

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced manuscript of a chapter accepted for publication in the book Eva Ehniger, Antje Krause-Wahl and Henning Engelke (eds), *In Terms of Painting* (Berlin: Revolver, 2016). The definitive version is Dominic Rahtz, 'Dematerialization and /Cloud/', in Eva Ehniger, Antje Krause-Wahl and Henning Engelke (eds), *In Terms of Painting* (Berlin: Revolver, 2016), pp. 141-155.

## DEMATERIALIZATION AND /CLOUD/

The article 'The Dematerialization of Art', written by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler and published in *Art International* in early 1968,<sup>1</sup> is still considered one of the most important attempts to define the tendencies that characterize late 1960s American art. This may be due more, however, to the phrase 'the dematerialization of art' than to the content of the text itself. As Rosalind Krauss pointed out as early as 1973, 'dematerialization', like 'post-Minimalism', was a periodizing term that merely positioned the art concerned in an historical relationship to the art that preceded it, which did not mean that it provided an adequate description of it.<sup>2</sup> The term 'dematerialization' was in fact widely criticized at the time, including by those artists who were taken to exemplify the tendency, who argued that even Conceptual works of art necessarily

---

<sup>1</sup> Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', *Art International*, vol. 12, no. 2 (February 1968), pp. 31-6.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture', *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 3 (November 1973), pp. 43-4.

existed in material terms, raising the question of what the materiality that had been thought to have been 'dematerialized' consisted in in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

The term 'dematerialization' is usually read in terms of a shift in condition, associated with Conceptual Art, from the work of art as object to one that privileges the idea or concept. Certainly there are many passages in the text that confirm this reading, such as the opening remarks that refer to an "ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively".<sup>4</sup> However, 'The Dematerialization of Art' is actually a more double-sided text than this emphasis on the conceptual suggests, since the term 'dematerialization' was also used to refer to those works in which there was a dispersal of the material that hitherto would have constituted the solidity of the object. In a remark made in the text on the phenomenality of certain works that were taken to exemplify 'dematerialization', Lippard and Chandler stated that "the "thinness", both literal and allusive, of such themes as water, steam, dust, flatness, legibility, temporality, continues the process of ridding art of its object quality".<sup>5</sup> Examples of works referred to in the text to which such a condition applied were Robert Morris's *Steam*, first realized in 1967 (fig. 1), and Carl Andre's *Spill (Scatter Piece)* from 1966, but the same themes can be seen in slightly later works associated with Process Art, such as Bill Bollinger's 'dust' piece, *Graphite* from 1969 (fig. 2), Richard Serra's *Splashing*, from 1968 (fig. 3), and even in Lawrence Weiner's work from the same year, "One aerosol can of enamel sprayed to conclusion directly upon the floor". Such works can be seen as a further development of the projection of the materiality of the work of art associated with

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Art and Language, 'Concerning the Article 'The Dematerialization of Art'' (23rd March 1968), excerpt published in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1997; first published 1973), pp. 43-4; Mel Bochner, 'Excerpts From Speculation (1967-1970)', *Artforum*, vol. 8, no. 9 (May 1970), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Lippard and Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Lippard and Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', p. 34

Minimal Art, except that the materiality concerned was not that of the object but rather that of a material or materials exceeding any solid shape. 'Dematerialization', in Lippard and Chandler's text, thus also refers to this wider condition of material, and perhaps a more accurate characterization of the art of this period would be that it consists in a further stage in a 'materialization of art'.

Process Art as it developed in 1968 and 1969 was first articulated in terms of a critique of objecthood, but since the objecthood projected by Minimal Art was itself originally defined negatively against pictorial illusion, the question arises as to whether the negation of this negation in the subsequent tendencies entailed a return to pictorial concerns in any sense, and, if so, what the relationship might be between a further elaboration of materiality in Process Art and the art of painting. By the late 1960s, the formalist art criticism of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, with its emphasis on the specificity of the medium as providing the self-critical "infra-logic" of the development of modernist painting<sup>6</sup>, was frequently criticized by artists and critics wishing to expand the possibilities of art. At the same time, painting in its wider sense as an historically developed *dispositif*, as standing for and determining the discursive conditions of art in general, continued, even in the late 1960s, to provide terms in which the new developments were understood. The possible return of painterly concerns were in fact a recurrent theme in the discourse associated with the dematerialization of art. According to Robert Pincus-Witten, for example, in a 1969 article on Richard Serra, late 1968 and early 1969 saw a "revival of painterliness", a "new sensibility... [that] again fosters values connected with Abstract Expressionism. That is to say, it sponsors the sensibilities covered by Wölfflin's term *malerisch*. In

