

# HEIGHTENED PERCEPTION

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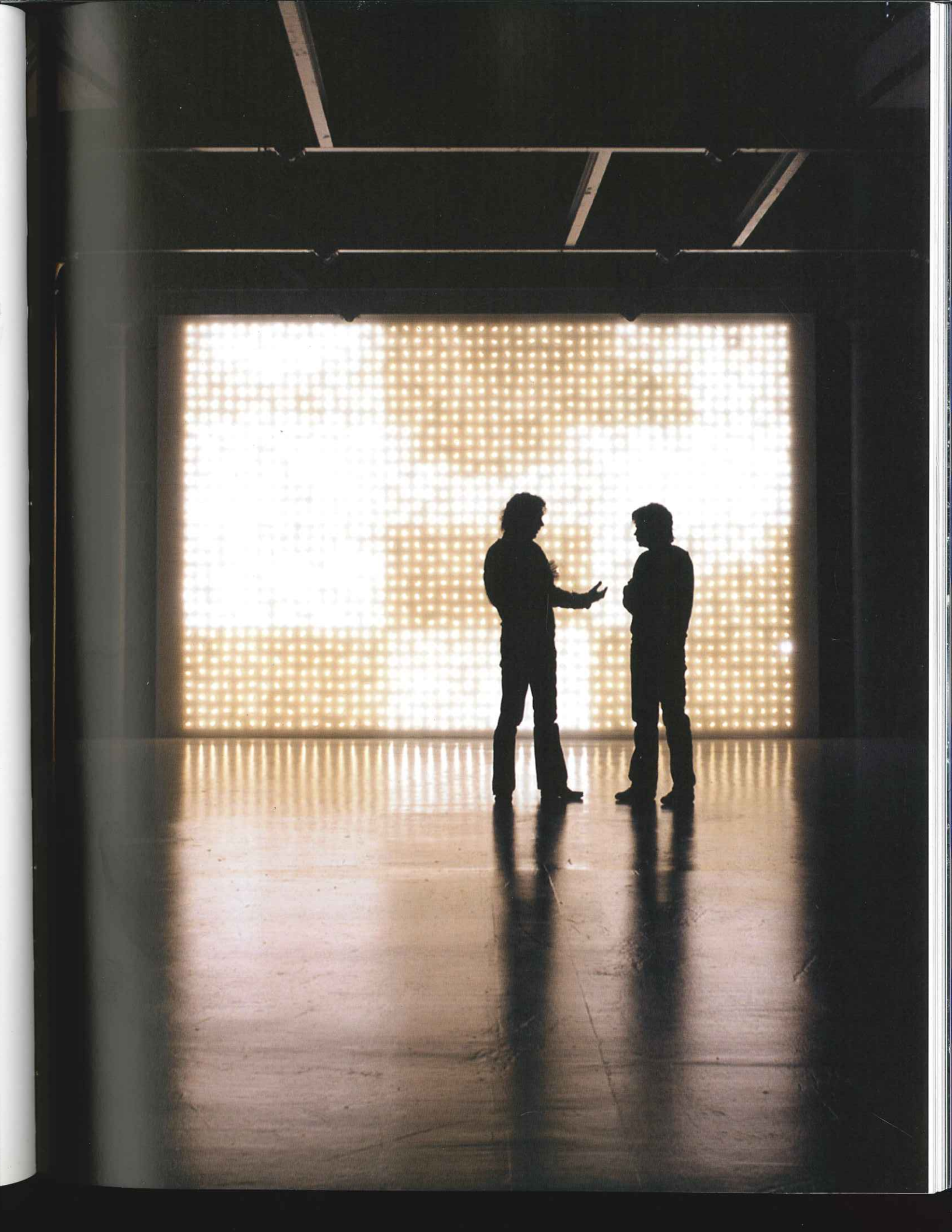
'Space is not there for the eye only: it is not a picture; one wants to live in it ... We reject space as a painted coffin for our living bodies.' El Lissitzky'

Carsten Höller's *Lichtwand* (Light Wall) 2000 comprises an intensely bright barrage of flashing lights whose harsh impact on the retina is almost intolerable for more than a few minutes. Several thousand lightbulbs flash incessantly at 7.8 hz – a frequency that is synchronous to that of brain activity and thereby capable of inducing visual hallucinations in the viewer. Entering this environment is unbearable for some people. The bulbs generate an oppressive heat, while the relentless lighting assaults not only the eye but also the ear, generating a sound pulse to equal the visual overstimulus that bears down upon us. It is a work designed to dislocate and disorient, but which also requires the presence of the viewer in order to generate its effect: Höller (b. 1961) describes *Lichtwand* and related pieces as 'machines or devices intended to synchronise with the visitors in order to produce something together with them. They are not objects that can be given a "meaning" of their own'.<sup>2</sup> The work is therefore incomplete without our direct participation.

Höller began to produce this type of work in the mid-1990s, harnessing the viewer's physical and mental engagement via machines and installations that provoke alterations of consciousness and cast the stability of our everyday perception into doubt. *Pealove Room* 1993 is a small space in which to make love under the influence of phenylethylamine (PEA) without touching the ground: it comprises two sex harnesses, a mattress, a phial and syringe containing PEA, the chemical produced by the body when in love. *Flying Machine* 1996 invites the viewer to be strapped into a harness and fly in circles above a room, able to control the speed but not the direction of his or her journey. Like Höller's *Slides*, adult-sized versions of the children's playground ride relocated inside a gallery, the *Flying Machine* induces a sense of bodily euphoria – what the artist calls 'a mixture of bliss and senselessness' that releases us from the gravitational certainty of daily life.

Höller has described himself as an 'orthopaedist who makes artificial limbs for parts of your body that you don't even know you've lost'. This comment highlights the feelings of bodily revelation and dislocation that can occur when interacting with his work. Perception is understood to be something mutable and slippery: not the function of a detached gaze upon the world from a centred consciousness, but integral to the entire body and nervous system, a function that can be wrong-footed at a moment's notice. Höller's art permits glimpses of the world from radically different perspectives – under the influence of drugs or a disorienting environment – and in this way aims to induce doubt about the very structure of what we take to be reality. Although at times the viewer may feel like a laboratory rat in this work, Höller aims less to prescribe a particular outcome or gather data (as in a scientific experiment) than to provide a playful arena for unique perceptual discoveries.

Carsten Höller  
*Lichtwand* 2000  
Collection: Museum für  
Moderne Kunst,  
Frankfurt

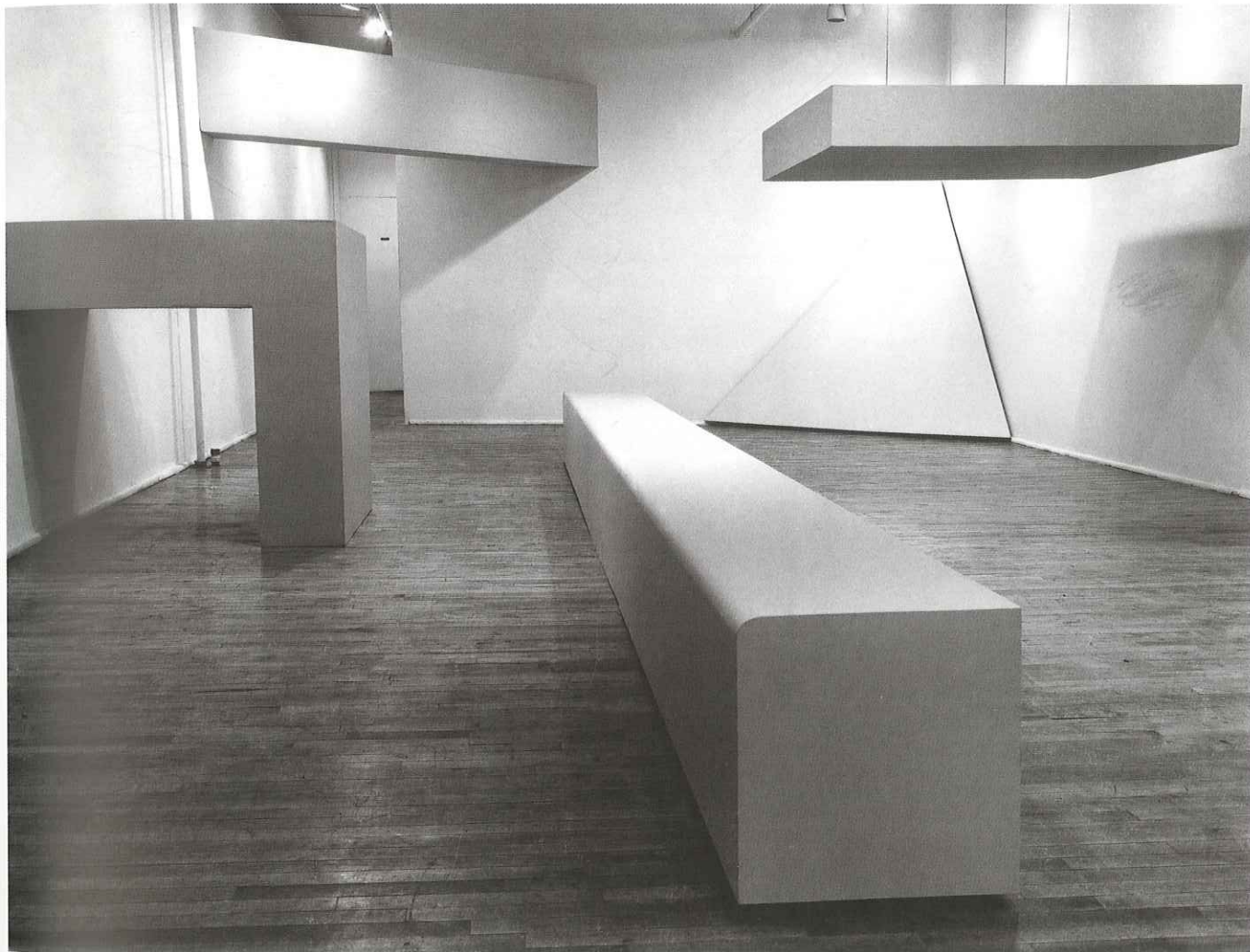


### Merleau-Ponty and Minimalism

The 1960s was the decade when this type of work first began to emerge. It is indebted to Minimalist sculpture, and to its theoretical reception by artists and critics in New York at this time, for whom the writings of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) were of decisive influence. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty addressed what he saw as a fundamental division in Western philosophy's understanding of the human subject. He argued that subject and object are not separate entities but are reciprocally intertwined and interdependent. One of the key claims of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is that 'the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity.'<sup>3</sup> The perceiving subject and the perceived object are therefore considered as 'two systems ... applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange'.<sup>4</sup> The second key claim of Merleau-Ponty is that perception is not simply a question of vision, but involves the whole body. The inter-relationship between myself and the world is a matter of embodied perception, because what I perceive is necessarily dependent on my being at any one moment physically present in a matrix of circumstances that determine how and what it is that I perceive: 'I do not see [space] according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me.'<sup>5</sup>

