UNTITLED (SCATTER PIECE) 1968-69 **ROBERT MORRIS**

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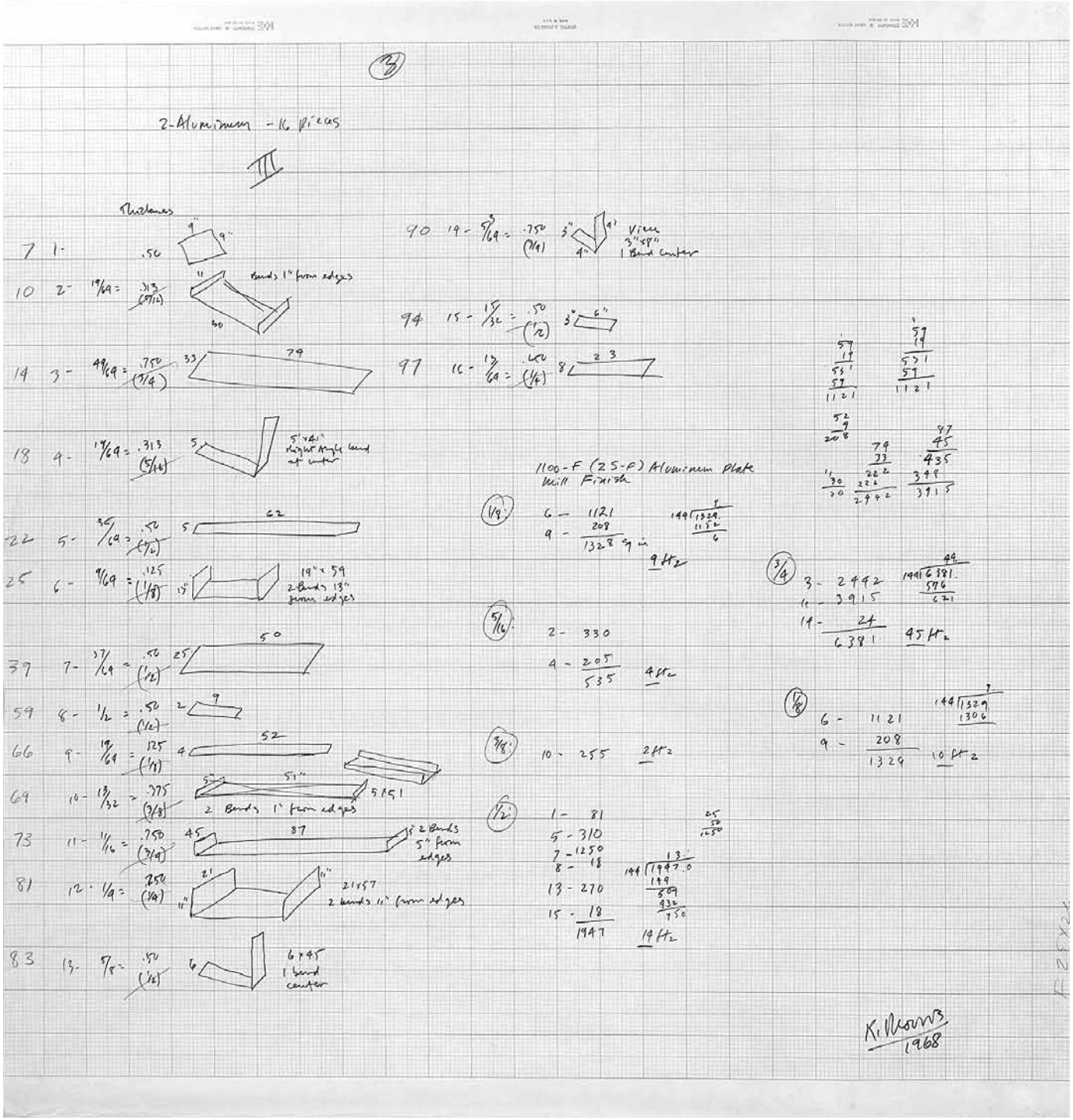

Drawing #3 for Untitled (Scatter Piece), 1968
Pencil and ink on graph paper
26 x 24 3/4 inches

THINGS FALL A P A R T

Jeffrey Weiss

This essay was originally published on the occasion of the exhibition *Robert Morris, Untitled (Scatter Piece), 1968 - 69*
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It may be useful to know that the elements of Robert Morris' *Scatter Piece* were mistakenly disposed of after the work was shown at the Castelli warehouse on West 108th Street in 1969. As a type of installation, the scatter piece is often composed of industrial raw materials distributed in random or seemingly random configurations: pieces strewn or arranged (but not *positioned* per se) across the floor of an open space. Even when the materials are not drawn from refuse and re-purposed for an installation, the very coordinates of the scatter piece are those of the *residuum*: of leavings and debris.

