

Achille Bonito Oliva

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**Art Tribes**





Achille Bonito Oliva

Galleria Comunale  
d'Arte Moderna  
e Contemporanea

# Art Tribes

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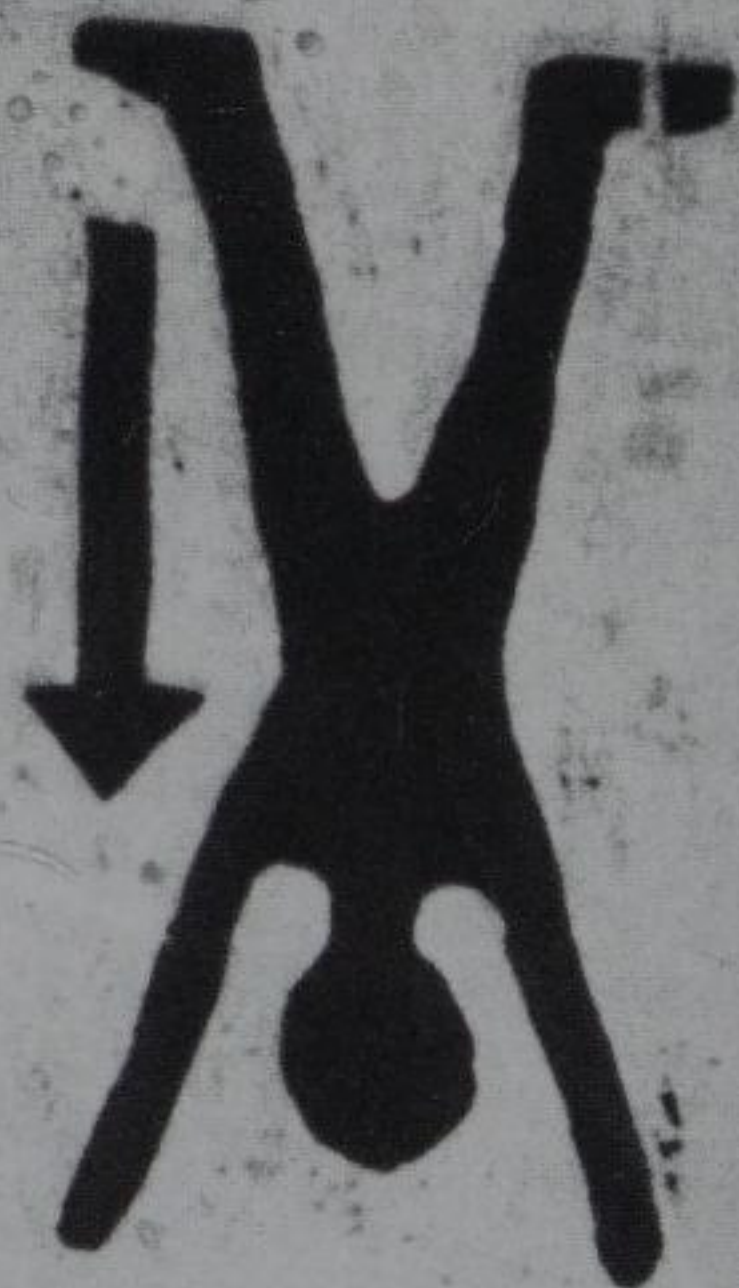
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LE FESTIVAL  
DES ARTS SCENIQUES  
ET DU COMPTAGE

# FLUXUS

RECHERCHE  
D'UNE NOUVELLE  
CRÉATION  
MUSICALE  
ET  
THÉÂTRALE  
AU  
NOUVEAU  
CASINO  
LE 27 JUILLET 1963



POUR PRÉPARER L'ÉVÉNEMENT  
CONDIAL BERN TRAVERSERA  
LE 26 JUILLET LE PORT DE NICE A  
LA NAGE EN TANT QU'ŒUVRE  
D'ART - RENDEZ-VOUS AU PLAGE A 10 H.



“Tribe, n. (from Latin *tribus*, of uncertain formation) [...] 2a. [second meaning] In the modern sense, an ethnic group of varying dimensions whose members speak the same language, and are aware that they constitute a well-determined, politically coherent social organization which is recognized as such by neighbouring groups; its cohesion almost always has a territorial aspect in addition to a linguistic and social one, since the group permanently occupies (if sedentary) or periodically traverses (if nomad) a geographically determined area on which it claims traditional rights that are acknowledged by the bordering ethnic groups; it very often has a genealogical character inasmuch as it claims to descend from a distant common founder of the family, for the most part mythic. Consequently, in anthropology, the concept of a tribe does not have a precise connotation; it is normally meant to coincide with the structure of the relationship or its units, such as the great family, stock or clan, the lineage, the segments or sections, the phratries or the matrimonial classes; in evolutionist ethnology the tribe indicated an inferior level of social organization, whence the pejorative meaning sometimes used for a type of rough, primitive organization.”

This definition from the *Encyclopedia Treccani Vocabolario della lingua italiana* underscores the interconnected community and settlement values that define a collective identity. Such a definition has in time been invigorated by blood ties and stretched to the point of confirming the community rather than the settlement value.

At the beginning of the third millennium, our era is traversed by the double extremisms of globalization and tribalism, and homologation and individualization. In both cases, the radicalization of the phenomena involves a loss of complexity. Globalization, the result of the structural superiority of the global economy, tends to confirm rules of behaviour that are increasingly ho-



mologated to the strong models of hegemonic countries. A regressive emotive reaction that plays on ethnic roots and territorial settlement springs up against such a hegemony, one that produces historic tragedies and the isolation of the Third World.

However, it is possible to find examples and models of cultural tribes in the history of contemporary culture that have faced the problem of aggregation unflinchingly and that of individualization creatively and constructively.

Art tribes arise and grow in great modern cities where anonymity and social standardization are the dominant influence. Groups of artists and intellectuals, producing different aesthetic expressions and cultures, tend to come together and join forces, bound by both cultural affinity and everyday practice. The tribal attitude, in a metaphorical sense, can be found in the collective answers that such groups have given to the problems posed by industrial civilization and mass society. In their fellowship, they find the force and the energy to respond to the intention of the single individual.

A kind of added value, a veritable ethical and aesthetic *surplus value*, marks their artistic and existential production that is guaranteed by a collective behaviour and a common cultural mentality.

Such tribes are concentrated primarily in the great European and American cities, where they seek a collective connotation that can provide strong group visibility in a society that tends to dissolve such visibility into a mass of anonymous solitudes.

The cultural and artistic tribes therefore reject the blood tie or the simple family settlement for a *genius loci* that is amplified and self-generating because of the mobility of collective behaviour. The tribal attitude becomes a great mobile mirror in which the single participants can see every finished gesture amplified, strengthened as it is by the specular capacity of the collective, aesthetic and ethical norm.

The art tribes do not necessarily correspond to the historic avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, where adherence at times simply regarded models of expression and was not also strategic for confirming the group ethic.

Industrial civilization and mass society have seen to it that such tribes do not simply dwell in the solitude of their individual ateliers but blend into the collective struggle of the group which represents the depository and site of creative fermentation. The noises of exchange and confrontation are accented in the world and become the background mood that accompanies the creative process, even though it is individual. The tribe must necessarily have a culturally collective identity, one that involves, positively and inevitably, a moderate depersonalization so that its members adhere as much as possible to a common front without the risk of dispersion or onanistic gratification.



A kind of utopian anarchy arms the art tribes of the twentieth century, since individual affirmation is protected through the group, and at the same time the aesthetic community loses a territorial identification. Better a collective non-place (as in the word "utopia": *u-topos*) as the point of departure and arrival: a departure from the precarious settlement of the imaginary and an objectified and behavioural arrival that is almost always above and beyond the system of art.

Acting as a concentrated community outside of the market of ideas and forms also implies a potentiality and productive dispossession that refers somewhat to the Medieval models that flourished in the thirteenth century, albeit without their fervid spirituality, but heretical, in any case, with respect to the strongly economical matrix of modern civilization: a secular heresy, for example, with respect to that of the free spirit that spread so rapidly at the end of the thirteenth century. From then until the end of the Middle Ages, this was propagated by men who were commonly called "Beghards", who constituted a lay counterpart, albeit not approved, of the mendicant orders. They too were mendicants (their name most likely derives from the word "beg"). They frequented the cities and wandered through the streets in noisy, bellicose groups, begging for alms with their characteristic cry "bread for the love of God".

What distinguished the free spirit adepts from all the other Medieval sectarians was their total amorality. Considering themselves "free", they created everything "in common": they were free to eat in a tavern and to refuse to pay; if a taverner dared ask for money, he would be beaten.

Were an adept to hand over purloined money, he stepped back "from the eternal to the temporal"; and when assisting a sick person, were the adept to ask for alms and be refused, he was free to take the money unscrupulously, by force, even if the victim risked dying. Fraud, theft, and armed robbery were perfectly justified. "Anything the eye sees and desires, the hand seizes!" was one of their maxims.

Calling themselves the "mendicant saints", they had nothing but disdain for the monks and friars of the comfortable life; they delighted in interrupting religious services, and refused to put up with ecclesiastical discipline. Their dress vaguely resembled that of the friars, but was distinguished from theirs by exclusive details. Their robes were usually red, and often tattered below the waist; they announced their professional poverty by the small, patched hoods they wore. Coming from all the social classes, they could be artisans but also well-to-do; some came from the less privileged classes of the intelligentsia, ex-monks, priests, and clerics of the minor orders.

Like any other prophet, an adept of the free spirit owed his ascendance in part to his reputation as an ascetic who was endowed



with thaumaturgic powers, in part to his personal talents of eloquence and manner. However, the followers that they sought to obtain differed from those of the other *prophetae*. When the free spirit movement passed from open activism to clandestinity, after having ennobled the rootless, disoriented masses of the poor, its chiefs began to turn to those who had other equally pressing reasons for feeling disoriented and disappointed: to women, and in particular to the nubile women and the widows of the upper classes of urban society.

It is not surprising therefore that the spinsters and the widows of the bourgeois class who had no need to work, nor domestic matters to settle, who had no specific position, nor any social esteem, often profoundly yearned, along with the masses of the poor, for some saviour, some holy man who would lead them to peaks that were as high as their own humiliation was low.

The Beguines – for that was the name of the women followers of the free spirit – were not heretical in intent; theirs was a passionate desire for the most intense forms of mystical experience. The emotive ties that bound them to the movement were often unquestionably ties of an erotic nature.

The eroticism of the art tribes is of a different mark. It is a widespread platonic love, the binding force of a group that sees the aesthetic effect multiplied through its febrile collective creation, which serves to undermine linguistic and social rules as it strives to construct a perimeter that paradoxically has been vaporized by the same works and behaviours.

The subjects of such tribes therefore are not the inhabitants of an ethnic geography, but rather the stateless protagonists of aesthetic communities that are more inclined to nomadism and ready to take part in any adventure of the creative spirit.

They are indeed the “travellers of the spirit”, according to Laurence Sterne’s definition in *A Sentimental Journey*: “Idle Travellers! Inquisitive Travellers! Lying Travellers! Proud Travellers! Vain Travellers! Splenetic Travellers! Then follow the Travellers of Necessity. The delinquent and felonious Travellers! The unfortunate and innocent Travellers! The simple Travellers. And last of all (if you please) The Sentimental Traveller.”

As citizens of mass society and often of the modern megapolis, the nomad travellers of the art tribes have known political situations that were at times prohibitive and other times more liberal. This has led to diasporas and temporary settlements based on the degree of individual resistance, but it has never cancelled membership nor eliminated solidarity. Such values in the first half of the twentieth century were a binder in the service of a common dream, that of founding productive counter-communities of a high ethical and aesthetic level in the hope that their action would also produce social renewal.



The Fascist and Communist dictatorships that cast a pall on social life between the First and Second World Wars put the cultural and libertarian nomadism of the art tribes to a hard test. Indeed, those regimes set up and imposed a settlement culture as an independent confirmation of local traditions against the anarchic cosmopolitanism of contemporary art.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, some groups not only revived the experimentation of the historic avant-gardes, but also their basic ethic of a search for new expressions which of course implied new social behaviours.

In this way, there was a confirmation of "Idle Travellers! Inquisitive Travellers! Lying Travellers! Proud Travellers! Vain Travellers! Splenetic Travellers! Then follow the Travellers of Necessity. The delinquent and felonious Travellers! The unfortunate and innocent Travellers! The simple Travellers. And last of all (if you please) The Sentimental Traveller".

Thus, even in the postwar period, the art tribes were composed of "travellers without bags", ready to strip themselves in the Medieval sense of all professional attributes and categorical production, in order to assume a modern identity, one set on crossing borders and multimedia experimentation.

Undoubtedly, it was then that the neo-avant-gardes revived the historic avant-garde spirit of research, and experimented new techniques and materials, but with extreme realism, observing at the same time how technology had transformed the international context. Art has by now become the linguistic product of a laboratory that only metaphorically refers to the anxiety of the transformation of the world; it is the animator of the strategy of the historic avant-gardes.

However, by means of a collective aesthetics, while still maintaining an individual production of works, some groups do develop expressions that are objectively alternative to the current mentality and to an art system that is made global by the economy and an international circuit.

Such groups have voluntarily or involuntarily revived the typical strategy of tribes, common mental attitudes and lifestyles based on a common identity that never expropriates individual differences: groups of artists, but not anonymous collectives.

The map of creative marginality once again extends to our days; it is the fruit of the artistic production of these tribes that have never lost a specific awareness of the research and the sense of autonomy of art.

The tribes here represented are: Lettrism, Situationism, Gutai, Mono-ha, Fluxus, Events, Happening, Actionism, Factory, Techne Tribe, and the Tribeless Chiefs. A video section accompanies the entire exhibition transversely and includes the works both of historic artists and those younger ones who have followed in the wake of the great art tribes.



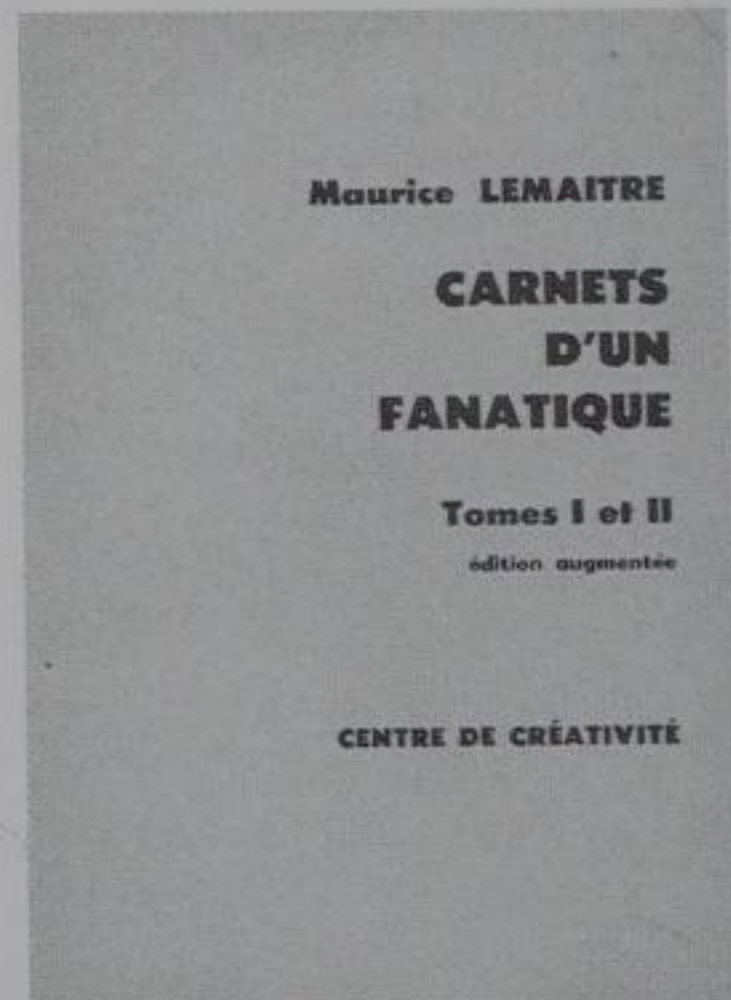


3/21 Isidore Isou 1989

Far from being a ghettoizing celebration that might reduce it to the static representation of an Indian reservation, this exhibition also traces the continuity and individual developments of these tribes in the most recent international generations.

The Lettrist movement, founded by Isidore Isou in 1946, gathered intellectuals and artists who had deserted Surrealism like Maurice Lemaître, Roland Sabatier, Jacques Spacagna and Alain Satié. The large group of artists who came from different movements contributed to the strongly provocative role of this tribe: opposition and anarchic subversion with respect to the old values that were still circulating in France under the aegis of the second Surrealist generation. In a period when aesthetic and moral values were in a state of crisis, the Lettrist group challenged and overturned the arts: poetry was reduced to letters, painting to poly-writing, the story to a meta-graphic fresco, the cinema to an imageless screen.

16 Isidore Isou, of Romanian origin like Tristan Tzara, declared in *La Dictature lettriste* (1946), the manifesto that was published



Maurice Lemaître, *Carnets d'un fanatique*, Editions Centre de Créativité





Pinot Gallizio, *Cavern of Antimatter*. Galerie René Drouin, Paris, 1959

in the first number of the movement's bulletin, their intention not only to overhaul completely the entire field of art but also to transform those of culture, philosophy and science.

In the place of the overdone figurative and abstract elements in painting, they proposed plastic elements like letters and marks. In the literary field, the word was to be decomposed, shorn of its logical and lexical context, and elevated to an autonomous sound element. Starting in 1951, Isou and Lemaître began to extend the Lettrist technique to the moving image in cinema. In the movie *Le film est déjà commencé?* (1951), Lemaître wrote a series of letters on the film itself. Debord went so far as to insert a twenty-four minute sequence in black monochrome without a soundtrack in his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952).

As for architecture, Isou proposed an anti-architecture in his *Manifeste pour le bouleversement de l'architecture*, written in 1966 and published in 1968, an "infinitesimal architecture" made up of architectonic constructions or modules that could be either visible or invisible, however, not cut in the customary way.

The second tribe documented, Situationism and its International (1957–1972), left profound linguistic and behavioural changes in the sixties that were linked to Lettrism and the pictorial movement of the Cobra group. Debord, Jorn, Constant, and Gallizio supplied the territorial seed of a tribe that managed to develop a truly revolutionary practice in art, both theoretically and creatively. It was an art that had social repercussions: 1968 in France and Italy, the Japanese Jengakuren movement, and the metropolitan Indians of Bologna in 1977.

The Cobra group's paintings (Jorn, Constant, Appel, Alechinsky), the industrial works of Pino Gallizio, Constant's maquettes of gypsy camps, and other spatial constructions exemplify the power of a creative thought that radiates into the social.

Indeed, some of Constant's aphorisms express the radicalness of a creative position that goes well beyond the formal appearance of a work projected in the hope of better times: "Our desire is for revolution; art has nothing in common with beauty; aesthetics is a tick of civilization; the best painting is the one rejected by reason."

Fluxus, which declared the principle of "non-art" and that of "total art", constitutes an example of a cosmopolitan, stateless tribe that has produced works, installations and events outside of the system of art. Its acknowledged founder is George Maciunas who, with objects, theatrical representations and performances, lectures and interventions on the stage, harangued the public that followed art with a post-Marinetti ardour.

While many artists in this tribe produced paintings, sculptures, 17





Congress of the Situationist International, Munich, 1959 (among those present are Guy Debord, Constant and Pinot Gallizio)

installations and events, Ben Vautier came forth with his first long series of aphorisms painted on canvas in 1958, in addition to the institutional diagram of art that Maciunas traced out like a genealogical tree. Ben Vautier has been chosen because his paintings, from 1958 to the present day, form a collection of aphorisms written out on canvas.

The dimension of writing comes to him from the Lettrists, but it was a notation by his friend Yves Klein that made him realize that his were not Lettrist hieroglyphics but an actual expressive structure instead, a vast Babel-like dictionary of preconceptions, received either correctly or incorrectly, of truisms, clichés, illusions and hopes, thoughts and stupidities that characterize the world of art and the spirit of contemporaneity. Ben Vautier, who is now in his seventies, has written his own history of art within which he has a precise position.

Nouveau Réalisme, which he sees as an “appropriation of the world like a painting”, Lettrism, which has caused a radical transformation of the customary language of the signs of communication with the disappearance of words, and naturally Fluxus are the three movements he refers to.

However, only Fluxus with its well-known declaration of the principle of “non-art” fully corresponds to his declarations (or negations).

With its formulation of “total art”, Fluxus reaches positions in accordance with those of George Maciunas, the founder and “pope” of the movement. A new statute of the artist is reformulated: the artist interacts with the world not only by producing objects or pictures, but also with theatrical representations and improvised performances in the streets, with lectures and interventions on the stage that are somewhat between a meeting and a Marinetti-type harangue, and with the publication of pamphlets, theoretical texts and reviews (*Tout*).



George Brecht executing *Composition 1960 no. 2*. Yam Festival, New York, 1963





Ben Vautier, 1963  
(photo Fabrizio Garghetti)



Milan Knizak, *Enforced Symbiosis*, 1977



Philip Corner, concert at the Fondazione Mudima, Milan, February 1993 (with Alain Gibertie and Laura Donnelly)

Happenings and Events constitute the aesthetic vaporization of a creative process that tends to dematerialize the artwork and exploit the aggregative moment between the artist and the spectator. Happenings arose out of the environment of the American New Deal, Events spring instead from the Fluxus group. Basically, both creative behaviours tend to exploit the common ethic of the artistic gesture. The value of active participation prevails, rendering the common action of the artists and spectators tribal, synchronic and synergetic. Kaprow, Oldenburg, Vostell and Lebel are the indefatigable pioneers of this aesthetic dimension.

The first public Event dates back to 1959 and was presented by Allan Kaprow at the Reuben Gallery in New York. This form of performance differs from traditional theatrical events since it is based on impromptu action; it does not follow any conventional narrative development, and is often characterized by a visual dimension on an environmental scale, one accompanied by actions that may be mimed, pictorial or musical. Its origins lie in the different artistic experiences that occurred immediately before such as:

- the Futurist evenings and the Synthetic Theatre of Marinetti, the Cabaret Voltaire, the Japanese Gutai group, the *Anthropométries* of Yves Klein, and the public performances of Georges Mathieu;
- the performance conventionally called *The Event* that took place at Black Mountain College in 1952 (with Cage, Rauschenberg, Cunningham, Tudor, Olson, etc.), and above all the didactic activity of John Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York starting in the autumn of 1957 (whose students included Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Al Hansen, Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young).

Allan Kaprow's formation was in the environment of the second generation of Abstract Expressionism, but it was Hans Hofmann's theories of "Push and Pull", Cage's lessons, and the Zen teacher Suzuki's American conferences that steered him towards the "action-collages", interactive installations that became more and more environmental in scale and left the galleries, becoming "performative environments" between 1960 and 1961.

In 1958, Red Grooms also made his debut in performance. In front of a public that had arrived for the inauguration, he created a series of works that were still conventional linguistically, in which the innovative element consisted of the impromptu aspect of the action (*A Play Called Fire* at the Sun Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts, in August 1958; *The Burning Building* at the Delancey Street Museum in New York, December 4–11, 1959; *The Magic Train Ride* at the Reuben Gallery in New York, January 1960).

Jim Dine entered the history of Happening with his performative environment *The House* that was presented together with



a Claes Oldenburg installation in 1960 at the Judson Gallery in New York in an exhibition-event entitled *Ray Gun Show*.

In the subsequent version in 1961, called *Ray Gun Spex*, Kaprow, Higgins, Whitman and Lebel also performed.

In 1961, Oldenburg inaugurated The Store, a studio-gallery, as an interactive environment for the public.

Between 1962 and 1967, Wolf Vostell, the founder of Fluxus in Germany, published the review *Dé-coll/age: Bulletin Aktueller ideen*, which collected and monitored the new experiences, paying particular attention to the world of performances and happenings.

Vostell, a key figure in the art world of the sixties (it was he who introduced Paik and Beuys to Maciunas when he was organizing the first European Fluxfest at Wiesbaden in 1962), produced some happenings of capital importance, among which:

- 1958, *Theatre in the Street II*;
- 1963, *Nein-9-dé-coll/agen* at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal;
- 1964, *You* at the Yam Festival in the United States.

Jean-Jacques Lebel, who was active in France, was the author of *Anti-Procès* which was organized in 1960 with the poet Alain Jouffroy in Paris, Milan and Venice as a protest against the war in Algeria.

In 1961, he participated in Oldenburg's *Ray Gun Theater* and gave a poetry reading at the Living Theater.

In 1962, he executed *Pour conjurer l'esprit de catastrophe* at the Galerie Raymond Cordier in Paris, where Tetsumi Kudo performed *La Philosophie de l'impotence*.

In 1963, he produced a happening at the Boulogne Movie Studios.

In 1963–1964, he participated in the Festival of Free Expression in which Carolee Schneemann executed her piece *Meat Joy*.

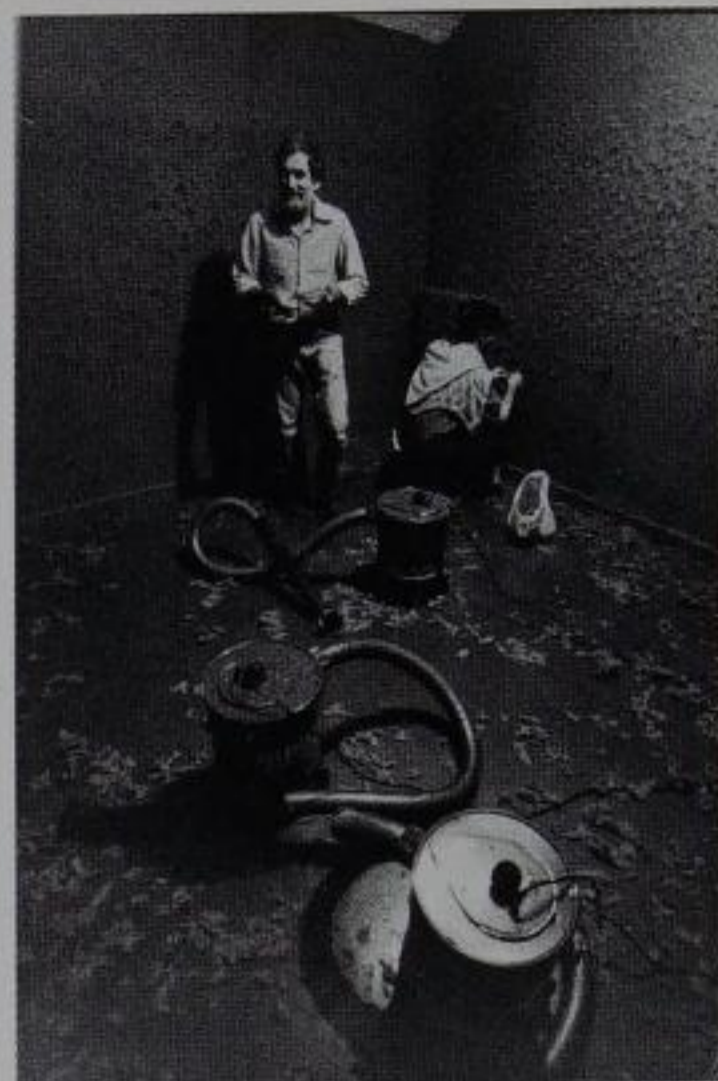
Schneemann also produced some important happenings among which:

- 1963, *Eye Body* (with the photographs of Errò);
- 1975, *Interior Scroll*;
- 1979, *More than Meat Joy*.

Milan Knizak and his Aktual Group, which included Sonja Svecov, Jan Trtilek, the brothers Jan and Vit Mach, and Zdenka Zizkova, put on a series of public happenings in Prague in 1962–1963. Among the first "Publjasche Demosfranvji" (Public Demonstrations) documented are:

- 1963–1966, including *How to Make Clothes Up-to-Date* in 1965;
- 1965, the happenings *Murdered Books* and *Destroyed Music*;
- 1968, the performance *Lying Ceremony* in the United States;
- 1973, *The March*, in which Knizak did not participate having been imprisoned by the Communist regime.

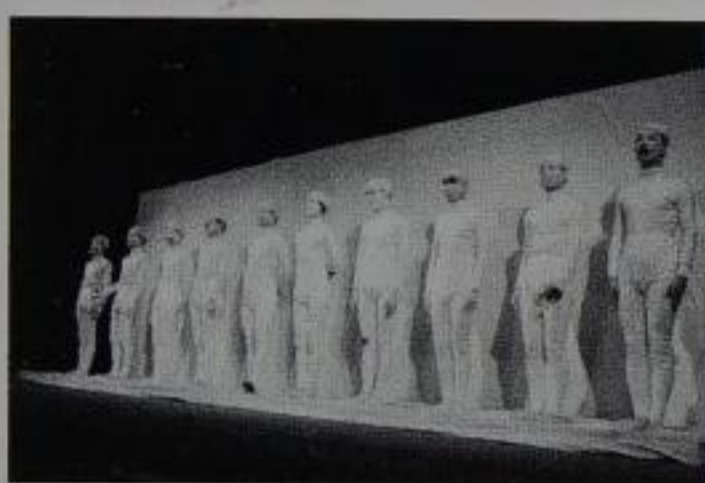
The Gutai and Mono-ha groups represent two Japanese tribes whose creative strategy between the late forties and early fifties had a profound influence on Western mentality.



Allan Kaprow, environment created in 1990 at the Fondazione Mudima, Milan (photo Enrico Cattaneo)



*First Gutai Art Exhibition, 1955*  
 (from left to right: Saburo Murakami, Kazuo Shiraga, Akira Kanayama, Tsuruko Yamazaki, Yasuo Sumi, Jiro Yoshihara, Sadamasa Motonaga, Itoko Ono and Toshio Yoshida). Ashiya City Museum of Art & History



Michio Yoshihara, *Rock 'round the Clock (Don't Worry, the Moon Won't Fall Down)*. Ashiya City Museum of Art & History

Shiraga, Motonaga, Kanayama, Shimamoto and Tanaka are the artists who combined pictorial gesture and aesthetic action in a performative attitude that was well ahead of its time with respect to American Abstract Expressionism.

This section of the exhibition illustrates the most outstanding performative aspect of the artistic research of Gutai and Mono-ha, demonstrating its strong connection with the Art Informel of Michel Tapié, but even more with happenings and American and European performances ranging from John Cage to Yves Klein and Viennese Actionism.

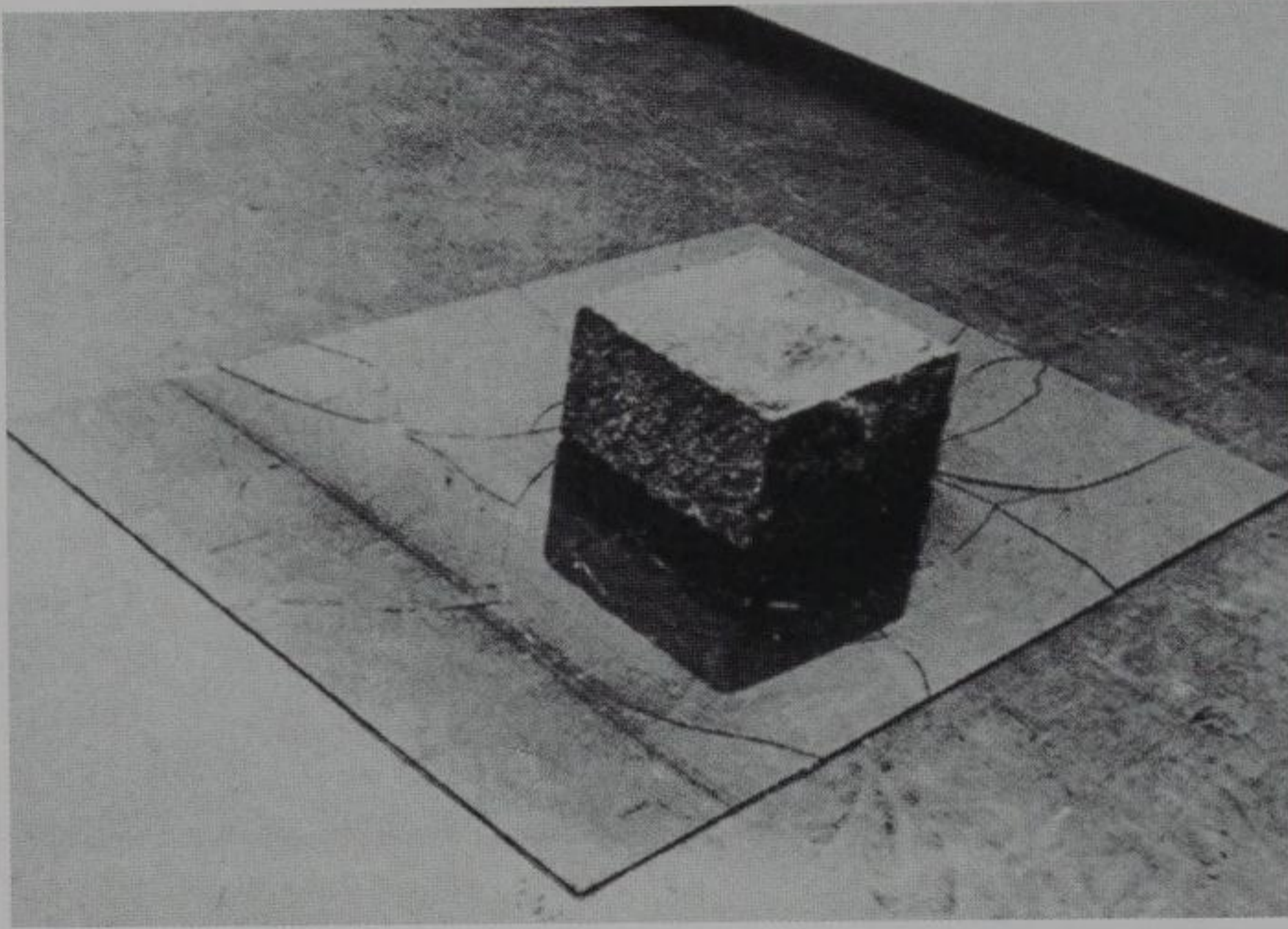
Installations by all the members of the group are on display in this section of the exhibition, together with original documentation and some pictorial works by Shiraga and Shimamoto. The documentation underscores:

- the artistic ferment at the end of the forties and the beginning of the following decade in the Japanese region of Kansai (the province of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe), the area that the Zero group (Zero-Kai) of Shiraga, Murakami, Tanaka and Kanayama came from, which then joined Jiro Yoshihara's already-formed Gutai group (Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai) in 1955;

- the development of their performative research through a succession of historic exhibitions and public performances organized by the group:

- 1) the *Avant-Garde Exhibition by Young Artists* in 1954;
- 2) the *Ashiya City Art Exhibition*, also in 1954;
- 3) the publication of the Gutai review: fourteen numbers from 1955 to 1965 (the second and third were found in Jackson Pollock's studio after his death);
- 4) the exhibition in the shop windows of the Osaka Department Store in 1954;
- 5) the *Outdoor Exhibition of Experimental Art* held on the banks of the River Ashiya in July 1955, sponsored by the Civic Associa-





Lee U Fan, *Relatum*, 1969,  
iron, glass and stone

tion for Art, at which time Shiraga executed his first action with an ax and red-painted wooden poles, and Motonaga hung strips of transparent plastic containing coloured water from the trees; 6) the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* held at the Ohara Kaikan Center in Tokyo in 1955, at which time Murakami first executed his well-known performance of passing through paper and Shiraga put on *Challenge for the Mud*, two actions that were of extraordinary importance for the subsequent developments of Happening, indeed, so much so that Allan Kaprow included them in his book *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (Harry N. Abrams, New York 1966);

7) the *One-Day Outdoor Exhibition* on the Muko River in April 1956, in which Shiraga produced a second version of his performance with an ax and wooden poles;

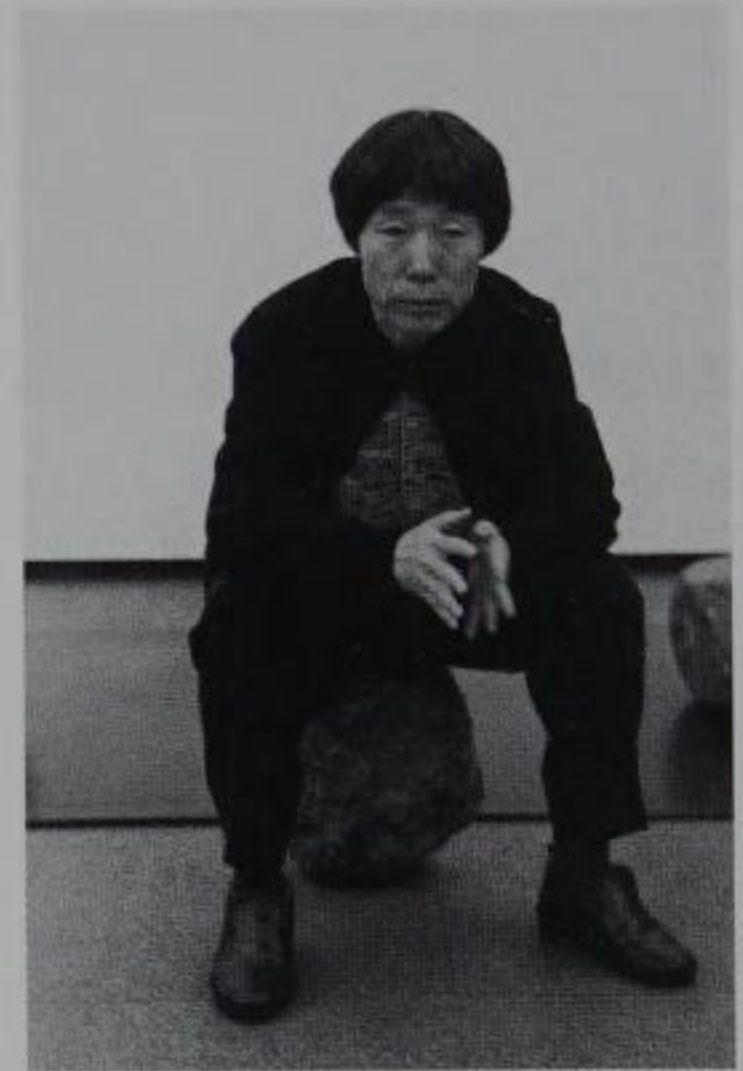
8) the *Second Outdoor Exhibition* on the banks of the Ashiya River in July 1956, with a performance by Shimamoto and Murakami, Shiraga, Kanayama, and the prototype of the famous *Electric Clothes* of Atsuko Tanaka;

9) the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* again held at the Ohara Kaikan Center in Tokyo in October 1956;

10) the *Gutai on Stage Art Exhibition* held in Osaka and Tokyo in May 1957, one of the group's most radical events in which Shiraga executed the performance *Sambaso Ultra-Modern* and Shimamoto his *Destruction of Objects*.

The dramatic, Central European tribe of Viennese Actionism of the sixties included artists like Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler.

The tribe – through the documentation it produced – recalled its own remote yet immediate references: the Dionysian cult of a certain German Romanticism, a certain rituality of the Catholic

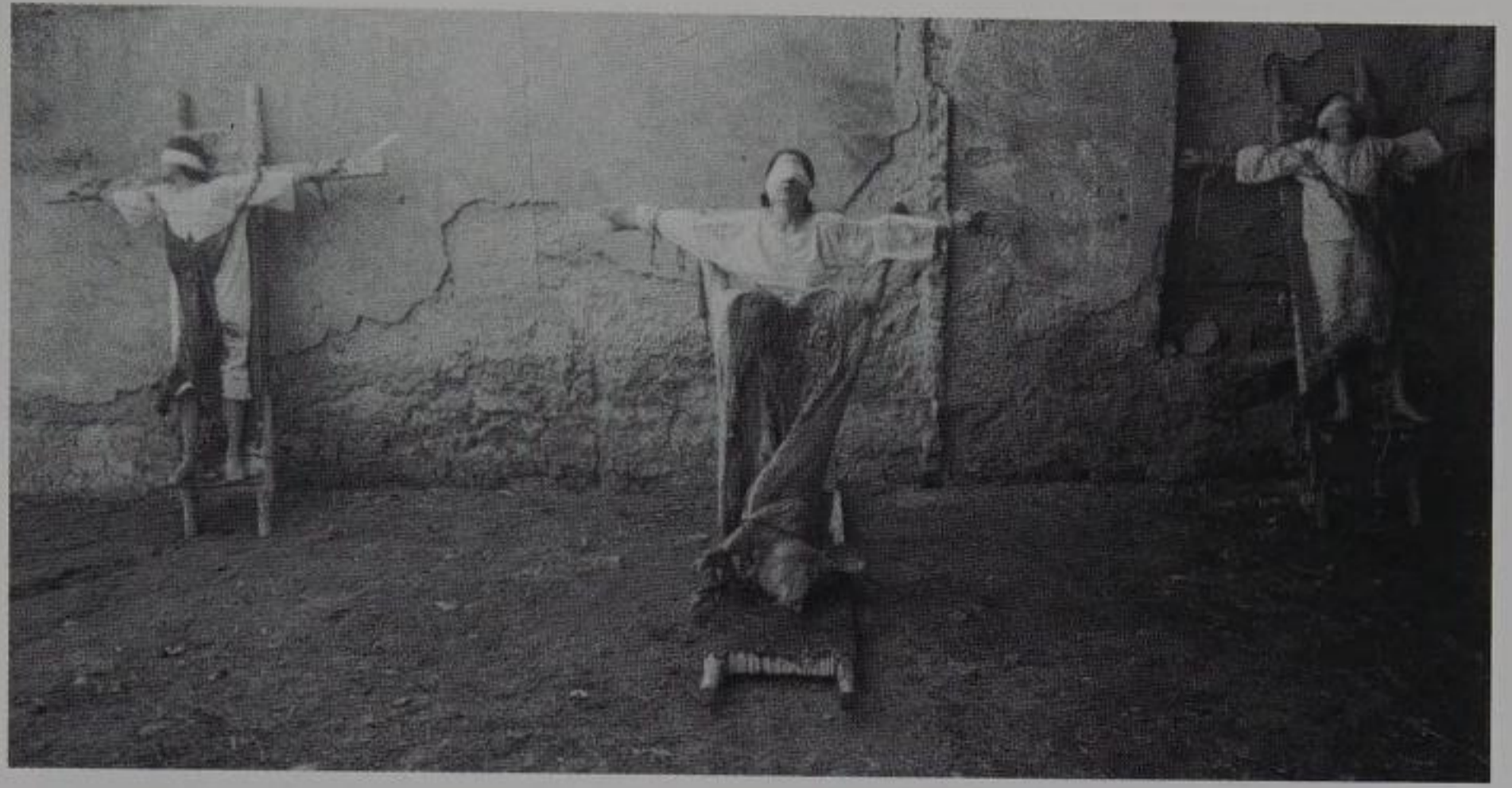


Lee U Fan  
(photo © Shigeo Anzai)





*Art and Revolution*, Vienna, 1968. Simultaneous performances by Brus, Muehl, Weibel, Wiener and Kaltenbaeck



Hermann Nitsch, *96. Action*, Naples, 1996 (photo Fabio Donato)

Church, the cultural decadence of Central Europe, Freud's psychoanalytical theories of sexuality, and even more those of Wilhelm Reich, Happening, Nouveau Réalisme and the experimental and performative attitude of the Japanese Gutai group.

The group's first performance took place on December 19, 1962, in the Viennese apartment of Muehl.

Also dating from 1962 are the first *Aktionsbild* of Nitsch, which took place just before the *Orgien-Mysterien-Theater* and the *Aktionscollages*.

The films and photographs provide historical documentation of those actions that were produced directly with the public:

- the two performative psychodramas, *Die Versumpfung einer Venus* (1963) of Otto Muehl and *Ma* of Günter Brus (1964);
- the performances in 1966 at the *Destruction in Art Symposium* organized by Gustav Metzger in London;
- the performance *Aktion (Ten Rounds for Cassius Clay)* of Muehl and Brus in 1966;
- the performance *Der Stadtbürger Günter Brus betrachtet seinen Körper*;
- Brus's *Zerreissprobe* action celebrated in the Aktionsraum in Munich in 1970 which concluded Brus's participation in the group's programmes;
- the AA-Kommune (*Aktionsanalytische Kommune*) of Muehl in Vienna from 1972 to 1990;
- Schwarzkogler's actions, among which the *Aktionssutzungen*;
- *Asolo Raum* of Nitsch in 1971;
- the relations between the Viennese group and the Monastyrsky Collective Action group.

Andy Warhol's Factory, founded in New York in 1965, represented the space for a creative and hierarchized collaboration and at the same time an existential cross section of everyday life in a continual exchange of experiences. This tribe, dominated naturally by Warhol, based its own identity on the aesthetics of multiplication, impersonality, neutrality and standardization, the constitutive as-



pects of the aesthetics of the greatest postwar American artist. Cameras, videos and recorders constituted the technological prosthesis of a human universe ready to reproduce itself for future reference, according to the canons of a mass society dominated by telecommunications and the industry of the image.

Mao's portrait and the other works by Andy Warhol are not only emblematic of Pop Art but also of his Factory, a veritable art tribe. Here, the works were created in a group much like an assembly line, in an atmosphere that was reminiscent of a Renaissance workshop.

Warhol, the Raphael of American mass society, endows the icon with classicism by means of a serigraphic language that represents the myth of the chief and his multiplication for possible collective adoration.

Warhol said: "Everyone looks alike and acts alike, and we're getting more and more that way. I think everyone should be a machine. I think everyone should like everybody". Pop is "loving things". Loving things means being like a machine, "because you do the same thing every time. [...] The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine."

I believe that the portrait of Mao is part of a chain of images, veritable individual machines in continual exercise in the service of a tribe like the Factory that was dominated by the amphetamine that traversed and determined the structure and syntax of its interior life.

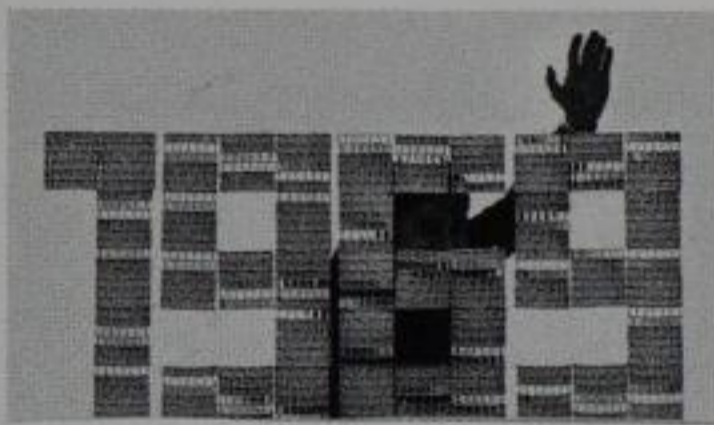
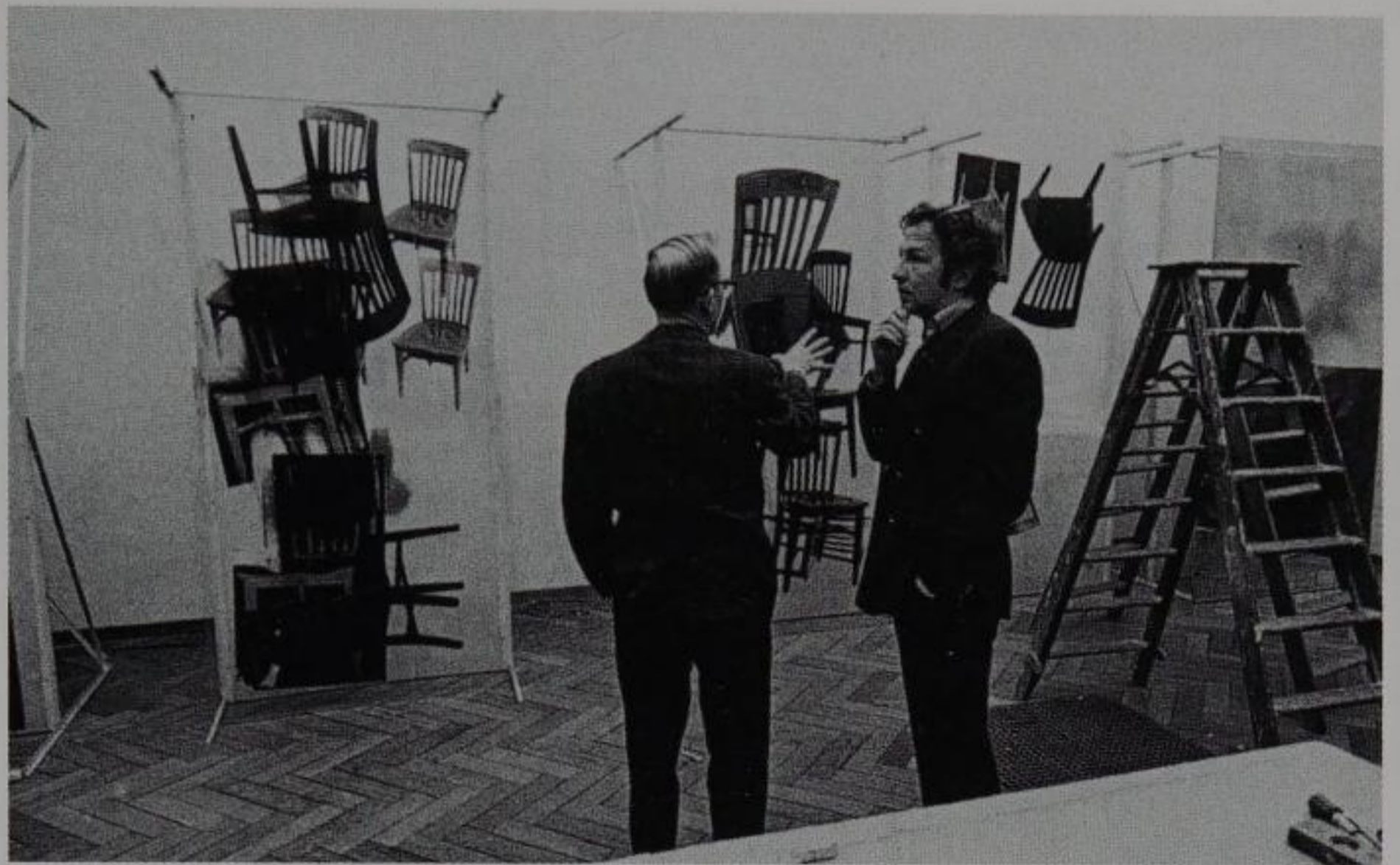
Its interlocutors are the artists, musicians, stars and the workers of the Factory, the voices of an inexhaustible, unpunctuated oral scene as befits the inert ordinariness of New York. Where what prevails is the anti-heroic character of lives filtered through telephone lines, television cables, photographic spots and recordings.

All these presences rush into the portrait of Mao. They rush from sources that are unexpected, albeit controlled by the artist, the great manipulator of the Factory who makes a listening base out of his work. A kind of espionage skimmed of any connection with the CIA, based on a social condition that is necessarily emphasized and ineluctably fomented by chemistry so as to become an interpersonal exchange.

An exemplary work on canvas by Warhol is *The Last Supper* (2 × 8 m), its singularity being that it is painted with phosphorescent colours that can be distinguished only when illuminated in a dark place with a Wood light. The painting intersects and absorbs the technological effects and develops a kind of epiphany of the image, an apparition that also becomes prolonged in the darkness of an image for future reference, revealing the Factory's desire for a long life as a tribe of unique intuition and collective elaboration.



Robert Rauschenberg and Billy Kluver during the installation of *Soundings*. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1968 (photo Ad Petersen)



Gianni Colombo

Behind the *Techne* tribe are historic pioneers (Moscow, Hanover 1925–1930), *Nouvelle Tendance* (Europe 1950–1960), MIT/EAT/ICA, *Art & Language/Artec* (United States and Great Britain 1950–1990), *Dvizdiene* (Moscow 1960), *Ars Technica* (Paris, Turin, Milan 1980–1990), *Art Science Centers* (Japan 1980–1990).

The *Techne* tribe includes works by Rauschenberg, Paik, Colombo, and Mario Merz, artists among others who have produced art by letting themselves be guided by the following concept: art is technology by *antonomasia*, and inasmuch as it is the original constitution of *techne*, it has laid the foundations for the logics and evolution of the techniques to come.

In affirmation of such a concept, the English group *Art & Language* also adopted writing, removed in such a way from a merely reflective moment for use in a more eminently creative direction.

The *Techne* tribe is an integral part of an extremely radical group that has interpreted the technological context in the direction of a creative process tending toward the dematerialization of the object and the exaltation of the concept, not by accident the fruit of the post-industrial civilization, that brings to an end the extremism of a language-centralized culture based on linguistic technique and experimentation.

In this sense, the artists of this tribe have operated in the twofold direction of the autonomy and heteronomy of art, the specific definition of artistic activity and the borderline of aesthetic vaporization.

From Europe to America, the *Techne* tribe finds artists of various tendencies ready to join it (the historic avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes), all of which are directed toward an art whose forms can compete with twentieth-century science.

Among the *Tribeless Chiefs* are Beuys, Morley, Broodthaers, Basquiat, Kusama, Tápies, Kounellis, Manzoni, Pistoletto, Pascali, Cage, Gilbert & George, Bourgeois, Klein, Schifano, Boltanski, 25



Clemente, Boetti, and Morris. They are artists of different generations who have had an influence internationally not only on the language but also on the mentality of other artists. Although not part of a particular tendency, they are the cultural and moral examples of an incisive creativity that is appropriate for an age such as ours that unites the search for an identity with the homologation of behaviour.

While each tribe requires an ethic-social fabric as a binder, this section, conversely, is based on exemplary figures who have functioned as stimuli in multiple areas. The tribal chief in this case is an example of creative and operative solitude that overthrows the original aesthetic forms in the social context. Such a pervasion does not occur in vertical or hierarchical terms, but rather through the merit of a cultural context that recognizes its exemplarity, productive quality and coherence of behaviour.

An ethic of continuity permeates the individual figures of the Tribeless Chiefs who can elaborate forms that permeate the art system and who are, at the same time, the harbingers of behavioural changes. Indeed, these artists are somehow not only presences that stride over the present and bestride the future, but veritable behavioural models who belong to their own contexts. They are thus seen and recognized by a social body in search of new ways to understand and interpret our problematic times.

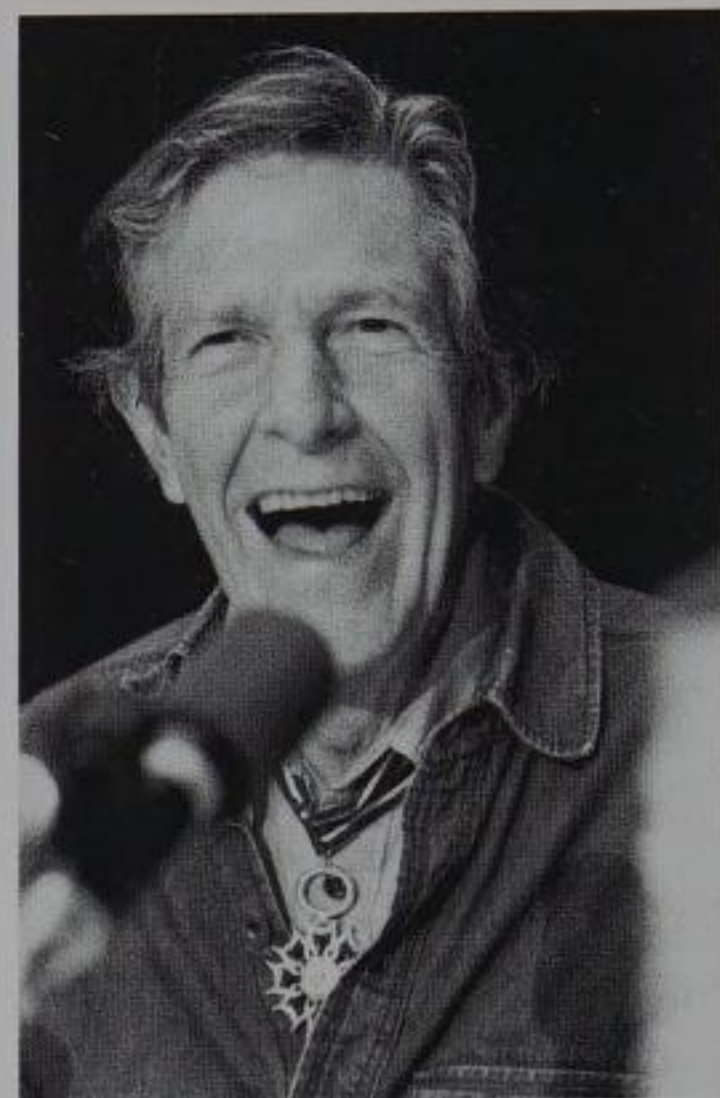
In this passage from the second to the third millennium, after the collapse of the culture of previsions (ideologies and human sciences), art proposes vertical and problematic models that do not impose and are not dogmatic, ones that are ambivalently fertile and complex.

In a society like ours that is accustomed to telecommunications and electronics that produce more and more positive services but also the passivity of the solitary user, community strategy has become a different way of living in the quantitative space of the city; it produces energy but also solitude, aggressivity and violence.

In its elaborate standardization of collective behaviours, the city has also produced communities that often follow the ferocious direction of the "pack", the emulative scene of gestures that multiply the visibility of the single individual: gestures that are not always criminal when cosmeticized by disguise and clothing, but ones that tend to lack meaning and assume a film aspect instead.

The filmic behaviour of the pack, the emulative reaction of mass society, finds its need for quantitative recognition in the group and its solid evidence.

The art tribes, on the other hand, do not live on mimetic, parasitic behaviour, but on the creative multiplication of artistic gestures that originate from the inside and do not encroach on the outside. An ethical fabric creates a perimeter around them in a



John Cage (photo Fabrizio Garghetti)



Yves Klein, *Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity*, Paris, 1959



Joseph Beuys

mobile, flexible fashion, and counters the quantitative solitude of the pack with the presence of solid individuality among those who exalt themselves because of affinity and difference.

The pack does not know the value of the difference; it operates through the homologation of endlessly repeated behaviours. The art tribe, on the other hand, by definition, consolidates by means of its common intentions the coexistence of differences that are guaranteed by the production of works sharing the same mentality.

The art tribes, in their historic and contemporary structures, developed before, during and after the rise and fall of ideologies, and are guaranteed by a coagulating, cohesive existential solidarity.

Thus the art tribes constitute a cross section of contemporary artistic creation, one seeking an equilibrium between ethics and aesthetics, aware of a social value that art can not only exploit but better express in an ordinariness that is ready to shatter solidarity and participation.



**ENTRANCE**

**EXIT**



## Welcome to All the Visitors to This Exhibition!

It may seem paradoxical to start the third millennium with an exhibition like *Art Tribes* that dwells on the most significant experiences of the recent past rather than looking forward to what the future holds. Those were extraordinary ventures, unforgettable and memorable, but their meanings and values were understood neither at that moment nor in time.

This exhibition, desired and conceived by its curator, has been made possible thanks to the support and consent of the City of Rome and the enthusiastic participation of the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea.

We have been given the opportunity – and may it not be in vain – to investigate once again the artistic development of both the individuals and the groups of the past fifty years in the history of art in order to point out the aspects of their utopian vision and the freedom contained therein.

Therefore, this is not simply an exhibition of discoveries, or of works that are themselves the absolute emblematic proof of the “making art” of these artists. We have put every effort into achieving our aim of describing the development of their ideas, their contaminated and contaminating creative processes, and their particular outlooks that have made this extraordinary combination of experiences possible, involving the north, south, east and west of our world.

This nomadism of thinking and making art, and of individual action, has for the first time created a universal nirvana that has united and not divided; it has broken down fences and taboos and made it possible for all of us to recognize one another naturally. It prompted one of the great protagonists of art history, Robert Filliou, to summarize the contents of artistic research in words that are both felicitous and sublime: “Art is that thing that makes life more interesting than art.”



No, it is not a paradoxical, nor a nostalgic look; it is the exact opposite. It is the realization that the artistic research of the future, if it wants to surprise and engage us as we sincerely hope, will keep these roots in mind.

Although the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea building is of a considerable size, it has not been possible to install the entire exhibition at one time. Therefore, the event will be presented in two episodes, rather like an old-fashioned serial movie.

Each itinerary has a particular history. Each history is based on its own autonomous research but contains in itself a common denominator.

The chronological exhibition does not only respond to the need to respect the historical moments of the events and their consequences, but also and more banally to the need to provide a rational organization. Each history contains in itself the essence of all the histories that we wish to recount to you.

There is neither a beginning nor an end. Each episode is only a particular moment, a particular journey, an invitation to reflect about some of the experiences that we feel were the most incisive in the history of art of the recent past. For future reference.



Art Tribes



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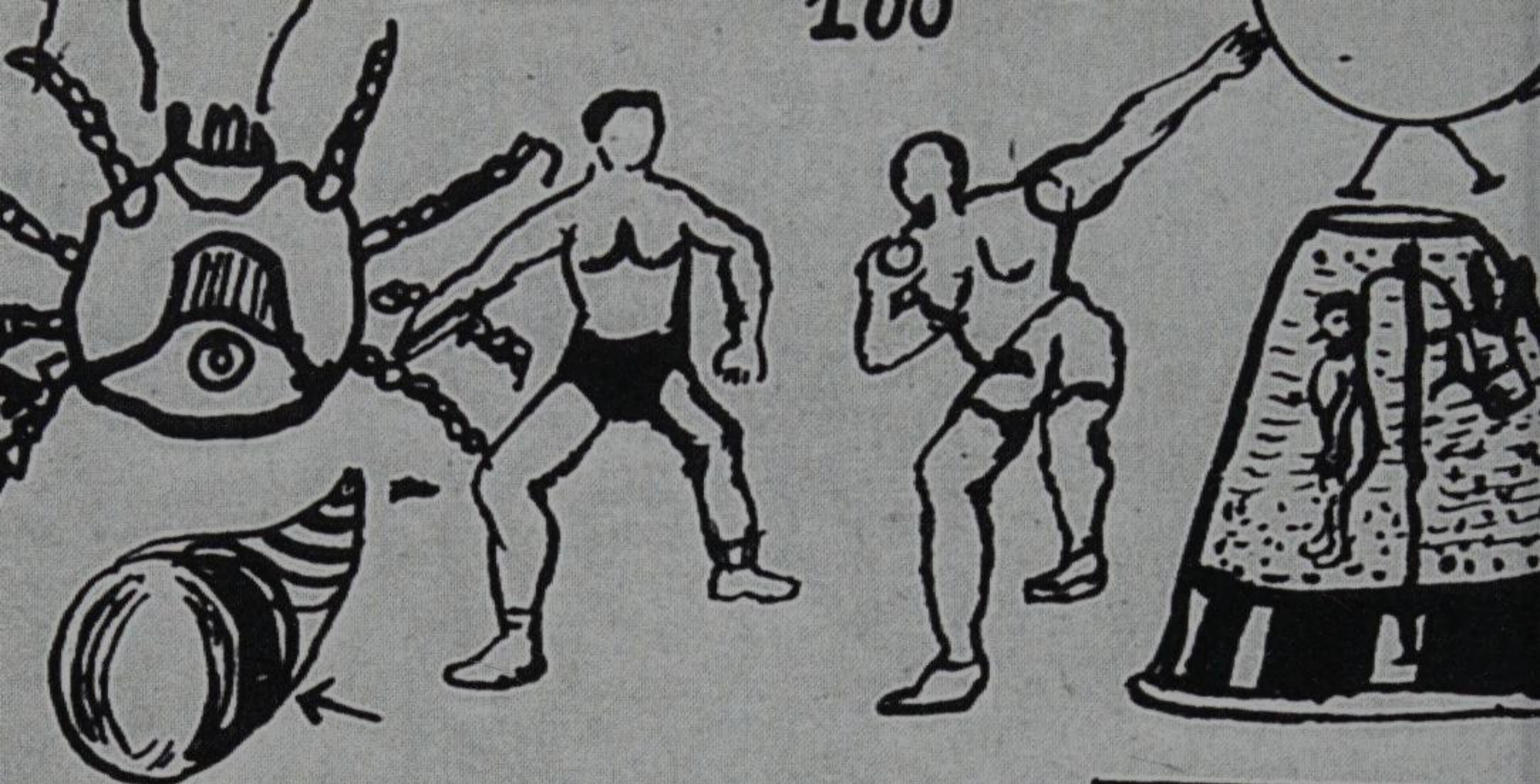


# Lettrism

*edited by*  
Sylvain Monsegu

Isidore Isou  
Maurice Lemaître  
Roland Sabatier  
Giò Minola  
Gil J. Wolman







The avant-garde movement of Lettrism, set up in 1945 around the theories of Isidore Isou, by Isou himself, Gabriel Pomerand and other “eccentrics” that the theories of the newborn Lettrist movement were going to bring together under the banner of *externality*,<sup>1</sup> has never ceased to ramify and to extend its field of theoretical and practical activities, giving rise to heresies and dissidences (Lettrist International, Ultralettrism...). Too often presented as the initial stage in the foundation of the Situationist International,<sup>2</sup> it met with the same fate as Dada, which historians and theorists long considered merely a phase in the development of Surrealism. While Lettrism is still largely unrecognized, it represents an essential key to the understanding of the fertile expansion of the avant-garde in the second half of the century. It is not just a question of arguing the historical priority of Lettrism, whose founding texts were published from 1946 onward, but of gauging the role of cultural subversion played by Lettrism within the field of a history still to be written, with regard to its own postulates as well as outside its orthodoxy.

In the effervescent setting of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and amid the ruins of a world that was soon going to vanish, Lettrism saw itself as the last avant-garde movement, and even as the only one since nothing was left of the movements that had preceded Surrealism. The Dadaists were forgotten and scattered, along with the Futurists, the Constructivists and the creators of Abstractionism. The division of the world into two blocks was certainly not going to favour the return of the Russian avant-garde to the limelight for a long time to come. As for the others, the collusion of Italian Futurism with Fascism and the breakup of the Surrealist group which had dominated artistic and literary life seemed to bear witness to this disappearance of the avant-garde

<sup>1</sup> See issue no. 1 of the review founded by Maurice Lemaître *Front de la Jeunesse* (1950), the three issues of the review *Ur* (1950–1953) and the single issue of the review *Ion* (1952).

<sup>2</sup> The argument of Anselme Jappe, Mirella Bandini and Greil Marcus, which integrates it to varying degrees with the “surpassing of art” that the Situationist International wanted to bring about.



movements. Quite to the contrary, during this period of historical retreat characterized by Marxism-Leninism and its “proletarian” culture, the Existentialists (Camus, Sartre), regarded by Isou as bad digests of Heidegger, and the poetry of “resistance,” Isou’s ideas about phonetic poetry and the potential Revolt of the Young literally came as an invigorating breath of nonconformity and rebellion that consummated the break with those who were perpetuating the immediate past in the name of a new avant-garde which in 1945 was not yet a group.

Nevertheless, the inaugural manifesto *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* was published in 1947 by Gallimard and triggered a series of scandals and conferences. Yet the audience attracted by these scandalous beginnings remained only on the margins of a postwar situation dominated by the poetry of “resistance”, by a variety of efforts to give the aging movement of Surrealism a semblance of relevance to the present day and by the Communist Party and its cultural line. It is impossible to understand Lettrism without taking this initial incomprehension into account. Coming too early at the end of the forties, it was later to appear dated when new tendencies such as Nouveau Réalisme, Pop Art, the Happening and Conceptual Art, or the New Wave – of which the body of Lettrist theory had envisaged the possibility since its appearance, without giving up the requirements of the avant-garde – left a permanent mark on the cultural “modernism” of the sixties. Scandalizing by its actions, by its early polemics and above all by its works, Lettrism prompted an amused or indignant reaction, and here and there the beginnings of comprehension,<sup>3</sup> in a broad swathe of the press at the time, but then interest in what some regarded as no more than a practical joke faded and Lettrism persisted, in isolation, through journals that were numerous but almost unknown and participation in a few shows, almost always achieved after endless “struggles”.

The eighties saw the start of a reevaluation of this avant-garde movement which had been kept almost secret: the numerous Lettrist exhibitions of this time, their presence at the Venice Biennale in 1993 and the growing interest in their cinematographic works<sup>4</sup> have allowed us to discover certain facets of a movement that, as a total avant-garde, had never ceased, ever since its heroic age, to carry out a permanent cultural revolution. The reasons for this long silence – at least in France, for it seems that Lettrism attracted attention much earlier elsewhere – stemmed primarily from its reduction to its early years: phonetic poetry and painting with signs. It was only belatedly that Lettrist cinema started to be recognized, for its “imaginary aesthetic” and “supertemporal frame”. But these two dimensions were largely ignored and the public became much more aware of the Happen-

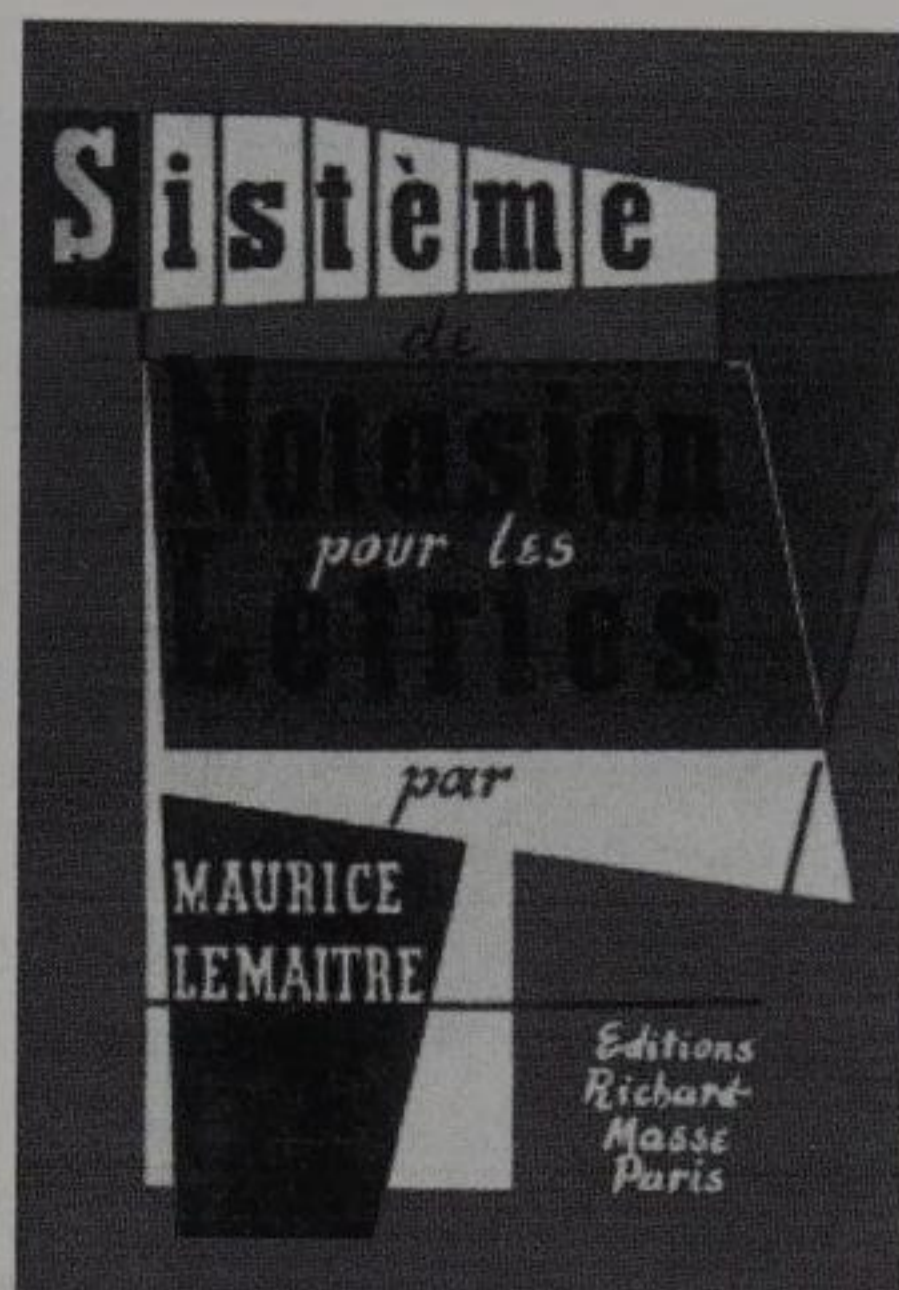
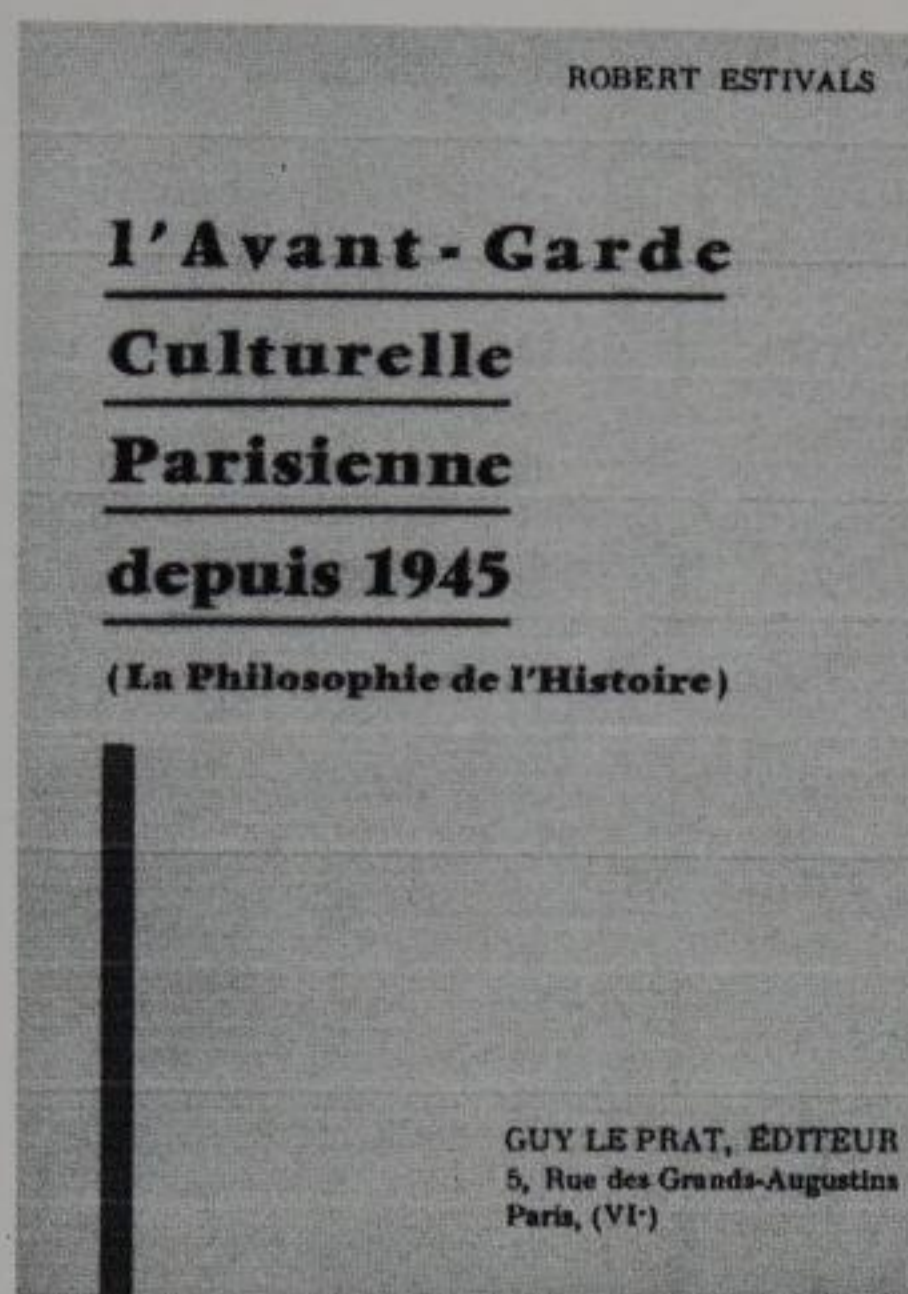
<sup>3</sup> Eric Rohmer discussed Isou’s film in his book *Le goût de la beauté* (Eng. trans. *The Taste for Beauty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 1989) and wrote that “Isou [...] displays a degree of cinematographic sensitivity and [...], unlike the avant-gardists of 1930, who tried to make film the field of application for their pictorial, musical or literary theories, the problems that he sets out to resolve are of a specifically cinematographic character”.

<sup>4</sup> This revival of interest in Lettrist filmmaking was linked with the emergence of what was known as “young cinema” at the beginning of the eighties and, more generally, with the so-called “underground” cinema (see the success of Isou’s film in the United States), notwithstanding Lemaître’s efforts in the sixties through his *Café-Cinéma*. On this subject, it is worth consulting F. Devaux’s book *Le cinéma lettriste*, Paris Expérimental, 1990.



Robert Estivals, *L'Avant-Garde Culturelle Parisienne depuis 1945 (La Philosophie de l'Histoire)*, Guy Le Prat éditeur, Paris 1962

Maurice Lemaître, *Système de Notation pour les Lettrés*, Editions Richard-Masse, Paris 1952



ing and Conceptual Art, which can be compared in some ways to the Lettrist creations.

On the other hand, the subsequent career of some of the early Lettrists has to some extent obliterated their “green youth”: Guy Debord, cofounder of the Lettrist International and then the Situationist International, and to a lesser degree François Dufrène, the theorist of *crirhythmes* who contributed to Henri Chopin’s magazine *OU* and then joined *Nouveau Réalisme*. Finally, it should be added that Lettrism is generally assessed on the basis of its most (in)congruent part: Isidore Isou, its creator, initiator and theoretician, ranked arbitrarily with Charles Fourier, Antonin Artaud and Salvador Dalí; and Maurice Lemaître, in whom the champions of “experimental” and “underground” cinema recognize a precursor and still a substantial ally far more than in the New Wave. If Lettrism – in its multiple dimensions – remains the theoretical project of Isidore Isou, it has still developed collectively, with its disagreements and conflicts and works by which each exponent has wanted to leave his mark on and to deepen – and in the end give reality to – the cultural renewal that it promised. The writings of each of these historical participants – starting from these theoretical foundations, all the way from Gabriel Pomerand and Maurice Lemaître to the youngest of the Lettrists like Catherine James and including those who have constructed a consistent multidisciplinary body of work like Roland Sabatier or Alain Satié, as well as those whose participation was brief but not necessarily less significant<sup>5</sup> – remain elements essential to grasping the complexity of the polymorphous development<sup>6</sup> of this avant-garde movement, unusual in so many aspects.

The breadth of this subject, which it would be futile to attempt to cover in the space of a catalogue, obliges us to approach

<sup>5</sup> François Dufrène, Jacques Spacagna, Roberto Altman, Jean-Louis Brau, Gil J. Wolman and many others, without counting those who have held a “dialogue” with Lettrism from their own positions like Henri Chopin or Ben.

<sup>6</sup> On this point, the works of R. Sabatier, *Le lettrisme. Les créations, les créateurs* (Z' Editions, 1988), and A. Satié, *Les avant-gardes retrouvées en peinture* (J.-P. Rocher, 1999), represent essential steps toward the debunking of the historical, dated view of Lettrism, and report its numerous further developments, which constitute the least-known part of its history.



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François Dufrene	Nuisse
Ghislain	Pas Pasco
Jean-Louis Brau	Gabriel Pomerand
Gil J. Wolman	

— 326 —

4 — CRIS POUR 5.000.000 DE JUIFS ÉGORGÉS

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 IODON IOUDN schalain noudu heinla

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B<sup>3</sup>

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 Buchenwald!  
 Buchenwald!  
 ADOSCOLI: ADONOI

4 D = rale  
 4 \* = pause d'une seconde.  
 4 B = expiration forte.

Manifesto for four Lettrist recitals, Paris, October 1950

Isidore Isou, original typescript of the text for *Cris pour 5.000.000 de Juifs égorgés*

Lettrism in a roundabout way, not so much by a chronological account of its works, publications, splits or adherences, scandals and the like, as by taking a dialogical stand over the set of problems about which Lettrism still has something to tell us, treating it not as a representative of the past but as a living possibility, a means of “exiting from the twentieth century”.

*The paradisiacal utopia*

Reading the first theoretical declarations of Isidore Isou,<sup>7</sup> one is led to wonder about the real intentions of the newborn movement and its ambitions. Lettrist poetry, reduced to the articulation of letters, does not appear to have been a final goal, the last stage in a process that could only be justified in and by the “poetic domain”. It only has depth because of the historical rupture that it irremediably introduces between a tradition of poetry based on words, wiped out by Dada, and the whole universe of forms that are still possible through the invention, the re-creation of the letter, before going on to explore the world of silence and virtual letters (aphonism). This “new amplitude”, as Isou chose to call it in his *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort*,<sup>8</sup> constituted a theoretical project, which he had first laid out in *L'Agrégation d'un Nom et d'un Messie*,<sup>9</sup> that had, above and beyond the restricted categories in which the Lettrists wanted to work at the outset (poetry, music, painting, film), to “go beyond and conclude, by a method of continual renewal, previous attempts to find a centre for knowledge and action: the Mosaic tables, Cartesian method, Hegelian ‘dialectics’”.<sup>10</sup>

This rupture sought and theorized by Isou forms part of a history that commenced with Proudhon and Fourier, a history revised and corrected by Marx and which Isou wanted to bring



*Bizarre*, no. 33-34, *Les grands poètes lettristes*, 1964: special number with an essay by Isidore Isou



to a conclusion: that of “changing life” and “transforming the world”. From this history, of which these few names constitute the negative counterpart that traverses and troubles modernity, Isou takes the end, but not the means. What “utopian” or “scientific” socialism leaves in abeyance is the possibility, starting out from the existing social situation, of going beyond it and opening the way to a society freed from the age-old fetters of alienating work, ignorance and survival, to the realization of human beings in the whole range of intrinsic potentialities of which they have been stripped by the prevailing social disgrace. Here there is nothing of the rambling reverie of a Rabelais, but an anticipation of the course that history might take if productive and creative forces were to be freed from the many chains – the most visible ones as well as the more insidious ones of culture – that the existing social contract condemns to silence.

Lettrism cannot be understood if one restricts its development and pretensions solely to the desire to add yet another chapter to the history of painting or poetry. Before constituting a break in the whole range of these disciplines, Isou’s Lettrism rests on a *Weltanschauung*, a primary focus, a *paradisiacal finality* (and here one is reminded of Marx’s “classless society”) and a *method*, a *system*, *Créatique* as he called it, necessary to attain it. All the rest is just literature. His reading of Marx was undoubtedly a decisive influence, less in terms of the positions he adopted, which Isou would challenge in order to propose *externality* as an alternative revolutionary dynamic to the proletariat, and more as a consequence of the scope of the theoretical aims of the author of *Das Kapital*, and the rigour of an analysis that stripped the revolutionary project of all its juvenile Hegelian retrogressions. Certainly, one can dispute his modes of interpretation of Marx (philosophic? economic?), but if Isou took up the demand for revolution, it was only to assert a method that sought less to make them (art, philosophy) “disappear” dialectically by “realizing” them than to multiply a creative order, to renew the whole of culture on the basis of this break. From this perspective, nothing would be left to chance.

In Isou’s system,<sup>11</sup> there is indeed a point where “all contradictions are abolished”, but it is not a point of the “spirit” in the Surrealist sense. It is a theoretical and practical point, based on the *method of creation* (integration and surpassing of everything established). It is no longer the insubstantial shadow of an unconscious, but on the contrary a consciousness that seeks to build up a quasi-Hegelian absolute knowledge, combining in a coherent whole the most fundamentally opposed facts and sphere – chance and necessity, conscious and unconscious, old and new – and organizing them around a central focus, creation, without the development of one of these dimensions ever de-

<sup>7</sup> *La Dictature lettriste* (single issue, 1946).

<sup>8</sup> In *Ur*, no. 1, 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Gallimard, 1947.

<sup>10</sup> M. Lemaître, *Qu’est-ce que le lettrisme et le mouvement isouien?*, Fischbacher, 1954.

<sup>11</sup> *La Créatique ou la Novatique* (1941–1976), 9 vols., Bibliothèque Nationale, 1976–1977.



stroying any of the others. Isou's system converges on a totality that does not propose leaving anything to chance, while integrating within a unitary system the whole range of disciplines in which the paradigm of the human being as a multidimensional being is in the end framed. So it is not a question of eliminating art or philosophy for the meager consolation of a "liberation of life", any more than it is one of denying life for the speculative inner worlds of philosophy or art. Neither the one nor the other ceases to express itself, no longer dialectically in the Marxist sense, but "creatically", by carrying out in each discipline a renewal that should lead to something "better".

The value of Isou's arguments lies in their having brought out the fundamental role played by culture in the determination of life, above and beyond mere economic infrastructures, which in fact are never more than a complex intersection of networks that form a sort of second nature. In this sense "the act of creation is the only chance of accomplishing a really free gesture".<sup>12</sup> For Isou, who, like Marx, rejects the illusion that an immutable nature lies at the base of the existing social organization and social relations, but sees history at work instead, the individual is always in the grip of some system. Marx and then Freud had ushered in the age of suspicion about the whole idealistic tradition that the individual is a sovereign and theoretically free being. In view of the inadequacy of "class struggle" or the "work of the unconscious", Isou has continued the critical reasoning about modernity by forging a theoretical system and method of his own to explain the complexity of the factors that structure and pervade individual and social experience.

A preliminary stocktaking of the disciplines tackled by Isou leaves us baffled: ranging from art to political economy, and taking in engineering, mathematics, the sciences and medicine on the way, he seems to have been obsessed with covering the whole body of knowledge and techniques. In effect, when compared with avant-garde movements like Dada or Surrealism, Isou's Lettrism appears to be an all-embracing design that distinguishes itself by its refusal to mutilate the urgent need to "transform the world" and "change life" by reducing it to the restricted categories of art or poetry. This deliberate effort to be exhaustive also suggests the importance he attached to different systems, of which the understanding and practice are never more than superficial phenomena that accelerate or thwart the development of culture. Isou was never to oppose these systems, such as liberalism or communism in political economy, except with a system that claimed to encompass, explain and supersede them.

*La Créatique ou la Novatique* does not dispense with the need to read the writings of Isou or the other Lettrists, or to study their numerous works, but explains the former and makes possible the

<sup>12</sup> In *Le film est déjà commencé?* by M. Lemaître, André Bonne, 1952.



latter, in the same way as Marx's theoretical work explains and provides a framework for reflection and action for such diverse authors as Lukács, Lefebvre and Garaudy, who each decipher the former's writings in ways that determine the level of their investigation. As for the surpassing, it is not a nuance in the interpretation of Marx that permits it, but the constitution of a system recapitulating and integrating Marx's, drawing on its virtues as well as its shortcomings to come up with new propositions.

The heated debate that still rages between the supporters of Dada and the Lettrists over the thorny question of Lettrist poetry and its antecedents has no other origin. Dada is based on a nonsystematic, non-teleological position and certainly represents the disquieting strangeness of a modernity that has never hinged on anything but a proliferation of systems, in contrast to the past or to antiquity when only one system was assigned authority, with Christianity borrowing a large number of concepts from Plato after they had been revised and corrected by its theologians. Surrealism was far more suited to the requirements of surpassing since it claimed to have brought the anarchy of Dada within the framework of a coherent plan. Back in 1947, however, Isou had pointed out that Surrealism represented a retreat<sup>13</sup> from the extreme, untenable position of Dada. Founded on a programme that was artistic (the means to change life and transform the world: painted metaphor and automatic writing) and political (but changeable and confused: Trotskyist or anarchist), Surrealism prompted the same kind of attack that it had itself made against the defenders of tradition. The Surrealist revolutionary program was transformed into a tyrannical tradition that refused to contemplate a surpassing, however easy it may have been in consideration of the hard-to-defend prejudices of the Surrealists against certain strangely despised genres such as music, the novel or drama. Yesterday's avant-garde turning into today's *arrière-garde*: a predictable outcome for any movement that sees and theorizes itself as at once a break and a surpassing. Dada, on the contrary, ignored tradition as well as the determination of present actions in relation to a future. It only made sense in the instant which it released through its action potentialities that did not fall within any *a priori* or *a posteriori* system. By claiming to be a surpassing of Dada, Surrealism could not fail to stimulate others to claim they had surpassed it – and not just the Lettrists but also Revolutionary Surrealism and the Cobra group – in its artistic, political and ethical choices and views.

The Lettrists adopted a logic of permanent surpassing with regard to their own works as well as those of their contemporaries, and this helps to explain many of the controversies inside and outside the movement. By establishing a *paradisiacal objective*, a "new promised land" and an omniscient method and theory,

<sup>13</sup> "Breton speaks of a movement that will be more liberating than his own. But such a group was born even before Surrealism. It was called Dada. The stupidity of Tzara, his weakness, the despondency that undermined his patience, his inability to cover the distance 'between the wars': these are what permitted the appearance of Surrealism, which curbed the impetus of Dada. And the latter, in order to defend itself, retreated from its hilltops and most forward positions behind a line of fortifications that were less advanced and easier to defend" (I. Isou, "Bilan lettriste", in *Fontaine*, October 1947).

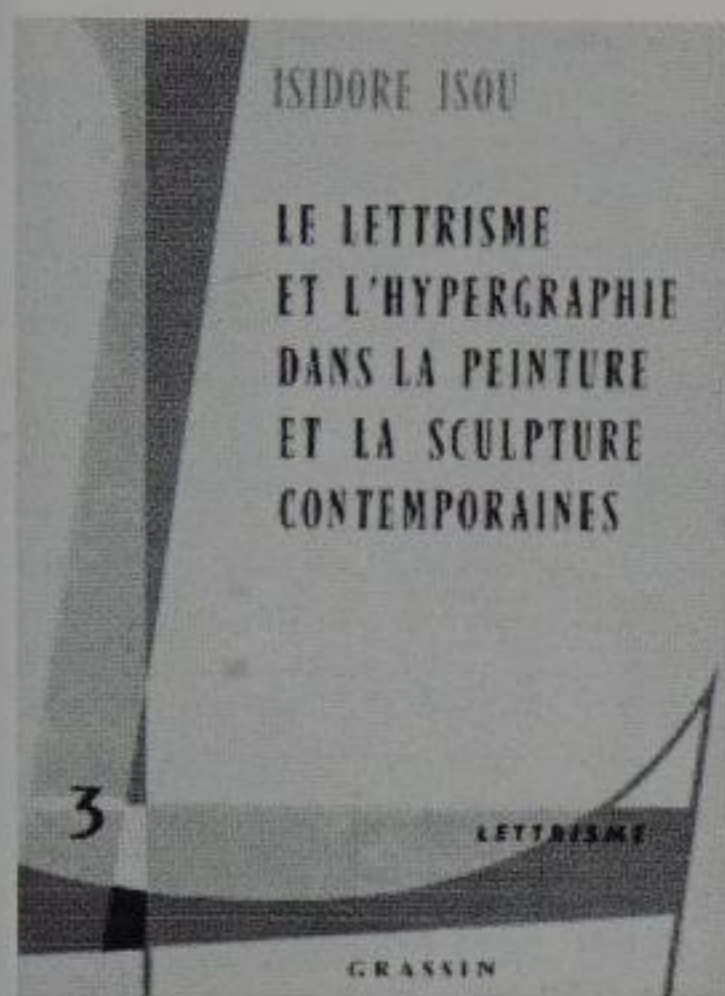


as well as a “super-Manichaeism” (the defense of creativity against all “retreats”), Lettrism plunged straight onto a social struggle that set out to promote the creators of the past and present, to place them in an open-ended history as achievements to be outstripped, and thus carried out a cultural revolution without precedent. This struggle often took a polemical form but it also, and this should be stressed, permitted the rediscovery of some great and forgotten figures in spite of a not very favorable historical context. In an article that appeared in *La Revue Musicale* in 1952, Maurice Lemaître reminded his readers of the importance of Satie, and the following year published the first new edition of Russolo’s *The Art of Noises*. Isou, in his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, underlined the essential role played by Tzara, then a member of the Communist Party and little inclined to recall his Dadaist past, and of Breton in poetry, at the time regarded as more of a theoretician and leader than as a poet in his own right. These initiatives were stepped up in the sixties with Lemaître’s project for a “new theatre” which permitted the rediscovery of Expressionist, Dadaist and Surrealist works at a time when their followers like Ionesco, Beckett and Adamov were hogging the limelight with their false innovations.

So their relations with previous avant-garde movements were complex, owing to the positive character of some of their contributions. But the Lettrists’ claims to represent the only avant-garde and their intransigence over the creative imperative soon condemned them to a long period of isolation, in spite of a few attempts at joint action or dialogue, especially with the Surrealists, that were quickly aborted. Yet this withdrawal from the official cultural scene did not signify a weakening of theory. What they were not permitted by a hostile institutional environment, the Lettrists never ceased to create with the means at their disposal, from the private publication of reviews to more important actions such as the foundation of their Institut Léonard de Vinci or the organization of artistic events or exhibitions. It is not surprising that in this area – *eco-aesthetics*, to use Isou’s term – the British and American underground has recognized Lettrism as a forerunner, whose still marginal existence is due solely to the activism of its members.

While Isou’s programme was made clear at the time of the publication of *L’Agrégation d’un Nom et d’un Messie*, the Lettrist group was set up amidst the greatest confusion. Little or nothing was left from *La Dictature lettriste* of 1946, with the exception of Gabriel Pomerand. The scandals and numerous conferences attracted many “outsiders” and a permanent exhibition was mounted at La Librairie de la Porte Latine, where the first plastic works were also put on show. A few names stand out from this heroic period: Dufrené, present since 1947, then Brau, Wol-





Isidore Isou, *Le lettrisme et l'hypergraphie dans la peinture et la sculpture contemporaines*, Grassin, Paris 1961

man, Lemaître and Debord. Isou wanted to set up “units” within the group that could be used for the formation and emergence of *new men*, in other words an individualism and a freedom resting on entirely new foundations. The *UR* and *Ion* reviews as well as the recitals at the Tabou, where Pomerand had already earned himself a solid reputation as a howler, attest to the progressive formation of a group that was particularly virulent and fertile in the events that it staged. The numerous subsequent splits would result in the departure of all the original members with the exception of Maurice Lemaître, who had displayed a complete orthodoxy right from the start. The enormous breadth of Isou’s theory introduced an involuntary hierarchy into the group through relationships of theoretical dependence. Each of the members wished to respond to Isou’s appeal for a perpetual surpassing. Even Lemaître, despite being the most “orthodox of Isouians”, often showed signs of impatience, no longer content with illustrating the theories of a master, i.e. confirming them through his own works, but seeking to assert himself as a creator in his own right.

The other Lettrists, while they were in agreement with Isou’s theoretical premises, looked for other ways of surpassing since they did not accept the programme proposed on the recognized basis of a breakdown of culture. The Lettrist International rejected a “new amplitude of the arts” which it saw as inevitably leading down the same blind alleys as in the past, and revived the figure of a Marx who was much misunderstood despite the importance of the Communist Party at the time. The revolutionary utopia once again took up the critique of society as part of its ideological and cultural baggage, setting itself the goal of “revolutionizing everyday life” through the construction of situations which, as Constant pointed out in connection with his scheme of unitary urbanism, jointly presupposed a social revolution in the use of time and space. The Ultralettrism founded by Estival, Dufrène and Villeglé also claimed to be making a break with historical Lettrism. François Dufrène, in particular, in the name of his “cry-rhythms”, spurned any system of notation inherited from music, since poetic Lettrism was supposed to be a new poetry and a new music, for improvisation.

However, these divisions should not obscure the links that were maintained – even amidst conflict and dissidence – with the original orthodoxy. All the secessionists continued to develop one aspect of Isou’s system, to which they applied different methods. Yet if these disagreements drew Isou and Lemaître into a long discussion of questions of ethics, of the rules necessary to the functioning of the group, they also offered a foretaste of the master’s refusal that was to characterize the events of May 1968. Along with traditional parties and groups, the protesters of May



'68 were to denounce theocratic and bureaucratic rules, the omniscience of leaders and militancy, as forms of the old theology. These events were characterized by a criticism of all establishments (cultural, educational, political) and their authority figures. The insurgents were not trying to seize power but to bring down all political, cultural and economic power. The subsequent "leftism" bore witness to the bankruptcy of the traditional political game. From this time on nothing would function as it had before. The very idea of group was viewed with suspicion and relative and restricted freedom was preferred to the absolutism of the militant, stripped of any goal after the failure of the great Communist plan.

Lettrism constituted a singular exception to all this: the prominence given to the creator, all the more because its theories covered ever broader spheres, became permanent at the moment when this model of hierarchic relationship deservedly lost all relevance and all evocative power. In fact orthodox Lettrism did not exercise more than a feeble capacity for "seduction" and it was much more through its fringes (Gabriel Pomerand, the Lettrist International), where the system functioned differently, or through those who for other reasons had been attracted by some of its researches, that it succeeded in spite of everything in infiltrating society, and in again providing grist for utopias.

To speak of "Lettrists" in general to designate all the artists who have participated in the movement for over fifty years runs the risk of creating some confusion: the work of reinterpreting and correctly evaluating the individual courses taken within the whole areas that Isidore Isou had opened up remains to be done. While Maurice Lemaître has always worked across the whole board of genres, from the cinema to poetry, painting, sculpture and even political economy, other Lettrists like Dufrène and Wolman did not share Isou's ideas about the plastic arts and confined themselves effectively to poetry. The current members, as a consequence of the range of contributions made and the breaches opened in ever broader spheres, tend toward a multidisciplinary approach that the Lettrists did not take at the beginning. Maurice Lemaître aptly sums up the Lettrist "constellation" when he says that the history of the movement only makes sense from the viewpoint of a "creative chronology," in other words the contribution of each of the participants in the multiple forms that Lettrism has taken, from "those who were there" to "those who have done something". So there is no historic Lettrism, reduced to the first members of a group that was to splinter in 1952, but *a theory in a constant state of flux* that covers new areas and marks them with its propositions, viewed as so many ruptures. From Lettrist poetry to the imaginary aesthetic and supertemporal frame and including the theatre and architecture, Lettrism has never



ceased to extend its creative principle. It had no desire for a simple style within the framework of an age-old tradition, after the fashion of Surrealism, but it wanted to be a *multiplier of values*, a revealer of virgin artistic worlds to be conquered,<sup>14</sup> in which experimentation and research could be pursued and defined by works of the dimensions suited to each of the artists.

The social isolation of the Lettrist group and a few other marginalized avant-garde currents has had the effect of distorting somewhat their image. Thus certain current interpretations tend to place them in the line of the “heresies” of the Middle Ages, like the free-spirit movement, and the secret societies of the nineteenth century. Perhaps Isou’s messianism, prophesying a paradisiacal society, lends itself to this interpretation, and there has always been a theological dimension to his vast project for a cultural revolution. But this hypothesis, seductive as it is, lacks the specificity proper to these avant-garde movements. As Maurice Lemaître wrote in the first issue of the magazine *UR*: “We are not mystics even if our language has something in common with them, for we believe in unveiling and popularization, not in mysteries and initiations. We want to be what the mystics were expecting when they talked about gods and eternal joy, and we will be it in the new sense of the nuclear economy.”

The rituals, language and “hyper-laws” practised by the Lettrists, and their avowed aim of *creating new values*, place them on the margins of a consensual *doxa*, but these propositions, far from setting out to define a space reserved for initiates, are intended to be *tools and methods that everyone can use*. Here Lettrism is reunited with the universal dream of modernity whose failure it has never ceased to denounce. The universal goal, accessible to all, a true collective utopia (Isou’s “all gods, all masters” to some extent foreshadows Raoul Vaneigem’s “society of masters without slaves”), can no longer be understood within our “postmodernity,” in which the “collective” and the “social” are nothing but outdated, historical categories of a way of thinking that has lost its allure and is no longer of any use to a history that has now fragmented into a multitude of “narratives”. To each his own fiction and his own tribe... The only priority that the Lettrists and the Situationists set themselves was that of *a new civilization*, for which they were laying the theoretical foundations, and of a new social space (Constant’s “unitary urbanism”). They sound strange to us in a context in which this utopia no longer functions except in a restricted sense, as one of the numerous “fictions” that underpin communities, “tribes”, now doomed to vanish, outside any unitary meaning postulated for history.<sup>15</sup>

The development of Lettrism came on the contrary as a denial of this restricted as well as restrictive usage. Maurice Lemaître’s work of dissemination, through the bulletin of the

<sup>14</sup> “When people say to me that that is not painting or sculpture, I tell them that I am the one who invents painting or sculpture; it is not they who invent me. And so as not to create confusion, I tell them: I let myself be invented by the plastic arts but as soon as they had finished inventing me, I invented these arts just as I will invent thousands of arts” (I. Isou, *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort*, in *UR*, 1950).

<sup>15</sup> On this subject see J.-F. Lyotard’s *La condition post-moderne* and J. Baudrillard’s *Le miroir de la production*.



Front de la Jeunesse, and the attempts to hold a dialogue with the people most liable to be interested in effective action (the contacts that had been established with anarchists over the propositions of the Youth Revolt back in 1950, and then later with the Provos, and even the Surrealists) were intended to realize a historical project in practical terms in the twilight of modernity. Oscillating between “super-Manichaeism” polemics in defense of creativity and the need for dialogue to permit a penetration of society by its arguments, the Lettrist group may have appeared rather esoteric at times, owing to its language and to an isolation that it did not choose but that was inflicted on it. In his book *L'autodissolution des avant-gardes*,<sup>16</sup> René Lourau declares that Lettrism “constitutes an almost unique case of non-diffusion at the middle, and even upper levels of society”. This statement is not entirely correct. It is true that Isou nurses the dream of a *pure creation*, which would function as a threshold free of all tradition, a *break* opening up an infinity of possibilities to be explored, but this extreme position runs the risk of very quickly cutting off any avant-garde from the *here and now* that has to be changed, leaving its works and theories in *a place outside of any place*, in an exemplary and *de facto* inaccessible purity. If Lettrism has set out to be, to borrow the words of Maurice Lemaître, an “orthodoxy that includes and gives rise to heresies” that confirm it through their rupture but at the same time reveal its potentialities, it is also in this aspect of impure creation that we must look for what is indirectly derived from Lettrism. Faced with their direct descendants, such as the Nouvelle Vague in cinema, or concrete poetry and sound poetry, the Lettrists often speak of *dilution*, contrasting it with the *purity* of their many different creations. Perhaps it is only the solipsism, a charge leveled against Isou by the Situationists, of Lettrism that has led it to value this orthodox position, which as Isou himself had realized would be resolved by a radical reform of teaching. Consequently, apart from these positions of principle, it is necessary to consider the wide influence that Lettrism has had, almost in spite of itself given that it aspired to an orthodox position, in numerous spheres. From this point of view, the history of the long dissemination of Lettrist ideas, of their diaspora outside the area in which they were initially and exclusively applied, has still to be written. This history will have to include a reevaluation of a cursed aspect inherent in Lettrism itself, *a unitary utopia* whose salutary excessiveness has to some extent been lost today but which survives in bits and pieces as a possibility still in suspense.

*A new plastic object: the letter and the sign*

As Serge Brindeau has pointed out,<sup>17</sup> Isou's Lettrism is based on an evolutionary theory of the arts, divided into two distinct phases:

<sup>16</sup> Editions Galilée, 1977.

<sup>17</sup> “Altagor perhaps touches on the right point when he sees in Lettrist works the application of a theory founded on a study of the evolution of poetry rather than on the expression of a profound organic need”, in *La poésie contemporaine de langue française depuis 1945*, Ed. Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1973.





Maurice Lemaître, *Le film est déjà commencé?*, Editions André Bonne, Paris 1952

*amplique* and *ciselure* (or “expanding” and “chiselling”). The period of amplitude is characterized by an expansion of the arts through the progressive integration of elements extrinsic to the formal sphere (anecdote, figurative motif...); the chiselling phase entails a renunciation of this body of extrinsic elements in favour of a questioning of and experimentation with the formal means specific to all art.

This breakdown of an artistic totality, in which motivations extraneous to the formal components dominate, makes it possible to uncover and investigate a forgotten root, hitherto neglected beneath anecdotal or figurative omniscience. This evolutionary cycle of modern art allows us to understand how Lettrism, anticipating the research of the Structuralists, very soon found itself in conflict with those who also discerned a deterioration of traditional means of expression in many spheres but, when all is said and done, merely made this “malaise in culture” the excuse for endless exegesis – the crisis of painting, the death of the anecdote in literature – and not the point of departure for a quest for new artistic directions. Under the impetus of the chiselling artists, the structural coherence of the arts in their *amplique* phase shatters into a constellation of particles that is less a sign of the irretrievable disappearance of an “ancient beauty” than of the re-discovery and exploration of a primitive root that serves to open up a “new amplitude of the arts”. Art, which has ceased to be alive as a coherent totality, is presented with the opportunity for a rebirth in and by its decomposition and the forgetting of its old constraints.

This hypothesis, formulated at the zero point of a cultural cycle that had exhausted all its possibilities for renewal, found its first justification in poetry, where Isou traced the *golden line* that confirmed this theoretical scheme, through works signifying a return toward a structural origin. The representative function that poetry had prior to Baudelaire was progressively abandoned after him in favor of the pure “evocative magic” of Rimbaud and Lautréamont, who investigated the power of language to conjure up images, no longer considered to be ornamental but to play a primary role in poetic expression, the near silence of Mallarmé which restricted the poem to the fragile thread of semantic research and lexical sophistication, the poems of Verlaine, already haunted by “music above all things”, and those of Valéry, who defined poetry as “a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense”. The poems of Dada and the Surrealists, the former based on mockery and absurd associations of arbitrarily chosen words, the latter striving to tame the initial anarchy of the language by means of automatic writing and thus to decipher the voice of an unconscious, put the last nail in the coffin of a poetry built on signification alone. After the word, the chiselling



phase<sup>18</sup> permits the rediscovery, starting out from its “disintegration”, of the letter which opens up a twofold horizon, at once poetic-musical (sound) and plastic (visual).

This atomization characteristic of the chiselling or cutting-back phase permitted an unprecedented liberation of the means specific to art and corresponded to the emergence of the avant-garde movements. Contemporary with Mallarmé, Debussy in music and the Impressionists in painting both gave priority to experimentation with artistic means, which became their sole justification. The abandonment of the figurative dimension in painting cleared the way for the further research of the Cubists and the Abstractionists, such as Kandinsky and Malevich, and for the increasing incorporation of new materials, exemplified by Duchamp’s readymades and Schwitters’s Merzbau, who thus gave a broader configuration to an ancient field of art that could not hope to survive in the form of an outdated academicism. In the same way the development of the novel by Stendhal and Flaubert marked a renunciation of the primacy of anecdote and mimesis and permitted a flowering of the structural systems of which it was composed: Flaubert, already dreaming of a novel “built on nothing”, in other words based solely on the possibilities of language, Proust and Joyce’s “inner monologue” and “portmanteau words” led to a genuine linguistic epic.

These works made as much of an impact by their rejection, their destruction of the aesthetic that preceded them, as they did by the unfamiliar territory that they revealed and investigated. Thus Russolo’s theories<sup>19</sup> should not be seen as the *negation* of musical academicism, any more than they were an expression of a nihilistic undertaking that we should seek rather in Dada, but as the renewal of the musical sphere by the inclusion of dimensions – noises rather than instruments – that had not been appreciated before that time. With the avant-garde movements, all artistic genres were characterized by a return and reduction to the most elementary particles, repudiating all previous development: painting moved from the representational to the abstract, poetry from the epic to the cry, music from the orchestra to noise... Satie, Schönberg and Russolo, along with Kandinsky, Mondrian and Duchamp and with Joyce and Proust, were integrated by Isou into a single movement of rejection of the fixed and unchangeable models of art, in order to redeploy their possibilities starting out from fragments whose autonomy had been restored.

So these works of chiselling went well beyond the role of a simple negation of tradition that might be assigned to them by a dialectical way of thinking. It suffices to look at the positive character of Schönberg’s twelve-tone system or Russolo’s ideas in order to realize that they were not trying to move into an area beyond art, into the kind of nullity that their propositions might sug-

<sup>18</sup> “The chiselling hypostasis will take the form of constant progress toward the destruction of the object. Here we find the course of an evolution that strives to destroy in the name of construction, to render useless in the name of research, to squander what has been accumulated in the name of a material that is being set free” (I. Isou, *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort*, in UR, 1950).

<sup>19</sup> *L’arte dei rumori*, 1913; Fr. trans., *L’Art des bruits*, 1916; Eng. trans. *The Art of Noises*, 1986.



SPUR group, *Canal Grand Growing*. View of the Venice exhibition, Palazzo Grassi, 1963



gest, but were reinventing art outside the limits assigned to it.

Isou saw himself as the first artist to have emerged at the end of the chiselling period and, aware of the latter's irreversibility, faced up to the need to continue with modernity's requirement of the surpassing of the old at a time in history that was already seeing the return of numerous forms of academicism, with the later Abstractionists, the anecdote making its way back into poetry under the cover of a "poetry of resistance" and a vague Surrealism. Lettrism has often been associated with Dada, with Lettrist poetry, for example, being seen as nothing but a negation of language, a typically Dadaist position. But Isou had something completely different in mind, for at the end of this chiselling phase which rendered impossible any going back and obliged any thinking artist to start out from the works of the previous avant-garde and attempt to surpass them, Lettrism found in the letter just what the chisellers had failed to find, that is a *new plastic object*, on the basis of which, as Roland Sabatier emphasized, "all art has to be re-created".<sup>20</sup>

Thus the letter and then the sign in all its multiple historic forms and potentialities became the base on which Isou intended to build a *new cathedral of the arts* in which each of the branches – poetry, music, film, painting, sculpture, architecture, etc. – could now be redeployed, beyond the frontiers acquired and conquered by the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists.

From the letter as a fundamental particle of sound to its visual equivalent in the plastic arts, reconsidered as sign, Isou proposed and deployed, in a system that affected the whole of the arts, a "unification of the means of communication". This did not mean, as he himself pointed out in *Le lettrisme et l'hypergraphie dans la peinture et la sculpture contemporaines*,<sup>21</sup> embedding the sign and the letter in an old aesthetic (an abstract one, as in the

<sup>20</sup> In *Le lettrisme. Les créations, les créateurs*, Z' Editions, 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Grassin, 1961.



work of Mathieu), any more than it meant confusing this fundamental particle and the horizon of experimentation and questions that it presented with related practices such as typography or calligraphy. By singling out the letter and the sign as a new justification for art, Lettrism was harking back to hieroglyphics, but for other reasons, and tending to bring together in a single fundamental element everything that the previous *amplique* culture had never stopped separating: image, sound, meaning. Besides, Isou had to recognize that Lettrism had permitted the rediscovery and reappraisal of these primitive languages with their religious justifications that were alien to him, seeing that he founded his approach on an aesthetic inconsequence, in the same way as Cubist research had permitted the rediscovery of African sculpture.

At first limited to existing alphabets, Lettrist plastics or *hypergraphy* were soon to embrace real elements, whose original function was abandoned so that they could become signs on which to found a new fictional epic. The *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort* and the *Essai sur le bouleversement de la prose et du roman*,<sup>22</sup> starting out from an identical exhaustion of the word in the space of the novel and the figurative object in that of painting, proposed replacing them with not just existing alphabets but also invented ones, with rebuses, fragments of reality metamorphosed into signs: Isou foresaw novels made up of cigarette butts, insects... The break was radical since, rather than a new aesthetic variation, it entailed a reconsideration of the very essence of art. As Maurice Lemaître wrote, “the arrangement of these signs in plastic, coherent phrases allows painting and sculpture to become spiritual messages again [...]. From painting, photography and writing, the Isouians have moved to hypergraphology. By turning all the attainments of these arts into the letters of an invented alphabet, they have rediscovered writing (the source of painting) and found a means of reintroducing signification into the visual arts, without having to abandon their formal discovery”.<sup>23</sup> The first hypergraphic works, consisting of Isidore Isou’s *Les Journaux des Dieux*, Gabriel Pomerand’s *Grimoire* and the first plates of Maurice Lemaître’s novel *Canailles*,<sup>24</sup> were based not on a synthesis of painting and writing but on a reconsideration of the sign, with its simultaneous plastic and semantic value. In his *Mémoires* Isou had stressed that hypergraphy or *super-writing* raised a completely new set of problems: from now on art would not find its problematization in relation to a referential externality, be it reality or the “inner model” of the Surrealists, any more than in an aestheticization of its materiality alone. This is not Duchamp’s “everything is art”, from the pictures of David to a urinal. Here, rather, *everything is sign*, that is to say, it can be used to illuminate a reality that has ceased to function as a final referent and been revealed instead as a still-

<sup>22</sup> In *UR*, 1950, and *Escaliers de Lausanne*, 1950.

<sup>23</sup> In *Qu’est-ce que le lettrisme et le mouvement isouien?*, Fischbacher, 1954.

<sup>24</sup> Isidore Isou’s *Les Journaux des Dieux* was published as an appendix to his essay on the novel (*Escaliers de Lausanne*, 1950); Gabriel Pomerand’s *Grimoire*, more correctly called *Saint-Ghetto-des-Prêtres* (Ed. OLB) and the first plates of Maurice Lemaître’s novel (*Ur*, 1950) were all published in the same year.

<sup>25</sup> “Lettrism that raises so many new questions about this galaxy of living elements [...] cannot disappear, cannot become outdated, so long as there is a problem in the world of the ‘relation’ between two beings, of ‘means of communication’, of inscription, of transmission, of ‘signal’, of ‘potentiality of contact’ to clarify or explore” (I. Isou, in the catalogue *Lettrisme et hypergraphie*, Galerie Stadler, 1964).

<sup>26</sup> In connection with Isou’s reservations about the Futurist movement, Christian Schlatter remarks that they are similar to the ones expressed by Roman Jakobson (in *Questions de poétique*, Le Seuil, 1973), another great Formalist, over what in the end was never more than an “improvement” of anecdote, through the introduction of modernist themes, of “odious reporting”.

<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the productions of the Tel Quel group or the Change collective never did anything but follow the example of the great “deconstructors” (Joyce, Proust, Céline, Artaud) of language or the historic avant-garde movements in painting (Malevich, Kandinsky), but shared Lettrism’s concern for theoretically programming literary practice, in the light of the corpus of Formalist works. Thus the revolutionary import of a text depended more on its structural capacity to break down the codes of the dominant ideology than on the



virgin semiological immensity.<sup>25</sup> Isou's Lettrism takes an analogous approach to the research of the Structuralists in so far as the sign takes the place of reality and testifies to the infinity of networks of meaning that structure the subject and this reality, an infinity that only has to be appropriated by each one in order to assert itself. This little-noticed affinity<sup>26</sup> is worth further study, as it would clarify the perennial character of a formalism that occupied minds for a long time in the sixties and seventies, by way of the positions of the Change collective and of Tel Quel, in total ignorance of the fact that people had never ceased pursuing this goal, well beyond the theories of the Prague Circle.<sup>27</sup>

Henri Chopin<sup>28</sup> points out how the Second World War had cast a great deal of suspicion on language, guilty of lending itself to any ideology and any lie, and how Artaud's experience ("all writing is trash") had been decisive in this questioning of language. But Dada had also responded to all "outmoded ideas" in poetry and ideology with total anarchy. Isou was less interested in repeating a critique of the inadequacies of the word than in opening up new breaches in order to found a *complete communication*, in contrast to the fragmentary "false communication" of the established codes, on an appropriation and reconstruction of reality in the scattering of its signs. The Lettrist painters too were less concerned with mere aesthetic appreciation than with a decipherment that opened onto a different universe each time, or rather they sought to articulate the plastic significans and a new signification (the letter and the sign as the new principle of communication, of meaning). The hypergraphies of the Lettrists, especially those of Roland Sabatier and Alain Satié, attain a high level of density, of inflation of signs. But we should not be deceived by this. They do not represent a final degree of abstraction, but a set of plastic propositions that are for reading, and in which each of the artists has forged less a style than an idiom.

With Lettrism, it was no longer the real, in its multiple dimensions of representation, that fed plastic art, but the possibility of constructing supports and systems of new and different meanings by means of and in the signs of the latter. Nowadays, with sociologists concerned about the abundance of growing networks of communication linked to the emergence of new technologies that modify both the content and the forms of this communication, some of them going so far as to want to make a clean sweep of them in order to get back in touch with a reality that has become the *objet perdu* of our *postmodern condition*, Lettrism opens up a new possibility, a way for this superabundance of signs to become the setting not for a new alienation (Artaud took this non-coincidence of the self with language to the point of madness: "This language of mine, my language, shit"), but for a reconstruction of the subject, essence of meaning and communication,

staging and presentation of a revolutionary theme (which had been the cultural line of the Communists). Certain areas of research pursued by the Change collective, especially the work of Maurice Roche, belatedly caught up with Lettrist hypergraphy and placed the need for revolution solely at the formal and communicative level, reestablishing a link with the long unappreciated tradition of the Russian Formalists.

<sup>28</sup> In *Poésie sonore internationale* (J.-M. Place, 1981).



through a subversion and appropriation of the many languages that permeate and structure an evanescent reality as well as the invention of new codes. With the old metaphysics out of the way, Isou's Lettrism defined communication as the foremost of all real or supposed motivations.

At a distance, it is easier to understand why the Lettrists were to some extent the "leper" of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The Existentialists pointed out the absurdity of a world in ruins and made it into a political issue, and Cioran was already quibbling about "decomposition", but in this postwar period the Lettrists were banking on the possibility of reinventing meaning by coming up with entirely new categories and formulas that raised the question of sense again through the multiplicity of mediations encountered in experience. Lettrism found its justification in the philosophical *a priori* that illuminated the unusual nature of its approach: man may be *made in the image of god, a thinking reed, a living being...* but he is before all else a being of communication, at once transmitter and receiver, organized by an infinity of networks of meaning that he produces and that define him as an individual.

"The unification of the means of communication" formulated in *Amos ou introduction à la métagraphologie*,<sup>29</sup> became the preamble to a revival of the political and artistic subversion, not at the level of real structures (classes, means and relationships of production) that Isou intended to carry out in the light of the Youth Revolt, but at that of the superstructures, the communication networks and the multiplicity of languages that order the relations between *words and things*, something of which only the Russian Formalists had grasped the full importance.

Isou, in asserting that he was proposing the "new sphere of the letter and the sign", provided no other justification for art than the set of signs as foundation for all expression in its dimension of communication and aesthetics. In his work *Qu'est-ce que le lettrisme et le mouvement isouien?*,<sup>30</sup> Maurice Lemaître had already proposed his "fragments of Lemaîtreian hypergraphic grammar", in which the phonetic alphabet was used as a "transcription base", and the phonemes translated in this manner in the form of symbols. In 1964, in his *Roman du Soulèvement de la Jeunesse*, Roland Sabatier offered a set of canvases superimposing two systems of signs: on the one hand typographic plates, which the Lettrists used both as support and as sign, illustrating the condition of the young (slavery at school, riots, police repression), accompanied by a hypergraphic commentary in which the artist took a stand on this in the light of Isou's "Youth Revolt". The whole of this revolutionary epic, divided up into chapters, confirms the narrative possibilities of the sign, bearer of a meaning and a plasticity at one and the same time, which allows

<sup>29</sup> Arcanes, 1953.

<sup>30</sup> Fischbacher, 1954.



Isidore Isou, "Recherche pour un poème en prose pure", fragment from *Dix poèmes magnifiques*, 1950

- 8 - 15 - 16 ...10. *Bombre, godo, godo, jtartelle tatou tompâtâfère.* 18 - 17 - 19. *Le quéffiant bicor quelficommé darnacoïou au don du guéfligant thondé cahlà cafonglan.*  
 - 9 - 8 - 6 - 3... - 1 - 2 - 1 - 2 - 1 - 2 - 11. *Tounfloiquième baval guené dâ grévélé saguézanse jusguagor disfété parvume bobilité babolue gointe àhune tastâpéderhougan 17 ! Leguéhoù nou gonnâ, Calfu, beste au filieu dela fiouteur. Hai toftiou ! Nécannetuva tonteur tencanturé. Ehoutan. Gor dé gahon blé-hair. Vandytrâcois. Kinné Couhâ, Kinné - 3 - 14 - 14 - 14 - 14 - Hil évéhi canlâgangouffâ ofite défafai. Noss. Léhidosson hihé. - 13 - 13 - 13 - 18 - 18 - 18 - 19. 15 - 15 - 15 - 17 !*  
 12. *Sédihomher diher quinédonga. Sédihol, sédihol. Lécahienne sâguenne sulacahoute déguéfil. Hântzag 10 - 10 - 10 - 10 - 4. 19 - 19 - 19 - 11 - 11 - 11 aaaa. 8 - 8 - 8 - 8 - 8 - 8, 7 - 7 - 7 - 7 - 7 - 7, 13 - 13 - 13 - 13 - 13, 5 - 5 - 5 - 5 - 5.*  
*Ondésséfi delfi hel 14 hombrâ. Léfolei dégoléé léfougroute. Cédendomme. Honcre la goui quéguerme léguehenne, tautre lasipsièsse quisifi daïssaïouss iou séamme hi séamme : lâhouma. Leganguerre ougorre. Lehagarde oubav. Defiel désybili zigoissâ dahassa. Quissimlassa, quissimplique. Lafiou quiquonqué suhla-conca vouvousimiminano. Dâgahou. Z ! Z. Z. X ! ...hnmoc ! nâsna.*

Lettrism

the critical translation of a current event, through the set of themes that Isou gave to the narrative sphere, and a form going beyond the restricted order of language to be brought together in a single unit.

If in his early works, such as *Les nombres*<sup>31</sup> and especially *Les Journaux des Dieux*, Isou had as was his habit played the card of radicalism by integrating Morse code, drawing and the word, conceived as letters of a new alphabet, with different colours of ink used to mark the different levels of reading, it was in his novel *Initiation à la haute volupté*<sup>32</sup> that he gave a real illustration of the specificity of the metagraphic approach. Thus the plates that accompanied the novel combined three formal levels of fiction: drawings of nude women, since the story was based on the plot of a detective novel coupled with the kind of erotic developments that Isou had formulated in his work *Je vous apprendrai l'amour* followed by *Traité d'érotologie infinitésimale*,<sup>33</sup> a narrative level in prose, and a hypergraphic level. These plates do not cancel out the word, but integrate it as a possibility along with all existing alphabets on the basis of its hypergraphic repositioning. So this work represents a true *initiation*, not only to *haute volupté* ("extreme pleasure"), but also and above all to the realm of hypergraphy, here presented as part of an ensemble dominated by traditional prose. It remains the most accessible introduction to a world in which the majority of the works,<sup>34</sup> motivated by the requirements and rigour of avant-garde experimentation, do not have such didactic clarity.

For all that, this is no concession to a tradition that is sup- 53

<sup>31</sup> Galerie Palmes, 1953.

<sup>32</sup> Escaliers de Lausanne, 1960.

<sup>33</sup> Le Terrain Vague, 1959.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, *Jonas ou le corps à la recherche de son âme* (G.-Ph. Broutin, 1984).



posed to have been surpassed,<sup>35</sup> but a reinterpretation and investigation of the forms and expressions of the past on the basis of an unprecedented plastic form. This procedure was to lead to the series of canvases entitled *Commentaires sur Van Gogh* and more generally to a whole set of works, such as the *Critique du ready-made du point de vue de la méca-esthétique*, in which Isou set out to reevaluate the great creations of the past which have stood on the threshold of new explorations, and which, re-examined in this way, at a higher degree of artistic rupture, were revealed in new dimensions, manifesting this persistence of the creative imperative through its many historical formulations. They also underline the fact that Lettrism has never set out to negate the old in order to replace it by a new order *ex nihilo*, as Futurism did. The rupture also testifies to the continuity of the most advanced forms and formulas, necessary as a springboard for their integration and surpassing on the route to “somewhere else”.<sup>36</sup>

However, Isidore Isou has on several occasions explained the denomination of *sign* envisaged in order to account for hypergraphy and the risks of confusion that it can bring. From the perspective of Lettrism, the chiselling phase led to a downfall of the old justifications (the anecdotal, the figurative) and was surpassed by the affirmation of the “letter” as unprecedented form destined to organize the universe of art re-created on its basis. The name “Lettrism” suggested the reduction of each linguistic or real element to this primary particle, the letter, which, in combination with other letters, formed propositions and phrases, and permitted a new narrative epic, or content of communication, to open up through this *plastic writing*. Linguistics and the structuralists, which have made abundant use of the term “sign” for reasons inherent in their discipline, treat the sign as representing an externality that it assumes in the space of communication. Lettrism ignores such a motivation since *hypergraphy* (or *superwriting*) is self-sufficient, outside any referentiality to an outside, and constructs, through articulation that is at once *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic*, to use Jakobson’s terms, signs from which it selects a system of communication, at once aesthetic and semantic, that is its sole horizon. Incidentally, it was here that the Lettrist encountered the first objection. Those who perpetuated the age-old separation between painting and writing could not grasp the break represented by Lettrist hypergraphy, which was founded on their necessary complementarity, in a new form, elevated to the rank of a complete means of communication, and have long refused to give Lettrist works the status of paintings. The emergence in the sixties of new tendencies such as narrative fiction and the efforts of Pierre Garnier and Spatialism, not to mention the international current that set out to rehabilitate the poten-

<sup>35</sup> Besides, this is a constant feature of Lettrism, which is reminiscent to some extent of Wilhelm Reich’s position: “Tradition has the habit of forgetting that it has lost its capacity to judge what is not tradition. The perfecting of the microscope, for example, was not achieved by destruction of the first model, but because it was preserved and developed to the highest level of human knowledge. A microscope from Pasteur’s time cannot be used to see what a researcher into viruses is looking for today. But imagine if Pasteur’s microscope had had the authority and desire to prohibit the electron microscope!” (translated from the French edition of *The Function of the Orgasm: La fonction de l’orgasme*, L’Arche, 1952).

<sup>36</sup> “The upheaval brought about by the individuals of our movement is produced in each established branch, starting out from the existing, but fixed accomplishments of these branches. Thus:

- 1) Poetical and musical Lettrism continues Symbolism (and its offshoots: Surrealism-Dadaism) and atonality;
- 2) Hypergraphy (originally called metagraphy) surpasses the achievements of James Joyce and the Abstractionists in the novel, painting and sculpture;



tialities of the letter and the sign but for reasons very different from the ones proposed by the Lettrists, reflected in the exhibition *Poésure et Peintrie* (Poeting and Paintry), at least had the salutary effect of making people reexamine this particle that is at once visual and aural, and of truly providing a springboard for these new avant-garde movements by linking up with the research of their predecessors, up until then regarded as simple appendices or supplements to a history wrongly supposed to have come to an end.

The hypergraphy in which numerous Lettrists had already distinguished themselves does not constitute a limited sphere like that of Surrealism in relation to the figurative, but a universe that still has to be explored. Its creations up to now represent so many *styles* indicating the possibilities of *amplique* or chiselling development, amidst the immense range of propositions that it permits. It also makes its own contribution of arguments to the never-resolved question of the enigmatic relations between art and politics. Here the seductive proposition of a disappearance/realization of art in politics, justified by a creative zero point observed at certain historic moments finds its first rebuttal: the terroristic formulation of the Lettrists chooses neither art nor politics. It brings about a transformation of both, postulating that a renewal of forms and contents still remains possible.

*Prolegomena to the virtual art: imaginary aesthetic and supertemporal frame*

In 1956, starting out from the new aesthetic form, Isou would propose the extension of the realm of the sign and the letter to include *virtual* particles, inspired by Leibniz's imaginary numbers, so that "the concrete data of art are surpassed in the indefinitely large as well as in the indefinitely small to reappear in the form of virtualities".<sup>37</sup> The imaginary art that is based on "visible or invisible particles, stripped of all immediate meaning and used to permit the imagination of other existing or possible elements",<sup>38</sup> does not represent a degree zero of creation, a situation in which, to borrow Michel Foucault's comment about Antonin Artaud, it is the absence of work that takes the place of the work, but an appeal to the creativity of the public to give meaning and substance to the infinitesimal opportunity. The infinitesimal aesthetic, which is not at all a negation of the hypergraphic realm but its investigation on all sides of real signs, in their immaterial symmetry, was then to be supplemented and extended by the supertemporal frame. The traditional limits (definitive fixity of a work that remains the project of a single artist) are broken down here by the multiplicity of unforeseeable participants and works that this frame is able to hold, with the role of the originating artist confined to the *carte blanche* left to posterity.

3) Discrepant cinema extends and breaks with the theories on photography and the montage of the 'classics' of the silent and sound film;

4) Chiselling and discrepant theatre transforms not just the overall framing of the spectacle, but overthrows a certain number of textual, corporeal and scenic arts dependent on it;

5) Nuclear economics surpasses the concepts of the liberalists and the 'critical' ones of the circuit;

6) Even further ahead, the established branches and the new (aesthetic and scientific) spheres which we apply ourselves to are linked to the *créatique*, domain of the hyperlaws obeyed by all creations" (M. Lemaître, *Qu'est-ce que le lettrisme et le mouvement isouien?*, Fischbacher, 1954).

<sup>37</sup> R. Sabatier, *L'art infinitésimal*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie de Paris, 1988.

<sup>38</sup> I. Isou, "Introduction à l'esthétique imaginaire", in *Front de la Jeunesse*, 1956.



In his *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort*, contrasting the surpassing of the self through actual participation in the creative process with passive consumption, Isou declared: "Soon will come the time when artists and observers will not experience any emotion in front of the work, so great will be the importance of discovery and invention, so great will be the ease with which new forces are brought to light and the speed with which their emission will be succeeded by another, that it will kill off the pleasure, the sensorial delight produced by the composition." Thus he envisaged an immaterial and anonymous future for the arts. With the imaginary aesthetic and the supertemporal frame, Lettrism was in fact seeking less to propose a new aesthetic equation than to find a new foundation for the artistic situation and its age-old rules of reception in an *unlimited interactivity*. By seeking to bring these lines of research into artistic practice, Isou was continuing with his ambition to extend and induce creative potentiality on the collective scale, rejecting the vacuity of an artistic spectacle solely for consumption.

Here we can also find an echo of Marx when he dreamed of a humanity at last "shaped by its own works". Isou, opposed in this to the Surrealist aesthetic of the unconscious, had clearly grasped that the "revolution of the spirit" could not be brought about by bringing additional images into circulation, in a break with the ideological and artistic dimensions that dominated everywhere else. In the darkness of their consumption images become interchangeable. They are lodged in the memory and end up constituting the heritage of a collective imaginary museum. When Isou published *L'Art supertemporel* in 1960,<sup>39</sup> everyday life in the highly industrialized countries was changing rapidly. Images were growing more and more abundant, to the point where they served as the sole collective reference and began to supplant the long tradition of writing. The movement owed much to the numerous technological advances (with television becoming a common consumer product), as well as to the role they were going to play in the transmission of ancient means of oppression. The Situationists were already aware of the extent to which the movement, in seeing poetic and plastic images as the only means of bringing about a "revolution of the spirit", had itself created the conditions for its own assimilation. The Lettrist avant-garde proposed an alternative to the Surrealist deadlock by turning a deficiency of visual presence into the dynamics of the imaging process in "observers".

Since it combined painting and writing in a single form, hypergraphy had already hinted at this reversal of roles in the aesthetic relationship, requiring its decipherment. The opacity of meaning along with the absence of any material visual form shifted the traditional priorities that structured the perception of art.

<sup>39</sup> Escaliers de Lausanne, 1960.



The role of the omniscient creator, depository of meaning and of its edifying value, gave way to a growing demand for intervention on the art by the public. This participation could take place as easily on the imaginary plane as on that of reality, especially through the *supertemporal frame* which Isou defined as a set of “supports that only have the value of a ‘chassis’ or the mechanics of a possible fabrication into which anyone and anything can come at any moment to express everything they desire”,<sup>40</sup> which as a framework for participation applied to the whole range of visual or acoustic arts (poetry, hypergraphy, architecture, cinema, sculpture...). Paints, paintbrushes, a graving tool, stone or just a simple word were enough and it was on the basis of these few elements that the public was invited to create indefinitely.

Isidore Isou applied this principle not only in the first exhibition expressly devoted to this new realm of art at the Galerie Valérie Schmidt in 1960, but also to cinematographic creation in which the audience was invited to cut the film and write possible soundtracks in notebooks provided for the purpose, among other propositions.<sup>41</sup> These lines of research, which represented a continuation of his *Film-débat* of 1952, by renouncing all materiality in favour of the indirect formulation of a linguistic support for a virtuality, gave notice of an art reduced to conceptuality alone.

Thus, in 1971 Editions Psi would bring out a cube by Alain Satié entitled *De A à Z, tout en un infinitésimal*, one side of which consisted of a notice saying that the object included “an engraving, a play, a ballet, a set of ethical rules, a work of architecture, a psychokladological study, a second erotic, a treatise of nuclear economics, a hypergraphic photo”. So the infinitesimal and the supertemporal frame testify to their archetypal value, which can be applied in the whole range of artistic genres: in 1963 Isou published a supertemporal novel entitled *La Loi des purs*, with blank pages that provide a space for a reader to write his own story; and in 1972 Albert Dupont screened a film which actually consisted of an entrance ticket distributed to the audience whose title *Imagine* was an invitation to construct a multitude of films that the absence of images and a narrative or anecdotal structure now made possible.

The Lettrists were to systemize the participation of spectators to a greater extent by asking them to bring personal effects to the screening of a film, or to comment on a sequence of filmed images so as to replace their nonexistent soundtrack. In addition to his seminal *Film-débat* of 1952,<sup>42</sup> Isou had opened the way to an imaginary cinema at the time of the première of the *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, at Cannes in 1951, when only the soundtrack of the second part was presented, the film not having been completed by that date. The attempts made by François Dufrène

<sup>40</sup> *L'Art supertemporel*, follow-up to *Le Polyautomatisme dans la méca-esthétique*, Escaliers de Lausanne, 1960.

<sup>41</sup> *Le Film sup ou la salle des idiots*, Galerie L'Atome, 1960, published in the magazine *Ligne Créatrice* in 1973.

<sup>42</sup> Published as an appendix to his *Esthétique du cinéma* (Ion, 1952).



and above all Guy Debord the following year<sup>43</sup> took an identical approach but arrived at very different results. The scripts published in the review *Ion* in 1952 do not match the first version of the two films to be presented in public. For his part Dufrène had planned to show a picture strip, but the lack of funds obliged him to make do with a reading of the soundtrack, made up chiefly of Lettrist poems, to the audience. Guy Debord never clearly explained his decision to abandon images in favour of sequences of black and white and a text literally riddled with silence. From the perspective of the future theoretician of the Situationist International, it was undoubtedly a question of taking the most recent art forms to an extreme point of no return, the same point where it had become necessary to invent new games better suited to bringing passion into life, as the artistic solution only led to an impasse. Movies without pictures therefore, but quite different from the propositions of Isou and more in the nature of chiselling works in a cinematographic realm that Isou wanted to take back to a formal becoming. Cinema would be hypergraphic, infinitesimal and supertemporal, or it would not exist at all.

Starting with hypergraphy, Lettrism has never ceased to develop gaps in its production and to propose creations founded on absence, to work on the key figure of the ellipse, leaving it up to the public to fill the holes, to intervene with concrete realizations or a mental elaboration so as to become a full participant in the creative process. The process took precedence over the completed work, opening up the way for an art that would be “unlimited, supertemporal, hyperchronist, historicist (as it assimilates history), open (open to time and to an infinity of producers), integrationist (for it unceasingly integrates new collaborators and new works), anti-artist (since it endlessly attacks the artists of the past on behalf of new artists), pro-artist (as it calls on unknown artists rather than old ones), durable, possible”.<sup>44</sup>

This approach resembles certain aspects of Fluxus and in particular the propositions of Henry Flint, as well as of the Conceptual artists with whom Lettrism in its infinitesimal and supertemporal dimensions shares the same refusal to dispense with the becoming of a creative process open to all for the sake of a few definitive and edifying works. We can understand the importance Isou attached to theory as a super-rationalization that rejected the chance on which both Dada and Fluxus were founded. In spite of the low level of representation of Fluxus in France, the points of agreement are indicative of a common approach, but one that was based on very different theoretical assumptions. Very close to Dada, with John Cage in particular acting as a link, Fluxus relied far more on chance, on the unpredictable flux of daily life and the possibilities that arise in the moment, the philosopher's

<sup>43</sup> F. Dufrène's *Tambour du jugement premier* and G. Debord's *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* were published in the review *Ion* (1952).

<sup>44</sup> I. Isou, *L'Art supertemporel*, follow-up to *Le Polyautomatisme dans la méca-esthétique*, Escaliers de Lausanne, 1960.



stone of creation, in the manner of the performances at the Cabaret Voltaire. We can find an unexpected continuation of this in certain contemporary scientific theories that postulate “chaos” as the creator of many possible worlds. In provoking an event, for example, nothing is less certain than the actual result; propositions and actions are made and unmade to make room for a liberation of modes of expression and behavior, in a break with the castrating rationality that hems in everyday life. Isou’s Lettrism, in all its past and future ramifications, is looking for no other effect than a *lifting of the ban on creativity*, by playing with the infinitesimal and supertemporal, but by the indirect means of a “hyper-rationalization”, a truly speculative cast of the dice which is supposed to abolish chance by incorporating it as positive possibility of an all-embracing theory. Here, theory is of prime importance – it replaces the materiality of a work – and this separates him totally from Dada and the post-Dadaism of Fluxus, which are based on a primacy of action and its always unforeseeable consequences. However, the potential debate between the *dispersion* of Dada and the systematics of Isou should not be reduced to a banal contrast between theory and practice, with each laying claim to the truth. Isou’s position is far more complex, as his system, far from rejecting chance as a disturbing factor, falling outside any theory speculatively founded *a priori* as an *exception* or *alternative*, seeks on the contrary to anticipate its possibility and to include it as one of its variable components.

The happenings staged by Fluxus, unlike the supertemporal realizations of the Lettrists, did not seek repetition and their trans-historic maintenance as a lasting framework. They could only exist in a given space-time, a unique instant which, as if echoing Heraclitus, could not be reproduced serially, that is to say be rationalized as an exception, without being distorted and prejudicing the potentialities that they were seeking to induce. Like Dada, Fluxus postulated discontinuity, non-repetition and the permanent destruction of rules in order to permit the emergence of new and again temporary rules. This approach aimed to destroy the fundamental *logos* of an omniscient rationality in and through play and to replace it with the unexpected, the return of the repressed eternal, life in its excess which constructs other rationalities if it ever finds itself set free.

It has been possible to speak of a search for a total art in connection with Fluxus and Lettrism. In his *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort*, Isou evokes a new “cathedral of the arts”, proposing bringing together all the branches of artistic communication in a single project: not a project of synthesis but one that would involve distinct arts in their most avant-garde phase in a single *grand work*. It is in the realm of theatre that the Lettrists have come closest to this “total art”. Isou’s



*Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*<sup>45</sup> envisaged the breakdown of the theatrical system into many dimensions and then allowing them to evolve in complete isolation from one another: mime, dance, the art of the body in their chiselling, hypergraphic process of development... Referring to the gestural sphere, implications would take the place of the traditional cues and the set become a place to experiment with Lettrist theories about architecture... Thus the extension of the supertemporal frame and the infinitesimal domain to the theatre would lead to a virtual drama and the real involvement of the audience in the production of this total spectacle. These theories were illustrated in Isou's first dramatic works: *La Marche des jongleurs*, which was staged at the Théâtre de Poche in 1954, and *Apologie d'un personnage unique*.<sup>46</sup>

However, Isou was very soon to denounce the risk of confusion and the illusions that could not fail to arise from such a concept. The example of Wagner is particularly illuminating in that his works, while involving several artistic dimensions (text, set design, acting and music, not to mention Wagnerian "themes"), only distinguish themselves from the viewpoint of artistic renewal in their music. The total art developed by the Lettrists cannot be reduced to a combination of techniques *without the discriminant of creativity*. Rather, they proposed bringing artistic means together in their most avant-garde forms. Thus film (chiselling, hypergraphic...), Lettrist poetry, the art of the body, the supertemporal frame, etc., would become distinct branches converging on the constitution of a "cathedral of the arts", proposing a broader theory of means of communication and their assembling in a single, unitary project in which "poetry, prose, dance, pantomime, painting, cinema, puppetry and lighting ask the theatre to present them together without their ever having got to know one another".<sup>47</sup> Henceforward "the system of anecdotal theatre must be surpassed and discrepant theatre created, in which the disciplines of writing, acting and staging pass away in tatters and without friendship".<sup>48</sup>

#### *From Duchamp's readymade to Lettrist "mecha-aesthetics"*

If Isou used to define Lettrism as the only avant-garde to have appeared since Surrealism, he now places the movement "in the avant-garde of the avant-garde", a formula that suggests Lettrism's capacity to continually outstrip its most advanced positions in search of the artistic unknown. These formulas of Isou's call for clarification about the reality that comprises the very notion of art. From the perspective of Lettrism, art has only a formal reality. Isou's fundamental conception of the arts is based on an atomization of their structural components. In his *Esthétique du cinéma*, published in 1952, Isou proposed a definition of all artis-

<sup>45</sup> Bordas, 1953.

<sup>46</sup> Both works were published by Gallimard in 1964.

<sup>47</sup> I. Isou, *La Marche des jongleurs*, Gallimard, 1964.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*



tic expression on the basis of its components, whose articulation determines the reality of the artistic act, in contrast to the elements in it that are borrowed and indirect, but dependent on adjoining spheres, in which he distinguished *mecha-aesthetics* (the support: film for the cinema, for example), *aesthetic form* (in painting, the figurative or abstract motif is fundamental, in Lettrism the letter and sign) and *theme* (anecdote).

While we find here the pressing concerns of all the historic avant-garde movements, Isou's extreme formalism has the merit of rejecting both the category of representation and that of abstraction, and reconsidering dimensions – especially the medium – long held back from the possibility of renewal by the domination of anecdote in the theatre and cinema, for instance, on the basis of a new plastic object. This precision preliminary to any work also fits in with the goal of reconstructing the arts that Isou has set himself, taking into account the whole of the material reality on which it has to be built. This is the source of all the controversies with the avant-garde movements that have appeared since the sixties, such as Pop Art or the New Realists.

If the *new amplitude* prophesied by Isou was founded on *the letter and the sign*, the avant-garde movements that came afterward, all of them professing to have grasped the irreversibility of the revolution brought about by Dada, which had destroyed the role of the figurative object in art, adopted its procedures, leading to a generalized neo-Dadaism. The aestheticization of the object of everyday use and the presentation of supports or objects as “works of art” were echoes of Duchamp's “everything is art” and his readymades. In the view of the Lettrists, Chopin's audio-poems only worked because of the importance they assigned to the mechanics (microphone, new audio media), but could not be the foundation for a new poetry and a new music.

Whereas Dada had experimented with new artistic media in a completely arbitrary fashion, Isou's Lettrism envisaged the artistic support and materials in terms of a new plastic form, the letter and the sign, going beyond the propositions of Dada based on an aesthetic reappropriation of the everyday object and the attendant collapse of the figurative imperative. Through the strategic utilization of chance, Dada had arrived at a fertile exploration of supports and set about demolishing all forms of artistic academicism and their figurative justification. Dada, the terminal phase in Isou's period of chiselling, was characterized by its destruction of the figurative plastic object and permitted an unprecedented liberation of dimensions like the material or the support, previously obscured by an age-old academicism. Michel Giroud stresses that the position taken by Dada, essentially one of protest and based on uncertainty and chance, was the sole source of creativity that by rejecting all rationality *a pri-*



*ori*, opened the door to the unexpected in the moment. Schwitters saw himself as a Dadaist, though Raoul Huelsenbeck accused him of deviation, and his *Merzbau* are nothing but a long accumulation of fortuitous encounters, far more fertile than Surrealist paintings or the wholly literary “exploding-fixed beauty” of Breton.

