

Dis/continuum

Blake Carrington / Central Utah Art Center / May 13 - June 3, 2011





Once an old mill, now a contemporary art space, the Central Utah Art Center retains signs of its past life in the limestone bricks of its exterior, the exposed beams and rafters inside. Beyond these bits of rustic architectural salvage, the interior space is otherwise a classic white cube. (Of course, the space is not really cubic, but few white cubes ever were.) There are reasons why this convention of display, however cold and pseudo-clinical, remains useful. The white cube gives art a room of its own. Cleaned up, emptied out, the gallery becomes an autonomous realm: neutral, pristine, and self-sufficient.

Yet if the white cube has traditionally functioned to keep the world out, Blake Carrington's recent installation at the CUAC seemed to invite it in. Rocks and other organic elements sat in piles on the gallery floor. A list of words—the names of so many land formations—ran up the gallery walls. Carrington's site-responsive intervention depended on the gallery's architecture as the literal support of his work. In the process, the gallery's hardwood floors became the earth, the walls and ceiling a surrogate sky.

Entitled *Dis/continuum*, Carrington's project comprised three distinct but interdependent components: the aforementioned list of geographic terms, which the artist called *Temporary Formations*; the aforementioned piles, or *Pile Gestalten*, variously composed of rocks, gravel, salt, or mulch, each one traced by a thick black line around its perimeter; and lastly, *Relational Wavespace: Mineral Crystals*, a work of video and sound art installed in the ceiling rafters, which translated the molecular structure of mineral crystals into droning sounds and 3-D animations (on a screen upstairs).

The presence of text—an alphabetized list—on the gallery's walls, along with the installation's deadpan aesthetic, seemed to invite comparisons to old school conceptualism of the 1960s. Adam Bateman suggested to me that Carrington's show was akin to Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), the landmark work of conceptual art which juxtaposed a dictionary definition of the word "chair," a photograph of a chair, and an actual wooden chair—three kinds of chairs, or three codes for a chair—as a means of questioning different modes of representation (language, picture, object). Carrington's version might be seen to represent "land" in three different registers, with each one a step removed from its referent: the piles of organic materials have been extracted from the earth and processed; the outlines describing these formations are abstracted, like a topographical map (as opposed to a photograph); and the text offers not a definition but a seemingly endless list of terms. Much as Carrington's work gestures toward conceptual precedents like Kosuth's, it also owes some debt to postminimalists like Mel Bochner, who marked the measurements of a room in black tape and Letraset, mapping the room's dimensions directly onto its walls (*Measurement Room*, 1969), or the late 1960s "scatter" work of artists like Robert Morris and Barry Le Va, who engaged the gallery floor as a field of play.

One last historical reference point cannot escape mention, for an artist cannot pile up a bunch of rocks in Utah without conjuring the specter of Robert Smithson, whose own coiling pile of rocks, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), sits at the edge of the Great Salt Lake. Yet it is not so much Smithson's earthworks with which I take Carrington's work to be in dialogue, but rather with the Nonsites, the sculptural works Smithson began producing in 1968. Representing or referencing sites in the physical landscape, Nonsites consist of documentation of a given site (maps or photographs, for example), along with mineral samples extracted from that site (sand, rocks, or slag, perhaps), and a container or bin that holds the samples. A Nonsite points to a physical site beyond the gallery's boundaries, while the site, for its part, retains a material connection to the Nonsite. In this way, the Nonsite is continuous with the site, never a singular or whole work unto itself.

As much as Carrington's piles share certain formal or morphological traits with Smithson's Nonsites, it may be the differences between the two projects that are most instructive. For if Smithson's Nonsite establishes a dialectical continuity with the physical site—here two opposing elements are reconciled through their merging and held in tension—Carrington's piles point to discontinuity within the context of the larger physical landscape (hence the exhibition's title, *Dis/continuum*). Indeed, his demarcated piles of rocks, gravel, salt, and mulch are suggestive of the human will to impose order and regularity on a landscape that is otherwise continuous. Similarly, his lists of landforms (Dale, Delta, Divide, Doline, Dreikanter, Drumlin, Dune...) suggest the assignment of meaning, of the name, to matter that is always in excess of language.

Carrington is perhaps more clear-eyed, less romantic, than earlier generations of artists exploring questions of land and landscape. For earthworks artists of the late 1960s and 70s, including Smithson among many others, set out into the vast spaces of the American west in search of a mythical outside, a place off the grid. Such practices began to wane in the late 1970s, perhaps because artists began to come to terms with the fact that this otherness, this landscape as tabula-rasa, was a fiction. The land was

already shot through with modes for systematizing and rationalizing space, including the control of natural resources, bureaucratic land management, and surveying and surveillance.

