

THESIS

IMAGES IN TIME

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring, 1987

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

IMAGES IN TIME

In my work of the past few years two of my major concerns have been the perception of wholes and the role of art as a means to understanding the world. Gestalt theories of perception present several principles describing how perceptual wholes are formed. However, Gestaltists see a whole only as perceptual and ignore that a whole is theoretical as well as perceptual. Also, Gestaltists do not consider a perceptual whole as changing and diverse. Our experience, however, is a buzzing confusion upon which we impose order in an attempt to see and understand our world. We are our own most intriguing example of theoretical and perceptual wholes. Despite tremendously varying experiences and changes in time we nevertheless view ourselves as whole and continuous. In my work I create a situation in which a person experiences the disparate elements within it over time as well as space, and interrelates those elements both through a perception of them as well as through an attempt to understand them as being together. It is my aim for my work to be a part of a history of art and ideas which serves as an instrument in an attempt to understand our world.

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In my work of the past few years two of my major concerns have been the perception of wholes and the role of art as a means to understanding the world. Gestalt theories of perception present several principles describing how perceptual wholes are formed. However, Gestaltists see a whole only as perceptual and ignore that a whole is theoretical as well as perceptual. Also, Gestaltists do not consider a perceptual whole as changing and diverse. Our experience, however, is a buzzing confusion upon which we impose order in an attempt to see and understand our world. We are our own most intriguing example of theoretical and perceptual wholes. Despite tremendously varying experiences and changes in time we nevertheless view ourselves as whole and continuous. In my work I create a situation in which a person experiences the disparate elements within it over time as well as space, and interrelates those elements both through a perception of them as well as through an attempt to understand them as being together. It is my aim for my work to be a part of a history of art and ideas which serves as an instrument in an attempt to understand our world.

The Gestalt theory of perception I will deal with here is a result of the original formulations and research by Koffka, Kohler, and Wertheimer in the early Twentieth Century.¹ This theory describes several principles operating in a field which determine how it is perceived. These are called "laws of organization" or

"good form." The principle of similarity describes the tendency one has to group elements of the perceptual field that are similar. Another principle is that of proximity, by which we group elements that involve the smallest interval. The principle of closure refers to the tendency we have to see integrated figures, or to close or continue a line perceptually when blank spaces appear in an otherwise



Fig. 1.1. An example of closure.

regular pattern. The principle of good continuation addresses the tendency to see smooth, continuous wholes over abruptly discontinuous particulars. Related to that principle is the principle of figure-ground, which describes the differentiation of a figure appearing upon a relatively homogeneous field. In some cases figure and ground may interchange, as in the well-known "face/vase" image.

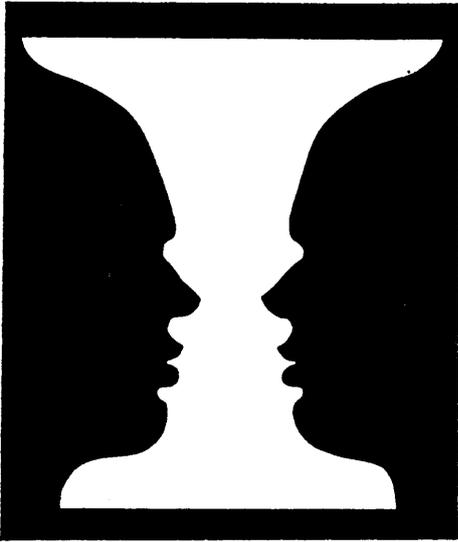


Fig. 1.2. An example of figure-ground.