Isidore Isou, investigating the possibilities of “mecha-aesthetics”, dissociated the *aesthetic form*, primary motivation of an artistic renewal, from the *support*, and proposed a widening of its field of application in a series of manifestos like *La peinture parlante*, *La plastique nécrophile* and *La plastique poudriste* and particularly spectacular works like his *Mobile vivant*, exhibited at the Avant-Garde Festival at the Porte de Versailles.<sup>49</sup> The extreme works produced by Lettrism in this treatment of the support bear witness to a constant exploration of mecha-aesthetics on the basis of a new plastic form lacking in Dada. Thus Isou was to propose an “insult” as a support for architecture (“I say shit to you. Live in this insult”), Micheline Hachette would display a bale as support for a still imaginary work of architecture (it was left up to visitors to imagine the house that could be created from this unexpected base), and Gérard-Philippe Broutin the entire population of New York as support for a “living sculpture”. Once again, it is necessary to underline the coherence of the lines of research pursued by the Lettrists, which complemented and merged with one another.

When all is said and done, the Lettrists never subscribed to the idea that the integration of new media and new materials was sufficient to bring about a revolution, any more than the recourse to new technologies, a growing cause of confusion today with the proliferation of those new technologies. Technological development, necessarily para-formal since this sector of invention is not under the control of the artist, who hijacks its formal possibilities to introduce them into the *gratuitousness* of the artistic game, is never more than an auxiliary that multiplies the ways in which a plastic form can be displayed but can never take its place without getting caught in the loop of the Dada experience again. The Lettrists, prompted by their objective of cultural renewal, could not adopt what looked like a return to Dada: the aesthetic appropriation of supports and materials, technological development made into the sole plastic object. In his book *Le film est déjà commencé?*, Maurice Lemaître rejected Technicolor and 3D cinema as means of breathing life back into a fairly moribund genre. The movie of the same name made in 1951, following Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, while continuing in the new directions this had opened up (discrepant cinema with the soundtrack independent of the picture strip, chiselling cinema with the scratching of the film becoming a medium for metagraphic ex-

<sup>49</sup> On the question of mecha-aesthetics, the reader is referred to two key works by Isou, *Le lettrisme et l’hypergraphie dans la peinture et la sculpture contemporaines*, Grassin, 1961; and above all *De l’Impressionnisme au Lettrisme, l’évolution des moyens de réalisation de la peinture moderne*, Filipacchi, 1974.



## La Guerre de la Liberté doit être faite avec Colère

pour l'Internationale Lettriste :

Henry de Béarn, André-Frank Conard, Mohamed Dahou, Guy Ernest  
Debord, Jacques Ellul, Gilles Ivain, Patrick Straram, Gil J Wolman.

Lettrist International leaflet  
in support of the Algerian  
nationalists

pression), initiated a total reexamination of the “mechanics” of cinematography by the introduction of a live show in the hall or of actors doing their best to disrupt the smooth screening of the movie, an experience that to some extent foreshadowed the happenings of the sixties. In later performances Maurice Lemaître was to present himself as a projection screen and Gil J. Wolman, at the première of his *L'anti-concept* in 1952, chose to use a weather balloon instead of a traditional screen. In the appendix to his *Esthétique du cinéma*, Isidore Isou proposed, in the context of his *Film-débat*, a debate among members of the audience over the “death of cinema” instead of the traditional sequence of sounds and images.

From Duchamp to Lettrism, one common denominator (mecha-aesthetics) persists, but it is viewed from different positions. Duchamp asserted “everything is art” without involving any plastic object, thereby destroying the figurative order and its authorized forms – and especially painting – for the integration of supports and materials that could all lay claim to the status of art. Lettrism explores the para-artistic sphere, such as the appropriation of everyday objects, on the basis of a new plastic form that necessarily defines the secondary place that the former occupies in relation to the latter.

What has come of all this today? The “digital” special effects that some people reckon are leading to a renewal of cinema have very quickly found their limits, those of the primacy of the anecdote, which has still not yet been surpassed. In the same way the massive utilization of new technology in what is called contemporary music does not allow us to speak of a “new music”. The Lettrists had already objected to this falsification by the exponents of *musique concrète* and electroacoustic music. The pop heritage, unchanged, remains the dominant plastic form, and electronic material and sampling are merely substitutes for the media (guitar, bass, drums, string orchestration) rendered obsolete by new technologies, but which persist all the same, the obsession with technological innovation symptomatically going hand in hand with a recurrent kitsch. The more adventurous explore the ground broken by avant-gardists long ago, such as Russolo, the great but always neglected innovator, or Cage, and their techniques, such as sampling, which is a continuation of Dada collages and the cut-ups of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin.

Responding to a series of questions in a recent issue of his review *Lettrisme*, Maurice Lemaître denies that poetic Lettrism is a negation of electroacoustic research. Lettrist poetry is based on the letter and on the body as the prime support for its transmission. It registers the chiselling period that preceded it, characterized by the exhaustion of the meaning of words and the abolition of instruments in favour of Russolo’s “art of noises”, in or-



der to realize poetry's age-old dream of being "above all music". Lemaître's *Bilan lettriste*<sup>50</sup> had already proposed a reconsideration of "mechanics" (utilization of the radio, magnetic tapes...) that Isou had formulated since 1946,<sup>51</sup> but which had long remained a dead letter. But here we are touching on a problem inherent in Lettrism and in the permanent lag between its theoretical propositions and their realization. This lag is only apparent and stems on the one hand from the need to tackle other spheres, such as political economy or the theatre, and on the other from the slow dissemination of the early works, due in part to ostracism by the cultural establishment, which by depriving the Lettrists of the material means to take their creation further left them with no other mode of existence than a purely theoretical virtuality.

The question of "mecha-aesthetics" goes well beyond the confines of art and relates also to the choices and positions adopted by the new avant-garde movements from the sixties onward, which Lettrism has never ceased to challenge, on fundamental questions of almost theological scope. The avant-garde movements that came after Lettrism acknowledged what Isou had designated the "chiselling period", and rediscovered Dada, notably through Cage in New York, previously obscured by Surrealism's reign of terror in the plastic arts. In his writings on the Nouveau Réalisme, Pierre Restany describes the Dada experience as fundamental and an experience that numerous later artistic movements would look back to, not in a negative way, as Breton himself had done when promoting the newborn movement of Surrealism as an overcoming of Dadaist anarchy, but as a positive contribution to art. At the moment when Lettrism, seeking to go beyond a general bankruptcy of the arts, proposed an artistic renewal on the basis of a new aesthetic form, the late Abstractionists occupied the terrain despite the persistence of the Surrealists, while the creators of abstraction, like Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, were totally ignored. In New York, on the contrary, Robert Motherwell published a Dada anthology that was at last going to make it possible to retie a thread that had long been broken and stimulate the emergence of post-Dadaist currents like Fluxus. The Lettrists, basing their practice on the imperative of creation, could not accept what they saw as a return to dated forms of expression. They insisted on another way, beyond the figurative, abstraction and Dada.

The overestimation of "mechanics" in the sixties defined a broader historical crisis linked to the glut of technological performance in a rapidly changing society – on this it is worth rereading Georges Perec's *Les choses* – in which the object of consumption, the growth in consumerism and a passivity encouraged by an expansion in leisure time had the effect of manifestly oblit-

<sup>50</sup> Ed. Richard Masse, 1955.

<sup>51</sup> "Lettre ouverte à Frédérique Lefevre", in *La Dictature lettriste*, 1946.



erating the philosophical humanism that had supported the historic avant-garde movements in their avowed desire to “change life” and “transform the world”, ushering in what Jean-François Lyotard was later to label “the modern condition”. The unique creation gave way to serial production, the permanent reappropriation of tradition in the form of aesthetic kitsch, the rejection of history and its subject (humanity), which were denounced as myth and mystification, and the “performability” of interchangeable situations attesting that “it functions”, “it works”. Rationalization was brought about less through work, and the division into classes, as is supposed, than through a mass culture spread by the rapidly expanding media, as Henri Lefebvre had clearly perceived in his *Critique de la vie quotidienne*.

The neo-avant-gardes sought, not without difficulties, to present themselves as a negation of this new rationality, but the majority were unable to avoid its illusions. The appropriation of the everyday object for the purposes of play, justified, as Pierre Restany put it, in the name of a “sociological realism”, represented a dilution of the readymade. The Lettrists too denounced this “retreat”, but only in order to affirm the possibilities that were still open for creation. In his book *L'autre face de l'art*, Pierre Restany distinguished the historic avant-garde movements, such as Futurism, from later lines of research that were not so much the product of groups endowed with a body of theory and a programme as empirical trajectories, carrying out a playful subversion of all codes and all functionalities at the level of everyday existence. In suggesting that the theoretical avant-garde movements had disappeared, along with their insatiable thirst for revolution, Pierre Restany overlooked the persistence of another current, that of Lettrism, more *concerned* – in a paroxysmal manner – *with rupture than with the continuation of a tradition, even an avant-garde one*, and which has never ceased to nourish other movements that came after it.

Did not the polemical dialogue between Isou and the Situationists,<sup>52</sup> ever since the split in 1952 that led to the formation of the Lettrist International, hinge on the only fundamental problem to be solved for the whole of the avant-garde after Dada: did art, stripped of its old justifications, have to disappear, or was there a plastic form capable of re-creating it in its entirety and extending its frontiers? And if art had to disappear and therefore be surpassed as a fragmentary and dated activity, what practice could, starting out from it and opposing it, claim to take over from it? The Situationists, who had adopted the scheme of the *amplique* and the chiselling phases, asserted that it was now necessary to “go beyond art” as a praxis separate from the totality of existence. Creativity had to spill over into daily life and subvert the structures of a society in which humanity could not be “shaped by its

<sup>52</sup> *L'Internationale Situationniste, un degré plus bas que le jarrivisme et que l'englobant*, Poésie Nouvelle, 1960.



own works". Isou's project was founded from the outset on the utopia of an identical passage from a restricted creativity to a generalized creativity tending to the prodigality of actual experience, but for all that not renouncing the sacrifice of artistic creation for an exclusively political solution/revolution. As he stated in an interview given at the time of the exhibition *Poésure et Peintrie*: "What is essential? I will tell you: everything is essential. I want to pursue all disciplines at once. I will continue on my march toward paradisiacal society and concrete eternity in the cosmos."

### *Lettrism and counterculture*

In the field of contemporary culture, Lettrism occupies a paradoxical position: generally ignored by art historians and critics, in spite of its avowed aim of radically renewing this sphere, it is above all on the fringes of official culture that it has experienced its most fertile developments. Isou's film *Traité de bave et d'éternité* and Maurice Lemaître's films are directly cited within the compass of a strange genealogy that commenced under the sign of avant-gardist radicalism and was continued in the ambit of the underground cinema. Lettrism very quickly found itself associated with counterculture (pop culture and various undergrounds) – a thesis first put forward by Michel Lancelot and then taken up by Greil Marcus – from the beat generation to more recent movements such as punk and rap. At the origin of this seductive affiliation, which is not without merit but cannot mask the gulf that separates the historic avant-garde movements from their pop descendants, lies a basic – and predictable – confusion between social criticism, sociology and art. We shall return to this.

To clarify the historic motivation of this collusion, it is necessary to recall the essential role played by William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, in their relationship with international sound poetry and the Parisian avant-garde movements, at their outset often unrecognized, over several generations, in the sixties, and later with what is known as "industrial" music – Throbbing Gristle – which found a place for the cut-up and Dadaist provocation in the world of pop-rock. The international network that broke down the traditionally sealed borders between high culture and popular culture from the sixties onward, in particular through the positions of Maciunas and Fluxus and of Andy Warhol, developed essentially in the context of New York. It finally opened up two not easily reconcilable perspectives: on the one hand some artists, better acquainted with avant-gardist ideas, introduced them into a rapidly expanding popular culture that was still ignored in academic circles (pop music, posters, comics); on the other, there were those who never ceased to seek the destruction of bourgeois culture called for by the Dadaists of Berlin, attempting to demolish the fetishism attached to art and the over-



Guy Debord, Mohamed Dahou and Gil J. Wolman



rated figure of the artist by introducing them into forms of popular culture.

Here Lettrism still occupied a position all of its own: bourgeois culture did not represent its avowed enemy owing to its political postulates,<sup>53</sup> which instead saw society divided into *insiders*, integrated into the economic system and perpetuating it in the same way as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and *outsiders*, marginalized because of their lack of an economic and social role, with youth possessing the “highest degree of externality”. On the plane of cultural superstructures, like art or philosophy, Lettrism made a division between a creative renewal and the eternal return of tried and tested forms and formulas. From this viewpoint, the sociological distinction between *high culture* and *popular culture* lost all relevance. All that mattered was the degree of rupture with and surpassing of a tradition, even where this claimed to be a revolt itself, like Surrealism.

In his book *Lipstick Traces*,<sup>54</sup> however, Greil Marcus points out that in its early days Lettrism was less a continuation of previous avant-garde movements, notwithstanding its pretensions, than a foreshadowing of many aspects of the emerging pop culture. In addition to Isou’s theories on marginality, the performances of Lettrist poetry at the Tabou as well as the conditions of production of the early works, realized with whatever means came to hand, and the experimentation with a “borderline” lifestyle prefigured what would come to be known as counter-culture over the course of the sixties: organized marginality, a parallel society rejecting the established rules, whether those of politics, economics, art or ideology, of a non-playful society.

All the same, Isou right from the start envisaged appropriating everyday forms of communication<sup>55</sup> in the cathedral of arts that he intended to build, especially posters and filmed images. This procedure, of which the Situationists would later make copious use for purposes that were no longer aesthetic but political, by the process of the referent that all appropriation brings with it, was then extended to the whole range of audiovisual means of expression. The hypergraphic approach, with the reappropriation of any sign in the elaboration of this “super-writing”, is not a continuation of the Dadaist collage, which demolishes all representation by the absurdity of its associations, but an attempt to create a higher level of signification on the basis of a non-exhaustive corpus of signs, a level that would go beyond the limits of language and the figurative image. The fertility of a creation can perhaps be gauged by its influence outside the place where it was initially supposed to be applied. Russolo’s ideas – largely kept under wraps for several decades and completely ignored by the exponents of *musique concrète* or serial music, even though they owed a great deal to him – have not found recog-

<sup>53</sup> *Le Soulèvement de la Jeunesse*, vol. I: *Le problème du bicaténage et de l’extériorité*, Escaliers de Lausanne, 1949; vols. II and III were published by Editions CICK in 1971.

<sup>54</sup> Allia, 1998.

<sup>55</sup> “Art makes a continual appeal to the genetic dregs, which it integrates into the framework that has been built up through consciousness and method. [...] By eliminating what is extrinsic (advertising) in the poster, but making use of its forces of double repercussions on the works, the new painting will write letters on the canvas that will be objects with a flourish” (I. Isou, *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort*, in UR, 1950).



nition in the academic circles of contemporary music, but among those who took up his most extreme conclusions at the end of the seventies, making them part of the heritage of a pop-rock in progress.

Lettrism is no exception to this rule and if it is conspicuous by its absence from the official history of the arts, it has not failed to reappear in terroristic fashion on the walls of the great urban agglomerations (as tags). However, the formal similarities should not conceal the lack of compatibility between the aims of counter-cultural dissemination and those of the historic avant-garde movements. In his *Essai sur le bouleversement de la prose et du roman*, Isou did indeed propose hypergraphic frescos, freed from the limits of the book as a traditional support ("the novel in the street"), but his research was exclusively directed at a historic renewal of artistic forms. Roberto Altman, adopting the formula at the time of the construction of the Centre Georges Pompidou, wanted to cover the hoardings of the building site with hypergraphic panels.<sup>56</sup> The "tag" has very different motivations: in its very illegibility, it is a rejection of the dominant code (single and falsely transparent language because it is the voice of the "ruling class"), a refusal to communicate, a "negative without a job" or prospects, that defines, at the worst, a reserved space, a territory in rivalry with other territories – and their owners – and thus pathetically reproduces the logic of the order from which it is excluded, in the form of a gregarious *tribalism*.

Lettrism was no stranger to these attractions – criticism of the dominant code and the false communication that it employs – but its flaunted internationalism meant that it had little sympathy for a tribal "re-territorialization". Thus it made marginality itself the location of a surpassing, open to everyone, placed under the sign of a social utopia: the drawing up of a "new social contract" and not the destruction of the social in favour of a restricted communalism.

Yet it remains true that the popular culture which fuelled the various underground movements, doomed by definition to stasis, has undergone an unprecedented qualitative renewal as a consequence of its adoption of the heritage of the avant-garde movements through the positions of Maciunas, who declared that he wanted to destroy "serious culture" – in a word the academicism of all art, even that of the avant-garde, in its relations with the institutions and authorities. Above and beyond the ready-made, Duchamp's "everything is art" has contributed to the dissolution of art and its dispersal into daily life. All that counter-culture has done is repeat a rupture that elsewhere, in the novel, painting or poetry, had already been made long ago, but it has done so in the field of a "mass" culture that remained a commonplace at once to be demystified, to be freed from the same

<sup>56</sup> See *Apeiros*, new series, no. 5 (utopian aperiodical).



old ideologies in which it inevitably abounds and to be turned into a space for play. Pop music, movies and comic strips do not represent *innovations* or a surpassing of literature or painting, but the production of these new media on an industrial scale has considerably modified our relations with writing and the image. One can see in the return of the avant-garde “recipes” of the past a sign of decay, an inability on the part of society to produce and create new forms and contents. This may be true in part, yet this repetition in the context of mass culture has also been a confirmation of what Isou calls the “chiselling phase”, the destruction of old justifications, in forms that have not changed for centuries.

In effect, both Dada and Fluxus appear to have been the unexpected precursors of pop culture, which then lost its connotations of protest and went on to add to the experience of the historic avant-garde movements. Since then the compartments have ceased to be watertight: the more adventurous developments in pop music have caught up with the practitioners of *musique concrète* and Russolo, graffiti and tags are kept alive by many a contemporary artist, the Z series is fostering cinematographic creativity as well as the classics of the big screen and citation and appropriation have become permanent. This has assuredly been a success on the sociological plane: the distinction between *high culture*, which has never been anything but the culture of the ruling class, and *popular culture* has ceased to be an insuperable barrier. One might object that social, structural relations have not changed and that the *fetishistic* idea of art, far from disappearing, has been extended to everyday life, which it is no longer a question of changing but of aestheticizing by means of the latest – but rather dated – formulas of a technology informed by almost a century of avant-garde.

Isidore Isou created Lettrism on the basis of a paradox that explains – after the event – its numerous dissidences and heresies. Emerging from the margins of the dominant culture, it aspired to become part of it and carry out its research within it, in its pretension, proclaimed from the outset, to shine in the empyrean of a new era, of which its objective contributions – such as nuclear economics, chiselling cinema, infinitesimal aesthetics, hypergraphy and supertemporal art – constituted the preliminary and prophetic threshold. Its necessarily discordant position with respect to established values remains unique to the extent to which it has never ceased to nurture counterculture and overlap with the whole range of such movements while refusing to see itself as being confined by them. Although founded on an obligation to subvert and rebel against all acquired knowledge, it has never stopped trying to integrate the restricted and reserved field of official culture, “avant-garde of the avant-garde” ushering in a



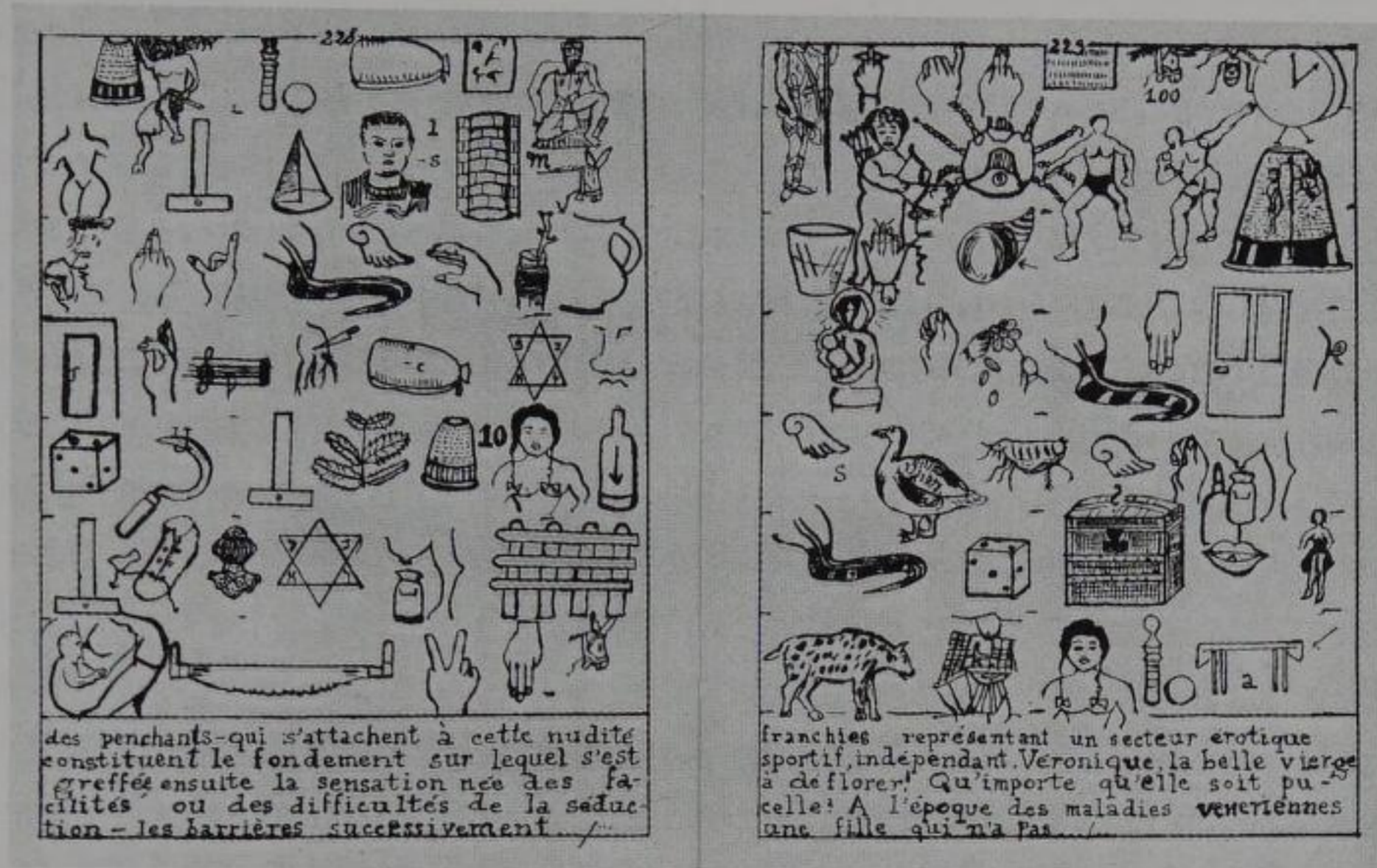
“new civilization” after classicism and romanticism, in order to transform its components in the perspective of its “paradisiacal utopia”.

The breaking away of the Lettrist International in 1952, apart from the pretext furnished by the “Chaplin affair”, was a mark of the discordant resolution of this original contradiction by the dissident Lettrists, but the latter maintained the same demand for a surpassing based on a social utopia. Along with the many controversies that accompanied the historical development of Lettrism, these disagreements do not belong – to the displeasure of the “well-meaning” – to the already lengthy tradition of Surrealist exclusions and invectives but resemble much more closely, if we have to look for a precedent, the “dustups” between Marx and Feuerbach and the Hegelians of the “Left”. Here Lettrism set itself radically apart from all the sociological undergrounds and micro-cultures of protest: the rupture was less with a dominant culture than with its most advanced practices, and with previous avant-garde movements in particular; a rupture founded not on declarations of intent, on an attitude or folklore, but on the degree of creativity, which remains in the last instance the only criterion that matters.

Isou saw in youth the possibility of a revolution, on condition that its scattered “gratuitousness” be channelled into a project in which it could at last affirm its own existence. Subjected to a twofold slavery, to school and family, before encountering the factory walls of a world that it had in no way chosen, youth represented not just a social no-man’s-land but also a trouble zone in which to experiment with *new lifestyles*, practices and languages that were still strangers to the imperative of reproduction. What do Lemaître’s *Canailles* say? A dual affiliation, with Joyce, Céline and Kafka on the one hand and Tarzan and comics on the other: the meeting of two universes that Lemaître was proposing to make coexist at a higher, hypergraphic level. The latter, moreover, felt the need to point out just how interesting comics remained as a place of experimentation and appropriation for hypergraphic ends, but also how much, like movies, they lagged behind their possibilities for renewal.<sup>57</sup> The remains of what had been done away with in literature (anecdote, characters) have been taken up by comics and films, the most recent of the arts, in perpetuity. Even today, the comic strip continues to obey the same rules of mimesis, not to mention the cinema which seems to have forgotten its turbulent and promising beginnings. The sociological importance attained by movies and comics, or by pop music, does not answer the question of their role in the business of demolishing “serious culture”. On the contrary, it will be noticed that this subculture now takes itself quite as seriously as the old forms of academicism.

<sup>57</sup> *Le Lettrisme devant le roman et les arts plastiques, devant le Pop-art et la bande dessinée*, Centre de Créativité, 1972.





Isou concluded his *Manifeste pour un Soulèvement de la Jeunesse*<sup>58</sup> with these highly significant words: “May the young cease to be merchandise and become consumers of their own energy.” As Greil Marcus points out, this neatly captures the dynamism and effervescence of underground circles from the sixties onward. But for Isou marginality went beyond the mere sociological level, it existed permanently and everywhere, from political economy to poetry and taking in cinema and painting. From this point of view the opposition between fringes and establishment had no validity: counterculture, lacking any awareness of its potentialities and of a unitary project, very soon demonstrated its factitious character by serving as a foil to the cultural “spectacle”, and thus has never been anything but an additional market. In the same way the Situationists denounced the efforts of the Provos,<sup>59</sup> the “angry young men” and the beatnik movement, for whom the future necessarily lay in a predictable integration within the factory walls or among the cadres of the “old world”, in assimilation in the form of conspicuous consumption or in a decline into a delinquency with no tomorrow. The Lettrists could not hide their perplexity at this return to fashion of outdated Surrealist and Dadaist ideas, but without losing contact with a youth that was doomed to suffer cultural abuse just as it had already been subjected to social and economic abuse.

Since then the old world has once again taken responsibility for “youth culture”, as have the political parties, and youth does not consume its own energy except through the prerogatives of the market. The value to which it still lays claim, “independence”, says nothing about the “independence” of forms and contents, their capacity to make a break with the old world in its artistic or ideological dimensions. Lettrism is indeed alien to the constituted romanticism of a self-satisfied revolt, or rather it seeks to inscribe it in a lasting framework, and one that is valid for all,

<sup>58</sup> In *Front de la Jeunesse*, no. 1, 1950.

<sup>59</sup> *De la misère en milieu étudiant*, Strasbourg 1966 (translated into English as *On the Poverty of Student Life in Situationist International Anthology*, edited and translated by Ken Knabb, The Bureau of Public Services, Berkeley 1981).



and therefore goes beyond the stage of an existential malaise and a confused anarchism, so that the expressions “changing life” and “transforming the world” become something more than a fleeting and literary impulse. Isou’s arguments, formulated in his *Soulèvement de la Jeunesse*, are no more than the first theoretical step toward an expanded sociality, integrating this “externality”, which only gains in emancipation because of the frameworks, forms and formulas that it constructs, in a break with the shibboleths that have ruled the world so far.

### *Beyond Lettrism*

Lettrism remains a difficult approach owing to the very postulates of its body of theory: the unique conception of creation asserted by Isou leaves very little room for “parallel fictions”. In accepting the historical comprehension – the *amplique* and chiselling phases, artistic formalism – that Lettrism brings, the onlooker enters a system whose developments and application necessarily confirm its postulates, giving it an exemplary value but one that is at the same time a little solitary in its exclusiveness.

Above and beyond this solitude, a real debate is required between Lettrism and other currents that do not share the same theoretical *a priori* and truly represent an “alternative” to the orthodox Lettrist position. It is enough to look at Fluxus to grasp the potential of such a debate, which would cover the basic problems that the avant-garde movements can raise in their encounters and confrontations. The Lettrists are not content with theorizing and producing works. They have included both in the one-way street of a history that they intend to take to its end. By its very orthodoxy the historical reasoning of Lettrism has relegated to its sidelines a number of currents that have started out from divergent positions but pursue similar lines of research. The failure to hold a dialogue with German Dada that goes beyond the level of mere questions of creative antecedence reveals more about a potential debate between two positions that are divergent, as Michel Giroud has clearly shown, but applied to common fields. Likewise, the splitting off of the Lettrist International falls within the framework of its fundamental divergences, which provide evidence of the possibility of finding ways out and alternatives at the same time as they attest to the substance of the initial source. A reading of Isou’s work *La Créatique ou la Novatique* would provide numerous arguments on which to base a resumption of this dialogue over contradictions and oppositions which in these more consensus-oriented days have lost most of their meaning.

What is Lettrism today? Isou continues, as he himself says, to investigate further his previous creations while extending his project to scientific fields, such as medicine and physics, for life



cannot be changed without an improvement in what are inevitably its most concrete aspects. As the realizations proposed within the compass of "excoordism", "infinite of the artistic infinite", show, the Lettrist group is proceeding with its decipherment of this new area opened up by Isou. Avant-garde *passé*? Or surpassed? And by whom or what? For the moment the most recent developments in the whole range of Lettrist research remain unrecognized, and it is not possible to give a verdict on the relevance or irrelevance to the present day of this avant-garde which has left the mark of its passage in theories and works whose real significance is far from having been grasped yet. Besides, the very idea of "relevance to the present day" cannot help but raise once again the problem of a certain relationship with time, with its passing, the direction of its development and the part that avant-garde utopias can play in it.



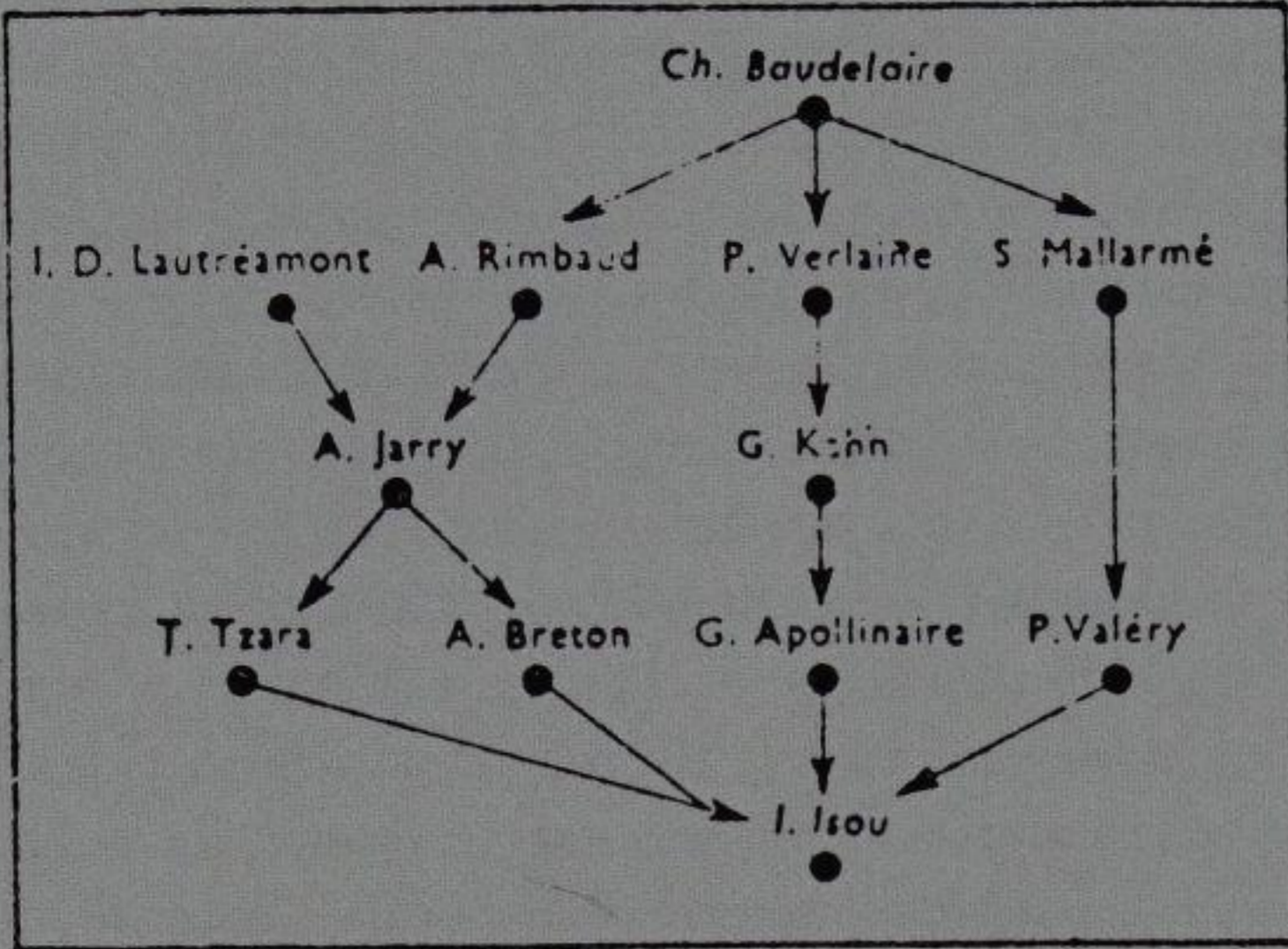


Schéma I : L'évolution spirituelle de la poésie.

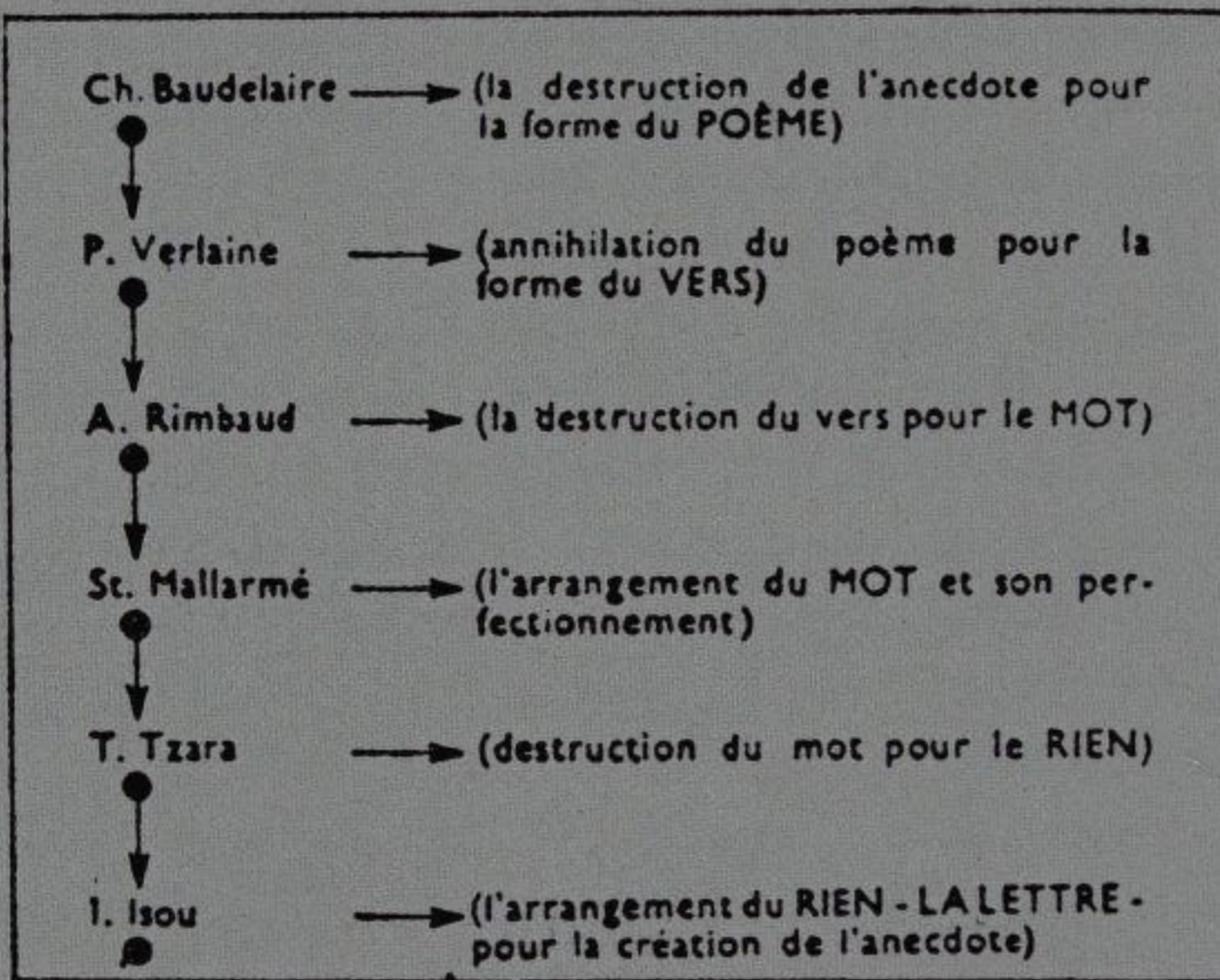


Schéma II : L'évolution du matériel poétique

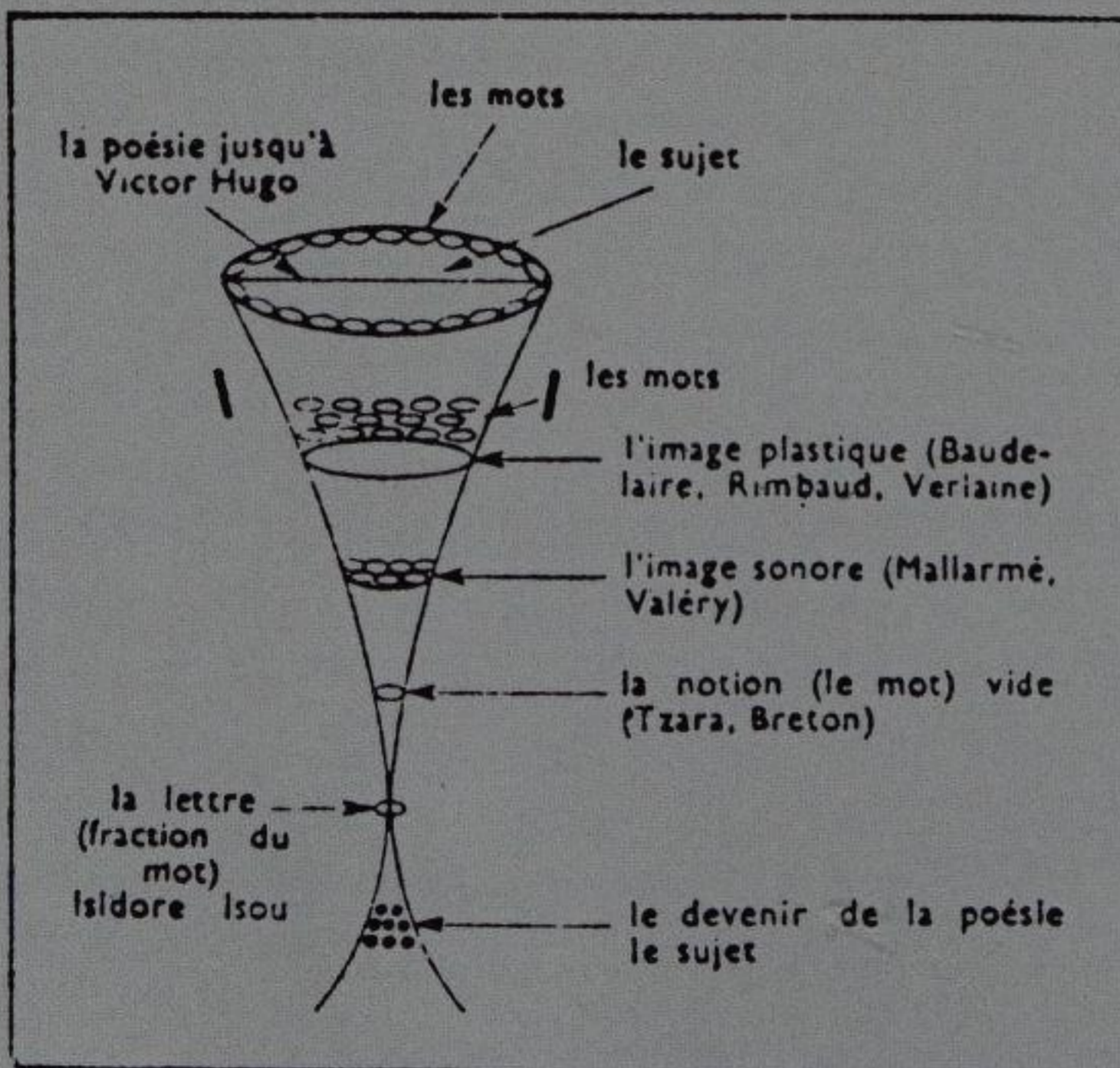


Schéma III : L'évolution de la sensibilité technique dans la poésie



LARMES DE JEUNE FILLE  
— POÈME CLOS —

M dngoun, m diahl Θ<sup>1</sup>hna îou  
hsn îoun inhlianhl M<sup>2</sup>pna iou  
vgaîn set i ouf ! saî iaf  
fln plt i clouf ! mglaî vaf  
Λ<sup>3</sup>o là îhî cnn vîi  
snoubidi î pnn mîi  
A<sup>4</sup>gohà îhîhî gnn gî  
klnbidi Δ<sup>5</sup>blîglîhlî  
H<sup>6</sup>mami·chou a sprl  
scami Bgou cla ctrl  
guel el înhî nî K<sup>7</sup>grîn  
Khlogbidi E<sup>8</sup>vî bîncî crîn  
cncn ff vsch gln *ié*  
gué rgn ss ouch clen *dé*  
chaîg gna pca hi  
Θ<sup>9</sup>snca grđ kr di

1. Θ, t = soupir.
2. M, m = gémissement.
3. Λ, λ = gargarisme.
4. A, a = aspiration.
5. Δ, λ = râle.
6. H, n = ahannement.
7. K, x = ronflement.
8. E, ε = grognement.
9. Θ, ι = soupir.



**Giò Minola**

*Lettrist Poem*, 1975  
Indian ink and tempera  
on canvassed paper  
with applications,  
cm 58.5 × 143.5 × 8  
Private collection, Turin





**Gil J. Wolman**

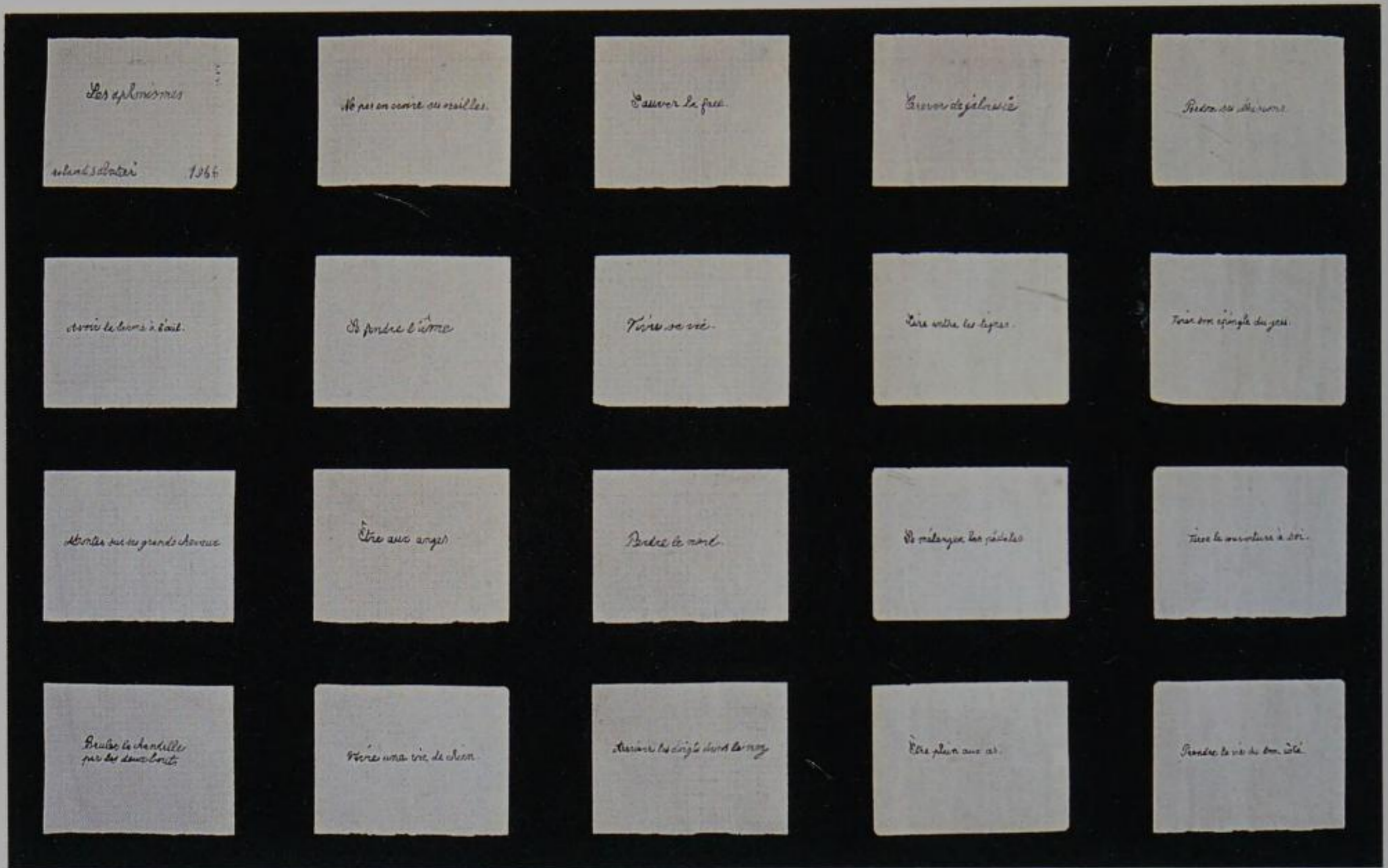
*We Are Abstracts from Father  
to Son, 1956*

Oil and metallic pigments  
on canvas, cm 70 × 60

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba









Faire le noir et le blanc.

Avoir des touches doubles.

Être plus haut  
que son œil.

Parler pour ne rien dire.

Se briser le cœur

Attendre les angles.

Être entre deux.

Boire le monde.

Être de peur.

Boyer du noir.

Promettre la mort.

Poser la face.

Prendre sur l'or.

Être au-dessus.

Être le danger.

Sourire aux anges.

Mourir de doute.

Être un mauvais coton.

Être la poussière.

Ne plus se voir.



**Maurice Lemaître**  
*Lettrist Poem-Making*  
*Machine, 1966*  
(photo Archives Eric Fabre)





**Isidore Isou**  
*Infinitesimal and Super-temporal Library*, 1997  
(photo Musée de l'Object, Blois, France)









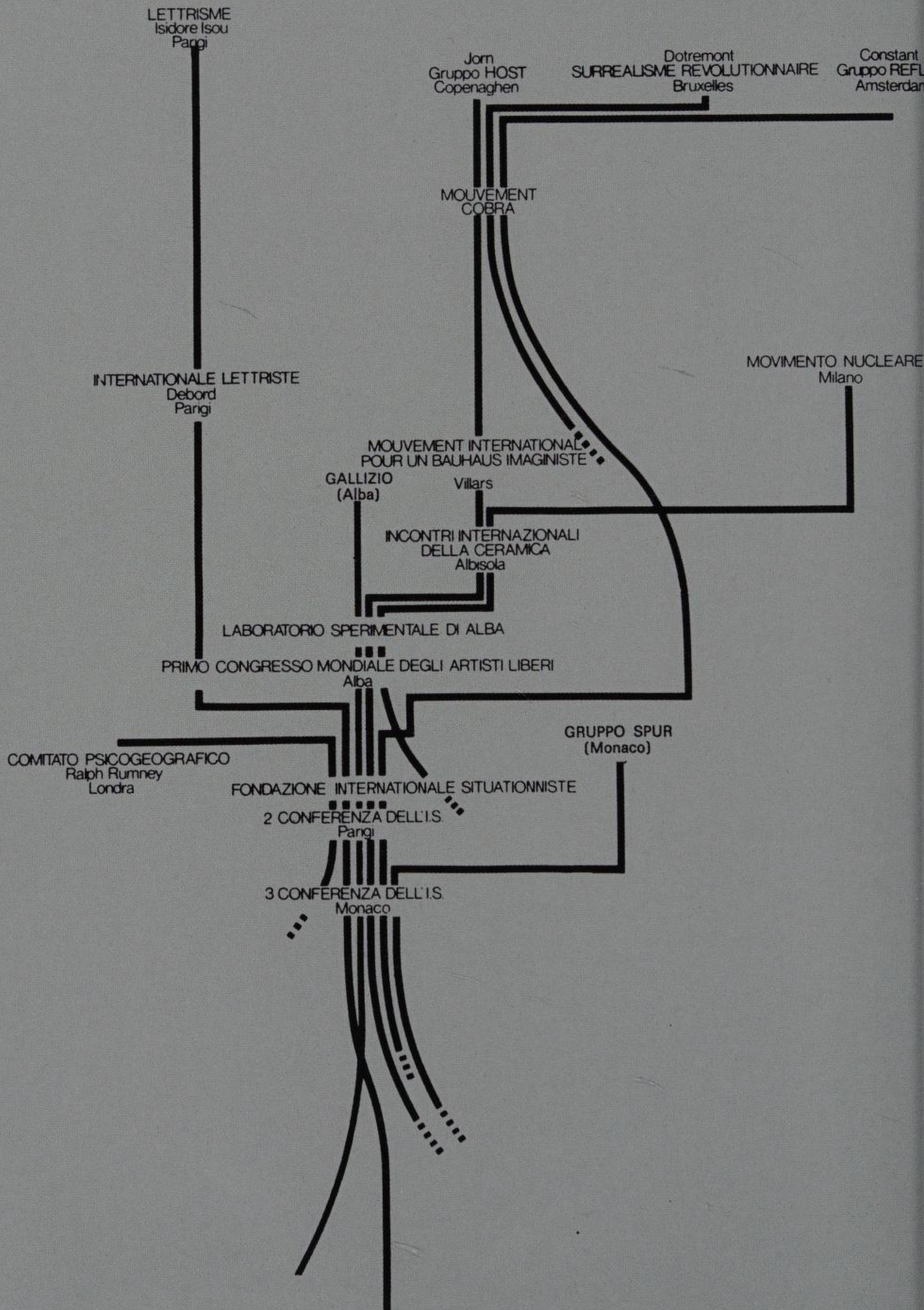
# Situationism

*edited by*  
Mirella Bandini

Pierre Alechinsky  
Karel Appel  
Constant  
Corneille  
Pinot Gallizio  
Asger Jorn



1948  
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“**I**n 1952, four or five rather questionable individuals in Paris decided that it was time to try to surpass art. By a lucky coincidence, the old lines of defense that had knocked down the preceding offensives of the social revolution had been crossed. The opportunity had come to launch another attack. To surpass art represents ‘the northwest passage’ in the geography of real life; it has been sought after for more than a century, in particular since the time of the self-destruction of modern poetry. The previous attempts, in which so many explorers were lost, had never produced immediate results [...]. The cause had never suffered a similar defeat, leaving the battlefield empty, until the moment that we lined up” (Guy Debord, introduction to the fourth Italian edition of *La société du spectacle*, Florence 1979).

“They have often attributed me with being responsible for the origins and development of May ’68. But I would rather believe that what I did in 1952 was even more unpleasant and more long-lasting. [...] I practiced an extreme nihilism in my early youth in Paris [...]. The people I respected the most were Lautréamont and Cravan [...]. The last possibility of my returning to a normal course of existence one day disappeared there [...]. I met rebels and the poor mostly [...]. I deliberately kept myself away from participating in any groups that were then passing for intellectuals and artists” (Guy Debord, *Panegyrique*, Paris 1989).

The creation of the Situationist International (1957–1972) was the result of the complex historical and theoretic components expressed through its three great protagonists and theorists: Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, and Constant who, along with Pinot Gallizio, came from cultures that were respectively French, Danish, Dutch and Italian, and, in turn, were represented by Lettrism, the Cobra group and



the Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste (MIBI). The radical criticism of art theorized by the Situationist International (SI) has distant matrices: it is therefore important to find its origins and trace the evolution of the individuals and movements that contributed to its creation.

From this viewpoint, the preliminary stage of the movement acquires more and more importance, starting from the time when the twenty-one-year-old Debord formed the small International Lettrist group in Paris in 1952 with three other young intellectuals, Michèle Bernstein, Gil J. Wolman, and Mohamed Dahou. After belonging for a very brief period to the Lettrism of Isidore Isou, Debord formed a secessionist group of his own. He began a close and implacable analysis of the conditions of social life aggregating some members of different nationalities – for the most part North Africans and foreigners residing in Paris – and evolving some theses of Isou’s Lettrism through the publication of the bulletin *Potlatch* which was distributed free. Regarding its symbolic value, Debord wrote: “The non-salable goods which this free bulletin can distribute are desires and unedited problems, and the only return gift will be profundity on the part of others.”

Debord chose the title deliberately: the *potlatch* is not an equivalent of the rule of exchange but the opposite act, and anti-capitalist par excellence; it attacks the idea of exchange as the essential element in the capitalist market of the accumulation of wealth, even though this interpretation represents a rejection of the initial notion of *potlatch* which is a political form. In this process of challenge and destruction, Debord’s suicide in 1994 is to be considered his ultimate act. The words that were repeated in every number – “All texts published here may be fully reproduced, adapted or partially quoted even without any indication of the origin” – would later appear in the review *Internationale Situationniste*. With a Dadaist type zero setting, Debord viewed the overthrow of culture and of society as inseparable: for him and his group, art and politics were to be faced together from then on.

The objectives that Lettrism first elaborated and largely subsumed are: to provoke an opposition to and the revision of old cultural values; to challenge and overthrow the arts; to launch the potential of the young again; to transform architecture into anti-architecture. The core concept of the SI, “to surpass art”, revolves around the idea of a life of “passion” and a criticism of everyday life in a revolutionary key, something that will be achieved through the “creation of situations” (and not through the expression of already existing situations).<sup>1</sup> Debord further developed the concept of *détournement* that Isou had already used as the technique of the devaluation and reversal of already structured cultural elements, and that Lettrism had organized through “metagraphy” or multiple writing in the form of collages.<sup>2</sup> Metagraphic or *détournement*



Guy Debord in 1959



Asger Jorn with one of his sculptures, 1955

<sup>1</sup> The Isou Lettrists considered traditional art dead by then; their purpose was to reconstruct the world under the banner of a generalized *creativity*, and no longer on economy.



techniques were used by Debord in his films together with *ciselure* or the cancellation of the images; in the Situationist cartoons through the substitution of the texts with new ones; and by Jorn in his painted or *modifiés* pictures. The best known examples by Debord are *La société du spectacle* of 1967 with *detournées* phrases from Marx and Hegel,<sup>3</sup> and the two books of *écriture détournée* by Jorn and Debord, *Fin de Copenhague* (1957) and *Mémoires* (1959).

In the first part of his last film, *Guy Debord, son art, son temps* (1994), which may be considered his spiritual testament, the films *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* and *Mémoires* are re-evoked as the most important references of the initial period. *Mémoires*, a work “composed entirely of prefabricated elements”, is divided into three parts based on three fundamental dates: 1952, with his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* on a white screen with a sound track and a black screen without one; 1952 again, with the splitting off of Lettrist International (abbreviated IL) from Lettrism; and 1953, when IL set off to a strong start using a page with a big red stain in the centre and a slogan taken from a soap advertisement, “The dirt disappears”. The premises of the Situationist Unitarian Urbanism, along with the concepts of “psycho-geography” and of *dérive*, descend from Isou’s proposal of *infinitésimale* architecture articulated by the transposition and substitution of constructive elements according to the sense and will of the inhabitant. The IL had already established these concepts in the early fifties through their harsh criticism of the functionalist and rationalist urbanism of the times, and they respond to the search for an interaction between behaviour and urban space that is to be used in a new, playful, dynamic way. In the project of mobile, changeable structures in which the inhabitants no longer have fixed residences but live like nomads (Constant’s suspended mobile cities, 1959), psycho-geography serves as a spontaneous, playful exercise in daily life that *dérive*, i.e. roaming freely without a fixed itinerary (its forerunner was the Surrealist *flânerie*), implements in a new human dimension based on the liberation of desire and the explosion of subjectivity as opposed to the conditioning of consumerist needs.<sup>4</sup>

“The real revolutionary problem is that of free time [...]. Its organization, together with that of the freedom of a population forced to work *a bit less* continuously, has been a necessity for the capitalist state as well as for its Marxist successors. It has been limited everywhere to the degradation of stadiums or television programmes. In this regard, we denounce the immoral condition and misery imposed on us [...]. One single condition seems worthy of our consideration: the setting up of an integral pastime [...]. The construction of *situations* will be the continuous achievement of a great deliberately chosen game [...]. Contributing to it will be a criticism

<sup>2</sup> Pre-Situationist *détournement* was theorized by Debord and Gil J. Wolman in “Mode d’emploi du détournement”, in *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 8, Brussels 1960. The small IL group had experimented with the Lettrist metagraphic techniques in two group exhibitions: the first at the Galerie Double Doute in Paris in 1954, and the second at the Galerie du Passage that same year, with the participation of Debord, Conord, Fillon, Ivain and Wolman.

<sup>3</sup> Of the two hundred and twenty-two Situationist theories making up the book, paragraph 207 is quoted here: “Ideas improve. The sense of the words participates therein. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implicates it. It holds the author’s sentence closely, it makes use of his expressions, it cancels a false idea, and substitutes it with the correct one.” And paragraph 208: “*Détournement* is the opposite of a quotation, of theoretic authority that is always falsified due to the simple fact that it becomes a quotation: fragments torn from their context, from their own movement, and in the last analysis from their time as a global reference [...]. It is the fluid language of anti-ideology.”

<sup>4</sup> G. Debord, “La théorie de la *dérive*”, in *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 9, Brussels 1956; republished in *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 2, Paris 1958. For documentation about the Surrealist *flânerie*, see M. Bandini, *La vertigine del mondo. Percorsi surrealisti*, Rome 1986.



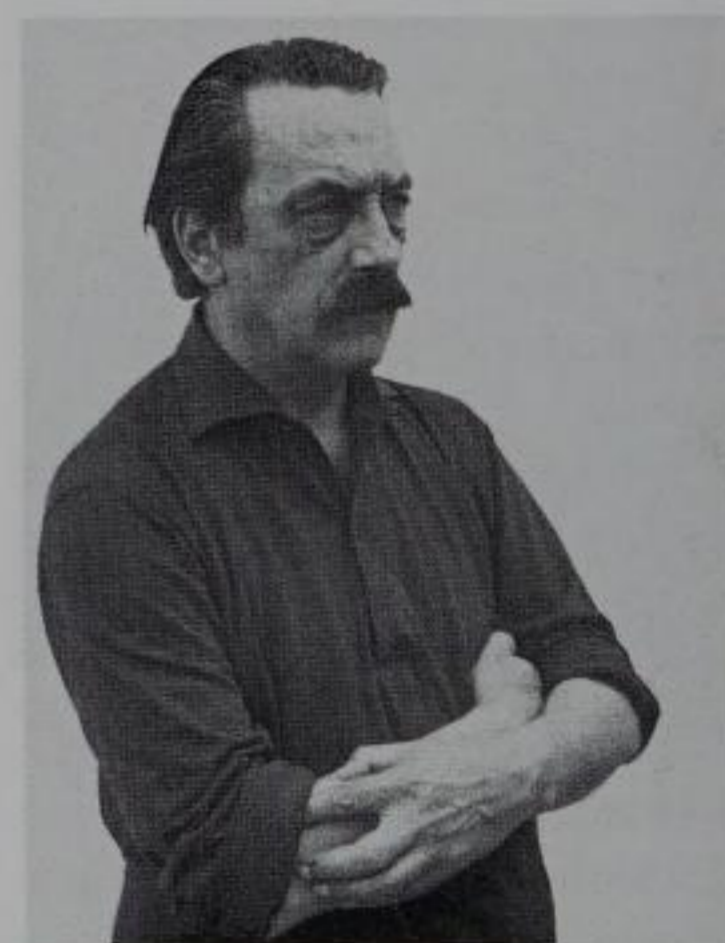


Constant in his studio.  
Amsterdam, circa 1960

of behaviour, and its influence on city planning and the technical means of the environment, the basic principles of which we know. It will be necessary to incessantly reinvent the supreme attraction that Fourier indicated in the free play of positions” (for the Lettrist International: M. Bernstein, A. F. Conord, M. Dahou, G. Debord, J. Fillon, Véra, G. J. Wolman, in *Potlatch*, no. 7, Paris 1954).

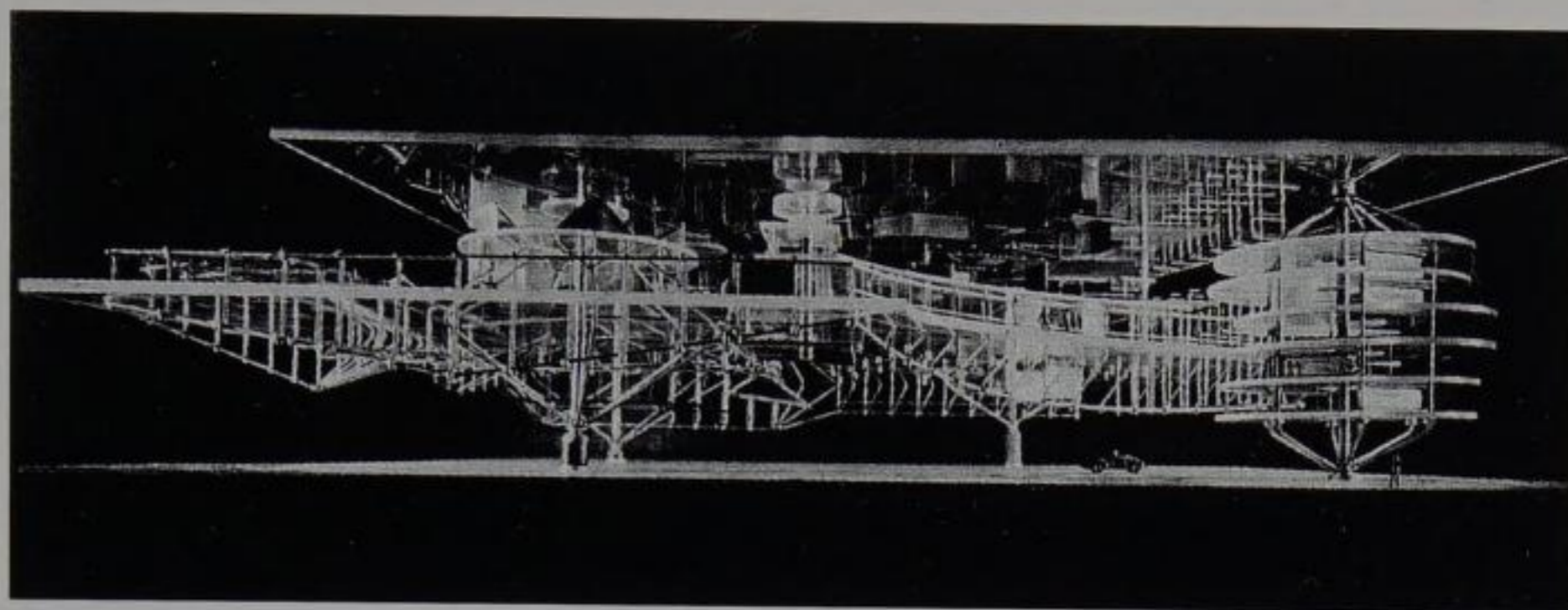
The issue of free time (*loisir*) and play was posed therefore from the very beginning, at the foundation of the Lettrist International in rapport with its ever-growing role. A debate arose about the use of the latest technical means and the consequence of creating new alienations even though these permitted man to lead a life under the sign of play and desire (Constant’s “technocracy”). Attention to the commonplace was one of the focal points discussed by Debord and his group during the years between 1952 and 1954, and starting in 1962 it became the centre of Situationist action. Debord’s Lettrists had divided the city of Paris (and London) into different psychic-climate zones, and into sad and pleasant (not elegant) quarters; they had revealed the environmental and even brusque change of one individual street according to a psycho-geographic criterion linked to the *dérive*.

“The Lettrist International proposes that you construct life emotionally [...]. In Paris, it recommends that its readers frequent Con-



Pinot Gallizio. Alba, circa 1960





trescarpe (the continent), the Chinese quarter, the Jewish quarter, the Butte-aux-Cailles (the labyrinth), Aubervilliers (at night), the Medicolegal Institute, Rue Dauphine, Buttes-Chaumont (the game), the quarter of Merri, Park Monceau, Ile Saint-Louis, Pigalle, les Halles, Rue Sauvage” (the editorial “Panorama intelligent de l’avant-garde à la fin du 1955”, in *Potlatch*, no. 24, Paris 1955).

Debord defines the Ideal Palace of the postman Cheval as “psycho-geographical in architecture”, and Jacques Fillon (like Breton) has himself photographed inside it as Debord did against the background of Aubervilliers (*Potlatch*, no. 20, 1955). The historical reference is to the excursions and visits in Paris promoted by the Dada movement, in particular to the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre in 1921, under the guidance of Tzara, Aragon, Breton, Eluard, and Picabia; while the programme for the other visits was articulated around the Musée du Louvre, the Buttes-Chaumont, the Gare Saint-Lazare, Mount Petit Cadonas, the Canal de l’Ourcq, etc.<sup>5</sup>

The “critique of everyday life” was related in those years to the theory of the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre; Debord attended his seminars at the universities of Nanterre and Strasbourg, and for a brief period they were friends.<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre’s thought, prior to its influence on the Situationists, was widely diffused throughout the countries of Northern Europe, especially among the artists and critics of the Cobra group (1948–1951), and in particular with its theorists, Asger Jorn and Constant. Through them, the IS made vital new contributions. This group, the first international movement that appeared in Europe in the circle of Surrealist culture and dialectic materialism following the Second World War, brought together young Danish, Dutch and Belgian “experimental” artists who were politically involved in the left, and whose work, based on a strict connection between experimentalism and the hypothesis of a popular figurative communication (deriving from Breton), meant to bring about a transformation of everyday life.<sup>7</sup>

“Our aim is to flee from the realm of reason which has been nothing but the idealized realm of the bourgeois [...]. The aesthetic law is that of our desires which enrich the theme determined by

<sup>5</sup> The Surrealist research dealing with the psychological interaction on the urban environment of Paris, experienced in a behavioural key together with the experimentation of nomadic itineraries in the city, were passed on to the Cobra group, and then through Jorn and Constant to the IS.

<sup>6</sup> For the influence of Henri Lefebvre’s Marxist thought on the IS, see R. Gombin, *Les origines du gauchisme*, Paris 1971; the introduction by M. Spinella to H. Lefebvre, *Il marxismo e la città*, Milan 1973; H. Lefebvre, *Le temps des méprises*, Paris 1975 (Italian trans. Milan 1980, with an introduction by Mirella Bandini).

<sup>7</sup> The Cobra group (whose acronym was created by Dotremont with the initial letters of the three capitals, Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam) was founded in Paris in 1948 with the fusion of the Danish group Host (Jorn), the Dutch group Reflex (Constant), and the Belgian Surréalisme Révolutionnaire (Dotremont and Noiret).



human morals by diversifying it [...]. Thus, the goal of art is moral first, and then aesthetic. While for the upper classes, on the contrary, art, like life, is first and foremost aesthetic. It sees the moral as a critical result of the aesthetic" (Asger Jorn, "Discours aux pingvins", in *Cobra*, no. 1, Brussels 1949).

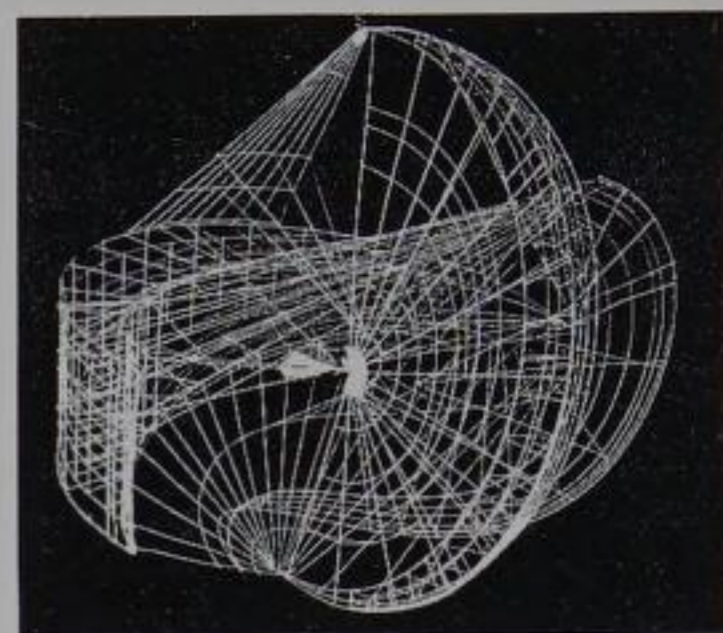
"The liberation of our social life, which we propose as an elementary commitment, will open the doors of a new world to us [...]. It is impossible to know a desire unless it is satisfied, and the satisfaction of our elementary desire is the revolution. Therefore, it is in the revolution that the creative activity is to be placed, that is to say, the cultural activity of the twentieth century [...]. Dialectic materialism has taught that awareness depends on social circumstances. And when these prevent us from satisfying ourselves, our needs then force us to discover our desires, and thus to experimentation which is the broadening of knowledge" (Constant, "C'est notre désir qui fait la révolution", in *Cobra*, no. 4, Brussels 1949).

The term "desire" used here by Jorn and Constant anticipates its Situationist use by Debord. The two theorists of the Cobra group derive the concept from its specific historical Surrealist meaning; that is, the libidinal energy of the psyche which is productively aimed at seeking the total freedom of the being, its removal being the result of social repression. In May 1968 in Paris, "desire" would invent new forms of struggle, new uses of the word, new writings, and it would turn political struggles into a continuous experiment.

When the Cobra experience came to an end in 1951, Jorn continued its theses, founding in 1953 the International Movement for the Imaginist Bauhaus (MIBI), whose members for a very brief time were Appel, Alechinsky, Enrico Baj and the Nuclear Painting Movement. Pinot Gallizio joined in 1955, Constant in 1956. The immediate aim of the MIBI was to oppose the industrial design functionalism that was being championed in that period by the new Bauhaus in Ulm directed by Max Bill.

There radiated from the MIBI Experimental Laboratory at Alba texts and ideas that were soon united with the positions of Debord's Lettrist International in Paris. The fusion occurred at the First World Congress of Free Artists that Jorn and Gallizio organized at Alba in 1956 along the lines of the internationality of the Cobra congresses, forming in this way the first link in the chain that led to the foundation of the IS the following year:

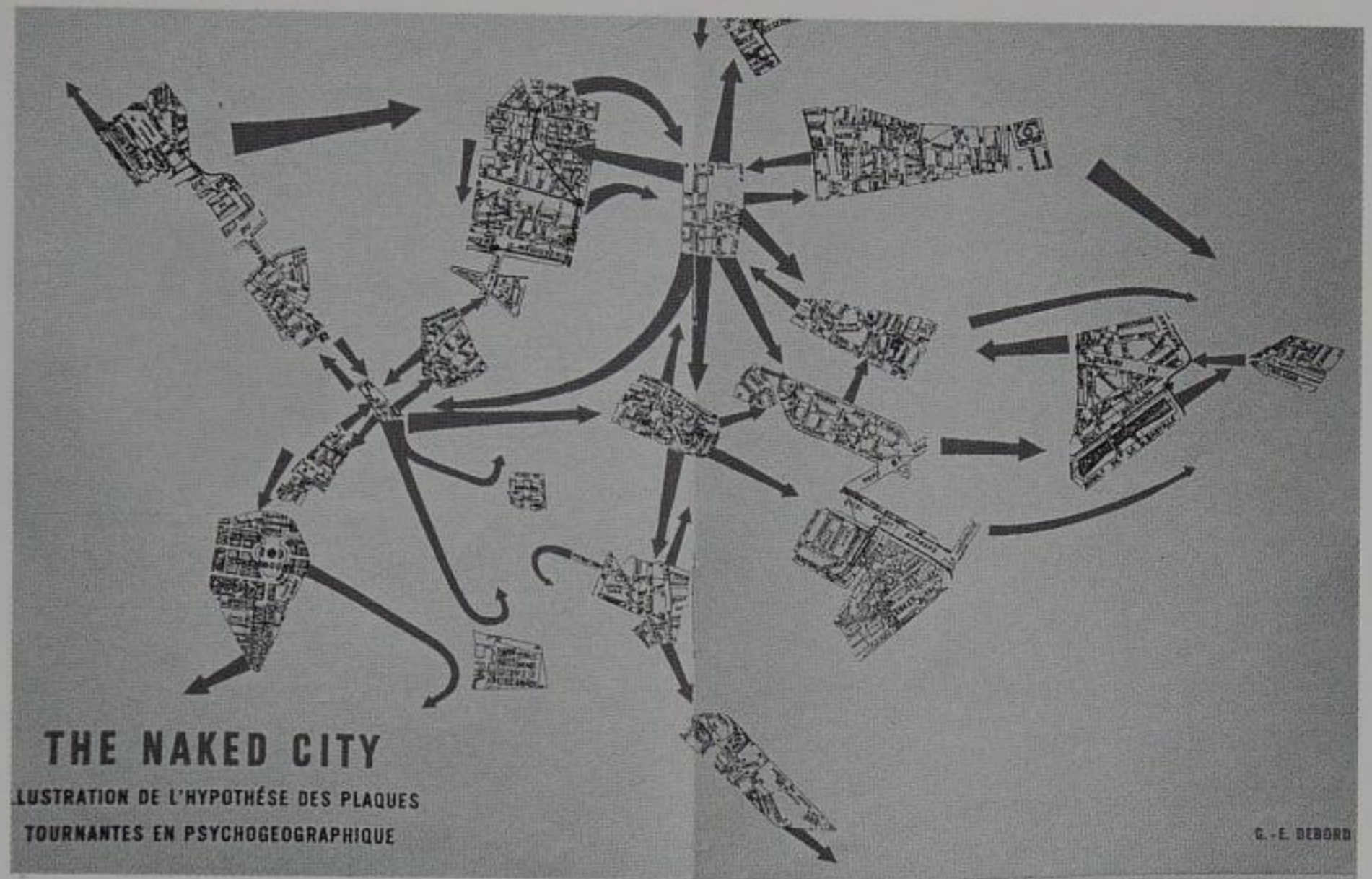
"The Congress of Alba will indicate one of the difficult stages, in the struggle for a new culture, of that general revolutionary movement characterizing the year 1956, which has appeared as the first political result of the pressure of the masses in USSR, Poland and Hungary [...] as well as in the successes of the Algerian insurrec-



Constant, *Exploration of Space*, 1957, steel and Plexiglas



Guy Debord, *The Naked City*, 1957



Constant, *Mechanical Nebula*, 1958, steel and Plexiglas

tion and the important strikes in Spain. The great hopes of the movement depend on the development of these events” (editorial “La Plate-forme d’Alba”, in *Potlatch*, no. 27, Paris 1956).

“We live in an era of profound transformations in different fields which will have decisive consequences for contemporary architecture. We address this appeal to architects so that they may consider these new proposals attentively [...]. For the first time in history, architecture can become an authentic constructive art. An art whose plastic expressivity will originate from the organization and assemblage of its elements in the same way that a painter organizes his brushstrokes. Today, architecture has an infinitely rich constructive technique at its disposal that makes it an art that is absolutely independent of pictorial or sculptural decoration, yet an art that does not fall into the sterility of functionalism. It will be able to utilize this technique as an artistic material much like sound, colour, or the word. It will be able to integrate the articulation of volumes and voids just like a sculptor, and the spatial colourism of painting in order to create a complete art that by its very nature will be both lyrical (because of the means used) and social” (Constant, *Speech to the First World Congress of Free Artists*, Alba 1956).<sup>8</sup>

While Constant’s *New Babylon* mobile and spatial constructions are prefigured in this passionate declaration, Jorn confirms at the same time the artist’s need to be closely related to society:

“Create, artist, don’t talk. This phrase has been repeated too often by people who felt they could speak for us, that is, politicians, intellectuals, art critics, etc. I create, I think, I speak. All one’s thoughts do not necessarily come from the mouth, man’s entire body thinks or speaks. One speaks with gestures as one does with a tongue, and just like the dancer and the musician, the painter

<sup>8</sup> Published in G. Berreby (edited by), *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l’Internationale Situationniste*, Paris 1985.

In 1953, Constant had signed the manifesto *Pour un colorisme spatial* with the architect Aldo van Eyck.



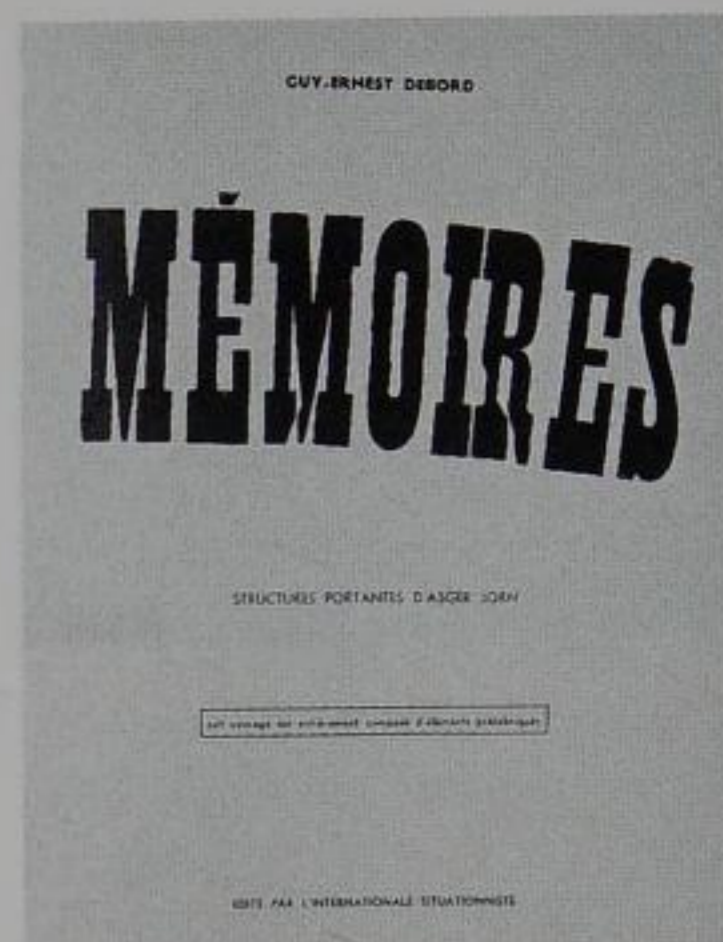
speaks with gestures. The pictorial creation is in fact a transmission of gestures [...]. Since I have always forced myself to establish close contacts with people in general and intellectuals, I am obliged to acknowledge that our movement can only be considered an avant-garde movement. There are two conditions: first of all, because it is isolated and lacks the support of the powerful; and then, because it is directed at an apparently impossible and useless struggle" (Asger Jorn, "Speech to the First World Congress of Free Artists", Alba 1958, in *Pour la Forme*, Paris 1958).

The urban project, the fundamental element of an integral new dimension of life "where all artistic activity comes together to construct new environments of life and behaviour through play, nomadism, adventure [...] and surpasses art", was the primary objective leading to the creation of the IS in Italy in 1957.<sup>9</sup> Together with their attacks on the cultural industry of the time, they implemented techniques to overthrow it, among these, Gallizio's "industrial paintings" which, starting in 1958, were produced in the Experimental Laboratory of Alba. Based on the quantitative ("industrial") principle of production, these were created with long rolls of canvas that were sold in pieces in order to decorate the Unitary Urbanism environments. One outstanding example is Gallizio's *Cavern of Antimatter* of 1959, the first "industrial painting" environment in which he literally covered the walls of a Paris gallery with one hundred and forty-five metres of painting.

"The Situationists, the specialized explorers of play and free time, are well aware of how the visual aspect of cities is related to the psychological effects it may produce, and these must be calculated. Our conception of city planning is not limited to constructions and functions, but is open to any use that one can make or imagine [...]. This use will have to change according to social conditions, and our vision of city planning is primarily a dynamic one" (Constant, "Le grand jeu à venir", in *Potlatch*, no. 1, Paris 1959).

The *Gypsy Camp* conceived by Constant at Alba in 1956 became the forerunner of his mobile Situationist cities (*New Babylon*): by using a system of movable dividing walls under a single covering it was possible to modify the internal arrangement according to the number and needs of the inhabitants.

Between 1957 and 1972, the IS became an international organization with seventy members of sixteen different nationalities which, through exclusions, resignations, and divisions, acted on the European scene under Debord's inflexible leadership. Until 1960–1962 it included Jorn, Constant, Gallizio, and the German group SPUR; after their expulsion, new protagonists, Raoul

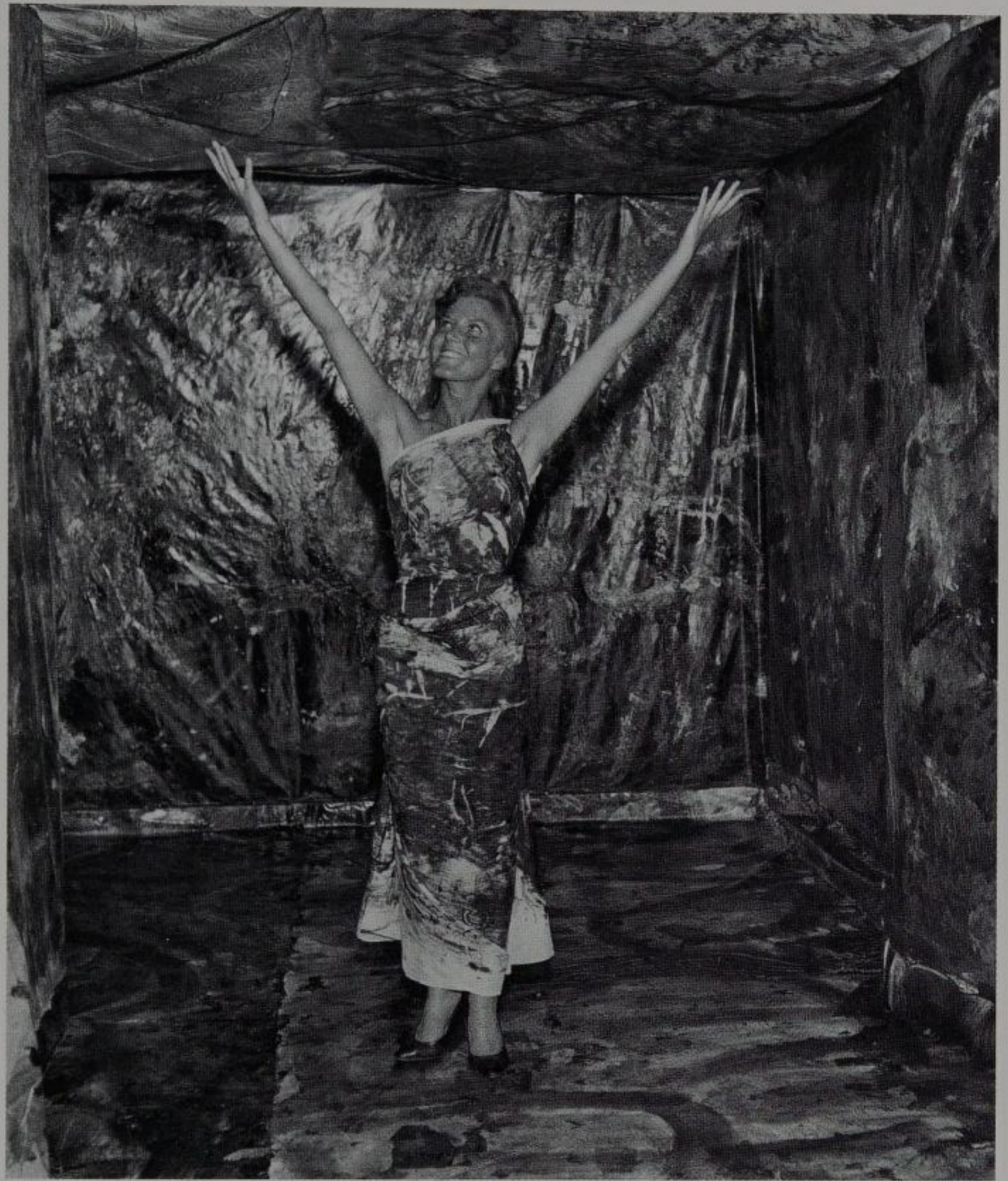


Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, *Mémoires*, 1959

<sup>9</sup> The Situationist International was founded at Cosio d'Arroscia (Imperia, Italy) in July 1957 with the fusion of the IL, the MIBI and the Psychogeographic Committee of London. The founding members included Debord, Jorn, Gallizio, Michèle Bernstein, Walter Olmo, Piero Simondo, Elena Verrone, and Ralph Rumney, but after a few months Olmo, Simondo, Verrone and Rumney were expelled. The documents relative to the origin and history of the IS were published in M. Bandini, *L'estetico, il politico. Da Cobra all'Internazionale Situazionista 1948–1957*, Rome 1977 (French transl. Marseille 1998). Regarding G. Debord, see A. Jappe, *Debord*, Pescara 1992; Marseille 1995; Rome 1999; for the history of the IS, see J.-F. Martos, *Histoire de l'Internationale Situationniste*, Paris 1989.



Pinot Gallizio, *Cavern of Antimatter*. Galerie René Drouin, Paris, 1959  
(Universal Photo)



Asger Jorn, *Poussin (A Detourné Painting)*, 1962

Vaneigem, Attila Kotány, and René Vienet, led the movement toward an essentially political reorganization. Friction with the artistic wing began in fact in 1960 with the break with Constant and Unitary Urbanism which was considered reformist and too closely connected to techno-scientific structures.

The axis returned to be centred on the “situation”, constructed or self-managed *inside* everyday life. And with it, the continual and increasingly radical criticism of a society based on commerce and the spectacle, and of its alienation and reversal, which culminated in Debord’s well-known essay *La société du spectacle* in 1967.

The complex issue of the “surpassing art” that had begun in 1957 concluded with the work of art being rejected as a revolutionary means: “When the previous avant-gardes presented themselves, they declared the excellence of their methods and principles, and consequently that they had to be judged by their works. IS is the first artistic organization that bases itself on the radical insufficiency of all possible works, and their significance, success or failure can only be judged by the revolutionary action of the times” (editorial “Sur l’emploi du temps libre”, in *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 4, Paris 1960). This position was subsequently confirmed, just before the expulsion of the artistic wing, in the *Man-*



Pinot Gallizio selling his  
*Industrial Painting* by the metre  
in Munich, 1959



*ifeste* of 1960 (signed by Debord, Jorn, Constant, Wyckaert, Gallizio and the SPUR group):

“We propose the autonomous organization of a new culture, independent of the current political and union systems [...]. What are the principal features of the new culture that will contrast with those of a traditional one? Rather than the spectacle, the Situationist culture introduces total participation. Rather than traditional art, it organizes moments that are directly experienced. Rather than fragmented art, production will become collective and anonymous with the use of all elements (since works of art will no longer be accumulated and commercialized, this culture will not be dominated by a need to leave its traces). Rather than a unilateral art, the Situationist culture will be an art of dialogue and interaction [...]. Each and every one will become an artist



Pinot Gallizio with some members of the SPUR group. Alba, Experimental Laboratory of the Situationist International, 1960 (photo Monika Maier, Munich)



at a superior level, that is the producer-user of a total creation in which the criterion of the new will rapidly disappear” (*Internationale Situationniste*, no. 4, Paris 1960; *SPUR*, no. 1, Munich 1960).

But at the fifth IS conference at Göteborg in 1961, a report by Vaneigem’s was approved whereby the possibility of intervention in this new course was denied to works of art, even Situationist ones: “In the capitalist or pseudo anti-capitalist world, life is organized like a spectacle [...]. It is not a matter of elaborating the spectacle of rejection but rather rejecting the spectacle [...]. Its destructive elements must not be works of art. Once and for all, there is no Situationism nor are there Situationist works of art” (*Internationale Situationniste*, no. 7, Paris 1962).



**Pierre Alechinsky**

*Oh, The Lovely Days (Thinking  
about Samuel Beckett), 1966*

Acrylic on lined paper,  
cm 117.2 × 150.1

GAM Galleria Civica d'Arte  
Moderna e Contemporanea,  
Turin





**Pierre Alechinsky**  
*Untitled*, 1961  
Acrylic on lined paper,  
cm 100 × 140  
Private collection, Turin





**Karel Appel**

*Untitled, 1955*

Oil on canvas, cm 77 × 97

GAM Galleria Civica d'Arte  
Moderna e Contemporanea,  
Turin





**Karel Appel**

*Face*, 1963

Tempera on lined paper,  
cm 36.5 x 34.6

Courtesy of Galleria Narciso,  
Turin (photo Padovan)





**Constant**

Sketch for the cover of the  
volume *Constant*, 1950  
Indian ink and watercolour  
on paper, cm 17 x 13.5  
GAM Galleria Civica d'Arte  
Moderna e Contemporanea,  
Turin



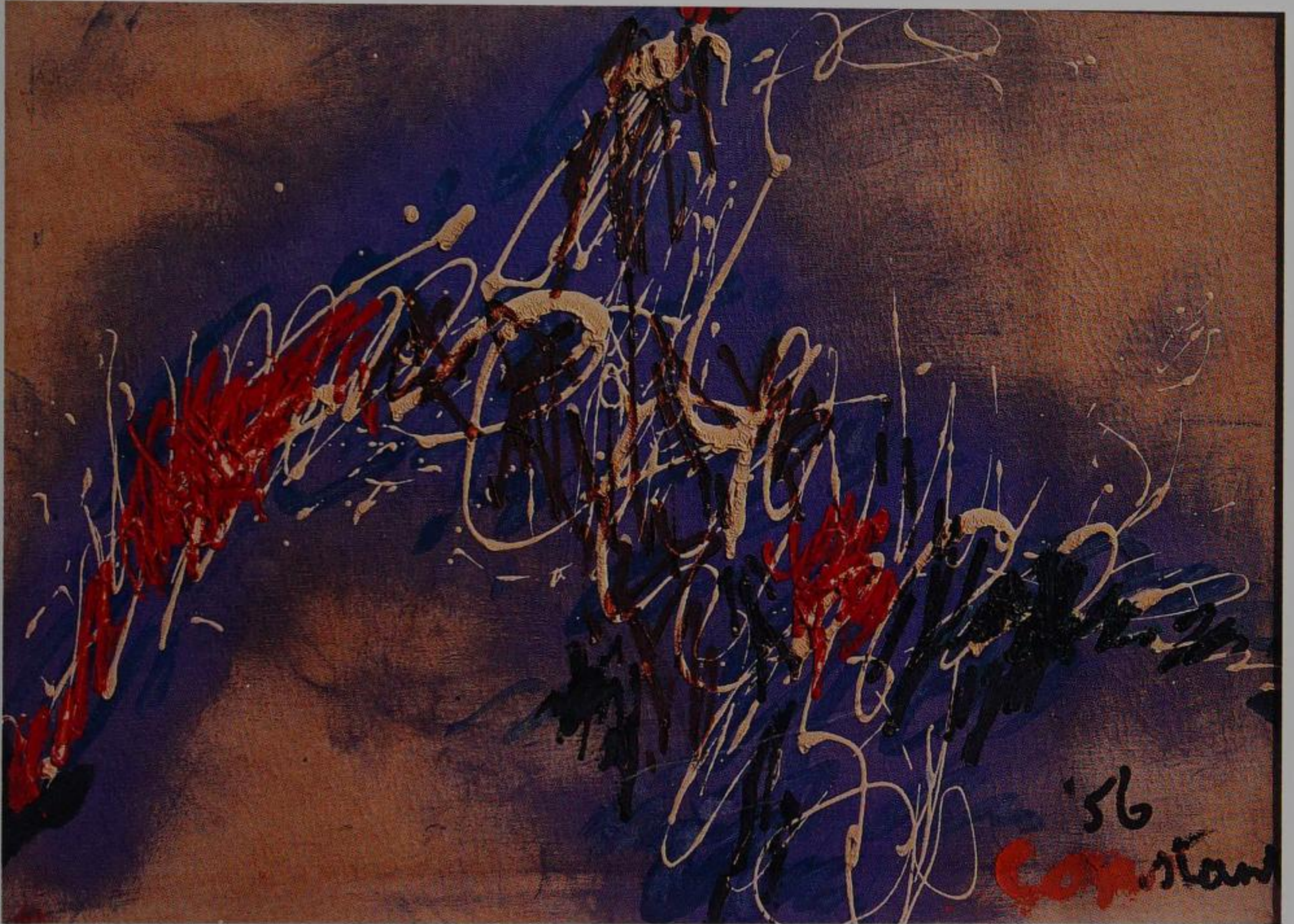


**Constant**

*Untitled, 1956*

Oil on canvas, cm 50 × 62

Private collection, Turin



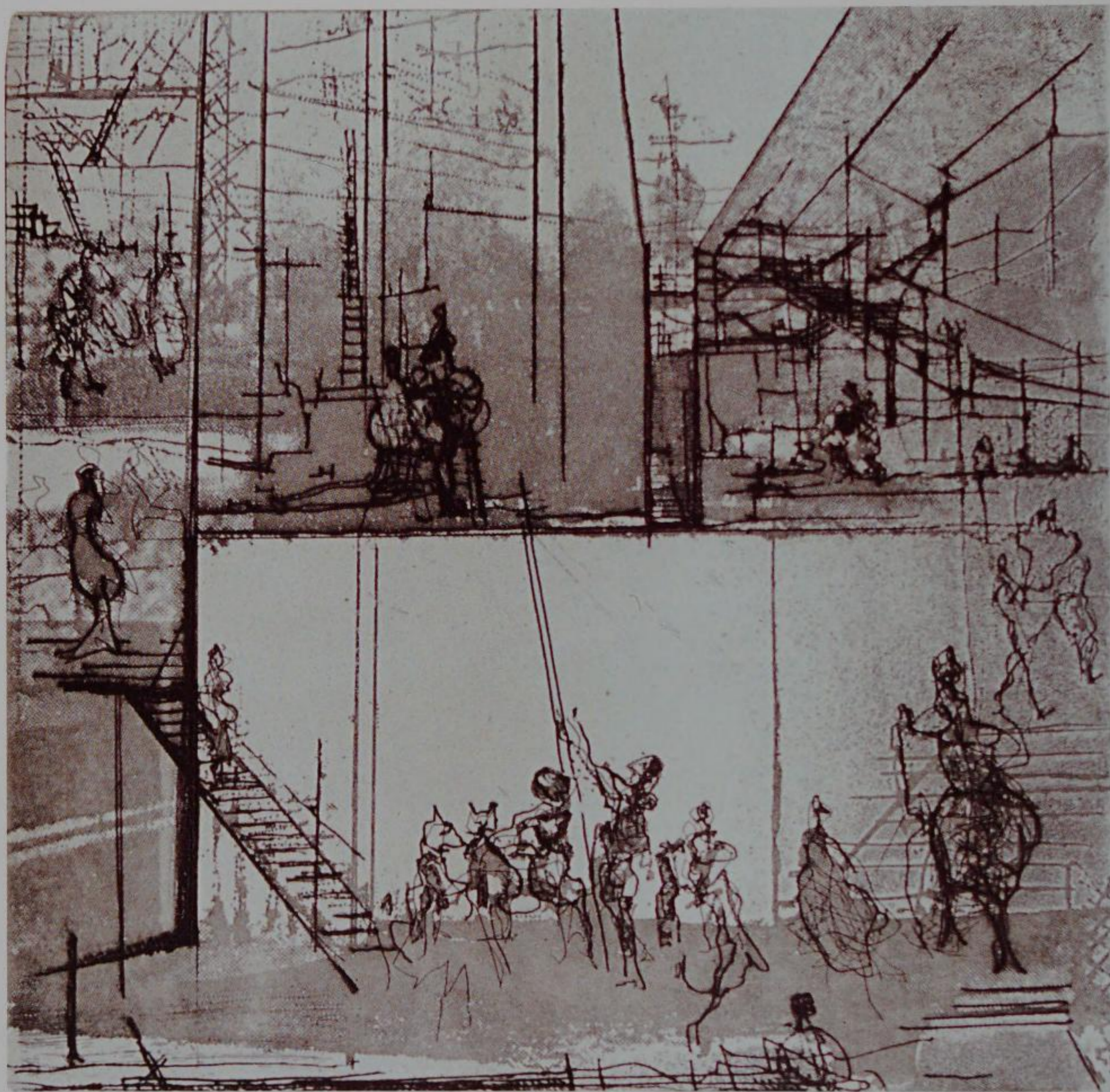


**Constant**

*Untitled, 1970*

Dry-point, 3/10,  
cm 15.7 x 16.2

Private collection, Turin



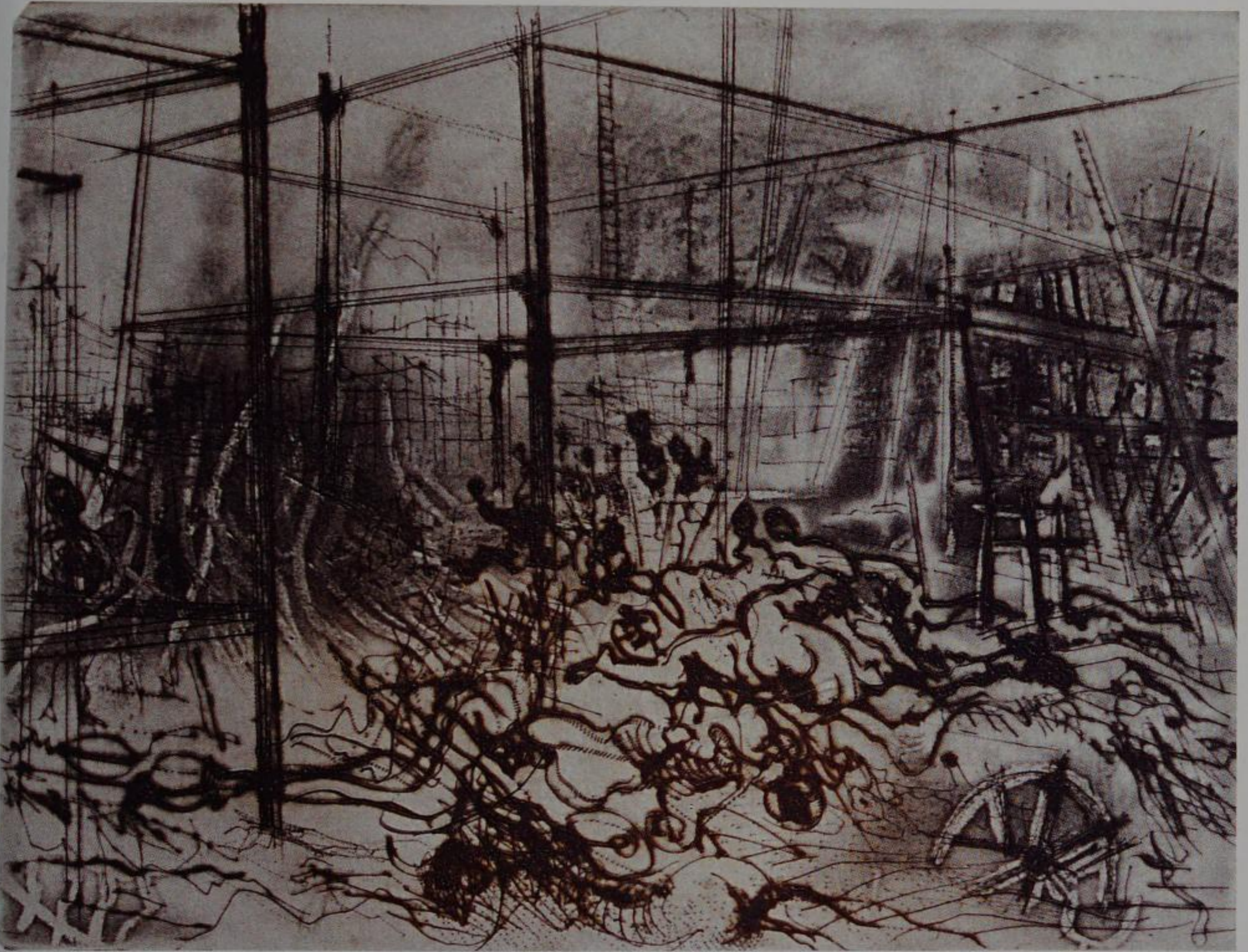


**Constant**

*Ontwaakt, Verworpeen  
der aarge, 1972*

Dry-point, 3/10, cm 14.5 x 19

Private collection, Turin





**Constant**

*Untitled, 1975*

Oil on canvas, cm 95 x 90

Private collection, Turin





**Corneille**  
*Summer Exuberance*, 1962  
Tempera and pastels on lined  
paper, cm 46 × 63.5  
Courtesy Galleria Narciso,  
Turin (photo Padovan)





**Pinot Gallizio**

*Ultrasonic Spiral*, 1956–1957

Monotype, typographic inks  
on canvas, plate cm 87.5 × 50.5,  
canvas cm 95 × 60

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba  
(photo Enrico Necade)





**Pinot Gallizio**

*Puppets*, 1956–1957

Monotype, typographic inks  
on canvas, plate cm 86 × 50,  
canvas cm 100 × 64

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba  
(photo Enrico Necade)



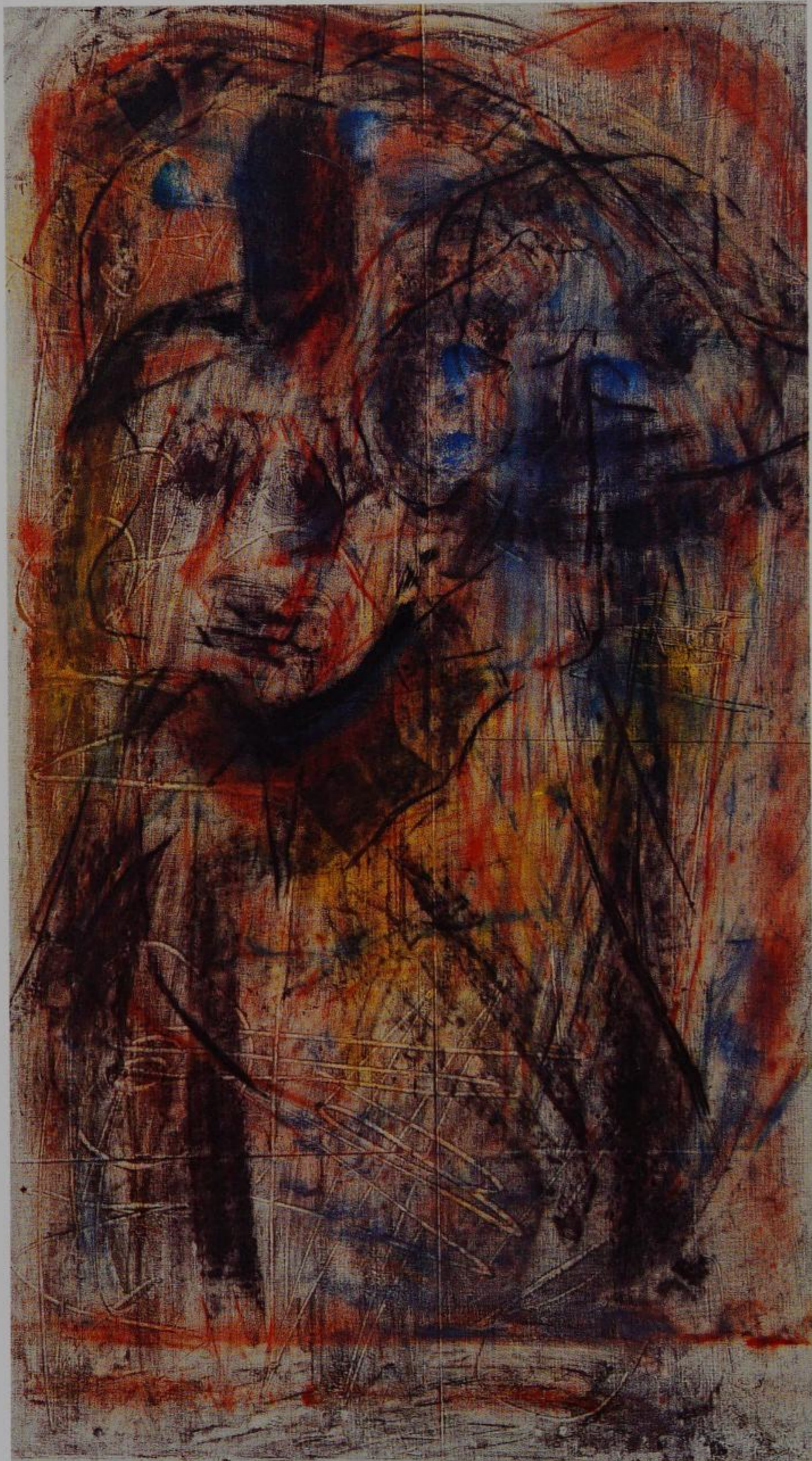


**Pinot Gallizio**

*Giacu Cheese*, 1957

Monotype, typographic inks,  
traces of frottage on canvas,  
plate cm 87 × 50,  
canvas cm 100 × 64

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba  
(photo Enrico Necade)





**Pinot Gallizio**

*The Moon Learns to Dance,*  
1957

Monotype, typographic inks,  
traces of frottage on canvas,  
plate cm 82 × 58,  
canvas cm 100 × 64

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba  
(photo Enrico Necade)





**Pinot Gallizio**

*Collective Hystericism,*  
1956–1957

Monotype, typographic inks,  
traces of frottage on canvas,  
plate cm 86 × 52,  
canvas cm 100 × 64

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba  
(photo Enrico Necade)





**Pinot Gallizio**

*Extemporaneous Game*, 1957

Monotype, typographic inks,

traces of frottage on canvas,

plate cm 83 × 54,

canvas cm 100 × 64

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba

(photo Enrico Necade)









**Pinot Gallizio**

*Industrial Painting*

One of the first rolls, 60 metres long, drying on the roof of the Experimental Laboratory of Alba, 1956

Galleria Martano, Turin

**Jorn, Gallizio, Constant, Kotik, Wolman and others**

*Untitled (collective work), 1956*

Mixed media, oil and enamels on plywood, cm 155 x 76

Giorgio Gallizio collection, Alba (photo Pino dell'Aquila)





**Asger Jorn**

Sketch for the cover of the  
volume *Asger Jorn*, 1949  
Indian ink and watercolour  
on paper, cm 17 × 12.7  
GAM Galleria Civica d'Arte  
Moderna e contemporanea,  
Turin





**Asger Jorn**

*The Mute Myth*, 1954–1955

Oil on canvas, cm 43 × 96

Courtesy of Galleria Narciso,  
Turin (photo Padovan)



Situationism



**Asger Jorn**

*Untitled*, 1963

Enamelled polychrome  
terracotta, cm 21.3 × 13 × 15

Courtesy of Galleria Narciso,  
Turin (photo Padovan)





**Asger Jorn**

*Doccodovere*, 1967–1968

Oil on canvas, cm 100 × 81.4

Courtesy of Galleria Narciso,  
Turin



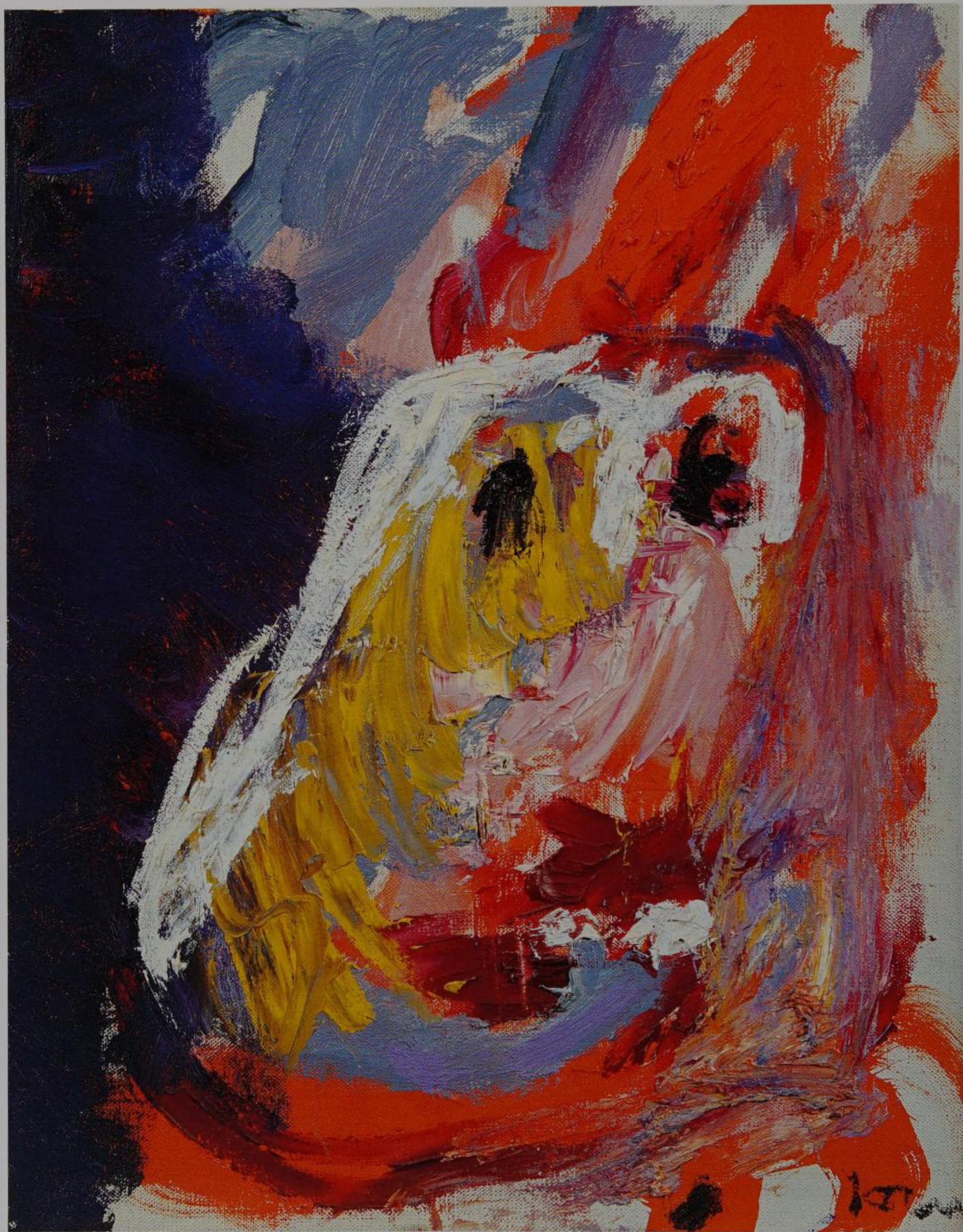


**Asger Jorn**

*Face*, 1965

Oil on canvas, cm 40.5 × 32.7

Courtesy of Galleria Narciso,  
Turin (photo Padovan)





**Asger Jorn**

*Décollage*, 1968

Collage of coloured papers,  
cm 69 × 64.5

Courtesy of Galleria Narciso,  
Turin (photo Padovan)









# Lettrism and Situationism

## Continuity and Developments

*edited by*

Lorenzo Benedetti  
and Alessandra Galletta

De Geuzen  
Atelier Van Lieshout  
Johan Grimonprez  
Dormice  
Eredi Brancusi  
Ora Locale  
Tim Rollins & KOS  
Bojan Sarcevic  
Stalker  
Sislej Xhafa







*"We are partisans of a certain future of culture and of life."*  
Situationist International, 1959

*A movement for the future*

What is left today of Situationism? Or rather, of the Situationists? Situationism is, as the Situationists themselves define it, a "word without a meaning, arbitrarily taken from the term "situationist". Situationism does not exist, because it would signify the doctrine of the interpretation of existing facts. The notion of Situationism was evidently conceived by the anti-Situationists".<sup>1</sup> The Situationist International disbanded in 1972 after fifteen years of internal and external fighting, including continuous expulsions and exclusions that eventually thinned out, indeed atomized, the movement, seeing that its founder, Guy Debord, remained its last exponent before decreeing its end.

The Situationists were aware of the fact that their ideas were destined for the future, and not their own insensible, frightened times. Thirty years of metabolism have brought their ideas and research, albeit altered, much closer.

"Spectacle is the reverse side of money, the general abstract equivalent of all merchandise."<sup>2</sup> This comment by Guy Debord underlines his ability to predict the future. Another excellent and illuminating example in this setting is Constant's *New Babylon* experiment, a project in search of a utopia that lasted twenty years, its preliminary sketches dating back to 1949. Strikingly similar to Constant's work is the panorama of contemporary architecture. Many features of his projects, exempt naturally from strong utopias, can today be found in the more advanced architecture. The idea of a network and non-work at the basis of Constant's projects are also the characteristics that are most evident in our socio-cultural panorama. On the other hand, Pinot Gallizio, one of the original founders of the Situationist International at Cosio d'Arroscia in 1957, revealed some lucid, anticipatory visions of the world of art in his *Manifesto of Industrial Painting*: "Artistic

<sup>1</sup> Definitions from *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 1, June 1958.

<sup>2</sup> G. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, 1967.



production produced by machines, compliantly serving our wishes, will be so great that we will not even have the time to fix it in our memory: the machines will remember it for us [...]. The world will be the scene and the counter-scene of a continuous representation: the earth will be transformed into an immense Luna Park, creating new emotions and passions [...]. Man is thus launched in search of the myth.”<sup>3</sup>

Comparing the Situationist International to the contemporary artistic panorama is as fascinating as it is improbable. What can be done, however, is to seek out the numerous splinters of what was one of the most singular and restless movements of the century. The splinters are not only to be sighted in many different areas, but are also often in contexts that are inconceivable from a Situationist perspective.

### *An imaginary mosaic*

The Situationist International was a characteristic phenomenon of the years of protest, and linked to certain historical events that had a strong influence on the entire artistic development of those same years.

From a historical point of view, the Situationist International represents, by nature, an extremely important moment, comparable to that of the turn of the century avant-gardes, since “for the first time after Surrealism, art and politics are being confronted in revolutionary terms”.<sup>4</sup> From a contemporary point of view, the Situationist International represents a contradictory situation. Its intense revival in recent years is in a certain way diametrically opposed to all its cultural operations. It is therefore impossible to track down those parts that have survived the Situationist International or similar situations, because the context in which that Situationist experience occurred is obviously totally different today.

The experience of the Situationist International can today be found in the cultural context of collective imagination. The cultural impact of those years, in which one could choose whether or not to join, is no longer possible. The Situationist International has become a historical fact for recent generations, and its ideas are an integral part of the DNA of all of us.

From this point of view, we can state that the Situationist International is to be found in many experiences of contemporary art in very different ways. It can actually be said that, albeit in non-orthodox fashion, it is one of the most common influences of contemporary art.

In this sense, the heritage of the Situationists is now dispersed in the general culture of contemporary art. To document everything that they have left in the field of contemporary art today would require more space and concentration than some ten Venice Biennale exhibitions put together.

<sup>3</sup> P. Gallizio, *Manifesto della pittura industriale. Per un'arte unitaria applicabile*, from the Situationist Experimental Laboratory of Alba, August 1959.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bandini, *L'estetico, il politico. Da Cobra all'Internazionale Situazionista 1948-1957*, Rome 1977.



The values that the Situationists created have been dispersed and subsequently assimilated integrally and indirectly in many aspects of contemporary art. They are striking for their different characteristics. It is of great interest to bring to light those analogies that correspond to the different components of the Situationist language in contemporary art, ranging from a political and theoretic commitment and the use of certain attitudes up to the aesthetic aspect; however, it is risky to find analogies that are not part of a temporal course – from the Situationist International to the present day – but are simply a repetition of morphemes. Rooted in time, in fact, Situationism has indelibly become integrated in the language of contemporary art.

*The Situationist International today: a mainstream phenomenon?*

The great revival, a phenomenon today consolidated by multiple perspectives, has been encompassed in a mainstream perspective that Debord's theories had already foreseen.

The Situationist International, originally formed by the strong concentration of other movements, could only disperse in a vast cloud of heirs who were more or less valid. What is certain is the fact that nothing exists or could exist today that is similar to the Situationist International. Its fragmentation is visible in many environments, but the preferred context seems to be in the boundless storm of the Internet. Many of the experiences connected to the Situationist International are preserved there, from a way of communication to a space that apparently belongs to no one. The Internet is particularly rich in Situationist International documents, and in a certain sense, it may be the most immediate "technical" heir of that movement that produced enormous quantities of materials, including critical texts and pamphlets, and films, as well as many other artistic productions. There is a proliferation of websites on the Internet that claim to be Situationist. It is an excellent example of how some Situationist theories have been integrated in the new technologies and the confusing world of contemporary information.

Each of the artists present in the exhibition constitutes one piece in the enormous Situationist mosaic now dispersed in the collective culture. To collectivize the Situationist International in the panorama of contemporary art is, on the one hand, remarkably easy, simply by singling out partial Situationist traces, but, on the other hand, it is practically impossible to seek the totality of its intrinsic character. Thus, Johan Grimonprez in his documentary *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* uses a collage of catastrophic events to show how information becomes a spectacle. The film is based on the idea that reality and history are inevitably manipulated by mediations and ideologies. Sislej Xhafa underlines the cultural contradictions that emerge out of the fears and anxieties of the wealthy



and powerful confines of Western society. Bojan Sarcevic interferes with the regular course of things by opening new perspectives on reality; he reconstructs everyday attitudes and operations as in the work *The Favourite Clothes, Worn by Women and Men, during Work*. The Stalker group imitates certain Situationist experiences perfectly while remaining within a contemporary context. Their ties with Situationist events are psycho-geography, that is the study of how the geographic environment affects emotions and behaviour. Their urban crossings are similar to the idea of *dérive*, the essential characteristic of Situationism. In a certain sense, their research comes close to the Situationist idea of being against urban functionalism because of its experience of urban space.

Atelier Van Lieshout creates self-sufficient and autonomous livable spaces. These independent spaces are inserted inside society, but are produced in a space that means to be different. The De Geuzen foundation for multi-visual research operates from a technical perspective of information and investigation with respect to the Situationist experiences: in a particular way, they have the ability to operate in the context of everyday life by adapting to the new technologies. Their aim is to initiate situations in which the visual practice is seen and interpreted as an integrated social process. The Schie 2.0 group always works with means and experiences that have great social impact. In their work, *Fantastic Italy*, there is a superimposition of the prohibitions, contradictions and social realities that surround us everyday.

Contemporary art and culture are strongly indebted to the experiences of the Situationist International. Therefore, it would seem absurd to have an exhibition regarding a movement that has declared itself to be “coherent, in its awareness of the new times and the surpassing of art”, that refused “the eclectic and opportunistic practice prevailing in the circles of modernist art in the name of a revolutionary cultural front”. But the fact that the common ground of the Situationists was “an awareness that they were living in a historical period of rapid and radical transformation that was opening up to a broad area of new possibilities” is enough to make a parallel exhibition possible today.



*“Our appeal is in favour of experiments that do not generate new systems, but exist temporarily among the widely different pre-existing systems, opening fields of action with variable rules that generate ephemeral zones of diversity, confrontation and intensification.”*  
 Knowbotic Research, artistic group founded in 1993

From the time I have been interested in it, which is about a decade, there have been very few artistic groups (with collective names) that have lasted more than a couple of artistic seasons, and anyway today many of these no longer exist. Of all the artistic formulas possible, that of “group” is the most temporary. One would say, except for rare cases, that there is a “deadline”, such as that of a guerilla operation that frees an area of time, space, imagination, and dissolves in order to form again in another place before being localized. It is known that the world, as Hakim Bey maintains, “takes its abstractions as reality; it is exactly *within* the margins of this error that TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone) can come into existence [...] its greatest force being its invisibility. As soon as the TAZ is named, represented and mediated it must disappear, *it will disappear*, leaving behind an empty cortex, only to spring forth once again in some other place”.

A confrontation among peers, because convoked by a work of art that means to come into the world thanks to more hearts, hands and neurons than those belonging to a single individual, seems such a disruptive practice that the energies it unleashes end up by dissolving the headquarters of the newly formed neo-group. However, the phenomenon continues undisturbed like a relay race with two disappearing and four appearing. General Idea, BP, IFP, Ingold Airlines, Seymour Likely, Grand Fury, Piombinesi, Plum Cake and Complesso Plastico have familiarized with Art In Space, Guerrilla Girls, Art Club 2000, Louvre Boutique, Bank of Reality, Different Opinion or Inspection Medical Hermeneutics, who have given way to Uno al Quadrato, Interzone, Artway of Thinking, only to continue in Superflex, Gruppo Mille, Mala Arti Visive... just to mention the first examples that come to mind, be these inside or outside of this *tribal* exhibition of the *tribes*, conceived by Achille Bonito Oliva, who maintains that art is “a mis-



sile launched into space that supersedes the present and latches onto the future for an unknown destination”.

The destination of this “natural” phenomenon (much closer to an earthquake than to a budding flower) fortunately remains unknown, but it does give us an interminable series of ideas in order to reflect about contemporary art, and about the thought that accompanies it. The group puts the concepts of solitude, genius, and creation into a crisis, but also the concepts of the single piece, signature, authenticity, continuity, curriculum, and geographic origin; terminologies that have implied and described for at least a century the themes that up to today have regulated and sustained the so-called “art system”. The group reminds us that art resembles life, but this is not so. Terms like franchising, time-shares, cast, SpA (joint-stock company), and production have been borrowed from the worlds of cinema, music, business and finance. The “group” phenomenon has made abundant use of them and had a wonderful time with initials, brochures, stamps, seals and logos that seem to have been created by a company art department. In some cases, it has reached analogous levels of internal hierarchy, or of bureaucracy, such as a regular registration with a notary, the establishment of a VAT number, and occasionally even a brief but intense stock market quotation, as in the case of the phantom airline company Ingold Airlines. Probably the rapidity with which the artistic corporations have followed one another or been modified, by changing name, presidents and members, address or the strategic modalities of communication also resembles the uncontrollable “expedient” companies in the real world. With the basic difference that while the business world finds some astute financial expedient that even the tax office on its heels has trouble unravelling, the artistic group continues to do what art has always done: produce, invent, shift, modify, and add meaning.

Art is the material of truth, not of reality. Reality is merchandise that we can find everywhere around us, and recently we have also been put out by its quantity, uselessness and intrusiveness. We ourselves are encircled by an ordinary, real life that disturbs and confuses the rare occasions of truth that art liberally continues to offer us. But when a work has been created by a group of artists rather than a single artist, the message that reaches us has already been “tested”. The debate that follows the arrival of a new work on the planet, in the case of group-produced works, is not only one that was already begun elsewhere, but is the very debate that generated it. It is an operation that depends on its own forces, and if art turns to groups of people, then why cannot other groups create it, by putting other groups of people “together”, be they *the* writers, *the* computer experts, *the* philosophers, *the* pop stars?

I have chosen four examples to describe how the course of  
128 the group – one that recalls and at times explicitly cites hacker



practices, as well as associated studios, production casts, and television networks – finds original paths of freedom and development in art, and modalities of action that are stereophonic to say the least.

In their group, the Dormice have found the courage to mix the cultures of their three continents of origin (Europe, America and Asia) so as not to give preference to just one. It is better to democratically blend all the techniques of art (painting, video, installation) with literature, music, gastronomy, and fashion: a stereophony of ideas, materials, and intentions in a highly coloured “Dormice world”, the only priority being the proliferation of an imagery without inhibitions or cultural restrictions. Represented on the five square metres of canvas of the work *Ricotta with Peas and Mint* are the regional recipe that gives the work its title, a particularly violent airplane attack with bombs, kamikaze and fires in a metropolis of the Western world, peace doves that flee, and an exquisitely slender model wearing a matching white undershirt and panties who looks at the photographer straight in the eye.

I have never met the four or five young women who make up Ora Locale, and I communicate with them through a delightful “messenger” who in turn communicates only by heart. They have trust in critics, exhibitions, destiny and feelings, but maintain that their own *ora locale* (local time) is always slightly different from that of the world that receives their work. At the last Venice Biennale, they used a suite in the Hotel Danieli to show us – in a deserted setting (much like a movie set during the actors’ and extras’ lunchbreak) – both a living room filled with the signs of what might be described as a temper tantrum on the part of a transvestite, star or spoiled rock singer, and a bedroom that evokes aromatherapy, incenses, and signs of relaxation and New Age sonority. Ora Locale also chooses deferment because of their physical presence which has still to be officially manifested; God only knows if that will ever be, or if the girls really do exist.

The Eredi Brancusi are a fake – documented, filmed, screened, registered and archived – of the most unverifiable stories that they can invent, beginning with the presumed heritage left them by Constantin Brancusi and Marcel Duchamp in the area of Bra, Piedmont, during huge feasts of meat ravioli cooked by the nanny. They have constructed an unusual cemetery in the Piedmont countryside where the marble tombs are inscribed with the names of people who belong to fantasy, and therefore to life and all of us: Anna Karenina, Butch Cassidy, Aureliano Buendia, Dorian Gray... characters who have been killed by their authors, but whom the Brancusi have undertaken, physically and morally, to provide with a decent burial.

The almost twenty-year career of Tim Rollins & KOS (Kids of Survival) has been one of a more explicit social commitment, 129



albeit not less literary. It is the truly choral product of the collaboration of a teacher (Rollins) and his young Hispanic students – with problems of social adjustment – in a Bronx public school. Tim is the teacher that all of us would have liked to have: he has developed a practice of collective art with the kids based on the texts that the group has studied in-depth. For Tim Rollins art and formation are like the two sides of the same sheet of paper, separate but indivisible: an ever so tangible metaphor, because it is literally on the pages of the original texts, *Prometheus*, Kafka's *Amerika*, Mark Twain, or *The Scarlet Letter*, that the students illustrate their contents and message with figures and gilt multiform symbols, according to a tradition that dates back to ancient illuminated manuscripts. In the work produced by their collective reading of *The Invisible Man*, for example, the monogram IM is repeated on the pages of Ralph Ellison's novel, and the painting, book and plot are revealed there, producing an ulterior affirmation of identity. IM, "I am": we are not invisible, do not marginalize us. Tim Rollins says: "The subject of the work and our name is *survival* – survival as individuals, as a group, as people, as a nation, as a species. The survival of the books themselves: literature, language, culture. This is why knowledge is important, because if you cannot reflect about how the world functions and where our ideas come from, there can be no freedom. Knowledge is not a power in itself – but it becomes one when you possess the intellectual instruments for deciding and choosing how to use information." Tim Rollins & KOS have been exhibiting in galleries and museums worldwide since the mid-eighties, exporting an absolutely unique model of contemporary art and creative didactics.

Limiting oneself to only four examples in order to summarize the aims and dynamics of artistic groups that continue to proliferate in contemporary art is a little like pretending to exhaust the theme of the imagery of adolescents by limiting oneself to the *Paul Street Boys* by Ferenc Molnar, the Junior Woodchucks and their *Grand Mogul*, *Little Women*, and the *Fantastic Four* (which, come to think of it, would not be such a partial exemplification), but it does contribute to making us once again the witnesses of a process that is anarchic, secret, free, mysterious and extraordinarily rich. Groups without proper names, without an origin, without duration, without age, without a signature, without a fixed abode, and yet with such a strong identity that it explodes in "objects" of unknown origin (and destination). Groups that form and act with modalities similar to those of the club formed by Brad Pitt in David Fincher's alarming film, *Fight Club* (1999): "The first rule of the Fight Club: don't talk about the Fight Club. The second rule of the Fight Club: don't talk about the Fight Club. Don't ever ask what the Fight Club is."



**Dormice**

*Ricotta with Peas and Mint,*  
2000

Oil on canvas, cm 200 x 250

Guidetti collection, Castiglione  
delle Stiviere

Courtesy of Galleria Alessandro  
Bagnai, Siena





**Atelier Van Lieshout**  
*Slachtinstallatie*, 1997–2000  
Varying dimensions  
Migros Museum collection,  
Zurich









**Johan Grimonprez**  
*Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, 1995-1997*  
Video still





**De Geuzen**  
*Democracy: Do Not Clean,*  
cm 120 x 260, for the exhibition  
*Democracy!*  
RCA, London, April-May 2000





**Eredi Brancusi**

*Roy Batty*, 2000

Bosco della Carbonera,  
America dei Boschi, Pocataglia

**Eredi Brancusi**

*Dorian Gray*, 2000

Bosco della Carbonera,  
America dei Boschi, Pocataglia





**Ora Locale**  
*Chip & Dale, 2000*  
Detail of the video  
of the installation



Lettrism and Situationism. Continuity and Developments



**Tim Rollins & KOS**

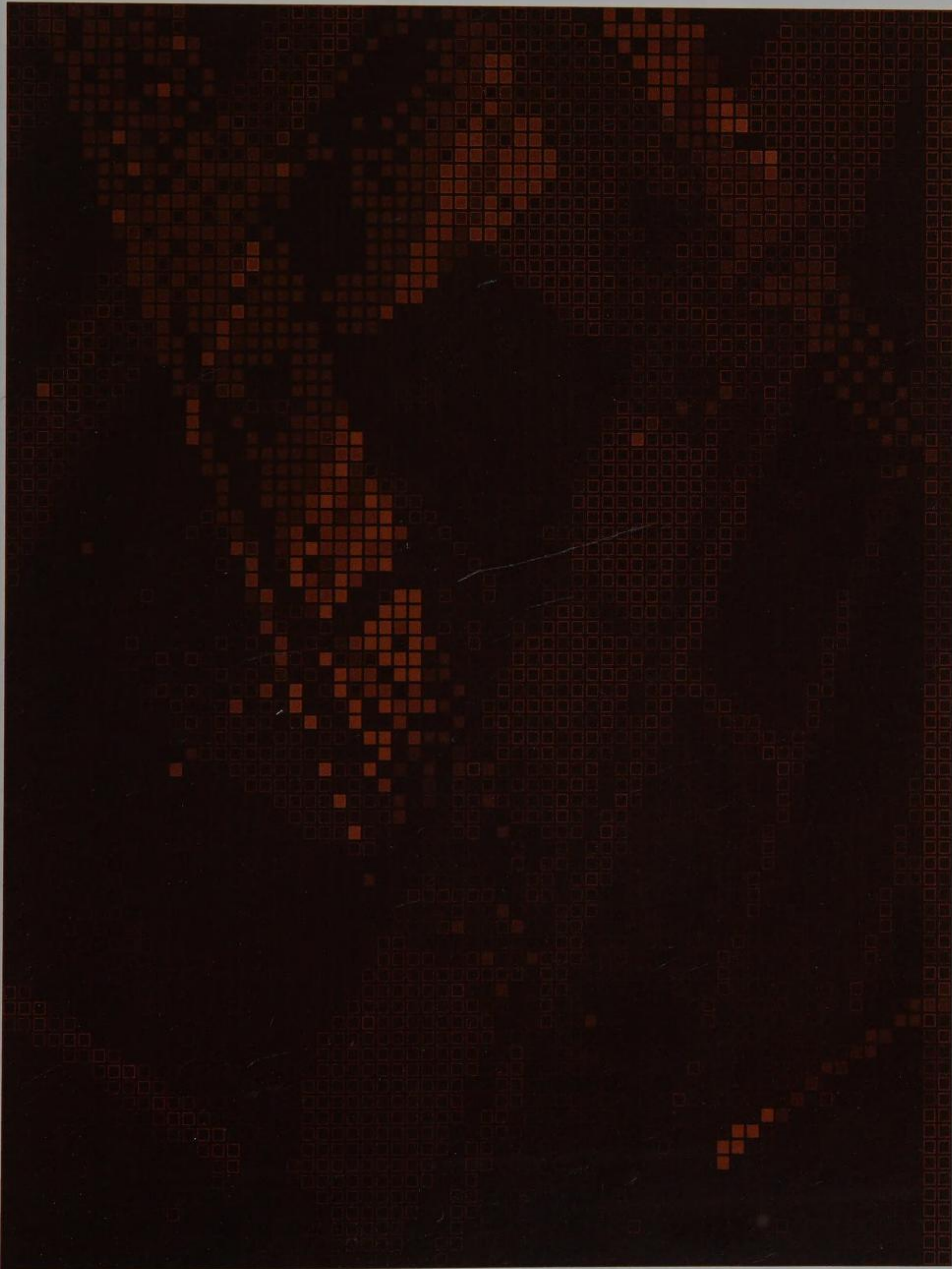
*A Midsummer Night's Dream*  
(After Shakespeare), 1999

Watercolour, fruit juice,  
collage, mustard seeds, book  
pages on canvas, cm 127 × 107  
Courtesy of Galleria Raucci  
Santamaria, Naples





**Bojan Sarcevic**  
*Thanx to That Desktop Image,*  
2001



Lettrism and Situationism. Continuity and Developments





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Intervento urbano  
2001



**Stalker**  
*Urban Intervention, 2001*

**Sislej Xhafa**  
*A Snow-warmed Perfume, 2000*  
Coloured photograph,  
cm 130 × 200  
Private collection, Milan









# Gutai

*edited by*  
Koichi Kawasaki

Akira Kanayama  
Sadamasa Motonaga  
Saburo Murakami  
Atsuko Tanaka  
Kazuo Shiraga  
Shozo Shimamoto  
Tsuruko Yamazaki  
Michio Yoshihara  
Shuji Mukai







*"Don't imitate others."*

*"Create an art which never before existed."*

*"Let us be rid of the stuck-up fakes found at altars, palaces, guest rooms and antique shops."*

*"In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed to each other."*

Famous sayings and expressions by Jiro Yoshihara such as these remain from the time when Gutai was established. Now, forty-five years have passed since its founding and the activities of the Gutai Art Association have been examined from various angles both as a group and in terms of the work of individual artists. Deeper analysis of Gutai is needed, however, to truly assess such matters as the fact that vanguard projects were limited to the early period and the relationship between Gutai endeavours and the day to day environment of Jiro Yoshihara himself.

Jiro Yoshihara's fantastic charisma and aesthetic sensibility were the very essence of Gutai. It would not be an overstatement to say that the figure of Yoshihara as an artist was transferred to the spirit of Gutai. Perhaps he was set apart from the culture which typified the Japan of his age. Yoshihara's life was profoundly influenced by a meeting with Tsuguharu Fujita who returned from Paris in 1929 soon after his first solo exhibition in 1928. Fujita's comments had a decisive effect upon Yoshihara, who did not study at art school. The young Yoshihara's work had been "too much influenced by others", Fujita pointed out.

The significance of originality was simply what Fujita himself had attached most importance to during his seventeen-year artistic career in Paris. In an era when many artists gravitated toward Paris and the return from that city by itself brought status, Fujita always persisted with the development of his own original form and did not seek to join the mainstream. In time, when Yoshihara reached his late twenties, he awoke to abstract painting and challenged himself to produce paintings superior to those of Mondrian.

At the close of the war – following 1945 – young artists who were in search of new expressive means gathered around Yoshihara and it was recognized by himself and others that he was a leader of the Kansai art world. The art world of that period which



was centered in Tokyo directed itself toward a revival of the group exhibitions which had existed before the war and had no links to new movements. In contrast, the Kansai art world based in the Osaka and Kyoto region where he lived sought to establish a style originating in Japan, uninfluenced by the art of Western countries, through the integration of Japanese traditions such as calligraphy or flower arrangement. Kansai art from around 1947–1948 to about 1954, with the inception of Gutai, is especially noteworthy. In the late fifties, after dismantling composition Yoshihara's paintings evolved as line, and later resolved themselves through an accumulation of lines that formed planes. It is true to say that he was sympathetic to the field of calligraphy. However, this understanding with calligraphy does not imply any direct influence on the works of Yoshihara or the actions of Gutai.

Among the young artists associated with Yoshihara during those years, Shozo Shimamoto is the one whose works were of greatest merit. When Shimamoto showed Yoshihara, one after another, works that were without precedent, such as one consisting of holes, he was left speechless. They exhibited their work at the *Ashiya City Art Exhibition* which had been held since 1948 in Ashiya, where Yoshihara lived – he was one of the judges and this task was a pleasure for him. Around the summer of 1954, seventeen members starting with Yoshihara formed the Gutai association, and in December, as their first project, they printed the inaugural issue of the *Gutai* bulletin by hand themselves and distributed it. In this first issue the two-dimensional works they had already made were listed.

We had to wait until July, 1955 however to see Gutai's great leap forward with the *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun*. It was Yoshihara himself who suggested holding the show out of doors. It was an idea inspired by the sight of works rejected from the *Ashiya City Art Exhibition* that had been left outside. The Ashiya Park with its many pine trees was the site of the event; it was close to Yoshihara's home and a place he had known like the back of his hand since childhood. As painters they found the space free and expansive, and it required them to create pieces based on totally different ideas from those used for indoor works. The space demanded their recognition, and the natural environment with its light and wind also had to be involved in their work. It is necessary to remember that some artists from the Zero group who had now joined Gutai participated in this show in addition to the members of early Gutai, and they included Kazuo Shiraga, Saburo Murakami, Akira Kanayama, and Atsuko Tanaka. The membership of early Gutai was fluid, and Yoshihara invited these artists to join the group. At the time, Shiraga had already painted using his feet, Murakami had produced his *Throwing Ball Painting*, Kanayama had done Minimal paintings and Tanaka had painted works with numbers.



Jiro Yoshihara at the International Sky Festival



Tsuruko Yamazaki, *Three-sided Mirror*, Ashiya City Museum of Art & History



Shozo Shimamoto, *Walk up Here*, Ashiya City Museum of Art & History

Set up at the same location in the next year – 1956 – was the *Second Outdoor Exhibition*. The works shown at these two outdoor events had a major influence on the members in their later approach to art. Shozo Shimamoto's *Canon Ball Painting* was done on a big scale that could only be accomplished outside and this resulted later in his *Bottle Throwing* works. Kazuo Shiraga's works painted with his feet evolved and he made efforts to let the traces of his activity appear directly in them. In the earliest example of Action, Saburo Murakami created works where he broke the surface of asphalt roofing material spread on the ground as he ran across it at the *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun* in 1955, and this led him to do *Entrance* at the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* and *Passing Through* at the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition*. Besides such works as these, in his original philosophical pieces Murakami presented *All Possible Landscapes*, *Air*, and *Peeling Painting*, shown at the *Third Gutai Art Exhibition*.

Atsuko Tanaka also showed a 10 square metre area of pink cloth supported by posts close to the ground, and her use of interval here was developed later in her projects with bells and electric clothes. Sadamasa Motonaga's *Water* was praised by Yoshihara as the first three-dimensional art done with water. Vinyl tubing carrying water coloured by ink produced a pleasant environment in the midsummer sun and wind. Such humorous form developed into Motonaga's style.

Gutai's existence was cemented by these consecutively held 147

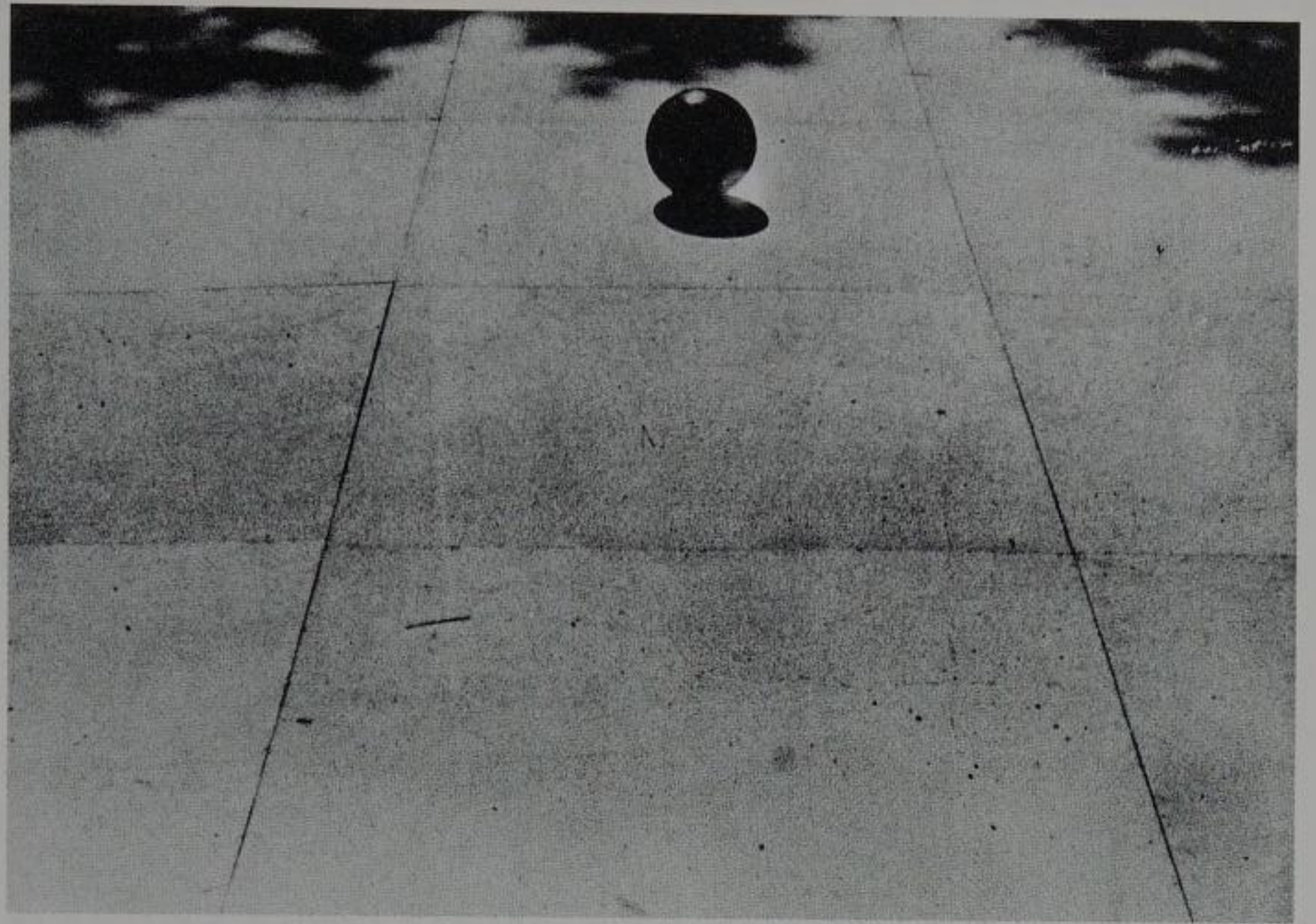




exhibitions: *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun* (July 1955); *First Gutai Art Exhibition* (October 1955); *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* (July 1956); *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* (October 1956). However, during the same period there were other shows which are less well known. One was the exhibition closed to the public and put on in response to a request from *Life* magazine in April 1956. Their works were set up among ruins at the mouth of the Muko River near Ashiya and performances were photographed at the Nishinomiya factory of the Yoshihara Seiyu Company (Yoshihara Oil Company) which Yoshihara owned and managed. Another such show was the “Gutai Group Room” at which all the members exhibited for the *Shinko Independent Exhibition*, held in Kobe that May. None of the works done for these shows exists now and we can only judge their condition then through a handful of photographs. Compared to the outdoor exhibitions or later stage shows, however, the works were more experimental, and the force of the group is more evident than their works individually. The works done are the essence of the expression “an art never seen before”, and even from today’s perspective they exceed the frame of art.

