

The Exposition of Artistic Research Publishing Art in Academia

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Between the White Cube and the White Box: Brian O'Doherty's *Aspen* 5+6, An Early Exposition

By Lucy Cotter

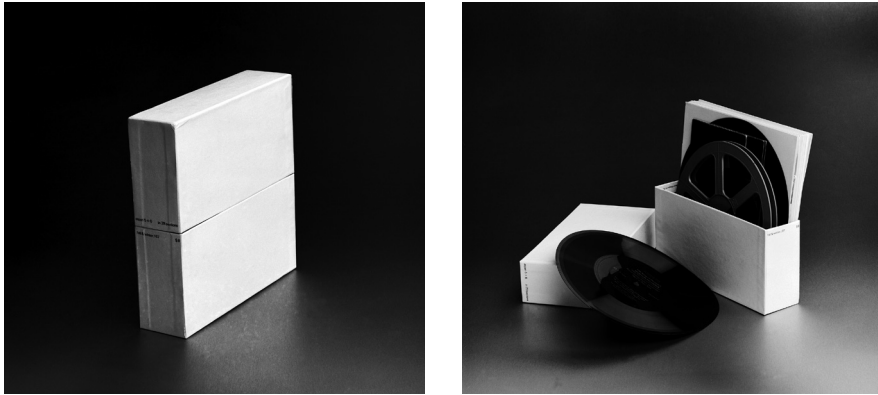


Figure 1. Brian O'Doherty, ed., *Aspen* 5+6 (1967), box exterior (left) and contents (right)
Photograph commissioned and arranged by Mary Ruth Walsh; photographer Fionn McCann

In the autumn of 1967, art critic and artist Brian O'Doherty guest edited a double-edition of *Aspen*, a magazine in a box published by Roaring Fork Press.¹ One of the most recent issues had been edited by Andy Warhol and David Dalton, the future founding editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine. Among its flamboyant contents were a flip-book based on Warhol's film *Kiss* and Jack Smith's film *Buzzards Over Bagdad*, a 'ticket book' with excerpts of papers delivered at the Berkeley conference on LSD, and a flexi-disc with music by John Cale of the Velvet Underground. O'Doherty's double-edition *Aspen* 5+6 was, in contrast, a minimalist white box (Fig. 1). It contained a thirty-two-page book with three essays, a reel of films, five vinyl phonograph records with music, interviews and readings, eight card boards that could be glued together to form a three-dimensional sculpture and ten items of printed matter, among them drawings, loose texts and scores. Its contributors were artists, critics, writers,

1. The edition was conceived, edited and designed by O'Doherty with art directors David Dalton and Lynn Letterman. *Aspen* was a multimedia magazine, ten editions of which were published on an irregular schedule by Phyllis Johnson from 1965 to 1971, each with a guest designer and editor. All citations in this chapter refer to unpaginated material from *Aspen* 5+6, unless otherwise stated.

dancers and musicians including Sol LeWitt, Susan Sontag, Samuel Beckett, Marcel Duchamp, Mel Bochner, Dan Graham and John Cage. As American critic Irving Sandler commented, 'In retrospect, [*Aspen* 5+6] summed up the sensibility of that decade and foretold much of what was to influence artists subsequently' (1996: 35). They were indeed a prophetic combination of ancestors and contemporaries, who would later be recognised as the artistic and theoretical backbone of poststructuralism and Conceptual art. Moreover, pre-figuring the first Conceptual art exhibitions of the later 1960s, the box was a canny curatorial intervention.²

At the time he edited *Aspen*, O'Doherty was trying to develop a post-structural artistic language using installation, drawing and performance.³ On an artistic level, the question motivating his edition of the journal was how to communicate the broader field of interest surrounding and informing his art practice. He wanted to gather together all the artists whose work he had 'passed through' – a kind of artistic ancestry – and connect them with the work of his generation. This comes close to the departure point of the contemporary artist doing artistic research, who 'distinguishes himself from other artists by taking it upon himself to make statements about the production of his work and about his thought processes' (Wesseling 2011: 3). O'Doherty's practice was a post-minimalist one that dealt with questions of language and form. He included one of his own artworks in the box, *Structural Play #3*, a performance in which a sentence is 'rotated' through several possible interpretations. *Aspen* 5+6 provides an exciting model for artists-as-researchers as they look for expository forms and face the task of translating the spatial and embodied experience of art into a publication in the broadest sense of the word.