Why should the perception of visual and otherwise sensed patterns organize themselves by the above principles? Gestaltists such as Rudolph Arnheim theorize that perceptual order is "the conscious manifestation of a more universal physiological and indeed physical phenomenon."² Similarly, Wolfgang Kohler describes his idea of "physical gestalten" in which physical and organic functions, such as nervous systems, electrical and chemical fields, and atomic and molecular organization, as involving the same fundamental characteristics as those in perception.³ We see things as individual wholes because, according to Gestalt theory, mental processes correspond to physical processes. This is reductionistic to the extreme. Although the principles of perceptual organization presented by these Gestaltists are useful in explaining some characteristics of wholes (and useful in the creation of artworks),

Gestaltists also reduce human behavior to the passive reception of external physical stimuli and autonomic reactions to those stimuli.

Gestalt theories also seem to emphasize that perceptual wholes are determinate, that is, having settled and definite limits. As Patrick McKee, professor of philosophy at Colorado State University writes, "[according to Gestaltists] we do not see a face-goblet gestalt figure as being more or less a face or more or less a goblet."⁴ He goes on to describe that Gestalt theories and examples of unity do not admit of degrees or ambiguity. They insist that the face/vase image is *either* a face *or* a vase. We tend to believe, as the Gestaltists imply, that the unity of something is caused by the physical characteristics of that object; consequently there is no ambiguity concerning the qualities of the object. The unity of our experience, however, is also derived from our need to explain the various aspects of our experiences as being together. In other words, wholes are both perceptual and theoretical at the same time. As a result, we are not passive receptors of stimuli but active participants in the perception and unification of the world.

We are familiar with perceptual wholes. In fact, Gestaltists supply us with many examples of them when describing principles of organization. Examples of perceptual and theoretical wholes can be found by referring to the solar system. Relying strictly upon the senses, it would seem that the sun, planets, and stars orbit the earth. In fact, this was the dominant idea of the nature of the solar system for thousands of years. The current theory of the solar system describes the planets as orbiting the sun even though this is not implied by more obvious sensual experience alone.

In Gestalt literature there is no explanation of temporal wholes, that is, wholes that are *in the process* of change. For example, music is discussed in the past tense, after it has ended, again speaking of the attitude that wholes are determinate. Also, the examples of organizing principles given by the Gestaltists are extremely simple and clear ones. These examples help us to understand those principles easily, but these examples do not deal with complex or incongruous wholes. As is characteristic of reductionistic and mechanical systems such as Gestalt, they simplify our experience beyond recognition and present a static, essentially unchanging world.

However, our world is in a constant state of change. It seems to be what Whiteheadian scholar Ernest Simmons phrases as a "buzzing confusion," the "here and now element of human perception."⁵ It is later that we experience the interconnectedness of things, and still later that thoughts, memories, and preconceptions enter into perceptual processes. Change is what the ancient philosopher Heraclitus believed in most. He said, "We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are, and we are not."⁶ No thing is static, but instead all the things that we say "are" are actually in the process of becoming.

We see things in space but also in time. A spatio-temporal thing is never perceived entirely at once but in successive perspectives, or what Edmund Husserl called the "flux of successive appearances."⁷ There is a unity to these appearances, but this unity is a unity of meaning, directed toward the consideration of a meaningful thing. I see a mountain, for example. While keeping it

in view, I walk around it, continuing to consider the same mountain, although my experience of it constantly changes. The color changes, the weather conditions, lighting, my angle and clarity of sight also change, but I still see the mountain as a mountain. The mountain remains a unity despite the constantly changing perspectives of it. This does not occur because the mountain is a solid, absolute object, but because my varied and shifting perspectives are directed toward something meaningful. Gombrich calls this meaningful something a "visual schema", a category that helps us to pick out significant content. He argues that "without some starting point, some initial schema, we could never get hold of the flux of experience."⁸ John Dewey sees experience as rooted in the interaction of persons with their environments, but conscious experience has a great deal to do with imagination. It is through imagination that Dewey sees meaning entering consciousness.⁹ For A.N. Whitehead also, consciousness always involves the synthesis of percepts and images (concepts).¹⁰ In short, we create a meaningful order out of the confusing blur of changing experience.

