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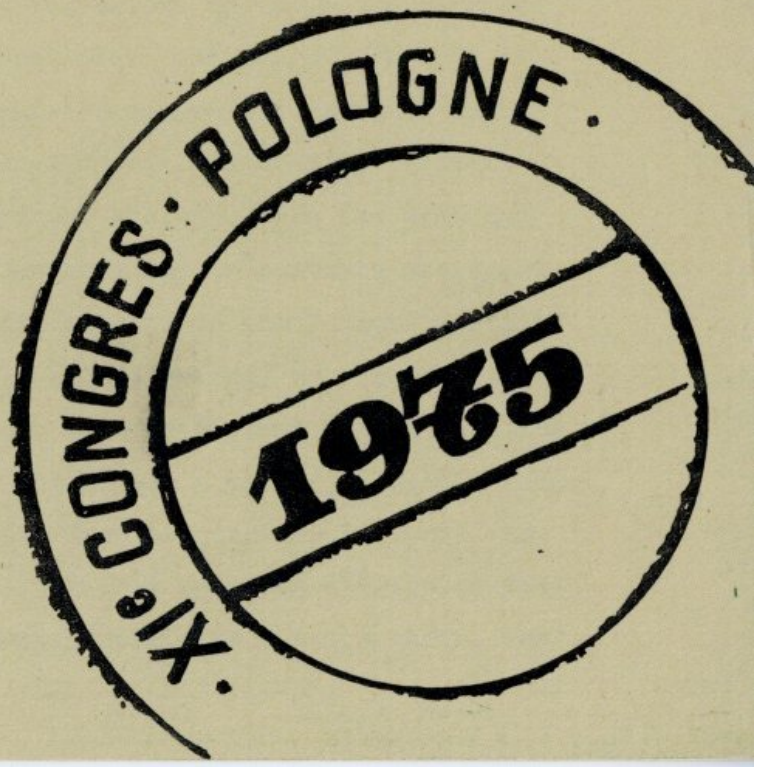

Douglas Davis

THE SIZE OF A CULTURE: TOWARD THE RE-DEFINITION OF SCALE

It is long past time for the concept of scale to be re-thougt and re-defined. Though the term is often used by artists and critics now - the phrase "art for a public scale" is becoming a compulsive cliche - it always carries connotations that are exclusively and narrowly physical. Certainly this is as inappropriate as yoking the definition of "scale" entirely to the problem inherent in Renaissance painting - of defining as object on the front plane of the painting against the far (and illusory) horizon ("scale", the dictionary therefore tells us, "is the proportion which the representation of an object in the twentieth century, a work of art can involve - in terms of its scale - time (as in film and videotape), rapidity and ease of dissemination (as in printmaking, pamphleteering, and photographic reproduction), the size and nature of the chosen audience, and the extent to which the work penetrates and affects the social-political context in which it is created. In other words, the scale of modern art is often measured by its effect upon the whole culture. Conversely, the work responds directly to the needs of the whole culture (as felt and interpreted by the artist). In moments and in contexts where art is an active ingredient in society it acts in the largest possible scale appropriate to its nature. The difference between a small table-sized Bourdelle bronze and a 400-ton Michael Heizer monolith standing alone in the desert is not simply a matter of size. Those points (beyond size) that separate them are the points I will explore in this essay. It is an essay that does not attempt to follow a consecutive line of argument, though the line is there, be-

neath the wide spread of the subjects covered. It moves toward redefinition.

