



**Fred Sandback. Installation  
drawing for Dia:Beacon,  
Riggio Galleries, 2003.  
Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.**

# Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?

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*Language without affect is a dead language; and affect without language is uncommunicable. Language is situated between the cry and the silence. Silence often makes heard the cry of psychic pain and behind the cry the call of silence is like comfort.*<sup>1</sup>

—André Green

## The “Greatest Generation”

I first imagined this paper on the train ride home after my first visit to Dia:Beacon in May 2003. I walked around the new museum's galleries that day with the other Sunday visitors. It was a diverse group that seemed to include art students and art professionals as well as families with strollers appearing bewildered but behaving, for the most part, in respectful consideration of the art of our recently proclaimed “Greatest Generation.”<sup>2</sup> I did what I always do when I visit new museums. I noted the relative sense of a “threshold” in the entrance area and the different arrangements made for members and non-members, insiders and outsiders. I examined the wall labels. I appraised the didactics. I paced the location of the cafeteria and bookshop relative to the galleries. I measured the scale of the spaces with my body. I watched other visitors interact with the art as well as with the institution. I did all that. And I also looked at the art—more than I often do in museums, because Dia's collection contains some of the art I love most.

I love Sol Lewitt's work. At an exhibition at the University Art Museum in Berkeley not long ago, I found myself cooing over his small square photos of stonework from the early 1970s like I was looking at baby pictures.

I love Dan Flavin's work. I had the privilege of seeing *Untitled*, 1970, which was on view at Beacon the day I visited, once before, in Donald Judd's Soho building, when I tagged along with a European dealer for a private tour.

I love Donald Judd's work, too, although I preferred the installation of *(Untitled) Slant Piece* when I saw it at Paula Cooper Gallery a couple of years ago.

I love On Kawara's work. I had never seen the calendar on view at Beacon. It was a revelation.

I love Agnes Martin's work, although I would have liked to

see more of her early work in the installation at Beacon.

I love Blinky Palermo's work. I worked as a gallery supervisor in Dia's Chelsea building when it first opened in the mid-1980s, and I spent months sitting with Palermo's *To the People of New York City*. That Sunday in 2003, it really was like seeing old friends again.

I love Robert Ryman's work. I stood and sat in the galleries with his paintings at Beacon for some time during my visit in 2003. The Ryman galleries were quieter than many of the other galleries that day, and I could settle into the subtleties of the installation with only the occasional distraction of derisive comments from other visitors passing through.

And I love Fred Sandback's work, which I only really know from the 1996–1997 show at Dia:Chelsea. When I got to the galleries with the installations of his work, I started to cry. I sat down on a bench there, and I wept.

Why did Fred Sandback's work make me cry? I began asking myself that question on the train ride home. I got Lynne Cooke's e-mail address, intending to ask if she would give me the opportunity to explore that question in one of their Artists on Artists lectures. But I got busy and kept putting it off. Then I heard of Sandback's suicide.<sup>3</sup> I thought, I can't write about his work now, never having met him, when so many people are experiencing such terrible personal loss and when what I would write would probably be mostly about myself. Last February, however, Lynne invited me to participate in the lecture series. Is there an artist in the collection you would like to write about, she asked? Well, I said, actually, I had this idea . . . but I can't possibly do it now. But Lynne convinced me that it would be okay.

This paper is a working through of my response to Fred Sandback's work that day at Dia:Beacon; it represents a kind of internal debate with myself about the positions that I've held on art and art museums, particularly as a practitioner of "institutional critique." As such, it follows a rather personal course, both in terms of the intellectual underpinnings of my arguments and the feelings invested in them. I do hope that those who knew Fred Sandback will forgive me for seeking to identify with a man I never met, whose work is so very different from my own.

### **Broken Frames and Water Stains**

My Sunday visit to Dia:Beacon wasn't the first time I wept in an art museum. The first time that I can recall was the first time I visited the Louvre. It was 1985; I was twenty, in Europe for the first time, in Paris for an international Lacanian conference. It was a terrifying experience for a young high school dropout, and the museum was something of a refuge from the lecture halls, an arena where I could feel just a little bit of competence, a little bit of legitimacy. As I walked around the Louvre, I thought,

boy, did Walter Benjamin ever get it wrong when he wrote “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” It was invariably the works of art I had studied in reproduction that struck me with the greatest “auratic” force: the *Nike of Samothrace*, the *Mona Lisa* (of course), and Raphael’s *Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist*, which I had used in a little artist book a couple of years before, my first work of “institutional critique.”<sup>4</sup> It was in front of that painting by Raphael that I started to cry.

