

the PARIS REVIEW

Objects Are What We Aren't

February 26, 2015 | by Andy Battaglia

Carl Andre's sculptures are "plainly, inescapably there."



The train ride upstate to Beacon, New York, is all geometry and noise, lines cutting through the countryside so that materials—wood, iron, steel—can do their churning work. From Grand Central Station, that palatial space with marble floors and walls of artificial stone, it's an hour-and-a-half trip to Dia:Beacon, an art museum in a former cardboard-box factory. Through the window, ice flows, steam billows from a nuclear plant, and craggy rocks rise up across the Hudson River. Inside is a mass of plastic—vinyl seats creaking with every clack on the tracks.

It's wise to be mindful of materials while en route to see art by Carl Andre, whose sculpture occupies Dia:Beacon in a monumental retrospective, "Carl Andre: Sculpture as

Place, 1958–2010,” through March 9. Materiality is the matter at hand, even in pieces that suggest otherwise. There’s materiality and then more materiality, abetted by still more materiality for good measure.

The effect is not as abstract as it might seem, though matters of the mind play a part in the whole of the show. It’s more an open invitation to look and reflect—to wonder at what might be at work in an experience as elemental as observing objects in space.

In *The Names*, Don DeLillo writes,

Maybe objects are consoling. Old ones in particular, earth-textured, made by other-minded men. Objects are what we aren’t, what we can’t extend ourselves to be. Do people make things to define the boundaries of the self? Objects are the limits we desperately need. They show us where we end. They dispel our sadness, temporarily.

The objects here appear less than entirely concerned with a viewer’s emotional state. But indifference is not disdain, and walking around them can offer consolation, if that is what one seeks. Walking *on* them, too—as the showgoer is encouraged to do with certain of Andre’s sculptures laid flat on the floor—makes for certain peculiarities of mood. In the exhibition catalogue, curator Yasmil Raymond writes of Andre’s habit for evoking the “solemnity and intimacy typically reserved for monuments, graveyards, tombs, and shrines, thus transforming the experience of art into a visit to a ‘place’ where one enacts an unrepeatable event.”

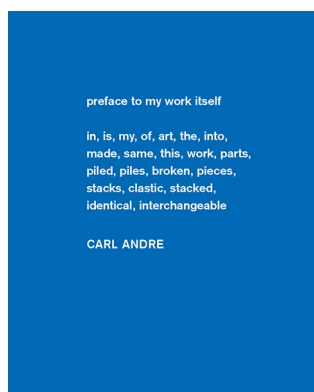
Andre’s favored media include steel, iron, copper, lead, zinc, magnesium, hay, and blocks of wood, among many other things. In the early sixties, his declarative arrangements of them guided what would come to be known as minimalism, with their ability to conjure so much by such minimal means. An arrangement of things on the floor, laid out with the right mix of meticulousness and deference to the inner life of materials, could communicate. It could spread and sprawl and have an invisible height to it, or at least suggest a sense of rising into space that needn’t be sullied by actually, literally, being risen into. It could define and command space without necessarily occupying it, all by intimation.

Andre’s art also, more simply, abides. While finding his way as a sculptor, he worked as a brakeman and conductor for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and his handle on materials is anything but dainty. Sculptures with titles like *Uncarved Blocks* or *Copper-Aluminum Plain* are just that. One of the thrills of the Dia:Beacon show is relaxing into the pure, simple earthiness of the materials on display: rusting steel, cracked wood, sand-lime brick shedding dust on the floor, bars of droopy aluminum. Andre’s eye for the arresting aspects of such things can be seen in *Quincy*, a stark and resounding artist book he made in 1973. Its pages are on display at Dia:Beacon, and it was reissued last year by Primary Information. The slim volume is nothing but photographs of industrial environmental scenes around Quincy, Massachusetts, where Andre grew up among granite mines and

shipyards. Tumbles of rock and railroad ties abound, with a curious sort of poetry about them.



From a 1962 essay by the artist: “Emerson writes in his *Journal* that all men try their hands at poetry, but few know which their poems are. The poets are not those who write poems, but those who know which of the things they write are poems.” The same applies to the materials that Andre scavenged from the streets of downtown New York. His arrangements of them were crucial, many of them systematic or mathematically derived. But in all cases, it seems, the artist would rather the materials prevail over the sculptural particulars. In a poem (an actual poem) from the early years in the exhibition, Andre writes, “I have licked the enemies of art on the planes of circumstance.”



