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Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2

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Notes on the Index:  
Seventies Art in America  
Part 2

ROSALIND KRAUSS

Nothing could seem further apart than photography and abstract painting, the one wholly dependent upon the world for the source of its imagery, the other shunning that world and the images it might provide. Yet now, in the '70s, over large stretches of the abstract art that is being produced, the conditions of photography have an implacable hold. If we could say of several generations of painters in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the conscious aspiration for their work was that it attain to the condition of music, we have now to deal with an utterly different claim. As paradoxical as it might seem, photography has increasingly become the operative model for abstraction.

I am not so much concerned here with the genesis of this condition within the arts, its historical process, as I am with its internal structure as one now confronts it in a variety of work. That photography should be the model for abstraction involves an extraordinary mutation, the logic of which is, I think, important to grasp.

In trying to demonstrate how this is at work I wish to begin with an example drawn not from painting or sculpture, but rather from dance. The instance concerns a performance that Deborah Hay gave last fall in which she explained to her audience that instead of dancing, she wished to talk. For well over an hour Hay directed a quiet but insistent monologue at her spectators, the substance of which was that she was there, presenting herself to them, but not through the routines of movement, because these were routines for which she could no longer find any particular justification. The aspiration for dance to which she had come, she said, was to be in touch with the movement of every cell in her body; that, and the one her audience was witnessing: as a dancer, to have recourse to speech.

The event I am describing divides into three components. The first is a refusal to dance, or what might be characterized more generally as a flight from the terms of aesthetic convention. The second is a fantasy of total self-presence: to be in touch with the movement of every cell in one's body. The third is a verbal discourse through which the subject repeats the simple fact that she is present—thereby duplicating through speech the content of the second component. If it is interesting or important to list the features of the Hay performance, it is because

there seems to be a logical relationship between them, and further, that logic seems to be operative in a great deal of the art that is being produced at present. This logic involves the reduction of the conventional sign to a trace, which then produces the need for a supplemental discourse.

Within the convention of dance, signs are produced by movement. Through the space of the dance these signs are able to be coded both with relation to one another, and in correlation to a tradition of other possible signs. But once movement is understood as something the body does not produce and is, instead, a circumstance that is registered on it (or, invisibly, within it), there is a fundamental alteration in the nature of the sign. Movement ceases to function symbolically, and takes on the character of an index. By index I mean that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples. The movement to which Hay turns—a kind of Brownian motion of the self—has about it this quality of trace. It speaks of a literal manifestation of presence in a way that is like a weather vane's registration of the wind. But unlike the weather vane, which acts culturally to code a natural phenomenon, this cellular motion of which Hay speaks is specifically uncoded. It is out of reach of the dance convention that might provide a code. And thus, although there is a message which can be read or inferred from this trace of the body's life—a message that translates into the statement "I am here"—this message is disengaged from the codes of dance. In the context of Hay's performance it is, then, a message without a code. And because it is uncoded—or rather uncodable—it must be supplemented by a spoken text, one that repeats the message of pure presence in an articulated language.

If I am using the term "message without a code" to describe the nature of Hay's physical performance, I do so in order to make a connection between the features of that event and the inherent features of the photograph. The phrase "*message sans code*" is drawn from an essay in which Roland Barthes points to the fundamentally uncoded nature of the photographic image. "What this [photographic] message specifies," he writes, "is, in effect, that the relation of signified and signifier is quasi-tautological. Undoubtedly the photograph implies a certain displacement of the scene (cropping, reduction, flattening), but this passage is not a *transformation* (as an encoding must be). Here there is a loss of equivalency (proper to true sign systems) and the imposition of a quasi-identity. Put another way, the sign of this message is no longer drawn from an institutional reserve; it is not coded. And one is dealing here with the paradox of a message without a code."<sup>1</sup>

It is the order of the natural world that imprints itself on the photographic emulsion and subsequently on the photographic print. This quality of transfer or trace gives to the photograph its documentary status, its undeniable veracity. But at the same time this veracity is beyond the reach of those possible internal

1. Roland Barthes, "Rhetorique de l'image," [my translation], *Communications*, no. 4 (1964), 42.

adjustments which are the necessary property of language. The connective tissue binding the objects contained by the photograph is that of the world itself, rather than that of a cultural system.

