

EARLY INTERVIEWS WITH  
BARRY, HUEBLER, KALTENBACH, LeWITT, MORRIS,  
OPPENHEIM, SIEGELAUB, SMITHSON, WEINER  
BY PATRICIA NORVELL

RECORDING  
CONCEPTUAL  
ART

EDITED BY  
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## DOUGLAS HUEBLER

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DOUGLAS HUEBLER: Just in terms of where I started from—I started rather conventionally, as a drawer, painter, and so forth. The reason I go into that is because the painting, at a certain point, like six or seven or eight years ago, moved toward what became known as hard-edge or reductive painting. And when I reached that point with my own painting, I think it was about seven years ago, I painted the stripes around the edge of the canvas, about three or four colored stripes, just to restate the edge, which is something that, you know, you've seen since that time. At that point, rather than make a style or an issue out of that aspect of reductiveness, it occurred to me that the painting had become in itself an object. And, again, a lot of this is quite familiar in the sense of recent art—I mean, quite familiar. I'm not saying that I invented or discovered these things, but they were discoveries to me at that time. And I'm just sort of recapitulating. The next sense that that object seemed to make for me was to jump right off the wall. In other words, objects that are reduced to that level become as valid three-dimensionally as they are two-dimensionally. And so I became involved with the whole form that got to be very reductive sculpture, and I made forms that were called, had been called, are called Minimal or Primary Structures, and so forth and so forth, that whole genre.

And the things I made were out of plywood. They became essentially architectural, or architectonic in structure. And they were meant to have a multipositioned aspect. That is, that they were made in such a way like a cube, in the simplest way ... a cube you could turn in any direction and it's saying the same kind of thing. And the forms that I made were more complex than a cube, but at the same time were meant to be multifunctional in that way, so that they had no privileged, pictorial aspect, you know. I also covered them with Formica, which was to sort of eliminate any sense of texture and any sense of color application. That is, I used very mild colors like grays or whites that are virtually no color anyway, and then the color was already built into the material itself, so that they were not meant to have a color aspect. They were not meant to have a visual aspect from the point of view of a more interesting place to view the thing. So that they became as neutral as possible.

And then again—consistent with ideas that I think [Robert] Morris and [Donald] Judd have expressed perfectly well, but I'll have to talk about them because they were my concerns—what did become of interest in the work then was where it was located in relationship to the viewer ... being off the pedestal, that kind of thing, but also, as I say, the fact that it had this multipositioning aspect to it as well. It turned out I didn't really ... That was an idea, but I didn't really do that that often. As I found out, the Formica could not take the piece being turned over and over and over again. So although my purpose was to always make it from that logic, the Formica wasn't that tough. It would scratch, and so I just didn't pursue that that way.

Anyway, obviously those concerns come from gestalt, you know: where something is in relationship to you, in relationship to the rest of the world, and so forth. Two or three years ago I was being interviewed in Boston and [was] trying to explain what my work was about, and the guy, Arthur Hohner,<sup>1</sup> up there said, "Okay, so when you see the piece and it's neutral and it's in relationship to you and so forth and so forth, what do you have left?" In other words, where's the art? He didn't say that, but that's what he meant. And I said, "The rest of the world," which is just what the work was about. Now I say all of this ... The work was meant as a springboard from your location, its location, and then the rest of the world, rather than as a thing upon which one focused for a final experience. It was kind of an intermediary experience, the idea, of course, being that the rest of the world is always there anyway and that the work, having its visual aspects removed—its anecdotal aspects removed and so forth—was meant to be an equivalent object in the world, rather than a special object in the world.

This is the sort of thing I did for a while. Most of the works were small enough in scale that they functioned in a room. But once they began to get larger in scale, let's say larger than four by eight feet, which is what I wanted to do with them,

the architectural aspect of the piece would seem to, rather than locate the room, would almost eliminate it, smother it.

And I began to think about putting these works outside so that they would have an ongoing aspect in actual nature, rather than working with the environment in an interior situation where they worked with the wall and the ceiling, which is what the gestalt things most often did when they were in museum presentations. You know, you were bouncing off the next piece and against the wall. And so that was the direction I was going to take my work about a year and a half ago. And I did a piece that I meant to go outside, and I took it outside, and I did another piece deliberately for an outdoor sculpture show that was more of a mock-up. And in both cases, I was absolutely destroyed to see how puny they looked outside. Enormous inside, too big for a room, too big for a normal room, not too big for a museum room. I wasn't making the work for museums anyway. I wasn't trying to say: The world is about the space in which museums exist and/or in which huge public buildings exist. I mean, the rest of the world ... that makes that a privileged situation too, that the work has to be in that kind of context. And in any normal room, any undifferentiated room, and so forth, the works just knocked it out. So then back to the point when I put the work outside. Wham! You know, there was the rest of the world, and trees were more interesting than the sculpture, and the sky was—and so forth. Unless—and this was the thing that really hit me—unless you framed the environment in which the sculpture existed outside, or made it huge. Now at that time, I had heard ... well, I can name some of the artists who were thinking in terms of wanting to make monuments as large as the Empire State Building. Ah, I won't name them—there are a number of them, and that really turned me off because it just seems to me that the world is full of junk, anyway. The world is full of too much stuff to walk around, anyway, and so forth. And I consider the attempt to make art attract attention by making it huge in scale something I didn't want to do. It seems to me a bit arrogant, I'll say that. But it seems to me something at least that I didn't want to do at all. I don't feel that the art has to be that assertive. That is like, for me, the gesturing in Abstract Expressionism, for instance, or any number of romantic postures where you're going to get attention by hook or by crook. You can cast the thing in bronze and polish it up or paint it [in] Day-Glo or do any number of things to make sure that the world knows it's there. But that wasn't the purpose of my work. This is why I'm going through this other stuff, you know. That wasn't the purpose of my work. It was not to be an attention-getting object. It was sort of ... to create this sort of ongoing thing.

