

# SCULPTURE AS

## PIQUE

ROBIN PECK

"Memorial"

Or Gallery, Vancouver

May 20-June 1

Carl Andre's aphoristic history of twentieth century sculpture, titled "Course of Development"<sup>1</sup>, is not as well known as Donald Judd's views on the same subject. Nevertheless it is recognizable in an emended form in the introduction to the text that accompanies Robin Peck's recent sculpture installation, *Memorial*:

Sculpture as Form  
Sculpture as Structure  
Sculpture as Place  
Sculpture as Memory

Peck has added the last line. His text goes on to describe the specific details of the development of *Memorial*:

The memory of the installation August-September, 1984, at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, is conditioned by the facts of its public representation.

The CAG installation developed from the destruction of an obstructive wall, 10 ft. x 8 ft. x 4 in. thick. The demolished wall provided the material for a set of topologically positive representations of a topologically negative volume: the new gallery created by the removal of the wall. Public reaction to the installation consisted of two exhibition reviews in Vancouver Art Magazines: *Issue* (Sept. 84) and *Vanguard* (Oct. 84). Both magazines used a vertical 8 x 10 format and an horizontal 8 x 10 photographic format.

These 8 x 10 formats correspond to the proportions of the demolished wall. The photographic reduction of the wall, particularly the reduction of the third dimension from the 4 inch thickness of the CAG wall to the thinness of the printed page, is one fact of this public recollection: another is the 90 degree displacement of the vertical 10 x 8 wall by the proportionally 8 x 10 horizontal photograph. The reduction and displacement is

sculpturally contiguous with the actual destruction of the wall and the displacement of the wall material.<sup>2</sup>

The text goes on to describe the facts of the present installation. "The new wall is a steel plate, reduced in size and increased in density. The plate is set horizontally, perpendicular to the Or Gallery wall. It is reduced from 4-inch thickness to 1-inch thickness of hot rolled steel stock." The text recalls the CAG installation with less selectivity than the actual steel sculpture, but it nevertheless fails to mention the fact that both reviews ("the public recollection") were negative, and that an entire section of photography in the CAG exhibition was not mentioned in the reviews and, hence, exists totally out of memory. This may be just as well, for Peck's speculations on the dialectical relationship of his sculpture to the social determinism of magazine photography is more interesting than his own photography. The text also is inadequate in describing the physical facts and the context of the present installation at the Or.

The Or Gallery is a smallish box-like space extending back from the street, approximately 24 x 12 feet with quite a high ceiling. It has white walls and a grey floor. Peck has surfaced the street-front windows with aluminum foil, permitting darkness for a black and white slide projection against the rear wall of the gallery. The image has been lifted from one of the magazines Peck alludes to in the text—it is recognized as such by text below and to one side of the photograph.

The steel plate extends out from a wall almost into the light of the projection. The opposing side wall displays two parallel rows of photocopied text running almost the entire length of the gallery. The only light is supplied by the projector, making reading of the text a difficult chore. The general effect is that of a nocturne, a melancholic study in grey and black.

Since the texts are so hard to read, one memorizes their shape rather than their content. They again repeat the 8 x 10 module of the CAG wall and the steel plate. Yet the texts do provide a theoretical context against which to measure this work. There is a text by Maurice Halbwachs from "The Collective Memory", which addressed the issues of the socialization of memory, while the text by

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Brian Smith, "Doubting the Authority of our Memories" from the book "Memory" addresses the problem of individual memory and its factuality when confronted by environmental determination.

Metaphorically the displacement, reconstruction and inversion of the installation over the period of a year and the alteration from the larger, centrally-located CAG to the smaller, eccentrically-located Or Gallery marks a movement from the public memory of Halbwachs to the private doubt of Smith's individual. Correspondingly the steel wall is a shield, providing mental armour against confusion. Peck expands:

This exhibition is not a clear statement of a rational fact, nor an expression of feeling. Rather it is a sculptural recollection, a memorial to an active doubt. This doubt is centered on an active faith... in sculptural massiveness, in simplicity, and the similarly obdurate facts of memory. It is an attempt to reconcile the public or social memory with the doubtful facts of my private experience in the interest of communicability.

