



Colette Whiten

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Introduction

Where in this art, as in life, are we to find the essence of the act in an assumed continuity of cause and effect? With all the apparatus of construction and casting and the panoply of process surrounding us – the photographs and film of **Structure #8**, for example – where are we to locate, in Colette Whiten's work, the centre of the artistic act and experience? It is a question of where does one focus attention, and how does one piece the different elements together. The separate elements of a work by Whiten – the construction used in casting, the moulds and casts, the photographs and films, and the new supports for the casts – do not, on display, cohere into an integral union. Each element, abruptly and physically separated from the others in the exhibition space and by their distinct and excluding media, reveals the discontinuity of a composite event.¹ Is one element more important than another, for instance, the construction rather than the photographs? What is the relationship between the construction and the photographs, between the construction and the casts? The experience, we find, is in none of the elements alone; it lies latent in them all in anticipation and memory. At different times the elements have different values. The construction, for example, before and during the casting has a use-value. It is the stage for the event. After casting it is like a ruin signifying its past purpose and evoking a memory of the event. The construction, as an object taken alone, is not the sculpture. Similarly, the documentation for the viewer and participating models functions as a trace of the event for the former and as a reminder of the experience for the latter. The work, as a whole, reserves different experiences for each.

The discontinuity of the elements seems to reflect an unwillingness on the part of Whiten to direct the spectator, to hide the process, or to work the sculpture towards a dramatic, heroic, or monumental climax. Indeed, part of the problem for the spectator is finding the limits and direction

of the experience. In this, her work militates against traditional and modernist sculpture both of which have been conceived as maintaining separate, pure existences and incorporating a unity of time. The temporal transcendence of modernist painting and sculpture has been claimed by Michael Fried who wrote:

This preoccupation [with time and the duration of experience in Minimal Art] marks a profound difference between literalist [as he names so-called Minimal Art] work and modernist painting and sculpture. It is as though one's experience of the latter **has no duration** – not because one **in fact** experiences a picture by Noland or Oliteki or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is manifest.²

Clearly the role of time in the process of creating the work and viewing it is evident in Whiten's sculpture. The physical dispersal of the elements in viewing alone implies this. But we shall see that the work is not wholly manifest at every moment in time. Whiten's work avoids a meaning that fully resides in sculpture conceived in formalist terms both in its construction and apprehension. During the past fifteen years the antagonism towards the Greenberg-Fried theory of modernism as practised in sculpture has been represented by Minimal and Process Art.³ It is within these movements that Whiten's art, albeit incorporating the human body, finds association. The association of the human body with the processes of abstract art, that is, Minimal and Process Art, shows a willingness to blur the boundaries and to avoid creating limits to the separate arts by considering art as a whole as an activity.⁴ Dissolution of boundaries betokens neither a **gesamtkunstwerk** nor chaotic anti-art. Discontinuity, still, between the elements continues to separate them, but this fact can function conceptually in the creation and experience of the work.

The question of limits is also a question of purity. The abandonment of these limits for what lies between the arts is what Fried labels "theatricality," the corrupting notion in

Minimal Art.⁵ Whiten's art mixes different media and documentation. It combines static constructions with real "performances" of bodies in time. It introduces activities from the mundane world in the process such as the shaving of arms and legs in preparation for casting. Finally, the work requires the participation of an audience in time in structuring the work in viewing and even a physical participation in some. This latter happens in **Untitled 1976-77** where the viewer is invited to share similar poses and attitudes with figures in the work. All of these strategies Fried would label theatre. In these works, however, there is never a confusion between what is art and life. The structuring of the event, the construction itself, even the lack of colour in the moulds (excepting the recent work) remind us that this is an experience of art. In Whiten's and other artists' work, it is not so much a notion of what lies between the arts as what can be structured within art.

Greenberg's and, by extension, Fried's theory of modernism – in which an art defines its purity by its own medium demonstrating what is unique and irreducible in that art – finds early expression in Lessing's **Laocoon** written in the eighteenth century.⁶ Lessing distinguished sculpture by what was unique to its nature as bodies in space, making it antithetical to the arts of time such as poetry. In traditional sculpture, unlike literature, a multiple action is displayed simultaneously. The narrative, therefore, has to be structured into the action and pose of the sculpture. Lessing did admit that

all bodies, however, exist not only in space but also in time. They **continue**, and at any moment of their **continuance**, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the center of a present action.⁷

Nowhere in Whiten's work involving cast structures do we find the "center of the present action." Separate activities are shown in the different documentation. Nor do we sense

any of the "continuance" of the separate elements or of the bodies in space or in a narrative of which Lessing speaks. Both structure and narrative that would be interconnected in continuity in the art Lessing discussed are discontinuous in Whiten's work.

