

STRUCTURAL (ISM) and PHOTOGRAPHY

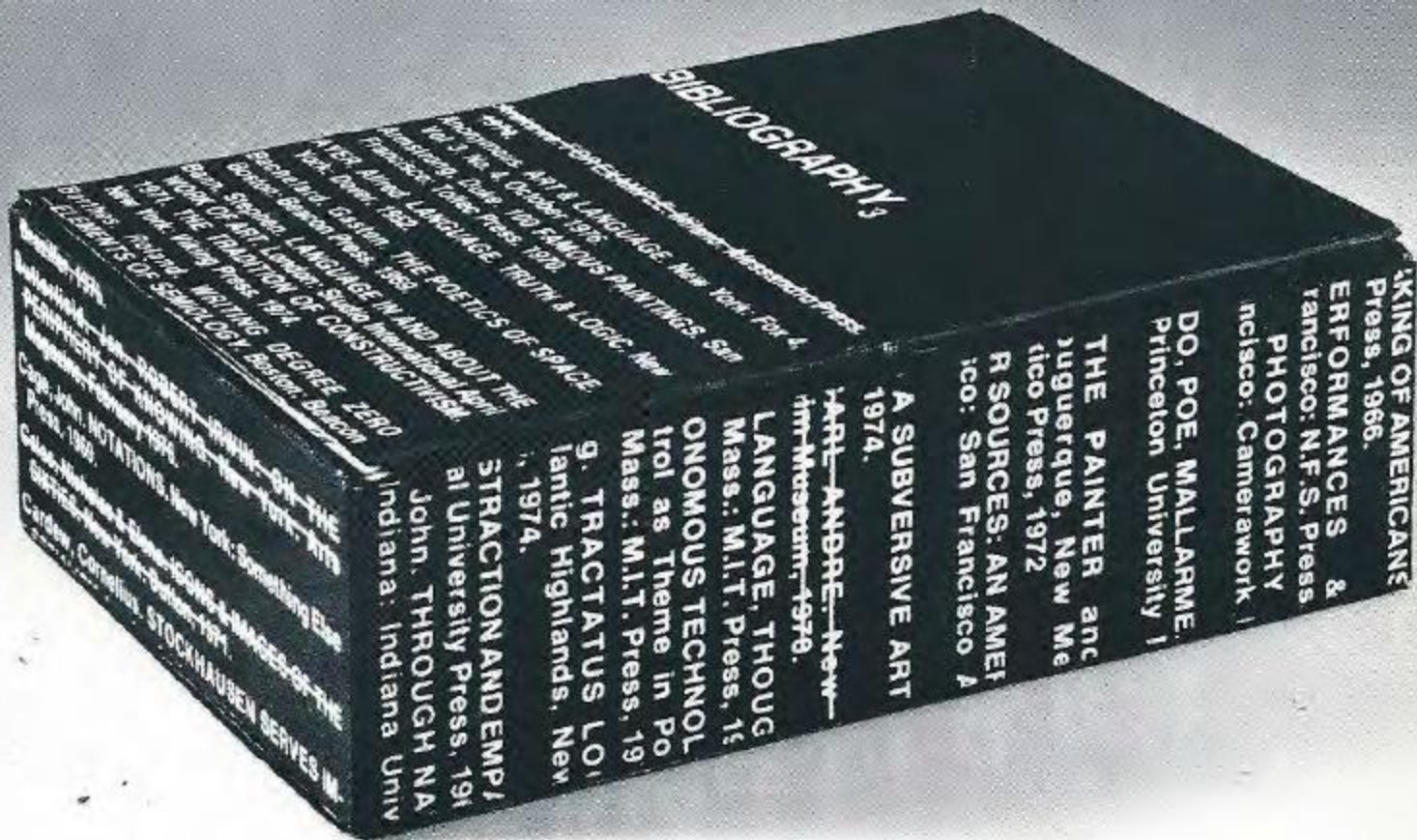
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Lew Thomas



BIBLIOGRAPHY-BOX (Artist's Book), 1977



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BENEATH THE PLOT IT THICKENS

After the movies on those summery Saturday nights that seem now to belong to a Southern California lost to everything but the imagination, Buddy Kramer, Bobby Beaver, and I used to go home by way of the alley that ran behind Solly Azekian's liquor store. Down the alley and then up over his storage fence and down inside and then back over again, but now with enough empty pop bottles for the price of the Sunday matinee. For we were improvising. You see, there was a war on, and the great depression just ended and our fathers only now steadily at work in those war plant places and everything rationed and very dear so that nobody was at all easy about giving anybody money to go to the movies two times in a row on the same weekend. But, even so, that extraordinary luxury was hardly the real treat. It was, rather, to be an initiate, to be in on the secret, to be able to sit there, rich in our superior insight, like veterans, and at the critically penultimate moment to lean forward over the shoulders of Lola Finch and Rosemary Borg and be able to whisper, in the voice of a confident elder, "Now, watch this—watch what happens next."

Such is the joy of entering into the structure of the myth.

Oh, to be sure, we were an audience still, and, still, like the rest of the audience, we stomped and screamed and hooted when the thundering entry of the U.S. Cavalry affirmed again the architectonic rightness of our moral universe, but now, the second time through, we were in collusion with the patterns beneath the plot. Like our Eleusinian ancestors, we had begun to assimilate the ritual itself, to know with certainty the rebirth of Dionysius, the purification of Oedipus, for, beneath the froth and penny-dreadful titillation with which we followed the mythic progress of our heroic idols, there was a deeper fermentation. We were being educated. We were ingesting the signals, the signs, and the symbols which inform the syntax of our cognitive behavior: the patterns beneath the plot. The structure of reality.

The plots of **Tom Jones**, of **Little Nemo in Slumberland**, of **The African Queen**, all represent a sequence of events. And the sequence is believable—that is, we willingly suspend our disbelief and accept it—because we are able to find a logic in the order of these events. They make sense. So does the plot of **Ulysses**; so, too, the plots of such seemingly "eventless" novels as Samuel Beckett's **Malloy** or Robbe-Grillet's **La Maison de Rendezvous**. For the sequential arrangement of perceptions, of thoughts, ruminations, and confusions is as much a history of behavior as any high tale of adventure and romance.

So in this sense anyway, plot is a kind of progress: This happened and then this and then this. And now the dragon, the cowboy, the beautiful maiden, was dead, and Robert Jordan walked away, alone by himself in the rain; it is a progress that is mythic because we believe, for a little while at least, that such is the way life is. But more than merely a literary analogy, this progress is of mythic stature because it is systemically structural, because it represents an ordering of the structure of perceived reality. In the oldest sense of the word it is a kind of cosmology, but it is also fundamentally rhetorical, for it is the dialectical agent by which the artist enunciates his vision of the world. The pattern beneath the plot is a mythic system, itself a microcosm allowing us to say that such and such is the way things are, and, even though they might be elaborated into such diverse and richly literary shapes as **Yojimbo** or **Cool Hand Luke**, such underlying mythic systems are virtually autonomous, for they operate almost as paranguages, generated, as it were, by the ordering logic of their own particular dynamic: the internal logic of the artist's world view, the structural relationships supporting his perceptual frame of reference.

Of course, to a large degree, one's frame of reference is a cultural matter. One thinks; one perceives; one, in fact, **experiences** cognition from within the shifting boundaries of the linguistically possible. As Edward Sapir pointed out more than fifty years ago, we are limited in our ability to form ideas by the nature of the flexibility of our language. The repository of our collective experience, **words and the combination of words**, our vocabulary is the data bank of our culture, and it is the structure of our language that governs the structure of our ideas. Reality, as we understand it, is in fact a projection of the structure of our perceptions,

**STRUCTURAL(ISM)
and PHOTOGRAPHY**
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INTRODUCTION
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DESIGN & PRODUCTION
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and, for Buddy Kramer and Bobby Beaver and me, and for the rest of the audience as well, the structure of **Stagecoach** or **Blood on the Sun** or, for that matter, **Dracula Meets Frankenstein** was analogous to the structure of reality. For unlike plot, which is anecdotal and involved with issues of taste and decorum, the structure of art speaks to the culture's collective sense of the believable. Because it is structure that orders and thereby organizes relationships. Arising from the bedrock of often unstated assumptions about causality, the structure of art mirrors the structure of the cultural matrix from which it originates.

What scholars once thought of as archetypal patterns of imagery may instead simply be the elements of a quasilinguistic bridge completing the analogy that anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss find between the structure of the mind and the structure of culture. The idea of the archetype, as embodied, for instance, in the myth of the Great Mother or the more-or-less emblematic attributes of the Hero, may now be understood to be something of a historically generated frame, a formative reservoir for those culturally loaded items whose organized interrelationships emerge not merely as a **story**, as an "archetypal" myth, but rather as a metaphorical system whose function is to simultaneously filter and translate the raw material of perception into the logical order of a world view. As I mentioned earlier, it is as if the **logic** of the organization of such works as **The Odyssey** or **The Adventures of Augie March** is, of itself, a kind of cosmology and the development of plot merely an expository system: necessary, but essentially functional, for, while plot provides the dialectical basis for the generation of images that will, in turn, become the "readable" components of a given story, its hypothetical validity as a proposition derives almost entirely from the paradigmatic nature of its structure: is it, or is it not, a "believable" model?

Thus, insofar as we understand it as a model, every visual image or system of images is equally biased, for, whether organized by Kasimir Malevitch or Jerry Uelsmann, every visual work is finally a closed system whose principle of construction is based on the tacit proposition that the structural relationships of the system are internally valid. In part this is what is meant when one says that a painting "works" or that a photograph "hangs together". Like the well-made play of which Aristotle wrote, the integration of the parts of a well-made photograph bespeaks an organization that is both "logically necessary" and believable. But believability is, in itself, tendentious. Remember the "existential" logic of Abstract Expressionism and those marvelous apologetics which never failed to find the work of pick-the-painter-of-your-choice to be either a calligraphy of the soul or a cartography of the mind? Never mind the question of verification, the rhetoric is wonderful. But here, as elsewhere, its function is to disguise distinctions, for the "model" at hand is always a work of art, an artificial construct, selective and, of course, interpretative: it is, operationally speaking, a metaphor, for it enjoys no correspondence with any dimension of reality existing independently of our perceptions. Art is neither autonomous nor objective, and the idea that it can be as a mirror held up to nature is a curiously specious kind of scientism, at once pretentious and naive. For, whether we speak of the surgically clear work of Walker Evans or the scrupulously detailed work of Honore de Balzac, the ostensible agreement between the willing suspension of disbelief and the doctrine of believability is an agreement that has nothing whatsoever to do with truth, but merely with acceptability. When one talks about structure as a metaphor for reality, what one means—although one may not intend to mean it—is that structure is coextensive with one's world view. It is an ideological construct.

The well-made play with its logical and necessary development of beginning, middle, and end, the photograph that hangs so well together, and the autonomous painting, are all programmatically ideological. Each is an attempt to affix the world. Shakespeare's sonnets and the blues of Mississippi John Hurt are, in this respect at least, children of the same impulse.

It should be understood, however, that structure is always an abstraction: the structure of something else. A plot map of relationships, its importance derives from its function as a focusing agent, channeling the semantic potential of polyvalent items—words, sounds, images—within the patterned organization of a specific form: a fugue, a poem, or a photograph. No matter how similar they may be, no two structures are ever identical, for each is a matrix of elements whose identities are generated by the specific dynamic of their context. The twisted sycamore appearing before the yellow stucco house in the photograph taken at the N.E. corner of 90th and 2nd Avenue in Inglewood, California, is an item in an

for Natalie

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image system. Not merely a representation of a specific tree, but an image given a relationship: an item organized with other items, all organized into a composition whose structural emphasis identifies them as syntactic elements bearing specific relational meaning.

Of course one may point to the structural similarities shared, for instance, by the landscapes of Ansel Adams and Jacob Ruisdael, but it is crucial that their significance is to be found in their differences and that those differences emerge, not merely as clusters of idiosyncratically distinguishing detail, but as the dialectical stuff of what we come to refer to as the artist's point-of-view. And point-of-view is accessible only by decoding the system.

A system—that is, a painting, poem or photograph—may be said to be closed when its composition seems designed to present its constituent elements within a syntactically finite relational framework. Images, or words, or objects may enjoy a very wide and ambiguous range of connotative associations, but within the context of a specific structure they are denotatively fixed. Relationships are systemic and specific, and the possibilities for connotative association are, in every case, prescribed by the nature of these relationships. The picture is a text.

In Fra Filippo Lippi's **Madonna and Child with Saints**, for instance, every apparently discrete item in the composition operates both as a denotatively identifiable object and as a schematically iconographic device. Madonna, child, angels, saints, and donor all exist not only in compositional relationship to one another, but in hierarchical relationship as well; and, because nothing is in the picture for the purpose of mere description, everything is to be understood not only in terms of its narrative and/or symbolic identity, but in terms of its thematic value relative to the entire system.

This, of course is hardly news, but the point of the illustration is not that a given system of images may operate iconographically, metaphorically, or analogically, but that the system itself can also: for, once an internally consistent referent system has been established, it not only provides a filtering frame of reference through which symbols may be integrated, it also operates as a structural analogy for the world view to which they, as values, adhere. Hence Fra Filippo Lippi's organizational system is, in itself, an analogy, an exemplary paradigm, if you will, for that neo-Platonic cosmology whose crystalline hierarchies served so well to rationalize the socio-economic stratification of the 14th-century state. The structure of the picture asserts that its order is the fundamental order of nature: it is the way things are.

In this sense, the structure of a work of art is also always rhetorical, for, no matter how much we may wish to believe that its constituent elements enjoy some degree of intrinsic—or even assigned—significance, their functional interpretation will always depend on the agreement between their cultural potential and their structural role. No system is autonomous. All meaning, all significance, all interpretation, and all emphasis refers back to the culture, is contextually generated, and referential.

In a book such as Robert Frank's **The Americans**, such apparently descriptive and representationally fixed images as, for instance, a juke box, a counter top, or a window glass may all interact metaphorically in connotatively thematic clusters. Operating interdependently, their cumulative function is to establish the working rhetoric of the artist's world view. Organized in a manner that recalls the technique of the extended metaphor, Frank's practice is unequivocally literary. It is, in fact, almost a visual version of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence.

But, unlike those rigorously self-contained sonnets which make up the sequences of Sidney, Fraunce, and their circle, the individual photographs making up Frank's book need not exist as formally autonomous entities. In apparent disregard for those esthetic biases which argue that a photograph should stand alone, be self-contained, compositionally unified, or, visually "complete", Frank uses photographs syntactically as interlocking parts of a developing whole. The book is the piece: composed musically, poetically; built up in terms of cantos and stanzas, lines, motifs, images, and echoes; words and pictures of things. Indeed, the logic of the photograph as a closed compositional system—as a thing-in-itself—is not only irrelevant, it is misleading, for the implied order of its structure is in contradiction to the image of the world to which Frank's rhetoric of alienation and fragmentation addresses itself.

But like most of that work which so very defensively defines photography-as-an-art prior to the publication of **The Americans**, Lippi's paintings and Sidney's sonnets

are closed compositions whose harmonically ordered vision mirrors a world whose structure is morally logical, for the concern for the integration of balance, harmony, and order bespeaks a world view in which nature, the state, and of course man, are all in some sense essential elements of an integrated cosmology. Indeed, the rigidly stratified hierarchies of Fra Filippo Lippi's society are understood as fundamental categories within the order of nature: they are the natural products of a divine plan whose program, like the architectonic programs of Chartres or Notre Dame, provides a sanctified explication of the existing political order. Yet, while the world of Walker Evans, Eugene Smith and Ansel Adams is hardly so stratified, it is, nonetheless, equally well balanced. It is still the world of the well-made play and the self-contained image. It is still a world in which history is an orderly process of events, dateable and definable in terms of cause and effect, in which credence is given to something called objective reality in which things have discrete and autonomous identities, and in which a particle is not yet also a wave. And yet it was, too.

But the implications of that apparent contradiction did not always so insistently nag for recognition. In Faulkner's novel, **The Sound and the Fury**, it is the idiot child Vardaman who says, "My mother is a fish". **A is also not-A.** The balanced world becomes increasingly unstable, and the idea of order becomes, more and more, a self-conscious imposition: an expression of hope, sometimes of faith, or of sheer will, a manifestation of the desperate need to contain confusion. For between 1914 and 1957, between Paul Strand and Robert Frank, the century turns and turns again. The ideas of Marx, Freud, Einstein, and Bergson, the events of WWI, the Crash and the Great Depression, WWII, Auschwitz and the Final Solution, Korea, the Cold War and the McCarthy era all combine, like blindly mounting furies, to erode that Augustan optimism which strives—**Onward, America!**—for the possibility of an orderly vision.

Closer to the sensibility of Samuel Beckett than to anyone in contemporary photography, Frank operates in a world of processes rather than events. The well-made play, with its logically constructed beginning, middle, and end, represents an ordering of perceptions that is at best inappropriate and misleading and at worst a distortion and a lie. History is the sum of the perceivable. There are no beginnings and no conclusions, only relationships; no items, no things, no events, only phenomena seen in relation to other phenomena; and identity is never autonomous. The persona shifts and reorganizes in choreographic accommodation to the shifts and changes in the environment. Identity is a product of context.

The proposition is basically a linguistic one, deriving from the argument that meaning is **always** contextually relational and that, contrary to that item-centered view which has traditionally seen language as composed of affixed units of lexical stability, our actual understanding of the designata to which all verbal symbols refer must, always, **develop** from within a specific rhetorical context. We cannot know what the words in the dictionary mean until we understand the meaning of the situation in which they occur. Moreover, because the overwhelming majority of our utterances are metaphorical (**I gave him a hand; You know that I really felt great when I lost my job**), their successful decoding depends entirely on one's ability to understand the unstated and often unwritten conventions of usage.

But the existence of such conventions does not in turn imply the existence of a fixed underlying structure. We need only to recall the tradition of the photographic portrait with its presumption of representation to realize that structure is always a rhetorically conditioned matter. Something that has been built up. The lady at whom the camera is aimed may indeed believe herself to enjoy a continuous and inalienable identity, but the identity presented by the photograph will always be a matter of selective iconography. The objects before the camera can never be more than raw material to be organized, transformed, and, if you will, presented as the artist chooses. As tendentious evidence. We may quiver in every joint at the "truth" of Avedon's Rosemary Wood or Steiglitz' presentation of Georgia O'Keefe, but both are fictions before which we have suspended our disbelief, willingly when the organization of the image conforms to our system of expectations and eagerly when it matches our ideological needs. Tendentious evidence.

And of course it is precisely as evidence that Robert Frank assembles his photographs, for such images as **Drugstore—Detroit** or **View from hotel window—Butte, Montana**, are not presented as objects of esthetic contemplation, but rather as organized bodies of information: Here, here is how it is; here is a photograph of the way things are. Thus the accompanying captions do not enable

they identify: **That is a picnic ground in Glendale, California, and that, that is a Jehovah's Witness in Los Angeles.** Often, in fact, the photograph will present only people, as if it were intended to be a kind of candid portrait, while the caption will refer with indifferent neutrality to the place, **Hotel lobby—Miami Beach;** the evidence builds, one example after another; this is the way things are in Glendale, L.A., Butte, and Miami; and we understand **how things are** because neither we, nor the artist, nor the photograph are, indeed, neutral.

Yet it is because Frank is not a disinterested observer that his photographs operate so emphatically as evidence, but, like impassioned accusations, they are argumentative and tendentious. He has something to say, and it is urgently partisan. He is committed and, being committed, he is able to work—when he chooses—with complete disregard for established esthetic prescriptions.

More concerned about the efficiency with which a photograph communicates than with its formal beauties, Frank seems always to use composition as a purely functional device. The function of the frame is to select—and to exclude, and the function of the formal structure is to enunciate and emphasize, for the first purpose of the photograph is to be read. It is an information matrix.

It cannot be more. Nor can it, in fact, be anything else.

When our concept of the visual image is desanctified, when we are able to disencumber ourselves of the need for an esthetic of transcendence or of purity, when we understand a painting or a photograph as a data system rather than as an urn of elusive and ineffable truth, then we may confront the piece simply and ask, **What is the nature of the evidence?**

Seen from this point-of view, from a position insisting that all photographs are aggregates of evidence, every photograph ever made may be separated off into one of two categories: those whose **structural** presentation of evidence is ideologically formed and those whose presentation is not. Of course, the ideological substrata of a structure may operate in a number of ways. It may, for instance, be an actively informing motive force, expressing itself overtly and polemically as in the work of Robert Frank or Danny Lyon, or, on the other hand, it may be covert, inadvertent perhaps, presented indirectly as a world view or ambiguously, blunted, or cosmeticized by the diffusing vaseline of esthetic distractions. One thinks of Paul Strand, for instance, or Ansel Adams, or even Walker Evans, for in any case the ideology is there, coloring, organizing, and directing the selection and presentation of the information. In a deeper sense it is the information, the thing learned. The pattern beneath the plot.

The other category, the second of the two, is one that only recently has been associated with art and even then only rarely by "serious" photographers. I am referring, of course, to the internally neutral photograph whose presentation is exclusively of "objective" or "factual" evidence: the scientific photograph, the illustrative photograph of tech manuals, the photograph organized for maximum denotative clarity: **This is a hand holding a wrench tightening a nut on a bolt. This is a piece of steel fissured under 7 million hours of stress. This is a red corpuscle and this is a cow:** the photograph that does not lie even as much, to paraphrase Douglas Huebler, "as a map lies when it joins the words **Wilshire Boulevard** with a line printed on a piece of paper." It must be stressed that it is this kind of photograph that points directly to the center of the potential for art-making inherent in the photographic process. Baudelaire saw it darkly: the tension that exists between the representationally factual and the structurally artificial. It is precisely because it appears to be so persuasively accurate that a photograph may be so metaphorically rich. And it is in turn precisely for that reason that the objective, factual, or non-esthetic photograph has become so useful to so many artists whose work has matured, or emerged, in the years since the advent of the conceptualist movement.

For the assumption that the photograph may stand as evidence, that, indeed, what it represents is **evident**, provides the **locus classicus** for an enormous range of explorations into the nature of information, translation, mediation, and, of course, evidence itself. Questions, as Jack Burnham argues, "of information's predictability, improbability, complexity, message structure, dissemination, delay, and distortion." Hence, the photographic document has been a major vehicle for conceptualist art, at least since 1968, and such installations as Joseph Kosuth's **One and Three Chairs** or such blandly indifferent documents as Robert Barry's

photograph of a **Site Being Occupied By Helium**, have contributed profoundly to the process perhaps best exemplified by the work of Douglas Huebler, in which, to borrow his language again, the photograph juxtapositions "the literally true with the conceptually possible"—a process that has radiated out, now, in the work of such diverse artists as Ed Ruscha, William DeLappa, Robert Cumming, Jean LeGac, and, of course, the artist for whom this essay is to stand as an introduction, Lew Thomas. You will be meeting him directly.

John Brumfield,
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CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ARTIST'S BOOKS | 1, 69, 75, 82, 105, 109 |
| INTRODUCTION | 2, 4, 5, 6 |
| LETTERS | 9, 10, 26, 51, 77, 79 |
| PREFACE | 7, 8 |
| CONCEPT:Construction | 9-27 |
| COLLAGE:Perspectives | 28-33 |
| FRAME:Window | 34-39 |
| FRAME:Polaroid | 40-42 |
| FORMAT/FIELD:Regular | 43-49 |
| FORMAT/FIELD:Irregular | 50-52 |
| CAUSAL/REFLEXIVE | 53-55 |
| WORDS & IMAGES | 56-60 |
| PROJECTS:Installations | |
| Displacement | 61 |
| 25-61 x 20's | 62-69 |
| 8 x 10 | 70-75 |
| Bracketing | 76-78 |
| Vitruvian Context | 79-81 |
| Deposition | 82-89 |
| Outside/Inside | 90-92 |
| Summa Bibliographica | 110 |
| WRITING(S) | 93-94 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY(S) | 1, 106-111 |
| REPRODUCTION(S) OF REPRODUCTION(S) | 70, 92-94, 97, 106-112 |
| ANALOGICAL AESTHETICS | 112 |
| TIME EQUALS 36 EXPOSURES | Front & Back Cover |

PREFACE

If the world were clear, art would not exist.—Camus

The contemporary world is dominated by the presence of **the photograph**. Its power to displace perspectives of the external world is now equivalent to the spontaneous act of seeing. This is translated into formalist theory when the thing photographed is less important than the photograph itself. The status of the photograph has reached the position whereby the world is now compared to it. **STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY** explores aspects of a photographic model inasmuch as the meaning of the external world has already been appropriated by the disseminating power of photography.

The "recording of phenomena purely by means of the effects of phenomena" defines photography as something which communicates itself—**reproductions of reproductions**—a transparent mode of production that generates an endless chain of signs. Here, images of identity and diversion are registered in sets of complimentary frames. The inside of the frame forms a target of content drawing attention to images of names, ideas and issues that turn the patterns of discourse into an exclusive index for those who manage the system. The accrued myth is two-fold: the utterance of the image and the multiplying of the object enshroud the system with an "aura of legitimacy" equal to nature.

During the production of **PHOTOGRAPHY & LANGUAGE** in 1976, the mythologizing function of a format was made apparent to me while compiling the bibliography for the book. Inside the folded space of a book the bibliography passes uncriticized due to its ostensible purpose as a supplementary source of references. The page on which the bibliography is printed evokes neither shadow nor ambience because of the shallow depth of its construction. The strictness of order is justified by an alphabetical composition. One does not read the stacking of authors in columns of type as a disembodied library; the effect of the design produces a neatly closed structure. However, in it, the restrictive act of authorization, of naming, is automatically sent and received in states of mind resembling the mode of production.

In order to neutralize a system of impositions, and the technique of naming that establishes the monopoly of art and photographic interests, strategies were incorporated into independent publications to renegotiate the space of ideas without a formal or permanent address. Issues were examined, **reordered**, and then put on the move in a series of titles disenfranchising the image of context. The white simplicity of the gallery was cancelled-out by a network of theory that has proven to be manifestly more real than the aesthetic furniture found in the fixed space. **PHOTOGRAPHY & LANGUAGE, EROS & PHOTOGRAPHY** and **STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY** are some of the titles that were sent out. The books were conceived and designed by Donna-Lee Phillips and myself to fulfill a multiplicity of functions. The format of the publications serves to **illustrate** a theory of photography that is intrinsically supported by the typographical presence of the text; and the format has had to act simultaneously as periodical, catalog, anthology, reference, history and text or book. **STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY** closes for me the reliable and useful **9" x 12"** vertical shape of the book.

The contents of **STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY** are divided into classifications of objects (or photographic pieces), installations, collaborative projects, writings and **reproductions of reproductions**. The work in the book is fundamental and mostly relies on the conventions of photography, the plus or minus of arithmetic, and the letters of the alphabet to formulate structures for the presentation of the different pieces or projects.

It is fundamental enough that I can construct an analogy identifying my activities as a photographer with the changes I have observed in my daughter, **Kesa**, since her birth in 1971. The photographic pieces are comparable to toys from which I have discovered simple patterns that allow me access to the world of photography and images. When the techniques for grasping the objects were learned, I attempted to mobilize the discernible ideas in order to adapt them to space outside the security of the studio. The resulting installations or games entailed activities that I could not sustain independently even though I had reduced the objects to a more portable set of materials. Whether the space was inside the studio, or even outside the gallery, I was forced to admit that there was another space that could be termed a **context of relationships**. The knowledge derived from these activities and associations made the limitations of the context clear to me insofar as space itself is a condition of thinking. From these experiences I was able to understand that the photographic pieces, the installations, collaborative projects, the context and the theory were not separate and divisible entities. Although the particular activities and products had had to undergo objectification, they were nevertheless a composite search for an order that is accessible and lived.

The book you are looking at is not contingent on the tradition of photography. When the material is derived from other photographs, it is from photographic reproductions of modern art, especially the art of Picasso, where "the act of painting new ensembles borrowed not from the reality of vision but from the reality of conception" such as Cubism was described by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1912. However, two notable exceptions to this view of photography are the influences of **Joe Schopplein** and **John Gutmann**.

The professional photography of **Joe Schopplein** has always provided me with a durable standard for measuring the clarity and effectiveness of photographs; and without his assistance and resources, the book and the work presented in it, would not have seen the light of day. The work of **John Gutmann** represents an "appropriating mastery" of photography. The image of the **Bibliography box** that begins the interior of this book is respectfully put there in association with **Gutmann's** photograph, **Automobile Covered with Political Slogans, 1938**, that opens the publication, **PHOTOGRAPHY & LANGUAGE**.

STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY manipulates the genre of the retrospective catalog by looping the chronological chain of the book with captions, letters, theory and images articulating the present state of the work. Though the status of the part is meant to govern the whole, each of the parts are themselves whole and reflect at anytime in the book the consequential meaning of the entire structure. The methodical practices expressed in the work allow me to dispense with compositional devices predicated on personal choices and taste. The less I have to do with the aesthetics of composition the more it is likely that I will find a suitable structure for the releasement of visible information. The spacing of the units into an organizational structure is derivative of Mallarmé's theory of **Espacement** where the words on a page are themselves surrounded by a system of blank white spaces actively denoting a constructive **memory**.

In 1973, I visited the studio of a friend and painter, Masashi Matsumoto, where I saw a number of hand-lettered signs tacked on the wall. The messages written to himself included memos, aphorisms and **Maximes**. The signs were carefully painted in combinations of vivid colors producing the effect of autonomous objects. They appeared to evoke fragments of a personal **text**. The association with **Masashi Matsumoto** has enabled me to transpose the meaning of the telephone conversation or the letter from an act of correspondence to a cultural unit. **STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY** is intrinsically dependent on files of correspondence. This documentation, although a function of language, is assignable to the activities of photography. Whether the documentary is an objective or provisional form of information, it can nevertheless exist privately as an agent of memory.

It is incorrect to view **STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY** as an effort to regulate facts or to systematize data. The work is ineluctably ideal. Its objectives revolve around a dialectic of criticism and synthesis where the problem of perspectives, experience, information and production is traceable to the graphic order of language and a system of **reproductions of reproductions**. It is here that the "still" photograph is meant to operate as an element of intelligibility. It is here that the photographic model represents the **bricolage** of elements controlling the appearance of meaning. The work of **Peter D'Agostino** demonstrates for me the concreteness of the photographic model. The observational projects set-up by **D'Agostino** identify the problems of "coming and going" (influence and direction) with graphic sensations derived from the topography of film and language.

It may be at this point that there arises the need to 'negate the negation'. And this may take the form of feeling that, after all, I am the 'one who' creates the world. That part of it, at least, that lives and dies with me. In this sense, the world is my invention; as I am myself: my own invention. Somehow though the sense of responsibility is divided—and we set on opposing courses what comes from 'out there', and what belongs 'in here'.
(Lawrence Fixel, **Glimmers Three: Mining Shadows**, April 18, 1977.)

A good example of facing the conflict of responsibility is **THE NEW COMMERCIALIST (A Review)** edited by Meyer Hirsch. In it the fetish of publication is reduced to the image of typewritten texts in order to provide a structure for ideas and beliefs that are rejected as awkward by those who control the systems of reproductions. **THE NEW COMMERCIALIST** is an accessible model that effectively contradicts the standards of publications even like the kind you are now reading.

I am grateful to **John Brumfield** for the distinctive introduction he has written for this book; and to **Donna-Lee Phillips** for the clarity of design and production. The first person to make it urgently clear to me that art was not the exclusive activity of "the others" was **Natalie Thomas** to whom this book is dedicated.

The compiling of **STRUCTURAL(ISM) & PHOTOGRAPHY** repeats the wholeness of the part that I have tried to make compatible with what I hear alone. I view the material of this book more as an intellectual observer of the sustaining ideas than from any position that appears to demand special gifts. For the work I am presenting, which I insist is photographic, could have been done by a blind person.

CONCEPT: Construction

Of course, to be completely sincere, I cannot conceive of writing validly any other way but mine.

The first question I will ask is this: how does one write?

Nothing more ordinary than what is happening to me, nothing simpler than the solution to the problem before me.

—Francis Ponge

September 21, 1972

To Fred Parker
Carmel, California

In 1971 I executed two prints, BLACK & WHITE (11" x 14" ea.), that were accepted by you for an exhibition at the University of Nebraska.

The production of these prints indicated that I could execute an idea photographically without the stimulus of a pictorial object.

I am enclosing slides of work done since the re-direction of my thinking. The pieces reproduced on slides express insights gained from the experience of BLACK & WHITE. They are:

1. I could photograph from the standpoint of an idea or concept.

2. The machinery of photography, camera and film, should not be limited to technical considerations. Film is serial and tonal and thereby implies a code and structure. The lens determines perspective enclosed within a frame, i.e., space. This is related to time through the mechanics of the shutter.

3. The pieces, BLACK & WHITE, TIME EQUALS 36 EXPOSURES, SINK: FILLING/FILLED/DRAINING/DRAINED, 36 KINDS OF WHITE ON 34TH AVENUE, 3 CIRCLES, made me aware that the traditional object of photography, the illusion of the image, had been displaced with a reflexive object inherent in the practice of photography.

4. There was no need to "push" or distort the basic techniques or materials of photography. Photographs were made to look like photographs and not an imitation of other graphic processes. When prints were mounted in a relative system, they were composed within a format revealing their construction. The material surface of the work was not submerged in technique.

5. The self-conscious application of cause and effect within the boundaries of photographic practices produced its own kind of binary language, i.e., black and white, positive and negative, the systematic use of film and the identification of perspectives with the movement of time.

The work is an internalization of process. The pieces proceed from an idea and they are executed in areas familiar to me. What I am doing is real.

Are you interested in seeing the actual work?

Your attitude towards photography seems more secure and open than that expressed by the ruling structure.

Please return the slides when you are finished.

Art or commercial photography will always exist as closed worlds to individuals working alone. I therefore dismissed the standards that dominate the meaning and value of these practices.

A clear and simple position was sought for work detached from the retarding influences of competition. My objective was to de-emphasize or displace the fixed-image with systematic ideas in order to formulate a different kind of photographic object.

The most complete reduction of photography that I could understand formally was the issue of black and white. No matter how remote the ideas might seem to the act of seeing—seeing was simply a distraction in relation to the foremost problem of structure.

The first pieces made from this kind of photographic thinking were BLACK & WHITE. They were reproduced from transfer type impressed on acetate negatives and routinely processed like snapshots. A total commitment was made to let the work speak for itself. There was no self-indulgence in taste, style or interpretation. I tried to begin at the beginning.

The practice of doing this work, BLACK & WHITE, made it clear that I did not need a reflected, pictorial image to make a photograph. I did not need to go somewhere to take a photograph. In fact all the content I would ever need for photography was already with me. To progress I needed structure. BLACK & WHITE is the structure on which all subsequent work is built.

Before the first work was completed, I was thinking about Time as a subject for another piece. Irrelevant details complicating the subject of Time were eliminated until I had reduced the process to a camera, a roll of film and a lab clock. I had no preknowledge of how the piece would look or what problems it might involve. The uncertainty of what I was doing intensified my awareness of methodology. I soon found procedure and process to be significant levels of construction indistinguishable from the objective content.

TIME EQUALS 36 EXPOSURES was made one step at a time. The presentation of the idea, Time, was completely identified with the practice of photography. 36 photographs of a GraLab clock turning counter-clockwise were taken and developed. Since I had 36 negatives, I made 36 prints each 8" x 10". In order not to confuse the issues of time and perspective only the face of the clock was reproduced photographically. The presentation was meant to emphasize the flat, two dimensionality of construction and the combining of 36—8" x 10" prints onto a single surface produced an enlargement of scale absent in most photography at this time. Glossy prints were used in opposition to the matte-look of most photographic art. The prints were mounted in a reading similar to a contact sheet. The systematic development of TIME EQUALS 36 EXPOSURES was resolved when a second panel was joined to the original construction made from prints of positive film.

When the work was completed, it measured 4 feet x 8 feet. It was not dependent on hidden messages for its depth of meaning. It was physical and opaque, its object being nothing more than the systematic exploration of the photographic process and its corresponding structure.

1971

May 31, 1978

To C. W.
SF

Though I have not been to the galleries on Grant avenue since 1975, I did want to see your show and I also looked at other work exhibited in the building. I suppose I don't go to these galleries any longer because of the atmosphere and context in which the art or photography is presented. Most of the work in the building struck me as condominium art, soft-core aesthetics, slick and pleasant if not dreamy and desirable. Of all the work I did see, I thought Penn's work was most impressive because the objects were at least formulated from a position of true style . . . objects, some of which are ICONS, fixed and static, permanently engraved on the commercial mind. Some of Lyons' photos also have this quality of the ICON. Of course, both Penn and Lyons have been around for a long time and their photographs have been distributed within the reproducible system . . . and the system has allowed their work to pass from public meaning to private artifact. The painting and sculpture I saw wasn't even worthy of elitist appropriation.

It would be unfair to say that the Penn or Lyons merely fit into a clothesline system of exhibition. Some of the photographs presented by both artists originally derived from concentrated states of practice that takes time and care. Art—whether I like it or not—whether it's an object or a concept—cannot be achieved in six months or even six years. In a decadent tradition artist and artifact are measured, judged and recognized by a persistence to inflict their insignificance on an empty world.

Caution! In your work I do feel the concentration and commitment to make something, i.e., to inflict the work with your presence. Though I don't understand the forms or the form of meaning you are using to release your content, I can however see a consistency of shape, planes and serious pattern, a repetition of view, that is yielding a reward because of persistency. In my mind some of the ground you are working on is fiercely competitive. That's OK because there is still something unique and obsessive in the photographs. Perhaps, the comparison is false but the work of these photographers is incredibly clear and polished so that any part of their process reflects simultaneously the whole like a cubist painting done on one side of the cube—reductivist formalism—expression contained within a measurement of a UNIT. The unit is made to stand for the thing measured, the ultimate contemporary artifact, the non-reflexive object.

Caution; For me your work seems burdened by a narrow reliance on the object's meaning. The relationship from image to image (for-me) is mostly sensitive. I don't know what the hell it is you want me to get out of your work. I seldom use my eyes anyway with one exception, of course. I am not interested in being made aware of the unique forms that abound in the landscape. I detest the consumption of symbol regardless of how sophisticated it may appear. I'm unimaginative and stupid and when I go to see someone else's work, I want to be informed—I want to be able to use that work in my own work—I want to move with art—I don't want to get stuck with someone else's stupidity, or worse, their taste.

May 22, 1977

To Michael Mathis
Santa Clara, CA

I certainly appreciate the kindness of your letter and the invitation to the exhibition at the San Jose Museum. I mostly receive very negative responses to my work so I hope whatever relationship there is between our work—it does not cause you the same kind of hostility I have experienced.

It's true I work from "very basic photographic concepts" though I must admit that some of the techniques you describe seem more sophisticated than the ones I usually rely on. However, any time you use your mind and present the results in a photographic context the effects will appear startling to people who are conditioned to straight images.

During the last six months I have been trying to move my work towards a "problematic" view of photography and its object, the image. One area in which my work is firm, and that is, language. I don't know how you feel towards the issue of language, but if you are dealing with concepts and their releasement through structure and imagery, the shadow of language will out of necessity show in the work. When you speak of the "zones of a photograph" representing another image different from the likeness of the original photograph, then you are engaged in decoding the object. In fact as I try to write this letter to you, it occurs to me that you have a grasp of what you are doing—a grasp of the idea and how perfect is the form of the idea once you can break down the restraints of taste and education—letting that form lead you beyond the weakness of the self. My god, it sounds so good I wonder if I have not lost it **myself**.

Do you know Stephan Moore at Union Gallery or the people at Words Work? Some of them are friends of mine and I am sure they would be interested in your work if they don't already know it.

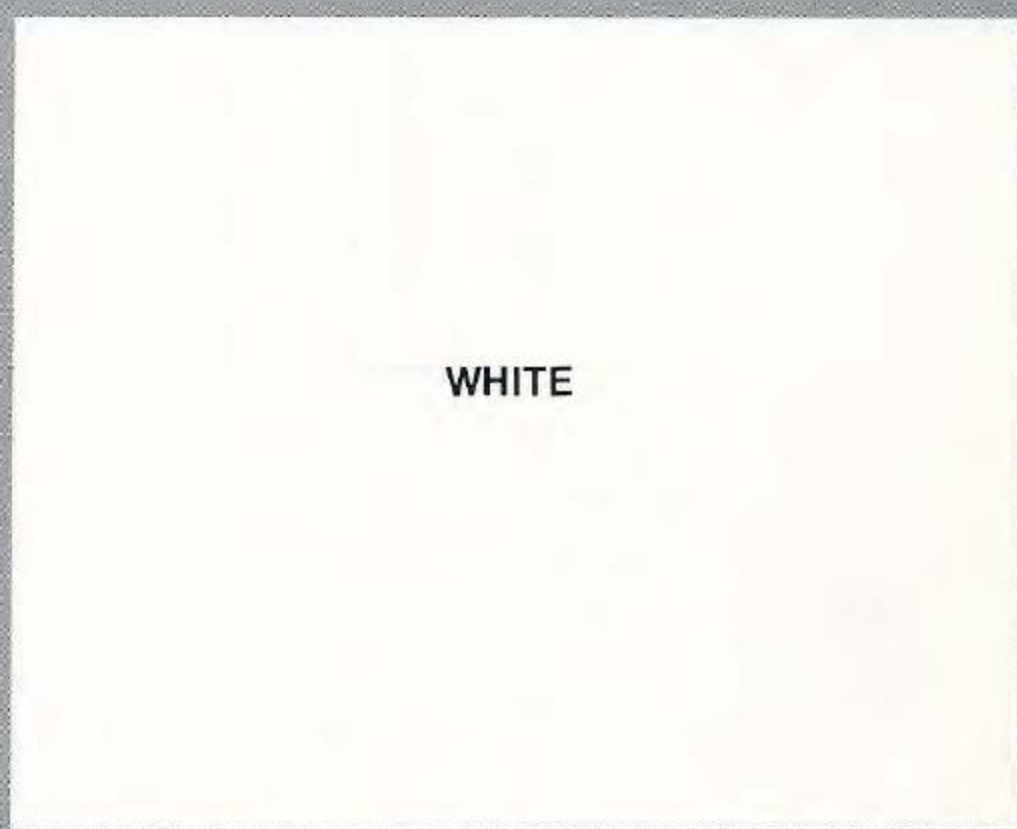
I will try to see your exhibition though my time seems to be divided by mostly unpleasant business in and out of the art world. Please consider this letter an open invitation to visit me any time you or your partners are in SF. I would enjoy talking with you and seeing your work.

Once again, thanks for the information and good luck with your projects. In closing, I might add that the application of concepts to photographic practices is still relatively unique and that you should pursue these aims diligently. Even though each work is authentic in itself, persistent work in a series creates an identity.