I was convinced that it wasn’t the painting itself that made me weep but the water stains on the wall next to it and the trash underneath it, left there by some of the hundreds of school-children marched through the galleries that weekday. I had read Daniel Buren’s “The Function of the Museum”: museums abstract art from their social and historical contexts, withdrawing them from the world of material conflicts and needs and imposing an idealist ideology of timelessness under the rationale of conservation.<sup>5</sup> That was my experience in the Metropolitan Museum, a place I practically lived in when I first moved to New York at sixteen, an idealized home away from home, always maintained in an immaculate state, never a dust bunny in sight. But the material world was not washed away at the Louvre.

A couple of years after that, back in Europe, I burst into tears in the galleries of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Again I was convinced that it wasn’t the art that made me weep. It wasn’t that group of late Rembrandt self-portraits. It was their unrestored frames. Dull and dusty and cracked in the corners, they were the materialization of the age and poverty worn on the represented faces, of the humanity reflected in the represented eyes. The frames provided those poor, passive pictures with a haven from the inhuman grandeur of the museum’s imperial architecture, held them in their own history—not a history of masterpieces but the history of lived life. They enacted a kind of resistance that the paintings themselves couldn’t mount, being as they were so contained by that architecture and all it represented.

The waitress in the café on the museum’s second floor, where I took refuge behind a massive marble column, sobbing, had obviously seen this before. She sat me down and administered Vienna’s other famous cure: a cup of hot chocolate and a piece of Sacher torte. She wouldn’t let me pay.

### **The Stendhal Syndrome?**

Were these experiences just instances of the Stendhal syndrome, the phenomenon of feeling overwhelmed by aesthetic beauty and old-world grandeur known particularly to affect Americans in their first encounters with the great cultural heritage of Europe? Also called tourism disease, the term “Stendhal’s syndrome”

was reportedly coined in 1979 by the Florentine psychoanalyst Graziella Magherini to describe the symptoms she found to afflict many tourists to the city, in some cases even driving them into psychiatric wards. The name was inspired by Stendhal's account of his 1817 visit to the Santa Croce Cathedral, where he reported "celestial sensations" and feelings of ecstasy followed by heart palpitations, dizziness, and exhaustion. I wasn't able to find any clinical papers by Magherini on this phenomenon (although she did write a psychological thriller called *The Stendhal Syndrome* that was later made into a movie). The symptoms I've found listed include—in addition to dizziness and exhaustion—nausea, disorientation, panic, paranoia, and temporary amnesia. I found no mention of weeping.

It's true that as I spent more time in Europe these outbursts of mine became less frequent, the last one that I can recall being at the Alte Pinotek in Munich in 1993.<sup>6</sup>

Then about five years ago I was visiting the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and decided to walk through the permanent collection. I've been there since then, of course, but I can admit that I don't actually go to museums all that often. I don't go to museums for fun. I don't go to museums with much anticipation of pleasure. I go to museums, particularly in the United States, in a pretty defended state. In modern and premodern art museums the ostensible object of that defense is mostly the institution; in contemporary museums or exhibitions the object is more often the art on view.

I hadn't visited the permanent collection at MoMA for some time, but both the art and the architecture were quite familiar to me. The walls and floors were clean. In the postwar section there wasn't much in the way of frames. But when I entered the room with Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, once again I started to weep. I paused to get myself under control and continue on. But when I looked up and saw an Ad Reinhardt on an adjacent wall, I burst into tears again.

It was this experience at MoMA that I recalled as I left Dia:Beacon. In neither case did my emotion seem to be a response to a perceived pathos—or grandeur—in the context of the works, but rather to the works themselves. What could it be about this extremely reduced kind of art, art so devoid of anything that would normally be considered expressive and affective, that caused me to weep?

