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OCTOBER

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Leo Bersani and
Ulysse Dutoit
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Lecture . . .

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from Americans on the Move
Stuart Sherman: Object Ritual
Pictures
Seven Prolegomenae to a Brief
Treatise on Magrittian Tropes
About Snow

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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
UNIVERSITY AT CARBONDALE

\$4.00/Spring 1979

Published by The MIT Press
for The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies

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OCTOBER is published quarterly
by the MIT Press for the
Institute for Architecture
and Urban Studies.

Subscriptions: \$14.00 per year;
institutions: \$20.00 per year.
Foreign subscriptions, including
Canada: add \$3.00 for mailing.
Address subscriptions to
OCTOBER, MIT Press Journals,
28 Carleton Street,
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142.
Manuscripts, accompanied by stamped,
self-addressed envelopes, should be
sent to OCTOBER,
8 West 40 Street, New York, N.Y. 10018.

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OCTOBER was designed by Charles Read,
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Lecture

in Inauguration of the Chair
of Literary Semiology,
Collège de France, January 7, 1977

ROLAND BARTHES

translated by RICHARD HOWARD

I should probably begin with a consideration of the reasons which have led the Collège de France to receive a fellow of doubtful nature, whose every attribute is somehow challenged by its opposite. For though my career has been academic, I am without the usual qualifications for entrance into that career. And though it is true that I long wished to inscribe my work within the field of science—literary, lexicological, and sociological—I must admit that I have produced only essays, an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing. And though it is also true that very early on I associated my investigations with the birth and development of semiotics, it is true as well that I have scarcely any claim as its representative, so inclined was I to shift its definition (almost as soon as I found it to be formed) and to draw upon the eccentric forces of modernism, located closer to the journal *Tel Quel* than to many other periodicals which testify to the vigor of semiological inquiry.

It is then a patently impure fellow whom you receive in an establishment where science, scholarship, rigor, and disciplined invention reign. In the interests of discretion, then, and out of a personal inclination to escape intellectual difficulty through the interrogation of my own pleasure, I shall turn from the reasons which have induced the Collège de France to welcome me—for they are uncertain, in my view—and address those which make my entry here more joyful than honorific; for an honor can be undeserved—joy never is. It is my joy to encounter in this place the memory or presence of authors dear to me and who teach or have taught at the Collège de France. First, of course, comes Michelet, through whom, at the start of my intellectual life, I discovered the sovereign place of History in the study of man, and the power of writing, once scholarship accepts that commitment. Then, closer to us, Jean Baruzi and Paul Valéry, whose lectures I attended as an adolescent in this very hall. Then, closer still, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emile Benveniste. As for the present, allow me to exempt from the discretion and silence incumbent upon friendship the affection, intellectual solidarity, and gratitude which bind me to Michel Foucault, for it is he who kindly undertook to present this chair and its occupant to the Assembly of Professors.

Another kind of joy, more sober because more responsible, is mine today as well: that of entry into a place that we can strictly term *outside the bounds of power*. For if I may, in turn, interpret the Collège, I shall say that it is, as institutions go, one of History's last strategems. Honor is usually a diminution of power; here it is a subtraction, power's untouched portion. A professor's sole activity here is research: to speak—I shall even say to dream his research aloud—not to judge, to give preference, to promote, to submit to controlled scholarship. This is an enormous, almost an unjust, privilege at a time when the teaching of letters is strained to the point of exhaustion between the pressures of technocracy's demands and of revolutionary desire, the desire of its students. To teach or even to speak outside the limits of institutional sanction is certainly not to be rightfully and totally uncorrupted by power; power (the *libido dominandi*) is there, hidden in any discourse, even when uttered in a place outside the bounds of power. Therefore, the freer such teaching, the further we must inquire into the conditions and processes by which discourse can be disengaged from all will-to-possess. This inquiry constitutes, in my view, the ultimate project of the instruction inaugurated today.

*

Indeed, it is power with which we shall be concerned, indirectly but persistently. Our modern "innocence" speaks of power as if it were a single thing: on one side those who have it, on the other those who do not. We have believed that power was an exemplarily political object; we believe now that power is also an ideological object, that it creeps in where we do not recognize it at first, into institutions, into teaching, but still that it is always one thing. And yet, what if power were plural, like demons? "My name is Legion," it could say; everywhere, on all sides, leaders, massive or minute organizations, pressure groups or oppression groups, everywhere "authorized" voices which authorize themselves to utter the discourse of all power: the discourse of arrogance. We discover then that power is present in the most delicate mechanisms of social exchange: not only in the State, in classes, in groups, but even in fashion, public opinion, entertainment, sports, news, family and private relations, and even in the liberating impulses which attempt to counteract it. I call the discourse of power any discourse which engenders blame, hence guilt, in its recipient. Some expect of us as intellectuals that we take action on every occasion against Power, but our true battle is elsewhere, it is against *powers* in the plural, and this is no easy combat. For if it is plural in social space, power is, symmetrically, perpetual in historical time. Exhausted, defeated here, it reappears there; it never disappears. Make a revolution to destroy it, power will immediately revive and flourish again in the new state of affairs. The reason for this endurance and this ubiquity is that power is the parasite of a trans-social organism, linked to the whole of man's history and not only to his political, historical history. This object in which power is inscribed,

for all of human eternity, is language, or to be more precise, its necessary expression: the language we speak and write.

Language is legislation, speech is its code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive: *ordo* means both distribution and commination. Jakobson has shown that a speech-system is defined less by what it permits us to say than by what it compels us to say. In French (I shall take obvious examples) I am obliged to posit myself first as subject before stating the action which will henceforth be no more than my attribute: what I do is merely the consequence and consecution of what I am. In the same way, I must always choose between masculine and feminine, for the neuter and the dual are forbidden me. Further, I must indicate my relation to the other person by resorting to either *tu* or *vous*; social or affective suspension is denied me. Thus, by its very structure my language implies an inevitable relation of alienation. To speak, and, with even greater reason, to utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate: the whole language is a generalized *rection*.

I am going to quote a remark of Renan's. "French, ladies and gentlemen," he once said in a lecture, "will never be the language of the absurd; nor will it ever be a reactionary language. I cannot imagine a serious reaction having French as its organ." Well, Renan was, in his way, perspicacious. He realized that language is not exhausted by the message engendered by it. He saw that language can survive this message and make understood within it, with a frequently terrible resonance, something other than what it says, superimposing on the subject's conscious, reasonable voice the dominating, stubborn, implacable voice of structure, i.e., of the species insofar as that species speaks. Renan's error was historical, not structural; he supposed that French—formed, as he believed, by reason—compelled the expression of a political reason which, to him, could only be democratic. But language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech.

Once uttered, even in the subject's deepest privacy, speech enters the service of power. In speech, inevitably, two categories appear: the authority of assertion, the gregariousness of repetition. On the one hand, speech is immediately assertive: negation, doubt, possibility, the suspension of judgment require special mechanisms which are themselves caught up in a play of linguistic masks; what linguists call modality is only the supplement of speech by which I try, as through petition, to sway its implacable power of verification. On the other hand, the signs composing speech exist only insofar as they are recognized, i.e., insofar as they are repeated. The sign is a follower, gregarious; in each sign sleeps that monster: a stereotype. I can speak only by picking up what *loiters* around in speech. Once I speak, these two categories unite in me; I am both master and slave. I am not content to repeat what has been said, to settle comfortably in the servitude of signs: I speak, I affirm, I assert *tellingly* what I repeat.

In speech, then, servility and power are inescapably intermingled. If we call freedom not only the capacity to escape power but also and especially the capacity to subjugate no one, then freedom can exist only outside language. Unfortunately, human language has no exterior: there is no exit. We can get out of it only at the price of the impossible: by mystical singularity, as described by Kierkegaard when he defines Abraham's sacrifice as an action unparalleled, void of speech, even interior speech, performed against the generality, the gregariousness, the morality of language; or again by the Nietzschean "yes to life," which is a kind of exultant shock administered to the servility of speech, to what Deleuze calls its reactive guise. But for us, who are neither knights of faith nor supermen, the only remaining alternative is, if I may say so, to cheat with speech, to cheat speech. This salutary trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture which allows us to understand speech *outside the bounds of power*, in the splendor of a permanent revolution of language, I for one call *literature*.

*

I mean by *literature* neither a body nor a series of works, nor even a branch of commerce or of teaching, but the complex graph of the traces of a practice, the practice of writing. Hence, it is essentially the text with which I am concerned—the fabric of signifiers which constitute the work. For the text is the very outcropping of speech, and it is within speech that speech must be fought, led astray—not by the message of which it is the instrument, but by the play of words of which it is the theater. Thus I can say without differentiation: literature, writing, or text. The forces of freedom which are in literature depend not on the writer's civil person, nor on his political commitment—for he is, after all, only a man among others—nor do they even depend on the doctrinal content of his work, but rather on the labor of displacement he brings to bear upon the language. Seen in this light, Céline is quite as important as Hugo, and Chateaubriand as important as Zola. By this I am trying to address a responsibility of form; but this responsibility cannot be evaluated in ideological terms—which is why the sciences of ideology have always had so little hold over it. Of these forces of literature, I wish to indicate three, which I shall discuss in terms of three Greek concepts: *Mathesis*, *Mimesis*, *Semiosis*.

Literature accommodates many kinds of knowledge. In a novel like *Robinson Crusoe* there is a historical knowledge, a geographical, a social (colonial), a technological, a botanical, an anthropological knowledge (Robinson proceeds from nature to culture). If, by some unimaginable excess of socialism or barbarism, all but one of our disciplines were to be expelled from our educational system, it is the discipline of literature which would have to be saved, for all knowledge, all the sciences are present in the literary monument. Whereby we can say that literature, whatever the school in whose name it declares itself, is absolutely, categorically *realist*: it is reality, i.e., the very spark of the real. Yet

literature, in this truly encyclopedic respect, displaces the various kinds of knowledge, does not fix or fetishize any of them; it gives them an indirect place, and this indirection is precious. On the one hand, it allows for the designation of possible areas of knowledge—unsuspected, unfulfilled. Literature works in the interstices of science. It is always behind or ahead of science, like the Bolognese stone which gives off by night what it has stored up by day, and by this indirect glow illuminates the new day which dawns. Science is crude, life is subtle, and it is for the correction of this disparity that literature matters to us. The knowledge it marshals is, on the other hand, never complete or final. Literature does not say that it knows something, but that it knows *of* something, or better, that it knows *about* something—that it knows about men. What it knows about men is what we might call the great *mess* of language, upon which men work and which works upon them. Literature can reproduce the diversity of sociolects, or, starting from this diversity, and suffering its laceration, literature may imagine and seek to elaborate a limit-language which would be its zero degree. Because it *stages* language instead of simply using it, literature feeds knowledge into the machinery of infinite reflexivity. Through writing, knowledge ceaselessly reflects on knowledge, in terms of a discourse which is no longer epistemological, but dramatic.

It is good form, today, to contest the opposition of sciences and letters, insofar as the number of relations, whether of model or method, uniting these two regions and often erasing their frontier is increasing, and it is possible that this opposition will appear one day to be a historical myth. But from the point of view of language, which is ours here, this opposition is pertinent; moreover it does not necessarily set up the opposition between the real and the fantastic, the objective and the subjective, the True and the Beautiful, but only different loci of speech. According to scientific discourse—or a certain discourse of science—knowledge is statement; in writing, it is an act of stating. The statement, the usual object of linguistics, is given as the product of the subject's absence. The act of stating, by exposing the subject's place and energy, even his deficiency (which is not his absence), focuses on the very reality of language, acknowledging that language is an immense halo of implications, of effects, of echoes, of turns, returns, and degrees. It assumes the burden of making understood a subject both insistent and ineffable, unknown and yet recognized by a disturbing familiarity. Words are no longer conceived illusively as simple instruments; they are cast as projections, explosions, vibrations, devices, flavors. Writing makes knowledge festive.

The paradigm I am proposing here does not follow the functional division: it is not aimed at putting scientists and researchers on one side, writers and essayists on the other. On the contrary, it suggests that writing is to be found wherever words have flavor (the French words for *flavor* and *knowledge* have the same Latin root). Curnonski used to say that in cooking "things should have the taste of what they are." Where knowledge is concerned, things must, if they are to become what they are, what they have been, have that ingredient, the salt of words. It is this taste of words which makes knowledge profound, fecund. I know for

instance that Michelet proposes much that is denied by historical scholarship. Nonetheless Michelet founded something on the order of an ethnology of France, and each time a historian displaces historical knowledge, in the broadest sense of the term and whatever its object, we find, quite simply, writing.

Literature's second force is its force as representation. From ancient times to the efforts of our avant-garde, literature has been concerned to represent something. What? I will put it crudely: the real. The real is not representable, and it is because men ceaselessly try to represent it by words that there is a history of literature. That the real is not representable, but only demonstrable, can be said in several ways: either we can define it, with Lacan, as the *impossible*, that which is unattainable and escapes discourse, or in topological terms we observe that a pluri-dimensional order (the real) cannot be made to coincide with a unidimensional order (language). Now, it is precisely this topological impossibility that literature rejects and to which it never submits. Though there is no parallelism between language and the real, men will not take sides, and it is this refusal, perhaps as old as language itself, which produces, in an incessant commotion, literature. We can imagine a history of literature, or better, say, of productions of language, which would be the history of certain (often aberrant) verbal *expedients* men have used to reduce, tame, deny, or, on the contrary, to assume what is *always* a delirium, i.e., the fundamental inadequation of language and the real. I said a moment ago, apropos of knowledge, that literature is categorically realist, in that it never has anything but the real as its object of desire; and I shall say now, without contradicting myself—because I am here using the word in its familiar acceptation—that literature is quite as stubbornly unrealistic; it considers sane its desire for the impossible.

This function—perhaps perverse, therefore fitting—has a name: it is the utopian function. Here we come back to History. For it is in the second half of the nineteenth century, one of the grimmest periods of calamitous capitalism, that literature finds its exact figure, at least for us Frenchmen, in Mallarmé. Modernity—our modernity, which begins at this period—can be defined by this new phenomenon: that *utopias of language* are conceived in it. No “history of literature” (if such is still to be written) could be legitimate which would be content, as in the past, to link the various schools together without indicating the gap which here reveals a new prophetic function, that of writing. “To change language,” that Mallarméan expression, is a concomitant of “To change the world,” that Marxian one. There is a *political* reception of Mallarmé, of those who have followed him and follow him still.

From this there follows a certain ethic of literary language, which must be affirmed, because it is contested. We often reproach the writer, the intellectual, for not writing “everyone's” language. But it is good that men, within the same language—for us, French—should have several kinds of speech. If I were a legislator (an aberrant supposition for someone who, etymologically speaking, is

an "an-archist"), far from imposing a unification of French, whether bourgeois or popular, I would instead encourage the simultaneous apprenticeship to several French forms of speech, of various function, promoted to equality. Dante seriously debates which language he will use to write the *Convivio*: Latin or Tuscan? Nor is it for political or polemical reasons that he chooses the vulgar tongue: it is by considering the appropriateness of either language to his subject. The two forms of speech—as for us, classical French and modern French, written French and spoken French—thus form a reservoir from which he is free to draw, *according to the truth of desire*. This freedom is a luxury which every society should afford its citizens: as many languages as there are desires—a utopian proposition in that no society is yet ready to admit the plurality of desire. That a language, whatever it be, not repress another; that the subject may know without remorse, without repression, the bliss of having at his disposal two kinds of language; that he may speak this or that, according to his perversions, not according to the Law.

Utopia, of course, does not save us from power. The utopia of language is salvaged as the language of utopia—a genre like the rest. We can say that no writer who began in a rather lonely struggle against the power of language could or can avoid being co-opted by it, either in the posthumous form of an inscription within official culture, or in the present form of a mode which imposes its image and forces him to conform to expectation. No way out for this author than to shift ground—or to persist—or both at once.

To persist means to affirm the Irreducible of literature, that which resists and survives the typified discourses, the philosophies, sciences, psychologies which surround it, to act as if literature were incomparable and immortal. A writer—by which I mean not the possessor of a function or the servant of an art, but the subject of a praxis—must have the persistence of the watcher who stands at the crossroads of all other discourses, in a position that is *trivial* in relation to purity of doctrine (*trivialis* is the etymological attribute of the prostitute who waits at the intersection of three roads). To persist means, in short, to maintain, over and against everything, the force of drift and of expectation. And it is precisely because it persists that writing is led to shift ground. For power seizes upon the pleasure of writing as it seizes upon all pleasure, to manipulate it and to make of it a product that is gregarious, nonperverse, in the same way that it seizes upon the genetic product of love's pleasure, to turn it into soldiers and fighters to its own advantage. *To shift ground*, then, can mean: to go where you are not expected, or, more radically, to *abjure* what you have written (but not necessarily what you have thought), when gregarious power uses and subjugates it. Pasolini was thus led to "abjure" (as he said) his *Trilogy of Life* films because he realized that power was making use of them—yet without regretting the fact that he wrote them in the first place. "I believe," he said in a text published posthumously, "that *before* action we must never in any case fear annexation by power and its culture. We must behave as if this dangerous eventuality did not exist. . . . But I also believe that

afterwards we must be able to realize how much we may have been used by power. And then, if our sincerity or our necessity has been controlled or manipulated, I believe we must have the courage to abjure."

To persist and, at the same time, to shift ground relates, in short, to a kind of acting. We must therefore not be surprised if on the impossible horizon of linguistic anarchy—at that point where language attempts to escape its own power, its own servility—we find something which relates to theater. To designate the impossible in language, I have cited two authors: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Yet both have written. It was in each instance, however, in a reversal of identity, as a performance, as a frenzied gambling of proper names—one by incessant recourse to pseudonymity, the other by proceeding, at the end of his writing life, as Klossowski has shown, to the limits of the histrionic. We might say that literature's third force, its strictly semiotic force, is to *act* signs rather than to destroy them—to feed them into a machinery of language whose safety catches and emergency brakes have exploded; in short, to institute, at the very heart of servile language, a veritable heteronymy of things.

*

Which brings us to semiology.

First of all we must repeat that the sciences (at least those in which I have done any reading at all) are not eternal; they are values which rise and fall on an Exchange—the Exchange of History. In this regard, it suffices to recall the exchange fate of Theology, now a diminished area of discourse, yet once so sovereign a science as to be placed outside and above the Septenium. The fragility of the so-called human sciences derives perhaps from this: that they are *unforeseeing* sciences (whence the disappointments and the taxonomic discomfort of Economics)—which immediately alters the notion of science. Even the science of desire, psychoanalysis, must die one of these days, though we all owe it a great deal, as we owe a great deal to Theology: for desire is stronger than its interpretation.

Semiology, which we can canonically define as the science of signs, of all signs, has emerged from linguistics through its operational concepts. But linguistics itself, somewhat like economics (and the comparison is perhaps not insignificant), is, I believe, in the process of splitting apart. On the one hand, linguistics tends toward the formal pole, and, like econometrics, it is thereby becoming more formalized; on the other hand, linguistics is assimilating contents that are more and more numerous and remote from its original field. Just as the object of economics today is everywhere, in the political, the social, the cultural, so the object of linguistics is limitless. Speech, according to an intuition of Benveniste's, is the social itself. In short, either due to excessive asceticism or excessive hunger, whether famished or replete, linguistics is deconstructing itself. It is this deconstruction of linguistics that I, for my part, call *semiology*.

You may have noticed that in the course of my presentation I have surreptitiously shifted from language to discourse, in order to return, sometimes without warning, from discourse to language, as if I were dealing with the same object. I believe, indeed, that today, within the pertinence chosen here, language and discourse are undivided, for they move along the same axis of power. Yet initially this originally Saussurian distinction (the pairing was *Langue/Parole*) was very useful; it gave semiology the courage to begin. By this opposition, I could reduce discourse, miniaturize it into a grammatical example, and thereby hope to hold all human communication under my net, like Wotan and Loge securing Alberich transformed into a tiny toad. But the example is not "the thing itself," and the matter of language cannot be held or contained in the limits of the sentence. It is not only the phonemes, the words, and the syntactical articulations which are subject to a system of controlled freedom, since we cannot combine them arbitrarily; it is the whole stratum of discourse which is fixed by a network of rules, constraints, oppressions, repressions, massive and blurred at the rhetorical level, subtle and acute at the grammatical level. Language flows out into discourse; discourse flows back into language; they persist one above the other like children topping each other's fists on a baseball bat. The distinction between language and discourse no longer appears except as a transitory operation—something, in short, to "abjure." There has come a time when, as though stricken with a gradually increasing deafness, I hear nothing but a single sound, that of language and discourse mixed. And linguistics now seems to me to be working on an enormous imposture, on an object it makes improperly clean and pure by wiping its fingers on the skein of discourse, like Trimalchio on his slaves' hair. Semiology would consequently be that labor which collects the impurity of language, the waste of linguistics, the immediate corruption of the message: nothing less than the desires, the fears, the appearances, the intimidations, the advances, the blandishments, the protests, the excuses, the aggressions, the various kinds of music out of which active language is made.

I know how personal such a definition is. I know whereof it compels my silence: in one sense, and quite paradoxically, all of semiology, the semiology which is being studied and already acknowledged as the positive science of signs, which is developing in periodicals, associations, universities, and study centers. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the intention behind the establishment of a chair at the Collège de France is not so much the consecration of a discipline as the allowing for the continuance of a certain individual labor, the adventure of a certain subject. Now, semiology, so far as I am concerned, started from a strictly emotional impulse. It seemed to me (around 1954) that a science of signs might stimulate social criticism, and that Sartre, Brecht, and Saussure could concur in this project. It was a question, in short, of understanding (or of describing) how a society produces stereotypes, i.e., triumphs of artifice, which it then consumes as innate meanings, i.e., triumphs of nature. Semiology (my semiology, at least) is generated by an intolerance of this mixture of bad faith and good conscience

which characterizes the general morality, and which Brecht, in his attack upon it, called the Great Habit. *Language worked on by power*: that was the object of this first semiology.

Semiology then shifted ground, took on a different coloration, while retaining the same political object—for there is no other. This shift occurred because the intellectual community has changed, if only through the break of May '68. On the one hand, contemporary studies have modified and are modifying the critical image of the social subject and of the speaking subject. On the other hand, it has appeared that, insofar as the machinery of contestation was multiplying, power itself, as a discursive category, was dividing, spreading like a liquid leaking everywhere, each opposition group becoming in its turn and in its way a pressure group and intoning in its own name the very discourse of power, the universal discourse. Political bodies were seized with a kind of moral excitement, and even when claims were being made for pleasure, the tone was threatening. Thus we have seen most proposed liberations, those of society, of culture, of art, of sexuality, articulated in the forms of the discourse of power. We took credit for restoring what had been crushed, without seeing what else we crushed in the process.

If the semiology I am speaking of then returned to the Text, it is because, in this concert of minor dominations, the Text itself appeared as the very index of *nonpower*. The Text contains in itself the strength to elude gregarious speech (the speech which incorporates), even when that speech seeks to reconstitute itself in the Text. The Text always postpones—and it is this movement of *mirage* I have attempted to describe and to justify just now in speaking of literature. The Text procrastinates elsewhere, toward an unclassified, atopic site, so to speak, far from the topoi of politicized culture, “that obligation to form concepts, species, forms, ends, laws . . . that world of identical cases,” of which Nietzsche speaks. Gently, transitorily, the text raises that cope of generality, of morality, of in-difference (let us clearly separate this prefix from the root), which weighs on our collective discourse. Literature and semiology thereby combine to correct each other. On one side, the incessant return to the text, ancient or modern, the regular plunge into the most complex of signifying practices, i.e., writing (since writing operates with ready-made signs), forces semiology to work on differences, and keeps it from dogmatizing, from “taking”—from taking itself for the universal discourse which it is not. And on the other side, semiotic scrutiny, focused on the text, forces us to reject the myth usually resorted to in order that literature may be saved from the gregarious speech surrounding and besetting it—from the myth of pure creativity. The sign must be thought—or rethought—the better to be deceived.

*

The semiology I speak of is both *negative* and *active*. Someone bedevilled throughout life, for better and for worse, by language, can only be fascinated by

the forms of its void—as against its emptiness. The semiology proposed here is therefore negative—or better still, however heavy the term, *apophatic*—not in that it repudiates the sign, but in that it denies that it is possible to attribute to the sign traits that are positive, fixed, ahistoric, acorporeal, in short: scientific. This apophatic quality involves at least two consequences which directly concern the teaching of semiology.

The first is that semiology cannot itself be a metalanguage, though at its origin it was entirely so predisposed, since it is a language about languages. It is precisely in reflecting on the sign that semiology discovers that every relation of exteriority of one language to another is, *in the long run*, untenable. Time erodes my power of distance, mortifies it, turns this distance into sclerosis. I cannot function *outside* language, treating it as a target, and *within* language, treating it as a weapon. If it is true that the subject of science is that very subject which is not shown, and that it is ultimately this retention of the spectacle that we call “metalanguage,” then what I am led to assume, in speaking of signs with signs, is the very spectacle of this bizarre coincidence, of that strange squint which relates me to the Chinese shadow-casters when they show both their hands and the rabbit, the duck, and the wolf whose silhouettes they simulate. And to those who take advantage of this condition to deny that active semiology, the semiology which writes, has anything to do with science, we must reply that it is by an epistemological abuse, *which in fact is beginning to crumble*, that we identify metalanguage and science, as if one were the necessary condition of the other, whereas it is only its historical, hence challengeable, sign. It may be time to distinguish the metalinguistic, which is a label like any other, from the scientific, whose criteria are elsewhere (perhaps, let it be said in passing, what is strictly scientific is the destruction of the science which precedes).

Semiology has a relation to science, but it is not a discipline (this is the second consequence of its apophatic quality). What relation? An ancillary relation: it can help certain sciences, can be their fellow traveler for a while, offering an operational protocol starting from which each science must specify the difference of its corpus. Thus, the best-developed part of semiology, the analysis of narrative, can be useful for History, ethnology, textual criticism, exegesis, and iconology (every image is, in a way, a narrative). In other words, semiology is not a grid; it does not permit a direct apprehension of the real through the imposition of a general transparency which would render it intelligible. It seeks instead to elicit the real, in places and by moments, and it says that these efforts to elicit the real are possible without a grid. It is in fact precisely when semiology comes to be a grid that it elicits nothing at all. We can therefore say that semiology has no substitutive role with regard to any discipline. It is my hope that semiology will replace no other inquiry here, but will, on the contrary, help all the rest, that its chair will be a kind of wheelchair, the wild card of contemporary knowledge, as the sign itself is the wild card of all discourse.

This negative semiology is an active semiology: it functions outside death. I

mean by this that it does not rest on a "semiophysis," an inert naturalness of the sign, and that it is also not a "semioclasty," a destruction of the sign. Rather, to continue the Greek paradigm, it is a *semiotropy*; turned toward the sign, this semiology is captivated by and receives the sign, treats and, if need be, imitates it as an imaginary spectacle. The semiologist is, in short, an artist (the word as I use it here neither glorifies nor disdains; it refers only to a typology). He plays with signs as with a conscious decoy, whose fascination he savors and wants to make others savor and understand. The sign—at least the sign he sees—is always immediate, subject to the kind of evidence that leaps to the eyes, like a trigger of the imagination, which is why this semiology (need I specify once more: the semiology of the speaker) is not a hermeneutics: it paints more than it digs, *via di porre* rather than *via de levare*. Its objects of predilection are texts of the Image-making process: narratives, images, portraits, expressions, idiolects, passions, structures which play simultaneously with an appearance of verisimilitude and with an uncertainty of truth. I should like to call "semiology" the course of operations during which it is possible—even called for—to play with the sign as with a painted veil, or again, with a fiction.

This pleasure of the imaginary sign is conceivable now due to certain recent mutations, which affect culture more than society itself: the use we can make of the forces of literature I have mentioned is modified by a new situation. On one hand and first of all, the myth of the great French writer, the sacred depositary of all higher values, has crumbled since the Liberation; it has dwindled and died gradually with each of the last survivors of the *entre-deux-guerres*; a new *type* has appeared, and we no longer know—or do not yet know—what to call him: writer? intellectual? scribe? In any case, literary mastery is vanishing; the writer is no longer center stage. On the other hand and subsequently, May '68 has revealed the crisis in our teaching. The old values are no longer transmitted, no longer circulate, no longer impress; literature is desacralized, institutions are impotent to defend and impose it as the implicit model of the human. It is not, if you like, that literature is destroyed; rather *it is no longer protected*, so that this is the moment to deal with it. Literary semiology is, as it were, that journey which lands us in a country free by default; angels and dragons are no longer there to defend it. Our gaze can fall, not without perversity, upon certain old and lovely things, whose signified is abstract, out of date. It is a moment at once decadent and prophetic, a moment of gentle apocalypse, a historical moment of the greatest possible pleasure.

If then, in this teaching which, given its very location, expects no sanction other than the loyalty of its auditors, if method intervenes as a systematic procedure, it cannot be a heuristic method meant to result in decoding. Method can bear only upon language itself, insofar as it struggles to baffle any discourse *which takes*, which is why we can justly claim that method, too, is a Fiction—a proposition already advanced by Mallarmé when he thought of preparing a thesis in linguistics: "All method is a fiction. Language has appeared as the instrument

of fiction; it will follow the method of language, language reflecting upon itself." What I hope to be able to renew, each of the years it is given me to teach here, is the manner of presentation of the course or seminar, in short, of "presenting" a discourse without imposing it: that would be the methodological stake, the *quaestio*, the point to be debated. For what can be oppressive in our teaching is not, finally, the knowledge or the culture it conveys, but the discursive forms through which we propose them. Since, as I have tried to suggest, this teaching has as its object discourse taken in the inevitability of power, method can really bear only on the means of loosening, baffling, or at the very least, of lightening this power. And I am increasingly convinced, both in writing and in teaching, that the fundamental operation of this loosening method is, if one writes, fragmentation, and, if one teaches, digression, or, to put it in a preciously ambiguous word, *excursion*. I should therefore like the speaking and the listening that will be interwoven here to resemble the comings and goings of a child playing beside his mother, leaving her, returning to bring her a pebble, a piece of string, and thereby tracing around a calm center a whole locus of play within which the pebble, the string come to matter less than the enthusiastic giving of them.

When the child behaves in this way, he in fact describes the comings and goings of desire, which he endlessly presents and represents. I sincerely believe that at the origin of teaching such as this we must always locate a fantasy, which can vary from year to year. This, I know, may seem provocative: how, in the context of an institution, however free it may be, dare we speak of a phantasmic teaching? Yet if we consider for a moment the surest of human sciences, if we consider History, how can we help acknowledging that it has a continuous relation with fantasy? This is what Michelet understood: History is ultimately the history of the phantasmic site par excellence, that of the human body. It was by starting from this fantasy, linked for him with the lyric resurrection of past bodies, that Michelet could make History into an enormous anthropology. Science can thus be born of fantasy. It is to a fantasy, spoken or unspoken, that the professor must annually return, at the moment of determining the direction of his journey. He thereby turns from the place where he is expected, the place of the Father, who is always dead, as we know. For only the son has fantasies; only the son is alive.

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The other day, I reread Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. This book deals with a disease I know well, tuberculosis. By my reading, I held in consciousness three moments of this disease: the moment of the story, which takes place before World War I; the moment of my own disease, around 1942; and the present moment, when this disease, vanquished by chemotherapy, has no longer the same aspect it once had. Now, the tuberculosis I experienced is, down to virtually the last detail, the tuberculosis of *The Magic Mountain*. The two moments were united, equally remote from my own present. I then realized with

stupefaction (only the obvious can stupefy) that *my own body was historical*. In a sense, my body is the contemporary of Hans Castorp, the novel's hero; my body, still unborn, was already twenty years old in 1907, the year when Hans entered and took up residence in "the country up there." My body is much older than I, as if we always kept the age of the social fears with which life has accidentally given us contact. Therefore, if I want to live, I must forget that my own body is historical. I must fling myself into the illusion that I am contemporary with the young bodies present before me, and not with my own body, my past body. In short, I must be periodically reborn. I must make myself younger than I am. At fifty-one, Michelet began his *vita nuova*, a new work, a new love. Older than he (you will understand that this parallel is out of fondness), I too am entering a *vita nuova*, marked today by this new place, this new hospitality. I undertake therefore to let myself be borne on by the force of any living life, forgetfulness. There is an age at which we teach what we know. Then comes another age at which we teach what we do not know; this is called *research*. Now perhaps comes the age of another experience: that of *unlearning*, of yielding to the unforeseeable change which forgetting imposes on the sedimentation of the knowledges, cultures, and beliefs we have traversed. This experience has, I believe, an illustrious and outdated name, which I now simply venture to appropriate at the very crossroads of its etymology: *Sapientia*: no power, a little knowledge, a little wisdom, and as much flavor as possible.

The Forms of Violence

LEO BERSANI and ULYSSE DUTOIT

From the ninth century B.C. through the reign of the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (688-627), the palaces of Nimrud and Nineveh were decorated with wall reliefs depicting scenes from Assyrian history. Most of the surviving examples of this art are now on view at the British Museum in London; the greatest number, and the most artistically impressive, come from the reigns of Ashurnasirpal (883-859) and of Ashurbanipal. The palace reliefs are pictorial narratives in which Assyrian history becomes primarily a spectacle of extraordinary power. The celebratory nature of the reliefs, the obvious relish with which the defeat, humiliation, and slaughter of Assyria's enemies are portrayed, and the profusely gory detail of the battle and the hunting scenes, would seem both to confirm the historians' view of the Assyrians as an intensely nationalistic, imperialistic, and violent people, and to justify the distaste one senses even in the admiration of Mesopotamian scholars for this art.



Figure 1 (All photos of Assyrian reliefs by Ulysse Dutoit.)

Essentially, Assyrian palace reliefs are condemned for what we will call narrative reasons. The story they tell is not ours. Subjects of only peripheral human interest transmit a message of repellent violence. But to what extent is Assyrian sculpture reducible to narrative accounts of it—accounts which inevitably stress the murderous violence of Assyrian history? In the section from the Lion Hunt reproduced in Figure 1, we are irresistibly drawn to the point of maximal violence. The movements of the wounded lion on the left and of the two horses compel a rapid reading of the scene from left to right. Our eyes stop at what appears to be the dramatic center of the relief: the plunging of the horseman's



Figure 2

spear into the lion's open mouth. But this anecdotal climax is ambiguous. First of all, the movement to the right continues *beyond* the climactic point. As a result, this movement does not merely serve the moment of violent contact between the animal and the man's spear; indeed, it carries the viewer away from that contact and thereby detracts from the impact of the lion leaping toward the left. If one looks more closely at this part of the scene (in Figure 2), it becomes even clearer that the juxtaposition of the two animals' opposite movements demands a continuously mobile reading of the scene rather than a visual stop at the lion's gaping, wounded mouth. There are, for example, formal relations in the scene

which distract the viewer from its violent subject: note the several parallel lines just below the spear (a series comprising the rein, the harness, the lion's leg, and the horse's leg), as well as a similarity in the broken lines which constitute the outlines of both the lion's paw and the hunter's tassel just beneath it. Finally, and most strikingly, the spear's identity is undermined by its participation in the triangle which it creates along with the rein below it and the part of the horse's mane between spear and rein. One's interest moves between the geometric and the anecdotal at the very point at which the anecdotal center of the scene is being most strongly emphasized.

The force of this violent subject is, then, contravened by visual abstractions which disrupt the spectator's reading of the subject. It is true that relations could be detected among the formal elements of any representation at all. But the close-up in Figure 2 should suggest what we believe to be the Assyrians' exceptional willingness to de-emphasize their subjects through various kinds of formal play. And because of this play, the mobility of the viewer's response can become more important than the violent movements which constitute the subject of the scene. The sculptural representation of the slaughter of lions offers the spectator an alternative mode of agitation; it is calculated not to produce "aesthetic calm" but rather to make us enjoy a kind of aesthetic violence—the "violence" of multiple contacts producing multiple forms. Finally, our perceptual wandering from one part of a scene to another is also an epistemological uncertainty about the identities of certain forms (a leg or merely one of several parallel lines, part of a spear or one side of a triangle).

The element of play is especially evident in the palace reliefs depicting the Assyrians' military campaigns. Play in these scenes is largely a question of a profusion of forms. So many things are going on at once—as, for example, in Figures 3 and 4—that we hardly know where to look. In Figure 3, we have a deceptive centering of all the action in the space between the top rungs of the two converging ladders. The ladders, as well as the men climbing them and the bowsmen to the right, all point to this apparently central space, but we are subtly moved into an entirely different direction by the curved line of prisoners descending toward the left on the bottom slab. And yet, as Figure 5 clearly shows, the horizontal line which begins about two-thirds of the way up the curve draws us away from the prisoners and toward the group advancing from the right. Because the horizontal line of the pole being carried by the first man in that procession is extended by the right leg of the second man from the top of the descending curve, to look at the curve is already to begin looking away from it, to start moving toward the right.

Nothing is more typical of Assyrian art than such mobilizing strategies. Any focused point almost invariably includes the cues which keep us on the move. The sculptor manages simultaneously to bring a coherent centering to his scene and to transform every center into the margin of another (provisional) focus of our attention. Moreover, the connections from one section to another make it difficult



Figure 3



Figure 4

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to settle on one "right" reading of these scenes—a reading which might guarantee our visual progress toward climactic spaces. We read not only from left to right on each slab; our taking in of the reliefs is always a complex sequence of horizontal *and* vertical eye movements, of movements from left to right and from right to left, of following a "story line" sometimes curved and sometimes straight.

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By devaluing the content of any one scene of violence, the Assyrian sculptors train us to *formalize psychic mobility*. Mobility becomes a response to formal stimuli rather than a movement of identification with the narrative content of any representation. Nothing could be more antagonistic to the narrativizing of violence which has characterized Western humanist culture.

Narrativity sustains the glamour of historical violence. It creates violence as an isolated, identifiable topic or subject. A liberal humanist tradition has trained us to locate violence historically—that is, as a certain type of eruption against a background of generally nonviolent human experience. In this view, violence can be accounted for through historical accounts of the circumstances in which it occurs. Violence is thus reduced to the level of a plot; it can be isolated, understood, perhaps mastered and eliminated. And, having been conditioned to think of violence within narrative frameworks, we expect this mastery to take place as a result of the pacifying power of such narrative conventions as beginnings, explanatory middles, and climactic endings.

The practical implications of this view are numerous. They range from political efforts to restructure governments in ways which will minimize occasions congenial to violence, to a refusal of certain subjects in art (especially in popular arts such as television), subjects which presumably bring violent impulses to the foreground of the public's desires. It is all right to study historical violence (only by studying it can we learn to arm ourselves against it), but few things are censored more harshly by the humanistic ethic we refer to than an "aesthetic complacency" in the images and language of violence.

We wish to take the opposite point of view: only a radically aesthetic perspective on violence (proposed, for example, by the Assyrian palace reliefs) will



Figure 5

allow us both to recognize and to redefine our constant implication in violence. In our culture, the "natural" tendency is to sequester violence: we immobilize and centralize both historical acts of violence and their aesthetic representations. A major trouble with this is that the immobilization of a violent event invites a pleasurable identification with its enactment. A coherent narrative depends on stabilized images; stabilized images stimulate the mimetic impulse. Centrality, the privileged foreground, and the suspenseful expectation of climaxes all contribute, in historical and artistic narratives, to a fascination with violent events on the part of readers and spectators. The historian's or the artist's privileging of the subject of violence encourages a mimetic excitement focused on the very scene of violence. The atrophied relations of that scene to adjacent (but background) activities blocks our own relations to those activities and limits the mobility of our attention and interest. All critiques of violence, to the extent that they conceive of it in terms of scenes which *can* be privileged, may therefore promote the very explosions which they are designed to expose or forestall.

The Assyrians appear to accumulate scenes of horror with a singular complacency, but the violent *spectacle* never maintains a privileged position in the palace reliefs. Such an art is enormously suggestive not only about aesthetic responses, but also about our moral relation to history. The Assyrians force us to see a continuity among all forms of violence. They refuse to melodramatize a type of violence which would appear to be inherently melodramatic. As a result, we are unable to abstract a particular historical horror from the disruptive mobility which is inherent to our contacts with the world. The murderous moments of history are perhaps efforts to stop that movement, to transform the mobile attention we bring to the world into a fetishistic immobilization of a privileged scene.

The very casualness with which the Assyrians treat violence should be instructive. The brutalities of war and of hunting are somewhat trivialized in their artistic re-creations. The great scenes of Assyrian history always include cues which invite us to dismiss their historical seriousness, cues which displace our attention and thereby prevent the stable reading of static images. Assyrian sculpture simultaneously celebrates, reformulates, and mocks the glory of Assyrian history. In art, omnipresent spectacles of historical violence can thus serve as a potential corrective to our fascination with violence in history. We are always implicated in violence; our choice is not between violence and nonviolence, but is rather between the psychic dislocations of mobile desire and a destructive fixation on anecdotal violence.

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The subversion of the anecdote in the Assyrian palace reliefs depends in part on the artists' indifference to psychological expressiveness. No two faces in the reliefs are ever the same, but the differences do not express different characters. The

Assyrians render distinctive details with a naturalistic scruple, although there is no sign in their work of the psychological intention usually associated with such scruples. The highly individualized heads in Roman sculpture, for example, are portraits of particular personalities. If we think of a psychologically nonexpressive figurative art, we are likely to take classical Greek sculpture as our example. The Greeks give us recognizable but idealized human figures, figures which are insufficiently individualized to be psychologically informative. We feel comfortable with the alternative best exemplified in Greek and Roman sculpture: between the subordination of the personal and the idiosyncratic to an idealized view of the human figure on one hand, and on the other, the triumph of the individual over the type in a richly psychological art.

But the Assyrians give us something outside this alternative: a realistic art in which the human body is individualized but nonexpressive. There is an impressive range of facial types in Figure 6, but they do not have the effect of substituting a more "refined" psychological interest for the grosser narrative design of glorifying the king. (Psychology would not in any case subvert narrative; it merely creates more sophisticated narratives.) The faces in Assyrian sculpture are blank or bland; a vague smile is the strongest expressive element in this representation of the Elamite king's worshiping subjects. In a sense, critics are right to speak of the palace reliefs as stereotypic; where they are wrong is in taking this observation as a self-evident condemnation. Given the extraordinary capacity for visual differentia-



Figure 6



Figure 7

tions which the Assyrians show in their art, it seems to us presumptuous to conclude that they are unable to imagine psychological differences. Or rather, it is a presumption typical of humanist culture to give the psychological imagination priority over other ways of imagining differences. The Assyrians never use a human face to tell a story. Faces interest them for their visibility, not for their depth. What strikes us as an exceptional respect for all the appearances in the universe—human as well as nonhuman—leads them to represent an incredible variety of volumes in men's bodies rather than the necessarily limited signs of a hypothetical and constraining human nature.

The Assyrians' imagination of difference involves a risky play with almost identical repetition. The palace reliefs often suggest a compulsive fascination with at least two versions of the same object or activity, but even such double images mobilize perception instead of arresting it. The general architectural design of Figure 7 is constituted by two sets of parallel diagonal lines which are intersected, in the middle of the scene, by the implied axes of a single vertical line and a single horizontal line. A potential architectural monotony is thus forestalled both by the conflicting directions of the two series of diagonal lines and by the powerful straightening effect of the centered cross. Another type of order is created by three sets of paired images: the huntsmen's heads, the lion's paws, and the two hands roughly in the same position. But this order is also thwarted by the peculiar

dissonances between the elements of each couple. The animal's paws move away from each other, and the upper paw is parallel not to its mate but to the tail draped over the shoulder of the man to the left. Also, which hand is the hand to the right really paired with? It lies on the lion's body in a position similar to that of the vertical hand to the left, and yet its diagonal shape makes it appear to be an extension of the arm rising diagonally toward it from the lower left. As is frequently the case in the palace reliefs, repetition gives rise to doubt or puzzlement in the spectator. One proceeds from *A* to its repetition in *A'*, but the latter contains a difference which makes us check the model by returning to *A*. *Repetition in Assyrian sculpture makes repetition itself problematic.* It appears to provide the strongest elements of order in our visual field, whereas in fact it initiates an inconclusive movement of perceptual verification on our part between the repeated terms.

A frequent configuration in the palace reliefs is that of two parallel lines fairly close to each other and, at some distance, another line parallel to the first two. Parallel lines create an order based on identical repetition. To read two parallel lines on a flat surface is to read the space between them as a space always identical to itself. Parallel lines can be used to reinforce narrative effects in painting and sculpture merely by providing the frame which focuses our attention on centers of narrative interest. The signs of exasperation with these framing effects in modern painting (such as the use of irregularly shaped canvases, or the



Figure 8

tracing of a mangled or incomplete frame within the painting itself) could be thought of as strategies designed to prevent this focusing on centers, to de-structure and disseminate the spectators' interest.

In Figure 8, it is the line of the bowstring, nearly parallel to the lines of the spears, which helps the Assyrian sculptors to de-center our attention. For in crossing the space between the two spears and the bowstring, we are drawn away from both the anecdotal violence accentuated by the spears (and the two hands) *and* the stabilizing order of parallel lines themselves. The line of the bowstring moves us toward the scene at the left and away from the potentially magnetic space between the bowstring and the spears. More exactly, the parallelism of the two spears and the bowstring should initiate a continuous movement between the scene to the right and the scene to the left. The empty space within the parallelogram is thus an extremely important part of the scene; our eye is always crossing this space in order to follow the contradictory cues on its edges. Could this space, then, be more important than the terminal points to which it leads us?

Let's take a more extreme example of space undesigned and yet crucial to the spectator's visual mobility. In Figure 9, each set of paws contains several parallel lines. We move between the image at the bottom and the image at the top partly because of this repeated design, and partly because the two fragments "come together" as bits of two implied diagonal lines which would meet on one of the claws of the animal at the bottom.

The empty space here, contrary to what can be repeatedly seen elsewhere in the palace reliefs, does not appear to be carefully designed; it may strike us as neglected, left-over space at the bottom of a scene and near the end of a slab. It is, we might say, merely between more interesting elements *and* spaces. But this very fact can help us to refine our notion of mobility. We wish to suggest that the spectator's pleasure in following all the cues in Assyrian sculpture which displace his interest and attention is less in the variety of scenes which he thereby takes in than in the very tension of the displacing movement itself.

