

a four dimensional being writes poetry on a field with sculptures

an exhibition curated by Charles Ray
at Matthew Marks gallery
New York

The beginning of this essay is the problem of Genesis; time starts before space, and time is very easy to understand until you try to explain it. Space of course has no meaning outside of time, which is its experience. This art show is about space, which I guess is like saying my watch is about time. Actually I do not wear a watch but like you have lived in both space and time. For centuries philosophers and scientists have studied the inscrutability of both these phenomena. Saint Augustine said that time is very easy to understand until you try to explain it. The obvious is always the most enigmatic. Fifteen hundred years later Albert Einstein linked time to space in the most inseparable way. Relativity and special relativity are felt through intellect rather than through human intuition. Throughout these centuries of scientific endeavor, we often turn to poets and artists to feel the most mysterious and obvious aspects of reality. Homer's Ulysses spent much of his time traveling through physical and metaphysical space while his wife Penelope stayed home and unwove the threads of time with a tapestry to hold off the erosion of her suitors. Two millennia later, in the New World, Mark Twain wrote of the exploits of Huckleberry Finn with the runaway slave Jim. The space and time of the flowing Mississippi are given witness through the narrative of Mr. Twain's writings. Mark Twain once wrote that to be a Mississippi river-boat pilot one had to be able to memorize a Bible that was continuously being rewritten from beginning to end. The ever-eroding shore, migrating sandbars and evolving timber snags had to be negotiated on moonless nights. When reading this passage I was touched by the way the Mississippi and

its flowing escalation felt like the ebb and tide of my own space and time. Zeno, Aristotle, Plato, Newton, Kant and Heidegger are the lighthouses and channel markers of human space and time. Poets and artists I think practice the more imperfect art of meteorology. Before going to sea, it would be foolish not to have the charts and piloting equipment for passages and landfalls, but it is only in listening to the weather forecast, however inaccurate, that my human doubts are put to rest and my impulses for voyaging are reassured. This exhibition was curated as an invitation to experience the poetics and artistic perception of both three-dimensional and pictorial space. If you care to link time to this attempt I will be as pleased as Dante's Virgil because, even if I do not throw so much light on it myself, light may be shed for the people who follow. Of the four artists in this exhibition only Jeff Wall works in two-dimensional pictorial space. Edgar Tolson, a folk artist, can be seen as a pictorial artist, but I hope the viewer will find surprising spatial consequences to his sophisticated choreography. Mark di Suvero is a constructivist who heroically demonstrates three-dimensionality through diagonality. In the '60s *Hankchampion* was criticized for its physicality in relation to Franz Kline's gestural triangulations. The nineteenth-century railroad trestle was seen as poetic in Kline's abstract paintings and mundanely obvious in di Suvero's heroics. This bit of criticism might seem easy to agree with, but after thirty years I still wonder. The last artist represented in the exhibition is Alberto Giacometti, who shares with Edgar Tolson an embedment in an amoral space described so beautifully by R. M. Schneider in Patrick

Dillon's book *Lost at Sea*: "There are things about the sea which man can never know and can never change. Those who describe the sea as angry or gentle or ferocious do not know the sea. The sea just does not know you are there, you take it as you find it or it takes you." This essay will also briefly discuss two pieces that do not appear in the exhibition, the Manhattan Kouros and a Donald Judd sculpture. Both are nevertheless crucial in understanding my thinking about the artistic use of space and time. Space is the sculptor's primary medium, a fact so obvious that it is easy to overlook. Rather than work toward an understanding of how a sculpture both creates and occupies space, we tend to focus on the comprehension of the subject matter and on the material qualities of the work of art. In ancient times, Pygmalion sculpted a human figure so magically alive that the transformation of marble into flesh obscured his mastery in shaping space itself. This shaping of plastic space is not easy to accomplish, but I think it is the quality that extends an object into time. The Manhattan Kouros is an archaic figure sculpted in the fifth century B.C. Scholars tell us that it served a votive function in the culture of its time. This aspect of the work is lost to us; with its polychrome surface worn away and its social function now part of history we are left with a marble image coming to us from another time. The sculpture is of a young man stepping forward; the kouros figure begins sculpture's journeys into space. A beautiful and touching aspect of this sculpture is its relationship of equal parts. What is essential in a work of art is found in the method of its construction. Artists in the late Hellenistic period and Roman and

Renaissance sculptors used flat chisels. They struck the marble with tangential blows, preserving the distinctive veins and crystalline structure of their block of stone. Using a flat chisel, Michelangelo could finish the details of a face emerging from his stone years before the completion of the work. In contrast earlier Greeks used punches, rather than chisels, striking perpendicular blows to the surface of the marble. This method of reduction shattered the crystalline structure of the future polychrome stone. More important, the sculptor created his work by reducing the size of this punch each time he passed around the block. The making of a sculpture was like the peeling of an onion. And reducing the size of the punch with each pass around the sculpture allowed the details to emerge simultaneously. An eyelid, a lip, a knee and a toenail all appeared at the same time. This not only gave the work a great democracy of parts but also forced the sculptor to follow contours that existed in the round. This method of construction is celebrated in the Parthenon, where the figures on the frieze are totally completed in the round. While we look at them from the front, the sculptors had a need to see the figures in their totality. This was due to the method rather than the fetish of their construction. When I enter the Metropolitan Museum of Art and view the Manhattan Kouros, I am struck by this figure's ancient smile, as alive today as it was in the moment of his creation. The smile is said to be an attempt to animate the figure with the energy of life. His step forward gives him a human quality of kinesthetic movement that is as timeless as his expression. Some aspects of the figures are highly stylized and

