


8-1-2017

# Object Language/On Defining Sculpture

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OBJECT LANGUAGE/ON DEFINING SCULPTURE

By

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Bachelors of Art – Studio Art  
Humboldt State University  
2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Art

Department of Art  
College of Fine Arts  
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
May 2017



## **Thesis Approval**

The Graduate College  
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

March 29, 2017

This thesis prepared by

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entitled

Object Language/On Defining Sculpture

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts – Art  
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## **Abstract**

### Object Language

In the current era we in the Western, developed world, have almost universal free and uninhibited access to almost every piece of information in existence. Increasingly, regardless of the source, material presented to us as fact has become increasingly suspect. Together, these two things mean this endless stream of data is useless. The question is how to combat this decline, how to reverse the process of a meaningless, constant data-dump. The answer lies in the language used to communicate information. Language is the means by which we communicate complex ideas and knowledge from person to person. Language is something ubiquitous in our society, we see it, we hear it, it is so constant we do not even consider it as a part of the concepts it is used to convey. Altering language is one of the subtlest ways that information can still be obfuscated.

Sculpture has the capability to reframe its own context. This is the great privilege evidenced numerous times by such works as Duchamp's Fountain and enumerated by prominent art historians. Transforming something into sculpture implies that the purpose of the work is, at least in part, to reframe the subject matter of the piece. Translating language into sculpture is an effort to reframe this system. The process takes that which is recognizable and readily consumable and obfuscates it, putting barriers between us, the reader, and the idea expressed. That which is freely given is valueless, easily discarded, and ignored. By transforming the content into sculpture the idea is elevated, made enigmatic, even esoteric. The ideas in the context of this show are not freely given. They have been rendered

inaccessible and there must be effort expended to understand the message. These ideas must be earned. This makes them more valuable and much harder to ignore or discard.

Information is the most powerful tool we have, its possession saves us from the mistakes of the past, it is what guides us through our present, and it is what ensures our future. When information becomes valueless it is altogether too easy for it to be taken away; we lose the most important tool we have in self determination.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the following people, without whom this project would not have been possible. Catherine Angel, Sean Clark, Susanna Newbury, Dave Rowe, and Shai Yeshayahu – Your unflagging support, incessant pushing, and occasional reprimands have kept me working, thinking, and often not sleeping. You have all made me a better artist. I would also like to thank my wife, who makes my rambling words flow and make sense, and my father who has always been there to edit and polish everything I have ever written.

## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife –  
Friday Celia-Zoellner, without you I would be lost, and I would never have survived this  
exile into the desert for so long.

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## Introduction

Historically, sculpture has been particularly difficult to classify. As a medium that is traditionally considered the opposite of painting, sculpture is often defined as such: “Not Painting.” But is this definition — sculpture as not painting — sufficient to define the medium? The difficulty with this traditional definition of sculpture is that the definition offers no explanation of why, for example, a chair is not considered a sculpture. A chair is not a painting, yet the category of sculpture is defined as “not painting,” thus a chair must be a sculpture.<sup>1</sup> Of course, a chair is obviously not a sculpture, but without a self-contained definition of sculpture there is little hope in explaining how this definitional contradiction can exist. An equally difficult explanation exists in explaining why something like Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 piece *Fountain* is considered sculpture, as the work is, on the surface, simply a urinal placed on a pedestal and signed. (Figure 1.) An additional problem with defining sculpture as “not painting” is that such a definition creates a hierarchical relationship between the painting and sculpture. When the definition of sculpture is predicated on painting, sculpture becomes inherently subservient to painting through the use of painting as the default medium of art. More to the point, such a definition opens up sculpture to derisive definitions in comparison with painting. The purpose of this monograph is to suggest and propose possible criteria by which sculpture might be defined relative to specific traits and conditions that underscore the unique nature of sculpture. The first of these traits will be the relationship of sculpture to space, as well as the relationship of sculpture to context. Additionally, the capacity of sculpture to *reframe* its own context will be discussed through an examination of how sculpture influences the contextual environment in which the sculpture exists.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1:  
Marcel Duchamp  
Fountain, 1917

This question of dimensionality — while not, perhaps, an encompassing classification for sculpture as a medium — does lead to a concept that may lead to a definitional understanding of sculpture: Space. Although to suggest that sculpture is concerned with space is not new, accurately defining the relationship of space to sculpture is extremely important. The simplest definition of space is one that is primarily geometric: The Cartesian plane in which all things reside. As philosopher Henri Lefebvre says about this notion of space, “The idea [mathematical/geometric space] evoked was simply that of an empty area.”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this definition, while a valid way to imagine the idea of space, does not further an understanding of the definition of the characteristics of sculpture because this definition will be over-broad. If sculpture is defined as the medium that is concerned with the specific, geometric-based concept of space, then any object in space is sculpture. Despite this over-broad definition, a distinction can be made

between objects and art, therefore defining “Sculpture” as a category term can aid in the development of an understanding of what art itself is.