In place of the baroque intertwining of the three figures and snakes in the **Laocoon** sculpture of Lessing's discussion and of the relational abstract syntax of modernist sculpture (as exemplified by Anthony Caro) the figures in Whiten's **Structure #8** are resolutely separate in containing silhouettes and only their fingertips touch. Each figure in the construction and in the process has the value of another; there is no hierarchy in which the figures strain towards a narrative or visual climax.⁸ Much as in the serial repetition of Judd's Minimal wall pieces where there is "one thing after another" the figures in **Structure #8** repeat poses. This, after all, is the nature of the casting process where identical sculptures can be cast one after another from the same mould. Nonetheless, in Whiten's **Structure #8** (and **March 1974** where the casting process is the same for all the arms although they are displayed intertwined in a different structure) subtle variations of individual nuance occur in the identical structure and process due to the use of individual models. Frontality and repetition of pose in the structure obviate any development of compositional or narrative continuity.

Lack of compositional motif through repetition of figures removes these pieces from any "narrative" development or thematic concentration. No more is there a compositional whole when we turn to the documentation of the event through the photographs, films, and casts. Each mode brackets the expression relevant to it: photographs and film capture different experiences, even the casts which are an initial record and stimulus for the other documentation "bracket" the body. The structure, through its imposing frontality and signification of absence in the empty cut-out silhouettes, is alienated from the spectator, unlike the more recent work where no construction is involved and

there is a consistency of process and image and an invitation into the work (for example, *Untitled, 1976-1977*).⁹ In its forbidding isolation, the casting structure of the earlier work asserts the separateness of the event from the spectator.

Narrative development implies time: an event unfolds in time. Although the repetition of poses prevents displaying the continuity of different poses at one time and through time, the work here in question resolves itself in time.¹⁰ On the one hand, the alienation of the spectator from the work and the original event and the mutual exclusion of compositional elements produce discontinuity. On the other hand, the separate elements each give record of that process which happened in time and which through the separate documentations is recreated, as much as possible, and understood by and through the intervention of the spectator. The "narrative" in Whiten's work is the process which evolves in time. It is not traditional narrative with an overt subject matter. Process resolves the discontinuity of the work on two levels: firstly, by being the means and guiding force in the creation and documentation of the work in its manifold ways; and, secondly, by being the means through which the spectator enters into the structure of the work. Process is continuity.

Given the mediative role of process, the original experience can never be reconstructed, however, from these referant points (that is, from the documents, structure and casts), especially on the part of the viewer. The constituents such as the casts retain material traces of the event. The film retains the flow of the experience in time. Being a temporal medium, it is a substitute for the event which took place in time. It does not have the tangibility of the experience that the real, solid casts emanate, although the transformation of the plaster material from its liquid to solid state is made accessible and evident for the spectator only by the film. The film, having recorded the event, draws the spectator into the experience because the unity provided by time in the film parallels real time.¹¹ It, thus,

brings the separate elements and traces of the event back into a union. The film, it must be remembered, is not the experience itself. It is one part of the whole work and functions to record the event and places the other material remains in their relation in a flow of time. The casting structure and casts, moreover, do not lose any of their specificity or obdurate reality by this means of recording.

In the film we see the participants who have served as models and experienced the casting. We realize that only the sculptor and the participants can recreate more fully the experience, but each from a different and subjective point of view. As the identically posed casts show the quirks of individuality, the film reveals the unapproachable subjective response of the participants. One of the participants has recorded an experience impossible for the spectator to recreate in the context of viewing the work:

1. I was asked to hold a particular pose
2. the process was explained
3. I agreed to hold the pose
4. the support structure was made
5. I voluntarily held the pose
6. the wet plaster was applied
7. I was obliged to hold the pose
8. the plaster grew hard
9. I was forced to hold the pose
10. the plaster was removed . . .¹²