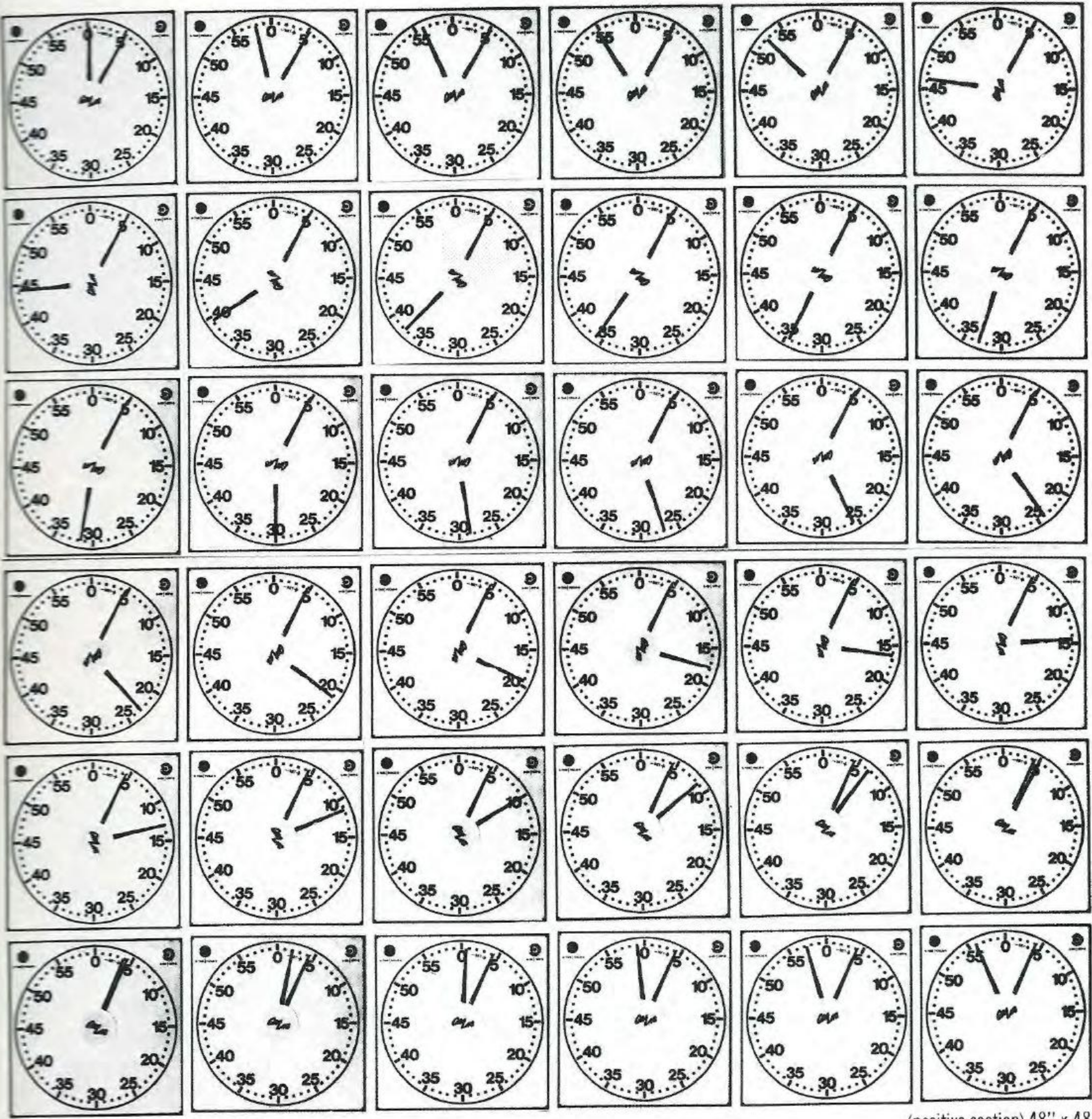
What I do recollect is this. I collect black and white.
From the standpoint of white all color is color. From the
standpoint of black. Black is white. White is black.
Black is black. White is black. White and black is black
and white. What I recollect when I am there is that
words are not birds. How easily I feel thin. Birds do not.
So I replace birds with tin-foil. Silver is thin.
—Gertrude Stein



BLACK & WHITE, 1971

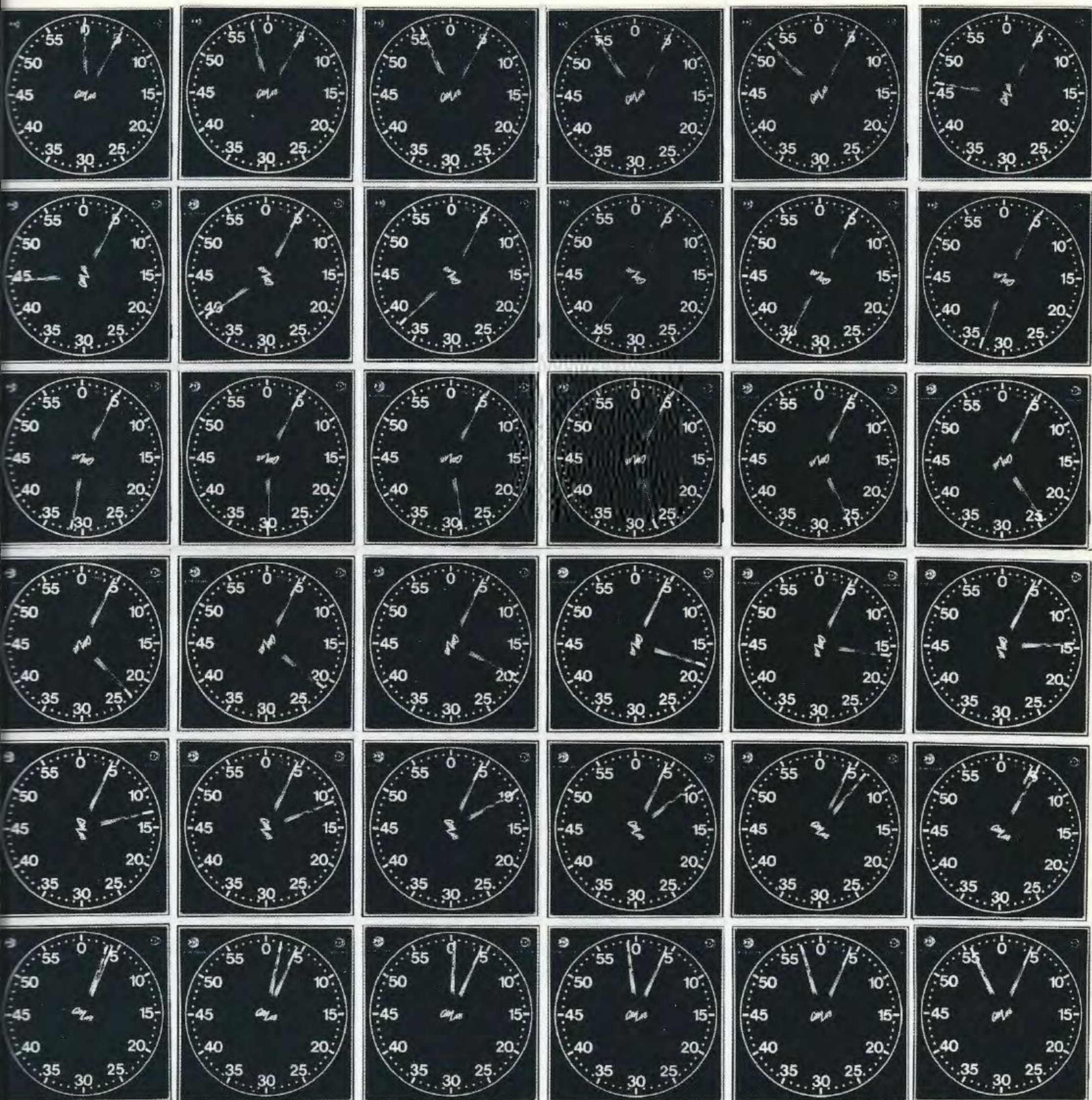


11" x 14" each



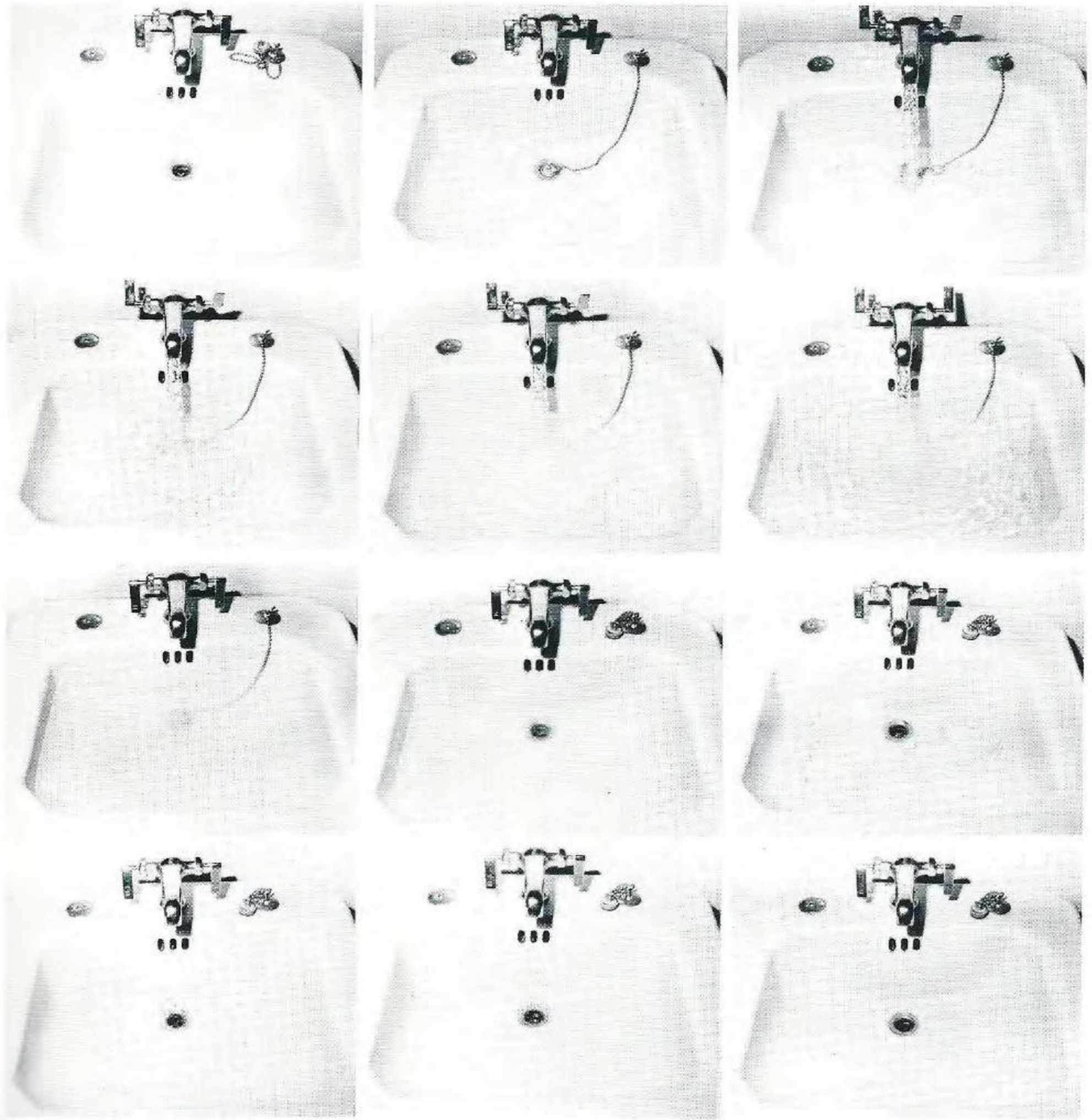
TIME EQUALS 36 EXPOSURES, 1971

(positive section) 48" x 48"



(negative section) 48" x 48"

repeated in the same sink for more than five years.
When I finished and removed the plug, I recognized the
idea instantly.



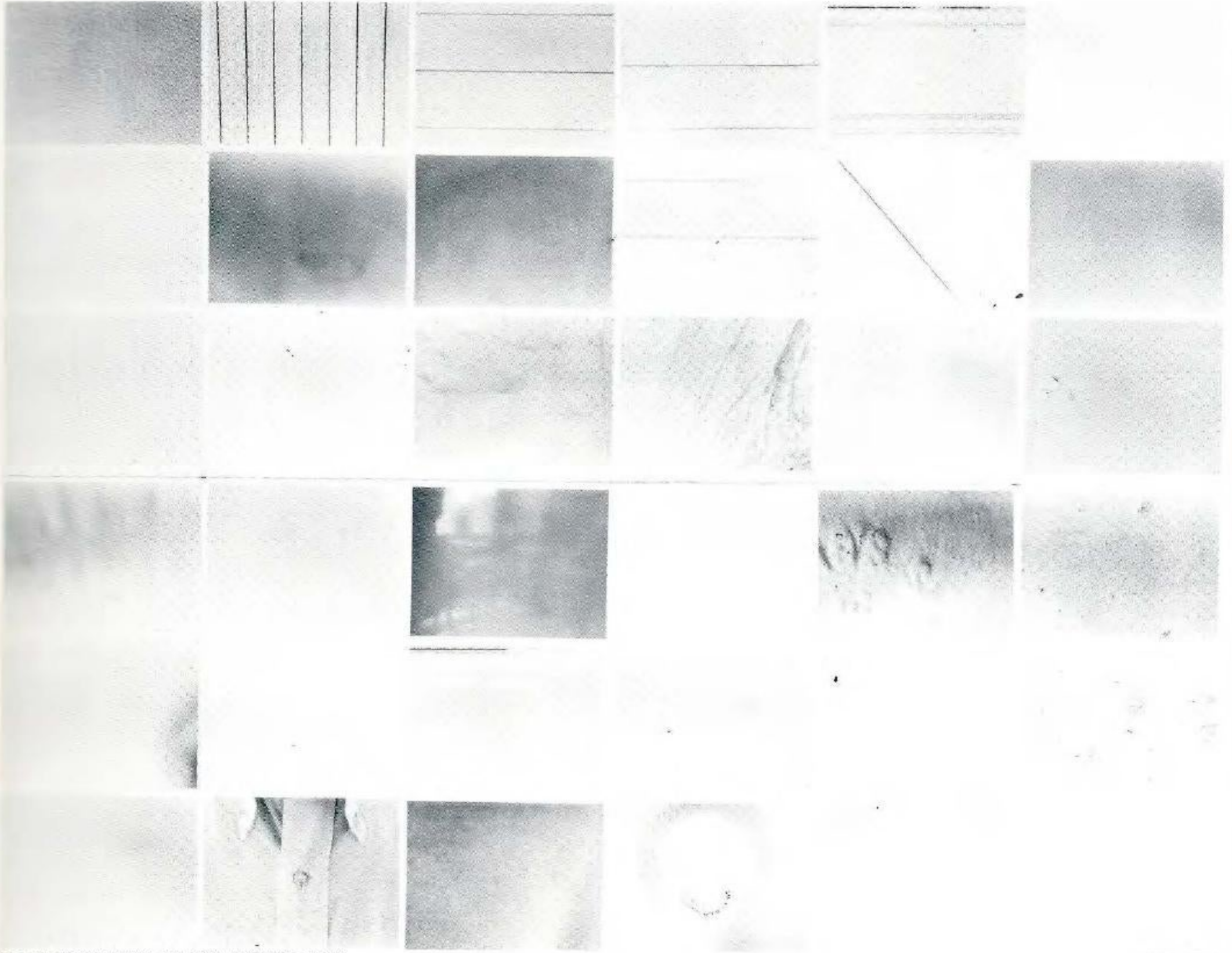
SINK: Filling/Filled/Draining/Drained, 1972

32" x 30"



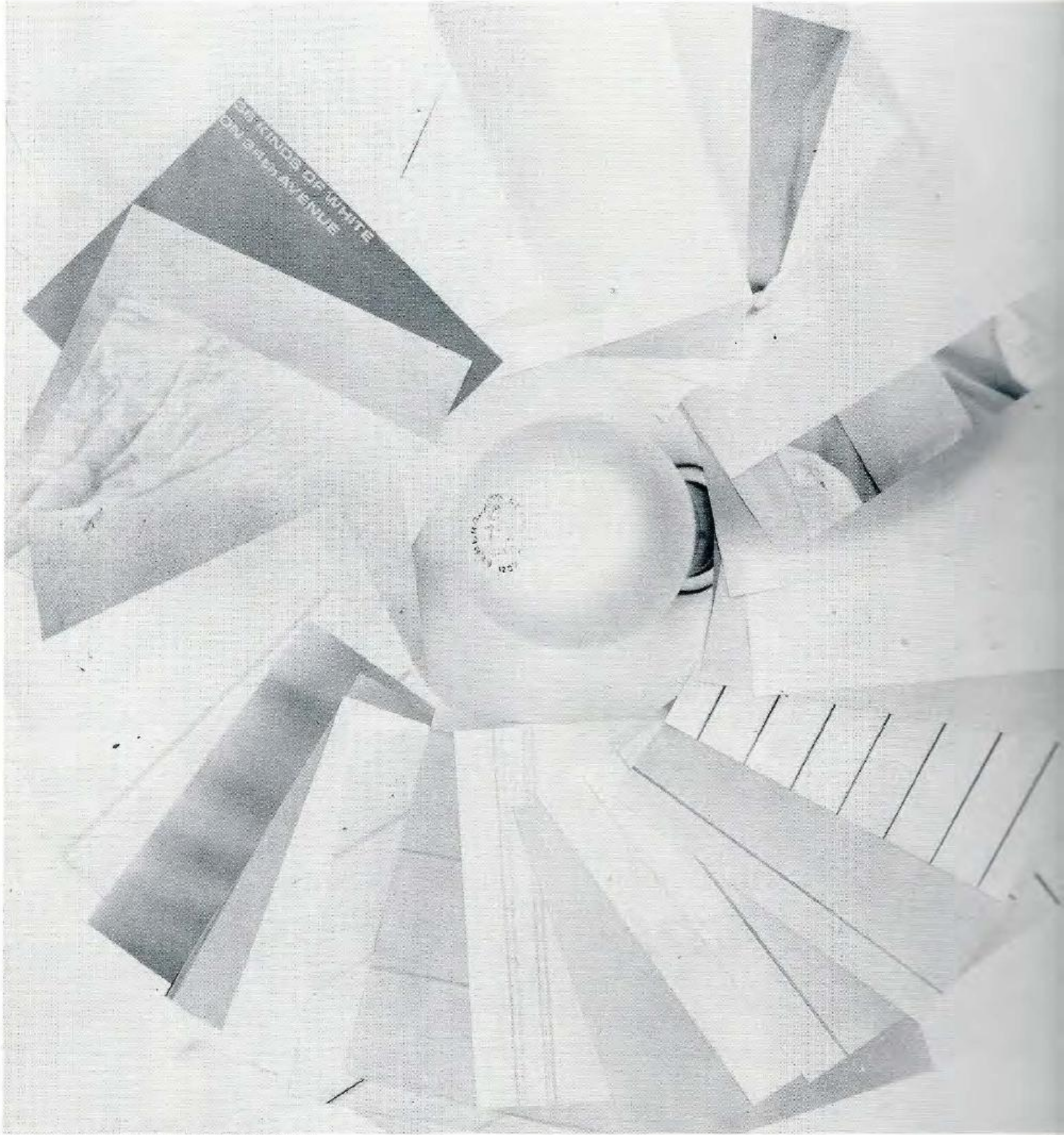
SPRINKLER SYSTEM, 1972

48" x 60"

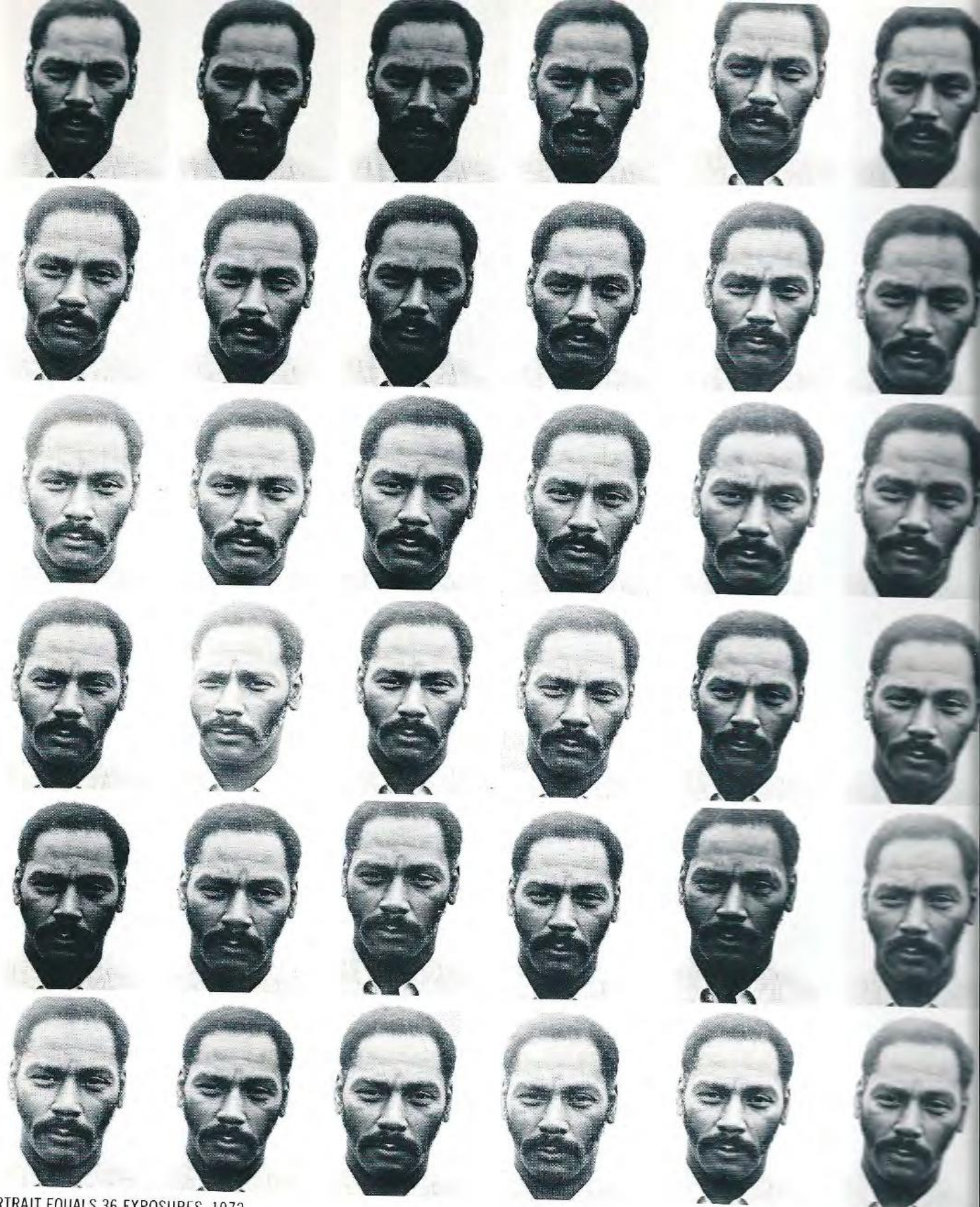


36 KINDS OF WHITE ON 34th AVENUE, 1972

48" x 60"



36 KINDS OF WHITE ON 34th AVENUE, 1976



PORTRAIT EQUALS 36 EXPOSURES, 1972

60" x 48"



DOORWAY, 1972

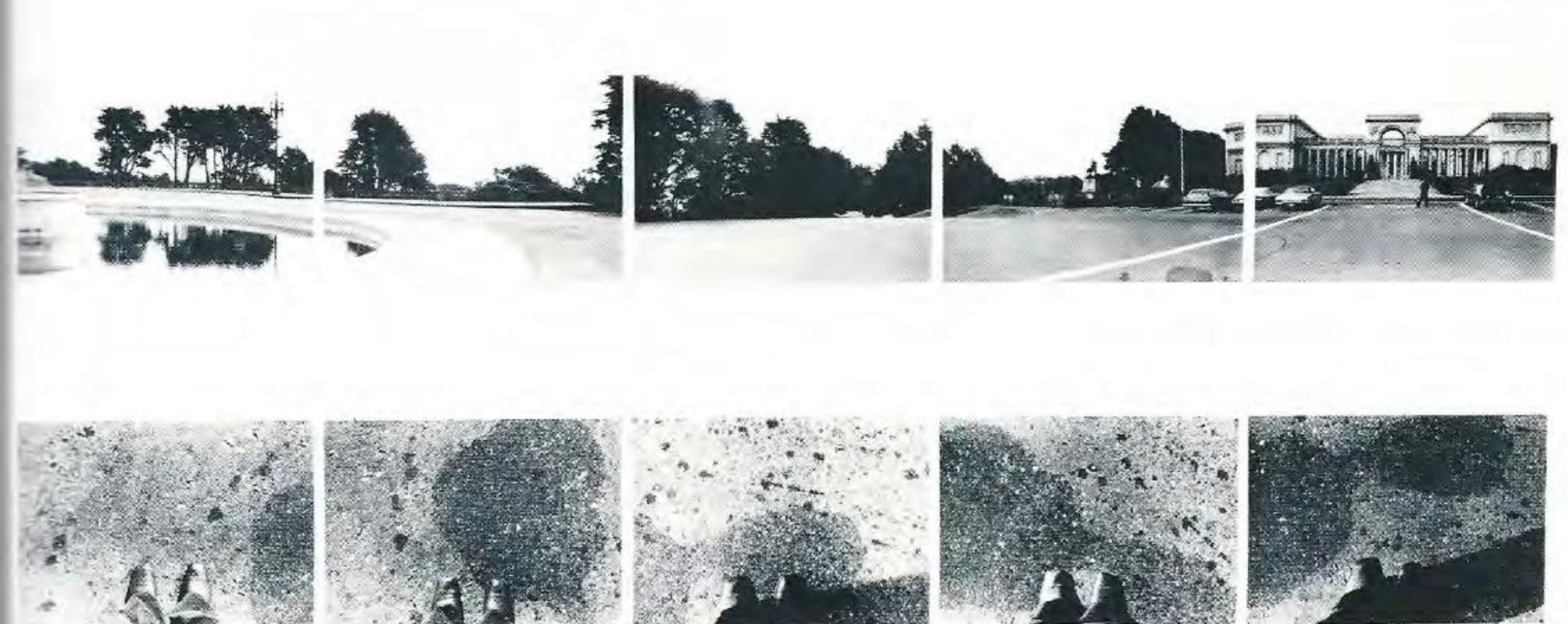
72" x 40"

The concept of a circle provided the impulse for making the piece, 3 CIRCLES: CALIFORNIA PALACE OF THE LEGION OF HONOR, in present the idea of a circle in the form of a panoramic sequence. When the process was completed, it seemed inadequate in iden- return to the original position to photograph the movement of my feet in relation to each point of the circle. The first panel repre- from photographs taken vertically in which the counter-clockwise movement of the shadow signifies frame by frame the changes in from a single abstraction, circle, operating on more than one plane.



3 CIRCLES: California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1972

April 1972. The circular fountain facing the museum acted as a symbol for the execution of the concept. My first decision was to tifying a pictorial space with the idea of a circle. It was not until I photographed the area where I had stood that I realized I had to sends the circular fountain and the panorama of the museum setting on a horizontal plane. The third circle or lower panel was made space and time. Two panels with different pictorial content and perspectives, separated by a linear gap, were created and joined



8" x 120" each panel



TAPE TRACK SERIES: Window, 1972

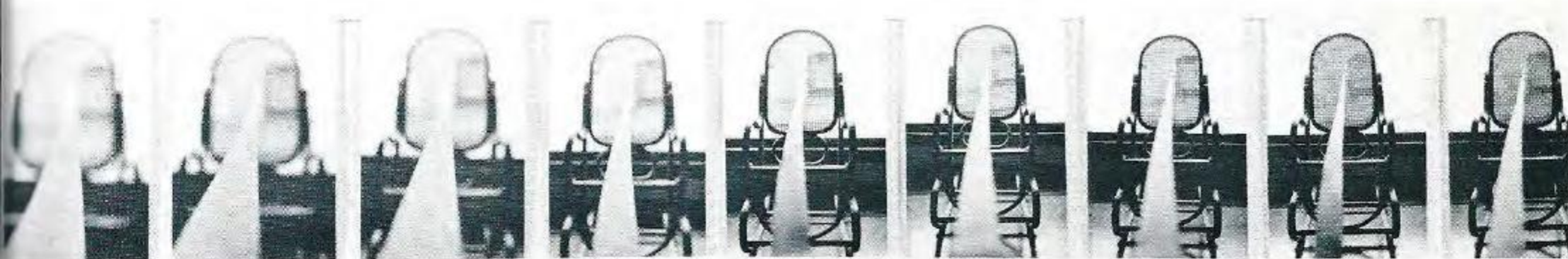
A variety of adhesive materials from transparent to masking tapes were essential to the construction of pieces I refer to as Collage (pg 28). Out of respect for these materials I decided to make a work in which tape would act as both signifier and signified.

Signifier: I attached a length of white masking tape beneath the lens of the camera and stretched it a distance of six feet fixing the tape to a window facing the camera.

Signified: In ten consecutive frames the ribbon of tape acted as an image for the "deeper" content of focusing. An operation of the camera, focusing (signifier), was joined to the content of the work, focusing (signified), in the sequential tracking of the stretched masking tape (signifier/signified).



8" x 120"



TAPE TRACK SERIES: Chair, 1972

9" x 48"



WHITE MOTION/BLACK MOTION, 1972

11" x 14" each

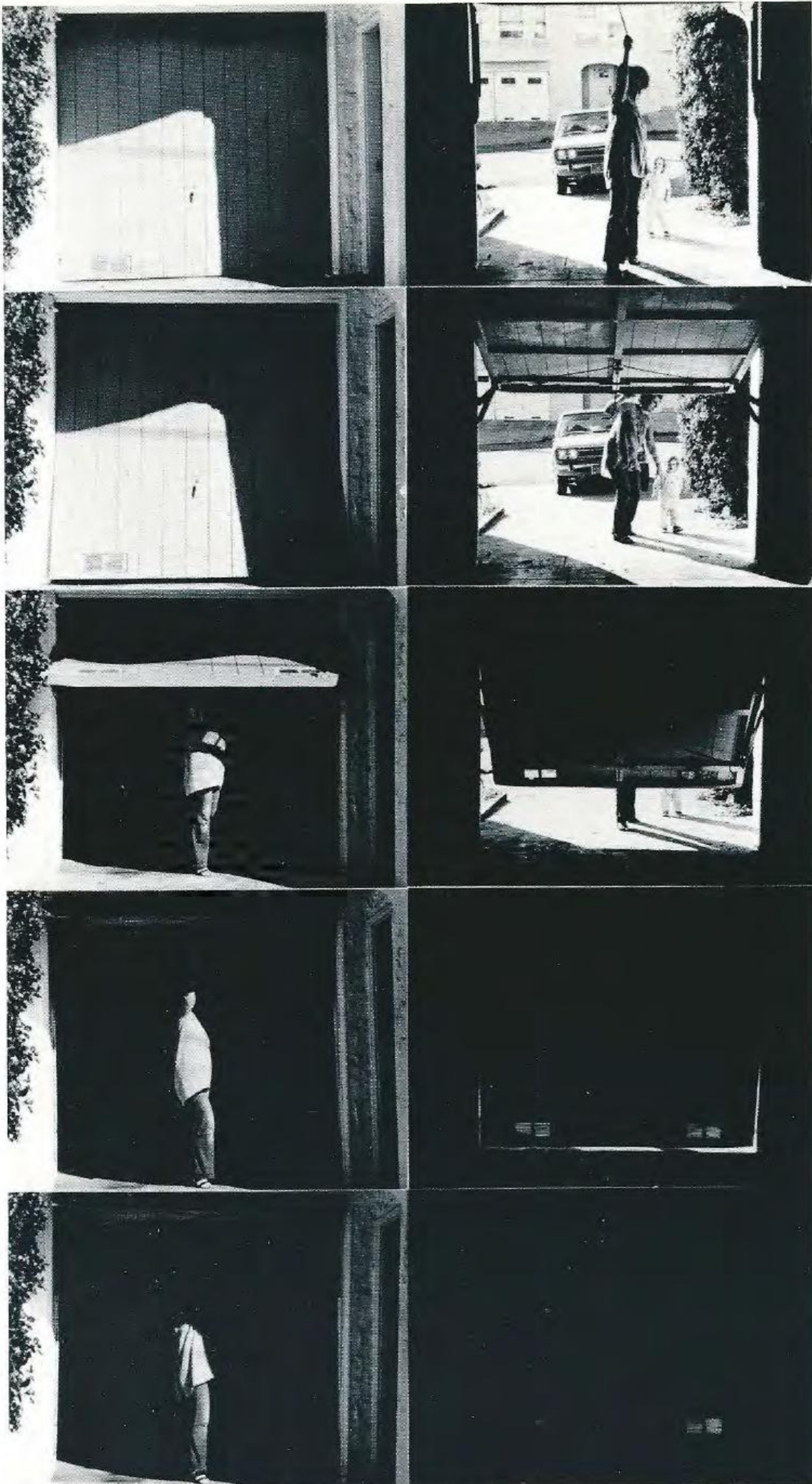
7 SPEEDS: 11 STOP: 5.6



1 SPEED: 1.0 - 71 STOPS

SELF-PORTRAIT: 7 Speeds/7 f Stops, 1972

20" x 35"



OPENING & CLOSING THE GARAGE DOOR: 2 Perspectives, 1972

30" x 14"



RULER, 1975 6" x 50"

One reason I am writing is to ascertain your decision about the purchase of **9 Perspectives** (pg. 29) for the museum's collection. The piece seems "to this viewer" eminently worthy of its position in the show, **Mirrors & Windows**, as a set of **arche**-photographs that "explore the ways in which photography can translate the exterior world into pictures, which is essentially not a personal but formal issue."

In addition I am adding some observations that were stimulated by the excitement of the exhibition's opening and the attendant confusion of simply **being-in** New York as a photographer-witness.

I am delighted by the inclusion of my photographic piece in the exhibit of American Photography since 1960. For me the show manifests a single, unalterable conclusion that you, not Minor White, Robert Frank or Gary Winogrand, are the star of this survey. And what is convincingly different about this survey as compared to other "unending chain-signs" is the presentation of photography supported by a resolutely intellectual system of values. Even though the ideas and examples selected to exemplify the dualism of your theory has already engaged critical opposition, the conflict will enlarge the narrow discourse controlling contemporary photography.

After reading the essay in **Mirrors & Windows**, I went back to some of your previous publications like the Walker Evans' catalog, **Looking at Photographs**, the introduction to "Eggleston's Guide," Winogrand's **The Animals and Public Relations**, and though I may be wrong, I detect a growing reliance on formalist principles to defend intuitive commitments, particularly on behalf of Mr. Winogrand's photographs. The genealogy of taste is recognizably rooted in the pages of the Evans' catalog prophesying even the advent of "New Topographics." This descriptive tradition emphasizing the reflexive purity of the "frame" has been advanced by a skillful exercise of will in contrast to the rhetoric supporting the grander and more accessible art of Adams, Strand or Weston. The voice of the new tradition encourages a disciplined reading of photographs whose obliquity of vision might be degraded by an illiterate visual audience. But to conclude that American Photography since 1960 can be enclosed in a formalist paradigm is to create a dialectical fable that avoids the originary meaning of photography as a redundant system. In other words, photography that is renovative seems excluded by a system of formulaic description and reflective symbolism. Or, where is work that contains a criticism of photography?

For example, on my way to the toilet on the ground floor of the museum, what do I see hanging on the wall and sitting on the floor—a photographic piece by Monsignor Kosuth whose literal view of definition and photography is no where to be found in either "mirror" or "window." Not far from Kosuth's "chair" is a set of acrid color photographs by William Beckley that problematizes the trend to transfer color into existing genres of black & white art photography. And in front of Mr. Beckley's chromatic faucets hangs an outrageous piece of photographic formatting by Douglas Huebler. I am not advocating insertion of these specific works into the show even though I cannot see what is more efficacious in the photography of Sol LeWitt than there is in photography by Bruce Nauman or John Baldessari. I am sure the list of WHO'S NOT in the show must be boring to you and means even less to me. It's true you have included photography that might be termed propositional like the pieces by Robert Cumming; and **9 Perspectives** (unfortunately labeled "Photomosaic") can pass for methodical practice. I can even accept the extension of Winogrand's work as metaphor for the teleological load you have put on it to carry the meaning of quintessential description. But photography that advances itself by theoretical use, seems clearly to be absent.

The imprint of your text is on one hand open and agreeable while at the same time distinctly points to promotional models conferring hierarchy and the responsibilities of a regime. The majority of photographic work in the show is neutralized by a discursive text that shifts ground between the deep space of theory and the foreground of recognizable practices. These trends can just as easily be gauged from the index of the catalog, the press kit or the schedule of lectures without anyone necessarily ever being present at the show—a few ways language cancels space, conserves time and inscribes vision.

For me, one of the highlights of the exhibition is Robert Heinecken's photographic version of "On Photography." The bits of photographs stitched together with staples to form computerlike patterns of black and white resembling publicity photos of Ms Sontag cleverly express issues **outside** the context of formalism. Perhaps you are not aware that these constructions previously hung in an exhibition, **Contemporary California Photography**, at Camerawork Gallery in San Francisco. The show consisted of photographic "units" in which each artist was allowed a sanctity of space for independent exploration in a structure determined by linguistic agreement. The work in the show confronted the matrix of photography that extends out into a system of reproductions. The formal question of whether there is a "clear photograph" that can "transpose the real world" was put under "erasure" in order to make present the relationships and contradictions of photography that are determined by an ideology of genre, format and classification. Heinecken's dissimulating portraits point to a "coded system" of photography as an agency of reproduction.

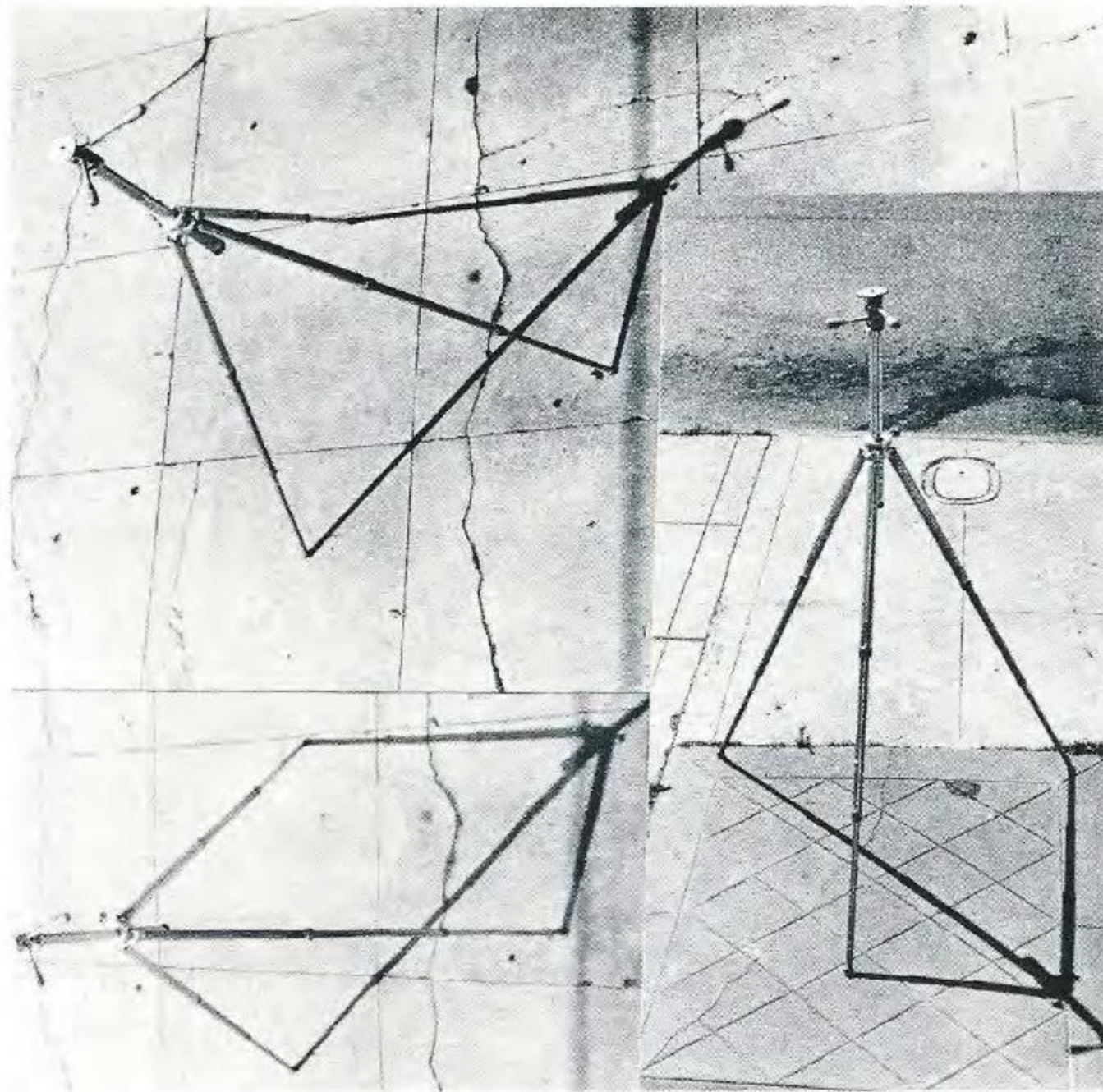
From a distance of 40 feet, the stereo portraits of Ms Sontag are meant to be viewed as a single unit of changing perspectives. However, on closer inspection one hemisphere of the unit is assembled from photographs of Sontag's text that postulates a **mechanical reader** in the act of deciphering. Whether Heinecken is aware of certain notions being developed in San Francisco, the use of text as an interchangeable part of photographic production is distinctly one of them. And I am not talking about narrative or diaristic practices **a-la** Michals or Krims, or for that matter, Cumming or Baldessari. The "hard-line" I am referring to is the examination of photography's disseminating powers that are everywhere, all-the-time, interpreting us, with or without our knowledge of their presence. Work of this kind is singularly absent from the context of your exhibition in spite of Heinecken's most recent work. The work of Donna-Lee Phillips, Peter D'Agostino, Hal Fischer, Meyer Hirsch, John Brumfield and Sam Samore, to name only a few, transgress the formal definitions of photography limited to a geometry of the frame.

In Ken Josephson's photograph, **Drottingham, Sweden**, the anecdote of the frame is translated into a variety of displacements describing some of the functions of the photograph. The frame however, determines the meaning and humor of the picture. The configuration of content is **inside** the photograph. The frame dominates the standards of correct photographic practices. The frame involves a series of **registrations**: the camera, film and photograph. "Window" photographs particularly demonstrate the dilemma of this confinement. The imprint of the frame, the trace of its presence, the infrastructure of photography, is shrouded in metaphors that are, nevertheless, returned to the registry of language. Therefore, to reverse perspectives terminating in files of photographs that obscure the signifier, counter positions must be restated in the name of photography to include language as a supplementary practice for the deconstruction of the frame, the object it contains, and its administration.

Your exhibition in many ways revitalizes the inert objects of photography. Your essay ends problematically. The choice of work you emphasize over others is reasonable within a

context of familiarity. To reiterate . . . what's mostly missing is photography that advances itself by theoretical **use** and not by the influence of imitative objects. Why not consider some of the work I am awkwardly trying to describe for presentation in the photo gallery upstairs in the museum. I can send you slides and glossies of the "Third Show" of **Contemporary California Photography** if for no other reason than simply to breach the problem of "un-familiarity."

I ask your indulgence in the reading of these "vague truths" that I have tried to set forth in this letter. For the last couple of years photography in San Francisco has undergone serious changes outside the support structures of schools, galleries or museums. And though these changes are by no means entirely confined to **Photography & Language, Photography & Ideology, Problematic Photography, Structural(ism) & Photography**, etc., these categorical issues have served to re-introduce by example supplementary views to the dominant structures existing in contemporary photography.



TRIPOD, 1972

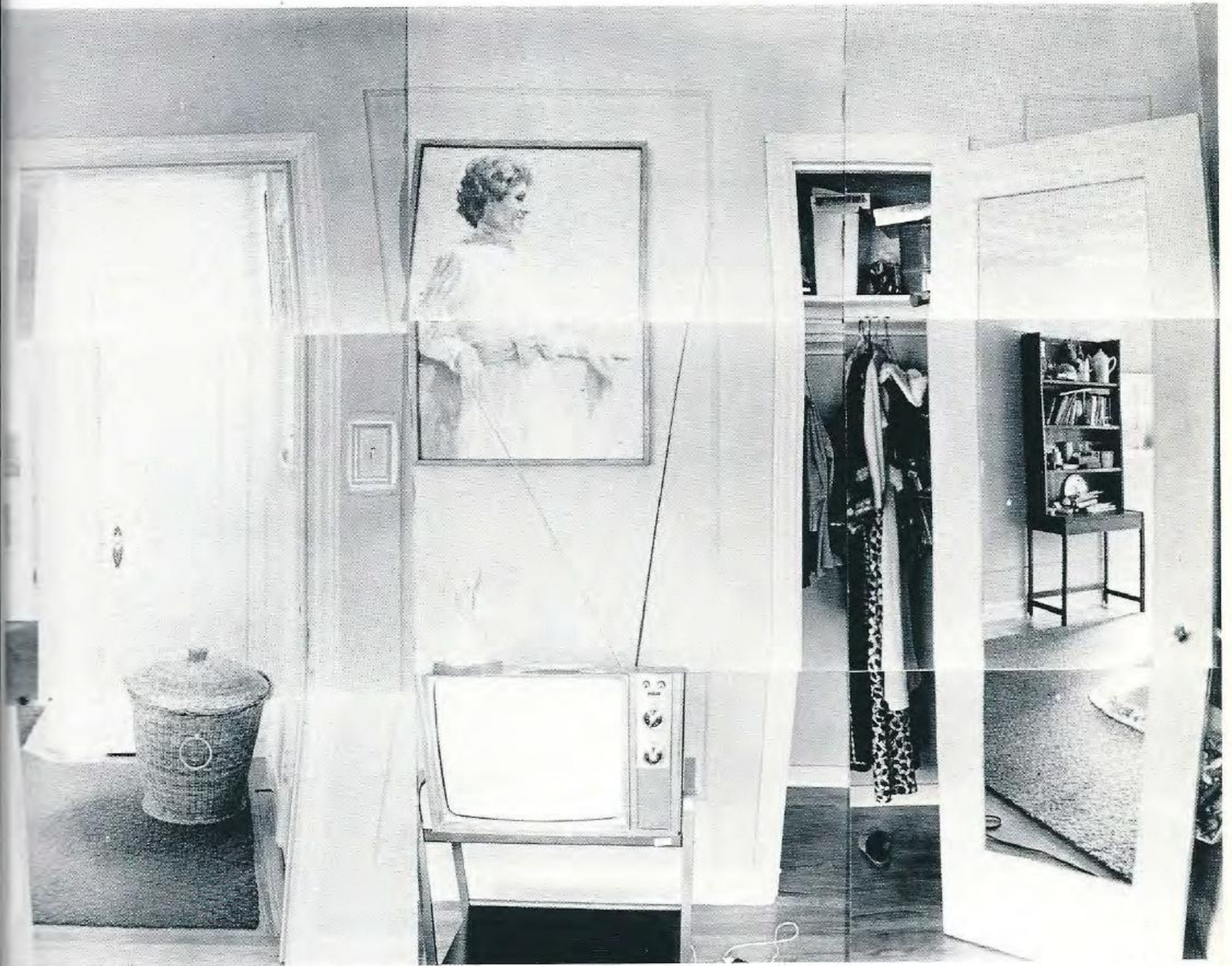
10" x 8"

A collage technique was introduced into the work in reaction to the smooth surface of the mounted photograph and to explore a different kind of pictorial space... a space of multiple and constructed perspectives.

I was conscious of a wall behind the television-set because it presented a variety of apertures, e.g., doorways, portrait, interior of closet, mirror and television screen. The concept of 9 PERSPECTIVES was based on the reproduction of these apertures.

The wall was divided into an imaginary grid of nine space. Each space was photographed in a lateral movement. When the photographs were ready for assembling, different kinds of single and double-faced masking tapes were used to attach the prints together in relation to the imaginary grid. Some of the images within the composition such as the basket, television-set, clothes in closet, electric cord, door with mirror project independent perspectives of depth, i.e., the illusions of depth. The images of illusionary depth are contrasted to the construction of the piece where the seams and cuts that join together the different photographs are clearly visible to the viewer, encouraging participation in the reading of the process.

