

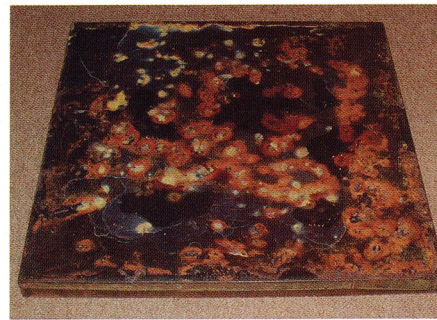
GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY



William Anastasi: Trespass, 1966/2006, wall removal, dimensions variable.



Relief, 1961, concrete, 2 by 18 by 18 inches.  
All photos this article courtesy the artist and  
Björn Ressle Fine Art, New York.



Sink, 1963, steel and water, 1 by 19 by 19 inches.  
Collection John Cage Estate.

## Rereading Anastasi

*Working in an impressive variety of mediums, William Anastasi brings to bear on his Conceptual work a wide-ranging formal inventiveness and a Duchampian wit.*

**BY BRIAN BOUCHER**

**A** mini-retrospective of work by William Anastasi at New York's Björn Ressle Fine Art stressed the artist's ongoing concern with foundational principles of Conceptual and Minimal art. A first-generation Conceptualist, Anastasi continues to extend a practice informed by scientific theories as well as philosophical and literary sources ranging from Zen to James Joyce, yielding a body of work that is both formally compelling and rich in personal meanings. The show, with examples of sculpture, drawing, photography and collage,

spanned from 1961 to the present and demonstrated the artist's protean accomplishment.

Before beginning to make art, Anastasi (b. 1933) had by his early 20s followed in a family tradition, becoming a successful masonry contractor. Self-taught through art books and trips to his hometown Philadelphia Museum of Art, he began to consider himself an artist in 1960, when he first assigned a date to one of his drawings. Several early works employ the stuff of his trade, as though he applied the

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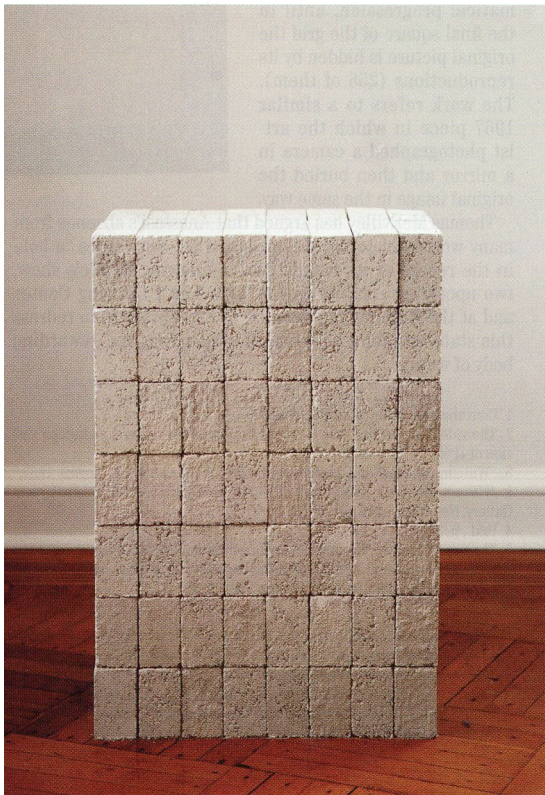
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“write what you know” maxim to his new calling, combining familiar, humble materials with ideas about found objects and the operations of chance. The earliest piece in the show, and one of his first, is a horizontal block of concrete into which the artist urinated shortly after it was poured, creating a floor sculpture to which he gave the punning title *Relief* (1961). The use of bodily waste calls to mind an array of contemporary and later works, from Manzoni’s *Merda d’Artista* (also 1961) to Warhol’s oxidation paintings (1978). The piece is, moreover, a witty play on Duchamp’s urinal; the Arensberg collection of Duchamp’s works at the Philadelphia Museum had particularly struck the young Anastasi.