### **The Disappointed Eye**

Encounters with art are among the occasions for tears described in the psychoanalytic literature on weeping. Under a subheading of "weeping for unclear reasons, mood, etc.," Lars Börje Löfgren includes "being moved to tears" by "scenes of unusual scenic beauty, certain types of music, usually described as

serene, spiritual, or tragic, certain cinema films, and, although evidently less often, other types of pictorial art.” Other situations of weeping he lists include: “frustrating encounters with persons and things and bodily pain”; “object loss”; “shame and humiliation”; “weddings, mother and child in tender situations, and the sweet innocence of budding love”; weeping when “compassion and empathy are stirred by observing the misfortunes and sufferings of others, especially when these visitations appear undeserved”; “tears of impotent rage”; weeping in situations of “danger leading to fear”; and “pathological weeping”—a term he borrows from Phyllis Greenacre to describe “situations where weeping is outside the grasp of the observer’s empathy or sympathy” and seems “alien or nearly so to the weeping person himself.”<sup>7</sup>

So I imagine my weeping must have appeared to many of the other visitors at Dia:Beacon that Sunday, if they could even conceive that my tears might be related to the art on display.

Of course, the most common occasion of weeping, as Greenacre notes in her essay “On the Development and Function of Tears,” is loss. In this category, Greenacre includes “the loss by death or by alienation of someone to whom the weeper has been closely attached” or “the loss of some material object, or the withdrawal of something promised, or the loss of a body part or possession; or even—and not infrequently—the loss of esteem for a friend or of self esteem, resulting then in a diminished self image.”<sup>8</sup> Löfgren also argues that many situations of weeping that appear remote from separation and its associated sadness are in fact “connected to early object loss.” For example, object loss can be found to underlie most experiences of apparently joyful weeping, like at weddings or at happy endings, which may remind us of a lost happy past or a past made unhappy due to loss.<sup>9</sup>

Separation and object loss also relate to the early communicative function of weeping, as Edwin C. Wood and Constance D. Wood point out in another paper, particularly when tears are accompanied by a cry. Whether occasioned by pain, frustration, deprivation, anger, or separation itself, a child’s cry is often a call for an absent mother and for the anticipated relief to be provided with her presence.<sup>10</sup> Writing in a very different context, Lacan linked the infant’s cry with the earliest of demands: a “demand of a presence or of an absence” that “constitutes the Other as already possessing the ‘privilege’ of satisfying needs, that is to say, the power of depriving them of that alone by which they are satisfied.”<sup>11</sup> For Lacan the cry is primarily linguistic. However, as other authors have pointed out, one can cry without tears and shed tears without crying. Weeping includes both.

It is the specificity of weeping that Greenacre is concerned with in “On the Development and Function of Tears.” Weeping, she reminds us, “is an affair of the eye.” So, she asks, what is the

relationship of weeping “to looking and to seeing, or to looking and not seeing”? She turns to the situation of mourning:

The bereaved person may find himself actually expecting to see the lost loved one, and will accordingly be startled by seeming resemblances in strangers. . . . This begins very much as in the child who weeps when left by the mother. . . . The weeper weeps because he does not see the person or the object which he has lost and must gradually accept the fact that his looking is in vain. . . . The eye is the most important sensory object in establishing a loss.<sup>12</sup>

And so, what she calls the “disappointed eye, failing to find the lost object, behaves very much like the physically irritated or traumatized eye which defends itself with the soothing tear”—caring for itself, perhaps, as it longs to be cared for by the absent other.<sup>13</sup>