Embracing his double position as an artist and critic, I propose that O'Doherty used *Aspen* 5+6 to stage an exposition in the gap between two primary sites of exposition – the gallery and the publication. I will look at

2. Mary Ruth Walsh notes that the only early Conceptual exhibition at this time was Mel Bochner's Christmas show at the gallery of the School of Visual Arts, New York, held in 1966. It consisted of Xeroxed copies of artists' notes and drawings from their sketchbooks displayed in four identical books, presented on four pedestals (2003: 42). Lucy Lippard refers to another early Conceptual exhibition at Seth Siegel's gallery in 1969, which was 'the first exhibition to exist in catalogue form alone' (1973: 79).

3. Brian O'Doherty was equally known as an artist and writer at the time of *Aspen*'s publication. This double role was later somewhat obscured by his adoption of the pseudonym Patrick Ireland from 1972 onwards for his artistic output, in response to the Bloody Sunday killings in Northern Ireland (1972). In a public ceremony he swore to use the name 'until such time as the British military presence is removed from Northern Ireland and all citizens are granted their civil rights'. On 20 May 2008 he reclaimed his birth name with the burial of his alter ego in the grounds of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, a gesture of reconciliation to celebrate the restoration of peace in Northern Ireland.

how O'Doherty translates the immediacy of engaging with the physical artwork into a publication, as well as how he uses the publication as a form to offer alternatives to restrictive aspects of the gallery experience. I will explore the author-reader/artwork-viewer relationship that *Aspen 5+6* establishes in the process. O'Doherty maintains the integrity of the edition's content-form relationship by placing apparently unrelated material side by side, whose contents touch each other tangentially. The result is a subtle and intricate web of inter-referencing that is difficult to capture in writing. Indeed, as we shall see, it is precisely the limits of linear text that inspired O'Doherty's sequence of juxtapositions. *Aspen 5+6* goes towards answering the question of how to deal with embodied and material knowledge in a manner that holds its own alongside the textual.

Tom Holert points out that the contemporary artists whose work has paved the way for the current interest in artistic research responded to an earlier generation of 1970s artists, many of whom were O'Doherty's peers.⁴ This is of relevance to the genealogy of artistic research, for which the development of Conceptual art has been an important milestone, not least through its challenge to the purely visual conception of art. *Aspen 5+6* can also be viewed in relation to O'Doherty's wider experimentation with artist's books and multiples in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as those by other artists, including the *Flux boxes* of George Maciunas with which it shares a number of attributes.⁵ As Alex Alberro has observed: 'In his choice of participants, O'Doherty was concerned with reinstating the often maligned legacy of European modernism extending from Russian Constructivism and the Dada tradition of paradoxical thinking to the predetermined structure of serial music and the non-metaphorical writing of the nouveau roman' (2001: 170). My intention is not to provide a discussion of the historical or disciplinary context against which the propositions of *Aspen 5+6* are made, however. I will instead explore the significance of O'Doherty's edition as viewed through the lens of contemporary conditions for artistic-research exposition.

4. Holert refers specifically to artists who came to fame in the 1990s, namely Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Fareed Armaly and Mark Dion, who engaged with the legacy of, among others, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, Dan Graham, Mel Bochner, *Art & Language* and Adrian Piper (2011: 46).

5. O'Doherty had been experimenting with what would later be called 'artist's books' from the mid-1960s. In 1966 he began a talking book, which he never completed. Subsequently, he made a 'flip-book', *Scenario for Sound: A Structural Film* (1967), followed by *Alphabet Book* (1968-9) and *Barbara's Alphabet* (1979-80), among others. See Moore-McCann (2009: 103-107). During the 1960s and 1970s, George Maciunas was assembling *Flux boxes* and *Flux-Kits*, small boxes containing cards and objects designed and assembled by Fluxus artists such as Christo, Yoko Ono and George Brecht. The first *Flux box* to be published was George Brecht's *Water Yam* (1963).

Opening the Box

In her influential essay 'Against Interpretation' (1961) Susan Sontag outlines the problematic relationship between interpretation and artworks. There is, in the first place, writing's tendency to take the sensory experience of art for granted and proceed from there. Sontag argues that interpretation separates form from content, with content becoming the essential and over-addressed factor and form becoming a mere accessory. Interpretation's illusory separation of the two has the result that 'to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings"' (2001: 7). Six years later she writes a commissioned essay for *Aspen 5+6* entitled *The Aesthetics of Silence*, in which she argues that art is itself 'mainly, a form of thinking'. Furthermore, 'each work of art gives us a form or paradigm or model of knowing something, an epistemology'. One of the challenges facing artists disseminating their research is the issue of finding an adequate expository form to hold this, at times idiosyncratic, epistemology. There is the most immediate problem of how to translate the medium-specificity of the artwork into other media, and writing in particular. Since artistic research can also shift the locus of art and artistic knowledge from the art world to the university, there is a further issue of how to engage with academic readers in such a way as to lure them out of their disciplinary and methodological modes. How can one make habitual readers look? How does one get them to *see* words? How can one convey materiality, even the materiality of language itself? How does one make people feel the body with which they read or look?