Although Merleau-Ponty wrote about art on several occasions, his focus was on painting as evidence of how the body is inscribed in its surroundings. His essays 'Cézanne's Doubt' (1945) and 'Eye and Mind' (1960) both turn to painting as a manifestation of the way in which we relate to the world in general. By contrast, if the artists discussed in this chapter use Merleau-Ponty's ideas, it is to illuminate our experience of a particular type of art: installation. For these artists, painting mediates the world, and does not allow the viewer to experience perception *first hand*. This chapter therefore deals with works that drastically change the way in which Merleau-Ponty himself exemplified his ideas with regard to artistic production. It is telling that this shift occurs in the early 1960s, when painting appeared to reach exhaustion. *The Phenomenology of Perception* was translated into English in 1962, and *The Primacy of Perception* in 1964; both were seized upon by artists and critics as a way in which to theorise the new aesthetic experience offered to the viewer by Minimalist sculpture. To begin this second genealogy of installation art, then, it is necessary to turn to Minimalism and its status as a crux between the tradition of sculpture and installation art.

Robert Morris's plywood polyhedrons, Donald Judd's Plexiglass boxes and Carl Andre's bricks are among the works that immediately come to mind when we think of Minimalist sculpture. The inert uneventfulness of these pieces, in which composition and internal relationships are stripped down to the simplest geometrical structure, often leads people to proclaim that Minimalism is



**Robert Morris**  
Installation view of  
exhibition at Green  
Gallery, New York,  
Dec 1964–Jan 1965



**Robert Morris**  
*Untitled (L-Beams)* 1965  
Collection: Whitney  
Museum of American  
Art, New York

inhuman, anti-expressive and therefore boring art. From photographs, one could be forgiven for agreeing, but in the flesh our encounter with the work is quite different. As we walk around a Minimalist sculpture, two phenomena are prompted. Firstly, the work heightens our awareness of the relationship between itself and the space in which it is shown – the proportions of the gallery, its height, width, colour and light; secondly, the work throws our attention back onto our process of perceiving it – the size and weight of our body as it circumnavigates the sculpture. These effects arise as a direct result of the work's *literalism* – that is, its literal (non-symbolic and non-expressive) use of materials – and its preference for reduced and simple forms, both of which prevent psychological absorption and redirect our attention to external considerations.

In his essay 'Notes on Sculpture 2' (1966), Robert Morris argues that one more factor determines the quality of our relationship to Minimalist objects: their size. Large works dwarf us, creating a public mode of interaction, while small works encourage privacy and intimacy. It is significant that most Minimalist sculptures, such as Tony Smith's 6ft cube *Die* 1964, fall between these two extremes and are human in scale. The critic Michael Fried, in his well-known indictment of Minimalist sculpture 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), argued that it was precisely this scale that gave such works 'a kind of *stage* presence', not unlike 'the silent presence of another *person*'. As such, Minimalist objects are inescapably 'in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder'.<sup>6</sup>

### Theatricality

Minimalism's call to the beholder threatened two of the paradigms that Fried, like many critics at that time, held dear: firstly, the autonomy of the art object (in other words, its self-sufficiency and independence from context) and secondly, the purity of each artistic medium. Fried argued that because Minimalist art shared its space and time with that of viewers (rather than transporting them to another 'world'), it was more akin to *theatre* than to sculpture. His argument hinges on the idea of temporality: rather than existing in a transcendent time and place (signalled by a plinth or frame), Minimalist sculpture responds to its environment. The experience of viewing it is therefore marked by 'duration' (like theatre), because it directly solicits the viewer's presence, unlike the transcendent 'instantaneousness' that Fried felt to be proper to the condition of beholding visual art. He used the term 'theatricality' to denote such unwanted cross-pollination between artistic disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

Minimalism was immensely controversial at the time of its appearance, and debate around it continued to rage throughout the 1960s. Merleau-Ponty was often invoked by Minimalism's supporters to explain the work's effect: Judd's sculptures, wrote Rosalind Krauss in 1966, were 'obviously meant as objects of perception, objects that are to be grasped in the experience of looking at them'.<sup>8</sup> Later, in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977) she argued that Robert Morris's

*Untitled (L-Beams)* 1965 demonstrated how perceptual experience precedes cognition: these three identical forms could each appear quite different, depending on the position of the work and of the viewer. Her argument is explicitly indebted to Merleau-Ponty: each L-beam takes on a different character according to the angle from which it is seen and a host of contingent factors such as the level of sunlight, the depth of shadows, and the varying intensities of colour even within the most neutral shade of grey. As Krauss explains:

no matter how clearly we might *understand* that the three Ls are identical (in structure and dimension), it is impossible to see them as the same ... the 'fact' of the objects' similarity belongs to a logic that exists *prior* to experience; because the moment of experience, or *in* experience, the Ls defeat the logic and are 'different'.<sup>9</sup>

By alluding to Merleau-Ponty, Krauss demonstrated that she understood Minimalism to have radical implications for the way in which art had hitherto been understood. By relocating the origin of an artwork's meaning away from the interior (the colour and composition as a metaphor for the artist's psyche – as in Abstract Expressionist painting), Minimalism proposed that art was no longer modelled 'on the privacy of psychological space'; instead, Krauss argued, it was structured 'on the public, conventional nature of what might be called cultural space'. By stressing the interdependence of work of art and viewer, Krauss showed that Minimalist work pointed towards a new model of the subject as 'decentred'.

As argued in the previous chapter, installation art's claim to destabilise the viewer is a recurrent theme from the 1970s onwards, and the idea also underpins Krauss's appreciation of Minimalism's importance. Intriguingly, it was not a Minimalist sculpture but Michael Heizer's epic earthwork *Double Negative* 1969 that she considered best exemplified this decentring tendency. Visitors to *Double Negative* – 240,000 tons of earth displaced from either side of a desert mesa in Nevada – could only ever have a partial view of this work because it existed in two halves, separated by a ravine. Krauss saw *Double Negative*'s elimination of a single viewing position as 'a metaphor for the self as it is known through its appearance to the other'. Her argument reflects the way in which Merleau-Ponty's ideas about the interdependency of subject and object came increasingly to acquire an ethical and political tenor in the years following 1968: the multi-perspectivalism implicit in installation art comes to be equated with an emancipatory liberal politics and an opposition to the 'psychological rigidity' of seeing things from one fixed point of view.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Minimalist environment**

Significantly, the artists associated with Minimalism did not consider their work to be installation art – or, as it would have been called at the time, an 'environment'. They acknowledged that the placement of the work in a gallery was important, but protested against the use of this term: 'That the space of the

room becomes of such importance does not mean that an environmental situation is being established,' wrote Morris. He immediately followed this statement, however, with the apparently contradictory view that 'the total space is hopefully altered in certain desired ways by the presence of the object'.<sup>11</sup>

Morris was not alone in expressing such reservations. Judd felt that the word 'environment' should denote one unified work, and concluded his review of Morris's 1965 Green Gallery show in characteristically prosaic fashion: the fact that the exhibition comprised several sculptures did not mean that it was an environment, because 'there are seven separate pieces. If Morris made an environment it would certainly be one thing.'<sup>12</sup> It would seem that for these artists, the word 'environment' evoked the assemblage-based works of Oldenburg and Kaprow, and the tableaux of Kienholz and Segal – art characterised by a symbolic and psychologistic *mise-en-scène*. Such pieces adopted precisely those aspects of the Abstract Expressionist legacy that Minimalism sought to eliminate: the narrative, the emotive, the organic. Indeed, anything remotely connected to the psychodramatic tendencies of the Happenings stood for the precise opposite of the Minimalists' literal 'what you see is what you see' aesthetic.<sup>13</sup>

Even so, critics were on the whole adamant that Minimalist exhibition installations forged a heightened awareness of space that was undeniably environmental. Reviewing Frank Stella's 1964 Castelli show alongside Judd's Green Gallery exhibition of the same year, Lucy Lippard noted how both bodies of work had affected their surroundings to such an extent that they had to be called environments:

There is a growing tendency, even in straight painting exhibitions, to surround the spectator, whose increased physical participation, or immediate sensorial reactions to the work of art, often operate at the expense of the more profound emotional involvements demanded by the New York school painting in the 50s... Don Judd was probably not planning an environment, yet his exhibition casts a definite collective spell which to some extent overshadows the individual pieces.<sup>14</sup>

As Lippard rightly notes, contemporary painting was also beginning to establish relationships with its place of exhibition: the bold, unmodulated colours of Frank Stella's hexagonal canvases at Castelli inevitably led the viewer to register the negative spaces between the paintings. The previously neutral background wall was activated, and the gallery walls gave the impression of a coherent, quasi-muralistic, whole. The syntax of these works became as important as the individual paintings, whose domain now seeped out to embrace the whole room.

To reflect this, 'installation shots' documenting an exhibition began to be reproduced in magazines, implying that the sum of the works *in situ* was more important than any single image of one object in the show. Such photographs recorded the negative space between individual works and the interplay amongst them, together with a host of contingent factors like the proportions of the room

Painting  
becomes  
environment



and the quality of light. The aesthetics of an exhibition's 'installation' and 'hang' were increasingly commented upon by critics, directly testifying to the way in which the new work shifted the viewer's attention away from the objects (be these paintings or sculptures) and onto their overall relationship to each other and to the space. In this respect, Robert Morris's 1964 exhibition at the Green Gallery, New York, is paradigmatic: the simple, block-like sculptures articulate and activate the room, creating an impression of a unified whole. (As a result the word 'installation', with its neutral overtones of the exhibition hang, increasingly gained currency as the 1960s progressed.

Yet, however panoramic, installation shots could not convey the viewer's experience of heightened bodily awareness when moving around the works. Morris was among the first to emphasise the importance of the viewer in understanding what was radically new about Minimalism:

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them *a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic.* 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.<sup>15</sup>

The viewer was now considered to be as essential to the work as the room in which it was installed, and the next generation of artists, on the West coast of the US, took up this challenge directly.