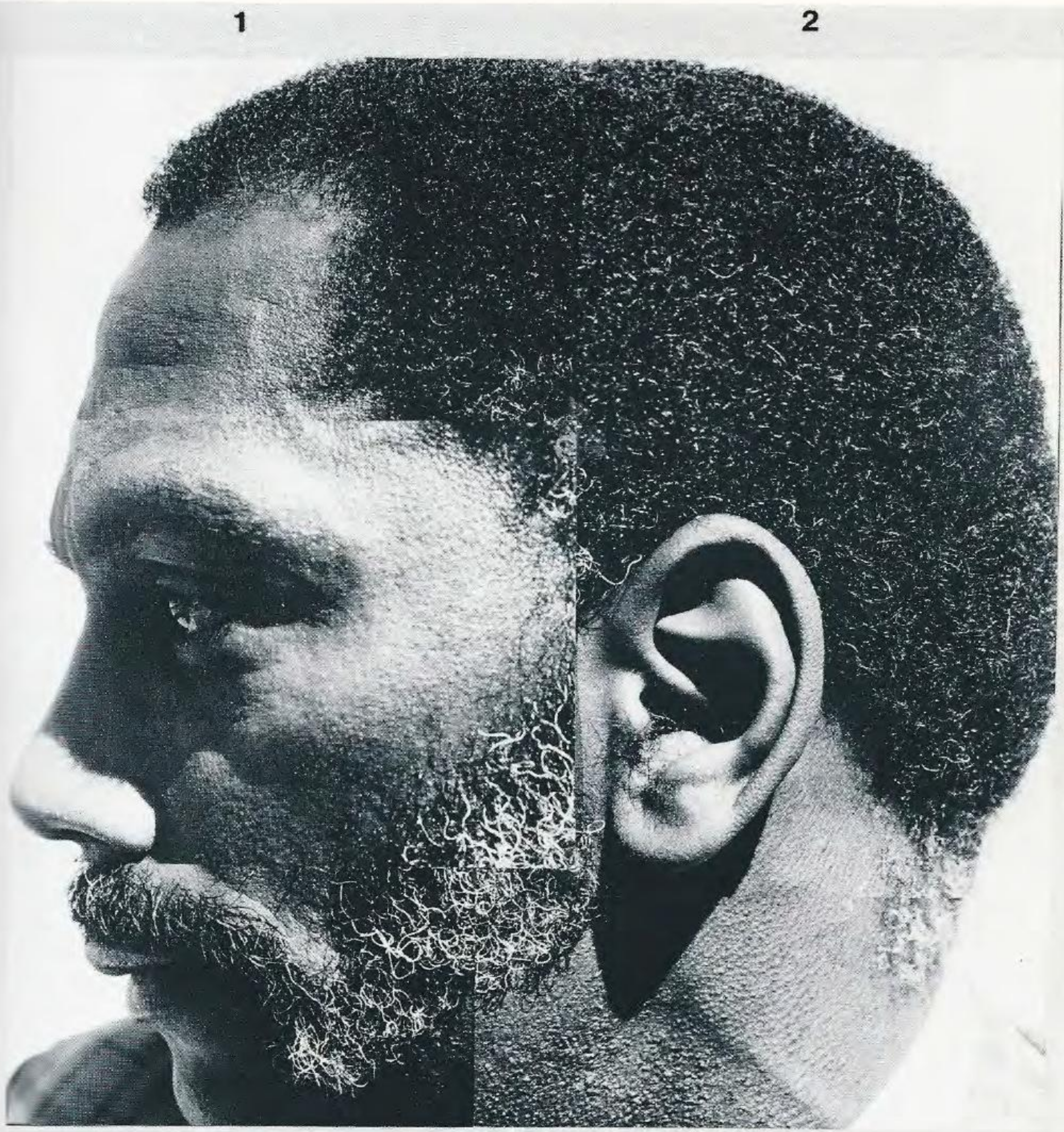
There are no hidden meanings in any of the collage pieces. They are simply the descriptions of the photographic process.



Empty enigmas, arrested time, signs which refuse to signify, giant enlargement of the tiny detail, narratives which come full circle: We are in a flat and discontinuous universe where each thing refers only to itself. A universe of fixity, of repetition, of absolute obviousness, which enchants and discourages the explorer.

—Robbe-Grillet

In ARITHMETICAL PORTRAIT six photographs were taken of the subject from a distance of six inches. The prints were made on 16 x 20" photographic paper. The contour of the head was represented by collaging the prints to resemble a single profile. The portrait is however, a series of intervening perspectives in which the motive of scale is developed through a process of addition in contrast to the normal blow-up made by enlargement. Viewed at close range the portrait will read as a topography of skin and hair. From a distance the multiple composition will appear to have the individual character of a unit. 1½" masking tape was selected as a border in reference to the method of construction. Transfer numerals were impressed on the border thereby determining the title—ARITHMETICAL PORTRAIT.



1

2

3

4

5

6

ARITHMETICAL PORTRAIT, 1972

42" x 41"



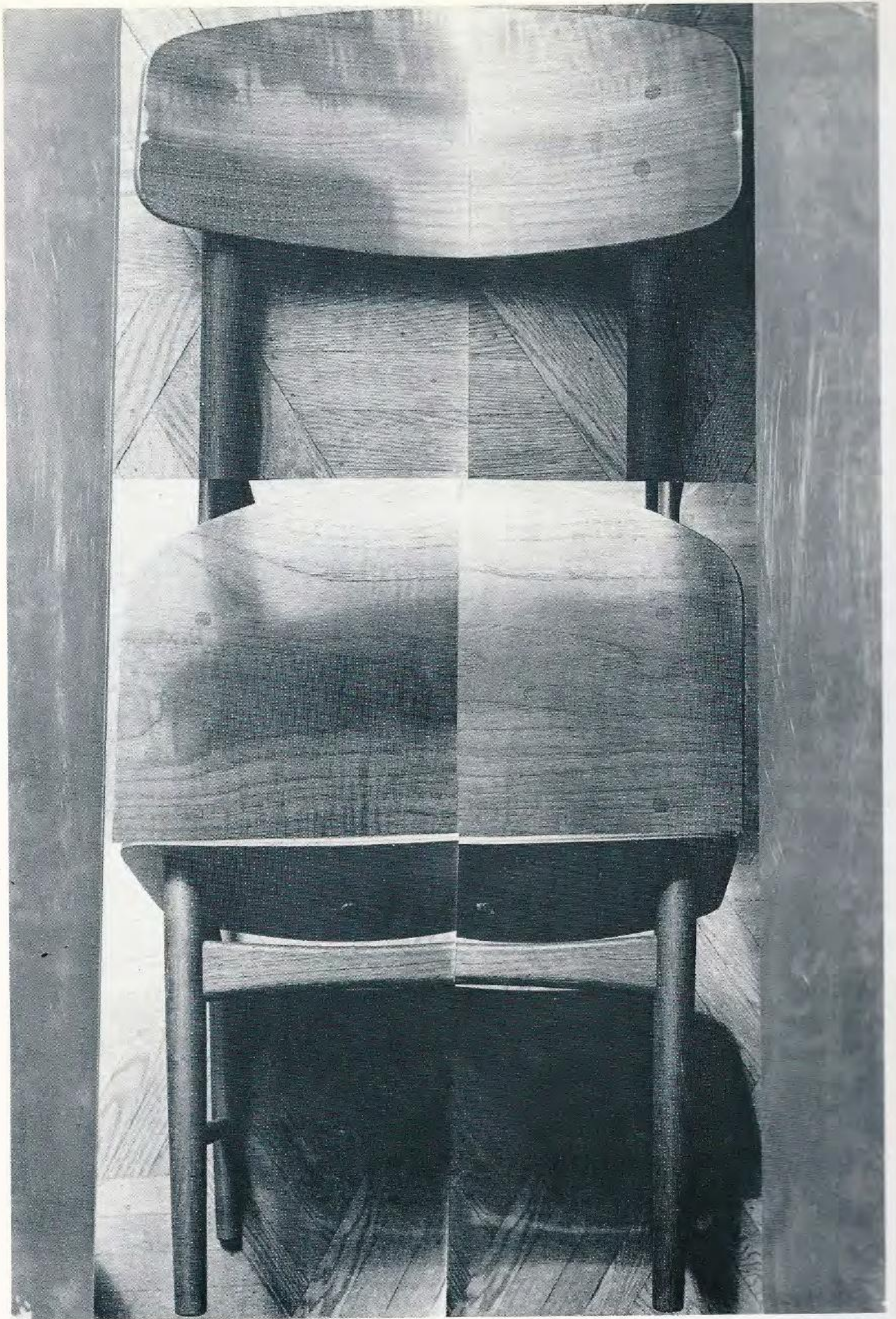
PERSPECTIVES OF THE BI-CY-CLE, 1975

48" x 60"



2 DIMENSIONAL DRAWER, 1973

25" x 36"



2 DIMENSIONAL CHAIR, 1973

36" x 25½"

FRAME: Window

From day to day, we witness the growing repugnance felt by people of a greater awareness for words of a visceral, analogical or incantatory character. On the other hand, the visual or descriptive adjective, the word that contents itself with measuring, locating, limiting, defining, indicates a difficult but most likely direction for a new art.

—Robbe-Grillet

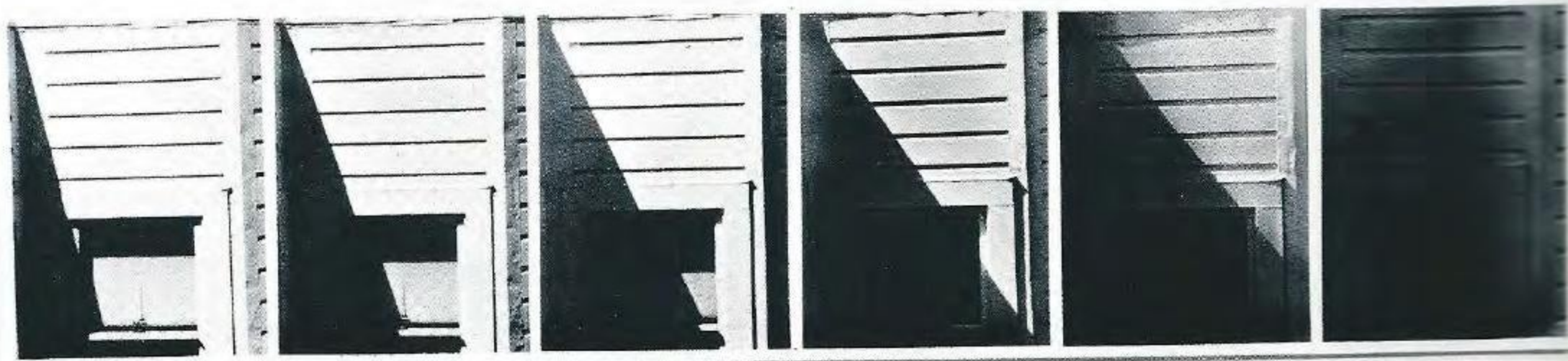
The window pieces are records of natural and photographic processes.

In SHADOW EQUALS 6 HOURS photographs were taken at hourly intervals charting the movement of light and time by the presence of a shadow. The window was framed to de-emphasize objectness and to stress a two-dimensional image. Besides the instances of comparative light and darkness subtle tonal variations occur within successive frames.

The density of light is measured in LIGHT EQUALS 6 HOURS. Here, the window acts as a channel through which the texture of light is exemplified in a comparative process.

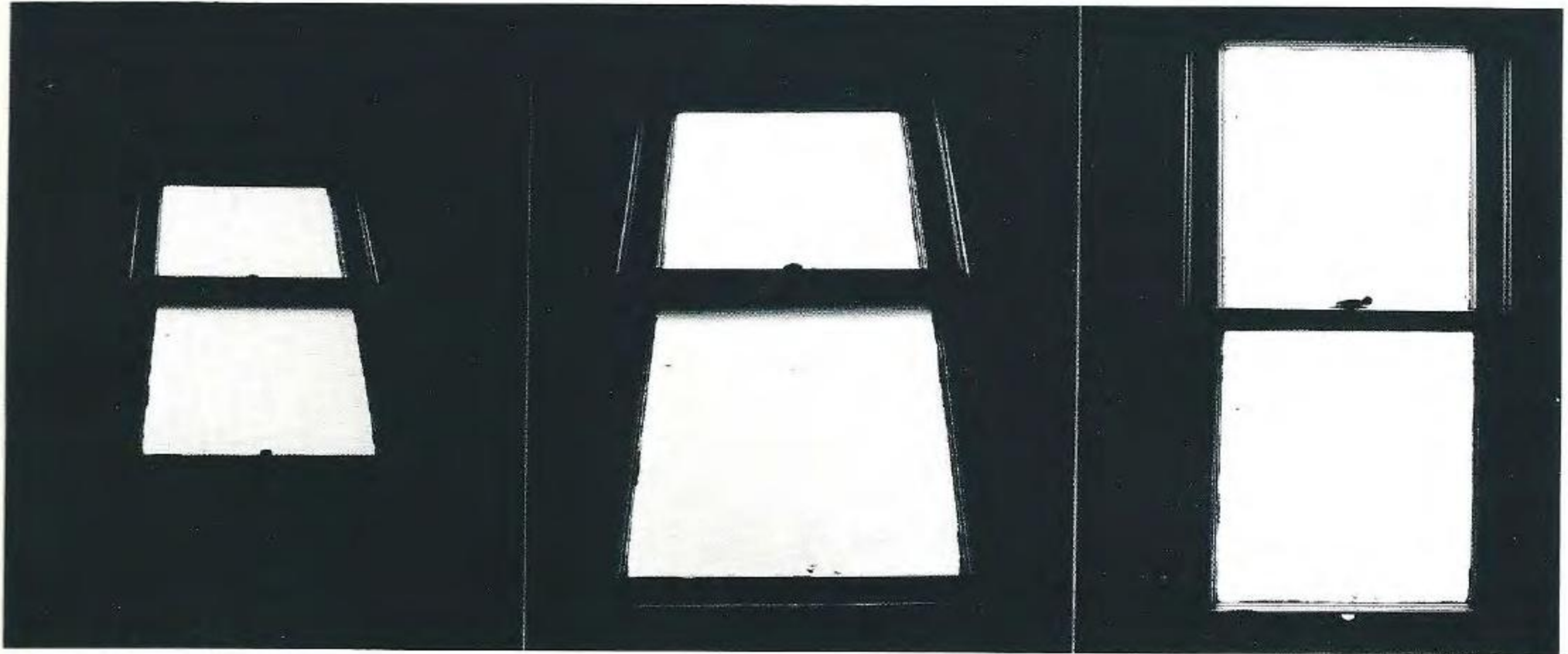
WINDOW PERSPECTIVE illustrates three angles of the same window by the imposition of photographic perspective.

LIGHT ON FLOOR is reproduced from the photographic contents taken from a roll of film exposing the hatching and cross-hatching of light patterns at fifteen minute intervals. A window provides the source of light and the angle of reflection.



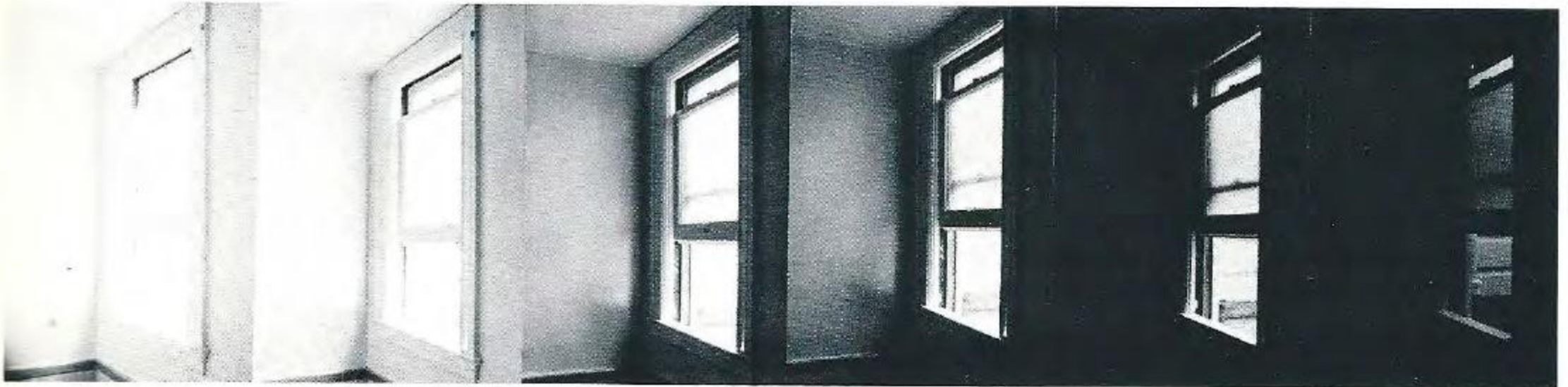
SHADOW EQUALS 6 HOURS, 1972

10" x 48"



WINDOW PERSPECTIVE, 1973

20" x 48"



LIGHT EQUALS 6 HOURS, 1972

10" x 48"

A photograph not only reads like the real world; it also shapes our vision. The power of photography to describe or mystify the evidence of our senses is present in the work of Richard Misrach. A "commitment to a personal vision of the world" is equally shared by the private language of ritual or photographic practice. By repeated actions of camera-pointing, controlled lighting and print manipulation, the artist struggles to accommodate the estrangement of experience with the remedial forms of craft.

The imprint of these patterns is traceable to Misrach's book, **Telegraph 3 A.M.**, where street photography is sublimated into a formal document revealing the aspirations and ideology of the artist. Here photographs of people in social isolation, the customs of a chemical culture and the aura of night appear like reversible metaphors encompassing the position of the artist, the practice of photography and the promise of vision. At this spiral of the process, Misrach's awareness of the synthetic qualities of the medium were transferred to a personal system of "night photography."

By returning to the competitive genre of landscape photography, the desert was chosen as a site to expand the "illusionistic devices" learned from **Telegraph Avenue**. The employment of two-source lighting (natural and strobe), long exposures and wideangle perspective increased the complexity of ritual penetrating the purity of forms veiled in darkness. In a series of photographic displacements, the images of cacti are illuminated "as if seen in a dream." The photographs are ceremonially completed in the darkroom. The prints are subjected to a toning process obscuring the space around the central object in the photograph. The effectiveness of the potential icon is directly related to the skill and mystification of its construction. The viewer is encouraged to freely interpret the work outside the process.

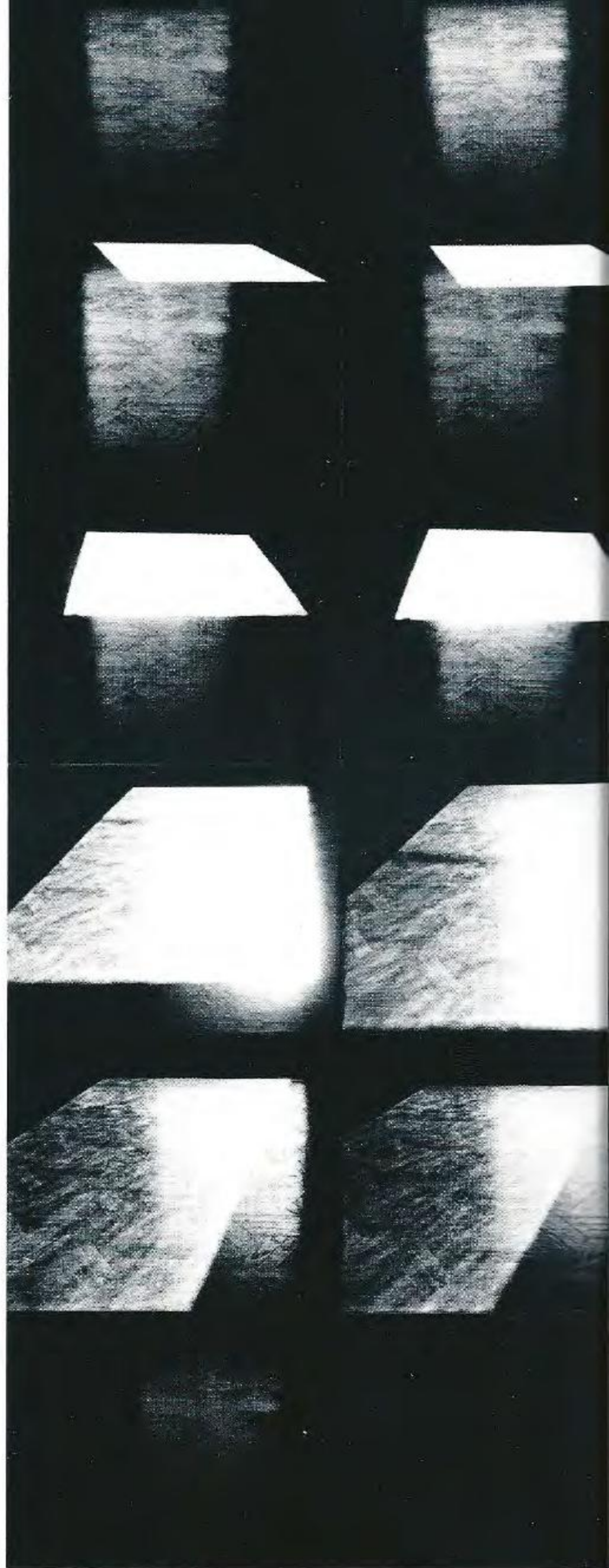
In order to close together the formal meaning of the photograph and its process in a more intrinsic reading, Misrach advances the following theory that now involves type-C color photographs of the Hawaiian landscape. "... and for me, what I feel like I'm doing is taking one step closer to the object, to the point where you normally don't see—you won't see a full palm tree. Its got to do with perspectives and when you don't see the full palm tree, then you see something else. You see what the camera sees—a configuration of forms."

The photographs of the Hawaiian landscape raise the problem of theory to the foreground of the artist's thinking. Perhaps, the additive process of color seems redundant in view of a landscape already charged with exotic forms of vegetation. Nevertheless, distinct changes appear in the photographs that can not be understood simply as visual adjustments. The shift in thinking has not altered the technical practices of the artist, i.e., two-source lighting, reciprocity of color shifts, long exposures and the problem of authentic color balance between the real world and camera vision. There is a move away from ritual to practices that are dialectical.

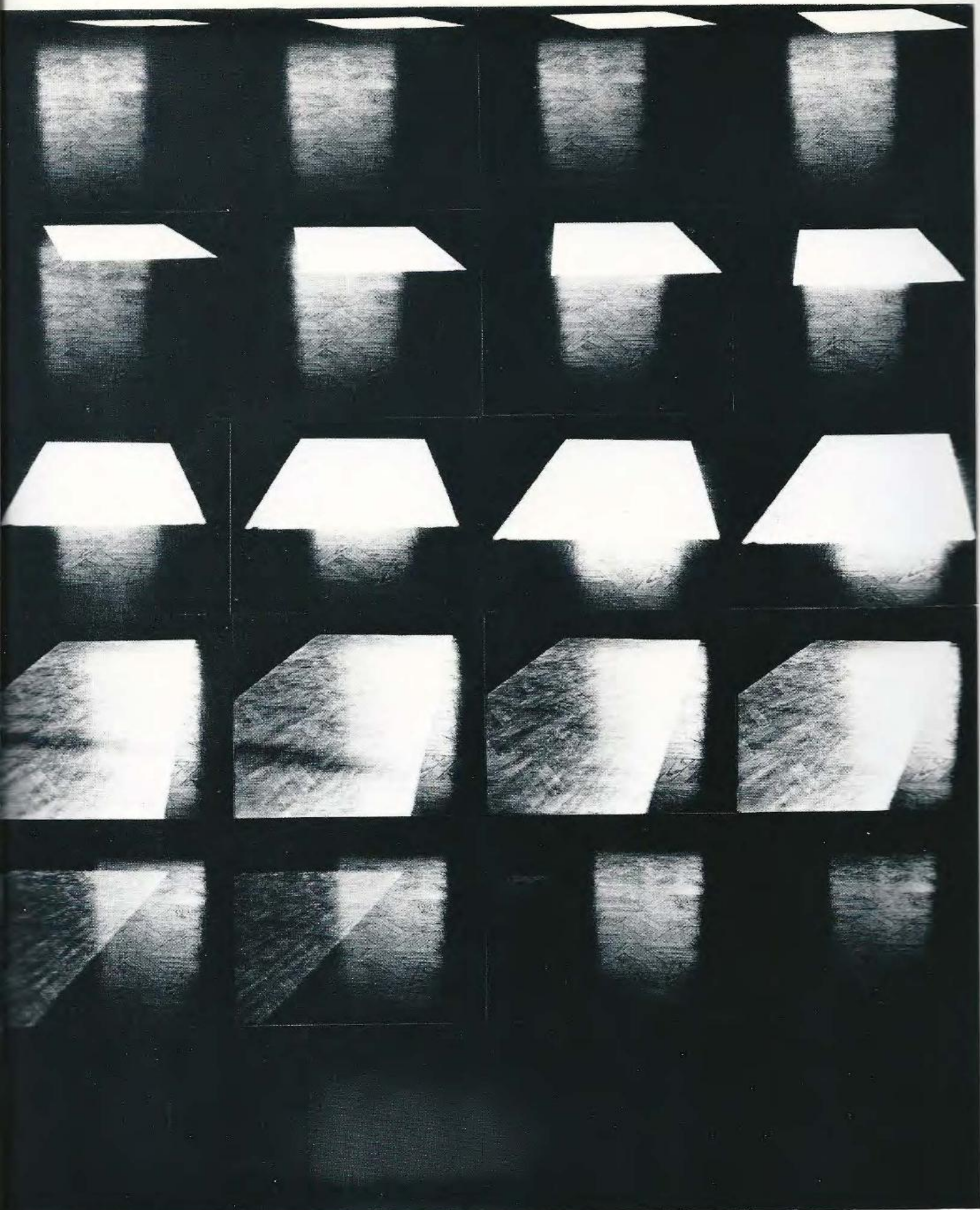
Some of the new photographs, particularly those depicting a rain forest, are more than antithetical to pictorial interpretation . . . they are surprising. The color values in the rain forest photographs are drab and washed-out; or they could be equally perceived as dry or tough. By throwing the foreground out of focus, the density of vegetation acts like a shredding of compositional conventions. Common sense perceptions are suspended by the ambiguity of gravitational forces. A Pandanus tree with torquing leaves, parasitical aerial roots, the trunk of a Banyan tree are shown in a photograph leaning, unrooted. All elements of the picture are grounded in the physicality of the photograph itself. These photographs are not simply confined to a ritual of strobing, chemical manipulation or iconic meaning. We are witnessing the meaning of a photograph . . . not a symbolic or surrealistic statement . . . but the way a camera sees a grotto, a rain forest, a jungle without a central object of focus or interest. The image of vegetation spreads across the surface of the photograph as if it were always there—a purification of vision, of language, of photography.

These photographs cannot be described in terms of metaphors or symbols; nor can you rely on what you already know. The pictorial information is no longer directed to a common sense view of the full form anchored in an illusion of reality. The images now look less like the thing photographed and more like a photograph.

and
geometry
are
illustrated
by
the
photographic
contents
taken
from
a
roll
of
film
describing
the
hatching
and
cross
hatching
of
light
patterns
every
fifteen
minutes.
The
photographs
were
taken
by
Natalie
Thomas
while
I
was
at
the
dentist.
A
window
provides
the
source
of
light
for
the
work.



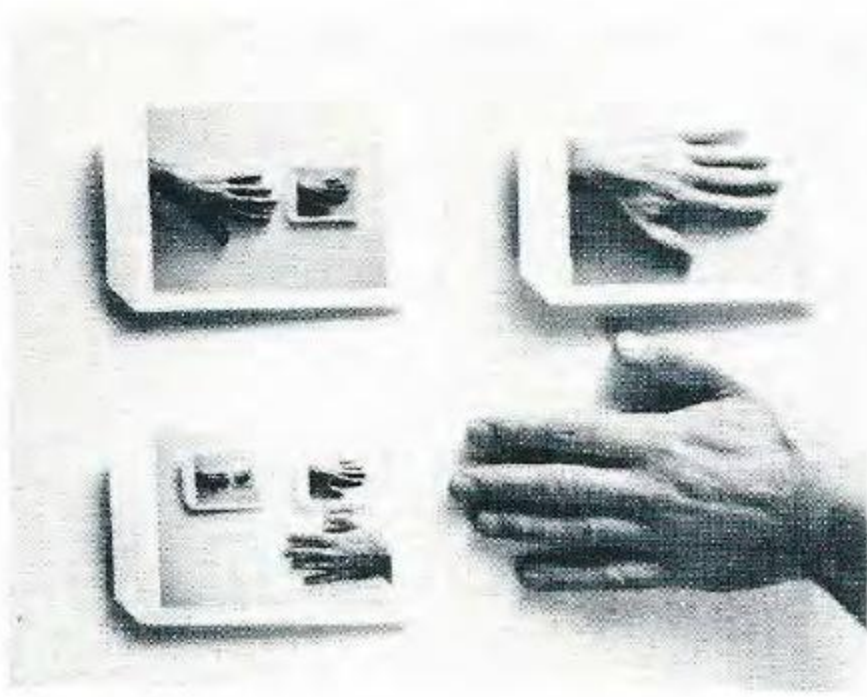
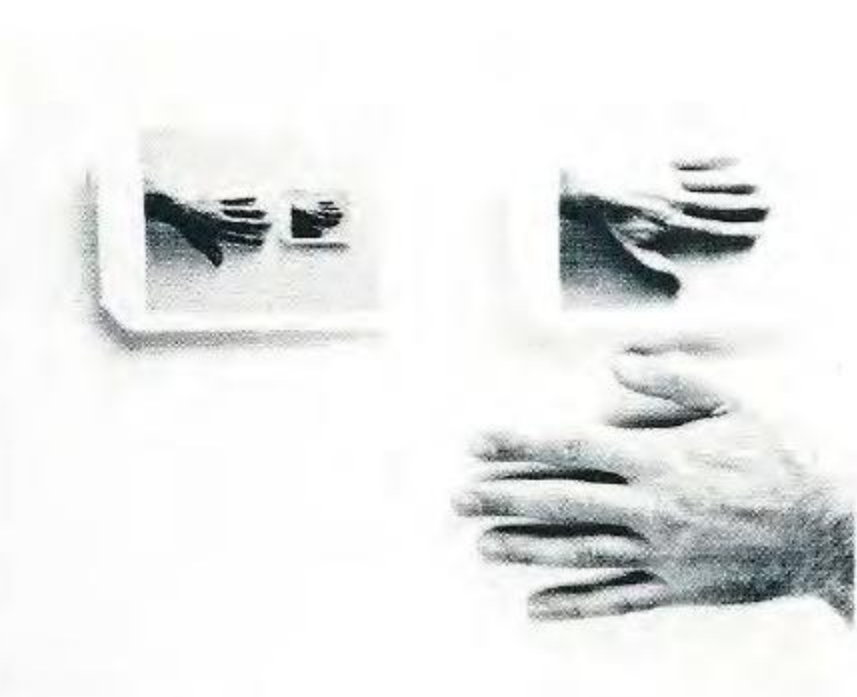
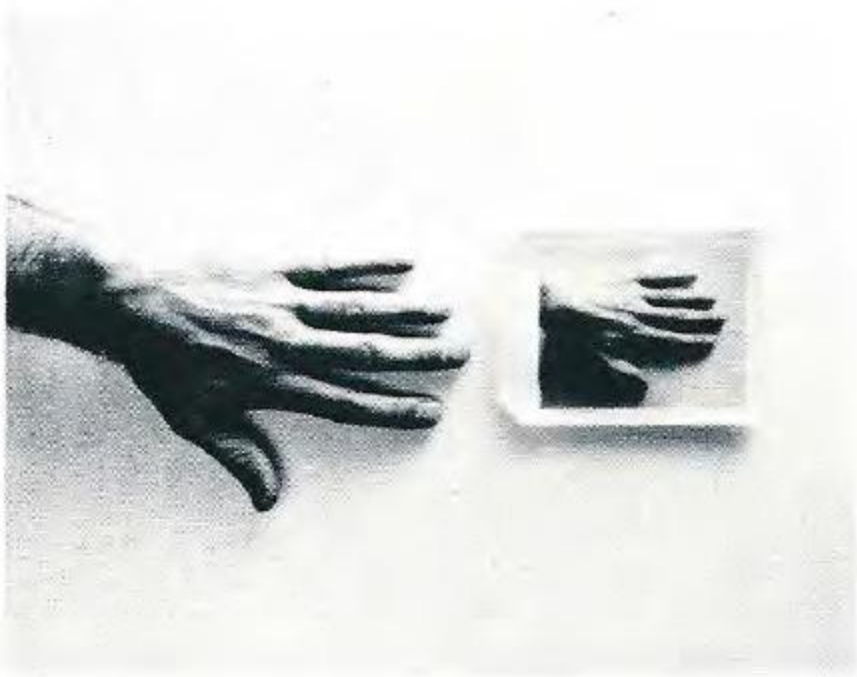
LIGHT-ON-FLOOR, 1973



FRAME: Polaroid

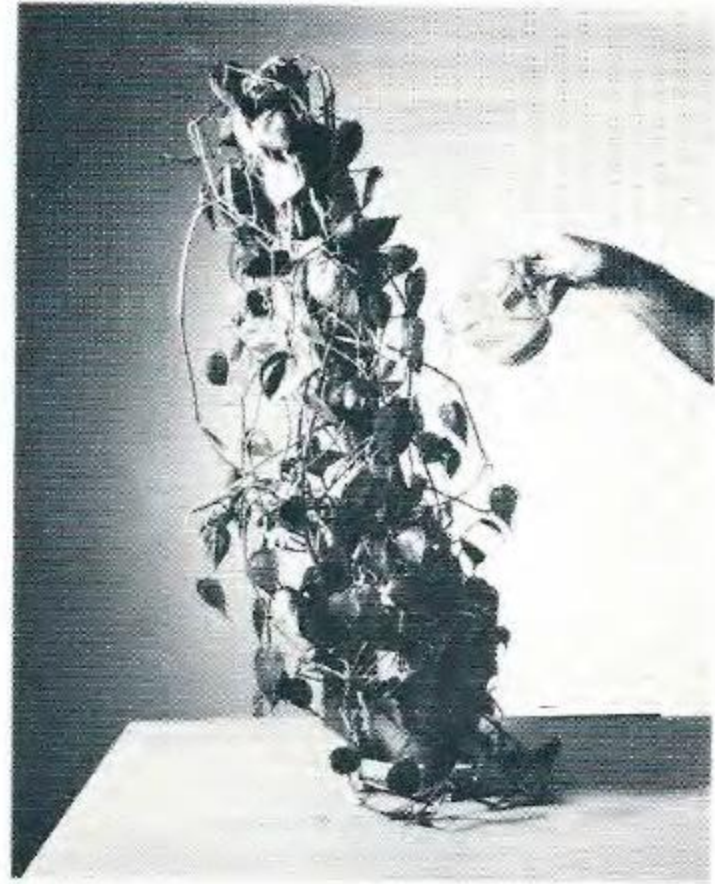
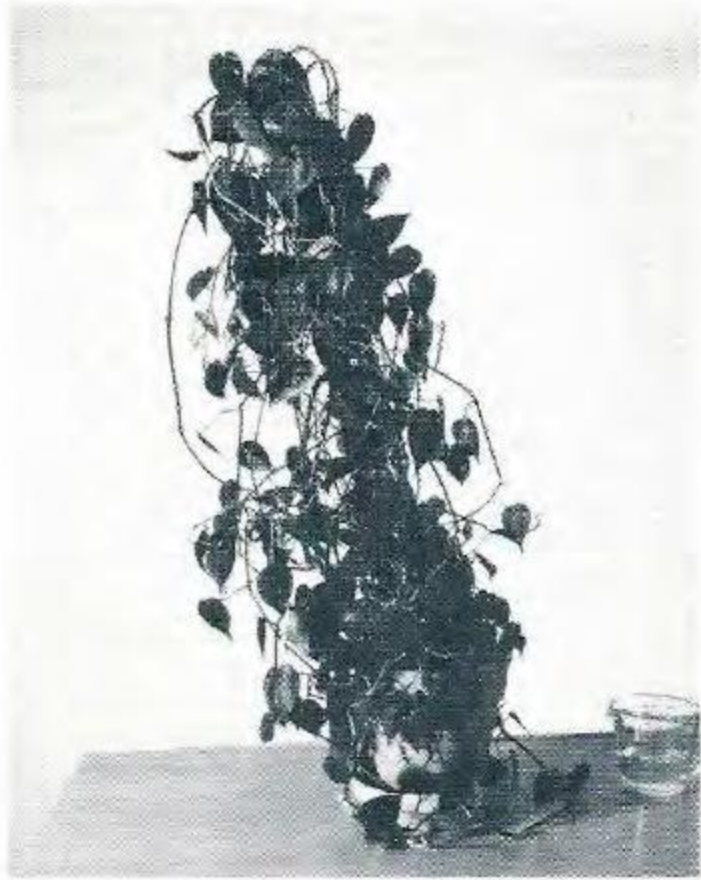
'Symbols are not what they seem to be' Wittgenstein wrote in 1913. 'In "aRb" "R" looks like a substantive but it is not one. What symbolizes in "aRb" is that "R" occurs between "a" and "b" '. For instance 'John loves Mary' the symbol is not just 'loves', but the fact that the word 'loves' occurs to the left of one name and to the right of the other.

—Anthony Kenny



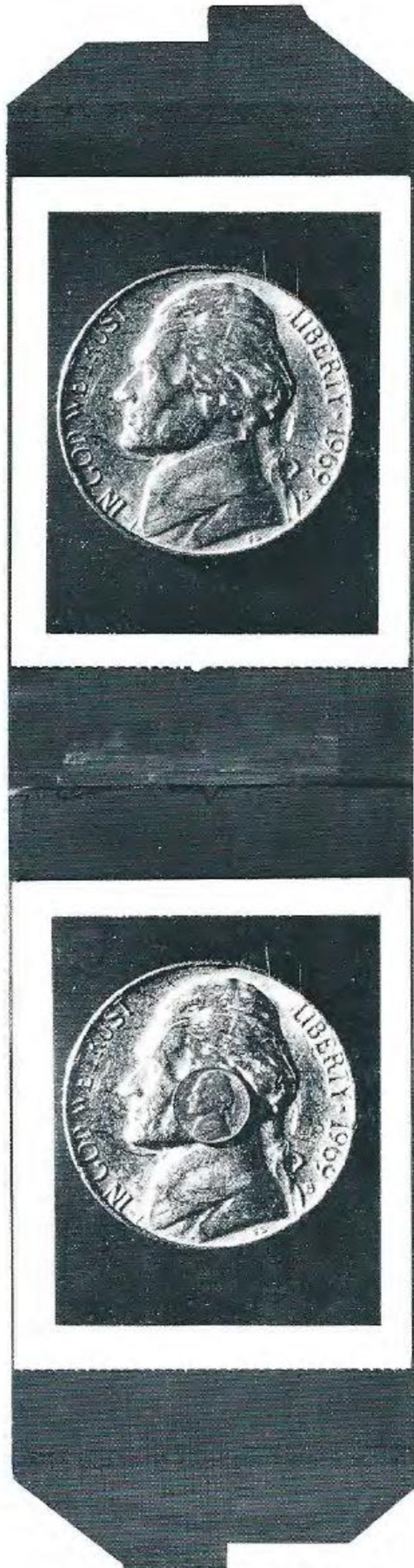
POLAROID HAND, 1972 (B & W & Color)

11" x 14"

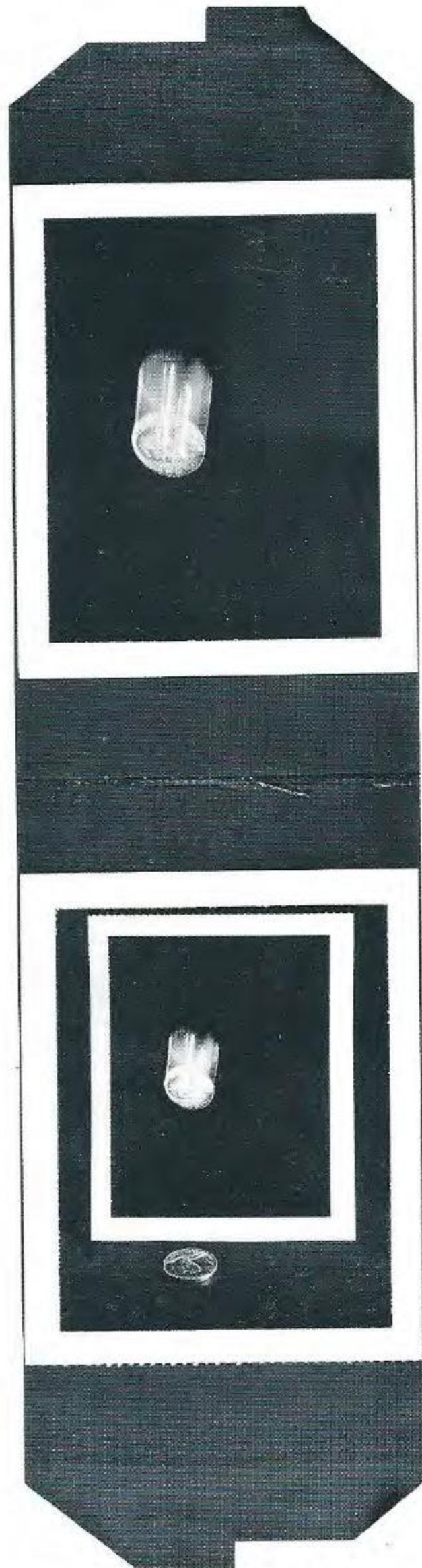


POLAROID PLANT, 1972 (Color)

14" x 11"



NICKEL SCALE, 1973



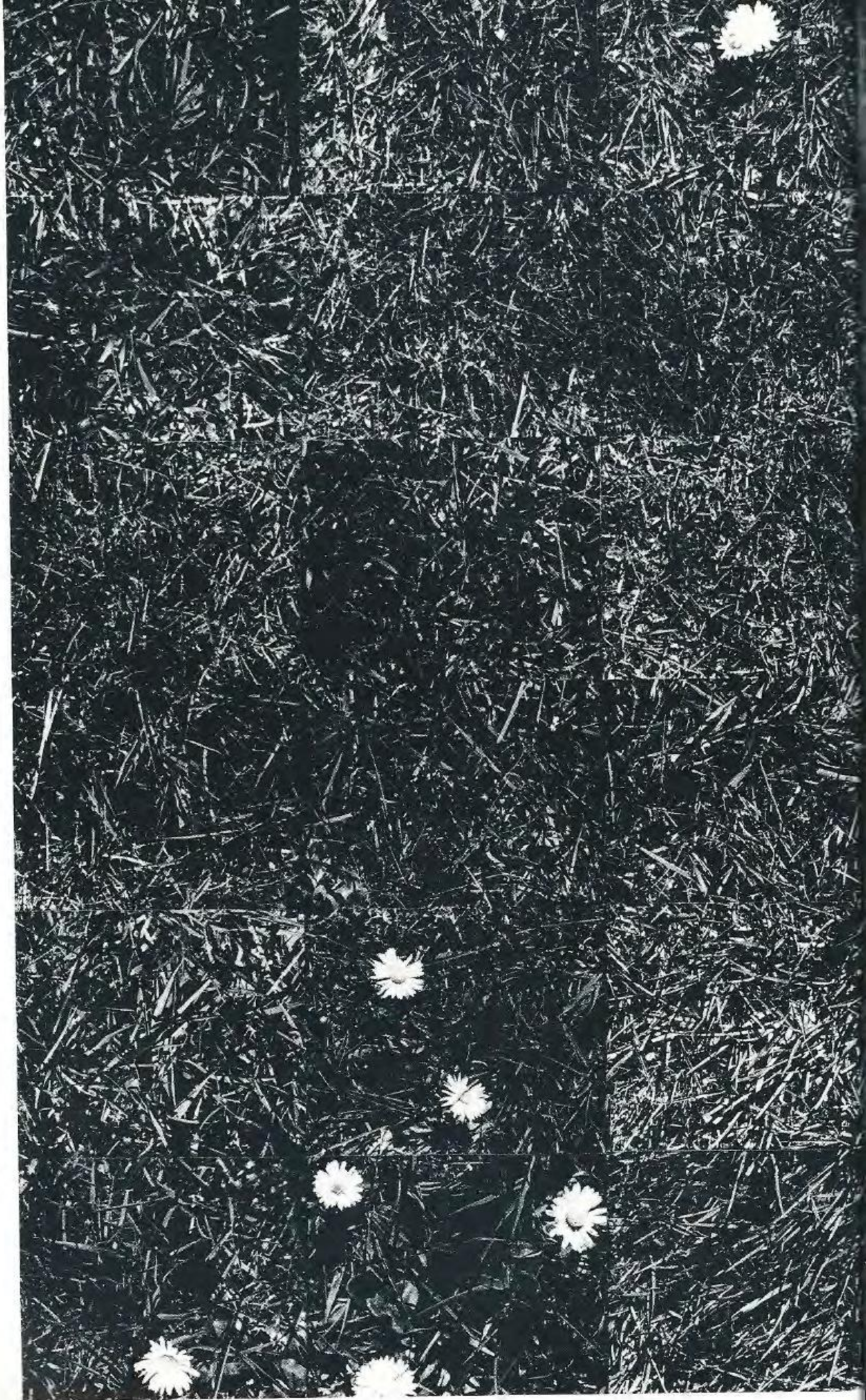
NICKEL MOTION, 1973

FORMAT/FIELD:Regular

Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them. If the predominate, hieractic nature of the unitary form functions as a constant, all those particularizing relations of scale, proportion, etc., are not thereby canceled. Rather they are bound more coherently and indivisibly together.