The clearest example of the effect that politics can have on esthetics - and the scale in which art decides to operate - is Constructivism. The ideas implicit in Constructivism are no different from the ideas implicit in Futurism, De Stijl, certain aspects of Dada (particularly its Berlin front), and even in Cubism (the fragmentation and abstraction of figurative forms; the collage of real rather than painted materials). But the extension of these ideas beyond the picture frame - to which Futurism, De Stijl, and Cubism clung - and beyond the anti-art gesture, in performance and film, the outer formal perimeter of Dada - is unique to Constructivism. The art of the Russian avanguard between 1917 and 1925 is only in part an art of room-sized painting and sculpture. Tatlin and Rodchenko in fact renounced painting for architecture and furniture, Tatlin's tower was an attempt not only to write Cubist cylindrical form large in the sky but to inform and therefore structure an entire society: the upper cylinder, moving faster than the other two sections, contained a fully-equipped media center, with offices for the publication of newspapers, public proclamations, and manifestos; it also contained projectors for a large screen to display information to the entire city of Leningrad, and a radio transmitter, of course. Mayakovsky and others (among them Lissitsky and Rodchenko) designed Agit-Prop posters placed on the sides of trains moving through the countryside. The Constructivist street spectacle and concert of factory whistles are well-known, as is the ambitions scale of Eisenstein's films, both in time and in the massive size of the casts. Malevich's manifestos

and writings this period are preoccupied with extensions of painting, particularly into film. In each of these cases, the expanded sense of scale is a direct product of societal need, form, and ambition. The idealism of the art matches the idealism of the new political program, which was later to shrink, as did the esthetic position itself. When Alfred Barr wrote of the LEF group in 1927 - shortly after first visiting the USRR - he sighted this instantly, in his own way: "The LEF is more than a symptom, more than an expression of fresh culture or of post-revolutionary man: it is a courageous attempt to give art an important social function in a world where... it has been prostituted for five centuries". I would argue this: the LEF (and Constructivist) dynamic was a direct - and temporary - result of its culture. As late as 1930, Lissitsky could still devote an essay in his book on architecture to "The Future and Utopia." The concept of Utopia is the last dimension of scale, and of culture.

The base for my argument is this: perception is active, not passive, both in making and interpreting art. Clement Greenberg's attitude is (of course) in opposition. He believes that cerebral activity occurs after the fact of seeing (and, presumably, of making), and is post-experiential. His is essentially a Lockean and empirical position, though it is shrouded is formalist and art-judgmental rhetoric, as is much early Conceptualist theory. But there is a great deal to be said for my side, though it presently commands few adherents in American art theory. By chance I was reading Merleau-Ponty not long ago, in a paperbound collection of his essays, and I came upon his description of the growth of perception in the child. The turning point in his/her early

development is when the child first sees himself. The mirror image teaches him that he is apart from what else he sees. From that moment on, the child is more aggressive, social, and selfish at once:

> To recognize his image in the mirror is for him to learn that there can be a viewpoint taken on him. Hitherto, he has never seen himself, or that he has only caught a glimpse of himself in looking out of the corner of his eye at the parts of his body he can see. By means of the image in the mirror he becomes capable of becoming a spectator of himself... The mirror image itself makes possible a contemplation of the self... in psychoanalytic terms the possibility of a super-ego. And this image would henceforth be either explicitly posited or simply implied by everything I see at each minute... The acquisition of a specular image therefore, bears not only on our relations of being, but with the world and with others.

Animals exhibit no such intense and continuing fascination with themselves, as Morleau-Ponty points out elsewhere. His position controverts the premise of much late 60's and early 70's art: it contends that the human mind responds to the world in ways unique to itself, a finding that is analagous to Chomsky's argument in linguistics and much recent research in educational and computer-theory - that language responds to deep structural characteristics within the mind. Taken in sum, these ideas form an anti-sensationalist position. Seeing, the act of perception (which is both visual and linguistic) is not a passive or responsive act. It is

neither remote, objective, nor scientific (as those terms are normally used). It is complex, personal, creative, and universal.

We are the creators of our culture, not the recipients. The culture responds to our needs, and, in the most practical sense, to our questions. This is particularly true in art, for scale. We cannot need -9 nor ask for - what we do not know, or care about. Aristotle's attitude toward scale in the Poetics is bounded by what he knows: no object that is a thousand miles long can be beautiful, he says, for "the eye cannot take it all in at once." He could not comprehend or accomodate a scale that is easily available to us (beginning with the airplane); Aristotle could have seen that far only by ascending the higgest mountain. Renaissance concept of scale was molded by the needs of a r esthetic. Not until late in the 19th century - when vast vistas of the Earth's surface were beginning to be domesticated by the train and aerial-balloon photography - did the propriety of a post-Aristotelian physical scale begin to appear in art history. Here it is, in John Ruskin's words: "No beauty of design in architecture, or of forms in mountains will entirely take the place of what may be called 'brute largeness' That is to say, of the actual superiority in feet and inches over the size of Humanity, our constant standard, the general truth being that... the greatest effect on sublimity will be produced by the largest truth over which can be clearly manifested to us."

