THE REAPPEARING MASTERPIECE:
RANKING AMERICAN ARTISTS AND ART WORKS
OF THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

David W. Galenson

The Reappearing Masterpiece: Ranking American Artists and Art Works of the
Late Twentieth Century
David W. Galenson
NBER Working Paper No. 9935
August 2003
JEL No. J0, J4

ABSTRACT

A survey of the illustrations in textbooks of modern art produces the startling finding that art scholars consider Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* to be the most important individual work made by an American artist during the past 150 years. More generally, quantifying the evidence of the textbooks reveals the source of the "pluralism," or stylistic incoherence, of American art since the late 1960s. A persistently high demand for artistic innovation has produced a regime in which conceptual approaches have predominated. The art world has consequently been flooded by a series of new ideas, usually embodied in individual works, generally made by young artists who have failed to make more than one significant contribution in their careers. The dramatic and monumental *Spiral Jetty*, made in 1970 by a young artist who was killed soon thereafter while in the process of making his art, has become a symbol for the art of this era.

David W. Galenson
Department of Economics
University of Chicago
1126 East 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
and NBER
sogrodow@midway.uchicago.edu

Late in the summer of 2002, visitors to Rozel Point in Gunnison Bay, the north arm of Utah's Great Salt Lake, reported that *Spiral Jetty* was visible from the lake's shore. The artist Robert Smithson had formed the 1500-foot-long jetty in 1970, using two dump trucks, a tractor, and a front loader to move more than 6,500 tons of mud, salt crystals, and rock.[1] Although Smithson recognized that his creation would be submerged periodically when the lake's level rose, he may have miscalculated how common this would be, for the jetty had been hidden almost continuously since 1972.

The reappearance of *Spiral Jetty* in August of 2002 occasioned little excitement. The *New York Times* did record the event, but only after the passage of several months and then only at a length of less than 750 words.[2] New York's Dia Art Foundation, which now owns *Spiral Jetty*, did not begin selling tickets for admission to view it, and neither the foundation nor any government authority in Utah undertook to pave the 16 miles of gravel roads that lie between Utah State Route 83 and the jetty.[3]

By surveying a large collection of scholarly narratives of the history of modern art, this study will demonstrate that art scholars have implicitly judged *Spiral Jetty* to be not only the dominant American work of art of the late 20th century, but the most important individual work produced by an American artist during the past 150 years. This startling finding raises a number of questions. One is how any work made in 1970, during an era that art historians invariably describe as a time of pluralism, can attain such a prominent position. Another follows from the events of the past year. If *Spiral Jetty* holds such an exalted position in American art history, how can its reemergence have produced so little reaction from the art world?

Quantitative analysis of the history of American art in the late 20th century can help to

answer these questions, by providing a new understanding of the careers and contributions of the

leading artists of the time. More generally, this systematic approach can allow us to perceive the

unifying elements of an era that is usually considered to be characterized only by disunity. Thus

as in similar studies of art in other periods, simple quantitative analysis serves both to pose and

to answer significant new questions.

Artists and Evidence

> In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that
> he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator
> in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally,
> posterity includes him in the primers of Art History.
> Marcel Duchamp, 1957[4]

The goal in choosing the artists to be studied here was to select the most important

American artists from the 1960s to the present. This was done by using six textbooks on the

history of modern art published since 1994.[5] Twenty-five artists who were born between 1930

and 1960 and who lived and worked primarily in the United States had at least one work

illustrated in three or more of these six books. They are listed in Table 1.

Textbooks of art history are also the source of evidence analyzed in this study. This

evidence was drawn from all available books, published in English since 1990, that provide

illustrated surveys of at least the period from 1960 on. A total of 40 such books were found.[6]

The data set for this study was created by listing every reproduction of every work of art shown

in these books by all of the 25 artists in the sample.

A straightforward measure of the importance of a given contributor or contribution to an

intellectual activity is the probability that that person or work will be discussed in the course of

scholarly accounts of the history of that discipline. Counting the illustrations in these 40 surveys

of art history to measure these probabilities for the sample members and their individual works

effectively allows us to draw on the judgments of scores of art scholars concerning which

American artists, and works of art, are considered to have been the most important of the period

studied here.

Rankings: Artists and Works of Art

Table 2 presents the ranking of artists by total illustrations. Two painters, Jasper Johns

and Frank Stella, head the ranking. Yet what is perhaps most striking about the table is its

evidence of the demise of painters as the leading American artists of recent decades. For after

Johns and Stella, the next 11 places in the table are held by artists who are known for work in

media other than painting. Eight of these 11 artists are younger than Johns and Stella, and as will

be seen below, all made their reputations after the two painters. No painter currently under the

age of 65 has his work illustrated in more than 70% of the books analyzed.

Table 3 ranks individual works of art by total illustrations. Like Table 2, it witnesses the

eclipse of painting as the primary source of the advanced art of the late 20th century. Only three

of the top 10 works in Table 3 are paintings, and of these three - all by Johns - only one is a

conventional painting in form, for *Three Flags* is composed of three separate canvases joined

together in layers, and *Target with Plaster Casts* has at its top a row of small boxes that contain

plaster casts of human body parts. In Table 3 as a whole, only seven of the total of 22 works are

paintings, and only three of these are by painters other than Johns.

Table 3 also clearly points to the preeminence of very large works in this period. Among

the five highest-ranked works in the table, in addition to the 1500-foot-long *Spiral Jetty*, Judy

Chicago's *Dinner Party* is 48 feet long, Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* consists of two wings, each 246 feet long, and Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* was 120 feet long. For another work ranked among the top 10 in Table 3, Christo used 6 million square feet of polypropylene fabric to surround 11 of the small spoil islands in Miami's Biscayne Bay with floating pink skirts for a period of two weeks.

