

LOTS (OF THINGS), BUT NOTHING (I COULD USE)

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Master of Fine Arts Thesis, University of Texas at Arlington

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Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to my husband, Brennen Bechtol who has not only supported my decision to pursue the MFA, but has offered advice, patience and love when I most needed it. And I am greatly appreciative to my dearest friend David Willburn who so graciously endured my whining and complaining while still remaining my biggest cheerleader. I would also like to thank my committee members and professors, Benito Huerta, Robert Hower, Stephen Lapthisophon and Kenda North who generously offered their time and knowledge, and for insisting that I had more in me. Additionally, thank you to the graduate advisor Nancy Palmeri for believing I could do this despite all the complications that life conjures. This book is dedicated to my daughter, Eva, who continues to amaze me and challenge my perceptions of the world.

Foreword

Iris Bechtol's work has evolved from traditional and object oriented works based on photography to more ephemeral experimental interventions in overlooked or commonly used nooks and crannies in rooms or hallways of ordinary buildings. This unexpected turn in her work was a result of her artistic evolution of wanting to do something else. This attitude is one that is ingrained in artists in their desire to grow and not repeat themselves. An admirable, yet dangerous quality, in that it does not insure success at every turn. Ms. Bechtol's time here at UTA has run the full gamut of creating works in the studio to works that could only exist in their respective contexts. Those interventions are what teases the viewer to see what they would ordinarily overlook and heightens our sensibility. This work is subtle, evocative and, at times, sublime.

I want to thank her graduate committee: Robert Hower, Stephen Lapthisophon and Kenda North for their insightful commentary and commitment to Ms. Bechtol's work and tenure here at UTA.

On a personal note, I am proud of being Chair of Ms. Bechtol's graduate committee. Iris has been great in her diligence and attention to the rigors of a Masters of Fine Arts program within the Department of Art and Art History here at the University of Texas at Arlington. We look forward to her future developments as a professional artist.

--- Benito Huerta

Introduction

Overwhelmingly powerful paintings of light were made at the hands of J. M. W. Turner. At least that is what I have heard. However, after seeing the master of light's exhibition of paintings at the Dallas Museum of Art, I found his best work to be the very simple, yet enigmatic watercolor paintings. These works were small and often, to my delight, hung awkwardly low on the gallery wall. They have a kind of quiet yet commanding way to them. Some of them seem barely touched by the brush while others are heavy with color almost to the point of overworking them. Considered studies, they have an immediacy to them that contradicts the need to go any further with a paintbrush. However unfavorably I think of the large oil paintings, those little watercolor paintings have resonated in me since I first met them last year.

It is interesting for me to think back on this work in preparation for my own exhibition. Especially since it is only a year later that I can truly appreciate Turner's sensibilities and recall why I liked the work in the first place. After all, I am not the most likely advocate of his work. A year ago, I would not have given it a second thought. My influences tend toward the minimal and post minimal genres, artists such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Tuttle have inspired my practice. However, I think it is important to mention Turner simply because of that immediacy that I am so struck by in his watercolor studies. It is that immediacy that permeates my thoughts when I am working.

The success of Turner's work is perhaps due in part to his ability to make the most simple of marks understandable. As gestures they are full of the artist's hand and full of the moment in which he produced them. The studies and even the large oil paintings show how attentive he was to the world.

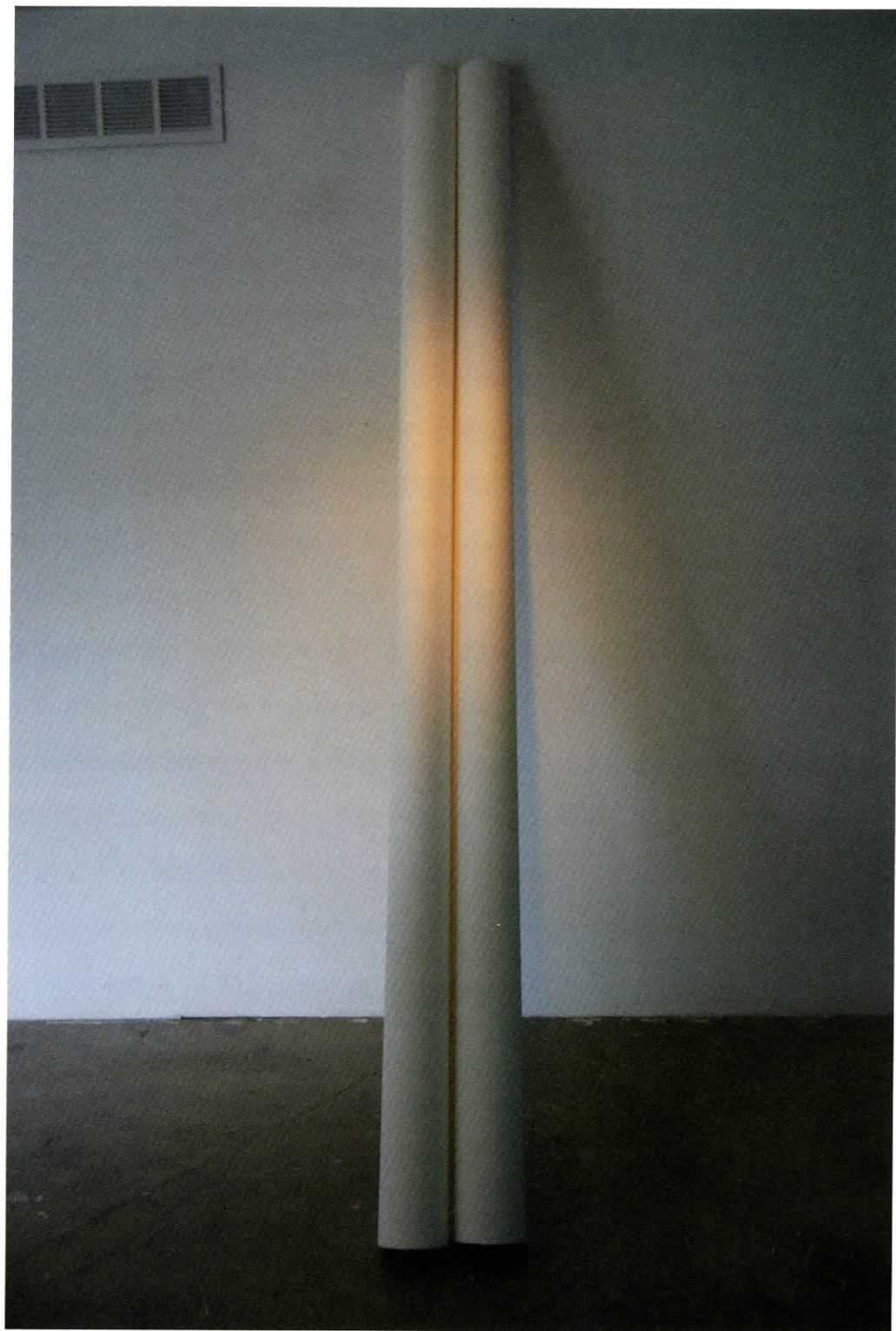
To be attentive, to know that you are fully immersed in a moment and fully aware of everything in that moment; it is a very difficult thing to do. I strive for it in my life and in my work. To achieve this in my work I displace, disrupt and reduce matter to encourage a re-engagement with the surrounding environment and heighten one's experiential relationships to a space or an object. Ideologically the work is a phenomenologically induced practice in how we (I and the other) encounter and perceive the ordinary.

