

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

MFA Thesis Exhibit Catalogs

Art and Art History

1-1-2018

Vacuum

Babak Shahsiah

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/mfa_exhibits

Recommended Citation

Shahsiah, Babak. "Vacuum." (2018). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/mfa_exhibits/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art and Art History at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in MFA Thesis Exhibit Catalogs by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.



Works by Babak Shahsiah کارهای بابک شاه‌سیاه

Instead of prologue

“Before me there were no created things,
Only eterne, and I eternal last.
All hope abandon, ye who enter in!”

- Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

Perhaps others could start these lines better than I, writing an attractive introduction for a body of work with an enticing hook, a firm structure, and a comprehensible thesis statement just like a promising opening is supposed to be. But what if the writer of these words has lost his certainty about where to start? How could one define the beginning of something without having any vision of its end? What if there is no actual beginning as there is no end? What if we are not supposed to come across any end because an end would kill all of our current hopes? ... No, we do not give up our hope even when we say farewell to our lives. And if we have the chance, we leave behind testaments. But, we may not be able to remember things clearly as we usually tend to keep mementos as reminders.

Yes, nowadays, we have the right to hope and we gained it with the price of forgetfulness. This actually could be the spirit of our time¹. Everyday, we wake up with a new story emerging, a new disturbing story, that we do not have any control over. We watch the news, we follow hashtags on social media, we like and/or distribute some of the prayers, condemnations, statements, and/or make a comment on some of them; and then we go to bed, and with the next day, new things happen somewhere else. Stories appear without any end. And this is perhaps what Millennials have inherited from the battlefields of the twentieth century: shock and awe.

1- Or as François Hartog call it in his book, *Regimes of Historicity*, “the Regime of Presentism” (in contrast to futurism).

For more info: *Regimes of historicity: Presentism and experiences of time*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

Shock and awe does not only kill people and destroy the land, it destroys the courage to fight back. It removes the will and replaces it with hope, an abstract hope for an unimaginable end. Those who survived shock and awe have lived days without nights, when the sky is always lit by either the sun or the gleam of artillery. They have lived nights without days, when they take shelter in basements without electricity. They have experienced life as prisoners and unemployed; passing the time by nursing hope². Hope becomes the only difference between those who are alive and those who are dead, and it does not bring any light but reminds everyone of the pain: "Time becomes space petrified for an eternity, and space becomes time lagging far behind its juncture."³

This body of work, *Vacuum*, is an attempt to explore the meaning of time under the burden of eternity: when the life would become accessible only between the memory of a beginning and the forgetfulness of its end, when each step is taken for the sake of taking a step as each day starts and passes with the hope of being finished at the end of the day, when the sun sets with the promise of the dawn and rises with the obligation of dusk, when the inflation of the present separates it from the past and the future; when repetition can be mistaken as the progress.

2- The original poem is: "Here on a hill slope facing the sunset and the wide-gaping gun barrel of time
near orchards of severed shadows
we do as prisoners and the unemployed do:
we nurse hope."

Darwish, Mahmoud. *State of Siege*. Syracuse University Press, 2015.

This poem, *State of Siege*, was written while Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine's most eminent poet, was under siege in Ramallah during the Israeli invasion of 2002.

3- *ibid*.

On Politics of Printmaking

When I started practicing printmaking, I had a political reason. While this still holds true today, it is not the first one anymore. Everything is political, but politics is not necessarily what I was taught. I am no longer interested in seeing politics in a transcendental frame, but I notice that politics immanently exist in all fields, including printmaking. Printmaking is not merely a technique or a tool to reproduce images, but a set of procedures and principles that historically could fulfill specific needs for specific people. Thus, printmaking as a form of economy reproduces relations around the print; it reproduces artists as artists, master printers as master printers, art patrons as art patrons, etc.

Compared to other contemporary reproductive practices, printmaking is slower, and I have found that this allows me to understand reproduction in more detail. Being involved in practicing and teaching, I realized that one of the first and foremost political notions in printmaking is a tendency of idealistic reification: a strong faith to an idea that has not yet interacted with the materials of the process. This approach is not only undertaken when an “image” is supposed to be transferred onto a matrix, but also when immense labor and care is needed for the process of reproduction in order to keep the authenticity of the information in each image of the edition. This course of work not only produces identical and perfect images that will be signed and approved by the producer, but also leaves

behind dead-proofs¹. Such act of discernment needs specialists who are trained to discern quality prints from the whole edition, even to a degree where the artist might not detect the subtlety of differences.

The separation of an idea and its materializing practice is rooted in the hierarchy of artistic fields in which printmaking is considered an offspring of drawing and painting. Historically, printmaking served to publish paintings and drawings in Europe, as in the same region, drawing and painting mainly had been in service of transcendental religious rituals. Since then, the dominant narrative of art education is putting a content in a form of expression. Although the secularization of art education would imply that these tools could be applied to non-religious ideas as well as to all forms of art, but it still kept a structure that prioritized ideas over interaction with materials. In most art schools there is a deliberate order of teaching skills and techniques, that is, not learning to sculpt, but learning to draw first. This way of framing art denies the fact that ideas come from the previous interplays between humans and their surrounding environment. In such a situation, not surprisingly, printmakers find themselves constantly evaluating each print based on its formal fidelity to the matrix. It really does not matter what they reproduce, reproductive specialists merely reproduce.

Reproduction of social roles has a long history, a history which is tied to idealistic reification and has been beneficial to previous hierarchical regimes as well as the current one; capitalism. As a prince in feudal times would hold the monarch position, modern institutions reproduce their future gate-keepers through their educational apparatuses. However, reproduction has a dual function in which reproductive practices not only reproduce hierarchies but can also reproduce autonomous subjects, subjects that are capable of making radical revolutionary changes. A dead-proof in a printshop may offer more visual potentials than the selected and signed one, not because it looks rebellious, but because it possesses

1- Proofs that are rejected from the printing process.

the collapse of false consciousness, the moment that the presumed ideal fails, a necessary moment for self-realization.

The political character of art, especially when it comes to printmaking, is often seen as criticizing the current political system or promising a utopia in companion with their contemporary political struggles. Individuals such as Goya (1746 – 1828), Daumier (1808 – 1879) and groups such as The Taller de Gráfica Popular in Mexico (1937 - 2010) and Justseeds in North America (since 1998) are generally considered political printmakers. But in all these examples and most of the other political concerned artists' work, politics is a canon of the idea that takes form in an artistic manner, hence their art becomes more a political support rather than a political act. Here, we can find traces of a transcendental approach to politics, as the art object is a projection of current political struggles. But, what if artists instead of sending their art into the political battlefields consider their art as a political battlefield? If the politics in streets and workplaces crystallized as resistance and occupation? What would then be the formation of politics in art practices? If protesters make barricades to protect themselves from police brutality, how would that be transposed to art practices? Who is the protester and who is the police, and what is the political agenda? And, what would be an alternative to the current art practices?

There are numerous examples in art, especially in the twentieth century, where artists, mostly but not limited to experimental and performative arts, attempted to put art on its feet - in contrast to what is considered as political art “which descends from heaven to earth, [they] ascended [art] from earth to heaven”². Kazimir Malevich (1879 – 1935) made his Black Square two years prior to the October Revolution, announcing the death of the cultural nostalgia and “any sentimental attachment to the culture of the past like an open window through which the revolutionary spirits of radical destruction could enter the space of cul-

2- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. The German ideology. Vol. 1. International Publishers Co, 1972.

ture and reduce it to ashes”³. Peter Schumann (1934 -) and Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) brought people to participate in creation. The *Poor Theatre* of Jerzy Grotowski (1933 – 1999) removed all tools and made theatre mirror the human condition under capitalism; body plus time. The Situationists International (1957-1972) offered intervention as a revolutionary art practice. In Latin Americas, artists under the neoliberal attacks acted politically in their practices as well. Antonio Berni (1905 – 1981) made his *Juanito Laguna* series with found materials from slums. Cildo Meireles (born 1948) made his *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* by printing a recipe for Molotov Cocktails on Coke bottles that were that circulated to the consumer through the established lines of consumption.

