

mirror mirror

then and now



In the 1960s, artists across a spectrum of international movements—including pop, kinetic, minimal, and conceptual art—began to use mirrors in their work. Mirror surfaces reflected the environment and the viewer, 'like a visual pun on representation', as Ian Burn observed. Mirrors indexed the instability of perception, while inviting viewers to participate in the purported endgame of late modernism. *Mirror Mirror* presents classic mirror pieces from the 1960s and early 1970s by major international artists alongside more recent mirror works by contemporary Australian artists.



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curated by Ann Stephen

IMA
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Modern Art



Jumping through the Mirror

Ann Stephen

SOME TIME IN 1967, the expatriate Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn had a revelation when, like a sleepwalker awoken, he discovered his mirror pieces were not alone: 'I recall my surprise when I realised how many other artists were using materials like mirrors, glass and clear plastic ([Robert] Morris, Robert Smithson, Michael Baldwin, Keith Sonnier, Joseph Kosuth.)'.¹ Burn's recollection of this moment—in his book *Dialogue*, published in 1991, midway between then and now—inspired this exhibition.

Mirror is the surface *par excellence* of late modernism. Its paradoxes confound the illusion of transparency—indexing the instabilities of perception, while offering the possibility of reflexivity. As Burn observed, 'a mirror produces not only an event or a piece of self-conscious theatre, but also deflects visual attention away from the object itself. Like [Ad] Reinhardt's paintings, mirrors and glass have a low level of visibility.'²

Mirror Mirror: Then and Now extends beyond the company of 1960s and '70s international minimal-conceptual artists by including contemporary Australian artists who reference and play with their legacy. It considers some of the implications of stepping into the zone of low visibility that a looking-glass offers.

Jumping through the mirror
I wonder if I'm here
This ordinary mirror
That's the mother of all fear

MIRRORS HAVE LONG haunted Western art. Throughout the history of painting—in works by those such as Jan van Eyck, Parmigianino, Diego Velázquez, Edouard Manet, and René Magritte—mirrors have been used to reflect upon representation, puzzling out the intersecting roles of artist, spectator, and voyeur.³ However, it was only in the late twentieth century that mirrors began to figure as a ubiquitous material in art. They first surfaced in the laboratories of the 1920s avant-garde in experiments that pursued a new type of spectatorship, particularly in cinema and photography. In *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), Fernand Léger and cinematographer Dudley Murphy appear reflected in a mirrored ball; Marcel Duchamp set the opening titles of *Anemic Cinema* (1926) on a pair of diagonal mirrors; and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and other Bauhaus staff and students used mirrors to 'see the world with entirely different eyes'.⁴ Florence Henri even fashioned a form of cubist photography out of mirrors in the late 1920s. Yet something different took place in late modernism, when the act of looking at looking became, if not a fetish, more like 'the demand that one recognise how little is left to work with',⁵ as Art & Language put it.

I look at my reflection
On the other side.
There is no connection
But the father of all lies.

EARLY MIRROR-PIECES had a quality of stealth and deception. Mirrors enabled shock encounters by stalking their unsuspecting audiences. For instance, several of Robert Rauschenberg's 1954 combines, where small mirrors were inserted into Merce Cunningham stage sets, operated as a 'hide-and-seek booby trap'.⁶ Rauschenberg's use of actual mirrors was preceded by his *White Paintings* (1951), which John Cage famously described as 'airports for shadows and for dust' and 'mirrors of the air'.⁷ Rauschenberg worked at the limits of visibility, creating a theatre of self-consciousness that anticipated what critic Michael Fried came to lament as 'decadent literalist art'. In fact, because of the way it includes or confronts the beholder, a mirror-work would represent Fried's worst nightmare. It would implicate 'the entire situation', lining up squarely on the side of 'objecthood' in the battle between idealism and materialism that would consume modernism in the late 1960s.⁸

*I see my brilliant double,
I'm sure that it's not me:
A rival that means trouble
He's messed up with jealousy.*

YET, THE BATTLE-LINES were never that clear. Robert Smithson dabbled in crystallography and various forms of 1960s primitivism in his assault on formalist aesthetics. His series of regularly stacked mirror-pieces, from *Mirror Stratum* (1966) to *Untitled (Mirror-Glass Quarter-Stepped Pyramid)* (1969), diverge from the standard account of minimalism by not only eliminating the beholder but by modelling other things. Smithson spoke of becoming 'more and more interested in stratification and the layerings. I think it had something to do with the way crystals build up too.'⁹ With their mirrors stacked symmetrically and diminishing in size, these works read simultaneously as macro and micro, as crystal structures and ancient architecture, both modelling forms of entropy. For instance, when placed on top of one another, the mirrors' illusionistic property is largely withdrawn, generating a compressed green light, more sci-fi than science.

Another type of entropy is realised by Michael Baldwin's *Untitled Painting (Mirrors)* (1965), which is 'both a near perfect blank (an end-game painting surface) and something which can almost never be blank'.¹⁰ While Smithson disabled the mirror's reflective function, Baldwin (who, in 1967, began to work with others as Art & Language, and would retrospectively assign authorship of his earlier work to the group) fixed a mirror on top of a canvas to stand in for painting. A related series, *Drawings (Typed Mirrors)* (1966–7), in which typed text fragments disappear into its reflective surface, strains a reader's desire for sense. With great difficulty one can retrieve the battles of the day—between, say 'Stella, etc [who] offer a final solution to the problems that they have set', and a reading of 'the *Tractatus* [that] points out not that the problems are insoluble but that the solution, however definitive, demonstrates its own initial inadequacy'. However, such quoting undermines the entropic play of words that are warped by their silvery medium.

A more earth-bound vision appears to underpin Smithson's floor-piece, *Rocks and Mirror Square II* (1971). Eight rectangular mirrors placed horizontally, back to back, create a low open square. They are held in place by basalt rocks—like those on railway tracks—piled on either side. Unlike other minimal mirror-works, such as Robert Morris's 1965 mirrored cubes, Smithson's square resists occupation. The spectator can

only ever see a partial view, including fragments of feet. Its reflective geometry pulls the immediate surrounds into the work to define a hollow bunker of disorientating parts, with the interior reflection deepened by a green cast. Smithson used the concept of 'nonsite' to describe such displaced earthworks: 'here the site/nonsite becomes encompassed by mirror as a concept—mirroring, the mirror being a dialectic.'¹¹ A tension exists as much between the mirrors and the sightlessness they induce as between the natural material and their displacement from site. Smithson liked to quote Jorge Luis Borges, who incidentally was mirror-phobic, because he shared the desire 'to design that ungraspable architecture'.¹²

A man watching the man *Watching the man*

WHEN BURN SAW *Mirror Stratum* in the 1967 New York exhibition *Art in Series*, he was struck by its accompanying models and sketches, and copied down Smithson's text, 'A Partial Description of Mirror/44'.¹³ These descriptions and diagrams suggested a way for Burn to give some visibility to his own mirror-pieces, which, by 1968, included a dozen quite different types of work—from a single sheet of glass framed over a mirror, to *Xerox Book*, to an *Acetate/Mylar Mirror Piece*. A photograph taken at that time, in his Sixth Avenue studio/loft, shows a version of the latter work taped up adjacent to one of his shiny *Blue Reflex* paintings, doubling its reflection. Acetate and mylar, being imperfect mirror substitutes that increase distortion, were becoming as interesting to him as painting because they could just as readily catch the contingencies of place, ambient light, and movement.

Another Burn mirror-work, never previously exhibited, is *Dissipating Mirror* (1968). It consists of an ordinary-looking rectangular wall-mounted box that resembles a bathroom mirror (complete with handle) that opens as a hinged diptych. A mirror on the left side, held by clips to a back panel, faces a panel covered with impasto brushstrokes, like those on a Robert Ryman painting, in metallic-silver. When the panels are obliquely angled, their stifled doubling confronts the viewer with a dilemma of not only where to look—caught between the painting and its reflection—but also with the quandary of exactly where the work resides: reflection-as-reflection or reflection-framed-as-art?

Watching the man *Watching the man . . .*

THE ARTISTS USING mirrors that Burn noticed in the late 1960s were orientated to minimal-conceptual practices, yet the use of mirrors was not limited to a particular project or movement. For instance, Michelangelo Pistoletto, later associated with *arte povera*, came to use mirrors as an extension of his painting, just as Smithson, Baldwin, and Burn did. After all, a sheet of glass backed with silver has certain features in common with a painting. In 1962 Pistoletto substituted his highly reflective paintings for polished-steel surfaces onto which he stencilled (and later silkscreened) contemporary figures and objects, producing a battery of *trompe-l'oeil* effects.¹⁴ *Lo Specchio (The Mirror)* (1974) represents an ornately framed, symmetrically positioned shaving mirror printed on reflective steel. Its circular face—an anthropomorphism

that aptly fits its entire wooden stand—is the only part that does not reflect, perversely frustrating viewers' expectations by presenting them with a blur where they would usually expect to find their head.

Prints by New-York-based Japanese artist Shusaku Arakawa combine reflective materials with language reversals as part of his investigation into 'the gradual creation and erosion of objects through names.'¹⁵ The paradox of mirrors even pressed Roy Lichtenstein's pop art towards abstraction, as he explained: 'There is really no convincing way to portray a mirror, because a mirror simply reflects what is in front of it. Cartoonists have used diagonal lines and slash marks to tell us they are rendering a mirror and we have come to accept these symbols . . . Many times I photographed a magnifying mirror because a magnifying mirror, when it's out of focus, produces abstract shadows and shapes which gave me ideas for the mirror paintings.'¹⁶ The British pop artist Richard Hamilton confessed that 'the most telling thing about mirrors is that they inevitably touch the ego . . . my reflection shocks me, it is even repellent.'¹⁷ His *Palindrome* (1974) ingeniously deflects the narcissistic impulse of self-reflection by directing attention back to the mirror. His gaze, fixed on the point where his raised right hand 'finger paints', dramatises the act of doubling. The unformed blobs of paint on its surface distract from Hamilton's highly crafted illusion, which is achieved with a 3-D camera and the trickery of 3-D postcards.

Kinetic artists, such as the Paris-based Argentineans Hugo Demarco and Julio Le Parc who worked as part of Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) in the 1960s, experimented with optics, light, movement, and highly reflective surfaces. They also introduced intense colour effects into the otherwise colourless world of mirrors. Le Parc's *Continuel Mobil* (1966) comes with a selection of mobiles and reflective backdrops. Its translucent coloured squares of plastic shimmer, double, and blur with the slightest air currents. Demarco's *Métamorphose* (1963), a wall-mounted box with a motorised convex mirror, turns a foreground row of rainbow dowels into a vertiginous pool of liquid colour. These works, purchased from Galerie Denise René, were first seen in Australia in early 1968 when the Power Collection was launched in Harry Seidler's modernist glass tower at Australia Square.

*Dashing through the mirror
With my eyes open wide
Forehead first and then my fists,
Through to the other side.*

IN THE EARLY 1970s, artists exploring the new technology of video often engaged its novel capacity to transmit live images, turning the monitor into a mirror. The performance-artist Joan Jonas speaks of the mirror as 'my first technological tool . . . and a metaphor for my reflective investigations',¹⁸ the effects of which were used to transmit light, fragment space, and confront viewers with their own (gendered) habits of looking. In one of her early videos *Left Side Right Side* (1972), Jonas divides not only her face in half, drawing a line along its biaxial line of symmetry, but also turns the monitor into a mirror, playing off reversed and non-reversed images, both in chalk drawings and through her body. At one point Jonas hesitates before the monitor / mirror in naming her left from right, caught in the confusing puzzle that Immanuel Kant first posed:

What can be more similar in every respect and in every part more alike to my hand and to my ear than their images in the mirror? . . . Notwithstanding their complete equality and similarity, the left hand cannot be enclosed in the same bounds as the right one (they are not congruent); the glove of one hand cannot be used for the other.¹⁹

Two other women artists also exploit feminine terrain—with hand-held mirrors that play with a more intimate scale of reflection. Yoko Ono's *A Box of Smile* (1971), with a mirror concealed under its small lid, is interactive—you provide the smile. This enigmatic object recalls those that Alice encountered in Wonderland, such as the 'little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found in it a very small cake on which the words "EAT ME" were beautifully marked in currants.'²⁰ While Ono's box does not offer hallucinogenic transformations, it draws a willing participant into play. Engraved with the Cyclops' single eye, Meret Oppenheim's fetish object, *Love of Polyphemus* (1974), plumbs darker myths. Two Greek tragedies converge within this looking-glass, as Narcissus finds not the object of his own desire but the giant's organ.²¹ If narcissism represents an unchanging condition of perpetual frustration, Oppenheim compounds the horror.

Looking back across this spectrum of historic mirror pieces—from the hypnotic optics of kinetic art to the metaphysics of neo-dada and surrealism—it becomes clear that it was only in minimal and conceptual practices that mirrors came to mark a crisis. These pieces concern seeing in the most commonplace sense and, by accentuating the ambiguities of that activity, they insist viewers question the role of spectatorship itself. Art & Language suggest that a desire for a more social practice also lurks in such mirror-works, for 'a queer consequence of speculation . . . about invisibility or dematerialised objects . . . [means] the author or artist is no longer alone; that a socialised base of art just might be developed . . . As a necessary internal development of the work.'²²

A man watching the man *Watching the man*

PETER CRIPPS PROVIDES a bridge of sorts to the contemporary Australian artists in the exhibition, being directly implicated in the crisis. His practice is marked by a critical (and, at times, almost paralysing) relation to the art museum and earlier avant-gardes. In the early 1970s he gained first-hand knowledge of minimal-conceptual art as a curator, installing and reconstructing work by such seminal figures as Sol LeWitt and Yvonne Rainer.²³ Cripps's attention to museum-language led him to observe its curious landscape terms: 'A painting hung high on a wall is said to be "skied", when low on the wall it is described as "floored" or "grounded".'²⁴ These conventions became part of his material, with the *Construction* series (1975) using improvised materials, such as small cardboard containers and metal cans projecting from the wall, in the place of painting—its components often being either skied or floored. These unprepossessing objects, frequently with small round or square cosmetics-compact mirrors attached, produce disquieting effects. As Carolyn Barnes observes, 'like optical devices . . . they became agents of spatial definition but also purveyors of spatial illusion . . . These objects appear as flat, geometric shapes, squares, circles floating in space, their actual distance from the wall difficult to define.'²⁵ The viewer only notices their low-level

effects when moving, as these ‘uncosmetic’ wall pieces punctuate and fragment the normal parameters of a space, while drawing attention to ambient, peripheral, and infrastructural supports. Cripps described the *Construction* series as part of an ephemeral, socially engaged, ‘recession art’—based on ‘limited means of production, speed of production, and small size of constituent units’²⁶—which enjoyed a largely underground presence over the following decades.

In 1990 Cripps launched another marathon series with mirrors. *Public Project (Fiction)* (1993) marks a shift in scale and production values; replacing recycled wall attachments with tall, freestanding modules inspired by the constructivist towers of the Soviet brothers, Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg. Their *Konstruktziia Prosannogo Sooruvieniia* or *KPS (Constructions of Spatial Apparatus)*, which filled the extraordinary Obmokhu (Society of Young Artists) exhibition in Moscow in 1921, used the language of technology in ‘prefabricated components of engineering construction . . . such as a bridge or crane’.²⁷ Cripps’s vertical units are structurally leaner: two schematic rhomboid planes joined by diagonal bars, assembled from standard lengths of painted wood, more IKEA kit than sculpture. Each supports a convex surveillance mirror or two. The mirror’s convexity turns the skeleton struts of its base into a mannered geometry—an echo of modernist sculpture before it lost its plinth and the other trappings of an individually hand-crafted object. While the constructivists imagined their explorations would eventually become the basis for some new architecture, Cripps’s title acknowledges that for the most part its fate is to be left stranded in the domestic art market.

Watching the man

Watching the man . . .

IF CRIPPS’S WORK arises out of the tensions between painting and sculpture, Callum Morton’s early work *Home* (1995–6) is a Frankenstein combine transplanting unlike genres; in his words, ‘the materiality of mirror-glass architecture inside a bastard or generic version of a Federation Arts and Craft sash window.’ As Morton continues, ‘this early combination and conflict of type has remained significant.’²⁸ Such hybrid objects merge with architecture, throwing into contention their immediate context. By coupling the language of serial modules with a pop vernacular, he turns the museum wall into a haunted suburban landscape.

Another artist working out of the miscegenation of minimalism and pop art is Alex Gawronski, whose pair of mirror cubes are suspended at eye level, each with an open base. One is pierced by a slit, the other by circular holes, give each a transparency that ‘counterpoints the reflectiveness of its mirrored surface’. As a form of armour—helmets or masks—they reflect ‘potential assailants while offering “symbolic” protection only.’²⁹

I see my brilliant double,

I’m sure that it’s not me;

A rival that means trouble;

He’s messed up with jealousy.