Almost all of the works exhibited then were shown following a review by Yoshihara. It was a simple thing, but they presented their works to him and only those which had been approved by





Atsuko Tanaka, *Bell*, Ashiya  
City Museum of Art & History

Yoshihara were displayed. This means that while experiencing the works' expressive strength we also experience the filter of Yoshihara's aesthetic. No matter how they were executed, Yoshihara himself was seeking a sense of the aesthetic and could not permit expressions of obscenity or inhumane character.

Gutai's progress was broadened further by the exhibitions held in 1957 and 1958. As with the idea for outdoor events, the concept for on-stage productions came from Yoshihara himself. Prior to the establishment of Gutai, Yoshihara had had experience in the supervision of stage-art in fashion shows, for example. His advice was to use the stage as a place to perform, not as a piece of equipment. It was important for the artist to become a leading player, and not remain a supporting actor.

The work and activity of early Gutai did not receive critical appraisal at the time. More accurately, we may say it was ignored. A young French art critic named Michel Tapié was the first person to take an interest, as is widely known now. Through their relationship with Tapié, Gutai artworks were rapidly introduced to Western countries and *tableaux* became the focus of their energies. Since all the members had originally been painters, this was perhaps only natural. Another person who paid attention to the works of the group's early years was Allan Kaprow in his book *Assemblages, Environments, Happenings*, published in 1966.

In 1962, the Gutai Pinacotheca (Gutai Museum) was completed after renovating a warehouse of Yoshihara Seiyu Company. Yoshihara's vanguard spirit can be seen here as well in his use of an old building to establish a museum, a process we see taking place around the world today. As a permanent exhibition hall for modern art there were regular visits by Western guests at the Gutai Pinacotheca, including such artists as Jasper Johns, John Cage and Isamu Noguchi. The Gutai Pinacotheca fulfilled its role as an ex-





Saburo Murakami, *Six Holes*,  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History

hibition space for Gutai art until 1970, when urban development forced its closure. During this period, however, we do not find the experimental or performance work typical of early years. It is clear that Gutai had transformed itself.

The vanguard nature of early Gutai experimentation is recognized by all. Their works were never academic and those pieces of which it may be said “anyone could do that” are not without an element of the slap-dash. The artists did not study technique in order to make the work, but created it out of original thought, a sense of time or their actual environment, we might even say their native environment. What cannot be overlooked is that Jiro Yoshihara made it happen. Today their works have begun to take on an established value in art historical terms. The greatest single factor was their creative attitude in their approach to the inner self. Including Yoshihara, all the members had received a Japanese education before the war and, considering their favourable circumstances, they were to a degree influenced by the age. Beyond ethnicity, however, their pure actions were a form of humanistic creativity. The early works have always been assessed in terms of their vanguard character, and indeed some of them share similarities with later Western art. The perception exists that they were well judged as a consequence of this, yet I believe they arrived at a commonality through the search to give concrete form to expressivity at its freest.

Up to the present many critics have made efforts to allocate Gutai a place in history. Whenever Gutai is discussed in the context of Western art, it is always with reference to the element of Dadaism. But Gutai was not anti-art, nor was it intent upon criticism of the establishment or society in general; rather, it simply set out to pour its energy purely into the making of an art never seen before. I would venture to say that they tried to represent



Kazuo Shiraga, *Foot Painting*,  
Ashiya City Museum of  
Art & History





Sadamasa Motonaga, *Water*,  
Ashiya City Museum of Art &  
History

the human spirit and reveal the beauty of material. Avoiding human intervention, their goal was to unite spirit with material through paintings or actions. Viewers also were required to follow this path. A simple example would be their effort to eliminate literary aspects in the titles of their works which were all called *Sakubin* (Work). Perhaps what is needed today is not to position them within art historical terms of influence, but instead to understand the activity and soul of Gutai in relation to the creative power of human beings.

Members of Gutai say that their eighteen years of participation in the group were like school. As a consequence of Yoshihara's charisma, something more that each individual possessed was brought to the fore and revealed. It is fair to say that whenever we see a piece of Gutai art we are at the same time, in some sense, seeing Jiro Yoshihara.







3M

Among the new members who joined in the first half of the sixties, generally called Gutai's second generation, the three artists Tsuyoshi Maekawa, Takesada Matsutani and Shuji Mukai (who together went by the name 3M) took on an important role in Gutai's mature period.

Among the three, Tsuyoshi Maekawa was the one to make his debut first. He was given recognition by Jiro Yoshihara as early as the late fifties, exhibited at the *Eighth Gutai Art Exhibition* (1959) for the first time, and became a member in 1961. In his method of emphasizing rough sack-cloth materials, distinctive features of the materials, such as deep lines and folds, were gradually coming to the fore. They suggest gigantic scars tingling inside our body.

Takesada Matsutani and Shuji Mukai got to know Sadamasa Motonaga when they went to a sketching class at Nishinomiya City Art Association and became involved in Gutai. In 1962, it was through his reliefs with wood glue, which was still a new product at the time, that he became acknowledged. The organic, erotic material leaves us with a vividly tactile impression. Both Maekawa and Matsutani belong to Gutai's orthodox line in that they let the material speak for itself, whether it be cloth or glue.

In contrast, Shuji Mukai attempted to reduce substances to make them equivalent with a mass of meaningless ideograms which propagated violently, denying them their uniqueness and identity. The *Room of Ideograms* was a work strongly evoking a Happening, which was not typical for Gutai at the time. Furthermore, it is remarkable that his idea that "the work is nothing more than excreta in the process of creation" was consistently evidenced by his works. On 15 November 1965, Mukai burned all of his works in his possession. This represents the conclusive



Michio Yoshihara, *Concrete Music (Sound performance)*.  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History





execution of his belief through the embodiment of its principle in such a shocking event.

### *Eighteen years of Gutai*

Soon after the Second World War ended, there was a group of young artists who naturally gravitated towards Jiro Yoshihara. This was the foundation of Gutai. Early on, they had organized group exhibitions independently, such as *Seven Avant-Garde Artists* (1948) and *Avant-Garde Exhibition by Young Artists* (February 1954).

It is generally thought that Gutai was officially founded around August 1954, when the group adopted this name.

Somewhat differently, the date of their break-up is more easily determined. On 21 January 1972, Yoshihara, the leader of the group, unexpectedly collapsed from sub-arachnoid bleeding and passed away on 10 February. Due to this turn of events, and after some deliberation, the entire membership decided to disband. They sent letters to announce the break-up, dated 31st March, to all concerned.

Thus Gutai lasted for some eighteen long years, and this period of activity can be divided into three parts.

### *Early years: 1954–1958*

This was the time when Gutai caused the most controversy. What characterizes this period is the form of their exhibitions, the settings for which were extraordinarily unusual. Some examples are cited below:

- July 1955: *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun*;
- April 1956: *One-Day Outdoor Exhibition*;
- July 1956: *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*;
- May-July 1957: *Gutai Art on the Stage*;
- April 1958: *Gutai Art on the Stage - Second Performance*.

Under these circumstances, diverse experimental works came about. Of course, it was pictorial perspective that engendered these works and one may consider the roots of the later performance, installation, light art, and land art to have already existed at this point.

### *Middle period: 1959–1964*

This was the period of the so-called *tableaux*. Michel Tapié initiated this trend when he visited Japan in September 1957. That is, he rated Gutai's paintings highly and placed them on the art market. It meant so much to the members of the group, who had been completely ignored on the art scene in Japan, that the works were artistically appreciated and actually sold. At *The International Art of a New Era* show (April 1958), which toured



Japan, Gutai's works were presented with those of contemporary Informel and Abstract Expressionism. This immediately led to the *Eighth Gutai Art Exhibition*. Photographs of approximately 250, mostly large, works displayed throughout the Kyoto City Museum are still deeply impressive.

#### *Late period: 1965–1972*

Gutai accepted many new members in this period. Some of them were established artists who had earlier received awards. In short, Gutai had become some form of authority. Moreover, their approach to hard-edge colour abstraction, light art, and kinetic art was in step with contemporary art trends. The circumstances surrounding the art of this era were also different from those of the fifties, and the number of artists itself increased. Gutai was no longer the only movement that was in advance of its time.

One of the factors in the transition from the middle to the late period was the Nul international exhibition of April 1965. Nul was a Dutch avant-garde group and the show was the third international exhibition of this kind; it was held together with the German Zero group at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Gutai was invited to the show and replicated earlier pieces under the supervision of Jiro Yoshihara and Michio, his son. At the show, Yoshihara took note of the light art and Kinetic Art of Zero group artists. It is easy to imagine that this event inspired him to decide to revitalize Gutai, which had at that time become somewhat mannered.

#### *Gutai's promotional materials*

Among the printed materials publicizing Gutai's exhibitions, there are some elaborate items, especially posters and invitations from the early years.

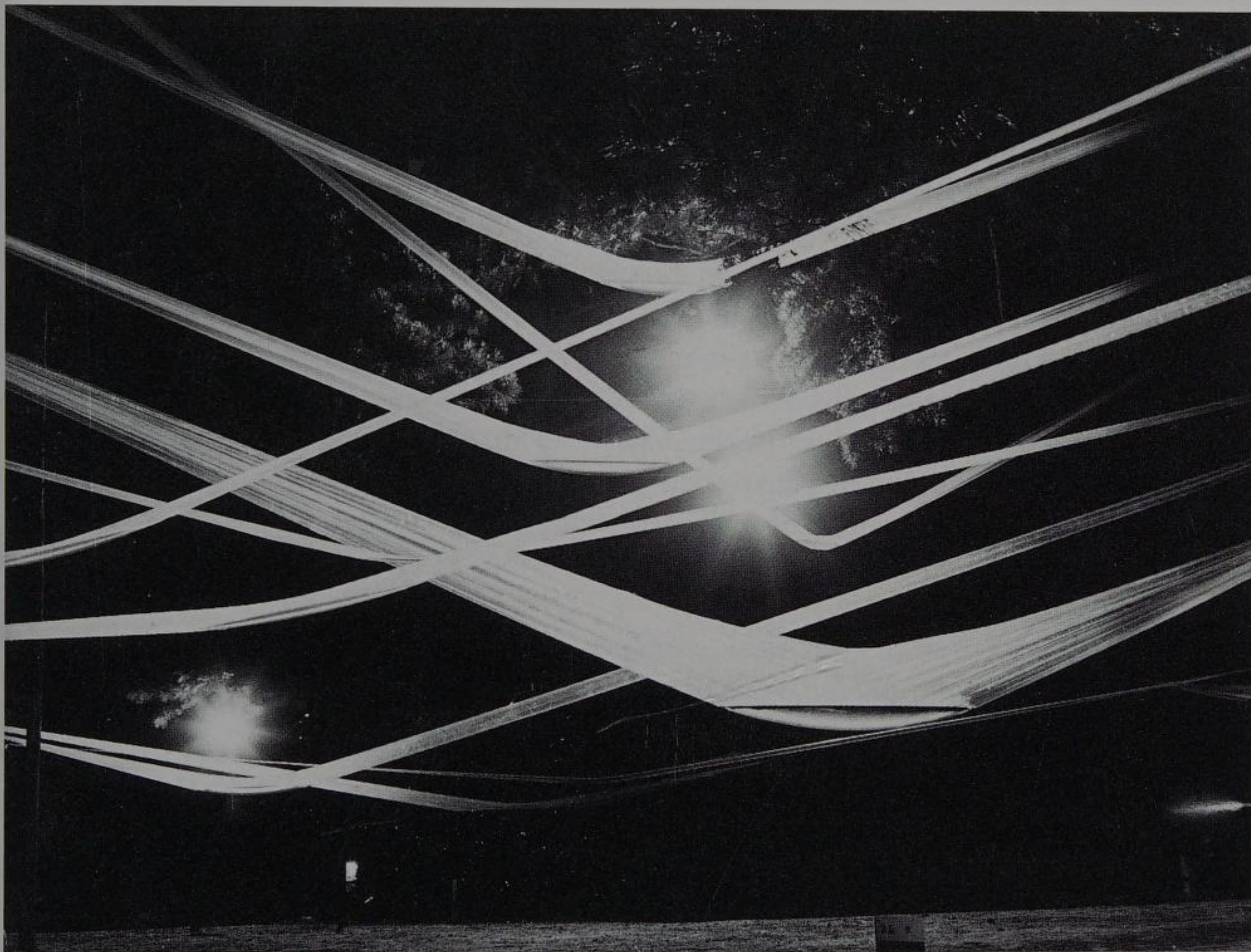
The poster of the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* (1955) can be taken as an example. White letters are simply arranged on a quiet reddish brown. There is a big blank space at the top, where a white paper rectangle is attached parallel to the edge. Posters are usually two-dimensional, but this one projects out toward the viewer. It was designed by Shozo Shimamoto.

The invitation of the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* (1956) was designed by Kazuo Shiraga. Information is printed on the inner surface of a sheet of thick yellow paper folded in two. So far, there is nothing special about this invitation. However, there is a piece of red paper inside it, fixed to a wire frame with a rubber band. Open it and this piece of paper jumps about, held back by the rubber band. It's just like Shiraga to give us a visceral image with a vaguely heart-shaped bit of red paper.

Akira Kanayama produced the invitation of the *Third Gutai Art Exhibition* (1957). When you open its envelope, you find a



Sadamasa Motonaga, *Water*.  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History



Gutai



white invitation letter. The paper is so thin that you can almost see through it, yet it has been folded several times. Unfold it and the paper seems to get bigger and bigger, and is eventually as big as a poster. The information is printed in blue ink. The daring handling of blank space is characteristic of Kanayama, and its layout is simple yet precise.

The invitation to *Gutai Art on the Stage* (1957) took the form of a roll. As you unroll it, you find small words put one after another, and colourful ticker tape falls fluttering out. In an historical drama, when a ninja disappears casting a spell, he sometimes holds a roll in his mouth. The hometown of Motonaga, who designed the invitation, is incidentally Igaueno, a famous ninja village. Motonaga himself sometimes referred to his works as “ninja art”.

The *Gutai Art on the Stage - Second Performance* invitation was designed by Saburo Murakami. The card, folded in two, had been glued shut and was not easy to open. Using force to open it caused the black and red inside of the card to tear, and you could see the printed details through the tears.

It must have been such great fun to receive invitations of this sort. These may be the pioneers of mail art.

#### *Shozo Shimamoto: “Walk up Here”*

This body-responsive piece of work was presented for the first time at the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* (1955). Later, different versions were exhibited at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* and the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* (1956). There are roughly two forms of the work. One uses a spring-like device where each board gives way differently when you step on it. The other has boards attached irregularly at different levels.

Early Gutai started out based on a standpoint of painting, but searched for a means of disengaging from that framework. Among its members, Shimamoto stood out in terms of his experimental spirit. He occasionally overthrew his existing approach without hesitation and made some pieces which at first glance seem completely unrelated. Such flashes and ideas were his gift. He produced works similar to the above-mentioned in which moving images and sound were the final elements and were to be experienced by the whole body.

#### *Don't imitate others*

Among the artists of early Gutai, Akira Kanayama, Kazuo Shiraga and Atsuko Tanaka had graduated from or attended art college. However, the members who had a formal education in art were the exception. The leader of the group himself, Jiro Yoshihara, learned painting almost on his own.

When Yoshihara was young, Jiro Kamiyama, an oil painter



Saburo Murakami, *Sky*. Ashiya City Museum of Art & History



who had studied in Paris, lived in Ashiya. Kamiyama used to work with Tsuguharu Fujita when he was in Paris. Yoshihara often visited him and heard about how things were in the French capital and what he had to know as an artist. Soon, through Kamiyama, he met Fujita, who was temporarily in Japan, and showed him his work. Fujita criticized him severely for having been influenced by others in many different ways.

A series of still-lives depicting fish is what Yoshihara showed Fujita. He persisted with this motif at that time and was said to have featured almost every kind of fish in the Inland Sea of Japan in his pictures. He had not received lessons in technique directly from Kamiyama, yet you can tell that he was somewhat influenced by him in multi-perspective composition and handling of materials. If you retrace these features further, you will realize that they are those of the Japanese Ecole de Paris painters, with Fujita at the head. Fujita, at a glance, might have felt that there was something resembling his style in the young artist's work, and I suppose that's why he criticized Yoshihara.

At the same time, Fujita rated Yoshihara's potential highly and eagerly encouraged his father to let him go to Paris. The stubborn father, however, who took it for granted that his only son would succeed him in his oil company, could not be persuaded after all.

By the way, making originality of prime importance was an attitude hammered into Yoshihara's head by Fujita, and he would carry it through his life. Therefore, he never advised or taught young artists about anything technical but kept saying to them, "Don't imitate others" and "Do what has never been done". Soon, this spirit would shape Gutai. Later, Yoshihara told the members of Gutai that they were the third-generation apprentices who had taken over the spirit of Fujita.

#### *Action. Working in public*

In *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*, authored by Allan Kaprow in 1966, Gutai was mentioned as the pioneer of Happenings. There is no doubt that this is one of the main reasons for the re-evaluation of Gutai today.

In early Gutai, there were indeed many works that could not be placed into the earlier categories of painting and sculpture, yet the artists had not planned at the beginning to establish new categories in opposition to the existing ones. This may sound surprising, but they were working all this time with painting in mind.

For instance, there is *Paper Tearing* by Saburo Murakami. The first of these works was of hand-torn paper fixed to a wooden frame, 163 × 131 cm in size. It was produced in his studio just as his regular oil paintings had been, and was brought to the Ohara Hall, the place of the *First Gutai Art Exhibition*. At the



same time, he submitted a small work on canvas in which all the paints he owned were squeezed onto the surface. In this piece, he must have intended to express his decision to abandon the conventional materials of painting. At the same exhibition he executed four other types of *Paper Tearing*, there on the spot. The first one had been done out of public view the day before the opening day and was hung on the wall together with his regular paintings throughout the period of the show. The second work was something like cutting tape, and was carried out not by the artist himself but by Jiro Yoshihara, the leader of the group, at the entrance to the hall. The other two were produced spontaneously to meet the demands of the mass media during their interviews.

Kazuo Shiraga gave up brushes and tried painting with his nails, fingers, and palms so as to bring the human body and painting closer. It was a logical consequence that he later came to paint with his whole body, after experimenting with feet. For the *First Gutai Art Exhibition*, he prepared mud mixed with cement because it was fluid, cheap and easy to obtain in a large quantity. During the exhibition period, he performed *Challenge for the Mud* three times. The second work was done in private, without the mass media, and painting still remained fundamental to this piece. The lumps of mud left from the performance were exhibited with a title card as the finished product throughout the show.

At the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1955, the artists had to set up everything for a performance every time there was an interview. They learned a lesson from this; at the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition*, the following year, therefore, they set a date for public performances so that they could show their works efficiently to the media: pieces such as *Foot Painting* by Shiraga, *Paper Tearing* by Murakami, *Bottle Throwing* by Shozo Shimamoto, and *Painting with a Watering Can* by Toshio Yoshida.

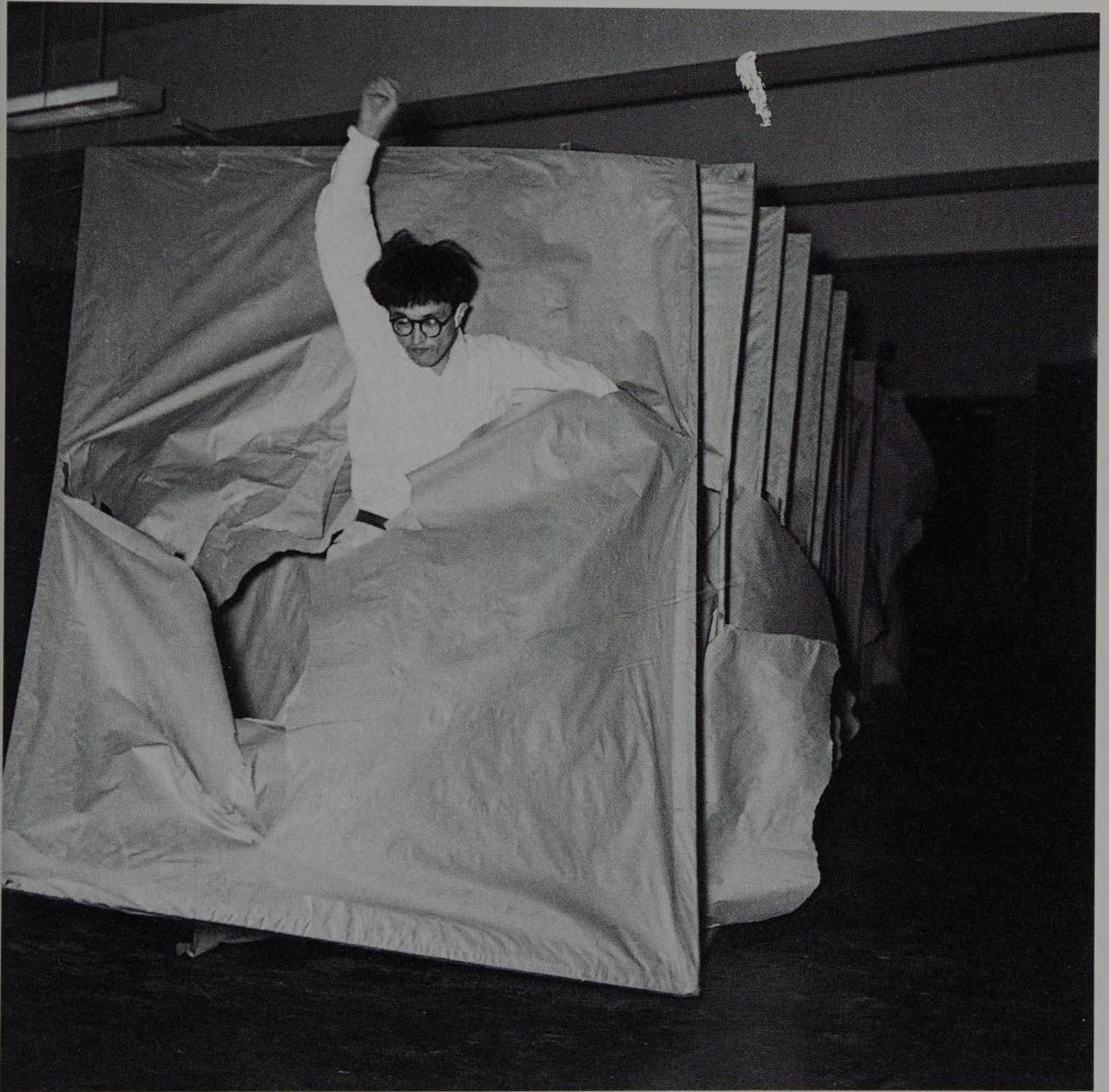
Public performance literally means revealing the creative process, which is supposed to be extremely private, to an audience. Unlike in a closed studio, there is a tense atmosphere between those watching and those being watched. By sharing this moment of tension with unfamiliar people, the members came to think that their processes of production, in other words their actions themselves, had a certain significance.

#### *Genbi (Contemporary Art Council)*

In November 1952, Hiroshi Muramatsu, who was from the arts, science, and entertainment department of the *Asahi* newspaper, gathered some people – including Shigeru Ueki, Kokuta Suda, Kenzo Tanaka, Shin Nakamura, Takao Yamazaki, and Jiro Yoshihara – and organized a group for people pursuing new forms of plastic art to hold free debates about painting, sculpture, callig-



Saburo Murakami, *Passing Through*. Ashiya City Museum of Art & History



Gutai



raphy, pottery, flower arrangement, or any other kind of art. The group was the Contemporary Art Council (which went by the name of "Genbi"). Besides study sessions, they held annual exhibitions. It was a movement unique to the postwar Kansai region to oppose the persistence of certain genres, and was rather different from the art world of Tokyo, which was trying to restore or rebuild art organizations that had existed before the Second World War.

The Genbi exhibitions were totally avant-garde all around. Even among the Genbi members, however, the dynamism and originality of Yoshihara's apprentices was outstanding. Before long, they organized the Gutai art association. The introduction of the *Gutai* journal's first issue (January 1955) says: "We hope to find fellow artists in different fields of visual arts, such as calligraphy, flower arrangement, handicraft, and architecture. [...] We will try to establish close relations with various genres of modern and contemporary arts, such as children's art and literature, music, dance, film and drama." This suggests that they were willing to accept different genres of art.

Later, in fact, Gutai took their action onto the stage and produced some pioneering works of experimental film and music, in which you surely can find the spirit of Genbi. On the other hand, it is interesting that Yoshihara strongly criticized the calligraphy work of *Poverty* by Yuichi Inoue for a Genbi exhibition as it still preserved features of the original Japanese written language. In his opinion, the concrete form of what the artist wanted to express should be completely pure, uninfluenced by anything else at all in any visual art, and abstract painting was at the top of the tree of the pure forms of art.

#### *Zero-Kai (Zero group)*

In 1952, Zero-Kai was set up with some members of the new creative association who had been showing some works; they were: Akira Kanayama, Saburo Murakami, Kazuo Shiraga, and Atsuko Tanaka. Though there seem to have been more than ten members, the membership was not clear. One news article of the time mentions such names as Tei Kanki, Ken Shibata, Koichiro Shiroki, Miyako Mizobe, and Sakuko Nakahashi. Besides them, Fujiko Shiraga, Shiraga's wife, may have participated in the group. The group's activities consisted of a number of gatherings to critique artworks and only one exhibition held using show windows of the Osaka Sogo department store, in 1954. Works presented at the exhibition included: Kazuo Shiraga's *Foot Paintings*, Saburo Murakami's *Throwing Ball Painting*, produced by throwing paint-covered balls at the paper, and Akira Kanayama's paintings with minimal elements. These works show that they had already established the archetypes of their own styles before they joined Gutai.



Yasuo Sumi, *Painting in the Air*. Ashiya City Museum of Art & History



Around August of the same year, Yoshihara's apprentices organized the new group Gutai. Within six months, however, more than half of the original seventeen members left the group, for Jiro Yoshihara, their leader, was outrageously critical about their works and insisted on the rejection of theory (creation should precede conception). Another possible reason was that there was no definite plan to hold an exhibition: they had only prepared to publish a journal. Gutai's existence was in danger, so Yoshihara sent Shimamoto to Zero-Kai asking them to join forces. That is to say some members of Zero-Kai – Shiraga, Murakami, Kanayama, and Tanaka at first – merged with Gutai. Considering the impact that the four of them had later, Zero-Kai's contribution meant a great deal to Gutai.

*Seiichi Sato: "Human Bag"*

"His [Akira Kanayama's] apprentice, Seiichi Sato, was determined to perform at one corner of the site. It may have been what is called a Happening, but he knew of no such thing. He brought with him a big knit bag with patches applied on it. He crawled into the bag right in front of us and Kanayama tied the opening firmly. Then he began moving around quietly, looking as if he were a big worm; his movements were humorous and strange. Soon, his motions became intense. In the end, he looked like some sort of writhing creature whose arms and legs were cut off; it was dreadful and spine chilling. This performance couldn't be carried on at all times, so the bag was filled with stuffing and hung from the top of a pine tree" (Kazuo Shiraga, "Record of Adventures: Twelve Years of the Gutai Group in Episodes", in *Bi-jutsu Techo*, no. 285, July 1967).

In the sixties there were some Fluxus works such as *Anima 2 (Chamber Music)* by Takehisa Kosugi and *Bag Piece* by Yoko Ono, and a performance in a huge balloon by Sho Kazekura. However, *Human Bag* had been produced much earlier than these. Thus, early Gutai contained an unpolished element that later would lead to Happenings. *Human Bag* is one of the works which shows this kind of element. The artist who made this work presented some pieces at early Gutai art exhibitions, but has not been active artistically since then.

*Children's art and Gutai*

In January 1948, *Kirin*, a magazine of children's poems, made its first appearance. Yozo Ukita, a member of the editorial staff, requested Jiro Yoshihara to make the cover design for the third issue, which brought children's art and Gutai closer. After Gutai was founded, many Gutai members, with Shimamoto as the core figure, contributed to the magazine, and their works and non-objective paintings by children appeared in it. Through the chil-



dren's works, Ukita came to have an eye for painting, and with a push from Yoshihara started to paint, and before long became a Gutai member.

Some Gutai members began to give art lessons to children to earn some extra money. One can see just how much importance they attached to children's art when we notice that half the pages of the second issue of the Gutai journal were devoted to Michiko Inui, who was in the sixth grade of elementary school at the time, and they supported the Kirin exhibition of children's art held at the Osaka City Museum in 1955.

In 1948, the Ashiya Art Association, of which Jiro Yoshihara was a representative, founded the *Hanshin Children's Painting Exhibition*, which is now called the *Dobi Exhibition*.

The 50th exhibition was held in 1999 and is still, even now, one of the most progressive shows as a public exhibition of children's painting. Every year, almost ten thousand works are carried into the Ashiya City Museum of Art & History and judged by former members of Gutai. Selected carefully, about a thousand paintings by children are exhibited all around the building and it makes a magnificent show. This exhibition, being so overwhelming, is almost the only that compares with the enthusiasm of early Gutai.

#### *Entrance – Passing Through – Exit*

Saburo Murakami's life has the shape of a circle defined by three works of the paper tearing series.

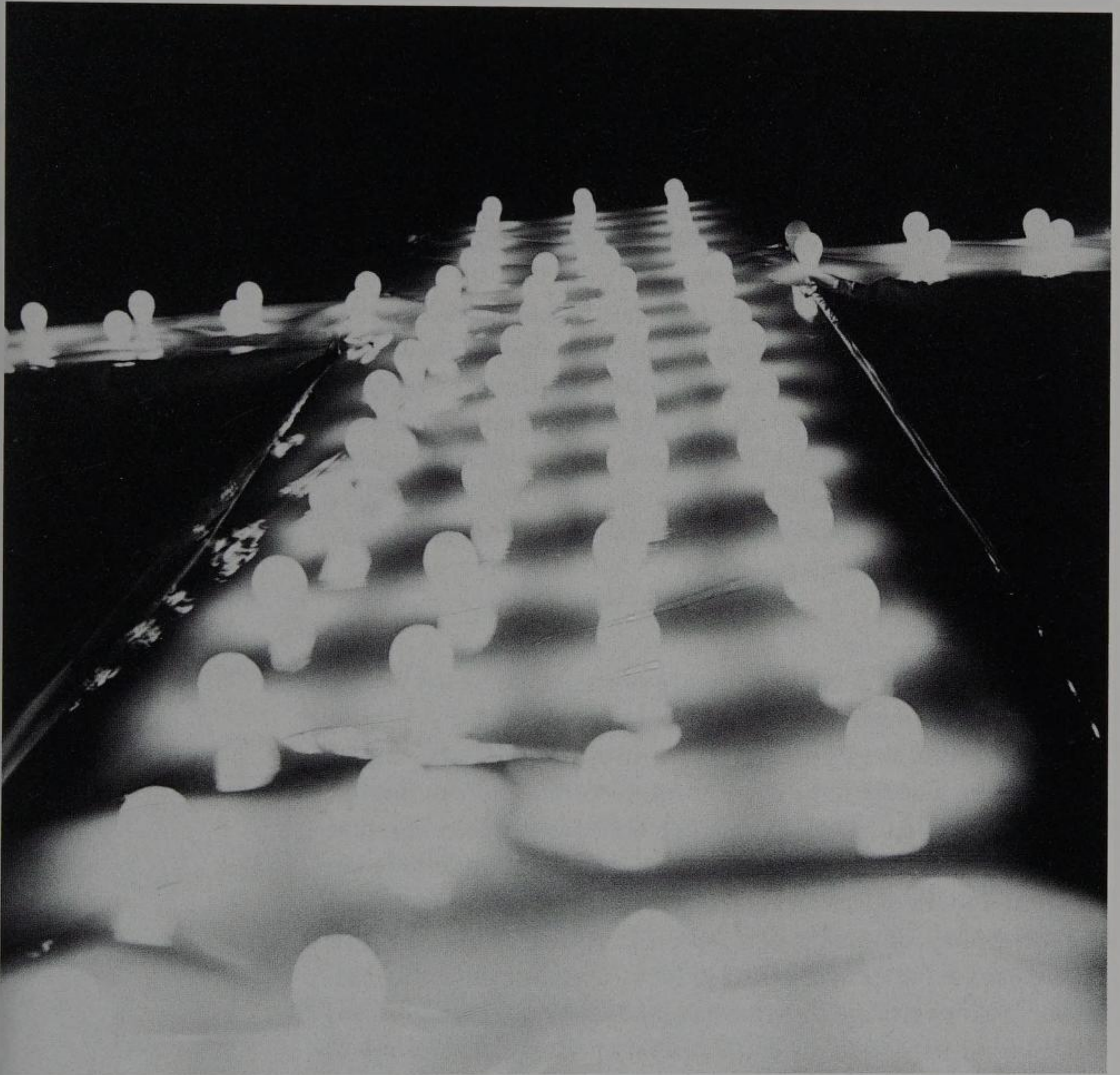
The first one is *Entrance*, which was performed by Jiro Yoshihara at the opening of the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* (1955), and involved the cutting of tapes. This was the most basic among the series of paper tearing works and was produced again from time to time. It had many of the elements of a ceremony and was the only piece where there was an unspoken agreement to let someone other than the artist perform.

*Passing Through* is the second, in which Murakami tore through forty-two sheets of brown paper attached to twenty-one panels one after another by dashing himself against them at the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* (1956). This piece, where the traces of tearing remained sequentially, was a precise indication of the unification of time and space in an artwork, something he had always been concerned with. It was reproduced several times, but the number of panels was reduced each time. Murakami planned to perform the original forty-two sheet paper tearing work at a one-man show at the Ashiya City Museum of Art & History in 1996; however he passed away suddenly just before the exhibition, so it was never carried out.

The third work, *Exit*, was the last performance of his life where he tore through thin machine-made paper outside the hall



Atsuko Tanaka, *Stage Costume*.  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History



Gutai





Toshio Yoshida, *Painting with a Watering Can*. Ashiya City Museum of Art & History

at the *Art Exhibition Just for One Day*, held in Kawanishi in 1994. *Entrance* was supposed to be watched by viewers from a position outside the hall, so that they would see the back of the performer. In the case of *Exit*, though, the visitors finished up by being both inside and outside the space, and the artist intended his back to be seen from the inside of the building. In this last performance, his figure was swallowed up in the booklet filtering in through the loose thin paper.

#### *Art leagues and Gutai*

To understand the peculiar structure of the Japanese art world, the existence of art leagues cannot be overlooked. For a person to show his/her work publicly he/she must first be accepted by one of these associations. After being accepted he/she may, in order, become an associate member and regular member, and eventually his/her artworks will be accepted without them being submitted to the selection committee. Strangely enough, reaching the summit of this hierarchy used to be regarded as a major status symbol for those aspiring to be artists. But since the mid-sixties, holding private shows at galleries which can be rented has also become a trend in the contemporary art world. Such a multi-layered structure does indeed make the Japanese art world more complicated.

Once a particular art league is looked upon as an authority, a new art league will come into being with more liberal principles to oppose it. Later, this art league becomes another authority, and another new art league will be born. This goes around in a circular fashion, and in a sense Gutai is nothing more than one variety of art league. Jiro Yoshihara did not especially forbid the members to belong to other art associations and present their works elsewhere. He himself submitted his work to Nikakai be-



fore and after the war, and was once a representative of the Kansai branch. Besides him, Shozo Shimamoto and Chiyu Uemae sent their work to the Modern Art Association, and Masatoshi Masanobu sent work to Kokugakai.

It was natural, however, that Gutai's radical stance created a gap between it and the existing art leagues. This gap was fully revealed at the *Sixth Kansai Composite Art Exhibition* held in April 1956, when a problem came up with placing the works of Kazuo Shiraga and Saburo Murakami in the "Western painting" category. Shiraga's works consisted of pieces of timber painted red and arranged in an L-shape with a lens fixed at the centre. Murakami submitted a wooden cube of approximately 80 centimetres size made from boards nailed together roughly, and entitled *Please, Sit on This*. Seen through Shiraga's lens, the scene appeared upside-down and small; Murakami's work was intended to cause disorientation by causing a shift in the position from which the exhibited paintings would be seen. Although both artists attempted to engage the surroundings in their work, this was a concept that was far from understood at the time. Shiraga's piece was rejected because a three-dimensional object was unsuitable for the category of "Western painting". Even Murakami's wooden box, which had luckily been accepted, was not exhibited at the show on the opening day for some unknown reason. The truth was that it had been mistaken for a packing crate and put in storage in the basement.

#### *Gutai "cardbox"*

At the *Eleventh Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1962, surprisingly, there was a vending machine that sold paintings. If you put a 10-yen coin in the machine and pushed a button, after a beep, a post-card-sized abstract painting would pop out. These actually were original paintings done by the members.

The machine was so popular that it ran out of cards very quickly and the members were kept extremely busy restocking it. Once the exhibition was over, the sales were donated to the Social Welfare Department of a newspaper office. In reality, inside the machine there had been a person who would push out the cards when the buzzer went off. It was a "manual vending machine".

#### *Gutai Pinacotheca*

The Gutai Pinacotheca was in a renovated warehouse dating from the Meiji era in Nakanoshima, Osaka, that belonged to Jiro Yoshihara and opened in September 1962. The "Pinacotheca" was so named by the art critic Michel Tapié: the name derives from a Greek word meaning "house of painting".

This building was not only the main stage for Gutai activi-



ties in the sixties – where the members held a series of solo and group exhibitions, and other shows to introduce foreign artists – but played a wider role at a time when there were few galleries and exhibitions for modern art. In addition, it was used as a meeting place for people such as foreign artists, musicians and critics. In 1970, nonetheless, it was forced to close due to the construction of a ramp for the Hanshin expressway. In the next year, its successor, the Gutai Mini Pinacotheca, was set up in a neighbourhood building, but it was closed in March 1972, as Gutai broke up.

That an avant-garde group had its own facilities for the exhibition of their artworks must have been truly exceptional. At the same time, it made Gutai very impressive as an art movement. On the other hand, it is also true that they had fewer chances to organize off-the-wall exhibitions as they had done earlier with outdoor and stage shows.

### *Gutai manifesto*

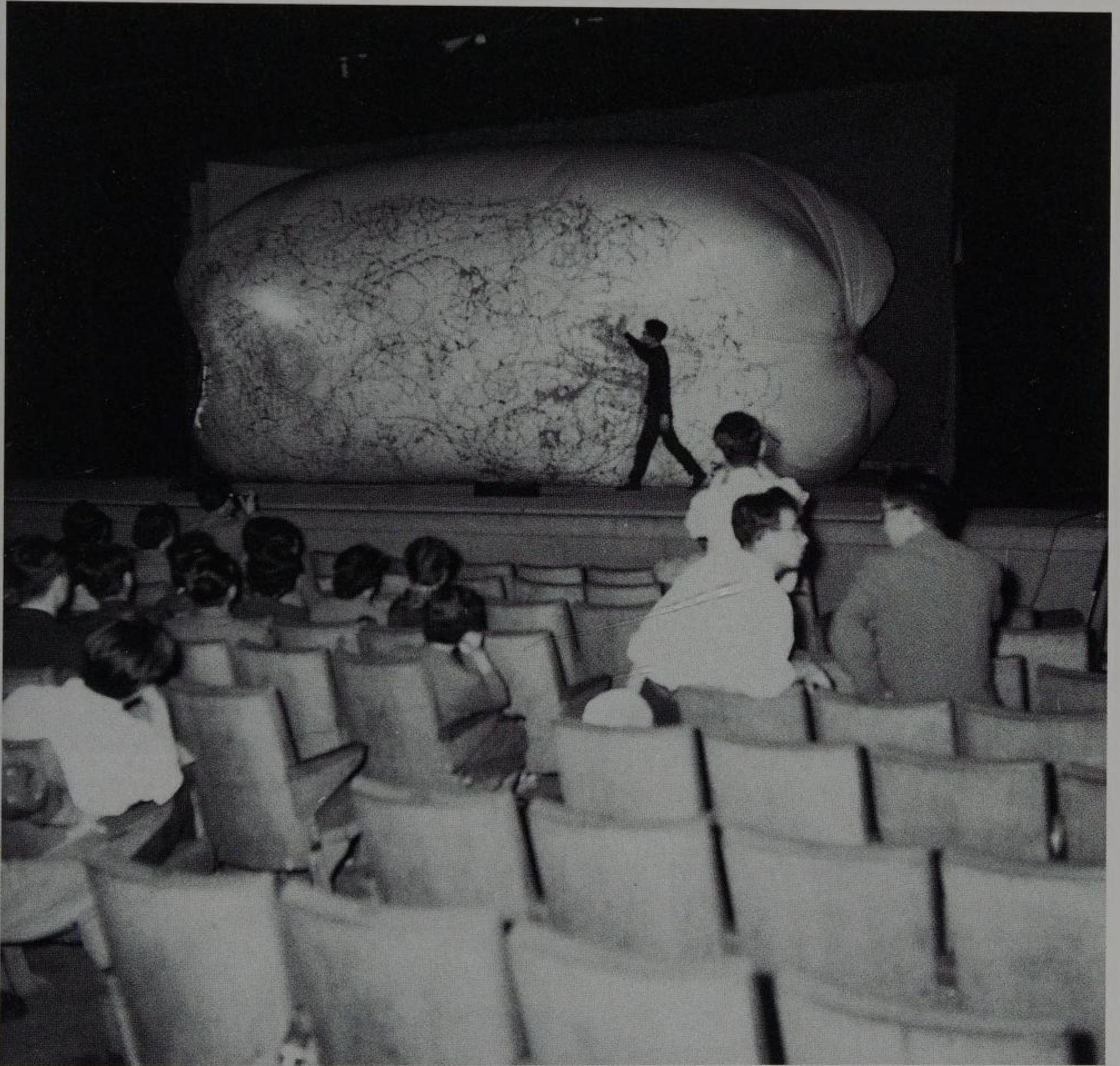
The first official manifesto made by Gutai was *In Publishing Our Journal* by Jiro Yoshihara, which appeared in the first issue of the *Gutai* bulletin in January 1955. At this juncture though, Gutai's unique aesthetic was expressed only abstractly, as in the statement "We wish to offer conclusive evidence that our spirit is free". They tended to emphasize their stance in seeking a borderless relationship by saying: "We hope to find fellow artists in different fields such as calligraphy, flower arrangement, handicrafts, and architecture", and "We shall try to establish close relations with various genres of modern and contemporary art, including literature, music, dance, film, drama and children's art".

Almost two years after the above declaration, another Gutai art manifesto was published, again by Jiro Yoshihara, in the December issue of the *Geijutsu Shincho*, an art journal, in 1956. It was contributed in haste to the magazine in response to a request from the editorial office, and appeared together with photographs of the members in action and their work. This manifesto, compared with the introductory message in the first issue of the *Gutai* art journal, expressed clearly their aims with complete confidence, defiance and aggression. It opened abruptly with an enumeration of defamatory words: sham, imitation, apparition, corpse, and so forth. Gutai was praised, by contrast, for its superiority and dialectic between material and spirit.

"In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed to each other. The material is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not force the material into submission. If one leaves the material as it is, presenting it just as material, then it starts to tell us something and speaks with a mighty voice. Keeping

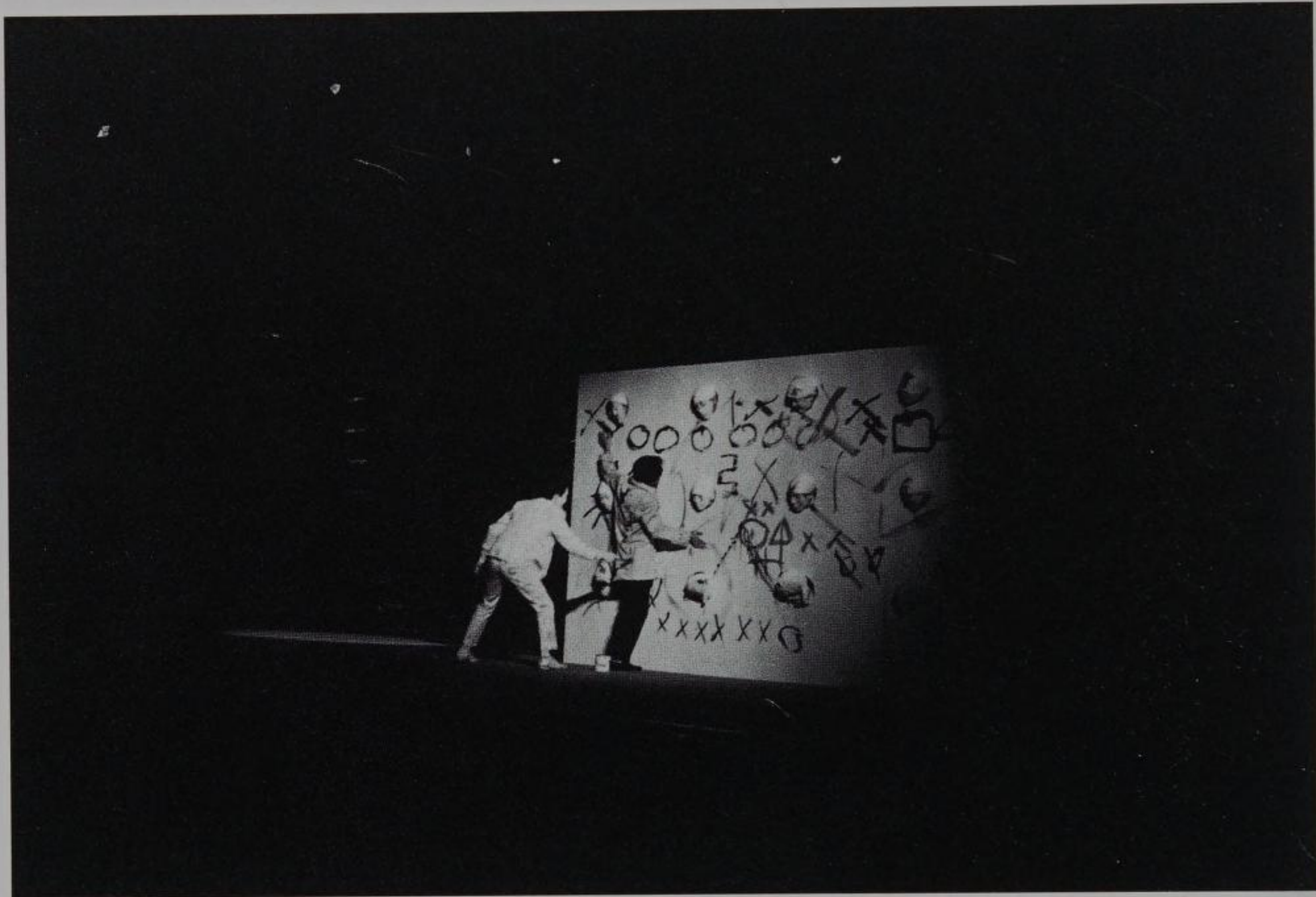


Akira Kanayama, *Gigantic Balloon*. Ashiya City Museum of Art & History





Shuji Mukai, *Face and Signs*  
(*Don't Worry, the Moon Won't*  
*Fall Down*). Ashiya City  
Museum of Art & History





the life of the material alive also means bringing the spirit alive, and lifting up the spirit means leading the material up to the height of the spirit.”

This transformation obviously reveals the development and condensation that had occurred through the group's activity over the two previous years. Incidentally, the opening, which states the principles of Gutai, is well-known and reference to it is often made, but this is only one-third of the whole manifesto. The following part discusses their affinity with the Informel movement and gives a detailed description of the activities of individual members.

#### *Avant-garde flower arrangement*

In October 1955, the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* was held at the Ohara Hall in Aoyama, Tokyo. Though it seems that the group had territorial ambitions, there was a quite practical reason for choosing Tokyo as the place for their first show over their home region of Kansai.

The headquarters of the Ohara School, a school of avant-garde flower arrangement, was Kobe; Houn Ohara, its director, and Jiro Yoshihara were old acquaintances. In July of that year, Houn visited the *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun* and was so interested in Gutai that he offered the school's newly built centre in Tokyo as an exhibition hall. Following this, the second, fourth, fifth, and eighth Gutai art exhibitions were held at the Ohara Hall, which means that more early Gutai art exhibitions were done in Tokyo than in the Kansai region. However, these exhibitions did not necessarily benefit from an appreciative audience.

Meanwhile, the Sogetsu School, the other leading school of avant-garde flower arrangement, was on the rise in Tokyo. Sofu Teshigawara, head of the school, was known for creating sculptural works with materials such as iron and was the originator of the so-called “objet flower arrangement”. Michel Tapié, the French art critic, who visited Japan in 1957, reckoned that these works were Informel sculptures and often selected them for his exhibitions. Teshigawara's works were frequently displayed with Gutai in shows such as the *World Contemporary Art Exhibition* in 1957, *International Art of a New Era* in 1958, and the *International Sky Festival* in 1960.

Flower arrangement became more popular than ever in Japan for a certain period after the end of Second World War. Each school competed for followers and to increase their size. Given the circumstances, these two avant-garde schools of flower arrangement must have intended to establish their image and – by actively forming relations with an avant-garde art group – to become themselves a form of contemporary art. Consequently, 171



the charisma of Sofu, together with the lively exchange with Informel, brought the Sogetsu School one jump ahead. Hiroshi, Teshigawara's oldest son, succeeded his father as director, and eventually this led to the founding of the Sogetsu Art Centre, the bastion of Tokyo avant-garde art in the sixties.

#### *Yoshihara's appreciation of Pollock*

"To anyone, the fascination and beauty of something unfamiliar is expressed not just visually, but in a concrete way that appeals to you directly. Pollock's drip technique with enamels is more beautiful than a painted enamel technique" (Jiro Yoshihara, Shin Nakamura, "American Contemporary Art", in the 13th issue of *Kansai Bijutsu*, 15 May 1951).

In February 1951, the *Contemporary French Art Exhibition* (Salon de Mai exhibition in Japan) and the *Third Japan Independents Exhibition* were held in succession. These shows were the first to introduce foreign artists after the Second World War and created a sensation. The work of such artists as Hartung and Soulages went on show in the former exhibition, and artists like Pollock and Tobey were included in the other. The reaction of Tokyo critics at these events was lukewarm towards French Abstract Expressionism and negative in the case of the Americans. In contrast, critics from Kansai took an almost opposite position. The conversation of two Kansai painters, Jiro Yoshihara and Shin Nakamura, in response to this situation was recorded in *Kansai Bijutsu* magazine. The above quotation is taken from Jiro Yoshihara's comments on Pollock.

His observations, with their reference to the material beauty of the paints, gave a hint of the coming Gutai art manifesto. Among contemporaries of the Japanese art world perhaps Yoshihara was gifted with a rare and accurate critical eye. Thus he could properly evaluate Shimamoto's early works, *Hall* for example, and could develop the talents of Gutai artists. On the other hand, the Tokyo art world continued to ignore them for a long time. It would not be an overstatement to say that the gap between the two art worlds of Tokyo and Kansai originated in this split reaction to Abstract Expressionism in 1951.

#### *Jiro Yoshihara: slump*

"In 1958, several months after we had set about organizing a Gutai art exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, Shimamoto, Shiraga, Murakami and I were called over to Mr. Yoshihara's house to help him stretch and prime canvases. At the time, he was working with calligraphy but he could not make progress as usual. One day, he let it all out, saying desperately: 'I am taking care of you, but who will take care of me? You guys are the only mentors I can rely on.' We were surprised to hear those



words from such a great master. 'You know what? I have to do much better than any of you.' I was struck by the depth of anguish that our leader Jiro Yoshihara was suffering from in this artist's slump. He said, 'This painting needs one dot somewhere, but where do you think I should put it?' We sat down in his studio. In front of us we saw him from the back standing with a big brush before the canvas. It would have been presumptuous to have responded. The four of us did not know what to do. Time passed in a long heavy silence. Then: 'What did you come here for!' he snapped. Under this pressure, of necessity and driven by his scolding, I suggested: 'How about somewhere around there?' He then painted a dot with great force and said nothing for a while. And then he went on: 'This ain't no good. How dare you!' It was as if he were in desperation. Day after day the same scene was repeated. He spent half a day just deciding to add a dot and the other half deciding to remove it. 'This isn't any good after all.' Time went by meaninglessly. The four of us started to get fed up. In those days, we often went out to get a bite to eat around dinnertime and let off steam at length as we drank shochu. When we were finally set free after ten at night, we used to sit down on a bridge over the Ashiya River saying, 'Why don't we throw a sack over the old man's head and just whack him?', and sighed deeply. For some three months this went on, from around 8 a.m. until 11 p.m., about the time of the last train. Since that time, Shimamoto had become sick of even doing his own painting and had not been able to do any for a while. Still, I was impressed by his attitude of sticking to what he had started until it was finished by whatever means and without compromise. It was a lesson that I'd never want to go through again, but I could never have imagined such an experience" (Sadamasu Motonaga, "Special Issue: Jiro Yoshihara. Footsteps of an Avant-Garde Spirit", in *Mizue*, no. 819, June 1973).

*Jiro Yoshihara's criticism of Saburo Murakami*

The day before the opening of the *First Gutai Art Exhibition*, in private, Saburo Murakami created the oft-named *Six Holes*. It consisted of a wooden stretcher for a 200 *go* (260 × 194cm) size canvas and a pair of wooden frames made of lath with brown paper covering all sides and connected to one another. There were seven sheets of brown paper used in total; only the front surface of the work had two sheets to increase the resistance. Murakami threw himself against the panel and in an instant had dived into the lower left corner of the last sheet. It is reported that on seeing it Jiro Yoshihara made the point, "You intended to dive down there from the start." For Murakami, whose slight weakness of attention had been seen through, the sixth hole continued to weigh on his mind heavily.



The next year, Murakami presented the series *Box*. The first piece was an approximately 80-centimetre cube made of Japanese cedar boards nailed together in a seemingly rough way. It was titled *Please, Sit on This* and was intended to cause some disorientation through a slight difference in eye level upon sitting down on the box. The next work was a similar box with a wall clock inside. When you pricked up your ears to listen, you heard the clock ticking away the seconds and found it would emit the wrong time signal. The empty interior space was not made evident in any manner. This approach was reflected exactly in the next work, *Air*. This was a 21-centimetre glass panel cube held together with cellophane tape (sellotape), and it captured the emptiness of air, as the title suggested. At the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1956, Murakami exhibited *Sky*. The piece consisted of a cylinder of cloth with a tin cone that had a hole in its point. When you entered the cloth cylinder you could see the sky through the hole, the edge of which was painted pink. Yoshihara's comment on this work was: "It appeals to me as a work whose purpose exists in rejecting all the possible elements that could be regarded as artistic" (Jiro Yoshihara, "About the *Second Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*", in *Gutai*, no. 5, 1 October 1956).

From this comment, one can imagine how extraordinarily severe was the struggle between the artists of early Gutai and the critical observations of Yoshihara. For the time being, in *Sky*, Murakami had found and produced in a brilliant way a means to remove the mental load he had carried since *Six Holes*.

*Shuji Mukai: "Room of Ideograms" and "Face and Ideograms"*

Through the uniform application of meaningless ideograms, Shuji Mukai attempted to deny difference and reject value systems.

At the *Tenth Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1961, he set up a room at the hall and covered everything there with ideograms, including the furniture and himself, and lay down. The next year, at the stage performance *Don't Worry, the Moon Won't Fall Down*, which was put on jointly by the Morita Modern Dance group and Gutai, Mukai plastered ideograms over the faces of twelve people who peered out from a white stage, scribbled ideograms on some audience members who came on stage, and finally even on himself. In 1965, on the occasion of a solo exhibition at the Gutai Pinacotheca, his plan to cover the whole building with ideograms was rejected by Yoshihara. In the same year, on the grounds that his work was nothing more than excreta, he finally burned all of his works in his possession.

Mukai had become a regular member in 1961, and belonged to the so-called second generation of Gutai. The group mostly concentrated on painting then, and Mukai's two-dimensional works were highly appraised by Michel Tapié, whose interest had



shifted from Informel to the sign. Mukai thus dared to work experimentally and his works consequently stood out prominently in mid-Gutai.

*Tsuruko Yamazaki and metal*

In Gutai, Jiro Yoshihara's only judgment about the finished artworks which members brought to him was "Good" or "No good", and he gave no detailed advice on the artist's technique or creative process. An exception, however, was the painting class held at his house soon after the end of the Second World War and before the establishment of Gutai. One of his students was Tsuruko Yamazaki, and so among Gutai members she together with Shozo Shimamoto were the longest standing apprentices.

There are few of Yamazaki's works remaining today. In most early works she persisted in the use of shiny metals like aluminum and tin plate: pieces where there were a number of tin cans painted red in a line, a painting with a mirror on the surface (both done in 1955), a gigantic three-sided mirror of tin plate (1956), irregular sheets of metal suspended and hung on the wall with various coloured lights coming from below, and so on.

In addition to unique textures with reflected light scattering on flimsy surfaces and cheap colours, what is remarkable in these two-dimensional works is where the surface of the painting is formed. In any normal picture the reflection of unrelated things on the canvas would be avoided. Nevertheless, in Yamazaki's case light and the surroundings are rendered on the painting's surface and this completes the work. This non-material appreciation of painting is a purely visual experience and unlike the approach in the Gutai art of other members where importance is attached to material.

At the *Gutai Art on the Stage* event in 1957, Yamazaki presented an experimental film titled *Film of Light*. "The subject here is light, which far from being concrete has neither shape nor colour. In general, people are taken up with the beauty of it, forgetting its metamorphic and fluid aspects, but these unpredictable things will be jumping about everywhere in this film. Further, you may vividly sense the real nature of something you never expected when something quakes in stillness, is not static, but liquid. When that nature exists, things are no longer material and become integrated with time" (Tsuruko Yamazaki, "Film of Light", in *Gutai*, no. 7, July 1957). Unfortunately, the film does not exist now; it was, nonetheless, a very interesting example of her work that exactly expressed her concept of her art.

*Shozo Shimamoto: Gutai music*

In early Gutai, materials which had thus far never been regarded as suited to art, such as industrial products that had recently



come onto the market, were picked up and used in a positive way, and sometimes non-material phenomena were used, including “sound”. Atsuko Tanaka’s *Bell* (1955) was one such work and a statement remains to tell us that in the following year, at the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* hall, taped music was played by Shozo Shimamoto. In 1957 and 1958, at the *Gutai Art on the Stage* shows, taped music by not only Shimamoto but also Michio Yoshihara, Sadamasa Motonaga and Yasuo Sumi was played. Almost none of these recordings has survived; only a part of Shozo Shimamoto’s piece remains. Tape recorders had just become available then and using one he produced an anonymous flow of sound, overdubbing the sounds of a chair being dragged along and the movement of water. It was a kind of environmental music, a musical form completely ignored those days; unlike *musique concrète*, which some so-called composers of the time created with Western techniques, it was highly intuitive.

They called their own musical work “concrete music”. *Musique concrète*, which used the sounds of various objects as a material, and the spirit of Gutai, which attached importance to the beauty of material itself, are mysteriously similar, and the music which they created intuitively, by denying composition in accord with an axis of time and coordinated harmony, coincidentally came to produce something akin to John Cage’s aesthetic.

#### *Shozo Shimamoto: “Canon Ball Painting”*

With regard to the early works of Shozo Shimamoto there seems to be some degree of confusion in terms of dates. If we refer to the historical documentation of exhibitions with their photographs, the period when he made two-dimensional works with a canon is concentrated within the years 1956 and 1957. The canon was handmade from metal pipe and adapted to the purpose of producing an explosion of paint using ignited carbide gas. The work shown at the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* held in July 1956 can be seen in photographs and we can guess at its scale. The support was a bright red vinyl sheet of 10 square metres, and besides the canon a broom was also used – replacing a paint brush. Due to the size, it often broke because of strong wind and the artist was busy repairing it all through the exhibition period. There is a newspaper report that the work was purchased by someone; another record states that at the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* there was a plan to install a tunnel and recycle this work at the entrance to the hall. An elaborate work made using light transmission was scheduled, but was destroyed by high winds the night before the opening. A newspaper article implies that the work could still exist now, however this contradicts the artist’s memory of events, as said before; the accuracy of the account cannot



His well-known painting method of throwing paint-filled bottles onto stones or blocks so that they would smash started in 1956. It probably originated in the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition*, when he produced such a work in public to appeal to the mass media. Shimamoto changed his approach afterwards show by show, but he did revive the bottle throwing for his solo exhibition of 1962 held at the Gutai Pinacotheca. Intermittently, the bottle throwing has been done since then and does somehow seem to convey the impression of a trademark for Shimamoto. In recent years, he created even larger *tableaux* by dropping bottles from an extreme height, using a crane and so forth, and sometimes the sense of a message was part of this.

*Shozo Shimamoto's work with holes*

It was around 1947 when Shozo Shimamoto first met Jiro Yoshihara. Shimamoto kept bringing his works around to Yoshihara one after another, and Yoshihara demanded only to be surprised, but did not give any critical comment or technical advice. Experimental works by Shimamoto from this time appear to be ones where direction is shown by arrows or roughly painted pictures with a dumpling-like circle on brown paper done in gaudy colours such as red, yellow and black, or a huge monochrome *tableau* in yellow. None of these can be confirmed to exist at present.

What Yoshihara evaluated especially highly during that period were Shimamoto's works with holes in the *tableau's* surface. The holes had not, though, been his original intent. He had then made *Paper-vas*, to replace *Can-vas*, with newspaper stuck together and painted with cheap paints. One day, when he had taken his work to show to Yoshihara, he accidentally broke the surface as he tried to take it out. He showed the work anyway, thinking that he did not see why it was so bad to have a work with a hole in it. Yoshihara admired it greatly and said: "I've never seen a painting like it. You're a genius!" Shimamoto was flattered and made a series of works with holes, but Yoshihara did not show much interest. "I've seen this before", he said.

Several works with holes still exist and we can tell the approximate period of their production from the dates on the newspapers appearing on the back. It is difficult to say exactly when the earliest one was made, but the one in the possession of the Ashiya City Museum of Art & History dates from 1954. It was 1951 when Fontana cut through his canvas. Coincidentally, these events took place almost simultaneously in the West and East.

*"International Art of a New Era": Informel and Gutai*

Planned by Jiro Yoshihara and Michel Tapié, this exhibition was held in 1958 and included about eighty artists from Europe, the United States and Japan, with about a hundred works being 177



shown. Included were Informel artists from Europe such as Georges Mathieu and Antonio Tápies; American Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline and Morris Louis; and the Japanese were dominated by Gutai members making up eighty percent of the group. It was a remarkable thing in that age that many of the major works of Abstract Expressionists were shown and the exhibition travelled to five cities in Japan. It was an epoch-making exhibition both in content and scale, although the Japanese press reacted coldly. It was largely seen as the propaganda of Tapié, an advocate of the Informel movement, and furthermore it was totally unacceptable to the art world of Tokyo that the structure of the show suggested Gutai represented contemporary Japanese art. It had originally been discussed that the show should travel around the world, but this was not feasible. What did happen instead was the first overseas exhibition of Gutai, which became possible in September of the same year in New York.

*Saburo Murakami: "Hakurakusuru Kaiga" (Peeling Painting)*

At the *Third Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1957, Saburo Murakami exhibited an enormous *tableau: Peeling Painting*. It was produced by putting many layers of paint on top of half dry glue. During the exhibition period, its black surface layers peeled away one after another, gradually leaving the red base exposed.

This work brought a sense of time to the originally static spatial art of painting. Thinking of the background which allowed Murakami to achieve this expressive form, we cannot overlook the relationship to paper tearing works that had been shown earlier. Especially *Passing Through*, shown at the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1956, was important. In this work, consisting of twenty-two panels with two layers of brown paper each, totalling forty-two screens, the trace of the artist's action was vividly marked out in accord with the axis of time. Time and space intersect in a completely new way here, and it could be said that the work is dealing with the same issues as are found in Muybridge's photographic "replay" works and Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

Some *Peeling Paintings* still exist today and surprisingly their surface continues to peel away. They are present progressive pictures and their completion is destined to be almost permanently delayed.

*A bulletin: the "Gutai" journal*

The Gutai Art Association was established around August 1954 and their first project was not an exhibition but the publication of a bulletin.



The first *Gutai* journal, published in January 1955, was a booklet printed by the members themselves and, though the print quality is not great, it does have the agreeable feeling of something hand-made with a beautiful layout. Following an introductory essay by Yoshihara, works of the seventeen members are shown in black and white reproductions and the artists' names are all given in roman letters together with an English translation of the introductory essay; it is notable that their perspective clearly included overseas. However, some founding members such as Hideo Yoshihara and Hiroshi Funai left Gutai as they felt it contradictory that the group at the time did not try to put on exhibitions and was instead involved with a publication.

We can actually find an earlier example of a booklet similar to this and made in Ashiya, where Gutai came into existence. The Ashiya Camera Club was established in 1930 in Ashiya and was the group which rose to the forefront of the new photographic movement in Japan. The *Ashiya Camera Club Yearbook*, which was issued the year after the club's founding, was printed beautifully in collotype and bears many similarities to the *Gutai* art journal: illustration pages bore only page numbers while the names of the artists in roman letters were set in a colophon. Sentences in English were also included. Another similarity is the fact that club took positive steps to exhibit in Tokyo and not only in its local home area of Kansai. We cannot say exactly to what extent Yoshihara was aware of its activity, but it is certain that Iwata Nakayama – the key person at the Ashiya Camera Club – did have contacts with Yoshihara, including his participation in the establishment of the Ashiya City Art Association together with him.

As I have said, behind the journal there was clearly a strategic purpose related to the media: the bulletin was mailed overseas to people in the art world. In the article "Obituary of Jackson Pollock", published in no. 5 (1956), it is interesting to note a message from Mr. Bernard Harper Friedman, a friend of Pollock's and an art critic: "While sorting out Mr. Pollock's books together with his widow, we came across the Gutai journals, nos. 2 and 3, and came to see that the artist must have been very pleased with the Gutai journal, as it shared the same kind of vision and reality as Mr. Pollock's. His widow gave me both nos. 2 and 3, however I should like to ask you to send me no. 1, and if more journals have been issued since then please send those too" (anonymous, "Obituary of Jackson Pollock", in *Gutai*, no. 5, 1 October 1956).

In no. 6 we find the obituary note for Pollock by Friedman and the reproduction of a work, together with a message, by an American artist, Ray Jonson, who wrote to the journal through Friedman's introduction. Jonson was a pioneer of the so-called



mail art and presented his work by means of correspondence, not just by doing the usual exhibition. Gutai artists appear to have taken interest in the originality of this style of presentation, yet there is no sign that the communication went any deeper. This contact between the artist and Gutai has not been investigated yet, however.

Anyway, the biggest outcome of the *Gutai* journal was that it was through it that Michel Tapié was informed of Gutai's existence. It came about through Hisao Domoto, who happened to be studying in Paris at the time. And having encountered the *Gutai* bulletin Tapié came to visit Japan in September 1957.

*Atsuko Tanaka: "Bell"*

Twenty bells were installed at some distance from each other in the hall. When visitors turned on the switch, the bells would begin to ring, going from nearby, away into the distance one by one and then returning. Through the way the sound of the bells travelled, the visitors became aware of the whole exhibition space, not just of the individual works. This work was exhibited by Atsuko Tanaka as painting. In early Gutai we find many attempts to challenge the limits of the concept of painting, but *Bell* is one of the most radical works among these.

It was not widely known, but the prototype of this piece was *Wind and Cloth*, shown at the *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun*, in 1955. A 10-square metre sheet of cloth was installed very close to the ground and fluttered in the wind; it was richly expressive. The cloth was of a cheap-looking pink colour with a blue border running all the way around the edge. This border, which encircled the two-dimensional surface, was actually the origin for the idea of *Bell*. The creation of a space with just the two dimensions of painting is the true essence of this work.

Soon after Tanaka had shown *Bell* at the *First Gutai Art Exhibition*, she presented the same work for the painting section of the *Third Genbi Exhibition* and stirred up a debate. It was beyond the comprehension of many judges, however Jiro Yoshihara insisted upon its admission and it was indeed displayed.

*Atsuko Tanaka: "Electric Clothes, Stage Clothes"*

There are a number of versions of Atsuko Tanaka's representative work, *Electric Clothes*. Due to the photographic documentation, the most widely known today is the work done at the *Second Gutai Art Exhibition*. Besides this piece many others were produced, but they were almost identical in their shape, the human body, and the covering of the physical structure with various electric light bulbs, with the intent that the work could actually be worn. The range of electric light bulbs included round



and tubular ones, they were either colourless, or painted in various colours, or covered with transparent vinyl. All these works amounted to a rehearsal for the *Gutai Art on the Stage* show, and were a simulation of the show on stage. In addition to the work covered with electric light bulbs, clothes of abnormal proportions with exceedingly long sleeves were tested and at the actual stage performance both kinds of work were brought together and presented as one piece.

Gutai works took up a stance near to “non-objective” art (without recognizable shape), and in this regard Tanaka’s series of works were the exception. For Jiro Yoshihara, the subject was assessed as something symbolical that had been created after the obvious shape had first been deconstructed. In any event, this series of Atsuko Tanaka’s works made with electrical devices were astonishing then. Even today, when technology such as the IC memory chip means we can achieve the same results much more easily, there are still difficulties in reproducing her artworks. Though she got some help from specialists, this artist who was an absolute amateur in terms of electronics developed a complicated switching system which was virtually hand-made. The switching mechanism of the original *Electric Clothes* was on a very large scale and made noises just like a factory.

All this hard work, however, had unexpected spinoffs. In the process of developing *Electric Clothes*, Tanaka drew many wiring diagrams. They are extremely beautiful and at the same time have great significance. The origin of Tanaka’s innovative paintings with their colourful circles and countless tangled lines can be traced here.

#### *Atsuko Tanaka’s large-scale works*

It is no bad thing for an artist to lose himself as he revels in the creative process. In the case of Atsuko Tanaka, however, various episodes we may recount suggest that for her this was rather extreme.

At the *Eighth Gutai Art Exhibition* (1959), Tanaka presented a 3-metre diameter white spherical cement object. The upper front half of the object, though a sphere, was open and its surfaces inside and out were covered with electricized cubes and wires. Many Gutai members lent a hand to carry the parts to the second floor of the Kyoto City Museum of Art and several photographs show the construction process. It would appear as if, should they have lost their grip, anyone who supported it from below could have died from the pressure. And yet, when she was planning the work, she had in mind a huge scale, of 5 metres in diameter. The piece she finally realized was in a reduced scale because Akira Kanayama had persuaded her that the larger size would fail structurally.



In the exhibition hall of the show *International Art of a New Era*, Atsuko Tanaka's gigantic floor work was impressive. When the work was delivered to the Takashimaya Department Store in Osaka – its first showplace (where the ceiling must have been about 3 metres high) – Jiro Yoshihara became angry and said: "Where do you think you can put it?" In the end, due to the mediation of Michel Tapié who happened to be present, it was displayed on the floor at a slight incline.

It really does seem absurd: the work was either inappropriate in its format or there was an intent to deliver a work that would plainly be impossible to show except on the floor. Paradoxically, however, such an incident describes eloquently Atsuko Tanaka's purity. Yozo Ukita memorably recollects Tanaka supervising a children's craft class. The word "supervise" was actually quite out of place at the scene. Watching children wind rubberized elastic around four old bricks, she became enthused and lost her sense of whether the work was her own or that of someone else. It was a moment when the boundary between teacher and pupil dissolved.

*Kazuo Shiraga: "Challenge for the Mud"*

Documentary photographs related to actions and performances sometimes amplify a particular aspect of a work. The more photogenic they are, the more careful we should be not to miss what is fundamental.

Several photographs remain which show Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenge for the Mud*. The most famous must be the one taken from directly above, while the artist lay in the middle with his body bent from the waist. A half naked man writhing in a vast amount of mud. The reality itself is outrageous enough, but the curves traced in the mud and the curving lines made by the artist's body were impressive for their circulating spiral movement, stressing further the dynamic action. Seeing this photograph for the first time, how many people would understand that this work is closely related to painting?

*Challenge for the Mud* was presented altogether on three occasions during the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* (1955). The above mentioned photograph was in fact taken at the second performance. The first work was done in the front garden of the Ohara Kaikan with about one ton of wall mud mixed with ten bags of cement. The artist did the performance after agreeing to a request for a photo-shoot from the French-American photographer Jean Renault. The cement began to harden before he arrived and a work different from what Shiraga had originally intended was completed.

Based on his reconsideration, the second work was created in a space to the side of Ohara Kaikan by kneading gently



only the mud. This time there were no reporters or photographers and the work was done for himself alone. After this had been destroyed, a third work was carried out and shot for a news film; this time it was done with the same mud as the second work.

In this situation, it is important to understand at what point the work was completed. Since the imagery of documentary photographs is so strong, one might think that the very action of writhing in the mud was the work, and yet this view is invalidated by the following two points. First, the second work was produced out of view. The action does not necessarily presuppose the presence of others. Second, each mountain of mud was displayed with a caption during the exhibition period. In other words, the material itself as a trace of action was seen to be the work.

*Challenge for the Mud* was evidently a work of painting. Shiraga proceeded to it from works painted with the feet and used his entire body as a paintbrush. Mud was the chosen material because, while it had a fluid quality like paint, it was inexpensive to obtain in a massive quantity. It is also true, though, that consciousness of action as a process was raised through works such as this. This was indeed a monumental work and relates to these two realities.

*Kazuo Shiraga: "Wild Boar Hunting"*

A fighting instinct and a phlegmatic temperament: these are the key words to remember in an appreciation of Shiraga's art. These traits in fact were deeply rooted in his childhood experience. He was born and grew up in the city of Amagasaki which used to hold extremely rough festivals. Participants would slam into each other with all their might as they carried movable shrines and almost every year injuries resulted; often, those hurt were brought to Shiraga's house. Finally, one day a man who got crushed between two moving shrines was killed instantly right in front of Shiraga. Seeing the vivid colour of the blood spread everywhere, the child felt it was "beautiful". Such experience later was to cast a dark shadow over his work.

At the tenth and thirteenth Gutai art exhibitions (1961 and 1963) Shiraga showed works "decorated" with wild boar fur. For this project, he had got a hunting rifle (Shiraga collects guns and knives) and joined a hunting club so that he could capture game himself. But the wild boar, inconveniently, did not make his appearance. Shiraga reluctantly got hold of the fur skin from a butcher and stuck it to the artwork; on the top of this he painted with his feet. This, even more than his other works, has the power to affect our physiological senses as we confront its butchery. Yoshihara, who had accepted almost all of Shiraga's pieces, just made a glum face this time. The first *Wild Boar Hunting*



(1961), though, soon became damaged as the artist had not tanned the skin. The two pieces which compose the second work (1963) – benefiting from the mistake – still exist and are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo and Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art.

Aside from the works done with wild boar skin, a photograph remains of a piece in which the artist had bottled cow's liver and cement. This work also stems from childhood experiences, but it was left as an experiment in his studio and never shown in public.

### *Kazuo Shiraga and the "Suiko-den"*

The instinct for combat is essential in the scope of Shiraga's art. He also was fond of reading ancient Chinese heroic stories and had enjoyed them from a young age. He liked especially the *Suiko-den* and used the names of its characters to title his own art works from the end of the fifties up through the sixties.

Generally speaking, literary and explanatory titles were avoided in Gutai and almost invariably works are titled *Work* or *Untitled*. Following contact with Tapié, however, Shiraga regularly had to send his work abroad and some kind of title was needed to assist in creating a mental picture of each piece. Naturally, when shown at the locations of the Gutai exhibition these titles were not used, but many public collections now adopt the names of the *Suiko-den* heroes as the official titles.

The *Suiko-den* recounts the stories of 108 heroes who gathered at Ryozanpaku. The thirty-six most important characters are called Tenkosei, the other seventy-two Chisatsusei; each has also the name of the star which carries their destiny. Following this, Shiraga named the bigger works, those exceeding 200 *go*, from the Tenkosei, and smaller works were titled from the Chisatsusei. Two of the characters were not adopted however, since they were set upon evil. Works by Shiraga bearing the names of the 106 other characters are supposed to exist in places all around the world.

### *Kazuo Shiraga's "Foot Painting"*

The dual structure of Japanese art – Japanese painting / Western painting – was established from the time the country was opened to the rest of the world in the Meiji period. This binary structure is exemplified in the introduction of the perspective and realism of Western painting, as well as in a reaction to it through an approach to two-dimensional space and a consistent use of art materials that have been traditional since the Edo era; through their influence upon one another, these two have been major forces in the formation of the basis of art in our country.



Technical School of Painting (now the Kyoto University of Art) which was one of the main bastions of power in Japanese painting. Gutai members, like Shiraga, whose art education was a major field of study were a minority. The art materials of Japanese painting were however utterly unsuited to his temperament. On the contrary, the viscous and flowing quality of oil paints was a better match for him, and around 1953 this became apparent in his style.

While working on a realistic picture in oils one day he was displeased with the look of it and scraped away the surface with a painting knife; he was fascinated by the abstract image that unexpectedly appeared. With this event, he began to explore subjects where “composition” – one of the foundations of painting – was omitted. If paints are spread in a regular and linear way from upper left corner to lower right corner then, unsurprisingly, compositional hierarchy is weakened. At first, he did this with the painting knife and then, in turn, with his fingers, fingernails and hands. With the paintbrush and its representation of artistic intention and hand movement gone, the issues of physicality and chance came to the fore.

Just at that time he got a push from seeing his friend Saburo Murakami's work *Throwing Ball Painting*. It was 1954, and as he watched the spectacle of Murakami throwing paint-covered balls at the artwork's surface Shiraga instantly and instinctively got a clue as to how he could go further into the above noted issues. Returning directly to his studio, he made his first work done by painting with the feet, and this was exhibited at the show of Zero-Kai later the same year. The works from this period up to the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1955 are somewhat different from his later bold pictures. Firstly, colour is almost entirely limited to the Crimson Lake. Further, they convey a sense of having been made by some vigorous stamping of the feet rather than the strokes seen in later works, replete with their sense of speed. This is evidence of his critical interest lying still with the obliteration of composition up to this time. At the start he had held onto a rope to support his body while painting, gradually however the element of motion expressed by the shifting of body weight was emphasized. With regard to the continuity from fingers to hands to feet, the whole body becomes an inevitability. *Challenge for the Mud* was an actual instance of this.

#### *Material and materiality*

With the exception of Jiro Yoshihara, who was the president of Yoshihara Seiyu (Oil) Company Ltd., all the Gutai artists were poor. Given such economic conditions, they had no choice when making large-scale work requiring massive amounts of material but to manage with anything cheap. Yoshihara would encour-



age the members by saying: "You're young, so paint big pictures with a vengeance. If you haven't enough money, paint on paper. Pictures can be painted on even newspaper or brown paper" (Kazuo Shiraga, in "12 Years of the Gutai Group", described in documentary episodes such adventures first in the seminal publication *Bijyutsu Techo*, no. 285, July 1965). In fact, some members including Shozo Shimamoto painted on *paper-vas* instead of *can-vas*, produced by sticking paper to wooden frames that were made by joining together timbers of rectangular section. The glued joints sometimes became a nest for cockroaches.

They also made good use of the new industrial products that began to come on the market then. Shimamoto used a tape recorder to create Gutai music, Sadamasa Motonaga used polyethylene tubing for *Water*, and Saburo Murakami joined six pieces of glass together for the work *Air* with sellotape, which had just become available then. The raw nature of such materials seemed to encourage an attachment on their part and alert them to its material presence.

"In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed to each other. The material is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not force the material into submission. If one leaves the material as it is, presenting it just as material, then it starts to tell us something and speaks with a mighty voice. Keeping the life of the material alive also means bringing the spirit alive, and lifting up the spirit means leading the material up to the height of the spirit" (Jiro Yoshihara, "Gutai Manifesto", in *Geijyustsu Shincho*, December 1956).

#### "Gutai Art on the Stage"

"In order to deliver all of its aesthetic impressions the revelatory enthusiasm of the Gutai group calls for the sense of space as well as time. The group is experimenting with new painting while abandoning the frame and jumping off the wall, going from still time to live time. This is totally different from the time-space seen in conventional drama with its portrayal of literary content. Here time is uninterrupted and creates an immediate impression; it is about the change itself that is going on here at this time. A space for such time, a time for such space – this is painting with a new meaning" (Saburo Murakami, "Regarding Gutai Art", in *Gutai*, no. 7, 15 July 1957).

*Gutai Art on the Stage* had in total three performances. In 1957, it was produced in Osaka in May and Tokyo in July, and in 1958 the third performance was held in Osaka in April (the two performances in 1957 toured two cities but had the same content). As the title suggests, it was an unprecedented style of exhibition, an exhibition on stage. The main thing to consider here



is the mentality the artists had in dealing with the space of the stage. Of course, the Gutai artists had none of the words and concepts used today such as “action” or “performance”, and it was not a new drama they were looking for. Consistently, the plastic arts were their foundation. Basically speaking, they sought to raise the status of stage art, which is normally subordinate to the unfolding of a story, to that of hero. Murakami dared to call it painting: “painting with a new meaning”.

Let us take a close look at the structure of stage space. Although it has depth that proceeds to a horizon, the stage as seen from stalls can be understood as a two-dimensional plane with a rectangular frame, broader than it is tall. In contrast, consider the happenings performed at Black Mountain College by John Cage, David Tudor, and Merce Cunningham in 1952. The audience members all sat around the space and happenings took place here and there within it. In that situation it was arranged so that the audience could not grasp the whole image. The attempt was to omit the ideal position, the location frontally of the audience. The two stage set-ups are the complete opposite of one another.

Shiraga's *Chogendai Sanbaso* piece aimed to expand body movement using a special outfit and create a kind of abstract picture in space with a red vector. Kanayama's *Balloon* was based on a formalist idea of placing a globe-shaped object on a rectangular picture, and in Murakami's *Challenging Paper Screen* the action of breaking through paper with the whole body can be seen as a metaphor of the relationship between the paintbrush and the canvas. Approaching it this way, we may find Motonaga's *Smoke* or *Extension* deeply meaningful. Eroding the space of the audience and extending beyond the limit of the painting's surface. This, I believe, symbolizes their attitude clearly as they sought to stretch the interpretation of the concept of painting to the extreme.

#### *Ashiya City Exhibition*

In April 1948, the Ashiya City Art Association was established. Thanks to a strong initiative coming from one representative, Jiro Yoshihara, the *Ashiya City Exhibition* showed the direction of avant-garde art very soon after it began and, as a municipally organized event, had an outstanding effect through its invitation to members of the public to exhibit. Right from the beginning its regulations stated: “Everyone is welcome to apply”, “No size limit” (there is a limit now), and a progressive way of thinking was already clearly visible and meant that aspects irrelevant to art were eliminated, such as any administrative guideline limiting it to this city alone. Gradually, young artists who were pursuing avant-garde methods competed for a place and later this



exhibition became the meeting place of Gutai and Jiro Yoshihara.

The *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun*, now recognized as the first real Gutai exhibition, was held in July 1955 and sponsored by the Ashiya City Art Association; it was an extension of the *Ashiya City Exhibition*. In time, during the second half of the fifties, the show became a gateway to Gutai and sometimes exhibited works by overseas artists who were in contact with Gutai, including people like Georges Mathieu, Sam Francis and Christo Coetzee.

More than fifty exhibitions have been held up to the present, and now they are done at the Ashiya City Museum of Art & History. Since Jiro Yoshihara died in 1972, a high standard has been maintained, but it is difficult to say that the *Ashiya City Exhibition* is ahead of its time as it was in earlier days. The outdoor section however, with size unlimited, has seen some highly charged works, and signs of a new movement have begun to appear.

#### *The very action itself*

“To tell you the truth, I paint so that I can experience that pleasant sensation I get after collapsing into the armchair. I want to throw out the easel that puts on airs, convenient but weak, and put the canvas up on the wall with nails and randomly cut it up with an axe until I sweat and get completely dizzy, just a step away from a heart attack” (Kazuo Shiraga, “Action Itself”, in *Gutai*, no. 2, October 1955). “My creative works are in no need of any permanent resolution; action is the whole venture” (Kazuo Shiraga, “Action Itself”, in *Gutai*, no. 3, October 1955).

Here the creative act itself was more important than the finished piece. For instance, in the work *Please Come in*, 1955, ten timbers that had been roughly cut through were assembled in the shape of a cone. The viewer would go inside the work and find that the trace of cutting formed a limitless image. The attempt to produce a spiritual effect through physical experience was a fertile concept, derived from an idea of painting. In other words, the result did not have to be permanent as it was the “action itself” that mattered.

At the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1955, Shiraga performed *Challenge for the Mud*. The development, paintbrush-fingers-feet-whole body was as inevitable as arriving at a terminal for him, and following this Shiraga lost the motivation to paint for a while. It was Jiro Yoshihara who advised him to investigate the potential of foot painting further. Later, Shiraga expressed his concept in these words: “Only by leaving artworks can an artist’s existence be significant”, and he created numerous paintings of lasting value.



### *Outdoor exhibition*

The *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun* was held in July 1955 in the Ashiya Park along the bank of the Ashiya River. Although Gutai had already been established by this point, the show was not organized by the group but by the Ashiya City Art Association and was something like an additional version of the *Ashiya City Exhibition*. Jiro Yoshihara, a representative of the Art Association, saw mountains of rejected works carried outdoors and took a hint from the sight of these works which looked rather impudent and undefeated in the strong sunshine. There was another incident which contributed to the idea of this outdoor exhibition. Ichiro Fukui (1893–1965), an artist who worked in the Western painting style, twice held an *Open-Air Exhibition of Western Painting* at the Ashiya seaside (1922 and 1924). Fukui, who had lived in Ashiya from the beginning of the Taisho era, was known to Yoshihara in person and it is surely possible that the latter had seen these exhibitions. They had been somehow tasteful in the way oil paintings were hung from the branches of pine trees.

In contrast, the *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun* was extraordinary and asked fundamental questions about the meaning of the relationship between the works and their surroundings. Faced with this huge space and its pine trees, something totally different from a common-sense exhibition hall, many artists recognized instinctively that it would be meaningless to simply bring their normal works outside. They took care to avoid any attachment to detail and rather gave the works the boldness needed not to be overwhelmed by the exhibition space, and they took up the challenge of adapting their art to the space by understanding it and using natural phenomena such as wind and light.

This was the first exhibition where Sadamasa Motonaga or members belonging to Zero-Kai such as Akira Kanayama, Kazuo Shiraga, Fujiko Shiraga, Atsuko Tanaka and Saburo Murakami showed their work together with established members of Gutai. In this sense, we can say this is the first real Gutai art exhibition. Anyway, there is no doubt that the outcome of this show was to accelerate their activities and lead them to hold the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* in Tokyo the same year, in October.

The next year Gutai organized the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*. The works were further improved and the number of pieces using the effect of luminescence at night, such as *Electric Clothes* by Atsuko Tanaka, increased.

### *Akira Kanayama: "Automatic Drawing Machine"*

Akira Kanayama exhibited a gigantic work at the *Third Gutai Art Exhibition* in 1957. The work, which has countless lines running



irregularly across a vinyl sheet, was in actuality drawn by a machine automatically. There is an electric toy car which changes direction automatically whenever it bumps into an obstacle, and Kanayama created a big version of such a machine and mounted tins of paint on the machine adjusting it so that there was a steady, even flow of the liquid. All that the artist had to do was just switch it on, and then he was free to leave or take a nap. To obtain a satisfactory result he did actually make dozens of failed works.

Kanayama's approach was consistently cool and inorganic and this was his merit. Unlike Kazuo Shiraga, his childhood friend, who sought to narrow the gap between painting and the body, finally in *Challenge for the Mud* throwing himself into the middle of the painting, Kanayama always seemed to keep a certain distance between himself and the work. This *Automatic Drawing Machine* is a device with that purpose, to maintain such a cushion.

This methodology originated not in any artistic inevitability, but actually from great necessity. Kanayama was extremely busy as a public relations person for Gutai and lacked the time to fully involve himself creatively. In the case of works where a minimum of elements were positioned on a canvas, as in his earlier works, careful consideration and development was required. He could not get involved in such time-consuming things.

Up until 1965, when he withdrew from Gutai, we cannot in fact observe any major development in Kanayama's style. For several decades following this, he devoted himself to the support of his partner, Atsuko Tanaka, and in recent years has finally started creative activity again. Long ago, he came up with an idea to transform the music or movement of the heavenly bodies into paintings through a mechanical or optical process, but it had never been feasible due to technical difficulties. Technical progress has finally enabled him to create a new "paintbrush".

*Yoshio Kaneki: "I Don't Want to Show"*

Shozo Shimamoto was Yoshio Kaneki's teacher during his junior high school days, and thanks to this connection he exhibited in early Gutai shows several times. Many people participated in Gutai besides the core members, and it is therefore difficult to define who were the members. Among the artists around Gutai, Kaneki's intense personality was outstanding.

His three-dimensional plastic works with organic forms were well known. In fact, they were a kind of ready-mades, waste articles which he asked children to collect at factories. On one occasion, a plan to build a hut outdoors and set it on fire was rejected by Yoshihara because it was against the unwritten law of



*I Don't Want to Show* was his most famous work: a sheet of plywood covered a painting with the words "I don't want to show" written roughly across it in the local Osaka dialect. It was submitted for the *Ninth Ashiya City Exhibition* in 1956. Most judges regarded it as a prank, and only Jiro Yoshihara insisted that it should be accepted, saying: "It's like nothing ever done before. It's original." But in the end it was rejected due to a majority decision. However, rumors exist to the effect that it was shown for reference and Yoshihara took all responsibility for it, while others say it was not shown at all. Even though rejected, it has become widely known since a reproduction of it was included in the *Gutai* journal, no. 5.

### *Anti-action*

When we think of Gutai, the first impression to come to mind is the brilliance of their actions and performances. However, of course, there were also artists who consistently showed only paintings.

Masatoshi Masanobu, one of the founding members of Gutai, was the oldest in the group except for Yoshihara. He sought to express himself through painting using layers of short brushstrokes. Colour was limited to black, yellow ochre, liver brown and the occasional use of white or a small amount of blue, while bright red or green were hardly used at all. Yoshihara commented as follows with regard to his work: "If a space existed within us, a space that we tried to locate in our heart when painting, for Masanobu it would be a place weighty with his original dark and sober two-dimensionality. It occurs to me that the images we may wish to paint from time to time, come to him one upon another" (Jiro Yoshihara, "Solo Exhibition of Masatoshi Masanobu", pamphlet, Gutai Pinacotheca, 1-10 March 1965).

Until the present, Chiyu Uemae has painted searchingly with an accumulation of fine brushwork. Each of his pictures demands much time and effort, but he has never been an artist to produce work sporadically. Furthermore, although his occupation is that of a crane operator in a shipbuilding yard, he has continued to paint and created a great number of works. His passion for collecting documents, photographs and films of his work place is extraordinary, and his present studio he built himself. He is also a good writer and some of his texts are worth mentioning, such as his essays on his racy younger days or recollections of the inception of Gutai based on his diaries.

Teruyuki Tsubouchi is the only artist to have come from outside Kansai among the early members. Even now, he continues to do his work in Matsuyama, in the prefecture of Ehime, on the island of Shikoku. He was impressed by the "Gutai Manifesto" printed in the art magazine *Geijutsu Shincho*, December issue, 1956, and sent some work to Yoshihara. This led to his becom-



ing a member of Gutai. His works then were mysteriously expressive, made by dripping paints which he had diluted delicately. After Gutai broke up he involved himself with Conceptual Art, declaring that all the road signs in Japan with "Speed Limit 40 Kilometres" were his works and doing performances such as binding his hand and feet. The underlying direction of his artistic commitment has been consistent, however.

As I noted, these artists' approach was different from the lively actions and performances. Their works were not treated lightly inside the group though. Jiro Yoshihara himself, the leader of Gutai, is, as a matter of fact, fundamentally a *tableau* artist. He did indeed show work at the stage exhibitions, but they cannot be said to have succeeded that well, and while he encouraged experiment among the members, his creative method was very orthodox. He actually was not capable of bringing the aspect of chance into his own two-dimensional works. His Informel style compositions were all finely calculated and even all of the "splashes" that at a glance appear to be the trace of some intense action were in fact painted by brush.

In Gutai, the dictum "Don't imitate others" was most important. It may be highly characteristic of Gutai that where action appears, it depends not upon action alone but involves a range of expressive methods.

#### *Avant-garde calligraphy and Gutai*

One right after the other, in June 1951 and April 1952, the calligraphy art magazine *Bokubi* and the journal of a group of avant-garde calligraphers *Bokujin* were published. With a perspective on contemporary art movements, these magazines were well known for the way they covered the critical issues of calligraphy in the modern era. Many works of modern art were shown in the magazines in addition to calligraphy, and round table discussions about abstract painting by contemporary overseas artists and calligraphy were often recorded. Among the most representative personalities who combined the two roles of Kansai calligrapher and avant-garde painter were Jiro Yoshihara, Kokuta Suda and Shin Nakamura. My comments about Genbi, regarding the exchange of views among artists of different genres in the first half of the fifties, apply here also to calligraphers and painters. Both magazines are valuable documentary records which serve as a reference when investigating their path.

As an insight to the future of Yoshihara and Gutai activities, the discussion entitled "Calligraphy of Nanten-bo", found in *Bokubi*, July issue, 1952, is interesting. At Kaiseiji temple in Nishinomiya City, calligraphy from the Taisho era by Nanten-bo, a Zen priest, was kept. Yoshihara discovered by chance these calligraphy works in which one enormous character was drawn on each



of eight sliding screens (*fusuma*) and, being deeply impressed, informed his art associates of their existence. The combination of their absolutely dynamic composition and the delicacy created by Sumi ink splashes undoubtedly influenced Yoshihara's Informel painting during the Gutai period. There was also discussion about the "sense of time" which could be felt from these calligraphy works and their connection with early Gutai activities was described.

Incidentally, both calligraphers and painters could not compromise with one another concerning one issue, that is the matter of literary content as it relates to calligraphy. Although Yoshihara repeatedly mentions the formative potential of calligraphy, he indicates that it is limited and restricted by "the sense of literary meaning". On the other hand, for calligraphers to abandon the "sense of the letter" would mean the loss of calligraphy's identity and result in a merging with painting. The close relationship of the two groups thus came to an end.

#### *International Sky Festival*

This was an event held simultaneously with the *Ninth Gutai Art Exhibition* in April 1960. It came about through a proposal made by Michel Tapié and included the work of thirty artists from Japan and elsewhere (approximately ten artists from Europe, ten from the United States and ten from Japan) whom he chose together with Jiro Yoshihara. The works were enlarged, put on calico and raised up high in the sky by balloons tethered to the Takashimaya department store in Namba, Osaka. In the way that this exceeded the common-sense idea of exhibition space we can consider this as an event that follows on the outdoor exhibitions or stage exhibitions of the fifties. We cannot, however, see a relationship in there being any new expressive form stimulated by a response to location. Rather, we should recognize the demonstrative character of the event and the way Gutai's international status was thus marked.

Incidentally, the balloon of Tsuruko Yamazaki was blown away and lost during the exhibition period.

#### *Akira Kanayama's white painting*

In the summer of 1946, art lectures were held at the Seido elementary school in Ashiya and Jiro Yoshihara was invited to speak. According to Tsuruko Yamazaki, who attended the lecture, Yoshihara stated that the objective of art henceforth would be to go beyond the Abstract painting of Mondrian. This is an extremely interesting episode which allows us to get to know about his critical stance just before Gutai's establishment.

Yoshihara was expected to be one of the pioneers of Abstract painting from as early as the years preceding the war, but we get



the impression of a rather abrupt change in the styles he used in his work. Like many Japanese artists who were his contemporaries, the relationship to earlier realistic works and the logic of their development appear unclear, and we cannot help feeling that these artists borrowed ideas from foreign magazines. Whether or not he regretted it, his first move after the war was to step back to realistic painting again and to start a process of dismantling shapes into linear elements.

When Yoshihara saw Kanayama's paintings he most likely felt he had found the way to go beyond Mondrian. Kanayama, prior to his involvement with Gutai, had been experimenting with realistic images reduced to linear elements. In his work, his approach was extreme and the elements that structured the pictures were often restricted to an absolute minimum. In a series of works from around 1954, the background in most cases was flat colour and on top of it some kind of shape was positioned as if in a diagram. His interest seems to have been in letting the diagram function as a trigger to energize the background as much as possible, rather than placing meaning with the diagram itself. Creating a painting requires the physical action of "painting" and the continuous feedback from this action confirms objectively the *tableau* and its outcome, and in Kanayama's case the emphasis was imposed abnormally on the latter. In this sense, his minimal work of early days and the automatic drawings by electric cars have something in common.

Kanayama, who had sought to develop composition through surface colour and line, finally was left to confront just the vertical and horizontal axes of the canvas. He therefore came to conclude that the canvas upon which he painted nothing could be a completed work as well and brought a brand new canvas to Yoshihara. This time, however, his work was rejected.

### *Shinko Independent Exhibition*

The *Shinko Independent Exhibition* was held in Kobe from April to May 1956. It was organized and sponsored by the *Shinko* newspaper. Originally, it was an exhibition with prizes, but from this year it became an independent style show in which anybody could exhibit.

The show was divided into two sections. In the first, the Western painting division, the participants from Gutai were Sadamasa Motonaga, Toshio Yoshida, Toshiko Kinoshita, and Michio Yoshihara. Articles about the exhibition by Yoshihara and others published in the *Shinko* newspaper together with some documentation allow us to get an impression of some of the work displayed.

More noteworthy was the Gutai group room in the second section, the plastic arts division, located on the third floor of the *Shinko* newspaper building. The interesting and significant as-



pect of this was not so much the autonomous individual works of the group's members, but the exhilarating vitality of so many works brought together in a somewhat excessive manner relative to the space and filling the room. Most of the materials were cheap and lacking any feeling of quality, such as paper, newspaper, cellophane etc. At the entrance, a gateway made of cellophane by Tsuruko Yamazaki was set up and viewers could not enter the room without stepping over it. Works were displayed not just on the wall, but also on the floor and the ceiling, and extremely long works with the shape of cords or tapes crisscrossed the space; it was as if a toy box had been overturned.

The Gutai group room received the first prize given by the vote of the readers of the *Shinko* newspaper.

### *The "Gutai Art Exhibition" in New York*

The *Sixth Gutai Art Exhibition*, held first at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1958, later toured the United States and was the first overseas opportunity for Gutai. It was made possible through contact with Tapié. Subsequently, many other exhibitions were kept abroad, mainly in Europe, but this show was the only one regarded as part of the series of Gutai art exhibitions.

A special issue of the *Gutai* journal, no. 10, was planned to cover the details of the show, but the texts were lost during editing and no. 10 was never published. According to the remaining few documentary photographs, it seems as though the works exhibited were mainly paintings.

What sort of reaction did Gutai get when they landed in America? In a review written by Dore Ashton for *Art and Architecture* magazine, the paintings were dismissed as merely the shell of Informel; while criticizing Tapié, she took note of the photographs, slides and films, writing that the stage exhibition came close to modern dance.

Today information about how Gutai travelled overseas is examined from various angles and it is extremely unfortunate that existing references to the show in New York are few.

### *One-Day Outdoor Exhibition*

This exhibition was held not for the public but for the French-American photographer Jean Renault, who also took photographs of the *First Gutai Art Exhibition*, and for Mr. and Mrs. William Payne, Far East correspondents for *Life* magazine.

Preceding the outdoor exhibition, shots showing scenes of the creative activity of the group members were taken at the Nishinomiya factory of Yoshihara Seiyu, the oil company of which Jiro Yoshihara was president. These showed Yoshiko Kinoshita drawing with chemicals, Kazuo Shiraga with his *Foot Paintings*, Atsuko Tanaka's work where she changed clothes in bewildering suc-



cession, Saburo Murakami's paper tearing, Sadamasa Motonaga's gigantic smoke ring, Toshio Yoshida drawing with a watering can and Michio Yoshihara drawing with a bicycle.

After three days of shooting indoors, the *One-Day Outdoor Exhibition* was held. At the south-western edge of the Amagasaki industrial area, at the mouth of the Muko River, there remained the wreckage of ten crude petroleum oil containers that had been destroyed during the Second World War. Yoshihara painted the tanks in many colours. The top of the tanks had collapsed and they were filled with water like swimming pools. He put timbers of various lengths inside them and set himself afloat among them in a rubber boat. Yoshihara also released white leghorns painted red, blue and yellow. Shozo Shimamoto produced a huge painting by splattering paint which was exploded from a canon using acetylene gas, and Saburo Murakami brought a gigantic yellow wooden box. One hardly needs to say that it was this experience of showing works in succession for the camera that led them to the idea of doing an exhibition on stage.

It is regrettable that the photographs shot during those days never, in fact, appeared in *Life* magazine.

#### *Michel Tapié and the Informel movement*

Around 1950, new explorations in painting were in progress in various places around the world. These works shared a common characteristic: an emphasis on the materiality and physicality of the painting. Michel Tapié, the French art critic, energetically organized group exhibitions such as *Confrontation of Passion, Significant de l'Informel, Another Art*, from 1951 to 1952, and provided a reasoned basis for the new art works in Europe and the USA. This was the so-called Informel movement.

Tapié learned of the existence of the Gutai group when Hisao Domoto, who was studying in Paris at the time, showed him the *Gutai* journal. In September 1957, during his visit to Japan, the French critic came face to face with the actual artwork at Yoshihara's main residence in Osaka, and was astonished by its quality, which was much higher than he had expected. Tapié, who also had the nature of an art dealer, bought the Gutai works one after another and worked as a negotiator between Shiraga and Motonaga and overseas galleries to initiate contracts. In this way, a great number of the best Gutai paintings from the late fifties to the early sixties were sent abroad. Just as in the case of Ukiyo-e before, a history of reevaluation of the art and costly retrieval once again took place.

By around 1957, incidentally, the Informel movement was losing the impact that it had had at the beginning of the fifties. Given this background, Tapié's visit to Japan also included the objective of propping up the Informel movement that was already



in decline. This tie-up between such a critic and Gutai was not judged favourably by the art world mainly centred in Tokyo and had the effect of increasing the severity of criticism towards the group from within this art world.

Today, by contrast, with the trend to reevaluate Gutai, it is said that the role of Tapié was of little consequence, even in his home country. The merits and demerits should be assessed objectively from scratch.

#### *Allan Kaprow and Gutai*

The American artist Allan Kaprow was the person who coined the term “Happening” to designate an art world event. In 1959, at the Ruben Gallery in New York, he held an exhibition called *18 Happenings Consisting of 6 Parts*. He divided the gallery space into six rooms with vinyl curtains, installed a painting or a piece of junk art in each room and let the viewer experience the work by moving around freely while the lights were switched on and off. On this occasion, the show had been well planned and a sequence was strictly followed with a script that Kaprow had prepared. The aspect of chance was not totally excluded, although it had an element of drama in some sense.

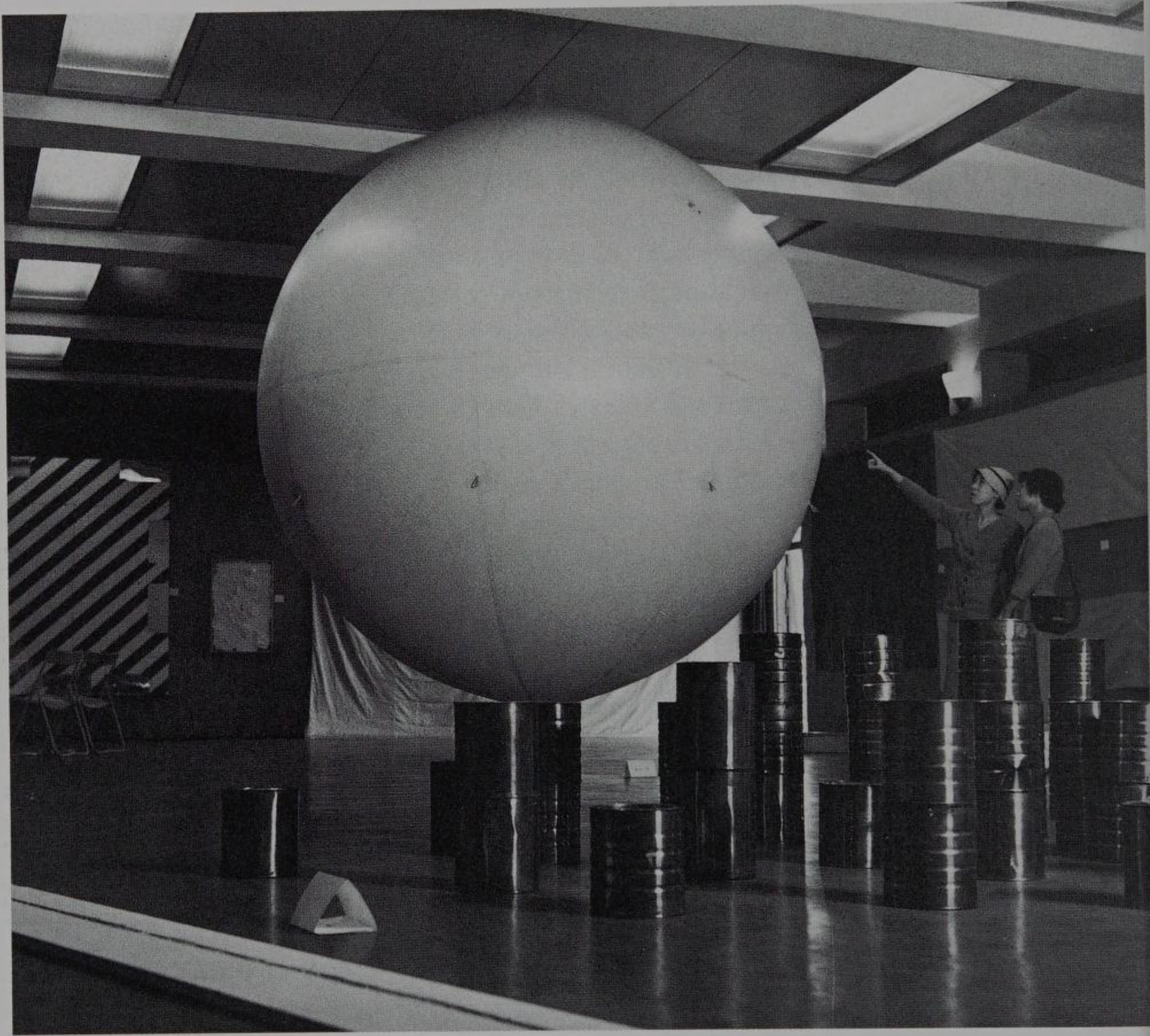
In his great book *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (1966), Kaprow enumerated various events using photographs to document historically and systematically his own activities, and he devoted one chapter to Gutai. It was due to this book that the impression of Gutai as a pioneer of Happenings gained currency. Chronologically, the experimental activities of Gutai certainly did precede those of others quite markedly.

In the aforementioned book, Kaprow himself detested the fact that the word “Happening” had taken on a life of its own and was interpreted loosely, and he attempted to rationalize his own activities precisely and provide some definition. On the other hand, although Gutai artists wrote many essays in the journals with much insight about their own working methods, they regarded their actions or performances as a painting come open rather than as one closed genre.

In 1993, at the 45th Venice Biennale, Gutai artists met Kaprow himself for the first time. It is said that the American artist described his impression like this: “Though they’ve aged, they all have the eyes of children.”



**Akira Kanayama**  
*Balloon*, 1955  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History





**Sadamasa Motonaga**  
*Water*, 1955  
Stones and paintings  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History



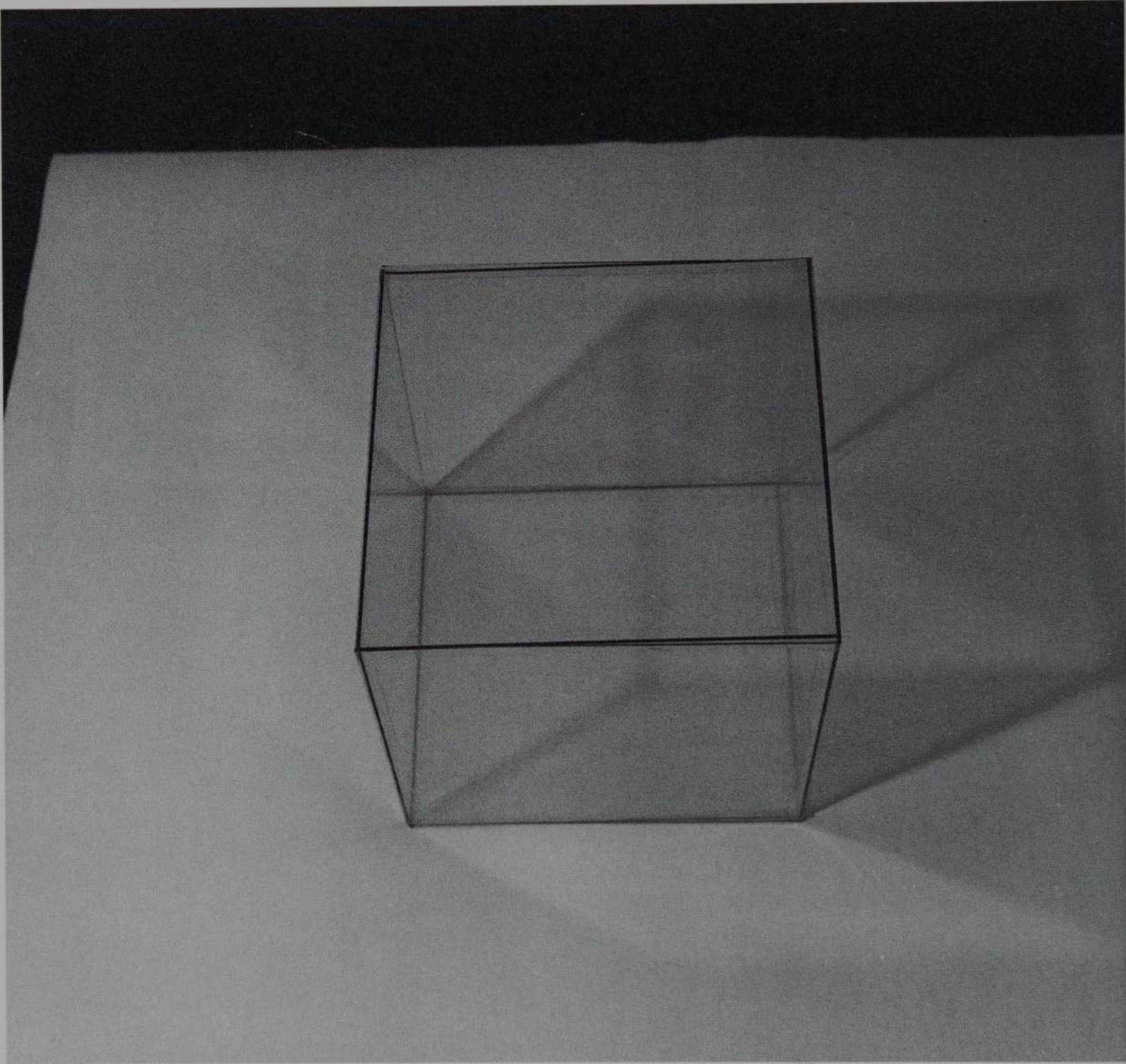
Gutai



**Saburo Murakami**

*Air*, 1956

Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History





**Atsuko Tanaka**  
*Stage Costume, 1957*  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History





**Kazuo Shiraga**

*Untitled, 1959*

Oil on canvas, cm 182 × 272

Private collection, Milan





**Shozo Shimamoto**

*Untitled, 1999*

Oil and mixed technique  
on canvas, cm 245.5 × 172.5

Private collection, Milan





**Tsuruko Yamazaki**  
*Work (Reflecting Metal)*, 1957  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History



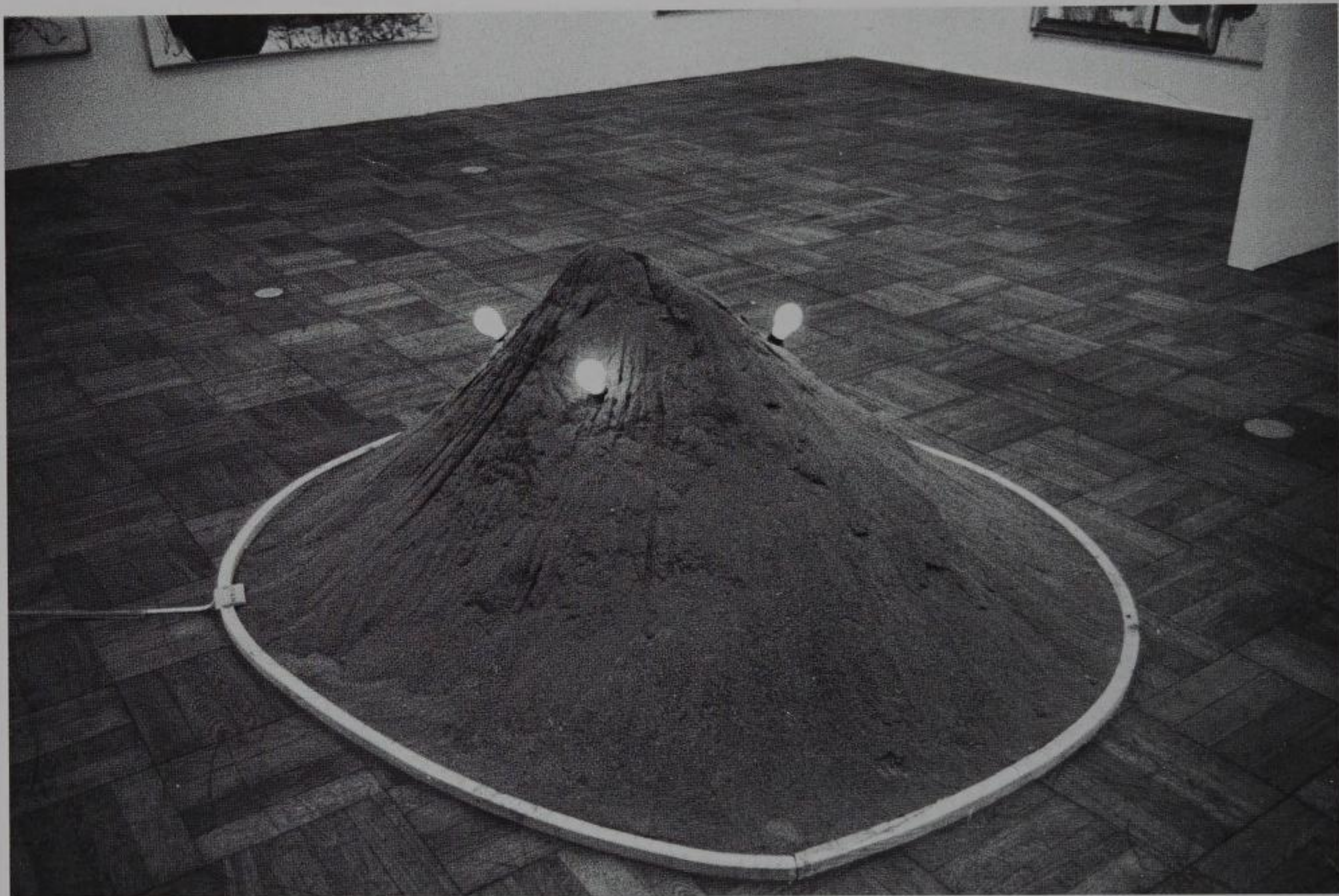


**Sadamasa Motonaga**  
*Smoke*, 1956  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History





**Michio Yoshihara**  
*Hill of Sand*, 1961  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History





**Shuji Mukai**  
*Room Filled with Signs*  
Ashiya City Museum of Art  
& History









# Gutai and Mono-ha

**Continuity and Developments**

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## Contemporary Japanese Artists New Video / Non Video

Immediately after the war the Gutai phenomenon in Japanese art produced an event whose effects were not to be felt until at least a decade later, but which from then on would be decisive for the future evolution of art, and not only in Japan. In that territory, which continues to be a different world for Westerners, the aesthetics of the "concrete" has evolved in time exactly as the Gutai meant it to. The Mono-ha group itself (which dates back to the seventies) has presented itself under other forms as a continuer of the previous group's aesthetics. Its concept of *relatum*, the relationship of things, remains in fact in the sphere of the idea that "things" are "concrete", and have their own life, due to the inevitable encroachment of one ego onto another, and the union of spirit and matter. The driving force of this aesthetics has gone beyond the trial aspect that was so characteristic of almost all the Western neo-avant-gardes, and is now having positive repercussions on young Japanese art. This is underscored primarily by that sense of encroachment that still conserves the freshness of that time.

The particular evolution of the idea of knocking down stylistic confines and making a three-hundred-and-sixty degree turn toward everything surrounding the individual, or to be more exact, zeroing the conventional code of the language of art, has brought the discussion around now as it did then to the exact meaning of the word "art" and naturally to the role of the artist as well. Thus in the present day, at least for a good number of Japanese artists, everything seems to be newly, and calmly, active (with respect to the neo-avant-garde furor of the past), rather like the natural process of cause and effect. There has thus appeared, in fact, the figure of an artist who in some cases does not even seem to care about obtaining a proper collocation. The Japanese critic, Akiko Miki, has said that art cannot be ascribed to predefined and tangible cat- 211



egories today, and the widening of the borders of visual expression is a logical consequence of the discovery of the diversity of individuals. For this reason, the artists selected here do not depend on the video image as a means of self-representation, but simply as one of the possible areas of research supporting other activities and expressive means: cinema, theatre or performance, photography, installation, etc., in absolute individual freedom.

It is a phenomenon that has an equivalent in the West. Even in the West a typology of multiform artists is taking shape, one that escapes categories and often has an active and equally versatile role socially, passing from scenography and direction to music, video, etc.

The causes are many, and even here are to be sought in a past that is not immediate but evidently still active, and that is, in the neo-avant-gardes of the sixties and seventies which introduced the phenomenon of "encroachment". On the other hand, I would dare say that the conceptual evolution of encroachment that occurred in the seventies led to a parallel path in the eighties that was structured on the anthropological concept of the citation of cultural models with the addition of the combined activity of different techniques. This would justify the sensation of still being close to the area of action of the past neo-avant-gardes, even after the pictorial parenthesis of the eighties (a totally apparent interruption since the exquisite conceptual structure of that pictorial revival surpassed technique). If the transcendent nature of both the trial procedure and the technical factor of the eighties is not understood, then it is impossible, in my opinion, to understand the following years, and the phenomenon and prevailing tendency of technical encroachment of the nineties and the first decade of 2000, which seems to be pushing still further forward, and changing the role of the artist in the process.

It would appear that both Western art and Japanese art are evolving in the same direction even though they are based on two different cultural principles: Japanese art is fortunate in being able to avail itself of a non-ideological philosophy that can withstand the impact with reality, Western art continues to make use of a rational typology, one rectified perhaps by an advantageous confrontation with Oriental philosophy and scientific relativism, and therefore, fortunately, capable of self-criticism and displacement.

Naturally, it remains to be seen whether this new figure of the artist will be stabilized, and how and by whom he will be received, seeing that the actual system of art still appears to be under the influence of the cultural and economic models of the first half of the last century. Therefore possible solutions and future evolutions are obviously open to conjecture. In the meantime, its cultural value remains unquestionable.



whose range of expressions is broad and original. This renders their versatility and their subsequent trespassing into different configurations and specializations all the more evident. There is a desire to be “the other one”, to expand, to be the “world”.

As Akiko Miki has mentioned, Ken Ikeda composes music and collaborates on dance works or with other video artists, among whom Mariko Mori. In his videos, Ken Ikeda often makes use of the images and fragments of the films of great directors of the past like Mikio Naruse and Yasujiro Ozu. He de-contextualizes them by cutting out details, and above all by changing the colour, thereby eliminating any figural values that might restore an inevitable temporal frame of reference to them.

Kyupi Kyupi is a direct evolution of the Dumb Type. One of its members is the director Yoshimasa Ishibashi, who is also its moral and legal leader (according to its statute), and the author of the film *I Want to Drive You Crazy* presented at the Stockholm festival, and interpreted by the OK Girls, the Kyoto group “whose performances are programmed to break all body taboos”. Other members include the artist-actor Mazuka Kimura, the singer Mami Wakeshima, who is also an expert textile painter, and the painter-designer Koichi Emura. Naturally, the wide range of this group’s action is immediately obvious: from cinema to music, dance, graphics and video clips. These artists have come up with interesting results with their television format work (musicals and commercials). Their particular insertion in the market reflects how successful their different formulas have been and the effect they have had on the art market so that there has been no other choice but to accept them.

Junko Matsumoto is an interesting video artist from the city of Hyogo. His videos evoke the swarmings of possible future worlds and the simultaneousness of virtual spaces, and denounce any association with the contemporary and the metropolitan dreams of humanity at the beginning of this millennium that are so well-represented by the young cyber-space and cyber-technology culture. The artist’s videos make interaction with the public possible, not the art public but rather the public of subways, supermarkets, shopping centres, the Internet – a public that goes beyond the old, ideological idea of the mass.

Hiroshi Ono, an artist from the provincial town of Okayama, moves in what might be called two orthogonal directions: a horizontal one with videos and a vertical one with photos. He recaptures the vertical development of cities and the territory with special enlargements and photographic formats, while – shooting horizontally with the video – he films everything that is visible from a train window, a car or any other means of transport. He has even made anti-rotatory journeys with respect to the planet while keeping the eye of the video camera uninhibitedly open in what may



be interpreted as a desperate attempt to stop time and space by means of man's possession of reality and the visible.

Yoshiko Shimada is also interested in photography, video installations and performance. After spending some time abroad, she has devoted herself to political themes related to women, concentrating in particular on the role of Japanese women during the American occupation: the changing figure of women therefore during the period they were being assaulted by the male chauvinism of two cultures. The results of her research appear quite interesting and are important for their unusual and meaningful point of view. She has recently been collaborating with Bubu de la Madeleine (performer and sex worker) in the fight against AIDS.

Softpad is a group of young artists whose base is Kyoto, each of whom comes from a different experience. They are united in their use of technological means, and their versatility ranges from design to electronic music, performance, the elaboration of computer images, to the mixing of all of these. They have worked with the Dumb Type group which had already become known in the West by the late eighties for their incredible ability to cross borders and their original use of what were then innovative technologies.

Naoya Takahara is a Japanese artist who has been living and working in Italy for some time now. He studied at Tama University in Tokyo under the guidance of Lee U Fan, an artist and theorist of the Mono-ha group. His work still reflects the culture and aesthetics of the Mono-ha, which allow him to be versatile a priori, and to test and make use of different materials and codes. Of particular interest are his photocopy installations that move from the industrial format of the mass object to the original and individual value of the natural object. It is as if the artist, through a distant viewpoint of the everyday notion of time, were able to detach himself from the common capacity of observation and see the natural side of things, even what appears to be extremely technological and virtual.

Momoyo Torimitsu works with video and performance, and video and computer graphics. Of particular interest is the research she has conducted on Japanese commercial images; she explores their symbolic capacity to determine what influence it has on the possibilities of diffusion. One of her most successful creations is a type of performance mediated by a robot who is actually the real performer. This personage is based on the standard image of the *sarariman* (the Japanese equivalent of a so-called white-collar worker) who is called Miyata Jiro and symbolizes Japanese economic development. The Miyata Jiro commercials are of particular interest because they express such a high cultural level of communication. In the mid-nineties, the artist moved to New York in order, she has discerningly declared, to have a better focus on her own culture.



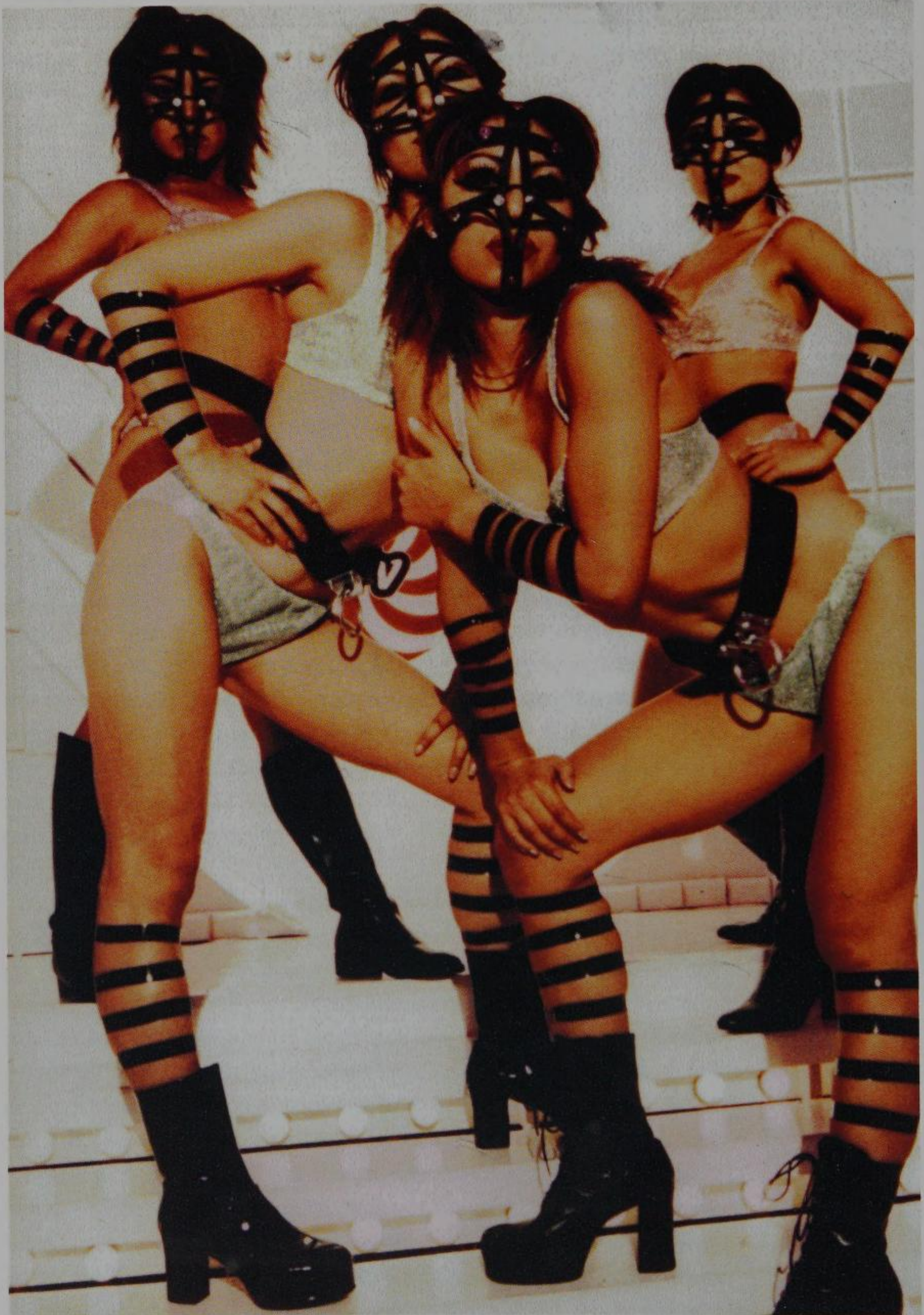
At the dawn of the new millennium, after the cultural collision of the past two centuries, we are now witnessing an intercultural evolution that is gradually surpassing and leaving behind the old ethnic cultures based on the geographic concept of belonging to a specific territory. We are, however, still at the beginning of this planetary process and the future configurations are still in the course of self-determination, or perhaps they have already been defined and the solution to their structure is continually being postponed.



**Kyupi Kyupi**

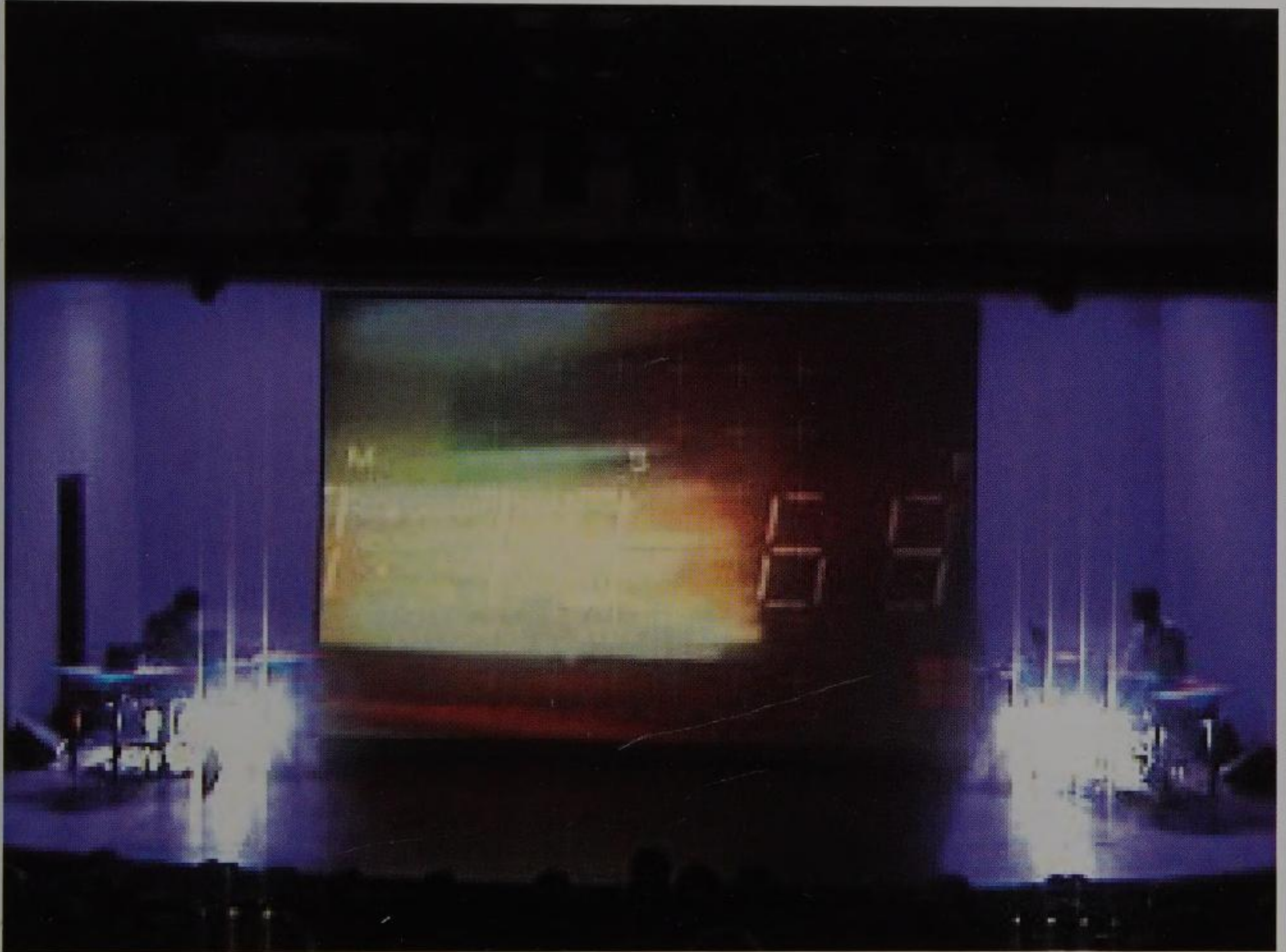
*Kyupi Kyupi 1 ++*

Video performance made with  
the collaboration of the OK  
Girls group, Kyoto, 2000  
Courtesy of Yoshiko Isshiki  
Office, Tokyo





**Softpad**  
*Stage View*  
Electronic music and video  
projection, Artsonje Center,  
Seoul (Korea), 2001



Gutai and Mono-ha. Continuity and Developments



**Bubu and Yoshiko Shimada**  
*Heal/Repair*  
Postcard, Tokyo, 1998





**Momoyo Torimitsu**  
*Miyata Jiro*  
Video performance, New York,  
1997



Gutai and Mono-ha. Continuity and Developments



**Softpad**

*Places and Sounds – Working Progress*

Digital images, electronic music, video

(Takuya Minami and Tomohiro Ueshiba of the Softpad group in collaboration with Toru Yamanaka of the Dumb Type group), Kyoto, 2001





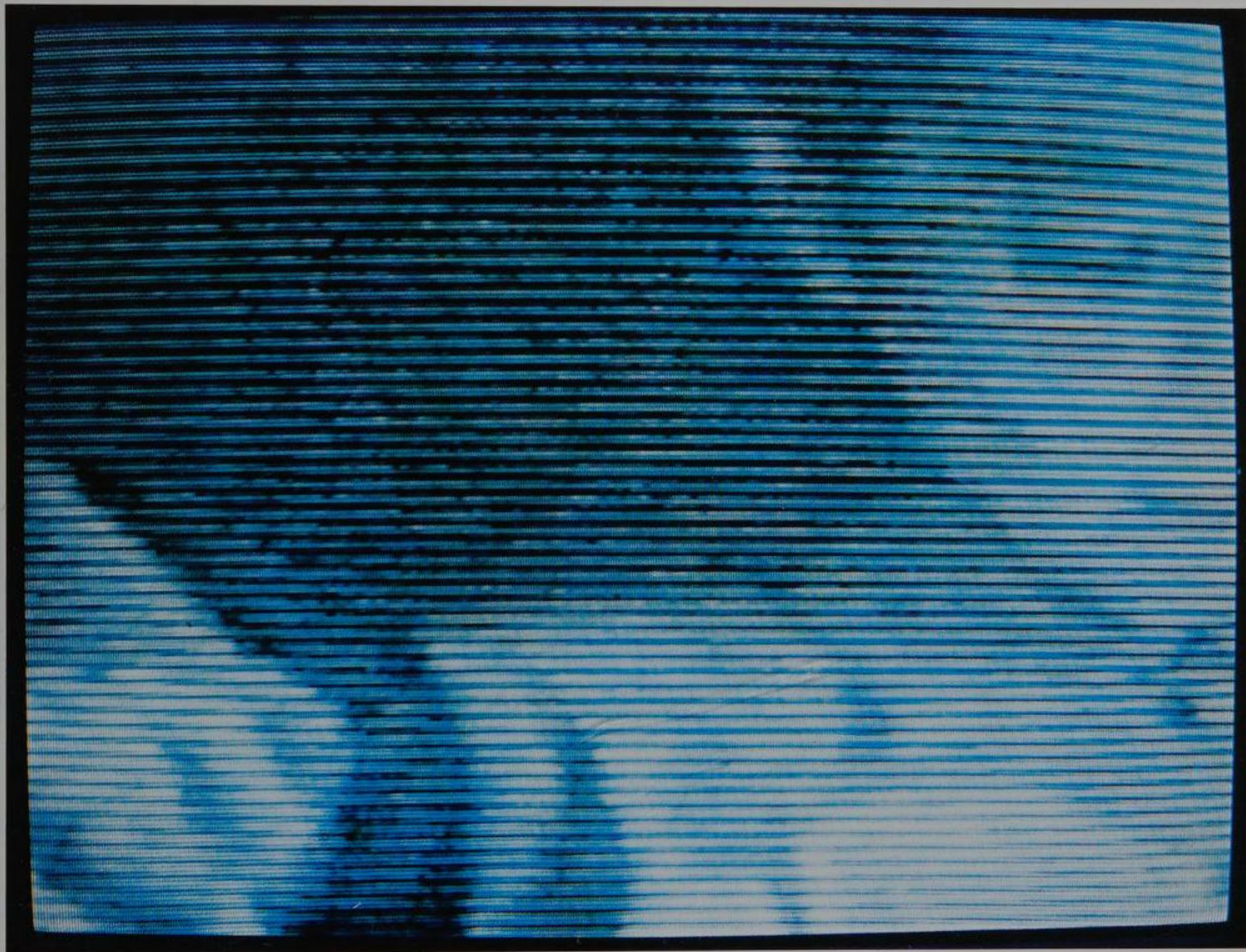
**Ken Ikeda**

*Behind the Scenes #2*, 2001

Courtesy of Shiraishi

Contemporary Art Inc., Tokyo

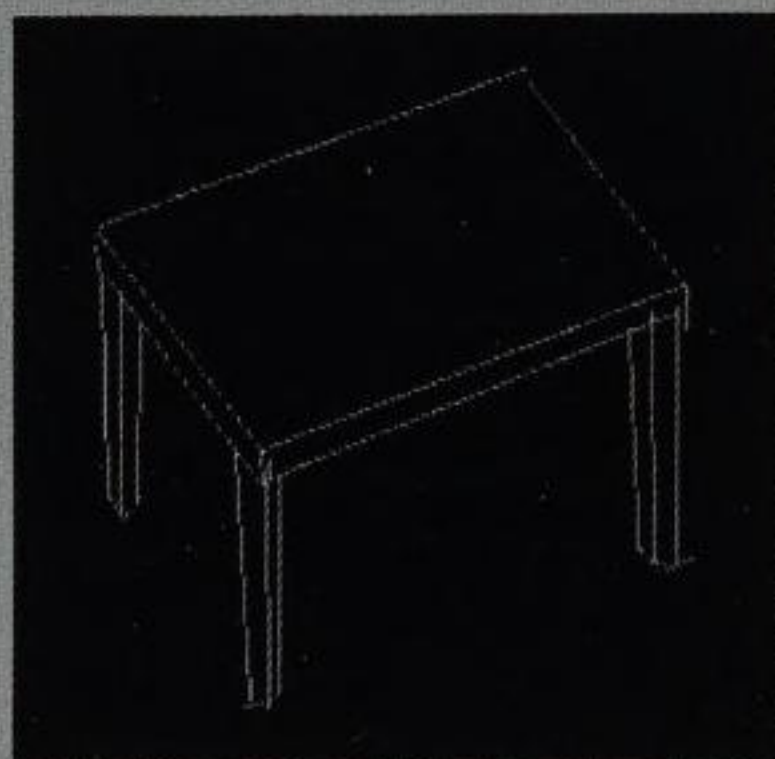
(photo Mori Kohda)







Attrice  
Colore  
Idea  
Illuminazione  
Immagine  
Oggetto  
Parete  
Parola  
Proiettore  
Suono  
Tavolo  
Videotape



Artista  
Grigio  
Aria  
Purificazione  
Semplice  
Metallo  
Bianca  
Povera  
Celestiale  
Voice  
Seduto  
Mulinello



**Bubu de la Madeleine  
and Yoshiko Shimada**

*Portrait*

Collage, cm 24. 8 × 34. 9

Detail of video installation,  
Tokyo, 1998





**Junko Matsumoto**

TV

Digital images of the video,  
Osaka, 2001





**Junko Matsumoto**

TV

Digital images of the video,  
Osaka, 2001

31









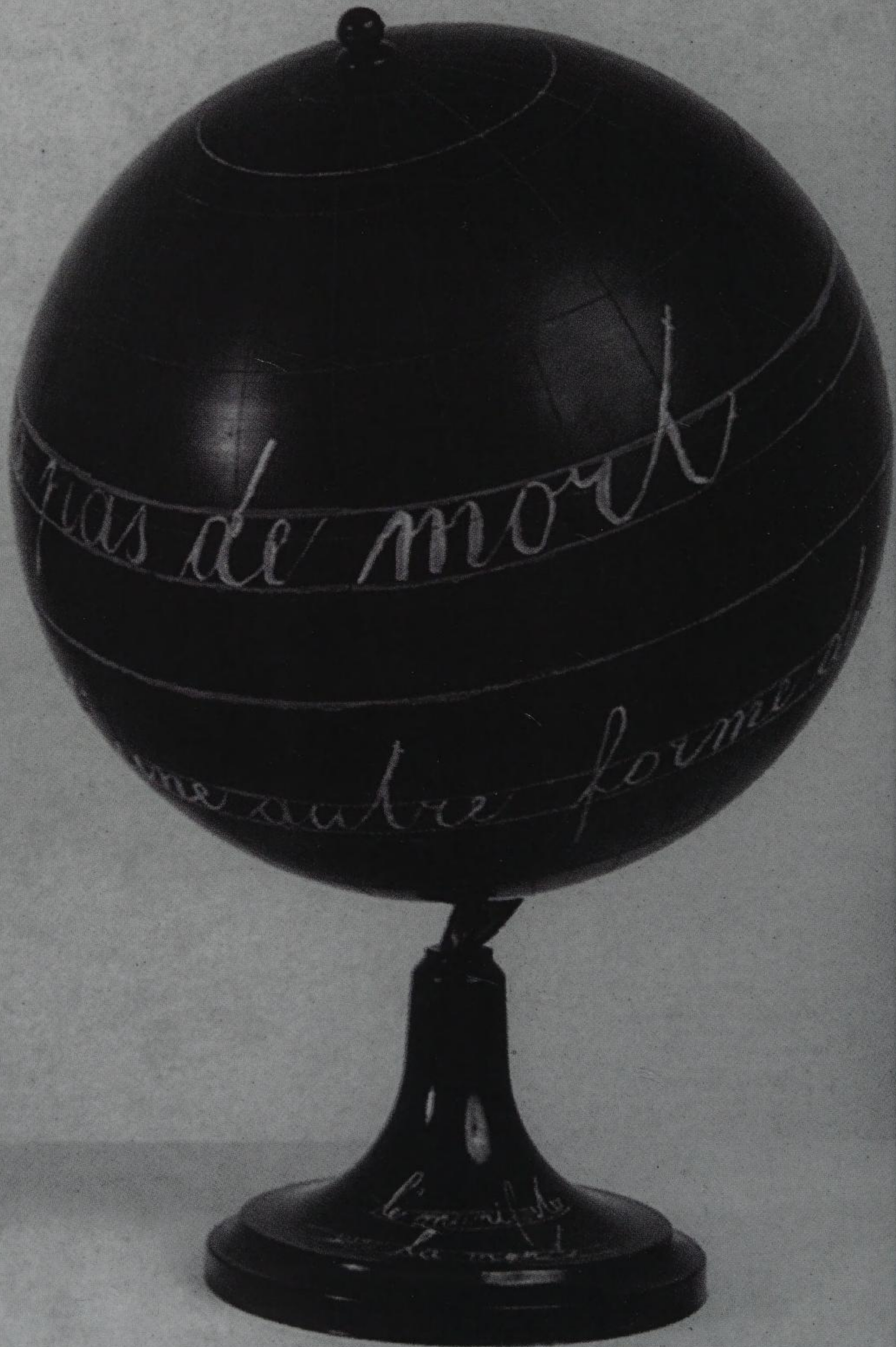
# Fluxus and Events

*edited by*

Biljana Tomic  
*and* Michel Giroud

Giuseppe Chiari  
George Brecht  
Robert Filliou  
Charlotte Moorman  
Daniel Spoerri  
Yoko Ono  
George Maciunas  
Wolf Vostell  
Allan Kaprow  
Gorgona group  
Ben Vautier  
Takako Saito  
Milan Knizak  
Ben Patterson  
Nam June Paik  
Eric Andersen  
Henry Flynt  
Walter Marchetti  
Joe Jones  
Shigeko Kubota  
Mieko Shiomi  
Collective Actions  
Musica Elettronica Viva





mas de mort

me s'abre forme

L'Éclaircie  
sur la mort



## Notes about Fluxus

### *Fluxus: America*

The cultural phenomenon of Fluxus came into being in the second half of the twentieth century as a specific art movement and an open-ended way of thinking and behaving. In reviewing this recent historical period, one has the impression that the Fluxus ideas, with their uninterrupted and elusive course and flow into “something else”, have spread and left traces in the historical continuity of the old and new avant-gardes. The spirit of Fluxus is still to be felt in the spiritual climate of the new generations of artists: in the search for the reaffirmation of the individual, free creativity and the institution of art’s concrete relations with life.

If a paragon were to be made between the postwar cultural movements and those of the century’s end, a sine curve would emerge, indicating the variations of the values and positions of Western culture, its mobility, and its ability to open up to the different ideologies of international art (an important feature of Fluxus), with the additional political, economic and cultural expansion of multiculturalism, trans-nationalism and globalism. The areas of cultural importance have changed as the influence of new centres and geographic localities throughout the global world have spread in the last fifty years. At the turn of the twenty-first century, cultural decentralization has contributed to the formation of new art centres connecting them to a common global network with respect to the cultural reality of our planet.

The exhibition *Art Tribes* can be interpreted as a kind of bridge, or passage, between the past and the present, in the current cultural, political and economic context; a connection between the historical events of the initial period of the second half of the twentieth century and the contemporary one, the result of the changed, extensive, digital expansion of culture in the world social scene.