## Space

Art has traditionally been categorized by dimensionality.<sup>4</sup> Paintings, drawings, and photographs are considered to consist of only two dimensions: Width and height. These art mediums are assumed to be flat, with no defined volume or depth. This is important as the modern era in art — the early Twentieth Century — was defined by the theories of Clement Greenberg; Greenberg celebrated this flatness and abhorred the three dimensions of sculpture. Acceptance of Greenberg's theories often led to sculpture being overlooked as a relevant medium of exploration in the Twentieth Century. Sculpture, in opposition to painting, drawing, and photography, is three dimensional, consisting of height, width, and depth. Therefore, sculpture can be defined as the medium that is not flat: the artistic medium that has volume. Despite Greenberg's insistence that painting is flat, however, painting (and drawing and photography) exists in the three dimensions of physical space.<sup>5</sup> This means that a painting, no matter how "flat," is a three-dimensional object because a two-dimensional object cannot be created in a three dimensional world: even the smallest building blocks of matter have measurable volumes. If paintings, drawings, and photographs are defined as two-dimensional, then actual physical examples of paintings, drawings, or photographs have never been made. All objects we currently call paintings, drawings, and photographs are three-dimensional objects and must be defined as sculpture.

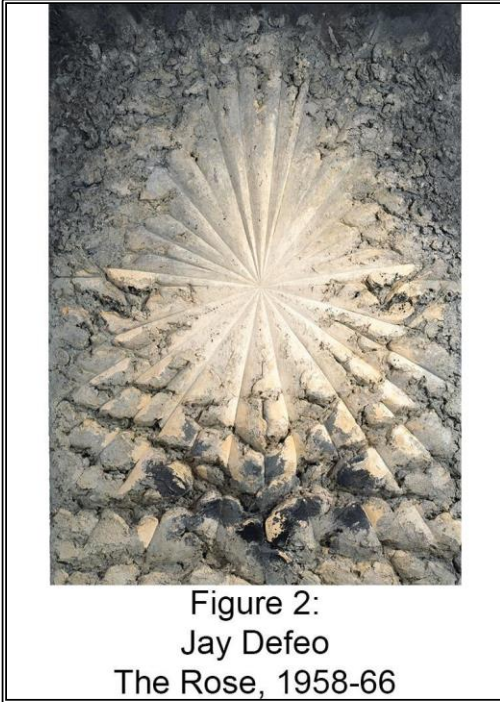


Figure 2:  
Jay Defeo  
*The Rose*, 1958-66

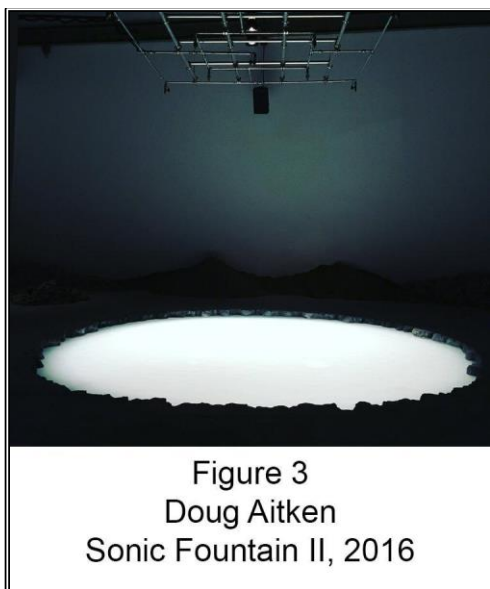
A more practical problem with insisting that paintings are flat is that this definition excludes paintings — that everyone would agree are obviously paintings — but which contain such an extreme facture that these paintings cannot be reconciled as flat images.<sup>6</sup> For example, Jay Defeo's painting *The Rose* is an undeniable representation of such a work. (Figure 2.) *The Rose* is an oil painting with overall dimensions of 128-7/8 inches x 92-1/4 inches x 11 inches and which weighs over 2000 pounds.<sup>7</sup> The painting took eight years to create and is the product of the painstaking application of layer upon layer of oil paint followed by an exacting process which involved carving into the mass of paint to create the extreme contours of the work. Defeo's *The Rose* is undeniably a painting but a painting that both exists in, and is concerned with, space. Thus, in *The Rose* there exists the theoretical contradiction of a painting that not only is three-

dimensional but is inextricably concerned with three dimensionality. This work exemplifies the concept that sculpture cannot be defined as simply the medium concerned with three dimensionality, unless the claim is also made that painting is a subcategory of sculpture. While this may or may not be the case, of greater importance is that sculpture has not yet been defined, which is a task that becomes more important if painting is, in fact, a subset of sculpture.

Another definition of space that can be considered is a definition that is dependent on objects or actors. Space is the environment created by the interaction of two or more agents.<sup>8</sup> This interaction activates the idea of space, makes space dependent on relationships, and makes space social. The most intuitive of art historian and theorist Miwon Kwon's classifications of space is that of the literal space: Literal space is the space that can be touched.<sup>9</sup> An observer can walk through literal space and be physically aware of doing so. The next classification of space by Kwon is mimetic space, which references or represents another space. Finally, abstract space is the space of an idea or of an emotion, and is the sublime space that the abstract expressionists sought to depict. Thus, the definition of space can be expanded as well: Space is the environment created by the interaction of two or more actors or objects that, depending on the nature of the interaction, may be broken down into these three subcategories of literal space, mimetic space, and abstract space.

How does sculpture, then, relate to space? To answer this question, Doug Aitken's *Sonic Fountain II*, from 2016, will be examined as an example. (Figure 3.) *Sonic Fountain II* is a large-scale installation housed in a large, dimly lit gallery. The piece consists of a large, rough edged, circular pool carved into the floor, filled with a

translucent, white, cloudy liquid that may be assumed to be tinted water. There is no discernible bottom to the pool, producing the illusion of indeterminate depth. The only illumination in the space comes from a single spotlight suspended high above the pool, causing the liquid to glow and to refract light along the walls of the gallery. Just below the single spotlight, above the pool, is a rectangular grid made of pipes that appear to be steel and which are supplied with the same liquid as the pool. Arranged on this grid of pipes is a series of control valves which release measured amounts of liquid into the pool in distinct patterns: Sometimes the valves release only a single drop of liquid, while at other times a steady stream is released. Beneath the liquid surface of the pool is a group of microphones arranged directly under the valves on the grid. These microphones pick up the sound of each liquid impact and transmit the sound to speakers hidden in the shadows of the gallery, amplifying the sounds and abstracting the sounds from their source and produce the sounds as disembodied echoes through space.





