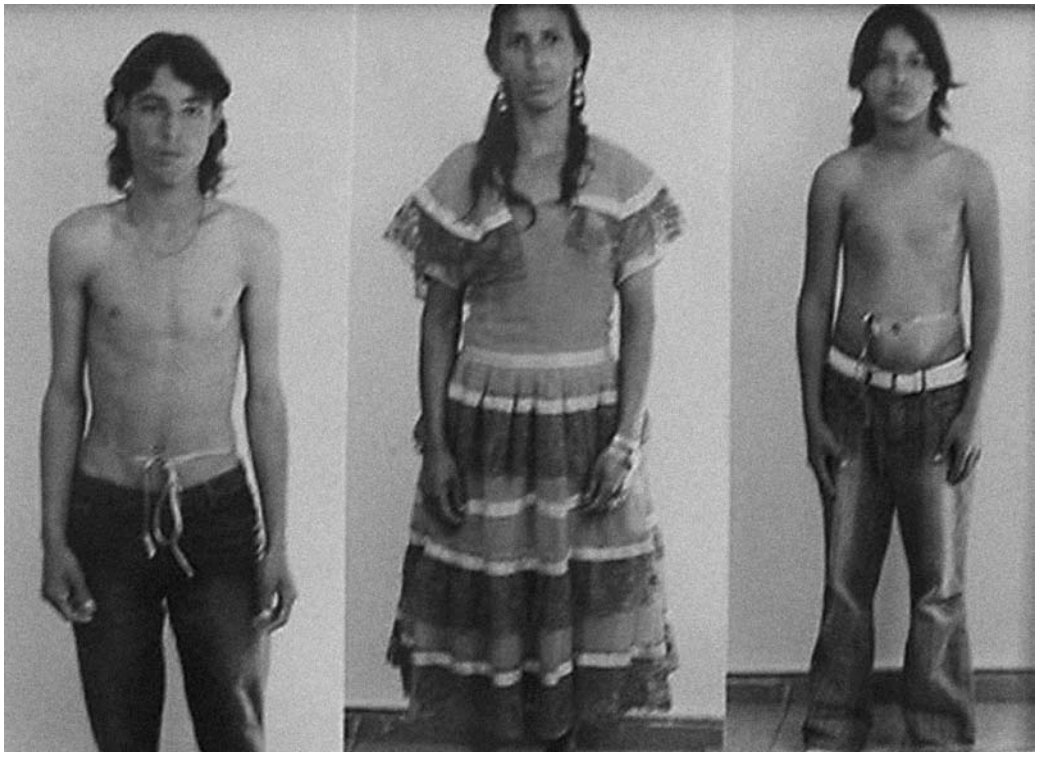

Figure 1. Anonymous, ex-voto, Sala dos Milagros, Bom Jesus de Matosinhos, Congonhas do Campo, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Photo by the author.

Believing in art

The votive structures of conceptual art

IRENE V. SMALL

> Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.
>
> —*Sol LeWitt*

> The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought.
>
> —*Jacques Rancière*

A framed image pictures three individuals staring impassively at the camera from within an indeterminate space (fig. 1). Each has been photographed separately against a white wall, the resulting images cut and meticulously pasted together to create a triptych: two teenage boys, shirtless save a thin ribbon tied around their waists, flanking a young woman who in turn wears a ribbon doubled around her wrist. The three subjects are siblings, perhaps, or, maybe, cousins. A hint of family resemblance passes across the surface of their faces but gathers mostly in the way their arms fall, momentarily slack, to their sides, and in the particular intensity of their address, which is arresting primarily in its stubborn lack of emotion. A careful observer might note how the ribbon clings to the older boy's stretched abdomen, or how the girl's festive dress does little to soften the haunting, gaunt angles of her face. But the subjects' expressions largely resist interpretation, stating little more than the essential fact of existence: "I am here."

This image, one of hundreds deposited in the Sala dos Milagros, or Room of Miracles, at the Baroque church Bom Jesus de Matosinhos in Congonhas do Campo in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, is an ex-voto, an image or object deposited in thanks for an answered prayer. The ribbons adorning the three individuals are *lembranças,* mementos associated with the church worn in mutual remembrance of a prayer and vow. They function as shorthand contracts between God and the human subject. The deposit of the ex-voto is the culmination of this contract: proof of divine favor and testament of renewed belief. "I am here" is a statement directed less towards the divine agent than to the anonymous viewers who come to gaze upon this image as the evidence of intercession on the depicted subjects' behalf.

The ex-votos collected at the Bom Jesus de Matosinhos date to the eighteenth century, after the church's founding on April 8, 1757. At that time, the ex-votos consisted of painted tablets and sculptural objects. The painted scenes conveyed concise narratives with direct economy of means, picturing the supplicant, often in the midst of prayer; his or her predicament (debilitating illnesses, head-on collisions with carts, fires, shipwrecks, falling objects, and the like); and the act of intercession, usually conveyed by the figure of a saint, Savior, or Virgin ensconced in the requisite profusion of billowing clouds. An accompanying inscription clarified the image's condensations of befores and afters, sorting out the complicated business of waiting and doubt, vow and deliverance, pending disaster and drawn-out suffering into the proper course of events. Though such painted scenes were careful to delimit heavenly space from that of the supplicant's earthly trials, they proclaimed in no uncertain terms the cause-and-effect interaction between the two. Prayer and vow were answered by miracle, and miracle met with the fulfillment of promise in the commemorative deposit of the ex-voto. The chain of events pictured within the image was thus brought full circle by the image's own character as public testimony. The painted ex-voto, in other words, pictured its own raison d'être, moving from entreaty to evidence through the context of display.