But it should not be thought that I agree with Ruskin, nor that I am arguing in behalf of brute largeness. I am arguing for something quite different, by approaching the issue of scale (as well as content, politics, and other related subjects in a new way. On the level of definition alone, Ruskin does not take into

account the temporal implications of a work of either art or architecture, nor does he face the social and political context in which the work appears and on which it acts all proper qualifications on the "scale" of any work of art. Instead of thinking of the work as a crafted and introverted object I want to see it as sentient and moving in a social landscape that is structured by political as well as esthetic values. The major importance of Marxist-inspired writing in the arts in the 20th century - such as Walter Benjamin's (and even Greenberg's, in the late 1930's) - is to remind us that criticism is not aloof these conditions, or prejudices. When the image left the cathedral and the fresco - as Benjamin reminds us - it became a portable, room-sized commodity, safe for the bourgeois living room. When conservative critics therefore attack a large public-oriented work as Utopian or rhetorical, the standard of judgment behind it in terms of scale is nearly always the middle-class living room (or the painting that fits there, to be precise). This is why I propose to define "scale" in art as a cultural phenomenon, including the social and temporal dimensions, as well as size itself. And of course I mean to completely discard the relationship between the object and whatever it is taken to represent.

Let me give you three recent references pointing towards a cultural re-definition of scale. At the height of the New York School, paintings came to be made regularly in human-size scale, six or seven feet across and up. This scale had nothing to do with representing anything else. It became necessary when painting ceased to be a decorative, depictive object, and became an arena for action. It was based in an heroic attitude: that painting should confront the eye in human scale, standing up to a man at his own

height. Second, contemporary physics believes that nothing is solid, static, or at rest, that everything moves, and changes as it moves, in time and in space. There is no such thing in astronomy as a form outside of time. I recently watched a film made by an astronomer, R.L. Meeks, at the Harvard Observatory. With the help of a computer program, Meeks was able to depict the orbits of the most distant stars - the very light patterns that seem fixed to us, with our naked ayes. By speeding up enormously the time-scale through which we see these stars, he shows for the first time in visual terms that the immutable universe praised by the Ancients and poets (and assumed in conventional art theory) is not immutable at all, but moving and in flux, like a human city, which seems at rest from an airplane, and in fluid motion from below. There is no eternal time, existing in an ideal and untroubled state. All life and all matter exists in a present tense and a troubled state. Third, the Renaissance notion of scale takes account only of the work itself and not where and how it functions. Joseph Beuys' dialogue with the public - expressed through the form of The Organization for a Direct Democracy - moves through the whole society, not as a painting might, or as an exhibition, but as an engaging, flexible, changing work, based in and defined by the politics of human exchange.

A cultural definition of scale would rid itself of the notion of proportion - as I said - and encompass time and politics, as well as size. Why time? Like the child in Merlau-Ponty's essay we have seen its image, the face of time, and now nothing we look at or create can encape a temporal dimension. Even in architecture, the most solid and permanent of the arts, the presence of

