

CONTINGENT OBJECTS



Adrian Piper, *Catalysis III*, 1970.
Street performance, New York.
Courtesy the artist.

Sometime in 1970 Adrian Piper impregnated her clothing with a concoction of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil and then spent a week moving around New York in her smelly regalia, subjecting other passengers on the rush hour subway or late-night browsers in a bookstore to an unannounced and open-ended performance that she called *Catalysis I*. Other works from the *Catalysis* series created an equally disconcerting presence, as she intersected with members of an urban public who had no idea that they were witnessing a work of art in action. For *Catalysis III* she "painted a set of clothing with sticky white paint with a sign attached saying 'WET PAINT,' then went shopping at Macy's for some gloves and sunglasses." *Catalysis IV* entailed stuffing her cheeks with a towel, part of which protruded from her mouth, and "riding the bus, subway, and Empire State Building elevator." She also went to the library with a concealed tape of loud belches (*Catalysis V*) and blew large chewing gum bubbles at inopportune times, letting the gum stick to her face (*Catalysis VII*). The point of these activities, as she described them, was to set up a confrontation "within oneself or between people," so that the artist "becomes the catalytic agent inducing change in the viewer."¹ Though this series of actions dealt less specifically with issues of racism than many of Piper's later works, it established her procedure of challenging beholders to respond to the perception of strangeness or difference in their midst. The goal of the work was not, Piper has indicated, to break down distinctions between art and life, since she assumed specific characters for the *Catalysis* series, and for later works as well. Yet she was clearly not a performer in the traditional sense, because her initial audience was not aware of its status as such, and had no warning that an art activity was taking place in its midst.

A few years earlier Piper had met another artist, Vito Acconci, whose self-described move from "I do art" to "I do" set him off on his own series of unusual actions and performances.² What he did most famously, for his 1972 *Seedbed*, was masturbate under a

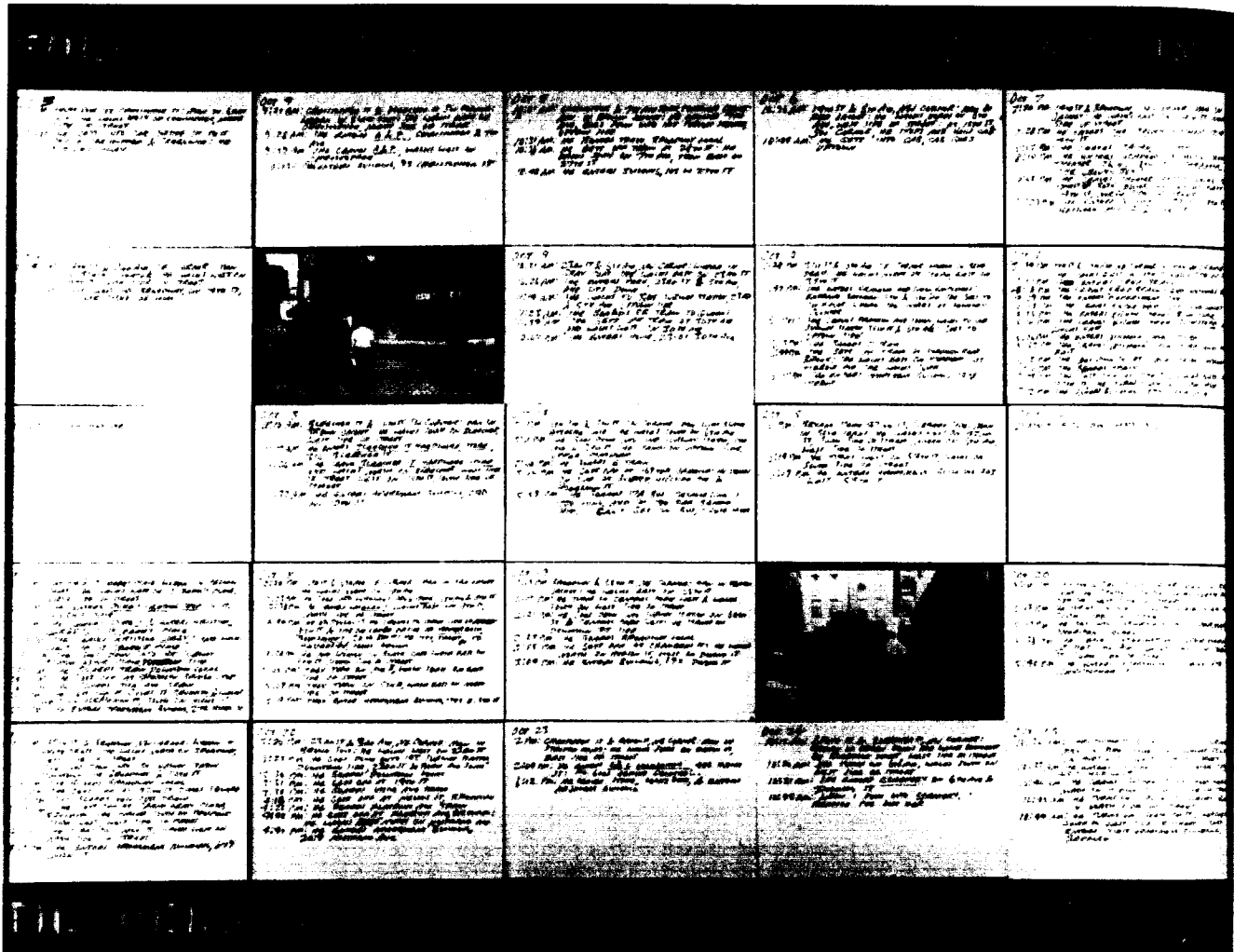


Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970–
1971. Street performance, New York.
Courtesy the artist.

ramp built across the end of the Sonnabend Gallery in New York while giving voice to his fantasies about the viewers who happened into the gallery space. Between 1969 and 1973, after which he removed his direct presence in favor of an emphasis on video and installation, he used his own body to explore confrontations with others and with himself, engaging in a list of actions that included issuing invitations to meet him at the end of an abandoned New York pier over a series of nights when he would reveal embarrassing secrets, stepping up and down on a stool every day over several one-month periods, dressing his penis in doll's clothes and talking to it for three hours, and biting the portions of his own body he could reach hard enough to leave temporary indentations that he would then ink up and use to pull prints. Through these actions Acconci used his body to articulate procedures that included turning inward on himself, using his presence to set up a confrontation with others, and establishing situations where his own actions would be determined in response to other "agents."

Some of his actions were announced yet still disconcerting, while at the opposite extreme, for his *Following Piece* (where he chose people at random and then trailed them until they entered a private space), only he was aware of the action taking place. "In *Following Piece* my space and time are being controlled" was how he described the action to Liza Béar: "I'm following a person, but I'm certainly not a spy, I'm being dragged along."³ In some cases these acts of following—one per day, between October 3 and 25, 1969, except for two days when he didn't follow anyone—were over in minutes and took Acconci only a short distance from where the following began, usually somewhere in the Greenwich Village area of Manhattan. Others went on for hours, requiring him to wait for an individual to finish a shift at work or watch a movie, or taking him on subway rides to points in Brooklyn, Queens, or the Bronx. *Following Piece* was a clandestine affair, since it did not involve the frame of the gallery or museum space or, seemingly, any awareness on the parts of the individuals Acconci selected for participation. By contrast, the *Proximity Piece*, conceived around the same time but realized for the 1970 "Software" exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, used the exhibition space to frame his transgressive confrontation. There, for the duration of the exhibition, Acconci challenged randomly selected museum visitors, "standing beside that person, or behind, closer than the expected distance—I crowd the person until he/she moves away or until he/she moves me out of the way."⁴

Acconci's *Following Piece* and Piper's *Catalysis* actions present a particular kind of hybrid: public yet private versions of performance with strong links to conceptual art and also to other ephemeral forms known only through documentation. They can be understood as offshoots of the mode of conceptual practice articulated by Sol LeWitt in his 1967 "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" was his



Vito Acconci, *Following Piece*,
October 3–25, 1969. Black-and-
white photographs with text
and chalk, text on index cards,
mounted on cardboard, 30%
× 40% (framed). Courtesy
Barbara Gladstone, New York.

introduction to a process of working with a predetermined plan or set of rules that, regardless of how selected, should be followed to their conclusion, with “the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work the better.”⁵ While the examples LeWitt gave of the move from idea to realization tended to highlight the simple geometric forms that characterized his own three-dimensional work of the time, the emphasis on plan had far broader applications. Nor is the connection to these conceptually oriented forms of performance fortuitous. Looking back at her early turn toward conceptual art, Piper described “LeWitt’s work and writings” as offering her “the tools and encouragement to pursue this line.”⁶ Moreover, a second key statement by LeWitt, the 1969 “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” first appeared in the poetry magazine *o-9* that Acconci coedited with Bernadette Mayer.⁷ Several of Piper’s early conceptual works also appeared in *o-9*, where Acconci’s own changing interests were reflected in the increasing emphasis by 1969 on conceptually oriented projects and descriptions—which not coincidentally shared with the poetry that prevailed in early issues the potential to be expressed with nothing more than the typewriter and mimeograph machine that determined the format of this modestly produced publication.