MIRRORS ARE THE skin of modern urban architecture, but they are also ubiquitous in

domestic interiors. Robert Pulie evokes this intimate space with a dressing-table 'vanity unit'. Pulie describes *W* (2007–9) as 'a concrete pun as you are seeing two reverse-mirror-reverse reflections of yourself . . . mirrors at ninety degrees . . . maintain a true (not reverse) reflection of the viewer . . . because (as I learnt in high school science) the angle of incidence = the angle of reflection, and the two reflective surfaces are at ninety degrees to one another.'³⁰ *W* offers an uncanny experience, by allowing the viewer to see a semblance of themselves as others see them, by reversing the mirror image, visually posing the conundrum of what appears to be natural. While functional and unadorned, its concertina arrangement recalls the cross-mirrored surfaces of art deco, a fascination that Pulie shares with Smithson—who wrote that in the ultramodern 'of the thirties, that multi-faceted segment of time, we discover premonitions, labyrinths, cycles, and repetitions that lead us to a concrete area of the infinite.'³¹

Another mirror set that alludes to art deco design's tricky geometry is Robyn Backen's phone booth. It triggers early media memories using a single piece of retro-communications technology, a Bakelite telephone, with an abandoned voice from the era of black-and-white TV in its earpiece. A euphoric spin on the physics of mirror optics as 'a very enchanting thing' is delivered by the TV scientist Julius Sumner Milner, who, back in the 1960s turned the captive living rooms of Australia into a school-room laboratory. Such enthusiasm for the science of optics also underlines Burn's diagrams and Pulie's apparatus.

I look at my reflection
On the other side:
There is no connection
But the father of all lies.

SOME CONTEMPORARY MIRROR-WORKS continue to evoke connections to forms of modernist painting. Jacky Redgate's *Light Throw (Mirrors) I* (2009) recalls certain momentous events in twentieth-century abstraction, from the early *Farbenlichte-Spiele* experiments of Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack to the blurred paintings of Gerhard Richter. Her new work is part of a decade-long project. It began with photographs of plastic containers abstracted against mirrors in a shallow white space, and ended as a massed still-life laid out on a mirrored floor with each plastic module 'plugged' with a custom-made mirror cap. Redgate observed that the work 'threw light on the ceiling . . . like a Bauhaus composition . . . denying the volume of the object.'³²

In the new work, these incidental light effects are intensified. A large-format photograph is made out of nothing more than the reflections of many small mirrors, multiplied by a battery of repeated flash exposures. Circular and rectangular pools of light loom out of a black field, glowing like crystals with soft edges. Such blurring is counter-intuitive to the sharp focus generally associated with photography. It is, however, not so different from the effect of looking hard at mirrors, pace Burn, who wrote 'the mirror surface demands concentrated effort, which may be assisted by focusing on imperfections, dust, smears, haze, steam (that is, by the mirror's inability or failure to be a perfect mirror).'³³ When viewing *Light Throw (Mirrors) I*, the eye involuntarily attempts to pull the shapes into focus. Yet, because they refuse to sharpen or resolve, this creates a sensation of optical pulsing like that of kinetic art.

Christian Capurro's mirror-works, while not exactly paintings, are painted with the awkward medium of correction fluid. In his *White Breath* works (2000–9), a congealed welter of small, thick, brush strokes covers a pair of wardrobe mirrors that are the full height of a standing figure. The brushwork is not expressive, bearing little individual trace. The latest example, *White Breath (Passenger)* (2009), was made with some assistance. The only part of Capurro's mirror surface left exposed is a narrow band running around the frames. Along this thin strip, fragments of movement are caught in brief hyperactive flashes, exaggerated by ambient light seen against its dense but luminous white field. Its covering implies a process of concealment more like Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* than a Ryman white painting. Does Capurro's effacement stand in for some primal scene? Take the claustrophobic interior at the heart of *Lolita* that imagines:

there was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with a mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass topped table, two bed tables, a double-bed: a big panel bed, to be exact, with a Tuscan rose chenille spread, and two frilled, pink-shaded night lamps, left and right.³⁴

The very act of covering, if nothing else, flirts with the possibility of concealment. Like all of Capurro's work, *White Breath (Passenger)* hovers between psycho-drama and phenomenological readings.

Another kind of painting is acted out by Eugenia Raskopoulos in *Diglossia* (2009), a sequence of eight black-and-white photographs. Like Hamilton's *Palindrome*, it emphasises surface over reflection, with the artist using her finger to draw letters on a mirror. Each photograph records the moment after she has made a letter in the condensation spelling out an indecipherable name—a rapidly drawn 'X', a wide sweeping 'U', the Greek letter 'Σ'—though the lines drip and lose their distinct shape almost instantly. The artist is present—naked but barely discernable in the background—overwritten by language and obscured by the glowing misted glass. The series has been described as 'a familiar topos where word and body co-exist in mutual support.'³⁵ Yet these mirror images appear to jeopardise the relations between language and the mother-tongue, representing the loss and effacement of translation. Like Capurro's work, they also seem to hover on the edge of some unspeakable horror, reenacting a primal site of Hollywood fear, of the naked woman caught alone in a steamy shower.

*Jumping through the mirror,
I wonder if I'm here;
This ordinary mirror
That's the mother of all fear.*

IT IS ALMOST half a century since Burn first recognised the mirror phenomena surrounding him. Now mirrors appear ubiquitous, a quotidian medium for many artists. Yet being commonplace has not lessened what Mikala Dwyer has termed the 'shifty' quality of mirrors, particularly 'the way they disappear into their context.'³⁶ Dwyer's *IOU* (2009) configures those letters as large 3-D mirrored objects in slapstick style. It employs the grammar of minimalism, and, like Judd et al., each specific object

has 'a relatively uncomplicated three dimensional composition . . . based on a square, cubic or rectangular format . . . the simple forms are not complicated by dynamic or unstable arrangement, and nor is there any added ornament.'³⁷ Yet, unlike minimal art, Dwyer's units spell out a message, not exactly a real word, but slang for being in debt. She explains, 'I think of the *IOU* as very shifty . . . the suspension literally of a promise as it rests undelivered.'³⁸ So, who or what is being owed? Toni Ross has cautioned that Dwyer 'invents scenarios that incite rather than terminate the desire of interpretation . . . the medium registers an indeterminate or unknown other, one that is not simply a mirror of prior knowledge or context for the viewer.'³⁹ Could *IOU* be a reflection sent from the present back to a moment of crisis in the 1960s? Or is this a stretch of the curatorial imagination that turns all to smoke and mirrors?

THE INTENTION OF bringing these mirrors-works together, was to see new correspondences reverberate between these 1960s and contemporary artworks. In returning to an era when the mirror became not just a looking-glass or a readymade, but, at its most extreme, implied an invitation to the viewer to join in all kinds of risky end-games, the exhibition asks whether that game is over. The crisis of late modernism is now thoroughly contaminated with multiple forms of eccentric abstraction and the metaphysical, as mirrors have become part of a recurrent vocabulary for a new generation. Perhaps this is the cost (or achievement) of minimal and conceptual art: that it has allowed practices to emerge from the breaking open of what once seemed a highly circumscribed set of possibilities.

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The title, 'Jumping through the Mirror', is taken from one of four mirror songs written and released by The Red Krayola with Art & Language (*Sighs Trapped by Liars*, Drag City, 2007). The lyrics of the song appear throughout the essay in bold italics.

1. Ian Burn, 'Glimpses: On Peripheral Vision', in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 191.
2. *Ibid.*
3. See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), which compares the different roles of mirrors in Italian and Dutch traditions. See also the classic account of *Las Meninas* in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1973), 3–16.
4. In the early Pathé film, *Lebendige Spiegelbilder (Living Mirror Images)*, a character enters the street holding a large mirror. Each time a passerby is reflected in it, the mirror brings the reflection to life and sends it back into the street to pursue its terrified owner. See Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema and its Cultural Reception*, trans. Alan Bodger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5; and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 29.
5. 'Art & Language Paints a Picture' (1983), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 1025.
6. Rauschenberg inserted a distorting mirror in *Minutiae* and a shaving mirror in *Charlene* (both 1954). Yve-Alain Bois, 'Eye to the Ground', *Artforum* 44, no. 7 (March 2006), 245.
7. 'John Cage Discusses 4'33"', San Francisco Museum of Modern Art website, http://www.sfmoma.org/multimedia/audio/aop_tour_402
8. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum* (Summer 1967), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, 823. In *Artforum*, Fried's essay was published alongside essays by two of the most renowned artists using mirrors at the time, Robert Morris and Robert Smithson.

9. Robert Smithson, interview with Paul Cummings, in Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 42–5.
10. Art & Language, *Art & Language Works 1965–1978, 2007–2008* (Belgium: Mulier Mulier Gallery, 2008), 9.
11. Robert Smithson, cited in Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View* (Duisburg: Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, 1982), 52. The 2004 Robert Smithson survey included five related works from 1969 that each paired mirrors with a single material—chalk, shells, soil, rocks, and salt. See Eugene Tsai, ed., *Robert Smithson* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 162–7.
12. Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View*, 33.
13. The *Art in Series* exhibition was curated by Elayne Varian at the Finch College Museum of Art/Contemporary Study Wing, 78th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan, November 1967. For *The Field* exhibition, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) did not hang the text panels, and in the accompanying catalogue the mirrors were photographed to reflect the modernist architecture of the new gallery. While largely invisible in *The Field*, when the NGV marked a new extension with the exhibition *Fieldwork* in 2002, Burn’s mirrors returned as museum classics and were reproduced in the publication as flat grey monochromes with no reflections.
14. While Pistoletto’s *Mirror Pictures* projected arte povera beyond the Turin avant-garde, Romy Gollan’s recent research on their circulation in 1960s Italian design and architecture journals proposes ‘evidence of a new bourgeoisie anxious to embrace a new consumer world during the years of the so-called Economic Miracle.’ Romy Gollan, ‘Chances are there will be . . . potted plants’: (*Considering the Early Photographs of Michelangelo Pistoletto’s Mirror Paintings: An Exhibition Proposal*) (New York: James Gallery, CUNY Graduate Centre, 2009), np.
15. Shusaku Arakawa, ‘Notes on my Paintings’, *Arts Magazine* 44, no. 2 (November 1969), 29.
16. Roy Lichtenstein, ‘A Review of My Work Since 1961: A Slide Presentation’, in *Roy Lichtenstein*, ed. Graham Bader (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 62–3.
17. Richard Hamilton, ‘Reflections’, in *Richard Hamilton Collected Words 1953–1982* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1983), 108.
18. Joan Jonas, ‘Transmission’, in *Women, Art, and Technology*, ed. Judy Malloy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 117.
19. Immanuel Kant, ‘Prolegomena to All Future Metaphysics’, cited in Martin Gardner, *The Ambidextrous Universe* (London: Penguin Press, 1967), 159–65. Kant concludes: ‘These [mirror-image] objects are not presentations of things as they are in themselves, and as the pure understanding would cognize them, but they are sensuous intuitions, i.e. phenomena, the possibility of which rests on the relations of certain unknown things in themselves to something else, namely our sensations.’, 165.
20. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia, 1971), 31.
21. Oppenheim may also have been drawn to the Polyphemus story for its word-play. Ulysses deceived the Cyclops by calling himself ‘Noman’, so, when Polyphemus cried out ‘Noman is killing me’, no one came.
22. This forms part of a commentary on early Art & Language mirror-works that begins: ‘The interest in mirrors rested in the fact that the mirror produced the perfectly ‘transparent’ image—its medium is, pace Panofsky, physical reality itself—something other than its surface—but this does not mean that you cannot be aware of the surface of the mirror itself however difficult that is (as Ian Burn pointed out).’ Art & Language, ‘Moti Memoria’, in *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966–1976*, ed. John Roberts (London: Camerawords, Camerawork, 1997), 62–3.
23. In 1973, when Cripps was Assistant Curator of Exhibitions at the NGV, he installed *Some Recent American Art*, a touring exhibition of minimal and conceptual art organised by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and *Object and Idea*, the exhibition of new Australian art.
24. Cripps continues, ‘When the “field painting” developed in the 60s the word “field” or “ground” was used to denote that part of the horizontal plane below the horizon line represented by the artist.’ Peter Cripps, ‘The Idea of Endless Space’, in *Stephen Bush and Janet Burchill* (Penrith: Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, 1988), 3.
25. Carolyn Barnes, ‘Specific Objects the Second Time Around: Two Installations by Peter Cripps’, in *Binocular*, ed. Ewen McDonald and Juliana Engberg (Sydney: Moet & Chandon, 1992), 102.
26. Peter Cripps, *Recession Art and Other Strategies* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1986).
27. Chrisina Lodder, ‘The Transition to Constructivism’, in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-garde* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 276. The constructivists held their first exhibition from May to June 1921 under the auspices of the Obmokhu (Society of Young Artists), featuring Rodchenko’s hanging constructions hovering over structures by Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, Konstantin Medunetskii, and Ioganson. Lodder suggests that the Stenbergs’s four pieces were ‘conceived as explorations towards the realisation of actual buildings’. Cripps’s work was triggered by the acquisition of four Stenberg models by the National Gallery of Australia (see Michael Lloyd and Michael Desmond, *European and American Paintings and Sculptures 1870–1970 in the Australian National Gallery* (Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1992), 132).
28. Callum Morton cites Jeff Wall’s essay ‘Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel’ as a major source ‘about the materiality

of glass (its vampiric qualities) in relation to Philip Johnson's glass house that was most important. It describes the shift from day to night when transparency (the view of the landscape) gives way to reflection (the confusion that multiple reflections of the self generate). I lived inside a form of 70s Modernity and this was a beautiful description of the feeling one had as a child in this house.' E-mail to the author, September 2009.

29. Alex Gawronski, e-mail to the author, September 2009.

30. Robert Pulie, e-mail to the author, May 2009.

31. Robert Smithson, 'Ultramoderne', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 63–5.

32. Jacky Redgate's series *Straightcut* (2001–6) was followed by her installation *Edgeways* (2008), exhibited in her 2008 solo show *Visions from her Bed* at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

33. Ian Burn, *Looking at Seeing and Reading* (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1993), np.

34. Vladimir Nabakov, *Lolita* (1955), (London: Penguin, 2006), 134.

35. Ann Finegan, 'Eugenia Raskopoulos: Language at the Scale of Bodies', *Eyeline* 69 (2009), 43.

36. Mikala Dwyer, e-mail to the author, September 2009.

37. David Batchelor, *Minimalism* (London: Tate Gallery, 1997), 8–11

38. Mikala Dwyer, e-mail to the author, September 2009.

39. Toni Ross, 'The Trouble with Spectator-centred Criticism: Encountering Mikala Dwyer's Art with Eva Hesse and Minimalism', *Eyeline* 35 (Summer 1997–8), 27–33.



Looking at Mirrors

Keith Broadfoot

WHY DID THE mirror start to appear in so many different artists' work during the mid-to-late 1960s? One answer can be found in Leo Steinberg's 'Other Criteria', his pivotal, period-defining article written in the early 1970s.¹ In the process of developing a criticism on Clement Greenberg's understanding of modernist art, Steinberg puts forward his own proposal of a structural shift in modern painting. In a remarkable move, Steinberg successfully refigures what he sees as Greenberg's rather incoherent and reductive equation between modernist painting and the progression towards 'flatness'.

Passing beyond Greenberg's poorly conceived understanding of the differences between what he termed the 'Old Masters' and 'modernist' painting, Steinberg deftly illustrates how it is wrong to see modernist painting's 'self-critical' tendency—its 'calling attention to art'—as something special unto itself. Steinberg believes that this quality is much more prevalent in the earlier history of painting than Greenberg is prepared to admit, offering the example of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meniñas* (1656). He suggests that *Las Meniñas* is emblematic of seventeenth-century interiors, which

often juxtapose a doorway or window view with a framed painting, and, next to that, a mirror filled with reflection. These three kinds of image serve as an inventory of the three possible roles assignable to a picture plane. The window pane or proscenium effect refers to what lies behind it, the looking glass [mirror] refers to what lies before, while the pigmented surface asserts itself; and all three are paraded in sequence. Such pictures soliloquise about the capacities of the surface and the nature of illusion itself.²

Because Greenberg is too quick and mechanical in the historical differences he constructs, Steinberg looks for a different way to understand the late modernist concern with 'flatness'. What Steinberg comes up with is the 'flatbed picture plane', a term he wants to use to describe the 'characteristic picture plane of the 1960s'.³ In the three ways that the Old Masters conceived of the picture plane (doorway, framed painting, and mirror), the one common element was the vertical orientation: 'the conception of the picture as representing a world . . . some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture.'⁴ Through cubism and up to and including abstract expressionism, this condition was still operative. However, during the twentieth century it gradually gives way, with the shift to the horizontal finally reaching completion in the works of Jean Dubuffet and Robert Rauschenberg.

The pictures by these artists, Steinberg says, 'no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does.'⁵ The consequences of this move are, for Steinberg, far-reaching. He stresses that it is not just a simple change in the literal placement of the image; there is no law 'against hanging a rug on a wall, or reproducing a narrative picture as a mosaic floor'. Rather, he wishes to highlight 'the psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation'.⁶ This

introduces a fundamental change, indeed so much so that he claims that 'I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.'⁷

It is curious, then, that the mirror should appear in so many different artists' work at a time when the impact of the flatbed picture plane would have already been so decisive. Is the mirror trying to hold onto the past—maintain the viability of seeing the world through painting? Is it trying, that is, to block out the new 'psychic address of the image', regressively harking back to the 'human' and the associated vertical orientation of a 'view'? A cursory survey of those artists using mirrors in the 1960s suggests that there might be a difference between painters who arrive at the mirror as the solution to various conundrums in their practice—in a sense exploring the practice of painting by other means—and those who are not painters, or who at least have a more limited investment in its practice. It is the difference between, say, the use of the mirror by the conceptual-art group Art & Language and by Robert Smithson, someone who, from the start, was much more architecturally orientated in his thinking.

