

Robert Morris's Ambiguous Containers

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This paper responds to divergent interpretations of Robert Morris's sculptures, neo-dada objects, and environments. In attempting to explain Morris's repeated use of barriers, cages, boxes, and containers, critics have offered one or the other of two irreconcilable opinions. The first, which appears in Annette Michelson's 1969 catalog essay, "Robert Morris—An Aesthetics of Transgression," is that Morris, like Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and John Cage, is a transgressor, one who goes beyond or over the boundaries of modernism, "re-defining and extending the arena of aesthetic discourse."¹ In an indirect rebuttal to Michelson, Carter Ratcliff in a 1979 article calls Morris a "Prisoner of Modernism" who is "incarcerated in a realm of reductivist forms by his own choice."² Ratcliff sees Morris continually re-inscribing, but refusing to exceed, the limits of "reductive modernism."³ Both critics locate Morris at the edges or boundaries of modernism. The question remains as to how these limits and boundaries figure in his work.

This question divides even recent criticism of Morris. Two recent, revisionist accounts of Morris's work of the 1960s differ profoundly in their assessment of Morris's underlying ideology. Anna C. Chave writes in 1990 that,

[Morris's] success at realizing such authoritative...images [of containment and repression] owed more to his infatuation with power than with his interest in finding strategies to counter the abuses of power...⁴

In contrast to this is Maurice Berger's 1989 assertion that, Morris's labyrinthine spaces serve as metaphors for the central and driving dialectic of his oeuvre: the idea of a desublimating, antirepressive art that deconstructs the institutional hierarchies of late capitalism.⁵

How could Morris's work suggest such contradictory readings? Is his work in an essential way ambiguous? If so, it might be understood best in the light of recent theory, specifically that of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and the literary critic, J. Hillis Miller, which stresses that the play of limits and boundaries makes a problem out of any simple opposition.

Typically, a critical analysis of an artist's work tries to determine the artist's position on controversial issues. The word "determine" derives from the Latin meaning "to fix the bounds of." The art historian fixes bounds in two ways: first by containing (an artist's work, a period, a canon); second, by

dividing (between styles, periods, major and minor work). The discipline of art history in this way mirrors Michel Foucault's analysis of how society's institutions effectively discipline its members: first by "enclosure," second by "partitioning."⁶ Foucault and his student Derrida attempt not to establish parameters and categories, but to examine them as acts of enclosure and division. Foucault and Derrida can be said to play the limits of institutional discourse. These limits can be located in the slash between conventional pairs of opposites: inner/outer, fixed/transitory, self/other, subject/object, etc.

The very notion of a limit itself suggests both boundary and transgression; a limit is that which one gets over. Transgression and limit cannot be understood apart from one another. Likewise, in psychoanalysis, the concept of repression is one of containment/escape; it needs this play of opposites in order to exist at all. By describing Morris as either transgressive or imprisoned, repressive or anti-repressive, authoritarian or oppositional, critics miss the playful oppositions that make his work so vexing and so meaningful. I will try to describe how I see these oppositions in Morris's work.

To take an early example, Morris's small *I Box* of 1962 (Figure 1) can be seen to represent the three-part self of psychoanalysis. The I or ego results from the repression of the naked id by the superego, a role played by the person who opens and closes the door. This act of repression, closing the door on the naked image of the artist, is continually erased and re-inscribed in unresolvable dialectic or play of open and closed. The *I Box* hinges on the modernist duality of repression and expression in a way that suggests a reciprocal dependence. Morris will later identify "the will to liberate man from his repressions" as an "axiom of modernity."⁷ Whereas the modernist tries to envision liberation and transcendence, Morris's work, to use the words of Carter Ratcliff, has "no lift-off to the paradise promised by tradition. It offers the paradox of a self-denying self-expression."⁸

This paradox implies that the self is the barrier or limit between repressive and expressive, or excessive, forces, a site of control and escape, like a prison. Morris suggests that the *I* is a *Box*, one which does not totally separate inside from out but allows a certain exchange between them. This theme will continue throughout Morris's work from this point on.