Table 3 furthermore contains one dramatic and unexpected fact. Three previous studies have measured the frequency with which the major works of the leading American artists of their time are reproduced in art history textbooks for the appropriate periods. One of these studies found that Thomas Eakins' *The Gross Clinic* was the most-often reproduced work made by any American artist born during 1830-60, a second found that Grant Wood's *American Gothic* was the comparable work made by an American artist born during 1860-1900, and a third found that Willem de Kooning's *Woman I* was the comparable work made by an American artist born during 1900-40.[7] The astonishing result in Table 3 concerns the relative frequency with which *Spiral Jetty* appears in the books surveyed here. *The Gross Clinic* appears in 70% of the books surveyed for that study, *American Gothic* in 48% of the respective texts, and *Woman I* in just 36% of the respective books. Thus *Spiral Jetty*, which appears in 93% of the books surveyed, is by this measure the most important single work made by an American artist during the past 150 years, for it is the work of art most likely to be reproduced in a scholarly narrative of the history of American art.

An Era of Incoherence?

Art scholars consistently characterize the American art world of the 1970s and beyond with the terms "pluralism" and "postmodernism." These words are effectively the scholars' way

of accounting for their difficulty in producing coherent narratives of the art of the past three decades. Thus one scholar observes that "the Pluralism of the seventies... effectively did away with the idea of dominant styles for at least a decade," while another remarks that "Postmodernism is an inclusive aesthetic that cultivates the variety of incoherence."[8] Although the number of artistic movements has proliferated as the number of artists has increased in recent decades, the absence of dominant styles does not mean that there are no coherent trends underlying many of the most important artistic developments of the 1970s and beyond. Tables 2 and 3 help us to perceive some of these broad trends.

The clear demise of painting from a preeminent position as the most advanced of the fine arts occurred within the period considered here. This was accompanied by the proliferation of new hybrid forms of art, a number of which were recognized as new genres in their own right. An example of this, of which *Spiral Jetty* is the prime product, is earth art; others include happenings, performance art, and installation art. Yet both the declining importance of painting and the appearance of new hybrid art forms represented a continuation of processes that originated much earlier, and in fact were operating throughout nearly the entire 20th century.

When Picasso invented collage in 1912 and Braque invented papier collé later the same year, by attaching small pieces of cloth and paper to their canvases, they were not only bringing scraps of waste material into the domain of fine art, but they were violating the integrity of the flat picture plane that had been respected by Western painters since the Middle Ages. This initiated a process in which the distinction between (two-dimensional) painting and (three-dimensional) sculpture would progressively be eroded. In 1913, when Duchamp first presented unaltered manufactured objects as works of art that he called readymades, he was defying the

tradition that art could be created only by the hand of an artist. This began a process that undermined the previously rigid division between fine art and everyday objects. The late 1950s and the 1960s witnessed an intensification of interest both in breaking down the barriers separating painting from other forms of art and in the use of real objects in the creation of works of art. Jasper Johns' use of sculptural and collage elements in his paintings and Robert Rauschenberg's use of found objects in making his combines were both strong proximate influences on many American artists of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s who participated in movements that further advanced these two tendencies.

During the 1960s another tendency appeared, as a number of leading American artists began to challenge the conservative role of museums and galleries in the art world in perpetuating traditional forms of art. Some Minimalist artists of the '60s pursued this agenda by bringing into galleries sculptures made of base material like bricks or lead plates. Other artists began to create outdoor sculptures that could not be brought into galleries - often because they were too large, but in some cases because the artists declared the works to be site-specific, and consequently valid only in the specific locations where they were created and placed.

The trends described above are familiar to students of modern art, for they are staples in accounts of recent developments. A third trend, however, is much less widely recognized, for its importance has only become apparent in light of recent research on artists' careers. This third element is the fact that American art of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s has been dominated by conceptual artists. The conceptual artists in question include not only those of the Conceptual movement of the late 1960s - Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and others - but more generally those artists who work systematically in executing preconceived images or plans,

in order to produce works that communicate specific ideas.[9] By this broader definition most of the leading American artists of the 1970s and beyond appear to have worked conceptually.

The significance of this recognition of the conceptual basis of most of the leading American art of recent decades goes beyond merely identifying a common practice of these artists. For recent research has found that conceptual artists tend to make their most significant contributions early in their careers.[10] This implies that the most important art of the past three decades should be the product of young artists.

Table 4 confirms that this has been the case. The table lists the 20 most important 5-year periods in the careers of the artists in the sample for this study, ranked by total textbook illustrations of the given artist's work in the appropriate period. All of the top 10 periods were completed by the time the respective artists were 35 years old; in the entire table, only two periods were completed when the artist was past the age of 40. Four of the top 10 periods, and 8 of the top 20, were completed before the artist reached the age of 30.[11]

Another characteristic of conceptual artists' innovations is that they appear suddenly, as the product of a new idea, and are quickly embodied in new work. Consistent with this, Table 4 shows that in 14 of the 20 cases, the five-year period identified in the table accounted for more than half of all the illustrations an artist received for all the work of his or her career. This temporal concentration was often extreme, as in no less than six of the cases, the period listed in Table 4 accounted for 90% or more of the artist's total illustrations in the textbooks.

