

## STRUCTURE AND DISPLACEMENT: AARON SCOTT, 2004 - 2006

By Daniel Sherer

*The wasted remains of ontology, cosmology, and epistemology still offer a ground for art.*

Robert Smithson, 1972

*Quality is decided by the depth at which a work incorporates the alternatives within itself, and so masters them.*

T.W. Adorno, 1969

We are confronted by a latticed volume, standing upright, the vertical axis dominating its surroundings with hieratic fixity. Viewed frontally, the object seems at once to be a built form, almost an architectural model, and a simple, abstract box that, despite its lack of any specific architectural characteristics such as doors or windows, retains a somewhat Miesian appearance. As we come closer, and look between the lattices, something unexpected occurs: a series of rectangular elements – luminous segments shaping the visual field – shifts with the angle of our gaze, opposing a play of reflections to the solidity of structure. Contrasted with the immovable, the dynamic is also contained by it – at least on the level of perception. The question thus arises: is this an illusion inside of a construction, or a construction made up of illusions? Are we placed before a bounded space, or a space whose essential attribute is boundlessness – a reading supported by the fact that the box has no sides, an openness that becomes evident when the work is viewed laterally? Is this object actually “objective,” a built fact, or merely subjective, the result of a play of representations unleashed within a fixed and framed parallelepiped? And, finally, does this volume placed upon a pedestal like a sculpture authorize us to identify it as such, or does its relentless abstraction undermine the sculptural conventions which it deploys, and which have been in fertile crisis for the past thirty years?<sup>1</sup> Standing mute, the object gives no definitive response to the multiple questions elicited by its silent, gleaming enigma.

The work in question, *Subtractive Ontology* (fig. 1), is paradigmatic of the problems raised by the artistic practice of Aaron Scott. In his practice there is always more than meets the eye: the boundary that it occupies is never fixed, but is instead an open

threshold that constantly redefines the relationship of art to the circumstances of viewing. Addressing itself to a rationality which advances universal, axiomatic claims inherent in geometrical order, Scott is aware of the fact that these claims develop in contingency: indeed his work derives its codes of reading, its conceptual clarity and a certain playful duplicity concealing a profound thesis about art's relation to knowledge from the antithesis between these two poles.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of circumscribing a space of self-referential signs, as its evident (yet clearly not exclusive) affiliations with Conceptual and Minimalist practices might initially seem to imply, Scott's appeal to an *a priori* that is simultaneously formal and structural derives unforeseen complexities from drastically reduced conditions. His objects are devices for the extrapolation of paradox from an immanent set of logical relations. It is not surprising therefore that his work possesses an aporetic character that conditions its own reception by initiating an as yet undecided contest between grounded field and groundless volume. Though it assumes a variety of different forms, this strategy always involves a dialectical tension whose uncertain perceptual status extends from the basic projective premises of visuality to the infinite perceptual possibilities opened by reflection.

It is reflection, then, rather than symmetry, rectilinearity, or orthogonality, that ends up being the projective mode that Scott consistently privileges. His interest in reflection is comprehensive, encompassing the most minute agitation of the impassive surface of a mirror and the most stable epistemological conception of self-reflexivity elicited by definitive orthogonal relations. In this sense, a logic of displacement emerges as the "dominant" of his inquiry (i.e. that aspect of the work which constitutes its specific trait), with all the unsettling ambiguity of an aesthetic that incorporates architectural parameters in works that are not architecture *per se*.<sup>3</sup> For this reason it is legitimate to speak of a "suspension of the architectonic" in the field delineated by Scott's investigations, which constantly return to architectural structure, the attribute of the tectonic, as a possible model of artistic production and yet also erase this possibility with every iteration. Inspired by this "para-architectural" aesthetic, his work proposes a clear and distinct geometrical order, pushed to a conclusion that is as precise and logical in its formal characteristics as it is unforeseen in its perceptual effects.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most conspicuous of these effects is a determinate reversal, motivated by the apparent deduction of fundamental geometrical properties from an axialized system of perceptions: this operation, modest enough in its initial premises, paradoxically

secures a unity of stasis and motion that might be characterized as “*vertige organisée*,” or sensation of organized vertigo, to quote an apt phrase of Gerard Genette.<sup>5</sup> This highly structured yet nonetheless agitated welter of percepts generates an oscillating illusion of space that proceeds according to three specific strategies: *reduction to a formal a priori*; *the inauguration of an open series of exchanges between the individual arts and the specificity of their media*; and *the engagement of a dialectic of scale and scalelessness* whose most prominent feature is the obsessive discipline inherent in miniaturization and whose essential consequence is the uncertainty of its attempt to impose semantic unity upon the aesthetic domain. Taken together, these strategies shape the work’s criteria of representation, unfailingly revealing an implicit architectonic structure. And yet, with the same rigor that they affirm architecture as a regulative principle for artistic activity as such, they contravene the object’s transformation into architecture, disrupting its trajectory from representation to built form. For this reason one can say that Scott’s works linger at the threshold of architecture, even as they touch on problems of construction and representation inherent in the other visual arts. Indeed, this is what “displacement” must ultimately be taken to mean in Scott’s figurative universe: in the dislocated limit between construction and representation, the work discovers its paradoxical and ever shifting locus. Thus, instead of referring to the *idée reçue* of “site-specificity” in connection with Scott’s investigations one might more correctly speak of explorations of a “non-site” in the sense that Smithson gave to this term. This designates an “open limit” whose essential contours, despite all appearances to the contrary, imply the emptying out, and even the ruin, of the traditional aesthetic categories on which they are ostensibly based.<sup>6</sup>