So how do we know that Piper and Acconci engaged in these activities? First and foremost, we know because they have told us so. One of the striking features of both Piper’s *Catalysis* actions and Acconci’s *Following Piece* is the way both performances partake equally of absolute immediacy and significant delay. The immediacy is in the unscripted interactions between the artist and an unsuspecting public. The delay is in the dissemination of knowledge about the work to an audience that has access to the activity only through the accounts and documentation the artist decides to provide. All of the descriptions above of Piper’s *Catalysis* series come from Piper’s own statements in “An Ongoing Essay,” published in *Art and Artists* in 1972, which constituted an initial and abbreviated version of her 1975 *Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object*.⁸ Acconci’s *Following Piece* was produced as part of “Street Works IV,” one of a series of exhibitions sponsored by the Architectural League of New York, which provided a framework for activities to be carried out in public spaces throughout the city. Details about the following procedure were, however, distributed after the fact, with the record of each day’s activities initially mailed only to a series of selected individuals.⁹ Wider dissemination followed later still as Acconci’s descriptions of his early actions appeared in various publications, including the 1972 issue of *Avalanche* devoted entirely to his work to that point. It was the dissemination of these descriptions that established the audience for the work (as opposed to those who happened to intersect with the action)—an audience that can only

experience the activities in retrospect, through the information provided by the artist, and therefore has to rely on the artist's claim that the described activities did indeed take place.

This is not to say, however, that even the experience of Acconci's announced actions was necessarily straightforward. Both *Proximity Piece* and *Seedbed* established "performance situations" where the activity was ambiguous, intermittent, and also required a certain degree of belief from its audience.¹⁰ The *Proximity Piece* was performed both by Acconci and by substitutes during the 1970 "Software" exhibition's eight-week run, and a written description of the action was posted on a three-by-five-inch card within the exhibition. If the person chosen for the action did not happen to see the description, he or she might well fail to distinguish the crowding as a performance; and, conversely, someone aware of the planned activity would tend to find it even when it was absent. According to Acconci, "if a person who was looking at an exhibit had read the statement and someone happened to be close to him, he might quickly assume that the piece was being acted out. I know it worked out that way because I got calls from people I didn't know saying that they had seen me at the museum on days when neither I nor the substitute was there."¹¹

Seedbed, by contrast, was in no danger of being lost in the cacophony of a group show. Visitors to this indubitably one-man exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery were greeted with a ramp construction evocative of minimalism. The ramp's association with minimalism was, however, interrupted by a speaker in one corner and further redirected by a set of written statements about the piece posted on the wall leading up to the construction. Via the texts Acconci announced his activation of the room by his "presence underground, underfoot" and his goal of producing and scattering seed by means of "private sexual activity" while fantasizing about the gallery visitors.¹² One thing not indicated in the wall text, however, was that Acconci was there only part of the time. By his own description he was under the ramp two or three days per week for the duration of the exhibition.¹³ Many visitors to the exhibition therefore heard only an ambiguous silence, and even those who did become the subject of verbalized fantasies could not see the artist. In the *Avalanche* interview published that same year he described *Seedbed* as his most important work because of the way it allowed him to be "with an audience . . . constantly physically present, in the sense of being audible." Yet he also acknowledged that his lack of visibility could lead a viewer to think he "wasn't really there, that it was just a tape."¹⁴ Looking back at the piece some years later, from the vantage point of his move away from live performance, he emphasized this latter aspect of the work, describing the obvious question it raised as "If I'm not seen do I have to be there?"¹⁵

Of course another reason that we know, or think we know, that Piper and Acconci did the things they have claimed is because we have seen the pictures. The *Catalysis* works,

Following Piece, and *Seedbed* are familiar from small groups of by now often reproduced photographs. The *Catalysis* series comes into view in four enigmatic images, two from *Catalysis III*, showing Piper on a crowded sidewalk sporting her WET PAINT sign and attracting the attention of some but not all passersby, and two more from *Catalysis IV*, with her standing on a sidewalk under a bus stop sign that says “no standing” or on a bus in the middle of a row of seated passengers. *Seedbed* is usually shown in one or more of three often-reproduced images, two of a woman in black either standing or sitting on the ramp, and one of Acconci threaded through the support beams under the structure, seemingly in the midst of the act he claims to have performed. *Following Piece* is represented by a single photograph or a sequence showing Acconci in the act of following a man in a short-sleeved white shirt and dark pants.

The specific issues raised by these images intersect with the challenge posed by a wide range of performance and other ephemeral manifestations. All too many works from the 1960s and 1970s can be only faintly apprehended through published and oral history accounts that have circulated after the fact, supplemented by sparse documentation often produced because someone just happened to be on hand with a camera. Even works that are well known may be represented by a single image or a small set that can convey little of a long or complex activity. Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* is identified with the singular photograph of her speaking the text on the folded strip of paper that she is pulling in a dramatic curved line from inside her vagina, even though her description of the 1975 performance and the many additional stills reproduced in *More than Meat Joy* show this moment to be the culmination of a varied set of actions.¹⁶ Or there are the photographs of the coyote interacting with the felt-enveloped Joseph Beuys in his 1974 *Coyote, I Like America and America Likes Me* at the René Block Gallery, capturing a few moments in a multiday action during which, for much of the time, the coyote slept off to the side. Or, from a different direction, while Chris Burden’s 1971 *Shoot* is most often depicted with the single image of the shot itself, the sequence of still images that includes the process of taking aim as well as him walking away and then looking into the camera in apparent stunned surprise as the blood drips from the wound in his arm creates a much greater sense of duration than suggested by the film of the event, where the action is over almost as soon as it starts.¹⁷

Then there is the impact that the act of recording can have on the activity being recorded—a dilemma Allan Kaprow recognized early on in the response to his happenings. The problem Kaprow had with photographic documentation was twofold. Not only did the photograph reduce an event in time and space to a series of isolated, two-dimensional images, but participants would act for the camera, with its presence therefore mediating their experience. To counter the danger of happenings being transformed into media-driven

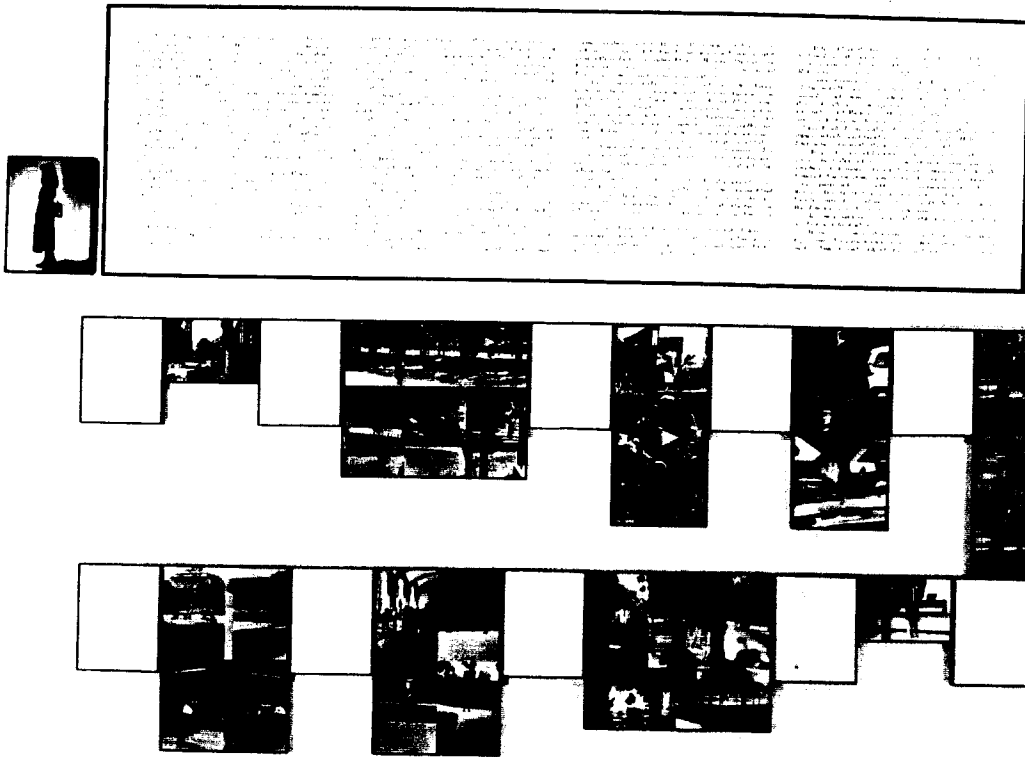
spectacles, Judith Rodenbeck recounts, "Kaprow banished both audience and photographers (but not photography) from his events," limiting those in attendance to participants and making sure that any photographs or other forms of recording or transmission were part of the action itself rather than documents produced by nonparticipants.¹⁸ Kaprow's alternative to external documentation was to establish a tradition of having the participants meet to discuss their experiences after an event, and allowing stories about the happenings to serve as their record.¹⁹ The opposite approach to the uneasy relationship between document and action was to transform the premise of the action so that its purpose was the making of a video. In fact Martha Rosler's consideration of the nature and impact of the document is part of the subject of her 1977 *Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained*, where a tableau staged for the video camera explores the objectification of the female body as a series of absurdly detailed measurements are taken by and reported to individuals whose clipboards and white lab coats associate them with both scientific and medical examination.²⁰

These issues circle back to the question of just what kind of evidence the photograph can provide. The image of Acconci under the ramp for *Seedbed* shows something that the initial audience for the work could not see taking place. In that respect the document is disconnected from the firsthand experience of the work in a manner similar to aerial views of certain installations or earthworks. Photographs taken from above of the 1972 *Maze* that Alice Aycock constructed on a farm in Pennsylvania, or Robert Morris's 1974 *Philadelphia Labyrinth* at the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, show the overall logic of the journey through those spaces not available to the ground-level viewers brave enough to enter them without knowledge of their layout. But the issues raised by photographs of the Acconci and Piper works under discussion become even more complex when one considers the relation of the photographs to the actions described by the artists. If one believes Acconci's descriptions of *Seedbed*, he was alone under the ramp, responding to footsteps above. He has not described being under the ramp with someone taking pictures of him masturbating, and in fact the paradox of a hidden exhibitionism is one of the striking features of the work. Likewise, in the artists' descriptions *Following Piece* and the *Catalysis* actions constitute particular kinds of performances, carried out without an audience, or at least without an audience that understood its role as such. The whole point is that the actions were unmarked, unannounced, unframed. The presence of a photographer would proclaim that something was happening, drawing attention to Acconci's covert operation, or framing the strangeness of Piper's confrontation as a planned and therefore less disconcertingly off-center activity.

