in the way in which General Idea’s project FILE magazine—more on which later—might conceivably be, then as now.

“This editorial,” however, is hypothesized as a potential “work,” perhaps to be discussed in a second-order manner in other essays:

Suppose the following hypothesis is advanced: that this editorial, in itself an attempt to evince some outlines as to what “conceptual art” is, is held out as a “conceptual art” work. At first glance this seems to be a parallel case to many past situations within the determined limits of visual art, for example the first Cubist painting might be said to have attempted to evince some outlines as to what visual art is, whilst, obviously, being held out as a work of visual art. But the difference here is one of what shall be called “the form of the work.” Initially what conceptual art seems to be doing is questioning the condition that seems to rigidly
govern the form of visual art—that visual art remains visual. (1)

The editors are asking, is “attempt[ing] to evince some outlines” as to what art is a sufficient condition for art status? Or is a visual component, beyond a discursive editorial in Times New Roman, a necessary condition?

Their choice of phrases highlights the incompatibility of art object and discursive essay. The phrase “held out as” indicates an object—pages 1 through 10 of *Art-Language* volume 1, number 1—being exhibited, offered, or presented to see if it deserves, as Thierry de Duve might put it, to be baptized with the proper name “art” (1996, 52). The *Art-Language* editors went on to point out that “many people would judge that this tendency is better described by the category-name ‘art theory’ or ‘art criticism’” (1). By contrast to the baptismal phrase “held out as,” “described by the category-name” suggests a literary genre, belonging to a class of writing with a certain content, quality, or objective features as opposed to *Art & Language*’s broader identification of “art”: it proposes itself for candidacy by attempting to evince some outlines as to what art is, and possibly has to take its visual form into account. The editors proposed another condition for art candidacy, being part of the artist’s “kit,” in their next question: “‘Are works of art theory part of the kit of the conceptual artist, and as such can such a work, when advanced by a conceptual artist, come up for the count as a work of conceptual art?’” (2). Here they also continue to employ a phrase typical of verbal as opposed to object forms. “To advance” is typically reserved for putting forward an opinion, suggestion, claim, or theory: in any case, a verbal form.

The phrase “come up for the count,” which Atkinson and Baldwin had also used frequently in their essay “Frameworks” printed in a numbered edition of 200 ([1967] 1972), is obscure. It seems to conflate the form of a prepositional phrase from boxing—to go “out” or “down” “for the count,” a boxer’s failure to stand up and resume a match within the ten-second
time limit competitors are afforded—with the concept of “counting,” as in the next question the editors posed: “Are past works of art theory now to be counted [esteemed, regarded, considered, held] as works of conceptual art?” (2). To “come up for the count” is perhaps intended to suggest that the work stands up after sustaining blows (of critics’ scepticism?) and then is counted; that is, if a work is able to recover from the blows it withstands within ten seconds, or during its moment of enunciation, it will be counted as art from that point on.

After this last question regarding whether past art theory now counts as art, and following up on the qualifying phrase “when advanced by a conceptual artist,” the editors stated:

What has to be considered here is the intention of the conceptual artist. [. . .] The intention of the “conceptual artist” has been separated off from that of the art theoretician because of their previously different relationships and standpoint toward art, that is, the nature of their involvement in it. The development of some work by certain artists both in Britain and the U.S.A. does not, if their intentions are to be taken into account, simply mean a matter of a transfer of function from that of artist to that of art theoretician, it has necessarily involved the intention of the artist to count various theoretical constructs as art works. (2)

Previously, art theoreticians would not consider their output visual art. But it is implied that a contemporary inquirer attempting to evince some outlines as to what contemporary art is, such as Charles Harrison a couple of years later, might be an editorial-as-work-of-Conceptual-art-producing Conceptual artist. The value of the artist’s stated intentions is raised often in this period. But in the context of this editorial, the assertion that an essay can be art if a Conceptual artist intends it to be art is not very satisfying nor are subsequent assertions, such as that it is “surprising” that while the visual language of art has been “ever-evolving,” this evolution has not “up to the present” entailed “includ[ing] and assimilat[ing] one or other or all of the support languages” (2-3).

Next, the editors raised what appears to be their most convincing point: that it is through works of art, and not art theory, that they arrived at their essay-writing practice:
It is through the nature of the evolution of the works of “conceptual art” that the implicated artists have been obliged to take account of this possibility [of art “inclu[ing] and assimilat[ing] one or other or all of the support languages”]. Hence these artists do not see the appropriateness of the label “art theoretician” necessarily eliminating the appropriateness of the label “artist.” (3)

Yet is it not also the nature of the evolution of works of art that obliges art theoreticians to do the art theoretical writing that they do? As de Duve puts it, analytical aesthetics “is a discipline that has currency only on the planet Mars” when a philosopher does not at least have “a foot in the real world and goes out to look at art more often than not” (1996, 58n22). Even if their current essay-writing practice is a direction that led from taking into account previous art—and thus conceptually though not formally develops out of a genealogy deemed, as they seem to want to emphasize, legitimate—the fact that the conditions are indistinguishable from art theory means that this point is insufficient to justify the term “art” or “artist.”

The next proposed affinity of the editorial to art is that of common procedure. “Inside the framework of ‘conceptual art[,]’ the making of art and the making of a certain kind of art theory are often the same procedure” (3). As noted, Judd subscribed to this view. For Judd, an artist’s procedure or method was already the same as that of the theorist or critic, and the latter’s second-order discourse made important contributions. The heart of the issue is the visual one the editors raised at the beginning: not that “the making of art,” the procedure, the kit, the methods, the responsibilities, the philosophy is the same, but that the output, as proposed, takes the form of an essay.

The editors returned to the issue of the non-visual in suggesting a scenario in which an artist hangs an essay in an art exhibition the way a print might be displayed. They claimed that the view that “many people” would express, that the exhibited essay is more like art criticism or art theory than art,

admits of a rather more bigoted view, that is this essay belongs more to art
criticism or art theory because it is formed of writing and in this sense it looks more like art criticism or art theory than it looks like art; that is, that this object (a piece of writing) does not have sufficient appearance criteria to be identified as a member of the class “art object”—it does not look like art (4).

This accusation of bigotry is followed by a “why-not?” contention:

there seems no reason to assume that inquiries pertaining to the art area should necessarily have to use theoretical objects simply because art in the past has required the presence of a concrete object before art can be thought of as “taking place.” (6)

Then, suddenly, it is assumed that the case for the editorial-as-art has been successfully made: “having gained the use of such a wide-ranging instrument as ‘straight’ writing, [. . .] a whole range of other types of entities become candidates for art usage” (6). Yet, toward the end of the essay, the status of work in essay form became once again more provisional: “What has become clear to the artists since is that this work was a necessary form of development in pointing out the possibilities of a theoretical analysis as a method for (possibly) making art” (9-10). In the final paragraph, the editors only mentioned a factor that is the crux of such a discussion, and one that I explore below: the art-candidate essays have used the form of support languages “not for any arbitrary reason, but for the reason that this form seems to offer the most penetrating and flexible tool with regard to some prime problems in art today” (10). While elaboration of this point may have benefitted the argument—and how lucid and sound Art & Language intended to be, and for what reasons, is an issue to which I return—the editors concluded with the rather weaker observation that “it is not beyond the bounds of sense to maintain that an art form can evolve by taking as a point of initial inquiry the language-use of the art society” (10, my italics).

While Art & Language inquired into the possible art-status of editorials, American Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth asserted that works of art are analogous to analytical propositions, then that they are analytical propositions, and then, by implication, that they should be analytical propositions. According to Kosuth, works of art propose that they are art, that is, a
definition of art ([1969] 1991, 20). Charles Harrison had invited Kosuth, whom he had met in New York that spring, to contribute to *Studio International*, where Harrison served as editor (Harrison and Orton 1982, 23). The result was a three-instalment position piece published in late 1969 and titled “Art after Philosophy.” Presumably, if art proposes definitions of art; if, in Kosuth’s works consisting of dictionary definitions printed as Photostats or advertising media and subtitled “Art as Idea as Idea,” the disposable Photostat or media is not the work of art but rather the idea is ([1969] 1991, 30-31); and if “[w]hat makes an artist, or any other thinker, important is what he has contributed to the history of ideas [. . .], how much one has enlarged the scope of our understanding of the area of endeavour” ([1971] 1991, 84), then artists’ essays could propose such a definition or idea and thus be art.

Kosuth does not allow this, however. He does acknowledge the importance of writing though. Owing to “the continuing enlargement of the complexity of issues in art,” “texts are the necessary result of ‘Conceptual Art’ activities. When objects are used—by myself or by Bainbridge or Hurrell, for instance—they are usually used as a kind of ‘formal’ language for which a support language is necessary to clearly understand the terms involved” ([1971] 1991, 84). Kosuth does not claim art status for these texts. Peter Osborne has stated that it “was only a small step” to claim that “discourse about art” is analogous to analytical propositions in the way that art is, “since it too, paradigmatically, questions the nature of art. Art becomes the product of the artist’s ‘total signifying activity’” (1999, 60). However, Osborne’s quotation of Kosuth is from an interview in which Kosuth explains “[w]hat [his] idea of art comes out in,” and this, he explains, includes the work he exhibits, the articles he writes, his lectures at universities, his teaching at the School of Visual Arts, and conversations such as the present interview he is giving. In context, the quotation Osborne uses reads: “What [Ad Reinhardt’s black] paintings mean is a product of his total signifying activity: lectures, panel discussions, ‘The Rules for A
New Academy,’ cartoons, and so forth” ([1970] 1985, 228-29). Kosuth here was describing where his ideas about art are presented and how artists’ activities inform their art, not what counts as art. Distinguishing himself from his former Art & Language friends and colleagues, Kosuth wrote in *The Fox* in 1975,

> While I always considered my writing on art a part of my role as an artist[,] I nevertheless have maintained that to quasi-gesturally profess one’s functioning as a *writer* [. . .] as continually the “model” [. . .] of art *qua* artist sets up too clear and in fact an inappropriate distinction between the meaning of the activity and the import of the content of what was being written. ([1975] 1991, 137)

Kosuth had the same objections to writing-as-art as he did to formalist painting after Duchamp. He believed it placed the “artistic significance of the group” on the “generalizable ‘script-making activity’ rather than on what is actually being said,” the ideas (137). Kosuth did, however, assert in “Art after Philosophy” that Robert Smithson should have “recognized his articles in magazines as being his work” ([1969] 1991, 29). The inconsistencies in Kosuth’s views on the status of artist writings are perhaps informed more by his strategic positioning and interpersonal relationships with other artists than by the rigour of his analysis; however, the unsolicited advice Kosuth offered Smithson via *Studio International* prompted an interesting response from Smithson that I discuss below.

Other Conceptual artists also made a point of specifying that they did not intend their writing to share the same status as their art. Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art” followed the *Art-Language* editors’ “Introduction” in that inaugural May 1969 issue, but it first appeared in the magazine *0-9* in January of that year.¹ LeWitt allowed that “[i]deas alone can be

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¹ *O-9* was a limited-run mimeographed magazine. Seven issues were published between 1967 and 1969. The editors, poet Bernadette Mayer and artist Vito Acconci, selected poems in addition to conceptual works for magazine pages by artists such as LeWitt, Graham, Smithson, Adrian Piper, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, Michael Heizer, and Robert Barry, as well as notes by Jasper Johns.
works of art” and that “the artist may use any form,” including “an expression of words (written or spoken).” He specified that “[i]f words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature; numbers are not mathematics.” However, his thirty-fifth and final sentence on conceptual art clearly states: “These sentences comment on art, but are not art” (in Alberro and Stimson, eds. 1999, 107-108). Lawrence Weiner likewise distinguished between art with words and artwriting. Eric Cameron reported in 1974 that Weiner “was very careful to point out in reply to a student’s question that when he writes about aesthetics he moves over to the role of art philosopher or art historian, this does not constitute part of his art” (3-4).

Adrian Piper supported “the activity of making explicit the thought processes, procedures, and presuppositions of making whatever kind of art we make” in a 1973 Artforum essay (1996, II:17). For example, thought processes might be subliminal, rational, or result from the influences of other works or texts. Procedures might entail questioning how and from whom materials are obtained. Methods for investigating one’s presuppositions might be derived from Kant, Hegel, psychoanalysis, or discussions with friends. The artist is then to “articulate and present these implications to an audience (either the same as or broader than the art audience) for comment, evaluation, and feedback” (18). This process “criticizes and indicts the machinations necessary to maintain this society as it is” (27). Piper explained that this “new occupation for artists” might exist as part of, alongside, or instead of the art itself. If it existed as part of or alongside the art, it might have the effect of giving the art a perspicuous and viable interpretation, support, or framework, although I don’t see this as its intention. If, on the other hand, it were to replace the art, well and good. We could then add it as a nascent appendage to the field, and spend hours of discussion and many kilocalories deciding upon its status and implications. I will call the occupation I have in mind “meta-art.” (17)

In suggesting that meta-art might exist “instead of” or replace art, Piper means that artists might devote all of their time to meta-art reflection. It replaces it not in the sense of counting as art but
as a “new occupation for artists.” In accord with her colleague Sol LeWitt, Piper included this essay, “In Support of Meta-Art,” in the second volume of her 1996 collected writings, subtitled “Selected Writings in Art Criticism,” and not the first, which is “Selected Writings in Meta-Art.” Meta-art-writing comments on meta-art but is not meta-art. “It is not the art”—for that would be art criticism—“but our role as artist that needs analysis” (25). Piper explains that “art itself cannot and should not be expected” to perform this analysis. (26). She implies in the passage above that meta-art’s candidacy for art is not the most important issue.

Daniel Buren’s view on the function of artist writings was similar to Piper’s. He explained in the preface to his 1973 John Weber Gallery publication 5 Texts, titled “Why Write Texts or the Place from Where I Act,” that “[t]he texts dislodge and clearly affirm that which one is reluctant to admit: for example, the relationship between the economy, aesthetics, politics, power, ideology, criticism, and the artist and the work.” The texts “decode the ‘mystical’ aura of art” (8). Buren’s writings are significantly posterior to the production of his stripe paintings: the texts “are not a demonstration of what the painting does not say because they themselves are dictated by a series of reflections resulting from works which preceded them” (6). For Buren, “one who has read the texts” is not “exempt from looking at the painting,” “for the texts are at best a mere echo of the works,” they “cannot and would not be able to be a substitute for the work on which it is based” (7). He conceived of them as didactic, required reading for viewers, including critics; they “permit seeing what they cannot say: the paintings” (8; [1973] 2004, 150). Buren’s paintings and texts are as necessary and incompatible as are word and image: “their very distinction confirms their existence”; “it would be as stupid today to give preference to the texts over the works as to pretend that the texts do not exist” (1973, 7). The division is not one of “theory” and “practice,” for Buren. “The texts are not theoretical. If there is theory it would appear in a painter’s practice” (7). Reminiscent of Foucault’s 1970 description of the grey
language with which we discuss images as “always over-meticulous and repetitive because too broad” (10), Buren’s 1973 account of writing includes broader goals such as “what I am doing, let’s say with art in general, or the question of art” ([1973] 2004, 150). “The texts talk about what the painting cannot, since the latter is apprehended in a glance. The texts permit discussion in a certain domain—that of art” (1973, 7-8). Buren was unequivocal as regards the status of his writing:

I just want to make this point, not to make confusion, especially right now with so many so-called works of art done as writing. These writings of mine are just to be taken as essays. Of course they are related to the work, but they are not the work itself. They are not “pieces” or something like that. ([1973] 2004, 150)

As Buren indicates, the stances of Art &Language and Kosuth on the status of artist writings seem to have prompted LeWitt, Weiner, Piper, and himself to voice their alternate views.