Table 5 gives additional evidence of the effect of the conceptual origins of most of the major works of art in this period, by showing the ages at which artists executed the works listed in Table 3. As in Table 4, the ages are generally low. Twelve of the 22 works were made by

artists in their 20s, whereas only four - less than 20% - were made by artists aged 40 and above. Remarkably, Joseph Kosuth produced *One and Three Chairs*, which is tied for third place in the table, at the age of just 20. No comparably important work of art has been produced by an American artist at such an early age in the past 150 years.[12]

Conceptual Artists at Work

Conceptual artists work systematically, after planning their work carefully in advance. The clarity of their purpose allows them to create individual works that fully embody significant innovations, and that can therefore be understood and appreciated even when seen in isolation from other works by the artist. Because of this, in the modern era conceptual painters have had a great advantage over their experimental counterparts in being able to produce individual large and complicated paintings that are generally recognized as important and successful works, and that can stand alone as milestones in art history.[13] The domination of recent American art by conceptual artists therefore helps to explain why a number of extremely large, and often complex, works stand at the top of Table 3.

The Dinner Party ranks second in Table 3, behind *Spiral Jetty*. To symbolize the neglect of women's achievements by historians, Judy Chicago decided to create a work that would reinterpret the Last Supper from the point of view of women. Because she found she could not reduce the number of guests to 13, she designed the table as a triangle, and tripled that number.[14] Chicago selected women who were representative of particular historical epochs, whose lives embodied some significant achievement, and who had worked in some way to improve conditions for women. After Chicago had planned the work, she assembled a team of people to help her execute it. A total of 400 people - mostly, but not all, women - worked on *The Dinner*

Party over a period of five years.[15] As described in an exhibition catalogue, the work has many

components:

> A triangular table, forty-eight feet per side, is arranged with thirty-
> nine commemorative settings in which sculptural ceramic plate
> forms, with napkins, knives, forks, spoons, and goblets, sit on
> individualized needlework tablecloth runners. Each plate setting
> creates a memorial to the life of an individual woman in history.
> The whole is complemented by the additional 999 names of
> women penned across the 2,300 lustrous triangular tiles that
> comprise the raised floor on which the table sits. *The Dinner Party*
> thus images a collaboration that is a collective or combined history
> of 1,038 women, through a process that was itself collaborative.[16]

In spite of the ambitious nature of its collaborative execution, *The Dinner Party* was a

conceptual work. Chicago herself left no doubt that her conception was the work's message, and

that the process of producing it was secondary: "I am often asked whether the process of creating

The Dinner Party was even more important than the final work of art, and my answer has always

been no."[17] Like the large paintings specifically planned by 19th-century French Salon painters to

be seen in institutional settings, Chicago explained that "*The Dinner Party* was conceived to be

exhibited in major museums."[18] Yet because it was a conceptual work, Chicago discovered that

its message could be communicated even if the work itself was not displayed:

> It was extremely fortuitous that *The Dinner Party* was structured
> so that the information it embodied was able to enter the culture in
> several forms. Consequently, when the work of art was blocked by
> the art system, the book [about the work, written by Chicago]
> brought the concept of the piece to what turned out to be an
> extremely receptive audience.[19]

One and Three Chairs ranks in a tie for third place in Table 3. It consists of a wooden

folding chair, flanked on one side by a life-size photograph of the same chair, and on the other

by an enlarged photograph of a dictionary definition of the word "chair." As a 19-year-old art

student, Joseph Kosuth had given up painting, having decided that "the belief system of the old language of painting had collapsed."[20] Kosuth believed that what the artist now had to do "was to question the nature of art," and he could not do that by painting, since by painting the artist was already accepting the nature of art.[21]

One and Three Chairs was one of Kosuth's earliest efforts at demonstrating how art could move beyond objects into a more purely conceptual realm. The work included a physical object, a visual representation of that object, and a mental representation of the object. Later Kosuth began to omit the first two of these from his work, and provide only the mental representation, in the form of photographs of dictionary definitions of a variety of words.[22]

Kosuth's austere form of conceptual art reflected his understanding of the implications of Duchamp's readymades: "With the unassisted readymade, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said."[23] In the mid-1960s, Kosuth observed that "How things were made was once important. The final object is now important."[24] His early work was among the most radical solutions to the problem that a number of artists of the period were posing, in their desire to produce a less commercial art that would undermine the gallery system, of how to make a more purely conceptual art that did not depend on any specific physical embodiment. Thus Kosuth declared that the objects in his work were unimportant:

> All I make are models. The actual works of art are ideas... It does not matter who actually makes the model, nor where the model ends up.[25]

Kosuth's explicit use of language in his work provided a model for a number of other conceptual artists who were seeking ways to present ideas without making objects. That he could produce a work as influential as *One and Three Chairs* at such an early age was a result of his success at

creating a form of art that embodied a complex idea without requiring extensive experience in the use of traditional artistic methods and materials.

Like *Spiral Jetty* and *The Dinner Party*, *Tilted Arc* gained attention in part for its large size and monumental conception, for it consisted of a curved sheet of steel 120 feet long and 12 feet high. The sculpture was commissioned by the federal government's General Services Administration, and was installed in 1981 in Federal Plaza in New York. After considerable public debate, the work was removed in 1989, in spite of the objections of the artist and many others in the art world.[26]

Ironically, the work's removal was a consequence of Richard Serra's success in using *Tilted Arc* to achieve specific goals he had set for his art. During the 1960s, Serra decided that what he wanted for his work would be "to take it out of the places that are considered the cultural institutions and bring it into greater dialogue, for better or for worse, with the general condition of where people are. My works deal head-on with their architectural sites."[27] From his admiration of Barnett Newman's large canvases in which blocks of color are divided by vertical lines, Serra also decided he wanted "to cut space with sculpture" in a way that the viewer would experience "as you walk or scan the field. It is an experience that unfolds in time."[28] Serra's success in achieving these two goals with *Tilted Arc* - of making viewers confront his work and having that confrontation require a passage of time - became a powerful argument for its removal, as opponents of the work could point to many people who worked in buildings on the plaza who complained that the sculpture inconvenienced them by requiring them to walk out of their way in getting to and from their jobs.