Considered as evidence, the four published photographs of *Catalysis III* and *IV*, credited to Piper's friend Rosemary Mayer, suggest an interruption, however brief, in Piper's

solo engagement with the public. In the case of the photographs for Acconci's *Following Piece*, credited to Elizabeth Jackson, their status as document is even more dubious. The sequence of four images published in 1971 alongside Cindy Nemser's interview with Acconci in *Arts Magazine*, and again in Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, presents strong internal indications that this particular instance has been staged for the photograph. The two views of Acconci's back that show him in the act of following the man in a white short-sleeved shirt and dark pants are preceded by two views of the man and Acconci approaching on the sidewalk—meaning that the photographer was positioned in advance of the trajectory of the following, taking pictures as both walked seemingly unaware toward the camera.²¹ In fact none of the hand-written lists for the different days, eventually assembled in an array that also includes two of the photographs, describe this man. The lack of correspondence between described action and photographs suggests that these particular images are better understood as illustrations rather than evidence of these activities. Moreover, the sense of the work conveyed by the photographs and accompanying accounts is potentially far more interesting than what one might have encountered at the moment, without knowledge of the plan motivating the actions, had one accidentally intersected with Piper or Acconci as they moved around the city. Rather than serving as proof, then, the photographs unexpectedly confirm the status of these actions as essentially unverifiable, with part of their power lying in the challenge they pose about whether to believe the artists' claims to have done what they describe.

Yet even plausible photographs would hardly, in themselves, serve as definitive proof of an activity—as Sophie Calle's somewhat later following works make clear. Calle did her own following around Paris, using randomly chosen individuals to take her to parts of town to which she would not normally have gone. The activity became her 1981 *Suite vénitienne* when she accidentally met one of the people she had followed, found out that he was about to leave for Venice, and decided to pursue him there. For *The Shadow*, also 1981, she inverted the process of following by having her mother hire a private detective to follow her for a day and document her activities. In this way she turned her entire day into a performance for an audience of one. While the detective knew he had been hired to follow Calle, he was presumably not aware that he was being led, that he was a participant rather than a shadow. The subterfuge set up a reversal of the standard relationship between the followed and the observed, with Calle acting the process of being followed while also, in the documents thus produced, having the opportunity to see herself through someone else's eyes. Both works are documented in textual accounts and photographs, the *Suite vénitienne* with ambiguous black-and-white photographs taken by Calle over the course of her twelve days in Venice, and *The Shadow* with photographs of Calle taken by the detective. Though Calle thus accounts for how the photographs came into being, they could still be read as an



Sophie Calle, *The Shadow (Detective)*, 1981. Nine gelatin silver prints, one color photograph, and twelve panels of text, overall dimensions variable. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

inversion of the proof they posit. Anyone familiar with her ongoing dialogue with the novelist Paul Auster might be tempted to wonder whether the photographs, presented along with Calle's first-person account and the reports about her various activities produced by the detective, could in fact be evidence of an elaborate fictional construction.

Does it matter whether a photograph actually documents the activity that it represents? Does it matter who took the photograph? In a sense it is not important whether these photographs are fact or fiction, actual documents or staged, because this is how each artist has decided to represent the work. "This is a portrait of Iris Clerf if I say so," asserted Robert Rauschenberg in a 1961 telegram that constituted his submission to an exhibition in Paris. Perhaps that assertion should be expanded to encompass the possibility that photographs represent an artist's work if the artist says so. So we have works that are about immediacy of experience accomplished through the direct presence of the body, but an immediacy that has to be imagined through the mediation of accounts and documents. The more immediate, the more ephemeral, the more of-the-moment or of-the-place the work is, the more likely that it is known through images and accounts, the two sometimes working together, sometimes in isolation from one another. Thus there is a temporal gap built into the reception of work understood in retrospect, only through documents of inaccessible actions—unless, of course, the work is identified as standing not in the initial actions but in the documents themselves. There is in fact always a question of when, within a progression of choices, the document may be transformed from secondary object to something identical with the work itself, either because the emphasis has tipped toward the material realization or, at the other extreme, because the work itself is defined as a conceptual idea only partially and temporarily manifest in any specific physical embodiment. Thus the central role played by photography and video in the complex and fluid continuum linking performance and conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s established a series of options that includes the document of the work, the document in the work, and the document as the work.

Amelia Jones points out a keen irony in a claim made by Ira Licht in the catalogue for a 1975 exhibition entitled "Bodyworks" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. There Licht proclaimed bodyworks as a form that eliminates the traditional art object as intermediary and instead "delivers information directly through confrontation."²² Against this, Jones quotes Laurie Anderson's description of "pieces of paper on a wall, photographs, notes, tapes. Artists putting their bodies on the line, on the shelf, dressing in drag, assuming alter egos, putting themselves through various exercises, contortions, exorcisms. . . . But in fact, no bodies were there. Only paper."²³ Furthermore, many of these pieces of paper could be disseminated through means more effective than the traditional gallery or museum format. Kathy O'Dell attaches particular significance to the circulation

of knowledge about performance work through published documents. Not only did this mode of dissemination activate alternative distribution systems, itself an important arena of exploration during this period, but it also brings out a different form of physicality, in what she describes as the combination of the “visual and haptic dynamics that one experiences in literally ‘handling’ the performance photographs.”²⁴

When the encounter with the work takes place at a remove, through documents or rumors, certainly the experience is transformed, but that does not necessarily mean that its significance is diminished. Thus Bruce Nauman recalled to an interviewer the importance during the 1960s of his awareness of what Merce Cunningham and John Cage were doing, but from the distance of the West Coast, where knowing about what was happening was formative for him even without the firsthand experience. He also described a series of interviews with Coosje van Bruggen in preparation for her 1988 monograph on his work: “I would tell her about something that had been very important to me, in terms of how to structure a performance or some art activity and she would say: ‘Oh, but it wasn’t like that.’ I said: It’s the way I remember it. So she calls what I did ‘a creative misreading or a creative misunderstanding.’”²⁵ The resonance of the document or account can also come from what is left to the imagination to complete. Janine Antoni has spoken about the importance of how she came to know about works like Acconci’s *Following Piece* or Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll*: “I realized at a certain point that I know those works mostly through an oral tradition, and through some blurry black-and-white photographs that don’t give me much information. I think I love this work so much because I’ve somehow elaborated on those stories and images in my imagination.”²⁶

The prospect that an activity might be understood through documents or accounts rather than firsthand experience has significant implications for contemporary practice. Photographic documents intersect with many other means by which artists make manifest the traces of the body and its actions. Thus the possibility that a manifestation need not be either permanent or accessible to be defined as a work has implications that extend far beyond the realm of performance practices. Photographic records may provide a particular kind of access to transitory or site-specific phenomena that, through this documentation, can be understood as continuous with an artist’s work as a whole. In a sense, then, the potential disembodiment of the photograph functions not to eradicate the importance of time and place, or the highly distinct nature of the material an artist may decide to use, but instead to enable experimentation that would not be possible if the only way of considering a work was through an enduring physical object or, at the other extreme, the immediate experience of a singular ephemeral action. In the work of many contemporary artists, both still photographs and video operate in a complex intersection of document, medium

of expression, and component within multimedia or installation practices. There can be no doubt that the photograph has come to inhabit contemporary art across an incredible range of practices; but it would also be impossible to understand its many and varied roles without looking at precedents in earlier works emphasizing ephemeral actions, site-specific phenomena, and the relationship between document and event.

One important twist on the idea of the document occurs when the work is defined as the outcome of a procedure, emerging from within an activity rather than existing as an externally produced record. The possibility that the camera might be an integral component of an action has the power to transform the photograph or video from a partial and fragmentary record of a performance into a full and complete register of actions performed with a camera. In his 1969 *Stretch*, for example, Acconci took four photographs “stretching as far as I can over my head, out to my left, down to my feet, out to my right; taking a photograph from each position.”²⁷ And shortly before the *Catalysis* actions Piper had produced another series of works under the title *Hypothesis* where the act of taking pictures was key to the process of marking and thereby increasing consciousness of a series of intervals within what would otherwise be everyday, unexceptional activities like watching television or walking down the street.