The catalogue, an impressive tome, shows the work in the show in a sort of exhibition itself. Everything about the book is desirable—blocky blue covers, tactile matte pages, black-and-white archival photos with a sense of a purposeful past. Reading it through on the train, the thought occurs that the documentation of works so minimal and austere might in fact be more appealing than the works themselves. A block of wood is a block of wood, even if it aspires to something else; a block of wood in a photograph set in the art-historical record would seem to have much more going for it.

This was proven intensely wrong upon entering the first of the big main galleries at Dia:Beacon. The immediate impression is one of space—the three core galleries of the Andre show are nearly thirty-two thousand square feet, which is a lot of square feet—and

then a strong need not to move around in it. Bearings must be established, and it might not be incidental that the first work, in the corner, is *Scatter Piece*, an arrangement of seventy-six small things (ball bearings among them) scattered on the floor.

The bigger works assert themselves quickly, though, and the process is as breathtaking as it is difficult to comprehend. In the catalogue, Raymond writes, “The experience of art is a displacement, the crossing of a threshold, or path, whereby we are invited to examine the verticality of bodies in opposition to the ground.” This goes a long way toward an explanation—to the sense of orientation necessary for such disorientation to set in. It’s hard not to feel tall next to Andre’s sculptures, even the tall ones, which aren’t so tall. The short ones, more renowned, couldn’t be shorter. But whatever the height, the most striking aspect of all the works is the way in which they are plainly, inescapably there. Andre’s materials, usually found and not much fussed-over after the discovery, are purely and simply put on display. The act is uncomplicated, and it’s hard to resist the want, or need, to complicate it. You have to respect a piece of wood or rolled steel that can stare you down and leave you scrambling for how to react. In a poem in the show penciled in on graph paper, Andre wrote, “Each of us has some area of competence no matter how small.” It seems the “us” there includes all the materials enlisted.



Poetry figures prominently in the exhibition, to similar effect. Andre’s ideas with letters and words were elemental to the extreme. His typewriter was an instrument no more or less blunt than any other sculptor’s tool. Laid out in vitrines that place pages at an angle just so, his poems—most of them minimalist or in league with “concrete poetry” from the early years—take shape as things, hand-forged, banged around, hammered until done. Some of them, made up of blocks of text, have to be read backward to be parsed or decoded. Others are so simple as to be self-evident. About his poetry, Andre once wrote, “Whole poems are made out of many single poems we call words ... I am trying to recover a part of the poet’s work which has been lost. Our first poets were the namers, not the rhymers.”

On a piece of fabric hanging in the show, he writes, “The job of the artist is to turn dreams into responsibilities.” This sentiment seems to materialize in the most known and important works in the exhibition, a series of arrangements of things flat on the floor. They’re horizontal planes, abysses, the tops of something going downward or the bottoms of towers without the tower part there. Magnesium squares, 144 of them set into a square of their own, make up the piece titled *144 Magnesium Square*. The booklet that accompanies the show describes the large *9 x 27 Napoli Rectangle* as “almost intimidating.” *Twelfth Copper Corner* nudges up to the right angle at the crossing of two walls. Another of the floor pieces, *46 Roaring Forties*, comes with encouragement to walk across its long line of plates of weathered steel.



It would be hard to overstate how strange the sensation of walking across a sculpture is, how enriched by a mix of exaltation and uncertainty over the whole affair. It’s weathered steel, marked by oxidation and anything but rarefied in its arrangement like a walkway— not just *like* a walkway but *as* a walkway, with a stated directive to walk on the thing. It would be heretical not to, negligent, and yet the prospect of doing so remains disconcerting and deeply weird. To be so aware of such a simple act, and in front of museum guards whose job otherwise is to make sure that artworks don’t come even close to getting touched, invites a certain conference with the whole enterprise of making and taking in art. A big point of Andre’s sculpture is its use of materials that are made for other means; their utility is crucial, so much so that the exhibition booklet calls Andre “one of the most radical and egalitarian proponents of art in the twentieth century.”

But the materials retain a certain sanctity, however much they might try to shake off such a fate. Preciousness seems like maybe a betrayal, a sign on the showgoer's part of having not done enough thinking about steel (or maybe too much thinking about steel—it's hard to know). But then that same preciousness—an inclination toward the kind of reverence that attends art—seems in its way the heights so far of the human project.

Either way, the steel is there, and it's fantastic.

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