Unlike the other artists whose work ranks highly in Table 3, Serra's approach to art was

not conceptual but experimental. He was one of a group of young artists in the 1960s who were

sometimes called Process artists. His first published article, titled "Verb List, 1967-68," was a

series of active verbs specifying things that could be done to materials: "to roll, to crease, to fold,

to store, to bend, to shorten, to twist..."[29] Serra later recalled his situation at the time:

> I was very involved with the physical activity of making. It struck
> me that instead of thinking about what a sculpture is going to be
> and how you're going to do it compositionally, what if you just
> enacted those verbs in relation to a material, and didn't worry
> about the result? So I started tearing and cutting and folding lead.[30]

Serra has explained that he avoids planning his works:

> I never begin to construct with a specific intention. I don't work
> from a priori ideas and theoretical propositions. The structures are
> the result of experimentation and invention. In every search there
> is always a degree of unforeseeability, a sort of troubling feeling, a
> wonder after the work is complete, after the conclusion. The part
> of the work which surprises me invariably leads to new works.[31]

For Serra, the source of his achievement lay in the process of making the work:

> I can't think my way through a problem; I have to work my way
> through a problem. And that's why I'm interested in building
> things, because often what happens in the process of sustaining the
> effort to build something is that you could not have foreseen what
> you thought the conclusion of what your intention would be. And
> the physical fact of things counts for a lot more to me than the
> thought that doesn't take a physical manifestation.[32]

Because he begins his works with no specific goal, Serra must execute his work himself:

> The building method is based on hand manipulation. A continuous
> hands-on procedure, both in the studio and at the site, ... allows me
> to perceive structures I could not imagine, for retention of physical
> properties is limited.[33]

Serra's experimental approach, and his desire that his finished works reveal the process

of their construction, reflect the powerful influence of Jackson Pollock on his art.[34] But Serra

wanted to extend Pollock's all-over compositions beyond the constraining boundaries of the

picture frame or the gallery, and his friendship with Smithson, whom he helped in laying out

Spiral Jetty, prompted him to make larger works that were designed for specific outdoor

locations.[35] The influence of Smithson contributed both to the monumental size of *Tilted Arc* and

to its demise, for when the government proposed to relocate the work to an alternate site, Serra's

response was unyielding:

> *Tilted Arc* was commissioned and designed for one particular site:
> Federal Plaza. It is a site-specific work and as such not to be
> relocated. To remove the work is to destroy the work.[36]

Thus although *Tilted Arc* is currently in storage, Serra's position remains that *Tilted Arc* is

destroyed.[37]

The *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* might fairly be called "The Masterpiece of the

Unknown Artist."[38] Its appearance in 16 textbooks places it in a tie for third place in Table 3.

Remarkably, no other work by Maya Lin appears in any of the textbooks analyzed for this study.

Lin's design for the memorial originated in an architectural seminar she took in her

senior year at Yale. At the time there was a national design competition for a Vietnam veterans

memorial, and the class, on funeral architecture, took this task as its final design project. Lin and

a few friends traveled to Washington, D.C. to see the intended site for the memorial, and there

Lin had the basic idea for her project: "I had a simple impulse to cut into the earth. I imagined

taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time

would heal." Lin later recalled that when she returned to Yale, "I quickly sketched my idea up,

and it almost seemed too simple, too little." Yet she soon dismissed the idea of making any

additions: "The image was so simple that anything added to it began to detract from it." When

Lin decided to enter the national competition, she found that it took longer to write the required one-page description of her project than it had taken to design the memorial.[39]

Lin's design for the memorial occasioned considerable controversy. One criticism, that a veterans memorial must include a statute of a soldier, was answered by placing a sculpture of three infantrymen near one end of the work. The memorial was otherwise executed according to Lin's design, and it was dedicated in the fall of 1982, just eighteen months after Lin graduated from college.

In the two decades since she designed the Vietnam memorial, Lin has pursued a career as an architect and sculptor. A recent book about women artists observed that "Now a beneficiary of a stream of commissions, this still-young master designer is riding her good fortune, turning out institutional and private projects while also making the individual sculptures to which she attaches such importance."[40] Yet the present study demonstrates that from the vantage point of art scholars Lin's career consists of a single work, that has been described by one scholar as "one of the most compelling monuments in the United States."[41] That a 20-year-old artist could conceive an idea that would be completely embodied in a single major work, and not be followed by any others deemed significant by art scholars, is a quintessentially conceptual phenomenon. Lin's procedures still reflect her conceptual approach: "I begin by imagining an artwork verbally... I try not to find the form too soon. Instead, I try to think about it as an idea without a shape."[42] Her plans for her works "are made instantaneously. Sometimes I just wake up and without really thinking make a model."[43]

American Icon

The questions posed earlier about *Spiral Jetty* remain to be answered. Table 3 documents

its remarkable position among art works of this era: not only does it appear in 93% of the books surveyed, but it is the only work of the era that appears in more than half of those books. How is it that an individual work from a pluralist era can emerge so clearly as a dominant work, and in view of the fact that it has, why is there not more excitement about the fact that the work can now be seen for the first time in three decades?

