JUST WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES THE SAME SO DIFFERENT?
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THE MONSTER IN THE SPECTRE
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ECSTATIC SELVES. The externalist object.
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“All art today is an art of postage stamps.” Tony Smith.¹

PART I

This paper could be written by an artist or by a critic. I think it can be read in both ways. As an artist, I will be putting forward the radical proposition of Object art while I will be arguing for the “return” of a self-referential, atomic, “empty”, literal Object (with a capital O). As a critic, I will be using this object proposition as an unusual methodological tool in the reappraisal of prevailing theories and their historical genesis, and as a means of stirring up some of these theories in our thoughts. Whichever way this paper is read, it is likely to vex academic standards on one hand and on the other hand to be quite unfit for the category of artist’s talk. But, as Toby Mussman put it in 1968: “The job of art, like philosophy, is to ask questions through such and such framework, or set such and such framework which asks questions of us.”²

The easel painting as an “absolute object” (that is to say abstracted from external relations) has repeatedly surfaced since the early 20th century. But I will be concentrating on it as it appears in object painting (or painting-as-object) in the 1960s and, more precisely, in the early work of Frank Stella (approximately 1959-1965) for whom Ad Reinhardt was the most direct predecessor.³ Object painting had its genesis in modernist painting
and its most far-reaching point in the work of Stella, which was soon seen as a dead end. But this short-lived object painting was at the centre of a debate opposing formalist abstraction to Minimalism (or modernism to postmodernism) and was at the tipping point in the turn from one to the other.

I will start by recalling the terms of the debate opposing modernist painting to Minimalism and define each of them in doing so. It is a historical narrative in which object painting has been given very little place consequently to having become in the new narrative precisely what art should not be. This turn and the paradigm shift made by Minimalism are major episodes in the founding scenarios of contemporary art from which all subsequent art finds its genealogy, as Hal Foster wrote in The Crux of Minimalism.

Aspects of this investigation will serve as a foil in a progressive definition of Object art, which will be approached in the last section of each part. This definition will partake in answering the question of the conditions in which an Object can “return” today, now that the course of Minimalism has been realised through post-object art, relational art, participative art and its most far-reaching point in the work of Stella, which was soon seen as a dead end. But this short-lived object painting was at the centre of a debate opposing formalist abstraction to Minimalism (or modernism to postmodernism) and was at the tipping point in the turn from one to the other.

I will also be recalling a number of distinctions made by Clement Greenberg and made even more explicitly by Michael Fried in his famous text Art and Objecthood (1967) in defining what is and what is not modernist painting. The surface of a painting is pictorial, not literal. The optical surface is the painting’s space, and however shallow it may be, it is not the literal space of the raw canvas. A painting has its own space and a scale that is distinct from its size (format). The figure is independent from the shape of the support, or only loosely interdependent with it.

What made the success of Fried’s text was that while he is defining what modernist painting is not, he is at the same time defining what Minimalism, or more extensively, to use Judd’s own words, the “New Art” is. As a consequence we find an almost perfectly inverted set of definitions stated by Minimalists in relation to modernist painting.

The modernist work is composed, made part by part, by addition — it has a “syntax” as Fried put it. The minimalist work is unitary, “non-relational”. The first calls for absorption, the second exists externally while its scale merges with its size in a direct reference to body size. The modernist work creates its own space while literalist works belong to “the same order of space as the body” as Greenberg put it. The first exists independently from the particular place and circumstances in which it is shown, the second is bound to them. The modernist painting is bracketed and belongs to the instantaneous time of presentness, the minimalist work is open and belongs to presence in duration, it is theatrical (in Fried’s sense) and bound to its site.

To these oppositions, so often formulated in essays by university students, I will add the notion, borrowed from systems theory, of first-order observation which focuses on the object (as with Stella) and of second-order observation in which the context and the observer are included (as with Robert Morris).

TWO DIFFERENT PARADIGMS IN THE WAY OF SEEING A SAME PAINTING BY STELLA

In his text Fried States: “This can be summed up by saying that modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to painting, it must be pictorial, not, or not merely, literal. Whereas literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not, indeed, as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.”

Stella’s early paintings (1959-1965) are at the centre of these oppositions. His work was one of the central elements of disagreement between the Minimalists and Michael Fried. Stella’s work was claimed by the Minimalist Carl Andre, as well as by Michael Fried. Retrospectively, Fried commented, “Carl Andre and I were fighting for his soul.” For Fried, who champions Stella’s new work (1963-66), his painting has maintained the imperative that it “defeat or suspend its own objecthood”; for the Minimalists it has succeeded in achieving the imperative of its objecthood. Stella’s object paintings are seen either as paintings or as objects. They are at the tipping point in the turn from modernist painting to Minimalism. We can switch back and forth from one way of seeing to the other. He is himself ambivalent in his statements when he walks the fine line between a painting which is and is not an object.
There is an element of melancholic loss in his early paintings, which are obviously still under the influence of Reinhardt in that they have in common with him a self-referential structure and a loss of content other than that of the painting “itself”. Emptiness, a kenosis, the “Dark Night”. The gnostic Black Monk’s ironical devotion to nothingness as he unfolds in his writings the implications of his paintings in practice, as logical, paradoxical and humorous.

What Stella’s object painting took from Reinhardt was the non-expressionist, non-gestural brushwork, symmetry, the no-content-as-content, the figure as modular structure, wholeness and its relation to man size. What he rejected was the dematerialised surface, the enclosing frame and “mysticism”.

As Barbara Rose wrote, with Stella, Reinhardt’s contemplative and negative icons were transferred into the realm of objects. They were dedramatised and have an air of matter-of-factness, futility and boredom you get in Pop Art.

One should not forget that at the same moment there was the Pop attitude and other post-painterly hard-edge artists such as, for example, Paul Feeley, Sven Lukin and Neil Williams, were producing unitary volumes that are literal, holistic, impassive, vacant and aloof. They were playing with formal devices (such as breaking symmetry), elegance, artificial colours and artificial mediums, and were melancholic in their refusal of transcendence (associated with authoritarian and ideological overtones). They partake of what Harold Rosenberg called the “anxious object”: “the kind of modern creation that is destined to endure uncertainty as to whether it is a work of art or not”. 10

Stella rejected the painterly brushstroke as Reinhardt, Noland and Olitski already had. He liked the impersonal craft-like paint handling of Johns and introduced the housepainter’s tools and materials. The painting’s holistic character and its relation to man’s size were prefigured in Pollock, Newman and Reinhardt, paintings which addressed the viewer’s body and neuro-motor system as much as the eye, kinaesthesia and visuality.

After using Reinhardt’s non-colour black, Stella’s colours are those of materials: aluminium and copper paintings (1961), prefiguring the Minimalists’ rejection of colour for being illusionist. They have a literal character: “I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can”. He keeps the basic constituents of painting: the flat plane, symmetry and the figure. The object-like character of his paintings was enhanced by matching the modular figure with a “shaped canvas” into which the depth of the stretcher was included. The figure and the shaped and “deep canvas” tend to stress the work’s wholeness and “concrete thereness” and the direct impact it has on the viewer.

The interdependence between parts and the whole on a modular basis is what was termed a “deductive structure”, a structure in which the parts are not interrelated in any traditional compositional way but through modular repetition and permutation within the overall shape. Minimalists used it in stressing the “holistic” character of the work.

From Judd’s point of view Stella’s “slabs” are three-dimensional, they defy pictorial space. As “unitary” forms they project out of the painting’s surface. But, from Fried’s point of view, the figure demands a degree of absorption on the part of the viewer. He sees the Minimalists’ interpretation of shape in Stella’s paintings as incongruous with modernist values.

A notable aspect in these two ways of seeing Stella’s paintings — as pictorial or as literal — is that they are both valid. To each perspective corresponds a different empirical fact. There is a paradigm switch from one to the other. As Deleuze put it, a perspective is not a thing upon which you add a point of view, the point of view has to also belong to the thing itself. A work is both a thing and a way of seeing that thing. In a sense the subject in art is always the subject of an object. What these two perspectives and corresponding facts bring forth is an epistemological problem in which the paradigm the apprehended phenomenon is premised on needs to be accounted for.

Stella was not the only one making literalist self-referential object paintings. In the fifties there are Rauschenberg’s White Paintings of 1951 and Manzoni’s Achrome paintings (started in 1957). In the sixties, there are Daniel Buren’s early works and the BMPT group’s Degree Zero Paintings in 1966-1967, and Mosset’s early “radical painting”, to name but a few.

