

Eliminating Subject and Object

A Conversation with

Susan York

BY JAN RILEY

Opposite: *Double Golden Mean Rectilinear Solid*, 2007. Solid graphite, 16 x 25.75 x 9.75 in. This page: *Homage to Malevich*, 2006. Solid graphite, 17 x 17 x 2 in.



Susan York and I began our day at Dia:Beacon last fall with a guided tour of Michael Heizer's sunken sculptures. She examined the way the pieces were set into the floor and questioned the guides about how they were installed. York investigated each piece with intention, wanting to see exactly how things were made and to understand why they were made that way. York has her MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art. The attention to detail and craft that she gives to her own works carries over into her examination of the works and practices of other artists. She currently teaches sculpture at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico.



In front of Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, she began to imagine the order in which the lines were made. Where were they started? It became clear that some of the wall pieces were meant to change in the making, as the person drawing the lines was given the challenge of either keeping them straight across the vast distance of the wall or letting them curve to match each other. We marveled at the passages where the lines had to stay straight and imagined how physically difficult it had been to draw them. I had never looked at LeWitt's wall pieces in that way and found that I was impressed with them as never before.

As our visit progressed, two things became clear: first that York was not going to address my questions about her work; second that it didn't really matter. I was watching the artist in action: she was so thoroughly engaged in her exploration of the works that I was witnessing an essential part of her own practice.

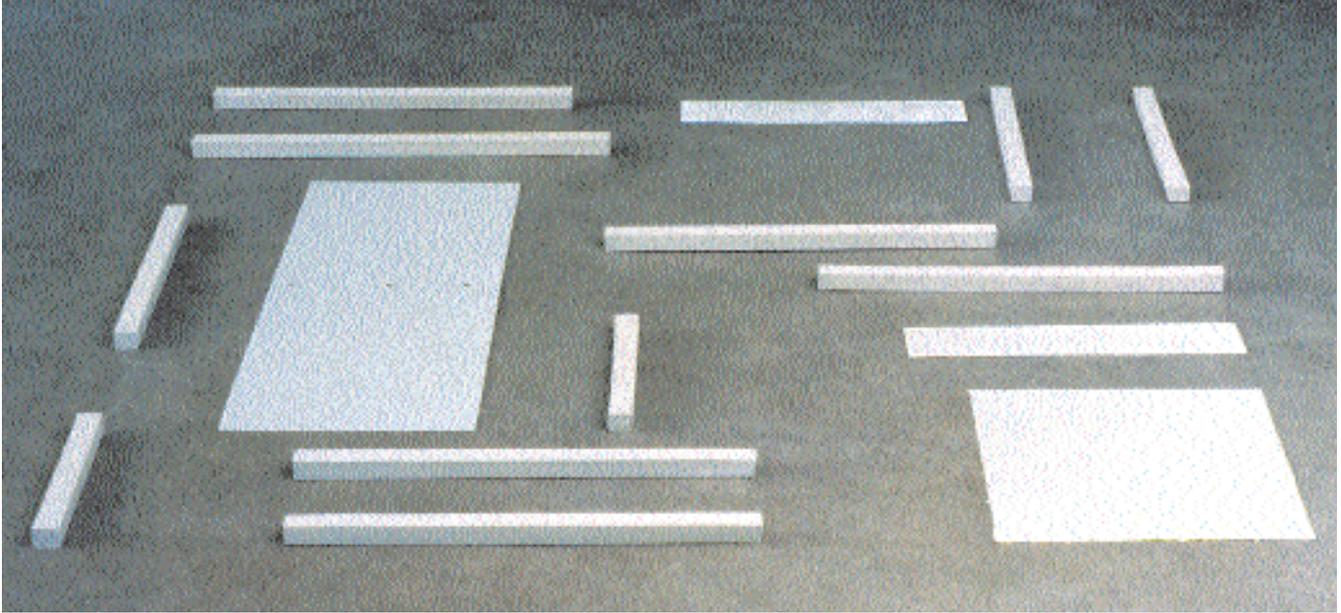
For want of a better term, I would say that York was obsessed, but that misses the sense of joy, wonder, and openness that she brought to each piece. In her own work, this quality translates as an extreme thoroughness in her choices of media and presentation. Nothing is left to chance, and nothing is ignored. Her pieces are made powerful by the control that she exercises over them. Viewing her work, it is clear that you are in the presence of something to be taken seriously, as small or as simple as it appears to be. One of York's graphite cubes mounted to the wall (even one as small as four by four inches) has a preternatural pull, almost like a specific gravity all its own.

York says, "One of the keys to looking at and understanding my work is to be able to stop, take a breath, look quietly, and take it all in. And when one is able to lose one's self in that moment, merging with everything, then subject and object vanish." As we entered the Agnes Martin rooms at Dia, York, who knew Martin, spoke about how the older artist had encouraged her to make drawings, to "do the drawings and then connect them to your practice."