In addition, scattered around the gallery floor are large piles of dirt and debris that appear to be the byproduct of the excavation of the pool. Aside from being reminiscent of the byproducts of construction or excavation, these piles of material also suggest stalagmites in a cavern or underground hole, and this effect is further magnified by the dim lighting and the incessant drips and flows that emanate from the pipes above. *Sonic Fountain II* exemplifies the concept of literal space through the piles of rubble which could be stumbled over, the large pool in the floor as an obstacle that cannot be traversed, and the percussion of the amplified drips that create a sound environment. All of these ingredients constitute a scenario between two actors — the viewer and the piece — creating the condition for literal space to exist within the piece.

Mimetic space is also a discernible aspect of *Sonic Fountain II*. The work develops the conditions of mimetic space — the interaction between viewer and object — by examining the way the work mimics, or alludes to, a cavern. This is the representational aspect of the piece: *Sonic Fountain II* is not a cave, nor does the work attempt to be a cave. However, aspects of the piece do represent or mimic cave-like things outside of the work. Although both mimetic space and literal space are both elements of the piece, literal space is the more prominent. The piece also sets up a situation between the piece and the viewer by which abstract space is also created. Upon entering the gallery of the installation, the viewer is engulfed by the sound of amplified drips, as well as the consuming silences in between these sounds. In conjunction with the indeterminate depth of the pool and the uncanny glow, the work slowly creates a meditative mental space of sublime oblivion, a space in which the viewer can lose all sense of self, and where the measurement of time shifts from the seconds of a clock to the patterns of drips

echoing through the chamber. This installation becomes an abstract space in which is created an environment that manifests ephemera. *Sonic Fountain II* becomes the embodiment of ideas: calm, sublime, timeless. Abstract spaces such as *Sonic Fountain II* embody, create, or render imaginary or emotional constructs into physical environments.

Aitken's *Sonic Fountain II* evokes all three categories of space: abstract, mimetic, and literal. This is of great importance when criteria for defining sculpture as a medium are considered. Like *Sonic Fountain II*, sculpture defines and describes aspects of space by engaging a viewer; sculpture activates space by converting the viewer into an actor. Thus, one of the defining characteristics of the sculptural medium is that sculpture engages space.

## Context, Site, and Ground

Sculpture must certainly, in some way, be concerned with space. But being concerned with space is insufficient as a definition of the medium: a poodle takes up space, as does a painting, but a poodle is not a sculpture. Sculpture is dependent something other than simply space as a category: context.<sup>10</sup> Context may be defined as the background or framework without which an understanding of the work of art is impossible. One comprehensive example of the primacy of context in defining sculpture is found in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, by Rosalind Krauss, in which a discussion of the sculptural subcategory known of relief is related.<sup>11</sup> Krauss suggests that the idea of sculpture in relief is not necessarily a physical characteristic, but rather a conceptual one. By definition, a relief is directly opposed to a sculpture in the round, wherein a sculpture in the round is totally removed from the physical ground and can be fully walked around.<sup>12</sup> Auguste Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, 1880-1900 C.E., is an excellent example of a relief in the traditional understanding. (Figure 4.) *Gates of Hell* exists as a set of massive, closed doors and door frame designed for a proposed Decorative Arts Museum in Paris. The relief carvings in the stone doorway depict scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. The massive set of bronze doors stands over twenty feet high and thirteen feet wide. The incredibly deep relief of the imagery protrudes in some places almost three feet from the wall with nearly two hundred figures enacting numerous scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. The most famous figures in the composition include Rodin's *The Thinker* and *The Three Shades*. The piece is only meant to be engaged with in a semicircular manner: *Gates of Hell* cannot be observed by walking completely around the work to acquire a different view, or to gain more information not accessible from the front.

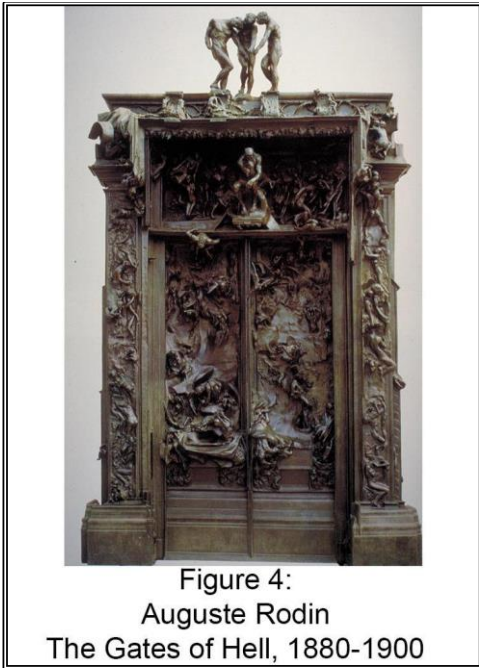


Figure 4:  
Auguste Rodin  
The Gates of Hell, 1880-1900

In *Passages*, Krauss takes one of the characteristics of the relief, that of the ground, and expands the ground as an interdependent relationship. She begins by writing that the physical location of the sculpture in the ground provides needed context for the sculpture, while at the same time the sculpture informs the context of the space.<sup>13</sup> The location of *Gates of Hell*, i.e., in a museum in Philadelphia, informs the viewer that this object is in fact a piece of art and not a fancy doorway. On the other hand, as *Gates of Hell* is a very well known piece of art, the actual presence of the work in a collection increases the prestige of whatever institution in which the piece is exhibited. The “ground” in Krauss’s argument could be the historical space the sculpture occupies, any

controversy connected to the sculpture, the history of the location, etc. Therefore, all sculpture stands “in relief” to context — to historical circumstance.