In all these examples, not only the content held a political agenda, but the artistic practice challenged political concepts as well. Indeed, the political contents were part of the materials and human interactions around those materials; a sort of unity in form and content. And, I believe, printmaking is a practice that contains politics immanently. Printmaking can be a reproductive practice to make a united group of autonomies rather than individual approved editions. Another possibility could be found in layering. Positioning layers and registration are both fundamental invisible techniques in printmaking that are revealed in misprinted editions like Punk aesthetics but also artists can emphasis on the separation of the layers. There are potentials to exaggerate it and to raise questions about common sight that is saturated by ideologies. These are only a few examples. It is all about self-consciousness. By questioning standard procedures and principles, politics within the printmaking practice will be unveiled, and as printmakers explore, potentials of political expressions will be discovered.

3 - Groys, Boris. “Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich.” *Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich- Journal #47* September 2013- e-Flux, 20 Sept. 2013, www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60047/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/.

In Practice

A fundamental principle in producing an identical edition in printmaking is to keep the physics and chemistry of the process consistent and accurate, and I have always found myself faced with this question: what is the proper degree of accuracy? Not only do I always wonder how the current art market evaluates prints from the pre-industrial era as authentic when our contemporary tools that measure identical procedures in producing the print were not accessible. Furthermore, considering that science tends to discuss and observe physical or chemical interactions in a vacuum state - an ideal and unattainable state that is free of any unwanted particles¹ – it bears the question if printmaking is a practice performed in a vacant space?

On a physical level, printmaking heavily relies on the vacuum state. In most traditional printing processes, the ink transfers from the matrix to the paper by immediate contact; in photo-based plate-making processes, the ideal exposure between the image and the light-sensitive surface takes place in a vacuum. Imagine how Plato would be excited if he had the chance to see this extreme version

1- By studying vacuum fluctuations in modern physics, it turned out that a space without any matter yet is not considered “empty” due to the existence of quantum physics phenomena such as dark energy, cosmic rays, neutrinos, and etc.

For more info: Browne, M. W. (1990, August 21). New Direction in Physics: Back in Time. Retrieved April 15, 2018, from <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/21/science/new-direction-in-physics-back-in-time.html?pagewanted=all>

of his allegory of the cave: when there is “nothing” between the light source, the objects, and the shadows on the wall. By impressing your inked body parts onto a surface, three layers of Platonian truth will be compressed onto one another. In a daily context, the authenticity of such truth is further tooled by legal agents in police stations and border checkpoints when they request your fingerprints. Printmaking is the art of shadows in the vacuum, transferring the truth in the most immediate way. Printmaking is about the touch and the relation between the *toucher* and the *touched*. Printmaking is the state of vacuum.

When I was ten years old I learned about human senses and how our body processes the information that is collected by these senses. Whenever my body parts touch each other this question comes up to me: am I touching myself or am I touched by myself? Especially when I experience arrhythmia and my cold fingertips touch my hot wrist veins. Is the coolness of the fingers soothing or the heat of the wrist agitating? This conversation between my wrists and my fingers always make me think of the final action and the last touches of those who have taken their lives by cutting their wrists. Were their hearts beating abnormally?

I have the same questions about my internal thoughts: with whom am I talking when I am thinking in my solitude? Do I already know everything that I am telling myself? If yes, why I still think/talk about it? Can thinking be considered a reproductive act since there is a projection engaged in this internal conversation? What if I have ideas and no words for them? If the language I am using for this internal conversation is adventitious, where do the thoughts and questions come from?

Traveling to the United States, with all its difficulties, at least brought me a chance to reconsider those questions by observing myself learning a new language. It is amazing when you realize that there are certain ideas that can be thought in only certain languages, meaning that in some areas there is no bridge between two different languages. I would name these gaps as the planes of assim-

ilation, self-otherization of incommensurable subjects. As Du Bois explains in his *The Souls of Black Folk* “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” the actual thoughts of minorities are reduced to flat shadows under the eternal source of light of the major power.

The body of work, *Vacuum*, is the result of internalizing art practices while I have been experiencing assimilation. The question “how I look” is prioritized over “how I see” when a shadow gains more attention than the subject of the shadow, when the colors have been replaced with the mere existence of colors; shades of black.

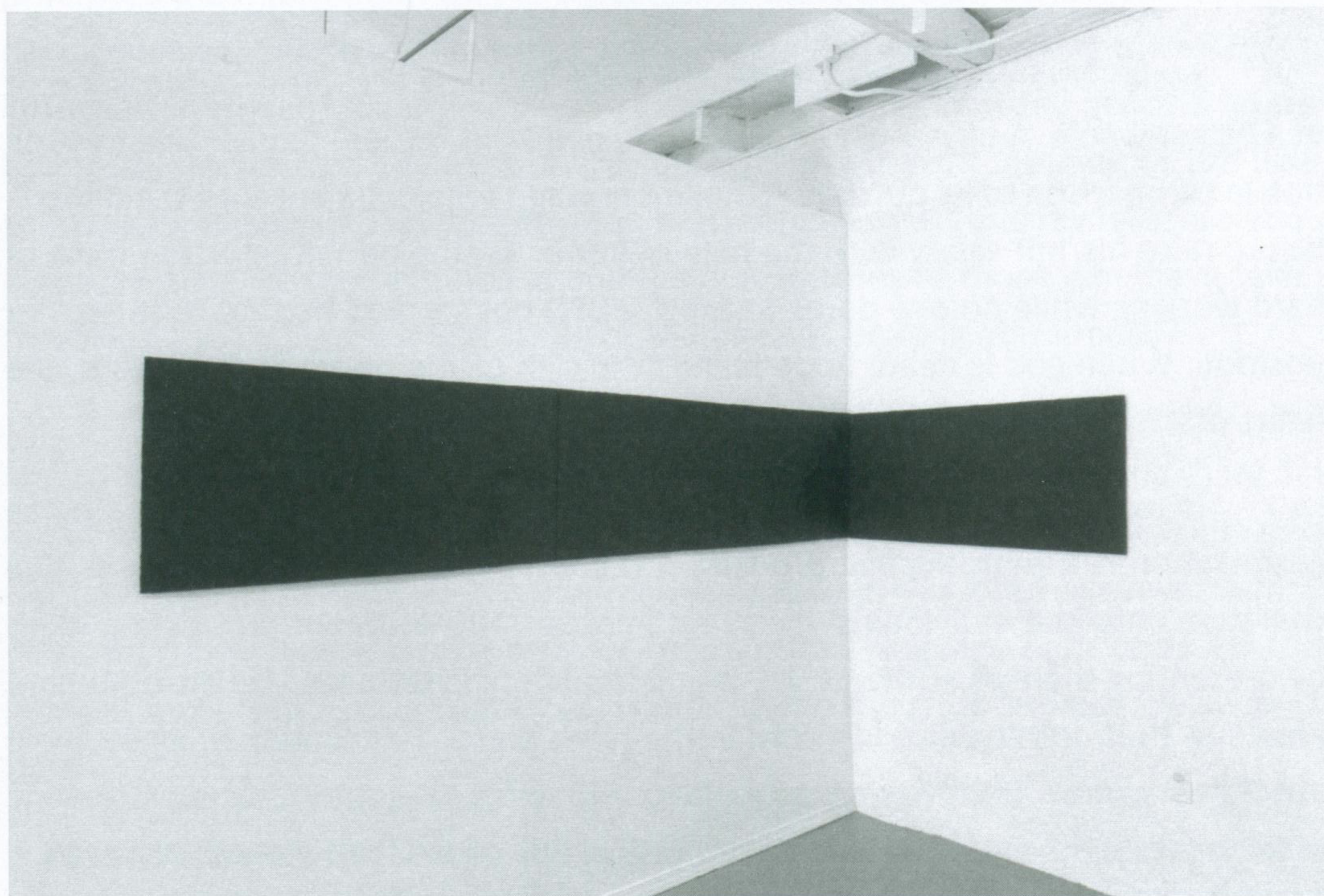
Assimilation is all about hope, the hope of being accepted, becoming part of a bigger whole. A bigger whole eventually needs an “other” to maintain its position in comparison to its outside. A minimum wage employee bears all the difficulties to raise his/her salary with the help of hope. He/she perpetuates the myth of hard working while no one dares to ask if a CEO has worked hard to have his/her position. When god is dead, hope is the “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions”².