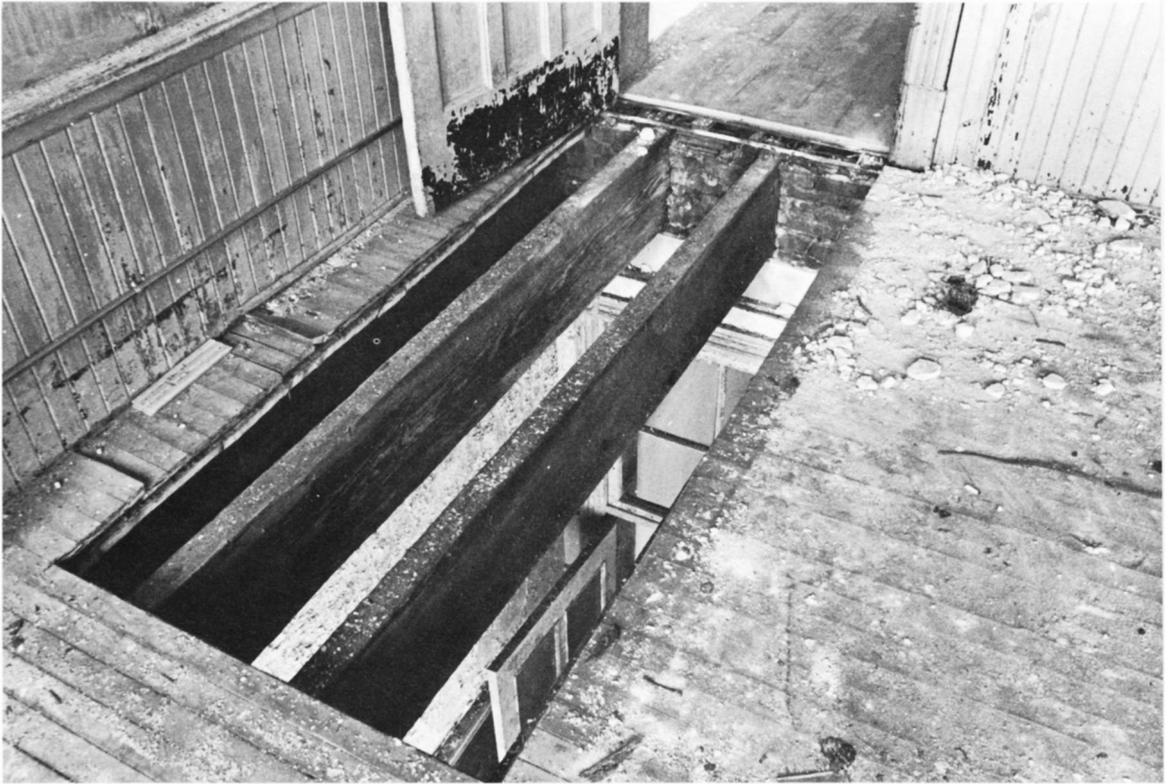
In the photograph's distance from what could be called syntax one finds the mute presence of an uncoded event. And it is this kind of presence that abstract artists now seek to employ.<sup>2</sup>

Several examples are in order. I take them all from an exhibition last year at P. S. 1,<sup>3</sup> an exhibition that had the effect of surveying much of the work that is being produced by the current generation of artists. Each of the cases I have in mind belongs to the genre of installation piece and each exploited the derelict condition of the building itself: its rotting floors, its peeling paint, its crumbling plaster. The work by Gordon Matta-Clark was produced by cutting away the floorboards and ceiling from around the joists of three successive stories of the building, thereby threading an open, vertical shaft through the fabric of the revealed structure. In *East/West Wall Memory Relocated*, Michelle Stuart took rubbings of sections of opposing sides of a corridor, imprinting on floor-to-ceiling sheets of paper the traces of wainscoting, cracked plaster, and blackboard frames, and then installing each sheet on the wall facing its actual origin. Or, in the work by Lucio Pozzi, a series of two-color, painted panels were dispersed throughout the building, occurring where, for institutional reasons, the walls of the school had been designated as separate areas by an abrupt change in the color of the paint. The small panels that Pozzi affixed to these walls aligned themselves with this phenomenon, bridging across the line of change, and at the same time replicating it. The color of each half of a given panel matched the color of the underlying wall; the line of change between colors reiterated the discontinuity of the original field.

