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THE COLUMBIA GUIDE TO

America in the 1960s

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with contributors

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW YORK

2001

Art: Expanding Conceptions, Sites, and Audiences

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The expansive sense of possibility that swept across America in the early 1960s fundamentally altered ideas about art and its relation to its consumers. As in so many other arenas in that period, but unlike any other phase of American art before or since, the decade produced an intense proliferation of new forms. And the innovations appeared with a rapidity that even in retrospect seems dizzying: in 1959, semiplanned group interactions with temporary sculptural installations called "Happenings"; in 1962, cartoon figuration and the monumentalization of grocery store merchandise in Pop Art; in 1965, the vertiginous geometric patterns of Op Art; in 1966, the overbearing austerity of Minimalism's unadorned blocks; in 1968, Postminimalism's reactive pliability and dispersal, one aspect of which was the large-scale earthen environments called "earthworks"; and across these years, an increasing emphasis on the conceptual element of art. Many of those movements have had a lasting impact on the look of art. Yet even more significant, these challenges to traditional formats altered assumptions about what "art" is, its proper relation to viewer/participants, the places where it may be sited, and who pays for it.

These bold experiments manifested on the visual culture front the expansive confidence of John F. Kennedy's identification of America as a pioneer of the "new frontier of the 1960s." That confidence galvanized younger artists' vigorous rejection of the avant-garde form of the 1940s and 1950s, Abstract Expressionism, which by the early 1960s had become official. Through exhibitions of large canvases by Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and others, organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art to circulate in Europe during 1958 and 1959 under the auspices of the United States Information Agency, contemporary American painting had reached a greater audience than ever before. In contrast to the gritty art being produced in those war-torn countries, these dramatic abstractions presented images of America's freedom of individual expression and robust culture. But for the New York art world, AbEx's fields of deep color and dynamic swaths and drips of paint had become not a mark of hard-won introspection but a clichéd sign of that, a convention.

Thus, when Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol glorified the bright packaging of common commodities, inane comic strips, and mythic movie stars, they rejected abstract painting and its evocation of interiority and spirituality. Instead, these "pop" artists (that is, imagists of "pop"ular culture), with producers of Photorealist painting, gave a fine-art face to America's satisfactions with prosperity. Not incidentally, these easily identifiable, emotionally unambiguous images appealed to beginner, newly rich collectors of newly fashionable *American* contemporary art.

Yet simultaneously, another fun form prominent in the first half of the Sixties implicitly rejected commodification: "Happenings." Announcing in the October 1958 *Art News* an alternative "Legacy of Jackson Pollock," Allan Kaprow stated, "Pollock left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life. . . . Not satisfied with the *suggestion*, through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movement, people, odors, touch." Kaprow, as well as Jim Dine, Red Grooms, and Robert Whitman, orchestrated events that mixed installations of painting and sculpture with lightly scripted group acts that allowed for chance and spontaneous participation. First performing in front of an audience in a gallery, they soon accommodated their draw of large crowds by moving to downtown outdoor sites.

The artistic medium where that sense of broad experimentation so endemic to the Sixties was particularly displayed was sculpture. In the hierarchy of artistic media, sculpture has traditionally been ranked, as Charles Baudelaire noted in his review of the Ecole des Beaux Arts' 1846 Salon, as "nothing else but a *complementary* art . . . a humble associate of painting and architecture." In the 1960s that custom was turned on its head. In the spring of 1966, New York's Jewish Museum highlighted the new abstract, pared-down steel or wood constructions by linking work by forty-two sculptors under the exhibition title "Primary Structures." Styles ranged from the dynamic equilibrium of David Smith's jumbled *Cubi* arrangements to the huge cantilevered thrusts of Robert Grosvenor to Carl Andre's long, floor-bound line of plain, unattached bricks. Ronald Bladen and architect/artist Tony Smith were prominent in this genre, as were the sculptor/critics Donald Judd and Robert Morris. Works by the younger generation showed no evidence of the hand of the artist, and in fact were often industrially fabricated. The very austerity of these forms led them to be termed "Minimal Art," but that emphasized only the most obvious aspect, their look. More radical was these reductive works' promotion of a shift in the observer's attention from a discrete object to its interaction with the configuration of its site, as well as to the viewer's own relative size and po-

sition. In effect, the viewer became more of an active participant in generating the experience of the work, which was beyond the perceptual, a more holistic experience of object, space, and environment.

Within the social milieu of sit-ins, civil rights protests, and the antiwar movement, these blunt, "environmental"-scale sculptures could also be taken as oppositional. "It's really anti-collector, anti-museum art," declared curator Kynaston McShine regarding "Primary Structures" (*New York Times*, April 24, 1966). "In it there's implied social criticism. Most of it is designed for indoor use but who could house works of this scale? It may in fact provoke hostility in the viewer." Actually, after the customary initial bewilderment, private and public collections extended the Sixties' enthusiasm for the new and the outrageous to these mammoth constructions, finding new places to "house" them in atriums, plazas, courtyards, and gardens. This effort was aided by two federal programs initiated in the mid-1960s to commission architecturally scaled work. The General Services Administration's "Fine Arts in New Buildings Program," begun in 1963 in response to a report requested by President John F. Kennedy on federal architecture, commissioned the creation of large tapestries, mosaics, murals, and sculpture. (The government suspended the program in 1966 due to "the economic pressures of the Vietnam War" and reactivated it in 1973 as the GSA Art-in-Architecture Program.) The National Endowment for the Arts, founded in 1965, established the Art in Public Places Program early in 1967 to award matching funds to nonprofit organizations for the purchase and installation of works of art in publicly accessible spaces.