The same year as *I Box*, Morris made *Barrier* (Figure 2), one of his first minimalist objects. Six and a half feet tall, it functions as a literal barricade in the gallery space. As such

it is at odds with the virtual space of transcendence explored in modern painting and sculpture. It simultaneously disrupts the gallery space and reinforces the rectilinear structure of institutional architecture. *Barrier's* title addresses its status as boundary marker; as with all of Morris's blank form sculpture, it designates boundaries and exists at the site of certain limits. At a fundamental level, these objects play on the idea of a box as container; as spatial boundary between inside and outside. Morris's early fascination with the box, already mentioned here, is well known, as is the fact that *Column* of 1961, his first blank form sculpture, was designed to contain the artist during a performance. Morris's boxes do not, however, simply limit inner from outer. They are rather sites of equivocation between inner and outer. An example of this uncertainty is the small *Untitled* box of 1963, locked and inscribed, "LEAVE KEY ON HOOK INSIDE CABINET" (Figure 3). The locked box restricts our capacity to act as surely as if we were locked inside of it ourselves, with the key outside. It subverts the distinction inner/outer while enforcing it at the same time, a common Morris strategy.

The same can be said for the human-scaled blank form sculptures, which have the paradoxical effect of boxing us in even as they lock us out. As previously noted, they limit the viewer's movements while calling attention to the architectural containers around them. On another level, by denying us a transcendent aesthetic experience, the boxes are turned inside out to contain us. Thus Carter Ratcliff feels constrained by Morris's work and calls him "the administrator of confining possibilities."⁹ By confining himself, Morris confines us: "With the warden's instinct, he constricts the possibilities for his art, hence the breadth and depth of one's response."¹⁰ Morris is, for Ratcliff, both "prisoner" and "warden."

To move back and forth between the opposites inner/outer, repressive/expressive, even prisoner/warden, is to transcend the boundaries between them. For the critic Annette Michelson, mentioned at the start of this paper, Morris's blank form sculpture is essentially transgressive because it subverts traditional boundaries even as it "intensifies our sense...of what a boundary is."¹¹ That is, by questioning the "distinction, the boundary instituted by traditional aesthetics between virtual and real space, the work was in reality...transgressive."¹² The minimalist object, by asserting itself as barrier, paradoxically crosses several barriers of modernism, what Michelson calls, "traditionally defended boundaries and conventions or distinctions."¹³ These include divisions between art and life, visual art and theater, viewer and artwork, self and other, form and content. In this last case, Morris suggests that form and content are mutually dependent, both in the aesthetic realm and in society. As a society we make our containers, and they in turn make us. Morris writes in a 1967 article that the "new three-dimensional work has grasped the cultural infrastructure of forming itself," which he calls "an order so basic to the culture that its obviousness makes it nearly invisible."¹⁴ For Morris, form inherently contains and divides. For this reason he is suspicious of pure formalism.

In his recent study of Morris, Maurice Berger recognizes that the "provocative, aggressive relation of Morris's sculpture to the spectator's body suggests...an erotically charged confrontation meant to overturn the purity and aloofness of much formalist sculpture."¹⁵ Morris, who wrote his master's thesis on Brancusi, demonstrates that reductive formalism is inherently repressive: "it was precisely the *repression* of eroticism that Morris's works attempted to dramatize...."¹⁶ So far, Berger's analysis agrees with Carter Ratcliff's hostile critique of Morris. But then, echoing Annette Michelson, Berger writes that "for Morris, such sculptural confrontation was transgressive because it defied the libidinal repressiveness of formalist sculpture."¹⁷