In many senses, the processes of assimilation and printmaking are similar. Assimilation is a reproductive process, it reproduces the matrix of the assertive narrative onto the individuals’ lives and imposes authoritarian preexisting ideas by presenting them as authentic truths. Assimilation is saturated by the dominant ideology, thus nothing else can exist in the same place. assimilation happens in an absolute vacuum. Printmaking only can be a practice of resistance if we intervene in its vacancy, otherwise, it will remain one of the other assimilation processes.

2- Marx, Karl. «A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction in EW.» (1975).

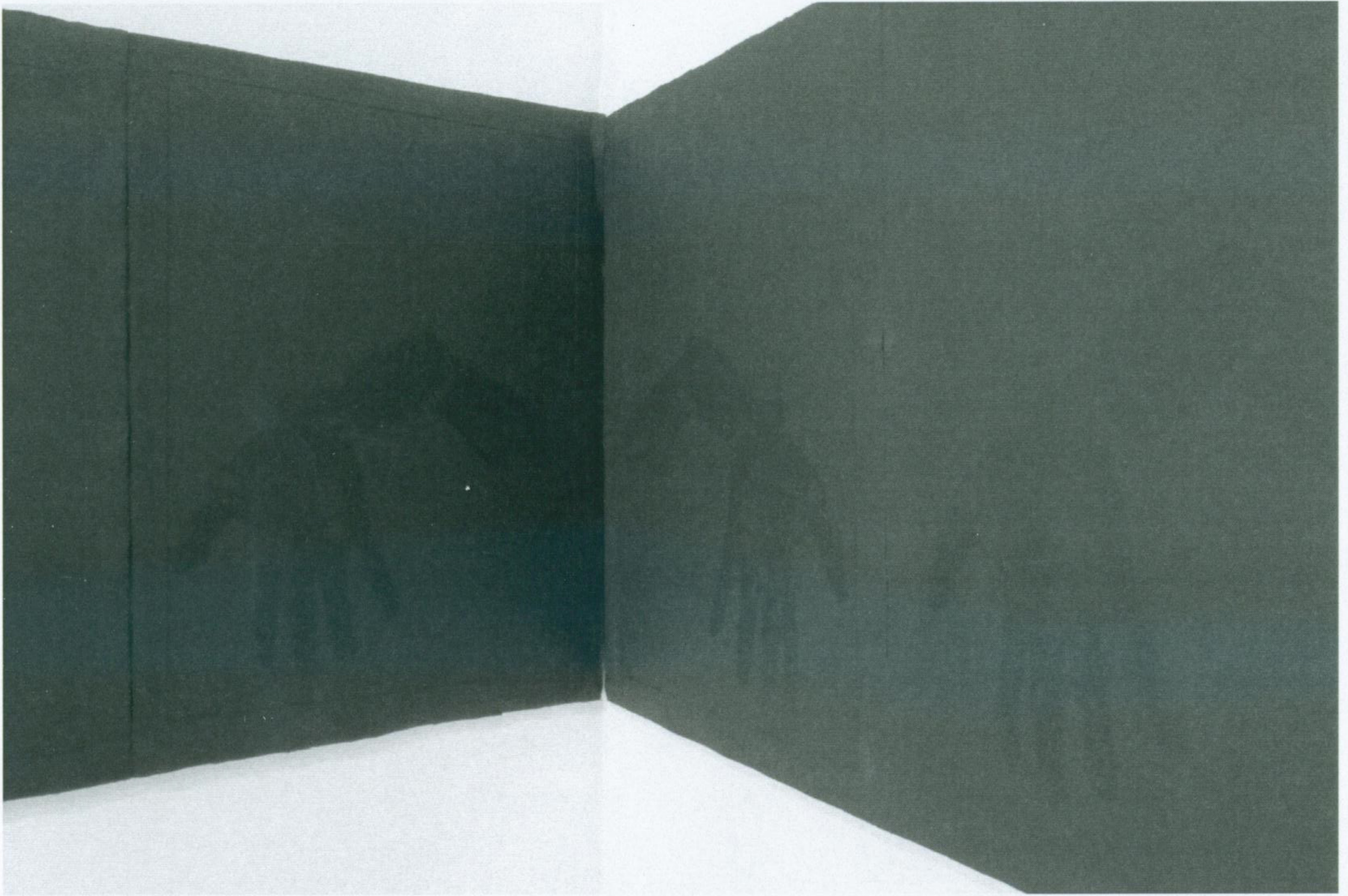
Untitled (or Metaphysics Is a Consequence of Not Feeling Well¹)

This set of prints consists of images of my thumbs touching the opposite wrists. Printing black ink onto black paper offers a visual nuance similar to the subtlety of the wrist pulses. As I become trapped in the repetitive loop of asking myself: "Am I touching myself or am I touched by myself?", the photographic intaglio matrix is reproduced ten times and put together the image runs along horizontally in the space.