Sometimes abstract painters and Pop artists could get very close to this sort of object. Duchamp’s readymades are, of course, not foreign to this affirmation of objectness. Although radical objectness is not exemplified in many works, it was an active concept for many artists around 1960. To my knowledge, a historical study of object painting through the 1960s and 1970s has yet to be undertaken. Because it is said to have ended in a blind alley and that it exemplified what the new art was not to be, it was not given a history, even a short-lived one.

Stella himself did not sustain the implications of objecthood in his work and went in a different direction to further exploit shape, colour and materials in painting.

On the Minimalist side, the literalness of the work and the processual character of its apprehension has a genealogy in time-based kinetic and
environmental art having its sources in the European historical avant-garde. But what was new with Minimalism is that it was challenging painting’s dominant position in the museum institution.

THE MINIMALIST OBJECT

Minimalism shares with Stella the literalness, the deductive structure, the impersonal procedures and other aspects, but they do not share the same sense of time. Because of their wholeness and frontalness Stella’s “One-image”, holistic paintings belong to the time of instantaneousness (“wholly manifest” at “every moment”), while Minimalist works exist in duration. Stella’s structural concerns were contained within the work of art itself, whereas Judd’s “specific objects” and Morris’s “sculptures” have an external structure that includes the viewer and the architectural space that the work is in.

When Stella started introducing the wall behind his paintings into them (into their syntax) by opening holes in the plane or making the shapes asymmetrical (dynamic, as Elsworth Kelly’s, making the wall a ground against which it appears) he was introducing something foreign to modernist painting and close to Minimalism.

Morris recognised the three-dimensionality of Stella’s slabs but he rejected the relief because the wall on which it sits delimits the number of views of the object. The relief being on the wall, it keeps the viewer still. According to Morris: “The ground plane, not the wall, is the necessary support for the maximum awareness of the object.”

Minimalism, like kinetic and environmental art, but unlike modernist painting, is inclusive of the viewer in a time-based work. Theatricality implies an active viewer, a co-producer of the work, it partakes in a blurring of the border between production and reception that would be one of the main characteristics of the art to follow.

In Notes on Sculpture (1966), Morris explains how the object works as a device in a sort of second-order observation in which the context and the observer are included with the object: “While the work must be autonomous in the sense of being a self-contained unit for the formation of the gestalt, the indivisible and indissolvable whole, the major aesthetic terms are not in but dependent upon this autonomous object and exist as unfixed variables that find their definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator. Only one aspect of the work is immediate: the apprehension of the gestalt. The experience of the work necessarily exists in time. The intention is diametrically opposed to cubism with its concern for simultaneous views in one plane.”

He is very clear in making the spatiotemporal limitations of the work independent from those of the object. “The object is but one of the terms in the newer esthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one’s awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.” His work is post-object and subject-based.

SERIALITY AND IMPERSONALITY

Another aspect of the change from modernist painting is Minimalism’s refusal in locating the work’s origin in the artist’s private subjectivity by placing the modular figure in the public sphere and collective codes. Literalness is seen as the public nature of the object. With deductive modular structures, procedures in making are impersonal and programatic all the way through. Works are “based on the application of a rigorous governing logic rather than on personal decision-making”. Systems are public and exist beyond the consciousnesses actualising them.

The search for impersonality is more than just a reaction to expressionism. We must also consider that the concept of the subject has been changing in philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, etc., which recognise an anonymous and collective dimension to the self.

Nevertheless, beyond the public existence of the work, its reality, in Minimalism as in all immersive and time-based art, was based in the viewer’s subjectivity, in the viewer’s experience and in the work’s impermanence.

VALUES CRITERIA AND NON-ART

A pending question was about these works being art or not, considering that by then it had somehow been institutionalised that Duchamp’s readymade was. Depending on whether it was an anxious object or a speculative one the question had different meanings. Non-art can be seen as an art in loss of art (an anxious object, in Rosenberg’s terms) or it can be seen as a device in making art.

Or it can be seen as being not art at all, as Greenberg does when he argues that Minimalist work has gone so far in the extreme of being non-art, that it is as non-art as “a door, a table or a blank sheet of paper”.

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When he says Minimalism is not art he is also inferring that the readymade is not art either.

Morris’ idea of non-art is very different. The work is immersive and not circumscribed in space or time while “The object is but one of the terms in the newer esthetic”. The object is only a component of the work and, consequently, can be qualified as non-art.

Greenberg’s criteria of taste vanishes as the readymade emerges. Minimalism makes a distinction between taste and fact. As Hal Foster noted, there was a shift in which we can see “[...] the normative criterion of quality displaced by the experimental value of interest [...]”.

NATURALISM AND IM-MEDIACY

Stella’s statement “What you see is what you see” has often been stigmatised as being naturalist, based in an essentialist ontology. Little was done to counter this assumption until more recently. But this assumption has less to do with philosophy than with art history because it operated as a foil in defining what post-object and postmodernism were not, while developing theories of process, context, instability of form, simulacra, and so on. These theories have been tremendously productive, but meanwhile the concept of the object has not been developed.

Hal Foster has challenged the naturalist assumption in the interpretation of the literalness of Stella’s empirical works. “So what you see is what you see, as Frank Stella famously said, but things are never as simple as they seem: the positivism of minimalism notwithstanding, perception is made reflexive in these works and so rendered complex.”

A complexity where the self-reflexive object is not limited to naturalist ontological assumptions. “In short, minimalism is as self-critical as any late-modernist art, but its analysis tends towards the epistemological more than the ontological, for it focuses on the perceptual conditions and the conventional limits of art more than on its formal essence and categorising.”

Nevertheless, there is a degree of “naive realism” in modernist formalism. This lack of philosophical sophistication is not just Stella’s. Consequently, the assumption of Stella’s “naturalism” in post-object art is itself somehow naive. But, again, it is by using this assumption as a foil that postmodernism articulates its Baroque dimension. It is against this ontology of substance, authenticity and presence that it animates its melancholic dramaturgy of loss, simulacra and irony.

The emergence of the readymade at the turn of the 1960s was a major factor in the progressive deconstruction of formalism. As Danto so elegantly demonstrated later, an identical form (shape and colour) can have very different meanings. Form has no inherent meaning. Postmodernism in abstraction has taken form beyond the problem of a division between “illusionism” and the “real”, as Danto did with his identical nine imaginary red monochromes in his book The Transfiguration of the Commonplace.

It would be incorrect to think that Minimalism had completely evaded the naturalist assumption regarding form. To some extent literalness and the public character of the object with its modular construction could be seen as universal and non-historical. But Minimalism’s positivism is a “naive perception” less because it does not account for cognition in perception than because it still shares the same basis in classical philosophy as the object it criticises.

Another formalist assumption that postmodernism’s metaphorical or semiotic procedures will overthrow is the idea of pure im-mediacy. The problem we are looking at is in the amalgamation of the notions of instantaneousness and immediacy. This confusion is found in Greenberg’s idea of pure visuality, an idea which Stella was referring to when talking of the baseball player Ted Williams, who could freeze a 90-mile-an-hour fastball into a clear image. Relating this episode to the self-containment of Stella’s early sixties paintings, Rosalind Krauss wrote: “It is thus a picture of pure immediacy, of complete self-enclosure.”

Consequently, at the time when immersive and time-based art was emerging, instantaneousness was thrown out with the essentialist idea of the unmediated and immediacy. We will come back to this also further on.

Literalness and empiricism can also be conceived as free from any inherence of meaning and phenomena to form, and form and matter conceived as free from any substratum. When Smithson defines a work as both a thing and a way of seeing that thing, he is a pragmatist not an idealist. He invalidates the naturalist as well as the subjective basis of meaning and identity. This epistemological approach to material reality has allowed the object to become central to theory as have, more recently, some of the object-oriented neo-materialist process philosophies informed by the philosophy of science. These are non-essentialist and non-subject centered theories in which an entity demands that we specify a process through which it emerges, even when it is a “still” object. There is a plasticity in things that evades the visual order.
THE OBJECT HYPOTHESIS I - THE DERIVATION OF A THIRD ALTERNATIVE

It is from the background of these observations that I will introduce my Object proposition, drawing features from both sides of the division, and try to convey how they work cohesively together.

I consider such a re-assembling less the proposal of a new type of object than the “return” of the “same” object as Stella’s, as it existed at the tipping point between modernism and Minimalism. The difference in the sameness is that the “same” occurs at a different time and in a different set of conditions.

