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"Specific" Objects

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# “Specific” objects

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ROSALIND E. KRAUSS

A whole generation of artists has found itself wandering down a dusty path, mired in confusion and finally reaching dead end, as its practitioners pursued the idea that in order for art to “think itself,” it must be reconstructed as language, as proposition: thought only available as speech. “Art after Philosophy” was the bible of this diaspora and Joseph Kosuth, its prophet. Viewing himself as an apocalyptic historian—the Oswald Spengler of aesthetics—Kosuth sketched the profiles of both philosophy and artistic practice in broad strokes.

Philosophy was seen as descending a slope that led abruptly from the heights of transcendentalist reflection to the depths of ordinary language: analytic philosophy’s focus on the nature of the proposition having voided all metaphysical considerations. Art, Kosuth reasoned further, is the phoenix of this situation; it is the life that bursts into flower on the ashes of philosophy’s exhaustion. Further, he argued, its bloom takes on the very form of the philosophical conflagration, since the rebirth of art will depend on its newly won configuration as language.

In Kosuth’s account, the prophet who had come before him was Marcel Duchamp, the first artist to reconceive objects as statements, insofar as the readymade only exists as a form of ostensive definition: “This is art.”

The readymade strategy overleaps the problem of the medium with the single bound that takes it directly into the central question of aesthetics, by bypassing the “trivial” issue of specific artistic practice. As Kosuth expressed this: “Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That’s because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Kosuth asked his readers to ignore the specific in order to achieve the general, he gave no advice about how this was to be done. Instead it was Donald Judd who, in his essay, “Specific Objects,” spelled out this strategy. “The best new work,” he

declared, is “neither painting nor sculpture,” but a paradoxical hybrid, like “a picture [which] stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object.”<sup>2</sup> The specific object only needs the third dimension in order to exist, he argued, since “Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art.”<sup>3</sup>

As Thierry de Duve has shown, however, Judd’s analysis is misnamed, since what he is supporting cannot be the *specific* object but is, instead, the *generic* one: Art-as-such, rather than painting, say, or sculpture.<sup>4</sup>

The third dimension, so imperative for the “specific object,” has been garnered for conceptual art in either of two forms: through “installation” on the one hand and photography on the other. Installation folds the actual space of gallery or museum into the matrix of the assembled object such that, as the stage on which the object appears, it becomes essential to the object’s very existence. Conceptual photography includes real space as the context for the objects the artist finds and reproduces in books of images, whether these be the industrial ant-monuments of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s *Anonymous Sculpture* albums or the gas stations and parking lots of Ed Ruscha’s modest publications.

In the context of Res’s colloquium on the polemical object, it is important to challenge the Conceptualist doxa about the status of books such as these and the “obviousness” of their renunciation of the aesthetic medium in the widest (but most naïve) reception of them. Ruscha’s case is particularly arresting since he so often invokes the concept of the medium, as when he says: “Right now, I am out to explore the medium. It’s a playground or a beach so I’m going to send as much sand up in the air as I can! I think the next time I’ll print with iodine. I have to be in control of the medium. The organic elements have to combine satisfactorily. What I’m interested in is the possible range; also in the use of

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1. Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy I and II,” in *Idea Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton 1973), p. 82; first published in *Studio International* (October and November 1969).

2. Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 181.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

4. Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas,” in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 230 ff.

the *processed* media.<sup>5</sup> Or, again, when he says: “New mediums encourage me. I still paint in oil paint. But what I’m interested in is illustrating ideas. I’m not interested in color, if color suits me, I use it intuitively. I’d prefer my painting to come to an end. . . . Painting for me is a tool” [32].

Ruscha is not sending sand “up in the air” so much as he is throwing it in the eyes of his admirers, who see him following the Conceptualist strategy of abandoning the traditional mediums of the visual in favor of the textural one of the book. Nonetheless, one of his interlocutors recently detected a connecting thread that weaves its way through the varied directions of the books and links them as well to other parts of Ruscha’s oeuvre. This is Henri Barendse who comments to Ruscha: “You’ve said, half-seriously, I suspect, that you came to California because you like palm trees and hot rods. You’ve done the book of palm trees but never of cars. It seems like cars are a missing link in the books, quite literally, since they would tie them together, be the conduit between the pools, apartments, and of course, the parking lots and gas stations. Perhaps I’m taking things too literally again” [213].