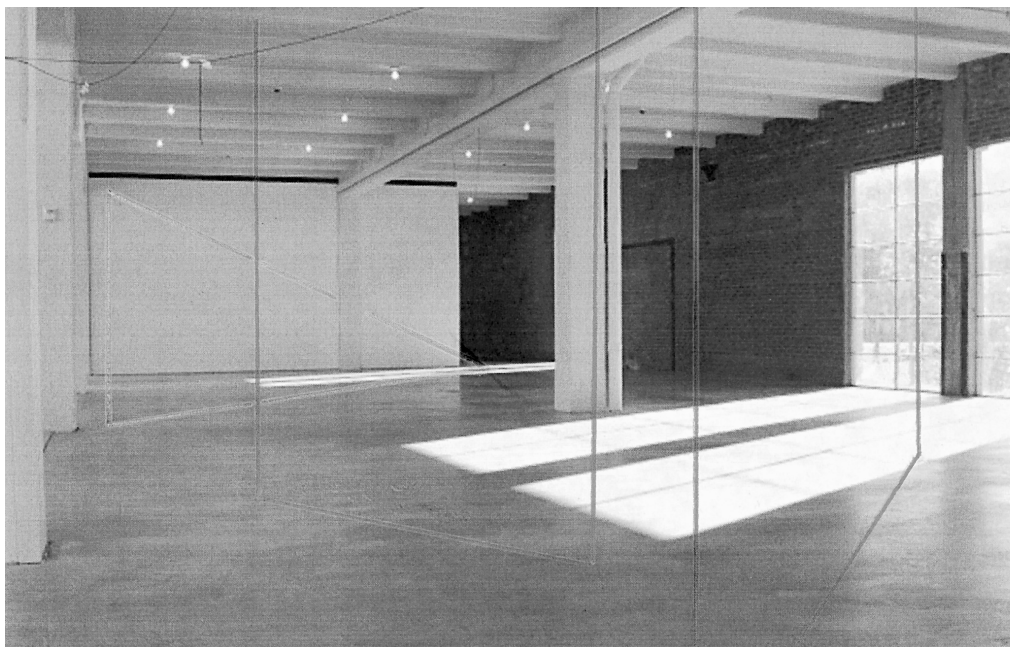
### **The Shadow of the Object**

Object loss, in psychoanalytic theory, is an extremely complex phenomenon, one that doesn't give rise only to feelings of sadness and longing. Greenacre reminds us of the ambivalence that Freud discovered within every experience of object loss, real or fantasized: “the first reaction may be one of anger and the wish to attack either the person who has gone away (deserted) or someone who is blamed for the loss, or the self for in some way, either actually or in feeling, being responsible for it.”<sup>14</sup> Psychoanalysts have found such ambivalence to underlie depressive states as well as mourning. In the case of melancholia, the subject identifies with the lost object and thus directs against itself the anger, criticism and aggressivity attached to that object but denied out of guilt or an inability to accept loss. In his essay on “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud describes the consequences of an identification of the ego with the abandoned object:

Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, so that the latter could henceforth be criticized by a special mental faculty like an object, like the forsaken object. In this way the loss of the object became transformed into a loss in the ego, and the conflict between the ego and the loved person transformed into a cleavage between the criticizing faculty of the ego and the ego as altered by the identification.<sup>15</sup>

Melancholia, as Freud puts it in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, “show[s] us the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second.”<sup>16</sup> In his paper “On Weeping,” it is in relation to the ambivalence of the experience of loss above all, and the unconscious aggressivity it engenders, that Löfgren finds the function of weeping. Tears, he notes, are the only human excretion almost universally regarded





Fred Sandback. Installation drawing for Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries, 2003. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

as clean. We speak of being “bathed in tears,” of “washing with tears.” Tears not only represent affective discharge and emotional relief, but also a kind of cleansing, a purification of feeling and particularly, Löfgren argues, of critical thoughts and aggressive feelings, a kind of self-absolution. Weeping is “an act whereby aggressive energy is dissipated in secretory behaviour . . . instead of [being discharged] on an object.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, he argues, weeping may serve as a way of avoiding the guilt connected to aggressivity as well as allowing for a purer expression of love and therefore, perhaps, a truer experience of loss.

### **The Location of Aesthetic Experience**

What kind of aesthetic experience can be admitted by a hardcore, uncompromising, materialist, sociologically informed “institutional critic” like myself?

The difficulty I have may be less with the experience, or having it, than with locating that experience in anything that might be considered immanent in a work of art, particularly in its formal aspects.

At Dia:Beacon one Sunday I encountered works of art composed of lengths of colored acrylic yarn strung from floor to ceiling or floor to wall. It’s art that I love, and when I encountered it I wept.

I can describe Fred Sandback’s work as beautiful. I can talk about the way it brings space alive by creating shimmering virtual planes. I can talk about the way it makes me hum in empathy with the visual vibrations created by the yarn. I can talk about the feeling of calmness brought on by the precise perceptual focus his work requires. But why would those things make me weep?

Sandback’s work is an art of absences, an art that’s only just



barely there to be seen. I could talk about the “disappointed eye” longing to see what is not there to be seen; the eye traumatized by loss, soothing itself with tears. But would such an experience be an aesthetic experience? And why would I find loss, or a memory of loss, in those visual voids? Against what kind of presence would they exist for me as voids?

I am speaking about art with a rigorously purified formal vocabulary. Could there be an identification of formal purification with affective purification? Of the washing away of an excess of form and the washing away of an excess of feeling—aggressive feeling? Could it be that when I encountered Sandback’s work I was able to discharge, in the form of tears, some of the hostility to art institutions—perhaps even to art itself—that turned me into an institutional critic in the first place? But here, once again, I left the realm of aesthetic form and returned to the institutional frame.