The *Laocoön*, 175-150 B.C.E., is an excellent example of an in-the-round sculpture that is, perhaps, best thought of as a kind of relief due to the complexities surrounding the work. (Figure 5.)<sup>14</sup> The *Laocoön* is a marble statue that measures approximately 6-1/2 feet high by 5-1/3 feet wide by 3-2/3 feet deep. The statue, unearthed in Rome in 1506, depicts the Trojan priest Laocoön with his two sons, doing battle with a serpent. Despite an origin in antiquity, and having been buried for hundreds of years, the *Laocoön* is remarkably intact. Only a few of the appendages of the various characters have broken off; Laocoön’s right hand is missing at the wrist, one of his sons is also missing his right hand at the wrist, and his second son is missing the right arm just below the shoulder. Aside from these instances of damage, the rest of the sculpture is intact. The serpent is the unifying element in the composition, as the serpent wraps around the three human figures, binding them together in their struggle. All three human figures are depicted nude, with athletic builds and slightly unrealistic musculature. This is particularly true of the sons, who, based on their size relative to their father, are adolescents. Despite their apparent age, the sons are heavily muscled, with clearly defined abdominal muscles and broad shoulders. Laocoön and one of the sons are supported by a plinth draped with fabric; both of which are rendered in marble.

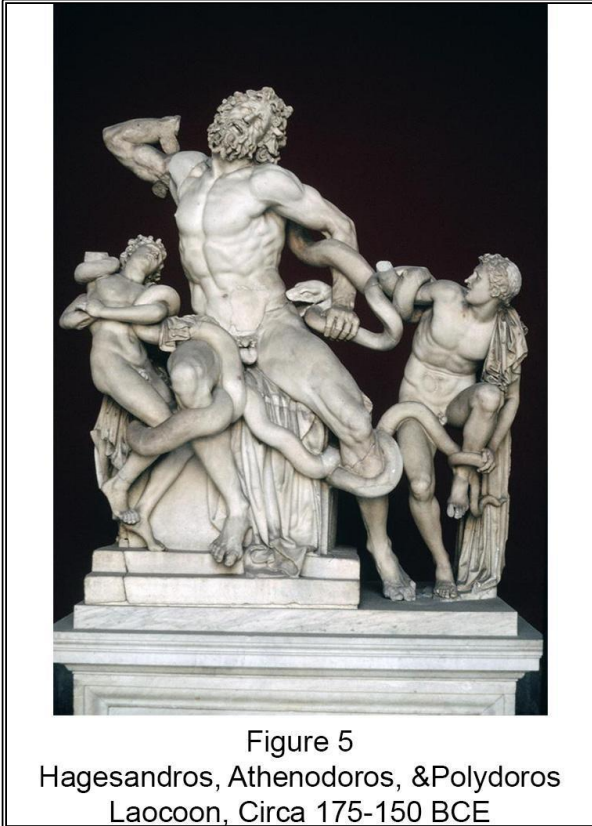


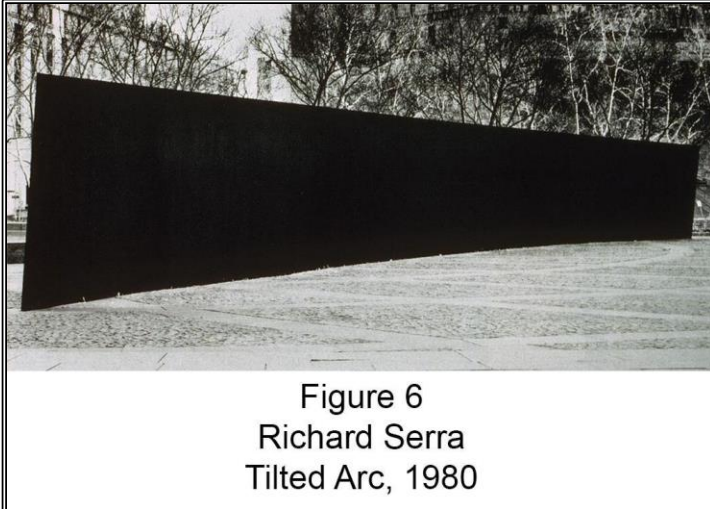
Figure 5  
Hagesandros, Athenodoros, &Polydoros  
Laocöon, Circa 175-150 BCE

To further develop the notion of context, potentially synonymous ideas must be examined: site and site specificity.<sup>15</sup> As art historian Miwon Kwon has discussed, “Site specificity used to imply something grounded, bound to the laws of physics. Often playing with gravity, site-specific works used to be obstinate about ‘presence,’ even if they were materially ephemeral, and adamant about immobility even in the face of disappearance or destruction [...], site-specific art initially took the ‘site’ as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of constitutive physical elements”<sup>16</sup> This is how the site used to exist, much in the way that the ground used to exist: as a physical attribute. The site of a work is in this earlier definition literally the direct

environment and physical location of a work. Kwon argues, as Krauss did for the ground, that the site is much more complicated than a simple physical location.