Now that postmodernism is at the end of its course, it is from that particular point that I would like to derive a third alternative and house the spectre of the before in its actual after. To replay the object not as pre-post-object but as post-post-object.

An object, any object, can no longer be conceived as im-mediate or grounded in the static substratum of naturalist ontology. Nevertheless, it depends above all on the simple and easy possibility it offers for being apprehended as “just itself”, before one even starts wondering about the nature of this “selfness”.

The entity, the object in general, is nicely defined in George Brecht’s exercise: “Add to the object [...] another object, to form a new object”, etc. An object is an abstraction, a gestalt, what is put in brackets. An Object can only be an object if it is bracketed as such. It is not even dependent on a geometrical border; entities can be topological, made out of an assemblage of elements belonging to different times and places, made out of elements “neighbouring” each other independently from any contiguity in space and time; mosaic-like entities, as for example some of Smithson’s non-site pieces. All an entity needs is a degree of “selfness”, of consistence and permanence that enables it to be abstracted from a background.

This is to say that boundaries are where you can set them rather than an inherent property of entities. In modernist painting, including Stella’s, there is a formal self-enclosing resulting from the relations between the figure and the physicality of the edge and the surface. But an Object cannot be produced through such devices, form can do no more than match with being considered as an Object. No formal device will ever give an Object more “selfness” than the one you can find in it yourself.

This enables the object painting I make to present itself in its most basic form, while being self-referential and suspending its own internality.

An Object — that is a panel considered as an Object — is neither composed nor elaborately constructed. But what it keeps from Stella’s paintings is their frontalness, their symmetry, the shaped canvas, the thick stretcher, the craftsman’s procedures in making it, their factual thereness, wholeness, instantaneousness (not immediacy), permanence, independence from the wall. The figure is reduced, like Morris’ objects, to an overall shape while there is no underlying grid or structure. The overall shape, with its unitary and holistic character, is directly referred to body-size, as for modernists and Minimalists, and this involves the viewer’s gravitational axis and motor skills.

Shapes and colours can be chosen, randomly chosen, computer generated, suggested by friends or some other means. Texture is canvas that has been coated with a brush then painted with a roller.

In serial simulation generated from an algorithm the entity’s invariance is displaced from its physical basis to a process. Sameness is generated in the repetition of a spectrum of possibilities and is freed from being identified with the repetition of identical forms.

As with other crafted objects, the way in which you make it is the same way you made the one before and the one you will make after. As Reinhardt put it: you are always making the same, one, painting.

Unlike Stella’s works, but like Lawrence Weiner’s, anyone competent can make one, and there are no instructions for doing so. It can subsist as a concept although it belongs to the physical world. It has the non-art quality of Morris’ objects. And, as with minimal works (suspending their own internality), it cancels absorption to exist externally.

Like the unitary volumes of that time, it is literal, impassive and vacant. But being a relief on the wall it also keeps the viewer still.

For this “wholly manifest” abstract object (a better word than autonomous) in the context of art, the alternative lies not in the binary and exclusive oppositions between object and non-object, between the self-enclosed and the unlimited, between instantaneousness and impermanence, etc., but in considering both as two coexisting levels in the work.

To the first-order observation that corresponds to the Object’s “selfness” is added a second-order observation in which the context and the observer are included. As for Morris, an object is only a component (non-art) in the work that includes both a context and the viewer. But the context of art, the alternative lies not in the binary and exclusive oppositions between object and non-object, between the self-enclosed and the unlimited, between instantaneousness and impermanence, etc., but in considering both as two coexisting levels in the work.

Just as with the two paradigms of object painting and of Minimalism, where you need to switch or leap from one to the other, you need to switch for this one too.
JUST WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES THE SAME SO DIFFERENT?

As a fact, an Object is a self-referred entity in a context maintaining it as such. This context is global, scattered and heterogeneous, while not being reduced to spatiotemporal actuality. It represents the empirical conditions in which an object of that sort can exist in the context of art as the Object it “is”. As for any artwork this context is variable and mostly distributed by the work itself as synchronic and correlative with a heterogeneous set of systems that are exterior to it. An entity does not preexist its external relations. The reality of a work is far larger than just its actuality. The meaning of these last remarks should appear more clearly by the time we reach the second part on the Object hypothesis at the end of this paper.

PART 2

WORKS AS SYSTEMS - Lawrence Alloway, Mel Bochner, Jack Burnham

I will now bring in a more marginal aspect of art theory of the 1960s that has associated works with systems. In 1966 Lawrence Alloway presented an exhibition called Systemic Painting at the Guggenheim Museum. In it he showed a wide range of One-image paintings, including Stella’s object paintings.

In his text in the catalogue he wrote: “The application of the term systemic to One-image paintings is obvious, but, in fact, it is applied more widely here [...]” He refers to the deductive structure in modular constructions and to more loosely produced works. All of which have in common an end-state somehow foreseen prior to completion.

A system is defined through recursion, and through its iteration it finds a degree of stability and permanence (homeostasis). What Alloway also reveals in this exhibition is that a system can be approached from two sides. On the one hand, he defines the work as a still object with its materiality and factualness, and on the other hand he defines it as a system which, on the basis of repetition, “returns meaning to the syntax”. A system ends up as an organised whole, but it is also the program of the dynamic process in producing that whole.

Judd and Morris did not take part in the exhibition, but, as we saw earlier, the systemic approach to unitary objects brings up a problem regarding composition. We saw that the Stella’s One-image paintings were apprehended in two different ways: by the modernists, as pictorial and calling for absorption; by the Minimalists as a unitary form existing externally. When Alloway switches from the artwork as system to the systemic process of its production there is a danger for Minimalism in letting the systems aesthetic reintroduce a form of absorption into the object. To read their works as indexes to the process of their production was not what they intended. Judd had stated that the work’s “assertion” of itself by the single form was more powerful than that of a work consisting of many elements. For Morris, it is the simplicity of the forms that triggers “strong gestalt sensations” as the viewer cannot perceive different components. Hence the single gestalt has a bigger impact on the viewer than any number of relationships between different elements. His objects work outwardly, not inwardly.

The work of Sol LeWitt would have been, had it been in the exhibition, exemplary of Alloway’s two-sided view of a system. We recall LeWitt’s famous statement: “The idea becomes the machine that makes the art” (1967). The end product virtually enfolds the whole process. You can go from process to product as you can go from product to process, imaginatively or literally.

His work fitted well in the text Mel Bochner published in 1967, Serial Art: systems, solipsism. Writing about the modular constructions or “arrangements” and serial methodology in the works of Andre, Flavin, LeWitt and himself, Bochner explains how these works, “based on the application of rigorous governing logic rather than on personal decision making”, are constructed through modular repetition, division, progression and permutation, while exposing the processual character of their production.

The fusion between product and process was the project of many other artists: in process art and in late 1960s performance art, one of whose precursors was Allan Kaprow. These immersive, time-based works also involved the spectator. Jack Burnham in his text System Esthetic (1968) orients his choices to artists making mobile, kinetic and ephemeral art, making what he calls “unobject” art. Hans Haacke is for him the artist most representative of this esthetic. He sees “system aesthetics” as more adequate in qualifying post-object art than “Mr Fried’s adjectives, theatrical or literalist art”. He also defines the system as a method in which an object is produced, while he associates “systematic” constructions with working methodology.

To this two-sidedness of the system, between a frontal synthetic entity and an immersive open-ended timeline, Smithson brings a concise answer: “System is a convenient word, like object. It is another abstract entity that doesn’t exist. /.../ A system is just an expansive object, and eventually it all contracts back to points.” Two aspects of the world that depend less on the nature of things than on the way they are bracketed.
Systems theory, because it had been associated with a certain type of art and, with technology and E.A.T., subsequently remained rather marginal to art theory.

Burnham’s resistance to bracket immersive works is shared by all post-object or “unobject” artists. But post-object artists such as Morris show clearly, despite their intentions, that it is the whole situation in which the viewer is immersed that can be considered as a system.

In the case of the 3 L-shapes Morris describes in Notes on Sculpture, the work is seen from the inside by an immersed viewer, but it can be also grasped from the outside as a system and as a concept that have a degree of stability. He explains how unitary objects, whose concept (gestalt) is instantaneous and constant, are also impermanent and variable as part of a situation in which the site, the position of the viewer and the light, all work together. In doing this he describes the recursive components of a system, something that can be repeated, iterated at different times and places.