Scott’s works fall into three broad categories: those that articulate this limit along the vertical axis (*Axis*, *Subtractive Ontology*, *Service/Served*), those that shift it to the horizontal axis (*Regression*, *Weg*, *Framing Device*, *Void Logic*), and finally those that open the ground-plane to relations of reflexivity, readmitting the banished vertical as a representation of space, a reconfiguration of the visual field in purely optical terms (*Ink* series, *Widow*). Most of these works use mirrors to replicate the spatial ground of their form to infinity. If *Axis* (fig. 2) exemplifies a mirroring around the vertical axis ensuring the interpenetration of structural and formal characteristics, *Subtractive Ontology*, conceals the mirror behind an external gridded structure, thereby bracketing the process of representation by restricting the pivotal moment of viewing to the disclosure of a fictive interior. If the first work is a mirror raised to a higher power, the second is a kind of anti-mirror, a hidden system of reflections that involves

the viewer in a game of paradoxical clarity. Despite their manifest disparities, both projects engage a specific dialectical reversal: if the potential is frankly exposed as a static structure, the actual, expressed in sheerly luminous terms, is hidden, consigned to the depths of the interior. In *Axis*, this chiasmus assumes a form that is marked by relations of color, since, in this work, the chromatic effect of the viewed object is due not to an application of an external, material pigment – a choice which would have thematized color as semi-opaque, or densely luminous material – but rather to the simple placement of a colored light source behind the contiguous planes of two intersecting vertical surfaces, splayed diagonally like an open book. Emphasis on the fact that color is a perceptual property that comes from without, rather than an inherent quality that arises from the work itself, gives the reflection through the visible axes, both horizontal and vertical, a greater scope of vibration. Although this strategy diverges from the introjection of luminous representation that occurs in *Subtractive Ontology*, both works operate as “suspended signs” that elicit a double reading as field and as structure. As a result, conventional figure/ground relationships are overthrown in favor of unforeseen dislocations of axiality, so that the latter, the main organizing principle of the object, comes to read as a potentiality for movement in oblique section, rather than as an instantiation of a regular grid defining a simple exterior condition. As for the second work, it prompts a reading that interpolates viewing as an interiorizing act, an exercise that projects vision into the object. Thus, if both works pit pure externality against a shared dichotomy of inside and outside, the orthogonality that permits this contrast is simultaneously affirmed and denied by a double articulation destabilizing the predominance of the vertical dimension, and, along with it, the foundational logic of the grid. The entire problem of viewing the object as architectural or sculptural is thereby referred to a more basic condition, that of the optical field which makes both operations possible, without privileging either.

Frequently the titles of Scott's work engage a play of reference that frames the perceptual displacements of the works they identify. *Subtractive Ontology* is particularly telling in this regard, as its subtraction (or depletion) of the real is underscored by the interiorizing gesture with precise formal implications: paradoxically, what stands out most clearly in this work is that which thematizes absence, the self-reflexivity of the mirror, rather than the “ontological” or ever-present structure of the framing box. In this way the empty series of the holes in the grid is emphasized to the perceptual detriment of the positivity of its system of material coordinates. In *Service/Served* (Fig. 3), it is unclear what is subordinated and what is subordinating – the mirroring

function of the internal play of representation or the tectonic function of the external lattice. Yet, when seen from another angle, this ambiguity fits neatly into Scott's logic of displacement: through the scalar development of the regularity of the grid, which here becomes so prominent that it almost overwhelms the mirror-box which fitfully reduplicates the image of the observer, the suggestion of a cantilever is counteracted by a *mise-en-abîme* of endlessly proliferating reflections. This work thus foregrounds a plunging into an abyss between the unitary object and its fragmentation of the real.

In *Regression* (fig. 4) the abrupt shift to the horizontal abrogates the tacit contract with the viewer established by the grid in his previous work, and by grids more generally in Minimalist or Conceptualist practice: the orthogonality imposed by the normative system of coordinates is no longer taken for granted, for now the perceptual distortion obtained by the reassertion of horizontal continuity has the effect of splaying out the lattice-work of the box<sup>7</sup>. Space itself becomes the protagonist of this contest with the grid that surrounds it; so much so that the grid is no longer contained within the space it evokes, but now ambiguously occupies space as an immanent context, a displaced network suspended between antithetical readings of depth and surface. What regresses, then, in *Regression* is not so much the object or the subject, but both together, in a quasi-perspectival lockstep that seems to signal a reduction to pictorial conditions of representation that, along with the work's engagement of ambient optical conditions, will be developed further in such works as the *Ink* series and *Widow*.

If the "opticality" of the modern pictorial surface (Krauss) is thematized in *Regression*, the "structurality" of the horizontal truss, and hence also a reversion to the para-architectural theme, is signaled in *Weg*<sup>8</sup> (fig. 5). Here the formal *a priori*, the assertion of formalization as a necessary condition of the work, is counterbalanced by an appeal to a predominantly tectonic logic whose concrete embodiment is the miniaturized truss that paradoxically floats above an aperture of light. The gap between the architectural and sculptural is thus bridged in the most literal sense of the term. This "bridging" evokes, for the first time in Scott's work, the thematic of scalelessness, since the path outlined in *Weg* can be read equally as a miniaturized convergence of artistic conditions previously held to be distinct or, alternatively, as a Neo-Minimalist reminder of the irrelevance of the distinction to begin with. In either case, the ambiguity of a condition suspended between extreme points of articulation becomes a basis for the articulation itself.

