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Post-War Sculpture

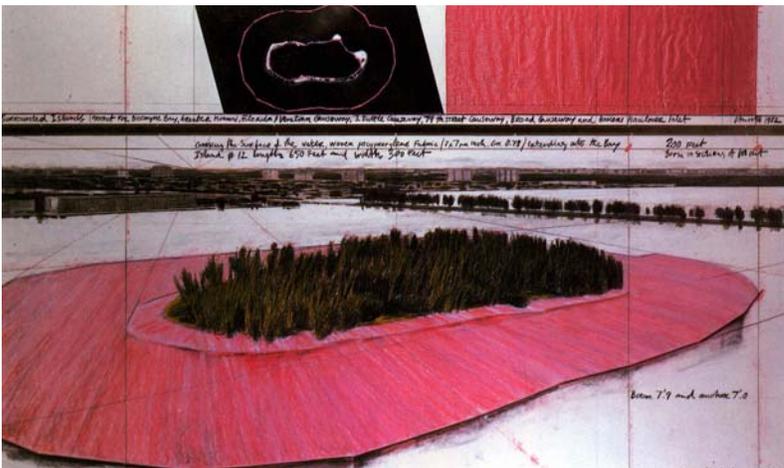
Earth Art

Because of its space-articulating function we might be tempted to call the Vietnam Veterans Memorial a work of architecture, like Stonehenge; yet it is so sculptural that it belongs equally well to Primary Structures. The two categories merge in "Earth Art," which is the ultimate medium for Environmental Sculpture, since it provides complete freedom from the limitations of the human scale. Logically enough, some designers of Primary Structures have turned to it, inventing projects that stretch over many miles. These latter-day successors to the mound-building Indians of Neolithic times have the advantage of modern earth-moving machinery, but this is more than outweighed by the problem of cost and the difficulty of finding suitable sites on our crowded planet.

SMITHSON. The few projects of theirs that have actually been carried out are mostly found in remote regions of western America, so that the finding is itself often difficult enough. *Spiral Jetty*, the work of Robert Smithson (1938-1973), juttied out into Great Salt Lake in Utah (fig. 1156) and is now partly submerged. Its appeal rests in part on the Surrealist irony of the concept: a spiral jetty is as self-contradictory as a straight corkscrew. But it can hardly be said to have grown out of the natural formation of the terrain like the Great Serpent Mound (see fig. 51). No wonder it has not endured long, nor was it intended to. The process by which nature is reclaiming *Spiral Jetty*, already twice submerged, was integral to Smithson's design from the start. The project nevertheless lives on in photographs.



1156. ROBERT SMITHSON. *Spiral Jetty*. As built in 1970. Total length 1,500'; width of jetty 15'. Great Salt Lake, Utah.



1157. CHRISTO (CHRISTO JAVACHEFF). *Surrounded Islands, Project for Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida*. 1982. Drawing in two parts, 15 x 96" and 42 x 96".

Pencil, charcoal, pastel, crayon, enamel paint, aerial photograph, and fabric

CHRISTO. By way of contrast, the projects of Christo (Christo Javacheff, born 1935), who first gained notoriety for wrapping things, are deliberately short-lived. They enhance the environment only temporarily instead of altering it permanently. *Surrounded Islands*, *Biscayne Bay*, Miami) his most satisfying project to date, was installed for all of two weeks in the spring of 1983. Part Conceptual Art, part Happening (see pages 841-42), this ambitious repackaging of nature was a public event involving a small army of assistants. While the emphasis was on the campaign itself, the outcome was a triumph of epic fantasy.

Photographs hardly do justice to the results. Our collage of Christo's drawings, an aesthetic object in its own right, gives a clearer picture of the artist's intention by presenting the project in different ways and conveying the complexity of the experience it provided (fig. 1157)

(Drawings such as this helped to fund the project.) In effect, Christo turned the islands into inverse lily pads of pink fabric. If Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* suggests the futility of grandiose undertakings, Christo's visual pun is as festive and decorative as Monet's water-lily paintings, an inspiration the artist has acknowledged.