This becomes a problem only when our experiences do not conform to our understandings. A moment such as that can be life-shattering. This often happens when we limit our understanding to that with which we are most familiar, and so fail to see other features of the world. It is what Whitehead calls the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, a tendency we have to mistake our abstractions for what is real.¹¹ The danger comes in self-deception, simplification, and in the shock of recognition. In his own sarcastic way Nietzsche warns us. "*O sancta simplicitas!*," he writes, "In what strange

simplification and falsification man lives! One can never cease wondering once one has acquired eyes for this marvel! How we have made everything around us clear and free and easy and simple!"¹²

In science, a systematic method of providing explanations, there is a preference toward explanations that are simple and coherent. Modern science, that is, before quantum theory, was well known for its search for a single account for the few fundamental processes in nature. In all directions was seen the *evidence* of an elegant simplicity underlying the wild diversity of the universe.¹³ Scientific activity of this sort does not exist simply because of the development of a scientific method but because of the value placed on the explanations provided by that method. A system which offers coherent explanations is valued not because it reveals the truth but because of the value placed on singular explanations. But this is exactly what Nietzsche and Whitehead warn us about. They insist that a theoretical whole that is simple may be useful but will also be inadequate. Inasmuch as art is a theoretical whole, in addition to being a perceptual whole, it will be as complex as the world is, according to those who use it as an instrument to understand the world.

My work is complex because of the use I put it to. That is to say, I use my work as a way of considering a world that is complex. My work encompasses my life up to the point that it is produced, and since I am not an island, my work is involved to a greater or lesser extent in all life. The creation of my work is experiential, not axiomatic. In other words, my work stems not from setting goals and following procedures to meet those goals, but from experience,

or interrelation with the world, and from an attempt to see and come to grips with it. I make one decision that is crucial and fundamental: to adhere to my method of creation which, for lack of a less pretentious term, I describe as "visionary". It is a method of following my imagination, described above as being the door through which meaning enters consciousness. I follow these "visions" in a similar way that Joan of Arc followed hers.

The images in my work come out of a strange mixture of decision and accident. For instance, I may choose to take an evening walk, to drive, to sleep, and so on. But what I see, hear, remember, and dream while doing those things is often a matter of happenstance. In this respect my work is similar to the Dadaist acceptance of chance in generating artworks. Any sight, sound, smell, memory, or daydream can in turn conjure up other images. This is similar to Surrealists who use images from dreams and free associations, but my understanding of the source of images differs. Some of these images remain in my thoughts. I reflect and contemplate upon them.

In some cases I assign personal and public significances to them. (The fact that I may not be able to assign an exclusively personal significance to an image does not exclude it from being used in an artwork.) In any case, all those images that remain with me over a period of time, in some cases days or even years, are usually quite detailed and specific, down to the media and technique to be used to make them "visible". In other cases I need only allow myself to imagine that image in a less vague form. If I use

an image more than once, for instance a dress pattern used for sewing, it is because the specific personal significance of that image eludes me.

The statement that "anything goes", that is, that any image is as good as another to use in my work, is obviously unfounded. Only those images that are especially meaningful or intriguing are used. I try to use all these images, in fact. This in part accounts for my work's complexity, with different images numbering over twenty in some cases. In these ways my work is similar to Rauschenberg's use of large numbers of meaningful and mysterious images. Like the Surrealists who juxtaposed content-laden visuals, and like the Dada placement of a readymade into a new context, the images in my work are images out of the past, out of memories, and out of one context that have been placed into another. But the relation of those images to one another in the artwork is similar to their relation in my experience. This relation is essentially similar to the relation of successive perspectives of a mountain I discussed above. In this case the mountain is my whole life. There are many artists who deal with temporal-spatial experience of this sort in their work. The later work of Monet, Cezanne, the Cubists, Pollock, and Richard Serra's more process oriented sculpture deal with shifting and/or multiple perspectives, a working process that is obvious and important, and in the case of the Cubists, collage and assemblage of differing aspects of experience. All this is to say that while "anything goes" is not accurate, I do hold a loose rein on my imagination, and I ride it where it may.