—Robert Morris

GRASS, SAND & CLOUDS are pieces that emphasize an overall pattern or "field." The format is made from photographs arbitrarily limited to a roll of film (36 frames). The content was chosen for its adaptability to a flat surface. Unlike other pieces, in which I use a serial order or linear scanning where borders bracket the movement of frames, the reading of these formats involves a unitary structure. The field is one order, a whole parcel, in which the random parts are blended together by the illusion of similar textures. The relationship of the process, taking the photographs, and the final presentation, the format, combines two levels of signification. The making of the work expresses horizontal relations in time while the finished object represents the simultaneous meaning of the process. It was not until a perspective was actually found that the idea for the work could be released. The idea of a field was determined by perspective, an aerial vantage of six inches for grass and sand, and infinity for clouds, provided the means of execution. By presenting the works as wallpieces the viewer faces a distortion of the original position or perspective. The scale of works engages the peripheral vision of the viewer in contrast to the monocular image of the landscape photographer. The pieces GRASS, SAND & CLOUDS have a fixed setting, i.e., the wall. They can, however, hang vertically or horizontally. To reiterate: photographs of grass, sand or clouds transmit their meaning relative to the development of ideas involving scale, setting, randomness and order.

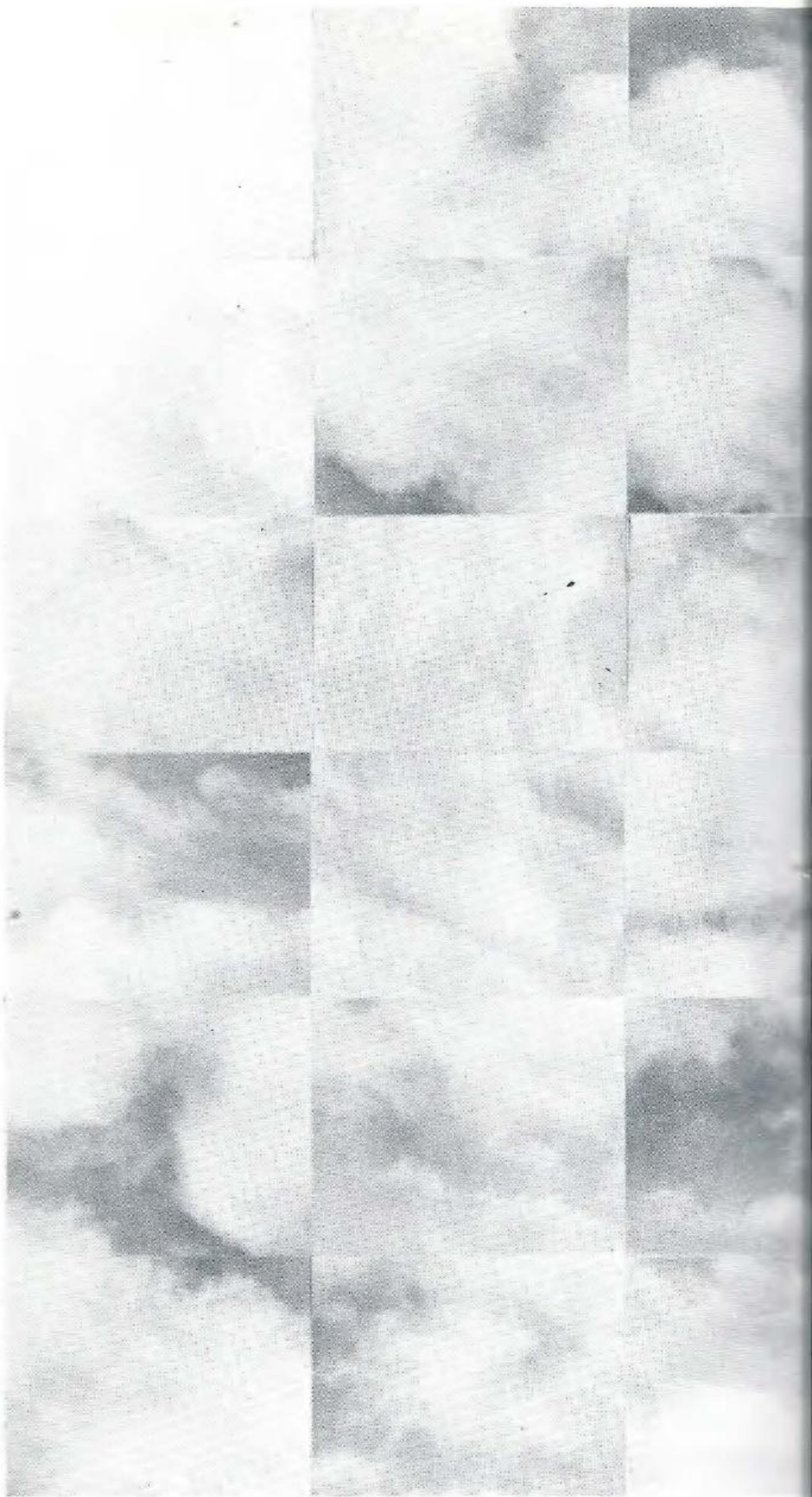


GRASS, 1973

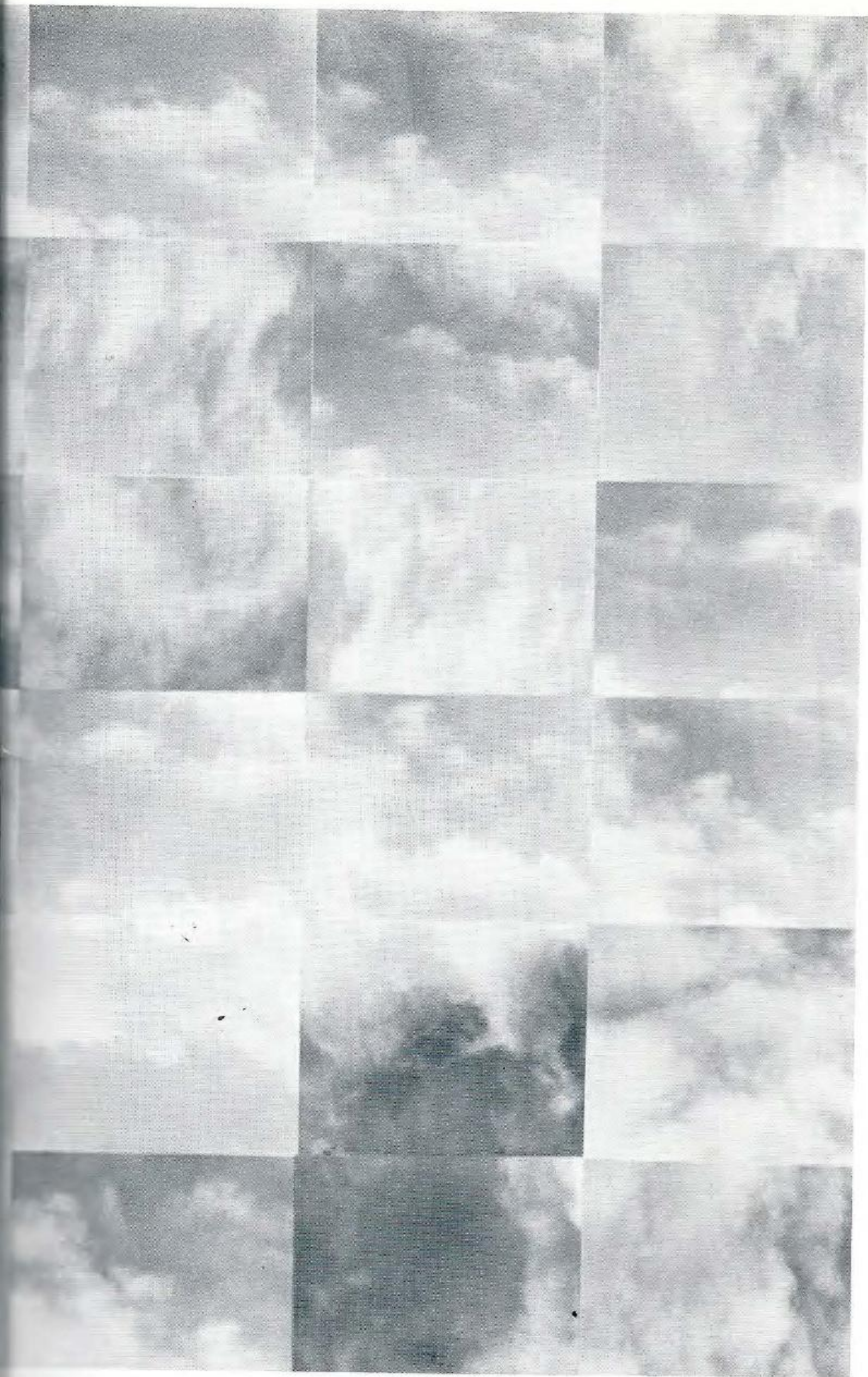


48" x 60"

Simplicity
of
shape
does
not
necessarily
equate
with
simplicity
of
experience.
Unitary
forms
do
not
reduce
relationships.
They
order
them.
If
the
predominate,
hieratic
nature
of
the
unitary
form
functions
as
a
constant,
all
those
particularizing
relations
of
scale,
proportion,
etc.,
are
not
thereby
canceled.
Rather
they
are
bound
more
coherently
and
indivisibly
together.
—Robert Morris



CLOUDS, 1973



48" x 60"

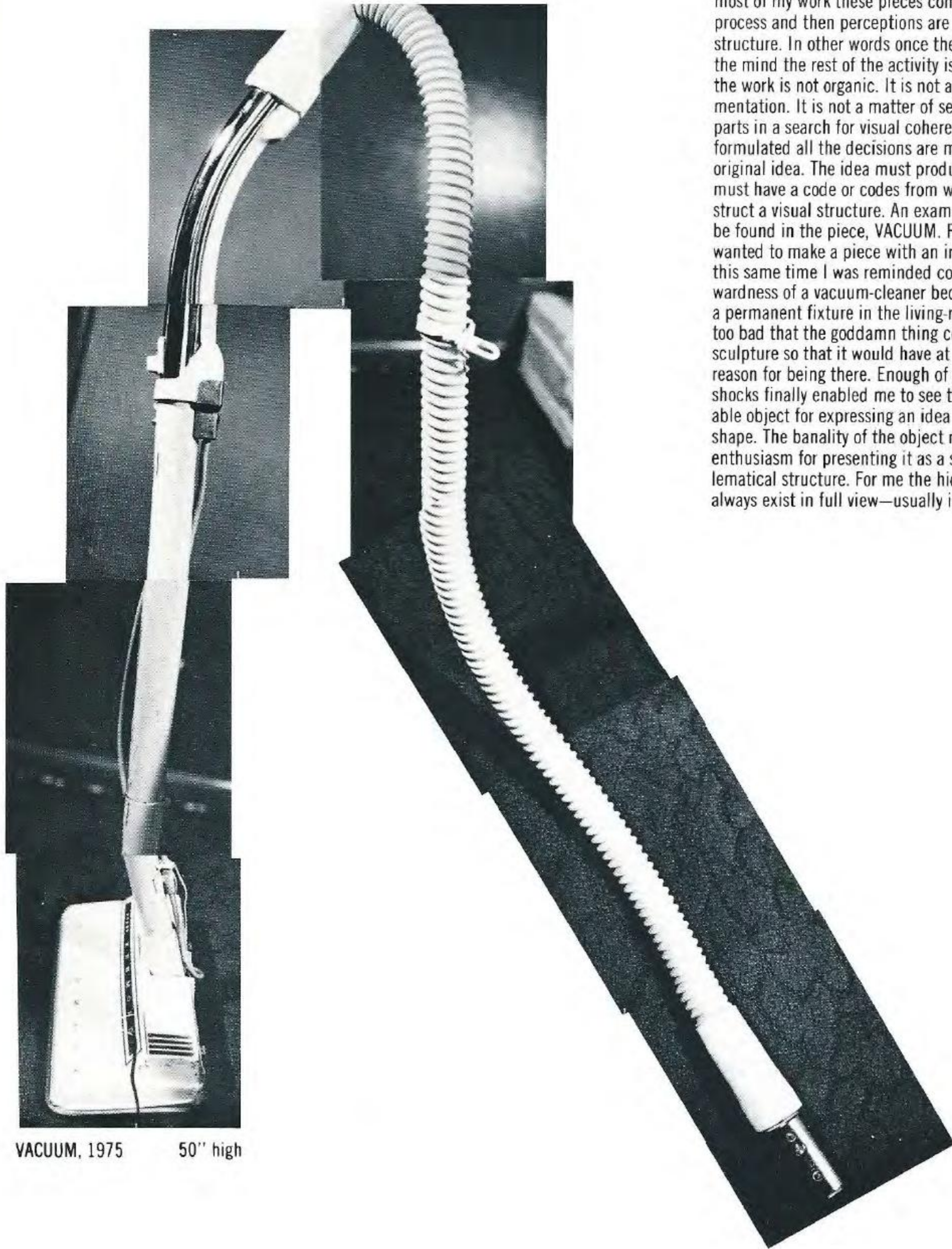


SAND, 1973

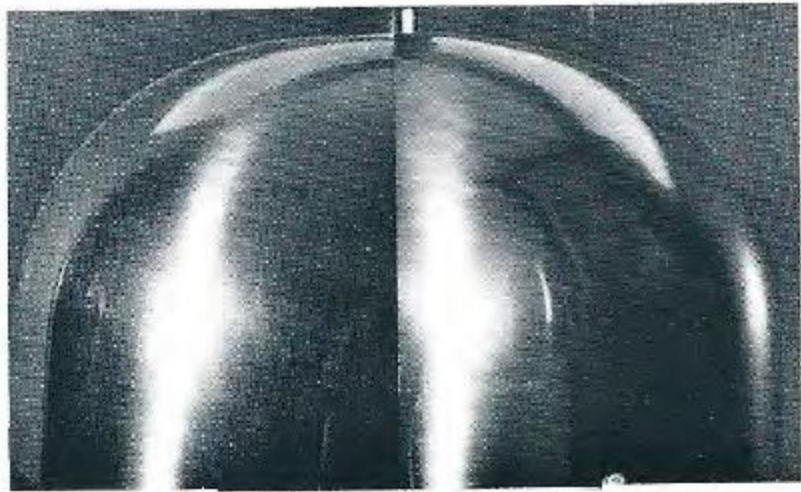


48" x 60"

In the show at William Sawyer Gallery you will find a couple of new pieces based on an ir-regular format. Like most of my work these pieces come out of a language process and then perceptions are introduced into the structure. In other words once the concept is formed in the mind the rest of the activity is routine. In this sense the work is not organic. It is not a process of experimentation. It is not a matter of selecting or adapting parts in a search for visual coherency. Once the idea is formulated all the decisions are made in relation to the original idea. The idea must produce its own answers. It must have a code or codes from which I am able to construct a visual structure. An example of this process can be found in the piece, VACUUM. For some time I had wanted to make a piece with an ir-regular shape. During this same time I was reminded constantly of the awkwardness of a vacuum-cleaner because it seemed to be a permanent fixture in the living-room. I thought it was too bad that the goddamn thing couldn't be a piece of sculpture so that it would have at least a decorative reason for being there. Enough of these domestic shocks finally enabled me to see that here was a suitable object for expressing an idea about an ir-regular shape. The banality of the object now intensified my enthusiasm for presenting it as a solution for a problematical structure. For me the hidden aspects of art always exist in full view—usually in front of me.

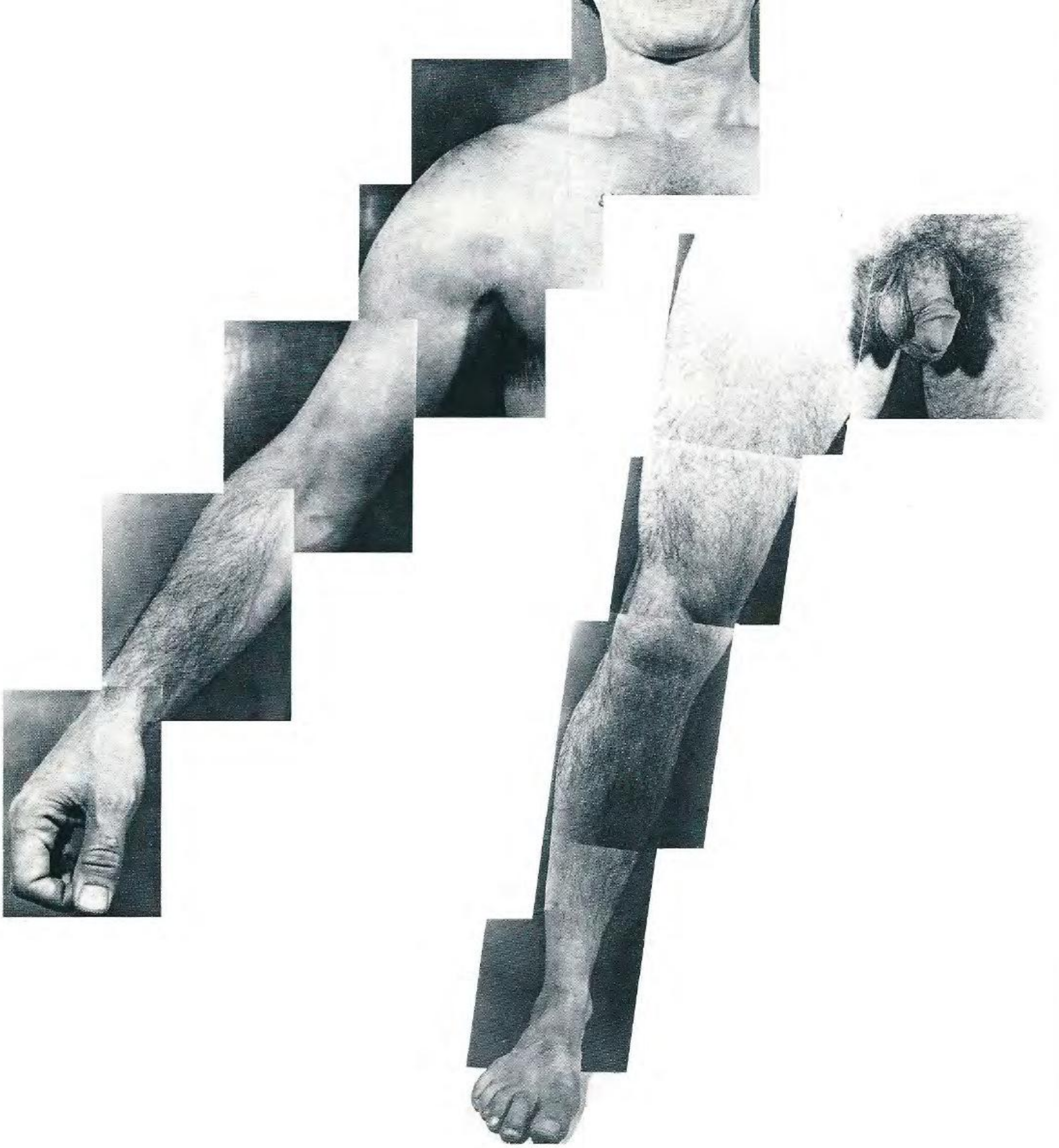


VACUUM, 1975 50" high



LAMP, 1975

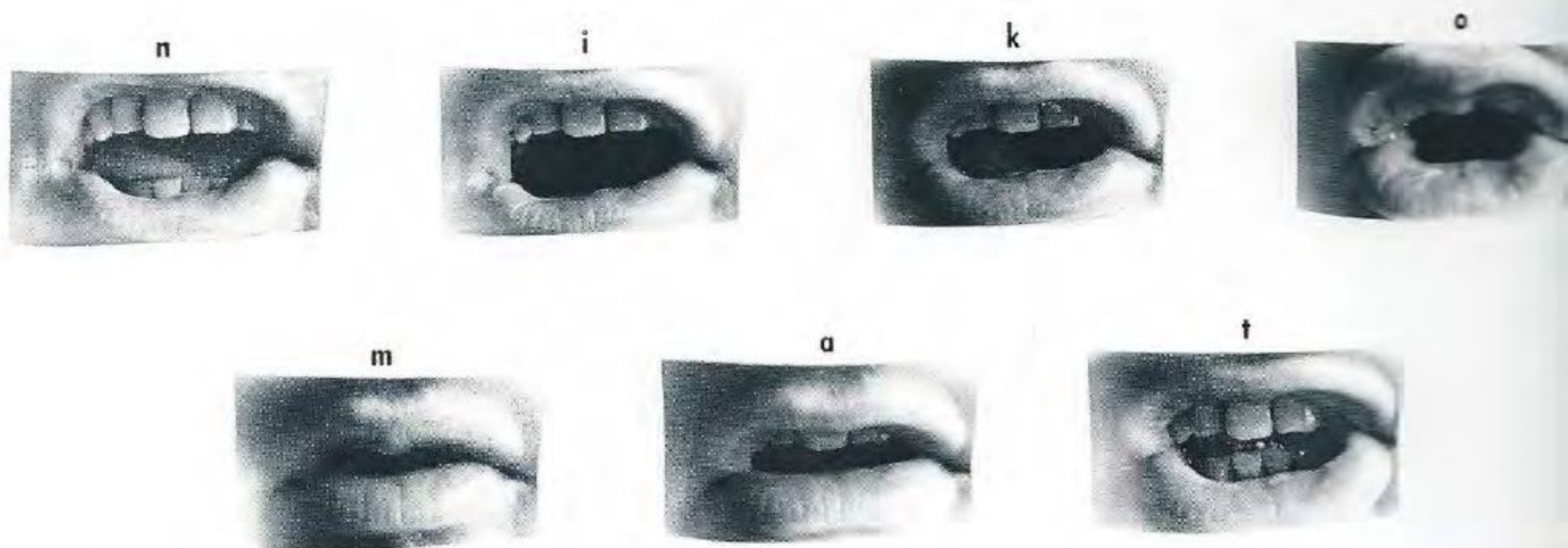
50" high



BODY FRAGMENT #1, 1975
BODY FRAGMENT #2, 1975

60" high
60" high

CAUSAL/REFLEXIVE



SOUNDING N-I-K-O-M-A-T, 1973

In the pieces, SOUNDING THE N-I-K-O-M-A-T, JUMPING WITH NIKOMAT and THROWING NIKOMAT, there is a conscious attempt to join cause and effect within a photographic structure.

SOUNDING THE N-I-K-O-M-A-T relates to the act of speech in which each image is presented as a gesture of sound expressive of an alphabetic character. In this case the camera produces a series of images naming itself.

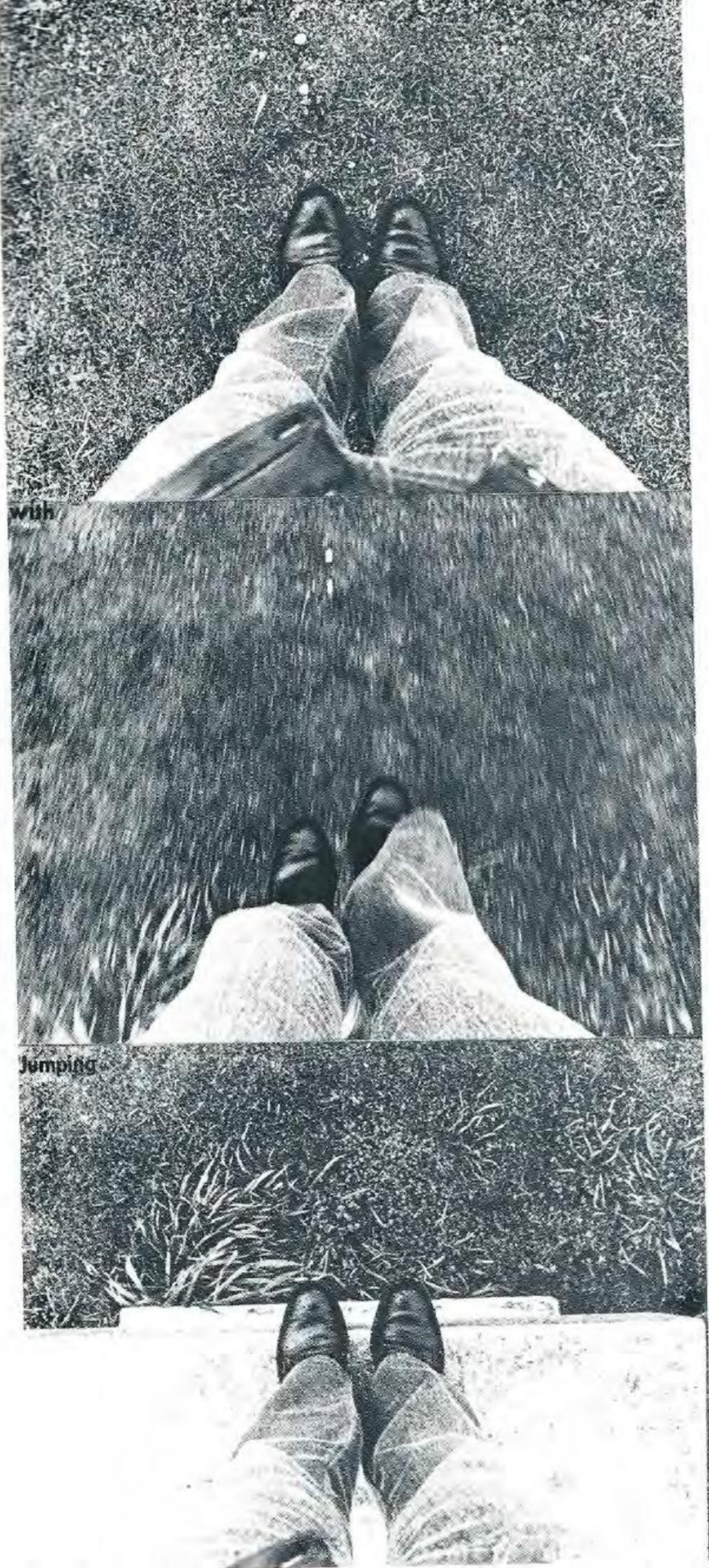
The pieces JUMPING WITH NIKOMAT and THROWING NIKOMAT integrate the act of photography with the images photographed.

In all of these examples the imagery is derived from language. Different words are considered as models for potential action. The sounding of a name is documentary in its effect; it's descriptive. SOUNDING THE N-I-K-O-M-A-T refers to itself. Though throwing and jumping transmit descriptive messages, these terms will expand the structure to include forms of an automatic response.

THROWING NIKOMAT is represented in two photographs by the documentation of the activity. The complimentary images illustrate the photographs taken automatically by the camera during the course of its flight.

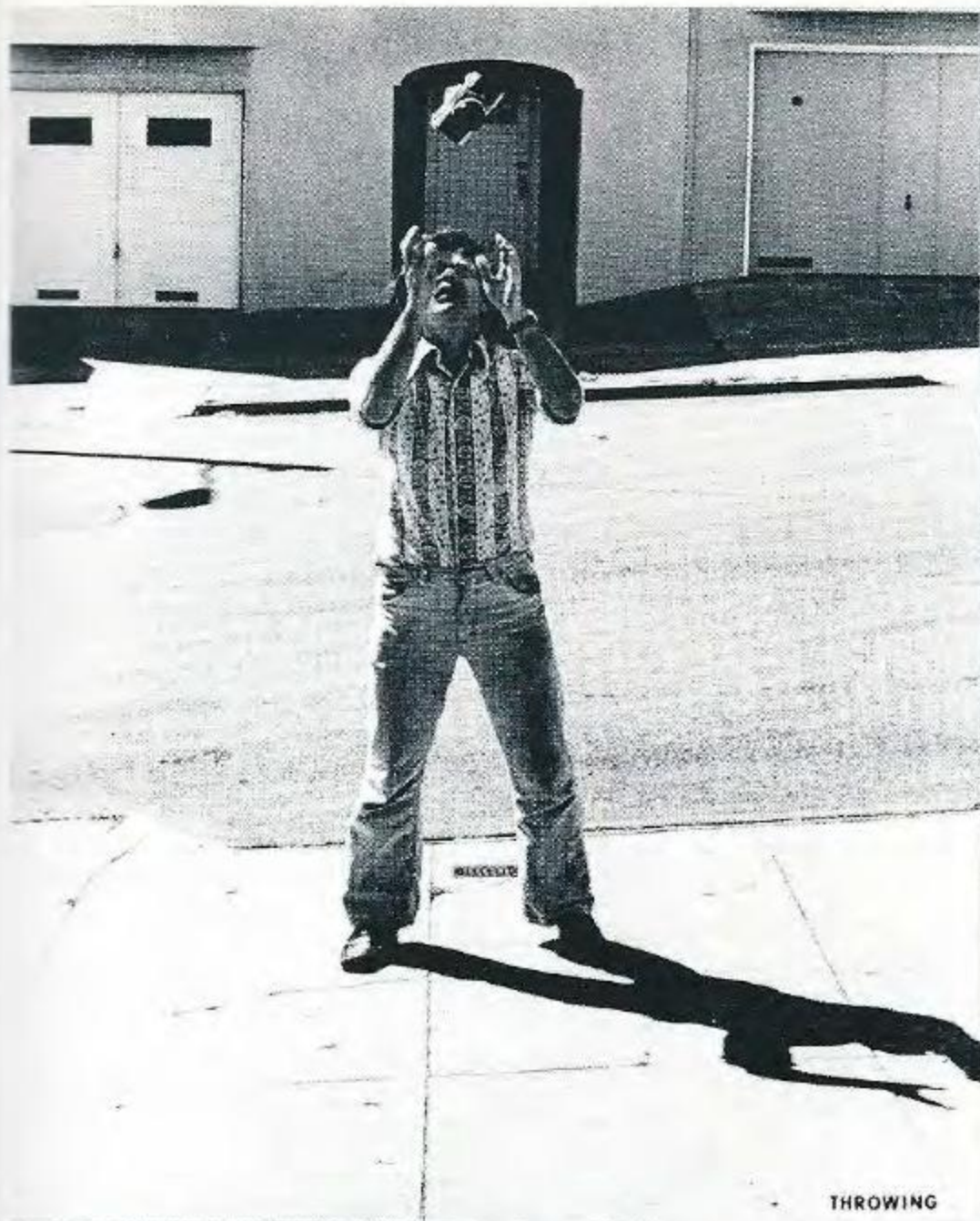
In JUMPING WITH NIKOMAT the camera partakes in all stages of the 3-part sequence; namely, recorder, recording, recorded.

graphing the photographer puts aside his past (and I guess his present and future also) and lets the camera be itself. There is one of your photographs that illustrate this quite well, two pictures of a man throwing his camera in the air, "Photograph by 'someone'" and "Photograph by Nikon". This seems to be related to the so-called "aesthetics of the snapshot".
—Minor White



JUMPING-WITH-NIKOMAT, 1973

33" x 14"



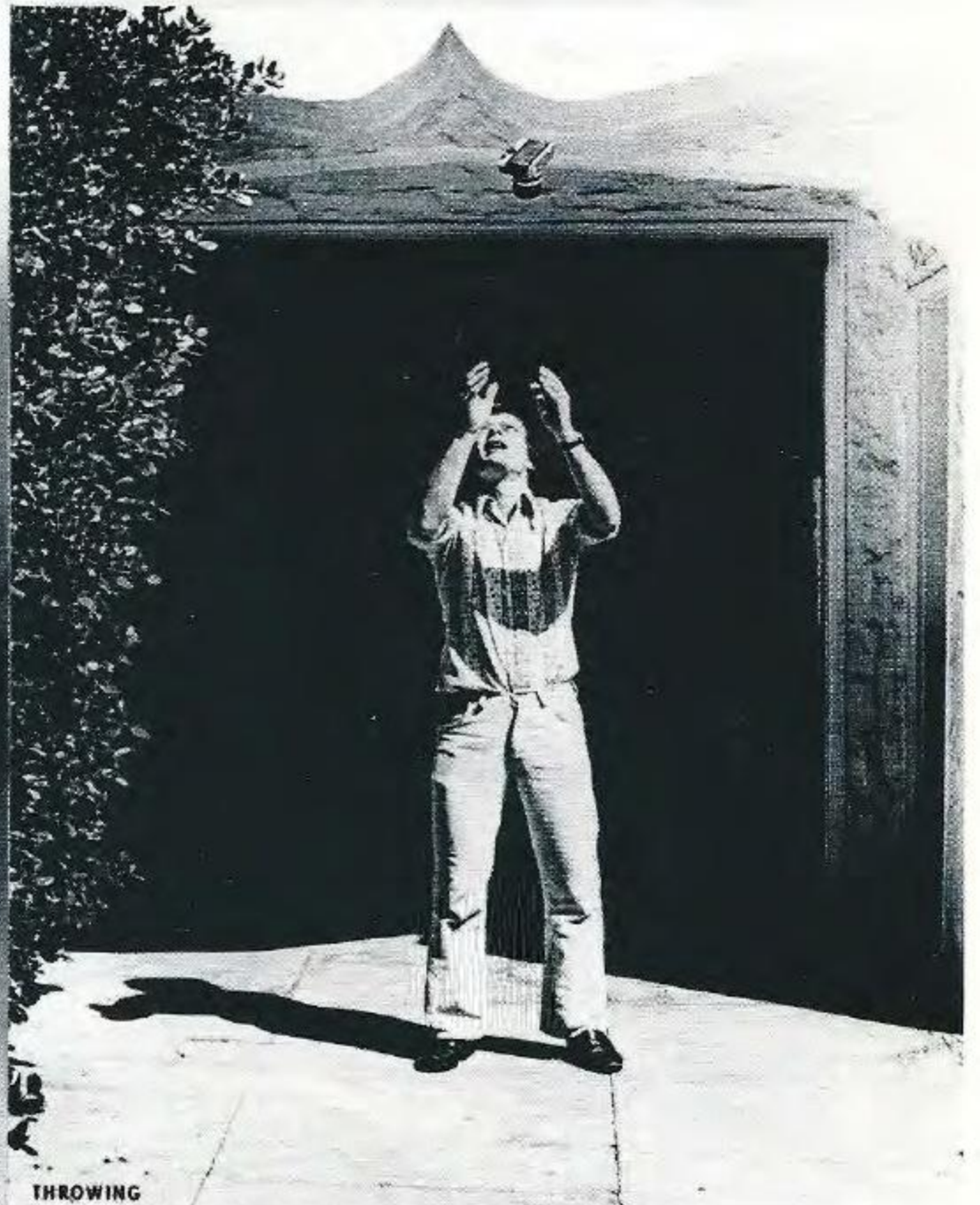
THROWING



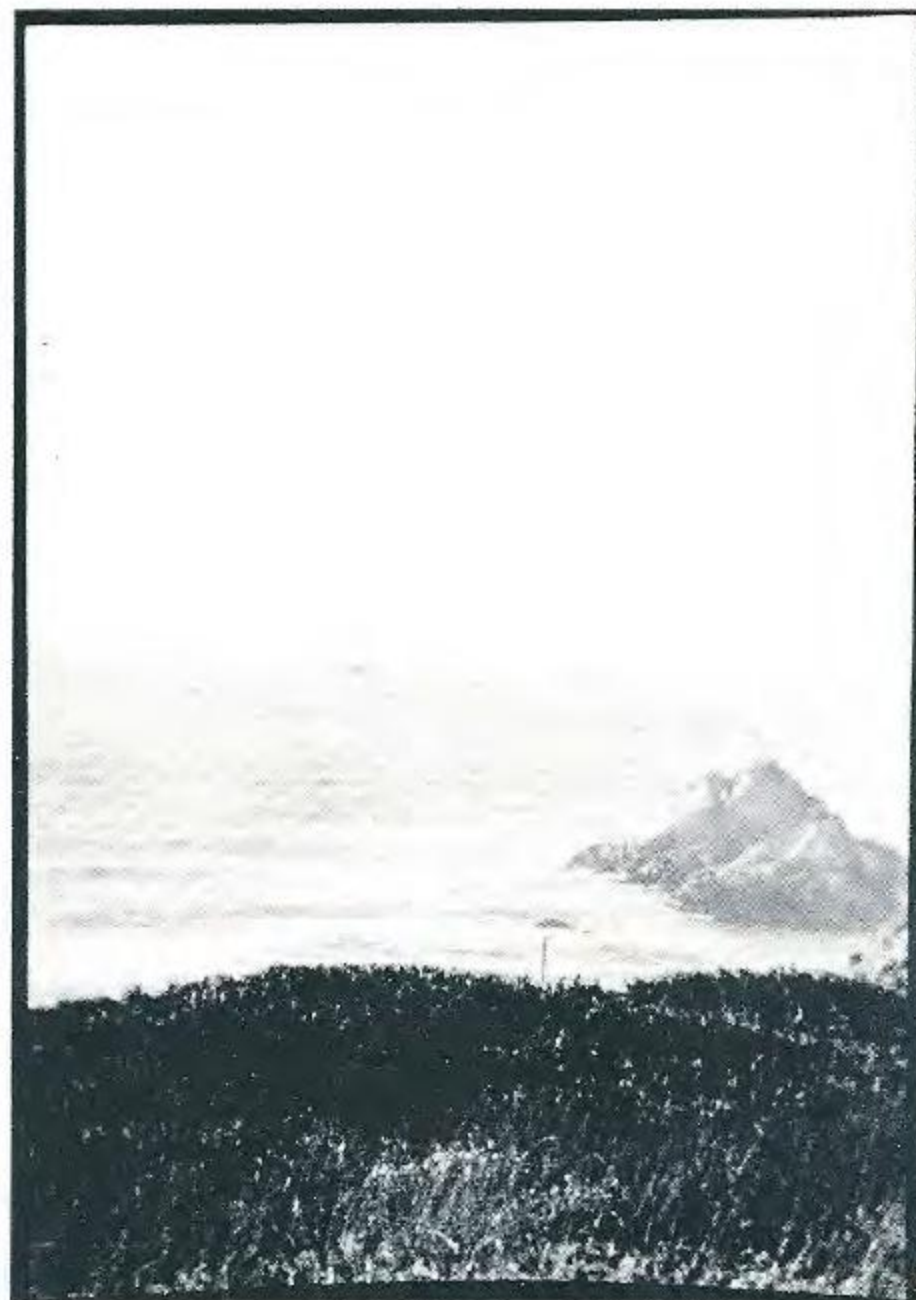
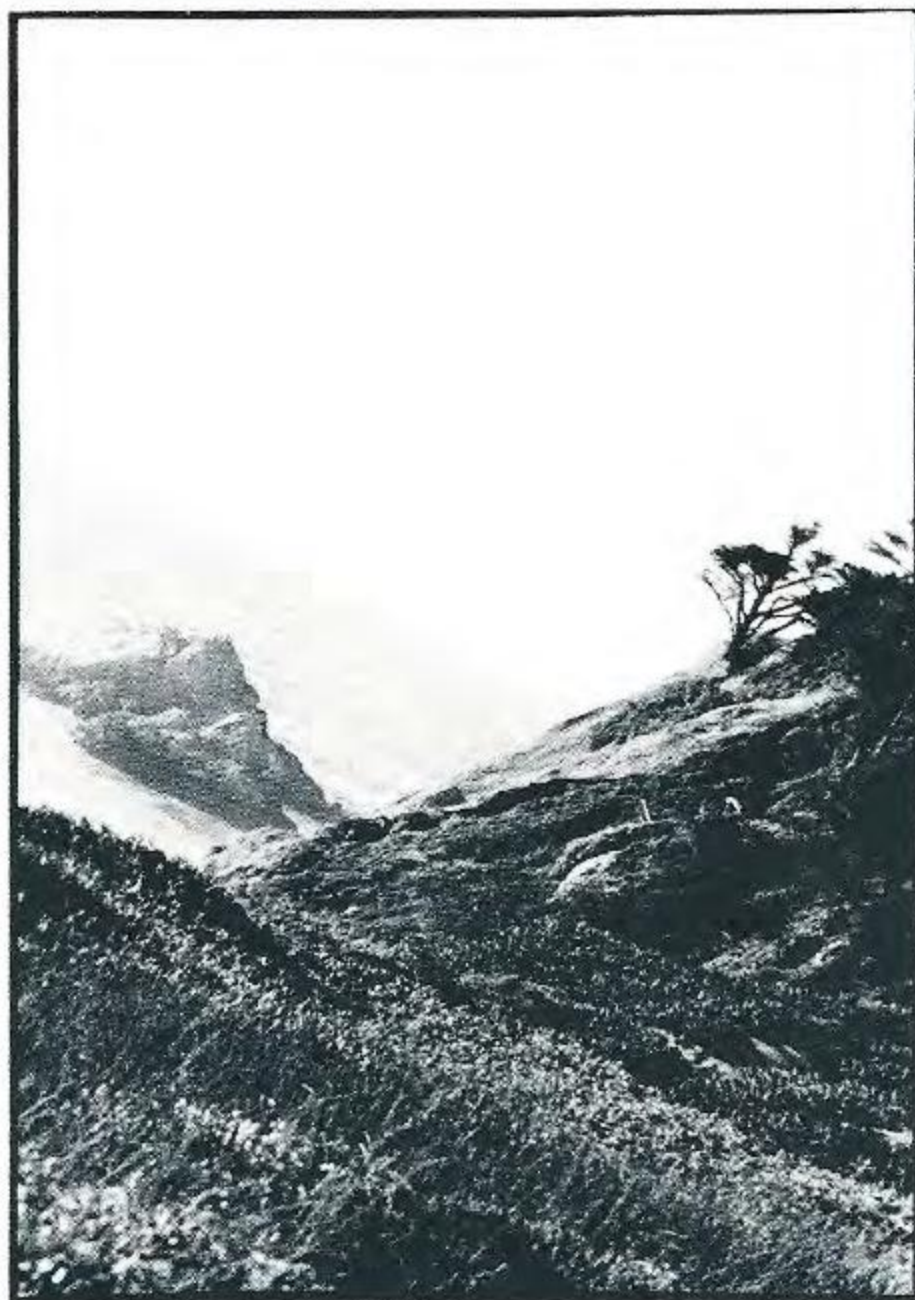
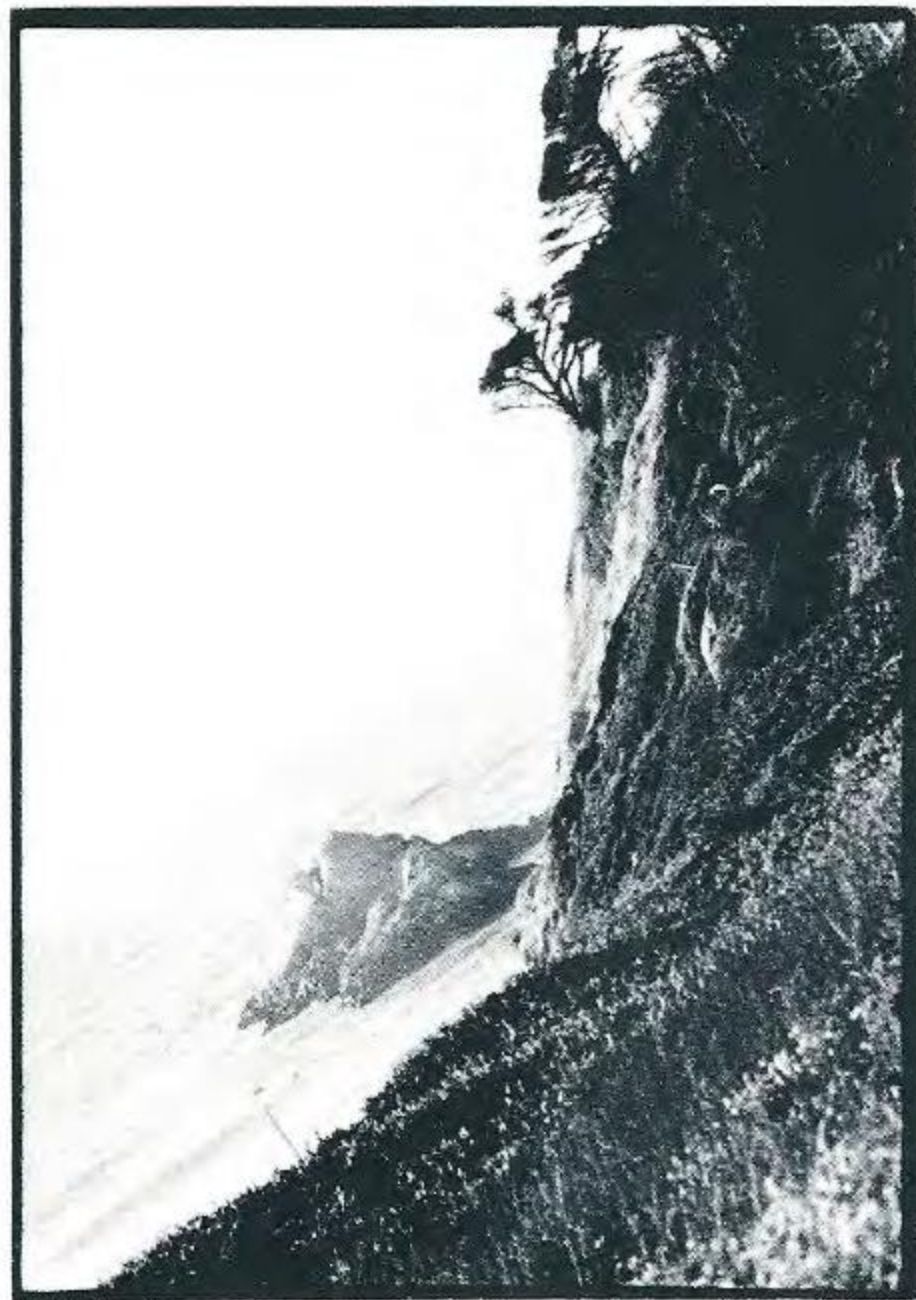
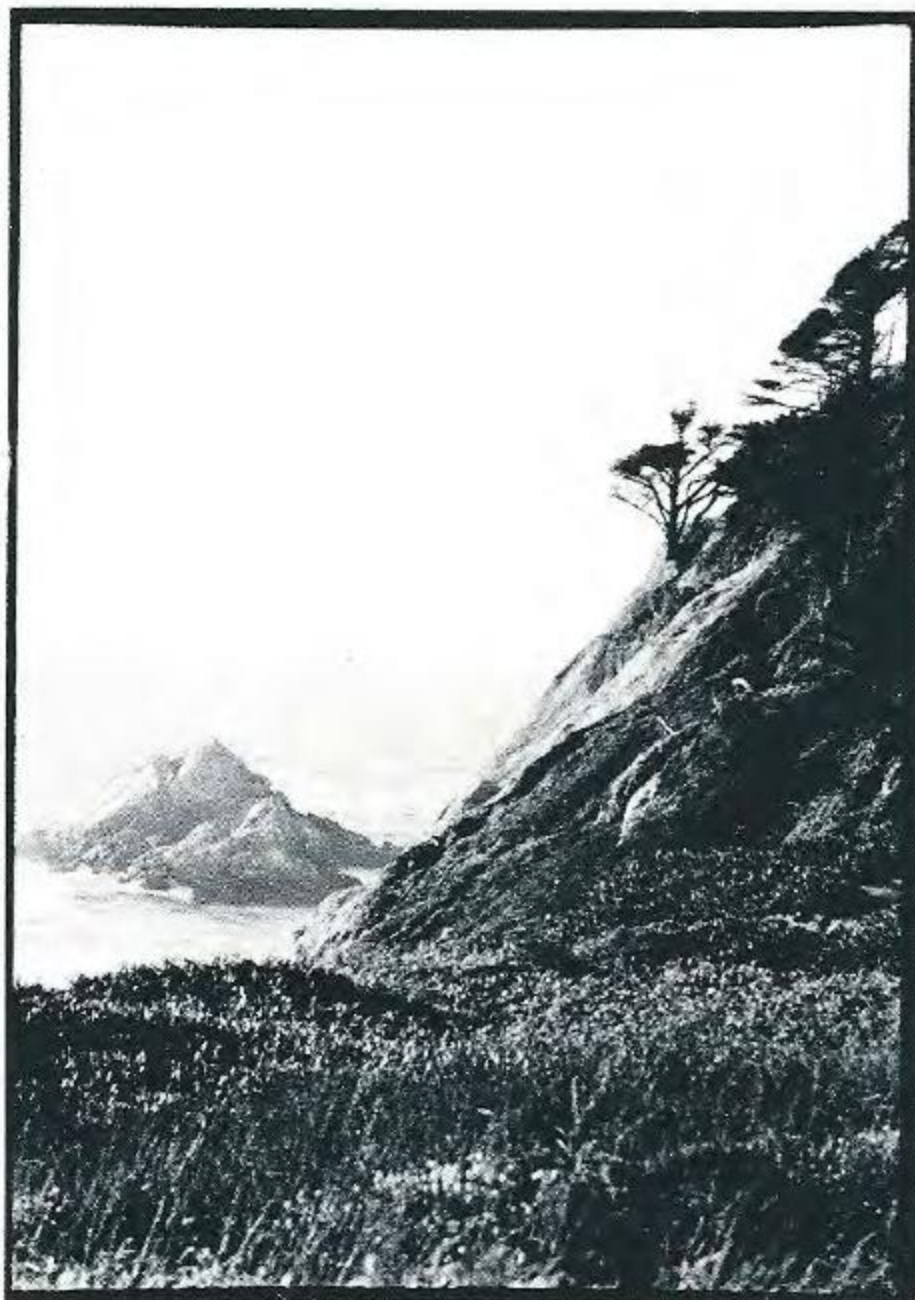
NIKOMAT