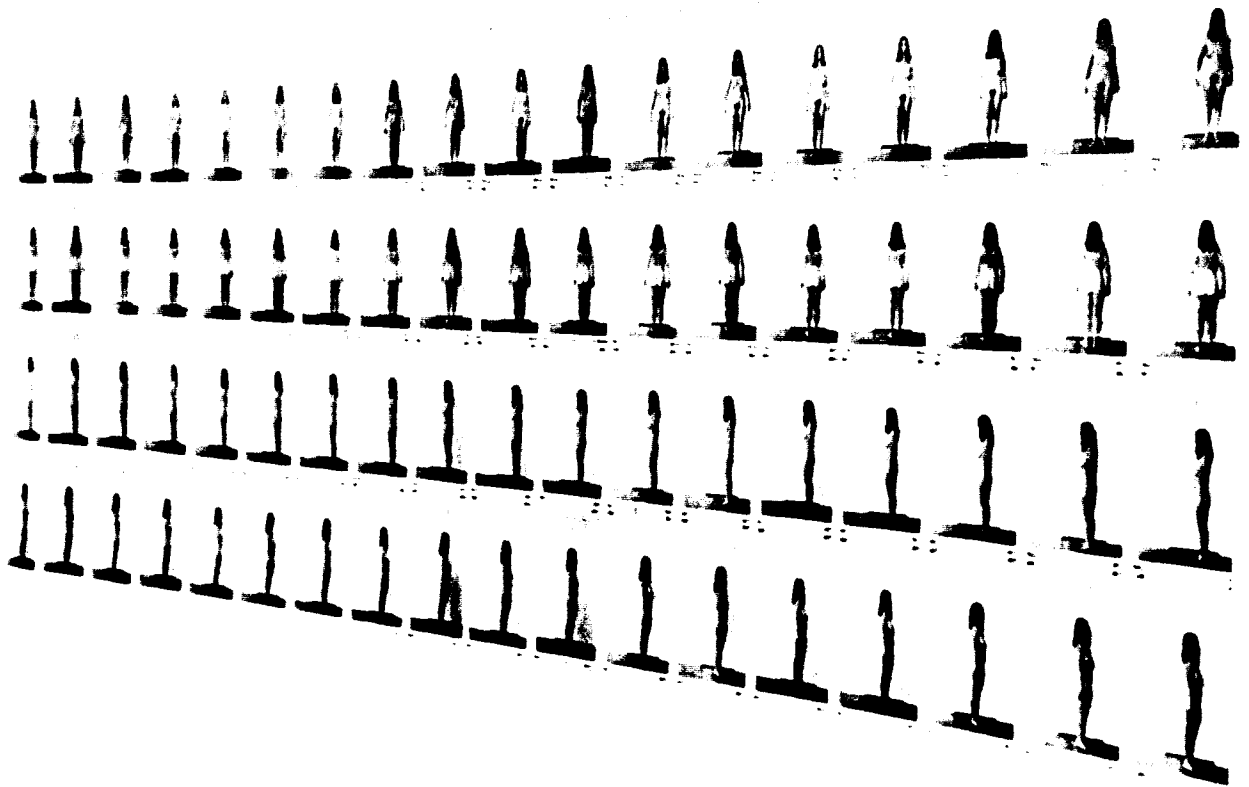
It is therefore telling that, in the account published in *Art and Artists* in 1972, Piper’s text describing her *Catalysis* series was presented by Lippard in conjunction with a group of works by Eleanor Antin that focused exclusively on the role of the document within the art-making process.²⁸ Antin’s “Proposal for a Film Festival Exhibition” presented images of a series of her *Movie Boxes*, each containing a combination of photographs and a single word arranged to evoke coming-attraction displays for movies. “I have directed and produced all seven of these movies,” Antin claimed in an accompanying text proposing that they be brought together in a film festival. Yet they are also movies, she continued, that “exist only and exclusively in the set of stills (plus title) of which they consist.” Although Antin would create close links between her performances and the manufacture of numerous fanciful documents to go with her assumed characters, this early work was comprised solely of the fictitious documentation, presented with the suggestion that, since any movie is simply “a handful of images offered to the mind,” she had “only removed the padding.”²⁹

In the 144 photographs that both record and constitute Antin’s *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, on the other hand, the link between performance and document is absolute. The photographs show, in daily front, back, left, and right side views, Antin’s transformation as she lost ten pounds during the course of a 36-day diet designed to reconfigure her body in conformity with classical ideals. Had she included only the first and last images, they would have suggested the standard before-and-after photos familiar from advertisements

for diet plans. But the daily record, arranged in a horizontal grid, tracks the progress of a transformation that is barely discernible from one image to the next. "Documentation is not a neutral list of facts," Antin insisted in a discussion of her choice to employ this form of recording. "All 'description' is a form of creation. There is nothing more biased than scientific documentation."³⁰ In choosing this aggressively clinical recording method she was responding to the important role of a particular kind of consciously deaestheticized photography used in many versions of conceptual art, while also turning the play with the document to feminist ends by using her own body to perform this critique of the pressure to conform to an image of idealized female beauty.

It was indeed a particular kind of photograph, composed as if to suggest the lack of conscious composition emblematic of amateur snapshots, that Ed Ruscha modestly but insistently announced in a series of books, beginning with his *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* in 1963, that established important precedents for conceptual uses of photography. "My pictures are not that interesting, nor is the subject matter," Ruscha told John Coplans in 1965, using a series of negations to characterize photographs he describe as "simply a collection of 'facts,'" with the books into which they were assembled therefore "more like a collection of 'readymades.'"³¹ Ruscha was also not particularly concerned with where the photographs originated, ascribing the decision of whether or not to take a photograph himself as merely a matter of convenience. Thus he took most of the pictures for *Various Small Fires* when he could not find suitable stock photos, whereas the views in *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* were commissioned from an aerial photographer Ruscha instructed to take pictures of all the empty lots he found.³² But the difficulty Ruscha had in finding stock pictures points to the exact qualities of the photograph he was after in his pursuit of images with the appearance of found facts.

The deliberately understated photographs help maintain the sense that the set of images comprises no more and no less than what is announced by titles that range from the absurd specificity of an exact number to the equally arbitrary vagueness of quantities like "various" or "some." It is, however, the ambitious term "every" that marks the tour de force of this series of projects, and the one where the title most insistently describes the plan for a systematic and predetermined course of photographic activity. In his 1966 *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* the disciplined execution of the title is evident in the layout of the book, 7 x 5½ inches in its folded state, but opening, accordion-style, to reveal a 299½-inch length of paper with the photographs of each building across the top and bottom, and the correspondence to the layout of the street further confirmed by the street numbers and names of cross streets printed in the white strip separating the horizontal rows of photographs. In this absolute adherence to the plan, followed to its conclusion, *Every Building on*



Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972. 144 black-and-white photographs, 7" x 5" each, and explanatory text. Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

the Sunset Strip is consistent with the conceptually based mode of production LeWitt would articulate the following year in his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." Yet it is equally clear that the idea described by the title has been used to generate a work identified as the book itself. Thus the absolute consistency of the title with the material form in which it has been realized should not be taken to mean that the idea articulated in the title might itself be understood as the work.

The question of where the work might reside was far more pointedly activated by Lawrence Weiner. In a frequently repeated statement of intent, Weiner outlined a set of alternatives emanating from the emphasis on plan rather than object:

1. The artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece need not be built

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership³³

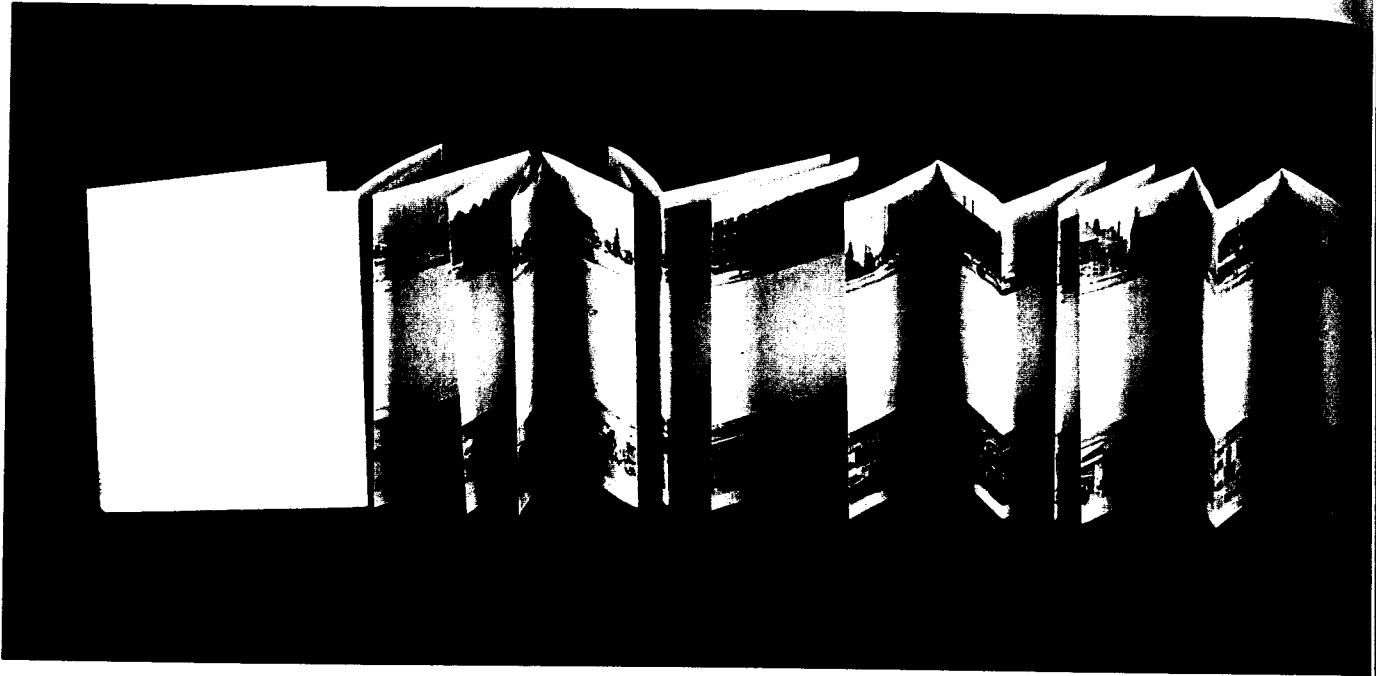
One of Weiner's most often reproduced works from the late 1960s is his *A 36" x 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL*. Numerous published photographs show its realization in many and varied locations, a square cut or chiseled out of a wall, with the shape, scale, and position of the removal evoking painting's traditional presentation. There are also photographs documenting *THE RESIDUE OF A FLARE IGNITED UPON A BOUNDARY* that show Weiner igniting a flare on the Amsterdam city limit in conjunction with the 1969 "Op losse schroeven: Situaties en cryptostructuren" exhibition at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. Within the exhibition, however, the work appeared as a statement on the wall of the museum and the same text printed on a small card.³⁴ It was also the statement itself that Giuseppe Panza purchased in 1970, along with *ONE KILOGRAM OF LACQUER POURED UPON A FLOOR* and *1000 GERMAN MARKS WORTH MEDIUM BULK MATERIAL TRANSFERED FROM ONE COUNTRY TO ANOTHER*, from the Konrad Fischer Gallery, with the transfer of the works effected in an exchange of correspondence, and the transfer of title duly registered with Weiner's attorney, Jerald Ordovery.³⁵ The photographs that document actions or installations therefore show not just isolated instances of a physical action that can be realized in different locations, but also works consisting of descriptive statements that retain their identity as linguistic propositions.