One contextual factor as regards questioning the art-status of artist writings in the 1970s that warrants discussion is, of course, Conceptual art. As averse as Art & Language and Kosuth may have been to art candidacy resting on formal affinity to previous art, the obvious fact that works of art increasingly contained textual components—whether as scores, scripts, directions, contracts, prints, or paintings—is not without relevance vis-à-vis Conceptual artists’ essay-writing. In the introductory essay to his co-edited anthology of artists’ and art critics’ and historians’ writings on Conceptual art, no less, Alexander Alberro lists general definitions of Conceptual art and notes that these also informed Lucy Lippard’s 1973 chronicle *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. They all describe potential motivations for artists to write essays. “Conceptual” denotes “an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness toward definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution” (1999b, xvii). The artist-as-writer also compliments
the contemporary understanding of the artist as researcher, as producer of patentable ideas or objects with documentable specifications. Douglas Huebler described this model as follows:

Someone who buys a Flavin, for instance, isn’t buying a light show. He is supporting an artist, like scientists receive the money from science foundations. They are supporting his activities, whatever his activities are, and if they want a fluorescent light they go to the hardware store and buy it for a great deal less. (in Alberro 2003, 74 from “Art without Space” symposium on 2 Nov. 1969, transcript in Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art)

In some cases, magazines and exhibition catalogues were already the site of the art. As artist, critic, and Aspen magazine-editor Brian O’Doherty put it, “[w]ith conceptual art, you needed a magazine more than a gallery” (in Allen 2011, 49 on 4 Dec. 2001). Publishing essays meant one’s activity was located where the art is. However, works for magazine or exhibition catalogue pages challenged the conventional autographic nature of art by employing a multiple, allographic mode where each example is equally authentic and original; mass-printed essays are already allographic and thus lack this subversive quality. As the art became more ephemeral in many cases, essays became a more accessible component of an artist’s activity. As Buren put it, “[a] text is easier to seize” in contrast to the “dispersion and successive appearance/disappearance” of his painting, “which is one of its principles” (1973, 7). Writing also paralleled other media artists preferred because of their everydayness, as I noted in the case of Dan Graham’s work. The medium of photography, for example, “became an instrument of artistic rebellion, a way to connect to core daily existence as it expressed itself through newspapers, magazines, and television” (Goldberg 1997, 175). “It didn’t belong to art: it belonged to everyone and no one” (Campany 2003, 15). Similarly, Kosuth explained, “I certainly came out of a painting and sculpture context, I never was a poet, never wrote, and so for me words are just a media, but a transparent media” (Kosuth in Alberro 2003, 180n21 on 10 Apr. 1969). Lastly, a new generation of artists first emerged in an art world that was explicitly textual. For example, Adrian Piper’s
first showing was in 0 to 9 magazine. Rather than house painting, museum guard duty, or design, her side jobs included working as a receptionist and administrative assistant for Conceptual art dealer and publisher Seth Siegelaub and typing Lucy Lippard’s manuscript on Ad Reinhardt.

Of course exploring how artist writings are like Conceptual art or endeavouring to determine whether artist writing influenced Conceptual art or vice versa is ultimately not terribly useful in that, belonging as they do to the same archaeological plane, they mutually constitute one another. I propose some implicit thoughts behind the proposed status of artist writings as art below; first, however, a noteworthy impulse for artists’ activities during this period is their reception of formalist criticism and the growing awareness that apparently “purely visual” definitions of art depended on discourse.

Not only had the apparent teleological quality of Greenbergian modernist formalism painted artists into a corner; its discourse became stale. As the Abstract-Expressionist-generation painter Philip Guston put it in 1978,

The few people who visit me are poets or writers, rather than painters, because I value their reactions. Looking at this painting, Clark Coolidge, a poet who lives about 30 miles away[,] said that it looked as if an invisible presence had been there, but had left these objects and gone somewhere else. I like that kind of reaction, compared with reactions like “The green works, the blue doesn’t work.” ([1978] 1982, 54)

Michael Fried noted he was “being ironic, but only up to a point” when he exclaimed in the 1990s that “I was sure that what I was doing mattered—in fact, I thought that nothing less than the future of Western civilization was at stake in ‘Art and Objecthood’ and the other essays of 1966-67,” yet at the time Philip Leider, as well as the artists who responded to “Art and Objecthood,” did not detect any irony (in Newman 2000, 435). Leider recalled believing that if they did not defend the right, difficult, high art, they would be “in some part responsible for the collapse of the culture”; they would “look like the late Romans” (in Newman 2000, 174, 298).
Barbara Rose avowed, “We believed in what we were saying, and we believed in the importance of the art, that it could still in some way change the world. There was a sense of real commitment, as if we were involved in something very important and unworldly, idealistic and committed” (in Newman 2000, 436). Finally, Rosalind Krauss confirmed, “What was at stake was the fate of cultural experience.” Critics have an “ethical” obligation to develop an “explanatory model” that is not “trivial” but instead is as substantive as the culture it explains (in Newman 2000, 439). As a student of Krauss, art historian Maurice Berger, observed, “For those upper-middle-class art-world denizens art was a form of grace” (in Newman 2000, 429).

More specifically, as Fried concluded “Art and Objecthood,” the “presentness” of modernist painting and sculpture “is grace” whereas the “presence” or literalness of objecthood or theatre is quotidian. For many artists and critics this was a trivial explanatory model; even if presentness were grace it could only be so for an art-world socialized upper-middle class, and it excludes other realms of value. The major influence on Fried, Rose, and Krauss was of course Greenberg who, as Mark Cheetham has observed, “continued to believe in the same threats defined early on as kitsch, and thus also in the same separatist solution to it, which was to be realized through formalist ‘purity’” (2001, 93). Parenthetically noting that “if Western civilization depended on a spray painting by Olitski, then it truly was in trouble,” Hal Foster has suggested that what “overdetermined the situation” is “a partial subsuming or sublimating of ethical and political questions into artistic and critical debate,” a sublimation that “was soon reversed by developments in the New Left, a pumped-up market, and feminism” (2002, 117-19).

Moreover, the debate itself informed the experiences the work was purely and simply believed to elicit. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood maintain in their anthologists’ introduction to *Art in Theory* that the Conceptual art movement was “strongly opposed” to modernist formalism specifically because “for all its claim to an absolute empiricism,” it “was engaged in the
dogmatization of expression: that it was tending to define and even constitute the expressive artistic objects of its own regard” (2003, 1014). Or, not in the anthologist’s but the Art & Language member/historian’s words, Harrison asserts: “The territory to be contested was the manipulative and constituting power of Modernist criticism and the surfaces [. . .] to which that criticism assigned virtue” (2001, 40). Or again, more to the point concerning the candidacy of an artist’s activities for art status, Art & Language contributor Ian Burn stated that it is “through” “the ‘linguistic support’ [. . .] the art community provides for its art-works” that “we identify an art-work as an art-work” ([1970] 1991, 126).

If the paradigm was established through writing, it stands to reason that writing is where many late 1960s and early 1970s artists felt compelled to intervene. “We’re less interested,” Art & Language wrote in 1975, “in the proliferation and criticism of art objects as such than we are in the development and criticism of the theory supporting practice, i.e., a dimension of social practice” (1-2). As Harrison put it in 1993, Conceptual art was designed to “confront” the authority of Modernist art and criticism “with the instruments of language; for it was by language that the power of the invisible establishment was actually secured, for all the mealy-mouthed talk of visual sensitivity and visual intelligence which echoed in the lesser salons of Modernist culture” (50). Having observed the informing, delimiting role of modernist formalist criticism, conceptual artists viewed writing as the appropriate means with which to challenge the reigning paradigm, to beat it at its own, legitimizing game. “As a form of corrective, various of the Conceptual artists proposed that works of art theory should be accorded the conjectural status of works of art,” Harrison and Wood assert (2003, 1014).

It is important to note that if using the instruments of language seemed radical, and if browsing literature from earth science, political science, philosophy of language or perceptual psychology is “of interest” because it was done “with a view to challenge the epistemological
hierarchy that had relegated such texts out of bounds to the serious Modernist artist,” as Art & Language member Michael Corris emphasized (2004, 272), this was because a different contingent truth of the artist was once again becoming operative. As Thomas Crow has pointed out, Conceptual art merely “recovered key tenets of the early academies, which, for better or worse, established fine art as a learned, self-conscious activity in Western culture,” including the view that “optical experience” alone is an insufficient function for art. When this view was deemed “a decayed academicism” only in the late nineteenth century, it was believed that more complex experiences and acute attention could be achieved through emphasizing visual elements such as colour and texture. “The limited historical life” of this latter strategy, Crow concludes, is what Conceptual art “was intended to mark” (2006, 55). On the model of Conceptual art, Greenbergian modernist formalism was framed as an insult to artists’ intelligence. Burn exclaime, “Greenberg’s oft-quoted dictum that ‘art is strictly a matter of experience’ is the antipathy of Conceptual Art and apparently an attempt to see art-objects as empirical entities, outside of the artist’s cognitive domain and in the domain (one assumes) of good food, mountains and thunderstorms!” ([1970] 1991, 224n3). Scientists, not mystics, become the relevant cultural comparison. As regards writing, Kosuth argued that if scientists are scientists when working in labs as well as when writing theses or reports, the same should be true of artists; they should not “depend on” critics “to cultivate the conceptual implications” of their “art propositions and argue their explication” ([1971] 1991, 86).

One factor that supported Conceptual art and writing as opposed to the sensuality and immediacy of modernist formalism was newly surfacing theories in the philosophy of language. Both Smithson in a draft essay noted earlier and Art & Language in their “Introduction” quoted philosopher of art Richard Wollheim as stating that it is “beyond the bounds of sense even to entertain the idea that a form of art could maintain itself outside a society of language-users”
Art & Language member Mel Ramsden pointed out that a third- and fourth-year course on art theory taught by members of Art & Language at Coventry College of Art included readings by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn, and Karl Marx (1988, 107). The group also read philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, philosophers of language Willard Quine and John Searle, and the writings of Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky (Corris 2004, 272). The Wittgensteinian notion that language is the vehicle of thought or the Saussurean notion that there are only relations of difference and no positive terms in language make language the means by which thought and sorting out perceptions can occur in the first place. As Stephen Scobie writes in his book *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*, we cannot know or talk about things “outside” Language because our “perception is based on the initial gesture of *perceiving difference*: even a perception as basic as light/dark or cold/hot is already, from this point of view, linguistic” (1997, 4-5). As the conception of language as a necessary condition of possibility of thought became prominent, so did the need to challenge those who maintained power by monopolizing it. Blurring the division of duties between critics and artists became an important goal.

Buren conceived of his writing as properly directing critics: “the texts will prevent those (the ‘critics’) who are tempted to define the work ‘in itself’ from doing so. [. . .] Writing them issued from the need to recapture the discussion which certain usurpers have tried to monopolize” (1973, 7-8).

Kosuth went further. He objected to the artist as “a prop man, a dummy” for whom “the critics do all the thinking and order the way in which you see it” ([1970] 1985, 229-30), but he also believed that the “middle-man/critic” was rendered “unnecessary” not, significantly, because artists were writing but because of the nature of conceptual art: “This art [. . .] annexes the function of the critic.” Conceptual art is concerned with “‘why’ procedures,” with “an inquiry
into the nature of art”; by contrast, “self-expression” and “visual experience” are merely “hows” masquerading as “whys.” Because conceptual art “is not just the activity of constructing art propositions, but a working out, a thinking out, of all the implications of all aspects of the concept ‘art,’” like science or philosophy “[i]t is interesting or it isn’t, just as one is informed or isn’t” ([1970] 1991, 38-39). Conceptual art does not allow for the option of the critic making the art (idea) more interesting for a lay audience.

The square-format Artforum-alternative Avalanche also sought to cut-out the middle-person by publishing only unmediated materials: “‘We publish articles by artists,’”—mainly informal interviews, sixty-one over six years in the early 1970s—“‘photodocumentation, and works executed specifically for the magazine. No critical bull,’” explained editor Willoughby Sharp to Newsweek (Anonymous 1972, 115).

Yet, the assumed directness of Conceptual art also led to a potentially fallacious emphasize on intention. As artist-writer John Miller has observed, “A lot of the first-generation Conceptualists fell into an intentionalist fallacy, where they thought that by eliminating the critic, then the audience would better and more directly understand their intentions as the correct meaning of the work” (in Baker et al. 2002, 208). More specifically, in the case of Art & Language and Kosuth, the artist’s intention was sufficient for a work to achieve art status. As noted, Art & Language stated that when determining whether works of art theory are “to be counted as works of conceptual art,” “[w]hat has to be considered here is the intention of the conceptual artist” (1969, 2). Kosuth, quoting Judd’s statement “if someone calls it art, it’s art,” asserted that a “work of art” “is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art” ([1969] 1991, 20). Kosuth stated that his own writing was “not intended to constitute some sort of ‘last word’”—note intention is still invoked here—and invited the reader to determine its usefulness in comparison to “the
objectively cloaked creative work done by our colleagues, those ‘neutered’ artists, the professional critics and art historians” ([1975] 1991, 130).

Judd’s influential intention-based art-status statement “[i]f someone says his work is art, it’s art” was critiqued by Art & Language protégés Philip Pilkington and Dave Rushton as “sociologically and historically empty—a self-certifying definition in search of some knowledge who that ‘someone’ might be” ([1971] 1980, 44). Buren concluded that Judd’s definition “has recently had success” but likewise pointed out that it does not satisfy the questions of by whom and how one is identified as an artist (in Oliva 1984, 179). The first context in which Judd made his statement is the 1966 Primary Structures catalogue, for which Judd wrote two paragraphs that object to critics’ labels including “reductive” “minimal” and “ABC.” He writes that the “negative characterization is glib; it’s another label and one not even concerned with what the work is. ‘Non-art,’ ‘anti-art,’ ‘non-art art’ and ‘anti-art art’ are useless. If someone says his work is art, it’s art” (1975, 190). Here Judd seems to want to point out that just because a work is compositionally basic does not mean it is unserious or against art. If one says one’s endeavour is a genuine contribution to the field of art, it is. A second context in which Judd uses the phrase is in discussion with New York Times reporter Grace Glueck: “‘I don’t know of any artist who wants a closed situation where one kind of work prevails—though I think some critics do. Let everyone do what he wants. If someone says his work is art, it’s art. I like having new things happen’” (in Glueck 1968, D23). Judd’s statement is more about discouraging limitations resulting from critics’ labels and programs and giving artists the benefit of the doubt. As for determining who an artist is, Judd specifically stated “if someone . . .” not “if an artist . . .” and in 1971 was opposed to the Artist Certification Committee, organized to determine who may live in SoHo: “You can’t say who is and who isn’t an artist” (1975, 205). In 1984, Judd elaborated,

As I’ve said elsewhere a while back anyone can say that what they are making is
art because that’s a judgement they make for themselves. In the long run any artifact will be art. In a thousand years the art of this century will be ceramic sinks and toilets because that’s all that will survive the wars and the developers. But as a viewer, I can say whether the art is good, middling or bad. This judgement is much more intelligible and interesting than a vague debate as to whether an old snow shovel is art or not. “Art or not art” is close to a beginner’s ethical problem such as in what circumstances should you give up your seat in the lifeboat.

(1987a, 70)

While Judd’s statement may have influenced conceptual artists, it does not tell us what art is or that an artist’s intentions are sufficient for conferring art status.

Others, including Buren and Piper, advocated an artist-knows-best position. Buren recalled in 1979 that he “understood some aspect of the work that no art critic was able to deal with at that time” (2). In 1973 he asserted,

The reader should not forget that the texts can contribute to the formulation of several fundamental concepts and that even if they are clumsy they are always more instructive and newer than what any critic, historian or other writer on art could perpetrated if he cared to. A situation mentioned in passing which may explain certain passionate dissension! (6n3)

Piper’s meta-art was predicated on self-analysis of the first-hand experience of art making, on “privileged access to the impulse, the activity, and the emergence of the art” ([1973] 1996, II:21). Piper allowed that “[o]bscuring the distinction between meta-art and art criticism has resulted in the conceptions of the artist as superstar, as financial con artist, as political satrap, as public relations expert” (21). Yet, she maintained that “it makes a difference whether we describe our own machinations and the motives and presuppositions behind them, or whether these machinations are revealed or imputed to us by a critic” (21-22). To Piper, artists could contribute analyses, presumably encompassing analyses of intentions, from a perspective that could not be duplicated. Another Conceptual artist-writer, Karl Beveridge, was careful to point out that when artists “describe the general ideological structures that have put us into this position,” that discussion is always already “framed in the language” of that system and thus
“reinforces that language” (1975, 139).

