

Golden Memories - Interview with Sculptor Robert Morris – Interview
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W.J.T. MITCHELL TALKS WITH ROBERT MORRIS

I taped an interview with Robert Morris a few hours before the February opening of his current retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. We sat on the floor in the Tower Gallery, where some of his earliest objects were displayed--Slab, Frame, and Corner, all from the early '60s. Mercifully, most of this conversation turned out to be inaudible on the tape. Instead, we offer here an edited sequence of the faxed exchanges that occurred in the days just before and after the opening.

W.J.T. MITCHELL: Let's pretend this is your 15 minutes and I'll ask you some celebrity questions. How do you feel about your success? Has it been a burden? What's it like to be retrospected by one of the great institutions of Modern art--do you feel humble, proud, exploited, anxious? About what? What is your view of that venerable artistic institution known as Fame?

ROBERT MORRIS: What I like doing is making art, and sometimes writing about it. What I detest is "being an artist" insofar as it connects with the celebrity question. As to that "venerable institution known as Fame," isn't it just one of those answers we grasp at in the face of our inevitable deaths?

WJTM: I know you hate interviews, but please explain why. Why did you decide to let me interview you? What is an interview anyway? Could an interview be a work of art--an inter/view, inner/between scene/look? How shall we play this interview, you as Ignatz the Mouse and me as Offisah Pup?

RM: I hate interviews because, (a) if verbalizing about the work, I would rather write; (b) they're part of the being-an-artist game; (c) they're performances pretending to be conversations; and (d) I occasionally read the art magazines and can't help wondering if this interview will be as depressing as what I usually find. Why did I agree to this? Because sometimes I find it hard to say no. This interview might become an artwork if we worked on it long enough--revised, rewrote, added, subtracted, etc. I'd like to play it by generating material at this first go-round and seeing where it leads--defining it "unfinished" for a while, throwing it into the mode of writing. I'll do nearly anything to avoid talking about myself or the work--except talking with you about the many things you and I talk about when there's no media apparatus plaguing us, talks I think you know I value.

WJTM: What are the protocols of the interview? Can I ask about your failures, the work you no longer like, or think was wasted? Can I ask about other artists? Current artists?

Artists whose work you admire, or despise? What do you think of contemporary political art?

RM: The protocols should be mutually agreed upon. I don't generally segregate my efforts into successes and failures; sometimes things are abandoned, and once in a while they return in other forms, media, etc. I have little to say about other artists and I fail to keep up much with what's current. I have no thoughts on contemporary political art.

I admire any number of artists of the past; the only one I vaguely despise is Picasso. As to influence, Marcel Duchamp is obvious. Less obvious perhaps was my first wife, Simone Forti, who set the agenda for the Judson group--rule games, task performances, the use of objects to generate movement, the use of text in performance. Yves Klein was an early force for me in his use of the body to make marks, his strategy of performance as artmaking, his easy movement between a space of emptiness or monochrome unity and an emphasis on the body, his use of text and of the elements of air, fire, and water, and his rejection of the notion of art as media bound.

WJTM: How is "History" a factor in your art--i.e., world-historical events like the Cuban missile crisis or the Vietnam War, or eras like the cold war or the post-cold war period? Do you feel that your art indirectly narrates some historical sequence in American culture? What sorts of histories have you felt responsible to, and what sorts of art history? A related question: what about memory? Some of your pieces seem designed mainly to show the dissolution of memory, its dispersal into enigmatic fragments of a "whole" that was itself already an assemblage of fragments now forgotten. Do you want your images to be memorable? Do you want to be remembered as a creator of images? How do you want to be remembered, how historicized?

RM: I responded in my aRT to the moments that you mention; whether those responses add up to a narrative seems doubtful. I haven't felt responsible but in some cases responsive. I've been interested in memory and forgetting, fragments and wholes, theories and biographies, disasters and absurdities, and drawing but not dancing in the dark. As for memorable images, one I consider a total failure and mistake, the 1974 poster of myself with chains and a Nazi helmet, seems destined for a Guggenheim T-shirt.