What Barendse is suggesting is that cars function as the “support” for all of Ruscha’s practice and Ruscha himself understands that mediums are, in fact, supports for the work, as when he says: “I’m painting on the book covers. But I think there’s another shift about to happen somewhere, maybe not so radical, but at least one that I know I will want to stick with” [322].

As Ruscha uses the word, *medium* can mean either the element in which color is suspended, traditionally oil, but for his “stains,” iodine, chocolate syrup, chutney, etc., or it can be in the technical support for the image, traditionally canvas, but for him, book covers like taffeta, or the photography of the books’ contents.

Besides the extravagance of his invention of matrices (axle grease and caviar is an example), Ruscha’s interest in the idea of medium as a type of support also takes shape as a set of rules, as when he remembers: “I had this idea for a book title—Twentysix Gasoline Stations—and it became like a fantasy rule in my mind that I knew I had to follow” [232].

So for him *medium* has less to do with the physicality of the support than with a system of “rules.” This is the system the philosopher Stanley Cavell wants to call *automatism*, in an effort to get his reader to focus on the

self-regulating character of traditional aesthetic mediums.<sup>6</sup>

The Greek word for *self* shared by the prefix for *automatism* and *automobile* not only restates the possible relation between car and medium but also turns medium in the direction of “medium-specificity,” or the medium’s power to represent itself so central to modernism. For Cavell, as for Ruscha, rules become necessary once the artist finds himself cut free of tradition and wandering haplessly in a field where “anything goes.” In this situation the artist has to improvise but it is only the rules—like the system of the fugue, or the resolution for the end of the sonata—that give his invention a goal, allowing him to gauge whether his polyphonic improvisation on a melodic fragment or his impromptu cadenza called for by the score is successful or not.<sup>7</sup>

*Auto* not only expresses the isolation of the artist, then; it also suggests that the source of the “rules” comes from within the support: “Twentysix” deriving from the number of gas refills necessary between California and Oklahoma and thus referring to the demands of driving and the exigencies of the car.<sup>8</sup> In good modernist tradition, “Parking Lots” could refer to the flatness of the page, but it more probably marks the serial nature of the car, its existence as a multiple, like the printed book itself.

In this form “medium” is both specific, which is to say self-reflexive, and inventive, in that anything can be a medium, even the most common contemporary substance the artist—newly *autonomous*—can imagine.

“Medium-specificity” may ring strangely in the instance of Ruscha, but his very case promotes a sense of how eccentrically medium is being used to track this dimension of contemporary practice.<sup>9</sup>

If the car can become a medium, then anything might be pressed into such service. It only needs the set of

6. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 101–118.

7. See Cavell, “Music Decomposed,” *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribners, 1969), pp. 199–202.

8. “I used to drive back [to Oklahoma] four or fives times a year,” Ruscha says, “and I began to feel that there was so much wasteland between L.A. and Oklahoma that somebody had to bring the news to the city. Then I had this idea for a book title—Twentysix Gasoline Stations—and it became like a fantasy rule in my mind that I knew I had to follow” [232].

9. My own efforts in this direction have been: “. . . And Then Turn Away?” An Essay on James Coleman,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997); “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999); and “The Rock’: William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection,” *October* 92 (Spring 2000).

5. Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 30. All pagination will henceforth appear in the text, in brackets.

rules that will open onto the possibility of artistic practice—like the musical goal in the example of improvisation. The very idea of the artist's invention of a medium and thus his or her devising a set of rules will undoubtedly make us nervous. A medium is, after all, a shared language developed over centuries of practice so that no individual initiative can either organize new sources of its meaning or change established ones. It is as though we were imagining the artist playing a game of chess and announcing in the middle that the bishop moves orthogonally instead of diagonally. Ruscha's inventions are arbitrary, but not as eccentric as the one above. His stains series exults in the exoticism of his choices, but the very term "stains" pays homage to the recent history of painting in which staining provided what was felt to be a necessary alternative to drawing such that from Jackson Pollock to Morris Louis to Helen Frankenthaler, laying down a stain was a way of avoiding the violence of a hardened contour. The rules for "stains" are thus "invented" within the context of a set of principles for abstract painting; these latter are presupposed for the possibility and pertinence of the invention of the former.