Constructions and Assemblage

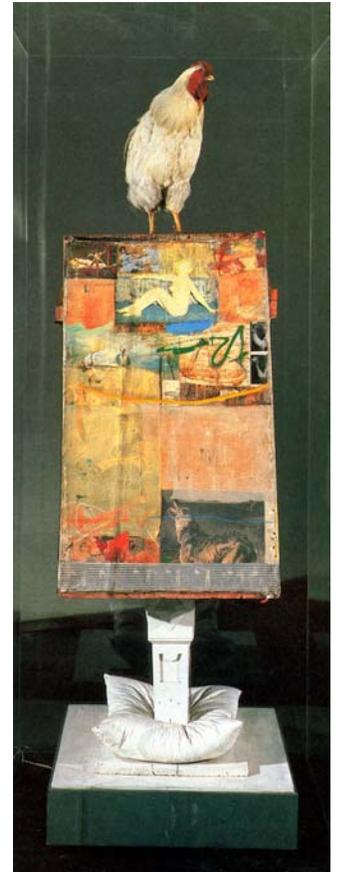
Constructions present a difficult problem. If we agree to restrict the term "sculpture" to objects made of a single substance, then we must put "assemblages" (that is, constructions using mixed mediums) in a class of their own. This is probably a useful distinction, because of their kinship with ready-mades. But what of Picasso's Bull's Head (fig. 2)? Is it not an instance of assemblage, and have we not called it a piece of sculpture? Actually, there is no inconsistency here. The Bull's Head is a bronze cast, even though we cannot tell this by looking at a photograph of it. Had Picasso wished to display the actual handlebars and bicycle seat, he would surely have done so. Since we chose to have them cast in bronze, this must have been because he wanted to "dematerialize" the ingredients of the work by having them reproduced in a single material. Apparently he felt it necessary to clarify the relation of image to reality in this way—the sculptor's way—and he used the same procedure whenever he worked with ready-made objects.

Nevertheless, we must not apply the "single-material" rule too strictly. Calder's mobiles, for instance, often combine metal, string, wood, and other substances. Yet they do not strike us as being assemblages, because these materials are not made to assert their separate identities. Conversely, an object may deserve to be called an assemblage even though composed of essentially homogeneous material. Such is often true of works known as "junk sculpture," made of fragments of old machinery, parts of wrecked automobiles, and similar discards, which constitute a broad class that can be called sculpture, assemblage, or environment, depending on the work itself.

RAUSCHENBERG. Robert Rauschenberg (born 1925) pioneered assemblage as early as the mid-1950s. Much like a composer making music out of the noises of everyday life, he constructed works of art from the trash of urban civilization.

Odalisk (fig. 1158) is a box covered with a miscellany of pasted images—comic strips, photos, clippings from picture magazines—held together only by the skein of brushstrokes the artist has superimposed on them. The box perches on a foot improbably anchored to a pillow on a wooden platform and is surmounted by a stuffed chicken.

The title, a witty blend of "odalisque" and "obelisk," refers both to the nude girls among the collage of clippings as modern "harem girls" and to the shape of the construction as a whole, for the box shares its verticality and slightly tapering sides with real obelisks. Rauschenberg's unlikely "monument" has at least some qualities in common with its predecessors: compactness and self-sufficiency. We will recognize in this improbable juxtaposition the same ironic intent as the ready-mades of Duchamp, whom Rauschenberg had come to know well in New York.



1158. ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG. *Odalisk*. 1955-58. Construction, 81 x 25 x 25". Museum Ludwig, Coloane.