One certain critical function of writing as an artist’s activity, besides appropriately, it would seem, being the same means through which the outgoing paradigm had been established, was that it rendered formalist connoisseurship irrelevant. Another connoisseur-thwarting appeal of writing was its potentially greater material accessibility as a multiple, allographic medium that cannot be owned, in contrast to the often privileged access and leisure time necessary for encountering artworks in singular, autographic media (see Burn [1981] 1999, 403). Curator Kynaston McShine reported in his essay for the important 1970 MoMA Conceptual art survey exhibition *Information* that “[m]any of the highly intellectual and serious young artists” seek to reach an audience larger than that of previous contemporary art (139). Writing was also considered to offer a point of access to the uninitiated. From 1974 to 1977, sculptor Herbert George produced the periodical *Tracks: A Journal of Artists’ Writings*, which was devoted to presenting artists’ previously unpublished notes, diaries, poems, projects, short fiction, philosophical tracts, manifestoes, or writing on another artist. He believed this “wealth of material” served not as a supplement to art or as a “self-sufficient reproduction” but as community-building further reading (see Melvin 2008, 89; George 1974, 2). George sought to recreate the 1940s and 50s environment of artists’ open discussion that Barnett Newman described, which he saw as preferable to the present situation:

> What I saw in the New York art world was a power structure wherein the artist was last on the list. We made work, but after it left the studio it fell into a closed commercial circle that did not include the artist. There was no opportunity to have a conversation that was inclusive with respect to alternative approaches and ideas. There was little free space for open discussions to take place. (in Allen 2011, 305 on 29 Jan. 2009)

*Tracks* was discontinued after the eighth issue because the circulation of 2000 could not be continued without the aid of additional assistants and advertising, which George believed would
have gone “against what I thought the magazine was about” (305). In addition to posthumous
texts by Barnett Newman, Alberto Giacometti, Ad Reinhardt, and Piet Mondrian, contributions
were submitted by, among others, Robert Indiana, Robert Motherwell, Sol LeWitt, Larry Rivers,
Barbara Kruger, Peter Plagens, Claes Oldenburg, Vito Acconci, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Carl
Andre, Richard Prince, Robert Morris, Dan Graham, Victor Burgin, Nam June Paik, Jennifer
Bartlett, and Hans Haacke.

Community-building as well as pedagogy were motives behind establishing the journal
Art-Language too, which intended “to circumvent the provinciality and conservatism of the
English art world” (Harrison and Orton 1982, 16). However, whereas Alberro could argue
concerning the American context that “[a]fter all, in a literate society, objects of visuality are
essentially the result of specific traditions, whereas language as a model of communicative
exchange is a condition within which everyone operates” (2000, 152), it has also been observed
that literature is “perhaps the most class-divided of all art forms because of its racination in
language” (Livingstone, Anderson, and Mulhern 2007, 108). Not only were language-based class
distinctions considered—perhaps mythically—less pronounced in the United States, making
written discourse seem a viable democratic means for anyone to access the art field, Art &
Language took a very different approach, as evidenced by the following critical remark from
Harrison: “Various members of Art & Language in England were invited to contribute to The
Fox as named individuals, with the reservation that material was supposed to be generally

While Art & Language’s production, according to Harrison, “offered nothing for the
exercise of taste, no surfaces from which viewers could find their sensitivity reflected,” it also
created a new, language-based elitism: “the competences of the literate were effectively
frustrated by the wilful obscurity—the irresponsible intellectualism—of its terms” (1993, 50).
Art & Language’s mode of writing has been described as “dense prose and contorted intellectualism,” “obsessive formalization, disjunctiveness and incompleteness,” “critical aggression and defensive self-parody” (Osborne 1999, 62, 64), “corrosive irony” (Ramsden 1988, 107), “spoof[ing] academic journalese” (Lawson 2005, 122), and “cultural malingering, intent on mocking and demystifying not only the institutions of art but also the sham-academicism of some Conceptual art” (Corris 2004, 272). Peter Osborne observes that “[s]ubcultural solidarity in the appreciation of difficulty for its own sake has long been central to the appeal of professional philosophy to outsiders. And this was a group who rapidly fell in love with the rituals and techniques of rigour characteristic of logico-linguistic analysis in the Anglo-American manner” (1999, 62-63). Perhaps in part because of the “admittedly” “cursory understanding” of the books they read—“admittedly, many of the ideological positions held by self-described ‘politically conscious’ Conceptual artists during the 1960s and 1970s were based on a cursory understanding of the texts in hand and played no vital role in the process of critical self-examination so characteristic of the feminist movement” (Corris 2004, 272)—one often has the impression when reading Art & Language texts that one is missing part of the dialogue, that one would have to belong to their discussion group in order to understand the debate. Further, Peter Osborne contends that the texts “were no more immediately intelligible in their own day than they are today” (1999, 62). I consider the critical function of this apparent elitism and evasiveness shortly, but it is worth noting that it is distinct from even Kosuth’s position. While Kosuth believed the only audience for art, as in science and philosophy, were its practitioners—“[i]t is interesting or it isn’t, just as one is informed or isn’t” ([1970] 1991, 39)—in his writing he seemed to aim for lucidity, even if his logic was not always without flaws.

It has also been suggested that writing was inherently more appropriate for, better suited to, and thus more effective at making the kind of programmatic analyses that a criticism of
modernism necessitated: that writing about art is more critically efficacious than making it. As noted, Art & Language stated that they “have tended to use the language form of the support languages,” “not for any arbitrary reason, but for the reason that this form seems to offer the most penetrating and flexible tool with regard to some prime problems in art today” (1969, 10). Michael Corris has posited that for Conceptual artists such as Ian Burn, language was not taken up as a new kind of art material: “Rather, it was reasoned that the pragmatic dimension of language would enable a Conceptual art with socializing potential [. . .], actively contrib[ing] to the constitution of a new type of spectator for art [who] would be encouraged to play a more active, discursive role” (2004, 8). In a 2004 article on artists’ writings, Jeffrey Weiss argues that “the nature of the new work was almost programmatic in its appositional relationship to modernism, and this lent itself to theorizing in prose” (215). In practice, Michael Baldwin deemed writing “a matter of [. . .] forcing any and every piece of artistic ‘work’ out of its need for incorrigibility and into the form of an essay” (in Harrison [1991] 2001, 60 from a 1989 note). Penetrating and flexible; pragmatically socializing readers into an active, discursive role; theorizing a programmatic juxtaposition; a foil to the unruly and unmanageable art object: these are some of the conventional functions and uses of the discursive essay mode.

Philosopher of writing Jacques Derrida highlights these strengths of the discursive essay in a 1993 interview with Bernard Stiegler. He explains that he did not accept films in lieu of term papers from his students not because they were not related to the seminar problematic but because

JD: I had the impression, in reading or in watching their production, that what I was expecting from a discourse, from a theoretical elaboration, had suffered from this passage to the image. I did not refuse the image because it was the image, but because it had rather clumsily taken the place of what I think could have and should have been elaborated more precisely with discourse or writing. I didn’t want to seem reactionary and backward-looking [. . .] but at the same time, I didn’t want to yield on seemingly more traditional requirements, to which I
continue to hold. And so I wrote them a letter telling them, in substance, this: “OK. I am not opposed to this in principle, but there has got to be as much demonstrative, theoretical power, etc., in your videocassette as there would be in a good paper. [. . .] [W]hat you are proposing is coming in the place of discourse, but it does not adequately replace it.”

BS: There does not yet exist a scholarly (if not scientific) practice of the image, nor a practice of the image that would be widespread in academia, but this will have to come.

JD: It ought to be encouraged, but provided that we don’t pay too dearly for it, provided that rigor, differentiation, refinement do not suffer as a result—the rigor, differentiation, refinement which our heritage continues to associate with the classical form of discourse, and especially with written discourse, without images and on a paper support. (2002, 142-43)

As Derrida points out, it is not as though there are forms or contents specific to word or image. It is not impossible to achieve the qualities “our heritage continues to associate” with the discursive essay in another medium or form, but it can be difficult to do so. Perhaps, then, an implicit thought of Conceptual art-as-writing is that writing is, to put it bluntly, easier than making visual art that would be resistant to co-option.

Similar to the way in which Derrida considered his students’ films inadequate as scholarly works because they did not elaborate, demonstrate, theorize, and differentiate, with precision, refinement, and rigour, Smithson took issue with Kosuth’s suggestion that Smithson should have “recognized his articles” as “being his work.” Kosuth wrote: “Robert Smithson, had he recognized his articles in magazines as being his work (as he could have, and should have) and his ‘work’ serving as illustrations for them, his influence would be more relevant” ([1969] 1991, 29). In addition to being condescending and officious, Kosuth uses the derogatory term “illustrations” to describe Smithson’s production, a word which, like “caption,” suggests a subservient supplemental relationship between word and image. Smithson objects in an unpublished portion of an interview with Dennis Wheeler:

DW: [Kosuth] did sort of all things that you would level as an attack against a particular critical—

RS: Well he attacks me in this particular article.
DW: He did? I didn’t see it. I was wondering—
RS: Well, I have it upstairs if you want to see it. But the thing is that he says there’s some sort of confusion about an article. Like a lot of people are saying, “Well Robert Smithson said that a photograph was a sculpture.” Well, I never said anything of the kind. A photograph is a different aspect of material properties. In other words, it’s a different syntax. [. . .] Each element of a work is discrete in terms of its own properties, so that he makes the point that, you know like, I should just say that my articles are art, and that the work depicted in the articles are art, and then forget about the physical properties [of the work] which I think is wrong on his part. [. . .] An article is an article in that it’s separate from the physical experience. It’s a mental aspect. The physical then is another thing entirely. They’re part of the same ensemble, but the properties are different. The properties of an article—the materiality of the article, print on paper[,] and the mental experience [that is] involved in the unusual thinking and unusual seeing that goes into making the article[—]are not dealt with [by Kosuth], that material is not dealt with. He’s dealing generally with simply a kind of definition of “article.” I mean he hasn’t read that article. In other words, he hasn’t absorbed the experience of the article which I resent, and I find that glib, and I find that most criticism is based on that. If you don’t get into the material of the article and digest that, then you’re not really confronting the material of the article, so that you’re missing the mental experience of the article in relation to the physical activity that went on, let’s say, in the Yucatan. I’ve always made this clear in my articles, and he makes it look like —uh, he says something like, “He could have said that his influence on Conceptual art would have been greater if he’d said that the articles were everything.” More or less, that’s what he’s saying. But I don’t say that at all, because they’re different kinds of activities. (Smithson and Holt 1986-2005, 3833:1104)

For Smithson, to call the articles art is a disservice to the work depicted; it denies the significance of the physical experience of them. What the articles offer, and what Kosuth misses, according to Smithson, is a “mental experience”—“unusual thinking,” “unusual seeing,” ideas—that is always already “in relation to the physical activity that went on”: in a word, artwriting, not art.

By implication, if Smithson were to conceive of writing-as-art, of producing an artistic practice of writing—the chiasma of Stiegler’s “scholarly practice of the image” (above), one would have to take into account its materiality, “print on paper.” Materiality is the quality that Smithson, like Derrida in relation to scholarly work, “continue[s] to hold” for art. Aside from ignoring the articles’ artwriting function, what Kosuth is “proposing is coming in the place of
[art], but it does not adequately replace it.” Smithson’s position is thus averse to Kosuth’s art-as-idea-as-idea notion and to Kosuth’s belief that Duchamp’s readymades and subsequent Conceptual art “changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function” ([1969] 1991, 18). Smithson also counters Burn’s assertion that “[conceptual art] isolates ‘the art’ from the form of presentation altogether [so that] [. . .] art can become more wholly art”; “The use of words is in itself of no importance. What is important is the information carried by the words. The presentation of art writing ‘as art’ does not mean that the form of the words is aesthetically significant” ([1970] 1991, 126, 224-25n4). From Smithson’s perspective, these views appear to throw out the baby—materiality and mode of presentation taken into account in a nuanced way, evident even in Duchamp’s readymades, incidentally—with the bathwater—successions of visual styles in selective and apparently autonomous media.

Indeed, it is the materiality and, more often, mode of presentation of artist writings that lead artists and commentators to identify artist writings as art. Smithson stated, albeit not specifically about writing, “I’m more interested in a kind of denaturalizing, or in things more in terms of artifice, rather than in any kind of naturalism. That’s why I insist on the notion of art” (Smithson, Boettger, and Sharp 1998, 75). Artifice, clever stratagems, insincere behaviour: as noted, for Bochner straight writing constituted criticism while playful writing and fake quotations constituted art. Yve-Alain Bois announces that there are many reasons why The Domain of the Great Bear—here italicized—“‘is’ a work of art”: “Parody, montage, and deadpan-ness are all aesthetic strategies, each with a copious history” (2008, xii). Gwen Allen deems Smithson’s, Bochner’s, and Graham’s magazine works “investigat[ions of] the magazine page as a new kind of artistic medium,” “occupy[ing] ambiguous ground in between magazine articles and works of art,” because of their use of elements and strategies including found materials, the “publicity medium” “against the grain,” “parody, pastiche, appropriation, and
mimicry,” Brechtian estrangement, campiness, esotericism, subtlety, and “stealth intervention” (2011, 31, 34). An extended scale and nuanced manipulation of the magazine medium is perhaps most notable in General Idea’s FILE magazine (1972-89). AA Bronson recalled, “I think FILE was very much an artwork by General Idea. It wasn’t really a magazine in the normal sense of the word. It was one of our projects and was very much integral to our project as a whole” (2007, 100). For Studio International’s 1976 “Survey of Contemporary Art Magazines,” Bronson responded to the question of “How important is the physical ‘look’ of your magazine—quality of paper, number of colour illustrations, high standard of design, etc?” with, “As File is an investigation into publishing as a visual medium, the ‘look’ of the magazine is almost synonymous with its content. Quality of paper (newsprint), number of colour illustrations (none) and standard of design (I [mine]) are all paramount considerations in our stylistic pose” (165, 166). These works are not without subject, or critical function: Allen reads late 60s magazine works as “challenging both the authority of criticism and the promotional role of the magazine” and FILE as “suggest[ing] a ‘queering’ of the media that at once exaggerated and undermined its spectacular visual regime” (2011, 31, 148). Yet on these readings, it is the artistic strategies that award art status to the new medium of writing in or producing magazines.

Despite the fact that these manipulations of text and of magazine conventions and use of artistic strategies constitute a quite different mode than Kosuth’s and Art & Language’s quasi-scholarly one, it was difficult to prevent an artistic reading of the latter mode. Smithson seemed to highlight this factor with his 1967 Dwan Gallery exhibition title Language to Be Looked at and/or Things to Be Read. As Peter Osborne has asked in challenge to Kosuth’s disposable art-as-idea-as-idea Photostats: “How can visual representations of language be purified of the pre-aestheticized structures of handwriting and typographical design [. . . ,] of the logic of the artistic field to present visual form, however attenuated or seemingly irrelevant” (1999, 61, 62)? Stating
that one is only interested in the art idea and not the “form of presentation” (Kosuth [1969] 1991, 30) does not thwart visual analysis.

