

Kant, Co-production, Actuality and Pedestrian  
Space: Remarks on the Philosophical Writings of  
Fred Sandback

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“My mom told me about this Charlie Chaplin film . . . said she enjoyed a clip of Charlie Chaplin eating an artichoke. Finding himself befuddled at a fancy dinner, he took one leaf off, looked at it, and threw it over his shoulder. And so on through the meal until he got to the lovely heart, he looked at it, and regarded it a little longer and threw it over his shoulder. And at that age when mom told it to me it was still already a potent image of moving on beyond Immanuel Kant and the thing itself and leaving that borderline with Platonism behind in the dust somehow. All right, so much for that.”—Fred Sandback, 2002.

Understanding something often means dissecting it into its component parts. My work resists that kind of understanding, as it’s all one thing to start with.—Fred Sandback, 1975.

*Beginnings: Philosophy at Yale*

In writings of great lucidity, written over a period of more than three decades, the artist Fred Sandback explained the evolution of thought behind his work.<sup>1</sup> Sandback’s training in philosophy while an undergraduate at Yale during the period 1962-66, one of the great philosophy departments in the United States at the time, not only informs the writings but, as Kant scholars may notice upon

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<sup>1</sup>Earlier drafts of this paper were presented in January 2011, in the art history seminar of the Art Academy of Helsinki led by Riikka Stewen; in November 2011 in the art history seminar of the Institute for Advanced Study led by Yve-Alain Bois; at the Pori Art Museum in conjunction with the exhibition “Fred Sandback at Pori”, Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland, February 4-May 16, 2011; and at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in October 2014. We are deeply grateful to the audiences of these talks for their insightful comments and questions.

contact with the texts, certain critical philosophical terms appearing in the more philosophical writings to be found among the texts point toward Kant's philosophy as a possible formative influence. In fact the period coinciding with Sandback's undergraduate years as a philosophy major at Yale was something of a Kantian age in the department, through the presence of Wilfrid Sellars and Ruth Millikan.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Sandback's art is in no way a product of this or that philosophical system; nor can it be said that Sandback ever had, or was ever interested in, developing such a system for himself. And yet, the thread of philosophy is woven into the writings, in particular the specifically Kantian philosophy to which Sandback would have been exposed at Yale. Thus it seems appropriate to give a reading of the texts that takes Sandback's philosophical training into account.

In the brief remarks that follow we juxtapose aspects of Kant's philosophy with that of Sandback's, in an attempt to begin to bring out what may be considered the philosophy of Sandback's writings—a philosophy that lives an independent life in those writings, while it may at the same time also inform, in some way, the work.

We do not wish to assert direct cause and effect here; we merely wish to point out a certain correspondence of ideas, and a shared philosophical language.

### *Kantanism, Co-production and the Sublime*

The distinction between the world as it is and the world as it appears; between the raw, unconceptualized domain of things in themselves, on the one hand, and conceptualized space (and time) on the other; the distinction between sense—that most raw and unconceptualized thing of all—and our cognition of sense, is a commonplace in philosophy, if not the spark that ignited the whole field in the pre-classical era.

It is sometimes said that phenomenology is the philosophy of Minimalism, because of the way these call upon bodily experience.<sup>3</sup> But Fred Sandback's

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<sup>2</sup>The list of courses Sandback took while an undergraduate are follows: logic, the history of classical and modern philosophy, "The Philosophy of Existence," "Symbolism and Experience," described as "an examination and critical reconstruction of four conflicting theories of literal and metaphorical meaning: logical positivism, traditional rationalism, existentialism, and the neo-Kantian positions of Cassirer and the later Wittgenstein"; "The Ways of Knowing," and finally, a course on Kant taught by Richard Bernstein, an admirer of pragmatism. For Sandback's Yale transcript see *Fred Sandback: Drawings*, Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2014, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup>See e.g. Fer, *On Abstract Art*, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 134.

idea—actually, *ideal*—of getting, through the work, at unconceptualized experience *directly*—veridical, unmediated, and most of all, unrepresented, seems to resonate much more with the problem posed in Kant’s philosophical writings, how do we come to experience the outer world and then to go on to have knowledge of it? The world *out there*, so to speak, mind-independent but nevertheless accessible to perception and understanding.