others very naturalized. This ancient equation organizes an energy that I find reflected in my own psychology: some aspects of the human personality are stylized while others are more comfortable and natural. The sculpture, like us, is in the act of perpetually becoming. The figure is of a young man stepping forward into adulthood. It shows the archaic moving into the classical. The stylized is shifting into the idealized; most important, the statue is stepping forward into social space. When, in an interview, Giacometti was confronted with the elongated surrealistic aspect of his grounded figure, he answered that he made his figures as realistically as possible. Taken aback, the interviewer replied, "What do you mean, they are not realistic at all." Giacometti countered, "When I look at you I see your eye, your nose, your mouth, your neck, your breast, your belly, your knee and then your toe. To see you I have to scan you. To see you in your totality I have to back up, way across the room, and then I see not only all of you but I also see a great volume of space surrounding and compressing you." While I don't project into the form of Giacometti's figure the way I project into the form of the kouros, the space that seems to sculpt the Giacometti is the same space that sculpts and compresses my life and time. Edgar Tolson was a celebrated folk artist from Kentucky; in the 1970s his work was discovered and championed by the sculptor Michael Hall. In 1989, the Milwaukee Art Museum acquired the folk art collection of Michael and Julie Hall in its entirety and it was there that I first viewed the *Fall of Man* series. I was impressed by the contradiction between its limited execution and its sophisticated choreography.

The work is viewed as a narrative; I moved through the timeline with conventional biblical understanding. The black snake in the branches of the Tree of Knowledge dominates through its spatiality. Later in the series, when Cain kills Abel, again we witness Evil dominating the limited world of Tolson's tableaux. In the last piece of the series there is a charged gap between the back of Cain and that of Eve mourning over Abel's dead body. Cain, however, holds the entire series in an equal relationship to the abyss into which he stares. I believe that the space Cain is looking into is the same space that we perceive to embrace and compress Giacometti figures. Jeff Wall, like Tolson, produces narrative structures. Unlike Tolson he uses pictorial ideas to compress and superimpose his images into dynamic non-linear structures. *A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947* is a two-dimensional image with dense pictorial overtones that are flattened into real and idealized memory. The composition of the picture is complex. We have a place that is culturally identifiable. As free as the balloons are from gravity, the descending ceiling suffocates. The symmetry of the room is not only reflected in the ventriloquist and his puppet but also in the partygoers depicted within the picture and the viewers' projected memory of the planned parties of our childhood. Wall's picture is a portal into the real space of our four-color memory. Here, pictorial space, like the space of our memory, is open to discourse and judgment in a way that the space surrounding a Giacometti is not. This difference between a pictorial image such as Wall's and a Giacometti is not a difference between sculptural structure and pictorial image. It has its roots in

a deeper spatial perception. The space compressed in a Giacometti was here before we were. The cultural space that is orchestrated in a Wall photograph is socially constructed. The balloons rise toward the ceiling, not so much because of their helium core, but more because of the supposed lightheadedness of the partygoers, so absent in the depiction of the children. Di Suvero, like Wall, works in a socially constructed space. He is a constructivist and his configurations dissect and punctuate space, creating positive and negative volumes. He, as a sculptor, is the primary actor and expresses himself working in a spatial genre. We physically link our own selves to his gesture through the established esthetic laid down by high modernism. There are good di Suveros and bad di Suveros and we use esthetic judgments to determine our favorites. While with Wall we partake of the work of a sophisticated cultural critic, our critique of di Suvero involves the complex connoisseurship of Modernist sculpture. The appreciation of both artists requires active judgment, and judgment, esthetic, ethical or not, is alive in its morality. There are good Giacomettis and great Giacomettis, but like Tolson's Cain, the space that we feel is not created by us. In a certain sense, it lies outside of social construction, beyond the long arm of the law. While I was a student I enjoyed reading Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Flatland was written at the end of the nineteenth century and concerns itself with an imaginary two-dimensional world inhabited by squares, triangles and other geometric figures. The beings of Flatland are embedded in the surface of a plane and have no concept of the three-dimensional world. In

the narrative, a square comes into contact with a sphere from our three-dimensional world. We humans live in three-dimensional space, and we can glimpse the higher dimension by understanding our relationship to the lower dimension. When we look at a square drawn on a sheet of paper we simultaneously see the square's interior and exterior. A four-dimensional being looking into our world would see our three-dimensional inside and outside at the same time. Creatures from the second dimension are perhaps an impossibility, as their digestive tract would cut them in two. If you can imagine a fourth direction perpendicular to the three that we know, you could understand why shoelaces can only be knotted at home in our three-dimensional space. Looking at the beautiful Judd sculpture reproduced in this book, one sees a three-dimensional structure. I am not a four-dimensional creature but while looking at the Judd I am privileged to see its internal and external structures simultaneously. Like a being from any dimension this sculpture is totally and completely embedded in the space of its existence. I am reminded of Aristotle's disbelief in the fourth dimension: his proof of its nonexistence was that he could not point in its direction.