What the statements share with Ruscha's books is the play between the general and the specific. Yet Weiner announced the primacy of the statement itself with his own mod-

estly produced book, his 1968 *Statements*, where twenty-four of his works were brought together, each isolated on its own page and presented in small blocks of type floating just below center within the vertical rectangle established by the format of the book. One of these works, *A FIELD CRATERED BY STRUCTURED SIMULTANEOUS TNT EXPLOSIONS*, represented a solution to the challenge posed by an earlier work made in California, his 1960 *Cratering Piece*, with the previous transformation of the landscape redirected into a far more open-ended linguistic declaration.³⁶ Nor did Weiner's own participation in the realization of the situation described in a statement give that particular realization priority. "A *SQUARE REMOVAL FROM A RUG IN USE* is a piece that was received by a person in Cologne," Weiner recounted to Willoughby Sharp. "I presented myself, and proceeded to remove a square from the rug in their living room. This is the construction of the piece. In the event that the piece is lent to an institution or the gentleman moves or so on, the rug itself has absolutely no value as art; the removal has no value as art."³⁷

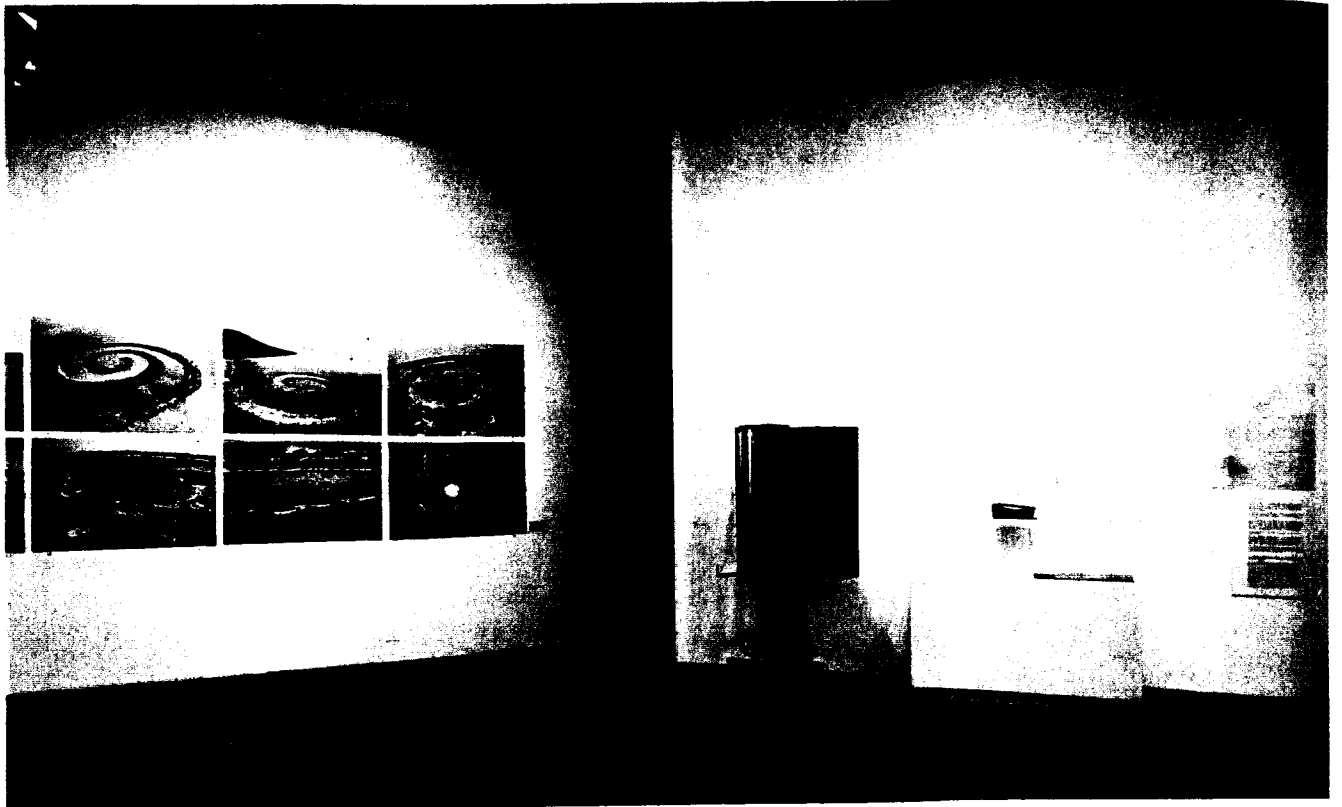
The only value Weiner would ascribe to the example was as "illustration" or "information," thus putting the physical manifestation secondary and incidental to the statement that actually constitutes the work—a reversal of the usual idea of the document. His resolutely conceptual approach nonetheless had much in common with a similar reorientation that is apparent in a number of contexts. The intersection of an engagement with material qualities or processes and works emphasizing concept over realization appears in the exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" at the Kunsthalle Bern, with their convergence particularly evident in the catalogue's inclusion of works executed outside the space or manifest only in their documentation. In this respect the exhibition, and in particular the catalogue, echoed a far more modest presentation earlier that same year, Seth Siegelau's "January 5–31, 1969," where the physical realization of works by Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Weiner installed in a vacant New York office space were described by Siegelau as secondary to the articulation of ideas in the catalogue. This shift in emphasis was even more apparent a couple of months later when Siegelau organized "March 1–31, 1969," an exhibition that existed only in the form of a catalogue of verbal descriptions of works submitted by thirty-one artists who had each been assigned a day of the month. A second exhibition, "July, August, September, 1969," also a catalogue only, presented geographically dispersed examples encompassing site-specific as well as conceptual works.³⁸

The role of information within conceptual practices generally was acknowledged by the title of the 1970 "Information" exhibition organized by Kynaston McShine for the Museum of Modern Art. The catalogue for the show, which proclaimed its allegiance to the modest production values of earlier conceptual publications with its Courier type and grainy black-and-white photographs, presented plans, documents, and statements of all



Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966. Book, offset printing, 7" x 5½" x ¼" closed, 299 ½" extended. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Paul Ruscha.





Installation view of "Information,"
Museum of Modern Art, New York,
July 2–September 20, 1970. Photo-
graph © 2001 The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.

kinds. In some cases the statement in the catalogue is itself identified as a work; in others, such as Acconci's plan for *Service Area* and Hans Haacke's proposal for his *MOMA-Poll*, the text describes a work realized specifically for the exhibition and subsequently known through descriptions and photographs. And, in a manner similar to Siegel's "July, August, September, 1969," the MoMA exhibition included photographs of physically imposing site-specific works that had been realized outside the confines of the museum and could not be relocated to it. In the context of "Information," Robert Smithson's distant earthworks (some of which were "exhibited" by Siegel as well) appeared in both the catalogue and the exhibition through documents, with a photograph and map relating to *Asphalt Rundown* in the catalogue and a group of photographs of *Spiral Jetty* in the exhibition.³⁹

These photographs were exhibited in the midst of what Caroline Jones has described as the "one brief moment," extending for a year or so after its completion, when "*Spiral Jetty* could be described as a fifteen-hundred-foot jetty made from rock and compacted earth in the shallow, microbially polluted water of the Great Salt Lake."⁴⁰ Even then the encounter with the work itself was limited to the small group of intrepid individuals who made the trek to the remote site in Utah. It is through the series of documents that includes drawings, maps, written descriptions, and, most importantly, photographs and film that the rest of us can claim familiarity with this now-famous work. Most of the visitors to the "Information" exhibition, however, would have been familiar with neither. The work had been constructed in April of 1970, so the appearance of the photographs in the exhibition, which opened at the beginning of July, preceded the Dwan and Ace Gallery exhibitions of the documents and film later that year, and also scooped the art magazines, where coverage of the work only began appearing during the fall. The early appearance of photographs of *Spiral Jetty* in this particular exhibition is telling in light of later descriptions of the discursive or postmodern Smithson—the Smithson known through his anthologized writings, the publication of which occasioned Craig Owens's "Earthwords," or Smithson the author of what Jones has called "the cluster of works that Smithson titled *Spiral Jetty*."⁴¹ What these accounts emphasize is a decentered construction of meaning that makes manifest the extent to which direct experience of the earthworks has been supplemented and most often replaced by an encounter mediated by documents and descriptions.