“Space is in us,” was, in brief, the Kantian solution. That is, consciousness is structured around the *a priori* categories of space and time, *forms of intuition*, in Kant’s terminology, that function as media through which the raw stuff that flows into perception in various ways, is molded *by us* into the world we know. And this—what we have, in some sense, made—is all we know. The *noumenal realm*, that is, the domain of pure reality or things-in-themselves, though it is an object of continual philosophical and artistic aspiration and attention, cannot itself be the subject of any of our knowledge claims. This is because while the noumenal inflects and shapes experience, it is at the same time closed off from perception.

So as to the question, how it is that we who are “locked inside,” as it were, can come to have knowledge of the outer world? Kant’s answer was that we are, in a special sense, the world’s author; and therefore as such, the products of our own constituting consciousness cannot fail to become known to us.

Sandback’s term *co-production* is resonant here:

Prokopoff: So the ideal is to really control the space through your gesture.

Sandback: Well, not to control it—that is the wrong word—but to cooperate with it, to co-produce with it.<sup>4</sup>

It is through co-production that the work is both delivered, and delivers itself, to us:

My intention is to utilize the space, to bring about a co-production between it and my intentions . . .<sup>5</sup>

And again in 1986:

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<sup>4</sup>“Interview by Stephen Prokopoff”, 1985, Fred Sandback Archive, <http://fredsandbackarchive.org/texts.html>. Henceforth the Fred Sandback Archive is abbreviated SA.

<sup>5</sup>“1993 Interview”, *Sans Titre*, SA

My feeling persists that all of my sculpture is part of a continuing attitude and relationship to things. That is, sometimes, I don't see various sculptures so much as being discrete objects, but rather more as instances of a generalized need to be in some sort of *constituting material relationship* with my environment.<sup>6</sup>

Dualism comes under attack, as well as a certain kind of idealist solipsism—for how can dualism be right when nothing knowable lies outside of human experience? And how can solipsism be right when space is in us? Dualist/idealist dichotomies are thus supplanted by a kind of radiant wholeness, both programmatically, in the artist's act of bringing together “the view from inside,” so to speak, and the world; and methodologically, in forms of art-making that are subject to the artist's own transcendentalist aims—aims that find expression in a critique of hiddenness, and a rethinking of the artwork's embodiment.

For it is simply the case that an object, whether it is to be considered a work of art or not, defines a boundary between itself and all that it is not;<sup>7</sup> effects a—to Sandback—*regressive* splitting of space into the space of the artwork on the one hand, and the space of the viewer on the other:

Prokopoff: Is it fair to say that you wanted to move away from the discrete object?

Sandback: Yes, I did. I wanted to open the situation up more, and I wanted a more pedestrian situation—I wanted the art situation to be more or less congruent with the everyday world.

Prokopoff: At that point did you begin to think about the surrounding space as an essential component of the piece?

Sandback: I was still thinking in terms of sculptural space. It would have been easier, probably, if I had thought more in terms of a different kind of space. But it was unavoidable to perceive that the sculptures didn't stop where the lines did, and that the situation had gotten more complex.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>“Remarks on my Sculpture 1966-86”, SA. Italics ours.

<sup>7</sup>As Sandback put it in 1975: “A line of string isn't a line, it's a thing, and as a thing it doesn't define a plane but everything else outside its own boundaries.” “1975 Statements”, SA.

<sup>8</sup>“Interview by Stephen Prokopoff”, SA

“Pedestrian space,” a term invented by Sandback and Dan Edge in 1968, codifies this idea of shattering the artwork’s “spatial pedestal,” as Sandback put it, and placing the artwork in the world. From the philosophical point of view the ideology of pedestrian space reads as a kind of monism. For it calls for a new kind of *diffuse* space, as Sandback called it; not a third thing in an, as it were, triple ontology of architecture, viewer and sculpture—but the *one thing*:

The line is a means to mediate the quality or timbre of a situation, and has a structure which is quick and abstract and more or less thinkable, but it’s the tonality or, if you want, *wholeness* of a situation that is what I’m trying to get at.<sup>9</sup>

And again in 1977:

I’m fascinated by your use of the term “pedestrian space,” a characterization that you and a friend—

Sandback: Dan Edge—

Simon: —first used in 1968. What did you mean?