---

<sup>6</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism' (1962), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 131.

this respect Serra's lead splashes and "tearings" are almost the *sine qua non* of the new sensibility."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Max Kozloff, in his review of '9 at Leo Castelli', widely regarded as the exhibition that established Process Art as a movement, considered the works shown as manifesting a sensibility that recalled American 'action painting', whilst distinguishing itself from it in its apparent negation of artistic self. "[O]ne might easily imagine the young sculptors [in '9 at Leo Castelli'] to have finagled themselves, unwittingly or not, into the old esthetic of "action" painting. Qualities of spontaneity and improvisation, all-overness and design, are much reminiscent of early fifties painting. But not only are these more atomized, they are also humbled, gratuitous, and thrown away, with the peculiar confidence of those who never had faith in the egocentrism of gesture, and who are therefore free to objectify it as the delicate chance slaving of gravity."<sup>8</sup>

As a periodizing term, 'dematerialization' may thus also refer to these possible returns of painting, but a painting involving other modes of action and materials other than paint, a painting that was in some sense also sculpture. The sense of "thinness" identified by Lippard and Chandler invokes a condition of material that was not only relatively insubstantial but also oriented to a flat surface, and in practice the dispersal of material that can be seen in certain 'dematerialized' works was frequently determined by its relation to the floor, seen as a 'ground'. And yet the mere dispersal of material on a flat surface cannot easily be reconciled with the constitutive nature of painting as the production of an illusionistic pictorial space. If Process Art constituted a return to painting, it was perhaps (as in the allusions expressed in the contemporary criticism) closest to the situation described by Harold Rosenberg in his 1952 essay 'The American Action Painters' in which the "canvas began to appear... as an arena in which to act. [...] What was to go on the

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Richard Serra: Slow Information', *Artforum*, vol. 8, no. 1 (September 1969), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Max Kozloff, '9 in a Warehouse: An "Attack on the Status of the Object"', *Artforum*, vol. 7, no 6 (February 1969), p. 41.

canvas was not a picture but an event.” This “event” was defined by an action involving materials on the part of the painter, who “went up to [the easel] with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him.”<sup>9</sup> The difference, however, was that ‘action painting’ was ultimately defined in Rosenberg’s text according to the image, which although not considered in terms of something that existed prior to the event of the painting was nevertheless its result (“The image would be the result of this encounter”<sup>10</sup>), whereas Process Art, like Minimal Art, defined itself negatively, in the literalness of its materiality, against the pictorial image. If one were to consider ‘dematerialized’ Process Art in terms of painting, a preliminary characterization of its condition might be that of an imageless materiality, corresponding in some way to the anteriority of the material “event” or “encounter” described by Rosenberg.

In considering the ‘dematerializing’ tendencies of late 1960s Process Art and their possible relationship to painting, it may be useful to initially approach the question from the side of the latter, and in particular from a theorization of painting that pays close attention to its material condition as distinct from its condition as pictorial image. One text that is exemplary in this regard is *A Theory of /Cloud/* by the French art historian Hubert Damisch, first published in 1972. Despite the connotations of immateriality that the word ‘cloud’ might suggest, Damisch’s book seeks to define painting as a material process of production. ‘/Cloud/’, like ‘dematerialization’, contrary to initial appearances, really refers to the definition of the materiality of the work of art, and, more particularly, of process. The sense of this material process, however, only emerges at the limits of a semiology of painting, and is therefore defined in negative terms with respect to the pictorial

---

<sup>9</sup> Harold Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters’ (1952), *The Tradition of the New* (London: Paladin, 1970), pp. 36-7.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters’, p. 37.