### **Light and Space**

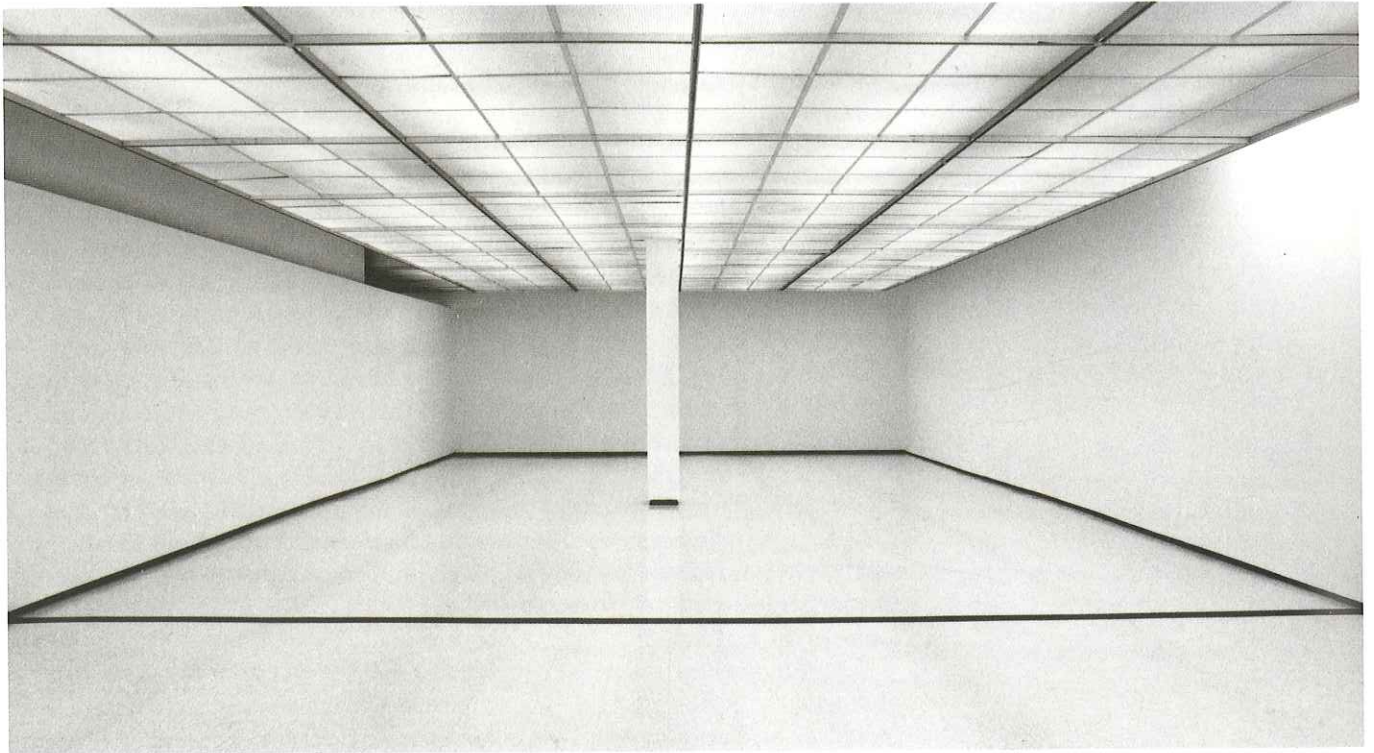
The West coast response to Minimalism focused less on the critical debates around objecthood than on the ephemeral character of the viewer's sensory experience. In many cases, this experience was staged within finely tuned spaces voided of all material objects – as seen in the work of Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Doug Wheeler, Bruce Nauman, Maria Nordman, Larry Bell and Michael Asher. The phrase 'light and space' was coined to characterise the predilection of these artists for empty interiors in which the viewer's perception of contingent sensory phenomena (sunlight, sound, temperature) became the content of the work. In photographic documentation, many of these works look disarmingly similar. From Bruce Nauman's *Acoustic Wall* 1971, to the MOMA installations by Michael Asher (*Untitled* 1969) and Robert Irwin (*Fractured Light – Partial Scrim – Ceiling – Eye – Level Wire* 1970–1), there is a tendency for each installation to resemble little more than a bleak, white, eventless space. To a degree this photographic similarity is unproblematic, since such installations intended to resist mediation and instead be experienced directly. Nevertheless, closer investigation of these works, and of the divergent criticism they attract, allows us to identify important differences between them.

The installations of Robert Irwin (b. 1928) are paradigmatic of this dematerialised response to phenomenological perception. They are governed by the idea of response to a site: what he calls *site-determined*, as opposed to site-dominant (work made in the studio without considering its destination), site-adjusted (work commissioned for a particular situation but relocatable) or site-specific (work that responds directly to a specific venue and which cannot be relocated).<sup>16</sup> Irwin's faith in the primacy of perceptual experience is evidenced whenever he discusses his installations made with 'scrim' of muslin that filter and reflect the light. He recalled standing in his 1970 project at New York MoMA, *Fractured Light - Partial Scrim - Ceiling - Eye - Level Wire*, when a fifteen-year-old boy entered the work, said 'wow' and 'spun around, sort of walked around in a revolving circle, turning as he went, just sort of really reaching and responding to it'.<sup>17</sup> Such a spontaneous response was, for Irwin, evidence of the primacy of embodied perception over intellection. As such, he considered his work to be democratically available to everyone. Describing *Black Line Volume* 1975, a single line of black tape installed on the gallery floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Irwin noted that four people who worked at the gallery asked whether he had built the structural pillar in the centre of this space. He regarded this as a great triumph since it indicated to what extent 'they were seeing this room for the first time'.<sup>18</sup>

For Irwin, such experiences demonstrated that *interpretative criticism* – like photographic documentation – was of limited value in relation to his work. Indeed, all mediation or explanation was doomed to failure: 'The idea of midwifing experience is absurd for this reason: the relationship between art and viewer is all first hand *now* experience, and there is no way that it can be carried to you through any kind of secondary system.'<sup>19</sup> To an extent this is true, at least as borne out in the writing on Irwin's practice, in which critics find little to observe beyond the fact that *the work makes you 'perceive yourself perceiving'*.

Irwin regards installation art as a way to 'free' the viewer's perceptual experience and allow the act of seeing itself to be felt. As might be anticipated, his writings make extensive reference to Merleau-Ponty, whose texts he studied throughout the 1970s. He considered the viewer's heightened consciousness and inclusion in the work to represent an ethical position ('by your individual participation in these situations, you may ... structure for yourself a "new state of real", but it is you that does it, not me, and the individual responsibility to reason your own world view is the root implication').<sup>20</sup> However, this 'responsibility' was far from the targeted political 'consciousness raising' of his contemporaries. Indeed, Irwin's ultimate aim seems to have been simply to open the visitor's eyes to the aesthetic potential of the everyday world as it already existed: 'if you asked me the sum total – what is your ambition? ... Basically it's just to make you a little more aware than you were the day before of how beautiful the world is ... The whole game is about attending and reasoning.'<sup>21</sup> For Irwin, perceptual

Participatory



**Robert Irwin**  
*Black Line Volume*  
Museum of  
Contemporary Art,  
Chicago, 1975

experience is unquestionable and absolute. The authenticity of our perception is what matters, and it is never considered that this experience might be socially and culturally predetermined. As such, his aestheticising approach could not be further removed from the rigorous interrogation of perception that was being undertaken at this time by several of his contemporaries, including Michael Asher (b.1943).

Asher's approach to installation art since the late 1960s has been allied to a critique of the political and economic role of exhibition venues. He is probably best known for his installation at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979, in which he removed a late eighteenth-century statue of George Washington by Jean-Antoine Houdon from the exterior of the building and replaced it in one of the museum's galleries of eighteenth-century art. Resituating the monument amongst other art of its period had the effect of immediately diminishing the political and historical rhetoric with which it was imbued when adorning the exterior of the Institute; Asher's gesture implied that art history could act as a neutralising cover for politics and ideology. The relocation of the statue demonstrated how objects are dependent on their context for meaning. Like Morris's three L-beams, Houdon's George Washington was perceived as different depending on where one stood in relation to it – but there was an important difference: in Asher's intervention the shift showed not merely the contingency of our perception, but also how objects acquire different meanings according to their context and the different discourses inhabiting them. Yet Asher's installations from the ten years preceding this work are – in the photo-documentation at least – almost indistinguishable from Irwin's: both artists present empty, white, uninhabited, apparently neutral architectural spaces.

In critical writing on Asher's earliest installations, perceptual phenomenology is down-played in favour of a more political enquiry into the work of art's ideological preconditions. But in his first appearance in a major exhibition, the Whitney Museum's *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* 1969, Asher produced work no more explicitly critical of the museum institution than most other dematerialised art of this time. His contribution to this exhibition – a 'sculpture' taking the form of a column of pressurised air – used one of the museum's existing passageways, eight feet in width, through which a planar body of air was siphoned. With low noise levels, minimum airstream velocity and a marginal location away from the main galleries, the work was imperceptible to the eye. Asher later rationalised the piece in terms of integrating peripheral phenomena into the institutional mainstream: 'In this work I was dealing with air as an elementary material of unlimited presence and availability, as opposed to visually determined elements. I intervened therefore to structure this material, given in the exhibition container itself, and to reintegrate it into the exhibition area.'<sup>22</sup> This uneasy use of phenomenological means for conceptual ends hints at some of the problems to be encountered by 1970s artists dealing with the legacy of Minimalism.