Smithson (as you notice in this exhibition) experiments with the horizontal placement of mirrors, whereas the painters maintain the vertical. Ian Burn (who, from 1969 to 1977, was part of Art & Language) is clearly on the side of the painters. The practice of painting haunts and shadows his work. When you see a mirror by him you know it is there instead of a painting. You wonder why this should be so; at the same time that you look at the mirror, you imagine yourself—or picture yourself—looking at a painting. In this regard, another telling detail is the photographic documentation that Burn and Art & Language took of their mirror-works, with their own reflections included in the mirrors—reflections that would naturally reassert the vertical plane. If there was a reflection of Smithson it had a much more disorientating relation to the viewer. Indeed, Smithson's guiding principle for his use of mirrors became how they could be used to *not* reflect the viewer. Hence, his strange, so-called *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. Based on the stereoscope, the mirrors in these works are arranged so that a viewer's expectation of seeing their own reflection is unexpectedly denied. You look into the mirrors and see nothing. For Smithson, significantly, these constructions enabled the 'removal of the [vertical] picture plane'.⁸

The direction in which Smithson took the concept of landscape, through his use of mirrors, is also a point of divergence. Both Burn and the Art & Language group staged a return to painting via the attempt to paint landscapes. This was done, if not by a mirror, then at least by means of highly reflective surfaces, such as glass and Perspex. However, both spoke of landscape as a 'lost' genre, and in a Western context, insofar as landscape is defined by the vertical orientation of a view, it could be said that it is the (Western) vertical orientation that is the lost part of the genre. If the 'psychic address of the image' did fundamentally change, then it is understandable that the desire to find a way back to what had been lost would be strong. In the shift from nature to culture, the abstract expressionists are still, Steinberg suggests, on the side of nature. Pollock, for example, did place his canvas on the ground in a horizontal position, yet this was just a means to an end, for it is on the wall that the canvas is truly seen. In their vertical orientation, Pollock's images cannot help but be read as landscapes—as thickets, Steinberg suggests—or as the 'abstract' renderings of atmosphere (for example, in a painting such as *Lavender Mist*). Pollock's work though is undoubtedly at the edge of a change, and this is perhaps why he would be such a crucial reference for both Burn

and Art & Language.

Consider one of Art & Language's works in this exhibition: *Untitled Painting (Mirrors)* (1965). The titling of this work already suggests much—'mirror' is in parentheses, while 'painting' is not. How does painting take precedence over the mirror when we can't even see the painting? A mirror is literally placed in front of a painting. It could be just a blank canvas, or maybe a monochrome, though we have no way of actually knowing, short of dismantling the work.⁹ Yet, whatever it may be, it is as if the mirror is there to 'right' or 'correct' any horizontal inclination of the underlying painting. Or, further still, as if the mirror is refining our perception of painting's essential qualities. When Art & Language (and also Ian Burn) discuss the perceptual peculiarities of looking into a mirror, it is still painterly concerns that guide them. This is clearly evident in Art & Language's commentary on *Untitled Painting (Mirrors)*. They observe how a mirror is a blank surface (like a blank canvas) but at the same time not, insofar as a mirror will picture (reflect and contain) whatever is in front of it:

The mirror is then *both* a near perfect blank (an end-game painting surface) *and* something which can almost never be blank. Reflecting on this, the viewer may attempt to look not at the image reflected in the mirror but at the blank surface itself. This is a difficult task. One is required to force the abstract seeing of an aspect (the knowledge of this blank surface is there) to overcome the seeing of the contingent world reflected.¹⁰

Strangely, this can be seen as an extrapolation of Greenberg, but with the crucial object—painting—missing. Even a kind of modernist quest for a purified vision remains. Overcoming the difficulty in seeing the mirror's 'support'—the blank surface that maintains the painting's vertical picture plane—evidently requires a great degree of discipline and rigour. As if in preparation for spiritual meditation, or to gain a higher plane of consciousness, you have to continually work at banishing the world—removing yourself from the surrounding reality that is all too evidently reflected back in the mirror—in order to see it.

By differentiating between Old Masters and modernist paintings, Greenberg wanted to suggest that we see an Old Master's painting as an illusion first—that is, we look through the surface of the painting to enter the fictional world it depicts, before we see it as a picture. In modernist painting this is reversed: we see the support of the painting first—the marks of the artist's gestures upon the surface—before we see it as an illusionary space into which we can look. Although Steinberg doesn't explicitly say so, an implication of his flatbed picture-plane proposal is that it makes Greenberg's appeal to the inescapable fact of modernist painting's surface—its 'support' that we see first—itself illusionary. This could explain why the historical distinctions Greenberg makes seem so forced to Steinberg. It is as if Greenberg's seeing of the painting's support, its flatness, is like a form of fetishism: history is projected backwards from this fixed point in time—just before the moment when there is nothing to see, just before the vertical plane is no longer there.

Steinberg offers a different historical perspective, one that shifts the dissolution of the vertical picture plane—and the associated, so-called 'dematerialising' tendency of conceptual art—more aligned with a new, emerging technological paradigm. Steinberg writes that, with Rauschenberg, the flatbed picture plane

makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion . . . Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane—radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man’s visual field.¹¹

Picking up on Steinberg’s references to data and information, can his concept of the flatbed picture plane not be read as an early indicator of how the screen—whether it be the TV, computer, mobile phone, or whatever—would proliferate and come to dominate all aspects of art and life? Or, taken even further, is the screen itself not the flatbed picture plane? It is the screen that can now be placed anywhere and be part of any surface—indeed, constitute any object—which renders obsolete previous distinctions between vertical and horizontal. It is also the screen that would make Rauschenberg’s reference to ‘hard surfaces’ not simply a ‘symbolic allusion’ but also part of an attempt to integrate a new form. With the screen as we now know it, it is not so much that a difference is to be drawn between a hard surface and information placed on it, but how surface and information are one, how the surface itself is created from information—in fact, the very condition that Rauschenberg tried to create in his art.

If, with conceptual art, there was no image, there was nevertheless associated text, that is, information. Although the artwork may be just an idea, and thus invisible, there was still information somewhere that would record the idea or give instructions for how the artwork was to be made or experienced. This might suggest that conceptual art is the product of an overtaking of the image by information. Yet, again with reference to the rising dominance of the screen, it is not so much that a difference is to be drawn between the two, because the image itself is written—digitally coded or transcribed. This is the retrospective significance of Art & Language’s other work in this exhibition, *Drawings (Typed Mirrors)* (1966–7). The text at once both disappears into and appears out of the surface, the effect of which is that you cannot definitively say where there is text and where there is not, or what is blank and what is not. In a way, it is a work attempting to move beyond the very distinction between what is blank and what is not. The artists’ comments on this work are intriguing, offering the observation that although you might say that a painting is blank, ‘there are no blank drawings’.¹² But, to again retrospectively consider this, the idea of the blank disappeared when, with the rise of the digital, it could be said that all image is coded, all image is text, whether we see it or not.¹³

Robert Hughes has suggested that:

the vogue for information went two ways in the early seventies. One took the form of conceptual art; the other, a direct descendant of Pop Art, was Photo-Realism. No art ever celebrated the random sight with such enthusiasm: these literal snapshots of store windows, suburban shopping malls, motorcycles, aircraft engines, or rodeo horses, enlarged and then rendered in fulsome detail with an air-brush, derived much of their popularity from the sheer accumulation of data in them.¹⁴

Although these two ways are seemingly different, Hughes wants us to see them as the same. With conceptual art, with so little to see and a proliferation of text, it is as though a form of ‘reading’ has taken over from a true seeing of the image. The same applies to the photorealist images: they come from a databank of images that we scan

rather than truly see. The way that the artist zooms in on the abstract detail—the data—is actually a means to highlight the way that we don't see the image. Placed in the gallery, the abstraction through the change in scale accentuates the tactile nature of the surface: it is as though in our blind consuming of the image we move across it—read it—rather than look into it. The mirror is also quite peculiar in this regard, wanting to halt our look, make us focus, and look into what we normally overlook.

The addition of text to the mirror, like that which occurs in both *Burn* and *Art & Language* works, further complicates this division between a seeing and 'reading' of the image. As the artists also comment on *Drawings (Typed Mirrors)*: 'the textual material serves to alert the viewer to the real surface which does not precisely coincide with what is reflected. In trying to read the text it is a literal and a virtual surface to which your attention is directed.'¹⁵ The 'real' surface, which we only become aware of when we read the text, is paradoxical in that, at this moment, we are not actually seeing the surface, since this can only be done when we don't read the text. At some imprecise point between reading and seeing, the real is lost in the virtual, and the vertical and horizontal imperceptibly shift.¹⁶ The indeterminacy, the sense of fragility, and the delicate, wavering indecision that the work conveys, seems all the more precious now. Like some specially preserved archaeological fragment, there is the sense here that with the ever-closer inspection of these enigmatic traces, or with the application of a more discerning vision, new ways of seeing the world would be unveiled.

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1. Steinberg's essay originated as a lecture given in March 1968 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 1972 a substantial version of it was printed in *Artforum* as 'Reflections on the State of Criticism', while the definitive essay was published, alongside other essays, in book form later that year. Citations in this text will be from the 2007 University of Chicago Press edition.

2. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 73–4.

3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 84.

6. *Ibid.*

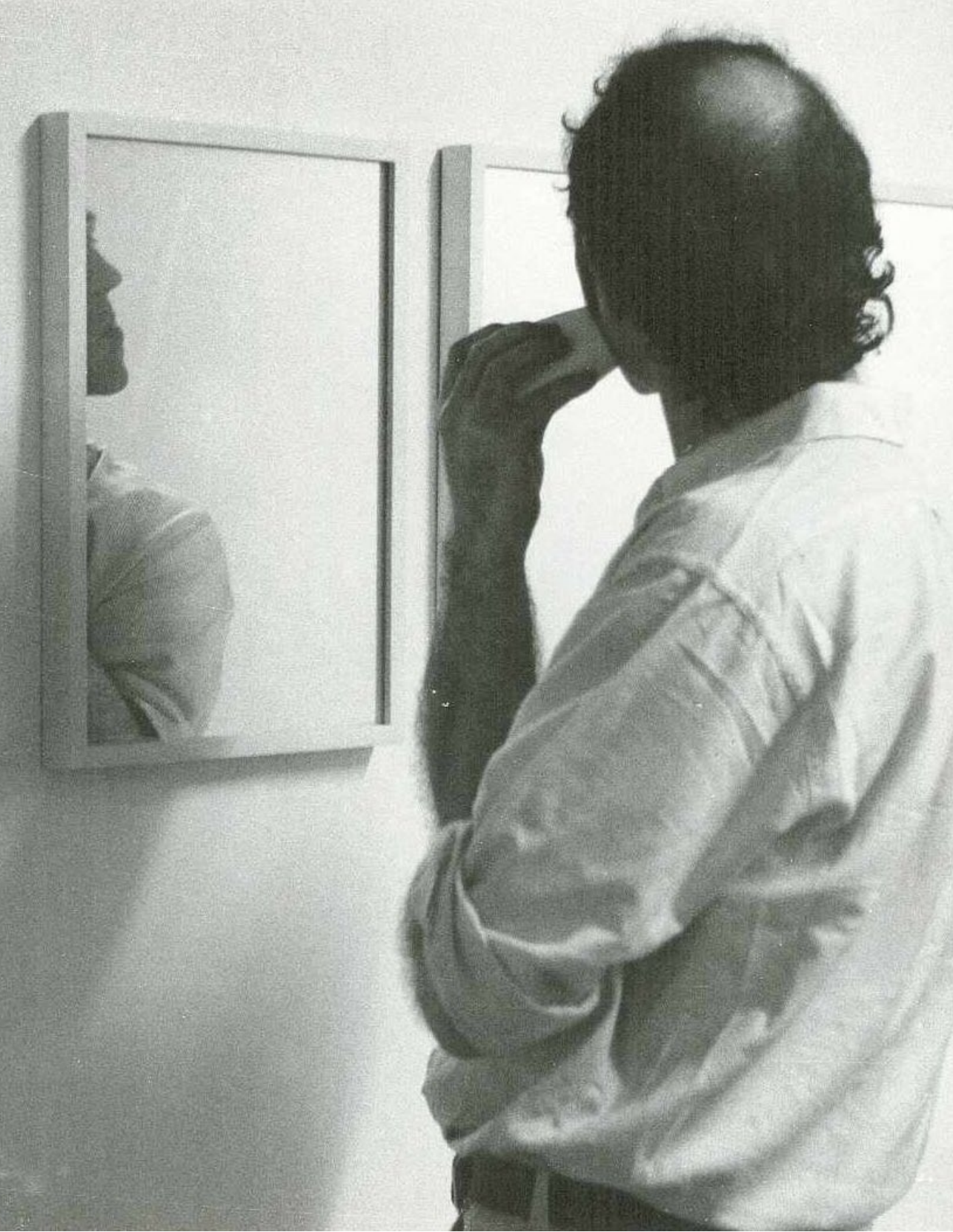
7. *Ibid.*

8. Robert Smithson, from draft of 'Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers', quoted in Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 60. Or consider this other wonderful comment by Smithson on his *Mirror Displacement* series: 'A mirror looking for its reflection but not quite finding it.' 'Incident of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan' in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 102.

9. More intriguingly, is there a painting underneath? In the artists' notes on this piece they do not say a painting is underneath but simply a 'canvas'. The presumption is that it is a blank canvas. But is a blank canvas a painting? Why already call a blank canvas, if there is no painting on it, a painting? Does a blank canvas become a painting once it is covered by a mirror? Perhaps these are overly pedantic questions. However, great significance has been given to this precise move in Thierry de Duve's influential article on the fate of art after modernism, and in particular the emergence of conceptual art: 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas', in *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 199–279. De Duve argues that even though a blank canvas was never exhibited as such (to his knowledge), art after modernism was conditioned by the blank canvas 'having been' exhibited. He writes that 'something minimal or conceptual beyond the blank canvas can be art without being a picture, but not without the blank canvas having been one' (252). I doubt if there is a more exemplary work to capture this temporal peculiarity than *Untitled Painting (Mirrors)*. Here we do not see the blank canvas; it is not shown. However, the work becomes an artwork only by the blank canvas *having been* a painting. We will never be able to look back and see this blank canvas, never see when this blank canvas was a painting: the more we look into this mirror, the more it reflects back the invisibility of this moment that was, or, as de Duve puts it, this moment that 'will have been'.

10. Art & Language, *Art & Language Works 1965–1978, 2007–2008* (Belgium: Mulier Mulier Gallery, 2008), 9.
11. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 88.
12. Art & Language, *Art & Language Works*, 13.
13. On this also see Art & Language's *Entropy* (1966), which offers a conceptual-art version of a computer screen. The artists write of how 'we might consider a large blank surface to be connected to a previous state in which it was subdivided and counted', *Art & Language Works*, 11.
14. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 364.
15. Art & Language, *Art & Language Works*, 13.
16. Walter Benjamin writes of the orientation of text: 'If centuries ago it began gradually to lie down, passing from the upright position to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking itself to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular.' 'One-Way Street', in *Selected Writings: Volume 1* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 456. Although text with conceptual art is often in the dictatorial mode—giving instructions, commands, or statements—it disrupts the horizontal and vertical orientation. The movement back to the vertical that Benjamin notes is, perhaps, then more to do with a loss of distinction than orientation. To recall Steinberg's key reference, which alters Benjamin's understanding, a flatbed picture plane no more depends 'on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does.'





Visual Acuity Is Not What It Seems: On Ian Burn's 'Late' Reflections

Andrew McNamara

We are still spellbound by a tradition that arranged psychological faculties hierarchically, relegating 'sensuousness'—that is, perception—to a lower position in comparison to higher, reflective functions of reason and understanding. The most advanced versions of 'conceptual art' still follow this tradition. By refusing to base themselves in sensuously perceptible distinctions between works of art and other objects, these works seek to avoid reducing art to the realm of sense perception.
—Niklas Luhmann¹

NIKLAS LUHMANN'S ASSESSMENT of an entire tradition is provocative: he pierces the radical facade of conceptual art by exposing how it unwittingly sustains an age-old hierarchy privileging the conceptual over the sensuous. This division of faculties, Luhmann further contends, is perpetuated by conceptual art's refusal to establish 'sensuously perceptible distinctions' between art and any other object—presumably everyday objects. Conceptual art, in other words, refuted what should have been its strength—its foundation in visual perception—and thus rather perversely quarantined art from the whole 'realm of sense perception'.