sign. Damisch placed the word 'cloud' between two forward slashes to separate it as a signifier—the material side of the sign—from the signified—the idea or image of cloud. The definition of /cloud/ in terms of the materiality of the signifier turns out, for Damisch, to stand for the materiality of painting in general. Elsewhere, reflecting later on his book, Damisch characterized /cloud/ as the “zero degree of painting”. As “purely material or substance”, it represented a dimension of painting on which its pictorial workings depended, but a dimension that remained anterior or exterior to these workings.<sup>11</sup>

The actual appearance of clouds in paintings throughout the history of art was seen by Damisch according to several different registers, but which nevertheless revealed the material limits of painting seen in terms of the pictorial sign. In a symbolic register, for example, cloud could perform functions such as providing a transition between the domains of the earth and the heavens, a solution to the pictorial problem of representing two separate worlds on a single surface. The theoretical significance of cloud in Western art, however, really emerges in its relationship to the invention and subsequent dominance of linear perspective as a means of ordering pictorial space. Damisch characterized perspective as a totalizing order that positions things and bodies within a necessarily continuous space. These things and bodies were circumscribed according to their surfaces and edges, since these attributes provided the points and lines according to which things and bodies could be positioned.<sup>12</sup> However, even at its origin, it was recognized that perspective could not assimilate the sky or clouds into its order. Here, Damisch referred to Leonardo da Vinci's distinction between bodies that have a determinate form and those, such as clouds, that do not. According to Leonardo, such phenomena as clouds

---

<sup>11</sup> 'A Conversation with Hubert Damisch', *October* no. 85 (Summer 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Towards a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002; originally published in French in 1972), p. 124.

consisted in “bodies... without surface”, and were, in his words, “thin or rather liquid, and... readily melt into and mingle with other thin bodies, as mud with water, mist or smoke with air, or the element of air with fire, and other similar things”.<sup>13</sup> In Western painting, according to Damisch, the image of cloud as a thing or body without a determinate surface or shape thus functioned as that which linear perspective was unable to incorporate into its order. The lack of a determinate form in cloud was due not only to its relatively insubstantial nature, but also to its constantly shifting and contingent character; its capacity, for example, to emerge and dissolve in air.

As well as in terms of its phenomenality, characterized by an indeterminacy of surface or shape, /cloud/ was also defined according to a materiality at the level of the signifier. This materiality was defined negatively in semiological terms, and relied on a distinction between sign and figure derived from the work of the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev. A figure, in the Hjelmslevian sense, was defined as that part of a sign which was not itself a sign but on which the latter necessarily depended for its working. An example of a figure in this sense would be a written letter that is a part of a word which does not by itself convey any meaning but instead provides the means for the internal articulation of differences that forms the basis of any signifying order. In considering painting in semiological terms, Damisch sought to identify those figures that could not be incorporated at the level of pictorial meaning but on which, nevertheless, the latter depended. In the most general sense, this dimension of painting constituted its “material texture”, or its “signifying materiality”.<sup>14</sup> The significance of cloud in this materialist semiology of painting was that it appeared as an element that could move between semiological levels, and therefore function as both sign and figure. As a sign, it was defined by its position within the signifying

---

<sup>13</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, p. 281, n. 115.

<sup>14</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, pp. 13, 14.



order of the pictorial (albeit a negative one in the order of linear perspective). As a figure, it was defined by its exteriority with respect to this signifying order, and as potentially undermining it.

According to Damisch,

... the functional nature of a *sign* does not suffice to justify its [/cloud/'s] value as theoretical index any more than it exhausts the efficacy of the *figure* at the level of the signifier. If /cloud/ assumes a strategic function in the pictorial order, it is because it operates alternately..., now as integrator, now as disintegrator, now as a sign, now as a nonsign (the emphasis here being placed on the potential negativity of a figure, on whatever in it contradicts the order of the sign, the effect of which is to loosen the hold of the latter).

[...]