NIKOMAT



THROWING



CAMERA-MOVEMENT, 1972

20" x 16"

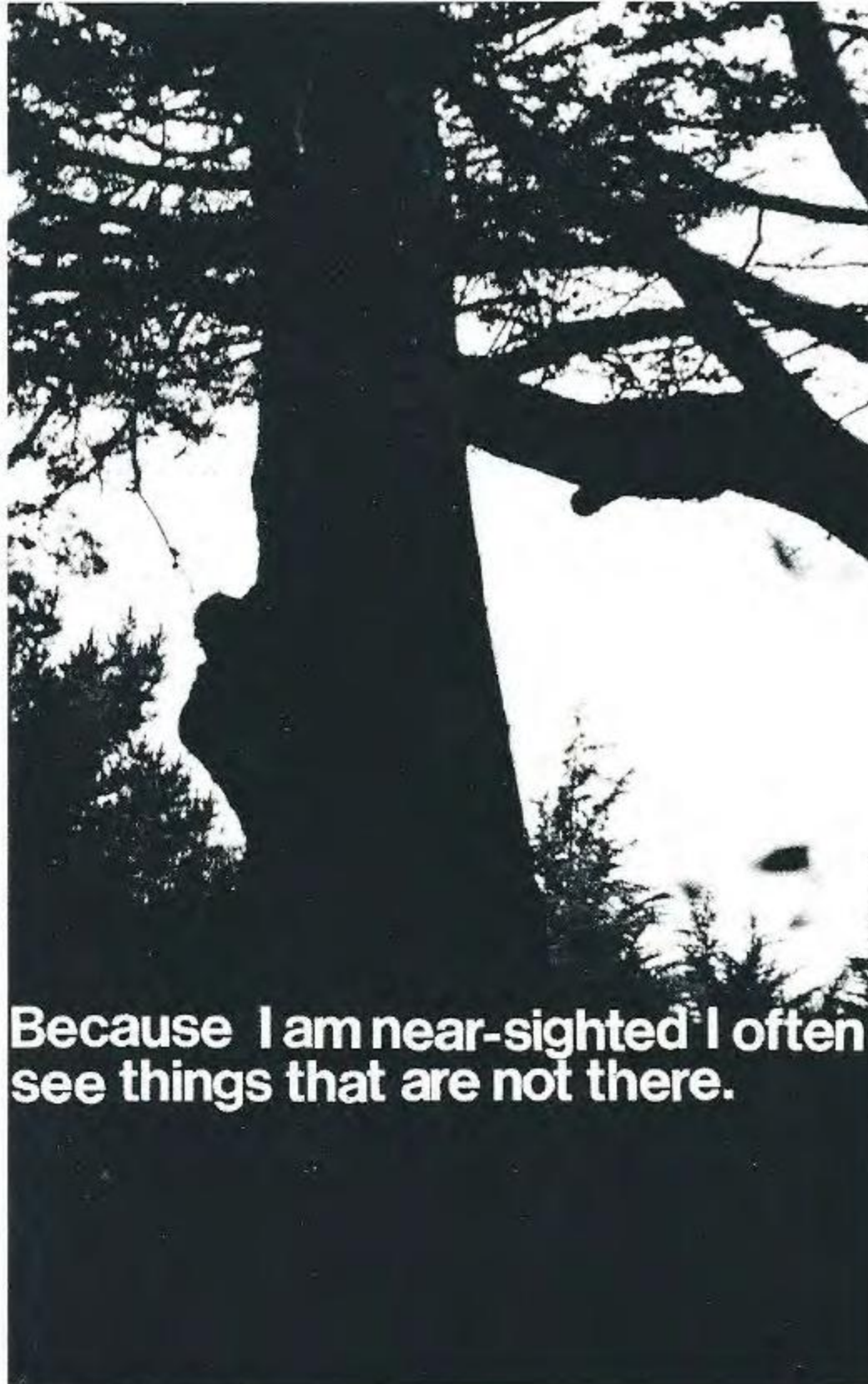
If you normally use a sponge to wash dishes or pots,



you will find a dish-cloth an unusual experience.

DISH-CLOTH, 1974

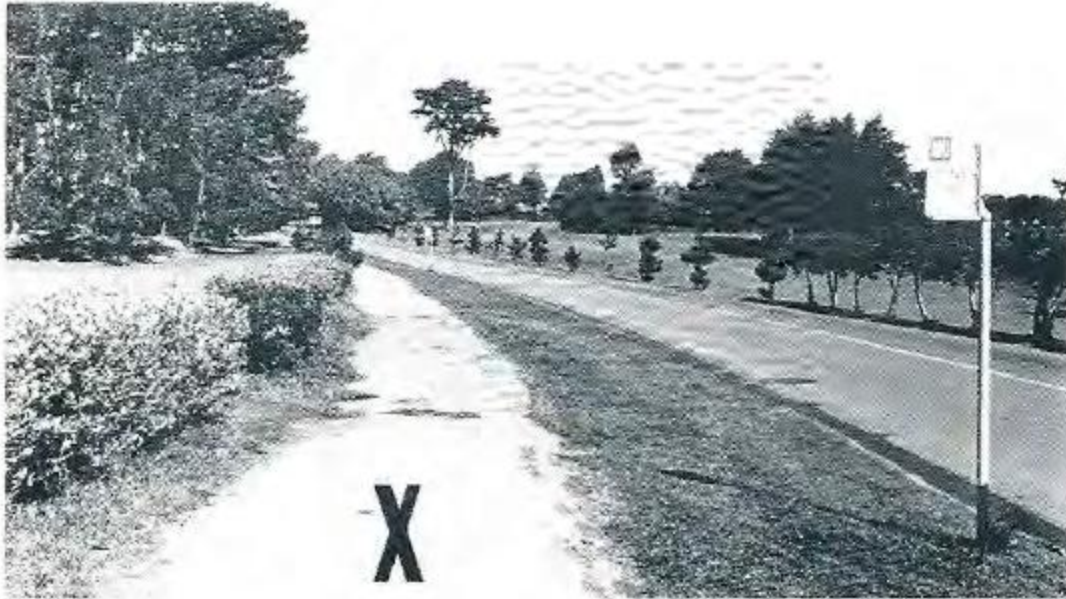
16" x 20"



**Because I am near-sighted I often
see things that are not there.**

NEAR-SIGHTED, 1973

20" x 16"



At a certain point (X) when walking to work I often have a clear impression of where I am. I ask myself will I recall the impression on reaching point (Y). Usually I do not.

X/Y, 1974



This question never arises when I am walking home downhill.

10" x 28"



LEVITATION IS THE DREAM AND FOLLY OF MANKIND, 1974

No word is used which is not immediately considered
an individual; whose inner light is utilized, and shadow
too.

—Francis Ponge



ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 6TH, 1974,
MY DAUGHTER KESA AND I VISITED MY
MOTHER AT HER APARTMENT IN THOMAS
PAINE SQUARE.

I MENTIONED TO MY MOTHER
HOW WELL SHE LOOKED AND I USED
MY DAUGHTER'S INSTAMATIC TO
TAKE THIS PICTURE.

ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 8TH, 1974,
MY MOTHER, CORA RUTH THOMAS, DIED.
LT

JANUARY 8, 1974, 1974

PROJECTS



DISPLACEMENT PROJECT

CHARACTERISTICS:

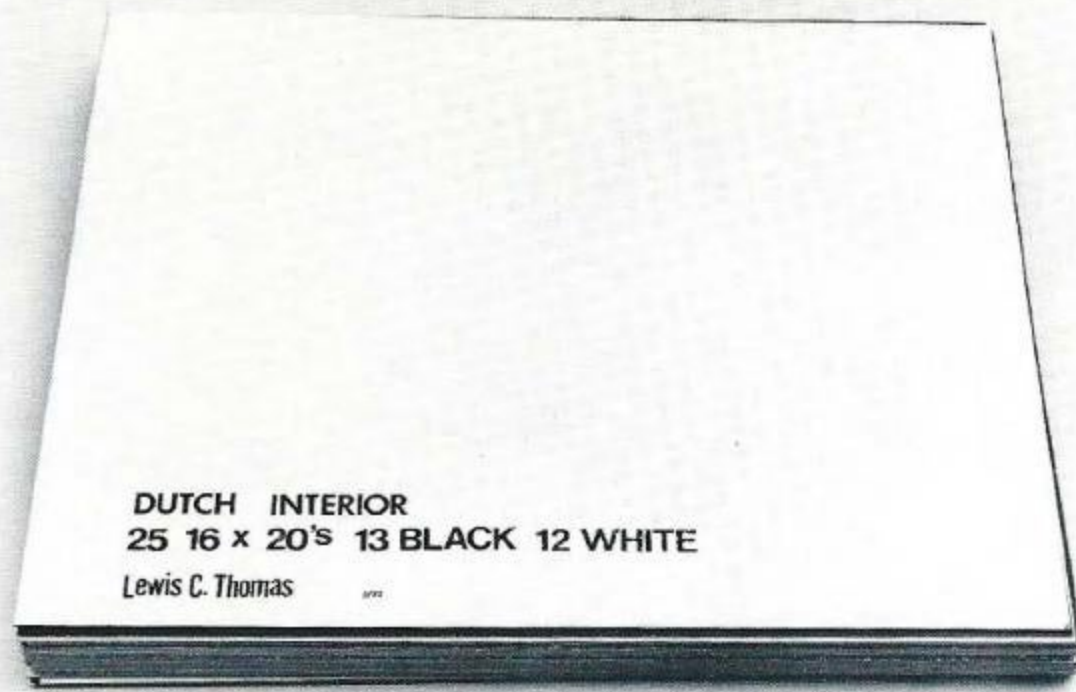
1. COMMUNICATION VIA TELEPHONE ASKING ROBERT LEVERANT IF HE WOULD PARTICIPATE IN IDEA ABOUT PORTRAITS OF PEOPLE AND THE SPACE THEY OCCUPY DURING PHOTOGRAPH. ALL PORTRAITS TO BE NORMAL, FRONTAL, FRAMED IN CENTER OF FOCUSING SYSTEM WITH EQUIVALENT SHOT OF UNOCCUPIED SPACE, THUS DISPLACEMENT.
2. BY HAVING ANOTHER PARTY EXECUTE THE PHYSICAL PIECE, MY IDEA WAS FURTHER DISPLACED BY ROBERT'S PARTICIPATION. SINCE I DID NOT KNOW THE PEOPLE OR SETTINGS, THE APPEARANCE OF PROJECT WOULD BE UNKNOWN TO ME—AND THOSE REALITIES UNFORESEEN AND FRESH.
3. REGARDLESS OF WHAT YOU SEE, AN IDEA HAS BEEN DEVELOPED BY ONE PARTY AND EXECUTED BY ANOTHER. EACH STAGE OF THE DISPLACEMENT HAS ITS OWN RENDERING AND IS UNIFIED BY AN IDEA OR PRINCIPLE.
4. FRAME 20 IS THE PHOTOGRAPHER TAKEN BY A PARTICIPANT; FRAME 8 IS THE TECHNICIAN WHO DEVELOPED THE FILM AND MADE THE CONTACT SHEET. THE WORDS ARE MINE. THE PIECE BELONGS TO ALL WHO PARTICIPATED.

11/7/72

LEWIS C. THOMAS

DISPLACEMENT PROJECT, 1972

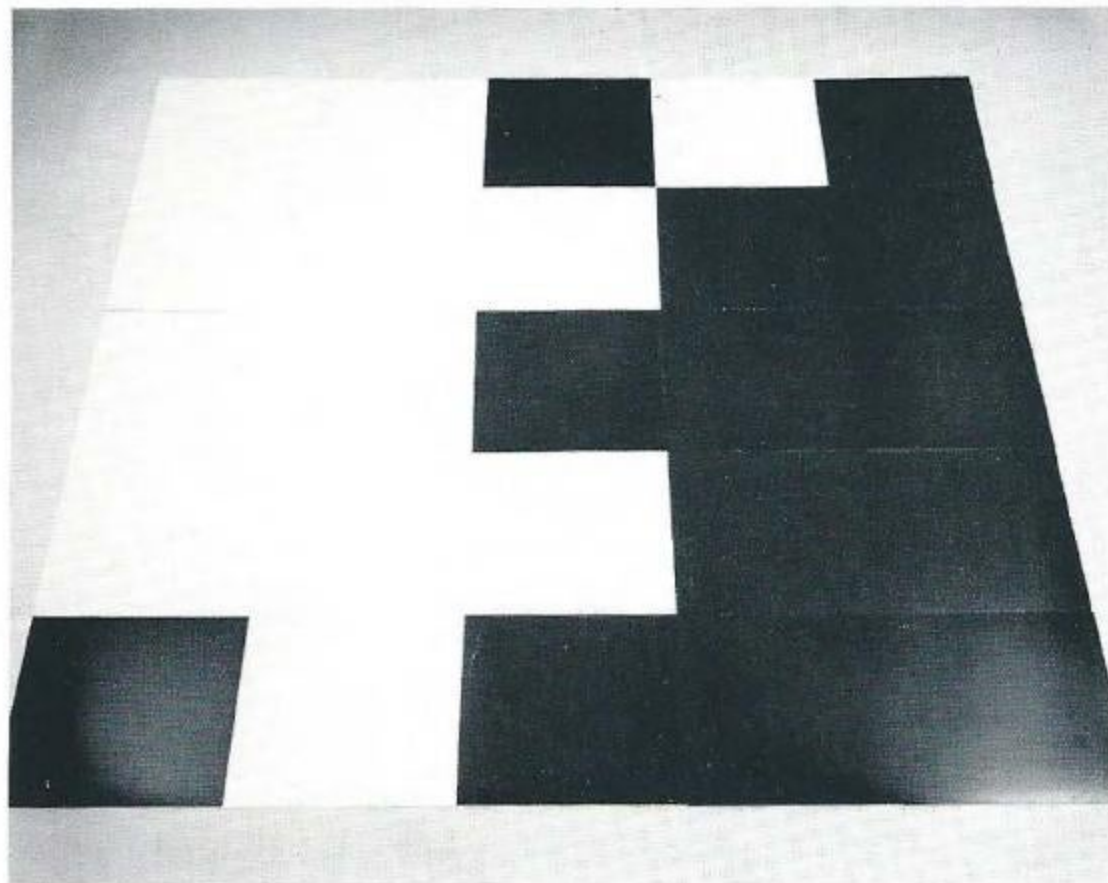
32" x 20"



STACKED



SHUFFLED



25—16 x 20's: 13 Black, 12 White, 1972

SET (on floor)

DUTCH INTERIOR

From day to day, we witness the growing repugnance felt by people of a greater awareness for words of a visceral, analogical or incantatory character. On the other hand, the visual or descriptive adjective, the word that contents itself with measuring, locating, limiting, defining, indicates a difficult but most likely direction for a new art.

—Robbe-Grillet

... so my advice would be to drop the 'known' aspects and move out into a grander, more surprising form of presentation. The 'future of art' lies in its theoretical expansion.

—Mel Bochner

DUTCH INTERIOR can be carried by hand (portable), distributed after calculation (variable) and designed by definition (coding).

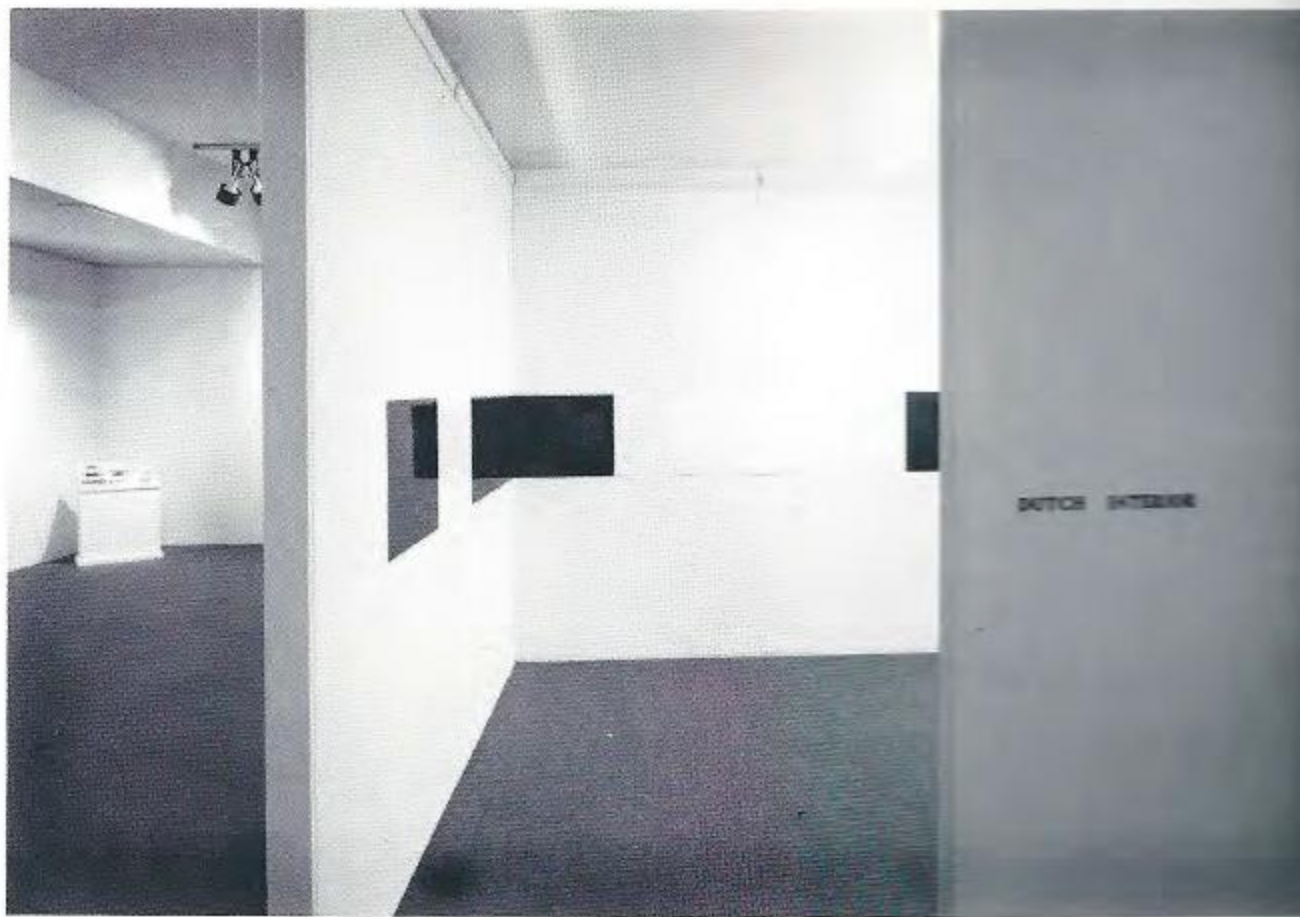
Photographic conventions such as paper size, 16" x 20", chemical processing, printing, developing, fixing, washing, glazing, mounting, displaying are used as tautological references in determining a non-metaphorical work.

Perspective is fixed by placement; where it is. Symmetry is shaped by arithmetic, 13 Black & 12 White, and their causal combinations. Exposure to surface color black as reflective, white as opaque, express sensation; Positive & Negative.

DUTCH INTERIOR has no depth. It is flat and simple supported by existing planes. Motion is experienced through unity and the materiality of the photographic process. There is no deception.

Since the work is portable, its closed position is stacked. Other locations from floor to ceiling can be arranged by setting or installation. Randomness is performed by an act of shuffling.

Dutch interior refers to Dutch painting of the 17th century. Within this kind of genre horizontal perspective (floor patterns) and left-right light source simulate linguistic processes. The understanding of the term should not be confined to an analogical code.



DUTCH INTERIOR, 1973 Installed deSaisset Art Gallery, University of Santa Clara
25—16 x 20's: 13 Black, 12 White



PHOTOGRAPHIC CORNERS is any part—even the least or most remote — a work in-progress begun 1972. The Corners come from a portable ensemble consisting of twenty five photographically processed prints. Each print measures 16" x 20" of which thirteen are black and twelve are white. Because the work is an ensemble, it can be stacked, shuffled, set or installed

The idea for this work results from the reading of Malevich's THE NON OBJECTIVE WORLD and Mondrian's PLASTIC ART AND PURE PLASTIC ART. In this sense, the twenty five 16" x 20"s — thirteen black and twelve white are literary. In this sense, the portable is conventional depending on arithmetic, measurements and process for its potential meaning and the relationship of these factors for its actual structuring.

Developing and fixing twenty five pieces of blank photographic paper is both a tedious and absurd process. At that time I had no plan for presentation which added equally to the ridiculousness of the process. The work is made in a mood similar to a fanatic's dream to see an idea succeed.

When the work was shown in 1973 as an interior, I was afraid of the baldness and simplicity of the piece so I invented a title, DUTCH INTERIOR, fabricated propaganda, and in general, gave into the need for a metaphor. I know now however, the prints are not imageless. They are the images.

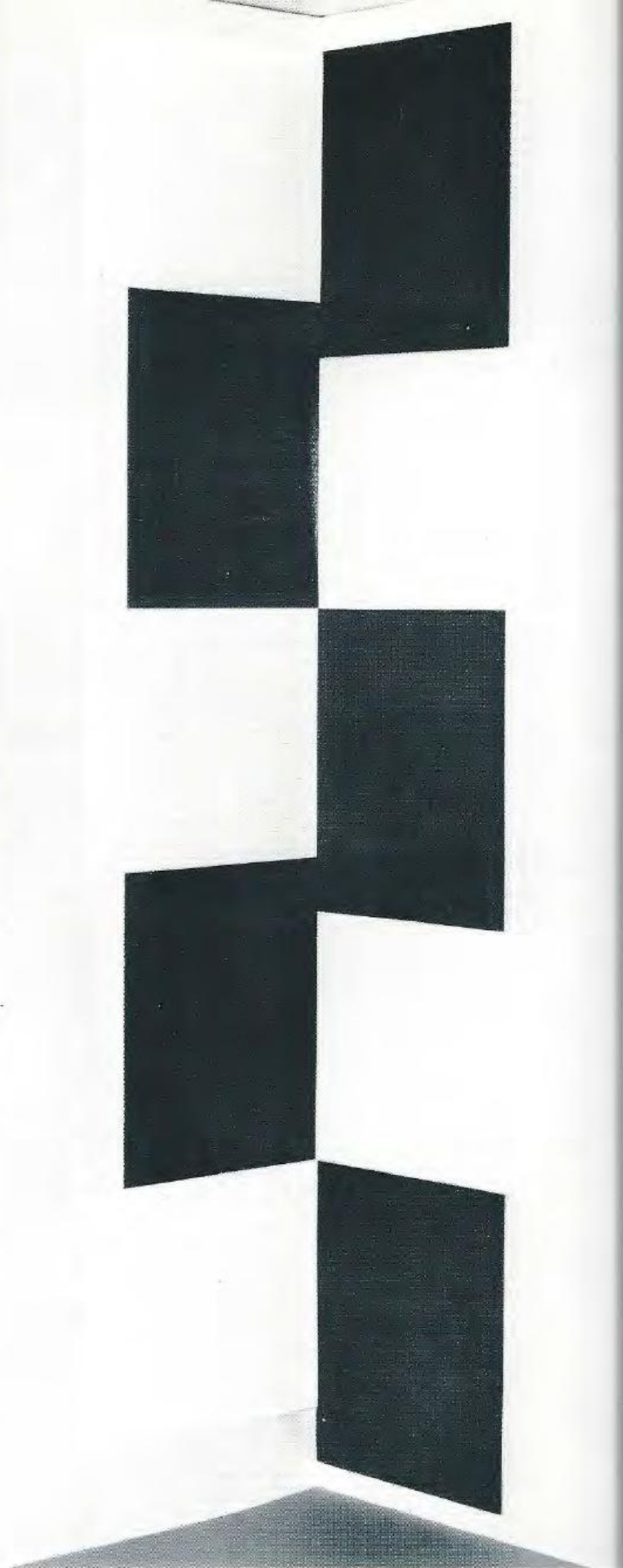
In the fashion of information art, this work undergoes the labors of documentation developing a history of positions and installations. This material is of course enclosed in an innocent publication.

PHOTOGRAPHIC CORNERS is next to the last step in a spiralling configuration that will hopefully end as a ceiling in another place. By adding black and white photographic prints to the sculptural perspective of gallery corners, I intend to make the space of the gallery the object of the work. Usage is easily understood from a theoretical view-point while the anxiety is maintained existentially when the work is exhibited.

"Je suis l'espace ou je suis."

PHOTOGRAPHIC CORNERS, 1974 Installed Atholl McBean Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute

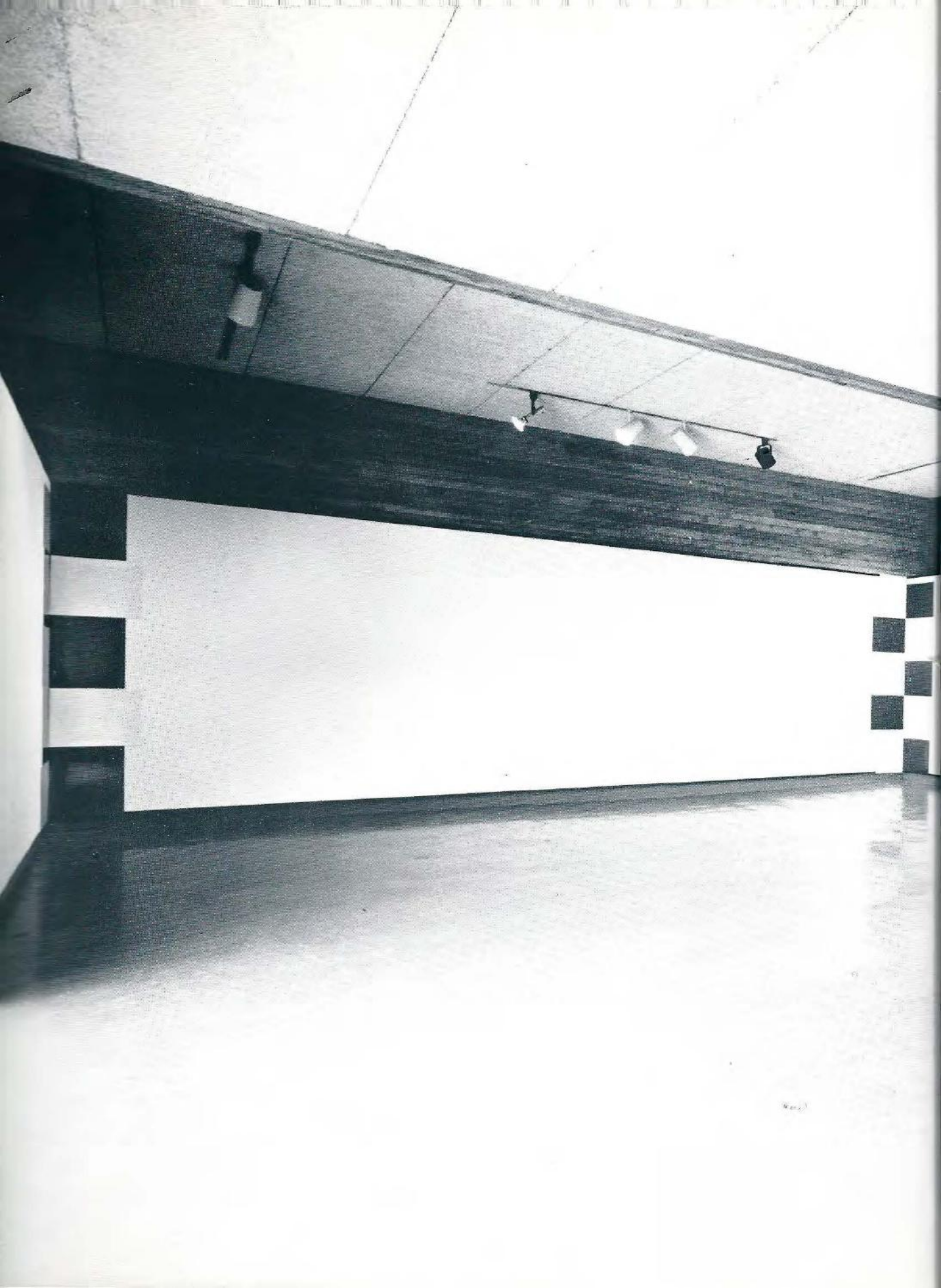
25—16 x 20's: 13 Black, 12 White



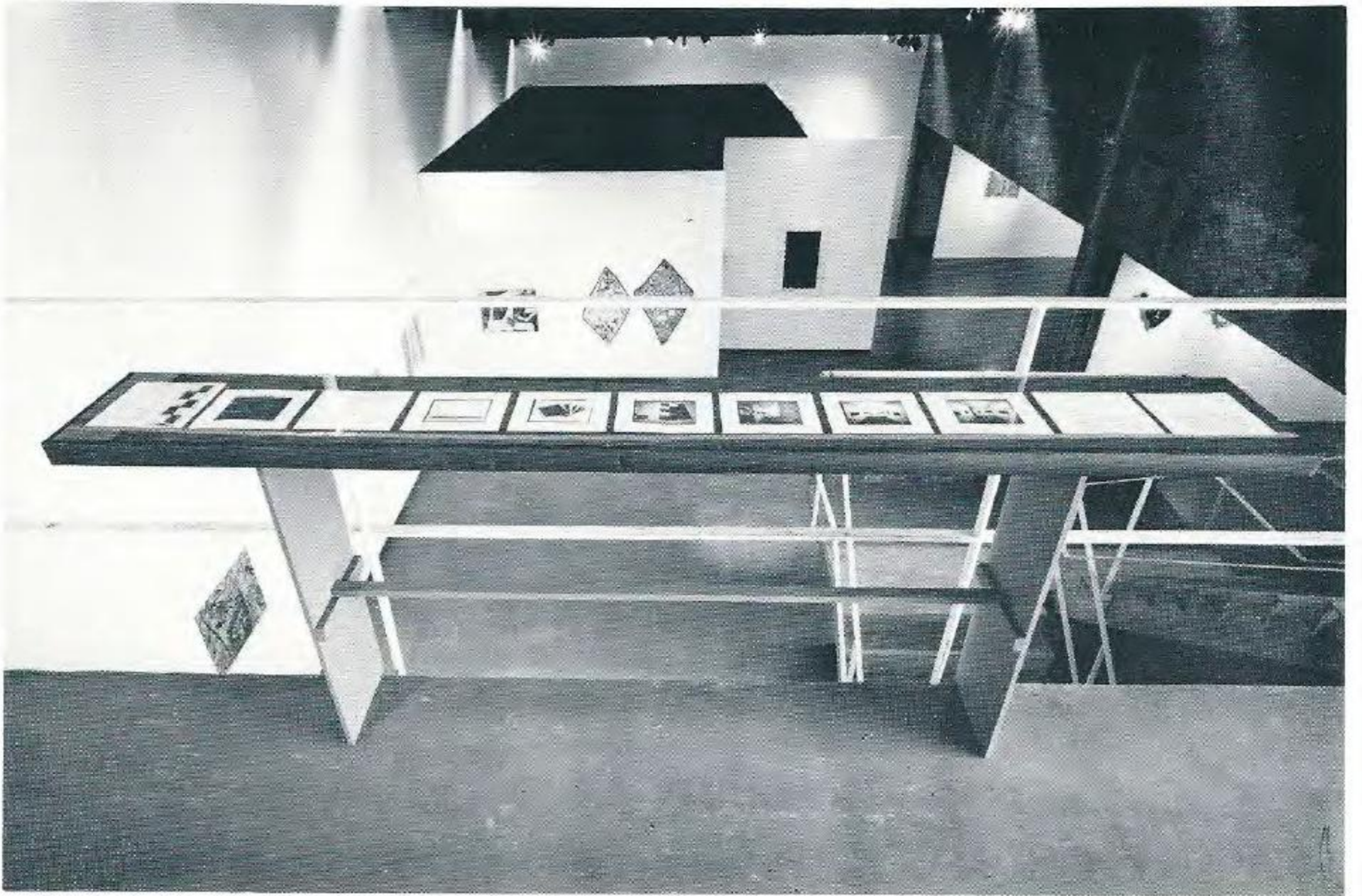


PHOTOGRAPHIC CORNERS, 1974

25—16 x 20's: 13 Black, 12 White







PHOTOGRAPHIC CORNERS, 1974
25-16 x 20's: 13 Black, 12 White

THE SAME 25 16 x 20'S



THE SAME 25—16 x 20s, 1976 Installed WEST COAST CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHERS La Mamelle, Art Center, San Francisco
25—16 x 20's: 13 Black, 12 White

PROPOSAL FOR NATIONAL EXHIBITION

1974

FROM: LEW THOMAS, 243 GRAND VIEW AVENUE, SAN FRANCISCO, 94114, (415) 647-4290

TO:

FROM JANUARY 12 TO FEBRUARY 6, MILLS COLLEGE ART GALLERY, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA, WILL PRESENT MY ONE PHOTOGRAPH EXHIBITION, "8 x 10."

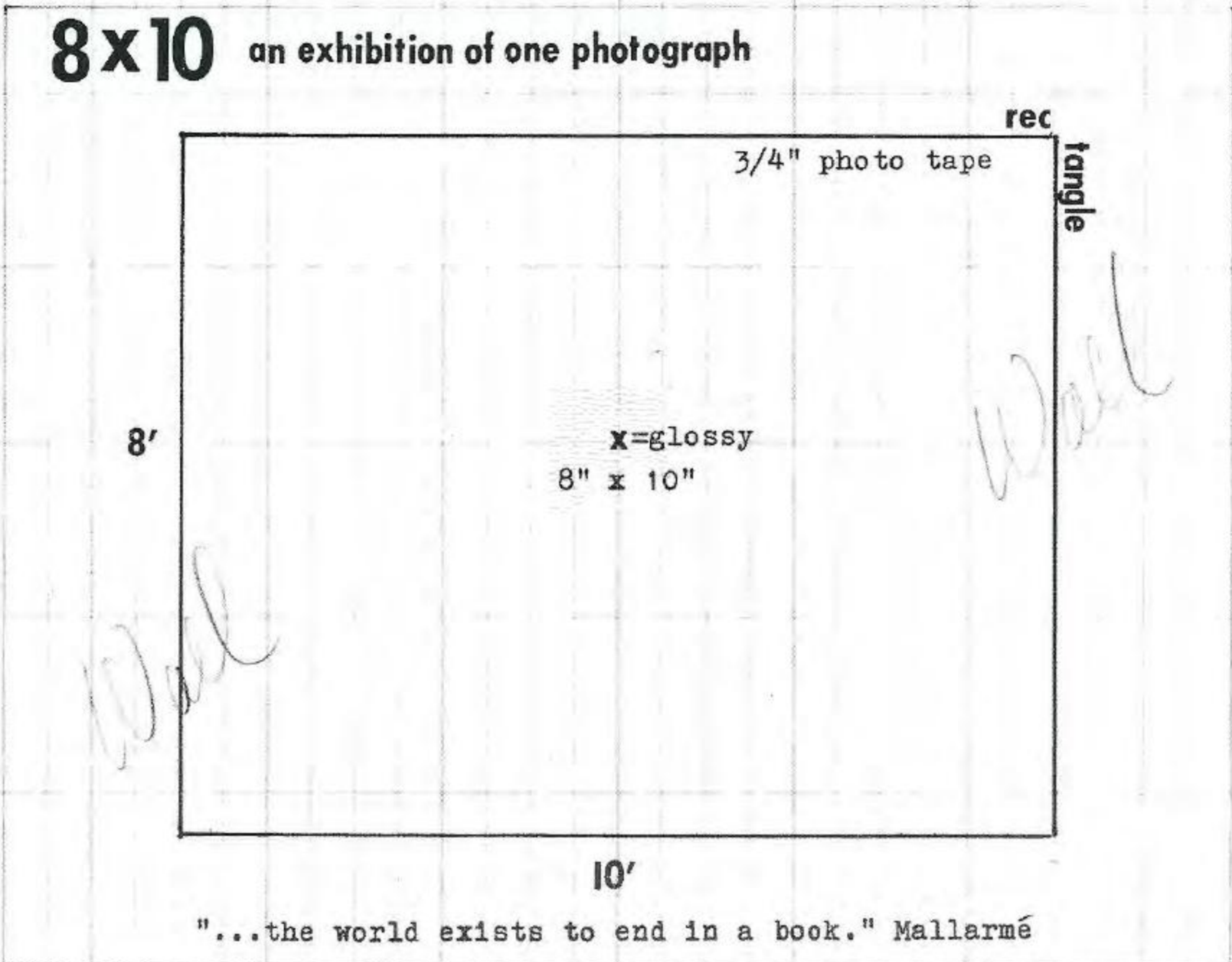
THE INSTALLATION INVOLVES A WALL (not necessarily flat and either interior or exterior) ON WHICH AN 8' x 10' RECTANGLE CAN BE MASKED OFF WITH 3/4" BLACK OR WHITE PHOTOGRAPHIC TAPE. A PHOTOGRAPH IS THEN TAKEN AND THE CORRESPONDING 8" x 10" GLOSSY PRINT IS ATTACHED TO THE CENTER OF THE RECTANGLE.

THE ONLY REQUIREMENT FOR OTHER INSTALLATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES IS THAT THEY COINCIDE WITH THE DATES OF THE MILLS COLLEGE EXHIBITION.

ALL INSTALLATIONS ARE TO BE CAREFULLY DOCUMENTED. CREDITS WILL BE POSTED IN THE MILLS COLLEGE ART GALLERY. PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE SITES WILL BE MADE AND EACH PARTICIPANT WILL RECEIVE AN ORIGINAL SET OF PRINTS.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN JOINING THIS NETWORK EXAMINING THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC OBJECT, PLEASE WRITE OR PHONE FOR FURTHER DETAILS.

8 x 10 an exhibition of one photograph



8 x 10, 1974

1978 photograph (from the series Reproductions of Reproductions) 40" x 30"

It then becomes clear and certain to him what he knows is not a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth . . .

—Schopenhauer

Dear Joan Murray:

Though "8 x 10" involves merely one photograph installed at Mills College Art Gallery, it has taken nearly three months of preparation and the process continues.

At this time there are approximately 24 sites including Mills College and Lamkin Camerawork where the "8 x 10" is installed. All documentation photos will be filed with me before the end of the month and they will become a part of the permanent record.

The photographic and written records will eventually comprise the only information regarding the "8 x 10" as an object of actual perception. This statement in itself explains the problems associated with the object as idea, image and fact.

Since my idea reflects an object, the space and installation another object, the photograph of the space fixed to the center of the rectangle and documented with a photograph completes the configuration within the boundary of the site. From this description you should see that an exhibition of one photograph can become a complex event. Multiply the event 24 times in different places with differing content confined only by the abstract structure of an 8 feet x 10 feet rectangle and the event has been transformed into a network of active interpretation of the object—the object of idea, image and fact.