Luhmann's challenge lends a different perspective to the legacy of conceptual art, but his depiction is not without its complications. For a start, the preponderance of mirrors in the art of this period suggests an intense focus upon visual perception of some kind or other. With mirrors, the emphasis does rest on objects that blur the distinction between art and a particular variety of ordinary, everyday objects used for looking. Yet, they are emphatically objects of seeing. Like cameras, mirrors are apparatuses of perception—they stage seeing—but more often than not they are viewed as automatic devices, a mere vehicle, something to be 'seen through'.

In terms of Luhmann's argument, Ian Burn presents a curiously ambiguous example of the conceptual in art. Like many of his fellow minimal-conceptual artists, Burn produced mirror-works during the 1960s. He felt it was important that they blur the distinction between, as Luhmann puts it, 'works of art and other objects', by declaring, 'I don't see why people don't look at my mirror pieces in the same way that they look into a bathroom mirror . . .'² Yet, Burn gives a viewer a major reason not to regard them in the same way: as opposed to a bathroom mirror, Burn's mirror-pieces of 1967–8 blur vision. Minimalism, Burn asserted, revived 'real space' as an ambition of twentieth-century art, but this claim for quotidian space and experience in art was often marked by a dislocation of the very thing it sought to enhance.³ Prompted 'by Ramsden's reflective, black paintings of 1965–66', Ann Stephen argues, Burn became so fascinated by the appeal of reflective surfaces that he used automotive enamel in works such as *Blue Reflex* (1966–7). This very highlighting of reflexivity produced an elusive quality that makes such works difficult to access. Viewers may wonder: Where is the best place to stand to access this work? Where do I focus? How can

a photographic reproduction be made of these works without including the act of photographing them?⁴ While Burn's mirror-pieces look like a sequence of ordinary household mirrors, they stage looking in a very different way. As one moves along the sequence of mirrors, one finds that they become more and more opaque, so that, by the end, a viewer is barely able to discern their reflection in them. 'In spite of Burn's polemic for the ordinary', Stephen notes, 'estrangement occurs.'⁵

Thus, in Burn's work, there is an appeal to visual perception and a complication of it at the same time. Yet, his explanation at the time of this art certainly fuelled the suspicion raised by Luhmann—that sensuous perception is always denied in this context. Conceptual art, Burn explained to an Australian readership in 1970, 'replaces the customary visual object with arguments about art', and it even 'isolates "the art" from the form of presentation altogether.'⁶ Such an argument fails to explain why art should evoke visual perception so powerfully with its use of all these mirrors—and it also fails to explain why such art should seek to estrange such perception while simultaneously evoking it. In fact, one would need to wait until the early 1990s for Burn to produce his most convincing and vivid account of this art and its legacy, as well as why such art sought to stall a viewer's perception during the very act of perception:

It's easy to take for granted how we see things. But if conditions are placed on my seeing—say, I'm asked to look at an object for one minute without blinking my eyes—then the object shifts out of focus and I become more aware of certain physiological sensations associated with perception. Such an awareness can also be induced by works of art which make unexpected demands on the visual competences of the viewer, or which are simply indifferent to the visual expectations of the viewer.⁷

While minimal-conceptual art may seem inordinately cryptic or difficult for many people, Burn insists that it derives from familiar processes of visual perception. The only qualification is that such art attends to what is overlooked or attenuated in these situations—the 'looking at seeing', as he put it, or otherwise what is less than automatic in visual perception. Burn's stance is that compelling art is likely to test an audience's visual competence. Hence, a certain thwarting of familiar expectations is a necessary aspect of the reception of the most provocative and intriguing art.

Focusing on the 'visual density of art-making',⁸ Burn reinterpreted the minimal-conceptual legacy in a series of important 'reflections' made in the early 1990s, before his untimely death. These reflections include a short 1992 article, 'Uttered Objects/Reflected Words', which explains why Robbe-Grillet presented a model for many minimalist artists in the 1960s; the 1993 catalogue and exhibition, *Looking at Seeing and Reading*; and a posthumously published conversation with the Australian artist Imants Tillers.⁹ By this time, Burn was confronting a revival of interest in the 'Minimalist moment' as well as in his own works from that period. Furthermore, he was evaluating this legacy against the backdrop of 'postmodernism', and its rhetoric of the image, all of which seemed to provoke him to revisit his original preoccupations in a new critical context.¹⁰

VISUAL ACUITY AND VISUAL CONFLICT

A statement by Hegel seems to typify the tradition that concerns Luhmann: 'the act of perceiving, as a movement, is the unessential moment, the unstable factor, which

can as well be as not be.’¹¹ Despite his one-time insistence on the strict separation of the conceptual and the formal, Burn ultimately proved an unlikely, even ambiguous example of the purportedly post-object iconoclasm of this period because he sought to explain how art had transformed this ‘unstable factor’ of perception—the factor that may ‘as well be as not be’—into its very basis or ‘content’.

Visual illusions and visual-perception tests reveal that a discrepancy often occurs between what is seen and how the phenomenon is cued perceptually. Many of the most confronting perceptual studies reveal that the urge to seek coherence and reliable knowledge on the basis of visual perception often leads to false assumptions, irregularities, and occlusions. Both the urge for coherence and for overlooking the ‘aberrations’ of perception uncovered by visual illusions might not ordinarily matter, but once combined with other inclinations, say in memory recall, an observer will frequently fill in gaps erroneously or draw misleading conclusions from partial information.¹² The propensity for filling in gaps, seeking similarities where they may not occur, or a striving to attain certainty and predictability from disparate information, is an urge that often outstrips any desire to pause and consider what fails vision or where adequate knowledge is lacking.

The above is not an incidental consideration because psychology studies and their findings were an important influence on many minimal-conceptual artists.¹³ Many of Burn’s writings begin by addressing a similar set of propositions concerning visual perception, including the familiar supposition that the visual is a transparent, automatic phenomenon summed up by the ever-seductive dictum, ‘seeing is believing’.¹⁴ In direct contrast, the ‘visual intelligence’ that Burn finds genuinely engaging counteracts these commonly held assumptions about the visual.¹⁵ Thus, the analogy he uses of prolonging viewing without blinking evokes visual testing. It seeks to show how commonplace sense-perception incorporates contingencies and instabilities as essential, though overlooked, components of its possibility. In effect, the analogy establishes a correlation between what is routine and familiar, but at the same time apparently exceptional and, at times, even disconcerting.

The challenge lies not only with bothering to look for oneself, but also with being willing to risk one’s expectations about how and what one might see. Artworks that stall or hinder the propensity to overlook the visual also seek to stall the effort to look through the visual as if it wasn’t really there. Burn explains how the act of dense overlaying in Jasper Johns’s *0 through 9* (1961) acts in such a way:

You can read each numeral, but it takes a considerable effort, and after you’ve gone through that process it’s as if you’ve gained nothing. Perceiving it is like a process of retrieval—seeing what you can read and reading what you can see . . . What interested me about the work was the way it managed to position the viewer in conflict between looking and reading, which encourages a critical awareness about what your eyes are doing.¹⁶

The visual acuity of such works therefore conflicts with the urge for filling in gaps, for coherence and stability. In the process, ordinary visual perception is shown to be never quite ordinary because, as Burn asserts in his 1993 conversation with Imants Tillers, one of Johns’s flag paintings is never simply just a flag because the eye must deal with ‘traces of other things, bits of newspapers, photographs, embedding these within his surfaces of wax encaustic making reference like de Kooning and Pollock.’¹⁷ Johns’s flag

paintings and his *0 through 9* display an ‘intelligence which functions visually’ because they present an overly familiar visual image, but in the form of an opaque surface that cannot be simply seen through or taken for granted. Johns’s work intervenes at the very point where perception and retrieval are presumed to operate in a direct flow of transmission. Both Johns’s flags and Mel Ramsden’s *Secret Painting* (1967–8) therefore interrogate ‘the visual in quite specific and profound ways’ at the ‘borders of perception’ or by operating ‘scrupulously at the edges of the visual, which gives the work its acuity.’¹⁸

BURN’S STRAINING ARTWORK

It is not surprising that much the same strategies of risking or straining vision pervade Burn’s own art practice. In fact, his own works frequently destabilise the very basis for ‘reading the visual’, pushing the limits of visual comprehension. The central curiosity of his entire critical-artistic oeuvre is that he advocated a highly attentive, even meticulous, analysis of the visual, yet his artworks often strained the conditions of viewing to such an extent that it was difficult to tell what one was seeing—or indeed whether one was seeing anything at all. In stretching a viewer’s engagement to this extent, Burn risked testing the patience of anyone willing to engage with contemporary visual art due to his contention that we become particularly alert to the complexity of the ‘visual’ at the margins of recognition. To repeat what he says of Johns, ‘it’s as if you’ve gained nothing’, but it heightens ‘a critical awareness about what your eyes are doing’.

Examples of a straining at the limits of visual comprehension are plentiful in Burn’s works. In *Systematically Altered Photographs* (1968), a once resolute image—gleaned from government-distributed promotional imagery of Australian suburban life—gradually ebbs from view through repeated photocopying until all that remains is a faint outline of dots and lines.¹⁹ The resulting mutation is then juxtaposed with the original image in order to draw attention ‘arbitrarily to certain features and details’.²⁰ It is like a process of extraction, although the outcome reveals that a photocopier, through endless repetition, is as readily capable of deranging visible form as registering it. The clichéd image is thus exposed to its own processes: the ‘cliché’ of the snapshot image is drawn out, snapped, and exposed so that a new arrangement of uniformity and disparity, of standardisation and mutation, comes to the fore.²¹

Xerox Books (1968), however, works in a converse direction by starting with a blank sheet of paper. The blank page is photocopied, then the resulting copy is photocopied once again, and each subsequent version is copied until an anemic, pixilated form finally registers. In both of sets of work, the final result is a kind of abstracted blur. In the case of *Xerox Books*, a work appears from nothing: or, more precisely, it accrues from nothing other than the serial process of photocopying. While Burn refers to this as a ‘dumb’ procedure, it is the infidelity and imprecision of these duplicating procedures (particularly the earliest photocopiers) that produce the residue that becomes the work.²² Here, the warping fidelity of technical reproducibility is allowed to register its presence and the inert seriality of its output is rendered visible as static. That is all one notices—the accrual of pixilated static from a process aimed at visual legibility. In the process, these mechanical procedures evoke the treatment of visual perception that Burn finds most compelling in art.

BURN: REFLECTING UPON ART AND VISUAL PERCEPTION (DISCORDANTLY)

Burn's ambitions attracted strong criticism for striving for the same kind of coherence and stability that visual acuity supposedly undercut. The conceptual artist Adrian Piper condemns a pervasive Platonic influence that she identifies both within Burn's work and conceptual art as a whole. Her critique is similar to Luhmann's. This Platonism, she asserts, is evident from the contention that 'the concept of a particular work—any work, be it sculpture, drawing, text, videotape, whatever you like—is a kind of perfect form to which the realization, the actual work itself, is just an imperfect approximation.'²³ Piper suggests that the focus upon perfect form or a pure idea has led to all manner of meta-art quests, which she identifies most distinctly with Art & Language because they proposed the 'idea of transcending the art context, getting outside it completely.'²⁴

The fault lies with Burn's own rhetoric of the time and how he articulated his aspirations. The appeal to exact and perfect language is apparent in his 1970 essay on conceptual art as well as in the whole strain of his thinking about an art history purely for artists. The recourse to a conceptual and/or cultural plenitude confuses the genuine challenge of modern and contemporary art that Burn would otherwise seek to endorse: it poses the question of whether the idea of retrieval can be understood adequately in terms of fidelity. In his 1973 essay, 'Art Is What We Do', Burn poses the question, 'How do we apprehend the ways in which an authoritarianism consolidates its powers and controls?' Does this imply, however, that everything within a specific (say peripheral) context will be good and valuable? How is it possible to evaluate anything in a specific context on this basis? Very suggestively, Burn proposes that the 'missing element' 'is some sense of interplay between divergent contexts.'²⁵ Because he also asserts that we are blind to our own conventions, then awareness must be possible to the degree that blindness forms some basis for interplay. Accordingly, it will not be context specificity that will prove crucial to Burn, nor that of his political-economy-inspired analysis of centre-periphery cultural relations, but the formal-conceptual issues that were first investigated in the mid-to-late 1960s—that is, that modernist-generated exploration, brought to bear on everyday contexts that points to where vision does not quite see adequately. This realisation does not dispense with critical-cultural questioning; it opens up a new possibility in regard to their consideration.

In his 1992 Robbe-Grillet article, Burn implicitly rebukes any residual utopian claim for plenitude associated with conceptual art. If Robbe-Grillet became a model for minimalism, then it was a model that thoroughly unsettled the role of description. With Robbe-Grillet, according to Burn, it was difficult to differentiate what was descriptive gloss and what was substance, so that if one skipped the descriptive passages, one was incapable of following anything. The conventional spatial-temporal and descriptive frames of reference had been displaced, though unexpectedly they were displaced to a central position and—just like perceptual testing or *Xerox Books*—what comes to the fore is that aspect that is most frequently overlooked, the critical awareness of what your eyes are doing. This displacement of the seemingly peripheral to a central position makes Robbe-Grillet's works all the more difficult to discern: 'imagining they [the readers] have been dealing hitherto with nothing but the frame, they will still be looking for the picture'. This was a 'world without adjectives', because

Robbe-Grillet 'rejected all associations, references and sensations, and his description acknowledges objects as merely the occasion of a certain optical resistance'.²⁶

Optical resistance returns as the central theme. As if to emphasise the connection, Burn interspersed this essay with his own artworks from the mid-to-late 1960s, namely *Looking through a Piece of Glass* (1967–8), *Looking at a Piece of Glass* (1967–8), and *Synonymous Structure* (1968). Burn likens description in Robbe-Grillet to a corrosive movement: it does not stop to delineate objects distinctly, but instead (perhaps thinking of his mirror-piece or of *Looking at a Piece of Glass*) 'description' acts 'like a mirror reflecting real space dislocating it, making it unbelievable, a surface denying its own substance, where do our eyes focus on a mirror?' The logic of such a work suggests that, if we are blind to our own conventions, then we do not perceive them until confronted by different conventions or by something that disrupts our conventions of seeing. At that point, one becomes aware of striving to grasp what is occurring. In Burn's terms, it depends upon 'being able to look at ourselves seeing, and on being able to interpret our not-seeing of the surface'.²⁷

The outcome is art that fails to elicit a coherent, readily secure, or stable point of visible access or recognition, even though, being mirrors, this is explicitly what they are designed to do. As if mining ambiguous identifications, Burn argues that the mirror-pieces do not require 'any time looking', but he does insist that they demand 'concentrated effort'. In *Looking at Seeing & Reading* (1993) Burn champions the virtue of a 'reading-seeing'—as against the 'terror of not-reading seeing'—which 'realises the visual density of art-making' by use of mirror examples. Just like Burn's 'reflective' works, they are all surface. It is as if they adhere to the dictates of American formalism, except that the surface is full of transient, incidental effects so that the work itself acquires an insubstantial quality: 'the works become structured as light falls on them . . . reflections make up the main visual content . . . the work has no fixed appearance.'²⁸ The end result, of course, is that reflection does not yield an autonomous space or a meta-art wonderland. As Burn notes in regard to Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Lo Specchio* (*The Mirror*) of 1974:

Representation . . . merges with reflections: representing reflections at the same time that it is reflecting, framing at the same time that it is being framed. This deceit becomes a device to 'trick' the viewer into seeing the mirror as mirror, not just a surface of reflections.²⁹

This is visual acuity discerned at a tension point, the point that Hegel asserted 'can as well be as not be', the unstable point of perception that is the necessary platform for conception—no longer simply a point of passage to be overcome and surpassed, but a point where art asks us to linger and no longer take seeing and its vicissitudes for granted.

CONCLUSION

This essay contends that Burn's discussions of the early 1990s constitute a significant re-reading and re-statement of 1960s art. By emphasising visual-perceptual instability, he refocuses his own arguments of the 1960s and '70s. Furthermore, by relating this visual-perceptual instability to the rigorous demands of visual analysis, it is now possible to see how Burn is much closer to the perceived nemesis of conceptual art, and post-object trends in general—Clement Greenberg and formalist criticism—than

was feasible at the time. Finally, Burn's late 'reflections' dramatically conflict with the best-known image of him held internationally—which identifies him either as a dogmatic, even didactic, post-conceptual militant, associated chiefly with political-economy-type analyses of the art market in the 1970s, or otherwise with the contention that 'deskilling' represents the chief (if unintended) consequence of modernist art practice.³⁰

Something more is at stake though—a kind of ethics derived from aesthetics. In his last writings, Burn emphatically concludes that the best art operates at the 'edges of the visual'. To reiterate, visual acuity counters the all-too-eager urge to fill in gaps, to seek coherence or stability where it may not necessarily occur. The entanglement with language as well as the expounding of the concept of visual acuity helped Burn disentangle his work from an idea of pure art. For Burn, however, it remained important to stress that specific visual engagements require a certain kind of fidelity. This fidelity requires us to return to the exacting scrutiny the work, which in turn exposes its visual density. The irony is that the confrontation with this visual density leads us to question whether retrieval (whether representational, perceptual, or in reception) can be understood adequately in terms of fidelity understood as transparency. It poses the question: how do we respond to the untoward, to that which is elicited from within the depths of our most considered reflections, our most automatic or well-attuned responses? For Burn, our most familiar premises become destabilised once we confront something different or unfamiliar. Being attuned to visual density or acuity prepares us for 'the interplay between divergent' social or cultural contexts. Such interplay only becomes possible when the familiar has become strange. As Burn said rather hopefully of his own *Xerox Books*, 'it requires you to extend your interest outside the normal level; by lowering your interest level things don't seem boring but become interesting again.'³¹ This is the lingering possibility that emerges from impinging upon one's familiar expectations—the acuity discerned in the most extenuated of circumstances. What emerges from everyday confrontations is no longer familiar and commonplace. Rather than a loss, it signals the point of renewed engagement where the obvious is no longer quite so obvious or straightforward.