...it [/cloud/] may operate as a disintegrator, insofar as, ceasing to operate as a sign and affirming itself as a figure (in the sense already explained [with reference to Hjelmslev]), it seems to call into question, thanks to its absence of limits and through the solvent effects to which it lends itself, the coherence and consistency of a syntactical ordering that is based on a clear delineation of units.<sup>15</sup>

The definition of /cloud/ as a figure in the Hjelmslevian sense thus provides the terms of its materiality within the signifying order of painting. This materiality was not that of a completely formless exteriority, but was rather, as Damisch put it, that of the condition of ""matter"" aspiring to ""form""<sup>16</sup> the condition of the material elements out of which differences were articulated to produce the signifying order of pictorial space as such. /Cloud/, for Damisch, was thus a material

---

<sup>15</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, pp. 184-5.

<sup>16</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, p. 35.

figure, an index of the relationships between the different strata of the pictorial sign, from the level of unformed matter and the merely material condition of paint and canvas, to the realms of form and meaning. In its capacity to revert to a figure, /cloud/ could perhaps be seen as an 'undecidable' in the sense defined by Jacques Derrida, as an element that deconstructs a given order by remaining unassimilable to its terms. (It is worth recalling here that Damisch, at the time of the publication of *A Theory of /Cloud/*, was working closely with Derrida and Louis Althusser at the École Normale in Paris.<sup>17</sup>) In the history of art, the depiction of actual clouds were really only the symptom of this more theoretical definition, their apparent immateriality only the surface phenomenon of a more general material condition of painting.

At the level of mere phenomenality, it is not difficult to see cloud-like attributes in certain works associated with 'The Dematerialization of Art'. Such features as the absence of a surface or shape can be seen very literally in a work such as Robert Morris's *Steam*, which produced a continually dispersing cloud of water vapour in its outdoor setting. But similar characteristics can also be seen more implicitly in an earlier work such as Carl Andre's *Spill (Scatter Piece)*, often seen as a prototypical Process work, in which hundreds of small plastic blocks were dropped onto the floor of the Dwan Gallery in New York in 1966, producing an arrangement of the material that had no edge or shape in any conventional artistic sense. This mode of 'dematerialization' as a dispersal of material subsequently coalesced as a distinct tendency during 1968 and 1969. It was first theorized by Robert Morris in his text 'Anti Form', published in *Artforum* in April 1968, and the ideas in this text provided the theme of the exhibition he organized in December 1968 entitled '9 at

---

<sup>17</sup> See Hubert Damisch, 'Hubert Damisch and Stephen Bann: A Conversation', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2005), p. 158.

Leo Castelli' (sometimes referred to as the 'Castelli Warehouse Show'), which included work by Serra, Bollinger, Eva Hesse, Alan Saret, and others.

The implications of 'Anti Form' for an understanding of the materiality of the work of art were initially theorized in terms of a critique of the pictorial sign. For Morris, the central problem was how to reconcile process and form without presupposing some metaphysical notion of form that existed prior to process. This presupposition concerning form characterized the history of painting in general, but by 1968 Morris had also become critical of Minimal Art for its dependence on what he referred to as the "reasonableness of the well-built", which presupposed certain forms defined by the rectangle and right angle.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, it was in recent American painting, and particularly in the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis, that the problem had been most successfully resolved. In a formulation that recalls Rosenberg's characterization of 'action painting', where the "image" was only the subsequent result of an "event" involving actions on materials, Morris described how both Pollock and Louis "used directly the physical, fluid properties of paint. Their "optical" forms resulted from dealing with the properties of fluidity and the conditions of a more or less absorptive ground. The forms and the order of their work were not *a priori* to the means".<sup>19</sup> In 'Anti Form', Morris defined a similar approach to materials in which form was not predetermined, where "Random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to the material".<sup>20</sup> It was as if the realm of the pictorial, already defined according to a rhetorical reversal of process and form, where form was seen as prior to its own cause instead of as

---

<sup>18</sup> Morris, 'Anti Form', p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, 'Anti Form', p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Morris, 'Anti Form', *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 8 (April 1968), p. 35. The term 'anti form' seems to have been Philip Leider's. See E. C. Goossen, 'The Artist Speaks: Robert Morris', *Art in America*, vol. 58, no. 3 (May-June 1970), p. 105.

its effect, was subjected in 'Anti Form' to a further rhetorical reversal that posited material process as the cause of form.