In the same *New York Times* interview, McShine also addressed artists' new professionalism and their intention to rethink their medium. He saw the young sculptors of the Sixties as "hip, sophisticated, articulate. Most are university-bred. They've read philosophy, have a keen sense of history, and know that they're supposed to be reading too. Their art doesn't answer questions, it asks them. Mostly, questions how to go about making sculpture." Around this time this reflexive attitude soon flipped over into Conceptual Art, which diminished the material properties of art and bolstered the other part of the equation, the idea. For Joseph Kosuth, creating art became intellectual research: his own works were photostats of dictionary definitions, documentary photographs, and "information rooms" (books splayed on exhibition tables). Lawrence Weiner affixed earnestly indecipherable propositions directly on a wall in a line or so of type; John Baldessari withdrew the aesthetic component by posting a certificate that he had cremated his earlier paintings, displaying the repeatedly handwritten line, "I will not make any more boring art," or using stock photography scenes with anonymous figures, their faces obscured by

colored disks. Serving as purgatives for a commercialized culture, these puritanical investigations aimed to thwart viewers' desires for sensory pleasure, emotional engagement, and portable collectibles.

Conceptual Art's increasing prominence toward the end of the decade corresponded to the broadening influence of the anti-Vietnam War movement, which led many to dispute the authority of governmental, academic, and corporate institutions. Yet it was only with the founding of the Art Workers Coalition in early 1969 that power structures in the art world itself began to be recognized. The AWC sponsored group protests of museum trustees' links between culture and politics and the initial omission of black artists from the Museum of Modern Art's Martin Luther King Jr. memorial exhibition. Gender bias in exhibition rosters was rarely addressed before the formation in 1969 of the Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) and in 1970, the AWC Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee. In the 1970s, the feminist art movement became an influential presence. Nationalistic chauvinism was typical of postwar American artists both eager to be "free from weight of European culture" (as the artist and intellectual Barnett Newman had urged in "The Sublime is Now" in 1948) and avid for recognition in Europe's capitals of modernism. Also, New York's dominance of the American art world was simply taken for granted. San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago possessed substantial communities of artists, each displaying a regional sensibility distinct from one another and from Manhattan's. But only in New York City was there the critical mass of museums, galleries, collectors, publications and critics sufficient to catapult local artists to international attention and economic security. A rare example of geographical inclusiveness was evinced in the massive survey exhibition "American Sculpture of the Sixties" in the spring of 1967, but this was clearly prompted by its "outsider" point of origin: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The West Coast perspective encompassed not only New Yorkers' exhibits in "Primary Structures" but also California work such as Edward Kienholz's pungent tableaux, Bruce Connor's funk assemblages, and John McCracken's luminous fiberglass planarity. Expansive also in media, the show included the ceramic expressionism of Peter Voulkos and the pristine, perverse wood laminations by Chicagoan H. C. Westermann.

If the spectacle of a jumble of Warhol's gigantic boxes of Brillo cleaning pads typified art in the early Sixties, by the end of the decade the sculptural material engulfing the art world was dirt. From 1966, Eva Hesse's pendulous sculptures of loosely arranged rope, netting, and/or rubber tubing presented transitional work. As the force of gravity emphasized natural processes of hanging or sagging, Hesse's piece and those by Morris, Richard Serra, Barry LeVa, and others refused the formal rigidity of Minimalism and came to be

called Process Art or Postminimalism. In 1968, Robert Smithson brought intricate bins of rocks indoors, and Walter De Maria and Morris aggressively displayed piles of dirt. Carl Andre, Michael Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim had recently made work outdoors in wilderness or countryside terrains. Smithson's grand *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a landfill 15 feet wide by 1,500 feet long extending from the north shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, is often cited as an icon of Sixties idealism. Locating this work distant from any art community, using Caterpillar trucks for the primitive technique of mound making, and shaping it as a mystical mandala situated in water of an eerie red color (caused by microbacteria, red algae, and brine shrimp in saline water) that one was supposed to experience by walking toward its center "point of beginning" exemplifies visionary creativity.

Society's increased concern for the natural environment prompted attention to the Earthworkers, but such massive rearrangements of land actually dramatized the period's ambivalence, not only about the status of culture but also about proper behavior in nature. These artists' putative refusal of commercialization depended upon the patronage of collectors and dealers who themselves benefited from the purchase and sale of the artists' ongoing gallery-scale work. Earth art can be taken as the most extreme instance of a 1960s motivation to counter dominant high culture. This dialectical stance unites it with the preceding avant garde's oppositions to the "Academy," except that earlier artists sought to supplant established styles with their own approaches to fine art. Pop Art circumvented such internecine conflicts, embraced the increasing domination of the marketplace, and produced legible images appealing to wits and nitwits alike. It is to the influence of Pop Art and its parallel 1960s democratizing forms of fashion, design, music, and social mores that we can attribute the ensuing erosion of high/low cultural distinctions.

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