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1. Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 5.

2. Ian Burn, 'Uttered Objects/ Reflected Words', *Art & Text* 41 (January 1992), 73.

3. *Ibid.*, 69.

4. Burn's reflexive works have a precursor in Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* of 1951, which strived to be smooth, featureless, monochrome works defying any symbolism or literal reference. This effect was achieved by using house paint applied with a roller. Rauschenberg described them in vaguely similar terms to Burn, 'one could look at them and see how many people were in the room by the shadows cast, or what time of day it was', in Roberta Bernstein, 'Introduction', *Rauschenberg: The White and Black Paintings 1949–1952* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1986), n.p.

5. Ann Stephen, 'The Conundrum of a Mirror Piece: "On Being Able to Look at Ourselves Seeing"', *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968–2002* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2002), 26–8.

6. Ian Burn, 'Conceptual Art as Art', *Dialogue: Writings in Art History*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 125, 126.

7. Ian Burn, *Looking At Seeing and Reading* (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1993), n.p.

8. *Ibid.*

9. The conversation was conducted in April 1993, but not published until 2003; see Ann Stephen, 'Ian Burn and

Imants Tillers in Conversation', *Art Monthly Australia* 159 (May 2003), page numbers.

10. Ann Stephen notes that she saw Burn for the last time in late September 1993 and describes him as being 'in an expansive mood. His art was engaging the attention of younger artists and writers', Ann Stephen, *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press/Melbourne University Publishing, 2006), 3.

11. G. W. F. Hegel, 'Perception: or The Thing and Deception', *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 67.

12. The best-known visual illusions, apart from the duck-rabbit puzzle, are the Ponzo, Müller-Lyer, and Zolner illusions. The more fraught and complex investigations involve verbal-visual interactions, particularly those examining eyewitness testimonies or memory recall. Given the credence placed on eyewitness testimony in court trials, many studies have revealed disturbing evidence that a range of factors—for example, loaded questions to an eyewitness—can considerably alter what was reported to have been seen. See R. Buckhout, 'Eyewitness Testimony', *Scientific American* 231 (1974), 23–33; E. F. Loftus and J. C. Palmer, 'Reconstruction of an Automobile Destruction: An Example of the Interaction between Language and Memory', *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 13 (1974), 585–9; S. M. Kassin and P. C. Ellsworth, 'The "General Acceptance" of Psychological Research on Eyewitness Testimony: A Survey of Experts', *American Psychologist* 44 (1989), 1089–98; M. S. Zaragoza and K. J. Mitchell, 'Repeated Exposure to Suggestion and the Creation of False Memories', *Psychological Science* 1 (1996), 294–300.

13. Such studies also informed the art history of E. H. Gombrich, an influence on many minimal and conceptual artists, though his conclusions were more 'naturalised' in regard to visual perception.

14. Ian Burn, 'Glimpses: On Peripheral Vision', *Dialogue*, 177.

15. In his conversation with Imants Tillers, Burn rebukes Juan Davila's work, because he finds 'little that interests me on that visual level—his work is not visually intelligent, its intelligence functions only on a literary or academic level.' Ian Burn, cited in Ann Stephen, 'Ian Burn and Imants Tillers in Conversation', *Art Monthly Australia* 159 (May 2003), 18.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. The source, *Australian Panorama*, was distributed from the Australian Consulate in New York, where Burn's wife Avril then worked. As Ann Stephen notes 'consular life was booming, since Australia had escalated its involvement in Vietnam, as a junior partner in the American alliance', *On Looking at Looking*, 72.

20. Ian Burn, 'Talk' (1988), reprinted in *Minimal-Conceptual Work 1965–1970* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1992), 84.

21. As Burn states, 'The clichéd character of the images was important', cited in Ian Burn, *Minimal-Conceptual Work 1965–1970*, 84.

22. Ian Burn, 'Conceptual Art as Art', *Dialogue*, 129.

23. Adrian Piper, 'Ian Burn's Conceptualism', *Art in America* 85, no. 12 (December 1997), 73–4.

24. Piper also notes that extra-artistic focus of artists 'was a real liberation from the art-school mindset'. Adrian Piper, 'Ian Burn's Conceptualism', 73.

25. Burn, 'Art Is What We Do, Culture Is What We Do to Other Artists', *Dialogue*, 138.

26. Ian Burn, 'Uttered Objects/Reflected Words', 73, 69.

27. Ibid. The quote is from the exhibition Burn curated in 1993: see Ian Burn, *Looking at Seeing and Reading*, n.p.

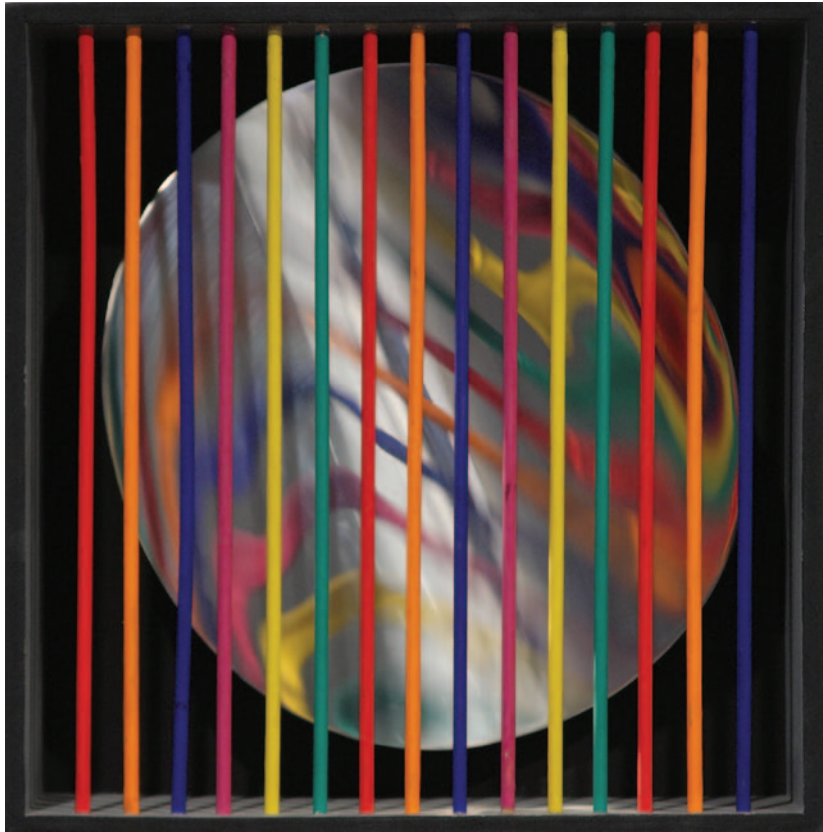
28. Ian Burn, *Minimal-Conceptual Work*, 70.

29. Ian Burn, *Looking at Seeing and Reading*, n.p.

30. Ian Burn, 'The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation', *Artforum* 13 (April 1975), reprinted in *Looking Critically: 21 Years of Artforum Magazine*, ed. Amy Baker Sandback (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 173–6. It also appears as Chapter 14 of *Dialogue*, 152–66. For Burn on 'deskilling', see 'The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath', *Dialogue*, 104–5. The emphasis on deskilling is showcased in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 531.

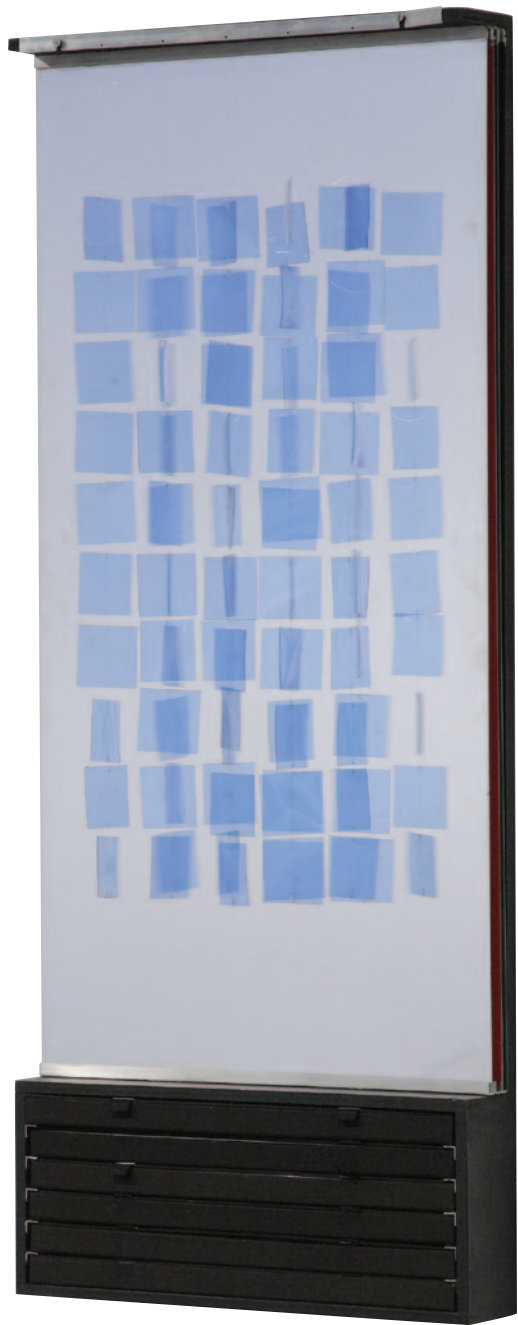
31. Ian Burn, letter dated May 1968, cited in *Minimal-Conceptual Work*, 81.

The Exhibition



Hugo Demarco *Métamorphose* 1964

RIGHT Julio Le Parc *Continuel Mobil* 1966



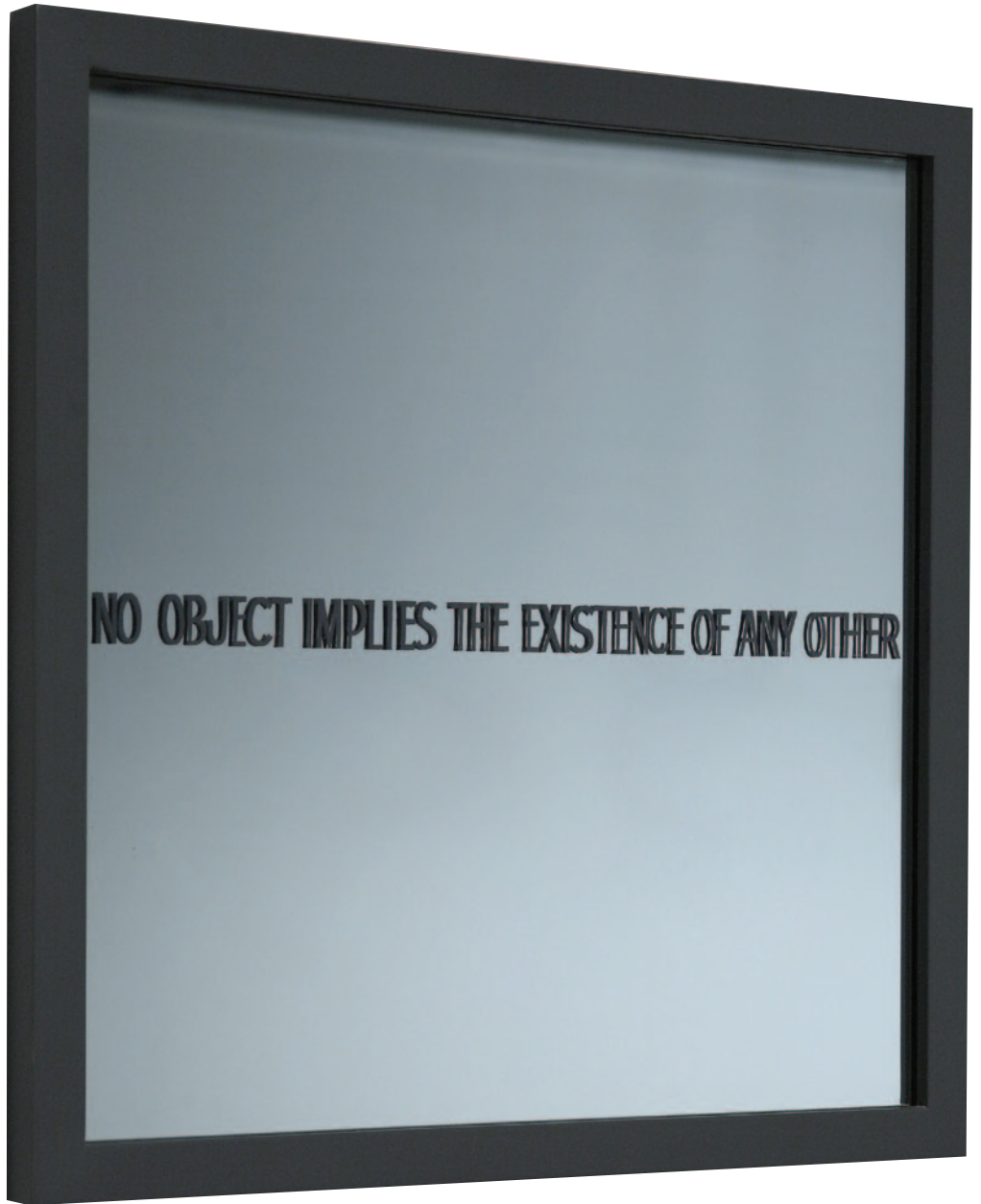


Art & Language *Untitled Painting (Mirrors)* 1965 PHOTO Richard Stringer

It must also contain that certain combination of symbols and subjects. And this is represented in our typ-
ings that we would be able to think of this thing out of its own account. (1966:166)
Such thought is a form of creative process. The combination of symbols to effect through the juxtaposition of
separate ideas, which
to make it not a copy of
such quality of it. It is a place to see of one. In this way, there are questions and repeated efforts to that
the order of things that are seen in our eyes (the world as a line of all the other things in the world)
that is a process of no definition. It can be seen from a new scientific perspective. It is as if there were
nothing to be seen in a mirror which are not to be seen in a mirror.
There is no transfer of information to be seen in the world. It is a process of
the order of things of information to be seen in the world. It is a process of
part of a world of information to be seen in the world. It is a process of
being the function of the world of information to be seen in the world.