Smithson's own statements hint at a complex relationship to photography. "Photographs steal away the spirit of the work" was his response to a question posed during the series of discussions that the editors of *Avalanche* conducted in December 1968 and January 1969 with Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim (which appeared in *Avalanche* as part of an elegant layout accompanied by more than thirty photographs of the artists and their works).⁴² But in another interview a few months later he described how

each of his mirror displacements “was dismantled after it was photographed,” thus linking their existence to the act of taking the picture. “Photographs are the most extreme contradiction, because they reduce everything to a rectangle and shrink everything down. That fascinates me,” he continued. “The photograph is a way of focusing on the site. Perhaps since the invention of the photograph we have seen the world through photographs and not the other way around.”⁴³ Or, there is his response to a question about whether he recorded the process of constructing his 1971 *Broken Circle*: “While the piece was being built, I was thinking about how this process could be captured on film and isolated in terms of the particular ideas I had in mind.”⁴⁴ In addition to these statements, there is the evidence of the documents themselves—nowhere more apparent than in the photographs and film that record not only the final work but every stage in the construction of *Spiral Jetty*.

Robert Hobbs recounts how Smithson had begun selling photographs of his work around 1970, including some signed photographs of *Spiral Jetty* and three panels of stills from the film, only to change course away from that practice. “When his photographs began to be regarded as the art,” Hobbs writes, “he decided not to sell any more, and the casual ambivalent status of gallery pieces that oscillated between being privileged objects and mere referents was again established.”⁴⁵ It is also significant that the photographs of *Spiral Jetty*, when they were first exhibited in 1970, could still be understood as documents of an extant if remote original that might actually be experienced by anyone inspired enough to make the trip. It was not long, however, before the work was overtaken by the rising water of the lake. The spiral was submerged briefly in June and July of 1971, then reemerged in time for Smithson to see it that August, looking “like a kind of archipelago of white islands because of the heavy salt concentrations.” Smithson’s description presents a dramatic image of a work “affected by the contingencies of nature,” as the structure that emerged covered with salt crystals was suddenly returned “back to naked rock” in the aftermath of a violent thunderstorm.⁴⁶ But by 1972 it was again under water, not destined to resurface until 1994.

Smithson’s death in 1973—when the plane from which he was photographing the early stages of construction on his *Amarillo Ramp* crashed near the Texas site—deprived him of the opportunity to determine a response to the rising water that had engulfed the *Spiral Jetty*. It also left unresolved questions about the extensive archive of photographs that record both the large-scale earthworks and far more ephemeral interventions in the landscape. In an essay devoted to what she has designated the “Preconscious/Posthumous Smithson,” Caroline Jones discusses what is in fact a double emergence since Smithson’s death, both of his early collages and of certain later works that have been reconstructed or, in the case of the photographs, newly printed on the occasion of two major photographic exhibitions organized during the 1990s. These exhibitions interspersed Smithson’s own

photographs, taken with a Kodak Instamatic (and in that sense consistent with conceptually based photographic practices), with those taken by others, including both friends and professional photographers. In their assembly Jones finds a second postmodern Smithson, not the discursive Smithson central to a critical analysis of the construction of authorship, but the “institutional and collector’s Smithson,” a version of the artist “gradually transformed from being a *user of photographs* to a *photographer*, full stop.”⁴⁷ While the archive of images leaves no doubt about the central role photography played in Smithson’s consideration of site and site-specific manifestations, these recent exhibitions also demonstrate, in the sometimes disconcerting plenitude of minor variants, the opportunity he lost to edit and define the presentation of his own work.

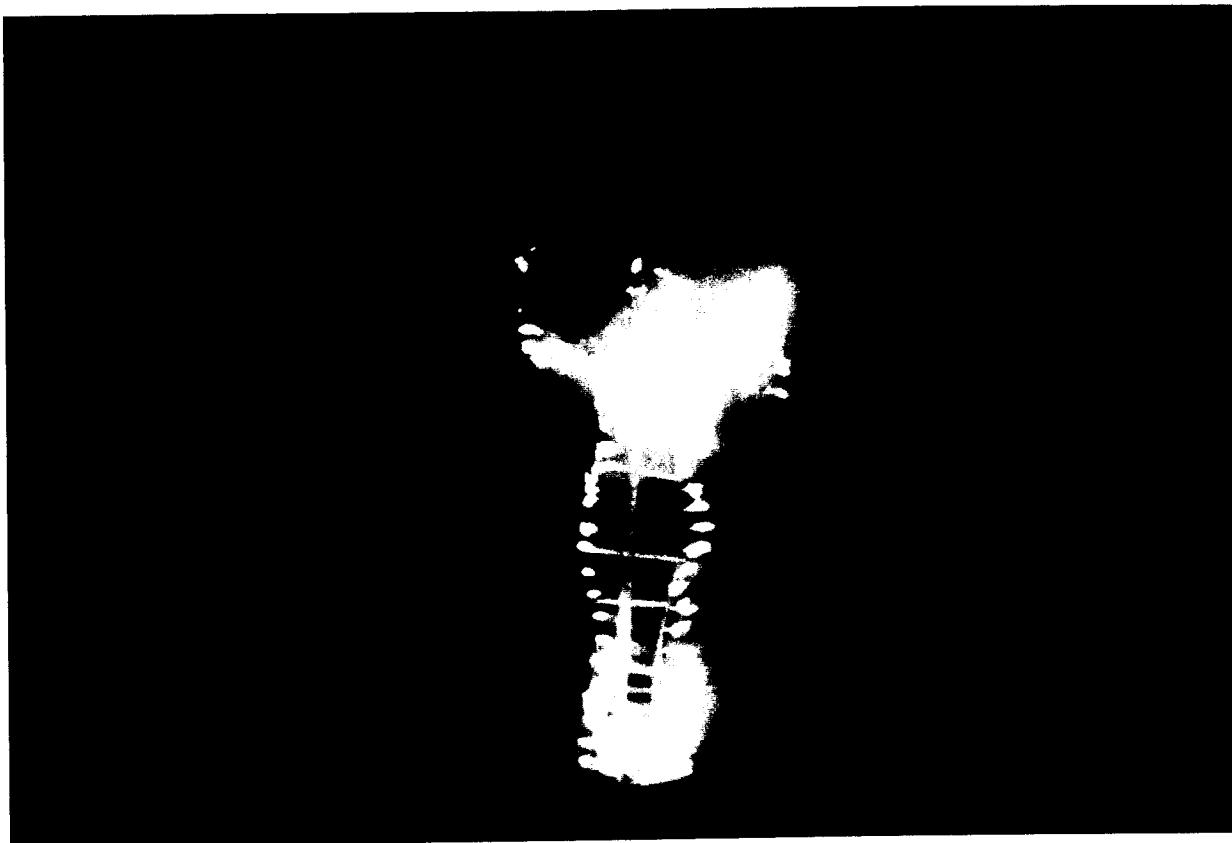
“Earth art and body art (with or without an audience) do not really have much existence as art without media transcription and distribution,” wrote John Perreault in 1987. “The works are made inaccessible by geography or time. Although the program of the time was to escape the gallery system, this escape created another regime of dependencies: photography, film, written publicity, and then video. Photography in particular became the art object and the language of communication. Photography became the proof of art.”⁴⁸ These words were also written on the occasion of the first retrospective of an artist whose early and unexpected death left to others the process of making sense of a trove of documentation related to site-specific and ephemeral manifestations—in many cases temporary and essentially private works where the only evidence was provided by documentation that the artist did not have the chance to organize for public presentation.

In this case the artist was Ana Mendieta, and the approach taken in the overview of her intensely personal and provocative use of her own body and of ephemeral manifestations, curated by Petra Barreras del Rio and Perreault for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, was to catalogue the work by medium, listing color and black-and-white photographs, objects from performance works, drawings, and sculptures. With only a few exceptions the works listed as sculpture dated from the period 1983–1985, when Mendieta had a studio for the first time in her career, provided as part of her fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. Yet the catalogue also hints at the problem with this traditional subdivision by medium with another device, an asterisk used to indicate the works from “an extensive body of work entitled the ‘*Silueta*’ series.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the relatively small number of photographs relating to her *Silueta* series that Mendieta printed during her lifetime has been extensively supplemented since her death with photographic editions produced from her extensive collection of slides and the release of the films that she also made of her work, now transferred to video.⁵⁰ But paradoxically this increase in the number of still and moving images has had the effect of emphasizing not photography or film, but

site-specific sculpture and performance. It is largely on the basis of works recorded by Mendieta in slides and film that her fame as maker of site-specific body art and earthworks has continued to grow since her death in 1985.