The ability of Smithson to create a preeminent work in 1970 in fact was a consequence of the conceptual orientation of the art world of the time. The secret of Smithson's success with *Spiral Jetty* appears to have been that in that single work he incorporated a remarkable number of the central themes of the advanced art of the 1960s. More generally, in a diverse body of work - monumental outdoor sculptures, small indoor exhibits that documented these, published explanations of his work, and photographs and films of the works - Smithson created a complex oeuvre that could represent many different things to different people. The dense and obscure nature of much of Smithson's writing about his work and his vision of art makes it impossible to catalogue its contents in any systematic way, but some central elements can be clearly identified.

Smithson's approach to art was archetypally conceptual. In one of the simplest statements he made about his work, he told an interviewer that "An object to me is the product of a thought."[44] The remarkable feature of his work is the surprisingly large number of thoughts he was able to associate with the objects he created. *Spiral Jetty* is the outstanding example of this, but many of the following generalizations apply to all his works.

The actual shapes of his sculptures were simple. In this they drew on Minimalism, which was the leading American art movement of the late '60s. Many art scholars in fact categorize Smithson's work as "Post-Minimalist."[45] Smithson put his stamp on this borrowing, however,

by the scale of his works - he made Minimalism larger, more monumental, and often more elegant.

In the placement of his monumental works in the landscape, Smithson was a pioneer of earth art. He was the first to use the term "earthwork" for the large objects that he and a few other artists created in remote areas.[46] *Spiral Jetty* became the trademark work of this movement.

The placement of art works in remote areas drew on the anti-gallery sentiment that was shared by many young advanced artists of the late '60s. Although Smithson regularly participated in gallery shows, where he displayed written texts, photographs, stones, and other documentation of his earthworks, his major works appeared to symbolize the rejection of the gallery-museum system in their scale and inaccessibility.

Smithson's work also defied the traditional canon of art, as did much other art of his time. Not only were his sculptures made of such base materials as dirt and stones, but their size and location required viewers to experience them over longer periods of time than fine art had traditionally required. In his writings Smithson vigorously attacked traditional divisions between the arts, and denounced critics who wished to maintain the formalist purity of painting and sculpture.

Smithson included written texts in many of the gallery presentations of his work. This followed the practice of Joseph Kosuth and other advanced conceptual artists of the '60s. More generally, Smithson was a prolific author, initially of art criticism, and later of programmatic statements about his work and his vision of art. In this Smithson's practice reflected a vital tradition of modern art, for since the time of Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism, in the first few decades of the 20th century, the impact of conceptual art movements has been greatly

enhanced by manifestos written by the artists themselves. Smithson's manifestos surpassed all such earlier documents in the great range of subjects they touched on and the remarkable variety of the symbols they cited for particular works. Smithson's writings about art combined, often in baffling ways, his interests in entropy, archeology, science fiction, physics, dinosaurs, geology, cartography, modern painting, technology, philosophy, and a host of other subjects. He provided not one or two symbolic meanings for specific works, but many more. So for example in an essay on *Spiral Jetty*, he associated its spiral shape variously with the solar system, the molecular structure of the salt crystals found in the Great Salt Lake, Brancusi's sketch of James Joyce as a "spiral ear," the spiral of the reels of the movie film he used to document the work, the propeller of the helicopter he used to survey the work, a painting by Jackson Pollock titled *Eyes in the Heat*, the ion source of a cyclotron, ripples in the water of the Great Salt Lake, and other images that are presented in rapid-fire prose that seems intended to document Smithson's thought processes.[47] The wide variety of suggested symbolic meanings considerably increases the intellectual appeal of *Spiral Jetty*, for art scholars are not constrained to any specific symbolic interpretation, but can instead choose from this cluster one or more that appeal to them.

Smithson made extensive use of photography in presenting his work, in numerous ways. An early published article about his excursion into a suburban wasteland was accompanied by still photographs he himself took with his Instamatic camera.[48] Their inelegant snapshot quality reinforced the unaccented prose that describes his progress through the unattractive and banal landscape. Later he also used movies in much more sophisticated fashion, as for example the construction of *Spiral Jetty* was filmed by a professional photographer according to detailed plans Smithson made for that treatment.[49] But perhaps the most important photographs of

Smithson's work were the dramatic stills of *Spiral Jetty*, in a number of which Smithson himself appears as a solitary standing human figure, dressed in black, silhouetted against the barren landscape of the shore of the Great Salt Lake.

All of the preceding characteristics of Smithson's practice and his art appear to have contributed to making *Spiral Jetty* an anomaly, a unique synthetic work in an artistic era that defied synthesis. Yet the reputation of the work has also been increased by the circumstances of Smithson's tragic death. Smithson died in 1973, at the age of just 35, when the small plane from which he was filming the staked-out plans for his latest work crashed into a hillside, killing the pilot, the owner of the Texas ranch where the work was to be situated, and Smithson.[50] Smithson's premature death, in the process of making art, added poignancy to the images of the brilliant and articulate young artist who created monumental works in remote and desolate places.

Spiral Jetty thus appears today as a work that stands for its time, made by a cherismatic young artist who worked on a grand scale and who sacrificed his life for his art. In view of this, in today's atmosphere of media-star artists and blockbuster museum exhibitions, why is *Spiral Jetty* the subject of so little fanfare?