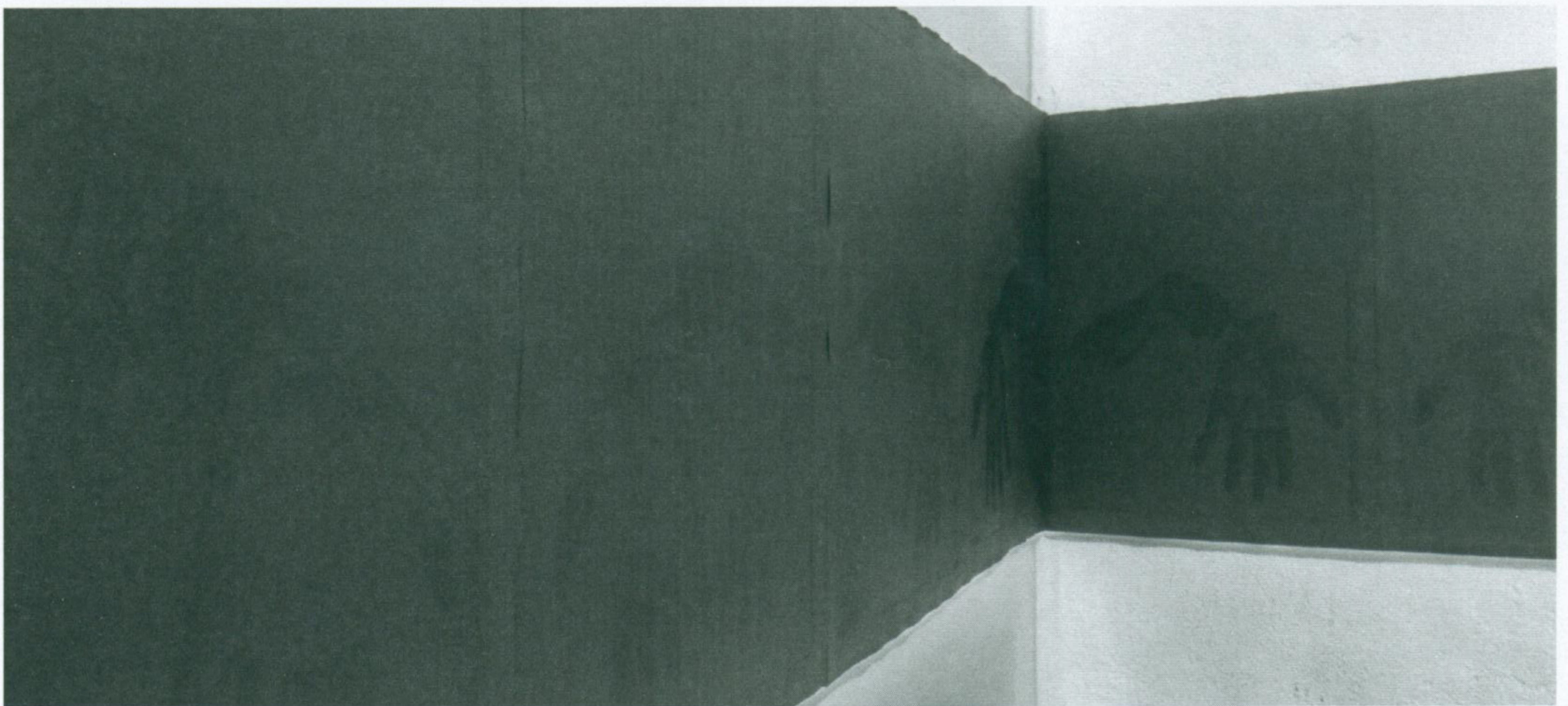


Untitled (or Metaphysics Is a Consequence of Not Feeling Well) - 2018
Installation shot
Ink on paper (intaglio)
150" x 20"

1- Part of the title comes from a master piece of early twentieth century Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa: The *Tobacco Shop*



Untitled (or Metaphysics Is a Consequence of Not Feeling Well) - 2018
Detail



Untitled (or Metaphysics Is a Consequence of Not Feeling Well) - 2018
Detail

All That Fall

In this set of prints, the reproductive feature of printmaking is used to make a large block of work rather than isolated individual prints. In this piece, the body is employed as a container of the current moment. My body is pressed on the lithographic stone to achieve the most direct way of the physical representation. These prints are made in an expandable fashion. Each proof has a possibility to join one another in such a way that the current moment grows vertically without any change. This experience echoes the printmaker's act of editioning.

All That Fall - 2018
Installation shot
Ink on paper (monotype, body print lithography)
25" x 96"





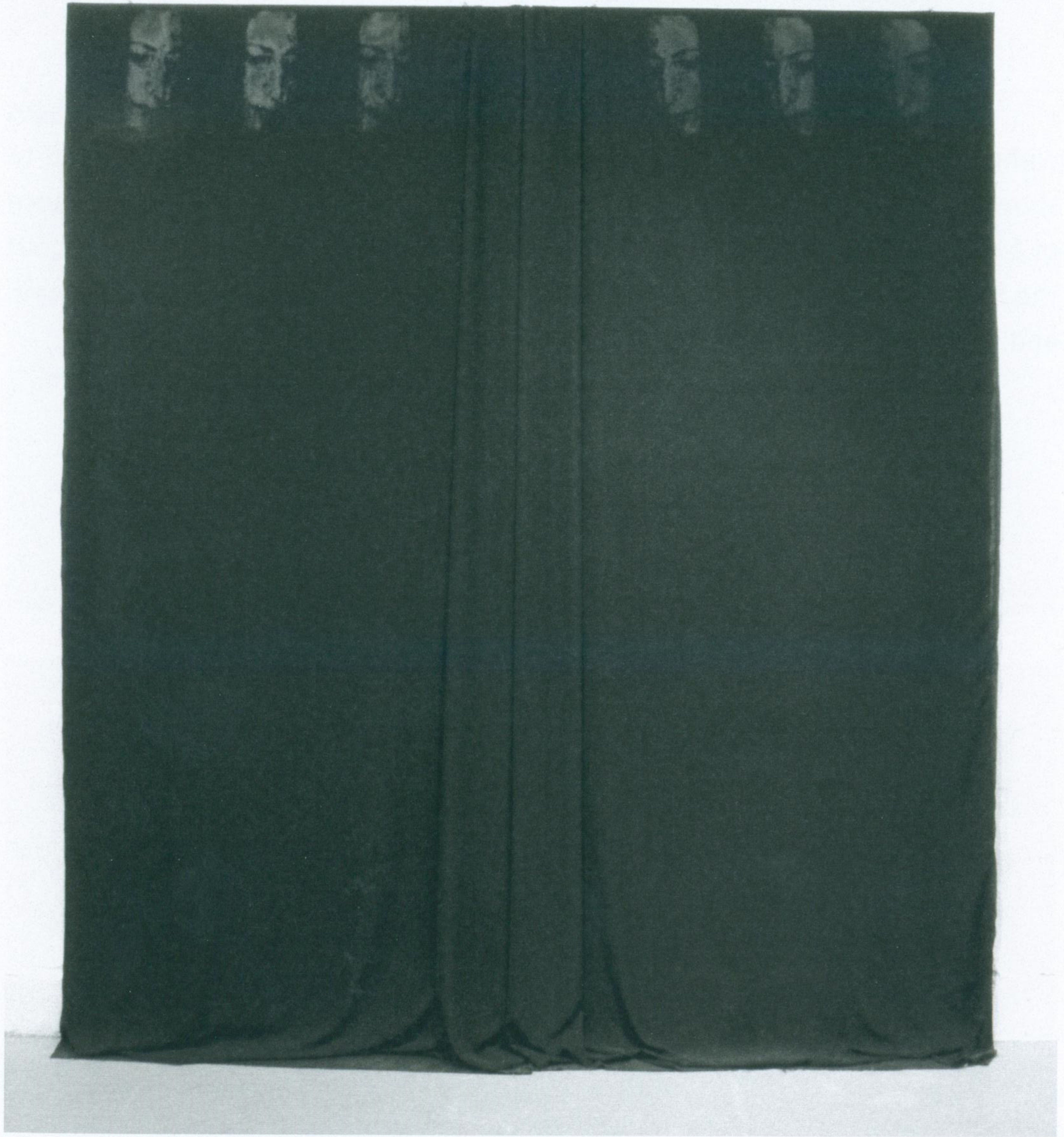
All That Fall - 2018
Detail

Pari the Tall (or The Soul of a Soulless World)

Experiencing the emptiness of the presence is like standing in front of a tall and wide black hole. For my work, I used a photograph of Pari, an Iranian sex worker killed during the post-revolutionary cleansing period (1980). She was forcibly removed at the very moment when marginalized people like her were promised a better life. Pari is absent in the middle of the piece, but her portrait is reproduced along the sides, evoking a line of people waiting to enter the void, a vacuum.