I often find myself wondering about the things of this world that escape me. It is a bit like missing time or as if I were in a glass jar moving from one place to the next throughout my day. So much of our lives are filled with meaningless activity, activity that distances us from the world around us. I am not talking about human contact, but our contact with the world - our experience within it. It is as if once we experience something, it becomes less meaningful.

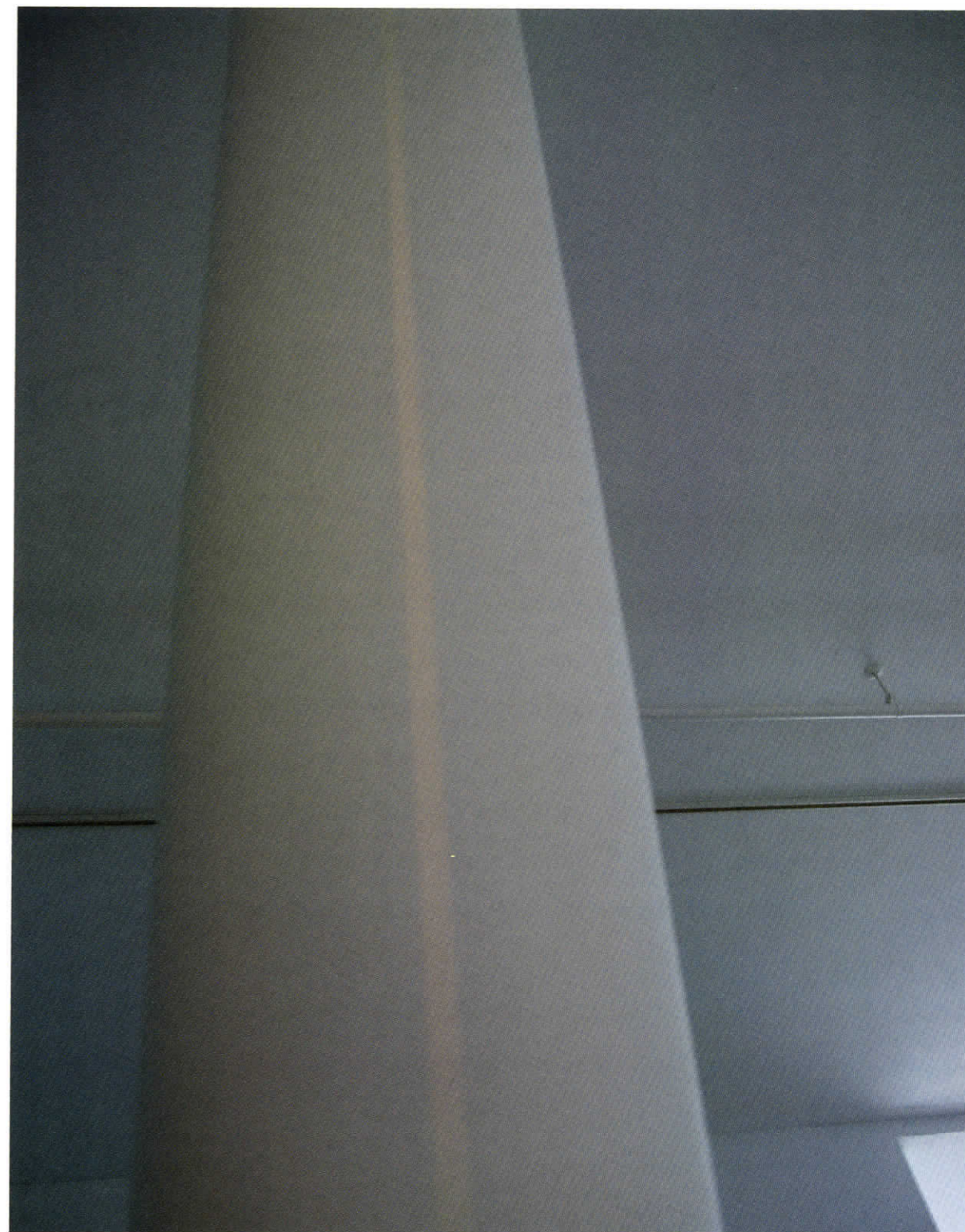
It is at the same time true that the world is what we see and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it - first in the sense that we must match this vision within knowledge, take possession of it, say what we and what seeing are, act therefore as if we knew nothing about it, as if here we had everything to learn. [1]

In recalling my readings of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau - Ponty's philosophical inquiries and dialectical investigations into phenomenological practice, I was struck most by his words in the previous quote. It is a sort of a roundabout way in describing the act of reduction, a term used in philosophical circles to describe the process of "practicing a thoughtful attentiveness". [2] Again, this attentiveness is something I wish to point out with the work. This ideology first surfaced in a work I call *Performance Piece*. It consists largely of a roll of white backdrop paper and the light illuminating it. The work emerged out of my realizing that the roll of paper needed a response - it is a thing in a space, in the world, and in action. And so it was situated in such a way that the viewer could respond to the leaning, the light and the thing in the space, in the world, reacting to everything around it. Though it has a kind of Duchampian quality to it, the object in this case has specific rules governing the lighting of it and how it is meant to be situated against a wall. Because of this, I am able to disregard the reference when the question arises as to which artist may have influenced the use of this object as art.