In declaring the importance of Fluxus as a cultural phenomenon in this historical period, it can also be said that it was and still is a political and spiritual corrective for the art system, pushing the latter through the stages of its evolution so that it returns to its specific, initial meaning, its basic relationship with reality and life, to art as a space for the freedom of ideas, total creativity and individual self-consciousness.

### *SoHo*

If Fluxus is to be described as a movement that originated between the late fifties and the early sixties, then the territories and locations in which this phenomenon occurred must be taken into account, in the vast context of other parallel movements and their intense, interdisciplinary interaction, in the period following Abstract Expressionism when some well-known art movements had emerged in new forms: New Dada, New Realism, Urbanism, Happening, Pop Art, etc.

Fluxus came into being in New York in the mythic neighbourhood of SoHo in lower Manhattan. It sprang from the experiences and friendships of a group of people from different professional and artistic backgrounds ranging from music to literature, from theatre to dance, from the visual arts to the new media, who were all united in their desire to combine the media with diverse artistic approaches.

According to Peter Frank, 1958 was the “crucial year” because it was in the summer of that year that Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Jackson Mac Low, Richard Maxfield, Al Hansen and George Brecht met for the first time. They were all students of John Cage at the New School for Social Research on West 12th Street. According to the chronology of the catalogue of the documentary exhibition *Happening und Fluxus* (Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970), 1958 was the year of Kaprow’s and Red Grooms’s first happenings, of the first actions of the Fluxus artists – who at that time were showing their works in the new co-op galleries – and of other manifestations that were taking place in the exciting atmosphere of the SoHo art scene where, in addition to Kaprow, people like Robert Whitman, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, George Segal, Lucas Samaras, Robert Rauschenberg, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Bob Watts, and Al Hansen were also working.

Postwar New York had features that were reminiscent of the lively, busy, open-ended cultural climate of that city on the eve of and during the First World War at the time of the arrival of those great European artists who were the protagonists of Dadaism: Man Ray, Picabia, Duchamp, and Jean Crotti (1913–1915–1918). In 1913 the Armory Show, the first great exhibition of modern European art, took place in New York.<sup>1</sup>

Alfred Stieglitz was instrumental in the field of cultural rela-

<sup>1</sup> A. Schwartz, *Almanacco Dada*, Milan 1976.



tions, since he had been gathering together the avant-garde authors and making contacts with European artists since 1910.

At the beginning of the century, Europe seemed to have rediscovered the new continent with its enormous indescribable potentials and cultural stimuli. The political and social crisis in Europe in the first part of the twentieth century had brought about a diaspora in European culture resulting in the departure of many personalities for America.

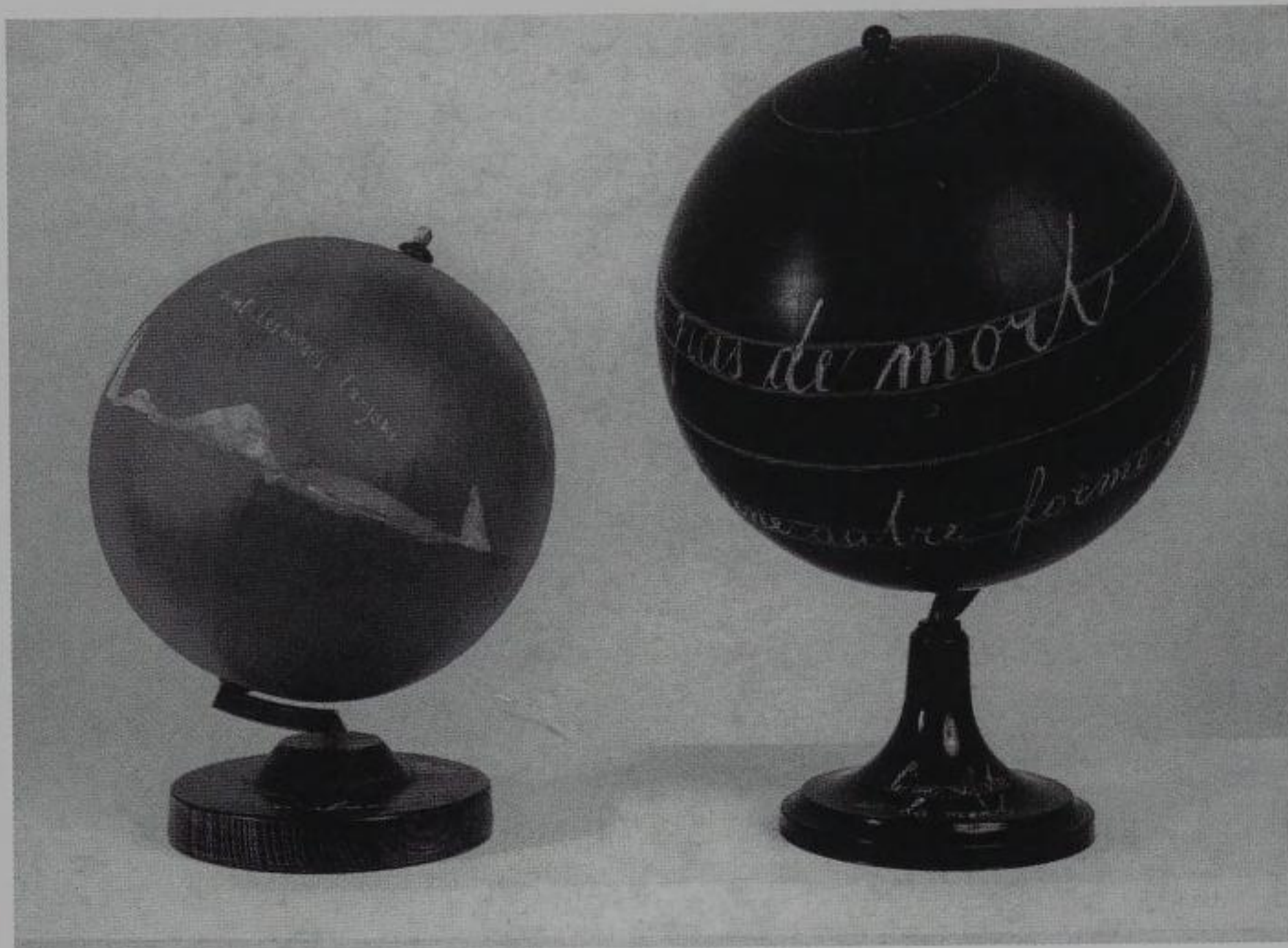
The New York environment following the Second World War was based on the pre-existing relations of the European artists with the American ones. The new cultural and philosophical climate, by then saturated with the postwar political consequences, was concerned with existential problems and the new influences of Oriental philosophies such as Zen and Buddhism. New York was an exciting, active centre for committed art between the late fifties and the early sixties. Filled with all kinds of artists and authors, it became a meeting point where different people created a mobile, dynamic and creative entity out of its streets and neighbourhoods, roofs and elevators, theatres, galleries, and SoHo bars. It was a territory filled with energy and artistic creativity where a constant series of exhibitions, performances, events, theatre, music, and happenings were taking place, among which some of the first performances that were close to Fluxus: that of La Monte Young in December 1960 and that of Yoko Ono in January 1962.

The A/G Gallery was founded in 1961 by two Lithuanians, George Maciunas and Almius Salcius, and became a centre that attracted artists who favoured the Fluxus events. Maciunas had met La Monte Young in John Cage's class, and through him, also Ono, Higgins and Mac Low. Attracted by their work, he too began to organize performances and group presentations in which Henry Flynt and Ray Johnson also participated with their artworks. These encounters and initial activities flowed into the vast notion of Fluxus.

The art groups and the artists themselves moved between New York and California in search of better working conditions. San Francisco thus became a second art centre for the majority of Cage's students: La Monte Young, Simone Forti, Robert Morris, Walter De Maria, Terry Jennings, Terry Riley, Dennis Johnson, and Joseph Byrd, who were interested in the radical forms of Ann Harplin's dance. Toshi Ichyanagi and Yoko Ono later joined them.

The activities in the centres of art, from the East Coast to the West Coast, were recorded in special printed editions containing documentary material from the new magazines and books of the artists. Maciunas published one of the first – *An Anthology* containing an original new document and an index of the events – and undertook to gather material for a second edition whose title was to be *Fluxus*. It was therefore with this idea that the name Fluxus appeared for the first time.





Dimitrije Basicovic Mangelos  
*Rembo no. 2*, 1977,  
 and *Le Manifeste sur la Mort*,  
 1977

The A/G Gallery suffered a crisis in 1962: Maciunas left for Europe where he presented numerous performances and events with the intention of accumulating the necessary means for printing a new magazine, *Festum Fluxorum F*. Although the magazine was never published, its project included various phenomena: Neo-Haiku Events, Object Music and Concept Art (the term was suggested for the first time in 1960 by Henry Flynt). That same year Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles visited Europe.

After their return to New York, and stimulated by their European experience and the influence of the Flux-itch, that is, the first Fluxus, Maciunas and Higgins launched the New York Fluxus between 1963 and 1964. They created an atmosphere that was intense, exciting and unrepeatable through events, performances, concerts and uninterrupted actions in which European and Japanese artists also took part: Vostell, Ben Vautier, Spoerri, Schmit, Paik, Takehisa Kosugi, Eric Andersen, Shigeko Kubota and Dieter Rot.

An enormous problem arose for Maciunas and the other Fluxus artists involving the documentation, publication and edition of their vast, eclectic production. In 1963, Maciunas published *Fluxus Preview Roll*, completing this documentation with the European activities of Fluxus as well; and, after a lengthy preparation, he published the first *Fluxus Yearbook* in 1964 which was produced in the form of a *fluxmultiple*. Maciunas's approach was personal and specific to the Fluxus editions. He composed them like an artist's books into boxes or multiples, giving each exemplar the autonomous and authentic quality of a handmade product. However, working in this fashion was not conducive to producing on a large scale. Due to misunderstandings that arose concerning printing, Higgins left Maciunas, and in agreement with Knowles founded the Something Else Press in 1964, publishing his first book, *Jef-*



*person's Birthday/Postface*. The Something Else Press went on to become the most important publisher of historical and contemporary works.

In 1965–1966, Maciunas published *fluxobjects* and *fluxfilms* principally, having lost interest in Fluxus editorial enterprises and performances, just as the European artists had, except for Vostell. After 1965 all these activities were transferred to Europe, and the American Fluxus artists migrated to that continent.

The Fluxus manifestations took place in a short period of time, but they left their mark on contemporary art. Fluxus was absorbed into all the later art tendencies and movements as a promoter of all those variations that had to do with the loss of reality and the possibility of stereotypes.

This brief summary of the events leading to the birth of Fluxus is based on the catalogue *New York – Downtown: SoHo*, published on the occasion of the exhibition held in 1976 at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

René Block, Peter Frank and other authors have provided a fascinating description of that period, perhaps the most exciting one in the second half of the twentieth century. I have made use of this catalogue because it historically documents the real chronology of the work of the American Fluxus artists together with that of George Maciunas, the founder and promoter of the basic initiatives and theories. Maciunas expressed his positions in the *Fluxus Manifesto* where he included all its authors in the “Fluxus chart”.

In his Fluxus text *Theory and Reception*,<sup>3</sup> Dick Higgins comments: “Fluxus is the iconoclastic artistic movement in a series of similar movements during our century such as Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, etc.; in fact, Fluxus was and is: 1. a series of editions created and designed by George Maciunas; 2. the name of our group of artists; 3. the types of work connected to these editions, artists and performances that we have carried out and still do carry out together; 4. all the other activities that have in time been linked traditionally to its editions, artists and performances (like *Fluxus Banquet*). Fluxus has no established programme. The works that make it up do not intend to change the surrounding world. Fluxus has not attacked the art world, it is just there in front of it. There do exist, however, some common points in the majority of the Fluxus works: 1. internationalism; 2. experimentalism and iconoclasm; 3. intermediality; 4. minimalism or concentration; 5. an attempt to resolve the dichotomy of art and life; 6. implicationality; 7. dance or tricks; 8. the ephemeral; 9. specificity.”

### *Fluxus: Europe*

Emmett Williams wrote the following about Fluxus in Europe: “In the beginning there was confusion. Lots of it. Not the kind of

<sup>2</sup> *New York – Downtown: SoHo*, exhibition catalogue, Akademie der Künste, Berlin 1976.

<sup>3</sup> D. Higgins, “Theory and Reception”, in *Fluxus*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of the Arts, Zagreb 1990.



confusion that exists today about what it is or what it was, or who is or who was Fluxus. But then there was so much flux into Fluxus. This confused beginning started in Europe in 1962 when George Maciunas said 'Fluxus be', and therefore it was Fluxus forever. Amen."<sup>4</sup> And so in 1962, he organized the first Fluxus Festival in the State Museum of Wiesbaden.

Williams continues: "At first there were seven of us. Dick Higgins and George Maciunas kept us informed about what was happening in America and Japan, for they were acquainted with Ay-O, George Brecht, John Cage, Philip Corner, Henry Flynt, Toshi Ichihyanagi, Taguehisa Kosugi, Joe Jones, Jackson McLow, Richard Maxfield, Yoko Ono, Terry Riley, Robert Watts, La Monte Young and others, and the work and ideas that were becoming the foundations of Fluxus. The only woman in our group was Alison Knowles. Nam June Paik, Ben Patterson and Wolf Vostell were active in Cologne where works by George Brecht and La Monte Young had already been presented in 1960 in the studio of Mary Bauemeister. Emmett Williams, an American poet who had been living in Europe since 1949, was associated with Daniel Spoerri, Robert Filliou and Addi Koepke, all of whom were soon to become part of Fluxus. There was not only the problem of creating a repertoire for the festival, but there was also a need to find a style of recitation that was as non-professional as it was free, simple and pure in form, and which did not negate the composer's intentions. Our guides in this were Maciunas and Higgins. At any rate, there was a big difference between an action in a New York gallery where everyone knows everyone else, and a public stage in a foreign country where the audience was basically composed of people who did not particularly like the 'latest music' from the whole world, although they were attracted by the posters announcing it [...]. Before the Fluxus Festival finished its tour to Amsterdam, London, Copenhagen, Paris, Düsseldorf, Nice and other European cities, the Fluxus group had expanded to include Eric Andersen, Joseph Beuys, Robert Filliou, Robin Page, Daniel Spoerri and Ben Vautier. The fact that artists of such different cultures, temperaments and nationalities were working so well together was not a miracle, but the fact that they *could* work together was."

These words of Emmett Williams describe how Fluxus was formed in Europe with the arrival of Maciunas and Higgins and then joined by the leading European artists. It is, however, interesting to note that Fluxus arose in New York out of the specific cultural context underpinning a new artistic behaviour, one in fact that all these artists had come into immediate contact with since they shared the same environment and interdisciplinary interests in order to insert their work into daily life and transform it into mass products for a mass public.

In Europe, the Fluxus artists live in different cities and coun-

<sup>4</sup> E. Williams, *An Anti-History of Fluxus - Una anti-storia di Fluxus*, Verona 1981; *Fluxus S.P.Q.R.*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Fontanella Borghese, Rome 1990.



tries and meet at artistic manifestations; their activities are more personalized and depend on their own individual historical and cultural backgrounds. This defines their political, cultural and social engagement as well as their forms of presentation and the aims of their work.

The Fluxus phenomenon in its original sense was of brief duration, from 1962 to 1964, but its echo was so strong that retrospective exhibitions soon began in Europe starting with the famous *Happening & Fluxus*<sup>5</sup> that Hans Sohn and Harald Szeemann organized in Cologne at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1970, and continuing up to the Venice Biennale of 1990.<sup>6</sup>

The radicalism of the Fluxus events and publishing activity stimulated great interest among many collectors and led to the organization of exhibitions in museums throughout Europe. Fluxus played a specific role in cultural trends and still continues to do so. In this regard, considerable credit is to be given to some collectors in Italy such as Gino Di Maggio and Francesco Conz, for it is due to them that the Fluxus artists have had permanent “residences” for their productions and the presentation of their works.

The Dada movement had a strong influence on American cultural tendencies during the first half of the twentieth century, just as Fluxus did in Europe during the second half of the century. When observed from the perspective of the year 2000, Fluxus is “something else”, and in itself specific, not only because of its indifference toward nationality, its openness, morality, nonchalance, sense of vitality, entertainment, pleasure, and its freedom of flux, but also because of its criticism, political rigour, social attitude, and its constant anti-conformism and radicalism. Anyone who has experienced this or a similar art movement can truly say that a kind of idealism, exaltation and passion is to be found therein.

### *Fluxus and Eastern Europe*

At the beginning of the sixties Fluxus and the Eastern European countries shared a common ground, that of their leftist political positions. The majority of the American and Western European Fluxus artists were explicit in their political commitment or cultural radicalism. Conversely, the Eastern European artists were trying to free themselves from totalitarianism. They expressed their commitments and contrasting views through artistic activities whose premises were very close to those of Fluxus and the new art movements of the sixties and seventies. If jargon were to be used to describe the situation, it could be said that everything was “fluxus” then; that is, there were many art movements based on the tradition of the avant-garde, Constructivism, and Dadaism, and later, on all the new events, and counter-cultural and alternative tendencies.

When discussing the Eastern Europe countries, it is necessary to mention the single groups of artists that formed in the princi-

<sup>5</sup> H. Sohn, H. Szeemann, *Happening & Fluxus*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne 1970.

<sup>6</sup> A. Bonito Oliva (edited by), *Ubi fluxus ibi motus*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, Ex Granai della Repubblica alle Zitelle, Milan 1990.



pal centres of culture. Yugoslavia, as an independent Socialist state between the East and the West, played a specific role and its art scene was very progressive. The Gorgona group was founded in the early sixties in Zagreb by Josip Vanista, Julije Knifer, Radoslav Putar, Matko Mestrovic, Marjan Jevsovar, Ivan Kozaric, Duro Seder, Miljenko Horvat and Dimitrije Basicovic. In its attitudes and methods of manifestation, this group showed itself to be in possession of all the primary features of Fluxus. Its members worked and expressed themselves in public activities – as professionals in the exercise of their profession – and in secret ones, that is, in activities carried out within their restricted circle where there literally reigned a “Gorgonian” atmosphere. Vanista initiated an important practice in the publication of the anti-magazine *Gorgona* of which eleven issues came out between 1961 and 1966.

As Jesa Denegri has written, in addition to the publication of the magazine, “all the other forms of Gorgonian existence were even more profoundly rooted in the private lives of the members of this entire circle: excursions into the countryside, jogging, visits to extraordinary places, talks, the choice of ‘thoughts for individual months’, correspondence without specific messages, invitations to events that were not meant to be held, the organization of a variety of referendums, the publication of newspaper ads containing true and false news, absurd questionnaires sent to important institutions, etc.: these were the different ways of expressing oneself in the Gorgonian adventure which at first sight seems lacking in sense and scope, but which does represent ways of doing specific things”.<sup>7</sup>

The Gorgona artists participated in the Officina d’Arte that Francesco Conz organized in Verona during the seventies.

A special member of the group was Mangelos – Dimitrije Basicovic – art historian, critic, artist, poet, philosopher and custodian in the Gallery of Modern Art. Mangelos was a pseudonym, a stand-in: this counterpart had started his activity as an author during the Second World War when he began to colour sheets of paper black, in school exercise books and notebooks, entitling them *Landscapes of War* and *Landscapes of Death*; then he wrote poetic compositions on small school blackboards and drew red lines on a black and white ground which subsequently constituted the permanent base for many of his texts. His basic idea was to return to a state of primitive, archetypal consciousness, to the origins themselves, when language and sign first formed to express the primary states of “no-art”. It was not until the period of Gorgona and the new scene of the sixties that Mangelos’s existence was made public with his works and activities and his first exhibition in Belgrade in 1968. Mangelos’s oeuvre includes works on paper, school blackboards, exercise books, books, cardboard and wood, and globes. His basic principles: “I have never called myself an

<sup>7</sup> Jesa Denegri, *The Art of Constructive Approach*, EXAT 51, Nove Tendencije, Horetzky, Zagreb 2000.



artist”, “The most philosophical and theoretic explanation of no-art is no-art”, “The most beautiful thing is not to be present”, among others. Mangelos had a strong influence on young artists, and during the seventies he began to be promoted in Yugoslavia and abroad. Credit for this goes to Nena Dimitrijevic, Branka Stipancic and many others, including the personal contribution of this writer whose friendship with Mangelos was based on sincerity, understanding and trust.

Fluxus was not a “foreign” phenomenon in Yugoslavia and the other Eastern European countries. Thanks to visual poetry and the publishing activities of the sixties, contacts were established with Maciunas, Higgins and the others. In this way, the publications of Bora Cosic, Rok and Mixed Media, saw the light. Other references were the art programmes of the BITEF (Belgrade International Festival of Theatre) and the Expanded Media Festival in the Student Cultural Centre (from the late sixties to the seventies) in which Giuseppe Chiari and Ben Vautier participated (with textual works) along with Joseph Beuys and Simone Forti. Giancarlo Politi spoke about Fluxus at the 1975 festival when he presented the Collezione Mudima of Milan. In 1986, an exhibition of Fluxus was organized at the Museum of Modern Art, and a book published with texts by critics and Fluxus artists. Ken Friedman was a guest of the Student Cultural Centre in 1990.

In the broad sense of the word, Fluxus expresses a state of reality, a borderline position, the permanent actuality of “no-art” and the fascination of freedom.



**Giuseppe Chiari**  
Performance during the  
exhibition *Contemporanea*  
Villa Borghese Parking, Rome,  
1973  
(photo © Giorgio Colombo)





**George Brecht**  
*Chance Operation*, 1959  
Ink on canvas, cm 200 × 150  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan



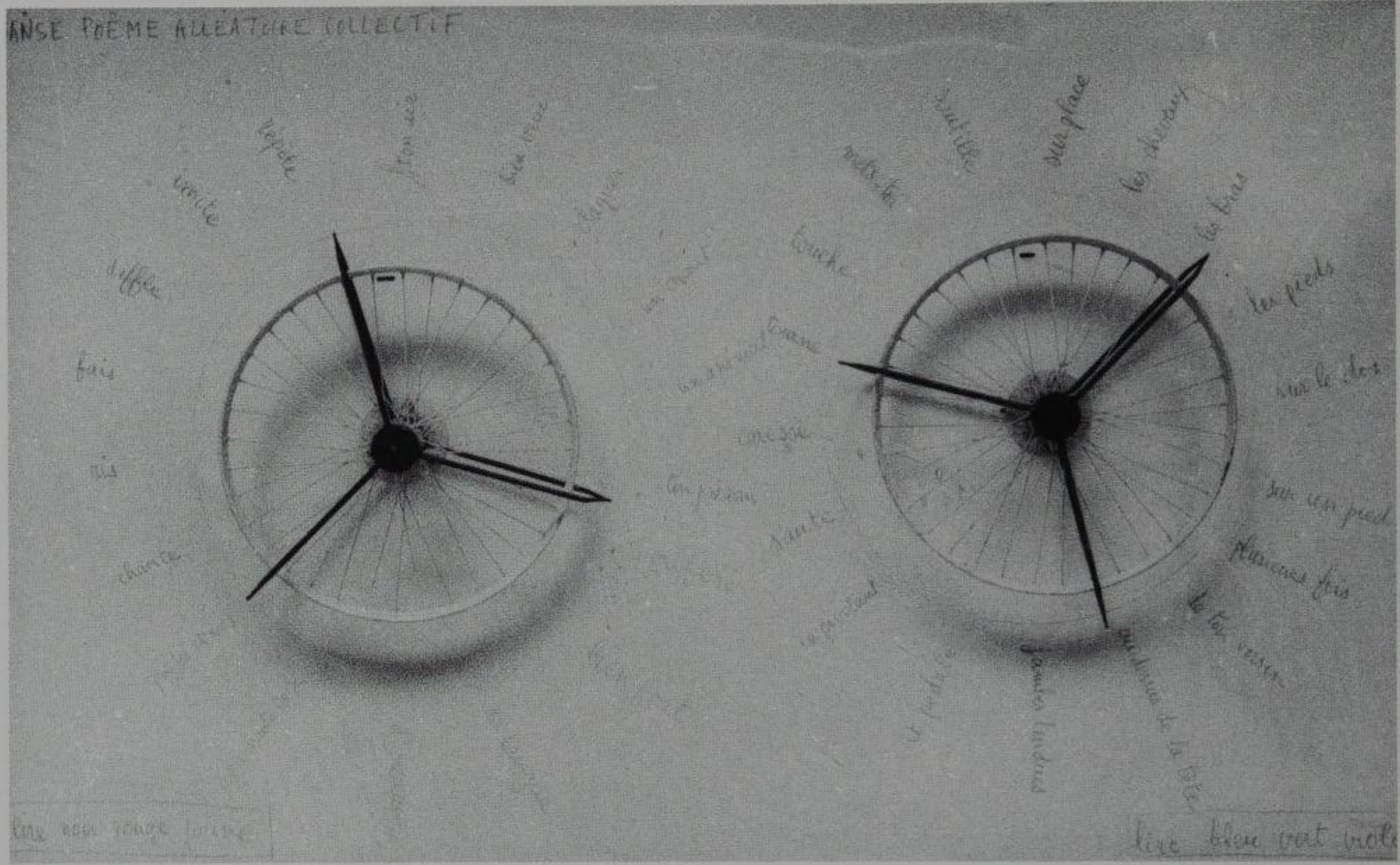


**Robert Filliou**

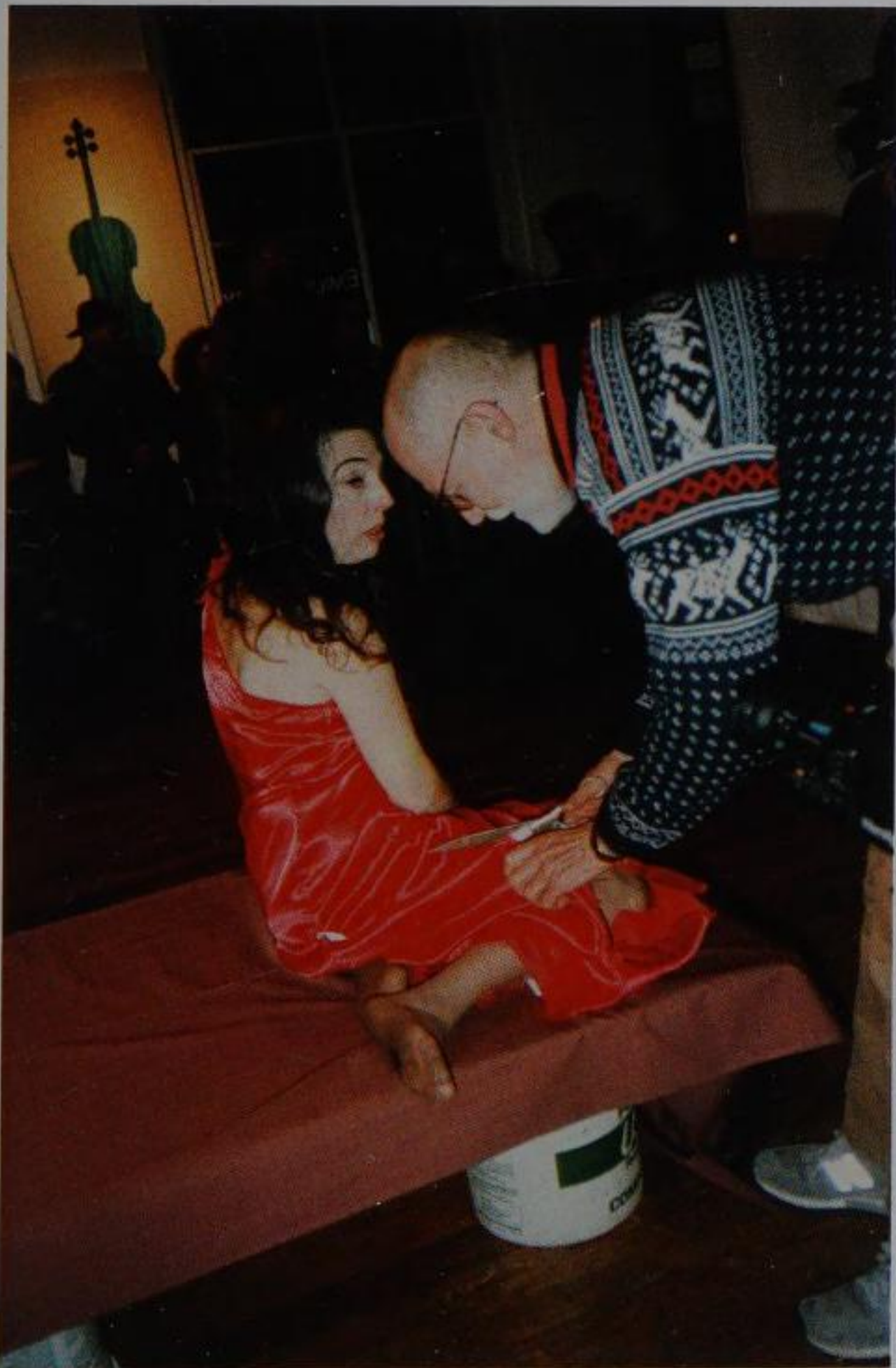
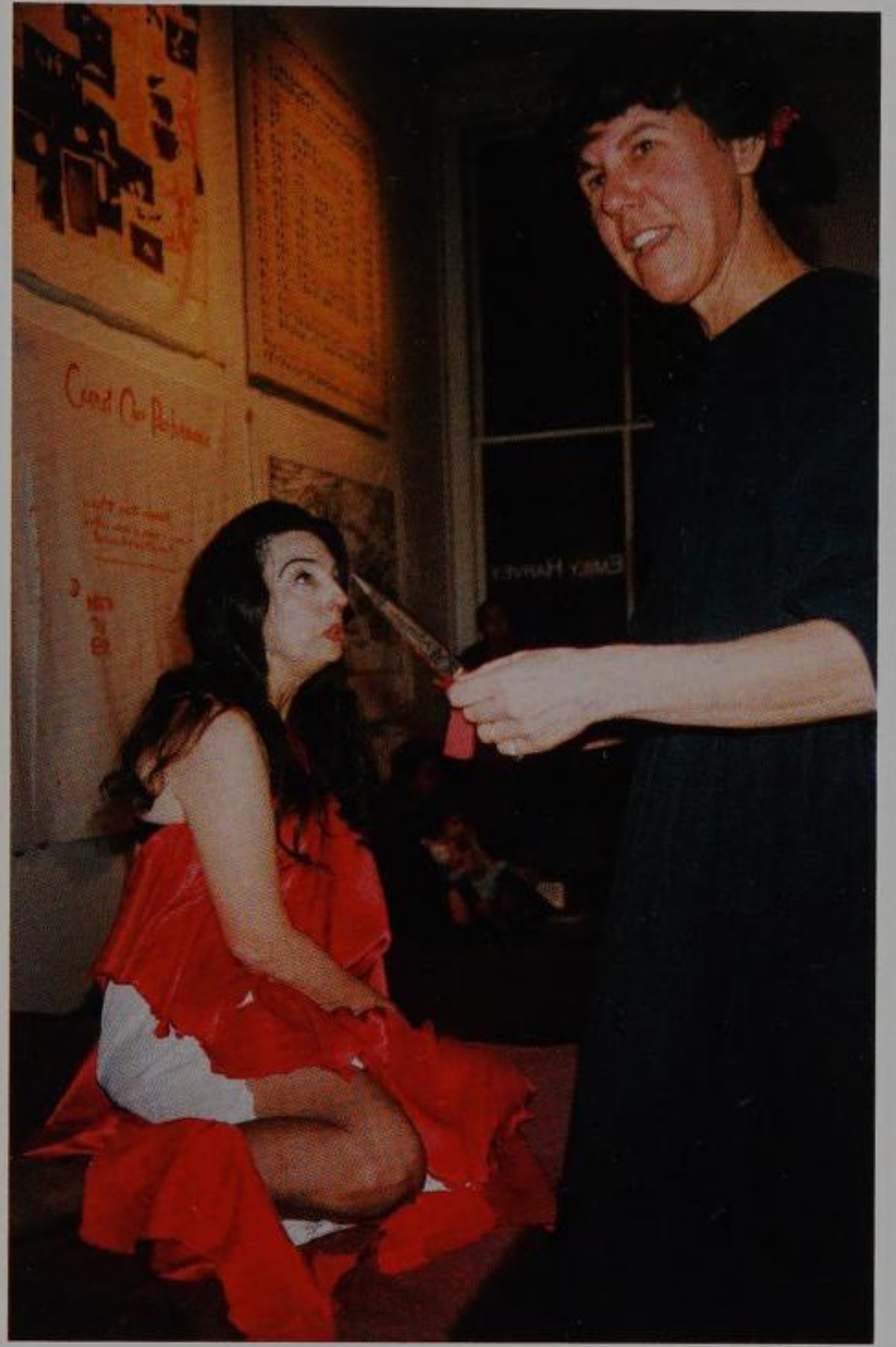
*Bicycle Wheels*, 1960  
Bicycle wheels and mixed  
technique on board,  
cm 165 x 260 x 20  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan

**Charlotte Moorman**

executing Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*  
on the occasion of the  
exhibition of the Francesco  
Conz Editions at the Emily  
Harvey Gallery in New York,  
November 1988  
Courtesy of F. Conz Archive,  
Verona (photo F. Conz)









**Daniel Spoerri**

*Mickey Mouse Cheese Piano,*  
1989

Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan

(photo © Fabrizio Garghetti)



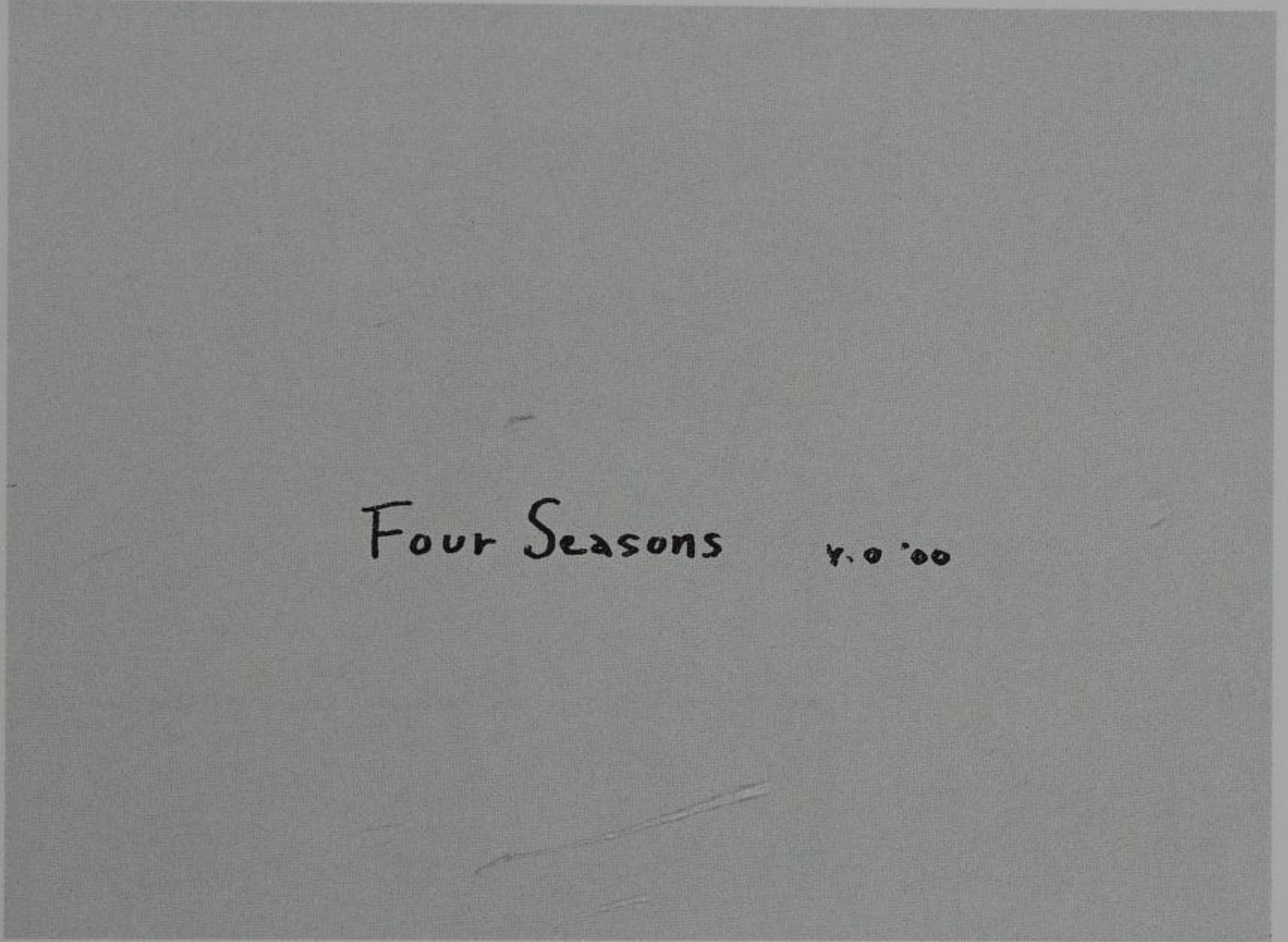


**Yoko Ono**

*Four Seasons*

Installation, UBU Gallery, New  
York, September-October 2000

(photo David Behl / © Yoko Ono)





**George Maciunas**  
*FluxKit*, 1964  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan





**Wolf Vostell**

*The Fluxists Are the Blacks  
of the History of Art, 1980*

Mixed media and  
assemblage on panel,  
cm 224 × 286 × 64

Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan



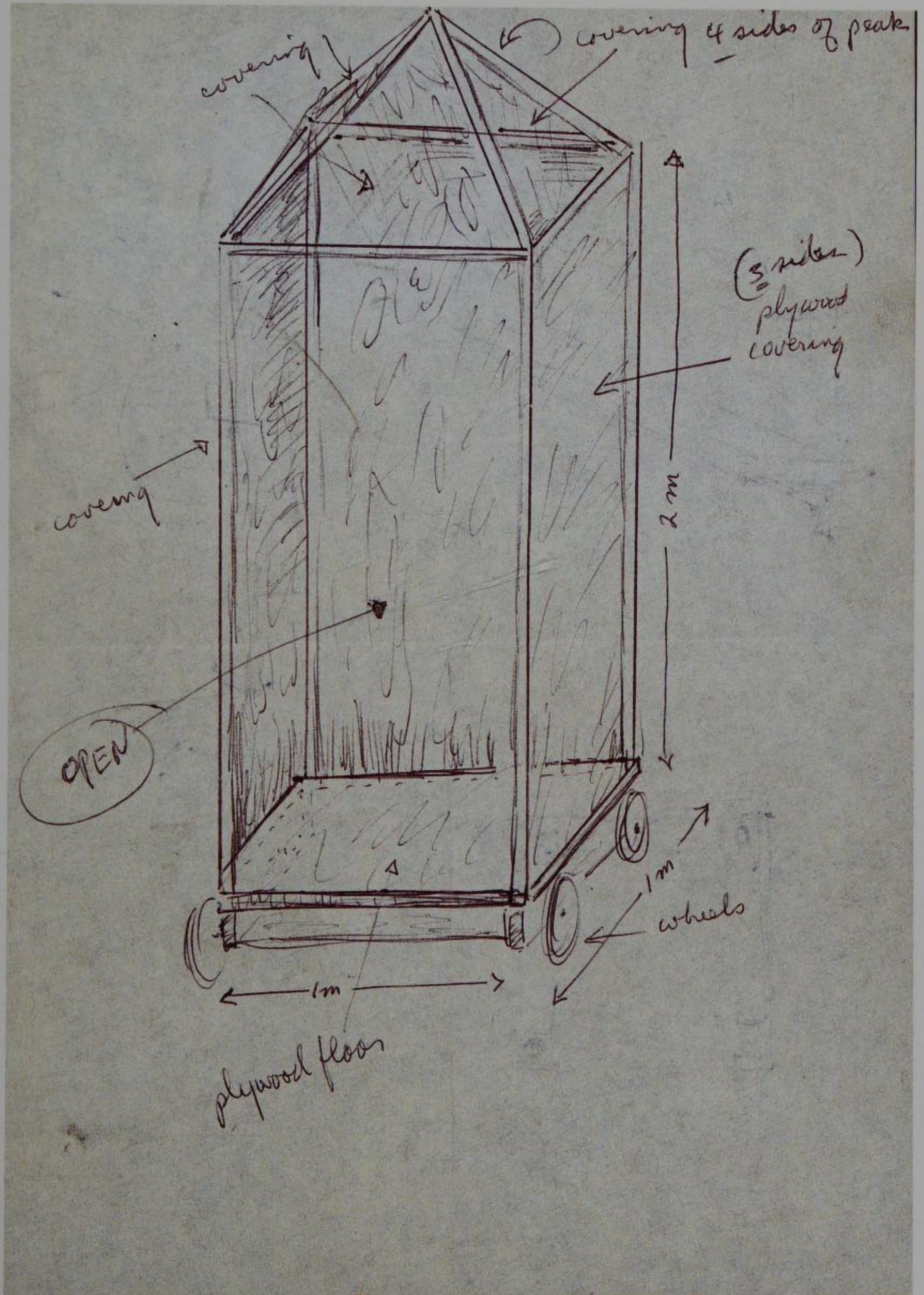






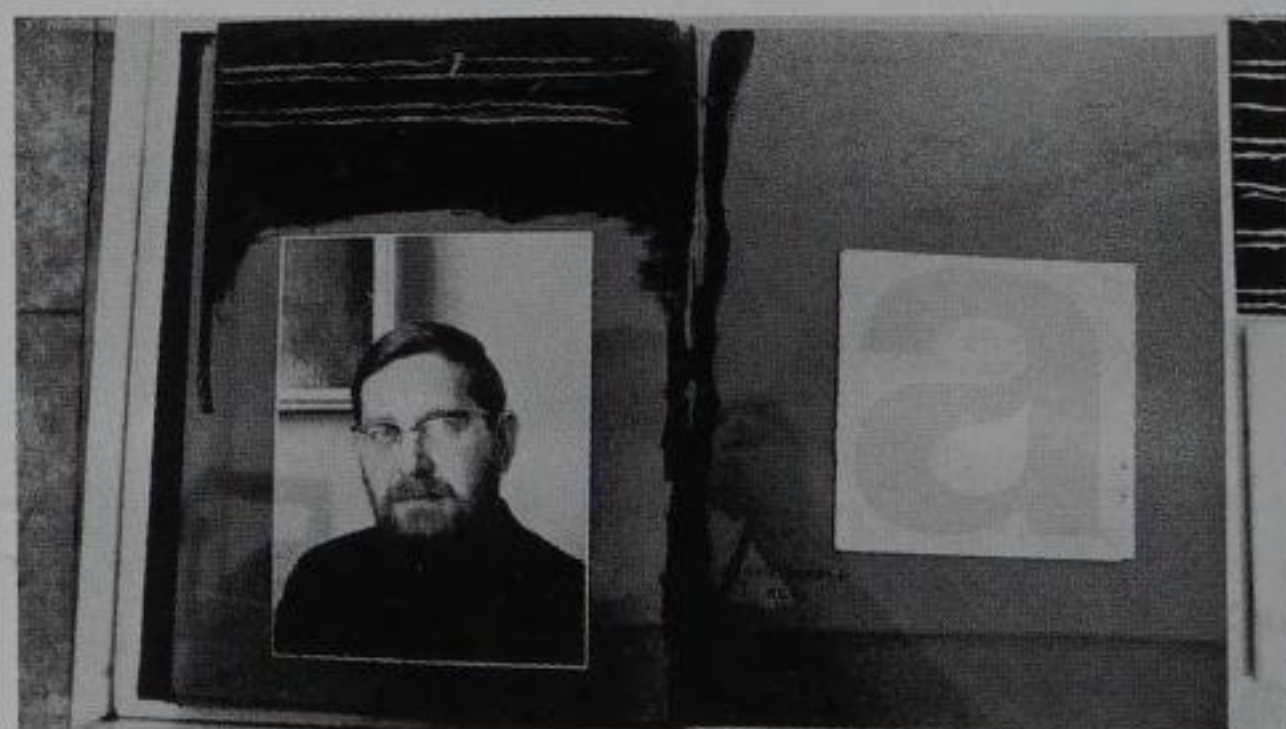
**Wolf Vostell**  
TV-Shoe, 1970  
Installation  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan

**Allan Kaprow**  
Preliminary sketch for *Cabin*,  
1963 and 1991  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan





**Gorgona group**  
*Collective Work, 1960–1980*  
Serigraph on canvas,  
cm 158 × 850  
F. Conz Archive, Verona





**Ben Vautier**

*Pas côté pas n'importe où*

Installation, 1989

(photo Villa Arson / Jean  
Brasille)









**Takako Saito**  
*Do It Yourself*, 1989  
Bonner Kunstverein  
(photo Wolfgang Träger)

**Milan Knizak**  
*Broken Music*, 1990  
Venice Biennale  
(photo © Fabrizio Garghetti)





**Ben Patterson**

*Fluxus Flags*, 1990

Multi-coloured sewn cloths

Courtesy of Fondazione

Mudima, Milan

(photo © Fabrizio Garghetti)

**Nam June Paik**

*Duchamp/Beuys Buddha*, 1990

Courtesy of Fondazione

Mudima, Milan

(photo Massimo Sangiorgi /

Studio Azzurro)







DLOCHAMP  
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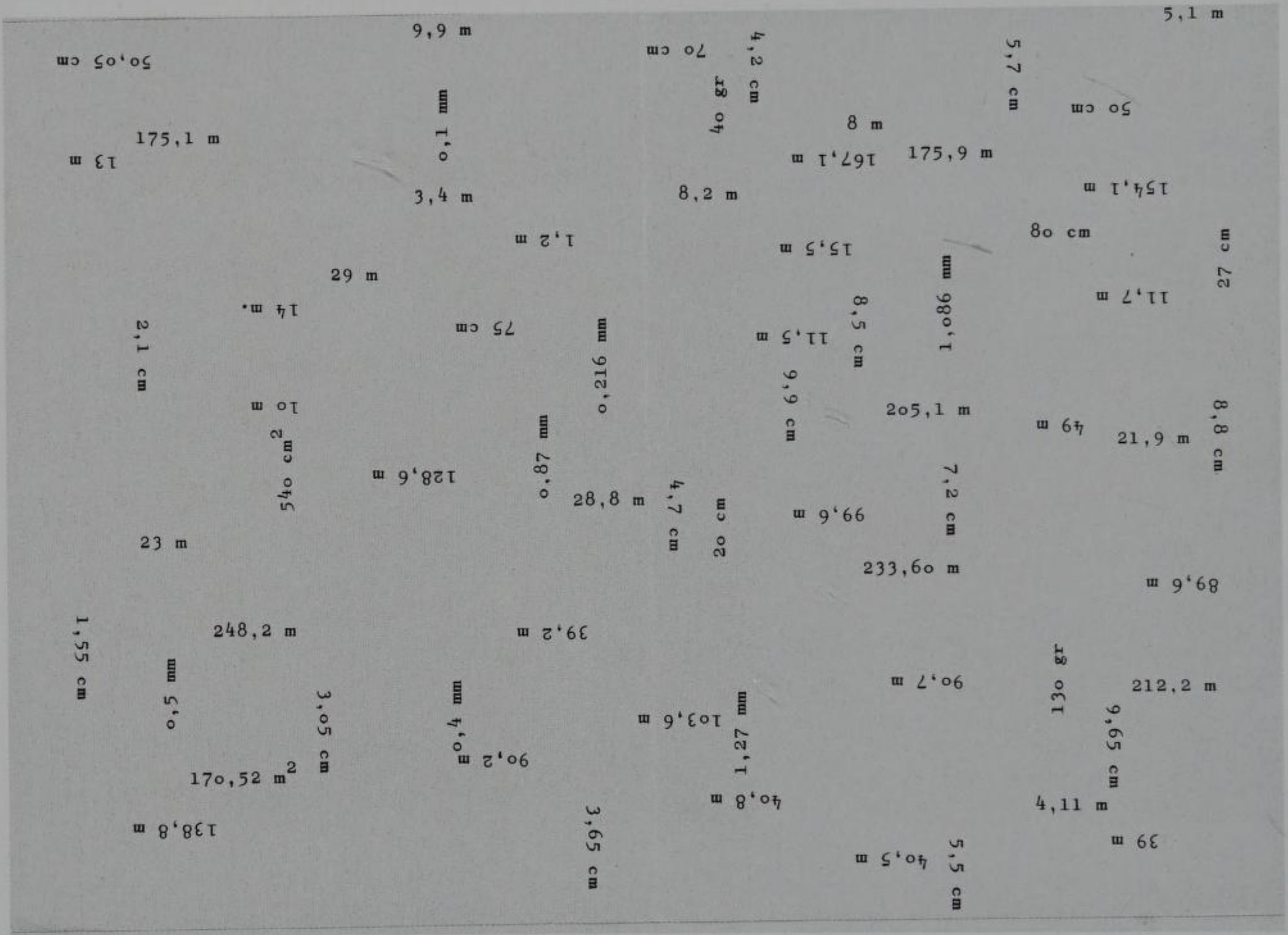


**Eric Andersen**

Score from the installation

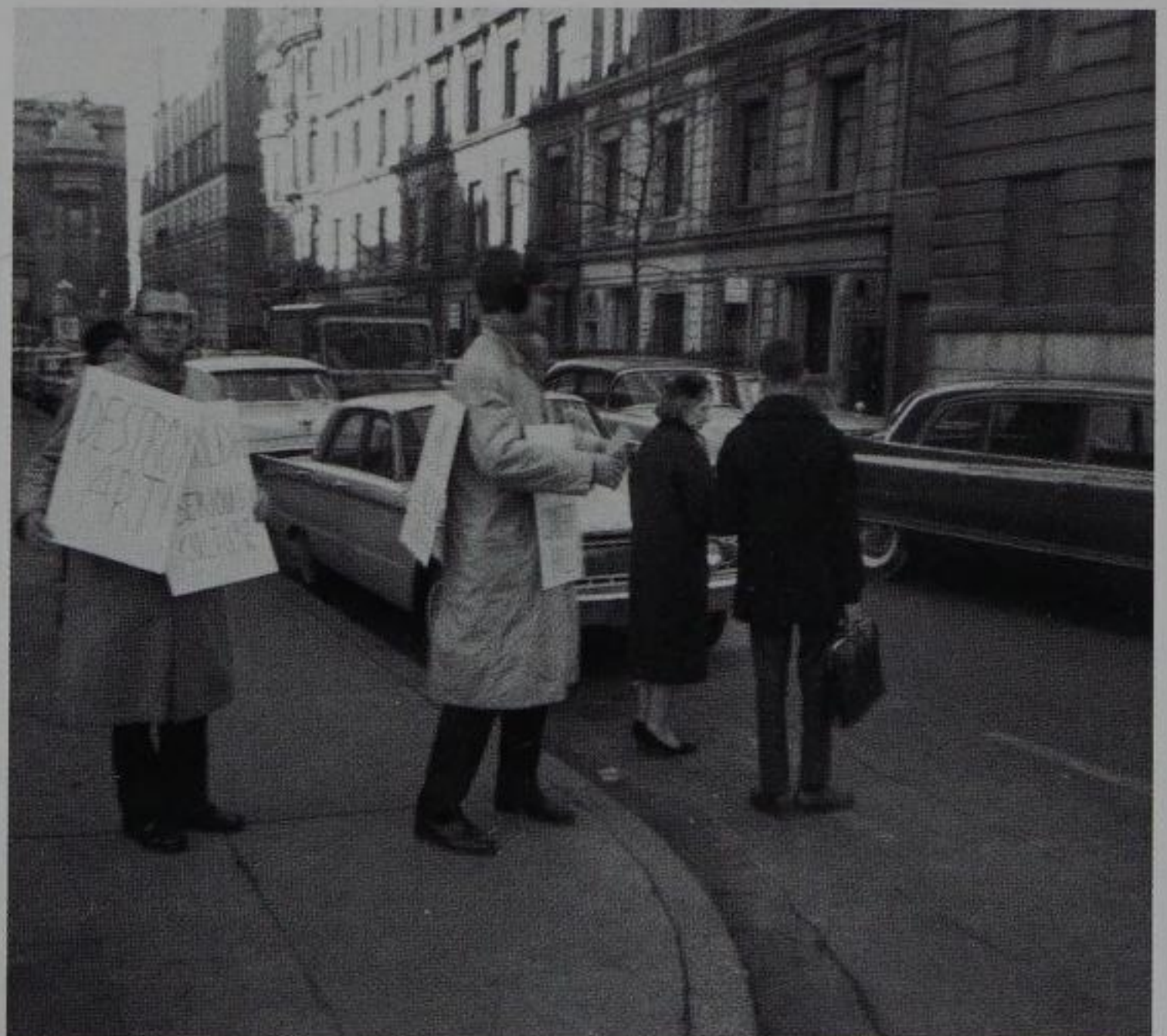
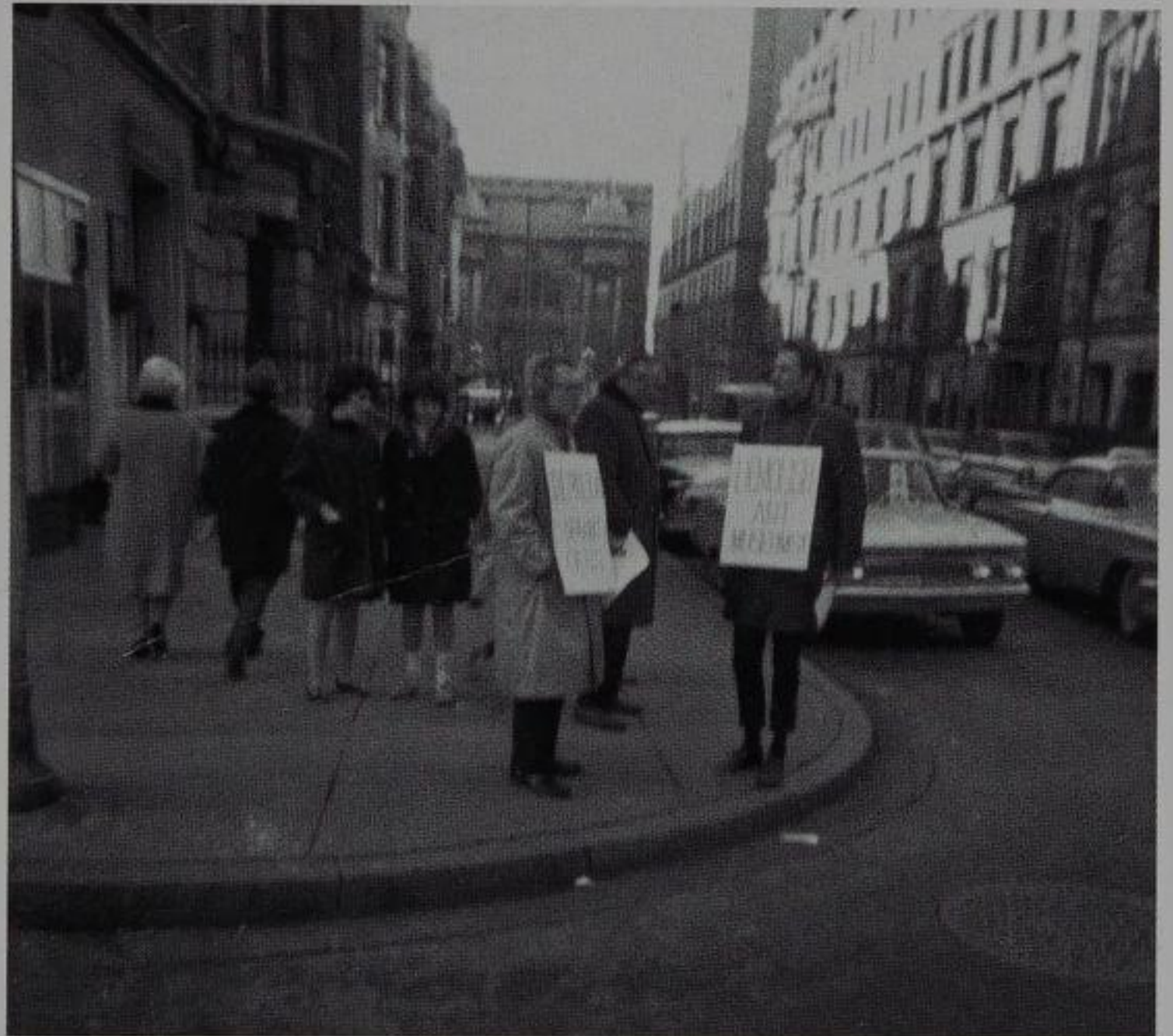
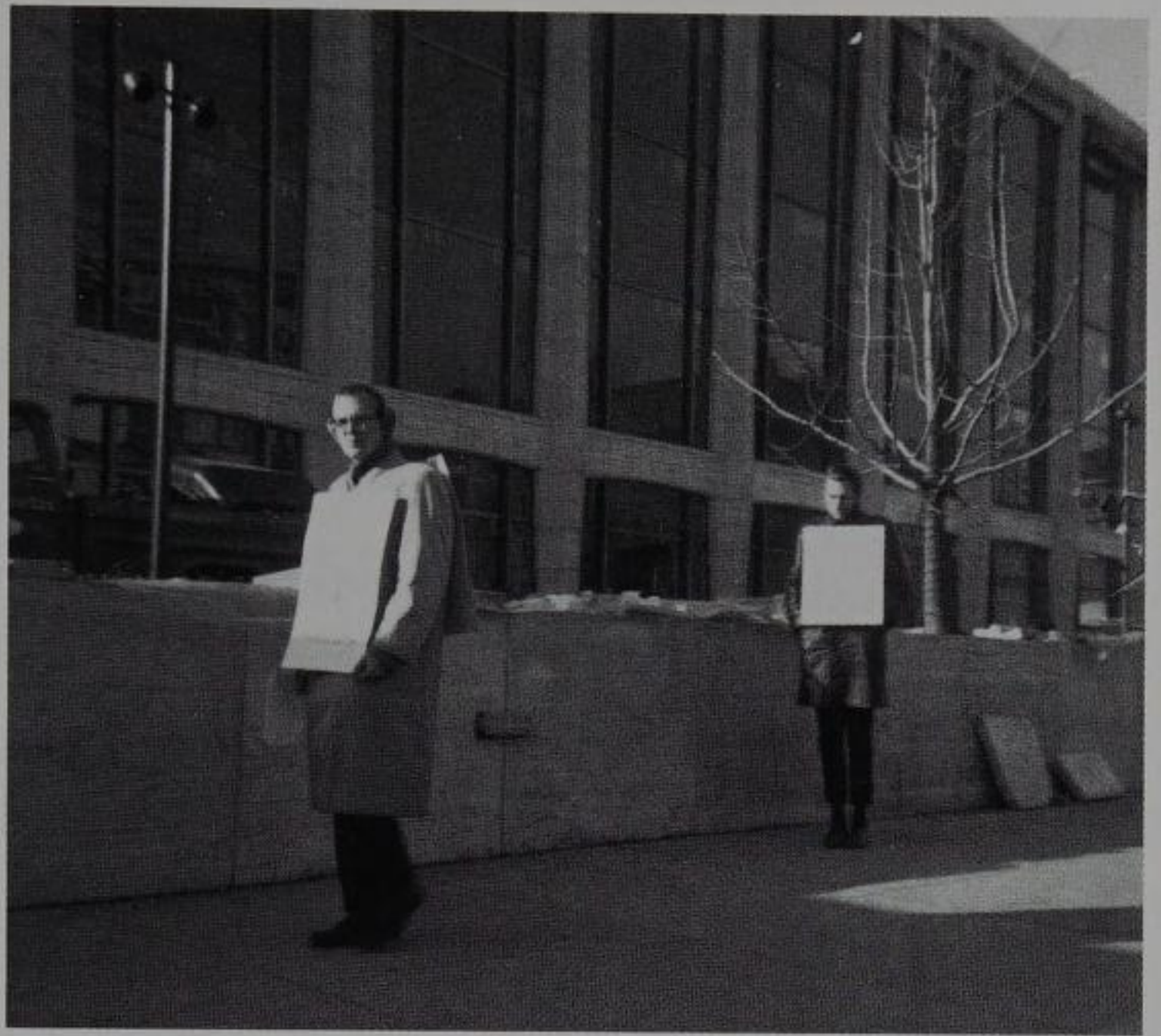
*Opera*, 1996

Artist's collection, Copenhagen





**Henry Flynt**  
Public demonstration, New  
York, 1962









**Walter Marchetti**  
*Chamber Music No. 11, 1974*  
Galleria Multipla, Milan

**Joe Jones**  
*The Music Bike, 1977*  
F. Conz Archive, Verona





**Shigeko Kubota**

*Duchamp Window*

*(Meta-Marcel=Window-Snow),*

1991

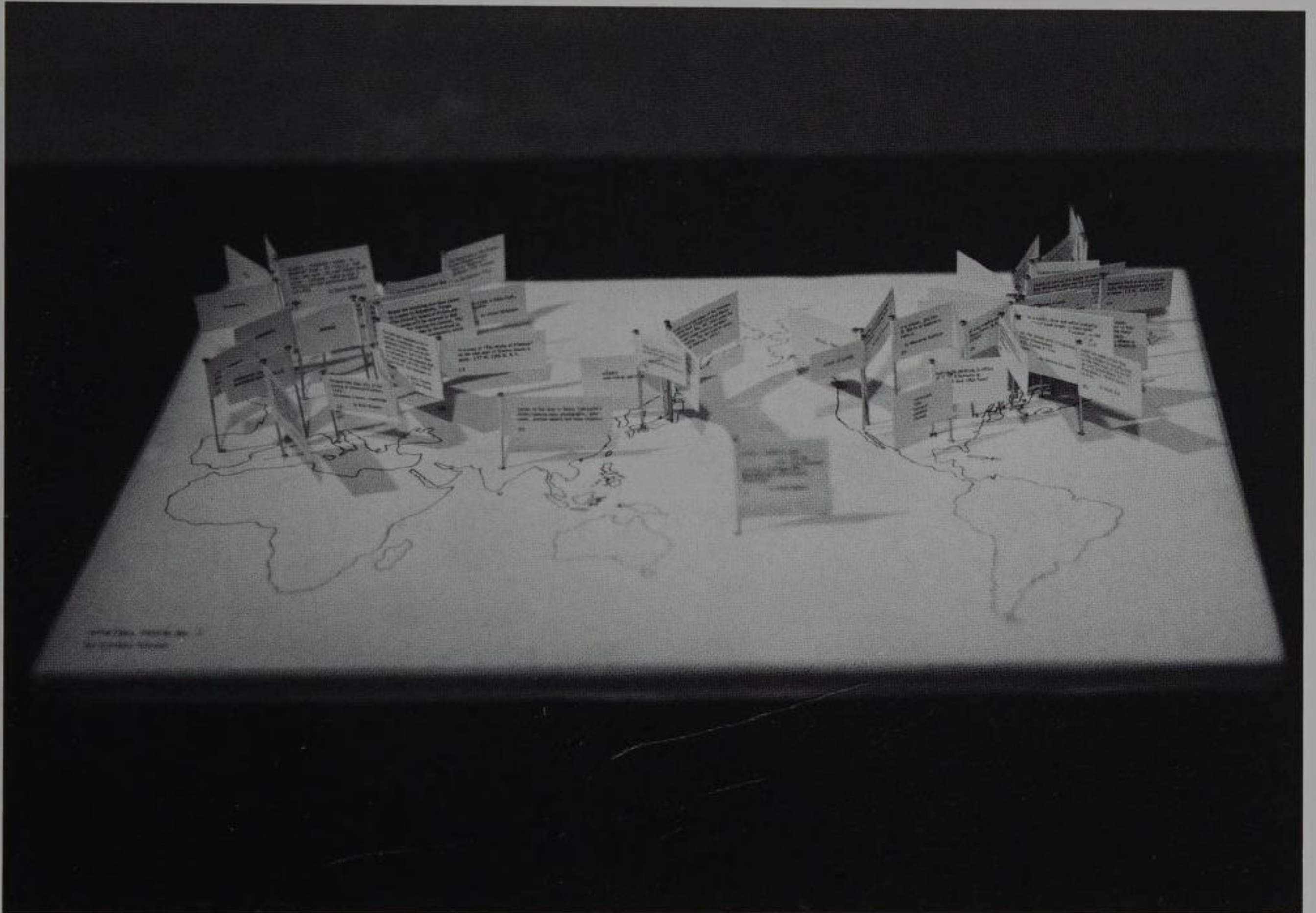
Courtesy of Fondazione

Mudima, Milan





**Mieko Shiomi**  
*Spatial Poem No. 1*, 1963  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan









## The Avant-Gardes or the Clan War in Paris (1952–1968)

**W**hy did no international movement of fundamental importance emerge during the sixties in Paris, the traditional capital of the arts up to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in spite of the numerous tendencies of the diverse avant-garde tribes (or sects)?

It was New York that emerged then as the new indisputable international capital of the arts; a hegemony determined by the effects of the Second World War and the consequences of the Stalinist and Nazi dictatorships together with the wave of European exiles who had headed toward the new Babylon after 1930–1933 – the land of liberty that was symbolized by its famous statue, the work of a European from France, Bartholdi (who was also the author of the *Lion* of Belfort).

During the forties, artists, collectors, and musicians such as Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Albers, Schönberg, Varèse, Breton, Duchamp, and Max Ernst transformed New York and Chicago as well as some of the universities. New York became an extraordinary laboratory for meetings, research and creativity.

What is more, from the time of the twenties, modern and contemporary art had been recognized and supported (realist-socialist and degenerate art did not exist, nor did the dictatorship of national academic art) by the liberal universities, the press and by the newly created foundations of modern art. This recognition was largely due to Katherine Dreier who, guided by Duchamp, organized the Société Anonyme and created the Yale University collection. Another American who was originally from Berlin, Steiglitz, founded his magazines, *Camera Works* and *291*, as well as his famous international gallery. There were no frontiers for a new art in a young country without an ancient heritage. In that period the Amerindian heritage was still not considered to be a source of revival (except by André Breton, Ernst and Varèse), nor for that mat-



ter was the African heritage of slavery (voodoo and the Caribbean rituals were so close). But as far as sound was concerned, New York had already become a fantastic melting pot of different sounds (jazz, blues, and the new musical forms) for the construction of a free planetary spirit.

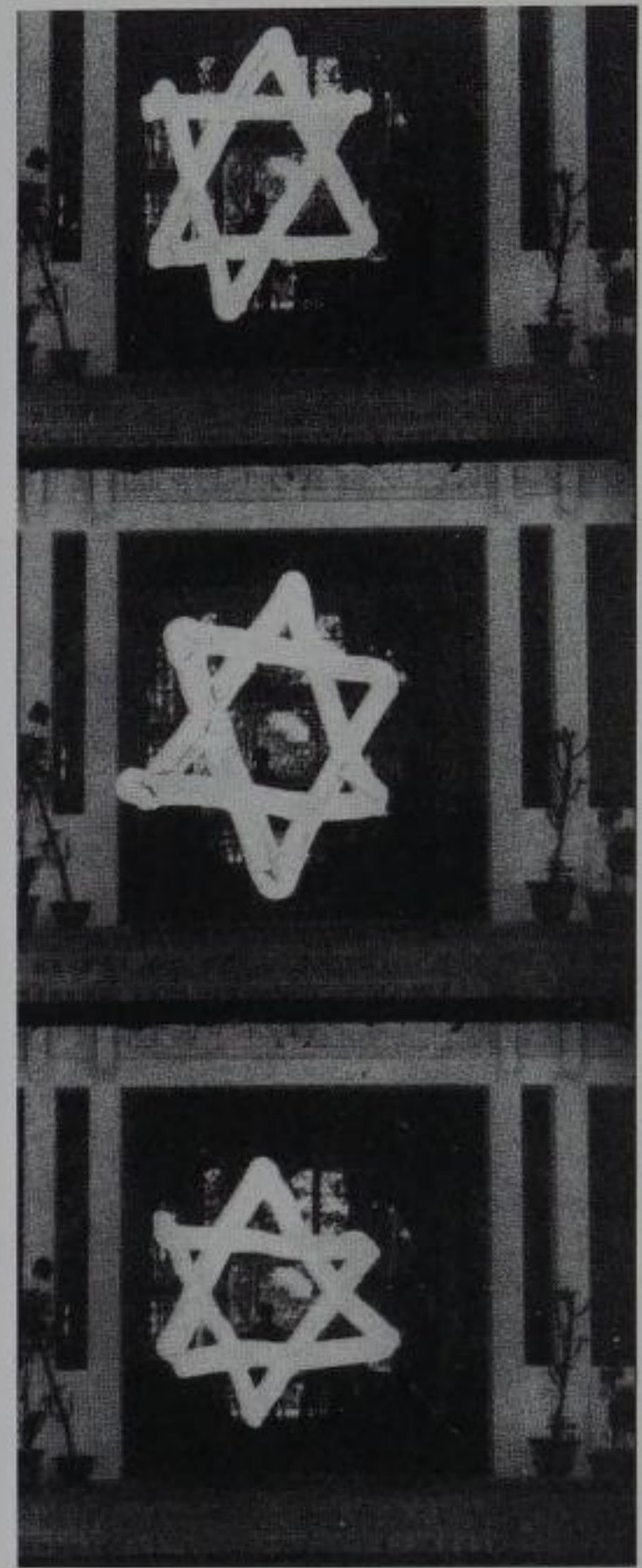
During the thirties, Moholy-Nagy (who had been a professor at the Bauhaus in Weimar, and was a colleague of Kandinsky, Klee, Albers and Schlemmer) became the director of the new school of architecture and design in Chicago. The fifties witnessed the birth of Black Mountain College and the New School for Social Research where John Cage taught. Nothing of the sort was happening in Europe. In New York, Abstract Expressionism made its appearance along with Pollock's Action Painting; Motherwell directed a modern avant-garde collection. Paris was recovering from the war and the occupation. New York was filled with refugees, expatriates and European deserters who were indifferent to nationalism. It was in this city that Breton and some of his friends managed to publish *View* with Duchamp, Ernst, Masson and Matta, and with support from Peggy Guggenheim, an exceptional patron who was instrumental in the foundation of the Guggenheim Museums.

In Paris, despite the difficulties of the postwar period, there was a great effervescence in the air: contrasting ideological tendencies clashed in an inexorable polemical climate (existentialism, Stalinist Communist Party, libertarian movement, Surrealism, Lettrism, revolutionary Marxist Surrealism...).

The Surrealist tribe was divided between a position close to Trotskij and another that leaned toward anarchy. The Communist Party had its cultural organ in the *Lettres Françaises*, the existentialists (Camus) had *Combat*, and the anarchists *Le Libertaire*. Debates took place in the offices of the weekly *Arts*. Discussions were underway everywhere. Cobra (from the initial letters of Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam), the organ of the new revolutionary Surrealism, declared that Paris no longer counted, undermined as it was by a Surrealism that had forgotten its early radical positions (the overthrowing of society, the revolution of the spirit). With Jorn (Danish), Constant (Dutch), and Dotremont (its coordinator who came from Brussels), Cobra established itself as a group dedicated to experimental research, meetings, and collective experiences, which were carried out far from the great capitals, and primarily in Italy, between 1948 and 1951.

With Baj (the founder of the Nuclear Movement in Milan), Jorn created the Bauhaus Imaginiste as a reaction to the new Bauhaus in Ulm defended by Max Bill. They were against the revival of the geometric tendencies that were appearing in Paris under the name of *Réalités Nouvelles* and published by the magazine *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*.

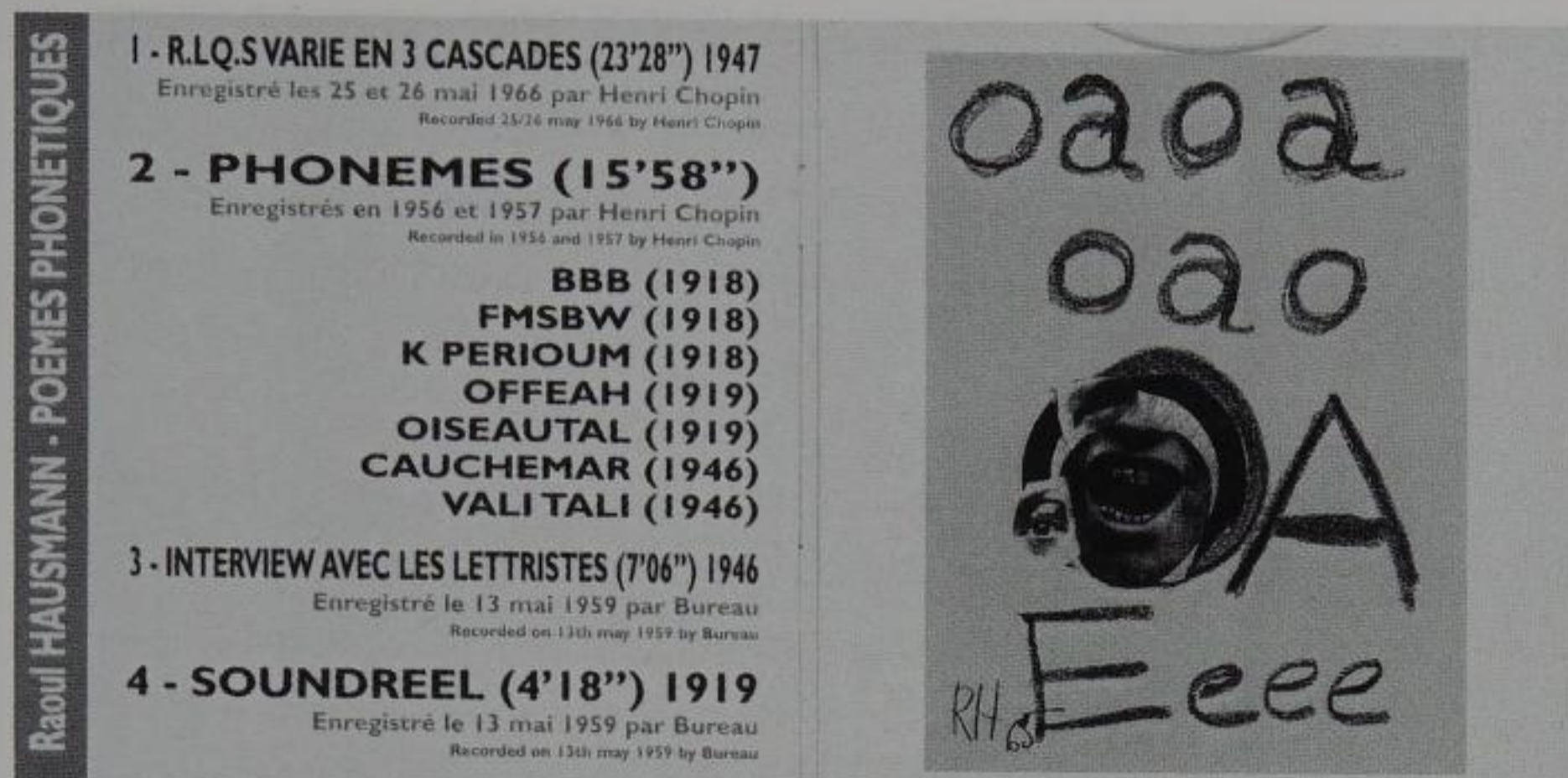
The contrasts during the twenties between Dada, Construc-



Isidore Isou, image from the film *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, Paris 1950



Raoul Hausmann, *Poèmes phonétiques*, cover of the CD made in 1997 by the Musée Départemental d'Art Contemporain of Rochechouart



tivism and Surrealism were still far from being resolved. The battle between the tribes continued invariably with the same iconoclastic and sectarian positions. However, a new literary movement, Lettrism, arrived on the scene in 1946. Its initial phase (1946–1952) was marked by the violence of its attacks and its provocations.

Like some new prophet, its founder Isidore Isou immediately announced that all the preceding movements had been surpassed, and so he proposed a general revolution of the arts, culture, and consequently, the entire social structure. His first book-manifesto, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*,<sup>1</sup> was published with Gallimard in 1947 by Jean Paulhan, the most strategically active Surrealist editor. As the messiah of the new avant-garde, Isou elaborated a theory of the new that would continue to the present day.<sup>2</sup> International Constructivism, like Suprematism, would never have been able to take root in France in the twenties (notwithstanding the presence of Mondrian and Doesburg in Paris) because of Surrealism and the prevailing academicism of the School of Paris. The geometric and abstract tendency of *Réalités Nouvelles* proved to be impotent in reviving that which had been a fundamental experience in Holland and the Eastern European countries (although rejected by the diverse powers of the Left and Right) both at a practical and a theoretic level (not until today has a complete *corpus* of Kandinsky, Doesburg, Malevich, etc. been made available).

Mondrian lived in isolation in Paris; he went into exile and died in New York during the forties. Kandinsky lived and died in Paris, and was the most famous, although hardly any of his writings were published (in 1947, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). Only a small circle of people, primarily Parisians, knew Malevich, Rodchenko, Stzreminsky, Kobro, Doesburg, and Lissitsky, thanks to Arp and Seuphor.

In the fifties, the three contrasting positions (the image, the structure, the letter and the sign) had not prompted any real theoretic debate. As far as it is possible to judge from the partisan magazines on the whole, during that period (1946–1958) there was on-



ly a slight historical and theoretic awareness of the artistic utopias of the twenties and of the total revolution foreseen by those prophets of a possible renaissance. The two wars and their international consequences had delayed everything by at least fifty years, and only now is it possible to really see the impact of the interdisciplinary projects of the first half of the twentieth century.

The impact of the Dada phenomenon in Zurich and Berlin was concealed in much the same way. And yet, the “dada-sopher” Raoul Hausmann, the co-founder of Dada in Berlin, was in Limoges. His work can be collocated in exemplary fashion midway between Constructivism and Dada (a rare figure with the exception of Arp, Doesburg, and Schwitters). This key witness, this activist in European art was marginalized from the Parisian scene both by the Surrealists and by Lettrism and the Left, despite the belated publication of his *Courrier Dada* on the part of Eric Losfeld (1958).<sup>3</sup> As for Zurich, the movement’s founder there, Hugo Ball, was totally ignored in Paris until 1980–1990, at which time the Zurich magazines were published (they have been reprinted by Jean-Michel Place, and his diary *La fuite hors du temps* by Sabina Wolf for the Editions du Rocher).

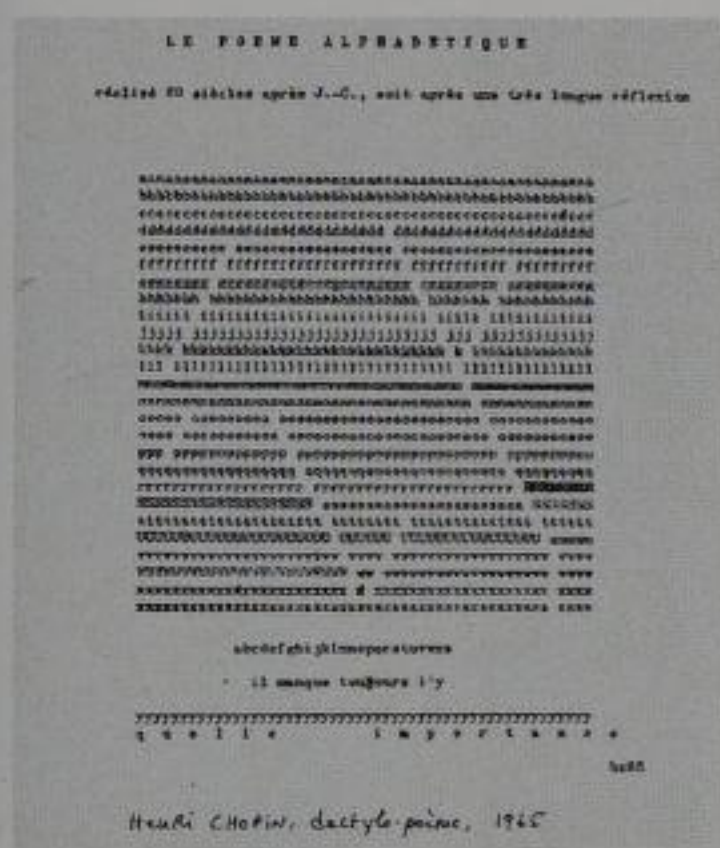
This context of a permanent settlement of accounts, often due to an ignorance of the historical and theoretic grounds (but where was the new generation of the fifties and sixties to find information?), shows fairly clearly how the too-umbilical Paris could not become an open-ended, vital international laboratory. It was an extraordinary laboratory, but it was closed, destructive, self-destructive, and suicidal. Inflexible in its internal disputes and unable to overcome them, the capital obviously lacked a unifying and sufficiently charismatic figure (a Gandhi of the avant-gardes?) able to articulate the dynamic contradictions outside of the conventicles and clans. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were key personalities on the scene such as Apollinaire, Marinetti and Walden (his magazine *Der Sturm* in Berlin was open to all the tendencies). André Breton tried to play the role of unifier but did not succeed in integrating Dada and Constructivism because he did not know them.

In New York on the other hand, John Cage had been carrying out this role with respect to music and related fields since the fifties. In the sixties, George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus, that wildly active and authentic utopian, tried to construct a new Bauhaus that would integrate the Dadaist, Futurist, Constructivist and Surrealist bases as the only possible alternative at that point given the entropy of partisan, partial projects. Maciunas turned out to be the unifier of divergencies and singular contributions, notwithstanding a certain authoritarianism. Since the sixties, Fluxus has been the only fluid non-movement that has contributed, without fanfare, to the establishment of a new international coordination after 1980



Camille Bryen, *Héperile éclaté*, shattered poem by Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé, 1958





Henri Chopin, *Le poème alphabétique (dactylo-poème)*, 1965

under the names of Action Art, Art Attitude, intervention, performance, eternal network... mixage, grand mixage, manoeuvres...

How did we arrive at this general collapse that was due to so many aborted attempts because of megalomania, theoretic mediocrity, warped egocentricity, non-critical autodidacticism, authoritarian projects, a non-contradictory and non-fluid systemic nature, and a lack of marked individuality?<sup>4</sup>

Does this signify the end of movements and exclusive tendencies, of hierarchical parties, and sects of every type, of contradictory and groundless ideologies?

Is it the announcement, albeit hesitant, of the appearance of individuals who rebel fiercely against any fixed forms, the dynamic builders of new situations without hope or despair, and of errant vagabonds like Antonin Artaud who was able to conclude the extreme experiment in spite of the circumstances and apart from situations, to theorize everything without a closed theoretic *corpus*?<sup>5</sup>

In any case, between 1950 and 1960, a decade rich in movements and antagonistic tendencies, dissident fractions and heresies against established opinions really did exist in Paris. In spite of all this, the different approaches were all oriented toward the same project, that of transforming life through art or art through life: Lettrism, Schematism,<sup>6</sup> Art Brut, Situationist International, popular Surrealism, International Surrealism, total art, Happening, Actionism, Fluxus, etc. Cobra disappeared but generated the Bauhaus Imaginiste in its place, thus providing the basis for Situationist International; Lettrism produced its dissident offshoot, Schematism (with Ultralettrism) and Lettrist International. The latter then became Situationist International.<sup>7</sup>

Poetry as energy, as an elevation of language, as a song, as a scanned word, as the insubordination of the spirit, as a combina-



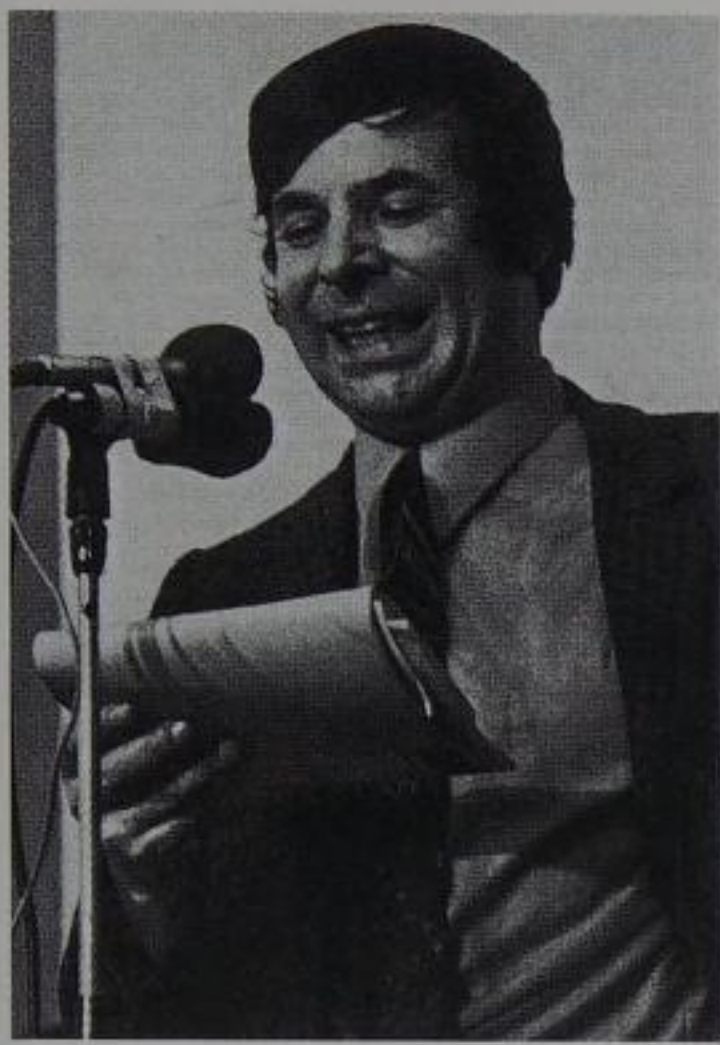
tory serial art, as a word machine, as an immoderation of the grammatical institution, as *glossolalia*, as furious inspiration/aspiration, as mastication of the language, as a delirious song, as a dance in all directions, as a silent mediation up to the "blown" void: poetry has been in a constant state of change since the twenties (like the language of sounds, like the language of forms). It became again an act and a material action, a spiritual physical shock, a subjectively objective *corpus*: it became Lettrist (letters and signs in 1946–1950), concrete (with Gomringer in 1953), spatial (with Pierre Garnier in 1962),<sup>8</sup> electronic sound poetry<sup>9</sup> (with Henri Chopin in 1963), permutational (with Brion Gysin), poetry-action (with Bernard Heidsieck and Robert Filliou in 1962), objectified (with Jean-Clarence Lambert), *verbofonica* (with Petronio in 1955), meta-poetry (with Altgor in the fifties), Ultralettrist (with François Dufrène in 1958), *megapneumica* (with Jil Wolman and Jean-Louis Brau), elementary with Julien Blaine<sup>10</sup> and total art with Ben Vautier.

Paris became an underground centre, albeit an underestimated one, in which antagonistic tendencies clashed in leaflets, exhibitions, performances, magazines and different bulletins. This phenomenon has never been fully investigated by the press except for some occasional articles in the weekly *Arts et spectacles*.<sup>11</sup> Neither the conservative press nor that of the Left and far Left were about to initiate a debate about this controversy of the avant-gardes, and much less the university, which remained immune to the idea of a permanent laboratory of contemporary ideas.

Conservative oppression (censorship was still active and the Surrealist bulletins and leaflets deserve credit for continually mentioning it) and social-communist obtuseness suffocated and blocked the establishment of a general front of information. Suffice it to examine the art and literature school texts of the twentieth century. Why do scientific research and the new technologies have a right to the information in manuals, while contemporary culture must wait some fifty or sixty years to be qualified or deemed valid? The conservatism both of the Right and Left is despotic: the same mediocrity, the same rejection of the contradictory and (why not?) paradoxical republican discussion. An extraordinary traditionalism had anaesthetized France. Naturally, an indistinct general front was in the process of forming, in spite of everything, around Breton, Dubuffet, Debord, Blanchot, Bataille, Mascolo, Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard and some others, but they hardly ever mentioned the emergence of this phenomenon to their readers in their respective magazines.

On a cultural and public level there was no equivalent to Castoriadis's magazine of political and social criticism, *Socialisme ou barbarie*,<sup>12</sup> or to Axelos's magazine of critical theory, *Arguments*, or to the social magazines of Souvarine, such as *Le contrat social*. The only magazine of cultural criticism, published by the Editions du





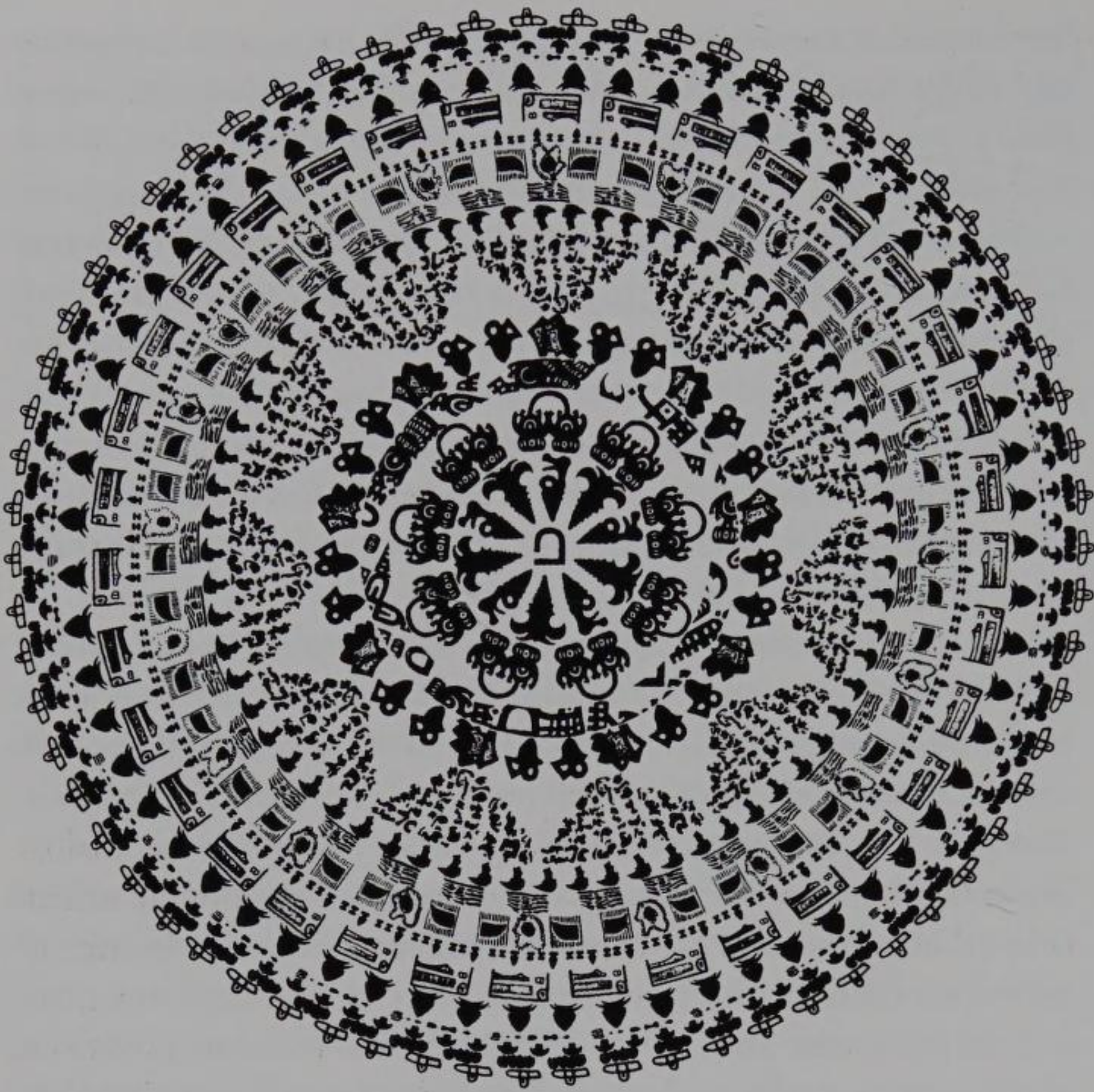
François Dufrène

Seuil in the sixties, was *Tel Quel*, an excellent magazine and an organ of systematic disinformation, directed by the Nouvelle Vague, the Nouveau Roman and company, a self-proclaimed groundless and thoroughly Parisian avant-garde.<sup>13</sup> In the fifties, there appeared on the art and cultural scene Bataille's magazine *Critique*, that of Castoriadis, and *Les Cahiers de l'art brut* of Jean Dubuffet which defended autodidactic art against that of the academy and the museum (the mediums, the alienated, the self-taught...): an art outside of the norm, far from ever being recognized or subject to avant-garde experimentation. It was close to Breton, Cobra and the popular Surrealism of Maurice Ropin.<sup>14</sup> It was an art of truly singular non-conformists.

Isou, on the contrary, provided Lettrism with a theoretic foundation aimed at revolutionizing all areas of social, political, economic and cultural activity. He elaborated a general theory of creation that he defined as *créatique*, and later as *novatique*. An examination of the composition of the first Lettrist team shows Lemaître, Pomerand, Dufrène, Wolman,<sup>15</sup> Brau and Debord side by side as they undertake an adventure that will prove to be stimulating, despite their later break-up.<sup>16</sup>

In just a few years, from 1950 to 1954, there was a brusque acceleration together with a series of dissidences: Wolman and Debord founded the Lettrist International, Jorn created the movement for a Bauhaus Imaginiste with Baj and the connection was implemented through the bulletin *Potlatch* in 1954.<sup>17</sup> The first Situationist texts were published in 1954 in the Belgian Surrealist magazine of Marien *Les Lèvres Nues* (regarding the psycho-geographic *dérive* or drift and the use of *détournement* or displacement). The *Internationale Situationniste* (the magazine) was founded in 1957 by Guy Debord; it was a radical criticism of the society of spectacle and cultural ideology, an appeal to surmount art (exhibitions, artworks, market systems...) by "the construction of situations" or through a playful practice of life. Situationist International claimed to be the heir of Dada, Surrealism and the revolutionary ideal that it had transcended into a new situation.<sup>18</sup> As we have just seen, apart from Sade, Fourier and the historic avant-gardes, the first movement after 1945 to theorize an overthrowing of all the categories and the crossing of all borders in order to one day reach a paradisiacal state was Lettrism and its theorist, Isou. The magazine *Ion* dedicated its only issue in 1952 to the aesthetics of cinema with texts and screenplays by Isou, Debord, Dufrène, Wolman, and Marc 'O. In his introduction, Isou had already then suggested a blank screen in place of film, and a lively debate in the movie house, an event instead of a spectacle, a pre-Happening.<sup>19</sup> It cannot be concluded that Fluxus derives from Lettrism, or for that matter John Cage, but in any case, it was through Situationist International that these ideas circulated rather rapidly in Eu-





rope and New York. During this period, Dufrène invented his *crirythmes*,<sup>20</sup> Wolman *megapneumia* (the poetry of breaths) and the film *L'anti-concept*.

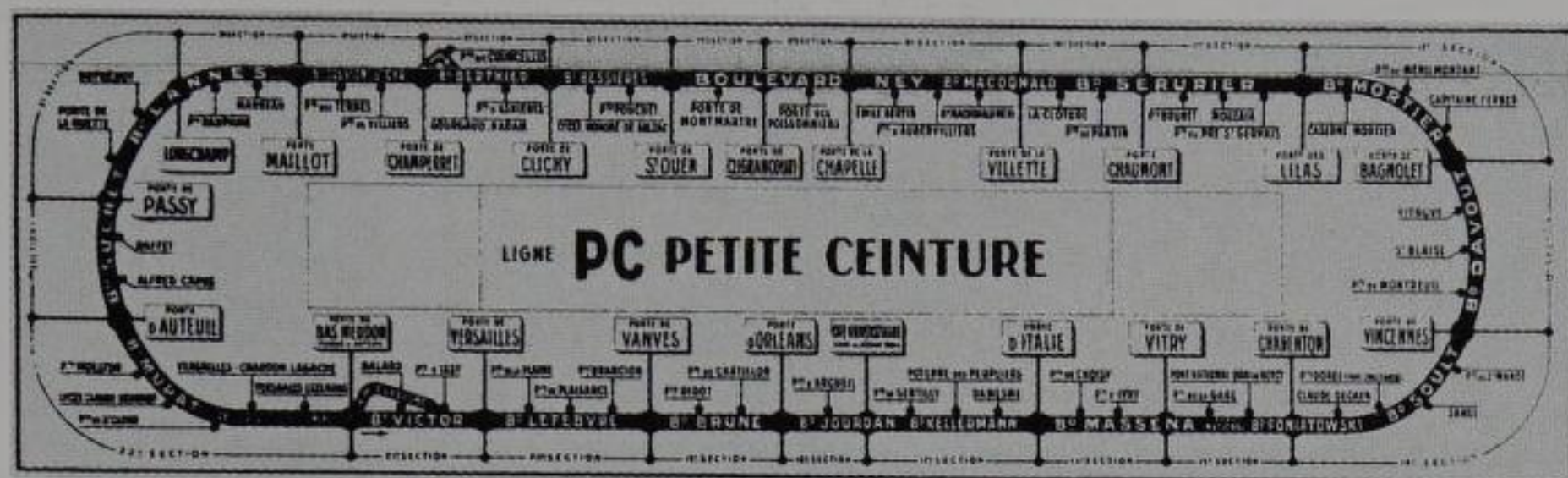
By 1950, Pomerand had already published the first hypergraphic story (letters, signs, drawings, rebus, images), *Saint-Ghetto-des-Prêts*.<sup>21</sup> Isou had just produced the Lettrist film *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (with a complete distortion of images, sound and commentary), and Lemaître his first movie in which the film was manipulated like a plastic material, *Le film est déjà commencé?* (later followed by his book: "a first attempt to flaw the normal frame of a cinematographic representation").

It is no longer a matter of demonstrating the importance of Lettrist cinema with respect to what would become experimental cinema, like the generalized art of signs (or hypergraphics) in 1954 and infinitesimal art in 1956.<sup>22</sup> Isou constructed a systematic theory, articulated in a system of branches (cladology). Fluxus, on the other hand, rejected all theories and proposed a chaotic, contradictory vision in which chance plays an essential role. The objective was to overthrow the hierarchical, divided cultural structure that bases all activity on the invention and practice of the game so that the cult of elitist art would disappear. This involved the overthrowing of music, theatre, poetry, the visual and the plastic arts so as to produce an interactive, festive art in which everyone could play.

Situationist International challenges the tongue and language,



Wolf Vostell, score created for Paris published in the magazine *Décollage*, no. 3, 1962



privileging “situations” (this abolishes all human creative potential: a conception close to that of the Protestant culture which has always distrusted the arts). Isou, conversely, proposed a jubilant exaltation of *créatique* inventions.

During this period, Gerasim Luca published *Heros Limite* with Soleil Noir<sup>23</sup> in which he rejected the laws of grammar and again brought up the question of the entire socio-political and cultural edifice, refusing to be subjected to any code that was imposed by education, family or scholastic teaching. Luca conserved the analogical image but broke with syntax and grammar, the double articulation that synthesized Dada and Surrealism. However, in spite of their theoretic differences, these movements (Surrealist, Lettrist, Situationist) were aiming at the same objective – the global rejection of a coercive, mediocre society (both the Fourth and Fifth Republics).<sup>24</sup> This period – between 1950 and 1960 – was characterized by continual polemics, since each one was trying to find the definitive path.

It was in this climate that a new art tendency was forming; lacking in theoretic ambitions it was christened Nouveau Réalisme by Pierre Restany in 1959. There was American Pop Art and there was Parisian Nouveau Réalisme. Describing itself as “40° above Dada”, it made the “dadasopher” Hausmann, in exile in Limoges, burst into laughter: he had just published his *Courrier dada* in 1958.<sup>25</sup>

And here another question arises: why was Hausmann part of a tribe that was neither Lettrist, nor Surrealist nor Situationist? That indefatigable researcher and experimenter was in contact with the European avant-gardes (as his correspondence demonstrates), yet practically ignored by the new tendencies that were making their appearance in Paris. He was joined only by Henri Chopin through his magazine of sound poetry *Ou*, and the Fluxus group who were aware of the role he had played as a witness and go-between for the different generations and European countries after the twenties in Berlin. In Paris, the magazine *Phases*, a heterodox Surrealist review,<sup>26</sup> published him. In spite of an attempt to collaborate, he carried on an ineffectual and ridiculous controversy with Isou. For the latter, Dada was Tzara, the self-styled founder and propagandist of Dada. But Hausmann had met Iliazd (the founder of the avant-garde Degré 41 before 1920 at Tbilisi) who, following his dispute with Isou, published *Poésie de mots inconnus*<sup>27</sup> in 1948, an



incunabulum of the avant-gardes, a testimony of phonetic poetry between the twenties and forties.

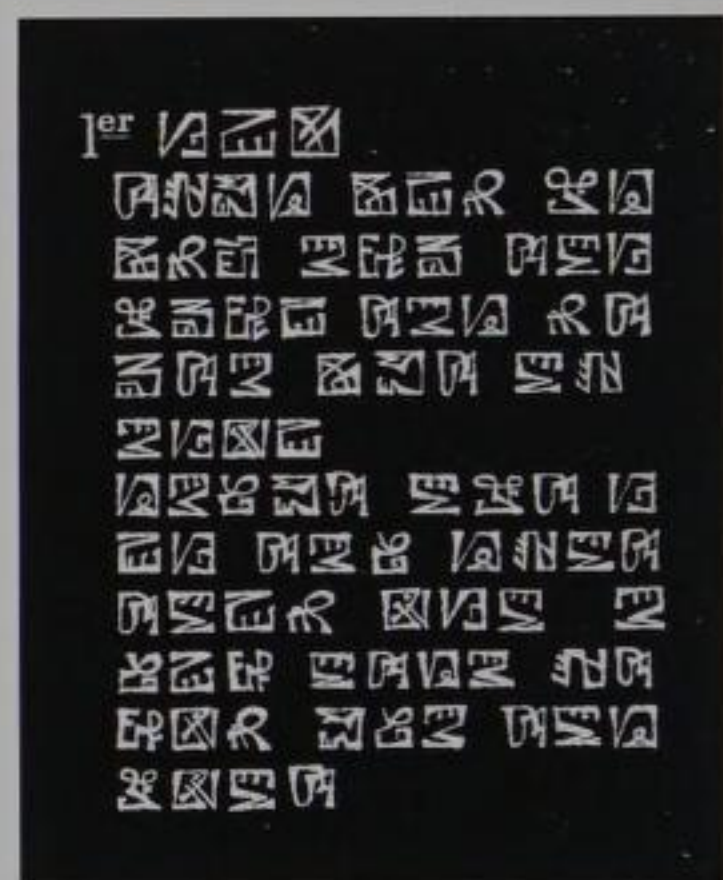
In the sixties (1959–1965), different forms of what may be defined as Action Art were manifested in Paris: the actions of the Japanese Gutai group and Viennese Actionism (Nitsch, Brus, Muehl...) at the Stadler gallery; the happenings organized by Jean-Jacques Lebel at the American Center, the actions of Aubertin,<sup>28</sup> the action-theatre of Robert Filliou,<sup>29</sup> Vostell's happenings and some Fluxus evenings. In those years, three people were busy shaking up the Parisian art scene: Pierre Restany, Jean-Jacques Lebel and Alain Jouffroy (more specifically around 1967).

Jean-Jacques Lebel introduced the Beat Generation tribe (Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs...) to France and the Happening that Kaprow had invented in the USA, while Vostell made the Living Theater of Beck and Malina known in Germany, and published the only work regarding the surpassing of museum art through interactive action. Lebel was the person who linked Paris, New York and California, who introduced Fluxus to Paris and set up the Festival of Free Expression. Alain Jouffroy who had just come out of a Surrealist experience close to Breton and Duchamp<sup>30</sup> shared his objectives, notwithstanding their differences. He defended individual insubordination and insurrection against all ideological forms; he supported both the new poetry of Claude Pélieu (who later went to the United States), the "infra noir" poetry close to the Beat Generation and Burroughs, and that of Rodanski and Gerasim Luca, the poetry of singular, irreducible languages, the only truly revolutionary ones. In 1967, he was responsible for the new art magazine *Opus International*, a tribune open to the diverse experiences of the different international tendencies.<sup>31</sup> The role of these individuals can never be stressed enough: the writer-founders of magazines, organizers of events, publishers (Le Soleil Noir of François Di Dio of 1953, Le Terrain Vague of Eric Losfeld, the editions of Jean-Jacques Pauvert), and the bookshops (Pauvert's Le Palimugre, Le Terrain Vague, the bookshop-gallery of Givaudan, Le Minotaure, etc.).

Publishers like these kept the memory of the long insubordination alive (moral, social, political, religious, cultural, and spiritual), fuelling in this way a permanent explosion of which the visual arts were the public manifestation. The publishing work that Surrealism had initiated in the twenties was continued with Gallimard, thanks to Jean Paulhan and Raymond Queneau, and with the younger editors (Di Dio, Losfeld, Pauvert, Girodias...). These editorial acts were gestures that were inseparable from the art scene and favoured the liberation of individuals from all forms of censorship. In that context of the global re-discussion of society, the role of those who contributed to the collapse of the entire system of subjection is not to be ignored: Félix Guattari and his friends; Gilbert Lély, poet, editor and biographer of Sade; Pascal Pia;



Fluxus – La Cédille qui sourit – Art Total – Poésie – Action, frontispiece



Jean-François Bory, from *Post-Scriptum*, Eric Losfeld Editeur, 1970



but the sounds themselves must be extraordinary

MEASURED-UP MUSIC

1- Measuring-up is done, a room, a stage, a person, a musical instrument, etc., in terms of sounds that lead to interesting musical compositions. The sounds can be obtained by running a microphone directly over the area, room (floor and/or walls and ceiling), stage, person, musical instrument, etc... The duration of the piece depends of course upon the speed at which the microphone is run over the object. Typical performances might be: 4 HOURS 12 MINUTES OF SOUND 1000 or A PIANO 3 SECONDS OF SOUND 5000.

In all cases the choice is left to the performer(s). A variation has to do with weight(s) - all the musical instruments to be used in a performance can be weighed and the weights announced to the audience. In a performer can be placed on a scale and his weight in, say, violins, announced. Or the number of violins and brass instruments needed to balance the weight of the piano can be arrived at on stage. Once more the choice belongs to the performer(s).

2- Take any musical composition, past, present and future. Then take any definition in the dictionary. Perform the musical composition, the length of the performance being measured up in terms of the definition found in the dictionary. For instance: performers decide to play Shostakovich's *String Quartet*, while looking up the dictionary at random they fall on the word "matches". So they play the piece: - as long as someone on stage with them keeps lighting the matches out of a matchbox. - or as long as the measuring-up of the stage or the concert hall with matches is not done with. - or as long as whatever they choose to do with matches is going on.

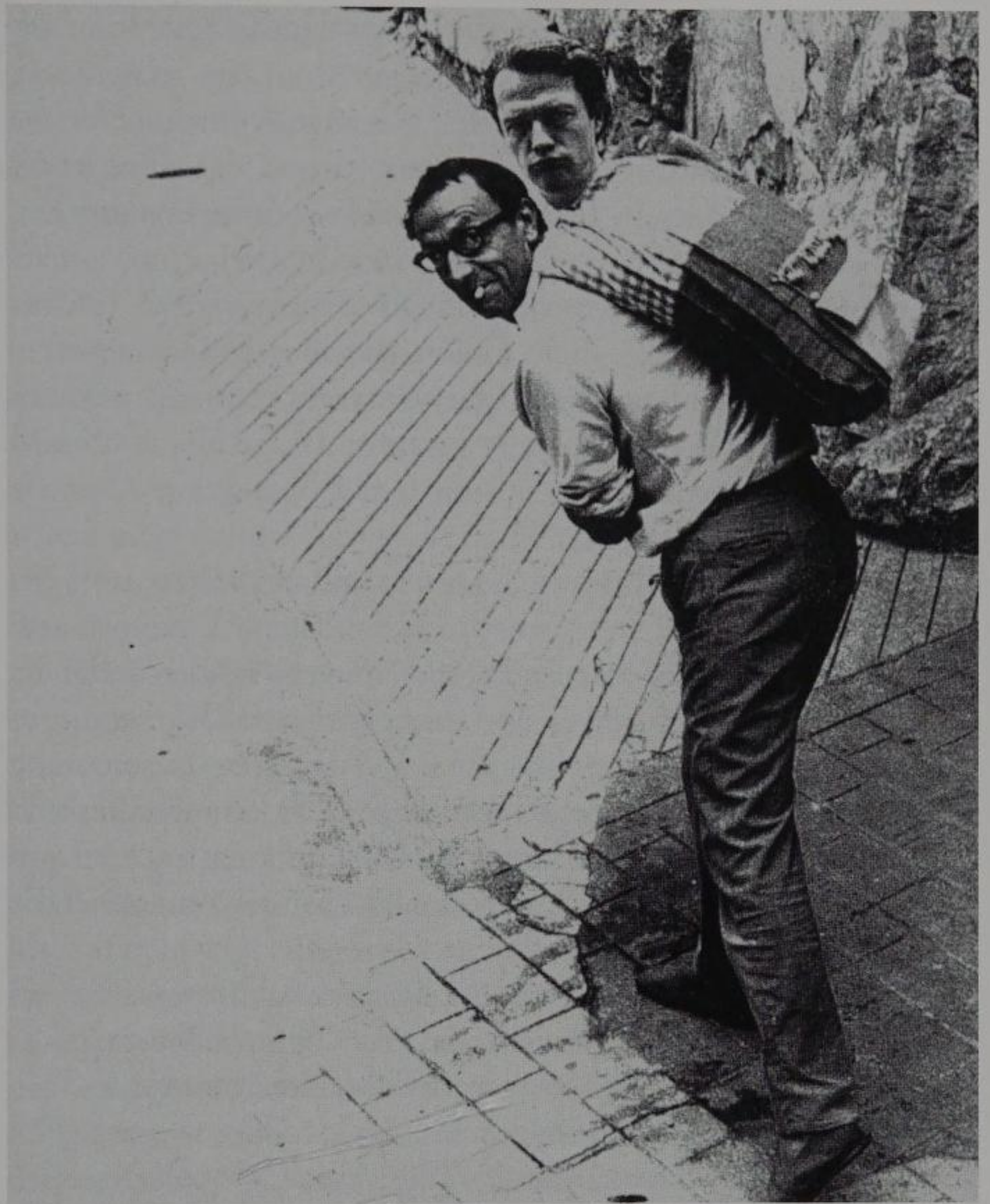
3- This leads to a possible solution to the problem of audience participation in audio, ballet and other performances: the length of any performer's performing will be measured-up in terms of any chosen action engaged in by a spectator situated at his side. This action can be deliberate (willing participation), for instance, jumping up and down, first violinist (last dancer), etc... until exhausted, or attempting to fall asleep, or eating an apple, etc... Or this action can be non-deliberate (unwilling participation). In this case each performer stops performing when a spectator of his choice does something like shuffle his feet, or bite his nose, etc...

Dick Higgins, come to think of it, has done work in this last direction.

Robert Filliou

Robert Filliou, *Measured-Up Music*

Robert Filliou carrying George Brecht to an exhibition in Nice in a "Sac à l'Artiste" by Marianne (photo J.-J. Strauch); published in *Games at the Cédille*, New York 1967



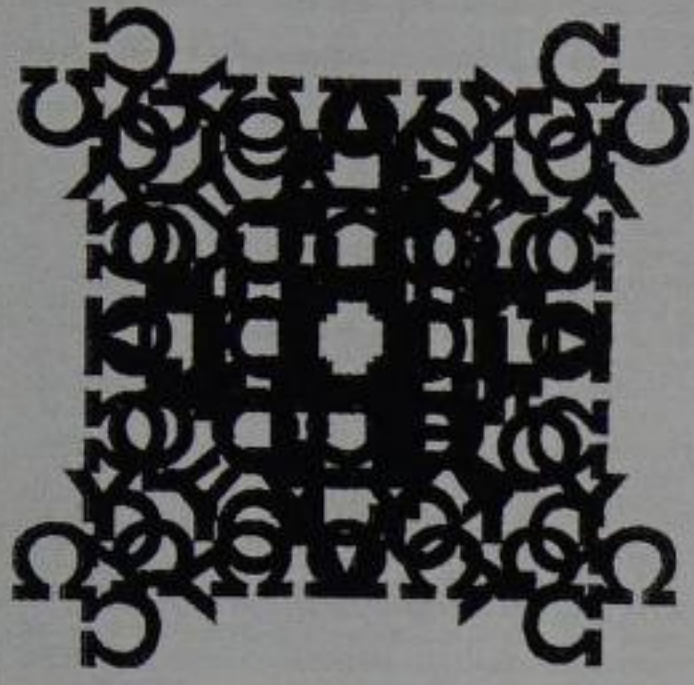
François Caradec, Henri Lefebvre and his *Critique de la vie quotidienne*; Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida... Pierre Restany, the critic and international globe-trotter, the promoter of Nouveau Réalisme and defender of all the new forms of immaterial art, was instrumental in establishing a permanent bridge between Milan and Paris through the magazine *Domus* in which he defended everything that he felt was announcing another way to live.

At the end of the fifties there were at least four projects underway for the transformation of aesthetics, those of Isou, Jorn, Debord and Klein. In those years, well before Beuys's international project and the foundation of the interdisciplinary Free University in 1973, projects that had previously been ignored began to bear fruit: Klein's idea of a university of sensitivity, Jorn's centre for research and experimentation, the Situationist International project for an open university, Vostell's ideal nomad academy, and primarily, Robert Filliou's invention of the *poïpoidrome* and the centre of permanent creation that he set up in 1962 (with Joachim Pfeufer and George Brecht). Filliou proposed the constitution of a *république*









John Furnival

John Furnival, *poème concret*  
published in Pierre Garnier's  
book *Spatialisme et Poésie*  
*concrète*, Paris 1968

declaration by Clauro<sup>34</sup> was reminiscent of Situationist radicalism. The anti-art and non-art tendencies (Fluxus, Happening, Action, Intervention...) appeared at the Biennial evenings of the *Domaine Poétique* (organized by Jean-Clarence Lambert and Jean-Loup Philippe),<sup>35</sup> but above all at Jean-Jacques Lebel's Festival of Free Expression at the American Center which included exhibition-events such as *Anti-Procès* and *Catastrophe*.<sup>36</sup> It was in this climate that key figures appeared such as Isou, Jorn, Debord, Hains, Chopin, Dufrené, Spoerri,<sup>37</sup> Ben, Gysin, Lebel, Jouffroy, Heidsieck,<sup>38</sup> and Blaine: the organizers of events who transformed the point where art and writing, and thought and action intersected, that interval where everything is torn apart and interwoven, outside of the tendencies, at the crossroads of the paths of the restless years of the new century.<sup>39</sup>

Paris was the melting pot of a formidable gestation (that spread throughout France starting in the seventies) that turned into that great psychodynamic, social, political theatre of May '68 when all kinds of actions and happenings emerged in just a few months: it was an insurrection of contradictory words and a dissolution of all truths, an immense collective *pièce*, improbable and never before seen, in which the word or different, paradoxical words were to form a new theatre of life, like the spasmodic repetition of another possible world in which all the established separations would be fragmented and dispersed in an outburst of laughter. Two symbolic events concluded this period, the symptom of an unfinished dream (to be continued): in 1969, the *Liberté de Parole* Festival (a wild *Polyphonix*, a "Mille voix / 1000 voies" in the beginning) with thirty-six hours of action, performances, interventions, films and sound, in which all the tendencies were mixed up together; and in 1970, the *Music Circus* – inspired by John Cage – at Les Halles in Paris, the first popular event when Fluxus finally broke down the barriers between the individual arts (popular arts, variety, experimentation, dance, theatre...). It was the end of a dream or the sign of an alternative that today is manifested everywhere on this planet and not only in its great capitals. As if a local new international were about to start, without a manifesto or exclusions, both inside and outside of institutions (Sub-Commander Marcos's tactics in the Chiapas, José Bové's crusade, Longo Mai's community experience in the Lubéron since 1973... the movement of the cooperative open universities... the many festivals and meetings of Action Art...). This heritage is visible in the multiplication of networks and meetings, in solitary and joint actions, in the art of coordinated acts.



<sup>1</sup> In 1947, Gallimard published *L'agrégation d'un nom et d'un messie*. See F. Devaux, *Entretiens avec Isidore Isou*, La Bartavelle, Toulouse 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Ben, in a conversation with Michel Giroud in 1994, stated: "Isou, I don't deny it, was very important for me around 1958 when I first theorized about art. It was thanks to Isou that I realized that what was important in art was not the beautiful, but the new, the creation. In 1962, while reading *L'agrégation d'un nom et d'un messie*, I was fascinated by his ego, his megalomania, his pretences. I said to myself then: there is no art without ego, and this is where my work on the ego is rooted. (Ben, Flammarion, Paris 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Seuphor and Hans Arp were the two who brought Constructivism and Dada to Paris. Originally from Antwerp, Seuphor, a writer and magazine editor (*Het Overzicht*, reprint, Jean-Michel Place), and a friend of Mondrian, Doesburg, Strzeminsky..., and the Dadaists (Picabia, Arp, Hausmann), published with Editions du Seuil in 1965 *Le Style et le Cri*, and the first work on Mondrian with Flammarion (new edition revised in 1970).

<sup>4</sup> "The age of collective movements has passed [...] the only opportunity that remains and will always remain is in the hands of individuals worthy of this name", declared Michel Tapié, who has gathered individualities since the fifties, published *L'art autre* in 1952, and who later participated actively in the diffusion of the Gutai.

<sup>5</sup> "Youth will never recognize this 'plaster'

oriflame as its own", proclaimed André Breton. Artaud's influence was decisive for the Living Theater, as it was for Grotowski, the theatre of the poor and for what became the theatre-action, the theatre of the body, a unique ritual in its ephemeral performance.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Estivales, a historian of this avant-garde concept, founded the Schematist movement in the fifties (schemes, diagrams, plans), and then the international magazine of theoretic research *Schéma et Schématisation*. He published the magazine *Grammes* (1958–1960) and the first long alliterative poem of François Dufrène *Le Tombeau de Pierre Larousse* in 1958. See also *Kanalthéorie n. 1* (1991) on Schematism. Les Presses du Réel (Dijon) published Dufrène's poem in its dossier on Ultraletterism in May 2001.

<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Collège de Pataphysique came into being, which united Jean Dubuffet, Noël Arnaud, François Le Lionnais, Asger Jorn, Boris Vian, and Raymond Queneau... In 1960, Oulipo (Laboratory of Potential Literature) was founded. Like Roussel and Hains, Queneau was an adept of Raymond Lull: see the dossier on Oulipo and Oupengo – beyond the limit of constraint – published by the magazine *Giallu* (no. 3, autumn 1994, Ajaccio). Jorn, a co-founder of Cobra, has participated in Situationist International up to 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Garnier presented the international movement of Concrete Poetry in his magazine *Les Lettres / Poésie nouvelle* (1963–1967). In New York, Emmett Williams published the first

anthology of Concrete Poetry with the Something Else Press, and Pierre Garnier published *Le Spatialisme* with Gallimard. All of these issues are dealt with in the two works about to be published by Les Presses du Réel, *Raoul Hausmann et les avant-gardes* and *La machine à mots*.

<sup>9</sup> In the early sixties, Henri Chopin became the defender of electronic sound poetry that he broadcast on the radio and popularized at festivals and through his magazine *Ou* (serigraphs, texts, records) between 1964 and 1974. Chopin investigated the voice, breathing, and the sounds of the body using electronic studio instruments or his tape-recorder (super-impression, velocity, intensity, deformation, acceleration). These experiences had nothing to do with Dada or Constructivist phonetic poetry, nor with Lettrism: his was a new exploration thanks to new technologies. Through his friendship with Pierre-Albert Birot, Michel Seuphor and Raoul Hausmann, Henri Chopin learned about the historic avant-gardes. He referred to this story and his new explorations in the experimental biography that Michel Giroud suggested he write, in 1975, as the one and only volume of his "Trajectoires" collection, for the Editions Jean-Michel Place: *La poésie sonore internationale* (1979). A fairly recent follow-up was just published in March 2001 by Voix in Metz: H. Chopin, *Les portes ouvertes ouvertement* (with a mini-CD). His correspondence with Hausmann and his many articles and conversations are being

prepared by Les Presses du Réel.

<sup>10</sup> In 1962 Julien Blaine published *Les Carnets de l'Octéor* (at Aix-en-Provence). He later met Carmelo Arden Quin who had just founded his magazine *Ailleurs* in Paris; he found Jean-François Bory there and they soon published their experimental magazine *Approches*. In 1965, he founded *Robho* with Jean Clay and created the first inventory of elementary poetry. Then, in 1975, he constructed with *Doc(k)s* the first international platform of different networks of living art for life, outside of the cultural manifestations. In 2001, Al Dante in Paris published a study by Philippe Castellin, the new coordinator of *Doc(k)s*.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Lemaître was practically the only one who started a permanent debate in the newspaper *Le Libertaire* (M. Lemaître, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1996).

<sup>12</sup> To be noted is the conversation with Castoriadis in *République des Lettres* (no. 4, June 1994), and G. David's work about Castoriadis, published by Michalon, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> A. Jouffroy, *L'abolition de l'art* (Givaudan, 1968) and *L'individualisme révolutionnaire* (Gallimard).

<sup>14</sup> La Société de l'Art Brut was founded in 1948 by Dubuffet, Breton, Paulhan, and Tapié (Maurice Rapin, in *Schéma et Schématisation*, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Wolman. Catalogue monographique*, Editions Allia, Paris 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Louis Brau, first a Lettrist, and later an International Lettrist with Berna, Debord and Wolman became an activist. A friend of



Claude Pélieu and Jean-Jacques Lebel, he stigmatized the despair and illusions of his times in the story *Le singe appliqué* (Grasset, 1980). Other underestimated figures were working on their own, such as Altagor, the inventor of “meta-poetry”, Chomo, and Requichot.

<sup>17</sup> The magazine was reprinted by Champ Libre (Ed. Ivrea) and the pre-Situationist documents close to *Potlatch* by the Editions Allia, Paris 1985 with the title *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale Situationniste 1948–1957* (Guy Debord, *Œuvres complètes* and *Correspondance*, Fayard, Paris). Cf. Lorand Chellet, *L'Insurrection Situationniste*, Paris 2000.

<sup>18</sup> The Belgian magazine *Les Lèvres Nues* published *Mode d'emploi du détournement* in issue no. 8, in 1956: “Any element taken from anywhere may be the object of new approaches.”

<sup>19</sup> In 1958, in the first number of the *Internationale Situationniste*, it says that “the basic inadequacy of modern art criticism is that it has never known how to conceive the culture totality and conditions of an experimental movement that perpetually surmounts it”. Klein dreamed then of a language of communication aimed at individuals, through which “the world became a total theatre”. With the establishment of new irrecoverable situations, the IS abolished the theatre. In 1959, Situationist International proposed an installation-labyrinth inside and outside of the museum to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, a project that was later postponed. By

an ironic twist of fate, Nouveau Réalisme inaugurated a labyrinth exhibition in that same museum in 1960. In 1967, the GRAV constructed a play labyrinth at the Youth Biennial in Paris.

<sup>20</sup> An excerpt from the introductory note to the magazine *Ion* gives a general idea of Isou's project: “The unification of the world can only be obtained through a new method of awareness that gathers and integrates all the creative formulations initiated in all the human disciplines from the origins of knowledge. These bases will have value as long as they do not require obedience to the results that have been transformed into rites, but permit for their incessant renewal by granting everyone instruments to carry out this effort on his own. The *créatique* or the system that overthrows all the disciplines corresponds to the new world of thought awaited by rationalists and romantics, and portended by all kinds of religious and mystics. This centre of recognition can only reconcile the Father and the Son, and fathers and children who are torn to pieces in all areas [...]. In a universe of actions without theory or theory without actions or fragmentary and contradictory actions, Isou represents a *modus vivendi* for us or the platform for our greatest needs [...]. The world will no longer be able to get rid of us. It will only be able to dissolve, to follow us or confirm us by transcending us in turn.”

<sup>21</sup> Artaud had a decisive influence on François Dufrène through his writings, published between 1945 and 1948,

his *glossolalia* phonetics, and famous text censored by the radio (but published by the K editions in 1948), *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*. The record could not be openly published until 1975, but an audiocassette had been in circulation for some time, as well as a recording of the broadcast. Artaud was the first to use the cry and *glossolalia* to surmount the institution of a given language, and to invent the signs of a meta-language. Henri Chopin learned about Dufrène's phonemics thanks to Isou's film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (1951). A new edition was published in 2000 by the Editions Hors Commerce in Paris. In the fifties, Isou commented, a propos of the paths followed by the new poetry: “The real return to free barbarity, poetry and visceral music, to the pure voice and the ancestral cry, the real discovery of our immediate original explosions, the naked barbarity of the throat: here it is, Lettrism.” In those same years, in Europe, Japan and the United States, there was an almost simultaneous appearance of the same demands for transcendence and a return to the origins on the part of the Gutai, Viennese Actionism, Happening, Art Brut, and Action Art in order to free the body, gesture, language, and all the ideologies of subjugation. Isou's writings were again published by the Cahiers de l'Externité starting in 1998, by the Editions Al Dante (with a CD) in 2001, and by the Editions Hors Commerce. Les Presses du Réel will publish *La Créatique*.

<sup>22</sup> Gabriel Pomerand belonged to the first Lettrist group and invented the first hypergraphic story which was published in 1949, prior to Isou's *Les Journaux des Dieux* and Maurice Lemaître's *Canailles*. See J.-P. Curtay, *Lettrism and Hypergraphics*, Franklin Furnace, New York 1983.

<sup>23</sup> A new edition of Luca's writings has been published by José Corti in Paris.

<sup>24</sup> An examination of the criminal code illustrates the degree of a society's freedom. Read the special number entitled *Censure* of the newspaper *Maintenant* (no. 6, June 1994, Paris).

<sup>25</sup> In 1957, Raoul Hausmann produced a film, *L'Homme qui a peur des bombes*. Lost, then found, and recently released by the Musée de Rochechouart as a CD, it unites his phonetic experiences (recorded in 1957): corporal vocalities, vociferations and gestures.

<sup>26</sup> Edouard Jaguer's review published anomalous and heterodox authors in the fifties: Bryen, Hausmann, Chopin... Cf. *Camille Bryen. Catalogue monographique*, Editions du Musée de Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 1986.

<sup>27</sup> One memorable evening in 1946, a violent argument broke out between Isou and Iliazd a propos letters, Lettrism and its forerunners. Recent studies have clearly shown the position of one of the founding members of Tbilisi's Dada circle in 1919: cf. the catalogues dedicated to Iliazd's editions. In 2002, Les Presses du Réel will publish an Iliazd dossier.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Aubertin met Yves Klein in 1957 and produced his first



*Monochromes rouges* in 1958, the first *Tableaux-clous* in 1960, and the first *Tableaux-feu* in 1961. Like Klein, he was part of the Zero group, founded by Mack, Piene, and Uecker in Düsseldorf in 1961, as well as a contributor to the magazine *Zero*. In 1965, he created the cover for Henri Chopin's magazine *Ou*. Using red materials and fire, he introduced psychophysical sensitivity and material touch. Fire became the writing of fluid energy with matchboxes, drawings of fire, bubbles of fire, the petard pictures, the squares of fire, the disks of revolving fire. Every exhibition was an *action-feu*. See the book *Le feu de la couleur*, Espace d'art concret, Mouans-Sartoux, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Filliou invented action-theatre in 1960 with *L'immortelle Morte* (Five Emotions Corresponding to Five Sounds, dedicated to Spoerri, September, Paris): the score was a poster. He published some works in the magazine *Kwy* (in 1962), and the Belgian review *Phantomas* (1963). In 1962, he opened his Galerie Légitime, with an exhibition of Benjamin Patterson ("the first gallery was my first beret"). The exhibition was located in different places, from Les Halles to La Coupole, and lasted from four in the morning until nine at night: "I consider it *legitimate* for art to descend from its heights into the street." He invented (or discovered) that same year the *poème-roue* ("aided by destiny, the spectators make their poem") and presented it in London at the Misfits Festival which Spoerri had started. Then, with George Brecht, he

invented a boutique-venue at Villefranche-sur-Mer near Nice: La Cédille qui Sourit (1964–1967). Cf. the book of notes and drawings, *Games at the Cédille* or *The Cédille Takes Off* by Dick Higgins, Something Else Press, New York 1967 (reprint and dossier, Les Presses du Réel, in the press), and *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, by W. Koenig Verlag, Cologne 1969 (French ed., Leeber, Brussels 1995). The catalogue raisonné of his books and multiples was published in 2001 by Les Presses du Réel, Dijon.

<sup>30</sup> Between the fifties and sixties, Duchamp was active on the sidelines. His friend Robert Lebel recalls that in 1953: "He seemed more and more the 'deus ex machina' of the current art in the West. The conspiracy of silence created in the French environment (with the sole exception of the Surrealists) around Duchamp would have been really compromised [...]. In order to reach the point in which we are, Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists had to connect art to behaviour with great visibility. An innovation whose consequences are still uncalculable, but which makes them the authentic precursors of that which is most ambitious in current art" (in *Positions*, no. 2, Cahiers du Soleil Noir, 1953).

<sup>31</sup> In 1960, Alain Jouffroy and Jean-Jacques Lebel organized *L'Anti-Procès*, a kind of action and happening. That same year, Breton participated in the drawing up of the *Manifeste des 121*, a declaration of the right of insubordination in the Algerian War (with Blanchot, Breton, Mascolo

and Schuster) for clandestine diffusion. After having been at *Combat* for some ten years (1960–1970), François Pluchart founded the magazine *Artitudes* in 1971 in order to defend Body Art, Action, Happening and Sociological Art (1971–1976). In 1965, under the name of Les Objecteurs, Alain Jouffroy regrouped the artists Kudo, Monory, Pommereule, and Raynaud, who had raised the question of the object. In 1964, he published *La Révolution du regard*. Kudo and his wife had arrived from Japan in 1962; Errò introduced them to Jean-Jacques Lebel. Alain Jouffroy invited Kudo to participate in *Collages et objets*, the first European exhibition of this type that he was organizing with Robert Lebel in October 1962 at the Galerie du Cercle (Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp, Man Ray, Rauschenberg, John Dine, Hains, Raysse, Spoerri, Arman, Rotella, Dufrène...). Kudo later participated in Jean-Jacques Lebel's happening *Catastrophe*, and in 1963 was invited to the Galerie J by Pierre Restany. He created *Harakiri of Humanism* for the Japanese pavilion of the Youth Biennial. He declared that his work "was a counter-teaching, through example, an attack against all the philosophies of impotence". There was a scandal and consternation over the enormous phalluses hanging from the ceiling. In 1964, at the Festival of Free Expression, he presented his happening *Instant Sperm*. In 1968, he criticized technological alienation with *Cultivation*

*by radio-activity in the electronic circuit*, and then returned to Japan. A dossier is in preparation at Les Presses du Réel, in *Action, Happening, Fluxus*. Fluxus had a short-lived, but intense existence in Paris thanks to Jean-Jacques Lebel, who brought the Fluxus Festival to the American Center. It was the same Lebel, for that matter, who had introduced the Happening, invented by his friend Kaprow, to Paris, and in 1965 he published the only work in French dedicated to that phenomenon. In December 1962, the Festa Fluxorum (poetry, music, anti-music, events) took place at the American Center with interventions and performances by Filliou, Koepcke, Schmit, Maciunas, Higgins, Knowles, Vostell and Hausmann's phonetic poems.

<sup>32</sup> The last Surrealist exhibition *L'Ecart absolu* was made in 1965, through Fourier's inspiration. Shortly before he died, Breton had said: "Today freedom needs inventors more than defenders." Pauvert and the Anthropos editions began to publish the complete oeuvre of Fourier in 1967, including two works with introductions and notes by Simone Debout: *La Théorie des Quatre Mouvements* and *Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux* (a revelation, hidden since the death of Fourier). Since 1998 all of Fourier's works are again being published by Les Presses du Réel in the collection *L'Ecart Absolu*.

<sup>33</sup> At the 1969 Paris Biennial, Billy Kluver, in charge of the United States section and president of Experiment in Art and



Technology (EAT), presented the first multimedia network. The first laboratory of multimedia visual research was established in 1967 at MIT in Boston by Gregory Kepes (a friend of Moholy-Nagy), who was succeeded by Otto Piene of the Zero group in 1974. "EAT is an international network of activity and experimental services, destined to catalyze the physical, economic and social resources necessary for the inevitable cooperation between artists, engineers, scientists, members of industry and the labour world [...]. A new form of university and laboratory in which each individual has access to other experiences in order to proceed. The artist represents a positive force in society and is concerned about the individual. He influences the way in which we perceive our individuality. He asserts the positive aspects of life. The artist must be able to work on the materials of our society..."

<sup>34</sup> The interventions at the 1967 Paris Biennial by Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni were *acts*: "The painting of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni do not mean to 'disturb' the public. But art is no longer what it has always been: a destruction. It is not a place in which to rest. It is not a blindfold to put on the viewer's eyes so that he does not look at reality, him against the world, the world against him. The painting of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni simply exists."

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Clarence Lambert organized, along with Jean Tardieu, the *Arts du Langage* evenings at the 1963 Biennial which were directed by Jean-Louis

Philippe with the participation of the Domaine Poétique and supported by the new tendencies. At the 1967 Biennial, *Objets et machines à langage* was presented. Today, "once an artist has chosen it out of the indistinct mass of things, any object can accede to the dignity of a *work*. The trans-valuation of values. In the same way, the poet, when he desires to act on language, modifies the signs and significances by isolating them from the mass of our daily manoeuvres [...]. *Objets et machines à langage*: words become concrete, objects speak". See G. Durozoi, J.-C. Lambert, *Espace poétique, Espaces plastiques*, Paris 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Jacques Lebel organized the International Festival of Free Expression in 1963 at the American Center. There were three festivals with happenings, dance (the undulations of Rita Lenoir), readings, direct poetry, total theatre (Ben), Fluxus, International Panic (Topor, Arrabal, Jodorovsky...), agit-prop, and experimental films.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Spoerri played a key role both in Nouveau Réalisme and Fluxus, working in Switzerland (with Tinguely), in Paris (where he arrived in 1959), and in Germany (Dieter Roth and his friends: see the exhibition of the seventies, *Freunde/Friends*). In 1958, he founded the magazine of concrete poetry *Material*, and introduced Filliou to this new language that another Swiss, Gomringer, had been promoting since 1955. He created the MAT (mechanically multiplied art) editions and collaborated on the magazine *MEC Art*

(mechanical art, multiplied art, edition of multiples). A friend of Filliou and Dietman since the early sixties, as well as of Dufrene, Williams, Roth, Tinguely and Bruses, he created a link between Paris and Düsseldorf with his Eat Art (cf. monograph Centre Georges Pompidou and Flammarion). Erik Dietman, a Swedish outsider who was oriented toward Dada and Art Brut, but not part of the clan, was present but without a label or a sign, like Robert Malaval. Declared "the ex-king of the *sparadrapp* [Band-Aid]", he was then inventing his bandaged objects. He could be found at times at the Ciraudon gallery with Deschamps, Dufrene, Thomkins, and Rotella, and at the Festival of Free Expression with Topor (cf. *Dietman*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1994; P. A. Gette. *Monographie*, Paris 1999).

<sup>38</sup> The continuous interrelations between artists and poets during the fifties and sixties was such that a poetic function in art should have emerged, one, however, renewed by art and by an appreciation of all the materials in writing. This led Adriano Spatola to write a work about this phenomenon entitled *Verso la poesia totale* [Toward Total Poetry] (Paravia, Turin 1978; the French edition was published in Marseille during the nineties by the Editions Via Valeriano). Filliou, Dotremont, Broodthaers, Chopin, Wolman, Dufrene, Blaine, and Bory are poet-artists, and Gette, Hains, Ben, Roth, Dupuy artist-poets. The new journal *Mille voix / 1000 voies* (no. 1, November 2000, no. 2,

April 2001) published in France by Les Presses du Réel is dedicated to this new *intermediate* territory  
<sup>39</sup> Cf. B. Heidsieck. *Monographie*, Paris 1986.



**Collective Actions**

*Representation of the Rhombus*  
Performance held in the field  
near the village of Kievi Gorki  
in the region of Moscow,  
October 1983 (participants:  
Nikolai Panitkov, Andrei  
Monastirsky, Sergei Romashko,  
Nikita Alexeev, Igor  
Makarevich, Elena Elagina,  
Georgy Kizivalter, MK).

**Collective Actions**

*The Time of Action*  
Performance held in the field  
near the village of Kievi Gorki  
in the region of Moscow,  
October 1978 (participants:  
Nikolai Panitkov, Andrei  
Monastirsky, Nikita Alexeev,  
Alexandr Abramov).





**Collective Actions**

*Winch (The Time of Action)*  
Performance held in the field  
near the village of Kievi Gorki  
in the region of Moscow,  
October 1985 (participants:  
Nikolai Panitkov, Andrei  
Monastirsky, Elena Elagina,  
Georgy Kizivalter, Igor  
Makarevich, Vladimir Salnikov).





**MEV. Musica Elettronica  
Viva**

Left to right: Richard Teitelbaum,  
Steve Lacy, Frederic Rzevski,  
Garret List, and Alvin Curran,  
Rome, 1977  
(photo © Roberto Masotti)











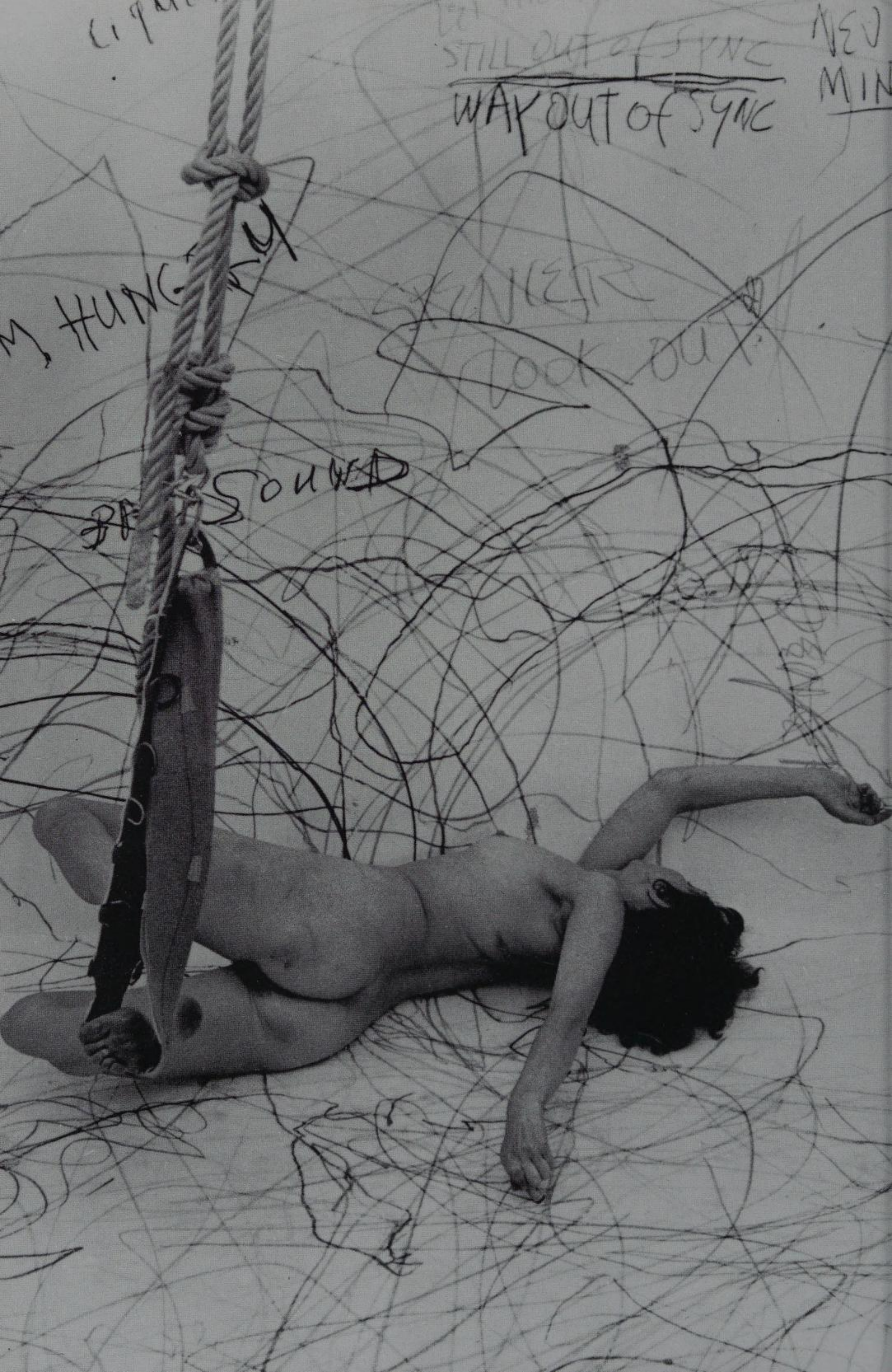


# Happening

*edited by*  
Jean-Jacques Lebel

Allan Kaprow  
Milan Knizak  
Jean-Jacques Lebel  
Carolee Schneemann  
Wolf Vostell





STILL OUT OF SYNC  
WAY OUT OF SYNC

NEW  
MIN

HUNGRY

SENSE

LOOK OUT

SOUND

DOWN



"At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

Harold Rosenberg

**A**rena! Yes, arena. Theatre of a ceremonial combat between the artist and society. Sacrificial enclosure where the fight to the death between gladiators and wild beasts is transcribed into Minotauromachian murder.

Location of a social tragedy experienced in real time where several roles are played and thwarted at the same time – the Beast, the Picador, the Matador, the Dancer, the Assassin – and where the Public, thirsting for a bloody spectacle, for ears, tails and even (if we are to believe Georges Bataille in *L'Histoire de l'Œil*) the most magical of organs, that of vision. So the arena is the place where the trace of the secret is inscribed, the place where the imaginary (whether painted, drawn, sculpted, glued, filmed or written) makes its appearance. It was not at all a question of using happenings or events to abolish this ritual, nor even to demolish this arena, but, on the contrary, of ejecting imposters, robots and bureaucrats from it in order to restore it to its original use.

All that is left of this libidinal event are some highly subjective memories, a few partial recollections in the form of images, some particularly biased reports (depending on the role and the place of their authors, inside or outside the arena) and, above all, secondary, long-term effects, that continue to act after the event, even long after the experience. This is the case with the Happening, whose various impacts are still making themselves felt well outside the artistic *demi-monde*. But misunderstanding prevails. Whoever evokes, in connection with happenings and the Fluxus festivals, "the abolition of art" has got hold of the wrong end of the stick (the truth is that the mass media prefer fist fucking to the diffusion of information).