Sontag suggests that the best art writing is of the sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form. So, too, I want to propose, do the best artistic expositions. For an artist, the publication can be an interesting formal problem. Brian O'Doherty treats it in this manner. *Aspen 5+6* starts with form. A square white box measuring 8 x 8 x 2 inches, *Aspen's* container is not merely a shell to be cast aside to engage with content. The box is named in the list of contents as one of the edition's twenty-eight elements. On second glance, we realise that the box in fact echoes the white-cube space. As Mary Ruth Walsh summarily put it, 'The gallery is the box itself' (2003: 42). O'Doherty would treat the box as an alternative exhibition context, holding open a space of tension between the physical exhibition space and the publication. The format of this exhibition/book anticipated its editor's critique of the conventions of the modernist white cube in an influential series of essays entitled 'Inside the White Cube', published in *Art Forum* in 1976. The most prominent issues that O'Doherty would go on to highlight in these essays are, I propose, some of the conventions of the exhibition that he tries to challenge in *Aspen 5+6*. Let me cite a central passage that elucidates some of the central concerns of the essays that are relevant to *Aspen's* counterstrategies:

Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial, the [white cube] space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists as a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of ‘period’ (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery its limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while your eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not – or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannequins for further study (1986: 15).

Central among these concerns is the absent presence of time created by the spatial set-up of the gallery. We will see that the question of how to introduce time forms a thread running through many of *Aspen 5+6*’s collected works. O’Doherty also critiques the disembodiment of the eye that views the artwork in standard modes and, by extension, the almost passive reception of the viewer as he/she moves from work to work. In contrast *Aspen 5+6* acts as a space to be entered into with a consciousness that is more embodied than history has allowed the conventional exhibition viewer. We are asked to engage physically, to touch the box’s contents, to make them grubby, to play. We are invited to spend time with its holdings, to listen, to watch, to read, to imagine, to make, to get lost and to discover. Or, to consider *Aspen*’s strategies in epistemological terms, we are prompted to use different registers of knowledge.

On opening the box, we find its contents dedicated to Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), the French poet who dealt, not only with words, but with the spaces between and around them. Among the contents of the box is a poem entitled ‘Repair’ by contemporary writer Michel Butor, made up of words that are fastened together through sequence rather than linear narrative: ‘break lightbeam stitch | rip | stop! | a drop of milk | burn nickel a drop of milk | soldering | a long time ago’. As Michel Foucault observes, even if statements are collectively nonsensical at an enunciative level (while making sense at a grammatical level), they are not deprived of correlations and therefore do not lose meaning (1972: 90). The poem invites us to construct meaning across the gaps between the word phrases. This literary logic reoccurs elsewhere in the box, most radically in a recording of psychiatrist Charles R. Hulbeck, formerly Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck, reading vowel poems and sound poems made up of fictitious words, as well as in a reading of *Nova Express* (1964) by William Burroughs, which was written using the cut-up method of enfolding snippets of different texts into the novel. A further work in the box, *Poem* (March 1966) by artist Dan Graham, reassembles the poem into a schema for its own making, composing it of formal elements (the noun, the adverb and so on) arranged in a given sequence, among them:

(number of) adjectives
(number of) adverbs
(number of) area not occupied by type
(number of) area occupied by type
(number of) columns
(number of) conjunctions

Both Butor's and Graham's poems deal with the space between. In Graham's, the 'area not occupied by type' is included and the entire list evokes elements placed on a white ground.

The dedication to Mallarmé is an invitation to engage with words differently; to see them, to hear them, to play with them. More than that perhaps, it is an instruction, coyly informing us how to engage with *Aspen* 5+6. We are asked to take into account not only the box's contents, but also the spaces between them. As in the poems of Butor and Graham, the 'meaning' of the box's contents is not given. We are provided with a list of themes – 'constructivism, structuralism, conceptualism, tradition of paradoxical thinking, objects and "between categories"' – and movements – 'time (in art and "history"), silence and reduction, language' – but there is no explanatory text that specifically expounds the meaning of the box's contents. The short introductory note accompanying the list of themes and movements (presented as a vertical column, as if to discourage us from reading them) is a text by a linguist, Sigmund Bode from 1928. The text tells us that 'this invisible grammar' – perhaps the themes and movements? – 'can be read *within and between categories*' (emphasis added). Bode is in fact a pseudonym for O'Doherty himself. It is his request that we listen to *Aspen* 5+6's interstitial knowledge, to that which lies in between.