Given my earliest thoughts about *Performance Piece* and their proximity to some of the theory put forth by Merleau - Ponty and Heidegger, I concluded that there was a strong connection between the "lived experience" [1] of phenomenology and how I came to make the work. Thus, I continued to absorb their writing if only to compare it with my own thoughts. The work created after my exposure to phenomenology is neither in response to it or a way to illustrate it, but it is in practice of it.



Performance Piece, paper and light, dimensions variable, 2008



Performance Piece, detail, 2008

I approach this practice which includes many thematic undertones and relationships to other artists in two ways. One approach is to encounter a space and respond to it through sound, installation, video or a combination of these, thereby bringing attentiveness into it. The second approach is to challenge perceptions of space, an object, or a moment. Artist, Robert Irwin talks most of all about the purpose of art, as a vehicle for attuning or retuning individual patterns of attention and perception. [3] This was exactly my purpose in a series of intervention works performed in a nondescript, overlooked stairwell.

Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work. [4]

This quote is taken from Bachelard's text, *Poetics of Space*; published in 1958, it is his phenomenological approach to the lived experience of space. I am interested in Bachelard's text because it attempts to explain our relationship to intimate space and he succeeds because his writing assists us in visualizing those spaces. His text pushes us to reconnect to what it is about a particular space that so affects us, emotionally, mentally and physically. Especially useful to me was his proposal that what we experience in a space or of a space is not necessarily true for others. He says, "All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. What is secret never has total objectivity. In this respect, we orient oneirism but we do not accomplish it." [4] In other words, one can never visualize or materialize another's concepts or perceptions.

The materializing of the stairwell interventions were a culmination of my time spent in the space as well as thinking about it, responding to its intimacy, its vagueness, its relationship to the door and the building as a whole, and the hum the wall made from some unknown, hidden machinery. Again, this is my perception of the space. It is impossible for anyone else to have the same reactions or perceptions. While my perceptions of the space may not be the same as others, and my intentions may be in some ways unclear, clarity is not essential to the work. In fact, to have clarity would mean the experience of the work is finished. For me, that would make my work finite. I do not want finite. There should be endless possible conclusions. The work is meant to disrupt the space and any perceptions of it. And hopefully it elicits a lasting response from the viewer even after they move away from it. The following poem was written as a response to my work:

something ongoing,

unfolding,

acting.



Intervention 3
plumbing pipe
dimensions
variable
2008



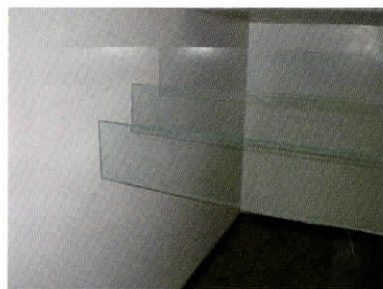
Intervention 4
lightbulbs
dimensions
variable
2008



Intervention 5
window film
dimensions
variable
2008



Intervention 5
detail
2008



Intervention 6
plexiglass
dimensions
variable
2008



Intervention 6
detail
2008

Larry Eigner said of his poems, "immediacy and force has to take precedence over clarity." [5] The poems themselves are very clean, not overly littered with meaningless words. They speak of things that are just there without gussying up the language. I am interested in Eigner's structuring and conjuring of poignant imagery, all with undemanding words. In process and in outcome, my work follows the same rule of "immediacy and force over clarity" as does Larry Eigner's poetry.

I think of Eigner's poems in this way too. Each word existing on its own but just as well with all the others. Each word has an impact or force individual of the whole. Perhaps it is in the structure of Eigner's poems that I have found the most influential in the overall outcome and understanding of my work. From Eigner's Trees:

we've had time for a few things

talking

he drives away profile

finger in the mouth

In his structuring it seems as if Eigner is trying to stretch the time we spend on each word. It is as if he wants us to feel what he feels, as he feels it - slowly. Like Eigner, I want the work to linger. And much like Eigner, in the beginning I do not want the viewer to be totally clear of what they are seeing. I want the work to resonate like Eigner's words - re-examined over and over without allowing the

viewer a clear sense of finishing the experience. To finish an experience would mean there was clarity. Eigner did not want clarity and I do not want it either.

Rather than provide clarity through the display of a body of work, what I most wish to do with my work is create a situation. Situations are ideal to me because they tend to include more than the work itself, they include the surrounding environment and all the conditions within the environment. Prior to installing the gold flake piece at the Arlington Museum of Art in 2009, I scouted out various spaces in the building to place the situation. The Arlington Museum of Art has a basement where they hold art classes. To access the basement one goes down a secluded flight of stairs. There is an uncanny alcove next to the stairway. I do not know why it is there, if it is structural or if it was some kind of previous display area for the old building. Because of its awkwardness, I took a liking to the space and decided to situate the gold flake in this space. Installing did not prove difficult. I let the gold flake fall where it may and only carefully manipulated parts of it to get it in the right spot. The result was a beautiful kind of moment that as it turns out not many people noticed. Funny, how people miss so much. I felt especially good about the work because there is still some gold flake floating around the space to this day. I had it on my shoes for weeks. This aspect of the work relates to the stretching out of words I spoke about in Larry Eigner's poetry. I am stretching out the life of the piece by displacing its matter.