### **The Criticizing Faculty**

As a student of Bourdieu’s work I have long been convinced that the disposition to seek aesthetic experiences with works of art, or in the institutions that house them, and the capacity to have such experiences are socially determined. They depend on competences acquired either through the implicit learning of exposure to art at home or a more explicit learning in educational and cultural institutions—a learning that in turn generally requires a disposition to recognize and accept the legitimacy of those institutions and aspire to the capacities they demand and experiences they offer.

I’ve been convinced of this by my own experiences as well as by Bourdieu’s research and analysis. However, this conviction also includes an element of ethical decision: the alternatives are just too politically problematic to consider. For me, the idea that some of us are born with greater sensitivity to beauty, or a greater ability to perceive form, or a greater capacity to be moved by color and line, can never be anything other than a figment of what Bourdieu called the “self-legitimizing imagination of the happy few”: one of those essentialist ideologies deployed by the culturally—and generally also economically—privileged in order to convince themselves and others of their entitlement.<sup>18</sup>

If the capacity for aesthetic experience is socially determined, so must be its relationship to the objects and situations with which those experiences are had. That is to say, those experiences can be no more immanent in objects than they are in persons. If some objects are more pleasing, more moving, more evocative or even provocative than others, *to some people*, it is not due to any innate characteristics of those objects, which certain people are more attuned to than others. It must be due,

rather, to the fact that the capacity to perceive and recognize, as well as the disposition to appreciate, particular forms *aesthetically* developed alongside the capacity to *produce* those forms—so much so that in the history of modernism they became almost the same thing. As Bourdieu wrote, modern art began to demand “categorically an attention to form which previous art only demanded conditionally.”<sup>19</sup> Modern art began, in effect, to require the viewer to re-produce, in his or her own perception of an artwork, the primary operation whereby that artwork was produced. Increasingly, as artists rejected the particular crafts that historically defined artistic competence—a process that has been called “deskilling” and associated strongly with minimalism—the primary operation of aesthetic production became almost inseparable from an operation of aesthetic perception: of perceiving a form or an object aesthetically. The work of art became, in a sense, the objectification of that aesthetic perception in an increasingly purified form.

A Bourdieuan definition of art could be summarized as follows: something is art if it exists for discourses and practices that recognize and can appropriate it as art. Thus, sociologically speaking, art cannot exist outside the field of art—outside the field of the discourses and practices in which it can be recognized as art. The institution of art is not something external to any work of art but the absolute and irreducible condition of its existence. The museum is not a mechanism for the institutionalization of art: the museum is *an institutional form of art*, of aesthetic perception and of aesthetic practice. The museum is art-made-institution. Public art, to the extent that it demands to be perceived as art, whether through its own internal formal characteristics or accompanying publicity and didactics, does not leave the institution of art: it carries that institution with it, out into the streets and parks and public squares. So-called outsider art, popular and vernacular culture, may indeed originate outside the field of art, but as soon as it enters the artistic field—not only physically in museum displays but discursively as the object of aesthetic recognition and perception—it ceases to be outside. Far from challenging the boundaries of art and the hierarchies of culture, however, its incorporation serves rather to expand and empower them.

What constitutes this “elite” or “high” aesthetic culture are not only rarified objects and works but also the modes of appropriation and appreciation of those works, which in turn depend on rarified and socially valorized dispositions and competences. And those dispositions and competences are not only objectified in art works, they are also internalized and embodied by individuals. Their internalization constitutes what Bourdieu called *habitus*: the “social made body,” the “social made flesh.”

## Institutional Bodies

We are all here members of cultural fields. We carry, each of us, our institutions inside ourselves. There's a museum in here, inside of me, with the Corinthian columns, the grand staircase, and the mezzanine. There's a system of organization: the way I see things. There are objects and images, and there are texts, and there are voices explaining. There's an archive that also contains my memories. And there's a basement where I keep the things I don't want to show.

Just as art cannot exist outside of the field of art, I cannot exist outside of the field of art, at least not as what I am, which is an artist. And this is also the limit of institutional critique. I can attack those internal objects. I can rip at the walls of my institutional body. But I can't tear it down completely, and I can't leave it, because I would then not only cease to have an effect within the field; I would also cease to exist.