The contents of *Aspen* 5+6 are not to be considered in isolation. It is precisely through viewing them in relation to each other that a dialogue opens up between them, making us see, hear and feel aspects of the works that would not otherwise have emerged. Let us consider, for example, what happens when we view Hans Richter's film *Rhythm 21* (1921) in relation to *Site* (1964), a film documenting a performance work by Robert Morris, with which it has no apparent relationship apart from the fact that both are included in *Aspen* 5+6. In *Rhythm 21*, which is a study in geometric composition, made up of a series of black and white rectangular and square planes moving backwards and forwards against an alternating white or black background, the screen acts as a space of time. *Site* shows Morris, dressed in white, deconstructing a structure made up of three horizontally placed white boards. He removes each before rotating them against his back and replacing them again. On viewing, we are struck by the visual correspondences between the two films, brought to the fore by O'Doherty's careful selection of the excerpt from *Site* and the removal of its original soundtrack of a jackhammer. Presented in this way, both films now revolve around a series of horizontal and vertical planes framed by light

and shadow, creating a 'dialogue of occlusion and revelation, of rectangle and edge' (Walsh 2003: 46). At moments in each, the screen is eclipsed by the white plane. Both films seem to 'speak the same language' although their time frames and departure points are different. We tune into this language as we watch, feeling that we understand something, even if we cannot name it. This invitation to pay close attention, but not come to any definitive conclusion, helps to open up what Sarat Maharaj refers to as 'non-knowledge' – 'forms of knowledge that are often below the radar of our conscious thought and which can bypass our rational minds to incorporate contradiction and intuition'.⁶

Each recombination of *Aspen 5+6*'s elements extends that non-knowledge, expanding outwards to form a complex network of interrelationships weaving through the box's contents. The white planes of *Rhythm 21* and *Site* are echoed again in Tony Smith's eight card boards, which can be put together to form a white cube that recalls both the modernist gallery space and *Aspen*'s box. White boxes return in John Cage's scores, each representing a space of time, just as 'the screen is always a space of time' in Richter (Walsh 2003: 46). Moreover, the musical structure that formed Richter's departure point for *Rhythm 21* becomes palpable while listening to the serial music that those scores notate ... and so on. The structure of *Aspen 5+6* is almost Kafkaesque, with (visual, tactile and cognitive) 'ideas' opening onto other ideas like a series of doors leading to a further series of doors. Yet one 'reads' in a circular fashion, approaching an internally dialoguing series of ideas from different places. In a recent text on artistic research, Janneke Wesseling proposes that in lieu of the question of whether research in art generates knowledge and what kind of knowledge that might be, it could be more productive to pose the question of how artists think (2011: 8).

The desire to hold open interstitial spaces, and thus to think something differently, calls for a different form of representation. It requires something other than the logic of the book, with its order of linear text that freezes representation into a regulated succession of static ideas or images. The book's structure, like all forms of representation, has an intrinsic epistemic force which *Aspen 5+6* is trying to work against, to undo. *Aspen*'s box provides an alternative logic, offering a dynamic and interactive space for the assemblage of works. As a container it facilitates the holding open of multiple perspectives through the potential rearranging of orders and groupings.

The problem to which the box provides a solution is the constraining taxonomy of academic thinking. Bode asserts that:

6. Sarat Maharaj used this definition in a workshop entitled *New non-knowledge strategies for the European Art Academy*, held as part of *Cork Caucus*, an artistic project that took place in summer 2005, organised by the National Sculpture Factory, Cork, and curated by Annie Fletcher and Charles Esche.

This linguistics of interval and position is usually closed off by themes and titles, complex nouns that immobilize a system in a particular attitude. In this sense, explanations are modes of concealing what is accessible by removing concepts to the area of other concepts (initiating that process which eventually leads to 'meaning' in the least fortunate academic sense).

He goes on to put forward an alternative representation of things outside of disciplines and historical time; a contextual frame that comes close to the condition of art itself, and thus to the preconditions of meaning-making in art practice:

Placement as a grammatical concept can be extended to any abstraction [...] to a degree we may speak of meaning as a system of permutations, as a mathematics of placement [...] It is, of course, also possible to consider how placement is concealed, how the objectified unit (a person, a concept, a period) can conceivably occur without dimensions, in no place and in no time, and thus approach the condition of art.

The pertinent question for the artistic research exposition is how O'Doherty creates those framing conditions for the material in the box, how he actualises an artistic way of thinking. How might an artistic research exposition be set up so as to enable others to think outside of the conventions of disciplinary lineage and methodology? *Aspen 5+6* creates space for those other meanings that the taxonomies of traditional academic disciplines forego by thinking across the delineated boundaries of disciplines. If we listen to the recording of *Nova Express* while watching Robert Rauschenberg's *Linoleum* (1967), the correspondence between Burroughs's palimpsest of images and the non-surrealistic contiguity of the disparate actions of Rauschenberg's actors rises above their disciplinary differences. In fact, *Aspen 5+6* acts in a post-disciplinary manner, as Graeme Sullivan observes of artistic research in general (2011: 96).