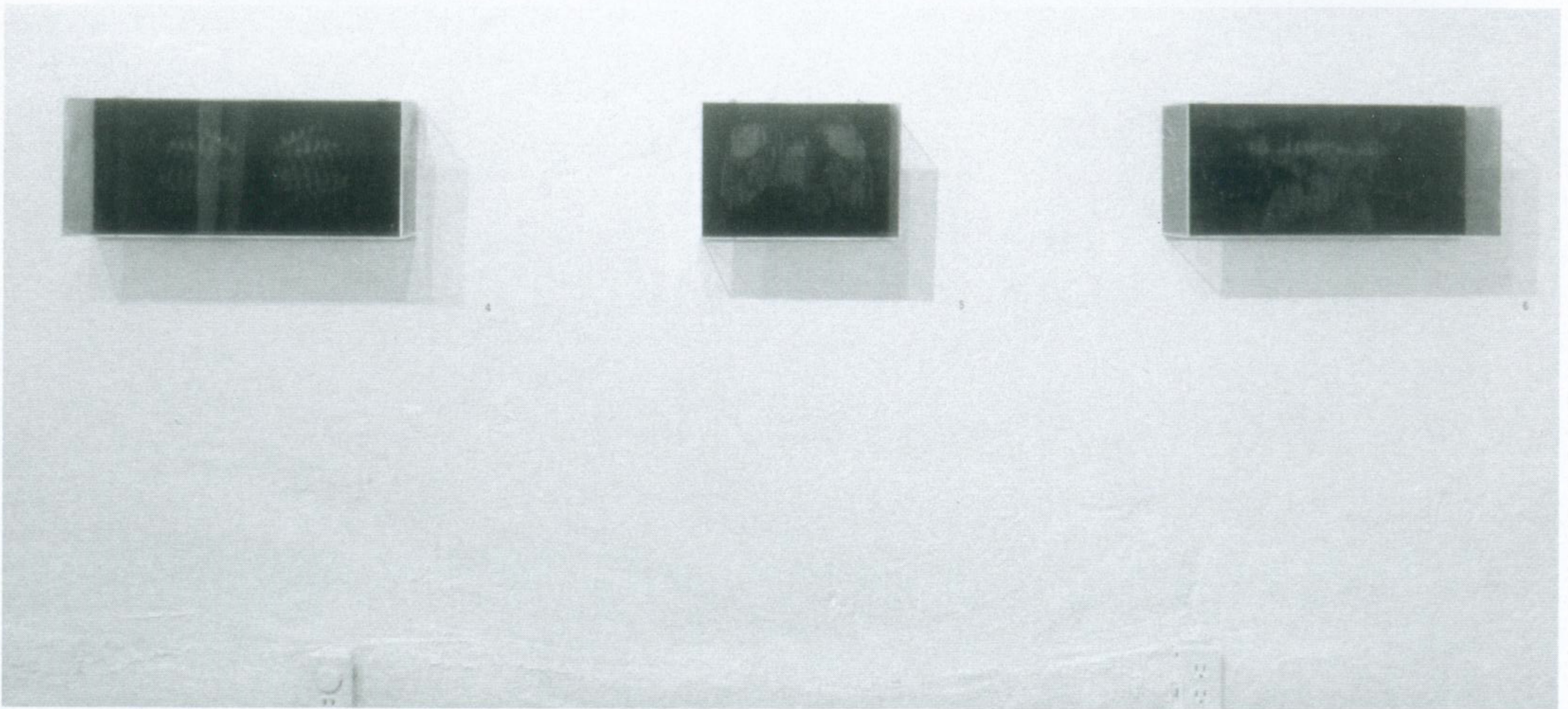
Pari the Tall (or The Soul of a Soulless World) - 2017
Detail



Pari the Tall (or The Soul of a Soulless World) - 2017
Installation shot
Mixed media (black chiffon, black cotton, silkscreen)
74" x 91"

Practice Makes Perfect

This set of sculptural pieces are composed of boxes that hold still images within; images capturing an assemblage of body parts. Each