Likewise relying on the interaction of solids and liquids is *Sink* (1963), a shallow, 19-by-19-inch steel square on the floor that is meant to be watered each day; the evaporating fluid leaves incidental compositions of rust. Anastasi was moved by a scientist’s characterization of rusting as the metal’s reuniting with the impurities removed from iron ore to create steel. “It’s trying to go home,” as the artist says.<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by the physical world on a larger scale is a sculpture featuring more delicate materials. In 1965, Anastasi learned that Bell Labs researchers had detected electromagnetic radiation permeating the universe, constituting powerful evidence for the Big Bang theory. The artist was reminded of the explosive opening to one of Beethoven’s best-known works, which was etched in his mind, having been featured in the soundtrack to many WWII newsreels from his youth. *Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony* (1965/2005) consists of videotape<sup>2</sup> of a performance of that composition, unspooled to form a wall relief in

Untitled (*En Route*), 1964, 112 concrete bricks, 25½ by 18½ by 15¼ inches.



Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, 1965/2005, unspooled videotape, 79 by 53 by 8 inches.

which the tape hangs from two nails a few feet apart, at the points the artist’s hands reached when his arms were stretched up and out (à la Leonardo’s Vitruvian man). The shiny black filament drapes and puddles in a mesmerizing, chaotic tangle; when a nearby window was opened at Ressler the tape fluttered in the breeze. The work formally predicts not only Eva Hesse’s hanging sculptures (1969 and 1970), but also Christian Marclay’s *Tape Fall* (1989).

Other 1960s works reflect, as does *Sink*, the then-emerging principles of Minimalism. At that time, Anastasi wrote, “One, just one. And simple. As simple as simple. Even dumb.”<sup>3</sup> *Untitled (En Route)*, 1964, adheres to this formula, consisting of gray concrete bricks arranged end to end in a tight rectangular stack. The formal precedent for Carl Andre’s brick floor pieces (begun in 1966) is obvious. In *Trespass* (1966), re-created for this show, Anastasi rubbed a small area of wall with a smooth stone to remove the plaster, encroaching only a fraction of an inch into the wall; he then enclosed the mottled, uneven area with an incised rectangle. The piece quietly echoes a host of modern removals, from Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) to Yves Klein’s emptied gallery (1958).

Above and beyond its minimalist look, *Trespass* embodies several key conceptual premises: it offers a tautology in which the wall exhibits itself; it implies a critique of representation; and it calls attention to the gallery, supposedly a neutral site for exhibiting art. In all these ways, it hews very close to Anastasi’s best-known work, an untitled piece that made up the 1967 show “Six Sites,” in which he hung on the



**Anastasi's "blind" drawings aim to bypass the artist's conscious will, submitting the graphic process to chance.**

Dwan Gallery's walls photo-silkscreens of the walls themselves, just smaller than the actual size of the walls. At the same time, the iteration of *Trespass* at Ressle was inadvertently beautiful, featuring subtly varying whites—slick and powdery, bright and dull.

The exhibition jumped from the 1960s to recent works, but all the same stressed the continuity of Anastasi's oeuvre. For example, he once described his wall removals as "a paean to the here and the now,"<sup>4</sup> and his text work *Exhaling, Then Inhaling* (2000) also fits that description. Those three words appear in small adhesive letters on the wall, forming a sort of portrait of the viewer in the moment of viewing by evoking his or her physical activity. As such the piece poetically addresses Duchamp's idea that the observer completes the artwork, here by being, so to speak, figuratively portrayed by it.

Anastasi's "blind" drawings aim to bypass the artist's conscious will, submitting the graphic process to chance. Part of an ongoing series begun in the 1970s, when Anastasi was often venturing downtown to play chess with John Cage, the "Subway Drawings" on view, dating from 1993-2006, were executed with a drawing tablet atop his knees.

