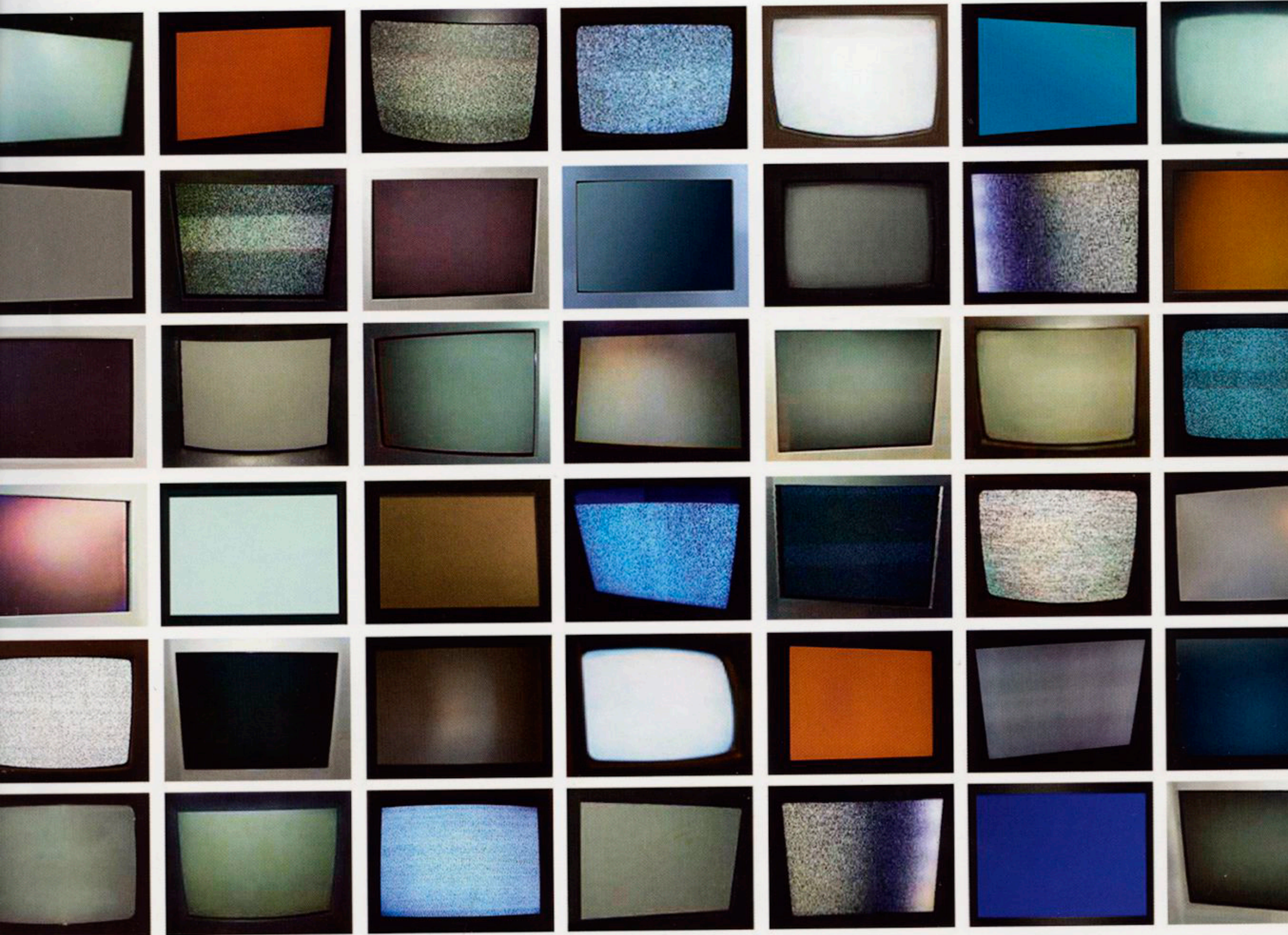


Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW



AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Luc Sante on Weegee

Robert Adams Liz Deschenes

Lutz Bacher Zoe Strauss



PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE *OBJET MANQUÉ*

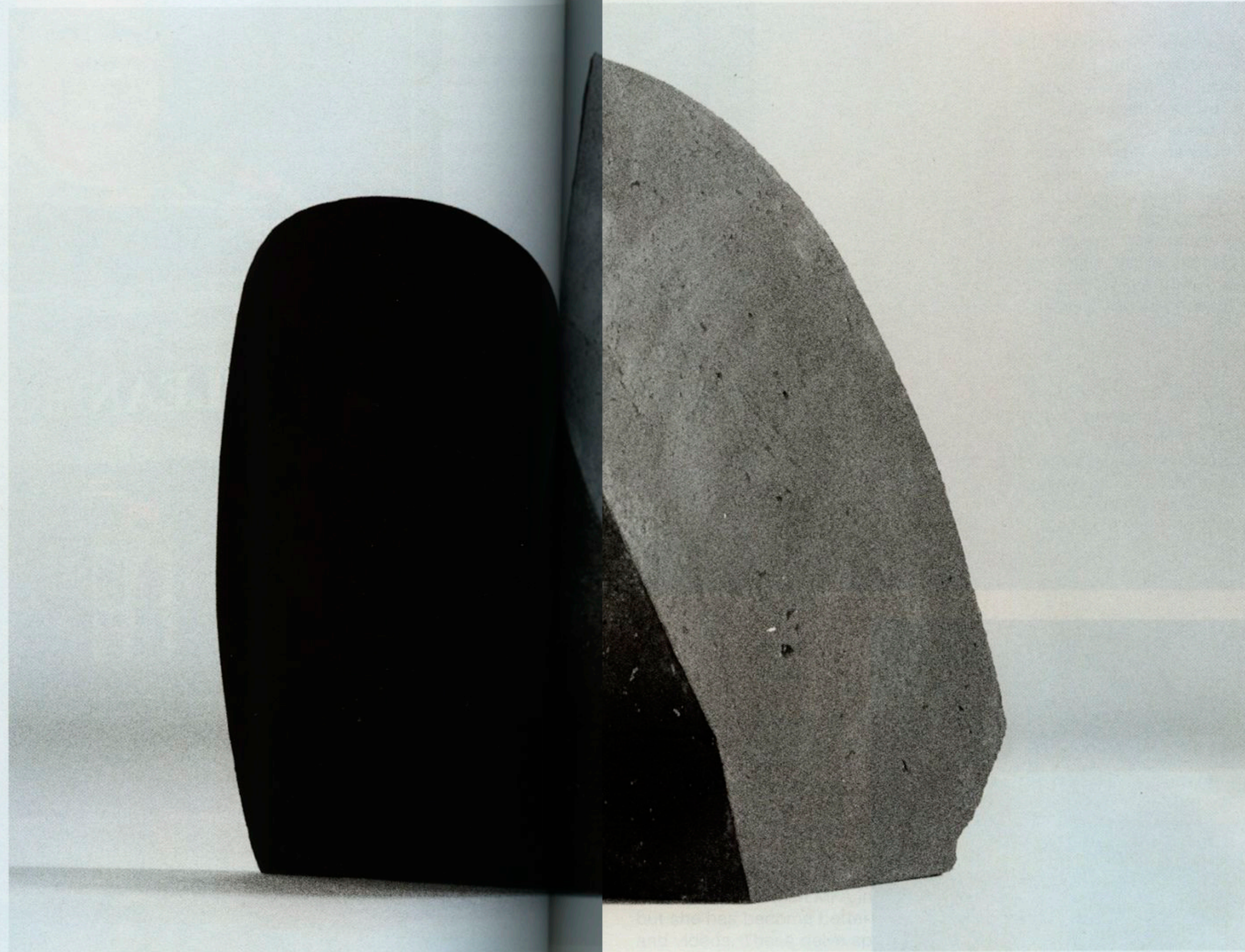
Creating sculptures and installations to be photographed and then dismantled, some contemporary artists put a fresh spin on the notion of photographic truth.

BY CLAIRE BARLIANT

IN 1978, IN THE PAGES of this magazine, sculptor Robert Morris bemoaned the “malevolent powers of the photograph to convert every visible aspect of the world into a static, consumable image.”¹ Today, when pictures captured by mobile phones or digital cameras are ubiquitous and photography so pervasive as to have become practically invisible, it’s worth parsing Morris’s statement. Note the vehement stance against photography—he calls its powers “malevolent.” And his other adjectives, “static” and “consumable,” are almost as harsh. Morris called the photographs Robert Smithson made of his outdoor mirror works “perverse,” saying they effectively mislead us as to what the pieces are about. Freezing the mirrors’ reflections and thereby rendering them moot, the photographs deny the phenomenological experience that lies at the heart of the work. Still, according to Morris, in requiring the viewer’s direct experience, the site-specific sculpture of his generation of artists was uniquely positioned to challenge photography’s adverse effects. “Space,” wrote Morris, “has avoided [photography’s] cyclopean evil eye.”²

Ironically, nearly 35 years after Morris published his article, photography is our main, if not only, conduit to much of the work that he was addressing. Already in 1947, André Malraux, while compiling the images that made up his “museum without walls,” posited that art history, especially the history of sculpture, had become “the history of that which can be photographed.”³ In 1989, the art historian Donald Preziosi wrote, “Art history as we know it today is the child