Untitled, installation of gold flake at Arlington Museum of Art, dimensions variable, 2009

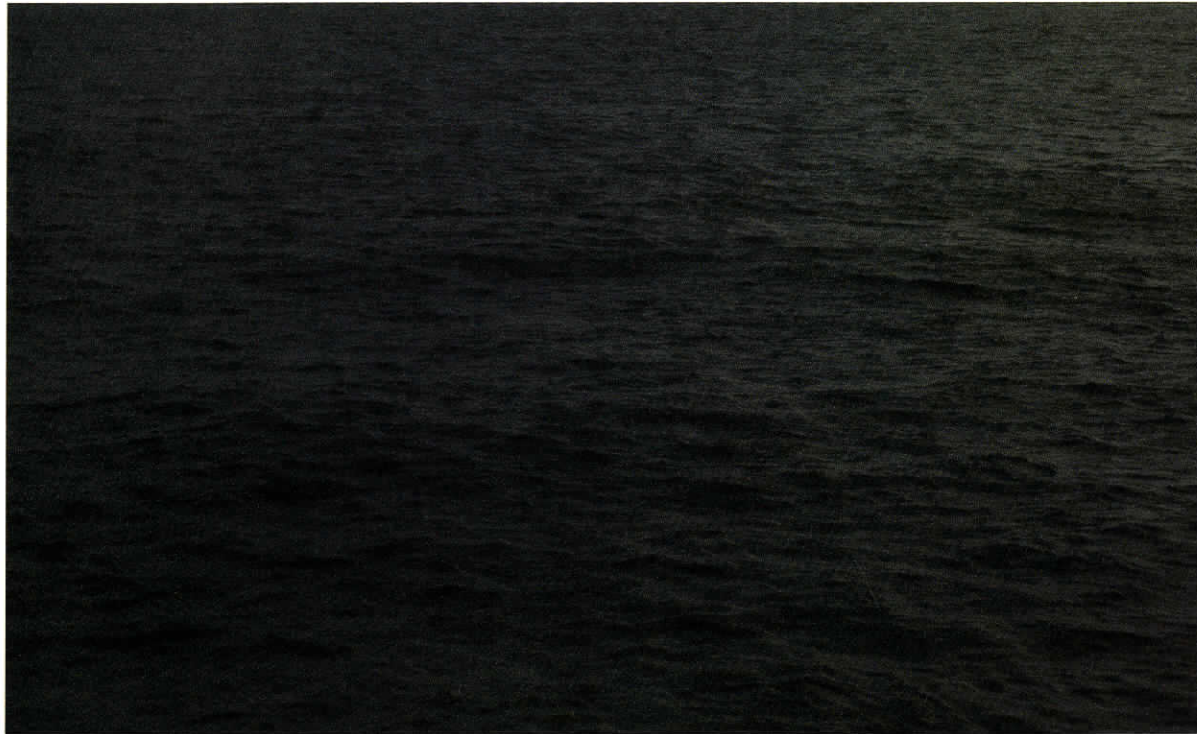


Untitled, detail, 2009

Minimalist artist, Carl Andre has described sculpture as matter mattering.[6] This idea is key to my practice and has followed me through all the work outlined in this thesis. While I would not call myself a sculptor, in some ways there are things that I do that could be considered sculpture - the performance piece, any of the stairwell works, or the performative objects and perhaps some of the things acted upon in the thesis exhibition.

I have followed with great admiration the work of many artists including minimalists Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and post minimalists Bruce Nauman and Richard Tuttle. One obvious reason is the ease at which they have worked with materials as well as space in an uncanny way. I appreciate the minimalist aesthetic largely because I do believe that it operates on a highly intellectual level; that one must study it, the context it was made in and any writing surrounding it to know the work more closely.

My interest also lies in the way that each of these artists works relate to the space surrounding them. Donald Judd's concept of constructing specific spaces that would hold permanent installations of a work or works of art has pushed me to carefully address the space where my work might reside even for short time. Nauman's work, *Fat Chance John Cage* inspired me to make *Sculpture*, a 59 minute long video loop of a projection screen in my studio scrolling up and down (see DVD insert). Relationships to my works can also be seen in Ad Reinhardt's black paintings referencing the void in my photographs 491 and 492; Vija Celmins examination of the ordinary can be seen as influential in my digital projection



Atlas, digital video projection still, dimensions variable, 2009

Atlas (see DVD insert); and more recently Richard Tuttle's enigmatic work, approach, and ruminations on the artistic process have influenced my thesis exhibition.