In spite of the seemingly unavoidable, unintended visual/artifactual readings of Kosuth’s and Art & Language’s Conceptual art and artist writings, one final and noteworthy appeal of writing for Art & Language was their conception of it as less determined than art making. In its presumed everydayness—before feminist, deconstructivist, and other critiques of language, as of photography—it seemed a less definitive, less circumscribed default mode. Michael Corris reports that the phrase “the artist out of work,” which came out of New York Art & Language group conversations, pointed to the idea that there seemed to be no work for the artist to do which was not circumscribed—that is to say, compromised by the tenacious protocols of Modernist cultural legitimation. [. . .] The problem became a search for ways to “go on.” Working and talking with each other was a means to construct a discursive space at some ideological and social remove from the institutional order of what was then called “normal art.” (2004, 1, 2)

As Harrison put it, “Art & Language was obliged to generate theory where there seemed to be none: [. . .] to proceed so that there might be materials to proceed with” ([1991] 2001, 76). “Going on” in writing was not going forward: “Not even the likes of Barnett Newman or Don Judd or Robert Morris, who spoke eloquently for themselves, could be said to have engaged in their published work in an open or self-annihilatingly discursive activity” (Art & Language 1999, 236). Poet Barrett Watten observes that Art & Language’s written proposals for art are “a perpetual holding back—and this holding back is accomplished by means of a skeptical method that puts anything under attack as ‘not good enough.’” Art & Language “can only take itself apart; the language itself is not meant to ‘take’” (1985, 213, 215). Writing was a place to explore all of the possibilities that were “not good enough” without embodying them. It was cross-disciplinary in order to evade discipline(s): “It was subject to a reciprocating form of ‘emergency
conditional’: it was ‘art’ just in case it was (taken for) ‘philosophy,’ and it was ‘philosophy’ just in case it was (taken for) ‘art’” (Harrison 2001, 19 Michael Baldwin in conversation); the texts “were theoretical just in case they were art object-like, and art object-like just in case they were theoretical” (Art & Language [1997] quoted in Harrison 2001, 210n22); the group “was engaged in something researchy and philosophical just in case this was an artistic practice (even if it was difficult to say how) and engaged in an artistic practice (etc.) just in case those involved thought they were engaged in something authentically research-like” (Art & Language 1999, 237). If Art & Language production is as preliminary as, in Anne Rorimer’s phrasing, “a discursive investigation devoted to setting forth the process of inquiry” (2001, 111), it is bound to ask something different from the art audience.

Art & Language sought to produce a gallery situation in which the “beholder” or “onlooker” “might be forced or persuaded to join the conversation” or in which “the silence of beholding” was “destroyed” “with talk and puzzles” (Baldwin 1988, 106; Baldwin in Harrison [1991] 2001, 60 note written in 1989). “One finds oneself searching for a key,” Peter Osborne remarks upon reading Art-Language, “only to be reminded that in this case the search is the key” (1999, 62). But was the search worth the effort? Did the apparent ambiguity and evasiveness result from the kind of difficulty that rewards close reading? Deriding demands for specialization and boundary-protecting appeals to autonomy, Ramsden voiced complaints with which it may be difficult to sympathize after time spent reading Art-Language, especially after Corris’s admission of their “cursory understanding” of their sources (2004, 272): “If you begin to theorize about art,” Ramsden stated, “you’re automatically a pop intellectual or a joke philosopher; [. . .] someone who uses material from outside the art domains is considered to be a dilettante, while people who stick to their business are considered to really know what they’re doing” ([1972] 2004, 119).
Returning to Art & Language’s hypothesis: apart from possibly not delivering on the rigour Derrida “holds” for scholarly work, just in case, not taking into account the materiality Smithson maintains for art, and not employing artistic strategies, we might still consider whether Art & Language’s “Introduction” and other written work could be baptized “art” in Thierry de Duve’s sense. This baptism would not entail “subsum[ing]” the “Introduction” “under a concept” or “justify[ing] it by means of a definition.” Rather, it would mean “relating it to everything else you call art” (1996, 59). Significantly, Art & Language present a hypothetical scenario as opposed to personally baptizing their editorial as art in the declarative manner of Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) or Robert Rauschenberg’s telegram stating “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so” (1961). Frank Bowling pointed out that asking whether there is a separate black art “puts in doubt the existence of black art” (1969a, 18); asking “can this editorial . . .” likewise evokes equivocation. Yet, when Watten observes that, “if naming the introduction an artwork were not problematic, the introduction would consist of a very short naming of itself as art,” he adds that this would be “hardly much of an artwork at all” and proposes that “[t]he ‘posing of the question,’ then, makes the introduction the artwork” (1985, 205). With Watten’s proposal that the “art” is in the extended posing of the question in mind, we might consider De Duve’s further suggestion that new things are more likely to be related to the things you already call art if your current range of things is broad, but that “as your exposure to art augments, so does the intensity level of the feelings, the quantity of surprise, the richness and density of experience, that you expect to be conveyed by works of art” (1996, 64). Even if Art & Language writing conveyed this richness of experience, there is a reason it could not come up for the count as art. That reason is that it already comes up for the count as, is recognized as, and is domesticated by falling into a category that is far less troublesome than a proper name. That category is artist writings.

Artist writings are, as Smithson puts it contra Kosuth, a “mental experience,” in words,
always already in relation to, if not directly addressing, past, present, or future art production, typically involving images or objects. They are simultaneously secondary, second-order—read as “about”—and primary—mined as unique source material. Like “artists’ books” or “what is,” according to George Baker, “still unfortunately called the ‘artist’s film’” (2005, 80), “artist writings” indicates a production at once precious and nonprofessional: the contribution of potentially rich experiences from an untrained bookmaker, filmmaker, or writer. Smithson seems to evoke these traits in an interview-description of his and Bochner’s “The Domain of the Great Bear” as “sort of an investigation of a specific place; but not on a level of science, but in terms of discussing the actual construction of the building; once again, an almost anthropological study of a planetarium from the point of view of an artist” (1996, 296, my italics). Yet what distinguishes artist writings from artists’ books or artists’ films is their secondary about-ness and relation-to and the primary inside information to which they provide access, in short their secondary and primary discursiveness, moreover outputted and quotable in the same form as that in which art historians and critics work.

This discursiveness, this belonging to a category or genre and not a candidate for a proper name, is what allows an “Introduction” by artist-editors and other artist writings to escape a predicament that post-métier, post-selective-and-apparently-autonomous-media art candidates face, which is “if it isn’t art, it isn’t anything.” This is the reason artist and former anthropologist Susan Hiller gives for her objection to commentators calling her installation work “anthropology” as opposed to “art” ([2005] 2008, 230). Likewise, Hal Foster asserts that Dan Graham’s video Rock My Religion (1982-84) “qualifies as art by default (it’s not quite history, so it must be . . .)” (2009, 225). It’s not quite comprehensive or methodologically rigorous enough to be history, so it must be art, because if it isn’t art it isn’t anything. Or, as de Duve puts it, “A bottle rack is neither a painting nor a poem nor a piece of music nor even a sculpture; it’s art, or
else it’s nothing” (1996, 377). By contrast to Hiller’s installations, Graham’s video, and Duchamp’s readymade, an “Introduction” by artists-editors will always already be something: namely, secondary-primary artist writing.

Even de Duve’s final art-status-determining proposal, which is that art candidates “should be submitted to the test of the Reciprocal Readymade = Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board,” highlights the secondary-primary document status of Art & Language’s “Introduction” (1996, 420). If Art-Language 1, no. 1 were subjected to the allographic equivalent to this test, banning or burning all copies, would not the regret primarily concern the loss of secondary-primary archaeological research materials, as when archives are destroyed due to human or natural disasters—the loss of writing that “defines, informs, and structures our experience of art,” as David Carrier describes artwriting (2003, 22)? Buren and LeWitt viewed writing this way in the 1970s. Buren stated in his “Why Write Texts or The Place from Where I Act” preface,

The texts presented here have nearly become “historical” since the (pictorial) experience to which they are related is appropriate to a specific point in time (the time when the texts were written). In other words, my current work is more evolved than the texts since the work itself has not solidified, while the fixity of the texts remains. (1973, 6)

LeWitt likewise deemed the value of artwriting fleeting while proposing that artist writings might have more, albeit perhaps still contingent, value:

The nice thing about art magazines is that they’re almost totally useless. It’s like last year’s copy of Time magazine. They’re just about as interesting. Pick them up after a year and they’re really boring because they only can have the current, you know, the idea of currency. But I think what they should do, as some of them are doing, is just to turn over pages and sections to artists and let them write it, instead of art hacks who have to turn out all this drivel every month. (LeWitt [1970] 2004, 36)

That the category or genre “artist writing” may not have passed de Duve’s destruction test in the 1970s is in the end less important than the fact that the issue of the possible art-status of artist writings was raised and that it was moot for artists before and since. The historically significant
issue is not whether the Art & Language editorial is art; it is that the editors were absorbed by this question for a time.

In fact, de Duve observes that it is “the height of irony” that Conceptual artists turned to analysing art’s “cognitive content” just when it became clear that Duchamp had already reduced “art in general” to its “sufficient conditions,” “that ‘art’ could only be a proper name emptied of all knowable meaning,” that “all a priori knowledge had withdrawn from the word ‘art’” (1996, 377). There is indeed an anxiousness and belatedness to Kosuth’s concerns in “Art after Philosophy”:

The strongest objection one can raise against a morphological justification for traditional art is that morphological notions of art embody an implied a priori concept of art’s possibilities. But such an a priori concept of the nature of art (as separate from analytically framed art propositions or “work” which I will discuss later) makes it, indeed, a priori: impossible to question the nature of art. And this questioning of the nature of art is a very important concept in understanding the function of art. ([1969] 1991, 18)

At this time, analytical philosophers of art became concerned with creating a definition of art that would take into account the defining role of institutions. George Dickie first elaborated his institutional theory of art—essentially that a work of art is something upon which an art-world representative has granted art-status—in a 1969 issue of the *American Philosophical Quarterly*. This theory is, significantly, sociological and, as Noël Carroll points out, criticizes the prevailing notions of aesthetic attitudes and aesthetic experience (1994, 3). It would be the most discussed theory in philosophical aesthetics in the 1970s (Yanal 1994, x). Arthur Danto, whose 1964 article “The Artworld” Dickie referenced, asserted in a 1973 article that because art, like philosophy, more and more takes itself as its subject, “[t]he distinction between philosophy of art and art itself is no longer tenable, and by a curious, astounding magic we have been made over into contributors to a field we had always believed it our task merely to analyze from without” (16-17). De Duve may consider this belated analysis on the part of Conceptual artists as well as
analytical philosophers the “height of irony.” But as Paul Veyne observes, paraphrasing Marx, “humanity raises problems only at the point when it resolves them”: the condemnation of slavery or the collapse of the “truths” that justified slavery was possible only at the point when a post-abolition plan was resolved (2010, 14). Likewise, the “truth” that artists pursue selective and apparently autonomous media collapsed when a resolution became apparent.

It was less a matter of the Introductions, the writings in meta-art, or the explorations of art-as-proposition, after philosophy, effectively teasing out a resolution. Buren discovered, contra Harrison and Art & Language, that “one should try and change, not the discourse on art, but art itself.” He saw that “the artwork suddenly loses all substance” when “one tries to subvert the customary discourse on art.” “The first signs of change will appear,” he contended, “when the vernacular, flourishing discourse of our critics, artists and historians alike, has to go through an irreversible reconversion so as to adapt to the new artwork in question” (1977, 25). The resolution thus appeared less through any definitive arguments established in the artist writings and more in the very fact that artists devoted their time to writing that was directly relevant to their visual production, such that a new term that appropriately encompassed all of this activity would become necessary: practice.

I want to propose that the shift from medium to practice was consolidated by the activity of artist writing more than by other activities in what Rosalind Krauss identified as an “expanded field” (1979). Insomuch as the history of art is full of expanded activities—indeed, closed versus expanded is perhaps not the most productive way to understand dominant modes of artistic production let alone “the field”—the secondary-primary quality of artist writing demands the notion of “practice” much more than does producing earthworks, photographs, architecture, films, videos, performances, happenings, or music or sound art. What is especially significant about the Art & Language group on this account is that they did not initially and as a group
produce objects or images: if their writing was not quite art, not even art by attrition, it certainly
was the activity they performed qua artists. When art becomes practice, the question of the art
status of an activity such as writing is, consciously or unconsciously, made moot. Not only is it
no longer anxiety-inducing. It is no longer interesting.

De Duve points out that the term “practice” was ubiquitous among those familiar with
French theory by 1975; carried celebrated Marxist and Althusserian connotations; referenced
“specific historical institution[s]”—“pictorial practice” as opposed to “painting”; and allowed
“artistic practice(s)” to be situated among one of a number of “signifying practices” ([1993]
2005, 28-29). Indeed, Buren asserted in 1969 that the “recognition of [the] existence [“of certain
problems”] can be called practice. The exact knowledge of these problems will be called theory
[. . .]. [T]he only theory or theoretic practice is the result presented/the painting or, according to
Duve rightly points out that the subsequent widespread use of the term is a “symptom,”
“conveying the vague suspicion that has come to surround the word art” without pointing to
specific works and questioning whether that word “has ceased to apply to them significantly”
([1993] 2005, 29). Yet, more than a symptom, the term “practice” also suggests that an object or
activity’s art status is a question that is no longer of interest.

The question artists would ask by the late 1970s was, according to 1978 MFA recipient
Howard Singerman,

the question of what to do, a question at once personal and what might be called professional. The question “What should I do?” was also always the question “What do artists do?” [. . .] The tools and skills of sculpture were available to me as options. If I needed them to do my work as an artist, to address the issues or make the objects I wanted to make, there were people who could teach me. But it was clear at the time that the craft practices of a particular métier were no longer central to my training; we learned to think, not inside a material tradition, but rather about it, along its frame. The problem of being an artist occupied the center. The question I posed to my teachers, and that they posed to me again and again,
was not how to sculpt or to paint, but what to do as an artist, and as “my work.”

(1999, 2, 4)

Pollock asked “Is this a painting?” Art & Language asked “Is this art?” Seventies art students asked “what should I do as my work?”

In a what-should-I-do model, medium is subservient to critical function, although no less significant for that. To be sure, the prioritization of critical function was part of Art & Language’s enterprise, even if inquiring about the art-status of writing was nevertheless a prominent concern. Michael Corris makes it clear that some members “imagined” conceptual art “to be a sign that the basis for a radical cultural practice lay elsewhere” (2004, 2). Harrison and Orton asserted that all forms of Art & Language work were directed toward “the possibility of critical content in that [art] discourse, rather than to the enlargement of the extensive category of art objects” (1982, 29). And it was as an endeavour to challenge the established terms of engagement in the art world that Conceptual art could be said to be “the art of the Vietnam war era,” as Kosuth reflected in 1975 (1991, 139). Art historian Blake Stimson has noted, “Conceptual artists of all varieties shared with others of their generation an unequaled sense of opportunity and obligation to question the authority of the institutions that superintended their social roles” (1999, xxxviii). Fried could claim, “I do think it’s pertinent that in 1968, in one of my pieces on Caro, I say his sculptures redeem the time if anything could. I was thinking of Vietnam, and lots else that was going on; what was happening in the world outside art partly accounts for the extreme tone of some of my writing during those years” (in Newman 2000, 300-301). However, many artists in 1969 and into the 1970s could no longer bring themselves to “redeem the time” through art. Kynaston McShine notably observed in his essay for Information, ...
universities, in your bed, or more formally in Indochina. It may seem too inappropriate, if not absurd, to get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas. What can you as a young artist do that seems relevant and meaningful? (138)

Significantly, one way to optimize the exposure of written criticality was through an especially “open” visual production. As noted, Buren found changing art discourse alone to be insufficient. Alexander Alberro asserts that “the very inadequacy” of his stripe paintings “index his interventions in the media in the form of writings, which [. . .] expound a theoretical position that critically analyzes, and prompts reflection on, the containment of art by institutional techniques and means” (1999b, xxv). While “inadequacy” may capture the aim of thwarting connoisseurship shared by many works of Conceptual art, it is perhaps more accurate to describe the point of intersection between the art and writing of Buren and later artist-writers such as Martha Rosler and Andrea Fraser as that of a confluence of critical function while employing an optimal disparity of means.

3 Feminist Disclosure

“Can the subaltern” even ask whether her production can come up for the count as a work of art? (Spivak 1999, 269). Indeed, the critical function of feminist artist writings from the 1970s was for the most part a pragmatic assertion of the existence of art by women, encouraging other female artists through this new exposure, and disclosing patriarchal assumptions that led to civil and art world discriminations. This was a necessary step if they hoped at some point to support themselves through their art and dispel the “curatorial defense” on the East and West coasts of the United States—“We don’t exhibit women artists because there are no significant women artists” (Rickey 1994, 122).