Sculptural ex-votos proposed a different method of witness. Rather than chronicle a sequence of events, these objects functioned most frequently as three-dimensional surrogates for ailing body parts that had subsequently been healed. Narrative here would be redundant. What mattered was the miraculous fact of healing and the material presence of the representative object given in thanks. Often fashioned at life-size or at near one-to-one scale, these sculptures operated according to a logic of substitution rather than illustration. Like molds, casts, and indexical surrogates such as measures of a supplicant's height or weight, the wooden and wax sculptures that litter the Sala dos Milagros in Congonhas and countless other such "miracle rooms" acted as material proxies for their donors. Part stood in for whole as a testament of the injured body returned to health. And while such objects failed to pictorially chronicle the historical events and personages that led to their deposit, they drew their

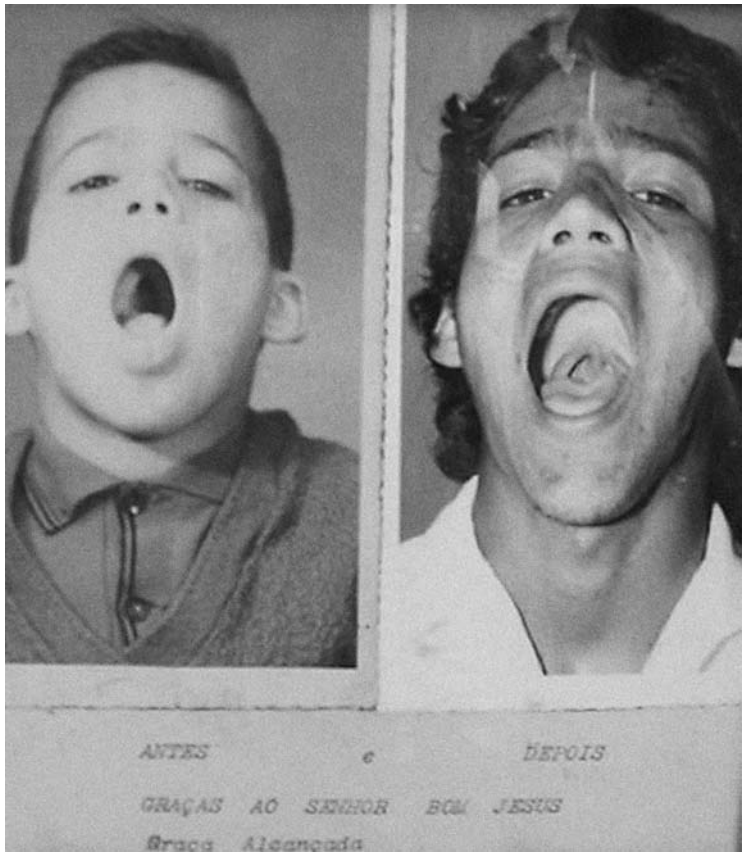

Figure 2. Anonymous, ex-voto, Sala dos Milagros, Bom Jesus de Matosinhos, Congonhas do Campo, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Photo by the author.

persuasiveness from an equally powerful source: one of physical approximation or actual contact with the body of the supplicant him or herself.

In the photographic ex-votos that began to replace their older counterparts over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these painted and sculptural modes were structurally collapsed. With a photograph, one could no longer picture the agent of intercession. Neither was it practical to document the multiple stages of action that often constituted the older painted scenes. Instead, the photographic ex-voto borrowed from the sculptural object its rhetoric of material authenticity, stating, by virtue of the photograph's indexical trace, that *this* body had witnessed divine grace. Take, for example, a second image from the Sala dos Milagros in Congonhas, which consists of two photographs of apparently of the same individual, separated by the space of several years (fig. 2). The boy is posed in the same position, head tilted back, mouth open wide for inspection, the composition tightly cropped at the base of his throat. Though it is not immediately clear what affliction he once suffered, the typed inscription—"BEFORE and AFTER / THANKS TO OUR LORD GOOD JESUS / Grace received"—clarifies that the condition has been successfully resolved. Unlike the painted formula, it does not pictorially condense years of waiting into the decisive intercession of the miracle. Neither does it picture the interceding force itself. But in its appeal to the photographic witness of a particular body and the caption by which this body's healing is established as a deliberative act, the image functions as a receipt marking the declarative acknowledgment of the event.

The structure of this ex-voto—photographic document, inscription, and the implication of a significant act—is not unique to such religious artifacts, although it is, as I will explore in this essay, common to a certain configuration of belief. Consider, for example, a pair

Figures 3 a and b. Vito Acconci, *Rubbing Piece,* 1970. Performance. Photograph courtesy of Acconci Studio.

of photographs taken in the booth of a restaurant over the course of an hour on a Saturday afternoon. The first image pictures a man sitting in the corner, his left arm stretched belly-up across the table, sleeve hitched just below the elbow and hand loosely uncurled (fig. 3a). The man touches this outstretched forearm with the fingers of his right hand, his eyes down-turned and focused narrowly on his task. The second image shows the man's left arm in the original position of extension, now with a wound gouged into its flesh (fig. 3b). The photographs are accompanied by a description: "Sitting alone at a booth, during the ordinary activity at the restaurant. With my right hand, rubbing my left forearm for one hour, gradually producing a sore."[1]

These photographs and text denote a key work of performance-based conceptual art by Vito Acconci titled *Rubbing Piece,* conducted in May 1970 at Max's Kansas City in New York. The performance of the work was ephemeral, seen by few and registered as a work of art by even fewer, if any at all. Rather, the piece has come to be known primarily by virtue of its announcement and accompanying documentation, in this case as a series of works published in the magazine *Avalanche* as part of a special issue on Acconci in the fall of 1972. In these pages, the work's description functioned much like the ex-voto's formal proclamation; its documentary photographs, like the ex-voto's image, establishing pictorial evidence of the body as the site upon which an event unfolds.[2] In ex-voto and conceptual work alike, the viewer's attention is directed to a completed action rendered significant by virtue of the act of declaration. Rather than naturalizing the connoted message of the photograph as per Roland Barthes's classic analysis of the advertising image, however, the image's literal or denoted character is harnessed to underscore the production of meaning in the photographic message as a whole.[3]

1. Vito Acconci, "Body as Place—Moving in on Myself," *Avalanche* no. 6 (Fall 1972):9.

2. On the structure of the ex-voto, see Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Ex-Voto: Zeichen und Abbildung im christlichen Votivbrauchteum* (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1972). See also David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) as well as Georges Didi-Huberman, "Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time," *L'Esprit Créateur* 47, no. 3 (2007):7–16.

3. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961) and "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964) in *Image-Music-Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

The photographic ex-votos of Congonhas and Acconci's *Rubbing Piece* are radically different in ways too numerous to be itemized here. That one emerges from an anonymous and ritualistic religious practice and the other from the authorial procedures of advanced art is a distinction neither insignificant nor useful to categorically erase. More interesting to consider, however, are the structural affinities and divergences such practices illuminate when thrown in mutual relief. In Acconci's case, the body is not healed, but injured, and the agent of this infliction is the subject himself. There is no miracle or mystery attached to the body's transformation, but rather the systemic process of the making of the wound. Acconci thus defines himself as both site of the act and its author: matter and agent, or, according to the ex-voto analogy, supplicant and intercessor simultaneously. The structural action of the miracle in the ex-voto configuration is replaced with the work's unfolding—the "exposure of the secret," as Acconci wrote—which is to say, the production of the event.[4] Yet, despite the essential demystification of this process, a fundamental homology must be observed between Acconci's documentary announcement and the votive object left in thanks. For even though Acconci's performance and resulting photographs foreground the process between the work's "before" and "after" states, and with it, the liminal overlapping of private experience and public display, the ontological significance of the work *as a work* is established by the ex-voto's rhetorical means of indexical evidence and declarative intent.

While early histories of performance and performance-based conceptual art tended to privilege the contingency of the body's presence in time and place, the publication of Acconci's experiments in *Avalanche* aptly demonstrates how such works often anticipated the document as part of the brokering of "presence" as something irrecoverably past.[5] *Rubbing Piece,* for example, is predicated precisely on how the body produces itself as document by virtue of the making of the wound, a conjunction of autoreferentiality and supplementarity extended in Acconci's *Trademarks* of September 1970, that same year (fig. 4). In this work, which consisted of the artist biting his own body and inking the resulting marks to create a kind of stamp, the

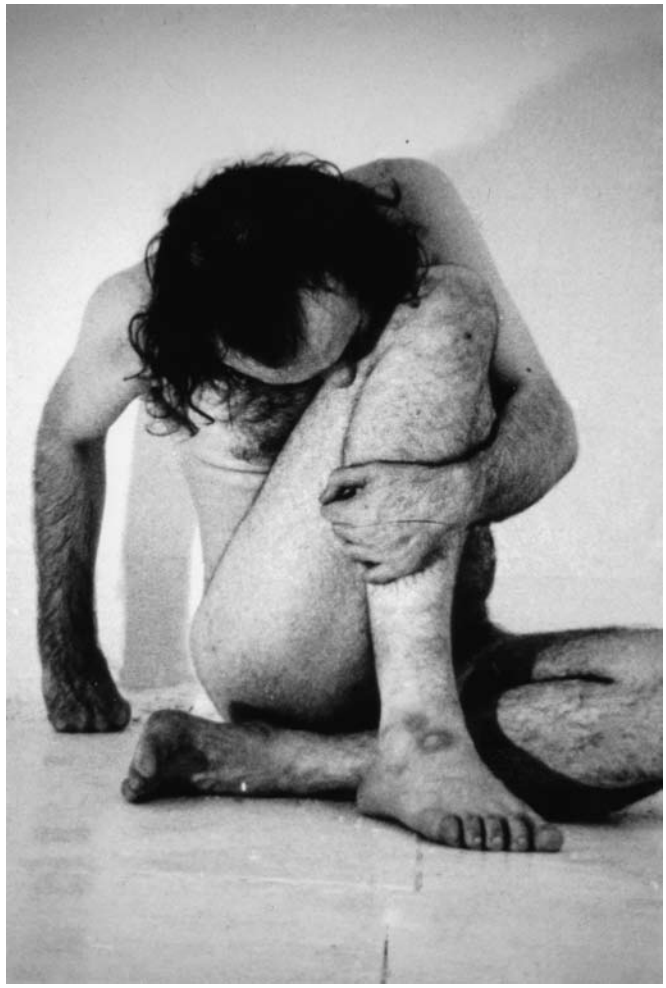

Figure 4. Vito Acconci, *Trademarks,* 1970. Performance. Photograph courtesy of Acconci Studio.

4. Acconci, "Notes and Diagrams for *Rubbing Piece,*" reproduced in *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents,* ed. Nick Kaye (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 65, where Acconci writes: "My performance has been announced: my performance keeps being announced (my performance consists in marking myself as the performer: marking time). / Performance as spread: breakdown of specific channels of adaptation, so that the reaction is forced to spread over different areas (expansion of the sore, exposure of a secret). / Performer as producer (of the sore); performer as consumer (receiver of the sore)."

5. See, for example, Peggy Phelan's chapter "The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction" in her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge Press, 1993). As she writes, for example: "Performance's only life is in the present. [It] cannot be saved, recorded, documented. . . . To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology" (p. 146). Amelia Jones has offered a useful critique of the argument for presence within performance art in her article "Presence in Absentia," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997):4–18.

emphasis is not simply on how the body participates in its own marking, but on the way in which this marking produces an emblem of incontrovertible, indexical authorship by way of a chain of evidentiary effects. Few would mistake the blotted impressions taken from Acconci's inky flesh as a work of art in and of itself. Rather, they offer proof of a network of action and intent whose significance as a work absconds from the naked visuality of the document even while it depends upon the document's rhetoric of announcement, persuasion, and presentation of fact.