Institutional critique has the structure of melancholia. Remember my quotation from "Mourning and Melancholia": "Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, so that the latter could henceforth be criticized by a special mental faculty like an object, like the forsaken object." I exist in the shadow of these internalized objects: the institution, first of all, and its voices that speak through me; works of art, through the eyes of which I see. To transpose the Freudian scheme, the conflict between myself and these internalized objects—which are also loved and forsaken objects—is transformed into a splitting between a criticizing faculty and myself as I have been altered by my identification with them.

But what is the loved and forsaken object here?

This is my greatest difficulty. I believe that art cannot exist outside of the field of art. However, at the same time that I maintain this view, I know that, somehow, I also believe that art cannot exist *within* the field of art.

It must be art in this sense that is lost for me.

But what could this art be, this art that can't exist within the field of art, the only place that art can exist? I'm afraid of this question. I'm afraid of its metaphysics. I'm afraid of the irreducibility of the loss that it leads to. I'm afraid of the lure of essentialism that leads away from that loss. How can I account for it?

In two monumental sentences in *Distinction* Bourdieu describes the "difference between the legitimate culture of class societies" and the "culture of little-differentiated or undifferentiated societies." In class societies, "the appropriation of cultural products presupposes dispositions and competences which are not distributed universally (although they have the appearance of innateness)." As a consequence, these "products are subject to exclusive appropriation, material or symbolic,"



Fred Sandback. *Untitled (from Ten Vertical Constructions)*, 1977. Two-part vertical construction, red (variation). Installation view at Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries. Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

and thus come to function as “cultural capital,” existing as products “of domination predisposed to express or legitimate domination.” In societies with little or no class differentiation, on the other hand,

access to the means of appropriation of the cultural heritage is fairly equally distributed, so that culture is fairly equally mastered by all members of the group and cannot function as cultural capital, i.e., as an instrument of domination, or only so within very narrow limits and with a very high degree of euphemization.<sup>20</sup>

The boundaries of the artistic field not only mark but continually reproduce an originary split that is also an originary loss. This is first of all the splitting that is social differentiation and hierarchization. It is the splitting of the social world into classes and, with divisions of labor, into specialized fields of production. It is the splitting off of art as an autonomous field from the field of general culture. It is the splitting off of artists as specialized producers of culture and the splitting off of com-

petences that are unequally mastered and cultural goods that are unequally shared.

This lost world of shared culture and competence may be no more than a kind of anthropological fantasy, our very own myth of origins.<sup>21</sup> However, I think that it is what serves as a lost object for many artists and much art. It is the idyllic, primal state of culture we want to imagine once prevailed before the expulsion, when we were driven out into the world of specialization, hierarchical divisions of labor and competence, and competitive struggles for recognition and reward. I can recognize it as a lost object of my own work, and I perceive a longing for it, too, in what Fred Sandback called “pedestrian space”: “literal, flat-footed, and everyday,” where the work of art exists “right there along with everything else in the world, not up on a spatial pedestal.” It was an idea, he wrote, full of “utopian glimmerings of art and life happily cohabiting.”<sup>22</sup>

### Worlds in Ruin

So this is my problem: I don’t believe that art can exist outside of the field of art, but I also don’t believe that art can exist within the field of art. For me, art is an impossibility. And if art is impossible, then artists are also impossible, and I myself am impossible. To the extent that I exist, I can only exist as a compromise, a travesty, a fiction, a fraud. The only integrity I can hope to recover is by trying to make sure I’m never misrecognized as anything else.

Hana Segal may have been the first to apply Melanie Klein’s theory of the depressive position—what Klein called “melancholia in *statu nascendi*”<sup>23</sup>—to art. In a 1952 essay entitled “A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics,” Segal argued that the work of art is like the work of mourning: a process of working through melancholic guilt and anxieties associated with real and fantasized loss through efforts at repairing, reestablishing, or re-creating lost objects of love.<sup>24</sup> Melancholia takes refuge from the anxiety of loss in the defensive splitting Freud wrote about in “Mourning and Melancholia,” splitting not only the lost object into good and bad, idealized and despised parts, but splitting herself into good and bad, loving and hating parts, corresponding to her own ambivalence. The resulting battle that rages inside the subject only increases guilt and anxiety and leaves the internal world of the melancholic in ruins. The work of mourning is to put that world back together again.

Segal writes that

all creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self. It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in

fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair—it is then that we must re-create our world anew, re-assemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life.<sup>25</sup>

The work of art, like the work of mourning, is a process of reconstructing lost and ruined objects, lost and ruined worlds.