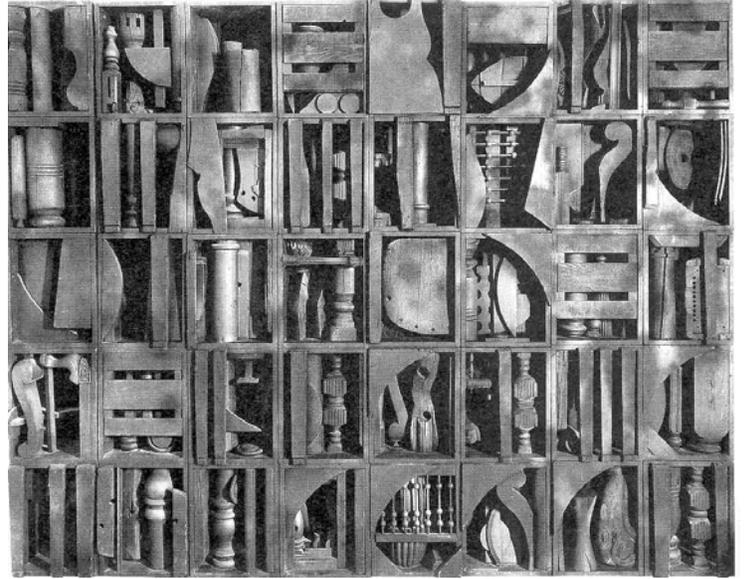


CHAMBERLAIN. A most successful example of junk sculpture, and a puzzling borderline case of assemblage and sculpture, is *Essex* (fig. 1159) by John Chamberlain (born 1927). The title refers to a make of car that has not been on the market for many years, suggesting that the object is a kind of homage to a vanished species. But we may well doubt that these pieces of enameled tin ever had so specific an origin. They have been carefully selected for their shape and color, and composed in such a way that they form a new entity, evoking Duchamp-Villon's *The Great Horse* (fig. 1128) rather than the crumpled automobiles to which they once belonged. Whether we prefer to call *Essex* assemblage or sculpture is of little importance, but in trying to reach a decision we gain a better insight into the qualities that constitute its appeal.

1159. JOHN CHAMBERLAIN. *Essex*. 1960. Automobile body parts and other metal, 9' x 6'8" x 3'7". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

NEVELSON. Although it is almost always made entirely of wood, the work of Louise Nevelson (1900-1988) must be classified as assemblage, and when extended to a monumental scale, it acquires the status of an environment. Before Nevelson, there had not been any important women sculptors in twentieth-century America. Sculpture had traditionally been reserved for men because of the manual labor involved. Thanks to the women's suffrage movement in the second half of the nineteenth century, Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908) and her "White Marmorean Flock" (as the novelist Henry James called her and her followers in Rome) had succeeded in legitimizing sculpture as a medium for women. This school of sculpture lapsed, however, when the sentimental, idealizing Neoclassical style fell out of favor after the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876.

In the 1950s Nevelson rejected external reality and began to construct a private one from her collection of found pieces of wood, both carved and rough. At first these self-contained realms were miniature cityscapes, but they soon grew into large environments of free-standing "buildings," encrusted with decorations that were inspired by the sculpture on Mayan ruins. Nevelson's work generally took the form of large wall units that flatten her architecture into reliefs (fig. 1160).



1160. LOUISE NEVELSON. *Black Chord*. 1964. Painted wood, 8' x 10' x 11 1/2". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Assembled from individual compartments, the whole is always painted a single color, usually a matte black to suggest the shadowy world of dreams. Each compartment is elegantly designed and is itself a metaphor of thought or experience. While the organization of the ensemble is governed by an inner logic, the entire statement remains an enigmatic monument to the artist's fertile imagination.