Ultimately for Berger, a Hegelian or Marxist dialectic is at work, whereby Morris's use of constraint always moves toward liberation. The more explicitly authoritarian and oppressive Morris's imagery gets, the more Berger reads it as anti-repressive or politically oppositional. In response to Morris's *Philadelphia Labyrinth* of 1974 (Figure 4), which puts the spectator in a winding, featureless, eighteen-inch-wide passageway with eight-foot-tall walls, leading to a dead end, Berger somehow concludes that the labyrinth is "a vehicle for spiritual freedom."¹⁸ He cites Stephen Eisenman, who writes, "The prisoner who survives incarceration or the rigors of the labyrinth...transcends bodily cares and is initiated into the realm of spiritual redemption."¹⁹

This represents a simple Hegelian dialectic, whereby limits signify an ultimate transcendence. Hegel, quoted by Derrida, writes,

that the limit [between thesis and antithesis] has a beyond...beyond which it must pass, but in so doing there arises another such limit, which is no limit. The solution of these antinomies is transcendental....²⁰

Morris's *Labyrinth* replaces the modern notion of transcendence with the reinforced boundary. A labyrinth is in essence entirely boundary: its "inner" and "outer" surfaces alternate endlessly. In its involuted passageway, one is outside of the inside while being inside of the outside. The same can be said of our experience as human bodies. As in *I Box*, the self is neither fully inside nor fully outside its container. In this way Morris's *Labyrinth* offers not transcendence but a reinforcement of bodily experience.

Indeed, Morris explicitly defies a redemptive reading of his work, one which explains away contradictions by assigning them a transcendent purpose within what he calls a "historicizing narrative."²¹ Morris, trained as an art historian, does not really believe in history. Theologian Mark Taylor calls history "a purposeful process whose meaning can be coherently represented."²² For Morris, every purpose or coherently represented meaning is suspect if not discredited in the late twentieth century. Morris's view of the terminal point of modernist history is not Hegel's final "solution" of transcendence in which opposites unite, but Hitler's "Final Solution," in which, for Morris, "all post-Enlightenment appeals to Truth

and Reason become covered with ashes."²³ His disbelief in a redemptive purpose can be found in one of his earliest works, *Passageway* of 1961 (Figure 5). The title is highly ironic, as the passageway itself narrows as it winds around, until the viewer gets stuck or turns back, unable to go beyond a certain terminal point.

There is a recurring theme in Morris's artwork that can be traced back to his childhood in Kansas City. His father worked at the stockyards, preparing cattle for the slaughterhouse. Morris went there often. "This was," he writes, "one big zone devoted to death. The stockyards were a living funnel into those charnel-house holes."²⁴ The implied comparison with Nazi death camps seems intentional. Both are purposefully ordered systems with coherent narratives, and the consequences are frightening: termination becomes extermination, in the absence of the redemptive potential of incarceration.

Morris had been making cages, partitions, prisons, and tight passages for seventeen years prior to reading the first translation of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* in 1978. Morris immediately responded with a series of drawings, entitled *In the Realm of the Carceral*, showing different real and utopian prison-like spaces, including a stockyard (Figure 6). This series takes its title from Foucault's last chapter, "The Carceral," in which he describes the carceral "network" of prison-like structures in society, based on the principle of cellular division and enclosure: schools, hospitals, army camps, prisons themselves. What is particularly chilling for Foucault about this carceral network is that it has "no outside. It takes back with one hand what it seems to exclude with the other."²⁵ The prison, like Morris's boxes, effectively contains that which is outside. As a site of physical control, it exerts a real mental control. Prisons work by excluding that which they contain, but they also contain that which they exclude.

This imperative of the container is impervious to deviance, indeed requires it. Morris's acute awareness of this belies a simple reading of his work as oppositional. Within a formalist modernism that enforces certain restrictive structural imperatives or boundaries, oppositional artmaking strategies can paradoxically end up reinforcing the presence of the container. Allan Kaprow argues as much in a 1968 article, "The Shape of the Art Environment," in which he criticizes the supposed oppositional stance implied in Morris's 1968 essay, "Anti Form," which was given its oppositional title not by Morris but by the editors of *Artforum*. Kaprow writes that "so long as we live in a world dominated by [rectilinearity]...we cannot talk about anti form...except as one type of form in relation to another (rectilinear) form."²⁶ Morris has pointedly disowned the phrase "anti form." He knows he is not so much offering an opposition as playing one out.