Our world and ourselves are our own most intriguing examples of perceptual and theoretical wholes. The project that I am working on is not actually one or a series of objects, but the creation of meaning that can be attached to experience, which is bound up in the world in which I am involved. (By "world" I do not mean objects which we find in our environment, but rather the whole context in which we find ourselves immersed, including memories, history, ideas and the like in addition to the environment.¹⁴) This accounts for the continuity of my work. The work of contemporary artist Joseph Beuys is similar to mine in this way, as he grapples with personal and public life in post-war Germany. I do not view each work as definitely distinct in itself but as a continuous and cyclical return to the main project. A practical outcome of all this is that the decision on when to begin and when to end an artwork is not a great problem. But there is a period when images occur to me rapidly and in large numbers. As I begin to construct the painting the images I use become more settled and definite. Later, after the construction process for one painting has been underway for some time, there begins another flood of images which find their way into later work.

In a similar way my work does and does not have definite physical limits. When I install a number of elements into a space, I use that already existing space as part of the painting, so a great deal of the surrounding space becomes part of it, as do any objects and irregularities fixed to the wall. Because of our tendency to group objects through proximity, as Gestalt theory shows, I have found it to be relatively clear to viewers which objects are presented

for consideration together. Any uncertainty on this point on the part of the viewer allows the viewer to see the work as coextensive with the room, and by extension, with the viewer's world in general. Also, the relation of a figure to a background, and the ability we have to see negative space as a figure in itself (see face/vase figure), allows for the piece to extend out beyond mere physical edges. This is because space is not empty, nor is space a thing in itself, nor is it an envelope containing things. Space is a relation of things, and it is made by the "positioned interrelationship of things", as F. David Martin describes it.¹⁵ Also, space is not simply something we displace or "take up". It is our lived context. So a painting, for example, does not exist as an independent thing but in relationship with its context, including surrounding environment and viewers. The meaning of a work stems from this relationship. A description of physical characteristics of a painting, no matter how systematic, is not the same as an understanding of it. The meaning of a painting is to be found in the experience that is the interrelationship of painting and viewer. It is then that the painting is brought fully into the world.

From what I've written above, and because many of the images I use are public as well as private, it may be apparent that I expect the viewer to be an active participant in my work and not a passive recipient of stimuli. In fact, it seems that viewers do participate in an active way with my work. As Duchamp said, "The artist initiates the aesthetic experience and the viewer completes it."¹⁶ I leave some aspects of my work to be completed by the viewer (I include myself as a viewer, even though my understanding of

the elements is different from other viewers). I do not create art only for myself, but recognize that I am not only part of a culture but one of many who are participating in the creation of it. I consider my work to be a kind of public document. That is why I exhibit, and that is why I consider the viewer to the degree that I do.

Incongruous and dissonant information is well-known in the field of psychology to create re-thinging, re-looking, and re-evaluation.¹⁷ The juxtaposition of ambiguous and dissimilar imagery is a hallmark of Surrealists, Jasper Johns, and contemporary artist David Salle. In each case the viewer is allowed to wonder why these images are grouped together; what does the combination mean? As I explained above, on the basis of proximity and figure-ground relationships I create a minimal perceptual whole with the images I group. But I see my work as a maximal theoretical whole, that is, a whole that exists largely through an attempt to explain images as being together. The ambiguous images I present in incongruous juxtapositions and contexts allow viewers to experience a situation that is both familiar and foreign to them. The situation is familiar in that the elements are at least recognizable or nameable, yet unfamiliar in that the meaning or even the experience of the associations can be unclear or confusing. In other words, the ambiguity allows the viewers to see a little for themselves. The viewing of my work becomes something like what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz aspires to when giving a "thick description" of a culture, that is, emphasizing cultural forms as "webs of significance." This makes an investigation

of a culture, including the viewing of artworks, "not an experimental science in search of law [lowest common denominator] but an interpretive one in search of meaning."¹⁸