In the case of *Scatter Piece*, the elements were not found, but fabricated for the work, as they have been once more for the present installation. There are 200 of them; half are produced using six metals: steel, lead, zinc, copper, aluminum, and brass; the other half are pieces of industrial felt. The forms and dimensions of the metal elements vary according to possibilities that fall within a pre-established range: each begins as a rectangular plate; some remain flat while others are bent either once or twice at right-angles (forming L-shapes, square-U shapes, and channels). The sets are generated according to chance calculations originally determined by coin toss plus numbers randomly selected from the New York City telephone directory (although the system is inconsistently applied); these govern the length, width, thickness, and number of bends (0, 1, or 2) for each unit. Given its overall weight (altogether roughly two tons), *Scatter Piece* can be said to have introduced considerations that would become more pronounced in installations of the early 'seventies: the strain that such a work — in heft and scale — places on a conventional exhibition space; and the implications of art-making as "mere" labor. To be sure, *Scatter Piece* does not require nearly the same degree of heavy-lifting that was necessary to produce Morris' massive installations of timbers, concrete blocks, and steel plates for a show of new work at the Whitney Museum in 1970. Nor is the distribution of elements significantly motivated — as at the Whitney — by practical considerations of hauling and rigging.[1] Indeed, *Scatter Piece* is at once heavy and light: it exists in the form of a proposition — concerning permutation and chance — whether or not it finally takes material form; and, at Castelli in 1969, its constitution on the floor, while heavy indeed, showed a roughly equal measure of substance and space.

As Morris himself explained in an early essay, the "open, lateral, random" character of a work like *Scatter Piece* obviates the convention of the pre-conceived image. This sort of installation — identified as belonging to the domain of "process" or, as Morris also argued in 1968, "anti form" — means instead to privilege activity over final form. (In this regard, the scatter piece as a category of work is understood to trace back to Jackson Pollock: to the way in which, in Morris's formulation, the "structure" of a drip painting is contingent on the medium's material nature and its submission to the pull of gravity — the fall of liquid paint from the stick to the floor.)[2] In *Scatter Piece*, the disposition of elements is never prescribed; successive installations count as iterations, each to be influenced by the dimensions and configuration of a given space as well as the choices of an installer — it need not be the artist — working within the confines of a few simple rules (elements *can* touch, for example, but may not; and they can be arranged as stacks or heaped into piles). Morris: "There was no image involved; it was a series of calculations, and then it occurred."[3]

What we might call the temporality of *Scatter Piece* was partly conditioned by recent developments in dance, which Morris pursued in collaboration with Simone Forti, Carolee Schneemann, and Yvonne Rainer, among others: the renunciation of narrative and esthetic forms for "found" movements or tasks — walking, running, lifting, turning, falling — often activated according to instructions and pre-determined rules. Rainer called the activity "factual:" "The desired effect was worklike rather than exhibitionlike presentation."[4] In some cases, large, simple objects were incorporated "in such a way that they created obstacles or changed the surface;" in others, ramps or platforms were introduced, heightening the strenuousness of the action; a "situation with rules" motivated a "situation of movement."[5] Images of "Carriage Discreteness," a work of this kind by Rainer from 1966 (commissioned for the *9 Evenings* performance project organized by Billy Klüver), bear a meaningful resemblance to the original photographs of *Scatter Piece*, notwithstanding the disarray of the Castelli installation. During Rainer's work, performers carried various objects from place to place — "cubes, planks, sheets, and beams of materials such as Masonite, wood, Styrofoam, and rubber." (The Styrofoam was supplied by Carl Andre, reminding us that

1 See Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Hard Hats and Art Strikes: Robert Morris in 1970," *Art Bulletin* (June 2007): 333-359.

2 Essays by Morris referred to here are: "Anti Form" (1968); "Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects" (1969); and "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated" (1970); reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1993).

3 Robert Morris, interview with Paul Cummings (1968), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

4 Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or An Analysis of Trio A" (1968), in Gregory Battcock ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 271.