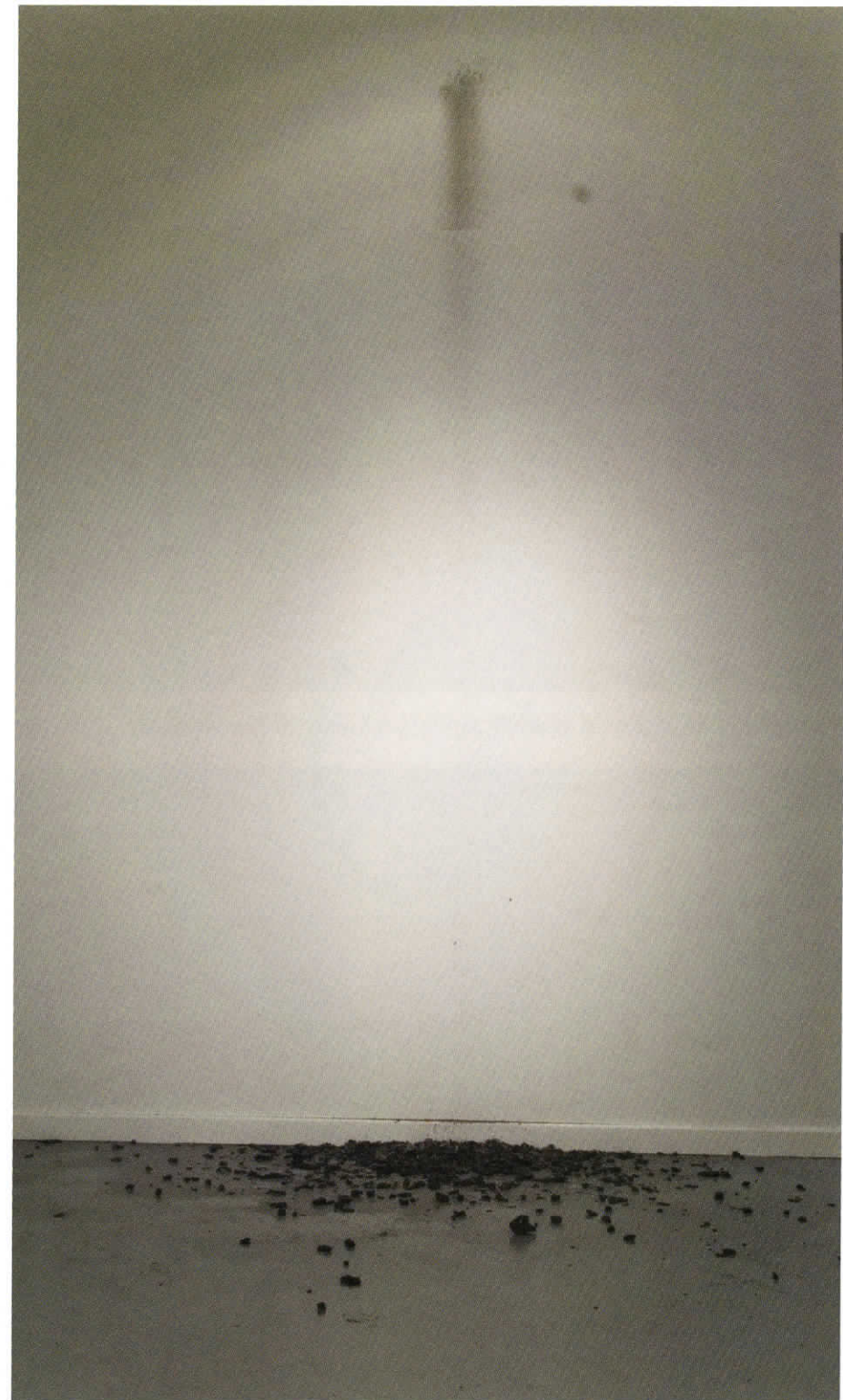


Vapor Trails, digital projection (detail below), dimensions variable, 2009





Untitled, black acrylic situated against a wall, dimensions variable, 2009



Nothing is still something, charred material poured down wall, dimensions variable, 2009



Untitled - Black 491-492, archival photographs, 17 x 22 inches, 2008-09



The thesis exhibition is not a culmination of my graduate work over the last 3 years or even over the last year, but it is separate and complete piece, a work that deserves immediacy much like Turner's watercolors. Thus, the "work" for the exhibition is not completed outside of the gallery space and then hung on the walls; instead it is begun upon entering the space and finished upon de-installation of the work. In essence the work does not begin until I enter the space at a specific time and it is not complete until it is gone (de-installed). The title, *Lots (of things), but nothing (I could use)* is taken from a comment made by Ed Ruscha in response to a question regarding his findings on a trip to Italy in 1956.[7] I used this as a title for the work because of its directness and the implications it had in relation to the overall work. Ruscha remarked that he had found nothing he could use on his travels. As I mentioned before, I did not create a body of work to be hung on the wall for this exhibition. It is not that I have found nothing, on the contrary, I have found everything.

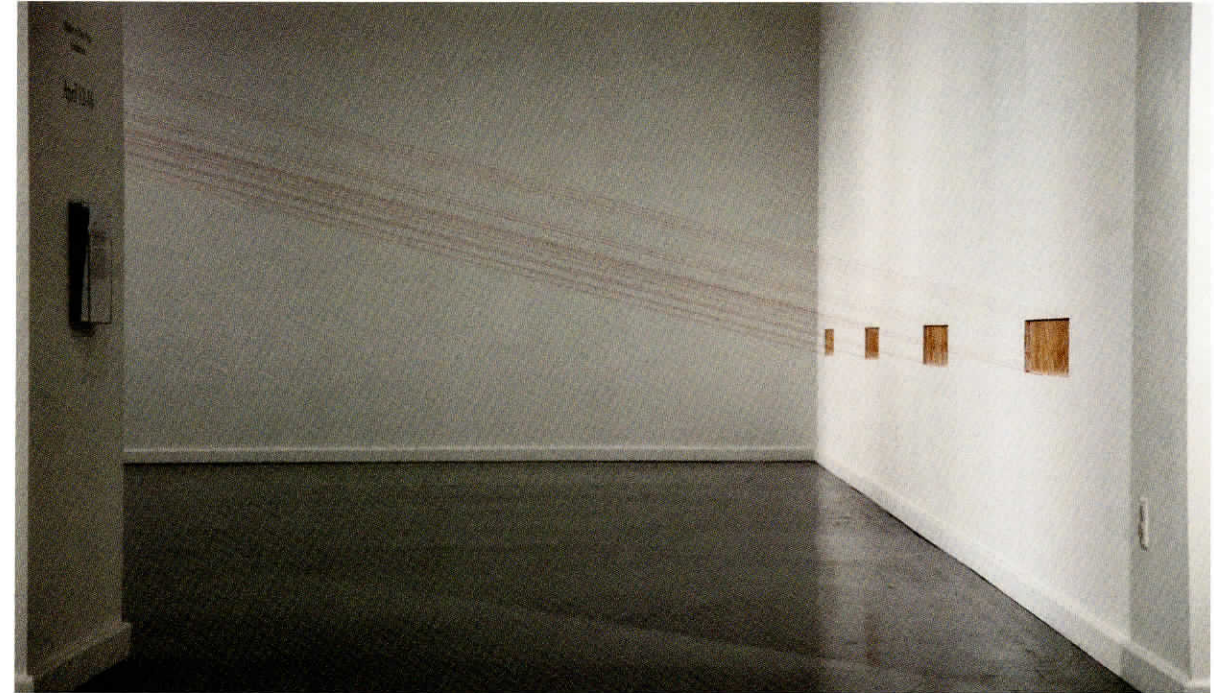
My preconception of this work has always been that it would somehow relate to the space. In the process of building the idea, I investigated several materials that I have had an interest in since the beginning - those materials being tape, paper, thread, paint and light. To close in on the idea, I visited the gallery several times to get a feel for the space and to really look at the structure and hear the sound of it. Relating back to the stairwell situational works, I turned toward the particular qualities of the gallery space. These qualities that I speak of are structure, lighting, and the function of the space as a gallery. These are things that might ordinarily be overlooked especially in a space that is meant to display artwork on its walls.