This sense of reversal was developed further in Morris's 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects', published in *Artforum* in early 1969. According to Morris, the Minimal art object, despite its attempted negation of pictorial illusion, was still subject to a mode of perception defined by the image, and therefore not properly material. "Objects provided the imagistic ground out of which '60s art was materialized. [...] Art of the '60s was an art of depicting images. But depiction as a mode seems primitive because it involves implicitly asserting forms as being prior to substances".<sup>21</sup> In terms very similar to those in 'Anti Form', Morris defined Process Art according to a reversal of an already reversed order of priorness, so that material, or "substances", were seen as prior to form or to the pictorial image. This prior material condition was, however, imagined, according to a term derived from the psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig, as a "dedifferentiated" visual field in which no figure stood out against a ground. Thus, by 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 4', Morris recognized that the projection of whole shape characteristic of the Minimal object merely displaced the figure/ground compositional mode that defined the realm of the pictorial to that of the space of the gallery. The distribution of materials over the floor of the gallery, the "heterogeneous, randomized distributions that characterize figureless sections of the world",<sup>22</sup> which can be seen, for example, in an untitled work from 1968, in which Morris spread an amount of threadwaste and other materials on the floor of the Leo Castelli gallery (fig. 4), represented an attempt to negate the pictorial relationship between figure and ground and produce the sense of a relatively undifferentiated visual field. The same dispersed condition may be seen in other works from the period, some of which were used to illustrate Morris's text, that

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects', *Artforum*, vol. 7, no. 8 (April 1969), p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects', p. 51.

distributed relatively insubstantial material over the floor, such as Bill Bollinger's 'dust' piece made from graphite powder first shown in early 1969 and some of Barry Le Va's work in which various materials such as felt, ball bearings and aluminium rods were seemingly randomly arranged over the floor. The character of having no clearly delineated edge meant that the 'ground' on which the material was scattered, swept or splashed entered the work, and took on an indeterminate condition with respect to it.

Although some 'dematerialized' Process works can be seen as cloud-like in their formal indeterminacy, this was really, like the actual depictions of clouds in the history of painting, only the surface appearance of a more properly material condition. However, the extent to which the definition of this materiality was approached in terms derived from the discourse of painting, even if negatively, revealed the dependency of Morris's theorization of Process Art on the realm of the image, and, in particular, on the pictorial relationship between figure and ground. The emphasis on the ground, and the attempts to prevent the material dispersed on this ground coalescing into any form or figure, from taking on any shape or edge, therefore remained within a certain problematic associated with painting. The materiality concerned was that of the figureless materiality of the 'ground', to which corresponded a "dedifferentiated" mode of perception. This condition can be seen as a version of Damisch's theory of /cloud/, in the sense that /cloud/ functioned as a figure of negativity with respect to the realm of the pictorial sign, and as containing the possibility of revealing the material basis of the pictorial order. A sense of this negativity may be read in Max Kozloff's contemporary characterization of the works in '9 at Leo Castelli'. "It is as if one had some quickened, evasive allusion to the "permeable" surface life of a picture which then dissolved back into the opaque physicality and presence of a raw material".<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Max Kozloff, '9 in a Warehouse: An "Attack on the Status of the Object"', *Artforum*, vol. 7, no. 6 (February 1969), pp. 39, 41.

What Kozloff was describing in this intuition, from the side of the materiality of the works, was the same double character of the pictorial figure as that theorized by Damisch as /cloud/.<sup>24</sup>

The reversal of terms that characterized the theory of 'Anti Form', however, left the meanings of the terms themselves relatively unaltered. The image of a figureless ground as a visual field produced through a negation of the figure/ground relationship, although suggestive of the immanent formal potential of material *per se*, nevertheless remained within the bounds of the pictorial and of its signifying order. As Morris acknowledged in 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 4', the dispersed lateral arrangements of materials in recent Process works continued to constitute a "general sort of image", one that was, moreover, suggestive of the imagery of Pollock's paintings.<sup>25</sup> The image of a figureless field does not quite reach the sense of the priorness of the material 'figure' in Damisch (and here one must be careful to keep separate the meanings of the word 'figure' as one side of the figure/ground relationship and the more elusive Hjelmslevian meaning as a material element of language that exists prior to its semiological dimension), which functions as ""matter" aspiring to "form"". In other words, there was a more fundamental sense of materiality at work in Damisch's theory of painting as /cloud/, which was ultimately related to the temporality of action, a material process of production inseparable from the immanent formal potential of matter.