moving time in concept and plan is definitive: the new Dallas-Ft. Worth airport, built to fill a space larger than Manhattan Island and accomodate 60 million people at its zenith, is in fact a spatial-temporal structure, extending across time as well as space (in stages forecast over half a century); John Johansen's Mummer's Theater, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, appeared in its entirety in 1970, but the parts are arranged for change and reversal, like a string of chassis components. It is since Picasso or Gertrude Stein banal to say that the contemporary experience of the world is spatially complex. More important, it is temporally complex. Our sense of time now is open and abstract - to the point where we are willing to allow for reversals and curvatures as well as sense its movements over thousands of years beyond our immediate experience. It is also dynamic (or moving) and static. Since we know that everything moves forward into the continuing present/future, we also know that movement is static, because it is ever-present. Kinetic art began crudely to respond to that experience. Performance, film and video (most of all?) serve this cycling sense of temporality. Aristotle argued not only against objects more than 1000 miles in size but against plots that stretched beyond the point where all of it could be held easily in memory. Robert Wilson's plays stretch from 12 hours in length to 168 hours; rather than compress or actually represent time, he expands a minute of "real" time into an hour of theater time. Roger Welch's film, Welch, is a pastiche of home movies made at differing times in his family's life, morging - when seen in whole - into one time. "It is the nature of time," he says, "to absorb everything into itself". Live telecast can transmit a focused sense of the passage of the immediate moment, a moment which is in part the same as

all moments and in part the moment that carries us another step toward death. Twenty-four hours, my work for cable television in Western Massachusetts, attempts to duplicate and intensify the ambiguity of this passage over a natural cycle of waking, thinking, sleeping, and dreaming, ignored to date both by commercial and by art television.

It must be stressed that in none of these works is the temporal scale the point or goal being sought. Mere scale - whether in inches or in hours - is merely a component of a larger whole. For the purposes of this essay and the cultural re-definition of scale the attitude being sought is one of indifference, not celebration. Scale is not the end but the means of art. The New York School's position on size was heroic. "What was to go on the canvas", said Harold Rosenberg in 1951, "was not a picture but an event." Malevich claimed even more, in 1919: "Now it is necessary to give the body shape and lend it a living form in real life... Such forms will not be copies of living things in life, but will themselves be a living thing. A painted surface is a real, living form." And I need not remind you of the tons of art-life rhetoric that have descended upon us in the past 30 years, first from Cage and then from Kaprow. I could not be further away from these positions, in attitude. I do not ask for an art on the scale of life (that would be a fraud and an impossibility). I ask for an art that is free to use whatever scale it needs, from miniature to maximum, in the pursuit of a full cycle of goals, including social-political.

It is the conventional critic - and the conventional artist - who is blinded by scale. For he/she instinctively attaches to it rhe-

torical attitudes. That is, once the work passes the safety of the living room, the market, and the seminar room it poses (for him) a wholly improbable threat to past art. Beuys' decision to dialogue with a constant and changing public is not the case of an ego swollen large but of a proper use of scale in the service of content. So are Hans Haacke's real-estate systems, often derided for their expansionist and extra-art ambition. The scale of Haacke's works - reaching into interlocking ghetto-midtown entreprenurial systems - is perfectly consistent with the intent of the work, which is to materialize an otherwise invisible political form. The contention that art has no business intruding in these matters is an idea that is proper to another time, not in a century when the politicalization of every activity has been stripped bare before the eyes of the public (I have already quoted Daniel Buren in "Content" that "Every act is political"). It is impossible simply to paint, to exibit, to sell or to trade, without an awareness of the total meaning of these acts. In other words, the employment of a full social-political scale in works like those of Beuys and Haacke is necessity, not artifice. The empty rhetoric in public art comes from the misguided attempt to "blow up" indoor forms of sculpture to gigantic size and place them on Park Avenue, or in public parks. This is scale inappropriate to the size. But the full awarness and esthetic use of extra-contextual system is - to my mind - the bare condition of post-conceptual art. In Giveaway (1969), we - that is, Gene Davis, Ed McGowin, and myself - made and gave away 50 "copies" of a Gene Davis painting, deliberately testing the ability of the art-marketing system to ingest an alien (that is, non-original) work and invest it with sacred uniqueness (it has). Christopher Cooke's Limited

Interval Administration Project (1971-72) deliberately incorporated as form the activities of a museum director (himself, running the ICA in Boston) over an entire year: In his successful proposal to the board of trustees he stated:

> Any and all activities of this year may/will be recorded for use as a comprehensive exhibition which will be the result of this year's activity. The work consists of:
> (1) the process of directorship; (2) notes, tapes, films, documents saved by the artist during the year; (3) activities, events, and things generated by the artist in the process of carrying out this project.