Let us acknowledge it for once and for all: it was *not an attempt to destroy art* when, in Osaka around 1955, the painters of



the Gutai group extended the concept of Action Painting to embrace action scenes; when, in the US around 1958, my friend Allan Kaprow laid the foundations of the Happening; when, at Venice in 1960 (within the framework of *Anti-Process II*) we put on the first happening in Europe; when, at New York and Wiesbaden in 1961 and 1962, Maciunas launched the Fluxus movement. It was a question, rather, of rescuing art from the official and commercial institutions that were strangling it. And thus safeguarding it, keeping it alive, as an independent and liberating social activity. It was an attempt to subvert the grammars of the superego and the commandments of ideology. As for the Situationists, they did indeed proclaim the “abolition of art”, which did not prevent them from ending up in the museum too. Their radical struggle continued, although on another level. Ours too. For Fluxus, it was a matter of rescuing music from the academy, from “national orchestras” and from soporific concert halls and opening it up to life, to whole new areas to set to music. The unforgettable happening staged by the great John Cage, lasting one whole night in 1974 (at the irreplaceable Halles Baltard in Paris, later demolished to make way for property speculation, suppressed by the criminal city planning of the municipality and government), will remain, for us, not so much a work of genius as an emblem of another way of seeing, of listening, of living. The obsession of the time was the *expansion of consciousness*, in the sense it was used in connection with hallucinogenic drugs. For that matter, hallucinatory perception has always existed – as Gilles Deleuze, another wonderful friend of mine, pointed out in *Le Pli, Leibniz et le Baroque* – but it was necessary to bring about the opening and establish the incompleteness of the pictorial, musical or poetic work as the foundation of the process of production. This is what the Happenings, Fluxus and Free Jazz did, as well as some major underground movies (I am thinking of certain “accelerated” motion pictures by Jonas Mekas, Bruce Conner and Taylor Mead and, much later, the videos of Nam June Paik, where the Dadaist practice of random montage carried out at great speed subverted the structure of the linear cinematographic narrative and put an end to the status of passive observer). Moreover, the alleged “contradiction” between Happening and painting has only ever existed in the arguments of a few academic eunuchs. The majority of the principal creators of happenings (Fahlström, Kaprow, Oldenburg, Dine, Schneemann, Pommerelle, Kudo, Vostell, Whitman and Kusama, to mention just a few) have never had to go back to art, for the simple reason that they had never left it. Harold Rosenberg died too soon to realize that the canvas had only been put aside *temporarily*, just for the time needed to make essential journeys off circuit, into as yet uncharted mental territory (again the “schizophrenic’s walk” beyond the limits of language). The concept of event-as-it-unfolds or of

<sup>1</sup> For, while Maciunas was a magnificent activist, he was a very bad historian, who was only interested in his restricted group of loyal followers and did not recognize the priority – in fact well established – of the Happening over Fluxus.

The criteria of evaluation used by Maciunas were often incorrect, in the sense that chronology is of much less importance to us, at the end of the day, than quality. Ben, another significant – and equally monomaniacal – Fluxus artist, was obsessed instead with something that does not exist: “the new”. This has no meaning to anyone familiar with the convoluted leaps and loops of artistic thought. Perhaps it is time we dropped the bogus notions of “precedence” and “originality” in favour of that of intensity, which would render pointless Maciunas and Ben’s permanent attacks on the colleagues and friends of their tribe.



Jean-Jacques Lebel, *120 Minutes dédiées au Divin Marquis*, a happening staged in 1966 at the 3rd Festival of Free Expression, 42 rue Fontaine, Paris (with the participation of Cynthia, Frédéric Pardo, Shirley Goldfarb, Barbara and Bob Benamou, Gerard Rutten, Jean-Claude Bailly, Philippe Hiquily, Billy Copley, etc.)



Happening



Top right: the transsexual "Cynthia" sodomizing herself with a leek. Above: the "Pisseuse de Rembrandt" soaks the audience from the balcony while Shirley Goldfarb sings the *120 Journées* (photo François Massal and Horace)

flux is incompatible with the norms of fixity and finitude, but not with a multiplicity of being. The coexistence, in many of our careers, of Happening and painting is no more "absurd" than the coexistence – vital, dynamic and structural – of poetry and the plastic arts, or of drama and the plastic arts, in the work of such important forerunners as Schwitters, Arp, Picabia, Artaud and many others. It would be better to dispense for good with any illusion about the "unity of the self", the unambiguous nature of impulses and the one-dimensionality of desire. *Changer la vie*, Rimbaud's subversive project, is more relevant than ever.

To what Charles Dreyfus says about Fluxus, I would like to add a remark that is valid not solely for those who appear, or ought to appear, on Maciunas's famous chronological chart (as precursors or creators of happenings and events, at more or less precise dates):<sup>1</sup> Heraclitus's concept of flux, by which a multiplicity of movements has forked off from the dominant artistic ideology of the age, is a concept that is very far from having had its last word, not just in art, music or philosophy, but even in politics. It would be dishonest, while official stooges have aspired to "celebrate" the bicentenary of the Revolution or the bimillennial of Christianity, to "forget" that in what is known as the "technological" and "global" era, State, Church and Party constitute obsolete archaisms that, by their very nature, hinder the spontaneous movement of society toward new ways of life. Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus, was perfectly aware of the interconnection between artistic and social impulses. He certainly would not have looked with disfavour on the formidable resurgence of the Dada movement – and in particular, Duchamp, Picabia, Satie and Schwitters – that directly and indirectly exercised a powerfully liberating influence on the radical currents of the sixties and seventies. A certain "Dadaization" of social life is perhaps one of the least stupid responses that the



worsening of the crisis in capitalism can bring about in those men and women who do not wish to be its victims.

It has been pointed out – in Edouard Jaguer's introduction to an exhibition by Joseph Cornell (Galerie 1900–2000 in Paris) – that the magic boxes (descendants of Duchamp's *valises-musées*) produced in the forties and fifties prefigured the Fluxus boxes of the sixties and seventies. So Cornell must be counted, along with Rus-solo, Duchamp, Schwitters and Cage, among the direct sources of inspiration for Fluxus and the installationists.

Anyone who recognizes the powerful upheaval – often “de-layed-action” in its effects – in drives, techniques and directions that took place in the sixties, and this is all the more true for those who lived through it, will not be surprised that in 1988 Marcel Fleiss was the first to bring together Happening and Fluxus at the same event. After all, Happening and Fluxus were contemporary – with Happening slightly predating Fluxus – and a fair number of artists had plunged simultaneously into the two currents of this same river. When all is said and done, the difference, if there is a difference, lies less in the programmatic intentionality – relatively change-able and hazy in both cases – as in personal, or even geographical or linguistic, emotional affinities that drew individual approaches together or drove them apart.

If we consider that this river was in a way a continuation of the Dada deluge – itself a tributary of the radical stream of black coffee that the brilliant Victor Hugo had poured over his magnificent wash drawings around 1855 (the time when he invented, with his signed and dated pebbles, the *objet trouvé*) – not to mention the *collages*, *frottages*, *assemblages* and *mixages* of the great artists of the twentieth century, then we get some idea of the extreme vitality of these subversive flows that have changed their name, form and direction, but never their intensity. Who would dare to claim that the art, music, cinema, theatre and politics of tomorrow will not, in turn, be affected positively?

All you need to do is watch and listen to certain performances, theatrical productions, rock groups and video clips, not to mention that famous video art of which there is so much talk (but to which the television, monopolized by propaganda and the ruling bureaucracy, does not give the least space), in order to find in them that hallucinatory mode of perception which the Happenings, Fluxus and underground cinema introduced in the sixties.

It is dismaying to realize that having made its debut in Osaka, in the postwar phase, and having gone right round the world in the manner of an uncontrollable and liberating fireball, the Happen-



ing movement has taken over thirty years to cross the China Sea and establish a foothold in Beijing. This is because Stalinism and Maoism have been synonymous with monolithic imbecility and these particular dictatorships have been the most resistant to the wind of fertilizing freedom that always starts to blow through the arts before sweeping through the whole of the social field. And so we learned from the press, in February 1989,<sup>2</sup> that an exhibition in Beijing bringing together 250 works by around a hundred nonofficial Chinese artists had got into trouble with the police. As the works included a giant phallus suspended from the ceiling between a gigantic breast and inflated surgical gloves and a triptych on Mao, among other things, the “authorities” (*sic*) had had some of them withdrawn for “obscenity” (*sic*). According to the news agencies, “several artists had tried to organize happenings in spite of the ban that had been placed on them” (*Le Monde*, 7 February 1989). A twenty-six-year-old artist called Xiao Lu had been arrested and held for three days for having fired two bullets into one of her sculptures, made up of two telephone booths.

According to the *Herald Tribune* (11 February 1989), Miss Xiao, showing off the holes made by the bullets, declared that the act was part of her art and complained that she had been misunderstood. “That stinks”, one visitor to the exhibition had said in front of a dead fish surrounded by seaweed on an inflatable mattress. “One artist was selling shrimps, in protest against the commercialization of art, according to a critic. Another washed his feet in public. Condoms and money were strewn on the ground and a half-naked man was sitting on eggs.” Indeed! What matters, in China like elsewhere else, is not that young artists are influenced by happenings or even the radical revolt of the Dadaists, but that all censorship, even the most brutal, is in the end bound to fail. The “reasons of State” invoked by ayatollahs, colonels and anachronistic inquisitors (like the mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, who aspires to set up a committee for decency [*sic*] in 2001)! Big or little, these “helmsmen”, instead of stifling the arts, always end up biting the dust. If only they would tell themselves: imprisoning de Sade for twenty years was of no use at all! His ideas, two centuries later, are stronger than ever! No society – whether it claims falsely to be “democratic”, “socialist”, or “communist” (laughable advertising slogans) – can, short of suffocating, do without a work of research and reflection on its finality, conscious or unconscious. It is here that art is irreplaceable. Can we be content with what the “authorities” allow to go on show in Beijing or what the art market permits to circulate in the museums and galleries of Paris, New York, London, Berlin or Milan? Can we accept the reduction of the whole range of contradictory currents of thought and movements in a

<sup>2</sup> Two months later, two hundred thousand demonstrators were demanding freedom of expression and real democracy. Once again, the revolt of the artists had proved to be a warning sign and a trigger for sociopolitical events of great significance. It has been said and written that the example set by such diverse and subversive happenings was the direct inspiration for the collective creativity of the 1968 movement in France and the 1977 one in Italy. True or an exaggeration? Decide for yourselves!



particular era solely to the standardized product of an official art, filtered by and for the market?

Now as in the past, there is a radical conflict between those who believe that artists should come up with commercial products and those who think, on the contrary, that they should create works independently of the requirements of bureaucracy and the market.

So it is high time, today, for the works and ideas of those who in the sixties broke the laws of the market, who refused to submit to the over-hyped and over-commercialized rot that was served up as the dominant culture, to be made better known. While people are lamenting the overthrow of "alternative cinema", "alternative theatre" and "alternative literature" by the cultural industry, here is a paradoxically vital example of high dissidence. To the fury of the ideologues of ready-to-wear art, the acolytes of academia and the planners of castration! To the joy of nomads! To the delight of seers! This exhibition does not have just the merit of uncovering the traces of Happenings or Events, and of revealing the contemporary offshoots of these actions, but above all that of continuing to raise, against all comers, the basic questions that forced industrialization and mass subjugation tend to drown out in the deafening racket made by the media and the government. These questions are not new, but the fact that they have been ignored for too long means that the very idea of culture is losing its relevance. And here are some of them: what are the functions of art in a market-based society? Who is running what? Who steers and controls artistic movements? What happens to the ideas embodied in myth when art vanishes (following its reification or suffocation)? How does the totalitarian attitude become established? What has become, in 2001, of this "freedom" that our rulers and their publicists are always dinning into our ears? What place have we been assigned in the arena? Is THAT really what we want?



**Allan Kaprow**  
*Yard, 1961*  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan  
(photo © Fabrizio Garghetti)





**Allan Kaprow**  
*Apple Shrine, 1960*  
(photo Robert McElroy)

**Allan Kaprow**  
*Yard, 1961*  
(photo Robert McElroy)









**Allan Kaprow**  
*Push and Pull*, 1991  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan  
(photo © Fabrizio Garghetti)





**Allan Kaprow**  
*Push and Pull*  
Fondazione Beppe Morra,  
Naples, 1992  
(photo Barbara Iodice)

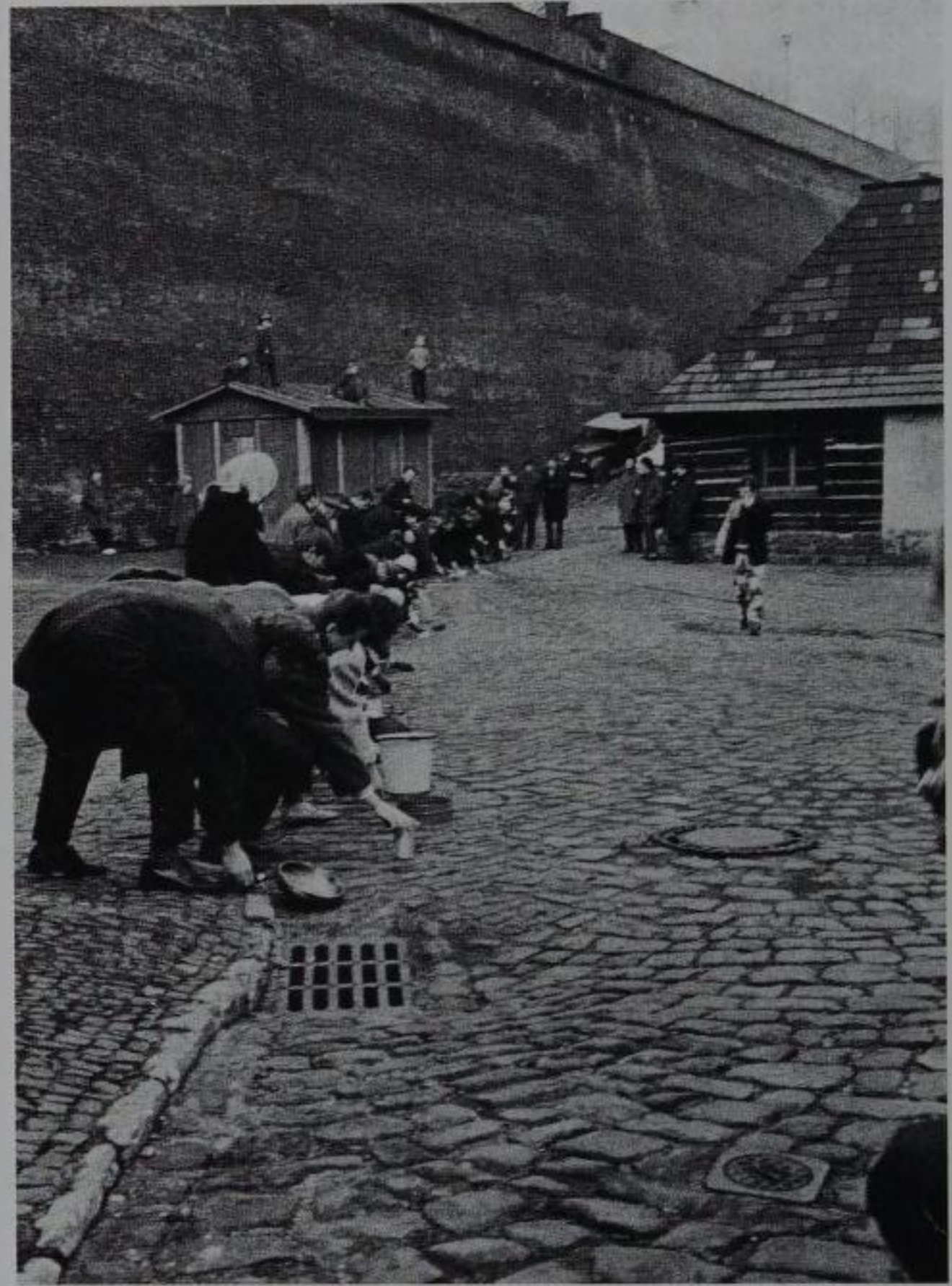




**Milan Knizak**  
Photograph from the *2nd*  
*Manifestation of Actual Art*,  
Prague, 1965



**Milan Knizak**  
Photograph from *Actual Walk*,  
Prague, 1964



**Milan Knizak**  
Photograph from *Actual Walk*,  
Prague, 1964







**Milan Knizak**

Photograph from *Short Carting*  
*Exhibitions on the Street*,  
Prague, 1962



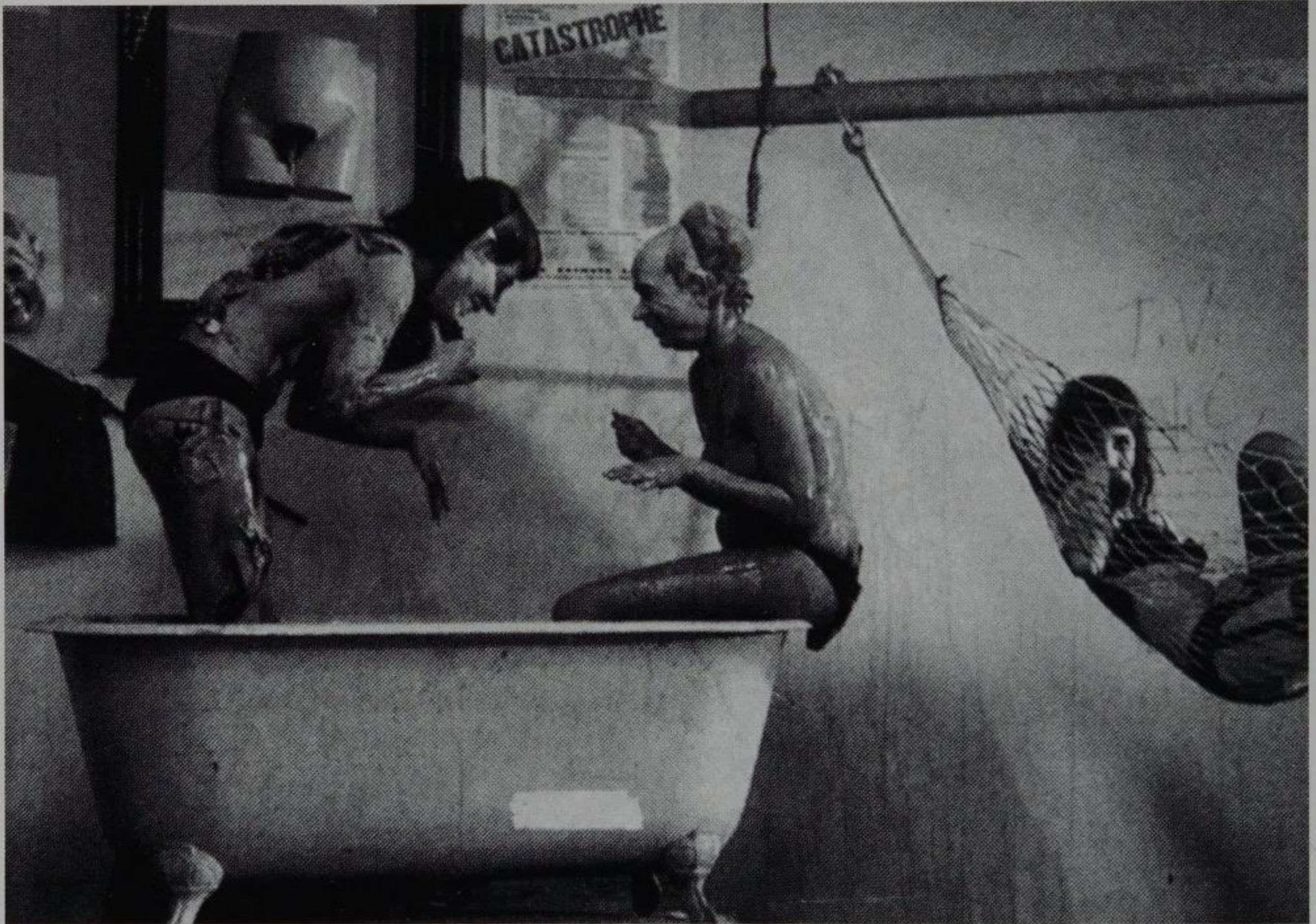


**Milan Knizak**  
*Lying Ceremony*  
New Jersey (USA), 1968





**Jean-Jacques Lebel**  
*Khrushchev and Kennedy*  
*in the Bloodbath*, sequence  
from the film happening  
*Pour en finir avec l'esprit*  
*de catastrophe II*, Boulogne,  
1963 (photo P. Volta)









**Jean-Jacques Lebel**  
Ceremony of the *Anti-Procès*,  
from the happening *Funeral*  
of Tinguely's "Thing", Venice,  
14 July 1960





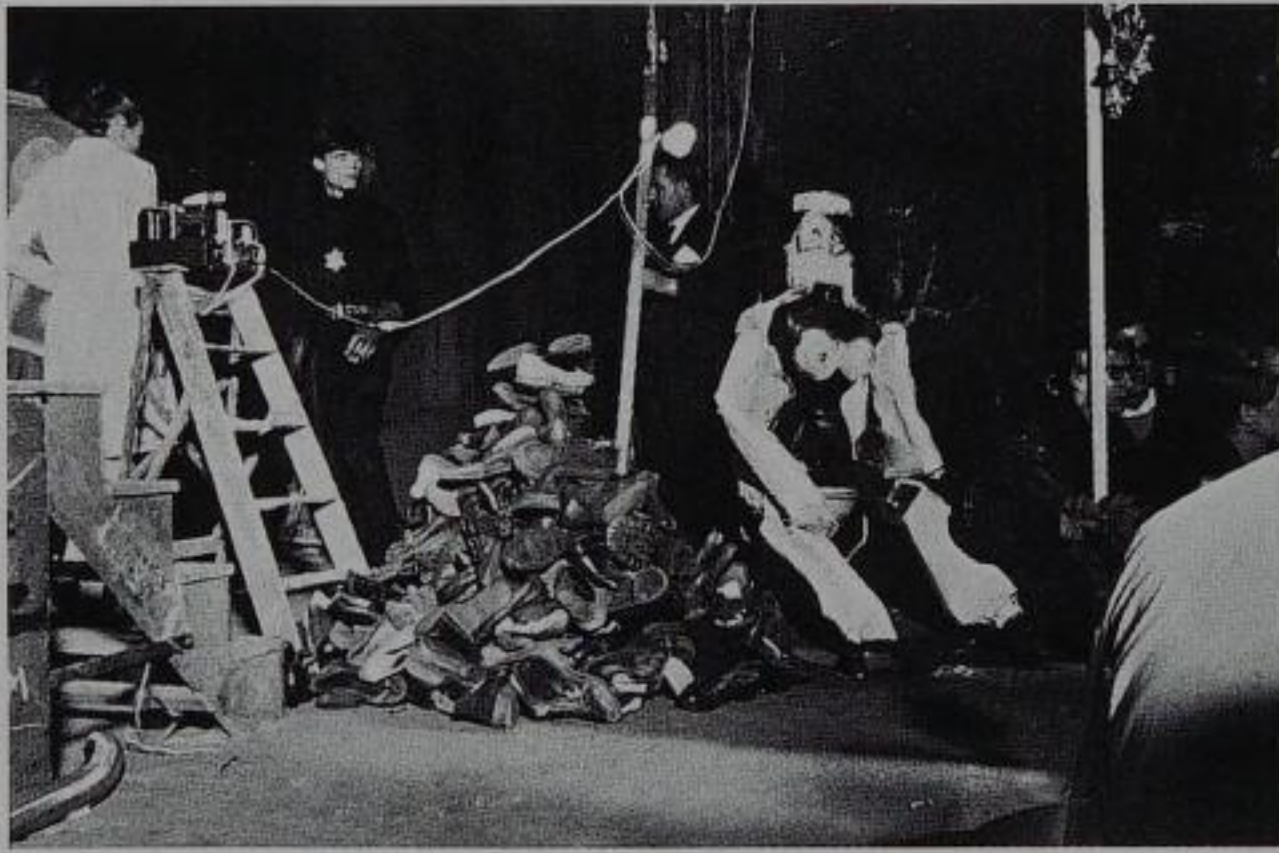
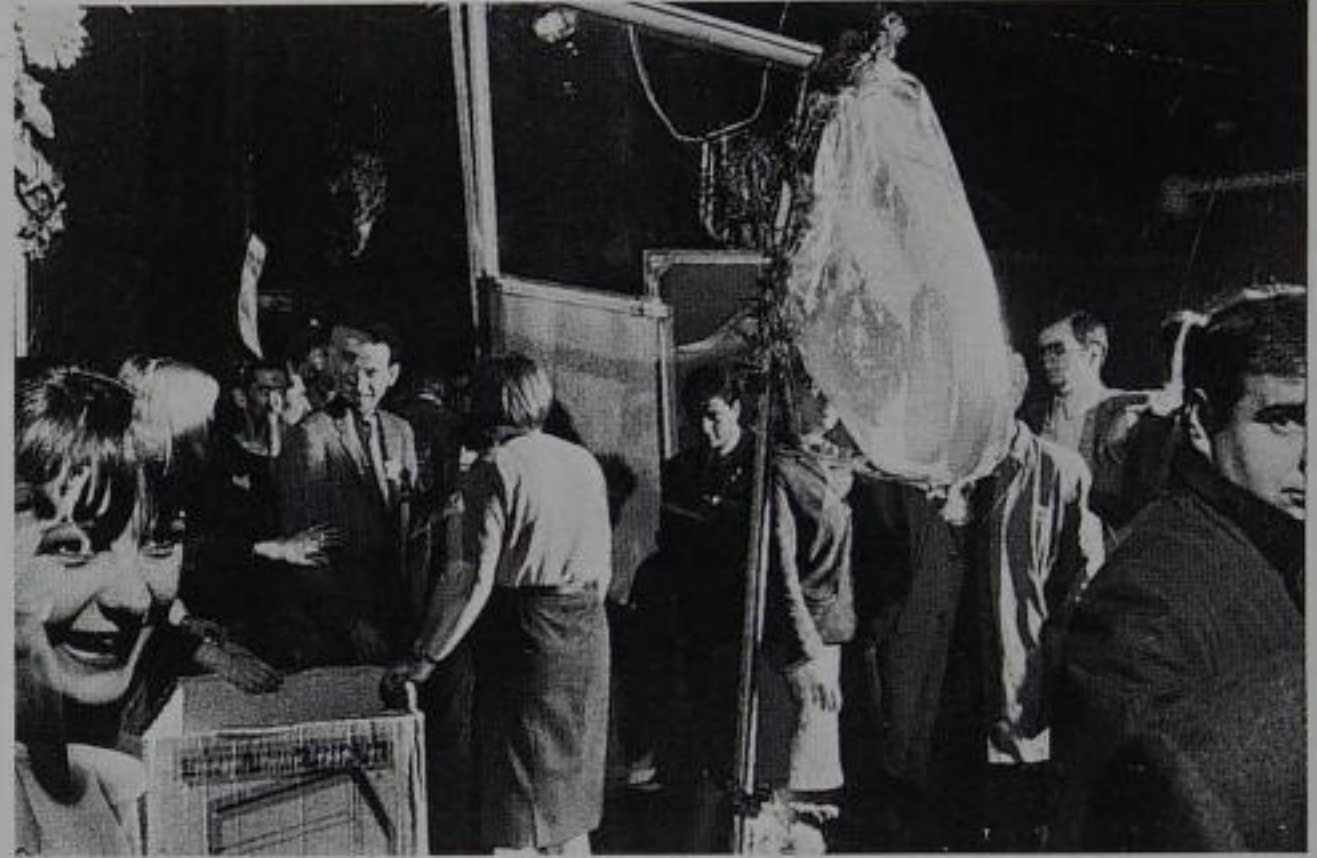
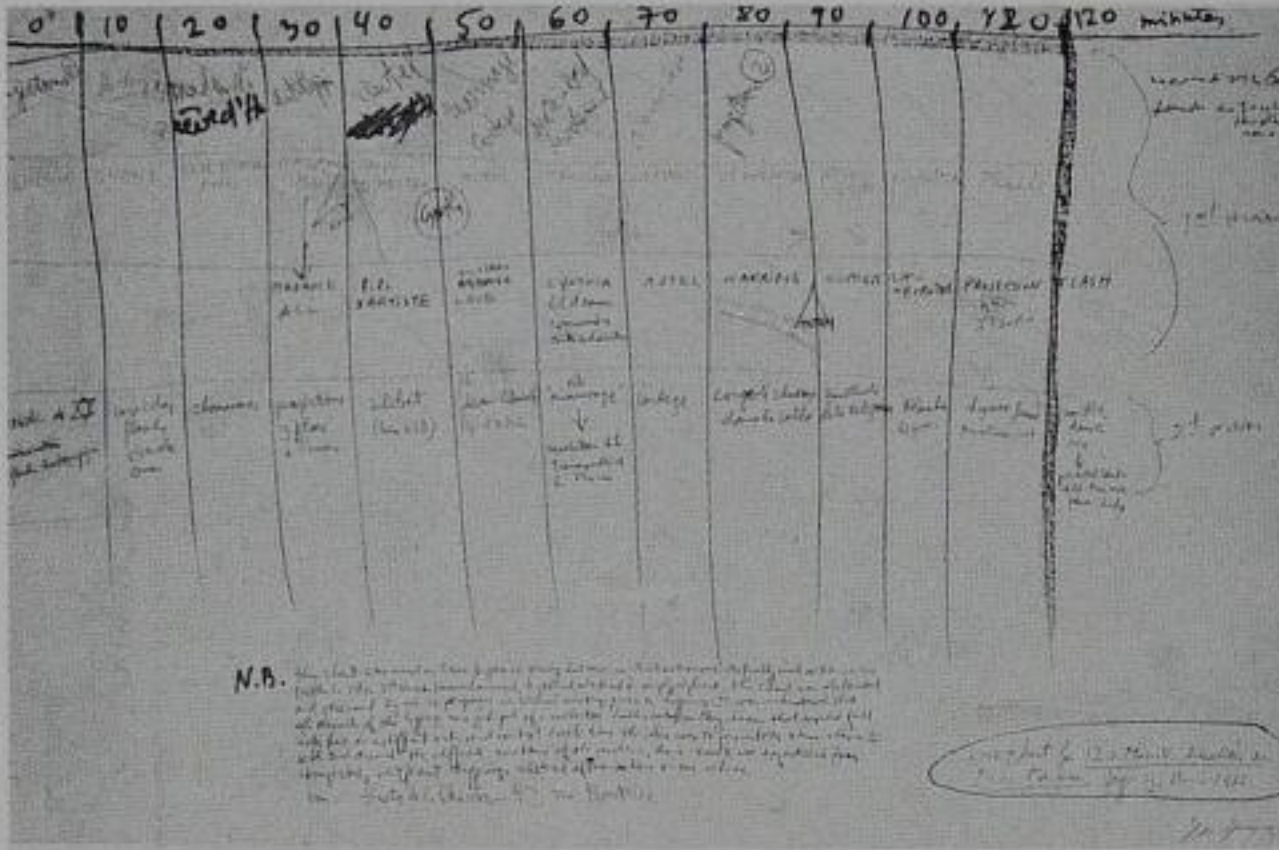




**Jean-Jacques Lebel**

*120 Minutes Dedicated to the Divine Marquis*, from the happening at the 3rd Festival of Free Expression, 42, rue Fontaine, Paris, 1966

(with the participation of Cynthia, Frédéric Pardo, Shirley Goldfarb, Barbara and Bob Benamou, Gerard Rutten, Jean-Claude Bailly, Philippe Hiquily, Billy Copley, etc.)





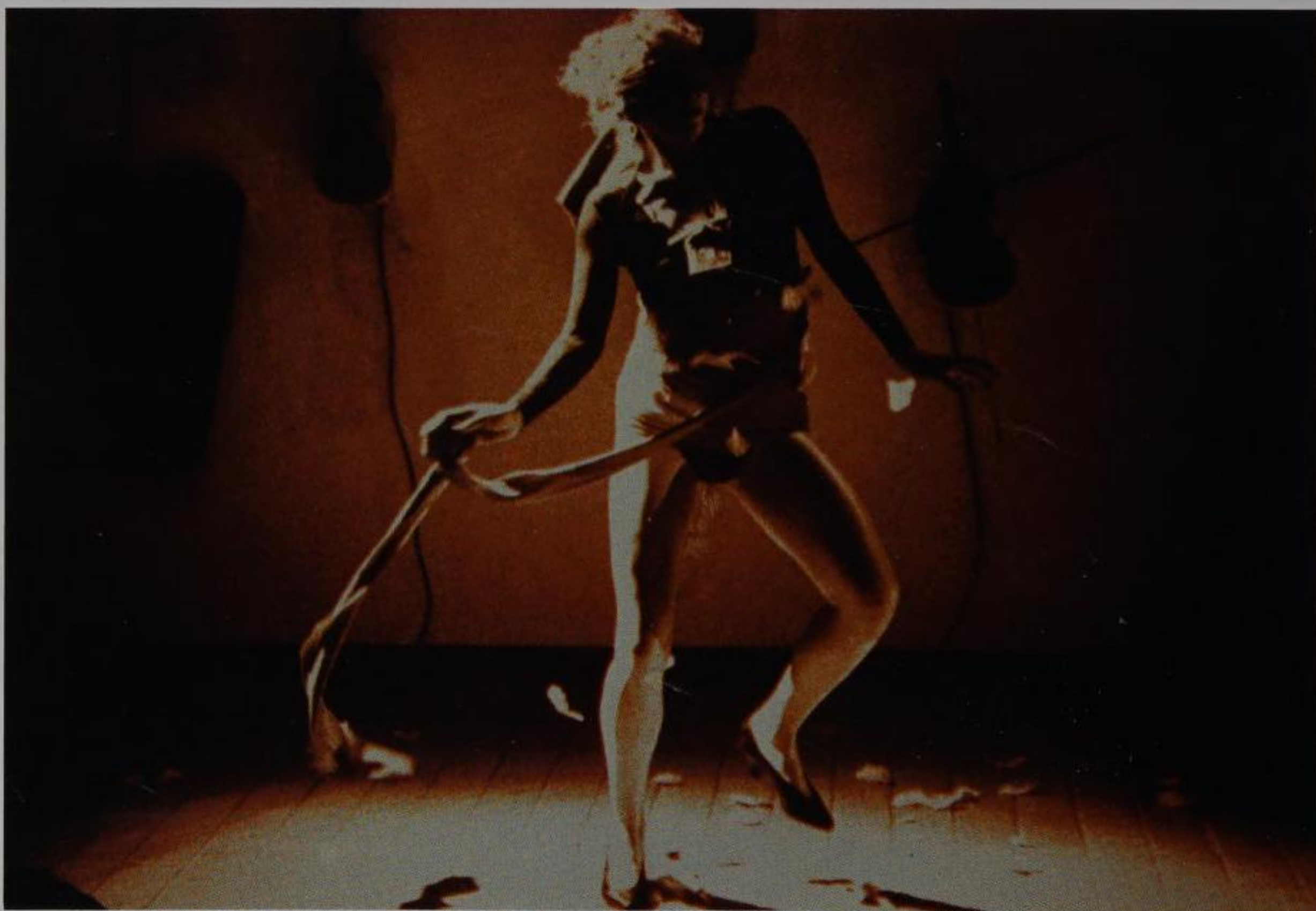




**Carolee Schneemann**  
*Meat Joy*, 1963

**Carolee Schneemann**  
*Cycladic Imprints*, 1989  
Installation/performance

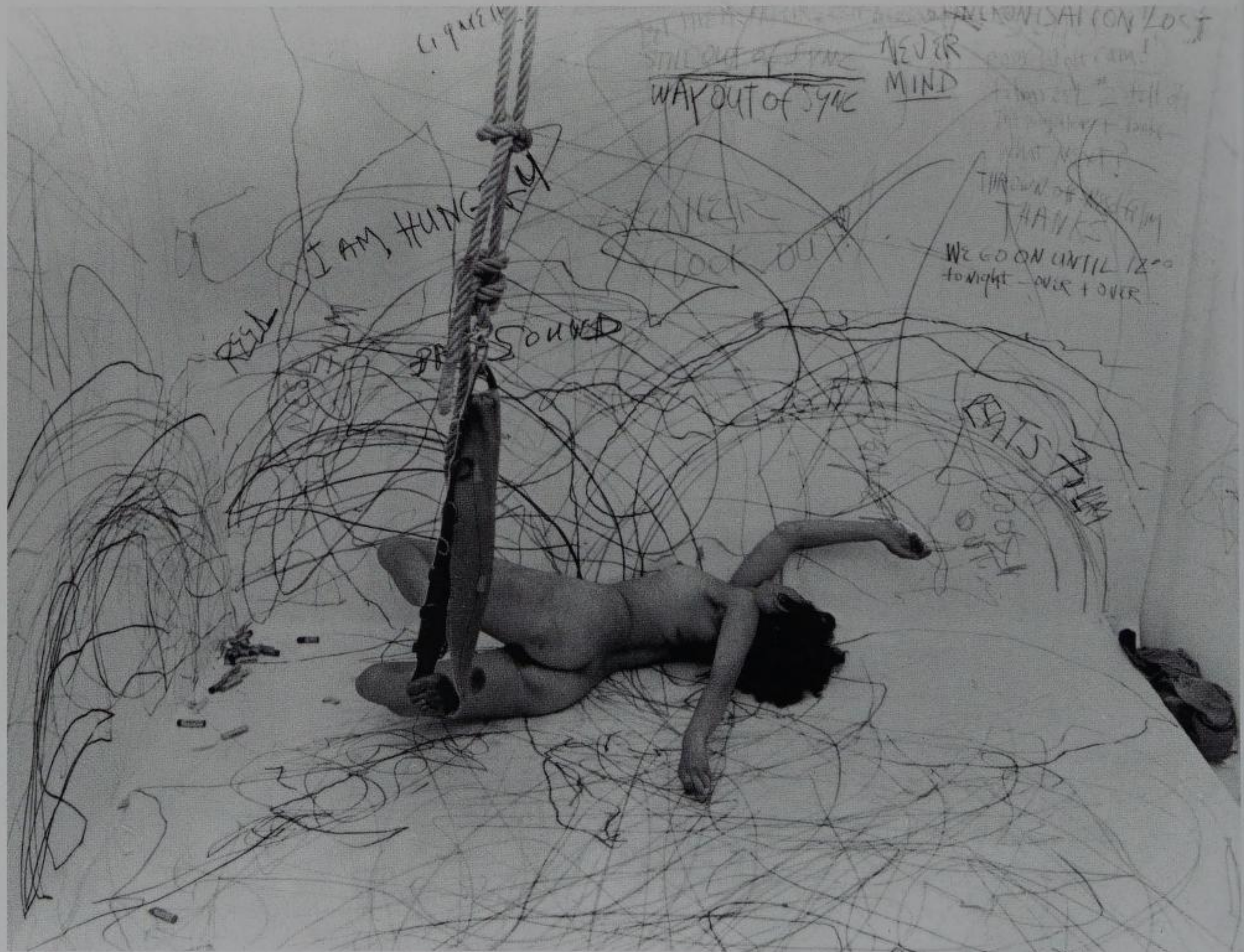
**Carolee Schneemann**  
*Meat Joy*, 1963













**Carolee Schneemann**  
*Four Fur Cutting Boards*, 1963  
Painted wooden board  
structure, lights, photographs,  
fabric and umbrellas  
in movement

*Up to and Including Her Limits*,  
1973–1976  
(photo H. Gaard)

**Carolee Schneemann**  
*Eye Body*, 1963  
Courtesy of Emily Harvey  
Gallery, New York





**Wolf Vostell**

*You*

Long Island, 1964  
(photo Peter Moore)





**Wolf Vostell**  
*You*  
Long Island, 1964  
(photo Peter Moore)





**Wolf Vostell**  
*Phenomena*  
Berlin, 1965



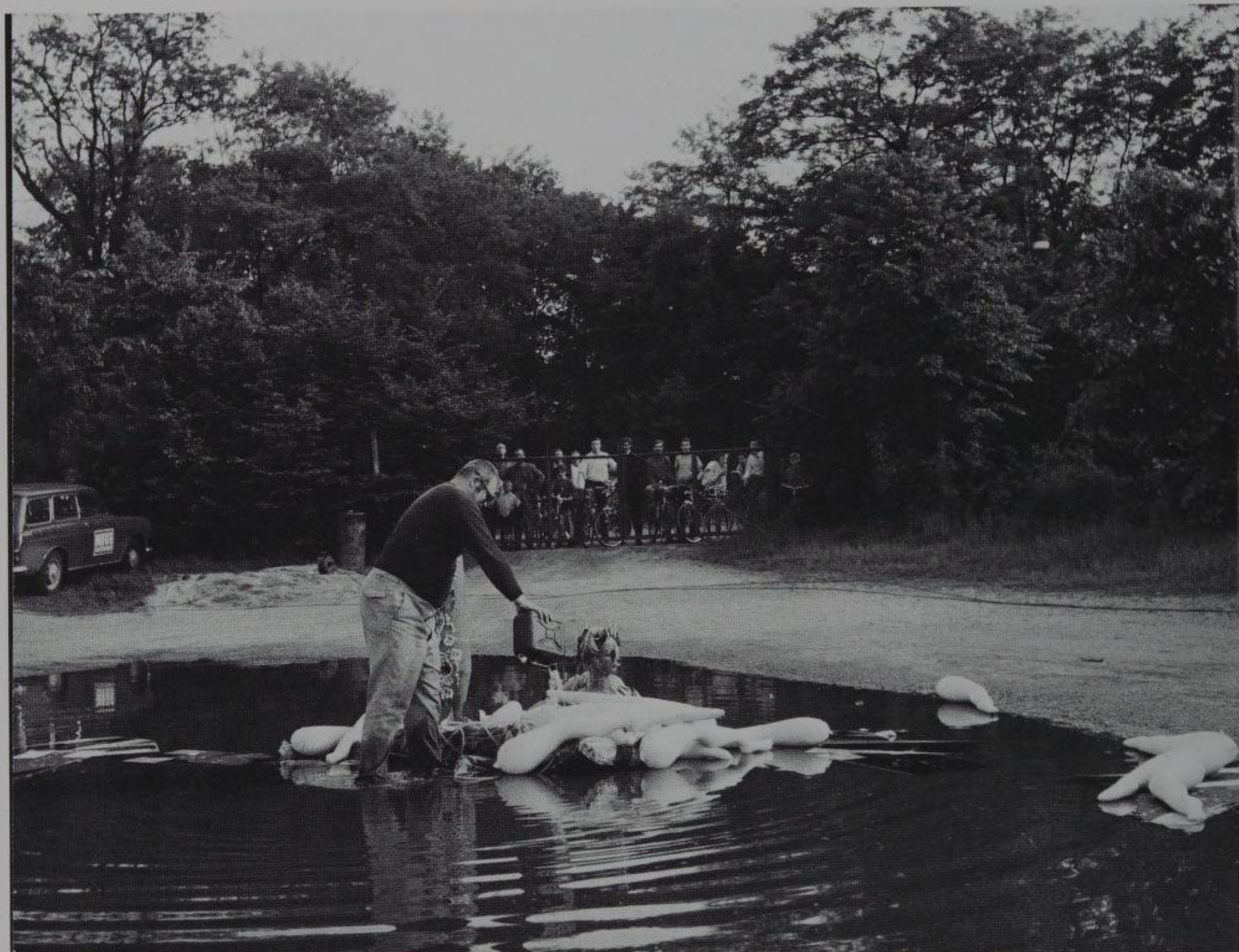


**Wolf Vostell**  
*130 per hour*  
From the happening  
*New No-dé-coll/ages*  
Wuppertal, 1963  
(photo Galerie Parnass)





**Wolf Vostell**  
*Miss Vietnam*  
From *Dé-coll/age Happening*,  
Cologne, 1967  
(photo Victor Schamoni)





**Wolf Vostell**  
*Salad*  
Cologne-Aachen, 1970-1971









# Fluxus and Events, Happening

## **Continuity and Developments**

*edited by*

Cecilia Casorati

*and* Viktor Misiano

Edicola notte

Vadim Fishkin

Oreste group

IRWIN

Oleg Kulik

Donatella Landi

Myriam Laplante

H. H. Lim

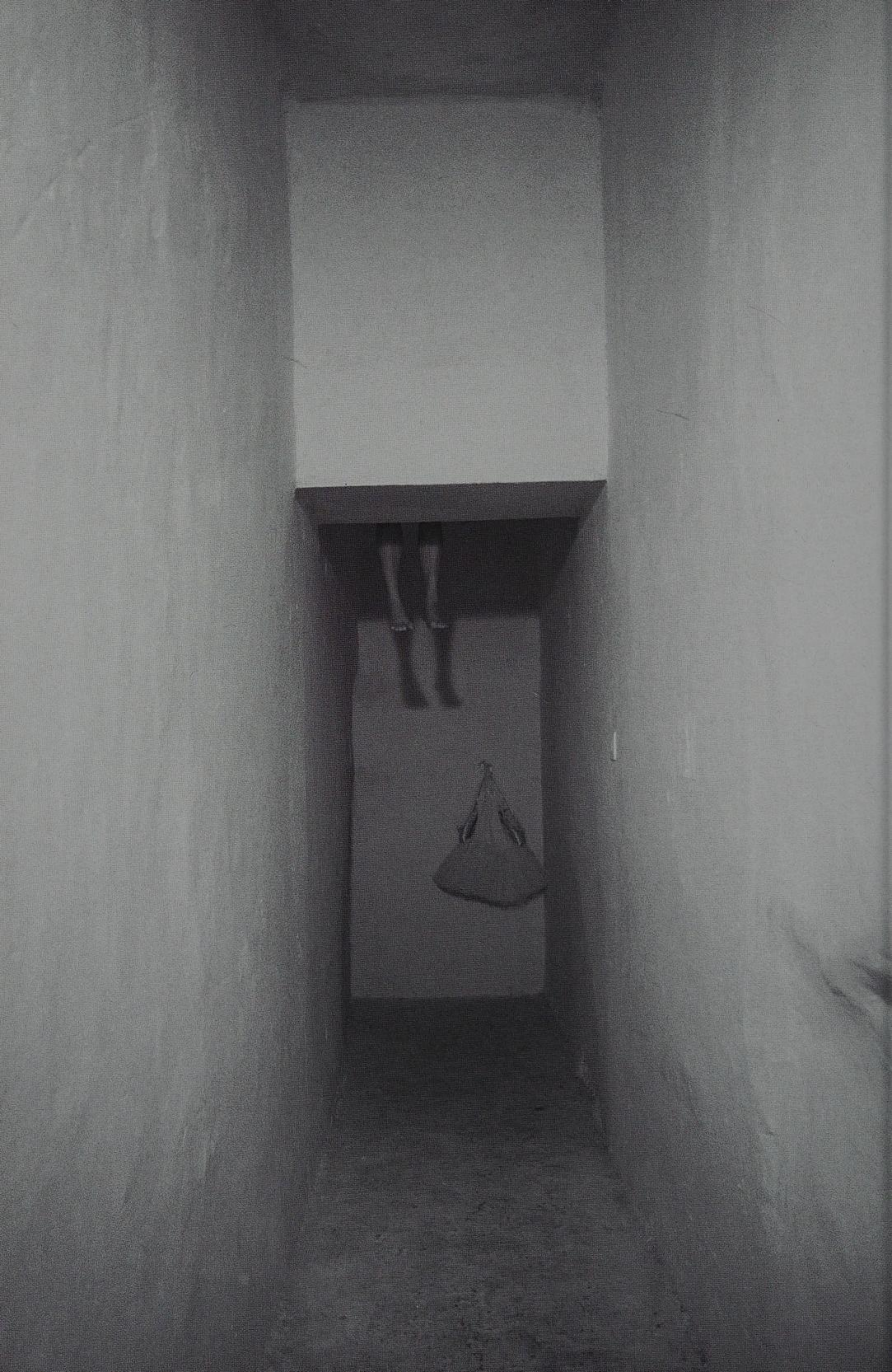
Yerbossyn Meldybekov

Schie 2.0

Alberto Sorbelli

Spencer Tunick







**M**ay 21, 1974. An ambulance leaves John Fitzgerald Kennedy Airport in New York: inside, wrapped in felt, is Joseph Beuys who has just arrived from Europe. The ambulance drops the German artist at the Block Gallery. Beuys is transported into a kind of cage that has been installed for the occasion, its net dividing the exhibition space. Little Joe, a young wild coyote, has been inside the cage for a few hours. Dressed in felt and with a shepherd's crook, Beuys asks that fifty copies of the *Wall Street Journal* – the symbol of American capitalism – be brought to the gallery every day with which he constructs two identical columns. In addition, Beuys has hung a triangle around his neck that he rings from time to time.

*I Like America and America Likes Me* was an attempt on the part of the artist to tame a wild animal by establishing a “private” relationship with it or, to use a current term, a “dual” one. For five days the man and the animal lived together in the cage under the eyes of the public with neither of the two appearing interested in what was happening around them; the coyote spent most of the time lying in a corner and only rarely approached Beuys or the newspapers. In any case, a rapport was established between the two as the photos taken during the performance demonstrate. On May 25 Beuys said goodbye to the animal and was taken back to the airport in an ambulance. The ritual of domestication was over.

*I Like America and America Likes Me*, like the previous action of 1965 *Wie man den toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* (*How to Explain a Picture to a Dead Hare*), was a decisive turning point in the history of performance and artistic actions.

Beuys managed through performance to develop an *individual* relationship with the spectator and at the same time place the figure of the artist in a different territory, one that was no longer exclusively aesthetic but professedly political.



Nonetheless, his first actions displayed a remarkable distance both from the performance “tradition” and from the actions of the Fluxus artists.

In a certain sense, it can be argued that the German artist managed to combine Kaprow’s Happening with John Cage’s inventions – or more precisely Cage’s professed wish not to control the public with Kaprow’s idea of using the spectators as a support through which the artist’s vision was executed. It indicated a totally new way of making art in which the focal point of art was to “define”, even politically, the contemporary cultural vision.

However, it was primarily the relationship with the spectator that was profoundly different; performance, generally, was an action that, while not following a conventional narration, maintained some elements of the theatrical spectacle and its principal feature was to actively involve the public.

Beuys’s actions, on the contrary, moved the spectator’s attention to the artist, from the public to the private and, at the same time, rejected the idea of turning the event into a spectacle. Even when the spectators were in direct contact with the artist – as in the case of the numerous lesson-conferences that Beuys held – their active participation was never requested. In *Wie man den toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*, the public was actually forced to remain outside the gallery and could only see what was happening through the windows.

Such an attitude reinforces the artist’s vision as myth on the one hand, while, on the other, it leads to a consideration of the work of art as a private experience – much like what happened in front of Duchamp’s door in *Etant donnés* – that activates in each one of us an awareness of our own creative capacities or, at least, our responsibility as a spectator. Private, in this case, also means something that occurs only before one’s eyes, a live performance.

This concept was radically transformed in the eighties. The image that no longer had an object became so omnipresent and omnipotent that it invaded even the few protected written reserves of the language. The image (although not possessing it but evidently dissolving it) now possesses a much more substantial, real body than the archival *corpus*. Perhaps it is the only body, and obviously one should not think, so as not to be paradoxical, about the images of advertising and marketing but rather those presumed to be of information.

The artists whose work derives directly from performance – I am referring in particular to Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo and Sherrie Levine – never act live, but choose to act “from the image”. The notion of presence is completely internalized. Although the performance becomes an exclusive way of creating the image, it nevertheless brings out that theatrical dimension in their works that was part of tradition, and which Beuys seemed to have condemned to oblivion.



In 1988, Guy Debord published *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in which he repeated the concepts expressed in his previous essay of 1967, and stated that turning existence into a spectacle had become a global event and was no longer only peculiar to American society. A consequence of that phenomenon has been, among other things, the reduction of borders; in spectacle in fact the entire audience finds itself linked to one central image contemporaneously. In this perspective, art can no longer be considered an *instrument of seeing*, it no longer occupies an *other* position – albeit adjacent – with respect to the outside, but is situated in the interstices of reality; it becomes a thought stretched between the subject and the world. The artists have rejected the relationship with history and abandoned the vertical view, proposing a vision that is often fragmentary and horizontal. The concept of horizontality is not used in this case as a facile label that aggregates and simplifies the complexity of different expressions and thoughts. Horizontality, as Merleau-Ponty has pointed out, offers us the object and the subject together, making it possible for us to once again redefine the world without falling into the characteristic dichotomies of tradition/modernity, real/virtual, universal/local, but by acting within them instead.

Once external distances have been eliminated, the space of art appears “*extended* between the logic of ideas and the substance of their presence”; a space that flows from the works and at the same time *remains* in the world, in reality.

The performance in technological society *takes shape again*. Although the actions are live, they no longer represent an opportunity for freeing oneself from tradition and analyzing the confines of being in the world. Art no longer bursts into the false, rigid solidity of the world to show the flow of reality. Technological society and the global village have neither limits to be crossed over nor a solid structure to breach; the object and the subject have changed roles.

It is the object itself that is transformed, as the sociologist Jean Baudrillard explained in his book *Fatal Strategies*: “Whoever predicted the supreme power of the object? In our estimation of desire, the subject detains the absolute privilege, since it is he who desires. But everything is overturned when we think in terms of seduction. In this case, it is no longer the subject that desires but the object that seduces. Everything departs from and returns to the object, in the same way that everything departs from seduction and not from desire. The immemorial privilege of the subject is inverted, since it is fragile and can only desire while the object can also seduce because of its absence of desire [...]. While the becoming-object of the subject is absurd, there is the identical inconsequence of the object’s dreaming of becoming-subject. And yet, all of Western science and consciousness aspires to this.



Thus the paradoxical situation in which the position of the object is the only one possible. We imagine the object in a passionate form. The subject, in fact, has no monopoly on passion – the field reserved to it is more one of action. The object instead is passive in the sense that it is the site of a passion that is objective, seductive, and revengeful. This world has made a greater effort to interpret and transform rather than to seduce; perhaps it is seeking on its own to seduce us, and this seduction is accompanied in the human universe by intelligence, astuteness, defiance and revenge.”

The actions of the technological society, while not opposing the spectacular dimension of the world (and perhaps even emphasizing it), are a response to the marginalization of culture and the lack of meaningful reference points. They have elaborated a language that contrasts with that of global communication; it is a fragmentary language, paradoxically inarticulate, whose principal feature seems to be irony (as occurs in *Snow-show* by Vadim Fishkin, *Mother Bear* by Myriam Laplante, *Holland is a Well-Regulated Country* by Schie 2.0, and even, albeit partially, in *Armadillo for Your Show* by Oleg Kulik, and in the performances of the Kazak artist Yerbossyn Meldybekov). They react to the pathology of existence by enacting it, or better yet, by enduring it (*L'Agressé* of Alberto Sorbelli). They present reality as an event (as in the case of the sound installation *Plan de Paris* by Donatella Landi) or conversely, they place themselves at such a distance from their action and in such a way that it is perceived as a representation (Spencer Tunick and the *NSK Guard* series of the IRWIN group). Naturally, a live performance.



**Edicola notte**

**Andrea Fogli**

*Possibility of a Double Flower*  
October-November 1990

**Alfredo Pirri**

*Troy, November-December 1990*

**Felice Levini**

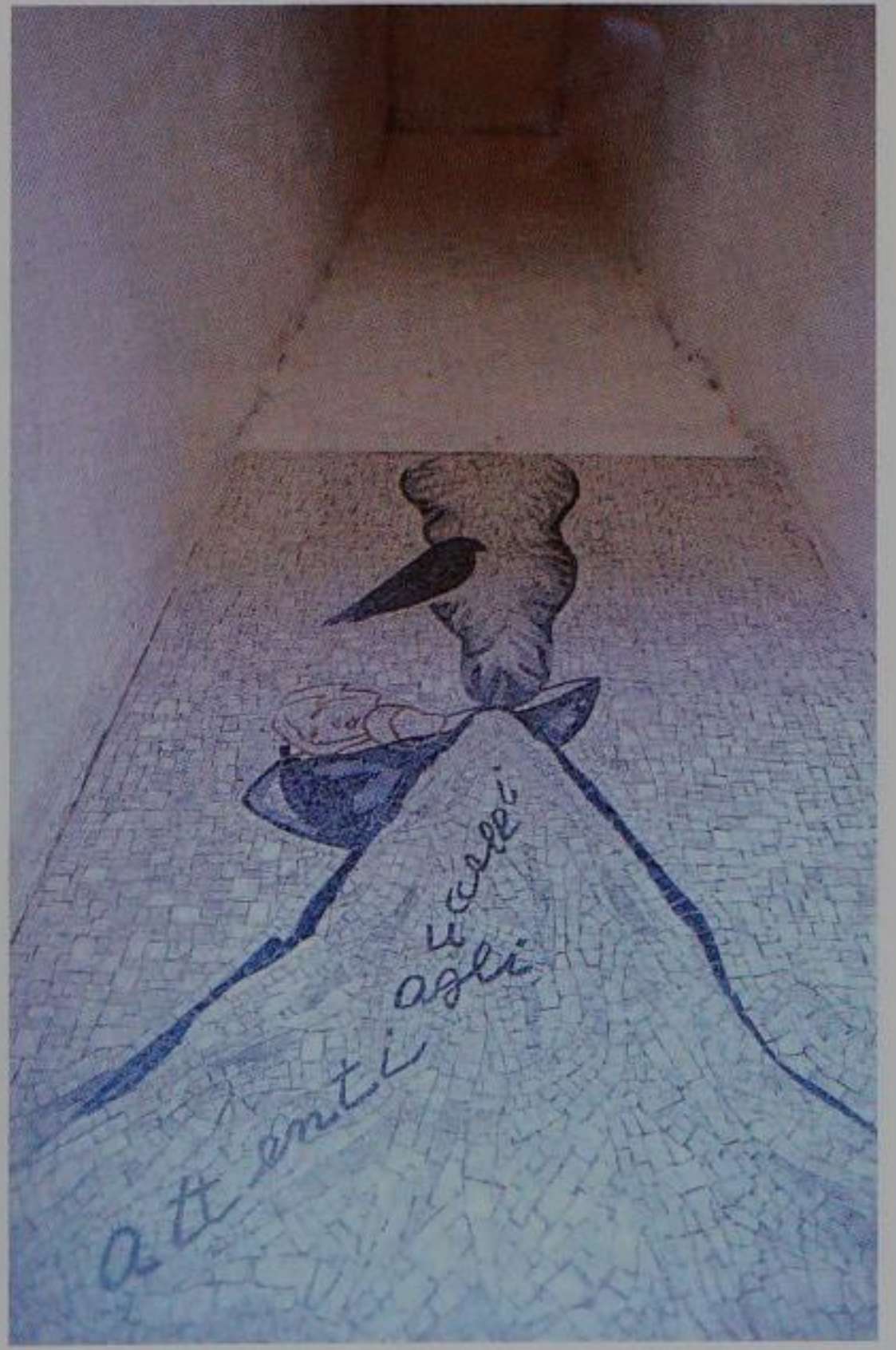
*In Heaven – On Earth*

December 1990 – January 1991

**Enzo Cucchi**

*Be Careful of the Birds*

January-February 1991

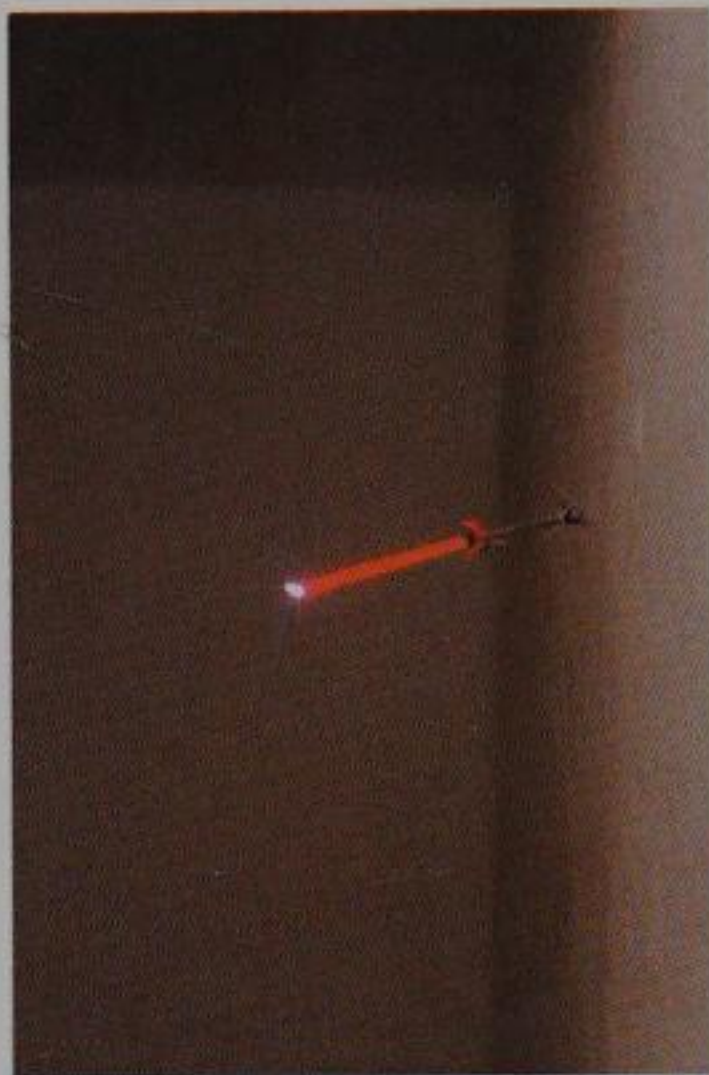




**Vittorio Messina**  
*A Room for Eisenberg,*  
February-March 1991  
**Maurizio Mochetti**  
*Untitled,* March-April 1991  
**Gianni Dessi**  
*Camera Picta,* April-May 1991

**Eliseo Mattiacci**  
*Rail Magnet,* June 1991  
**Fabio Sargentini**  
*How Beautiful Youth Is,*  
October-November 1991  
**Giuseppe Gallo**  
*Love Is a Lemon,*  
December-January 1992

**Hidetoshi Nagasawa**  
*Zero Time,*  
January-February 1992  
**Nunzio**  
*Passage,* March-April 1992  
**Michel Verjux**  
*Untitled,* May 1992





**Thorsten Kirchhoff**

*Untitled,*  
November-December 1993

**H. H. Lim**

*Temptation,* March 1997

**Luca M. Patella**

*Sentiment-Sentiment,*  
December 1998 – January 1999

**Emilio Prini**

*Art & Language, Kienzle  
& Gmeiner, Compagna Edicola  
Notte, Emilio Prini, Tremezzo  
von Brentano: We Want to Be  
Amateurs Installed in the Style  
of the Jackson Pollock Bar,*  
March 1999

**Fabio Mauri**

*To Gino,* April 1999

**Giuseppe Salvatori**

*For No One,* December 1999

**Pietro Fortuna**

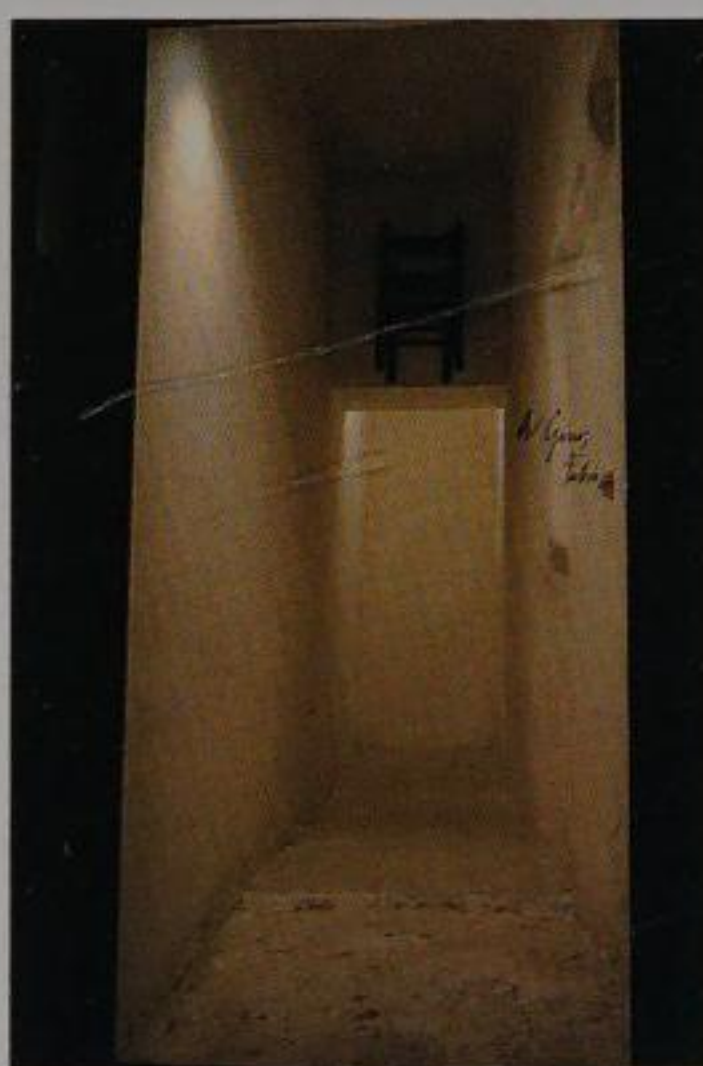
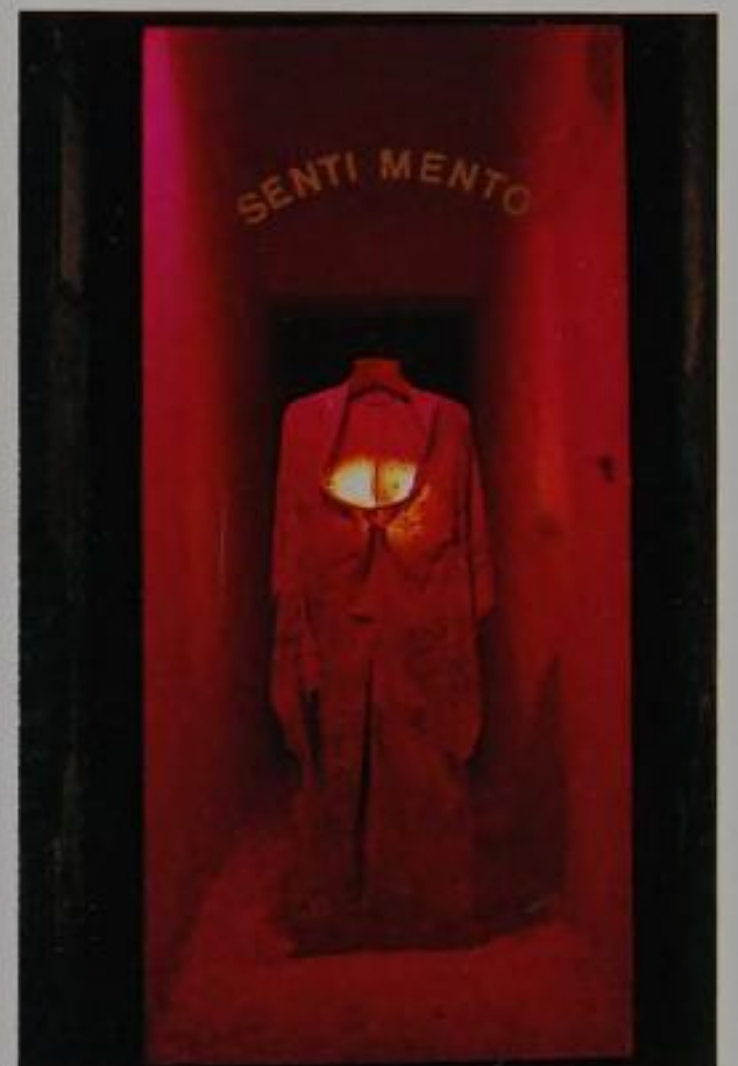
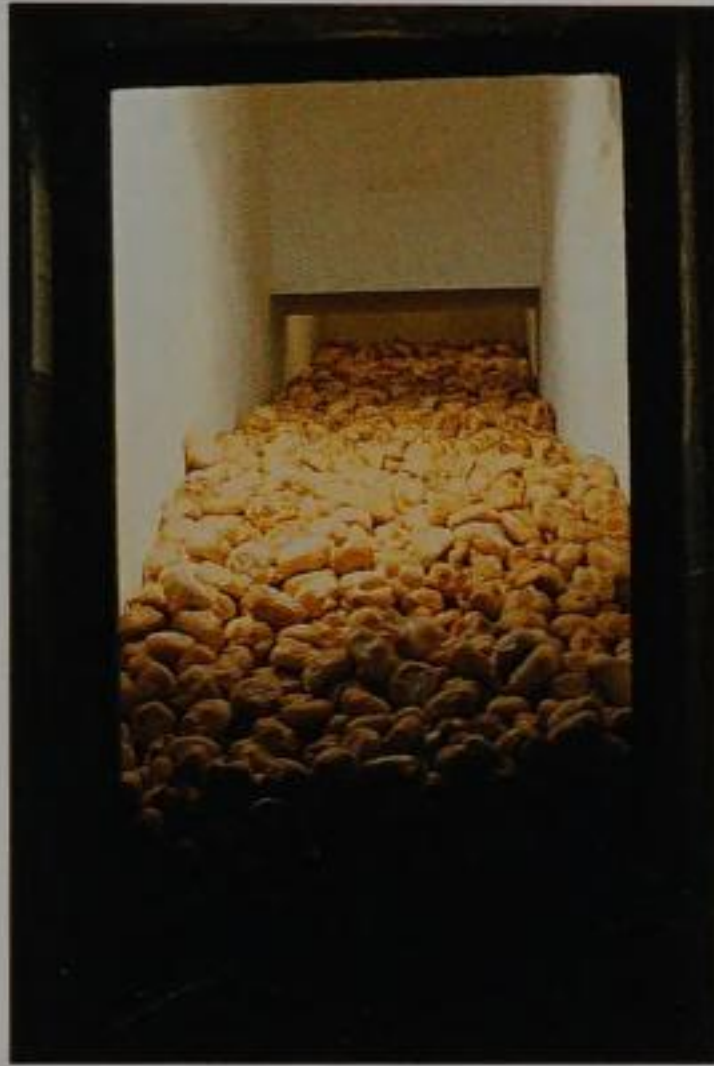
*Untitled,* January 2000

**Aldo Mondino**

*Sadhli-Ganges View,*  
May 2000

**Nanni Balestrini**

*Return to Love*  
February 2001



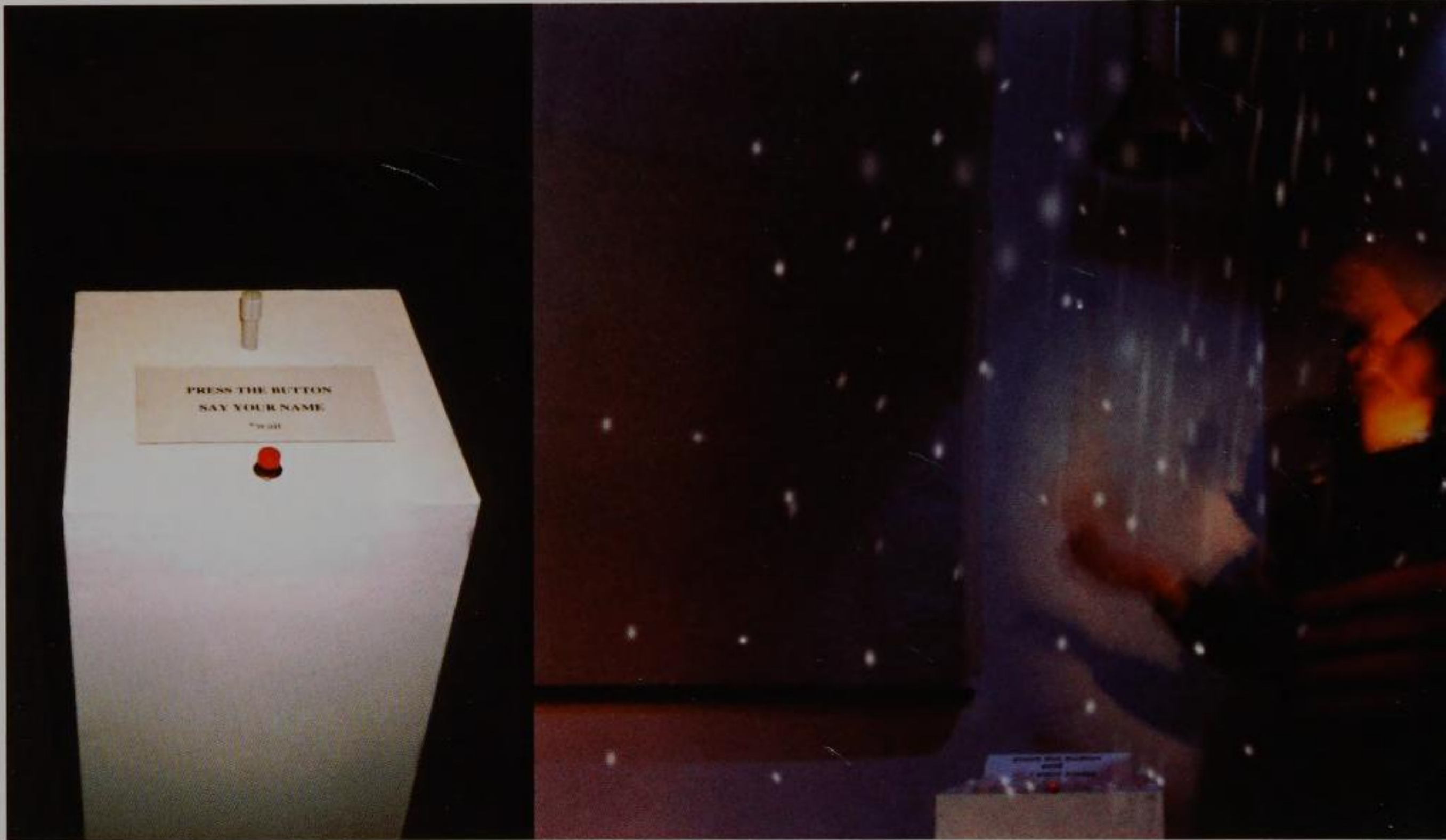
Fluxus and Events, Happening, Continuity and Developments



**Vadim Fishkin**

*Snow-show, 2000*

Red button, audio system,  
computer, fans, polyfoam



The visitor is invited to press the button and say his/her name. A computerized voice will announce a personal dedication, saying: "Dedicated to... (followed by the name of the person who pressed the button)"; then a special light will go on, music will be heard and snow will begin to fall slowly.





Fluxus and Events, Happening, Continuity and Developments



Photos taken by Mario Gorni  
during *Oreste 3*,  
Montescaglioso,  
August-September 2000



It seemed impossible not to remain in that place where we were.  
Then everything returned to the way it was.





She continued to look for a house.  
All the paradises she found were empty.

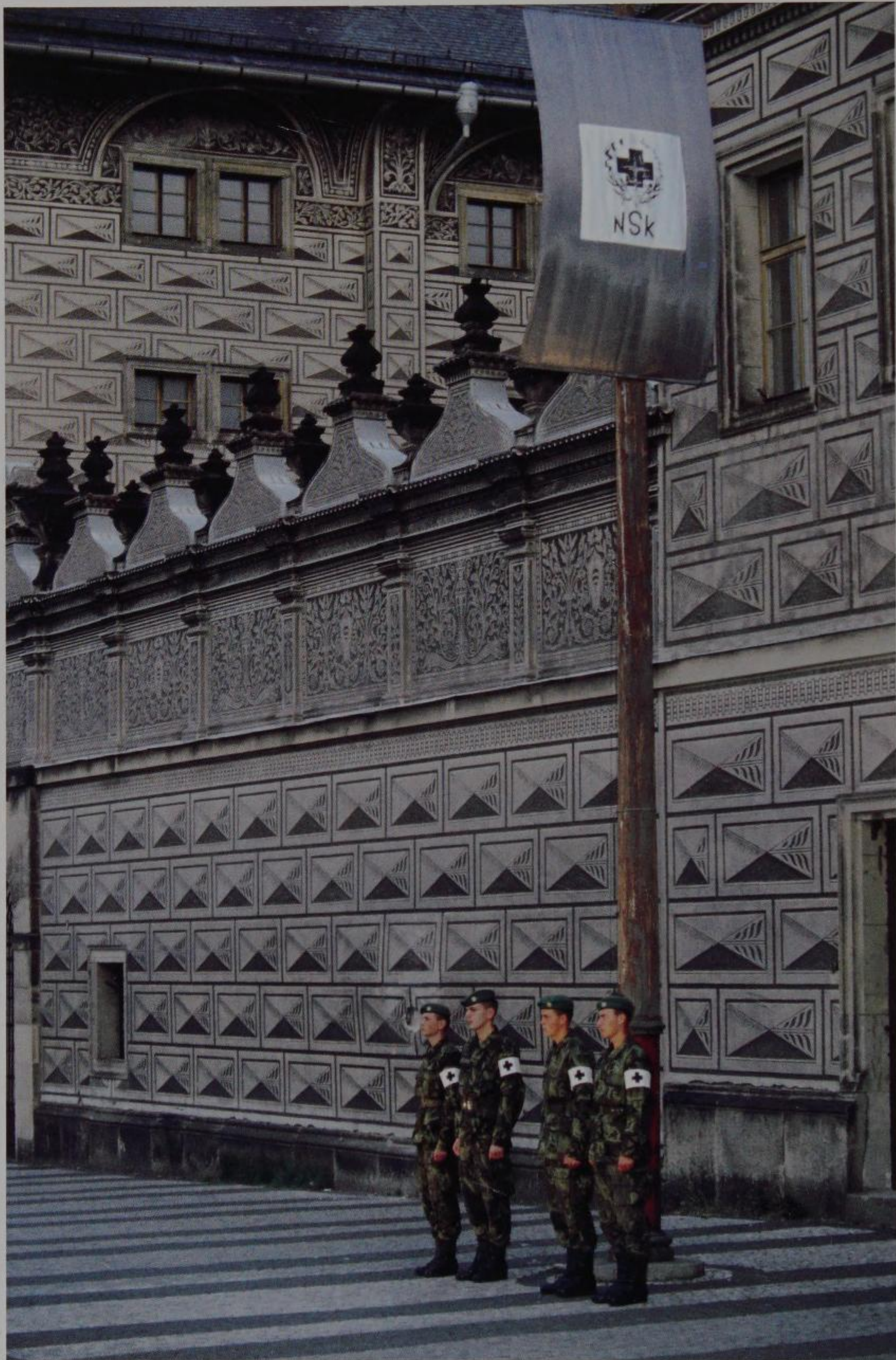


**IRWIN**

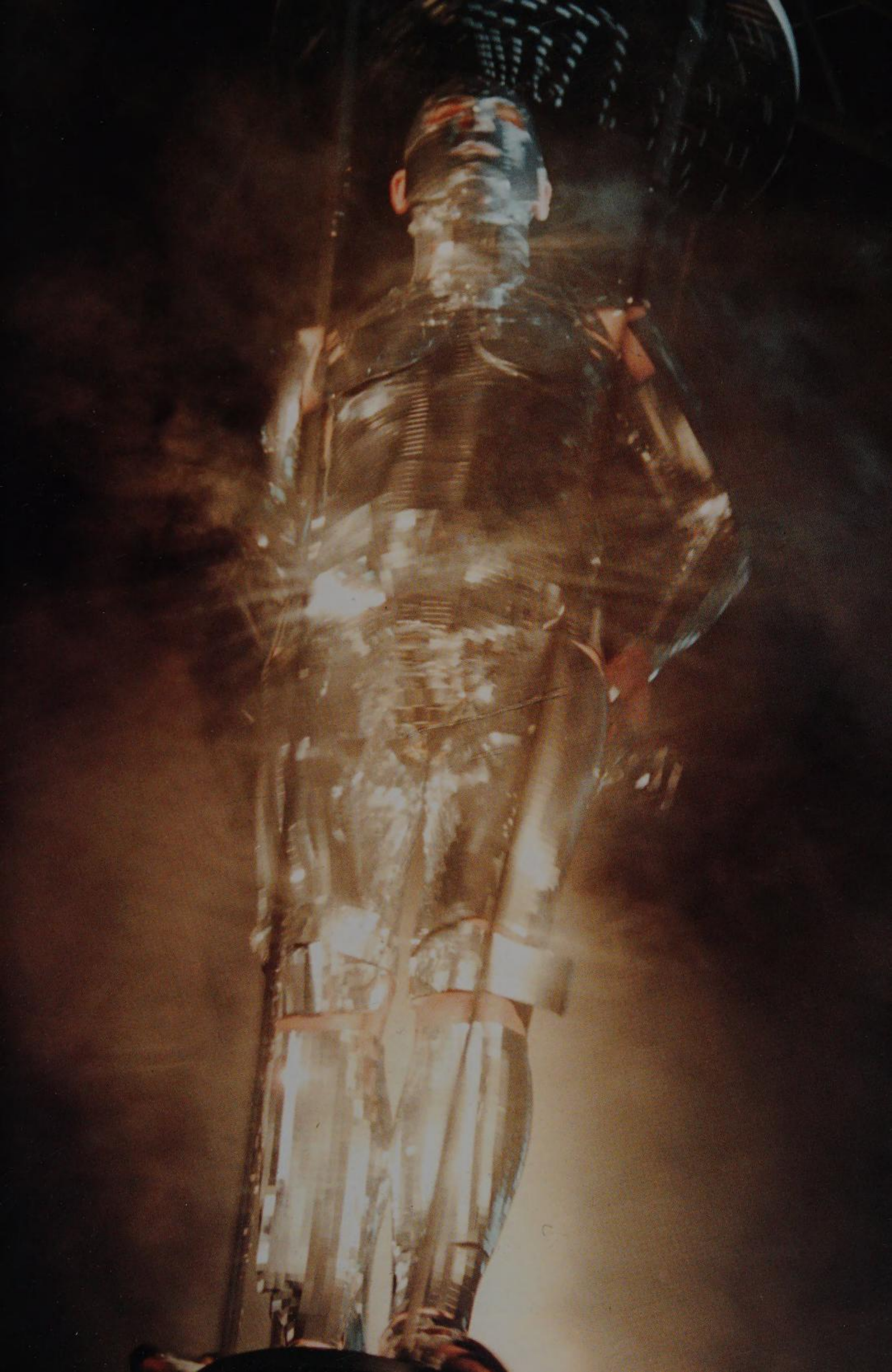
*NSK Guard Prague, 2000*  
In collaboration with the Czech  
Army (photo Igor Andelic)

**Oleg Kulik**

*Armadillo for Your Show, 1996*  
SMAK Gent  
(photo Mila Bredikhina)









**Donatella Landi**

Plan de Paris, 2001

Sound design for the map of the Paris Métro in 14 itineraries  
Installation for 14 headphones and environment sound

**Itinerary 13:**

- Châtelet line 4 for Barbes Rochechouart
- From Barbes Rochechouart line 2 for Belleville
- From Belleville line 11 for République



- si la chose se maintient...
- à part sur la ligne de...
- et c'est bon...
- une fois que tu t'habitues au train, s'est vachement plus...
- viens voir les monstres...
- Ah, non, c'est pas le...
- Qu'est-ce que tu veux dire...
- Je regarde...
- ah oui oui oui c'est vrai, ah oui t'as raison, oui oui...
- il était passé vite en plus...
- je ne me rappelle plus, écoute, je ne me rappelle plus...
- à jeudi,
- à jeudi, d'accord...
- à demain...
- à demain...



**Myriam Laplante**  
*Mother Bear*, 2001  
Performance

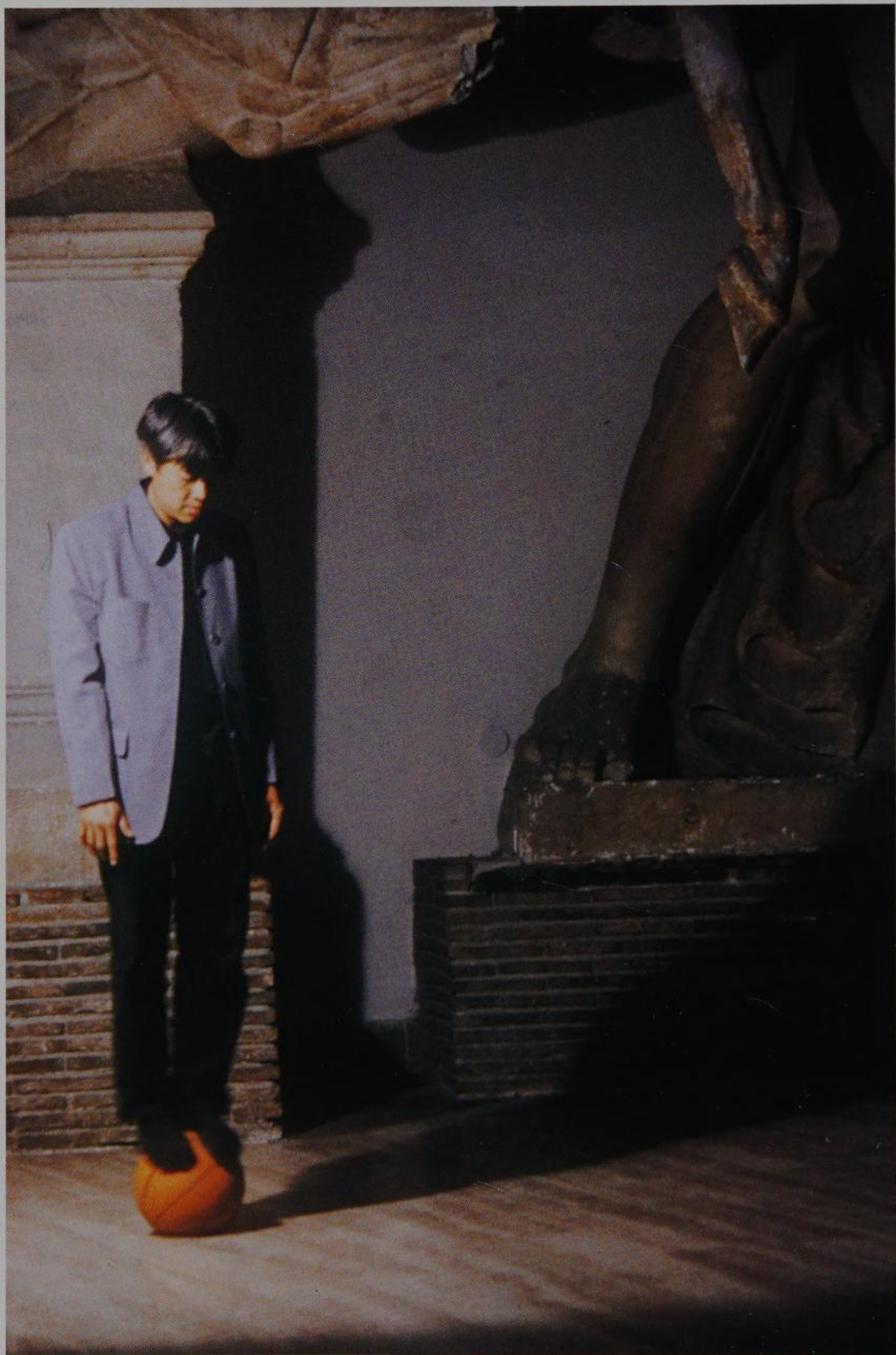




**H. H. Lim**

*About 60 kg of Wisdom*

Happening held in the  
Auditorium of the State School  
of Art in Rome, 1998  
(photo Claudio Abate)





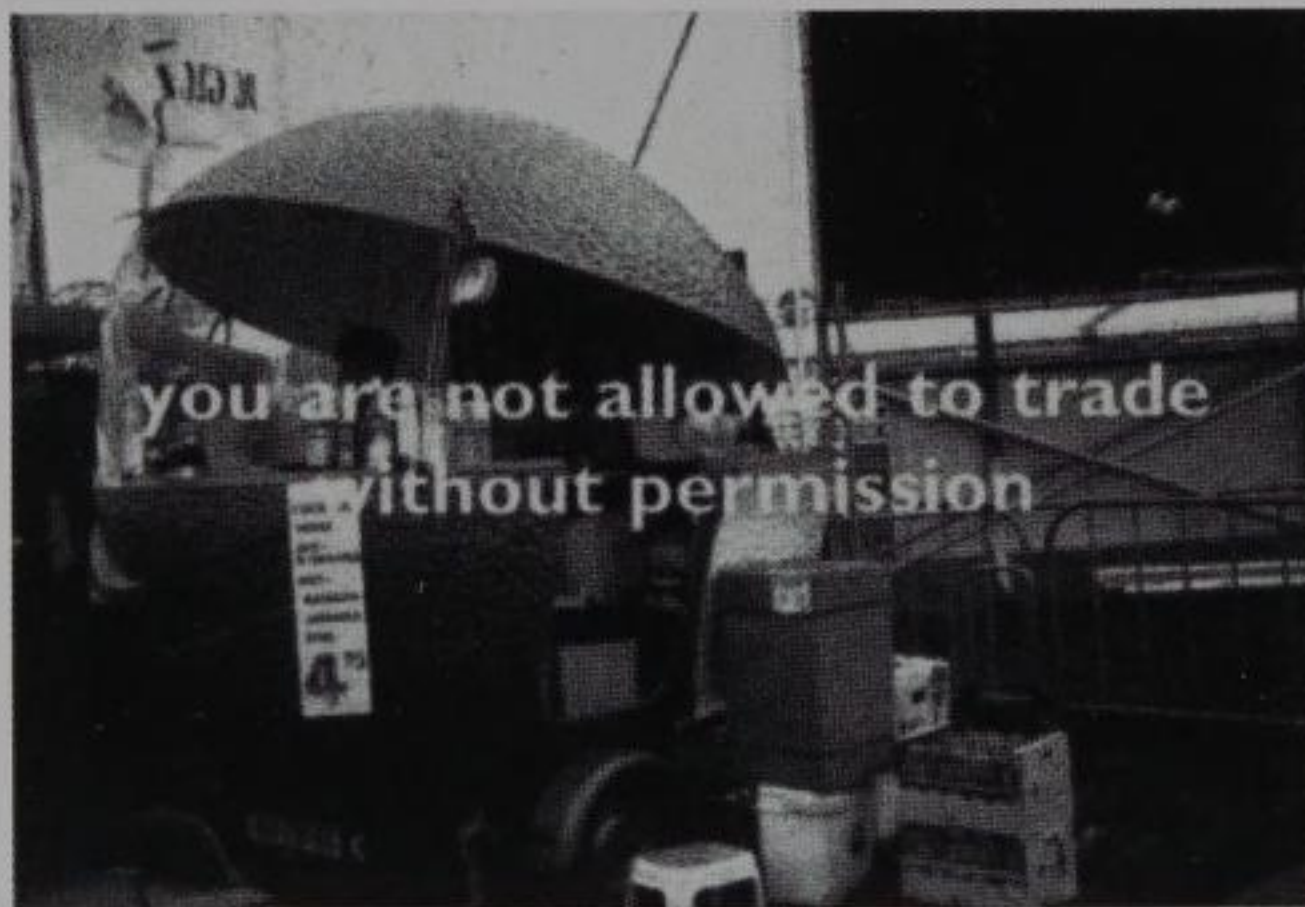
**Yerbossyn Meldybekov**  
*Asian Prisoner*, 1998  
Kunstforum, Berlin





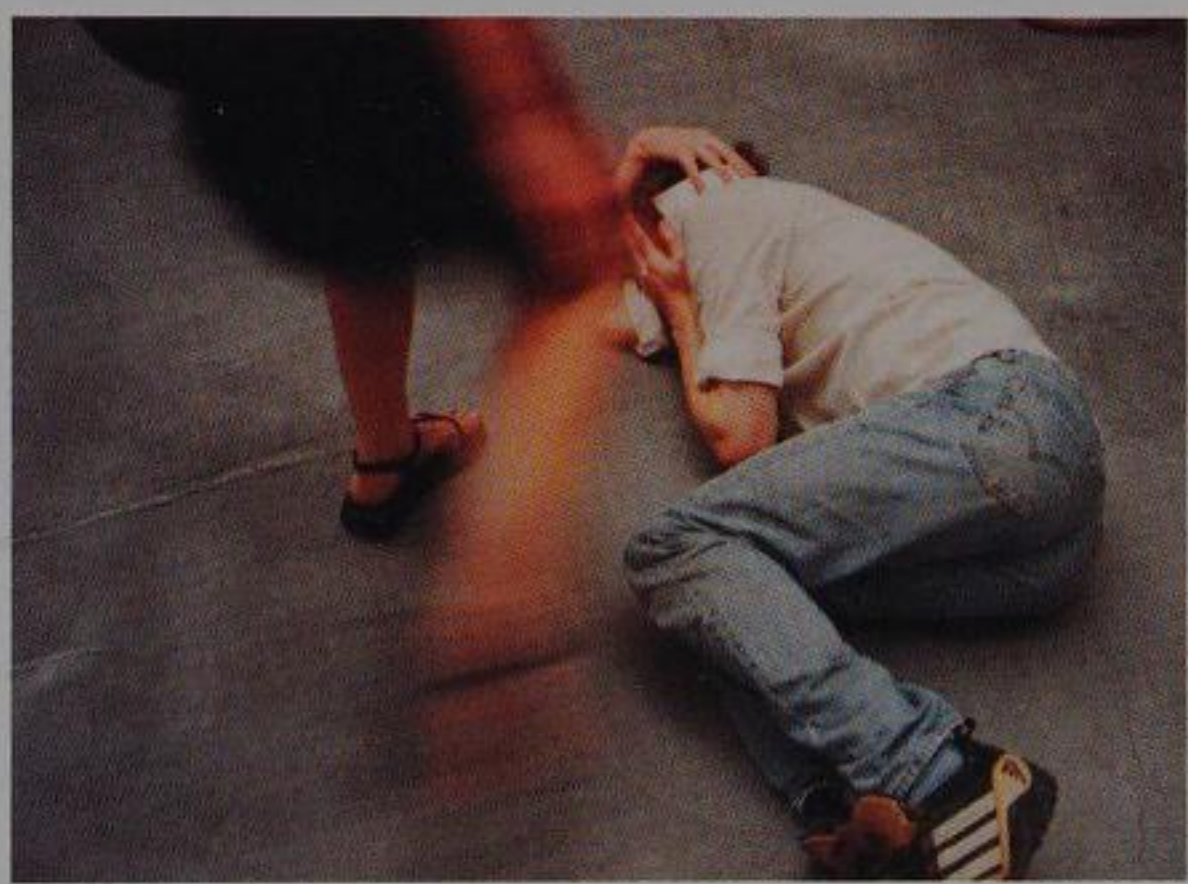
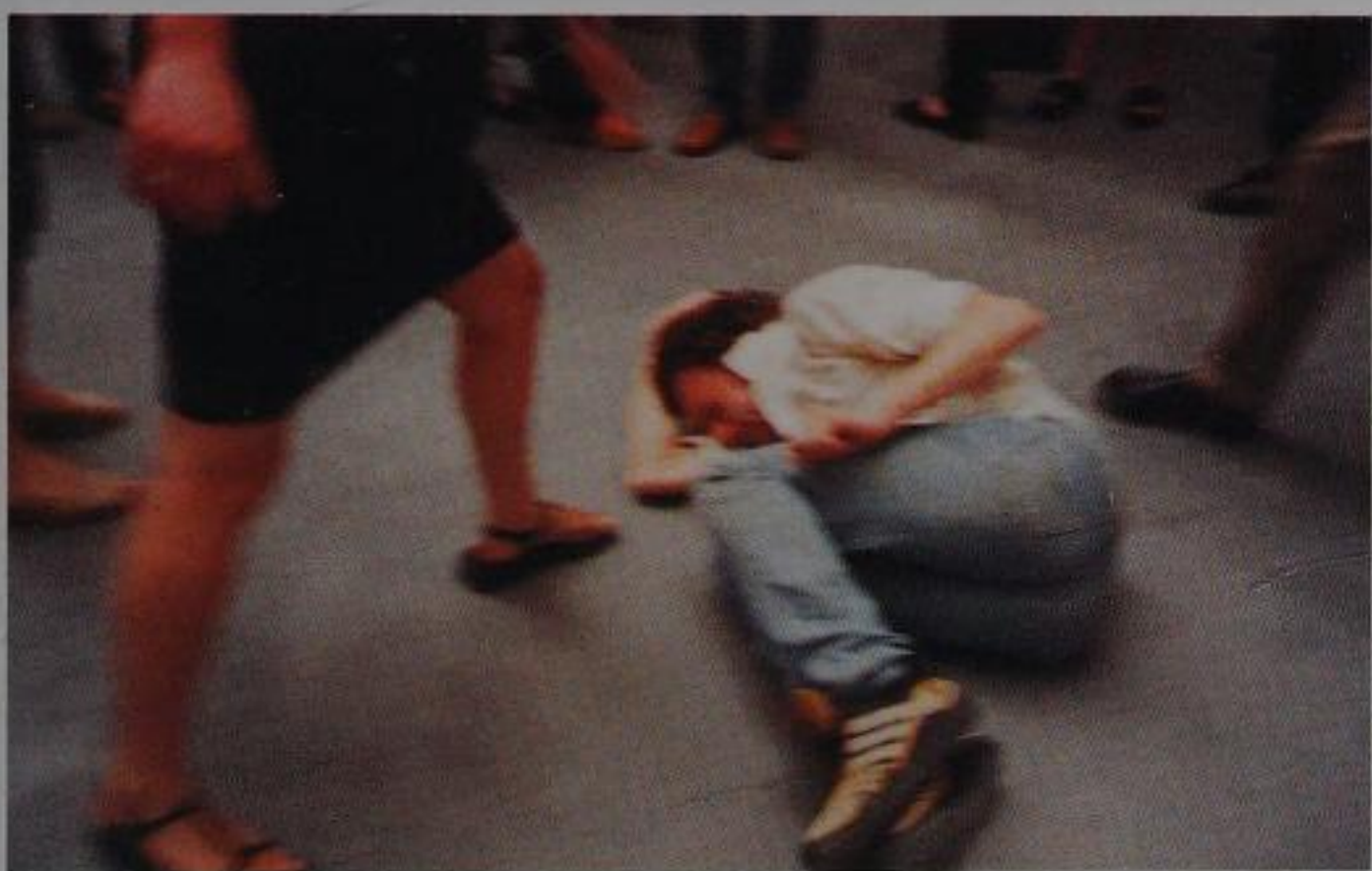
**Schie 2.0**

*Holland is a Well-Regulated  
Country, 1999*





**Alberto Sorbelli**  
*L'Agressé*, 1999  
XLVIII Biennale of Venice  
(photo Nicola Hoffmann)



Fluxus and Events, Happening, Continuity and Developments



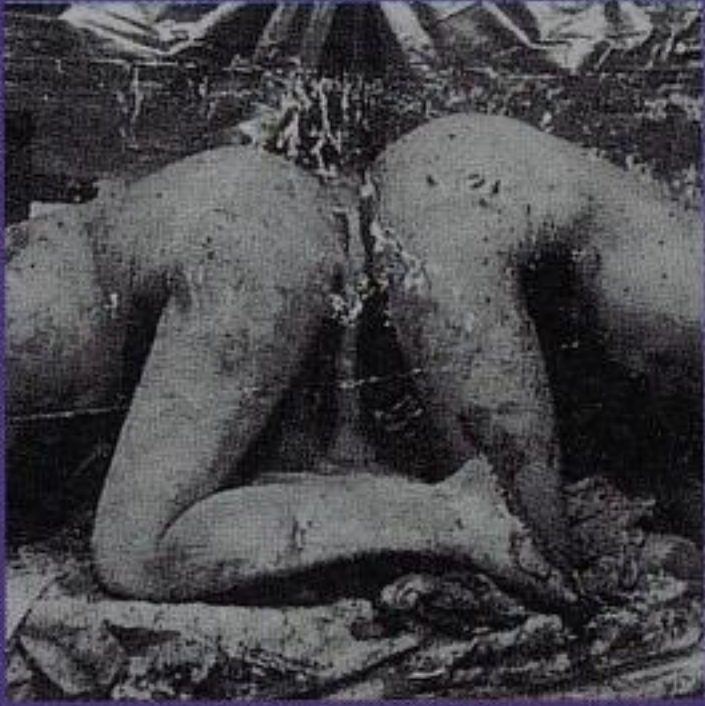




**Spencer Tunick**  
*Connections*, 1996  
Silver gelatin print on  
aluminium, cm 152 x 124  
Courtesy of Gianni Giubergia,  
Turin, and 1-20 Gallery,  
New York









# Actionism

*edited by*  
Lorand Hegyi

Günter Brus  
Hermann Nitsch  
Otto Muehl  
Rudolf Schwarzkogler







## Between Provocation and Liberation

*The Contextualization of the Body in Viennese Actionism*

While the radical aesthetics of Viennese Actionism (*Aktionismus*) and the social and political attitude connected to it are unanimously considered to be a typically Austrian phenomenon, indeed Austrian par excellence, Austrian Action Painting and this specific form of Body Art and collective performance are profoundly rooted in the international evolution of the different forms of Action Painting. In the first place, the Viennese artists also place the temporal collocation of an event and generally the real time of the real action at the centre of their artistic activity; and secondly, the body – and any kind of collective manipulation of it – is considered to be the most important means of aesthetic expression. The temporal and physical truth of the aesthetic structure also implies a redefinition of the artist, now viewed as a “dramaturge”, “pedagogue”, “psychologist” or “shaman”, and at the same time as the leader of those who are united in the same group and whose members participate in the collective happening.

The legendary authors of Viennese Actionism certainly constitute the most significant association of artists present in Austrian art after 1945. Closely connected to the international events of the sixties and seventies, their work was an authentic reply, exasperated and radical *ad absurdum*, to the painful questions posed by the search for an aesthetic identity and an artistic creation of the ego as well as by the search for a way to insert art in the social context. The spiritual heritage of Viennese Actionism influenced the subsequent generations of artists in the diverse aesthetic relationships that existed in the increasingly new social and historic conditions. In the work of the artists who in the past were part of the often mythicized Viennese Actionism – Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Adolf Frohner, Alfons



Schilling – it is possible to recognize the different paths of evolution and possibilities of development inherent in an aesthetic past that was common, yet never unitary or homogeneous.

Some time around 1960, Art Informel, which had dominated the artistic scene after the Second World War, began to be perceived by the younger generations of artists merely as an aesthetic and academic point of reference. These artists were trying to create a “new identity between art and life”.<sup>1</sup> Action Art, and consequently also the Viennese group, originated from Informel and gestural painting which in turn had been influenced by the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock and – more significantly for Vienna – from the Action Painting of the French artist Georges Mathieu.

### *It all began in Vienna*

In order to understand how Viennese Actionism started among a loose-knit group of friends who for slightly more than a decade were intent on reaching the same artistic objectives, at least three decisive factors that influenced them must be pointed out.

a) First of all, the extremely conservative political-social situation in Austria during the sixties. Between 1966 and 1970 the country was ruled by a Christian Democrat government that was notorious for its particularly reactionary cultural and judicial policy. Veit Loers has aptly used the term “cultural obtuseness” in this regard: “The bureaucratic policy of the authoritarian state has paralyzed artistic activity in the same way as the Austrian political marginality had impeded its participation in European modernism.”<sup>2</sup>

b) The strong cultural impact of the Austrian, and in particular the Viennese, intellectual heritage: “Austrian art can only be understood in the light of its cultural past, there being no trace of ‘action’ in the American or German sense [...]. The Austrian artists refer to Freud and Jung, to Schönberg, and the figurative tradition of Klimt, Schiele and the early Kokoschka. Their literary models are Trakl and Musil, whose works, at least as interpreted by the Viennese, described the repressive character of the city, the permissivity of the monarchy, the ‘philosophy’ of the operetta, and the typical atmosphere of old Austria (Nitsch). It was exactly at the turn of the century, during the Jugendstil period, that art evolved in the sense of an expressive, morbid eroticism.”<sup>3</sup>

c) As far as art is concerned, its evolution was direct; sparked by Art Informel, in no time at all it developed into the various forms of Viennese Action Art. The Viennese Action artist, Hermann Nitsch, explains how his art originated from Informel painting in this way: “In 1959–60, I realized that there was a connection between my action theatre and Informel painting, or Action Painting. The artistic practice of Abstract Expressionism (Pollock and Mathieu, among others) had a dramatic, theatrical character. The

<sup>1</sup> J. Schilling, *Aktionskunst. Identität von Kunst und Leben?*, Lucerne-Frankfurt 1978.

<sup>2</sup> V. Loers, “Als die Bilder laufen lernten”, in *Von der Aktionsmalerei zum Aktionismus, Wien 1960–1965*, Klagenfurt 1988, pp. 12–13.

<sup>3</sup> Schilling, 1978, pp. 148–149.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *Von der Aktionsmalerei zum Aktionismus*, p. 124.





Otto Muehl, *Material Action No. 19 Bimmel Bammel*, 1965, photograph, cm 65 × 52. F. Conz Archive, Verona

creative process, the artistic event that occurs at that moment was as important as the final result. In this sense, in 1960, I put on my first painting performances in my studio. The dramatic process of the pictorial gesture was an integral part of my 'theatre of orgies and mysteries'."

About 1960, in addition to Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, Alfons Schilling, Otto Muehl, and Adolf Frohner transformed abstract Action Painting into the art of a multimedia, interdisciplinary performance, each producing very different results.

Alfons Schilling (born in 1934), who for a certain time was Günter Brus's companion in studies and in life (Brus was born in 1938), came into contact with Informel painting at the end of the fifties during a visit to Spain (Majorca) and to Paris, as well as in Vienna at the Galerie St. Stephan. In 1960, he began to produce numerous works in this style. His large panels are characterized by a strong iconoclast vision and reveal a marked spatial sense. "The action takes place in space, there's a picture in any point whatsoever, the brushstrokes come later, casually" (A. Schilling).<sup>4</sup>

During this period, Günter Brus and Alfons Schilling experimented a kind of art that extended over the canvas (or panel), while Schilling – who settled in Paris in 1961 – created revolving paintings mounted on round wooden disks. In Paris, he continued to develop his dynamic paintings, using electrical mechanisms. A short time later, however, he declared that his pictorial experiments were finished. In September 1962, he moved to New York where he presented real events (like coach trips through the disastrous industrial landscapes of New Jersey) in the form of artistic actions. It was not until 1968 that he resumed his work as a painter.

Adolf Frohner (born in 1934), a friend of Otto Muehl (born in 1925) from Academy days, was connected to the Viennese group of Action Art only for a brief period. In 1960, he was still exhibiting academic style canvases and drawings at the Junge Generation, then a very important gallery close to the SPO (Austrian Socialist Party). He subsequently used the American Abstract Expressionists, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, as his models, and under the influence of Günter Brus and Alfons Schilling in particular he developed a freer gestural style in his painting. He soon began to make use of the techniques of assemblage and collage, creating sculptures based on the use of discarded material. Frohner also took part in the first collective exhibition of the Viennese group. In the exhaustive catalogue *Wiener Aktionismus 1960–1971* (Klagenfurt 1989), Hubert Klocker describes how in the spring of 1962 Adolf Frohner, Otto Muehl and Hermann Nitsch (born in 1938, he had been in contact with Muehl in 1961 thanks to the exhibition at the Galerie Fuchs in Vienna) staged a protest against contemporary Austrian conservatism by organizing a counter-event at the same time as the Wiener Festwochen.





Günther Brus, *Self-painting 1 (2C)*, 1964, photographs, cm 65 × 72. F. Conz Archive, Verona

On June 1st the Action Painting artists shut themselves up for three days in Muehl's studio in Perinetgasse (in the twentieth district of Vienna), and after the "reopening", they organized a presentation. During the course of this action, the artists and the psychoanalyst Josef Dvorak – subsequently the owner of a gallery that specialized in Action Art – drew up the theoretic manifesto *Die Blutorgel* (literally, "The Blood Organ").

During the three days they were shut up, Frohner and Muehl worked on different sculptures using construction materials and metal scraps, while Nitsch held his seventh performance (the first had been in November 1960 in his studio at the Technological Museum in Vienna). In this performance he used the crucified carcass of a lamb for the first time, arousing the indignation of the bourgeois press. After *Die Blutorgel*, Frohner realized that working before the public was not for him, and he returned to his studio to work.

Late in 1962, and especially in 1963, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl and Günther Brus – they were joined in February 1965 (the date of his first "action") by a fourth representative, Rudolf Schwarzkogler (1940–1969) – began to present their public or semi-public actions, raising violent protests and creating a great scandal, one that culminated in an incrimination. With the violence of Nitsch's total work and his *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, with Muehl's action "of the self-liberation of energy and group analysis",<sup>5</sup> with Brus's "shamanic-analytical ritual of self-elimination",<sup>6</sup> and lastly, with Schwarzkogler's "isolated alchemic-synesthetic work",<sup>7</sup> the movement took form as an agglomerate of distinctly individual artistic experiments.

"The elements in common were: the importance attributed to the action as the evolution of painting, the fundamental role of the human body as a concrete means and indispensable surface for the action, the existentialistic-psychoanalytical approach and the tendency toward anti-mimetic art."<sup>8</sup>



Rudolf Schwarzkogler, *3 Action*, 1965, photograph, cm 64.5 × 84.5, actor H. Cibulka (photo L. Hoffenreich). Courtesy of Beppe Morra, Naples



Hubert Klocker – already mentioned for his contribution to the history of Viennese Action Art, and currently the agent for the former Friedrichshof collection in the art market – has collocated the Vienna movement in the broader context of international art: “Like Arte Povera, Nouveau Réalisme, Pop Art, Happening, Fluxus and No-Art, as well as Art Brut, Viennese Action Art deconstructs the language and signs of modern art. Brus, Muehl, Nitsch and Schwarzkogler arrive at the extreme consequences of this process, placing the human being, lastly, as the decoded product of psychoanalysis in the centre of art with all the implications deriving thereof. This choice can probably be traced back to the social and religious situation in Austria and its repressive culture as a form of sublimation.<sup>9</sup> At this point the question is raised: was Viennese Action Art the product of a group activity? The answer is no. The artists have never been formally united in an association, nor have they ever formed a homogeneous whole. It is true that the principal representatives of the movement were friends among themselves and that they occasionally worked together. Therefore a narrow circle of artists of gestural abstractionism did exist that at times produced group events (as in the case of *Kunst und Revolution*), and was supported by a wider circle of friends, disciples and travelling companions who were always present at any event that had to do with Action Art (for example, Peter Weibel, Valie Export and Otmar Bauer).

In 1966, the Action Art artists took part in the *Destruction in Art Symposium* in London, one of their first important collective exhibitions. Brus, the cineaste Kurt Kren, Muehl, Nitsch and Peter Weibel went to London as members of the School of Direct Art that had been founded by Brus and Muehl in June of that year. Their participation in the symposium led, almost for the first time, to their international recognition (with an article in *Time Magazine* for example), since these underground Viennese artists had been completely ignored in their own country. Another event was the Zockfest in 1967 at Grünes Tor, a restaurant on the outskirts of Vienna. On that occasion, Nitsch, Brus and Muehl showed their works together with Gerhard Rühm and Oswald Wiener, members of the Viennese group and writers with a strong bent for Happenings (the first and second literary cabarets, respectively of 1958 and 1959, are to be mentioned), who had played an important role as forerunners of Action Art. The largest circle of Action Art was completed with the participation of Peter Weibel, Dieter Haupt, the painter Christian Attersee, and the writers Dominik Steiger, Wolfgang Bauer and Reinhard Priessnitz.

In any case, the most important event, and certainly the most controversial in the history of the movement, took place in June 1968 at the University of Vienna with the title *Kunst und Revolution (Art and Revolution)*. The event, which became known in Aus-

<sup>5</sup> H. Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus 1960–1971*, Klagenfurt 1989.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> H. Klocker, “Die Dramaturgie des Organischen”, in *Wiener Aktionismus*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.



tria as *Uni-Ferkelei* (*University Garbage*) and which provoked almost hysterical reactions among the conformist public, included among others Brus, Muehl and the Direct Art group (Dieter Haupt, Herbert Stumpfl, etc.), Oswald Wiener, Peter Weibel and Franz Kaltenbäck.

In March 1970, at the Aktionsraum in Munich, Günter Brus held his last performance, entitled *Zerreissprobe* (*Tear Test*). The following year, Otto Muehl also carried out a series of actions abroad. He then left the field of art in order to dedicate himself to the community he had founded based on Action Art and psychoanalysis, and in opposition to the bourgeois model of the nuclear family and the heterosexual couple.

Muehl's intention was to translate art into a new, emancipated way of living. The year 1972 saw the creation of an Aktionsanalytische Kommune, or AA-Kommune, based on the principles of collective property and "free" sex. Toward the middle of the seventies it developed into the larger commune of Friedrichshof in the Austrian province of Burgenland on the Hungarian border. Thus, by the beginning of the seventies, Viennese Action Art had reached its epilogue. Only Hermann Nitsch would continue to stage his performances as part of his project *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*.

With the foundation of the AA-Kommune, and later of Friedrichshof, Otto Muehl and his friends accomplished their radical experiment: to create an adequate form of social existence for the total art of action and a suitable form of life for the individual artists. On the basis of their working and living together – which was also considered a therapy – Muehl tried to translate the old avant-garde dream into reality: art and life, work and freedom, functionality and creativity, the private and the collective were placed in immediate contact in order to attain an identification. The aesthetic strategy of Actionism thus took on a philosophical-social importance that had an effect not only at the level of metaphorical significance but also on practical, technical, and pragmatic methodology and the process of realization. The collective artistic creation and the mutual work of the artists operating in the community – the global aesthetic and therapeutic structure – were inseparably connected to one another; art (painting, the creation of the work of art, the action) became an integral part of living together. In this "ideal" form of life that the artist organized, art returned to take on a primordial, mythological, ethical function, and was again defined as an organizing force and centre. By heading in this direction, art moreover had to relinquish its own aesthetic autonomy. And yet, it was precisely this loss that made the return to a culture that was both archaic and utopian possible, where cultural communication was not represented by alienating autonomous spheres



Hermann Nitsch,  
96. *Action*, Naples, 1996  
(photo Fabio Donato),  
Courtesy of Beppe Morra,  
Naples



Hermann Nitsch, 96. *Action*,  
Naples, 1996 (photo Fabio  
Donato). Courtesy of Beppe  
Morra, Naples



governed by their own laws and formal languages, but where a cultural, spiritual and ethical community could express itself, all values being equal in all sectors of activity. The history of the historic avant-garde has shown that the radical utopia in which art disintegrated into social activities has never succeeded in attaining its scope, that of imparting art and aesthetic structures with values that can change life. Conversely, art is not about to dissolve into the real activities of life, and it is primarily due to the radical aesthetic strategy of renouncing autonomy that a new artistic communication and new forms of art have developed in artistic activity. Hans Richter already formulated this very poetically in his book, *Dada. Kunst und Antikunst*, when, in a last analysis of the Dada “rebellion” against art, he said that in spite of all its anti-artistic strategies, it produced an activity that was a new art and not “no art”.<sup>10</sup>

Even in the Friedrichshof experience – as in the majority of older radical social experiments – the problem, together with all its consequences, existed of how to achieve a new revolutionary society among people who had been socialized in an old conservative system, and who were hardly prepared for a radical new one. In the ideology and practice of living together, incurable contradictions and new hierarchies were created in that great community. And, lastly, in the nineties, the founders of Friedrichshof were forced to admit that their experiment had failed. However, it cannot be denied that precious ideas and experiences for a better future are to be learned from the experiments and the models initiated by the artist Otto Muehl and his fellow travellers.

Although Günter Brus had represented, during the period he adhered to Actionism, the most radical and most provocative phenomenon of the new Austrian performance – having united the

<sup>10</sup> H. Richter, *Dada. Kunst und Antikunst*, Cologne 1964, p. 7.



most elemental to the metaphorical, the existential sensual-corporeal directly to the structures of political-social values – all his work and life in the years following that period are to be described as the exact opposite of that represented by Otto Muehl's experiments. Brus, who was perhaps the most disturbing exponent of Viennese Actionism in his actions, who made a theme out of the existential danger constituted by repressive political, social and religious mechanisms, and who used body language as a system of signs that was irrational, self-destructive, redeeming and subversive at the same time, completely alienated himself from artistic life in the seventies in order to create his own, individual aesthetic mythology.

His art displays symbolic features as well as individual mythological ones; in his works (paintings, drawings and writings) he interiorizes specific memories and fragments of art history, stylistic metaphors and compositional clichés as his own aesthetic material, creating a subjective iconography and dramaturgy. The images he has created in his art in the past twenty years evoke an aesthetic microcosm in which his radical sensuality acts as a catalyst on artistic communication. This extreme accentuation of sensuality and eros confers an almost diabolical, yet precise dimension of unconscious associations to the forms depicted, a dimension in which the world is represented as a mythical stage where the struggle between the uncontrollable giants of the unconscious takes place.

Rudolf Schwarzkogler's career led to an aesthetic cult that was esoteric and meditative as well as being self-oppressive and self-destructive, to the liberation of the self and the renunciation of the self; a cult in which the artist attempted to reach and cross over the limits of physical existence by means of radical sensual experiences.

Although Schwarzkogler's expression was indulgent, sensual, and exalted *ad absurdum*, it created a disturbing dramatic environment, and the conclusive moments in his aesthetics are to be compared to the universalistic spiritual sensuality of Yves Klein. Latent parallels show that he was approaching the borderlines of existential experiences, although the presence of the body and the visualization of its dematerialization through the metaphoric gesture of body destruction were proof of a sensuality in Schwarzkogler that was disturbingly direct, yet often brutal, destructive and almost uncontrollable.

The tragically brief artistic career of Rudolf Schwarzkogler evolved in a particular situation determined by the cultural history of his native land of Austria. In the theory and practice of Viennese Actionism, the artistic elements take an active and critical position with regard to society, one therefore of implicit political consequences; they are elements that indirectly predict the utopia of an alternative society and culture, as well as that of a pessimistic



tive, and without hope, manifested in an art structured on the limits of intolerability. This art has not only shown possibilities of amplifying artistic activity but has also called attention back to the need to know oneself with provocative immediacy and disturbing brutality.

The art of Schwarzkogler is probably the most radical expression of the need to know oneself not only from an individual psychological point of view, but also from the point of view of social criticism and pathology. His radicalness is not simply an attempt to develop an aesthetic means of expression that departs from painting in order to arrive at new forms of artistic activity, as much as it is a dramatic awareness of the self and the representational ethical-provocative role of real art, which – albeit in a radically direct, pessimistic, self-oppressive manner – presents an authentic image of the *condition humaine* to us with burning intensity. The great artistic proclamations of the twentieth century were formulated between the two extremes of the optimistic-evolutionistic utopias of universalism that were projected toward the future and the self-oppressive, uncompromising, dramatic-pessimistic visions of the negative utopias.

Early in 1962, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl and Adolf Frohner elaborated projects for exhibitions in common which after some resistance materialized in the manifesto *Die Blutorgel* (together with Josef Dvorak) and in the action that was given the same name. It involved their closing themselves up for three days, starting on June 1, 1962, in Muehl's studio which was located at no. 1 Perinetgasse. The *Die Blutorgel* action represented a key event in the debut of Viennese Actionism. It should furthermore be underlined that the zoophiles were already then protesting (most likely unjustifiably in the case of the four Actionists) “about the disgraceful, injurious act against an animal, albeit a dead one”. This protest, especially in the case of the *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* of Hermann Nitsch, continued through the late nineties, at which time it was directed against “the laceration of the lamb” (which, for that matter, had already been slaughtered and was destined for consumer use!). Muehl and Frohner then began to produce sculptures made from scrap material.

Shortly before he withdrew from Viennese Actionism (primarily because, as he himself explained, he did not think he could continue to carry out his own work as a militant of the movement particularly in public), Adolf Frohner created numerous works during those years employing used materials, among which the triptych he made out of old mattresses in 1963, *Monument for Henry Miller*. In subjects such as these, Frohner showed a close affinity to the existentialist writers of his time.



Literary inspiration was therefore an essential factor in the art of Adolf Frohner. Dominating it, however, was an emotive intensity that determined his entire expressly structured figurative, poetical-sensual world. The literary and the plastic-visual par excellence combine to form therein a coherent, sensual unit, a spiritual-intellectual and sensual-pictorial combination of a poetic dramatization of figurative language. A new monumentality totally lacking in pathos (as in the example of the painting *Crucifixion*, 1976–1977, in the MMKSLW collection in Vienna) is manifested in pure pictorial form. In Frohner's post-Actionism paintings, one notes his courageous, unconventional continuation of the dramatic realism that went from Rembrandt to Courbet, from Slevogt to Ensor, from Soutine to Bacon.

The scene, the theatre, the representation carry out a central role in the overall work of Hermann Nitsch, who successfully realized his ideas for a new work of total art. While Günter Brus in his pictures and writings made the theatrical his theme, Nitsch created an actual, real "total theatre" which, in unrepeatability and without models, merged myth and aesthetics, religious metaphors and everyday life, the classic, the archaic, and even the barbaric. He had defined his friend, the artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler, as an Apollonian creator who aspired to the principles of beauty in perfect form: the ideal, spiritual beauty that paradoxically appears at the same time under a dematerialized and sensually intensified form. Sensuality here is "sublimated": it has abandoned the earthly, material desires of a body that seeks the satisfaction of the senses, and may thus be described as a pure, impersonal beauty that is no longer bound to the frailty of the body, a spiritual beauty in the sense of pure experiences.

In contrast with all this, Nitsch defines himself as a Dionysian artist who, through struggle and destruction (also self-destruction), through corporeality exasperated to ecstasy, and through the wild, unlimited pleasure of the sensual experiences of collective sin and redemption, attempts to relive the primordial mythical stories so as to define art, thanks to these, as the most intense experimental method that is capable of changing life and situated beyond good and evil.

In the total art work programme of his *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, Nitsch discovered the reserves of ethical and aesthetic meaning of the art of action that, originating from myth and structured by the philosopher-artist, manifests itself in the activity of the masses who participate in the representations. Nitsch combines the Medieval mysteries of the Passion, Catholic processions, and the spontaneous vitality and sensuality of traditional country feasts with the reinterpreted and demonically structured forms of the ancient



Rudolf Schwarzkogler,  
*3 Action*, 1965, photograph,  
cm 64.5 × 84.5, actor H. Cibulka  
(photo L. Hoffenreich).  
Courtesy of Beppe Morra,  
Naples



Mediterranean rituals of redemption and fertility, and with collective sacrificial ceremonies. This entire patrimony of ideas – pagan, Christian, Nietzschean and Freudian – is given a radically different meaning in order to verify the sense and role of artistic activity and the processes of cultural depiction.

Hermann Nitsch attempts to attribute an extraordinary meaning to art that can be embodied in aesthetic-physical perfection only in the invention of the total art work of post-mythological time. His art creates the myth that legitimizes the visual-plastic forms of manifestation and, at the same time, that spiritual and social environment – naturally only in the invention of the aesthetic – that can decipher the message and the meaning of the rituals.

This apparent contradiction that existed as a counter-strategy from the time of Romanticism up to the birth of the idea of the total art work is surpassed by Nitsch with the exasperated sensuality *ad absurdum* of immediate existential experiences which are intended as a form of universally valid perception. Just as Nietzsche put collective ecstasy as a form of perception in the centre of his interpretation of the birth of Greek tragedy, Nitsch, in his *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* tries to potentiate the radicalized sensuality and corporeality by means of the total art work, so as to attain a combination of feelings, physical experiences, and the collective revival as the principal element for arousing the aesthetic conscious.

In international literary criticism, Hermann Nitsch has been identified principally with the evolution of Austrian art after 1945 and, in particular, with Viennese Actionism. His *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* and its subsequent development in the fields of painting and installation, as well as his literary and musical activity, have made a significant and particular contribution to the late modern



total art work of Central Europe (Austria); a contribution imbued with Viennese intellectualism and determined by the specific social and political developments that took place in postwar Austria, especially after 1955.

The painter, the set designer, the writer, the musician, and the dramatist Hermann Nitsch all embody an attitude that the creative activity of the artist takes into consideration in an anthropological and historical-cultural context, while the artist (as a private individual) withdraws behind the figure of the art prophet, the philosopher, the pedagogue. In this regard, his activity is to be compared to the "socially plastic" one of Joseph Beuys, although Schiller's concept of "aesthetic education" and its inherent political or semi-political moralistic activity in Beuys relegates artistic activity more to the idealistic-romantic context of the stylized *Kulturkampf*. What convinces and yet remains enigmatic in all of Nitsch's work is that the individual works of art appear in a meaningful, complete form and have a visual-sensual, formal-dramaturgical clarity, so that they never become mere illustrations or demonstrative objects, or for that matter the "coadjutors" of ritual processes.

Hermann Nitsch: a legendary name, an extraordinarily important personality in the history of Austrian art after the Second World War, one who has attempted to recreate the total art work, a strategy of perfection that appears in the sensual-artistic form of the systems of spiritual, philosophical, aesthetic and social values. Nitsch is one of the most prolific and convincing of creators, and in his monumental development of the baroque-sensual and the Mediterranean and Austrian he has indissolubly united myth and life, art and theatre, philosophy and the pure aesthetic form. Certainly, in the past thirty years all his work has provoked violent debates and strongly contrasting opinions, and certainly the artists of the generation that followed his have had to free themselves from the powerful weight of his jocose-demonic monumentality. Nitsch, he who rages in stylized, Dionysian, demonic, boundless sensuality; he who commands all kinds of art with unlimited sovereignty and with an almost imperial will; Hermann Nitsch, who directs the great masses of those who recite in the *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* with a magical force and a monumental formal will, that same Nitsch represents the great, tragically beautiful aesthetic utopia of the total art work of the avant-garde, the radical unit of art and life. It is a utopia that is absolutely unfeasible in its romantic contradictoriness, and unattainable in all its perfection in a philosophical-historical sense.

In Alfons Schilling's activity, the programme of the radical reciprocity between art and life is integrated into the fusion between art and



semi-science, activity and observation, intervention and reflection. Schilling's work presents many elements of the objectivistic-analytical observation of art, kinetic experiments, and a didactic encyclopedic research typical of the Enlightenment. His activity, immediate participation, and active collaboration have played a decisive role. His systematic reflections about visual structures, and the observer's movements and changing positions constitute a practice that is not mechanically objective, but rather spontaneous and subversively improvised. Because of his position, Schilling represents another kind of artist, one who differs from the "guru" Otto Muehl, from the "mystic" Hermann Nitsch, from the "eccentric" Günter Brus, and from the self-destructive – to the point of renouncing himself, and a purist to the extreme – Rudolf Schwarzkogler.



**Günter Brus**

*A Walk in Vienna, 1965*

Action

Courtesy of Museum Moderner  
Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna

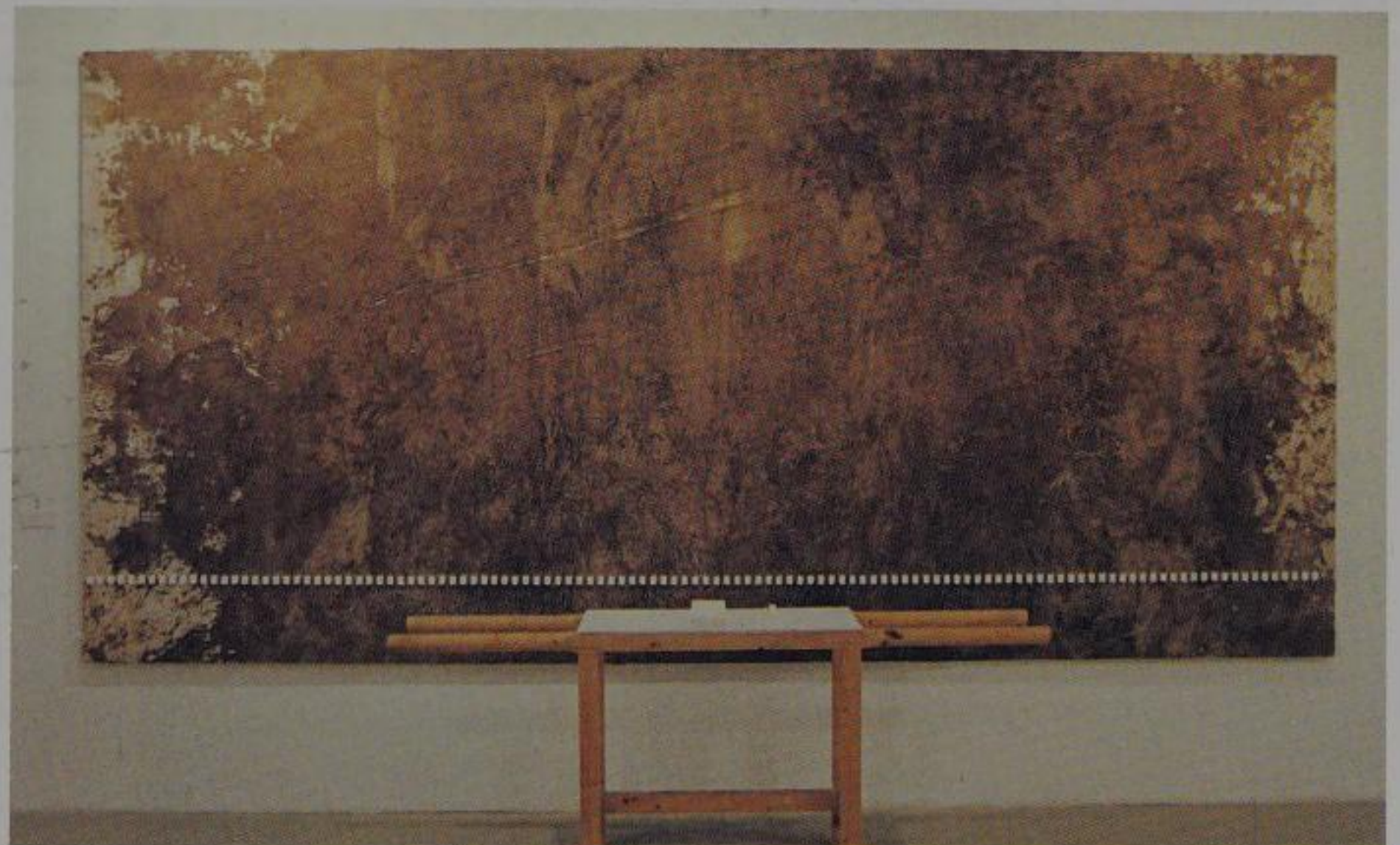




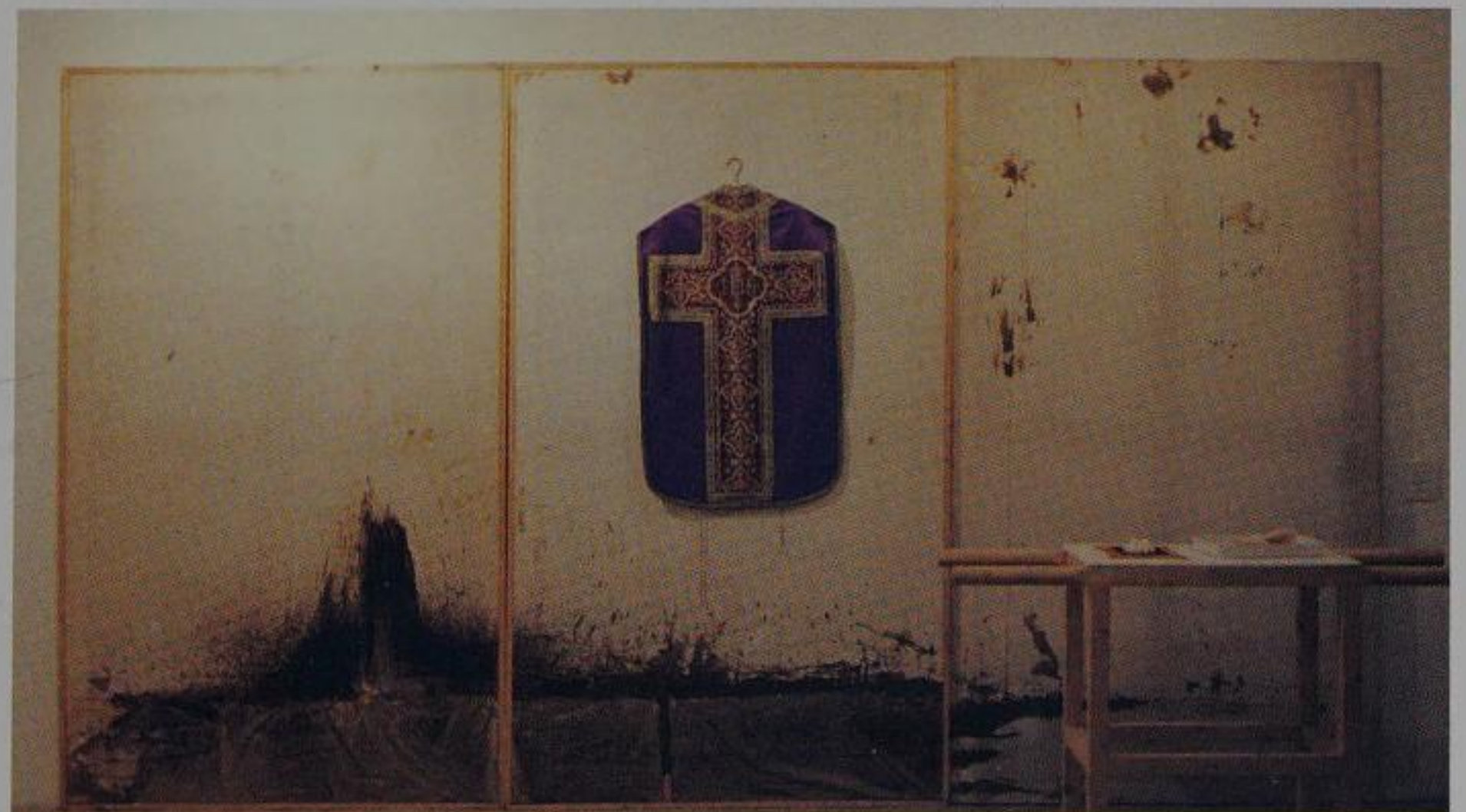
**Hermann Nitsch**  
*Naples, 1987*  
Courtesy of Beppe Morra,  
Naples



**Hermann Nitsch**  
*Trieste, 1978*  
Courtesy of Beppe Morra,  
Naples



**Hermann Nitsch**  
*Düsseldorf, 1974*  
Courtesy of Beppe Morra,  
Naples





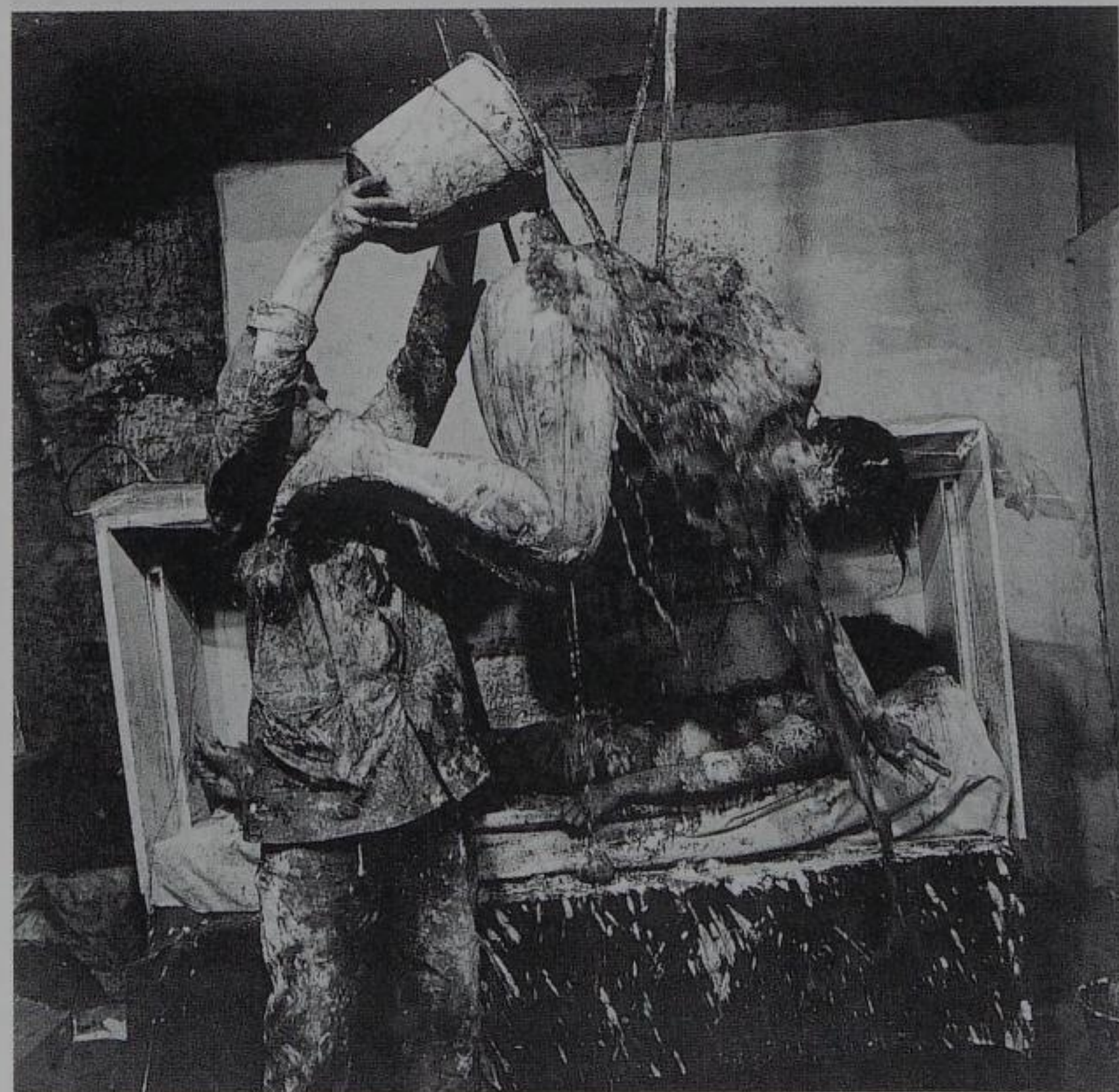
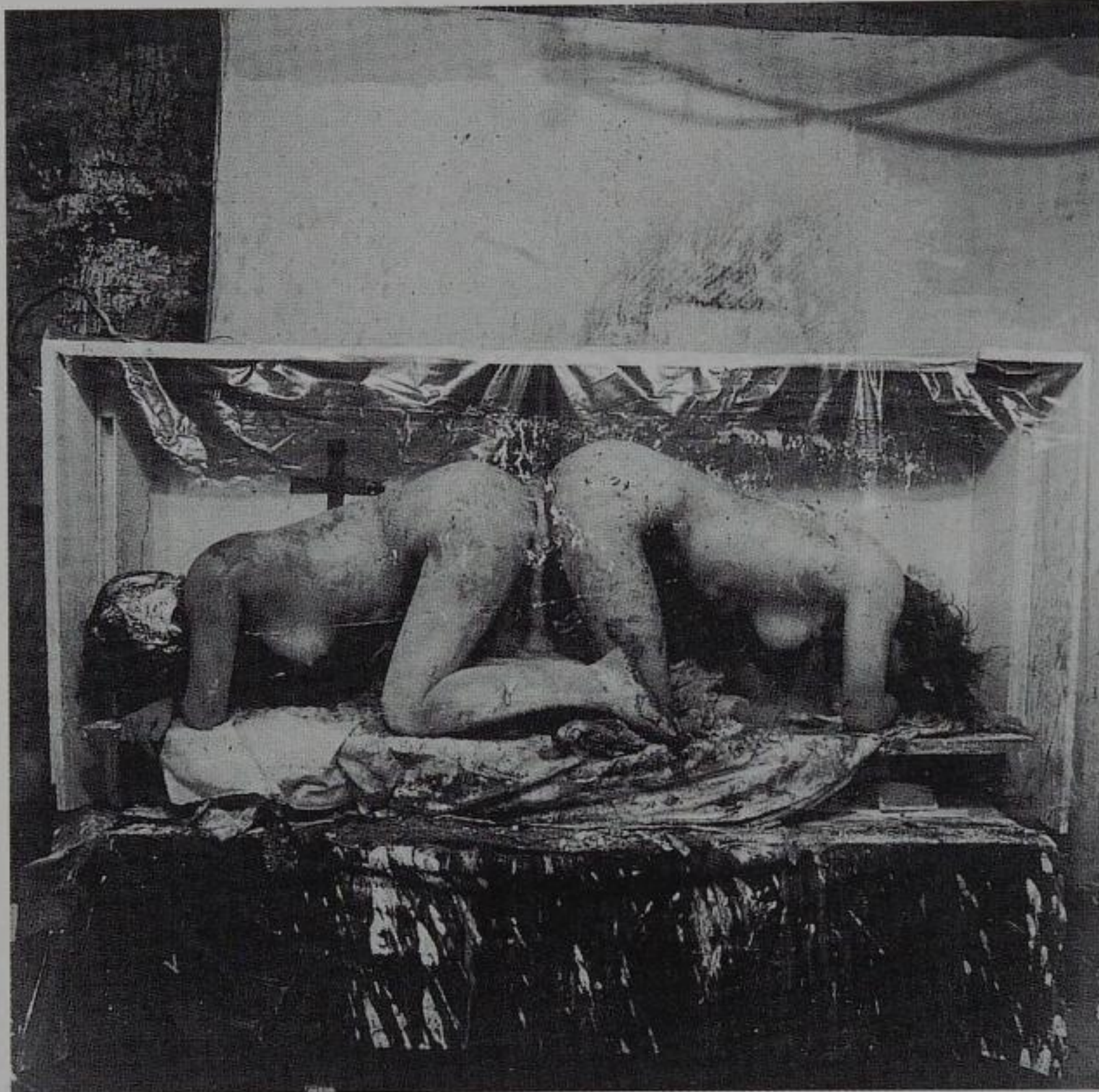
**Otto Muehl**

*Material Action No. 31*

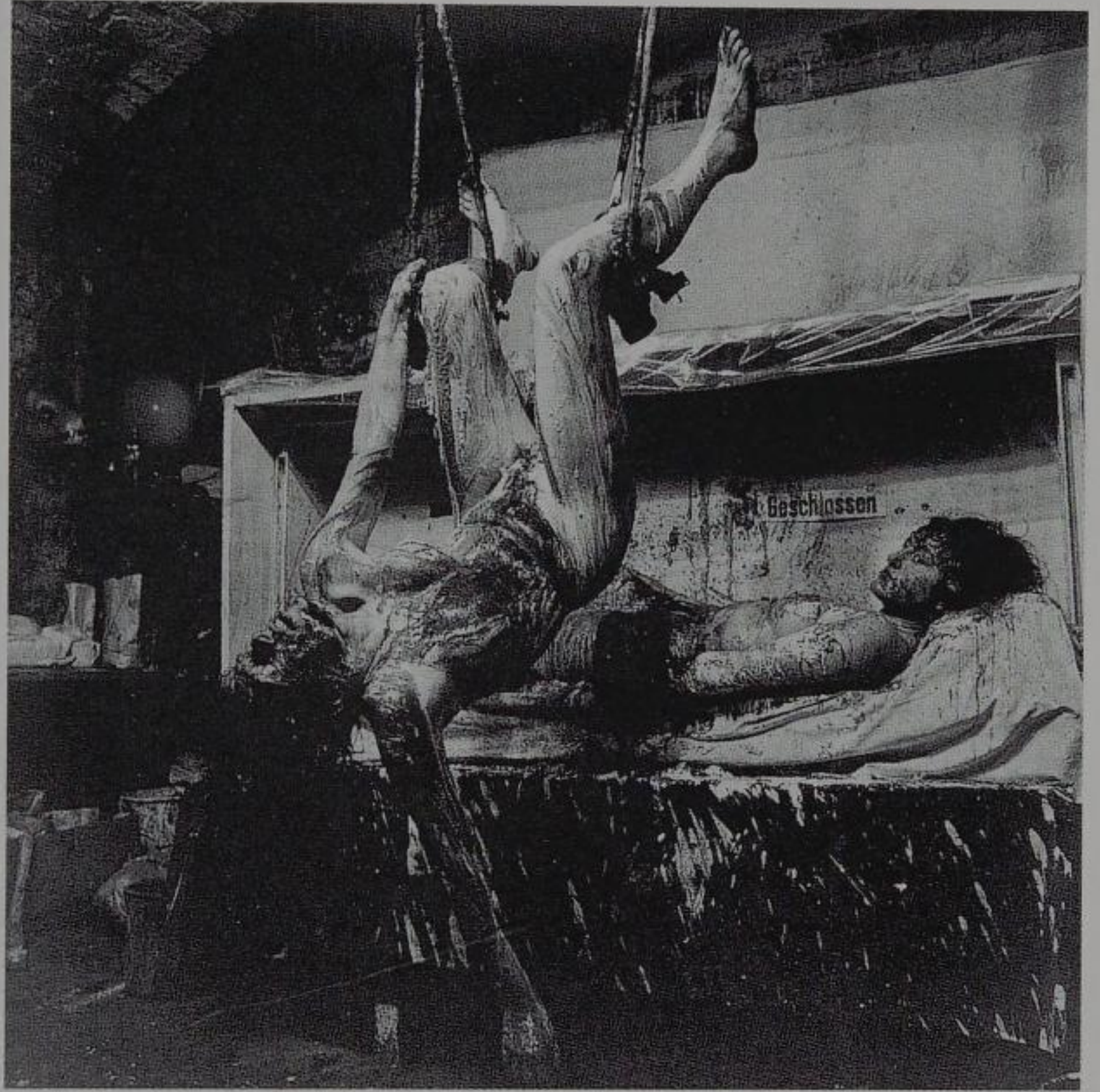
*St. Anna, 1966*

Photographs, cm 65 × 52

F. Conz Archive, Verona





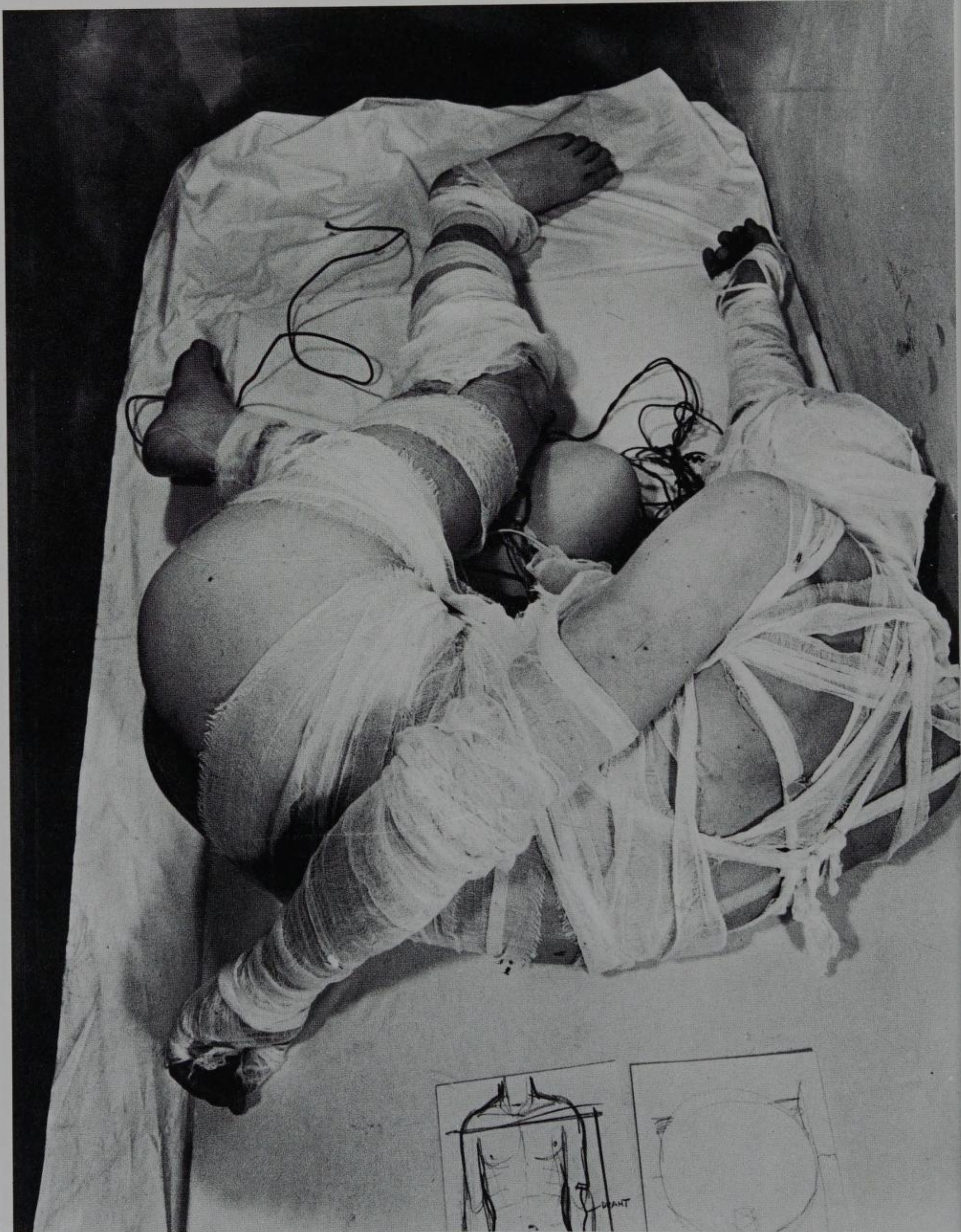




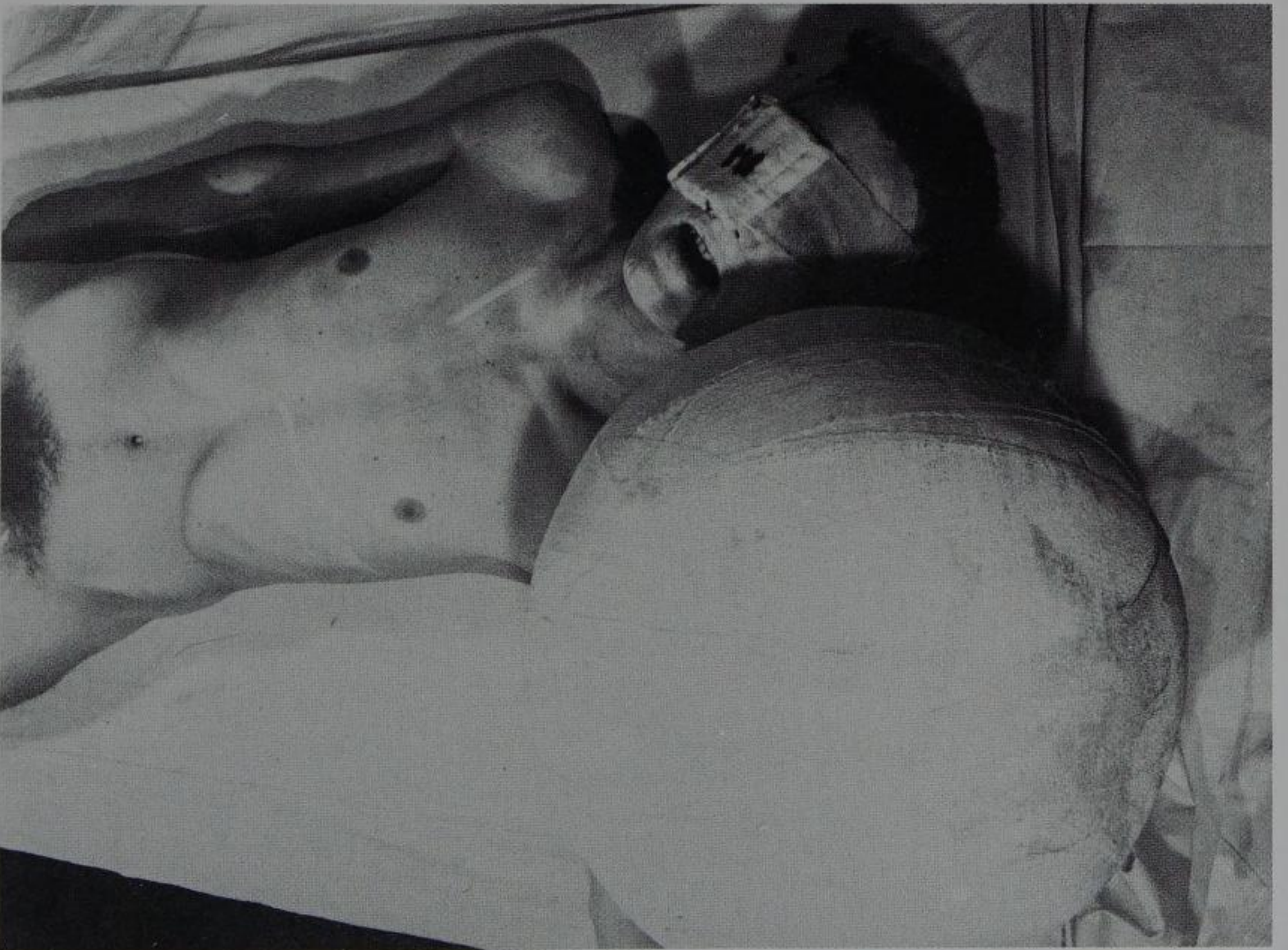
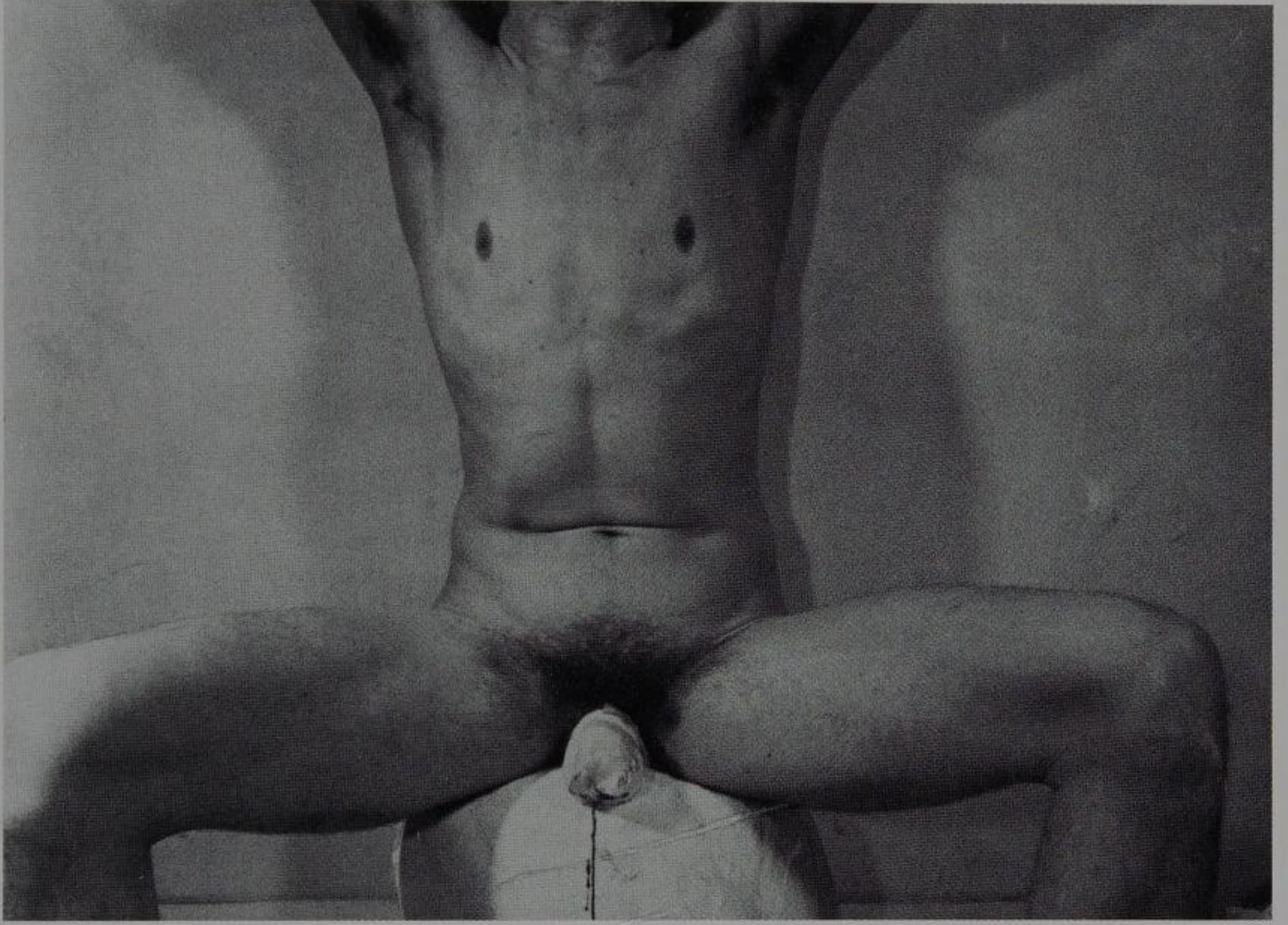
**Rudolf Schwarzkogler**

*3 Action* (actor H. Cibulka),  
1965

Photograph, cm 64.5 x 84.5  
(photo L. Hoffenreich).  
Courtesy of Beppe Morra,  
Naples













# Actionism

## **Continuity and Developments**

*edited by*

Dobriła Denegri

Cheryl Donegan

Franz Kepfer

Elke Krystufek

Via Lewandowsky





A film strip is a...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...