In the late 1960s, Morris, like other artists, became interested in certain kinds of random distribution that can be called dispersion. This interest resulted in *Steam* of 1968 (Figure 7), in which steam emerges from a grouping of nozzles and wafts into the atmosphere of the piece's outdoor setting. In

the very same year, Morris's work included a series of steel and aluminum mesh dividers, such as *Untitled* of 1968 (Figure 8), that suggest cages or cubicles. The untitled grate piece and *Steam* relate in a complicated way, since they seem to suggest radically different sculptural strategies: one a liberational and limitless dispersion, the other a restrictive, geometric division with fascist overtones. Their conflicting coexistence in this divided body of work again suggests the play of limits. *Steam* suggests infinitude, the grates finitude. Yet one can imagine *Steam* wafting through the grates: these are almost companion pieces in the nature of their playful opposition, each containing and contained by the other. Deconstructionist theologian Mark Taylor writes, "finitude and infinitude are neither simply opposed nor mutually exclusive. To the contrary, they enact a ceaseless play in which each becomes itself in and through the other."²⁷

Robert Morris's ambiguities of containment imply neither a repressive nor an anti-repressive position. By being both or neither, Morris attaches himself to the terms of modernism itself, like a parasite (Figure 9), a paramodernist. In his theory of the parasite, J. Hillis Miller defines the prefix "para-" as

something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it...A thing in "para," moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It also is the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing and joining them.²⁸

Miller points out that "There is no parasite without a host."²⁹ On the host of modernism, Robert Morris plays and displaces the boundaries, acting ambiguously from an ambiguous location, defying a final determination. Morris is neither fully inside nor outside the modernist enterprise. Rather, he is at the limit of modernism, fascinated not so much with its contents as with its containers.

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¹ Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris—An Aesthetics of Transgression," *Robert Morris* (Washington, D. C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969) 7.

² Carter Ratcliff, "Robert Morris: Prisoner of Modernism," *Art in America* October 1979: 96.

³ Ratcliff 108.

⁴ Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts* January 1990: 57.

⁵ Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism and the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 132.

- ⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 141-143.
- ⁷ Robert Morris, "Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions)," *Art in America* November 1989: 148.
- ⁸ Ratcliff 109.
- ⁹ Ratcliff 97.
- ¹⁰ Ratcliff 97.
- ¹¹ Michelson 37.
- ¹² Michelson 37.
- ¹³ Michelson 23.
- ¹⁴ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3," *Artforum* June 1967: 26.
- ¹⁵ Berger 56-57.
- ¹⁶ Berger 58.
- ¹⁷ Berger 59.
- ¹⁸ Berger 132.
- ¹⁹ Berger 132.
- ²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) ix.
- ²¹ Morris, "Three Folds" 148.
- ²² Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: a Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) 70.
- ²³ Morris, "Three Folds" 150.
- ²⁴ Morris, "Three Folds" 148.
- ²⁵ Foucault 301.
- ²⁶ Allan Kaprow, "The Shape of the Art Environment," *Artforum* Summer 1968: 33.
- ²⁷ Taylor 114.
- ²⁸ J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1986) 453.
- ²⁹ Miller 452.