So at any rate, as I say, the alternative was to frame the environment. That is, a sculpture garden, you know, put a hedge around it, or have it define in the same way that a room defines a certain space, have the sculpture exist in a space out-



side where it is also defined in a slightly larger context. But what really happened to me was that I began to realize that there were different ... that there was a whole convention about how we frame our location anyway, and that convention was essentially a conceptual one. And that is, once you begin to push through these artificial structures that are hedges or walls or man-made things, nature itself goes on and on and on in an altogether undifferentiated way. And the way we deal with the world, if we locate ourselves, really is a matter in the head. It's a matter of terms or, as I said, conventions. Anyway, that's where I stopped making objects and began to think about what there was about location, where you are, that can be determined, experienced, or used without making objects, still using the central concern of location and so forth. [Phone rings]

The reason I know where I am is because I'm kind of bored with what I've been saying, which is kind of like art-historical BS, you know. I'm really just trying to get at where I came from, in a way, which may or may not be interesting to anyone else. It is to me, that's all. What I began to be concerned about, as I was sort of saying, is that it occurred to me that our way of dealing with the world was based on all of these conventions. And almost any convention is workable. It's just the purpose to which you want something to work. And I became very interested in the sense of your feeling about a place, where you are in relationship to any larger context. Now, when you've got a piece of sculpture to help define the space in which you exist, and you are there, that becomes like an immediate spatial situation. But I'm rather interested in where we are if we can measure this place in relationship to another place and make these jumps, which we do anyway. You know, just as the telephone just rang, you make a spatial jump to sort of face or experience the person with whom you were talking. In other words, all the conventions that had to do with addresses or time or maps—and the map in particular ...

I want people to see, you know, where the world's at and where they are at within it. Maybe the simplest thing to do is what I did at that time, which was to draw up a series of trips, absolutely random trips, the way the AAA draws up your chart for you if you want to go from here to Cleveland. And I made a series of round trips that I just did absolutely without knowledge of where I would be sending people. And the trip itself was the art, and that was all. I did about, oh, four or five of those last year, or whenever it was, um ... as the first things I did. Anyway, I began to work with the idea of the map and the language that you use to tell people where they are. The map is only a chart, you know. It isn't really a real thing, and yet we begin to assume it is a real thing. Most people experience maps or clocks or charts and so forth as very real life-defining phenomena, or whatever. [Pause]

Then I jumped from those map trips to defining spaces by points or markers located in huge areas of space. I made a piece which was an exchange of a shape between New York and Boston, and so forth, and it exists only as an idea. I can define the same dimension, the same apparent amount of physical space, laying markers down just to sort of locate it, and make photographic documents of where it was located. The photographs were not really meant to be good photographs of an interesting place. They just happened to be where the place was that I'd already located on a map before I went in the first place. And what I was doing was to set up a system or a structure or an idea which would direct me to do the things that were demanded in order to complete it: that meant to go to places. Of course, by making a dot on a map, you really are covering perhaps twenty or forty square feet, or circular feet. And there's no proof that when you get there you're pointing your camera or putting that marker on the exact spot, which is of course part of the point too. It doesn't matter, you see; it doesn't matter. It could have been three feet over, or you could have miscalculated just because your pencil was too thick, you know. Any number of things. So what it finally comes back to is the idea of these locations, the idea of the system, and that demands language. I began to get into the whole notion of language, the convention of language as a way by which we read our experience—really read our experience or conceptualize our experience. And how ... as many years as I had had teaching art or art history, how much we use language and then try to cover it up. How art history has always said, "But you really have to look" or, particularly more recent art history, "You[ve] really got to learn how to look." Well, what does this mean? Well, it means that we give you twice as much language, and we tell you what Impressionism is, and we tell you how volume and space is restructured in Cubism. Or even with primary forms, we have to tell you what gestalt is about so that you know what you're looking at. And all of this language is built right into the experience.