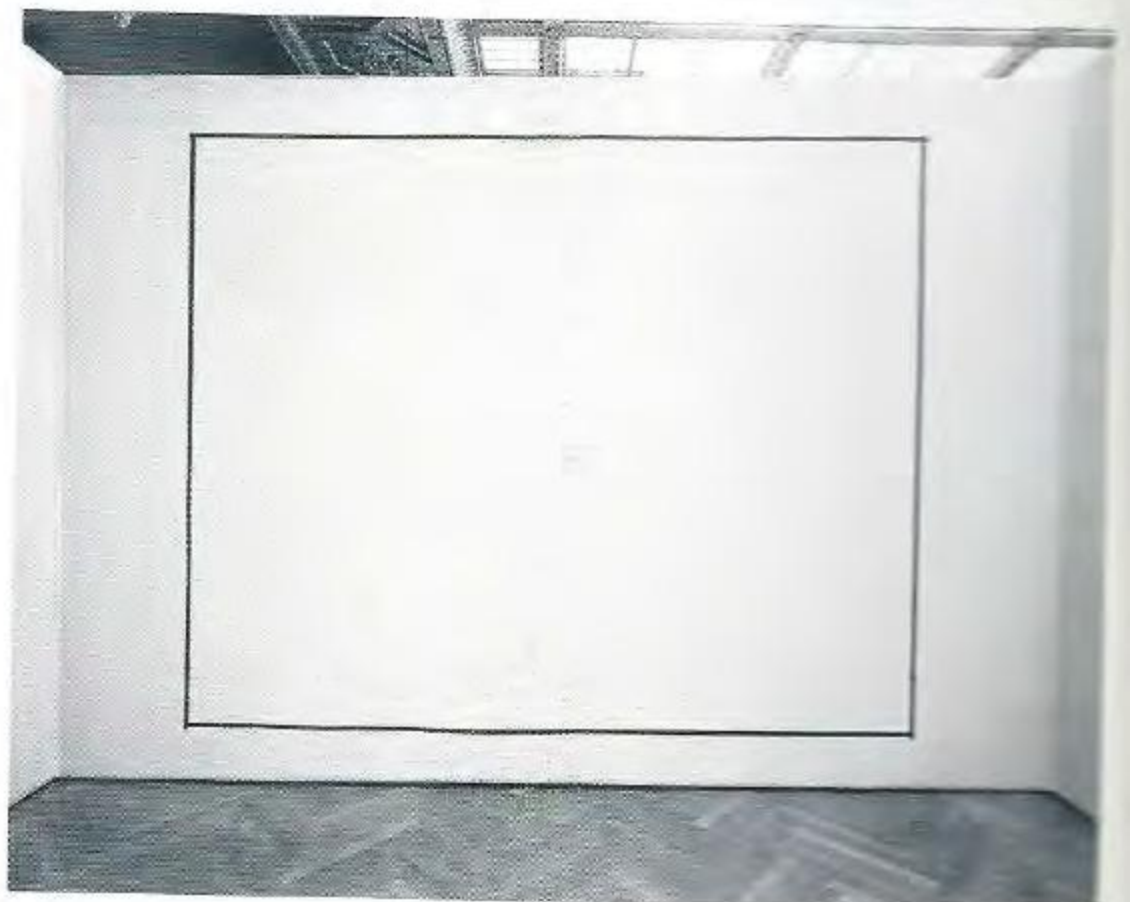
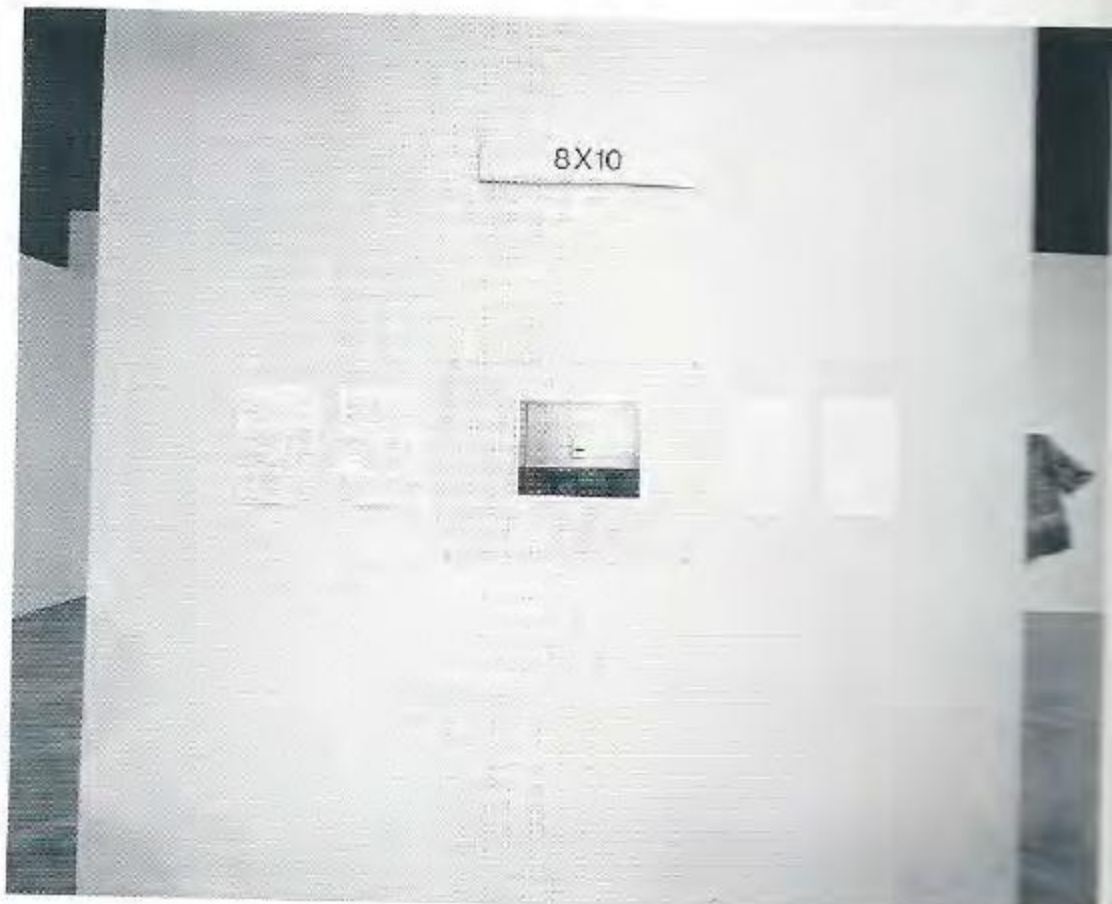
I am not interested in showing the photographic image as a distortion of the space photographed, i.e. analytical and negative. I am trying to join the photographic act with the space in a manner that is physical, perceptible and, at any point within the site, intelligible. Unlike the photographer who with his mind and eye seeks a frame in which to bank this content, I make my frame with my hand and simply photograph. The sensitive photographer searches for content that is interpretive and meaningful. I try to eliminate or neutralize the content depending only on the structure to reveal my intent.

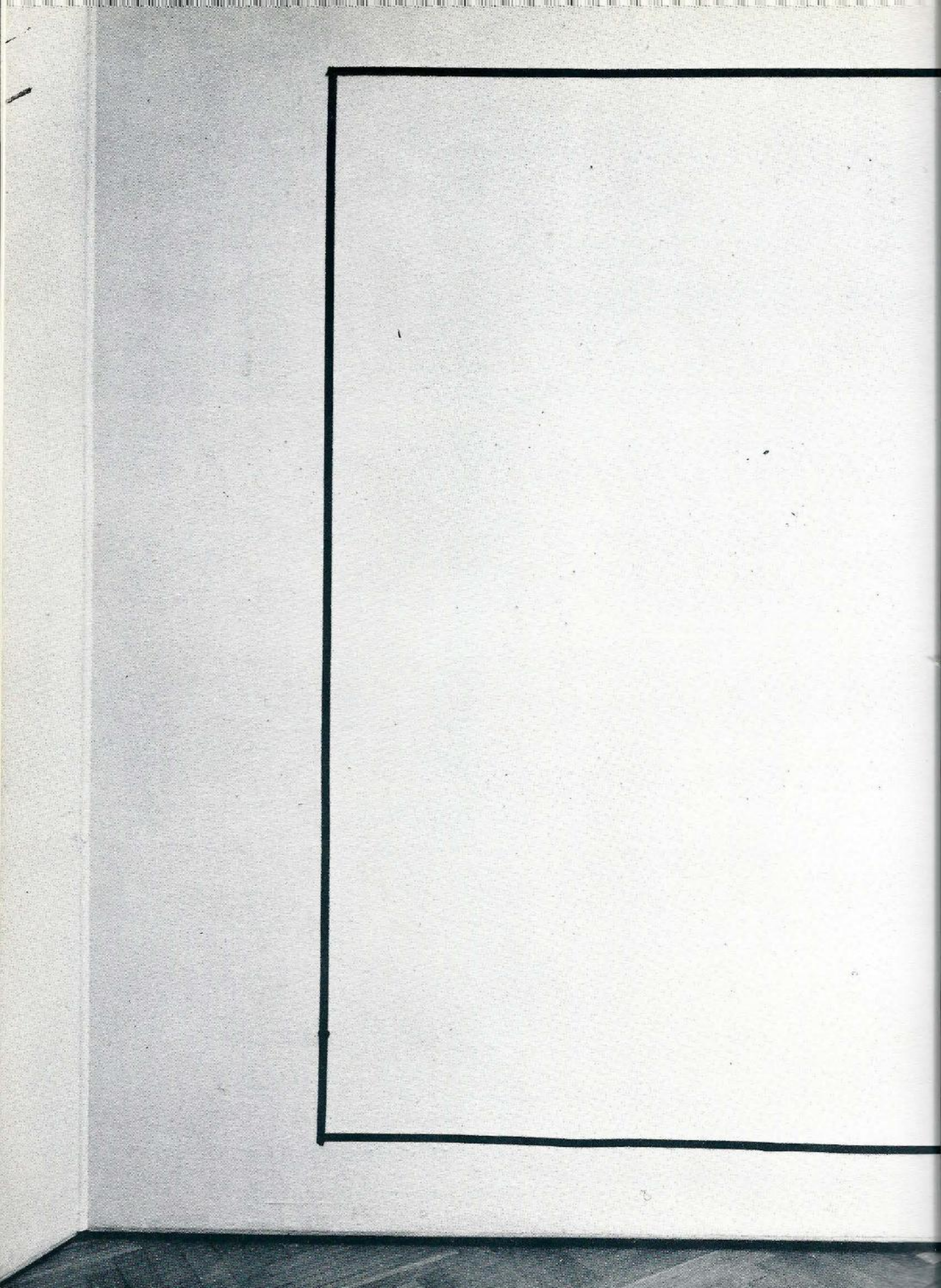
I do not go to the gallery or the space with a collection of fixed and memorable objects. I go there to find the here and the now and that is what I photograph and that is what I hope some people will find when they go there too.

As far as I am concerned, the installation at Mills is perfect, classical. The reading material is posted on the outside of the gallery and it is sensible. Inside the gallery the visuality is pure and apparently simple.

On the outside wall of the gallery beneath the sign, "8 x 10," is posted a letter and documentation photo by one of the participants, Robert T. Dalton of Castaic, California, who expresses perfectly the intention of this work. I am enclosing a copy of the letter.

Lew Thomas





"8 x 10"

Published by NOT-FOR-SALE-PRESS

Compiled by Lew Thomas
Designed by Ron Rick
Contributions from 24 Artists

48 pages, 16 photos, price \$3.00 (incl. tax & post)

Since exposure of artists' work either in gallery space or printed form is determined by curatorial taste or critical opinion, the project "8 x 10" is designed to counteract the limits imposed by a closed system.

The finished form of the idea is now being prepared as a publication. The book will include documents and site photos submitted by the 24 participants. The material was filed chronologically and the presentation of the work will be made without alteration or decorative judgments usually associated with art publications.

Many of the artists collaborating on the project are being published for the first-time. Unlike the competitive system (regardless of how "open") that selects by a strategy of solicitation, "8 x 10" is an open network of experiential cooperation.

Because I wish to make the project self-sufficient (just as the idea is self-generating), I am asking for your immediate financial support. Profits made from the book will be reused for further publications devoted to the unsolicited artist. L T

8x10

"8 x 10" published by NOT-FOR-SALE-Press
243 Grand View Ave
Price: \$3.00 San Francisco, Ca
incl. tax & post. 94114

Name _____
Address _____ zip _____
No. Copies _____ Total Amount _____
_____ \$3.00 each _____

READY AUGUST '75

BRACKETING

The term BRACKETING is herewith being used to indicate a method in which x units of space have been isolated (photographed) and reintroduced as 2-dimensional furniture within the space.

Since there is no thought without an antecedent cause, the structure of BRACKETING proceeds from experience previously developed in the exhibits PHOTOGRAPHIC CORNERS & "8 x 10." Similarly, the finalization of form is unknown until the installation is completed. Installation in this form is no longer an external operation in which qualitative decisions are made in order to present aesthetic objects in an expedient context. The installation of BRACKETING becomes a co-efficient cause equal to the original idea; or else, there is no visualization past or future except for theoretical posturing.

Some poets gain their insights from the color of ink and the blankness of paper they face before the act of writing. Thusly, there are artists who begin with the primacy of space and re-create what is measurable.

There are seven units to BRACKETING. Walking west through the gallery in a clockwise course, the first work involves a rocking circle. Sheets of photo paper are mounted in varying degrees of diagonal movement with only the architectural verticals within the images to normalize positioning. The simple information of a panorama is complicated by the contradiction of photo paper & photo illusion.

BLACK & WHITE Backdrop pieces face each other in a statement that fixes the space in an abstract vise.

There is a linear panel that brackets the exposure of a gallery chair and another rectangular bracketing piece that reflects the white paint of a gallery door.

One focusing piece sits freely on the floor in a setting similar to the shooting position. An irregularly shaped work that begins with photos at the center of the window-wall fanning out to the corners of the gallery completes the seven units.

Four pieces are stapled to the walls and the other three are prepared on styrofoam board.

When the installation was completed, labels were omitted as devices that would interfere with the idea in that labels separate objects one from the other by their verbal intrusion.

It should not go unmentioned that several times during the process of actualizing BRACKETING some of the individual pieces appear woefully weak. Conditioning to fixed objects as an aesthetic end stimulates feelings that tend towards panic when one is forced to wait for the experience to work itself inside-out-to the present.

Finally—reflection should not be understood as a form of thinking or analysis but more accurately is the balancing of internal & objective forces within a satisfying whole.

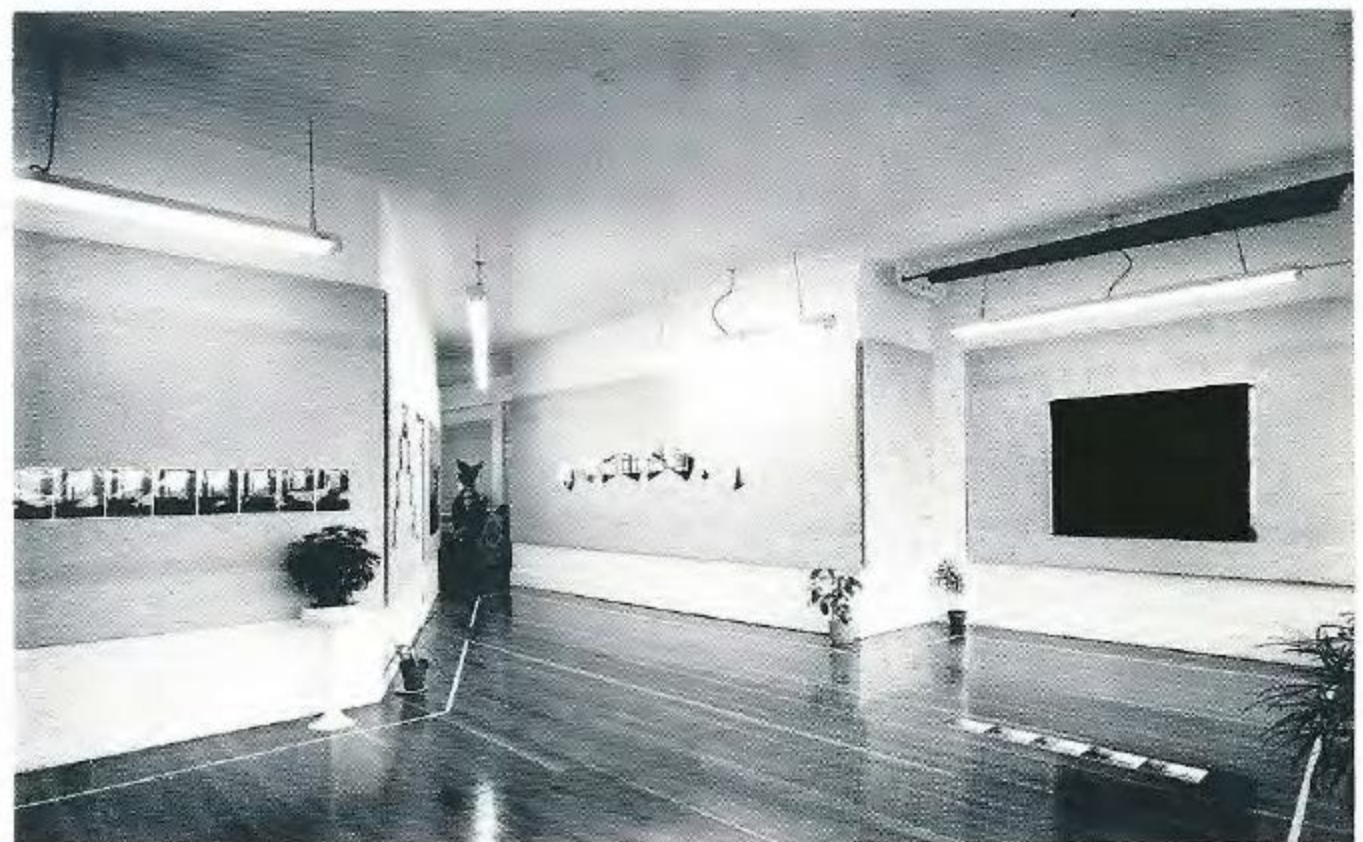
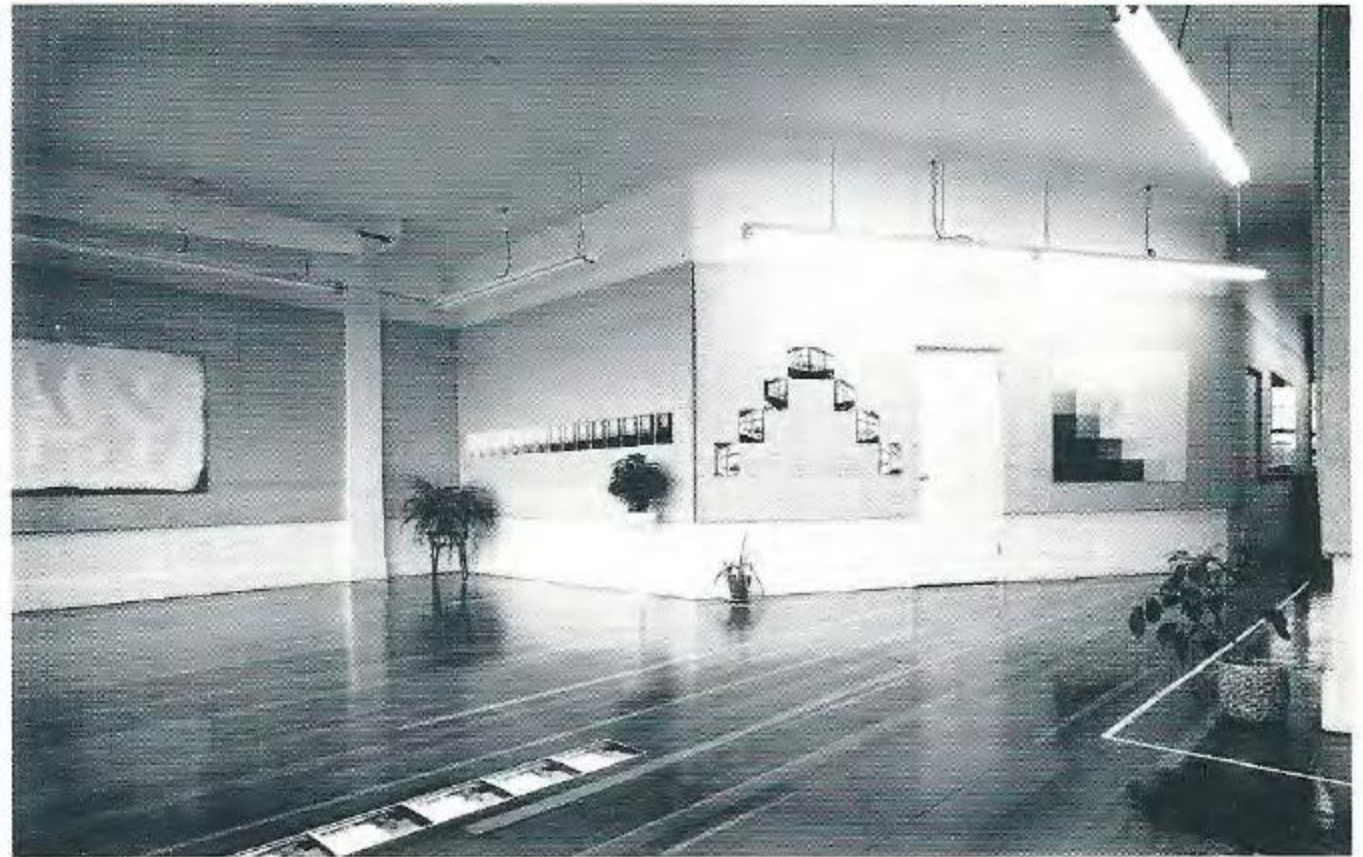
This work aspires to a didactic purpose and as such should be treated as false. At least in art everyone else's truth is a distraction.

6/30/75

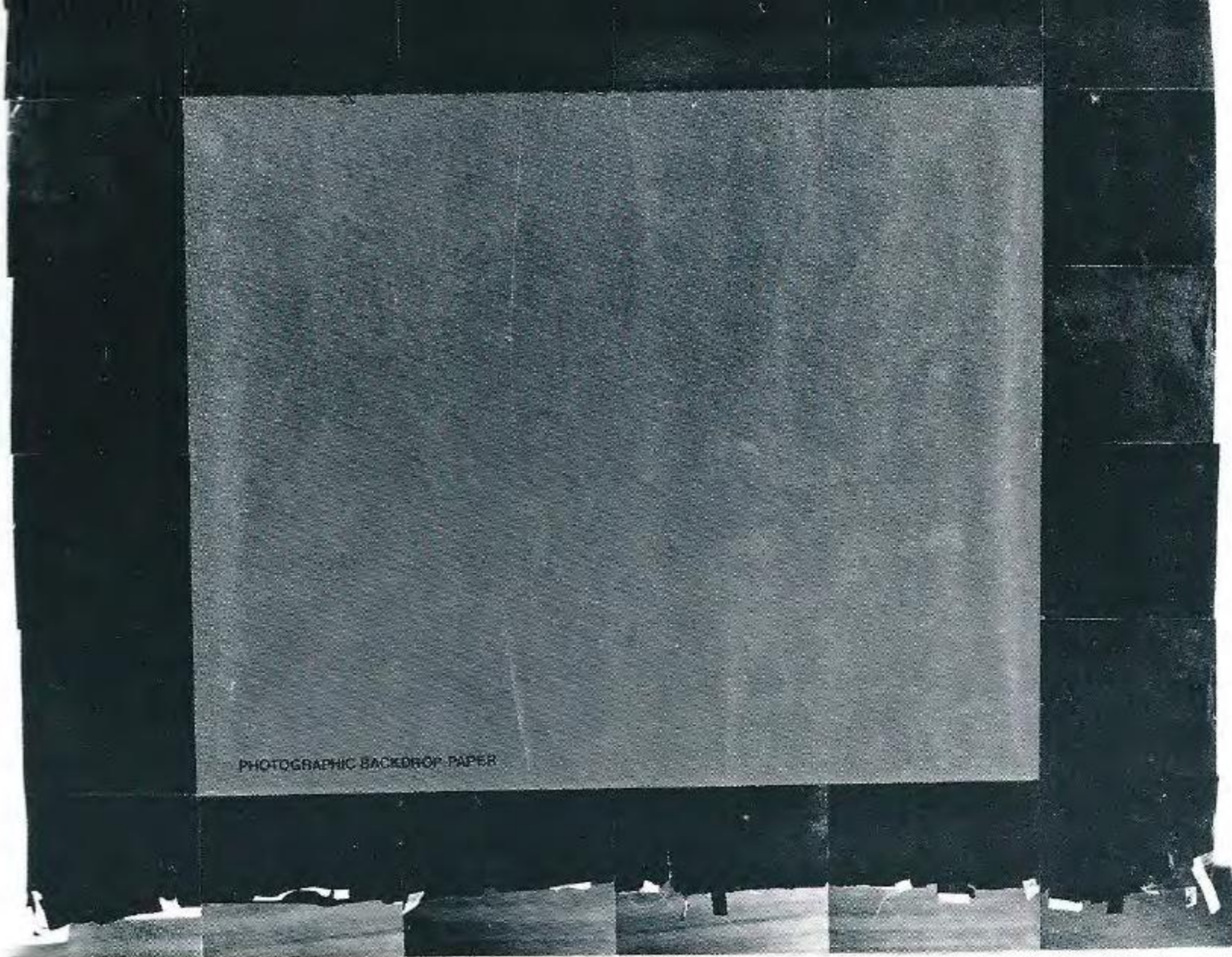
To John Allen
Darkroom Workshop
Berkeley, California

The major part of the show is definitely under control. Two objects 4 feet x 5 feet are ready as well as a number of other works. The larger pieces are important to the balance of the exhibition and they look good. The photobackdrop piece gives me complete satisfaction. I think it's a knockout but then my tastes are quite removed from the monocular view of most photographers. Don't fear, I have plexiglass for some of the larger pieces that will add glossy conviction to the total process. WHAT IS THIS SHOW? Let's say it's just another move on my part to demonstrate the use of photography as a reflexive medium for defining actual space. I'm using the term "bracketing" in the grammatical sense to express the parenthetical abstracting of objects within a given space. In this exhibition the viewer is presented a set of recorded images and the opportunity to measure the records with the actual information since they both exist simultaneously in the environment. You might say this is literal documentation incorporated in a phenomenal method. The techniques I am using employ documentation as a kind of measuring device. AND. I know of no other exhibition that has taken the actual space in which the photographs presented refer directly to where the photographs were taken. There have been modest attempts to locate a single point within a given space re-presenting that point with photography. In BRACKETING a series of photographic pieces are made to represent the space and objects where they are being shown. The work is not interpretive. I'm not looking for any ghosts in your gallery. There's no romantic obsession with light or the cultivation of strangeness through the history of things. I simply want the viewer to experience a sense of reflection within a specific context produced by photography. It's my current conviction that there is no art without reflection and the more experiential the sense of reflection the stronger is the art regardless of how humble the work might appear.

Make sure that Sharon Golden receives credit for her assistance in this project, BRACKETING.

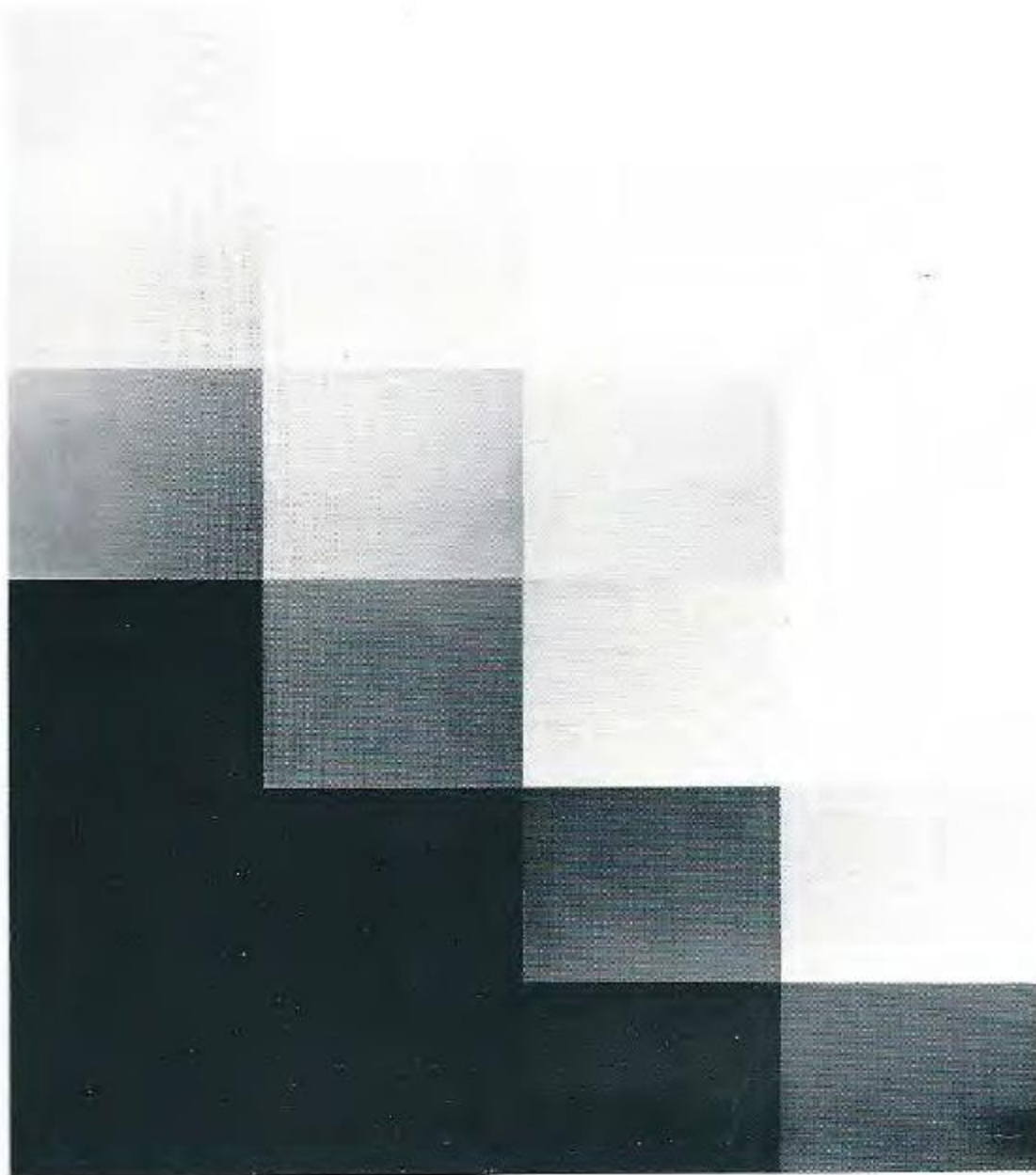


BRACKETING, 1975 Installed Darkroom Workshop, Berkeley, California



BACKDROP CLOTH, 1975

48" x 60"



BRACKETING, 1975

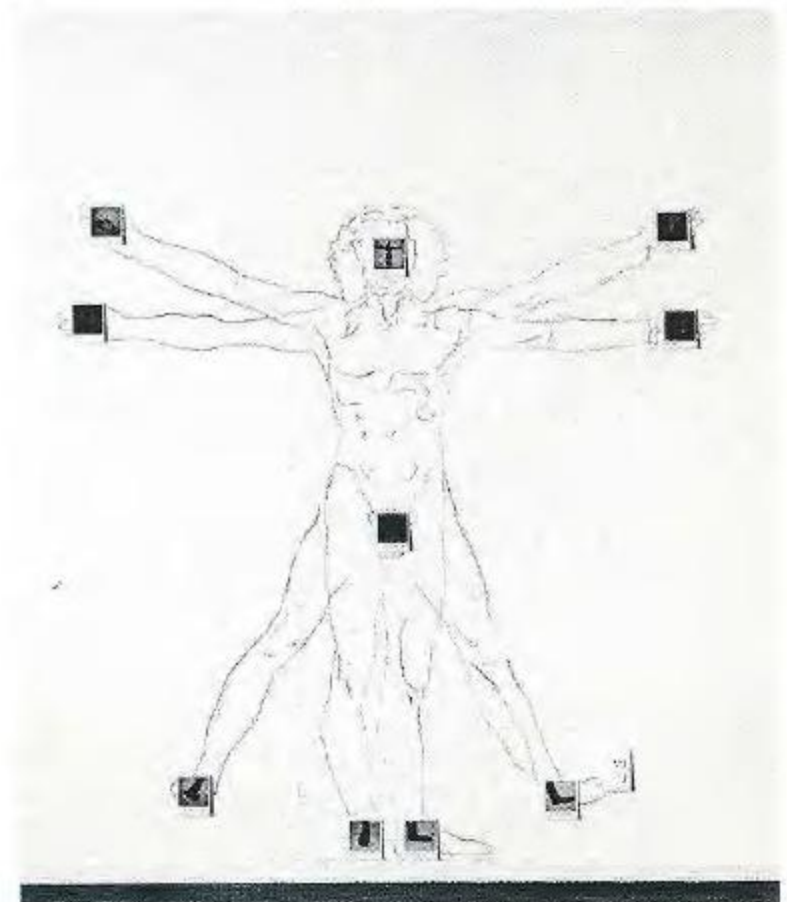
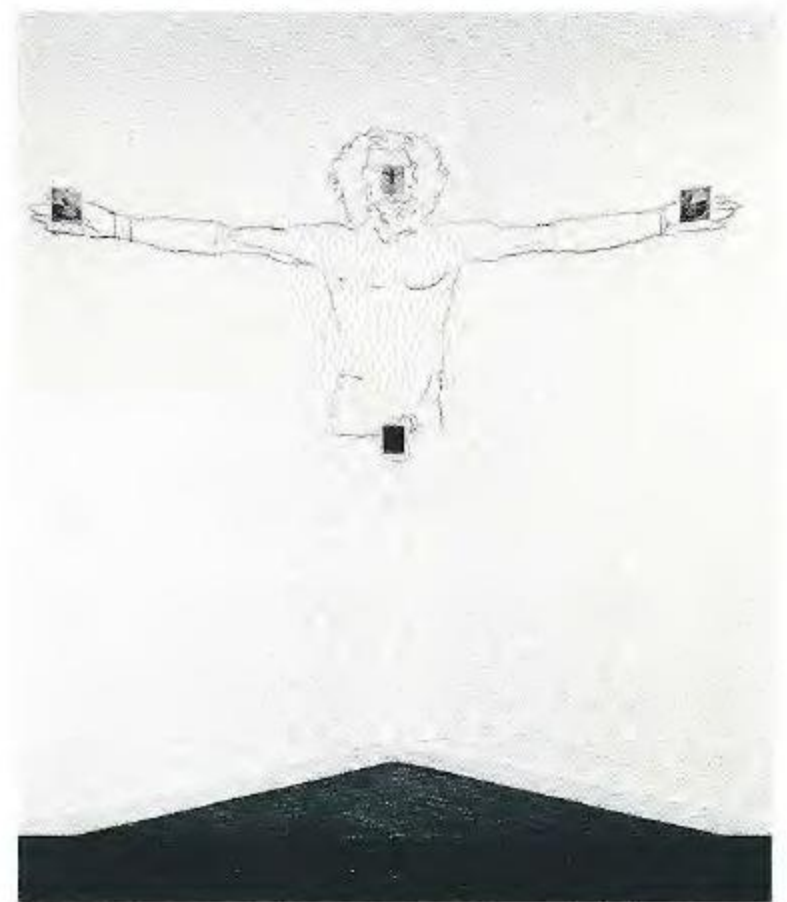
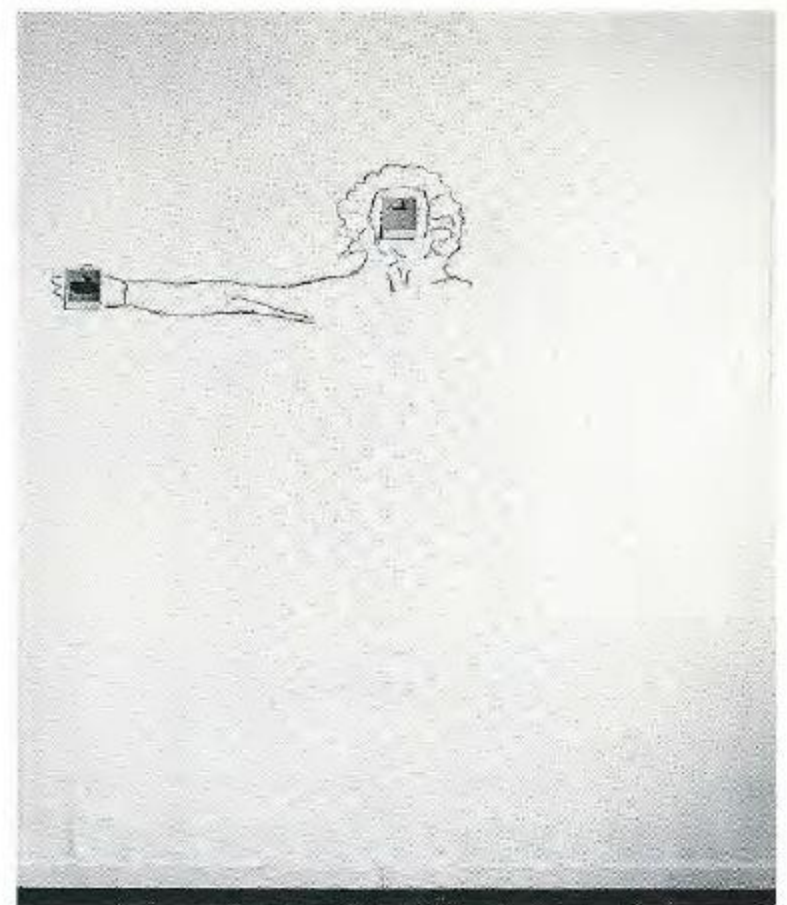
48" x 60"

VITRUVIAN CONTEXT

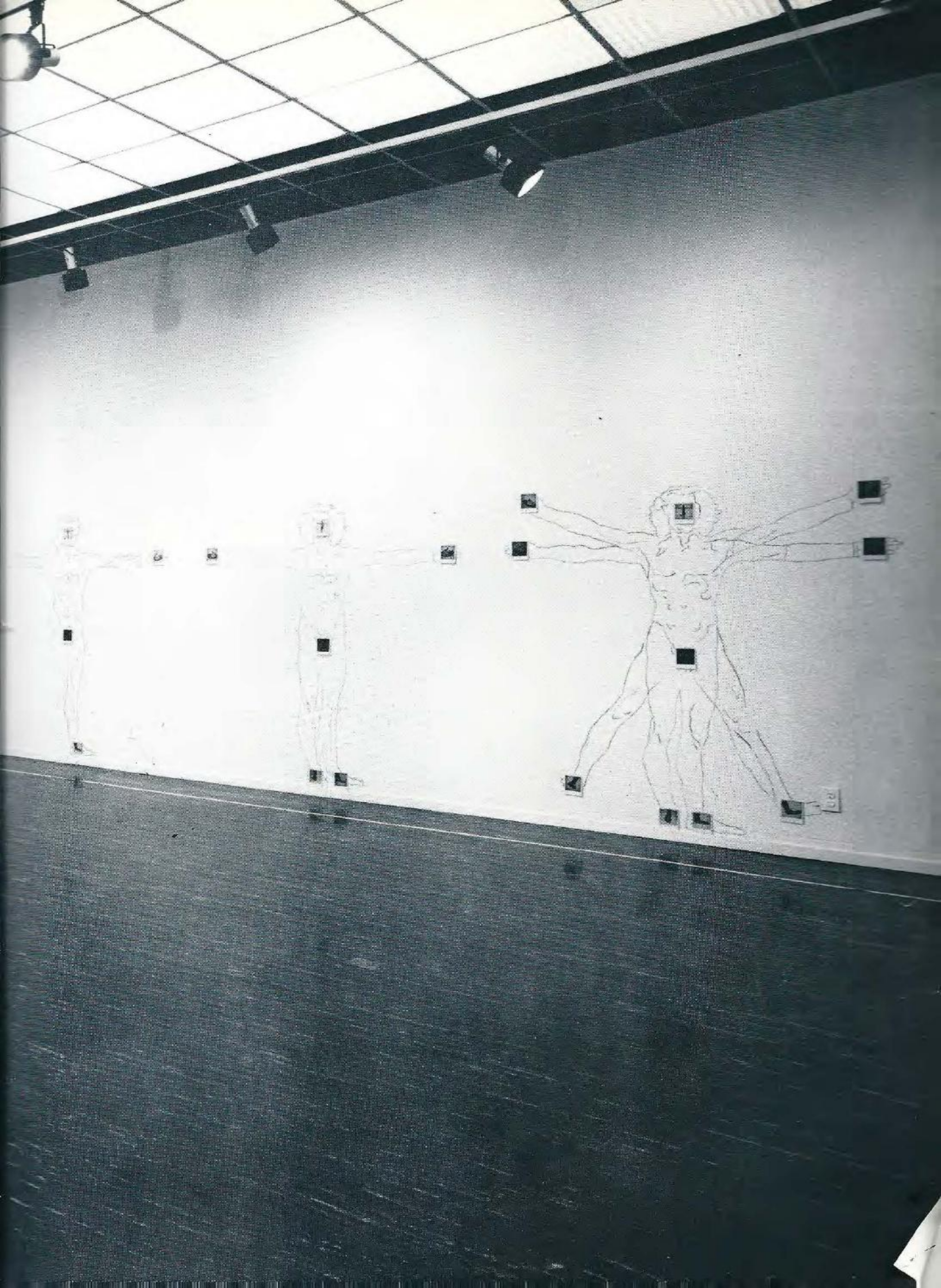
12/12/75

To Elena Layland, Art Gallery
San Jose State University

My last three shows (PHOTOGRAPHIC CORNERS, 8 x 10 & BRACKETING) were done without the security of studio objects. They were shows whose meaning is developed within the space of the gallery during the installation. Since the relationship of ideas to the space are meant to integrate in practice, the actual appearance or effectiveness of the work cannot be known until the presentation is completed. In the new work, THE VITRUVIAN CONTEXT: 1480 to 1976, the only objects brought to the gallery will be a copyslide of the Da Vinci drawing, charcoal for drawing over the slide when it is projected onto the wall and an SX-70 Polaroid camera for photographing parts of a model's body (black male). The slide will be projected to the scale of the actual model and they will be photographed in a progressive sequence with the prints being fixed within the corresponding area of each drawing. I'm certain the installation will be quite attractive on a visual level with the drawing (outline) acting as a faint impression of markings into which the polaroid prints are set resembling a series of miniature windows through which the contemporary content may be viewed. The shiny brilliance of SX-70 prints will produce an effect of stained glass insets. The piece will consist of 6 to 8 drawings and polaroid prints. Each drawing will expand the information of the figure until it is completed in the manner of the original model. Therefore, the series will run from left to right in a simple, arithmetical relationship between drawing and polaroid print: first drawing, one photo; second drawing, 2 photos; third drawing, 3 photos; and so on . . . This work is entirely contingent on presentation; the pieces or objects are specifically accountable within the boundaries of the actual space. The show exists in actual time. No object except an idea supports the meaning of the show and no object is taken from it. It either works here and now or it's a failure. THE VITRUVIAN CONTEXT purely relates to the issues of installation and context, and it is formulated from a purely photographic response to these concerns.



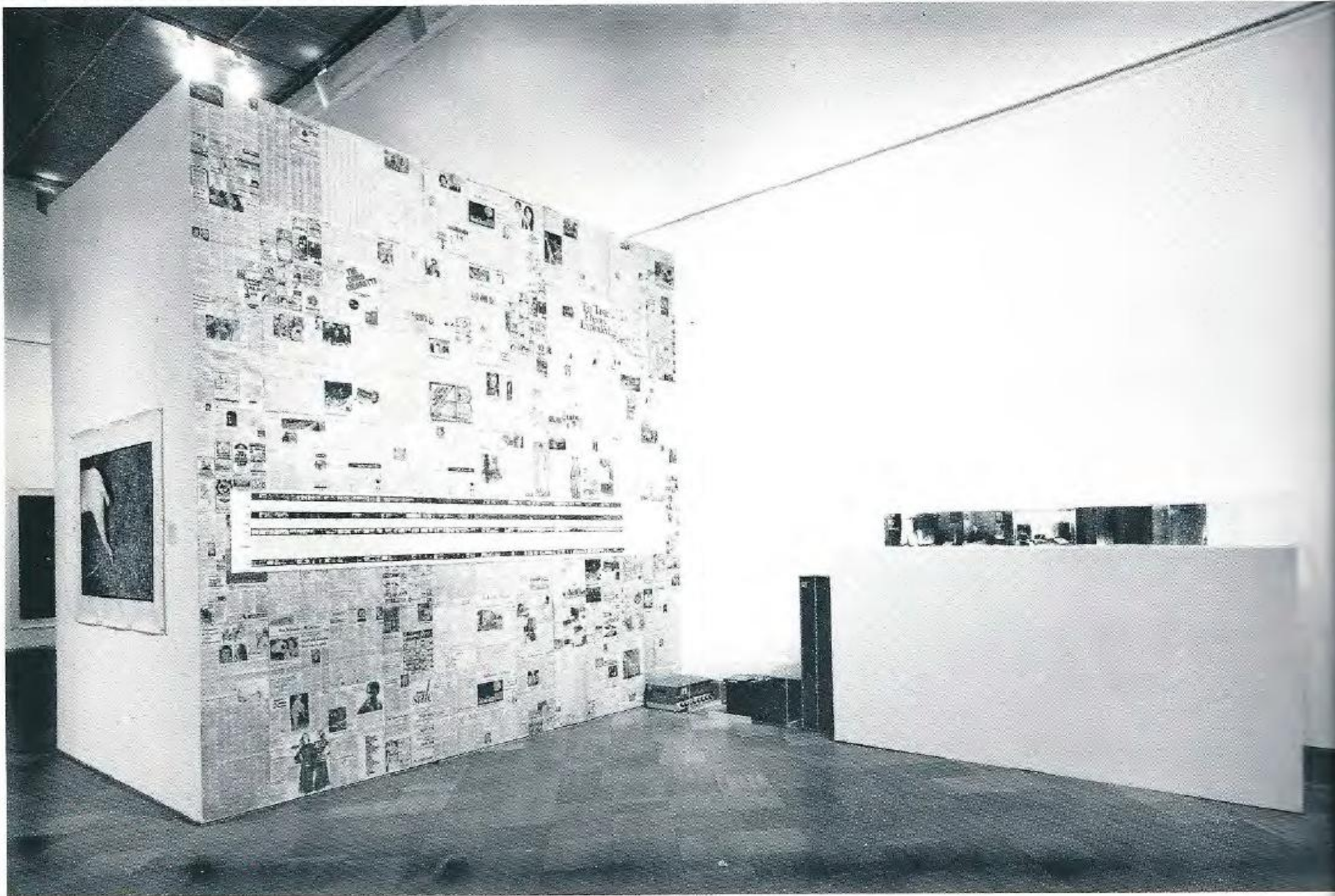




DEPOSITION



XEROX BOOK from DEPOSITION: 1974-1976



DEPOSITION: 1974-1976 Installed San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 1976



DEPOSITION 1974-1976

Text



Title

QUOTATION: DEAD SUBSTANCES ARE BORN TOWARD LIVING BEINGS IN ORDER TO TAKE UP A PLACE AND EXERT AN INFLUENCE WITHIN THEM DETERMINED BY THE SCALES OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS. THIS TITLE - DEPOSITION - 1974 - 1976: DEPOSITION WAS NOT THE FIRST TITLE APPLIED TO THIS WORK. IT HAS HAD A VARIETY OF NAMES ACROSS THE DECADE FROM THE CITY FALLS, A FILM EXTENDED FOR MORE THAN 100 MINUTES MAKING IT IMPOSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND FROM A FIXED PERSPECTIVE. TO READ THE MATERIAL THE VIEWER MUST USE A LAMBDA COPY (WHICH IS WHO PURSUES A COURSE OF LIFE THAT IS INDEPENDENT IN THAT HE SURVIVES WITHIN REALITY BY MAKING HIS OWN DECISIONS). THOUGH THERE ARE NEVER ANY FACTS TO SUBstantiate THE SEVENTIES. THE GREAT, WUNDERFUL WORLD OF AMERICA HAS AT LAST SHED A TERRITORY WHERE EVERYONE IS FREE TO WALK AND BE ALONE. AND AN OLD MAN WITH A GLASS OF WHISKY...