This, then, is one legacy inherited (ambivalently, perhaps) by contemporary artists concerned with spatial practice, but there are others: Carrington has cited, for example, the importance of cultural geographers such as Don Mitchell to his work. As an artist, Carrington is not alone in responding to critical human geography; since the 1990s, that field has been revolutionized, offering not just geographers, but also artists and art historians, new tools for making sense of how humans create space, and how, reciprocally, space creates us.¹ No one has been more influential in the realm of geography and spatial theory of the past two decades than the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, whose radical analysis proposed that space itself is not natural, but social through and through.² (While Carrington doesn't name Lefebvre among his influences, Lefebvre has inspired much of Mitchell's research.)

Carrington's work seems to intuit certain of Lefebvre's key insights, especially those articulated in *The Production of Space*, the philosopher's most important book (published in 1974, but not translated into English until the early 1990s). There Lefebvre explains that space is not an inert, empty container, but rather something that is organized and produced by humans—not unlike the production of commodities that surround us (however magical and detached from human labor they may appear).³ Lefebvre rejects the conception of space as “a container without content,” an abstract mathematical or geometrical continuum that is independent of human subjectivity and agency. Instead, he posits three categories of spatial production, different ways in which humans can be seen to produce space. It is the first of these, *representations of space*, that I want to say is close to the core of Carrington's project. A *representation of space*, according to Lefebvre, is space as it is conceptualized by professionals and technocrats (planners, architects, geographers, and the like), space as it is reflected in conceptual abstractions like Cartesian geometry and linear perspective, architectural models and specialized jargon. All of this is in contrast to *representational space*, which is the lived space of everyday experience. For Lefebvre, these categories of space cannot really be seen as distinct, because they overlay one another, affecting the way we perceive the world around us.

Lefebvre's *representations of space* seem to find expression in Carrington's *Pile Gestalten*, which first of all separate out various organic elements drawn from the earth, isolating them as discrete formations. Why this title, *Pile Gestalten*? The gestalt is a way of thinking about the ordering of perception—the idea that form is made possible, made perceivable, in the simultaneous separation and coordination of figure and ground. Carrington traces lines around each pile, as if reducing the three-dimensional reality of the pile to two dimensions, as if making a life-size topographical map. *Pile Gestalten*, taken together with *Temporary Formations*, the running lists of terms for landforms, seems to underscore the way in which sign systems, from language to cartography, structure our perception and knowledge of the world. The problem is that we take these systems, these conceptual abstractions, to be natural—*just the way things are*—instead of understanding them as representations produced by humans.

Near the beginning of this essay, I observed that Carrington's installation effectively invited the outside world into the space of the gallery. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, within the context of *Dis/continuum*, the gallery came to function as a microcosm. For the exhibition space, the white cube, is yet another system that isolates and demarcates, in this scenario positing a discontinuous space for art in the otherwise continuous expanse of the central Utah landscape.

--Jill Dawsey

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Utah Museum of Fine Arts

¹ See also the work of Trevor Paglen, who describes his practice as “experimental geography,” and related projects by the Center for Land Use Interpretation and curator Nato Thompson.