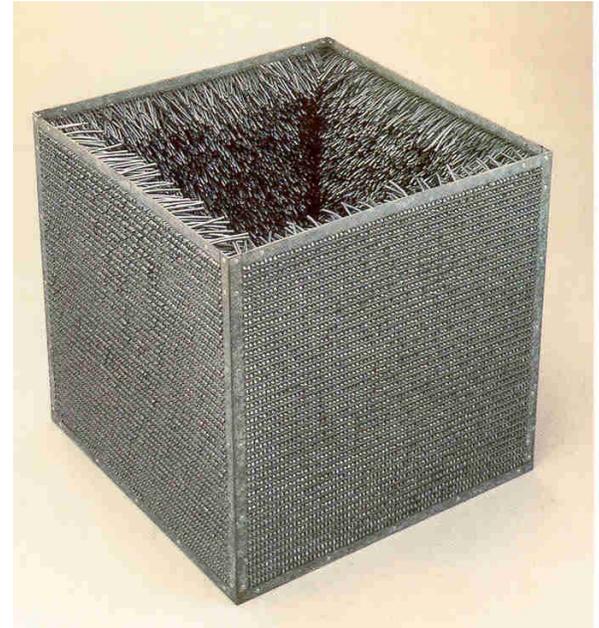
1161. (right) BARBARA CHASE. *Confessions for Myself*, 1972. Bronze, painted black, and black wool, 10' x 3'4" x 1'. University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley.

CHASE. Nevelson's success has encouraged other American women to become sculptors; Barbara Chase (born 1939), a prize-winning author who now lives in Paris, belongs to a generation of remarkable black women who have made significant contributions to several of the arts at once. She is heir to a unique American tradition. It is a paradox that whereas black women never carve in traditional African cultures, in America they found their first artistic outlet in sculpture. They were attracted to it by the example set by Harriet Hosmer at a time when abolitionism and feminism were closely allied liberal causes.

Chase received a traditional training in her native Philadelphia, the first center of minority artists. In search of an artistic identity, she then turned to African art for inspiration. Her monumental sculpture makes an indelible impression. In *Confessions for Myself* (fig. 1161) she has conjured up a demonic archetype of awesome power. Its sources can be found in cast bronze figures from Benin and in the Senufo tribe's carved wooden masks, which are sometimes embellished with textiles. From them she developed her highly individual aesthetic, which utilizes a combination of bronze that has been painted black and braided fiber to express a distinctly ethnic sensibility and feminist outlook.

HESSE. A special case is formed by Eva Hesse (1936-1970). Although her work stands on its own, she had just begun to hit her stride when her life was cut short by cancer. Moreover, it is impossible to separate her work from her life, which is known in considerable detail, thanks to her diaries and many interviews. In many respects she represented the very prototype of the feminist artist, one who was later to provide inspiration to others. Her sculpture, too, defies convenient categories. It began to develop rapidly only in 1966 as the result of a stay in Germany, where she was influenced by Joseph Beuys and his Zero Group (see page 843). For her as for Beuys, art had healing powers through its revelatory function, only they were private rather than social in nature. Her artistic milieu was nevertheless the New York circle of Minimalists that included her closest friends. Her work derives its best features from both, but restates matters in an entirely individual way.

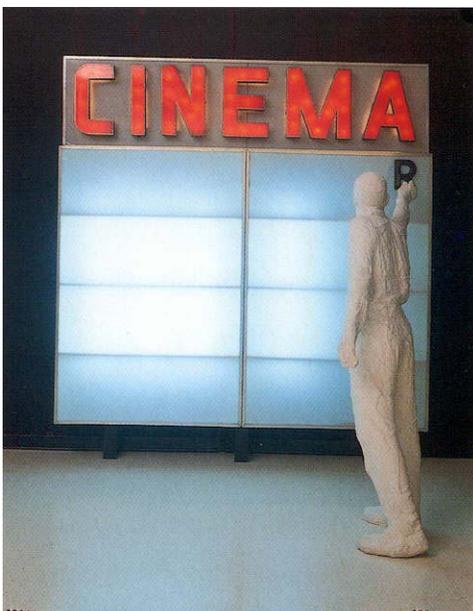
To look at Hesse's sculpture is to see a central mystery unveiled through its often paradoxical, mythic character. Thus *Accession II* (fig. 1162) has aptly been described as "suggesting a stylistic collision between one of Donald Judd's minimalist aluminum boxes and Meret Oppenheim's Surrealist fur-covered teacup of 1936." Aesthetically it has the spareness of Minimalist art, but with infinitely richer content, for Hesse has reinvested her industrial object with personal meaning. It at once possesses all the enigma of Pandora's box and the piquancy of an erotic fetish, a quality found throughout her mature work, which is laden with unmistakable sexual overtones.