box is designed to show a kinetic movement: as the viewer moves around the box from a distance of 14.5 inches, the image within begins to move. This sculptural piece talks about the relation between the observed and the observer, or the trapped and the freed, and it questions the meaning of time in a looped situation.

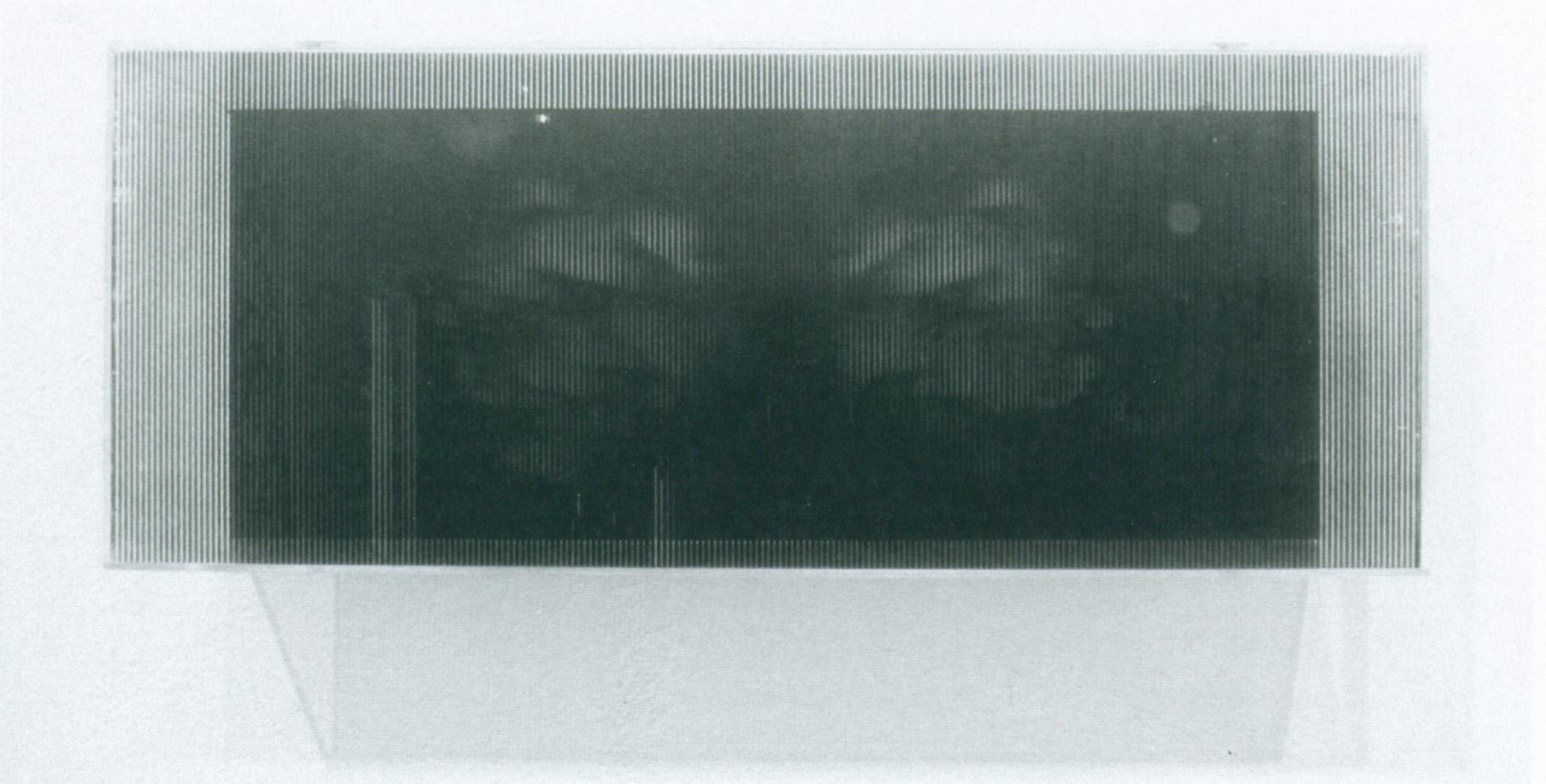
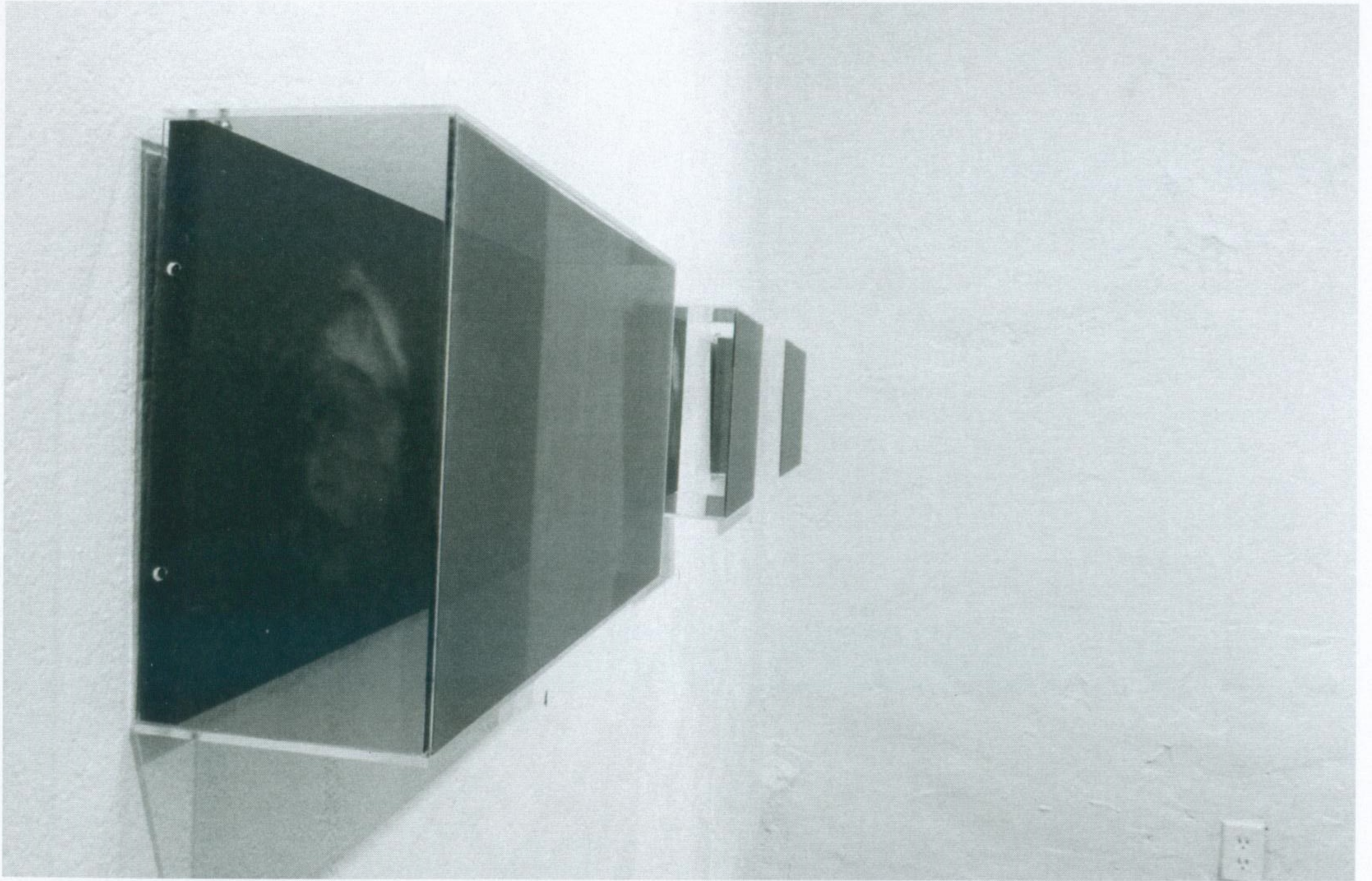