of photography.”⁴ For many contemporary artists, a relentless flood of reproductions of artworks raises issues that cannot be ignored. Tino Sehgal, who choreographs live actions (he doesn’t call them performances) that encourage viewer participation, refuses to let any of his work be photographed. In a 2008 conversation in *Bomb* with artist Nayland Blake, sculptor Rachel Harrison lamented that the photograph inhibits the possibility of really grasping an art object: “Maybe I’m starting to think that artworks need to unfold slowly over time



Erin Shirreff: *Signature*, 2011, pigment print, 23½ by 32 inches with fold. Courtesy Lisa Cooley Gallery, New York.

in real space to contest the instantaneous distribution and circulation of images with which we’ve become so familiar.”⁵

Partly in resistance, a rash of artists born after 1970—Talia Chetrit, Jessica Eaton, Daniel Gordon, Corin Hewitt, Alex Hubbard, Elad Lassry, Yamini Nayar, Demetrius Oliver, Erin Shirreff and Sarah VanDerBeek among them—are addressing (or redressing) the issues attendant on becoming familiar with an artwork through its photographic reproduction.⁶ Most of them have a studio-based practice that involves more than one medium—some are not even primarily photographers—but thinking about photography is central to what they do. Often their work includes handmade objects as well as photographic reproductions from any number of sources. They might build a sculpture based on a reproduction of an existing sculpture. They might videotape or photograph an object or setup they have created, destroying it after (and sometimes during) its documentation, or create an installation whose sole purpose is to generate photographs. Viewers consider the artwork before realizing that the object or situation they are contemplating no longer exists (a realization that is sometimes accomplished by reading some form of accompanying text). All that is left is the photographic trace—an *objet manqué*, as I think of it, using a somewhat antiquated art historical descriptor.⁷

Today everybody knows that a reproduction is divested of a transparent relation to an original, yet that doesn’t stop collectors from judging and buying work simply by looking at jpegs; indeed, most of us first experience an art object by seeing an image of it in an advertisement, a magazine or online. For artists, it seems natural to start with an object that they then drain of significance as an *original* through its reproduction and circulation.