In such works of performance-based conceptual art, the document, as in the ex-voto, announces the significance of the body's transformation by asserting authorship over a change in the body's state. Thus, whether that authorship is attributed to the divine, in the case of a miracle, or the artist, in the case of a work of art, the structural relationship remains the same. This configuration is strikingly clear in Eleanor Antin's 1972 work *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (fig. 5). For this piece, Antin subjected herself to a severe diet, documenting the resulting physical transformation in a grid of 148 black-and-white photographs that picture her body from front, sides, and back over the course of the thirty-six-day regime. Likening the gradual loss of weight to the subtractive carving of traditional sculpture, Antin established her body as plastic material for her own intervention as well as discrete object for her camera's recording lens. In so doing, Antin dispersed any residual notion of a unitary subjectivity while securing the categories of authorship and the work of art anew. To submit oneself to a drastic dietary regime is of course the repetitive ritual of millions of women. Antin's incisive joining of conceptual and feminist practices lies in her orchestration of this process as a delimited artistic act. Just as the ex-voto inscription beneath the "before" and "after" photographs of the boy with open mouth attribute his healthy growth to a specific agent, Antin's photographs and accompanying text offer evidence written upon the body as the means of asserting the public significance of this body's transformation as a deliberate, meaningful event. Art intervenes, as the philosopher Jacques Rancière might say, reordering the signs of the sensible as its primary task.[6]

Although aesthetic and iconographic correspondences between religious artifacts and the conceptual and performance-based art of these movements' formative

Figure 5. Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture,* 1972 (detail). 148 black-and-white photographs and text panel; each photograph 17.7 x 12.7 cm (7 x 5 in.). Twentieth Century Discretionary Fund, 1996.44, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

years are often striking—their dual repertoire of secrets and starvation, pain, pilgrimage, trials, and the posing of near-impossible tasks—it is the structural configuration of the ex-voto that makes it relevant to discussion here. For during the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of the works that radically questioned the role of aesthetics and, indeed, the nature of the work of art itself, often took on curiously premodern structures of witness and address. Art historians Benjamin Buchloh and Alexander Alberro have persuasively shown how conceptual art's processes and presentational forms evoked contemporaneous social and ideological configurations concerning both the aesthetics and logic

6. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible,* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

of administration, business, publicity, and sales.[7] Yet these works are largely unexplored in terms of their startling homologies to religious structures of belief and evidentiary persuasion such as those entailed by the votive gift.

Such configurations emerge into more complex focus if we shift from the body and performance-based works of the early 1970s to a slightly earlier moment within the emergence of the conceptual paradigm, one in which artists aggressively explored the limits of privileging ideas over the material means by which such ideas were conveyed.[8] In order to displace the centrality accorded to the tangible form of a work of art's presentation, for example, several of the more rigorously "ideational" works of conceptual art from this period revolved around actions that remained necessarily invisible or obstructed from subsequent view. For his *Inert Gas Series* (*Helium, Neon, Argon, Krypton, Xenon*), *From a Measured Volume to Indefinite Expansion, April 1969,* for example, Robert Barry released odorless and colorless gases into the atmosphere at several remote locations in California (fig. 6). His *Carrier Wave* pieces, also of 1969, took as their primary material electromagnetic waves that traveled across the space of the gallery but that, like the inert gas, were imperceptible to human sense. As Barry noted in an interview in May that year: "What I was trying to do, really, was create something which really existed, and which had its own characteristics and its own nature, but which we couldn't really perceive."[9]

Barry, like his dealer Seth Siegelaub, carefully sought to distinguish the making of the work from its presentation.[10] The latter, both men asserted, was nothing more than the means by which a work could be known. For his *Inert Gas Series,* for example, Barry announced the work by virtue of posters and catalogue entries that stated little more than his name and the work's title, the latter a self-explanatory description of the act.[11] The artist's photographic documents of the action, meanwhile, are, of course, striking in how little they offer to see. Quite the opposite of Acconci's or Antin's assertion of bodily evidence, Barry's photographs display resolutely empty landscapes occasionally interrupted by a ruptured gas vessel to gesture to the material that had been released.

These photographs occupy an unstable place within the logic of "dematerialization" that this work is often called in to historically represent. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, whose 1967 essay famously described this tendency, noted that "Dematerialized art is post-aesthetic only in its increasingly non-visual emphases."[12] Such "non-visual emphases" were certainly critical to both Barry's formal and conceptual intent. As he explained in his discussions of the work, inert gas is chemically stable and does not mix with other elements as it is released. Thus, while its once-compressed "form" physically expands as its molecules gradually disperse within the atmosphere, this form cannot be confirmed by empirical observation: It is imperceptible, intangible, and indeed only conceptually existent by virtue of a certain leap of faith.

Yet despite the concentrated invisibility at the heart of this work, the documentary photographs that accompany Barry's *Inert Gas Series* are emphatically visual, even in their inability to picture the work of art's form. Indeed, historical hindsight allows us to see what is patently obvious: such documents visualize the absence of perceptible evidence as its own kind of visual address. Whereas the body was the site of evidence for an authored act in the analogy between Acconci's *Rubbing Piece* and the photographic ex-voto, Barry's

7. Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* no. 55 (Winter 1990):105–143, and Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

8. Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (*Artforum* 5, no. 10 [Summer 1967]:79–84) is the first concise characterization of this kind of practice, here explicitly described as a prioritizing of the conceptual aspects of a work over its perceptual identity. As he wrote: "In conceptual art, the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work" (p. 79).

9. Robert Barry, interview with Patricia Norvell, May 30, 1969, in *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelaub, Smithson, Weiner,* ed. Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 89.

10. Seth Siegelaub often framed the problem as a difference between the "primary" and "secondary" information of conceptual art. In a 1969 interview he explained: "But here you're in a situation where the presentation of the art and the art are not the same thing. . . . [T]he reason for assembling this information is just to tell you that a work of art . . . that something has been *done,* you see, whereas before, when someone painted a painting, what had been done and what you saw were the same thing. You had no presentation problem in the same way as this." Seth Siegelaub, interview with Patricia Norvell, April 17, 1969, in ibid., p. 34.

11. For Siegelaub's March 1969 exhibition, Barry announced the work with the following catalogue statement: "Sometime during the morning of March 5, 1969, two cubic feet of Helium will be released into the atmosphere."

12. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no 2 (February 1968):31–36, reprinted in *Documents of Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p. 48.