Ian Burn *Dissipating Mirror* 1968 PHOTO Richard Stringer

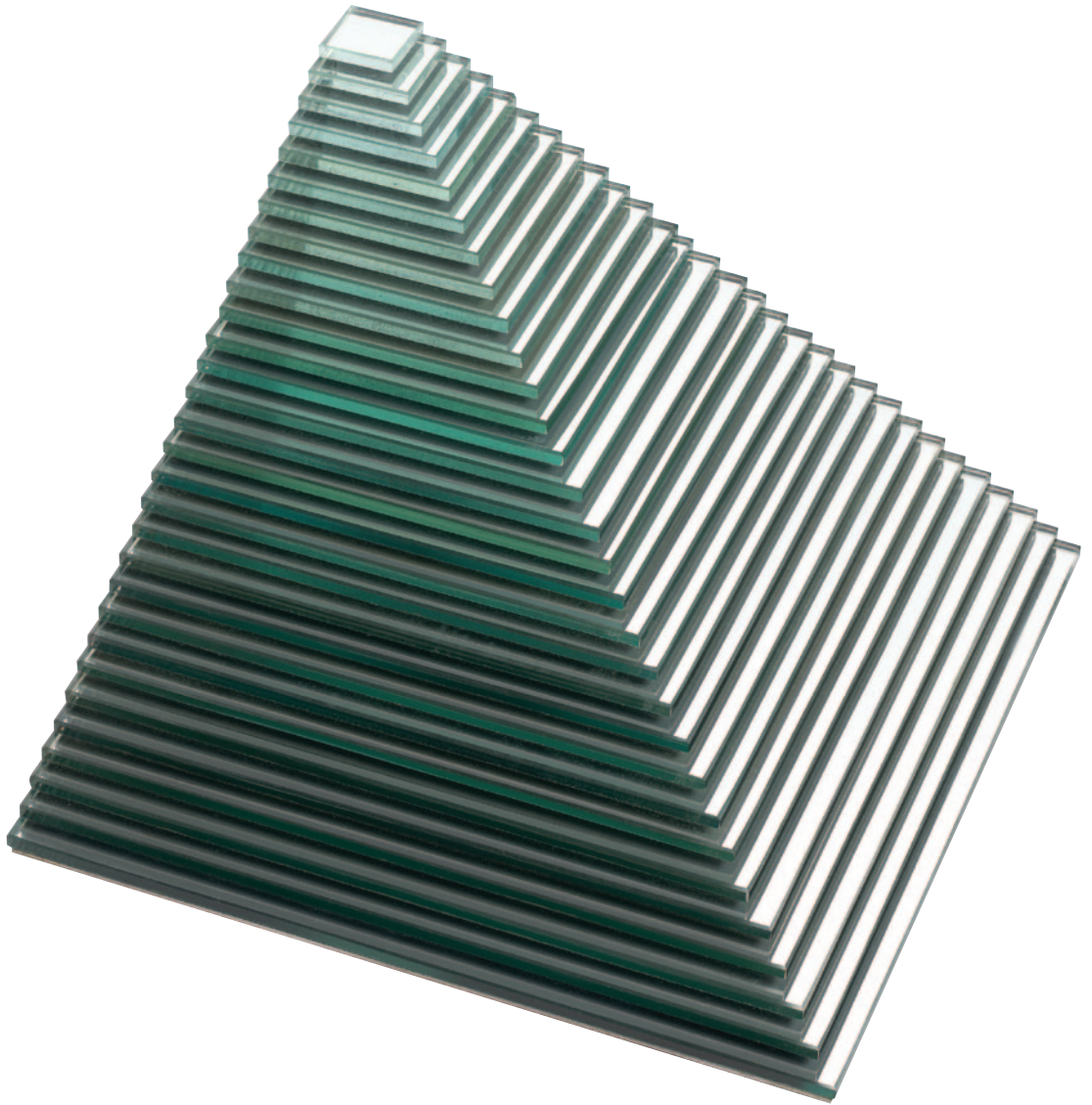


Ian Burn *Hume's Mirror (No Object . . .)* 1967 PHOTO Richard Stringer





Robert Smithson *Rocks and Mirror Square II* 1971



Robert Smithson *No Title (Mirror-Glass Quarter-Stepped Pyramid)* 1969



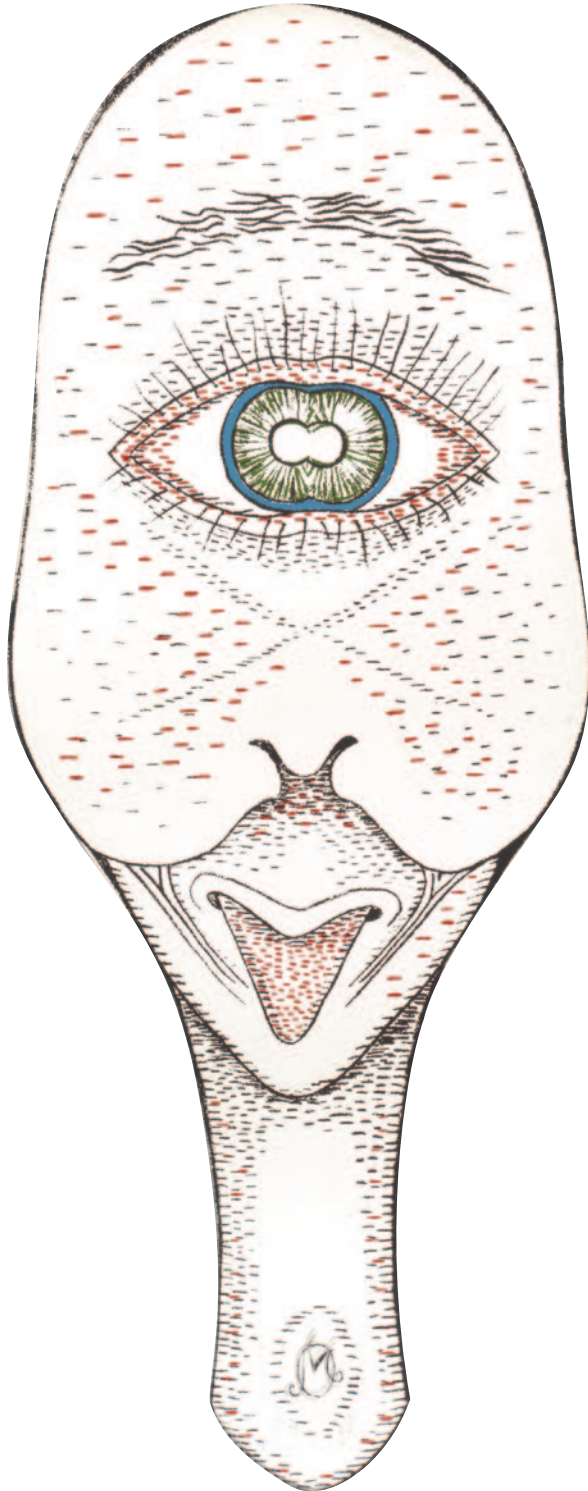
Joan Jonas *Left Side Right Side* 1972



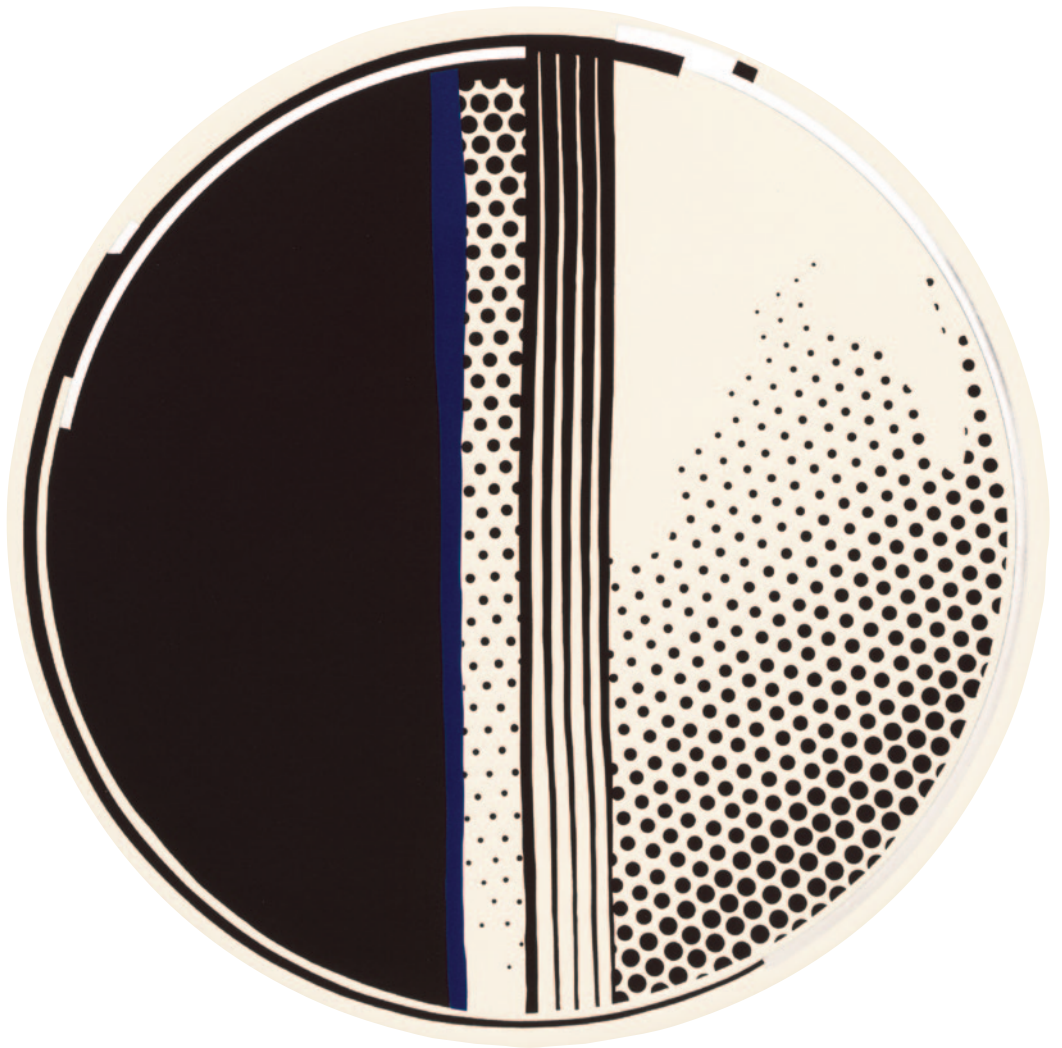
Michelangelo Pistoletto *Lo Specchio [The Mirror]* 1974
RIGHT Richard Hamilton *Palindrome* 1974



© 1984 by [unreadable]



Meret Oppenheim *Love of Polyphemus* 1974



Roy Lichtenstein *Mirror I* 1972

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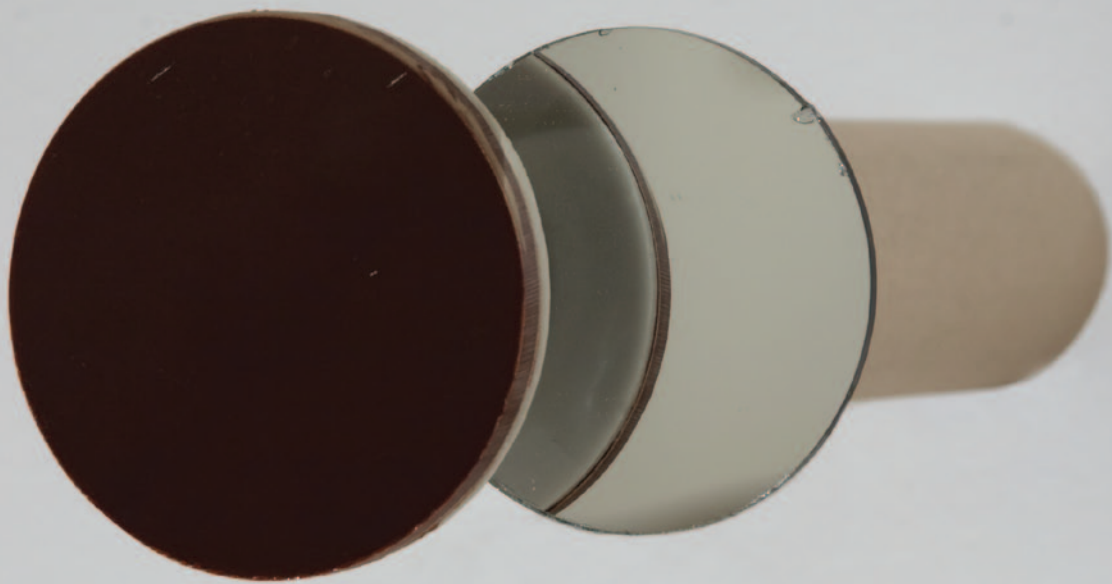
Shusaku Arakawa *Test Mirror* 1975
NEXT SPREAD Robert Rauschenberg *Diptych: Re-entry* 1974





RESEARCHER

STRIA



Peter Cripps *Construction* 1975 (detail) PHOTO Richard Stringer
RIGHT Peter Cripps *Public Project (Fiction), Series Two*, 3 1993



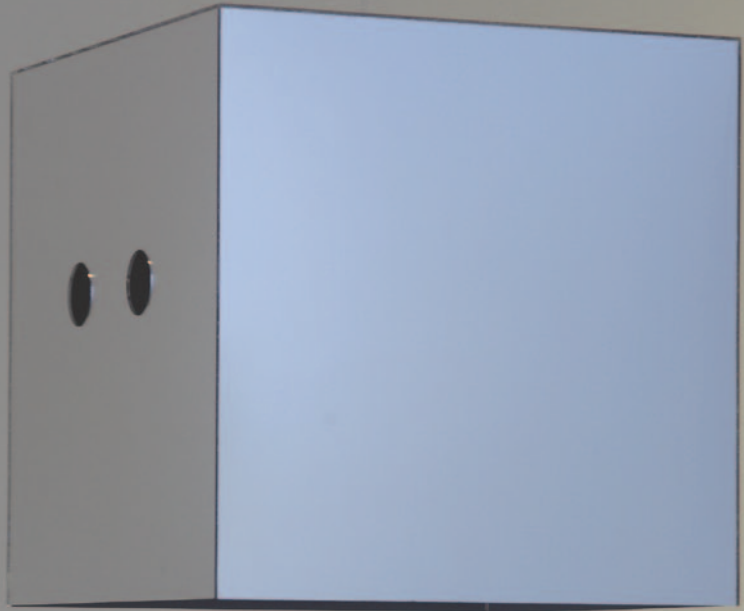




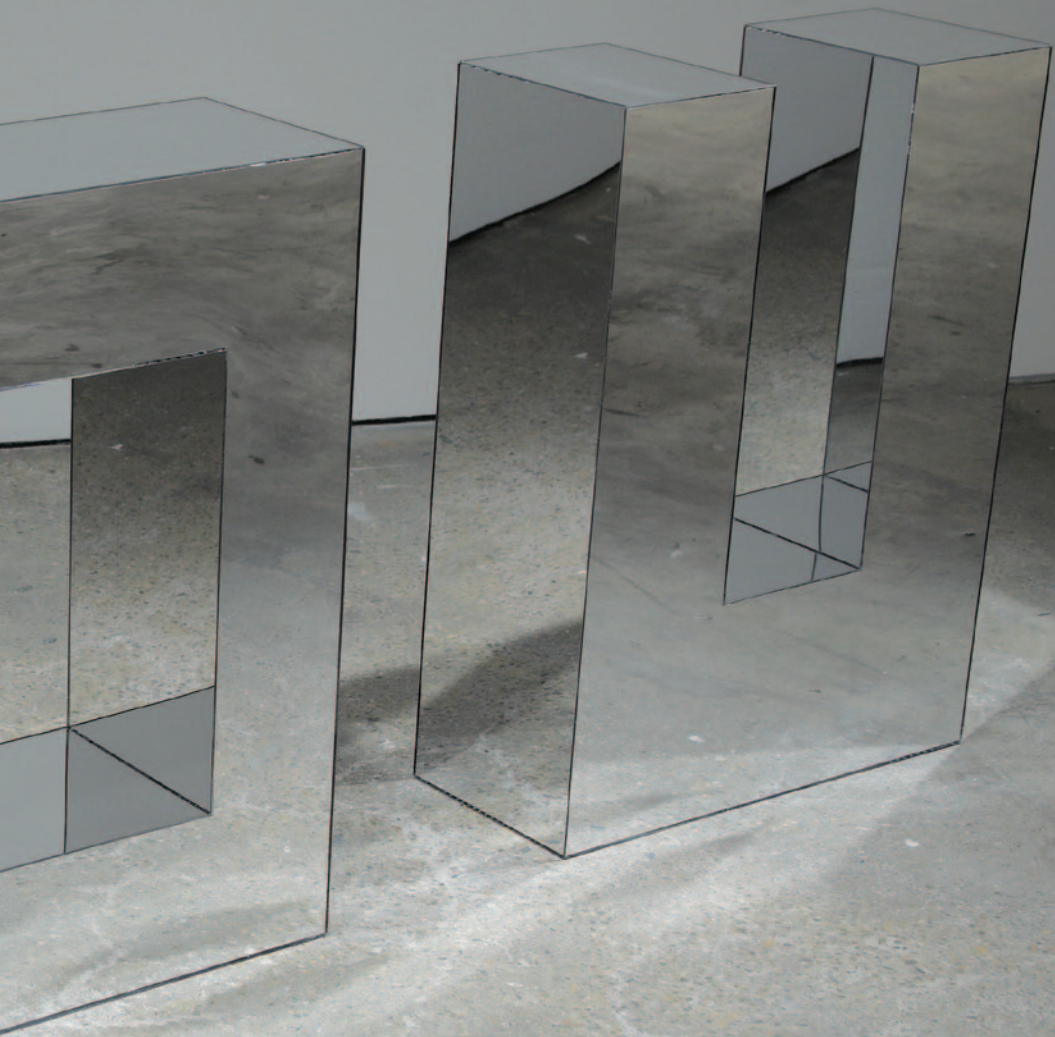


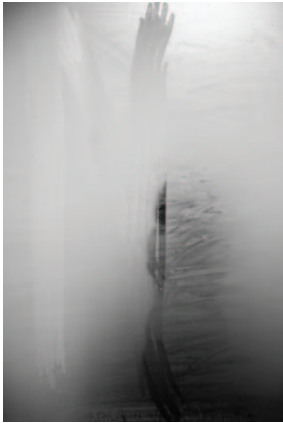
Robyn Backen *A Very Enchanting Thing* 2007–9 (detail)

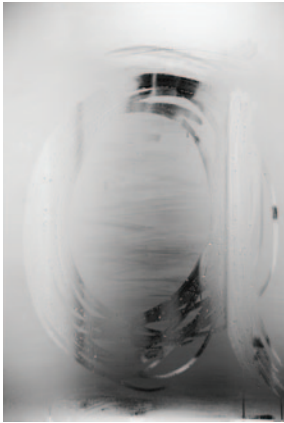
RIGHT Alex Gawronski *Knowing Me / Knowing You* 2008 PHOTO Richard Stringer