By absenting the referent, they would assert control over a system of circulation that they see as generally depriving the artwork of its autonomy.

These artists take the virtual, and the idea of the simulacrum, for granted. For them, there is no “punctum,” as Roland Barthes termed it—no lacerating detail that connects the image to a particular time and place. There are precedents in work by Hirsch Perlman, Barbara Kasten, Thomas Demand, James Casebere and James

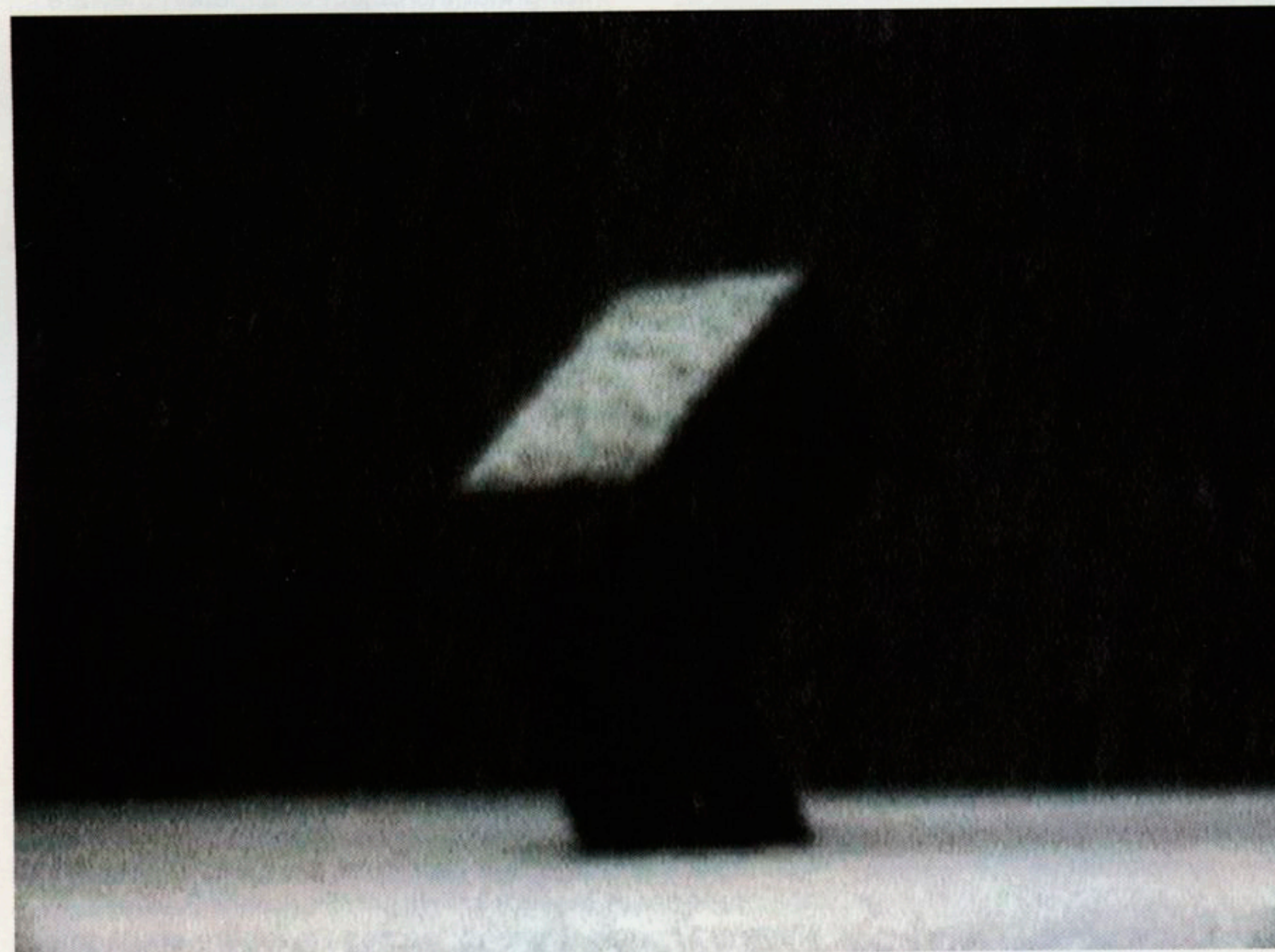
SEVERAL WORKS BY SHIRREFF INVESTIGATE PHOTOGRAPHY'S "CYCLOPEAN EYE," SPECIFICALLY IN RELATIONSHIP TO DOCUMENTING SCULPTURE.

Welling, to name just a few. Going further back, one might cite the abstract photograms of László Moholy-Nagy—the polymath Bauhaus artist who dubbed photography “the new culture of light.” Brancusi’s sculptures survived, but not the studio arrangements in which he photographed them.

In our postmodern age, the image, the copy and the notion of what is “real” have been problematized many times over. These issues—surrounding the simulacrum and the trivializing of experience as a result of the pervasiveness of photography—came to the fore in the late 1970s, when many of these artists were growing up. Following is a discussion of four of them: artists who *begin* with the understanding that an image is based on a purely provisional object. They are proving the *objet manqué* newly relevant.