According to Philip Leider, in his review of '9 at Leo Castelli', which explicitly related the work shown to Morris's 'Anti Form' essay, it was the work by Richard Serra that best exemplified

---

<sup>24</sup> Compare Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/', in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1999), pp. 75-89, which uses Damisch's concept of /cloud/ to interpret the different modalities of materiality, 'atmosphere' and opacity at work in Agnes Martin's work.

<sup>25</sup> Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects', p. 54.

the tendency in its concern with “the natural formlessness of the material”.<sup>26</sup> In particular, Serra’s 1968 piece *Splashing*, the result of the action of throwing molten lead at the foot of a brick wall, produced the sense of an absence of form in the material, achieved partly through foregrounding the immanent possibilities of the material itself in terms of its change in condition from a liquid to a solid. In similar terms to those invoked by Morris in ‘Notes on Sculpture, part 4’, a sense of the pictorial problematic and its limits, and its relationship to Process Art, can be read in a text by Serra from early 1970:

A recent problem with the lateral spread of materials, elements on the floor in the visual field, is the inability of this landscape mode to avoid arrangement *qua* figure ground: the pictorial convention.

[...]

One way of coming to terms with this problem is to reveal the fact of the operative rationale that allows the work to find its place. Lawrence Weiner and Carl Andre point out the polarities: Andre’s place, Weiner’s residue.<sup>27</sup>

In this text, the “pictorial convention” provided the negative terms by which a process, or a procedure, was defined. Serra was critical of the dispersal of materials that characterized many ‘dematerialized’ Process works. “The concern with horizontality is not so much a concern for lateral extension as it is a concern for painting. Lateral extension in this case allows sculpture to be

---

<sup>26</sup> Philip Leider, ‘The Properties of Materials’: In the Shadow of Robert Morris’, *New York Times*, 22nd December 1968, p. D31.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Serra, ‘Play it Again, Sam’, *Arts Magazine*, vol. 44, no. 4 (February 1970), p. 24.

re-viewed pictorially — that is, as if the floor were the canvas plane”.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the “operative rationale” of the work, the process or procedure that defined the forming of the materials, produced a sense of temporality that would necessarily be absent in the spatial character of the figure/ground relationship.

Whereas Morris’s sense of the capability of a material to suggest its own form ended up producing a particular kind of image, a figureless ground, Serra was more interested in process as an “operative rationale”, a mode of action, which existed prior to any relationship between material and form. This privileging of action itself can be read in Serra’s *Verb List* (1967-68), often referred to as providing the principle of his work during the late 1960s. The verbs that Serra listed, such as “to roll, to crease, to fold...”, etc., did not apply to any particular material, but consisted in transitive actions which, presented as singular infinitives, did not specify any subject or object in grammatical terms. The actions thus existed in a state of possibility represented in language, but nevertheless a possibility that required some form of material realization. In his solo exhibition at the Castelli warehouse in late 1969, Serra exhibited a work, *Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure* (1969), which seemed initially to consist in a random dispersal of materials similar in appearance to Morris’s untitled work using threadwaste or to some of Le Va’s ‘distribution’ pieces. However, as Leider wrote in his *Artforum* review of the exhibition, although the materials appeared dispersed they were in fact brought together according to the action to which they were all subjected, namely cutting or sawing. “The work is thus a process piece in a very elegant sense, for it delivers to us in an admirably straightforward way not only the process of its making, but also the information that the same process is also the solution to the problem dealt with in the work, *i.e.*, the sawing plainly both *makes* the piece and is also that which unifies the various materials in

---

<sup>28</sup> Serra, ‘Play it Again, Sam’, p. 25.



the work".<sup>29</sup> Process as a mode of action was here the prior term that determined the mode of existence of the materials. For Serra, the work consisted in the action on or of materials, the suggestion of which continued in the work, a condition that can be read in Serra's quotation in an article from 1969 of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's doctrine, from *Modes of Thought* (1938), that "process and existence pre-suppose each other".<sup>30</sup> The reference to Whitehead brings out the character of Serra's imagining of materiality as essentially processual in nature.