The constant is not only the physical object, it is, at another level, the processual invariance of the whole situation. The work can be defined as variable or as constant, it depends, as Smithson just put it, on the level at which you apprehend it. Morris would have had to fully account for this level of processual invariance for an observation to be really of the second order.

Despite his siding with time-based art, when Burnham states in System Esthetic that “Systems exist as ongoing independent entities away from the viewer”, he is not only recognising the system as an entity but also declaring it independent from experience and duration, as having a virtual existence beyond individual subjectivity, and having a reality larger than its actuality.

Hence, a system can be seen from without as from within. But it is difficult to consider these two sides to the system as separate from each other, because each side is within the other, although only apprehensible as separate levels. At one side, all the stages of the system are enfolded in a synthetic (instantaneous) entity, at the other, these stages are unfolding along actual timelines. But we must also consider that every actual stage in this unfolding, split between a past and an anticipated future, also enfolds the whole system.

These different ways of apprehending a system, through its enfolding and unfolding, are bound as two sides of a same problem. But here too, in this binary configuration, there is another possible alternative. By suspending its own internality, an object can also be considered as working corelatively and interactively with outer systems, and hence as working in a recursive

and stable (homeostasis through periodicity) context. It is an environment of systems that cannot be apprehended as a whole and in which the object could be said to be “ex-folded”.

THE NON-OBJECT AS ENTITY IN ART LAW

“Yet, if it’s art it must have limits.” Robert Smithson.

An entity depends on a limit, even if, as we saw, that limit escapes being an outline. But at an immersive level, Minimal works are conceived as having no boundaries. They are, as Fried said, frameless objects or events. In System Esthetic, Jack Burnham states that “we are now in transition from an object-oriented to a system-oriented culture”. He expanded the idea of the system to what he called “post-formalist” works. This meant for him that a system can be organised independently from structured materials. A system is a way of articulating terms with one another while those terms can be as formless as air. In the happenings (participatory aesthetic) of Allan Kaprow there are rules that can be repeated without depending on form. A system is information; while it is informing the physicality of the work it is independent from it. Although this is not said by Burnham, the work becomes identified with the rules under which it could be repeated. The level of invariance at which a happening by Kaprow can be repeated, transferred and exchanged is reduced to a concept and a program allowing it to be actualised again. Only if a work were not repeatable and transferable across space and time would it cease to be an entity and to have limits. But then it would cease to be a work of art altogether.

This shift, in the definition of a work as an entity, from un/limited and topographical to systemic and topological, has been clearly expressed in art law. In the age of dematerialised art, law has to be able to integrate works that are only physically actualised when exhibited, and which when not exhibited, have no physical existence other than in certificates, contracts and working plans. It had to define what was named under the work’s title (which itself presupposes the work as being an entity). The concept of the work, with its potential for materialisation, has replaced the work that had until then been defined as material-based. The concept of the entity has replaced the work as material entity. The concept is that of a system’s syntax (Fried), of a process (Bochner), of a procedural methodology (Burnham) rather than that of any material end-product. In law the work is assimilated to a concept but the concept is dynamic while the work always has a physical manifestation in the material world.
In contemporary art, law has become a casuistry. Each work is a particular case demanding jurisprudence (case law). As a lawyer you are not only required to be a theoretician but also an expert on the works being treated. Today collectors in some cases do not even buy something but a right to show something, backed by a certificate or by some sort of contract. Through court cases works are permanently engaged in defining the adequacy between the material form and the intention of the author, in defining the author's intellectual rights and the owner's property, in defining the terms of a work's ownership and so on. In order to treat a case you will have to base your understanding from within an aesthetic relation to the work. To be apprehending it from the position of the spectator is a preliminary condition for applying to it any legal practice. Intellectual property is intricately bound with the work's own program.

**THE WORK'S MAINTENANCE CONTEXT AND INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

Non-object art, or the so-called neo-avant-garde, did not resist the institution and the market, it changed it. More precisely, its public emergence was correlated, synchronic, with changes in conventions, taxonomies, practices and technical procedures in institutions related to art.

It is non-object art that has over time made us become sensitive and aware of the work's context and created new conditions that were not conceivable at the time of the early Stella. By incorporating segments of the context into its syntax it has reflected problems at every level of institutional practice: curating, conserving, restoring, transferring, reproducing, etc. The roles of the artist and the curator often overlap, particularly since the 1990s. Beyond these segments, the more global context has remained separate from the work and unaccounted for. Beyond the entity's boundary, neither the context nor the observer partake of a second-order observation. This is why the separation between art theory and institutional theory was never really bridged.

By momentarily suspending the work's internality you can start considering it in an environment that is other than itself. When considered from the outside, it is correlated and interacting with a scatter of other systems. Such an approach implies a context that has very little to do with Minimalism's site-specificity, or even with contextual art. It evades the realm of the actual perception and topological space of the site, to split into multiple coexisting heterogeneous timelines, to split into a topological and virtual space for which the model is no longer the image but the map.

The particular context that correlates and interacts with a work in its maintenance, the ways in which it is displayed, installed or reconstructed, illuminated, titled, handled, restored, conserved, reproduced, legally contracted, and so on, are particular to that work. In a word, it exists nested in the ways in which it is maintained in the public space as being the thing it is. Whether you consider this context as a large and uncharted social space or as a space limited to curatorial practices, it is proper to the work itself. A maintenance context is not just an environment, it is correlative with the work and selected by it rather than existing prior to it.

Danto's nine monochrome paintings identical in shape and colour require being handled, exhibited and administrated each in a different way. A work exits in a particular context, in a distribution of a variety of roles, functions and material practices that correlate and interact with it.

As we have seen in the practice of law, we can observe the adaptability of different curatorial practices to the particular case of each work. The practices involved in the work's maintenance are also a casuistry and based in an aesthetic relationship to a work, which are variable, even in the case of formally identical works as with Danto's monochromes.

Second-order contextualism is not a reversal of the primacy of the work's internal determination to external determination. Correlations between a system and other systems should be approached in circular causality. Inside and outside work together correlative.

Contextual practices are themselves recursive and are iterated from one time to another. With the entity's instantaneity is enfolded a scatter of timelines; what could be called, after David Böhm, the virtual explications of its implications. The reality of a work is far larger than its actuality. It is a virtual event simultaneously unfolding across a multilayered map. Works work from the inside as they work from the outside. This is why even a still object can be seen as an emergent being. An inanimate object has a life of its own, it is an agent. What something is is also what it does and makes you do. And it partakes in systems that are, as Burnham put it, "ongoing independent entities away from the viewer."

**THE VIRTUAL, THE LITERAL AND THE REAL**

Literalness refers to the concrete thereness of materials as well as to practical conditions in the production and reception of the work. With object painting and early Minimalism, it meant the physicality of materials, the factuality and impersonality of the form (having antecedents in Constructivist and Concrete art). With works extending into their own
processes, as with process art and performance art, literalness extends to process. There is also a literalness in the viewer’s experience of the work in real time, as Fried explained in Art and Objecthood (1967): “The literalist preoccupation with time — more precisely, with the duration of the experience — is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical: as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of time [...]”.

Literalness, having lost its formalist basis, lost the stability of form and materials, could hardly apply any longer to the physicality of materials. However interesting semiotics and metaphorical procedures are in subverting any inherence and immediacy in the physical work, they do not say “where” the non-actual elements are. This “where” is assumed to be in some sort of mental storage rather than out there in the real world. At a much less metaphorical level, we saw earlier that the non-essentiality of the material form was revealed in the differences between the paradigms observations are premised on. Although the word went out of use after the 1970s, literalness had extended from the work itself to the practical procedures by which it exists. The literalness of these procedures can be observed in many works from Lawrence Weiner to Tino Segal. The literal procedures of production can also be placed on the side of the receiver, as when the work has to be physically (re)made by the person showing it, some works requiring that they be completely reconstructed, “restored”, at each exhibition. To these performative practices I have added, at the level of second-order observation, a whole context of other, no less empirical practices interacting with the work. In those conditions, even the most abstract and atomic object is embedded, as such, in material processes.

But, should literalness be limited to the actual, to the actuality of sense perception and topographical space? Aren’t the practices correlated with the work literal, even when not actual, even when they are virtual? If we were to understand Morris’ literalism word-for-word — that is, as purely belonging to the actual — the world would be as flat as its image on our retina and completely inconsistent. The third dimension in actual perception is somehow already virtual, inferred by memory and anticipation. If the un-actual was not somehow “in” the actual, the actual would have no depth or consistence. Even in Morris’ phenomenology, the present is necessarily always split between memory and anticipation, past and future. If the virtual is opposed to the actual, it nonetheless belongs to the real. As Deleuze said in reference to the object: “The virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real insofar as it is virtual... Indeed, the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object — as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as though into an objective dimension.” An object’s event is no less real. And the space of the event is no less real than the “real-space” of site specificity.

