

Chapter 3

A Paradoxical Situation, 1966–67

“‘Form-content,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘classic,’ ‘Romantic,’ ‘expressive,’ ‘experiment,’ ‘psychology,’ ‘analogy,’ ‘depth,’ ‘purity,’ ‘feeling,’ ‘space,’ ‘Avant-garde,’ ‘lyric,’ ‘individual,’ ‘composition,’ ‘life and death,’ ‘sexuality,’ ‘biomorphic,’ ‘biographic’—the entire language of botany in art—can now be regarded as suspect,” declared artist Mel Bochner, reviewing the Jewish Museum exhibition *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* for *Arts* magazine in his critical writing debut.¹ Such language served only to “separate the viewer from the object of his sight” by asserting an irrelevant historicism and sentimentality. “The New Art of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Don Judd, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson deals with the surface of matter and avoids the ‘heart,’” and further, it succeeded in erasing “the dichotomy between art and science” by embracing such de rigueur conceptual tools as Set Theory, Fibonacci numbers, and “modern technology” in general. All significance was manifest in an unmediated encounter with the viewer. Scale, materials, form, and presence in physical space were irreducible facts, “distant from the humanistic stammerings of Abstract Expressionism, Happenings, and Pop Art.”²

When *Primary Structures* opened in April 1966, the new tendencies in three-dimensional art that Lucy Lippard had termed “laconic post-geometric structures” in her “Third Stream” essays the previous year became the focus of the art world. Curated by Kynaston McShine, Lippard’s good friend and former colleague at the Museum of Modern Art, *Primary Structures* developed out of conversations between McShine and Lippard.³ Lippard’s observations regarding artists’ use of industrial and commercial materials as an oblique reaction to postwar consumerism were taken by McShine in the direction of technological optimism. “Methods of industrial fabrication in the Space Age have facilitated the accuracy of many of the structurists,” he wrote in the catalogue introduction.⁴ Tom Doyle’s sculpture *Over Owl’s Creek* (1966), a “free-flowing floorpiece” of linoleum, wood, and steel, painted red, demonstrated that work in the show need not be modular, or even a structure.⁵ Rather, industrial materials and anonymity of execution were common properties—even if many artists, including Doyle and LeWitt, still made their own work. McShine dwelt upon the “Space Age” sculptor

Fig. 44
Sol LeWitt, installation view, Dwan Gallery, New York, 1966. Foreground: *Double Modular Cube*, 1966. Painted wood. 108 × 55 × 55 in. Destroyed, remade in steel 1970. Background: *Modular Floor Structure*, 1966. Painted wood. 25¼ × 141½ × 141½ in. Destroyed, remade in steel 1968.