Text



Essay

ARE PHOTOGRAPHS "CULTURALLY IN LEM"? SAN SANDRO - "In France they have an old saying: 'Stipendio X painter'. The painter was considered stupid, but the artist who resists painting must be explained in this way -- as conceptual rather than visual (or optical), with the exceptions of Vermeer and certain photo-realists. I was on a discussion panel on Sontag at the Society for Photographic Education conference in March. He always photographs with being "culturally correct" and says: "As Oscar Wilde once said, 'the first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is to one has yet discovered.' Probably the second duty is to be longer mattered. Intentions never do." Artists' intentions are a meaningless criteria to evaluate an art object. John Kears's synopsis of the James Bond, 'The Bond' means in the picture but only to recognize it and fix it on film." DANIEL K. SANDRO, SAN FRANCISCO

Text



Literature

LITERATURE - A SHORT STORY - THE KILLERS by ERNEST HEMINGWAY -- THE DOOR OF HENRY'S lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter. "What'll you have and eggs, bacon and eggs, liver and bacon, or a steak." "Give me chicken croquettes with green peas and bread sauce and mashed potatoes." "That's the order." "They all come here and eat the big dinner." "That's right," George said. "Do you know that's right?" Al asked George. "Sure." "You're a bright boy, aren't you?" George. "So he thinks it's all right. That's a good one." "Oh, he's a thinker," Al said. They went on eating. "What's the bright boy's name does the waiter?" Al asked. "Max." The door to the kitchen opened and the midget came in. "What was it?" he asked. The two men at the counter took a look at him. "All right, midget. The waiter says 'Max looked into the mirror all the time he was talking. 'I wouldn't say.' 'Hey, Al, bright boy says he wouldn't say what he thinks it's all about.' 'I don't see anything did he ever do to you?' 'He never had a chance to do anything to us. He never even seen us.' 'And he's only going to see us once.' Al said from the kitchen. "What you say from the street opened. A Street-car motorman came in. "Hello, George," he said. "Can I get supper?" "Sure, sure," George said. "He'll be back in about half an hour." "Can he do anything?" Max said. "He can cook and everything. You'd make some nice little wife, bright boy." "Yeah?" George said. "Your friend, the Anderson, isn't he?" "He straightened his coat with his gloved hands. "So long, bright boy," he said to George. "You got a lot of luck." "That's the truth," Max said. "You could be a lot of luck." "You better not have anything to with it at all," Sam, the cook, said. "You better stay way out of it." "Don't go if you don't want to," George said. "I'll be in the kitchen." "I'll be in the kitchen with all his clothes on. He had been a heavyweight prizefighter and he was too long for the belt. He lay with his head on the pillows. He was the midget." "No, it ain't just a bluff." "The Anderson rolled over toward the wall." "The only thing is," he said, talking toward the wall, "I just don't want to be in the kitchen. He was in the ring, you know." "I know it." "You're never gonna except from the way his face is," the woman said. She stood talking out inside the street door. "What did not say anything. George reached down for a towel and wiped the counter. "I wonder what he did?" Sam said. "Double-crossed somebody. That's what happened."

Text



LEW THOMAS

Panels from DEPOSITION: 1974-1976

17" x 22"

OR IS IT (reprinted from *The New Commercialist (A Review)* October 1978)

"What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a pre-occupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accomodates. To find a form that accomodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now."

Quotes are similar to images. They are reproductions that serve to illustrate the outside of a text. Like a photograph. Or is it a medium whose material resolution instantly gaps rational causality; or that, attempts to discuss or define photography lead directly to analogy or mysticism.

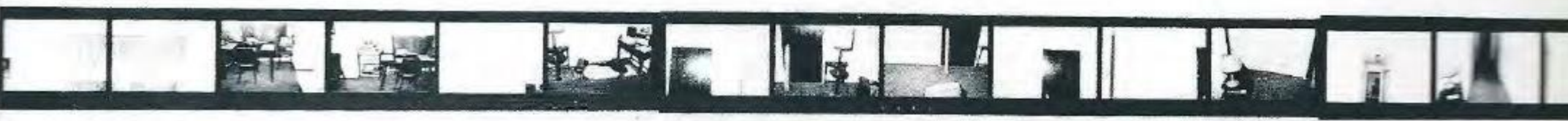
A photograph signifies the past. The sign is always present. A shift in tense like language. Or cogito. (I) think therefore (I) am not. (I) write to form-u-late a case, nominative; a will, possessive; (I) cannot see my eyes except in reflection, objective. My-self. Who am (I)? Today. And image disembodied from the root of perception. Like a photograph. To mask the identity of my instincts. In-order-to-act formats are invented for control. History. Who am (I)? Today. Formats are invented for my control. Genre. What is the purpose of photography? Comfort,



...and order to escape from them again one day so as to fall once more under the laws of inanimate nature. -G. Olivier QUOTATIONS: THERE ARE THOSE WHO WANT A TEXT (AN ART, A SIGNIFIER) WITHOUT A...



...intelligence, "I've got to help once said. So far has raised some questions about the lack of narrativity in such straight photography, which appears broadened by explaining, in the end, ..."



...said Nick. "I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat." Outside it was getting dark. The street-light came on outside the door. ...



control, emotion, identity, perception, reflection—to form-u-late a will. Format. Format. Format. Ideology. If (I) see a photograph of a penis and another of a prick, are they the same object? A vagina or cunt? The interpretation of one, the other, is an arrangement of information.

Fetish, ritual, perception—a form-u-lated experience. The anesthetized image. Like a photograph.

"And I have known the eyes already, known them all/The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase/And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin/When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall/Then how should I begin."

A photograph? Or is it? Or is it "the recording of phenomena purely by means of the effects of phenomena." Is photography transparent in the manner of a true method—that which communicates itself; the reproductions of reproductions? A photograph reads like the real world because it designs it. Today the photograph is the world: the world is a photographic model. "O moon my pin-up." The "Third Show" at Camerawork Gallery divides the photograph between the connotative aspect of the sign and its signifier. The work in the show does not invoke the private language of ritual such as repeated actions of camera-pointing, artificial lighting or print manipulation to mystify the evidence of our senses. The imprint of these patterns is traceable to the fiction of genre and its identification with a proper name.

"Each proper name pretends that it is the origin and end of a certain collocation of thoughts that may be unified . . . The indicative value that I attribute to them (names of authors and



WITHOUT THE "DOMINANT IDEOLOGY"; BUT THIS IS TOO WANT A TEXT WITHOUT PRODUCTIVITY, WITHOUT PRODUCTIVITY, A STERILE TEXT...THE TEXT NEEDS ITS SHADOW; THIS SHADOW IS A BIT OF IDEOLOGY, A BIT OF REPRESENTATION, A BIT OF...
...of determinable areas of the deposition. The term, deposition (written testimony used in the place of the witness), is perfectly suited to the method and construction of the work. In fact, the title...
...is also used to present a more complete view of the work photographically. This introduction (TITLE), an ESSAY on the state of photography by SAM SAVORE, and (LITERATURE) a short story, THE PYLERS, by ROBERT...
...by the literature of Hemingway. Even after I had collected all the material I thought was needed for DEPOSITION, the threads of this literature remained with me until I saw the possibility of tying the two...
...stalls of Picaso meditation complete with sentiment and artistry. Content and meaning are useless without an understanding of the structures that organize our life. Why did Duchamp choose a... of...



...photographs tend to reveal in the degree to which they exalt surface, surface relationships and the visual aspects of perceived reality." This in part answers some questions I have had (over the years) about the...
...I seem to be confined to the intentions of an artist. ("Shooting America"). This vital distinction leads Kozloff to confess that "...determining element of the medium (photography) here is that it...
...bottom of the heap. "One might for example consider the idea that the art of photography is in its nature receptive, or passive..." writes John Szarkowski. Indeed, the idea that photography is...
...or rendered or justly," said H. B. Macomber. "You can't change things anyway; its been going on for 10,000,000 years." Macomber continued. "It's moral principles and fixed attitudes which impose...
...painting as permanent display, we perceive it most of the time as a turntable. Conversely, almost anything can acquire a sense of heightened reality and presence if it is detached, possibly by its...
...of...



...two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in. "I'll have a roast pork tenderloin with...
...chest. His face was small and white and he had tight lips. He wore a silk muffler and gloves. "Give me bacon and eggs," said the other man. He was about the same size as Al. His hair...
...of bright boys." Max said. George put two placers, one of ham and eggs, the other of bacon and eggs, on the counter. He set down two side dishes of fried potatoes and bread...
...the counter. "What's the price?" George asked. "Order of your damn business," Al said. "Who's out in the kitchen?" "The nigger." "What do you mean the nigger?" "The nigger that cooks." "Is...
...go on back to the kitchen, nigger. You go with him, bright boy." The little man walked after Nick and Sam, the cook, back into the kitchen. The door shut after them. The man called Max...
...You move a little to the left, Max." He was like a photographer arranging for a group picture. "Talk to me, bright boy," Max said. "What do you think's going to happen." George did not...
...bright boy?" "You talk too damn much," Al said. "The nigger and my bright boy are assessed by themselves. I got them tied up like a couple of girl friends in the convent." "I suppose you...
...No," said Max. "It ain't that. Bright boy is nice. He's a nice boy. I like him." At six-fifty-five George said "Let's not...". Two other people had been in the lunch-room. One...
...at five minutes," Al said from the kitchen. In the five minutes a man came in, and George explained that the cook was sick. "Why the hell don't you get another cook?" the man asked. "...
...back through the swinging-door into the kitchen and untied Nick and the cook. "I don't want any more of that," said Sam, the cook. "I don't want any more of that." This...
...s receiving house." George said to Nick. "I'll go up there." Outside the art-light shone through the bare branches of a tree. Nick walked up the street beside the car-tracks and...
...They put up in the kitchen," Nick went on. "They were going to shoot you when you came in to supper." Old Anderson looked at the wall and did not say anything. "George thought I better...
...in wrong." He talked in the same flat voice. "There ain't anything to do. After a while I'll make up my mind to go out." "I better go back and see George," Nick said. "Go back," said...
...man said. Nick walked up the back street to the corner under the art-light, and then along the car-tracks to Henry's auto-lodge. George was inside, under the counter. "Did you see...
...of. "You better not think about it." THE WILLIAMS, A SHORT STORY BY ERNEST HEMINGWAY



doctrines) is first the name of a problem."⁵

The competitive struggle of artists estranges community experience; and the dismay of artists is traceable to this coded hierarchy. Photography in the "Third Show" examines the authorization of form by asserting the presence of the signifier and by distancing the object of perception. The "re-ordering"⁶ of photography into systems that analyze its capacity to inscribe consciousness with meaning and value asserts an activity of remedial will as being more instructive than the decorating functions of vision. When photographs reveal their originary functions, i.e., the power to conceal alienation, to transmit "uncriticized ideology" in forms that are "familiar, well-know, transparent myths in which a society or an age can recognize itself (but not know itself)," then, and only then, will the mirror and the frame undergo disillusion. This leads to a critique of genre, to contextural questions, which in turn lead to a dis-ordering of knowledge where the individual can put aside "spontaneous consciousness," the "institutionalized subjective." "What's really at stake is one's image of oneself."

In Hal Fischer's piece, **18th & Castro x 24**, a "perpetual calendar" is constructed out of automatic images and "cold type." The straight forward presentation of photographs and text confounds the abusive functions of interpretation and taste because of its simplicity and accessibility. A project grouped around a set of combinations, contrasts and perceptions moves forward with the obvious continuity of a machine.⁸ A site is subjected to an automatic witness, a camera that records in intervals the data of time. To counter the automatic observations, a monologue is appended to the matrices of the documentary surfacing the problems of context. The frame and the mirror are shown as mechanical and arbitrary devices. It is inter-



...of stimulating intellectual dialogue I've experienced with most photographers I've met. This is not as apparent with other artists in the other art forms, such as painting and sculpture. Perhaps photography is a necessary requirement to the existence of a work of art. Would a still frame from film shot by an aerial reconnaissance plane with an...
 ...of the material I had been gathering. Until then I had been routing heavily on sound tapes to carry the load of intention. Written material now became a means to parallel the...
 ...the original intent of the work to expand and obscure the meaning. Words and images roturing the paper be... attempting to find the transversal process within a linear...
 ...the old man whose case I attended in...
 ...the old man whose case I attended in...
 ...the old man whose case I attended in...



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esting to see how artless photographs reveal more about the construction of photographic vision than the work of pure description or synthetic objects. Fischer's decision to rigidly fix the view of the camera and its constant perspective **stereotypes** the documentary and the fiction of objectivity. The genre is penetrated by the admission of the photographer's voice. "I was not one man only," says Proust's narrator, "but the steady advance hour after hour of an army in close formation, in which there appeared, according to the moment, impassioned men, indifferent men, jealous men . . . In a composite mass, these elements may, one by one, without our noticing it, be replaced by others, which others again eliminate or reinforce, until in the end a change has been brought about which it would be impossible to conceive if we were a single person." The Cross-coding of photography and language releases the discovery of the Other and does not suppress the awareness of I myself am that risk insofar as I am the other.⁹ Film is advanced frame by frame ineluctably recording its own rendezvous by nature of its seriality. Fischer's tinkering with the codes of the documentary directs attention to the problems of form, or how it, form, is constituted and whether it can be divided by its inside or outside: or is there an outline? What does the photographer the viewer, or the critic perceive? Anyone looking into the photograph chooses from a set of terms, identity and difference, that control and unify the heterogeneity of signs flooding our vision. The signs float upright in consciousness no matter how chaotic or disorienting the content may seem. The field of a photograph diminishes towards a center of enclosed information and draws the photographer and viewer alike into a state of imagined security and endless diversion. The enclosure cannot be felt or



...of conclusion of TEXTS. In this case, DEPOSITION stresses a rational unintelligibility to guide the construction. Written material which is concerned in legible terms is here distorted by the...
...of one. THE TEXT - Initially my aim was to locate and define the problem of one man whose existence was threatened by a social pathology. The subject of the work is a man whose existence is threatened by...
...: "THE DOOR OF HENRY'S LUNcheon OPENED..." and here I am trying to open the door of HENRY'S LUNcheon... as I merely a witness? The themes of death & paranoia as written by Doszway take THIRTEEN... a...



...al sign system of plastic values. While, as E. H. Gombrich notes about 16th century landscapes, "... they are not 'low' but largely accumulations of individual features; they are conceptual rather than representational...
...to depicting three-dimensional objects on the two dimensional surface of a piece of photographic paper. Bill Jay seems to agree with me on some issues as expressed in the "Summaries of Imposed Concepts",...
...has said that the artist is more important than the art, and I agree. I think that has always been part of the reason why photography has yet to receive the applause of the elite patron...
...culture of fine art rather than against the 'low' culture of Hollywood and the supermarket; however, in the end, the artists and their works were snatched up by the very rich and by the...
...a work of art... This is precisely what typically occurs in 'straight' photography. The photographer who deliberately takes his picture chooses some configuration from an environment in a constant state of...



lock." "The clock says twenty minutes past five," the second man said. "It's twenty minutes past." "Oh, to hell with the clock," the first man said. "What have you got to eat?" "I can give you any kind of...
...drink?" "Just those I said." "This is a hot town," said the other. "What do they call it?" "Sinsinnot." "Ever hear of it?" Al asked his friend. "No," said the friend. "What do you do here nights?" Al asked. "They eat...
...a looked at George. "Nothing." "The hell you were looking at me." "Maybe the boy meant it for a joke, Max," Al said. George laughed. "You don't have to laugh," Max said to him. "You don't have to laugh...
...aid to George, "I'll be right to come out here." "What are you going to do in him?" "Nothing. Use your head, bright boy. What would we do to a nigger?" George opened the door that opened back into the kitchen. "...
...you say something?" "What's it all about?" "Fey, Al," Max called. "Bright boy wants to know what it's all about." "Why don't you tell him?" Al's voice came from the kitchen. "What do you think it's about?" "I don't...
...know all that, bright boy," Max said. "Talk about something else. Ever go to the movies?" "Once in a while." "You ought to go to the movies more. The movies are fine for a bright boy like you." "What are you going to...
...got that, bright boy?" "All right, George said. "What you going to do with us afterwards?" "That'll depend," Max said. "That's one of those things you never know at the time." George looked at the clock. It was twenty...
...a the table. Nick and the cook were back to back in the corner, a towel tied in each of their mouths. George had cooked the sandwich, wrapped it up in oiled paper, put it in a bag, brought it in, and the man said...
...What the hell," said Max. "We got to keep amused. Haven't we?" "You talk too much, all the same," Al said. He came out from the kitchen. The cut-off barrels of the smoking pipe...
...support of his mouth with his thumbs. "They all gone?" he asked. "Yeah," said George. "They're gone now." "I don't like it," said the cook. "I don't like any of it at all." "Listen," George said to Al. "You better...
...a woman in a night of stripes and black to the end of a corridor. She knocked on the door. "Who is it?" "It's somebody to see you, Mr. Anderson," the woman said. "It's Nick Adams." "Come on," Nick opened the door...
..."That's all right." Nick looked at the big man lying on the bed. "Don't you want me to go and see the police?" "No," Old Anderson said. "That wouldn't do any good." "Isn't there something I could do?" "No, Nick...
...a be God's feet well. I said to him: "Mr. Anderson, you ought to go out and take a walk on a nice cold day like this." But he didn't feel like it. "He doesn't want to go out." "I'm sorry he don't feel well," the woman...
...a knows what it's all about." "What's he going to do?" "Nothing." "They'll kill him." "I guess they will." "He must have got mixed up in something in Chicago." "I guess so," said Nick. "It's a hell of a thing."

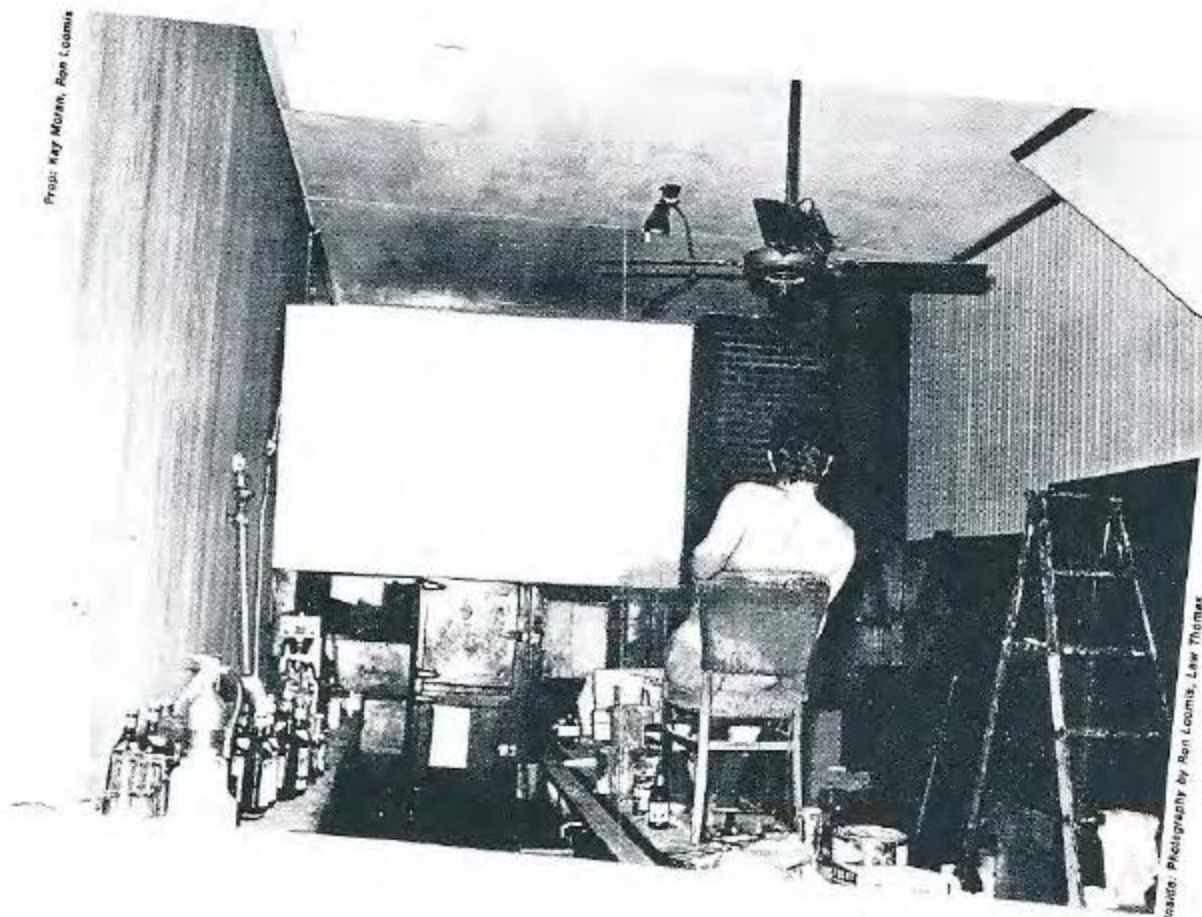


seen, it has no weight or texture; photographer and viewer co-exist in a transparent discourse where the need for meaning and emotional equivalents are incessantly rendered in reproducible forms (terms). The inside. Content. Or is it.

(I've heard Fischer comment with self satisfaction that some of the work in "Third Show" including his own reaffirms the presence of people and the issues of content as central to the practice of photography. This may be the case but to this critic the statement is provisional. The "Castro Street piece" is interesting because of its integrity and adherence to a methodical process where the structure of "making equal," subject and object, dissolves the distinction between language and photography.

"If one is always bound by one's perspectives one can at least deliberately reverse perspectives as often as possible, in the process undoing opposed perspectives, showing that the two terms of opposition are merely accomplices of each other."¹⁰ The strategy of plural voices allows Fischer to break out of the enclosure of interpretation that dissimulates form, format, classification in an exchange of views where the photographer is no longer problematic to the appropriating power of photography. The view of unorthodox street conduct does not exclude the role of the photographer. All aspects of the work are open. The resolve to accept signs that deny the transformative appetites demand patience and willingness to work in a state of aesthetic doubt. Compared to previous works by Hal Fischer, the growing interest in format and presentation has advanced his photography to a greater degree of transparency. No longer using the photograph as the only point of contact, the referential quality of the work increases

The (New) COFFEE GALLERY:



Photography: LEW THOMAS

OUTSIDE/INSIDE

Sound: Geoffrey Cook

June 19 — July 26, 1976

Performances & Reception:

June 29th, 7:00 p.m.

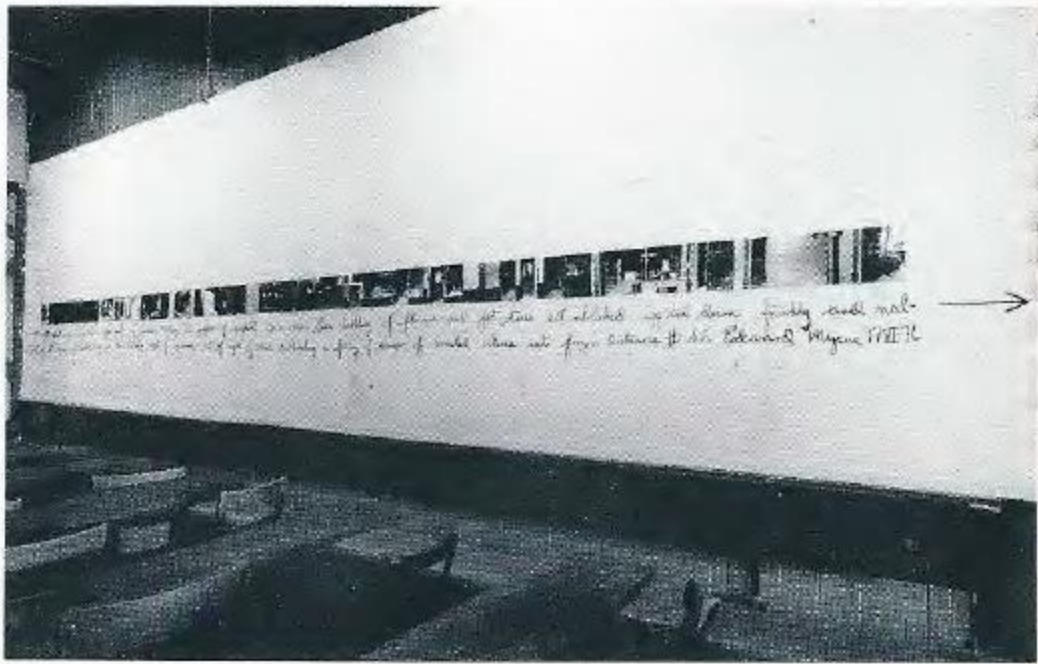
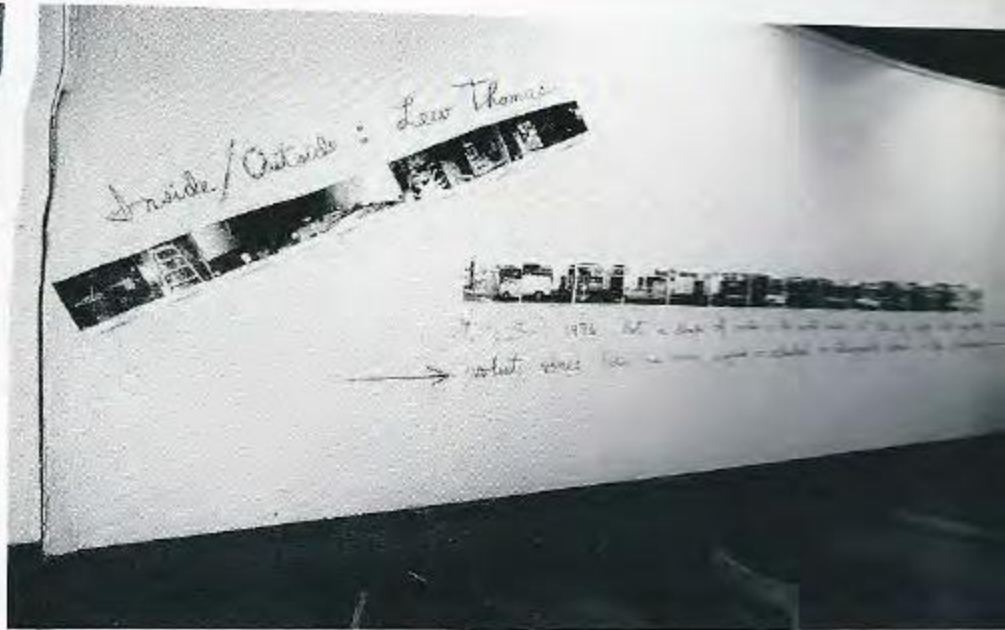
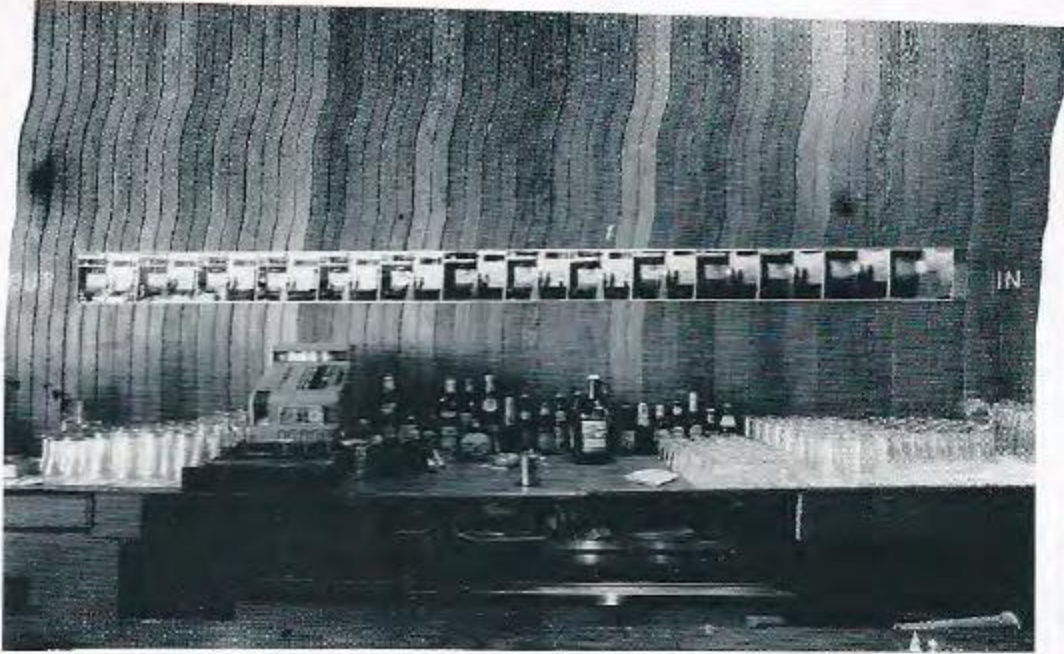
Sir Lawrence Washington

The Friends of Art

(Howard Hack, Cheryl Smith, Edward MyCue)

The (New) COFFEE GALLERY

1353 Grant Ave.



OUTSIDE/INSIDE

Choice

- (A) Art is ritual
- (B) Art is political
- (C) Art is unique
- (D) Art is reproducible
- (A) Art is style
- (B) Art is autonomous
- (C) Art is image
- (D) Art is language
- (A) Art is content
- (B) Art is context
- (C) Art is experience
- (D) Art is structure
- (A) Art is technique
- (B) Art is concept
- (C) Art is concrete
- (D) Art is process
- (A) Art is dream
- (B) Art is reflective
- (C) Art is pleasure
- (D) Art is complex
- (A) Art is complex
- (B) Art is

Inside



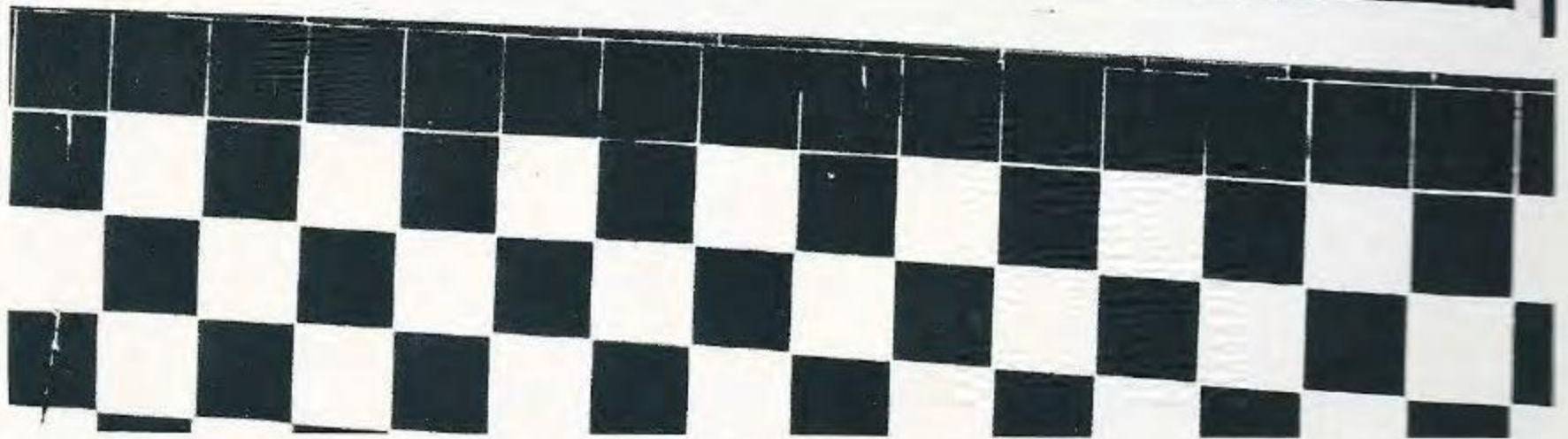
from OUTSIDE/INSIDE:CHOICE (Written Installation), 1976

1978 photograph (from the series Reproductions of Reproductions) 40" x 30"

April 13th, 1977
 To Donna-Lee Phillips
 San Francisco

It's no problem now to see why Conceptual art, for example, which ~~mostly~~ subsists on photographic evidence looks curiously schematic like the thing it was meant to displace namely, the object in its hardened form. Even film with its pervasive influence needs a controlled space to transmit illusionistic messages similar to the enclosure of the gallery.

In a corresponding way it is intelligible why the fixed image as an object of contemplation and common-sensibility is totally inadequate to challenge structures ironically created and maintained by the mechanism of images - Photography. How can any work delivered in a package marked "Masterpiece" and whose historical acceptance is contingent on "aura" and uniqueness presume to expose issues in which their bridage to the repressive structures contradicts the problematic meaning of their creation? LT



CORRESPONDENCE (A Written Installation), 1977 Galeria de la Raza, San Francisco
 from the exhibition INSIDE/OUTSIDE curated by Masashi Matsumoto

Photograph by Sharon Golden

1978 Photograph (from the series Reproductions of Reproductions) 40"x30"

change will things, it execute and process of idea to yourself commit you once. imitation or stylization of problems only are they. manageable become will photography illusionistic of distortions the, time and space of fictions, beginnings false. processes film other of look the with himself concern to have not does he. work own his for criterion as photography traditional to relate not does he. illusionistic not are that values and photographic is that material with deals photographer the. radical are results the image the from freed.

technique graphic of mingling a not and photographs be to meant are that photographs evolve will range this for respect. scale grey of utilization full mean will normalcy. value material its for exposed completely be should surface photographic the. frameable not is it, finished is it when. real is what represent to means a find will vision his internalizes who photographer the, style of pretensions from freed.

authenticity its be will completeness. aesthetic is it when not; effective it is when completed is concept photographical.

definition constant of state a in is it, interpretive not is it. freely work my about talk can I. process enlarge they because acceptable are relationships verbal.

referential not is it. not is it or is it what is either it. ideas of effectiveness measure to used is standard 1:1A.

photography internalize. taste and values comparative by judged are that pictures create will they and decorative and obsessive are preoccupations these. aesthetics and composition inhibit. visible the for disregard with ideas execute.

competitive and redundant simply are techniques effective promise which aims their. content their for exploited be should photography on manual. space is camera. structure present to time with integrated be can geometry and movement camera, progression film, speeds shutter, stops F., scale and measurement, perception expresses it. method is camera. moment decisive the necessarily not is that idea an identify to used be can film of roll. structure implies and movement possesses, serial is film roll. content are photography of materials.

object the photography making concept by displaced is photography traditional of concern and object the is which illusionism.

(s) image than rather (s) idea be can photography for base A. ◀

**Nothing more ordinary than what is happening to me,
nothing simpler than the solution to the
problem before me.**

Francis Ponge

Conceptual photography is an investigation of the photographic process. In most constructions it articulates a binary relationship of methodology to content. Unlike experimental or even fine-arts photography, it relies on a direct process or common technology to the degree that sufficiently expresses the intention of the artist. The work in this exhibition is generally characterized by a non-visceral content which confines its meaning to measuring, locating, limiting or defining directions uncommon to pictorial photography. In fact images, which hitherto have been the collective source of photographic culture, are here incorporated into structures or formats that are alien to a tradition of illusions. They are alien in scale, i.e., one-to-one representation of visual information; the use of camera perspectives to isolate and analyze lateral movement with concurrent modes of scanning; a systematic use of seriality that is not merely an analogy for motion; the formulation of coding devices to develop structure and encourage the viewer in a rereading of the actual process; the combining of various photographic genres to produce reflexive formats; or language and time which in conceptual photography are equal to light and space respectively.

There are now logic and ideas in photography and individual photographs. Not just things, or people, or decisive moments. There are other concomitants like scale, materiality, anti-decisive moments, metaphor and motion which are independent of the classical elements of light, tone, expressiveness and likeness. . .

Robert Leverant

The work in this exhibition was selected because of a preoccupation with the meaning of the photographic object and not the continued exaltation of a privileged image. It is this inquiry into the nature of the object that unites the independent works into a projected whole or aggregate of philosophical interests. The issue confronted by the artists here are so divergent from the normal functions of photography that they can be considered ideologically different in development and origin. These issues involve the use of ideas as a primary source for the practice of photography. The relationship of these ideas to the visual object exists in a referential state where idea and representation are as clearly calibrated as the marks on a ruler. The meaning of the object is always recognizable for what it is. Regardless of the intellectual powers associated with certain historical photographers, their immersion into an orthodox tradition has diluted the radicalism of their thinking to the extent that their influence is prolonged by a process of imitation.

Empty enigmas, arrested time, signs which refuse to signify, giant enlargement of the tiny detail, narratives which come full circle: We are in a flat and discontinuous universe where each thing refers only to itself. A universe of fixity, or repetition, of absolute obviousness, which enchants and discourages the explorer.

Robbe-Gillet

Conceptual photography in its purest form has displaced the image and its sophistry of seeing with a new arrangement of visual ordering namely: the idea, process and the meaning of photography itself. Although this sequence is interchangeable during the execution of a photographic work, it is quite different from the secondary status granted by artists who use photography to record their activities whether it is painting for reproduction or saleable documentation. A conceptual photographer always begins at the beginning in a search for authenticity and the work in this exhibition is no exception. My thanks to Carl Loeffler whose assistance and resources have made possible an exhibition of photography that is beyond the scope of those who manage the art in this area; and to Samuel W. Samore who shares one-third of the responsibility of this exhibit.

LETTERS

Concerning The Photography and Language show at La Mamele Arts Center and Cameraworks Gallery in San Francisco, The exhibition is up until November 22, 1976.

Dear Mr. Thomas,

Just one comment about the Photography and Language exhibition. Being the first exhibition of the relationships between Photography and Language to be done with the emphasis on Photography, is it totally justified to curate the show in such a manner that it may actually misrepresent certain artists' work due to your decision to restrict entries to an 8 X 10 inch horizontal format? I know that I felt a little galled at having to conform to your preconceptions of what the show was about and resented you using the exhibition as an excuse to "do a piece". When you curate a show, especially in this situation where much of the work shown has not had extensive visibility, you take a responsibility to show the work in its proper context without taking such curatorial liberties with the work. This is my objection to the format of the show. I admire your urge to put on unique exhibitions like 8 X 10 back in 1975, but in this instance the show purports to represent a certain direction within Photography, so can you justify from an historical point of view having the artists who participate restrict their entries to your format limitations?

Sincerely,

James Hugunin
Los Angeles

Dear Mr. Hugunin,

In reply to your letter of July 1, regarding the 8 X 10 inch horizontal format for the Photography and Language exhibition held jointly at the Arts Center and Camera-work Gallery, let me begin by saying that I was not the author of the format. It is unfortunate that my "8 X 10" book should be the cause of erroneous identification. However, any policy involving the exhibit must have the unanimous consent of John Lamkin, Carl Loeffler and myself. So, if the format appears to be an "excuse to do a piece", this judgement must be shared by the three of us.

From my reading of your articles and publications which I admire for their analytical efforts to define Photography as an intellectual medium, your comments expressing "preconceptions" and "misrepresentation" came as a surprise to me.

Because of the experience during the West Coast Conceptual Photographers' exhibition which was designed to show a physical kind of photography using seriality, scale, and eccentric formats, we decided to find a strategy that would eliminate curatorial choices of "where do we hang this" and "how does this look" syndrome. In other words, even in the WCCP show we found ourselves relying on institutional sensibilities that in theory is deplorable. Let the galleries and museums worry about the historicity and other forms of aesthetic entertainment. It is our desire and business to create alternative structures that involve the highest form of risk. A risk circumscribed by artist and theoretician.

Within the format of the 8 X 10 inch horizontal print artists are free to send as many photographs as they deem necessary to complete their projects; they are free to send copies of original work because of installation procedures where unmounted prints will be stapled to the wall; or, to enable artists outside California to participate via the copy in that they can reduce non-transportable pieces to entities that can simply be mailed. How can this format be considered a manner that "may actually misrepresent certain artists' work"? If you mean eccentrically shaped photo pieces or hyperbolic objects are necessary for the serious investigation of the uses of photography and language, then of course this show will blow it. Even in the area of the object or aesthetic

commodity whereby Photography is currently supposed to represent the new bourgeois art market's need for inexpensive, "original" items, the choice of the 8 X 10 inch format is morally and politically defensible.

Therefore, the conditions and policy of the Photography and Language exhibition make it possible to install work without subjective mediation, encourages the submission of work beyond a regional scope, neutralizes the fetishistic values of the object, equates an exhibition with theory, and finally provides a conceptual context where questions are not only related to the identity and meaning of the art, but of the artist also.

We are aware that many photographers will not participate because of the format. That is our gamble. We may end up with 3 pieces or 240 square inches to 4500 square feet of space. But if these so called Language artists took the time to think out the implications of the format they ought to understand that one more "hot" show will only satisfy personal exposure. These same artists would not have felt comfortable in the show regardless of conditions.

Speaking now only for myself I don't see any need for producing a show that is compatible with the mentality that extends from Rochester to Carmel. The Romanticism of Photography is hardly the issue now.

I hope this information finds you in an indefatigable mood and I am grateful for your honesty and the material you have made available to the exhibition.

What we are doing is not predictable.

Very Sincerely,

Lew Thomas
San Francisco

PHOTOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE Photography and Language is the title of an exhibit that will consist of concurrent installations at La Mamele Art Center and CAMERAWORK Gallery, and a book of the same title, published concurrently with the exhibit, that will provide an extension of the gallery installations and also serve partially as an exhibition catalog. The exhibit will open October 22 and run through November 21, 1976. For the exhibit we are soliciting all types of photography in which words and images are joined in a visual presentation such as diaristic (subjective documentation), narrative (objective, closed temporal sequence), semiotic (the demystification of signs), etc. Also welcome are works where the ordering of words and/or images imply another level of representation (e.g. image juxtaposition in such a way that words (or language) are implied, even though not used). For the book, *Photography and Language*, we are soliciting texts of critical or theoretical information related to language and photography or any written work related to photography that transcends the usual orthodoxy of photographic writing.

The installation of these exhibits will be experimental in that the curators are attempting to avoid the usual aesthetic and logical decisions in hanging the exhibit, i.e. arrangement of like subject matter, arrangement of work to be visually pleasing, juxtaposition of pieces to convey the curator's message, etc. To accomplish this, we are requesting that all work submitted be in 8-inch by 10-inch horizontal format. The work may be original work or copies of original work. The piece may consist of more than one 8x10 print. The prints will be given a number when received and will appear in the exhibit in order of receipt. The work will be treated as nonprecious objects (not protected with glass, staples or pushpins used, etc.). Photography and Language is being jointly curated by Dancho Nangwa, director of CAMERAWORK; Carl Loeffler, director of La Mamele and Lew Thomas.

All work sent for consideration for the exhibit and the book should be addressed to Photography and Language c/o Lew Thomas, 243 Grand View Ave., San Francisco CA 94114 and should include \$3 handling fee and any pertinent information about the artist and the work. All work to be returned after the exhibit should be sent in a reusable shipping container with return postage included. The deadline for work submitted for the exhibit and the book is July 31, 1976.

When writing for further information, please be specific about the project(s) you are interested in submitting.

APLOGIES: In our first issue we had incorrectly titled Mr. Rowland's short story "Charity and Morality in Madison", whereas the correct title should read "Charity and Morality in Madison". We deeply regret this error and apologize to Mr. Rowland and our readers. (Ed.)

1. Michael Snow's book *Cover to Cover* could raise in some partisans of the art world the need to sweat. The majority of photographic artists use the format of a book as an excuse to pour out their sensitivities. Snow, however, turns a book into a machine that powers its own imagery within a reproducible system. In notes prepared in 1967 for his film, *Wavelength*, Snow explains issues central to his art-making: "I was thinking of, planning for, a time monument in which the beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated, thinking of trying to make a definitive statement of pure film space and time, a balancing of 'illusion' and 'fact,' all about seeing." *Cover to Cover* demonstrates a preoccupation with enclosure, the releasement of radical information engendered in a reflexive process and the commitment to detach the work of art from arbitrary interpretation. Snow is not the first artist or poet to find in process an ideological solution. In the essay, *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*, Mallarme writes, "Yes, without the folding of paper and the secrets it establishes, the shadow sprinkled in black characters would offer no reason to be spread like wreckage of a mystery on the surface, in the gap raised by the finger." Or now, 1977, when the thin, wafer-like volumes of Ed Ruscha have been received in the communion of the avant-garde, the stitched binding of some of these small books still evokes the fading aura of perfection "verging on ritual." At first glance, *Cover to Cover* exerts the same persuasiveness and authority. It looks and feels like a sculptural book carved out of coated-paper-stock and painted edge-to-edge with the metallic greyness of printer's ink. Handsomely published by the Nova Scotia Press, voluminous in relation to the genre of the "artist's book" and to which this book provides the latest mode, we are presented with more than 350 full-page, vertical halftones, and enough type to identify credits in a kind of rolling screen style. In fact there are two screens moving on parallel axis where time and space are sandwiched between the perspectives of a binary structure. This strategy is equated with the naturalism of the book or its recto-verso coding. *Cover to Cover* begins at the phenomenologic door (recto) through which Snow enters (verso) revealing page by page (coextended to the photographic frame) the autonomous relationship of two photographers, Keith Lock and Vince Sharp, to Snow's heuristic world. "I am working," Snow said before 1970, "to use photography in a very enclosed way so that there is nothing outside the work itself that is used in the photograph...as in certain kinds of painting which have an autonomy of their own." This dialectic which can be split between the historical need for "authenticity" and a modernist phasing out of connotative values is here illustrated by Snow in a primary field of reproduction - the photographic book. Are the processes that direct our lives more meaningful than the information they transmit? Has the classic "whatness" of a thing been subverted by how we get it? *Cover to Cover* presents us with the manifold uses of the "mechanical reproduction." Graininess of film signals the change from a reproduction of a photograph to a reproduction of a photographic copy. The door and windows are merely parodies of the frame. The Datsun is used as a propositional form of motion. Fingers, hands, arms, head, hair, paper, shirt represent objects in a game of sleight-of-hand or mechanical cunning. A black recording disc or the book itself are offered to us in sequences and principles of circularity, displacement, inversion, reversal and looping that produce in *Cover to Cover* the converging of reproduction with reflection. Even without a written text to parallel the visual narrative *Cover to Cover* is an exemplary work of photography and language. For ten years Snow has breached the pictorial tradition of photography - an exasperated tradition currently prolonged by a few symbolists and a mass of imitators. Simply on a retinal level *Cover to Cover* transmits a systemic madness inherent in a structuralist world. For if you look at the images of Michael Snow stripped of the aesthetics of the "limiting of arbitrariness," you should see a kind of "hip" frankenstein, rigid, mechanical, speechless, who can walk and drive upsidedown within the context of a linear, divided, parallel state of being. "By means of the unity that it provides and the problems that it eliminates, this notion of totality is well adapted to introduce into pathology an atmosphere of conceptual euphoria." (Michel Foucault, *Mental Illness & Psychology*).

by Lew Thomas

To Minor White
Arlington, Mass.

