

LESSON THREE: Constructing Space



IMAGE TEN: Richard Serra. American, born 1939. *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*. 1969 (refabricated 1986). Lead, four plates, each 48 x 48 x 1" (122 x 122 x 2.5 cm). Gift of the Grinstein Family. © 2007 Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE ELEVEN: Robert Morris. American, born 1931. *Untitled*. 1969. Felt, 15' 3/4" x 6' 1/2" x 1" (459.2 x 184.1 x 2.5 cm). The Gilman Foundation Fund. © 2007 Robert Morris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE TWELVE: Dan Flavin. American, 1933–1996. *Pink out of a Corner—To Jasper Johns*. 1963. Fluorescent light and metal fixture, 8' x 6" x 5 3/8" (243.8 x 15.2 x 13.6 cm). Gift of Philip Johnson. © 2007 Estate of Dan Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

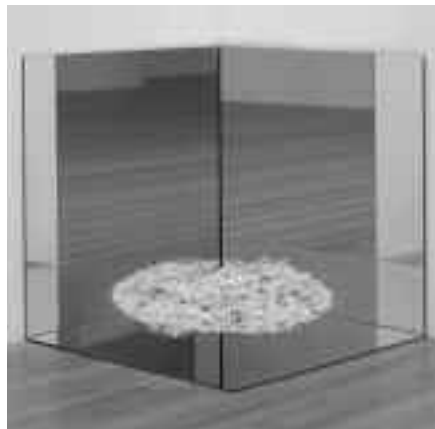


IMAGE THIRTEEN: Robert Smithson. American, 1938–1973. *Corner Mirror with Coral*. 1969. Mirrors and coral, 36 x 36 x 36" (91.5 x 91.5 x 91.5 cm). Fractional gift of Agnes Gund. © 2007 Estate of Robert Smithson / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

INTRODUCTION

One of the goals of Minimalist artists was to produce work that engaged the surrounding space. Although art has long been made to be looked at, these artists sought to involve viewers in a more physical way, acknowledging that their perception shifts as they move through space. In this lesson, students will be introduced to three-dimensional works that employ a wide range of materials to engage the surrounding space and an embodied viewer.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore artists' choices of nontraditional art materials.
- Students will explore how artists use different materials to engage space and will consider the role of the viewer in that process.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

Ask your students to collectively define sculpture based on examples they have seen before or by referring to the list of characteristics they made in Lesson One. Students should consider materials, subject matter, and scale. What does sculpture typically depict? How is it displayed? How does it relate to space differently than painting? How does a viewer typically interact with sculpture, compared to painting? Students should keep their responses in mind as they explore the four works in this lesson.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students the image of *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, by Richard Serra (Image Ten), but do not tell them the title right away. Ask them to describe what they see.
- Inform your students that this sculpture is made from four lead plates, each four feet by four feet in dimension. Ask them to name some properties of lead.
- Inform your students that this work, part of a series Serra made "dealing with the basic tectonics of building," is called *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*.¹⁹ Ask your students to define the elements that compose the title: *ton*, *prop*, and *house of cards*. What does each word or phrase suggest? How do they relate to each other, and how might they relate to this work?
- Inform your students that the four five-hundred-pound lead plates lean against each other and prop each other up; they are not attached to each other or to the floor. Ask your students to come up with some verbs to describe the action performed by the lead plates making up this sculpture.

In the early 1960s, Serra wrote something he called "Verb List," hoping, he said, to "establish a series of conditions to enable me to work in an unanticipated manner and provoke the unexpected" (see For Further Consideration).²⁰ He subjected materials, including lead, rubber, and steel, to the different actions on this list. He made *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* by reacting to the verb *to prop*. About *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, Serra has said, "Even though it seemed it might collapse, it was in fact freestanding. You could see through it, look into it, walk around it, and I thought, 'There's no getting around it. This is sculpture.'"²¹

- Ask your students how the artist's statement relates to their definitions of sculpture (see Lesson One).
- Ask your students to describe the surface of the lead plates. How do the materials and surface differ from Donald Judd's *Untitled (Stack)*, discussed in Lesson One?