So remote is the idea of the medium from the center of attention of the contemporary viewer that concern for the medium is often confused with very different preoccupations. The work of the Irish artist James Coleman is a case in point. The medium he has "invented" is the slide-tape, a sequence of exactly projected slides synchronized with a taped sound track. The slide-tape is familiar to most of us from the advertising projections we've seen in train stations and airports. It's part of the spectacle culture so widespread in the West—a public form of entertainment to distract commuters and relax shoppers. Coleman's version of the slide-tape seems to have as one of its "rules" that it will acknowledge this condition as entertainment and to this end his characters are often lined up across the visual field as though taking a bow at the end of a play. Altogether its "rules" take the form of auto-reference; the staccato sound of the slides falling into place as the carousels turn in sequence is imitated on the sound track of the work I.N.I.T.I.A.L.S. as the narrator spells complicated words by rapping out the individual letters: e.s.o.p.h.a.g.u.s.

There is another "rule" Coleman has invented, which we might miss in a casual viewing, since we so often rely on a set of familiar ideas in explanation for this vivid work. The human subject, we have been taught, is constructed, a concatenation of social, ethnic, and even gender protocols to produce the roles each of us will

play. Coleman's theatricality presents this project of construction and the way individuals bend to its demands, we might think. In our reading of what we take to be the "politics" of Coleman's work, we might neither notice nor ask about the curious choreography of his characters, who interact by facing the audience rather than one another. If we had taken the time we would have thought of the way Roy Lichtenstein's lovers are always looking directly out of the frame even while their speech balloons project the most tender expressions towards each other ("It's, it's not an engagement ring?!!"). We would have realized that the syntax of film is not open either to the comic book illustrator or to Coleman, since a film can jump back and forth between a speaker's face and the person to whom he or she is talking, the alternation (called angle, reverse-angle in cine-speak) happening in the blink of an eye.

For Coleman to imitate angle, reverse-angle would be more "realistic" but extravagantly distended in terms of the number of images needed to enact even the briefest of exchanges. It is both more simple and more economical for his actors to express their most fervent emotions as they both stolidly face the camera. So one of Coleman's rules could be called the "double face-out." He takes it from other forms of visual narrative: What it supplies him with is a sense of the tragic temporal pressure that makes the voicing of emotion so impossible within the developed societies of the West. What it also furnishes is a reminder of the screen's surface as the underlying principle from which the "rule" derives.

Every space of projection seems to supply proof that there is no field of "specificity," no surface against which to register the unity and extension of something like the picture plane. Because the picture plane had been, for many centuries, the cornerstone for "specificity," its erosion is the warrant, we believe, of these artists' indifference to the problem of the medium. From Coleman, our attention might be drawn to William Kentridge, a South African artist whose animated films pursue the problems of apartheid across the African Veld with its mines and its slag heaps. Kentridge is another artist, however, who is inventing a set of "rules." His technique is erasure; every line is a potential pentimento, a mark to be modified, each modification recorded by a frame of film. This "rule" produces many of the sequences such as a car ride through which the view is of the landscape constantly blurred by the windshield wipers, an image of the very act of erasure. The car's interior is then the site of the traumatic memory that forms the narrative climax of the work,

*History of the Main Complaint*, Kentridge's technique constantly narrativizing its own process. Erasure is to line what Ruscha's stain series is to drawing: two artists having converged within the grammar of modernist painting to discover the same set of "rules."

It is easy to miss this coincidence. But if our attention is on the blackness of the space of projection, we will overlook the aliveness to the issues of the medium that even this darkened field now promotes.