Figure 6. Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series: Neon, From a Measured Volume to Indefinite Expansion. On March 4, 1969 on a hill near a valley in Los Angeles, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, one liter of neon was returned to the atmosphere,* 1969 (detail). Copyright by Robert Barry. Courtesy of Yvon Lambert, Paris and New York.

Inert Gas Series approaches the structure of the ex-voto in staging the impossibility of verifying the essential nature of the "documented" event. Paradoxically, then, the photograph's indexical claims are called upon to certify an intervention that the viewer can imagine but never directly perceive. What one faces when confronted with such documents is therefore a set of questions framing the conditions of the viewer's own belief. Did the artist do what he said he would do? Is the photograph a historical record of the actual event that its text describes? Can its visual indexicality nevertheless witness the release of an invisible form? Does an imperceptible act, finally, constitute a work of art in and of itself?

Since Barry sought to focus attention primarily on the ontological questions posed by imperceptible actions or forms, he insisted that presentational documents such as photographs were incidental to the works themselves. If "no presentation" was not possible, he preferred the "least amount of presentation that I can get away with" in order to convey the existence of the work.[13] The photographic document was therefore necessarily incommensurate with the work it was called in to describe. Thus, even for artists such as Douglas Huebler who acknowledged that the ideational act was dependent on its material or linguistic support, this support was conceived as a rigorously unaesthetic statement of fact. As Huebler wrote in 1968: "Because the work is beyond direct perceptual experience, awareness of the work depends on a system of documentation."[14] These supplements were not intended to be "pictorially interesting," but rather what Huebler called "absolute documents," functioning as evidence that the work of art exists.[15] As in the ex-voto, such

13. Robert Barry, interview with Patricia Norvell in *Recording Conceptual Art* (see note 9), p. 90.

14. Douglas Huebler, "Untitled Statements (September and December 1968)," in Germano Celant, *Arte Povera* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 43.

supplements were necessary in order to establish that "something had been done," yet were simultaneously ancillary in relation to the significance of this "something" itself.[16]

Although notions of "no presentation" and "absolute documents" were ultimately too reductive to account for the work conceptual artists actually produced, Barry's and Huebler's statements nevertheless functioned to cue conceptualism's displacement of the primary location of the artistic utterance within a work's internal ecology of material presentation, announcement, realization, and intent. Indeed, it was precisely this unhinging of "art" from a discrete object in favor of a dispersed system of interrelated procedures and effects that reveals the epistemological shift that, if not initiated by conceptual practices of the late 1960s, was most concisely demonstrated by the works developed within its contested field. In such works, the visual object did not disappear, but simply lost priority as the work's privileged means of conceptual address. The deliberate impoverishment or deskilling of the conceptual art document in this period—the "bland, shitty reproduction" of artistic information Siegelaub provided in his Xerox Book exhibition of 1968, the amateur snapshot, or the recourse to tersely laconic statements of fact—are all symptomatic of this shift.[17] In light of such deskilling, it is not surprising that photography, with its extra-artistic roots in depiction and reportage, became a privileged medium by which to convey this new conceptual mode. Indeed, as Jeff Wall has argued, it was the very "impersonation" of reportage projected by the indifferent, haphazard photographs of conceptual art documents that allowed photography to become "a model of an art whose subject matter is the idea of art."[18]

Photography forced into inspection the gap between sign and referent that the medium's mimetic capacities would at first seem to collapse, a quality one could extend to a consideration of many of the documentary objects and images produced within the rubric of conceptual art. In crude terms, to endow such documents with aesthetic significance was the equivalent of confusing the representation of a thing with the thing itself.[19] While such mistaken identity figures in the classic charge of mimetic deceit, a more provocative analogue might be located in the theological confusion that textures the slippage between idolatry and the use of images within properly pious belief. According to Christian doctrine, the image of Jesus or the Virgin Mary was to be worshiped as a representation of the divine being, but was not to be understood as the actual embodiment of the deity itself. Icons, relics, and miracle-making images, however, all pressed upon the boundaries of this distinction, a fact that was cause for much anxiety in premodern times. One way of counteracting this confusion was to deliberately underscore the physical image's supplementary status as a fragmentary and incomplete indication of the power it sought to represent. The miraculous interventions chronicled by the ex-voto, for example, were necessarily incommensurate with the object's own identity as witness to such acts. As a result, the ex-voto, much like the conceptual art document, often exhibited an inverted relationship between its impoverished physicality and the religious or ontological substance for which it acted as proof. The material artifact thus absconded from the full plenitude of its referent, as such plenitude belonged properly to the spiritual or ideational realm.

It was precisely the proportions of this inverted relationship that began to shift within the new configurations of art that emerged in the Renaissance. While increasingly beautiful and decisively authored votive paintings offered up their splendor as a symbol of their donors' devout belief, it was precisely this beauty that allowed such images to double as "mere" aesthetic things. Set free from their functional position as indispensable elements within a tightly circumscribed spiritual contract, the secularization of votive objects was ultimately completed when they entered the museum as autonomous works of art. In this new context, it was the aesthetics of the votive object rather than its evidentiary function that took pride of place. In so doing,

15. See, for example, Douglas Huebler's interview with Patricia Norvell on July 25, 1969, in *Recording Conceptual Art* (see note 9), pp. 135–154.

16. See note 11.

17. As Siegelaub described the Xerox project, "I chose Xerox as opposed to offset or any other process because it's such a bland, shitty reproduction, really just for the exchange of information. . . . So Xerox just cuts down on the visual aspect of looking at the information." Interview with Patricia Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art* (see note 9), p. 39.

18. Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975,* ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) p. 258.

19. In his introductory essay "At the Threshold of Art as Information," Alexander Alberro notes precisely this anxiety regarding the slippage between art and document among many of the conceptual artists of the movement's early years. See *Recording Conceptual Art* (note 9), pp. 1–16.

the physical object acquired an independent presence that sharply departed from its status as mere witness to a completed event.