Sandback: It was related to the idea of wanting to get off the pedestal, get off the canvas. And I think it was coined with an awe of other cultures where art seemed to fit in the middle of things rather than on the periphery... I wanted to be in the middle of it, whatever “it” was. Whether it was culture, or life, whatever... Pedestrian space had a different intonation but it certainly was related to the literal space that Don Judd wanted to occupy.<sup>10</sup>

Judd’s call in *Specific Objects*<sup>11</sup> to “[exclude] the pictorial, illusionistic and fictive in favor of the literal”,<sup>12</sup> was to be implemented through the suppression of an artwork’s “neutral or moderate areas or parts, any connections or transitional areas.” Literal space became a fundamental locus of aspiration and pictorial space, in which the artwork sits, in some sense, on the exterior of the entire object—what faces the viewer—was abjured. The idea was absorbed by the

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<sup>9</sup>“Remarks on My Sculpture, 196686”, SA. Italics ours.

<sup>10</sup>“Interview by Joan Simon”, 1997, SA

<sup>11</sup>Donald Judd, *Arts Yearbook 8*, 1965

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artists of the day and became entrenched subsequently, so that now installation-based practice and the expansion of the artwork's experiential envelope are at the absolute center of the artist's range of possibilities.

Briony Fer has noted certain Freudian roots in Judd's problematisation of interior, REF, "The work of art becomes a site of anxiety . . . At stake is not only control over the object but over the relations of inside and outside and anxiety over whether such control is ever to be achieved."<sup>13</sup> MORE HERE

Sandback's aspiration toward wholeness, his critique of the surface (see below), and his idea of a new, pedestrian space do seem to resonate with the objectives of literalism and the language of *Specific Objects*:

I did have a strong gut feeling from the beginning though, and that was wanting to be able to make sculpture that didn't have an inside. Otherwise, thinking about the nature of place, or a place—my being there with or in it—and the nature of the interaction between the two was interesting.<sup>14</sup>

I didn't want a volume enclosed by a surface. I also wanted a wholeness that was, approximately, not reducible.<sup>15</sup>

But in the pedestrian space point of view a different spatial agenda seems to be at stake. The *ambivalence* between exterior and interior that the work enables allows the viewer to be literally drawn into it:

Early on, though, I left the model of such discrete sculptural volumes for a sculpture which became less of a thing-in-itself, more of a diffuse interface between myself, my environment, and others peopling that environment, built of thin lines that left enough room to move through and around. Still sculpture, though less dense, with an ambivalence between exterior and interior. A drawing that is habitable.<sup>16</sup>

the positioning of the self, an exaltation beyond our own individuality<sup>17</sup>  
The 18th century aesthetician A. Gerard would write that the experience of

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<sup>13</sup>REF

<sup>14</sup>"1986 Remarks", SA

<sup>15</sup>"Interview by Stepehn Prokopoff", SA

<sup>16</sup>"1999 Statement", SA

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the sublime is characterised by a sense of all overness, or being everywhere at once: “The mind sometimes imagines itself present in every part of the scene it contemplates.” The Gerardian sublime exists in the liminal space of the objects of perception, somewhere between object and subject.<sup>18</sup> and indeed a sense of sublimity, or as Sandback would call it, “mysticism,” is enabled, and Sandback would later remark on the formative influence of Pollock’s overall concept of painting.

But Sandback’s conceptualisation of, his problematisation of interior and exterior set in very early—a “gut feeling” that may very well have harkened back to other, philosophical sources, in particular to Kant’s monism, as we have suggested. For Kant’s move, if Kant can be said to have made a philosophical move, that is, was nothing other than the dissolution of the idea of inside and outside, relative to the subject. It was a move that revolutionized philosophy, and that was very likely the centerpiece—or at least one of them—of Sandback’s philosophical training at Yale.

And the Sandback problematises the idea of interior space in ways that depart from the approach of *Specific Objects*.