The subsequent development of the procedure used in *Splashing* brings out the priorness of the temporal clearly. Whereas *Splashing*, in its realization in the Castelli warehouse exhibition, consisted in the "residue" of an action that had been completed, the later version of the work installed in the 1969 exhibition 'Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials' at the Whitney Museum in New York, further brought out the temporal nature of the procedure through its repetition. In this later work, *Casting* (fig. 5), Serra removed a series of the residues of the action, laying them in sequence away from the gallery wall in order to foreground the temporal nature of both the action and the immanent possibilities contained in the material. As Robert Pincus-Witten pointed out, the succession of actions that determined this work introduced another form of temporality into a work already defined by the temporal change of state from molten to solidified lead.<sup>31</sup> Because the series of castings were detached from the place that determined their shape, the foot of the wall, their subsequent relationship to the ground, the floor, was indeterminate if the latter was considered in terms of a horizontal pictorial ground, as a surface on which materials could be dispersed. Rather the ground was, in a sense, produced by the work, by the temporal series of actions performed on the material. (A similar strategy can be seen in a later work produced by

---

<sup>29</sup> Philip Leider, 'New York', *Artforum*, vol. 8, no. 6 (February 1970), p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Pincus-Witten, 'Richard Serra: Slow Information', p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Pincus-Witten, 'Richard Serra: Slow Information', p. 36.

Barry Le Va in London in 1971, in which he successively blew, using an air compressor, a series of waves of white flour across the floor.<sup>32</sup>) Whereas Morris imagined a materiality consisting of a figureless ground, Serra imagined a materiality shaped by a procedure that also produced its own ground. The action that constituted the work was also what allowed it, in Serra's words, to "find its place".

Although it might appear that the emphasis on process and procedure moves work such as Serra's away from a specifically pictorial problematic, it brings it closer to the question of painting defined as a material process of production. Returning to Damisch, this material process of production can be seen as that which operates between a materiality that is indifferent to form and a materiality oriented to, or "aspiring", to form. In *A Theory of /Cloud/, /cloud/* is this relationship between these two senses of materiality, the first articulation of a difference that provides the prior basis for any image to form, or for any signifying order to establish itself. In the terms of Damisch's reference to Hjelmslev, this articulation occurs at the level of the figure, as distinct from the sign, and so any signifying order was subject to what Damisch referred to as "the potential negativity of a figure", the negativity of its indifferent material condition, which was in itself meaningless. What Damisch called the "material texture of the pictorial process"<sup>33</sup> was thus a texture that comprised the figures and the material substratum against which and out of which these figures were articulated, the imageless materiality that constituted the prior condition of the image.

---

<sup>32</sup> Barry Le Va, 'Notes on a Piece by Barry Le Va', *Studio International*, vol. 182, no. 938 (November 1971), pp. 178-9.

<sup>33</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* p. 13.