The gap bridged in *Weg* acts as a surrogate for the sculptural base or pedestal, privileged

signifier of the self-enclosed, auratic object traditionally representing the free-standing human figure which was thrown in to crisis by Rodin and Brancusi before it became a floating axonometric abstraction in the Neo-Plastic explorations of De Stijl and in the Suprematist inquiries of Malevich and El Lissitzky in the 1920's.<sup>9</sup> Implicitly situating himself within this trajectory, even as he develops it further by taking into account the intervening practices of Minimalism and Land Art, Scott will be concerned in his last works with excavating the pedestal or base, making it read not only as a specifically architectonic condition, but, more cogently, as a negative of architectural space. We thus come to confront the inverted mold/model of a skyscraper in *Void Logic* (fig. 6), one of Scott's most spectacular works. Despite its ample scale, this project reads simultaneously as an effective negation of scale and an incisive comment on the impossibility of introjecting architectural conditions into sculpture. The residue of this aporetic operation, the work seems to say, is the work itself, insofar as it is the manifest result of a hollowing out of the pedestal into which the architectonic idea is thrust as it is projected downward into a luminous abyss.

Evoking at once an inverted Seagram Building, the ineffable spaces of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century set designer Adolphe Appia, the hieratic order of an ancient Egyptian temple and the articulated rim of a pool, this object is uneasily suspended – all the more uneasily because of its implicit monumentality – between aestheticizing codes and more ordinary, quotidian references. The most obvious artistic reference, itself a para-architectural conundrum, is Rachel Whiteread, more than, say, Gordon Matta Clark; yet ultimately the logic that is voided in *Void Logic* has little to do with the immense negatives of real structures that the English artist achieves. In fact, in inverting the typological constant *par excellence* of the American city, the skyscraper, in its deployment of a double procedure of inversion and miniaturization, what ends up being stressed is the relative position, as well as the inverted positivity, of the negative. The welling up of the light source in this upside-down mold not only serves to reinforce this reading of a negative shot through with positivity in this, the most Hegelian work of Scott. Here, we see the artist coming to grips with, only to mark his distance from, the positing of the ground of the arts in architecture, which for Hegel stood at the furthest possible remove from the philosophical idea while paradoxically retaining its originary status as the foundation of art's striving to attain a solid cognition of philosophy's metaphysical truths.

Employing a different set of strategies that radically modify his earlier use of mirrors, *Framing Device* (fig. 7) traces the extreme limit of this process. In this work, the central

part of the plinth is evacuated, so that the horizontal axis is simultaneously asserted and literally undermined. Even more significantly, this material groundplane is replaced by a rationalized enclosure that, since it is made up of mirrors, transforms the space of the void into a theater of ambiguous representations. This is undoubtedly one of Scott's most duplicitous works, since it seems innocuous, even neutral, in its positivist appeal to an objectified viewing machine – at once a device for framing the gaze and a conventional apparatus reminiscent of the overhead projectors, marked by an archaic or obsolete quaintness, typical of high schools throughout the United States from the Cold War era to the 1970's. Art is thus "sent back to school," not in Mike Kelley's sense of a repressed memory syndrome abjectly fixated on the traumas of puberty, but in a perhaps equally insidious sense that further voids the Conceptual heritage of its already voided meanings, introducing a plethora of reflections in its place. The ground of the piece is removed, as if to identify the return of the repressed with a return to the idea of representation, or to the representation of the artistic idea: a maneuver which thematizes a confluence, and a subtle divergence as well, between the thesis that architecture is the ground of the arts and the groundlessness of the mirrored *mise-en-abîme*. Claims to axiomatic certainty are thus destabilized by a precisely defined architectonic system, a deceptively simple apparatus whose ultimate consequence is an infinite duplication of appearances. Drawing the gaze into hidden depths, the peculiar visual logic of *Framing Device* is activated when one looks down into the "flatbed picture plane," here constructed so as to surround a box made up of mirrored surfaces deftly joined at the corners.<sup>10</sup> The ground is thus pulled out from under the viewer, who nonetheless continues to stand on a groundless perch, peering into the abyss.

The *Ink* series (fig. 8) brings about a shift to the wall-plane. This move reads both as a transition to pictorial conventions and as a new reconfiguration of the relation of the object of representation to architectural space. Instead of incorporating the parameters of architecture into an excavated object, a plexiglas surface is incised with helicoids and spirals reminiscent of nebulae and galaxies, which cast a shadow on the otherwise undisturbed wall behind. Light itself becomes the painter in this evocation of the origins of painting that recalls the famous etiological myth narrated by Philostratus, who related that painting was born at the moment when the artist traced the shadow contours of his departing lover onto a wall illuminated by candlelight. Avoiding any direct allusion to the myth, Scott's work may be said to fulfill it in another sense: the wall onto which the shadow is cast is doubled by the plexiglas surface; the vanishing

lover's outline is displaced by a transitory projection of curved geometries. Open boundaries between the two surfaces thus catch and obstruct the light, a universal or cosmic light that substitutes real optical effects for conventional artifices of pictorial illusion. The work therefore hovers in an uncertain region between the reduction of the universality of knowledge to the objects of perception and the merely optical registration of its theses.