We take a moment to explain this move. The *sideways-on view*, also called *the view from nowhere*, is the idea of an unembodied perspective from within which the conceptual order can be appraised—from the “outside,” as it were.<sup>19</sup> The idea is rooted in “the paradox of man’s encounter with himself,” as Wilfrid Sellars called it, the paradox being that a person is forced to act out two roles in that conceptual order, to wit: the person is both the source of the conceptual framework, and also subject to it. “Interior” and “exterior” language is inevitable. To be in the world, according to the sideways-on-view, is to be subject to the causal effects of brute, meaningless, exterior reality, while all the experience of *meaning* takes place wholly within. Of course in the end, that conception of a “meaningful inside and a meaningless outside,”<sup>20</sup> may or may not have been Sellars’s own world picture (though it was attributed to him).

Kant complicated this picture ETC

The trail of influence—or, more precisely, counter influence—is subtle, and can be hard to trace. Still, when read from the philosophical point of view; when read, that is, for the metaphysics that is embedded in them, Sandback’s

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<sup>18</sup>ref thesis

<sup>19</sup>The sideways-on-view was attributed to Wilfrid Sellars by McDowell, critically.

<sup>20</sup>Danielle Macbeth, *Realizing Reason*, p. 20.

engagement with wholeness and the possibility of synthesis of artwork, space and viewer, sparks a confrontation with the sideways-on-view, the *view from nowhere*. It is an encounter between pure art-making and philosophy, staged within and through an artist's writings. What Sandback offers us here is not the view from nowhere; it is *the view from everywhere, all at once*.

Our interest here is in reading the writings for the philosophy they contain. But it would be remiss not to mention certain art historical developments, ideas in the air at the time. We referred to *Specific Objects* but lying behind that work is the idea that the artist's of Sandback's generation, that is of the post-abstract Expressionist era, were simply working in a revolutionary context. "Linear history had unraveled somewhat", as Donald Judd put it in *Specific Objects*; or as the minimalist composer Morton Feldman would say, looking back on the 1950s: "for one brief moment, maybe, say, six weeks-nobody understood art."<sup>21</sup> Out of this ferment arose the idea that the inherited format, as Judd called it, was no longer credible. Sandback put it this way:

There was a lot in the air at the time, especially the painting of the 1950s. The factuality of Pollocks paintings, for example, was so dense, so direct and real, that it only seemed like a small step towards having no sign, nothing at all on the canvasto simply putting the sign into the room, creating something that had an objective, three-dimensional reality, instead of a reality that always needed the illusion, the being- elsewhere. The strength of that painting was the struggle it involved, between the actual space in which it unfolded and the non-concrete space which up until then it always had to use. Thus it offered the possibility of creating different things.<sup>22</sup>

### *Synthesis*

Though Sandback resisted conceptualist readings of his work, he did write at times of an emphasis on "the thinking" rather than "the doing":

And at that point the thinking was perhaps more interesting than the doing, though it's of course the latter that has sustained my interest.

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<sup>21</sup>Give my regards to 8th street

<sup>22</sup>quote sandback on this

and a sense of ambivalence toward the sculptural artifact itself:

In the main, it is our terms, as maker and user, which are significant, and the terms of the work of art “on its own” may be less important.<sup>23</sup>

Putting it in Kant’s terminology, one would say that the forms themselves do not create experience, on their own. It is only the forms *together with* the faculties of the understanding which create the possibility for knowledge and experience. This is a fundamental feature of Kant’s notion of *synthesis*, an account of mental processing by which the objects of experience are given through the a priori concepts of space and time. In Kant’s language, synthesis is just “the act of putting different representations together, and grasping what is manifold in them in one cognition” (A77/B103); it is a process that “gathers the elements for cognition, and unites them to form a certain content” (A78/B103).

In his account of “the more complete situation that I’m after,” Sandback describes his own art-making as an act of synthesis:

...it is an “aggregate of experiences” equally ... a conceptualization to make something which can be perceived in enough different ways that its identity becomes apparent as something independent of the mode of perception employed.<sup>24</sup>

The Kantian subject plays a crucial role in mental processing.<sup>25</sup> From our point of view, then, Sandback’s forefronting of the subject here is crucial. Co-production is not specialised to the artist, rather it is the artist and the viewer together who are the work’s constituents:

My marks are the gap between the spectator and the space that allow him to create his own conception of reality.<sup>26</sup>

And in 1995:

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<sup>23</sup>“1995 Interview by Kimberly Davenport”, SA

<sup>24</sup>“1975 Statements”, SA. The background of this passage may have come from various sources. The phrase “aggregate of experiences” is a pragmatist term. The passage also seems to refer to Husserl’s notion of *eidetic variation*.