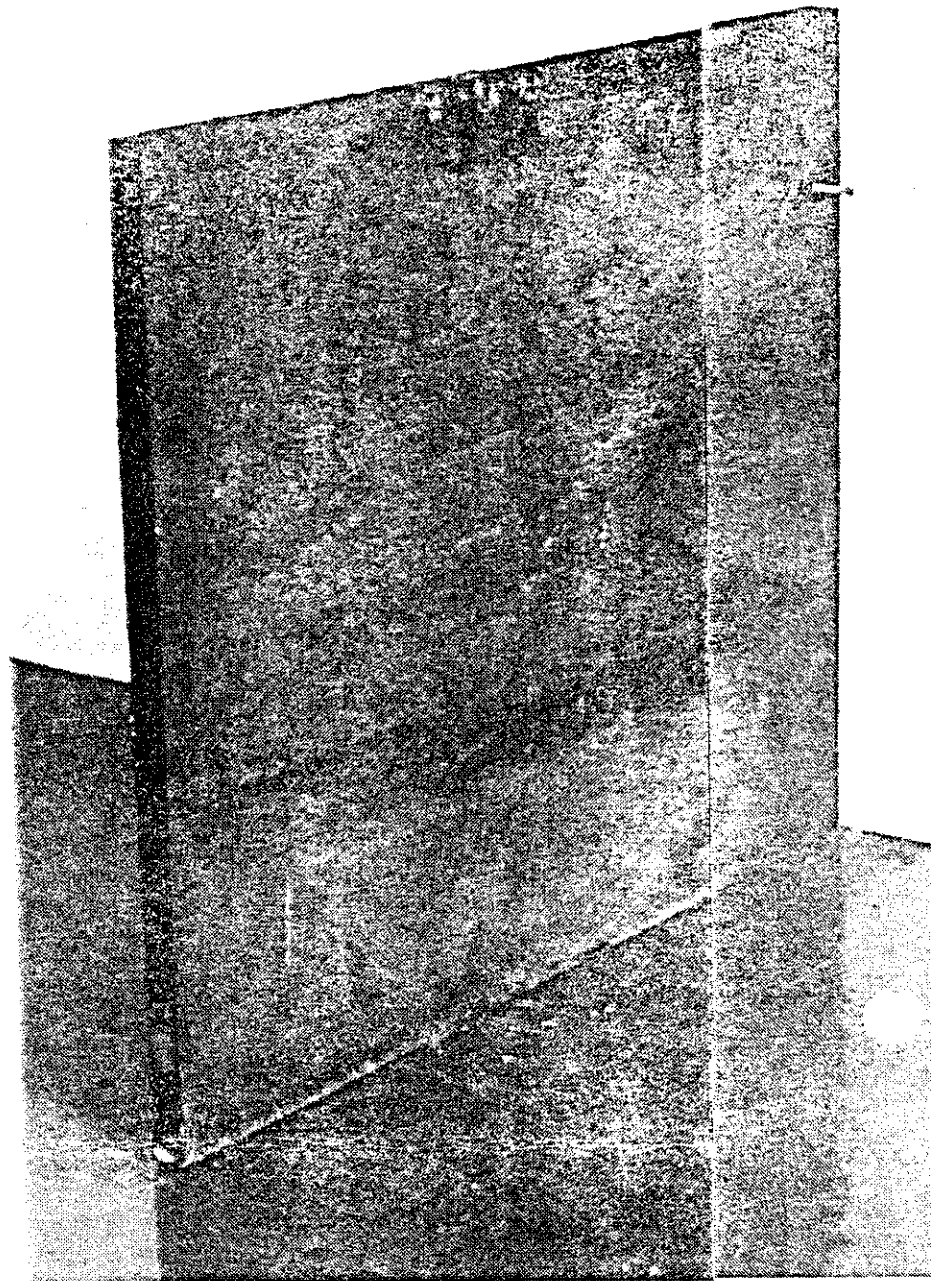
Whether or not this is a resolution to his exercise in sculptural mnemotechnics, Peck seems to be suggesting that what we memorize may be nothing more than the way we memorize. The obverse would hold as well.

To gain insight into Peck's reasons for this memorial to doubt, one must return to the previous installation at the Contemporary Art Gallery. There, Peck assumed the role of the knight-errant, leading an unguarded assault on the gallery's existing Art/Religious framework, relying on his faith in the obdurate massiveness of traditional sculpture. It was a didactic presentation carried out with apparently careless bravado, a symbolic flagwaving of Peck's elitist ideology.

One of Peck's quotations from Halbwachs can be interpreted as an analogy for the public's relationship to the gallery:

"...we may be most sensitive to that separation between sacred and profane places that is paramount in the religious consciousness. For there are certain areas of space that the faithful have chosen "forbidden" to anyone else, where they find both shelter and support for their traditions. Hence each group cuts up space in order to compose either definitively or in accordance with a set method, a fixed framework within which to enclose and retrieve its remembrances."

The significance of this "fixed framework" is apparent with regard to the published memory of Peck's earlier installation. Barbara



Robin Peck; *Memorial* (detail of installation): 1985. Photo: Alberta Hunter.

her animosity towards what she considered to be Peck's profanation of the religious outlook through a fanatical defence of her faith in the existing Art/Religious framework. Her bitter misrepresentation of the show was disguised by a superficial understanding of conceptualism and by a misrepresentation of Peck's religious and political symbolism.