Where the first retrospective focused on Mendieta's most recent work, which was also the work that most clearly existed at that time, subsequent examinations have drawn connections with her earlier performances, as she set up tableaux using her own body or bloody traces to create visceral confrontations around issues of violence against women. The *Silueta* works were initially known through a series of single images, but the performative aspect has been emphasized by the release of sequences of photographs showing the temporary body traces and outlines being transformed by natural forces, or subject to a more dramatic conflagration for those using gunpowder or fireworks. This instability in the status of the photograph is also a function of Mendieta's own emphasis, in her relatively small number of statements, on the event rather than the record. "In 1973 I did my first piece in an Aztec tomb that was covered with weeds and grasses," she would later tell Linda Montano about the inauguration of the *Silueta* series. "I bought flowers at the market, lay in the tomb and was covered with white flowers. The analogy was that I was covered by time and history."⁵¹ Her desire to forge a connection to a site marked by the intersection of natural and cultural traces, and her use of materials found readily at hand, are both apparent in this passage. What she does not talk about is the process of recording her action. But photography was key to the portability of her practice—her ability to work wherever she might happen to be and then leave, often carrying away nothing more than a series of images. Since her own life was marked by a succession of moves starting with her exile from Cuba to Iowa at the age of thirteen, it seems telling that the *Silueta* series originated while she was on another journey, in this case a 1973 trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, with Hans Breder, who assisted her with the work by taking the pictures.⁵²

The extensive literature that has developed around Mendieta since the New Museum retrospective is remarkably silent about how most of the photographs and films were made, or even the fact that we are looking at her works through such images in the first place. One exception is provided by Miwon Kwon, who has emphasized the sense of loss running through this work—the traces that stand in for the body in most of the *Silueta* series, and the role of documentary images as "delayed relays" that represent inaccessible events already marked by a profound sense of absence.⁵³ Nor is that sense of absence lessened by additional evidence. Her 1976 *Anima*, also realized in Oaxaca, is marked by three different forms of document or relic: both still photographs and film that show the burning firework silhouette in the shape of a body lit up against the faint outline of a hill under the night sky, and a physical trace in the armature made from bamboo and rope. The pre-



served armature from *Anima*, created for Mendieta by a fireworks maker in Oaxaca, has to be understood as an artifact of an event, not the work itself. Even with the fireworks attached, the form would have been meaningless if Mendieta had not lit it on fire. It was therefore photography and film that allowed her to retain potent traces of work incorporating processes of consumption or destruction.

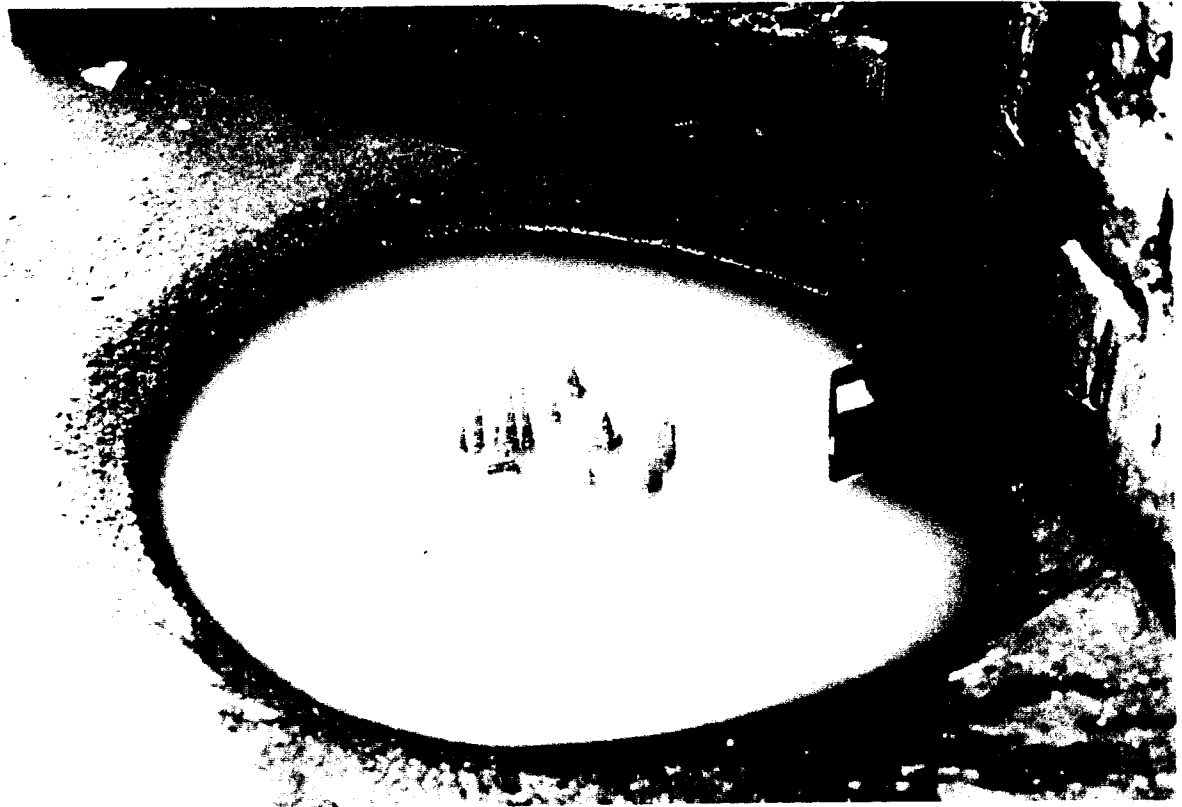
What is the work, and what is the document? As various uses of photography have become interwoven into the practices of many different contemporary artists, the photograph may well play a double role, or it may slip between definitions. Not only have the forms of photography deployed by artists expanded exponentially; so too has the range of practices enabled by the possibility that the photograph might stand in, not just as a secondary document but as a substitute for direct access to a wide range of experiences that can, given the right combination of circumstances, be defined as works of art. In the case of Smithson's work, photographs as well as film provided a third element in his

Ana Mendieta, *Anima*, 1976 (from the *Siluetas* series). Fireworks, Oaxaca, Mexico. Courtesy the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York.

combination of site and non-site works, and Mendieta's temporary incursions into the landscape are even more extensively framed by the documents through which they are received. Each in turn established important precedents for the artists who came after them, many of whom have accompanied their use of photography with far more explicit instructions and definitions regarding authorship.

A complex intersection of action, site, and document appears in many different guises in the work of contemporary artists who present photographs as part of their work while also relying on photographs to document works understood through, but not as, such images. Yet it is also clear that the establishment of a range of possible approaches, drawing upon earlier site-specific, performance, conceptual, and process-oriented work, often with reference to an equally wide set of options for forms and materials, forces a high degree of self-consciousness about authorship. The intersection of the photographic record and the engagement with specific materials or situations is part of an even more extensive set of options that brings with it an ongoing necessity to define exactly what constitutes the work, as it emerges from an array that includes photographs as objects, documents, or elements of a work and physical objects that may or may not be identified as permanent components of the work. Within this spectrum, the incursion of photography into the work of artists involved in a variety of procedures or practices, rather than promoting unity or uniformity, is likely to further enable experimentation with an increasing diversity of highly specific materials and forms.