Differently to time-based and variable art that develops along a single actual timeline, the still object has in its instantaneousness many enfolded timelines: the timelines of its enacted logic, all virtually unfolded at once in light-time. The entity’s event is its fourth dimension.

EXPERIENCE AND SUB-ACTUALITY

Experience is bound to actuality. The experience, conscience, here-andnowness of the transient, impermanent, work, is only a single line in its event. To the three dimensions of actuality I have added the fourth dimension of the virtual. It is the space of the object’s collective. It is the time of instantaneousness and of simultaneity, of the un-actual or the sub-actual enfolded within the actual. A dimension without which the actual and experienced entity would have neither depth, consistence or sense.

Deleuze wrote: “Every actual is surrounded with a cloud of virtual images”. This cloud is an unconscious to actual consciousness. Made of “virtual images”, “[...] they are called virtual images because their speed and briskness have kept them under a principle of unconsciousness.” The virtual is subconsciousness in the sense of a sort of consciousness we are not conscious of. The subconscious in this sense is not hidden to consciousness, it is what is not in the actuality of consciousness at a given moment, but which could be. It is not what you do not know, although it may sometimes be what you do not know that you know.

This fourth dimension is a material subconscious to the actual which is shared by both, the viewer and the object. It partakes in systems that exist beyond the consciousnesses that are actualising them, it is objective and engaged with the material world. The subconscious unfolds an event inscribed within the real, material, practical and factual world. The semantics and syntax of cognition are also those operating in the material world. In the coupling of the “who” with the “what”, the “what” acts as a memory and in driving cognitive processes. It is no longer a question of asking whether the event belongs to the viewer’s inner or outer worlds, to the knower or to the known, but of
wondering about how both worlds match with one another.

Because the object’s context is distributed through many types of recursive practices, a spectator is more than just one person. The curatorial context is a transpersonal event in which many actors partake, each relating to the object in practice from an aesthetic standpoint, just like the spectator is expected to do.

More recently, participative art has undermined the generic spectator who was then turned into a “plural participant”.

This entails the generic spectator being reintroduced only if each participant is considered as “containing” all the others or being “in them”. As a generic spectator you have to be both: a point in a map and the map itself. But unlike the work in which the participant is immersed, an object’s enacted context is a scattered and heterogeneous collective. It is the object’s own collective coordinated through distributed cognition, which has little to do with any communitarism, a collective in which no division can be made between subjects and objects. In sharing an object’s subconscious you are like the Leibnizian monad that is contained in the world while itself also containing the world.

In Minimalism, the work is equated with its experience, with subjectivity. Experiences are variable from one person to the other. But the idea of variation presupposes a degree of sameness that experiences and affects can differ from. This sameness is not a core or underlying substratum, but a recursive system, an invariant operating as a pattern behind physical variations, a processual entity with a cloud of logical interactions that has stability and permanence through its own iterations. It is also this unvisual virtual cloud in which an entity is nested that gives it its solidity and permanence.

THE OBJECT HYPOTHESIS 2

Back to Object art. Although shapes, sizes and colours are variable, a panel is the same Object every time. The one you are making is the same one that you made before and the same one that you will make later. In this way it can be seen as constructed and resulting from a systemic production. But this is secondary to the point. We need only to consider an Object as having suspended its own internality and as existing as such in the environment of art. Its limit then appears as a multifaceted interface in the distribution of a context.

In the second part of this paper I have added a second-order context to artworks in general as an extra dimension that is foreign to their concept, and in this sense irrelevant to them. Only curators have been concerned by this context. In the present case, what in art usually stands for the work is an Object — in a context maintaining it as such. And as we saw earlier, the art is not in the Object (as it was not in Morris’ unitary shapes) but in the whole situation. The context is the medium.

An Object’s instantaneousness enfolds a dimension that is too complex to belong to representation but which can be travelled in all directions, unfolded imaginatively or practically. Actuality, experience or consciousness are only lines in a fourth dimension that is non-representational. Beyond an Object, the work is not identified with actuality. 

The phenomenologist will see in the experienced object a synthesis of the unactual. I am veering from this subject and object centeredness, or, more precisely, I am complementing it with a contextual dimension. An Object’s actuality is the distributor of its virtualities rather than their synthesis. While the actual object is a contraction of the virtual it is also an expansion of its “ex-folded” reality. While an exhibition is the exhibition of an Object it is also the exhibition of its exhibition.

In this sense, “what you see is what you see” insofar that “what you see is what you do not see”. What you do not see is visual (or plastic) art’s unvisibility, actuality’s sub-actuality, emergence in stillness, ecstatic scatter in oneness, context as mind, body as map, etc.

It is ironical that it could be with a “still” object that art reconducted the avant-garde project of an art of complete immanence and open-ended process. There is sometimes a sort of humour in the way things work. Ha ha ha.
NOTES

3 Prior to Frank Stella’s paintings of the early 1960s, radical self-referential paintings were claimed by Malevich in 1915, Rodchenko in 1921, Strzemiński around 1930, Ad Reinhardt from the early 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg’s White Painting series in 1951, Manzoni’s Achrome series of paintings started in 1957, only to mention the most famous artists.
6 Michael Fried formulates the relationship between Stella and the modernist genealogy in his essay “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons”, remarking on the continuity between the outside and inside of painting in Stella’s work. For Fried, the continuity is not through a third dimension, as Judd claims, but actually through the independent shapes within the work that are connected/disconnected from the limits of the support. In Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
7 See, for example, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” interview by Bruce Glaser. Art News, September 1966. Reprinted in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology (Battcock ed.). “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. [...] I don’t paint around the edge; Rothko does, so do a lot of people; Sven Lukin does and he’s much more of an object painter than I am.”
8 Barbara Rose also talks of Reinhardt’s “dark night” and how this nothingness frustrated people. “ABC,” in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology (Battcock ed.), pp. 296-7.
9 This crossover between abstraction and Pop Art is described in “Mannerism in the abstract” by Peter Hutchinson. In Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology (Battcock ed.).
11 The literalness of the work and the processual character of its apprehension has a genealogy in time-based kinetic and environmental art, itself having its sources in the European historical avant-garde going back to Tatlin, Lissitzky and Rodchenko. It was theorised and/or exemplified in the demonstration rooms of Lissitzky and Herbert Bayer, in the Surrealist exhibitions and later in the early exhibitions of British Pop Art in 1956, in Calder’s work in the early 1950s in France and in Latin America with Jesús Rafael Soto, Carmelo Arden-Quin in the mid-fifties, François Morellet and the GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel) in 1960, in Rauschenberg’s White Paintings in 1951, to name a few. See Willoughby Sharp. “Luminism and Kineticism,” (1967) in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology (Battcock ed.).
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
THE VIRTUAL AND THE REAL

Length, width and depth make our 3D world. Although there is something absurd in conceiving each dimension separately from the other two, we do it all the time. In this paper I will endeavour to define what I call a fourth dimension: the space-time of the virtual, the non-actual (or more precisely, as we will see further, the sub-actual) in the actual, without which the actual would have no consistence, and a dimension it would be equally absurd to separate from the other three.

I will be approaching artworks as observatories for this dimension. But before then, what follows is set out in seemingly fragmented parts.

Starting on the level of the retinal image, the actual is full of the virtual. The world as it is projected on the retina is 2D although we experience it as 3D, even in one-eyed vision. The 2D retinal image corresponds to a 3D real world out there. This is an old problem in aesthetics; Hildebrand explained depth in the flat retinal image through virtual movement: “Indeed, everyone can imagine a sphere as a form but not how the sphere communicates its roundness as a visual impression. What we all recall is the two-dimensional circular line and the kinaesthetic idea with which we repeat that circular line in every direction.”

But before I define the virtual as contiguous with the actual in space and time, and the actual as split between past and future, the virtual can be
Space exists through their simultaneous distribution. The hidden side of the sphere, the cube I am sitting on and the Pacific Ocean are all there although not in my sight. In time, the actual object is split between past and future. Although non-actual, the virtual is latent; what is not yet and no longer actual inhabits the actual. In actuality's timeline unfolding a recursive (periodic) sequence, the actual instant can virtually contain the whole sequence.

