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A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Arts

In the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

by

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The Ohio State University

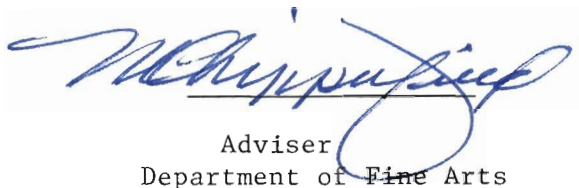
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VITA

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FIELDS OF STUDY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgements | ii |
| Vita | iii |
| List of plates | v |
| Footnotes | 17 |
| Bibliography | 18 |

PLATES

Plate 1 Vessel, 1985, page 13

Plate 2 Ninety Nine to One, 1986, page 14

Plate 3 Acedia, 1986, page 15

Plate 4 Installation view of M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition (l.to r.):
For Nori and Marina, Dessert, Drawing, 1986, page 16

In this paper I will discuss the relationship between form and meaning in my work. I will touch upon ideas I have encountered, experiences I have had, images I am attracted to and connections I have made with the past and present, all of which have influenced my life and work. As I write I am conscious of you, the reader and this awareness influences me to write as if I am having a conversation. I hope that it is read with the same frame of mind. I do not feel the need to prove everything I say nor are my words meant to be read as if they were pure fact. I am not fully convinced that it is ever possible to have the same clarity in the present moment that the distance of time allows for. I still advocate it as a goal and can only tell you that I am aiming for the truth and searching for words that will help you to understand the way I see and think and consequently make art. Last week I had a conversation with my friend Francis and his friend Nathan. Francis said, "Artists should only think, they should let other people make their art for them so they can spend all their time thinking". I said, "If I did not make art myself, I would have nothing to think about". Nathan said, "It's because she works with clay, the material is so important". I agree with myself and Nathan and disagree with Francis. I hope that you understand why after reading this paper.

I produce objects, tangible things. I acknowledge that my work is more than form alone; that it has substance beyond its physical nature; that the forms are vehicles for meaning. The forms themselves and the meaning of those forms are not two separate entities which can be separated in theory. Their relationship is similar to the relationship between perception and thought. Perception is of the senses, the information we gather; thought is how we process it. Perception is the raw material needed in order for thought to exist. Nothing is in our thoughts which was not previously in our senses. Throughout western history these two concepts have been looked upon as inferior to the higher cognitive functions of our minds. Robert Arnheim has written a very strong argument against being able to split the physical and the mental in his book titled "Visual Thinking". The title itself implies that you cannot have one without the other and they are given equal billing. He believes the arts are exemplary of the fact that we do not perceive and then think, in two stages. "Artistic activity is a form of reasoning in which perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined. A person who writes, composes or paints, thinks with his senses".(1) Writing about my art poses a dilemma. I will explain it here by interviewing myself.

Q. How do you arrive at the forms you make...what is their meaning?

A. I arrive at these forms because of how I see the world (my perception) and because of how I think (my reaction to the world).

Q. Can you describe to me how you see and what you think?

A. Yes, look at my art, that describes it.

Quite obviously I have gone around in a circle and my intention is not to be evasive. The problem with talking about art is that the art somehow gets left out of the conversation.

For me, there exists another dilemma concerning the process of discussing art. It has to do with the relationship between intuitive and intellectual thought. The components of intuitive thought work within a continuous field; those of intellectual processes follow each other in a linear succession. I have a story which describes the difference well. This was taken from an eighteenth century treatise on the plants of Switzerland written by anatomist, physiologist and poet Albrecht Von Haller. At the end of the section describing the various types of lillies, Haller explains that he could proceed in a natural order to arrow grass and rush using the antler as the basis of the relation, but the natural order would lead him equally well from the lillies to the orchids which have similar roots, leaves and fruit, yet quite different stamen. He says this, "Nature connects its genera in network, not in chains, whereas men only follow chains because they cannot present several layers of things at once in their speech". (2) When I work on a particular piece I am presenting several layers of ideas at once. The piece is also connected to the one before it and the one which will follow it. I work intuitively; I also spend a great deal of time thinking about my work. This allows me to focus intellectually upon my intentions, the meaning behind the piece, yet it is not always a matter of "a" equalling "b". What I am trying to solve in one piece often leads to new problems (intentions, meanings) in the next and this movement often occurs intuitively before my mind

has a chance to put it in an orderly framework. I will say that my intuition initiates the movement and my intellect puts it in perspective, but the process is circular.