19. Richard Serra, audio interview for *Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years*, The Museum of Modern Art and Acoustiguide, Inc., March 13, 2007.

20. Richard Serra, quoted in Carmen Gimenez et al., *Richard Serra: The Matter of Time* (Bilbao: Guggenheim, 2005), 30.

21. Ibid.

While drawing on the simplified geometric forms and industrial materials of Minimalism, Serra used the weightier, unpolished materials he first encountered working at steel mills and shipyards as a young man.

- **Show your students the image of *Untitled*, by Robert Morris (Image Eleven). Ask them to infer what material the artwork is made from.**
- **Inform your students that this work is made of a large piece of felt, cut and hung on the wall by two hooks. Ask them to name some qualities of felt and things that are made from felt.**

Both Serra and Morris have likened the materials and forms of their artworks to the human body. Serra has related his Prop pieces, including *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, to the body in terms of their reliance on balance and counterbalance, and he has claimed that they were inspired in part by experimental dance performances he saw in New York in the late 1960s.²² Morris, who choreographed several dance performances in New York in the early 1960s based on the exploration of bodies in space, believes that felt is “skinlike.”²³

- **Ask your students to draw an outline of Morris’s *Untitled*, using pencil and paper. Then have them draw the outline of what they imagine this same piece of felt looked like after it was cut, but before Morris suspended it from the two hooks on the wall. How do these two shapes differ?**
- **Ask your students to compare and contrast Serra’s *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* with Morris’s *Untitled* in terms of materials, lines, and shape. Ask them to consider the role of gravity in each of these sculptures.**

In the late 1960s, Morris broke away from the rigidly geometric, industrially fabricated forms of Minimalist sculpture and began using materials, like felt, with more expressive potential. Subjecting this malleable and tactile material to simple actions such as cutting and dropping—a strategy he called “anti-form”—Morris relinquished much of his own artistic control to gravity, inviting chance to play a role in creating form.

Many artists in the twentieth century—most notably Dadaists and Surrealists—used chance as a strategy for making art. To explore chance as an artistic strategy, see *Modern Art and Ideas 5: Dada and Surrealism* or encourage your students to explore Chance Words at Red Studio, A MoMA Site for Teens, at www.moma.org/redstudio.

The next two artists in this lesson use very different materials to make works that engage the space around them.

- **Show your students the image of *Pink out of a Corner—To Jasper Johns*, by Dan Flavin (Image Twelve). Ask them to write five adjectives describing what they see. Inform your students that Flavin’s work is made from a fluorescent tube that is eight feet tall. Ask them where they usually find fluorescent lights. What is their function? What colors are they? Ask your students to describe the color of this light and consider how its color affects its function.**

Flavin began using fluorescent light tubes as an artistic medium in 1963, the year he made this work. The colors and lengths of the fluorescent tubes he used were determined by what was commercially available at the time—red, blue, green, pink, yellow, ultraviolet, and four shades of white, in two-, four-, six- and eight-foot tubes.

22. Ibid.

23. *MoMA Highlights*, 287.

- Ask your students to look at the image of *Pink out of a Corner—To Jasper Johns*, paying close attention to the light and shadows cast on the walls and floor. Have your students close their eyes and imagine they are standing in front of the work. How might the colored light flood the surrounding architectural space? How might it color their bodies and how might this change as they move around the space?

Flavin did not consider his works to be sculptures, because they consist not only of the physical object (the fluorescent tube) but also of the space illuminated by the light. When the light emitted touches people or objects or a reflecting plane, such as a wall, floor, or ceiling, it illuminates and colors these as well. Flavin's work unites color with light and space, bringing color into three dimensions and transforming the surrounding space.