1162. EVA HESSE. *Accession II*. 1967. Steel and rubber tubes, 30 3/4 x 30 3/4 x 30 3/4". The Detroit Institute of Arts.

Environments and Installations

A number of artists associated with Pop Art have also turned to assemblage because they find the flat surface of the canvas too confining. In order to bridge the gap between image and reality, they often introduce three-dimensional objects into their pictures. Some even construct full-scale models of everyday things and real-life situations, utilizing every conceivable kind of material in order to embrace the entire range of their physical environment, including the people, in their work. These "environments" combine the qualities of painting, sculpture, collage, and stagecraft. Being three-dimensional, they can claim to be considered sculpture, but the claim rests on a convention which Pop Art itself has helped to make obsolete. According to this convention, a flat or smoothly curved work of art covered with colors is a painting (or, if the surface is not covered, a drawing). Everything else is sculpture, whether or not the surface is colored and regardless of the material, size, or degree of relief—unless we can enter it, in which case we call it architecture.



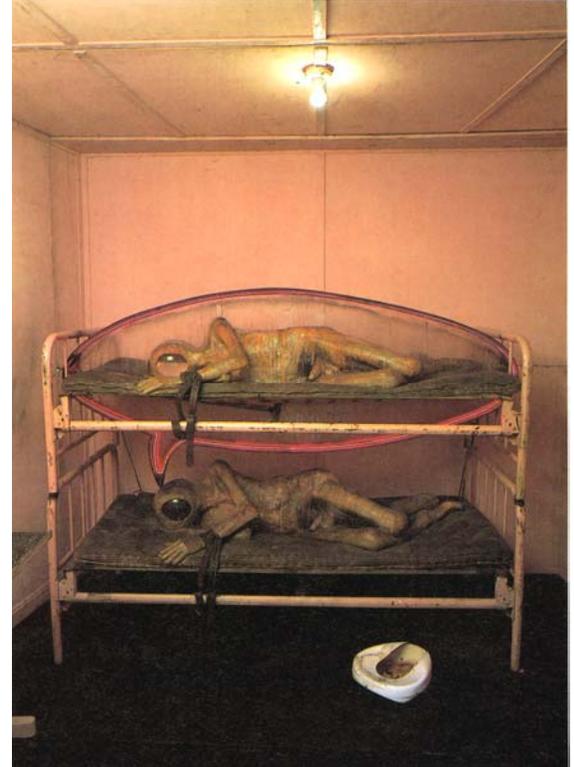
Our habit of using the term "sculpture" in this sense is only a few hundred years old. Antiquity and the Middle Ages had separate terms to denote various kinds of sculpture according to the materials and working processes involved, but no single term that covered them all. Maybe it is time to revive such distinctions and to modify the all-inclusive definition of sculpture by acknowledging "environments" as a separate category, distinct from both painting and sculpture in its use of heterogeneous materials ("mixed mediums") and blurring of the borderline between image and reality. The differences are underscored by "installations," which are expansions of environments into room-size settings.

SEGAL. George Segal (born 1924) creates three-dimensional lifesize pictures showing people and objects in everyday situations. The subject of *Cinema* (fig. 1163) is ordinary enough to be instantly recognizable: a man changing the letters on a movie-theater marquee. Yet the relation of image and reality is far more subtle and complex than the obvious authenticity of the scene suggests. The man's figure is cast from a live model by a technique of Segal's invention and

1163. GEORGE SEGAL. *Cinema*. 1963. Plaster, metal, plexiglass, and fluorescent light, 9' 10" x 8' x 2'6". Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

retains its ghostly white plaster surface. Thus it is one crucial step removed from our world of daily experience, and the neon-lit sign has been carefully designed to complement and set off the shadowed figure. Moreover, the scene is brought down from its natural context, high above the entrance to the theater, where we might have glimpsed it in passing, and is presented at eye level, in isolation, so that we grasp it completely for the first time.