From the point of view of thinking about the publication as a site of artistic research exposition, O'Doherty's undermining of the conventions of academic writing is particularly interesting. He disregards the norm of historical sequencing, setting texts from the 1920s and 1930s side by side with contemporary expressions and opening a trans-generational dialogue. A commissioned text by George Kubler, *Style and The Representation of Historical Time* (1967), partly theorizes this position. Kubler argues that art-historical conventions are unable to address the duration of style and, by extension, its interweaving and transformation in the 'flow of happening'. Furthermore the three essays, presented in the form of a booklet, are given no page numbers, challenging the academic reference system and raising questions about the status of the presented texts. Side by side with artists' statements and Conceptual artworks composed of text, their status becomes ambiguous.

For the contemporary artist as researcher facing the demands of academia, O'Doherty's most radical strategy is that he refuses to write. There is of course the 'introduction', which offers a list of movements and themes, together with a short text by his alias Sigmund Bode that can be read so as to prove meaningful for the contents of the box. But there is no descriptive interpretative text that 'explains' the artworks or the box's contents. The choice to use a pseudonym and refer to this personage as a linguist evacuates the position of the critic. O'Doherty remains true to Sontag's critique of interpretation as setting up a 'shadow world of "meanings"'. In its place, a constellation of existing and commissioned texts collectively pinpoint the range of formal/content-based issues that O'Doherty saw as important to his artistic practice. Side by side with artists' statements and Conceptual artworks composed of text, their status becomes ambiguous. And, crucially, many of those texts intrinsically reflect on their own status – as text, as text-in relation to artworks, as writing. By extension, they (indirectly) reflect on their status within the box and in relation to the other contained material, textual or otherwise.

By not explicitly addressing the points of connection among the box's twenty-eight elements, O'Doherty does not fix and thus close down their potential significance for the reader-viewer. Rather, he attends to the possibility of multiple outcomes following every recombination of the box's contents. In doing so he foregrounds the position of the viewer-reader in the production of meaning. This comes close to the proposition of one of the box's three essays, Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* (1967), which, it is little known today, was published for the first time in *Aspen 5+6*. In what was later recognised as a key poststructuralist text, Barthes undermines the hegemony of the author as source of authentic meaning, to make way for an active role for the reader. He asserts that:

[A] text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. [...] [T]he reader [...] holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.

Aspen 5+6's 'reader' is asked to take up a comparable position, as an embodied mind that gathers and interacts with an assemblage of works rather than viewing/reading them as a pre-regulated succession of static ideas or images or as the output of an artist whose intention is to be seen as *the* source of meaning of the work. We find another echoing moment in Barthes's discussion of Mallarmé:

In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is [...] to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’.

In Barthes’s text, criticism and literature become writing-as-such. Content lies in form, which means that we must take form seriously. In many ways, post-structuralist writing acts as a bridge between the word and other art forms in *Aspen 5+6*, offering an engagement with the materiality of language and its embedded content-form relationship. Although the work of Barthes and other writers central to the literary canon in France in the late 1960s was ‘still regarded as marginal and suspect by the Anglo-American literary community’, O’Doherty noticed how unsurprised his artist friends were by the text, which seemed to speak to their artistic logic.⁷

The Death of the Author’s challenge to the exclusive agency of the artist in the production of art prompts a further analogy with Marcel Duchamp’s precociously early proposition that the viewer completes the artwork, outlined in *The Creative Act* (1957), another of *Aspen 5+6*’s essays. Duchamp outlines that while the artist struggles through ‘a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions’ to bring to light his or her artistic production, it is the viewer who can see the artistic product for what it is:

[I]n the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal ‘art coefficient’ contained in the work. In other works, the personal ‘art coefficient’ is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

Not being able to recognise the difference between intention and outcome, the artist needs the viewer to finish or complete the creative act. Duchamp’s text marks the death of the Romantic conception of the artist, making way for the anti-authorship stance of O’Doherty and his generation of Conceptual artists. It gives birth to an active viewer, whose agency is in stark contrast to the passivity of the historical exhibition visitor, addressed in O’Doherty’s later essays. A

7. Brenda Moore-McCann cites this observation by Susan Sontag from her preface to a 1993 edition of Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero* (1967) (2009: 77). She explains that this may be the reason for the general critical neglect of *Aspen 5+6* on publication. An important exception is Dore Ashton’s review in *Studio International* (Ashton 1968). O’Doherty discussed the reception of Barthes by his peers in conversation with the author in September 2011.

further analogy can be made between Barthes's reader, Duchamp's viewer and Morton Feldman's listener, who occupies what the composer called 'a plane of attention', listening to a series of evocative sounds in such a work as *The King of Denmark*, a recoding and score of which is contained in the box.⁸ Rather than these positions conflating entirely into one other, a highly interesting space opens up in the slippage between these active positions of receivership from one discipline to another.