In this set of works by Pozzi one experiences that quasi-tautological relationship between signifier and signified with which Barthes characterizes the photograph. The painting's colors, the internal division between those colors, are occasioned by a situation in the world which they merely register. The passage of the features of the school wall onto the plane of the panel is analogous to those of the photographic process: cropping, reduction, and self-evident flattening. The effect of the work is that its relation to its subject is that of the index, the

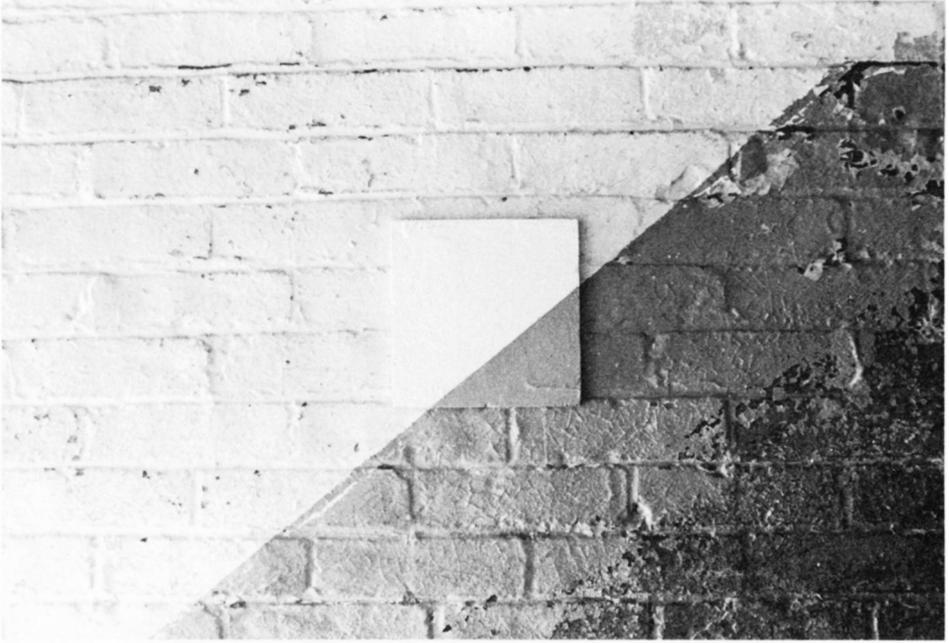
2. The pressure to use indexical signs as a means of establishing presence begins in Abstract-Expressionism with deposits of paint expressed as imprints and traces. During the 1960s, this concern was continued although changed in its import in, for example, the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. This development forms a historical background for the phenomenon I am describing as belonging to 1970s art. However, it must be understood that there is a decisive break between earlier attitudes towards the index and those at present, a break that has to do with the role played by the photographic, rather than the pictorial, as a model.

3. P.S.1 is a public school building in Long Island City which has been leased to the Institute for Art and Urban Resources for use as artists' studios and exhibition spaces. The exhibition in question was called "Rooms." Mounted in late May, 1976, it was the inaugural show of the building. A catalogue documenting the entire exhibition was issued in Summer 1977, and is available through the Institute.



*Gordon Matta-Clark. Doors, Floors, Doors. 1976.  
Removal of floor through 1st, 2nd and 3rd floors.*

p. 62:  
*Lucio Pozzi. P.S.1 Paint. 1976. Acrylic on wood panel.*



impression, the trace. The painting is thus a sign connected to a referent along a purely physical axis. And this indexical quality is precisely the one of photography. In theorizing about the differences among the sign-types—symbol, icon, and index—C. S. Peirce distinguishes photographs from icons even though icons (signs which establish meaning through the effect of resemblance) form a class to which we would suppose the photograph to belong. “Photographs,” Peirce says, “especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs [indices], those by physical connection.”<sup>4</sup>