Inference is statistical throughout, whether in space or time.

So the virtual is the non-actual (potentially [already] actual) in the actual, without which the actual would have no depth and consistence. Such sensory processing is not a subjective outlook. It is not a mental projection. What is perceived is not a projection, the retinal image is structurally embedded in what is observed. In perception, the observer's mind is meshed with the material world. The virtual, as Manuel de Landa put it, is an empirico-ideal event. He quotes Deleuze saying: “The virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real insofar as it is virtual... Indeed, the virtual must be defined as strictly part of the real object — as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as though into an objective dimension.”

The illusion of picture-space is produced in a similar statistical processing, while it does not correspond directly with the real world out there. Nonetheless, even the image can be engaged in acting upon the physical world insofar as it is active in modelling it or affecting it. Sometimes images have more practical effects than physical things.

I have defined the virtual as contiguous in space and time with what is actually observed. But we will see further that actuality's proximity with the inferred virtual is not limited to spatial or temporal contiguity, nor is limited to the geometrical space of sense perception. Actuality can be seen as unfolding along a single timeline, but each thing can also be considered as belonging to a space-time of simultaneous virtual timelines. This will contribute to conceiving a complex virtual environment.

In associating the virtual with anticipation in recursiveness and statistical foresight, as with planetary orbits, we can say that sometimes things have already happened before they have happened. The regularity of recurrence turns the future into a sort of future-past. But the virtual in something's becoming can have variable degrees of uncertainty. It can be running close to the edge of uncertainty and sometimes bifurcating into it. Because it evolves in a complex virtual environment it can be creative, innovative and
eliciting our sixth sense.

But before returning to these problems I will discuss the body and neuromotricity in conjunction with the observations I have just made on visuality.

**KINAESTHETIC EMPATHY**

The 2D image on the retina is also a position of the body that the eye belongs to in real space. The disembodied retinal image is attached to a material body. Things in the world find virtual depth through their own movements and/or through our moving body. Their past and their future are also those of neuromotricity.

The space of the body is the space of sense perception, where all senses overlap in our apprehension of a single topographical (Euclidian) environment. Space is apprehended in reference to the observer's body.

The problem of the bodily apprehension of objects in space was one of the central concerns in 19th-century German aesthetics. Kinaesthesia and empathy were key concepts dealt with by Robert Vischer, Heinrich Wölflin, Adolf Hildebrand, August Schmarsow and others. These writers relate kinaesthetic empathy to a sort of projection or transferral of the body in the apprehension of space and entities. For Vischer the meaning of empathy (einfühlung) is a direct fusion of representation with the form of the object, it is a transferral of our own body image, and of our soul, in the object's form. As he put it, our soul and body are united with what is perceived, apprehended.

The idea of kinaesthetic empathy was developed at times by these writers by placing the body within the picture. In a similar way to architecture, the picture is absorptive, immersive and given to temporal eye scanning. At other times it is developed from placing the body in front of the picture (as with sculpture), which is then apprehended instantaneously as an object. In both cases what is apprehended involves the body, its musculature and scale.

Already in this aesthetic the object of perception is considered for being interesting rather than for its beauty. Long before the emergence of the readymade there is a shift from Kantian taste to phenomenal factuality as a criterion for art.

In his theory of pure visuality Feidler uses the distinction Kant makes between subjective perception (that which is the determination of a feeling of pleasure or pain) and an objective perception that is the representation of a thing. Feidler states that art belongs to objective perception, the phenomenological approach developed into literalness and materiality through formalism and abstraction, through Surrealism and the historical avant-gardes, right into minimalism which is all about interactions between the body and objects. In this respect, the Marxist conception of the commodity and its materialist approach were also to become of central importance to artists from the early 20th century onwards.

The move aesthetics made toward phenomenology places the subject's body as essential in object-perception. For Vischer: "When I observe a stationary object, I can without difficulty place myself within its inner structure, at its center of gravity. I can think my way into it, mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it.” Wölflin is close to Vischer's idea when he writes: "Our own bodily organisation is the form through which we apprehend everything physical." In a similar way Schmarsow speaks of our subjective center as transferred to a surrogate center. They share the idea that in kinaesthetic empathy the body transfers its own measures of dynamism and scale and its own gravity axis to the apprehended object.

These theories had parallels in other fields. From the early 19th century there is a general awareness of the body as fundamental to perception, in philosophy, psychology and neuroscience, and to some extent in the motion studies of Marey and Muybridge.

Regarding the body being transferred to objects, we cannot help remembering that we were once animist believers in personified anthropomorphic beings. Objects would speak to us. To some extent they keep looking back at us beyond the Modern age. Objects, entities, have lost their personhood but each is left with a scale, an edge, a gravity axis and selfhood.

**FROM KINAESTHESIA TO NEUROSCIENCE**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the wake of Husserl's phenomenology introduces the concept of the body image (schéma corporel, image du corps) already used by neurologists and psychiatrists from early in the century. This borrowing has worked both ways; conversely neurologists have found inspiration in Merleau-Ponty's thinking even in an advanced stage in neuroscience, as recently for Alain Berthoz. In placing the kinaesthetic body at the center of the problem of perception and representation, Merleau
Ponty's investigations have opened a cross-disciplinary field in holding people's interest in philosophy, aesthetics, art history, neuroscience and film studies as well as in art practice. Theories in these domains stem separately from a similar problem and turn to each other for inspiration, but they all turn to the arts that which does what the theories say.

Embodiment theories have replaced those of empathy, but a central idea remains: “perception is simulated action”, as Berthoz put it. Sensory and motor processes are united. The neural network responsible for motor sensitivity is deeply buried and spreads throughout the whole musculature. The proprioceptive body somehow embodies the topographical exterior space of the senses.

From our corporal body, a virtual body, a body image, can be detached. While our actual eye is where our physical body is, it can also fly across space and time, disembodied, in light-time. Nevertheless, because of the inseparability of eye and body, the disembodied eye has to be at the same time a disembodied body. In our imagination, in dreams, in film and in simulated reality (which I will not call virtual [VR] in this context) we have our body with us. We are a flying body-and-eye, not just a flying eye.

Writing on film, Anne Rutherford says that it is not the “mind’s eye” that reaches out to grasp or grope the image or space before me — it is my embodied self locating, placing myself in the world which I am viewing. In simulated action, as in imagining or dreaming, what is simulated at the same time as our body-and-eye is an environment we reach into and with which we interact. What is simulated is not just an image but a physical contact with an environment.

Simulation of action not only takes place in imagining and dreaming (and to some extent overlaps real action) but also in perceived action. An emphatic transferral of the body image into observed action is shown in brain imaging. Perception as simulated action has been observed in what has been called mirror neurons. A subject’s action, watched being executed by someone else in real life or in film, or merely imagined, corresponds to the same regions of the brain being activated.

SEEING WITH

The cognitive process engaged in perception operates in a coupling between brain and environment. External features are bound with the human body in driving cognitive processes. Even the non-organic has a form of life in existing as self-organised material systems. In observing it intelligence operates in the world in an analogy with the way it operates in the mind. Thinking is adherent to the way things themselves are constructed and operate. Mind is meshed with the material world in tracking it. The removed image on the retina adheres to matter. Tracking is not simply recording: the activity of the mind consists in producing statistical inferences from previous recordings. It is a latent, virtual foresight that is validated or corrected in the tracking. In tracking, there is a pre-visibility that corresponds with what is observed or dismissed by it. There is a match between the a priori model and its modelling.

Despite James Gibson’s rejection of Bayesian inference there is a truth in his radical hypothesis that “Information [about our present environment] does not have to be stored in memory because it is always available.” André Leroi-Gourhan, observing the techniques used in producing primitive stone implements, places their origin not in consciousness but in an “operative syntax” in which the mind is coupled with the materials themselves. The first flint implements were born from a possibility of the material itself in its coupling with representation, in the coupling “silexcortex” (flint-cortex) coupling, not from any preliminary representation. These ideas were furthered by Gilbert Simondon and more recently by Bernard Stiegler though Derrida’s idea of grammatisation.

A dynamic conception of sense data allows for conceiving perception as a coupling with objective systems. Because theories of perception make their observations from frozen “sense data” even within the perception-action cycle, the invariance in which an object persists supposes a underlying substratum. But by associating the “sense data” with processual invariants and systemic assembling and chaining, and by adding a 4th dimension to the other three, process takes over.