And so I began to do drawings and I began to make art in which, rather than try to put the language off the art, I tried to put it right on the art—in the art or as part of the object or whatever it was. A document, you see. So this is something that I haven't begun to fully explore even now. I've made some works that have been directed absolutely towards the use of language and have made works where I've used the photograph as a document, but not, I hope, as an ornament. In other words, I have to be very careful. For instance, I'll tell you about a couple of works which will make it maybe more clear. I set up a system that was to shoot the snow on the side of the highway [see figure 37]—this was up in Massachusetts and New Hampshire in the middle of the winter, February—to shoot straight down at the snow, so there's no pictorial aspect. Shooting straight down

at the snow, every five miles, as registered on the car. Actually, it was a forty-five degree angle to the snow, but essentially not pictorial. And it could have been, and maybe it was, every five yards, or maybe it was every five feet, or maybe it was every five miles, you see. At any rate, the pictures and that quality, the system, or the either/or system ... that I throw in as a possibility here too—and I won't say which it was, really, because it doesn't matter, you see—but the pictorial aspect ... The photographs in this case are absolute documents because they don't show anything pictorially interesting. But they have to exist as part of this either/or documentation. Now, that's one kind of piece where the photographs are essential to knowing the idea of the piece. And the language of the piece as I've described it is usually typewritten on another, you know, eight-and-one-half-by-eleven-inch piece of paper. So that exists as one document—language or the idea—and then the photographs reinforce or are a part of the structure of the idea.

Now sometimes I'm not so sure about the photographs. And I had a recent example where I finally canned the photograph as being too much. And this particular piece is lyrical or romantic enough that one more aspect of ornamentation or romanticism, or sentiment, or whatever, could be too much. Because I don't know ... That line is a very hard one to be certain about. I don't want the works to be clever, romantic, sentimental, you know, or nice or anything like that.

But I did one piece where I used the actual location where I existed; that was in this girls' college, Bradford Junior College, which we talked about before. And I sent a memorandum ... You see, here's a kind of a system. The visual world is always there. And then there are systems in the world that are always there, like the post office. I've done pieces where I've dipped into the post office and brought something back out using that system. Well, in the case of Bradford, I used the system which is that memoranda are always being sent out, right? I made up a memorandum to all students, four hundred girls, and had it put in every mailbox. I said I wanted to use a secret of theirs for a project on which I was working, and I wanted them to write it out. Well, though I wanted their most important secret, I really didn't expect that anyone was going to give it to me. But then of course the option was, or as a matter of fact the direction was, that they were to write the secret out and then burn the secret in an ashtray and place the ashes in an envelope and put the envelope in my mailbox. And when I had them all in, then I would mix all of the ashes together. You know, that's kind of like a ritualistic or romantic little gesture and so forth, but the idea was really meant as putting something out into the world, you know—a request like that—based on a kind of system, based on some things that are going on anyway, secrets, you know. And remove the load from the secret by having it burned, and then, of course, mixing them all together, and then the final act here was to scatter them throughout the campus. So that the whole piece was made in that location at

Bradford, and it was finished there. And the whole piece is really brought off by the language which I'm using right now. Well, I had, actually, as a piece of real romance, a bunch of faculty children take that box full of ashes—I got sixty-three secrets and I ripped them all open and mixed all those ashes together and all those secrets together and so forth—and then I had a bunch of faculty children actually scatter the secrets, about six or eight kids with their little hands running around the campus just throwing the ashes around. And I took some photographs of that. All I'm saying is that those photographs on a personal level are interesting, but for the piece absolutely unnecessary, so I canned them. And I'm just bringing this up to say that sometimes the photographs are absolute documents when they are what the piece is about, and sometimes they could be ornamentation. And I have to, as I say, be careful about that.

And in those two examples, I sort of thought a lot of what the work is about because it's about dipping into things that are going on, pulling back just enough, without changing anything. In other words, I'm not trying to put anything out into the world like a big or small object, you see ... I've stopped making objects, so I'm not putting anything out like that, and I'm not trying to take anything away from the world. Nor am I trying to restructure the world. I'm not trying to tell the world anything, really. I'm not trying to tell the world that it could be better by being this or that. I'm just, you know, touching the world by doing these things and leaving it pretty much as it is. And all of these things are based on a system. In other words, ultimately a structure, a conceptual structure. And I've done this with the post office a couple of times where I have used a certain amount of what they do, dipped in and defined space and time by sending documents around that [get] touched, that get returned, that are actually in contact with locations that are elsewhere, and so forth.

I'll stop talking for a minute ... I'd like you to, you know ... You jotted down some things ... I'd like you to ask me some things.

**PATRICIA NORVELL:** What is the aim of your art if it's not to produce objects or to point things out to people or move people or transcend the event or the system? What is the aim?