The essence of Kwon's writing is that the site of a work can be considered to be any of the conditions surrounding that work, not just the physical location. This means that everything from social issues, theoretical concepts, historical or socio-economic conditions, current events, personal relationships, or any number of other things can be considered to be the 'site' of a work. Such a new definition of the site encompasses all sculpture, as the concept of a site is not limited to a single location or to the intention of the artist. Further, based on this new definition of the site, when a work is moved, the site changes with it. With this expanded definition, the circumstances of a work's creation and ongoing existence, as well as the physical location, can be considered a site to which that work is specific. As the site changes, so does the content of the work. The artist must determine whether the change of site is acceptable or if the work needs to be altered or destroyed in reaction to the change.

Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, 1980, is a great example of this decision. (Figure 6.) *Tilted Arc* was a massive curve of Corten (weathering) steel installed in the plaza in front of the federal building in New York. The piece was 120 feet long, 12 feet high, and about 2-1/2 inches thick, and bisected the plaza, acting as a barrier between the two sides. In 1989, after a lengthy court battle, the decision was made to move the piece due to protests that the work made the plaza too inconvenient. In response to this decision, Serra chose to destroy the work, concluding that the context of the piece would change too dramatically if it were to be moved.<sup>18</sup>



Two concepts, the ground — what the sculpture is made of or carved from — and the site — the circumstances of the creation of a work and the ongoing existence of that work — have now been examined. At the confluence of these two concepts, an acceptable definition with regards to the context of sculpture can begin to be constructed. This context can be the physical, theoretical, or conceptual environment in which the sculpture exists, with an interdependent relationship between a sculpture and its context. The frame of reference surrounding a sculpture can continue to change long after the form of the sculpture has become fixed: the content of sculpture is continuously shaped. Therefore, the sculpture is inseparable from its context. There are multiple frameworks that will apply to any individual sculptural object (or objects); each one can be referred to as a condition, and the sum of these conditions will hereafter be referred to as the contextual environment of the sculptural object.

To exemplify this condition of sculpture — requiring that sculpture be inseparable from the contextual environment — an examination of some of the early work of Louise



Bourgeois is instructive: one of the pieces from Bourgeois' early *Personages* series is exemplary. *Personages* consists of approximately eighty sculptures created between the early 1940s and 1955.<sup>19</sup> Of this group, one in particular stands out: *Listening One* from 1947. (Figure 7.) *Listening One* consists of two tall slim objects resting on a single low pedestal. The tallest of the two objects measures 6-3/4 feet, including the pedestal, while the other is approximately a foot shorter. The entire piece is made of cast bronze, although the pedestal is painted black and the two objects rising from the pedestal are each painted white. The taller of the two objects is somewhat reminiscent of a piece of driftwood with a rough hewn texture, with a roughly cylindrical cross section, and asymmetrically tapered ends. There is a dimple in the surface approximately a third of the way up what is referred to as the first object, the larger of the two, that mimics the scar left by ripping a branch from the body of a log. Roughly two thirds up this larger object, the artist apparently carved into the body of the piece, creating eight nearly spherical objects, clustered as grapes and arranged in rows, such that there are three spheres in the first and second rows, and two in the third. The very top section of this larger object is unmarred by carving and tapered to a dull cone. The second, smaller, of the two objects is only slightly shorter than the first and maintains the tall and slim sensibility of the first. This second object; the smaller of the two, is, unlike the first, rectangular in cross section. Less than a foot from the base is a small round indent in the surface of the piece, similar to prehistoric cupules.<sup>20</sup> Another such indentation exists about a foot and a half from the top of the shorter object. Spaced evenly between these two cupules is a long shallow indentation on the surface, approximately a foot in length and an inch in depth. The top of this second object appears to be a separate square of material balancing on top. This

piece is a rough and imperfect rectangular block — slightly larger in depth and width than the piece below — about eight inches in height. There is a nearly perfectly rectangular depression in the face of the block, as if someone had pressed a cube into the surface and removed it. The first and second objects stand on the pedestal only a few inches apart. The pedestal consists of three concentric, terraced disks that are approximately three inches each in height.



What makes this piece germane to this discussion is how time is evident within it as a matter of material condition. When the pieces were originally shown, the pieces existed in contrast to the dominant aesthetic of the time. Bourgeois consciously wanted *Personages* to resemble figures and personal relationships at a time when impersonal

and anti-representational minimalism was at its heyday. The scale and proportions of the pieces all are indicative of the human figure, with height and orientation similar to a standing adult human and is in direct opposition to the Formalist dominance in the Post-war era.<sup>21</sup> The original context of the work is, therefore, an expression of defiance and an adherence to the belief that biography could still play a role in sculpture. As more and more of Bourgeois' work, particularly members of the *Personages* series, entered the collections of prominent institutions, the context of the work changed, as did the content.<sup>22</sup>

Even in the formal description of the piece, *Listening One*, contextual cues cannot be avoided. When one object is used to describe another, meaning is transposed between the two. Other aspects of the context for this piece are the prehistoric examples of art (cupules) and the contextual connection to driftwood. These descriptive cues are important in that they form another layer of context for all sculpture. This context is different from the institutional and systemic contexts that were discussed earlier in that the context of *Listening One* is much more personal and the descriptive cues that work for one person may not for the next. This creates a subjective state of context for *Listening One*, a context that is not unique, but is in fact universal to the medium.