Perhaps for this reason, because it was precisely the category of "art" that conceptual art troubled as a means to newly secure its ontological claims, it was not the votive images of high art that its documents approximated, but rather the class of crude, anonymous objects that registered, quite simply, that something of significance had occurred. Conceptual art's frequent staging of a double indexical trace—the photographs of trampled grass tracks in Richard Long's *A 2 1/2 Mile Walk Sculpture* of 1969, or the imprint of On Kawara's stamp, impassively registering "I GOT UP" at such-and-such time—all dramatize the document's supplemental character in relation to a prior event. As supplements, these documents troubled the epistemological plenitude of the art object, pointing not to its self-presence but to its mechanics of witness and delay. Yet in displacing the self-presence of the art object, they simultaneously signaled new presences within the temporally complex character of the work of art as a whole. Thus, just as the subjects depicted in the ex-voto illustrated in figure 1 needed only communicate "I am here" to offer testimony to the intercession performed on their behalf, the attenuated operations by which conceptual art made its ontological claims could rely on as little as On Kawara's telegrammed messages stating: "I AM STILL ALIVE." For this reason, while such works sought jointly to extricate artistic practice from the fetishistic aura of the object and to problematize authorship as a specifically material performance of intent, they paradoxically appealed to a notion of evidentiary persuasion quasi-mystical in address.

Indeed, it was this latent notion of ideational purity within conceptual art's antipictorial, antivisual emphases that made its appropriation within the preexisting commodity system of art appear both retroactively inevitable and politically devastating to many of its early proponents. As Lucy Lippard wrote in the "Postface" to her 1972 anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 to 1972*:

> Hope that "conceptual art" would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively "progressive" approach of modernism was for the most part unfounded. It seemed in 1969 that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a Xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project of work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation.[20]

For Benjamin Buchloh, writing with further historical distance in 1989, Lippard's hope had been not only naïve, but also oblivious to the way in which conceptual art's "aesthetics of administration"—its appeal to the discourses of legality, informational organization, institutionality, and linguistic definition—mimicked configurations of postindustrial capitalism and ultimately paved the way for its capitulation to the commodity structure of this regime.[21] For Buchloh, conceptual art was a movement of "profound disenchantment" rather than utopian aspiration, its chief merit lying in its extinguishing of the residual transcendence accorded to the aesthetic experience of art.

Following the argument laid out by this interpretation, conceptual art's homologies to the religious ex-voto would appear to exemplify a vestigial instance of misplaced transcendence, one which imputed neoplatonic mysticism to the ideational act and anachronistic moralism to its claims for artistic purity. Indeed, it was precisely this mysticism that Mel Bochner observed in 1970, when he criticized the "magical" overtones of the notion that artistic ideation was somehow separable from the perceptual real. As he wrote:

> Connotations of an easy dichotomy with perception are obvious and inappropriate. The unfortunate implication is of a somewhat magical/mystical leap from one mode of existence to another. The problem is the confusion of idealism and intention. By creating an original fiction, "conceptualism" posits its special non-empirical existence as a positive (transcendent) value. But no amount of qualification (or documentation) can change the situation. Outside the spoken word, no thought can exist without a sustaining support.[22]

In the attempt to displace the fetishism of the art commodity, in other words, conceptualism had merely erected a new kind of mystical thought. Conceptual art's "original fiction" was thus precisely its unacknowledged appeal to the miraculous otherworldliness of religious

20. Lippard, "Postface" in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 263. This position of course anticipates the argument for the singular value of presence in performance art as put forward by historians such as Phelan (see note 5), in which the very irretrievability of the body is figured as resistance to the commodity demands of the market.

21. Buchloh (see note 7).

22. Mel Bochner, "Excerpts from Speculation (1967–1970)," *Artforum* 8, no. 9 (May 1970):70–73; p. 70.

belief. Taken to its ultimate conclusion, such irruptions of mysticism would seem to signal not the residual traces of traditional aesthetics, but a premonition of the fully regressive tendencies Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer described in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1944, the underlying theoretical paradigm from which Buchloh's essay departs. The presence of quasi-religious structures of evidentiary persuasion within conceptual art's seemingly logical procedures, according to this scenario, anticipated rationalism's reversion to the very mythic structures it sought to overcome.

Though Buchloh posits the return to the object-based commodity forms of painting and sculpture in the 1980s as the ultimate unfolding of this regression, a striking premonition can be located in Yves Klein's 1961 ex-voto for Saint Rita of Cascia, a work that anticipates the conceptual practices of the late 1960s but also doubles as a legitimate artifact of ritualistic religious belief. Discovered posthumously in 1981, the ex-voto was originally deposited by Klein in thanks and entreaty for his continued artistic success. It consists of a plastic box holding a votive prayer, compartments of the artist's signature raw pigment, and three bars of gold, the latter the result of Klein's protoconceptual sale of "zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility" to various collectors in 1959. This sale had already appealed to a votive structure, the materiality of the gold bars testifying to the immaterial action for which they were given in exchange. In Klein's version, however, divine intercession was replaced with artistic volition, and the act of offering with that of sale. By subsequently offering up those gold bars within a specifically *religious* ex-voto in 1961, Klein suggested that it was divine intercession that allowed him to orchestrate the very usurpation of an ex-voto's miraculous structure for an act of commercial exchange.[23]

Klein's ex-voto is a highly idiosyncratic hybrid of not simply the form, but also the content of religious and artistic belief. As a protoconceptual work, it reveals the shrouding of ideology that might occur if conceptual art's "original fiction" was mapped upon actual religious belief within the context of the commodity systems of art. Such actual hybrids, however, were largely absent from the vast majority of works produced within the conceptual frameworks of subsequent years. Instead, these works approximated the ex-voto in configuration rather than implication, a distinction worth bearing in mind. Indeed, I would argue that the votive structure of conceptual art fulfills Adorno's and Horkheimer's most cynical predictions only when one understands the votive analogy as operating on a logic of blind belief. And this, curiously enough, is what I would like to suggest the votive configuration holds at bay.