Working with minimal materials, the work for this exhibition uses the space as a conceptual platform to engage the audience in a dialogue about awareness and perception. The gallery space is not itself compelling, however my particular interest is in the awkwardness of the HVAC vent covers as well as the height and structure of the walls and their relationship to the gallery as a whole.

To bring attention to these things, I performed a series of maneuvers that result in a subtle but monumental change in the perception of the space. The vent covers have been removed to reveal the more interesting innards of the HVAC system. Corresponding to the vent covers, portions of sheetrock were removed from the opposite wall to create a connection and contradiction between the two walls. Red polyester thread was installed between the two walls to further the connection and the contradiction between the walls.

There is an obvious reference to Fred Sandback's work with some differences in material and construction, however I am indebted to him for making something as simple as yarn come to life so beautifully and enabling me to pursue the same general dialogue about space with the construction of my work. The resulting installation disrupts the space and the audience entry into it, forcing a re-engagement with the surrounding environment.

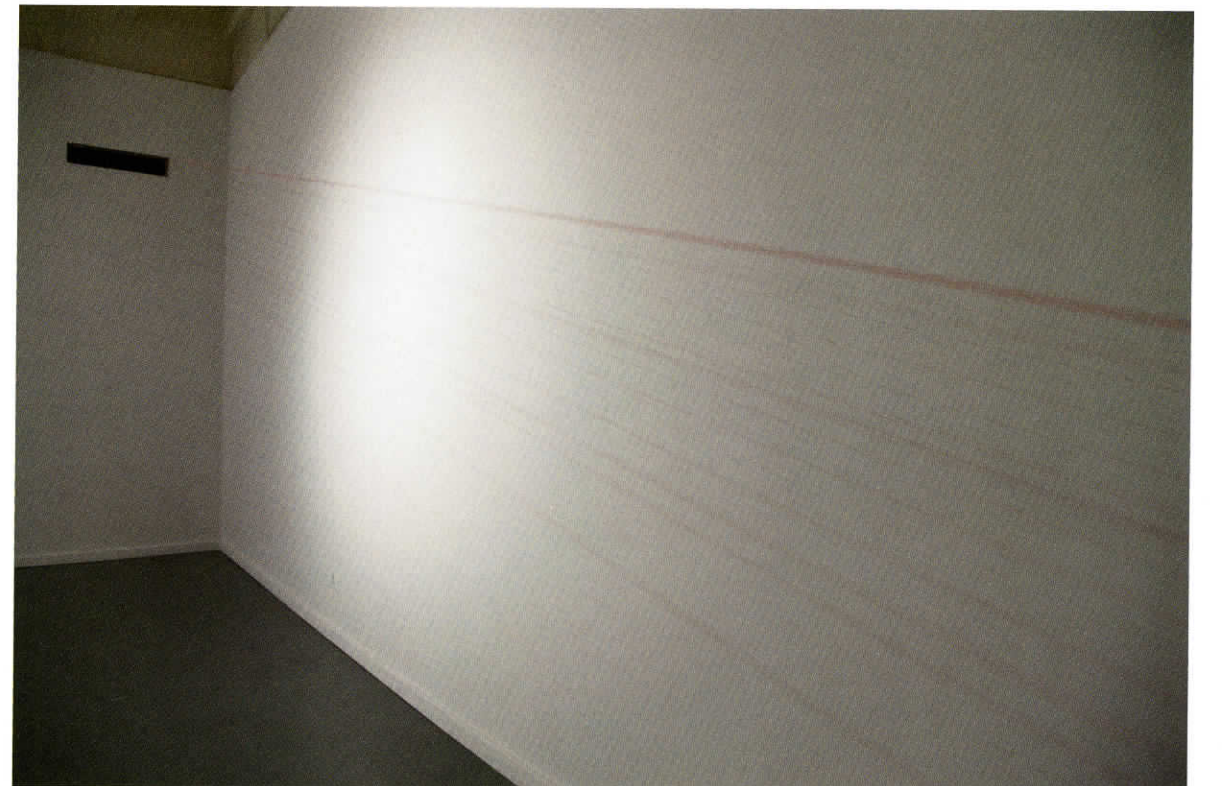
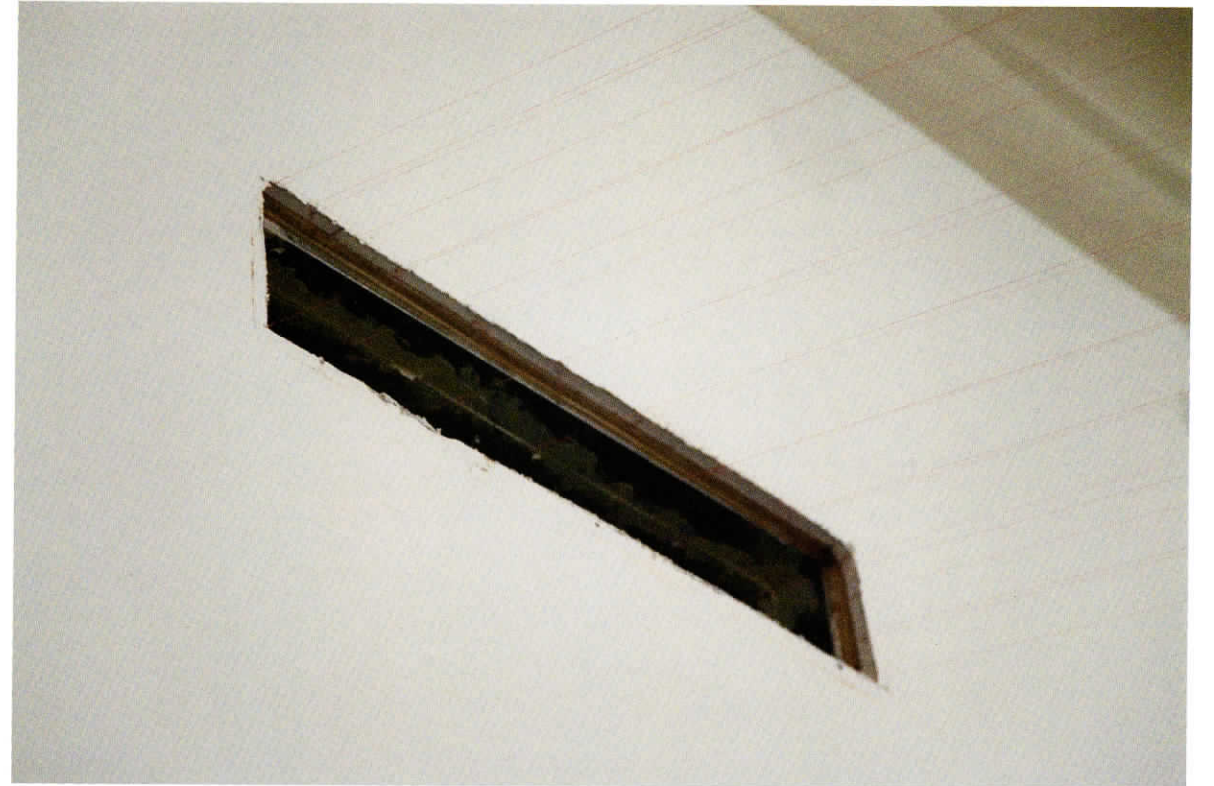
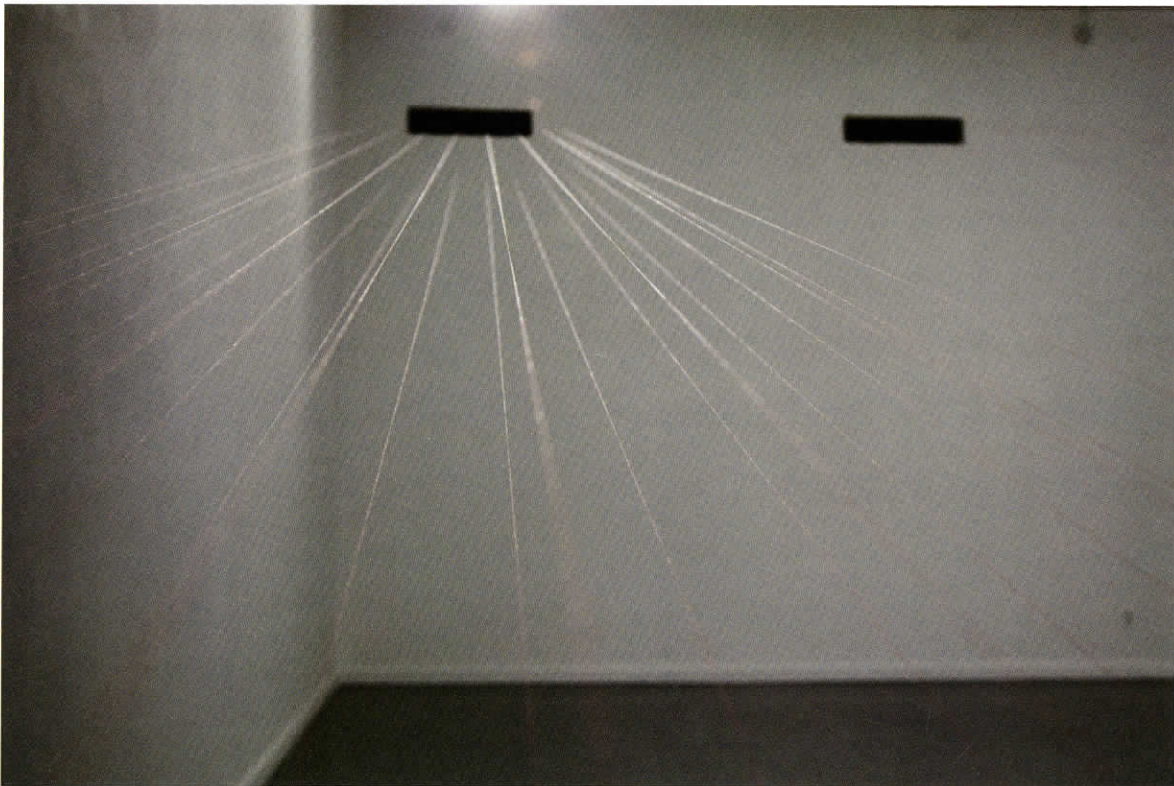
An additional part of the project lives on behind the areas where I removed sheetrock. To instill a kind of longevity in the act of removing the sheetrock, I applied goldleaf to the plywood wall and then re-sheetrocked over this area. I also left a very faint area of the rectangular cutout visible by lightly mudding the wall