Ultimately, it would be reductive, and even misleading, to read Scott's investigations of negative space, of paradoxical voids and deliberate inversions, his whole subtle play of accretions, illusions, evacuations, and regressions as so many commentaries on the impossibility of philosophy or metaphysics today. Rather, their real interest lies in their solidarity with the negated content of the metaphysical; or, to be more precise, with the metaphysical afterimage of a theory of architecture, and of a theory of aesthetic production as such.<sup>11</sup> They are built afterimages of this theory. The nature of his approach makes it clear that, in *Widow* (fig. 9), one of Scott's most enigmatic and richly overdetermined works, painting is the ultimate referent of this idea of a structure that is materially negated yet ideally preserved. And just as the pedestal is voided in the previous horizontally and vertically articulated works, so too the frame is emptied of its implicit semantic function (one pointed out by Meyer Schapiro over thirty years ago).<sup>12</sup>

In this work, which, by penetrating the wall of the gallery, becomes an ephemeral, but nonetheless integral part of the real architecture of the space of display, the "umbilical" connection to the real offers the occasion for an explicit return to, and simultaneous critique of, the restricted modernist assumptions of a denuded pictorial representation. What emerges at this point in Scott's trajectory is a new frame-field relation (to cite Schapiro's concise phrase), whereby the place of the frame which normally protrudes is substituted by a hole of considerable depth, a negation of the real, outstanding frame by means of a fictive, yet nonetheless present, reassertion of space. Here the "non-frame" surrounds a suspended and opaque parallelepiped, signifier of the occlusion of the visual cone, just as the "non-sites" of the earlier works open the ground to an abysmal representation. What better way to signify the blockage of a metaphysics of seeing, the aporetic condition of a technical reason blinded by its own procedures?

However, the primary referent that is evoked and negated here is not an abstract philosophical idea but an interrelated trio of works by Duchamp: *Fresh Widow*, *The Brawl*



at *Austerlitz*, and *Étant Données*. The first reference is obvious, given the simultaneous displacement of the word "window" in the punning title, the evocation of infinite mourning (infinity signs are painted on the pane of glass, invoking at once the opacity and silencing of the voice of painting as well as an infinity of melancholic loss, a parodic celebration of the alleged or desired death of painting) and their common Albertian thematization of the window of pictorial representation. The second is equally clear in its Dadaist assimilation of the illusionistic "window" to something completely unrelated to it: a bar brawl with nationalistic overtones; as for the third, it is possibly the most important precedent of all, since the observer becomes a voyeur spying, through a peephole – the peephole of representation itself – a nude recumbent female figure provocatively holding aloft a Bec Auer Lamp (abject sign of denuded circumstances of vision) while her sex is displayed on the horizontal plane: not so much a Statue of Liberty as a Statue of Libertinism. Scott's new iteration subsumes and evacuates all these references which, insofar as they exemplify the displaced logic of the readymade, were already voided, emptied, and absurd to begin with. The window of pictorial vision is now filled in, rendered opaque and material, in the cone that is replaced with a long rectangular piece of wood – a kind of materialized equivalent, reduced to rectilinearity, of the optical rays; the contradictory references to the cosmic or mathematical infinite, to feminine sadness, death and conflict and to a kind of petit-bourgeois, jingoistic pettiness are neutralized, rendered superfluous by a minimalist "primal scene" of enframed visuality; the peephole is plugged, with a certain simplicity and panache, making the residues of light spill through the sides of its orthogonal contours; and finally, instead of being invited to spy upon a recumbent pornographic playmate, holding aloft her Bec Auer Lamp, we confront a denuded space of a different kind. This in fact is a paradoxical space that describes the conjunction of reduced and austere fragments of discourse, reminiscent in equal measure of Gordon Matta Clark's surgical cuts through the body of architecture, the neutralization of affect that characterizes Ryman's white on white canvasses and Agnes Martin's serenely oscillating grids. The grid returns by being negated. But what really returns, in a fixation of attention bordering on unease, is a subtle split between the empirical world of things as they are, the *étant données*, and the phenomenal envelope in which they appear. Hence the object of thought, the geometrical figure of knowledge, is divided, if only by a hair's breadth, from the object of experience, the empirical figure of vision, the *données immédiates de la conscience*.

The interplay between the codes specific to painting, architecture and sculpture in

Scott's practice thus yields a stalemate, one that, despite, or precisely because of, its aporetic character, has proven itself to be incontestably fertile in its oscillation between the givenness of the world, i.e., the universe of objective things that are given over to perception, and the interiorized *camera obscura* of consciousness. From this new threshold between the observer and the object that he reaches, it is but a small step – one as small as the interval of lit space separating the rectangular cone of sight from its enveloping box – to the anguished recognition of a negated metaphysics. Scott's art places itself squarely on this epistemic abyss, this metaphysical non-site, the discarded remnants of which are gathered, reinstated, and reassembled into a structure of negation whose semblance of rational order cannot dispel, but on the contrary only serves to underscore, the impossibility of restoring the ruinous system it is built upon. Suspended equivocally between a negated inside and an outside that does not yet exist, Scott's work holds out the possibility, the hope beyond hope, that something, some object that is surely paradoxical and ironic in any case, might yet still exist, voided of all reference, yet persisting nonetheless, like the space that surrounds the emptied, contiguous and perpetually displaced sign.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a reading of the signs of this crisis, which presupposes the breakdown of the traditional barriers that conventionally divided the visual arts and the arts more generally, I have relied above all on the seminal idea of the "expanded field" enunciated in R. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 276-90 and the concept of the "crisis of the object" formulated in M. Tafuri, Theories and History of Architecture (London/New York, 1976), chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Foucault, "Introduction," to G. Canguilhem, The Normal and the Pathological (New York, 1991) 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> B.H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969. From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," reprinted in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, eds. A. Alberro and B. Stimson (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 524. For the notion of the dominant I have relied upon R. Jakobson, "The Dominant," Language in Literature (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 41-46.