What about memory? I can remember so many different reactions to various works, some of them varying wildly over the years. I could discuss this phenomenon in terms of theoretical notions about interpretation: how art permits relatively sustained periods of puzzlement and deferred responses--"delays"--in terms of "truth." But I want to open up the subject of memory as the subjectivity of memory, as the genealogy and/or etiology of certain feelings. (Wittgenstein: "On the other hand one might, perhaps, speak of a feeling 'Long, long ago,' for there is a tone, a gesture, which goes with certain narratives of past times.") And here we enter a tangled, murky zone where phantasy and images, desire and loss, and wit and guilt reside. Joseph Brodsky once said something to the effect that one of his strongest visual memories was of sitting on a wooden porch in Russia at the age of

five, looking out at a muddy road, and wearing green rubber boots: "Maybe I'm still there," he said.

Rather than discussing how some of my works have involved themselves with memory, I want to point to the texture of that involvement, to that density of feeling, to the simultaneous recovery and loss that memory delivers to us, that particular kind of death we never escape. And if there is this, there is also much in each individual's history that cannot be remembered directly but that shapes one's desires and one's character. "What about memory?" An expanded answer would examine how certain images in the work issue from memories both conscious and unconscious, and how these reveal and disguise, stand as metaphors that play out and play back. If all we ever do is move our bodies, as Donald Davidson has noted (Davidson allows such things as lying and standing fast as body movements), our current motions and their effects resonate to a past that is as compelling as it is irrecoverable. The drawing out of this side of memory as source and force in shaping particular works is not perhaps for me to try.

Some works might be looked at as strategies for forgetting. Some of the so-called "Anti Form" pieces of 1967-69 were capable of an indeterminate set of formal "moments" without any final configuration; they worked to "forget" their form. And that strategy itself is invariably "forgotten" as the works recede in time, for when others attempt to reinstall one of these works they invariably construct it from a photograph, as if the work had only that one possible shape. I myself succumbed to such loss of memory in installing some of these works in the Guggenheim retrospective, and went by the photo in hand. (Wittgenstein: "Does he know that it is memory because it is caused by something in the past? And how does he know what the past is?")

How is it possible to remember--sitting in the Guggenheim with you, next to Untitled (Wall/Floor Slab), in 1994--that moment when I put the last nail into that piece, the first time it was built, one cold winter night in 1963 in an unheated loft on Fulton Street? Should I remember to/for you the sense that before me stretched eight square feet of as negative a sculpture as it was possible to make? Such memory degenerates into nostalgia now. How should I remember for/to you the context of those days, a time some felt was one in which Nietzsche's sense of "tragic truth" was being replaced by the "desperate truth" of questioning values and premises? How should I remember to/for you a sense of how the world felt, how nailing together a slab of gray plywood resonated to impulses compounded of desperation, humor, speculation, anger, indifference, malice, doubt? How antique, how naive it seems now, when some have construed being homosexual as being avant-garde. (Wittgenstein: "Remembering has no experiential content--Surely this can be seen by introspection? Doesn't it show precisely that there is nothing there?")

Guggenheim retrospective: retrospection involves memory. Old works are borrowed, some I haven't seen for thirty years. Dusty artifacts. I cannot replace a missing screw without permission from the owner. The dust of language covers these works. Their identities give way to the balance of how this one looks against that in a given space. Interior decoration becomes the concern. Memory vanishes.

Memory reads off fragments seen out of context. I leave fragments that will be read out of context: it was an investigation, there were accidents; desire and fear, loss and memory, repetition and abandonment, theory, speculation, and doubt all accompanied the enterprise. These and the perpetual question, the whispered conundrum, that has followed me since childhood: why is there something instead of nothing? Over and over again the mark gathers itself as a kind of membrane over absence. Movements of the body, the only movements there are, mark this membrane. Again and again the approach to touch its surface, to press, to rub, to mark. What are inscribed there are the signs of passing. These fall away into fragments, runes that stand in for the body that moved. If we are beings obsessed with asserting and interpreting, moving and signing, there is something undeniably agonistic about the game. Memory is delay. Memory is a fragment. Memory is of the body that passed. Memory is the trace of a wave goodbye made with a slightly clenched fist. Memory is politics. Memory is a loss. Memory is hunger.