Perhaps the most distinctive and influential feature of the new feminist art journals was
their co-operative foundation. Unlike Leider’s *Artforum*, which included commissioned writings by artists five years into its existence, the feminist art journals were often co-operative, founded and consisting of writing by artists, art historians, and critics. In particular, the three-issue *Womanspace Journal* (1973), published by the eponymous exhibition space founded by Judy Chicago in Los Angeles, published contributions from female artists and art historians in similar numbers. An editorial by designer Sheila de Bretteville and art historians Ruth Iskin and Arlene Raven reads in part:

> WOMANSPACE JOURNAL is consciously attempting to overcome false divisions of disciplines. Rather than reinforcing one area as creative (art) and another as helping this creative area to be expressed (criticism, art history and design), we recognize the creativity involved in any of these areas and wish to acknowledge their credence. In conjunction with this effort, designer Sheila de Bretteville has become a contributing editor of WOMANSPACE JOURNAL. In joining the editorial and design teams she wishes to arrive at more open form attitudes that will facilitate the realization of a reader’s impulse toward being a contributor. The definitions of art and design are confused and limiting; in suspending them, a new range of ideas can be explored and a new group of women in the arts can participate in this exploration. (1973, 3)

This would be the journal’s last issue, but the aim is noteworthy. Here artists might work with non-artists to blur the division of duties, not in order to take over the master’s/critic’s tools, but to explore collaboratively the possibilities of interdisciplinarity.

A second notable feature of feminist art journals is the breadth of their coverage. Seventies feminist art periodicals—particularly the *Feminist Art Journal* (1972–77) and *Chrysalis* (1977–1980)—were multidisciplinary, often reporting on literature, music, and other forms in addition to visual art. They were also politically engaged, reporting on current events, actions, and panels and symposia. In 1977, artists Harmony Hammond, Joan Braderman, Mary Beth Edelson, Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, May Stevens, Mary Miss, Marty Pottenger, Joan Snyder, Elke Solomon, Pat Steir, Michelle Stuart, and Nina Yankowitz; writers Patsy Beckert
and Arlene Ladden; architect and scholar Susana Torre; and curators/critics Sally Webster, Elizabeth Weatherford, Elizabeth Hess, and Lucy Lippard cofounded *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1977–1993). In the first issue, the collective explained that *Heresies* “is structured as a collective of feminists, some of whom are also socialists, Marxists, lesbian feminists or anarchists; our fields include painting, sculpture, writing, anthropology, literature, performance, art history, architecture and filmmaking” (1977, 1). While many of the artists’ contributions consist of reproductions of their art, as is also the case with *Chrysalis*, Harmony Hammond contributed essays on feminist abstract art (1977b) and on class consciousness. The latter concern “raises questions of imagery, permanence, scale, ways of working, and concepts of art education. It raises questions of money and power, who sees my work, and what effect I want it to have on others” (1977a, 36). The third issue was devoted to “Lesbian Art and Artists” and included responses to the previously advertised question “What does being a lesbian artist mean to you?” (Stedman et al. 1977, 38).

Seventies feminist journals were also temporally inclusive, containing both historical and contemporary material. As regards the former, the two-issue publication *Woman and Art* (1971–72) presented articles on Rosa Bonheur, Paula Modersohn-Becker, and Romaine Brooks. One fifth of articles in this publication’s successor, the nineteen-issue *Feminist Art Journal*, were devoted to historical female artists, as were one third of the articles in the seven-issue *Womanart* (1976–78). *Feminist Art Journal* also published proceedings from the first meeting and subsequent activities of the Women’s Caucus of the College Art Association, demonstrating a shared commitment to the work of contemporary feminist academics.

When one considers the statistics for the female to male ratio of *Artforum* coverage, it becomes clear why female artists believed that if they wanted to disclose their work and build a community around it they would need to found alternative venues. During the first ten years of
that magazine, 1962–72, fewer than five percent of feature articles were on female artists. There were single feature articles on eleven female artists, three on Helen Frankenthaler, and two each on Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, and Georgia O’Keeffe. In the exhibition review sections of the 1970–71 volumes of *Artforum* and *Art in America*, only twelve percent and eight percent, respectively, of the reviewed shows were of female artists’ work (see Newman 2000, 513n90). The female to male ratio of critics writing for *Artforum* was closer to equal with the writing of Barbara Rose, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Lucy Lippard. Art world acceptance as an artist was more convoluted than sending a writing sample to or being recruited by Philip Leider. Thus, to be solicited as an artist-writer required not only that acceptance through convoluted channels but also notable presence and a degree of cachet. To ask, of the 1970s, “why have there been no great women artist-writers?” is to ask “why have there been no great women artists?”

Art historian Janet Wolff points out that in the case of writing literature, “where problems of training and acceptance into male-dominated and male-defined academies did not exist, women’s entry into the profession was not a simple matter, and was by no means on equal terms with men.” She cites social restrictions preventing travel and participation in literary milieux, beyond “the basic prerequisites of time, money and ‘a room of one’s own’” ([1981] 1993, 43). Brian O’Doherty observed of the period that “[w]omen were acceptable as intellectuals, critics, partners, sex partners, supporters, polemists, publicists, helpers, but they were not as acceptable as artists,” and therefore not as artist-writers (in Newman 2000, 422).

A 1976 performance work by Poppy Johnson evokes some of these challenges. Poppy Johnson was a member of the Guerrilla Art Action Group and co-chair with Robert Morris of the May 1970 Art Strike against War, Repression, and Racism, an anti-war demonstration sponsored by the Art Workers’ Coalition. Her performance *Writing about This Work Is This Work—This*
Work Is Writing about This Work was first performed at Artists Space, New York in 1976, followed by the Leo Castelli Gallery the same year, the Whitney Museum in 1977, and the Pratt Institute in 1978. The artist writes using an electric typewriter while a monitor displays a live recording of Johnson and the typed, stream-of-consciousness text as it is produced. The work discloses the personal; the text describes her experience of making the work and of writing in public, including the phrase “‘I want to be alomne [sic]’” (Jacob and Roth 1983, 104). The notion of being on display, and the attendant notion of objectification, is also raised. The work simultaneously asserts a positive image of woman-as-artist-as-writer and produces a critically efficacious moment of hesitation. Viewers might at least initially bypass Johnson, not realizing this is “the artist” and “the work” because mistaking her for yet another female gallery assistant or receptionist. A ubiquitous image indeed, women involved with 60s political movements often raised the complaint that they were treated as secretaries, assigned to or presumed to do the typing, photocopying, and coffee-pouring (see Wark 2006, 24–25 and Bailey 2001, 127). That affirming the gallery presence of woman-as-artist-as-writer was a novel enough gesture to make into a performance gives some indication that the female artist-writer was an unfamiliar subject in the 1970s.

Exposure and opportunity were the basic functions of writing by female artists. These functions developed out of the slide registry and newsletter West-East Bag (WEB) begun by Judy Chicago, Grace Glueck, Lucy Lippard, and Miriam Schapiro. As Carrie Rickey observed, “[e]ach month, the WEB newsletter originated from a different city, educating its subscribers about the latest happenings, conducting a census of women faculty at major institutions, maintaining a slide registry so that curators and critics would have a visual data bank of work by women” (1994, 122). It appears that it was in response to this and other women’s groups’ activities that the 1971 Whitney Annual increased the percentage of female artists to 22 from the
five percent representation of the past.

Forming new magazines entailed taking control and holding the highest positions on the masthead themselves. The first editorial for the Feminist Art Journal quoted an English suffragist and then announced, “[i]n our own words, we say ‘Women artists, we now have our own place to be our own selves in print. The battle has begun’” (Moss, Nemser, and Mainardi 1972, 2). Concurrent with feminists establishing their own bookstores, health centres, credit unions, and publishing and record companies (Grimstad 1989, 369), producing periodicals on art by women was conceived less as an anti-authoritarian gesture—as were Dan Flavin’s and Mel Bochner’s remarks, speaking for oneself in Artforum without exactly having to storm the citadel to do so—and more as an alternative. In addition to feminist collectives being collaborative in that they included artists, writers, artwriters, and curators, they were also, if not precursors in every case, at least parallels to co-operative, alternative artists’ spaces. These spaces’ multi-purpose functions included bookstore, gallery, film or video screening room, and performance space. In turn, control-taking feminist art magazines, alternative spaces, and other 1970s alternative so-called “artists’ magazines”—typically geared toward artists, “counterpublics,” and political activists “within the art world,” as Gwen Allen points out (2011, 142), although, it should be noted, not strictly consisting of writing by artists—cultivate communities.

Feminist art periodicals had been supported by public funding sources in the mid 1970s such as the New York State Council on the Arts, alongside National Endowment for the Arts-backed art magazines (see Women Artists Newsletter 1, no. 3 [June/July 1975]; Allen 2011, 142, 329n8, 333n90). However, by the late 1970s, the Feminist Art Journal and Womanart folded owing to inflation and lack of funds. These magazines had also been “co-opted by success,” as artist and editor of the Feminist Art Journal Pat Mainardi put it:

When we began, there was no way to get articles in print that raised the issues
those articles did. It was difficult to reproduce the work of women in magazines, and the other journals wouldn’t even see or accept art history articles about women. One of the things that the \textit{Feminist Art Journal} and \textit{Womanart} did was to force major magazines to recognize women artists’ existence. (in Robins [1979] 2001, 199)

Indeed, in just over two years in the early 1970s, \textit{Artforum} published more articles on more female artists then they had in the first ten years of the magazine. The percentage of feature articles on women increased from five percent during the first decade to nineteen percent between September 1972 and December 1974. To be sure, the highest percentage of reviews of solo exhibitions by female artists in \textit{Artforum, Art in America}, and \textit{Arts Magazine} between 1970 and 1985 would be only 29 percent, in 1980 (Olin and Brawer 1989, 216). The significant increase in visibility and engagement is nevertheless a shift that artist writings helped constitute.

Advocacy through visibility in new magazines was a necessary first step, yet it was often the only function of the writing. At the early date of 1979, Corinne Robins reported in her survey of “women’s art magazines” that \textit{Feminist Art Journal} and \textit{Womanart} “appeared quarterly to discuss and describe the problems and successes of women artists and the women artists’ movement” ([1979] 2001, 199). Indeed, describing and reporting were in many cases the sole operation of the writing.

The first-issue editorial for the \textit{Feminist Art Journal}, the editors of which were Irene Moss, Cindy Nemser, and artist Pat Mainardi, provides a mission statement with simple goals, deemed no less lofty for their simplicity:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The Feminist Art Journal} is here to carry women artists’ voices throughout the world. Our aim is to enhance the status of women in all the arts by publishing articles on their past history and on their current history making activities. With this goal in mind, we will encourage women artists of all persuasions to discuss and illustrate their work. We will also expose and discredit all personages and institutions which exploit or discriminate against women artists. (1972, 2)
\end{quote}

In the same issue, artist Faith Ringgold wrote about the prospects of “An Open Show in Every
Museum,” and artist Kay Brown contributed a “‘Where We At’ Black Women Artists” report, including a list of demands such as day-care centres at museums so that mothers may attend classes. Yet in the issues that followed, very few articles are by artists. Those that are primarily consist of reports. Robins observes that even this reporting, from all contributors, fell short. The magazine failed to cover significant activities such as the 1973 New York Cultural Center “Women Choose Women” exhibition; the 1972 opening of Artists in Residence (A.I.R.), the first women’s artist-run gallery in the United States; and Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, Faith Wilding, and their students’ 1972 Womanhouse exhibition. While the Feminist Art Journal covered photo-realist painters, “none of the decorative artists or pattern painters (such as Joyce Kozloff, Mary Grigoriadis and Cynthia Carlson), none of the younger abstract women painters who came to prominence in the seventies (Elizabeth Murray and Frances Barth), and none of the women landscape sculptors (such as Mary Miss, Michelle Stuart, Alice Adams and Alice Aycock) are discussed” ([1979] 2001, 201, 202). The resulting lack of breadth is perhaps in part a result of a decline in artists’ contributions.

In the first article of the short-lived Womanspace Journal, Judy Chicago does not mention the journal itself or writing. Rather she encourages readers to come to Womanspace and offer donations. She closes with,

Sisters, I ask you . . . help us, support us, work with us, so that women artists can have their place in the world, can share work with each other, with us, with you. Come to Womanspace . . . bring your ideas, your thoughts, your strong arms, your donations. Come together with us and make Womanspace a space for all women. Provide artists with the audience we want . . . our sisters. (1973, 4)

The subsequent entry, from curator Gretchen Glicksman, announces that Womanspace Journal is “principally” “conceived as a primary forum for feminist criticism, for the formulation and practice of the tenets of historical scrutiny of the feminist art heritage, past and present. The editors whose contributors’ page appear herein encourage all who wish to write from a feminist
point of view to join them in this production” (1973, 5). What a feminist criticism might consist of is not explored, however. Likewise, a second-issue editorial from art historian Ruth Iskin stated that the journal “is devoted to the analysis and interpretation of women’s art as well as specifically to a documentation and critical evaluation of the exhibitions and activities at WOMANSPACE” (1973, 4), yet what is offered consists more of documentation than analysis. Writings by artists in this issue include Norma New York’s report on the successes of Lesbian Week, Christina Schlesinger on “The Image of the Lesbian in Contemporary Society,” Betye Saar on her work and the current Womanspace show on the theme of “Black Mirror,” and Barbara Smith’s and Susan Moss Galloway’s reviews of exhibitions.

Given the feminist concept that “the personal is political,” female artists’ sharing their experiences as artists in writing may be viewed as carrying inherent critical efficacy. In the article “The Tapes” in the third issue of Heresies, artist Louise Fishman presented the edited comments of ten lesbian artists who had never before had the opportunity to discuss their lesbianism and their art as a group. She opened the article with an epigraph from poet Adrienne Rich: “[. . .] we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other” (1977b, 15). Fishman’s “How I Do It: Cautionary Advice from a Lesbian Painter” is published later in the same issue. She cautioned, “Any place we deny the validity of our thoughts or activities is a place that will weaken our relationship to our art,” described the satisfactions and insecurity she experiences while working, and admonished, “We can’t allow anything unworthy to distract us from working as intensely as possible” (1977a, 74, 75). Yet, art historian Jayne Wark explains that the “challenge” of “the personal is political” “does not seek to collapse all distinctions between these categories but rather considers how each set of these categories has been ideologically constructed in relation to the other [. . .] to make visible the character and bases of women’s subordination and thus to
make way for the reconstruction of society’s civil and political institutions” (2006, 26). This deeper function of “revealing the terms” is for the most part lacking in 1970s feminist artist writings.

In the case of one 1970s female artist’s writing on her now well-known feminist work, an underlying assumption is that one way to make personal documents political is through theory. With Mary Kelly’s folder of footnotes and her essay “Notes on Reading the *Post-Partum Document,*” writing, more specifically reference to psychoanalytic theory, legitimates for analysis found objects and constructed documents of motherhood by supplementing them. Here writing about art is more critical than making it in that it does more critical work than the framed objects and documents: the work is not an image or object that embodies meaning; it is not what I referred to earlier as a confluence of critical function while employing an optimal disparity of means; rather it is found objects and constructed documents plus folder of psychoanalytic theory footnotes and essay. This mode of art making has the desired benefit of pre-empting further critical discourse. The writing served in part to justify the work’s entrance into the art field—soiled diapers are less likely to be “just” soiled diapers if Lacan is in the footnotes—but it also implies a lack of faith in art commentators. Artist-writer Andrea Fraser saw Kelly’s theoretical texts as “supplant[ing] the institutional rhetoric that would otherwise frame the work” ([1986] 1999, 217). Kelly prepared “Notes on Reading” for a seminar on Psychoanalysis and Feminism held during the first, 1976 exhibition of the 1973-79 *Post-Partum Document.* The following year the “Notes” were printed in *Control Magazine.*

The essay situates the work under three discourse subheadings in order to interrogate how gender figures in the ways in which women are made into ideologically appropriate subjects. “The Discourse of the Women’s Movement” describes various levels on which the *Document* operates: it
reiterates, at one level, the unique contribution that consciousness-raising made to political practice in general by emphasizing the subjective moment of women’s oppression. But, at another level, it argues against the supposed self-sufficiency of lived experience and for a theoretical elaboration of the social relations in which femininity is formed. In this sense, the *Post-Partum Document* functions as part of an ongoing debate over the relevance of psychoanalysis to the theory and practice of both Marxism and feminism. Furthermore, the debate includes a critique of the patriarchal bias underlying some of the theoretical assumptions on which the *Document* is based. (1996, 20-22)

With “The Discourse of the Mother-Child Relationship,” as well as the other discourses, Kelly applied psychoanalysis, identifying the child as the phallus for the mother. “The Discourse of Women’s Practice in Art” lays out an essentialist/post-structuralist split amongst feminist practices that would become prevalent in writing if not so tidily in practice. Kelly concluded the essay by remarking that

> [i]n the context of an installation, this analysis is not meant to definitively theorize the *Post-Partum* moment, but rather to describe a process of secondary revision. In a sense, this text is also included in that process not as a topology of intention, but as a rewriting of the discourse of the *Document* which is at once a repression and a reactivation of its consequences. (24)

Nevertheless, that the text explicitly and exclusively addresses the *Document* has effectively limited the potential for alternative discourses on the *Document* and its “moment.”