<sup>4</sup> For the notion of the para-architectural, see D. Sherer, "Thresholds of the Sign: Situations of Subjectivity in Matt Mullican's Para-Architectural World," in Matt Mullican: More Details from An Imaginary Universe (Milan, 2000); cf. G. Genette, Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> G. Genette Figures III (Paris, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> R. Smithson, "Discussion with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," in The Collected Writings of Robert Smithson, ed. J. Flam (Berkley/LA/London, 1996), 246ff.

<sup>7</sup> Krauss, "Grids," in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, *cit.*, 8-22.

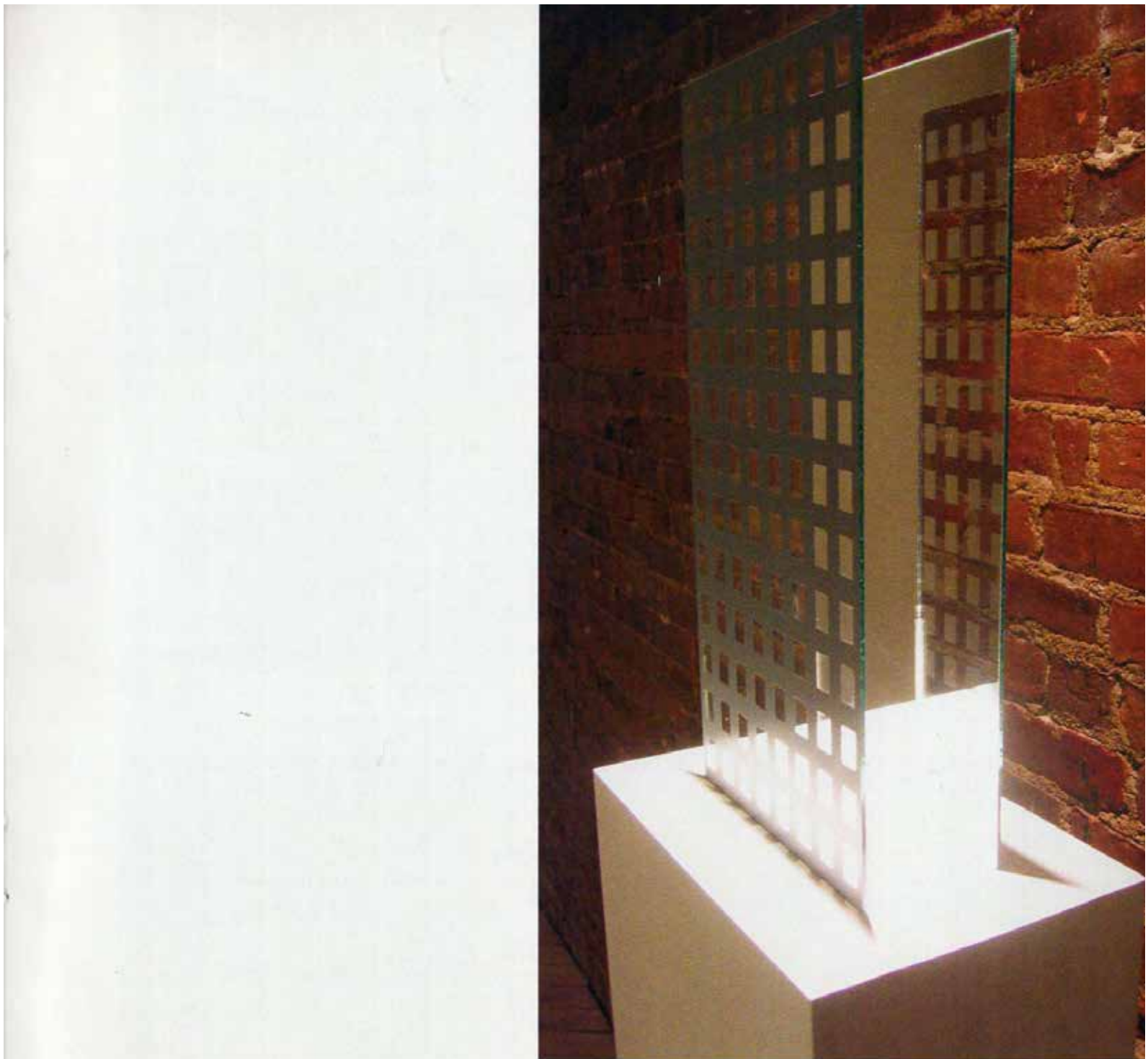
<sup>8</sup> Krauss, The Optical Unconscious (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *cit.*, 280.

<sup>10</sup> L. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," Other Criteria. Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art (New York, 1972), 82ff.