**DH:** If I were trying to point things out in the world in a traditional sense, I would be picking something that I found specially moving, and, say, I'll look at that and I'll paint it like an Impressionist, like an Expressionist, like a Romantic, or like a Cubist. I'll do it my way and show you how we might see that appearance, which you may have overlooked. We'll see that specially. And so I'd intrude my style on it. Well, that, I think, is a traditional way of pointing at the world. I am pointing, I suppose, at the world by saying that how we deal with the world, how each individual does, how each person chooses ... whatever structure, whatever system he sets up, can make the world more or less interesting. But the world itself does not

change. The world itself is always there. The systems in it are always there, pretty much as they are ... Time is, you know, whatever. Things are going on all the time. And that, we can reach out—and we do, of course, reach out and have a certain aspect of the world—in the way that we choose to do it, and we can choose to do it in any number of ways, but that choice is pretty arbitrary. Just as I say one can document one hour of time or one day of time in a certain location and take everything that's going on there ... It's a completely arbitrary choice. It could have been elsewhere or elsewhere or elsewhere. And what I'm doing, frankly ... I mean if I can say I'm trying to do something ... I was trying to avoid saying I was trying to do something [laughs], but I am. I've got to be honest ... I am trying to do something. I am trying to say that, yeah, the world is always there and maybe ... I'm not saying everything's the same, either, you know. And I do not say anything is art. [Pause] I don't think anything is art. I think that no thing is art. I think that this is really what I'm against, the notion that things can be art. I don't think things are art at all. They are only things. What we do, and what we put together using the available things maybe—what we can call art, or whatever we choose to call it—maybe the whole idea of what we call art is a redundancy, or maybe it's useless now.

But in particular, by making these choices of what is documented through photography, making that a part of the work, and to make it occur randomly, is to take the load off appearance that I think art has built into the expectation of appearance. If there's anything that I really can say is part of my work, at least, it's to take the notion that appearance itself carries aesthetic value, or art value, I should say ... I'm not talking about real experience—I mean real visual experience, where I might choose to look at one kind of thing over another kind of thing in the world just because my responses are that way. I'm talking about art using appearance—using certain color structures, certain notions of composition and so forth. All the art jargon has been built into how the eyes see the world. [Pause] And I don't object to the eyes seeing the world in privileged and less privileged ways. But I guess I object to the fact that art has been predicated, since Impressionism at least, on our experience with the world being located in the eyes, you see. I don't know what this means. I don't know if I'm trying to ... I'm not trying to revolutionize art. I'm not trying to negate anything. I'm not consciously trying to do that. But I am certain that art is not limited to being something that's located at the end of your eyeballs, you know. And so that's what this work is about. It's not pointing to the world and saying it's better than we are or anything like that. It's kind of like saying, art is not necessarily a visual experience.

PN: In your trip pieces, for instance, how important is it for people to take the trip?

DH: Not at all. I've never taken one myself. [Laughs]. I gave those away. Those are the first ones I made, and I don't know if anyone has taken the trip either.

PN: But in the piece that you just did in Bradford, where you scattered the secrets, how important was it to you that they got scattered?

DH: Not at all.

PN: But you did do it?

DH: Yeah, yeah. [Pause] I did do it just because, actually, a good many of the students expected that it would be done. I would have been completely happy to have created the idea and perhaps never actually performed it, you know. I mean, even to the point of putting it in the girls' mailboxes. It could have been just as an idea, and perhaps maybe just as interesting.

A lot of these things I honestly haven't figured out completely yet. A lot of these things have to be done. You know, it's like painting the picture. You paint it to see what it's going to look like, and then you decide if you want to do another one like that, or if that wasn't worth doing that way, and so forth. I'm perfectly happy to have done that secrets thing that way, but I also know from having done it that it probably didn't have to be done that way. Maybe another piece will be done another way. [Pause]

PN: Like, [Lawrence] Weiner is just publishing ideas and not even necessarily executing any of them.

DH: Right. He sometimes does, as you know, and he doesn't feel that they have to be done. And I think this is, you know, perfectly true. I think that the truth of this work is not literal truth.

PN: That's the next question I was going to ask—about judgment. Do you think that this new work has a whole new system or grounds for judgment? [Phone rings]

DH: As a matter of fact, the question is maybe what the work is about. While you were talking on the phone, I was thinking about the question, and I can say this: judgment itself is going to develop as the work develops. I'm still in the process of trying to develop a judgment about my own work, as I said, as I work it out. And the same thing is true about knowing about Larry [Weiner]'s work or Joseph [Kosuth]'s work, or anyone else. I'd known about what these guys had been up to for a year or so, and I'm still forming values by which I can know their work better. They may have known how to describe it to me better. This is why, even talking about the work this way is likely to lead you into saying things that you might not have wanted to say, or have given examples, like the secret thing I just brought up, to juxtapose it against how I use photographs as documents ... But it doesn't really tell everything about the work. And what I suppose I'm after in saying that is that the work really tells about the work. As a whole body of the work, it's not very easy for one person just to pop in, as has been done, and to make works that seem to be similar and have that continuity, that sense that at least interests me to figure out—how one can make art without locating it in the visual aspect. If it's possible to do that ... Maybe it does require calling art something other than it



has been. It's usually called either art or the visual arts. Art forms or expressive forms that have used language have been called poetry or literature, and have not been allowed to be about the visual arts at all. Maybe all of these categories are a bit stuffy and archaic at this point. And maybe there are experiences that we can have where we shift from those normal expectations. It's in challenging these expectations that I am the most interested, and I think the other guys are too.