While the body had seemed a superfluous intrusion in the modernist gallery space, the artists in *Aspen* often lend physicality to the viewer's/reader's task of completing the work. Tony Smith's *The Maze* and Mel Bochner's *Seven Translucent Tiers* (Fig. 2) are examples of this. *The Maze*, an installation made up of four large-scale rectangular elements, is documented by a series of drawings and a statement by the artist. But we are also provided with a set of card boards representing elements of the maze scaled down to fit the box, which can be reconstructed by gluing, following the given instructions. Once assembled, it echoes the structure of *Aspen*'s containing box, which bisects when opened to form two identical halves – two minimal forms that can be combined in various ways. The reduction of the box's printed title to minute font on one side of the white box underscores this sculptural quality. Bochner's work is a grid study

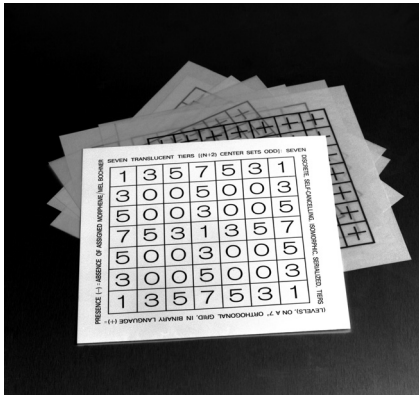


Figure 2. Mel Bochner, *Seven Translucent Tiers* (1967), 16 x 8 inches

Photograph commissioned and arranged by Mary Ruth Walsh; photographer Fionn McCann

Body and Its Discontents (1964), which represented the systems of knowledge through which our bodies are intercepted by medical science using a grid of small blocks.⁹ *Structural Play #3* contained in *Aspen* is an attempt to highlight

on a single sheet of white paper, accompanied by a further seven translucent sheets. The numbers on the grid correlate to binary language, with the permutations of arranged pluses and minuses on the seven translucent sheets connoting absence and presence. We are invited to place each of the seven layers over the grid, giving us the agency to create different linguistic outcomes. Both Smith's and Bochner's works prompt tactile engagement and play in the process, forcing us to use our bodies.

O'Doherty had been busy with the question of embodied knowledge systems in a literal sense in his art practice with earlier artworks such as *The*

8. Mary Ruth Walsh draws this analogy with Feldman's listener (2003: 43).

language as an untrustworthy locus of meaning and to reunite it with the body in space. This linguistic performance also takes place on a grid. Two performers, A and B, take turns to recite a short sentence, moving in patterns predetermined by the artist. With each movement, emphasis is placed on a different word in the sentence, subtly changing its meaning. The sentence is thus 'rotated' through a number of possible interpretations, and the performance in turn moves the body through a series of placements, exhausting language by means of a system of permutations. *Structural Play #3* is represented by schematised drawings in the box, as if to beckon viewers to reconstruct the performance, to experience this embodied knowledge for themselves. The boundary between drawings and scores collapses in *Aspen*, when the two are aligned.¹⁰

O'Doherty includes two recordings with choreographer Merce Cunningham, which extend the interests of his *Structural Play* by considering time and the body in space. In one, Cunningham reads his essay 'Space/Dance/Time', while the other is an interview from 1967 addressing related issues. He increases the agency of each individual dancer by proposing that no one point occupied by a dancer is inherently more important than the other and that each individual dancer can be the centre of the space he/she occupies. We start to become increasingly aware of the importance of the interstitial space – of what happens between things. Cunningham speaks about the equality of stillness with movement in a manner that reverberates with Butor's spaces between the words and with Cage's focus on silence between sounds. O'Doherty insists that we discover these points of convergence ourselves, through the act of looking and listening. We are led to grasp the imaginative patterns that underlie the works intuitively, bringing a depth of understanding that reading an interpretative text could hardly have achieved.