Even more ambitious (in the orthodox sense) - though less ditated - was Walter De Maria's year-long Proposal For the Olympic Games (1971). Planned an offered as a site piece on the hill overlooking the games, it contemplated drilling a cylindrical hole through the hill itself and deep into the earth, De Maria's thrice-rejected work activated the entire German nation. Before it was definitively defeated, De Maria's project created a mountain of press and headline debate over the meaning of "Earth Art", "Conceptual Art," and "Process Art," The work's was realized in the media and in the mind rather than in objecthood.

I have been deliberately describing recent works that act in a scale beyond physicality, but energetically. None of them - though large in scale - is large in physical size. Their material embodiment ranges from nothing (in the case of Beuys' dialogue) to Haacke's photographic records to fifty 6' x 6'

Gene Davis paintings (which nevertheless act always alone) to the documentary and media detritus left over from the Cooke and De Maria projects. A massive concrete triangle in the desert or a dematerialized telecast can engage the new concept of scale, as well as a performance, a book, or a photograph (Hueb-ler's lifelong project - "to photograph everyone living" - comes to mind. Then what about physical size? When can it be employed in extremity? Terry Atkinson has maintained in Art-Language that Duchamp left us at a point where any size is within reach: "If a bottle-rack can be asserted as a member of the class 'art-object,' then why not the department store that the bottle-rack was first displayed in, and if the department store why not the town... and so on, up to a universal scale." This is correct reasoning from Duchamp's premise. It is entirely incorrect from our own, and proves that Duchamp is history. Within the structure of this reasoning there are the seeds of political and esthetic irresponsibility. They are why Vincenzo Agnetti lately wrote that the time for gestures is finished.

It is not the argument in behalf of size alone that concerns me in Atkinson's paradigm. It is the disjunction between size and temporal-political values. Although a giant Nevelson or Caro financed by public subscription for City Hall obeys a different esthetic lineage, each shares with Atkinson an indefference to consequences beyond itself. The worst excesses of High-Tek art (ironically perpretrated by painters and sculptors drafted into the Los Angeles County Museum's Art and Technology exhibition in 1971) share the same insensitivity to the present situation. In Udo Kulterman's Art and Life, he announces that the time has come

to deal with universal-scale and quotes with approval the action of Marinus Boezem "who had the idea of signing the universe with the help of an airplane whose condensation trails would spell out his name." The universe, says Kulterman, echoeing Atkinson/Duchamp, is "no longer heaven, to be worshipped" but simple "physical experience." Substitute the name of an oil company for Boezem's, and you have the justification for digging the Alaskan pipeline. It is an attitude in complete variance with the one I am trying to define/create, and with the works shown in his book by Heizer, Smithson, De Maria, and others, works that engage rather than dominate the Earth, and direct themselves against the constraints of art-political marketing, and (particularly in Heizer's case) position themselves in an open and entirely relevant temporal scale, extending, like prehistoric land sculpture, through centuries.

The problem of scale - and its use - is inescapably and properly a matter of larger value. Its changing definition is a function of changing cultural needs. I have tried to demonstrate that the physical size of a work of art is simply one of several components that describe its scale, and that the work may function successfully on many expressionist levels, whether or not it is large or small. Sheer size alone (as in civic sculpture blown large) is irresponsible and boring. Far more important are the means by which the work extends itself in time and in politics. The situation now forces the artist (for the first time in 100 years) to contend with extra-art issues, in order to make effective art. We can no longer pretend that art is beyond meaning

or politics, as Kosuth did in Art After Philosophy (1968), either as creators or as observers, for it is simply unbelievable. Both of those acts are conscious and informing acts and both make the culture we live in. Furthermore, we know - or sense - these implications of a tripartite scale, and cannot forget them, any more than the child in Merleau-Ponty's essay can forget himself. Warhol's wonderfully ironic 60's line (I want to be a machine) now must be read in another way. The artist can no longer mechanically sign everything in sight, ignore the consequences of his gestures, or act in any scale that is not right to the purpose. If it is right to the purpose, however, the size-time-politics of the work can be as large as the nation-state systems of the Earth, the unsigned universe, and the space -time curve.