From the spectator's point of view the process is reconstitutive. At this stage process is arrested in the documentation. A stage back, on the level of artistic creation, the work is a documentation of its own process. Process is the initiating and sustaining force throughout from conception, construction, casting to viewing. Process is not documented at one point only. Whiten goes beyond the need of showing the process only in the final product, as a manifestation of making in the actual sculpture, as the casts marks in a bronze sculpture, for instance; it occurs throughout the making of the work.¹³ The sculpture also is not just process documenting pure activity as in, for example, Richard

Serra's lead pieces. That is the process is not the interaction of a statement of intent or instruction with a material. Whiten's work turns process into iconography. She takes the tradition of casting and finds subject matter within it such as in the abstractions arising from a situation where opposites or reversals are created. Since human bodies not inanimate clay models are cast the possibility exists of portraying specific human relations. The very process of making the mould and the mould's own materiality – as a thing in itself, as a thing to be kept and displayed and not to be destroyed after its use has been fulfilled – usurps the role of the final cast to which the mould usually serves only as a means. The mould even assumes the qualities of the cast. An example is **September 1975** where the moulds of the three mummy-like figures project positive images. The images of what would have been the final casts – three-dimensional solid figures – are now obviated by the possibilities inherent in the moulds.

The concentration on the activity of moulding/casting establishes an iconography of dichotomies which permits abstract formulations to be derived from physical objects and relationships. Associated with this is the relation between the person cast and the mould and cast, not to mention the relation between the individuals cast. Finally, the point of contact between the two (mould/cast) is the surface which presents a physical mediation between that which is cast and the mould and an iconographic mediation between internal and external, private and public.

The display of the mould without the cast presents the question of the form in ambiguity. Usually, the mould is only the agent in producing the cast which is considered to be the final sculpture. In the traditional casting process the clay or plaster model to be reproduced is covered with plaster through a special procedure. The hardened plaster is removed retaining on its surface the negative imprint of the model. Then the mould is filled with molten metal and later broken to reveal the sculpture as an exact reproduction of the model. In Whiten's sculpture, the process is

halted at the stage of the taking of the mould. The negative form, the negative image of the original form impressed in its surface, substitutes for its positive counterpart. The negative image is an exact duplicate of the surface of the form but in reverse; it relates to the form but as its mirror image. In the absence of the mould's reproductive function – it still retains a duplicative function, though the image is reversed – the form retreats to the inner surface of the mould which keeps the memory, so to speak, of the solid object. Surrounding the surface is the void of the former object. The mould is a void that maintains the plenitude of the absent form. Even though the mould contends as a surface or form in itself it cannot escape the reminder or trace of the body from which it was cast. Here an absence-presence duality is conferred upon the mould since it holds the memory of a form or body while that form is absent, much in the way a death mask keeps the image of one deceased. At the point when we think that the mould is a void and negative image it produces a positive image that reawakens the natural form of the body while still remaining a visual, not sculptural image. The sculptural surface is concave whereas the visual image we see is convex. A tactile versus optical duality ensues. This optical illusion occurs in **September 1975** (and **Untitled 1976-1977**) due to the play of light on the concave surfaces. A work that signified absence in its moulded image and even death and entombment in its hieratic rigidity in a mummy-like enclosure produces a visually palpable and mysterious image of presence. Art usurps the presence of the living by its own presence. Here life is made present through visual engagement revealing that art is a reconstitutive process of life.

The mould is unlike most sculpture in that it treats the form from the outside rather than relates the surface to the body's inner structural anatomy. It approaches the body from the outside and directs itself to the impenetrable centre of the body by adhering to its surface. As an object in itself, the mould has a form of its own. On the exterior side there is the undetermined form of rough textured plaster.

The contrasting smooth form of the interior is determined by the form of another figure. The mould may be presented with its image-retaining inner surface as in **September 1975**. Or the moulded form may be hidden under the accretion of plaster as in **Structure #7** where we can see the approximate form of the figures' arms and legs but not the duplication of the surface inside the mould.

The mould establishes all the more the role of surface in creating the identity of the body. The surface or skin is that point between the self and others, between the interior and exterior of personality, between that which we know of ourselves and the external object of our bodies which we present to the world and others. One can be an object for others but not for the self. Whiten during the process of casting does make the other, the person casted, into an object (literally by making that person into a cast but also by treating the body as an object to be cast) while the experience of being cast makes the participants aware of their bodies. Nonetheless, the relationship Whiten establishes is not purely that of subject-object (artist-participant); moreover, the relationships set up are not only formal but interpersonal.