The answer to this puzzle seems to lie in the fact that, in part as a consequence of the efforts of conceptual artists of recent decades, photographs are now widely accepted as adequate representations of many works of art. As discussed above, Joseph Kosuth presented photographs of written texts as sufficient representations of, or substitutes for, objects. Early in his career, Robert Smithson appears not to have regarded photographs and other documentation of his earthworks as works of art in their own right, but as time went on he apparently realized that

these secondary representations could not only enhance the appreciation of the primary works, but could become part of their meaning, embodying the same ideas as the object they portray. His careful attention to the filming of *Spiral Jetty* served to make the film "both a record and a representative work by Smithson."[51] The availability of this film and of the dramatic still photographs of *Spiral Jetty*, in combination with the considerable difficulty involved in traveling to the actual site, appear to account for the fact that it could become the greatest masterpiece that few people have ever seen, and why today *Spiral Jetty* may be the destination for handfuls, but not busloads, of artistic pilgrims.[52]

The Disappearing Master

This investigation points strongly to the underlying source of the lack of coherence emphasized by art historians in describing American art of the 1970s and beyond. As many in the art world have observed, during this time there has been a persistently high demand for artistic novelty and innovation.[53] This has produced a regime in which conceptual approaches, which can quickly create new results, have been preeminent. The result has been that the advanced art world has been flooded by a series of new ideas, usually embodied in individual works, and in most cases created by young artists who have failed to make more than one significant contribution in their careers.[54] American art in the last three decades of the 20th century has therefore produced more masterpieces than masters.

Perhaps the most telling quantitative evidence of this phenomenon comes from Table 4. In that table, which effectively ranks the most important periods in the careers of the most important American artists of this era, only three artists have more than a single entry. Of these three, Jasper Johns and Frank Stella had completed their two five-year periods listed in the table

before they reached the age of 35.[55] Only Richard Serra, whose second entry in the table spans the ages 38-42, managed to make one of his two significant contributions even partly in his fifth decade.

With the exception of Serra, American art in the late 20th century appears to have produced no great experimental innovators whose work developed over an extended period. Nor with the possible exceptions of Johns and Stella has American art in this era produced great conceptual innovators who made more than one important contribution. Now, with Johns, Serra, and Stella all past the age of 60, we continue to wait to see whether any younger American artist or artists can develop into figures whose entire careers can attract the attention of art scholars.

Footnotes

1.   Smithson 1996, 146; Robins 1984, 84-85.

2.   Kimmelman 2002.

3.   For directions on how to reach *Spiral Jetty*, see Case 2003. No one appears even to know how many people visit *Spiral Jetty*. In phone conversations of July 10, 2003, neither John Bowsher, administrator of arts programs at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, nor the Acting Chief Ranger at the Golden Spike National Historic Site in Utah - which anyone driving to *Spiral Jetty* must go through - was able to give even a rough estimate of the number of visitors. (The rangers at Golden Spike NHS do recommend that only 4-wheel-drive vehicles be used to make the trip to *Spiral Jetty*, because the gravel road has many large lava rocks embedded in it.)

4.   Duchamp 1989, 138.

5.   See the appendix.

6.   See the appendix for a listing.

7.   Galenson 2002a, Table 2; Galenson 2002c, 119; Galenson 2003, Table 3.

8.   Robins 1984, 1; Fineberg 2000, 365.

9.   Galenson 2001, Chapter 5.

10.   Galenson 2001.

11.   The generally young ages in Table 4 might be attributed to the bias of the textbooks against recent work. Some bias is inevitable, if only because some of the books analyzed were published early in the 1990s, so obviously could not present later work. And Table 4 contains no period in any artist's career that runs past 1990. Yet the same is not true for the late 1980s, for the table does contain two periods from that time, as Jeff Koons' work from 1985-89 ties for 7th place, and Jenny Holzer's work from 1986-90 ties for 12th. In 1985, 10 of the artists in the sample were 45 or older, yet none appears in Table 4 for work done after that age.

12.   Galenson 2002a, 2002c, 2003.

13.   E.g. see Galenson 2002b.

14.   Chicago 1979, 11-12.

15.   Sackler 2002, 118.

16.   Sackler 2002, 118-19.

17.   Chicago 1996, 57.

18.   Chicago 1996, 118.

19.   Chicago 1996, 78.

20.   Kosuth 1991, 90.

21.   Kosuth 1989, 13.

22.   Wheeler 1991, 248.

23.   Kosuth 1991, 18.

24.   Kosuth 1991, 3.

25.   Kosuth 1991, 3.

26.   For a review of the debate, see Senie 2002.

27.   Serra 1994, 188.

28.   Serra 1994, 280.

29.   Serra 1994, 3.

30.   Tomkins 2002, 57.

31.   Serra 1994, 167.

32.   Sylvester 2001, 302.

33.   Serra 1994, 168.

34.   Serra 1994, 113; Kimmelman 1998, 55-64.

35.   Serra 1994, 114, 159.

36.   Serra 1994, 194.

37.   Serra 1994, 194.

38.   Also see Galenson 2002d, 77-79.

39.   Lin 2000, 4:08-4:11.

40.   Munro 2000, 485-86.

41.   Stokstad and Grayson 1995, 1162; also see Beardsley 1998, 124-25.

42.   Lin 2000, 3:05.

43.   Lin 2000, 3:07.

44.   Smithson 1996, 192. This sentence appears slightly differently in a book edited by the interviewer: "An object to me is a product of thought;" Alberro and Norvell 2001, 124. Preference is given here to the version quoted in the text, which was edited by Smithson (see Smithson 1996, 192), but for the point made here the difference is insignificant.

45.   E.g. Sandler 1996, 58-62.

46.   Smithson apparently took the term from a science fiction novel by Brian Aldiss, titled *Earthworks*; Smithson 1996, 68.

47.   Smithson 1996, 143-53.

48.   Smithson 1996, 70.

49.   Hobbs 1981, 194-95.

50.   Robins 1984, 85.

51.   Alloway 1975, 231-35; Shapiro 1995, 154-59; Alberro and Norvell 2001, 128.

52.   For discussion see Alloway 1984, 258-59.

53.   E.g. see Tomkins 1988, 88; Hughes 1992, 401-04; Danto 1994, 85-86; Sandler 1996, 443.

54.   For fully 8 of the 25 artists studied here, including such highly-ranked artists as Johns and Sherman (who are both in the top 5 in Table 2), the earliest year from which any of their work is reproduced in the textbooks is their single year with the largest number of illustrations.