5 Morris, Cummings interview. For the relation of dance to Morris' other work, see also Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989): 81-105.

the coordinates of the floor-bound installation were established in breakthrough work by Andre beginning that year, and that Andre was among the first artists, along with Barry Le Va, to apply scatter as an operative principle for post-object sculpture.) Tasks were instigated by spontaneous instructions delivered via walkie-talkie by Rainer and, when Rainer was taken ill, by Morris.[6]

The relevance of "worklike" performance practice not only identifies *Scatter Piece* as a kind of event,[7] a staged manifestation of physical effort with no fixed goal; it also helps show how "scatter" can be said to reverse a long-held convention of sculptural beholding (first formulated as a critique of the sculptural medium by Charles Baudelaire in 1849): that a sculpture cannot control its conditions of viewing because, as a brute object — unlike a painting — it invites scrutiny from many sides and therefore "fails" to establish and hold a single, preferred vantage. With *Scatter Piece* and related installations, this mobility — a "weakness" for Baudelaire — is exploited: the integruous sculptural object is, so to speak, shattered and made to occupy many places at once. Walking through the work becomes a task-like encounter in actual space and actual time.

Scatter Piece is one of four works simultaneously produced for the Castelli Gallery in March 1969 and exhibited at two locations: the gallery itself, at 4 East 77th Street, and the Harlem warehouse. The best-known of the four is *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, with which *Scatter Piece* shared the warehouse location; the other two works, at 77th Street, are both untitled: one (now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art) consists of thick heaps of "threadwaste" — as well as bits of asphalt, copper tubing, and felt — with inserted mirrors; the other (no longer extant) was comprised of irregular, remnant-like elements of felt and lead distributed in ungainly piles across the floor. The four installations lend synchronous weight to one another: while they are generally discussed as discrete efforts, their concurrence matters.

In this regard, while *Scatter Piece* clearly draws certain terms from a language of contingency we historically associate with John Cage, evidence at the warehouse motivates us to look beyond the Cagean model for a separate condition of uncertainty. In interviews from this period, Morris speaks on and off of frustration and fatigue. With strenuous physical effort as the primary means of process and anti-form, the labor of installation becomes a function of "going through with something" (as opposed to the careful manipulations of material — the "craft" — required for conventional art-making); but interest is sapped by an encroaching sensation of futility, "crushing ennui," even despair. Journal entries written during the production of *Continuous Project* address the medium — so much raw material, including earth, asbestos, grease, felt, water, and a full ton of wet clay, heaved around a room at the Castelli warehouse day in and day out for three weeks, but to what end? — as primal matter. "Perhaps the only real fear is exhaustion. [...] I chart the profile of the course I'm following, the feelings, the changes, the fears, the disgust, the acceptance and the dread." Eventually, associations build: "viscera, muscles, slime, primal energies, afterbirth, feces. The work exists close to these levels."[8] There may be something of staged loathing in all of this, but it does correspond to the floor — the ground — as a precinct of the abject.[9] More, insofar as the materials did not *remind* Morris of viscera and feces so much as they *belonged* to a class of matter that is execrable and rejected, we might describe the materialist impulse of *Continuous Project* as not only downward, but *inside-out*.

All of this is to say that it would be wrong to address *Scatter Piece* at the Castelli Warehouse without accounting for the work that Morris was doing in the next room. For "scatter" has surprising reach: in 1968, Robert Smithson opposed it to "containment" in order to construct a dialectical rationale for the relationship of site to non-site in his own work — for the dispersion of matter at the site (the land) and the consolidation of it in geometric bins in the space of the gallery. With recourse to Anton Ehrenzweig (whose theory of dedifferentiation he drew from one of Morris' essays), Smithson identified

6 See Rainer's original description of the work, in Catherine Morris ed., *9 Evenings Reconsidered: Art, Theatre, and Engineering, 1966* (exh. cat. List Visual Arts Center, 2006): 16-17.

7 Morris's traffic with George Brecht and La Monte Young around 1960 is clearly relevant with regard to the textual or "Event" score, an early model for the activation of chance as a method for the proscription of authorial control. See Brandon W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008): 109-152; and Julia Robinson, "From Abstraction to Model: George Brecht's Events and the Conceptual Turn in Art of the 1960s," *October Issue #127* (Winter 2009): 77-108.