II

The sculpture in the present exhibition dates from 1972-1977. During these six years Whiten's sculpture has both shown and developed the varying relations between process and product. The figure of the cast sculpture dominated process and structure in the earliest work. Intermediary work in this exhibition shows a shift to an emphasis on process; the cast sculpture, casting structure and process interact in the works. Finally, the latest work from 1976-1977 presents the wedding of image and structure so that process and image become one in presentation. The ambitious increase in the size of casting structures and events (compare **Structure #4** to **Structure #8**) makes the process all the more apparent and its integration into an artistic whole all the more cumbersome. The latest work simplifies the attendant apparatus of process and its

visual record by adapting the structure and image to each other, by imbedding the image in its own structure as in **September 1975** rather than separating them as in **Structures #4, #7, #8** or **March 1974**.

The integration of process into the presentation raises the problems of the significance of the end product, that is, the cast sculpture, and the meaning to be attached to the structure and its role in casting. In an early work, **Structure #4**, the human figure is drawn into the casting structure, contained there in plaster during the casting process, and then released in the form of the cast sculpture. If we accept this whole operation as part of the meaning of the sculpture we ask what subject matter can be attributed to this process? In other words, can we read an intention of the artist, that goes beyond the art process, in subjecting her models to the structure and casting process?

If we are willing to read an iconography into the structure, **Structure #4** taken alone suggests an instrument of imprisonment and torture with its ropes and chains, props and supports. Photographs of the man being cast show him firmly contained in his forced stance, secured by ropes and chains, pressed into position by prods, with his arms in stocks, hands clamped and legs in plaster casts. What a cruel device, we might say implicating the artist in our associational reading (applying Kafka, Sade and Piranesi) of the structure. But we must remember that the meaning of the piece does not reside only in the structure thus far described. The subjection to the casting structure was voluntary on the part of the man who served as the model. The man naturally felt constrained and uncomfortable in the experience but the event had its ends which surpassed this experience. We confuse the issue if we think that the event takes place in the domain of life rather the realm of art. In the latter, the outcome of the casting event is dual: relational and physical.

In the participants' encounter new relationships were established and new experiences and emotions undergone. If **Structure #4** established relations between artist

and subject only and forced an individual, not intersubjective, experience of the casting on the part of the model, **Structure #7** allowed a relationship between two individuals to be created during the casting and commemorated in the final casts. The concern for grouping individuals in experience continued in **Structure #8**; nonetheless, each individual was alone in his experience although he knew that the others endured the same. Their overlapping fingers indicate this but lacking is the shared intimacy of the face to face encounter of **Structure #7**. Relationships in **March 1974** were created after the fact. Each set of arms was cast individually and then joined with the others in the display structure. If not physically cast together the similar experiences of each join them as is symbolically manifested in the presentation of the linked arms.

An affirmative rather than negative conception of the body, as implied by imputing sadistic impulses to the artist's intentions, is found in **Structure #4**. The plaster casts affirm the strength and physicality of the human body. When we see the final casts, edited so that the energy and strength of the body is concentrated in fragmentation, we realize that the casting structure was required to make these casts. Physical constraint was necessary to achieve physical affirmation, one of the tasks of the sculptor. Similarly, in **Structure #8**, even though the figures conform to a silhouette, are imprisoned by an iron strap, and cast in plaster, all of which are means of containing the body, the figures in their stances are heroic. The heroism of the stance and linked touching hands uniting the figures in experience transcend the imprisoning and de-individualizing conditions of the sculpture.

The structures were not created for the purpose of eliciting subject matter. Certain relationships arise in the casting and constructive apparatus due to the needs of the casting process. These are not necessarily planned as part of a signifying subject but are accepted in the process as part of the new experience.

Even though the casting apparatus is not an end in itself

– during the casting process or at its completion – it does have a presence of its own. If the physicality of the casts and the heroic stances of the figures overwhelm the implications of the casting structures, they do not completely obviate the structures. In the early work emphasis was placed on the end product. With a developing interest in process Whiten had the problem of balancing and integrating structure and process against the cast sculpture as end product so that there was no disjunction between the two. Or rather if there was a disjunction, how was this to be utilized so that the piece would function as a work of art?