55.   On the conceptual approaches of Johns and Stella, see Galenson 2002c.

References

Alberro, A. and P. Norvell. 2001. *Recording Conceptual Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Alloway, L. 1975. *Topics in American Art Since 1945*. New York: W W. Norton.

Alloway, L. 1984. *Network*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.

Beardsley, J. 1998. *Earthworks and Beyond*, Third edition. New York: Abbeville Press.

Case, W. 2003. "Pink Water, White Salt Crystals, Black Boulders, and the Return of Spiral Jetty." *Utah Geological Survey Notes* 35 (1).

Chicago, J. 1979. *The Dinner Party*. Garden City New York: Anchor Books.

Chicago, J. 1996. *Beyond the Flower*. New York: Penguin Books.

Danto, A. 1994. *Embodied Meanings*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Duchamp, M. 1989. *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Da Capo Press.

Fineberg, J. 2000. *Art Since 1940*. Second edition. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Galenson, D. 2001. *Painting outside the Lines: Patterns of Creativity in Modern Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Galenson, D. 2002a. "The Methods and Careers of Leading American Painters in the Late Nineteenth Century." Unpublished paper, University of Chicago.

Galenson, D. 2002b. "Quantifying Artistic Success: Ranking French Painters - and Paintings - from Impressionism to Cubism." *Historical Methods* 35 (1): 5-20.

Galenson, D. 2002c. "Was Jackson Pollock the Greatest Modern American Painter? A Quantitative Investigation." *Historical Methods* 35 (3): 117-28.

Galenson, D. 2002d. "Measuring Masters and Masterpieces: French Rankings of French Painters and Paintings from Realism to Surrealism." *Histoire et Mesure* 17 (1-2): 47-86

Galenson, D. 2003. "Before Abstract Expressionism: Ranking American Painters and Paintings of the Early Twentieth Century." Unpublished paper, University of Chicago.

Hobbs, R. 1981. *Robert Smithson*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hughes, R. 1992. *Nothing If Not Critical*. New York: Penguin.

Kimmelman, M. 2002. "Out of the Deep." *New York Times Magazine*, October 13.

Kosuth, J. 1989. *Joseph Kosuth Interviews*. Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwartz.

Kosuth, J. 1991. *Art After Philosophy and After*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lin, M. 2000. *Boundaries*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Munro, E. 2000. *Originals*. New edition. New York: Da Capo Press.

Robins, C. 1984. *The Pluralist Era*. New York: Harper and Row.

Sackler, E., editor. 2002. *Judy Chicago*. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications.

Sandler, I. 1996. *Art of the Postmodern Era*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Senie, H. 2002. *The Tilted Arc Controversy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Serra, R. 1994. *Writings, Interviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shapiro, G. 1995. *Earthwards*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Smithson, R. 1996. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stokstad, M. and M. Grayson. 1995. *Art History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Sylvester, D. 2001. *Interviews with American Artists*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Tomkins, C. 1988. *Post- to Nio-: The Art World of the 1980s*. New York: Penguin.

Tomkins, C. 2002. "Man of Steel." *New Yorker*, August 5. 52-63.

Wheeler, D. 1991. *Art Since Mid-Century*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Appendix: The 41 books surveyed for this study are listed here, ordered alphabetically by author's surname. The six books also used to select the artists for the study are indicated by asterisks.

1.   *Adams, Laurie Schneider, *A History of Western Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

2.   Archer, Michael, *Art Since 1960*, 2e (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

3.   Arnason, H. H.; Marla F. Prather, and Daniel Wheeler, *History of Modern Art*, 4e (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998).

4.   Baigell, Matthew, *A Concise History of American Painting and Sculpture*, Revised edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

5.   *Bjelajac, David, *American Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001).

6.   Blistène, Bernard, *A History of 20th-Century Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

7.   Bocola, Sandro, *The Art of Modernism* (Munich: Prestel, 1999).

8.   Britt, David, ed., *Modern Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

9.   Craven, Wayne, *American Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

10.   Dempsey, Amy, *Art in the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

11.   Doss, Erika, *Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

12.   Fineberg, Jonathan, *Art Since 1940*, 2e (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000).

13.   Fleming, William, *Arts and Ideas*, 9e (Forth Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995).

14.   Gilbert, Rita, *Living with Art*, 5e (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1998).

15.   Honour, Hugh, and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts*, 5e (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).

16.   *Hopkins, David, *After Modern Art, 1945-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

17.   *Hughes, Robert, *American Visions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

18.   Hunter, Sam, and John Jacobus, *Modern Art*, 3e (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992).

19.   Janson, H. W., and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art*, 5e (New York: Harry N. Abrams,

1997).

20.	Kleiner, Fred; Christin Mamiya, and Richard Tansey, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (New York: Thomson Wadsworth, 2001).

21.	Lucie-Smith, Edward, *Visual Arts in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

22.	Lucie-Smith, Edward, *Movements in Art Since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001).

23.	Marceau, Jo, ed., *Art: A World History* (New York: DK Publishing, 1998).

24.	Parmesani, Loredana, *Art of the Twentieth Century* (Milan: Skira, 2000).

25.	Pohl, Frances K., *Framing America* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

26.	Preble, Duane; Sarah Preble, and Patrick Frank, *Artforms*, Seventh edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice -Hall, 2002).