In establishing continuously dismissed and displaced relational terms, the viewer of the Assyrian palace reliefs experiences a pleasure akin to the pleasure of desire. Desire could be defined as a pleasurable movement toward an absent source of satisfaction. The pleasure of desire is inseparable from the tension created by the lack in desire. Desire constitutes a mobile and indeterminate sensuality, for it is never quite focused on its object (which is both present and absent in the rich but insubstantial images of desiring fantasy). And the



Figure 9

incomplete pleasures of desire, incapable by definition of filling the lack in desire, stimulate the productive restlessness of fantasies always on the move. In the visual mobility which we have been describing in connection with the Assyrian palace reliefs, the spectator moves between two forms with a residual impression of the first form and in anticipation of the second. The latter will, presumably, "complete" the former by establishing a structurally intelligible relation with it. But, as we have seen, the second form also initiates departures toward other forms. This constant mobility leads us to postulate an aesthetic pleasure brought about not by aesthetic objects but by the spaces between their constituent parts. We may define this pleasure as an agitated crossing of the intervals which separate forms. Assyrian art is a lesson in *interstitial sensuality*.

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As a final example from this extraordinary art, consider the representation of a lion being released from a cage in Figure 10. There is a powerful narrative line here: both the man and the lion direct our attention toward anticipated scenes of action to the left. The cages function as immobilizing frames, and in a sense the narrative movement in this scene is anti-aesthetic. It is as if violent pressures inherent to the action being represented made representation itself impossible; we have two picture frames in the process of being abandoned by their subjects.

And yet we are also drawn back into the frame—without, however, being forced to substitute a pictorial immobility for narrative movement. First of all, in terms of mere quantity of space, the nearly abandoned cages occupy almost the entire scene. Partly because of the prominence given to the repeated lines and forms of the two cages, they can compete for our attention with the dramatic subject in which they play only an accessory role. Above all, the lion's progress is strangely arrested by a certain confusion between his body and the bars of his cage. An undisturbed narrative reading would require a clear sense of the lion *behind* the bars of his cage. In fact, his resemblance to the cage is emphasized by the blurred distinction between foreground and background. The next to the top bar in particular seems to be an extension of the lion's body. At the same time, however, the leonine aspect of that bar is qualified by its relation, simply as a curved line, to the straight line across the top of the cage. We have, as it were, an overdetermined curve: it is simultaneously a nonfigurative line, the bar of a cage, and part of an animal's body.

The inside of the cage is thus transformed from a narrative space (bars in the foreground, moving lion in the background) into a continuous aesthetic space of related forms. We are kept within the frame, but its contents have, so to speak, become extremely active without contributing to narrative movement. This activity is purely relational. It consists of contacts among juxtaposed forms, contacts which suggest a certain irrelevance in the anecdotal distinction between the animate and the inanimate. The lion, it might be said, leaves his cage by

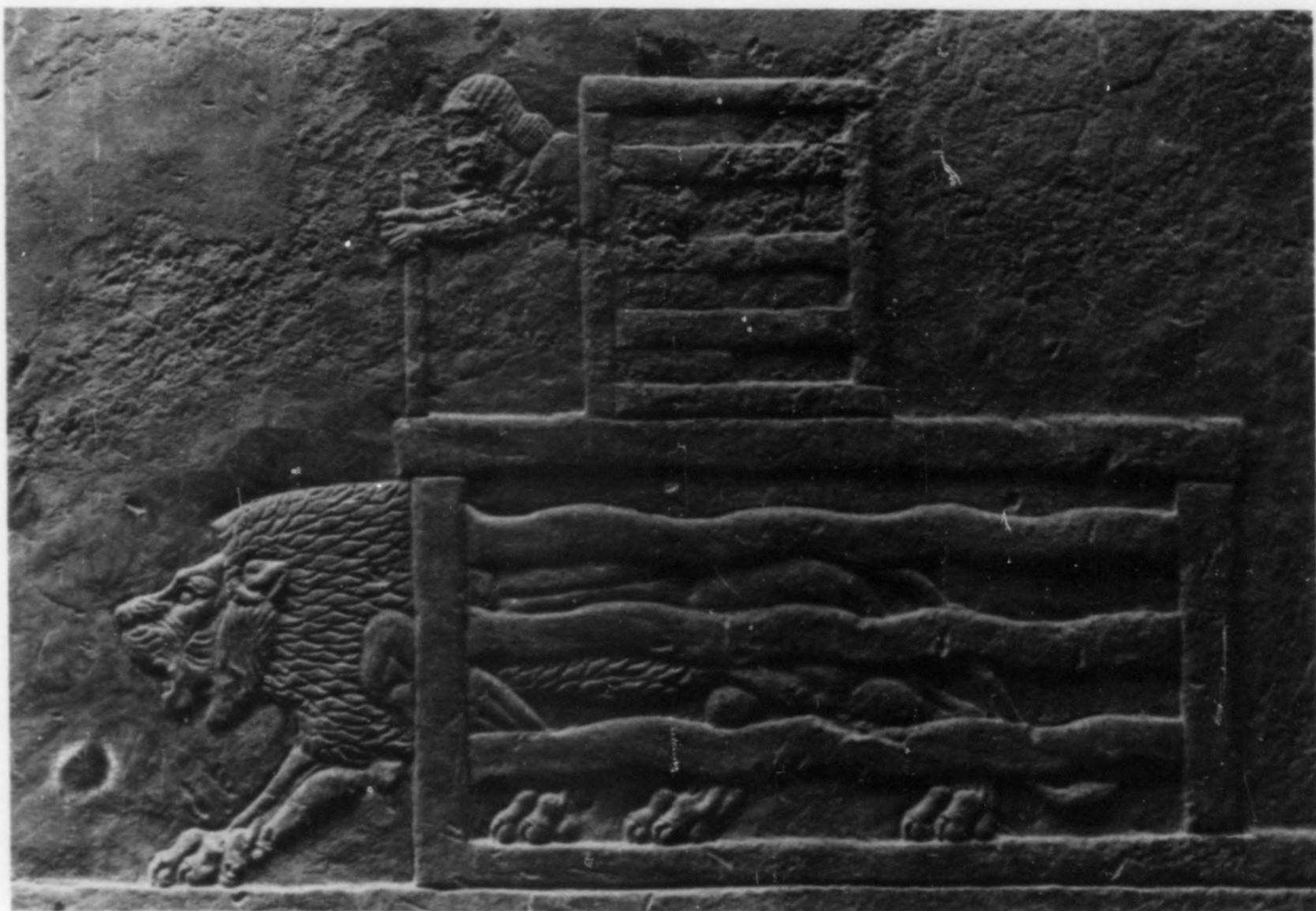


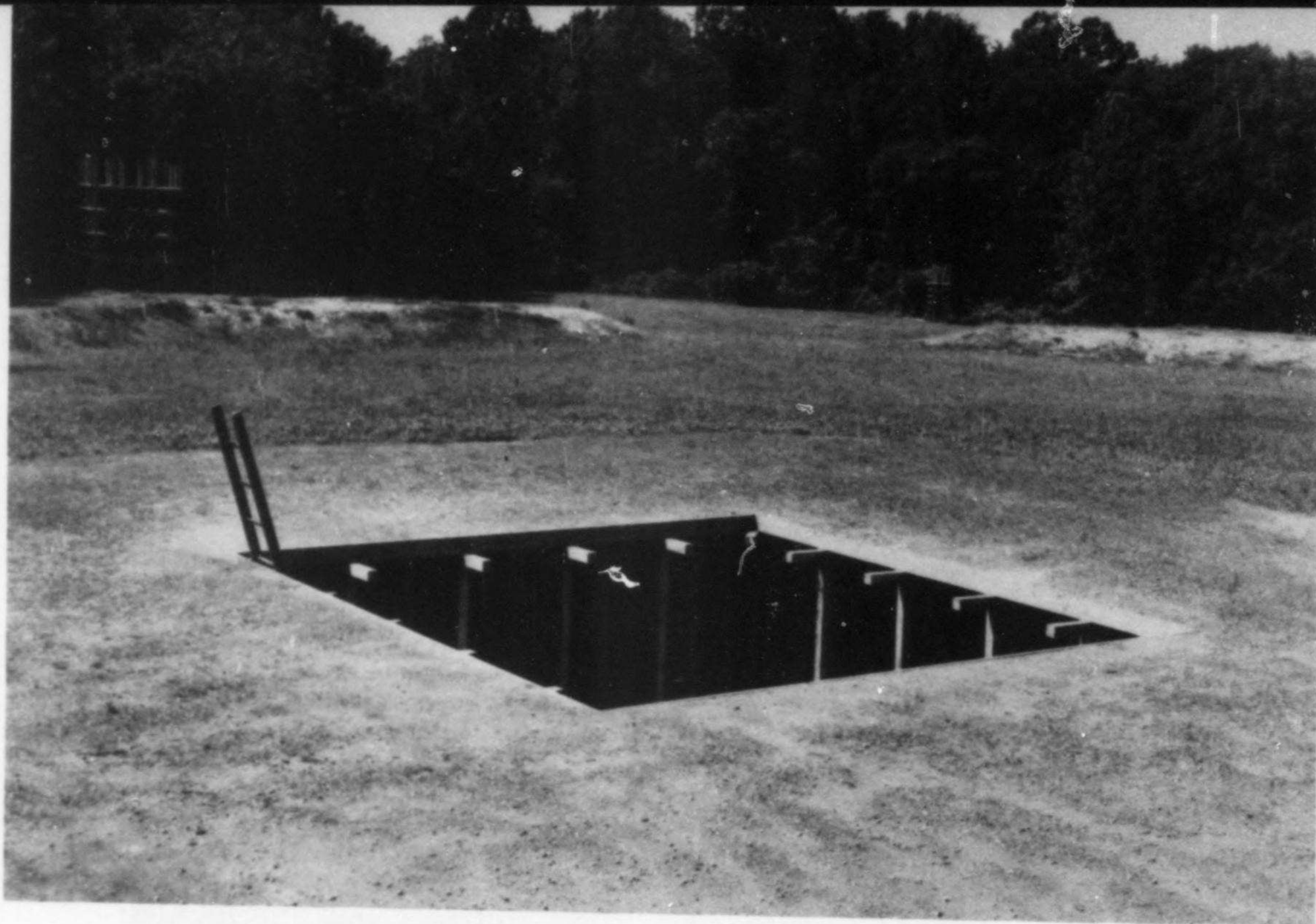
Figure 10

remaining within it, by the peculiar way in which he almost becomes his cage. As is frequently the case in the palace reliefs, relations make identities somewhat uncertain. Or, more exactly, the subject of the scene *is* its de-narrativization—that is, the process by which we substitute a reading of related fragments for the reading of a coherently structured anecdote.

Nonetheless, the narrative power of Figure 10 remains very strong. The movement toward the outside of the cage may very well strike us as more dramatically delineated than the relational activity we have just mentioned. Not only is the subject of the lion leaving his cage emphasized by the human figure's repetition of this action; we might also note that all the horizontal lines help to guide our attention to the long horizontal shape of the emerging animal's body. Furthermore, formal relations by no means only de-narrativize the scene. The implicit diagonals which connect the lion's face to the man's face and the lion's front paw to the top left of the man's cage have the effect of intensifying our attention to the most dramatically narrative aspects of the scene. There is in fact a complex diagonal structure in Figure 10. We have not only the lines just mentioned, but there are also implicit diagonals moving in the opposite direction, from the lower right to the upper left. These two series of diagonal lines "meet" in the small empty square to the left of the man's cage, and this space thereby becomes a focused element in the scene.

In conclusion, we might consider the emphasized emptiness of that square space as emblematic. The square is a cage which imprisons nothing. It is an insignificant focal point designed to scatter rather than to concentrate our attention. It is a space through which the play of lines compels us to pass repeatedly, and we might say that its interpretive location is somewhere between two very different readings of the scene. On the one hand, the structuring lines, which, if drawn in, would pass through the empty square, lead us back to narrative content. They help to define a particular incident and to place this incident within the larger narrative subject of the lion hunt. On the other hand, one series of diagonal lines leads us back to the wavering identities and predominantly formal relations within the large cage. The empty square thus mediates between two modes of attention: a narrative vision which organizes forms into the elements of a story, and a more agitated, erratic vision which substitutes related and continuously shifting bits and pieces for the static integrity and wholeness of being in narrative forms.

We have emphasized the second mode, for, in our culture, it is more neglected than the first; most importantly, it has provided us with the perceptual model of an alternative to narrative and historical violence. We may, however, perversely end with a more conciliatory remark, and note that the peculiar impression of balance and sanity which the Assyrian sculptors give us may be due to their willingness not only to fracture their subjects but also to regale us with images of the narrative violence so horrifying and so thrilling to the narrative spirit. The nearly indefinable quality of "betweenness" in the palace reliefs may, then, manifest an impressive hesitation or even ignorance, on the part of these anonymous ancient artists, about the forms of disruption and of violence which they had chosen to love.



*Mary Miss. Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoys. 1978.
(Nassau County, Long Island, New York.)*



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Sculpture in the Expanded Field

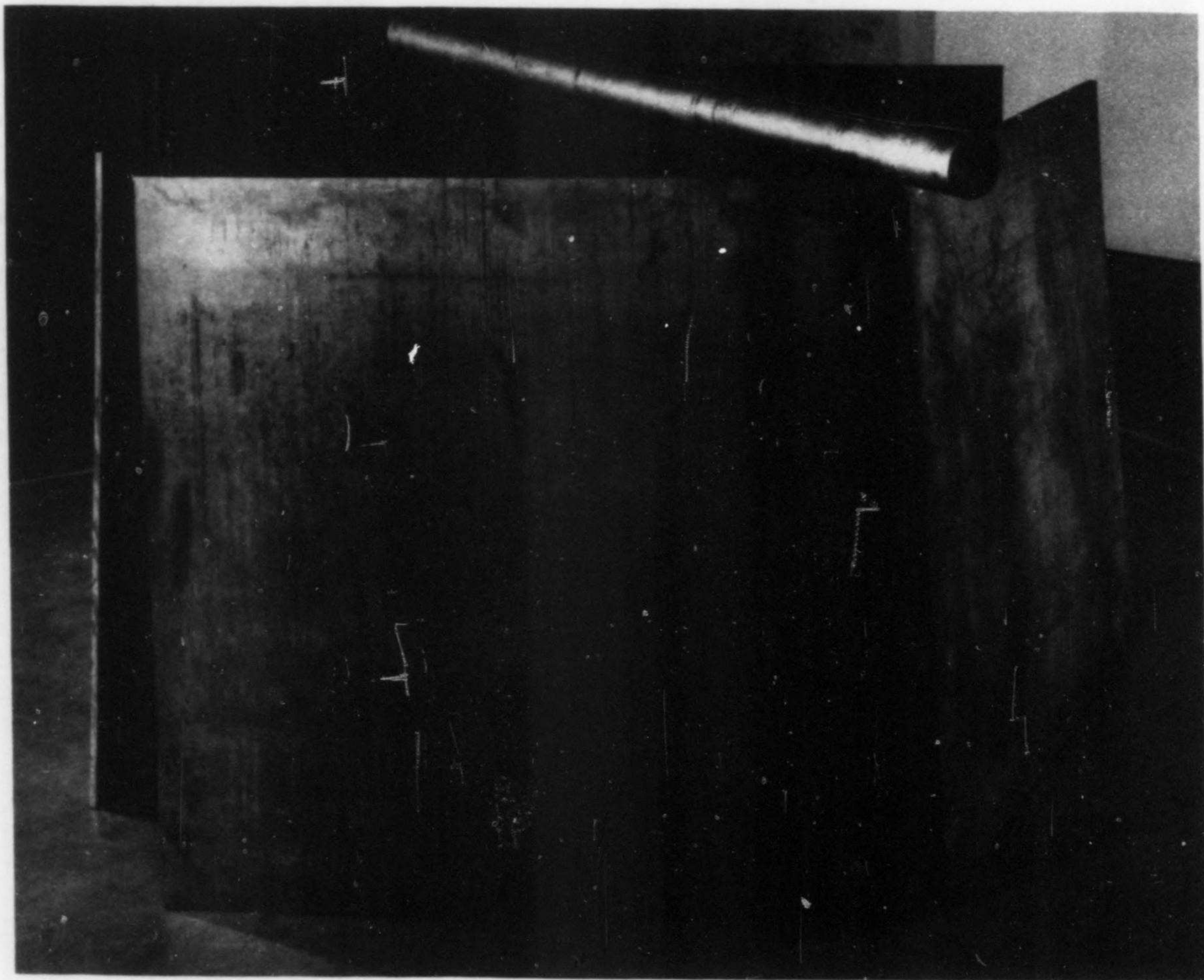
ROSALIND KRAUSS

Toward the center of the field there is a slight mound, a swelling in the earth, which is the only warning given for the presence of the work. Closer to it, the large square face of the pit can be seen, as can the ends of the ladder that is needed to descend into the excavation. The work itself is thus entirely below grade: half atrium, half tunnel, the boundary between outside and in, a delicate structure of wooden posts and beams. The work, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, 1978, by Mary Miss, is of course a sculpture or, more precisely, an earthwork.

Over the last ten years rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert. Nothing, it would seem, could possibly give to such a motley of effort the right to lay claim to whatever one might mean by the category of sculpture. Unless, that is, the category can be made to become almost infinitely malleable.

The critical operations that have accompanied postwar American art have largely worked in the service of this manipulation. In the hands of this criticism categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything. And though this pulling and stretching of a term such as sculpture is overtly performed in the name of vanguard aesthetics—the ideology of the new—its covert message is that of historicism. The new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past. Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference. It makes a place for change in our experience by evoking the model of evolution, so that the man who now is can be accepted as being different from the child he once was, by simultaneously being seen—through the unseeable action of the telos—as the same. And we are comforted by this perception of sameness, this strategy for reducing anything foreign in either time or space, to what we already know and are.

No sooner had minimal sculpture appeared on the horizon of the aesthetic experience of the 1960s, than criticism began to construct a paternity for this work, a set of constructivist fathers who could legitimize and thereby authenticate the strangeness of these objects. Plastic? inert geometries? factory production?—none of this was *really* strange, as the ghosts of Gabo and Tatlin and Lissitzky could be called in to testify. Never mind that the content of the one had nothing to do with, was in fact the exact opposite of, the content of the other. Never mind that Gabo's celluloid was the sign of lucidity and intellection, while Judd's plastic-tinged-with-dayglo spoke the hip patois of California. It did not matter that constructivist forms were intended as visual proof of the immutable logic and coherence of universal geometries, while their seeming counterparts in minimalism were demonstrably contingent—denoting a universe held together not by Mind but by guy wires, or glue, or the accidents of gravity. The rage to historicize simply swept these differences aside.



Richard Serra. 5:30. 1969.

Of course, with the passing of time these sweeping operations got a little harder to perform. As the 1960s began to lengthen into the 1970s and "sculpture" began to be piles of thread waste on the floor, or sawed redwood timbers rolled into the gallery, or tons of earth excavated from the desert, or stockades of logs surrounded by firepits, the word *sculpture* became harder to pronounce—but not really that much harder. The historian/critic simply performed a more extended sleight-of-hand and began to construct his genealogies out of the data of millenia rather than decades. Stonehenge, the Nazca lines, the Toltec ballcourts, Indian burial mounds—anything at all could be hauled into court to bear witness to this work's connection to history and thereby to legitimize its status as sculpture. Of course Stonehenge and the Toltec ballcourts were just exactly *not* sculpture, and so their role as historicist precedent becomes somewhat suspect in this particular demonstration. But never mind. The trick can still be done by calling upon a variety of primitivizing work from the earlier part of the century—Brancusi's *Endless Column* will do—to mediate between extreme past and present.

But in doing all of this, the very term we had thought we were saving—*sculpture*—has begun to be somewhat obscured. We had thought to use a universal category to authenticate a group of particulars, but the category has now been forced to cover such a heterogeneity that it is, itself, in danger of collapsing. And so we stare at the pit in the earth and think we both do and don't know what sculpture is.

Yet I would submit that we know very well what sculpture is. And one of the things we know is that it is a historically bounded category and not a universal one. As is true of any other convention, sculpture has its own internal logic, its own set of rules, which, though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change. The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place. The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius is such a monument, set in the center of the Campidoglio to represent by its symbolical presence the relationship between ancient, Imperial Rome and the seat of government of modern, Renaissance Rome. Bernini's statue of the *Conversion of Constantine*, placed at the foot of the Vatican stairway connecting the Basilica of St. Peter to the heart of the papacy is another such monument, a marker at a particular place for a specific meaning/event. Because they thus function in relation to the logic of representation and marking, sculptures are normally figurative and vertical, their pedestals an important part of the structure since they mediate between actual site and representational sign. There is nothing very mysterious about this logic; understood and inhabited, it was the source of a tremendous production of sculpture during centuries of Western art.

But the convention is not immutable and there came a time when the logic began to fail. Late in the nineteenth century we witnessed the fading of the logic of

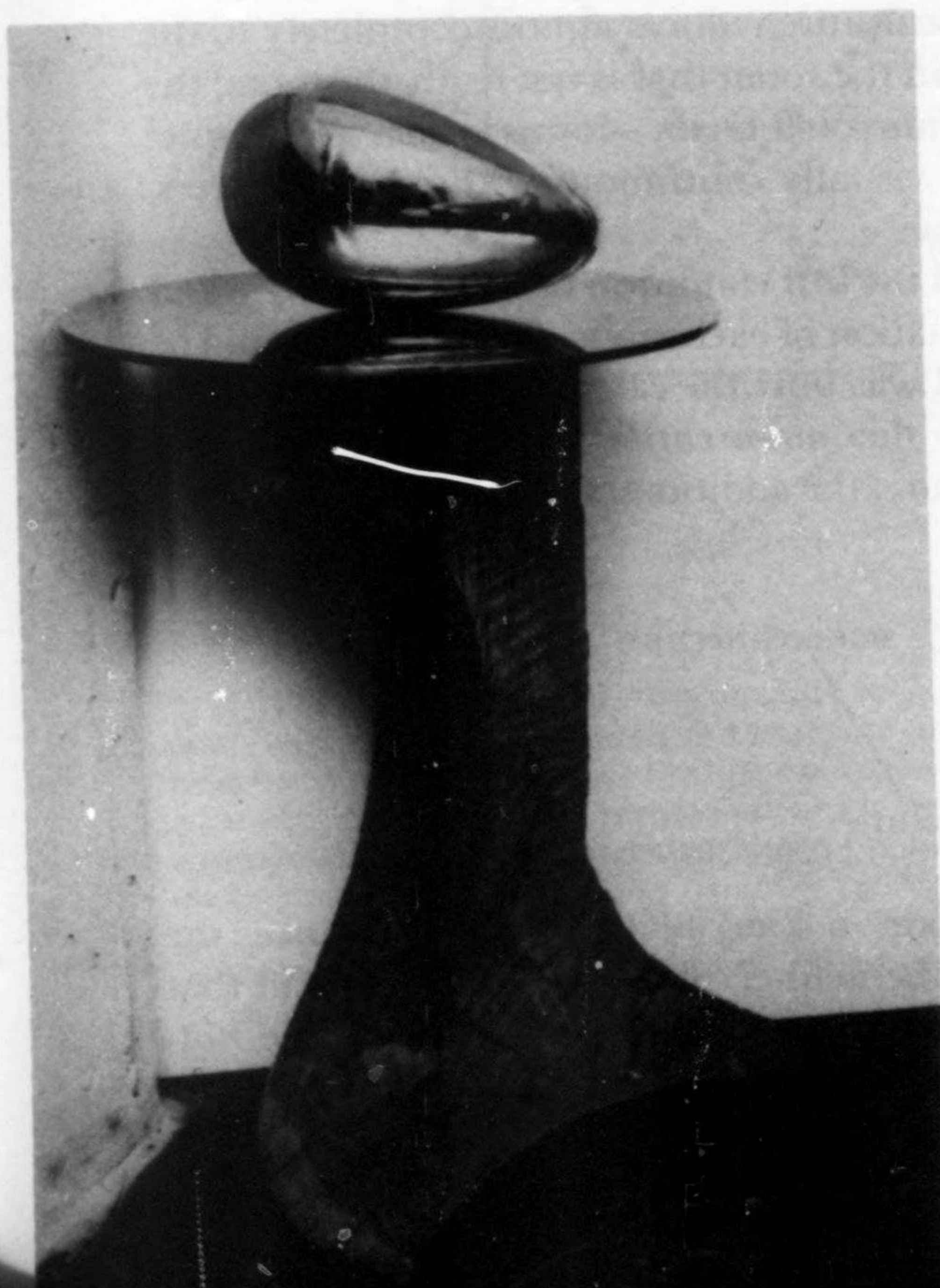
the monument. It happened rather gradually. But two cases come to mind, both bearing the marks of their own transitional status. Rodin's *Gates of Hell* and his statue of *Balzac* were both conceived as monuments. The first were commissioned in 1880 as the doors to a projected museum of decorative arts; the second was commissioned in 1891 as a memorial to literary genius to be set up at a specific site in Paris. The failure of these two works as monuments is signaled not only by the fact that multiple versions can be found in a variety of museums in various countries, while no version exists on the original sites—both commissions having eventually collapsed. Their failure is also encoded onto the very surfaces of these works: the doors having been gouged away and anti-structurally encrusted to the point where they bear their inoperative condition on their face; the *Balzac* executed with such a degree of subjectivity that not even Rodin believed (as letters by him attest) that the work would ever be accepted.

With these two sculptural projects, I would say, one crosses the threshold of the logic of the monument, entering the space of what could be called its negative condition—a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. Which is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential.

It is these two characteristics of modernist sculpture that declare its status, and therefore its meaning and function, as essentially nomadic. Through its fetishization of the base, the sculpture reaches downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from actual place; and through the representation of its own materials or the process of its construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy. Brancusi's art is an extraordinary instance of the way this happens. The base becomes, in a work like the *Cock*, the morphological generator of the figurative part of the object; in the *Caryatids* and *Endless Column*, the sculpture is all base; while in *Adam and Eve*, the sculpture is in a reciprocal relation to its base. The base is thus defined as essentially transportable, the marker of the work's homelessness integrated into the very fiber of the sculpture. And Brancusi's interest in expressing parts of the body as fragments that tend toward radical abstractness also testifies to a loss of site, in this case the site of the rest of the body, the skeletal support that would give to one of the bronze or marble heads a home.

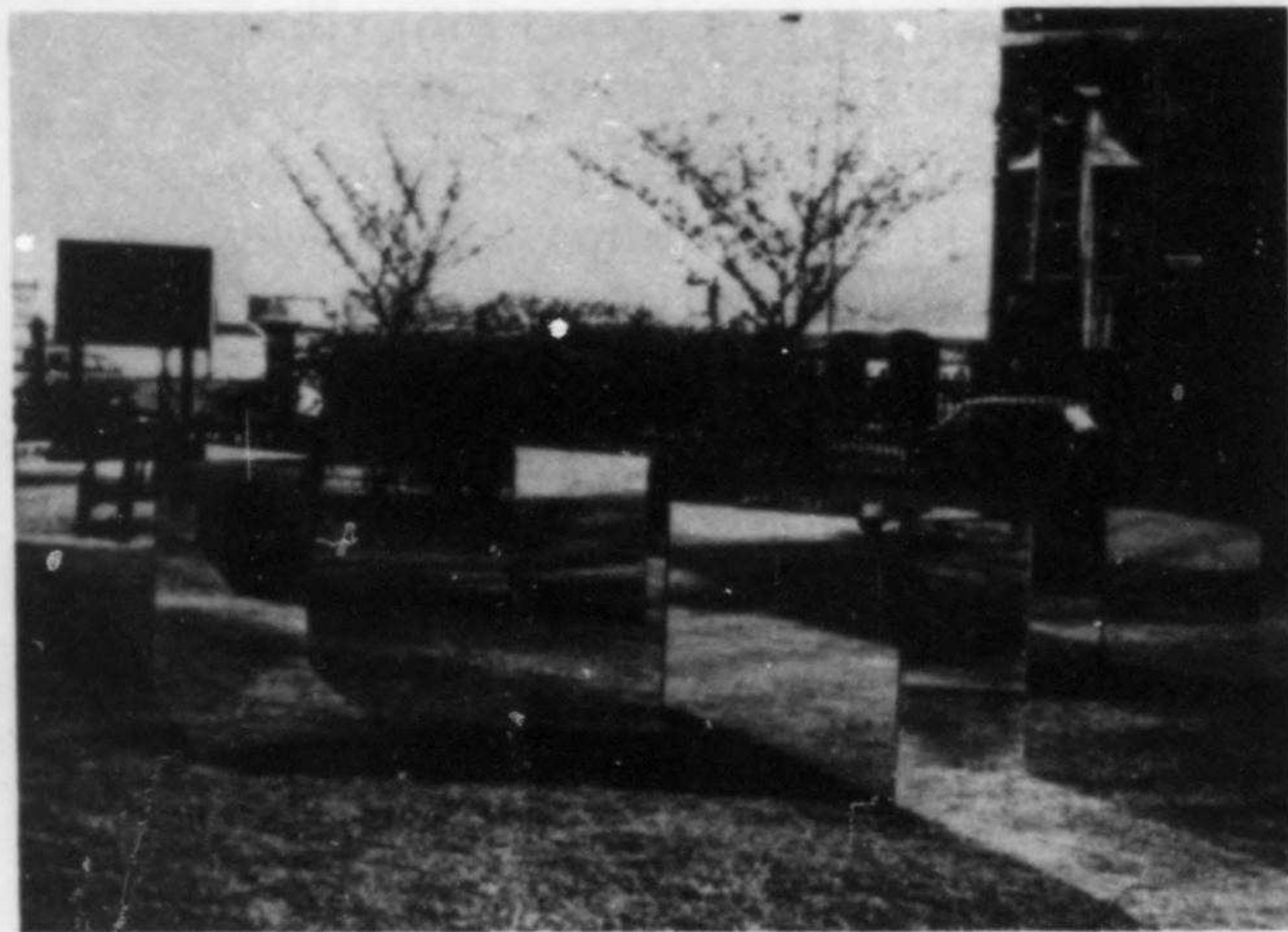
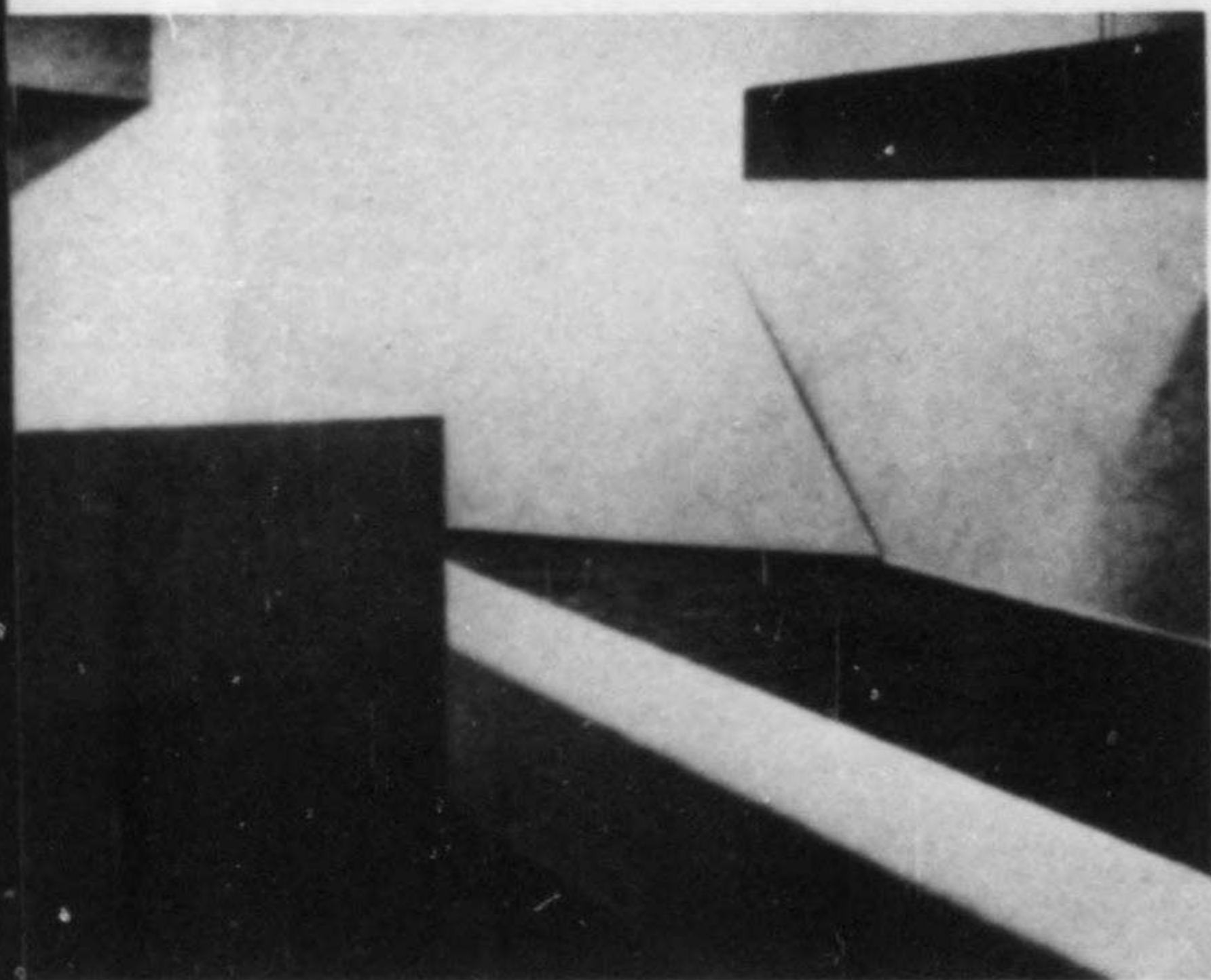
In being the negative condition of the monument, modernist sculpture had a kind of idealist space to explore, a domain cut off from the project of temporal and spatial representation, a vein that was rich and new and could for a while be profitably mined. But it was a limited vein and, having been opened in the early part of the century, it began by about 1950 to be exhausted. It began, that is, to be experienced more and more as pure negativity. At this point modernist sculpture appeared as a kind of black hole in the space of consciousness, something whose positive content was increasingly difficult to define, something that was possible to locate only in terms of what it was not. "Sculpture is what you bump into when

Auguste Rodin. Balzac. 1897.



Constantin Brancusi. Beginning of the World. 1924.

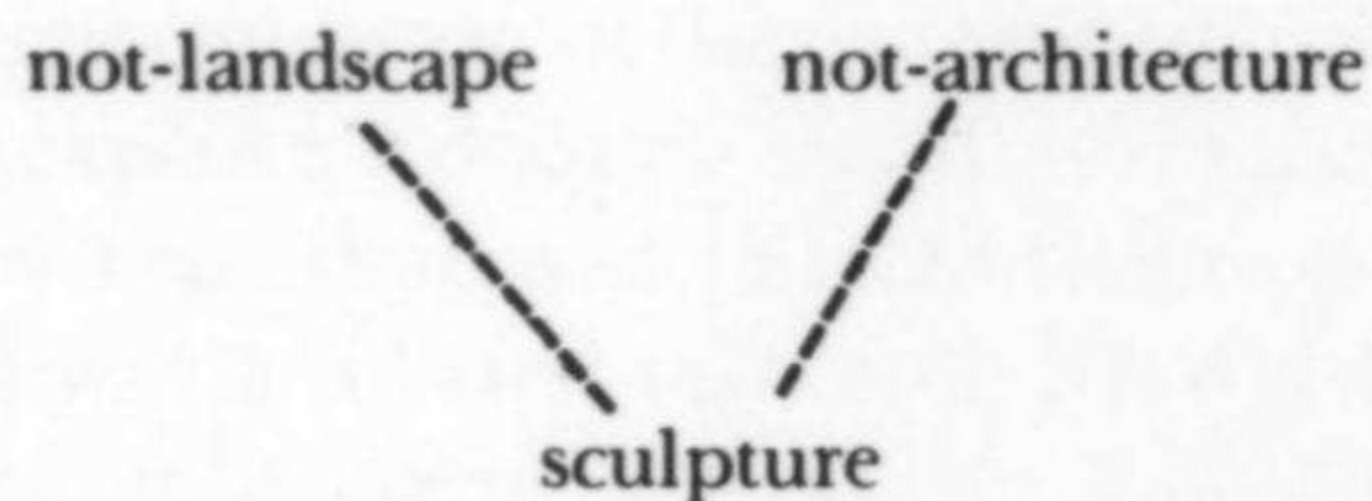
Robert Morris. *Green Gallery Installation*. 1964.
Untitled (Mirrored Boxes). 1965.



you back up to see a painting," Barnett Newman said in the fifties. But it would probably be more accurate to say of the work that one found in the early sixties that sculpture had entered a categorical no-man's-land: it was what was on or in front of a building that was not the building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape.

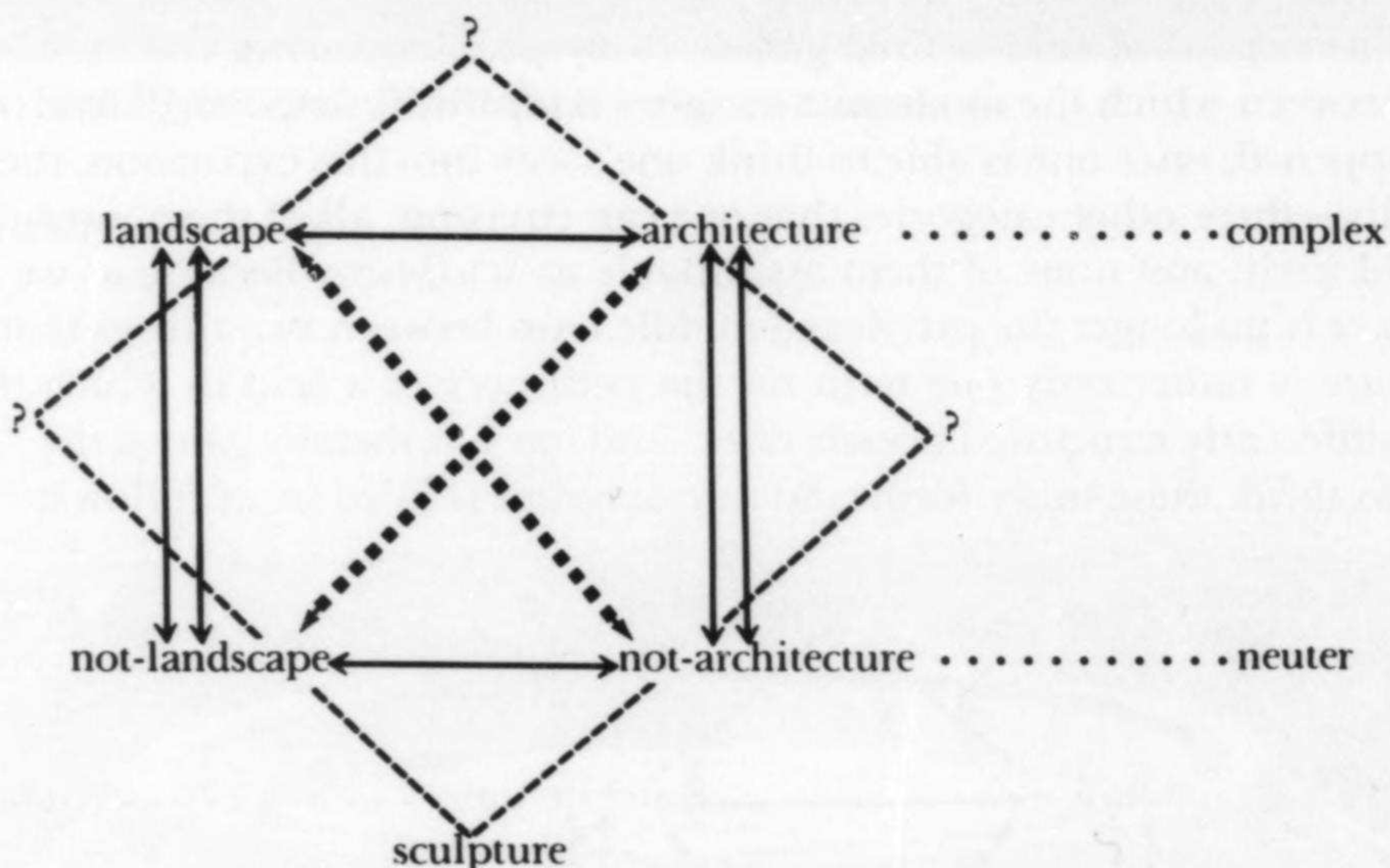
The purest examples that come to mind from the early 1960s are both by Robert Morris. One is the work exhibited in 1964 in the Green Gallery—quasi-architectural integers whose status as sculpture reduces almost completely to the simple determination that it is what is in the room that is not really the room; the other is the outdoor exhibition of the mirrored boxes—forms which are distinct from the setting only because, though visually continuous with grass and trees, they are not in fact part of the landscape.

In this sense sculpture had entered the full condition of its inverse logic and had become pure negativity: the combination of exclusions. Sculpture, it could be said, had ceased being a positivity, and was now the category that resulted from the addition of the *not-landscape* to the *not-architecture*. Diagrammatically expressed, the limit of modernist sculpture, the addition of the neither/nor, looks like this:



Now, if sculpture itself had become a kind of ontological absence, the combination of exclusions, the sum of the neither/nor, that does not mean that the terms themselves from which it was built—the *not-landscape* and the *not-*

architecture—did not have a certain interest. This is because these terms express a strict opposition between the built and the not-built, the cultural and the natural, between which the production of sculptural art appeared to be suspended. And what began to happen in the career of one sculptor after another, beginning at the end of the 1960s, is that attention began to focus on the outer limits of those terms of exclusion. For, if those terms are the expression of a logical opposition stated as a pair of negatives, they can be transformed by a simple inversion into the same polar opposites but expressed positively. That is, the *not-architecture* is, according to the logic of a certain kind of expansion, just another way of expressing the term *landscape*, and the *not-landscape* is, simply, *architecture*. The expansion to which I am referring is called a Klein group when employed mathematically and has various other designations, among them the Piaget group, when used by structuralists involved in mapping operations within the human sciences.* By means of this logical expansion a set of binaries is transformed into a quaternary field which both mirrors the original opposition and at the same time opens it. It becomes a logically expanded field which looks like this:

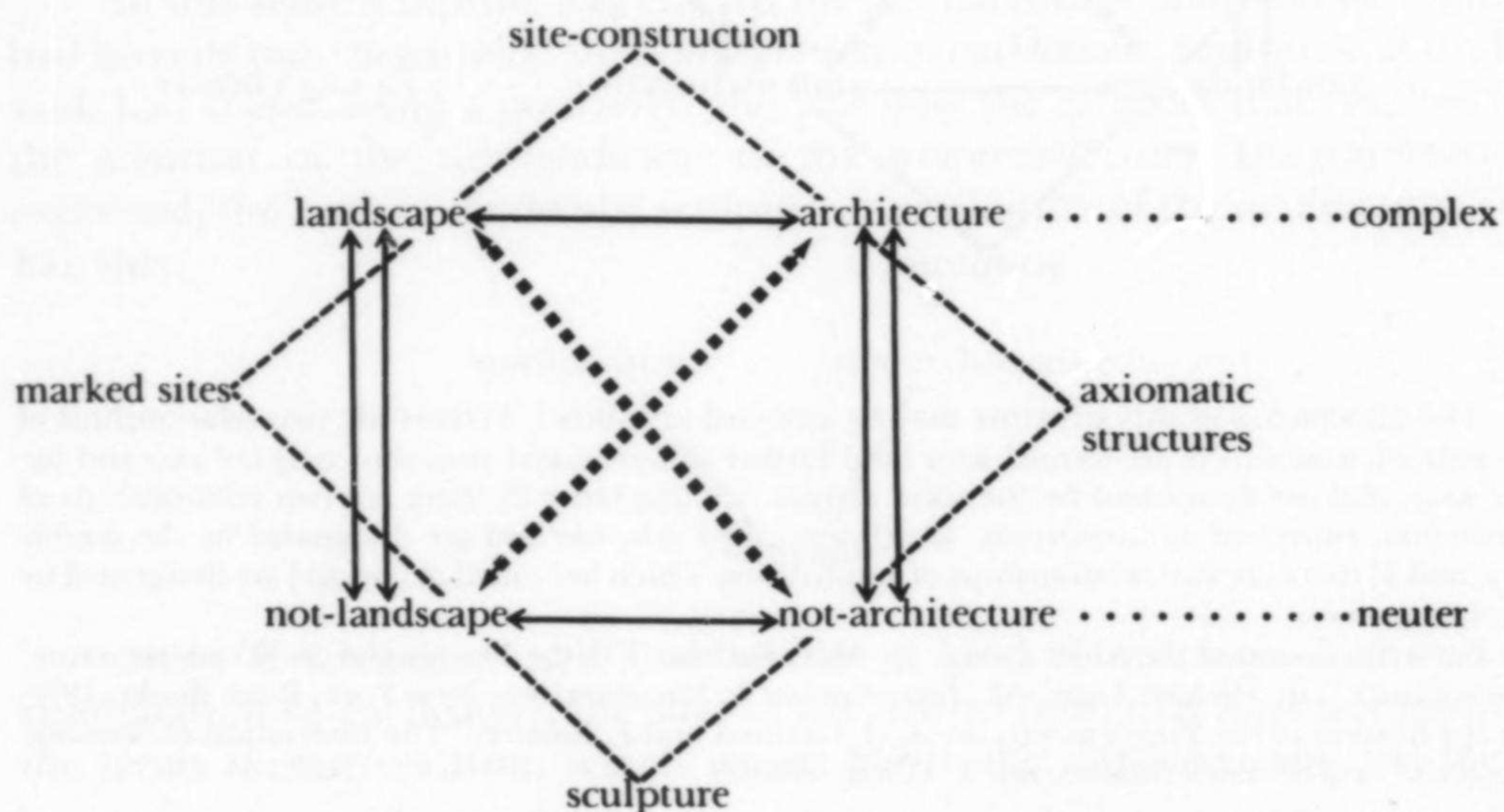


* The dimensions of this structure may be analyzed as follows: 1) there are two relationships of pure contradiction which are termed *axes* (and further differentiated into the *complex axis* and the *neuter axis*) and are designated by the solid arrows (see diagram); 2) there are two relationships of contradiction, expressed as involution, which are called *schemas* and are designated by the double arrows; and 3) there are two relationships of implication which are called *deixes* and are designated by the broken arrows.

For a discussion of the Klein group, see Marc Barbut, "On the Meaning of the Word 'Structure' in Mathematics," in Michael Lane, ed., *Introduction to Structuralism*, New York, Basic Books, 1970; for an application of the Piaget group, see A.-J. Greimas and F. Rastier, "The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints," *Yale French Studies*, no. 41 (1968), 86-105.

Another way of saying this is that even though *sculpture* may be reduced to what is in the Klein group the neuter term of the *not-landscape* plus the *not-architecture*, there is no reason not to imagine an opposite term—one that would be both *landscape* and *architecture*—which within this schema is called the *complex*. But to think the complex is to admit into the realm of art two terms that had formerly been prohibited from it: *landscape* and *architecture*—terms that could function to define the sculptural (as they had begun to do in modernism) only in their negative or neuter condition. Because it was ideologically prohibited, the complex had remained excluded from what might be called the closure of post-Renaissance art. Our culture had not before been able to think the complex, although other cultures have thought this term with great ease. Labyrinths and mazes are *both* landscape and architecture; Japanese gardens are *both* landscape and architecture; the ritual playing fields and processions of ancient civilizations were all in this sense the unquestioned occupants of the complex. Which is *not* to say that they were an early, or a degenerate, or a variant form of sculpture. They were part of a universe or cultural space in which sculpture was simply another part—not somehow, as our historicist minds would have it, the same. Their purpose and pleasure is exactly that they are opposite and different.

The expanded field is thus generated by problematizing the set of oppositions between which the modernist category *sculpture* is suspended. And once this has happened, once one is able to think one's way into this expansion, there are—logically—three other categories that one can envision, all of them a condition of the field itself, and none of them assimilable to *sculpture*. Because as we can see, *sculpture* is no longer the privileged middle term between two things that it isn't. *Sculpture* is rather only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities. And one has thereby gained the "permission" to think these other forms. So our diagram is filled in as follows:

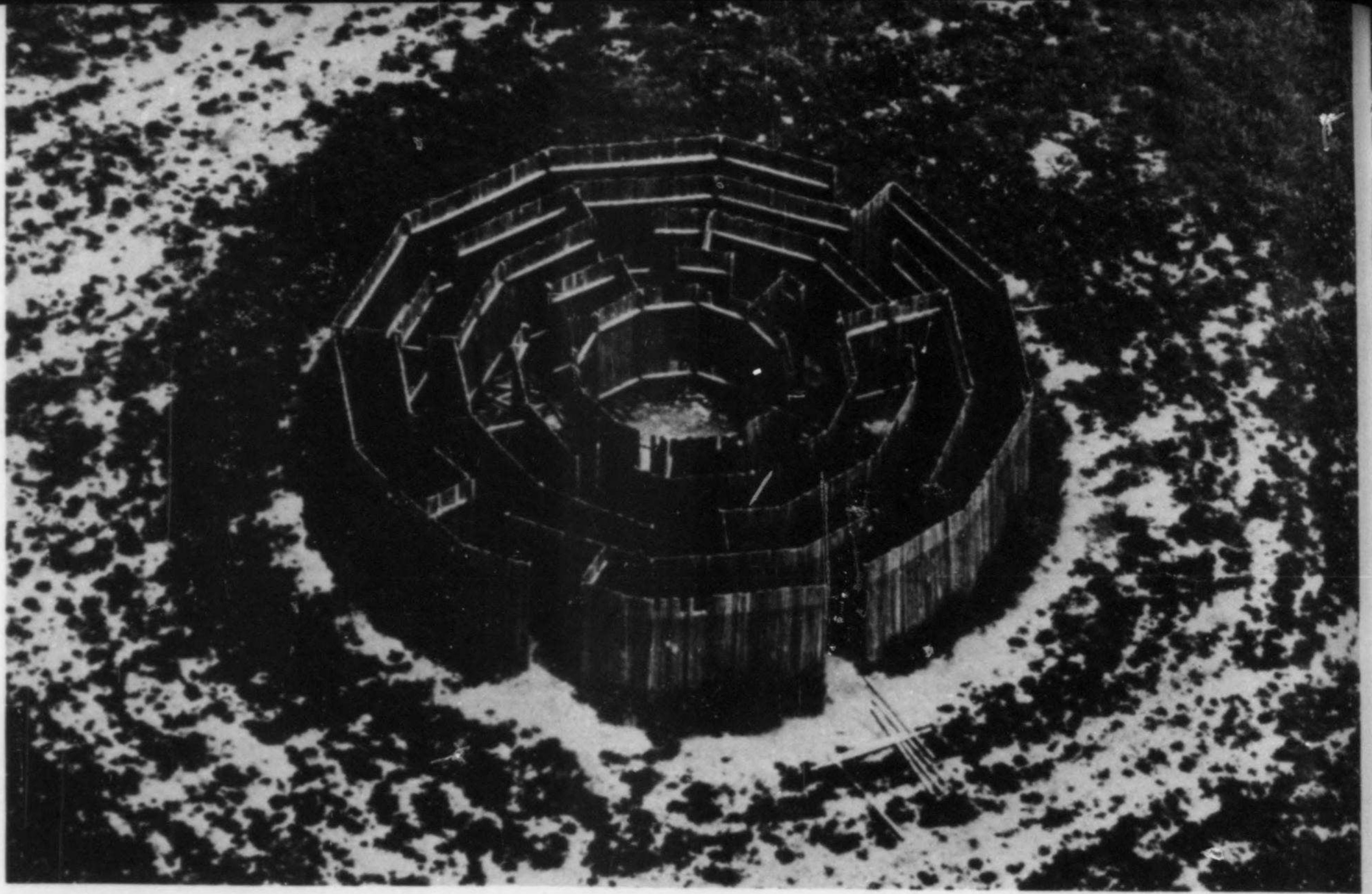




Robert Smithson. Spiral Jetty. 1969-70. (Photo Gianfranco Gorgoni.)

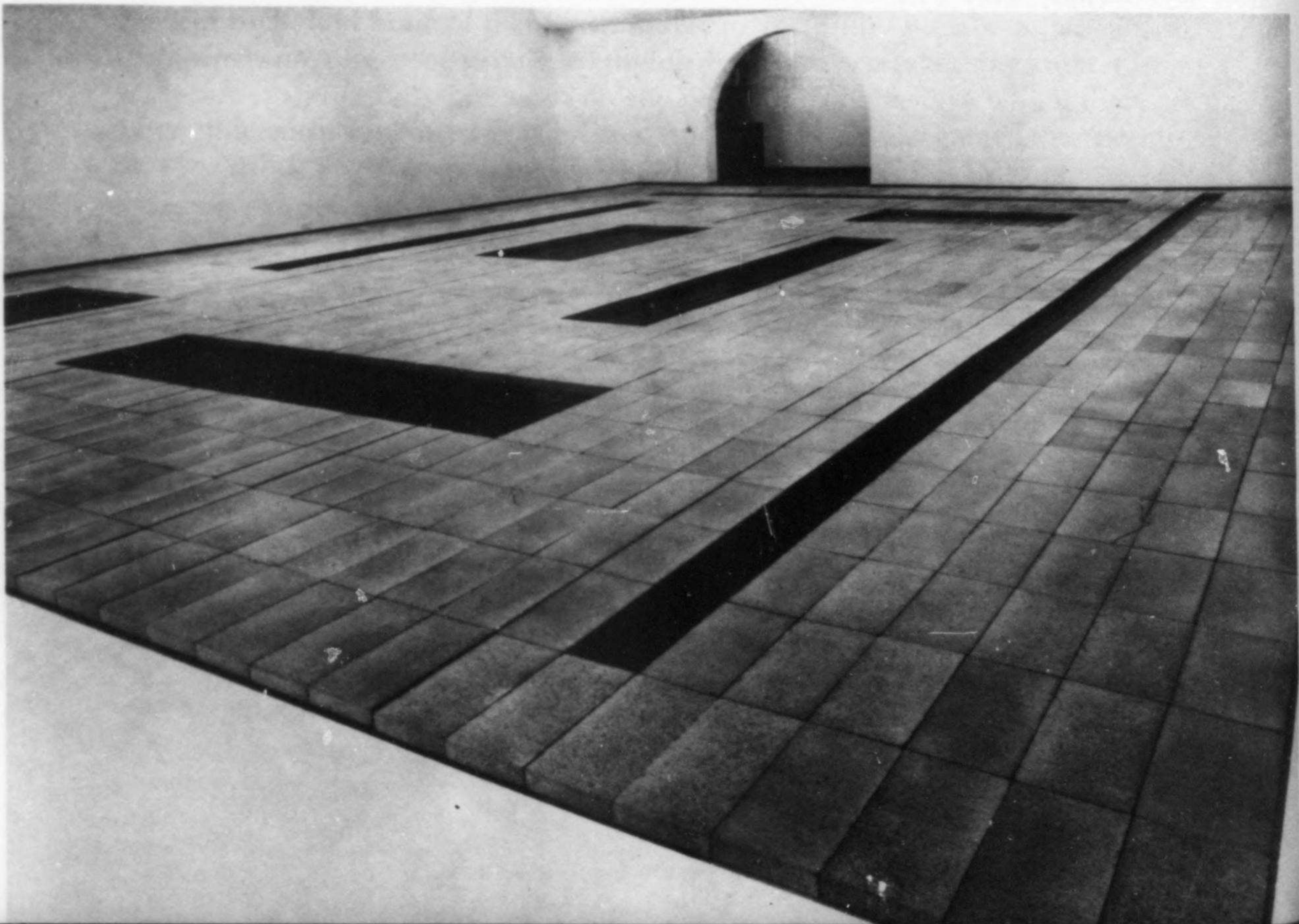
Robert Morris. Observatory. 1970.





Alice Aycock. Maze. 1972.

Carl Andre. Cuts. 1967.



It seems fairly clear that this permission (or pressure) to think the expanded field was felt by a number of artists at about the same time, roughly between the years 1968 and 1970. For, one after another Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Richard Serra, Walter De Maria, Robert Irwin, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman . . . had entered a situation the logical conditions of which can no longer be described as modernist. In order to name this historical rupture and the structural transformation of the cultural field that characterizes it, one must have recourse to another term. The one already in use in other areas of criticism is postmodernism. There seems no reason not to use it.

But whatever term one uses, the evidence is already in. By 1970, with the *Partially Buried Woodshed* at Kent State University, in Ohio, Robert Smithson had begun to occupy the complex axis, which for ease of reference I am calling *site construction*. In 1971 with the observatory he built in wood and sod in Holland, Robert Morris had joined him. Since that time, many other artists—Robert Irwin, Alice Aycock, John Mason, Michael Heizer, Mary Miss, Charles Simonds—have operated within this new set of possibilities.

Similarly, the possible combination of *landscape* and *not-landscape* began to be explored in the late 1960s. The term *marked sites* is used to identify work like Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969), as it also describes some of the work in the seventies by Serra, Morris, Carl Andre, Dennis Oppenheim, Nancy Holt, George Trakis, and many others. But in addition to actual physical manipulations of sites, this term also refers to other forms of marking. These might operate through the application of impermanent marks—Heizer's *Depressions*, Oppenheim's *Time Lines*, or De Maria's *Mile Long Drawing*, for example—or through the use of photography. Smithson's *Mirror Displacements in the Yucatan* were probably the first widely known instances of this, but since then the work of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton has focused on the photographic experience of marking. Christo's *Running Fence* might be said to be an impermanent, photographic, and political instance of marking a site.

The first artists to explore the possibilities of *architecture* plus *not-architecture* were Robert Irwin, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Christo. In every case of these *axiomatic structures*, there is some kind of intervention into the real space of architecture, sometimes through partial reconstruction, sometimes through drawing, or as in the recent works of Morris, through the use of mirrors. As was true of the category of the *marked site*, photography can be used for this purpose; I am thinking here of the video corridors by Nauman. But whatever the medium employed, the possibility explored in this category is a process of mapping the axiomatic features of the architectural experience—the abstract conditions of openness and closure—onto the reality of a given space.

The expanded field which characterizes this domain of postmodernism possesses two features that are already implicit in the above description. One of these concerns the practice of individual artists; the other has to do with the

question of medium. At both these points the bounded conditions of modernism have suffered a logically determined rupture.

With regard to individual practice, it is easy to see that many of the artists in question have found themselves occupying, successively, different places within the expanded field. And though the experience of the field suggests that this continual relocation of one's energies is entirely logical, an art criticism still in the thrall of a modernist ethos has been largely suspicious of such movement, calling it eclectic. This suspicion of a career that moves continually and erratically beyond the domain of sculpture obviously derives from the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialization of a practitioner within a given medium). But what appears as eclectic from one point of view can be seen as rigorously logical from another. For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used.

Thus the field provides both for an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore, and for an organization of work that is not

Robert Smithson. First and Seventh Mirror Displacements, Yucatan. 1969.



dictated by the conditions of a particular medium. From the structure laid out above, it is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation. (The postmodernist space of painting would obviously involve a similar expansion around a different set of terms from the pair *architecture/landscape*—a set that would probably turn on the opposition *uniqueness/reproducibility*.) It follows, then, that within any one of the positions generated by the given logical space, many different mediums might be employed. It follows as well that any single artist might occupy, successively, any one of the positions. And it also seems the case that within the limited position of sculpture itself the organization and content of much of the strongest work will reflect the condition of the logical space. I am thinking here of the sculpture of Joel Shapiro, which, though it positions itself in the neuter term, is involved in the setting of images of architecture within relatively vast fields (landscapes) of space. (These considerations apply, obviously, to other work as well—Charles Simonds, for example, or Ann and Patrick Poirier.)

Richard Long. Untitled. 1969. (Krefeld, Germany.)



I have been insisting that the expanded field of postmodernism occurs at a specific moment in the recent history of art. It is a historical event with a determinant structure. It seems to me extremely important to map that structure and that is what I have begun to do here. But clearly, since this is a matter of history, it is also important to explore a deeper set of questions which pertain to something more than mapping and involve instead the problem of explanation. These address the root cause—the conditions of possibility—that brought about the shift into postmodernism, as they also address the cultural determinants of the opposition through which a given field is structured. This is obviously a different approach to thinking about the history of form from that of historicist criticism's constructions of elaborate genealogical trees. It presupposes the acceptance of definitive ruptures and the possibility of looking at historical process from the point of view of logical structure.

*Joel Shapiro. Untitled (Cast Iron and Plaster Houses).
1975.*



LAURIE ANDERSON

EVER SINCE SWITZERLAND, I've been trying to keep things simple. I was doing a performance that involved a lot of cues for films and sounds. I was working with two technicians and we'd gone through the piece several times in rehearsals but I guess I'd never noticed that they didn't speak English. I'd say, "Listen, when you see the pictures of the birds come up, take channel 2 out slowly, switch mic 3 off, and hit the slide," and they'd shrug that confident continental shrug. I wasn't worried at all. But on the night of the performance, about three minutes into the piece, I began to notice that films were appearing at random, sounds blasted in, then died out. The mics were dead, pictures of birds flashed on and off. Between sections, I'd run back to the projection booth and yell, "That film was supposed to be on three sections ago! What are you *doing* back here? You're really messing things up! Here, put this on . . . gotta go," and I'd run back up to the front, grab the mic, and my voice would become sweet, rise an octave of its own accord, become, you know, mellow. The schizophrenic shifts were becoming unbearable. Holding that mic was like going to Paris. The second I arrive in that city, my voice rises. It becomes singsong. I get flirtatious. Wear different clothes. Mince. My voice in drag.

I've noticed that nuns do this, too, sometimes. Last spring I spent a week in a convent in the Midwest. I had been invited to do a series of seminars. I'm not sure why I was invited but I think it had something to do with the fact that I'm a woman and men weren't allowed near the convent . . . and with something they'd read somewhere about my work dealing with "nomadic voices" and "the spiritual issues of our decade." (Actually, this was probably from a press release I'd written myself.)

I stayed in a very spartan room—a cross over the head of the single bed. It was quiet there at night but at 5:00 A.M. precisely, there was a tiny tapping at the door. I'd jump out of bed and run to the door. One of the sisters always left orange juice in what looked like a plastic methadone cup on the floor just outside the door.

* These texts and lyrics are drawn from the first stages of the working process of a performance to be presented at The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance in April. A preview was given at Carnegie Recital Hall in February.

The night I arrived they had a party for me in a nearby town—in the downstairs lounge of the Crystal Lanes Bowling Alley. The alley was reserved for the nuns every Tuesday for their tournaments. It was a pizza party. The lounge was decorated like a cave with that spray-on rock that's usually used in sound proofing. In this case it had the opposite effect—it amplified every sound. The tournament play-offs were that night and we could hear the bowling balls rolling slowly down the aisles, the rock-globs acting as resonators. Finally the pizza arrived and the Mother Superior began to bless the food. She had a gruff, low-pitched speaking voice but as soon as she began to pray, her voice rose, became pure, like a child's. The prayer went on and on, increasing slightly in volume when the noise upstairs got louder. After the prayer, we all sang a song before eating. I have forgotten what the song was about except for a few lines. Sisters and mothers kept getting mentioned. There were lines about voices raised in song. No fathers. No brothers. Just a lot of bowling balls rolling overhead.

A Duet for Paper and Hand

A while ago, I got a letter from a woman in Holland who was writing to ask what it was like to be an artist living in New York City. She wrote, "Dear Laurie Anderson, For a long time have I been walking around with a great deal of surprise in my eyes to the American art development. And how to know except to go? Since I cannot for several reasons to the New World and especially to New York City go: Where are the questions: 1) How is it to leave your own town and so to go to New York? What means it? And how feels it? 2) How did you become a good house to live in? 3) What do you do to be living? 4) What means New York in the social way? Cafes? 5) What means New York? What means it and how feels it? What needs it? These are the questions and hoping am I to take your answers into Dutch so the townspeople in Holland can better know the townspeople of New York and what their reasons are. And for my own person, hoping am I that these reasons will help me to be more complicated. Thanking you, I am truly your own. . ."

I tried for days to answer this letter. But each time I thought I'd gotten it just right, I'd get up, drink some coffee, smoke a cigarette, then go back to it, and it was always completely garbled, unreadable, something very odd about the syntax. I'd rip the paper out of the typewriter, crumple it up, and throw it on the floor. Mounds began to form around my desk. I began to work on it only late at night when it was quiet enough to concentrate. After a while, I began to notice a sound. It became increasingly prominent, nervewracking. It was the sound of all that crumpled-up paper slowly, spasmodically unwrinkling. All those mistakes reconstituting . . . opening back up with what seemed like an organic life of their own.

It was like the time I went to see a palm reader in Albuquerque. The odd thing about the reading was that everything she told me was totally wrong. She took my hand and said, "I see here by these lines that you are an only child. . ." (I

have seven brothers and sisters) “. . . I read here that you love to fly. . .” (I’m totally terrified of planes) and so on. But she seemed so sure of this information that eventually I began to feel like I’d been walking around for years with these false documents permanently tattooed to my hands. It was very noisy in the house, family members kept walking in and out speaking a high clicking kind of language that sounded like Arabic. Books and magazines in Arabic were strewn all over the carpet. Suddenly I realized that maybe it was a translation problem—maybe she had been reading from right to left instead of left to right—and thinking of mirrors, I gave her my other hand. She didn’t take it, but instead, held out her own hand. We sat there for a minute or two in what I assumed was some sort of strange participatory, invocatory ritual. Finally I realized that her hand was out because she was waiting . . . waiting for money.

from *Modern America Moves*

Last year I was on a twin engine plane from Milwaukee to New York City. Just over LaGuardia, one of the engines konked out and we started dropping down . . . flipping over and over. Then the other engine died; we were out of control; it was silent; New York City was getting taller and taller.

A voice came over the intercom and announced:

Our pilot has just informed us that we are about to attempt a crash landing. Please extinguish all cigarettes. Place tray tables in upright locked position.

Your captain says: Please do not panic.

Your captain says: Put your knees up to your chins.

Captain says: Put your hands over your eyes.

Captain says: Put your hands on your heads.

Put your hands on my knees!

Heh Heh, you riff raff, this *is* your captain and we are going down . . . down . . . we are all going down . . . together.

As it turned out, we were caught in a downdraft which rammed us into a soft bank near the edge of the airstrip. It was . . . a miracle. But afterwards, I was terrified about getting onto planes. For months, the minute I started walking down that aisle, it would happen—my eyes would clamp shut . . . I’d fall into a deep, involuntary sleep. My mind would shut down.

You don’t want to see this.

You don’t want to be here.

You will lose your dog.

Finally I was able to remain conscious while in the air but I always had to go up to the forward cabin and ask the stewardesses if I could sit with them. “Hi . . . mind if I join you?” They were always rather irritated (“Oh all *right* . . . what a

baby!") and I watched their uniforms crack as we made nervous chitchat. Sometimes, even this didn't help and I'd have to find one of the other passengers to talk to. You can spot these people immediately . . . there's one on every flight, someone who's really on *your* wavelength. I was on a flight from LA when I spotted one of them—a girl about fourteen. She had a stuffed rabbit set up on her tray table and she kept arranging and rearranging the rabbit and waving to it. And I decided, *this* is the one I want to talk to. So I sat down and we started to chat and suddenly I realized she was speaking an entirely different language—computerese—a kind of high-tech lingo.

It was amazing. If she didn't understand something, it just "didn't scan." Everything was circuitry . . . electronics . . . switching. We talked mostly about her boyfriend. He was never in a bad mood—he was in a bad mode. Modey kind of a guy. The romance was rocky and she kept saying, "Oh man like, it's like it's so DIGITAL." She just meant the relationship was on again/off again. Always two things switching. Current passes through. And then it doesn't. It was a language of sounds . . . of noise . . . of switching. It was a language of the rabbit—of the caribou, the beaver, the penguin. A language of the past. Current running through bodies. On again/off again. One thing instantly replaces another—a language of the future.

Put your knees up to your chin.
 Have you lost your dog?
 Put your hands over your eyes.
 Jump out of the plane.
 You are not alone.
 There is no pilot.
 This is the language of the on again/off again future.

from After Dinner Science

Last week I got a call from the Tesla Institute in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The voice was saying, ". . . so we understand that many of your works are dedicated to Nikola Tesla and we know you understand the importance of this thinker and that you deplore the Western World's information blackout of this research. We invite you now to come to speak at the Institute—as a free thinker and free citizen of the world speaking on the American Imperialist blackout of information, Western intervention in the course of Progress and Knowledge, the Capitalist Obstruction of Right Thinking and Scientific History. Please inform us of your decision." Click. I hung up. It was certainly tempting—really a chance to speak my own mind. I began to do some research on Tesla's life—a story that not many Americans seem to know. Tesla was from Graz, Austria. He had a brief career working under Edison, who despised Tesla for several reasons. One was that Tesla came to work every morning in formal attire—hat, morning coat, spats—

and this just was not the American way. Another was that Tesla invented so many things, while wearing these clothes. He was the discoverer and defender of the clean and efficient AC. He was very secretive, however, and people were suspicious of him. For a while he had a lab in Colorado; one of the effects of his work on the Tesla Coil was the creation of powerful electromagnetic fields—every time his neighbors turned on the water, they received high-voltage shocks. He was also responsible for designing generators that converted Niagara Falls into power for New York City. Edison was threatened by this new kind of power and did everything in his power to discredit Tesla. In his later years, Edison was something of a showman and used to go on the circuit demonstrating the effects of (Tesla's) AC current. He'd get up on stage with a dog and some bare wires. "Ladies and gentlemen! This demonstration is merely to suggest the effects of AC current on the human body!" And attached the wires to the dog. The dog was dead in under three seconds. Edison never elaborated on what more than a suggestion of this force could mean.

Tesla's situation deteriorated in the '40s when the US Defense Department demanded the plans for the Tesla Coil, which its inventor would not surrender. His research was made more and more difficult. Gradually he lost everything and spent the last decades of his life wandering around New York City as a bum.

I decided to open the series of talks in Belgrade with a song called "The Dance of Electricity." The rhythm is derived from an actual dance—a kind of involuntary dance—the dance you do when one of your fingers gets wedged into a live socket. A slow foxtrot in place . . . arms pumping up and down . . . the mouth opening and closing . . . the teeth bared.

from *After Science, Dinner*

(fieldwork, Southeastern Kentucky, September '78)

I had no money. No tent. No definite plans. Just a sleeping bag, lighter, some Burroughs books, a few packs of Camels.

Out on the highway, it's warm for September and bright. A semi loaded with limestone rolls up and I climb in. "Sexy Baby Maker's the handle," says the scrawny, slit-eyed driver. "Murried are you?"

"Uh, sure, I'm mar--ried. Hus-band's waiting in the next town . . . for---get the name of the town right now . . ."

"Well, uh, yuh know, nine outta tin murried women go out. Ja know that?"

"Oh. I didn't re---alize that . . ." The limestone is heavy—every pothole chops my words into syllables.

"Yup. You one?" His hand is on my knee and I'm not sure he doesn't know it's not the gearshift. I stick a cigarette in my mouth. We hit a pot hole and I miss. The cigarette sticks to my lower lip, bobbing up and down while I talk.

"I just re---mem--bered that I left a . . . a . . . left a . . . I left a . . . book back there," and I jump out at the next light.

A couple of miles down a back road, I see a sign that reads "COPPERHEAD ZOO THIS WAY." Around the next bend there is an old roadside stand—the kind that sold ice cream and auto parts in the fifties. A hand-labelled sign—"COPPERHEAD ZOO ADMISSION ONE DOLLAR"—was nailed to the door. No one's around to collect so I walk right in. In the center of the building is a large chicken-wire pen, a copperhead coiled in the corner. The walls are lined with dozens of identical cages, all labelled "COPPERHEAD." They are filled with rabbits, crowded ten or twelve to a cage. Black, brown, spotted, white rabbits press their noses to the mesh, sniffing frantically, rhythmically.

"No point in hanging around here," I hear myself say. I have begun to talk out loud.

It seems like the middle of the night. I wake up suddenly and look out from under the rock ledge. The fire has burned down to coals and it is dark in the woods. I hear a rustle and wait for my eyes to adjust to the blackness. I can just make out, from my low vantage point, the butt of a musket and a pair of cracked, spatula-shaped shoes. I crawl out of the sleeping bag and the rest of the figure looms into view: Male; About 60 years old; 5'5"; 140 lbs.; Black hair; Tight sweatshirt; Armed with what appears to be a musket. A minute or so passes. Finally, I hear a voice, "We eat critters." I don't know what to say, so more time passes. "We eat critters," he repeats. "Possum. Squirrel. Rabbits. That's what." I suddenly understand—he is out hunting. Night food.

His name is Mr. Taylor and he is 22 years old. He invites me back home, "next holler," where he and Mrs. Taylor, also 22, live with their four children, Rhonda, Jack, Jim, and (oddly enough) Jim. There used to be two more Taylors but last summer they fell down one of the holes left by Exxon's systematic strip mining. Now that certain kinds of low grade coal can be converted into oil, companies are reopening mines that were sealed 75 years ago . . . Holes were drilled and left uncovered. Dense brush quickly camouflaged the holes. The holes were deep, vertical, their sides slippery as intestines. "I could see the two little 'uns out in the field . . . and then I couldn't see them no more," explained Mrs. Taylor, recalling the incident.

Mostly we sit on the porch, Mr. Taylor, Mrs. Taylor, and me, watching it rain and making small talk. Every time the rain stops for a minute, Mr. Taylor jumps up and trots around to the back of the house. We can hear intermittent hacking sounds from the tobacco patch. Then he reappears. We talk slowly and every sentence seems to end the same way, a kind of lyrical upswing: "Rain's letting up . . . don't you think, Rhonda?" (Gap of 20-30 seconds.) ". . . Yup. . . ." "Think it's time to check the pot . . . don't you think, Momma?" ". . . Yep. . . ."

I follow Rhonda into the cabin. Every few seconds she opens a large pot and steam billows out. Inside there is a large piece of grayish meat, swollen and prickly, bobbing up and down in the water. "Possum," says Rhonda. We make the biscuits—light and fluffy—pile them on plates, scoop the possum on top and begin the gravy. "Red Eye Gravy . . ." says Rhonda as the pork fat begins to simmer. She adds a pot of yesterday's coffee, stirs in some corn meal. We pour this over the possum and then, because it's Sunday, we get out a rusty can of maple syrup and drizzle it over the whole thing.

from *Early American Money: the Big Picture*

WHITE WATER: The open seas. Gray waves in all directions. Not a day goes by but it gets darker . . . then gradually lighter. No birds. It's 1850 in this part of the ocean. In the distance, a square-rigged clipper is looking for oil. And underneath, like primitive cars, the greenback whales swim. Short wave rumbles.

We're the new money.
We sing the popular songs.
We're the drivers now.
We are the animals with the original tanks.
We are the vaults.
We are the banks.
Oil in water.
Dust to dust.
Got no gold teeth.
In God we trust.

BLACK OIL: Texas dust. Years of pumping. Finally the ocean underneath explodes through the dirt, shoots up, is captured, dwindles, is translated into petrodollars. The dark new world makes way for the sweet and handsome Arab women, their kohl-darkened eyes looking into shop windows in Paris where everything is shiek. A new language is coined.

Modern Money: Types

—Switzerland has introduced braille characters on the edges of bills in consideration of the high percentage of blind citizens.

—Italy has run out of metal and each town has introduced its own paper currency representing small amounts. The pictures on this money are crude drawings of local businessmen and politicians.

—The United States of America has adopted Plastic Plug-In Currency. Cars pull up to toll booths. Current races through the plastic. Transportation is charged.

Modern Money Sings to Itself

Mom said: Honey don't put that money in your mouth.
 You never know where money has been.
 Pop said: Put your money where your mouth is,
 And you'll never have to talk again.
 Cause money talks and nobody walks.
 Money talks and NOBODY walks.
 And when money talks, money says,
 It says, I'M EASY AND I'M FAST. LET ME TAKE YOU FOR A RIDE.
 LET ME EASE YOU DOWN THE FREEWAY.
 Well, you're sitting at the kitchen table,
 Sucking on your silver spoon—
 Mom says: Don't talk with your mouth full, honey.
 You know it's rude to choke on your food.
 Cause money talks and nobody walks.
 And when money talks, money says,
 It says, EASY COME EASY GO. It says COME AS YOU ARE . . .
 It whispers SWEET, SWEET NOTHING . . . COME AS YOU ARE
 BUT DON'T FORGET TO PAY AS YOU GO.

Three Colonies

Jamestown . . . 1607 . . . John Smith
 Ship docks . . . all out . . . by bye! . . . (good luck)
 Left . . . on a rock . . . waving good bye . . . no maps
 No money . . . no recipes.

Oh we're Americans. On the move. We're colonists.
 Colonists on the move and we're moving. On the move.
 Yeah we're Americans on the move.

Jonestown . . . 1977 . . . Jim Jones moves out and America moves.
 Cause we're Americans. Americans on the move. On the move.
 Yeah we're colonists on the move and we're moving.
 (John Smith, Jim Jones, just your normal, average,
 All-American colonist, colonists; on the move.)

The moon . . . 1999 . . . we move up . . . move out . . . on the move.
 And we leave our flag . . . planted up there . . .

Stretched out straight . . . on wires . . . so it looks . . . like it's waving
In the nonexistent . . . lunar . . . breeze . . .
Oh yeah it's left . . . on that rock . . . waving . . . on that rock.

Cause we're Americans. We're Americans on the moon.
Yeah we're colonists. Colonists on the move and we're moving.
On the move. Moving out.

A Picture: sitting on the bus, a voice from behind:

"You know, when I make it, I mean really *make* it, I'm going to get an island and there will be no laws . . . and no money. I'll make my own laws . . . and you know sometimes I just sit around real late at night, and I'm real stoned, wrecked . . . and I go outside and just kind of stretch out under the stars . . . and I look up and sometimes I think I can actually read my own mind."

Song for the Night Driver #1

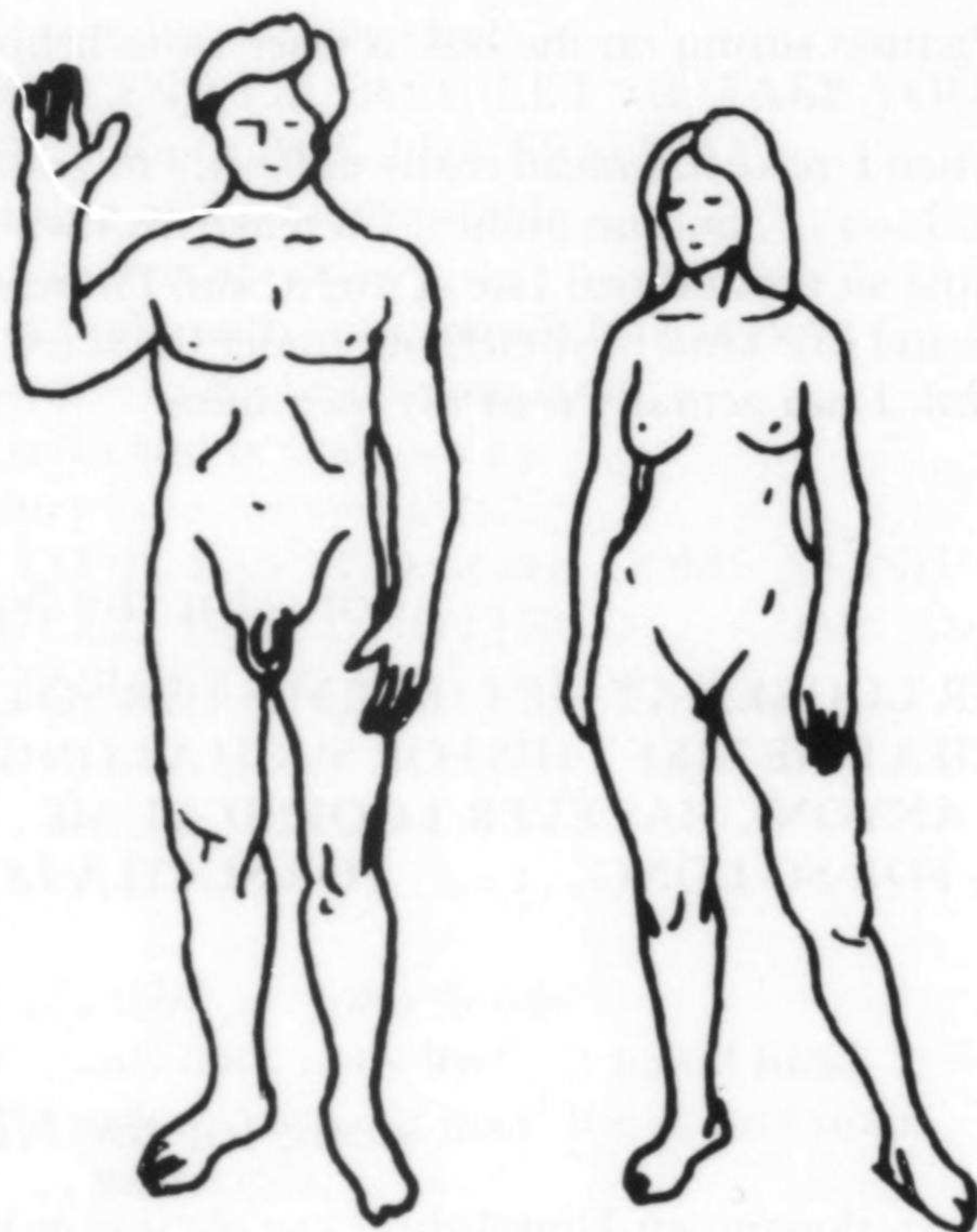
NO ONE HAS EVER LOOKED AT ME LIKE THIS FOR SO LONG. NO ONE HAS EVER STARED AT ME LIKE THIS FOR SUCH A LONG TIME. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME ANYONE HAS EVER LOOKED AT ME . . . STARED AT ME LIKE THIS . . . FOR SO LONG FOR SUCH A LONG TIME FOR SO LONG.

Song for the Night Driver #2

It was a hot day in downtown Honolulu. I can see it now without opening my eyes. Palm trees swaying in the white hot heat. We were people with no definite plans. Driving up and down the main street. Sleek convertibles with long sharp fins were gliding effortlessly along the boulevard like fish that had somehow evolved and slithered out of the warm water. We saw you arrive, pull onto Main Street, a huge mound of snow piled on the roof of your car, snow drifts on the fenders, your headlights on in the afternoon. You'd been on *that* road so many times before you'd lost count. You could do it with your eyes closed. I can see it now. You were rarely where you thought you were. Space always seemed to be falling away from you. You thought of space that way—as something you could fall into—falling for miles—sideways. You never felt out of place because you never stopped. I never saw you get out of your car. And no one knew where you'd been.

Song for the Night Driver #3

I . . . I AM I AM IN MY BODY I AM IN MY BODY THE WAY I AM IN MY BODY THE WAY MOST PEOPLE DRIVE I AM IN MY BODY THE WAY MOST PEOPLE DRIVE IN THEIR CARS.



Say Hello

(In this piece, a violin bow is initially moved like a windshield wiper. The text in italics is harmonized, dropping the pitch of the voice at octave.)

Look at all that traffic! You know when you're driving at night like this it can suddenly occur to you that maybe you're going in completely the wrong direction. That turn you took back there . . . you were really tired and it was dark and raining and you took the turn and you just started going that way and then the rain stops and it starts to get light and you look around and absolutely everything is completely unfamiliar. You know you've never been here before and

you pull into the next station and you feel so awkward saying, "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"

(The violin bow is extended to the right continuing to describe an arc. A series of slides of hands waving is projected across the stage; the bow's motion provides a "screen" which picks up the image at its plane of focus.)

You can read the signs. You've been on this road before. Do you want to go home?

Hello, excuse me, can you tell me where I am?

You can read the sign language. In our country, good-bye looks just like hello. This is the way we say hello. Say hello.

Hello, excuse me, can you tell me where I am?

In our country, good-bye looks just like hello. It is a diagram between two points. It is shorthand for last night you were here and then when I woke up in the morning you were gone. In our country, good-bye looks just like hello.

Hello, excuse me, can you tell me where I am?

You can read the signs. This is our sign language. It is a diagram of movement between two points. It is a sweep on the dial. It is shorthand for you moved away and I'll never forgive myself for not spending more time with you now that you're gone. In our country, this is the way we say hello. This is the way we say good-bye. Say hello.

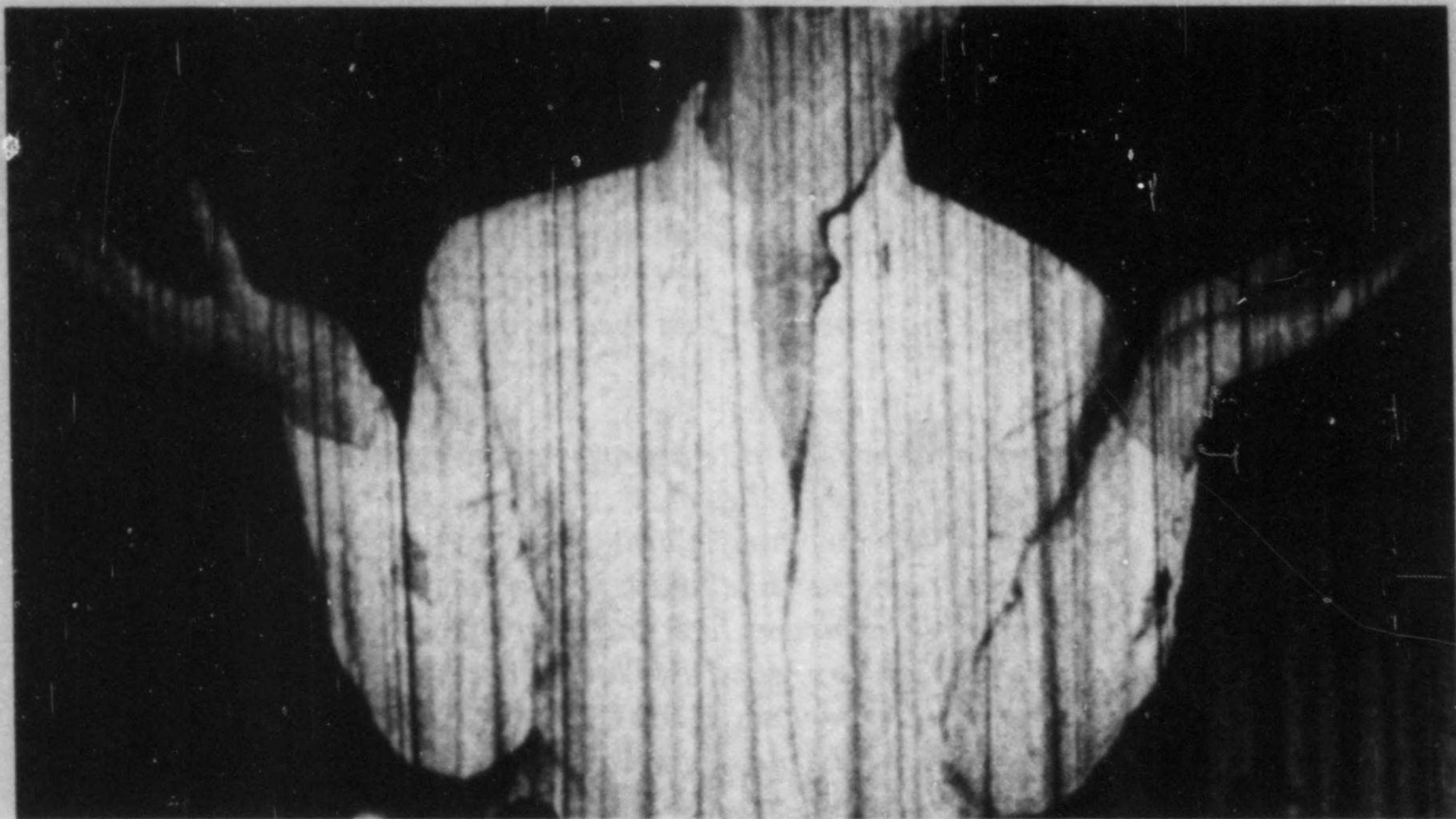
Hello, excuse me, can you tell me where I am?

(An image of Apollo 10 diagram of male and female is projected onto the bow.)

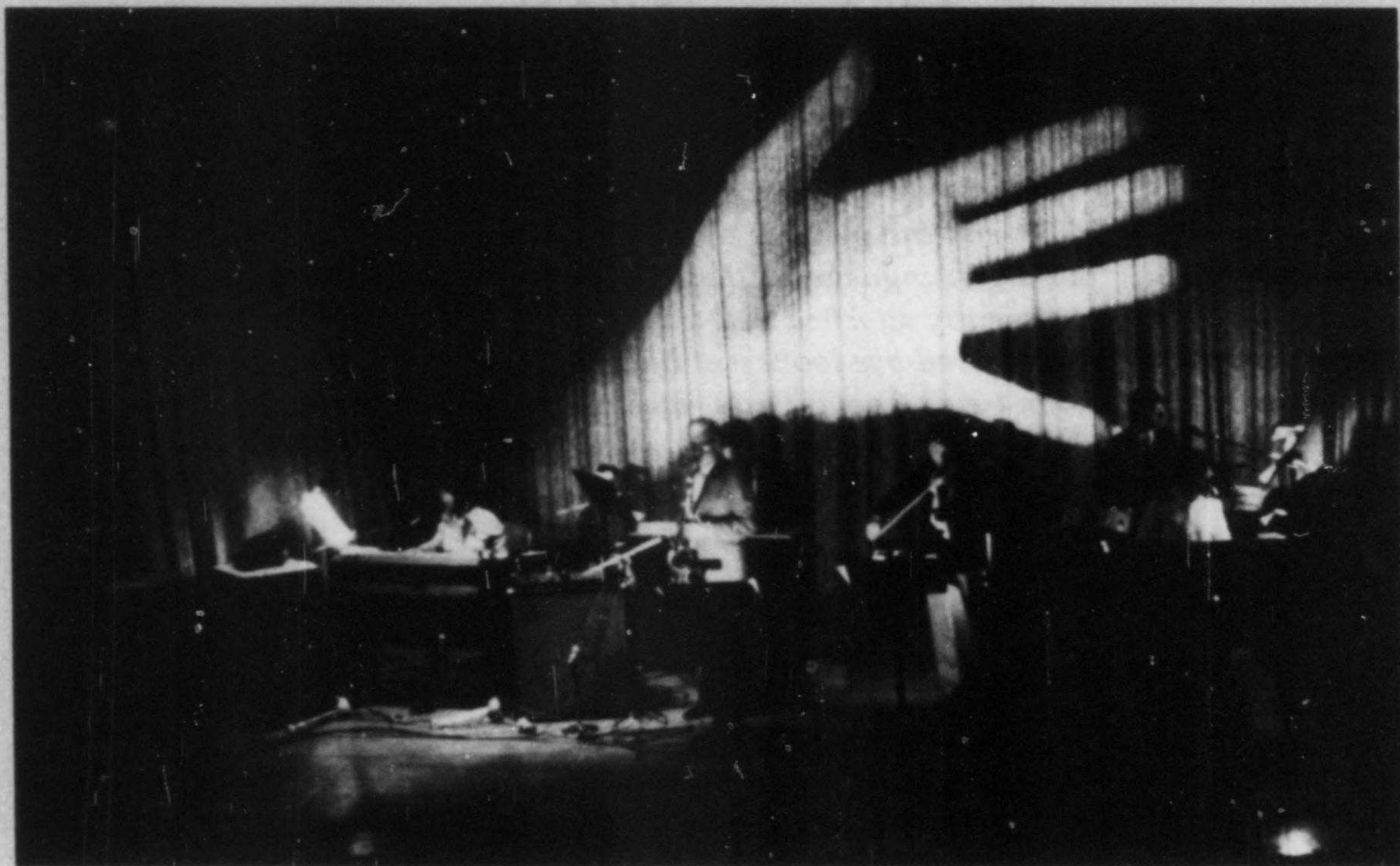
In our country, we send the pictures of our sign language into outer space. They are speaking our sign language in these pictures. Do you think they will think his hand is permanently attached that way? Or do you think they will read our signs? In our country, good-bye looks just like hello. It is a sweep on the dial. In our country, you don't ever know if you have really arrived. You don't even know if you have left yet. In our country, good-bye looks just like hello. Say hello.

pp. 54-5:

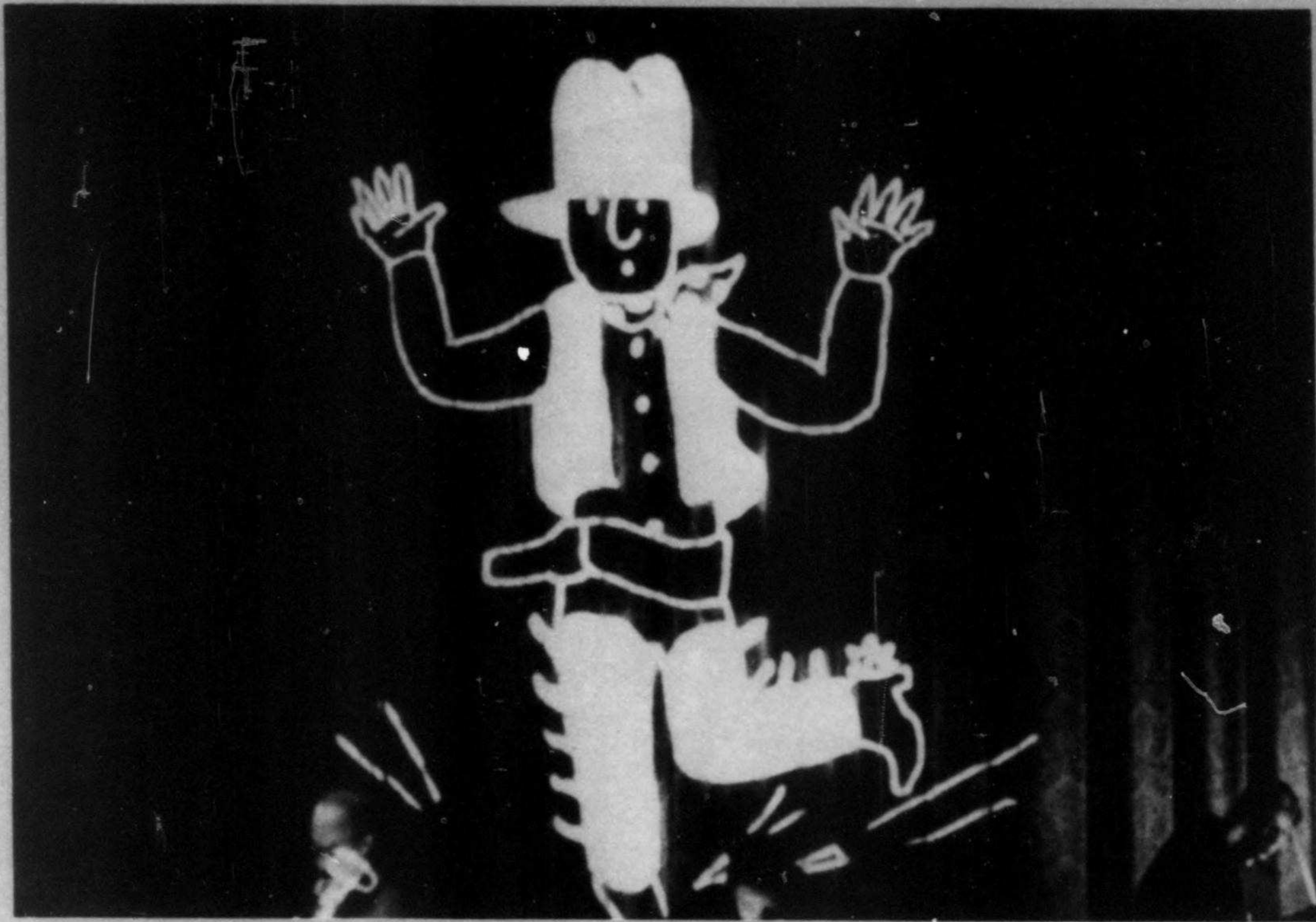
Laurie Anderson. *Americans on the Move*. Preview performance, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York February 11, 1979. (Photos Marcia Resnick.)



from "Does this woman think it's raining? Or do you think it's all the same to her?"



from "I went to a palm reader..."



from "You want . . . so you dance . . ."



from "So you're born . . ."

Or do you

reader . . ."



Stuart Sh
"Toulou

Stuart Sherman: Object Ritual

BERENICE REYNAUD

translated by THOMAS REPENSEK

To understand the work, one should not, of course, ask what it "means"—but only what need does it answer.

—Richard Foreman, "The Carrot and the Stick"

Since 1974 Stuart Sherman has been giving performances, usually unaccompanied, sometimes with other participants, in the lofts of lower Manhattan and on the street in various locations around the city. He has completed his *Eleventh Spectacle* as well as two other presentations that have not been numbered. Most of his performances, executed in silence with an almost religious concentration, consist of the manipulation, generally on a fragile little folding table, of different kinds of objects, usually plastic toys, but also bars of soap, kitchen utensils, and other objects manufactured in assembly-line imitations of one another, that cost little, and are easily obtainable.¹ It is Sherman's manipulation of objects that makes his performances resemble a magic show, but magic without tricks, suggesting that the point of his activity is something other than what it seems to be, that it is not the transformation of objects that is important, but, as Noel Carroll has observed, the order that is imposed on them.²

Some of the performances have titles, for example, the different sequences of *Ninth Spectacle (Portraits of People)*: "Bill Ives," "Nancy Tobin," "Sam Sherman," "Richard Needle," "Richard Foreman," "Stefan Brecht," "Kate Mannheim," "Charles Ludlam," "Stuart Sherman," and so on. But the use of titles should not mislead us. Sherman's performances do not depict anything; they have no representational content. In the *Tenth Spectacle*, for example, the sequence of manipulations called "Paris" is not a signifying chain whose referent is Paris;

1. During a conversation with Sherman I happened to use the term *junk* to designate his objects; he strongly disapproved and we finally agreed on the term *cheap artifacts*.

2. Noel Carroll, in *Soho Weekly News*, September 28, 1978, p. 81.

neither is it a "painting"—expressionist or representational—of Paris as seen by Stuart Sherman (being thereby the projection of Sherman as epistemological subject). Yet it *is* possible to think of this sequence of manipulations as some kind of signifying chain, and to determine *what* kind will be the task of this analysis. Which is to say, how does one make an art that is entirely constituted of objects such that the objects themselves are denatured, and, to what ends does one do this? Or to ask the question in yet another way, what is the meaning of an art which is populated with objects but is, simultaneously and above all, abstract?

One can of course turn to the history of modern painting for examples of the formalist denaturing of objects. Cubism for instance exploits a limited repertory of mundane objects—guitars, bottles, pipes, bowls of fruit—for expressly pictorial ends, as aspects of things become the signifiers for elements of spatial syntax: overlap, contiguity, recession, diminution. But this cubist absorption of the depicted object into the abstract, formal codes of representational space can be seen as a rather more traditional attitude toward the object than the one enunciated by Apollinaire, who asserted (along with the futurists) that one could paint as well with feces and blood, with oil cloth, or with detachable collars.

Whatever lineage we might trace forward from the formalist sublimation of the object, the one that leads from Apollinaire's eruptive conception of it obviously moves in another direction—from Duchamp to Rauschenberg to Warhol to today. (An analogous revolution occurred in music with the introduction of noise to replace notes, a revolution Cage did not begin but whose principles he established and of which he became one of the most forceful exponents.) It is this second tradition of the object to which Sherman's work belongs, a tradition in which art is made not out of the already constituted space of Western painting or sculpture or theater, but rather out of the inchoate and unexplored space of postindustrial consumer capitalism itself, the space of the cheap, disposable simulacrum of the real.

It is not necessary to reproduce here the kind of semiological analysis that during the last several years has incontestably established the "redundancy" if not the "orgy" of signifiers (and its humanist correlative: the loss of the Signified) in the advanced capitalist countries during the era of "mechanical reproduction." But it is important to focus on the fact that the multiplication of consumer objects, their mass production, their interchangeability, their temporary use value, and their mass consumption have created between objects and the signifying chains into which they are inserted a different relationship than would exist if one were dealing with a uniquely fashioned object whose perfection is its durability. Indeed, the society labeled "consumer" and so easily accused of materialism is the very one which exhibits the strongest contempt for objects. This is not only, as Marx has said, because exchange value has replaced use value, giving rise to a new fetishism—that of money—but because the signifying value, far from being lost in an overabundance of manufactured products, has been transferred from the object or from a collection of objects to the manipulation of those objects.

This displacement of value from the object to its relation to gesture can be

found in certain preindustrial cultures; an obvious example is the potlatch ceremony practiced by the Northwest Coast American Indians, in which goods acquired through conquest or work signify the wealth of their possessor only when given away as a gift to an enemy. With this gift the owner denies practical and even symbolic (ostentatious) value to the vehicle, transferring signification from the object to an action applied to that object.

The potlatch thus provides a useful, because simple, model of the process of denaturing an object. Yet between the potlatch and the manipulation of objects in advanced industrial societies there is an essential difference, for in making a gift its basis, the potlatch sets up a relationship between two subjectivities, even if that relationship is one of defiance and hostility (although one is also aware of the underlying eroticism in such an encounter). The consumption of industrial products, on the other hand, creates no such link, the discarded object becoming the empty signifier of an absent subject; for in the essentially solitary act of consumption there is no one to identify the subject as subject.

It is to this situation that the second tradition (Apollinaire/futurism/Duchamp . . . Cage/Rauschenberg, etc.) of object-art addresses itself—a situation in which the number of potential signifiers (objects) is vastly expanded, while the specific power of each to signify is radically reduced. Questions of meaning are only specified through contexts of manipulation.

As I have said, Sherman's work is located within this situation. His is an art of chains of manipulation performed on a group of objects. Insofar as his work is conceived from within the productive domain of a consumer culture, it addresses the problem generated by this mode of production: the nightmarish possibility of an aesthetic medium based on a theoretically limitless group of objects and therefore a potentially infinite number of signifying elements. But insofar as Sherman is an artist he is equally concerned with the problem of limiting this exponential burgeoning of signifiers, and of determining criteria for delimiting them. Thus it is necessary to establish, within the theoretically limitless group of objects that are likely to be used, floating sub-groups which will constitute for each work, or each performance, the lexicon of terms available. This is the function, for example, of the little suitcase lugged about by Sherman from performance to performance: to create an enclosure in the visible world that separates the objects that will be used during the performance (to be gradually revealed to the audience) from all others; in other words, to establish a collection.

In a collection it is neither the objects themselves nor their symbolic value that matters, but something that is made precisely to negate it all, as well as the reality of castration in the subject itself, which is the systematization of the collective cycle in which the continual movement from one element to another enables the subject to construct a closed, invulnerable world, without any obstacle to the fulfillment of a, needless to add, perverse desire.³

3. Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'Economie Politique du Signe*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 103.

In other words, in the collection, as Baudrillard analyzes it, objects are negated in the name of their principle of organization. What matters is no single object but the beauty of their collective encounter, as in a jumble of surrealist odds and ends—Lautréamont's umbrella and sewing machine collected on the dissecting table of a modern imagination—or the more neutral than picturesque accumulations of a 42nd Street storefront, where you find displayed together electric vibrators, languid Christ statues, *Star Wars* toys, horror-film masks, and mechanical dentures similar to those used by Sherman (but a more recent model—obsolescence occurs quickly—that says "Hi, baby" with a click of its jaws). That such an assortment is possible in the same store window teaches that neither the vibrator nor the plastic Christ is blessed with an independent symbolic value.

In both his collection and performance Sherman attempts to substitute for a theoretically infinite world of signifiers—a world overflowing with identically manufactured elements—a closed and autonomous one (every collection, while open theoretically, selects new elements according to an organizing principle, elements, therefore, which belong to the collection by definition, even though they are still a part of the outside world). This autonomous world of the collection will then be one whose signification depends wholly on itself and carries unmistakably the mark of subjectivity which is its source (although this is not to imply that the subjectivity constitutes its signification), a world where, as Sherman describes the mental space created by his performances, this subjectivity finally feels "at home."

It is a gesture, as abstract principle and realization mediated through a subjectivity, that constitutes both Sherman's collection and performance. Again, it is Baudrillard who provides the relevant terms of analysis. "The function of modern art in all its manifestations," he writes, "is above all to preserve the gesture of the moment, the entire intervention of the subject. . . . Modern art will bear witness to the systematics of today's overstuffed world by the inverse systematics of its empty gesture, a pure gesture marking an absence."⁴

The pure gesture we see at work in Sherman's manipulations establishes similarities and differences between apparently random objects, transforming them into the elements of a discourse. This discourse contains some characteristics not unrelated to the choreography of modern dance (I am reminded of the recent solo performances of Lucinda Childs, for example), for it sets out to exhaust the formal possibilities inherent in a closed permutational set. I will include here only two examples chosen from among his pieces, the first from *Portraits of Places*:

When X is dropping the second and fourth stick, he is looking in the direction of the mirror, and when he is dropping the first, third, and fifth stick, he is looking in the direction of the sticks;

the second from *The Erotic*:

In the lower left-hand corner with the other half eyeglass frame, the

4. Baudrillard, *Economie Politique*, pp. 121-2.

performer repeats all the actions previously performed in the upper right-hand corner.

If Sherman had only looked toward the mirror and not toward the sticks, if a sequence of actions had been performed with only half of the eyeglasses, if an object placed in a box had been left there instead of being taken out a moment later, the manipulations would represent a linear development comparable to the traditional stream of writing in which a sentence can only be written by eliminating all the others that could have been written in its place.

The absurdity of Sherman's manipulations, which consists roughly speaking of undoing what he has just done, is the result of attempting to explore the system of combinations which a series of two or more objects can produce: putting one object in the other, then taking it out, one object under the other, then the other under it, and so on. A linear combination would not make us laugh; what does is the fact that these actions, some of which are extremely complicated and require a high degree of concentration, say nothing and go nowhere. In the industrial world there are productive chains of action which are similarly absurd for the author-subject: the repetitive actions of the assembly line, the very ones that produce the objects Sherman uses. But the example of Sherman's five sticks shows that his manipulations are never simply repetitive. Along a chain of similar actions variations are introduced precisely in order to explore the possible combinations within that chain. And it is through the mechanism explored by Chaplin in the famous sequence of the breakdown of the assembly line in *Modern Times* that these variations make us laugh.

If the spectator's laugh in *Modern Times* tends to ridicule assembly-line work, and if the laugh excited by one of Sherman's performances ironically deprecates the "cheap artifacts" he uses, it is perhaps this ironic negation that constitutes the subject of a film like *Modern Times* or of one of Sherman's performances, and may be the source of its pleasure.⁵

And, indeed, if the structure of Sherman's work can be described as a system formed by the permutation of two sub-systems—objects and actions, one of the effects produced by that system is pleasure, specifically aesthetic pleasure. It would seem that aesthetic pleasure arises as a response to the deployment of sensuous elements within a delimitable space; without that space (that frame?)—the space, for example, of the little table where Sherman performs his manipulations—there is no pleasure in the aesthetic sense. In analyzing the function and appearance of pleasure within Sherman's medium, it is perhaps helpful to equate the distinction

5. Compare Baudrillard, *Economie Politique*, pp. 123-4: "The discourse of modern art attempts to convey signification *through the very banality of ordinary objects, that is, through their potential systematic*. It is this serial, differential arrangement, with its own time scanned by the modality and the recurrence of its behavioral models, that art witnesses today by continually verifying itself through a repeated gesture within a closed set of optional variations that makes it precisely something other than absolute repetition."

from Stuart Sherman's Eleventh Spectacle
(The Erotic): "EYES"

In the center of the table is a long, thin spike erected on a black base. On the spike is a round artificial eye. In the upper right-hand corner, from the performer's (X's) point of view, is one-half of a black eyeglass frame. Inside the frame the word *eye* is printed in black capital letters on a white background. Through the word *eye* a small hole has been pierced. Behind the eyeglass frame is a horseshoe magnet which is red except for its unpainted metal tips. In the lower left-hand corner is the other half of the eyeglass frame. Inside the frame is a part of a color photograph. Through the photograph a small hole has been pierced. Behind the eyeglass frame is an oval artificial eye with a thin metal strip glued to its back.

X takes the magnet and the oval eye, turns them so that the metal tips of the magnet and the metal strip in back of the eye are in diagonal alignment, then draws and "locks" the eye and magnet together around the spike. Turning the magnet eye in the direction of the audience, X lifts the magnet eye up over the spike eye, then turns the magnet eye and holds it over the spike eye.

Keeping the magnet eye over the spike eye, X brings both eyes to the upper right-hand corner behind the half eyeglass frame. Then X draws the magnet eye away from the spike eye and holds it (upturned) at left beside the spike eye. X bows his head and begins lowering it, stopping when his left eye is just over the magnet eye and his right eye is just over the spike eye.

Keeping his left eye just over the magnet eye, X picks up the half eyeglass frame, places it over his right eye, looks at the spike eye underneath, removes the eye from the spike, slips the half eyeglass frame onto the spike (through the hole in the center of the word *eye*), and replaces the round eye on the spike.

Straightening up, X holds the magnet eye over the spike eye (the half eyeglass frame under it on the spike) and brings both eyes to the lower left-hand corner where, behind (and, eventually, with) the other half eyeglass frame, X repeats all the actions previously performed in the upper right-hand corner.

Then, holding the magnet eye over the spike eye (the two half eyeglass frames under it on the spike), X brings both eyes to the center of the table.

X lowers the magnet eye over the spike eye, down along the spike toward its base. Unlocking the oval eye and the magnet, X draws them back to their original corners, breaks their diagonal alignment, and sets them down.

X takes the spike eye off the spike and holds it (upturned) at the right beside the spike. Then X bows his head and begins lowering it, stopping when his left eye is just over the point of the spike and his right eye is just over the round eye.

X slides the two half eyeglass frames up off the spike, replaces the round eye on the spike, places the eyeglass frames over his eyes, looks in the direction of the audience, and quickly draws the eyeglass frames forward. Then X separates the eyeglass frames and lays them on the front edge of the table, leaving a gap between them through which the spike is seen.

X takes the magnet and the oval eye, turns them so that the metal tips of the magnet and the metal strip in back of the eye are in diagonal alignment, then draws and locks them together around the spike. Turning the magnet eye in the direction of the audience, X lifts the magnet eye up over the spike. Then X lifts the spike and sets the magnet eye down in its place. Removing the round eye from the spike, X turns the spike and the round eye so that the point of the spike and the pupil of the eye are in horizontal alignment.

Then X quickly draws his hands apart to his full arm span, turns the spike point and the round eye in the direction of the audience, and raises his own eyes in the direction of the audience's eyes.

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between a wholly subjective experience and the objective, spatialized aesthetic experience of the performance, with the opposition established by Lacan between bliss (*jouissance*) and pleasure.⁶ In Sherman's work, the fact that pleasure is spatialized is what makes his performances and films *spectacles*; the pleasure I am speaking of now is that of the spectator, made manifest by the presence of the spectator's laughter. (Sherman's manner, however, evokes no sense of pleasure, none of the evident delight one might see in an actor or musician who clearly experiences pleasure in the interpretation of his role or musical score; rather his is the slow, difficult progress of bliss, reflected in the splendid solitude of his concentration.)

If the spectator's pleasure does not come from the actual possession of the objects but from the gesture that constitutes, manipulates, and negates them, then its source remains to be determined. A word comes immediately to mind to describe Sherman's pieces, inasmuch as they take into account both this hidden sense of pleasure and the almost obsessive character of his actions: an obsessiveness that negates the spontaneity in which a segment of our avant-garde theater has been indulging, and that a large number of our contemporaries find essential to pleasure, an obsessiveness which must be identified with *ritual*.⁷

In the 1907 essay "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," Freud compares the private rituals of the obsessive neurotic with the public ones of religion, noting the following similarities: they can both be described (at least, in the case of religion, from the point of view of the unbeliever) as a series of apparently futile, useless, or ridiculous actions which are obligatory and which serve to repress sexual drives in the case of neurotics, and antisocial ones in the case of religion.

Ceremonial and obsessive actions arise partly as a defense against the temptation and partly as a protection against the ill which is expected. . . . Again, a ceremonial represents the sum of the conditions

6. According to Lacan, "It is not the Law itself that bars the subject's access to *jouissance*—rather it creates out of an almost natural barrier a barred subject. For it is pleasure that sets limits on *jouissance*, pleasure as that which binds incoherent life together, until another, unchallengeable prohibition arises from the regulation that Freud discovered as the primary process and appropriate law of pleasure" (Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Norton, p. 319).

7. I am referring here not only to Sherman's attempt to exhaust the formal possibilities of a space, but to his own insistence upon justifying his activity: "For instance, I had a hammer and a keyboard. Maybe I had the idea that I wanted a keyboard and then the next idea was that I wanted to play it. But I didn't want to play with my fingers. What else could I play with? Then the idea came of playing with the hammer, and then I thought: 'let's just go like that.' Then . . . well, if I have a hammer . . . a hammer is something which is made to hammer nails . . . so if I put the nails between the keyboard and the hammer, I have something else which is created. So I played with that in my mind and I said: 'Can I decide for myself what the idea is about all of that? What it means to do that?' I never just simply allow myself to see things and to like them. I have to justify them at every level—intellectually, spiritually, psychologically . . . and in this case erotically. Everything in that show had to have an erotic value" (From a transcript of a conversation held after the performance of the *Eleventh Spectacle (The Erotic)* on November 10, 1978).

subject to which something that is not yet absolutely forbidden is permitted, just as the Church's marriage ceremony signifies for the believer a sanctioning of sexual enjoyment which would otherwise be sinful. A further characteristic of obsessional neurosis . . . is that its manifestations . . . fulfill the condition of being a compromise between the warring forces of the mind. They thus always reproduce *something of the pleasure which they are designed to prevent*. . . .⁸

Now, in Sherman's work, the object of repression, that which is continuously revealed as the central obsession of all his manipulations is writing,⁹ writing as forbidden bliss.¹⁰ Sherman's manipulations can be viewed as a way of rerouting the prohibition against writing in order to achieve a certain kind of profane pleasure, which explains his use of mundane objects. When this pleasure occurs in a performance, it is the result of intersubjectivity. It nevertheless retains certain characteristics of the solitary, unattainable, sacred bliss for which it is a substitute. Witness, for example, Sherman's manner during a performance: withdrawn in his concentration, his fleeting eye-contact negates the existence of his own audience. (I have noticed the same intense concentration and the same absent/present look in the eyes of Catholic priests during those parts of the mass that call for the most active manipulation of an object—the host, whose material nature is also sacrificed to an ideal object: the offertory, consecration, and communion. This behavior differs from that of those parts of the ceremony during which words—the gospel, the sermon—are addressed to the faithful.)

All ritual involves the simultaneous summoning and warding off of something absent. Sherman's performance is obsessed with the absence of the Word—the source of the silence that presides over the greater part of his presentation—the Word blocked and returned to a state of nonexistence by the profane barrier of

8. Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. IX, pp. 124-5.

9. We have mentioned, for example, the symbolic value of the little table. It is the "original void," the "tabula rasa," but also, finally, the blank sheet of paper. This interpretation can also be applied to one of Sherman's films which shows an old man seated at a table quietly performing actions that serve no apparent purpose.

10. I believe we are dealing here with a collective obsession. The society in which we live is undoubtedly the most prolific producer of the printed word in the world yet it has the least *writing*. Walter Benjamin has said, "For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed towards the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional and local organs before the reader, an increasing number of readers became writers—at first occasional ones. . . . And today there is hardly a gainfully employed [person] who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing" (*Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 231-2).

The written word loses its sacred character as it is multiplied. But we can hardly forget that we are the products of a civilization which believes the book is One and that Writing is a religious activity, whose profane expression carries with it that frightening, curious sense of transgression—sin if you will—particularly well expressed in the myth of the poet—divinely inspired yet damned—of which the nineteenth century furnishes abundant examples.

objects, of the mute sensible world deployed in space. But this barrier has its openings and from time to time a word appears, and, proof of both its foreignness and value, it is at the same time redundant (hence absurd) and emphatic (hence ritualistic). There are many possible forms that these words may take within the performances: they might be printed on something they designate (a piece of cardboard marked *hat* coming out of a hat or the word *eye* written on a pair of glasses that he puts on); or on something they do not designate (a piece of cardboard marked *hat* attached to a glass ball); they might be a series of words that could serve as a signifying sequence uttered in a loud voice by Sherman as he manipulates his objects (*pillow, wig, serene, concert, hook*),¹¹ which is finally designated by another word “: word” (after an imaginary colon perceptible in speech—we are dealing here with a spoken sequence), introducing the interesting problem found in writing but not in the manipulation of objects, that of the ultimate signifier, contained for example in the proposition, “If a catalogue is made of all the books in a library, should it be included as one of the books?” Or, finally, it might take the form of a text distributed to the public before the performance, a parallel discourse which never equals what we see on the stage, and which has always proved to be someone else’s words, Richard Foreman’s and Stefan Brecht’s, for example.¹²

These words, either written or spoken, are handled in the same way as the objects and sounds used by Sherman in his performance. They lose their privileged signification to become the objects of a collection, which, by the gesture that constitutes and animates it, in turn becomes a discourse. But inasmuch as our culture makes it impossible for us to treat these linguistic objects with the same neutrality that we do a piece of soap or a plastic coffee pot, their use takes on the ironic value of a quotation, like that of a passage of classical harmony in a piece of post-Cagian music.

It becomes clear that the repressed writing has nevertheless continued to assert itself, masked though triumphant, yet without its usual means of expression: letters, words, phonemes, a piece of paper; these things remain only as isolated symptoms. Then, passing from neurotic repression to perversion, this writing appropriates “unnatural” objects, the theoretically infinite collection of cheap artifacts whose constitution and use are unlimited, unlike the grammatical and linguistic laws which determine the juggling of words.¹³

11. But Sherman, when asked about those words, made it clear that their order was randomly chosen, and that the words themselves were randomly chosen.

12. At the first performance of *Three Equals One*, Sherman expressly requested the audience to read the text either before or after but not during the performance.

13. If I may continue the metaphor and compare writing and its laws as “normal” sexual practice with Sherman’s manipulations as the “perversion” of that practice, it would be difficult to imagine a more fertile field of perversion than one in which the erotic object is an unlimited class of objects, unlimited as well in the functions which those objects may be made to serve. This limitless aspect is tempered, however, by what I would call the return of obsessive neurosis which makes possible the structuring of the performance as a clearly defined ritual.

What is the value of the object in this nonverbal detour? Since we are in the realm of perversity, it would seem to be a fetishistic one, as long as it is not taken to be, as Baudrillard cautions us, a flight from the expressive, emotional, or ontological value of absent words, but the very constitution of signs. Sherman's objects are valueless in themselves, or perhaps their real value is derived from their place within two networks of association: the one weaving the reality of the visible world of the performance, the other the unreality of the invisible world ("There is an idea for every object," Sherman has said).

To clarify the way in which these two networks overlap in every combination of objects, transforming objects into actual linguistic signs,¹⁴ let us take a simple example, the manipulation of a small plastic scale and a pair of plastic dentures.

First system (a) a scale is used to weigh objects lighter than itself; the dentures are placed on the scale;

(b) the scale performs its function by being articulated at its center; now, the dentures are also hinged at their center; therefore one can conceive of placing the scale on the dentures (a manipulation as a kind of Aristotelian syllogism);

Second system (a) according to Sherman, the scale evokes the idea of justice, and the dentures speech (putting them together in different ways makes different statements);

(b) I would go one step further than Sherman and base my interpretation on the idea of articulation: it is being articulated around an absence that establishes a relationship between the world of institutions and the world of language.¹⁵

(It should be noted that laughter is associated with the first system, that is, taking the most absurd "here and now" consequences inherent in a physical object, which is not unrelated to the fetishistic pleasure that may be derived from the foot, for example. To return to our two systems of association: the foot as a source of fetishistic pleasure is not the foot we walk on (1a), neither is it *foot* as it exists in a system of symbolic associations (2a, b, c, etc.) but the physical member taken in its most absurd literal sense (1b); which does not prevent us from seeing it as a metaphor for another object, *la chose*, the phallus, so completely unrelated in its physical nature as to be beyond the second system of signifiers.)

14. First, the value of a linguistic sign exists only in relation to other signs within the same system: at least two signs, therefore, plus an articulatory connection (or, in the case of objects, an operative connection) are needed for a signifier to exist. Secondly, a linguistic sign is generally ambiguous because overdetermined (for example, denotation and connotation constitute two systems of determination which may be defined one in terms of the other as metaphor).

15. In both the first and second system, neither (a) nor (b) is restrictive. Of course, the scale and the dentures can be combined in more than two ways, and if Sherman is reluctant to supply his audience with interpretations it is, he says, in order to free them to make their own.

If Sherman's work is to be called fetishistic, the ambiguity of that term in current speech should first be clarified.¹⁶

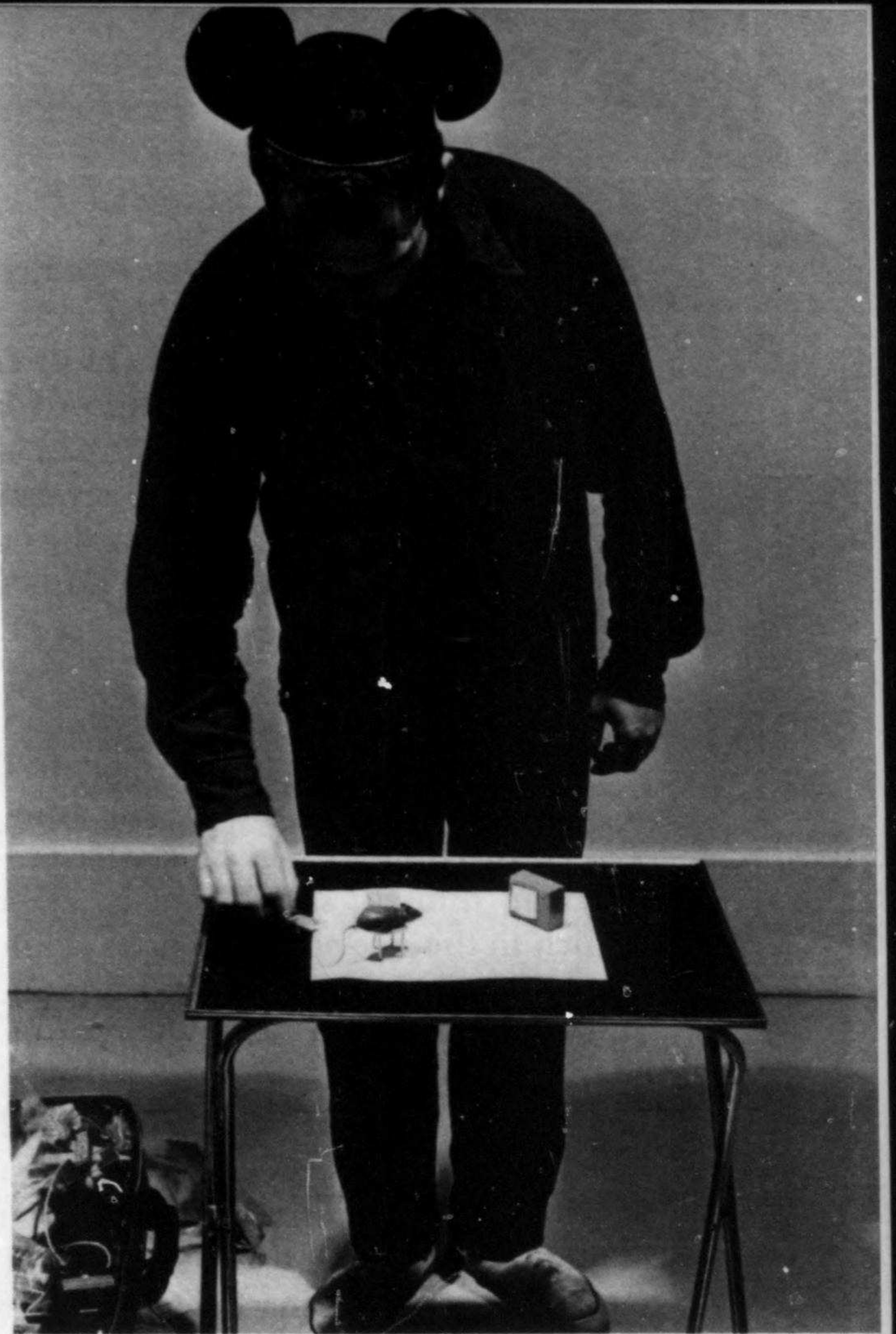
It would seem only psychoanalysis has escaped this vicious circle by attaching fetishism to a perverse *structure* which could perhaps be the base of all desire. The structural definition of the term, articulated on the clinical reality of the fetishistic object and its manipulation, rejects the concept of the difference of the sexes. Thus defined, it no longer serves as a prop of the occult but becomes an analytic concept in a theory of perversion. . . . As such, it is not a fetishism of the signified, of the substance and so-called ideological value which are embodied in the fetish-object for the alienated subject; it is rather, according to this reinterpretation which may rightly be called ideological, a *fetishism of the signifier*. The subject is apprehended by what, in the object, is factitious, differential, encoded, systematized. In fetishism it is not the passion of substance (whether of the objects or the subject) that speaks, it is the *passion of the code* which, ordering and subordinating both objects and subjects, delivers them over together to abstract manipulation.¹⁷

The strength and originality of Sherman's work is his own passion for the code which enables him to set this perfect machinery in operation: that ruling order established by the manipulation of objects. This is an order in which the subject, perhaps for the first time, finds its own space, "an imaginary breast of repose." The manipulated objects are of course imaginary; they are neither the little colored plastic things seen in Sherman's hands, nor ideal objects (as in a Platonic conception of the world in which the ideal Scale would be the archetype of the little plastic scale operated by Sherman). To return to Sherman's statement that "there is an idea for every object," I think it would not be wrong to go even further and claim that the idea, far from being "the idea of an object," is a mental *operation*. The object is not to be taken as the materialization of an abstract idea, but rather as the "word matter," the sequence of phonemes in its relation to the concept. But if a relationship of signifier/signified is established between the object and the concept, one must not replace a mysticism of symbol by a mysticism of signification: the signifier represents nothing but the subject (metaphor), and that only in relation to the other signifiers in the same chain (metonymy).

How little Sherman values the symbolic nature of his objects is apparent in the grammar that he imposes on his manipulations. One of the most apt examples

16. Adopted from the French *fétiche* which in turn was adapted from the Portuguese *feitiço* (fr. Latin *facio, factitius*), English *fetish* appeared in the seventeenth century in the form *fateish*, originally referring to inanimate objects worshipped by savages as repositories of the supernatural. The sense of "factitious" is primary, "to make by art, to be artificially contrived." From the same Latin root developed Spanish *afeitar* ("to make up, to make beautiful"), *afeite* ("trimmings, cosmetics"), French *feint* ("feigned"), and Spanish *hechizo* ("enchantment").

17. Baudrillard, *Economie Politique*, pp. 98-100.



Stuart Sherman. *Eleventh Spectacle (The Erotic)*. 1978.
(Photo Helene Winer.)

I can think of occurred in the *Eleventh Spectacle*: one sees a little plastic mouse placed on a little plastic chair facing a little plastic television set. One might imagine that the television is going to be taken as a symbol of all the televisions in the world, thereby signifying *cinema, image, vision*, and other even more sublime concepts. But Sherman bluntly destroys any attempt at symbolic association on this level by revealing the television here for what it is: a toy pencil sharpener which he uses to sharpen his own pencil with which he then traces on a piece of paper the geometric displacements he performs with all the objects on the table, including the television. The pencil shavings could become a metaphor for the conditions necessary for a topology, and we would have a geometer's pencil sharpened by a television set, that is, a drawing formed by vision. Again, Sherman destroys these ponderous lucubrations (which, as he says, he tries to avoid through the speed of his manipulations) by misusing these pencil shavings as tobacco (a misuse that nonetheless admits their flammability) in a little toy pipe. The laugh that inevitably occurs at these two moments (the first taking an object in its most literal sense: a pencil sharpener is a pencil sharpener is a pencil sharpener; the second substituting an unexpected object for an expected one), comes from our

deep satisfaction in seeing these objects negated in so radical a manner, for the benefit of a superior order.¹⁸

Perhaps this negation is most clearly expressed in Sherman's short films, whose subject is the camera-imposed distortions of space and time. So it is that the audience laughs when Scotty Snyder throws carefully folded white towels one by one into the sea, or when, in a reversal typical of Sherman, he walks up to a tree carrying a hat and a ladder, puts the ladder on his head, and the hat on the ladder; or when his perilous attempt to push his hat against the ceiling is followed by his lying on the ground next to the tree of the preceding shot, with his hat and ladder alongside him.

The imaginary object to which the world of sensible objects is sacrificed is not symbolically contained in any of the objects on the table nor in any of their manipulations. The role of the title in the different sequences of *Portraits of Places*, therefore, has to be clarified. These titles, announced in a loud voice by Sherman himself, should not be taken as the content of a particular sequence (which in the case of certain titles would be difficult to define: "Toulouse-Lyon" or "Los Angeles-Saint Petersburg-Eden"), but as a linguistic object, excerpted from Sherman's perverse private code (equal to *hat*, *eye*, and *word* . . .).

Perhaps we have by now arrived at a position from which is it possible to see that the purpose of Sherman's ritual is the constitution of an idiosyncratic metalanguage that enables the subject to speak, and within which the articulated word serves the function of a quotation: a piece broken off from an earlier language which establishes the truth of the new order. It is easier to appreciate the music of Cage knowing how it is related to the development of classical music; it would likewise be difficult to understand Sherman's work not knowing the immeasurable detour he takes which enables him to make his way through writing, all the while remaining on its periphery—that obsession with writing which he contains in his ritual manipulation of objects, always imperfect but at least tangible, burying unbearable desire under a heap of artifacts whose negation is their very use (like women's makeup, that masquerade with which, as Lacan has observed, women make themselves desirable for what they are not, that comes off at the moment of erotic consummation—only film stars go to bed with their makeup on), but which results at least in holding back the desire (to write) and its affect.

These objects [the objects of desire] have one common feature in my elaboration of them—they have no specular image, or, in other words, alterity. It is what enables them to be the "stuff" or rather the lining.

18. The object is also negated in other ways. By manipulating layers of cardboard or newsprint cut in the form of the object, Sherman makes the object appear to be less important than its trace. By placing one object in another only to immediately remove it, by performing an action and then performing it in reverse, he inflicts on the object a purposeless repetitive cycle. He also frequently drops his objects on the floor.

though not in any sense the reverse, of the very subject that one takes to be the subject of consciousness. For this subject, who thinks he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement, is no more than such an object. Ask the writer about the anxiety that he experiences when faced by the blank sheet of paper, and he will tell you who is the turd of his fantasy.¹⁹

Yet even if the foregoing analysis is convincing, one problem still remains. Is the manipulation of plastic objects as if they were linguistic integers any less painful than writing? Is the space of Sherman's little table or the screen on which he projects his films capable of containing more pleasure than a sheet of paper?

The only possible answer is that neither endeavor is preferable to the other, and that all that matters is the work which takes place to effect the substitutions. If Sherman's work is a detour around writing, then it is the relationship established between performance (or film) and writing that is crucial; in other words, what is most important is the detour itself. For, during this detour there occurs—as in dreams—the substitution of one language for another, or more precisely, the perversion of one language by and in another. If it is true that in every intellectual activity (especially systematic intellectual activity, philosophy and poetry for example, where one deals with a closed system—with that passion for a perfect code to which Baudrillard refers) perversion plays an important part, then Sherman's detour is the perversion of that perversion, elevating the detour to the level of aesthetic activity, to become a work of art instead of a psychological symptom.

There is special significance in the direction of this detour: a swerve through the realm of objects taken in order to bypass writing. A certain number of important events occur along the detour, transfer phenomena, in which a kind of psychological material is expressed through tangible objects. In fact, the use of purchased objects preexisting in space enables Sherman to avoid the unbearable gesture of subjectivity inherent in writing, in which to all appearances one's words are drawn from oneself, from one's most intimate recesses (even though these words only pass through us, they have nonetheless penetrated us, and undergone the action of our own chemistry in an almost physical sense), making the most natural metaphor for writing the emission of bodily excreta: come or shit. The manipulation of objects exterior to the subject obviates the necessity of discharge, and therefore, at least outwardly, the psychic material associated with it. If manipulation is a substitute for writing, the manipulated objects are the visible symptoms of the anguish and pleasure of writing. We are dealing here with an operation accomplished without pain or obscenity.

It is ob-scenity in fact that transports us into the "other scene" of the unconscious of which Freud speaks, and it is that other scene that constitutes the

19. Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 315.

invisible subject of Sherman's work—a Pandora's box of great value which is never open to us, for it is another box which signifies, and negates it, the suitcase opened at the beginning of the performance in which the objects of the collection are contained.

But the problem has been relocated, thereby asserting the distance between an aesthetic and a psychoanalytic enterprise. It has been relocated to a table where there is not enough room to lie down, where the subject is articulated in his signifiers; and if he has found his space here, it means he must forever refuse the satisfaction of being at its center.

To understand the work, one should not, of course, ask what it "means" but only what need does it answer. In my case the most consistent, passionate need . . . is the need to *fill a space* in which I find myself (mentally). That is, I suppose, a kind of erotics of thought . . . using thought to manipulate imagination, which is a body. Fill that space . . . not by being at the center . . . but rather by a twist administered to the imagination-body: an unnatural extension of some sort, generating a new periphery, a difference.²⁰

20. Richard Foreman, "The Carrot and the Stick," *October*, 1 (Spring 1976), 25.

DOUGLAS CRIMP

Pictures was the title of an exhibition of the work of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, which I organized for Artists Space in the fall of 1977.¹ In choosing the word pictures for this show, I hoped to convey not only the work's most salient characteristic—recognizable images—but also and importantly the ambiguities it sustains. As is typical of what has come to be called postmodernism, this new work is not confined to any particular medium; instead, it makes use of photography, film, performance, as well as traditional modes of painting, drawing, and sculpture. Picture, used colloquially, is also nonspecific: a picture book might be a book of drawings or photographs, and in common speech a painting, drawing, or print is often called, simply, a picture. Equally important for my purposes, picture, in its verb form, can refer to a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object.

The following essay takes its point of departure from the catalogue text for Pictures; but it focuses on different issues and addresses an aesthetic phenomenon implicitly extending to many more artists than the original exhibition included. Indeed, although the examples discussed and illustrated here are very few, necessitated by the newness and relative obscurity of this work, I think it is safe to say that what I am outlining is a predominant sensibility among the current generation of younger artists, or at least of that group of artists who remain committed to radical innovation.

1. *Pictures*, New York, Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977. The exhibition subsequently traveled to the Allen Art Museum, Oberlin, the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, and the University of Colorado Museum, Boulder. I wish to thank Helene Winer, Director of Artists Space, on three counts: for inviting me to organize the Artists Space exhibition, thereby giving me the opportunity of seeing a wide variety of current work in studios; for steering me in the general direction of the work I have come to find so engaging; and, most particularly, for her commitment to showing the work of a group of young artists of major significance which would otherwise have remained publicly invisible.

Art and illusion, illusion and art
 Are you really here or is it only art?
 Am I really here or is it only art?

—Laurie Anderson

In his famous attack against minimal sculpture, written in 1967, the critic Michael Fried predicted the demise of art as we then knew it, that is, the art of modernist abstract painting and sculpture. "*Art degenerates,*" he warned us, "*as it approaches the condition of theatre,*" theater being, according to Fried's argument, "*what lies between the arts.*"² And indeed, over the past decade we have witnessed a radical break with that modernist tradition, effected precisely by a preoccupation with the "theatrical." The work that has laid most serious claim to our attention throughout the seventies *has* been situated between, or outside the individual arts, with the result that the integrity of the various mediums—those categories the exploration of whose essences and limits constituted the very project of modernism—has dispersed into meaninglessness.³ Moreover, if we are to agree with Fried that "*the concept of art itself . . . [is] meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts,*" then we must assume that art, too, as an ontological category, has been put in question. What remain are just so many aesthetic activities, but judging from their current vitality we need no longer regret or wish to reclaim, as Fried did then, the shattered integrity of modernist painting and sculpture.

What then are these new aesthetic activities? Simply to enumerate a list of mediums to which "painters" and "sculptors" have increasingly turned—film, photography, video, performance—will not locate them precisely, since it is not merely a question of shifting from the conventions of one medium to those of another. The ease with which many artists managed, some ten years ago, to change mediums—from sculpture, say, to film (Serra, Morris, et al.) or from dance to film (Rainer)—or were willing to "corrupt" one medium with another—to present a work of sculpture, for example, in the form of a photograph (Smithson, Long)—or abjured any physical manifestation of the work (Barry, Weiner) makes it clear that the actual characteristics of the medium, *per se*, cannot any longer tell us much about an artist's activity.

But what disturbed Fried about minimalism, what constituted, for him, its theatricality, was not only its "perverse" location *between* painting and sculp-

2. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, V, 10 (Summer 1967), 21; reprinted in *Minimal Art: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Battcock, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1968, pp. 116-47. All subsequent quotations from Fried are from this article; the italics throughout are his.

3. This is not to say that there is not a great deal of art being produced today that can be categorized according to the integrity of its medium, only that that production has become thoroughly academic; take, for example, the glut of so-called pattern painting, a modernist-derived style that has not only been sanctioned with a style name, but has generated a critical commentary, and constituted an entire category of selection for the most recent Whitney Museum biennial exhibition.

ture,⁴ but also its "preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the *duration of experience*." It was temporality that Fried considered "paradigmatically theatrical," and therefore a threat to modernist abstraction. And in this, too, Fried's fears were well founded. For if temporality was implicit in the way minimal sculpture was experienced, then it would be made thoroughly explicit—in fact the only possible manner of experience—for much of the art that followed. The mode that was thus to become exemplary during the seventies was performance—and not only that narrowly defined activity called performance art, but all those works that were constituted *in a situation* and *for a duration* by the artist or the spectator or both together. It can be said quite literally of the art of the seventies that "you had to be there." For example, certain of the video installations of Peter Campus, Dan Graham, and Bruce Nauman, and more recently the sound installations of Laurie Anderson not only required the presence of the spectator to become activated, but were fundamentally concerned with that registration of presence as a means toward establishing meaning.⁵ What Fried demanded of art was what he called "presentness," a transcendent condition (he referred to it as a state of "grace") in which "*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*"; what he feared would replace that condition as a result of the sensibility he saw at work in minimalism—what *has* replaced it—is presence, the sine qua non of theater.

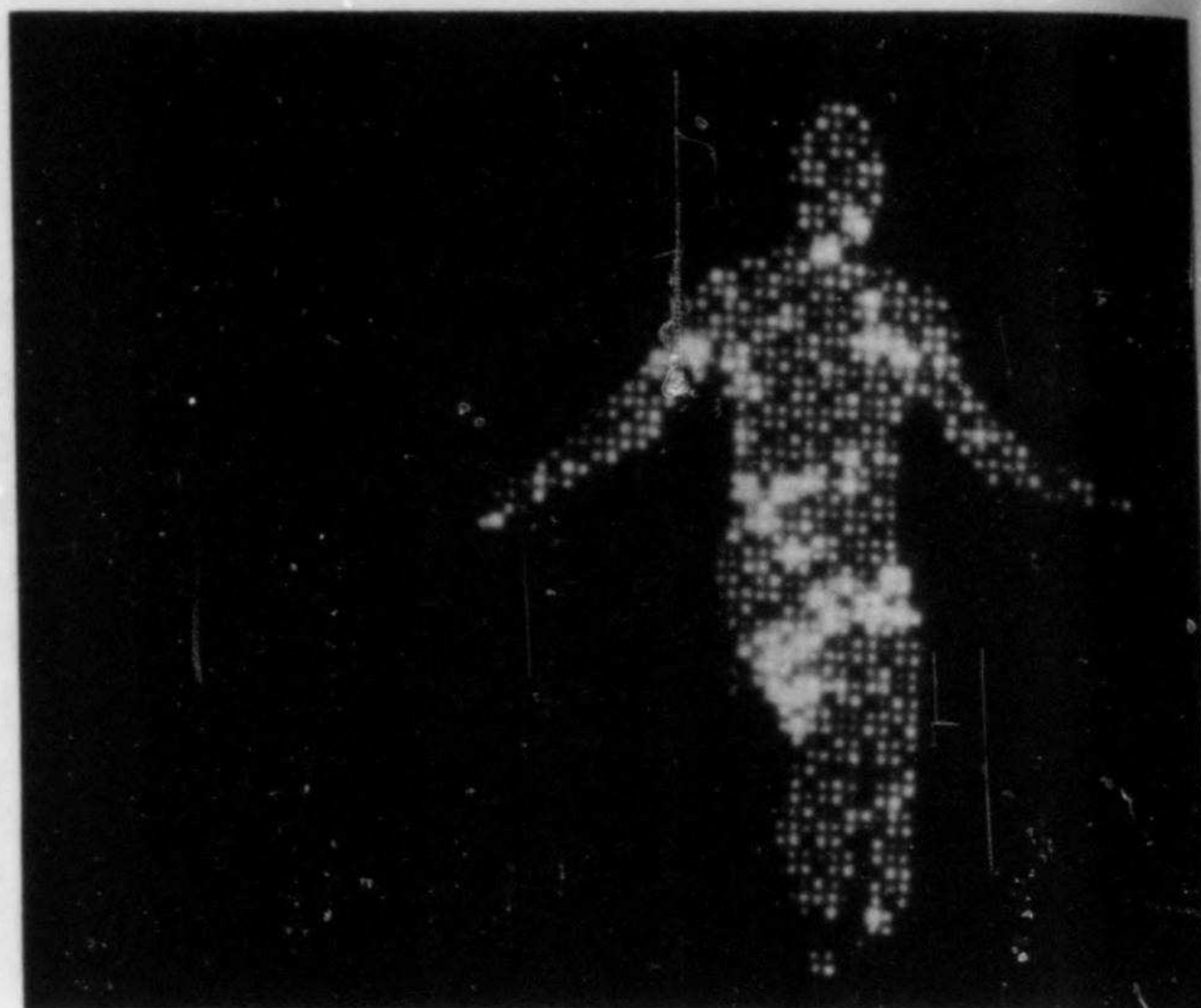
The presence before him was a presence.

—Henry James

An art whose strategies are thus grounded in the literal temporality and presence of theater has been the crucial formulating experience for a group of artists currently beginning to exhibit in New York. The extent to which this experience fully pervades their work is not, however, immediately apparent, for its theatrical dimensions have been transformed and, quite unexpectedly, reinvested in the pictorial image. If many of these artists can be said to have been apprenticed in the field of performance as it issued from minimalism, they have nevertheless begun to reverse its priorities, making of the literal situation and duration of the performed event a tableau whose presence and temporality are utterly psychologized; performance becomes just one of a number of ways of "staging" a picture. Thus the performances of Jack Goldstein do not, as had usually been the case, involve the artist's performing the work, but rather the presentation of an event in such a manner and at such a distance that it is apprehended as representation—representation not, however, conceived as the *re*-presentation of that which is prior, but as the unavoidable condition of intelligibility of even that which is present.

4. Fried was referring to Donald Judd's claim that "the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture," made in his article "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook*, 8 (1964), 74-82.

5. Rosalind Krauss has discussed this issue in many of her recent essays, notably in "Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, 1 (Spring 1976), and "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," Parts 1 and 2, *October*, 3 (Spring 1977) and 4 (Fall 1977).

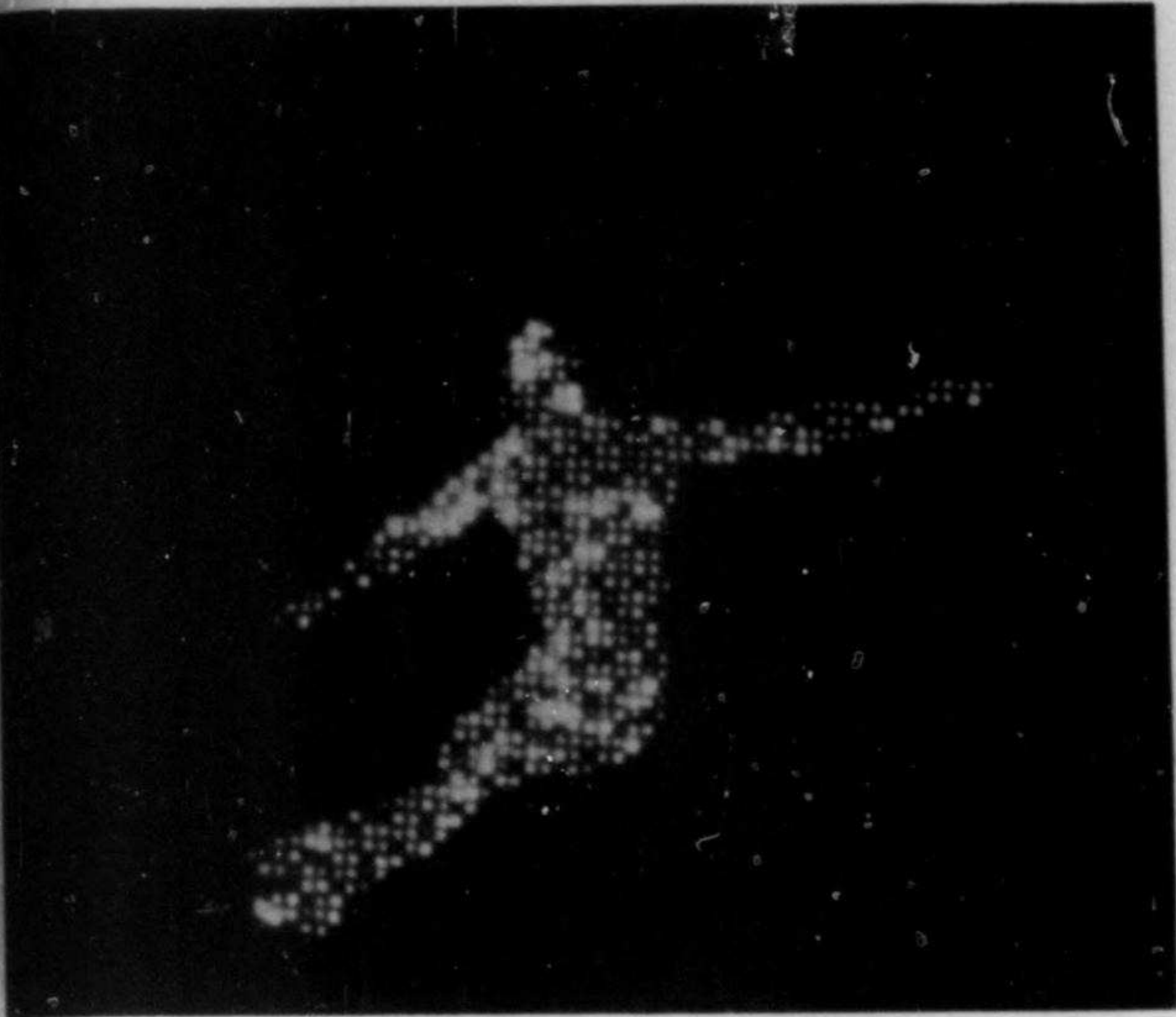


Jack Goldstein. Stills from *The Jump*. 1978.

Two years ago Goldstein presented *Two Fencers* at the Salle Patino in Geneva. Distanced some fifty feet from the audience, bathed in the dim red glow of a spotlight, accompanied by the sound of recorded music taken from Hollywood swashbuckler soundtracks, two men in fencing gear enacted their athletic routine.⁶ They appeared as if déjà vu, remote, spectral, yet just as certainly, present. Like the contortionist and gymnast of Goldstein's earlier performances, they were there, performing in the space of the spectators, but they nevertheless looked virtual, dematerialized, like the vivid but nebulous images of holograms. After one fencer had appeared to defeat the other, the spotlight went down, but the performance continued; left in darkness to listen to a replay of the background music, the audience would attempt to remember that image of fencing that had already appeared as if in memory. In this doubling by means of the mnemonic experience, the paradoxical mechanism by which memory functions is made apparent: the image is forgotten, replaced. (*Roget's Thesaurus* gives a child's definition of memory as "the thing I forget with.")

Goldstein's "actors" do not perform prescribed roles; they simply do what they would ordinarily do, professionally, just as the Hollywood-trained German shepherd growls and barks on cue in Goldstein's film *A German Shepherd*, and a ballerina descends from pointe in *A Ballet Shoe*, and a lion framed in a golden logo tosses his head and roars in *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*. These films show either simple, split-second gestures that are repeated with little or no difference, or slightly more extended actions that appear to exhaust themselves. Here, for example, is the scenario for *A Ballet Shoe*: the foot of a dancer in toe shoe is shown on pointe; a pair of hands comes in from either side of the film frame and unties the ribbon of the shoe; the dancer moves off pointe; the entire film lasts twenty-two seconds. The sense that its gesture is a complete one is therefore mitigated by its fragmented images (generating multiple psychological and tropological reso-

6. Goldstein's phonograph records, intended both as independent works and, in some cases, as soundtracks for performances, are made by splicing together fragments, sometimes no longer than a few seconds, of sound from existing recordings, paralleling his use of stock footage to make films.



nances) and its truncated duration; the whole is but a fragment.

The impression of a completed action (one fencer defeats the other) combines with a structure of repetition (the match is one of constant attack and parry) so that no action is really brought to closure; the performance or film stops, but it cannot be said to end. In this respect the recent film entitled *The Jump* is exemplary. Shown as a loop, it is a potentially endless repetition of repetitions. A diver leaps, somersaults, plunges, and disintegrates. This happens very quickly, and then it happens again, and still a third time. The camera follows the courses of the three divers, framing them in tight close-up, so that their trajectories are not graphically discernable. Rather, each diver bursts like fireworks into the center of the frame and within a split second disappears.

The Jump was made by rotoscoping stock super-8 footage of high dives and shooting the animation through a special-effects lens that dispersed the image into jewellike facets.⁷ The resultant image, sometimes recognizable as diver, sometimes amorphous, is a shimmering, red silhouette seen against a black field. Time is extremely compressed (the running time is twenty-six seconds) and yet extremely distended (shown as a loop, it plays endlessly). But the film's temporality as experienced does not reside in its actual duration, nor of course in anything like the synthetic time of narrative. Its temporal mode is the psychological one of *anticipation*. We wait for each dive, knowing more or less when it will appear, yet each time it startles us, and each time it disappears before we can really take satisfaction in it, so we wait for its next appearance; again we are startled and again it eludes us. In each of Goldstein's films, performances, photographs, and phonograph records, a psychologized temporality is instituted: foreboding, premonition, suspicion, anxiety.⁸ The psychological resonance of this work is not

7. Rotoscopy is a technique of tracing over live-action footage to make an animation.

8. Each of the artists discussed here might be said to work with the conventions of a particular genre; if that is the case, Goldstein's would be those of the disaster film. In the movie *Earthquake*, for example, the entire first third of the film is nothing but a narration about an impending earthquake; yet when it comes, we are taken completely by surprise.

that of the subject matter of his pictures, however, but of the way those pictures are presented, *staged*; that is, it is a function of their structure. Goldstein's manner of staging the image is perfectly exemplified by the technique used for *The Jump*, the technique of rotoscoping, a process that is both a trace(ing) and an effacement of the filmed image, a drawing that is simultaneously an erasure. And that is what any staging of the image must always be. The temporality of these pictures is not, then, a function of the nature of the medium as in itself temporal, but of the manner in which the picture is presented; it can obtain in a still picture as well as a moving one.

Here is a picture: It shows a young woman with close-cropped hair, wearing a suit and hat whose style is that of the 1950s. She looks the part of what was called, in that decade, a career girl, an impression that is perhaps cued, perhaps merely confirmed by the fact that she is surrounded by the office towers of the big city. But those skyscrapers play another role in this picture. They envelop and isolate the woman, reinforcing with their dark-shadowed, looming facades her obvious anxiety, as her eyes dart over her shoulder . . . at something perhaps lurking outside the frame of the picture. Is she, we wonder, being pursued?

But what is it, in fact, that makes this a picture of presentiment, of that which is impending? Is it the suspicious glance? Or can we locate the solicitation to read the picture as if it were fiction in a certain spatial dislocation—the jarring juxtaposition of close-up face with distant buildings—suggesting the cinematic artifice of rear-screen projection? Or is it the details of costume and makeup that might signal disguise? It is perhaps all of these, and yet more.

The picture in question is nothing other than a still photograph of/by the artist Cindy Sherman, one of a recent series in which she dresses in various costumes and poses in a variety of locations that convey highly suggestive though thoroughly ambiguous ambiances. We do not know what is happening in these pictures, but we know for sure that *something* is happening, and that something is a fictional narrative. We would never take these photographs for being anything but *staged*.

The still photograph is generally thought to announce itself as a direct transcription of the real precisely in its being a spatiotemporal fragment; or, on the contrary, it may attempt to transcend both space and time by contravening that very fragmentary quality.⁹ Sherman's photographs do neither of these. Like ordinary snapshots, they appear to be fragments; unlike those snapshots, their fragmentation is not that of the natural continuum, but of a syntagmatic sequence, that is, of a conventional, segmented temporality. They are like quotations from the sequence of frames that constitutes the narrative flow of film. Their sense of narrative is one of its simultaneous presence and absence, a narrative ambience stated but not fulfilled. In short, these are photographs whose

9. See, for example, Hollis Frampton, "Impromptus on Edward Weston: Everything in Its Place," *October*, 5 (Summer 1978), especially pp. 59-62.



Cindy Sherman. Untitled. 1978.



Robert Longo. Still from film for Sound Distance of a Good Man. 1978.

condition is that of the film still, that fragment "whose existence never exceeds the fragment."¹⁰

The psychological shock that is registered in this very special kind of picture can best be understood when it appears in relation to normal film time as the syntagmatic disjunction of a freeze frame. The sudden abjuration of narrative time solicits a reading that must remain inside the picture but cannot escape the temporal mode of which it is a fragment. It is within this confusion of temporalities that Robert Longo's work is situated. The central image of his three-part tableau performance, *Sound Distance of a Good Man*, presented last year at Franklin Furnace, was a film, showing, with no motion at all (save for the flickering effect of light that is a constant feature of cinema) the upper torso of a man, body arched and head thrown back as if in convulsion. That posture, registering a quick, jerky motion, is contrasted, in this motionless picture, with the frozen immobility of the statue of a lion. As the film unwound it continued to show only this still image; the entire film consisted of nothing but a freeze frame. But if the film's image does not traverse any temporal distance other than that literal time of the performed events that framed it on either side, its composition followed a rather complex scenario. Longo's movie camera was trained on a photograph, or more precisely a photo-montage whose separate elements were excerpted from a series of photographs, duplicate versions of the same shot. That shot showed a man dressed and posed in imitation of a sculpted aluminum relief that Longo had exhibited earlier that year. The relief was, in turn, quoted from a newspaper reproduction of a fragment of a film still taken from *The American Soldier*, a film by Fassbinder.

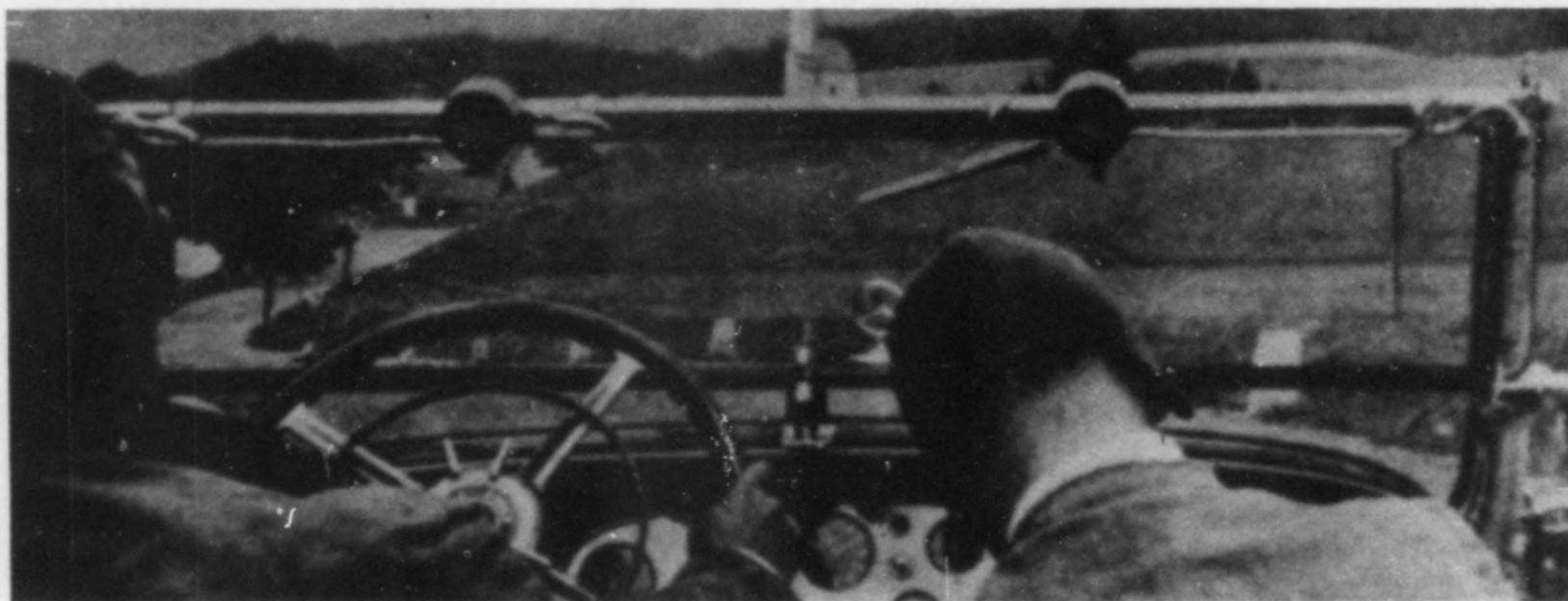
The "scenario" of this film, the scenario just described, the spiral of fragmentation, excerptation, quotation that moves from film still to still film is, of course, absent from the film that the spectators of *Sound Distance of a Good Man* watched. But what, if not that absent scenario, can account for the particular presence of that moving still image?

Such an elaborate manipulation of the image does not really transform it; it fetishizes it. The picture is an object of desire, the desire for the signification that is known to be absent. The expression of that desire to make the picture yield a reality that it pretends to contain is the subject of the work of Troy Brauntuch. But, it must be emphasized, his is no private obsession. It is an obsession that is in the very nature of our relationship to pictures. Brauntuch therefore uses pictures

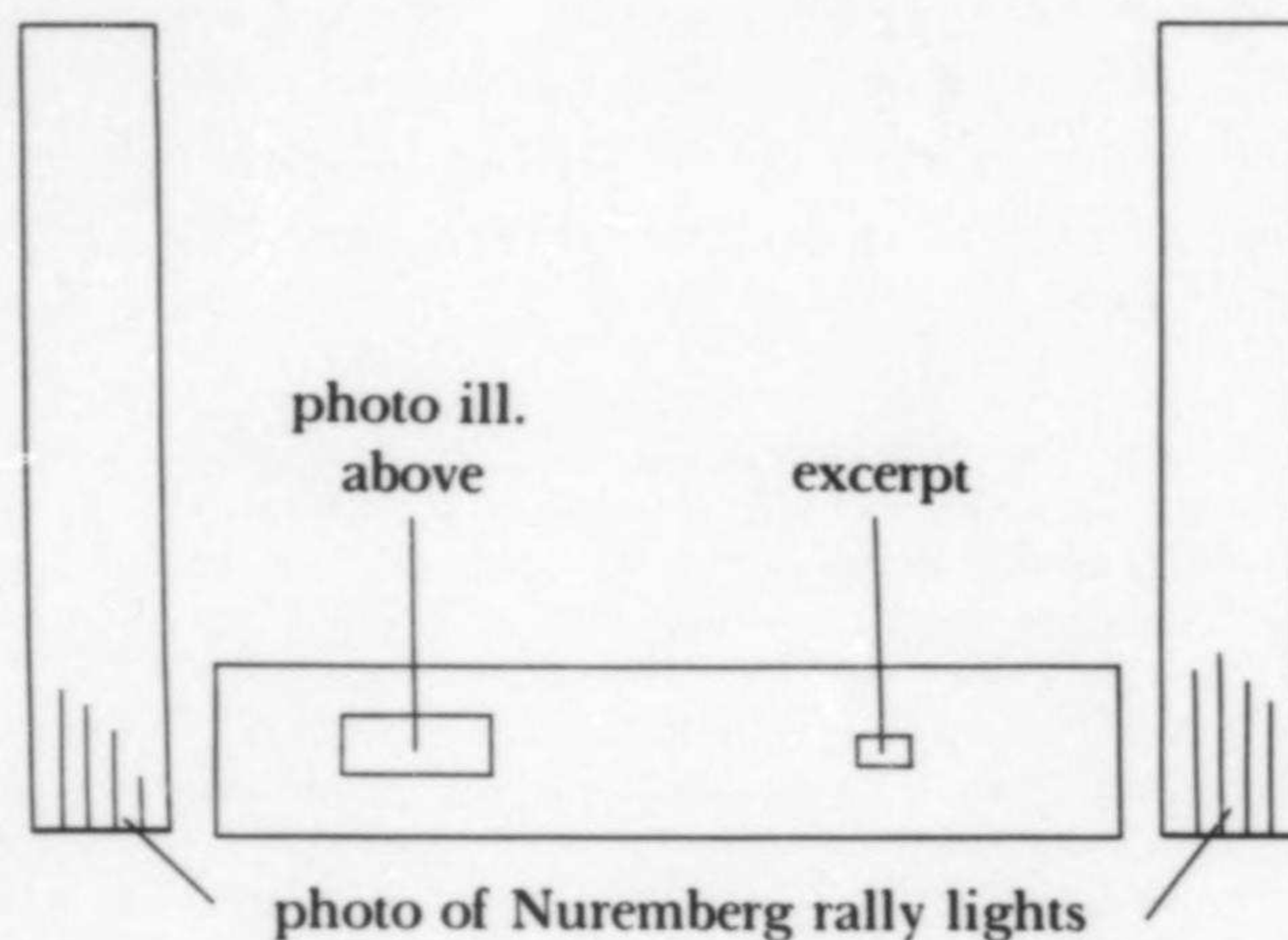
10. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 67. The appearance of the film still as an object of particular fascination in recent artistic practice is so frequent as to call for a theoretical explanation. Both Sherman's and Robert Longo's works actually resemble this odd artifact, as does that of John Mendelsohn, James Birrell, among others. Moreover, many of its characteristics as discussed by Barthes are relevant to the concerns of all the work discussed here. In this context, it is also interesting to note that the performances of Philip Smith were called by him "extruded cinema" and had such revealing titles as *Still Stories*, *Partial Biography*, and *Relinquish Control*. They consisted of multiple projections of 35-mm. slides in a sequence and functioned as deconstructions of cinematic narrative.

whose subject matter is, from a humanist point of view, the most loaded, most charged with meaning, but which are revealed in his work to be utterly opaque.

Here is a picture:



It appeared as an illustration to the memoirs of Albert Speer with the caption "Hitler asleep in his Mercedes, 1934."¹¹ Brauntuch has reproduced it as the central image of a recent three-part photographic print. The degree to which the image is fetishized by its presentation absolutely prevents its re-presentation; itself photographic, Brauntuch's work cannot in turn be photographically reproduced. Its exacting treatment of the most minute details and qualities of scale, color, framing, relationships of part to part would be completely lost outside the presence of the work as object. The above photograph, for example, is enlarged to a width of eighteen inches, thereby making its halftone screen visible, and printed on the left-hand side of a seven-foot long bloodred field. To the right of this picture is a further enlarged excerpt of it showing the building in the distance seen just above the windshield of the Mercedes. The panel on which these two images appear is flanked by two other panels positioned vertically, so that the ensemble of photographs looks diagrammatically like this:



The two vertical panels are blown up photographs, as well, although they are too abstracted to read as such. They are, in fact, reproductions of a fragment of a photograph of the Nuremberg rally lights shining in parallel streaks against the vast expanse of darkness. They are, of course, no more recognizable than the right-hand figure in the above photograph is recognizable as Hitler, nor do they divulge anything of the history they are meant to illustrate.

Reproduced in one book after another about the holocaust, already excerpted, enlarged, cropped, the images Brauntuch uses are so opaque and fragmentary as to be utterly mute regarding their supposed subject. And indeed the most opaque of all are the drawings by Hitler himself.¹² What could be less revealing of the pathology of their creator than his perfectly conventional drawings? Every operation to which Brauntuch subjects these pictures represents the duration of a fascinated, perplexed gaze, whose desire is that they disclose their secrets; but the result is only to make the pictures all the more picturelike, to fix forever in an elegant object our distance from the history that produced these images. That distance is all that these pictures signify.

Although the manipulations to which Sherrie Levine subjects her pictures are far less obsessive than Brauntuch's, her subject is the same: the distance that separates us from what those pictures simultaneously proffer and withhold and the desire that is thereby set in motion. Drawn to pictures whose status is that of cultural myth, Levine discloses that status and its psychological resonances through the imposition of very simple strategies. In a recent tripartite series, for example, Levine cropped three photographs of a mother and child according to the emblematic silhouettes of Presidents Washington, Lincoln, and Kennedy. The currency of the myths with which Levine deals is exemplified by those profiles, taken as they are from the faces of coins; the photographs are cut out of a fashion magazine. The confrontation of the two images is structured in such a way that they must be read *through* each other: the profile of Kennedy *delineates* the picture of mother and child, which in turn *fills in* the Kennedy emblem. These pictures have no autonomous power of signification (pictures do not signify what they picture); they are provided with signification by the manner in which they are presented (on the faces of coins, in the pages of fashion magazines). Levine steals them away from their usual place in our culture and subverts their mythologies.

11. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, New York, Macmillan, 1970, ill. following p. 166. It was of course Walter Benjamin, a victim of the very history this memoir would recount, who asked, "Is it not the task of the photographer—descendent of the augurs and the haruspices—to uncover guilt and name the guilty in his pictures?" But then he added, "'The illiterate of the future', it has been said, 'will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph'. But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures? Will not the caption become the most important component of the shot?" ("A Short History of Photography," *Screen*, Spring 1972, 24).

12. Brauntuch has used these drawings, which have been extensively published, in several of his works. Perhaps even more surprising than the banality of Hitler's drawings is that of the art produced inside the concentration camps; see *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940-45*, New York, Jewish Museum, 1978.



Shown as a slide projection last February at the Kitchen, the mother-and-child/Kennedy picture was magnified to a height of eight feet and diffused through a stream of light. This presentation of the image gave it a commanding, theatrical presence. But what was the *medium* of that presence and thus of the work? Light? A 35-mm. slide? A cut-out picture from a magazine? Or is the medium of this work perhaps its reproduction here in this journal? And if it is impossible to locate the physical medium of the work, can we then locate the *original* artwork?¹³

At the beginning of this essay, I said that it was due precisely to this kind of abandonment of the artistic medium *as such* that we had witnessed a break with modernism, or more precisely with what was espoused as modernism by Michael Fried. Fried's is, however, a very particular and partisan conception of modernism, one that does not, for example, allow for the inclusion of cinema ("cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a *modernist* art") or for the preeminently theatrical painting of surrealism. The work I have attempted to introduce here is related to a modernism conceived differently, whose roots are in the symbolist aesthetic announced by Mallarmé,¹⁴ which includes works whose dimension is literally or metaphorically temporal, and which does not seek the transcendence of the material condition of the signs through which meaning is generated.

Nevertheless, it remains useful to consider recent work as having effected a break with modernism and therefore as postmodernist. But if *postmodernism* is to have theoretical value, it cannot be used merely as another chronological term; rather it must disclose the particular nature of a breach with modernism.¹⁵ It is in this sense that the radically new approach to mediums is important. If it had been characteristic of the formal descriptions of modernist art that they were topographical, that they mapped the surfaces of artworks in order to determine their structures, then it has now become necessary to think of description as a stratigraphic activity. Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture.

A theoretical understanding of postmodernism will also betray all those attempts to prolong the life of outmoded forms. Here, in brief, is an example,

13. Levine initially intended that the three parts of the work take three different forms for the purposes of this exhibition: the Kennedy silhouette as a slide projection in the gallery, the Lincoln as a postcard announcement, and the Washington as a poster, thus emphasizing the work's ambiguous relationship to its medium. Only the first two parts were executed, however.

14. For a discussion of this aesthetic in relation to a pictorial medium, see my essay "Positive/Negative: a Note on Degas's Photographs," *October*, 5 (Summer 1978), 89-100.

15. There is a danger in the notion of postmodernism which we begin to see articulated, that which sees postmodernism as pluralism, and which wishes to deny the possibility that art can any longer achieve a radicalism or avant-gardism. Such an argument speaks of the "failure of modernism" in an attempt to institute a new humanism.

chosen because of its superficial resemblance to the pictures discussed here: The Whitney Museum recently mounted an exhibition entitled *New Image Painting*, a show of work whose diversity of quality, intention, and meaning was hidden by its being forced into conjunction for what was, in most cases, its least important characteristic: recognizable images. What was, in fact, most essential about all of the work was its attempt to preserve the integrity of *painting*. So, for example, included were Susan Rothenberg's paintings in which rather abstracted images of horses appear. For the way they function in her painted surfaces, however, those horses might just as well be grids. "The interest in the horse," she explains, "is because it divides right."¹⁶ The most successful painting in the exhibition was one by Robert Moskowitz called *The Swimmer*, in which the blue expanse from which the figure of a stroking swimmer emerges is forced into an unresolvable double reading as both painted field and water. And the painting thus shares in that kind of irony toward the medium that we recognize precisely as modernist.

New Image Painting is typical of recent museum exhibitions in its complicity with that art which strains to preserve the modernist aesthetic categories which museums themselves have institutionalized: it is not, after all, by chance that the era of modernism coincides with the era of the museum. So if we now have to look for aesthetic activities in so-called alternative spaces, outside the museum, that is because those activities, those *pictures*, pose questions that are postmodernist.

16. In Richard Marshall, *New Image Painting*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978, p. 56.

Seven Prolegomenae to a Brief Treatise on Magrittian Tropes

JEAN CLAIR

Though a state of affairs that would contravene the laws of physics can be represented by us spatially, one that would contravene the laws of geometry cannot.

—Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3.0321

I.

Oculus

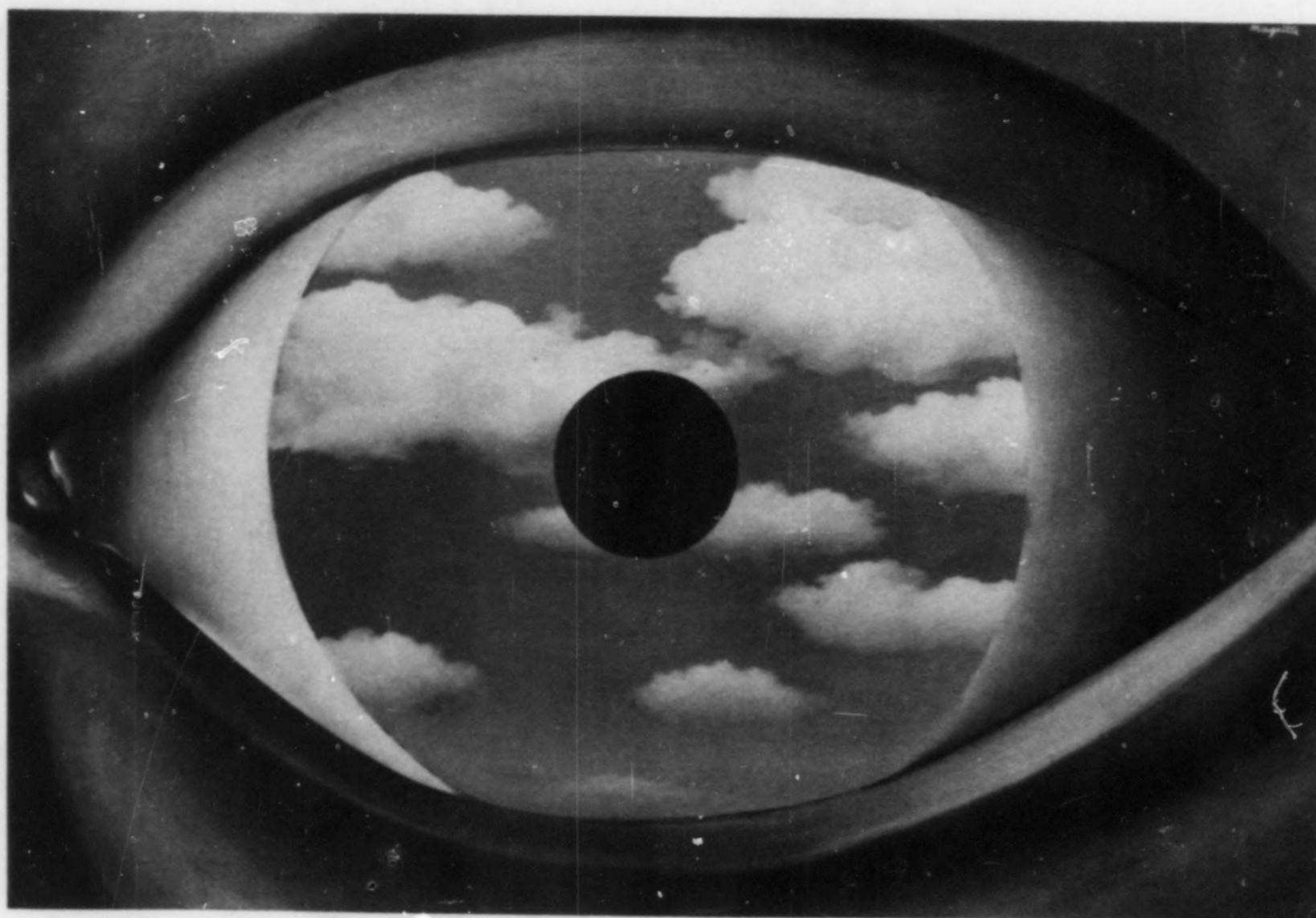
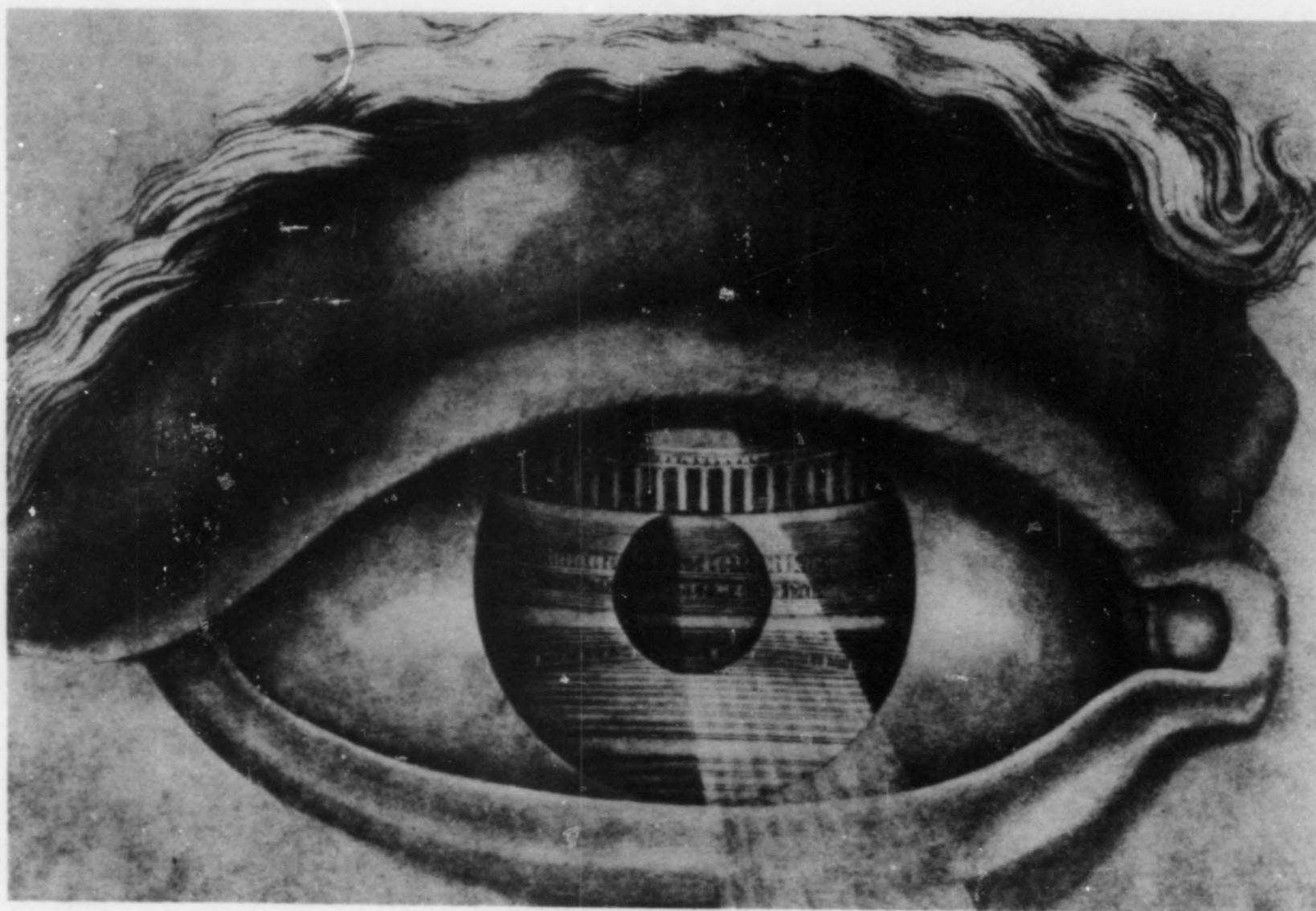
In 1928 Magritte painted *The False Mirror*. This giant eye whose iris, pierced by a black pupil, reflects a sky with clouds is, as we know, an adaptation of the theme of a well-known engraving which adorns the volume by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux entitled *Architecture Considered in Its Relation to Art, Social Custom, and the Law*. This image showed an eye in whose iris was reflected the interior of the theater of Besançon. Ledoux had conceived that theater as a vast hemicycle, which had acquired, as he put it, “the strength of the semicircle, the only form to reveal all the scenes of the theater”; it had also granted every spectator “the right to an equal sight-line.”¹

And it is surely in the perfect convergence of forms—spherical for the eye and ideal for the theater—that the origin of this engraving is to be seen. It is there in the convergence between the organ of sight and the edifice celebrating visibility, there in this equal sight-line common to the instruments of vision and of spectacle, and there in that curvature, identical in the monument which stages and the retina which registers. If through physiological congruence, the theater was, as it were, the perfect reflection of the ocular globe, that globe was reciprocally the perfect mirror of the theater.

As a neoclassicist, Ledoux seems, in regard to this belief, to extend the doctrine of the quattrocento painters, who had also conceived a perfect correlation between the space of mathematics and that of a psycho-physiology. Thus Leonardo, in what he called the painters’ visual faculty, had remarked upon the

1. Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'Art, des Moeurs et de la Législation*, Paris, 1804.

Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Eye Reflecting the Interior of the Theater of Besançon. 1804.



René Magritte. The False Mirror. 1929.

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structural identity of the visual mechanism with the visual world: "Nature has made the surface of the pupil situated in the eye convex in form so that the surrounding objects may imprint their images at greater angles than could happen if the eye were flat."² Furthermore, he had identified this visual faculty with a specular one. On the one hand, Leonardo notices,

The image of every object is changed in the mirror so that its right side is opposite to the left of the object reflected and similarly the left to the right. . . . And this effect in the mirror would be as though someone who was looking at you, someone, that is, who has the left eye opposite to your right, were as by a miracle transposing left and right as in the case with letters used in stamping and wax which takes the impress of the cornelian.³

But he also remarks,

The pupil of the eye which receives through a very small round hole the images of bodies situated beyond this hole always receives them upside down, and the visual faculty always sees them upright as they are. And this proceeds from the fact that the said images pass through the center of the crystalline sphere situated in the middle of the eye; in this center they unite in a point and then spread themselves out upon the opposite surface of this sphere without deviating from their course; and the images direct themselves upon this surface according to the object that has caused them, and from thence they are taken by the impression and transmitted to the common sense where they are judged.⁴

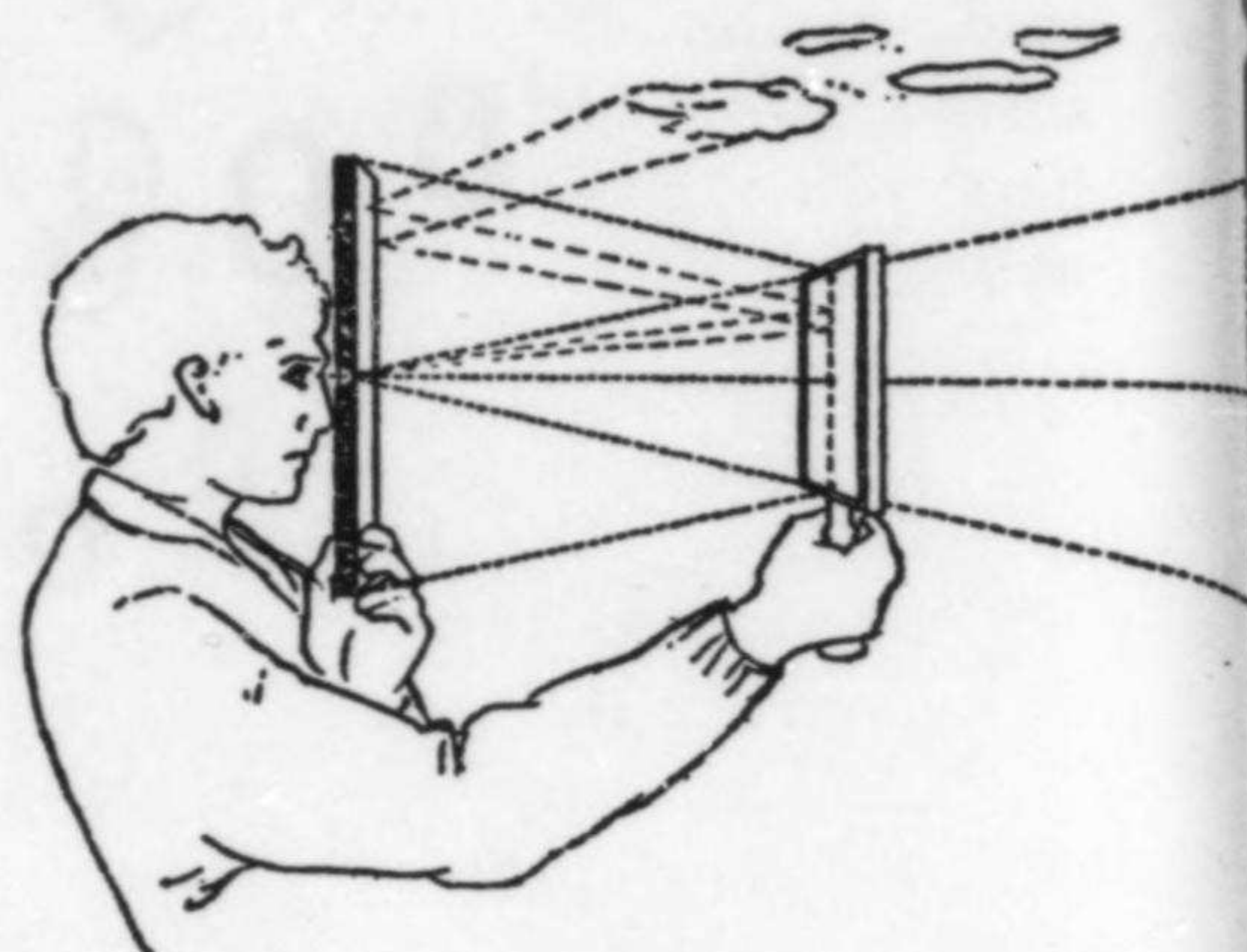
In Magritte's painting, something other than these specular and ophthalmological considerations is of course at work. One has only to consider its title and the fact that he substitutes for the curved image of Ledoux's theater the flat rendering of an azure sky with passing clouds. This eye which mirrors the sky, this cornea which embraces the expanse of space, imperiously fixing it with the black disk imposed upon the iris, naturally recalls another mirror in which sky and clouds were caught in the foils of an ingenious mechanical and mathematical device—a cloud-filled mirror of particular importance since its discovery was to mark the beginnings of the art of classical perspective at the dawn of the quattrocento. An anonymous biographer (possibly Antonio Manetti) has related the experiment: Brunelleschi, in order to demonstrate the art of figure construction according to *la costruzione legittima*, had decided to paint a *veduta* on a small wooden panel, representing the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, seen from

2. *The Notebooks of Leonardo*, Vol. 1, trans. Edward MacCurdy, New York, George Braziller, Chapter IX, "Optics," p. 217.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

inside the Cathedral. The *tavoletta* required that one look at it in a particular way, by placing the eye at a given point—the *punto dove percolteva l'occhio*; the place was determined by an oculus cut through the panel at the vanishing point of the depicted image opposite a second panel held parallel to the painted panel and whose face, turned toward the painting, is simply a mirror. The reason for the mirror lay in the fact that although Brunelleschi had represented the buildings on the ground, that is, the Baptistery and that part of the piazza which corresponds to the angle of vision he originally used, he had merely claimed to show (*dimostrare*) the sky. In order to do this he had used a subterfuge which, as Hubert Damisch writes,



Reconstruction of Brunelleschi's experiment.

... introduces within the circuit of representation both a direct reference to exterior reality and an additional redoubling of the specular structure at the basis of the experiment. The observer, placing his eye against the panel and focusing, through the hole pierced at the composition's vanishing point, on the reflection of the painted image in a mirror placed at a specific distance, perceived a "sky" that was merely the reflection of a reflection. Actually, insofar as Brunelleschi had to take into account the place on which the perspectively rendered walls were imprinted (*stampassono*), he had covered the corresponding part of the panel with a darkened silver surface in which the atmosphere and the real sky were reflected as were the wind-driven clouds which became visible in the silvered surface.⁵

Damisch can, then, claim to recognize in Brunelleschi's experiment a limitation inherent in the system of perspective from the moment of its inception. "Perspective has to take cognizance of only those things which it can reduce to its order, things which occupy a place and whose contour can be defined by line. Now, the sky occupies no place. It cannot be measured, and as for clouds, their contours cannot be fixed nor can their forms be analyzed in terms of surface."⁶

Given these considerations, it is of interest to note that Magritte gives the title *The False Mirror* to an eye whose pupil does not, as in the case of Ledoux,

5. Hubert Damisch, *Théorie du Nuage—Pour une histoire de la peinture*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1972, p. 169.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

reflect the ordered and measurable structure of an architecture constructed and defined with the regularity and linearity of Brunelleschi's Baptistery. Magritte's eye reflects instead a sky with clouds, that is to say, forms belonging to the category of surfaceless bodies as they will be defined by Leonardo, precisely those bodies which defy the possibilities of the perspective code. The subversion of the specular apparatus is absolute, so that the organ of vision, hitherto the regulator and master of appearances, is now subjugated to the point of total encroachment by the spectacle of that which can be neither regulated nor mastered.

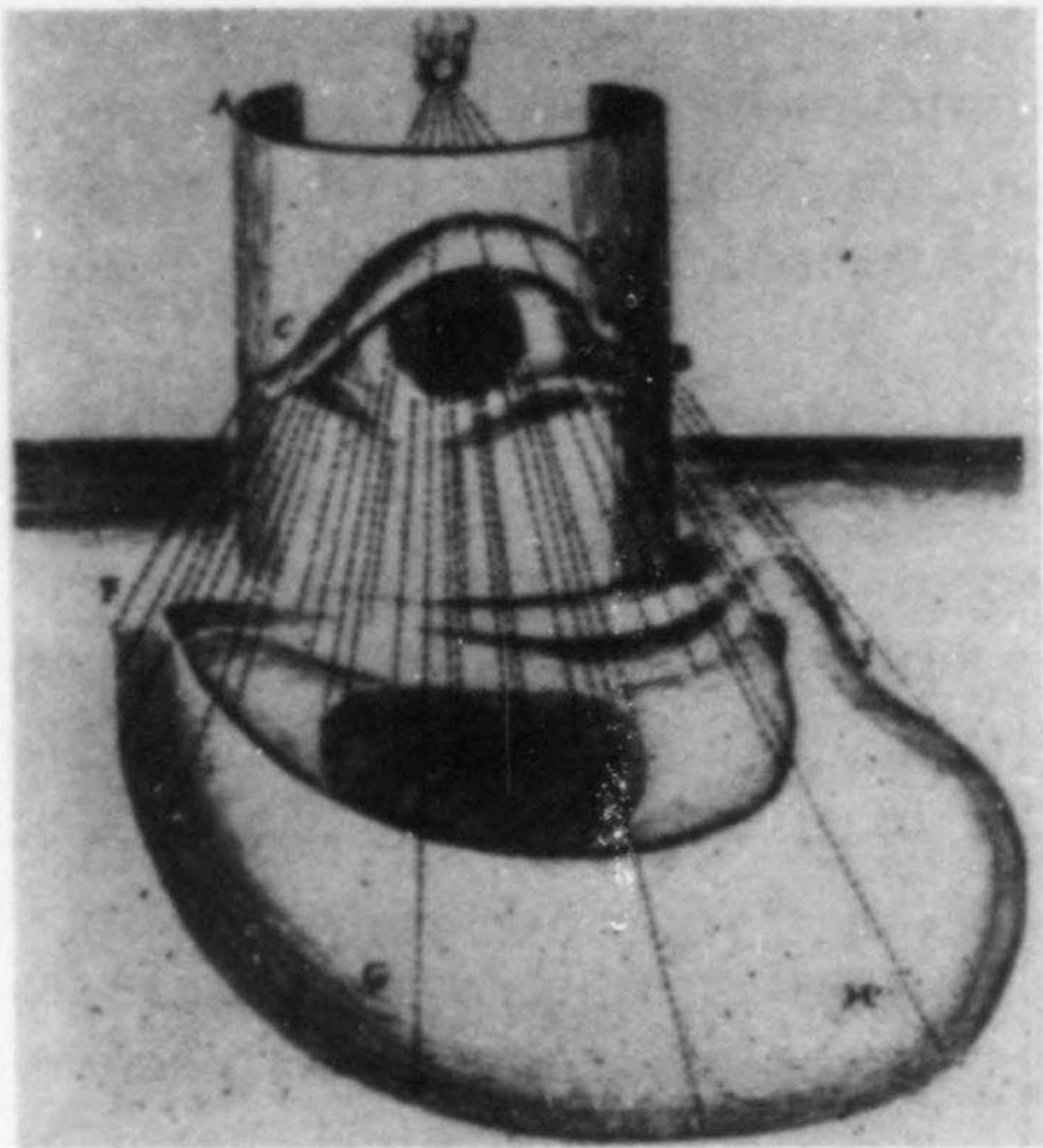
The False Mirror, as we shall see, traces an emblematics of Magritte's oeuvre; it substitutes within the pictorial field the fleeting, labile, and nonmeasurable bodies of clouds sweeping the sky for the regular, fixed, and measurable bodies of classic perspective.

For the fact is that Magritte's painting, as against most other tendencies within contemporary art, does not try to forget or abolish classical perspective. Rather, it reestablishes that perspective, decked out with all its magical charm, at the heart of representation, the better to turn it against itself within its own code, and at its limits. Magritte's painting no longer makes use of perspective in submission to the *nomos* of forms lawfully disposed in space, thereby confirming the reality of the objects represented. Rather, that very perspective is used as a given system, its possibilities are exploited to the point where the system becomes anomic, surrendering to the arbitrariness of forms that are indecisive, without measure, in constant interpenetration, lacking identity and definition like the clouds which scud across the sky.

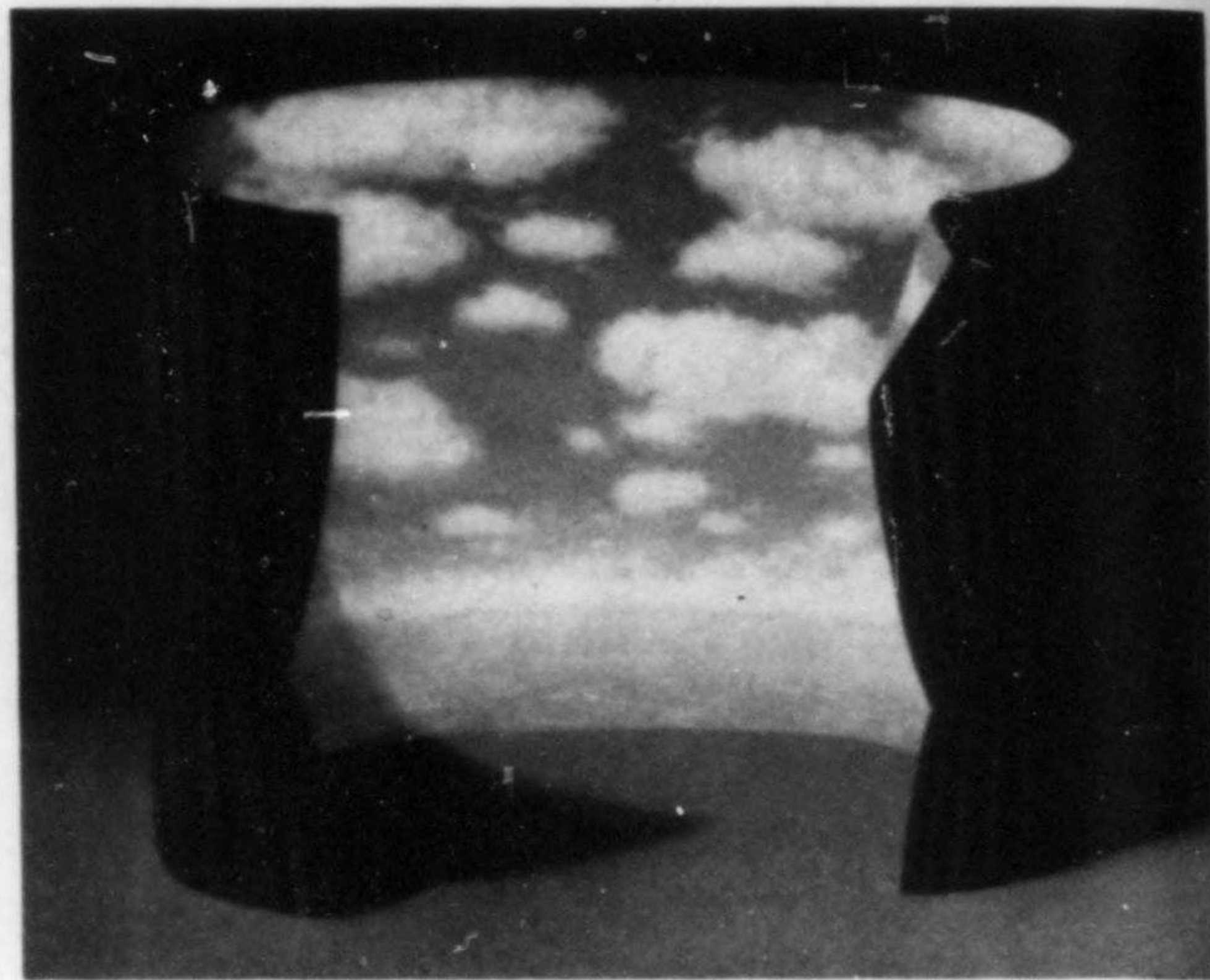
Leonardo had offered a definition of perspective as "the first thing a painter has to learn in order to give each thing its place and to give it the right proportion in its place." He thus defined the coherence and propriety of a spatial structure such that the bodies inserted within it and the intervals separating them are interrelated by a single law. Similarly, Pomponius Gauricus had defined the law of perspective as that which allowed one to "deduct what spacing should separate one object from another or, on the contrary, what relation should be established between them in order that one's understanding of the representation be neither hindered by overloading nor impaired by poverty."⁷

Magritte brings into play those very mechanisms which defined perspective as a system. Without abandoning this system, but using it in reverse rather than according to custom, he thereby becomes involved in displacing things from their expected sites, assigning a dimension different from that provided by the ordered spacing of the perspective grid. The representation is consequently in every case either overloaded or impoverished to the point where it becomes incomprehensible to any eye with a possible claim to mirror things.

7. Quoted in Erwin Panofsky, *La Perspective comme forme symbolique*, trans. Guy Ballangé, Paris, 1975, pp. 156-7.



Mario Bettini. *The Eye of Cardinal Colonna*.



René Magritte. *Memoirs of a Saint*. 1960.

II.

Scenographia

The Eye of Cardinal Colonna, engraved by Mario Bettini for his *Apiaria*, is not so well-known as Ledoux's eye, but it is also interesting. It is depicted on a convex screen. A light source in the sky projects this deformed eye onto a horizontal plane, rather like an anamorphosis on a cylindrical mirror. This curved mirror evokes another screen, that of *Memoirs of a Saint*, set up like a curved stage backdrop in which another cloud-streaked sky is projected.

This theme introduces two characteristics of Magritte's universe. The first is his fascination with anamorphosis, for the visual conceit, for all those *inganni degli occhi* which trouble and disturb the rational order of perspective. The second is his taste for a scenography intended for the staging of these different visual games, intended as the space of their deployment and which, in marshaling the entire machinery of perspective illusion, appears to aim at their exhaustion, at their transcendence. Magritte therefore produces an endless series of paintings in which a scenic cube is very strictly organized by a given number of predetermined elements. The unit of cubic space is defined in the foreground by curtains, masonry ledges, or sometimes by both together, joined at right angles. In the background, the perspective cube will be closed for an interior or opened for a landscape. But even in the latter case, the opening seems artificial, since it is represented by a uniformly cloudy sky which stops the spectator's gaze like the backdrop of a stage set. A certain number of other elements reappear regularly, in the manner of theatrical machinery; among these are pierced paper screens, giant bowling pins, grooved wooden stretchers.

Perspective and stage design have always been linked, as we know. Vitruvius

tells us that the first systems of perspective reduction invented by the ancients were used for painting stage sets, and the codification of their principles was carried out in the context of *Scaenographia*, a discipline distinct from that of *Optikè*. Equally significant is the fact that Alberti, one of the Renaissance theoreticians of perspective, is also the author of *Philodoxus*, the first comedy written for a single, precisely conceived setting, with definite architectural elements to the right, to the left, and upstage. More curious, with respect to our subject, is the fact that it is the Ferrarese tradition of large-scale spectacle which generates the classical stage in single-point perspective, with a piazza edged on every side by houses rendered in illusionist relief and closed off by a background on which a panoramic view of a stylized city is simply painted.⁸

Magritte's surrealist stage design can, as we have just seen, be understood in a double sense: as both the taste for the construction of theatrical sets and that of conceiving plays, that is to say, as two complementary ways of occupying and organizing space, either by geometrically determined form, or by characters, attitudes, and speech. How, then, are we to forget that this sense of design undoubtedly developed as a result of a shock caused by the discovery of De Chirico's painting? It is no accident that both the scenic and perspective elements of Chirico's work were inspired by the contemplation of Ferrara's city squares.

Magritte's scenic design is, however, not at all metaphysical. As a contemporary of *Cinéma Bleu* and *Fantômas*, it will inspire popular playlets like *The Threatened Assassin* or *The Lovers*, whose mystery is more a matter of situations or characters than of scenic artifice as such. The scenic cube will at a later time, however, become the site of strange metamorphoses; it will become the set of quick change, of disappearance and appearance, in constant renewal of the enigma of the object there encountered. The mechanical artifices set into play by Magritte's dramaturgy, the strange, fabulous, or fantastic effects created by the stage machinery and its sets, correspond with total precision to the marvelous effects—the flats, curtains, and frames—obtained by the workshops of the baroque theater.

Consider, then, the work of Nicola Sabbattini, one of the most celebrated stage designers and master-craftsmen of the early 17th century. The chapters of his *Pratique pour fabriquer scènes et machines de théâtre*⁹ raises problems of perspective and lighting similar in many ways to those treated by Magritte; they range from "how to draw several windows on facades in perspective" to "how to adjust off-stage lighting." But, the wonderful effects sought by Sabbattini are, above all, so strangely identical with those encountered in Magritte's paintings that one must briefly attempt to draw some parallels by placing side by side a few examples taken from Book II of the *Pratique* and the subject matter of certain pictures.

8. On this question, cf. Robert Klein, "Vitruve et le Théâtre de la Renaissance italienne," in *La Forme et l'Intelligible: Ecrits sur la Renaissance et l'art moderne*, Paris, 1970, pp. 297ff.

9. Nicola Sabbattini, *Pratique pour fabriquer Scènes et Machines de théâtre*, trans. Maria et Renée Canavaggia et Louis Jouvet, Neuchâtel, 1942.

Chapter 11. "How to Make It Seem that the Whole Stage Is in Flames" / *Ladder of Fire*

Chapter 24. "How to Cause Mountains or Other Things to Rise from Beneath the Stage Floor" / *The Domain of Arnheim*

Chapter 25. "How to Make a Person Change into Rock or Other Substances" / *Memory of a Voyage*

Chapter 26. "How to Represent the Transformation of Stones or Rocks into Men" / *Every Day*

Chapter 27. "First Manner of Causing the Sea to Appear" / *The Collective Invention*

Chapter 33. "How to Make It Seem that a Ship or Another Kind of Vessel is Anchored in the Middle of the Sea" / *The Seducer*

Chapter 37. "Manner of Making a Sky in Several Pieces" / *Delusions of Grandeur*

Chapter 47. "How to Make a Cloud Crush the Stage" / *Poison*

Chapter 50. "How, with No Clouds, to Make a Person Descend from the Sky" / *Infinite Gratitude*

Chapter 52. "How to Simulate Lightning" / *The Haunted Castle*

III.

Tropologia

Let us continue the consideration of *diverse e artificiose macchine* which do machinate perpetually, although according to a set of permutations that would have to be defined on the basis of a determinate number of elements, generating visual effects that are surprising and disconcerting. Like figures of rhetoric, they displace the usual elements of an utterance in the production of effects, so that they can henceforth be called tropes. These visual effects can be compared to those of an extravagant linguistic figuration: transporting, transferring, transposing, in an incessant movement of *translatio*, the properties and habitual sites of bodies in accord with an inverted natural history, such as when a rock floats in the sky and a cloud's weight presses on the earth, or flesh becomes stone and stone, skin; or again, the reflection diverges from the object reflected, the part is mistaken for the whole and the near seems far. These effects are not rhetorical in character, for rhetoric not only respects the *ratio* of things whether linguistic or visual but, through its own order, strengthens and confirms that *ratio*; rather, they are governed by the excessive and perverse rhetoric to be called *tropologia*, employed to make perspective order strange to itself—"making strange" as the poetic conceit exhausts language, making it "strange." And like Gongora, who talked of "red snow," Magritte reveals to our disconcerted gaze the shadowy clarity of a burning candle.

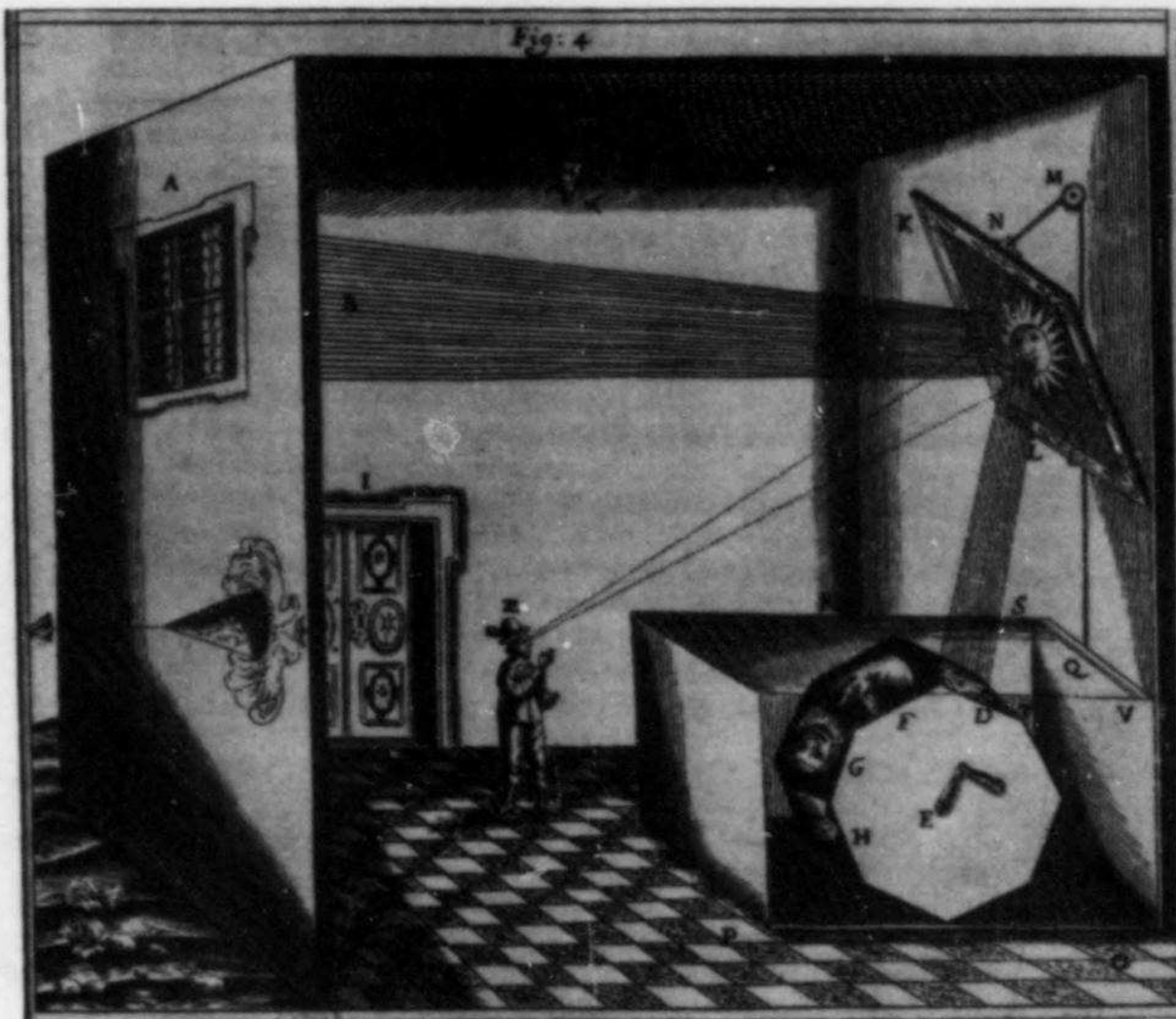
At the end of his *Ars magna lucis et umbrae*, Athanasius Kircher proposes a machine for the fabrication of metaphors, invented by Jean Trithème, theologian and cabalist. It relies on the mechanics of *magia catoptrica*, or the transformation

of images by the play of mirrored surfaces. He describes it thus: "*Per specula plana machinam catoptricam constituere, ut homo speculum intuens, loco humani vultus, asini, bovis, cervi, accipitrix, aut simili animalium vultus referre videatur.*"¹⁰

The visitor entering this image factory discovers a piece of furniture, shaped like a chest, in which a drum with various images revolves. Over the chest hangs a mirror. If the visitor looks at himself in the mirror he will see himself in all sorts of forms—animal, vegetable, or mineral. Everything is transformed into everything else, and everything becomes like everything else.

The human face is constantly and in a thousand ways deformed—*faciem hominis mille modis deformare*. Some of the metaphors thus obtained by Kircher recall some of Magritte's tropes. An example is the face that is transformed into stone, or stranger still, the face changed into a sun. The results can be compared to what happens in *Black Magic* and *The Pleasure Principle*. . . .

The last chapter of Kircher's *Ars magna* is entitled "*Sphaera mistica sive tropologia lucis et umbrae*." The importance of those chapters of perspective treatises devoted, as Father Du Breuil puts it, to "Procedures for Establishing Shadows Cast by Sunlight and Torchlight as well as by Candle and Lamplight" is generally known. "The treatise on shadows is one of the most essential for the work of practical perspective since it is shadow which gives strength to the objects, *which present appearance as reality to our sight.*"¹¹ This accounts for the almost obsessive attention of the perspectivists to the slightest variations of light, leading to endless taxonomies and the observation of the thousands of ways in which the subject can be lighted or obscured. "It can be illuminated by sunlight in the open air, in calm weather; it can be illuminated by the same sunlight, slightly overcast by clouds, trees, tents, floors, a cover, a part of a wall, or something similar. It can be illuminated by a fire of clear flames or smoke, by the light of burning coals, of a lamp, of a torch, either great or small; and by several different lights simultaneously originating in different places."¹²



Athanasius Kircher. *Ars magna*. 1646.

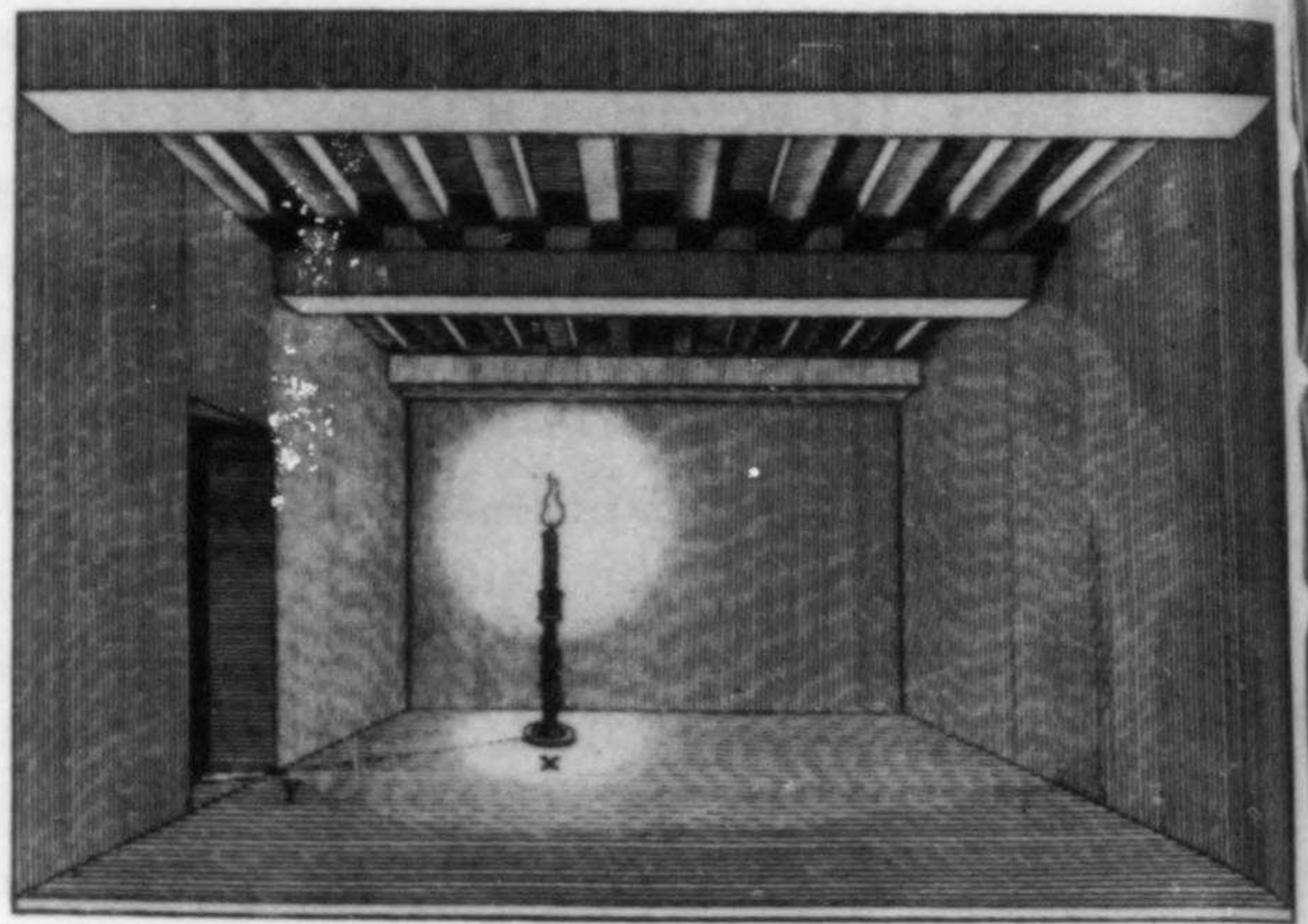
10. Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna lucis et umbrae*, Rome, 1646, p. 901.

11. Le P. du Breuil, *La Perspective Pratique* . . . , Paris, 1649, vol. I, p. 124. (Italics in original.)

12. Abraham Bosse, *Manière universelle de M. Desargues de pratiquer la perspective*, Paris, 1648, p. 213.

For Kircher this study of light and shadow goes further than the obsessive attention to effects of luminosity; it leads to a quasi-ritualistic practice, to which he gives the name of *Sciasophia*; and it exacerbates the rules of perspective rhetoric, thereby opening the way to what he properly calls a *tropologia*, or the concerted search for surprising effects in which the natural order of things is inverted or reversed, in which night becomes day or light becomes shadow; fire, dark; darkness, light. . . . These phenomena can be compared to those of that *Empire of Lights* to which Magritte held the key. One thinks, as well, of his own statement about his magic.

As to light, I thought that if it has the power to make objects visible, its existence is manifested only when received by objects. Without matter light is invisible. That is made evident, I think, in *The Light of Coincidences* in which an object, a woman's torso, is lighted by a candle's flame. . . .¹³



Du Breuil. *La Perspective pratique*. 1649.



René Magritte. *The Empire of Lights*. 1949.

Or further:

What is represented in the picture entitled *The Empire of Lights* are things that occurred to me, which is to say, precisely, a landscape at night and a sky as we see it in full daylight. The landscape evokes night and the sky evokes day. To me this evocation of night and day seems to possess the power to surprise and charm. I call this power poetry.¹⁴

A flame radiating darkness and a daylight sky shedding night upon a landscape do, of course, reverse the laws of the *costruzione leggitima* just as surely as the false perspective of *The Promenades of Euclid* or the fanciful couplings of *The Collective Invention*.

IV.

Intarsia

No external mechanism is employed, however. Magritte draws his subversive machinations from the working principles of perspective. The sense of wonder in his work lies in the joy of testing a mechanism which had fallen into disuse since the nineteenth century, his purpose being not so much the correct construction of figures but rather their playful exhaustion through permutational possibilities.

Magritte's project, playful and sometimes, perhaps, epistemological, is directed toward an inventory of a given system's possibilities, fascinated by the passing flash of figures, or—as the linguists would have it—concerned with signifiers caught in a structure's predetermined network and not with the reproduction of a signified. He rediscovers in the 1920s the Lost Continent of the *Perspectiva artificialis*. His work thereby paradoxically parallels that of the mannerists, whose interest in the possibilities of the *costruzione leggitima* lay only in its aberrations. And not because they wished to implement their discovery once made, but rather because, having exhausted the rhetorical resources of direct discourse, they now wished only to exploit the spurious charms of indirect discourse, all the paradoxes and illusionistic effects of a *concordia discors*. Hence, some of the most typical traits of Magritte's art take on, as if spontaneously, aspects typical of Renaissance art. We shall consider one example in some detail.

The close links between the brand new science of perspective and the technique of marquetry are well known. Intarsia has always accompanied or preceded its applications. "We must," says André Chastel, "actually understand the contemporary development of the new technique of marquetry and the perfecting of modern perspective as a convergence that has significance for the history of the entire century. It seems as though they had, at a certain moment, revealed their mutual indispensibility to one another."¹⁵ The conquest of picto-

13. René Magritte, *La Ligne de Vie*, II, February 1940.

14. René Magritte, *L'Empire des Lumières*, April 1956.

15. André Chastel, "Marqueterie et Perspective au XV^{ème} siècle," *La Revue des Arts*, 1953, 141-54.

rial space through Brunelleschian perspective found, as it were, a choice material and technique in the linear carpentry of wooden inlay:

A geometrical network was determined by the play of intersections formed by the simple scaffolding of orthogonals and lines converging on the vanishing point; this network was then worked out in a set of easily detachable basic forms. . . . When the space had been broken up into its component parts, it could be put together on the surface like a puzzle, that is to say, like marquetry.¹⁶

Now, are not many of Magritte's paintings put together, in the regular delineation of their component forms, like inlays? Beginning in 1927, *The Bold Sleeper* includes a certain number of familiar objects—a mirror, a hat, a bird, a ribbon, an apple, a candle—set into the thickness of a tablet seemingly made of soft wax. In the painting of the following year, *The Imp of Perversity*, the tablet reappears with its cavities waiting to be filled in, as if by missing pieces of a puzzle. In 1930, *The End of Contemplation* presents two figures in profile, cut out and set into the background of the painting. *Le Beau Monde*, of 1960, has a set of vertical curtains presented as an adjustment of marquetry. This conjoining of regularly formed pieces, mutually and precisely adjusted so as to recompose, through the analytical excision of forms, a trompe l'oeil effect in an imaginary space, is seen again in *Amorous Perspective*. It is at work in all those paintings in which the little man in frock coat and bowler hat appears, such as *The Spirit of Adventure*, *The Pilgrim*, *The Masterpiece or the Mysteries of the Horizon*, etc. This male silhouette is moreover so well-conceived as a moveable piece of inlay that in *Decalcomania* it turns on an axis and is flattened through a half turn onto the left half of the picture, leaving behind it a "hole" in the curtain which held it. This last instance of Magritte's intarsia confirms the rule governing Renaissance marquetry emphasized by André Chastel, according to which "frontal and profile views dominate, and the turning of bodies is limited to a few axes."¹⁷

16. *Ibid.*



René Magritte. *The Bold Sleeper*. 1927.

It is, however, in the series of paintings which explore a single idea that the principle of Magritte's marquetry is most strongly expressed. It is in them that his radical subversion of his classical model is evident. In *The Palace of Curtains* (1928), *The Proper Meaning* (1928), *The Six Elements*, and *The Empty Mask*, the canvas surface is divided into a series of adjacent compartments, either curved or rectilinear. In each compartment we see either the excision of a partial image (a woman's torso, a façade, a sky, hailstones) or else a word—"sky," "curtain," "building facade," etc.).

For the fifteenth century the technique of intarsia provided the basis for the unity of what was seen. The pieces of objects collected and recomposed according to the schema of the perspective lattice along the cleavage lines of carpentry offered clear evidence and confirmation of the ordering of the real. For the perspective checkerboard and its set of black and white pieces is but itself the simplest variation upon the inlaid construction and, as such, inherent in the intervals between things in space. And it is, conversely, this inherent quality and this unity of the visible which Magritte's intarsia subverts; dissolving the bonds between objects in space, it restores a kind of natural disorder to the puzzle.

Further still, it reduces the relations between things to their designation. If some of these elements recombine and recombine with each other like the figures of an enigmatic coat-of-arms (thus the four elect figures of *The Alphabet of Revelations*: the bird, the key, the glass, and the pipe), the disjunction between these images and their accompanying labels, intertwined through obscure nomenclatures, the discrepancy between the emblem and its motto, initiates a new and completely indecipherable art of the *impresa*.

V.

Perspectiva

"Cross-axial vision," is Dürer's attempt at a definition of the new concept of *perspectiva*. A century later, Abraham Bosse, in his *Treatise on the Practice of Geometry and Perspective*, proposed an attractive image of this concept, an engraving which represented, in flat projection, a perspective lattice on which were rendered and *deformed* two regular volumes—a cube and a pyramid—and a small theatrical character. Set into the lattice was a small picture which repeated the scene *en abyme*, except that the lattice and the three figures in the small picture were seen in perspective. At a slight distance from it stood the "viewer" with his back to it. The small, inset picture, in which the motif of the engraving is repeated, and its viewer are in fact paper figurines, cut out and pasted so that they can be raised at a 90-degree angle to the plane of the engraving's surface. The ingenious device gives one an immediate grasp of the connection between the flat projection and the perspective while the demonstration of the picture as a glass screen intersects the visual pyramid.

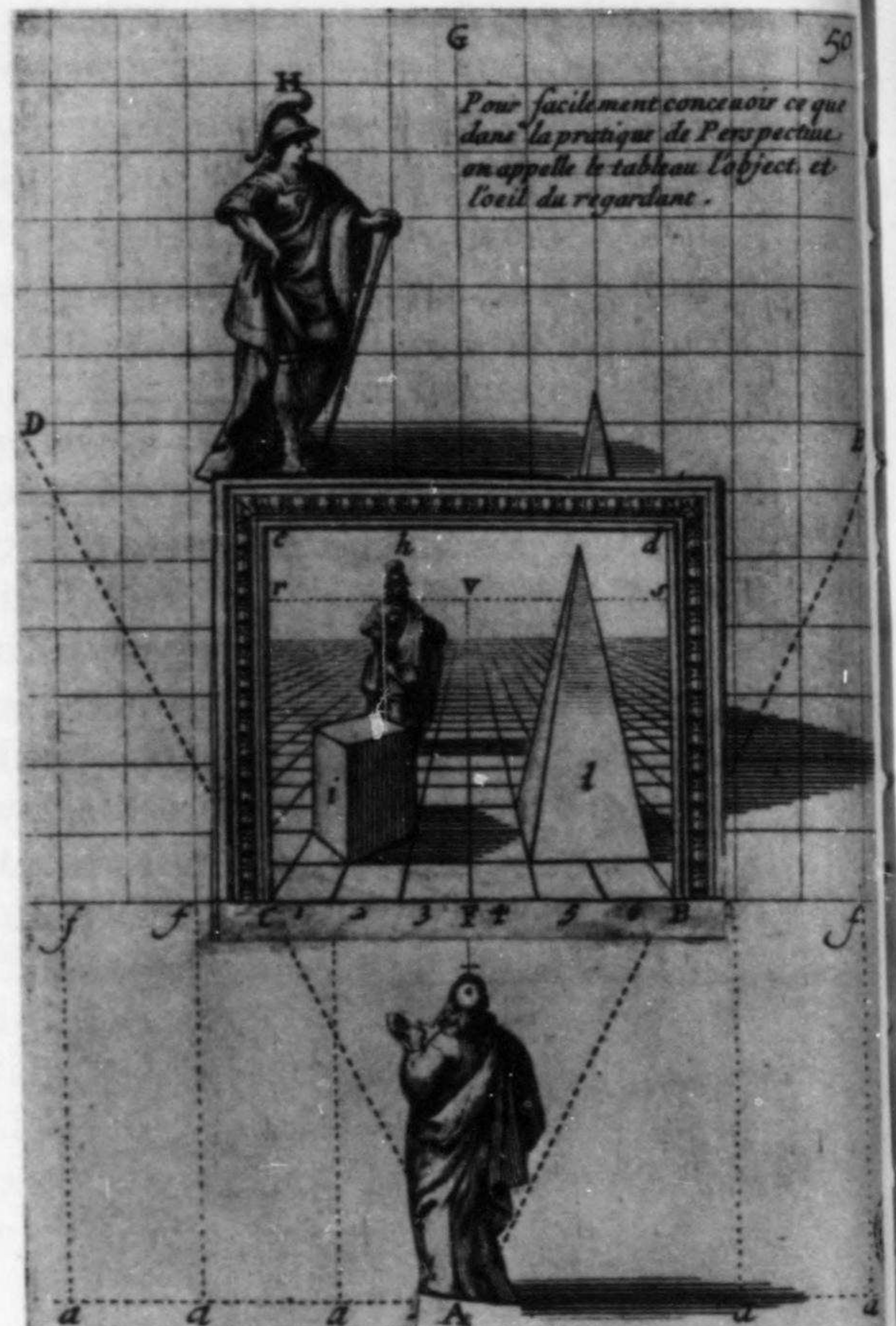
17. André Chastel, *Le Mythe de la Renaissance*, Geneva, 1969, p. 91.

The fascination of this little montage lies elsewhere, however. It offers, in addition to the perfect transparency obtaining between the visible and the representation which defines the picture, a space that is conceived entirely in mathematical terms, covered with regular networks containing forms. This is more than a window space, it is crystalline, and from that property it seems to derive the possibility of engendering regular forms. Here again is a space of intarsia. It is the space of those tiled floors whose straight lines generate for the eye, in an almost hallucinatory manner, geometric figures of varying degrees of complexity. That crystalline space, centered and tiled, seems endowed with the power of condensing, as by a physio-chemical effect of crystallization, along the virtual nets which traverse it, regular polyhedrons, cubes, pyramids, pentahedrons which will float like aerial apparitions.

The strange and wonderful effects described by Stoer in his *Geometria et Perspectiva* and Sandrart in his *Deutsche Akademie* were derived from these mathematical phantasmagorias by eliciting from the surveying of the real world these pure bodies descended from the *Timaeus* of Plato.

Now Magritte's space, precisely insofar as it also participates, as we have seen, in a space of intarsia, often reveals itself as the locus of similar marvels. Next to a meticulously painted little house in Brussels, a perfectly regular cube settles down. Elsewhere, in a sky that is very realistically rendered, the perfect sphere of a giant hailstone comes floating by.

And yet, everywhere else, Magritte's intarsia belies these crystallographic enchantments. Is *The Human Condition* to be understood as the very model of a perverse intarsia? The "representing" picture is certainly set into the "represented" picture like a piece of marquetry. But it is not a repetition in infinite regress; it is an extension, with no break in continuity. It gives us no glimpse of the picture, but conceals it from view; the "picture" hides the real, masking, not revealing, it. The clear wall of glass which Leonardo defined as painting, Alberti's perfect *interseguazione*, becomes the shoddy trick of a prestidigitator, whisking



Abraham Bosse. Treatise on Perspective.

screens on and off in order to make images appear and disappear. And *The Evening Falls* seems in this respect, like the climax, the final conceit of this disappearing act. The splinters of the visual world, once ordered along the carpenter's lines of cleavage, reunited in the unity of a central viewer, now lie scattered, like the pieces of a puzzle that cannot be put back together, under the failing light of a small round sun, fixed and cold, like the pupil of *The False Mirror*.

The glass window, the instrument on which the visible world founded its cohesion, is broken beyond repair; the order of the perspective marquetry is dispersed. The isotopic, crystalline, and homogeneous milieu which stretched unbroken from the visual to the represented has become heterogeneous and opaque. (And it is in this sense that Magritte, who, while seeming to reinstate the apparatus of classical perspective, cannot rest until he has perverted and negated its transparency, shares in that "modernism" which declares the painting to be a flat, material, opaque, afocal, and amorphous space—in a manner as "abstract" as that of Mondrian.)

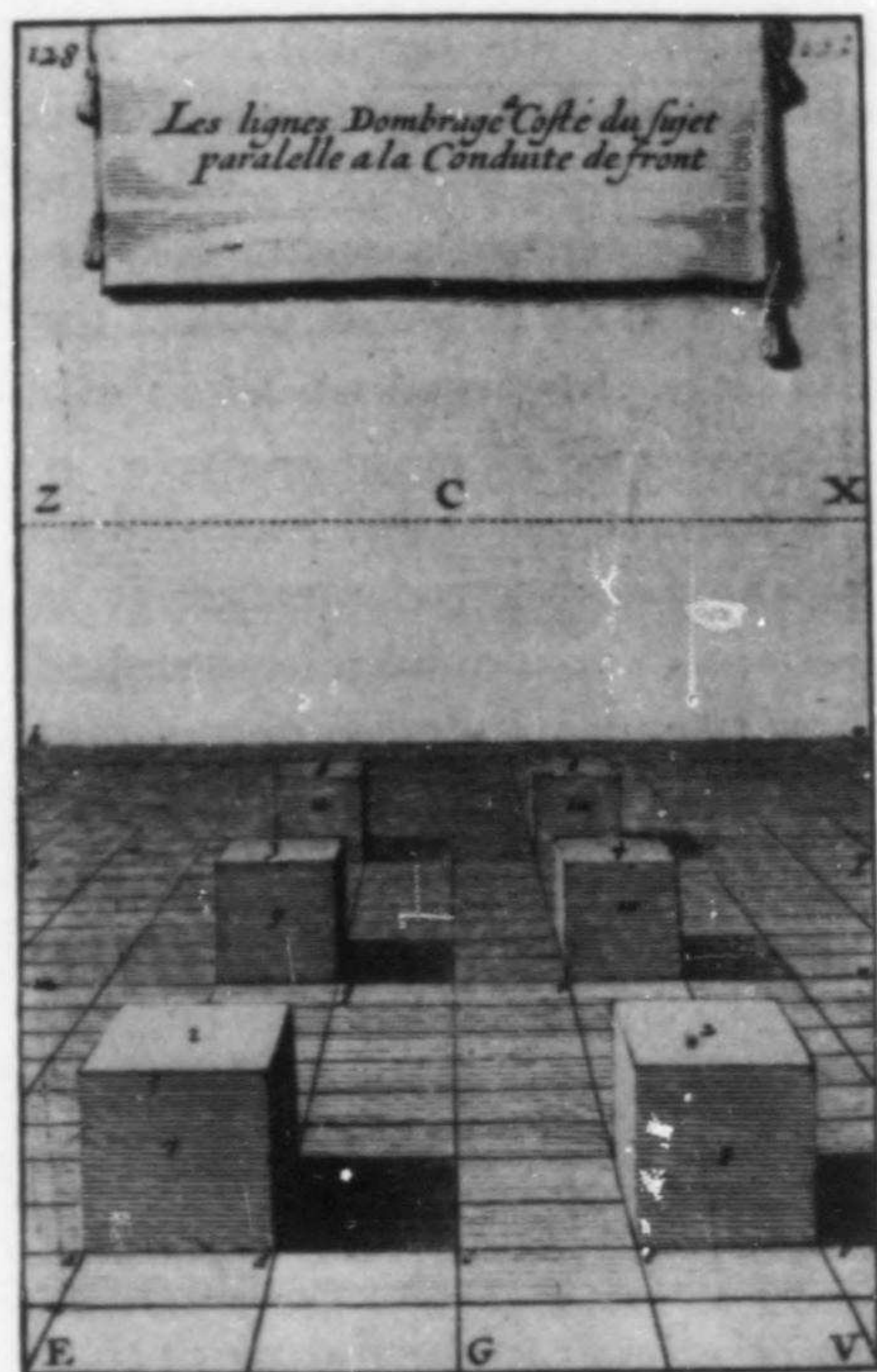
The consequences are several: in classical painting, a body, object, or figure does not really conceal another body; the crystallographic structure of the mathematical space allows one to infer the concealed parts from the visible ones. In Magritte's painting, on the contrary, we are never certain as to the nature of that which remains hidden; the part that is veiled can differ from that which is visible and, when uncovered, it may reveal some unexpected aspect. One of the effects of this heterotropic space is consequently the multiplication of wild tropes, the generation of hybrids whose rule of construction cannot be deduced from a general rule.

This leads to the proliferation of chimeras and grotesques, the female bodies transformed into fish (*The Collective Invention*), the tower bases changed into roots (*Almayer's Folly*), and above all, the bodies stretched and deformed like rubber (*The Acrobat's Ideas*). And this produces, as well, that principle of opacity in substitution for that of crystal through which, in this inverted perspective, flesh, clouds, common objects, and even glass and windows become the sites of strange petrifications, like so many impenetrable blocks.

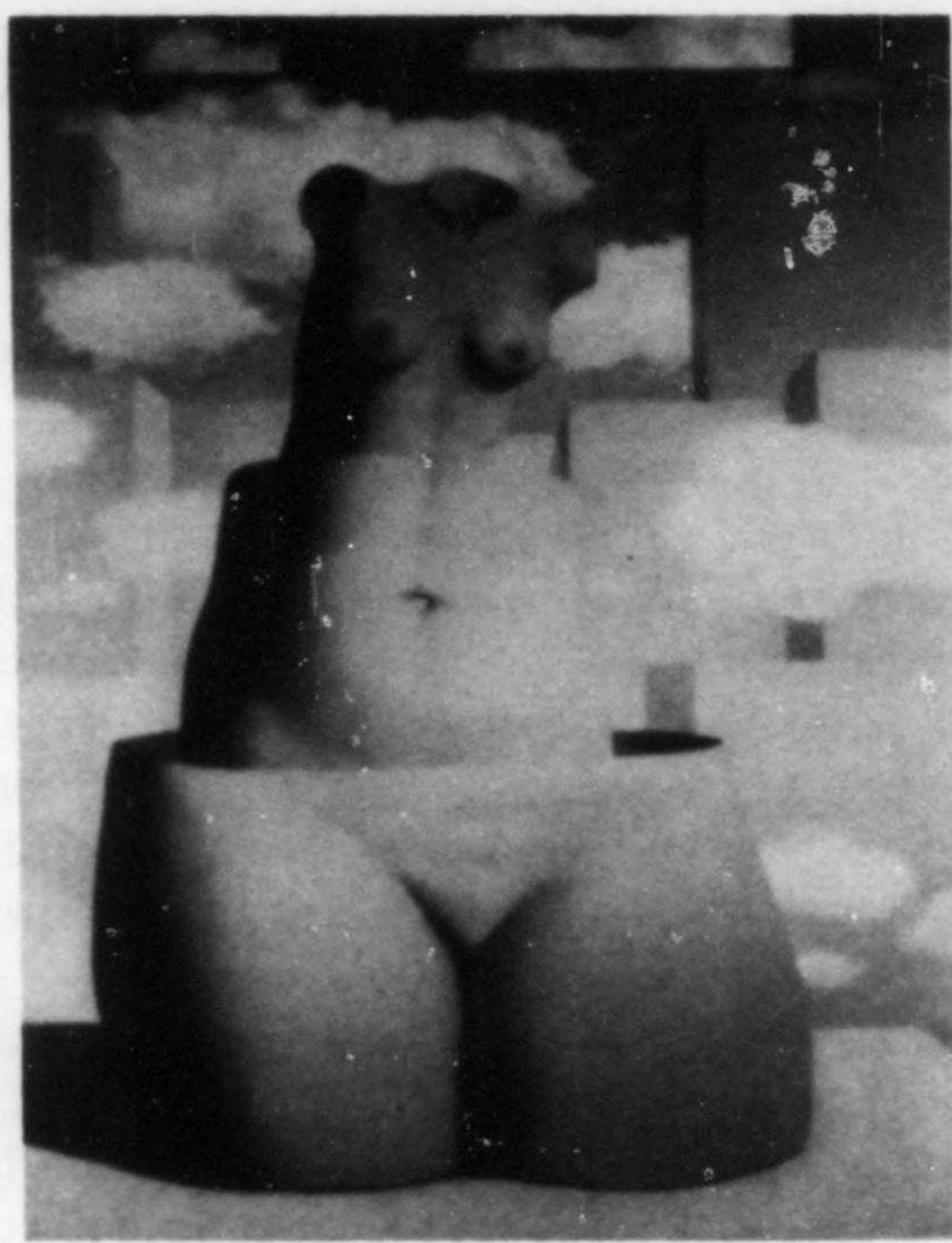
VI.

In Alto Verso l'Aere

"Inverted perspective" may indicate the germ of a principle of construction. Magritte, in perfect awareness, gives it the title, *Hegel's Holiday*. On top of an open umbrella rests a glass filled with water. Not only is the natural order of objects displaced, but so is their function; the glass receives that which the umbrella is supposed to reject. *The Song of the Storm* offers another illustration of these "dialectical reversals": a cloud lies on the ground upon which rain is falling. In *Beautiful Realities* a giant apple, floating in the sky, supports a tiny table; "common sense" in the physical and intellectual senses of the term would have supposed the contrary with respect to dimensions and functions alike.



Du Breuil. *La Perspective pratique*. 1649.



René Magritte. *Delusions of Grandeur*. 1962.

Delusions of Grandeur is richer and more complex. Its title can be understood as the common expression designating an exaggerated taste for luxury. It can also be taken as designating sizes which have become somehow excessive, mad. It can, finally, be understood as the affirmation of the unreasonable nature of wanting to measure and attribute dimension to things. The picture's imagery plays on these three possible readings. The female torso, a prop straight out of the classical academy and thereby out of the regular and measurable universe of the *ars perspectivae*, is, in its attempt to reach the sky, really subject to "*la folie des grands*." At the same time, however, the reduplication *in diminuando* of its volume insinuates doubt as to its real scale. Various elements of the painting disturb our usual spatial perception, thereby emphasizing that uneasiness and leading to a third interpretation: it is unreasonable to attribute measure to things.

One of the most striking of these elements is surely the way in which the sky is rendered—in the form of cubes piled one on top of the other. Magritte has, as it were, reversed the order of things, applying to the sky the ancient procedure of *quadratura* which the perspectivists applied to solid bodies resting on the ground, that is, raising the scale of heights on the perspective chessboard so as to delimit the cubes which define the exact volume and size of the objects represented. In so doing, he reverses there, as well, the order of things, applying it to the sky, that is

to say, once again, to the only element which by its very nature is not subject to the laws of linear perspective and cannot be measured.

In his treatise on painting, Alberti says that the painter's principal task, *la summa opere del pittore*, is *l'istoria*, that is to say, the composition of bodies, their relations, their intervals as they are determined by both their real size and their function: "*Adunque tutti i corpi per grandezza et suo officio s'acconfarranno a quell che ivi nella storia si facci. . .*"¹⁸ The painter's main concern is thus to place each thing according to its real size and in its proper place (*a suo luoghi*). We see the retaliation imposed by Magritte on *l'istoria*, diverting bodies from their functions, displacing their locations and delivering their sizes into madness.

And it is precisely by pulling all the strings which command the illusionistic space of classical perspective that Magritte disturbs the order of the physical world; he thus disturbs the congruence claimed by Alberti between the mathematical order of representation and the properties of things represented according to their proportions, weight, role, and place.

Alberti nevertheless goes on to say that if the painter must deviate from things that are not to be seen, must ignore the phenomena which transgress the ordinary measures of reality, if he then wishes not to succumb to "*la folie des grandeurs*," but to apply himself to the simulation of only those things that are to be seen (*Solo studia il pittore fingire quello si vede*), it is still true that of all the movements, all the displacements to which a body may be subject, there is one that is more alive and more agreeable than all the others; one which will confer grace and beauty on the painting. It is the movement upwards, *in alto verso l'aere*,¹⁹ which belies the weight of solid bodies and demonstrates their freedom.

When we consider the number of paintings in which this movement figures, we see that Magritte, too—and more frequently than any other artist—has stressed this movement, to the point of making it the most characteristic trope of all those affecting his forms. One recalls the image of the little balloon which, in picture after picture, seems to point the way toward the top, the hailstones suspended like balloons in the sky, and above all, those bodies—people, flowers, rocks, domestic utensils—defying gravity in a state of levitation. And finally there are those bodies which are not only *simile alle fiamme*, as Alberti wished horses to be painted, but so eager despite their own material composition to become part of air and fire that they appear to be in a state of spontaneous combustion. This last series of paintings is entitled *Ladder of Fire*, as if the only sort of size that deserved measurement were precisely that which denotes this ascent to the heights.

And it is no accident that, in *The Readymade Bouquet*, Magritte uses one of the most celebrated images of weightlessness that the painting of the Renaissance has given us: that of Botticelli's *Primavera*. Hubert Damisch, writing of the effect produced by this feminine allegory, says, "It exists only as an effect, in proportion

18. Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura*, Vol. II, p. 91.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

to its illusionist basis and the perceptible, 'visible' relation between the body and the space in which it moves. Suffice it to say that the composition of solid bodies in which *istoria* consists presupposes the geometric construction of space."²⁰ And Magritte too, by inscribing his production of images within a geometrically predetermined space, follows a model (in the epistemological sense of the word), which is that of the linear perspective of the Renaissance artists, in order to obtain its effects. We may say, however, that the effects no longer serve within the framework of a preestablished system, of a *nomos*, to make the *istoria* agreeable. Used deliberately, for their own sake, to make the system function to the very limit of its possibilities, exhausting it to the point of destroying the body's "normal" relation to its space, these magnified effects have become the very content of the work.

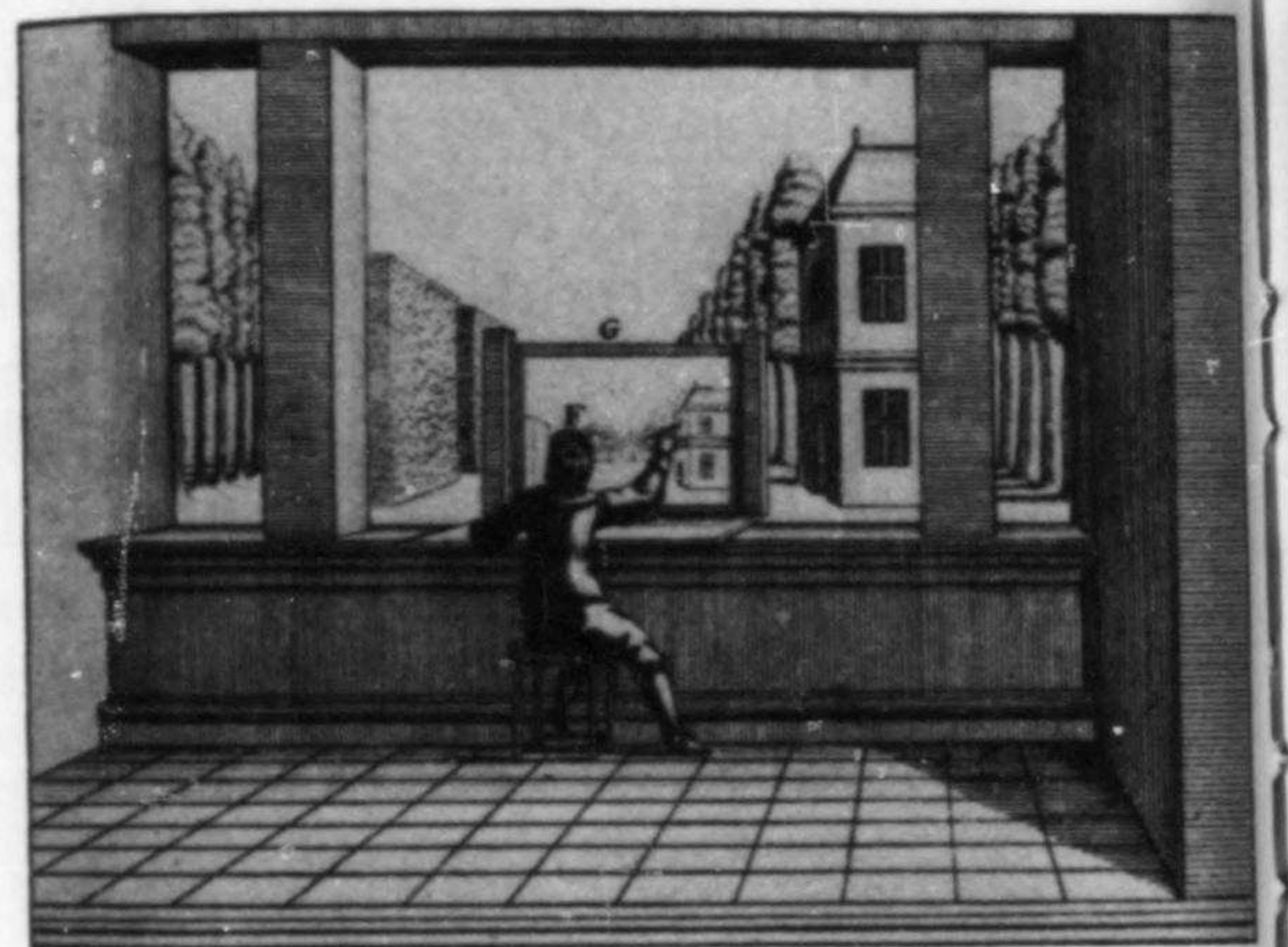
We may nevertheless wonder at the way in which the surrealist aesthetic coincides with classical *theoria*: is not that movement *in alto verso l'aere* which defines the charm of motion the same by which André Breton defined the marvellous: "the ascending sign"?

VII.

Grammatica

These visual games which sustain Magritte's scenography we have called tropes, rather like those language games which are not part of a fixed rhetoric. These games do not rely on the rules of such rhetoric, fortify its cohesion, or demonstrate its expressiveness, but rather come under the heading of a tropology, that is, a set of figures used deliberately at the limits of a language for themselves and for their effect, and which are therefore disturbing of its order and destructive of its clarity.

It would surely be amusing to describe, one by one, with the help of the taxonomies established by Du Marsaid or Fontanier, the figures of contiguity or resemblance which group or match the forms in Magritte's canvases along unexpected modes, to list the tropes functioning according to laws different from those which govern the appearances of the real world and push one figure in the direction of another. A leaf, covered with birds and standing for the whole tree (*The Inner Look*), might thus be termed "a synecdoche of species." An eye which radiates rather than transmits the sky's light (*The False Mirror*) might be named a "metonymy of effect"; while the representation of an object whose dimensions are exceeded to the point of improbability (the giant rose of *Tomb of the Wrestlers*), could be called "hyperbole." And in terms of what Fontanier



Du Breuil. *La Perspective pratique*. 1649.

20. Damisch, *Théorie du Nuage*, p. 155.

calls the "transfer to an object of that which seems really appropriate to another with which it has some relation,"²¹ as exemplified by the water and glass in *Hegel's Holiday*, we find a case of "hypallage." Etc.

This learned inventory does not, however, instruct us as to the real mechanisms behind these displacements. For are they not, as I have already suggested, figures of style intended to strengthen our understanding of things through a preestablished harmony between thought and a given sign system? We know how stubbornly Magritte has always denied the attribution of figures to given symbols in his paintings. And they are not produced by a mysterious dream work, in the Freudian sense of the word, insofar as they seem—and in this they are antithetical to other surrealist art—not to conform to "an inner mode." Their originality and their effectiveness actually derive from the fact that they originate in the possibilities of inner connection within a given system of representation and not from the connections between this system and a model which is exterior, objective or subjective, naturalistic, symbolic, dreamlike, or anything else. Their game is, in its frosty humour, a game of "irreference," as it were, which tells nothing, teaches nothing, but can only disconcert, being at once abusive and amusing.

The picture in *The Human Condition* does not "represent" the landscape concealed by it through an effect of *mise en abyme* in the manner of the classical system of representation of the picture window. Instead, it extends the landscape

with no break; the distinction between inside and outside is suppressed, or rather, one's belief in the capacity of a sign system to secrete an inside and an outside is negated. Although seemingly subject to the rules of representation, the painting "represents" nothing; neither a tree in a landscape nor a picture representing a tree in a landscape; nor does it represent itself as a picture representing a picture which might represent a tree. . . . This link, which formed the last connection between representation and its system through the transparency of representation itself, is undone. The painting has become a system of autonomous signs none of which is in itself "the image" of an object in the real world— *This is never a pipe*. Only the connections



René Magritte. *The Human Condition*. 1933.

21. Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du Discours*, Paris, Editions Flammarion, 1968, p. 266.

which establish these signs as a system can be compared to those which, in reality, distribute things before our eyes so that we can recognize them.

The problem posed by Magritte, which is that of the status of the image, of its standing and its place—in that it “stands for” and “takes the place” of something else external to it—is thus identical to the problem posed with respect to language by Wittgenstein at almost the same time, when he declares the illusion involved in our belief that we can distinguish between the rules of grammar “that set up a connection between language and reality and those that do not.” Actually, he says, “Language is not something that is first given a structure and then fitted onto reality.”²² There is therefore no coordination between language and external reality, and the explanations of words are wholly internal to the grammar of language. “Where” indeed is the picture which represents a picture representing a tree, a tree which is in turn only the fragment of the same picture? The problem of the space of pictorial inscription and of the relation between that inscription and its support is thereby posed as well: either the support is denied its materiality as an object and becomes the transparent pane which guarantees the interchange between “outside” and “inside,” the perfect reciprocity between the representing and the represented things, or else, as with Magritte, its opacity is confirmed by this inscription. “Then I ask you,” says Wittgenstein, “is the subject-experimenter observing one thing or two things? (Don’t say that he is observing one thing both from the inside and from the outside, for this does not remove the difficulty). . . . I can say ‘in my visual field . . . I see the image of the tree in the middle of the visual field.’ And now we are inclined to ask ‘And where do you see the visual field?’”²³

The logic thus brought into play does not refer to the logical form of propositions or the logical structure of language; it puts to the test all conceivable language games, which are, says Wittgenstein, infinite in number and, in a certain sense, “unforeseeable.” Similarly, Magritte’s visual games are not the results of a rhetorical application which would be that of classical perspective, but rather the endless multiplication of those “new” tropes which put the logic of the system to the test.

At the really debatable borderline—for there is no such borderline—between painted and objective representation, *The Human Condition* raises another problem formulated by Wittgenstein when, in contrasting “representation” and “meaning,” he speaks of the possibility of a “private” language distinct from a common idiolect:

Someone paints a picture in order to show how he imagines a theater scene. And now I say: “This picture has a double function: it informs others, as pictures or words inform—but for the one who gives the

22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1974, p. 89.

23. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York, Harper and Row, 1958, p. 8. Cited by Suzi Gablik, *Magritte*, Brussels, 1978, p. 96.

information it is a representation [*Darstellung*] (a piece of information?) of another kind: for him it is the picture of his image [*Vorstellung*], as it can't be for anyone else. To him his private impression of the picture means what he has imagined, in a sense in which the picture cannot mean this to others." And what right have I to speak in this case of a representation [*Darstellung*] or piece of information—if these words were rightly used in the *first* case?²⁴

Wittgenstein's language games, like Magritte's visual games, demonstrate that there is no confrontation of sign with reality but rather a scoring of reality by the sign. Classical semantics are replaced by a deixis; that which I know I am representing or naming, is what I show: meaning is distinct from denotation. Above all, it is usage:

"I don't merely have the visual impression of a tree: I *know* that it is a tree."

"I know that this is a hand."—And what is a hand?—"Well, *this*, for example."²⁵

And furthermore, in this passage which suggests the image of one of the six objects represented in *The Key of Dreams*:

Isn't the question "Have these words a meaning?" similar to "Is that a tool?" asked as one produces, say, a hammer? I say "Yes, it's a hammer." But what if the thing that any of us would take for a hammer were somewhere else a missile, for example, or a conductor's baton? Now make the application yourself.²⁶

Magritte is simply posing the same dilemma and with a similar humor when, under the painted image of a hammer, he traces the caption "The Desert."

The theory of language games as presented at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* is directed at allowing for the observation of language *in stato nascendi*, in very simplified ways of functioning, using only prime words or what Russell called "object words," which can be taught ostensively. If the word *dog* does not bite, a dog in its turn cannot understand the gesture which indicates an object, and will, for example, come over to sniff at a pointing finger. This theory of language games is oddly similar to the almost propaedeutic method conceived by Magritte for his *Alphabet of Revelations*. This step is, however, only the first one:

... naming is a preparation for description. Naming is so far not a move in the language game—any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess. We may say: *nothing* has so far been

24. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York, Macmillan, 1953, § 208.

25. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, New York, Harper and Row, 1969, § 267-268.

26. *Ibid.*, § 351.

done, when a thing has been named. It has not even *got* a name except in the language game. This was what Frege meant too, when he said that a word had meaning only as part of a sentence.²⁷

One might say, then, that all terms of a language have to be defined contextually, or in reference to a determined language game—which would mean, in visual terms, a return to the space of intarsia described above, and to its play of pieces in conjunction. And Wittgenstein's use of the image of the chess game, which alone explains the use of the king, is revealing, for it recalls precisely the context of chess, that of classical perspective, in which Magritte's visual games developed and whose coherence he perturbed.

Wittgenstein expresses the same idea more concisely in the *Investigations*:

The general form of propositions is: "This is how things are." That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.²⁸

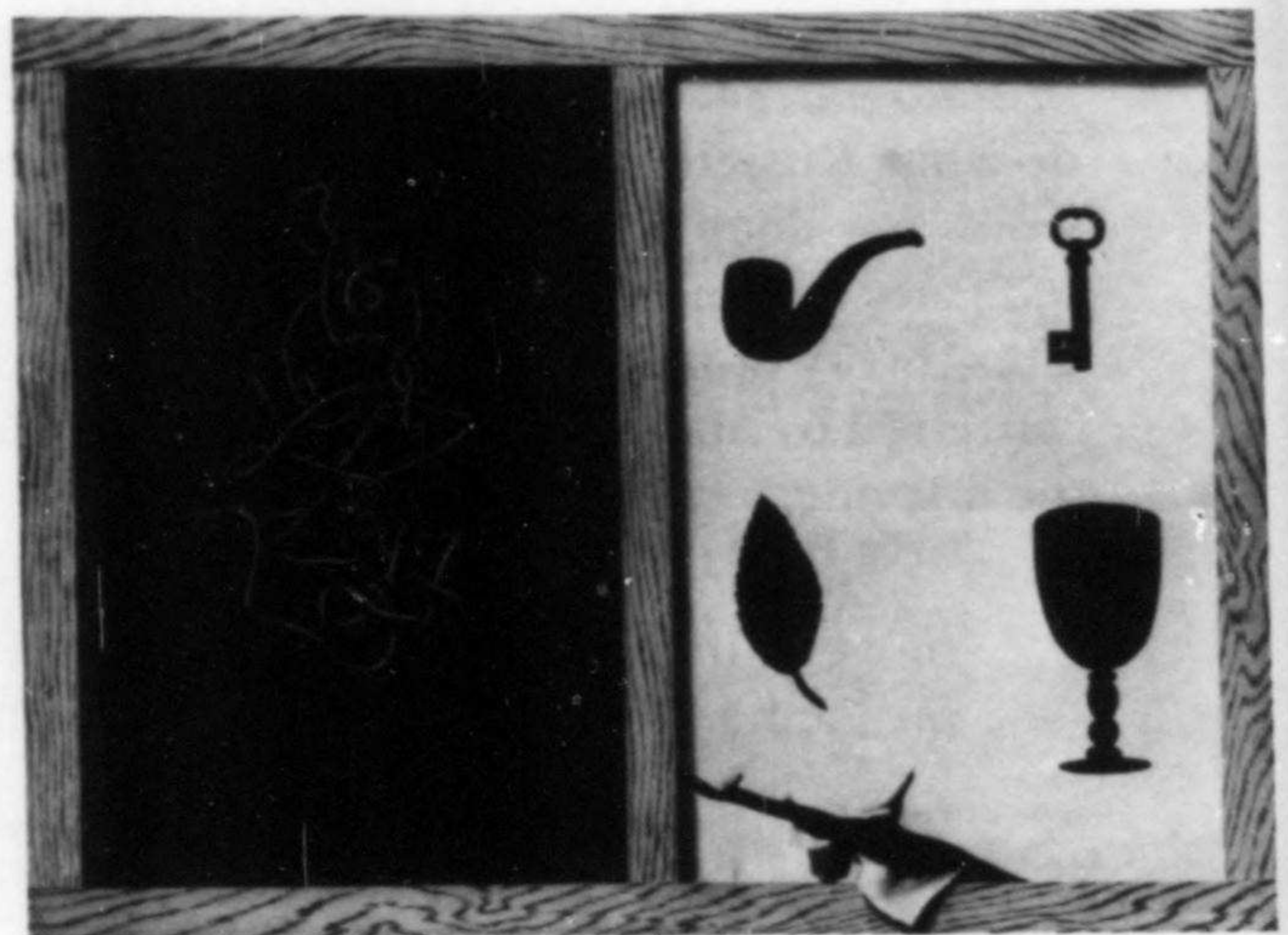
There follows this aphorism, even more concise: "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."²⁹

There would seem to be no better way to define the rigor and humor which give Magritte's art its fascination.

27. *Philosophical Investigations*, § 49.

28. *Ibid.*, § 114.

29. *Ibid.*, § 115.



René Magritte. Alphabet of Revelations. 1935.

ANNETTE MICHELSON

I

The entire conduct of our life depends upon our senses, of which sight is the noblest and most universal, so that those inventions which serve to increase its power are surely the most useful possible.

—Descartes, *First Discourse on Light, Dioptrics*

A decade and a little more have passed since Jules Olitski wistfully revealed his desire to spray color upon the vacant air, a fantasy anticipated and realized some seventy-five years before in the projection of the first tinted film. The intensity of this illusionist aspiration, apparently frustrated by the materiality of canvas and stretcher, was to generate some of the most improbably and perversely painterly sculptures of the 1960s. Frustration and perversity alike may, as I have in another context suggested,¹ be read as elements of a more general syndrome, that of a crisis of pictorial enterprise. It is as though contemporary painting had acknowledged, through color-field painting, an impasse, hesitated upon the threshold of temporality before retreating, capitulating to sculptural materiality. It is in this critical moment that the polyvalent venture of Michael Snow originates.

That Snow began as a painter, exhibiting in Canada and later in New York, is generally known. The climate in which he matured was that of the mid-1960s, when the interpenetration of painting, theater, and dance, the flowering of happenings and performance were intensive. The systematic exploration of interrelated modalities of sculpture and performance, as in the early work of Morris and Rainer; the modification of the space of gallery and museum; the prospecting of new arenas and theaters of operations: these shaped the expanding and somewhat eccentric areas of inquiry in which Snow, together with figures such as Jacobs, Foreman, Jack Smith, developed. The consequent displacements

1. In "Paul Sharits and the Critique of Illusionism: an Introduction," in *Projected Images*, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1974, pp. 20-5.

and redefinitions were not to be accommodated by the decorum of pictorial modernism; these men drew upon the synthetic tradition of pictorial, sculptural, theatrical, and poetic enterprise—the cinema of the Bauhaus, the theater of constructivism, the objects of surrealism, the festivities of dada, preserved, partially and precariously, through the emigration of European artists driven to this continent by fascism.

The lone survivor of that older generation, the most sympathetic and seminal figure was, of course, Duchamp; and it was his multiplicity of effort and confusion of genres, his own passage from painting to sculpture, to cinema, his excursions into photography which were exemplary for some younger artists of this time. He was, in fact, a model of that polyvalence we shall see in Snow, who passes from painting to sculpture, to film, and whose mature work circulates more freely and regularly between film and photography, music and video and environmental installation, in contestation of the purity, discreteness, and irreducibility of pictorial effort central to the theoretical and critical orthodoxy of that time. For it was not only the polyvalence of Duchamp that disturbed; the subtle and radical manner in which he had long since introduced temporality into painting was now sensed as a threat to the integrity of pictorial space. The optical drawings made to turn and be filmed in *tournage*, the work *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* can now be seen in their fully subversive functions—like the concept of “the delay in glass,” with its ambiguous resonance of the time limit inscribed within the material as well as the stirring, turning, revolving figure, so constant in Duchamp’s work.²

Above all, however, it was the idea of framing as the quintessential compositional strategy which challenged, in a characteristically paradoxical way, the value of pictorial purity. The frame, empty and infinitely mobile, directed literally and metaphorically towards the world itself, proved an implacable generator of forms. Against the irreducible purity of the image-free, color-field painting in its frame, Duchamp proposed *The Large Glass*, that painted window whose frame constantly renewed, in interstitial space, the composition of the visible world beyond it.³

To a young painter such as Snow, working in a Canadian animation studio, impressed with the implications of Duchamp’s framing gesture, the motion-picture camera quite naturally presented itself as the most powerful instrument devised for the further implementation and articulation of that gesture’s implications. *Wavelength*, the first wholly achieved articulation of that intimation, takes

2. For a detailed consideration of these particular temporal aspects of Duchamp’s work, see Annette Michelson. “Anemic Cinema: Reflections on an Emblematic Work,” *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 2 (October 1973), 64-9.

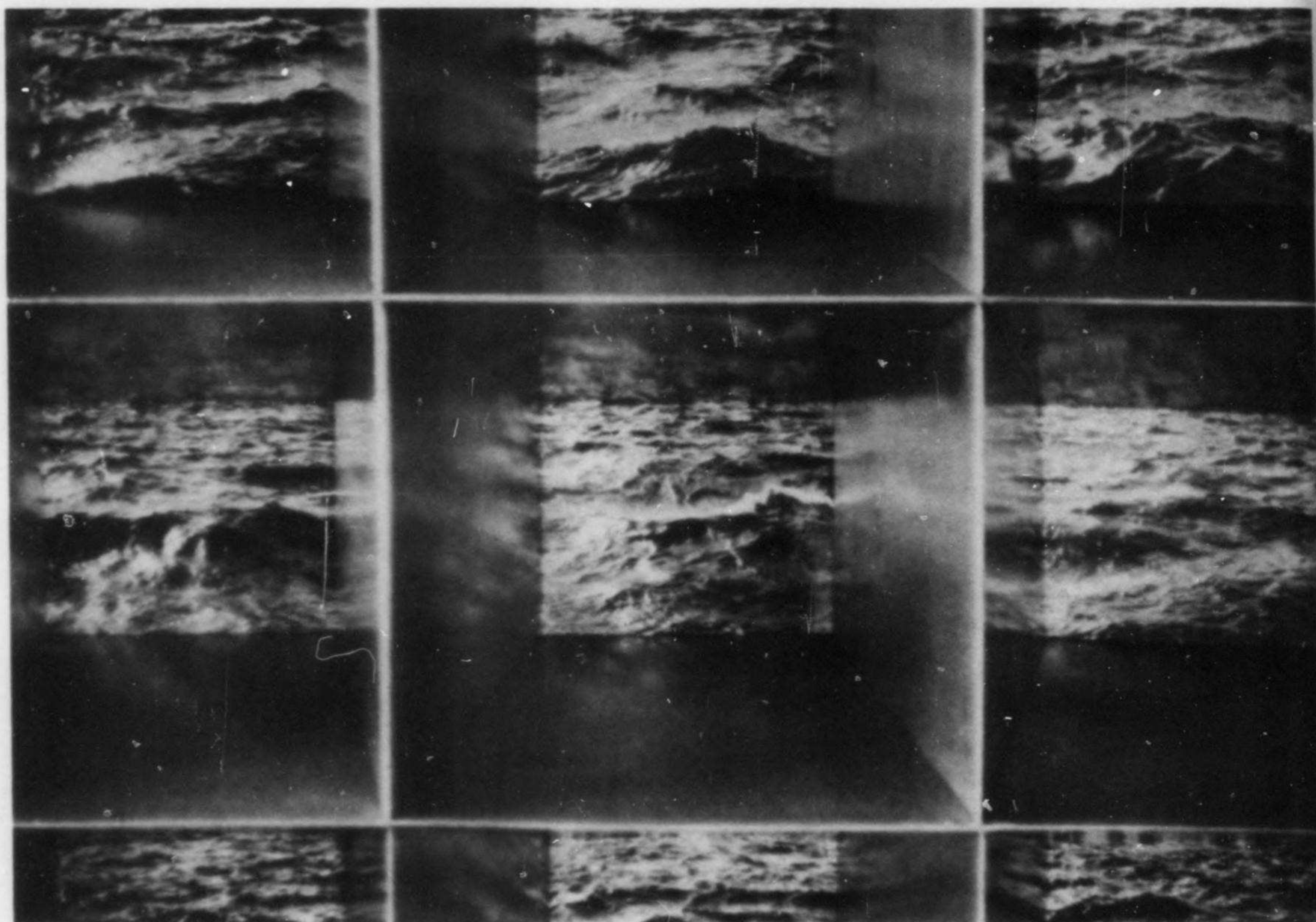
3. Christian Metz has noted in *Le Signifiant Imaginaire* (Paris, Union Generale d’Editions, 1977, pp. 104-6) the affinities between framing and camera movements in cinema, on the one hand, and the mechanisms of censorship and desire, on the other. Further study of Duchamp’s radicalization of the framing gesture and of Snow’s multiple adaptation of it might well profit from consideration within this context.

as its central statement the framing process itself, organized as an extended spatio-temporal strategy of complex resonance. Creating a radically new conception of filmic action as being literally the camera's use and exhaustion of a given space, punctuated by changes of stock, filters, light flares, superimpositions, alternations of positive and negative image, Snow made of the slow and steady optical tracking shot or zoom the axis of a displacement whose perceptual solicitations and formal resonance are those of narrative action.⁴ The film, presented at Knokke-le-Zoute in 1966, broke upon the world with the force, the power of conviction which defines a new level of enterprise, a threshold in the evolution of the medium. Upon this threshold, differences of sensibility and of theoretical commitment were reconciled, conflicts of dominant and marginal efforts were transcended. This work came, as if in ironic response to Brakhage's characteristically categorical declaration: "My eye, tuning towards the imaginary, will go to any wavelengths for its sights."⁵ This film quickly won an adherence which has surpassed any other of its period. But *Wavelength*, in its traversal of a space in depth, restoring the depth of narrative space, comes to rest on the framed flatness of the still photograph; this "monument to time," as Snow himself termed it, ends with an *instantané*. And Snow will now move with increasing freedom between still and moving pictures.

Atlantic is a culminating work of that period. Still and cinematic image are comprehended within and mediated by a sculptural structure which confirms the specific properties of each. Thus, thirty images of the waters upon which *Wavelength* concludes its trajectory are disposed in thin, deeply recessed frames of tin, the whole forming a grid measuring 70" x 96" x 12". Each photographic image is reflected on the polished surfaces of the grid, so that the structure is perceived as both an ordered series of discrete units and as a whole. Continuity is virtual, the effect of those reflections which subsume the frame which is their surface, in a general aspect that recalls *Wavelength's* penultimate visual cadenza of superimpositions. As was immediately remarked upon its completion, *Atlantic* is the work of a particular moment in sculptural development; its idiom is that of minimalist sculpture of the mid-1960s, the most seminal working period of Morris and Judd, of LeWitt and Smithson. In it the elements which will now come to dominate Snow's work are focused and fused: the framing strategy, the adoption of the strong gestalt and of the systematically permutational form. And in the play between real and virtual image, the dominant axis of Snow's work now emerges in its obsessional force, replacing the incessant variational experimentation of the earlier *Walking Woman* series. It is the dynamics of the perceptual process, of sight, reflected in the titles of the works to come—*Blind, Sight, A Wooden Look, Scope, Glares*, among others—that henceforth occupies the center of Snow's thematic and formal preoccupations.

4. See Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow (Part I)," *Artforum*, vol. VI, no. 10 (Summer 1968), 67-71.

5. Stan Brakhage, in "Metaphors on Vision," *Film Culture*, no. 30 (Fall 1963), n.p.



Michael Snow. Atlantic (detail). 1966.

The period of minimalist art, whose full consequences have yet to be appraised, is that of a systematic exploration of the modalities of perception, epitomized not only in the sculpture and painting of its artists, but in a particularly rich theoretical production as well. The period of 1964-71 is that of Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture," Smithson's textual variations on the theme of entropy, of Judd's "Specific Objects." To these we must add the writings of Frampton, Sharits, and the printed statements of Breer, Landow, all following upon the preceding, pioneering work of Brakhage. If one were to characterize this period in terms derived from older art-historical tradition, one might say that it brought about the recapitulation, in the idiom of abstraction, of the passage from the theory and practice of expressionism to that of a New Objectivity.

This transition, developing within a North American context—that is to say, within a relatively thin theoretical tradition—relied upon conceptual substructures largely imported from abroad. These artists proceeded to replace the ideological postulates which had served the preceding generation of abstract expressionists (a somewhat Jungian psychoanalysis and the immediately postwar continental existentialism) with perceptual theory, grounded in phenomenology

and the more specifically Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy. In this context Peirce and Wittgenstein had privileged status.

It is the peculiar strength of these artists—and of their predecessors—to have assumed and, as it were, exploited the contradictions of this syncretic positivism. Shaped by an empirical tradition, artists on this continent have refrained from giving to their successive sets of postulates, axioms, and methodological options the status of orthodoxy; these have functioned instead as working hypotheses, generative, productive, or, when not, easily disposable. The intense concentration on phenomenologically grounded perceptual theory as implemented by the art of Judd and Morris, among others, was, moreover, supported by a critical tradition which extended from the writings of Roger Fry to the younger critics, many of them grouped around *Artforum*. Analytic and descriptive functions now succeeded the expressive imperatives of the 1950s.

The situation of filmmaking presented one very different aspect: a kind of continuity through change. Two related factors assured a continuity between the theory and practice of these two successive periods, between, let us say, the work of Stan Brakhage and that of Michael Snow: an insistence on the primacy of vision and a correlative emphasis on the primacy of Light. Further study should reveal the seminal strength of what we might call the scopophilic and fetishistic characters of this American avant-garde in its perpetuation of the idealist primacy of vision.

Independent film between 1950 and 1965, as exemplified by the work of Brakhage, had adopted an artisanal mode of production, in 16 millimeter. The problematic sound technology of that format was joined with the primacy conferred by a romantic poetics on the sense of sight to produce an oeuvre that is, with very few exceptions, silent, predicated upon the optical spatiality and the gestural dynamics of abstract expressionist painting. It went so far, in fact, as to incorporate a gestural painting on the surface of the film. And Brakhage's theoretical production, comparable in both its scope and its contradictions with that of Kandinsky, rehearses in its central text, "Metaphors on Vision," the notion of film as the luminous inscription of the Imagination, deployed in a pristine purity of vision. This is a vision uncorrupted by that Fall we know as the Renaissance, perpetuated by the codes of representation and ground into the very lenses of the camera. We recognize in this seminal text of 1963 Brakhage's anticipation of the major theoretical and critical themes to emerge in the French literature following upon the crisis of 1968.⁶ The cinema of Brakhage, however, is one of pure presence, in which the limits separating perception and eidetic imagery are annulled in the light of Vision as Revelation.

Snow, presenting an outline for *Standard Time* in August, 1967, said:

I'm interested in a kind of balance that has some similarity to the way Cézanne equalized the physical facts and the presented illusions in

6. This anticipation is discussed in "Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* (Part 2)," *October*, no. 3 (Spring 1977), 77-8.

painting. On film the transformation is into light and time and the balance is between the illusions (spatial and otherwise) and the facts-of-light on a surface.

It had been the singular achievement of Brakhage, as a typically New World artist, to have fashioned from the contradictions between his modernist strategies (drawn from Pound, Stein, Cage, Olson) and his idealist presuppositions the working hypotheses which could generate the constantly renewed filmic enterprise of two decades. This interesting and, as I have suggested, generally characteristic contradiction is further articulated in a prime filmic text of 1970, Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, a tripartite structure in which the central section, whose form is derived from set theory, is preceded by the presentation of that set which is the English-language alphabet (in the 17th-century version of the *Bay State Primer*, the first textbook published in New England). This section is then followed by a twelve-minute sequence, whose sound track is composed of a metrical reading from the cosmogony of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (1168-1253), celebrating light as the shaping agent of form. "Light, the first bodily form which drew out matter along with itself into a mass as great as the fabric of the world," is celebrated in a metaphysics that stands beside Grosseteste's contribution to scientific method and the theory of knowledge. Frampton, in a characteristically lucid and allusive manner, translated the contradictions between lyric and analytic modes, between idealist and modernist tendencies at work in the theory and practice of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Asserting "difference," film as proposed by "Metaphors on Vision," solicited, nonetheless, a hallucinated gaze. Not narrative form, but the *space in which it takes place*, was the object of radical assault. For the gaze of fascination, the filmmakers of the late 1960s were to begin substituting analytic inspection. Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1970), which subjects a ten-minute primitive film to an hour-long reviewal on an analytic projector, is the key work in this vein.

Adopting and expanding the repertory of filmic "anomalies," as Vertov had termed them, the independents made use of superimposition, slowed and accelerated action, freeze frames, alternations of color with black and white, conspicuous change of focal length, and the aforementioned empty frame, among other devices. (The elimination of gestural camera movement and of sexual thematics, following upon Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*, makes for a de-eroticization of the independent film of that period.) It was, however, insofar as these "anomalies" were enlisted in the subversion of the perspective constructions which served as models for the construction of cinematic space and its narrative forms that filmmakers implicitly claimed the sovereignty of the spectator. The hallucinated viewer was, so to speak, replaced by the cognitive viewer, but common to them both was the status of *transcendental subject*.

It is within this broader context that Snow's particular contribution may now be viewed, and for elucidation of its crucial quality, I turn to a celebrated text of Jean-Louis Baudry.

Situating the ideological role and function of the cinematic machine within Western ideology, Baudry, in a text which acquires a very precise resonance for viewers of the independent cinema, traces the origins of that ideology in the rationalization of perspective performed by the artists and theoreticians of the Renaissance.

Fabricated on the model of the camera obscura, it permits the construction of an image analogous to the perspective projections developed during the Italian Renaissance. Of course the use of lenses of different focal lengths can alter the perspective of an image. But this much, at least, is clear in the history of cinema: it is the perspective construction of the Renaissance which originally served as model. The use of different lenses . . . does not destroy (traditional) perspective but rather makes it play a normative role. Departure from the norm, by means of a wide-angle or telephoto lens, is clearly marked in comparison with so-called "normal" perspective. We will see in any case that the resulting ideological effect is still defined in relation to the ideology inherent in perspective. The dimensions of the image itself, the ratio between height and width, seem clearly taken from an average drawn from Western easel painting . . . the painting of the Renaissance will elaborate a centered space. ("Painting is nothing but the intersection of the visual pyramid following a given distance, a fixed center and a certain lighting."—Alberti) The center of this space coincides with the eye which Jean Pellerin Viator will so justly call the "subject." Monocular vision which, as Pleynet points out, is what the camera has, calls forth a sort of play of "reflection." Based on the principle of a fixed point by reference to which the visualized objects are organized, it specifies in return the position of the "subject," the very spot it must necessarily occupy.

In focusing it, the optical construct appears to be truly the projection-reflection of a "virtual image" whose hallucinatory reality it creates. It lays out the space of an ideal vision and in this way assures the necessity of a transcendence—metaphorically (by the unknown to which it appeals—here we must recall the structural place occupied by the vanishing point) and metonymically (by the displacement it seems to carry out: a subject is both "in place of" and "a part for the whole").⁷

To this powerful exercise in the archaeology of the cinema, we may add Snow's own description of "trying to make a definitive statement of pure film space and time, a balancing of 'illusion' and 'fact,' all about seeing. The space

7. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Effets Idéologiques de l'appareil cinématographique de base," *Ciné-thique*, no. 7-8 (1970), 1-8. Although translations have subsequently been published in *Film Quarterly* and *Camera Obscura*, the reader is advised to consult the original text for a sense of the specific historical context provided by the journal *Cinéthique*.

starts at the camera's (spectator's) eye, is in the air, then is on the screen, then is within the screen (the mind)."

We are now, I believe, in a position to more fully understand the particular impact of Snow's filmic work from 1967 on, to discern the reasons for the large consensus given to the work honored at Knokke-le-Zoute and to answer questions of the following sort: How did Snow's film differ from other recent uses of the long take? Why was it that differences of taste and of theoretical orientation were so promptly reconciled on the appearance of this work? Why was it that viewers and critics, hitherto resistant to the innovations of independent filmmaking, found themselves engaged by this particular new work? Why, in fact, did it seem to constitute, even at that time, a threshold in the development of the medium so that a critic known for his allegiance to dominant narrative cinema could speak of it as a kind of *Birth of a Nation* of the avant-garde?

Snow invented, in the camera's trajectory through empty space *towards* the gradually focused object on the farthest wall, a reduction which, operating as the generator of the spatiotemporality of narrative, produces the formal correlative of the suspense film. Baudry's text, however, gives us another grasp upon the reasons for the impact of this work and of others that were to follow. For Snow had, in that reductive strategy, *hypostatized* the perspective construction within the space of cinematic representation, and in so doing he had laid bare the manner in which cinema proceeds from the conventions of painting. He had made visible the way in which "painting is nothing other than the intersection of the visible pyramid according to a given distance, a fixed center and a specific light." He had, in fact, by restoring and remapping the space of perspective construction, reestablished its center, that place which is the space of the transcendental subject.

Wavelength, then, appeared as a celebration of the "apparatus" and a *confirmation of the status of the subject*, and it is in those terms that we may begin to comprehend the profound effect it had upon the broadest spectrum of viewers—especially upon those for whom previous assaults on the spatiotemporality of dominant cinema had obscured that subject's role and place. The spectator for whom that place was obscured—and threatened—by the spatial disorientations of, say, *Dog Star Man*, (a space purely optical and a temporality of the perpetual present) could respond, as if in gratitude, to Snow's apparently gratifying confirmation of a threatened sovereignty.

But Snow was not content to reestablish "the referential norm"; he subjected it—and in this he is, indeed, the follower of Cézanne he claims to be—to constant analytic transformation. Thus the slight, constant movement of the camera within its sustained propulsion forward, the light flares and filters which punctuate that movement, the changes of stock and the final shot which intensifies, in superimposition, the flatness of the photograph on which the camera comes to rest. The depth and integrity of the perspective construction is at every point subjected to the questioning and qualification imposed by the deployment of anomalies as differences within the spatiotemporal continuum.



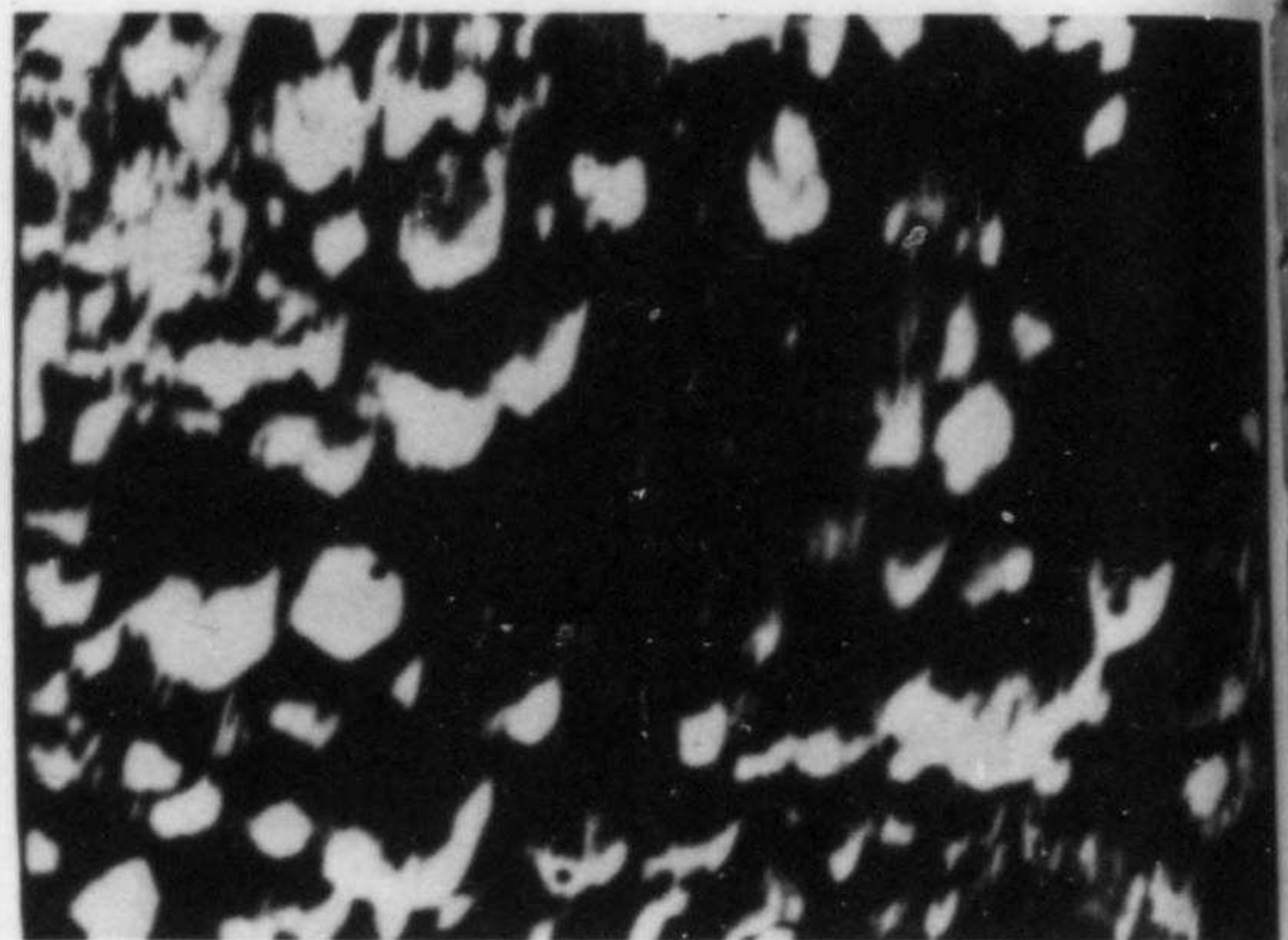
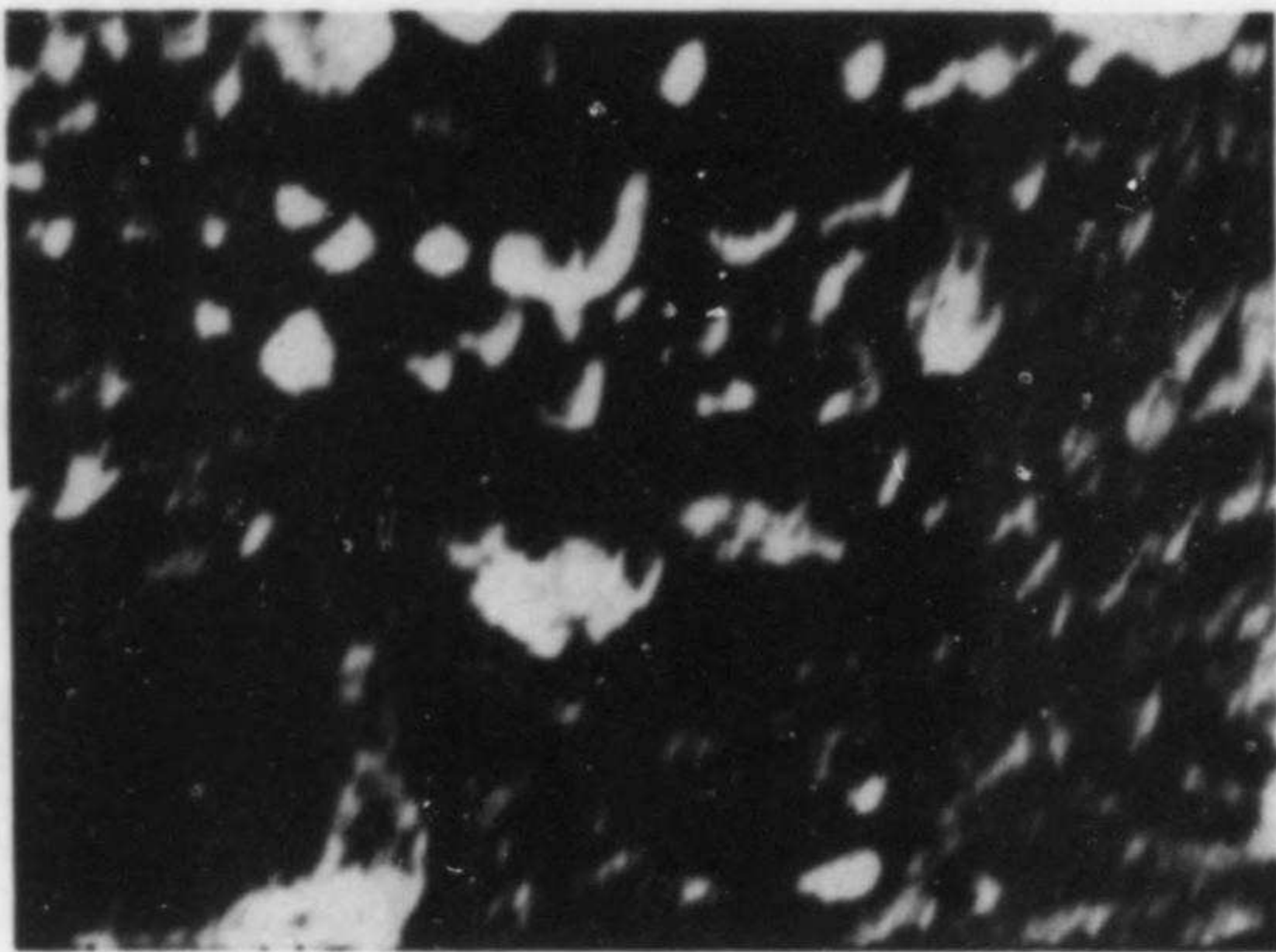
Michael Snow beside the machine for shooting *La Région Centrale*, 1970.

II

Even our judgments about the cosmic regions are subordinated to the concept we have of regions in general, insofar as they are determined in relation to the sides of the body.

—Kant, *On the First Ground of the Distinction of Regions in Space*

Snow now proceeded to embark upon a series of films which systematically explore the modalities of camera movement; they culminate in *La Région Centrale*. This film marked, to begin with, a significant break with the technology and production system with which filmmakers such as Snow had been involved. It was made possible by substantial grants from the Canada Film Development Corporation and Famous Players. State patronage and the film industry joined in financing this venture for which a special machine was designed to control a maximally mobile camera. There is at roughly this point, among filmmakers as a whole, the developing interest in an expanded technology (use of video, computers, sound synthesizers), and it will be largely the role of the universities to provide them in exchange for teaching duties. The situation develops somewhat on the order of musical composition in the United States during the 1960s, and its consequences, insofar as one can at all foresee them, raise a number of questions. Having returned to Canada from some years of work and residence in New York, Snow found himself free of the particular academic constraints which characterise the American filmmaker's situation, and *La Région Centrale* is one among a number of major enterprises benefiting from government patronage.

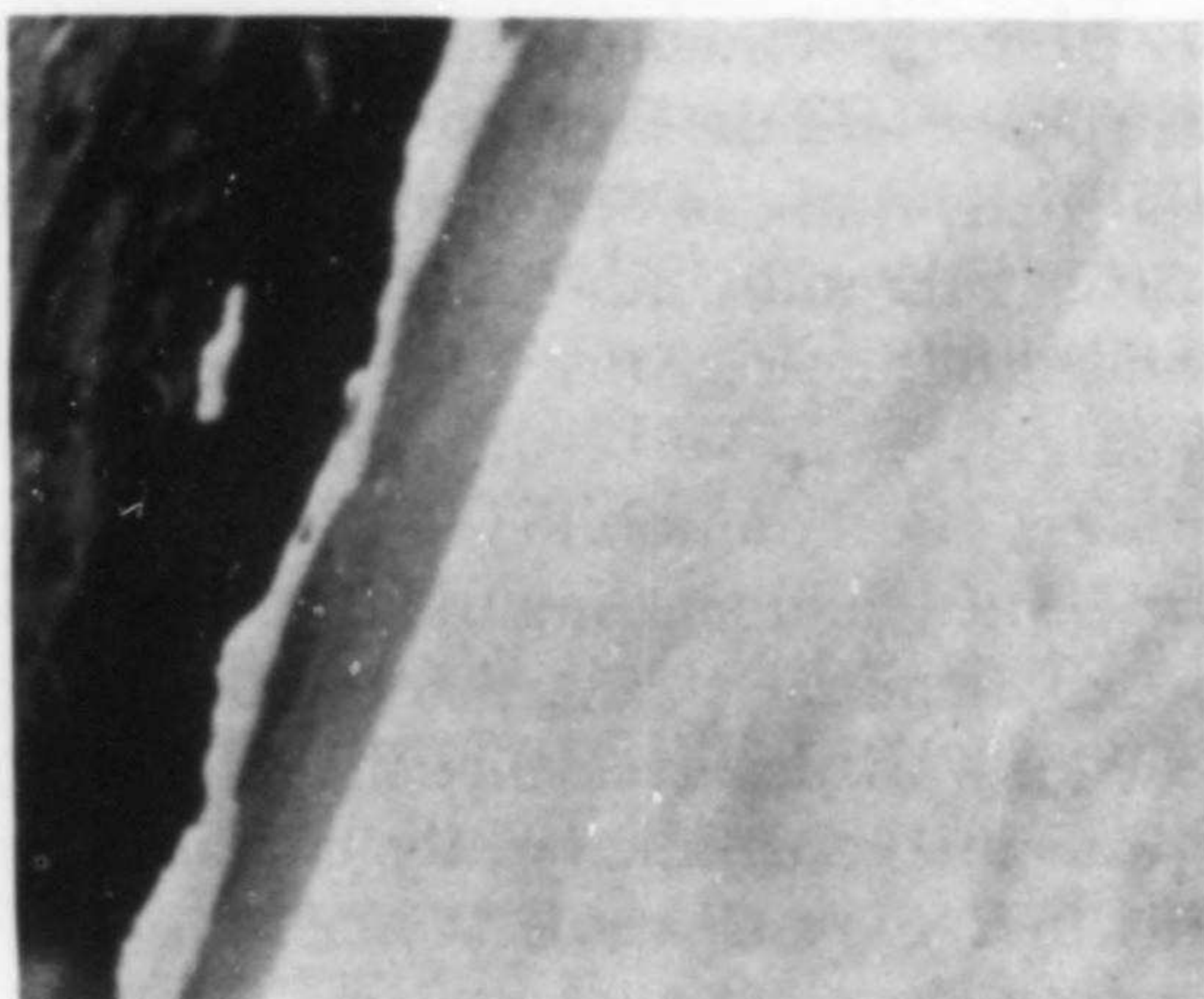


The camera of *La Région Centrale*, instructed and controlled by the machine, turns in a wild and isolated Canadian landscape in a series of circular variations whose multiplicity—of speed, direction, focus—is the function of a “liberated” eye. As Snow himself has said, “I wanted the spectator to be the lone center of all these circles. It had to be a place where you can see a long way and you can’t see anything man-made. That has something to do with a certain kind of singleness or remoteness that each spectator can have by seeing the film.” And, “just think of that . . . that there is nobody there.”⁸

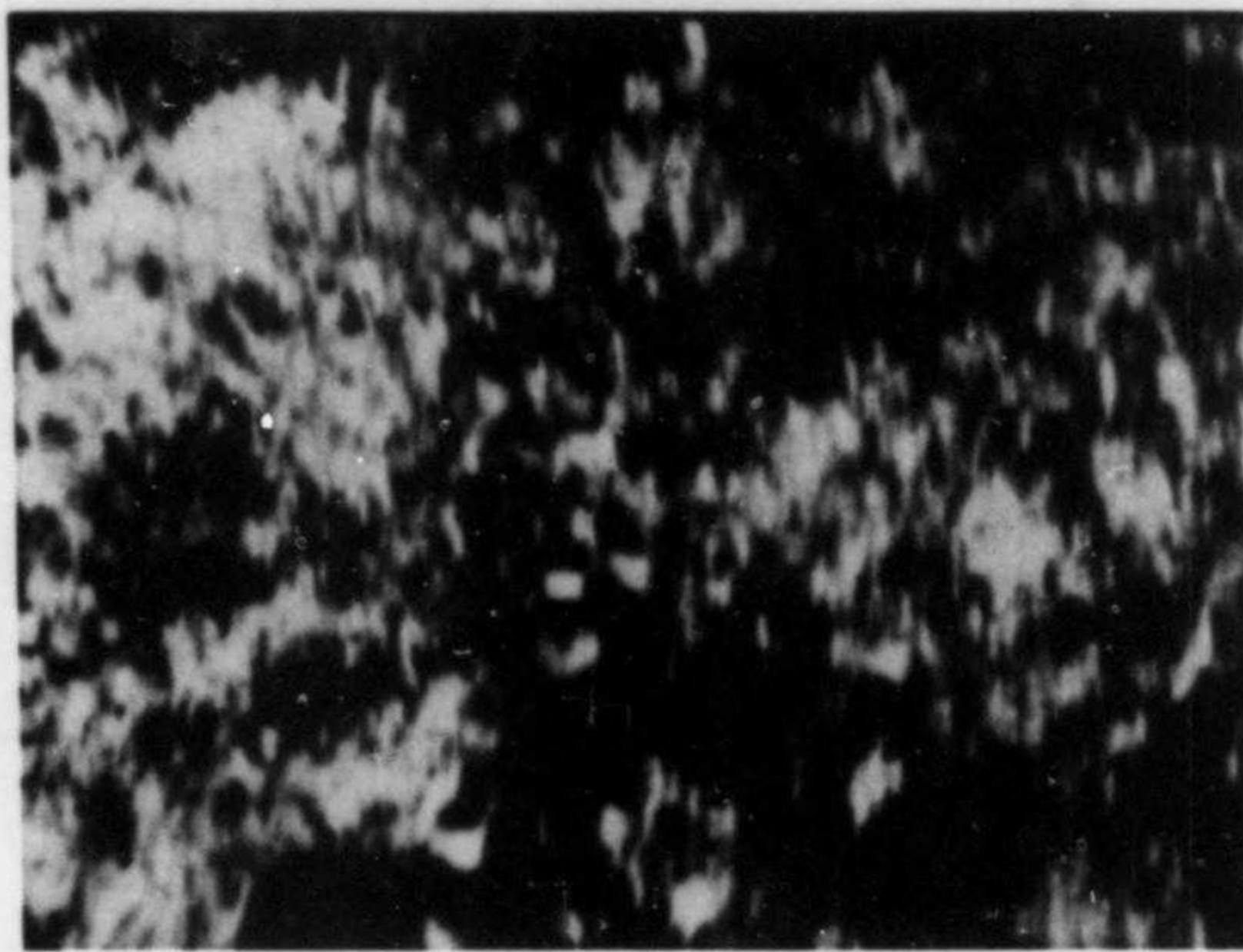
Returning now to Baudry’s text, we pursue the investigation of the role of camera movement within the cinematic apparatus.

To seize movement is to become movement, to follow a trajectory is to become trajectory, to choose a direction is to have the possibility of choosing one, to determine a meaning is to give oneself a meaning. In

8. Michael Snow, in Jonas Mekas, “Interview with Michael Snow on *The Central Region*,” recorded January 2, 1972; tape deposited at Anthology Film Archive, New York.



Michael Snow. *La Région Centrale*. 1971.

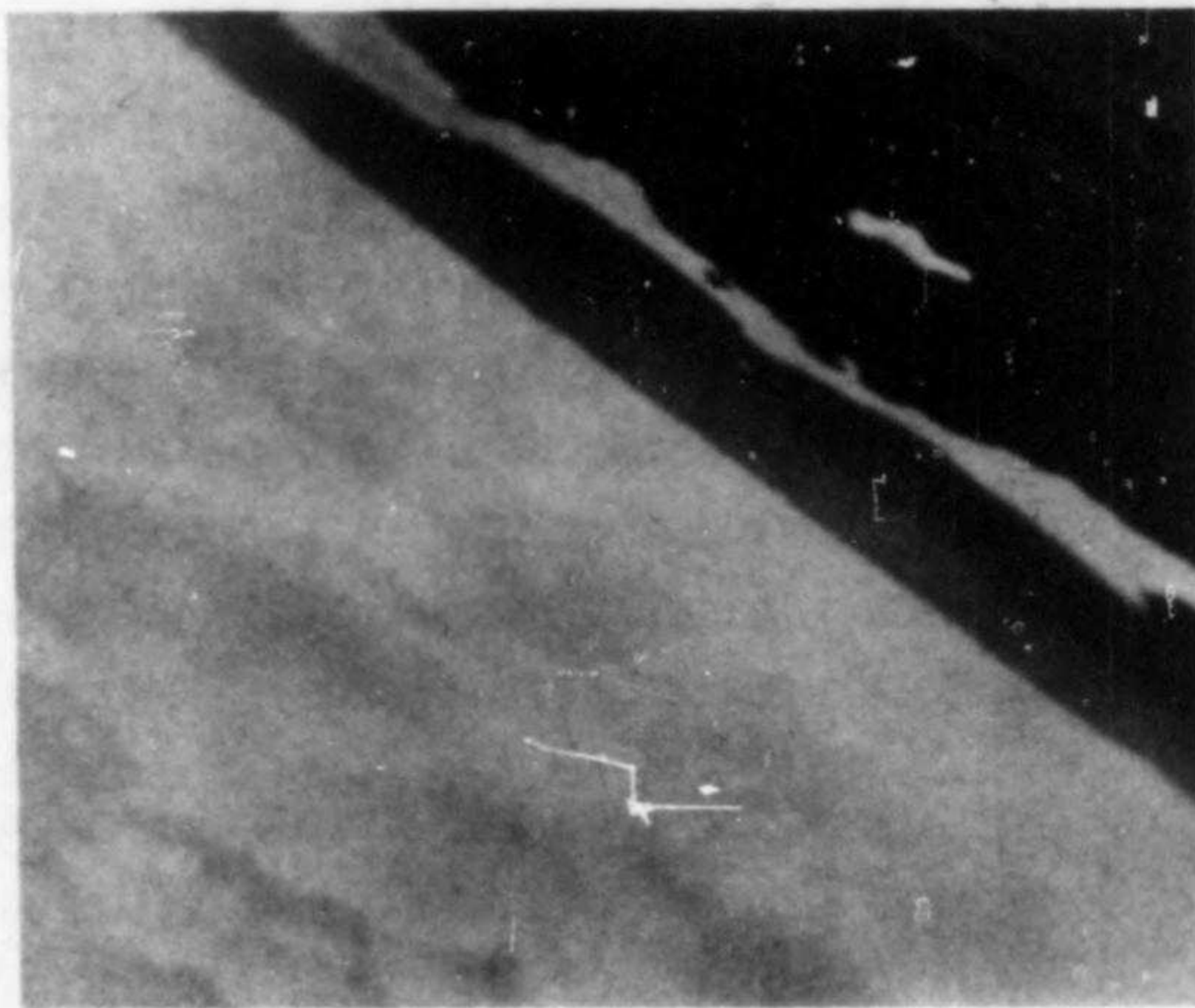
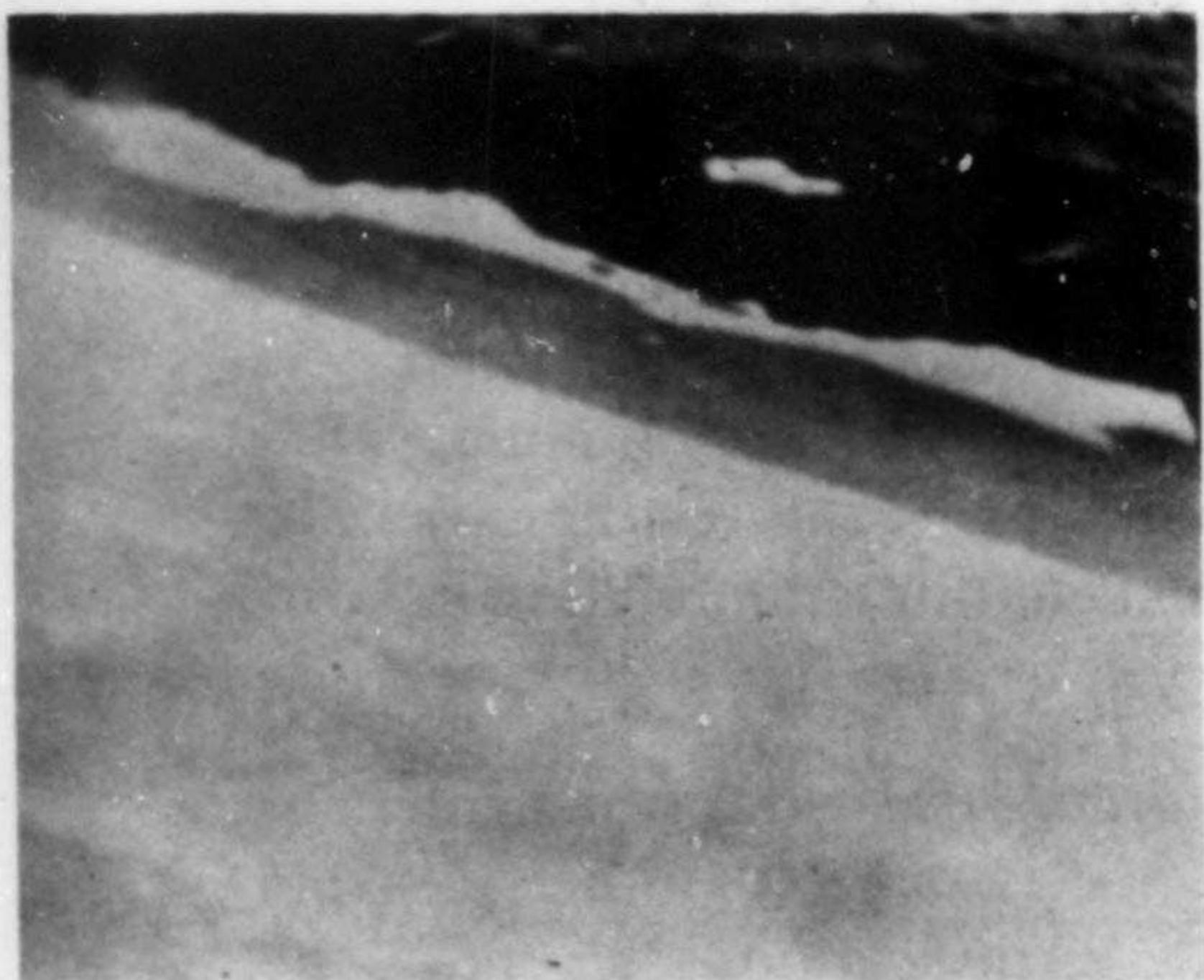


this way the eye-subject, the invisible base of artificial perspective (which in fact only represents a larger effort to produce an ordering, regulated transcendence) becomes absorbed in, "elevated" to a vaster function, proportional to the movement which it can perform.

And if the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement—conditions fulfilled by the possibilities of shooting and of film—the world will not only be constituted by this eye but for it. The mobility of the camera seems to fulfill the most favorable conditions for the manifestation of the "transcendental subject."⁹

It is, of course, this disembodied mobility of the eye-subject which is *hyperbolized* in *La Région Centrale*, and it is again the spectator as "lone center" and as "transcendental subject" who is personified in the camera, whose extended mobility rivals that of dominant cinema—that of Ophuls, Welles, or Kubrick.

9. Baudry, "Effets Idéologiques."



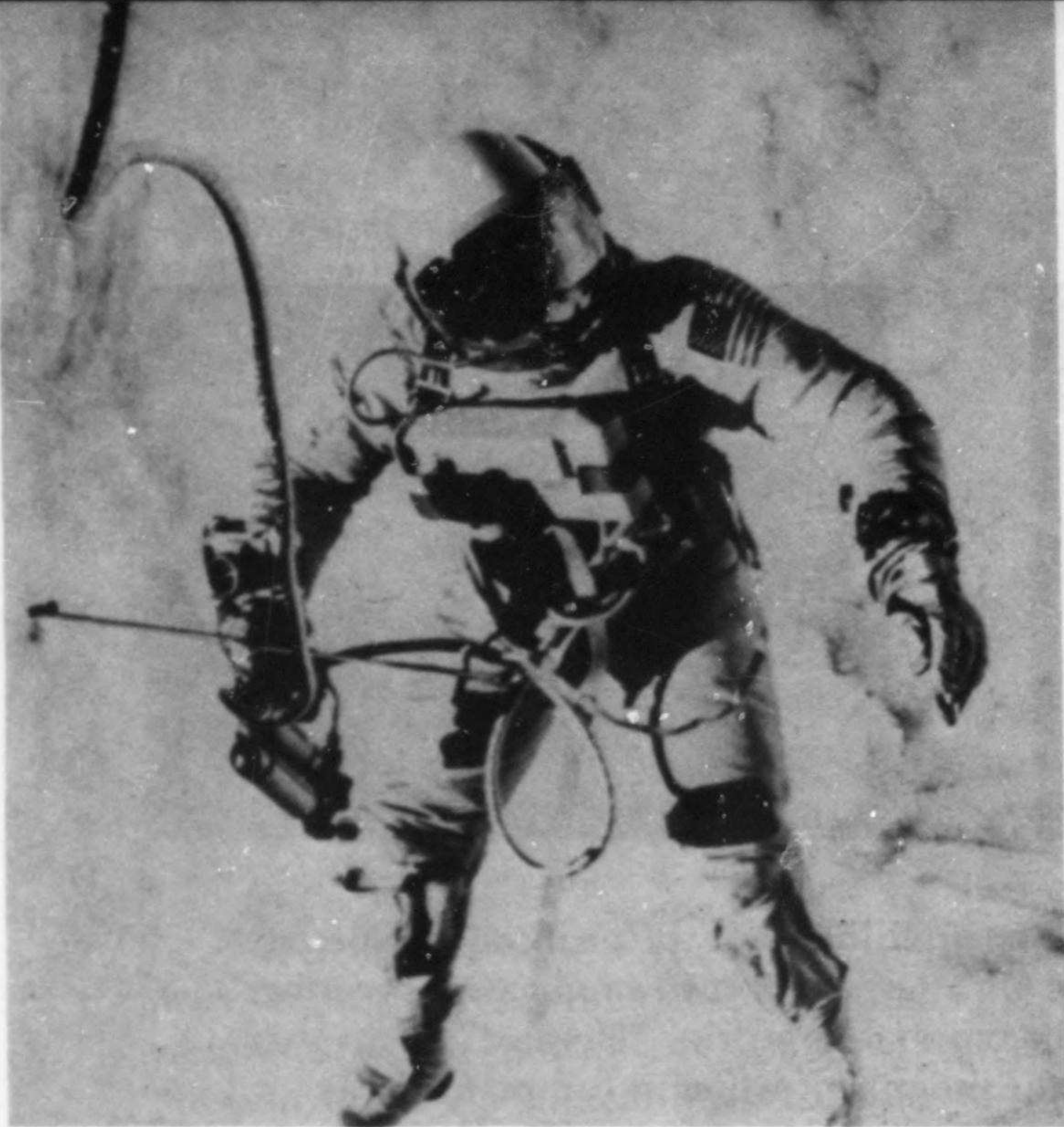


Photo courtesy NASA.

La Région Centrale was conceived and shot during the two years which followed the most intensive period of America's space program, culminating in the fulfillment of the Apollo Mission, itself the most extensively filmed and televised event in history. Snow's film conveys most powerfully the euphoria of the weightless state; but in a sense that is more intimate and powerful still, it extends and intensifies the traditional concept of vision as the sense through which we know and master the universe. This film, in its circling, spiraling, rising, sweeping movements, crossing the distances between peaks, creating, in imperceptible loops through empty skies, reversals of direction which disorient the riveted spectator, seems to question, through kinetic counter-example and disorientation, the "ground" of the Kantian "view" which founds the modern sense of "place":

Since through the senses we know what is outside us only insofar as it stands in relation to our selves, it is not surprising that we find in the relation of these intersecting planes to our body the first ground from which to derive the concept of regions in space. . . . Even our judgments about the cosmic regions are subordinated to the concept we have of regions in general, insofar as they are determined in relation to the sides of the body. . . .

For Snow, in jettisoning all anecdote, in enforcing the collapse of camera or filmic agent into "character," has deprived the spectator of all other possible source or medium of corporeal grounding and identification. "It's not," he

remarks, "handmade, but rather as if the film were made by the machine. The film seems to come from the machine towards the spectator. The reconstitution is more mental than physical. For some films, you think of the cameraman when you see camera movement. He sees for you. Here, it is as if you were the cameraman."¹⁰ This ultimate identification of spectator with the camera completes and intensifies, as well, what Christian Metz has described as the primary cinematic voyeurism, unauthorised, and reenacted, through framing, as a direct recapitulation of the child's vision of the primal scene. Snow's infinitely mobile framing, his mimesis of and gloss upon spatial exploration offer, most importantly, a fusion of primary scopophilic and epistemophilic impulses in the cinematic rendering of the grand metaphor of the transcendental subject. *La Région Centrale* gives new meaning to the notion of science fiction.

III

Cinema is a Greek word that means "movie." The illusion of movement is certainly an accustomed adjunct of the film image, but that illusion rests upon the assumption that the rate of change between successive frames may vary only within rather narrow limits. There is nothing in the structural logic of the filmstrip that can justify such an assumption. Therefore we reject it. From now on we will call our art simply: film.

—Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film"

A thing is what it is and not another thing.

—G. E. Moore

Let us suppose we must compile a set of instructions for the use and understanding of Snow's work. One might begin by listing the basic formal and discursive strategies which animate films, photographic work, projections, sculpture, painting. To hypostatization and hyperbolization one would add such pairs of terms as identity and contradiction, reduction and extension, punning and disjunction.

I have chosen to consider Snow's film work—and it is extended in the vast and systematic exploration of image-sound relation of *Rameau's Nephew*. Consideration of the above paired terms and the manner in which they function throughout the range of work leads one, however, to locate axes and continuums which join seemingly disparate efforts. Or rather, let us say that Snow's obsessively systematic investigations exclude the notion of disparity.

10. Michael Snow, in "Entretien avec Michael Snow," *Michael Snow: Retrospective*, La Cinéma-thèque Québécoise/Musée du Cinema, 1975, p. 19.

Consider, for example, *One Second in Montreal*, a work which he has described as an attempt to construct a purely temporal structure. It is one of the less frequently screened and appreciated works and one of the finest and most arresting. It offers a filmic projection of a serially composed succession of still photographs of squares and parks in Montreal (possible sites for a monument), seen "under snow"—the sort of small, assertive pun in which this artist delights. The images succeed one another in series of expanding and contracting length. The main compositional parameter is that of duration and the work offers, consequently, with unadorned intensity, the tension inhering between still photograph and filmic image. Or rather, it forces the question: why present still photographs in filmed succession rather than through slide projection? Reply: the temporality which circulates through the optical flicker of projected film joins to the rhythm of images in static succession the pulse of an ostinato. This is, then—not unexpectedly—the most musical of a musician's visual constructions. And if one reflects upon the nature and condition of the continuity-in-stasis given each still image projected at twenty-four frames per second, one sees, as well, that they compose, in a sense that is both strictly and paradoxically Framptonian, that cinematic entity, a "movie."

Snow then continues to pursue, with an obstinate sort of wit, the exploration of the modalities of photographic imagery. Thus, *A Casing Shelved* has two components: a colored slide in projection and a taped recording of the filmmaker's voice. Before one, on the screen, is the single still image of a bookcase (most likely the one installed near the beginning of *Wavelength*). Its bisected shelves, structurally recalling *Atlantic*, contain (frame) the contents which Snow begins to enumerate and describe in a narrative that evokes the years of work and residence memorialized in the accumulation of objects and documents. The disjunction of the narrative is generated by the random order of objects and intensified by the manner in which Snow directs our attention to events separated in time through the scanning of objects scattered in space. And we, instructed by the author's verbal scanning of this "landscape," find ourselves performing those eye movements over the surface of the projected still image which compose the repertory of the camera: the pan, the tilt, the crane shot. The reduction performed in the passage from film to filmed photograph to projected slide has generated a continuum structured by the formal strategies of identity and contradiction.

When is a film not a film? And when is a film a movie? And, as they say, "What is cinema?"

Well, let us make a movie (we will call it *Wavelength*) and show that it is film. Then, let us take the still photograph and show it as a movie. And if we instruct the camera-subject to scan the surface of the still image as though it were a landscape, what must we expect—a film or movie?

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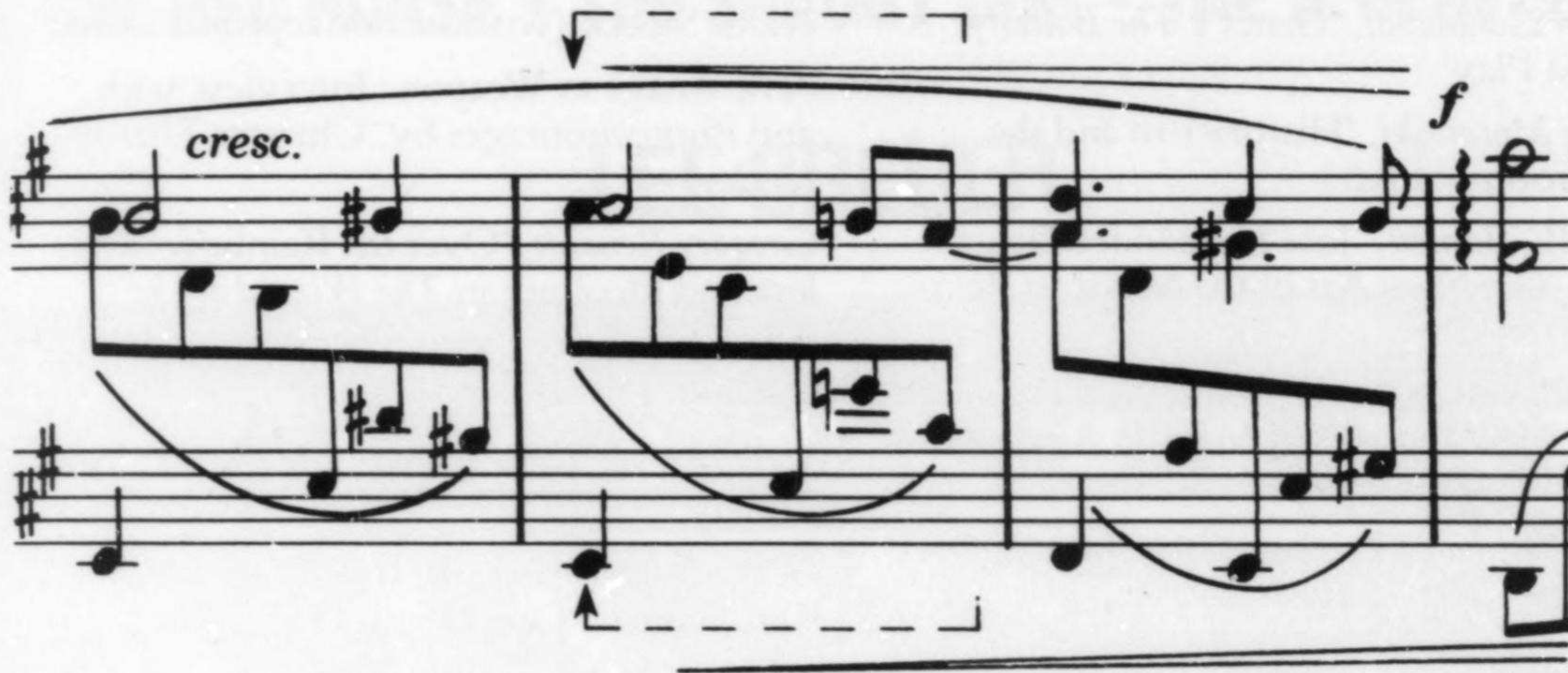
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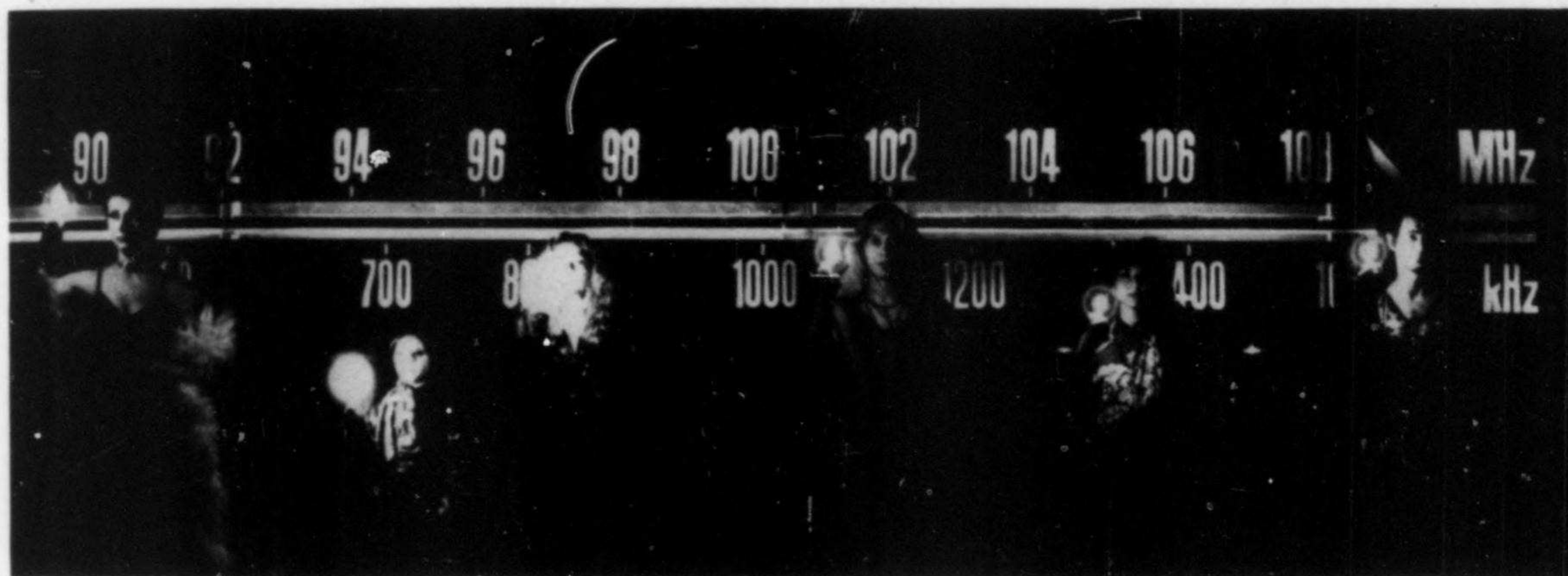
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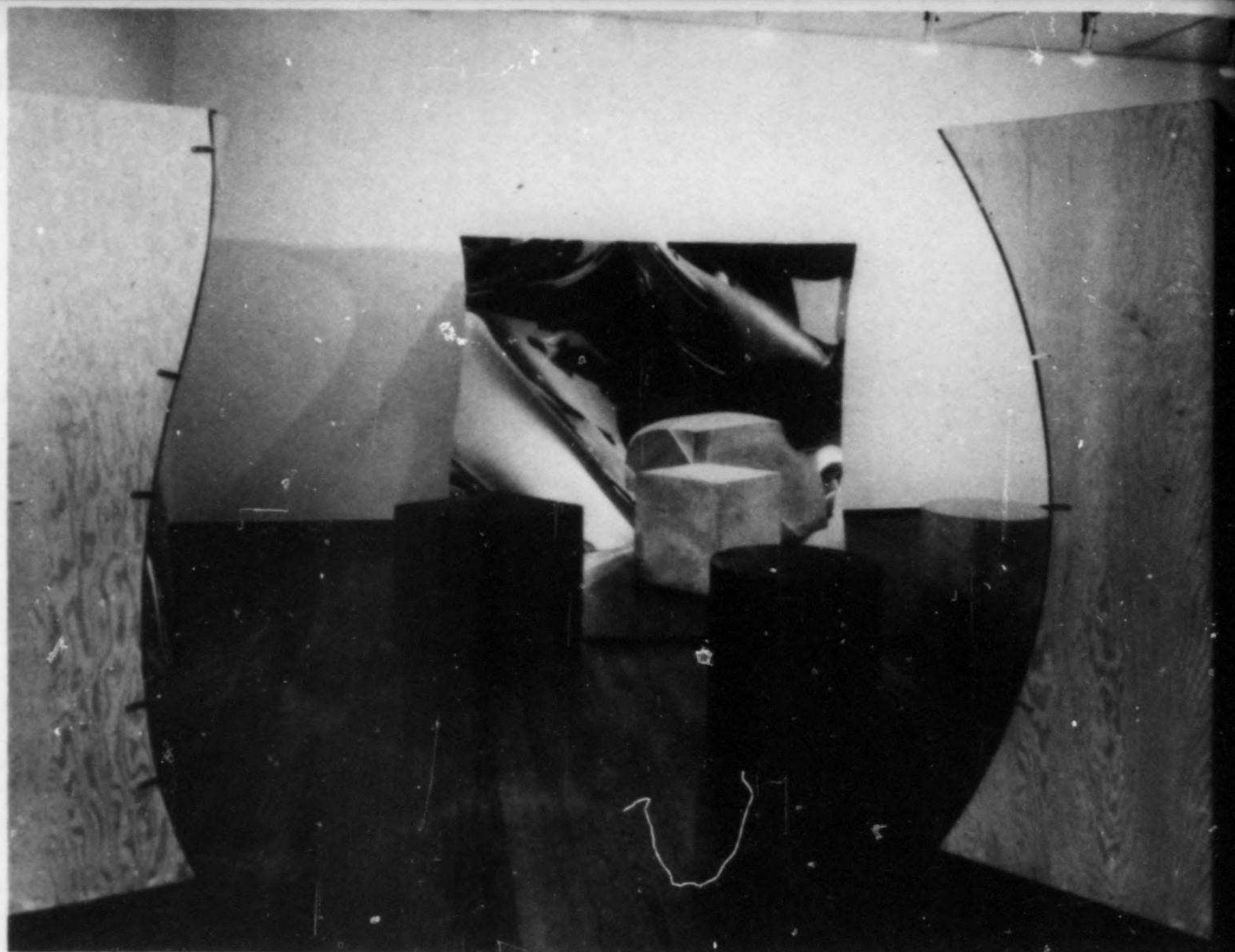
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