"Alas, in this occupation, you begin like the one and end like the other!"

Courbet

"Some people get a cheap thrill out of detachment."

Matsumoto

"Art - in other words the search for the beautiful and the perfecting truth, in his own person, in his wife and children, in his ideas, in what he says, does and produces - such is the final evolution of the worker, the phase which is destined to bring the Circle of Nature to a glorious close. Aesthetics and above Aesthetics, Morality, these are the keystones of the economic edifice."

Proudhon

"Nowadays a Cage concert can be quite a society event."

Cardew

March 1, 1977

To Dr. William Fielder, Chairman
SECA
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

A representative of SECA has formally asked me to write a paper on Bay Area photography concerning the avant-garde. This information, I am told, will be printed with other essays in a comprehensive index listing names, dates, places and reviews of photographic exhibitions held in San Francisco and the Bay Area during 1976. The objective nature of an index represents a significant change in the distribution of information because it is not limited to a system of arbitrary choices. John Berger puts it this way: "I have come to see that the arranging of artists in a hierarchy of merit is an idle and essentially dilettante process. What matters are the needs which art answers." An accurate index could be a fundamental step in this direction.

However, the theme of the avant-garde, as it was loosely presented, seems outside the scope of my activities since I am neither critic nor historian. In fact, the term itself projects an image of extremist doctrine that hardly relates to issues that concern my work, namely: normalcy, language, structuralism and the problematic of photography:

Robert Leverant sent me your request for examples of my work. The work may appear oddly simple. It relies on a non-visceral content deprived of sex and sympathy. The meaning is confined to measuring, locating, limiting or defining a photograph that is reflexive of itself. The expression of imagery is secondary to an insistence on ideas and their releasement through the agency of photography. The work is formulated by language and not by a reading of nature. Scanning, seriality, the objective use of perspective are internal to the methodology. The formats employ coding devices that encourage the viewer in a rereading of the photographic process. In this context, time and language are equal to the "classical elements of light, tone, expressiveness and likeness..."

This kind of photography, allegedly referred to as "conceptual," has had only incidental exposure within the museums of San Francisco. You might say that museum policy as it specifically relates to photography has been distinguished by the exclusion of these issues. I am not talking about anti-photography or documentary evidence that supports the activities of other art forms like Earth art, Body art, Performances and Installations. No, I mean problematic photography in which questions are posed in opposition to a set of standards, which has produced a tradition of commodities whose value at any level of the structure is more monetary than aesthetic.

Problematic photography contradicts the assumptions of conceptual art and photography whose operant form is a "law that can be shown on the basis of certain rules to exclude no logical possibilities." The comfortable autonomy of conceptualism can now be viewed as merely hermetic exercises in a competitive struggle for economic survival in the marketplace of art. And the "felt" image of humanistic photography is simply inadequate in deciphering the codes that determine our perceptions of reality. "The 'creative' principle in photography," writes Walter Benjamin, "is its surrender to fashion. Its motto: the world is beautiful. In it is unmasked photography, which raises every tin can

into the realm of the All but cannot grasp any of the human connections that it enters into, and which, even in its most dreamy subject, is more a function of its merchandisability than of its discovery. Because, however, the true face of this photographic creativity is advertising or association; therefore its correct opposite is unmasking or construction." Neither repetitive practices nor the perfectability of the photographic print can reverse the tradition of the "unmasked" photograph that freezes the dialectic of the tradition into a program of connoisseurship. This linear tradition cannot sustain itself indefinitely through the practices of analogy, mechanical advancement, or purity. It must bear some responsibility to contemporary reactions and mental adjustments forcing critical issues into a present frame of analysis.

A museum ought to provide space for intellectual examination of photography. Of course nothing may be wrong with a series of choices that determine photographic examples for promotion, but it is in relation to these decisions that the outsider is forced into a state of alienation and subversion. I must confess that prolonged counteractivity has produced within me a sense of paranoia to the extent where I now have a picture of the museum as an instrument of repression.

September 30, 1974

John Humphrey
San Francisco Museum of Art

A friend told me you are putting together a show entitled PHOTOGRAPHY & ART. Though I have no real idea of the nature of the exhibition, the rumour makes it clear to me that you cannot accept my work as either photography or art. This troubles me deeply because I respect the contributions you have made to photography in this area. However, I must take the position that the work I am doing is simply remote from your tastes and ideas.

If I don't hear from you, I will simply leave it at that...

I hardly see any reasons for disguising the frustrations that contribute to my point-of-view even though the rumour was false!

During the period 1971 - 1975 I have been provided plenty of opportunities to show my work in a museum context. This may seem contradictory or even hypocritical based on previous statements expressed in this letter. However, the idea of

"context" for which most artists seek as an adjunct to their forms of expression slowly evolved in my thinking to a point where it became inseparable from the content of the work itself. The retrospective lessons that produced this change can be listed as follows: a.) The space for which an artist yearns, i.e., the gallery or museum, is temporal and inadequate to the demands of purposeful or radical art. b.) In relation to the support-structure as a whole, the independent artist is defenseless and depends categorically on values similar to those of an entertainer. c.) Rejection is usually not personal; it is more insidious because it operates ostensibly as a curatorial process that is nothing more than a fiction concealing the economic interests of the material structure. d.) So-called "high risk" exhibitions, particularly in photography, are limited to marginal space within the museum, while the depth of resources are devoted to the historical survey reflecting the hierarchic reference (an obsession) of bourgeois art. e.) This tradition is not prolonged by creative internalization, it is mediated by a system of communicational clichés known as the press release, review and the picture-book catalog.

March 20, 1976

To Thomas Albright
San Francisco Chronicle

The real threat to contemporary art is not the issues of language or structuralism; it's really the closed nature of the system which is managed on a political level. In other words, every artist knows how it feels to go on trial and for what? The sexual fantasy of the exhibition? The rewards for craftsmanship? Servicing the elite? Sure, some can get over on the strength of their objects but here too, the object ends up in the laps of those who deserve it the least. There must be another way to practice art on a professional scale. For once, Tom, I'm in agreement with you. The Mexican Museum and La Mamelle can "take over the functions of a museum." "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you will find, you get what you need." (Mick Jagger)

Besides these two there are other spaces challenging museum practices directed towards contemporary art.

There are the "floating" structures -

the seminar, the museum, the radio and cable television. There's BLUXOME STREET and LANGTON STREET. SITE. THE FARM. CAMERAWORK GALLERY and WEST COAST PRINT CENTER. All use photography. Some of the photography shown in these spaces looks as good as the photographic prints hanging in museums. However, the image as object is something I am resistant to. But in the new time/frame South of Market, in the meadow-like loft of 70-12th Street, photographic exhibitions have been mounted on a scale equal to the museum.

The two shows I am familiar with are WEST COAST CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHERS, March 1976, and PHOTOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE, October 1976 - exhibitions detached from the crippling criteria of "quality" and the guarantee of security.

March 15, 1976

To Jan Butterfield
San Francisco

The feeling that you might not find time to see the exhibition, WEST COAST CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHERS, has occurred to me and I hope the suspicion is unfounded. An imageless catalog resembling "contraband" has been assembled for the show and it is a thorough explication of purpose and information. For a long time it has confused me why people who are literate and committed to the issues of contemporary art take so long in showing serious interest in work that directly confronts these problems. My guess is that without the semblance of an audience the work waits ... "hip" art is OK if it is predigested in the theoretical sauces of the NY art magazines. What I'm trying to say is why not take a chance and investigate an exhibition that has no precedent in this area. I don't want to make it appear that the "breakthrough" in photography has happened; rather, it is the context whereby something indicative to the Bay Area might be taking place... It is not my intention to offend you or anyone - I simply wish you would attend...

In the two exhibitions, WEST COAST CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHERS and PHOTOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE, nearly 150 photographers and artists participated. The former show was a "free-form" installation of photographic works in which scale,

seriality, camera perspectives, construction and methodologies were projected on a level of sculpture without resorting to a confusion of graphic processes. It was "straight" photography only ripped out of the prison-house that extends mentally from Carmel to Rochester and vice versa. The term, "conceptual," was strategically joined to the title of the exhibition more as a purgative to the photographic system than for reasons of classification.

On the other hand, PHOTOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE was devoted exclusively to theory and to the problems of structure. Here, the meaning of photography, artist and curator was examined extensively by participant, spectator, reviewer and, most importantly, in the book - PHOTOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE.

December 6, 1976

Peter Bunnell
Princeton University

I appreciate your letter of interest expressing concern for some of the projects we are doing in San Francisco. It's true, we are amateurs when it comes to the business of promotion. Anyway, here's a copy of the P & L book. It's by no means definitive but it has an auspicious quality since it was finished at the bindery on the day André Malraux died. There are a few stars in the lineup but it is mostly made up from unpublished material. The book has its faults centered mainly around the ideology of the typographical error but even here it's amazing how the book predicts political tendencies of the 70's in imagery and content. I hate to ask you for the \$6.95 but we are under-the-gun to pay our bills. Please consider this letter in-voice.

Influential traditions are built and generated in and by print and, traditionally, critics and curators have summarily dismissed ideas and exhibitions that are outside the dominating ideology; and the burden of proof is always carried by the artist. Some controversial issues can be tolerated within the frame of the exhibition because it represents merely a tiny node in a system transmitting comparatively weak vibrations through the medium as a whole. Without a text, the reference point of departure, the museum or gallery, cannot alter the course of action open to artists, i.e., the next exhibition, for

which they must line up for competitive slots in the schedule. The system, consciously or unwittingly, keeps artists separated one from the other in an exasperated search for recognition. A generation of new art forms from Happenings to Contextural art are the results of this systemic frustration no matter how ideological they may seem in appearance.

In print however, artists bridge the spatial gaps with a medium that is essentially portable. With the advent of the "artist's book," the proliferation of cheaper printing processes, the arrival of ARTWEEK, INTERMEDIA, LEFT CURVE, VILE, BOMBAY DUCK and LA MAMELLE, to name only a few, artists have found a temporary communications network relatively free of institutional manipulation. Even here photographic artists have had to de-emphasize a classical reluctance to allow their work to be printed in an inferior state, and to overcome the sentimentality of language as it has been associated with the image. Most importantly, this wave of publications allows artists to view themselves on a serious level of commitment, and at the same time, enables them to assimilate the maximum impact of language.

In the area of photography where I have witnessed and participated in projects involving groups of artists expressing ideas and information pertinent to themselves and reality, it is evident that commitment, individually and collectively, in duration and intensity, is the raw material that holds it all together. There are individual conflicts within a faction and there are contradictions of taste and experience between factions; but a coalition of skills can emerge whose sense of accomplishment can make the gallery, the museum, the institution, psychologically obsolescent.

This complex of skills, ideas, ideologies is under persistent threat of financial crisis. The depth of context as it now exists should produce a set of intellectual patrons whose interests will reflect a maturity beyond the possession of objects and social mystification.

• Very truly yours,

Lew Thomas

May 31, 1977

To Martha Chahroudi
Rochester, N Y 14607

On behalf of all artists participating in the PHOTOGRAPHY & LANGUAGE book including myself, I want to thank you for the comprehensive and intelligent review of this publication in Afterimage, April 1977.

Even though most of the material normally printed in Afterimage is of little interest to me, I cannot think of anyone on the West Coast who would have taken the time to analyze the structuring and content of the book in the manner presented by your carefully written article.

Perhaps the only area of disagreement I find with the review is the selection of artists whose work you singled out to discuss. In this case there was something predictable about the evaluation. However, I am amazed by the clarity of distinctions you make in relation to the philosophical nature of the book. By not invoking false issues or photographers whose use of language is merely a padding of pictorial interests, you were able to deal with the substantive material of the book itself.

People who have access to publication, print, are only aware of their power in so far as it furthers their own bourgeois position of security and reputation. For the most part it does not occur to them that they practice a one way production of meaning in which the receiver is nothing more than an ideological patient. The domination of printed material by limited sources creates a false enclosure reducing participation while at the same time controlling ideas and issues. From these statements you can see that I look upon the book as a weapon to be used against the existing structures of aesthetic oppression. It's unfortunate that most people are mystified by the examples of publication and accept passively the conclusions presented by a few self appointed historians of photography some of whom appear in your periodical. We are out to change a few of these dominant positions and in the process awaken the need for a more thoughtful and independent attitude towards photography.

I am currently editing an issue for Dumb Ox which will utilize photographic work from the Bay Area that expresses ideological content of society and photography. The work will in some instances oppose conceptualism because of a more "problematic" investigation of the photographic object. When it's ready, I'll send you a copy.

Thanks again for your fair and significant review of Photography & Language.

Lew Thomas



Photograph by Ron Rick

PHOTOGRAPHY & IDEOLOGY: Theory, Review & Correspondence

Lew Thomas

'Some people get a cheap thrill out of detachment.'

-Masashi Matsumoto

In Bertolt Brecht's writings there's a *Theory of Radio* challenging the false relationship between sender and receiver. In this kind of divided system, informations and meaning are controlled and limited by the the power of production in which the recipient of messages is voiceless, an ideological patient.¹

THEORY: A similar theory can be applied to photography when the one-way flow of information is connected to the social structures that dominate our awareness through the apparatuses of communication. Photography that is totally identified with the systems reproducing information emerges as an authoritarian center in the *production of meaning*. 'It is clear that while production furnishes the material object of consumption, consumption provides the ideal object of production.'² Images in this perspective are the 'material object' of photography. To fix or limit their signification to a perceptible impression results in the division of meaning. Something is hidden.

Opposing, contradicting or demystifying the structures informing consciousness represent actions of a political type in which the role of photography is not immune to criticism. Photography bears a fundamental responsibility to the reality of the system. In this instance the 'ideal object of production' is not only determined by consumption but by its manifestation or communications... 'No needs, no production.' This theory locating photography as a center of production, *the production of meaning*, demonstrates ontological issues inherent in photography, the identity problem of imagery and print, the division of its object into material or ideal forms. Again, processes mediating information such as print, advertising, cinema, video and television can be materially defined as photographic.

Before images are processed through technological screens, they can be made 'cameraready' simultaneously with type. A 'lineshot' reproduces type or imagery in the same process. The halftone is a tonal variation between the polarities of black and white without negating the interchangeability of type or images either as language for reading or as visual shapes. In other words, blocks of type can be designed to emphasize their visibility while the study of photographs will result in a reading of information. The transmission of these patterns by mechanical or digital systems of reproduction produces effects atmospheric to the mind. Unlike painting, sculpture or even cinema, photographs are everywhere, all the time, interpreting us with or without our knowledge of their presence.

In an ascending order photography is a process, a power, an industry, whose agency is superior to the meaning of its function and the object of its functioning - imagery. Only a nearsighted ideology scans the significance of photography simply as a medium. Submerged within the 'material objects' of photography are signs, abstract and elusive, whose combinations can produce a network of structural meanings. The locking of these structures into a mass of communications will leave the individual psychologically vulnerable to the extent where conditions of malfunction are diagnosed as aberrant behavior even though the structures themselves may have reached a state of corruptibility.

After all, if beauty (like language) is one of the arms the ruling class uses to pacify us and 'keep us in our place', then one of our tasks is to turn that weapon around and make it work against the enemy. One way to do this is to demystify beauty and to show how the ruling class uses it against us; another way is to effect a 'transvaluation of values' in which we make a vice of the bourgeois concept of beauty while making a virtue of a very different concept (e.g., 'Black is Beautiful') which the bourgeoisie will be unable to recognise or accept.⁴

It's no problem now to see why Conceptual art, for example, which mostly subsists on photographic evidence, curiously looks like the thing it was meant to displace, namely, the object in its hardened form. Even film with its pervasive influence needs a controlled space similar to the enclosure of the gallery to transmit its illusionistic messages. In a corresponding way it is intelligible why the fixed image as an historical object of contemplation or connoisseurship is totally inadequate to challenge structures paradoxically created and maintained by the mechanism of imagery - photography. How can any work delivered in a package marked *Masterpiece* and whose historical acceptance is contingent

on 'aura' and 'uniqueness' presume to expose hidden meanings or even guilt when their bondage to repressive structures contradicts the problematic origins of their creation?

Day by day the need becomes greater to take possession of the object - from the closest proximity - in an image and the reproduction of an image. And the reproduction, as it appears in illustrated newspapers and weeklies, is perceptibly different from the original. Uniqueness and duration are as closely entwined in the latter as transience and reproducibility in the former. The removal of the object from its shell, the fragmentation of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sensitivity for similarity has so grown that by means of reproduction it defeats even the unique.⁵

Can the undisguised meaning of photography be characterised as 'the product of complete alienation'?⁶ Isn't imagemaking or newsgathering circumscribed by the allocation of space in a classic division of production and labor? Contemporary artists work in the face of paradox: Once a work becomes a work of art, it assumes the status of a lie despite inspiration or conception. Photography that does not move toward the *problematic* runs the risk of being controlled by the apparatus of production and those who control it.⁷

REVIEW: A book exhibiting exemplary tendencies toward the problematic in photography is *Evidence* by Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan. It has none of the sentimentality or scavenging motives expressed by many photographers and publishers in their exploitation of the *Family Album*. *Evidence* goes straight to one of the sources of the *human condition* - institutional files - to re-present from photographic artifacts the social family. Here we are given further proof, or let us say, evidence hidden not in the bureaucratic sanctuaries of the museum or university, but in the authentic California archives ranging from the Aeronutronic Ford Corporation, Newport Beach, to the Veterans' Administration Hospital, Palo Alto - some of the domains of power.

A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah. And now the faithful says to himself: 'Since photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude that we could desire (they really believe that. Ahé mad fools!), then photography and Art are the same thing.'⁸

Indeed, files have been pulled from the darkness of their chamber, spread apart under peaceful light, yielding incorruptible secrets buried in the memory of the photograph - evidence. Not the banal or tedious evidence of reality as it passes from day to day. No, it's the evidence of Art... more proof that the image has reached a point of saturation whereby the camera has been rendered harmless in the anonymous production of visceral statements. One still goes to the 'scene of the crime' but this time it's to a *reproduction* selected with the care and skill of a successful Kafka. There is in *Evidence* the faint flickering of styles moving sometimes between Man Ray and Weston, Minor White and Callahan, illuminating the ambient glow of the document. It's all so interesting it makes me yearn for volume two presenting the negative coding of the selective process in which the *unexciting* pictures might be seen in a comparative form.

The text or 'afterword' presents another problem potentially spoiling the purity of *Evidence* as a visual model. Terms imploring magic, '20/20 vision,' 'yin/yang,' 'leaps of logic,' and 'this little rime':

*And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, as stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.*

All this makes me wonder: Is this book the inspired product of intuition, or is it, in fact, an exercise of the contemporary appetite? We must wait for the reactions of the 'albinos' who administer the culture from California to Rochester. Will they ask the question - is it photography? And is it art? Questions like these preoccupy the 'intellectuals' of photography and their response will provide a gauge to the controversial character of *Evidence*.

By the same token credit must be given to the *San Francisco Museum of Modern art* for venturing out into the area of contemporary photography, especially as it affects and supports *new trends* in the problematic of photography. Whether the museum would have done a show of this kind without the incentive of a book, is open to speculation. *Evidence* as a book overlaps a couple of genres in publication - namely the photographic book and the *artist-book*. This book is *tight* and finely polished to a finish reminiscent of the Bechers' presentation of anonymous industrial sculpture or Michael Snow's convincing use of formalism in *Cover to Cover*. The printing of *Evidence* was done in the same professional shop that gave us the deluxe vision of Ansel Adams.

Since we cannot be certain that we are being 'put on' by photography or by the truth, we are faced with a book whose substance is problematic. Whether *Evidence* is merely a mild current in 'new wave' photography, which invokes language, structuralism, 'new documentary,' or Benjamin's theory of 'unmasking' and 'construction,' does not alter the importance of this book in its commitments and economic risks. One repressive aspect of this culture is the belief that art is made by others. The 'ripping off' of this activity is perpetuated by a closed-system, subtle in its promotion of the avant-garde. See the March issue of *Artforum* for a transparent example of dialectical humor in which 111 petitioners declare themselves for 'academic freedom in education and creative freedom' in a journal celebrated for its inbreeding of reputations.

People, artists, in opposing the structures that keep them defenseless and insignificant, will find they already have the content they think is missing. In print however, artists can rewire structures short-circuiting the reciprocity of needs.

*CORRESPONDENCE: April 13, 1977
To Donna-Lee Phillips
San Francisco*

My commitments to photography are becoming complex because the issues are not as simple as they once were. I am developing a disturbingly moral need to justify my work... make it useful. These terms fill me with loathing but they persist. So when you come to a choice of which road to take, you do so at your own risk and commitment. Eventually you will lose sight of when and where it began to change, and by that time, the return effort may prove impractical or ideologically impossible. Something like Mallarmé's *Throw of the Dice*.

Therefore, I think we are talking about photography that is -depositional, problematic, a 'new documentary.' The *production of meaning* preoccupies the work of people who are trying to stake photography out of a static role determined by aesthetics and commercial persuasiveness. This kind of photography is dialectical, attacking and dislocating, even subverting ideological meaning hidden in visual messages presented in the limiting context of art and advertising. There's no question the photography I am thinking of represents political commitment in which its own meaning is sometimes disguised as theory.

Let's say it's not a photography vis-a-vis politics or propaganda. No, it's a photography appealing to intelligence and it is supported by methods of linguistics, structuralism and semiotics. It differs from conceptualism in its emphasis on content as being manifestly more important than the hermetic issues of formalism.

From what I have done, seen or read, the work can be characterized by exhaustive explication of issues... 'overloading.' The viewer's sense of perception is assaulted by means of comparing, contrasting, contradicting - opposing information with information, images with images. The work jams, clarifies, interferes, intercedes, confuses, communicates. These are methods of stress in which the viewer is challenged to participate in the process. However, the efficacy of process is not an end-in-itself.

Contrary to this, only yesterday, I visited a friend who is working on a silverpoint drawing whose content is nothing more than an antique lampshade (some ideology) and it struck me as incomparably beautiful.* After all, that is a rule of art, is it not, to make something beautiful. All the theory in the world cannot alter this unfortunate truth. I'm not interested in the fetishism of the object; but when the object is classically rendered as something perfect unto itself, it is terribly difficult to dismiss the incorruptible logic supporting its presence.

The saying is, Donna-Lee, 'you pays your money and you takes your chances.'

FOOTNOTES:

1. Brecht's *Theory of Radio* was made known to me by Peter D'Agostino during a recent conversation.
2. Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, ed. and trans. David McLellan (New York, 1971), p. 25.
3. The ubiquity of the photograph in contemporary society was made patently clear to me by Allan Sekula.
4. James Roy MacBean, *Vent d'Est or Godard and Rocha at the Crossroads*, (Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods*, Berkeley, Calif., 1976, University of California Press), p. 98.
5. Walter Benjamin, *Short History of Photography*, trans. Phil Patton, (New York, February 1977), *Artforum*, p. 49.
6. Mel Bochner, *Ten Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)*, (New York, 1970), Multiples, Inc.
7. James O'Connor, *The Corporations and the State*, (New York, 1974), Harper and Row, p. 6. (This chapter, *The Need for Production and the Production of Needs*, reflects pertinent associations when commodities are identified with communications. The translation from a verbal to a visual structure can also be made from Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, (New York, 1965), Grove Press.
8. Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art*, Trans. Jonathan Mayne, (New York, 1956), Doubleday, p. 230.

*The Silver point drawing referred to is the work of Howard Hack, Oakland, California.

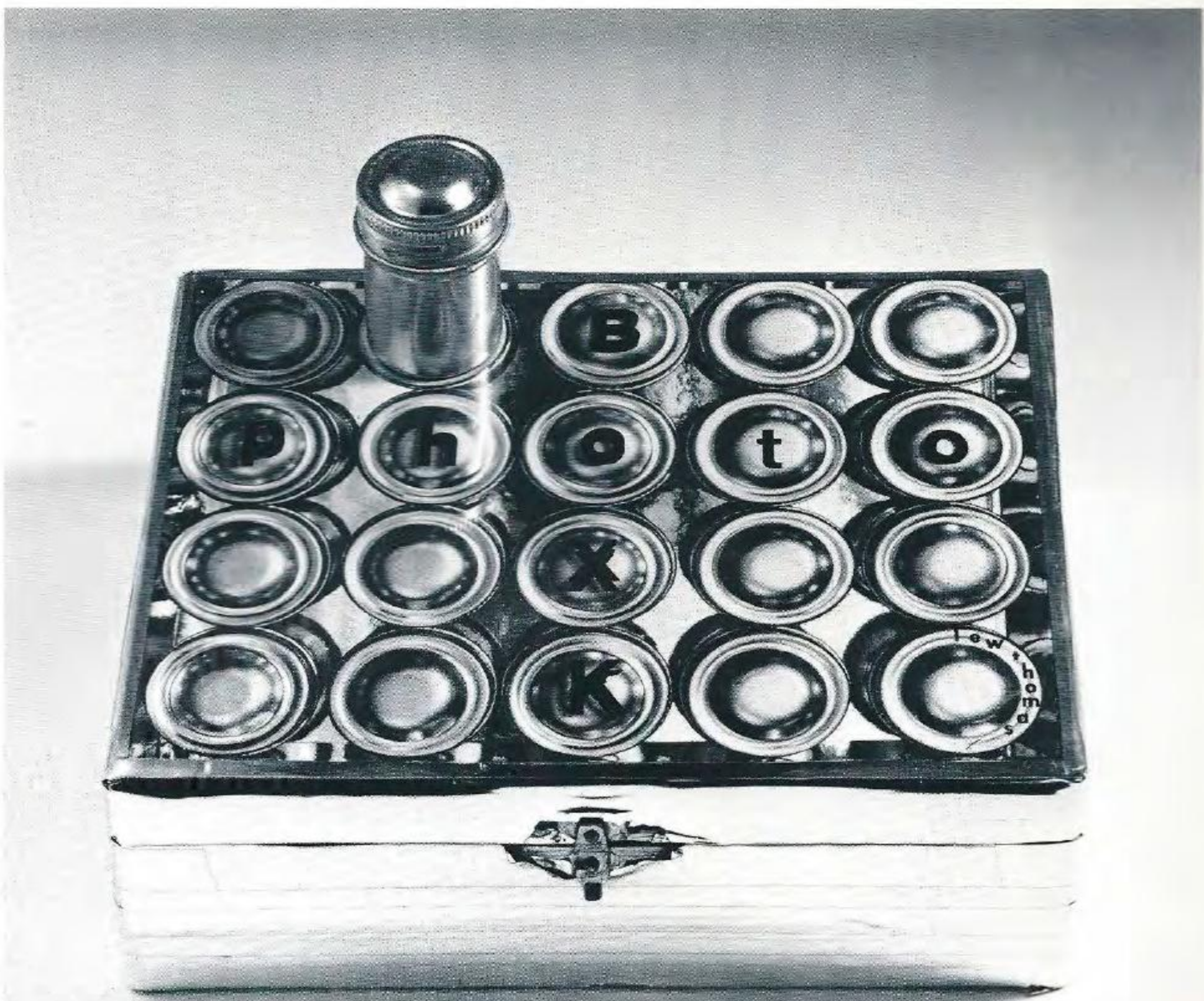


PHOTO + BOXK (Artist's Book)

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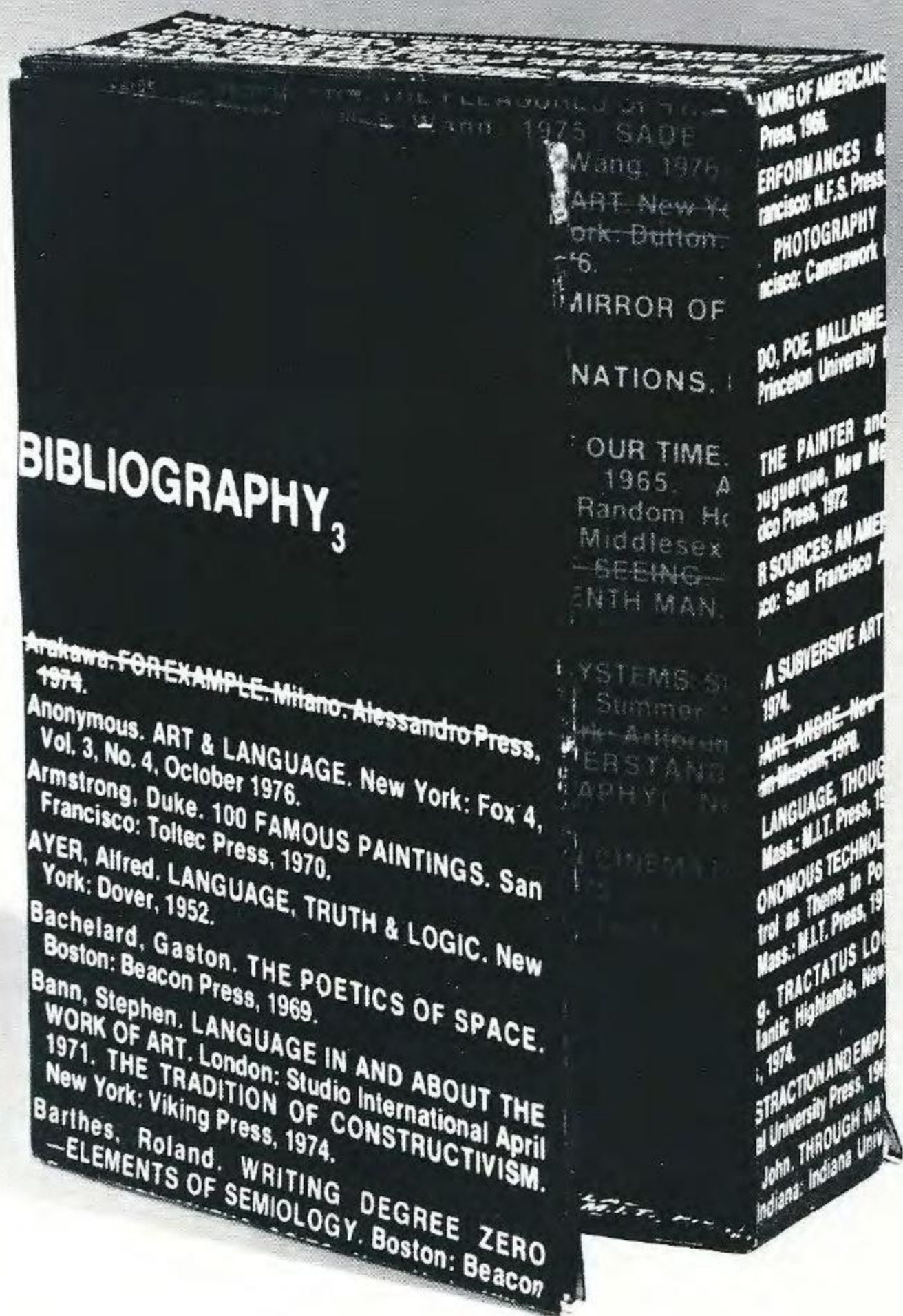
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BIBLIOGRAPHY³, 1977 Photo-silkscreen print, edition 75

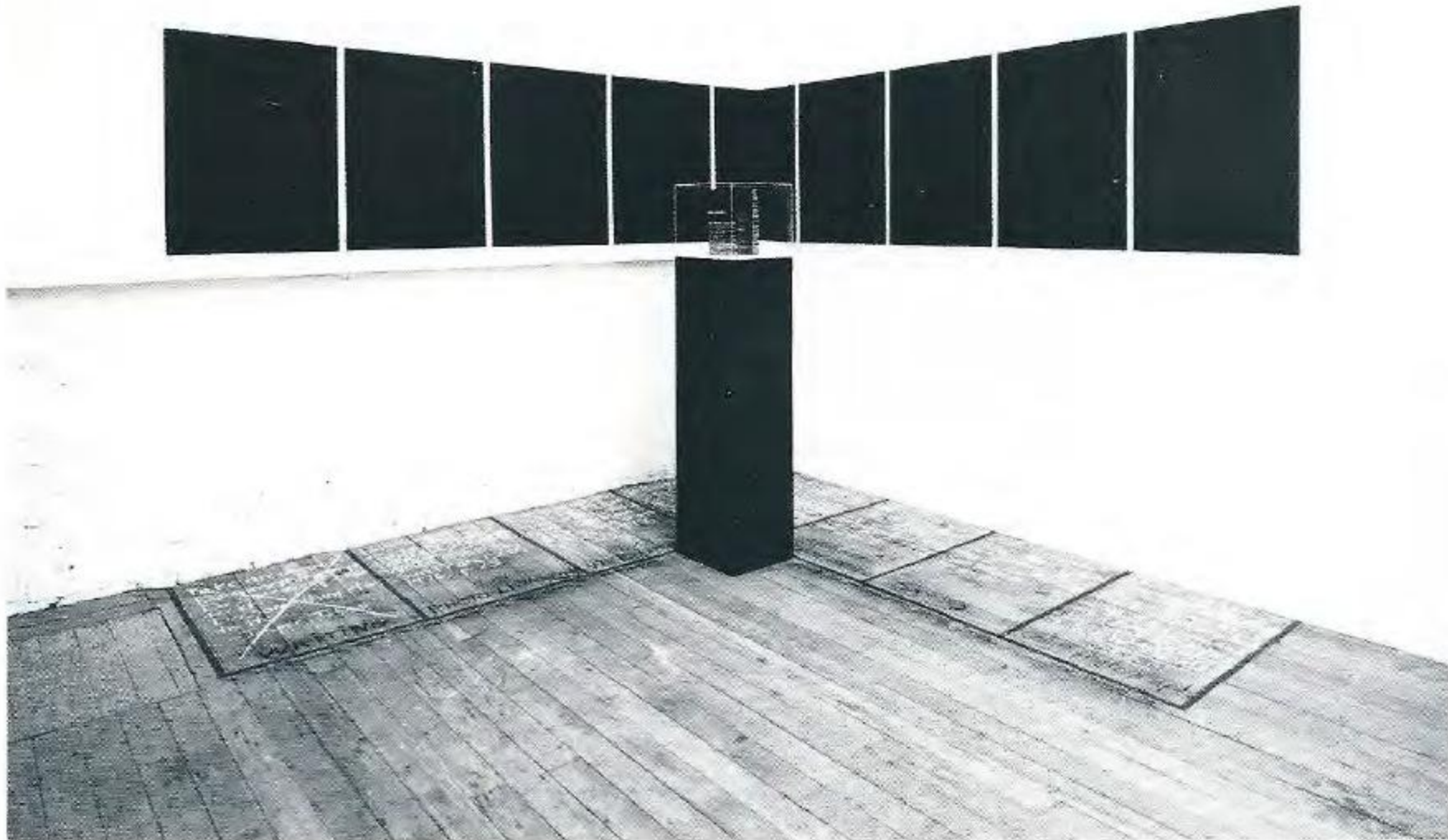
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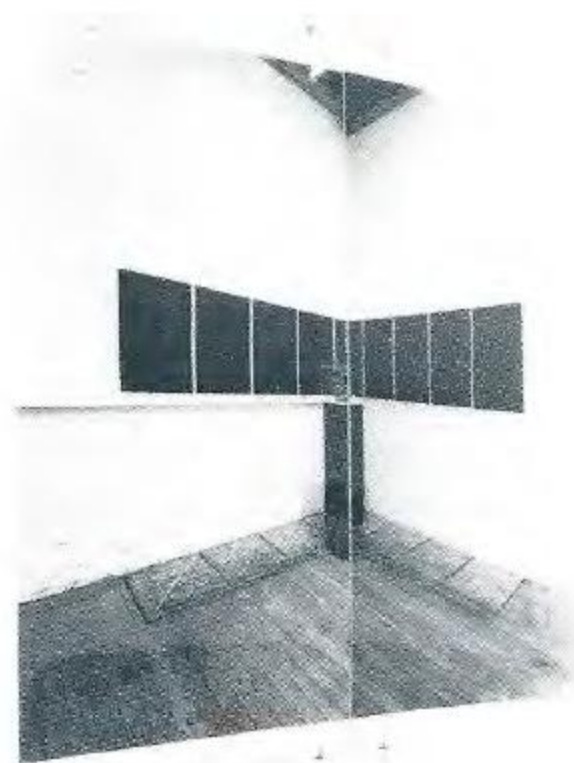


BIBLIOGRAPHY-BOX (Artist's Book), 1977

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SUMMA BIBLIOGRAPHICA, 1978 Installed Camerawork Gallery, San Francisco



BIBLIOGRAPHY(S), 1978 Reinstalled San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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 1978 Color photograph by Richard Misrach 40"x30"
 1978 photograph (from the series Reproductions of Reproductions) 40" x 30"

ANALOGICAL AESTHETICS 6

- iv. Artaud, Antonin
- lv. Barthes, Roland
- lvi. Baudelaire, Charles
- lvii. Benjamin, Walter
- lviii. Berger, John
- lix. Bochner, Mel
- lx. Casanova, Giacomo
- lxi. Cook, Geoffrey
- lxii. D'Agostino, Peter
- lxiii. Glaze, Lionell
- lxiv. Gogh, Vincent Van
- lxv. Hack, Howard
- lxvi. Heidegger, Martin
- lxvii. Lond, Harley
- lxviii. Malevich, Kasimir
- lxix. Malraux, Andre
- lxx. Marx, Karl
- lxxi. Matsumoto, Masashi
- lxxii. Nodal, Adolfo
- lxxiii. Phillips, Donna-Lee
- lxxiv. Proudhon, Pierre Joseph
- lxxv. Ruskin, John
- lxxvi. Schopenhauer, Arnold
- lxxvii. Thomas, Lew
- lxxviii. Twain, Mark
- lxxix. Vinci, Leonardo Da

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 Francisco, CA 94131.
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All art is a revolt against man's fate.

No one has ever written, painted, sculpted, modeled, built, or invented except literally to get out of hell.

Art -- in other words the search for the beautiful and the perfecting truth, in his own person, in his wife and children, in his ideas, in what he says, does and produces -- such is the final evolution of the worker, the phase which is destined to bring the Circle of Nature to a glorious close. Aesthetics and above Aesthetics, Morality, these are the keystones of the economic edifice.

It is clear that while production furnishes the material object of consumption, consumption provides the ideal object of production.

In a divided system of false communications whereby the sender controls and limits information and meaning, the recipient of these messages is voiceless -- an ideological patient.

It is not truly speaking, the labour that is divided: but the men: -- Divided into mere segments of men -- broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little pieces of intelligence that is left in man is not enough to make a pin or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail.

I have come to see that the arranging of artists in a hierarchy of merit is an idle and essentially dilettante process. What matters are the needs which art answers.

Contemporary artists work in the face of paradox. Once a work becomes a work of art, it assumes the status of a lie despite inspiration or conception.

Only dull and impotent artists screen their work with sincerity. In art there is need for truth, not sincerity.

Art is a Racket.

...so my advice would be to drop the 'known' aspects and move out into a grander, more surprising form of presentation. The 'future of art' lies in its theoretical expansion.

I give warning of a danger. Reason has now imprisoned art in a box of square dimensions. Foreseeing the dangers of the fifth and sixth dimensions, I fled, since the fifth and sixth dimensions form a cube in which art will stifle. Escape before it is too late.

It then becomes clear and certain to him what he knows is not a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees the sun, a hand that feels an earth...

Every light is a shade, compared to higher lights, till you come to the sun; and every shade is a light, compared to deeper shades, till you come to the night. When, therefore, you have outlined any space, you have no reason to ask whether it is in light or shade, but only, of what colour it is, and to what depth of that colour.

What is drawing? How does one do it? It is the act of working one's way through an invisible wall of iron which seems to lie between what one feels and what one can do. How is one to get through this wall, for it does no good to use force? In my opinion, one must undermine the wall and file one's way through, slowly and with patience.

Some people get a cheap thrill out of detachment.

An author who teaches a writer nothing teaches nobody anything. The determining factor is the exemplary character of production that enables it, first, to lead other producers to this production, and secondly to present them with an improved apparatus for their use. And this apparatus is better to the degree that it leads consumers.

It is clear that while production furnishes the material object of consumption, consumption provides the ideal object of production.

I do not go to the space of a gallery with a collection of fixed and memorable objects. I go there to find the here and now and that is what I present. That is what I expect people to find when they too are there.

We, Suprematists, throw open the way to you.
 Hurry!
 For tomorrow you will not recognize us.

You're considered mad until your idea succeeds.

Why is there something instead of nothing?

The whole field of human activity, the progress of civilization, the tendencies of society, bear witness to this process. All that makes a man, all that he loves and hates, all that affects and interests him, become for him a matter of art. He composes it, polishes it, harmonizes it, until by the prestige of his work one could say he makes matter disappear from it. Man makes nothing according to nature: he is, if I dare put it this way, a ceremonial animal (an animal faconnier).

The 'future of art' lies in its theoretical expansion.

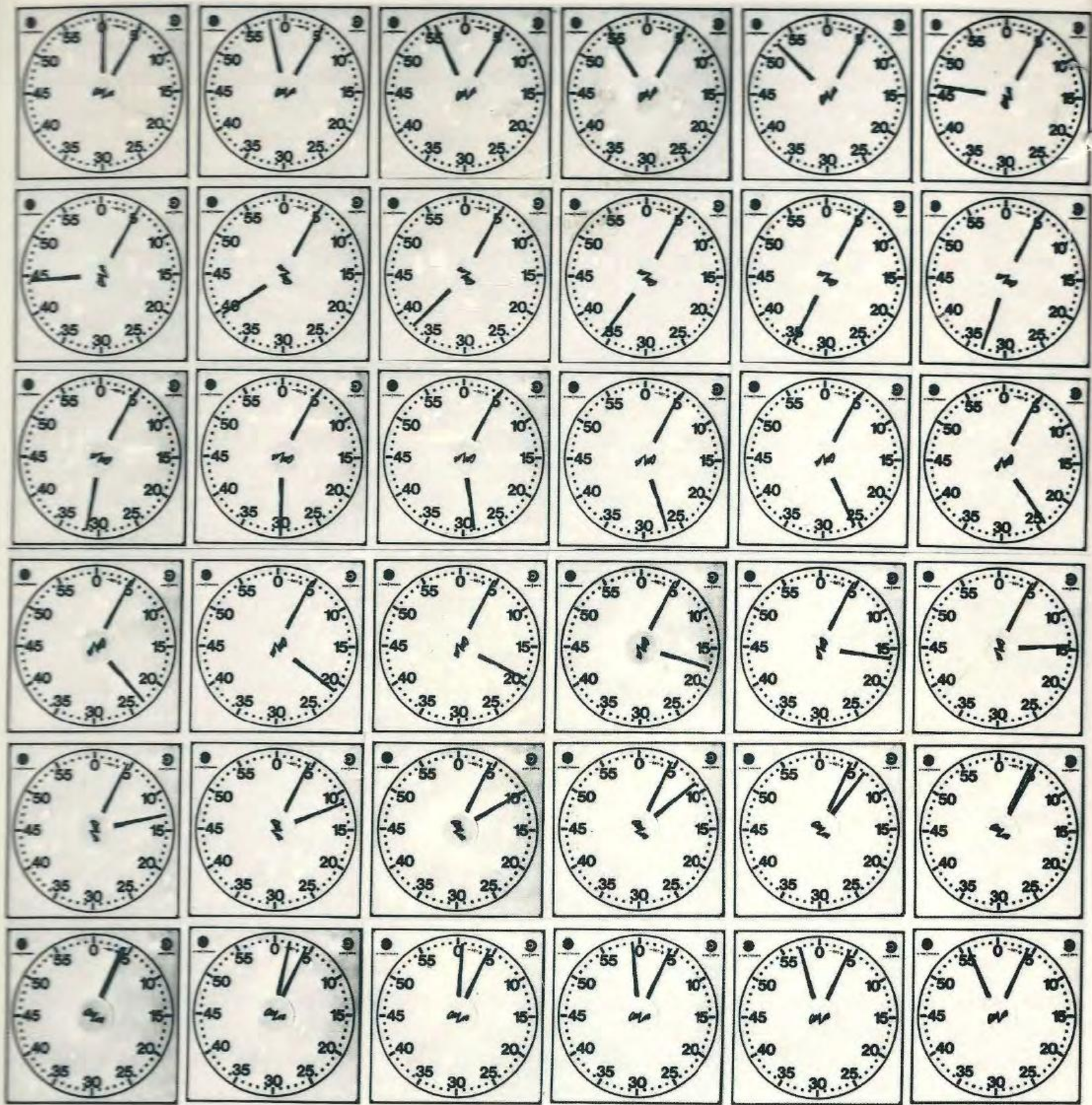
What is fair in men, passes away, but not so in art.

He is troubled by an image of himself, suffers when he is named. He finds the perfection of a human relationship in this vacancy of the image: to abolish-in oneself, between oneself and others -- adjectives: a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death.

...all my life I have been the victim of my senses. I have...

Fucking is the lyricism of the people.

Il faut fusiller le general Aupick!



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Lew Thomas