Writing this paper makes me wish that I could present all this information to you as if it were a very complex mathematical problem. I would like to sweat it out and finally arrive at a solution that would give you a feeling of satisfaction. I would like to be able to translate each series of work and tell you exactly what I was thinking about. I am sorry. I simply cannot do that because it is not the way I work; it is not the way I think either. Art making is not that way for me, neither is life. I am constantly asking myself questions yet I do not seek definitive answers. I make observations concerning my life and work yet I often refute that which I previously accepted to be true. Time and space allows for greater clarity yet is what I see or think or feel now any less true because I know it will change in time? Art making has less to do with absolute answers and right and wrong and more to do with choice. It has less to do with end product and more to do with the process of learning and understanding.

Now I will contradict myself. Without end product (art) the process would come to a standstill, there would be no motion. I accept paradox as that is to the part of me that longs for a rational and logical world, the real world is one step beyond rational. I believe that is the main reason I am an artist. If I ask you this question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg"? Does it make you angry, does it seem pointless? I happen to think it is a

a wonderful question and very appropriate not only to the relationship of form and meaning in my art but also to the question of why I make art in the first place. Life is filled with questions just like that and if I view them as vicious I will only remain frustrated and standing in one place. I prefer to view it as a way of initiating some kind of mental movement and since there is no right or wrong answer to that question, movement is the best thing I can hope for.

It makes sense to me now to tell you that I view the world in terms of the balance of opposing forces and that an entire series of pieces which I have been working on for three years have grown out of my involvement with this philosophical point of view. First the philosophy, then the art. I am very interested in Eastern cultures because they are all based upon the concept of the balance of opposites which are termed "yin" and "yang". They are antagonistic yet complimentary. Every phenomenal manifestation in nature, in the universe, can be experienced, compared and understood as either more yin or more yang. It is the relationship between these forces which causes harmony or disharmony, sickness or health, in fact causes all things to occur. It is the mechanism of the movement of life. Yin is expansive, yang is contracted; yin is psychological and mental, yang is physical and social; yin is female, yang is male. The proportion of yin and yang in everything is constantly changing and everything eventually changes to its opposite. It is the circle of life which leads to the circle of death which leads to the circle of life again. These laws govern all things; they are the highest understanding that

mankind has and are the native, genuine and intuitive wisdom in everyone. This is the basis of Eastern cultures. Western cultures stress the intellect, Eastern cultures the intuition. I am more attracted to the latter because it is my intuition which always sees me through my most difficult problems. During the past two years I have been working on a series of pieces titled Vessel. (plate 1)

The pieces consist of a vessel form which sits on top of a sculptural form. When I first began this series, the vessel form was subordinate to the sculptural form. After two years there is now a more equal relationship. The change was gradual. These two forms could exist as separate pieces for they are both dominant. There is tension between them; they compete yet they also work together as a whole simultaneously. Why have I placed them together? At about the same time I began recognizing these things, I began to more fully understand the work in terms of what it symbolized. The sculptural forms are yang (male, contracted, heavier). The vessel forms are yin (female, open, lighter). The pieces became larger and their almost human scale accentuated their figurative nature. I realize now that their transformation paralleled changes that were taking place in my personal life. I did not recognize this until it occurred. As I said before, my intuition initiates things, it is my intellect which puts it in perspective. There were other issues involved here also. I have always been attracted to vessels yet could not figure out how to use them in a nonutilitarian context. It is important that they keep their integrity as a vessel yet equally important that they exist as a metaphor and in relation to some other form.

Man as part of the universe, not separate from the world which includes him, is a concept which American Indian cultures have a keen understanding of. They believe that you cannot separate the idea of heaven and earth, the spirit and the body, man and nature. They understand that there is a certain order to the universe and that man is part of that order. In the forward to the "Book of the Hopi" Laurens Van der Post deplores "the loss to our society of the whole natural language of the spirit with the result that we no longer have a basic sense of proportion concerning life". (3) I need this sense of proportion in my life and feel that making art is the best way I have discovered so far to find it within myself. A friend of mine, Meg Ford, said to me that art making was one of the few rituals existant within our culture. I feel that my art is a ritual process in which I celebrate life. It is the way I have chosen to connect myself to the rest of the world. I have the need to reify my particular individual experience; this allows me to feel connected to some larger universal whole. I made a piece (plate 2) which consists of thirty-four buoy shapes and I titled it Ninety Nine to One because the piece is about odds; it is about being the person with the odds against you, the person who does not make it. The shapes are very beautiful yet it is about something very sad. Its direction is dominant, pointing equally to heaven and earth. It consists of many individual forms yet they all need each other for strength. The dictionary says that a buoy keeps something from sinking, it marks something, it sustains and encourages. I was thinking about that also.