You can trace the mystery of ancient history  
through art of...  
You can...  
The Tower of...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...

And...  
All...  
You can trace the mystery of ancient history  
through art of...  
You can...  
The Tower of...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...

On the...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...

All you very...  
You can trace the mystery of ancient history  
through art of...  
You can...  
The Tower of...  
The film strip of...  
and there's a...  
The Tower of...



*Dresden-Berlin*

The group of artists that includes Else Gabriel, Micha Brandel, Rainer Gör, and Via Lewandowsky, who began to put on performances in the latter half of the eighties that were extremely shocking, cruel and sarcastic, imposed themselves on the art scene of the German Democratic Republic as a strong and disturbing phenomenon. The violent actions and sadomasochistic, destructive gestures of these four self-perforator-artists (*Autoperforationsartisten*) was their answer to a politically and culturally closed and oppressive world in which space for collective utopias no longer existed, but only for obscure, tragic, paradoxical personal visions.

By formally reconnecting to the tradition of Fluxus, New Dada, radical Body Art and Viennese Actionism (in particular to Arnulf Rainer and Günter Brus), they put on a series of performances until 1990 in which themes based on sexuality, narcissism, infancy, repression, sacrifice, and punishment, intersected, touched on, and undermined the taboos of the moral, hygienic Protestant body. Furthermore, by reviving ritualistic forms, but without referring to any aspects of a Dionysian, cathartic or redeeming nature, they produced performances that might paradoxically be defined as "Protestant rites".

This line, in particular, has been followed individually by Via Lewandowsky, who now creates not only actions, but also installations; and since the late nineties, the "suicide machines" that are presented on this occasion.

*Vienna*

Elke Krystufek made her debut on the lively Viennese scene of the nineties as a provocative, egocentric, undisciplined artist who exhibited herself in autoerotic actions and showed scatter pieces composed of paintings and drawings executed with rapid, expressive



strokes, together with citations and instantaneous photos that portray her in everyday situations that are private and intimate. Through forms that evoke Expressionism and Viennese Actionism (portraits by Schiele and Rainer, the first collages of Muehl), as well as those of the Californian performers, the artist composes and recomposes a chaotic world mixing voyeurism and exhibitionism, violence and pornography. But she is above all the protagonist, sometimes together with female pop icons, one who attempts to assert her own identity by rebelling against the still strong repressive conceptions of the body, both those imposed by Catholic morality and those dictated by fashion and the media.

In contrast with this bad girl, Franz Kepfer is also to be found in Vienna: this artist made his appearance at the end of the nineties with a work that humorously deals with one of the most unassailable of all taboos, that of male potency and virility.

After about a century, the conflict between *eros* and *thanatos* is tinged with irony in the performance *An Druck auf die Eier* (*Pressure on the Balls*) in which the artist, who is in a closed space, tries for about an hour to keep a huge phallus erect until he finally collapses from exhaustion. In reality, the phallus is an *objet trouvé*: a small iron column (80 centimetres high and weighing 20 kilograms) that was an element of the urban decoration of nineteenth-century Vienna.

### *New York*

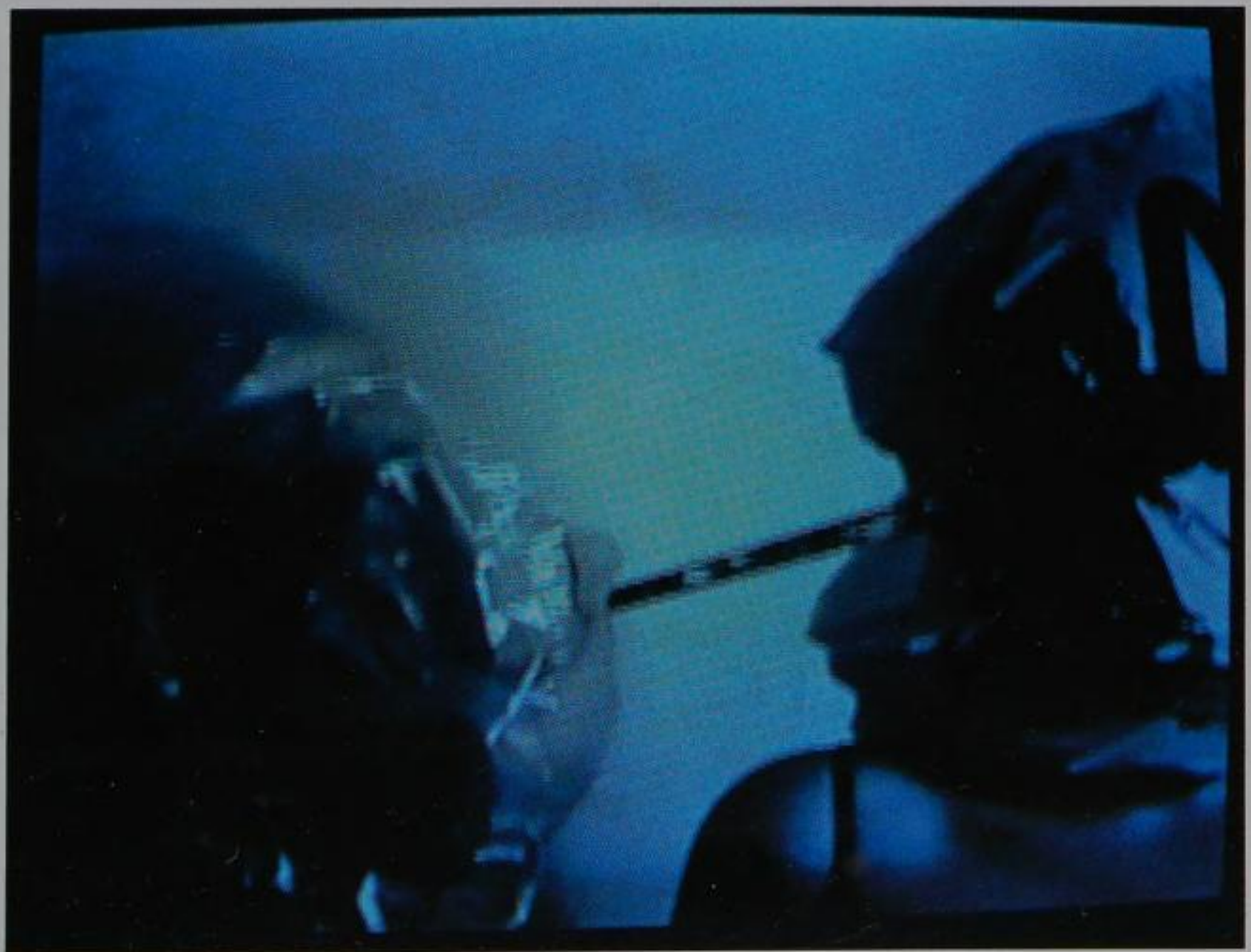
This is the third place on a much greater map that has been especially chosen in order to show what unites not only the artists presented here but many others who have not been named, but who have assimilated and expressed the artistic languages that have been introduced since the sixties in their work, and whose conscious yet nonchalant attitude toward the history of art has enabled them to continually move and change places within the different disciplines and spheres of reference.

This movement takes a single individuality (a body, an identity) as its departure point in order to reflect, interact and communicate within the global context.

The specific idea of the body becomes the motive and principal material that exhibits itself and transforms in photographs, video sequences, drawings, and paintings, relating to the historical precedents of the sixties. This type of attitude is to be found synthesized in the work *Artists + Models* of Cheryl Donegan who assembles the different processes of making art: she edits history and the present, and adds her own comments to the history of art, thus creating a work that brings to mind the complexity, heterogeneity, and the crossovers that characterize today's art.



**Cheryl Donegan**  
*Artists + Models*, 1998  
Videotape, 4'43"  
Basilico Fine Arts, New York



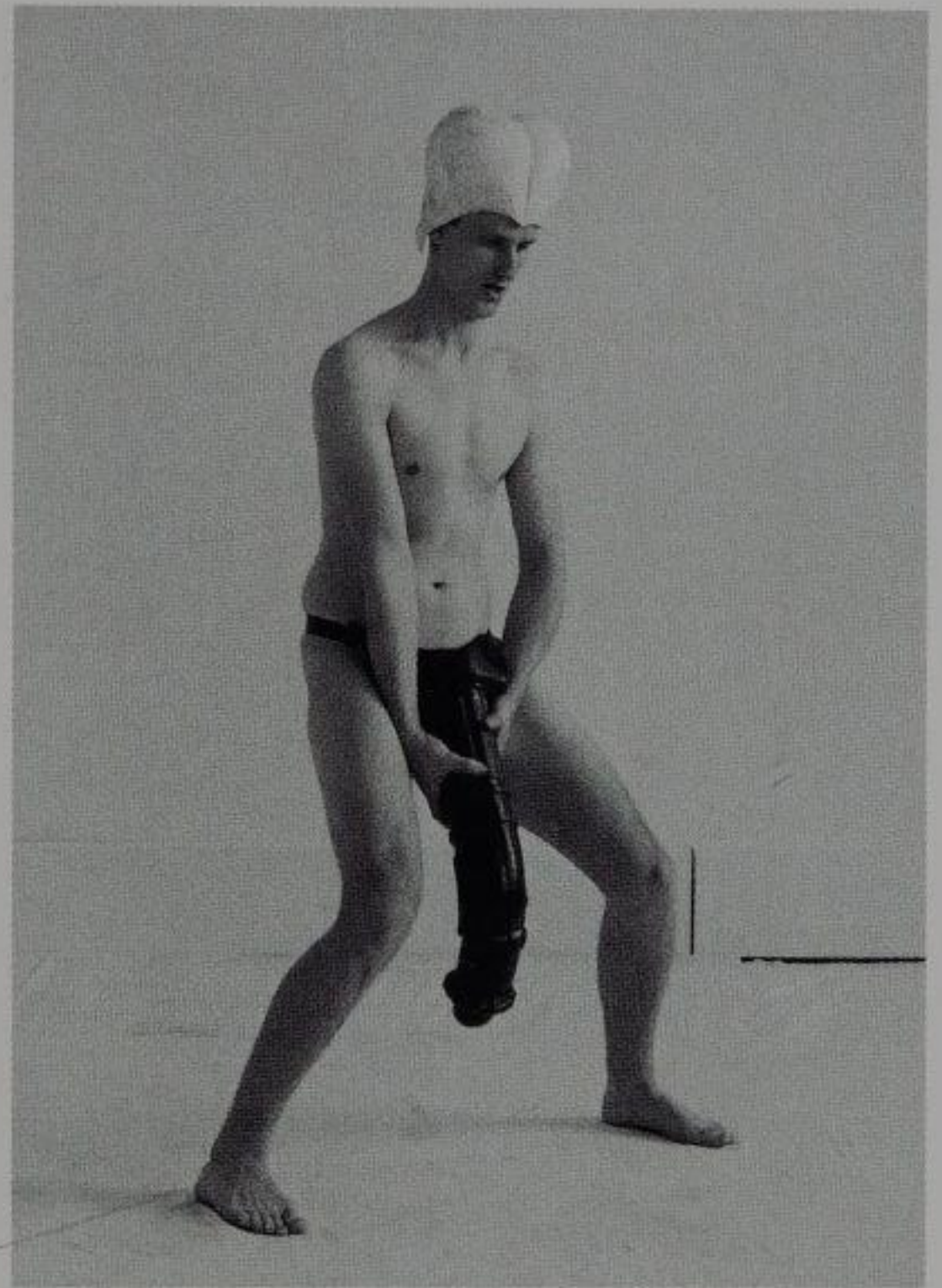
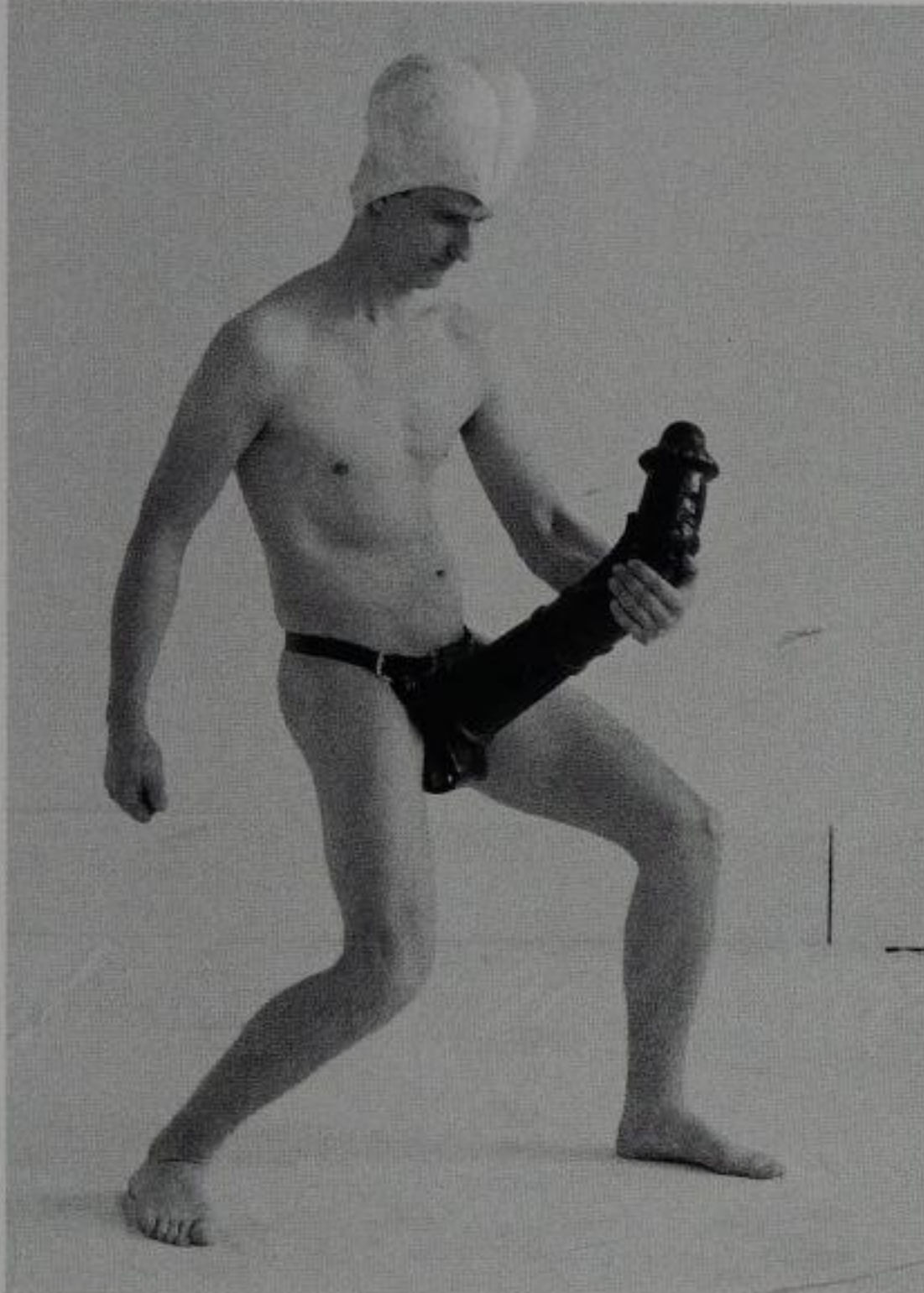


**Cheryl Donegan**  
*Untitled "with Lyrics", 1998*  
Acrylic, oil, pencil on canvas,  
cm 182 × 156  
Basilico Fine Arts, New York





**Franz Kepfer**  
*Pressure on the Balls*, 1998  
Video of the performance, 17'





**Elke Krystufek**

*Oskar Kokoschka Elk Elk (The  
Wind's Bride), 1999*

Acrylic on cloth, cm 180 × 140

Courtesy of George Kargl,  
Vienna





**Elke Krystufek**  
*Fauves*, 1999  
Acrylic on canvas,  
cm 180 x 140  
Courtesy of George Kargl,  
Vienna





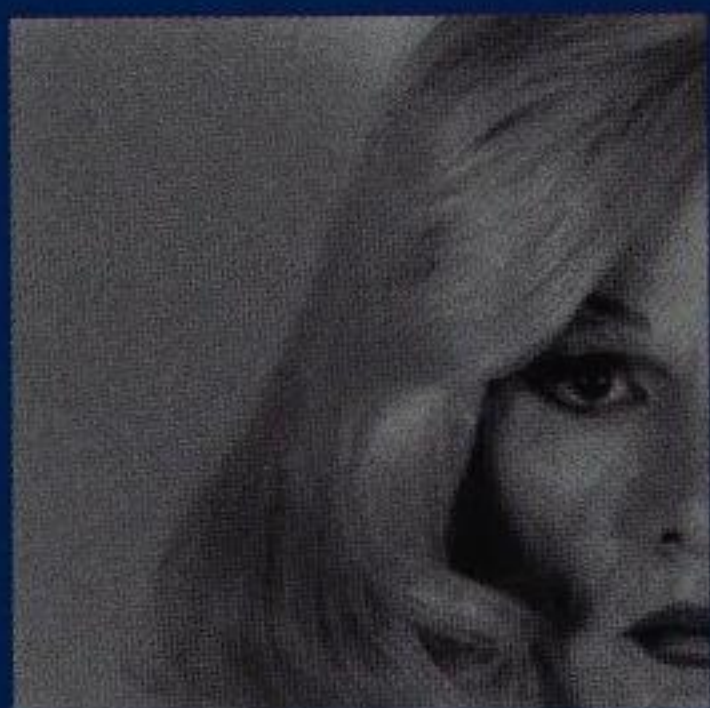
**Via Lewandowsky**  
*Bona Fide (To Drown),*  
*Bona Fide (To Kill),* 1999  
Installation, varying  
dimensions  
Courtesy of Arndt & Partner,  
Berlin













# Factory

*edited by*  
Alessandra Bergero

Andy Warhol  
Gerard Malanga  
Christopher Makos







Unfortunately, I have never been to the Factory, I am too young. I am part of the generation for which that special moment in history still represents a myth, a symbol of transgression. That's why, to satisfy an impossible desire and replace my impossibility of not having been there, I feel now compelled to reproduce a virtual reconstruction of it for the event *Art Tribes*, in collaboration with those who did visit the Factory...

For the visitor, stepping into this ex-beer factory here in Rome must feel like being thrown into the real momentum at the Warhol's Factory in New York, thirty years back...

*It's an open house with Andy Warhol and everyone's invited...*

*Paul Morrissey, Gerard Malanga, Viva, International Velvet, Nico, Valerie Solanas and many others ...*

*The couch ... The bathroom... The aluminum covering everything...*

*Making Music... Painting... Performance... Cinema...*

*Eating... Drinking... and many parties...*

This is an attempt at juxtaposing a moment of the recent past with the present time. It will give the viewer an inside portrait of an avant-garde tribe in New York City circa 1970. How it was created, how it continued to thrive and consequently impressed its style and ideas throughout the world. As a matter of fact those only apparently "improvised" ideas and concepts, the lightness of their own living and creating process with no boundaries, were a crucial part of the foundations of today's mass culture and consumption (i.e. the *Factory Diaries* – Instant and always-on video cameras are the base of the newest tv and mass media productions: *The Big Brother*, Internet Web Cams...).

This demonstrates, once again, that artistic movements, tribes of energetic creative people, are never-ending stories. The stories



keep evolving, developing and reaching all social levels, through all forms of communication and all nations (i.e. the same phenomenon happened with the Graffiti movement and Rap music). Artistic movements always create energy which transforms constantly through time and space.



The sixties marked the exploits of Andy Warhol's work in cinema. They were the years of *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Vinyl*, *My Hustler*, *Nude Restaurant* and the epic *Chelsea Girls*. Although they made a powerful impact, influencing and arousing the curiosity of many directors, both in Hollywood (Peter Fonda, John Schlesinger) and Europe (Bernardo Bertolucci, Jean-Luc Godard), they never received regular distribution, and so they were projected at the Factory, thereby becoming the firm's best known emblem, after the famous Campbell's Soup.

Again in the sixties the Factory became famous as a cult place, because it was where interminable parties were held after the projections; where Harvard heirs mingled and connected (in every imaginable sense) with Harlem drag queens, before the somewhat absent gaze of Andy, Joe Dallessandro, Jim Morrison, Cecil Beaton, Judy Garland, Tennessee Williams, the Rolling Stones and the "Swinging London" crowd, passing through, amid that rather minimalist glitter invented at a stroke of genius by Billy Name. "Life is a party" was the unwritten motto. The old premises had become a bit tight as activities multiplied; so in the first months of 1968 Billy Name started over decorating the new one, at number 33 Union Square West, with rolls of silver foil.

I was busy in Europe at the time, in Cannes to be precise, attending the famous festival interrupted by the explosion of student movements and consequent expression of political conscience of the various *gauchistes* (actually history was to reveal them as rather wavering in alignment) who descended on the Croisette demanding and obtaining the suspension of such a bourgeois ritual. Which was just as well, since some of the jurors, with Monica Vitti leading the way, were spending less and less time at the projections and opting for languid afternoons on luxurious yachts, in the best of company.



I myself was staying in Paris, scarcely aware of the revolution game in progress. I had the wrong clothes. I was with Jean-Pierre Rassam (before his death he vindicated himself by producing *La Grande Bouffe*) and Letizia Paolozzi, who took it all seriously, and following an even more “serious” parenthesis, launched herself at the *Union*, pardon, the *Unità*, the organ of the Communist party, and married an authoritative representative, not to be confused with Zurlì the Magician.

But the “party” was soon over. As we all know, de Gaulle “immediately put things right”. And so I was able to return to New York with lots to tell Andy, Paul and the others.

I went at once to the new Factory in Union Square: it was the afternoon of June 3rd 1968!

Andy was at the phone in an interminable conversation with Viva (superstars, even the few survivors, had, and continue to have, an incredible capacity for logorrhoea), but he still found time (Viva was doing all the talking) to greet me with affection and expectancy. The moment he hung up, Valerie Solanas, an aspiring superstar, and authoress of a violent feminist manifesto called SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men), fired off an interminable series of shots from a 32 automatic at close quarters.

Her eyes fixed and abstract and insane she turned and started on Paul Morrissey, gelidly reciting crazy reasons for the punishment. Joe managed to distract her and disarm her...

At 4.51 p.m., at the “Mother Cabrini” hospital in New York, Andy Warhol was declared clinically dead.

Five surgeons worked frantically for five hours, cutting and stitching lungs, liver, oesophagus, intestines and gall bladder. After many days of coma and years of convalescence Andy recovered. His stitched up torso was photographed by Avedon and became more famous than Campbell’s Soup.

Andy died in February 1987 through complications following an operation on the gall bladder.



When Andy Warhol and I talked about collaborating on a photo project, I was at once excited and knew I wanted to do it. But I wanted to make sure we created something new and different and not just trade on Andy's celebrity.

Not that I was any slouch; the reason I attracted Andy's interest (other than my blonde hair and youthful, bounding energy) was because of the success I had already achieved at that point in my career. Andy loved success – of any kind. The only thing he liked more than success was successful young men.

In 1977 I had published a collection of photographs – titled *White Trash* – which had attracted a lot of attention. *White Trash* included mavens of contemporary culture – Tennessee Williams, Halston, Marilyn Chambers (the Ivory soap spokeswoman turned porn star), Liza Minnelli, Paul Getty and others – along with pictures of the emerging Punk Rock music scene, with Debbie Harry (Blondie), Richard Hell and Robert Mapplethorpe's favourite, Patti Smith.

The visual juxtaposition of celebrity culture with an emerging downtown punk culture that had not yet found understanding amongst the masses was a first, and a source of endless fascination to Andy. He loved not only the photographs in the book, but also the book's design and, most importantly, its spirit. Andy asked me to art direct his book, *Exposures*, which documented the rich and famous, not-so-rich and not-so-famous, the barely clothed, fashion moguls, society matrons, artists and other eccentricities that passed before Andy's small, secretive Minox camera.

Andy loved my work and he loved carrying a camera, which he did often from the late seventies, when we became close friends, until he died. I learned enormously from Andy, but he, too, learned from me, particularly about photography. My photograph sensibility became his, as is clearly seen in a chronological review of his photography and my own.



My studio printed Andy's photographs, I art-directed them with rough edges, made bad shots better by blowing them up, and made good photos better by shrinking them.

Andy and I were usually on the same page, sharing a vision influenced by religious repression of sexuality and spirituality that is familiar to Catholic schoolboys everywhere. We found an ability to free ourselves from that repression through our shared photography. It served us both well. He was collaborating with an up and coming photographer, and I was collaborating with an iconic superstar Artist.

It was a perfect marriage.

Andy took me – and our cameras – everywhere. During the late seventies and early eighties the Swiss art dealers Bruno Bischofberger, along with Thomas Amman, the German art dealers Hans Meyer and Herman Wunche revived Andy's career with lots of projects, and especially lots of what we called "Pay the Rent" portraits of rich German/Swiss/French industrialists' wives and their families. It was during lots of these trips, Concorde first to Paris, then connecting to various points in Europe, always ending up at Rue Cherche-Midi in Paris, that Andy and I really bonded regarding the way we saw photography.

In early 1981, we started talking about collaborating on a project. The obvious was just some great photos of Andy, but somehow that didn't seem enough to me. I had already taken hundreds of thousands of images of celebrities and Andy had already been shot by the photographic greats of the twentieth century, including Irving Penn, Horst, Mapplethorpe and others.

Andy loved Dalí, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and anything surreal. In fact, Andy's Pop sensibility is considered by many a late-century Dadaism. I kept this in mind as my mind churned, trying to find the right collaboration with Andy. The project was important to me and I did not want to waste the opportunity on something that could quickly be forgotten or assigned to the genre of celebrity photojournalism.

The photographs that Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp did in 1921 were my inspiration. Duchamp dressed in drag, and Man Ray did the photos. It was perfect, except how could we do something similar in an inspired way without simply copying a brilliant idea Man Ray and Duchamp executed sixty years before? The life-long problem for artists: when is appropriation theft and inspiration creation?

Well, the Man Ray / Duchamp shots were very dark, very moody, very noir. Andy is very white, very bland, very very very white. White skin, white hair, just white right down to his soul. He was the whitest man I ever knew.

Duchamp wore a women's hat and dress in his most famous image by Man Ray. In telling Halston about the idea, he offered



a beautiful sequined gown, but Andy and I declined. The whole drag thing wasn't entirely comfortable for either Andy or myself. I decided to just change Andy's face and hair, but keep his signature jeans, white button down shirt, plaid tie and (during this period) cowboy boots.

We needed new hairpieces, Andy knew just where to go, Jean Louis on East 57th Street. I thought, "Great, this guy has it down." Late one afternoon, after one of Andy's advertiser lunches, and after his workout with Lydia his trainer, we hopped into a taxi and headed up to 57th where he showed me where the wig boutique was.

I say boutique, because my only reference to wigs was the shops that I would bike past on 14th Street coming home from the factory. Somehow I thought that's where the wigs would come from. But this was far better. The owner Jean Louis himself showed us several hairpieces, as they are called in the business, and escorted us into private rooms, where Andy tried on the wigs. We had trouble deciding which was best, so he bought several, five different ones that were eventually used in the final shoots. I even tried on several shorthaired wigs. It was amazing to realize how a new hairstyle – whether a man's hairpiece or a traditional women's wig – would really "alter" one's image. This is where the phrase and the final concept for "altered image" really came about, from this visit to the 57th Street wiggery.

And now came the shoots, who would do the make-up? There were two shoots; the first ones were done by the same make-up artist that did the make-up for Andy's portrait commissions of those rich women that I discussed earlier. The first shoot is where Andy looks a bit haggard and peculiar, this is because you really can't take a man and turn him into a woman's face with just a bit of make-up and clever facial expressions. This we learned, although this book is full of those shots, because with time all things become one, and the bad becomes good, and the good goes bad. The second shoot we hired a theatrical make-up person that really ratcheted it up a notch, finally turning Andy into beauty. Some straight guys actually ask me if some of the shots of Andy were of Faye Dunaway.

There were five wigs, five different shoots, 2 shoot days, 16 contact sheets, over 300 different poses, of which a few are in this book. When these pictures were first presented, in 1981, they did not attract that much attention. But, in time, that changed.

It is appropriate that this book project was made possible by a French publisher. I've always found French culture to understand nuance and subtlety in photographic ideas, in poses, facial expressions, body language, hand placement and other small details that differ slightly from one image to the other. That is so much of what fashion – an industry dominated by the French – is



all about. Almost imperceptible change, visible only to those with the most discerning eye and aware sensibility. Much of my work has been about nuance, seemingly slight differences that – when viewed by a perceptive eye – can provide a very different glimpse into the soul of the subject.

Until now, the story behind these pictures, including the depth of Andy's participation and enthusiasm for the project, has never really been told. In this book one can finally understand to the full extent Andy's input and my direction, with my subject and his intuition. The photos were taken in 1981. What follows is what has taken twenty years to accomplish: the understanding of "altered images".



## Working with Warhol

I worked with Andy during inarguably his most important period. The very first painting I screened was a 40" x 40" silver Elizabeth Taylor portrait at a shut-down firehouse on East 87th Street that Andy rented from the City of New York for one hundred dollars a year. In making the Elizabeth Taylor painting, masking tape was shaped to the contours of the face directly on the canvas to create a stencil that followed the lines originating from the acetate-positive.

Then we filled in the flesh tones, eyebrows, and lips by hand with Liquitex. When the paint dried, the masking tape was peeled off, resulting in shaped colours. Andy remarked to me once that his painting looked more like Alex Katz paintings before the silk-screen was applied. The last step in the process was to screen in the black paint. The paintings were a step-by-step transformation of photography into painting.

Andy loved all sorts of machines and gadgets, embracing new techniques and technologies, working with tape recorders, cassettes, Polaroid and Thermofax printing. But the heart of all this experimentation had as its central focus photography and the silk-screen for making a painting; this fulfilled by extension his love for the machine, because the screen process was very machine-like. Andy's reasoning was that the silk-screen would make it as easy as possible to create a painting. Ironically the process relied directly on manual application.

When the screens were very large, we worked together; otherwise, I was pretty much left to my own inventiveness. I had a firsthand knowledge of silk-screen technique, having worked for a summer as intern to a textile chemist in the manufacture of men's neckwear, so I knew what I was doing from the start.

Andy and I would lay the screen down on the canvas, trying to line up the registration with the marks we'd made where the



screen would go. Then oil-base paint was poured into a corner of the screen's frame, and I would push the paint across the mesh surface with a squeegee. Andy would grab to squeegee still in motion and continue the process of pressuring the paint through the screen from his end. We'd lift the screen, and I would swing it away from the painting and start cleaning it with paper towels soaked in a solution called Varnolene. If this was not done immediately, the remaining paint would cake up and clog the pores.

After work was completed, we would go over to Andy's house. The firehouse was three blocks from where Andy lived with Julia, his mother, a seemingly frail but hearty woman who was then in her seventies. She would make lunch for us, which usually consisted of a Czechoslovakian-style hamburger stuffed with diced onions, sprinkled with parsley, and always on white bread, with a 7-Up on ice.

Sometimes, he would have people over to view the work. Most of the paintings were rolled up in the corner of a very cluttered living room. He couldn't store the art at the firehouse, because there was no electricity or running water – no conveniences of any kind. The firehouse was basically a shell of a space. There was an opening in the floor where the slide-pole would have been. All this would shortly change.

In September of 1963, he was notified that the building would be put on the auction block. We went hunting for a place. We spent two months looking throughout the city. We covered Hell's Kitchen and Little Italy. The move forced Andy to get a better working space. Upon moving into the new studio, which had previously been a hat factory, all socializing at Andy's home pretty much ceased. When this happened, his work schedule changed, because once he'd leave the house for the day he was out for good. There was no returning home for lunch or anything. We were now in Midtown, on the East Side. Andy would arrive at the Factory, as it was now called, noon or thereabouts. We would work on and off until 5 or 6 p.m. and then go out to party.

The first works created at the Factory were a series of food boxes. Andy was fascinated by the shelves of foodstuffs in supermarkets and the repetitive, machinelike effect they created. Andy wanted to become totally mechanical in his work, the way a packaging factory would routinely silk-screen information onto cardboard boxes. He wanted to duplicate the effect, but soon discovered that the cardboard surface was not feasible. I found a carpenter in the East Sixties, and Andy hired him to build plywood boxes that we would then paint and screen, to create the illusion of the real thing.

The brand names chosen consisted of two versions of Brillo, Heinz Tomato Ketchup, Kellogg's Corn Flakes, and Mott's Apple Sauce. We obtained cardboard-box samples of each of these



products, either from a grocery store or, in the case of the Brillo box, directly from the manufacturer. I'd deliver the cardboard box, at this point flattened out, to the silk-screen manufacturer, Harry Golden, who made all of Andy's screens. Specifications were drawn up according to the size and density of the screen. In this case, we went for a total black-and-white contrast to complement the original we were working from.

We'd line up twenty or so boxes according to their size and carry the screen across their tops, one at a time. Then I'd clean the screen and turn the boxes on their sides and repeat the application until the six sides of each box were screened. We were able to get at least two sides done in a day. A hundred or more were produced in a period of a month. They were literally three-dimensional photographs of the real thing.

The ambience was workmanlike. When we were making a painting, the conversation would go something like, "Let's move it over this way." When we were working on the Elvis Presley series, I remember suggesting the superimpositions that we tried and successfully realized, which is why these paintings look the way they do. It was a creative period for both of us.

Sometimes, we'd go off-register when making a painting, and there'd be a flaw. Andy accepted these mistakes, what I would call "embracing the mistakes". We never rejected anything. If we were in the process of making a series of paintings and all of a sudden one painting went off a bit, or the image inadvertently overlapped the previous image, we kept right on moving along. We'd keep it, or, as Andy would say, "It's part of the art." He possessed an almost Zen-like sensibility.

Warhol was one of the first artists since Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists to embrace this seemingly casual attitude. Rather than create art by hand, he made art by way of his decision – to accept or discard. Appropriative selection, as it were. He would make decisions about how certain material would go in the screen. We would discuss the possibilities. He would turn the acetate one way, then another. A decision would be reached either to go with a halftone or stick with the contrast. If we agreed, "Yeah, that's great", the screen would be ordered.

The early paintings, from 1961 to 1962, were made from screen that lacked any halftone layering. He would draw from actual photos, and the drawing would be converted into a screen that was photographic by nature to re-create the drawing as a photographic image in silk-screen application. But a year or so later, he eliminated the drawing altogether and appropriated the photo head-on, turning it into a screen. I was sometimes Andy's photo researcher. We would discover images in newspapers and magazines, and I would search out photos in out-of-the-way, second-hand book shops, or bring something in from home.



He was still making art during the period when he started making films. In July 1963, poet-artist Charles Henri Ford and I took Andy shopping at Peerless Camera and helped him select his first movie camera – a 16mm Bolex with through-the-lens focusing, complete with motor-drive that allowed for a one-shot, three-minute take.

*Sleep* was Andy's first and, indisputably, his most famous film. Perhaps it was famous, too, as a film that few if any ever sat through. Andy told me, before he actually owned a movie camera, of wanting to make a film of Brigitte Bardot sleeping for eight hours. He said something to the effect that you could get to know what it would be like to watch a movie star sleeping. Obviously the concept was more essential to the realization than the protagonist, and, knowing Bardot was simply out of his league, he settled for a friend, John Giorno, who was a natural for not waking up.

John gave Andy a key to his flat, and Andy would let himself in. The Bolex was already set up, with the lights in place. Andy would turn on the lights and camera, continuing to film for about two weeks.

*Sleep* runs approximately six and a half hours of equivalent shooting time. Andy duplicated an additional ninety minutes from an equal ninety-minute section of the film to stretch it out to eight hours, approximating the generally accepted length of time for a normal night's sleep.

The film *Empire* was also shot mostly at night in the summer of 1964. We started shooting at around 6 p.m., in the daylight, and finished at one in the morning. The first two reels are overexposed because Andy was metering for night light, but it was all guesswork. In the course of the first two reels, and partway through the third, the skyscraper slowly emerges from a twilight haze, balancing out the exposure from the darkness that slowly blankets the sky. The Empire State Building was already a star of sorts after being featured in *King Kong*, but Andy wanted to make the building an even bigger star!

*Sleep* and *Empire* are very similar in style. Both treat time as a one-to-one ratio. They are black and white, with no sound, shot at night, and the camera never moves. The only major difference between the two films is that *Sleep* was shot with the Bolex, using 100-foot/three-minute film rolls, and *Empire* was shot with a rented Auricon equipped to shoot 1,200 feet of film for thirty-five minutes, nonstop. Andy would probably have filmed *Sleep* with the Auricon had he known of the camera's existence. He was learning as he went along, mimicking the process of Hollywood without knowing it.

It was John Palmer who came up with the idea for *Empire*.

388 Andy had the resources to get the concept realized, so he was es-



essentially the film's producer, but he got all the credit. He barely touched the camera during the entire time the movie was being shot. John, Jonas Mekas, and I changed the reels for him. The machine would do all the work in Andy's head. So there's a direct connection between the silk-screen, which is a photographic and mechanical process, and the movie camera, which also creates a photographic-type image.

Photography has always been the underlying theme, the consistent strain in Andy's work. If you were to take a strip of 16mm footage of *Sleep* and examine the frames horizontally, the repetitive images that occur in his head-shot paintings of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley would come to mind.

I remember attending the premiere screening of *Empire* at the Bridge Cinema in Lower Manhattan. Andy and I were standing in the rear of the auditorium. He was observing the audience rather than the film, and people were walking out or booing or throwing paper cups at the screen. Andy turned to me and in his boyish voice said: "Gee, you think they hate it? You think they don't like it?" *Empire* is a seven-hour movie where nothing happens except audience reaction.

Andy was not overly conscious of how an audience might respond to one of his films. In his mind, he was realizing a concept that was perhaps less original than the decision to put that concept in motion. He extended a minimal and appropriative vocabulary to include the kind of decision-making he applied to his painting. The only way his films would be accepted or criticized was through their audiences; otherwise, they would remain concepts in a can.

Andy is often characterized as a voyeur, someone who likes to watch. Watching takes time. You don't just look and turn away; it's a matter of optic absorption. One of the ways Andy expressed obsessive looking was through the movie camera. Most of his silent films intentionally took the same amount of time to make as to watch. A voyeur needs a window frame, or a blind, if he is to inhabit a situation in a secretive way. Andy's fascination extended to watching his audience sitting in the dark. It implied power over those who are unaware of being watched, as if they were sleeping. Andy's desire for power was initially realized through the voyeuristic tendency of distancing himself from what he was watching with the use of the movie camera.

His desire to make films evolved from his love of Hollywood – the allure, magic, and mystery he responded to as an adolescent, when he wrote to film companies for photos of his favourite stars. Years later, in 1965, Andy's introduction to Edie Sedgwick was the closest he had yet come to meeting someone who possessed the aura of a Hollywood starlet.

Edie was not career-oriented at the time she met Andy. Edie 389



was a blue blood. Her life imitated art to the extent that it was colourful and ephemeral. She had the one ingredient essential to stars – glamour. Glamour is not beauty, but it can become that. Glamour is aura. The person who already possesses an aura becomes beautiful. Andy was deeply fascinated with glamour on this level. He had an eye for it.

Eddie first starred in Warhol film with *Poor Little Rich Girl*, shot in her one-room studio. Her close friend Chuck Wein fabricated some notes and coached Eddie. The concept of “embracing the mistakes” played an integral part in the film. We shot two reels. When they came back from the lab, we previewed them and, to our horror, found them to be extremely out-of-focus – not even close to salvageable. After replacing the lens, we reshot the two long takes, a week later, and got it right. We took the first reel, from the first version, and sequenced it with the second reel, from the second version, so the film opens with an out-of-focus thirty-five minute take.

As the months progressed, Eddie appeared in a number of films, some especially scripted for her, the first being *Kitchen*. The films had an instant audience; reviews ran in the press; and Eddie’s career was launched. She thought Andy was making money with the films, because of all the hoopla. But the sales from his painting were supporting his highly speculative venture into filmmaking, which was a drain on him financially. Nevertheless, Eddie wanted to get paid. Andy never indicated that any payment would be forthcoming, except to say to her ever so often: “Be patient.”

Andy assumed, wrongly perhaps, that if he paid for whatever work was involved with his projects, the result would be of poor quality. He was convinced of this. This attitude turned on him with the portrait commissions he executed during the seventies.

At around the time Eddie was losing patience with Andy, an opportunity presented itself to her. Bob Dylan’s confidant and roadie, Bobby Neuwirth, acted as liaison in getting Eddie to come over to the Dylan camp. The people advising Dylan thought that they could develop Eddie into a singer and, in turn, capitalize on her already established reputation in the media. So it was easy for Eddie to finally leave Andy. By switching allegiance, she left the homosexual sensibility Andy represented and became part of a heterosexual/homophobic milieu.

Eddie’s association with Dylan’s group never developed in any viable way, because her talent was totally undeveloped. She thought she could further her career by being associated with Dylan, but this was merely optimism based on hope and dreams. And she soon learned that Bob had been secretly married during this time.

There are, of course, many points of view about Andy Warhol’s character. A good deal of mythmaking about Andy’s as-



sociation with Edie has been inspired by Jean Stein and George Plimpton's book, *Edie: An American Biography*. Andy did not turn Edie on to drugs – she got caught up in the drug scene shortly after leaving him. The closest Andy ever came to taking drugs was a prescription for the diet pill Obitrol. At the time, Edie was taking Obitrols to get through the day. Andy was taking them to lose weight.

What made Andy glamorous was his unique appearance, with his silver wig and lack of pigmentation. He was instant material for the media, and deliberately became his own instant star.

Andy was also simplistic. If he said to me, “Oh, that poem was fabulous, wow!” that was the end of the conversation. But he was intelligent. He was not an imposter. On trips, many a time, we would share the same motel room, which says something about the relationship I had with him. It wasn't all that verbal, but a genuine sense of trust existed between us. This trust was simply that Andy never wanted to be alone.

Andy lived with his mother for the greater part of his adult life, up to the time she died in the late seventies. A fear of being alone was very much a part of his shyness and reticence. I don't think Andy was as much consciously trying to hide anything about himself as he was attempting to maintain a mystique to cover for his own sense of inadequacy. His shyness allowed him to be private. He felt that his sexual preferences were no one else's business, and didn't go out of his way to make a point of his homosexuality.

Many people agree that the seventies were bad years for Andy's work. In a less urgent decade than the sixties, Andy was simply out of touch with those from whom he could have benefited creatively. He relied on his fascination with the so-called rich and famous. Those people never really had anything to contribute to his art except by way of their vanity. They paid dearly for a forty-inch square canvas of themselves. The vitality of Andy's art diminished to the point where all he was making were ooh-and-ah celebrity portraits, receiving incredible sums of money for them. I don't believe for a second that he had any genuine interest in his subjects. But these rising pop personalities that Andy had identified in his artwork of the sixties became transformed into icons for the eighties. This complete circle of events gave Andy a new surge of optimism and self-confidence... and then he died.

There's no denying that Andy Warhol is part of the history of modern art. But does the social phenomenon boost the artist or the other way around? Some claim that his greatest achievement was his adage, “In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes” – a frightening thought, because the culture does seem to be developing in ways that would allow one to be famous merely on charm.



If you were to meet Andy for the first time, and he liked you, he became your instant fan, and this, in turn, would give you a feeling of importance. He had a hypnotic power to create a personality for someone. He re-created his daydreams on paper and film. The secret to Andy's success was his own self-effacement.

*on pages 394-395*

**Gerard Malanga**

*Andy Warhol Factory*

*Group Shot*

33 Union Square West, 1968

Upper row (left to right):

Nico, Brigid Polk, Louis  
Waldon, Taylor Mead,  
Ultra Violet, Paul Morrissey,  
Viva, International Velvet,  
unidentified person.

Lower row (left to right):

Ingrid Superstar, Ondine,  
Tom Baker, Tiger Morse,  
Billy Name, Andy Warhol



**Andy Warhol**  
*Unpublished Portrait of Nico*  
Courtesy of Mario Zonta, Rome

**Andy Warhol**  
Shot of Nico from a scene  
in *Chelsea Girls*  
Courtesy of Mario Zonta, Rome



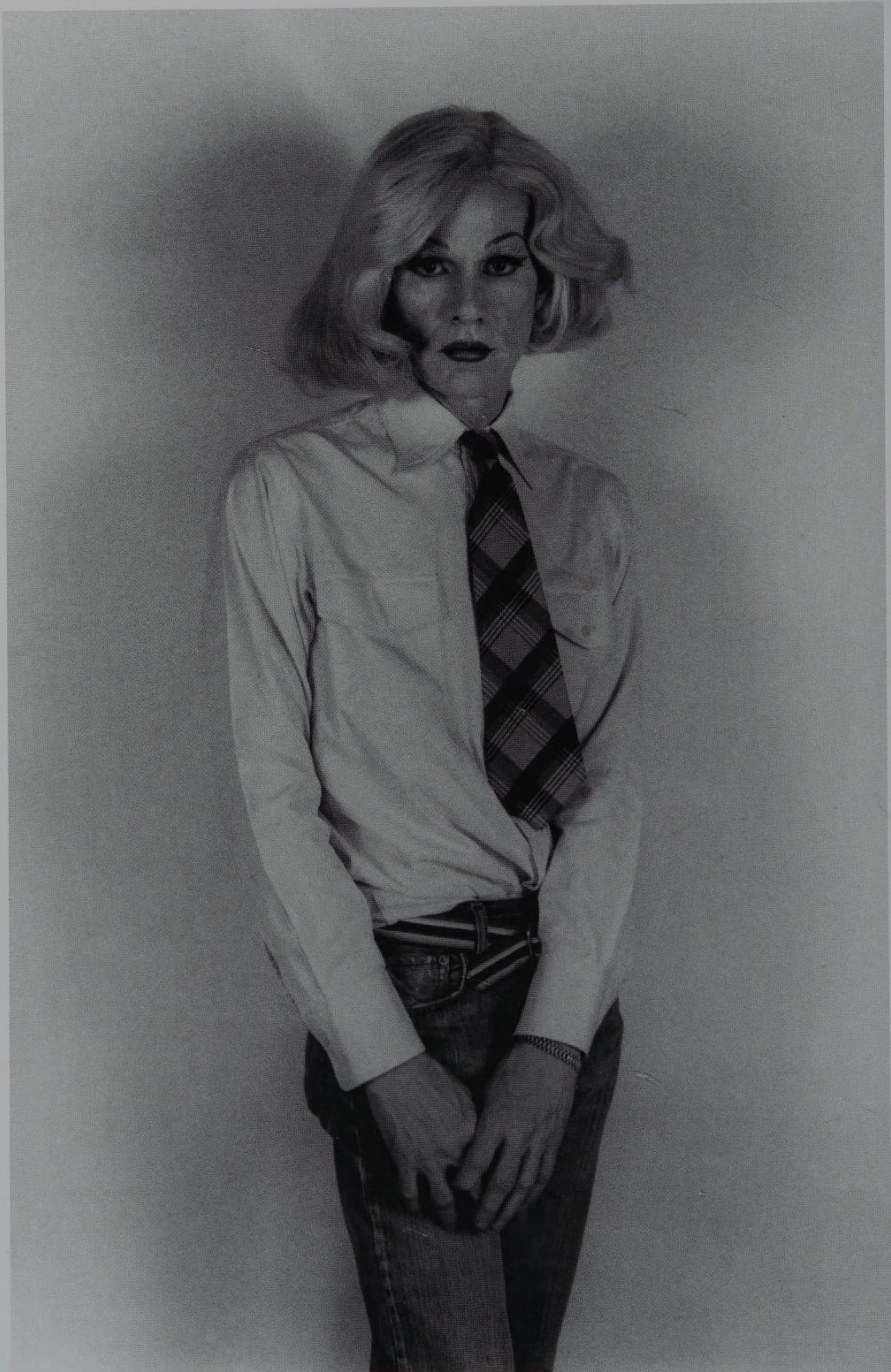






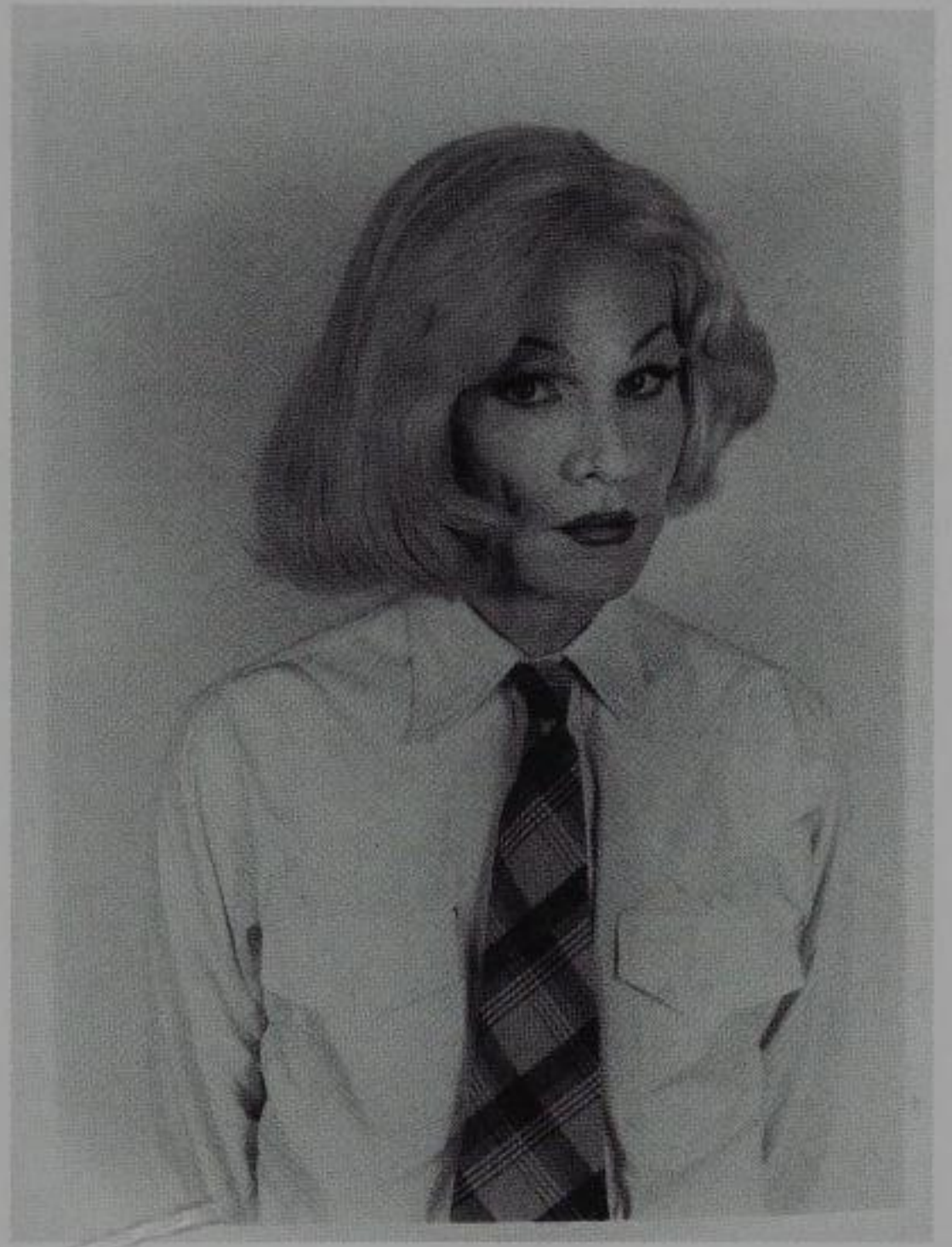








**Christopher Makos**  
*Andy Warhol, 1981*







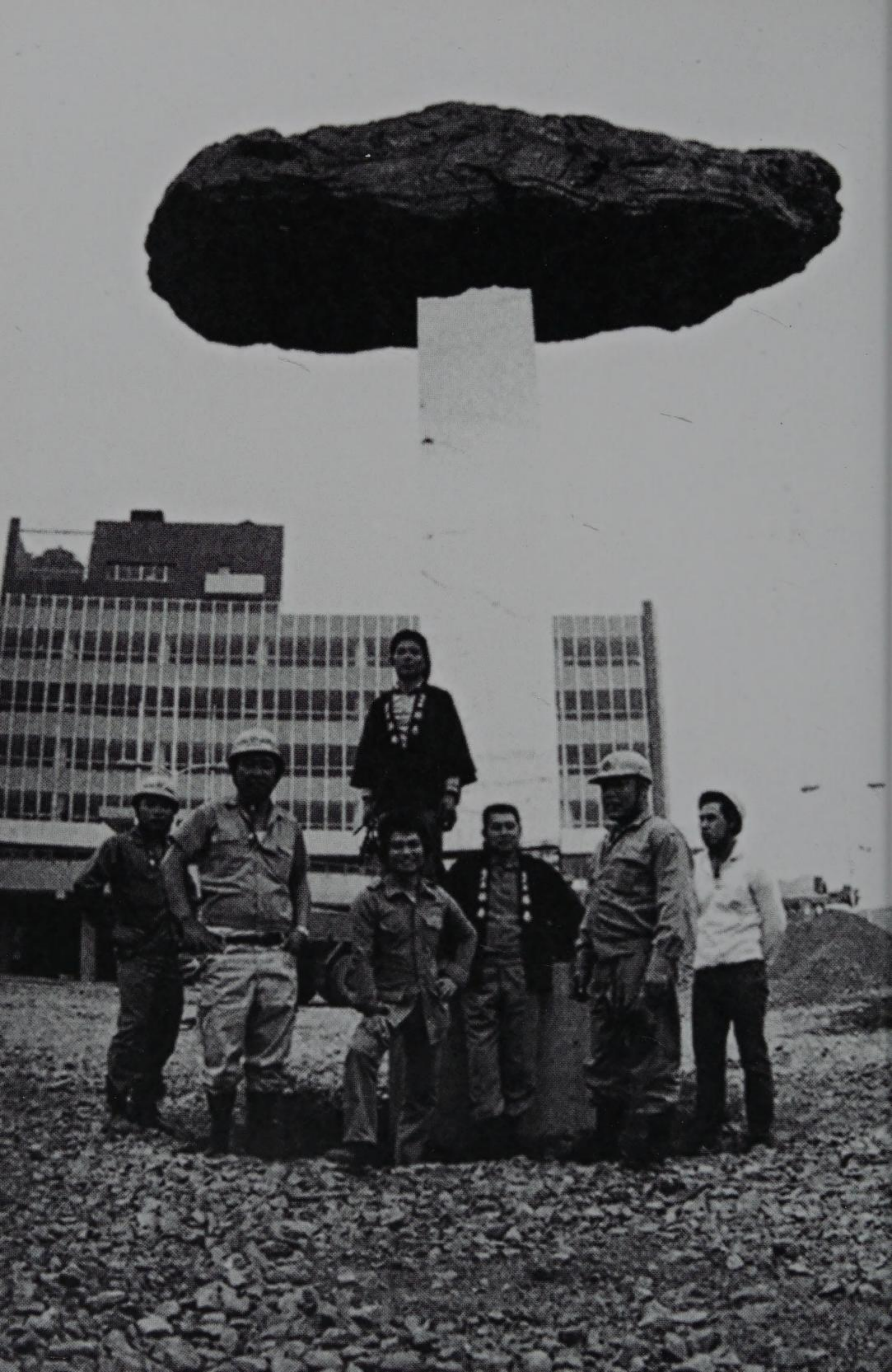


# Mono-ha

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**M**ono-ha is an art movement that, with a radical, definitive logic, denies the dualistic spirit underlying Western tradition. But the phenomenic analogy and the chronological correspondence with Italian Arte Povera and American Anti-illusion have ended up by shifting the discrepancies to a secondary level; in some cases this has led to discussion of the influence of these new currents on the Japanese movement, finding accordance with a pattern very frequently met in the history of Japanese art of the past. So it is well worth repeating that Mono-ha has made itself the spokesman of a radical refusal towards a system of Western art with its roots in the Italian Renaissance or in modern French art. It contests the aspects of Western civilization that have developed in the modern era, and its idealistic art springs from an anti-materialistic approach.

In the last ten years the museums of the West have repeatedly presented the Gutai art group and the Mono-ha as the two movements most representative in the postwar Japanese panorama. However the methodological criteria linking the Gutai to developments in Western art do not work for the Mono-ha. This statement may appear extreme, but it immediately becomes understandable if we take a closer look at the special situation which occurred in Japan from the Meiji period on, when every new art trend took its direction from new stimuli imported from the West. First *plein air*, then Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism and Constructivism and finally the Informel have continued to develop, never according to an interior logic, but as imported objects. Following the precept of Jiro Yoshihara ("Never copy, create something absolutely new"), entirely on their own the Gutai group had produced a non-figurative art that already contained the constituent elements of Performance and Conceptual Art. From this viewpoint it was a decisive cut-away from all the new trends in the art move-



ments seen in Japan until that moment. However the same striving for originality foreseen in its motto descended from the Western idea of progress. It is well known that Yoshihara had learnt this philosophy from Tsuguharu Fujita, who studied in France.

The case of the Mono-ha is altogether different. Within an art context that did not possess an intrinsic evolutionary logic, for the first time a form of expression could be founded on criteria that were absolutely original. From the point of view of structure, it was never a real group with members, leader, statutes and programme points. On the whole, the artists who belonged to it claimed that its activity began with the work *Iso-daichi*, presented by Nobuo Sekine in October 1968, when the first *Exhibition of Sculpture in the Open* was held in the Sumarikyū Park in Kobe; nor have substantial objections ever been raised by the critics as to this date. These characteristics of the Mono-ha might give the mistaken impression of a group who appeared on the scene out of nowhere; but there are precise historical premises that led up to its formation.

#### *Before the Mono-ha*

Although official exhibitions and a number of academic circles had resumed their activities in postwar Japan, the artists who pursued the freer modes of expression in making themselves known to the public had held only the two "independent" exhibitions of the Nihon bijutsu-kai and the Yomiuri shinbun-sha. At first, these exhibitions showed artists from the Paris Salon de Mai, and it was in this context that, in November 1956, the works of these Informel artists, who represented the most radical artistic field in the postwar period, were shown at the *International Exhibition of Contemporary Art* at the Takashimaya department store in Tokyo. It was not long before the influence of the exhibition made itself felt. As early as February in the following year, the ninth *Yomiuri Independent Exhibition* bore unmistakable traces. The art critic Shuzo Takiguchi spoke in his review of a "crisis in representation" concerning the excesses in this "expressionistic tendency" revealed by the painters.

There can be no doubt that, in assimilating the Informel, the Gutai painters played a fundamental role. Michel Tapié, theorist of the Informel, arrived in Japan about that time, in 1957, and recognized in the works of the group a special form of Japanese Informel. As a result, in April 1958, he organized the *International Exhibition of New Painting: Informel and Gutai*, presenting the peak movement of those years as an intrinsically Japanese phenomenon. As we mentioned at the beginning, the affinity between the works of the Gutai artists and Informel works is perfectly apparent, and the fact that there was no influence of one upon the other makes it an extraordinary case in modern Japanese art. While Art Informel



set out to create “another art” that was able to get beyond the geometric abstract that appeared in the Salon de Mai, the Gutai group, with its non-figurative painting, did not aim at getting beyond anything at all, it was simply an accidental phenomenon in the history of modern Japanese art, born of an auto-referential practice – the “search for originality”. After 1959 this sort of guiding principle adopted by the group, the search for the “never seen before”, began to be clearly manifest in the “independent exhibitions” of the Yomiuri. First, the painting was enriched with shards of stones and broken glass, then the proportion was inverted and solid blocks of materials were created. Sculptures made up of piles of junk began to appear and the conventional categories, sculpture and painting, lost their meaning. Concerning this Dada “anti-art”, Takiguchi states that the driving motive was “a creative impulse that could in no way be confined to forms and traditional techniques, inexorably carried out to correspond to a vague anxiety, a longing, a wager with the unknown”.

The artists moving in this area of expression in 1960 founded the New Dada Organizers group (it later took the name New Dada). But who were they protesting against when they were the exact Japanese version of the New Dada in America? In the States the New Dada painters, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, had turned Abstract Expressionism into an academic exercise and went out to do battle. Generally speaking, Japanese academicism was identified with the belt of art groups who were working with respect for techniques imported from the West, but these were not seen as a target to strike at or an obstacle to overcome. So the Japanese “anti-art” who absolutely needed an adversary to fight, struck out against the “something unknown” which was an imaginary academicism. During the 1964 *Yomiuri Independent Exhibition*, while the artists in throes of this sacred ardour were setting up independent exhibitions and carrying out collective activities all over the country, two new groups were born: Ba (place) and Hohoron (method).

#### *Towards Iso-daichi*

As we said, the work the Mono-ha started out with was *Iso-daichi*. It was presented in October 1968 by Nobuo Sekine at the first *Exhibition of Sculpture in the Open* at Sumarikyū Park in Kobe. The work consisted of a cylindrical hole, 2.7 metres deep, with a 2.2 metre diameter; the earth that had been dug out was heaped up beside it in a cylinder of the same dimensions. From a conceptual point of view, Sekine explained, “the work was intended as an application of topographical geometry (*iso*) in which I took a great interest at the time. Ideally, if you dig a hole in the ground and keep extracting the earth, you reduce the Earth’s crust to a sort of empty eggshell; then if the shell overturns, the Earth tips upside



down. So the point was to illustrate this process by creating in real space a cylinder in both negative and positive”.

At the beginning of the year Sekine had begun to present works that elaborated this concept, from time to time repropounding the “topological” motive in jutting manufactured objects where the cylinder was obtained from the composition of three-dimensional parts and flat painted surfaces. Concerning the underlying theory of these works, Sekine said that “contemporary art has absolutely no other task but that of discovering and inventing new interpretations of space”. For these works on the theme of *iso*, Sekine was awarded first prize in the three-dimensional objects section, at the eighth *Exhibition of Japanese Contemporary Art* held in June that year, and was chosen to participate at the above-mentioned exhibition in the open.

Katsuro Yoshida, who contributed to the creation of *Iso-daichi*, expressed the mentality of the artists working around Sekine in those years in much clearer terms: “The thing that really interested them”, he declared, “was to understand how to go about creating a work of art.” This statement is reminiscent of the Gutai principle: “Never copy; create something absolutely new”, but their premises stand at quite a distance from this, first of all because Sekine and Yoshida raised doubts on the very existence of art as they had conceived it up to that moment. According to what they assert, this interrogation on the meaning of actually *making* appears to result from studies at the Tama Bijutsu Daigaku, and particularly the teaching of Shigeyoshi Saito. Sekine remembers that Saito’s principles were not based on any fixed method, but consisted of an examination and confrontation of the work so that the possibilities that come up from time to time are able to emerge. Moreover Saito advocated the total refusal of the painted image: if every image is a concept created by man, then this could not be the departure point for the artist. But above all the master influenced many students with his particular acceptance of Taoism, which saw the world in terms of structure. We have no documents on these theories, but probably it was from here that the refusal of Western dualism developed, as expressed in the formula: “Being and Non-Being generate each other, the difficult and the easy complement each other.” In other words, don’t go looking for what differentiates one thing from another, but cultivate the awareness that the Ego exists because the other exists.

This outlook on the world was not only Saito’s, but also Jiro Takamatsu’s, who took his diploma in 1958 and appeared in the independent exhibitions of the Yomiuri. In presenting his work *Point* in 1961, Takamatsu – in winding black wire roughly in a centripetal direction – demonstrated the infinite and diversified range of possibilities of a point in space; while his next work *Rope* transformed real space into artificial space forming segments of objects



tied together, or else stretching the same rope from the gallery across the park to the station. This conceptual operation of capturing real space and transforming it into artificial space was developed even further with the series *Shadows*, where only shadows were painted on the canvas, according to the thesis that if shadows are painted, it means that the images must also be there, somewhere off the canvas. Finally, the last evolution in the awareness of the artifice of human vision was produced with the series *Perspective*, where chairs and tables were built according to an inverted perspective.

In 1967, the very same year *Perspective* appeared, Japanese attention was catalyzed by new movements from the West: Pop Art, Optical Art and Primary Structures; which only went to show how, over the twenty years since the end of the war, not much had changed in the way new trends had formed in the Japanese art world. Even the eighth *Exhibition of Contemporary Art in Japan* in May 1968 which laid the basis for the creation of *Iso-daichi*, reflected the general art scene: many of the winners, from Katsuhiko Yamaguchi to Koichi Moriguchi and Masunobu Yoshimura, could be ascribed to light art or technology. Up to that moment Sekine had never created three-dimensional works. It was owing to a mistake on the part of the organizers that his jutting *iso* was exhibited in the three-dimensional section where it won a prize. Like Takamatsu's *Perspective* series, this work – consisting of a cylinder that was half three-dimensional and half painted – worked on optical illusion. Its simplified structure and lively colour may have been reminiscent of Minimal Art and Pop Art, i.e. to the peak trends of the moment, but its composition was such as to create the illusion that it was produced on a surface that was flat and three-dimensional at the same time, and thus represented the world in relation to the visual consciousness of the subject, following Takamatsu's line of expression.

#### *Birth of Mono-ha*

In October 1968 Sekine was pursuing his “search for new interpretations of space” when he conceived *Iso-daichi*, a happening during which he and some friends dug a hole in the ground and heaped up the excavated earth beside it. For the first time, the place was the earthly terrain and the material a pile of earth, while the “topological” works he had produced before had consisted of building carbon encrusted boards painted in bright colours, within the “official” space of the art gallery. A certain number of critics placed *Iso-daichi* in relation to Land Art, which had begun to appear in America in 1967, but with his preparatory sketches of the work Sekine left some notes on “a conical sculpture in Ginkakuji sand” as a solid example of where his original idea was created. Land Art had never gone further than transforming the earth into an ob-



ject or sculpture. But Sekine had his sights on the structuring of the world, and this came very close to the symbology of the Japanese garden. Thus the creation of what may be considered the founding work of the Mono-ha, *Iso-daichi*.

The two artists who participated in the happening, Katsuro Yoshida and Susumu Koshimizu, had been working on the subject of optical and spatial illusion; but after *Iso-daichi* they began to produce works which revealed the structure of the world through the exhibition of specific materials. U-Han Lee, who was met by Sekine a few weeks after *Iso-daichi*, confirmed the existence of several points of contact in their lines of expression. The meetings between the two artists became more frequent and Yoshida and Koshimizu also began to take part, until in February 1970 the article by U-Han Lee "In Search of Revelation" appeared in the review *Bijutsu Techo*, with the first declarations of Mono-ha poetics. In his article U-Han decreed the death of the representational function which had belonged to modern art, and announced the creation of works able to "reveal" the natural world in such a way as to make its structure visible.



**Noriyuki Haraguchi**

*Children's Land*

Work exhibited at the Open Air

Contemporary Art Festival,

Yokohama, April 1970

(photo © Shigeo Anzai)





**Kishio Suga**

Work exhibited at the 5th Japan Art Festival, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, July 1970 (photo © Shigeo Anzai)

**Lee U Fan**

Work exhibited at the *Aspects of New Japanese Art* show, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, August 1970 (photo © Shigeo Anzai)









**Susumu Koshimizu**

Work exhibited at the *Aspects  
of New Japanese Art* show,  
The National Museum  
of Modern Art, Tokyo,  
August 1970  
(photo © Shigeo Anzai)









**Koji Enokura**

Installation at the Walker  
Gallery, Tokyo, March 1971  
(photo © Shigeo Anzai)





**Nobuo Sekine**

Work erected in the Shiki City  
Plaza at Saitama, June 1972  
(photo © Shigeo Anzai)

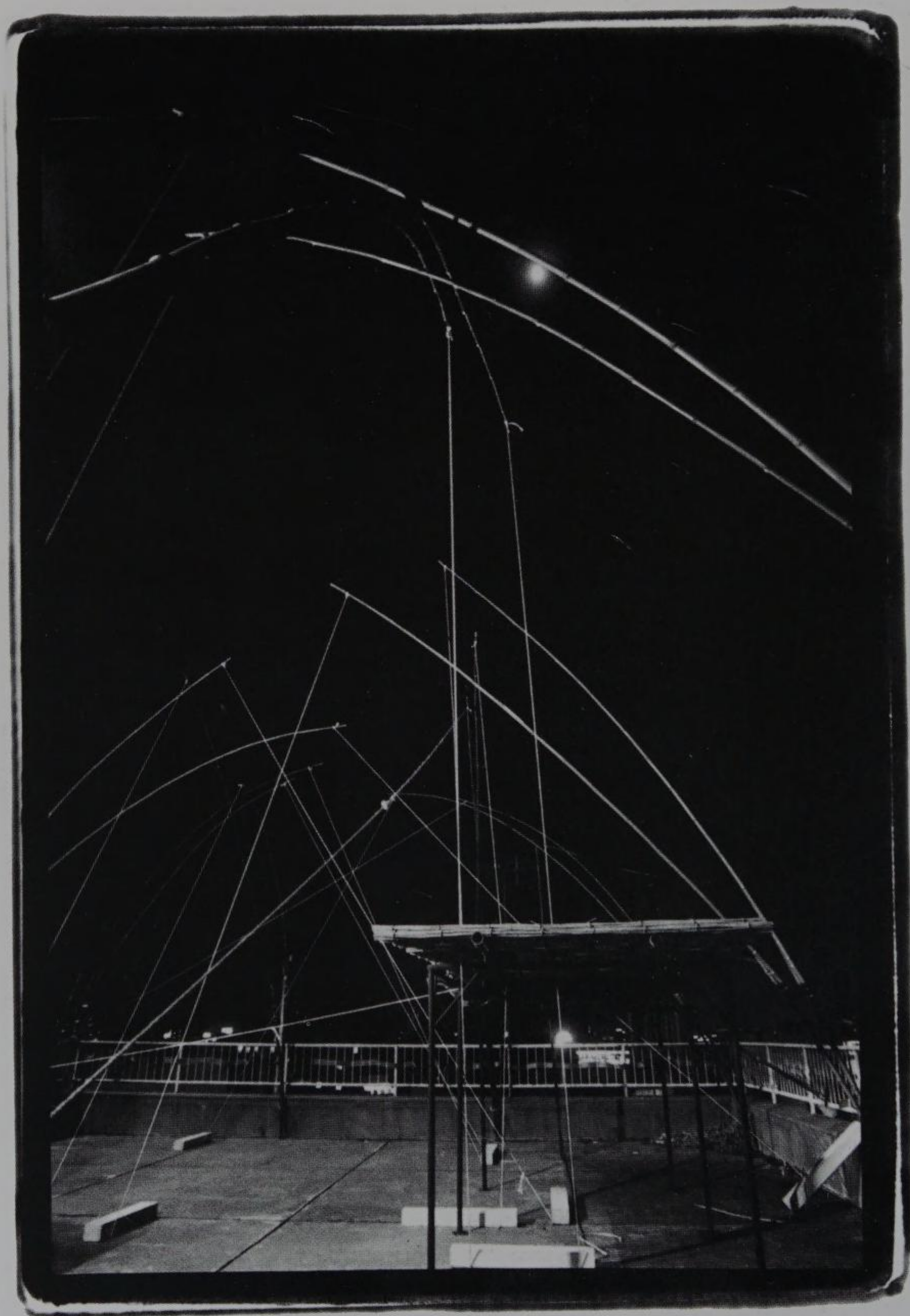




**Kishio Suga**

*Event*

Roppongi, Tokyo, November  
1972 (photo © Shigeo Anzai)





**Katsuhiko Narita**  
Installation for Tokyo Biennale  
'70, Tokyo Metropolitan Art  
Museum, 1970





**Lee U Fan**

Installation at the Tamura  
Gallery, Tokyo, July 1974  
(photo © Shigeo Anzai)

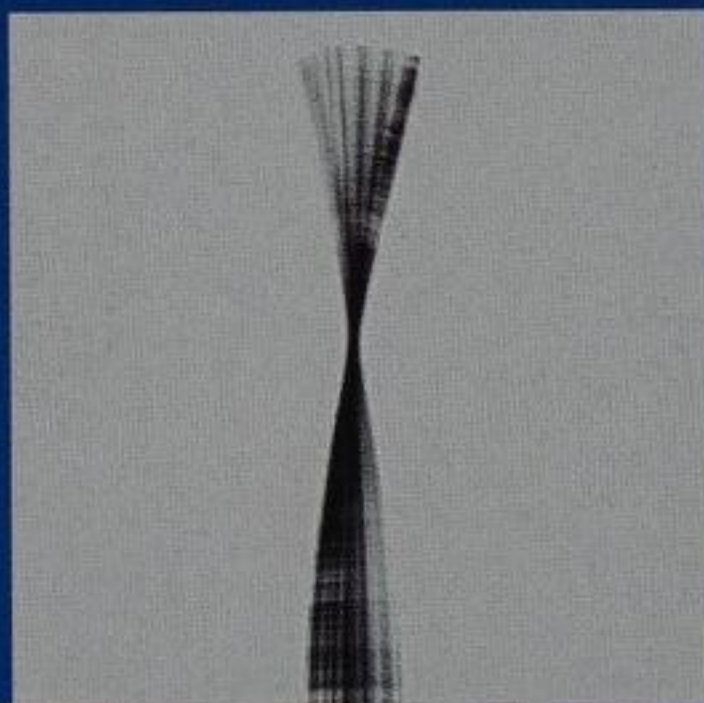




**Kishio Suga**  
Installation at the Galerie 16,  
Kyoto, July 1974  
(photo © Shigeo Anzai)







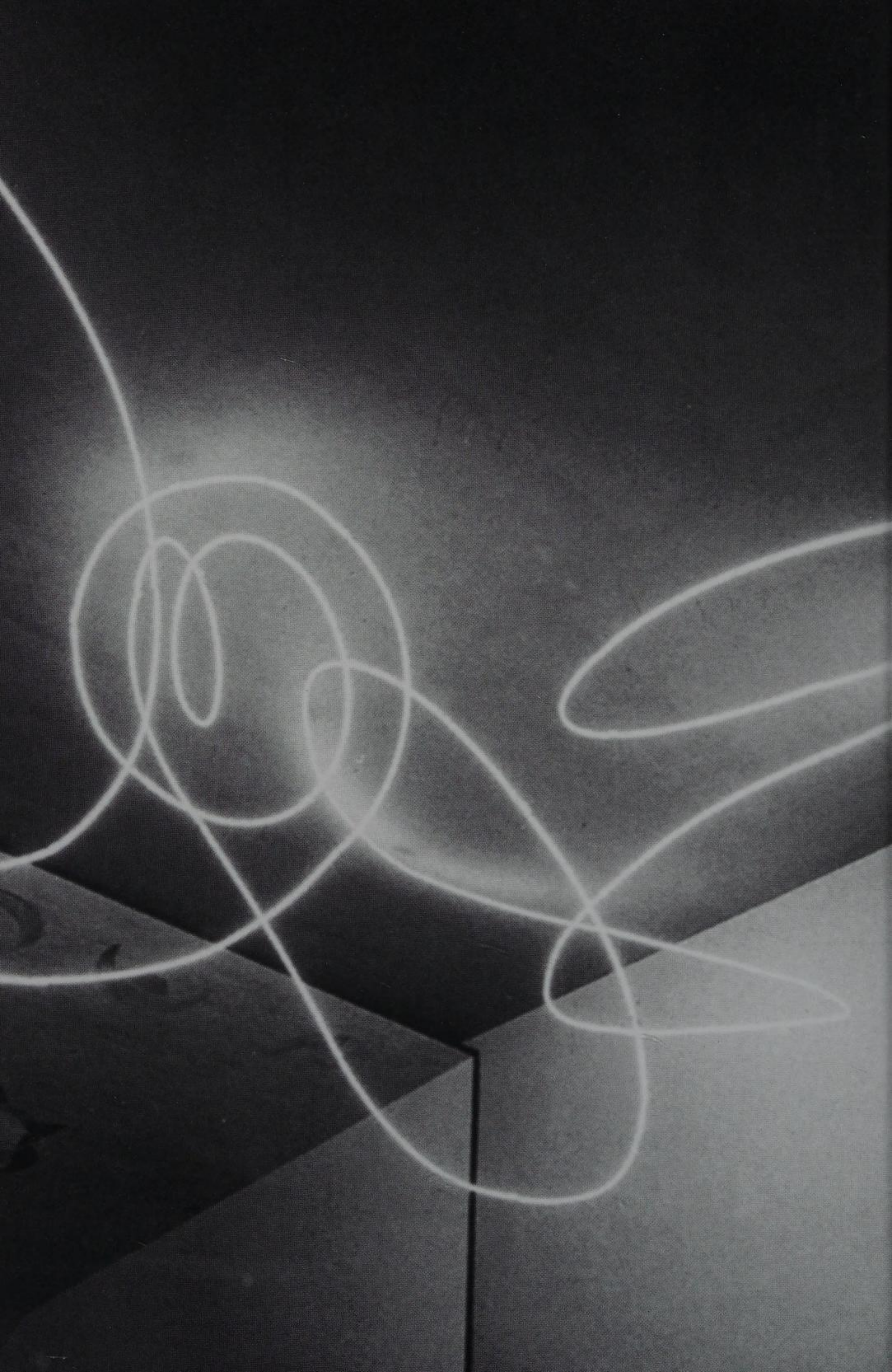


# Techné Tribe

*edited by*  
Tommaso Trini

Billy Kluver  
Robert Rauschenberg  
Lucio Fontana  
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Nam June Paik  
Shigeo Kubota  
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Piero Gilardi  
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Maurizio Arcangeli







“**O**ur culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999).

“The ecology of disappearance. All these works bound to modern technologies have a ‘possible’ character. They sediment a permanent physical condition with difficulty [...]. The concept of the original expires and a new interpretation of the *work of art in the era of its mechanical reproduction* as urged by Benjamin is realized. Not a work that is reproduced an infinite number of times, by the multiplication of its presence, but an absent work that reappears on request. Until today our conception of the world has been one of ‘putting’, the era of ‘removing’ could now be arriving” (Paolo Rosa / Studio Azzurro, *Rapporto confidenziale su un’esperienza interattiva*, 1999).

“We have seen in the efforts to connect relativity theory with Cubism and Futurism, and Abstract art with quantum theory, how analogy rests on the disregard of the different meanings of the terms *space*, *time*, and *simultaneity* – unlike, say, the meaning of perspective as projective transformation in geometry and painting. But the common features of modern science and art are more likely to be found in aspects such as the individual character of scientific imagination and discovery, in the inventive processes, in the ongoing collective activity, in the critical openness to the new, in the models science offers of sustained searching, questioning, and freedom of thought. [...] Replying in 1946 to the inquiry of Paul Laporte, an historian of art who had submitted to him an unpublished article comparing Cubist painting and



the concepts of space and time in the theory of relativity, Einstein spelled out his ideas on the grounds of aesthetic value and judgment in art and science [...] in which he denied the supposed correspondence of Special Relativity and Picasso's Cubist style" (Meyer Schapiro, "Einstein and Cubism: Science and Art", 1979, in *The Unity of Picassos's Art*, George Braziller, New York 2000).

"I find your comparison rather unsatisfactory. If I disregard the practical value of a science, I do see something similar in scientific and artistic activity. Both strive to constitute from parts a whole which is in itself unclear, but in such a way that the order underlying that recomposition produces distinctness and clarity. The distinctness and clarity thus achieved give us a deep satisfaction. This is realized in art as well as in science. In science the ordering principle that produces unity is the logical connection, while in art the ordering principle remains anchored in the unconscious. In the latter it is always a matter of traditional modes of connection, which are felt by those who live in that tradition to be just compelling as the logical connection is felt by the scientifically oriented.

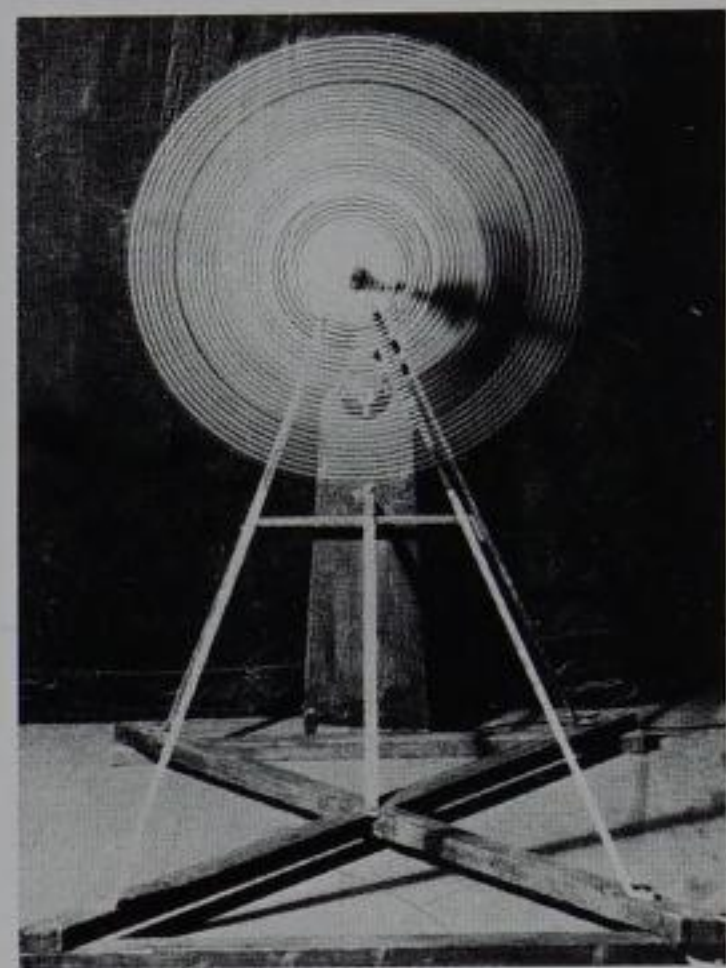
"The essence of traditional modes of connection in art is shown clearly in the simple forms of art, e.g., in musical melody and in ornament which rests on an intuitively grasped regularity. In both cases the means of effecting lucidity are perceived as necessary, in a way similar to logical inference in mathematics. With more complex forms of art those basic means of producing lucidity or 'unity' are easily grasped.

"A work of art can therefore be experienced and evaluated as such only by those in whom the relevant traditional modes of connection are alive. For them there is no other sanction than their living existence. If they are given, the work is good or bad in relation to them, according to the perfection with which, based on the traditional methods of composition, the impression of lucidity is achieved.

"If the foregoing is correct, it is absurd to try to evaluate traditional modes of composition (the languages of the periods of art, so to speak) relative to one other.

"Now, as to the comparison in your paper, the essence of relativity theory has been incorrectly understood in it, granted that the error is suggested by the attempts at popularization. For the description of a state of affairs one uses almost always a *single* coordinate system. The theory says only that the general laws are such that their form does not depend on the choice of the system of coordinates. This logical requirement, however, has nothing to do with how the single specific case is represented.

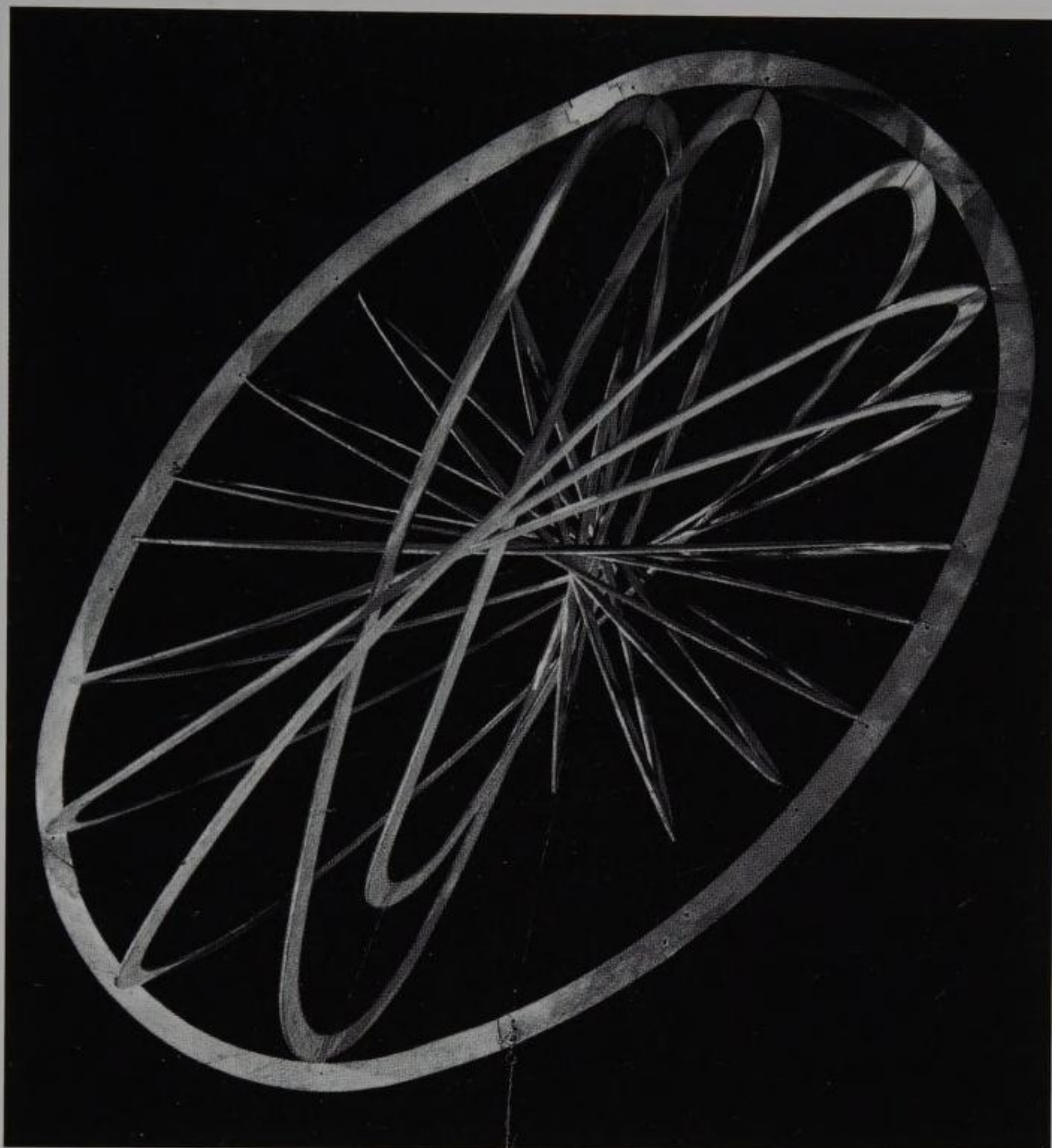
422 A multiplicity of coordinate systems is not needed for its rep-



Marcel Duchamp, *Rotative Plaques Verre*, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut



Aleksandr Rodchenko,  
*Suspended Oval Construction*,  
1919



Techne Tribe



Vladimir Tatlin photographed  
in front of the model for  
his *Monument to the Third  
International*, 1920

resentation. It is fully sufficient to describe the whole mathematically with reference to *one* system of coordinates.

“This is quite different in the case of Picasso’s pictures, as I do not have to elaborate any further. Whether in this case the representation is felt as an artistic unity depends, of course, on the artistic antecedents of the viewer. The new artistic ‘language’ has nothing in common with the theory of relativity” (Albert Einstein, 1946, in Paul M. Laporte, “Cubism and Relativity, with a Letter of Albert Einstein”, in *Art Journal* 25, no. 3, Spring 1966).

“What is a medium? We offer this simple definition: a medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real. A medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media. [...]

“Transparent immediacy. A style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium (canvas, photographic film, cinema, and so on) and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation. One of the two strategies of remediation; the other is hypermediacy.

“Hypermediacy. A style of visual representation whose goal



is to remind the viewer of the medium. One of the two strategies of remediation; the other is (transparent) immediacy.

“Remediation. Defined by Paul Levinson as the ‘anthropotropic’ process by which new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies. We define the term differently, using it to mean the formal logic by which new media refashion media forms. Along with immediacy and hypermediacy, remediation is one of the three traits of our genealogy of new media. [...]

“In addressing our culture’s contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy, this film (*Strange Days*) demonstrates what we call a double logic of *remediation*. [...]

“Like other media since the Renaissance – in particular, perspective painting, photography, film, and television – new digital media oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity. [...]

“The two logics of remediation have a long history, for their interplay defines a genealogy that dates back at least to the Renaissance and the invention of linear perspective. We do not claim that immediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation are universal aesthetic truths; rather, we regard them as practices of specific groups in specific times. Although the logic of immediacy has manifested itself from the Renaissance to the present day, each manifestation in each age may be significantly different, and immediacy may mean one thing to theorists, another to practicing artists or designers, and a third to viewers. The diversity is even greater for hypermediacy, which seems always to offer a number of different reactions to the contemporary logic of immediacy. Remediation always operates under the current cultural assumptions about immediacy and hypermediacy.

“What we wish to highlight from the past is what resonates with the twin preoccupations of contemporary media: the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves” (Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999).

“Future projects. We wanted to deal with the problems regarding project interactivity, a future with meaning, and avoid being pulled by a new necessity dictated by technological evolution. We succeeded by seeking continuity with our previous video environment experiences, and by keeping two clear points in mind: to create spaces of *collective fruition* and to utilize *natural interfaces*.

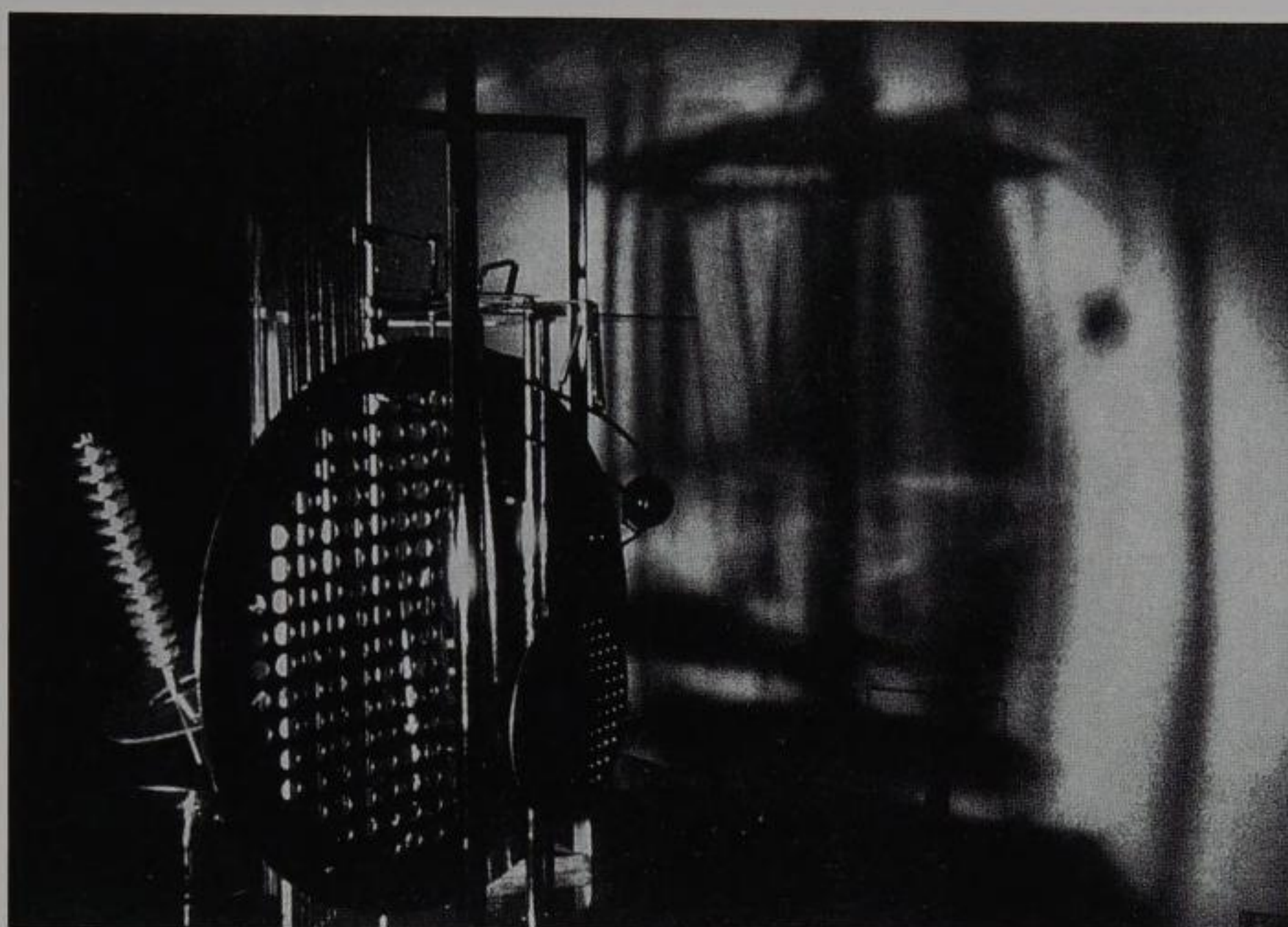
“Both these events had to converge to formulate a hypothesis of narration that did not simply show the disposition. Not the machine recounting itself, but the machine that recounts. I



Vladimir Tatlin, *Letatlin*, photograph



Laszlo Moholy-Nagy,  
*Lichtrequisit*, 1923–1930,  
University Museum, Harvard,  
Massachusetts

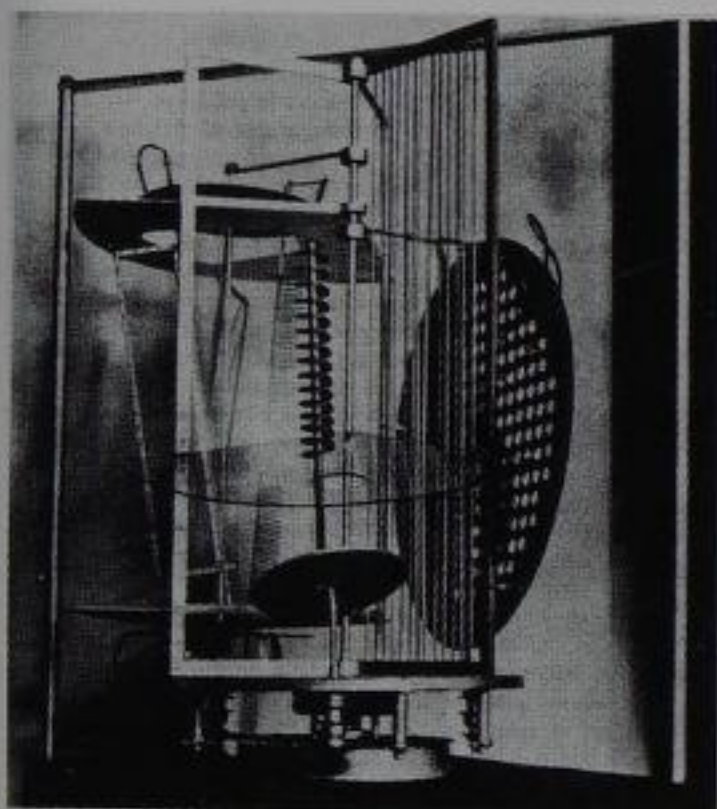


would add to these two points also the desire to maintain an active memory, a root connection to historical experiences, especially those tied to the patrimony of our territory.

“A point of life. We are losing that sense of control that gave us a so-called viewpoint, the view that outstrips reality and arranges it in a logical scheme, a reassuring geometry. Interactivity projects us inside the representation, upsets the geometry, excludes an authoritarian centrality, and sets off a dynamic of continual transformations: a *point of life*, as Derrick de Kerckhove defined it. It represents, lastly, a timorous need to pass from the illusion of recognizing oneself in control to the emotion of losing oneself in chaos. ‘Losing oneself’ is an essential condition of contemporaneity that can favour a renewed capacity for ‘finding oneself again’ and ‘recognizing oneself’ in new and old values.

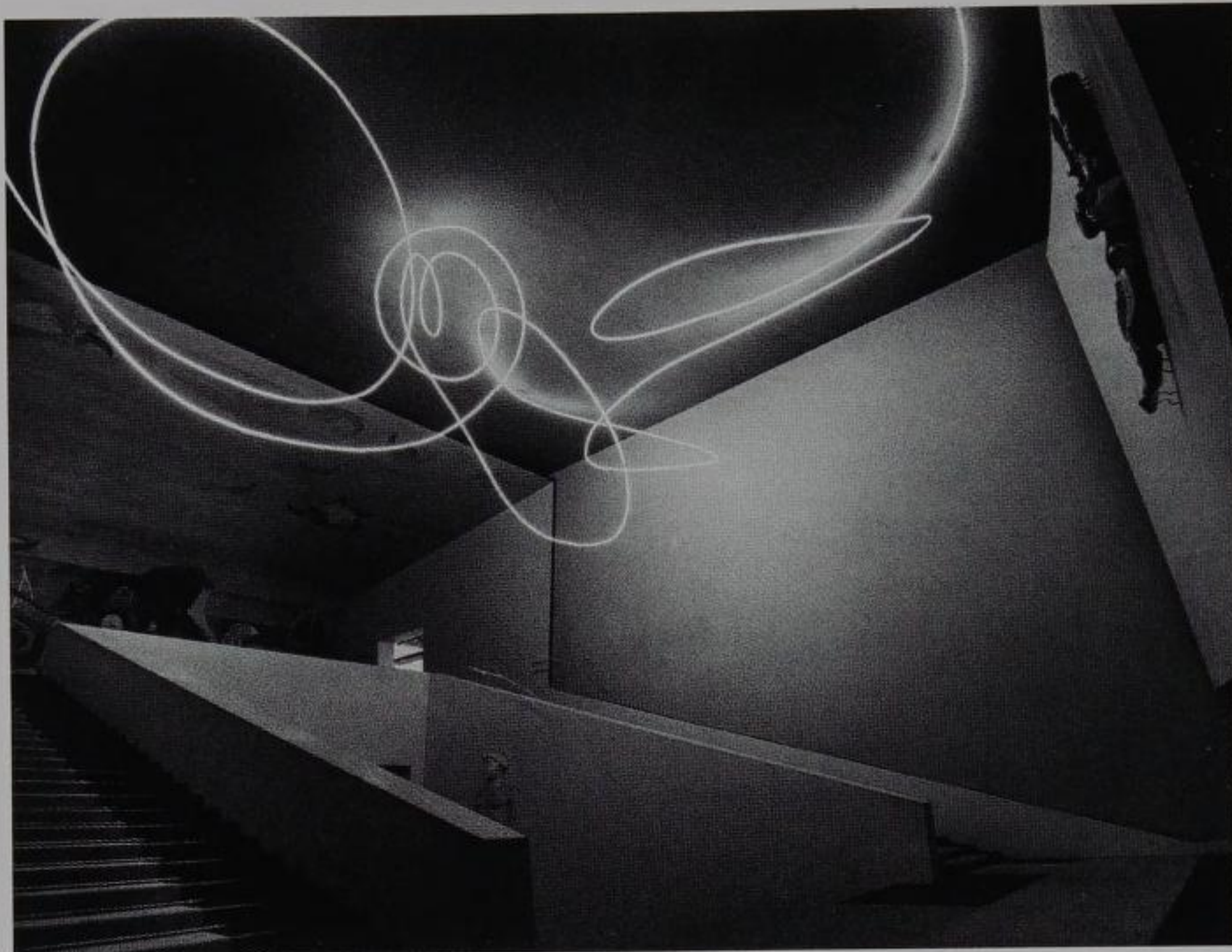
“To take a work among people’s gestures. The impression is that an era has closed, the one that started with Duchamp and his readymades, objects snatched from everyday rituals and provocatively sent to the sacred area of a gallery. The current process seems to be the reverse: to try to bring a work, an artistic artifice, toward the gestures of people, to set an artistic experience amid the behaviour of the spectators, to again move close to their worlds [...]. What happens on these occasions is that even the author-public relationship is overturned, transforming the former into a surprised spectator of his own public.

“Difference and convergence. The conditions seemed to have been created for conceiving the ‘Total Work’, but one is more and more convinced that this utopia that is depicted by the harmonious impasto of various languages is hardly appropriate. Primarily because it brings back the idea of a definitive and defining work: a polyphony of instruments that intone the



Laszlo Moholy-Nagy,  
*Space and Light Modulator*

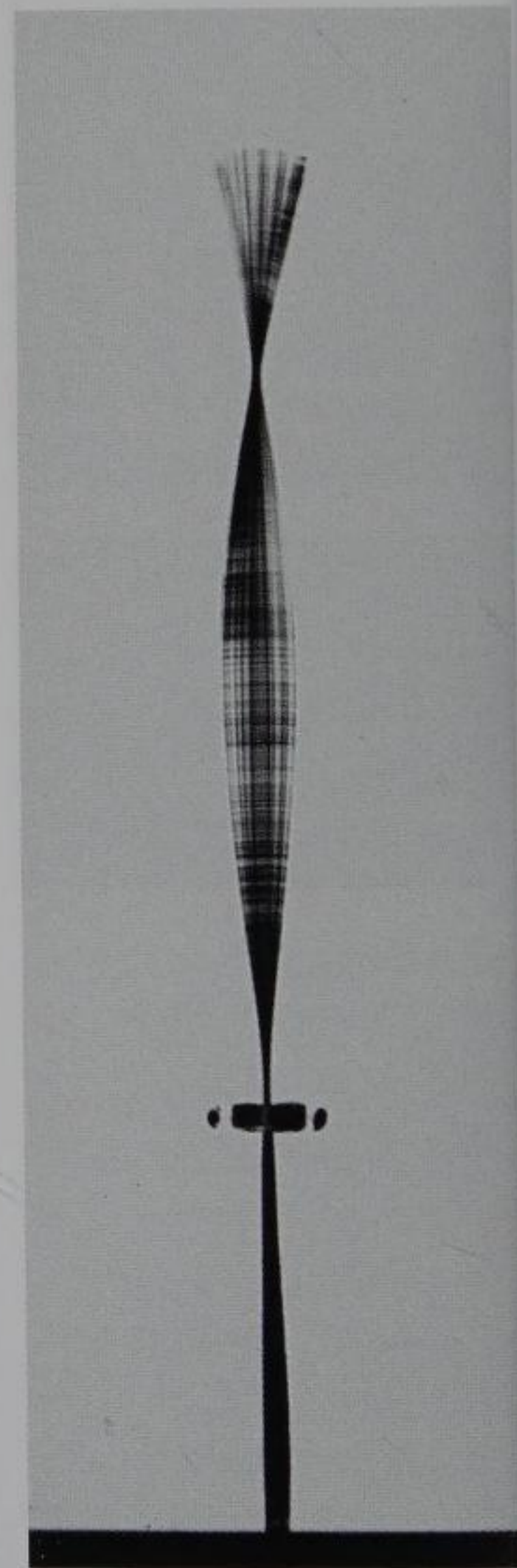




Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Light*,  
neon structure for the  
9th Triennial, Milan, 1951

same sublime air. It is no longer the time. It seems to us that a position that provides for an autonomy of different languages that contribute to a creation is more appropriate: languages that draw near, find convergence points and superimposable areas without overlooking their differences. Indeed, it is precisely these non-homogeneous approaches that create the premises for a narration that is open and shared. The very definition of multi-mediality can be interpreted in the same way: a parallel flow of different contributions, both old and new, that cross, superimpose, run into and move away from one another” (Paolo Rosa / Studio Azzurro, *Rapporto confidenziale su un'esperienza interattiva*, 1999).

“What was the first message? ‘What hath God wrought?’ Or, ‘Great step for mankind?’ No. All we tried to do was log on from our host to their host. Remember – we’re engineers. So I had one of my guys, Charles Kline, set this up and we also had a voice line in parallel over the data line. He had a pair of headphones and a speaker and so did the other guy at the other end. You want to type in LOG and the rest would span out: ‘LOG IN.’ And so we typed in L. And we said: ‘Did you get the L?’ And he said, ‘I got the L.’ Typed the O. ‘You get the O?’ ‘I got the O.’ ‘You get the G?’ Crash! The system failed on the G. A couple of hours later we successfully logged in, did some minimal things, and logged off. That was the first message on the Internet. ‘Log in, crash.’ Or, as I like to phrase it, the first message was ‘Hello’, which is the way the two letters L, O sound” (Stephen Segaller, *Nerds. A Brief History of the Internet*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, New York 1998).



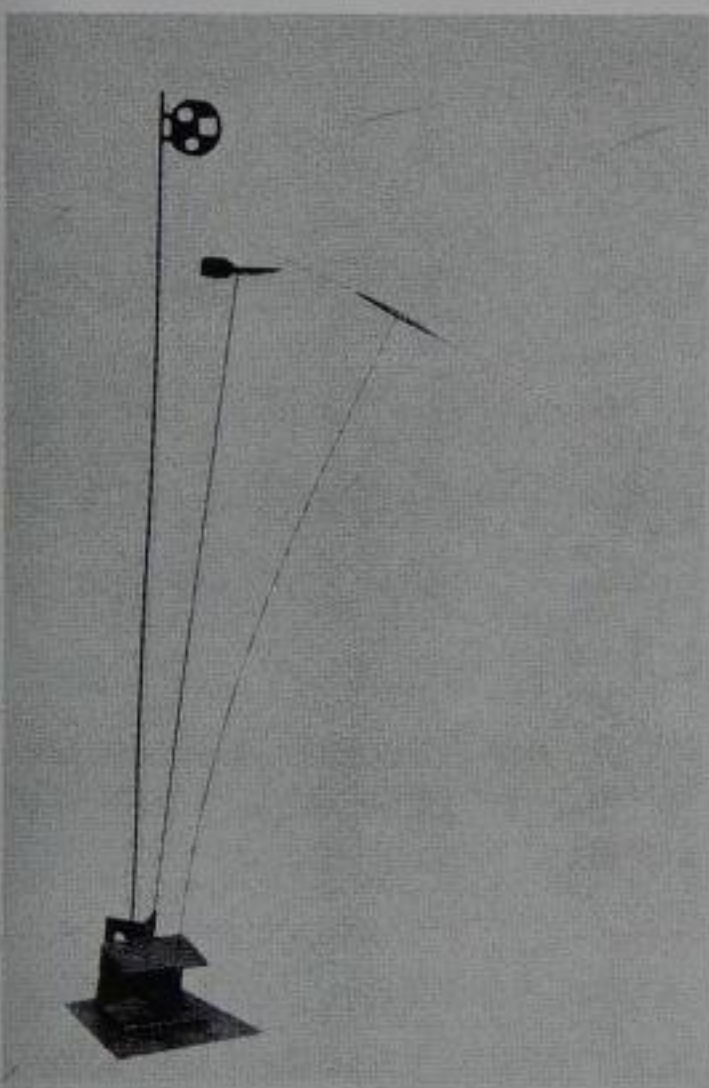
Gabo, *Kinetic Construction*,  
1922



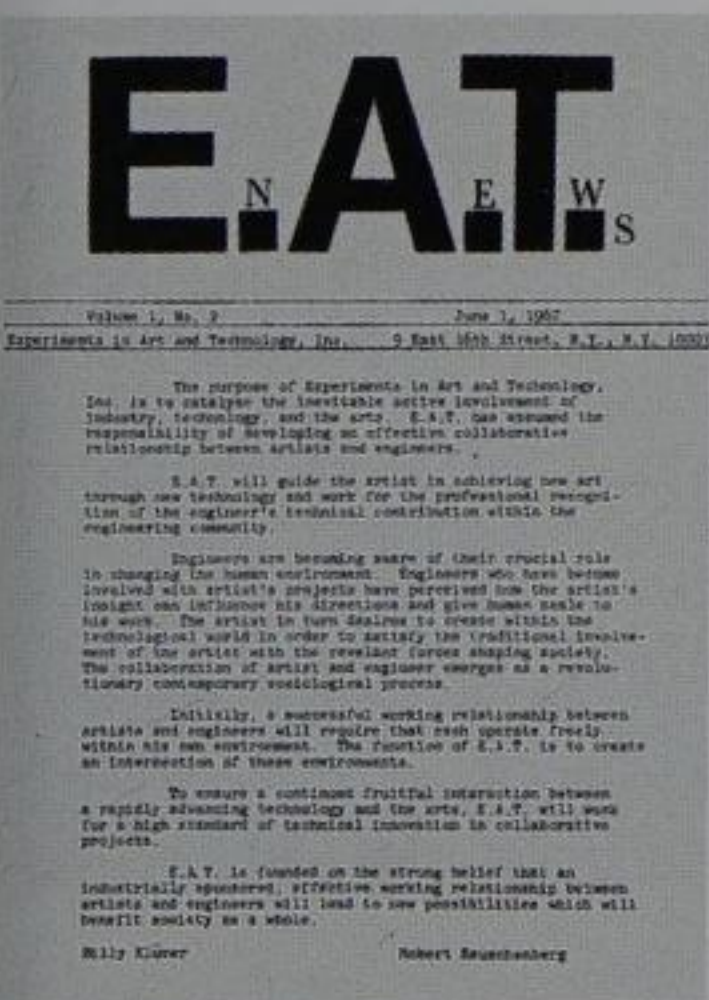
Billy Kluver lecturing at the E.A.T., Toronto, 1968



*L.H.O.O.Q.* is the title Marcel Duchamp gave to a reproduction of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* in 1919 on which he had pencilled on a moustache and beard (thus completing the object with a name in accordance with one of his rules for forming a readymade), which simply meant "elle-a-chaud-au-cul".



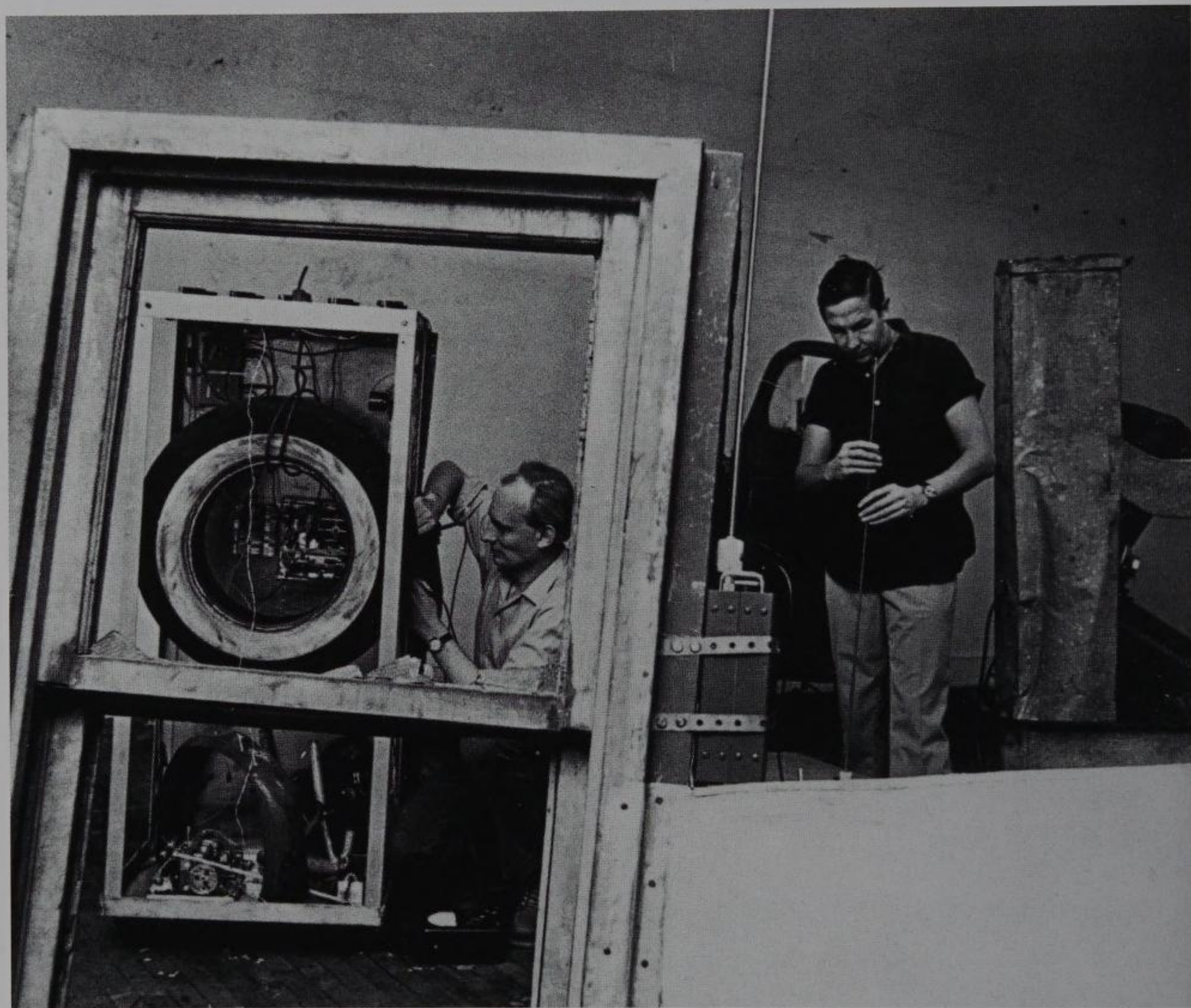
V. Takis, *Signal*, 1956



*E.A.T. News*, no. 1, 15 January 1967, p. 1



**Billy Kluver and  
Robert Rauschenberg**  
working on *Oracle*, New York,  
1965



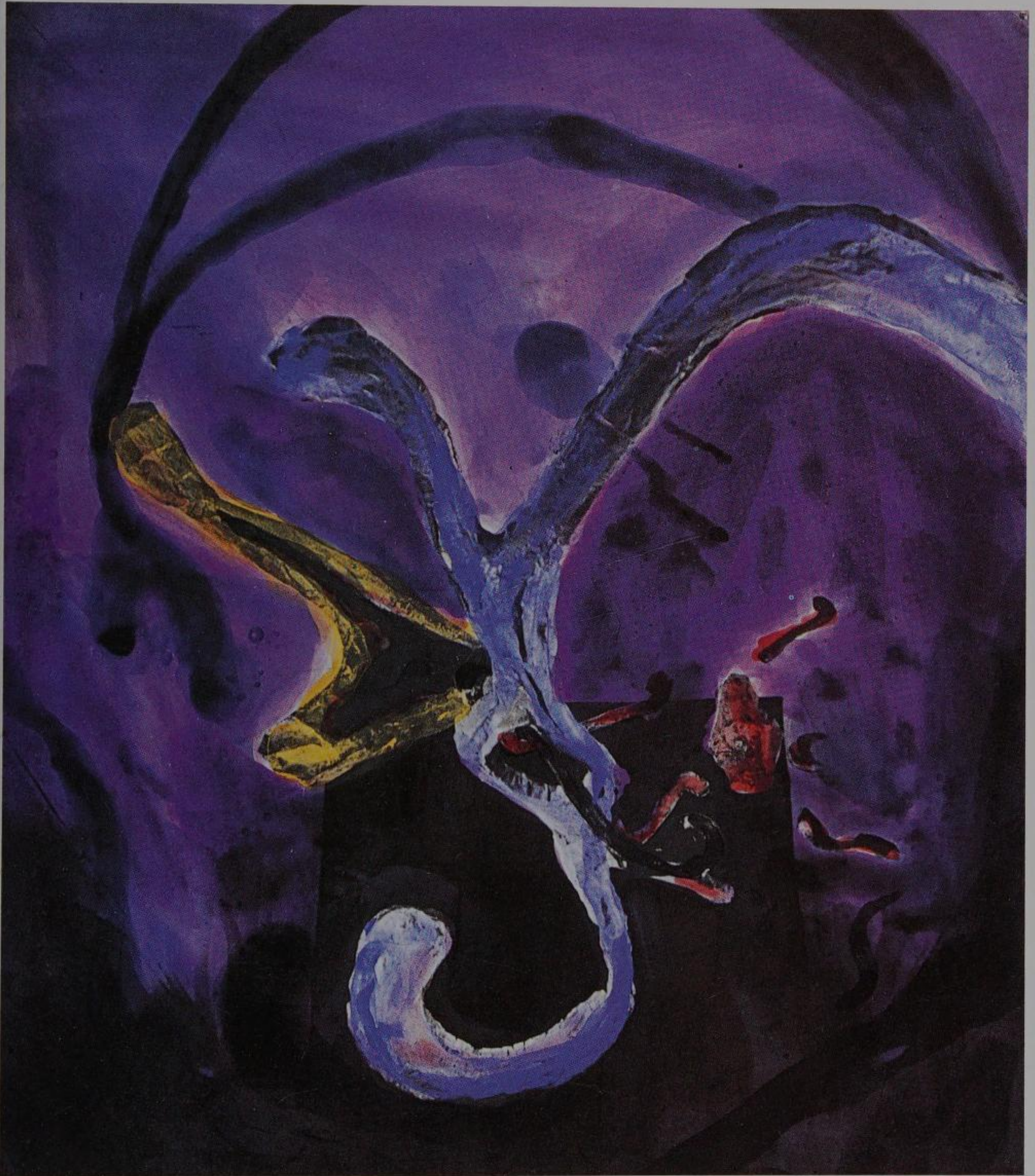


**Lucio Fontana**

*Spatial Environment*, 1949

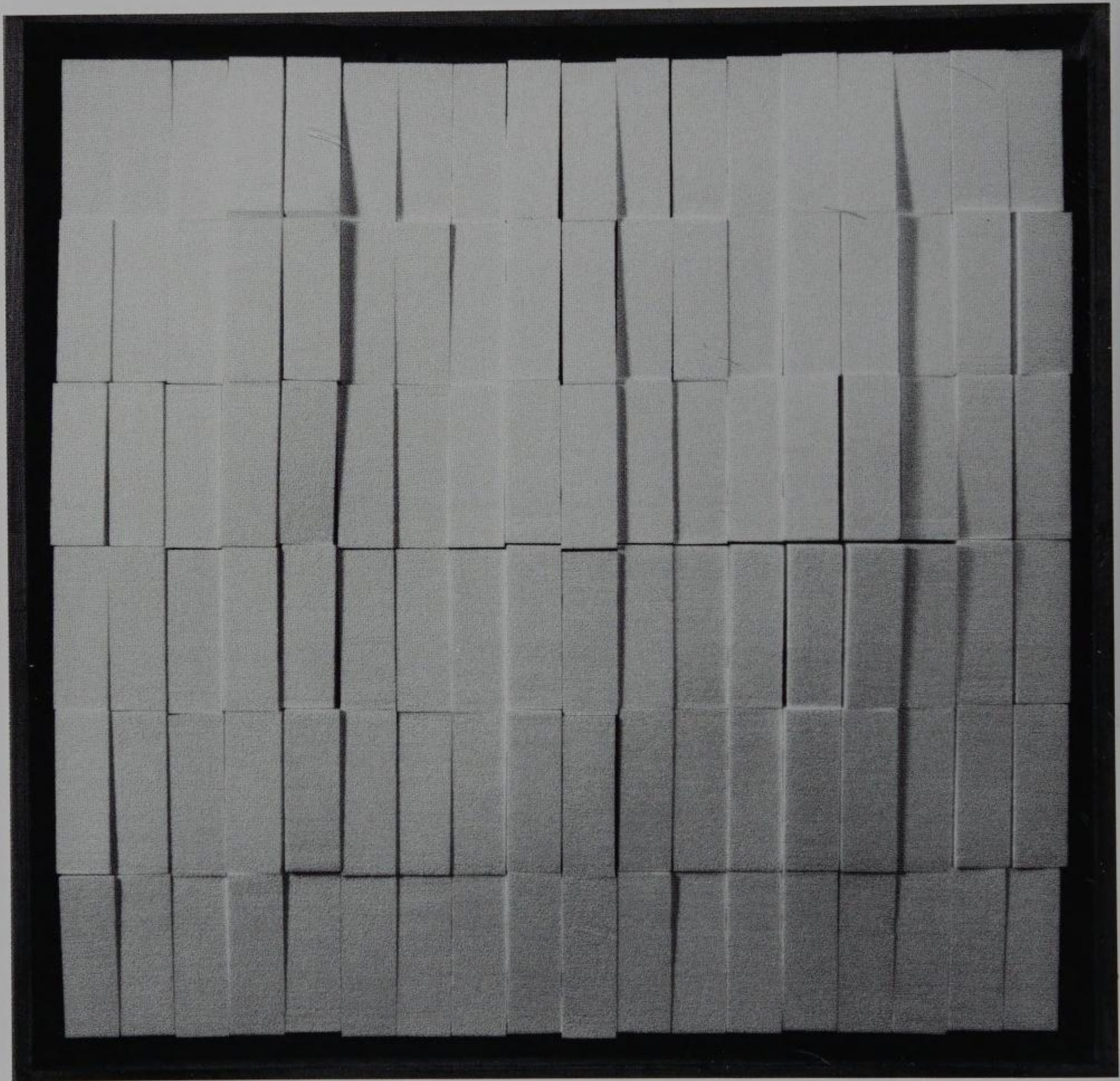
Coloured pigments  
on polystyrene, varying  
dimensions

Fondazione Lucio Fontana,  
Milan





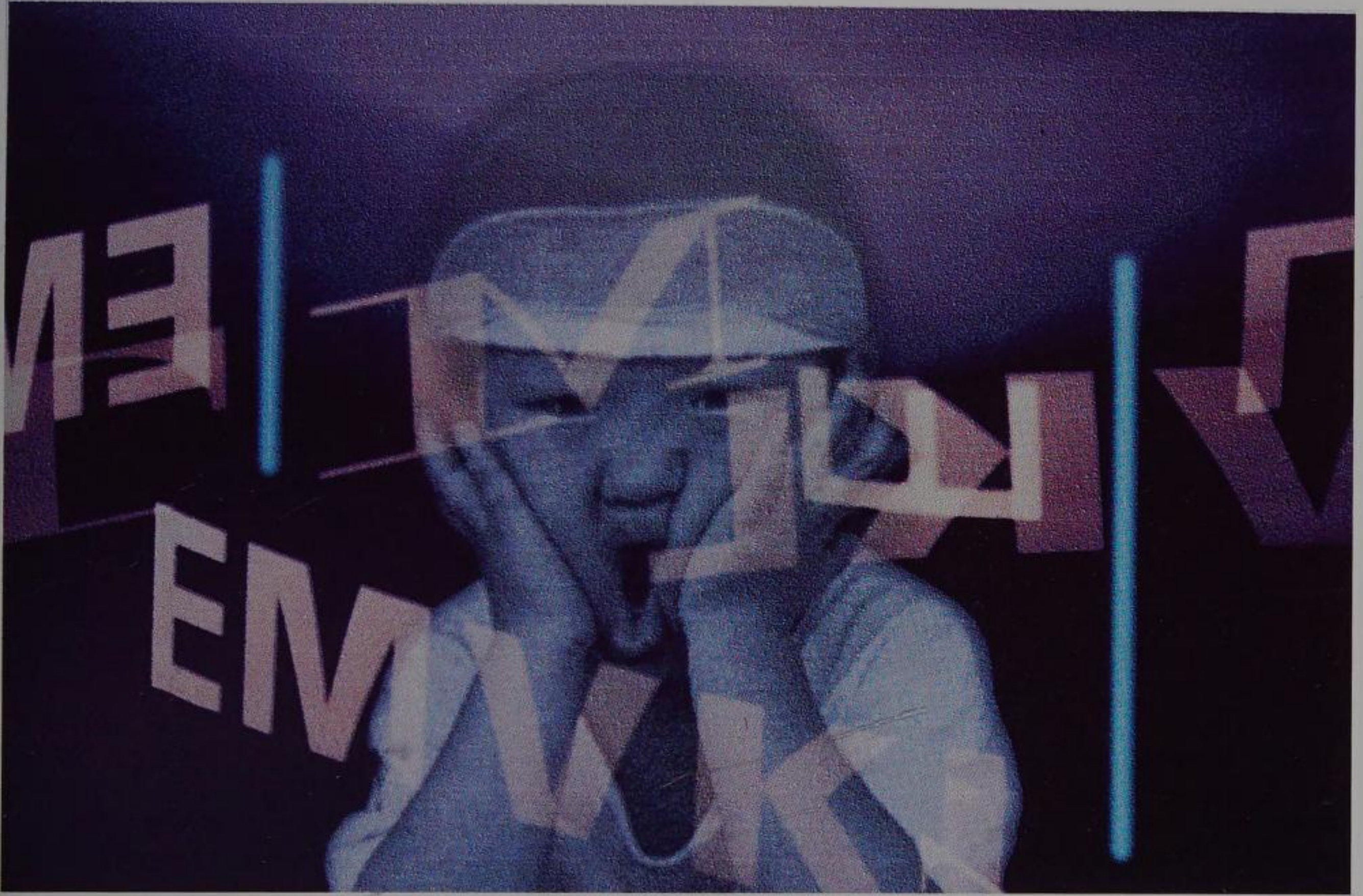
**Gianni Colombo**  
*Pulsing Structuration*,  
1959–1971  
Wood, polystyrene and  
mechanism, cm 120 × 120  
Courtesy of Studio Casoli,  
Milan





**Piero Fogliati**

*Apparitions Stall*, 1986  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan (photo  
Mabritto)