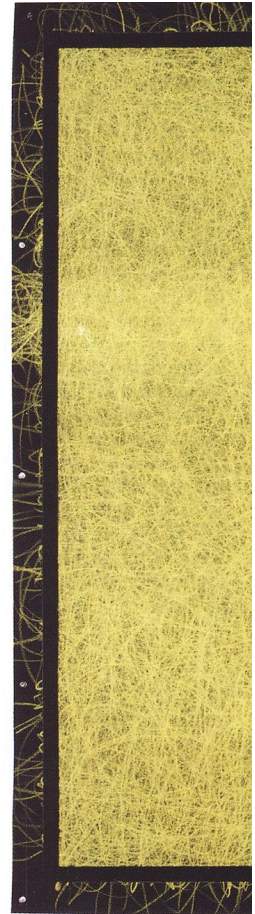
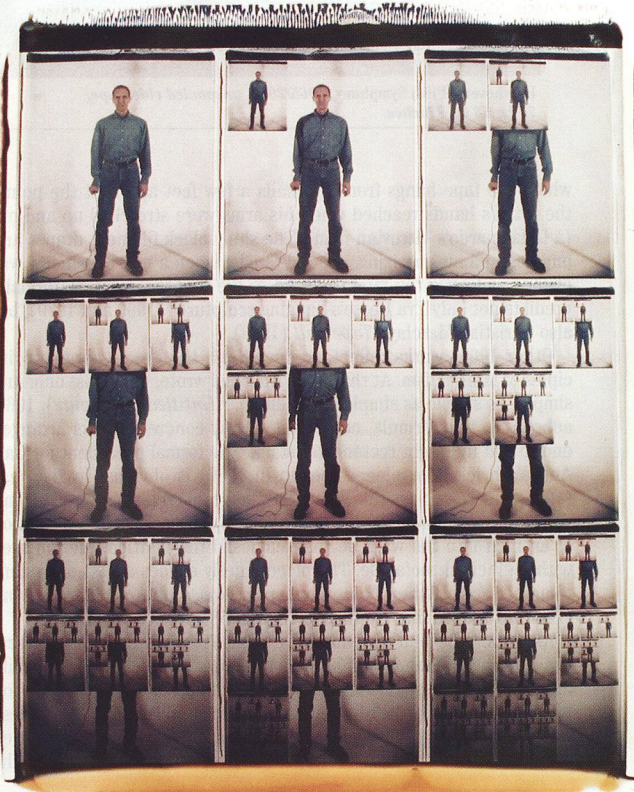
Eyes closed, he rests two pencil points on the paper, allowing the train's motion to create a drawing that resembles a seismograph, with spidery lines connecting two tumbleweeds of line.

The much larger (and conventionally prettier) *Roaryboaryellas* (2003), measuring 60 by 108 inches, was drawn in the studio, the blindfolded artist scribbling in yellow chalk over the paper's entire surface in swooping lines that form a sublimely delicate web. (The title comes from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a lifelong fascination for Anastasi.) A Milky Way-like band across the paper above center, where his arms have crossed the same level twice, disrupts the alloverness, as if the artist's personality were sneaking into even what he intended, through the use of the blindfold, to be the most self-effacing work.

In like manner, a recent piece could be read symbolically as the artist claiming his place in the history of Conceptual art. In the grid of photos that forms *Nine Polaroid Photographs of the Artist* (1999), each successive image is obscured by another inset version of the same self-portrait; in turn, each inset image is covered with more smaller versions of same in a mathematical progression, until in the final square of the grid the original picture is hidden by its reproductions (256 of them). The work refers to a similar 1967 piece in which the artist photographed a camera in a mirror and then buried the original image in the same way.

Thomas McEvilley has argued that Anastasi's absence from many written histories of Conceptual art constitutes "a hole in the record at its foundation."<sup>5</sup> Following Ressle's show, two upcoming exhibitions—at New York's Drawing Center and at the Birmingham Museum of Art—promise to redress this state of affairs by reconsidering a rich and rewarding body of work. □

*Nine Polaroid Photographs of the Artist, 1999,*  
78 by 64½ inches.



1. Conversation with the author, July 2006.

2. The videotape version was created later, after the original audiotape version of 1965.

3. "William Anastasi and Thomas McEvilley: A Conversation, August 1989," in *William Anastasi: A Selection of Works from 1960 to 1989*, Scott Hanson Gallery, New York, 1989, pp. 12-13.