I see a plurality of possible meanings which can come from the experience of my work. The meaning I find most interesting has to do with meaning itself. As I said, art can be an instrument in an attempt to understand the world. It can be a means to *create* meaning, significance, and importance in the world. The art of a person and a culture reveals what is important to a person or culture. Art can present created frames of perception and meaning by which we can interpret our experiences. After experiencing an art work we can compare other experiences to it, and vice-versa. Many see art and religion as related in this way, and philosopher T.R. Martland in fact sees religion *as* art.¹⁹ In this respect the Catholicism of my youth, as well as my research into Navajo religion, have been important influences on the development of my work.

I see my work as a way to make "visible" and meaningful how we are involved in the world. What I present for viewers to see is, however, ambiguous. My work is ambiguous because experience is not entirely determinate. That is, each object may be understood through one significance, but that one meaning does not exhaust that object. Every object is interwoven with a plurality of meaning; consequently, every experience is a lattice of interconnected significances. The multiple meanings possible with my work create problems for the normal tendency to construct coherent and simple accounts. In that sense my work can be described as "deconstructionist", as is

so much contemporary art, including the work of Vernon Fisher, an artist whose work bears uncanny resemblances to my own.

My work is diagrammatical insomuch that it is like a drawing that presents arrangements and relations of parts. But I do not attempt to present meanings in a didactic (axiomatic) way, that is, I do not work to instruct or convey information and observations. Instead, I hope that the viewer will experience the disparate images of my work and interrelate those images not only through seeing them but also through an attempt to create an understanding of their juxtaposition.

ENDNOTES

¹For a history of original research and formulations see S.R. Yussen and J.W. Santrock, Child Development, (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1978).

²R. Arnheim, Entropy and Art, (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), p. 4.

³W.D. Ellis, A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1938), p. 18-33.

⁴P.L. McKee, "An Explanation-Model of Aesthetic Unity," British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 17, No. 1, (Winter, 1977), pp. 19-20.

⁵E.L. Simmons, "Mystical Consciousness in a Process Perspective," Process Studies, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1984), p. 5.

⁶This and accompanying references to Heraclitus from B. Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), pp. 43, 35, 150.

⁷D. Stewart, Exploring Phenomenology, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974), pp. 38-39.

⁸J. Gilmour, Picturing the World, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 58.

⁹S.D. Ross, An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 221.

¹⁰F.D. Martin, Sculpture and Enlivened Space, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), p. 245, n. 20.

¹¹A.N. Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, (New York: The Free Press, 1925), p. 51.

¹²F. Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1966), paragraph 24, p. 35.

¹³For an excellent example of this attitude see T. Ferris, The Creation of the Universe, (Pasadena: Northstar Associates, 1985).

¹⁴F.D. Martin, (paraphrased), p. 48.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 86, 125.

¹⁶Quoted from the Public Broadcasting System's Bye Bye Kipling, a project conceived and produced by Nam Jun Paik, broadcast Oct. 4, 1986.

¹⁷A. Woolfolk, Educational Psychology for Teachers, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984), p. 214.

¹⁸All references to Geertz's ideas on cultural investigation from C. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

¹⁹T.R. Martland, Religion as Art, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 1-2.