- Ask your students to consider the location of this work, in a corner. What are their associations with corners, and why might Flavin have placed it in one?

As its title suggests, *Pink out of a Corner—To Jasper Johns* was made to be installed in a corner. While the fluorescent tube and metal backing physically obscure the corner, the light emitted seems to erase the fluorescent tube itself. When a viewer looks at the work for a sustained period of time in close proximity to it, the light creates the effect of a cylinder much wider than the tube itself. When the viewer looks away from the work, the surrounding space briefly appears to be greenish-yellow—the complementary color of pink.

- Ask your students to test this by staring at a bright-colored image or light for thirty seconds then looking away, at a white surface. The color of the afterimage will be the complementary color of the original colored image or light.

Like all lights, fluorescent tubes, which are formed from a combination of mercury vapor, argon gases, and glass, have a finite lifespan. When a museum acquires a work by Flavin, it receives an artist's certificate indicating specifications for replacement tubes, which it purchases when necessary, to extend the life of the work.

- In 1915 Marcel Duchamp suspended a snow shovel from the ceiling and affixed a bicycle wheel to a stool. For this work, Flavin oriented a fluorescent tube vertically in a corner. Ask your students to consider how Flavin's use of commercially available material relates to Duchamp's readymades (see *Setting the Scene*). Duchamp, who made several versions of each readymade, did not consider any one of them to be the original. Ask your students to draw parallels between the choices made by these two artists with respect to found objects.

Although his work has often been described as sublime, or awe-inspiringly beautiful, Flavin rejected this characterization, stating, "One might not think of light as a matter of fact, but I do. And it is . . . as plain and open and direct an art as you will ever find."²⁴

- Show your students the image of *Corner Mirror with Coral*, by Robert Smithson (*Image Thirteen*). Divide the class into pairs and ask them to compare and contrast this work with *Pink out of a Corner—To Jasper Johns*. Then have each pair share their ideas with the whole group.
- Inform students that this work is made from three square mirrors in a corner of a room—two perpendicular mirrors against the wall and one on the floor—and a small pile of pinkish-white coral. Given the shape of the coral's reflection in the mirrors, ask your students to infer the shape of the actual pile of coral.

24. Dan Flavin, quoted in Michael Gibson, "The Strange Case of the Fluorescent Tube," *Art International* 1 (Autumn 1987): 105.

Smithson believed that taking natural materials out of their original contexts abstracted them. In this work, Smithson's idea of abstraction is made visual as the wedge-shaped pile of coral is multiplied and fragmented in its mirror reflections.

- **Ask your students how mirrors can make them aware of spaces around them. Ask them to think of instances when mirrors alter or distort appearances rather than reflect them.**

On his use of mirrors as a material, Smithson said, "I'm using a mirror because the mirror in a sense is both the physical mirror and the reflection: the mirror as a concept and abstraction; then the mirror as a fact within the mirror of the concept."²⁵

- **Ask your students to consider how Smithson's statement might also apply to Flavin's use of fluorescent lights. How do mirrors and lights engage viewers and space in a similar way?**

In using these materials, Flavin and Smithson acknowledged that viewers experience artworks with their bodies, not just with their sense of sight, and that their perceptions of works of art shift as they move through space. The light cast by Flavin's fluorescent tube and the reflections in Smithson's mirrors change in direct relationship to the position of the viewer. No two people experience these works in precisely the same way.

- **Ask your students to close their eyes and imagine they are standing in front of *Corner Mirror with Coral*, which is three feet high. Ask them to imagine what they would see reflected in the mirrors, aside from the pile of coral.**

Because Smithson's work is located in a corner, it fragments the viewer's body and the surrounding architectural space in its reflections. To get a better sense of this effect, it may be useful for students to hold two small mirrors perpendicular to each other and observe what the mirrors reflect. Is it possible for your students to position themselves so they will not be reflected in the mirrors at all?