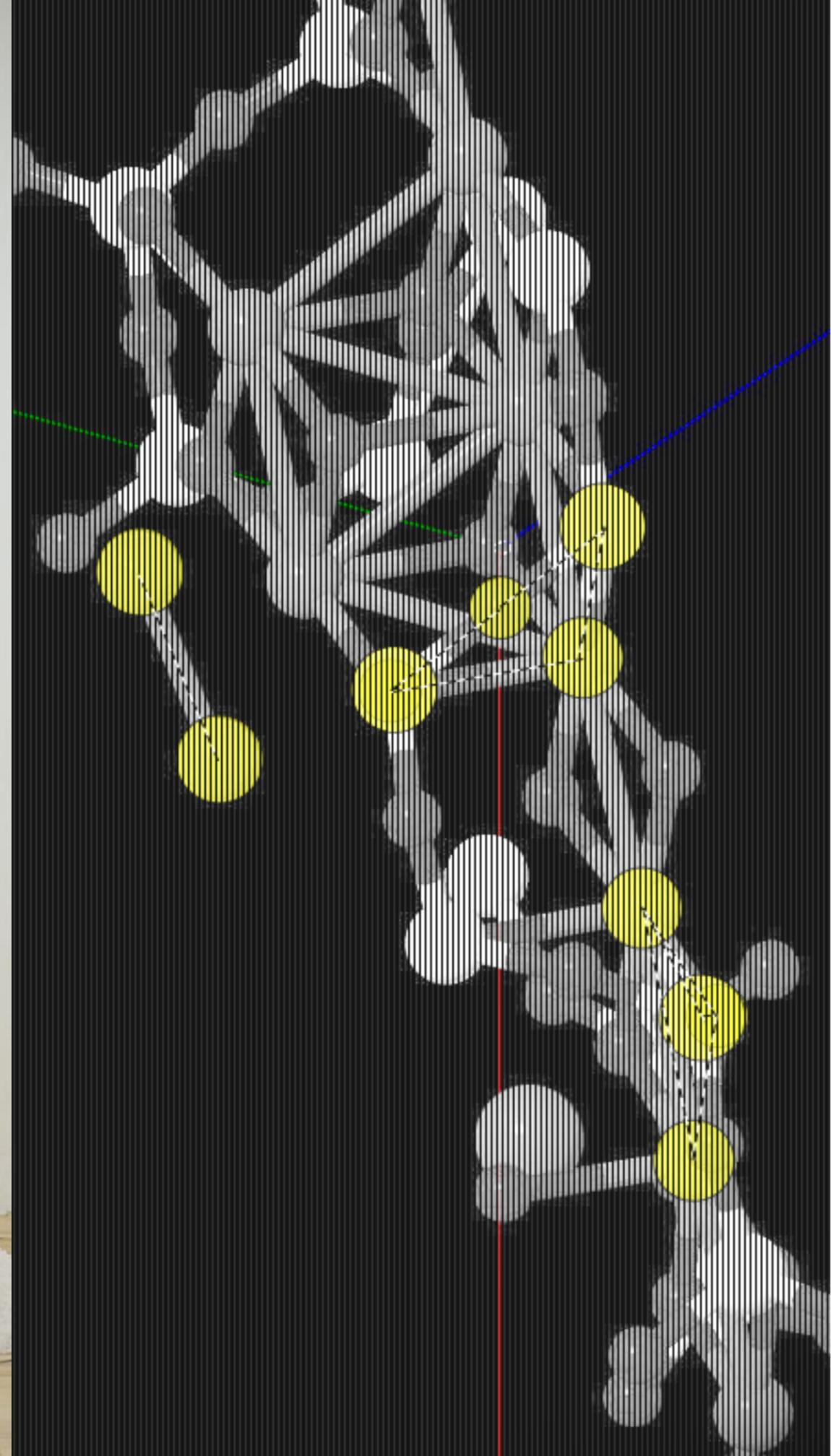
² For a discussion of Lefebvre's reception, see Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) 103.

³ Lefebvre was a rather eccentric Marxist. Interestingly, he was also influenced by—and in turn exerted his own influence on—the contemporary artistic movements he encountered, including Surrealism and, more significantly, the Situationist International and its leader, Guy Debord.



- Abyssal Fan*
- Aeolian Landform*
- Alcove*
- Alluvial Fan*
- Alluvial Terrace*
- Anabranch*
- Anticline*
- Aquiclude*
- Aquifer*
- Archipelago*
- Arête*
- Atoll*
- Ayre*
- Badlands*
- Bajada*
- Barchan Dune*
- Barrow*
- Basin*
- Bay*
- Bayou*
- Bergschrund*
- Berm*
- Blowout Depression*
- Bluff*
- Bight*
- Bog*
- Bolson*
- Butte*
- Caldera*
- Canyon*
- Cape*
- Cave*
- Cay*
- Cenote*
- Channel*
- Chine*
- Cirque*
- Cliff*
- Closed Talik*
- Col*
- Cove*
- Crater*
- Cuesta*
- Cuspate Foreland*
- Dale*
- Defile*
- Deflation Hollow*
- Dell*
- Delta*
- Depositional Landform*
- Distributary*
- Divide*
- Doline*
- Dreikanter*
- Drumlin*
- Dune*
- Erg Desert*
- Escarpment*
- Esker*
- Estuary*
- Eyot*
- Fault*
- Fen*
- Firn*
- Firth*
- Fissure*
- Fjord*
- Floodplain*
- Foiba*
- Geyser*
- Glacial Milk*
- Glade*