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PLATES

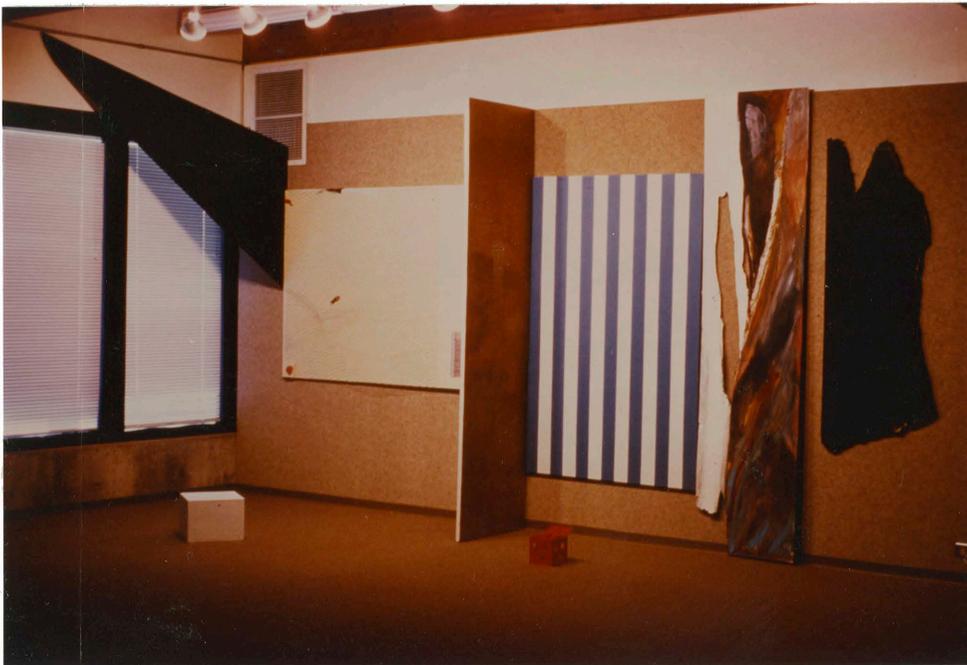


Plate 1. I Am the Boy in the Picture, 1986, 9'4" x 16' x 5'.



Plate 2. Listening to Starfish, 1986, 8' x 13' x 5'.

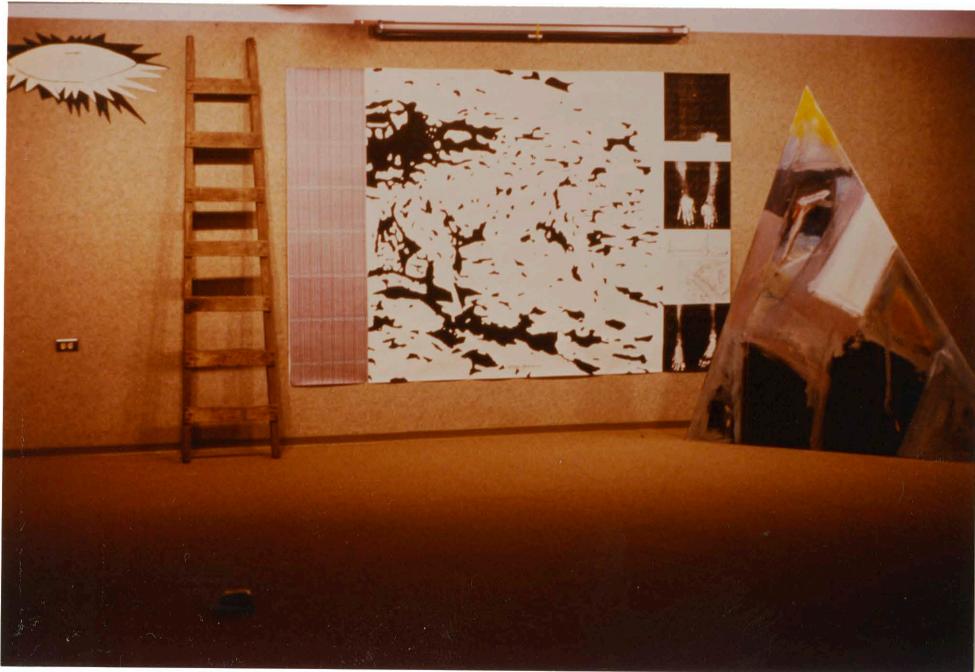


Plate 3. The Curve of Forgotten Things, 1986, 7'6" x 13' x 5'.