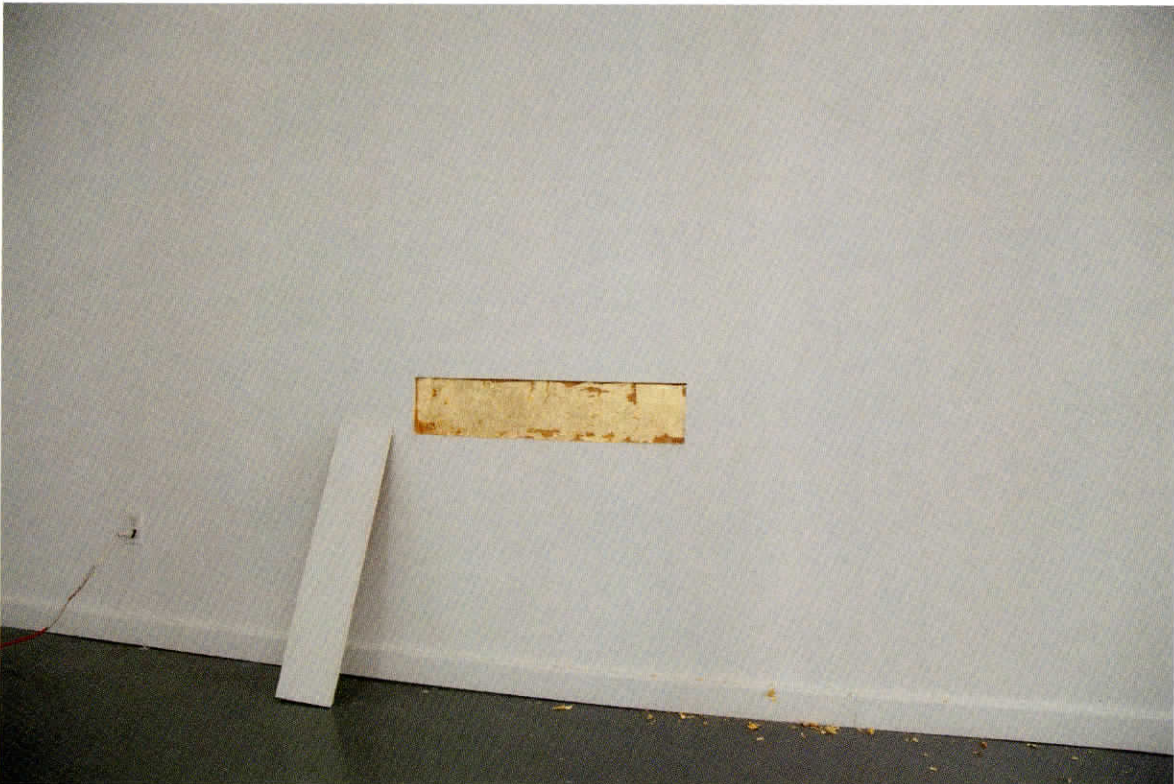
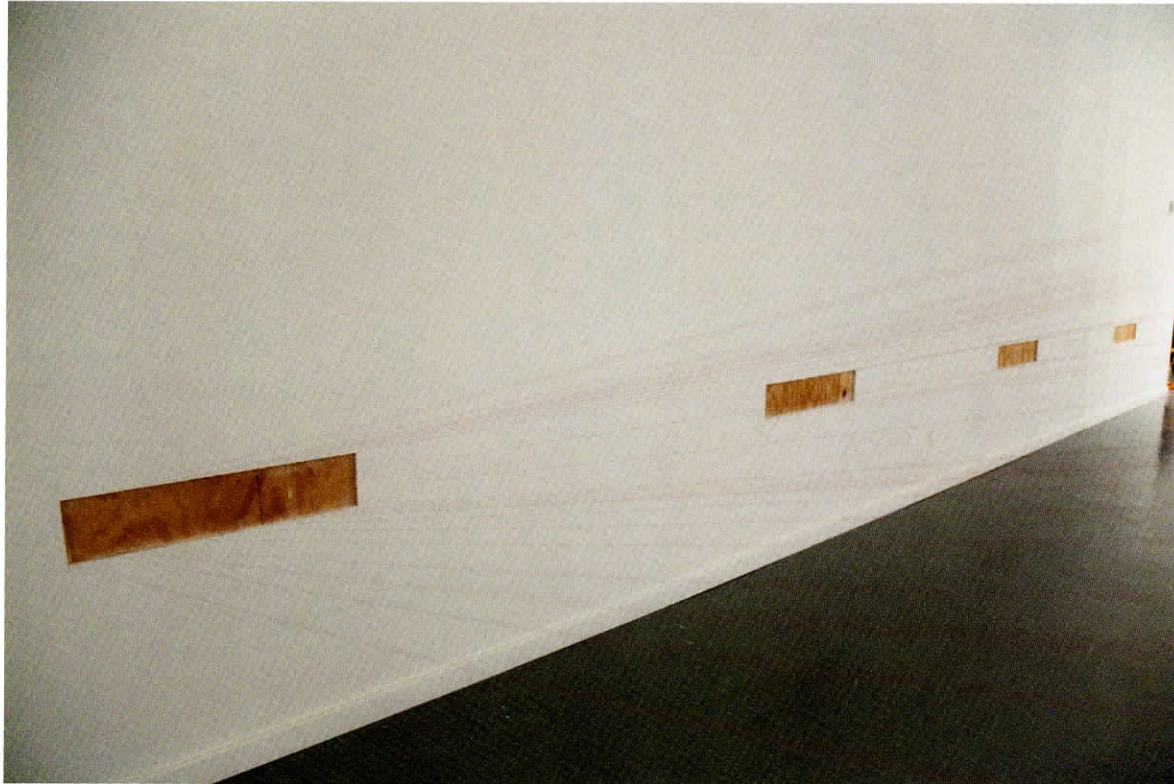


