

CARL ANDRE: *now now* (1976)

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This text is an edited version of the audio commentary recorded by Anjali Nerlekar as part of the Zimmerli Art Museum's audio guide for the exhibition *Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists* (September 4, 2012 – January 6, 2013). No passage of this text may be reprinted or quoted without permission from the author. To obtain permission, please contact Marilyn Symmes at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey: msymmes@zimmerli.rutgers.edu.

Carl Andre's concrete poem *now now* intrigues me because it relates to similar attempts in modernist postcolonial literature to arrest the passing moment in words on a page. The word *now* means "at this moment" or "at the present time" or "at once." As soon as you read or say the word *now* it is already the past, and you are in a new present. When Andre typed the word *now*, four times in four equal quadrants of this sheet of paper, it was 1967. And yet you are viewing this work at this moment in 2013, and I am writing about this work now—oops, *was* writing about it. In this constant weaving from the "now" to the past and then back again, Andre's work is timeless, in that its meaning involves the viewer (you) in making the *now* exist in your present.

As an artist Andre works in the minimalist tradition. He has created sculptures and installation works in various materials—among them metal, wood, and paper—and in various sizes, to fit large and small spaces. He is also known for creating his own type of concrete poetry, by typing individual letters, words, phrases, or numbers with a manual typewriter, similar to the three pieces included in *Art=Text=Art*. In his sculpture Andre devises dynamic spaces and meaningful interactions through the sheer placement of his material, which makes the viewer notice the relationships created by negative and positive spaces. The line, the grid, the stack, and equivalents are some of the concepts Andre has paired with different materials to create his art.

We see the same emphases at work in this typewritten piece, although the material in this case is paper and ink and the blank space of the page. The usual connections made between paper/writing/society/

history are undone here, as the artist forces you to look anew, and with no preconceptions, at the appearance of the word *now* and the linear marks on paper that geometrically divide the blank space of the page into a grid.

As you can see, the paper is divided into four equal sections—uniform, spare, blank—except for the typed word *now* placed at unexpected points within each of these squares. Your eye is forced to move all around the paper surface, visually touching each corner of the grid, almost the way a gymnast is required to touch each corner of the rectangular floor-space in a competition. The eye dances from here to there, from one *now* to the next—to which one can imagine the title playfully admonishing: "now, now!"

The title could also be interpreted as a more urgent intervention to emphasize the instantaneous moment of the contact of eye to material, a more focused statement: "now...now." The eye moves along the stacked quadrants, from the top left square to the top right one, to the right bottom and then to the left bottom—all the while enunciating the word *now*. The word tries to capture that split moment of attention when the eye hits on that section of the paper, that hyper-present moment of *now*. But of course the eye moves immediately to the next word, thus reinforcing the transient nature of this interaction and the impossibility of capturing each *now* in time, in art or in words. As soon as the eye hits the word, it is already *not-now*. The four black marks of *now*, then, are like small splashes of the present in the wide expanse of blank time.

A second or third viewing of the artwork makes one notice yet another characteristic—the four *nows* are not as randomly placed as one might think at first. Three repetitions of *now* align themselves into a diagonal (starting in the upper left, moving toward the center, and ending at the bottom right), and when connected to the remaining *now* in the top right square, the words form a kind of projectile breaking the square grid of the page, destroying the rigid demarcations of equivalent spaces.

Usually, in a poem, the poet uses the black marks of letters to lead you away from the surface of the page, toward the idea or concept behind the poem. The surface of the paper does not typically figure into the meaning-making process of the poem, except as a delivery vehicle for these ideas. But not so here. As in all of Andre's sculptures, here too the artist emphasizes the material of writing as much as the

message. The message is, in part, the viewer's own attempt to deal with the surface of the paper, the black grid, and the placement on the page of each typed *now*.

As Andre says, he tries to remove history and any trace of past meaning from his work: "My work is the exact opposite of the art of association." Here too the paper is meant to be viewed only as paper, without reminding one of other written texts. The word *now* is also shorn of its history of use in literature—you, the viewer, are not prompted to remember any poem or story that features this word centrally, because the artist uses it in such a way that he prevents you from making associations. The word stands in front of the viewing eye as if for the first time. Through this relentless endeavor to capture the *now*, Andre attempts to recreate the original encounter between the world and the eye every time the viewer interacts with his concrete poem.

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