ERIN SHIRREFF

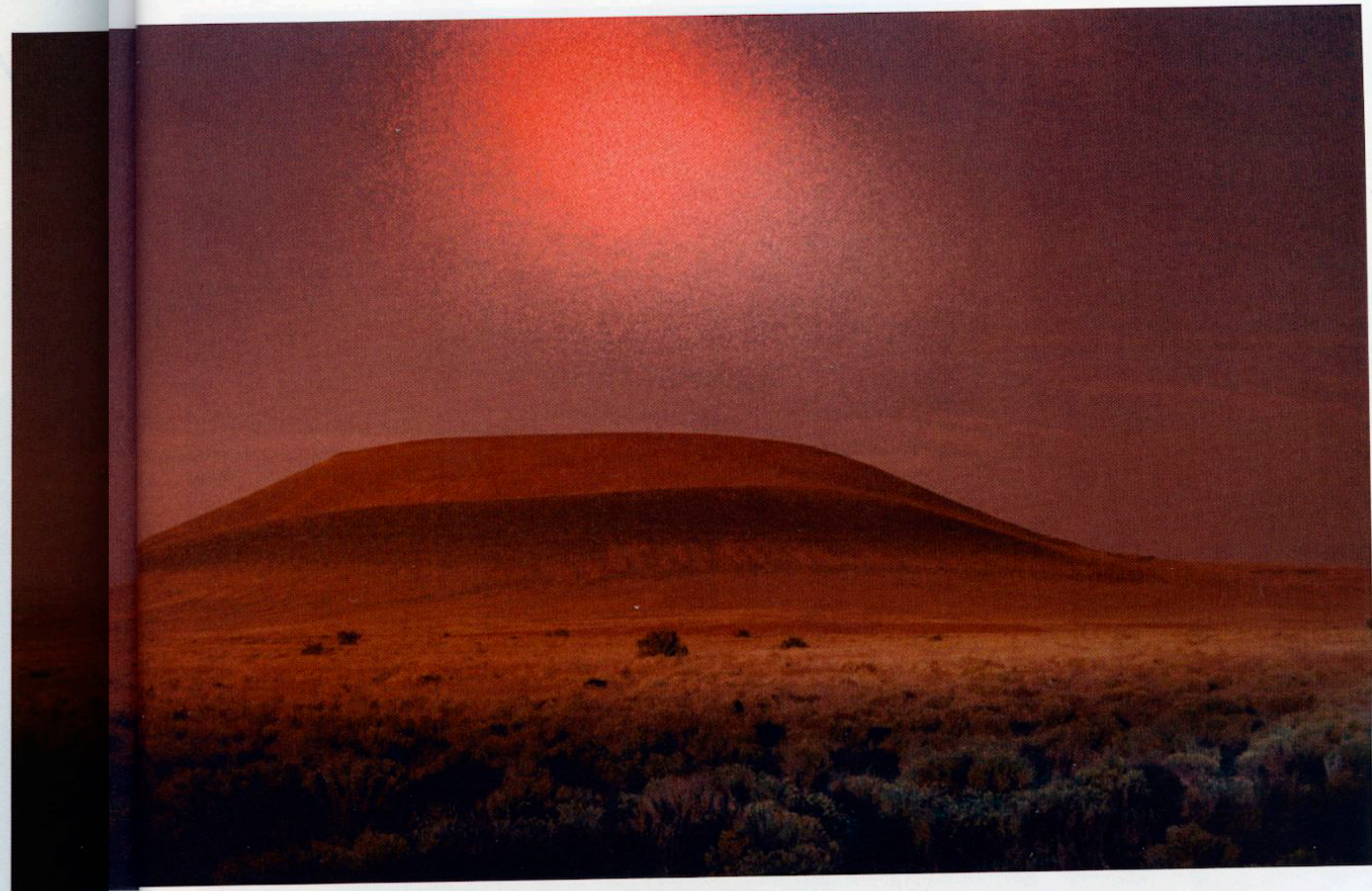
On a brisk day in Brooklyn last fall, a small group of art enthusiasts gathered in the MetroTech Commons for the unveiling of a sculptural exhibition [on view through Sept. 14] under the auspices of the Public Art Fund.⁸ One of the works, made of painted aluminum, looks like a partially unfolded origami form. The piece, titled *Sculpture for Snow*, by Erin Shirreff, is based on an iconic work by Tony Smith, *Amaryllis* (1965-68). But of Smith’s original



Above, Shirreff: *Roden Crater*, 2009, HD video, approx. 14½-minute loop.

Left, Shirreff: *Sculpture Park* (Tony Smith), 2006, color video, 37-minute loop.

Photos this page courtesy Lisa Cooley Gallery.



composition—an angular Minimalist abstraction composed of equally proportioned horizontal and vertical elements—Shirreff retains only the vertical element, because the photographic reproduction on which she based her work obscures the horizontal element. The Smith-inspired piece is one of several works by Shirreff that investigate photography’s “cyclopean eye,” specifically in relationship to documenting sculpture.

Shirreff earned an MFA in sculpture from Yale in 2005, but she has become better known for her photographs and videos. These delve specifically into the problem of representing three-dimensional works in two-dimensional form. For an ongoing series titled “Signatures” that she started in 2010, she cuts abstract shapes from card stock, then paints and shoots them using lighting that makes them look like modernist steel sculpture. Separate halves of different constructions are then juxtaposed within a single print, which is folded down the middle, like a spread in a book—except that the two halves do not make a whole. The image “breaks” the sculpture, or rather creates a new one of already purely invented parts. The series, which is photographed in an austere black and white, evokes the dismantled signatures of old books

about modernist sculpture, but the sensibility behind the work’s wry juxtapositions and fundamental fiction is unmistakably contemporary.