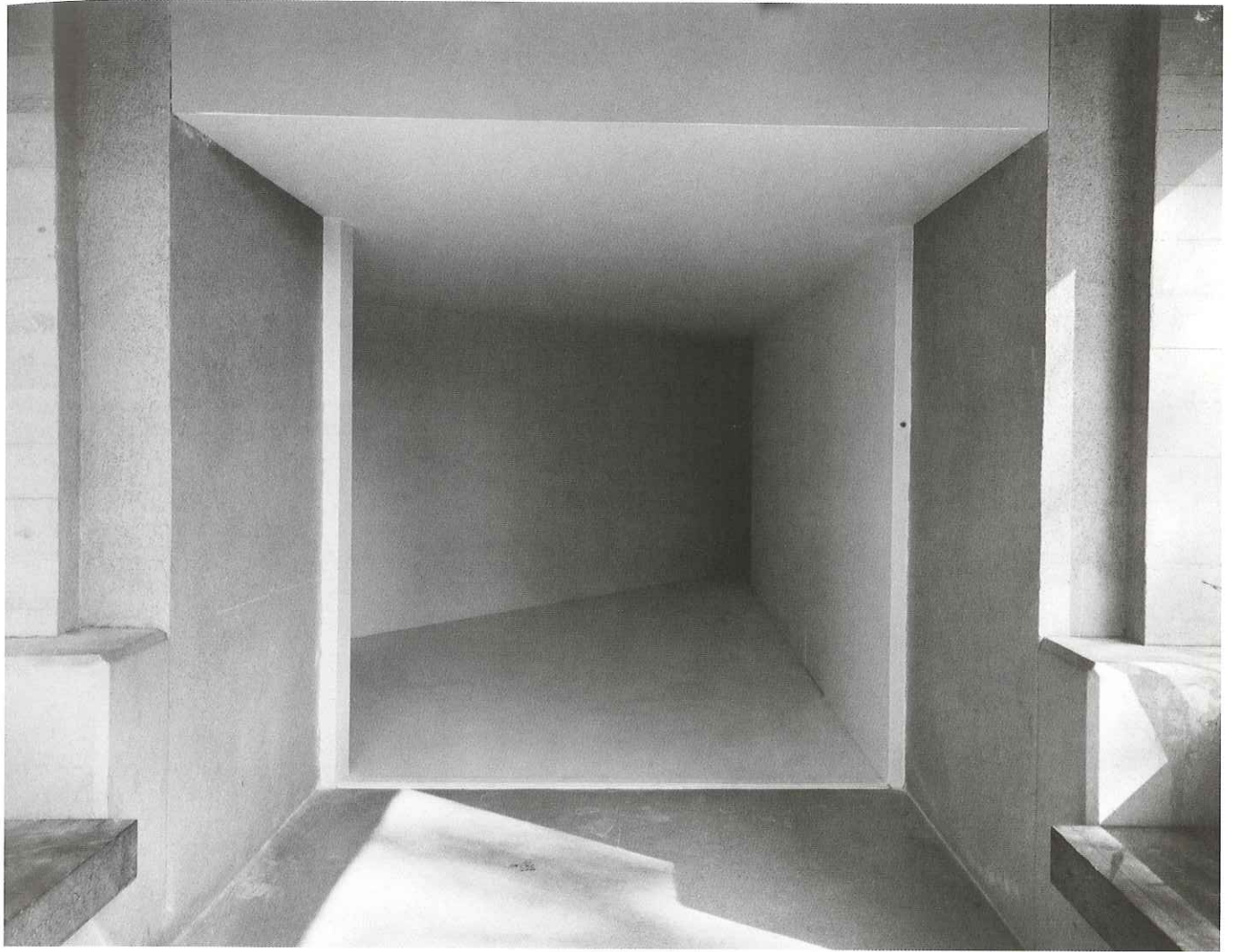
A similar confrontation between sensory immediacy and institutional critique is seen in Asher's 1970 installation at Pomona College, California. The photo-documentation of this work is once more deceptively similar to Irwin's installations in consisting of little but a series of empty, white, well-proportioned architectonic spaces. Asher removed the front door to make the entrance area a perfect cube, open day and night. He then split the gallery into two triangular spaces, linked by a short corridor, and lowered the ceiling to provide a uniform height throughout. The installation therefore comprised a series of clean and immaculately sealed spaces, while the drywall panels and sandbags of their construction could be seen from the gallery offices, entered by the public from a courtyard behind the gallery during working hours. Like Minimalist sculpture, Asher's installation focused attention on the viewer, and on how we receive and perceive any given space. Unlike Minimalism, it also showed how the white gallery space was not a timeless constant but subject to contingent flux: the installation was accessible day and night, so that 'exterior light, sound, and air became a permanent part of the exhibition'.<sup>23</sup> In Asher's description of the work, he becomes more critical as he proceeds: because the work was open to a multiplicity of viewing conditions, it was seen to undermine both the 'false neutrality of the [art] object' and its dependency on 'the false neutrality of the [architectural] container'.<sup>24</sup>

Later, Asher was at pains to distance these installations from 'phenomenologically determined works which attempted to fabricate a highly controlled area of visual perception', yet this was precisely how Asher's work was received when first exhibited.<sup>25</sup> Like the work of Irwin, Nordman, Bell and others, Asher's installations offered situations for the viewer to meditate on the contingent and contextual nature of their sensory perception in relation to their surroundings. His association of the phenomenological with the purely *visual* (rather than the embodied) is revealing: Merleau-Ponty's complex account of perception is reduced to opticality, and the politics of his phenomenology are ignored. Instead, Asher regards perception as a de-intellectualised sensory indulgence – in opposition to Merleau-Ponty, for whom it is precisely 'the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us', summoning us 'to the tasks of knowledge and action'.<sup>26</sup>

### **Vivências**

The reception of Merleau-Ponty in the US is markedly different from its application in Brazil, where phenomenology was introduced into the artistic context in the late 1940s by the art critic Mário Pedrosa. Pedrosa – along with the poet and theorist Ferreira Gullar – was a decisive influence on Concretism (the first wave of Brazilian abstract art) in the 1950s. The second wave of abstract art, Neo-Concretism, reacted to this Constructivist-inspired work by manipulating its abstract geometrical forms into environmental situations that surround and

Concretism



**Michael Asher**  
*Untitled installation*  
view from exterior,  
Gladys K. Montgomery Art  
Center at Pomona College,  
California, Feb–March 1970



**Hélio Oiticica**  
*Tropicália*  
Museu de Arte Moderna,  
Rio de Janeiro, 1967

directly engage the viewer. Lygia Clark (1920–88) produced multi-panel objects to be manipulated by the spectator; by the mid-1960s these took the form of softer, more malleable toys to prompt heightened sensory perception as a direct stimulus for psychological exploration. The work of Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) was more social and political in inclination, engaging with the architecture of the *favelas* (slums) and the communities that lived there. Oiticica's writings about viewer perception, interactivity, and lived experience (*vivências*) are therefore a crucial reference point not only for this chapter but for the history of installation art as a whole.

By the mid-1960s, Oiticica had developed a series of objects that were to form the building blocks of his later environments, the most important of which were the *Penetrables*. Initially produced in maquette form, the *Penetrables* used panels of colour to create temporary-looking architectural structures. The viewer was required to 'penetrate' the work physically, and it is telling that Oiticica's description of this anticipates the multi-perspectival theme reiterated by Western installation artists in the following decade: 'the structure of the work is only perceived after the complete moving disclosure of all its parts, hidden one from the other, it is impossible to see them all simultaneously'.<sup>27</sup> *Tropicália* 1967 was the first of these environments to be realised, and took the form of a closed labyrinth. It comprised a wooden structure curtained with cheap patterned materials, set amongst a 'tropical' scenario with plants, parrots and sand. Entering the structure, viewers walked over a sequence of different materials (loose sand, pebbles, carpet) and could play with different toys and tactile objects before arriving at the innermost space, which was dark and contained a television. For Oiticica, the underlying meaning of the work was not the 'tropicalist' imagery but the viewer's 'process of penetrating it'.<sup>28</sup> He compared the sensory experience of entering *Tropicália* to walking over the Rio hills and to the architecture of the slums, whose improvisational dwellings strongly appealed to him as formal influences, as did makeshift structures on construction sites and popular decorations in religious and carnival feasts.

Underpinning all of Oiticica's tactile and sensory environments was the desire to exceed the 'passive' experience of viewing two-dimensional works of art. Spectator participation, Oiticica wrote in 1967, was 'from the beginning opposed to pure transcendental contemplation'.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Europe and the US, where single-point perspective came to be regarded as analogous to an ideology of mastery (be this colonialist, patriarchal, or economic), the Brazilian emphasis on activated spectatorship was a question of existential urgency. A military dictatorship seized control of the country in 1964, and from 1968 onwards the government suspended constitutional rights, practised kidnapping and torture, and effected a brutal censorship of free expression. It is impossible to regard the drive towards interactivity and sensuous bodily perception in Brazilian art during the 1960s as other than a political and ethical exigency in the face of state repression.



The sensory fullness of *vivência* (total life-experience) in Oiticica's installations therefore came to focus on an idea of individual emancipation from oppressive governmental and authoritative forces.<sup>30</sup> Oiticica developed the term 'Supra-sensorial' to account for the emancipatory potential of this work which, it was hoped, could 'release the individual from his oppressive conditioning' since it was irreducible to consumer product or confinable by state forces:

This entire experience into which art flows, the issue of liberty itself, of the expansion of the individual's consciousness ... immediately provokes reactions from conformists of all kinds, since it (the experience) represents the liberation from those prejudices of social conditioning to which the individual is subject. The stance, then, is revolutionary.<sup>31</sup>

Oiticica argued that he could not have come to this new understanding of the relationship between work of art and audience without the development of the *Parangolés* (1964 onwards), capes and tents to be worn and (ideally) danced in, which he developed in collaboration with the Mangueira samba school. His experience of the samba, and of the Dionysian fusion of individual and environment that it provoked, was for him revelatory in rethinking the viewer's position within a 'cycle of participation', both a 'watcher' and 'wearer': 'My entire evolution, leading up to the formulation of the *Parangolé*, aims at this magical incorporation of the elements of the work as such, in the whole life-experience of the spectator, whom I now call "participator".<sup>32</sup> Like the *Penetrables*, the *Parangolés* were regarded as open-ended objects that did not enforce a particular reading or response, and as situations that permitted the participant to realise their own creative potential through a direct engagement with the world. That this engagement was effected through the intensity of sensory perception – to the point of hallucination – was of the highest importance.

Political censorship in Brazil increased after 1968 and resulted in an artistic diaspora: Lygia Clark relocated to Paris, while Oiticica moved to New York in 1970. Cildo Meireles likewise moved to New York at this time in order to avoid the cultural marginalisation that was taking place in Brazil. His work, as we have seen in Chapter One, is strongly marked by phenomenological interests, but its sensory impact always aspires to a more symbolic level (as in the use of the colour red in *Red Shift* or the smell of natural gas in *Volatile*). Merleau-Ponty's principle of embodied perception continues to be a prominent feature of contemporary Brazilian installation art: Ernesto Neto's engorged membranes of translucent fabric, held taut by bundles of aromatic spices, invite the viewer to relax inside their curved and sensuous forms, while Ana Maria Tavares employs urban architectural materials such as steel, glass and mirrors to create complex walkways. In *Labirinto* 2002, Tavares cut through several floors of a former textile factory in São Paulo to create a Piranesian series of spiral staircases and paths that offered the viewer different means of navigating the space, and radical new perspectives onto it.