There is a kind of violence against art and against culture that art is. It is there in the structure of art, in the structure of our field—just, perhaps, as aggression is there in the structure of our subjectivity. It is the violence of emptying the world of representation and function, communicative and material use, that is done when we insist on the primacy of form; it is the violence of separation we enact in all kinds of aesthetic distancing; it is the violence of splitting off shared culture and competence, cutting up shared language, that we perform in every narrowing dialogue with the history of our own field; it is the violence of the competitive struggles for differentiation, achievement, and recognition that so often drive our practices; and it is the violence of every intention to subvert, transgress, confront, challenge, critique, and negate.

It is inescapable, this violence, even when we forget it is there and see only what appears to us as beautiful, peaceful, and calm—say, in a work by Ryman or by Sandback—at least until our reverie is interrupted by the derisive remark of another visitor passing through who experiences only affront and exclusion. That forgetting itself is itself a kind of violence. It is what Bourdieu called symbolic violence: the violence of misrecognition enabled by institutional legitimation and by the collective blindness consequent to the relative autonomy of our field. It is also what Klein might have called the violence of idealization, when we split off and condemn to oblivion or project out into the social field all the bad, aggressive parts of our objects and of ourselves. This is the violence that art institutions do, above all.

I'm not condemning this violence, as I'm calling it—except the violence of forgetting our violence and of idealization. This is what art is; this is what art does—or a very important part of what art does.

### **Objects without Shadows**

Art for me is a kind of tragedy. In classical tragedy, as Segal writes, “the hero commits a crime: the crime is fated, it is an ‘innocent’ crime, he is driven to it.”<sup>26</sup> As artists, we also commit crimes against art and culture. These crimes are fated and they are “innocent” crimes in that sense: we are driven to them, not least by the logic and structure of our field. What makes art tragic, however, is not the “innocence” of its violence but its ambivalence, because that violence is most often violence against



what we also are and what we also love. And because art is so often, at the same time, an attempt at reparation.

Institutional critique, for me, is a tragedy—even though I tend to play it as farce. Minimalism, for me, is also a tragedy. At its most extreme and restrained and purified, minimalism represents, to me, a kind of heroic sacrifice in the face of art's contradictions. By "heroic sacrifice," I'm not talking about the boys who drove backhoes out into the desert. That's a kind of Hollywood heroism of scale and ambition. And I'm not talking about the artists who ended up filling corporate lobbies, a fate from which Dia's patronage saved a few. And by "contradiction," in the case of minimalism I'm thinking above all of the contradiction of art's so-called deskilling: that the "purging of image and skill, of memory and vision within visual aesthetic representation," as Benjamin Buchloh once put it, did not serve to "liberate the world from mythical forms of perception and hierarchical modes of specialized experience" but rather represented a "profound and irreversible loss."<sup>27</sup> I see that loss rather differently than Buchloh does, however: not as a loss of autonomy but as a loss *consequent to the contradictions of art's autonomy* as a specialized field. Rather than level cultural hierarchies and close gaps in the distributions of cultural competence, the monumental sacrifice of so-called deskilling produced an art that may be more aesthetically demanding and remote from everyday life than any other art ever made. The loss produced by the tragic result of minimalism's sacrifice is above all a loss of possibility brought about by yet another failure to close the gaps between specialized aesthetic experience and pedestrian, everyday world; yet another failure to restore a ruined world through the wholeness of form.

Fred Sandback's work is an art of impossibility. Not of illusion, he insisted, which "refers you away from factual existence toward something else." "My work is full of illusions," he wrote, "but they don't refer to anything else. Fact and illusion are equivalents."<sup>28</sup> Sandback's work is an art of disappearance, as the forms he draws in space appear and disappear as one moves around them. His work has been described as just barely there, verging on invisibility, trembling optically with perceived fragility, mortal in its impermanence. However, the impossibility and impermanence, fragility and disappearance of Sandback's work are not only matters of the perception of form. They are also the facts of the works themselves. He was "producing a product," he wrote, "that could not be easily acquired or preserved" and that even after many years of work "had almost completely ceased to exist."<sup>29</sup> And those attributes are also manifestations of the conditions of his practice as an artist, of the experience that produced the work and that we as viewers are called upon to reproduce in our own experience of it. To



**Fred Sandback. *Untitled* (from *Ten Vertical Constructions*), 1977. Two-part vertical construction, red (variation). Installation view at Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries. Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.**

work so simply, to do so little, to restrict oneself to such modest means and such a limited formal vocabulary, over such a long period of time, is itself a kind of disappearance. For me, what makes Sandback's work so moving is not that he did so much with so little, but that he did so little.