Joan Miro said that the "underlying purpose of art is to rediscover the sources of human feeling". (4) Hans Hoffman said that "artistic intuition is the basis for the confidence of the spirit". (5) Marsden Hartley said "I am clearing my brain of all art nonsense and trying to achieve a simplicity and purity of vision for life". (6) I quote these men not because my reason for making art lies in any one or all three of these quotes but because my need to make art has something to do with all these reasons and I recognize something in their words; I sense truth in what they say. William Carlos Williams does not talk about the spirit or purity of vision; he talks about the imagination and would perhaps refute what the others have said. I make a connection with his words and feel I must quote him.

"To refine, to clarify, to intensify the eternal moment in which we alone live, there is but a single force - the imagination. It makes blackness beautiful. The birth of the imagination is like waking from a nightmare. Never was the night so beneficent. In a mysterious psychoanalytic transition with the self, the imagination gives the feeling of completion by revealing the oneness of experience; it rouses rather than stupifies the intelligence by demonstrating that the individual depressed before it, that his life is valuable when completed by the imagination and then only. Life becomes actual only when it is identified with ourselves. When we name it life exists. My whole life has been spent thus far in seeking to place value on the objects of experience that would satisfy my sense of inclusiveness without redundancy, completeness, lack of frustration, with the liberty of choice that the pursuit of 'art' offers". (7)

I cannot remember making the decision to make art. It is more that I woke up one day and realized I could not stop or at least did not want to. When I work, I feel like I am in control yet I also feel that the work controls me. At times there exists clarity; other

times it is like making your way around a room with the lights off. I realize I make mistakes; certain paths lead to dead ends. It is the balance of these opposites which keeps me excited; makes me feel alive.

I work with clay. I am aware of the relationship between idea and material and it is analogous to the chicken and egg question. I began working with clay because I felt comfortable with the material yet it has only been within the last two years that I have begun to understand it as a material and develop a two way relationship. I previously made objects from slabs; the pieces were rigid, hard and two dimensional. I moved to molds in order to achieve more flexibility of form but that was one of those dead end paths. I now pinch or coil all of my pieces and have discovered that this allows me the most freedom of choice.

Through the years I have developed a certain visual language which I recognize. As with learning any new language, time and practice allows me to increase my vocabulary. That process never ends. The forms I choose are the center of my work. As a person, I am the sum total of every event that has occurred in my life till this moment; my choice of forms is the sum total of all the work I have previously made. My physical sources are many and varied. I am attracted to forms in nature, the flora and fauna of land and sea. I am interested in those objects of everyday function such as tools and toys. I have a strong affinity for the vessel and that

has been consistent during the past ten years. If you ask me why I am drawn towards these things, I can only answer with a question. My sister likes the smell of ammonia, I do not. Why is this?

I am aware of certain contrasts in my work. My most recent pieces suggest utility or function, yet the reference is not certain or specific. My forms are often awkward and elegant at the same time. The work has a sense of being familiar to something which already exists in the world yet there is a feeling of looking at something altogether new. I use the vessel which is usually an object of function or utility yet I do not use it in that context. The nature of the vessel is open and yielding and I choose to place it on top of a form which is its opposite: closed, massive and masculine.

I have also trecked a long path when it comes to surface. At one time, I used many glazes with shiny surfaces and was once accused of treating my pieces as if they were a '57 Chevy. I then rejected all glazes and only worked with colored slips. I still had the desire to introduce color to the work but there seemed to be no reason for it to be shiny. The application of slip to the leather hard clay was more immediate than glazing. I was searching for a more complete marriage between three dimensional form and two dimensional surface. I tried "drawing" images on the forms but as the forms began to develop, the drawings began to diminish because one fought the other. I began drawing on paper and searching for new ways to enhance the forms with the surface treatment. I now use a combination of slips and glazes. I often layer many colors of slip and glaze on top of each other. The result is a rich surface which

sometimes cracks and crawls, exposing the layers underneath. I feel this surface treatment allows for both the addition of color and texture which both compliment the forms without obscuring them. I see the surfaces as being equally beautiful and decrepit; a contrast which strengthens the concept of the balance of opposites.