Do I feel that my art narrates "some historical sequence in American culture?" Does narrative retrieve the fragment? Does interpretation come in the form of narrative? Do our movements form a narrative? Shall we descend to some form of Kantian epistemology, some sort of empiricist assumption of a given, the narrative grid, intervening between mind and world? If Fredric Jameson does this, should we? Then, like Jameson, should we delight in the contradiction of privileging space over time, excusing ourselves by appealing to the zeitgeist? You have gone to some trouble to dismantle such drivel.

". . . Some historical sequence in American culture?" Me and American culture. Up from the working class. Maniac for work. Work ethic. Workmanlike in the beginning--make a slab, make a column. Straightforward. Work alone with simple tools. Only what the unaided body can achieve with inexpensive materials. Watch time--"Time is money," they said, or "Time is all you've got." How long does it take to make a walnut box 9 3/4 inches on a side?

"History": terra moto. A shuddering of earth and memory. "What sort of histories have you felt responsible to?" If this is being asked of the artmaking, the answer is: none. Whose history is to be called "History"? Once I said that every history was someone's propaganda. (But do I remember this correctly? In what context did I say it? Do I begin to lose a grip on my own "history"?) Does memory form a history? How is a narrative obtained from its fragments? How do we identify whose memories form a history? What about the incomprehensible that has happened in our time--do we now know, for example, the real history of Albania? Add that to all the other events that we can hardly bear to remember but can't succeed in forgetting. There are too many corpses to count.

Stalin once remarked that the death of one man was a tragedy, the death of a million a statistic. I once quoted Beckett's Watt: "I am of the little world not the big world." Don't we wish. I made a work in memory of Alan Buchsbaum, one of several friends who have died of AIDS. The work was not a response to the "history" of this plague, not a

historical response: the death of a single man, not the statistic. Pretending as hard as I can to be of the "little world."

"Do you want to be remembered as a creator of images?" My Schema M: at the apex of a triangle, the object; in the lower-left-hand corner, the self; in the third, lower-right-hand corner, the other. Following Davidson, language flows along the baseline between self and other. A second, inverted triangle above shares the object as its lower point; in the upper-left-hand corner, the text; in the upper-right corner, the image. In the lower triangle, it could be said that a philosophically realist version of the world is delivered by force of the antisubjectivist epistemology that flows along the baseline. Shall we, with a dotted, perhaps unconscious line, connect the other and the image at bottom and top on the right, and on the left, tie a social and symbolic line between self and text? (Continuing to play here, we could superimpose some shadowy third triangle, the Oedipal, at the appropriate register.)

As you pointed out when I first laid this diagram on you, all the corners can be permuted. But I leave it as it is, for now--even though the "image" corner wants to occupy the central point, causing a permutation of all the others. The image exerts pressure on the center, moves toward it out of its inertial mass, and will, eventually, migrate there. We know that in the future, image will triumph in its imperialistic conquest of the center. But for now: objects are what we make, images are what is done to us.

WJTM: The problem that initially brought us together was our mutual interest in the relation of art and language, visual experience and words. Shall we talk about this? This is where you get to interview me.

RM: I'm still interested in the old paragone, and still inspired by your work on the subject. I'm also interested in Davidson's work on language and radical interpretation. In his essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," Davidson looks at the interpretation of malapropisms and other misspoken expressions on the basis of "passing theories of meaning." Such passing theories supersede the "first meanings" with which the interpreter begins, for those meanings require a theory that is (a) systematic, (b) shared, and (c) prepared by conventions, while the interpretation of malapropisms involves us in a situation where interpreter and speaker do not share a language "governed by rules or conventions." The passing theories of meaning that come into play in such a situation are derived by "wit, luck and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar," and there is no "chance of regularizing, or teaching this process." Davidson concludes that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed." He seems to imply that we do not have an adequate concept of language--that as it now stands, "language" is another reification. Linguists and philosophers have not sufficiently taken account of the art necessary to communication.