Jan Riley: *How did you first arrive at making sculpture?*

Susan York: Before Cranbrook, I made a lot of flat works—reductive assemblages. There, I started working with sweeping compound, the oily sawdust that janitors use to sweep school floors. I began filling rooms with shapes of thick, furry, dark red sweeping compound and oxides. I was very relieved to be making shapes that did not have to deal with gravity. I also loved the fact that I could just sweep it all up into a trash bag. Agnes was horrified. She asked me, "How are you ever going to establish a market for that?"

39 Shards, 2000. Porcelain and steel, 16 x 6 x 6.5 in.



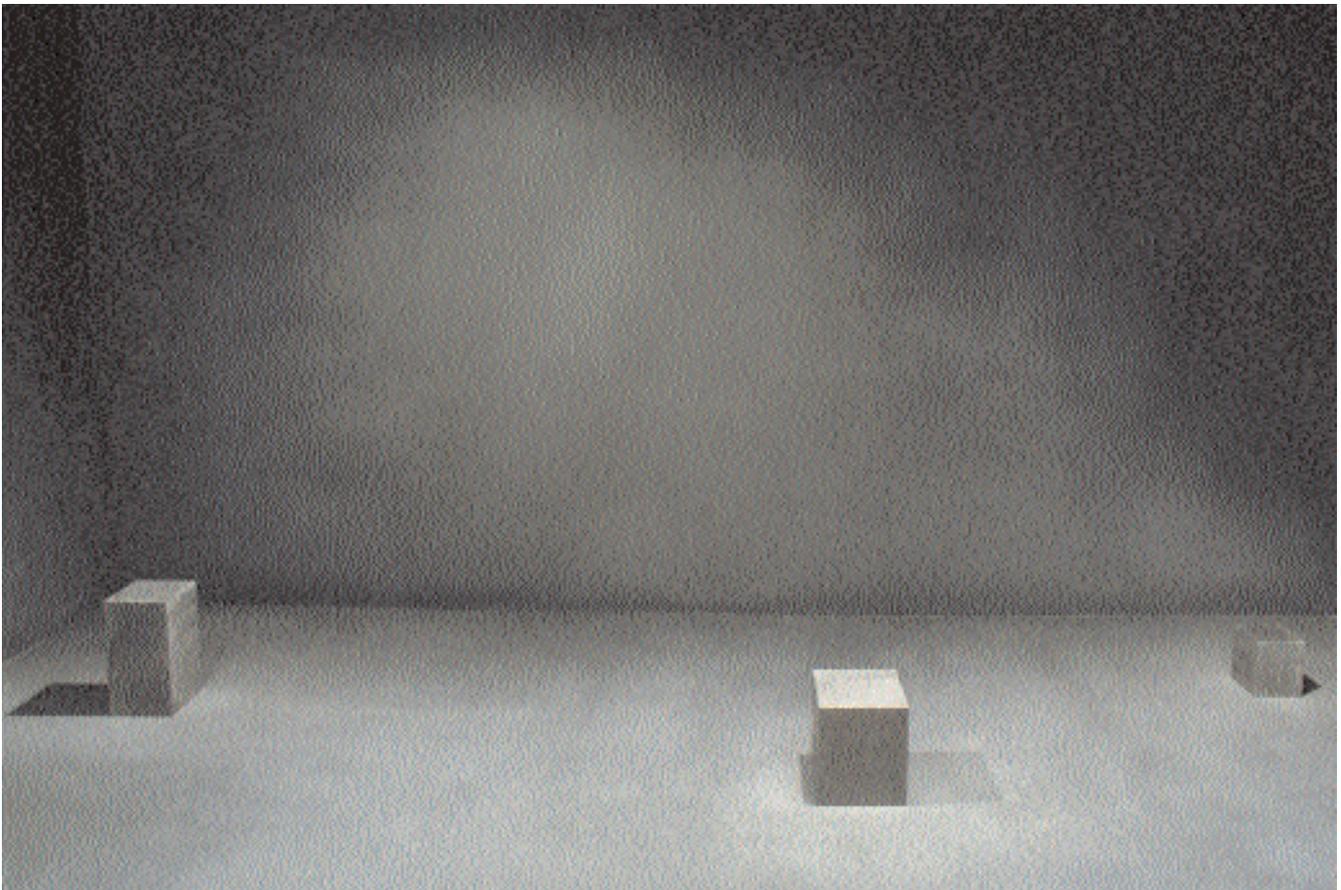
After Rietveld, 1997. Porcelain, 5 x 5 x 5 ft.