The piece Acedia (plate 3) does not have any color. This piece consists of nine parts which were made over a six month period. The intention of placing these particular pieces together occurred approximately one month prior to the installation of my thesis show. I often look at my work grouped together in the studio, but the relationship is often one of chance or coincidence. I recognized that all the black and white pieces made during this time period had a certain sense of sadness or emptiness: a solemn nature. At this time, I was struggling with the issue of accepting death as part of life. The first noble truth of Buddhism is called "Dukkha". It states that suffering and frustration develops because of our inability to face the fact that everything around us is impermanent and transitory. All things arise and pass away. Suffering occurs when we cling to fixed forms called "maya", whether they be people, ideas, or events. I wanted to make a piece that would help me to let go of my sadness. The space is semi-enclosed; the color is soft. The V-shaped piece just left of center is reaching upwards with outstretched arms as if it could hold something, yet it holds nothing. The large enclosed vessel forms are not open or yielding, they are closed, contracted and yang. The figure-eight shape in the right upper corner is broken; it does not connect on the bottom; it is incomplete. The

decision concerning the choice and placement of these pieces occurred at the time of the installation. In essence, I created a three dimensional drawing with all the elements. The process was based more on intuition than anything else. I realize the choices and decisions were intelligent.

I have a long ride home every night. Once a week, usually, I realize I am home because I hear my blinker clicking just before I turn down my street. Most times I cannot tell you my thoughts during those forty-five minutes, or even where I began or finished. I can tell you that it always feels good and that I know something has been resolved during the ride. There was a time when I would try very hard to reconstruct what took place; I no longer do this. Because I sense that I have moved forward, I accept that I have.