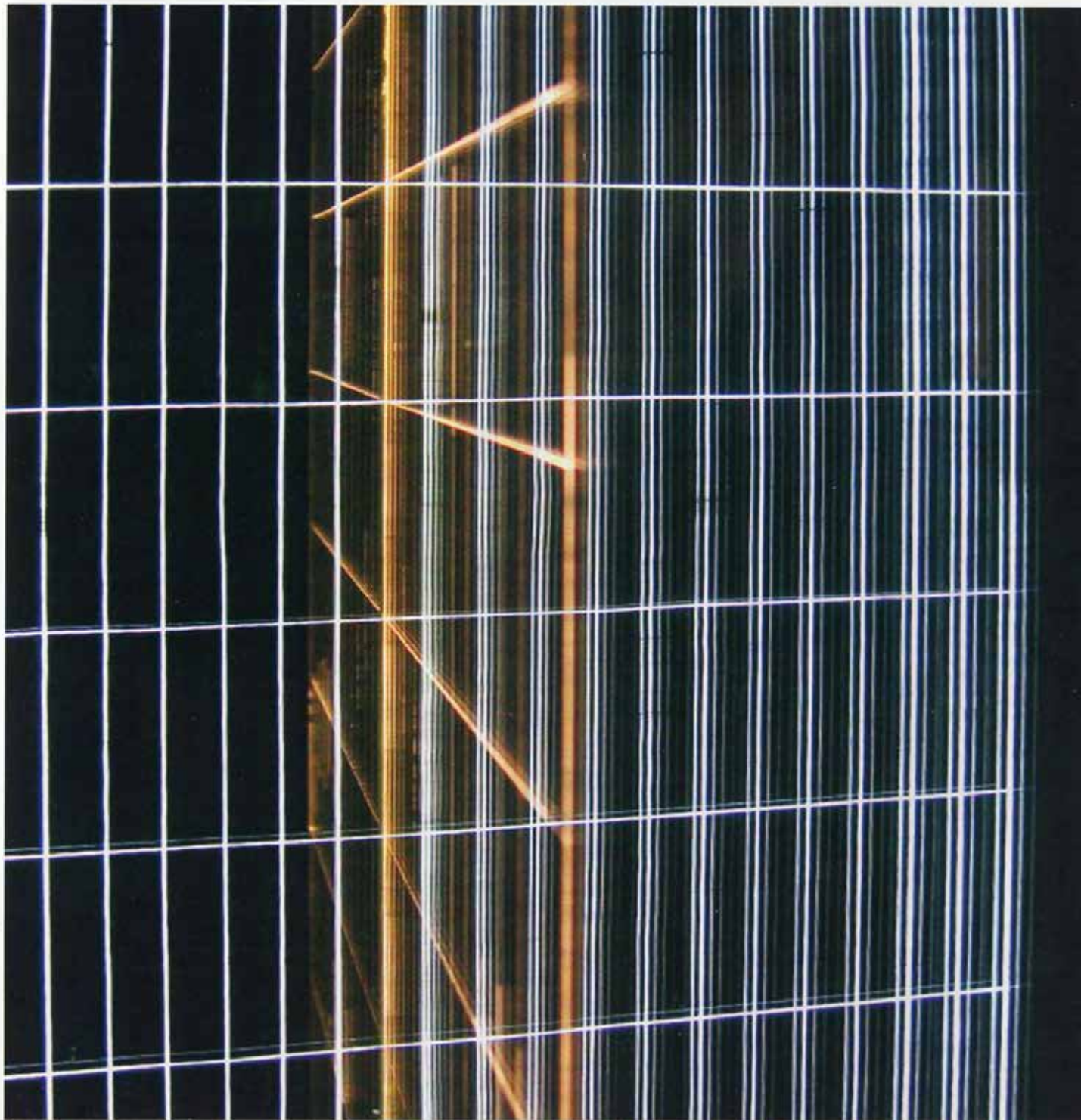
<sup>11</sup> In this sense Scott's work recalls T.W. Adorno's dictum, according to which the task of contemporary philosophy is that of forging solidarity with metaphysics at the moment of its fall.

<sup>12</sup> M. Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," in Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society (New York, 1994), 1-32, esp. 8-9.



**Fig 1** Subtractive Ontology (2006)  
painted wood, hand etched mirrors  
69 x 12 x 8

Fig. 2 Axis (2005)  
painted wood, mirrors, fluorescent lights  
35 x 16 x 10 inches