The predominance of psychoanalytic approaches to Kelly’s work has been noted in scholarship. As Helen Molesworth observes, the way in which Kelly uses psychoanalysis in discussions of her work makes it “difficult” for readers to “think outside” that discourse (1998, 87). Catherine Lupton begins her chapter on Kelly with the question, “What else is there to say about the work of Mary Kelly?” (1994, 230). While Lupton discusses Kelly’s 1981 meta-critical essay “(Re)viewing Modernist Criticism” rather than Kelly’s writings about her own work, she observes that the “‘Kelly discourse’ always has the capacity to pull the rug out from under any critical position which fails to acknowledge its own discursive existence, and has the strength of admitting the partiality of its own interpretations, while at the same time always rendering these
as the most legitimate on political grounds” (246). In addition to effectively positing a “correct” feminist art practice (247), a further concern Lupton raises is whether the stagnant discourse on the Document restricts its future efficacy: “its very discursive self-sufficiency might bind it so inextricably to its own formative historical and social circumstances that its potential for political effectivity in changed circumstances is severely curtailed” (248). The Document and other works are thus “in danger of being consigned as relics to the vaults of a forgotten feminist past” (253).

It is possible that the “Kelly discourse” has served its purpose and is now limiting the work’s political efficacy for the present. However, it is worth noting that it is precisely Kelly’s political motivations that make the work resistant to critical updating. Arthur Danto, in discussing Rembrandt and the possibilities for post-historical art, points out that “historically circumscribed art is capable of historically transcendent messages.” Yet, while “Rembrandt’s heavy darks and mysterious lights” “speak as fluently to us as to his contemporaries,” Danto also points out that Rembrandt’s “message was less historically indexed” (1997, 209). The latter is not true of Post-Partum Document. If it were not significantly historically indexed and resistant to further critical discourse, what hope of efficacy could it have?

Recalling the context of 1970s language-based work, Kelly explained:

But what I had assumed to be inevitable—that interrogating the conditions of existence of the object would necessarily include the question of the subject and sexual difference—was not the case. Although there was a move to extend the analytical method beyond the exclusive parameter of aesthetics (for example, Art and Language in the mid-1970s), it stopped dramatically short of synthesizing the subjective moment into that inquiry. [. . .] Much of my writing then was preoccupied with theorizing the strategic absence of the woman’s body as iconic sign, questioning the notion of a pre-given or essential femininity, and broaching the topic of female fetishism. These arguments entailed the somewhat daunting task of introducing the subjects of psychoanalysis and semiotics into the discussion of visual arts [. . .]. The initial step was taken [. . .] when I wrote “Notes on Reading the Post-Partum Document” (1977) and “On Femininity” (1979) for Control Magazine. (1996, xx-xxi)

The artist’s perceived need to produce a resistant art work and a tight theoretical framework for it
is a significant conception of feminist artist writing in the 1970s.

Artist Harmony Hammond’s essay “Feminist Abstract Art—A Political Viewpoint,” published in the first issue of *Heresies*, would seem to be directed toward establishing a specifically feminist criticism. Hammond, whose visual production primarily consists of abstract painting, participated in the founding of *Heresies* as well as A.I.R. and in 1978 curated New York’s first Lesbian art exhibition. Hammond began with the complaint that “[m]ost articles originating from the art world tend to be formal descriptive attempts at documenting what women are doing, and do not attempt a feminist analysis of function and meaning” (1977b, 66). She advocated for greater understanding of the “creative process,” noting that “[w]hile feminist poets and writers comment on each other’s work and write of their own processes, we visual artists tend to remain silent and let others do the writing for us” (66). Just because one’s visual art does not involve writing does not mean one should not comment on it; if one does not, others will. Akin to Barnett Newman’s belief in the democratizing, dialogue-facilitating function of artist writings, Hammond went on to observe, “Our silence contributes to a lack of dialogue between artist and audience” (66). Artists’ silence also contributes “to the lack of criticism from a feminist perspective, and ultimately to the misinterpretation of our work.” (66). Inside information, it is suggested, will afford a feminist criticism and thwart misinterpretation. While Hammond would go on to note that “much of women’s past creativity” “has been abstract,” citing “the incredible baskets, pottery, quilts, afghans, lace and needlework” (66-67), the underlying assumption here is that artists’ written commentary as regards creative processes and intentions is what makes feminist abstract art feminist.

Hammond encouraged “break[ing] down the myths and fears surrounding abstract art and mak[ing] it understandable”:

It is by talking about our work and work processes that we will not only begin to
develop a new language for interpreting abstract art, but also to integrate this work with society. This language, which I see evolving from consciousness-raising techniques, will be able to be shared with any woman, regardless of class background. (66)

Writing will pinpoint meaning. Talking will elaborate a distinctive new language. The new language will make the work accessible. Discourse is the key for fulfilling the desire “to reclaim abstract art for women and transform it on our own terms” (66). Notably, the impulse for “a new language” “on our own terms” is not coming from the work—from its new formal vocabulary, process, or mode, its new means or materials, as was the case with Barnett Newman’s and Donald Judd’s justifications for a “new literature” and “new terms”: “this work cannot be described within the present framework of established notions of plasticity,” according to Newman (1992, 162); “words that have been used to describe old work” “have to be discarded as too particular to the earlier work or they have to be given new definitions,” according to Judd (1975, 196). For Hammond, the impetus for a new language is the “feminist perspective.”

Whereas Frank Bowling wanted to acknowledge black experience and hints at particular qualities in the work without elaborating a new critical vocabulary, Hammond wants to distinguish a new feminist abstract art precisely through a new language without specifying how that language might be distinct from previous discussions of abstraction.

Indeed, it would be difficult to claim that the points Hammond raises as specific to feminist art do not also apply to the art discussions and brushstrokes of individuals without feminist political commitments. Hammond asserted,

Women tend to talk first about their personal associations with the piece, and then about how these are implemented through visual means; in other words, how successful the piece is in its own terms. This approach to art and to discussing art has developed from the consciousness-raising experience. It deals primarily with the work itself, what it says and how it says it—rather than with an imposed set of esthetic beliefs. (67)

As Judy Siegel commented in her review of Heresies for Women Artists Newsletter, “it’s
arguable [...] whether women do talk about their work so differently from men, as Hammond claims. (I thought all artists talked about their work this way.)” (1977, 8). Hammond next asserted, in an assessment derived from Kathryn C. Johnson, that “[i]t is this ‘oneness of subject and content’—for example that a work “is about pain and is painful”—“that carries their work through feminist consciousness beyond the personal to the political” (68). Yet the quality of action that the mode of application conveys, which is incidentally never necessarily the same as the mental or emotional state of the painter, could be equally significant in representational as non-representational work. The choice of abstraction over other modes is never explicitly addressed by Hammond. She did however go on to acknowledge that this “oneness” “is also present in abstract paintings that seem superficially more related to the male modernist tradition than to women’s creativity in that they involve the physically expressive manipulation of paint on a two-dimensional surface” (68). Hammond then emphasized that catharsis and sharing anger through abstract painting is politically efficacious:

When she [Louise Fishman] looked around at other women, she saw that they were crippled by their anger too. These paintings were made to force women to confront it rather than letting it turn inward and become self-destructive. Grouped together as a wall of women’s anger, the paintings show a tremendous amount of energy that can now be redirected towards feminist creativity and revolution. [...] This work is certainly political. (68)

Finally, Hammond did call for a new visual language as well. Referencing writer Andrea Dworkin, Hammond confirmed her avant-gardist faith in the power of new formal devices to provoke new ways of reading/seeing and thinking:

As abstract artists, we need to develop new abstract forms for revolutionary art. The women’s work I’ve discussed here, and I include my own, is moving in this direction. We are not yet there. Hopefully, [...] we will develop a new visual language. (70)

The only facet of feminist abstract art, as Hammond delineated it, specific to feminism, but not only to feminism, is the anger of the subjugated practitioners.
Hammond, as well as artist Mary Beth Edelson, offered a more careful discussion of issues surrounding feminist art in response to a 1976 *Art in America* article by Lawrence Alloway. Alloway criticized writers on “women’s art” for neglecting to establish a concrete program or position or specific issues for “women’s art in the 70s” (68). He also suggested that contributors to the *Feminist Art Journal* failed to appreciate that “[o]ne function of art criticism, when it is done by writers who are close to artists, is to bring into public use early formulations of the ideas and words originated by artists about their own work. [. . .] [T]he *FAJ* has never been sensitive to the special articulateness of innovative artists. As a result, the artists who are its subjects have been made to seem (and perhaps to feel) mute” (68). Eight women responded. Edelson explained,

> We are not looking for finalized manifestoes for validation—that is a patriarchal mandate. [. . .] We are in the growth/creative process of regenerating each other balancing the mind/spirit/body realms of the feminine. I object, for myself and for other women, to the instant capsulization, lumping and stereotyping of our art. Alloway’s cool and light touch may be easy to read, but it is misleading. The forms taken by feminist art are amorphous and defy clear-cut, black-and-white analysis—whether this is because such dissection is premature, male-oriented and not suited to our ways, or because of the very nature of our multiplicities, will no doubt be more obvious in the future. (Burko *et al.* 1976, 13)

Hammond also identified Alloway’s concerns as counter to feminist artists’ projects:

> The history of the patriarchal art world is and always has been the history of definitions and boundaries. [. . .] I’m bored with men’s needs to define feminism and feminist art or insisting that we must define it for them—right now. [. . .] The fact that efficiency is not the only concern of feminist groups is not acknowledged. [. . .] [T]he richness of diverse feminist philosophies (as well as the diversity of feminist art) is seen as divisionary rather than forming the basis of feminism itself. We are told that opposing ideologies imply conflict and are therefore bad and destructive. [. . .] When will it be realized that feminism is not a life style or an art movement but a political condition? [. . .] One by one, he refutes ideas about central imagery, women’s self-imagery, women’s sexual imagery, feminist herstory as resource material and a source of iconography, craft techniques and materials, primitivism and decoration, on the basis that they are not the one central theory out of which all feminist art must come, or that men too work with these concerns. (Burko *et al.* 1976, 13, 15)
Without explicitly pointing out that Alloway failed to deliver on his own conception of a function of the critic—“to bring into public use early formulations of the ideas and words originated by artists about their own work,” Hammond asserted that “[i]f at least, like some men, he understood feminism (to be feminist implies a political analysis of being a woman in a male-dominated society), he would see that it is important for women to develop our own definitions and processes” (13). She closed with, “All good criticism must deal with art in the terms that the art itself sets up. If men can’t deal with feminist art, they shouldn’t write about it” (17).

Alloway’s rebuttal that follows the eight responses indicates a fundamental lack of appreciation for what was at stake for Hammond and others: “My intention was to treat women artists as if they were artists and, as such, subject to the same methodology and arguments as anybody else. Hammond takes as oppression what I take to be elementary procedure” (23).

Indeed she did, for this is precisely the problem. Alloway and others—see Leider (in Newman 2000, 307) and a host of other critics, editors, and gallerists (in Nemser 1971, 1-2)—failed to see the ways in which their elementary procedures might always already exclude certain ways of thinking, art making, and community organizing.

Alloway added, “She seems to regard ‘efficiency’ as a male attribute: taking the word to mean something like ‘effective performance.’ I hope not, for the sake of the future of the feminist movement among other things” (23). The tension in Hammond’s essay on feminist abstract art and my and Judy Siegel’s analysis of it is a symptom of the fact that while one might suspect, based on analysis of past ruptures and shifts, that a different discursive field is conceivable and probable, one has no way of knowing what that new field might be. One cannot will building and jumping into a new field, such as feminist criticism; one can only push against one’s discursive field. In this context, one suggested strategy—or, perhaps more appropriately, process—for operating in a discursive field against which feminists wished to press was to
endeavour to produce writing that carefully and with nuance examined underlying principles without producing definitive programs. As Judy Siegel beseeches the *Heresies* collective in *Women Artists Newsletter*, “politics is supposed to convince the unconvinced, not merely incite the faithful. Too many of these essays *unconvince* me. When rage and idealism are unmodified by critical thinking, Radicalism becomes a kind of stereotypical Female Emotionalism—an irony indeed” (1977, 8).

Perhaps most critically in this regard, in the fourth issue of *Heresies* artists Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff assembled a series of quotations from artists, critics, and historians that highlight “how *language* has been used to communicate” the “moral superiority” of “fine art above decorative art, Western art above non-Western art, men’s art above women’s art” (1977-78, 38). Three years previously, Joyce Kozloff’s husband Max Kozloff composed an article using the same format of quotations organized under topic headings. While he did include one section, “Wreaking the Male Artistic Ego Upon the Female Environment,” addressing gender and noting that “the artists so far quoted have been men, heterosexual for the most part,” he simply concluded that “[f]or the time being, however, who is to deny that there may well be a nexus of art, sexuality, and politics?” (1974, 46-47). Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff organized quotations under the headings War and Virility; Purity; Purity in Art as a Holy Cause; The Superiority of Western Art; Fear of Racial Contamination, Impotence, and Decadence; Racism and Sexism; Hierarchy of High-Low Art; That Old Chestnut, “Humanism”; Decoration and Domesticity; and Autocracy. Jaudon and Kozloff reported that upon recognizing how certain words “have colored our own history, our art training[,] we have had to rethink the underlying assumptions of our education. […] [T]o continue reading them in an unquestioning spirit perpetuates their biases” (1977-78, 38, 42). Instead of endeavouring to elaborate an inconceivably distinct feminist criticism, Jaudon and Kozloff concluded, “we hope to reveal the
inconsistencies in assumptions that too often have been accepted as ‘truth’” (42). Likewise, in a later issue of Heresies, and in the same year that Pierre Bourdieu’s book La Distinction was first published, artist Howardena Pindell pondered, “(One wonders why there has never been a scientific objective study of the hidden aspects of the art world.) Who is the critic writing for and how is the critic affected and infected by the prejudices of his/her unconscious?” (1979, 4).

For Hammond in “Feminist Abstract Art,” a new language was the solution, and for Jaudon and Kozloff in “Art Hysterical Notions,” language was the site of contestation. Even if one could rally around essentialist/biological difference in mark-, object-, or image-making, “insist[ing] on sexual difference as the fundamental and eternally immutable difference,” philosopher Moira Gatens observes, “take[s] for granted the intricate and pervasive ways in which patriarchal culture has made that difference its insignia” (1996, 73). And, on one persuasive view, those “intricate and pervasive ways” are always already linguistic. As noted, Stephen Scobie asks, “is there anything that exists ‘outside’ Language? […] All my perception is based on the initial gesture of perceiving difference: even a perception as basic as light/dark or cold/hot is already, from this point of view, linguistic” (1997, 4-5). If language was the site of contestation, artist writings were the pointed means of protestation.

4 “Artists as Writers”

Artists’ interest in (once again) intervening in art discourse exceeds Conceptual and feminist artist-writers. Editors of Towards Another Picture: An Anthology of Writings by Artists Working in Britain, 1945-1977 announced that “[i]t is a presupposition of the book that art should not be seen as separate from the world of discourse around it and therefore that it is useful to examine that world. The book is a conscious attempt to intervene not only into that world but thus into the practice and experience of art” (Brighton and Morris 1977, n.p.). Also in 1977, artist Howardena
Pindell first described artists’ periodicals in general as “an alternative space” (99).