Yet we are beings who have our passing theories of truth by which we understand one another, more or less. And we continuously make and interpret assertions, which are all

produced by moving the body--by moving our mouths, to disturb the air, or our hands, marking surfaces. The questions I would put to you would be along the following lines: (a) given our obsessive activity as assertive/interpretive beings, could we theorize that what separates "art" (the term is another reification) from the rest of things is a "delay," a holding back of closure in the formulation of a theory of truth, an allowance for the play of repression to emerge, via transforming phantasy, within and beside the task of interpretation? The esthetic does seem to involve (partly) intellectual puzzlements, contradiction and paradox received as pleasure rather than problems, together with somatic sensory pleasure--all bubbling up in the permissive space of the delay, during which theories of truth are held in abeyance. Here not only Eros but loss, pain, guilt, and Thanatos are tolerated as pleasures--as if for a brief moment the dualistic and contradictory economy of the unconscious were permitted acknowledgment and affirmation. (b) These reifications--art and text, poetry and philosophy, etc.--appear distinct and categorical only when seen from the point of view of medium. From the interpretive point of view, they appear as a continuum, mediated by the demands of the varying interpretive speeds that yield theories of truth (instantaneously in the case of everyday speech, delayed in that of literature or art). If we try to set them aside, could we arrive at a theory that would account for that slow passage of metaphor into truth, not to mention having knocked a few rough edges off the old paragone? WJTM: I'm intrigued by the idea that art might be thought of as a sanctioned "delay" in the insistence on truth--is this so far from the old saw "The poet nothing affirmeth," or from John Cage's deadpan insistence that he had nothing to say and was saying it? But a "delay" suggests resumption after an interval. Why not call it, rather, a cancelation of the demand for truth? Otherwise you'll have to tell me what happens to the artwork when the delay is over. Does it then pass from metaphor back into truth--i.e., into prose, philosophy, assertion, objecthood? Or are you thinking of some indeterminate delay, in which a metaphor (or a work of art) might become literal, closed, assertive within a theory of truth, but then, for unpredictable reasons--a new interpretation or historical context, perhaps--might enter a new delay? I also wonder whether it's possible to reformulate this relation more positively, not just as a delay in a theory of truth, but as a switch-over to some other picture of theory, in which truth, assertion, and interpretation would be minor issues. Would all of this only bring us back to Kant and "the esthetic"? Does it make sense to speak of "passing theories of beauty"?

Also, before we knocked the rough edges off the "old paragones" in favor of a "continuum" of more or less speedy "passing theories" of truth, I would want to know if this really would produce a dereification of media, a deessentializing of categories like "language" and "art." Or would it jettison a set of "rough," qualitative distinctions (painting, photography, performance, poetry, etc.) in favor of a "smooth," quantitative continuum between fast and slow interpretive speeds? This would worry me, if only because it would picture the whole situation as homogeneous, and as regulated by binaries. I like the messiness and "roughness" of the qualitative distinctions among genres and media. The paragone (or difference) between painting and poetry (Lessing's problem) is quite different from the paragone between painting and sculpture (your problem). You said that Klein was important to you because he rejected the notion of art

as media bound, but you didn't mean that he saw art as indifferent to or independent of media: he worked with the body and with materials, and that meant thinking about their rough histories, their traditional constructions and relationships. Your own I-Box, of 1962, is sometimes described as "mixed media" (wood, painted Sculptmetal, photograph), and one reason I love that piece is that it explores the rough edges between media so knowingly; it doesn't smooth them over. And it only pretends to arrive at "a theory of truth." What it really does is put theories of truth on hold, and replace them with a fort/da game for adults.

RM: I don't think truth, assertion, and interpretation are ever minor issues in art. What I'm trying to do is to rethink them along other lines than I have in the past. As for the "delay," it leaves all media as they are. Their differences are still in place, maybe even more available to the perception of each one's concrete separateness. Precisely one of the things I liked in Klein's work was his use of multiple media. His artistic identity wasn't bound by allegiance to one or another.