At Cranbrook, I investigated materials for materials' sake. I began using media based on what they evoked, rather than what I wanted to use. My thesis show included two gravity-formed, amorphous balls, one graphite-covered and the other solid aluminum. I built a wall in the gallery and tilted it four degrees. I wanted the tilt to be felt, not necessarily seen. Large panes of sandblasted glass were balanced against the wall to create underlying tension.

JR: *You have moved from work in porcelain, begun in the late 1990s, to sculptures and room installations created from graphite. How did the graphite pieces evolve?*

SY: I was working with raw pigment and oxides on the floor and also casting them into forms. I wanted to work with elemental materials, particularly lead, because its soft, mercurial beauty is neither solid nor immaterial. But graphite was a safer alternative,

Center of Gravity, 2005. Graphite, 20 x 15 x 14 ft. Installation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; sound component by Steve Peters.





Floating Rectilinear Solid, 2007. Solid graphite, 35.5 x 6.25 x 22.25 in.

and though it is harder, it holds many of the same properties. I began by covering different materials in graphite, but I hated that they weren't solid graphite. In the Netherlands, I made large squares of graphite on the floor. At this point, I began experimenting with casting it.

Graphite is my baseline material: it erases my presence through repetition. Although my hand is making the piece, it is also erasing the piece. Through process and form, the drawings done in graphite are related to the graphite objects. They are smudged evenly and also erased and polished as they are being formed. They are also blurred—my homage to myopia. Graphite has a low resonant tone. It belongs to the cello—Bach's *Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello*.

With the graphite pieces, you can experience respite. The porcelain pieces held a lot more tension and evoked a fear of falling. The graphite rooms, though, have tension for some viewers. The discrete graphite objects also

have a subtle tension held within the geometry of each piece. This tension is magnified by the elemental qualities of graphite. Because of this material, these works do not have an opaque picture plane. You can see into them. Graphite is like looking into a pond: you see the glassy surface, and at the same moment, you see through the water into the depths of the pool. In some ways, the physical material of graphite recedes and takes us all into it.

JR: *I know that Constructivism and De Stijl are important to you. How has your understanding of those movements influenced your work?*

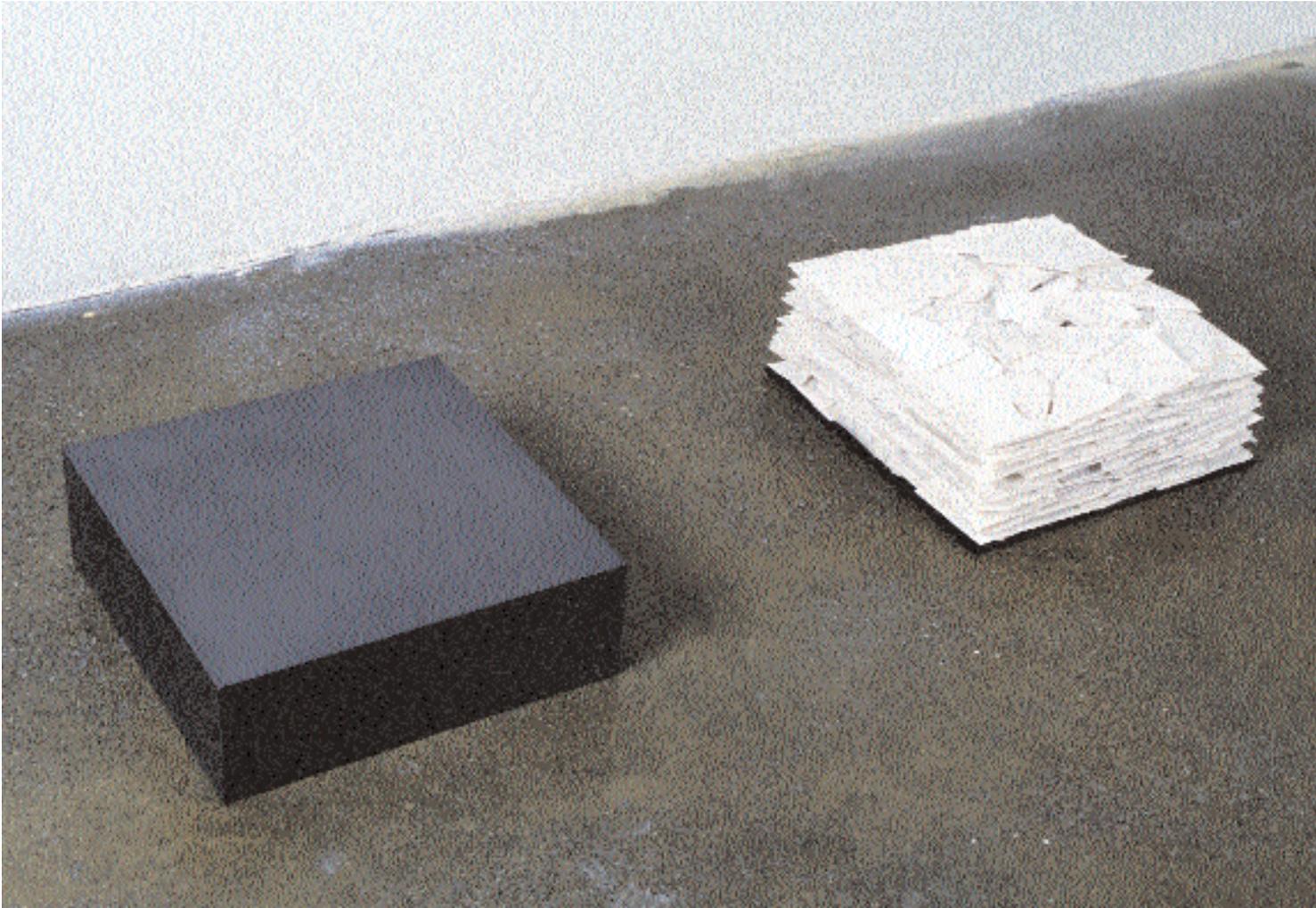
SY: When I was a young student, I saw a photograph of Gerrit Rietveld's *Red Blue Chair*. The reproduction was only a few inches high, but I couldn't stop thinking about his work. It wasn't until I went to the Netherlands in 1997 that I got to see those chairs. What appeared to be a manufactured chair was, in fact, an artist-produced sculptural object. His works differed in size and composition in the most subtle of possible ways. Each chair was an individual sculpture.