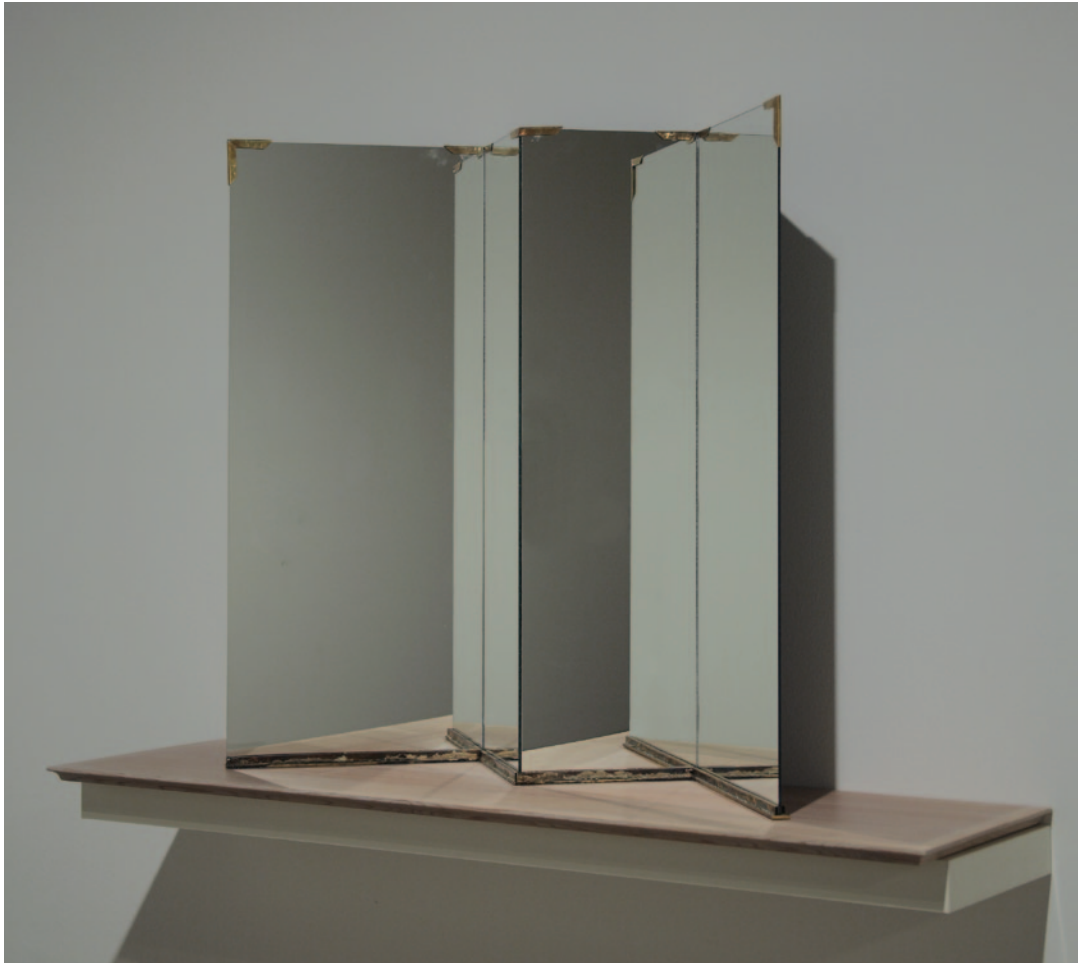












Robert Pulie *W* 2007–9 PHOTO Richard Stringer

RIGHT Christian Capurro *White Breath (Passenger)* 2009





Jacky Redgate *Light Throw (Mirrors) I* 2009

Timeline

1954

Robert Rauschenberg includes mirrors in his *Charlene* and *Minutiae* combines, which appear in Merce Cunningham performances, New York.

1955

Tsuruko Yamazaki incorporates mirrors in her paintings in *The First Gutai Art Exhibition*, Ohara Hall, Osaka.

Vladimir Nabakov publishes *Lolita*, his first novel in English. Its narrator recounts his crime through leitmotifs of doubling and mirroring.

1960

Martin Gardner publishes *The Annotated Alice*, explaining Lewis Carroll's looking-glass world of mathematical puzzles and wordplays.

Michael Powell directs *Peeping Tom*, in which a psychopathic voyeur murders women using a movie camera fitted with a spike and a concave mirror.

Jean Cocteau directs *Testament of Orpheus*, the final part of his Orphic trilogy, following *The Blood of a Poet* (1930) and *Orpheus* (1950), in which the mirror marks a portal between reality and the underworld.

Helio Oiticica begins *Bólides Caixas* (*Fireball Boxes*) series, which he described as 'structures for inspection', with moveable panels, frequently using mirrors to intensify light and colour; Rio de Janeiro.

1961

Robert Morris constructs *Mirrored Portal*, New York.

1962

Michelangelo Pistoletto begins his *Mirror Paintings*, Milan.

Larry Bell begins making his mirror cubes, Los Angeles.

1963

Włodzimierz Borowski writes 'MANifest LUStrzany' (Mirror Manifesto), which argues that mirror-based art 'makes the object unreal and the illusion—real . . . making pure sensation possible', Warsaw.

Hugo Demarco makes his kinetic sculpture *Métamorphose*, Paris.

1964

Robert Smithson makes *The Eliminator*, combining neon and glass, New York.

Martin Gardner publishes *The Ambidextrous Universe: Mirror Asymmetry and Time-Reversed Worlds*, which popularises a science of mirrors.

Hans Breder makes *Two Cubes on a Striped Surface*, New York.

1965

Robert Morris makes *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, New York.

Robert Smithson makes *Four-Sided Vortex*, New York.

Michael Baldwin begins *Untitled Paintings (Mirrors)*, exhibited the following year in

Coventry.

Włodzimierz Borowski creates an installation with mirrors, Foksal Gallery, Warsaw.

Yayoi Kusama creates *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field*, New York.

Julio Le Parc produces kinetic mirror works, Paris.

1966

Robert Smithson begins *Mirror Strata* series, New York.

Robert Smithson publishes 'Entropy and the New Monuments' in *Artforum*.

Yayoi Kusama installs *Narcissus Garden*, 1500 mirrored spheres, under a sign reading 'Your narcissism for sale', in the Venice Biennale.

Michel Foucault publishes *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (translated in 1970 as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*), introduced by a study of Velsaquez's *Las Meniñas*.

Lucas Samaras exhibits his mirror-room *Room 2*, New York.

1967

Robert Smithson makes *Mirage No. 1* and *Pointless Vanishing Points*, New York.

Ian Burn makes *Mirror Piece*, New York.

Lygia Clark makes *Sensorial Hood*, with mirror eyepieces that allow a costumed viewer partial glimpses, Rio de Janeiro.

Robert Smithson exhibits *Mirror Stratum*, in *Art in Series*, Finch College Museum of Art, New York.

Michel Foucault delivers his lecture 'Des Espaces autres' ('Of Other Spaces'), in which the mirror's duality provides an analogy for heterotopic space.

1968

Ian Burn exhibits two mirror pieces in *The Field*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; installs *Mirror Line*, in his Sixth Avenue apartment, New York; and makes *Dissipating Mirror*, New York.

Joan Jonas begins her *Mirror Pieces* performances, reciting all passages about mirrors from Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths*.

Edward Krasinski begins installations with mirrors and blue tape, Warsaw.

Lygia Clark exhibits *The House is the Body*, Venice Biennale.

Robert Rauschenberg exhibits *Carnal Clocks*, New York.

1969

Robert Smithson publishes his *Yucatan Mirror Displacements 1–9* as 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan' in *Artforum*.

Robert Smithson makes *Mirror Trail*, Cayuga Salt Mine, Ithaca, New York; *Chalk-Mirror Displacement*; *Rocks and Mirror Square II*; *Mirror with Crushed Shells (Sanibel Island)*; *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)*; and *Glass Strata*, which is exhibited in *Earth Art*, Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

Keith Sonnier makes *Mirror Act* and *BA-O-BA* with mirrors and fluorescent light, New York.

Michael Snow makes *Authorization*, photographing sequential polaroids looking in a mirror, New York.

Iain Baxter (N. E. Thing Co.) photographs himself with curator Seth Siegelaub in a mirror for the exhibition *One Month (March 1969)*, New York.

Keith Arnatt makes *Mirror Plug*, the catalogue card for the exhibition, 557, 087, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle.

Robert Morris exhibits *Finch Project Film, 'Art in Process IV'*, Finch College Museum of Art, New York.

1970

Joan Jonas performs *Mirror Check*, New York.

Guiseppa Penone makes *To Turn One's Eyes Inside Out*, Turin.

Bruce Nauman constructs *Corridor Installation with Mirror-San Jose Installation (Double Wedge Corridor with Mirror)*, San Jose State College, California.

Hans Breder photographs his *Body Sculpture* performance with nude models and mirrors, University of Iowa.

Dan Graham videotapes *Body Press*, New York.

1971

E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology] constructs a mylar mirror dome, Pepsi Pavilion, Expo 70, Osaka.

Chantal Akerman films *Mirror Still* in New York, turning the camera on herself, nude before a large looking glass, interrogating the representation of feminine identity.

Adrian Piper performs *Food for the Spirit*, which photographically documents the gradual 'dematerialisation' of her nude body in a mirror as she recites from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in her New York studio.

1973

Hans Breder makes his *Ventosa* series on location in Mexico with the artist Ana Mendieta as model holding large polished steel mirrors.

1975

Andrei Tarkovsky directs *The Mirror*.

Dan Graham makes *Performance/Audience/Mirror* at the EA-Generali Foundation, Vienna. Standing in front of a mirror, he describes his audience, then turns to the mirror to describe the reflected audience and himself as performer.

Poet and art critic Nicholas Calas commissions *Mirrors of the Mind* portfolio, through Multiples Inc and Castelli Graphics, with artists Vincenzo Agnetti, Shusaku Arakawa, Marcel Broodthaers, Richard Hamilton, Roy Lichtenstein, Man Ray, Bruce Nauman, Meret Oppenheim, Robert Rauschenberg, and James Rosenquist.

1977

Francesca Woodman begins photographing *Self-Deceit* in Rome. In these nude self-portraits with mirror, she obscures her face, turns her back on the camera, or blurs the image with movement.

1981

Gerhard Richter constructs *Spiegel/Mirror, No. 485-1*, the first of his monumental transparent mirror installations, Dusseldorf.

A light-colored, teardrop-shaped object with a handle, resembling a piece of wood or a ceramic mold. The object is centered against a dark background. Inside the teardrop-shaped opening, the words "corps" and "humain" are written in a cursive script. The object is positioned on a dark surface with a grid pattern.

corps
humain

Quotes

ROBERT SMITHSON, 1964

The Eliminator overloads the eye whenever the red neon flashes on, and in so doing diminishes the viewer's memory dependencies or traces. Memory vanishes, while looking at the *Eliminator*. The viewer doesn't know what he is looking at, because he has no surface space to fixate on; thus he becomes aware of the emptiness of his own sight or sees through his sight. Light, mirror reflection, and shadow fabricate the perceptual intake of the eyes. Unreality becomes actual and solid. *The Eliminator* is a clock that doesn't keep time, but loses it. The intervals between the flashes of neon are 'void intervals' or what George Kubler calls, 'the rupture between past and future'. *The Eliminator* orders negative time as it avoids historical space. 'The Eliminator', 1964, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flann, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 237.

ROBERT SMITHSON, 1965

Both structures have symmetric frameworks, these frameworks are on top of the faceted mirrored surfaces, rather than hidden behind the surfaces. The frameworks have broken through the surfaces, so to speak, and have become 'paintings'. The frameworks are light blue with rose mirrors and yellow with blue mirrors.

Each framework supports the reflections of a concatenated interior. The interior structure of the room surrounding the work is instantaneously undermined. The surfaces seem thrown back into the wall. 'Space' is permuted into a multiplicity of directions. One becomes conscious of space attenuated in the form of elusive flat planes. The space is both crystalline and collapsible. In the rose piece the floor hovers over the ceiling. Vanishing points are deliberately inverted in order to increase one's awareness of total artifice.

The commonplace is transformed into a labyrinth of non-objective abstractions. Abstractions are never transformed into the commonplace. All dimensionality is drained off through the steep angled planes. The works feed back in infinite numbers of reflected 'ready-mades'.

'A Short Description of Two Mirrored Crystal Structures', 1965, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flann, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 328.

ROBERT SMITHSON, 1966

Unlike the hyper-prosaism of [Robert] Morris, [Dan] Flavin, [Sol] LeWitt, and [Don] Judd, the works of [Paul] Thek, Kauffman, and [Larry] Bell convey a hyper-opulence. Thek's sadistic geometry is made out of simulated hunks of torn flesh. Bloody meat in the shape of a birthday cake is contained under a pyramidal chrome framework—it has stainless steel candies in it. Tubes for drinking 'blood cocktails' are inserted into some of his painful objects. Thek achieves a putrid finesse, not unlike that disclosed in William S. Burroughs' *Nova Express*; 'Flesh juice in festering spines of terminal sewage—Run down of Spain and 42nd St. to the fish city of marble flesh grafts.' The vacuum-formed plastic reliefs by Kauffman have a pale lustrous surface presence. A lumpy sexuality is implicit in the transparent forms he employs. Something of the primal nightmare exists in both Thek and Kauffman. The slippery bubbling ooze

from the movie *The Blob* creeps into one's mind. Both Thek and Kauffman have arrested the movement of blob-type matter. The mirrored reflections in Bell's work are contaminations of a more elusive order. His chrome-plated lattices contain a Pythagorean chaos. Reflections reflect reflections in an excessive but pristine manner. 'Entropy and the New Monuments', *Artforum* (June 1966), 27–9.

ROBERT SMITHSON, 1967

I walked down a parking lot that covered the old railroad tracks which at one time ran through the middle of Passaic. The monumental parking lot divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection—but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection. One never knew what side of the mirror one was on. There was nothing interesting or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity; perhaps the secrets of the universe are just as pedestrian—not to say dreary. Everything about the site remained wrapped in blandness and littered with shiny cars—one after the other they extended into a sunny nebulosity. The indifferent backs of cars flashed and reflected the stale afternoon sun. I took a few listless, entropic snapshots of that lustrous monument.

'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', *Artforum* (December 1967), 51.

IAN BURN, 1967

Reflexions ... depend largely on indeterminate conditions ... [For] a reflex to exist requires a focal point provided through a viewer: an absence of any viewer renders an absence of any reflex ... A reflex is fluxional, a surface retains no fixed appearance ... It seems improbable for a traditional 'psychological depth' to be attained through perception of a reflex: the immediate-environment becomes the reflex denying any possibility of being metaphored ... All the diagrams are made after the work: they are literally invented, the fiction follows a fact: the invention of methods-of-viewing as art ...

'Notes for Mirror Reflexes', *Mirror Piece*, 1967.

The varying numbers of sheets of glass placed in front of a mirror shows a variance of degree and depth of refraction. Whenever a ray of light passes from one transparent substance into another, its speed is altered, and as a result its direction is also changed. This change of direction is refraction ... Substances in which light travels at slower speeds are said to be optically more dense ... the number of sheets of glass does not make it more or less dense, but it will determine how much refraction there is. This can be 'measured' by ... how long the line of sight is travelling in a different direction. One must also take into account that the refraction occurs twice: the line of sight is refracted as it enters the glass, it is reflected as it reaches the mirrored surface at the same angle of the refracted line, and finally as it leaves the glass it changes direction again to an angle equal to that between the original line of sight meeting the surface of the glass.

However there is another marked difference. If that was all that occurred, then the (for example) six pieces of glass could be readily substituted by a single piece of glass of that thickness. But there is in fact a number of slight reflexes occurring from each surface of glass ... The blurring which occurs is not then refraction but simply is due to the imperfections of any piece of glass, which are multiplied in the mirror. However the speed of a ray of light would still apparently slow down while travelling into the glass and back again.

We are used to perceiving sameness and difference in terms of what we can see in the object itself, or what we can see of or about the object we are looking at. In that sense of perceiving, the difference between the two of the mirrors is not likely to be noticeable ... Perception then becomes an arbitrary process and appreciating the structure becomes a matter of knowing about it – rather than seeing it or deducing it. It would seem then that this work occurs outside of the range of usual works as far as perceiving it goes.

'Selected Notes Etc.', *Mirror Piece*, 1967.

IAN BURN, 1969

A mirror is a very simple object physically but to try to develop an idea of what a mirror situation really is, it is a very complex thing ... When I first made a mirror/ piece, I couldn't look at it and I didn't like it, but my ideas told me it was alright. But it took me about six months to really develop a way of thinking about it – but only by considering it without looking at it, the looking interfered too much with any thinking about it ... I have specifications for the mirror/ pieces ... so anyone can make one—the two shown in Melbourne [in *The Field* exhibition, 1968] I have never seen, they were made to specifications in a factory in Melbourne. This eliminates any preciousness from the object itself and makes a much healthier art. Kosuth talks about removing the experience from the work of art, Robert Morris talks about detaching art's energy from the craft of tedious object production—all this seems to permit an artist to act more directly as an artist.

Letter to Bruce Pollard, March–April 1969.