Lots (of things), but nothing (I could use), installation view, sheetrock, plywood, HVAC vents, red polyester thread, light, dimensions variable, 2010

prior to it being painted. The remnant of the rectangle cutout is subtle and yet can be seen if one is aware of it.

All of these acts when combined together induce a kind of questioning. Is the work about what is absent, what is hidden, what is underneath, the process, the viewer, or is it about the pieces that are excavated and then pulled together by the red polyester thread? Thus the exhibition space itself becomes central to the work.





Madeline Grynstejn on Richard Tuttle's work:

...Instead, meaning was located "outside the art object, in its physical setting or in viewers' responses, rather than 'inside' it, in the literary or psychological import of an image. For Tuttle and his phenomenologically oriented peers, the work can only be known and completed - and continually renewed - in social experience, in the meaning brought to bear by the collective: "art, artist, collector, viewer, curator, collection, exhibition, institution." [8]

I believe the above to be true for much of my work. It is something that I have contemplated in the process of conceiving the work for the thesis exhibition and it is something that will remain as important as the work itself as I continue to grow as an artist.

I am not an idealist as an artist. I try to discover my visions in the conditions of the world. It's the conditions which are important.

- Carl Andre

Conditions, situations, environments, and settings are all important variables in my work. I have consistently approached the work with the intent to heighten awareness by displacing, disrupting or reducing of matter and/or space. My methodology includes pursuing a phenomenological practice in my everyday life and allowing my work to slip into the space of my life without separation. Thus allowing the work to be informed by *conditions of the world*.

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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

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COVER ILL. *Lots (of things), but nothing (I could use)*, 2010.

Photograph by Jesse Barnett