Sculpture for Snow is not the first work Shirreff has based on Smith. A 2006 video titled *Sculpture Park* (Tony Smith) comprises five episodes depicting individual works by Smith becoming gradually invisible as each one is covered by snow. But the snow is artificial (Styrofoam shavings), and the entire tableau (which consisted of spray-painted card stock and seamless paper) was produced in the artist’s studio. Shirreff has created videos composed of hundreds of different iterations of a single still image, often of an iconic artwork, including an image printed from the Internet of James Turrell’s massive earthwork *Roden Crater*. She shoots the source images in her studio, using a range of analog lighting effects. These images are then stitched together and animated as videos. In *Roden Crater*, it seems as if the sun is rising and setting. A video from 2010 that appears to be of a lunar eclipse was made from analog photographs of the moon waxing and waning over the course of a month, which were then compiled in Final Cut Pro.



SOME OF THE IMAGES GORDON CUTS AND TEARS APART ARE NATURALISTIC; OTHERS HAVE A GLOSSY SHEEN AND VIBRANT COLORS THAT CREATE AN ILLUSION OF SLICK DIGITAL EFFECTS.

DANIEL GORDON

Gordon, who graduated with an MFA in photography from Yale in 2006, has long played with the artifices of photography. As an undergraduate at Bard College he made a series of self-portraits "in flight" in various landscapes. Taking a running leap, he would launch himself in the air, torquing his body so that it was parallel to the ground. An assistant photographed him in midair before he came crashing back to earth.

Lately he has turned to a studio-centric (and safer) mode of working. For a show at WallSpace gallery in New York last fall, he created a series of C-prints called "Still Lives, Portraits & Parts," based on three-dimensional setups constructed of images culled from Google Image searches. The photographs are monstrous, Frankenstein-style heads or arrangements of fruit and flowers that allude to classical still-life paintings. A row of potted plants is composed of a range of photographs of succulents, while a bouquet of lilies is made of pictures of unconnected petals. Gordon finds imagery online, prints it out, crafts it into an approximation of the object it represents, and then creates a flat, two-dimensional image of the result.

Gordon has called his studio a "physical manifestation of the Web." He embraces a slightly rough esthetic, saying that he is interested in "showing my hand and letting people see the imperfection."⁹ In *Portrait in Red, Blue and Green* (2011), cut-out profiles cast silhouettes on surfaces behind them, making the third dimension of his setup explicit. Some of the images he cuts and tears apart are naturalistic, others have a glossy sheen and vibrant colors that create an illusion of slick digital effects, yet the overall quality of the construction announces, "Someone made this."



Above, Daniel Gordon:
Portrait II, 2011, chromogenic
print, 40 by 30 inches.
Courtesy WallSpace, New York.

Opposite top, Gordon:
Untitled, 2002, from *Flying
Pictures*, published by
PowerHouse books.

Opposite bottom, Gordon:
Nectarines in Orange and Blue,
2011, chromogenic print, 24 by
30 inches. Courtesy WallSpace.

SARA VANDERBEEK

Here, unlikely juxtapositions come together to form a logical, transcendent whole. Sara VanDerBeeck, who graduated from Cooper Union with a BFA in 1998, co-ran Guild & Greyshkul, a gallery in SoHo, from 2003 to 2009 while also developing her own practice of collecting and creating objects and images, assembling them in her studio into delicate structures that she then photographs before dismantling them. Her choice of materials and images is never random, and her allusions to politics and history are carefully considered. In one panel of the six-photo sequence *Four Photographers* (2008), an oval photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron of her niece Julia Stephen, who was the mother of Virginia Woolf, hovers over one side of a circle painted on a pane of glass, which, in turn, rests on a square plaster form that has been bisected into two triangles. This construction was destroyed after the photo was taken. That Cameron was one of the first women photographers to achieve fame, and that Stephen was famous in her own right as a Pre-Raphaelite artist's model, are not incidental facts. VanDerBeeck's intricate compositions address topics both broad and personal, such as feminism, art and her own family lineage. (Her father is Structuralist filmmaker Stan VanDerBeeck, and her brother is also an artist.)