You have to form a judgment about a guy who says the work may or may not be made. You know. Or when you have to decide at the end of the work whether or not you're going to put it together this way or that way. You start the work and you have a system—in my case, a system—and then I look at the work, and then when it's finished ... I mean, this is still like making art, you know.

PN: And do you think that you're still working within a pure medium?

DH: No, no, no. As a matter of fact, again, it's an attempt to try to make what I would call art—creating new judgments about what art may be called—but what I would call art by straddling previous limitations on media, that is, as I said earlier, by deliberately bringing language in and recognizing the role of language. Now I didn't really explain some of the works I made where I have used language, but I will say that in terms of straddling ... I have used things that can go on a wall, like going back to making a drawing or a painting and the whole visual experience. And then I called back on the visual experience and mitigated the visual experience by putting the language right on the picture plane, putting more language there than anything else to look at.

I have, for instance, made a drawing where I put a point in the middle of a big sheet of white paper. It can be, you know, eleven by eleven inches, or eleven by eleven feet—the size doesn't matter. That interests me too, you see ... that by using language I can mitigate any expectation of size. And that also can be on the wall or it can be held in your hand, and the experience of it visually, conceptually, can be the same. And I've made dots where I said, for instance, "On this point are located all the other points in this room." You know. Well, what does that mean? Well, the world, the room is full of points. Points begin to define and measure things, but it's altogether visual. Some of these points may be invisible, and some of them may be visual. And they may be measured and so forth. But there you've got something to look at. Or let's say, another piece that says, "Ahead of this surface"—and it's a blank piece of paper—"ahead of this surface is located an infinite amount of three-dimensional space." It's a true statement. And I have also worked to define large aspects of natural space, outdoor space, by locating points that may be thousands of miles apart, and giving similar language utterances to those locations or those forms, if you will.

Well, sculpture has located distances from point to point. And so has painting in a way, you know. In other words, all of these things that had been visual have

put the demand on you to have that visual experience through competence that you develop by knowing, as I said, from Impressionism to Cubism and so forth—how you learned to see. But how you learn to see that way may be just in terms of the conventions that were decided for the rules of those games. Right?

PN: Right. You're redefining them?

DH: I'm only saying, I'm only saying ... that I'll play another game, that's all. I'll say that those visual ... I'll play on those visual experiences. I'll play on where points are located and use language. But as I say, the language is part of the work. The language is not out here where you're told it so that you can walk up to that Impressionist or Cubist painting or optical painting and have your experience by having that language located in the back of your head, but it's invisible. I make it visible, that's all. So in this way I am really straddling conventional experience or conventional media. That is, I'm putting something on the wall, but I'm also putting the language right there, you see, and I'm suspending the other kinds of experience with it by doing that. And some of these things I say are altogether true. And yet they suspend normal truth too.

PN: Do you feel there's any historical precedence in art for what you're doing? For instance, [Marcel] Duchamp or [John] Cage?

DH: Well, you know, this is something very interesting. I've become much more interested in Duchamp and Cage in the last couple of years because of what I'm doing. [Pause] And I have to admit that I guess very often I'm not very smart because I didn't quite understand what Duchamp was up to. Some of the things, I did very well. But the little Green Box, or whatever it is—boy, I still don't understand what he was up to! I think I'm coming closer, though. I certainly understand Cage much more. I sort of liked Cage for years, but I don't think I quite knew him very well. As a matter of fact, a lot of his work wasn't really published. You know, he was sort of known by word of mouth, really, more than by this recent book, that rather plush paperbound book that's out now. Is that called *Silence*? Yeah. Well, I've been reading that and I really like it.<sup>2</sup> And I really know a lot more about Cage. I really feel as if we're soul mates that way. And I'm learning more about Cage. So I could say, "Gee, these guys were probably interested in the same kind of territory." Or I could say that, you know, frankly, Zen Buddhists were ... or any number of places where people have experienced the world in ways that I would now look at and say, "Wow, you know, that's kind of what they were doing; I like that." Only I didn't know about it, you know. I knew about a lot of things. I've been interested in Zen Buddhism for years, but I don't pretend to be one. I'm not a mystic. I drive an automobile; I swear at people that do the wrong things, you know, when I'm driving; therefore I know I'm not serene. I haven't reached satori, and so on and so forth. But I still dig very much ideas which are based in these kinds of views. Eastern thought, with its notion that things do become undifferen-

tiated, that we're all part of a universal or undifferentiated manifold, or, you know, whatever. I dig these ideas, but I don't practice them. I know kids that do now, very, very militantly, you know ... who will insist to you that there is truth in ... I don't believe it's true. I don't believe that the oyster I was about to eat two weeks ago in front of a young mystic has a soul, you know! I just do not believe it. I sort of teased him. I said something about it and he was really rather uptight about it. But I do believe the idea of it, you see. I don't believe that everything is undifferentiated, but I like the idea of it as something to work by.