Through the exploration of *Listening One*, the context of a piece of sculpture can be seen to profoundly influence the content of that sculpture. Thus, another characteristic by which the medium of sculpture can be defined has been added

The category of sculpture is context specific.<sup>23</sup> The discussion of Bourgeois' work did, rather conspicuously, miss one of the aspects of sculpture previously discussed concerning context: the interdependent relationship between the sculpture and context, where the context informs the sculpture and the sculpture informs the context. The reason

that a discussion of the interdependent relationship has been omitted from this part of the definition is that this statement proposes a much larger question: What does sculpture do?

## What sculpture does: transformation

In the definition of the context of sculpture, the relationship between context and sculpture is defined as inherently interdependent. However, in the previous section, context was solely discussed as a one-way street because of the idea that the environment influences the sculpture is an identifying characteristic of how sculpture exists. This is a reciprocal relationship which leads to a different question: How does sculpture function? An understanding of this question is necessary to move forward because, as currently defined, there are very few objects that could not be considered sculpture. Thus, an investigation of what sculpture *does* becomes necessary in order to identify the differences between object and sculpture. As Gregory Battcock stated, “In a sense, what is most important is [...] what the object *does* — in terms of response — rather than what it *is*.”<sup>24</sup>

We see evidence of what Battcock was talking about in the work of sculptor Scott Burton. Burton’s piece, *Two Part Chair*, is a public sculpture made of green granite and is approximately 40 inches by 23 inches by 36 inches in size. (Figure 9.)<sup>25</sup> *Two Part Chair* is composed of two block of granite, one resembling an uppercase “L” resting on the short leg while the other block resembles a tetris piece; the two pieces nestle together so as to remain standing. The piece can and does function as a chair, but it does not look like a typical chair. In fact, the chair looks like an abstracted act of coitus, the coupling being all that keeps the piece upright. David Getsey, in his book, *Abstracted Bodies*, quotes Scott Burton in regard to Burton’s sculptural chair, “Any chair is useful but a very striking looking chair, something that isn’t like a usual chair [a sculptural chair], can make people perhaps more flexible in their attitudes to accept more things, to become more democratic

about what a chair is. *They may even become more democratic about what a person is* [emphasis added].”<sup>26</sup>



*Two Part Chair* is an example of a sculptural chair, an object that carries the entire context of what is known about chairs through its capacity as sculpture, and questions, confounds, and expands the boundaries of the understanding of a “chair”. This capacity of sculpture is the main idea discussed in *Abstract Bodies*. Getsy suggests that by changing one of the contextual conditions of a piece (or pieces) of art, that piece of art then has the capacity to profoundly change other aspects of the contextual environment to which the piece belongs. In a specific case within the book, Getsy introduces the lens of transgender issues and experience to the contextual environment of specific works. In so doing, Getsy allows those works to redefine the larger context of abstract sculpture — a

context to which those pieces belong.<sup>27</sup> This transformational capacity of sculpture will be examined in more detail through specific works by the sculptor and installation artist, Nadim Abbas.

Nadim Abbas is an installation artist working primarily in somewhat unusual materials. His installation from the New Museum's 2015 triennial, entitled *Chamber 664, Chamber 665, and Chamber 666*, is an example of how sculpture is transformative. (Figure 8.) All three pieces are custom-built biohazard bunkers that tower over the viewer, placed in succession and extending away from the walls. The backside of each bunker, as well as the roof and wall farthest from the gallery wall, is made of thick, cast concrete. The front of each bunker is composed of a steel wall with two large inset glass panels that appear to have once opened, although they are now securely sealed. In each of these panels is a set of black rubber gloves, one set reaching out, one set reaching in. The interior of each bunker is just large enough to contain a single mattress. There is a small storage space along the wall above the mattress, containing personal items from the absent occupants. The interior walls of each bunker are painted a stark white. The sterility of the objects is only slightly mitigated by a lone framed picture in each space. The *Daily Serving's* editorial review of the triennial has this to say about the work, "[the piece is] loaded with an Ebola-era anxiety, the details of each structure lend them a particularly wrenching effect, conveying the desperation of feeling trapped and oppressed."<sup>28</sup>

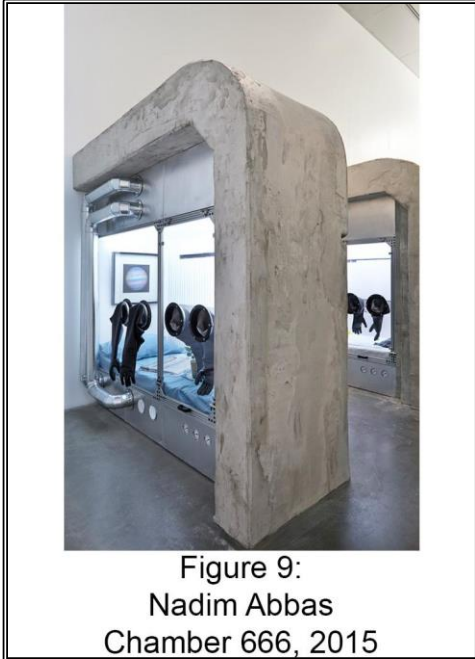


Figure 9:  
Nadim Abbas  
Chamber 666, 2015

*Chamber* is clearly set against many societal contextual conditions: biological warfare, fear of global disease outbreaks, quarantine protocols, immunization politics, the gallery and art institutions (by virtue of being installed in one), and social interaction, to name just a few. All of these things are a context that influences the content of the work; all of these contexts are, to some degree or other, reframed by the work. For example, consider art institutions and immunization. With the first — art institutions — the influence of the institution on the exhibition of the piece(s) is self-evident: by being installed in the New Museum — a relatively new museum in New York — the work is more easily identified as art rather than as an actual biocontainment apparatus. The New Museum, along with other museums such as the Guggenheim, MoMA, The Tate, and others, are obviously prestigious institutions that collect and exhibit works of art. When these institutions include works in their collections, the works are not only labeled as art, but as