27.	Richter, Klaus, *Art from Impressionism to the Internet* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).

28.	Two books treated as one:
Sandler, Irving, *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).
Sandler, Irving, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

29.	Silver, Larry, *Art in History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993).

30.	Sprocatti, Sandro, *A Guide to Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992).

31.	*Stokstad, Marilyn, *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

32.	Strickland, Carol, and John Boswell, *The Annotated Mona Lisa* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992).

33.	Tamplin, Ronald, ed., *The Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

34.	Tesch, Jurgen, and Eckhard Hollmann, eds., *Icons of Art: the 20th Century* (Munich: Prestel, 1997).

35.	Tobler, Jay, ed., *The American Art Book* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999).

36.	Walther, Ingo F., ed., *Art of the 20th Century*, 2 Vols. (Cologne: Taschen, 1998).

37.	Wheeler, Daniel, *Art Since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991).

38.	*Wilkins, David; Bernard Schultz, and Katheryn Linduff, *Art Past, Art Present*, 3e (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

39.	Wood, Paul; Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris, and Charles Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

40.	Yenawine, Philip, *How to Look at Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991).

Table 1: Artists Included in this Study

Artist	Year of birth	Year of death
Andre, Carl	1935	
Basquiat, Jean-Michel	1960	1988
Chicago, Judy	1939	
Christo (Christo Javacheff)	1935	
Close, Chuck	1940	
Estes, Richard	1936	
Fischl, Eric	1948	
Graves, Nancy	1940	1995
Haacke, Hans	1936	
Halley, Peter	1953	
Hesse, Eva	1936	1970
Holzer, Jenny	1950	
Johns, Jasper	1930	
Koons, Jeff	1955	
Kosuth, Joseph	1945	
Kruger, Barbara	1945	
Lin, Maya	1960	
Nauman, Bruce	1941	
Schnabel, Julian	1951	
Serra, Richard	1939	
Sherman, Cindy	1954	
Smithson, Robert	1938	1973
Stella, Frank	1936	
Tansey, Mark	1949	
Turrell, James	1943	

Source: see text.

Table 2: Ranking of Artists by Total Illustrations

Artist	Total illustrations
1 Johns	108
2 Stella	73
3 Smithson	56
4 Christo	53
5 Sherman	46
6 Serra	44
7 Nauman	43
8 Hesse	36
9 Andre	35
10 Kruger	31
11t Holzer	30
11t Koons	30
11t Kosuth	30
14 Schnabel	28
15 Haacke	27
16t Close	26
16t Estes	26
18 Fischl	23
19 Chicago	21
20 Basquiat	20
21 Graves	19
22t Halley	16
22t Lin	16
24 Turrell	14
25 Tansey	8

Source: This and subsequent tables are based on the data set constructed for this study.
               See text and appendix for description.

Table 3: Ranking of Works of Art by Total Illustrations

Rank	Illustrations	Artist, Title	Date
1	37	Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*	1970
2	19	Chicago, *The Dinner Party*	1979
3t	16	Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*	1965
3t	16	Lin, *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*	1982
3t	16	Serra, *Tilted Arc*	1981
6	13	Johns, *Three Flags*	1958
7	12	Johns, *Flag*	1955
8t	10	Christo, *Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida*	1983
8t	10	Holzer, *Installation*	1989
8t	10	Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*	1955
11t	8	Johns, *Painted Bronze*	1960
11t	8	Nauman, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*	1970
13t	7	Christo, *Running Fence*	1976
13t	7	Close, *Self-Portrait*	1968
13t	7	Hesse, *Hang-Up*	1966
13t	7	Johns, *Target with Four Faces*	1955
13t	7	Kosuth, *Art as Idea as Idea*	1966
13t	7	Stella, *Die Fahne Hoch*	1959
19t	6	Fischl, *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog*	1982
19t	6	Haacke, *Condensation Cube*	1965
19t	6	Haacke, *Shapolsky et. al., Manhattan Real-Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*	1971
19t	6	Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*	1979

Table 4: Ranking of Five-Year Periods in Artists' Careers, by Total Illustrations

Artist	Dates	N	% of Artist's Total Illustrations	Ages
1 Johns	1955-59	64	59%	25-29
2 Smithson	1967-71	55	98	29-33
3 Hesse	1966-70	34	94	30-34
4 Stella	1959-63	29	40	23-27
5 Kosuth	1965-69	27	90	20-24
6 Stella	1964-68	26	36	28-32
7t Andre	1966-70	25	71	31-35
7t Koons	1985-89	25	83	30-34
7t Sherman	1977-81	25	54	23-27
10 Johns	1960-64	24	22	30-34
11 Nauman	1966-70	23	53	25-29
12t Holzer	1986-90	21	70	36-40
12t Serra	1967-71	21	48	28-32
14t Basquiat	1980-84	20	100	20-24
14t Chicago	1979-84	20	95	40-44
16 Serra	1977-81	19	43	38-42
17 Schnabel	1980-84	17	61	30-34
18t Fischl	1981-85	16	70	33-37
18t Lin	1980-84	16	100	20-24
20 Kruger	1981-85	15	48	36-40

Table 5: Ages at which Artists Executed Works Listed in Table 3

Rank	Artist	Age
1	Smithson	32
2	Chicago	40
3t	Kosuth	20
3t	Lin	22
3t	Serra	42
6	Johns	28
7	Johns	25
8t	Christo	48
8t	Holzer	39
8t	Johns	25
11t	Johns	30
11t	Nauman	29
13t	Christo	41
13t	Close	28
13t	Hesse	30
13t	Johns	25
13t	Kosuth	21
13t	Stella	23
19t	Fischl	34
19t	Haacke	29
19t	Haacke	35
19t	Sherman	25