I am claiming, then, that Pozzi is reducing the abstract pictorial object to the status of a mould or impression or trace. And it seems rather clear that the nature of this reduction is formally distinct from other types of reduction that have operated within the history of recent abstract art. We could, for example, compare this work by Pozzi with a two-color painting by Ellsworth Kelly where, as in the case of the Pozzi panels, two planes of highly saturated color abut one another, without any internal inflection of the color within those planes, and where this unmodulated color simply runs to the edges of the work’s physical support. Yet whatever the similarities in format the most obvious difference between the two is that Kelly’s work is detached from its surroundings. Both visually and conceptually it is free from any specific locale. Therefore whatever occurs within the perimeters of Kelly’s painting must be accounted for with reference to some kind of internal logic of the work. This is unlike the Pozzi, where color and the line of separation between colors are strictly accountable to the wall within which they are visually embedded and whose features they replicate.

In the kind of Kelly I have in mind, the demands of an internal logic are met by the use of joined panels, so that the seam between the two color fields marks an actual physical rift within the fabric of the work as a whole. The field becomes a conjunction of discrete parts, and any drawing (lines of division) that occurs within that field is coextensive with the real boundaries of each part. Forcing “drawn” edge to coincide with the real edge of an object (a given panel), Kelly accounts for the occurrence of drawing by literalizing it. If the painting has two visual parts, that is because it has two real parts. The message imparted by the drawing is therefore one of discontinuity, a message that is repeated on two levels of the work: the imagistic (the split between color fields) and the actual (the split between panels). Yet what we must realize is that this message—“discontinuity”—is suspended within a particular field: that of painting, painting understood conventionally as a continuous, bounded, detachable, flat surface. So that if we wish to interpret the message of the work (“discontinuity”) we do so by reading it

4. C.S. Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” *Philosophic Writings of Peirce*, New York, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 106.

against the ground within which it occurs. *Painting* in this sense is like a noun for which *discontinuous* is understood as a modifier, and the coherence of Kelly's work depends on one's seeing the logic of that connection. What this logic sets out is that unlike the continuum of the real world, painting is a field of articulations or divisions. It is only by disrupting its physical surface and creating discontinuous units that it can produce a system of signs, and through those signs, meaning. An analogy we could make here is to the color spectrum which language arbitrarily divides up into a set of discontinuous terms—the names of hues. In order for a language to exist, the natural order must be segmented into mutually exclusive units. And Kelly's work is about defining the pictorial convention as a process of arbitrary rupture of the field (a canvas surface) into the discontinuous units that are the necessary constituents of signs.

One could say, then, that the reduction that occurs in Kelly's painting results in a certain schematization of the pictorial codes. It is a demonstration of the internal necessity of segmentation in order for a natural continuum to be divided into the most elementary units of meaning. However we may feel about the visual results of that schematic—that it yields sensuous beauty coupled with the pleasure of intellectual economy, or that it is boringly minimal—it is one that takes the process of pictorial meaning as its subject.

Now, in the '70s, there is of course a tremendous disaffection with the kind of analytic produced by the art of the 1960s, of which Kelly's work is one of many possible instances. In place of that analytic there is recourse to the alternative set of operations exemplified by the work of Pozzi. If the surface of one of his panels is divided, that partition can only be understood as a transfer or impression of the features of a natural continuum onto the surface of the painting. The painting as a whole functions to point to the natural continuum, the way the word *this* accompanied by a pointing gesture isolates a piece of the real world and fills itself with a meaning by becoming, for that moment, the transitory label of a natural event. Painting is not taken to be a signified to which individual paintings might meaningfully refer—as in the case of Kelly. Paintings are understood, instead, as shifters, empty signs (like the word *this*) that are filled with meaning only when physically juxtaposed with an external referent, or object.

The operations one finds in Pozzi's work are the operations of the index, which seem to act systematically to transmute each of the terms of the pictorial convention. Internal division (drawing) is converted from its formal status of encoding reality to one of imprinting it. The edge of the work is redirected from its condition as closure (the establishment of a limit in response to the internal meaning of the work) and given the role of selection (gathering a visually intelligible sample of the underlying continuum). The flatness of the support is deprived of its various formal functions (as the constraint against which illusion is established and tested; as the source of conventional coherence) and is used instead as the repository of evidence. (Since this is no longer a matter of convention but

merely of convenience, the support for the index could obviously take any configuration, two- or three-dimensional.) Each of these transformations operates in the direction of photography as a functional model. The photograph's status as a trace or index, its dependence on selection from the natural array by means of cropping, its indifference to the terms of its support (holography constituting a three-dimensionalization of that support), are all to be found in Pozzi's efforts at P.S. 1. And of course, not in his alone. The work by Michelle Stuart—a rubbing—is even more nakedly involved in the procedures of the trace, while the Matta-Clark cut through the building's interior becomes an instance of cropping, in order that the void created by the cut be literally filled by a natural ground.