Consider the basic unfolding of the votive transaction. A subject, finding him or herself in peril, makes an appeal for divine intercession, promising that this deliverance will be publicly commemorated if and when such action comes to pass. The supplicant's promise is therefore made in advance of this action, and the divine entity only "rewarded" when the request is subsequently fulfilled. The ex-voto structure is thus reciprocal and based on mutual interest, even if this interest is not of the same kind. As an exchange, it entails a contract before an affirmation, and in this sense is a deeply contingent expression of belief. For this reason, while the ritualistic practice of depositing ex-votos implies a certain consistency of faith, the ex-voto's *contractual* structure both acknowledges and accounts for the significant position of doubt. Indeed, this doubt is externalized in the evidentiary character of the object and anticipated in the spectator position implied by its subsequent display. Thus, far from being a repressed element within its structure, the ex-voto assumes that one must doubt in order to believe, a proposition more theologically complex than the routine practice itself.[24]

It is this structural principle of doubt that provides the most surprising entry into the homologies between ex-votos and works of conceptual art. For if both phenomena function to reinstate belief in the efficacy

23. Curiously, this ex-voto has been harnessed by some critics as evidence of the sincerity at the heart of Klein's conceptual gambits. Jerome Coignard, writing in response to the 2006 Klein retrospective at the Centres Pompidou, for example, proclaimed: "Pourtant, son oeuvre suscite toujours le doute: était-il vraiment sincère? . . . Aux incrédules de talisman publié en 1981 par le critique d'art Pierre Restany et montré aujourd'hui au publie pour la première fois dit au moins une chose: Klein n'était pas un truquer. Sa foi en son art était aussi pure que sa foi en Dieu." See "Yves Klein, la vie en blue, or, rose," *Connaissance des Arts,* no. 642 (October 2006):58–71. The opposite position has been argued by Thierry du Duve in "Yves Klein, or the Dead Dealer," *October* 49 (Summer 1989):72–90. On the discovery of Klein's ex-voto in 1981, see Pierre Restany, "Yves Klein: The Ex-Voto for Saint Rita of Cascia," in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962, A Retrospective,* exh. cat. (Houston: Institute of Fine Arts, Rice University, 1982).

24. In a related issue, Slavoj Žižek, for example, has distinguished the facticity assumed by fundamentalist assertions of faith from the highly complex articulation of doubt embodied in Jesus' query from the cross (Matthew 27:46): "My God, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?" See Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001) as well as his presentation "The Ignorance of Chickens, or Who Believes What Today" at Princeton University in November 2005.

of art or the divine, they do so by testing the pragmatic limits of these categories rather than assuming their existence as a priori fact. Here one might consider the use of task-based operations in the work of On Kawara or Sol LeWitt. In such instances, a system is either identified or created beforehand, thereby eliminating subjective intervention once its rules are put into play. The act of artistic making—once dependent on the demonstration of authorial performance if not direct artisanal skill—approximates an automatic process whose unfolding is divorced from the artist him- or herself. As LeWitt stated in his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" of 1967: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."[25] This "machine," one could say, was a means of temporarily suspending the programmatic link between the work and its authorial intent (Robert Rauschenberg's *This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I say so,* 1961) in favor of foregrounding the work of art's categorical contingency, its status as proposition that solicits the viewer's confirmation by way of a set of results. This provides a useful contrast to the tautological position put forward in Joseph Kosuth's 1969 text "Art After Philosophy," by which each work is a definition of a work of art by virtue of the artist's intention.[26] In light of the contractual structure of the votive analogy, by contrast, art, like belief, is a retroactive category that emerges after the fact.

In its sustained questioning of art's ontological bases—its structure of belief conditioned by doubt—conceptual art threw into relief in most attenuated form art's function as the reconfiguration of meaningful signs. In Acconci's *Rubbing Piece,* Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture,* or On Kawara's stamped postcards, the conceptual art document did not provide proof of "art," but rather proof of a proposition by which art might be considered or thought. Such documents invite their viewer to imaginatively reconfigure aspects of the sensible world along new lines of conceptual demarcation. This is why, as artists such as Huebler and Lawrence Weiner realized, it was enough to activate the evidentiary structure of documentation rather than to insist on a privileged relation between documentation and truth. As Huebler stated: "The documents prove nothing. They make the piece exist and I am interested in having that existence occur in as simple a way as possible."[27] In this statement one detects a hint of the shift art historian T. J. Demos has recently noted with regard to the documentary assumptions of photography in contemporary art. As Demos writes: "[The] carefully staged indeterminacy between fact and fiction . . . emphasizes how photography not only may access a past, but produces and authorizes something new—an identity, a history, an experience—through its very visualization."[28]

Here the question of politics emerges from within even the most esoteric forms of conceptual art that claimed little more than the reflexive investigation of art itself. Once again the votive object offers a point of entry. As a public announcement of a meaningful sign, the ex-voto not only intervenes within an existing system of signification—the system that determines what occurrences are natural, the result of human intervention, or determined by divine intent—but also actively reorders the configuration of this system itself. While one of the principal functions of church hierarchy is to organize and regulate the meaning of signs, for example, the ex-voto allows its donor to circumvent such institutional mediation in order to newly narrate his or her sensible world. As a public statement, the ex-voto claims individual perception as meaningful within a larger social framework of valid facts. The evidentiary claims of the ex-voto are therefore also a means by which a subject enters and participates within the shifting determinations of public space. If, as Rancière has argued, politics "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it," around who sees and who speaks, such interruptions of accepted sense experience provide a model for the emergence and redefinition of political subjectivities within a common sphere.[29]

In ex-votos and conceptual works alike, the subject who chooses to believe is an interpreter who participates in the redistribution of the "system of self-evident facts" that determine what is known, what is valid, and what can be counted as real.[30] Thus, while many of the early instantiations of conceptual art disavowed social or political concerns, it was within the narrow confines of this ontological framework that such questions acquired new methodological force. As conceptual

25. Sol LeWitt (see note 8), p. 79. See also his "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *0–9,* no. 5 (January 1969):3–5.

26. Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (October 1969):134–137; no. 916 (November 1969):160–161; no. 917 (December 1969):212–213.