<sup>25</sup>See Derk Pereboom, “Kant’s Transcendental Arguments”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-transcendental/>.

<sup>26</sup>“1992 Interview: Sans Titre”, SA

A work—one of mine—is on its one side, a reflection of, or a locus for, my various needs and desires to see things one way or the other. It must hold these things in focus. On its other side, it does the same thing for someone else—the viewer or participant. It is animated by one or both of us. In the main, it is our terms, as maker and user, which are significant, and the terms of the work of art “on its own” may be less important.

### *Temporality*

Temporality emerges as another aspect of what we have been suggesting are the specifically Kantian conditions under which a work of Sandback can come into being. Sandback’s idea of wholeness, and the idea, as he wrote, that “in my works the unity is given from the beginning”<sup>27</sup> implies a temporality of immediacy and all-at-once-ness that resonates with the Kantian ideas of cognitive spontaneity and the innate creativity of the mind. It is art-making in a single, simple act of synthesis:

I don’t have an idea first and then find a way to express it. That happens all at once. That notion of executing an idea is the same as giving form to material, and it’s a confusion of terms. Ideas are executions. I don’t make “dematerialized art.” I complicate actual situations, and this is as material as anything else. It’s the same false distinction of paring away the matter to get at the idea which allows people to talk of something getting “dematerialized.”<sup>28</sup>

And in 1975:

I am interested in a strong, *immediate*, and beautiful situation.<sup>29</sup>

Time functions in two ways for Sandback, according to what the line does (its meaning), vs what it is (its existence):

A line has direction—a point of origin and a point of termination.

A line is also a discrete entity which exists altogether at the same time.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “1975 Interview by Ingrid Rein”, SA

<sup>28</sup> “1975 Notes”, SA

<sup>29</sup> “1975 Statements”. Italics ours.

<sup>30</sup> “1970s, Untitled”, SA

Sandback is remarking here on the line's dual nature, but through this he is also noting time's deeply paradoxical nature: time must begin and end, just like anything does, that exists in the world; but at the same time there is a meaningful sense of something "existing altogether", at once—of time without a beginning or end.

### *Actuality*

Sandback's philosophical shapeshifting revolved mainly around spatiality. But *surface* and *representation* are taken up in the writings too, and seem linked to his concept of *actuality*:

There isn't an idea which transcends the actuality of the pieces. The actuality is the idea.<sup>31</sup>

The writings here declare an intention for the work that it bend toward the *factual*, or other passages, the *objective*, the *concrete*, or finally the *particular*, in addition to the *actual*. *Actuality* is somewhat reminiscent of the philosophical term *facticity* and may connote, for Sandback, the *noumenal*:

Artists wanted concepts that were credible, with which they could work, meaning concepts that were not loaded down in, or interwoven with, some cosmology. They wanted to create their own art on their own terms, in their own time and space. They were concerned with the *objectivity* of personal reality.<sup>32</sup>

From "Statements 1975":

I intend what I do to be concrete and particular. It's just the opposite of abstract art, which is derived, deduced, or refined from something else. It's a point of origin rather than a conclusion.

Among Sandback's numerous writings that mention the *factual*, one of the most striking describes how the orientation of the work toward factuality—what we have called the *noumenal*—accounts for the sense of mysticism that hovers over it:

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<sup>31</sup> "Notes/Appunti." *Flash Art*, no. 40 (March-May 1973), p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> "1975 Interview by Ingrid , SA. Italics ours.

The inherent mysticism resides in persisting in wanting to make something as factual as possible and having it turn out just the other way—the immediate positive engagement with the way situations always transcend our perceptions of them—the realization that the simplest and most comfortable of perceptions are shadows.<sup>33</sup>

If *actuality* represents the *noumenal*—or *some* concept of reality—Sandback seems to associate narrativity with the *phenomenal* realm, the realm of “false appearances” (in Kant’s terminology):

Fred Sandback: Although I don’t consider it overly interesting, the work I did immediately preceding the first line construction was welded and assembled steel sculpture. It was a narrative-additive sort of sculpture with an open-ended pictorial quality. Its method was not unlike David Smith’s sculptures of the early 1940s.