- **Ask your students to collectively generate a list of adjectives describing the coral and a list describing the mirrors. Write them on the board for reference.**

Although Smithson was best known for his *earthworks*, sites in which he manipulated the natural landscape, *Corner Mirror with Coral* is an example of what he called a "non-site." Combining natural materials with the sleek, industrial materials of Minimalism, non-sites are typically displayed in galleries or museums rather than outdoors. About these works, Smithson stated, simply, "Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art."

Smithson referred to gallery spaces as prison cells and likened museums to tombs or graveyards, and his non-sites function in part to critique conventions of displaying art. For instance, *Corner Mirror with Coral* reflects the institutional setting of the museum back to the viewer, who cannot avoid seeing its reflection. Furthermore, Smithson's non-sites sit directly on the floor of the museum rather than on pedestals. This was a huge break from tradition, instigated by Minimalist artists. In opposition to traditional museum display, the works become part of the viewer's space rather than taking on a separate or elevated status.

- **Ask your students to reconsider their definitions of sculpture in relation to the works of art in this lesson. How do these works define space? How do they engage viewers in the space?**

25. Robert Smithson, "Fragments of a Conversation," ed. William C. Lipke, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 169.

ACTIVITIES

Public Art: Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*

In 1979, Serra was commissioned to produce a public work of art for Federal Plaza in New York City. About his design for *Tilted Arc* (1981), the sculpture he made for the plaza, Serra said,

The viewer becomes aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza. As he moves, the sculpture changes. Contraction and expansion of the sculpture result from the viewer's movement. Step by step the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes.²⁶

Because of its high cost and massive scale, *Tilted Arc* was the subject of public debate from the time of its installation in 1981 to its removal in 1989. Have your students conduct research on this controversial sculpture. Have each student write a one- to two-page opinion piece about *Tilted Arc* addressing the issues raised at the time, using at least two sources. After completing the assignment, divide your class into two groups—one for and one against the removal of this **site-specific** sculpture. Have your students discuss and debate their ideas about the role of public art, using *Tilted Arc* as an example. Encourage them to research and draw on examples from where they live.

For more information about Serra's sculpture, visit www.moma.org/serra or www.pbs.org/art21/artists/serra. Visit www.publicartfund.org for more information about recent public art projects in New York.

Color Fields

Flavin's early fluorescent works were influenced by the work of **Abstract Expressionist** painter Barnett Newman, who was known for his large **color field paintings** divided by vertical bands he called "zips." Have your students explore Newman's expansive painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–51)—nearly eighteen feet wide—which envelops viewers with color. In what ways does Newman's painting function similarly to Flavin's fluorescent tubes? In what ways does it function differently? To further explore this work by Newman, see *Modern Art and Ideas 7: Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art*.

Jasper Johns's *Flag*

Pink out of a Corner—To *Jasper Johns* is dedicated to an artist Flavin greatly admired whose work similarly blurred boundaries between objects and their representation. To explore Jasper Johns's painting *Flag* (1954–55), see *Modern Art and Ideas 7: Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art*.

Earthworks

Smithson is best known for his earthworks, artworks in which he manipulated natural landscapes. His best-known earthwork is *Spiral Jetty* (1970), in Utah's Great Salt Lake. Have your students conduct research on *Spiral Jetty* or another of Smithson's earthworks, considering some of the following questions: What is the significance of the location? What kinds of natural materials does Smithson manipulate? What is the scale of the project? How has it changed over time? How do photographs and films of the earthwork shape our perception and interpretation of it?

For more information about Smithson and his work, visit www.spiraljetty.org and www.robertsmithson.com. An excerpt of a film Smithson made about *Spiral Jetty* in 1970 can be viewed on UbuWeb, at www.ubu.com/film/smithson.html.

26. Richard Serra, quoted in Vilis R. Inde, *Art in the Courtroom* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 59.