Likewise, the cultural currency of artwriting drew the attention of, but was not always celebrated by, critics in the 1970s. In a 1969 *New Yorker* article identifying contemporary art as “a species of centaur—half art materials, half words,” Harold Rosenberg lamented that “[t]he words are the vital, energetic element, capable, among other things, of transforming any materials (epoxy, light beams, string, rocks, earth) into art materials” and determining “the prestige of the work, its power of survival, and its ability to extend its life through aesthetic descendents” ([1969] 1973, 151-52). While Rosenberg bemoaned the significant functions performed by the textual, the fact that even early- to mid-twentieth-century art is always already informed by a theory came as a great shock to Tom Wolfe in 1975, who in an essay for *Harper’s Bazaar* and subsequent book recounted being “jerked alert” (1975, 4). Hilton Kramer’s commonplace notion that when an art movement or approach “‘lack[s] a persuasive theory’” it “‘lacks something crucial—the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify’” scandalized Wolfe (4). Yet he seemed comforted finally to know why he did not “get” abstract art: “frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can’t see a painting” (6). Wolfe’s extreme version of the dominance of “theory” over “experience” included the prediction that, in the year 2000, a retrospective of American Art from 1945 to 1975 will consist not of art works but of wall texts by Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Steinberg with “small reproductions of the work of leading illustrators of the Word” (1975, 119-20). The shock regarding the significance of art theory experienced by this author of an albeit sensation-seeking book succeeds Conceptual artists’ adamant desire to expose theory’s role. Likewise successively, *Studio International* devoted the entire fall 1976 issue to the topic of art magazines, noting that year’s Victoria & Albert Museum exhibition on *The Art Press* and two international conferences on art magazines as well as pronouncing that “[t]here is no doubt that
at the moment there is an unprecedented interest in the art, magazine” (Walker 1976b, 113; see Fawcett and Phillpot 1976). While Art & Language refused to participate in the Studio International special issue because they did not want to be a part of “what magazines like Studio really represent, that is, a capitalist consumption-category masquerading as reality and fooling people into accepting capitalist production relations,” editor Richard Cork professed that it was “necessary,” and presumably that the special issue would endeavour, “to expose magazines in general, and Studio in particular, to a long-overdue analysis which reveals something about the mechanics of ownership, marketing, promotional ploys, critical inadequacies and editorial manipulation” (1976, 101).

In spite of this attention to artwriting, notable statements pertaining to writings by Abstract Expressionist artists enounced in the 1970s include Annalee Newman’s defense of her husband Barnett as painter, not writer, and Philip Guston’s ambivalent stance on artist writings. In 1977, Annalee Newman felt compelled to point out in a letter to Arts Magazine that the idea that her husband was principally interested in “polemics rather than in painting” during the mid-40s is “false” and that he was in fact painting and exhibiting at that time (1977, 41). Philip Guston began a 1978 lecture with the observation, “There are people who think that painters shouldn’t talk. I know many people who feel that way, but that makes the painter into a sort of painting monkey.” He went on to assert that it would be “totally impossible” for him to comment on what his paintings “mean”:

I’m certain that professional art writers could do it much better than I could. Besides I have developed a tendency to disbelieve what artists say in their official statements. Nevertheless I will try to be as candid as I can be. I feel that strongly believed in and stated convictions on art have a habit of tumbling and collapsing in front of the canvas, when the act of painting actually begins. ([1978] 1982, 49)

Guston at once defends artists’ right to speak, respects the perceptiveness of art writers, is skeptical of artists’ claims but strives for candidness himself, and, like Motherwell, “feels” that
artists’ stated—thus verbal—convictions cannot be fully maintained or perhaps even accessed while in the process of producing a painting. This latter concern would diminish with pre-planned or scripted Conceptual or performance works. Importantly, functions of artist writings other than the official statement of convictions or the candid artist’s talk are not explored by Guston.

It is in a 1969 Studio International article by American, London-based art historian Barbara Reise that one finds the first unapologetic, celebratory appraisal of contemporary artist writings. Reise asserted, “it is not insignificant to their abundance of ideas and sophisticated exploration of media that these artists write: frequently and well.” She characterized Andre’s poetry as having “a more imaginative relation of words as visual and audial units to their conceptual agglomeration” than does Dada and Concrete poetry; deemed Judd’s contributions to criticism “significant”; described Flavin’s writing as having “a protean energy and multifaceted profundity which is mind-boggling”; deemed LeWitt’s texts meaningful “models of verbal economy”; praised Morris’s essays for having “taught a great deal of phenomenology to students and would-be-critics”; and found Smithson to be “more involved with styles of intellectual thought than plastic creation. He writes profusely” (166, 172). Here, writing is associated with having an abundance of ideas and exploring media with sophistication. Artist writings are received as a metonym for thinking about art; art making might well be too, but not strictly or necessarily.

Likewise asserting without elaborating on the significance of artist writing, critic Annette Michelson referred to Minimalist artists’ writings in her essay for a 1969 Robert Morris exhibition catalogue. Michelson stated that “artists responded” to their Minimalist sculpture that she characterized as apodictically saying “‘I am that I am’” with: “1. A growing personal concern and active involvement with critical practice. 2. Serious attempts to re-define the limits
of criticism. 3. A correlative attempt to reform critical language and descriptive terms.” “Thus,” Michelson continues, “by the winter of 1966, one felt obliged to point out that all but a very few of the artists exhibiting in the important exhibition ‘10 x 10’, held in the Dwan Gallery, were currently involved in the writing of criticism,” as the critic did in her aforementioned review of that exhibition (1969, 13; see 1967, 31). Beyond the notion that new forms require a new critical vocabulary, what is not interrogated is what relationship the “response” of “personal concern and active involvement with critical practice” on the part of artists might have with apodictic sculpture.

That Judd’s writings were identified as the key point of reference for discussions of his work was noted in a 1973 *Arts Magazine* article. Gregoire Muller observed, “To put it bluntly, it seems that much of the world has been living off of Judd’s mental energy while often remaining surprisingly blind to the visual clarity of the works themselves” (36). Muller proposed that Judd’s ideas “had been too quickly and too superficially accepted” or that “few viewers have been willing to accept the full consequences of the actual art works” (35). Muller saw this attention to Judd’s writing stemming from the fact that Judd “was witnessing radical changes,” but Muller failed to appreciate the fact that Judd’s writing was utilized—indeed, in some cases selectively and without nuance—precisely because it was seen to apply to his own work (35). Significantly, though, Muller disapproved of commentators’ inconsistent uses of Judd’s writings, such as using Judd’s ideas to set up terms for the kind of pigeon-holing that Judd derided or using his notions of scale and wholeness to discuss details. At the same time and contra Judd, however, Muller aimed to explore the “illusional qualities” of Judd’s work, but not in order to prove Judd’s desired avoidance of illusion wrong, as 1960s critics revelled in asserting. Rather, Muller generously professed, “I feel confident that, if my questioning of the literalist intent of Judd’s work seems to contradict his own writing, the emphasis on its unique illusional qualities
can do more to bring the eyes back to the pieces” (35). A 1976 Artforum book review of Judd’s recently collected writings exhibits the lack of nuance Muller noted. It glosses Judd’s ideas by equating them, equally uncritically, with Greenberg’s: “Greenberg insists on flatness, Judd insists on specificity” (Perrone, 46). Critic Phyllis Tuchman noted in her 1977 survey of critical responses to Minimalism that “[i]n the 12 years since Specific Objects initially appeared, it has aged into as historic a document as something like Alberti’s 1430s treatise De Statua (that perhaps equally youthful consideration of the properties of sculpture). How and why new art should be made seems communicated by both” (29).

Most pointedly in the 1970s reception of Judd’s writing, artists Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn asked in The Fox, “Don Judd, is it possible to talk?” before provoking their interlocutor and readers to question what assumptions underlie Judd’s writing and art making (1975, 129). “[C]an we ask what sort of relation your writing has to your work? Maybe the easiest way to summarize the function of your writing is to say it operates almost like a Manual for the sculptures or objects you make” (129). Beveridge and Burn were unequivocal in their derision of what they deemed the criticism-forestalling impact of Judd’s writing:

A persistent problem is that any interpretation we can come up with for one part of your “system” not infrequently contains contradictions of another part of your system. This becomes frustrating when you make few, if any, remarks about your aims, content or intentions. A possible resolution would be that adopted by some of your “critics,” like Barbara Rose and Rosalind Krauss, who allow all your terms ostensive definition by your work . . . however that sets up a situation in which it is impossible to criticize your work in any terms acceptable to you, a tactic guaranteeing your work immunity to criticism. (148n8)

Stressing the ostensible insistence of Judd’s writing, the artists stated, “Emphatically enough, you’ve insisted on the terminology you want your work experienced in relation to . . . [which] provide[s] a more or less linguistically defined context. [. . .] [W]hat can we say about the form of art this context presupposes?” (129). For Beveridge and Burn, to fail to make
institutionalization and American cultural domination the content of one’s work is equivalent to
supporting these forces. Beveridge later noted of the article that he, as a Canadian, and Burn, as
an Australian, were interested in “addressing the ‘arrogance’ of a dominant US culture. There
seemed to be a total absence on the part of artists like Judd (and most other prominent NY
artists) of any consciousness of their possible complicity in US cultural globalization” (in Raskin
2010, 149n8 on 28 July 1998). Most incisively, Beveridge and Burn asked, “given what we know
about the political and ideological appropriation of the function of art, is the autonomy of art
history an assumption we can abide any longer?” (1975, 130). This question hints at how the
New Left was fundamentally at odds with Judd’s brand of capital-collecting anarchist
citizenship.

In the decade of Robert Smithson’s accidental death, statements about his writings
abounded. In 1971, David Antin preferred the notion of hybridism to describe Smithson’s total
output: “for their most effective operation [Smithson’s earthworks] require support from
Smithson’s prose. This is not an especially limiting factor. It merely means he has a hybrid
medium, partly literary and partly physical” ([1971] 2011, 57).

By contrast, in a curious, anachronistic statement in the Italian journal Domus, critic
Tommaso Trini explained that “Smithson was a highly intelligent artist, with but one handicap:
he was also a cultivated and distinguished man of letters. [. . .] Unfortunately, the art world fears
knowledge, because he who knows is afraid of inventing” (1979, 53). Other comments ascribe an
aura to artist writings. Thomas Zaniello described “The Monuments of Passaic” as combining
“the storyteller’s vignette, the scientist’s experiment, and the artist’s touch” (1978, 117). In a
eulogistic essay for Art in America, Leider wrote of “how firmly Bob had already taken his place
in that rare and special tradition of artist-writers” (1973, 81). And in his Introduction, also
printed in Arts Magazine (1978), to the first collection of Smithson’s writing, Leider rhapsodized
over Smithson’s written contributions. “Incidents of Mirror-Travel,” we are told, “has the accent we hear whenever art itself speaks, as in the writings of Malevich, the statements of Pollock, Rothko, Still, the sketchbooks of Mondrian.” Smithson’s essays share “the same kind of ‘muttering’ familiar in many artist’s writings, the same flashes of visionary brilliance, the same fundamental appeal to the spiritual and the same wish to identify with artists of remote pasts and futures, priests and shamans rather than painters and sculptors.” Finally, it is a “mingling of the aspirations of the ‘extra-individual’ community with those of the ‘private personality’” that “gives to the writings of artists their special preciousness, and insures the enduring value of these essays” (1979, 2-3).

Smithson’s essays and interviews were frequently cited and his activity as a writer was consistently noted in 1970s articles on the artist. Most of the fourteen articles in the Smithson-focussed May 1978 issue of Arts Magazine touch on his writings. Valentin Tatransky provided a chronological summary, with commentary, of Smithson’s writings in his otherwise unremarkable “Themes with Meaning: The Writings of Robert Smithson,” while Thomas Zaniello focused on “Science Fiction and Robert Smithson.” Two essayists stressed that Smithson’s articles were his work. Ted Castle noted Kosuth’s advice that Smithson should have considered his articles his work and adds, “Didn’t he? I always thought they were among his most important works” (103). Likewise, Howard Junker stated: “Smithson: Champion of his own critique. Smithson’s work was, in fact, the creation of ‘articles’ for art magazines” (131). These essays consolidated the received domestication of Smithson’s writing as artist writing.

The most sustained 1970s analyses of Smithson’s writings are Artforum and October book reviews of the 1979 anthology. Writing for Artforum, Kate Linker offers the following rich proposal: “What emerges from Smithson’s varied literary modes is not a stylist in search of a subject”—indeed, there were many subjects to which he was drawn, perhaps a given for
someone who is “interested in exploring the apparatus” one is “being threaded through” ([1972] 1996, 262)—“or a theorist using language as thought’s instrument”—as was the case with discursive essays by Conceptual artists—“but an artist researching a verbal style adequate to expressively convey, and embody, his point. No theorist would so energetically sound the crevasses of words, the fissures and failures of language, within the context of his writing style” (1979, 62). While the phrase “no theorist” exposes a failure to acknowledge post-structuralist theory, which Craig Owens would be sure to remedy by mentioning Derrida and Foucault in his October review, Linker’s analysis is otherwise insightful. Smithson would be one of few artist-writers endeavouring to use artist writings to convey as well as embody meaning. Noting Leider’s extolling introductory comments, Linker observed, “[w]hat these writings convey, devoid of exaggerated readings, is the artist acting as spokesman for a generation beginning to sense the inadequacy of traditional “rational” esthetic categories (painting, sculpture, architecture) and to propose, as a solution, an expanded artistic field” (60). While the field may have been always already expanded, it was Smithson’s writings that seemed, even to late 1970s commentators, to have precipitated an expansion.

Likewise claiming a rupturing expansion for Smithson’s writings, Craig Owens declared, “If this collection of Smithson’s writings testifies to anything in our present culture, it is to the eruption of language into the field of the visual arts, and the subsequent decentering of that field—a decentering in which these texts themselves play a crucial part” (1979, 122). Owens proposes that this eruption is “coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism,” simply because it “disrupts the stability of a modernist partitioning of the aesthetic field into discrete areas of specific competence” (126). The notion that a work is “defined by the position it occupies in a potentially infinite chain extending from the site itself and the associations it provokes [...] to quotations of the work in other works” more accurately
describes postmodern architecture than Smithson’s non-sites or the Spiral Jetty trio (128). Moreover, it is because the terms “modernism” and “postmodernism,” with their attendant temporal associations, cover over important ways in which so-called modernist work is not partitioned and so-called postmodernist work is that I have proposed that post-60s artist writing consolidated the shift from medium to practice as opposed to modernism to postmodernism. However, Owens’s essay shows the late 70s acknowledgement of the significance of artist writing, couched in the most charged terms of debate of the day. Owens’s closes with, “the failure of contemporary theory, which too often operates in a vacuum, to see its own realization in Smithson’s practice is, and remains, a scandal” (130)—thus marking artist writings as a highly significant neglected object of analysis.

Contrastingly, commentators on Frank Bowling’s art failed to engage with the artist’s ideas on black art as presented in his writings. Reviews of Bowling’s paintings are limited to formal analysis and discussions of his painting process, occasionally comparing his work to Francis Bacon’s and addressing his use of maps (see Baker 1966; Henry 1971; Tancock 1973; Masheck 1974; Siegel 1974; Lorber 1976). Only a 1977 exhibition catalogue noted that Bowling was expected to “proclaim” his blackness and “outrage” yet already had his subject matter and did not want to be a “Black” painter (Seidel 1977, n.p.). However, in limiting themselves in these ways, reviewers were also working within Bowling’s modernist framework.

Critics picked apart Art & Language’s writings, believing they were doing so on Art & Language’s own grounds by finding faults in their essays’ logic or deeming them lacking in rigour. Sue Stedman-Jones calls to mind Duchamp’s reference to the French phrase “bête comme un peintre” when she asserted that the group’s members “remain [. . .] artists,” “despite their intellectual indigestion” of philosophers. “The approach to ideas is not analytic, discussive [sic] or explicatory. The basis for the choice of philosophical ideas is at best eclectic and the
connection between the ideas is random, intuitive and inspirational” (1973, 271-72). Stedman-Jones did not conceive of any value in “eclectic,” quasi-analytic artist writings. She observed that “no philosophical critique in the obvious way is available or even fair, since it would not correlate with their intentions or the nature of their art” and noted the writing’s “ambivalence,” but deemed this ambivalence “a block to a genuine understanding of the work” (272). Bruce Boice writing for *Artforum* the same year found Art & Language’s writing “a philosophical mess,” faulting the group for arguing from authority and failing to follow philosophical decorum by not clarifying “ordinary language” and, unthinkably, not clarifying “exotic language.” Referring to a more straightforwardly written essay by Atkinson, Boice made a point of noting that this “proves that it is within his power” to write more clearly. He then somewhat arrogantly asserted that the sources Art & Language cite “are not at all difficult to read,” without considering whether a difficult writing style might have a critical function (86).