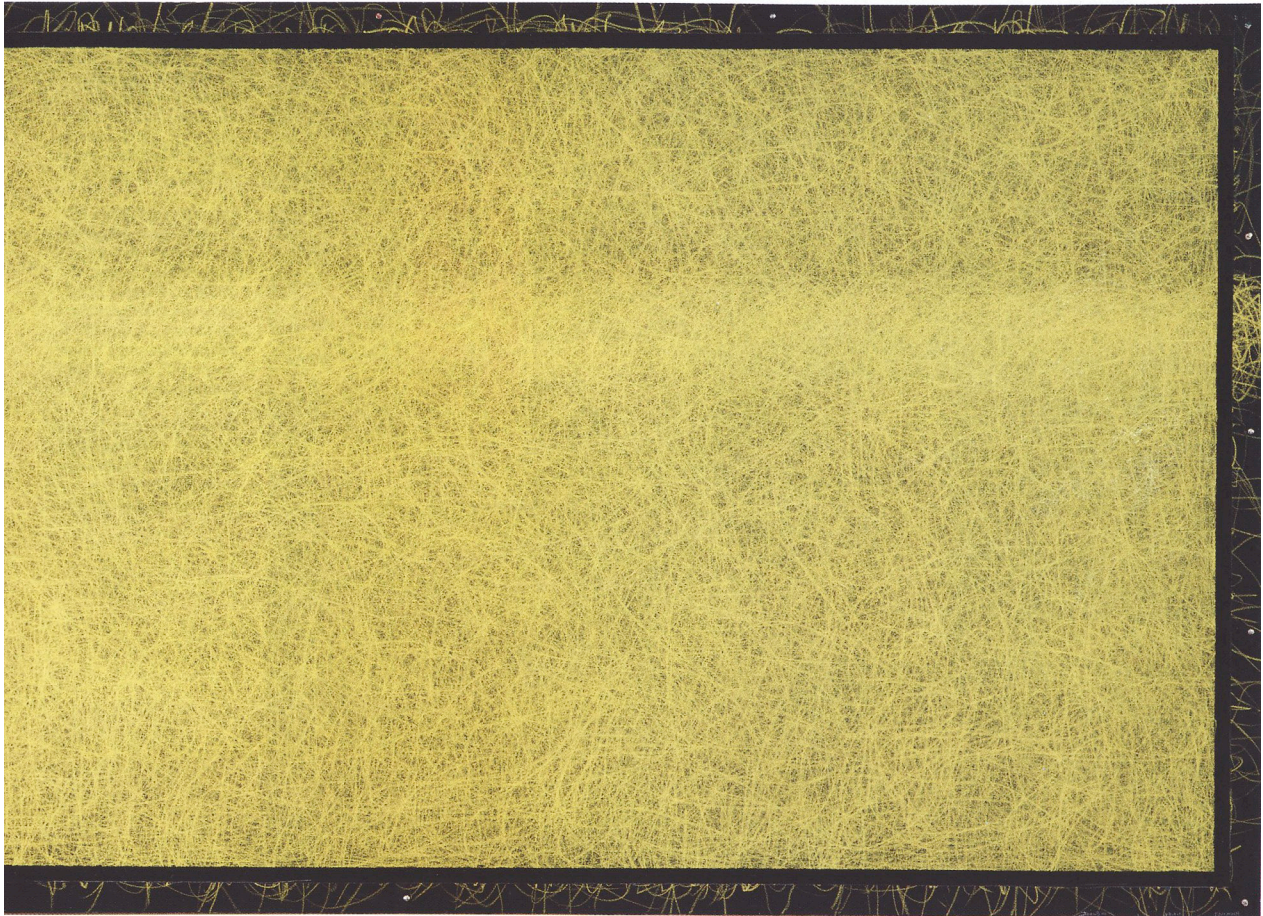
4. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

5. Thomas McEvilley, "Setting the Record Straight: William Anastasi and the History of Conceptual Art," in *William Anastasi: A Retrospective*, Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 2001, p. 30.

"William Anastasi: Works from the '60s to the Present" was at Björn Ressle Fine Art in New York [May 17-July 3]. "William Anastasi: You're Through" appeared at Baumgartner Gallery, New York, [Oct. 14-Nov. 8]. Works by Anastasi will be on view at the Birmingham [Ala.] Museum of Art [Jan. 26-Mar. 4, 2007]. A retrospective is scheduled at the Drawing Center in New York [Apr. 21-July 21, 2007].



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**Roaryboaryellas, 2003, pastel on paper,  
60 by 108 inches.**



**Left, Subway Drawing, 2002, pencil on paper,  
7½ by 11½ inches.**

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