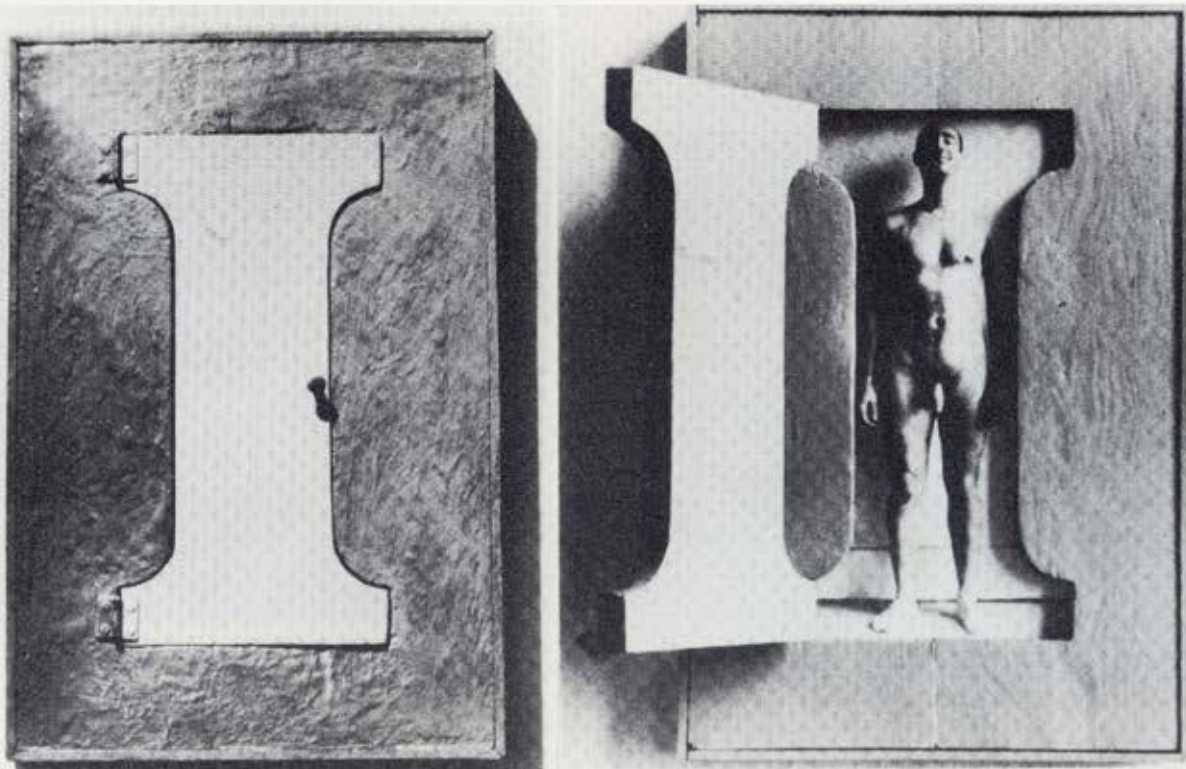


Figure 1. Robert Morris, *I Box*, 1962, plywood cabinet, sculpmetal, photograph, 19" x 13 3/4" x 1 3/8", copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS, NY.

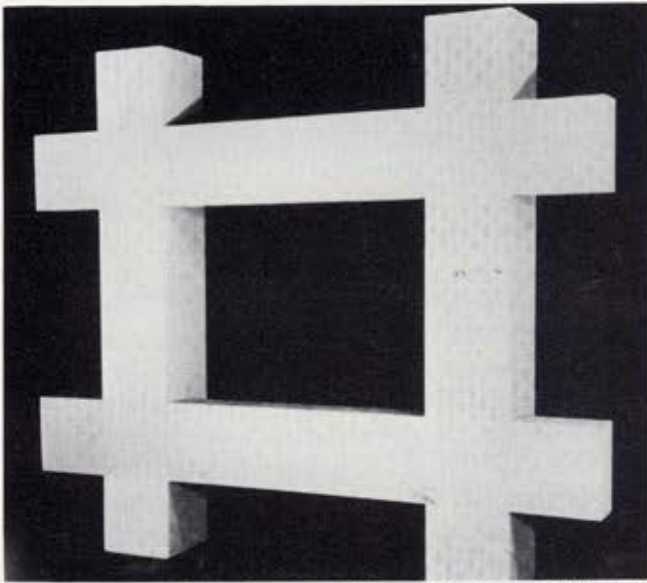


Figure 2. Robert Morris, *Barrier*, 1962, painted plywood, 79" x 90" x 12", copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.



Figure 3. Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1963, painted bronze, 13" x 7 1/2" x 3 1/2", copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.