In each of these works it is the building itself that is taken to be a message which can be presented but not coded. The ambition of the works is to capture the presence of the building, to find strategies to force it to surface into the field of the work. Yet even as that presence surfaces, it fills the work with an extraordinary sense of time-past. Though they are produced by a physical cause, the trace, the impression, the clue, are vestiges of that cause which is itself no longer present in the given sign. Like traces, the works I have been describing represent the building through the paradox of being physically present but temporally remote. This sense is made explicit in the title of the Stuart work where the artist speaks of relocation as a form of memory. In the piece by Matta-Clark the cut is able to signify the building—to point to it—only through a process of removal or cutting away. The procedure of excavation succeeds therefore in bringing the building into the consciousness of the viewer in the form of a ghost. For Pozzi, the act of taking an impression submits to the logic of effacement. The painted wall is signified by the work as something which was there but has now been covered over.

Like the other features of these works, this one of temporal distance is a striking aspect of the photographic message. Pointing to this paradox of a presence seen as past, Barthes says of the photograph:

The type of perception it implies is truly without precedent. Photography set up, in effect, not a perception of the *being-there* of an object (which all copies are able to provoke, but a perception of its *having-been-there*. It is a question therefore of a new category of space-time: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority. Photography produces an illogical conjunction of the *here* and the *formerly*. It is thus at the level of the denotated message or message without code that one can plainly understand the *real unreality* of the photograph. Its unreality is that of the here, since the photograph is never experienced as an illusion; it is nothing but a *presence* (one must continually keep in mind the magical character of the photographic image). Its reality is that of a *having-been-there*, because in all photographs there is the constantly amazing evidence: *this took place in this way*. We possess, then, as a kind of

precious miracle, a reality from which we are ourselves sheltered.<sup>5</sup>

This condition of the having-been-there satisfies questions of verifiability at the level of the document. Truth is understood as a matter of evidence, rather than a function of logic. In the 1960s, abstract art, particularly painting, had aspired to a kind of logical investigation, attempting to tie the event of the work to what could be truly stated about the internal relations posited by the pictorial code. In so doing, this art tied itself to the convention of painting (or sculpture) as that continuous present which both sustained the work conceptually and was understood as its content.

In the work at P. S. 1, we are obviously dealing with a jettisoning of convention, or more precisely the conversion of the pictorial and sculptural codes into that of the photographic message without a code. In order to do this, the abstract artist adapts his work to the formal character of the indexical sign. These procedures comply with two of the components of the Hay performance described at the beginning of this discussion. The third feature of that performance—the addition of an articulated discourse, or text, to the otherwise mute index—was, I claimed, a necessary outcome of the first two. This need to link text and image has been remarked upon in the literature of semiology whenever the photograph is mentioned. Thus Barthes, in speaking of those images which resist internal divisibility, says, “this is probably the reason for which these systems are almost always duplicated by articulated speech (such as the caption of a photograph) which endows them with the discontinuous aspect which they do not have.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, an overt use of captioning is nearly always to be found in that portion of contemporary art which employs photography directly. Story art, body art, some of conceptual art, certain types of earthworks, mount photographs as a type of evidence and join to this assembly a written text or caption.<sup>7</sup> But in the work I have been discussing—the abstract wing of this art of the index—we do not find a written text appended to the object-trace. There are, however, other kinds of texts for photographs besides written ones, as Walter Benjamin points out when he speaks of the history of the relation of caption to photographic image. “The directive which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines,” he writes, “soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones.”<sup>8</sup> In film each image appears from within a succession that operates to internalize the caption, as narrative.

At P. S. 1 the works I have been describing all utilize succession. Pozzi’s panels occur at various points along the corridors and stairwells of the building.