A work not included in this exhibition, **February 1975** (a "sketch" for this piece is illustrated on the front cover), led Whiten to the solution of the problem. It allowed the structure to be incorporated into the making of the image so that process and image become one. Hence, documentation was not so important because no separate structure was involved that needed to be reconciled through documentation with the final sculpture. The process **made** the structure and image instead of acting within an already constructed apparatus.

A young man was stood in place, measured and a two-dimensional enclosure of brick built up by his side. This is one measure of containment with no casting involved in the process; it replaces casting. With the body in place, the space around the figure was made solid by the bricks. When the body was removed a space was formed so that the built structure now became a cast, so to speak, revealing the negative space of the body like a cast. The structure indicates two measures of accuracy. On one side the trace is less accurate since a brick must be the unit of measure. On the reverse, a plaster silhouette, as a basic form of representation, more accurately delineates the basic shape of the body. Whereas the plaster silhouette generalizes the shape of the human body so that the spectator seems invited to step into the structure, the bricks assert physical containment. That is, while the silhouette is generalized and almost optical, giving little sense of con-

tainment, all bodies must conform to the physical fact of the spatial dimensions determined by the brick structure. What is primary, though, and of importance for what was to follow, is the negative space that gives a sense of enclosure. With its stress on enclosure, negative space, and definition by boundary, **February 1975** made possible **September 1975** and the subsequent pieces that involve negative cast images.

September 1975 is another of the pieces that is self-referential, that unite the structure and casting in one image. Like **February 1975**, **September 1975** defines and delimits the figure by solidifying the space around the body. Unlike **February 1975**, however, the later piece returns to the casting process to attain the image of the negative space of the body. Although the figures in **September 1975** are silhouetted in plaster, direct impressions of the bodies have been made rather than contained in an approximate measure as in the brick structure of **February 1975**. Complete bodies, rather than fragments, have been cast and the image of each cast body is contained as a whole within the hinged structure when it is closed or as a front and back when opened. When closed, the mummy-like structures are mysterious; they enclose an undefined space for the body. Open, the structures display the negative image of the body. For the viewer, they perhaps provoke the desire to enclose oneself in the form. Either we see security in withdrawing and enclosing ourselves in the space of another figure, in visually trying the image as it is open and being hinged shut. Or we think that this is an image of death because of its mysterious, hieratic, colourless qualities and feel claustrophobic when one of the sculptures is closed. This ambivalent relation to enclosure breaks down the absolute dichotomies of open and closed, of inside and outside. These terms are not simply opposite and excluding conceptions. The physical situation strikes diverse psychological responses.

The optical illusion of a positive image giving three-dimensionality to the negative impression of the body is

very strong in this work. For a viewer who tries to act upon this positive image a conceptual puzzle arises due to the contradictory image of the figures if the cast is closed, unless, in closing the figure passes through itself and rearranges its divided self into wholeness. Only if the images remain negative can we conceptually close the sculpture. Although these puzzles suggest themselves in viewing they do not detract from witnessing the presence and aura of a solemn and mysterious sculpture.

Untitled 1976-1977, the piece with five seated women, continues Whiten's interest in negative images and enclosing space. The presentation is quieter and more intimate and much of the dramatics of the Structures and **September 1975** have been reduced by creating a more natural situation. Methods of individualization such as the introduction of colour into the moulds soften the effects of the positive-negative contrast. The negative image is no longer so evidently positive, so optically assertive.

The plaster element is, in effect, a negative wall relief: the forms are negative and the space between solidified. Conversely, we can optically read the forms of the women as positive and the solid wall of plaster as space surrounding the figures. A quietness pervades the piece, as the artist says, "a quietness that makes room for the viewer."¹⁴ The second bench supplies room for the viewer. He or she can actively engage in the work and mime the poses of the individualized spaces in front of them. Here the viewer is free to participate in a way the cast figures cannot; the women are trapped and anonymous in their poses. "The piece expresses the passivity that I and other women feel," claims Whiten. The introduction of women makes this work a counterpart to **Structure #8**. While relationships have always been created and depicted in the course of making these last works perhaps indicate a shift in concern to more personal documentation of the artist's life and activity.

Philip Monk