There is a matching between matter and cognition, between the known and the knower, to the extent that they become entangled. There is also a coupling between the mind or the body and objects, implements and machines, an operative closure in which the subject exists as an assemblage (agencement, cyborg), as a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. In both cases the subject-centered approach to the world is challenged.

THE VIRTUAL AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

We first need to consider two distinct modes of apprehension: one directed at the environment which is immersive and the other directed at the object (having therefore an edge) which is frontal. Immersion and frontalness are
two ways of observing we constantly alternate. Until now I have discussed the geometrical, topographical space of sense perception. But object and environmental spaces can also be conceived beyond the geometrical space of the senses, as topological and no longer topographical, composed of co-existing elements that are not contiguous in space and not continuous in time, as aggregates for which the edge is no longer an outline and for which the model is the map and no longer the image.

Robert Smithson fractured the geometrical space of sculpture and site specificity by making aggregates of broken-up space-times. He got our body-and-eye flying while at the same time anchored in raw materials. In doing so his work refers more to the fragmented and recomposed space-time in film than to usual collage. His Spiral Jetty collages do not imitate film but work in a similar way to film. Levels are discontinuous but they introduce a kind of diegetic space, even though it is at the edge of collapsing into chaos.

An entity that is a topological aggregate has no outline but it has an edge, a boundary or, as we will see, an interface. As Smithson himself put it: “if it is art, it must have limits”. In the case of architecture the alternation between the two modes of apprehension, immersion and frontalness, is programmed within the construction. Hildebrant speaks of distant vision in which an object can be grasped as a whole and of close vision in which its instantaneous wholeness is broken up with the eye scanning along timelines.

Schmarsow develops a similar idea. Architecture can be apprehended from inside / or outside, it can be immersive / or frontal. Seen from inside, it extends beyond the visual field. Seen from outside, he notes the building’s similarities with the human body, its anthropomorphic character: gravitational balance, edges, a front and a back, a left-right outstretching symmetry...

Many other artefacts are, just as our bodies are, shaped in fronting the direction of time (maybe an animal in the radiating shape of a star lives in space and hardly in any time).

Environmental and immersive space is distributed around the subject’s axis, its space-time coordinates are distributed around the kinaesthetic body. It can be considered as the environmental space the subject is in or as the subject’s own subjective “Life Space” as with Kurt Lewin’s Hodological Space. Lewin’s space is assembled like a mosaic and extends beyond what is actually perceived, up to the limits of what a subject can remember or imagine. Deleuze found inspiration in this, in what he termed a topological or geographical unconscious. An unconscious which has mapping as a model and not archaeology, which is produced from routes rather than from roots. He describes Lewin’s topological space in which distances, paths and vectors are defined psychologically. It is a cognitive map, a map in which there are regions and boundaries, it is an environment of forces interacting with each other... A space defined as a multi-layered map, unconscious because unactual to consciousness.

The subconscious should first be defined as what could be conscious (actual) although it is not. It is the virtuality of memory and cognition. It is a space of simultaneity, the non-actual in which the actual belongs. This too was a problem taken up in 19th-century German thinking. There was an awareness that most of what is in our minds is subconscious: although it is “there” (though one still needs to ask “where, exactly?”) it is not actually present to our minds. Because it can neither be said to be “not there”, it must be in some way conscious although we are not aware of it. An earlier version of this view, explored in detail in phenomenology, was already put forward by Leibniz in his theory of petites perceptions, perceptions that were not “appercieved” in the sense of one being reflectively aware of having them.

A model for the subconscious can also be found in film. Through the overall timeline of the film narrative the diegesis builds up into a map of coexisting objects, facts, places, times and events. “Such coexistence of images has the effect of dispersing the punctual body (which is only at one place at a time) into a multiplicity of bodies inhabiting different temporal and spatial sites.” The diegetic space is made of simultaneous timelines running alongside one another in the multiple layers of narration. Once the diegetic space has built up, any fragment of the film is instantaneously set in that space. Each image contains virtually the whole film. The diegesis is the subconscious of each actual image, the non-actual within actual consciousness. Our brain is (in) the movie. The diegetic space of film, because of its fictional character, and remoteness from practical life, is in general possible rather than potential. Although, as I said earlier for the still image, it can be engaged in acting upon the material world insofar as it is active in modelling it.

The virtual as potential in subject-object couplings belongs to the material world. The concrete world in which our subconscious is embedded has its logic and objectivity. We have a material subconscious that shares its operative logic with the material world. Our subconscious always knows more than what we consciously know.
THE OBJECT AND OBJECT AGENCY

I would like now to retrieve some of the main points I have laid out here in order to talk of the object. Objects, entities depend on the way we cut up the world, as in George Brecht’s exercise: “Add to the object […] another object, to form a new object”. Any object can be broken up into other objects or become part of a larger object, it depends on how it is bracketed.

Entities have permanence and are endowed with an edge, a closure analogous to our own. They do not have personhood but each one is left with a scale, an edge, a gravity axis (balance and motion) and selfhood. They have a sort of anthropomorphic framework. Selfhood (although it is a mirror transposal of the subject’s self) does not suppose a founding interiority. As it should appear more clearly further, it is nothing but a conjunction of exterior relations in the here and now, a multifaceted interface and not a core that would be given prior to these relations.

Animism is subject-centred in the sense that it supposes personification. We are accustomed to the opposition between the primitive and the modern epistemes, but animism also has more mundane forms, as in the child animism studied by Jean Piaget. The child playing with its teddy bear and the cat with its ball are heartily animist, they are learning from objects that are alive. There is also a kind of animism in a man’s exasperated kick at a dysfunctional lawnmower.

As Piaget has explained, child animism is a process by which the intellect is formed. In play our egocentrism makes us as a master animator in a closed fictional world. Differently, collective animism in tribal societies is, like taboos and rituals, intimately bound up with an ongoing engagement with the environmental conditions of survival, it is largely pragmatic and down-to-earth, restricted to particular contexts. Animist cosmology is essentially practical. If the personified object demands respect, it does not demand fervour. As some anthropologists have noted, it calls for jokes rather than veneration. The sanctimonious may only concern the universal tendency to postpone adulthood when conditions allow for it: the sanctimonious in need of consecration?

In Capital he wrote: “In other words, the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things.”

Despite the Marxist views on industrial production, there has nevertheless been a growing industrial aesthetic that proceeds from the negation of the artefact’s material context. An aesthetic of disguise and mystification that calls upon a system of packaging, marketing, branding, advertisement, storytelling and mass media. But as Erich Fröm (Man for Himself) and Jean Baudrillard (Le Système des objets) have explained, the hero of the commodity fetish is the “I”. The fetish corresponds to a belief in the subject’s substantial and distinctive core. The substantialism of the object corresponds to the substantialism of the subject.

THE OBJECT IN THE CONTEXT OF ART AND LIFE

An object does not just exist in an environmental space, it is correlated with a context, relating to it in reciprocal or circular causality. Modes of correlation have been variously investigated in philosophy as relations (or relationships), interactions, implications (and explications), effects, powers (potentials), qualities or attributes, indexes, affordances, etc. There is no such thing as a sound beginning, but a practical framework can be set for approaching objects. What interests me is their empirical, performative and agential reality and, as we will see further, the possibility the art context offers in observing them.
Objects are engaged in practices as in Gibson's theory of affordances or, more recently, routine theory. What something is is also what it does and makes you do. Objects have lives of their own, they have agency as they interact with humans and other things, they have practical effects, unite or clash with one another, etc. An object is an actant or an operator (Bruno Latour). It has selfness but has no in-itselfness independently from its invariance in process and the context in which it exists and operates and is correlated with. Its context is the topological distribution of a selective mapping.

But the condition that enables the object's exterior relationships to be accounted for is the suspension (temporary abrogation) of its own internality. This is so for the simple reason that if you focus on its internal composition, your object has vanished, has broken up into other objects. As in Brecht's exercise it has become absorptive and immersive. Interactions between systems and interactions within a system belong to two different levels of observation. This way of positing the object — as static, atomic and instantaneous (all there at once) — is a method of investigation. Positing it in this way allows us to consider it as having its own life and agency.

Art, termed non-object or post-object, which is immersive and which negates the work's boundaries, does the opposite of suspending its own internality. Nevertheless, art's dissolution of borders (more often presupposed as outline rather than as edge) is a blurring not a doing away of edges. Despite the under-theorised externality of the work in art theory, art offers a particularly interesting context for the observation of the object's exterior relationships. Contextual art, by integrating segments of the context into the syntax of the work, has created the awareness we have today of the context. But because they are non-object oriented, it is not the works but mostly curatorial or institutional theory and practice that have been providing the best observatory.