- Sandur*
- Scree*
- Seif Dune*
- Shoal*
- Sill*
- Sinkhole*
- Sound*
- Spit*
- Stack*
- Steppe*
- Strait*
- Strath*
- Syncline*
- Taiga*
- Talik*
- Talus*
- Tarn*
- Tea Table*
- Terminus*
- Terrace*
- Thermokarst*
- Through Talik*
- Thrust Fault*
- Till*
- Tombolo*
- Tor*
- Tumulus*
- Tuya*
- Undercut Bank*
- Vale*
- Varve*
- Ventifact*
- Wadi*
- Wave-Cut Platform*
- Yardang*
- Yazoo Tributary*



- 0.298 nm Cu2 --> Cu7
- 0.336 nm Cu2 --> Cu10
- 0.315 nm Cu2 --> Si4 (⊙) 1079Hz
- 0.197 nm Cu2 --> O2
- 0.193 nm Cu2 --> O-H5
- 0.199 nm Cu2 --> O-H7
- 0.197 nm Cu2 --> O-H8
- 0.251 nm Cu2 --> O17 (⊙) 1354Hz
- 0.3 nm Cu3 --> Cu4
- 0.298 nm Cu3 --> Cu6
- 0.198 nm Cu3 --> O9
- 0.198 nm Cu3 --> O13
- 0.325 nm Cu4 --> Cu9
- 0.203 nm Cu4 --> O1
- 0.202 nm Cu4 --> O9
- 0.192 nm Cu4 --> O-H11
- 0.299 nm Cu5 --> Cu7 (⊙) 1137Hz
- 0.298 nm Cu5 --> Cu8
- 0.198 nm Cu5 --> O3 (⊙) 1717Hz
- 0.198 nm Cu5 --> O4
- 0.202 nm Cu5 --> O6
- 0.202 nm Cu5 --> O12
- 0.243 nm Cu5 --> O-H18
- 0.196 nm Cu6 --> O13
- 0.196 nm Cu6 --> O-H46
- 0.316 nm Cu7 --> Si7 (⊙) 1075Hz
- 0.198 nm Cu7 --> O3 (⊙) 1717Hz
- 0.195 nm Cu7 --> O-H5
- 0.198 nm Cu7 --> O6
- 0.198 nm Cu7 --> O-H7
- 0.257 nm Cu7 --> O16
- 0.317 nm Cu8 --> Si8
- 0.199 nm Cu8 --> O4
- 0.195 nm Cu8 --> O-H10
- 0.198 nm Cu8 --> O12
- 0.298 nm Cu9 --> Cu10
- 0.316 nm Cu9 --> Si5
- 0.239 nm Cu9 --> O-H11
- 0.196 nm Cu9 --> O-H14
- 0.198 nm Cu9 --> O15
- 0.197 nm Cu9 --> O19
- 0.24 nm Cu10 --> O-H8
- 0.197 nm Cu10 --> O-H14
- 0.199 nm Cu10 --> O17
- 0.199 nm Cu10 --> O19
- 0.162 nm Si1 --> O16
- 0.162 nm Si1 --> O20
- 0.161 nm Si1 --> O25
- 0.162 nm Si2 --> O1
- 0.161 nm Si2 --> O43
- 0.161 nm Si3 --> O17 (⊙) 2111Hz
- 0.162 nm Si3 --> O20
- 0.162 nm Si3 --> O39 (⊙) 2098Hz
- 0.162 nm Si4 --> O2
- 0.162 nm Si4 --> O39 (⊙) 2098Hz
- 0.161 nm Si4 --> O43
- 0.299 nm Cu1 --> Cu2
- 0.299 nm Cu1 --> Cu4
- 0.337 nm Cu1 --> Cu9
- 0.324 nm Cu1 --> Cu10
- 0.199 nm Cu1 --> O1
- 0.201 nm Cu1 --> O2
- 0.194 nm Cu1 --> O-H8
- 0.197 nm Cu1 --> O-H11
- 0.252 nm Cu1 --> O-H14



List of works:

Pile Gestalten

salt / gravel / rocks / wood chips / electrical tape

Temporary Formations

vinyl text / 4 columns 9' tall each

Relational Wavespace: Mineral Crystals

single-channel video / stereo sound / running time 16:00

Blake Carrington website --> <http://blakecarrington.com>

CUAC website --> <http://www.cuartcenter.org>

Photography: Jason Metcalf



GEORGE S. AND DOLORES DORÉ ECCLES

F O U N D A T I O N

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts