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EVA HESSE 1936-1970

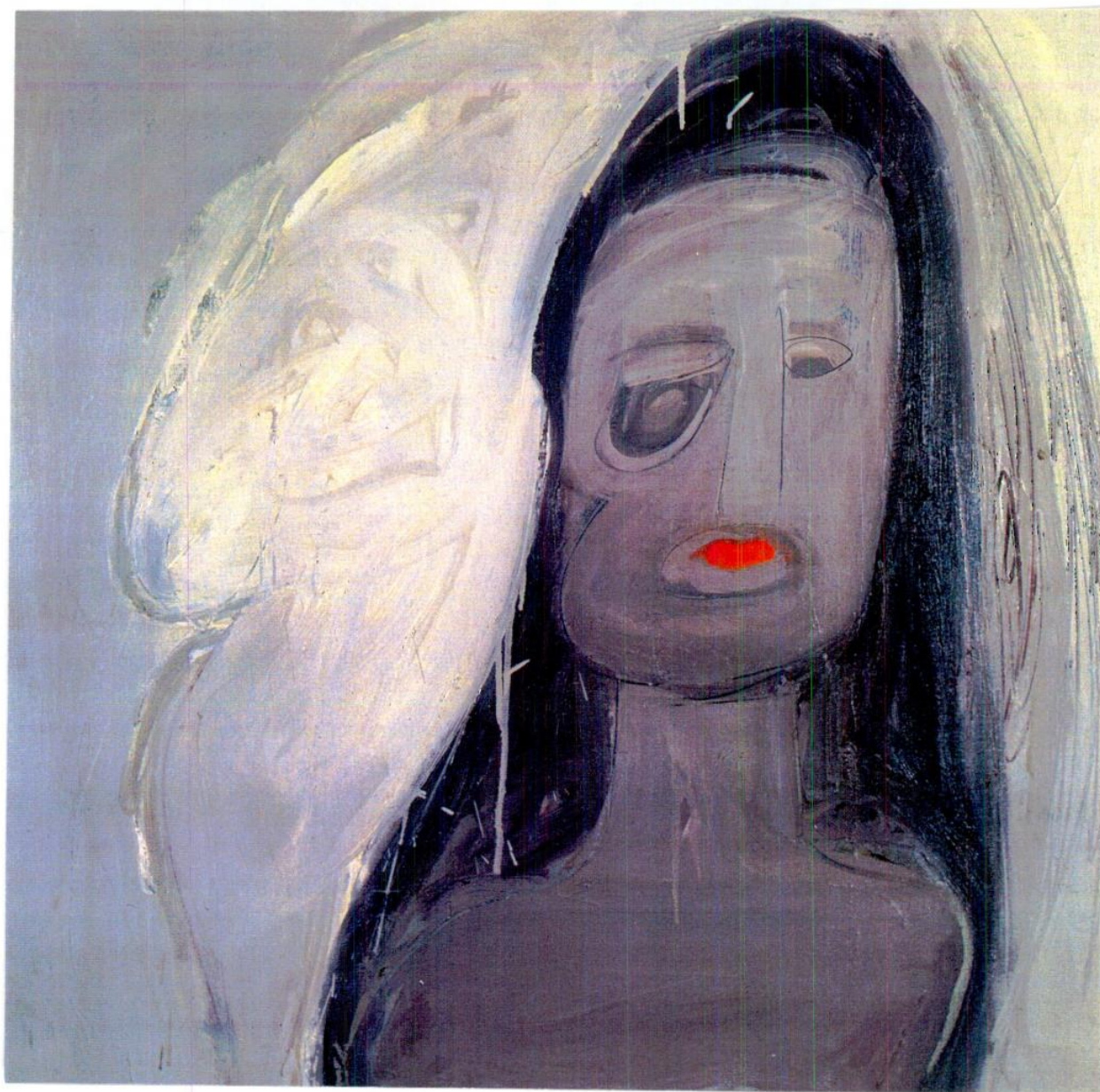
Beyond Minimalism

by

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EVA HESSE 1936-1970

Self Portait

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INTRODUCTION

A painting can only be as much as its creator, a mirror of himself.

Eva Hesse, Diary 1958, (Cooper, 1992).

Rationale:

This study is conducted on the premise that Eva Hesse is a significant artist producing works in the middle part of 20th century that illuminate the importance of the artist's personality in the formation of the controversial avant garde. The retrospective exhibition of her work in the Yale University Art Gallery, 1992, confirms the view 'she was one of the first female artists to gain international recognition' in our century. She has "assumed a near-mythic status in the History of contemporary American art.

We examine Ad Reinhardt's characterisation of "Art as Art" because he was instrumental in establishing the theoretical foundation for the freedom or non-accountability of the artist in the U.S.A., in particular that enjoyed by Joseph Kosuth and contemporaries. The key expression is simple: "Art needs no justification." It is in such a climate that we must evaluate the artistic achievements of Eva Hesse.

The one subject of a hundred years of modern art is that awareness of art of itself, of art preoccupied with its own process and means, with its own identity and distinction, art concerned with its own unique statement, art conscious of its own evolution and history and destiny, towards its own freedom, its own dignity, its own reason, its own mortality and its own conscience. Art needs no justification with 'realism' or 'naturalism' or with any other ideas.

(Reinhardt, 1962)

The hell with them (academic painters in the Yale School of Art & Architecture) all. Paint yourself out, through and through, it will come by you alone. You must come to terms with your own work not with any other being.

Eva Hesse, Diary, 14 April 1959, (Cooper, 1992).

One has the impression – but only the impression – that the immediate future of Western art, if it is to have any immediate future, depends on what is done in this country. As dark as the situation still is for us, American painting in its most advanced aspects – that is, American abstract painting – has in the last several years shown here and there a capacity for fresh content that does not seem to be matched either in France or Great Britain.

(Greenberg, 1948, pp. 82-83).

Clement Greenberg might have included Eva Hesse ~~might~~ among those artist demonstrating a capacity to generate fresh content.

She was strongly influenced by Marcel Duchamp's innovativeness, his originality and energy. As a leader of the New York Dada Movement, he had invented the *ready mades* that Hesse would encounter in New York and Philadelphia: a bicycle wheel mounted on a kitchen stool, a bottle rack (bought in Paris), and a urinal. The urinal, entitled *Fountain* and signed R. Mutt, articulates his conviction that life is meaningless absurdity. Moreover, his elevation of *ready mades* incited young artists to repudiate all the values or conventions that traditionally informed the artist.¹ In contemplating his work, Hesse and her peers might be prompted to conclude that any object removed from its logical context and exhibited as a work of art might be regarded as a work of art because it acts associatively on the viewer's imagination. The work may lack an intrinsic meaning, meaning may be ascribed to it by the viewer. Paradoxically, the ambiguity of the work invites ascription. Hesse was aware of the paradox, she explored its potential without

resorting overtly to the use of *ready mades*. She preferred to fabricate her own forms.

In this study we will draw on Lucy Lippard's insights on *Eccentric Abstraction*, an exhibition organised at the Fischbach Gallery in the Autumn of 1968, the year in which Hesse's career rapidly accelerated. Hesse died from brain cancer in 1970. She was born in Hamburg on January 11th 1936. She was the youngest of two daughters born to Wilhelm and Ruth Marcus Hesse. Her father was a criminal lawyer. The family fled from Germany to the U.S.A. in 1938.

Her pre-sculptural production is immense. "The sculpture that she produced during the last five years of her life is celebrated almost to the exclusion of all her previous work" (Cooper, 1992, p. 52). I will be concentrating on her sculptural production, in particular those works in which she explores the *body ego*. My analysis will be informed by her drawings, paintings, sculptures, extensive diaries, notebooks, and descriptive drafts for catalogues. These sources indicate that she was interested in exploring organicism, phallicism, desiccation, bondage, liberation, surrogate motherhood, form, repetitive form, and esthetic pattern, etc.

In Chapter I, I will consider Eva Hesse's artistic intentions and her attention to structure in painting and sculpture. I will also consider her childhood experiences, education and training in the visual and plastic arts, and her psychological state. I will argue that her work is a profound reflection of her condition, her anxieties, and her premonitions of abandonment and premature death.

In Chapter II, I will attempt an analysis of Eva Hesse's seminal works: *Repetition Nineteen III*, *Cool Zone* 1965, *C-Clamp Blue* 1965, *Accession II* 1970, *Nine at Leo Castelli*, *Metronomic Irregularity I, II and III*, and *Hang Up* 1969. I will consider the significance of the exhibition, *Eccentric Abstraction*, and review contemporary discourse on her work.

Chapter III, I will conclude with an examination of Eva Hesse's efforts to secure psychic space for her artistic endeavours, and her unwillingness to be categorised as a member of a movement. I will, in appreciation, highlight her unique qualities.

¹ Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). French artist. Combined the principles of Cubism and futurism in his most famous work: *Nude Descending a Staircase* (Armory Show 1913). He was the brother of to the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon (1876-1918), and half brother to the painter Jacque Villon (1875-1963)

CHAPTER I: BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST

The Artist's Intentions

Art is an essence, a centre. I am interested in solving an unknown factor of art and an unknown factor of life. My life and art have not been separated. They have been together.

Eva Hesse: Letter opposing Mayor Daley, (Hesse, 1968).

What counted to Eva Hesse was the sincerity of, and involvement with the work. The personal *giving* of the artist to the work was the quality most respected by Hesse. Her work achieved its desired effect. Many acclaimed her for having created "exasperating, irrational searching pictures" (Chave, 1992, pp. 99). It might be said that her work and her idea of spectatorship departs from *gender fixity*. She did not make gender distinctions between man and woman; she regarded both as equal heirs to disorder and death. It seems her concern is to conceal gender difference: "the way to beat discrimination in art is by art, excellence has no sex" (Ibid.). Her themes of binary opposition - man and woman, soft and hard, seduction and repulsion, the mundane and the macabre, etc. - occupy her mind up to her death. We can also identify other themes in her work: organicism, phallicism, desiccation, bondage, liberation, surrogate motherhood, form, repetitive form, and aesthetic pattern, etc. The list clearly indicates a complex personality.

Structure

Hesse's confident use of structuring conventions and forms allows a dialectic between her own forms and forms that are given. The dialectic is highly personal. Consequently, it is difficult to categorise her work. Hesse combined an innovative

approach to structure and materials with a profound sense of the absurd. She regarded *Hang Up* of 1960 (See Plate 1) as her most 'transgressive' sculptural work, her 'most important early statement' on her idea of absurdity or extreme feeling. It prefigures the stylistic devices of her mature work. In it she draws together painterly and sculptural properties to project the erotic into the spectator's space. In doing so she transcends her hang-ups about the difficulties of mastering the traditional techniques of painting, and the problem of suppressing sexuality, etc. She opened up sculpture. So much so, that her contribution to contemporary practice cannot be ignored. She was inclined to pursue polarities and contradictions. By the late 1960s, she had invented 'new criteria for the assessment of sculpture.' Having fought the early obligation to paint, seeing it possibly as the medium of the classic artist, she eventually found in sculpture the freedom and spontaneity to express herself successfully and humourously as an artist before her early death at the age of thirty-four.

Childhood

Eva Hesse was born 11 January 1936 in Hamburg, Germany. She was the second and youngest child of Wilhelm Hesse, a criminal lawyer, and Ruth Marcus Hesse. In the period 1938, she and her sister Helen were placed in a Catholic children's home in Amsterdam. In June 1939, the family emigrated to New York City after several months of living at secret addresses in the German countryside. They were avoiding the Nazi persecution. They settled in Washington Heights. Her father became an insurance broker. The mother, severely depressed by her experiences in Germany, was hospitalised. In January 1946, her mother committed suicide. Later in her life, Eva would wonder if she had inherited her mother's instability. Her parent's divorce in the previous year, and her father's remarriage must have affected her emotionally. She and her sister lived with her

father and stepmother, Eva Nathansohn. Despite the problems, she remained deeply attached to her father throughout her life.

Education

In the period 1952-1959, she studied industrial arts, advertising design, drawing, painting and music. She graduated from the High School of Industrial Design in 1952. She abandoned her study of advertising design in the Pratt Institute of Design during her second year. In 1957, she graduated from the Department of Painting at the Cooper Union. She accepted a scholarship to the Yale Summer School of Music and Art in Connecticut. In June 1959 she graduated with a B.F.A. after two years of study from the Yale School of Art and Architecture. Shortly after, she moved to 82 Jane Street in New York and made arrangements to share a studio on Ninth Avenue with Phyllis Yampolsky.

Therapy

Despite her successes, she was insecure and anxious. Early in June 1954 she began therapy with Dr Helene Papanek. The therapy was unsuccessful. In 1959, Dr Papanek transferred her to the care of the psychiatrist Dr Samuel Dunkell. She remained under his therapy until her death in May 1970 at the age of 34. Throughout her life she suffered recurring nightmares about abandonment and early death. She documents her anxieties in her diaries. (Cooper 1992, *The Hesse: Diary February-March 1960*).

CHAPTER II : ANALYSIS OF WORKS

It is the unknown quantity from which and where I want to go. As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self. It is something, it is nothing.

Eva Hesse, June 1968. (Berger, p.119)

Body Ego

Hesse's work is characterised by an indulgence in the bizarre. She persuades us to respond with curiosity to the intuitive order and sensory pleasure of her work. We are easily ensconced by the tension that she creates in her mature works between the body and its space. The body in question is not so importantly Hesse's as the viewer's, in that it is the presence of the piece that incurs from the latter whatever bodily analogies his personal experience will allow. Such a bodily experience would therefore be as much implicated in the making of the work; Hesse being her own first viewer. Of course it is important to recognise that a piece for the duration of its exhibition is subject to other protocols of viewing. The inclusion of various orders such as the regularity of the grid, the rhythm of a series, the obsessive if not compulsive use of repetition, is a deliberate invitation to interpretations that are more or less than purely personal. In this way Hesse created a system that used a grammar to invoke conditions that are its conceptual opposites, without defining it within the artistic orders of the day. If *organised chaos* could exist, it would do so in Hesse's work. She reaps content for her work from the themes of finite unresolved self, duality and containment. *Body ego*, a theme in her work, exposes our willingness and resistance to integrate empathically with her work. Our empathic integration is an aesthetical phenomenon. Hesse allows the spectator to discover himself in her work. The spectator is engaged solipsistically, even transformed.¹ In doing so, she endorses

P. J. Proudhon's wish to obliterate the distinction between art-as-art and art-as-life.

Lucy Lippard supports this interpretation of Hesse's work; she attributes Hesse's success to her awareness of the *body ego*. Arising from Hesse's true understanding and identification of her materials, we are enabled to explore her work as a provocation that demands more than a passive or fixed appreciation. Hesse eases us into the sensual environment of her works. The viewer, seeing a swelling, sagging, lying or leaning work, crouches or stands erect in imitation of it.

In Lippard's comments on the experience of the body, a theme central to *Eccentric Abstraction*, the expert artistic manipulation of materials and treatment of form is a vital sensuous response mediated by the body's relationship to the physical world. Body-ego is represented as a state divided between desire or the longing to be close to something and repulsion or the antitheses of desire. She observes that taste and distaste are immediately felt in the spectators body at the point of initial apprehension.

Hang-Up,² first exhibited in the Graham Gallery (May 1966) and *Metronomic Irregularity II*,³ deliberately completed by Hesse for inclusion in the exhibition, *Eccentric Abstraction*, at the Fischback Gallery (October 1966) are distinctively different works. The former contains allusions to the organic, the latter is characterised by its abstract and precise rectilinear geometry. Both satisfy the criteria defined by Lucy Lippard for eccentric abstraction:

In eccentric abstraction, evocative qualities or specific organic associations are kept at a subliminal level, without the benefit of Freudian clergy... Ideally a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol...

(Cooper, 1992).

Other exhibitors – Louise Bourgeois, Alice Adams, Bruce Nauman and Don Potts – also satisfied the criteria. Hang-Up awakens subliminal organic associations in the spectator; its extension into the spectator's body space dictates the choreography of all who approach it. It is particularly 'eccentric', even erotic; a definite alternative to the 'solemn and deadset Minimalism' of Judd, Morris and Andre. Hesse's *Untitled*⁴ of 1969 acts on the spectator in the same way (Fer, 1994, pp. 428-449).

Repetition Nineteen III

Repetition Nineteen III 1968 (See Plate ii) shows a terrain of bubbling and translucent skin-like fibreglass buckets standing in "aimless but congenial order" (Berger, 1992, pp. 119-20). The viewer apprehends each piece as it swings in to visual and visceral focus. This is a perceptual experience in which he becomes conscious of the body ego. The buckets, possessing hollow centres and distorted walls, standing rigidly or pliantly, are reminiscent of our own vulnerability. We are made aware of our repetitively awkward choreography as we mentally traverse the terrain. Working with randomness and disorder was a generative idea for many of the post-Minimalists, however none of them linked it so convincingly with the absurd, and all of its emotional freight.

Hesse's interest in the spectator's choreography may have been stimulated by the intrusion of experimental dance into the visual arts during the 1960s. For a time, the intrusion influenced the incorporation of body and movement in the visual arts. Visual artist, interested in dematerialising the art-object, explored the possibility that dance which they regarded as experience-ritualised, fleeting, and infinitely permutational might inform their endeavours productively. Repetition in performance art became a theme in the visual and plastic arts. Coincidentally, Lippard sought the reintegration of the visual, plastic, tectonic and performance

arts. She was impressed by the integrated and indispensable nature of art in pre-historic society. The performance arts affected such societies cathartically. She drew on the authority of Proudhon:

The image of a vice, like that of a virtue, is as much the domain of painting as poetry. According to the lesson that the artist can give, all figures, all fulfil the goal of art.

P. J. Proudhon. 1853. (Tucker, 1984).

The adoption of a dead-set modernist style lends Hesse's work an often seriously obsessive content. Process art, earth art, and conceptual art share a de-emphasis on the final piece, and an emphasis on how it comes to be. Hesse's work explores gravity, and random or naturally ordained activities like scattering, piling or leaning. Such activities contain repetition, and repetition is a property of ritual. Eva Hesse said she used repetition in her work because it "recalled the absurdity of life." Hesse's work is therefore experience-ritualised. Freud had concluded that ritual is composition, and that the motivation to behave artistically is provided by hysteria. Was Eva Hesse informed by her psychoanalyst?

The Central Paradox

Her diary entry of September 7th 1958 suggests that her entire career was shaped by a battle between her intellect and her emotion. Hesse asserts that she is "making an effort to remain rational and objective and less emotional. An effort that thus far seems fruitless." It was imperative to her to combine her personal pursuit of balance with a formalism that '[transcends] the intellectual emptiness of pure expression' (Cooper 1992, pp. 17-50). This constitutes the central paradox of her work. In her early work, the confrontation and mutual exclusion of the systematic and the emotional in modernist art is most apparent. In the early 1960s, she abandoned the easel in favour of sculpture:

[F]or me painting has become.... [anti-climatic]. Making art, painting a painting, the art, the history, the tradition, is too much there.

I want to be surprised. To find something new.

Eva Hesse, Diary 10 December 1964, (Cooper, 1992).

Sculpture

On moving into Kettwig Studio, Hesse constructed her first serious sculpture from the materials found in the abandoned factory. The untitled work, lost or destroyed, consisted of a stretched heavy mesh screen through which she threaded and knotted pieces of plaster-soaked chord. This marks the beginning of ordered spontaneity. A softness and rigidity prefiguring the conceptual and formal relationships explored in her mature work.

Plaster! I have always loved the material. It is flexible, pliable, easy to handle in that it is light and fast working. Its whiteness is right. I will take those screens. Finish one I began in lead. Then get a cloth, cut in strips and dip in plaster, and bring through the screen. I needed a structure that is perfect.

Eva Hesse, Diary 10 December 1964, (Ibid.).

Such enthusiasm for the piece brought about the realisation that she did not have to paint to validate herself. She started a series of reliefs. Her relationship with painting and sculpture (See Plate iii), remained ambivalent, containing strains of each other in themselves. "[contingent is really a] hung painting in another material more than they are sculpture" (See Plate iv) (Nemser, 1973, p.12).

Mature Work

Hesse's mature work challenged her contemporary critics in particular their understandings of space and spectator. Prolific writer, Suzanne Langer

documented this as a rebellion in her publication: *Feeling and Form: Modes of Virtual Space*:

[T]he most resonant sculptural form functions as a powerful abstraction from actual objects and the three dimensional space which we construe by means of them, through touch and sight.

(Langer, 1953).

Langer spoke of such work as being an organic parallel for the viewer's body, a 'semblance and objectification of the living self.' in

A virtual Kinetic volume, which dominates a surrounding space and this environment derives all proportions and relations from it as the actual environment does from one's self.

(Ibid.)

This prescience of organic metaphors punctuated Formalist discourses of the 1950's and 1960's. Prevailing attitudes had been that art was to be merely viewed whereas Hesse saw art as a vehicle of engagement. The solipsistic emphasis is apparent in the endeavours of a number of so-called Minimalist artists: Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Carl Andre and Robert Smithson.

Critique of modernism

The Optical Unconscious, written by Roselind Krauss is the most important recent critique of modernism and its exponents Michael Freid and Clement Greenburg. She asserts that the fundamental value of a work of art is contained in its pre-ordained organic meaning *pace* Rainer, Morris, Serra, Andre, and Smithson. She adamantly holds a global vision of mainstream modernist painting from start to finish.

[Modernism as] a metonym of the search for the self demands a continuous wandering, a relinquishing of the knowledge of where one is.

(Freid, 1967).

On the Overtly Sexual Reliefs

Hesse made much of her work in the form of small scale constructions in the mid-1960s. On viewing these reliefs, a viewer may be disconcerted by the strange convergence of sexual and machine forms. In *Cool Zone*, 1965, (See Plate v) a magenta painted cloth covered chord is looped into an aluminium found object. It hangs there, falling as if milk from the breast. Similar in that series of 1965 is *C-Clamp Blues*, (see Plate vi) This relief contains a pink button, rather reminiscent of a belly button but as teasing as a small pink nipple enticing the viewer to activate the 'machine.' All severed from their hosts are oversized phalli and disconnected breasts hanging in the form of pendulous polythene black net-bags alluding equally to both male and female anatomy in a several notable pieces; Untitled 1965' (See Plate vii), Untitled 1966 (See Plate viii), and *Not Yet* 1966 (See Plate ix). Hesse refuses to categorise sexuality as static.

I remember always working with contradictory forms, which is my idea that in life - the whole absurdity of life - every thing has always been opposites. Nothing has ever been in the middle. I was always aware that I would take order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small, and I would try to find the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites. I was always aware of their absurdity, and also their contradictions formally. And it was always more interesting than making something average, normal, right size, right proportion.

Eva Hesse, (Berger, 1992).

Duchamp

Hesse's interest in Marcel Duchamp focused on his manipulation of the absurd and his imagery, particularly in that of the fragmented or mechanical body. Their shared interest was in the immediate erotic implications. Hesse and Duchamp would have had a different experience of the body. The charismatic '*Don Juan*' would have known little of the bruising incurred by the abandonment of loved-ones, or the focus on bodily disease, without which Hesse's work would have lacked her 'cheerful embrace of absurdity'; an embrace that gave her efforts tremendous force and poignancy. In the catalogue for the comprehensive exhibition of her work at Yale University Art Gallery in 1992, Maria Kreutzer asserts that Hesse's sculpture offering us the body, "turned inside out, flayed and exposed" (Kreutzer, 1992, p.75).

In his insightful Lacanian analysis of Marcel Duchamp's construction of the self, Macon Klein asserts that the myth of a unified 'self' was hardly endorsed by Marcel Duchamp, whose [self professed] female creativity [was] integrated into his *alter ego* Rose Selavy, if not completely resolved with his ready-mades" (Berger, 1992, p.113). Duchamp's investigation of the unity of the subject questions its (subject's) sexuality. Duchamp's work plays between contradictory possibilities and the familiarity of the objects that he transforms. In using words, randomly or arbitrarily taken from a thesaurus, he sets aside comfortable linguistic and structural conventions to explore the aesthetical impact of words set in an unconventional context. In doing so the familiar acquires a mysterious quality. resonating in Hesse's work is a similar tension between the arbitrary and the motivated.

Accession II

In 1967, a turning point in her *oeuvre*, as the sensibility of her objects became larger in scale, and more conceptually more daring, she constructed one of her more renowned works: *Accession II*. (See Plate x) This was the first work to be part fabricated to her specifications by assistants. It stands at waist height, a perforated grid steel box with a bristling interior suggestive of the untouched inside, the murky core. Here there are visual and sensual contradictions between a hard exterior and a dense interior. On her person agenda, was the wish to liberate the art object. In order to do so, she had to liberate the materials. Therefore, previously repressed industrial materials, such as wire, steel and latex were indeed permitted to constitute much of her sculptural works.

If a material is liquid I just dont leave it or pour it, I can control it, but
I dont really want to change it.

Eva Hesse, (Cooper, 1992, pp. 17-50).

Eva Hesse has been categorised quite liberally as a process artist but her attention to the objectness of the finished piece and its affect on the viewer suggests an independent position in the *avant garde* of the 1960s. She comments: "I think for me the great involvement is for the material to arrive at the end" (Ibid.). Anti-form, the process-oriented art of the period was supported by Robert Morris:

The focus on matter and gravity as a means results in forms which were not projected in advance. Considerations of ordering are necessarily casual and imprecise and unemphasised... [C]hance is accepted and indeterminacy is implied...

Robert Morris, (Fer, 1994. pp. 424-449).

However, Hesse's work was less ideological and less chance oriented than Morris suggests. But it did carry the same torch in pursuit of the liberation from traditional painting and sculpture. In an interview with Cindy Nemser in 1970, Hesse professed her interest in the potential of the unknown and the preconceived. She in fact longed to reduce the planning and let things go.

Anti-art

Anti-art was a term first introduced by the presiding panel at Art Forum to denote the sensibility discussed by Morris in his controversial essay. He argues that the term refers to a "liberatory response to the repressive." The repressive was minimalist sculpture. Anti-art would have been a response to commercial hierarchies that defined the art-object, templated its form and appearance, and determined its sale and distribution. It disengaged itself from the class, race, gender and anti-war politics of the 1960s. It was more concerned with issues of spectatorship and capitalist institutions, and hence its own indirect critique of cultural politics.

9 at Leo Castelli

In 1969, Hesse exhibited at a group show entitled *9 at Leo Castelli*. The show was inevitably a catalyst in the crucial debate about the nature of advanced art. The exhibits presented by Claes Oldenberg, Alan Sarat and Richard Serra denied the limitations of traditional materials, proposing instead non-closed forms. The materials used were recognisable, ordinary substances taken out of this world in that wood was not affiliated with organic nor plastic with modernity, or steel with brutality. The show was a successful attempt to free the object from the confines of conventional composition. While Hesse's objects in many ways depart from Morris's understanding of anti-form, her work did enter its abstract psycho-sexual

dimension. Lucy Lippard observed that it had been speculated to be an "erotic season."

I believe in eroticism a lot, because it's truly a rather widespread thing throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands, it replaces, if you wish, what other literary schools called symbolism, Romanticism. It could be another *ism*, so to speak.

Duchamp, (Ibid.).

Metronomic Irregularity II . 1966

In a show organised by Lippard entitled *Eccentric Abstraction*, which opened in October 1966, Hesse was represented by three pieces: *Several*, *Ingeminate*, (See Plate xi) and *Metronomic Irregularity II* (See Plate xii). Lippard was surprised by the precision of this work. She had expected the work to have more organic associations:

In eccentric abstraction evocative qualities or specific organic associations are kept at a subliminal level, without the benefit of Freudian clergy.... Ideally a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol. Too much free association on the viewer's part is combated by formal understatement.

(Lippard, 1971).

While Lippard's accompanying text to the exhibition would render Hesse's work a personal disappointment, her comments, nonetheless, remain astute and central to any consideration of her work. Lippard depends on the pleasure and intrigue of Hesse, and upon her ability to conjure opposites and make them co-habit. In the exhibition, Lippard had intended to show work that offered "eccentric or erotic alternative to a solemn and dead-set minimalism." Hesse exhibited a labyrinth of white threads connecting three grey panels evenly placed on an incorporated wall,

presenting the adoption of a modular principle native to structure. A tension is emitted by the toughly bound undulating shapes of the smaller works and the linear tempos of the larger ones. It was described by Lippard repressing or imprisoning energy in a “timeless vacuum tinged with anticipation.”

In preparatory studies for *Metronomic Irregularity II*, Hesse's drawings show lines on a vertical plane, demonstrating conscious or formal logic implying that Hesse had preconceived the art work. Lippard was looking for anything that lay beneath the logic of Hesse's finished work. Whereas Hesse would prefer us to see beneath what she called the 'formal principals' to another structure that of the non-logical self. If we want to understand this important point, we must distinguish between the rational and the irrational in the art of her contemporaries. Perhaps the sustained dialogue between Hesse, Lewitt and Andre would be illuminative. One might locate Andre, in particular, within the rational field, and Hesse in the irrational. On a bad day, one might define gender this crudely but on an ordinary day we might see underlying irrationalism in minimalism as a whole. In an interview conducted by Cindy Nesmer, Eva Hesse declared the utter connectedness between her art and her life (Nesmer, 1970).⁵ Her statement develops from her contemplation of Andre's work. She reports that though his work “does something to [her] insides” she cannot agree with his argument that life and art are separate:

He says you can't confuse life and art. But I think art is a total thing. A total person giving a contribution. It is an essence, a soul, and that's what it is about... It becomes more absurd and less absurd to isolate a basically intuitive idea and then work up some calculated system and follow it through - that supposedly being the more intellectual approach - than giving precedence to soul or presence or whatever it is you want to call it... [B]ut nothing smacks of Romanticism the way pretty pictures and sculptures and nice parallel lines do.

(Ibid.).

Hesse admits that like Andre, she edits the possible interpretations of her work with logical vigour. These contradictions in turn demonstrate the control needed to curtail the ways gender specific referentiality in art. Anna C. Chave's argument proposes that Hesse's work is an articulation of "elements of that which is so often denied or repressed about the female experience; it's repugnant and piteous inheritance of pain" (Ibid.). This description though endorsed by Hesse's life - which was one of personal struggle - places Hesse in the position of plaintiff. But is it not more conceivable that Hesse's work is more purposeful than a mere report on women's misery? The idea that her work was more purposeful is heavily endorsed by the fact that the body we see in her art can be anyone's, and that her deliberate blurring of sexual definition is a generous invitation to a contemporary experience of the body. This effectively renders her work "completely abstract and resist[ant to] any kind of single-levelled interpretation or response" (Ibid.). When Nesmer asked Hesse whether she thought in terms of male or female forms, Hesse replied that "[she didn't] see that at all... female/male... I think my work is very strong and yet sensitive so there you have both so-called masculinity and femininity" (Ibid.). In a different time, in a more recent context, she might have been able to see strength as feminine but regardless of the hypothetical, her respect for and dependence on a personal content makes question of gender-strength irrelevant.

Literalness

It was said of the exhibition, *Eccentric Abstraction*, that the work conformed to a "general tendency to substitute the literal for the metaphorical" (Kramer, 1977). If this is correct, the work denies the possibility that the artist's intention is informed by any unconscious perspective. Similarly, it denies the possibility that the spectator's judgement might be similarly informed (Fer, 1994).

It is important to know that there are three versions of the *Metronomic*, of which the second is most successful. The second lent itself to the prototype for the labyrinth: *Right After* (1969), (See Plate xiii) completed one year before her death. *Right After* is the name of two of Hesse's works; one a drawing with weak horizontal lines and hatching, and the other a hung sculpture containing an interlace of fibre glass covered threads. According to Lippard there is little connection. In contrast, Briony Fer insists that the shared title has relevance to content. She directs our attention to the 'other' processes occurring in the deeper levels of the unconscious *qua* Hesse's 'non-logical self':

Individual parts of a system are not in themselves important but are relevant only in how they are used. (ibid.)

There is a constant re-evaluation of ideas in Hesse's work. Drawings translate to sculpture and then back without loss of essences. This, easily recognised in any tracing of Hesse's creative output, substantiates ~~by~~ Briony Fer's observations. (See Plates xiv, xv and xvi)

Hang Up

Hang-Up is an object that though apparently empty possesses space, and extends it. It's form effectively plays with it's own boundaries. The same equivocal position toward space and the viewer, what is inside, outside, and beyond is recurring in many of her sculptures. Again and again, the viewer's access to a piece is encouraged or denied with the use of voids, compartments and ropes in a repertoire of solicitation and refusal:

[W]hile they throw us a rope, sometimes literally, always figuratively... we can never be sure if we are climbing in or out.

(Wagner, 1994).

In *Hang Up*, the interest is drawn to the outside of the frame. By adding a rod projecting beyond its logical self from the frame into the spectator's space, Hesse dictates the choreography of the spectator. The work intrudes on his body-ego. It confronts, invites and then rejects him. Hesse does not attempt to answer his questions definitively. In her commentary she approves its non-definitive quality and suggests that in naming what it expresses we need not choose among "depth or soul or absurdity or life or meaning or feeling or intellect."⁶

Woodstock Drawings

Loyal to *Hang Up*, many of her later Woodstock drawings explore the void. It is interesting that she produced these drawings when she was too ill to sculpt. In them, busily defined areas of blankness seem to allude to either the dislocation or absence of self:

In the end it was not only a kind of opacity but a kind of nothing that Hesse, as she articulated it several times, was striving for, but one that could be meaningful and hold us in an art work.

(Fer, 1994).

Such work should not be regarded as a product of reductionism. Although blankness is primarily two dimensional it can imply an infinite three-dimensional space. The presence of which does not seek to occupy or fill an empty gallery space but nonetheless seeks to transform it. In *Untitled* 1969,(See Plate xvii) a fibre-glass coated wire falls haphazardly to the floor. It falls "as if it almost isn't there at all." the sculpture is, despite it's slight existence and 'spare elegance,' a disturbance, activated by virtue of the fact that it is barely there. Similarly, the possibility of three dimensional space implied by the presence of blankness constitutes an equally potent disturbance. It is Hesse's manipulation of her materials, and the resultant variety of transparencies and opacities that she

achieves in such material as latex that lend proof to the difficulties of making something that is hardly there. In *l'Art Primitif*, George Bataille refers to the alteration of surfaces as *alteration*, in the sense of something being destroyed or spoilt. While Clement Greenberg in his contribution to the modernist discourse places 'elaborate formal properties' in works of art "possessing a low level of incident." He regards Mondrian as typical of low incident. Mondrian demonstrates the minimum means for the production of a work of art. Similarly, in Malevich's *White on White*, blankness is not blankness *per se*; it alludes to a prohibition on religious imagery. It is the location of the painting in the room, in particular its position in a corner near the ceiling, that evokes in the viewer's mind a recollection of the forbidden image. Significantly, three architectonic lines converge at a point behind the painting: The horizontal lines of two walls and the vertical line of their conjunction. This linear configuration, traditionally alluding to the presence of the Trinity in the Russian household, combined with the blank rectangle, acts as a potent sign.

The absence of figuration was to become a formal component of pure painting in modern art (See Plate xviii). Greenberg argued that a stretched or tacked up canvas might be regarded as a picture, though not necessarily a successful one. He was interested in the intent and the choices of the artist, the process, medium, colour, shape, form and scale. Every thing mattered, and so to impress Greenberg every thing had to matter.

The Art-Object Crisis

In his essay, *Recentness of Sculpture*, Greenberg criticises minimalism. He dismisses the so called 'art-object crisis':

The look of accident was not the only *wild* thing that Abstract Expressionism first acclimatised and then domesticated in painting, it did the same to emptiness, to the *look of void*.

Clement Greenberg, (Fer, 1994).

The *look of void* was dismissed by Greenberg as being even less than non-art in that it was 'art-denying', not sufficiently hard-core because it left him and possibly spectators in general unmoved. He described his encounter with the void as an experience with "an art-work that simply did not return the look" (Ibid.). Hesse has been discussed elsewhere in relation to Clement Greenberg's modernist logic as neither inside or outside its realm. Hesse's reflective deliberations are obviously personal, and no doubt informed by her subconscious mind, the substratum of modernism's non-logical self. However, it is reasonable to conclude that the conceptual process sustaining her fabrication of work was also consciously and intellectually determined. The evidence for this is present in her written commentaries on her practice. I am referring to her remarkably comprehensive diaries and notebooks.

¹Solipsism. An extreme form of scepticism which denies the possibility of any knowledge other than that of one's own existence. Latin. *Solus*: alone. *ipsis*: self.

² Eva Hesse: *Hang-Up* (1966), acrylic on cloth, wood and steel, 1.83 x 2.13 x 1.98 m. The Estate of Eva Hesse, The Robert Miller Gallery, N.Y., and the Art Institute of Chicago.

³ Eva Hesse: *Metronomic Irregularity* (1966), painted wood, cotton-covered wire, 1.22 x 6.10 m. The Estate of Eva Hesse, The Robert Miller Gallery, N.Y.

⁴ Eva Hesse: *Untitled* (1969), fibreglass and polyester resin over cloth covered wire, 18.59 m x 2.54 cm x 2.54 cm. The Eva Hesse Estate, The Robert Miller Gallery, Arthur Keating and the Art Institute of Chicago.

⁵Nesmer, Cindy. (1970), "An Interview with Eva Hesse," *Artforum*, May 1970, pp. 59-63. Quoted in Wagner, Anne M. (1994), *Another Hesse*, October 69, Summer 1994, pp.49-84.

CHAPTER III: DISCOURSE**Psychic Space**

Eva Hesse's diaries contain her testimony on the distress and pain that she suffered on the loss of her father. We can only speculate on how the loss affected her work. Does the void in her Woodstock drawings reflect the loss of her father, her illness and confinement? In *Metronomic Irregularity II*, the blank wall alternating between the panels is part of the work. When shadows of wire, activated by the movement of light, play on the new surface (wall) a relationship is established between the blank space and the interlacing of line producing in turn 'a symbolic exchange'. There is a pattern of give and take between things in her work that might be considered an unconscious structure. In her essay on *Infantile Anxiety Situations in a Work of Art and in Creative Impulse*, Melanie Klein vividly allies loss and depression with the blank space, particularly in the lives of female artists. However, since she published the article in 1929 she could not have had Hesse in mind (Mitchell, 1986). Nevertheless, her observations might help us to allow for the unconscious in Hesse's work. Klein is not concerned with process, she is interested in reflection. Is the 'blank space' in Hesse's work a metaphor for her infantile experience of loss or abandonment?

There was only one dark spot in her (Eva Hesse's) life. In the midst of the happiness which was natural to her, and seemed so untroubled, she would suddenly be plunged in to the deepest melancholy. A melancholy that was suicidal. If she tried to account for this, she would say something to this effect: 'There is an empty space in me, which I can never fill.'¹

(Mitchell, 1986)

Was this observation informed by Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical work (1929) on infantile anxiety and the creative impulse?² Though it is possible to find an convincing explanation (for most things), we should not assume that it is a valid explanation.

Since Klein's literary style is rich in metaphor one might permit her theories to flow beyond the confines of language into the other modes of narrative artistic expression. According to Klein, the blank space is astructural, alinguistic; it is psychic space existing in mind prior to the acquisition of language. In Klein, desire and loss are the opposite poles of psychic space. Perhaps Hesse's *Metronomic Irregularity II* is an expression of such a polarity! Does Klein provide a psychological profile for Eva Hesse? Good, bad, part, whole, functional and dysfunctional are structures in the Kleinean model; structures present in Hesse's work. It is vital that we look at Klein's description of 'something lacking in the body' because it may bring us to a better understanding of what it is to feel incomplete and permanently longing. While the wires appear to fill the space, they actually serve to obscure it.

Post-minimalism

If Eva Hesse lived today she would be sixty-three years of age. Most of her peers still have an active role in contemporary art. Though they are commonly perceived as a generation that developed and sustained the minimalist mode of artistic expression, they exhibited their works under many rubrics, anti-form, process-art, eccentric abstraction, and earth art. What distinguished Hesse's endeavour from that of her peers was the manner in which she excluded nothing. Her innovativeness carried her beyond minimalism; she should be regarded as a post-minimalist. In his account of Hesse's contemporary Richard Serra, Robert Pincus-Witten characterises the sensibility of post-minimalism:

This new sensibility tends to be anti-precisionist and anti-geometric. It once again fosters values connected with Abstract Expressionism.... But while being related to widespread painterliness, pronounced constructivism is also in evidence.

(Witten, 1972, pp. 74-76).

Pincus-Witten's observations on Eva Hesse are well informed. He and Lucy Lippard enjoy exclusive access to Hesse's diaries and notebooks, etc. The executors of the Eva Hesse estate sought to prevent any mishandling of the diaries by limiting access to the two critics. Many have argued that this arrangement has curtailed the development of proper discourse on the significance of Hesse's work. Broader access to her archives might engender the formation of a broader consensus on her work. Opposition to the arrangement is apparent in Walter Erlebacher's recent necrophilism to characterise Pincus Witten's interest in the archive (Hunter, 1991, p. 144).

Despite the arrangement, published parts of the archive clearly indicate that Hesse was unwilling to be categorised. In remarking on her idolisation of Willem de Kooning, Hesse states that her early vocabulary was informed by abstract expressionism, the most influential mode of artistic expression in the Yale School of Art & Architecture where she was a student, 1957-1959. However, she also states that she was unwilling to be subject to any established mode of expression. She also resisted staunch. However she admits that many of her later works emerge from embryonic forms or ideas suggested by her experiences of both modes of expression. In her unwillingness to be subservient to any established movement she articulates Willem de Kooning resistance to established movements:

Personally, I do not need a movement. What was given to me, I take for granted.... [T]here is that one-man movement, Marcel Duchamp –

for me a truly modern movement because it implies that each artist can do what he thinks he ought to do – a movement for each person and open for everybody.

(de Kooning, 1951).

Though we may look at Minimalism through Eva Hesse, it is difficult to see it in Eva Hesse. She is author of a finite body of work and words, in which it seems she still lives. Perhaps it is the virtue of sincerity present in her art, perhaps it is her honesty, her originality that preserves the value of her work in the late 20th century. The wish to know Hesse is profoundly nostalgic. One might suspect that this sentiment is induced by the early loss of not just the art but the person within it. Certainly were she to be alive today she would not be the attractive cultural commodity that her fate and subsequent absence establishes. Popular writers and scholars, concentrating on her anxieties and talents, have elevated her to a mythical level:

Hesse is endlessly gorgeous, girlish, incomplete, immature, melancholic, a symptom of the pathology of the female condition.

(Wagner, 1994).

This quotation is typical of the Hesse myth. The notion of Hesse as a ‘wound’ is a strongly rooted theme in recent academic writing. The wound analogy has two parts, firstly the artist was literally wounded, and secondly the artist as a woman embodies the wound as a condition of female being. It is certainly true that her diaries reveal anxieties about her role as a woman, her marital relationship, her mental health, and her desire to secure space for her artistic endeavours. We sense that she precludes “withdrawal into those extremely personal reaches” by dedicating and rededicating herself energetically to her work as an artist. We also

sense that personal reaches of experience “beyond or beneath speech” inspired her work (Krauss, 1979).

When we speak of Hesse’s work, particularly her seminal sculpture *Hang Up* 1960, we are not bound by any conditions, except ourselves. This being the case we are not licensed to speak of its frailty or strength. Rather while there is frailty there is also strength, and alongside absence there is presence. This is the scope and the achievement of her art. She took us beyond convention, *Beyond Minimalism...*

¹Karin Michaelis’s description of Eva Hesse’s mental state quoted in Mitchell, Juliet., (Ed.), “The Selected Melanie Klein”, New York: Harmondsworth, 1986.

² Klein, Melanie., “Infantile Anxiety Situations in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse”, International Journal of Psychoanalytic Studies, October 1929.

APPENDICES

Eva Hesse: *Paintings from 1960 to 1964*. New York. Robert Miller Gallery. New York. Exhibition Catalogue containing 52 pages of text by Max Kozloff., 20 full-page colour plates, b&w photo of artist. Robert Miller Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, New York, New York 10022

Eva Hesse: *Drawing in Space (Bilder und Reliefs)*. Exhibition Catalogue contains 189 pages of German/English text, 53 colour plates, 55 b&w illustrations, four critical texts, interview with Mel Bochner, biography, and bibliography. Reinhardt, Brigitte, ed. Stuttgart, Cantz, 1994.

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PLATES I

Hang-Up

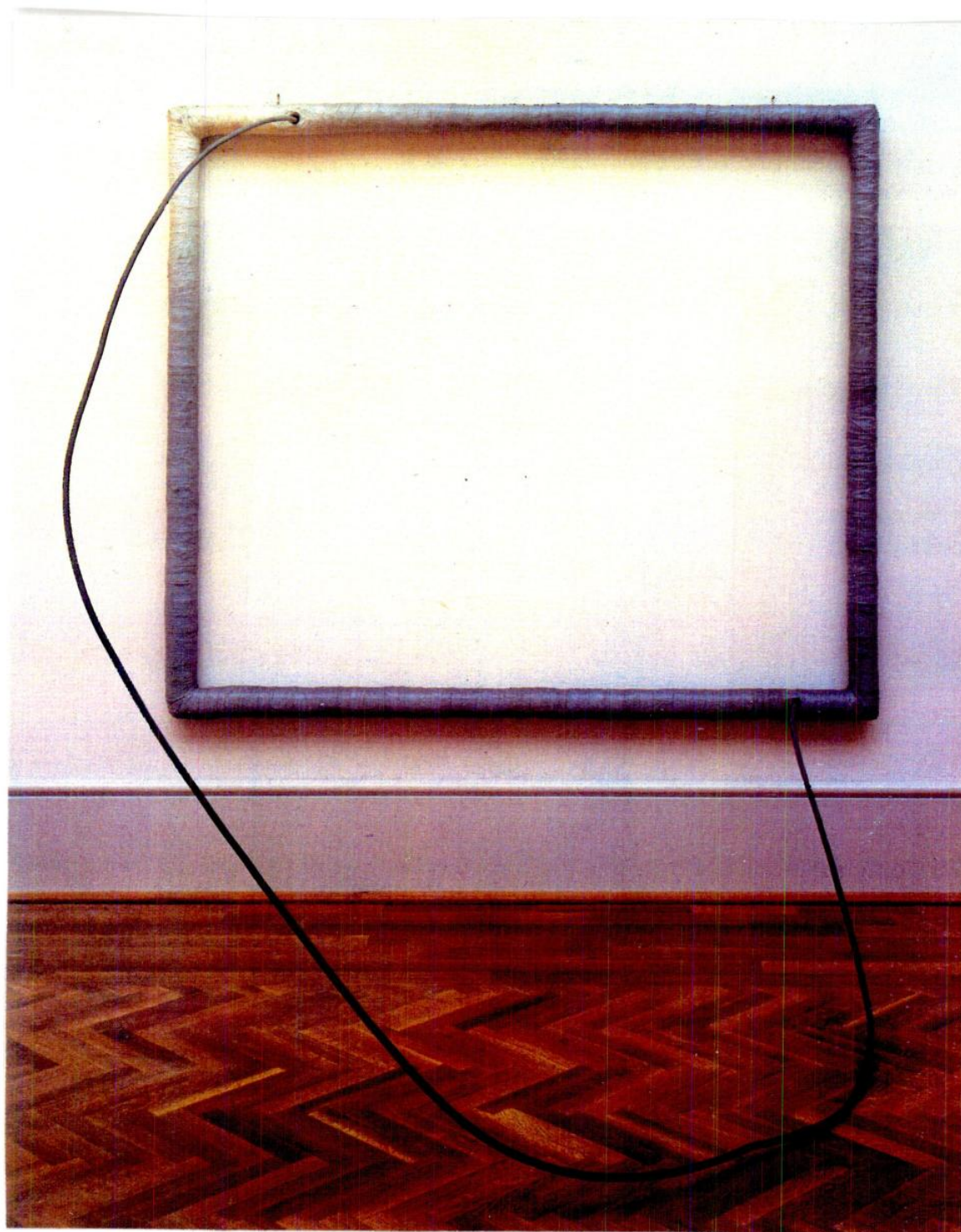


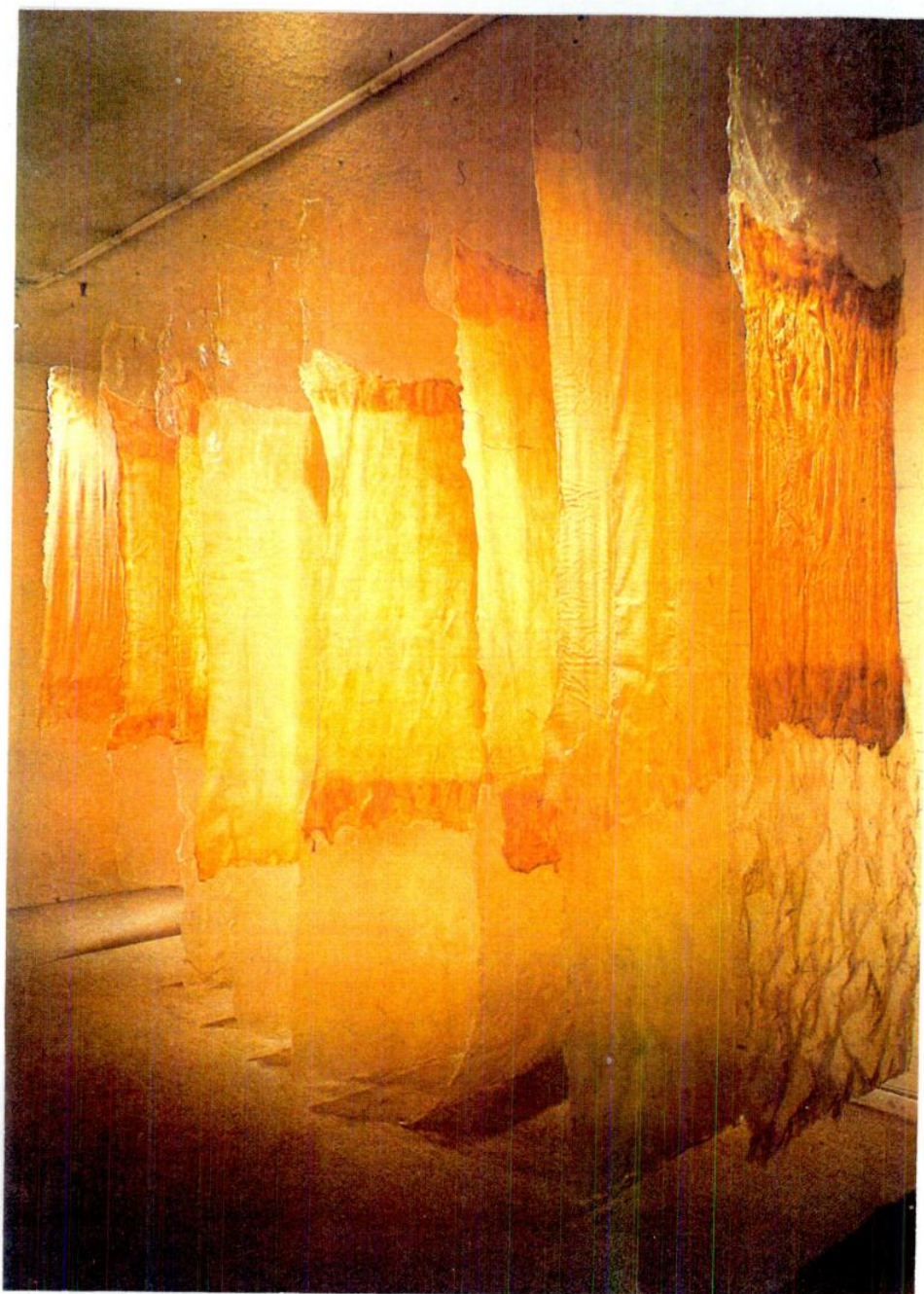
PLATE II

Repetition Nineteen



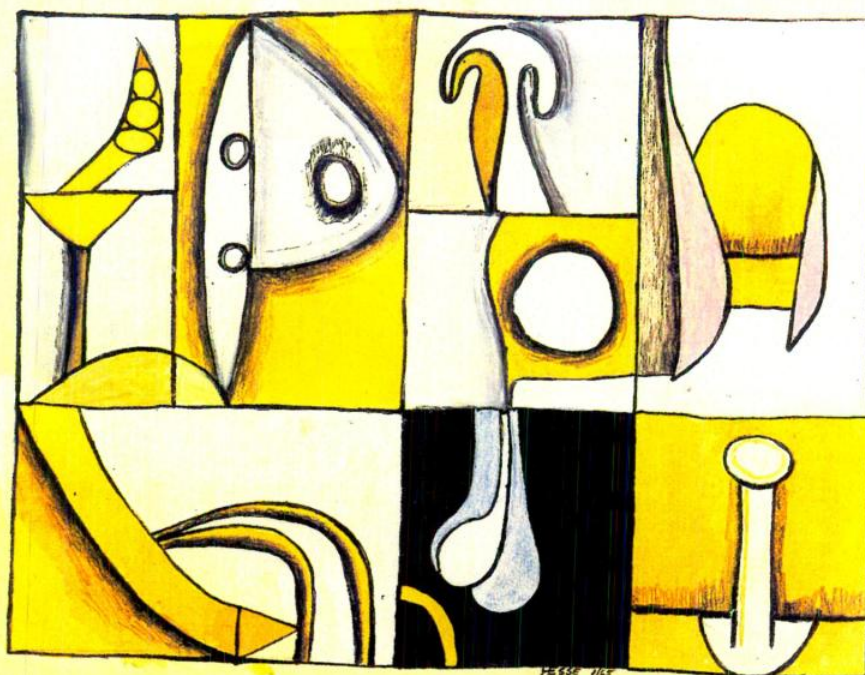
PLATES III

Untitled 1965



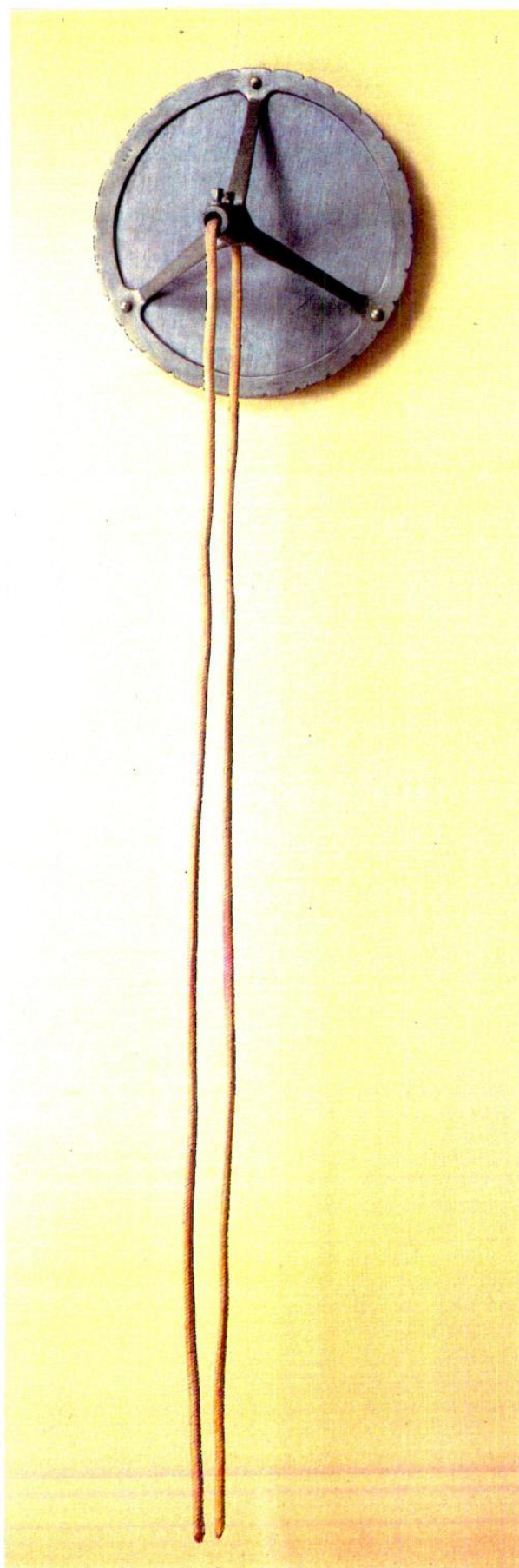
PLATES IV

Contingent



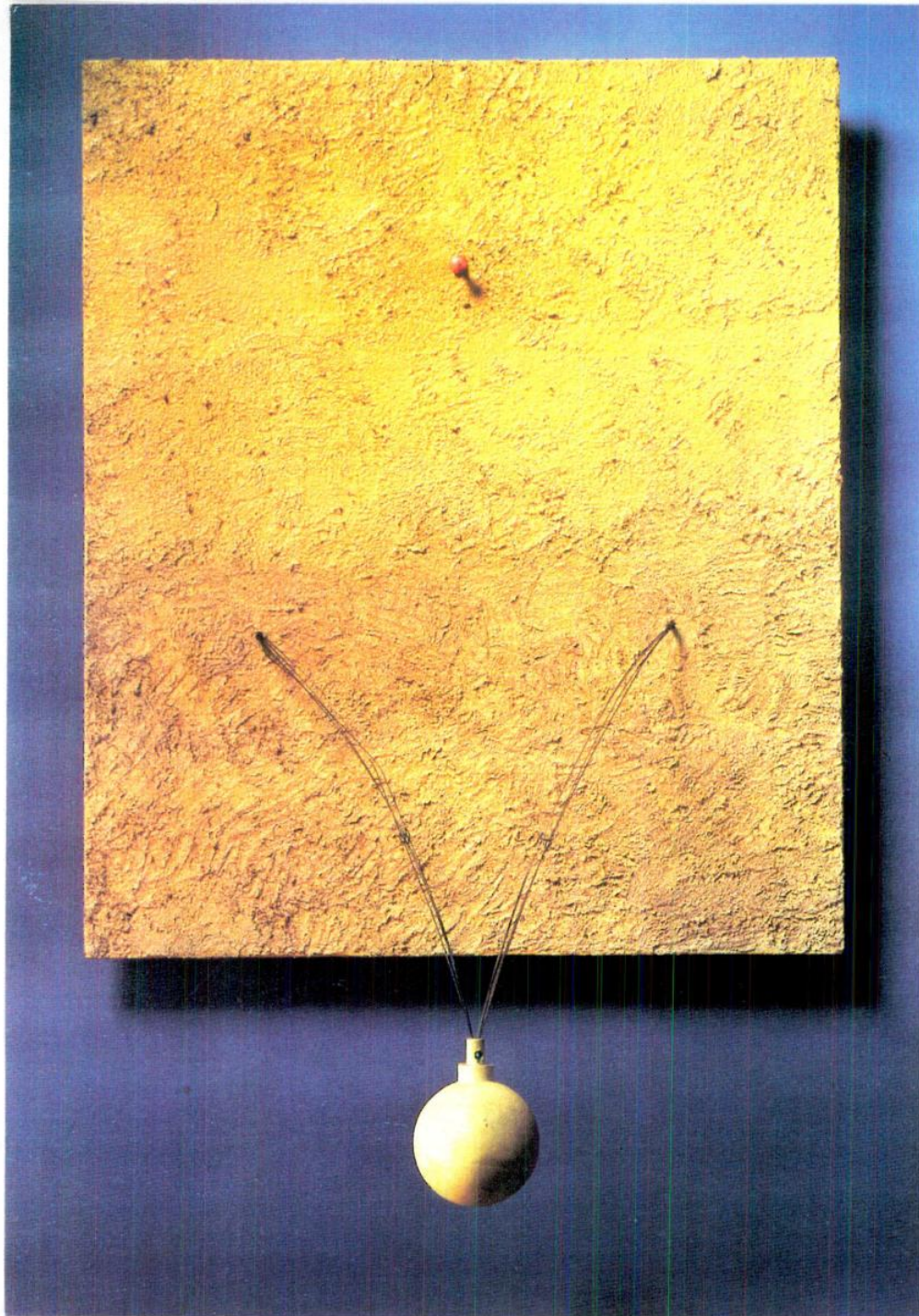
PLATES V

Cool Zone



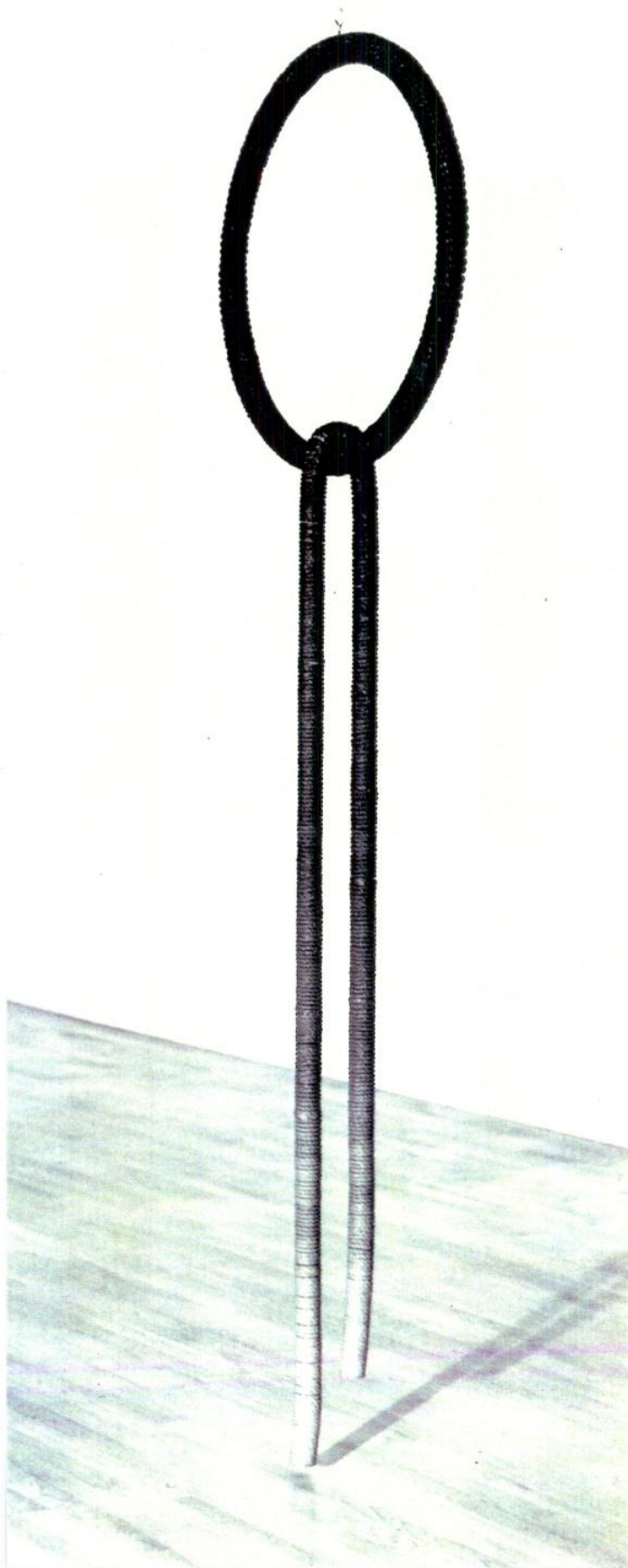
PLATES VI

C-Clamp Blues



PLATES VII

Untitled



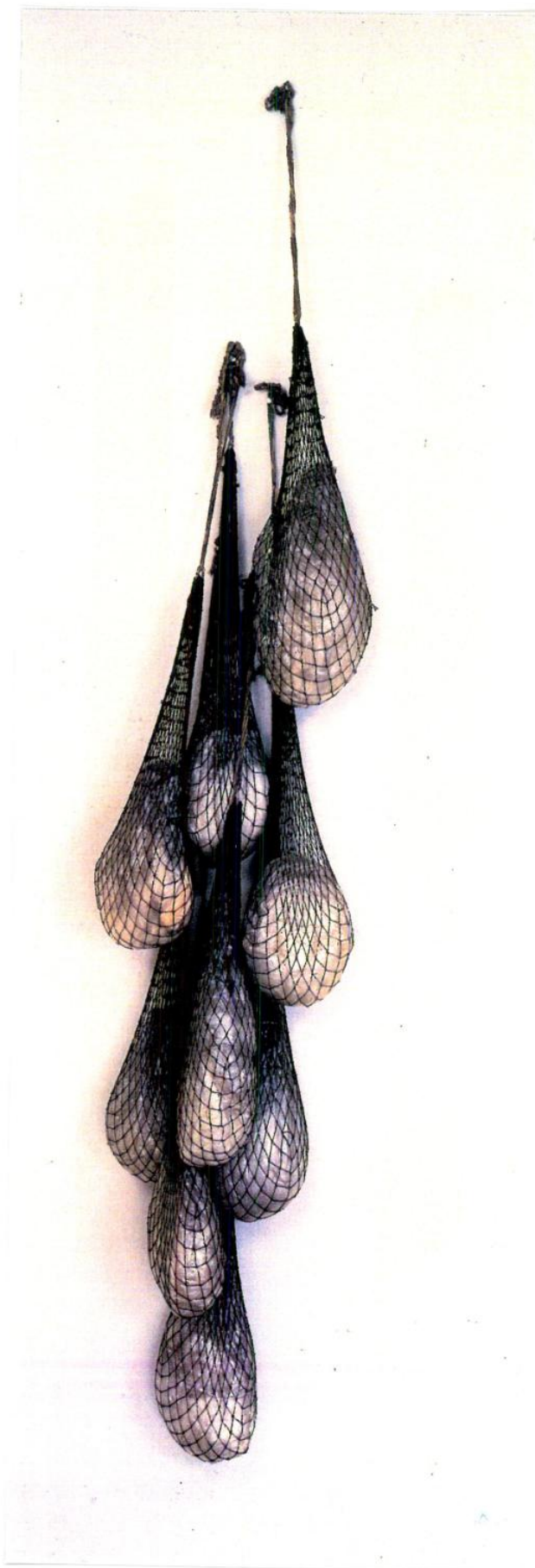
PLATES VIII

Untitled



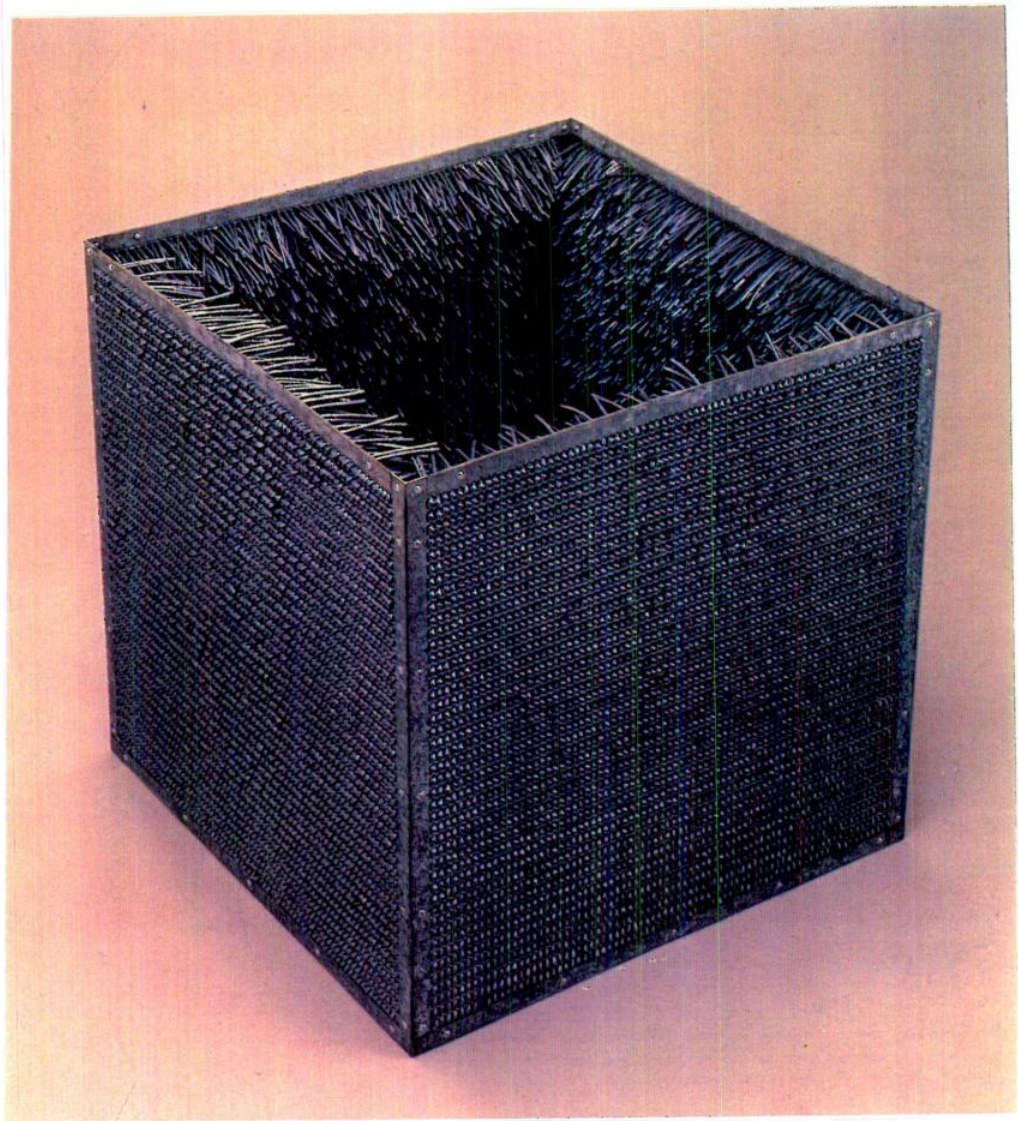
PLATES IX

Not Yet



PLATES X

Accession



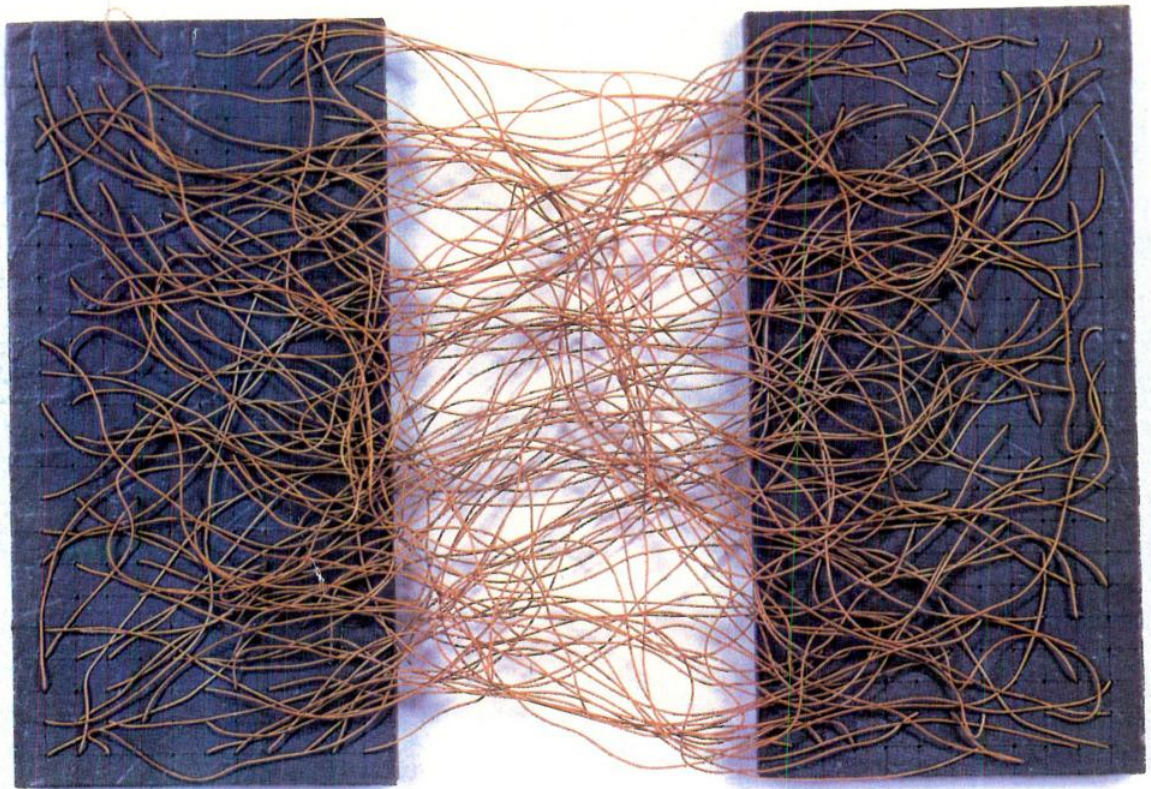
PLATES XI

Ingeminate



PLATES XII

Metronomic Irregularity III



1783-1784

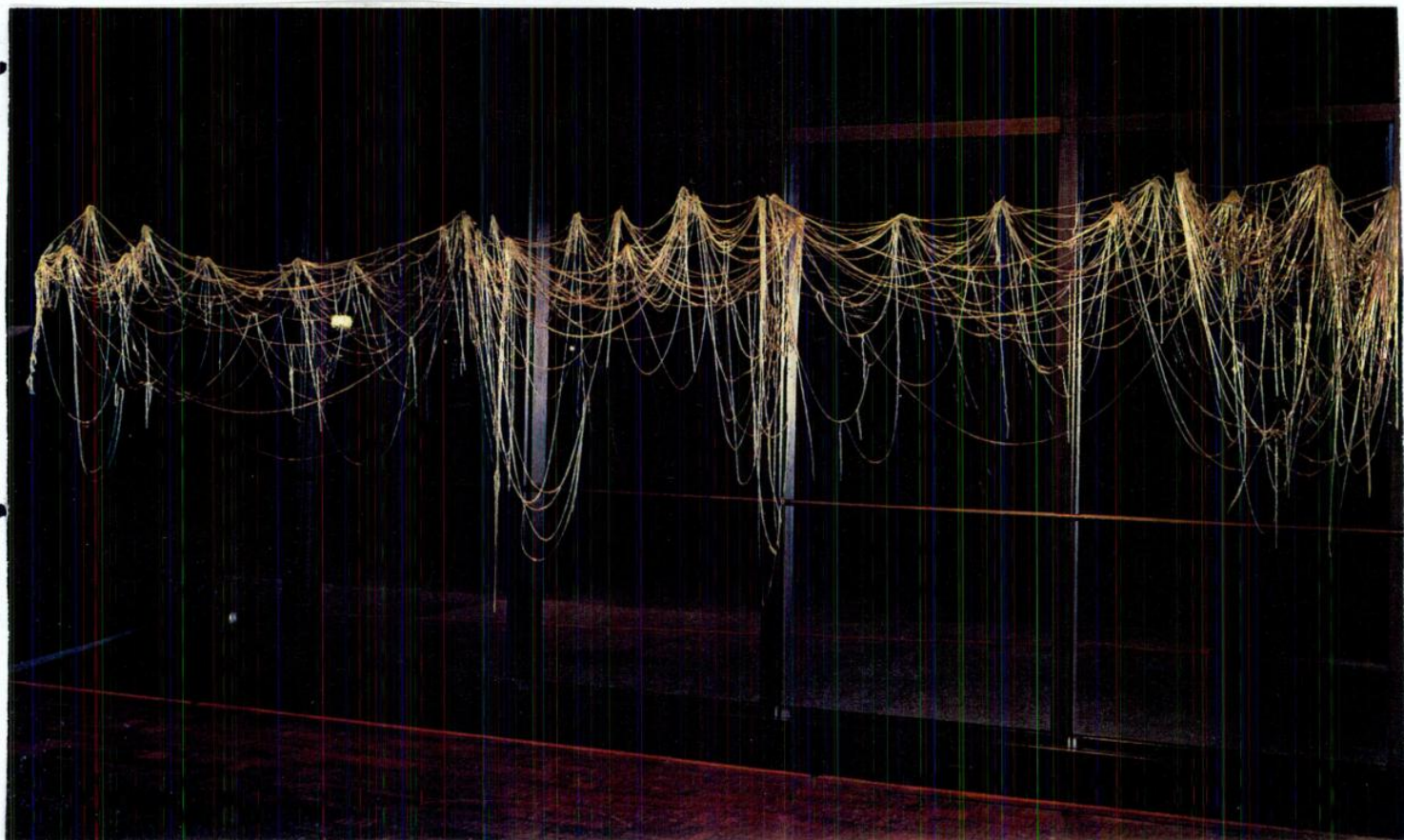
1783-1784

1783-1784

1783-1784

PLATES XIII

Right After



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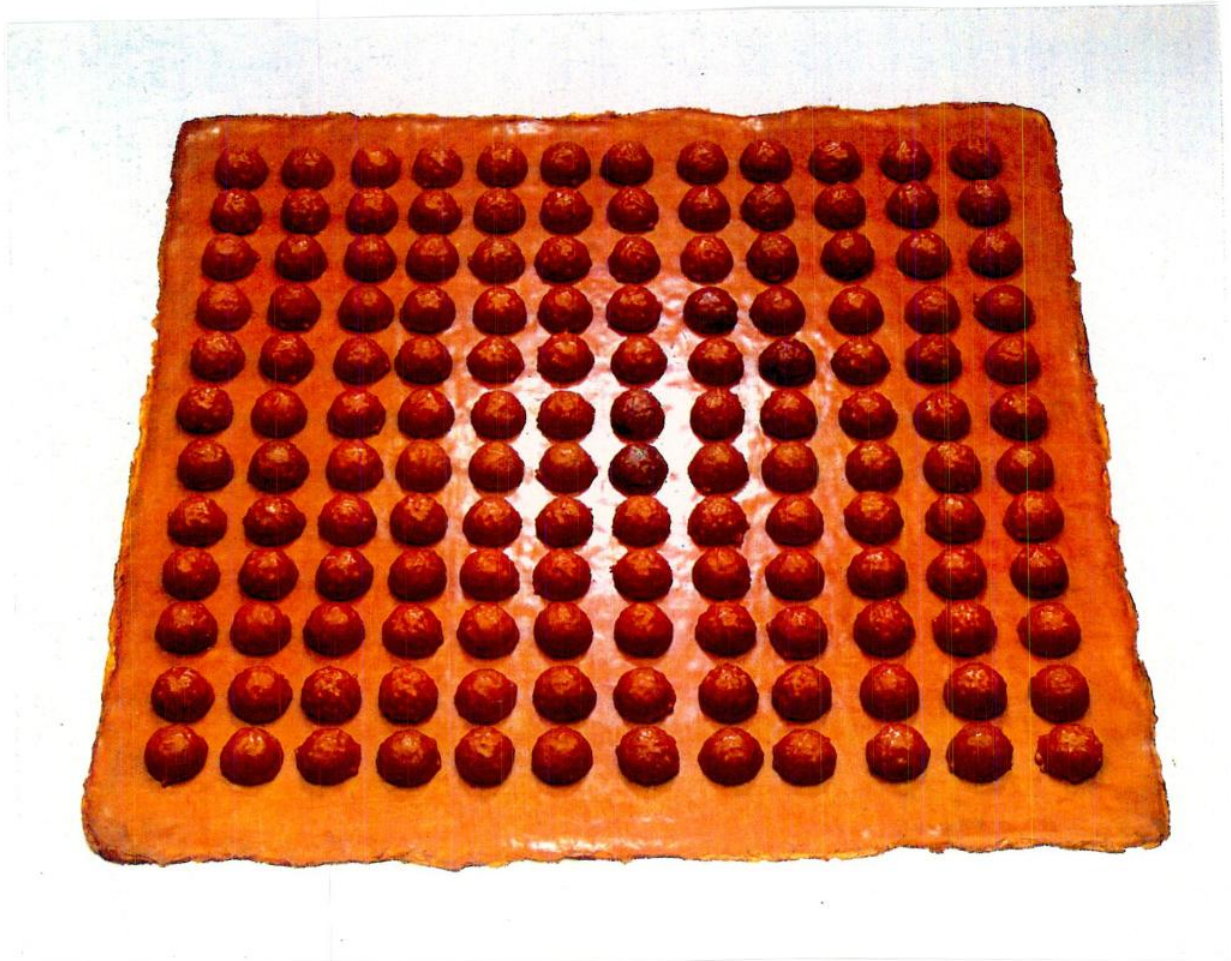
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PLATES XIV

Schema



12-23-78

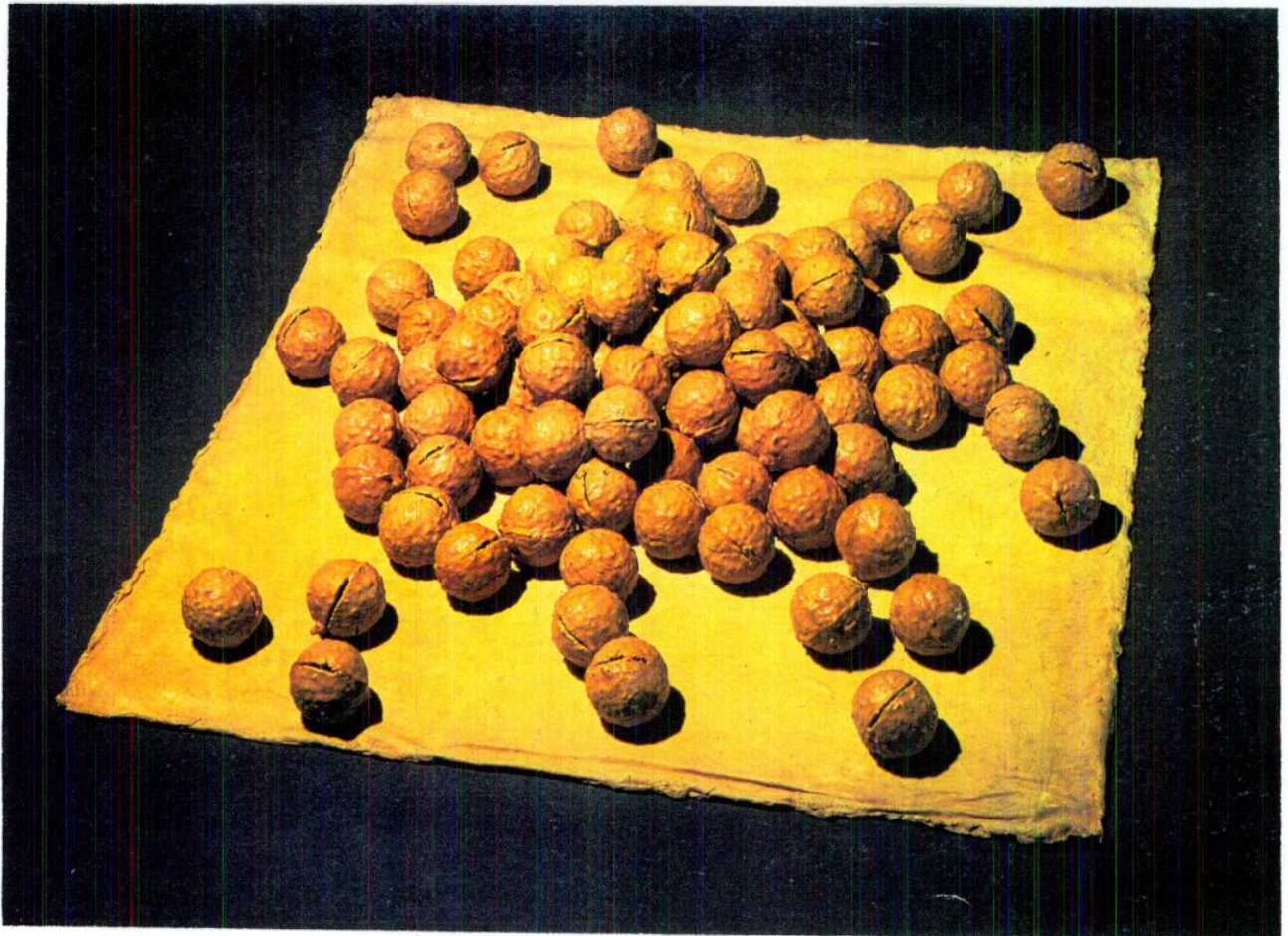
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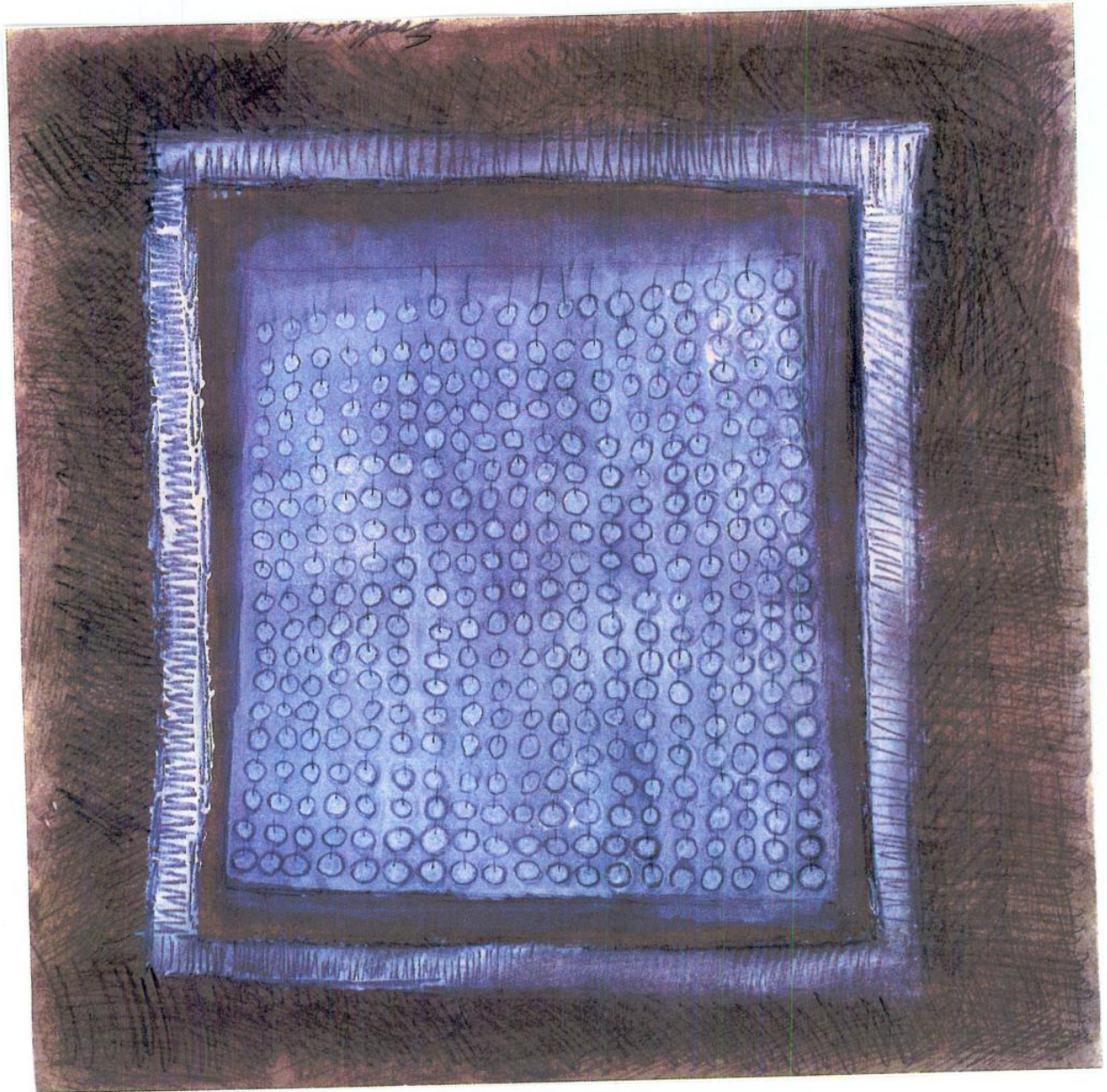
PLATES XV

Sequel



PLATES XVI

Untitled 1968

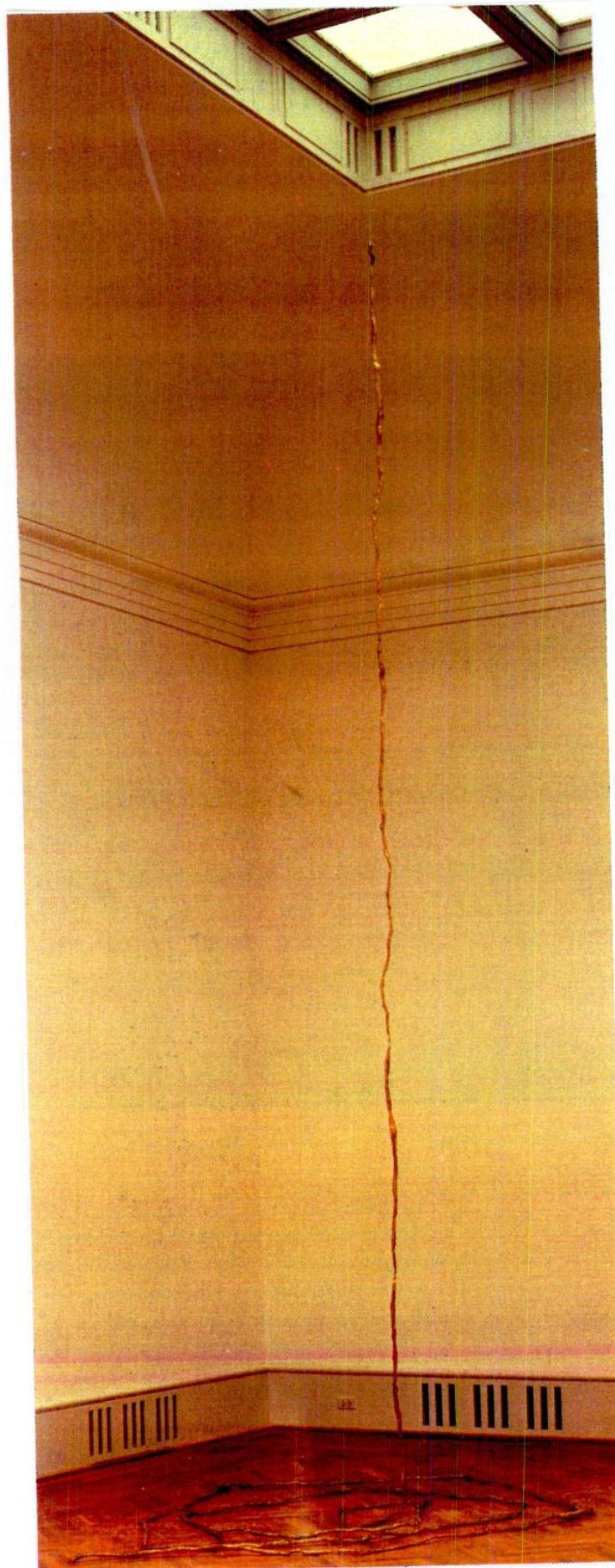


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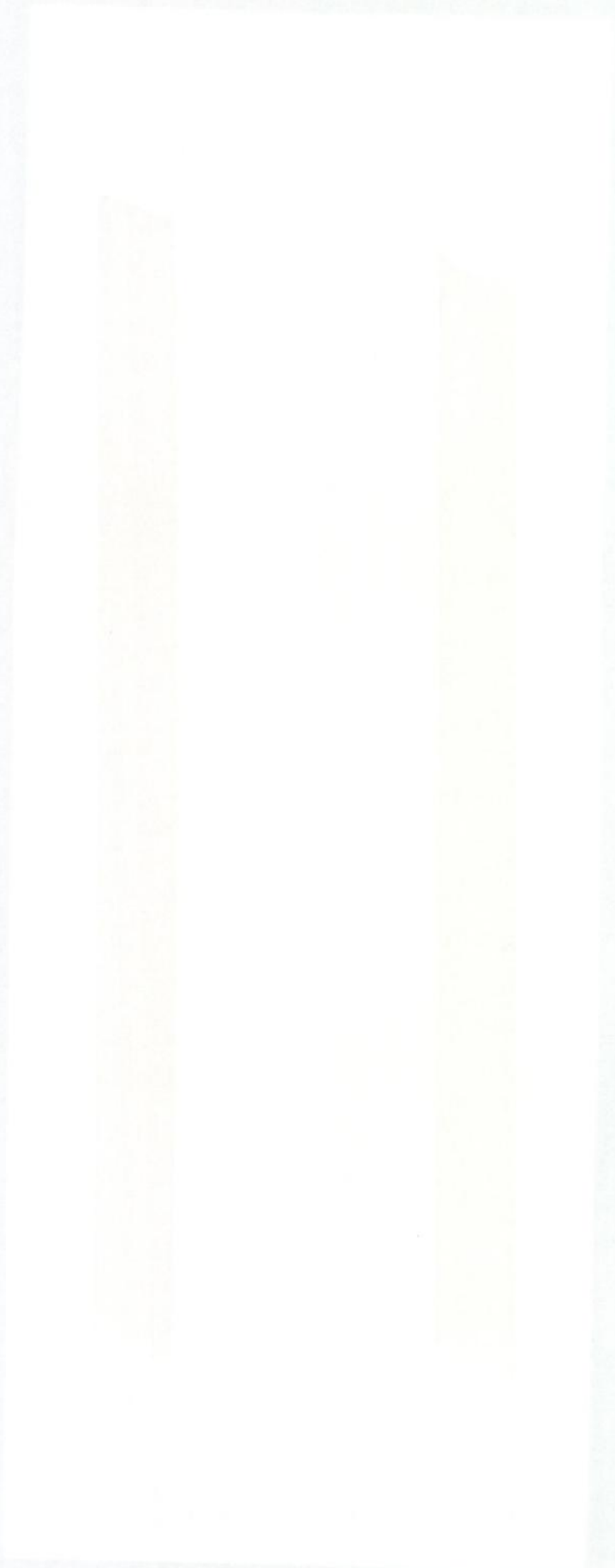
PLATES XVII

Untitled



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(1972)



PLATES XVIII

Untitled



1972-1973

1974-1975

1976-1977

1978-1979