So anyway, I think that reaching out into Cage or Duchamp or certain philosophical notions ... I'm trying to learn more about phenomenology. I don't really quite understand that the way I would like to think I could understand [it]. Maybe some day I will. But actually, I don't know, if you can call art anything, you can call it a way whereby you can try to figure out what things are all about. And that's what I'm doing now. And sort of, I guess I sort of felt that I'd figured out certain things [about] what painting was about, and what sculpture was about. Not a matter of being great or not great ... just a way of figuring out how you're alive in the world. And I'm doing other things to figure out interesting ways to deal with the world. And I guess I will call that art, you know ... to try to figure out how to be significantly alive in the world. I will call that art. Even if you don't know exactly what it means while you're doing it, that's what you're doing.

PN: What kind of choices are you making in what you choose to deal with, or in how you choose to execute it? And do you feel the choices are very different from choices you were making in your original object?

DH: No, no, no. I would say there's a lot of similarity there. I was trying to make very reductive art at a certain point. I didn't even go back far enough before. I will say that I've been around long enough [so] that ten years ago, twelve years ago, I was an Abstract Expressionist painter. I was using cement and slapping it on the canvas and throwing paint on it and letting it roll around, taking a very natural course. I did a few rather decent paintings that way. But I got uptight about the heroic gesture involved. When I began to understand Abstract Expressionism, I understood that it was about an existential stage ... a heroic stage for the artist. I began to feel a little uptight about that. It was that long ago that I began to be more interested in a reduced way of being alive, instead of shouting at the world, you know, as I felt Abstract Expressionism did. Well, since that time—it's been ten years or so—I've been interested in a more reduced way, a less noisy way, of being alive and of making art. And so the choices that I make now are very similar. I'm trying to do the most with very little, you see. When I reduced down to Formica, I was trying to do a lot with the idea basic to the work and less with the sensuous aspect. And I'm still concerned with that now. I will say again that the

most loaded piece I've ever done was that secrets thing, and Seth Siegelaub doesn't really like it so much. [Laughs] [Phone rings]

I'd answer that another way by just saying that I've done much more reductive or simple works where I've ... I just have to describe what I've done, you see, I think to make the point a little better. I'll do it as quickly as I can. I set up a system of a simple doubling of the numbers system, as old as man, where I've taken a photograph of the nearest surface—just taken a walk in New York—the nearest surface to my camera, or the nearest appearance, you see. After one minute and another two minutes and then four minutes; and then eight, you know, on and on and on until finally the last photograph is about five hours after the first one. And then I've put those together without putting the order down because the order doesn't matter, you see. It's again the either/or kind of thing. Well, that's ... I told you of the either/or with the snow piece. I had taken photographs of the escalator at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, which I took every minute on the minute for eight of the photographs. And then I took one in another fifteen minutes, then I took one in another hour or something like that. Then I took one the next day, and of course they all look the same, and of course I wouldn't put those in sequence, but I could. Again, it doesn't matter.

It's like, I set up a system, and the system can catch a part of what is happening—what's going on in the world—an appearance in the world, and suspend that appearance itself at any given instant from being important, you know, being what the work is about. The work is about the system. The system is not proof of anything either, except that you can set up almost any series, you see, and reach into anything that's going on, as I say, from post offices to escalators moving or to just plain blank surfaces, or maybe not blank surfaces. But it's all out there at once, and the most removed, least intrusive role is just to use the most dumbbell possible kind of system and bring back enough from the world, you know, to illustrate the system. But again, at the same time, to suspend anything that is brought back from having more importance, or having that visual importance, that pictorial importance, all those things that it once had, you see. So it's like reaching into the world and then bringing back and suspending what you brought back from its normal role, and having it serve art—the art being the thing that comes into your head—and not being about a visual thing. You see, by using the visual thing and then suspending it, then the art has to be located in the idea and away from the visual appearance, you see. When I say, “Do you see?” I'm also saying to myself, Do you see? [Laughs]

PN: Then you have priorities in your art?

DH: Yeah.

PN: The systems taking top priority?