Todd Davis (*Issue*, September 1984) waived involvement with the religious undercurrent of the show, and proceeded to lecture Peck from a position of inflexible Marxist doctrine. Davis condemned his estimation of the failure of the crusade. Conditioned by this public reaction, *Memorial* is clearly on the defensive as if the vultures of social determinism were circling Peck's faith—his faith that, as with simplicity, the brute facts of memory are their own reward.

*Memorial* was the antithesis of the previous installation, taking an approach of morbid for-

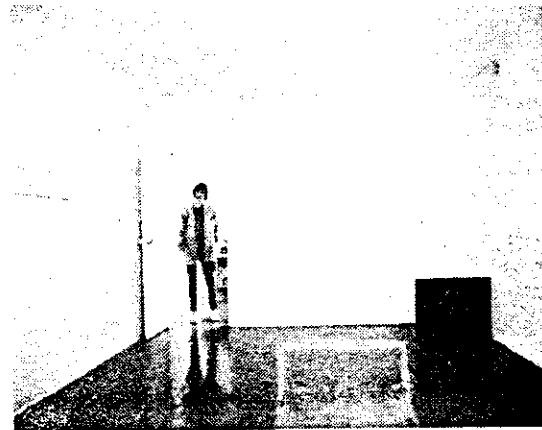
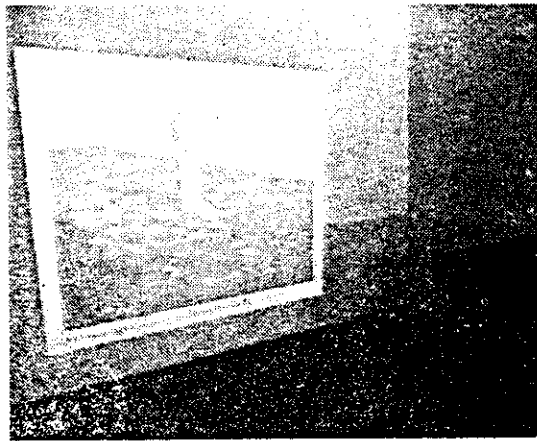
simplified version of the wall rendered the painful memories of reception altogether harmless. To the same end, the imposition of the nocturne served to camouflage the printed text and protected the unproven theories from misinterpretation.

Aside from this melancholic dimension, Peck's private memory is more clearly understood as a psychological phenomenon. Adler's description of the Compulsion Neurotic applies in this instance. The neurotic:

... retreats farther and farther before the bayonets of life... until he finds a secluded cranny of life where he is put to no real test and can make use of notions that give him a feeling of complete superiority... he acquires a sense of omnipotence in overcoming some variety of self-created, imaginary fears.<sup>4</sup>

Adler goes on to suggest that dream simplification (or, in this case, the crystalline simplification of Peck's turgid memory) is a significant device of self-deception, used to "cause the narrowing down of the problem". Used so much that nothing is left but a small and harmless remainder.

The split between the public memory of the CAG installation and Peck's private doubt of the Or installation represents a mental dissociation, a rupture between faith and knowledge. Jung refers to this split as an "incommensurability" between world views, one which, significantly, passes the line from personal mental disorder towards a social dissociation, a public neurosis<sup>5</sup>. Conscious or unconscious, Peck's art is not so much a public proclamation of a private neurosis as it is a demonstration of the extremes of society's mental dissociation. The brilliant authenticity of his projection of a neurotic complex is a result of skillful Method Acting, but his project may be logical in theory even though it breaks down in practice. Using a mnemonic approach to public memory results in a codification of experience through crystallisation. This process renders public memory generalized and impersonal while leaving active memory open to alteration. Peck's intention of acting in the interest of communicability is then insincere, for his encoding of experience is personal, veiled by the supposedly neurotic defense.



Robin Peck; *Memorial* (details of installation); 1985. Photos: Alberta Hunter.

So this investigation of sculptural memory remains incomplete by virtue of Peck's exclusion of the undeniable influence of the psychology of the contemporary ethos. One perhaps ought to add "Sculpture as Psychology" to Andre's "Course of Development", in the interest of communicability.

James Graham

#### Notes

1. Andre's "Course of Development" is reprinted in David Bourdon's "The Razed Sites of Carl Andre". *Artforum* (October 1966).
2. All quotations attributed to Peck are from the text exhibited in *Memorial*.
3. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (Harper & Row, 1980).
4. Alfred Adler, *Superiority and Social Interest* (Northwestern University Press, 1970).
5. Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (Little Publishing, 1958).