The object is what makes possible a shift from first-order observation (focusing on the object) to second-order observation in which context and observer are included with the object. It is what makes it possible to account for the context in which it exists and for the practices involved in maintaining it in existence, to account for the particular context that correlates it in being viewed, displayed, installed or reconstructed, illuminated, titled, handled, restored, conserved, reproduced, contracted - in short, the ways in which it is maintained in the public space as being the thing it is.23

The context, in which an art object is made to exist publicly, is a distribution of a great variety of roles or functions, each relating from its own position and expertise to (what, by principle, is) a same thing. These practices correlate the object and are coordinated by it — in the sense they are relating to it as the thing it is — not only as occasional isolated actual facts but as systems. Because they are recursive, and what happened before is likely to happen again, they exist beyond their actuality, making a virtual context. Alongside the timeline of an actual interaction with an object there are innumerable other folded potential (virtual, inferential) timelines. While the object has no inherent reality, its border belongs to a scattered, heterogeneous context as a kind of multi-faceted interface.24 Virtualities can be unfolded in sequences into actuality (literally or imaginatively) but they are mostly enfolded in the virtual, as are the explications in the implicate order in David Bohm's theory. As he said: "At any given moment we feel the presence of all the past and also the anticipated future. It's all present and active."

Objects in general, artefacts as well as artworks, exist in a field, in a cloud of virtualities. As with Gibson's affordance theory, in which an object by what it can afford branches out in many directions, in which an object can afford many different possible uses and interact not only with humans but also with other things, or, like Marx's commodity, be engaged in circular causality, not only with usage but also with the industrial machine from/ with which it emerges. These are examples in which objects exist with a complex material diegesis.

It is in conjunction with a dynamic context that even a still object emerges. The artefact has no inherent or internal reality, independent from an external reality. Other than in the illusion of natural perception, it is never given prior to its external relations and independently from the context it belongs to. Beyond its apparent closure (selfhood) and fullness, it is embedded in physical relationships in which our bodies are engaged.

A SHARED MATERIAL SUBCONSCIOUS

The topology and dynamism of an object's context, of its range of interaction and agency, has a reality through the body's own measures of dynamism and scale and the transposition of its own gravity axis.

Our subconscious knows more than we consciously know. Virtual timelines can be unfolded in consciousness one at a time, but they exist virtually all at once, simultaneously, virtually unfolding the object as a map or an instantaneous event. The virtual is the non-actual, the sub-actual (inferred as being potentially [already] actual) in the actual, without which the actual would have no consistence. It is the fourth dimension that completes the
three others while being warded off in their phenomenal apprehension.

The virtualities of an entity are its sub-actuality or its subconscious, as it is ours. It is a subconscious shared by the subject and the object. The subconscious engages extensive cognitive, mnemonic and statistical processes. These operations within the object’s instantaneousness exist in light-time. But rather than conceiving this latent conscience as housed somewhere as representations in our head, we can conceive that its memory is inscribed in materials and in the logical unfoldings of the intelligible world, including those of inorganic matter.

The subconscious involves extensive live neuronal interconnectivity alongside neuronal activity in consciousness. In the observation of brain activity motion is needed for what is observed, in order to locate activity in the observer’s brain. But, if we could observe, unfolded in a brain scan, the innumerable enfolded timelines of a still object’s event, we would need to track them as a field or a cloud, matching expanses out there.

ECSTATIC AND DECENTRED SELVES

The object’s subconscious is a heterogeneous collective. An object is correlated with various social practices, with an objective inter-personal world in which we are no more than a position. As a film viewer, our body is dispersed into a multiplicity of bodies inhabiting different temporal and spatial sites.

Therefore it is not possible to speak of a generic subject or recipient of the object if this subject is in the world without the world being also in the subject. A materialist approach to consciousness and its subconscious can dispense with psychology and subjectivity.

This is not to exclude the singularity of subjective experience and taste from art. When artists say that everybody can see a work in their own way, they are right but they omit to say that such differences between one person and another are being determined relatively to sameness. Our taste for a work is also a standpoint, a position we take in an art world that includes others who do not have the same taste and position as we have. How could these positions differ from each other if it were not presupposed that there was something common they would differ from.23 Now we can answer the question of what this presupposed sameness the object’s phenomenon is. Its solidity and permanence is not due to any inherence or essence but to a homeostatic context of recursive systems (processual invariants), of collective and objective systems. It is established in that we share and partake in the same objective (not just inter-subjective) context the object is correlated with. Sameness does not lie in any phenomenal core or underlying substratum.

Aesthetics and phenomenology are centred on experience and consciousness, on actuality. Even though experience is a scatter of virtualities, consciousness and representation remain central. But there is the possibility for a reversal of the priority of the synthesis over the scatter. The object is then no longer a point of arrival but a point of departure in the unfoldings of a multi-layered map and in the acting out of a scattered event. Its actuality is the distributor of its virtualities rather than their synthesis. It is also the distributor as well as the coordinator of its collective, which calls for a redefinition of its generic subject.

What we have seen implies for both the subject and the object a body that extends its limits beyond the objective frames of visibility and presence. It has the effect of dispersing the punctual and self-possessed body into a multiplicity of bodies, timelines, operative couplings, etc., where there is no dividing line between the knower and the known, between subjectivity and processes of material reality.

Vischer’s statement in which he explains the analogy between the body’s structure and that of the observed object – “I wrap myself within its contours as in a garment”24 – could be reverted to the statement “I unwrap myself with the object into a scatter of timelines in a multi-layered map.” Or what I called its fourth dimension, the complex spatio-temporal and material breadth entities have in becoming.

This is the paradoxical situation we have arrived at in pushing further the tradition of a literalist art reflecting on the material conditions of its own existence. I believe that in addressing problems of plasticity, aesthetics and art theory can include theories of the work’s institutional and social context without simply being a sociology or anthropology of art.
NOTES

1 Adolf Hildebrand. “The Problem of Form in the Fine Arts (1893),” in Empathy, form, and space: problems in German aesthetics, 1873-1893 (Santa Monica, CA, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994).


3 I discuss this aspect of the image in “Documentary Images in Contemporary Art,” in Frameworkings, textes et conférences sur l’art et le musée 2003-2009 (Hôtel des Bains, 2010).

4 See Empathy, form, and space: problems in German aesthetics, 1873-1893 (Santa Monica, CA, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994).

5 Merging with phenomenology aesthetics extended the meaning of its concept from the philosophy of art to the theory of reception. John Dewey often used the word in the second sense.


7 Heinrich Wölfflin. “Prolegomena to a psychology of architecture (1886),” ibid.


9 The emphasis on the structural couplings of brain-body-world also constitutes the kernel of Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s program of embodied cognition, building on the classical phenomenological idea that cognitive subjects bring forth a world by means of the activity of their situated living bodies. Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).


12 An example is Smithson’s work Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey, 1968.

13 Kurt Lewin borrowed the concepts of the force field from physics and applied it with the concept valence to psychological life space. The valence gives a field or region its goal character. But my interest here is for the map it spreads out.


15 For Leibniz, the monad contains the entire objective universe whether as perceptions without consciousness or part of reflexive consciousness.


17 Cinema has the immersive character of architecture, but it cannot simply be called an object as a building can when seen from a distance. Nonetheless, this does not mean that it is not whole enough as a product to have an edge, to be correlated with an
JUST WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES THE SAME SO DIFFERENT?
In the book's two texts concepts of art "return" from the past, mostly from the founding narrative of contemporary art, but they are not taking us back to the past. The past that is recovered in our present is a measure of the distance that separates us from then.
The texts' central proposition operates through the bracketing of objects. Boundaries and interactions are asserted, but boundaries are not inherent properties of entities and entities have no inherent substance. A boundary is like a multifaceted interface at which a synthetic inside and a scattered outside meet, correlate and interact with one another.
By suspending its own internality an object allows itself to be examined through its external relations in the material context of art and institutional practices. Its customary literalness and self-reflexiveness are turned round into a working method for unfolding and investigating its own contextual complexity. What an artwork is is also what it does and makes us do. Through its agency, it engages a coordinated collective of people, practices and objects. Its event questions the boundaries of personhood and consciousness, and it decenters the anthropocentric as well as the generic spectator. Somewhere in between the academic's talk (what I am thinking) and the artist's talk (what I am doing) theoretical discourse can exemplify the representational as being routed in live performance and material externality. Theory and practice make a single loop this book is part of.