**Nam June Paik**  
*Man*, 1990  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan (photo  
Fabrizio Garghetti)





**Shigeko Kubota**  
*Niagara Falls, 1987*



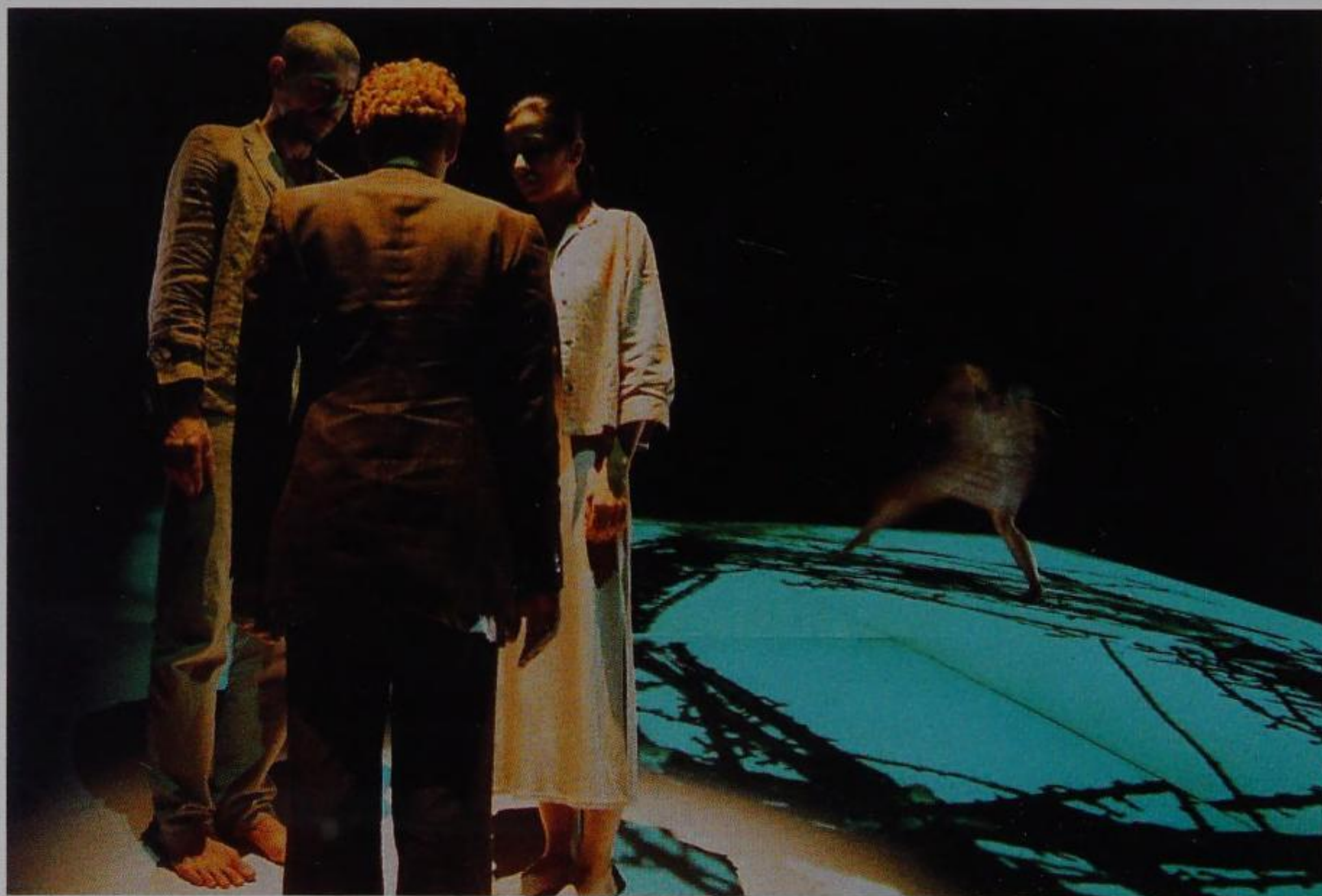


**Studio Azzurro**

*Fire, Water, Shadow.*

*The Dance of Nature in the  
Images of Andrei Tarkovsky,*  
1998

Dance and video spectacle

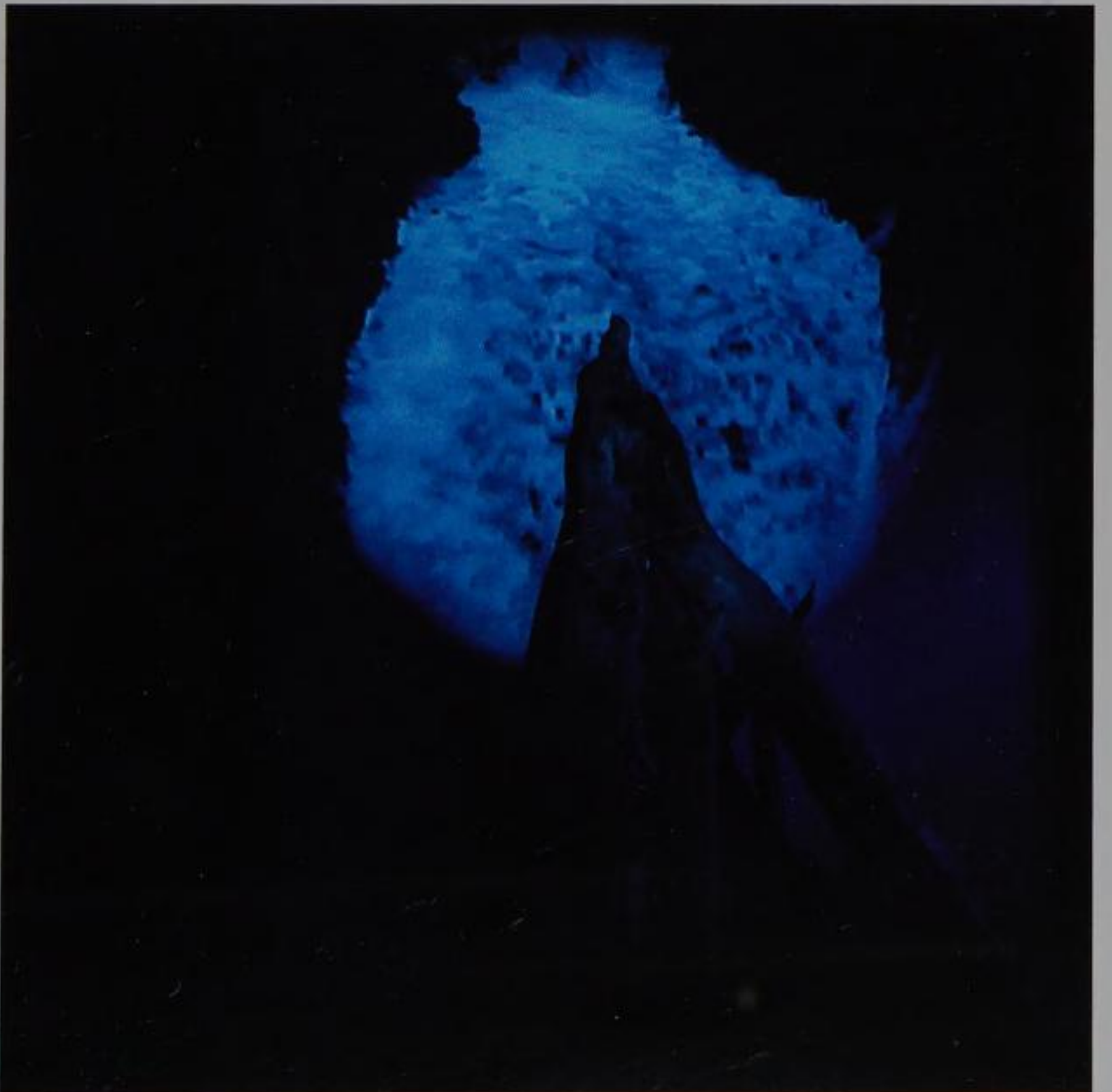




**Piero Gilardi**

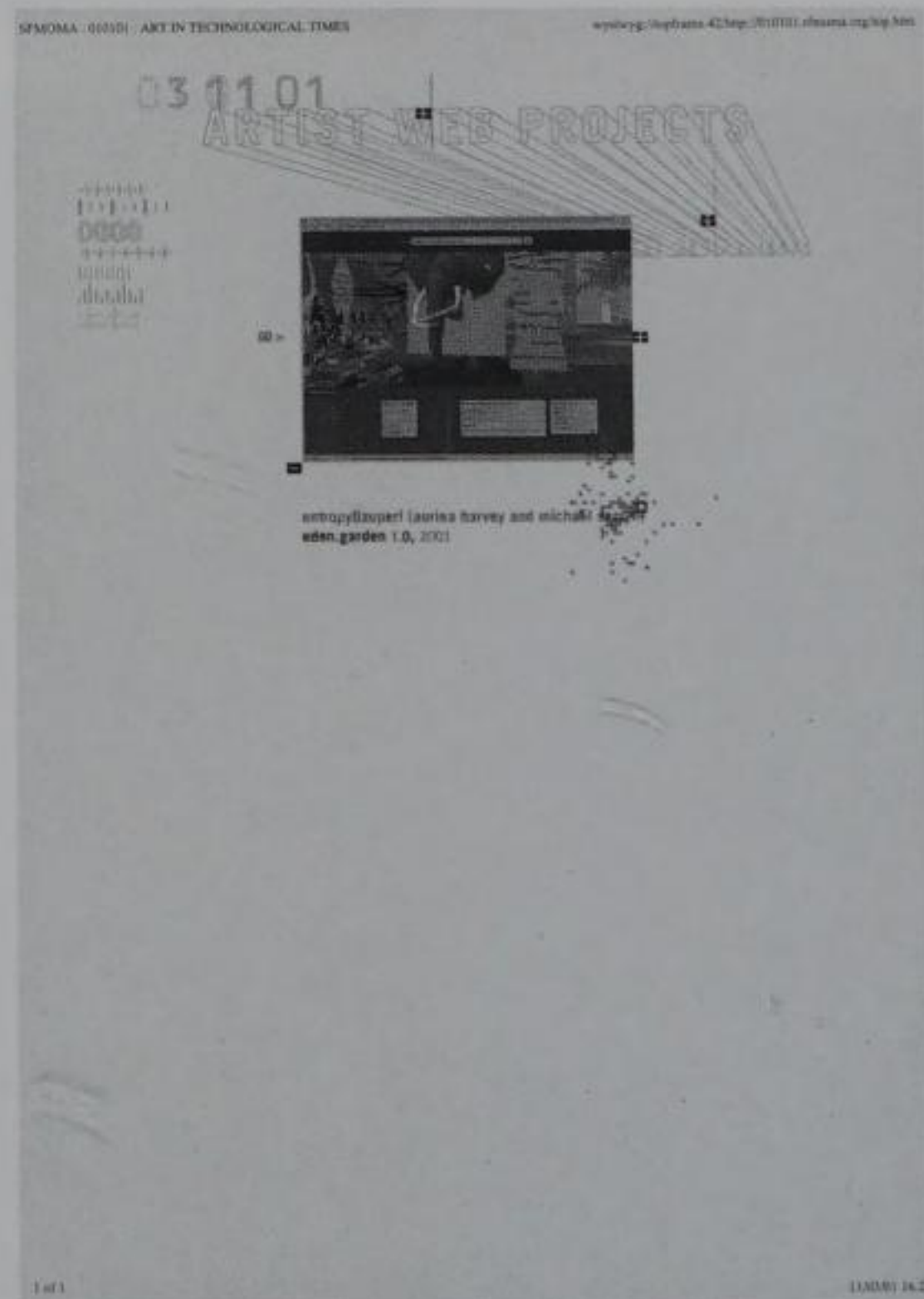
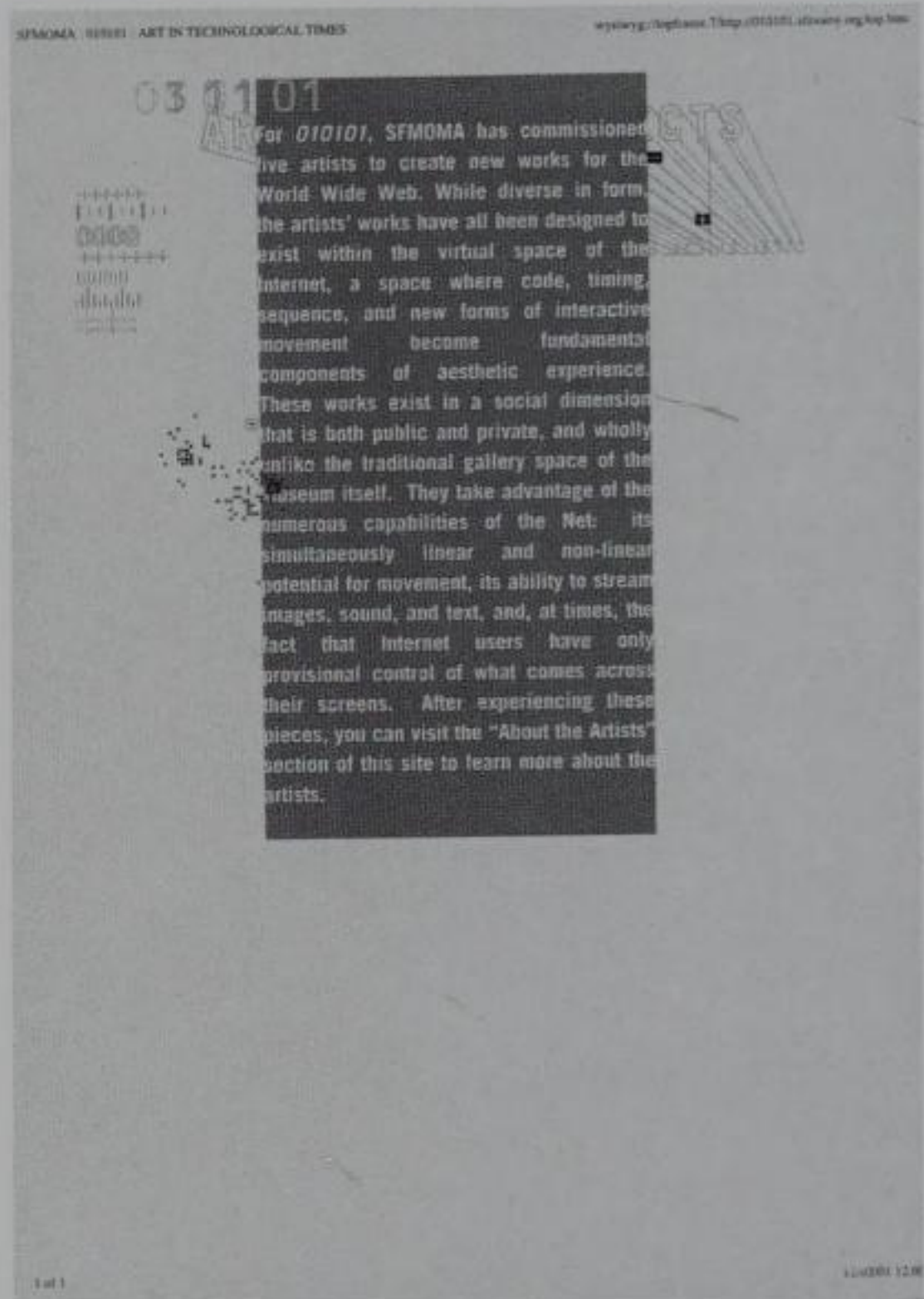
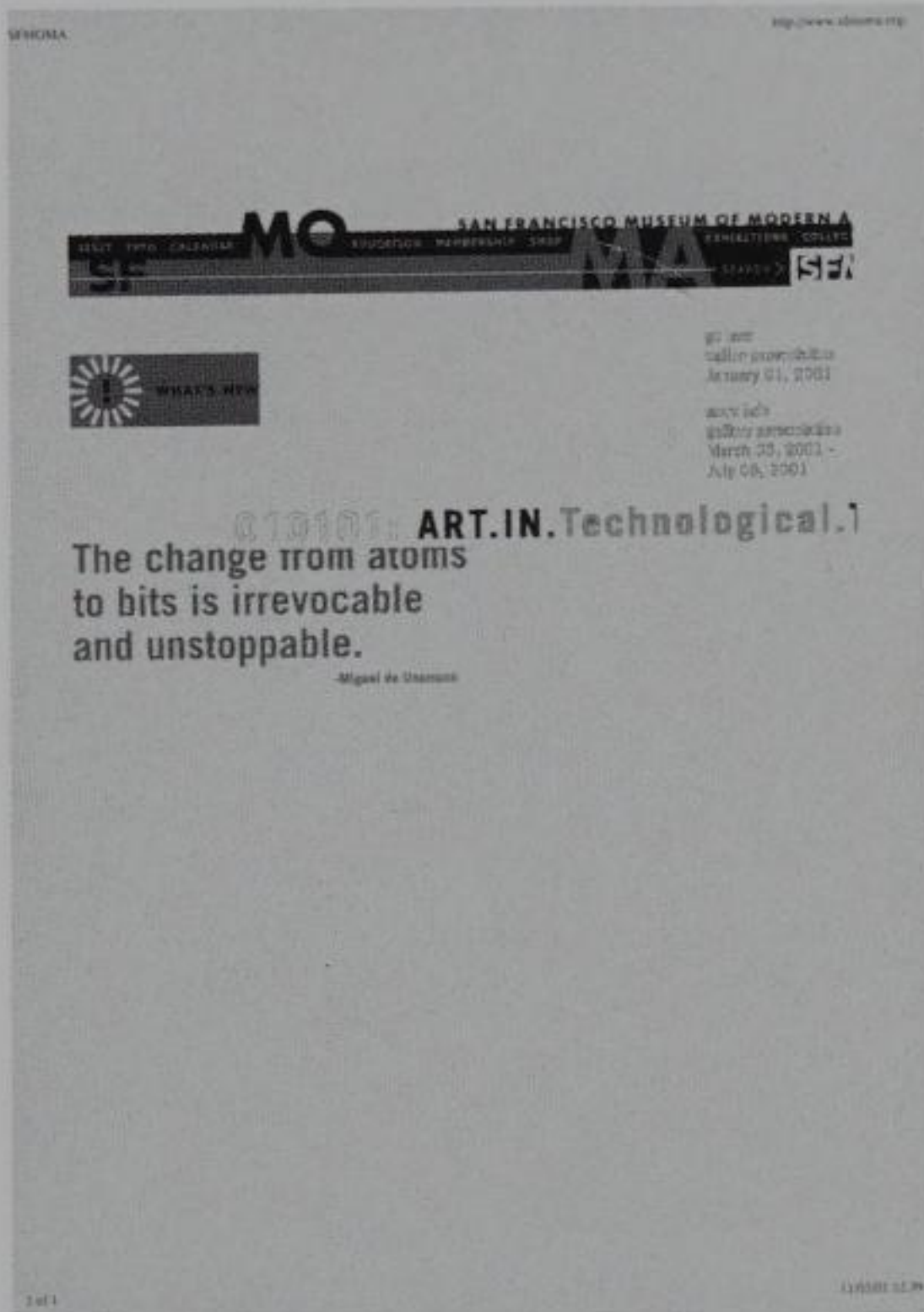
*Liquid Breath*, 1999

Computerized interactive  
installation (in collaboration  
with Riccardo Colella)

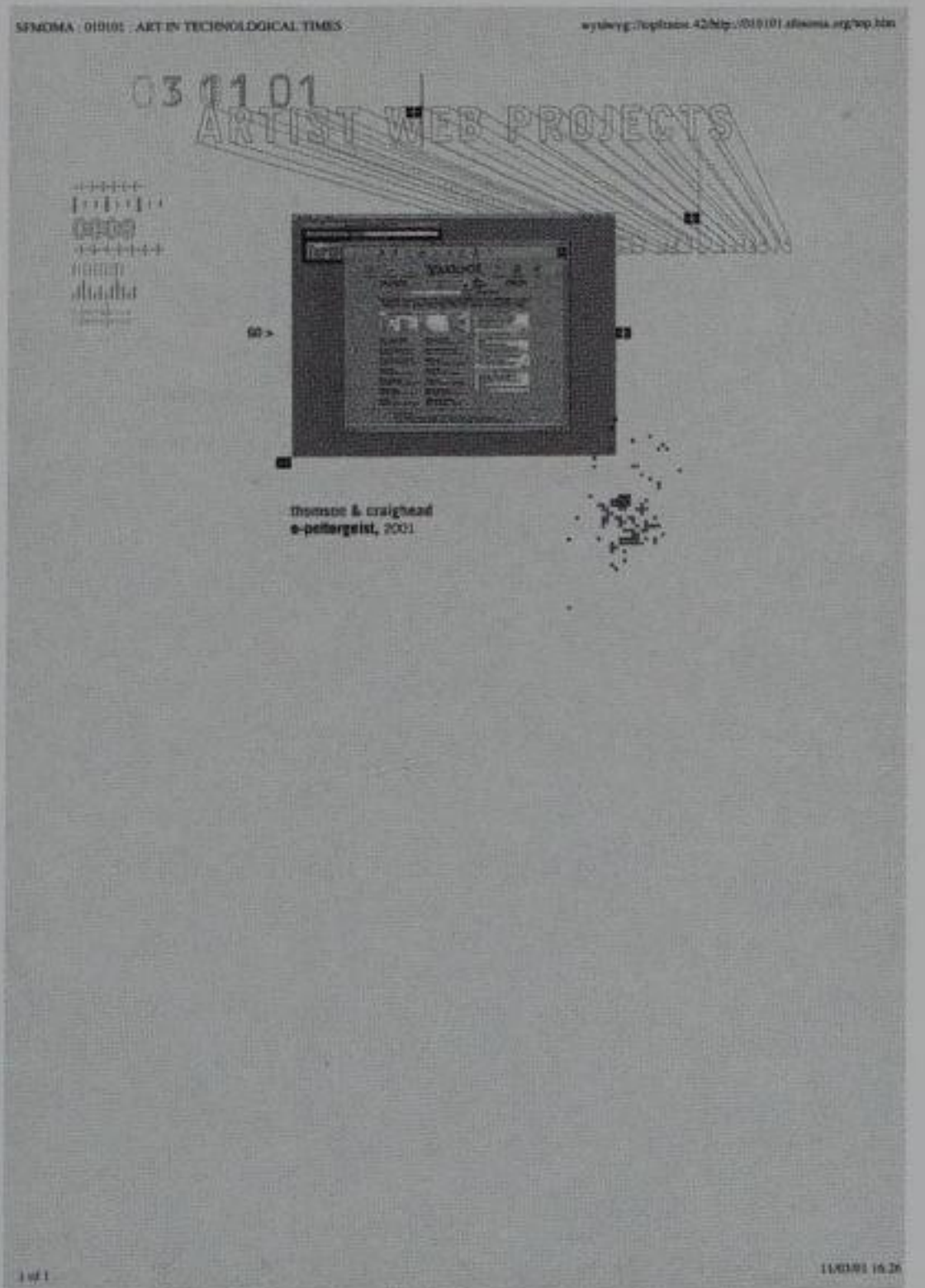
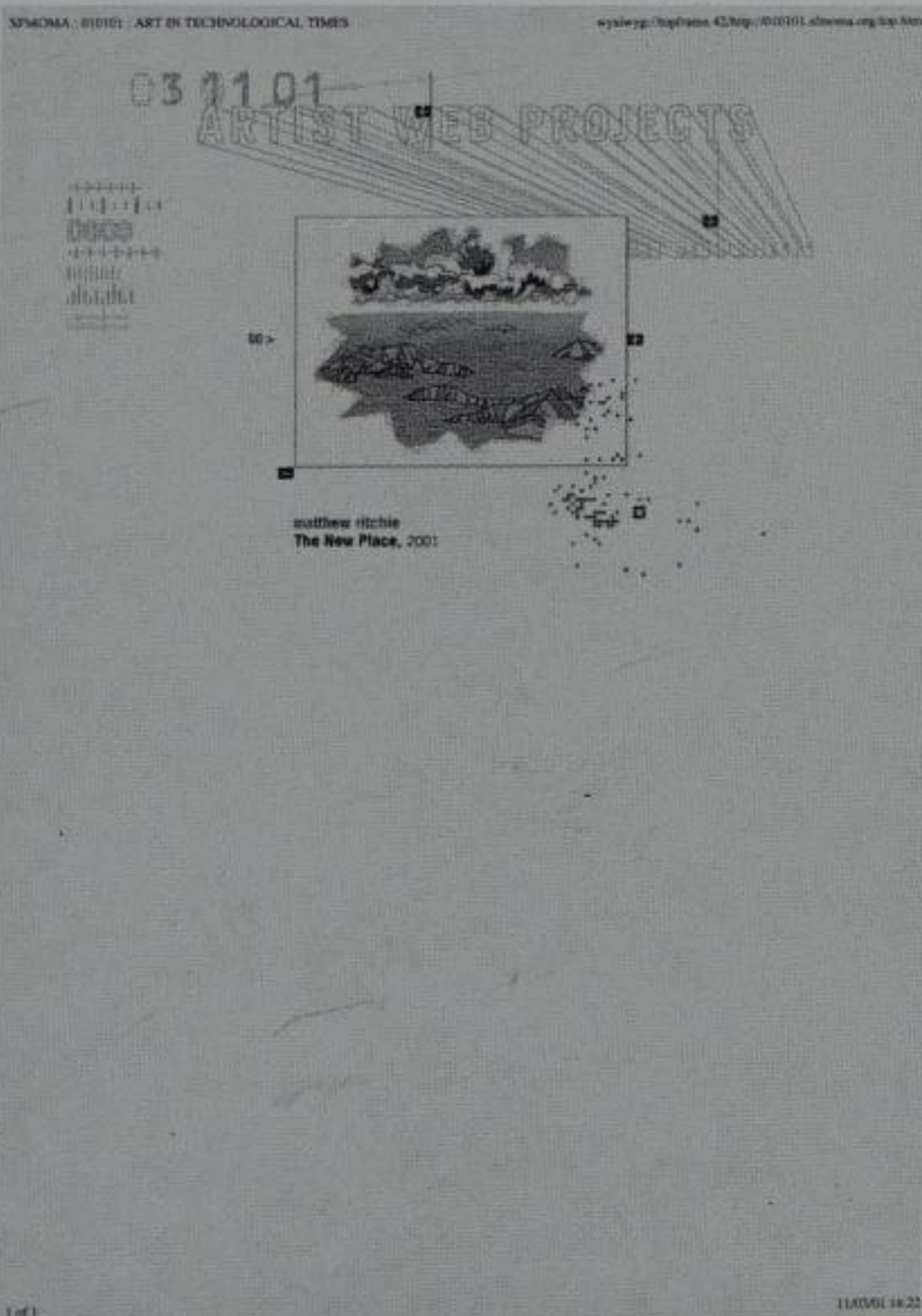
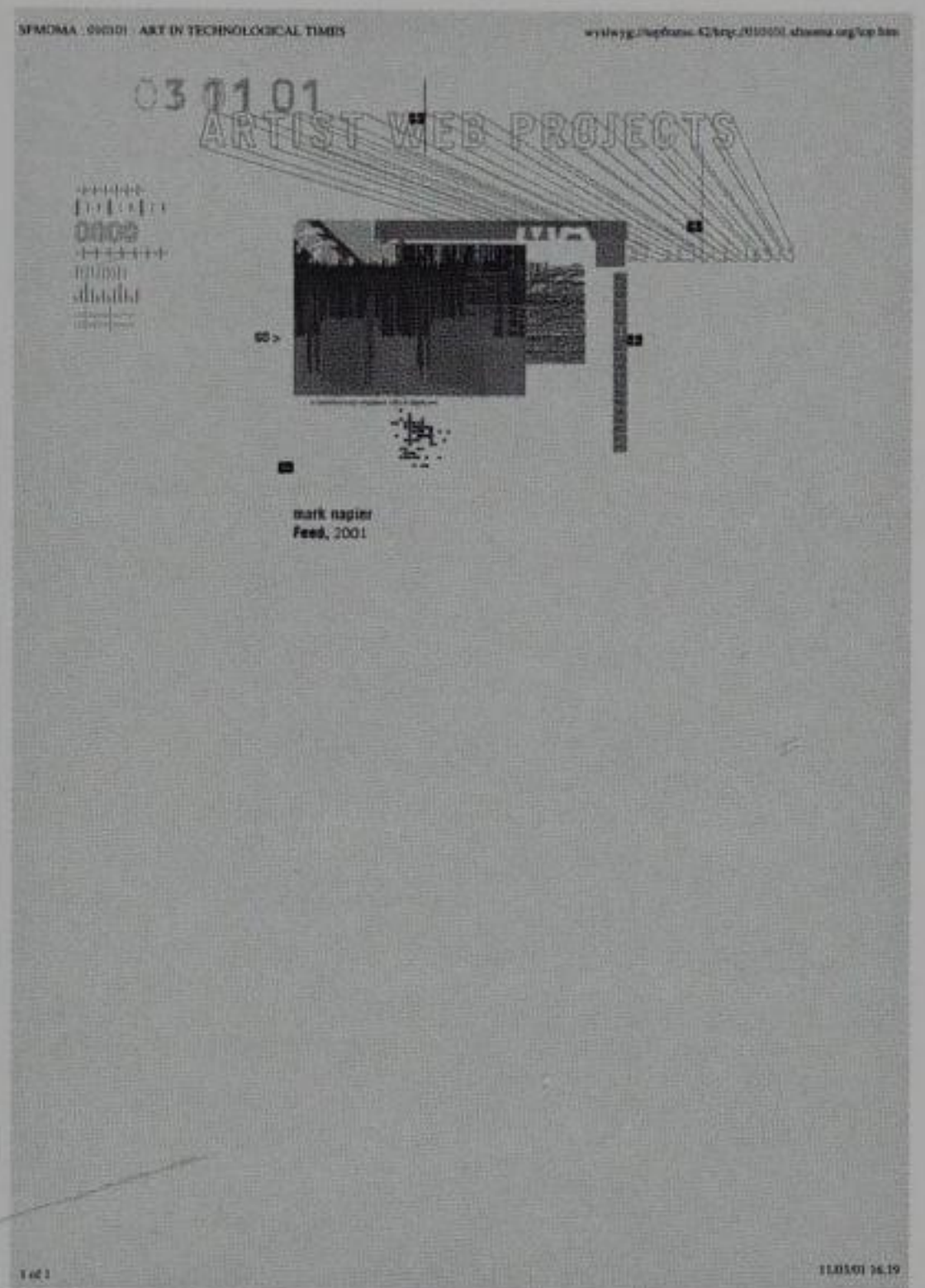
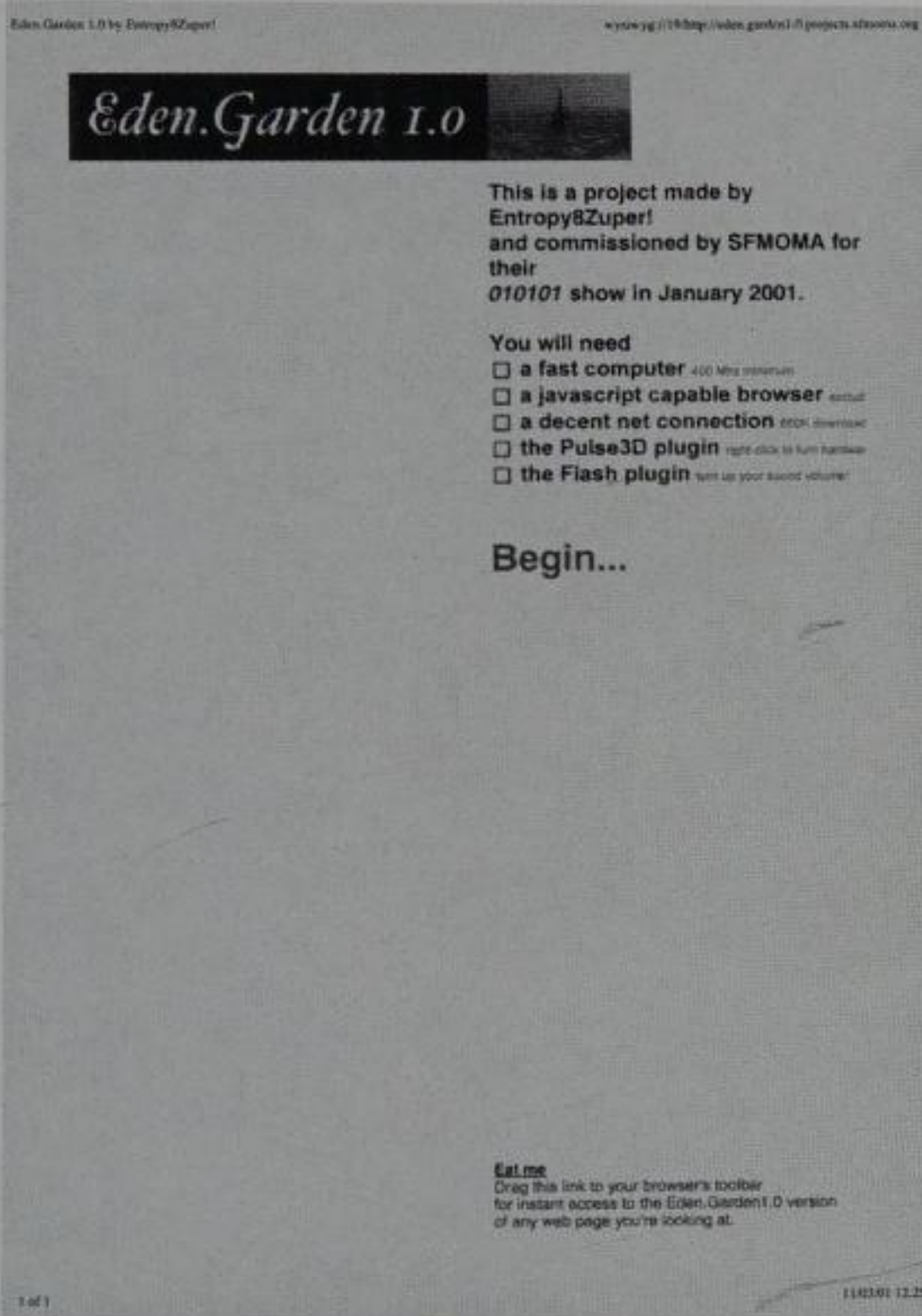




**010101 ART. IN. Technological. Times.**  
 Exhibition of seven net-artists  
 on web of 1st January 2001  
 www.sfmoma.org  
 San Francisco Museum  
 of Modern Art









**Marcello Mazzella**  
*Bodydrome*, 2001  
[www.marcellomazzella.com/bodydrome](http://www.marcellomazzella.com/bodydrome)





**Joseph Kosuth**  
*The Second Investigation*  
 (Art as Idea as Idea)  
 Work exhibited at the *When Attitudes Become Form* show,  
 Kunsthalle, Berne, March-April  
 1969



Techne Tribe



# Art-Language

Edited by Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge  
Michael Baldwin, Harold Hurrell  
American Editor Joseph Kosuth

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The relation between words and art images disappears into the night of time. Leaving aside Platonic disputes on the primacy of language (*logos*) over images (*idola*), with the consequent condemnation of art, our history begins with the titles of the works. Normally, as well as traditionally, titles are a description, a sort of confirmation of the image itself (e.g. *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, *Impression, soleil levant*, *The Fourth State*, *Composition with Red Circle*, etc.); in other words these are almost tautological expressions that repeat the same thing in terms of language. The image says itself through the title; so we are in the presence of the *name of the thing*.

This is precisely the burning point that Conceptual Art has been hammering on with particular insistence, starting from Duchamp and passing on to Magritte, Kosuth, Baldessari and Art & Language.

But even before the avant-garde began its experiments, things were not simply confined to the field of sheer tautological assertiveness.

Take for example a picture like Giorgione's *The Storm* (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice): the title is not autographic, but, as happened so often in the past, this is due to a tradition consolidated over the centuries. And yet the subject of the painting is certainly somewhere else in respect to the small lightning flash in the background that provides the title: the figures, the landscape, the town, the weather... The subjects that assume a hierarchically dominant position within the picture are a different matter, but, curiously enough, the choice of title fell capriciously on the small flash of lightning that heralds the "storm". The heightening of the "storm" corresponds to a heightening of the meaning that adds complexity and richness to the painting, but most of all it confers that enigmatic quality where the true



literary-narrative substance of the work resides. The modest flash has been promoted, to the diminishment of the other hierarchically dominant parts, as if it really were a means of heightening the meaning of the painting; like a switch that can illuminate the scene whose true meaning, in its real metaphysical essence, would otherwise lie hidden.

To take another case of a small picture of 1866 now in the Musée d'Orsay: Courbet paints a female sex at the very front of the composition. If the painting were not called *Origin of the World* it would certainly not have assumed the greatness of an event; it would have been reduced to a reference, to an intimate chronicle, to depicting a private place of pleasure. But now that the subject bears this title, it at once assumes an absoluteness far removed from peremptory expectation. In losing its private qualities it becomes a totalizing force and archetypal icon.<sup>1</sup>

In the twentieth century, of course, events in the interweaving of art images with words assumed a complexity of another kind altogether. We are necessarily obliged to transit through the Duchampian experiments. In his readymade phase Duchamp had already intuited the importance of an event that lay purely in name, a pure linguistic abstraction. The readymade is primarily a linguistic operation. Think of the urinal renamed "fountain" and already you are fully aware of the potential of language compared to the thing, because in respect to the thing it produces a slight shock and effects a contradiction.

With Duchamp *the name of the thing* makes the thing different: *the power of language is transformative and possesses faculties that are alchemical, transmutant.*

An even more authoritative example is provided by the re-naming operation Duchamp performed on the *Mona Lisa* (Art-Language enquiry 1970). After his first desecrating experiment when he painted a moustache on the portrait, and the irreverent acronym "L.H.O.O.Q.", Duchamp put his signature on a normal *Mona Lisa*, a real non-modified readymade, only he called it *Rasée* (*Mona Lisa Shaved*). So, very subtly, by the simple addition of that one word he restored the original with a conjuring trick, relying totally on the magic of language of which he was an excellent manipulator.<sup>2</sup> By means of an expert linguistic shave, the *Mona Lisa* is restored to her original state after losing her moustache, having passed through the desecrating and irreverent tinkering the artist imposed on the work.

In the case of Manzoni we also come up against a large number of works where a unifying and, with it, transmutant solution is proposed between art and language: the relation between these is often resolved by a flight of imagination that gives voice, for example, to a simple base, a simple pedestal. Through the magic transformative power of language which calls it "Magic Base" it becomes

<sup>1</sup> In my opinion (no one has ever mentioned it, and this is certainly not the place to do so) this painting represents the antecedent, both in form and content, of Duchamp's *Etant donnés*. The work was also referred to in a series of works by Art & Language in the early nineties.

<sup>2</sup> "Esquivons les ecchymoses des Esquimaux aux mots exquis", or "On demande des moustiques domestiques demi-stock pour la cure d'azote sur la Côte d'Azur" and also a touch of Anémic Cinéma.



capable of changing anything placed on it into a work of art, and anyone who climbs up on it into a living monument, until it reaches the absolute extremism of the plinth of the world, transforming the globe itself into a readymade, the earth as a map of the world.

And then there is the more explicit Italian answer to Art & Language in Alighiero Boetti who has proposed witticisms, proverbs, assonances, quips, philosophical maxims and many other things to fit the austere, enclosed order of the square. Among these “squarings” of meaning, squares in squares, some of the more memorable must be mentioned: *It doesn't square*, *The progressive disappearance of the habitual*, *He who plays alone never loses*, *Nothing seen, nothing to hide*, *Languid looks that kill*, *Culture and sculpture*. These and many other suggestions have found a way of being formalized through the precious weft of the embroidery in an orderly and composed linguistic weaving. But what is really startling, even though implicit in our culture, is that Alighiero Boetti cannot help aestheticizing the elaborate writing drawn from the ancient knowledge of the tapestry. Along with Art & Language, Boetti also shared an interest in maps and geographical writings which link us to Diamante Faraldo's *Work in Black*. But beyond any discussion, how can one fail to mention the enormous difference between the puritanical, ascetic, scientific writing, and the black and white of a Kosuth or a Baldessari, as well as a host of Art & Language experiments?

The typical attitude of these Conceptualists consists in denying any aesthetical quality in the linguistic event, purifying it, distilling it in a writing that is more and more visually inert in order to gather the very depths of the message together with the obvious difficulties of the sense.

In Alighiero Boetti we find a writing concealed in the intensely colourful beauty of the embroidery, capable of verticalizing the flat horizontality and the obvious consequentiality of the writing, thereby imposing a more arduous reading that becomes increasingly remote in meaning.

#### *Art & Language: a brief historical profile*

Mel Ramsden was born at Ilkenston, Derbyshire, in 1944. Michael Baldwin was born at Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire, in 1945. Both live and work at Middleton Cheney, Northamptonshire.

The name Art & Language indicates both the artistic and literary work in collaboration between Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden. It also identifies works written in collaboration between the two of them with Charles Harrison. Their activities have been in progress for over twenty-five years.



The name derives from the *Art & Language* review published in Coventry (first number: May 1969) which originated with their work and conversations with Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin (since 1966) in association with Harold Hurrell and David Bainbridge who were the original publishers of the journal. *Art & Language* was later used to designate and identify the common participation in the numerous works of these four authors in an attempt to reflect the conversational basis of their activity, since 1969, which was already including contributions from Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, and Joseph Kosuth from New York.

Matters in regard to “who did what”, and what contributions and whatever else each of them made, are fairly well known and by no means a secret. However the (slight) degree of anonymity in the original collective name still carries a certain historical relevance.

With the circulation of the review and development of the art teaching practices applied by the publishers and others, the conversations expanded and multiplied, until around 1971 they were including artists\writers in Great Britain like Charles Harrison, Philip Pinkelton, David Rushton, Lynn Lemaster, Sandra Harrison, Graham Howard, and Paul Wood; while in New York there were Michael Corris, and later Paula Ramsden, Mayo Thompson, Christin Kozlov, Preston Heller, Andrew Menard and Kathryne Bigelow.

So the name *Art & Language* was precariously adopted by all the above mentioned authors. Of course its meaning and the way it was used vary from person to person, from allegiance to allegiance, from (sub)discourse to (sub)discourse – from the ones in New York who produced *The Fox* (1974–1976) to those involved in music projects, down to those who continue to publish the original journal.

There has been great confusion however: Terry Atkinson left the group for personal reasons in 1974, and in 1976 a fruitful and dialectical confusion turned into chaos between individuals and concepts at loggerheads.

In a practice that has always tried to avoid pomp and control as far as power is concerned, decisive action became necessary to keep vestiges of the foundation ethic of *Art & Language* alive.

There were those who regarded themselves as excluded from collective work and abandoned the group to devote their time, individually, to practising art or teaching. There were others without these problems but who found other occupations. Again there were others who left because of the ones who continued to iden-



tify with the review and its premises. While the musical activities went ahead with Mayo Thompson and the literary activities have continued with Charles Harrison, since late 1976 the genealogical line of this art work remains in the hands of Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden.

The collective practice of Art & Language was established in 1968, and for at least two years gathered into a group activity that sought to test the claims of the modernist theories of the sixties, and eventually to verify their destruction. At the beginning, the practice of the group consisted in producing a permanent *forum* where theories and forms of art could be submitted to discussion. It is to that moment, and to that cultural climate, we intend to refer in our exhibition.

### *Contemporary*

From the point of view of form the exhibition presents only two young Italian artists who may be said to represent the two poles of the discourse between Art and Language. Like the swing of the pendulum, the presentation of two works ought to constitute the space, and also the exhibiting space, where the immaterial experience of Art & Language can be placed.

On the one hand, we have the purely and fully iconic work of Diamante Faraldo, where a map of the world (a subject dear to the hearts of Art & Language, Boetti, et al.) dialogistically puts the quality of the material in check. The relief of the black Belgian marble used to trace the emerging countries contrasts with the flatness of the black rubber – tyres were never before so beautifully recycled – that shapes the seas. The bitumous temper of the material forms the significant surface where the world is drawn; after Manzoni, it may be considered the ultimate in ready-mades.

In Arcangeli, however, we find the other linguistic pole where language is structured through its lettered, iconic and symbolic qualities which also tell us that images are capable of making images of themselves. Again a meticulous formal precision leads language to investigate one of its own internal beauties. The man who has undertaken to relate this beauty of language and *ars combinatoria* is one of the most important artists of the later twentieth century: Alighiero Boetti (the most authentic version of an Art & Language Italian style). And in that perspective Arcangeli works at amplifying and, at the same time, celebrating the prodigious – and aesthetic – power of the word, perhaps in order to confirm once more that supremacy of the *verbum* that also turns out to be the theoretical premise of Conceptual Art and the resonance it has upon the contemporary scene.



**Diamante Faraldo**  
*Work in Black*, 1999–2001  
Air chamber, Belgian black  
marble, cm 200 × 320

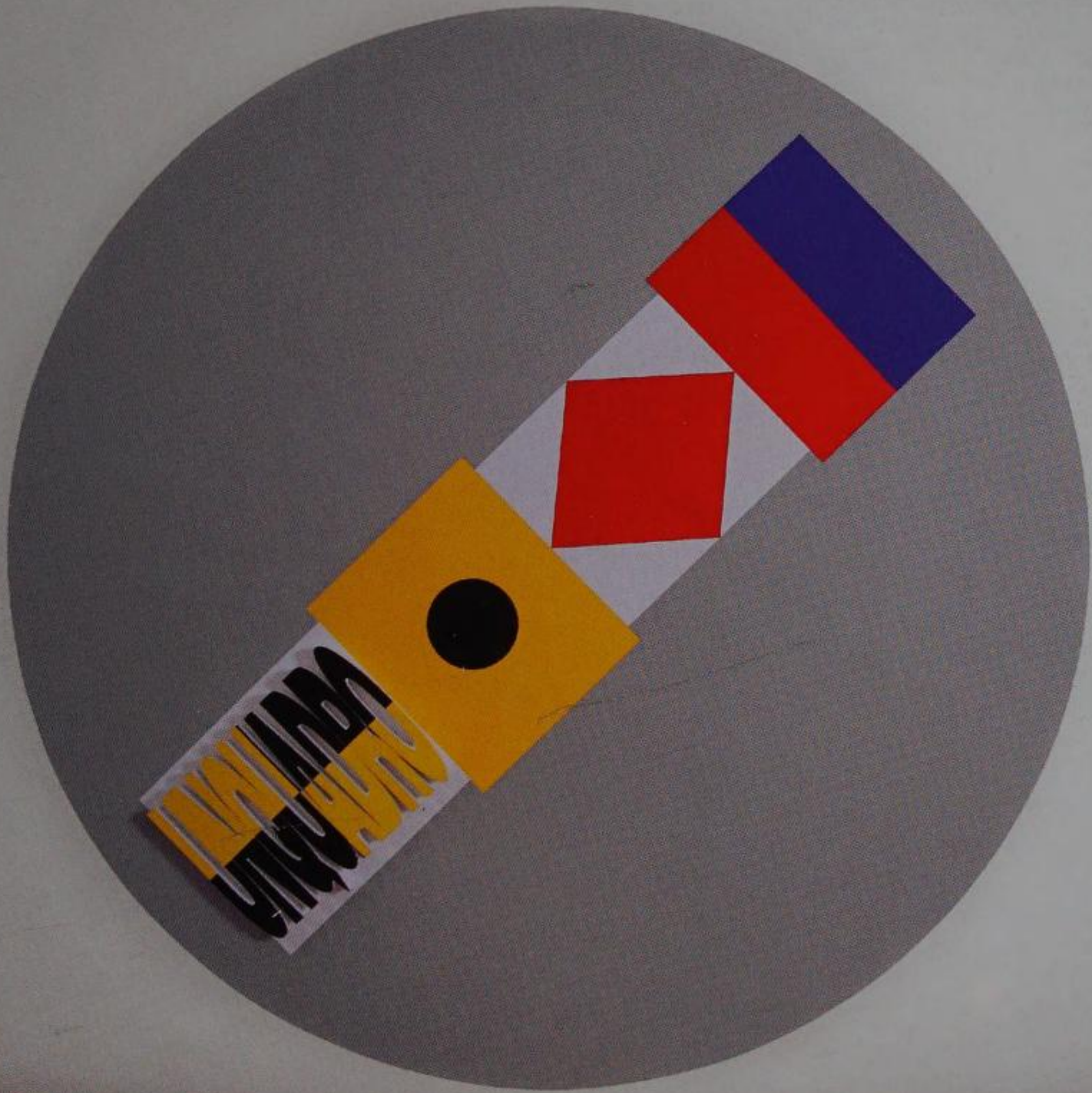




**Maurizio Arcangeli**

*Life 2001, 2001*

Acrylics on canvas and wall,  
Ø cm 290









# Techné Tribe

## **Continuity and Developments**

*edited by*

Giulio Alessandri

*and* Manuela Gandini

Apsolutno

Maja Bajevic

Olivo Barbieri

Raffaella Nappo

Alma Suljevic

UnDo.Net

Innocente

Mark Kostabi







If we held up a magnifying glass over the social bustle of our years in the twenty-first century – remember what they said about that far-off 2000? – we would see aggregations great and small, mobile, quick and impermanent, making and unmaking, with an unprecedented dynamism. The tribes of our metropolitan lives are provisional and shifting, concerning fields of activity in a state of transformation, continually overlapping, starting from physical persons, in the indistinct ocean of the Internet, to become immaterial.

But at the centre of everyone's tribe is the Ego. The individual, with thoughts of his own and an interior world of his own, forms a tribe of immaterial figures, past and present, weaving mental and intentional relationships in the great spider web of the globe. I am my tribal chief and the tribe is my daily round.

The artist who is becoming less and less involved in groups and movements, acts alone, with a gallery of personages – the critic, the gallery owner, the collector – co-authors in packaging his work. But in the eighties every form of aggregation, from political to cultural, fell beneath the wheel of the economic push, gradually losing idealism and ideology. Through the decade that followed the work became increasingly more material and marketable, in order to have a chance to shine in that multinational museum circuit which Achille Bonito Oliva defined as the “seven sisters”.

The most subterranean, diffused and imperceptible aspect of the development of Joseph Beuys's social sculpture concept can be located in places very remote from the market and museums. People of the West not only need museums to pass things on, but also to alienate their own death. They must produce objects, tangible things and above all try to conserve them through museification. To consign the present day to eternity and find its non-existent roots, America is overloaded with museums preserving, in the more recondite Edward Hopper sort of places, cigarette lighters,



advertisements, dolls, coffee-tins and objects of every kind. The aborigines, as Bruce Chatwin tells us, follow the song lines, listen to the earth and bring their ancestors back to life through dreams.

With the dematerialization of reality through the news that comes to us through the cathode tube, and with the life of images that parallels ours, art looks for its physicality in forming social relationships in extreme situations.

Its function as *representation* grows more and more anachronistic. True, it does show – with naked lenses that add no metaphysical decoration to existence – the squalor and poverty of the contemporary, but it is equally true that, without taking some sort of concrete action within social processes that are becoming increasingly responsabilizing, it does not concretely cut between people and life, and remains a circuit that is closed and limited.

The planet swarms with collective micro-memories. A parcelled intelligence, which is diffused at global level, with no centre and no movement, characterizes the shift in energy in these years. Each one is individually conscious of what he is living and adds a contribution of his own; and knowing more or less what he is doing he fishes among the innumerable images produced by the first and second avant-gardes of the last century.

The big movements – Dada, Fluxus, Situationism – have become fragmented, “banalized” and stripped to sharpness in the work of the young who form no aggregations but, in line with the general drift, become part of infinite networks, with no centres and no peripheries. In tribal societies the grade of kinship with the chief can be seen in each member by the position of their tattoos – i.e. the nearer to the head the closer their relationship to the chief. But today the powers tend to decentralize and are metaphorically distributed throughout the entire social organism. The drive towards self-representation, however, creates social hierarchies which are often founded on powers that derive from appearance, and from lies.

Action – which in the case of the young artists presented in this section is extensive and tends to include, rather than exclude – is almost always directed towards confirmation of democratic society.

In the specificity of each context, from the most dramatic to the most “comfortable”, each is the bearer of an action within some provisional tribe. In spite of the fear of death, much of contemporary art moves on the flux of events, through continuous performances aimed at the well-being and, in some extreme cases, at the salvation of peoples. Beuys’s whole life can be seen as a performance. As in life, once the action has been completed, nothing, or almost nothing remains. By the law of impermanence, that rules everything, you have to start over again from scratch.



In 1995 at Novi Sad, a Serbian town near Belgrade involved in Milosevich's Balkan wars, the Apsolutno group created *Good Evening*, a video showing the start of the tv news all over the world, with the respective talking-heads wishing everyone good evening. The good evening of the television networks of the entire globe, in all languages, speeded up, superimposed and repeated, begin to pitch the viewer into a state of anxiety. The message reaches the homes of all the people on the planet and seems to predict that there will be nothing good about it at all, and that very shortly, behind the "good" wishes, will follow the announcement of the worst catastrophes and villainies perpetrated by human kind on their fellow man. The news "blender" which has become no more than a set phase, goes into centrifugal action and overrides and effaces all the silhouettes. The deafening sound of good evening ends in a sort of black hole, tragedy. Silence.

While the Serb artists present the drama of the human family without needing to narrate it, on the other side of the barricade in Sarajevo, Bosnia, immediately following the war and the hopeless depression, the men and women who were artists re-appropriated a city that had just been under bombardment for five relentless, interminable years. They stop the traffic and walk slowly down the Titova, the main street.

They try to understand what has happened, and so become living works in their own drama. For ancient and tribal reasons, one people has decimated another. One tribe has proclaimed their own racial superiority and done some ethnic cleaning on the other.

Alma Suljevic renders a service to the entire population, with a concrete symbolic action, putting her life at risk. Before the public and carrying the necessary equipment, she de-mined the open fields of Sarajevo, then sold fragments of the mined territory, tracing it on the map, and turning over the money she received from the sales of the works towards the de-mining of the whole city. With this social action, powerful enough to sound insane, but dedicated to the elimination of one of the countless mortal dangers, the artist does not represent herself. She is working for life, running the risk of being blown up.

In a project undertaken by Dunja Blazevich, director of the Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art, and created with works by a number of artists installed on the scaffolding of the Gallery of Modern Art of Bosnia Herzegovina, Maja Bajevic called five women refugees from Srebrenica to embroider the scaffolding. The five women from this town – which alone had a death-toll of ten thousand men – seated on boards set at various levels of the scaffolding, sewed designs of their own choice for five hours every day. Embroidery, Maja explained, is the first way to make a woman refugee feel at home. The actions on the scaffolding, planned for *Under Construction*, bring art to the city instead of having the city feel it



must participate in the fashionable inaugurations at the museum. *Under Construction* is the anti-museum which involves the whole tribe and Maja Bajevic shows the images, people and lives of a civilization in extinction. The same women Derek Jarman speaks of at the beginning of his incomparable film *Blue*.

*Sprecare sentimenti* (Wasting Feelings) is the title of the video Olivo Barbieri and Daria Menozzi made in 1997 in the Tien-An-Men Square. For the festival of the Republic, crowds of Chinese arrived from all the provinces to see the decorations in the capital and feel united with one another while singing together the national anthem. Ethnic groups flowed into the square, which is also a tomb, and posed, all smiles, before the cameras of their relations. There was some uneasiness in those faces which the video artists filmed while keeping a wary distance from the police: the unease of the memory of the massacre, the succession of generations on the earth's crust, the infinite ethnic variety in search of an impossible sense of unity.

Raffaella Nappo and the UnDo.Net group work in a more comfortable area, where violence seems to concern only small circumscribed activities. Actually the circumscription of violence is only a myth because, in subtly different and extensive forms, the violence of the economy has been circulating for years, entering imperceptibly into people's bodies. Carbon monoxide, impoverished uranium, mad cows, hormones and an infinite series of poisons live right along with us in our lungs and our livers, where they meet and interact and drive our cells crazy. Raffaella Nappo has elaborated her work on pollution and seriously cancerogenous materials. She creates impossible clothes, over-long pants and unwearable jackets, or rigid spatial wigs. She even uses carbon fibre to weave underpants for beings and tribes who have not yet appeared on earth but belong to the imaginary populations of science fiction. Black meadows and black flowers are the horizons the artist hurls at our uncertain future.

And the invisible, accumulating, unlimited, over-brimming tribes of navigators which UnDo.Net brings together, mixes, and meets at every moment, find names, places and tastes in the "art tribes". In the *No Privacy* project, the tribe of navigators suddenly materializes before our very eyes and is at once illuminated, targeted, identified. The daily rounds of each are closely watched, they emerge from darkness and anonymity only to appear strangely remote from the treacherous magma engulfing them.

In the 24,833 pages visited on one day – of the UnDo.Net site, which offers an art service that tends to stretch into infinity, in a horizontal, non-hierarchical dimension – you can meet anyone at all. In the "common place", where each and everyone is welcome, everything occurs in real time and the compressed, packed spatial dimension. And one is lost in a tribe that has no more margins and



**Apsolutno**  
*Good Evening*, 1996  
Video, 8'



Techne Tribe. Continuity and Developments







**Maja Bajevic**

*Woman at Work*

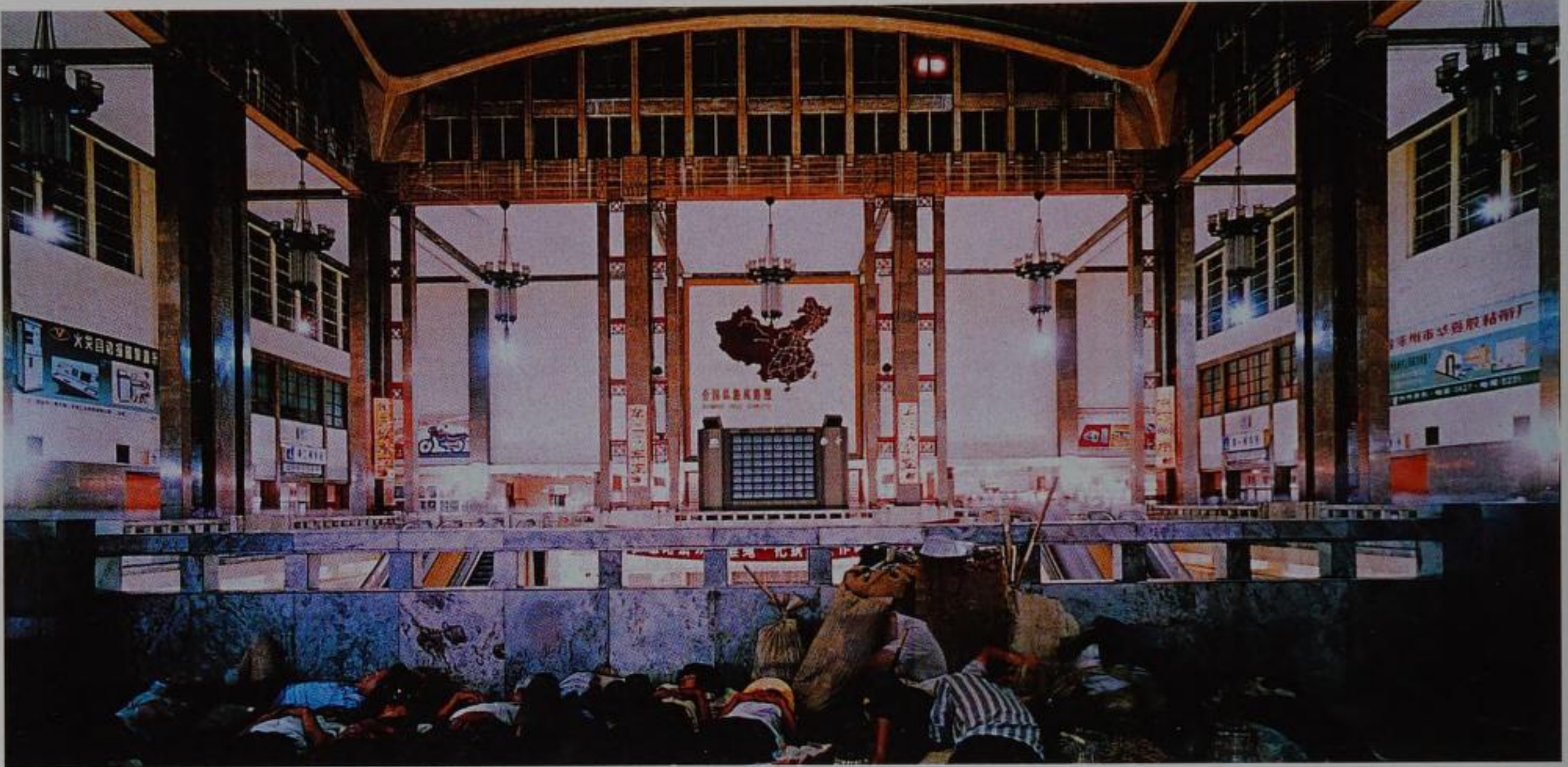
*Action, Third Annual Exhibition  
of "Under Construction", 1999*

(photo Marijana Curic)





**Olivo Barbieri**  
*Peking, 1991*





**Olivo Barbieri**  
*India, 1999*



**Techne Tribe. Continuity and Developments**



**Raffaella Nappo**  
*Untitled, 1998*







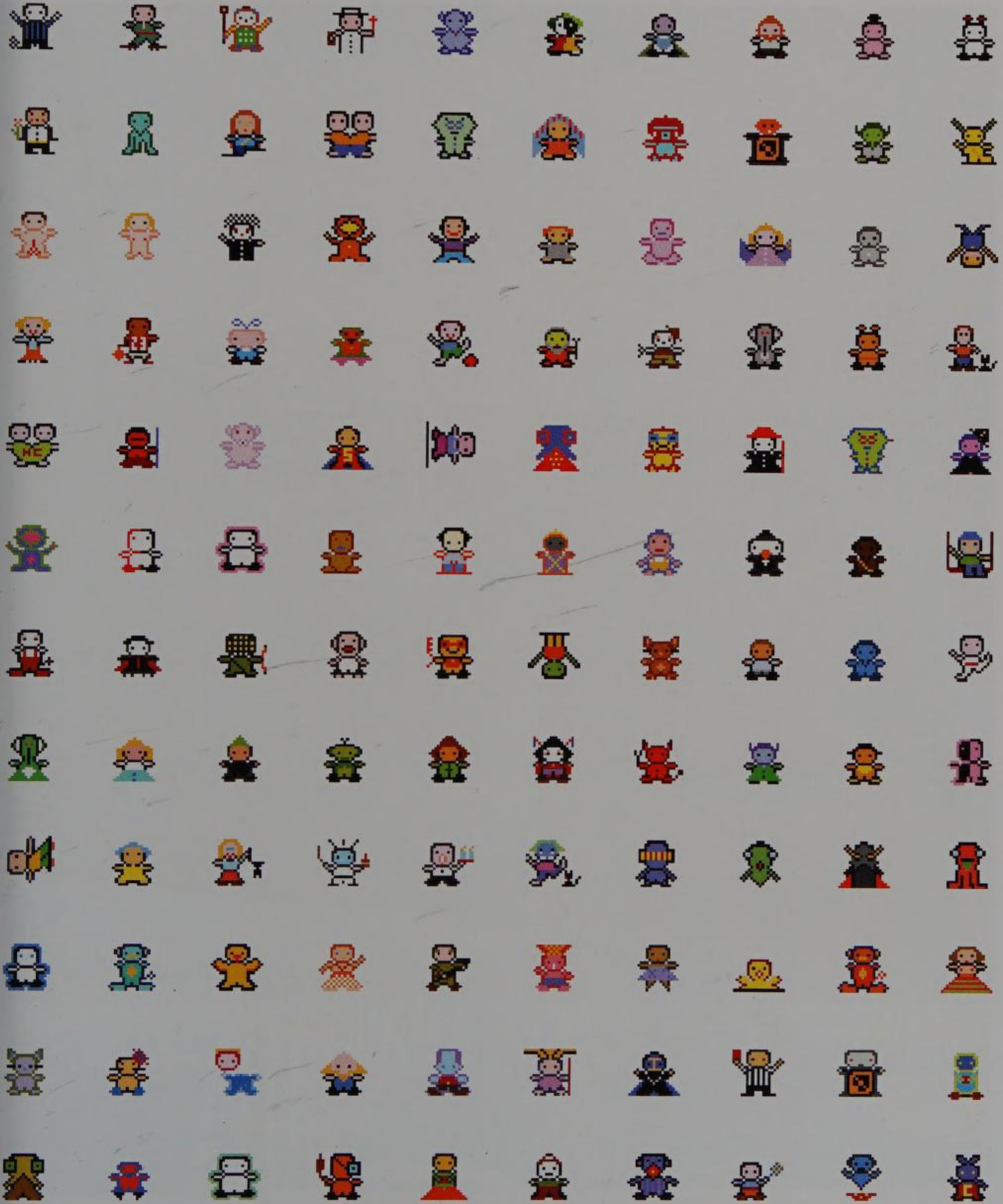






**Alma Suljevic**  
Corridor  
Installation/performance  
(photo Zijad Gafic)

**UnDo.Net**  
Undo-Tribe, April 2001  
Web project, [www.UnDo.net](http://www.UnDo.net)



Techne Tribe. Continuity and Developments

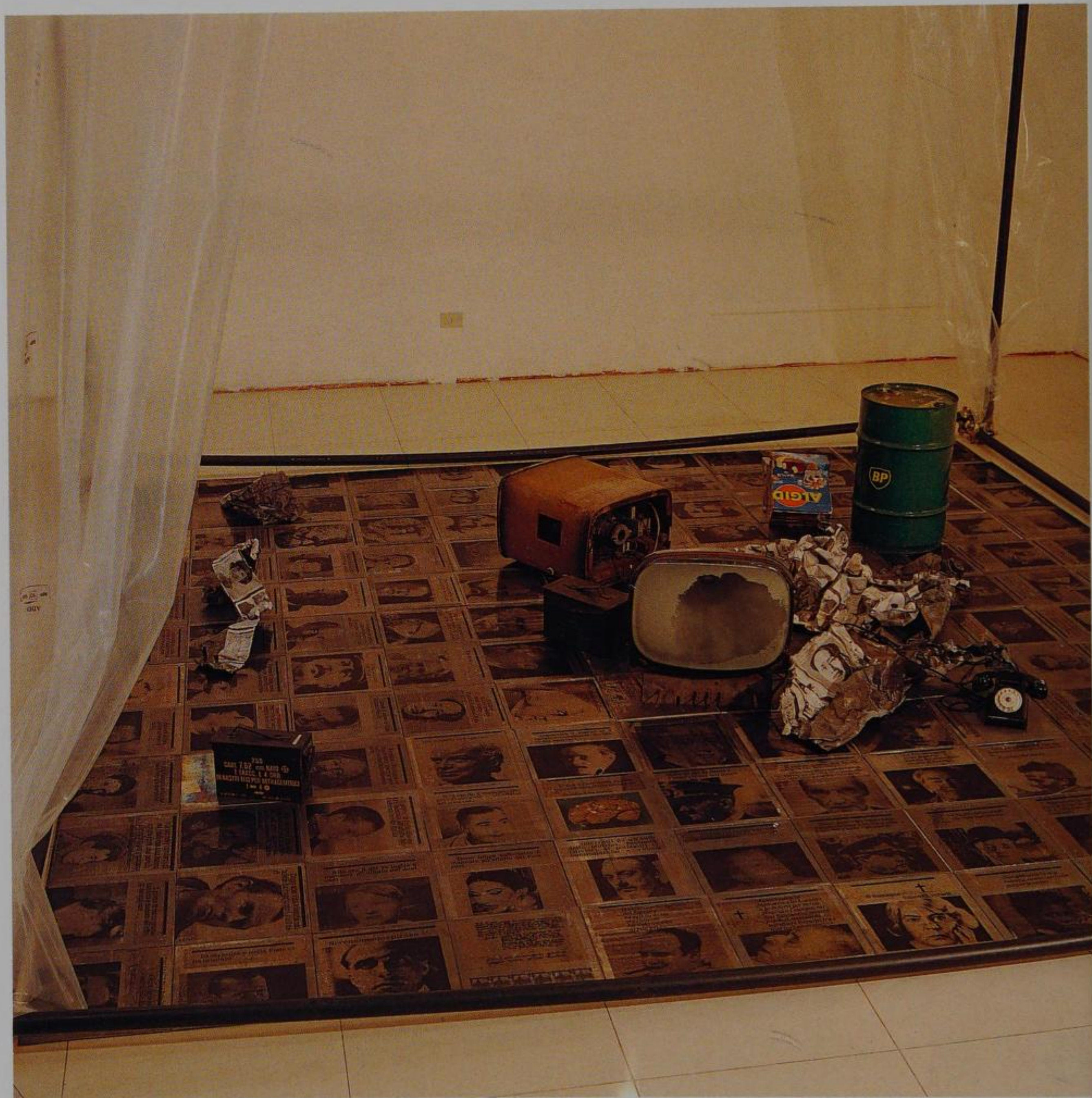


**Innocente**

*Curtain*, 2000

Installation (lead, transparent photocopies, Innocenti tubes, objects)

Courtesy of Galleria Girondini, Verona (photo Arturo Rinaldi)





**Mark Kostabi**  
*Backlash (Limited Palette)*, 1999  
Oil, cm 250 x 500

**Mark Kostabi**  
*The Last Supper at McDonald's*  
(photo © Ron English)









# Tribeless Chiefs

*edited by*  
Danilo Eccher  
*with* Daniela Lancioni

Jean-Michel Basquiat  
Joseph Beuys  
Alighiero Boetti  
Christian Boltanski  
Louise Bourgeois  
John Cage  
Marcel Broodthaers  
Francesco Clemente  
Gilbert & George  
Yves Klein  
Jannis Kounellis  
Piero Manzoni  
Malcom Morley  
Robert Morris  
Pino Pascali  
Mario Schifano  
Michelangelo Pistoletto  
Yayoi Kusama  
Antoni Tàpies







There are times when tribalism can be reduced to and confused with a sort of “counter-altar”, an alternative article of faith, in a bid for nostalgic purity, functioning as a defence against the gluttony of all-devouring, cannibal globalization. At other times, however, the same tribal concept appears to evoke the exotic appeal of the “noble savage”, the serene wisdom of the primitive taken as a scarcely attainable model for a submissive population suffocating amid the obsessive rhythms of a culture that has by now become unrecognizable. Then there are the times when tribalism is no more than the emargination of an illusory tendency towards the visionary that sets off the most bizarre practices, to tear off fragments from an improbable and certainly impracticable truth. The symbolic incrustations the term preserves and protects allude to a complex of analyses that make this obscure world of meanings seem, if possible, even more attractive. Among them, the existential fact is probably the one that most affects the sphere of art, the connection between the language of art and existential liberation reveals energies in common with the practices of tribal necessity, and erects unsuspected bridges between shamanic activity and the making of art. But this is a path peppered with ambiguity and traps, facile nods of acquaintanceship and illusory affinities, similarities that turn out to be differences, but also mistaken identities, familiar sonorities and emotions in common. Thus, it may just be possible to wander the territories of art in search of signs and places of a “magic world” that can collocate one of the elementary structures of a social grammar in the tribe, where it performs a leading role.

The nomad tribes of Australian Achelpa fix their territory in terms of the “Kauwa-auwa” pole, which they see as the axis of their world, a centre of communication amid the various cosmic levels, and probably as a prop to stop the vault of heaven from crashing to earth. The function of the “Kauwa-auwa” pole is to redeem a



wandering humanity from territorial anguish. To plant the "Kauwa-auwa" pole in the place of sojourn is to be understood as re-centring the world and a renewal of the act of foundation: "By virtue of their pole, the Achelpa can walk anywhere while still keeping to the centre." The experience of wandering and sojourning while maintaining the world axis wherever they go is also an attitude that distinguishes the world of art. Like the "Kauwa-auwa" pole, the art world performs the function of existential redemption by protection and support through the awareness of their own centrality. From this point of view the exploration of the "Art Tribes" is not only navigation in the archipelago of languages, but also a letting-go towards the most intimate practices of producing art, revealed in the surprise of echoes and references, the unexpected way of bringing things together; subtle affinities and new friendships. So the tribe is not simply an expedient to facilitate cataloguing. It is a community through encounter and recognition which demands no sacrifice and imposes no renunciation. Behaviour of this kind may prove solitary; in essence it is an experience the artist practices with his poetics and which he silently expresses through his works.

Surveying the work of artists from this angle, we can probably get a much clearer idea of the nuances that help us penetrate the surface of art works, past the place of representation and into the "magic mirror" of a forgotten truth. An unreal space extending like a field of energy, a mental screen for an exclusively poetic vision, which can be traced, for instance, in the exalted monochromes of Yves Klein's works, or the more tormented ones of Piero Manzoni. In the absolute ecstasy of pigment, as much as in the desperately intense whiteness of his material, the work radiates with its emotional force and the tremor of experience.

The same experience of redemption is captured by Joseph Beuys in the felts and animal fats he uses in his shamanic ritual to express the vital energies of the universe and sound its voice. The same sound as John Cage's lament in his sour and subtle whisper of life's relentless flow. Only the voice or the memory of a ceaseless day to day routine in the overwhelmingly immediate flow of history into its present. And so the existential relics are all that remain of a presence constantly fixed at the centre of the world and, at one and the same time, on the edge of the precipice, in the chaos of Schwitters' *Merzbau*, or buried under Spoerri's trash. Enveloped in the traces of Marcel Broothaers to discern a secretly personal, intimate narration, and incredibly secret in its ferocious exhibitionism. In his suspended memory, no nostalgia, and experience played to the very last with no protection or stand-ins, the artist shows his personal unconscious courage. The same perversion in displaying their own experience stamps the works of Gilbert & George. It is the way they put themselves on line, no holds barred, mapping out the border between art and life. Their work is always more connected to



the facts of an intimate daily round, shut away in the objects and places in the eyes of friends, that the clues transform into memory and narration. A narration that follows only along the thread of memory, like the disquietening one of Christian Boltanski. Here, as with Gilbert & George, the support of photography does not intervene solely as narrative, and not even as a conceptual cooling of the visual theme; the photographic data takes on the significance of a call to action, the stressing of partiality and a fragment of a creative process already ended; it has all happened before.

The transience of the work is reflected in the fragmentary state of the relics that shed light on barely conscious morbidity and unconfessable curiosity. The deeper sense of the extraneousness of the work – that refers to a completed action, that emphasizes the real presence of the artist, that brings in an intentionally illusory linguistic process – is the awareness of an intimate subjectivity that governs the flow of time and the personal individual presence. The emotion of the memory that recomposes dissolved reality, according to its own laws, is the artist's secret thought which has its own roots in an all-enveloping total existentiality. The secret of time becomes confused; it coincides with the intimacy of being; the subject marks the entire development of its own reality which then becomes the only one possible. Then the objectivity of the work can only be recomposed by retracing, individually, the emotion of memory and the dimension of its own time.

Through the mechanism of contextualization, access to the temporal sphere also presupposes a sort of need for judgment, i.e. the will to express, through the practice of art, a knowledgeable and articulated social language. This was borne out in the works of Robert Morris which were reduced to primary forms and composed of plain essential letters elegantly balanced between a detached but incisive narration and a stirringly persuasive language.

The object takes on again a material skin, emphasizing its meaning by keeping a very clear distance from any existential presence. The violent energy of the narration takes ascendancy over the fascination of the memory, and this is why we find on the large metal sheets of Jannis Kounellis conglomerates of fears and collective anxieties. The sense of tragedy expands from the artist's heart to boost the intensity of the insurgent suggestion fixed in the fire and the carbon, the rust and the wood. But it is the voice of a society that is becoming more and more present, who can recognize their symbols and draw the same images; a society who wants to enter into the work itself, mirroring themselves physically, leaving their own changing imprints, so as to recognize themselves as having an equal significance. Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirrored surfaces provide a good opportunity, since they restore the image of a world which is slipping away out of our grasp, an illusion of truth, a visionary fragment of reality that will inexorably evaporate. In this



delicately narrated fragility, the weight of the work of art re-emerges and with it its symbolic role, its poetic energy. Like "Kauwa-auwa", the work is aware of its own centrality, its own reassuring role, the magic of its intense and exciting presence.

Poetic energy charts a more painful and unknown path, but it also allows the use of more mysterious instruments of symbol and enchantment. These we find in the work of Louise Bourgeois, and they concern the sort of fairytale narration in images whose contours are shrouded in mystery. Suddenly the work is populated with new and important characters that call into life a fantastic universe where its creatures play an obscure and disquietening role. On stage we see maternity and solitude, nightmare and thought, the whole range of the deepest and most secret feelings. What we have here is a strong and vital image released from story-telling to enter the language of symbol and the thrill of alarm. This is the line taken in the work of Antoni Tàpies where a dense and rough-cut materiality is harrowed and ripped apart by a primordial, almost liturgical iconographic line. A solemn, tragic narration is expressed in a painful, instinctive gestuality, that intensifies the severity of his poetic approach. Grandiosity on this scale, however, cannot stifle the detached element of irony that the language of art always has at hand, and which can be seen in the works of Yayoi Kusama. Art plays at redesigning the world, building its own landscape, and animating it with extravagant figures whose movement throws the established order into chaos. Everything is covered with a sort of coloured film, that helps produce a sudden bewilderment, overwhelming the eye of the beholder in a jubilant riot of disorder that confuses the general perspective and the physiognomy of the figures. But the objects return to reclaim their presence through the distorted fiction of an irreverently blatant painting that envelops and changes everything.

This presence of deformed and painted objects which suggests a fantastic, unreal vision, is also manifest in the real-life weapons of Pino Pasquali. Like Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* they pose questions on the tricks of perception and the truth of pain. The presentation of the object satisfies a morbid curiosity, attracted by a theoretical function alluding to death and destruction. Raising the scale of the game to gigantic proportions lends it a degree of truth that cuts across the level of meaning, transforming a childish image into an icon of tragedy. The ambiguity that insinuates like this into the narrative passes from the object to the painting, and can re-emerge in the glowing figuration of Malcolm Morley. The pictorial scheme is complex and sophisticated in its articulation between a seemingly haphazard composition and aggressive colour. The images are disproportioned and weak, distorted by a surprising perspective and outrageous colour with its violent contrasts and the sinister gleam of acid pigment. This is the energy of a profoundly pictorial narration, the result of chromatism applied to the territo-



ry of decisive, arrogant figuration. In Mario Schifano we find the same instinctive, turbulent painting, the same visionary world which, in his case, blazes with the light and vibrant colour of his enamels. Here everything is yoked to a break-neck acceleration which throws up scraps of narration garbed in a profoundly popular language. Landscape and figures are confused in a visionary frenzy that allows the eye no quarter, dragging it into the pleats of colour with a gestuality that runs out of control among the swarming images which are as precise as they are dishevelled.

This is the narration of daily living on the edge of one's nerves, redeemed through the mediation of iconography, a chaotic flow of images that preserve slivers of a reality, lived through but never understood, that have descended upon existence leaving superimposed traces of disconnected images. The work becomes the territory of improbable deciphering of narrated meanings: figures and letters, side by side, like a crazy herbarium of jumbled illustrations that spring to life in a shrill, inexistent babble. This magnet of images is represented in the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat; forever at cross current, they surprise in a tragic yet ironic view of the world. Here there are no objects, nor the throw-away scraps that gave life to the *Merzbau*, but their icons, fragments of images of a reality displayed on the surface and fixed in the eye. The same iconic process, this time however on the side of transcendental contemplation in narrating images, can be seen in the works of Franco Clemente. The visionary aspect is more intimate, the images more secret, the atmosphere more rarified and, linguistically too, the artist's hand is more cultivated and controlled, while the virtuoso handling of colour exemplifies his subtle capacities. And yet again we find the same narrative urge; the role of drawing in the annotation defines a code of expression that, whether yelled at us or whispered, continues to reveal a profound intimacy.

Through Alighiero Boetti's work we can reconstruct the climate of vaporous meditation and cold conceptualism that still leaves room for a certain playfulness and tricks with images. The icon can be reduced to the abstraction of an alphabet or Arab decoration, but the eye must be on the look-out to find the magic keys to enter a world of meanings that this art conceals enshrined. So, like the outside world, the existential experience becomes fused and intermingles in a project of knowledge that transcends the work itself, in order to assert its own absolute poetic freedom.

These are some of the solitary shamans who have lived in many places and frequented many tribes. They have preserved traces of their wanderings and can allow themselves the privilege of embarking on a silent story-telling. Prophets of the mountain and the desert, forests and ice, lost in the crowd and drifting through the city. Yet they are enveloped in an art that represents the centre of the world and sustains the universe; an art that undertakes the redemption of *being here* in this world.







## Notes on Some Contemporary Aspects of the Historic Avant-Gardes and on the Idea of Supremacy in Art

**W**e seldom use the word “avant-garde” when speaking or writing about the art of today. Its etymological meaning refers to its military use since the twelfth century in France to indicate a squad of soldiers who went on ahead of the armies. When the word was taken up in the twentieth century to distinguish the most advanced works of art, it preserved, in some ways, the memory of a bellicose spirit, whether in music or the visual arts, literature or cinema. It was also called avant-garde because it denied, and thus attacked, the established values. Around the work of art there is a thriving system of economy, places and a whole range of professions. While we must admit that the system sometimes promotes interests that have little to do with culture, art is recognized as such – not only in newspapers, galleries or museums, but also in daily conversations or in studies by writers – through a series of indications whose nature, however much it may change with the times, reflects the civilization, the consciousness, the psychic state of those who examine it. Among the distinctive elements of twentieth-century avant-gardes I do not think that provocation and scandal play much of a role in the art of today. The common-sense offensive of Dada, non-conformist Surrealism and provocations of the Futurists were addressed to a bourgeois public whose chief defect was hypocrisy. Today the bourgeoisie is far more heartless but it lives in a more democratic society, so the provocation of scandalistic art has little reason to exist. Shall we take a look at provocative films like *Kids* or *Gummo*, both scripted by Harmony Korine? Aren't they just stories that come very close to the truth, with fragmentary tales of young immoral social outsiders? Is it wrong to regard them as resulting from the great tradition of the nineteenth-century novel that narrated diversity and made way for an expansion in consciousness? One feature of the concept of avant-garde we still find in contempo-



rary culture is that of an art which opens up what has been kept in the shadows. The work of art, whose origins were investigated by Heidegger, historicizes the truth and opens a world. The French psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel associates art with the perversion that shifts forward the frontiers of the possible and prevents society from remaining fixed once and for all. What art allows to happen is a truth that never loses its fascination in spite of the fact that everyone knows they can contest it. A truth that concerns getting down to creation and which practices doubt. It is a state of consciousness that does not produce certainties. Not exactly an approximation. "Too convenient: approximation was invented by the Impressionists. I'm writing this manifesto" – the writer is Tzara – "to show how the most contradictory actions can be carried out at the same time, in a single breath of fresh air; I am against action; I am in favour of continual contradiction, but I am also for affirmation."<sup>1</sup> Affirmation and consciousness of contradiction have co-existed ever since the acquisition of "the conventional and abstract nature of language".<sup>2</sup> Filiberto Menna considered as modern, and not chronologically contemporary, the art that questioned the correspondence between language and reality. A topic upon which the literature of the avant-gardes is prodigious. "Without the poets and artists, men would quickly become bored with the monotony of nature", as Apollinaire wrote of painters who "always distanced themselves more and more from the ancient art of illusion and local proportions to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms."<sup>3</sup> For Malevich, "the phenomena of objective nature, in themselves, from the point of view of the Suprematists, are without significance";<sup>4</sup> De Stijl launched an appeal to "all those who, in their art, have annihilated natural form which blocks authentic expression".<sup>5</sup>

With the elimination of the natural model there disappeared, partly, the need to conceive art as an assembly of complex elements intimately remembered. Imagine the challenge to make a flesh that reflected organs, viscera and states of mind all at the same time. In the conventional field of language, starting from the avant-garde, there was a proliferation of hyperboles, extreme declarations, parcelled visions. The praxis of Conceptual Art was to isolate a subject and make it the absolute protagonist of the work. The work keeps its degree of complexity, but in the case of the works of Boltanski memory predominates. Where the field of action is circumscribed and the work concentrates on a detail, aspiration to the universal can be achieved. This is the path followed by Malevich or by Mondrian, but it is also what led Brancusi to imagine the infinite column. The possibility to intuit a universal scale still seduces today: Pistoletto's mirrors can reflect everything and all the humanity on earth, Boetti's *Tutto* (Everything) was probably connected with an intuition of Schifano, who, in an exhibition en-

<sup>1</sup> T. Tzara, "Manifesto Dada", 1918, in M. De Micheli, *Le avanguardie artistiche del Novecento*, Milan 1966, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> F. Menna, *La linea analitica dell'arte moderna*, Turin 1975, p. XI.

<sup>3</sup> G. Apollinaire, "Méditations esthétiques. Les peintres cubistes", 1913, in M. De Micheli, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

<sup>4</sup> K. Malevich, "Manifesto del Suprematismo", 1915, in M. De Micheli, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

<sup>5</sup> T. van Doesburg, R. van't Hoff, W. Huszar, A. Kok, P. Mondrian, G. Vantongerloo, J. Wils, "Primo Manifesto della rivista 'De Stijl'", 1918, in M. De Micheli, *op. cit.*, p. 410.



titled *Tutto* at the Galleria Odyssia in Rome in 1963, put an end to monochromes by showing pictures with multiple subjects. In all these cases the work assumes the value of example and offers a truth; not a changeless reality, but a changing vision. The Cubists and Futurists, who developed a new sensibility with their simultaneous visions, showed they were capable of perceiving the relations of relativity, and were conscious that very soon something different would appear. “The truth is never discovered once and for all”, “The truth will always be new”,<sup>6</sup> said Apollinaire. And Marinetti: “When we are forty, other men, younger and better men than we are, will throw us into the waste paper basket like useless manuscripts. And that’s exactly what we want!”<sup>7</sup> Hence Queneau’s *Exercices de style* and the *Opera aperta* theorized by Umberto Eco.

When Celant traced the outline of Arte Povera in 1967 he wrote of “a new attitude to repossess a ‘real’ dominion of our being, that leads the artist to the continual shifting from his deputized place, from the cliché society has stamped on his wrist”.<sup>8</sup> The highlighting of an erratic attitude was a good interpretation of the choice made by some artists to abandon consolidated techniques, question the concept of style and assume the freedom of producing art with anything or anyone at all. Celant even compared the artist to a warrior, taking up arms again in the bellicose attitude of the first avant-gardes. “No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece”,<sup>9</sup> wrote Marinetti. The view of art as a head-on collision, a scream, or trauma was common currency. But once the last postwar period was over (very late in Italy), it was no longer a question of fighting, all in it together, against a declared enemy. The context of reference faded and for many intellectuals the yardstick became a personal matter, to verify through one’s own behaviour. This is also borne out by political battles, the years of legalizing divorce, the abortion laws and the ones which effectively changed the position of women in society.

The importance of behaviour, in other words the superimposition of art on life, was one of the foundations that migrated from the avant-gardes, not only from Futurism and Surrealism, but also from Isadora Duncan’s dancing on the seashore dressed as a Grecian goddess, the dressing up of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and the Nabis, or from the utopian communities of people like the ceramicist Francesco Randone. Participating here we find the work of Pollock and Kaprow, Klein and Manzoni, then that of Beuys and the others, and this includes Gilbert & George. In order for this art – that was so mixed with life, but also philosophy, theatre, ecology, anthropology down to daily routine – to maintain its own identity, it was necessary to provide a space to function as a frame, that is, by separating, it would distinguish but also create a free zone within which the categories of the illicit could be suspended. In 1971 Achille Bonito Oliva wrote of a *Territorio*

<sup>6</sup> G. Apollinaire, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

<sup>7</sup> F. T. Marinetti, “Manifesto del Futurismo”, 1909, in M. De Micheli, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

<sup>8</sup> G. Celant, “Arte povera. Appunti per una guerriglia”, in *Flash Art*, Rome, November-December 1967.

<sup>9</sup> F. T. Marinetti, *op. cit.*, p. 370.



*magico* (Magic Land), “a single gateway within which the partiality and circumstances of life flow together in totality and freedom”.<sup>10</sup> “The single word freedom exalts me”,<sup>11</sup> wrote Breton, and Kounellis, speaking to Carla Lonzi: “I think of a possibility that is less and less tied to the structure of painting, and more and more free, like someone who, very slowly as time goes by, becomes freer and freer.”<sup>12</sup> Freedom is judged the indispensable condition for art to manifest.

Now this freedom to assume different aspects and to appear in different contexts runs the risk of preventing the work of art to be recognized as such. Outside a gallery, a museum or a collector's house, Robert Morris's installations of 1969 in felt, rubber, stone panels, slabs and metal sheets could not be identified as a work of art. Indispensable for this work are individuals who give particular care and attention to the work, and are prepared to interpret it in relation to the ones that appeared before, and make it known to a much wider public. The artist with multiple interests is an ancient figure, a humanist, made contemporary in the light of nineteenth-century utopias, and kept alive by the exaltation of the creativity conducted by the avant-gardes. In more recent times freedom of expression and expansion of the field of action have led to the abolition of the authority of technique and language. And this freedom to ignore art's own codes, neither to take account of them nor transmit them, nor contest them, nor to refer to them in meta-linguistic terms, also guarantees the artist the possibility of renewing himself, from time to time to have access to a peak where the aspirations and feelings, accidents and discoveries of humans become exemplary.

There is only one demand art still seems inclined to listen to, the insistence that the work of art be new, or in any case different from the ones that preceded it. New, from one case to the next or one time to another, can assume various nuances and appear alternative, original and exceptional. Something new can be the vision that redesigns the past (to the point where tradition develops from the needs of a present, well exemplified in the spread of images of the face of Christ centuries after his death), and new was the art from which theories of quotation and postmodern culture were developed. New is the freehand drawing made by Clemente in 1976 on the walls of Gian Enzo Sperone's gallery. New and alternative to the frenetic state of things the *Silence* of John Cage. New, unique, exceptional are attributes art still uses. Moreover, the exceptional seems to be enjoying a new run of luck in the striking gigantism of some recent works and museum spaces. The category of judgment on the exemplarity of a work, and on being a creator of an individual, might be said to persist, although the originality is perceived through the awareness of a collective source of creativity. Freud's theories on introjective identification of the leader

<sup>10</sup> A. Bonito Oliva, *Il territorio magico. Comportamenti alternativi dell'arte*, Florence 1972, pp. 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> A. Breton, “Manifesto del Surrealismo”, 1924, in M. De Micheli, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

<sup>12</sup> C. Lonzi, “Un villaggio pieno di rose”, interview with J. Kounellis, in *Catalogo*, Rome 1966.

<sup>13</sup> P. Celan, *La verità della poesia. Il meridiano e altre prose*, edited by G. Bevilacqua, Turin 1993, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London 1945, p. 37.



among members of a group have been taken over, as well as the contrary theory of Bion who saw the members of the group transfer their functions and emotions to the leader. Paul Celan wrote exemplary pages on the need for the other and the mystery of the encounter: "The poem tends to an Other, it needs him, it requires an interlocutor, it goes looking for him, and dedicates itself to him."<sup>13</sup> Carla Lonzi renounced art so as not to submit to the male system which gives power to the leader with the support of individuals who make a myth of him – men always come first, a woman's duty is veneration. "Women have served", wrote Virginia Woolf, "all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."<sup>14</sup> Louise Bourgeois is a woman however, and also an exceptional artist, and her works are in fact monumental. Redimensioned by the consciousness of the participating presence of the other, sheltered from the dangers of the inequality between men and women, the idea of supremacy in art, traced in the wake of the avant-gardes, still seems to be alive and thriving: so what are the categories that will substitute it?



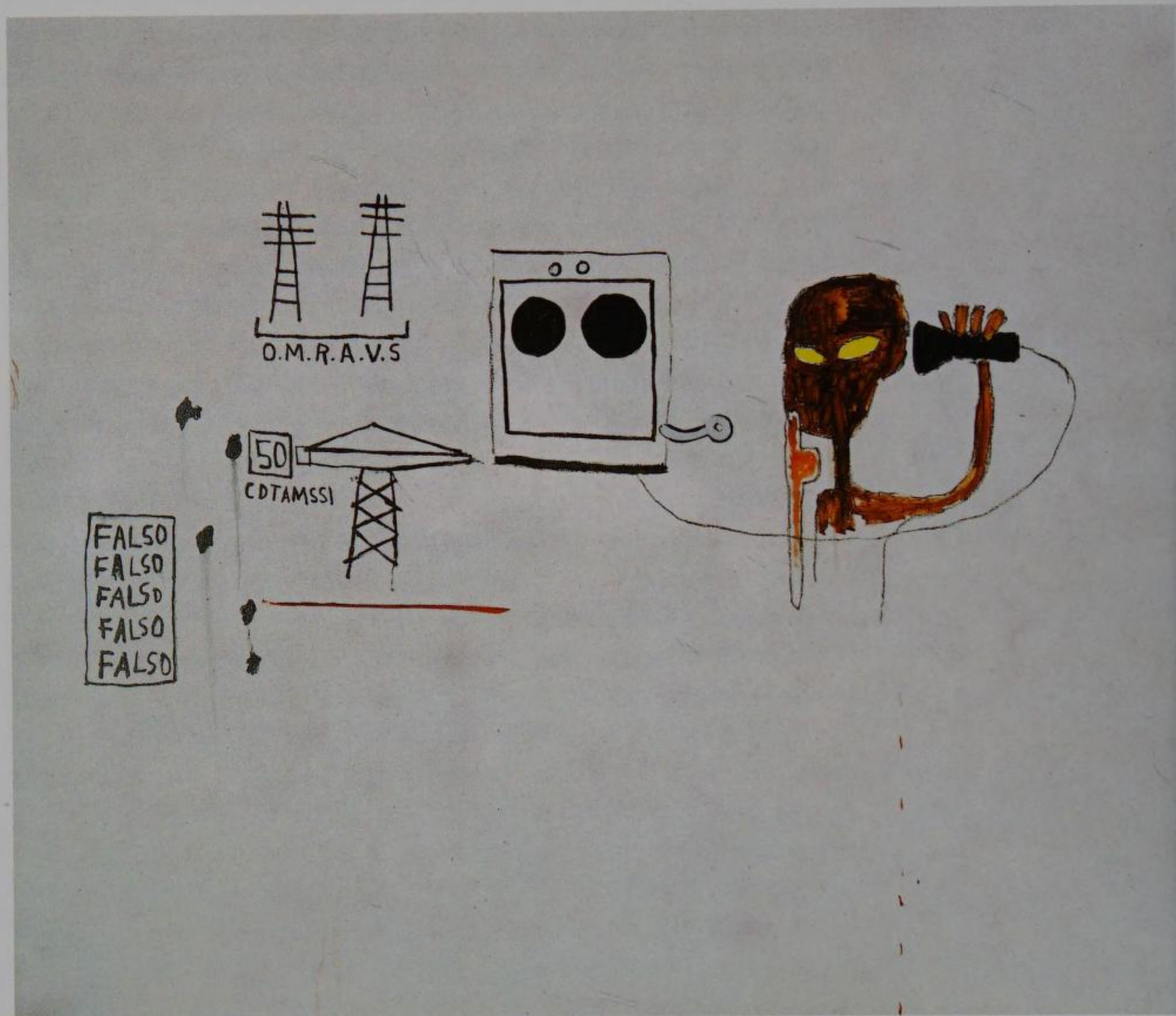
**Jean-Michel Basquiat**

*O.M.R.A.V.S.*, 1984

Acrylic and pencil on canvas,  
cm 218.5 x 294

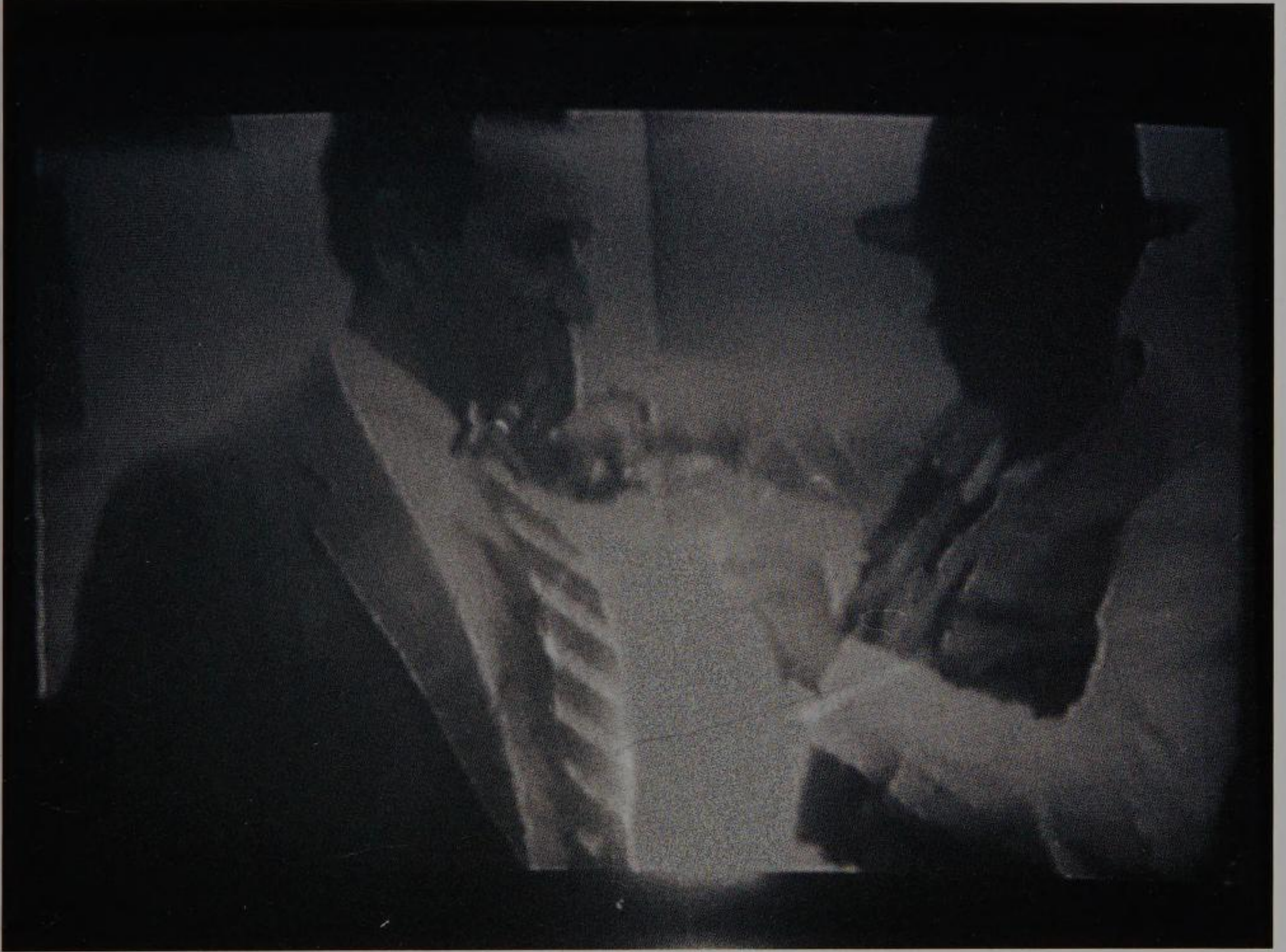
The Estate of Jean-Michel  
Basquiat

Courtesy of Galerie Enrico  
Navarra, New York





**Joseph Beuys**  
*Earthquake Diagram*, 1981  
Video frame





**Alighiero Boetti**

*Tutto*, 1989

Hand embroidery,  
cm 182 × 272

Caterina and Giordano Boetti  
collection, Rome





**Christian Boltanski**

*La Réserve des Suisses Morts,*  
1990

Biscuit tins, photographs,  
lamps, variable dimensions

Courtesy of Galerie Yvon  
Lambert, Paris

(photo A. Cesari and Studio  
Pym)

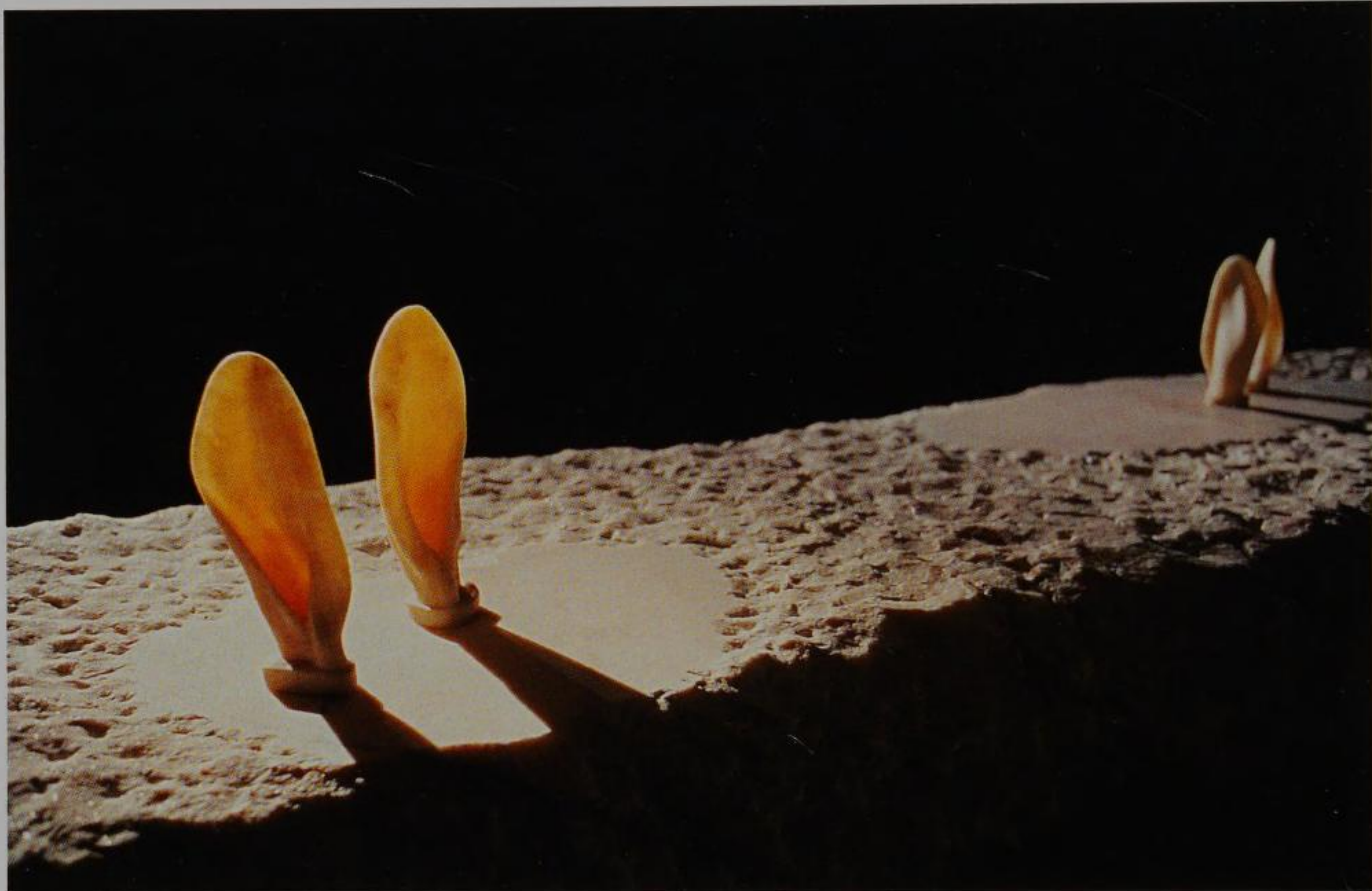




**Louise Bourgeois**

*Ears*, 1998

Pink marble,  
cm 100.3 × 72.3 × 182.8, as  
installed for the *Arte all'Arte*  
1998 project, by Arte  
Continua, San Gimignano  
Courtesy of Cheim & Read  
Gallery, New York  
(photo Attilio Maranzano)





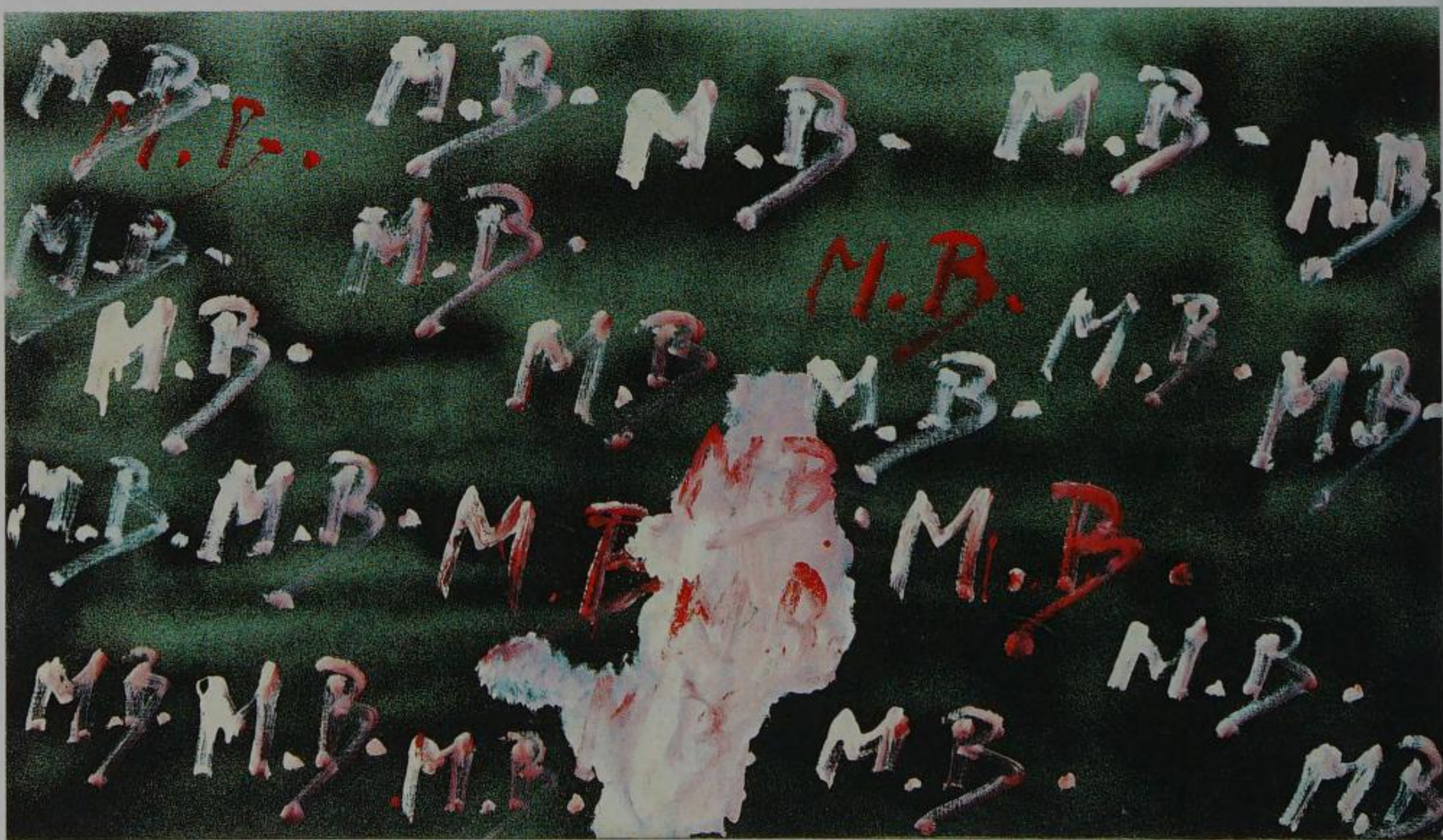
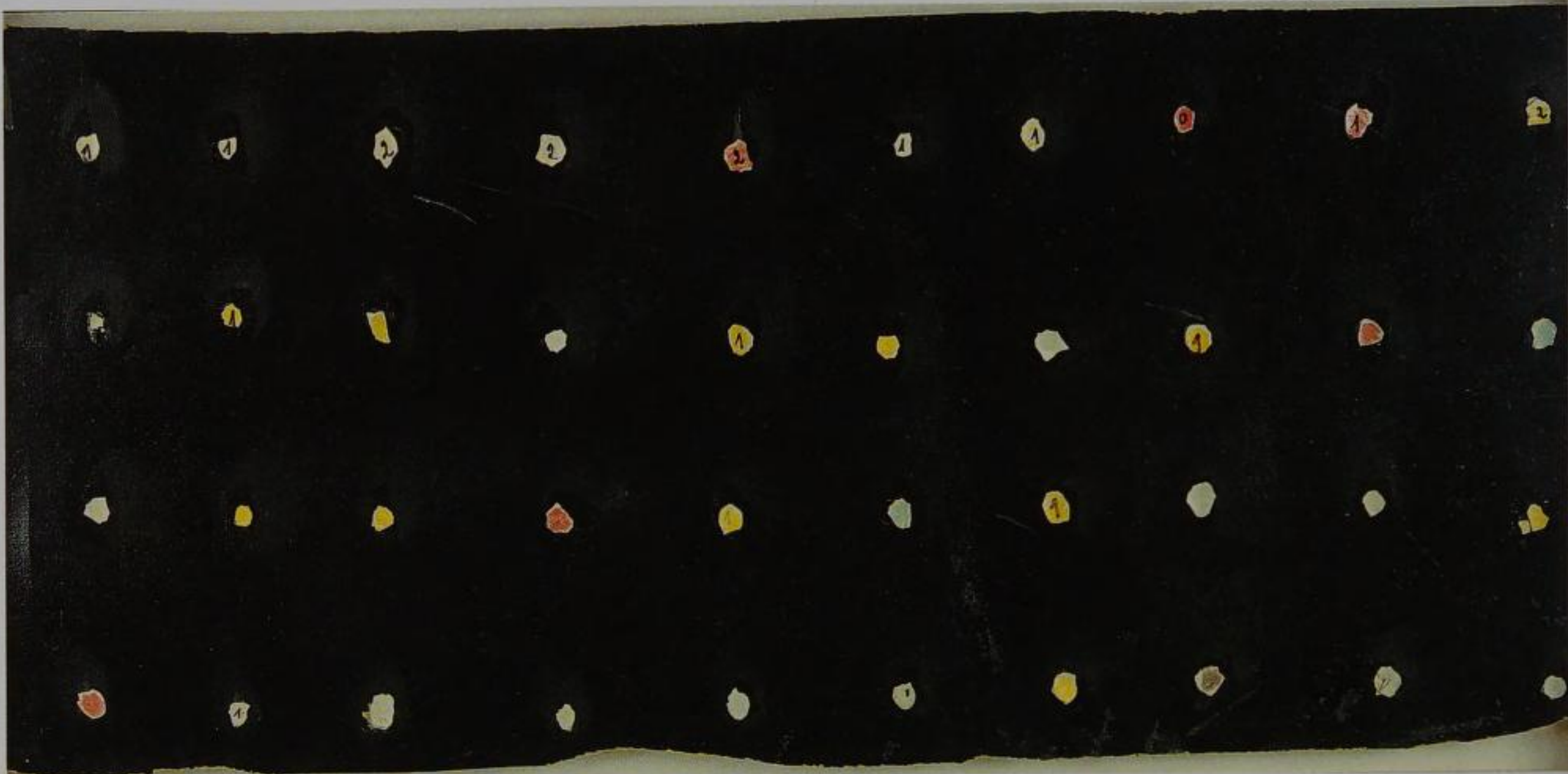
**John Cage**  
*Untitled*, 1990  
Installation  
Courtesy of Fondazione  
Mudima, Milan





**Marcel Broodthaers**  
*Untitled*, 1966  
Egg-shell, oil on canvas,  
cm 45 × 95  
Courtesy of Galerie Michael  
Werner, Cologne

**Marcel Broodthaers**  
*M.B. M.B. M.B.*, 1968  
Oil on canvas, cm 65 × 115  
Courtesy of Galerie Michael  
Werner, Cologne





**Marcel Broodthaers**

*P*, 1974

Walnut, plaster and metal  
plates, cm 150 × 147 × 50

Courtesy of Galerie Michael  
Werner, Cologne





**Francesco Clemente**  
*Not Everybody It's Nobody,*  
*Some It's Not All,* 1981  
cm 153 x 356  
Private collection, Rome





**Gilbert & George**

*Sleeping*, 1981

Colour photos mounted  
on masonite, cm 253 × 426

Galleria d'Arte Moderna,  
Bologna



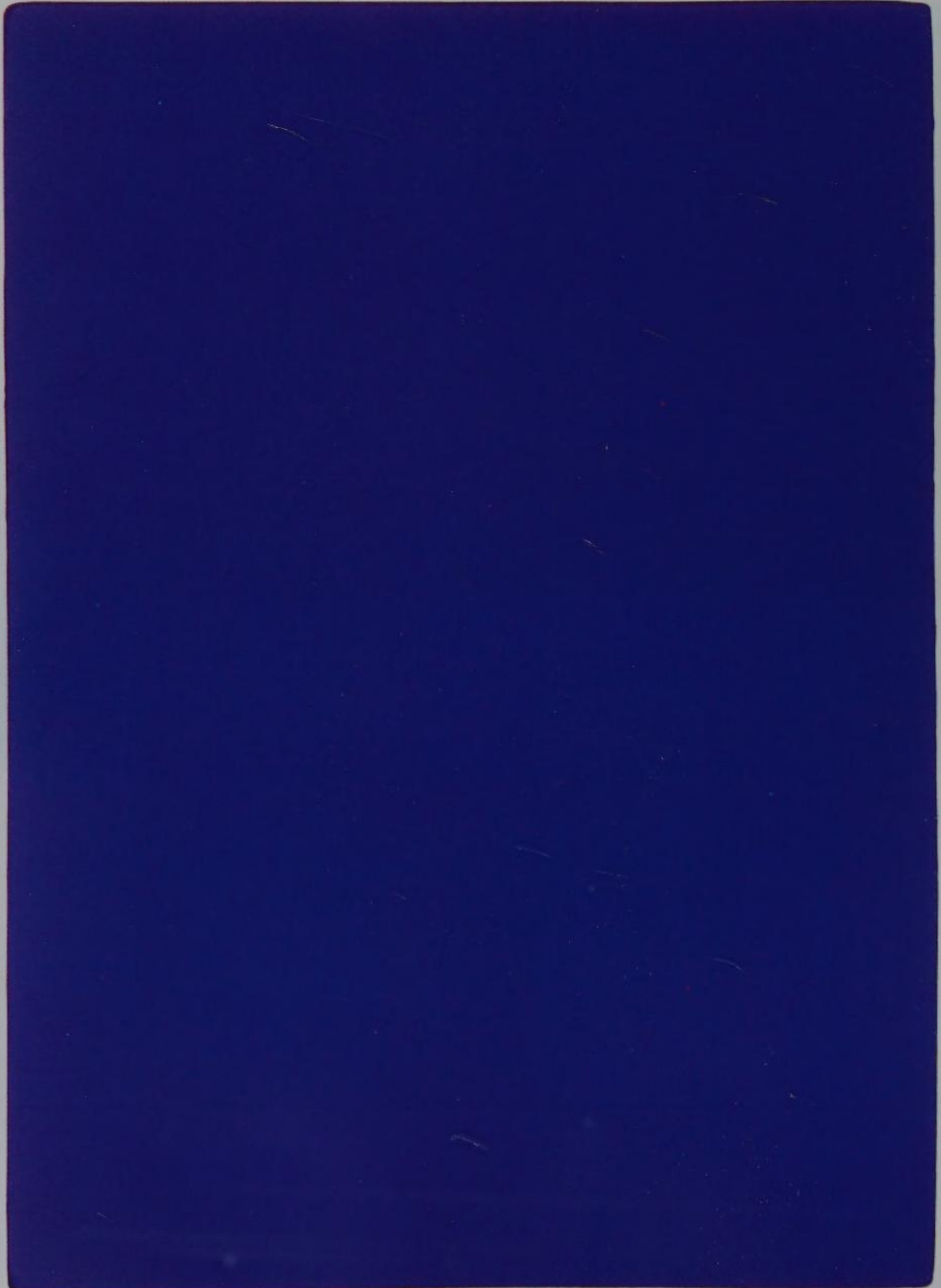


**Yves Klein**

*Untitled*, 1956

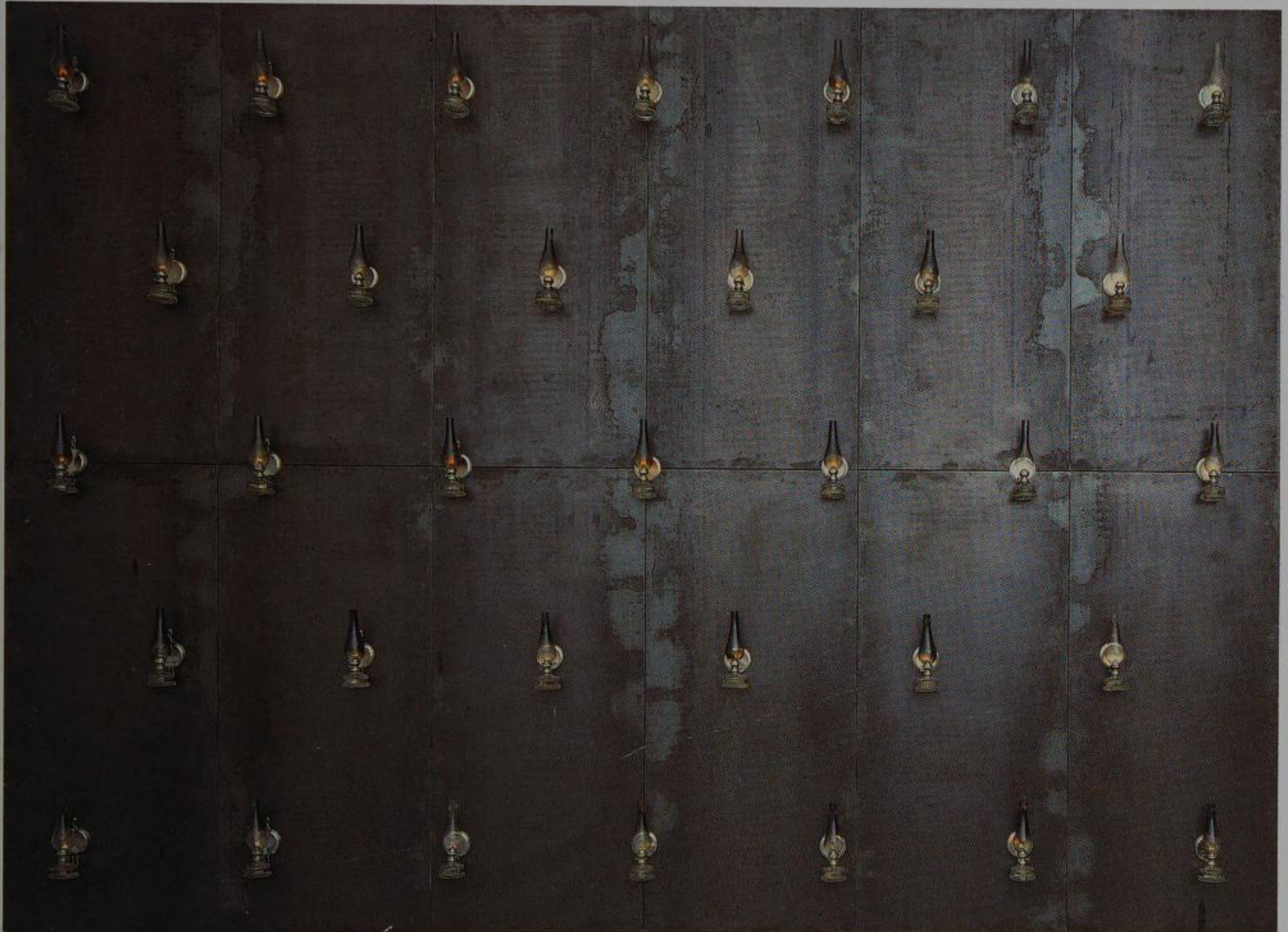
Blue pigment on canvas,  
cm 79 × 56

Private collection, Rome





**Jannis Kounellis**  
*Quadreria*, 1993  
Iron and oil lamps,  
cm 400 × 540  
Courtesy of Galleria Christian  
Stein, Milan



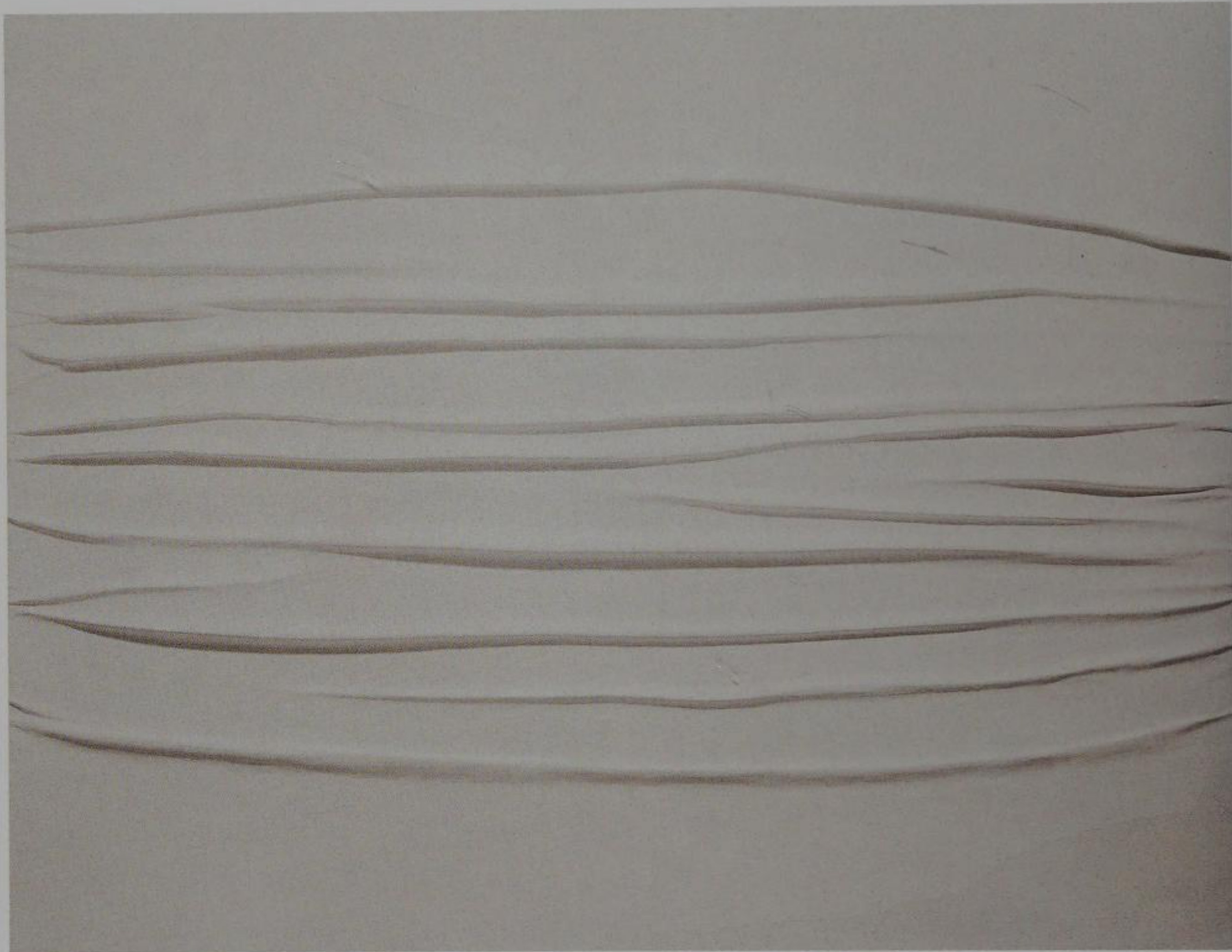


**Piero Manzoni**

*Achrome*, 1958

China clay on canvas,  
cm 70 × 90

Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni,  
Milan (photo Orazio Bacci)





**Malcom Morley**

*Bait Drums*, 1992

Oil on canvas, cm 203 × 255

Courtesy of Galleria d'Arte

Moderna Emilio Mazzoli,

Modena (photo Paolo Terzi)





**Robert Morris**

*Untitled*, 1983

Black industrial felt,  
cm 240 × 120

Pino Casagrande collection,  
Rome

(photo © Luca Borrelli)





**Pino Pascali**  
*Anti-aircraft*, 1965  
Recycled materials,  
cm 170 × 95 × 130  
Franchetti collection, Rome





**Mario Schifano**

*For Example*, 1989

Enamel and acrylic on canvas,  
cm 390 × 900

The United Nations High  
Commissioner for the  
Refugees, Geneva

(photo Marcello Gianvenuti)





**Michelangelo Pistoletto**

*Man with Stool*, 1962–1980  
Silk-screen on stainless steel,  
cm 230 × 125

Tommaso and Giuliana Setari  
collection, Rome

*Woman Turning*, 1962–1979  
Silk-screen on stainless steel,  
cm 230 × 125

Mario Pieroni collection, Rome  
(photo courtesy of Zerynthia)

*Ladder*, 1962–1983

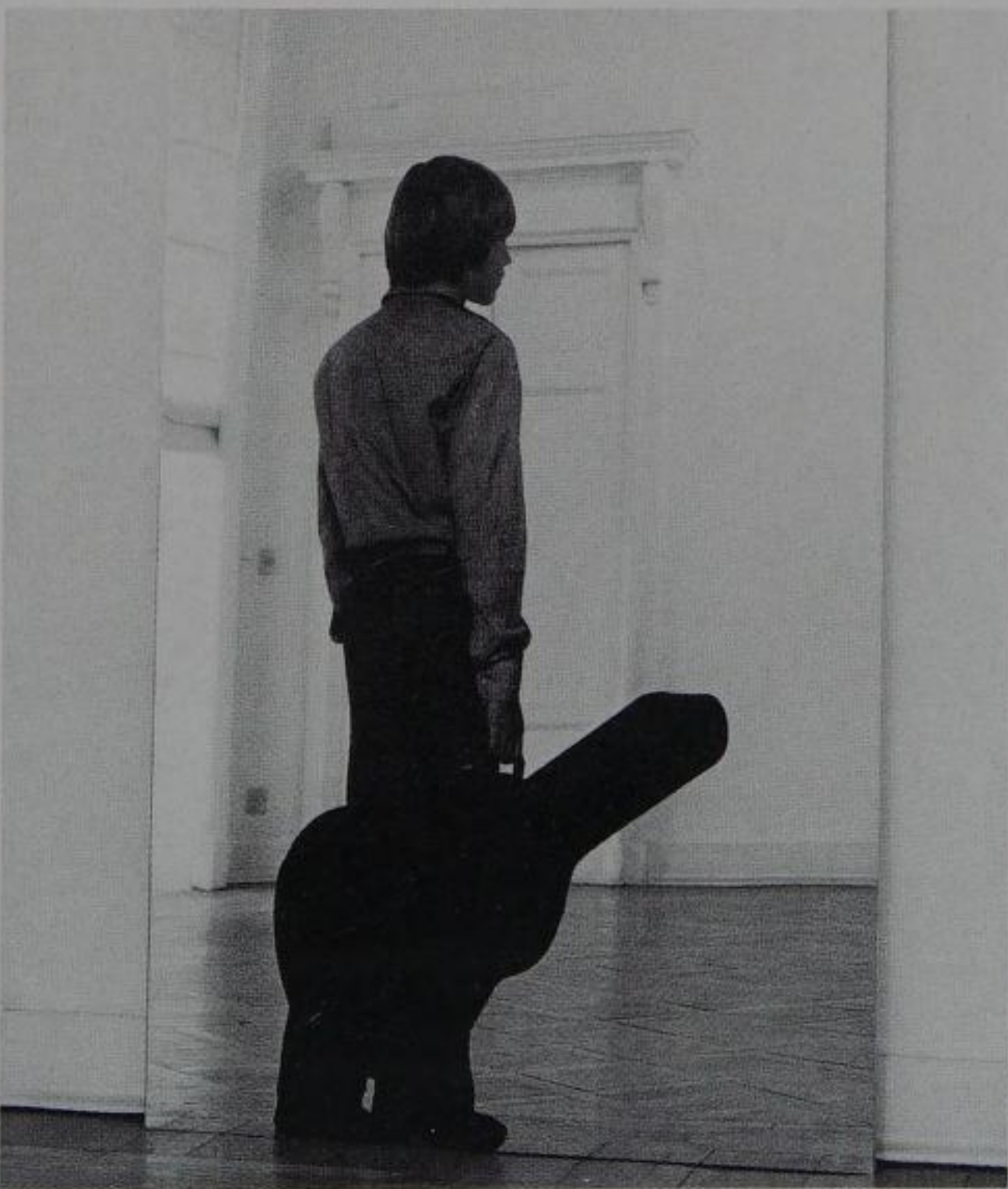
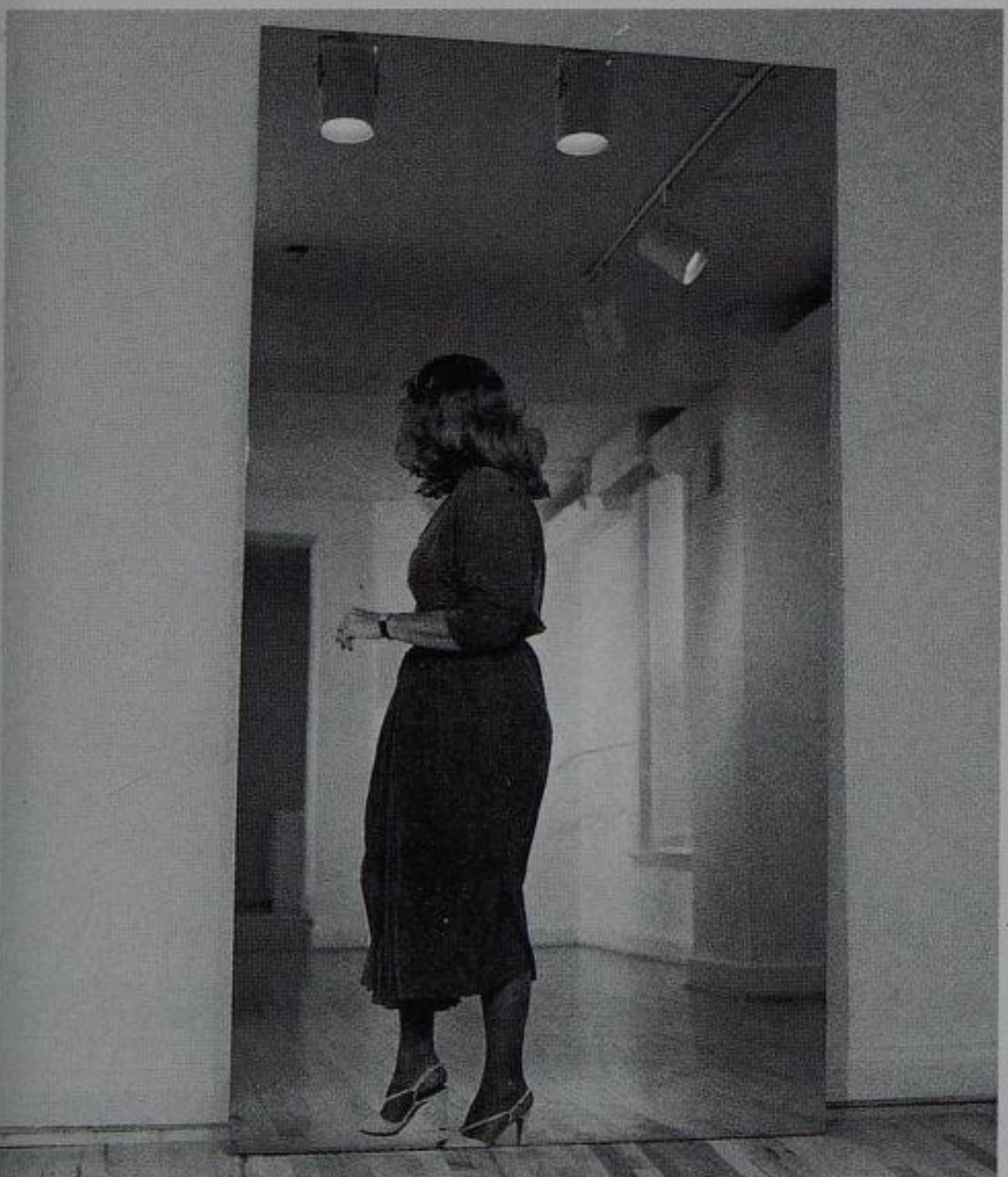
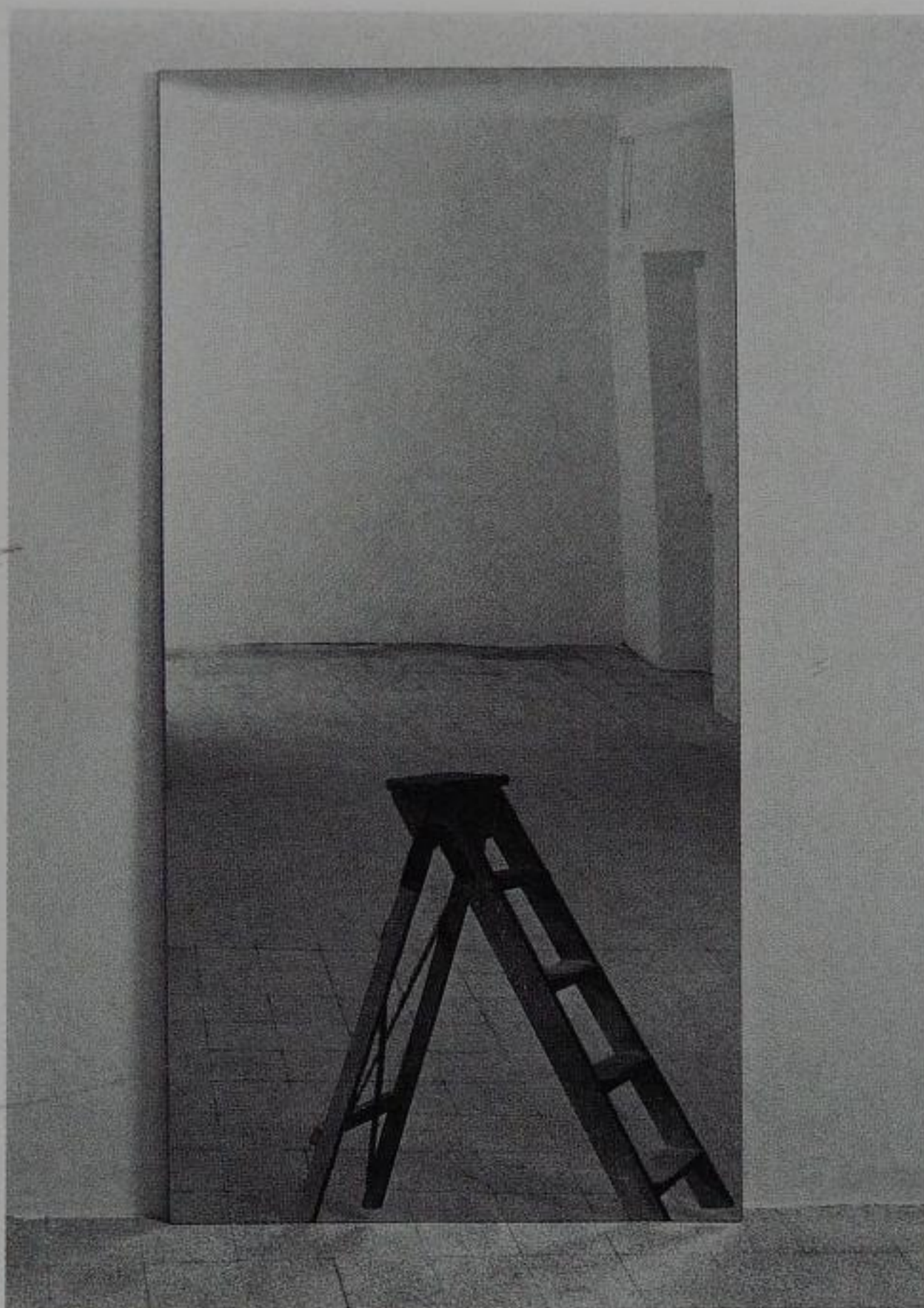
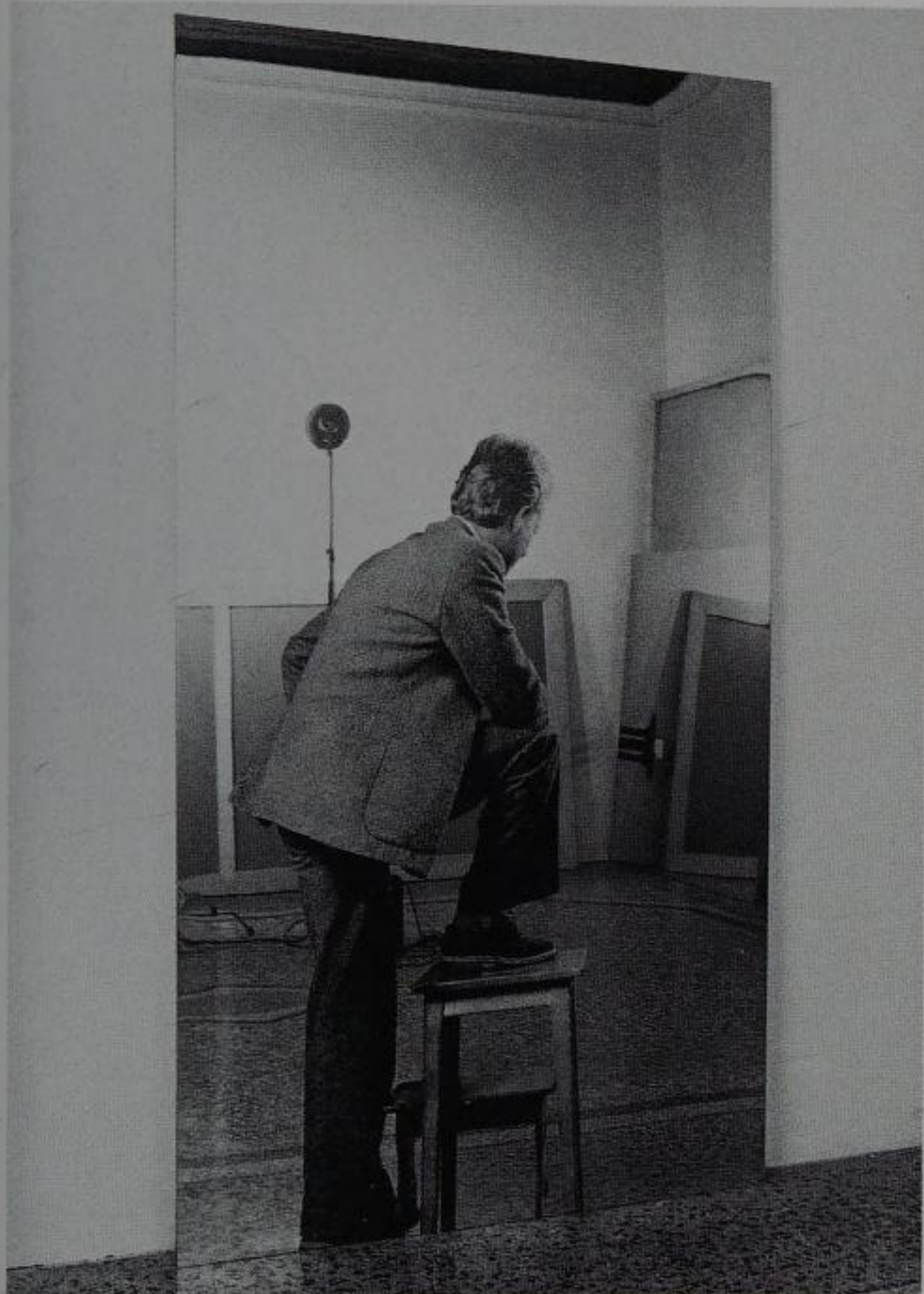
Silk-screen on stainless steel,  
cm 230 × 125

Mario Pieroni collection, Rome  
(photo P. Pellion)

*Boy Carrying a Guitar*, 1962–1979

Silk-screen on stainless steel,  
cm 230 × 125

Private collection, Milan  
Courtesy of the Galleria d'Arte  
Persano, Turin (photo P. Pellion)



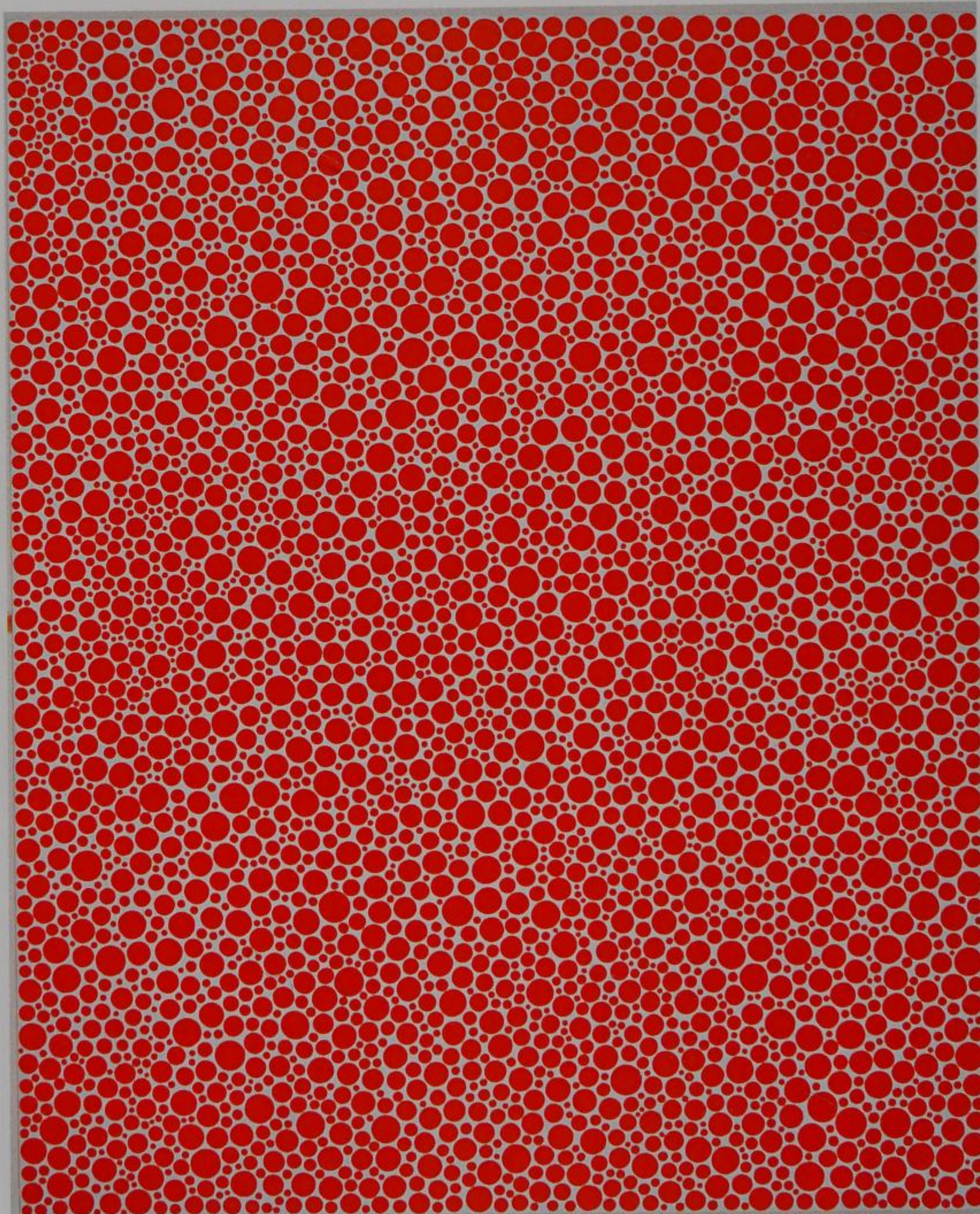


**Yayoi Kusama**

*Infinity Dots*, 1996

Acrylic on canvas, cm 160 × 152

Courtesy of Studio Guenzani,  
Milan





**Antoni Tápies**

*Bed*, 1988

Terre chamottée,  
cm 27 × 86.5 × 175

Courtesy of Galerie Lelong,  
Paris









# Video

*edited by*  
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Charlotte Moorman  
Bruce Nauman  
Marina Abramovic  
Jayne Parker  
Cheryl Donegan  
Alix Pearlstein





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The theory that has guided us in establishing a path between video works and artists who have used video electronics, as regards the theme of this exhibition, was to see whether, in the short history of the video, these artists have produced practices in common from the point of view of ideologies and aesthetics. Bearing this in mind, our perspective is “historical”. History, however, in this case is neither a document nor a monument, and must be interrogated in terms of the pressing events of the present, which has led us to reconsider the most authoritative readings archived in the “inventory” of the recent past, thereby promoting an exercise in comparison and synthesis. For example, we refer to today’s renewed interest in performance. As well as the insistence with which new technologies keep being brought up in relation to radical thought, as though telematic technologies (and whoever creates art by these means) were a destabilizing influence, a critical contestator. Continuing in this direction we can identify some constants that will allow us to attribute to a number of experiences in the short history of the video a degree of cohesion on the bases of their descent from mythical “founding fathers” (the Fluxus tribe) and identify their common methods of production: the video as utopia to regenerate tv and cinema; as an instrument for political dissent; and as auto-representation of the artist in action (Body Art).<sup>1</sup>

#### *Intelligent tv*

Halfway through the eighties a feeling of omnipotence was rife on the video scene: the watchword was to take possession of television and transform it, overcoming the wave of contempt that marked the origins of video art. This new attitude – after the Minimalist and Conceptualist avant-garde experiences had died down – derived from the need to conquer a mass public, aban-

<sup>1</sup> I have given much wider consideration to these topics in essays published in: *Dissensi*, edited by V. Valentini, Palermo 1991; *Video d'autore* 1986–1995, edited by V. Valentini, Rome 1996; *Dal Vivo*, edited by V. Valentini, Rome 1998.



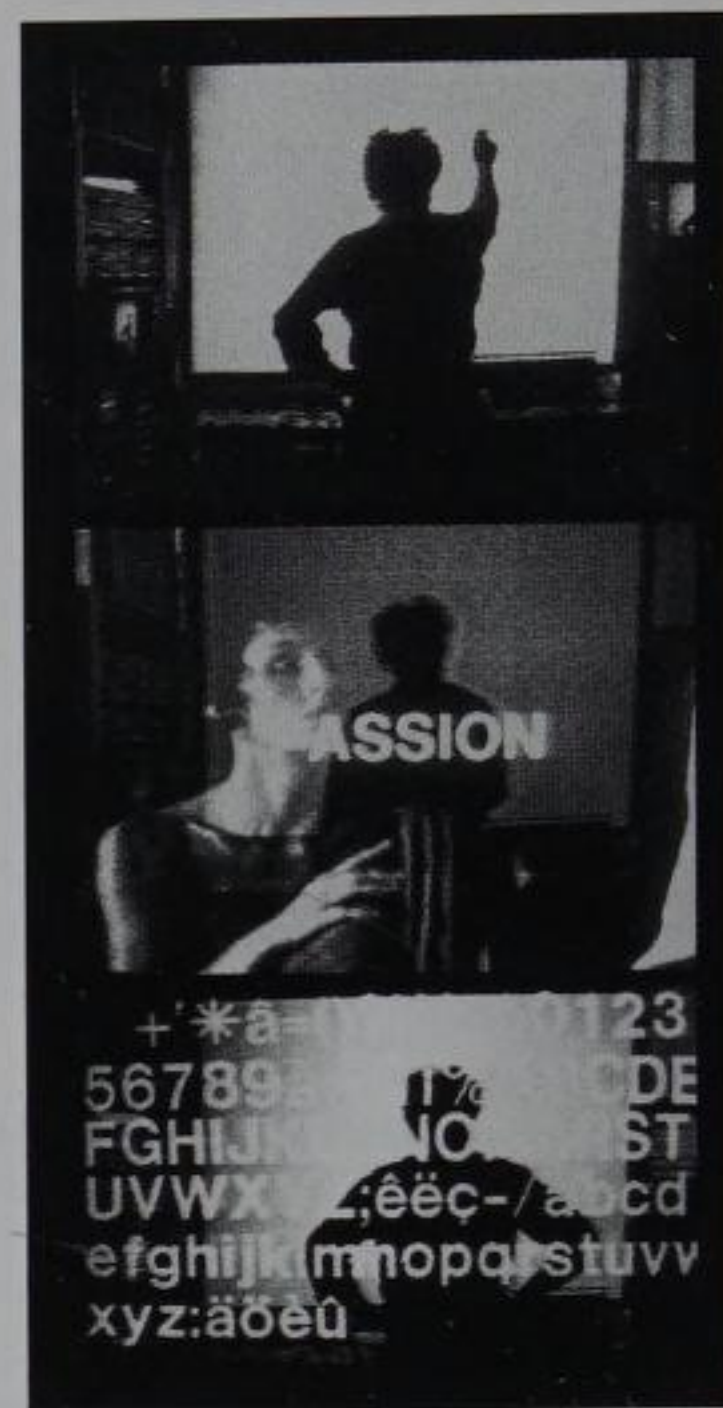
doning the élite spaces of art in order to occupy the places and channels of social life, mainly discotheques and tv networks.

Between the mid-seventies and early eighties, in the United States, it was the artists who set up the experimental workshops of Television Art, like WGBH in Boston and the WNET in New York, where Peter Campus, Bill Viola, Nam June Paik and William Wegman produced a substantial part of the video work. In these years Robert Ashley and John Sanborn made *Perfect Lives* (1976–1983); in Europe Peter Greenaway began his collaboration with Channel Four, whose intentions were to promote experiment and independent production. Robert Wilson produced *Video 50* and *Stations* for INA, while WNET of New York broadcast the memorable films of Nam June Paik, *Good Morning Mr Orwell* (1984) and *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986).

The nineties marked the end of the dream: tv saved by the power of the *nouvelle image*, with spectacular special effects, and the pride of possessing an apparatus of independent production and distribution, which meant that a single artist could control the entire production process.

The theory behind the ideology of video's encounter with tv was understood as a regeneration from the exchanges that were to lead not only to the emergence of a new television with a vocation for experimentation in the interests of culture, but also, indirectly, to a new cinema. As Godard asserted in his 1981 manifesto, *Changer d'image*, both cinema and tv are under occupation by the enemy, and so both should be interested in finding a "formula" to change the images. The foundation of electronic workshop was part of this strategy for change because it was aimed, experimentally, at solving the key problem: for the audio-visuals in general to become a kind of "indifferent nature". From this point of view Godard assumed that tv was the place of mega-discourse on the modes of exchange between broadcaster and receiver, between artist and viewer, as an interrogation on the role and job of the director (in crisis) who since that time had begun to occupy centre stage in several new roles. Interviewer and interviewee, *actor* and *spectator*; mechanisms that exalt tv's auto-reflective vocation.