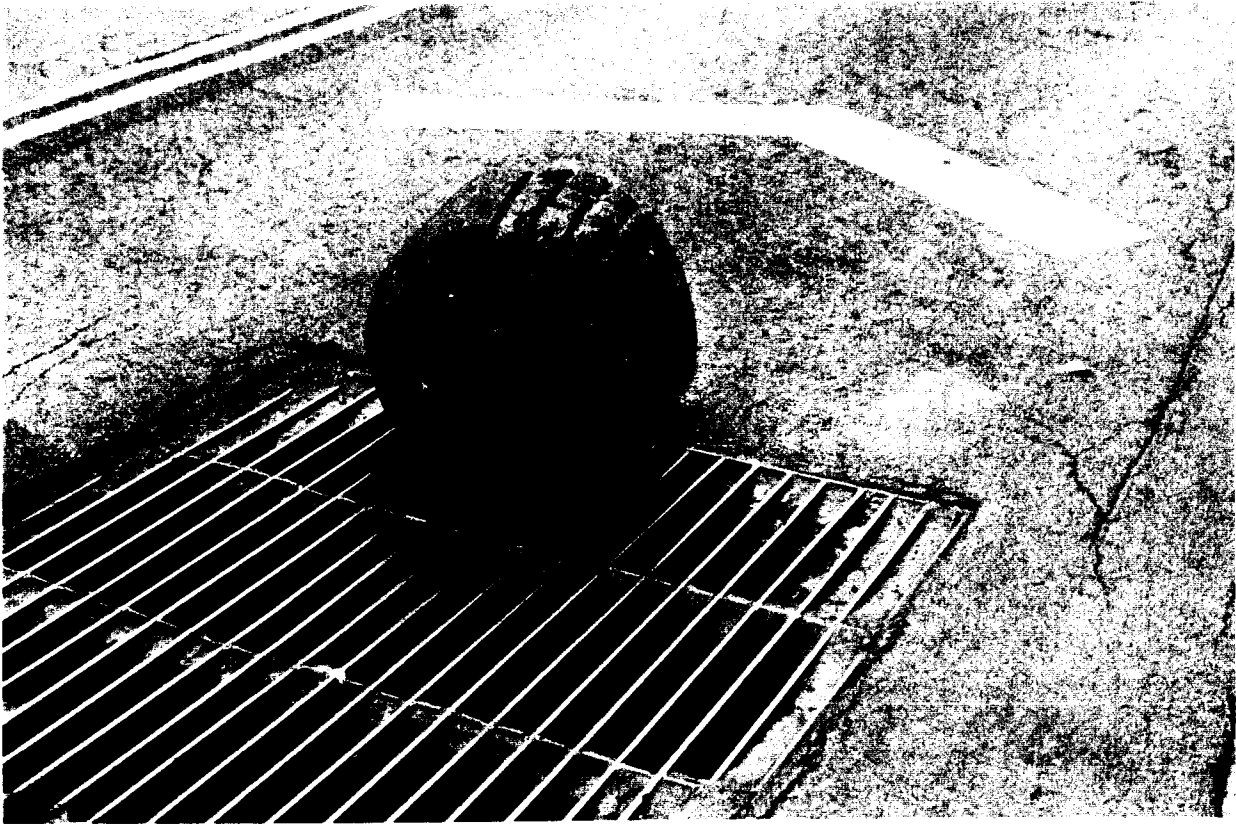
In Cornelia Parker's case, her interest in the historical specificity of objects and materials, combined with systematic procedures for their collection and transformation, has yielded both sculptural and photographic works. But other photographs appear as secondary documents pertaining to works comprised by ephemeral actions or situations. It is photographs that record her 1992 *Words That Define Gravity*, when she took the series of words constituted by the title, cast them in lead, and threw them off the White Cliffs at Dover. And it is a photograph that documents the even earlier *Drowned Monuments* of 1985, a remarkably modest installation of souvenir models of famous buildings partially submerged in a drainage puddle. In an account of the origin of this early installation, Parker described her fascination with a series of children's encyclopedias from the early thirties that "always use famous buildings like the Empire State and St. Paul's Cathedral as measures of scale. Placed beside Everest or at the bottom of the deepest ocean, these familiar landmarks that everybody recognizes are used to describe the indescribable, taking the things you know to describe the things you don't." With her arrangement of the miniature buildings in *Drowned Monuments*, she was therefore "trying to measure how deep the gutter was."⁵⁴ The paradox suggested by this description lies in the fact that here, in the situa-



tion documented in the photograph, the suggestions of scale reside in the drainpipe and wall surrounding the puddle, not in the souvenir buildings, whose value as indications of scale is lost by their nonspecific miniaturization. The fugitive nature of the installation also raises questions about the mechanism that transformed this humble action into a work. The most obvious answer would be that it has this status because the artist has so designated it. But wider knowledge of its momentary existence depends on the dissemination of the photographic document.

"I like to see my work as the result or a byproduct or a leftover of specific situations," Gabriel Orozco has said of his subtle and often ephemeral manipulation of objects and sites. "That's probably why I cannot separate photography from my sculptural practice. I don't know in advance whether I will need to use the photograph or whether it will, at the end, become an object."⁵⁵ The work that inspired this series of observations was the *Yielding Stone*, a 132.2-pound ball of plasticine that Orozco rolled around Monterrey, Mexico,

Cornelia Parker, *Drowned Monuments*, 1985. Installation in a gutter, souvenirs of famous buildings. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.

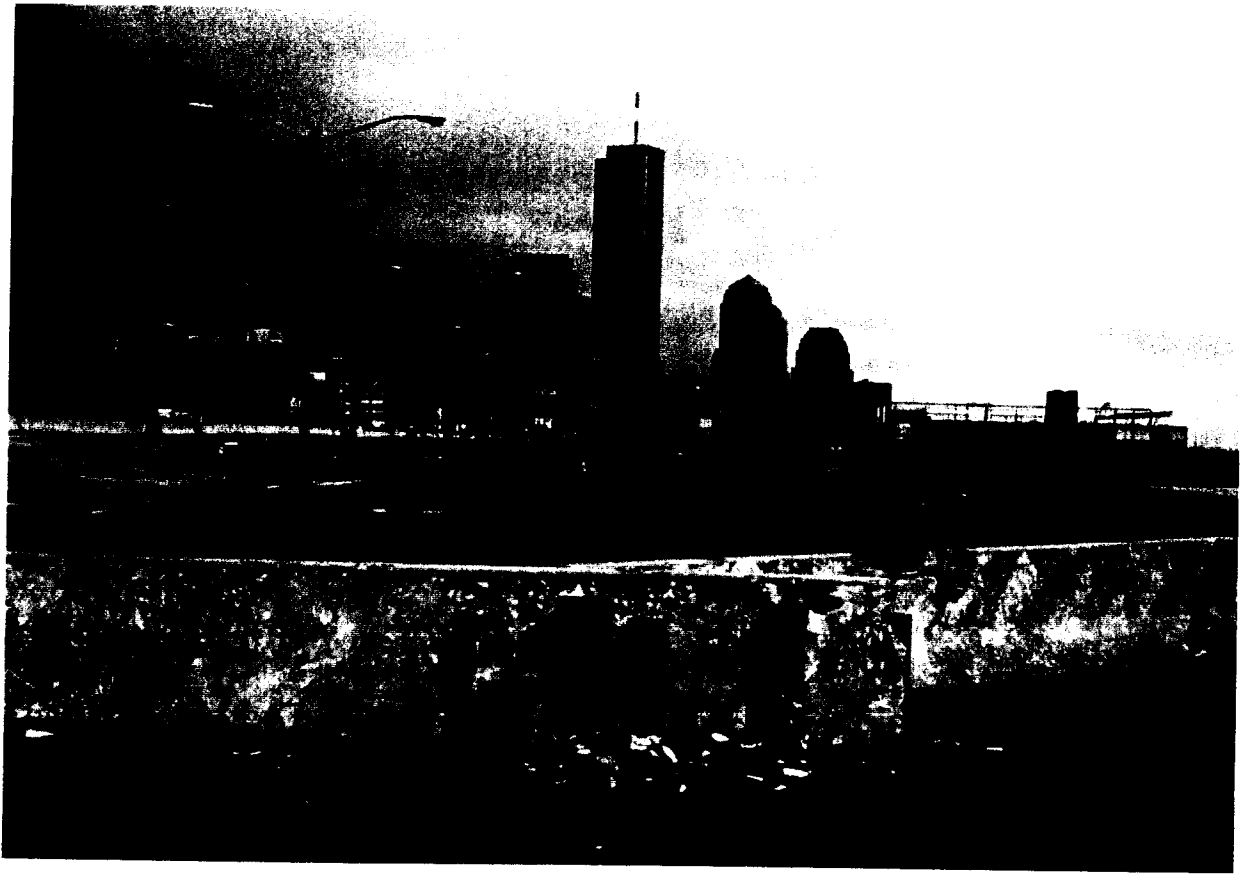


Gabriel Orozco, *Yielding Stone*,
1992. Plasticine and dust,
132.2 pounds. Courtesy Marian
Goodman Gallery, New York.

for a period of a little over a week during 1992. "Plasticine," Orozco wrote in his notebook, "a material often used for some sculptural processes, is hardly ever used for the definitive version of the work. . . . That is why it interests me: it is a material in a state of constant mutability, every time that it is touched it changes, it becomes 'upset.'"⁵⁶ The material was thus chosen for its malleability, its ability to evade permanence, as it remained soft and sticky, changing shape and picking up debris from its environment. Photographs of its progress show the *Yielding Stone* imprinted with numerous traces, including some recognizable as footprints or the grate by the edge of a road over which it has just been rolled. These images present a permanent record of a series of temporary situations, where vestiges of the object's earlier history were both erased and expanded upon by the marks and debris collected along the way. The work then entered the gallery as a sculptural object consisting of a somewhat irregular and dirt-encrusted sphere, still subject to the forces of its environment, with hints of its earlier history contained in the material it thus collected. In this case the work is defined as this object; but in many other situations the result has been a video or photograph.

"I saw it, I did it," Orozco wrote across the top of another notebook page from 1994, in a remarkably concise summation of the combination of found and lightly transformed situations recorded in his photographs.⁵⁷ Wet tire tracks left on the pavement by a bicycle ridden repeatedly in a circle that includes several puddles; an empty outdoor market ever so slightly transformed by the oranges distributed throughout the space, one on each table; some old pieces of wood and other debris in a little puddle, leaning against a cement barrier, echoing the seemingly far more permanent lower Manhattan skyline rising up in the background—all of these very temporary alterations were captured and became photographs bearing the titles *Extension of Reflection*, 1992, *Crazy Tourist*, 1991, and *Island within an Island*, 1993. And these are some of the more obvious transformations. In many images it is difficult to guess whether a slight oddity was made or found. In still others it is the photographic object itself that is altered, by being cut up and rearranged or subject to other alterations across the surface. And some found objects that became photographs have also made their way into the gallery as sculpture.

Elsewhere in his notebooks Orozco has described the Citroën DS that he altered in 1993 to form his sculpture *La DS* as a three-dimensional photograph, and indeed there are notebook pages that show the process of removal that transformed the actual car into a narrow, single-seat-wide, carlike object first taking place in a sequence of cut and pasted images.⁵⁸ The dramatic consequences that might follow upon a slight alteration of conditions are suggested by his unrealized proposal for the 1997 Münster "Skulptur" exhibition for a partially submerged Ferris wheel, half of whose circumference would move through



Gabriel Orozco, *Island within an Island*, 1993. Cibachrome, 12½" × 18½". Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