important and valuable art. The inverse relationship is perhaps not so obvious, but the piece does reframe the context of art institutions. The viewer can draw connections between the stark white walls inside the bunkers, and the white wall of the gallery space. From this, other conclusions can be drawn, such as a suggestion that art institutions may be as cut off from the outside world as the occupant of the bunker would be. The idea of the art institution must shift to incorporate into itself this aspect of isolation.

The second example, immunization, must include discussions of communicable diseases, with which this piece definitely engages, and the question of immunizations and whether or not they are beneficial. The discussion of immunization is often about whether the preventative measure could result in contraction of the disease, whether being immunized inhibits development of natural immunities, or any number of other concerns. Not discussed is the concept that without immunization, disease is contracted. Abbas' work reframes this particular conversation by highlighting the wretched, isolated desperation of quarantine; his single installation reframes both of these dissimilar contextual conditions, as well as others not discussed here. *Chamber* is an excellent example of what sculpture does: sculpture reframes its own contextual environment.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this investigation has been to develop a reasonable definition of sculpture, one which is not predicated on any relationship to other mediums, but rather on separate, unique traits and conditions: a systematic discussion to define the medium specificity of sculpture. As a result of this investigation, a tentative definition has been attained. The definition has three parts, all are required in order to consider an object to be sculpture.

First, following the definition of space — the environment created by the interaction of two or more actors or objects which, depending on the nature of that interaction, may be broken down into the subcategories of literal space, mimetic space, and abstract space — sculpture engages with space. Second, sculpture is context-specific and inseparable from that context. Finally, sculpture —while being inseparable from the contextual environment — reframes and exerts influence on that contextual environment. Defining sculpture in this way is particularly useful (as opposed to the myriad ways sculpture has been previously defined) because this definition provides a solid way to categorize an object as sculpture or not a sculpture. Using this definition, a toilet in a bathroom can be recognized as not being a sculpture, while a toilet in a field or on a pedestal is a sculpture. The toilet in a bathroom engages in space by virtue of use, and is inseparable from that context, but the toilet in a bathroom does nothing to reframe that context, and the toilet does not change anything by being in a bathroom. A toilet which is placed on a pedestal in a gallery however — as we well know from Duchamp's *Fountain* — changes everything.

## Notes

1. “[w]hat has defined sculpture is not so much a set of self-contained rules or principles, but its status as something other than painting.” Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*.
2. “A capacity is both an ‘active power or force’ and an ‘ability to receive or maintain; holding power’ (OED). A capacity manifests its power as potentiality, incipience, and imminence. Only when exercised do capacities become fully apparent, and they may lie in wait to be activated.” (Getsy, pg. 34)
3. Lefebvra, 1991
4. When one says that art is categorized by its dimensionality, what is meant is that art traditionally falls into one of two categories. Art is either flat, painting or photography for example. Or art is not flat (three dimensional) such as with sculpture.
5. The classic definition of physical dimensions states that there are three: length, width, and height. With this model there is also a fourth dimension, time. This is not to say that there is no discussion as to the veracity of this claim. There are numerous physical and mathematical models that call for more dimensions. M-theory calls for three time dimensions whereas string theory, superstring theory, supergravity theory all call for more physical dimensions: twenty six, ten, and eleven, respectively. Regardless of theories in theoretical physics, three dimensions works for the discussion of the experiential world. Additionally, in the entirety of human history, no two dimensional object has ever been created.
6. There absolutely is a problem with the claim that any painting can be said to obviously be a painting, but that discussion is better saved for a later paper. However, this does highlight the fact that often these distinctions are arbitrary. If something is a painting then it is a painting, but there is no rubric and no explanation for how that “obvious” conclusion was reached.
7. The Rose, 2016
8. Objects and Actors: an object in this context is any inanimate thing that is participating in this interaction which creates space. An actor is any animate thing that participates in the interaction which creates space. These terms are almost interchangeable save for one difficulty—it is problematic to say that an animate thing is a object. This is primarily a semantic difficulty, however for the sake of avoiding engagement with unrelated issues, the term actor is used to avoid “objectifying” people.
9. Kwon, 2004
10. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word context as: The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.

11. Krauss, 1981

12. In this context the ground refers not to the floor but the material upon which, or from which, the sculpture is made. That is to say if one were to carve a face into the wall of a church, the wall would be the ground. The mountainside is the ground for the statues at Mt Rushmore.