- DH: Trying to show that the system, or the idea, the thing that you've set up as the structure within which you will work, is what the art's about.
- PN: But then you say that it doesn't matter whether the pictures were taken every minute or every five days?
- DH: That's right.
- PN: So then you're destroying your system, or you're ignoring it?
- DH: Right, right, right. That's right because, as I said, these systems do not prove anything either. They're dumbbell systems. Very simple dumbbell systems. In other words ...
- PN: Yes, but then what do you leave the observer or the receiver with?
- DH: You leave him with the notion that he can have an experience that is just that experience. It could be that one or the next one or the next one. In other words, they are all based on the convention that the system sets up. But it could be any system, you know. And the visual experience gets knocked out.
- PN: But that's the idea that you're leaving them with. What are you physically actually leaving them with to let them know that?
- DH: Just the idea.
- PN: But the presentation is what?
- DH: Documents. Yes. The documents are composed. I see, you know, if you want to get at that. It's the documents that carry the idea. And the documents have to exist, of course, to carry the idea—usually one sheet on which words that express the work are laid out, typewritten and formalized, dated and all that. And then other documents: maybe maps, maybe photographs, you know, whatever else is necessary, but all rather of the same size and presented normally as paper, not framed. In other words, to leave presentation out of it almost as much as possible, you know. You could think of having twenty photographs showing what happened to that escalator, all lined up on the wall, and read it the way you would a piece of a movie film. If you did that, without the language, looking at that escalator would be like looking at a chunk of movie film. But that isn't what the work's about. It's about the language, you see. And the pictures support it. I don't care if someone had the piece on the wall, if they had the language up on the wall with it or not, as long as they knew what the idea of it was about. In other words, it can be on the wall, it can be looked at in a notebook, it can be looked at just as you'd look at playing cards, a deck of playing cards. Any way that it comes into your experience is all right. And it's neither meant to be like an art experience [n]or not like an art experience. In other words, I don't care if it goes on a wall or not on a wall. And I don't put them on the walls myself. Some people have. And some people leave them in a notebook situation. I think it's important to keep them, you know, sort of together as a little package.
- PN: So your choices are mainly centered around clarifying the presentation of the idea?

DH: Right, right, right. And that, I found, is extraordinarily difficult, because so much is dependent on the language. I try to be as economical and as clear as I can with the language. I try to synthesize the whole idea in about three sentences. That puts very real demands on me, because I am not a trained writer. I'm not really trained at words any more than anyone else. And I rewrite these things. I rewrite these three or four sentences sometimes for two weeks! I say that with passion because it's very frustrating. I don't like to do that. I want the idea to be clearer. But I don't like to spend the time writing and rewriting as if I were a writer, because I'm not about that, you know.

PN: Would you prefer to talk about it rather than write it?

DH: No, I like the idea that I can finally get it down to a form that I hope is as crystal clear as possible. And I can tell you, for instance, of another piece, a very complicated piece, which I have reduced to about four or five sentences. Well, one, for instance, has to do with money. I have taken the serial number of one hundred one-dollar bills—Federal Reserve notes, as they call it in the language—taken the serial numbers, made a list of a hundred serial numbers, and then I put my initials down in the lower right-hand corner, and then I put the money back out into circulation by spending it—for the most part, except that I sent off a dollar to someone I know in Canada, another one to someone in Mexico, another one to someone in Germany, England, Spain, France, Switzerland, Greece, and so forth, so that it's an international piece. That money's been recirculated. The final piece is composed of a statement and one hundred documents, which the one hundred dollars are. Now, that's the start of the piece. The piece is a duration piece. It's going to be twenty-five years long. And at the end of twenty-five years—whoever owns the piece—as a condition for the piece to be completed, the owner has to complete it. And the owner has to complete it by putting an announcement in an international art magazine listing all of those serial numbers again, and offering—and this is built into the condition of owning the piece—to redeem any of those that are brought forth for a thousand dollars. Theoretically, there is a hundred thousand dollars' worth of documentation out on that piece. Now, I've put down as a final condition: if the owner does not fulfill that responsibility, then the piece will no longer exist as of 1995—at the end of the twenty-five years.<sup>3</sup> Now, all right, to get that all down—I've told you this, you know, in, like, five minutes, in a rather random manner—but to get that down and to get it down very clearly, without making a long story out of it, without this and that, was very difficult. That is a piece that does not use photography. It uses something that's going on in the world anyway—dollar bills being circulated and accumulating value, perhaps. Art accumulating value and so forth and so forth. Systems being completed. Maybe I take ten photographs in ten minutes, or maybe this piece takes twenty-five years to be completed. Maybe it opens up for the owner, or it does



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PN: Jack Burnham has said that we're going from an object-oriented society to a systems-oriented society. Do you feel that's true?

DH: Yeah, well, I don't know about the whole society. I know Jack, and I like what he's saying. I think that what interests me about him ... I didn't know he was saying these things until ... You know, it's like finding out that people are saying things that interest you. I found after I started this whole systems approach that I'm not very smart, that I can't set up very elaborate systems. My systems are ... Well, I mean them to be dumbbell. But I don't understand computers. And I don't understand a systematized society. And I'm not trying to direct myself towards that possibility. As a matter of fact, it probably is dehumanizing. But maybe there are ways in which we can [sigh] learn to bear that too; I don't know. I'm not trying to make that happen in my work. Because I think that has sociological implications, and it's sort of open to any number of things happening with it. But I do very much like the way Jack has analyzed some of the things that have been done with systems. I just couldn't say that it has much to do with any deliberate didactic intent that I might have. I'm interested, as I said before, and I think I can put it this way again ... in trying to put together other ways of making what I would call art ... in some ways, drawing on what has been art and drawing on things that are going on anyway. And changing the burden on them, particularly the visual burden on things.