**Ernesto Neto**  
*Walking in Venus Blue*  
*Cave*  
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,  
New York, 2001

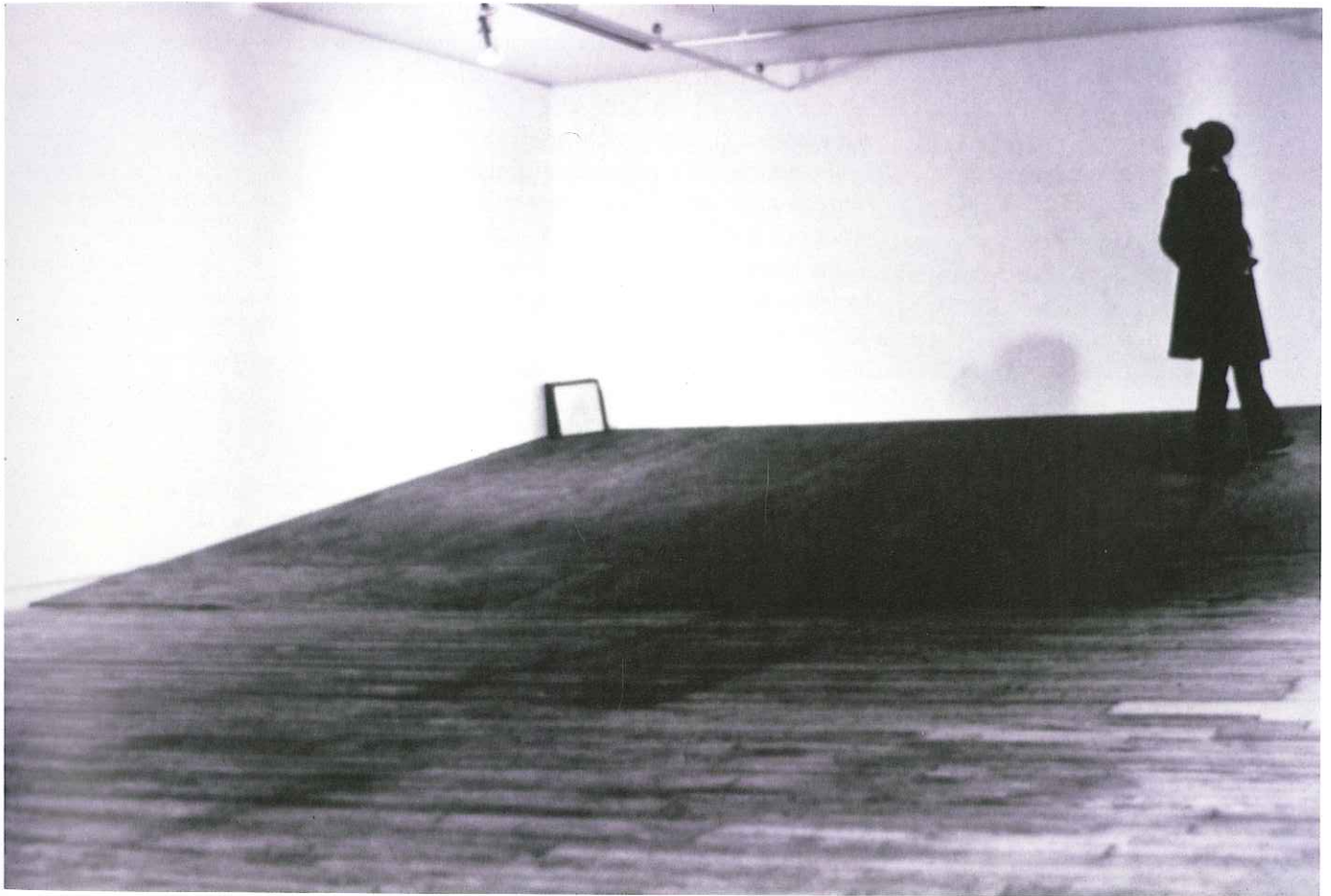
### Live installation

The approach to embodied perception by Brazilian artists is noticeably more sensuous than in the West, where it was used more strategically, and often to highly conceptual ends. By the 1970s in New York, Minimalist sculpture was the subject of extensive critique by the subsequent generation of artists, particularly those associated with performance art. The work of Vito Acconci (b.1940) is typical of the convergence of installation, performance and Conceptual art: from making performances staged outside the gallery (and shown as documentation), he moved to performing inside the gallery space, and then abandoning performance altogether in favour of showing residual props in installations where viewers are expected to perform for themselves. In this last move, the activated role of the viewer was seen as explicitly political in motivation: encouraging the viewer to interact with the installation was hoped to raise consciousness directly, and to produce an active relationship to society at large. As Acconci later said, 'I never wanted to be political; I wanted the work to *be* politics.'<sup>33</sup>

Acconci acknowledged that his early work 'came out of a context of feminism, and depended on that context', but it was equally an engagement with Minimalism, which was by 1970 the art norm. He recognised that Minimalism had initiated an important shift in the viewer's perception of gallery space: 'For the first time, I was forced to recognise an entire space, and the people in it ... Until Minimalism, I had been taught, or I taught myself, to look only within a frame; with Minimalism the frame broke, or at least stretched.'<sup>34</sup>

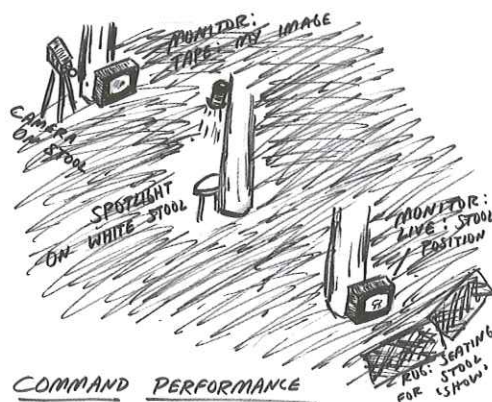
In his now legendary *Seedbed* 1972, Acconci presented an installation of clearly Minimalist lineage that was used as a masking device to conceal his body and to shift the focus onto the viewer. He performed *Seedbed* three times a week, for a duration of three weeks, in January 1972. The gallery was empty but for a ramp of raised floorboards at one end of the room, culminating on either side with a loudspeaker. Beneath the ramp Acconci lay masturbating, his amplified gravelly Brooklyn accent dominating the room and responding verbally and physically to the visitor's presence above. The self-consciousness that Fried found to be uncomfortably 'theatrical' in Minimalist sculpture became, in *Seedbed*, acutely intimate: every audible physical movement on the visitor's part triggered a flood of ambiguous verbal fantasy from the artist.<sup>35</sup> The visitor was implicated in the installation-performance, and this complicity was soldered by Acconci's suggestion that without the viewer, he would be unable to 'perform' successfully. It hardly needs saying that this eroticisation of phenomenological perception wrought a significant twist in the received understanding of these ideas. The viewer's experience of *Seedbed* could not be more different from the emotionally detached, self-reflexive stroll taken around the work of Morris or Judd.

*Seedbed* therefore seemed to be a critique of Minimalism, and of its viewing subject: although Minimalist sculpture foregrounded the viewer's perception



Vito Acconci  
*Seedbed*  
Sonnabend Gallery,  
New York, Jan 1972

Vito Acconci  
Sketch for *Command Performance*  
at 112 Greene Street,  
New York, Jan 1974



as embodied, this body was not gendered or sexual. *Seedbed* brought the visceral corporeality and sensationalism of the more explicit performance art by women (such as Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting* 1965, or Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* 1966–7) into a literalist and anti-expressive Minimalist installation. When Acconci compared himself to 'a worm under the floor' he hinted at the repressive clinicality of both Minimalism (with its emphasis on de-eroticised 'pure' perception) and the 'white cube' gallery space, in which baser actions, emotions and excretions had no place.<sup>36</sup>

By the mid-to-late 1970s, Acconci turned to making installations in which the audience was invited to 'act' and assume for themselves the role of performer. In his notes for *Command Performance* 1974, this summoning of the audience was explicit: 'to leave viewers room to move, on their own, the agent has to get out of the space (since, as long as he/she is there as "artist", other people can be there only as "viewers")'.<sup>37</sup> Made for 112 Greene Street, New York, *Command Performance* comprised a chair placed at the base of one of the columns bisecting the gallery. A closed-circuit television camera was trained upon the spotlight chair, filming whoever sat in it; in front of the chair was a monitor playing a tape of Acconci inciting the visitor to step into the limelight and 'perform' for him/herself. The camera linked the participants' image to a monitor positioned behind them at the entrance to the installation – and which they would have seen upon entering. Viewers became both passive observers and active participants in the piece, watching Acconci on video while bringing the work to completion by sitting in the chair and 'performing' for other visitors who enter the installation. For Acconci, this perceptual activation was expressly political in motivation:

much of the early work focused on instrumentality because at that time there was an illusion that the instrumentality of a person was important and it could lead to a revolution ... The viewer is sort of – you're in this position where you're pushed. You have been aimed at. Now that you're aimed at, though, you can potentially do something.<sup>38</sup>

Acconci's installations of the late 1970s, such as (*Where We Are Now ...*) 1976, *The People Machine* 1979, and *VD Lives/TV Must Die* 1978, all set up situations in which literal 'missiles' were suspended in rubber slingshots, aimed at visitors and the gallery architecture: if the viewer unhooked the swing of *The People Machine*, 'one swing after another will swing out window, catapult will be released, ball will be shot, flag will wave and fall into heap'.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, this potentially violent interaction was never actually realised. Acconci came to acknowledge that both the artist and the gallery situation would inevitably restrict what kind of gestures (if any) would be taken by the viewer.