Towards the end of his book, Damisch invoked the late paintings by Paul Cézanne as representing a “break”<sup>34</sup> in the history of Western painting (a “break” that may be characterized as epistemological if one recalls the intellectual context in which Damisch was working). This break consisted in a shift from image to text, where the painterly text was defined as a material texture constructed from the relationships between touches of paint and the canvas. Thus, although the late paintings are often considered unfinished due to the areas of canvas that Cézanne left untouched, for Damisch these gaps represented the necessary counterpart to the painted touches, and together with the latter constituted the constructed nature of the painted surface. The materiality of these areas of unpainted canvas could, however, only be seen in relative terms. From a materialist, or historical materialist, perspective, the canvas support, although functioning within painting as its material basis, and in itself indifferent to the realm of depicted form, had nevertheless its own form, defined by the production of canvas in general as a conventional support for painting (a relatively recent convention in the history of art), and of the more or less industrial production of the material itself. As Damisch warns, “The substratum, the “canvas” as revealed by Cézanne and set up as a signifier, is by no means a *given fact*... The canvas is the product of a history...”<sup>35</sup> As material, canvas, as well as the wood for the stretcher, the paint, and so on, was already formed, already matter worked on. It is in the nature of such raw materials that they will be subject to further work, and given new forms as part of a temporal process. In painting, one could say that its capacity to produce new forms depends as much on this raw material, as itself formed, as on the imagined realm of form as such. Without the temporal dimension of the process, the relationship between the literal materiality *per se* of the materials on one side and form on the other would lapse into mere indifference. The material substratum of

---

<sup>34</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, pp. 226-7.

<sup>35</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, p. 230.

painting was therefore, for Damisch, the stratum at which painting could be seen as a material practice, in its own specificity and as one material practice amongst others.

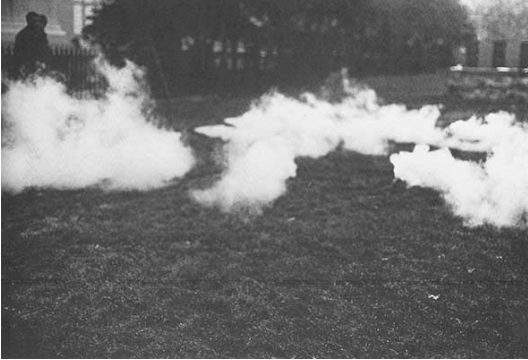
Reading the continued reference to painting in American art discourse of the late 1960s through Damisch's theory of the materiality of painting reveals the extent to which, on one side, this discourse was negatively dependent on painting defined in terms of the pictorial image, and on the other, was introducing concerns that, although also constitutive of painting in a certain Rosenbergian sense, open on to the world of action and material practices in general. The 'dematerialized' Process Art of the late 1960s, in its emphasis on a figureless ground, and on the actions that produce this ground, can be seen as invoking the same materiality that is one side of the articulation of difference that defined the "material texture" of painting, the index of which was theorized by Damisch as /cloud/. The concern with action and procedure revealed, from the other side as it were, the nature of the immanent temporal process according to which a materiality defined by indifference and meaninglessness becomes a materiality defined from the side of the signifying order, from the side of form.

## IMAGES

### 1. Robert Morris, *Steam* (1967)

Installation at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, 1967

Rights: Robert Morris/ARS, New York



### 2. Bill Bollinger, *Graphite* (1969)

Installation at Bykert Gallery, New York, 1969

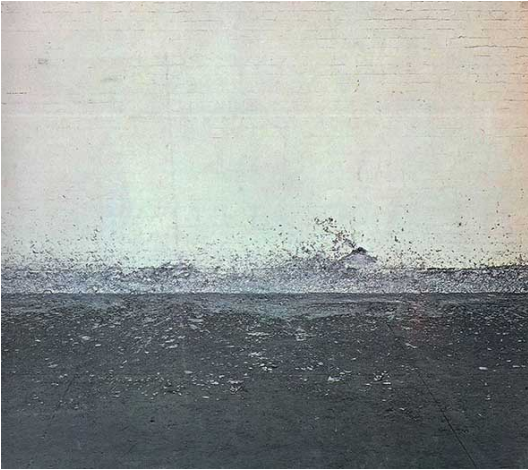
Rights: Bill Bollinger, courtesy Rolf Ricke Archive



### 3. Richard Serra, *Splashing* (1968)

Installation in the exhibition '9 at Leo Castelli', Leo Castelli Warehouse, New York, 1968

Rights: Richard Serra/ARS, New York



4. Robert Morris, *Untitled* (1968)

Installation Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, 1969

Rights: Robert Morris/ARS, New York



5. Richard Serra, *Casting* (1969)

Installation in the exhibition 'Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials', Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 1969

Photo: Peter Moore

Rights: Richard Serra/ARS, New York