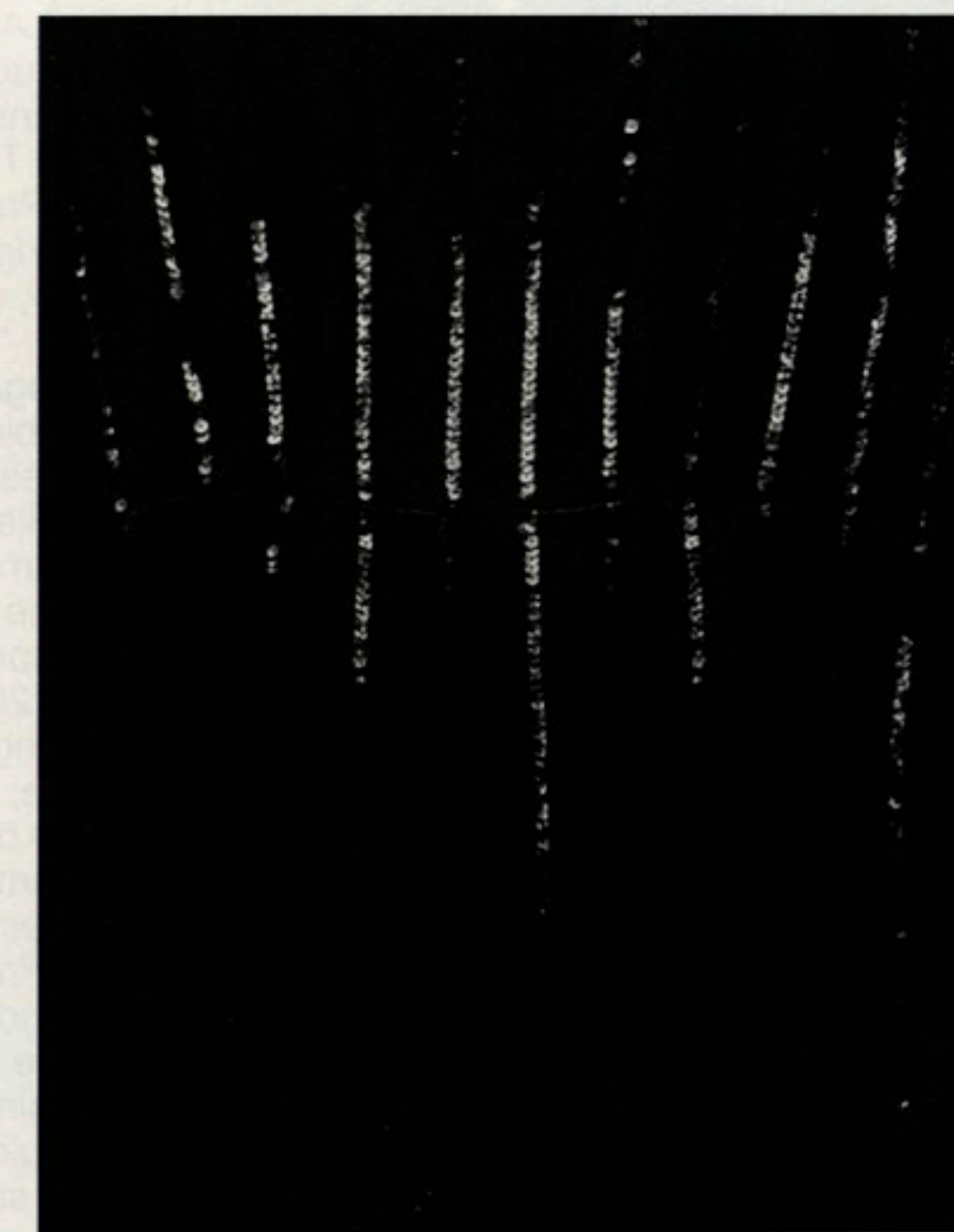
LATELY VANDERBEEK HAS BEGUN TAKING HER CAMERA OUTSIDE, SHOOTING DOCUMENTARY IMAGES THAT SHE THEN INTEGRATES INTO HER TEMPORARY STRUCTURES.



Sara VanDerBeek: *Four Photographers*, 2008, six digital C-prints, each 18 by 21 inches. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

Over the past few years, VanDerBeek began taking her camera outside the studio, shooting documentary photographs which she then integrates into her temporary sculptures. For a 2009 installation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, *A Composition for Detroit*, the artist tightened her conceptual focus to address an American city in sharp decline, while simultaneously expanding the scale of her imagery. In an interview with MoMA curator Eva Respini, VanDerBeek explains that after visiting Detroit and taking pictures of architectural spaces there, she decided to base the composition on "a bank of broken windows that I encountered in these factories." She organized the movement of images throughout the work's four panels to reflect the rhythm of the remaining panes.¹⁰ Each panel is 65 by 48 inches and combines the artist's own photographs with found imagery mostly drawn from MoMA's collection, such as Walker Evans's 1935 photograph *Belle Grove Plantation*. The panels—whose continuity is not unlike that of the frames of a film—create a subtle portrait of not only the city's decay, but also its resilience. In 2010 she showed a series at the Whitney Museum of American Art called "To Think of Time," which included images of an abandoned schoolhouse in Treme, a neighborhood in New Orleans that was severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina, and constructions that she made in her childhood home in Baltimore, which was being put up for sale.

Increasingly turning to deteriorating architecture, VanDerBeek captures the entropic effects of time and economic dissolution. Like so many human enterprises, her fragile constructions—a few poles tied together, images hanging by bits of string—are destined to collapse.



Above, VanDerBeek: *Western Costume, Isis*, 2011, digital C-print, 20 by 15½ inches. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

Left, VanDerBeek: *Baltimore Window*, 2010, C-print, 20 by 16 inches. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

CORIN HEWITT

Born in Vermont, Hewitt studied art at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Karlsruhe, Germany, in the mid-aughts after graduating from Oberlin College in 1993. In 2008, he was an artist in residence in the Whitney Museum's first-floor project room. He built a white cube within the gallery, and at each corner made an opening through which visitors could peer at a chaotic installation in which he was often, though not always, present. The experimental tableau was titled *Seed Stage*, a reference to the work's incubator atmosphere, its organic materials and its performative aspect. Indeed, the piece had the feel of a laboratory, with the artist engaging not only in mundane activities such as cooking, eating and reading, but also tending to boxes of worm-filled compost, planting vegetables from the seeds of those he'd eaten or adding scraps to boxes of mulch.

Hewitt's work is rooted in the idea of recycling, both ecological and artistic. The leavings included not only fruit and vegetable matter but also photographs that he was shooting continually while in the space. Creating maquettes and still lifes from whatever materials were available, including half-eaten squashes and modeling clay, he then shot photographs and printed them on site, mounting those he deemed successful on the walls surrounding the installation (the castoffs were chucked into the compost bin). The number of prints grew over the course of the show. The idea of