The history of the big but by no means homogeneous family of audio-visual media can be read today in the considerable flow of exchanges and interferences: video takes the cinema as model, fascinated by its presentation of images, its material for expression and methods of screening (the screen as nostalgia for perspective centrality). From this angle video appears to have abandoned the tradition of the *nouvelle image*, composed of superimposition, window play, incrustations, the typical mix of images that Philippe Dubois calls "the image as composition",<sup>2</sup> seduced by structures of composition and linear narrative, which have very little to do with the constructive procedures of *mixage*. As for tele-



Jean-Luc Godard, *Scénario du film Passion*, 1982, 53'24", PAL, sound, colour

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. Dubois, "L'elettronica: la questione estetica", in *Il Video a venire*, edited by V. Valentini, Soveria Mannelli 1999, p. 25.





Robert Wilson, *Stations*, 1982, 56', SECAM, sound, colour

vision, which has never exploited its particular aspect of live reportage (except in the case of major public events and sport), it has adopted what used to be one of its most widespread practices – the opposite of video – with the fifty days of non-stop shooting on *Big Brother*, i.e. filming events in real time; and in its turn, attracted by the dimension of the real, the performance appears to be presented with no mediation, *obscene*, because work on this subject requires neither imagination nor composition.

Today, now that the video adventure has been pushed aside and ignored in favour of “intelligent television”, exchanges between the media are heading in the direction of modernization of the apparatus (cutting production costs) rather than an effective reorganization of the processes of production.

### *Real images / synthesis images*

In an article published in a number of *Communication* (1988), entirely devoted to the video, Marita Sturken accused American critics of distorting the history of the video by amputating its militant dimension, and its political-social counter-information, as well as its relation to the other media, and exclusively favouring the “museum” dimension which is exactly what has found a home in the system of the visual arts.<sup>3</sup>

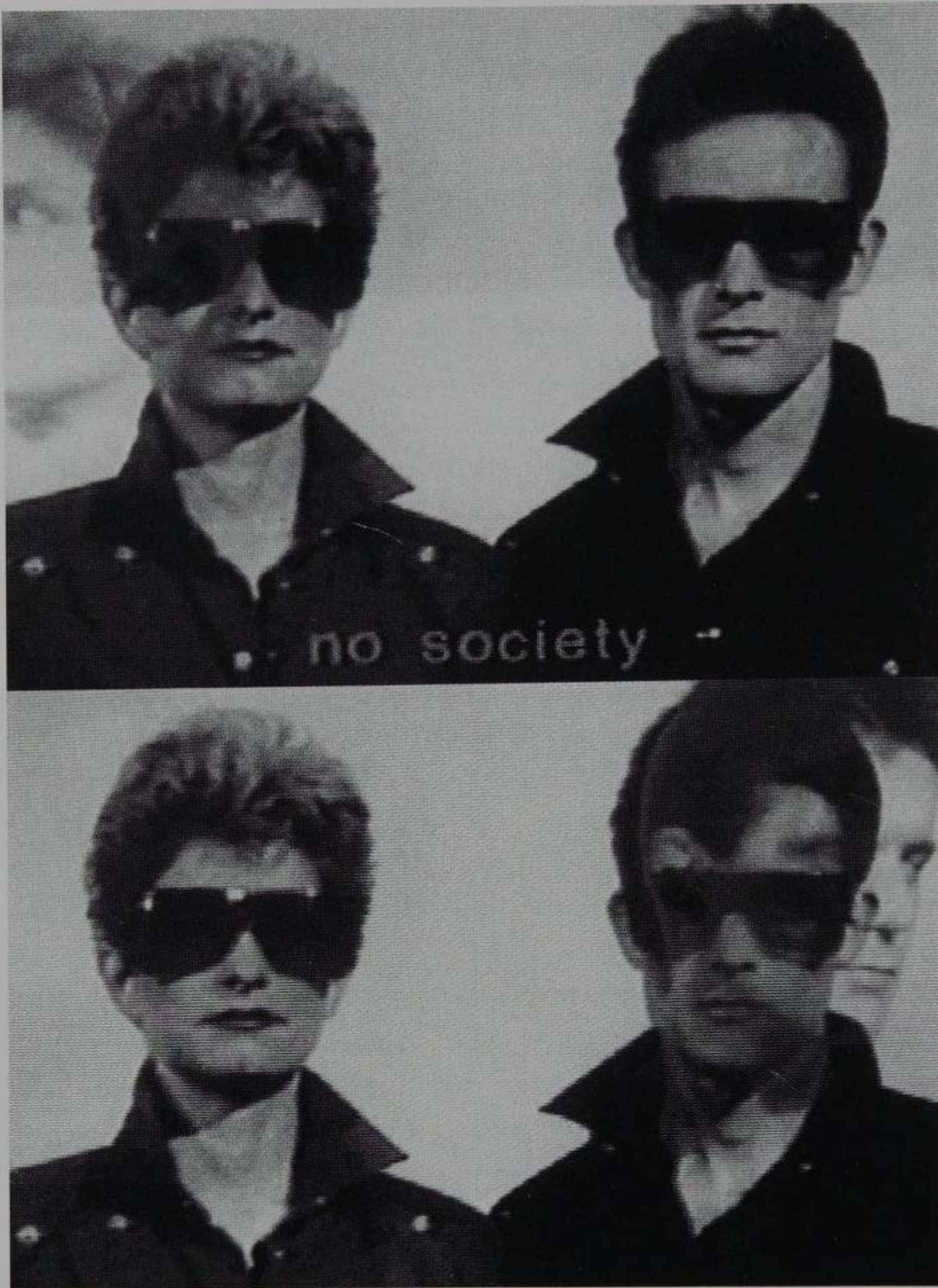
When the video began it was a medium taken up by feminist movements and political groups of counter-culture and counter-information, in that it favoured processes of participation and socialization. It has been the medium of widespread creativity, contributing to the myth of transforming the *spectator* into an *operator*. Pragmatically its efficiency was measured by the intensity of involvement it succeeded in stirring up in the context in which it was used. Ever since the demonstrations of the 1968 student movements, the protests for the right to a house and the occupation of the factories, the video has been an instrument of immediate and direct denunciation in the hands of the people fighting dominating power. The Roman group Videobase (Leonardi, Lombardo and Lajolo), Silvano Agosti, Ant Farm, Paul Garrin and the Gorilla Tapes, in various periods, ways and geographical areas, have been motivated by similar instances: circulating uncomfortable images excluded from the official channels of information that testify to a reality that has no access to mass media.

From newsreels of 1968, recently re-edited by Silvano Agosti, to the superimposed images of Aboriginal women trying to change their destiny as colonials by the white people in *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) by the Australian Tracey Moffatt, the path is intersected with symptomatic reversals of the relations between medium and reality.

In *Home(less) Is Where the Revolution Is* (1990) by Paul Garrin, representation of social conflicts is compromised by the effects

<sup>3</sup> M. Sturken, “Les grandes espérances et la construction d’une histoire”, in *Communication Video*, no. 48, 1988, pp. 125-149.





of electronic editing which confuses the antagonist roles, victim and oppressor, which are perceived as computer processed caricatures drawn from cartoon characters.

The radicalism of Paul Garrin and Tracey Moffatt belongs to a dimension where the transparent and immediate use of the video camera – the eye that records “live” while shooting in the secret hope that an extraordinary event will leap out of the flow of images – substitutes structured composition. This is where *video verité* gives way to archive images whose reality is withdrawn to make way for synthesis images. From the exorbitant, explosive character of the video, an ironic trend has become established, because it cannot succeed in being aggressive towards the targets, whether they are the world of art (*Artist's Mind*, by Alex Bag), or political superpowers (*Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* by Johan Grimonprez).

The radicalism of the third millennium is entirely consumed on the telematic networks, in digital editing and interactive games that impose on the viewer the illusion that he is conducting the





Gorilla Tapes, *Low Pay No Way*, 1986 (made with Jon Dovey, Gavin Hodge and Tim Morrison), 6'50", PAL, sound, colour

game himself, that he is the determining element in what the programme is presenting. The myth of interactivity is raised to the level of a relational aesthetic principle (unlike participation in collective creation according to the theorizing of the 1968 contestation), and whether it makes its point in the endless field of the computer network, or is structured through a material action within pre-set rules, it implies the sharing, not the contestation, of a social condition.<sup>4</sup>

### *The vanishing subjects*

The fact that Body Art implied confirmation of the subject as an absolute presence was brilliantly refuted at the time by the sound arguments of Rosalind Krauss (1978). The feedback which many videos set at work – I look at myself on the monitor in front of me while the camera is filming me – creates a situation where past and present become detached, representing “time present in a state of collapse”. The subject is deprived of relations with the world in so far as the disinvestment it suffers is transformed into concentration upon itself because of the annulment of the distance between subject and object. “The double reflection is not another in itself, but a doubling, a dislocation of the self from the reflection.”<sup>5</sup>

Before a fixed telecamera, in an empty space with no limitation between background and figure, artists like Nauman, Acconci and Baldessari swing into action, and thanks to a telecamera recording the action “live”, they can watch themselves doing something the very moment they do it. This mechanism, which is very much what the first videos were all about, lends itself to a telling representation of the drama of the divided self, as well as of the artist-become-spectator, which, in turn, expresses the inseparable connection between doing an action and watching oneself do it, a very special condition of the self-reference of contemporary art, or, to use Rosalind Krauss’s expression, its “reflectivity”.

In the works of the early seventies the space plotted by the telecamera and monitor became a workshop-gym within which the artist, entirely on his own in his studio, could experiment a new grammar of relations between body and space, the I and the You, the subject and the environment, the physical and the mental. The new grammar is essentially based on cancelling the distance between the subject of the enunciation and what is enunciated, i.e. between subject (whether artist and/or spectator) and work, and between the I and the World. Hiding his face (the subject is filmed from behind) or, vice versa, shooting him in such a close close-up as to make him unrecognizable, the effect in both cases amounts to depersonalization, even in the excessive presence of the self.

The most reliable readings of the original Body Art performances emphasize the dimension of the heroism, challenge ad per-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Glicenstein, “La place du sujet dans l’œuvre interactive”, in *Artifices*, no. 4, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> R. Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism”, in *New Artists Video*, edited by G. Battock, New York 1978.



sonal risk of the artist, his aggression and exhaustion spent on the production and consumption of energy. In a certain sense the actions of Abramovic & Ulay, Douglas Davis, Joan Jonas and Vito Acconci showed resistance to the cancelling of the I and the You, and staged (Nauman's *Corridors*) the possibility of putting themselves in the image, a possibility denied to the viewer. In spite of this, the narcissism of the original videos is that of a divided self that does not communicate with the world but with the artist's omnipotent vitality: "The work is myself."

So what is the distance between performances which have come back again after more than a decade, and those of the "founding fathers"? Are they working along the same tracks the "fathers" founded? And in what way are they bringing them up to date?

The body as a figurative, thematic and component element has become a presence consigned over to the artistic production of the last ten years. Compared to the Body Art of the seventies we can identify some macroscopic differences: the "minimalist" procedure of decomposition is no longer a relation of the whole, and is not inclined to concentrate so intensely on the single pieces that shed new light on the whole of which it is a part; even in performances taking place before a telecamera – Cheryl Donegan's *Head* (1993) and *Sets* (1997), and *Egg Yang* (1995) by Alix Pearlstein, for example – the electronic device does not function as a means to construct the artist's action, as in the video performances of Vito Acconci's *Theme Song* (1973) or *Open Book* (1974), but simply as a recording instrument.

The irony towards the art system and the art world ("I am making Art", repeats John Baldessari, touching various parts of his body, decomposing it, so that we see only his arms and legs on the screen; "Art must be Beautiful. Artists must be Beautiful" repeats Marina Abramovic, brushing her long hair with increasing violence) which was common currency in the early performance videos, has mostly disappeared in recent performances. Pop culture, sex, voyeurism and art history are the worlds that sprout from these performances where irony has been usurped by the grotesque.

The lack of distance between the self, the world and the work remains the constant in uniting the tribe through the course of time, and certainly the most consistent among the ones identified. "I don't think my work is especially about art", states Kiki Smith. "It is more about me, about being here in this life, in this skin [...]. For me, there's no difference between living and doing my work; they're not separate. In fact I do whatever comes naturally... I don't think I chose my body as the subject of my work, not consciously, but because it is the only form everybody shares."<sup>6</sup>

But "obscene" features have been highlighted in the representation of a world that is both traumatic and over-sweet. Images of damaged, ailing bodies, of corpses, photographed by An-

<sup>6</sup> Kiki Smith, in *Flash Art*, April-May 1996, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> "Stelarc", edited by Fam and Jolly Red, in *Virus*, April 1995, p. 38.



dres Serrano; the monstrous figures of Yoel Peter Witkin – monstrous because we cannot tell whether they are men or women, human or animal, statues or living creatures; the body weighed down by “virtual” arms by Stelarc who claims to show the passing of the present body (functioning imperfectly with a chemistry generating obsolete emotions) into a cyberbody no longer thought of as subject but as an object of engineering.<sup>7</sup> These are only a few examples among the many.

Pieces of body in suspension, navigating in the pastel colours of a Barbie world in Pipilotti Rist's video, *Pikelporno* (1992) (mouths, feet, breasts, nipples, nails, sex organs: a decomposable body like a doll's), express hedonism and self-indulgence, but are incapable of making an assault on authentic feeling. And the figures in John Maybury's videos have also completely disintegrated the bodily dimension into the synthetic, in spite of the exhibition of nude bodies – a body made artificial by dressing-up and imitation of stereotypes from the mass media, a world that is claustrophobic and obsessive.



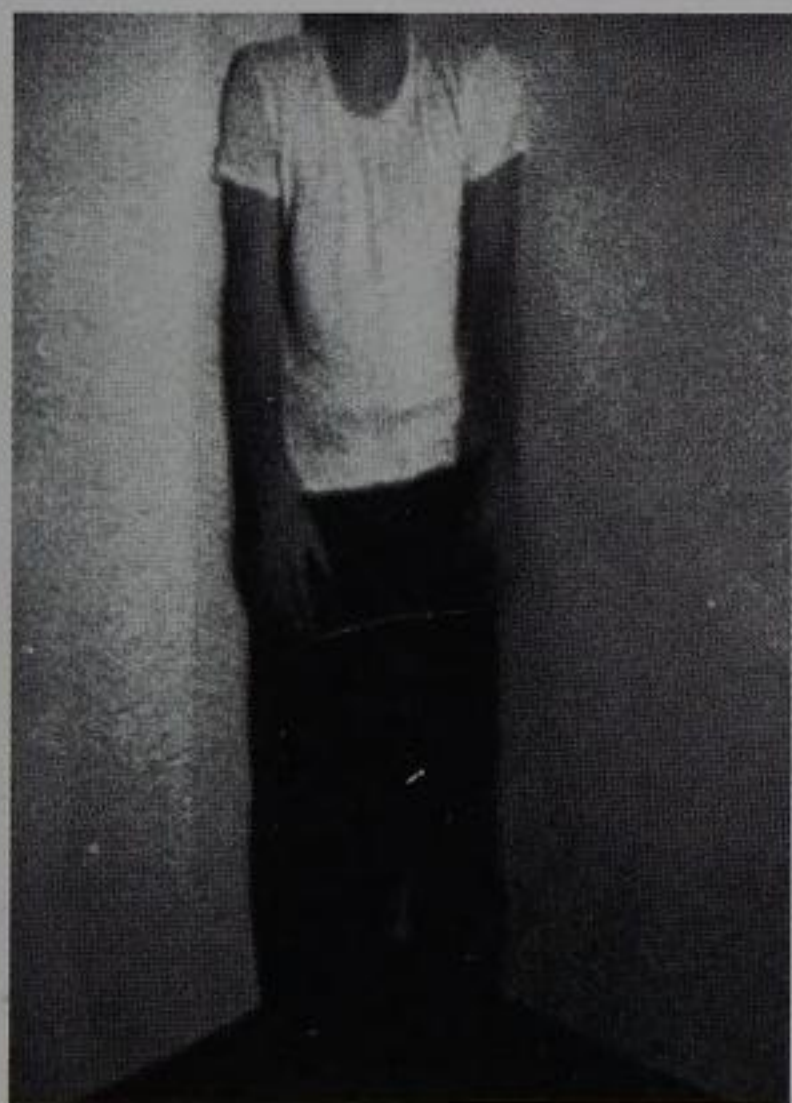
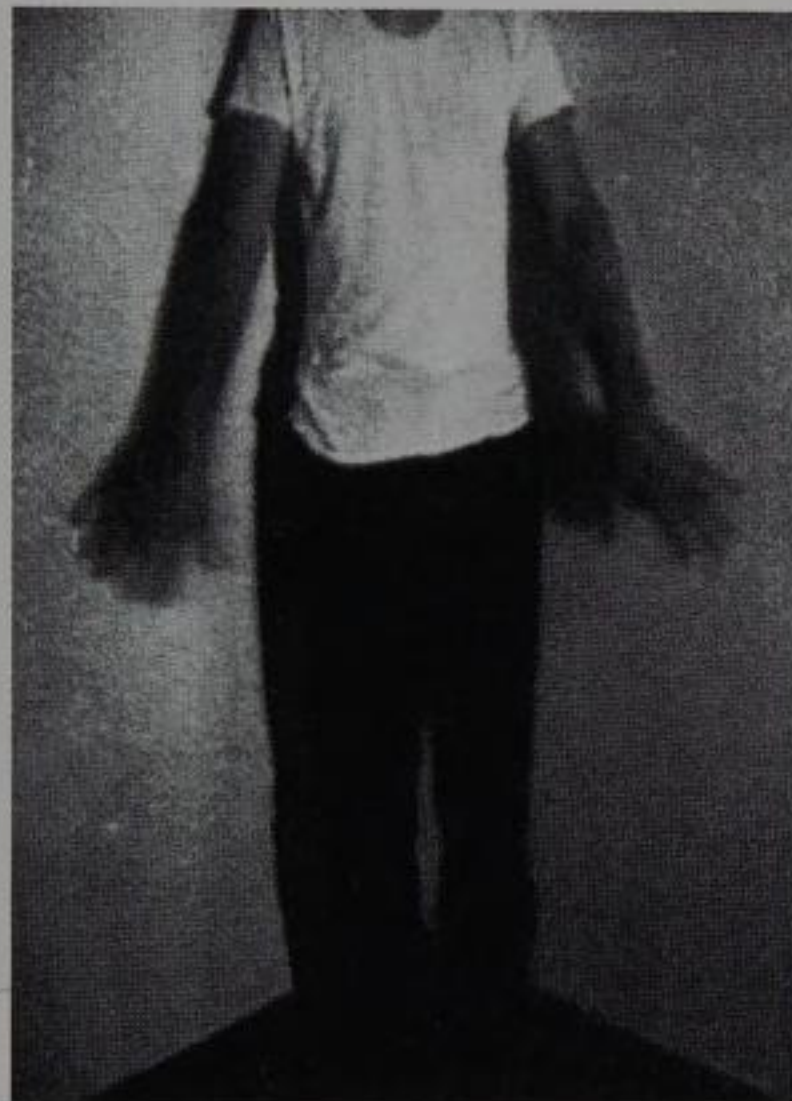
**Nam June Paik  
and Charlotte Moorman**  
*Tv Bra for a Living Sculpture,*  
1969





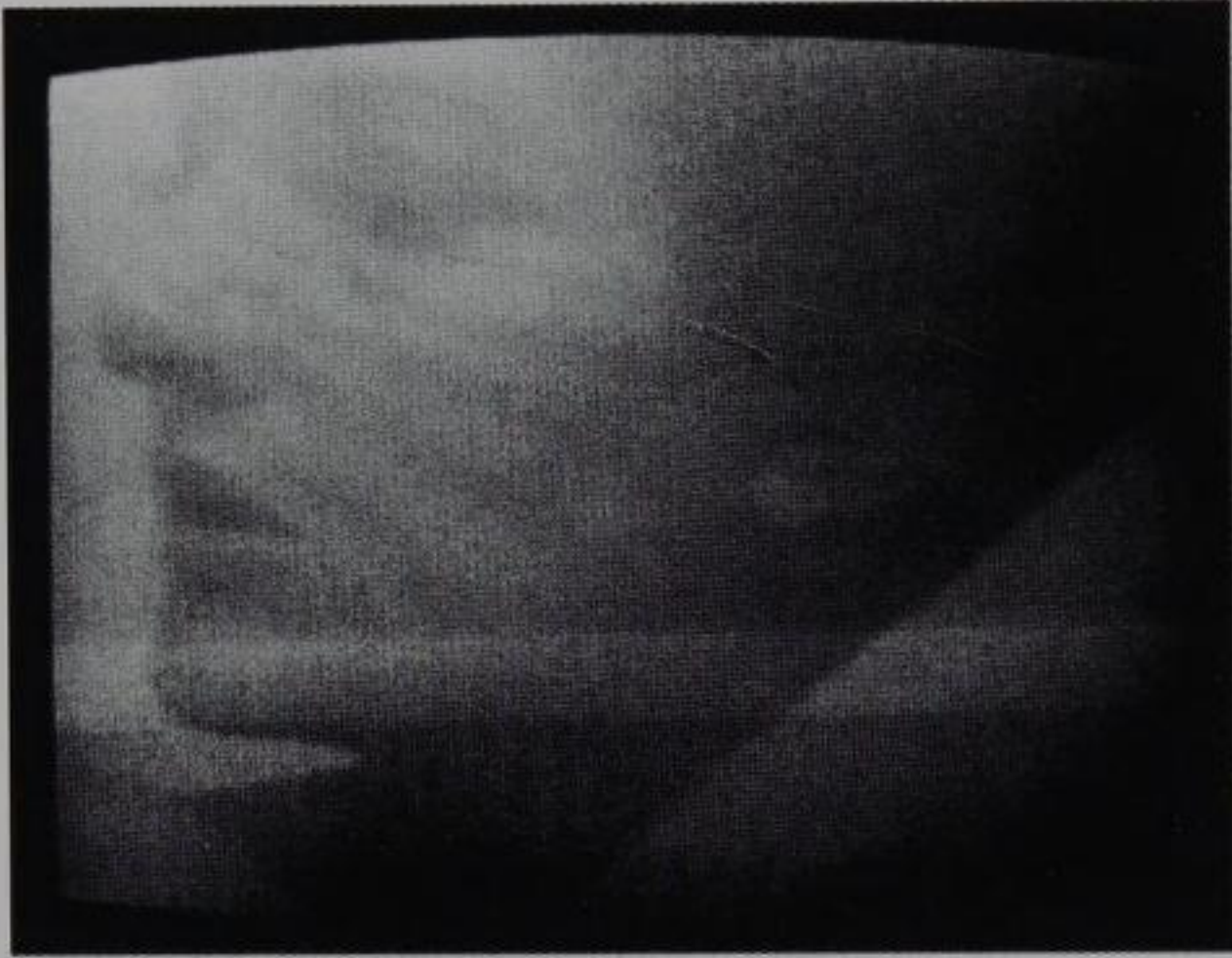
**Bruce Nauman**

*Bouncing in the Corner 1 and 2*  
*(Upside Down)*, 1968–1969  
20', NTSC, sound, black/white





**Marina Abramovic**  
*Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist  
Must Be Beautiful, 1975*





Jayne Parker  
K, 1989



Video

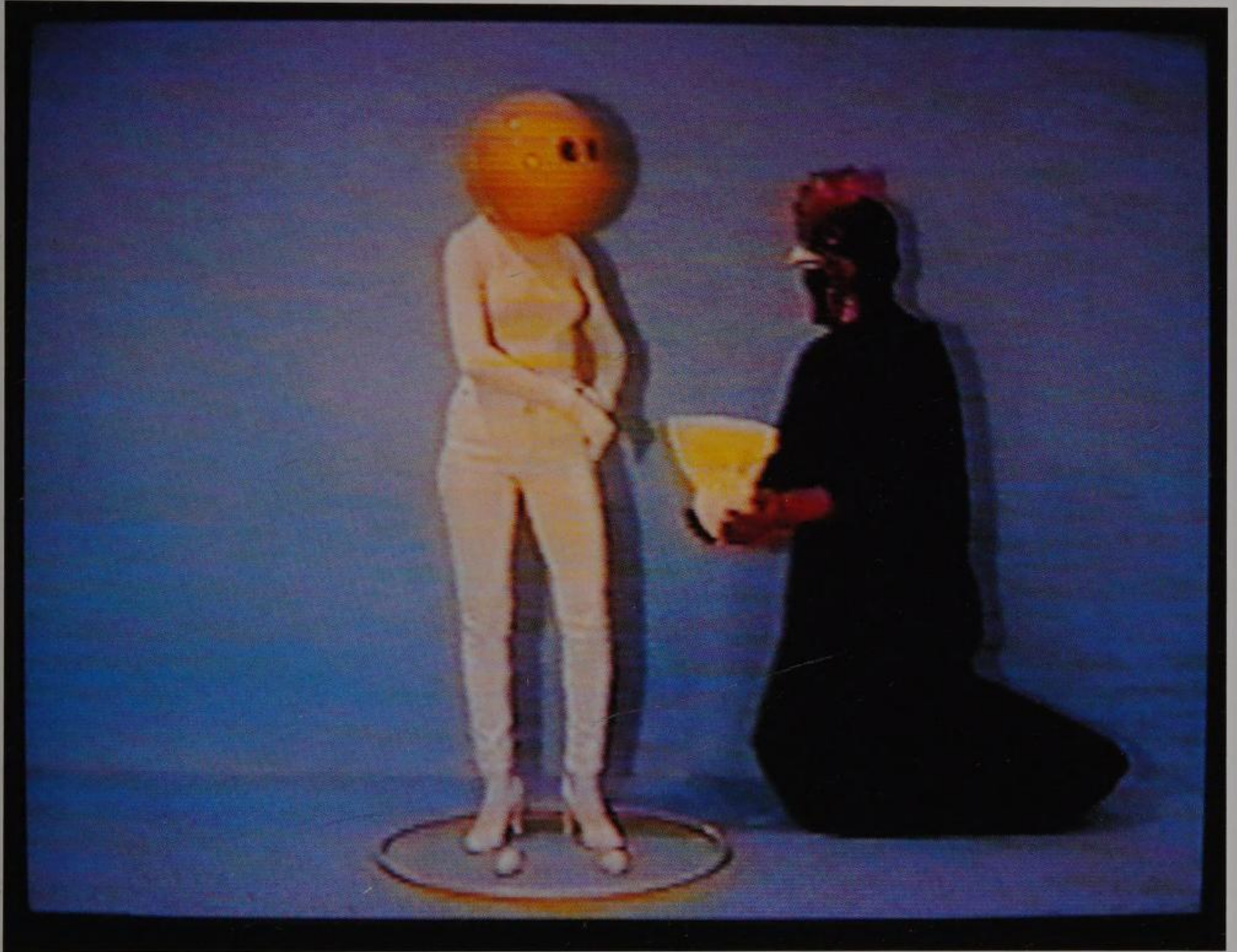


**Cheryl Donegan**  
*Sets, 1997*





**Alix Pearlstein**  
*Egg Yang, 1995*



Video







# Historic Tribes

*edited by*  
Angelo Capasso  
Rossella Caruso







## From Café Greco to Café Bom: Artist Groups around Europe between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Century

*“There will never be associations with modifications that are more fruitful, more eternally alive than those formed among artists, because when every individual has learned to act in accordance with the spirit of the community, he will engender a new association.”*

Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, 1849

It is curious to think that it was at a place in Rome, the Café Greco in Via Condotti – opened in 1760, the café was to remain famous through the next two centuries as a favourite and much frequented haunt of Italian and foreign painters and men of letters – that fiery, polemical letters were sent off to the Berlin Academy by the young painter Jacob Asmus Carstens (1754–1798), a talented scholarship student of Danish origin. Yet the Academy had taken him on to teach drawing from plaster models, so rescuing him from a patch of grinding poverty.<sup>1</sup> The last of these letters (which provide a good example of relations between artist and State in the nineteenth century) is dated 1796. It was an important moment in the steadily increasing affirmation of the artist’s right to free expression which this particular painter could share with his contemporary from Salzburg, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

“I do not belong to the Berlin Academy”, wrote Carstens, “I belong to humanity. [...] I can only express myself here [in Rome] among the highest works of art in the world, and to the best of my powers I shall continue to justify myself to the world through my work.”<sup>2</sup>

The choice of Rome, identification with a place as an ideal reality that made his art explicit, can be seen not only in relation to the epoch and the atmosphere, but also the nostalgic fascination the “eternal city” and Italy held for a large troop of intellectuals of his generation. What Carstens was at pains to bring out was how the need to be fully free of any limitation and coercion, including academies (“All the schools of painting, whether public or private, supported by patronage or individual contributions, were and remain symptoms of the ruin of art, monuments of public negligence and the decay in taste”),<sup>3</sup> had similarly led in time to the affirmation of individuality, even in groups and non-institutionalized associations. It was almost as though

<sup>1</sup> N. Pevsner, *Le accademie d'arte*, Turin 1982, pp. 212 ff. and relative footnotes (*Academies of Art, Past and Present*, New York 1973).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.



there were a need for defence and opposition, as well as distinction, to confront and toughen their sinews against any kind of constituted order.

Carstens was contesting the academic system with its rigorous hierarchy and constriction; the futility of its structure of directors, rectors and professors; and the sterile, mechanical teaching system. In the decades that followed, and even more at the end of the following century, what we see is the less-than-sporadic formation of artist groups, who were not necessarily identified by a programme or who rigidly reflected an aesthetic ideal, but who gathered together to form free creative associations, committed in various ways to a collective renewal of their own codes of expression and behaviour. Of course, from this premise – which in the interests of coherence should be taken with a certain flexibility – a large part of the so-called historical avant-gardes are excluded, while progress was being made in the fertile territory of elaboration and the explication of new languages, guided by reflections on the role of the artist in the changed order of things between the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

The German community of Nazarenes, artists from the Vienna Academy who arrived in Rome in 1810 (P. Cornelius, P. Veit, W. von Schadow, J. Führich, and J. Koch, under the leadership of Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pferr), have interest for us here less with respect to their preferences and emulation for the pictorial models of the fifteenth century – influenced by their theoretical readings of A.W. von Schlegel and W. H. Wackenroder – than for their explicit desire to return art to “the road of truth”. This reflects a particular spiritual tension as well as an existential disquiet. It is also the first example of a complete, romantic identification between art and life.<sup>4</sup>

They too were up in arms against the rigorous classical bias imposed by the imperial Academy they had attended and abandoned in 1809, forming a group called the Lukasbrüder<sup>5</sup> in Vienna. In Rome they took the name Nazarenes, so-called because of the way they did their hair and the ascetic communitarian lifestyle they adopted when they established themselves in the ex-convent of Sant’Isidoro on the Pincian hill, and moved in an extremely restricted area of the city (the Pincian; Villa Malta near Trinità dei Monti; and then towards the houses on Porta Pinciana, Via Sistina, Via dei Artisti), together with established rituals like visits to the Vatican (including the Sistine Chapel and Fra Angelico’s Chapel of Nicolas V), with daily stop-offs at the Café Greco, then also known as the Café Tedesco, or else at the Osteria di Spagna on the Ripa Grande in Trastevere.<sup>6</sup> As an art community (employed also in producing the wall paintings for the Casino Massimo), and as a movement with an explicit opening towards nineteenth-cen-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. Piantoni, “Considerazioni su alcuni aspetti della teoria nazarena”, in *I Nazareni a Roma*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by G. Piantoni and S. Susinno, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, 22 January – 22 March 1981, pp. 30–37.

<sup>5</sup> M. Krapf, “Premesse alla nascita del Lukasbund a Vienna”, in *I Nazareni a Roma*, pp. 39–46.

<sup>6</sup> M. G. Messina, “I luoghi dei Nazareni”, in *Artisti e scrittori europei a Roma e nel Lazio: dal grand tour ai romantici*, conference papers, Rome, 26–28 November 1984, pp. 125–136.



F. L. Catel, *Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria at the Spanish Tavern in Rome, 1824*



tury revivalism, the Nazarenes introduced a model for living based on aesthetic ties, as well as faith and friendship, which were to shed a wide-ranging influence throughout the century, however different the forms might be (one need only think of the Purists and later the Pre-Raphaelites).

The position they took towards the Academy, to rescue art education from rules and regulations in favour of a free personal statement, may easily appear to our eyes – however much influenced by a certain kind of Metaphysical painting – in sharp contrast to the results of their painting. But this *ante litteram* secession would lose its authentic historical importance if we failed to take account of the fact that the Nazarenes' tension towards early-Christian Rome, surrounded by a nature still unblemished, with the impact of its “natural and healthy looking” inhabitants, was no more than the reflection of introspection, leading to their desire to identify with a not-too-distant past and to the formation of meaningful associations in order to regenerate and distinguish themselves in the present.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in the anti-repressive and anti-authoritarian society proposed by Charles Fourier (1808) – who paid little enough attention to the artists – every tribe that was animated by the pleasure principle, whatever their poverty, felt obliged to serve, mostly through *esprit de corps*, to eliminate any sort of low conduct and coarseness.<sup>8</sup>

Another path that will help identify other artist groups is to follow the nineteenth-century theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art where a number of creative personalities were bent on fulfilling a single purpose, a common idea, in order to attain, as Vincent van Gogh was later to write (1888), “a height

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> C. Fourier, *Teoria dei Quattro Movimenti e dei Destini generali* (1808), Turin 1971, pp. 89–90: “As for their customs, one may predict that in every Tribe, however poor they may be, there will reign an *esprit de corps*, a pride of the Tribe [...]. This *esprit de corps* will be sufficient to disperse the most repellent vices of the civilized rabble: their grossness, their filth, low conduct and all the other defects with which a Tribe would consider itself degraded, and would in no time at all eliminate whoever, of either sex, was found guilty.” Engl. transl. *The Theory of the Four Movements*, Cambridge (England)-New York 1996.



that equalled the serene peaks reached by the Greek sculptors, the German musicians and the French novelists".<sup>9</sup>

Wagner's *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849) proposed a return to the ancient Greek feeling for unity ideally exemplified by tragedy: through the reunification of all the branches of art – dancing, music, poetry; backed by architecture, sculpture and painting – and “the free communion of artists”, it is possible to achieve that “great, universal artwork of the future”, where “the egoist becomes communist, the one becomes everyone, man becomes God, the branches of art become art *tout court*”.<sup>10</sup>

A fusion between art, science and religion – as an extension and development of Wagner's project – also found a spokesman in Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), the architect-founder of anthroposophy, which, through objectivizing, resolves the expressionist dream of a unity between all the arts. Following his break-up with the theosophists in 1913, owing to their constrictive élitism, Steiner and his collaborators in the Anthroposophical Society built the Goetheanum at Dornach in Switzerland. This “harmonious settlement upon the earth”, this temple-theatre “capable of speaking the language of the gods”,<sup>11</sup> represented the possibility of re-founding human society on a basis of mysticism. In view of the disasters resulting from the First World War Steiner countered with a type of community life and teaching based on the confrontation of theory and practice; where the theory was mostly derived from Steiner's lectures (on the essence of colours, the meaning of music, sound and eurhythmics), and the practice was carried out in the art, crafts and theatre workshops.

Such a model could be compared to that of the Bauhaus. It also worked on the same lines as the theoretic assumptions of Bruno Taut in the Novembergruppe (1918) and the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (spring 1919) whose members were mostly architects.<sup>12</sup>

Another Swiss locality that had been bringing people and ideas together, since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, was Ascona, which is characterized by the special nature of its electromagnetic fields. This region on the shores of upper Lake Maggiore saw the growth and development of utopias and model ways of life, on the one hand tending towards the formation of a classless society, on the other, subordinating the formation of a new community to contact with nature, prospecting a third path between capitalism and communism.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century there arrived in Ascona a number of individuals who had “fled from capitalism, civilization, European traffic and social falsity to propose a social example where men could live according to personal ethical and social principles, creating a voluntary solidarity and preserving intact their own individualism even in the life of the community”.<sup>14</sup>

522 Before and after the foundation of the Monte Verità vegetarian

<sup>9</sup> “I am more and more convinced that one must do all one can for painting to find its authentic self, though rising to heights equal to the sublime peaks reached by the Greek sculptors, German musicians and French novelists would surpass the power of an isolated individual. So they will probably be created by groups of men who collaborate on the execution of an idea in common.” Quotation from R. Melchiori, “Cime tempestose dell'arte. Alcuni motivi romantici nelle avanguardie”, in *Sentieri interrotti*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by L. Bonotto, M. Guderzo, R. Melchiori, T. Santi, Bassano del Grappa, 17 June – 20 August 2000; and in M. De Micheli, *Le avanguardie artistiche del Novecento*, Milan 1982, pp. 33–34.

<sup>10</sup> R. Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849), Lincoln 1993; O. Marquard, *Estetica e anestetica*, Bologna 1994, pp. 195–213 (*Aesthetica and Anaesthetica: philosophische Überlegungen*, Paderborn 1989); J. Nigro Covre, *La “Sintesi delle arti”*. *Fonti per la cultura tedesca del primo '900*, Rome 1985.

<sup>11</sup> One should in fact speak of a first Goetheanum in wood, and a second one (1923–1928) built in concrete on the same site. For this information and the quotations from Rudolf Steiner see D. Coia, “Note su Rudolf Steiner, la ‘sintesi delle arti’ e le avanguardie architettoniche”, in *Verso la “Sintesi delle arti”*, edited by J. Nigro Covre, Rome 1993, pp. 101–116 and the bibliography quoted.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110–111. For German-speaking artist groups from 1900 on, including the avant-gardes, see the expansive and detailed publication of C. Wilhelmi, *Künstlergruppen in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz seit 1900*, Stuttgart 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Szeeman writes: “Along with Capri and Taormina in Italy, Ascona [around 1900] was



The Griensteidl Café in Vienna, with the artists' corner, from a photograph taken at the end of the nineteenth century



colony (1900) by Henri Oedenkoven, Ida Hofmann and Karl Gräser, others who had come to settle in the Locarno area included the Russian anarchist Michail Bakunin (1869); Eric Mühsam (1905), a fervent supporter of a republic of the stateless and the creativity of the under-proletariat; Rudolf von Laban (1913), founder of the Art of Living School, a part of the Individualist Cooperative; Theodor Reuss, who organized the OTO (Ordo Templi Orientis) Congress, and promulgator of a series of reformist ideas: “A form of a-national social cooperative, modern age education, the emancipation of women in future society, mystic masonry, new forms of sociality, ritual and cultural dance restored from ancient and non-European cultures, the culture of expression in education, life and art. Healthy diet, homeopathic medicine, reform of habitat, clothing and handwriting, reform in the culture and life in extra-urban residential settlements.”<sup>15</sup>

After 1909 there are records of the presence of artists who chose Ascona for short holidays, then came back for much longer stays or else with the intention of settling there permanently. Arthur Segal (1916–1920), Marianne von Werefkin (1918–1938), Alexei von Jawlensky (1918–1922), the Zurich Dadaists (Ball, Hennings, Arp, Richter), Paul Klee, and the writers James Joyce and Rainer Maria Rilke, are the most famous of those between the two wars. In the twenties, Werefkin, Frick, Helbig, Kohler, McCouch, Niemeyer and van Rees founded the Orsa Maggiore group, while Lissitsky was living near Locarno to take the cure, and some of the Bauhaus teachers (Albers, Bayer, Breuer, Gropius, Moholy-Nagy) went to Ascona in search of an “alternative world”.

The point which emerges from this bare list of facts and presences, and unites these groups of artists and writers in a thirty-year sojourn in southern Switzerland, was the choice of a geographical location to contemplate and give form to their own ideas, rather than the virtues of homogeneity. Ascona never was a real artist

becoming the sacred site for rediscovered cults of the Youth, the Woman and the Great Mother, the Wise Old Man, the elements and the stars; it was becoming the focal point for the projection of the dreams of the Nordic man”, in *Monte Verità*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by H. Szeeman, Locarno-Milan 1978, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> E. Mühsam, “La storia di una montagna’ di Robert Landman” (Berlin 1930), in *Monte Verità*, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Szeeman, pp. 5–6, also for following information.



colony (like Darmstadt or Worpswede in Germany). In spite of this we can still identify common motivations which certainly generated break-away models and attitudes which found a wide range of emulation. The escape-renunciation-introspection tendency,<sup>16</sup> which affected personalities like Hesse, Werfkin and Ball, was by no means shared by the vegetarian, naturist colony of Monte Verità, who optimistically believed in a *Lebensreform*, reformed living to be achieved by leading a “simple” existence, “in harmony with nature”, in “the unity of spirit and body”, in accordance with “a positive-idealistic nature”.<sup>17</sup> Guided by these ideas, and with the understandable enthusiasm of the early days, they built their first “air cabins” on the stony, and laboriously broke up and cleared the ground of the Monescia above Ascona;<sup>18</sup> here they projected a school of art based on the educational and didactic principles of Laban de Varalja. This institution, aimed at the recognition and progressive maturing in each individual, was subdivided into several courses: “art of form”, “art of diction”, “art of movement” and “art of sound”. These were carried out both individually and in groups, in pursuit of the totality of the art work, whose theoretical roots we have already mentioned.

Their programmes and intentions were not without incoherence, as we can see from a text written at the beginning of the century by one of the founders of Monte Verità, Ida Hofmann, and addressed to the Symbolist painter Fidus. The farsighted modernity of this text (part of which follows) is indeed an expression of a progressive enlightened bourgeoisie, limited by an idealism that swings between absolute individuality and sociality, but which opens a discussion on questions that would interest the art world for a long time to come.

“How I wish for a general overthrow of the educational theory in force today, that raises the stereotype to an absolute model and promotes to the rank of artists a bunch of unauthorized people who reduce art itself to a handicraft! Can a ‘still life’, for example, be called art? Isn’t it just the reproduction of the present day use of art and the major part of its products? [...] Apart from the fact that art develops in the true, profound sense of the word, only if it acquires, freely and spontaneously, the most individual stamp; only when it ceases to be a mass product and returns to being an expression of the most intimate need of the individual; when it is no longer daughter of necessity, as it is today, and will reveal in all its fields – and not only exceptionally – forms that are edifying and not petty, art will then be more intrinsically divine, and it will act divinely. Only if it is immersed in the daily life of man, and no longer serving as luxury objects for houses [...] used for covering up defects, for filling in spaces [...]. Of course we will still have to wait some decades before this use of art is at least understood, not to say assimilated [...]. However the path ahead



Paula Modersohn-Becker,  
*Self-portrait with Camellia*,  
1907

<sup>16</sup> T. Kneubühler, “Gli artisti, gli scrittori e il Canton Ticino (dal 1900 a oggi)”, in *Monte Verità*, p. 139 ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>18</sup> N. and O. Birkner, “L’arte come espressione di una nuova vita”, in *Monte Verità*, p. 123.



is open and the intuition of such a new process, on ground that seems almost exhausted, will be a powerful stimulant for new tension and new enthusiasm. Then some of today's artistic products will appear in museums like still-lives, like testimonials for historic-cultural studies of the evolutionary process of art."<sup>19</sup>

As far as France is concerned, quite close to Paris at the end of 1906 the Abbaye de Créteil was created:<sup>20</sup> "a phalanstery of intellectuals" founded by the painter Albert Gleizes and the poets René Arcos, Alexandre Mercereau, Charles Vildrac and Henri-Martin Barzun, who brought in around fifty new members, as well as a host of visitors from all over Europe.

Driven by their desire to escape the chaotic reality of the city, and seek surroundings more in keeping with contemplation and creation, the five artists rented a building standing in a vast abandoned estate in the forest of Fontainebleau on the banks of the Marne. They did it up, keeping five apartments for themselves and their women companions, guest rooms, a reception room, a big dining room, a kitchen, a painter's studio and a printing press, where each of them worked for about four hours a day. The printing of books (though unpaid) was part of their activities (in the catalogues of the Abbaye editions we find texts by Robert de Montesquiou, Valentine de Saint-Point, Pierre-Jean Jouve, Roger Alland, as well as by Barzun and Mercereau), but it did not suffice to guarantee the community economic autonomy. Already by the end of 1907 they had broken up, having failed to rouse sufficient interest by appeals in the press, even though these were directed to many who had recognized the courage and authenticity of their ideals. As Barzun himself was to write later on, the "aesthetic operators" of Créteil, who had united to confront the indifference of the times for art and beauty, insisted upon ignoring the confirmation that could be given to collectivist doctrines.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, even in the eyes of contemporaries, they appeared to be an attempt to establish a new community that could be followed up, and lived under "a reformulation of specific codes that established the autonomy of every artistic form of expression", in the wake of the Symbolist poets. Not to mention the importance the Abbaye assumed for the avant-garde in painting from 1910 to 1912.<sup>22</sup>

The influence these artist groups had on the avant-garde movements that followed shortly after appears fairly consistent. It confirms how they acted, amid the process of specific determination of movements of break-away and re-foundation in art and society, as a sort of foundry of ideas as well as a precipitate of libertarian experiences in the various creative fields of art.

The above-mentioned colony at Worpswede (Fritz Mackensen, Otto Modersohn, Paula Becker, Hans am Ende, Fritz Overbeck, Heinrich Vogeler, the sculptress Clara Westoff, and, from time to time, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke) also developed on similar lines.

<sup>19</sup> Kneubühler, p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> As M. G. Messina points out (in *Il cubismo dei cubisti*, with J. Nigro Covre, Rome 1986, p. 46 ff.), "the name was taken from the Abbaye de Thélème, Rabelais's invented utopia which became a synonym for a community harmoniously integrated in their work". For bibliographical information see Messina's text.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* And further, D. Robbins, "From Symbolism to Cubism. The Abbaye of Créteil", in *Art Journal*, XXXII, no. 2, 1963–1964, pp. 111–116; A. Petronio, "La libera Abbazia di Créteil", intro. and trans. by C. Sitta, in *Carte Segrete*, no. 19, 1972, pp. 122–132.



The artist community was established around 1889 in the countryside near Bremen, with the intention of capturing the particular beauty of the surrounding landscape. Heinrich Vogeler, who designed his house and garden at Worpswede (Barkenhof) and also one of the rooms in the Bremen town hall (*Güldenammer*),<sup>23</sup> had partly realized the dream that Joseph Maria Olbrich, himself a leading member of the Darmstadt Künstlerkolonie (1901–1906), had shared with his friends in the Viennese Secession (Hermann Bahr, Josef Hoffmann, Kolo Moser). They proposed “an entire city”, where “the whole complex, down to the last detail, is imbued with the same spirit: the streets and gardens, city blocks and huts, tables and chairs, lights and spoons, are all expressions of the same sensibility; and in the middle, like a temple in a sacred wood, a house to work in, with an artist’s studio and artisan’s workshop where the artist can always enjoy peace and quiet and order in his manual work, the artisan of the liberating and purifying function of art, until both grow together into a single personality”.<sup>24</sup>

For her part, Paula Modersohn-Becker (married to Otto Modersohn) had progressively distanced herself from the Symbolist formation, to arrive at a type of simplification of form and colour that came from French painters like van Gogh, as Rilke wrote, but also Cézanne and Gauguin, on the threshold of Expressionism.<sup>25</sup>

In Russia, before and after the October Revolution, there occurred a proliferation of artist groups and formations that, in some cases, combined to develop into authentic avant-gardes in the wake of the ones in France (Fauvism and Cubism) and Italy (Futurism); in others they participated in the release of new and vital energies, and so the cultural scene, already in ferment, could harness the driving force of revolutionary ideals to influence various aspects of civil life.

The World of Art association (Benois and Diaghilev) and the review of the same name (1899–1903); the young artists of the Blue Rose (led by Kusnetsov) and the *Golden Fleece* review (1906–1919); the Jack of Diamonds association (1910–1911; Konchalovsky, Larionov, Goncharova, Malevich, Yakulov, the Burliuk brothers, and others) and the later neo-Primitive group Donkey’s Tail are only some of the groupings that show what strong ties united the Russian artists with the European visual currents, French in particular, in the theoretical elaboration of totally “self-sufficient” painting.<sup>26</sup>

The experimentation in art that followed, especially in the twenties, led to the rapid creation and dissolution of various art organizations where very often names emerge that also owe their fame to an entirely personal affirmation. At the end of 1919 the OMOChU (Society of Young Artists) was set up. Between 1921 and 1923 it organized three exhibitions, showing the “constructions” of the Stenberg brothers and Melnikov (their 1922 exhibition was entitled *Constructivists*). In 1920 the INChUK (Institute of Artis-



Wassily Kandinsky, original cover of the journal *Der Blaue Reiter*, 1912

<sup>23</sup> R. W. Pettit, “The poet’s eye for the arts: Rilke views the visual arts around 1900”, in *Studies in the History of Art*, no. 53, 1996, pp. 251–273.

<sup>24</sup> The quotation is from H. Bahr, “Ein Dokument deutscher Kunst“ (1900), in M. G. Messina, *Darmstadt 1901–1908. Olbrich e la colonia degli artisti*, Rome 1987, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> J. N. Covre, *L’arte tedesca nel Novecento*, Rome 1998, pp. 24–25.

<sup>26</sup> M. G. Messina, “Il sistema della pittura. Teorie e prassi nelle avanguardie russe, 1907–1915”, in *Sviluppi e crisi delle prime avanguardie: 1910–1920*, Università degli Studi di Roma, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Rome 1982; G. Spendel, *La Mosca degli anni Venti. Sogni e utopie di una generazione*, Rome 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Spendel, p. 117.



tic Culture) was founded in Moscow: it expressed the main trends of Soviet architecture (rationalism and productivism), only to be immediately abandoned by those artists that did not intend to turn their backs on painting. The INChUK's first work programme was drafted by Kandinsky, who placed the accent on the psychic reflections that art should have on the human spirit. In 1919 at Vitebsk, Malevich founded the UNOVIS (Affirmation of the New in Art), which broke up in 1922, to pursue the principles of economy and utility, those of Suprematism in fact, in an attempt to extend them to all the other human activities. The Markovek association was formed in 1921 from the union of the Jack of Diamonds with other young people who had no intention of contesting anyone or creating yet another "ism" (the group stayed united until 1926, when it joined up with the OMCh and the Four Arts).

Over these same years the artists and the new generation of poets met and discussed in the cafés, cabarets and literary salons of Moscow. At the café Bom, which had opened before the revolution, "there gathered together poets of every school, ex-journalists, literary speculators, young firebrands who easily and courageously adapted to the 'times of the torbids', girls poisoned by boredom and cocaine, small-time anarchists looking for hard-core amusement, the middle class there for the cakes" (A. Tolstoy).<sup>27</sup> There were places where you met Mayakovsky, Esenin, Pasternak, the poetess Tsvetaeva; they sat up till all hours of the night reading poems, singing and dancing. Many of these gatherings sparked off new associations; but the only ones that lasted were the poetry movements and groups linked to political power. For many of them who were forced to emigrate, it just was not possible – as Kandinsky wrote in 1912 (*Der Blaue Reiter*) – to put form into uniform.



# Camera Work

THE MAGAZINE WITHOUT AN "IF"—FEARLESS—INDEPENDENT—WITHOUT FAVOR □ □ □



BY MARIUS DE ZAYAS



1900–1950

From the United States to the Old Continent,  
as Far as Japan (and Back Home Again Fast)

Frontispiece of *Camera Work*,  
30 April 1910

The combination of the words “tribes” and “history” in relation to the American continent instantly takes the collective imagination to the history of the American Indians, and thence to that complex system of ethnic groups who populated the region between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic coast. Native American settlements defined the first organizational models of social and economic life in the United States before the arrival of the Europeans. Today, like a conscious removal of the history of the States, the pre-modern system survives in compulsorily fixed groupings in the natural reservations, where we still recognize features of their essentially nomadic spirit and elements of tribal culture through their profound relation to the territory and nature. Upon this shifting differentiation, based on a few general characteristics, and especially on the opening up to foreign influences, we can conjure up a distant comparison with the artist and writer groups who marked a turning point in their search for a language in the visual arts, literature and theatre in America during the early years of the twentieth century.

In anthropological studies today, the term “tribe”, in spite of the negative connotations acquired from evolutionary determinism, substantially denotes a “dynamic unity, open to every possible relation”, whose open structure allows for the development and enrichment of the inter-ethnic relations within it.<sup>1</sup> The subsistence, stability and strength of every tribe is based on its capacity to endure through time and prosper in the interchange with the exterior.

And in this opening up, American art circles were able to make good use of the free circulation of intellectuals who swelled the ranks of immigrants, especially from the end of the nineteenth century. These infused an energy of renewal into American culture, at a stable temperature, and seldom settled into rigid ideologies

<sup>1</sup> For a wider definition of the tribe in anthropology, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *I Nuer: un'anarchia ordinata*, Milan 1975, pp. 170–174 (Engl. ed. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutes of a Nilotic People*, 1940); B. Bernardi, *Uomo Cultura Società*, Milan 1985; C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston 1969. For a detailed description of the life of the tribes of American Indians see P. N. Carroll, D. W. Noble, *The Restless Centuries: A History of the American People*, Minneapolis 1979.





Some members of the Bloomsbury group at Charleston in 1925 (Clive Bell with Angelica in his lap, Stephen Tomlin and Lytton Strachey)

with pretensions to aestheticism; therefore they had few obstacles in permeating the ample strata of civil life.

The first American tribe of the twentieth century was that of Alfred Stieglitz and the review *Camera Work*, which he founded and ran through the years 1903–1917. So, according to a chronological study of the tribe at its first degree of twentieth-century renewal, we can put photography, which, as regards the United States, is proposed with considerable value as a symbol: photography is the art form closest to civil life, an instrument for the recognition of historical facts and a census of the populations that composed the social tissue (from the photos of the Civil War taken by Matthew Brady down to Lewis Hine's portraits of immigrants). With its importance for innovation and technology, the camera anticipated the destinies of an art culture that opened boundless horizons with its networks and digital systems. The *Camera Work* group looked upon the art-technology connection as a system that would throw the traditional puritanical assumptions into crisis, since the latter considered art an immoral form of pleasure and technology as essential to the production system. *Camera Work* first came out on the 1st January 1903, as "a review independent of any organization or political faction",<sup>2</sup> following the first pictorial photographic exhibition which Stieglitz organized on behalf of the National Art Club, with a group of secessionist photographers (a reference to the Secessionist movements in Munich and Berlin) chosen by Stieglitz.<sup>3</sup> Among those who collaborated with *Camera Work*, apart from the secessionists themselves who often assumed the role of critics, appeared such prestigious names as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gertrude Stein (names that often recur among the tribes that have passed through the culture of Western art and letters).

In 1905 Alfred Stieglitz opened a gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue where he organized exhibitions of artists of the European avant-gardes (Matisse, Cézanne, Rodin, Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec), pursuing the wave of curiosity aroused by the great international art exhibition of the Armory Show in New York in 1913<sup>4</sup> that had brought the works of the Post-Impressionists, Cubists and Futurists

<sup>2</sup> "An Apology", in *Camera Work*, 1st January 1903, p. 16. Cf. *Camera Work*, Kraus Reprint, Nedeln (Liechtenstein) 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Among these there were: Eduard Steichen, Frank Eugene, Joseph Keiley, Eva Watson, Schutze, Clarence White and others, apart from Stieglitz himself.

<sup>4</sup> The Armory Show was the International Exhibition of Modern Art, at the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, New York. Cf. M. W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, Greenwich (Connecticut) 1963; and *The Catalogue of the 50th Anniversary Exhibition of the Armory Show*, Utica-New York 1963.



to America. In order to understand some intrinsic characteristics of the American tribes, it should be emphasized that a distinctive element of Stieglitz's group upheld civil commitment: because the artists never proclaimed a "negative ideology". Even though the American tribes can be connoted on the avant-garde level (against industrial domination and fired by the urge to provoke bourgeois quietism), relations between artist and public, in spite of their resort to challenge and provocation, were always soundly based on a level of communication.<sup>5</sup>

The Armory Show had a special interest for the components of a brand new periodical, *Poetry: a Magazine of Verse*, founded in Chicago in 1912 by Harriet Monroe. The publishers' office at 543 Cass Street was to become a gathering point of the cultural ferment in the middle West; this was known as the "Chicago Renaissance", where the very young and little known poets and writers, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay and Sherwood Anderson, were to meet. It was in *Poetry* that T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Arthur Prufrock* first appeared, and the first poems of Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore and D. H. Lawrence.<sup>6</sup> *Poetry* also published the works of the "imagists" Pound and William Carlos Williams, who – as F. S. Flint describes – "admitted to being contemporaries of the Post-Impressionists, Futurists, but had nothing in common with these schools".<sup>7</sup>

A widespread phenomenon of spontaneous groupings that seeped across the United States were the "little theatres" which laid the foundations of the new American theatre in 1910–1925. The "little theatres" usually occupied the premises of old abandoned office buildings and functioned as alternatives to the commercial-impresario run circuits or repertory and travelling theatre, and stood against "naturalism" and "theatricality". New York immediately proved itself a sounding board and megaphone for every innovation in the theatre. In 1915 alone it could chalk up three group performances which were to be generally indicated as the origins of the new American theatre: the Provincetown Players, the Neighborhood Playhouse and the Washington Square Players. What the three groups had in common were: choices that favoured real communion with the arts; experimenting the "one-act play" as a fundamental element of the ritual of theatrical communion; the development of new dramatic writing which was essentially American; and above all absolute spontaneity and freedom of association for theatre artists. The group was intended as a gathering of people working in "communion" (*Gemeinschaft*) and not as a business firm or company (*Gesellschaft*). The differences between the groups mostly stemmed from the various personalities among their components. The Provincetown Players were a group of intellectuals and writers (George Cram Cook, Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Kenneth MacGowan and Robert Edmund Jones);

<sup>5</sup> A thorough documentation on Stieglitz's review is contained in the volume *Camera Work. La rivista di fotografia di Alfred Stieglitz, 1903–1917*, Turin 1981.

<sup>6</sup> E. Williams, *Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance: The First Ten Years of Poetry, 1912–1922*, Urbana 1977.

<sup>7</sup> B. Dijkstra, *Cubism, Stieglitz and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, Princeton (New Jersey) 1978, p. 24.



the Washington Square Players – coming from the Macdougall Street Liberal Club founded in 1912 by Henrietta Rudman – were a group of artists and political activists (among them Ida Rauth, Albert Boni and Lawrence Langner) who performed their theatrical actions around the streets of New York, where they picked up the intellectual and social energies of the city; the Neighborhood Playhouse arose from the didactic-recreational activities of a social assistance centre run only by nurses, the Henry Street Settlement, which two Jewish artists, Alice and Irene Lewisohn, transformed into a theatrical community in the Lower East Side, a quarter with the largest population of immigrants. Contact with the wealth of ethnic groups in the quarter and collaboration between artists of different cultural extraction like Boleslawsky, Tagore, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Sarah Le Moyne Cowell, and Yvette Guilbert, made the Neighborhood Playhouse the first multi-cultural theatre in America, as well as in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

The didactic aspect of the communal art experience came from Black Mountain College. From 1933 on Black Mountain created a permanent community attended by various alternating generations of students and notable names in the visual arts, poetry, dance and theatre. Among them: Josef and Annie Albers, Walter Gropius, Amédée Ozenfant, William Carlos Williams, Thornton Wilder, Robert Creeley, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Clement Greenberg, Willem de Kooning, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan.<sup>9</sup> The same spirit, Clement Greenberg tells us, was to be found in New York after 1947 in that island of poverty, the area south of 34th Street, where young artists, “few of them over forty, in lodgings with cold water, and living from one day to the next” – among them William Bazotes, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still – made their mark on the new scene in American painting. Their discussions on art were closely followed by such eminent figures as Alfred H. Barr Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art, and Thomas B. Hess, the young, new director of *Art News*. In 1948 some of them decided to open an art school to carry the spirit of their meetings, and thus a city version of Black Mountain arose in New York: the Subjects of the Artists, with premises at 35 East on Eighth Avenue.<sup>10</sup> Only a few steps away from the school was the Artists’ Club, a meeting place for Jack Tworkov, Franz Kline, Ad Reinhardt and Willem de Kooning, later joined by future exponents of the New York school: apart from Tworkov and Kline, there were Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Philip Guston, James Brooks, Bradley Walker Tomlin, David Smith, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still and, among them, the poet Frank O’Hara.

“Everybody who writes”, said Gertrude Stein in *Paris France* (1940), “is interested in living inside themselves in order to tell what is inside themselves. That is why writers have to have two coun-

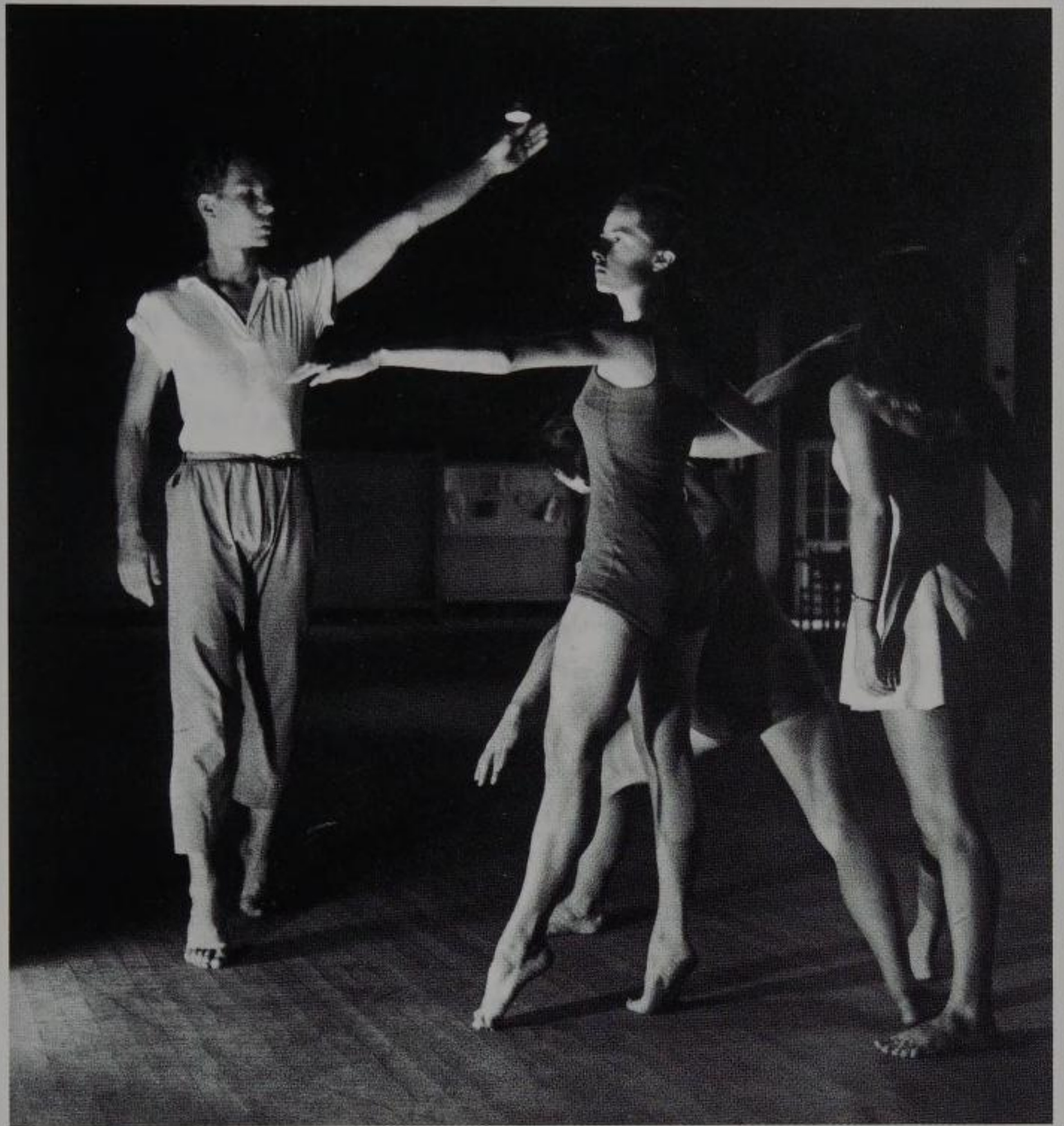
<sup>8</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, *Twentieth-Century American Theater*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1982, pp. 36–120.

<sup>9</sup> M. E. Harris, *The Arts at the Black Mountain College*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1987.

<sup>10</sup> *New York: Culture Capital of the World, 1940–1965*, edited by L. Wallock, New York 1988.



Merce Cunningham giving a dance lesson at Black Mountain College (summer 1948)



tries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really. The second one is romantic, it is separate from themselves, it is not real but it is really there.”<sup>11</sup> The expatriates represent the first American tribal experience to do the Europe-America crossing the other way round. “To expatriate” (not “to emigrate”), according to a recurrent bohemian ideal among artists with a double homeland, is how they can clearly affirm their dissension and open criticism of the world they belong to, its moralizing and bigoted culture and its contradictions. In the twenties and thirties Paris was the homeland chosen by Hemingway (who began his career as a writer in Paris), Alice B. Toklas, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein: their favourite place for exchanging opinions was Gertrude Stein’s apartment. Hemingway left many memories of these meetings in his novels, but *A Movable Feast* (1964), a posthumous collection he made with his wife Mary, compacts them in a single American epic of the nomadic tribes.

The attraction of Paris for artists from all over the world is substantially linked to its international *humus* where roots had already struck deep. Alfred Jarry, who was 23 in 1896 when he wrote *Ubu Roi ou les Polonais* in Paris, had got to know the art and literary circles extremely well and frequented all the places favoured by the young culture: Bergson’s lectures, the Salons de la Rose-

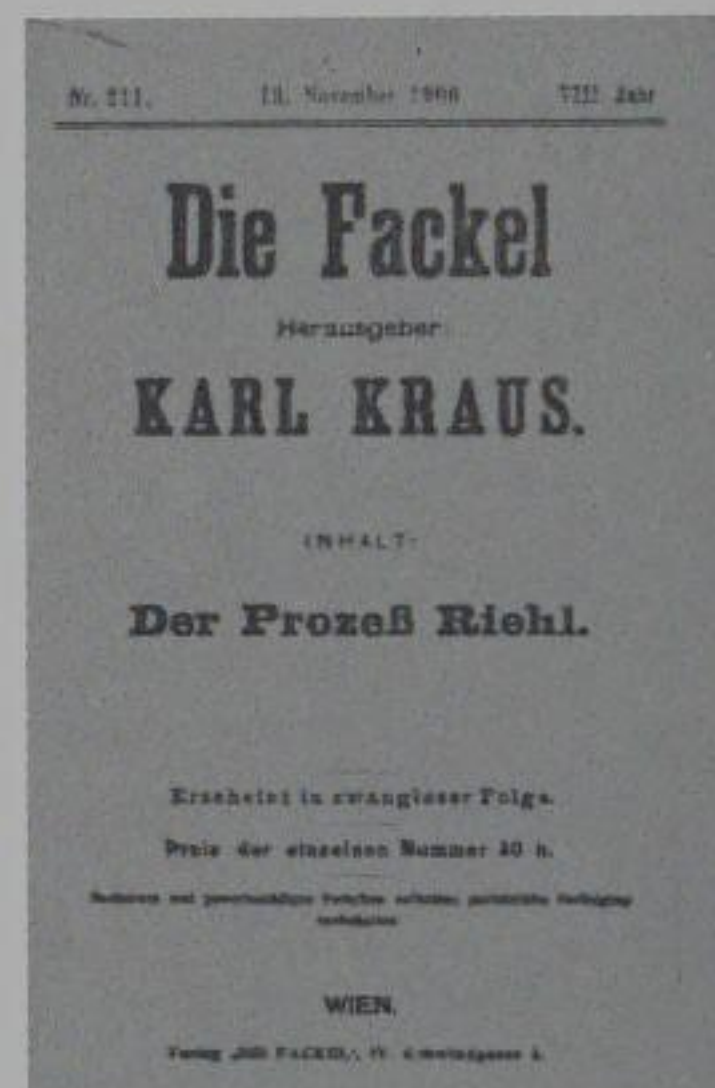
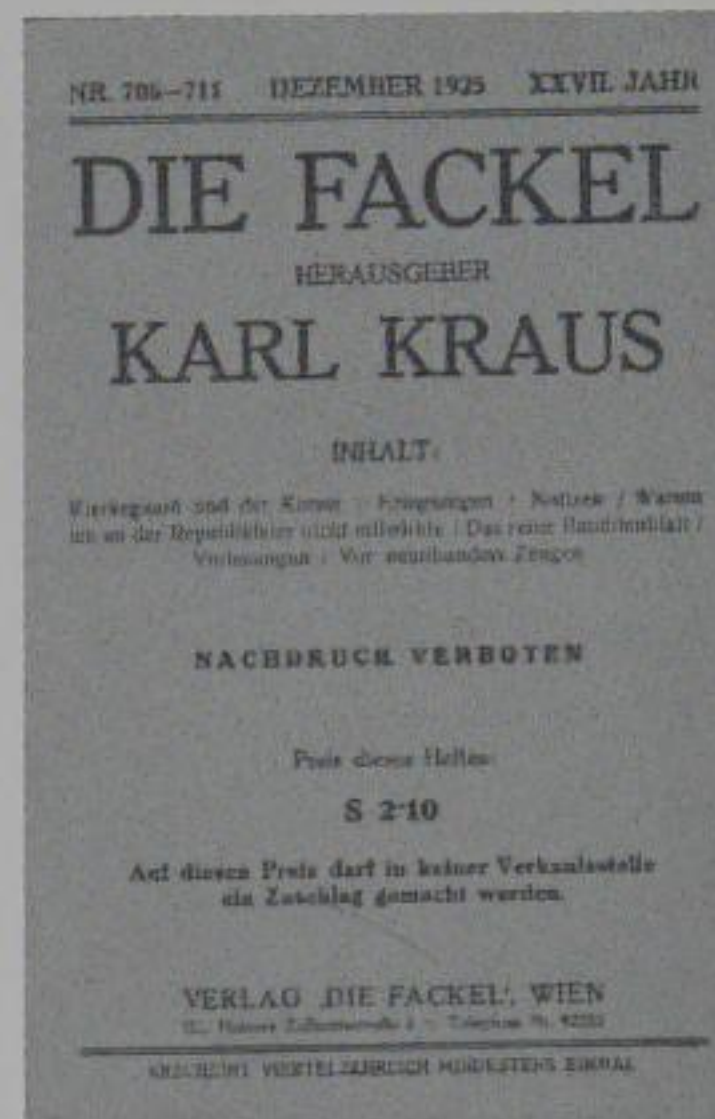
<sup>11</sup> F. J. Hoffman, *The Twenties. American Writing in the Postwar Decade*, New York 1962, p. 43.



Croix, the Théâtre d'Art, L'Œuvre, the Gauguin exhibitions, the fashionable bookshops; moreover he had read Grillparzer and Grabbe. *Ubu Roi* is the key text of his works for the stage, the product of a tribal ideal, the mirror of intellectual ferment and fantastic speculation that joins in with the tensions of renewal in all art between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. *Ubu Roi* is a satire of high school audacity, with absurd provocative language in a grotesque form that has the absolute power of a myth, a fundamental saga for the dawning century based on inter-crossings and nomadism among the arts and sciences. The "pataphysique", the word *Ubu Roi* uses to affirm artistic science, was to become the most favoured theory, in a more or less voluntary way, by all these artists working on the transposition of reality according to a lateral scientific theory, against every pre-constituted aesthetic confronting them.

On a more concrete level, the most solid tribe and the one more closely connected with the cultural life of Paris, were certainly the components of Les Six. The name brings together six French composers: Milhaud, Poulenc, Honegger, Auric, Durey and Tailleferre, associated from the point of view of the innovative importance of their musical endeavours.<sup>12</sup> Actually two personages who were fundamental for the new music were not included in the count: Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau, the animator and the inspirer of the group. The Six worked together for a number of years between the end of the First World War and 1924: they were united in close ties of friendship, and all of them, except for Tailleferre, enjoyed a very comfortable economic situation; they met regularly almost every Saturday evening, first in Milhaud's house, then at the Café Gaya, then at the more sophisticated night spot Le Bœuf sur le Toit (actually the name was taken from one of Milhaud's compositions); they mostly performed their works at the little Salle Huyghens. All of them shared Cocteau's new musical aesthetic: "Assez de nuages, de vagues, d'aquariums, d'ondines et de parfum la nuit; il nous faut une musique sur la terre, une musique de tous les jours."<sup>13</sup>

Whether it was his natural disposition to inspire elective affinities, or else his many wide-ranging areas of expression, Jean Cocteau was the reference point of Paris night life for many different tribes of artists who frequented the night spots of Saint-Germain. The *cave*, a typical night spot of the north of Europe (similar to the famous Café des Westens in Berlin)<sup>14</sup> was the cult club for the tribe of Existentialists. The best known *cave* was the Tabou, frequented by writers like Boris Vian, Sartre, Prévert, Camus, Astruc, Roger Vaillant, Gaston Gallimard, and also Gérard Philipe and Roger Vadim, Albert the nephew of Raymond Radiguet, and it was also possible to meet Giacometti, Jean Genet, Merleau-Ponty and Juliette Gréco. The Tabou was where Dionysian rites were performed



Frontispieces of the review *Die Fackel*



against a background of jazz, where they danced to boogie-woogie and the jitterbug, drank Coca-Cola and increasingly wore Juliette Gréco's moonlit make-up, the men dressed in a carefree coupling of the obligatory cowboy tartan shirts with bulky check jackets over gaudy, flapping, creaseless trousers. The *caves* had Existentialist sayings and catch-cries scrawled over the walls.<sup>15</sup>

The most famous of the London tribes, the Bloomsbury group, was considerably more composed and intimate. In his autobiography, *Beginning Again*, Leonard Woolf points out that Bloomsbury was the term used to define – often quite wrongly – a largely imaginary group of people, united by largely imaginary similarities and characteristics. He describes the group, of which he was part, as being composed of a small number of friends who happened to live in that part of London which had every right to bear the name of Bloomsbury. In point of fact the original nucleus of Bloomsbury was born in Cambridge in the last years of the nineteenth century; undergraduates from King's College and Trinity took part, and many were members of a very exclusive secret society called "The Apostles" which had existed for generations. Above all they shared the lectures of the idealist philosopher G. E. Moore, whose *Principia Ethica* was then the fashion amongst an entire generation. When the circle transferred to London, the little group of students matured into a circle of intellectuals among whom we find: Lytton Strachey, the iconoclastic biographer of *Eminent Victorians*; the art critic Clive Bell, who together with Roger Fry (who joined the group in 1910) had the merit to introduce the French Post-Impressionists into England; J. Maynard Keynes, the economist who radically changed economic thought; Leonard Woolf, writer, publisher, and left-wing theorist and politician; Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, painter and Virginia's sister; Lytton Strachey's painter friend, Dora Carrington; and with rather less frequency than the others, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, the theatre critic Desmond MacCarthy and E. M. Forster who wrote *A Passage to India*. A portrait of the Bloomsbury meetings and their philosophical, political and aesthetic discussions can be read between the lines in Virginia Woolf's masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, where she does not spare the irony when dealing with how far their culture really went.<sup>16</sup>

In Italy an interesting workshop of thought, projects and passions in the midst of social and civil life was certainly the café in Piazza Vittorio in Florence: Le Giubbe Rosse. It was where the challenge Marinetti addressed from Paris to the avant-gardes was taken up: "We want to sing the love of danger, acquire the habit of energy and audacity... We want to exalt aggressive movement, feverish sleeplessness, the running pace, the somersault, the slap and the punch." Thus thundered the ideologue of Futurism from the pages of the *Le Figaro* on 20th February 1909, in a vain attempt

<sup>12</sup> The name arose from an article by a French critic who spoke of The Six in comparing the French composers to the famous group of Russian composers: The Five.

<sup>13</sup> L. Rognoni, *La scuola musicale di Vienna*, Turin 1966, pp. 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> Where Max Reinhardt, Herwarth Walden, Else Lasker-Schüler and Jhering used to meet in the twenties, the review *Aktion* was born and Karl Kraus found material for *Die Fackel*.

<sup>15</sup> B. Vian, *Manuel de Saint-Germain-des-Prés*, Paris 1997.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account of the Bloomsbury group see J. Lehmann, *Virginia Woolf and Her World*, London 1975; for the relations between painting and sculpture, see A. Capasso, *Lo specchio infrangibile: il ritratto di Mrs Ramsay tra pittura e scrittura*, Padua 2000.



to arouse Italy's sleepy-headed, respectable intellectual world. "When the first manifesto arrived", Papini recalled, "I showed it at once to Ardengo Soffici at the Café Le Giubbe Rosse. And they said: 'At last here is someone in Italy who actually feels the disgust and weight of the load of antique junk our disrespected schoolmasters have been piling on our heads and shoving between our legs. At last we have someone making a bid for something new, who celebrates audacity and violence and stands for freedom and destruction!... However it is a pity they feel the need to write so emphatically, and adopt these swashbuckling attitudes, the mask slipping over their mechanics, presenting themselves with an air of tragic clowns out to scare the placid audiences at a variety matinee. You can be even more brazen and louder without all that fracas'." It was on the slender bar tables of Le Giubbe Rosse that the leading Florentine reviews were created: Giovanni Papini founded *Il Leonardo* with Giuseppe Prezzolini and Cecchi; at the time of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Futurist manifesto the Florence group united around Prezzolini's *La Voce* and from the pages of this review Ardengo Soffici violently panned the first exhibition of Futurist painting in Milan, with pictures by Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà and Luigi Russolo, among others. In 1913, as a result of their contrasting views with Prezzolini, *La Voce* lost Papini and Soffici who went off to found *Lacerba*. From Le Giubbe Rosse came polemical articles by Papini, and studies on philosophy and painting by Soffici, Aldo Palazzeschi's *Counterpain* manifesto, Italo Tavolato's study *Against Sexual Morality* and the *Manifesto of Lust* by Mallarmé's niece, Valentine de Saint-Point; the latter caused a pandemonium in accusations of immorality which dragged the authors and publishers before a court of law.<sup>17</sup>

In Rome, from the end of 1918 till June 1921 the Casa d'Arte Bragaglia – composed of four small rooms, a salon and a corridor – opened in Via Condotti 21. The activity of the gallery, which during this time had hosted over seventy exhibitions, was supported by the review *Cronache di Attualità*. Here too the fundamentally anarchic character of the art selected was apparent in the total absence of programming art activities, and in the opening up towards the various currents of the day. The main painters who showed there were Giacomo Balla, Giorgio de Chirico, Mario Sironi, Giulio Evola and the Dadaists, Klimt, Schiele and Zadkine.<sup>18</sup> From 1926 on, a group of young physicists met in Via Panisperna, which marked the entrance of Italian physics onto the European scene. These were "the boys from Via Panisperna", the group of scientists composed by Enrico Fermi, inspirer and promotor of the study group, Franco Rasetti, who held the chair of spectroscopy, and a group of students from the Engineering faculty – the first among these was Emilio Segrè, with his following of B. Ferretti, E. Majorana, G. C. Wick, M. Ageno, E. Amaldi and B. Pontecorvo. In

<sup>17</sup> For the "incendiary years 1913–1915", Alberto Viviani (in M. Assirelli, "Il Caffè letterario delle Giubbe Rosse", in *Uroboro. Rassegna elettronica di letteratura e critica*, IV, Florence 2000) presents vivid memories of Giuseppe Vannicola, Nicola Moscardelli, Arrigo Levasti, Giannotto Bastianelli, Angelo Cecconi (Thomas Neal), Dino Campana (who tried to sell copies of his *Canti orfici* to the customers of the café), Ottone Rosai, Ugo Tommei, Federico Tozzi, Raffaello Franchi, Luciano Folgore, Marino Moretti, Fernando Agnoletti, Mario Novaro (brother of Angiolo Silvio) with his son Cellino, Arturo Reghini, Medardo Rosso, André Gide, Gordon Craig, the young Primo Conti, the Trieste group, Tavolato, Daubler, Slataper.



the period 1926–1937 the young men of the “Roman school of physics” met at the Istituto di Fisica in Rome which then represented the most avant-garde research centre in Italy for the availability of its excellent instruments, possessing not only “classical” spectrometers but also the most advanced Hilger spectrographs, and the right sort of auxiliary equipment. The highly intense work carried out as a group by these “boys from Via Panisperna” was interrupted by a series of defections that began in 1935 when Rasetti left for America, Pontecorvo for Paris, Segrè for a professorship in Palermo. By the end of 1938, shortly after the proclamation of the so-called racial laws in Italy, Fermi went to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize, awarded for his fundamental contributions to neutron physics, and from there proceeded to the United States where he settled. Fermi’s decision to emigrate was also because his wife, Laura Capon, was Jewish.

In Vienna, on the 1st April 1898, the first number of the review *Die Fackel* (The Torch) was issued. Its publisher and editor was Karl Kraus who was to write it almost entirely, on his own, until his death. The periodical had a rapid success with the public, for its language and satirical style regarding politics and social events in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century. In its first phase *Die Fackel* could rely on articles from such well known writers and personalities as Richard Dehmel, Paul Heyse, Oskar Kokoschka, Else Lasker-Schüler, Adolf Loos, Heinrich Mann, Arnold Schönberg, August Strindberg, Frank Wedekind and Oscar Wilde; after 1911 Kraus decided to write the review entirely on his own, having run into a tight economic situation which prevented him from making further payments to outside contributors. The original idea of a tribe orbiting around the Viennese review was turned into a monologue, more often than not expounded in apocalyptic tones, between Kraus and his increasing number of readers on subjects that included politics, society and culture. *Die Fackel* became the press organ of an ideologist, with no manifesto and no group to support him, who conducted a harsh and purely theoretical guerrilla warfare against the press, which represented the sole form of debate and participation in the cultural life of Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century. His attacks were chiefly directed against Vienna’s most powerful newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*, against feuilleton writers like Felix Salten, Leo Ebermann and Arthur Schnitzler – whom Kraus saw as mainly responsible for the fall in tone from the language of Goethe and Schiller – and the lack of vigour in critical consciousness. This was the burning flame that ignited *Die Fackel* for the thirty-seven years of its life.<sup>19</sup> The Griensteidl Café was the ideal editorial room for the review and at the same time the watchtower from where Viennese and European society in general could be surveyed. It was from here that ideas came to Kraus for his articles; and it was here

<sup>18</sup> M. Verdone, *I fratelli Bragaglia*, Rome 1991.

From 1922 the Casa d’Arte transferred to the cellars of Palazzo Tittoni in Via Rasella, which also contained ancient areas of the Baths of Septimus Severus; the gallery extended as far as Via degli Avignonesi and was composed of three different rooms. The larger space that was now available allowed them to devote more attention to the nineteenth century as well as to contemporary painting.

The basement area also housed the Teatro degli Indipendenti, which presented a highly important series of plays.

On the tables in the “grottos” in Via degli Avignonesi the 21-year-old Alberto Moravia wrote his first novel, *A Time of Indifference* (1929). The 1929 exhibition was memorable for its presentation and comparison of three groups of painters: the ones still linked to Impressionism like Amato, Bertolotti, Bartoli; the “Magic Realism” painters, Ceracchini, Di Cocco, Donghi, Francalancia, Oppo, Socrate, Trifoglio, Trombadori; the group of young Expressionists, Mafai, Mazzacurati, Scipione, Raphael. Cf. E. Mondello, *Roma futurista*, Milan 1990.

<sup>19</sup> H. Zohn, *In These Great Times*, Montreal 1976, p. 72.



that the periodical found its circulation, along with all the other European cultural publications which the Griensteidl Café, in a way that was quite exclusive for premises open to the public, always kept available for their clientele.<sup>20</sup>

The expression “The Vienna Circle” was understood as a group of scholars, of strictly scientific subjects on the whole, that gathered in Vienna around Moritz Schlick, since 1922 a teacher of the philosophy of the inductive sciences. They met every Thursday evening on the ground floor of an L-shaped building which housed the scientific institutes of the university. For hours they would discuss mathematical logic, Einstein’s relativity, quantum physics, as well as economics and sociology. Formed in the early twenties, the Circle marked a turning point in philosophy, focusing attention on scientific practice and refusing any kind of “giving way” to metaphysics. Not only philosophy scholars came to the Circle’s meetings (Schlick himself was a physicist), but also many mathematicians, among them Hans Hahn and Karl Menger, and scholars of other branches, among them the important sociologist Otto Neurath.<sup>21</sup> With the spread of Nazism the Circle suffered an authentic diaspora. Then in 1936 Moritz Schlick was assassinated on the steps of the university by a student who sympathized with the Nazi regime.

In the field of music Vienna saw a considerable speeding up in the process of total revision of the elements of traditional musical language, starting with tonality. Above all with Schönberg and the works of his pupils, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, this revision was more radical and rich in developments. Schönberg trained in the Vienna where debates raged between Wagnerians and Brahmsians. The years between 1903 and 1911 were the most important period of his teaching in Vienna. They were the years when, first at the school of Eugenie Schwarzwald, then privately, the so-called “Second Viennese School” formed around him (the first School was held to be that of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven) not only with Berg and Webern, but also with an increasing number of pupils, admirers and followers, among whom we should mention Erwin Stein, Heinrich Jalowetz, Egon Wellesz and Karl Horwitz. This community of musicians had to face the hardships of getting their new and difficult music performed, the scant and mainly hostile audiences and consequent economic problems. It was from their meetings that the *Harmonielehre* (1911), Schönberg’s radical text-book on harmony, originated. In 1913 the Second Viennese school scored a series of successes with a season rich in operatic works (1908–1913) affirming the point of arrival for a complete renovation of musical language.

In 1946, under the influence of Webern’s rigorous dodecaphonic music, the School of Darmstadt in Germany was formed, with the participation, among others, of Nono, Boulez, Maderna



Luca, *Prop Art*, poster for the first exhibition of Prop Art, cm 70 × 50. Galleria Libreria Guida, Naples 1973

<sup>20</sup> C. E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle. Vienna: Politics and Culture*, New York 1979; H. Segel, *The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits, 1890–1938*, West Lafayette 1993; M. Freschi, *La Vienna di fine secolo*, Rome 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Among the members of the Circle were: Friedrich Weismann, Herbert Feigl, Rudolf Carnap, Hans Philipp Frank, Viktor Kraft, Kurt Goedel, Edgar Zilsel, Olga Taussky Todd, Olga Hahn-Neurath, Felix Kaufmann, Rose Rand, Gustav Bergmann, Richard von Mises; there were other outside guests like Hans Reichenbach, Carl G. Hempel, Alfred J. Ayer, Ernest Nagel, John von Neumann, Willard Orman Quine and Alfred Tarsky, as well as participation from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl R. Popper and Heinrich Gomperz.



and Stockhausen. This new musical avant-garde declared its radical proposals by assuming the Adornian name of “New Music” and established its epicentre in the little town in West Germany just outside Frankfurt. Founded in 1946 through the initiative of Wolfgang Steinecke, the Kranischstein Institute of Darmstadt originally took steps to reconstruct the musical life of Germany from the point where it had been violently interrupted by the advent of Nazism. The intentions of its first director, Wolfgang Fortner, followed by Hindemith, who directed the 1947 summer courses, were for the institute to become a centre where young German composers could study the modern music that had been banned for more than ten years. This music was mostly identified with Stravinsky’s neo-classicism, Hindemith’s own music and the atonal and dodecaphonic music of the twenties and thirties: Webern was considered the precursor of “serial” music, *musique concrète*, and electronic music; his scores were submitted to arithmetical “analysis” to count the number of different metrical values and the duration of silences. All kinds of “theories” were formed on “spatial sound”, on “parameters” and “musical objects”.<sup>22</sup>

Frankfurt was the centre for the most intense experience of German philosophy in the forties and fifties. The original nucleus of the School of Frankfurt originated in 1922 around the Institute for Social Research, founded by F. Weil and directed by K. Grünberg, an Austrian historian and founder of the Archive for the history of socialism and the proletariat movement. At its beginnings the Institute had a circle of eminent academics that included the sociologist K. A. Wittfogel (expert on pre-capitalistic Asian societies and Soviet society), the economists H. Grossmann and F. Pollock, the historian F. Borkenau, the philosophers M. Horkheimer (who was to assume direction of the Institute in 1930) and, after him, T. W. Adorno. Later the group was joined by the literary sociologist L. Löwenthal, the political scientist F. Neumann, the psycho-sociologist E. Fromm, the philosopher H. Marcuse, the literary critic and philosopher W. Benjamin. In 1932 Horkheimer founded the *Review for Social Research* which acquired international fame. With the advent of Nazism the School emigrated first to Geneva, then to Paris and finally to New York. At the end of the Second World War some of the members remained in the United States: Marcuse, Fromm, Wittfogel, Neumann and Löwenthal; while Horkheimer, Adorno and Pollock returned to Germany and rebuilt the Institute, in whose cultural atmosphere a new generation of scholars were formed, among them A. Schmidt, O. Negt and J. Habermas (the latter is the School’s most important heir).

### *New developments*

During the postwar period the tribes settled into a character that came closer to the literary cafés of the nineteenth century; they con-

<sup>22</sup> R. Leibowitz, *Le compositeur et son double*, Paris 1971.

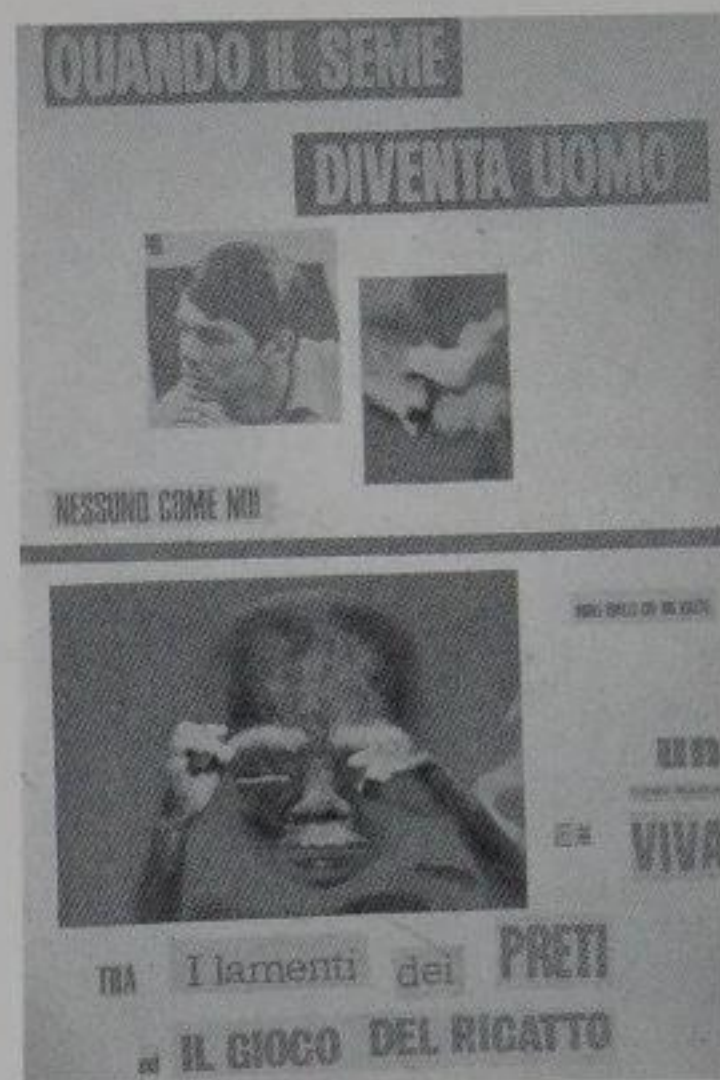


tinued to produce reviews and improvise associations based on elective affinities, on an increasingly structured system (similar to the cultural associations of today). Four tribes can be identified in the international panorama to focus new characteristics following those we have already seen in the early twentieth century.

A remarkably original case is the para-military-artistic group formed by the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, the Tatenokai. In this case the combination of art and war is a consequence of the “art and action” paradigm to be found in Mishima’s aesthetic-philosophical ideal. It descends directly from literature and the art of war, which formed part of the traditions of the old Japan. The group broke up after Mishima’s suicide on the 25th November 1970, which the writer staged with an authentic public ritual after completing the final version of *The Decay of the Angel*. Mishima concluded his literary and artistic career with the *seppuku* before the eyes of the Japanese army, and with the collaboration of his own little army who participated directly in the ritual, to the point of providing the suicide of one of his adepts. It was a ritual of consecration in the ancient custom (to conserve beauty and moral and physical integrity, and restore it to the Emperor) and a radical act of dissent against the culture American capitalism had imposed on Japan after the Second World War. With Mishima and his group (the Tatenokai) the tribe assumes the characteristics of cohesion for the defence of principles (even though not entirely shared) and unites to form a single body, sacrificed, as an extreme gesture, on the altar of art.<sup>23</sup>

Much closer to our idea of the Indian tribe is the beatnik community of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who gathered around the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco (opened in 1953 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Peter Martin to support the *City Lights* review). They all passed through the same experiences of Oriental philosophy, drugs, jazz clubs and travelling like pioneers, following the cry “Go east!” instead of the famous “Go west!” of the Pilgrim Fathers and gold rush prospectors. Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel *On the Road* is a direct description of this feverish experience that corresponded to the wish they all shared to live “a life narrated directly”.

In 1958 in Naples the Gruppo 58 was formed with Guido Bi-asi, Lucio Del Pezzo, Bruno Di Bello, Salvatore Fergola, Mario Colucci, Luca (Luigi Castellano) and Mario Persico. This was the first Neapolitan avant-garde group of the post-war and it assumed the lessons of Dadaism and Surrealism placing the results on a more strictly political level. “Their operation can be attributed to a context of communication, as they wanted, outside the static oppression of galleries and museums, preparing a VISUAL discourse for future communications, manifestos, leaflets, street shows, theatre,



Luca, collage/modification from *L'Espresso*, cm 100 x 70, Naples 1970



public meetings and anything else they could think of. In short whatever has to happen when pictures are no longer sold to the collector, but can be used for something.”<sup>24</sup> The inventor and promoter of the publishing and theoretic initiatives which form the basic elements of Gruppo 58, as well as its offshoots, was Luca, a creative-creator, famous both for his spatial-visual experiments with images, writing and colour, and for having been the promoter of groups and periodicals that gave rise to an art policy tending to “a political art”. In Naples the group’s work undertook, as a vital need, to create a system of creative interaction and art dialogue towards the re-elaboration of culture. They saw it as a vital need in a context that had completely disintegrated and left without channels of access. The result of their work was to transfer their researches in art to a study of the city, seen as a living nucleus and cultural tribe, where internal relations and those of the external can be recognized and analyzed, as Luca proposed in the eighties, involving scientists, writers and intellectuals.<sup>25</sup>

Another group of a political kind, seen as (re)constructing society according to models free from discrimination, but with more precise implications in the world of art, is that of the Guerrilla Girls, formed in 1985, when the exhibition *An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture*, which was supposed to represent a detailed census of the more significant ventures in contemporary art, was held at the MOMA in New York. Of the 169 artists chosen for the exhibition, only thirteen were women; all the artists were racially white from Europe and the United States. The Guerrilla Girls’ actions, anonymous as always (in public: wearing gorilla masks; in the press: signing with names of the famous women artists of history), went as far as using technology and the Internet with website [www.guerrillagirls.com](http://www.guerrillagirls.com), through which they urged the re-formation of an anonymous, trans-national and trans-cultural tribe to keep alive the renewal that is one with the spirit of art.

<sup>23</sup> H. Scott-Stokes, *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*, Tokyo 1975; A. R. Smith, “Mishima’s Seppuku Speech: A Critical-Cultural Analysis”, in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, no. 10, 1990;

M. Yourcenar, *Mishima: A Vision of the Void*, New York 1986; M. Yourcenar, *Le tour de la prison*, Paris 1991.

<sup>24</sup> U. Eco, contribution to the catalogue *Di Bello, Luca, Rubino, Rassegna d’arte e cultura d’avanguardia*, for the exhibition at the Galleria Il Tunnel, Rome, 4 June 1966.

<sup>25</sup> Luca was a publisher, producer and director. Reviews he published: 1959–1961 – *Documento Sud* (typography, poetry and painting), six numbers; 1963–1967 – *Linea Sud*, six numbers; 1969–1971 – *NO*, Nuovo Operativo di Comunicazione on mass basis and culture on class basis (political avant-garde art and culture), three numbers; 1983–1984 – *Città & Città*, fortnightly for the theory and practice of a new culture.

Groups he promoted: Gruppo 58; Operativo 64; Gruppo Linea Sud (1963–1966); Operativo Gruppo Studio P 66; “NO” group (1969–1971).

Luca also designed the following posters: *Primo Manifesto Nullista* (in *Documento Sud*, no. 3, 1959), *Manifesto contro l’Arte e gli Artisti* (in *NO*, no. 3, 1971); *Manifesto del Neovedutismo*, 1977.







## The Literature of the Tribes in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century in Italy

**W**e may as well begin by quoting Sextus Empiricus for his decisive statement on the matter: namely that the objects of the “zetetica” (i.e. the research) are the problems. So now we can resume with notions by F. Gil. “The ancient sceptics, also known as ‘aporetici’, opposed their investigation, the zetetica, which was founded on their practice of suspended doubt, both to the ‘dogmatic’ conviction of possessing the truth, and to an agnosticism according to which the truth is likely to be an object refractory to plucking” (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 3). “Apart from the conflict between the different schools we find here a distinction between a total determination of the truth (full possession of truth) and the search [...]: alongside ignorance and knowledge, it takes its intermediate existence from the nature of its objects: which are the problems” (*Enciclopedia Einaudi*).

The search has in fact a value that is in a contrary sense to the enigma of the oracle – or, as we might say, a crisis-seeking, with the emphasis on crisis, against which pure reason can do nothing. This has clearly emerged from the beginning. Again with Gil: “In Greek thought the idea of the search could be carried out by moving from and against the background of the enigma proposed by the oracle. This is quite clear in Aristotle, where the association of the search with the *aporìa* – the difficulty to be overcome through methodical exploration – is of a marked difference from the enigma”, where the information is ambiguous and turns out to be totally elusive.

When we shift from the field of the problematic itself to the specific recent territory of literary and artistic research – whether we see it in the broad sense as cognitive or in the reduced sense as connected to expression – we immediately come up against the well-worn notion of “experimentation” or “neo-experimentation”.

It is common knowledge that in the midst of the post-war, in



the mid-fifties in fact, the lesson of Gianfranco Contini on the language of Petrarch was exemplary: it clipped Dante's expressionist "wings", that is, the "wings" of Dante's "incessant experimenting". Not much more than this was the reference used by Pier Paolo Pasolini (also common knowledge) in providing one of his definitions for the poets of the second half of the twentieth century (in the *Officina* review he directed with Roversi and Leonetti, with contributions from Volponi, from 1956 to 1961).

Returning for a moment to Dante studies, Maria Corti has recently made some valuable discoveries of the theoretical sources (Averroist) of the researches of the young Dante (in *La felicità mentale*, 1983). For instance Corti investigates the "process of a polysemy that had cropped up again on the quotation" of a sacred text: and in a song by Dante this led to "la 'défiguration' of the original meanings and a new burst of semantic impulse that 'overprinted' it", thereby implying "a transgression of poetry towards philosophic reference". And thus the data, however textual they may be, drawn from philosophy and science have entered into a poetic text in a completely different way, through the personal thought of the experimental author.

But let us return to the theoretical abuse which is useful, firstly, for the problems of research, Pasolini's to be precise, on the part of Contini (who said in the course of a discussion in a book that "that mad impetus in Dante" is very different from the experimentalists of the twentieth century). Before briefly recapitulating, let us re-read Pasolini, reconstructing the panorama of his early poetry in 1956: "We derive the term (neo-experimentalism) more from philological terminology than philosophical, since it can be reduced by degrees from a maximum to a minimum of value (from the "incessant experimentation" Contini spoke of in regard to Dante, to the experimentalism of the seventeenth century, for example) in order to understand the true innovating or re-innovating movement [...], and together, as an external phenomenon, not innovation or research, but merely an opposition to the immediately preceding institutes". With the pre-semiological precision of the "stylistic criticism" of that time, referring to texts with apposite "instances", Pasolini hailed the new as breaking away from tradition, that is, breaking away from the hermetic zone, and, from Neo-Realism as well, with the "worn-out hallmarks" of the "devalued" poetics that had come before (among the names he mentions we notice Zanotti and Giuliani).

Many of us found ourselves in this situation; we kept on trying to arrive at further definitions. Then around 1960 a "new avant-garde" took over, which attained the level of formalization, or verbal processing, with the aid of de Saussure's linguistics and the choices of Benjamin (first filtered by Sanguineti). Here a number of positions co-existed for a while: a rigorously materialistic one,



another that was semiological, and one influenced by phenomenology.

The radical position of the avant-gardes, with their criticism of the Ego, the subject and identity, were in fact persecuted by the “very new” poets, then promoters of the Gruppo 63 and its initiatives of meetings and debates (Balestrini, Giuliani, Pagliarani, Porta and Sanguineti) in internal contrast with the Officina group who also referred to Gramsci and his *Quaderni dal carcere* (Notebooks from Prison). In the eighties the monthly critical review *Alfabeta* (1979–1988, 114 numbers) had a decisive development, bringing together on its editorial board Volponi and Leonetti (“experimentalists”), Porta and Balestrini (promoter), and also Corti and Eco, semiologists, Rovatti and other philosophers.

In the 1988–1992 period experimentation claimed to be understood – in the words of Biagio Cepollaro, of the *Baldus* review and group – “as linguistic research that assaults the ‘neutralized’ material of mass media languages, mostly by means of the following: 1) the use of carefully handled dialect, employing traditional academic forms, with fragments of publicity and with neologisms; 2) work on quotation as re-writing and re-activation of expressive possibilities, as a means of ‘redemption’; 3) reference to the experimental tradition of the last thirty years, starting from re-definition of the ‘scenario’ containing, most emphatically, both the aestheticising of language, and the problems inherent in the union of ethical-cognitive instances and linguistic invention”.

On page 90 of the Merker edition of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, in the famous introductory sub-division, I read: “Meaning cannot be completely impressed in expression and, even making every effort and endeavour, the incongruence of form and idea will always remain unassailable.” Thus the definition of the final stage of the philosophy of aesthetic history in Hegel (later, in the triad, the classical Greek stage and the romantic modern-Christian). From the sub-division one is then directed to the first section of the second part: “symbolic art”, from the prehistorics to the archaics, from cave dwellings to villages. Hegel says that the symbol “is first and foremost a sign”, so already, an entire century before, it sounds like de Saussure, through the influence of Humboldt, rather than Creuzer; Hegel notes that “between meaning and its expression the link is entirely arbitrary” (p. 334), etc. And on the subject of allegory, he says briskly: “Allegory is the opposite of enigma”, and brings in Egypt, India and Islam. So the Expressionist artists of the twentieth century choose the primitive, or rather the tribal world, another world as a place and a way of nomadizing our institutionological civilization.

It we now shift to Renato Solmi’s introduction to the Italian collection of Benjamin’s essays, *Angelus Novus*, whence we took



our formation, we read that: "Allegory is symbolic art", not in the mythic or atemporal picture of ancient theocratic societies (as considered by Hegel) but in one that has profoundly changed the Christian philosophy of history". Solmi notes (p. XIX): "Hegel's use of the term 'symbolic' is the exact antithesis of the – positive – one of classical aesthetics which Benjamin attacks" (to bring out the anti-classical trend of the Baroque). Perhaps Solmi's Hegelian reading blurs the Marx versus Hegel contrast, and certainly in the case of Lukács: but today, the question has been re-thought by Romano Luperini, who differentiates a Goethe-Lukács line (in the international conference at Siena in May 1989; cf. the review *Allegoria*, year II, no. 6). And Luperini supports and gives searching development, compared to the passing reference of Solmi, to a different "functioning of the particular", in the words of Solmi. And, since we find ourselves back with allegorism, "the necessary partiality and fragmentary attention of every position" rests on this, that is a not-guaranteed certainty, the bet, the non-perspectivism; because today (see Luperini) allegory only tears the masks away, deconstructs false totalities and declares a vacuum". But this should not start us off on demolition, attracted by the "instability" (*Geist*, ashes, that hedgehog poetry) we find in Derrida: today what really counts, in its subtle way, is a precisely projected and constructed activity, however fluid, suspended, aphasic, idiolectal, conjectured or seen through.

What we need to do first of all is to demonstrate in unmistakable terms in the field of arts and letters (only for Benjamin do they enjoy equal ascendancy) how the only good thing about the disconcerting break-away from traditions in the twentieth century (i.e. the "divorce" between artist and public, as Dorfles put it) is Benjamin's explanation: that in the twentieth century and the avant-gardes there was a certain reprise of "symbolic art" as Hegel saw it. Actually it was not the incongruity as it seemed to Hegel but, like the century's art, the lack of equilibrium, proportion and symmetry; the contortion (which we have seen in the language he used about reality in *German Ideology*). Here Expressionism is like the beginning of a watershed, with abstraction which is anti-representational; and then there is the precedent which Benjamin theorized as its counterpart: the Baroque. For us Baroque and Expressionism are modernity. And all this is drawn together at the first stage of Hegel's enquiry: the prehistoric (so it is rather like beginning all over again); and art anticipates the historic discovery of that great level of civilization, the tribal world: which the artists refer to with their new modern anxiety in categorizing its forms.

All these things are well known, of course, and in confirming them I feel I must add a critical note about the way they extend backwards. If linguistic radicalism is modern and belonging to the twentieth century, every generalized use made of it eliminates a cer-



tain differential threshold; ours of course. For example, if Wilhelm Worringer used the term “Expressionism” in 1911 about van Gogh, the early Matisse and even Cézanne, and then Longhi got hold of it and applied it to Vitale da Bologna back in the fourteenth century, this certainly is a valuable metaphorical extension, not to say exemplary, for the interpretation of history. And so it is goodbye to the radical, no more avant-gardes for Longhi; only historicism. But the moderns do have a visual attitude that is wild and primitive. It is authentic in that it is not symmetrical, nor harmonious, nor is it out to make something look beautiful, nor purely innovative and conciliatory. (For Expressionism in the arts and literature we should not refer either to Longhi or to Contini, who is also drawn into the matter, but instead to Bloch in his polemics with Lukács.)

Now that the problem is posed it directs us to a recent theory of tradition invoking the *auctoritates*. This is the only sense in which we can speak of tradition. Let us read, briefly, what Gadamer says when he tells us what tradition means. (Remember that the text Gadamer sent to Siena, translated and read by Cesare Cases, twice mentions Goethe and Heidegger together as great names, almost a strain of neo-Greek germanism.) The chapter in *Verità e metodo* that interests us is entitled “Problematicità dell’ermeneutica romantica, e della sua applicazione all’Istorica” (Problems of romance hermeneutics, and its application to History; It. ed., p. 211), theorizing the “pre-comprehension” dear to Heidegger (against Schleiermacher and his individualism) and goes as far as to say, for example: “The overcoming of all prejudices, which is a sort of general precept for enlightenment, will seem itself a prejudice; and upon the revision depends the possibility of a proper knowledge of the ‘finitude’ that forms not only our essence as men, but also our historical consciousness” (It. ed., p. 234). Here we are to read how the term “finitude” is connected with “essence as men”, and through the “also” to the “historical consciousness”; with Gadamer it becomes quite clear that the interpretability of the text is recuperated, with an aura of mission, while the arbitrariness of the *Zeichen* (mark, sign) leaves room for question, in the modern way; but the text is recuperated outside the history of the community and on the responsibility of the authors. The point, in fact, appears on the following page: “Prejudices as conditions of comprehension – Rehabilitation of authorities and tradition” (It. ed., p. 235). And among his conclusions Gadamer speaks of the hermeneutic experience as “having to do with tradition” which “is language, i.e. it speaks to us using the familiar pronoun”: and yet this traditional familiar “Du” is compared to Kant’s categorical imperative (It. ed., p. 414). As we know, we have lost almost everything, like the “men of ’45”. And we also know that recently Derrida said that it is better not to cram a humble little mammal with polysemous vitamins. For him the mammal is the hedgehog, poetry: in a well-dosed classicism, against



Witz. After all, tradition today is a return to pre-1945, and this is becoming more and more prevalent and widespread.

*On literary research in 1999*

Recently a useful debate was held on the situation of literary research today.<sup>1</sup> We should first remember that the linguistic text is expressed in the language of a community, and according to what Braudel has written,<sup>2</sup> it actually refers to the “patria” (home country); and while the avant-gardes claim to be cosmopolitan, there still remains a sort of untranslatableness, especially in poetry. Today we have entered a new phase. Back in 1981 when I was launching the “Tesi di Lecce” (the Lecce thesis; later published by Manni), I wrote that the principle that must be firmly observed in conducting research was the “unpredictable”, having already undertaken a speculative check on the cost of publication (“to get money”, as Tatò will later say, explaining the forthcoming competitive rivalry with the CD-ROM). But there is no dry problem of production or the standards of television, with marketing taking the place of the intellectual consultant. There is that, as well as the fact that the cost of publishing books is met by the new and difficult authors (except for Lang), but it is by no means the whole story. Today in the general, aesthetological picture, we have the principle of reading for pleasure, the aesthetics of reception, with a privileged attention to the reader, rather than to the text and the author; this will also have the effect of rendering void any form of criticism of the context. I quote G. Guglielmi at his most severe in regard to the present changes in the function of literature: “In the wake of post-modern ideologies, Jauss tends to bring the work to the reader, making a sociology of taste, rather than the reader to the work.”<sup>3</sup>

In contradiction to the critical and innovative power of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, of Abstract Expressionism, of allegory, the great Heidegger of *Interrupted Pathways* (*Holzwege*) came into public favour in the eighties, with a notion of “truth” (the Greek temple and van Gogh’s peasant shoes, as regards art) in connection with the hidden-revealed Being. And in his own taste there was asserted (incorrectly referred to Hölderlin – as De Man claimed – and currently contradicted by the Baudelaire-Benjamin connection) an exemplary though monotonous meditative tone that was intended to unite poetry with thought. Now that particular union was very definitely made by the Baroque of Bruno or Campanella... In any case the route was emarginated by the impact of Freud and Lacan. In the sixties the Conceptual Art movement was strong enough to abolish the object, and the market along with it. Meanwhile a decisive passage proved to be the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer that brought “interpretation” into the field of action.

<sup>1</sup> Initiated by F. Leonetti, R. Luperini on interpretation, by N. Balestrini with his 1960 paper on language (today now that the language-product in the terms detailed by Ch. Marazzi in *Il posto dei calzini* is a very different simplification from the one of the “parataxis”), a debate took place in the review *L’immaginazione* (1998–1999, nos. 152–156, Manni, Lecce). We should mention the papers of M. Castaldi on space and time; G. Guglielmi on levels of writing and the readers of today; the young writers Mascitelli, Lacatena, Maggiolini; and E. Fiorani referring to Marc Augé who compares the condition of imagination today to the Catholic colonization of pagan peoples; and finally R. Barilli, V. Consolo (from an interview), G. Ferroni (from a teachers’ conference). E. Sanguineti (from an interview in *Allegoria* under the title “Elogio della sintesi”): “It appears one can say that in others there is a certain difficulty in the attitude on the point of the present loss in the incidence of literature – both of the intellectual and the book itself – while Augé, and Virilio before him, have expressed themselves quite clearly on our ‘surmodernité’.”

<sup>2</sup> F. Braudel, *L’Europe*, Paris 1982.

<sup>3</sup> G. Guglielmi, “Lo spazio letterario”, in *Il Verri*, no. 9, 1999, p. 54. For the new phase Guglielmi is much to the point when he speaks of an “ideology of conciliated modernity (without critical programmes and utopian projections); in fact it remains an *incognita* of modernity”.



So today, why do we go on acting like lost souls? Because from the right and proper rigours of semiotics which considered things as pure “references” of man’s discourse, we are now moving on to “imperialism” (named by S. Timpanaro speaking of Hjelmslev): with global networks, economy-technology to the fore (and then bombs on the anomalies of Third Worlds...). Literature has become a “form of communication”, with characteristics defined by Segre.<sup>4</sup> And here, it seems to me, is the point that can re-open the discussion.

What we are left with is an investigation, or a challenge, on where our times are leading us; though without wishing to assert, like Nietzsche, that the imbeciles are legion – even if they all vote the same way – we are left with an intrinsic quality of literature and the arts that has faded into the shadows because of the excesses in communications: polysemy.<sup>5</sup> Which opposes the use of abridged texts by the buying public who use books and, to put it in one historic word, alas, circuses: with a “mass communication” understood in terms of the plebs... The polysemous is difficult; and elusive; for instance, Hemingway’s hunting and drinking appear to be just drinking and hunting; they are not intended as a visionary inspiration to recuperate some primordial attitude, in contrast to standardization and consumption...

I admit to being a materialist and a follower of Della Volpe (and moreover, today, shall I say? “iconophobe”). And yet, after aphasia and idiolect in defining art in terms of communication, when Italian semiologists come up with the proposal to regard literature as a “hyper-sign”, it is not a question of pure idealism, as though they were hoping to maintain the most profound linguistic workshop for the poet (and the people), but rather a question of motivated internal pressure that heightens the value of the polysensous. What we must hold on to in order to distinguish ourselves from fashions (and from the elections which are something else) is the polysensous, modern allegory, the manifold levels, and hence what belongs to the work of art itself.

In order to re-enjoy Expressionism in all its modes I shall again quote from Gianfranco Contini’s *La Lingua del Petrarca* (Petrarch’s language) which was in fact published in 1953. For Contini, of course, Petrarch (who dominated a global trend in poetry) clipped the expressionist “wings” of Dante. And where did this concept come from? From Roberto Longhi, who once again picked it up from Worringer, the art critic, for whom Expressionism was related to the Fauves and the first twentieth-century groups with a self-coherent “imbalance” (Dorfles’s word, used to contrast classical symmetry). Longhi however shifted it back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and in the twentieth century he had a special fondness for Guttuso. On the other hand Contini, whose main interests lay with his contemporaries, wrote on Gadda, while his line of Expressionism that started with Jacopone and Dante

<sup>4</sup> C. Segre, *Avviamento all’analisi del testo letterario*, Einaudi, Turin 1985, observes that what is being communicated and those who receive it are not co-present and therefore the communication is on a one-way basis, with a philological advantage and the possible re-reading of the message.

<sup>5</sup> It is well known that Della Volpe, with his timely materialistic elaboration of semiology (*Critica del gusto*, 1960), defines the work of art in its internal – and polysemous – coherence “stylistic-semantic aseity”, and therefore unites the level of meanings with the level of forms; moreover he presents art and science as diversified linguistic forms of the same activity of knowledge. Bachtin takes a similar position.



leaped ahead to the great dialectical poets, Belli and Porta, and the writers of the Scapigliatura movement and those of *La Voce* review. From there, another leap took him to the second half of the twentieth century.

Now, it has to be observed that an art critic like Achille Bonito Oliva,<sup>6</sup> who in 1976 re-examined the Mannerism of the mid-sixteenth century and a little later theorized researches made after 1977 as “Transavantgarde” (also cited by Jameson, the theoretician and art critic of the Postmodern), defines a few artists of the Transavantgarde itself (who were originally Cucchi, Clemente, Chia, Paladino and De Maria) as Neo-Expressionist.

From the Greek temple and portico of the philosophers it was of course necessary for our culture to pass through Africa (with the Cubists) and the East (Schopenhauer), until we arrive at Coca-Cola bottles – if we want to pick examples in the spirit of Heidegger.

The many currents of the thought, art and literature of research and invention are in fact correct. Good. And when today’s hyper-realism in images provokes objections to the insidious, “moderate” re-sprouting of mimesis just about everywhere – though not in the masterly sense of Auerbach, but as a postcard landscape, or portrait, or another premise for a return to classicism – how are we to answer them? By saying, provocatively perhaps, that the thing that interests us is the extreme experience in living and, in the work, exclusively the polysensuous: as in the recently elapsed twentieth century which was disposed towards irregularity in the new, since, repeating what Benjamin said, in the course of all the other centuries the Baroque is the only mode of expression modern art can relate to.

However in the new phase of “surmodernité” (Augé’s word) various ways have already emerged in regard to inventive resistance against the invasion of “images” in a period when ideas are controlled in the moderate or conciliatory sense. As far as Italy is concerned, we may still speak of “allegory” (comprehensive vision and/or strong conceptuality) in the case of a number of young authors. And whereas there have been hostile objections to a scandalous element, I think of it as a rather expressionistic tonality on the subject of Eros (this is difficult in literature because of western “knowledge” as investigated by Foucault and because of the poverty of the vocabularies used in modern languages compared to Latin) and generally speaking the choice of subjects that create tensions among the conventions of the present day.

<sup>6</sup> A. Bonito Oliva, *Oggetti di turno*, Marsilio, Venice 1999.



## Materials in Avant-Garde Experiments through the Twentieth Century

I

Material has never enjoyed much citizenship in the world of art. It has always been imposed only to be taken away, denied, transformed and manipulated. It has hardly ever been taken into consideration, or even taken seriously, as something in itself. Modern eyes, that have privileged science and technique, tend to dissolve it, privileging the immaterial element, the meaning and the information the form carries. Material remains leaden and opaque. Art alone has seen to the emergence of the spirit that fills it.

And yet all of us, however much we may have become “simple men with pale hands”<sup>1</sup> carry inside us the enchantment of materials and the dream of the forge where the cosmos of material is made manifest. Bachelard reminds us that there is a “material imagination” that turns up in reverie and art, as a return to the primordial imagination of the elements which has accompanied man throughout his history. The artist dreams the dreams of material. He is able to imagine not only forms and colours but also the material in its elementary virtues. For here are the great germs of life and the works of art. And here the artist anchors form and colour and evolves his dreams that stand between the material and the light or between the material and space.

Besides, the process of projecting is not an abstract fact, that applies a form or a project, but arises within the legality and the potentiality of the materials. It is something organic and alive created in contact with the body or the “flesh” of the materials. Materials and project are born together. The physical legality of materials concern the symbolic level and the level of communication, and have to do with form, with its consistency and density.

Art returns to material all the infinite potentiality of the use of materials and brings it into being. Materials have a determining importance in the constituent and expressive purposes of an

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Bachelard, *The Right to Dream*, Dallas 1988.



object or a work. Every material has its own tactile characteristics. There is tactile pleasure from stone, marble, wood, cloth, Plexiglas or paper. Ivory is more pleasurable to the touch than gold, silk more than wool, porphyry than iron. And colour can also have its consistency, a body, a weight of its own. Bright colours seem to us more lightweight than the dark ones. There are flat and surface colours, and colours that are thick, with body, and therefore material since they answer to the sense of touch.

Not only is colour visible, but it is one thing with the body of the things, and presents therefore a vast range of tactile and material properties. The aesthetic and artistic history of colour passes, above all, through the fabrication of colours, their projecting and the various ways they are used. Temperas, watercolours, oil paints, acrylics, varnishes are not only aesthetic and styled universes but ways of thinking and saying the world; they are rich and potent languages.

To take a homely example: blue is the colour of the mystic flower of Novalis, the colour most loved by the late nineteenth-century Symbolist painters. Transparent like water or sky, it is the most immaterial of colours as well as the most profound because the eye loses itself in space, unobstacled, and plunges to the depths. It rises towards white and descends towards black. In blue, forms lose their visual consistency, the real transforms into the imaginary. It is the colour of the spirit, the colour of dreams. It is the colour of the utopia of the Blue Rider where we find Kandinsky and Marc.

In his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky<sup>2</sup> “devotes some fascinating pages to colour: it is not only a surface quality, but something glowing inside, revealing the essence of the world, something to feel with the mind and with the body, something to imagine, to touch and smell”.<sup>3</sup>

Kandinsky brings us back to the “thingness” of colour, to what Sartre defines as the “wild” character or state of things. For the artist “the colour, the scent, the tinkling of a spoon on a saucer are *things* in the highest degree; the artist stops on the quality of the sound or the form, and returns to it continually; he is fascinated by it, he will transfer this colour-object to the canvas, and there submit it to modification: he will transform it into an *imaginary object*”.<sup>4</sup>

So, the colours come to life and become creatures with an interior autonomous life of their own, each for itself, able-bodied, mixing themselves to create an “infinite series of new worlds”. And Kandinsky gets us to see the energy of yellow that has no depth, the bursting force of red, the nostalgia and profundity of blue, the stilled opulent quietude of green that hides life, the irredeemable immobility of grey, the ailing sadness of purple. And the weighty silence of white speaks to us of the “nothing before the origin”, how the Earth must have been in the “white time of the ice age”.

<sup>2</sup> W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York 1977.

<sup>3</sup> E. Di Stefano, *Kandinsky*, in “Art Dossier”, 1993, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> J.-P. Sartre, *Che cos'è la letteratura*, Milan 1966, p. 13 (*What is Literature?*, London 1967).



And the tragic silence of the black speaks of the “death of nothingness after the sun has burnt out”, a silence without future, without hope.

With colours Kandinsky puts us through a sort of visionary revolution charged with all the emotions, from the dream to the joke, from the sigh to melancholy. Colours acquire sound, scent, density and lightness; they are seen in all their “materiality” and in all their “spirituality”, in the evocative power of emotions and sensations: living creatures that speak to the soul and the mind.

The place of art is where the synaesthesia is explored. There is in fact a close connection between perception and invention and imagination, that has led to the exploration of the possibilities and diversities of sensory experience, to the search for the perceptive innocence of childhood, and to the values of the materials used. In the avant-gardes this has given life to real manifestos of tactilism, smells, tastes, and to the relative events and researches.

In the *Manifesto of Tactilisms* of 1921, for instance, Marinetti provided tactile tables, with experiences using sandpaper, netting, wool, spongy material, chamois leather, wire brushes, and other things. Assigning a scale of tactile values to the various objects, he drew up tables to allow one's hands to follow a track of different sensations. Marinetti intended the first table, *Sudan-Paris*, to evoke the sensations of a trip from Africa to Paris. In the *Sudan* part we feel sandpaper, wool, the wire brush; thus tactile values that are abrasive, greasy, harsh, pungent, burning; in the *Sea* part we feel silver paper, which gives fresh, metallic, slippery values; in the *Paris* part, silk, velvet, feathers, eiderdown; hence soft, caressing tactile values, warm and cool at the same time.

Apart from inventing “pocket tactile tables” for travelling, Marinetti also conceived a tactile theatre with moving tapes that could convey epidermic sensations across the hands at different rhythms. Somewhere between art and design, Munari conceived objects that were beautiful to touch, and tables with the elements arranged as a keyboard to suggest the possibility of tactile music.

Sculpture presents its materiality more than the other arts, hence the tactile element and the use of hands present in all the arts. In respect to the nature of materials Brancusi established one of the characteristics of modern sculpture. The Abstract-Expressionist sculpture of the twentieth century that used solid, geometric forms such as the sphere, the cube, and the cylinder, privileging the material, surfaces, weight and size, emphasized tactile values.

#### *From Constructivism to Bauhaus*

We may even say the avant-gardes possess an anticipatory sensitivity which is a decisive element in the elaboration of new languages and new aesthetics as far as materials are concerned.

In Russian Constructivism there was already a systematic in-



vestigation of materials that carried the assumption of a functional vision of art in reference to materials. The renunciation of decorativeness and the emphasis on materials in their crude essentiality confirmed the view of the artist as “technician”. The horizon was that of the October Revolution.

Tatlin, Popova and Rodchenko worked in factories and designed tools and functional objects. Tatlin’s polymaterism, with his abstract constructions in glass, iron, rope and other materials, was intended to explore the relations between construction, space and volume. And Naum Pevsner, who took the name of Gabo to distinguish himself from his brother Anton, was the first to turn his attention to plastic materials in the renewed interest in the relations between art and science, and in quite a different vision of space and time. Gabo used plastic materials to introduce light and space in contrast to seeing material as mass. He used celluloid, a recently invented material at the time (1917); it was artificial, man-made, transparent, deformable and allowed the exploration of empty space and the reflection of light to render virtual space as three-dimensional. Using plastic materials gave the Pevsner brothers the chance to achieve a new vision of sculpture, no longer based on volume, but on the manifold play of light.

In the *Manifesto of Realism* of 1920 space and time are indicated as the only forms that life is built on. Colour is therefore renounced as a pictorial element: the only pictorial reality is the “material body absorbing light”. The line was renounced as a descriptive value, and volume as a spatial, pictorial and plastic form.

Among the materials, not only the solid materials were taken into consideration, the “things”, in which they investigated all the aspects of nature, production and sensory impressions, but also the ones the *Manifesto* indicated as “rational materials”: “light, surface, colour, volume”. For the Bauhaus, too, the systematic study of materials, their qualities and possibilities for use in art work was proposed as the basis of all projects for industrial and architectural objects.<sup>5</sup> The intention to bring art and industry together implied a new relation with materials, also discernable in the obligation for useful manual work in order to learn the technical and formal aspects of the different materials.

In the first phase of the Bauhaus – usually termed “Expressionist” phase, the one most concerned with the aesthetic aspect and research – Johannes Itten was decisive in the study of materials; he concentrated on the quality of the material and on its sensory exaltation, thus on the sensory, perceptive, imaginative vibration, on the emotional impact, on the emotional context created in the observation, in listening, in sensory exploration. Hence the term “material” took on many different kinds of values, and expanded to include what is physical, what is corporeal, what is psychic.

<sup>5</sup> The activity of the Bauhaus which lasted from 1919 to 1933 – when the school was closed by the Nazi regime – first in Weimar (1919–1924), then in Dessau (1924–1930) and finally in Berlin-Steglitz (1930–1933), marks the break-away from nineteenth-century principles and, for the first time, considers the industrial object in terms of aesthetic values.



Unlike Itten, Josef Albers had a technical approach, focusing the structural element of the material: on lines, curves, objective and spatial integrations, on constructionism that placed structure upon structure.

Everything can become utilizable and manipulatable material, only it does not occur in the same ways. Each has its own structure and its own characteristics and implies differentiated techniques, sets limits to utilization and responds in different ways to handling. One needs to have a good knowledge of the material in its intimate structure, in relation to the hand, the body, as well as with other materials. At first, as Albers said in his lessons at the Bauhaus, the material is alone: you meet it, you think about it with knowledgeable liking, you play with it, handle it, introject it, make it a living experience, an intention, a metaphoric prolongation of its possible existence.

Albers urged preliminary plans, for which he needed only scissors, glue and paper. Everything starts with the simplest materials; what counts is the rigorousness and rational method according to principles of the economy of materials and work. This means being capable of using minimum material and maximum efficacy. These are the bases of functionalism, which aims to attain the most with the least, in a form perfectly adaptable to both the material used and the requirements of the function of the manufactured object. The aesthetic result comes from working intelligently.

Not only raw materials can be processed, but already processed and abandoned materials like razor blades, match-boxes, a collection of throw-away objects. So there are two levels of technical approach: a) raw material for invention and conjecture; b) working with already processed materials, and effecting a transliteration and plastic metamorphosis.

In the artistic field, an extraordinary example is Picasso's head of a bull which he made out of a bicycle seat and handlebar. And now *trash* brings "rubbish" into the sphere of artistic invention, the left-overs from the post-industrial societies, as Pop Art did, in a different way. And anyway, on a daily life basis, the peoples of the Third World have practiced and continue to practice, with extraordinary invention, exactly this sort of transformation.

In 1923 Moholy-Nagy inherited the course from Itten, and while preserving his intuitive and sensory approach, developed the aspect of experimentation with new materials and the use of new technologies. Among these were synthetic polymers in which he examined their aesthetic-perceptive aspects.

Moholy-Nagy carried out tactile exercises on the materials, also constructing "scientific" tables on the lines of Marinetti's. Touch restored to the object its three-dimensional mass and volume. And since he taught the elementary theory of building three-dimensional objects, he studied exercises of spatial equilibrium with glass, Plex-



iglas, wood and metal. Moholy-Nagy also gave attention to matrix constructivist material that had been experimented by Gabo and Pevsner and identified in the light the intrinsic medium of the new materials, since they were transparent.

With the use of these new materials, he undertook research in optics and kinetics, fascinated by the transparency of celluloid, milk-stone, methyl methacrylate and the play of light that amplified the effects.<sup>6</sup>

Works produced in textile workshops were yet another example of the high aesthetic quality and perfection in craftsmanship devoted to materials. As happened with other workshops of the Weimar period, it meant a return to artisan techniques and typologies, with the accent on the weaving of tapestries, carpets and shawls; these unique pieces were described by Gunta Stroelzl as having a "barbaric beauty" for the Expressionist intensity of the language. In others, there was reference to Klee, who held an integrative course on the theory of form, or Kandinsky or Abstractism.

This work at the loom very soon led to research on primary forms. Form was not added to the textiles, it was directly introduced with the colour and with interwoven materials. Naturally it meant a rigorous knowledge of materials and textile structures, a sensitive attention to their potential, receptivity to light, the structures of interlacing and colour. "Cloth is alive", said Otti Berger. So the tactile properties of the textiles were fundamental: they needed to be touched in order to be understood. Here the tactile value is of first importance: it is the departure point for an expert exploration of the materials conducted through sensory and emotive introspection, according to the teaching of Klee. The textile was restored to its own corpus and cultivated like an "organism". This is the only way we have of exploring its secrets, said Benite Otte, and we can feel the "sound of the colour" in the material and can get a sense of warmth from pure silk, coldness from artificial silk, and roughness from sackcloth and wool.

The visual and optical research of the Constructivists, and later those of the Bauhaus, were fundamental for the whole twentieth century in art and design.

## II

It was in the second half of the twentieth century that "material painting" was established, and that "new values linked to the use of a determined material became more important than the expressive form itself, or identifying itself with it".<sup>7</sup> Dorfles understood them, on the one hand, through the experiments with materials made by artists like Tápies and Burri, and on the other, with the spatial researches of artists like Fontana and Rothko.

Also the art movements that followed the Second World War cut the last thread connecting the historic avant-gardes of the ear-

<sup>6</sup> L. Moholy-Nagy was also deeply interested in photography and cinema.

<sup>7</sup> G. Dorfles, *Le ultime tendenze dell'arte oggi* (1961), Milan 1987, p. 19.



ly twentieth century to the great art that had developed since the Renaissance; in fact they not only abandoned the naturalistic canons, but changed the use of the canvas, brushstrokes, paints, the “bella materia” (beautiful material),<sup>8</sup> as had already occurred in some Surrealist and Dada works, and in the second Futurism (e.g. Prampolini’s poly-material experiments).

What distinguished the new experiments in art was the discovery of new means of expression, traced in movement or in the use of unusual materials, iron sheeting, glass shards, steel thread, sacks, rags, cloth, sand, enamels, varnishes, which opened up to “an ephemeral and autonomously proliferating materiality”, and altogether a new concept of “internal spatiality”.

In Europe, Burri, Fontana, Dubuffet and Tápies carried out research on materials, detaching themselves from the traditional ones and enriching the nature of traditional impastos. In Burri, material has played a preponderant role: there is a real equivalence between poetics and the use of materials and new techniques, like polymeric materials, cracking, burnt wood, iron, plastics, in a relation of dialogue and reciprocal influence between matter and idea. Burning creates wrinkling, swellings and colour changes to give surprising optical results, as well as effects of space and luminosity. Burri used material as a thing in itself, with its own grain, its chemical composition.

Art Informel and the materic were the first currents to emphasize the weight of the material factor within a totally abstract art work. The use of elements in the work that bring with them semantics implicit in the material used (wall plaster, earth, crystalline formation or concretion, fragments of stumps, chalk, tar) constitutes a semantic revaluation of the materials that make up the world.

This is what is important, and so we can use enamels, varnishes, or tar, or else resume painting in oils, making it something quite different from tradition: the artist always chooses the right materials according to his needs for expression, but they are never neutral; always semantically relevant and something of a gamble.

So if we look at Rothko’s work where we find no figures, forms or even impastos and material concretions, what emerges is a new spatiality, “a new concept of pictorial space or rather visual space, one very different from the naturalistic and perspective”,<sup>9</sup> and hence from Cubist or geometric Abstractism. A space that is not earthly, but of silence and depth, which to Dorfles appeared to emanate directly from colour.

In Fontana space enters the painting: first from the material concretions, then from the holes and slashes, from the shadow in the reliefs, the hollows. Fontana’s researches are the reference point for Azimuth and the Zero group and all the spatial researches that interested painting and sculpture in the sixties. But plastics can

<sup>8</sup> G. Dorfles observed that “the same ‘sculptures in the round’ of Boccioni, Archipenko, Laurens and Brancusi were indeed very different from Leda-with-Swans and Madonnas-and-Children, but on the whole they were still finished, well-balanced physical entities which took full advantage of the material employed, and its smoothness and shine”, *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.



also be used, or unusual materials like cotton, sponges, scraps of canvas, like Piero Manzoni used in his white paintings (*achromes*) that create an “objectual painting”. Or else one can work like Enrico Castellani on the incidence of light of the multiple extroflexions to which he submits his monochrome canvas.

In the sixties the Gruppo T (Giovanni Anceschi, Davide Boriani, Gianni Colombo, Gabriele De Vecchi, Grazia Varisco) of Milan, Azimuth (Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani, Agostino Bonalumi, Vincenzo Agnetti, Dadamaino), the Gruppo N of Padua (Biasi, Costa, Massironi, Landi), the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) of Paris worked on the space-time relation, on new systems of communication, conducting visual and optical research and experimenting with new materials. The sixties were dense, feverish years in art, literature and science. One went to workshops and factories to work on new industrial materials, testing their possibilities and inventing new ones. They worked in a spirit of expectation preparing the new, making the new.

For example, in the Gruppo T's declaration of programme for its first collective exhibition, *Miriorama I*, they declared: “Each aspect of reality, colour, form, light, geometric spaces, astronomic time, is a different aspect facet of SPACE-TIME effects, or rather, are different ways of perceiving the relations between space and time. Therefore we consider reality as the continual becoming of phenomena that we perceive in the variation.”

The intention of Programmed and Kinetic Art was to make art into a science in relation to the phenomenological manifestations of space-time. The exhibition presented works of research on the variation, on the effective kinesis – for the movement of the work – or virtual kinesis – the effect of the viewer's perception. Working on the variation meant introducing time, instability, causality. The art of variation involved materials and means provided by today's society. Also the choice of technological materials is strictly connected with an expressive need. Most Kinetic Art works were created from plastic materials like polystyrene, polyvinyl film and various resins. For example the *Great Pneumatic Object* is a tube of small inflatable bags which continues to swell until it fills up the exhibition space and pushes all the people out before deflating.

For those years Dorfles spoke of a “fetishization of component material”, both in painting and sculpture, that is no longer interested in the “beautiful material”, the shine of bronze, the polished smoothness of marble, the grain of wood. What interests now “is often the raw material, the rough stone (Pietro Cascella), the accumulation of dripping wax that is then thrown into lead (Somaini), the rustiness of iron (César, Fabbri), or else the presence of unusual materials like scrap and waste metal (Franchina, Chamberlain, Colla, Calzolari)”.<sup>10</sup>



and tin for the hollows and “informal” features that compose his “writing” in sculpture: and moreover a “gestural and lettering art” that re-connects with Surrealist automatism and Japanese calligraphy.

Gestural painting was the major technical innovation on the postwar art scene with its use of acrylics. In fact the first appearance of acrylic paints on the market was quite a novelty among the synthetic materials, and the first to use them were the American artists, who quickly abandoned traditional oil paints. From the fifties until today acrylics have become the most widespread and cheapest medium for painting, but above all they have opened up new possibilities of expression.

Their material possibilities, their speed in drying made them a fundamental instrument for Abstract Expressionism, which conveys its own uneasiness in the gesture of painting (Sam Francis, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko). Jackson Pollock, whose gestural technique became his act of painting (Action Painting),<sup>11</sup> used synthetic enamels and metallic pigments. He began with dripping, allowing the paint to drip from a pot held over the canvas. In Action Painting the relation with the material changes, it can no longer be part of a system of representation, but becomes memory, a fragment, autonomous reality.

New materials are also used in painting: silicones and varnishes. Silicones have become the material for outdoor wall painting: traditional fresco painting is applied to a wall surface coated with lime but does not fit the new cement clad buildings of the modern city, which imply new solutions like the ethyl silicate Siqueiros used in Mexico.

Siqueiros insisted on the importance in art of the materials and instruments, to which he attributed a genetic function, a determining value, both formal and aesthetic, which is just as decisive as techniques. In his view modern art demands a “new technology” that adds to the cement, steel and crystal, the plastic materials, “the ones created by modern organic chemistry”, to be used in mural painting, monumental polychrome sculpture, as well as in polychrome decoration for buildings. Siqueiros mentions celluloid, synthetic rubber, bakelite, vinyl, the various silicones, the various pyroxylines, fluorescent painting materials.

Spray varnishes are the “paint” used in Graffiti Art. Spray-can Art is the name given to Graffiti Art executed thanks to the polymeric medium, and represents a new phenomenon of artistic expression outside the system, and with a language all of its own. It is a form of expression deriving from the culture of the black suburbs of New York, an art *par excellence* for the big city and the subway; it is “the visual concretization of rap music, and the transmutation of hip-hop philosophy into paint”.<sup>12</sup> It is connected with speed of execution and fruition. Its favourite supports are the car-

<sup>11</sup> The name “Action Painting”, proposed by the American poet and critic H. Rosenberg in 1952, “emphasizes the importance of the physical action of painting for many painters who are usually given that ambiguous label ‘abstract expressionists’”, *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> M. Pugliese Degli Esposti, *L'estetica del sintetico*, Genoa 1997, p. 71.



riages of the subway trains. Images and writings are primed by the vision of a work in movement.

In Europe Graffiti Art is expressed in other forms and languages, favouring the wall for support. Spraycans of synthetic nitro-varnishes are used for the outsides of cars.

To conclude these brief references to the use of new materials in art research, we should not overlook the very curious case of Cracking Art that appeared in 1993. The Cracking Art group takes its name from the technological process of catalytic cracking, transforming the organic substance into synthetic. The group want to transform the plastic synthesis into a "poetic tale of the bi-directional transition from the organic to the synthetic and back". In their *Manifesto* they announce they want to communicate "another" vision of the world and history through the use of petroleum/plastic.

This movement of "plastic eaters" wants to confront the triumphant nihilism in art and culture with "the explosive power of an ancient organic substance like the primordial forms of life in symbiotic relation with contemporary man". The novelty of this movement comes from the sharp and exclusive identification with a class of materials that reverse the image. Plastic is not seen as an artificial material as opposed to a natural one, but as organic material running through the subterranean veins of Mother-Earth.

Petroleum/plastic is assumed to be a substance as ancient as the Earth itself, and so becomes the memory of its living forms. Petrol is also the "memory of the present, in that infinite micro-organisms are imprisoned in the organic substance". It is the "depository of the very essence of history" in that it lives together with everything manifested in living forms. It is vital energy, heat and movement. Cracking Art activates a shift in looking. Centrally based on ecological themes, it uses throw-away products and also a natural plastic, produced from a completely degradable maize starch, which the artists themselves claim to have eaten to prove it is harmless.

### *The body-object, the body-material*

Sometimes it is the body itself that becomes the material: it becomes an original organization and communication of its own. In dance, mime, theatre, especially the theatre which from Artaud and Grotowski is called the "theatre of the body", in "behaviourist" art, in Body Art, in the performance of auto-exhibition: here the body is material in itself and its own artistic techniques.

But the body is also at the heart of re-planning. The body that is the subject and "flesh", that is perforated, incised or written on is substituted by a mechanical, prosthetic body that changes the very biological "raw material" of man.<sup>13</sup> The new dimension of body-ness is configured through technological innovations (ge-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. Baronia, *Il corpo virtuale*, Padua 1996.



netic engineering, bio-technology, robots) in a kind of symbiosis and joint penetration between body and machine. The prosthetic body functions on a technical basis and becomes an object for re-planning: a body-object-machine, more and more determined by the motory prosthesis, sensory-perceptive and intellective. Or, as Stelarc says, it is a “hollow body” open to new artificial organs.<sup>14</sup> Open to be practiced upon, a smooth surface ready for incision.

In the world of the multiplicity of visual and audio-visual prostheses, the body becomes discourse, a mark, a thing. Digital handling of the images (morphing) brings us to fluid, malleable bodies that can transform into any object, and can assume any likeness or de-form into any shape at all.

*The immaterial of the material and the materiality of the immaterial*

The wholesale integration between materials and the process of production has led to the technical invention of ever new “composites” that may concern both traditional materials and plastics, or their hybridisation. They have changed the world of things, changing the “how” and the “what” the products are made of. It has changed the aspect of the world, transforming the world of things from the inside. This accounts for the expression “the silent revolution” of the new materials. Not only plastics but traditional materials too have taken on another aspect and are also considered new materials, because they are used for doing things, and in forms and ways completely unknown before. So now we have the super-alloys, resistant to high temperatures, highly resistant steel, light titanium alloys, hybridizations of metals and plastics, and so forth.

These artificial and technological materials, produced by their capacity for penetrating into the structure of matter and modifying it, have led to the discovery of new territories of materiality, where the properties we used to attribute to material no longer apply, or else are shattered, to the point of paradox where they seem to contradict the laws of physics.

The possibilities these new materials offer as they give rise to a world of forms and surfaces which are autonomous compared to the material supports, present us with the image of an ultra-plastic material. The new materiality is light, takes up little space, and yet it effects a complete reorganization of the artificial environment. The world of today is heading towards “immateriality”; the materials themselves are becoming more and more thin and transparent.

Materials that are infinitely manipulatable and compoundable lose their cultural identity. They become a neutral support. Since they are capable of assuming all images, they no longer have an image of their own to exhibit or show off, or rather their image is their capacity to “transform themselves”, to assume infinite images

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



that can be projected on the surfaces. The model is the video-screen or printed paper upon which the images are projected (colours, decoration, textures). There is now a domination of two-dimensionality in the surfaces and the messages they carry.

But for the first time the really new property of materials lies in the fact that they are “materials that are made to measure and conform in a whole variety of ways, capable of carrying any image at all while being deprived of an image of their own: “*zelig* materials [...] whose sincere image was the capacity to assume any image the designer had decided to give it”.<sup>15</sup> A “material of invention”, as Manzini defined it.

But materials are never a neutral support and their properties have always been a qualifying aspect of the planning itself. And now, more than ever before, they can go back to saying something. It is precisely to this fact that research in design and contemporary art is addressed. Work has been done on the properties of the new materials in order to make them speak: whether by using these materials with their surprising properties to the point where they constitute the characterizing aspect of a project, then searching for a legitimacy of form in the material, or else by experimenting the peculiar characteristics of the new material in being “made to measure”, not only in its technical properties but also the aesthetic and appeal to the senses. Hence it becomes possible to “invent” the form of materials at the very moment their interior structures are created. The new design of materials selects from the possible forms the ones that can identify the new material in the most original way.

This might explain the spread of an aesthetic element in the eudermic surfaces in our everyday objects; surfaces that are warm, moderately rough, preferably non-reflecting.<sup>16</sup> An aesthetic is also a “lifestyle”, a new sensibility. This aesthetic is progressively substituting the aesthetic of metallic surfaces to the point where it is no longer necessary to textualize technology through material and resplendent artifices, and select a form because it gives the impression of strength, a clean four-square aspect, precision, durability, and no rough edges. Today the preference is for materials that are pleasant to the touch, warm and with a roundness, the sensation of contact with a new body. Materials that stimulate “an affective investment”. They “become ‘seduction operators’: materials expressing aesthetic qualities intended for reconsideration in the study of the affectivity of objects pleasing to the senses”.<sup>17</sup>

Today the design of surfaces and interfaces is asked to restore the body or its simulacrum, make it visible, and recreate the simulacrum of sensibility, cutaneous contact, to the limits of the natural.

<sup>15</sup> E. Manzini, *La materia dell'invenzione*, Milan 1986, p. 327.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Il senso delle cose*, edited by A. Semprini, Palermo, 1999. Cf. also E. Fiorani, *Leggere i materiali*, Milan 2000, and A. Greimas, *Dell'imperfezione*, Palermo 1988.

<sup>17</sup> M. Deni, A. C. Jurado, “Studiare gli oggetti”, in *Lexia*, September-December 1996, pp. 11-12. Cf. on the same subject J. Fontaille, “Ergonomia e bio-design”, in *Estetica e vita quotidiana*, edited by M. P. Pozzato, Milan 1995.























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