5. Barthes, “Rhetorique de l’image,” p. 47.

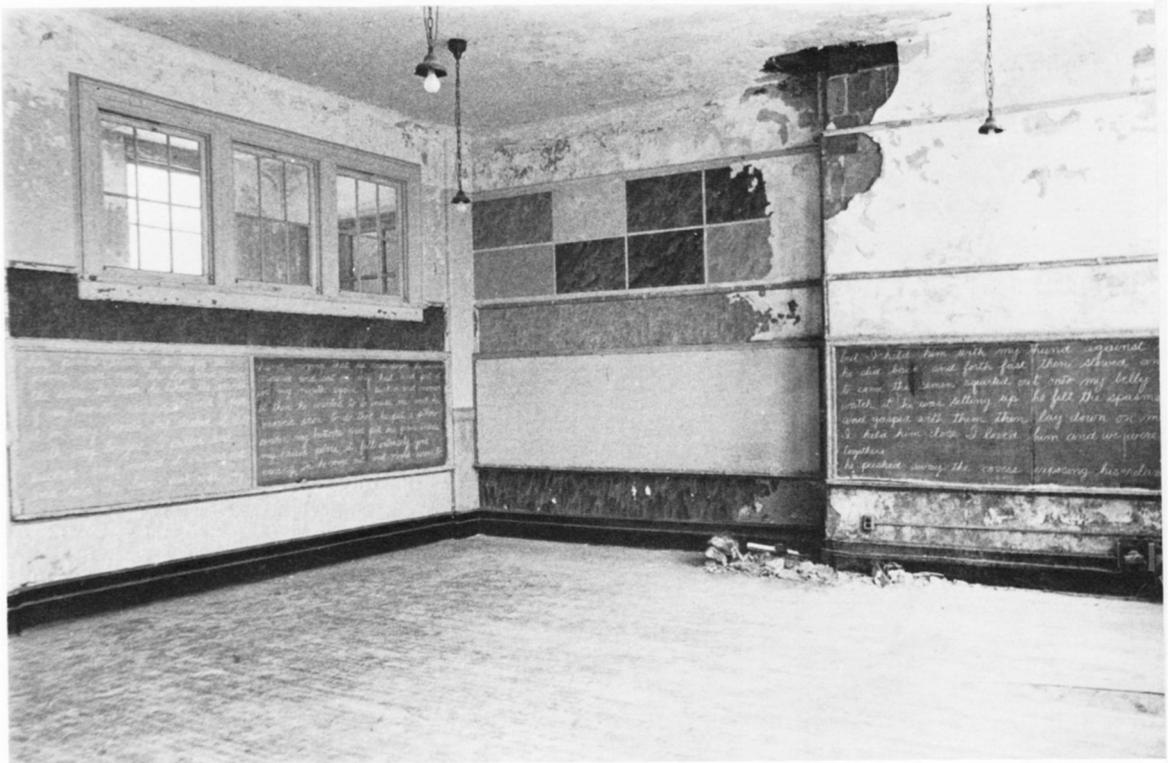
6. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967, p. 64.

7. See Part I of this essay, *October*, 3 (Spring 1977), 82.

8. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 226.

Stuart's rubbings are relocated across the facing planes of a hallway. The Matta-Clark cut involves the viewer in a sequence of floors. The "text" that accompanies the work is, then, the unfolding of the building's space which the successive parts of the works in question articulate into a kind of cinematic narrative; and that narrative in turn becomes an explanatory supplement to the works.

In the first part of this essay I suggested that the index must be seen as something that shapes the sensibility of a large number of contemporary artists; that whether they are conscious of it or not, many of them assimilate their work (in part if not wholly) to the logic of the index. So, for example, at P. S. 1 Marcia Hafif used one of the former classrooms as an arena in which to juxtapose painting and writing. On the walls above the original blackboards Hafif executed abstract paintings of repetitive colored strokes while on the writing surfaces themselves she chalked a detailed, first-person account of sexual intercourse. Insofar as the narrative did not stand in relation to the images as an explanation, this text by Hafif was not a true caption. But its visual and formal effect was that of captioning: of bowing to the implied necessity to add a surfeit of written information to the depleted power of the painted sign.



*Marcia Hafif. Untitled. 1976. Paint and chalk on walls and blackboards.*