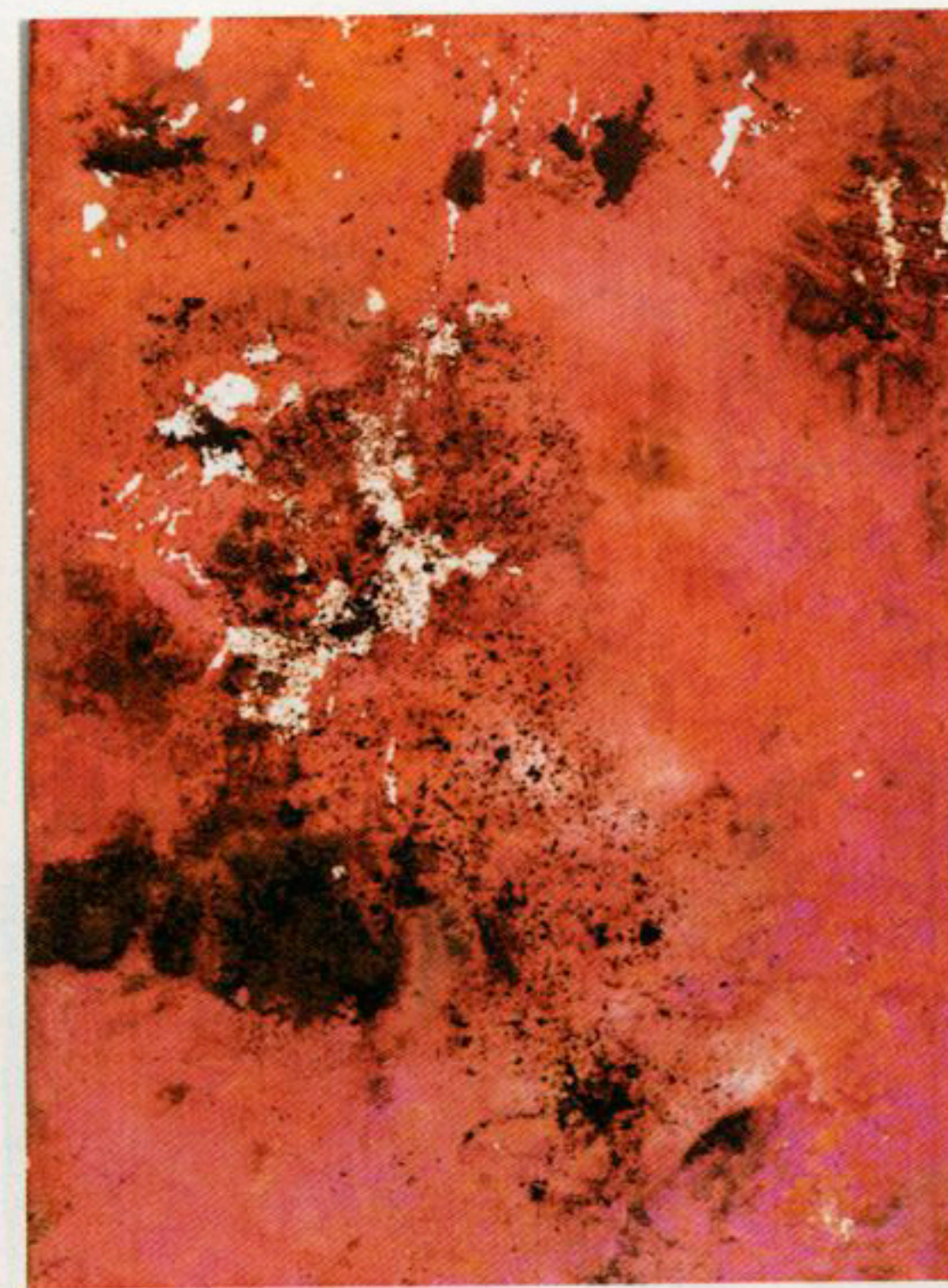
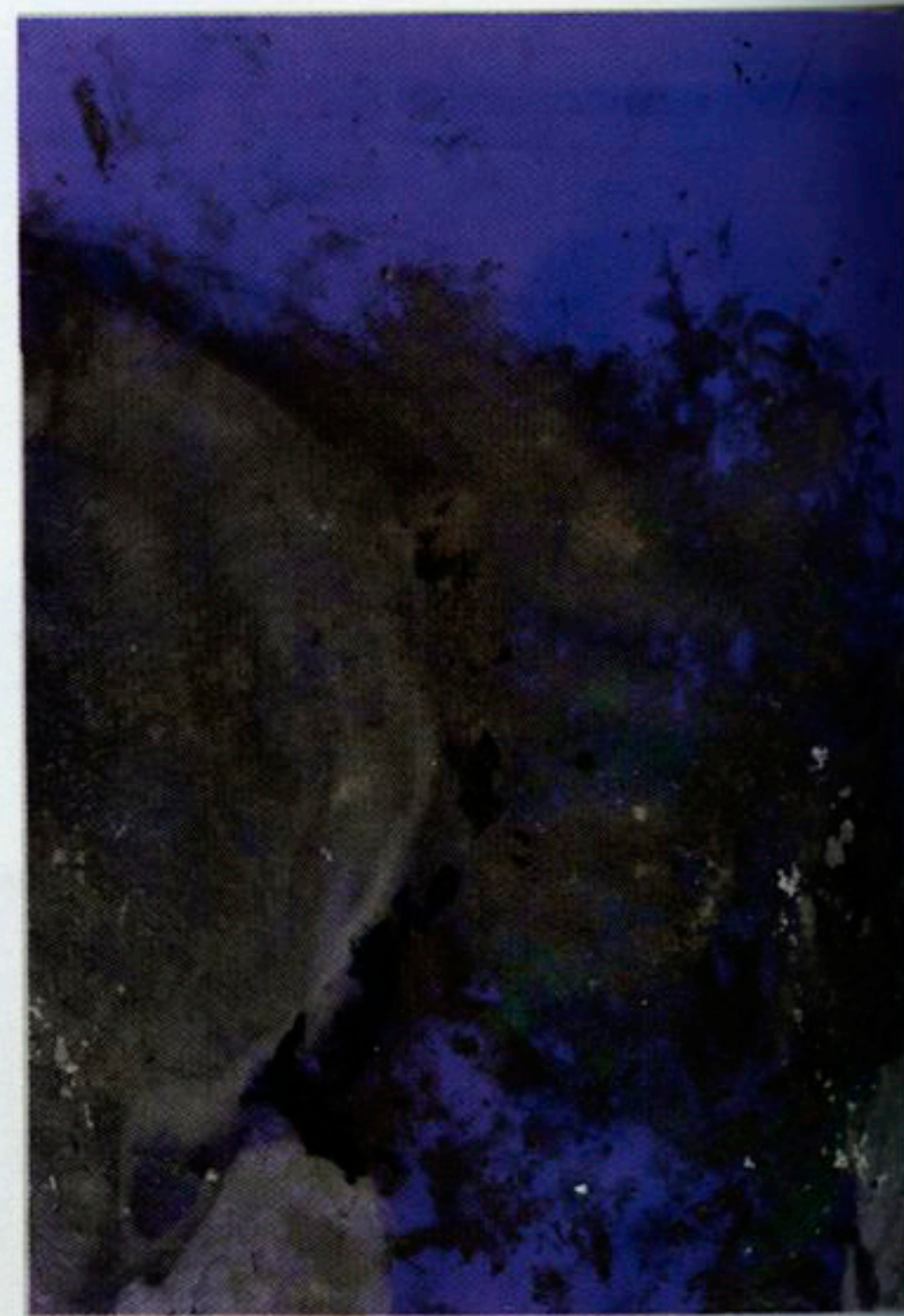
HEWITT TURNS HIS EXHIBITIONS INTO MACHINES WHOSE FUNCTION, AS IT WERE, IS TO PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR MAKING PHOTOGRAPHS.