In my studio practice in the Netherlands, I took one of his chairs and made it to scale in porcelain, but laid it out like a schematic on the floor. And, all along I drew, playing with those forms, using value and shape to arrange them on the paper. I was really interested in the transition that Rietveld made by making two dimensions into three. What happens when something flat becomes dimensional? This led to the shard pieces. I began by making one paper-thin porcelain shard. How many would it take to make it three-dimensional? At what moment does that occur? I made a thousand shards.

Early in my life as an artist, I saw the Constructivism show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I was dumbstruck. Again, I felt that I had met an ancestor. I looked at a reproduction of Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist Painting: 8 Red Rectangles* for about six weeks before I saw that one rectangle was tilted. I had felt that tension but had not seen it. This is very interesting to me. How do you create tension that is viscerally felt but not necessarily seen?

After I took apart the Rietveld chair, I began making a series examining the transition from two dimensions to three. I also began making the graphite rooms. After the rooms, I realized that I could build discrete objects attached to a wall but not part of an installation.

JR: *Can you explain the value of repetition in your work, both in its structure and in your process? You told Kathleen Whitney in *Sculpture* that "repetition and labor are my benchmarks. I am transfixed by the constant circling of my hands across the graphite and the gradual silvering of the surface as my hands rub across it again and again." Do you still agree with that?*



Shard Square, Graphite Square, 2001. Graphite, porcelain, and steel, 12 x 12 x 4 in.

SY: Yes. Through the same action, I completely transform, inhabit, and then, in a sense, erase my presence from the room. While the physical action required by my work is intense, I am mesmerized by the movement of my body rocking back and forth as both of my arms circle, as my hands rub the floor or the wall for hours that turn into days. Through this process, thinking becomes impossible. Because of the sheer physical effort required, my brain becomes equal to the rest of my body.

When I was 20, I attended my first weekend-long Zen Buddhist retreat, a *dai-sesshin*. One rises, with a group of practitioners and a teacher, at 3 a.m. and meditates throughout the day, until 9 p.m. By doing *zazen* (sitting meditation) and *kinhin* (walking meditation), following your breath, and staying in silence and not making eye contact—and doing this whether you are tired or bored or resistant or in terror, doing it no matter what—there is a release from thinking. There is also a rhythm, like the tides, of which one becomes a part. Eventually one's will recedes, and one becomes a part of a larger organism—the structure and group practice of the *sesshin*, the rhythm of

breath. Within this very prescribed structure, there is a huge space and a freedom from decision and thinking and one's own will. This practice also builds concentration and stamina, which is really good for artists. You do it. You don't think about it—you just do it.

With the graphite rooms—and also the graphite and porcelain objects—I have created a structure where the primary decisions are already made. What it takes is committing and then sinking into the rhythm of doing the same thing over and over—the act of rubbing the wall or graphite forms over and over and over for days, or pouring and cutting and stacking hundreds of porcelain shards. These repeated actions create a freedom from will, and to do them for days at a time, for me, requires attention to breath. In this practice, there is a release from thinking and a falling into breath that I am pulled into, like the tides of the ocean.

Jan Riley is a writer and curator who works for Knoedler Gallery in New York.