THE KIENHOLZES. Some environments can have a shattering impact on the viewer. This is certainly true of *The State Hospital* (fig. 1164) by the West Coast artists Edward Kienholz (born 1927) and Nancy Kienholz (born 1944), which shows a cell in a ward for senile patients with a naked old man strapped to the lower bunk. He is the victim of physical cruelty, which has reduced what little mental life he had in him almost to the vanishing point. His body is little more than a skeleton covered with leathery, discolored skin, and his head is a glass bowl with live goldfish, of whom we catch an occasional glimpse. The horrifying realism of the scene even has an olfactory dimension. When the work was displayed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, it exuded a sickly hospital smell. But what of the figure in the upper bunk? It almost duplicates the one below, with one important difference: it is a mental image, since it is enclosed in the outline of a comic-strip balloon rising from the goldfish bowl. It represents, then, the patient's awareness of himself. The abstract devices of the balloon and the metaphoric goldfish bowl are both alien to the realism of the scene as a whole; yet they play an essential part in it, for they help to break the grip of horror and pity. They make us think as well as feel. The Kienholzes' means may be Pop, but their aim is that of Greek tragedy. As witnesses to the unseen miseries beneath the surface of modern life, they have no equal.



1164. EDWARD and NANCY KIENHOLZ. *The State Hospital*. 1966. Mixed mediums, 8 x 12 x 10'. Moderna Museet, Stockholm



1165. JUDY PFAFF. *Dragons*. Installation at the Whitney Biennial, February-April 1981. Mixed mediums. Whitney Museum of American Art, New

PFAFF. The installations of Judy Pfaff (born 1946) can be likened to exotic indoor landscapes. The inspiration of nature is apparent in the jungle-like density of *Dragons* (fig. 1165), aptly named for its fiery forms and colors. Pfaff uses painting together with sculptural and other materials to activate architectural space. The treatment of the wall surface will remind us of the collage in Rauschenberg's *Odalisk* (fig. 1158), but Pfaff's work is characterized by playfulness rather than ironic wit. The nearest equivalent to Pfaff's spontaneous energy is the Action Painting of Jackson Pollock. It is as if the poured paint had been released from the canvas and left free to roam in space. The swirling profusion around the viewer makes for an experience that is at once pleasurable and vertiginous.

Conceptual Art

Conceptual Art has the same "patron saint" as Pop Art: Marcel Duchamp. It arose during the 1960s out of the Happenings staged by Alan Kaprow (born 1927) in which the event itself became the art. Conceptual Art challenges our definition of art more radically than Pop, insisting that the leap of the imagination, not the execution, is art. According to this view, works of art can be dispensed with altogether, since they are incidental by-products of the imaginative leap. So too can galleries and, by extension, even the artist's public. The creative process need only be documented in some way. Sometimes this is in verbal form, but more often it is by still photography, video, or cinema displayed within an installation.

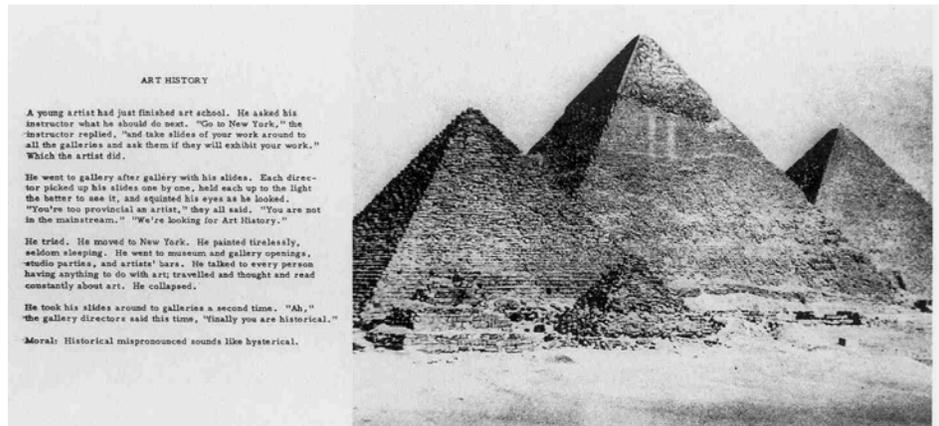
Conceptual Art, we will recognize, is akin to Minimalism as a phenomenon of the 1960s, but instead of abolishing content, it eliminates aesthetics from art. This deliberately anti-art approach, stemming from Dada (see page 784), poses a number of stimulating paradoxes. As soon as the documentation takes on visible form, it begins to come perilously close to more traditional forms of art (especially if it is placed in a gallery where it can be seen by an audience), since it is impossible fully to divorce the imagination from aesthetic matters.