**Fig 4** Regression (2006)  
wood, mirrors, plastic, incandescent lights  
20 x 25 x 3 inches

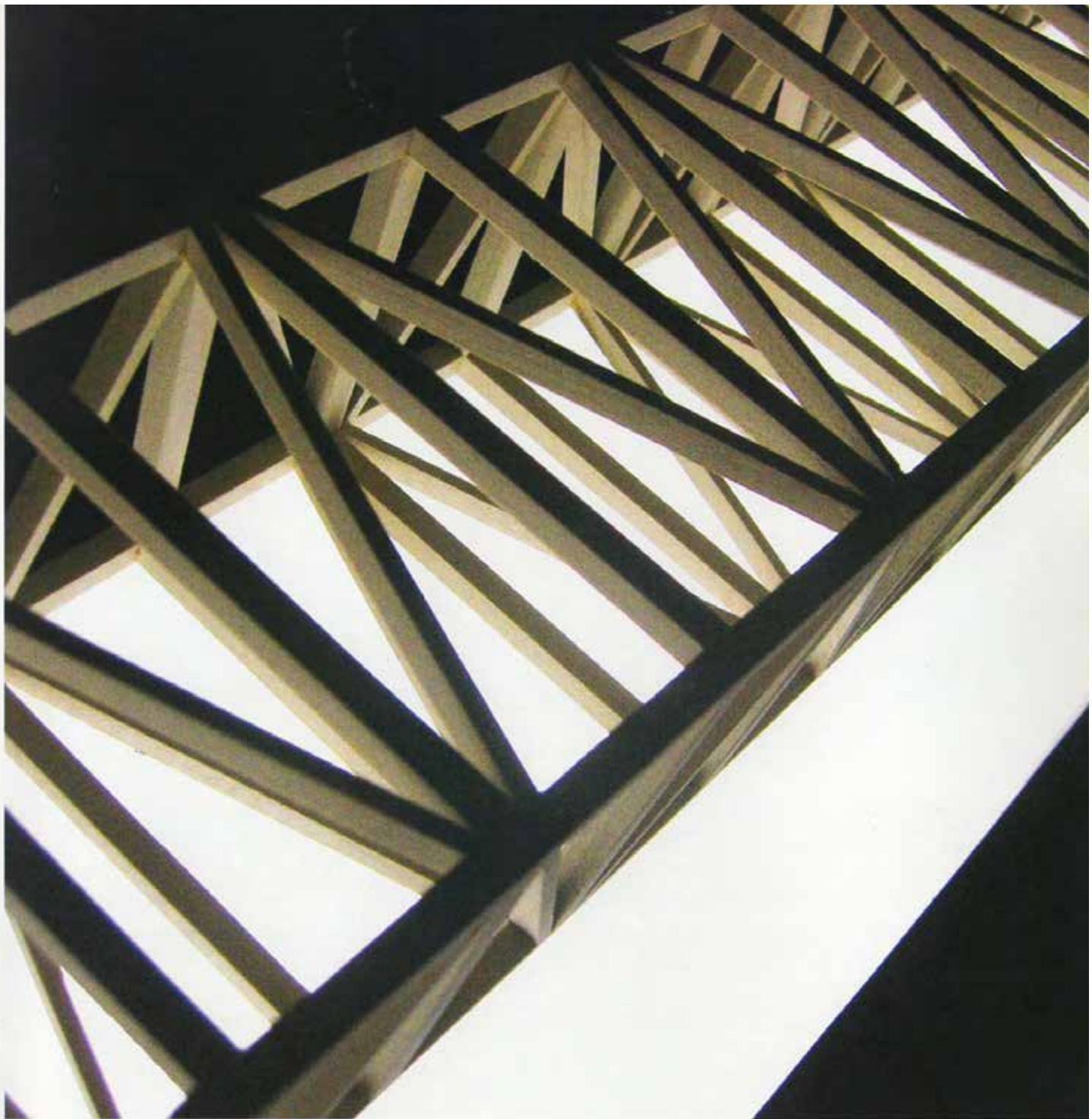
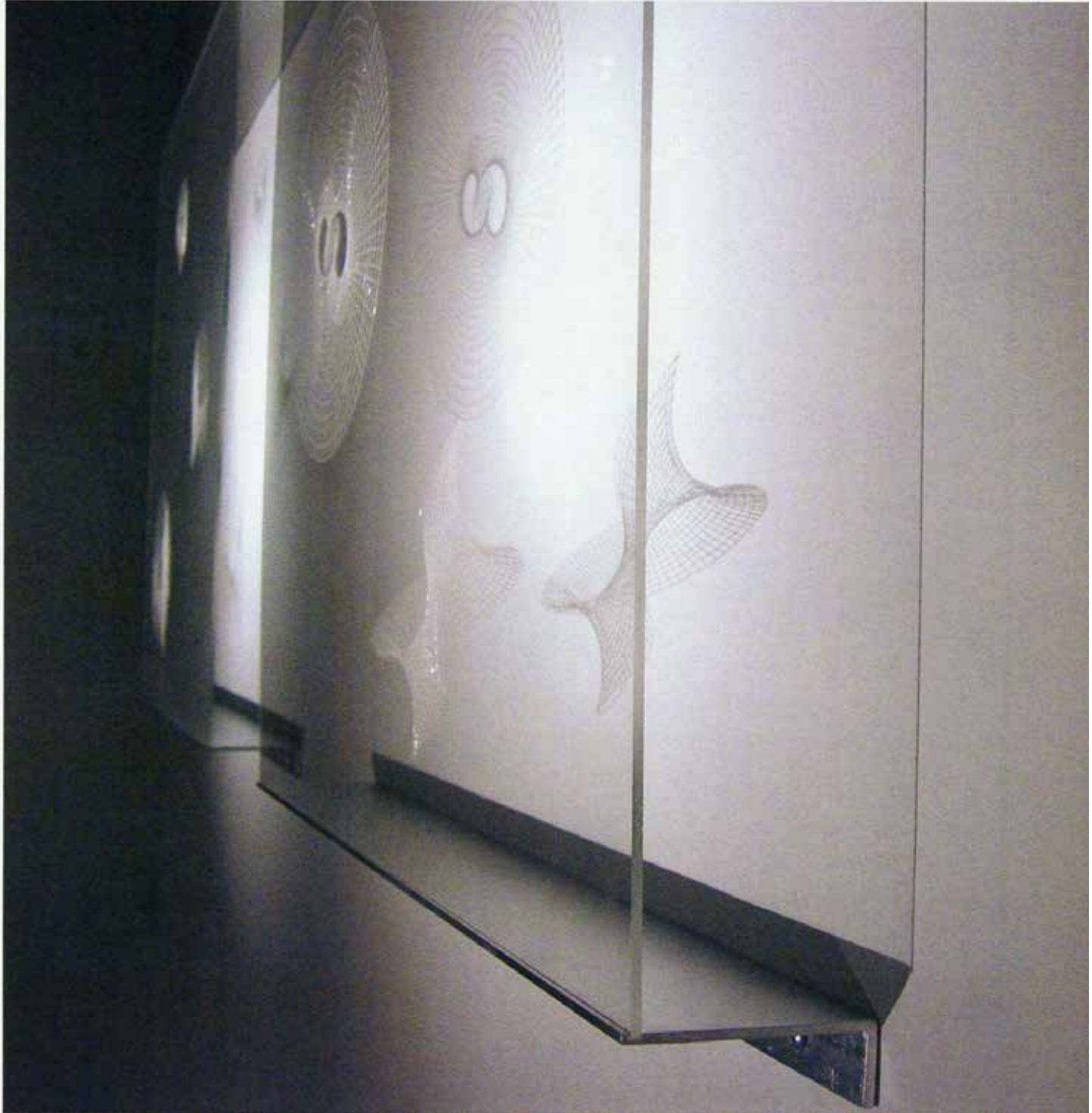
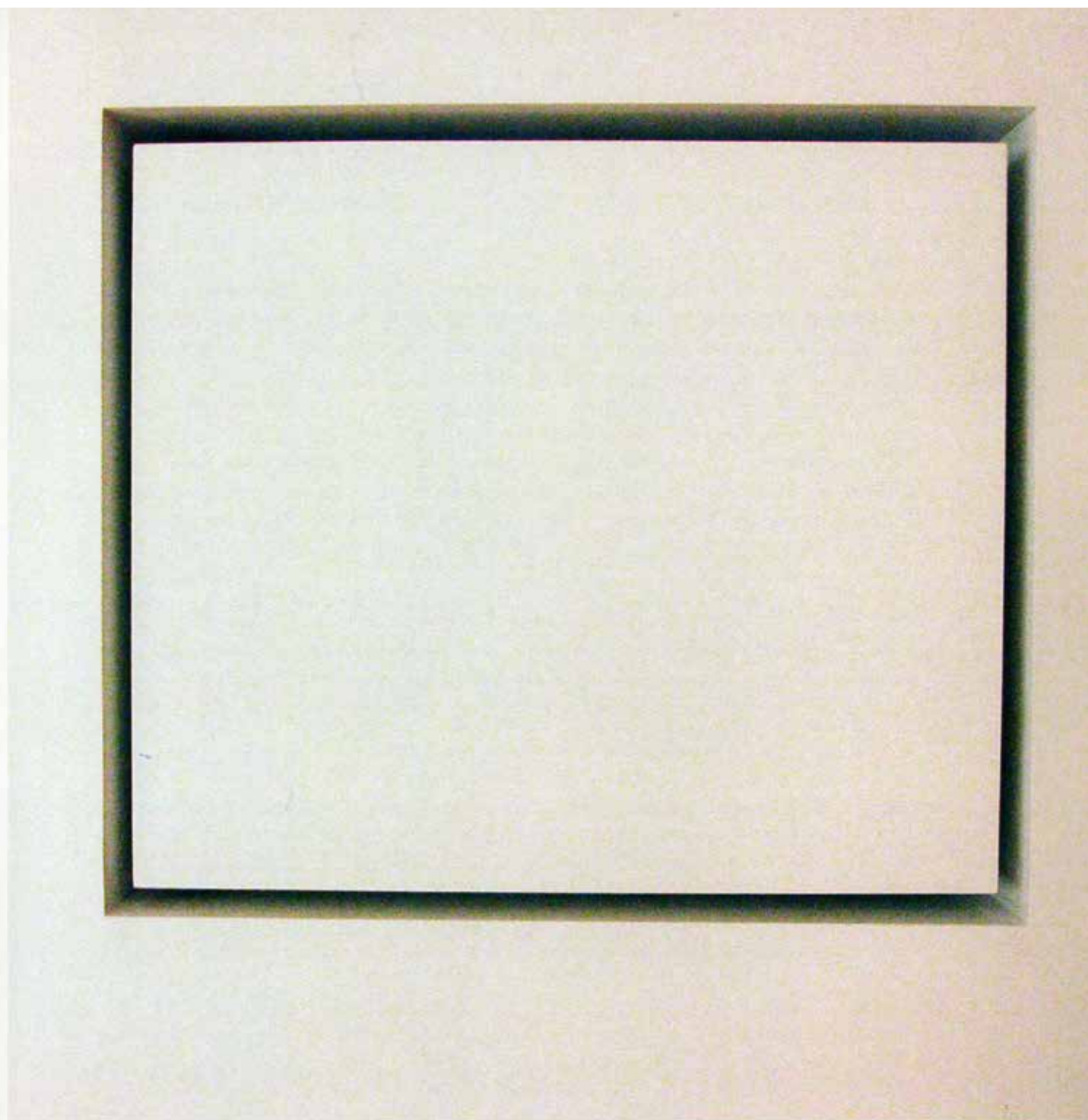


Fig 5 Weg (2005)  
painted wood, mirrors, Plexiglas, fluorescent light  
19 x 26 x 16 inches

Fig 8 Ink IV (2005)  
Plexiglas, aluminium, incandescent light  
24 x 24 x 3 inches







**Fig 9** Widow (2006)  
painted wood, Plexiglas, incandescent lights  
20 x 23 x 72 inches