The extreme reticence of Sandback's work is not something I experience as an act of withholding but rather as an act of extraordinary generosity. By removing himself to the extent that he does, he makes a place for me. It's not a place in front of his work, or next to his work, or inside his work (he once wrote that he aspired to make "sculpture that didn't have an inside"<sup>30</sup>). It makes a place for me inside the institution that the work is inside. It is a place that exists between fact and illusion, between reality and fantasy—what D.W. Winnicott called a transitional space, where loss can be renegotiated in the re-creation and reparation of things. It is a place of affective possibility created by work that doesn't ask me to feel, and so, I think, allows me to feel, and to be alone, in the presence of this art that's so quiet and still, and makes too little in the way of demands. It is an art of objects without shadows.

## Notes

This text was originally written for the Dia Art Foundation's Artists on Artists lecture series, presented at Dia:Chelsea, October 25, 2004. Many thanks are due Lynne Cooke for inviting me to participate in the lecture series and for providing the necessary encouragement to write about an artist with whom she had worked so closely. I also want to thank Gregg Bordowitz for showing me the way back to reading psychoanalytic theory, and for making it feel safe to write about affect. Finally, I want to thank George Baker for his committed support through the process of finding a venue to publish this essay.

I don't feel that I can dedicate this essay to the memory of Fred Sandback, a man I never met, but I can dedicate it to his art, which survives.

1. André Green, "Conceptions of Affect," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 58 (1977):129–156

2. Michael Kimmelman began his *New York Times Magazine* feature about Dia:Beacon, which ran shortly before its opening, by announcing it to be "the first museum dedicated to the greatest generation of American artists." Michael Kimmelman, "The Dia Generation," *New York Times Magazine*, 6 April 2003, 30.

3. Fred Sandback took his own life on June 23, 2003.

4. Andrea Fraser, *Woman 1/Madonna and Child, 1506–1967* (New York: Andrea Fraser, 1984).

5. Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Museum," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropol, 1983).

6. Having just returned from my first visit to Florence, I can report that I wept in the Uffizi and the Palazzo Pitti. I was unable to get to the Santa Croce Cathedral before it closed.

7. L.B. Löfgren, "On Weeping," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 47 (1966): 375–383.

8. Phyllis Greenacre, "On the Development and Function of Tears," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 20 (1965): 210–211.

9. Löfgren, 377–378. See also Sandor S. Feldman, "Crying at the Happy Ending," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 4 (1956): 477–485.

10. E.C. Wood and C.D. Wood, "Tearfulness: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 32 (1984): 117–136.

11. Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 286.

12. Greenacre, 212–213.

13. Greenacre, 213.

14. Greenacre, 211.

15. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," (1917) in Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 170.

16. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1959), 41.

17. Löfgren, 377–378.

18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 31.

19. Bourdieu, 3.

20. Bourdieu, 228.

21. As an anthropological fantasy, it may in fact refer to a state even prior to what would be "before" divisions of cultural labor; that is, a "before" the sexual division of labor that many social theorists see as the origin of all social

differentiation. And then one might go on to speak about a “before” the division of self and other—and then we might even find ourselves in the realm of a “before” subjectivity. But I have no desire to hierarchize the subjective and the social here. In fact, it’s what I’m trying to avoid. My question is, what functions as the lost object of our field? Not of “a subject,” nor of “a social agent,” but of an artist? For myself as an artist and perhaps for other members of the artistic field?

22. Fred Sandback, “Remarks on My Sculpture, 1966–86,” in *Fred Sandback: Diagonal Constructions/Broken Lines*, ex. cat. (Hannover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1987), 26.

23. Melanie Klein, “Mourning and Manic-Depressive States,” in Juliet Mitchell, ed., *The Selected Melanie Klein* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 148.

24. Hana Segal, “A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 33 (1952): 196–207.

25. Segal, 198.

26. Segal, 204.

27. Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 143.

28. Fred Sandback, “Notes,” in *The Fred Sandback Museum, Winchendon, Massachusetts* (New York: The Fred Sandback Museum, 1982), 4.

29. Sandback, “Remarks on My Sculpture, 1966–86,” 26.

30. Sandback, “Remarks on My Sculpture, 1966–86,” 23.