KOSUTH. We see this in *One and Three Chairs* (fig. 1166) by Joseph Kosuth (born 1945), which is clearly indebted to Duchamp's ready-mades (fig. 1134). It "describes" a chair by combining in one installation an actual chair, a full-scale photograph of that chair, and a printed dictionary definition of a chair. Whatever the Conceptual artist's intention, this making of the work of art, no matter how minimal the process, is as essential as it was for Michelangelo. In the end, all art is the final document of the creative process, because without execution, no idea can ever be fully realized. Without such "proof of performance," the Conceptual artist becomes like the emperor wearing new clothes that no one else can see. And, in fact, Conceptual Art has embraced all of the mediums in one form or another.

1166. JOSEPH KOSUTH. *One and Three Chairs*. 1965. Photograph of chair, 36 x 24 1/8"; wood folding chair, 32 3/8 x 14 7/8 x 20 7/8"; photographic enlargement of dictionary definition of chair, 24 1/8 x 24 1/2". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

BALDESSARI. Like Dada, Conceptual Art is notable for its ironic humor—whose bark is admittedly worse than its bite, however. It reached its high point with *Art History, from Ingres and Other Parables* by John Baldessari (born 1931), which is both a witty spoof on art-history texts such as this book and a telling commentary on the difficulties young artists face in finding acceptance (fig. 1167). The juxtaposition of a great monument, mock-serious narrative, and absurd moral is meant to deride traditional value judgments about art. Yet it remains strangely innocuous, as if the artist were too self-consciously aware of his mischievous role.



1167. JOHN BALDESSARI. *Art History, from Ingres and Other Parables*. 1972. Photograph and typed text. Collection Angelo Baldassarre, Bari, Italy

Performance Art

Performance Art, which originated in the early decades of this century, belongs to the history of theater, but the form that arose in the 1970s combines aspects of Happenings and Conceptual Art with installations. In reaction to Minimalism (see page 828), artists now sought to assert their presence once again by becoming, in effect, living works of art. The results, however, have relied mainly on the shock value of irreverent humor or explicit sexuality. Nonetheless, Performance Art emerged as perhaps the most characteristic art form of the 1980s.

BEUYS. The German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) managed to overcome these limitations, though he, too, was a controversial figure who incorporated an element of parody into his work. Life for Beuys was a creative process in which everyone is an artist. He assumed the guise of a modern-day shaman intent on healing the spiritual crisis of contemporary life caused, he believed, by the rift between the arts and sciences. To find the common denominator behind such polarities, he created objects and scenarios which, though often baffling at face value, were meant to be accessible to the intuition. In 1974, Beuys spent one week caged up in a New York gallery with a coyote (fig. 1168), an animal sacred to the American Indian but persecuted by the white man. His objective in this "dialogue" was to lift the trauma caused to an entire nation by the schism between the two opposing worldviews. That the attempt was inherently doomed to failure does not in anyway reduce the sincerity of this act of conscience.



1168. JOSEPH BEUYS. *Coyote*. Photo of performance at Rene Block Gallery, New York, 1974.