recycling was not only literal, in terms of reusing matter, but also conceptual, alluding to artistic production as an ongoing process of mining his own work in order to constantly generate new objects.

In 2010, Hewitt built a hybrid stage/floor for the Burlington City Arts gallery, placing plants and soil native to Vermont underneath. He spent two days a week during the month of July working with, in a manner similar to that of *Seed Stage*, the objects he had assembled. The installation, which was titled *The Grey Flame and the Brown Light* (derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color*), also vaguely recalled Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1971), although the activity Hewitt was engaged in beneath the floorboards was not of the prurient sort. Instead, he was scanning the surfaces of rocks and vegetation, using them to create a series of digital photographs. While he began with the various browns and grays of the scanned organic materials, Hewitt went on to supersaturate his images digitally with single colors. He then "fed" the prints back into the piece by thrusting them into the soil under the stage, where they degraded before being removed; though still dominated by a single intense hue, they also presented discolorations and atmospheric-looking damage that were a result of the chemical action of the soil. These altered objects were then scanned and made into a suite of digital pigment prints, titled "Recomposed Monochromes."

Of course, as is true of all performances, the evidence of Hewitt's activities is mainly photographic. His photographs operate not only as documentation of the performance and installation but also as art objects that turn the entire exhibition into a machine, as it were, whose only function is to provide a framework for making photographs.

IN HIS 1931 ESSAY "Proust," Samuel Beckett wrote: "But when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general nature and detached from the sanity of cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and only then may it be a source of enchantment."¹¹ Beckett was writing about Proust's resistance to the force of habit, to the way that habit deadens our perceptive faculties. When an object is isolated from the circumstances with which it is generally associated, we look at it anew, with fresh eyes and understanding. The artists discussed here are, in a sense, making two art objects—one that is meant to be destroyed, and another that is a record of the destroyed object. The objects depicted in these photographs do not exist in real time or real space, only in reproduction—and their absence alludes to what is, in photography, a fundamental condition. "Detached from the sanity of cause," the photograph becomes a source of enchantment. ○



Below, view of Corin Hewitt's installation *The Grey Flame and the Brown Light*, 2010, at Burlington City Arts, Burlington, Vt. Photo Raychel Severence.

Far left, Hewitt: *Recomposed Monochrome* (63, 46, 204), 2011, digital pigment print, 30 by 22½ inches.

Left, Hewitt: *Recomposed Monochrome* (216, 115, 177), 2011, digital pigment print, 34 by 26 inches.

Photos this page courtesy Laurel Gitlen Gallery, New York.

1 Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," *Art in America*, January 1970, p. 79. 2 Ibid. 3 Malraux, quoted in Geraldine A. Johnson, "Introduction," in Johnson, ed., *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1998, p. 2. 4 Quoted by Roxana Marcoci in *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1830 to Today*, exh. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2010, p. 12. "The Original Copy" exhibition raised provocative issues regarding the relationship between photography and its objects and was instrumental to me in the writing of this essay. 5 Rachel Harrison, "Rachel Harrison and Nayland Blake," *Bomb* 105, Fall 2008, available at bombsite.com. 6 Among the notable recent shows that have included these artists and/or others engaged in the conceptual aspects of photography were "New Photography 2009" (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, featuring six young photographers with a studio-based practice, and "The Anxiety of Photography" (2011), an overview of 18 artists at the Aspen Museum of Art. 7 See, for example, Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1975, p. 35. He writes, "Now it is essential to the notion of an image, or imitation, that it fall short in some way of its original; if the image were perfect—expressing in every point the entire reality' of its object—it 'would no longer be an image,' but another example of the same thing (Cratylus 432; trans. Jowett)." 8 The show, curated by Andria Hickey, is titled "A Promise Is a Cloud." 9 Emma Allen, "The New Collage: How Photographers Are Rewriting Our Stories," *Modern Painters*, November 2010, available at artinfo.com. 10 Quote from an online video produced in conjunction with "New Photography 2009" at the Museum of Modern Art, available at moma.org. 11 Samuel Beckett, "Proust" (1931), in *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit*, London, Cadler, 1965, p. 23.

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