Plate 1



Plate 2

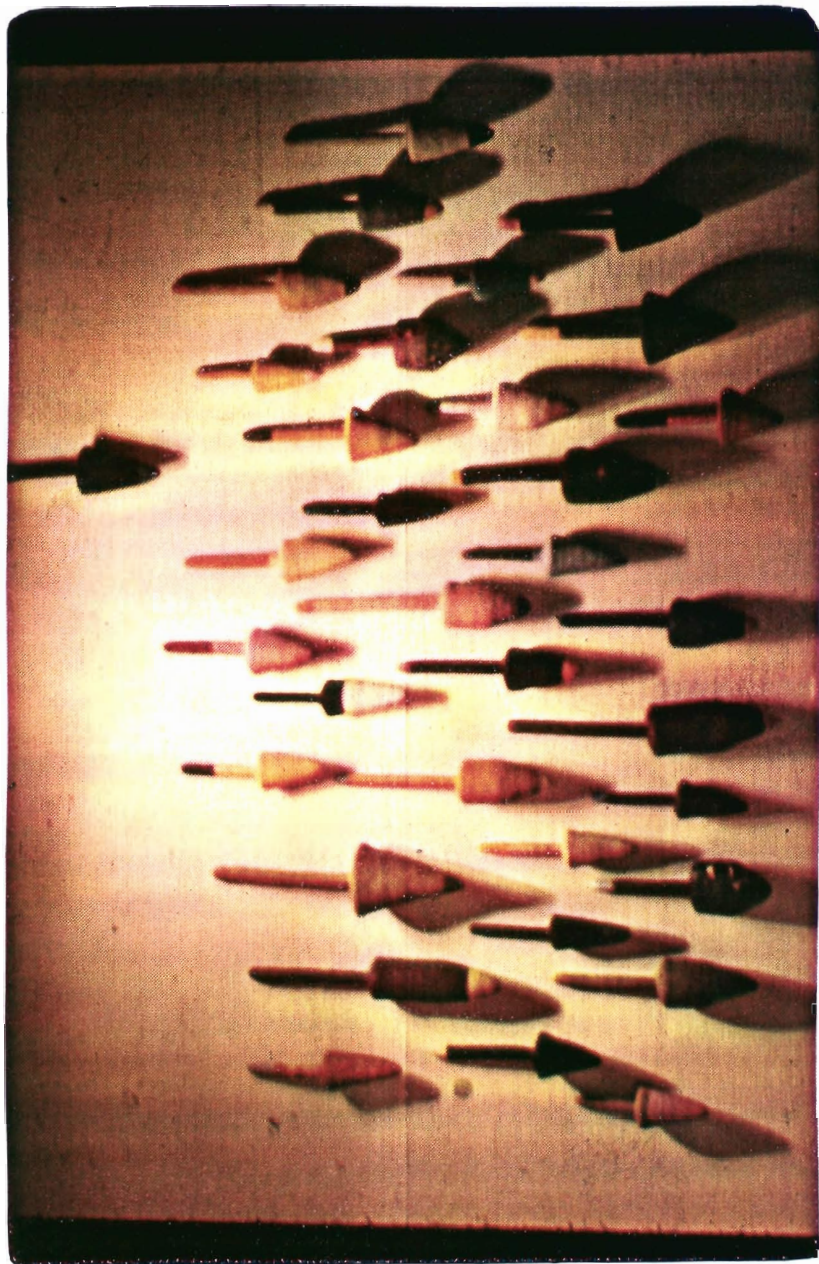


Plate 3

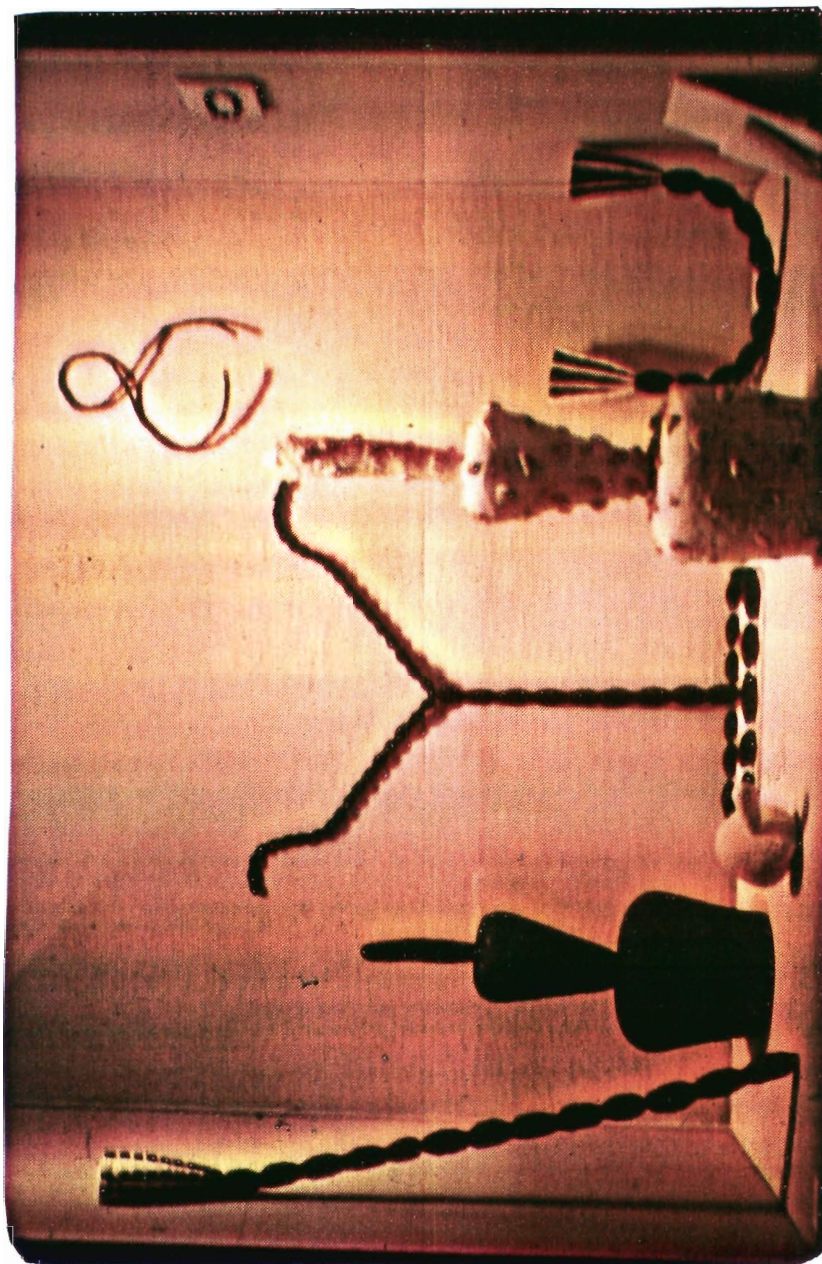
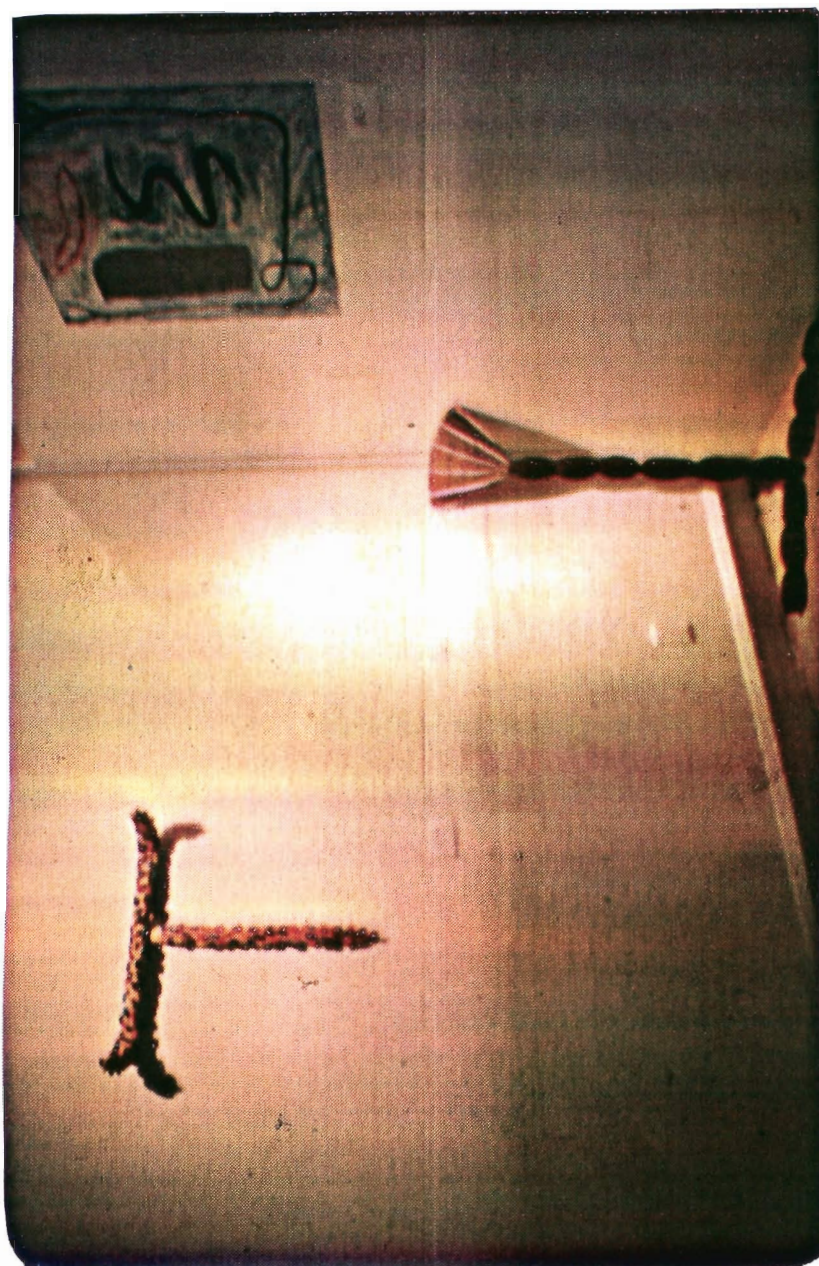


Plate 4



FOOTNOTES

1. Rudolph Arnheim, Visual Thinking, 1969, Forward, p.v.
2. Ibid, p.234
3. Frank Waters, The Book of the Hopi, 1963, Forward by Lauren Van der Post
4. Gregory Battock, The New Art, 1976, quote from Joan Miro, p.63
5. Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, 1968, quote from Hans Hoffman, p.528
6. Ibid., quote from Marsden Hartley, p.538
7. William Carlos Williams, Imaginations, 1970, p.115

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