8 Morris, unpublished journal, 1969.

9 What Rosalind Krauss has theorized as the corporeal dimension of "horizontality" after Pollock. See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003): chapt. 6.

previous pages left and right:
Untitled (Scatter Piece), 1968–69
Felt, steel, lead, copper, zinc (plated), copper (plated), aluminum, brass
Indeterminate dimensions
photos: Rudolph Burckhardt

left:
Untitled (Threadwaste), 1968
Threadwaste, asphalt, mirrors, copper tubing and felt
Indeterminate dimensions
photos: Rudolph Burckhardt

scatter not only as raw material, but as "the undifferentiated or unbounded methods of procedure that break with the focused limits of rational technique. Here tools are undifferentiated from the material they operate on, or they can seem to sink back into their primordial condition." Smithson exemplified dedifferentiation, in turn, by citing Tony Smith's now-celebrated account of a night

drive on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike: Smith's sensation in plunging through this vast, dark, unmarked, manmade landscape represents "the primary process of making contact with matter," a "suspension of boundaries between the self and the non-self" — an encounter, finally, with nothing less than the "physical abyss."[10] Scatter signifies unboundedness. It was, then, never solely a medium of chance; it was, in fact, just as much a medium of terror.

What is the progress of *Scatter Piece*? Calculations derived from simple chance operations motivate — but not consistently — the industrial fabrication of 200 elements which are then distributed across the gallery floor in a fashion that is not quite but almost random. Never finished in its form, the only state of "completion" it attains comes with the beholder, whose encounter represents something like the last in a series of contingent operations. (For all that, Morris insists that the work is no less itself when it is in storage than when it is on view.) That the application of systems in the anti-authoritarian era of postminimal art was attended by skepticism and instances of breakdown should come as no surprise; but the personalization of methodological uncertainty — the pull of fear and loathing in the next room — can be startling. Decades later, Morris portrays scatter as a kind of figure, with reference to photographs from *Life Magazine*: "a series of stop action photos [from the 1950s] of a fighter plane disintegrating in flight due to some extraordinary stress or defect of construction. One image showed the pilot sitting, hand on stick, feet on rudder pedals, the gestalt of the plane still there but as so many fragments around him, his body eerily revealed through the interstices of spaces between all the fragments. I recall this image when I think of *Scatter Piece*."[11] In accounting for the physical nature of the installation — open, lateral, random — as being antimonumental, scatter is preceded by shatter.

Could doubt itself — Morris is fond of quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein to this effect — be the germ of a system?[12]

Morris's career is often described as a succession not just of investigations, but of disavowals (conventionally, a dis-integrated practice). Yet, since shortly after *Scatter Piece,* there has been one recurring tenet, itself a radical — therefore active — disavowal: blindness. In 1973, the artist embarked on a strategy (returned to intermittently over the course of the last 35 years) of drawing blind-

folded. The drawings are often produced according to specified protocols concerning procedure and elapsed time. The sheets are always identical in dimension; the medium is powdered graphite (with plate oil), which the artist applies with his hands. The support functions as a confined space; the process, which amounts to calculated groping, portrays drawing — all drawing — as a situation or event. The protocols are rules, but they serve solely to be undone by sightless agency (the abyss is not metaphysical, now, but local), which expresses some semblance of an ethic: the limit conditions of practice — constraints of medium, time and space, sight — are not merely acknowledged, but engaged. ■

above:
Continuous Project Altered Daily, 1969
Earth, clay, asbestos, cotton, water, threadwaste, electric lights, photographs and tape recorder
Indeterminate dimensions
photo: S. Balkin

right:
Untitled, 1969
Felt and aluminum
Indeterminate dimensions
photo: Rudolph Burckhardt

10 Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968), reprinted in Jack Flam ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 102-04.

11 Correspondence with the author, Sept. 16, 2009.

12 Indeed, drawing an analogy between the rules of language and the rules of games, Wittgenstein wrote: "Is there not also the case where we play and — make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them — as we go along. [...] What does a game look like that is everywhere bounded by rules? Whose rules never let a doubt creep in, but stop up all the cracks where it might? — Can't we imagine a rule determining the application of a rule, and a doubt which *it* removes — and so on?" This consideration takes a further, relevant turn: "But that is not to say that we are in doubt because it is possible to *imagine* a doubt. I can easily imagine someone always doubting before he opened his front door whether an abyss did not yawn behind it, and making sure about it before he went through the door (and he might on some occasion prove to be right) — but that does not make me doubt in the same case. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* G.E.M. Anscombe transl., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958): 39e.

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