#### **PheNaumanology**<sup>40</sup>

Acconci wanted to take a step back from performing 'so there could be room for other selves ... Remember, this was just after the late 60s, the time – the starting



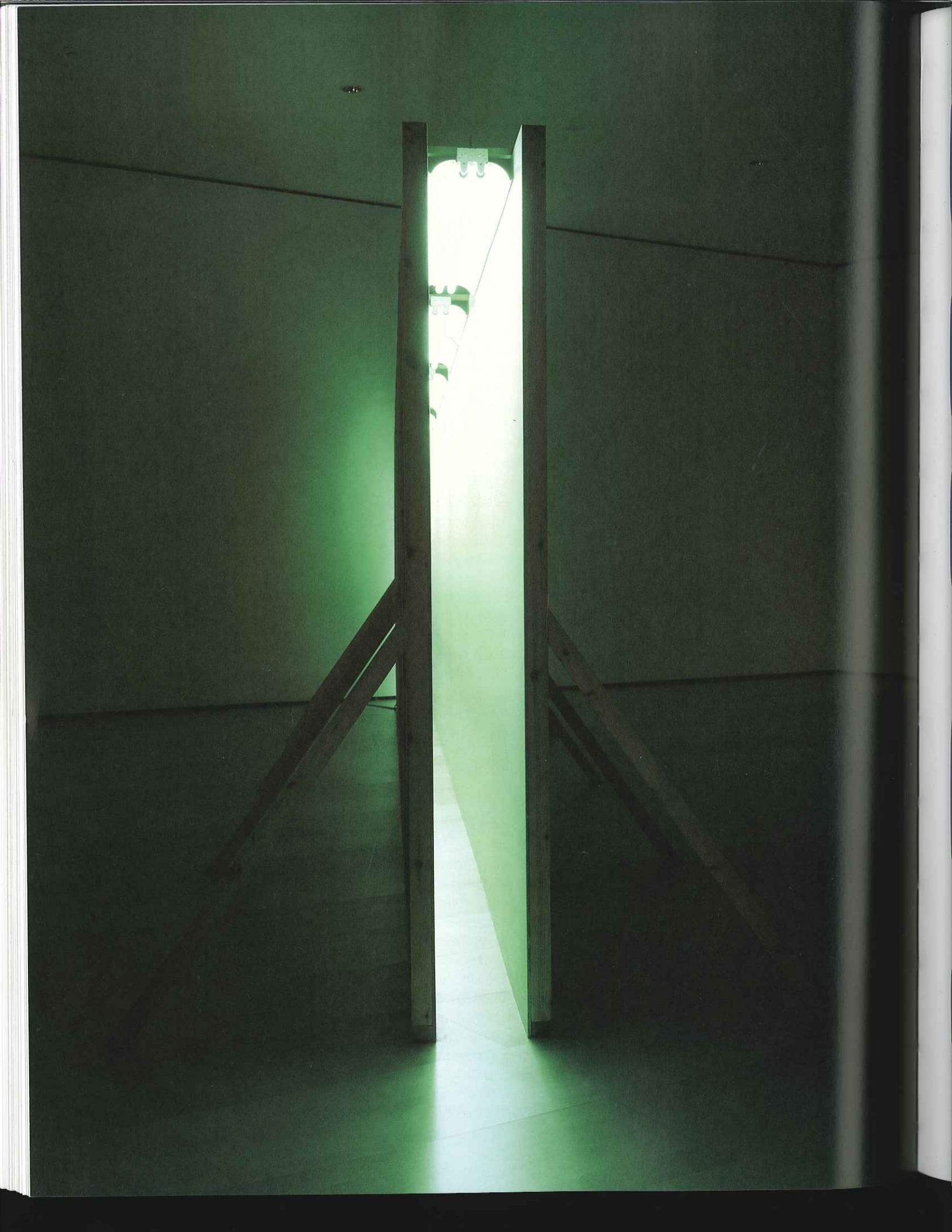
**Vito Acconci**  
*Command Performance*  
 112 Greene St, New York,  
 1974  
 Collection: San Francisco  
 Museum of Modern Art.  
 Accessions Committee  
 Fund: gift of Mrs. Robert  
 MacDonnell, Byron R.  
 Meyer, Modern Art Council,  
 Norman C. Stone and  
 National Endowment  
 of the Arts

time of gender other than male, race other than white, culture other than Western.<sup>41</sup> As the 1970s progressed, phenomenology came under attack for assuming the subject to be gender-neutral and therefore implicitly male. Feminists and left-wing theorists argued that the perceiving body was never an abstract entity but a nexus of social and cultural determinations. This type of thinking sought to 'decentre' further what was already (in Merleau-Ponty) a project of destabilising subjectivity. These arguments will be revisited at the end of this chapter. What follows next is a focus on the work of Bruce Nauman (b.1941) whose installations of the 1970s did not directly engage with such identity politics but instead proposed a type of 'difference' more akin to Merleau-Ponty: one in which perception itself is shown to be internally fractured and split. Nauman's influential output suggests that the body, rather than being a unified repository of sensory perceptions, is in fact in conflict with itself.

In Nauman's soundproofed *Acoustic Wall* 1970, one becomes aware of the fact that we perceive space with our ears as much as with our eyes: as one moves past the wall, auditory pressure increases and subtly affects one's balance. *Green Light Corridor* of 1970-1, by contrast, uses scale and colour to generate physical unease: the corridor is so narrow that it can only be entered sideways, while the oppressive green fluorescent light lingers on the retina and saturates one's after-vision with magenta upon leaving the space. Even with full knowledge of how these pieces work, they still prompt a certain level of anxiety: anticipation is wrong-footed by actual experience, and we feel perpetually at odds with the situation. The introduction of closed-circuit video technology allowed Nauman to develop these ideas, and to suggest that these moments of bodily confusion could disrupt the plenitude of self-reflexive perception proposed by Minimalist art.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, instant video feedback was widely used by artists, since it allowed them to watch the monitor (as if it were a mirror) while simultaneously performing for the camera. In an essay published in 1976, Rosalind Krauss argued that such work was narcissistic: because video could record and transmit at the same time, it 'centred' the artist's body between the parentheses of camera and monitor.<sup>42</sup> She went on to discuss works that exploit technical glitches and disruptions in feedback in order to criticise the medium of video. At the end of her essay she turned to video installation as a further example of the way in which artists might resist the easy seductions of video. She mentioned Nauman but trained the full weight of her argument on the work of Peter Campus. In his installations *mem* 1975 and *dor* 1975, Campus projects video feedback of the viewer onto the gallery wall from an oblique angle; rather than presenting a mirror-like image that we can master, he allows us to see only a fleeting, anamorphic glimpse of ourselves when exiting the room.

Nauman's works of the early 1970s set up a similar tension between the viewer's anticipated and actual experience:



They won't quite fit. That's what the piece is, that stuff that's not coming together ... My intention would be to set up [the situation], so that it is hard to resolve, so that you're always on the edge of one kind of way of relating to the space or another, and you're never quite allowed to do either.<sup>43</sup>

In *Live-Taped Video Corridor* 1970, two video monitors are installed at the far end of a long thin corridor; the top monitor is linked to a camera positioned high on the wall at the corridor's entrance; the lower monitor plays a pre-recorded tape of an empty corridor. As you walk into the work and advance towards the monitor, the image of your head and body (filmed from behind) becomes visible on the upper screen. The closer you get to the monitor, the smaller your image appears on screen, while the more you try to centre your image on screen, the further away from the monitor you are required to stand. At no point are you allowed to feel 'centred' and in control.<sup>44</sup> Nauman compared the viewer's experience of these works to the moment of 'stepping off a cliff or down into a hole':<sup>45</sup>

The feeling that I had about a lot of that work was of going up the stairs in the dark and either having an extra stair that you didn't expect or not having one that you thought was going to be there. That kind of misstep surprises you every time it happens. Even when you knew how those pieces were working, as the camera was always out in front of you ... they seemed to work every time. You couldn't avoid the sensation, which was very curious to me.<sup>46</sup>

Although clearly related to Minimalist sculpture in their literal use of materials, and in foregrounding the viewer's perception in time and space, Nauman's *Corridor* Installations also differ from these works. Rather than providing a plenitudinous experience of perception, Nauman fails to reassure us that we are a synthesised unity (and seems to relish our discomfort). The glitches and misrecognitions that take place in these corridors suggest that there might be a blind spot in perception that becomes apparent only when our looking is returned to us by a camera or a mirror.<sup>47</sup> We can therefore observe some subtle differences between Minimalist sculpture and the Postminimalist installations of Nauman. Krauss argued that Minimalism *decentres* the viewer, because we are no longer afforded a single position of mastery from which to survey the art object. However, we are only decentred in relation to the work, not in relation to our own perceptual apparatus, whose plenitude still guarantees that we are coherent and grounded subjects. By contrast, Nauman's installations demonstrate how easily perception can be prised apart and might be far more fragile and contingent than we allow. Merleau-Ponty describes this failure of perception in *The Visible and the Invisible*: it is impossible to be both subject and object, as the point of coincidence 'collapses at the moment of realisation'.<sup>48</sup> He describes this as a blind spot or *punctum caecum*, evidenced when we try and feel our left hand touching our right hand at the same time as feeling our right hand touching our left. Each limb has

**Bruce Nauman**  
*Green Light Corridor*  
1970–1  
Collection: Solomon R.  
Guggenheim Museum,  
New York, Panza  
Collection, Gift, 1992



its own tactile experience, and cannot be synthesised. Nauman's installations likewise point to the impossibility of our own organs of perception being immanent: I fail to coincide with myself.