We also find our understanding of time expanding thanks to Cunningham's reconsideration of the formal structure of dance. He replaces the conventional notion of form as shape in space with the possibility of form as shape in time, with time constantly 'arriving and dissolving' – a notion that we have seen embodied in *Rhythm 21*. Time returns as the ordering factor in Feldman's *The King of Denmark*, where it brings about a death of the composer as exclusive author by inviting musicians to operate around a given note for

9. It consisted of a small wooden box divided into sixty compartments, each one holding a wooden block whose sides were painted in four colours as a code for one of the systems of knowledge through which our bodies are intercepted by medical science: red for anatomy, blue for pathology, white for macro-level physiology and yellow for micro-level physiology.

10. This is true of a number of O'Doherty's other drawings from the period. The most elaborate of these was *Vowel Chorus for Five Voices* (1968), an ink drawing on paper that mapped out a series of vowel sounds to be performed by sustaining the voice in a choice of pitches (Moore-McCann 2009: 112-113).

a given length of time, and in Max Neuhaus's score for Cage's *Fontana Feed Mix*, which he made by assigning a ten-second time period to each of the differentiated lines notating the frequency response of two channels of feedback on opaque sheets of paper.

The system of permutations generated by the scores of Feldman and Cage, O'Doherty's *Structural Play* and Cunningham's choreography evokes in turn the seriality of Sol LeWitt's work for *Aspen 5+6. Serial Project #1* (Fig. 3), a multi-part work consisting of endless permutations of a single cubic form that occupied the gallery space like the trace of movement. LeWitt had in fact taken the structure of serial music as his departure point, a piece of information that we can sense through the juxtapositions in the box. O'Doherty's choice to record readings of texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Beckett and Burroughs for *Aspen* furthermore enables us to hear aural correspondences between words punctuating silences and the serial sounds that made up Feldman's and Cage's music. This is true, for example, of Robbe-Grillet's reading 'Now the shadow of the southwest column' from his novel *Jealousy* (1957), which is composed of recurring images, impersonally depicted physical objects and random events. The narrator expounds the structural formation of the banana plantation where the novel is set in increasingly repetitive detail, echoing the obsessive logic of LeWitt's sculptural permutations:

In the second row, starting from the far left, there would be twenty-two [banana] trees (because of the alternate arrangement) in the case of a rectangular patch. There would also be twenty-two for a patch that was precisely trapezoidal, the reduction being scarcely noticeable at such a short distance from its base. And, in fact, there are twenty-two trees there.

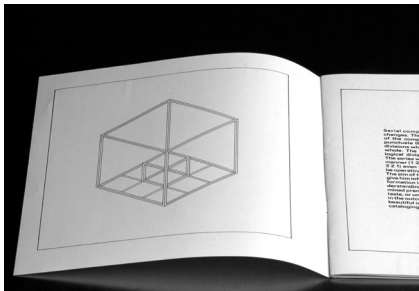


Figure 3. Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project #1* (1966), Detail, 16 x 8 inches
Photograph commissioned and arranged by Mary Ruth Walsh; photographer Fionn McCann

Robbe-Grillet's characters, named 'A' and 'B', remind us in turn of the alphabetically named actors in O'Doherty's *Structural Play*. And like them, they seem to empty out the meaning of language. The endless combining and recombining of words in Robbe-Grillet and the endless permutations of form in LeWitt exhaust the object. Both exert 'the greatest exactitude and the most extreme dissolution'.¹¹

11. Deleuze refers to this aspect of Samuel Beckett's work (1997: 154).

O'Doherty has a keen respect for Samuel Beckett's ability to 'exhaust' language (Deleuze 1997: 156). Beckett's *Text for Nothing #8* (1958), contained in *Aspen* 5+6 and read by Jack MacGowran, not only shares this quality but explicitly addresses the subject of trying to exhaust words:

It's an unbroken flow of words [...] with no pause for reflection [...] between the words, the sentences, the syllables [...]. But nothing of the kind. That's how it is. It's forever the same murmur, flowing unbroken like a single endless word and therefore meaningless. For it is the end gives the meaning to words.

Gilles Deleuze comments that this problem, 'to have done with words' dominates Beckett's later work, and that it is a search for 'a true silence, not a simple tiredness with talking, because "it is all very well to keep silence, but one has to consider the kind of silence one keeps"' (1997: 156). In *The Aesthetics of Silence* Sontag affirms that 'the artist's activity is the creating or establishing of silence', yet the silence the artist keeps is of a particular kind:

The exemplary modern artist's choice of silence isn't often carried to this point of final simplification, so that he literally becomes silent. More typically, he continues speaking, but in a manner that his audience can't hear. Most valuable art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence (or unintelligibility or invisibility or inaudibility).

Beckett's character, too, hopes 'to wear out a voice, to wear out a head. In the silence you can't know'. By not knowing in the habitual sense, one may find other non-knowledges. Sontag proposes that the artist's silence is established 'to help bring these new ways of thinking to birth'.