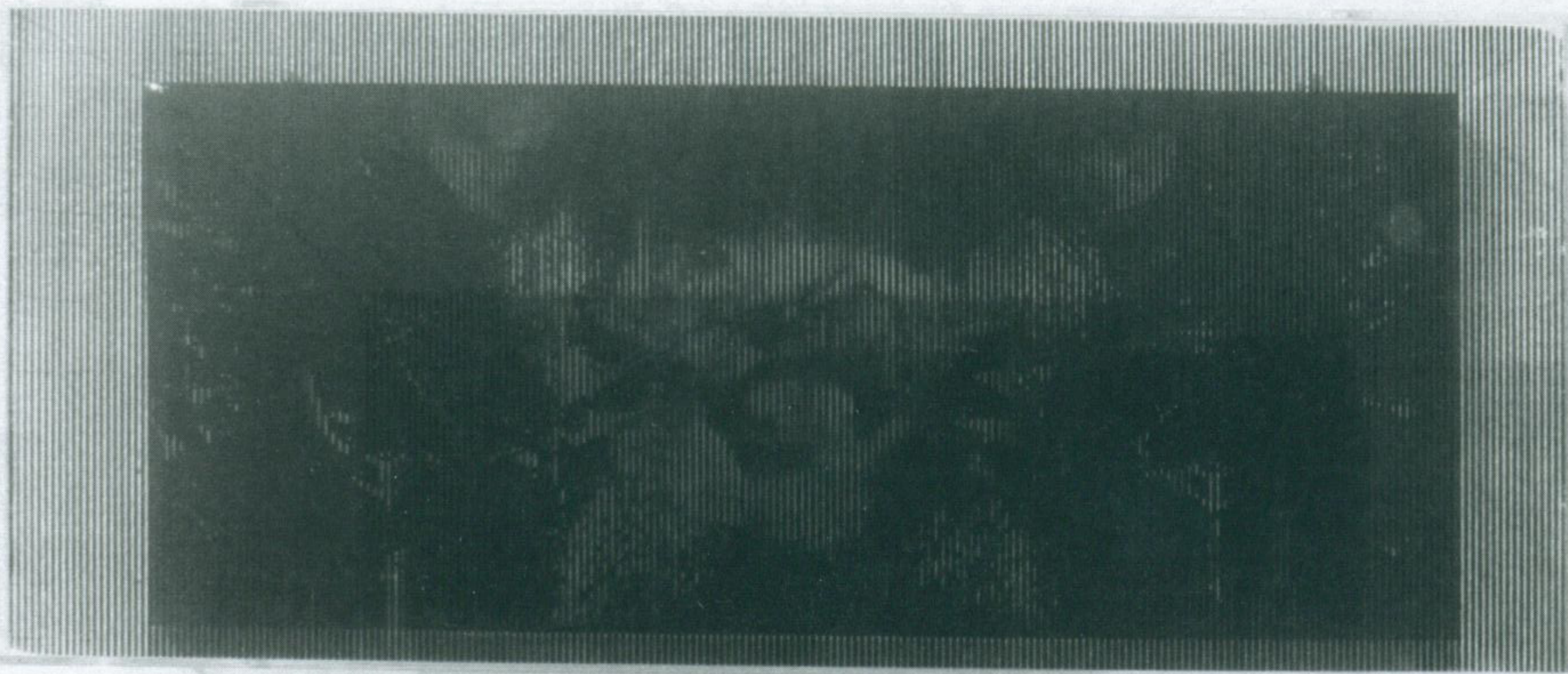
Practice Makes Perfect - 2018

Installation shots

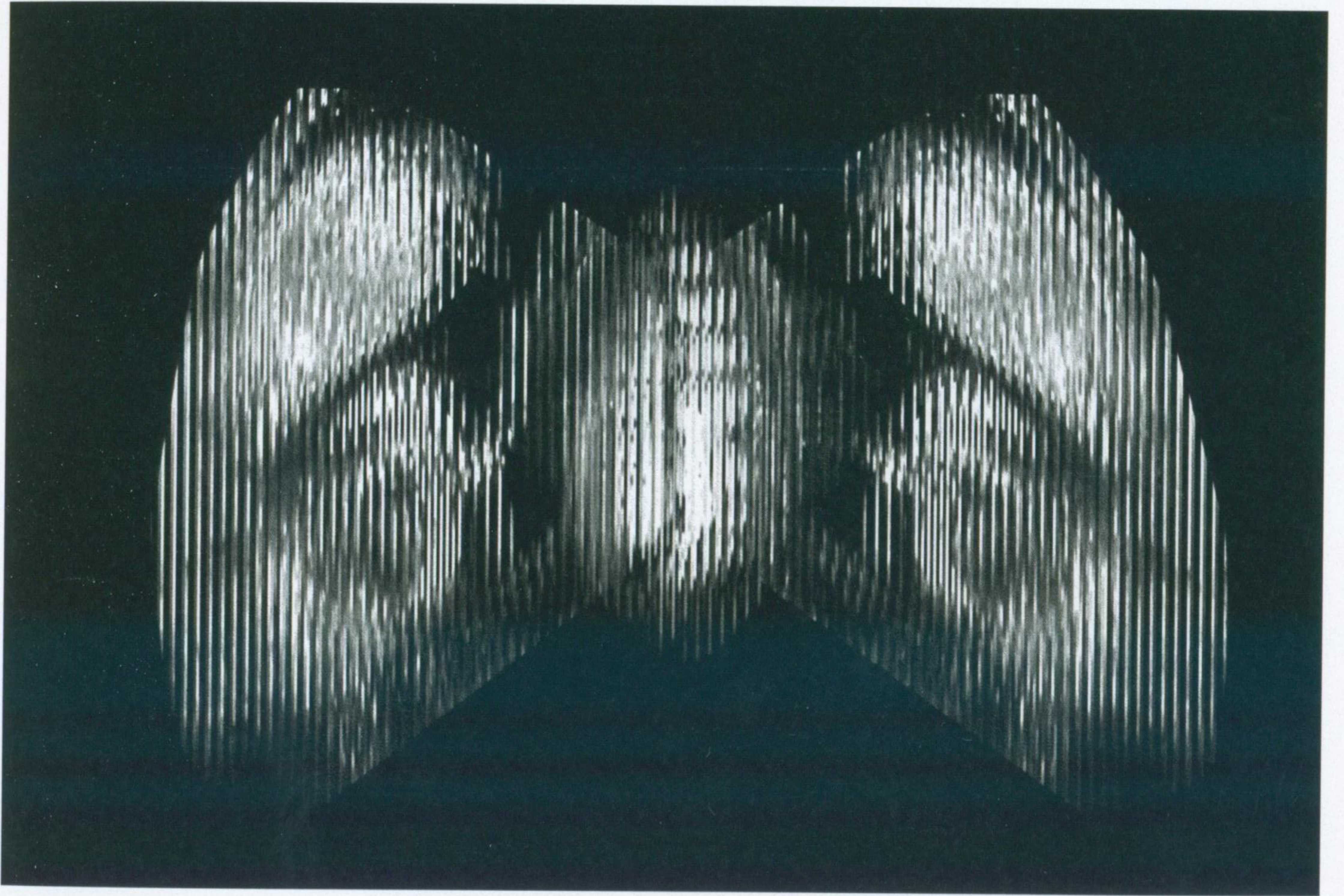
Mixed media (silk screen on plexiglass, lithography on paper)

20" x 8" x 4", 12" x 8" x 4", 20" x 8" x 4"





Practice Makes Perfect - 2018
Details

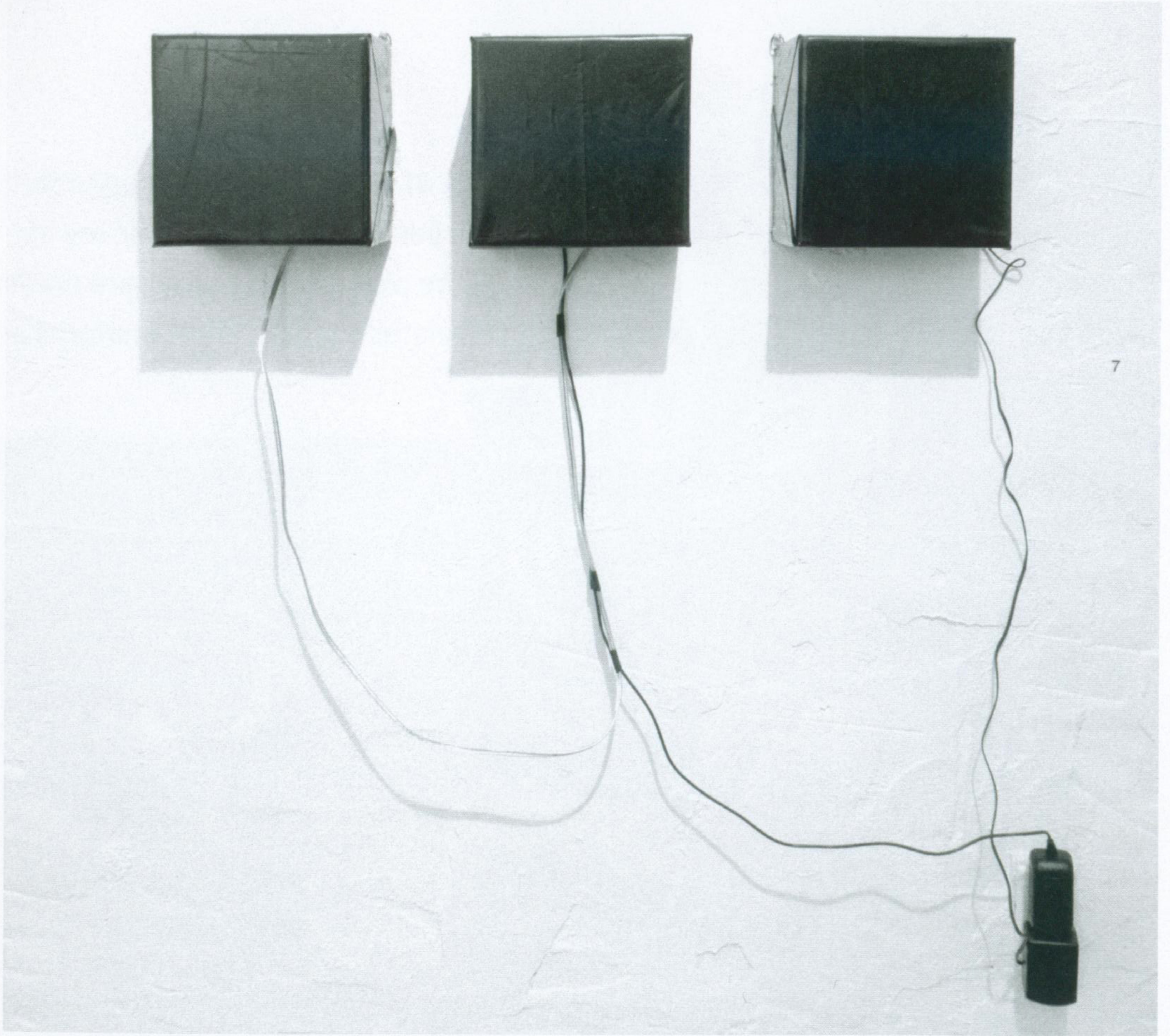


Impetus

A set of three inside-out drums. Opposite to the drums that produce sounds based on the vibration of the drumhead, in this piece the surface vibrates based on the bass sound that comes from speakers which are placed within the boxes. I employed this mechanical feature of the sound waves to imply inexpressible impulses. For this aim, colonoscopic images are printed in black on top of black plastic sheets. They vibrated with the help of a rhythm that is based on digestive noises created by my own body