### Dan Graham

Merleau-Ponty discusses the blind spot in chapter four of *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he also introduces the idea of the 'chiasm', a crossing over between ourselves and the world. It is well-known that Merleau-Ponty's idea of the blind spot derives from his reading of an essay by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' (1949). In this paper, Lacan argues that it is only when seeing itself in the mirror (or having its actions reflected by a parent) that the child realises that it is autonomous and independent entity in the world – rather than narcissistically co-extensive with it. Of course, for Lacan this independence is mere illusion: our sense of self (the ego) is just an imaginary construct, a defence against our internal sense of fragmentation. What is important in Lacan's essay is that the ego is structured as an effect of an external or reciprocal gaze: the world looking back at us. Lacan's theory came to be of great importance to a generation of film theorists and feminists in the early 1970s who focused on the question of perception as socially predetermined, indebted to the world that pre-exists our presence in it. In the installations of Dan Graham (b.1942) made in the 1970s, mirrors and video feedback are used to stage perceptual experiments for the viewer that demonstrate how our awareness of the world is dependent on interaction with others. Graham's work is therefore a crucial consideration for this type of installation art, since the status of the viewer preoccupies his thinking throughout this decade.<sup>49</sup>

Graham's installations and writing of the 1970s can be understood as attempts to address what he saw to be two problems in Minimalist and Postminimalist art of the 1960s. The first problem was that its emphasis on perceptual immediacy and the viewer's presence 'was detached from historical time': 'A premise of 1960s "Modernist" art was to present the present as immediacy – as pure phenomenological consciousness without the contamination of historical or other *a priori* meaning. The world could be experienced as pure presence, self-sufficient and without memory.'<sup>50</sup> For Graham this was suspect because it paralleled consumerist amnesia: the way in which the 'just-past' commodity is repressed in favour of the new. In contrast to perception as a series of disconnected presents, Graham wished to show 'the impossibility of locating a pure present tense'; the perceptual process, he argued, should instead be understood as a continuum spanning past, present and future.<sup>51</sup> His second criticism of 1960s art was its stress on the viewer as an isolated perceiver. He particularly objected to the solitary and 'meditative' nature of Light and Space installation art developed on the West Coast: 'when people in California were



**Dan Graham**  
*Public Space/*  
*Two Audiences* 1976  
 Collection:  
 Van AbbeMuseum,  
 Eindhoven

doing meditative spaces around the perceptive field of the single spectator ... I was more interested in what happened when spectators saw themselves looking at themselves or looking at other people.<sup>52</sup> Graham's installations of the 1970s therefore insist on the socialised and *public* premise of phenomenological perception. This interest, as already suggested, was partly informed by his reading of Lacan: the installations 'are always involved with the psychological aspect of your seeing your own gaze and other people gazing at you'.<sup>53</sup> Any experience of his work therefore aims to be 'a socialised experience of encountering yourself among others'.<sup>54</sup>

vs.  
 loss of  
 self

For Graham, the experience of being among other people forms a strong counter to the 'loss of self' that we experience in traditional works of art, specifically painting, which encourage us to escape from reality by identifying with the scene or objects represented: 'In this traditional, contemplative mode the observing subject not only loses awareness of his "self", but also consciousness of being part of a present, palpable, and specific social group, located in a specific time and social reality and occurring only within the architectural frame where the work is presented.'<sup>55</sup> The spartan, empty spaces of his own installations deliberately eschew the direct imagery of advertising and representational painting in favour of presenting the 'neutral' frames through which we usually experience these objects (the white walls of a gallery, or the windows of a shop). In the absence of an object, picture or product to look at, our perception is necessarily reflected back onto ourselves. Again, this approach continues the phenomenological concerns of Minimalism, but there is an important difference: although Graham's materials look 'neutral', for him they are socially and historically referential. Mirror and glass partitions, he writes, are often 'employed to control a person or a group's social reality':

Glass partitions in the customs area of many international airports are acoustically sealed, insulating legal residents of the country from those passengers arrived but not 'cleared'. Another example is the use of hermetically sealed glass in the maternity ward of some hospitals, designed to separate the observing father from his newly born child.<sup>56</sup>

Graham's writings on his installations therefore move beyond abstract theoretical issues of perceptual phenomenology and Lacanian models of vision in order to ground these theories in specific social and political situations: the shopping mall, the gallery, the office, the street, the suburban residence or urban park.<sup>57</sup>

Even so, Graham's installations appear somewhat stark and literal, harnessing the viewer's body in a manner more conceptual than sensuous. *Public Space/Two Audiences*, made for the Venice Biennale in 1976, comprises a 'white cube' gallery with a door at either end, bisected by a pane of sound-insulated glass. The far wall of the space is mirrored, while the other end is left white. Two systems of reflections are thus established – in the ghostly, semi-reflective glass divide, and in the mirrored wall – both of which offer the viewing subject a reflection of



**Dan Graham**  
*Present Continuous*  
*Past(s)* 1974  
Collection: Centre  
Georges Pompidou,  
Paris

him/herself in relation to the other viewers. Graham used his allocated space in the Italian pavilion in order to display 'the spectators, their gazes at themselves, their gazes at other spectators gazing at them'.<sup>58</sup> One's experience of the work is rather drab, if not pointless, without the presence of other viewers to 'activate' this network of returned glances and make one 'socially and psychologically more self-conscious' of oneself perceiving in relation to a group.<sup>59</sup> Other works achieved a similar effect in a less austere fashion, using video to explore the temporal aspects of perception that were absent in Minimalist sculpture. *Present Continuous Past(s)* and *Opposing Mirrors and Monitors on Time Delay*, both 1974, take the form of plain white gallery spaces in which mirrors, monitors and delayed video feedback encourage viewers to move around and collaborate with each other in order to activate a network of reciprocal and temporally deferred glances.

In Graham's *Cinema* proposal, 1981, the complex account of heightened bodily awareness that forms such a major theoretical component of his 1970s installations is applied onto a functional architectural structure: a cinema. In this model, the walls are constructed from two-way mirror and glass in order to make film-goers conscious of their bodily position and group identity. As might be imagined, the work is an explicit response to 1970s film theory. Paraphrasing Christian Metz's influential article 'The Imaginary Signifier' (1975), Graham argues that cinema-goers passively identify with the film apparatus (the point of view of the camera) and become 'semi-somnolent and semi-aware', disembodied viewers in 'a state of omniscient voyeuristic pleasure'.<sup>60</sup> Cinema audiences lose consciousness of their body, because they identify with the film as if it were a mirror: 'At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived; on the contrary, I am all perceiving.'<sup>61</sup>

It is against this disembodied perception and passive identification with the film apparatus that Graham's *Cinema* proposal is targeted. When the house lights are on, the audience sees itself reflected in the mirrored walls, while also being visible to passers-by outside; when the lights are down, the mirror becomes glass, allowing two-way visibility between inside and outside. This, says Graham, enables spectators both inside and outside the building to perceive more accurately their positions in the world. Once again, implicit in his account of this work is an idea of *decentring* the viewer, and the implication that this reveals the 'true' status of our condition as human subjects.

Graham's works of the 1980s are atypical, in that there is a sharp decline in 'phenomenological installations' during this decade. An interest in the perceiving body has nevertheless returned in contemporary art via video installation. Although this merits extensive discussion in its own right, it must briefly be noted how embodied perception has become a crucial consideration for artists like Susan Hiller, Jane and Louise Wilson, Doug Aitken and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, who work with multi-channel video projections. Although these video installations

feature highly seductive images that appeal strongly to imaginary identification, our psychological absorption in the work is often undercut by a heightened physical awareness of our body and its relation to other people in the room.<sup>62</sup>

### **The return of phenomenology**

As mentioned above, the main reason for the demise of interest in phenomenology after the 1970s was the rise of feminist and poststructuralist theory that showed how the supposedly neutral body of phenomenological perception was in fact subject to sexual, racial and economic differences.<sup>63</sup> The writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others placed the subject in crisis, dismantling Merleau-Ponty's assertion of the primacy of perception to reveal it as one more manifestation of the humanist subject. Yet in the 1990s, the 'phenomenological' type of installation art returned as an explicit point of reference for contemporary practitioners who now seek to incorporate identity politics and 'difference' into the perceptual agenda; these artists address time, memory and individual history in ways that are arguably truer to Merleau-Ponty's thinking than the reductive interpretation offered by Minimalism. As Merleau-Ponty observed, the self is not simply an embodied presence in the present tense, but a psychological entity that exists 'through confusion, narcissism ... a self, therefore, that is caught up in things, that has a front and a back, a past and a future'.<sup>64</sup>

The installations of Danish artist Olafur Eliasson (b.1967) are clearly indebted to the work of 'Light and Space' precursors of the late 1960s, as well as to Graham's perceptual experiments of the 1970s. Indeed, several of Eliasson's works appear to be remakes of key pieces from this decade: *Room for One Colour* and *360 degree room for all colours*, both 2002, for example, allude to Nauman's *Yellow Room (Triangular)* 1973 and *Green Light Corridor* 1970-1. This return to 1970s strategies arises partly from Eliasson's belief that the project of dematerialisation begun during this decade is still urgent and necessary (since the 1980s saw only a return to objects inundating the art market) and partly from his conviction that chronological distance permits a more nuanced rereading of this work, particularly with regard to its understanding of the viewer. Rather than presupposing a 'neutral' and therefore universal subject, Eliasson considers his work to be a 'self-portrait of the spectator'.<sup>65</sup> His emphasis on the non-prescriptive individuality of our responses is seen in his titles, which often address the viewer directly: *Your intuitive surroundings versus your surrounded intuition* 2000; *Your natural denudation inverted* 1999; *Your windless arrangement* 1997. The 'you' implies the priority (and uniqueness) of your individual experience – in contrast to Eliasson's precursors, for whom a particular type of embodied viewer (and experiential response) was pre-empted.

Eliasson is best known for harnessing 'natural' materials (water, air, earth, ice, light) into spectacular but low-tech installations that deliberately reveal their staging; in *Beauty* 1993, a perforated hose sprinkles down tiny drops, creating a liquid curtain, while a lamp beams light onto the water to produce a rainbow.