ROBERT SMITHSON, 1969

In the rear-view mirror appeared Tezcatlipoca—demiurge of the 'smoking-mirror.' . . . The mirror itself is not subject to duration, because it is an ongoing abstraction that is always available and timeless. The reflections, on the other hand, are fleeting instances that evade measure . . . The mirror displacement cannot be expressed in rational dimensions. The distances between the twelve mirrors are disconnections, where measure is dropped and incomputable. Such mirror surfaces cannot be understood by reason. Who can divulge from what part of the sky the blue color came? Who can say how long the colour lasted? Must 'blue' mean something? Why do the mirrors display a conspiracy of muteness concerning their very existence? When does a displacement become a misplacement? These are forbidding questions that place comprehension in a predicament. The questions that mirrors ask always fall short of the answers. Mirrors thrive on surds, and generate incapacity. Reflections fall onto the mirrors without logic, and in so doing invalidate every rational assertion.

Small bits of sediment dropped away from the sand flats into the river. Small bits of perception dropped away from the edges of eyesight ... Sight turned away from its own looking. Particles of matter slowly crumbling down the slope that held the mirrors. Tinges, stains, tints and tones crumbled into the eyes. The eyes became two wastebaskets filled with diverse colours, variegations, ashy hues, blotches amidst sunburned chromatics. To reconstruct what the eyes see in words, in an "ideal language" is a vain exploit. Why not reconstruct one's inability to see?

. . . If one wishes to be ingenious enough to erase time one requires mirrors, not rocks.

'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan', *Artforum* (September 1969), 28, 30, 32, 33.

IAN BURN, 1971

I frequently use a *Mirror Piece* to shave in. Now anyone can see this is not an art-function, but while it is functioning in this utilitarian way, it doesn't necessarily cut out its art-function. You see, its only art conceptually, perceptually it's still a mirror.

Interview with Joel Fisher, in *The Situation Now: Object or Post Object?* (Sydney: Contemporary Art Society, 1971), np.

RICHARD HAMILTON, 1974

Perhaps the most telling thing about mirrors is that they inevitably touch the ego – the myth of Narcissus says something about a particular psychological condition but it also refers to the peculiarity of everybody's relationship to reflection; we all react to our own appearance every time we see ourselves. I can't bear to sit in a restaurant facing a mirror, my reflection shocks me, it is even repellent.

While thinking about, and therefore looking at, mirrors, it seemed that there would be little distinction between a representation of a mirror and a representation of anything, in the sense that a picture of something, a photograph or a figurative painting, is a fixed reflection of a thing seen. To experience the true nature of the mirror it is necessary to be aware not only of the reflection but of the thing reflected—the more intense the appreciation of this duality the stronger the experience, and we are aware of nothing more than ourselves, hence the trip of delight or disgust ...

During the course of conjuncture on the 'given' theme of this portfolio, I touched the mirror surface and realized that the fact that I could see part of my physical self, as well as its reflection, made the transition between the actual and the reflected smoother; it made the sensation more spectacular while making the plane of separation more of a barrier. It also increased the perception of depth beyond the plane. My task became a problem of recreating these aspects in the print. Reaching for a volume behind the mirror suggested that the use of three-dimensional photography might help to reconstruct that experience.

A preliminary black and white photograph, home made in my studio, established the plausibility of the composition; this was the basis for a re-enactment with the special equipment of the Vari-View company in their Mount Vernon plant. A unique property of the three dimensional camera is the possibility of focussing in two senses. There is the normal photographic focus which fixes sharpest definition at a chosen distance; but, because the camera swings radially, the locus of the arc of camera movement will determine a focus of minimal displacement. This can position the reflected form behind the picture-plane. My concern was to define the subject in such a way that its scale would be 'life-size'. The printed image, theoretically, would recall the scale of reflection resulting from a person placing his hand on a mirror.

'Reflections', reply to Nicholas Calas, in *Richard Hamilton: Collected Words 1953-1982* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 108.

JOAN JONAS, 1982

I found myself continually investigating my own image in the monitor. I bought a mask of a doll's face. It transformed me into an erotic seductress. I named this TV persona Organic Honey. Increasingly obsessed with the process of my own theatricality, the images fluctuated between narcissistic and a more abstract representation. The risk was submersion in solipsistic gestures. When exploring the possibilities of female imagery, thinking always of a magic show, I attempted to

fashion a dialogue between different disguises and the fantasies they suggested.
Brooklyn Museum, 2004.

PETER CRIPPS, 1987

Materials such as circular cardboard boxes similar to those used in packaging cheese, cardboard cylinders, tin cans and glass mirrors have been used in these constructions. The constructions are stem like and protrude abruptly from the wall just below eye level. The projection of the stems places the point of focus out into the gallery space. This conscious manipulation of the point of focus creates an unusual presence. The constructions are austere and when viewed front on they cut a series of clean shapes against the gallery wall ... Two of the constructions include small glass mirrors. Due to their reflective qualities the mirrors cut a precise shape. They intersect the stem at different angles and this placement creates a further plan and a sense of movement. The reflective surface extends the physical limitations imposed on the sculpture by finite materials. The mirror refers to and reflects the environment. These constructions are minimal in nature and make reference to Futurist stage imagery and to the Constructivist aesthetic.

Recession Art and Other Strategies (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1987), 7.

IAN BURN, 1993

I notice reflections in a mirror more readily than I see the surface of the mirror. To 'see' (produce, project) the mirror surface demands concentrated effort, which may be assisted by focusing on imperfections, dust, smears, haze, steam (that is, by the mirror's inability or failure to be a perfect mirror). The extent to which we are able to see the mirror surface irrespective of these incidental factors depends on a self-consciousness of the possibilities of seeing: on being able to look at ourselves seeing, and on being able to interpret our not-seeing of the surface ...

While mirrors have no fixed appearance, we do try to determine the readymade 'composition' of the reflection: we position a mirror on a wall to reflect a particular view of the room, or at portrait height, etc. The reflected forms however can claim no significance as content. Both reflecting and framing, mirrors force a decision about how to position oneself as a viewer – and how we position ourselves determines whether or not we are in (the frame of) the mirror. A mirror enables us to experience ourselves in a world of experiences, and as part of that world of appearances... with the appearance of being a unified subject. Mirrors however produce reflections, not representations, thus pre-empting the possibility of pictorial interpretation.

Looking at Seeing and Reading (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1993), np

ART & LANGUAGE, 1997

Minimalism was 'dematerialised' to the point of invisibility. I am thinking of attention being drawn to such so-called materials as 'water', 'air', 'temperature' 'ice', 'glass', 'fog banks', 'mirrors', 'chemical constituents' and so on. The point was that some of these try-ons were non-empirical, a bit theoretical, a bit theoretical...if you are stuck with 'invisible or theoretical objects you have to find some way of locating them, identifying them. How do you do that? Well, you talk about them, you write about them, you make diagrams, you describe them. I think it is from this point that the language base of Concept Art originates.

'Memories of the Medicine Show', *Art-Language*, new series, No. 2, June 1997, 35.

ART & LANGUAGE, 1997

Let us consider as 'images' the early A&L 'Mirror' works for a moment. They are blank, they have no pictorial structure of their own but they are inflected by whatever they reflect. Is the mirror the Modernist surface so reduced that it transforms itself into what? Into a camera? The interest in mirrors rested in the fact that the mirror produced the perfectly transparent image—its medium is, pace Panofsky, physical reality itself—something other than its surface—but this does not mean that you cannot be aware of the surface of the mirror itself however difficult that is (as Ian Burn pointed out).

'Moti Memoria', in *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966–76*, ed., John Roberts, (London: Camerawork, 1997), 62.

JOAN JONAS, 2003

Inspired by the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges I chose as my first technological tool the mirror, a device that transmits light. From the beginning the mirror provided me with a metaphor for my reflective investigation. It also provided a device to alter space and to fragment it. By reflecting it, I could break it up. I could mix reflections of performers and audience, thereby bringing all of them into the same time and space of the performance. In addition to making a space a mirror also disturbs space suggesting another reality through the looking glass—to see the reflection of Narcissus, to be a voyeur, to see one's self as the other.

'Transmission', in *Women, Art, and Technology*, ed., Judy Malloy, (Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 2003), 117–8.

JOAN JONAS, 2004

My earlier works involved mirrors as props, as metaphor. Self-examination and reflection were major political themes. The monitor—an ongoing mirror. In the late sixties and early seventies the feminist movement exploded. Anger was a positive driving force. New technology gave women a new way of expression. During this time our friendships altered. This was a time of women talking, becoming more open, sharing how they were represented, revealing their position. My work developed against this background; I became involved in the roles women play ...

This shift was also true for our friendships with men. We did not have to compete in the same way. The process was exciting, difficult and totally necessary ... During the woman's movement it was especially important for women to inspire women. It is also imperative that men and women inspire each other. There is still room for self-examination. We must look outward to other cultures in diverse situations and take care of our collective futures.

Feminist Art Base, Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, http://brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/joanjonas.php

THE RED KRAYOLA WITH ART & LANGUAGE, 2007

IL NE QU'A CHARTER

Three mirrors hang on a wall.
Obeying and breaking the law.
You can think of them as portraits
As you inspect your face.

You can even think 'That's all'.
 Or you might suppose there is more:
 That no mirror can dictate
 What is bound to leave no trace.
 The silvered slab can have no say
 In what it may reflect.
 It does not look away.
 So take your eye off what it sees—
 The passing everyday—
 And make the effort to detect
 The glassy surface. Say
 What you see when it frees
 Itself of the world's contingency.
 There are three mirrors on a wall,
 They may vary in size
 But not a whole lot.
 Call the possible variants (a), (b), (c),
 Any of these may be
 In one of two states we'll call
 (1) and (2), depending whether or not
 An imperfect plane has been placed
 Covering the mirror's flat surface.
 The distortion created
 Is not at all great-
 There's no drama for the eye.
 For a set of three mirrors;
 There are eight
 Possible configurations, (a), (a), (a),
 Or (b), (b), (b), or (c), (c), (c), or (a), (a), (b),
 or (a), (a), (c),
 Or (a), (b), (b), or (a), (c), (c), or (a), (b), (c).
 And there are fifty six combinations
 In which they may be distorted or flat.
 Now we say
 That a flat mirror is a (1),
 And an imperfect one a (2).

So that for a set that's (a), (b), (c),
 We may have state or condition
 (1), (1), (1), or (1), (2), (1) or (1), (1), (2),
 Or (1), (2), (2), or (2), (2), (2),
 Or (2), (1), (2), or (2), (2), (1),
 Or (2), (1), (1).

If we have three dimensions
 (a), (a), (b), they can appear
 In state or condition (1), (1), (1),
 Or (1), (1), (2), or (1), (2), (2),

Or (1), (2), (1), or (2), (2), (1),
Or (2), (2), (2).

And similarly

For (a), (b), (b), (a), (a), (c), (b),
(b), (c), (a), (a), (c) and (b), (c), (c).

For (a), (a), (a) we may have
(1), (1), (1), or (1), (1), (2),
Or (1), (2), (2) or (2), (2), (2).

And similarly

For (b), (b), (c) and (c), (c), (c).

That is what you could see.

Sighs Trapped by Liars (Chicago: Drag City, 2007).

ART & LANGUAGE, 2008

Untitled Painting (Mirrors), 1965. These were produced in the mid 1960s. They were conceived as entropic 'paintings'. A mirror is placed on a canvas so as to cover its entire surface: the paintings are therefore constructed things, forms of collage. A mirror, insofar as it is reflective has no pictorial structure of its own, Its surface, in being perfectly uninflected—blank—is inflected by whatever it reflects. The intrinsically unpictorial surface is inevitably pictorial. The mirror is then *both* a near perfect blank (an end-game painting surface) *and* something which can almost never be blank. Reflecting on this, the viewer may attempt to look not at the image reflected in the mirror but at the blank surface itself. This is a difficult task. One is required to force the abstract seeing of an aspect (the knowledge of this blank surface is there) to overcome the seeing of the contingent world reflected.

Art and Language (Knokke-Zoute: Mulier Mulier Gallery, 2008), 9.

Drawings (Typed Mirrors), 1966-67. These are described as 'drawings'. In the Mirror paintings the artist merely selects the dimensions of the reflecting surface and the nature and depth of the stretcher. There are no blank drawings. The plastic mirrors contain a fragment of a text on a part of their surface. This textual material serves to alert the viewer to the real surface which does not precisely coincide with what is reflected. In trying to read the text it is a literal and a virtual surface to which your attention is directed.

Art and Language (Knokke-Zoute: Mulier Mulier Gallery, 2008), 13.

Works

SHUSAKU ARAKAWA

Critical Mistake 1971
screenprint on acrylic
23.4 x 22.4cm

J. W. Power Bequest, University of
Sydney, managed by Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney

Test Mirror 1975
from the Castelli Graphics portfolio
Mirrors of the Mind
screenprint
75.4 x 108.8cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

ART & LANGUAGE

Untitled Painting (Mirrors) 1965
mirrors, canvases; two units
34.5 x 21.5 x 7.5cm each
Mulier Mulier Gallery, Krokke-Zoute

Drawings (Typed Mirrors) 1966–7
typewriting on mirror; three units
12.5 x 29.2cm each
Mulier Mulier Gallery, Krokke-Zoute

ROBYN BACKEN

A Very Enchanting Thing 2007–9
mirror, Bakelite telephone, sound
204 x 55.5 x 55.5cm
Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

IAN BURN

Mirror Piece 1967
glass over mirror in painted wooden
frame, notes and diagrams
mirror 52.7 x 36.6cm
13 sheets 27.5 x 21.3cm each
Queensland University Art Museum,
Brisbane

Hume's Mirror (No Object . . .) 1967
painted mirror
60 x 60cm
Ian Burn Estate, Sydney; Courtesy
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Dissipating Mirror 1968
mirror mounted on board, metallic paint
on board, hinges
two panels, each 36 x 27 x 3cm
Ian Burn Estate, Sydney; courtesy
Milani Gallery, Brisbane

CHRISTIAN CAPURRO

White Breath (Passenger) 2009
correction fluid on two wardrobe mirror
doors, reflected light; two units
180 x 100 x 3.5cm each

PETER CRIPPS

Construction 1975
Bakelite, plastic, glass mirrors,
cardboard; three units
approx 11cm wide x 27.5cm deep each

Public Project (Fiction), Series Two, 3 1993
wood, acrylic paint, convex mirror
320 x 92.5 x 64cm
Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery,
Melbourne

HUGO DEMARCO

Métamorphose 1964
painted wood, chrome-plated steel,
electric motor
35.5 x 35.5 x 17.5cm
J. W. Power Bequest, University of
Sydney, managed by Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney

MIKALA DWYER

IOU 2009
mirror acrylic
80 x 180 x 30cm
Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

ALEX GAWRONSKI

Knowing Me / Knowing You 2008
mirror acrylic
35 x 35 x 35cm

*Knowing Me / Knowing You (JANUS:
Local Version)* 2009
mirror acrylic
38 x 38 x 38cm

RICHARD HAMILTON

Palindrome 1974

from the Castelli Graphics portfolio

Mirrors of the Mind

lenticular acrylic laminated on collotype
59.6 x 44cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

JOAN JONAS

Left Side Right Side 1972

video 8:50 min

Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New
York

JULIO LE PARC

Continuel Mobil 1966

synthetic fabric, nylon monofilament,
aluminium, painted wood, fabric,
acrylic paint

99 x 40 x 9cm

J. W. Power Bequest, University of
Sydney, managed by Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Mirror I 1972

stencil print, collage, embossing
53.8cm diameter

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

CALLUM MORTON

Home 1995–6

mirror glass, painted wood; four units
120 x 84 x 15cm each

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

YOKO ONO

A Box of Smile 1971

acrylic, mirror

5.3 x 5.3 x 5.3cm closed; 11.2 x 5.4 x
4.7cm open

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

MERET OPPENHEIM

Love of Polyphemus 1974

from the Castelli Graphics portfolio

Mirrors of the Mind

screenprint on mirror

47.6 x 18.6cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

Lo Specchio (The Mirror) 1974

screenprint on steel

100 x 70cm

J. W. Power Bequest, University of
Sydney, managed by Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney

ROBERT PULIE

W 2007–9

72.3 x 72 x 32cm

mirrors, brass stand, brass clips

EUGENIA RASKOPOULOS

Diglossia 2009

eight black-and-white photographs

142 x 95cm each

Courtesy Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Diptych: Re-entry 1974

from the Castelli Graphics portfolio

Mirrors of the Mind

transfer, collage; 2 sheets

38 x 56.8cm overall

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

JACKY REDGATE

Light Throw (Mirrors) I 2009

colour photograph

155 x 124cm

Courtesy Arc One Gallery, Melbourne,
and William Wright Artists Projects,
Sydney

ROBERT SMITHSON

Untitled (Mirror-Glass Quarter-Stepped

Pyramid) 1969

mirrors, steel, felt

17.8 x 30.8 x 30.8cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Rocks and Mirror Square II 1971

basalt rocks, mirrors

36 x 220 x 220cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

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COVER John Tenniel, illustrations to Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking Glass*, 1872

INSIDE FRONT COVER Christian Capurro *White Breath (Passenger)* 2009 (detail)

INSIDE BACK COVER Art & Language, *Drawings (Typed Mirrors)* 1966–7 (detail) PHOTO Michael Myers



The University of Sydney



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Shusaku Arakawa
Art & Language
Robyn Backen
Ian Burn
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Joan Jonas
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Robert Smithson

rorrim rorrim then and now