Prokopoff: At the time you were a student at Yale and had had some encounters with Naum Gabo, I believe. How did that experience affect your work?

Sandback: It had a strong influence then. His work was compelling; it was very good work. He was certainly one of the strong oaks around there. A little bit too strong, although it was work that had a great deal of what I thought I wanted in sculpture. It also had just as much of what, increasingly, I didn’t want. It ultimately seemed to focus itself in the opposite direction from the one I wanted to follow. And, also, it seemed to be leaning toward not doing what it sought to do, toward being a picture of a reality, rather than a literal reality. And it was this narrative pictorial quality that didn’t make sense to me.

Prokopoff: Can you describe what you mean here by narrative?

Sandback: I mean the way in which a completed sculpture, an existing thing, might be a picture of the voyage of a line in space. It’s a little story about a little line which is once removed from the original line.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Statements. In *Fred Sandback*. New York: Zwirner & Wirth, Lawrence Markey Gallery, 2004, p. 8. See [www.fredsandbackarchive.org/atxt\\_1975stat.html](http://www.fredsandbackarchive.org/atxt_1975stat.html)

<sup>34</sup>“An Interview: Fred Sandback and Stephen Prokopoff.” In *The Art of Fred Sandback*:

Sellars's idea of the *unreality of the manifest image*, a Kantian view of perceptual objects as apparent or “illusory effects of imperceptible things in themselves...”<sup>35</sup> was a view of perceptual objects qua *phenomena* which seems to have been absorbed by Sandback:

My work is not illusionistic in the normal sense of the word. It doesn't refer away from itself to something that isn't present. *Its illusions are simply present aspects of it.* Illusions are just as real as facts, and facts just as ephemeral as illusions. Illusionism is making a picture of something... I'd rather be in the middle of a situation than over on one side either looking in or looking out. Surfaces seem to imply that what's interesting is either in front of them or behind them.<sup>36</sup>

Of course for Sellars it would be science that unmasks reality *as it is in itself*, not art.

As to being in the middle of a situation, Sandback is speaking literally here—to experience his work one must place oneself in its midst. But he is also speaking metaphorically. Ideas also have a surface—an ideological surface, if you will—that, as such, interferes with, or obstructs, the immediate, veridical, actual and concrete experience of the artwork.

*“It is of no assistance...”*

We hoped to draw a line from Sandback's philosophical education at Yale to his writings. Drawing a line from the writings to the art is more difficult. Was Sandback's art made out of the aims of transcendental philosophy? Sandback's dream of merging with an a priori, more fundamental form of life, through his work; his bend toward *actuality*—his word, we proposed, for the *noumenal*; his concept of the *situation*, that pedestrian space brings into being; the idea of *co-production*; Sandback's problematization of surface and interior, and finally his attunement to the distinction between meaning and existence, lend philosophical vibrancy to the writings.

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*A Survey.* Champaign-Urbana: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, 1985. See [www.fredsandbackarchive.org/atxt.1985proko.html](http://www.fredsandbackarchive.org/atxt.1985proko.html)

<sup>35</sup>Terry Pinkard, “Sellars the Post-Kantian” in *The Self-correcting Enterprise: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, 2006.

<sup>36</sup>“Notes.” In *Fred Sandback*. Munich: Kunstraum, 1975, pp. 11-12. Italics ours.

Clearly, Sandback’s art exceeds philosophy—even his own philosophy. And indeed, if we think the philosophical writings may shed light on the work, Sandback warns us from making too much of them:

Whatever philosophical, historical, or literary artillery I bring to the workplace, it is of no assistance in the art of trying to stretch a line between two points. In that I am alone and voiceless.<sup>37</sup>

It is nevertheless true that Sandback developed a distinctly philosophical vision for the work in his writings. He created a plainspoken philosophical environment—a kind of monism, as we called it—in which the work, the space and the viewer all rise, magnificently, together.

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<sup>37</sup>“1999 Statement”, SA