27. "Four Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, Weiner," *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 4 (February 1969) reprinted in *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Gregory Battock (New York: Dutton, 1973), p. 144.

28. T. J. Demos, "The Ends of Photography," in *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives on Photography* (London: Phaidon, 2006), p. 9.

29. Rancière (see note 6), p. 13.

30. Ibid., p. 12.

Figure 7. Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From,* 2001–2003 detail (Sonia). American passport, 30 texts, 32 c-prints, and 1 video; text (Sonia): 24 x 30.5 cm (9½ x 12 in.); photo (Sonia): 38 x 38 cm (15 x 15 in.) Photography: Bill Orcutt. Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York.

art demonstrated, aesthetic interventions need not be determined narrowly by the visual qualities of an object, but by the way such interventions reconfigured how the surface of the sensible itself might be intellectually perceived. In that this topography is conditioned by social and political concerns, conceptual art provided the rubric for the kinds of critical interventions one finds in much advanced contemporary art today. These postconceptual or neoconceptual practices do not take the ontological boundaries of art as their primary site of investigation, but rather how such boundaries reveal the social and political configurations that construct perceptible experience as such.

It is perhaps for this reason that such contemporary practices frequently return to early conceptual art's implicit structures of documentary witness and persuasion at one degree removed. In conclusion, then, I would like to consider a striking example of such a return in Emily Jacir's *Where We Come From* (fig. 7). For this piece, Jacir asked a number of Palestinians living in exile or in conditions of drastically limited mobility: "If I could do something for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" Jacir who, as an American citizen, is able to circumvent the physical restrictions imposed on most Palestinians, then fulfilled the resulting requests, ranging from visiting a mother's grave to paying a phone bill to eating a favorite dish. The work is presented as a series of diptychs consisting of text detailing the subject, his or her request, and Jacir's own logistical remarks, next to a modest photograph that documents the artist's varying ability to complete the given task: a shadow thrown over a grave, a line at the billing office, an empty plate.

Where We Come From, more explicitly than other works discussed thus far, takes up both the evidentiary structure of the ex-voto and its fulfillment of a wish. Acting as a proxy for her subjects, Jacir performs a series of intercessions made possible by virtue of her American passport, which is listed first among the materials for the work. In this sense, Jacir extends an investigation initiated by her 1998 work *Change/ Exchange,* in which she changed one hundred dollars into French francs and then back into dollars and so forth until there was nothing left. If "the idea was the machine that makes the art" in rule- or systems-based works of early conceptual art, Jacir posits the formations of power that regulate geopolitical boundaries as a new kind of generating "machine." In *Where We Come From,* the social and political configurations that determine perceptible experience thus become the medium of the intervening act.

Yet for precisely this reason, Jacir's role as a proxy can only fail to achieve the underlying political

redistribution—the demand for self-determination and autonomy of each of her individual subjects—that lies implicit within each wish. The moving appeal of Jacir's intercessions ironizes this failure, and in so doing, underscores that the reconfiguration of political coordinates cannot be achieved by single individuals alone.[31] Here *Where We Come From* enters into delicate territory. For in its emphatic staging of the limits of its political action, the work implicitly poses a question about the efficacy of the work as a work of art. In this respect, it is significant that the piece was first circulated not as a gallery piece, but as documentation in a magazine produced by the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem. As a publication, the work was able to transgress precisely those geopolitical boundaries it critiqued in order to reach its ideal audience of exiles forced to live outside of Palestine and residents unable to move freely within the territory itself. For such an audience, Jacir's transit between places and proxy fulfillment of tasks was a familiar occurrence, one undertaken by friends and relatives over the course of years. In this sense, the efficacy of *Where We Come From* emerges from its intellectual intervention: the way it defamiliarizes and politicizes this practice through the procedures and discourses of art.

However, when the work was subsequently exhibited in various gallery spaces, primarily in the United States, it inevitably developed a secondary audience whose starting point was not the intimate familiarity with such practices but the a priori assumption of art. The work's evidentiary structure thus took on a new function of politicizing the viewers' perception as they moved from each photo to text. Here Jacir's provision of a set of idiosyncratic proxy services to specific individuals inadvertently began to act as a support for the emergence of a new dynamic entailing an ethical service provided to anonymous viewers in the gallery space. This is perhaps the reason for Jacir's ambivalence about the work's subsequent public display. As she observed in a 2004 interview: "Now, looking back, I think showing *Where We Come From* is a failure in some way. I am not sure how to reconcile the notion that non-Palestinians are being entertained by our sorrows and dreams."[32] Recasting this observation, I would suggest that the problem lies in the varying degrees to which an exhibition context might dispense with the figure of doubt so elegantly sustained in the original proposition. And by doubt I mean uncertainty on the part of the artist's subjects as to her intentions, the artist's own doubt regarding her ability to fulfill the given tasks, essential concerns about the work's political efficacy, and ultimately, doubt with regard to the action's status and implications as a work of art. The question posed by the subsequent exhibitions of *Where We Come From* circles around how to productively maintain this doubt as a precondition for belief in the mutual articulation of aesthetics and politics staged by the work. As the work itself argues, aesthetics both participates in and models the redistribution of the sensible at the heart of the political, but it is not a substitute for political action in and of itself. For politics, ultimately, is not miracle work, even in art.

31. T. J. Demos and Lori Waxman have both called attention to the work's strategy or performance of failure at the level of political realization as well as the photograph's ability to act as witness. See T. J. Demos, "Desire in Diaspora: Emily Jacir," *Art Journal* 62, no. 4 (Winter 2003):69–78, and "Life Full of Holes," *Grey Room* no. 24 (Summer 2006):72–87, and Lori Waxman, "Picturing Failure," *Parachute* no. 115 (Fall 2004):30–47.

32. Emily Jacir, interview with Stella Rollig in *Emily Jacir: Belongings, Arbeiten/Works 1998–2003* (Linz: O.K. Centrum für Gegenwartskunst Oberösterreich, 2004), p. 6.