I-Box has been pretty good with its delay. A real knuckleball. But eventually it too will recede into accepted "truth," its complexity/simplicity duly noted, its historical moment recorded. Then, probably, it will be difficult to "see" it anymore.

WJTM: Whom do you imagine as the beholder of your work? To whom is it addressed? Say something about your disillusionment with public art. What is the (non-?) relation of your work to mass culture? Do you think any of your objects will ever be seen as "classics," hypercanonized like Las Meninas, the Mona Lisa, the Demoiselles d'Avignon, certain Pollocks?

RM: I don't imagine a beholder. Art is a social activity; communicating--exhibiting--is part of it. I make art out of the contingencies of my experience. The response of the other might or might not resonate to mine.

As others have pointed out, the making of public art has often been conflictual. On the one hand, the demand for some unique work, some expression of radical subjectivity on the artist's part; on the other, the demand for reinforcing community values. Difficult to negotiate the contradiction. In the last few years an entire industry has arisen called "Public Art," but this is a form of exterior decor, complicit with the most callow demands of the architect.

Mass culture: the Guggenheim is making a scarf with a "Labyrinth" drawing on it, as well as that T-shirt. That's two relationships to mass culture right there.

Classics? I restored a 1955 Porsche Speedster. Now that's a classic.

WJTM: What's your favorite color? Astrological sign? Do you use cosmetics?

RM: I thought once that gray was my favorite color. Aquarius. I don't use cosmetics, but ever since my daughter, at the age of five, asked "Daddy, why don't you buy some more white hair?," I've thought, longingly, of wearing a luxuriant wig.

WJTM: What difference would it make if the figure in I-Box was a woman? What about the role of sex and gender in your art? In your life?

RM: Maybe a woman would have to make another letter than an "I" with her body. Sex and sexuality have often shown up in the art; gender has been fairly straight, though I once wore a regal gown in one of Jill Johnston's '60s performances.

WJTM: What letter might be left for the female artist? O and S seem obvious candidates, but they display an obvious lexical lack. Do you have a photograph of yourself in that regal gown?

RM: I do not want to speak for women, or for what they might or might not want to do with their bodies. Perhaps an unprinted negative of R. M. curtsying in that regal gown lies buried somewhere in the archive of the late Peter Moore, tireless documentarian of marginal '60s performance art.

WJTM: Please explain the relationship between art and politics in 25 words or less. Do you feel that your art used to be more political, say in the '60s? How do you think the political conditions of art have changed during your career?

RM: If the essence of the political is the coercion of the other, by covert or overt means, to do one's will, then art always fails. (Twenty-five words exactly.) I was more political in the late '60s, but my art probably wasn't. During those years I was arrested with a classy crowd that included Dr. Spock and Noam Chomsky. I don't understand the phrase "political conditions of art."

WJTM: Darn, I was hoping you'd make sense of it for me. The Guggenheim is a notoriously problematic space for showing art. Your work is notoriously space-dependent; how do you feel it looks in Wright's building?

RM: I had dreaded the building, and was prepared to bate working in it. I thought the work would look terrible on the ramps without horizontal or plumb references. But when I got into the spaces, and began to feel them with my body, they felt good. Once I started installing I had no problem with Frank Lloyd Wright. I began to go down the ramps without lifting my feet--sort of skating along, with one hand sliding down the parapet. I would sit in smaller alcoves and look around at all the soft curves coming at me, or peer over the parapet and see all those curving walls below sweep into a tangent point just under me. I began to think of the place as the great "Ma" building, the great female space. I wondered what it would be like to lick the curve of the parapet wall all the way down. That I regarded the space as generous and female and that I had the privilege to put something in it is, I suppose, a rather specific gender response.

WJTM: Let's close where we started, with "fame"--but this time fame in the classical sense, as distinct from the modern celebrity of mass culture. Of course you're right that fame is one of the things we grasp at in the face of death. But for an artist (an artist not as some reified oracle, but as someone who wants to make art), is it "just one of those answers"? Don't answer this yet. I haven't got the question right.

RM: Fame. Here is an unanswering answer as an unanswerable question: What could I say about fame, since "Robert Morris" is somebody else?

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