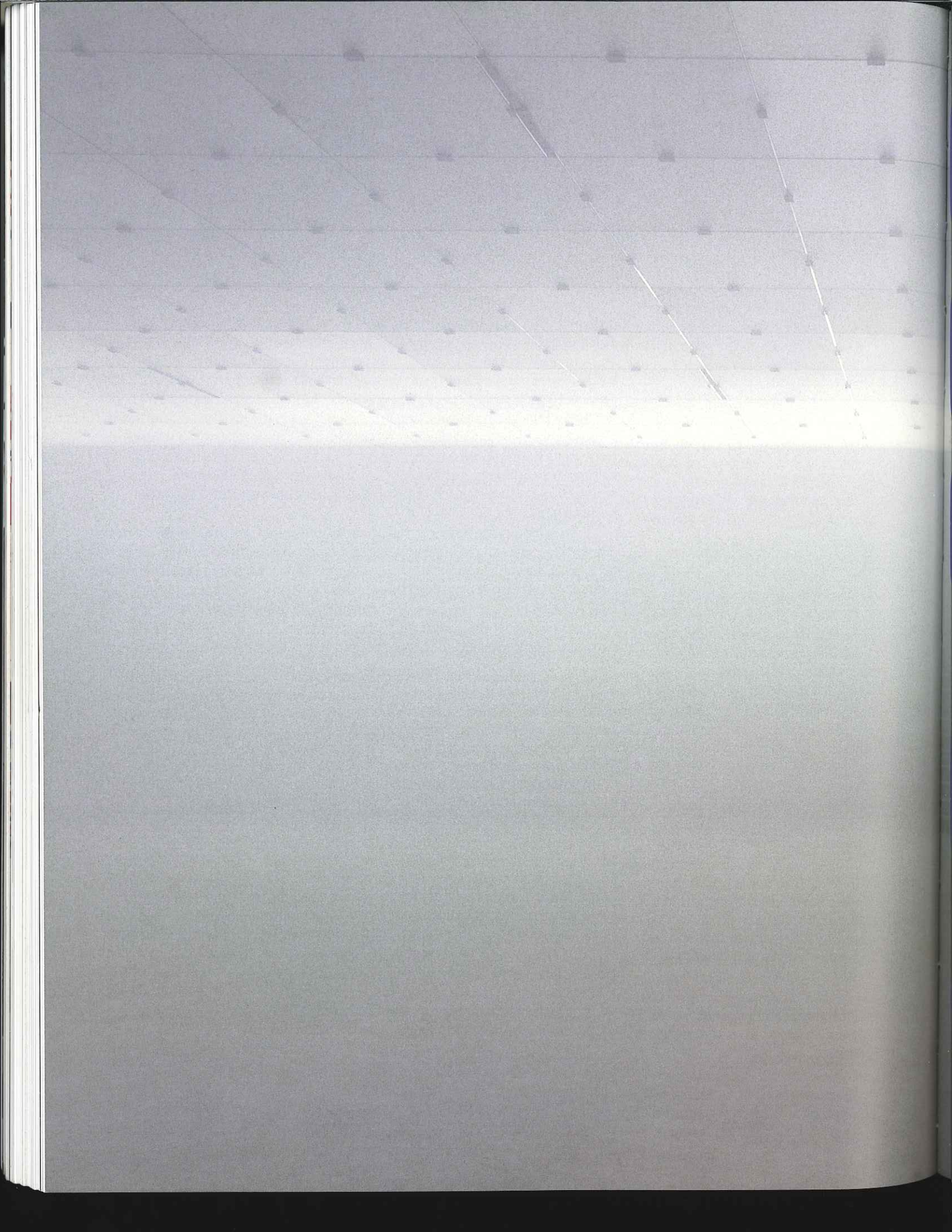
In *Your intuitive surroundings versus your surrounded intuition* 2000, the effect of a changing sky as clouds pass over the sun is recreated through electronic dimmers on an irregular schedule – but the lights are not concealed, and the mechanism is laid bare for us to see. Eliasson makes a point about our perception of nature today (as something we more frequently experience through mediation than first-hand), but the fact that such a point about mediation is made through installation art (a medium that insists on immediacy) is paradoxical. This is reflected in visitors' response to his work: during *The Weather Project* 2003, a vast installation that suffused the turbine hall of Tate Modern in hazy and acrid yellow light, it was curious to see visitors stretched out on the floor bathing beneath Eliasson's artificial sun.

Eliasson maintains, however, that the allusions to 'nature' in his work are not designed to form any environmentalist critique; rather, nature comes to stand for what is 'natural', in the broadest ideological sense of something that is taken for granted. Despite the sensuous and spectacular appearance of Eliasson's work, he is keen to assert that it is also a form of institutional critique. Significantly, this critique is no longer directed at the literal physicality of the white cube or the authority it symbolises (Asher, Graham), but at its 'natural' presentation of objects:

I think that the museum, historical or not, much too often is exactly like *The Truman Show*. The spectator is tricked and neglected with regards to the museum's failure to carry out or enforce its responsibility by means of the way it discloses its ideology of presentation. Or to put it more straight: most institutions forget to let the spectators see themselves seeing.<sup>66</sup>

Providing an experience of heightened consciousness, not only of the work but also of our position in relation to the institution, is regarded by Eliasson as a moral and social responsibility (just as it was for his *Light and Space* predecessors). Unlike business, which offers experiences for profit, art institutions should, he argues, 'unveil the politics of experiential conditions ... [so] they do not submit to commodifying our senses using the same manipulative techniques as elsewhere'. In Eliasson's ambitious series of installations for Kunsthau Bregenz in 2001, *The Mediated Motion*, he presented a different sensorial 'landscape' or environment on each of the museum's four storeys: a floor of mushrooms, a watery plane covered with duckweed traversed by a wooden deck, a platform of sloping packed earth, a rope bridge hanging across a foggy room. The uneven floor of earth, for example, affected the visitor's balance (rather in the style of Nauman's *Acoustic Wall*), and this physical destabilisation sought – by extension – to raise doubts about the museum's authority 'naturally' encoded in this space.

It could be argued that in such installations, Eliasson does little more than spectacularly alter the gallery space: the critique operates on so refined and metaphorical a level that its relationship to our experience of the installation is hard to fathom. This dehiscence was particularly evident in *The Weather Project*, where institutional analysis was confined to the catalogue: a series of interviews







vs.  
Anti-institutional  
Structuralist

with Tate staff sought to render the museum's *modus operandi* more transparent. It is important, however, that Eliasson's call for change is not directed at external considerations (such as the museum's infrastructure), but at 'the way we see and locate ourselves in relation to that external *materia*'. This point underlies an important difference between his work and that of his 1970s forbears: rather than seeking to overturn the system by addressing its structure, Eliasson wishes to change our *perception* of that system, beginning from the individual, since 'changing a basic viewpoint necessarily must mean that everything else changes perspective accordingly'. Like many of his contemporaries (such as Carsten Höller), Eliasson has 'a renewed belief in the potential of the subjective position'. This marks a major shift away from the anti-humanist and 'structuralist' thinking of previous institutional critique, such as that of Buren and Asher. By returning to the subjective moment of perception, Eliasson aims less to activate viewers than to produce in them a critical attitude.

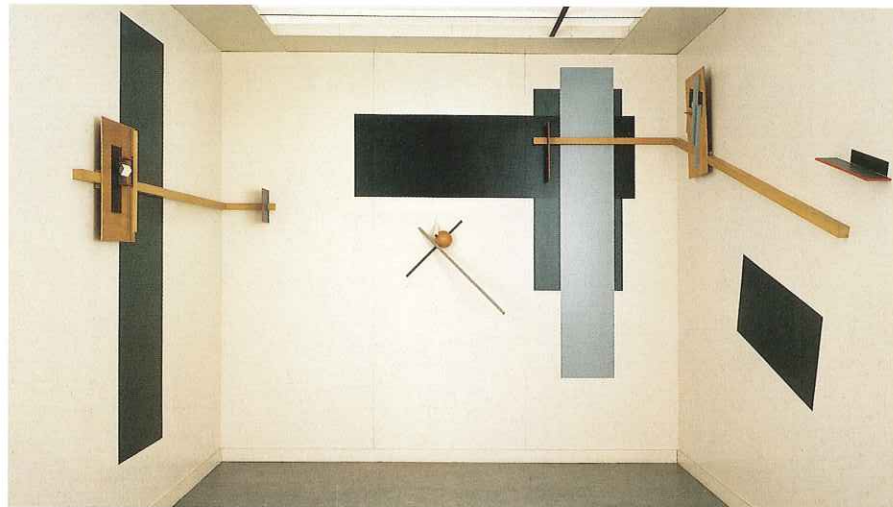
Emerging here, then, is a reiteration of the concerns already unfurling in the previous chapter: an increasing interest in directly implicating and activating the viewer as a direct counterpoint to the pacifying effects of mass-media entertainment, and in disorientation and decentering. Both of these point to an overriding insistence on the viewer's first-hand experience, since neither operation (activation nor decentering) can conceivably take place through a mediated experience of the work in photographs, magazines, videos or slides. In this way, installation art implies that it reveals the 'true' nature of what it means to be a human in the world – as opposed to the 'false' and illusory subject position produced by our experience of painting, film or television. But this idea is not simply the preserve of post-1960s art. Although Minimalist exhibition installation is crucial to the development of installation art as a whole, an important precursor for its literalist, non-symbolic use of materials is found in the writing and exhibition spaces of El Lissitzky (1890–1941).

At the 1923 Berlin Art Exhibition, El Lissitzky was allocated a small gallery space to himself, but did not use it for a conventional exhibition of his drawings on paper. Instead, since all six surfaces of the room – ceiling, floor and four walls – could potentially be part of the exhibition, he integrated these architectural elements into a unified display. Attaching coloured relief forms to the walls, Lissitzky drew visitors into the space and encouraged their dynamic movement around it through a predetermined sequence of visual events.<sup>67</sup> The emphasis on movement was deliberate: pondering the nature of exhibition installation, Lissitzky noted that 'space has to be organised in such a way as to impel everyone automatically to perambulate in it'.<sup>68</sup> He understood the need to keep people flowing around the rooms to be the practical imperative behind any given exhibition. In his essay 'Proun Space', written to accompany the 1923 room, Lissitzky argues – in terms that anticipate Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied vision – for a new conception of three-dimensional space. Lissitzky posits space

**El Lissitzky**

*Proun Room* 1923  
(reconstructed 1965)

Collection:  
Van Abbemuseum,  
Eindhoven



as 'that which is not looked at through a keyhole' but which instead surrounds the viewer. Rejecting the Renaissance 'cone of perspective', which fixes the viewer in a single vantage position, Lissitzky argues that 'space does not exist for the eye only: it is not a picture; *one wants to live in it*'.<sup>69</sup> For Lissitzky, the wall as neutral support should itself be mobilised as a vital component in the composition: 'We reject space as a painted coffin for our living bodies.'<sup>70</sup>

Lissitzky's equation of decorative walls and death prefigures innumerable avant-garde gestures against the sterility of white galleries. However, it is important to recognise that – unlike later artists – he is not targeting the ideology of institutional space; instead he is seeking a practical, utilitarian revision of conventional perspective, so that space becomes not a pictorial abstraction but a real arena in which every subject must act. The implication is that 'keyhole' space for the eye alone – the perspectivalism of traditional painting – is synonymous with complacent bourgeois spectatorship, in which 'real life' is observed from a safe, detached and disengaged distance. The axonometrical space that Lissitzky developed in his Proun drawings was intended to supplant the structural limitations of perspective, which bound the spectator to a single point of view, at a specified distance, before a painting.<sup>71</sup> Most importantly, he considered these drawings not to be 'yet another decorative patch' for the walls of a home or gallery, but as 'diagrams for action, operational charts for a strategy to adopt in order to transform society and to go beyond the picture plane'.<sup>72</sup> Exactly like subsequent installation artists who equate activated spectatorship with social and political engagement, the Proun Space was not simply an architectural installation adorned with reliefs, nor an exercise in fusing interior design with sculpture, but a blueprint for activating and engaging the viewer in everyday life and politics.