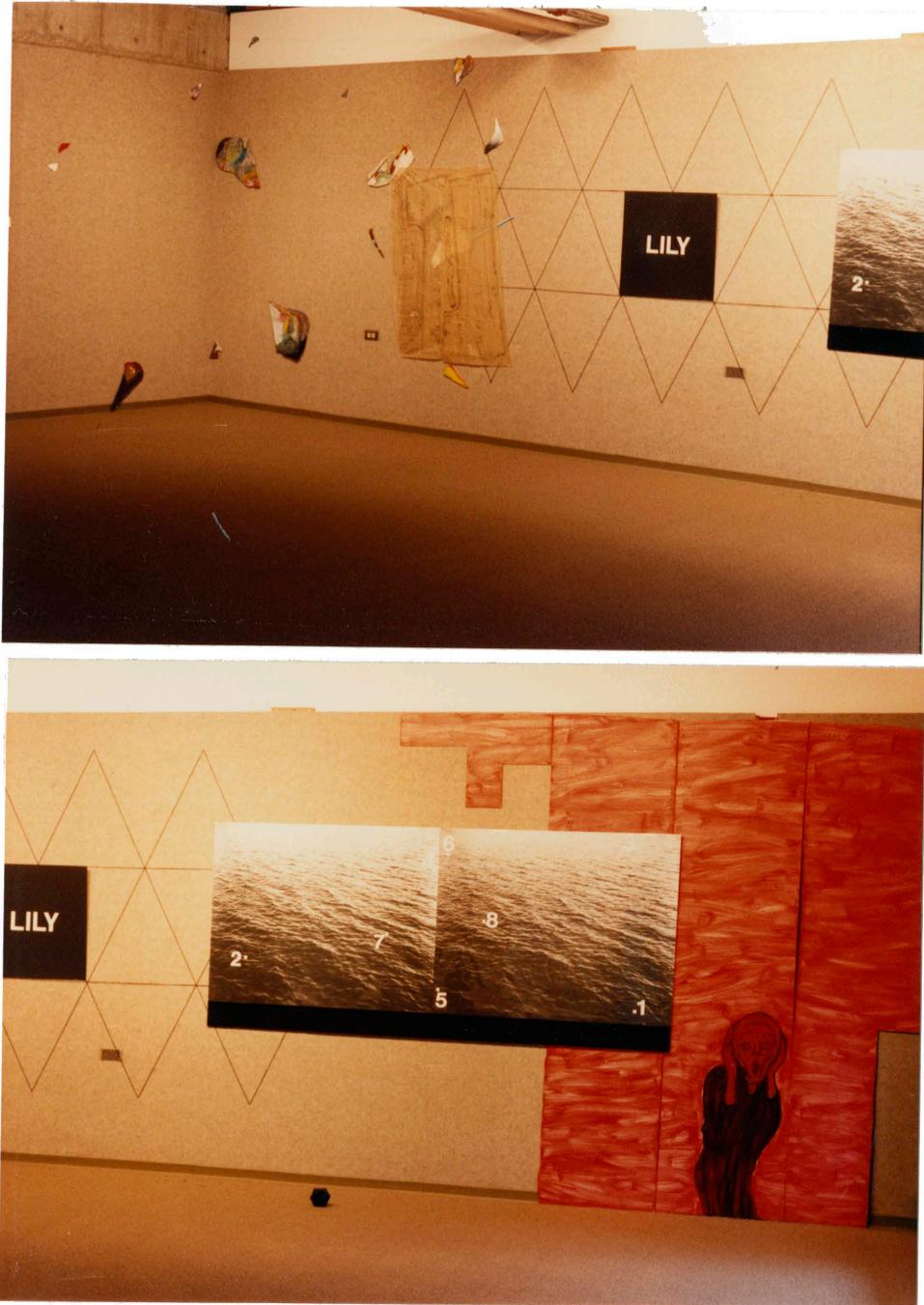


Plate 4. Group Portrait Without the Lions, 1987, 9' x 30' x 6".



Plate 5. You Will Have Unreal Recollections of Me, 1987,
8' x 17' x 6".