13. Krauss, 1981

14. The *Laocoon* is a marble statue that measures approximately six and a half feet high by five feet, four inches wide by three feet, eight inches deep. The statue, unearthed in Rome in 1506, depicts the Trojan priest Laocoon with his two sons, doing battle with a serpent. The Laocoon is considered to be a statue fully in the round. Despite its origins in antiquity, and having been buried for hundreds of years, the Laocoon is remarkably intact. Only a few of the appendages of the various characters have broken off; Laocoon's right hand is missing at the wrist, one of his sons is also missing his right hand at the wrist, and his second son is missing the right arm just below the shoulder. Aside from these instances of damage, the rest of the sculpture is intact. The serpent is the unifying element in the composition, as it wraps around the three human figures, binding them together in their struggle. All three human figures are depicted nude, with athletic builds, and slightly unrealistic musculature. This is particularly true of the sons, who -- based on their size relative to their father -- are adolescents. Despite this however, the sons are heavily muscled, with clearly defined abdominal muscles and broad shoulders. Laocoon and one of the sons are supported by a plinth draped with fabric; both of which are rendered in marble. What then, as the Laocoon is clearly a sculpture fully in the round, makes it function as a relief? We have already touched on part of the answer to this question by mentioning that the Laocoon stems from antiquity. We can reasonably say that the Laocoon has existed for the entirety of the common era, and as such it has stood in silent witness to these last two thousand years of history. This then means that the Laocoon is fundamentally set in the "ground" of the expansive historical period of its existence. This condition of historical grounding is not unique to the Laocoon, the same can be said for all of the sculptures of the era. It is however, still useful to note the existence of this condition with respect to the Laocoon. What is unique to the Laocoon is the place that it has occupied in art theory and criticism over these last two thousand years. This sculpture has been written about from the time of its creation. Pliny the Elder (C.E. 23-C.E. 79), was a Roman author who wrote "Natural History" an early encyclopedia on which many later encyclopedic ventures would be modeled. Pliny wrote this in the thirty seventh volume of his encyclopedia about the Laocoon, "[...]in the case of several works of very great excellence, the number of artists that have been engaged upon them has proved a considerable obstacle to the fame of each, no individual being able to engross the whole of the credit, and it being

impossible to award it in due proportion to the names of the several artists combined. Such is the case with the Laocoön, for example, in the palace of the Emperor Titus, a work that may be looked upon as preferable to any other production of the art of painting or of [bronze] statuary. It is sculptured from a single block, both the main figure as well as the children, and the serpents with their marvellous folds. This group was made in concert by three most eminent artists, Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus, natives of Rhodes.”(Pliny, volume XXXVI) This is but the first example of writings about this sculpture. In the eighteenth century, after the Laocoon was unearthed (C.E. 1506), Gotthold Lessing wrote a treatise on the nature of sculpture and strives to form his own definition of the medium. In this treatise, entitled “Laocoon,” Lessing, in very favorable terms, uses the sculpture to define his position on the nature of sculpture. (Krauss pg. 1) Later, Clement Greenberg wrote “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” to enumerate his opinion of the medium, demanding that sculpture turn away from the history illustrated by the Laocoon, towards abstraction. Greenberg’s student, Rosalind Krauss in 1977 used this sculpture again; this time as the springboard from which she launched her own treatise on sculpture, “Passages in Modern Sculpture.” The list continues, but what points to is the primary way in which the Laocoon functions as a relief. The Laocoon is a relief because it is intractably bound to the trajectory of sculptural theory. Put differently, the Laocoon is a relief that is contextualized in the ground of sculptural theory, while at the same time the Laocoon informs that ground, shaping as point and counterpoint, sculptural theory.

15. In exploring site and site specificity we look again to Miwon Kwon, particularly at her article in the journal “October” from the spring of 1997 titled “One Place after another: Notes on Site Specificity.”

16. Kwon, 1997

17. “[...]reflected on aspects of site-specific practice itself as a ‘site,’ interrogating its currency in relation to aesthetic imperatives, institutional demands, socioeconomic ramifications, or political efficacy. In this way different cultural debates, a theoretical concept, a social issue, a political problem, an industrial framework (not necessarily an art institution), a community or seasonal event, a historical condition, even particular formations of desire, are now deemed to function as sites.”Kwon, 1997

18. Kwon, 1997

19. Rothrum et al. 2016

20. A cupule is a hemispherical petroglyph that is made through some means of carving into a vertical or horizontal surface. The cupule must have been made by humans, and must have been made intentionally. They must also be non-functional—meaning that they are decorative. Cupules are the oldest examples of art, with some having been dated to the early stone age, some two and a half

million years ago.

21. Greenberg's strict doctrine with regards to art praised formalism and abstraction. Greenberg believed that any form of representation was the basest subject matter of art.
22. MoMA, Dia Beacon, Guggenheim, and the Tate Modern, among others, own pieces from Bourgeois's *Personages* series.
23. The context of a sculpture is the physical or theoretical/conceptual environment (or site) in which that sculpture is set. In terms of relief the context is the ground of that relief.
24. Battcock, 1968
25. Getsy. 2015
26. Taken from a 1980 recording between Scott Burton and Edward Brooks de Celle. The recording is in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. Emphasis: David Getsy
27. David Getsy, in his book Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender examines the works of David Smith, John Chamberlain, Nancy Grossman, and Dan Flavin through the lens of trans theory. In doing so, Getsy sets up a system where the whole of abstract art can be recontextualized as bodily and representational; as opposed to the strict formalism and non-representation that was the dominant force of the time.
28. Wilson, 2015

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"The Auction" , Contemporary Arts Center, Las Vegas- February 25 through March 4th, 2016

"Expanded", LVCCLD Gallery, Las Vegas-November 2015

"Out of Vegas", CCA gallery, San Francisco- February 2015

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"Charity Tsunami Relief Auction", Hall Gallery, Arcata, CA- Fall 2010  
"Associated Student Sculptors Group Show", Foyer Gallery, Arcata, CA- Fall 2010  
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"Art exhibit challenges how we process information", Alexander Steffanus, The Scarlet & Gray Free Press. March 27, 2017

"Between the Black and White", Ken Weiderman, The North Coast Journal. September 5, 2013

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