Figure 4. Robert Morris, *Philadelphia Labyrinth*, 1974, plywood and masonite painted gray, 96" high x 360" diameter x 18" wide passageway, copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.

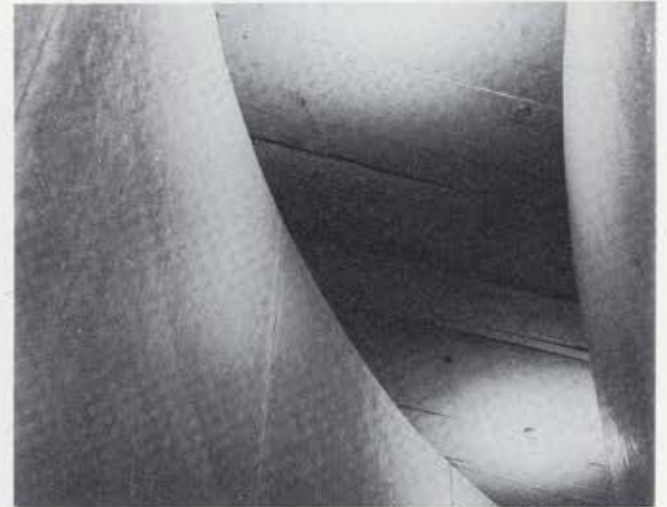


Figure 5. Robert Morris, *Passageway*, ceiling detail, 1961, plywood, 96" x 48" x 600", copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.



Figure 6. Robert Morris, *In the Realm of the Carceral: Stockade*, 1978, ink on paper, 45" x 33 3/4", copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.

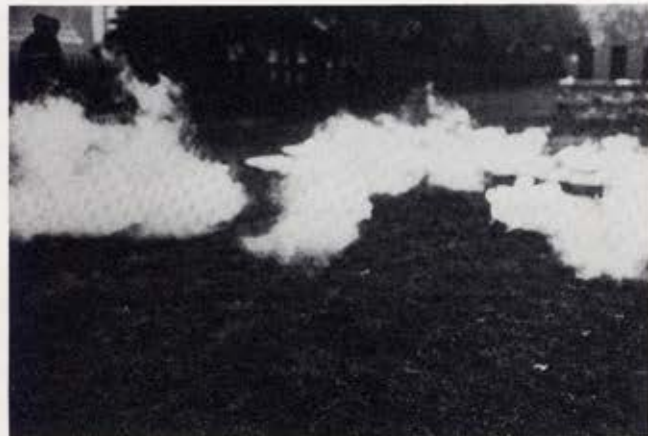


Figure 7. Robert Morris, *Steam*, 1968-9, copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.

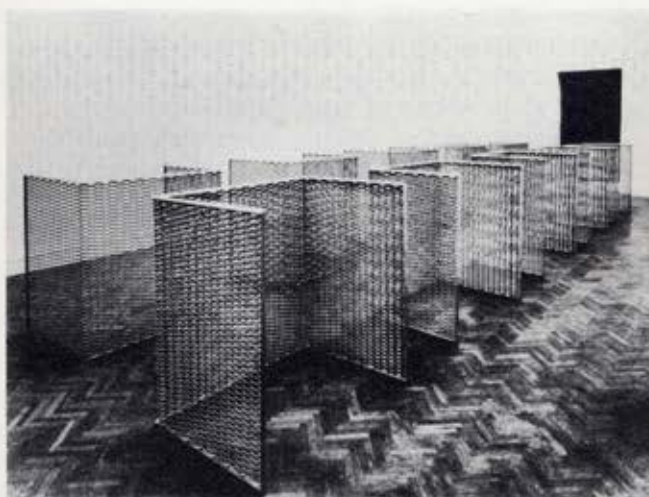


Figure 8. Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1968, expanded aluminum, ten units each, 60" x 60" x 42", 42" apart, copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.



Figure 9. Robert Morris at the entrance to *Passageway*, Yoko Ono's Chambers Street loft, New York, June 1961, copyright 1992 Robert Morris/ARS NY.