Some commentators concluded by dismissing Art & Language’s work. *Art International* readers were told in 1977 that “further examination would be an excursion in academic obscurantism and of questionable value” (Donnell and Holloway, 55). And at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, the “Art Theory” component organized and taught by members of Art & Language was cancelled through the members’ dismissals as well as a ruling by the Chief Officer of the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design that mandated strictly “tangible, visual art objects” as eligible for assessment (Harrison [1991] 2001, 70, see 270n10). However, a number of 1970s commentators showed a desire to have wanted to like Art & Language’s writing, indeed hinting at the forever deferred gratification of artwriting; is not its grey language, incapable of producing a compatible key, always already bound to disappoint? Boice confessed, “Probably I would not complain about Art & Language so much if I weren’t so interested in the possibilities that seem implicit in what they’re doing and in their generally philosophical
approach to art and what gets said about art” (1972, 87). David Wood took issue with the inaccessible mode, but not the principle, of Art & Language’s activity: “High level theoretical discussions about the practice of art by its practitioners are very valuable indeed. Art-Language would gain infinitely by the introduction of intelligibility into its writings” (1973, 275). Lucy Lippard admitted not understanding “a good deal of what is said” by the group but admiring “the full commitment to the reestablishment of a valid language by which to discuss art, and the occasional humor in their writings.” She concluded, “I don’t know how it is or if it is evaluated by adepts in philosophy as philosophy, but I find it infuriating to have to take them on faith” (1973, 151). Two years later, philosopher Richard Sclafani did report in the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism on a group of “conceptualist pieces” he lists as “essays, discussions, lectures, etc. of a self-consciously philosophical, or quasi-philosophical, sort” (1975, 455). Mentioning Kosuth’s “Art after Philosophy” and an essay by Burn and Ramsden as belonging to this group, he allowed that “inquiries into the nature of art, language, thought, etc.” need not be performed solely by professional philosophers or through analytical means but insisted that “the issues involved are highly complex, and any adequate discussion of them must reflect that complexity.” Sclafani thus “fail[ed] to see any serious philosophical implications” in the conceptual artists’ writings (457). Lastly, in what is perhaps the most complimentary 1970s statement on Art & Language, Jon Bird announced, “That there is now (some) evidence of an awareness of the complexities of discourse is some measure of the significance of their contribution” (1979, 34).

The impact of artist writing on critics’ roles began to be articulated in the 1970s. In the introduction to her Conceptual art anthology, Ursula Meyer reported that “certain critics,” including Gregory Battcock and Lucy Lippard, have “sympathized” with Conceptual artists’ aim of eliminating the division of the artist’s and critic’s functions (1972, viii). Battcock notably offered the rare assertion that “[i]t’s like everything that happened in 1968, at Columbia and
Paris and all other symbolic places is finally being understood, and it all really meant something and it really will result in something because it already has in this [Seth Siegelaub] show” featuring the work of Robert Barry, Douglas Heubler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner ([1969] 1999, 88). He would go on to curate “documentations” in *Arts Magazine* by Weiner, Daniel Buren, Mel Bochner, and Sol LeWitt, asserting, “There are no more reproductions. There is no more criticism. No more aesthetics. Only art. [. . .] What was previously a mere communicative vehicle can now become an independent form of enormous potential” ([1970] 1972, 174, 175). Lippard, who used artist writings, statements, and interviews to produce her scrapbook-like chronicle documenting six years of the so-called dematerialization of art in 1973, declared in a 1968 precursor essay with John Chandler that “[s]ometime in the near future it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist as well as for the artist to be a writer. There will still be scholars and historians of art, but the contemporary critic may have to choose between a creative originality and explanatory historicism” ([1968] 1999, 49). Craig Owens also conceived of “critical practice,” which includes an artist’s art making, teaching, writing, and political engagement and in relation to which the critic’s activity runs parallel; it has been suggested that this conception greatly influenced Owens’s own artist-writer students such as Gregg Bordowitz and Andrea Fraser (Meyer 2003, 261, 260).

Finally, it is in the 1970s that the first full-length articles, as opposed to book reviews, devoted to the phenomenon of post-60s artist writings appear. Focussing on earlier artists’ statements asserting “The Authoritarian Personality in Modern Art,” Max Kozloff in an aforementioned quotation-compilation article concluded that “[v]isual artists often like to be mystical, rationalizing, and nihilist at the same time. Future studies are obliged to take account of this” (1974, 47). However, he does not take it upon himself to analyse the possible strategies, motives, and thoughts the verbal phrase “often like to be” implies.
Lawrence Alloway’s essay “Artists as Writers, Part One: Inside Information” and “Part Two: The Realm of Language” published in 1974 issues of *Artforum* offers some common assumptions about self-promotion and inside information. Alloway advises that “[a]ny study of artists as writers must allow for artists as respondents in a wide range of interviews.” The interview “has expanded the sources of first-person statement beyond conventional art resources.” Also, “[t]he best comment on de Kooning’s big-brush ‘landscape’ paintings of the later ’50s, by the artist, was in *Time*: ‘I have to do it fast. It’s not like poker, where you can build up to a straight flush or something. It’s like throwing dice. I can’t save anything’” (1:34).

Alloway’s advice, which I do not follow in the present study, suggests that, if writing is antithetical to an AbEx painting practice, real-time, immediate conversation is not: the latter is closer to gestural abstraction. It also prioritizes information and disregards the forethought and craft that writing may entail and exhibit.

Alloway offered other observations that are important for apprehending the 1970s reception of artist writings. In one of two 1972 precursor essays, Alloway asserted, “In fact, artists of our time have demonstrated that they are a very articulate group: the literature of art in the 20th century has been, to an unremarked extent, in their hands” (1972a, 668). In “Artists as Writers,” he explained that since the late nineteenth century, “the literature of art has been dominated by artists, though the fact has not been sufficiently recognized” (1974, 1:30). He characterized Minimal art as “an inextricable compound of text and sculpture” (2:30). Robert Morris, we are told, “wrote as a representative of the ideas in the work; he is not giving us insight into how he arrived at the work, or what it means, but providing the theoretical framework that is its justification,” while “Smithson proposes the fictions to be our only intimations of reality. Thus language cannot have an explicatory relation to the work of art, for it is part of the same primary but idiosyncratic system as the art itself. Explanations are no longer in order. The whole
of Smithson’s article [“A Museum of Language”] should be read” (2:31). Amy Newman claims that this essay “challenged the privileged position of artists’ writings as not providing insight into the work, but rather ‘the theoretical framework that is its justification.’ In a dramatic—one could say traitorous—way, this was a direct attack on what Artforum had been doing” (2000, 326).

However, it is evident that while Alloway did point out that artist writings can potentially “have an inhibitory effect” on further critical discourse (1:31), he also clearly acknowledged their value. He therefore implicitly advocated closer analysis of artist writings, including consideration of the social and historical contexts of “the writings as a whole and [. . .] the contents of the magazines in which [. . .] articles originally appeared” (1:31; 1972b, 30); careful examination of existing interviews as opposed to merely doing a new one (1974, 1:33); and an approach in which artist writings are “inspected critically, treated as symptom as well as law” (1974, 1:31).

The critical attention Battcock, Lippard, Owens, and Alloway paid to artist writings at once legitimized the activity by recognizing published artist writings as a critical space in which artists operate and circumvented certain artists’ threat of usurping the critic’s role by preserving the analysing function of the critic. As much as the division of activities may be blurred, the subject-position is not. Writings by artists always already come up for the count as secondary-primary artist writing.
Conclusion

Perhaps this secondary-primary quality is what caused tension for commentators on the Abstract Expressionist generation of artist-writers, including Motherwell in hindsight. Secondary-primary artist writing conflicts with that moment’s contingent truths of paintings as independent of language because self-sufficient—paintings speak for themselves—and medium-specific—a painter should be committed to his medium wholly and from the beginning of his art-world involvement.

Judd, in distinctly dismissing medium-specificity and following the guiding principle that art comes from art, from taking into account developments of the recent past, was led to recognize review-writing as acceptable because it stemmed from the same preliminary methods and responsibilities of the artist. Following Reinhardt and Newman, Judd employed writing as an essayistic means to air his extra-art concerns. Yet for Judd, too, art was self-sufficiently independent of language, though not because autonomous but because uniquely empirical: it operated by inscribing agency aesthetically, not argumentatively.

We might consider artists’ theories from Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives* ([1550] 1998) to Judd’s “Specific Objects” as occurring before the era of artist writing, just as Hans Belting would subtitle his book on sacred icons *The Image before the Era of Art* (1994) and, after him, Arthur Danto would discuss what it means to operate in a period *After the End of Art*, or of art meta-narratives (1997, 3). The era of artist writing—of essays by author(ities) with art practices always already belonging to a market-, museum-, or media-driven art world—begins when Judd finds his “secondary” exhibition and year-end reviews could only be perceived as “primary” in spite of their original context and function, when Graham’s were ignored, Smithson’s were domesticated, and Art & Language’s “Introduction” always already came up for the count as
secondary-primary artist writing, which Arts Magazine wanted from Frank Bowling on black art and feminists wanted for their own art.

If varying levels of tension or receptivity vis-à-vis the secondary-primary quality of artist writing mark twentieth-century moments as before or during the era of artist writing, the question remains as to what conceptual or epistemological change constituted the increased demand for artist writings and the willingness of artists to provide them. Beyond conditions of production such as an American model of professionalization, 60s antiauthoritarianism, and the new affordability of magazines printed in small runs, what conceptual or epistemological shift made artist writing possible? In closing, I offer a speculative response.

I want to suggest that “the death of the author” is such an artist writing-constituting shift. I use this phrase to refer to what Jane Gallop has recently described as “a familiar slogan, efficiently and evocatively representing the poststructuralist dismissal of the author, signifying polemically that the author does not matter, only the text” (2011, 1). In addition to the poststructuralism for which the slogan stands, I also intend to refer specifically to the ideas presented in Roland Barthes’s short essay of this title, which was first published in 1967 in the multimedia, boxed art and literary magazine Aspen when the issue 5+6 editor, Brian O’Doherty, invited Barthes to contribute alongside Dan Graham, Robert Morris, Mel Bochner, and Sol LeWitt, among others.

Specifically, if artist writing and art making are “that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing[/making]” (Barthes [1967] 1978, 142); if artist-writers and art makers are “born simultaneously with the text” such that “there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now” (145); if they cannot record, notate, represent, depict, or express but can only perform, inscribe, and mix writings and/or visual
conventions (145, 146); if artist writings and art works can have “no other content [. . .] than the act by which [they are] uttered” (145-46); if they do not “releas[e] a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God)” (146); if, instead, they are “multi-dimensional space[s] in which a variety of writings [or images or visual conventions], none of them original, blend and clash” (146); if reading and viewing entail disentangling threads and not deciphering a message; if they involve ranging over and not piercing (147); if meaning is a process and not a product; if signified and signifier are dissociated; if the signified is no longer considered the artist’s “place of origin” (Barthes [1970] 1974, 174); if artist writing and art making are no longer understood as “go[ing] from signified to signifier, from content to form, from idea to text, from passion to expression” (174); in short, if artist writings and art works are “texts” read anew with each encounter, then the secondary about-ness of artist writing cannot pose a threat to works of art. Artist writing can no more pre-empt art or further critical discourse than can any other text.

“The death of the author” may have made it possible for artists and some critics to understand the secondary quality of artist writings as another thread for perpetual disentanglement, and thus a non-hierarchized facet of artists’ practices. Perhaps parallel to Michel Foucault’s demonstration that “the dissociation of the sign and resemblance in the early seventeenth century caused these new forms—probability, analysis, [etc. . . .]—to emerge [. . .] as a single network of necessities[, a]nd it was this network that made possible the individuals we term Hobbes, Berkeley, Hume, or Condillac” (Foucault 1970, 63), we might consider the possibility that “the death of the author” caused artist writing to emerge and made possible the individuals we term Graham, Smithson, or Bowling. Yet, additionally, a persistent need—perhaps exacerbated by new media and modes of art making and the market for them: capitalism can and will preserve the cachet of art and therefore the artist—also created a demand for the primary quality of artist writing. It is in this sense that Foucault demonstrated in a 1969
published lecture titled “What is an Author?” that the author is alive and thrives as an ideological product. While we may be “accustomed [. . .] to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations,” the author in fact “allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations” ([1969] 1980, 159). Foucault points out that “the author is a particular source of expression that, in more or less completed forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in works, sketches, letters, fragments, and so on” (151), hence the interest in writings by artists both before and during the era of artist writing. The dangerous proliferation of significations is limited by the primary collected corpus, by the figure of the artist and of the artist-writer.

Thus critics and historians may desire artists’ statements and writings to further thwart the proliferation of meaning. Critic Dave Hickey bemoaned this state of affairs in a discussion of late-twentieth-century so-called non-commercial art: “Since it cannot be misinterpreted, an official interpreter can just tell you what the artist means. Thus, ‘misinterpreting the artist’s intentions’ quickly replaces ‘ornament’ as art’s capital crime” ([1993] 2009, 111). While artist-writer Victor Burgin, for instance, conceived of artist writings as “‘local’ narratives” that contrasted with “the master narratives of Art” in his 1986 essay on “The End of Art Theory,” Hickey’s identification of artists’ intentions as the new master narratives is noteworthy (180).

That the poststructuralist death of the author and a persistent meaning-limiting author-function may have made secondary-primary artist writing possible in the mid to late 1960s points to difficulties that can only be raised here but that suggest directions for further study. Firstly, it remains to be considered whether it is possible to abstract a more specific epistemological “transformation” from “the death of the author” as well as other Foucauldian “rules of formation” responsible for the emergence of artist writing (Foucault [1969] 2002, 184, 190).
Also, it remains to be explored whether shifts in the media and modes of art making are also constituted by “the death of the author” or if other transformations are operative. Pop’s found images, Robert Rauschenberg’s proposal of “the flatbed or work-surface picture plane as the foundation of an artistic language that would deal with a different order of experience,” as Leo Steinberg observed ([1968] 1972, 85), and Minimalism’s fabrication by contract would seem to be constituted by a dismissal of the author. But there are also art historical “precedents” for these practices that would need to be examined, not because practices in the 1960s and after emerge out of them, but because they have their own rules of formation that need to be identified before shifts are observed and transformations abstracted. Moreover, an archaeology of the relationship or incompatibility between word and image would usefully complicate the intersection of artist writing and art making.

In the meantime, when not used to assuage the fearful proliferation of meaning, artist writings can return us to art works again, thereby demanding subsequent and different viewings and readings, blendings and clashings. We thus might usefully consider Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s “logic of the AND” ([1980] 1987, 25), as do Bill Readings and Stephen Melville in their book on *Vision and Textuality*:

> To read is to add another AND, another circumstance, to set a text to work in yet another way. Writing it this way, *Vision AND Textuality*, we would argue that these bodies of knowledge, research and teaching are without organs, that they hide no essences, no final and secure inner form; vision is plugged into textuality, and vice versa, in multiple ways. What counts is how we follow the lines of their intersection, how we pay attention to their circumstances. (1995, 7)

Indeed, if I have passed over many examples of artist writings that are ripe for discussion in what turns out to be my largely American story, it is because I prioritized analysing fewer examples in their singularity to emphasize their entanglements. Further supporting Thomas Crow’s argument that art cannot “be defined by its essentially visual nature” because it does not “work exclusively
through the optical faculties”—and thus that “visual culture” is insufficient “as a blueprint for the emancipation of art history” (2006, 53-54)—my study confirms that when non-visual artistic facets are ignored, a site for rigour and criticality is lost. Thierry de Duve’s observation that “when I sense that a critical function is active in the work of art I am beholding, it prompts me to activate in myself a similar critical function” (1996, 448) applies to both artist writing(s) and writing on artist writing(s). Critical engagement with writings by artists is a challenge: to viewers/readers, to art writers, and to artist-writers during the nascent era of artist writing.
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