PN: Has the landing on the moon changed your thinking at all?

DH: No, no, no. I would avoid very much trying to get very much involved with ... Well, I've located points here and there, you know. And the idea of my locating a point on the moon just as a great heroic gesture, you know, is too much. I still would prefer to deal with extremely mundane things, like a hundred dollar bills or an escalator moving up and down.

PN: But in terms of people's orientation or concept of place, it's going to have to change.

DH: Okay. All right. Exactly. I was thinking about that today, as a matter of fact. I did a piece in Seth's summer show in which I located a point, where it's located on that latitude ... And I had to find this out through expert help ... You see, this is why I say I'm not very smart; I always have to call someone who has this kind of information ... I found out that at that placement in Los Angeles the point would rotate around the axis of the earth twenty thousand six hundred and forty-three miles, I think it was, each day. And for the period of time that that point was on exhibition ... in other words, between the beginning and end of the exhibition,

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DH: I don't know. I don't know what they're thinking about. [Pause] I suppose they're given the opportunity to think without worrying about practical applications. Is that what you're saying? Is that what they do?

PN: That is their purpose ... just to think. And not be limited by the present structure or uses.

DH: I don't know what they're doing. I mean, I would like to think that what they're doing is like what I'm doing. And maybe better, maybe more confident. I'd like to think that that's what they're about. I don't know. I don't know who they are, and I don't know what they've done. Do you? We sort of know they are doing that ... I sort of know that too ... but I don't know what it's produced.

As a matter of fact, I would think that it would be very strange just to sit around and do that. I think it would be kind of interesting, as I have suggested to some of these guys who are physicists up around Boston, that ... Some of the very bright ones are really very interested in the way artists do think, and they would like to tap into that, as we would like to tap into them in a way. And I have suggested, I guess, something similar to what you're talking about with the think guys, that I'd just as soon sit around and never produce anything and just talk with them because I like to talk with them. Because I like to find out, you know. The really bright ones are very interesting to talk with. I don't know what it means. And as long as you can talk and talk and talk without ever worrying about finally producing an art show, which is what often happens around groups like E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology] and PULSA and so forth. They finally look for something practical to result. And once you begin to do that—and every time they've done it, every time they've started to say, well, what can we do now in three months—you know, as soon as that happens, wow! You know, everything begins to tighten up and closes off. And the real imagination, I think, stops as soon as they begin to center in on making an object or an exhibition or something like that. I think these guys are fascinating to talk with, you know ... If they could get turned on ... a lot of them who are extremely bright, if they could get turned on to some of ...

PN: I think it's probably whether they get turned on to calling it art.

DH: Yeah, that's what we were talking about all along, in a way. If you can begin to suspend the notion that art is about museums and about all of the things that art has been about, if you could put that aside and open it up for more people, like these very bright guys with special talents, that is, not just for people with a special talent for painting color ...

PN: But there's something that makes you an artist, that you're doing and you want to do, that I don't think has been clarified. They aren't interested in that. They are not making art. They are not involved in that. And there's a difference.

DH: I think they're not involved because they still see art the way I feel virtually everyone sees art.

PN: But is it your interest to dissolve those limits?

DH: Yes, that's right. That's right. And when you asked before about new systems of judgment or whatever about art, yeah, very much so. I think that this is what a number of people are up to, not just me—but I'm only speaking for myself now—very much challenging the way that art has cornered itself more and more.

PN: But you still want to call yourself an artist?

DH: Oh yeah. Yes. Because that's the best thing I could be, I guess. I can't start all over again as something else. But I would stay that way anyway, you know—even if I could be a physicist or something that's ... that I can really respect. You know, I can respect using the world in the rather elegant and beautiful ways that they can. I'd still want to be what I call an artist, what you call an artist. And we're ... Well, I have been fifteen years at this kind of thing, or I should say all my life—since I was a little boy I wanted to be an artist. So I just like to call what I do art. [Laughs]

I do think that what is going on with a number of people right now is extraordinarily important. I don't think that we can articulate it in a special way yet. I think that this will come as more ... I think more people have to know that we're doing what we're doing. And more people come in from more objective situations, the kinds of people that you might conventionally call critics, if you will, or philosophers or other artists. Anyway, people that look and try to figure out and talk about what we're up to as well. I mean, it has to be a larger dialogue, and I want to hear it myself, just so I can sort of expand, you know, where I'm at.

PN: Is there anything else you'd like to cover?

DH: Nope, nope. I've talked more than I've talked for a long time.

#### NOTES

1. Editors' note: We have been unable to identify Arthur Hohner.
2. See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966).
3. Huebler refers to *Duration Piece #13, North America–Western Europe*, 1969. For a list of the serial numbers of the one hundred one-dollar bills, see Frédéric Paul, *Douglas Huebler*, exh. cat. (Limousin, France: F.R.A.C., 1993), n.p.