Let us consider for example a short excerpt from LeWitt's description of *Serial Project #1* that accompanied its documentation through drawings and photographs: 'The individual pieces are arranged in three rows of three forms each. In each row there are three different parts and three parts that are the same. The inner forms of one row of three are read in sequence as are the outer forms.' Although LeWitt's analysis of the work *appears* rational, it does not lead to a comprehensible conclusion. It is closer, in fact, to the obsessional logic of the narrator in *Jealousy*. We can draw similar conclusions to Krauss, who observed that:

The babble of a LeWitt serial expansion has nothing of the economy of the mathematician's language. It has the loquaciousness of the speech of children or of the very old, in that its refusal to summarize, to use the single example that would imply the whole is like those feverish accounts of events composed of a string of almost identical details, connected by 'and' (1986: 253).

Krauss argues that what looks like ‘the look of thought’ (as Donald Kuspit had called it) in LeWitt’s or his peer conceptualists’ work is often its opposite, at least if thought is taken to mean classical reason. She elaborates, ‘[W]hat we find is the “system” of compulsion, of the obsessional’s unwavering ritual, with its precision, its neatness, its finicky exactitude, covering over an abyss of irrationality’ (254). LeWitt’s absurd abstract nominalism resembles classical Euclidian thought but departs from it in ways that frustrate linear thinking.

The multiplicity of outcomes of LeWitt’s drawings shows us that the artwork is not only the end product of the artist’s thinking but an intermediate stage, ‘a temporary halting of a never-ending thought process’, with which the viewer can engage.¹² The conceptual interrelationship between the breakdown of linear narrative in authors like Barthes and Robbe-Grillet and LeWitt’s approach to logical thought is not elaborated on explicitly inside the *Aspen* box, yet as Krauss acknowledged almost twenty years later, to speak of LeWitt’s work in relation to the *nouveau roman* was ‘to help locate the real territory of its meaning’ (1986: 256).

The endless permutations of LeWitt’s work are echoed in the formal structure of *Aspen*’s contents, whose multiple inter-references resound with each other in ways that confound the norms of academic analysis. O’Doherty facilitates a breaking down of the barrier between works and an opening up of the potential collective creativity of *Aspen*’s material contents. *Serial Project #1*, like *Aspen* as a whole, makes tangible the fact that form is not the result of thought but the medium of its production. The artistic-research exposition, by extension, is ‘not the end but the beginning of the generation of knowledge, in which what is represented is exposed to ongoing projective inscription and unexpected driftage’ (Busch 2011: 76).

Closing the Box

Working like a magnet pulling all that is of a certain substance towards itself, with little regard for specific form or location of origin, *Aspen* actualises a non-hierarchical and non-taxonomic form of knowledge-making. Through it, O’Doherty explores the possibility that artistic research offers a transgressive knowledge that is different from art criticism or academic knowledge. The formal structure of *Aspen* 5+6, a multimedia assemblage in a box, enables a threading of lines of thought through different kinds of materiality. The contained materials differ greatly in origin, but the form of the exposition gathers the threads tight enough for reader-viewer to hold ‘together in a single field all the traces’ (Barthes). Whereas an academic essay on the same contents, or even those very contents supplied with an interpretative text, is likely to fix the outcome, *Aspen* defers any definitive conclusions. As an exposition, it functions

12. Janneke Wesseling describes artworks in general in these terms (2011: 12).

as a site for the emergence of knowledge, for its release rather than merely its containment. It opens up the prospect of gaining knowledge that was not foreseeable beforehand.¹³

O'Doherty recognises that “the fine line between the known and the unknown”, which is the true site of the generation of knowledge, is always to be found in the material representation’ (Busch 2011: 76). He uses a range of strategies to keep us close to the materiality of the work at hand, translating text to voice when necessary, or removing a film’s soundtrack to make us pay close attention to the visual. In doing so, he opens up the paradigms of knowing of each work by bringing them to bear on each other. *Aspen 5+6* acts as a reminder not to take the material experience of art for granted amid the distractions of overabundant reading matter. It intimates that written words cannot capture all knowledge; that, as Jacques Derrida has highlighted, they act as a detour, ‘defer[ring] the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence’ (1982: 9). O’Doherty makes no justifications for art. *Aspen 5+6* shows, rather than explains. As an early exposition of artistic research, it is free of the constraints of academic requirements, yet it inadvertently offers ways to subvert them.

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13. In my formulation, I draw on Kathrin Busch’s discussion of representation: ‘Representation [...] is less a fixation than a release of knowledge, which means we must [...] attribute a certain agency to it. In this regard representations play a certain role in the emergence of knowledge, and only representations open up the prospect of cognitive attainments that were not foreseeable beforehand’ (2011: 76).

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