Impetuses - 2018
Detail



Impetuses - 2018

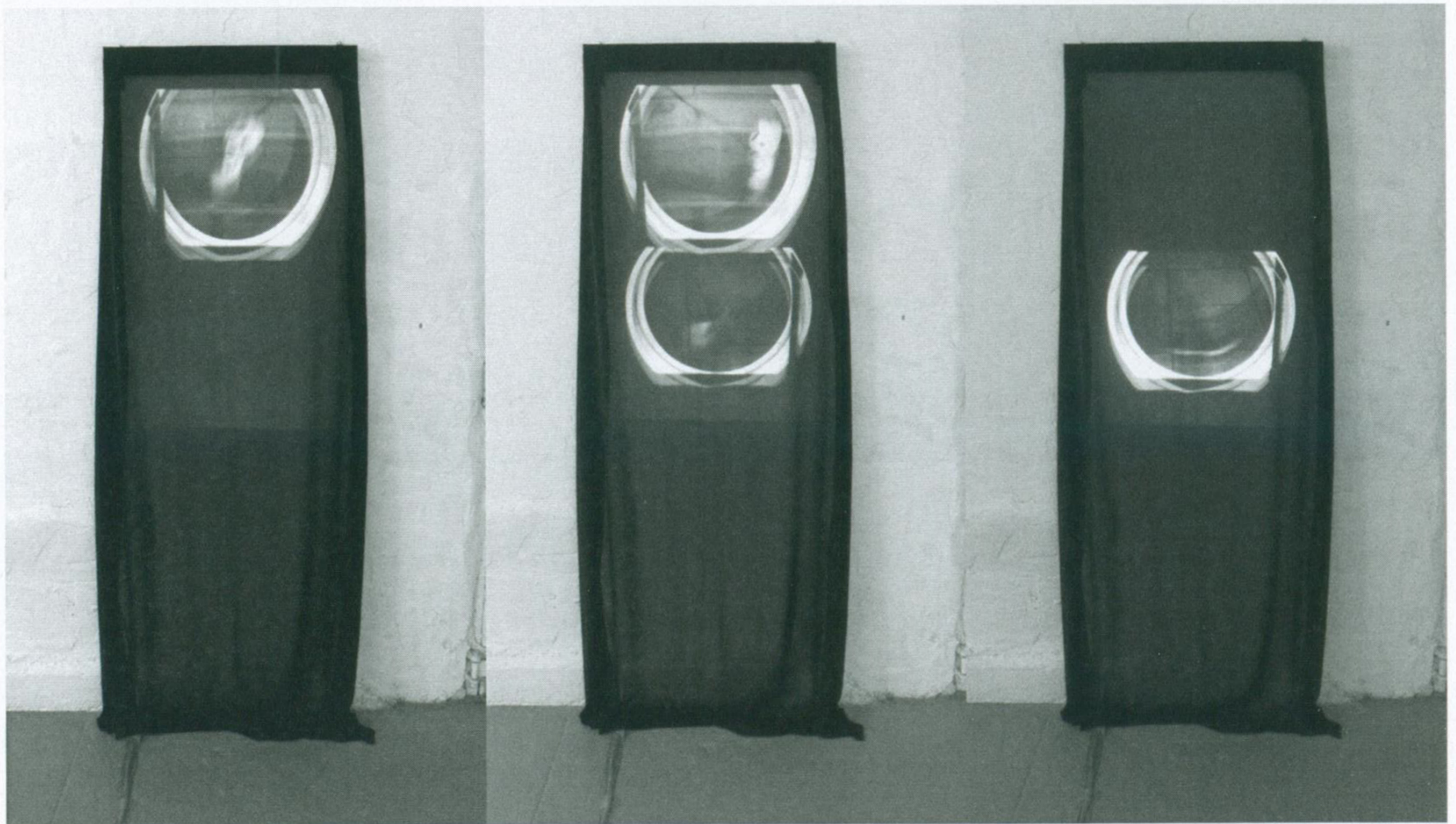
Installation shots

Mixed medias (custom sound boxes, silkscreen on tarp), 11 second long rhythm on 20 hz frequency
32" x 8" x 5"

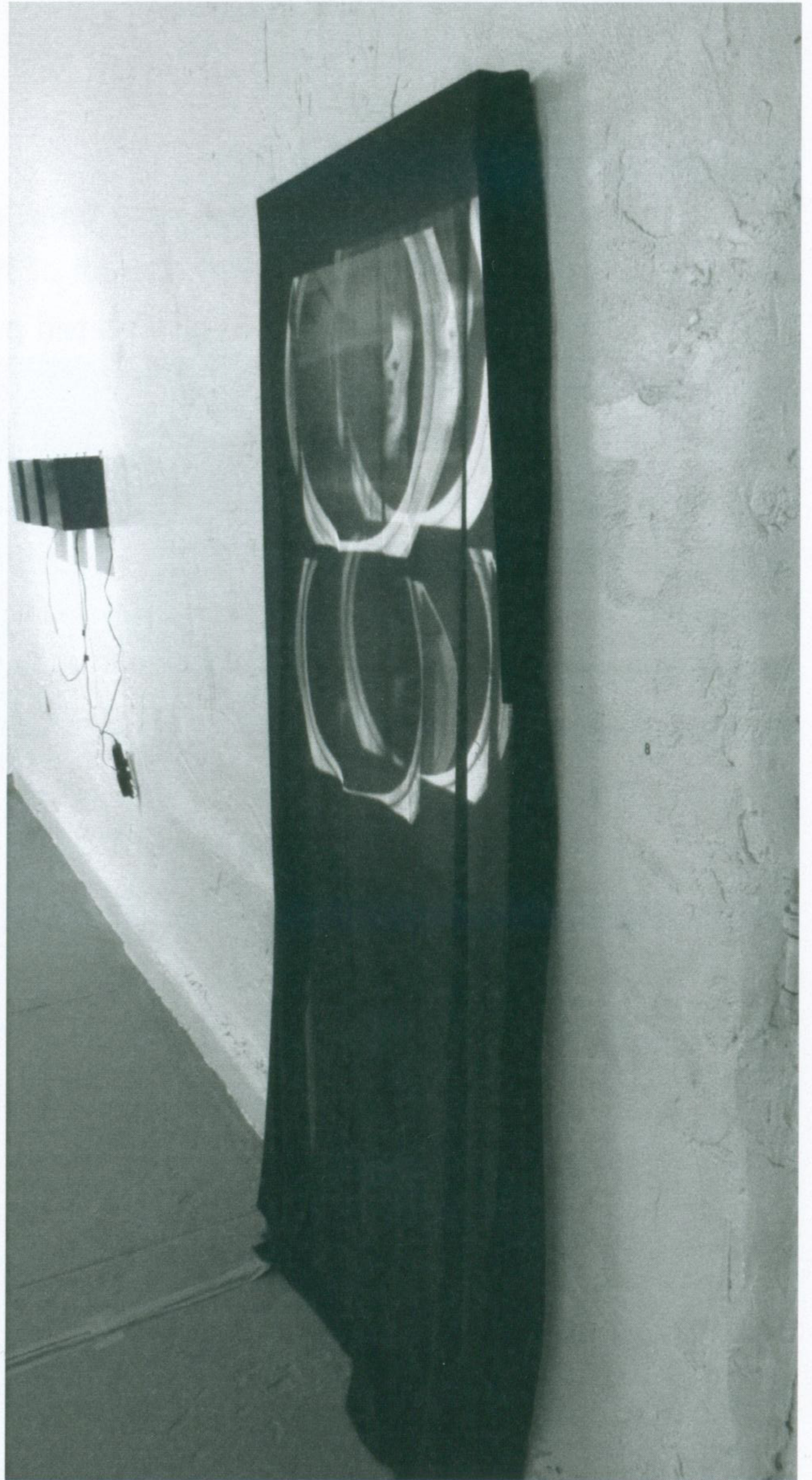
2017

Self-Portrait

This video installation is made by the help of weekly laundry meditation; observing endless circular motions of shoes in a dryer. Those shoes mimic my life-long stumbling progress in an endless loop. As all the pieces of the series are made in life-size, the sculptural screen of this piece correlates to my current anatomical dimensions: 73 x 42 inches.



Self Portrait - 2018
Stills



Self Portrait - 2018
Installation shot
10 minutes and 8 seconds video projected on a mixed media sculpture (chiffon and wooden frame)
24" x 74" x 2"

Acknowledgements

This body of work would not have been possible without the advice and support of many people. I am grateful to all of those with whom I have had the pleasure to work during this and other related projects. Each of the members of my Dissertation Committee has provided me extensive personal and professional guidance and taught me a great deal about artistic practices, theoretical research and life in general: Yoshiko Shimano (the chair of my committee), Dr. Susanne Anderson-Riedel, Ligia Bouton, Szu-Han Ho, and Matthew Rangel. I am also indebted to Brooke Steiger, who has always been more than a Printshop Manager, always supportive and has taught me a lot. Most importantly, I wish to thank my dearest partner of greatness, Sara Siyavoshi, who provides unending inspiration for me .

Babak Shahsiah
May, 2018

